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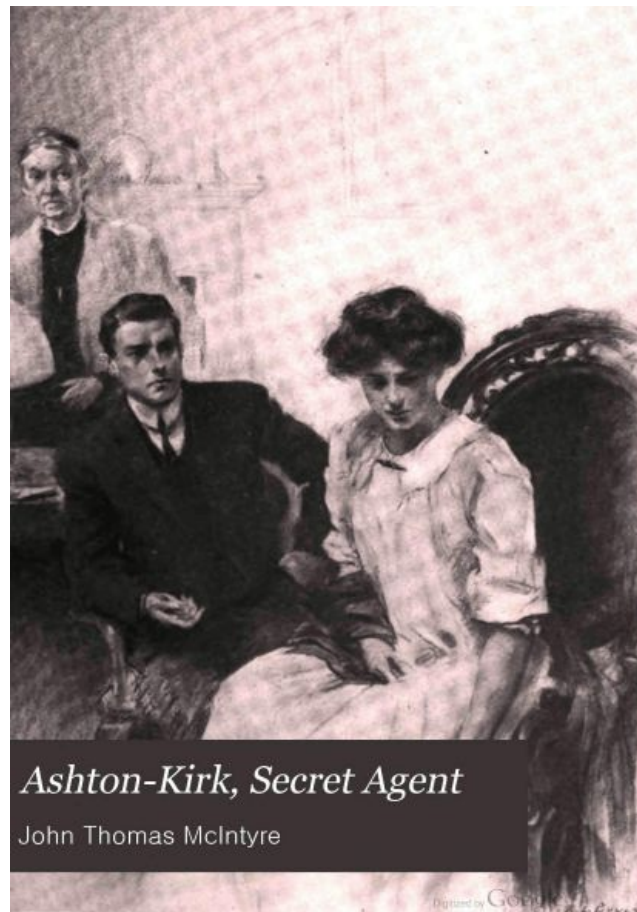
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ASHTON-KIRK, SECRET AGENT ***





HE TOOK UP THE ENVELOPE

**ASHTON-KIRK
SECRET AGENT**

BY

John T. McIntyre

Author of "Ashton-Kirk Investigator," &c.



**ILLUSTRATIONS BY
RALPH L. BOYER
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1912

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To

Helen Ray

Those who have read "Ashton-Kirk, Investigator" will recall references to several affairs in which the United States government found the investigator's unusual powers of inestimable service. In such matters, tremendous interests often stand dangerously balanced, and the most delicate touch is required if they are not to be sent toppling. As Ashton-Kirk has said:

"When a crisis arises between two of the giant modern nations, with their vast armies, their swift fleets, their dreadful engines of war, the hands which control their affairs must be steady, secret, and sure. Otherwise an unthinkable horror might be brought about."

It frequently happens that such a crisis arises, the issue is joined and fought out to the bitter end, and the watchful public press never gets even a hint of it. Indeed, if the secret archives of the nations were thrown open for inspection, a long series of appalling dangers would be shown to have been passed by each—dangers arising from small and apparently remote things, but capable of swift and deadly growth.

Experience, steady courage, and sure talent are required in dealing with such things; and these qualities Ashton-Kirk possesses in abundance. To be sure, the departments of the government have the "Secret Service" at their hand; but the specialist is called in when the general practitioner is at a loss, and he is as much a part of the structure as his regularly employed colleague.

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The adventure of the present story is only one of many to be told of Ashton-Kirk.

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SOME PECULIAR CIRCUMSTANCES

Fuller studied the heavy, decided signature at the bottom of the typed page; then he laid the letter upon the table.

"One who judges character by handwriting," said he, "would probably think the secretary a strong man."

Ashton-Kirk took the stem of the long German pipe from between his lips.

"From your tone," said he, "you do not so consider him."

Fuller was looking down at the letter.

"With that looking me in the face, how can I? Here is a matter of tremendous importance—one of the most guarded secrets of the government is endangered. Yesterday, in what was undoubtedly a panic, he wired you, begging help. Then, almost immediately after, he weakens and writes, requesting you to do nothing."

Thick clouds arose from the Coblenz; the smoker snuggled down into the big chair luxuriously.

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"And from these things," said he, "you draw that he lacks force?"

"Yes; he quit before even catching a glimpse of the end."

There was a moment's silence, and then the secret agent spoke.

"There are times," remarked he, "when it is not altogether desirable to catch that glimpse." He blew out a veil of smoke and watched it idly for a moment. "It is possible, in pushing a thing to the end," he added, "to force an entirely unexpected result. Take for example the case of the Molineux chaplet, some little time since. Could there have been more fire, more determination than that exhibited by old Colonel Molineux in this room when he brought the matter to our attention? And yet, when I showed him that his own daughter was the thief, he instantly subsided."

Fuller regarded his employer with questioning eyes.

"You think, then, that some one concerned in the government has been found out as——"

But the other stopped him.

"Sometimes," said he, "we are even more anxious to spare an enemy than a friend. And the reason usually is that we do not care to force the said enemy into such a position that his only resource would be an open blow."

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"Ah!" Fuller's eyes widened. "They hesitate because they fear to bring about a war." He looked at the secret agent, the question in his face growing. "But with whom?"

Ashton-Kirk put aside the pipe and got up.

"For years," said he, "the specialists of the Navy Department have been secretly working upon a gun designed to throw a tremendous explosive. That it was delicate work was shown by the quality of the men employed upon it; and that it was dangerous was proven by the lives lost from time to time in the experiments. Six months ago the invention was completed. The news leaked out, and naturally the powers were interested. Then to the dismay of the heads of the department it was learned that a most formidable plan to obtain possession of the secret had been balked by the merest chance. The agents of the government were at once put to work; not satisfied with this, the secretary wired me to come to Washington at once. But I was in no haste to do so, because I foresaw what would happen."

The questioning look in Fuller's eyes increased.

"I knew that the agents of a foreign government laid the plan," proceeded Ashton-Kirk. "Who else would desire information upon such a point? And at this time there is but one government sufficiently interested in us to go so far."

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"You mean——"

Ashton-Kirk yawned widely and then asked:

"Have you seen the morning papers?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you noticed a speech by Crosby, the Californian, in Congress. Rather a slashing affair. He continues to demand a permanent fleet for the Pacific and increased coast defenses."

The windows were open; the high-pitched complaint from the mean street drifted up and into the room. A bar of sunlight shot between two up-rearing brick bulks across the way; it glittered among the racks of polished instruments, slipped along the shelves of books and entered at the door of the laboratory; here the vari-colored chemicals sparkled in their round-bellied prisons; the grotesque retorts gleamed in swollen satisfaction.

A knock came upon the door, and Stumph, Ashton-Kirk's grave-faced man servant, entered with a card.

"It is the gentleman who called yesterday while you were out," said Stumph.

The secret agent took the card and read:

"Mr. Philip Warwick."

"He asked me to say," proceeded Stumph, "that his business is urgent and important."

"Let him come up."

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Stumph went out. Fuller began fingering a packet of documents which he took from the table.

"I suppose," said he, "that I may as well file these Schofield-Dempster papers away."

"Yes, the matter is finished, so far as we are concerned. It was interesting at first, but I'm rather glad to be rid of it. The piquancy of the situation was lost when the 'forgeries' were found to have been no forgeries at all; and the family despair is a trifle trying."

"Mr. Philip Warwick," said the low voice of Stumph, a few moments later.

A big, square-shouldered young man entered the room; he had thick, light colored hair and wide open blue eyes. That he was an Englishman was unmistakable. For a moment he seemed in doubt as to whom he should address; but Fuller indicated his employer and the caller bowed his thanks.

"Sir," said he, "if I am intruding, I ask your pardon. I was directed to you by Professor Hutchinson of Hampden College, with whom I have become acquainted through our mutual interest in the Oriental languages."

"Ah, yes. Hutchinson is a very old friend of mine, a splendid fellow, and a fine judge of tobacco. Will you sit down?"

"Thank you."

Mr. Philip Warwick sat down, and looked very big and strong and ill at ease. There was a perplexed expression upon his handsome face; but he said, quietly enough:

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"I take this occasion, Mr. Ashton-Kirk, to express my appreciation of your book upon the Lithuanian language. I spent some years in the Baltic provinces, and am fairly familiar with the tongue."

Ashton-Kirk smiled, well pleased.

"A number of people have been good enough to notice that little book," said he, "though when I wrote it I did not expect it to get beyond my own circle. You see, the Lithuanians have grown rather thick in this section of the city; and the great similarity between their language and the Sanskrit interested me."

"The work," said the young Englishman, "is very complete. But," and his voice lowered a trifle, "much as I am delighted with it, still, that is not why I have ventured to call upon you."

"No?" The secret agent settled himself in the big chair; his singular eyes studied the visitor with interest. Fuller having finished with the papers at the table now asked:

"Will you need me?"

"Perhaps."

The assistant thereupon sat down, took out a pencil and laid a pad of paper upon his knee. Philip Warwick shifted uneasily in his chair; his powerful fingers clasped and unclasped nervously.

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"Professor Hutchinson informs me," said he, "that you take an interest in those problems which spring up unexpectedly and confound the inexperienced. Have I been correctly informed?"

The secret agent nodded.

"Am I to understand that you have brought me such a problem?" he asked.

The visitor bent forward a trifle.

"Perhaps," he said, "it will prove no problem to you. It may be, to some extent, that our imaginations have been playing tricks upon us. But, however that may be, the whole matter is utterly beyond our comprehension. I have done what I can to get to the bottom of it and failed. If you will be kind enough to hear and advise me, I shall be profoundly grateful."

Ashton-Kirk gestured for him to go on.

"The affair," began the young Englishman, "is not my own, but that of my employer, Dr. Simon Morse." He caught the look in the eyes of the secret agent, and added: "No doubt you have heard of him; his theories attracted wide attention some time ago."

"I recall him very well," said Ashton-Kirk. "A sort of scientific anarchist, if I'm not mistaken; he had many daring ideas and considerable hardihood in their expression."

"Any sort of government, human or divine, has in him an outspoken enemy," said Warwick. "I know him to be a man of great learning and splendid ability, but somewhere in his brain there is a something which nullifies it all."

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"You say the matter regarding which you came to see me is that of Dr. Morse. Did he ask you to come?"

"No, no," young Warwick held up his hand, hastily. "He knows nothing of it; and I much prefer that he should not. You see, he is a man of peculiar temperament. He is very silent and secretive regarding his private affairs; also he has," drily, "a somewhat violent temper."

"You picture a rather unpleasant character."

"But I do him no injustice," protested the young Englishman. "Frankly, he is not at all my sort; and I should not remain with him a day, were it not for Stella—Miss Corbin."

"I see."

"She is his niece—the only child of a younger sister; and the things which I am about to relate have caused her much alarm. She fears that some strange danger threatens him. He has always been kind to her, and she is very much attached to him.

"Dr. Morse is an Englishman and a graduate in medicine; but having large means has given but little time to the practice of his profession. As his published works have shown, he detests all governments; however, that of Russia has always been his pet aversion. He has declared it the most corrupt system extant, and maintained that not a patriotic pulse was to be found among the ruling class throughout the vast empire. Its mighty army, he predicted, would crumble before the first determined foe.

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"When the war broke out between Japan and Russia, Dr. Morse at once placed his niece in safe hands; then he disappeared for more than a year. Upon his return it was learned that he had, somehow, managed to have himself enrolled upon the medical staff of the Russian army, and had witnessed most of the operations in Manchuria. Though he came back rather worn and with a slow-healing wound, he seemed much elated.

"I now have the direct proof which I desired," he said. "The Muscovite army reeks with chicanery; and the book that I'm going to write will set the whole world talking."

"But before beginning the book he determined to have a long rest; he took a fine old house, just outside Sharsdale, in Kent; and with him were his niece and an old French woman servant who had been in the family for many years. They lived very snugly there for some three months; then there began a most singular train of incidents. Of these I have but a slight personal knowledge, for, as I have said, Dr. Morse is a secretive man. But, little by little, Stella and I gathered up the fragments and put them together; the result was rather an alarming whole. Odd happenings became of daily occurrence; a peculiar, nameless something seemed hovering about the place; a vague agency was felt in the commonest things; the household began to live in the expectation of some indefinite calamity."

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"Pardon me. You were at Sharsdale at the time, I take it?"

"Yes; stopping at the village inn. My excuse was that I was doing some sketching; but," with great simplicity, "as a matter of fact, I was there in order to be near Stella Corbin."

"I see. Please go on."

"Gradually we came to know, from the doctor's manner more than anything else, that he fancied himself watched. Indeed, more than once I personally noted traces of what I can call mysterious visitations. And twice within as many months the house was broken into and ransacked from top to bottom."

"A moment ago," said Ashton-Kirk, "you spoke of odd happenings. Just what were the nature of these?"

"What I consider the first," answered Warwick, "was the visit of Karkowsky. He drove up one morning in a high-seated pony cart—a round-bellied, fresh-faced, smiling little man with eyes that stared as innocently as a child's. He seemed in most urgent haste, gave his name, said that he was a Pole and gave as his business that of confidential adviser in those delicate matters which one hesitates to bring to the attention of a solicitor. I was with Dr. Morse at the time, and I recall that Karkowsky's manner was most important and his time apparently of much value. But, queerly enough, his methods were singularly futile; they led in no particular direction. Several times Morse hinted concerning the nature of his errand, but he avoided the subject. Finally he arose, and I fancied that he wore a disappointed look; and upon taking his leave gave the doctor his card bearing a London address and begged that he be communicated with should his services ever be needed.

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"On the night following this visit, Dr. Morse dined with me at the inn; Stella was away from home and the old French woman was with her. About nine o'clock I walked with the doctor to his garden gate. Just as we were saying good-night we noticed a dim light shine in his study window. As we stood surprisedly watching, it disappeared. A moment later, however, it returned, a faint fluttering sort of light which maintained itself with difficulty. Again it disappeared and once more returned; and then we understood. Some one was lighting his way about the room with matches.

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"At first we thought it must be Stella returned unexpectedly; but instantly we knew that this could not be, for she would have turned on the lights had she had occasion to visit the room. We entered and softly ascended the stairs. But all was dark and still; we searched everywhere, but found no one.

"A week later, Stella and the servant having returned, they all awoke one morning some hours later than usual. The bedrooms were heavy with the fumes of a drug; locks had been broken, chests, desks and cupboards had been opened, and their contents strewed the floors. But, strange to say, nothing had been stolen.

"Two nights after this Dr. Morse was struck down in a lane; he was found by some workmen and brought home. Of this incident he refused to speak other than that he had not been robbed.

"Stella now became frightened. At night she saw shadows flitting in the garden; that these were

not fancies was proven by the strange foot-prints which I found in the soft mould. The dog died of poison; another was procured, a savage, crafty creature; but she went the way of the first. One day, and at broad noon, the doctor arose from his desk and went into an adjoining room for a book. He was not gone above a minute; but upon returning he found a loaded revolver lying upon the tablet upon which he had been writing. This apparently drove him frantic, for he seized the weapon and rushed through the house. But there was no one save Stella and old Nanon.

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"Then once again they were drugged and the house ransacked, but this time the attention of the intruders seemed directed toward Dr. Morse's papers only. They showed every indication of having been exhaustively examined; but nothing was missing.

"As these things continued, the tension began to tell; the face of Stella's uncle became drawn and his eyes quick and feverish. At the least sound he would start; and it became almost as much as one's life was worth to approach him from behind. Then suddenly and secretly he made up his mind to come to America; at the last moment he made me an offer to accompany them as his secretary.

"The work upon my proposed book will be heavy,' he said, 'and I shall require aid.'" Here young Warwick nodded and smiled. "Nothing could have fallen in better with my desires than this," he said. "And so, of course, I accepted the proposal. This was three years ago; at first we occupied apartments in the city here; but some five months back, Dr. Morse took a house on Fordham Road, Eastbury; and there the work upon the book, the idea of which had greatly expanded, went on without a halt.

"But," and the young man gestured oddly, after the fashion of one curiously impressed, "though the doctor had crossed the sea he had not traveled beyond the reach of his mysterious persecutor. The happenings at Eastbury are every bit as queer as those at Sharsdale; and they began in the same way. As the doctor and I sat working in the library one day, a taxi-cab stopped and Karkowsky, as cheerful, red cheeked and comfortable as before, alighted. And as before, he seemed in great haste. Apparently Dr. Morse had never marked, as I had done, Karkowsky's first visit as the beginning of his strange troubles. At any rate he showed no resentment, but merely seemed surprised at so unexpected a visitor. The Pole talked volubly about the new country and of his prospects; the delicate matters, so he said, which it was his business to handle were vastly greater in number in America. And I noted that he kept to this point; no matter what unexpected turn was given the conversation he always came back to it. And all the time he kept his eyes fixed eagerly upon the doctor. But at the end of a half hour he arose; again I sensed that he was disappointed; but he said nothing, merely handing my employer another card and begging that he be summoned any time his services were needed. Then he took his departure.

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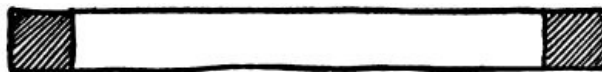
"It was next morning that I entered the library rather quietly and found Dr. Morse with a heap of mail before him; in his hand he held a square of white paper at which he looked fixedly. Upon this was a roughly drawn device done in brown crayon. I could make nothing of it. When he discovered me looking over his shoulder he uttered an impatient exclamation, tore the sheet into strips and tossed them into the waste basket. That same day I opened some mail matter, as was my habit when the doctor was not about; and in one of the envelopes I came upon a duplicate of the drawing that I had seen in my employer's hands. When I handed this to him a little later I fancied that I caught a gleam of the old haunted look which I had so often noted at Sharsdale."

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"Have you, by any chance, one of these drawings?" asked Ashton-Kirk.

"I have." Philip Warwick took out a wallet and from it selected a paper. "It is the third that came—and in every respect like the other two."

The secret agent looked at the paper carefully; it bore a rough, hurried tracing done with a brown material—and looked much like this:



Attentively Ashton-Kirk examined the drawing. But if it bore any meaning for him, he gave no indication of it; for placing the paper upon the table, he said:

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"Go on."

"As I had suspected upon sight of Karkowsky," resumed Warwick, "the persecution of Dr. Morse was resumed. But, so it seemed, the matter had entered into a new phase. There was no more mysterious prowling, waylaying and housebreaking; the mail only was used. But, so far as I know, duplicates of this drawing," pointing to the one which the secret agent had just laid down, "were the only things sent up to yesterday. The outline of the thing never varied; but, oddly enough, the color has."

"Ah!"

"At first the design was always in brown. Then, finally, one came in light blue, and for a space they were all of that color. The next change was to black, then to red, and finally to white—drawn upon neutral tinted paper. But yesterday," and once more the young Englishman opened the wallet and took out a paper, "this came."

Ashton-Kirk took the sheet and glanced at it. In the same brown material that had been used in making the other drawing he found the picture of a woman.

"Apparently meant to represent a person of some consequence," he said. "There is a sort of tiara, or coronet upon the head." He laid the drawing upon the table with the other. "Was there never

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any accompanying writing with these?"

"None that I ever heard of."

"Have you any of the envelopes in which they came?"

"No."

Ashton-Kirk arose and took a few turns up and down the long room; then pausing at a stand he opened a case of heavy looking cigars, one of which he offered Warwick.

"Thank you, no," said the young man.

The secret agent, however, selected one, lighted it and resumed his pacing.

"That is about all I can tell you," said Warwick. "And now if you can offer any explanation of it all, I beg that you do so. I shall be perfectly frank and say that I am not greatly interested in the matter beyond natural curiosity. But," and here the strong fingers began to intertwine once more, "Miss Corbin is filled with fear, and it is for her sake that I appeal to you."

Ashton-Kirk shot a quick look at him.

"Your personal regard for Dr. Morse's possible safety is not very great, then?"

"I wish him no harm. But there is no warm feeling between us. If you knew him you would understand the reason for this readily enough." He paused for a moment and then went on.

"Perhaps," he said, "the matter, as I set it before you, seems absurd. But to Miss Corbin it is a continuous menace—a thing which throws its shadow across her uncle's daily path. To her, it is impossible that what has happened and is happening has not a deep significance; the apparent resolution behind it inspires her with awe. It is her firm conviction that if something is not soon done, unspeakable things will happen."

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Ashton-Kirk paused by the table; the smoke from the heavy cigar curled pungently upward.

"What address did Mr. Karkowsky's card bear?" he inquired.

"It is in the Polish section. Corinth Avenue and Fourth Street."

"Do you know whether Dr. Morse has called upon him?"

"I do not. But I am inclined to think that he has not done so. However, I have taken it upon myself to pay the man a visit. He lodges upon a third floor, over a harness-maker; and when I entered he received me eagerly and with delight. But when I began to question him he grew enraged and ordered me from the place."

"You have never repeated the visit?"

"No."

The secret agent drew softly upon the cigar; its spicy aroma filled the room.

"Coming in personal contact, so to speak, with this matter," said he, "it is but natural to suppose that you have formed some opinion as to the cause of it."

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The young Englishman nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I have. It is my opinion that the Russian government is behind it all. They have heard of the proposed book."

But Ashton-Kirk shook his head.

"The Russian government," smiled he, "is charged with a great number of things; and the foundations of most of them are as light as this. According to your story, Dr. Morse's papers were once examined very minutely. Were the notes for the book among them?"

"Yes."

"That then places Russia outside the probabilities. If that government had been sufficiently interested in Morse to have done the housebreaking, rest assured that the notes, if considered harmful, would have disappeared."

"I have thought of that," said Warwick. "But," with a shake of the head, "St. Petersburg being denied me, I am at a loss."

"There are two common causes for most things of a criminal nature," said Ashton-Kirk. "These are robbery and revenge. The fact that nothing is known to have been stolen in either of the nightly visits to the house at Sharsdale seems to eliminate the first of these; and that Morse was twice drugged and once waylaid and still not seriously injured, does away with the other."

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"It would seem to."

There was another pause. The secret agent regarded Warwick intently.

"Think carefully before answering the question I am now about to ask. What is there in the doctor's possession that you have seen, or have even heard hinted at—that is in any way remarkable or unique?"

Warwick pondered, but finally shook his head.

"Take your time—think deliberately. What does he own that would excite the cupidity of persons of much power and great wealth?"

"I know of nothing," replied the young man.

"It would scarcely be a thing to be measured by a money value," encouraged the secret agent. "It might be, and the fact that the doctor's papers were once searched seems to indicate it rather strongly—a document."

Again Warwick shook his head.

"As I have said, Morse is not of a confiding nature. He keeps his affairs to himself."

Ashton-Kirk laid his half-burned cigar upon a bronze shell; and as he did so his eyes fell once more upon the drawing of the crowned woman. A sudden tightening about his mouth showed a fresh interest; taking up the drawing he examined it with eager attention. At length he said:

"Previous to the first visit of Karkowsky at Sharsdale—Morse had never experienced any of the things of which you told me?" [Pg 31]

"No."

"You are sure of this?"

"Positive. Old Nanon would have been sure to have heard of them. She has been with him since he was a child."

"You have mentioned that Dr. Morse is possessed of means. Did he inherit this, or did he accumulate it himself?"

"He inherited it from his father."

"Have you ever heard anything uncommon of the father? Any of the sort of things which you have just mentioned?"

"No. According to Nanon he was an extraordinarily gentle and simple-minded man."

"Has Dr. Morse ever traveled in the East?"

"In Egypt and the Holy Lands when a young man, seeking material for his anti-religious lectures. Then, of course, there was the war in Manchuria."

"Have you ever heard him express any opinion as to Orientals?"

"Only that they were intelligent and in many ways capable. The Japanese he only came within musket shot of, but," with a smile, "he thinks them very competent fighters."

Ashton-Kirk joined in the smile.

"A remarkable race," he said, "and one of whom the last word has not yet been spoken." [Pg 32]

Here Warwick arose and Ashton-Kirk pressed the bell for Stumph.

"This," said the secret agent, "promises to be a very interesting matter; and, it so happens, one that falls in with my inclinations at this time."

"You will undertake it then?" eagerly.

"With pleasure."

Stumph held open the door that the caller might depart.

"In behalf of Miss Corbin," said Warwick, earnestly, "I thank you." He hesitated a moment, and then said: "Before making a definite start in the matter, I suppose it will be necessary for you to visit us at Eastbury. I confess that rather puzzles me. You see, I would not have Dr. Morse——"

"Rest easy as to that," Ashton-Kirk assured him; "we need tell him nothing."

"When will you come?"

"To-night."

Philip Warwick smiled.

"You are prompt," said he. "But Miss Corbin will be delighted."

And with that he took his departure.

CHAPTER II

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ASHTON-KIRK GOES TO EASTBURY

Ashton-Kirk turned to Fuller.

"Read what you have taken down," he directed.

Fuller did so, and while he read, the secret agent stood by the window, listening. When the assistant finished the other did not speak; he remained gazing down at the shabby hordes which eddied and murmured in the street. There was a strange look upon the keen, dark face of the watcher; the eyes were full of singular speculation. At last he spoke.

"Queer things come out of the East," he said. "Even these people below, who have merely lived upon the western fringe of the Orient, are tinged with its mystery. Every now and then an Occidental eye gets a flash of something among them for which we have no explanation."

"I have felt that frequently," said Fuller; "but never gave much thought to it. Orientals, somehow, have always impressed me uncomfortably; they seem, so to put it, to have something in reserve. It is as though they had a trick or two up their sleeves which they have never shown us."

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

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"A strange and interesting people," said he. He crossed to the book shelves and took down a thin folio; placing it upon the table, he began to rapidly turn the leaves; a series of Japanese prints fluttered before Fuller's eyes.

"There are numberless things which are held as marking the line of division between the races of the East and West," remarked Ashton-Kirk. "But," with a smile, "I have an idea that food and the cooking thereof has more to do with it than anything else. The mental and physical differences are the results of this. And in nothing does the Japanese, for example, show the result of his nourishment as in the matter of art. His hand in a drawing is unmistakable."

He closed the volume of prints; and from a stand took a telephone book and opened it at Eastbury. This was a "Boom" suburb, and as yet had no great population; down the list of subscribers ran the inquiring finger; at length it paused and a slight hissing intake of the breath told of a discovery.

"Good," said he.

Tossing the book to Fuller, he added:

"Find Dr. Morse's number in Fordham Road."

While the deft fingers of his assistant ran through the pages, Ashton-Kirk turned to a sort of rack; throwing open one of the huge rolls which it contained, he displayed a section of a marvelously complete map of the city and suburbs. It was done by hand and in variously colored inks; every street, avenue, court and alley were clearly traced; each house and number was microscopically set down. This map was the growth of years; each month it was altered in some small way as the city expanded; the care taken with it was the same as that which a business house gave its ledgers. Again the long, inquiring finger began to move.

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"Ah! Fordham Road is the first street east of Berkley."

"Dr. Morse's address is 2979," said Fuller, looking up from the directory.

"The same block!" cried Ashton-Kirk, his finger searching among the lines. Then he burst into a laugh and allowed the spring to whisk the map out of view. "Their houses stand back to back," said he.

Fuller's expression indicated curiosity; but he had been with Ashton-Kirk a number of years and had grown to know that his utterances were not always meant to be heard. The secret agent took up a bit of brown rice paper and a bulging pinch of tobacco; as he delicately manipulated these, he said to Fuller:

"Do you recall the name of Okiu?"

"It seems familiar," replied the assistant, after a moment's thought. Then suddenly: "Wasn't he one of—"

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"Look in the cabinet," said Ashton-Kirk.

Fuller went to the filing system and pulled open the drawer marked "OK." After a search of a few moments he turned.

"Yes," said he, eagerly. "Here he is, and underscored in red. The details are in Volume X."

Ashton-Kirk touched one of a row of bells. A buzzer made reply; through a tube the secret agent said:

"Bring up Volume X at once."

He threw himself into the big chair, stretched his legs contentedly and drew at the cigarette. In a little while Stumph entered, bearing a huge canvas-covered book; this he laid upon a small table, which he then pushed toward his employer. The latter looked at his watch.

"I'm not to be disturbed again to-day," said he. "And I'll dine earlier—at five o'clock."

"Anything more?" asked Fuller, when Stumph had left the room.

"Look up the trains stopping at Eastbury after seven o'clock. And stand ready to go with me. I may need you."

Fuller went out; and Ashton-Kirk, with a cloud of blue smoke hovering about his head, opened the canvas-covered volume, found the name he sought, and at once plunged into the finely written pages. The minutes went by, and the hours followed; cigar succeeded cigarette and pipe followed cigar; the table became littered with burnt matches, ash, and impossibly short ends. When Stumph finally knocked to announce dinner, he found tottering mountains of books, maps and newspaper cuttings everywhere and in the midst of them was the investigator, lying back in his chair with closed eyes; the only indication that he was awake being that a thin column of smoke was ascending from the pipe.

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At seven-twenty that evening a local paused at Eastbury Station; and among those who got off were Ashton-Kirk, and the brisk looking Fuller.

The station lamps were lighted, but were pale as yet, for deep splashes of reddish gold piled high

on the horizon line, and long, shaking lines of light shot down the sparsely built streets.

Fordham Road was one of the newest of these latter; its asphalted length showed hardly a trace of travel and its grading was as level as that of a billiard table. The buildings were even fewer here than elsewhere in the suburb; and upon the vacant spaces huge signs reared themselves, announcing the sale of choice sites.

Number 2979 was a brick and brown-stone house with a wide veranda and a smooth lawn which ran all around it. Skirting the lawn was a hedge fence; and a cemented path led to the front door. A tall, angular old woman opened this in answer to the ring. Her eyes were sharp and gray; her face was severe—crossed and recrossed by a thousand minute wrinkles; her hands were large and the veins were blue and swollen.

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"Is Mr. Warwick at home?" asked Ashton-Kirk.

The sharp, gray eyes seemed to become partly veiled, the thin lips only moved a trifle when she spoke.

"You would see him?"

Ashton-Kirk nodded; and as the old woman admitted them, he said:

"You are not English, then?"

For an instant she seemed to bristle with indignation; her eyes, wide open now, snapped.

"English! No; I am a French woman, thank God!"

She showed them into a somberly furnished but spotlessly kept sitting-room; a single window overlooked that portion of the lawn which lay behind the house.

"If you will sit down," she said, "I will speak to Mr. Warwick."

Ashton-Kirk, whose first glance had been through the window, said:

"You have Japanese for neighbors, I see."

The woman's eyes also went to the window; there was a long, narrow stretch of lawn between the house and the one behind it; and this was divided in the center by a hedge fence. Upon the opposite side of the latter, engaged in uprooting the encroaching weeds, was a small, dark man with spectacles and grayish hair. At sight of him the old woman made a gesture of aversion.

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"The good God hates all pagans," she said, resolutely, and went out.

The secret agent smiled.

"I think I should have known her for a zealot even without that," he said. "The type is perfectly expressed in her."

"She has no love for the Japs, at all events," said Fuller, as he went to the window.

"The man clipping the hedge," said Ashton-Kirk, "is a member of the household of whom Warwick neglected to speak."

Fuller looked at the person indicated; he was upon the Morse side of the fence and wielded a huge pair of shears diligently; in spite of the mildness of the evening he had a heavy coat buttoned to the chin. Near him frolicked a small terrier.

"He may be a gardener called in to do the trimming," suggested the assistant.

"I think we'll find that he belongs here," said Ashton-Kirk. "That is a Scottish terrier running about there; and that breed is never friendly with strangers."

There was a piano being played somewhere in the house; the touch was sure and soft, the air mournful and full of minors. They had listened but a moment, however, when Warwick entered the room.

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There was a flush in his cheeks and an excited sparkle in his eyes; as he spoke his voice shook a little as though not perfectly under control.

"Thank you," he said, eagerly, as he shook hands. "I am glad that you have come."

"Something has happened?"

"Yes. A special delivery letter came for Dr. Morse about an hour ago. A few moments after receiving it I heard him shouting aloud in the library, and apparently smashing things in his rage."

"Did you go to him?"

"No. When he is that way, we have found it a better plan to leave him alone. After venting his rage in the way I have just mentioned, he rushed from the place."

Ashton-Kirk did not immediately comment upon this; his eyes were upon the man clipping the hedge.

"Who is that?" asked he.

Warwick followed his glance.

"Oh, a young fellow whom the doctor employs about the place. He is a Pole, and came about a month ago; he seems very intelligent, and I know he is hard up. Morse knew his father somewhere, I believe."

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"I see." The speaker turned from the window.

"You were saying that Dr. Morse rushed from the house in a passion."

"Yes. And I went at once into the library. Upon his desk I found this, which was, more than likely, the cause of the outburst."

He handed Ashton-Kirk a sheet of paper; in the center was a cross, the only peculiarity of which was that the down stroke was red, and the other was blue. This the secret agent inspected with interest.

"I believe you said that he cried aloud in the library—did you catch any words?"

"No. But Miss Corbin did. She told me that——"

"Wait!" Ashton-Kirk halted him. "I would like to speak to Miss Corbin personally."

"Ah, yes. I suppose it would be best."

Warwick left the room. Instantly Ashton-Kirk was at the window, and after a glance, he laughed softly.

"Fuller," said he, "if you saw a man weeding a garden and another man clipping a hedge near by; and if you noticed that they gradually and almost imperceptibly worked toward each other, what should you think?"

Fuller looked out at the two stooping figures; the terrier had stopped his capering and lay gnawing one of the cuttings from the hedge, which he held between his paws. [Pg 42]

"They *are* nearer to each other," said Fuller. "And look! they never exchange a glance. It seems to me," in the low, rapid tone of one to whom an idea had just occurred, "that they desire to speak to each other, but would rather not be observed."

Before the secret agent could reply to this, Warwick reëntered, and with him was a girl. She was slight and dark and dressed in white. Her most remarkable feature was her eyes; they were big and black and wonderful. Her manner was hushed and fearful; her voice, when she spoke, was sunk almost to a whisper.

"Philip tells me that you are a very gifted man," she said, after Warwick had spoken the words of presentation. "He says that hidden things are plain to you. I do not understand how or why this is, but nevertheless I am glad that you have come. And I only hope," here one of the slim, white hands trembled upon his sleeve, "that you have come in time."

"I think," said Ashton-Kirk, quietly, "that you had better make an effort to control yourself. You are cold with fear. It is necessary that you answer a few questions; so try and calm yourself—even if only for that reason."

"I can't! I can't!" She made a despairing sort of gesture, the great eyes filled with a thrilling terror. "How can I be calm when I read such things in his face?" One hand was upon the arm of the secret agent, the other upon that of young Warwick; she looked first at one and then the other. "Death is near to him," she said. "It is very near to him." [Pg 43]

"No, no!" cried the young Englishman.

"I tell you, yes! And, perhaps, it is even nearer than I dream. It may be upon the very threshold."

"My dear girl," cried Warwick.

"Have you been blind, Philip?" she asked in the same whispering voice as before. "Have you been blind that you have not seen? But no," her tone changing tenderly, "it is not to be expected of you. He has not been a father to *you*."

"No," said Warwick, and somehow a second meaning seemed to lurk behind the words, "he has not."

The girl turned to Ashton-Kirk.

"Never," she said, "has any one been better or kinder than Dr. Morse has been to me. Everything that I have I owe to him. And so can you wonder that *I* have been quick to see?"

"Quick to see—what?"

"The fear," she answered, "the fear which has gradually taken possession of him. You have seen some of it," to Warwick, "but not all. It is terror of the unseen, of the unknown. It is fear of a danger which he does not understand." [Pg 44]

"You think, then, that Dr. Morse does not know the meaning of these grotesque messages which he has been receiving?"

"I know that he does not. I have always known it; but just how, I cannot say. This evening, upon opening the letter, he rushed out of the library. I happened to be passing the hall, and heard him cry out: 'Be plain! Who are you? What do you want?'"

"Is that all you heard?"

"Yes; for with the last word he threw open the front door and was gone."

Ashton-Kirk glanced at the two-colored cross.

"Perhaps," said he, "if we could find the envelope which this came in, it would tell us something."

"Will you come into the library?" said Warwick.

As they were moving toward the door, Ashton-Kirk whispered a few quick words to Fuller; the latter nodded and took a seat by the window, partly screened by a hanging and apparently much interested in the lawn.

The library was a large, high ceilinged room, darkly paneled and with a smoothly polished floor. The chairs were massive oak affairs and there were two huge, flat-topped desks. The bookcases were stuffed with serious, well-handled tomes; at one side was a highboy, the many drawers of which were furnished with glass knobs. Upon the top of this was a large English traveling bag, the strap of which was tightly buckled.

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From the floor near one of the desks Warwick picked up a torn envelope.

"That is what the paper came in," said he. "I know, because it was I who handed it to him."

"Postmarked at three o'clock this afternoon at the central station," said Ashton-Kirk. "And the address was written on a typewriter." He threw the envelope upon the desk. "We'll learn nothing from that, except, perhaps, that the sender is one who understands the value of keeping hidden."

Just then a door was heard to open and close heavily. At the sound Ashton-Kirk noted the girl go swiftly to Warwick's side and whisper something hurriedly.

"No," said he, and there was just a trace of sharpness in his tone. "Of course not."

Quick steps were heard in the hall, then a man entered the room.

"Uncle," said Stella Corbin.

She went to him and put an arm about him, but his feverishly burning eyes singled out the stranger.

"It is a friend of Philip's—Mr. Ashton-Kirk. He has been kind enough to visit us."

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There was a disagreeable smile about the thin lips of Dr. Morse as he said:

"Kind, indeed. We are charmed." Then to Warwick he added, "It is not every one, my dear Philip, who has the power of attracting friends."

Dr. Morse was a tall man, with high, narrow shoulders and a long, pasty-white face. There were deep, sour-looking lines about his mouth; the short black hair stood up on his head like bristles.

"To attract friends," said the secret agent, "is rather an enviable knack."

"It denotes a perfect nature, I have no doubt," replied Dr. Morse, still with the disagreeable smile.

"And if such a knack exists," said Ashton-Kirk, evenly, "it argues the existence of a counter condition, don't you think, in some others—that of attracting enemies?"

For a moment there was a dead silence in the room; a look of consternation appeared in the face of the young Englishman. Dr. Morse smoothed back his short, stiff hair and sat down; the smile was still present, but his red-lidded eyes were narrowed in a way that was not at all pleasant.

"Perhaps you are right—things are usually balanced in some such way. We all have our enemies," he added. "I have read somewhere that the fewer the personal foes, the weaker the man. And since we must have them in order to prove our personality," with a laugh which sounded peculiarly unnatural, "why, we can consider ourselves fortunate if they but stand out where we can see them."

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"Your businesslike enemy seldom fights in the open," commented Ashton-Kirk with the air of a man merely making talk. "Our American politicians could teach you that fact."

The physician nodded.

"The ambushade is effective," he agreed. "I learned its use in the Russo-Japanese war."

"So!" The secret agent's brows went up. "You served in that war then? What regiment?"

"The 47th infantry, Siberians."

"It is peculiar how things come about," smiled Ashton-Kirk. "While waiting for Warwick I noticed that the house in your rear is occupied by Japanese. Rather close quarters for old opponents, is it not?"

"The Japanese," spoke Dr. Morse, "were the opponents of Russia."

"I see. You are on good terms with your neighbors, then?"

"No. They have been there almost as long as I have been here; but I have never spoken to one of them."

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Just then there came a tap upon the door; the old servant woman entered, but at the sight of those present, she halted.

"I beg your pardon, Simon," she said to Morse. "I did not know you were engaged."

He looked at her coldly.

"Well, Nanon," said he, "what is it now? Out again? There is no service at your church to-night."

There was a jeer in his voice, but the old French woman paid no attention to it. That she addressed him by his first name indicated that she felt no sense of inferiority. Indeed, as Ashton-Kirk regarded her, he detected a look of contempt upon her severe face.

"No," she answered, "there is no service to-night, as you know very well. I came to speak of Drevenoff."

A peculiar look came into the eyes of the secret agent; it was as though he were groping about for something hidden away in his memory; then like a flash, recollection seemed to come.

"Well, what of him?" asked Dr. Morse.

"He is no better. Even now while he clips the hedges, he shakes with cold; again he burns."

The physician gestured impatiently. Arising he went to a small cabinet and took out a jar partly filled with whitish pills. While he was so engaged, Warwick whispered to Ashton-Kirk. [Pg 49]

"Don't wonder at Nanon's manner. You know I'd told you she'd been in the family for years—before the doctor was born. He has the bad taste to sneer at her religion; and I really think that she considers him somehow evilly possessed. It's a sort of truce between them."

Dr. Morse placed some of the pellets in an envelope upon which he scrawled some lines.

"Tell him to take these," he said, handing them to the old woman. "The directions are on the envelope."

"I hope it is nothing serious," said his niece.

"He needs some quinine, that is all," returned the physician.

Old Nanon moved toward the door. Her withered, large veined right hand hung at her side; Ashton-Kirk noted her dart a sidelong glance toward Morse; then the bony forefinger made a rapid sign of the cross between them.

And so the door closed behind her.

CHAPTER III

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AN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIR

Next morning Ashton-Kirk's car was drawn up at his door; in the hall, the secret agent pulled on a pair of gloves; at his side stood the alert Fuller.

"You carried out my instructions?" asked the former.

"Yes," answered Fuller. "I telegraphed the secretary that you would reach Washington by 11:40 and would call upon him at once."

"You urged him that the matter was possibly one of much importance?"

"Yes."

The secret agent turned to Stumph, who stood at the front door.

"Have Dixon meet every Washington train after dark," said he. "We shall be on one or the other of them."

Stumph threw open the hall door and then that of the car; the soft throb of the engine changed to a startled snort, and then the huge vehicle glided away.

A little later the two men sat facing each other upon the heavy "Limited"; Ashton-Kirk turned the pages of a magazine. For a time Fuller was silent and thoughtful. But at length he said: [Pg 51]

"Do you know—I don't just understand those two fellows behind the house last evening, the Jap, you know—and the one who acted as though he were cold. What are we to make of men who edge toward each other, apparently bent upon some sort of a secret communication—and then when they get within speaking distance, work away doggedly and at last depart without exchanging a word?"

"You are quite sure that there was no message dropped across the hedge, or stuck among its branches?"

"Positive. I did not take my eyes off them for a moment; and later I made it my business to go out and look. That they exchanged signals is scarcely possible, unless they were remarkably ingenious ones. And then, had they desired to signal, they could have done so at a distance; it would have been unnecessary for them to risk attracting attention by drawing so closely together."

Ashton-Kirk did not reply; and after another period spent in cogitation, Fuller spoke again.

"The feeling which you have spoken of as existing between old Nanon and her employer is rather queer, isn't it?"

"Somewhat."

"But that she should remain with him—even accompany him to a new country—and all the time hate, or fear, him is perplexing." [Pg 52]

Ashton-Kirk nodded, his eyes half closed.

"Yes," he said, "it is rather so. But," and he opened his eyes, "don't forget that this woman is, by

her trace of accent, a Breton, and the peasantry of that section have very rigorous notions as to duty."

"They must have if she's borne with his quips and sneers all these years. I can see very readily what Warwick meant when he said you'd not wonder at his lack of interest in Dr. Morse if you knew the man."

"When Warwick came into the room where we were awaiting him last evening, did you notice anything in his manner?"

"He *did* seem rather agitated, now that I think of it. His face was flushed and his voice trembled a bit—just as though he had been quarreling with some one."

Again the secret agent nodded.

"But with whom?" said he. "Not Miss Corbin, I feel sure; and scarcely the old servant woman."

"You think it was with Dr. Morse?" eagerly.

"I don't know. But when Morse was heard entering the house, the girl whispered something to Warwick, rather pleadingly I thought, and he brusquely denied having any intention of doing—whatever it was that she spoke of."

"Humph," said Fuller.

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After some hours the train drew into the station at Washington; at once they took a taxi-cab and whirled to a government building. Ashton-Kirk was shown through a spacious suite and into a room where a handsome white-haired gentleman sat at a huge mahogany desk.

"It was kind of you, Mr. Secretary, to put yourself out," said the secret agent.

The white-haired gentleman arose and shook his hand cordially.

"I have had such telegrams from you before," he said, "and they have never failed to be followed by matters of some interest."

Ashton-Kirk sat down; the secretary pushed a box of long loosely wrapped cigars toward him.

"They are Porto Ricos," said he. "You may fancy their flavor."

For a little time after lighting the cigars they sat in silence watching the smoke drifts and enjoying the aroma. Then Ashton-Kirk spoke.

"Yesterday," said he, "my attention was called to a rather interesting train of circumstances."

"If *you* class it as interesting," said the statesman, "there is nothing more to be said. I recall several matters which you handled in a somewhat bored fashion; and yet, to me, they were in many ways really amazing."

"That is, perhaps, because you held to the point of view of the spectator. There is a broad element of drama in most things of this sort, and as a looker-on, this appealed to you. But this present affair," leaning a trifle forward, "may have a greatly increased interest for you, for the indications are that it will lead directly to your department."

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The secretary knocked a narrow rim of ash from his cigar; he examined the red end carefully, and then said:

"Indeed?"

"All countries have had their secrets," said Ashton-Kirk, after a pause. "Some never see the light—others are only made known after centuries. If the hidden archives of the nations were thrown open to the world, history, perhaps, would have to be rewritten. Of course," with a wave of one long finger, "some governments have more of these state secrets than others; the Italian republics probably were in the lead; the United States I should place almost last."

"You are very good," smiled the secretary.

"But, still, we have some. Even in a democracy, it is not possible to make public all the details of government. Things are handed from one administration to another which must await the time of ripening and fulfilment."

The secretary smoked quietly, but he said nothing.

"These matters," continued Ashton-Kirk, "are not, of course, to be disclosed—they are scarcely to be hinted at. But the case which I bring to your attention perhaps involves a delicate point of international relationship; if my reasoning holds, I do not require you to make any admissions. That you consider the affair important and worth following out will be enough."

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"Go on," said the official.

Ashton-Kirk reflected for a moment; then with a smile, he said:

"Don't be alarmed if I date the beginning of my story back quite a bit. I merely desire to glance at one or two facts which I consider of some importance; then I will come as swiftly as I may to the present." There was another pause, but in a moment he resumed. "Have you ever noticed that there are individuals who, without any great intimacy, seem to cherish a steady regard for each other? There are families which do the same thing. And there are nations.

"Now, I'm going to take a running view of such a friendship between two countries. When George III was puzzled as to how he should put down the rebellion of England's American colonies in the year 1775, he turned to Russia and tried to borrow an army. Catherine was then Empress of

Russia; and her answer to the request was a most biting one. And George growled that she was a barbarian and contented himself with Hessians and Brunswickers. [Pg 56]

"When the second war of independence began, John Quincy Adams was United States Minister at St. Petersburg; and to him the Czar expressed the keenest regrets. And he did not stop at this. Through his representative, Daschkoof, and by personal letters, the Czar strove to bring the war to an end; he failed, but through no fault of his own. The friendly manner in which Russia ceded Alaska to the United States needs no comment.

"During the blackest period of the Civil War, when practically all Europe favored the Confederacy and were upon the verge of giving it official recognition; when France had gone so far as to throw troops into Mexico in defiance of the Monroe doctrine, Russia still stood our firm friend. To the wonder of the nations she sent a fleet across the Atlantic; it entered our northern ports and lay grimly waiting. What the admiral's orders were, only St. Petersburg and Washington knew; but that they warranted his stripping his ships for action in the event of certain conditions arising, I have no doubt.

"When the famine swept Russia a score of years ago, what people so quick to respond as our own? And when that same nation, because of geographical disadvantages, was outclassed in her war with Japan, it was the United States that stepped in and called a stay which resulted in the treaty of Portsmouth." [Pg 57]

There were some few moments of silence; the secretary leaned back in his chair, his fingers pattering upon its arms; that he was interested was shown by the quick little jets of smoke which rose above his head.

"Well?" said he.

"We now come to the matter of present interest," said Ashton-Kirk. "The early defeats of Russia at the hands of Japan demonstrated her unpreparedness; and upon the heels of the news, the Russian Count Malikoff, with some military officers, came to Washington. At once a scarcely audible murmur ran through the more daring of the newspapers, but almost instantly died away. However, one with his ear to the ground could detect the falling into place of the ponderous parts of some international arrangement; but just what this arrangement was has not been made known."

"Well," said the secretary again.

Slowly and with great care, the secret agent then began the story of Dr. Morse. Starting with the visit of Warwick, he related the queer happenings at Sharsdale; then came the flight to America and the grotesque messages which had so startled Stella Corbin. He proceeded:

"A second glance at the picture of the crowned woman handed me by Warwick, and my attention was caught. It was the work of a Japanese." [Pg 58]

"Ah!" said the secretary. And he sat a trifle more upright.

"It was a Japanese with a thoroughly Western training; but that his point of view was still Oriental was plain in the drawing. It then occurred to me that if a Japanese were vitally interested in Dr. Morse he would be likely to live as near to him as he could. And the telephone directory informed me that the house directly behind that of Morse was occupied by one Okiu."

The secretary laid down his cigar.

"Okiu!" said he. "I think I recall that name."

"And more than likely it is the same person," said Ashton-Kirk; "though as yet I am not assured of that fact."

"Well?" said the official, expectantly.

"As you have seen, the persecution of Dr. Morse began only after his return from Manchuria, where he had served in the Russian army. This in itself seemed to tell something; but when I add to it that he had never before come into contact with Japanese, and that one of the race was plainly involved, you will see that I had a fairly good reason for supposing that the thing had its beginning in Manchuria.

"But what was the thing? Plainly it was not a personal matter, for his person and effects had been spared more than once. Then I got a faint gleam of light; for just about now the name of Drevenoff comes into the case." [Pg 59]

"Drevenoff!" The official repeated the name quietly; his ruddy face was entirely devoid of expression.

"It is the name of a young Pole who is employed by Morse as a sort of gardener. He is educated and, I understand, capable of filling a much higher position in life. A few weeks ago he came to Eastbury entirely destitute. I recalled that a Colonel Drevenoff made one of the party which bore Count Malikoff company upon the mysterious mission to Washington in the early days of the Russo-Japanese war; I remembered also that Philip Warwick had told me that Morse had known young Drevenoff's father.

"This suggested an amazing possibility. After leaving the house on Fordham Road I consulted the files of a newspaper; from this I learned that Colonel Drevenoff had, some six months after leaving Washington, joined the army in Manchuria and had been killed in battle."

The secretary nodded.

"Well?" said he.

"Morse told me, in the brief talk that I had with him, that he had been attached as surgeon to the 47th Siberian infantry; and I learned from the newspaper file that Colonel Drevenoff had been commander of that very regiment."

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The official shifted his position; his face was still unreadable; his voice, when he spoke, was even.

"You appear to attach some significance to that," said he.

"Suppose," spoke Ashton-Kirk, "that Colonel Drevenoff were possessed of something of great value; when brought in wounded and dying, what more likely thing than that he should be attended by Dr. Morse? Also it is not without the range of possibility that he should entrust this precious possession to the physician's keeping."

"You are not deficient in imagination." And as the secretary said this he smiled.

"Imagination is a vital necessity in my work. Without it I could make but little headway. And now I will venture still farther upon the same road; but, remember, I am claiming nothing substantial for what I am about to say. I merely place it before you as what might have happened and ask you to fit it to any facts of which you may be possessed. That Colonel Drevenoff was in the party of so eminent a diplomat as Count Malikoff shows him to have been a person of some standing; that he should so suddenly be packed off to the Orient to head a provincial regiment indicates a fall in favor.

"What was the cause of this? I have no means of knowing, but in view of what I do know, I can build up a structure which may be more or less composed of truths. Suppose, after Malikoff left Washington, he missed something—a document, perhaps, in the hand of some person high in this government. Suppose Drevenoff were suspected of taking it, but could not be charged with the act because of lack of proof. There we have a reason for his banishment. Now we will suppose that Drevenoff did actually take this paper. Why did he do so? In order that he should profit by it. In what way? The answer follows swiftly: by selling it to the Japanese government."

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The secretary arose and crossed to a window.

"It is rather close here," said he. "But don't stop."

"Suppose the mission of Malikoff had already suggested the existence of this paper to Tokio; but upon Drevenoff getting into communication with them, they learned for the first time of its reality. But before the matter could be closed, Drevenoff met his death; and after Dr. Morse returned to England, the enemies of Russia in some way discovered that he had been made the custodian of the secret. What followed has been in the nature of attempts to gain possession of the coveted thing."

"But if this is so, how do you account for the bizarre—almost nonsensical methods employed? And how do you account for the apparent ignorance of Dr. Morse as to the meaning behind this persecution of him?"

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Ashton-Kirk shook his head.

"I do not account for it," he said. "That is a thing which I have not come to, as yet."

The secretary recrossed to his desk, took another cigar and pushed the box toward his visitor; after he had the long roll burning freely, he began pacing up and down. After quite a space, he resumed his chair.

"As you said in the beginning," he spoke, "there are things which cannot even be hinted at before the time of ripening and fulfilment. Therefore, I can say only this: Count Malikoff *did* lose a document of most tremendous importance. Colonel Drevenoff *was* suspected. The paper in question, should it fall into the hands of those unfriendly to this government, might cause a nasty diplomatic complication. That it has not done so as yet, we feel sure; because the conditions are such that immediate and open steps would be taken. But official Washington has, so to speak, been living over a volcano for several years."

"This is all you can say?"

"In an official way, yes. But, assuming the point of view of a mere spectator, of which you lately accused me," and here the secretary smiled, "I should say that this matter of Dr. Morse holds all the elements of an interesting case."

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"I agree with you," said Ashton-Kirk, as he arose to his feet and looked at his watch, "and as there is a train in another half hour I think I shall return at once and take up the study of it."

CHAPTER IV

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THE TAKING OFF OF DR. MORSE

As it happened, Ashton-Kirk was too late to get the train which he had mentioned. The next did not leave until 7:30; and even this was delayed on the way, so that it was rather an unusual hour when they stepped into the motor car which the waiting Dixon held ready for them.

The mean street, with its high smells and grimy buildings, was strangely quiet; the venders'

carts, along the curb, were empty; the stands were shrouded, and the stores dim-looking. As the automobile stopped before the secret agent's door, a bell in a neighboring tower struck one.

"Hello," cried Fuller, "what's Stumph doing?"

The hall door stood open to the fullest extent; the light was switched on, and beneath it stood Stumph with a roughly-dressed man whom Ashton-Kirk an once recognized as young Drevenoff. Stumph, aroused out of his usual gravity, was gesticulating determinedly. Drevenoff seemed insisting upon something doggedly. As Fuller spoke, the two heard the car for the first time, and turned.

"Thank goodness, here he is now!" cried Stumph. He dashed excitedly down the step. "Here is a man who desires to see you, sir," he said to Ashton-Kirk. "He would not leave, though I told him a dozen times that you were not at home."

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The secret agent, followed by Fuller and the man, entered the hall and the door closed behind them.

"Well?" asked the former of Drevenoff.

"You are Mr. Ashton-Kirk?"

"I am."

"I was sent to fetch you at once to Dr. Morse's place on Fordham Road, Eastbury."

"Who sent you?"

"Miss Corbin."

Ashton-Kirk looked at the young man; his face was pale, his eyes were brilliant with excitement.

"Has anything happened?"

"Dr. Morse has been murdered."

Ashton-Kirk turned to Stumph.

"Tell Dixon to wait."

Instantly the man opened the door; the chauffeur was upon the point of starting away, but halted upon hearing Stumph's voice.

"What trains are there?" asked Ashton-Kirk of Drevenoff.

"No more to-night," answered the man. "I had hoped to find you before the last one left."

"No matter—the motor will do."

Followed by the others, he hastily reached the car; Fuller seated himself beside Dixon and Drevenoff entered the tonneau with the secret agent.

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"Fordham Road, Eastbury," directed Ashton-Kirk. "The number is 2979."

The car wheeled in its own length under the skilful hand of Dixon; then it went speeding away.

"When did this happen?" asked Ashton-Kirk, of Drevenoff.

"The murder?"

"Of course!" sharply.

"I don't know the hour. Some time to-night."

"How was it done?"

"He was shot through the chest."

"Where?"

"In his library."

It is natural, under such circumstances, for an informant to become very voluble; but not so Drevenoff. His answers were brief; his manner, too, was sullen and unwilling.

"Tell me what you know about it," requested Ashton-Kirk.

"I know very little," said the man. "This evening about dark I ate my dinner and looked at the evening paper; then I went to my room, which is on the third floor. I go to bed early these nights; I am not well, you see. It must have been about half-past ten when I heard a knocking at my door. It was Nanon, and she was crying out that Dr. Morse was dead. I dressed and hurried downstairs. Dr. Morse was sitting all huddled up in his chair; his face was smeared with blood. Miss Corbin was kneeling beside him; the old woman stood by the door."

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"Is that all?"

"Nanon told me to go for the police; but Miss Corbin got up at once and warned me not to. There was a train almost due; she told me to take that and go get you."

"I see."

The big car rushed along at high speed through the silence of the night; in a surprisingly short time Eastbury was reached and they turned into Fordham Road. The residence of Dr. Morse was silent and dark; the blinds were closely drawn; not even a glimmer of light was to be seen around their edges. Ashton-Kirk touched the bell; almost instantly the door opened and through the darkness a voice asked:

"Is that you, Drevenoff?"

"Yes," replied the Pole.

"Have you brought the gentleman?"

"Here he is."

The light was switched on; they saw the seamed face of the old Breton woman, harsh and emotionless. She spoke to Ashton-Kirk.

"Miss Corbin will see you at once, sir, if you please."

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The secret agent followed her down the hall; they passed the library door, which was closed; and the old servant paused at the room into which she had shown them the evening before.

"I will tell her that you are here," she said.

Ashton-Kirk entered the room; it was dim, for only one light was burning; the atmosphere was hushed and breathless; a sort of terror seemed to have settled over everything. He had waited but a few moments when he heard a light, hasty step. Then Stella Corbin came in.

Her face was white and the great eyes were dry and dumb with fear; the corners of her mouth twitched. Silently she held out both hands to the secret agent; they were deathly cold and he felt them tremble.

"I came as soon as I could," said he.

"I called and called upon the telephone, but they told me that you were not at home. Then I sent Drevenoff." She spoke in broken, sobbing sentences; and the fear in her eyes crept into her voice as she went on. "You see, it is as I expected. He is dead. They have killed him."

"Are you quite strong enough to tell me what you know?" he asked. "It is important that we act quickly; the police will, of course, be in the house before long, and they are sometimes disposed to stand in the way."

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"The police!" He felt the small, cold hands tighten convulsively, and, if possible, her face went still whiter. "The police! Oh! I had forgotten them."

He got her a chair, forced her to sit down, and then took another, directly facing her. The light fell dimly upon the dark, loosely coiled masses of her hair and brought out the clear perfection of the face. Her slight figure seemed almost childish in the long enveloping robe which she wore.

"I have heard the manner of your uncle's death," he said. "When you entered the library did you see any sort of firearms lying about near to his hand?"

Instantly she grasped the meaning behind the words.

"No, no," she said hastily. "It was not suicide! Tried as he was, many would have resorted to that; but my uncle was not of that sort. He was murdered."

"There were no firearms, then?"

"No."

"Who discovered the body?"

"Nanon."

"If I may I should like to ask her a question or two."

The old servant was summoned; she entered, angular, severe and sharp of eye.

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"Miss Corbin tells me," said the secret agent, "that it was you who discovered the body of Dr. Morse."

"It was."

"Would you mind telling me how you came to do so?"

"When he worked at night, he always drank coffee to keep himself awake. I always made and took it to him. When I went into the library to-night, I found him sitting in his chair—dead."

"You heard no shot?"

"No."

"When did you last see the doctor alive?"

"About half past nine. I had just finished locking all the windows and doors when he rang for me."

"Is it your custom to lock up every night?"

"Yes. I have always done so at nine o'clock by the doctor's orders."

"He was so urgent about this," said Stella, "that I have thought he feared a repetition of the entrances which occurred at Sharsdale."

"You had seen that everything was fast, then?" said Ashton-Kirk, looking at the old woman.

"Yes; every door and every window upon the lower floor and every window overlooking the porch on the second floor. As there was no way by which the house could be entered by any of the other windows we never bothered with them."

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"You say Dr. Morse rang for you as you finished locking up?"

"Yes, sir; and I answered. He was in the library, and I was surprised to see that he was dressed as though he meant to go out—perhaps upon a journey. He had on his hat, an overcoat lay across a chair and he was trying to turn a key in the lock of his traveling bag. The key was bent and he had rung for me that I might bring him something to straighten it with. But as he was speaking to me, the lock turned, and he told me that I need not mind."

"You say he was dressed as though to go out. Did he do so?"

"No, sir. I am sure of that, because I went to the hall door and sat upon the step for some time. It was a fine night. So if he had gone out I should have seen him."

"How long did you sit there?"

"About ten minutes. Then I went to prepare the coffee."

"While you sat upon the step did you see or hear anything?"

"I heard Dr. Morse talking."

"With whom?"

"I don't know. I heard a second voice, but not distinctly. I thought it must be Miss Stella or Mr. Warwick." [Pg 72]

Here the girl drew a deep, audible breath, and Ashton-Kirk saw the old woman fix her sharp eyes upon her.

"But," resumed Nanon, "Miss Stella tells me that it was not she."

"You went directly from the library to the hall door after speaking to Dr. Morse, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you close the door while you sat upon the step?"

"No; I left it open, thinking to hear if the doctor rang again."

"No one else was in the library when you spoke to the doctor regarding the key?"

"No one."

"Was there a light in the hallway while you sat at the door?"

"There was."

"Should you have seen any one entering the library?"

"I should. To go into that room he would first have to come through the hall."

"There were no visitors in the house at any time during the evening?"

"No," said Nanon. "I should have heard them ring, even if some one else had admitted them."

Ashton-Kirk turned to the girl.

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"It is necessary that I know everything that can be told me as to what took place in the house to-night. So you will pardon a question or two, I know."

She inclined her head in answer to this; but her mouth twitched nervously, and her hands held tightly to the chair upon which she sat.

"Where were you when you learned that Dr. Morse was dead?" proceeded Ashton-Kirk.

"In my sitting-room, where I had gone to read immediately after dinner."

"Who brought the news?"

"Nanon. She stood at the foot of the back stairs and called to me."

"Where is your sitting-room?"

"On the second floor at the back; the door was open and I heard her at once."

"Did you hear or see anything else, previous to this?"

"Very early in the evening I saw Drevenoff going to his room on the third floor; I sat facing the doorway and had a view of the stairs."

"He did not come down again?"

"Not until Nanon called him."

"You are quite sure of that?"

"Quite. I should have seen him had he come down."

There was a pause of some length; the secret agent looked from one to the other of the two women, and finally he said to Nanon:

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"You say that you are not sure that the second voice you heard in the library was Mr. Warwick's?"

Again came the quick, deep drawn breath from the girl; and



"WHO BROUGHT THE NEWS?"

again the gray eyes of the old woman sought her face. At the same time she replied:

"I heard a voice. Whose it was, I cannot say."

There was another pause; then he turned to Miss Corbin.

"At all events," said he, smoothly, "I should like to speak to him."

She arose a trifle unsteady.

"I am sorry," she said in a low voice, "but I am afraid that is impossible, just now."

"Impossible?"

"He is not here—he has gone away."

"Gone away!" It was old Nanon's voice, and it was pitched a shade higher than usual. She took a step toward the girl, the thick gray brows bent over the sharp-sighted eyes. "Where has he gone? Why did he go?"

The girl did not reply; she put her hands to her face, and the secret agent as he looked at her saw that she shivered as though struck with a chill.

"I do not know," she said.

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For a moment the old woman stood looking at her, something like menace in her face; it seemed as though she were about to burst forth into a torrent of words. But Ashton-Kirk rose.

"If you don't mind," said he, calmly, "I should like to go through the house."

Slowly the stern eyes turned from the girl to the speaker.

"You will not see *him*?" indicating the direction of the library.

"Not until afterward."

Without another word she walked toward the door. Ashton-Kirk followed her; as he was stepping into the hall he looked back. Stella Corbin was standing erect, her hands clasped, her face white and drawn with what seemed suspense; and the great dark eyes, filled with terror, were fixed steadily upon him.

CHAPTER V

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THE HOUND STRIKES THE TRAIL

Old Nanon led the secret agent through the rear of the house and then up the stairs from floor to floor and room to room. His eyes seemed to take in everything, gauging, measuring, speculating; now and then he asked a question to which she returned a brief, illuminating answer. Finally they descended and Ashton-Kirk examined the front door. Beside the ordinary spring lock it had a heavy bolt.

"When you left the step and went back into the kitchen to prepare the coffee, did you close this door?" he asked.

"I did; and bolted it."

"Did you look at it after the body was found?"

"It was I who opened the door for Drevenoff when he started after you. It was still bolted."

Both Fuller and Drevenoff stood in the hall; and as old Nanon paused at the library door, Ashton-Kirk said to the Pole:

"How far away is the nearest police station?"

"About half a dozen blocks," answered the other.

"I want you to go there at once and report what has occurred."

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"I can call them upon the telephone," suggested Drevenoff.

"I prefer that you go in person," said Ashton-Kirk, smoothly. "More than likely they will send a man or two; if so, please wait for and return with them."

Nanon opened the library door, turned the switch which controlled the library lights, and then stepped back.

"He is there," she said, one lean finger pointing to the empty doorway.

"Will you not go in?" Ashton-Kirk looked at her keenly.

"No." She drew back further, and he noted her make the same furtive sign that he had caught upon his first visit. "He has filled the world with evil," she went on, "and you see the end of it. Who knows but what that room swarms with things that the soul should fear?"

With this she turned and retraced her steps down the hall, and they saw her reënter the room where the girl had been left.

"A queer sort of old party," commented Fuller. "And one that seems to stick to her opinions."

The two went into the library and closed the door behind them. The hideous thing which sat huddled in the desk chair compelled their instant attention; the head lay tipped back and the face was caked with dry blood. From one thing to another the secret agent swiftly turned his attention; his singular eyes were narrowed, his nostrils widened like those of a hound searching for the scent.

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"He was killed while he sat," said he to Fuller. "His position in the chair is too natural for it to be otherwise. And from the size of the wound I should say the weapon was a small one; the fact that no one, not even a woman seated just outside the door, heard a report, also indicates the same thing."

Around the library went the secret agent; the side windows were tried, but were fast, as were those opening upon the porch. A raincoat lay upon the floor; upon the top of the highboy rested a dark, soft hat.

"The bag!" said Ashton-Kirk in a low voice.

"Was there a bag?" asked Fuller.

In a few words the other related what old Nanon had said. Fuller whistled through his shut teeth as he searched the room with a glance.

"It's gone," said he, "and a hundred to one the thing we want is gone with it."

"Perhaps," said Ashton-Kirk quietly. "But we are not at all sure of that. The person who is keyed up to the pitch of a desperate deed such as this seldom is in the state of mind to make an intelligent search. If the desired thing is at his hand, well and good, but if it is hidden the chances are decidedly against him. Witness the attempt upon the rubies of Bostwick's wife, in which her butler lost his life; also the astonishing matter of the numismatist Hume.^[1] A miscalculation spoiled the criminals' chances in the first case; and a misunderstanding with a confederate was fatal in the second. The beast in a man is uppermost when he can do murder; and even the most intelligent of beasts is not a reasoning thing."

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"That sounds like truth," said Fuller. "But this is the way I look at it. Dr. Morse was clearly in a state of dread; all about him agreed that these queer things, which were continually recurring, had broken his nerve. A servant enters a room and finds him preparing for a journey. Yet apparently he has not mentioned his intentions in this regard even to his niece, to whom he is much attached. To my mind this indicates that he was about to run off somewhere without saying anything to any one. He feared to remain and he feared to tell that he was going, thinking it would, somehow, leak out."

"Well, and what next?"

"The most natural thing for him to do under the circumstances," proceeded Fuller, "would be to take with him the article which created all the fuss. It would be against human nature to leave it behind. He was about to put it into the bag, or he had already done so, when the servant saw him endeavoring to turn the key."

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"That," smiled the secret agent, "is rather well thought out. But you have overlooked one thing. That Dr. Morse intended doing as you state would necessitate his knowing definitely what his mysterious communicants desired. His own acts and especially his own words, as overheard by his niece, indicate the reverse of this. And if he did not know what they wanted," with a twinkle in his eye, "it is certain that he could not pack it away in a bag."

Fuller looked perplexed, but nodded understandingly.

"That's so," said he. "I forgot, for a moment, that the case had that peculiar phase." Again he looked all about. "However," he continued, "the bag is not here, and if the murderer took it with him, you can bet that he had an excellent reason for so doing."

While Fuller was speaking, Ashton-Kirk lifted the coat from the floor; several of the pockets were pulled out. At once he examined the coat worn by the dead man; the inside pockets of this were also turned out, as were those upon the lower outside.

"There was a search," said he. "But, as before, when the house at Sharsdale was broken into, the personal valuables were not its object. Here is his watch in his fob pocket, and this," taking up a torn card case from the desk, "lies just where the criminal flung it in his anger at not finding what he wanted. Its contents," pointing to a tightly wadded heap of bills also upon the desk, "are there."

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"Suppose," doubted Fuller, "that the paper wanted was in this pocket case. The murderer would have taken it. As it stands, you do not know whether he found it or not."

"I think I do," replied Ashton-Kirk. "A man who has sought for a thing for a long time is delighted at finding it. The man who threw those bills upon the desk," holding up the tightly twisted lump, "was angry. That is plain in the vehemence of the act."

He stooped and pulled open drawer after drawer in the desk; their contents were tumbled, showing that a rough and hasty hand had been plunged into them. Fuller was gazing in fascinated silence at the long, supple, inquiring fingers as they deftly ran through everything; then suddenly he noted them halt. At once his glance went to the owner's face; Ashton-Kirk, his eyes turned in a sidelong look toward a door at the rear of the room, stood in an attitude of listening. Fuller was about to speak, but the other lifted his hand in a warning gesture. There was an instant's silence, the secret agent listening as before; then he bent toward Fuller and said softly:

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"Switch off the lights!"

Stealthily Fuller crossed the room and did so; then he stood waiting. In a few moments he heard a slight creak from the hall, and a muffled sort of jar. A minute or two passed; he was then astonished to hear the voice of the secret agent speaking in an unconcerned tone of voice.

"Hello," muttered the young man, "he is mighty cool about it, whatever it is. Turning off the lights to hold a conversation is rather new, I should say, outside of a spiritualistic seance."

A short time passed; then steps came along the darkened hall, and Ashton-Kirk's voice said:

"Now, Fuller, the lights, if you please."

Fuller turned on the lights once more, and again the two entered the library.

"I thought I heard you speaking to some one," said Fuller inquiringly.

"Over the telephone," said the other, quietly. "There was a little matter that I desired information upon."

Again he resumed his inspection of the room. The furniture, piece by piece, passed under his keen eye; the floor, the walls, the hangings, the books and writing materials—nothing escaped him. At length he came once more to the highboy with its numerous drawers and glistening glass knobs.

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First one and then another of the drawers he pulled open; like those of the desk, they told of the same hasty hand. However, this seemed to be all they had to tell, for the secret agent did not spend more than an instant over each. But as he was about to open the last but one, Fuller saw him pause and bend nearer. Then out came a morocco case and from this was produced a powerful magnifying glass. It was the knob upon the left hand side of the drawer that had caught his attention; putting the lens on this it threw up a thick, dark splotch.

"Blood!" said Ashton-Kirk.

Fuller bent forward with great interest.

"In searching the body after the shooting," said he, "the fellow, whoever he was, probably came in contact with the flow from the wound. And in opening the drawer he transferred it to the knob."

But Ashton-Kirk shook his head.

"No," said he. "It is his own blood. Look!" and he ran the glass from knob to knob upon the other drawers; "there are no marks here. And yet a man making a search would invariably start at the top, as I have done." Then the lens shifted back to the knob with the splotch. "Mark this one closely," he added, "and tell me what you see."

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"The knob has been broken," said Fuller at the first glance.

"Exactly. All along its top there is a keen ragged ridge. Probably seizing this to tear open the drawer, the criminal cut himself."

For a moment the speaker stood studying the broken knob with its particle of dried blood; then like a flash he turned to Fuller, his singular eyes ablaze, and snapped:

"On the desk there is a paper-weight. Get it."

Fuller, astonished, did as he was bidden.

"What now?" he inquired.

"Throw it through a bookcase door," was Ashton-Kirk's astonishing reply.

Fuller stood amazed.

"What?" gasped he.

"Throw it through a bookcase door," repeated the secret agent, busy with his lens.

Fuller stood a moment, hesitating; the other arose impatiently, took the heavy paper-weight from him and sent it crashing through the door of the nearest case. The glass splintered and fell jingling to the floor; Ashton-Kirk selected two small pieces and handed them to Fuller.

"In the kitchen you will find hot water and soap; wash and dry these carefully."

The assistant went hastily, and while he was gone, Ashton-Kirk bent once more over the broken knob. With the thin blade of a pocket-knife he picked at the fragment of dried blood; finally he worked it loose and caught it upon a card as it fell. Carrying this to a small table above which hung a light, he examined it carefully. Then to Fuller, as the latter returned, he said:

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"Are they ready?"

"All ready," replied Fuller, and he placed the two pieces of glass ready to his employer's hand.

Once more Ashton-Kirk looked at the blood clot; selecting that portion of it which appeared to be thickest he pressed the back of the knife blade carefully against it; then taking it up with the tip of his fingers he carefully broke it in two at the exact place. Sharply he brought the pieces under the light; two crimson, shining spots of uncongealed blood showed within the outer crust.

"Excellent," said the secret agent. "I thought it possible, but scarcely dared hope for it."

One after another and with delicate care he applied the newly exposed surfaces of the clot to one of the bits of glass; a fair sized smear of red appeared upon the smooth glaze. Then he drew the

second glass across the top of the first; the result was that he now possessed two distinct smears of the blood.

With much satisfaction he placed these upon the top of the highboy.

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"Now we'll leave them to dry," said he, "and in this place they'll not be likely to be disturbed."

Fuller was filled with curiosity as to the meaning of the foregoing performance, but the other had already resumed his prowling up and down, and the aide understood that this was no time for questions.

After a little, Ashton-Kirk opened the door at the back of the library, and they entered the rear room. There was a long window overlooking the lawn, and a door opening into the hallway. The room was scantily furnished; but upon the shelves were a stack of books in wrappers; also there were a number of filing cabinets.

The secret agent looked at some of the books.

"Remnants of editions," he said. "Morse was his own publisher, it seems."

Fuller examined the window.

"All tight," said he. "A Caspar window holder."

The door leading to the hall was fitted with a large old-fashioned lock, from which protruded a copper key.

"That looks safe enough," said Fuller, as he glanced at this.

"If it were fast it might be," said the other, drily. "But I had occasion to use it while you had the lights out, and found it unlocked."

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Nanon was summoned and Ashton-Kirk met her in the hall.

"This door," said he; "is it usually left unlocked?"

"Never," she answered. "Dr. Morse always had it fast from the inside. He kept his books and papers there, and did not care to have them disturbed."

"That will do," said Ashton-Kirk. The old woman was just about to turn away when there came a loud peal at the door-bell.

"The police," said Fuller.

"Go and see," said Ashton-Kirk to Nanon.

Grimly she went along the hall, her spare, strong figure iron-like in its rigidity; Fuller's eyes followed her and then turning to the secret agent, he said:

"The thing looks queer, doesn't it? Everything tight as wax, but a very effective job done for all." Then, lowering his voice, he added: "There were only four of them inside; and from my way of thinking the thing rests between them."

The front door had opened in the meantime; they heard the murmur of voices and then it closed sharply. The old Breton woman hurried back to where they stood; and as she came the hall lights showed that her lined face had gone a livid yellow; her bony, large veined hands were outstretched.

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"Who is it?" asked Ashton-Kirk.

She pointed toward the door quiveringly.

"The Japanese," she answered.

CHAPTER VI

[Pg 89]

THE VISIT OF OKIU

For a moment there was a silence; then Fuller spoke.

"Japanese!" exclaimed he. "At this time of the night? They are original in their choice of hours, anyhow."

"Let them come in," said Ashton-Kirk, quietly.

The old woman turned her startled face toward him; her hands went up rebelliously.

"No," she said. "They must not come in—at this time above all others."

The singular eyes of the secret agent fixed themselves upon her steadily.

"Show them into the room across from the library," said he in an even tone. "It is necessary that I should speak to them."

The stern gray eyes met the dark ones squarely. There was no sign of weakening in them; the yellow tinge left the old face; the hands fell at her side.

"Very well," she said, after a moment. "But let it be understood that I lifted my voice against it."

Again she went to the door; they heard the bolt shot and a rush of air told them the door had

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opened. From where they stood they had no view of the entrance, as the stairway shut it off. Again there came the voices, then footsteps and once more the door closed. In a moment the old woman returned. She pointed down the hall.

"I have done what you ordered," she said. Then in an ominous tone she added: "And I trust no harm comes of it."

With that she went on, and they saw her enter the rear room once more. Ashton-Kirk spoke quietly to Fuller.

"Stand in the hall and busy yourself somehow."

"I understand," answered Fuller.

Ashton-Kirk approached the room into which the visitors had been shown, and went in.

Two men arose upon the entrance of the secret agent. One was the small gray-haired man Ashton-Kirk had seen weeding the lawn two days before; the other was larger in girth and taller; his face was yellow and as devoid of lines as that of an infant.

It was the latter who spoke.

"Do I see Dr. Morse?" he inquired. The accent was perfect, the voice soft, smooth and almost caressing. Ashton-Kirk, as he looked at him, saw that the lineless face was singularly expressionless; however, a pair of jetty eyes looked out piercingly from between the drooping lids and the chin protruded with much natural resolution.

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"I am a friend of the family," said the secret agent. "If there is anything that I can do I shall be pleased."

The Japanese smiled.

"You are very good," said he. "But it is Dr. Morse whom I wish to see."

The voice was soft and purring; it was as though he were speaking to a child.

"If you will be kind enough to call him," suggested the speaker, "I will be obliged to you."

"That," said Ashton-Kirk, "is a thing which I should readily do if it could have any effect. But it would not. Dr. Morse is dead."

There was complete silence for a moment; a tall clock ticked solemnly at one side; its strokes now seemed to grow quicker and louder, like the heart-beats of a man fighting down an increasing excitement.

"Dead!" said the small man in a throaty voice.

"Not that, surely!" spoke the other, and one hand went out, as though in protest.

"He is dead," said the secret agent. "And more, he has been murdered."

"No, no," cried the small man. "That is horrible!"

The other approached a step or two; both hands were gesticulating as though he found it difficult to find words. And the hands were quite wonderful, slim and strong and beautifully shaped. Their color was a bright saffron, the fingers were long and as supple as those of a magician; their tips were delicately pointed, the nails rounded and gleaming.

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"This what you tell us," said he, "is a frightful thing! Murdered! And by whom?"

Ashton-Kirk shook his head.

"That," said he, "is yet to be learned."

"But the police? They are not here?"

"No."

One of the wonderful hands touched the smaller man upon the shoulder.

"Humadi," said the gentle voice, "murder has been done and the police are not here."

The eyes of the gray-haired Japanese sought those of his companion; and a look as rapid as lightning passed between them.

"The West prides itself on many things," said Humadi, "but in Tokio, this would not be so."

"The officers will arrive in due course," said Ashton-Kirk, quietly. "But, in the meantime, if there is anything that I can do, I shall be, as I said before, much pleased."

"Will you permit me to sit down?" asked the taller of the two. "Thank you; and you will sit there, will you not?" As he spoke he smiled and pushed a chair toward the secret agent in such a way that it would bring his back toward the door if he sat in it. But Ashton-Kirk took it readily, without a sign that he noticed anything studied in the act.

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"My name," said the Japanese, as he seated himself facing Ashton-Kirk, "is Okiu. My house is on the next street; the back you can see from the rear windows of this. On the second floor there is a room where I read and smoke and study. It is at the back, and there," with a wave of the hand, "I sat to-night."

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"It is in the blood of all lands," proceeded Okiu, "to love its native literature. I have many quaint books and rare manuscripts; they are full of the, as you of the West call it, folk-lore of my people."

I love it;" the soft voice seemed to caress the subject on which it dwelt; "I sit and smoke and dream for hours. The bright legends of the Samurai sound like music to the mind; and forgotten heroes rise before me in all their ancient power." Here he laughed gently. "You see," said he, "how filled I am with the subject, when I drift unconsciously into it at a time like this.

"To-night I was so engaged. I was deep in a book lately sent me by a friend, a reprint of a precious writing that I had never before seen. I became lost in its pages; two, three hours slipped by before I knew it. But when the clock struck ten, I got up and turned off the light, for I live very strictly," smilingly, "much as one of the recluses of the waste places of our own island. The night was beautiful, however, and I stood for a little looking out. The shadows fell in long lines and finally upon the edge of one of these—the shadow cast by this very house—I saw something stir."

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The last word had hardly left his lips when there came a sharp swift rustle in the hall, an exclamation and the sound of a closing door.

"What is that?" cried Okiu, as he came to his feet.

"I'm inclined to think it's your friend," said Ashton-Kirk, as he lounged back in his chair. "I rather wondered why he went out into the hall."

Humadi appeared in the doorway, his manner apologetic, but a heavy furrow between his eyes. Fuller glanced in, over his shoulder.

"The gentleman made a mistake in the room," said he. "If I startled him in putting him right, I'm sorry."

"It is my place to ask pardon," said Humadi to Ashton-Kirk. "While you talked to my friend I stepped into the hall thinking to observe something which might be of value to the police when they came."

"I thank you for your interest," said the secret agent. "It is kind of you to trouble yourself. The door across the way leads to the room where the body lies, and it is as well that it be kept closed."

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"It is for you to say," agreed Humadi, as he sat down, wearing a somewhat baffled look.

Okiu laughed softly, and the wonderful hands gestured appreciation.

"You do not know Humadi," he said to Ashton-Kirk; "you do not know him, or you would not wonder at him for this. His is one of the helpful natures; always is he desirous of being of assistance. To aid others is his one ambition."

"Ah, yes, to be sure." And Ashton-Kirk's fine white teeth shone in a smile of understanding. "One meets people of that sort now and then, but upon the whole such natures are rare."

"Rare, indeed! But the world," caressingly, "would be greatly the better if there were more." There was an instant's pause, then Okiu went on: "As I was saying, while I stood at my window, I saw a stirring just upon the edge of the shadow cast by this house. It was not a very marked movement, and at first I thought it must be something waving in the breeze. But after a little I knew that this was not so; the movement was too intelligent; I felt that there was some one lurking about on the lawn. Then I called Humadi; and when he came he said—what was it you said, Humadi?" turning to the gray-haired man.

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"I said it must be men," said the other Japanese promptly. "And I said that there were more than one, and that they appeared to be thieves."

"He has such excellent vision," said Okiu, approvingly, to Ashton-Kirk. "He is many years older than I, but his eyes are like those of a boy. Yes, he said that they must be thieves, and I agreed with him. We watched for some time, but the shadows were so dense that we could make out little or nothing. Then suddenly we saw a man emerge into the moonlight."

"A tall man," said Ashton-Kirk, "broad in the shoulders, and carrying a leather bag."

Both Japanese turned their eyes upon him with swift surprise.

"You saw him?" cried Humadi.

"No, I merely fancied that it might be so."

The surprise died quickly out of Okiu's eyes; and in its place came a look that was peculiarly speculative; from the beginning he had regarded Ashton-Kirk with interest; but to this was now added surmise and, perhaps, quickening dread. But when he spoke his voice showed no trace of this.

"Your imagination is excellent," purred he, gently; "indeed, it amounts to something like second sight. You are quite right, sir," his glance running over Ashton-Kirk; "he was tall and well set, and also young, judging by the ease with which he leaped over the fence. After this, as nothing more happened, I went to bed. But I could not sleep. I felt sure that something had occurred, and it troubled me. At last I got up, called to Humadi and came here to speak to Dr. Morse."

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Here the Japanese arose; the smooth chubby face expressed no emotion, but the eyes, the hands, the whole body showed evidences of shock.

"I thought," said he, "to tell of a mere robbery; but I find something more terrible!" Then as though a thought had occurred to him. "But the others—the young lady? the young man? They met with no harm?"

The secret agent shook his head.

"No," replied he.

"That is well! The other is a frightful calamity, but even that could be worse." He seemed to hesitate for a space, then added in another tone: "You will express my sympathy to them?"

"I will," said Ashton-Kirk.

"I would not disturb them now," and Okiu gestured the idea from him. "No, that would not do. But I will leave my sorrow with you. It is fitter that it should be mentioned by an old friend of the family like yourself." Again there was a slight pause; the speaker looked at Ashton-Kirk inquiringly as he asked:

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"Am I right in understanding you to say that you are an old friend of the family?"

"A friend, yes," answered Ashton-Kirk, readily. "But scarcely what could be called an old one."

"Ah!" The drooping lids almost hid the searching black eyes. "Then you have not known them long?"

"For two days merely."

"Two days!"

Again the glances of the yellow men met, and again did a rapid intelligence pass between them.

"Two days," repeated Okiu, softly. "That is odd, is it not?"

"Acquaintances must begin some time," protested the secret agent.

"To be sure. But that your acquaintance with Dr. Morse should begin last night, and that he should die to-night——"

"Well?" The keen eyes of Ashton-Kirk met the peering ones of Okiu inquiringly.

"Fate seemed determined that the friendship should not grow," answered the Japanese, gently. "It is strange how things come about, is it not?"

Ashton-Kirk also got upon his feet.

"Fate seldom consults us," he said, drily. "If it did, perhaps things would happen differently."

Just then there came the growing sound of voices without; the shuffle of feet was heard upon the walk and then more noisily upon the porch. The bell rang in long streams of sound.

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"The police," said Ashton-Kirk, looking at his watch. "Their methods are as distinguishable as their uniforms."

Fuller looked in; the secret agent nodded and the young man stepped briskly toward the hall door. In another moment a thick-set man in a sergeant's dress entered the room, and with him were two patrolmen.

"How are you?" said the sergeant, nodding to the three men. "Members of the family?"

In a few moments the status of the Japanese was explained; the sergeant listened to their story of the prowler with satisfaction.

"There's the party we want," said he. "Had a bag, did he? Humph! Full of swag, I'll bet." He then took Okiu's name and address. "A headquarters man will go on this case, of course," continued the sergeant, "and he'll want to hear you tell about that. And in the meantime," stuffing his notebook into his breastpocket, "I'll have to ask you all to go. We've got to look things over, and get the hang of it all, and you can see how too many people would be in the way."

As Ashton-Kirk and Fuller emerged from the house, they found the two Japanese standing by the gate. Dixon, who had been waiting all this time, threw on the power at sight of his employer, and the engine of the big French car began to hum in the silence.

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"Good-night," said Okiu, gently, a smile upon his smooth face. "I shall see you again, sir."

Ashton-Kirk waved his hand in answer; and as the car started off, and he and Fuller settled themselves back, the latter said:

"Did you notice the way that fellow said that? It sounded to me much as though he had something against you, and meant to get square."

"Perhaps," returned Ashton-Kirk quietly, "that *is* what he meant. One can never tell."

CHAPTER VII

[Pg 101]

THE METHYLENE STAIN

The following morning the secret agent sat in his study immersed in the newspapers. Each contained a circumstantial account of the murder of Dr. Morse, and each, according to its policy, commented thereon. Much was made of the mysterious happenings at Sharsdale and the equally mysterious communications at Eastbury; the police had gone to apprehend Karkowsky at his lodgings, but he was missing.

The *Star*, true to its enterprising spirit, contained front page reproductions of the three drawings

which young Warwick had shown Ashton-Kirk.

"The pictures," said this newspaper, "will in the end be found to contain the solution of the entire matter. What they mean and why the colors varied so is just now a puzzle. The crowned woman and the cross with the different colored strokes are at this stage of the case absolutely without meaning. But the police are working upon this phase of the affair with much interest and zeal; and any hour may bring forth amazing results. Osborne, a talented man from the central office, has the matter in hand; and judging from past performances, he should accomplish wonders."

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"Well, there are worse than Osborne," commented Fuller when his employer pointed out the latter passage, "but he'll never set the earth to rocking, at that."

"He has a healthy brain," said Ashton-Kirk, "but he seldom centers it properly. And if his mind is kept constantly between the narrow barriers of police procedure, its possessor cannot hope for moments of inspiration."

The *Standard* dwelt at great length upon the missing bag and the disappearance of Philip Warwick. The story of the two Japanese convinced this newspaper that with Warwick discovered the case would end there and then.

"There can scarcely be any doubt that it was he whom Messrs. Okiu and Humadi saw leaping over the hedge fence in the moonlight," declared the *Standard*. "The leather bag which he carried was more than likely the same that Dr. Morse was fumbling with when the servant last saw him in the library. To be sure, the old woman does not definitely state that it was Warwick's voice which she heard later as she sat upon the step. But circumstances fail to point to any other possible person. The house was absolutely secure, except for the street door, and the servant sat in front of that. It would have been impossible for any one to have passed in and she not be aware of it. The young man, Drevenoff, was in his room from first to last; we are sure of this because Miss Corbin saw him go up the stairs before Dr. Morse sent for the servant about the key, and is absolutely certain that he did not come down until after the body was discovered. Warwick, therefore, is the only person unaccounted for; and the fact that a person answering his description, even if only vaguely, was seen stealing away shortly after the time the crime must have been committed, seems almost convincing evidence of his guilt. And that this dimly seen person also carried a hand-bag, the only article learned to be missing, and that Warwick's present whereabouts is unknown, almost clinches the supposition."

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Fuller nodded his head at this.

"They make a good case against him," said he. "I'm also of the opinion that Warwick, when found, will tell a mighty illuminating story—if he has the mind."

Ashton-Kirk threw the papers from him with a yawn.

"As usual," said he, "they grasp the obvious and apparently sensational features. The trouble with some of the journals and their staffs, however, is not lack of acuteness; it is the desire to get in on a good story before their rivals—to flame out into broad-faced type which will give the prospective purchaser a blow between the eyes as it lies upon the stand, or allow the newsboys a fine line to fill the streets with. But the real things are not brought forward with such a dramatic rush; they filter gradually through a mass of extraneous matter and their quality appears only to a person seeking an absolutely convincing result."

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He pulled off his coat and turned up his sleeves; entering the laboratory, he opened the drawer of a stand and took out the two pieces of glass broken from the front of Dr. Morse's bookcase. Holding these up to the light he said:

"We secured two very satisfactory blood smears under most unpromising conditions. That the clot was not altogether hard was fortunate; and that I was able to take advantage of the fact without accident was doubly so."

Lighting a Bunsen burner he passed the glass once through the flame; then he took a shallow vessel and poured out a quantity of liquid; in this he immersed one of the bits of glass with its dry stain.

"Some sort of a test?" inquired Fuller.

"Yes. This bath of alcohol will fix the smear."

"I see."

Fuller's curiosity prompted him to inquire as to what would follow this fixation; but knowledge of the other's habits of mind forbade this.

"About all that is known of the parasite for which I am going to seek," said Ashton-Kirk as he stood by the tray, watch in hand, "is due in the first place to a French army surgeon named Laveran. After him came the Italian, Marchiafava, the German, Koch, and a number of others. There is a monograph upon the subject by Mannaberg which is most comprehensive."

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"What sort of a little beast is it?" asked Fuller.

"A lively, wriggling atom—a unicellular organism, directly upon the border-land between the animal and vegetable kingdoms."

"That sounds very exact and scientific," said the other. "But it means little to me."

"The young specimens of the plasmodia, as this particular germ is styled, develop in the red blood cells; and as they grow they destroy their habitation. I could tell you of interesting changes of color in the blood corpuscles, of the active, joyous dancing of the parasite, and of its

multiplication by sporulation. But not now. All this, however, is repeated again and again; and each sporulation of the parasite is usually associated with marked symptoms in the person whose blood it inhabits."

"You speak as though you expected to find some such condition in this," and Fuller nodded toward the blood smear.

"I expect nothing. I am merely about to prove or disprove a suggestion."

At the end of twenty minutes, Ashton-Kirk took the bit of glass from the fixing bath, threw the alcohol into a waste pipe and ran some water into the vessel. [Pg 106]

"It will take some ten minutes for the slide to dry," said he. "And in the meantime we shall prepare the next step in the process."

He took down a bottle filled with a dark blue liquid. This he held up to the light that poured in from the window.

"Here," said he, "is the bloodhound upon whom I depend to find and mark the parasite. It bears the rather formidable name in its present state of aqueous methylene-blue, and is in a two per cent. solution. Combined with it is a five per cent. solution of borax. I had a druggist send it in this morning."

This mixture he poured into the small vessel until the bottom was barely covered; then he added water until there was a layer of perhaps one centimeter in thickness, and the blue began to become transparent.

The alcohol had dried off the bit of glass by this time; and Ashton-Kirk took the fragment up with a pair of forceps and dipped it several times into the methylene stain; after this he passed it through clear water until the blue paled to a greenish tinge. Then he took up a white disc of filter paper; placing this upon a stand he laid the glass upon it and carefully dried both sides, much as one would blot ink from a letter sheet. [Pg 107]

"This process is what is called staining," said Ashton-Kirk, "and the method I have used is one recommended by Koch; it is somewhat similar to the older one of Mannaberg, but more rapid in result."

Out of a tube he dropped a single gem-like globule of cedar oil upon the blood smear; then he covered it with a small square of glass; upon this in its turn fell a second drop of the oil.

The whole was then placed in position under a microscope and fastened. Then the secret agent brought out the lens. It glittered like a tiny diamond in a huge setting, and Fuller gazed at it fascinated.

"How you can see anything through a glass as small as that I can't understand," said he. "It looks like the point of an awl."

"It is a one-twelfth objective," replied the other, as he screwed the lens firmly down upon the cover glass, and thus embedded it, so to speak, in the globule of cedar oil.

"It is necessary," said he, "that the specimen be observed through the oil because the lens must be brought down directly upon the glass; without the oil the glass would be scratched and the whole thing ruined."

Then he set himself to the close study of what the tiny lens made plain; in a few moments he lifted his head with an exclamation of triumph. [Pg 108]

"I have it!" he cried.

"What have you found?" asked Fuller eagerly.

"Evidence," answered Ashton-Kirk, triumphantly, "that will enable me to lay my hand upon the person who searched the library and clothing of Dr. Morse."

"The murderer?"

"Perhaps he is that also—who knows?"

"But," demanded Fuller, "I don't quite understand."

Ashton-Kirk waved his hand toward the microscope, and Fuller applied his eye to it.

"What do you see?" asked the secret agent.

"A pale green circle," answered the other, "and it is crowded with irregularly shaped spots."

"Compare the circle with the dial of a watch and look closely at the point where the six should be."

"Yes," said Fuller.

"What do you see—at a very little distance from the edge?"

"There are some small blue spots; some are dark, the others lighter and more intense."

"That last is my proof," said Ashton-Kirk. Then as Fuller turned upon him a still inquiring look, he added:

"The indications have been that some member of Dr. Morse's household had a hand in his death. The house was secure at all points; it was not possible for any one to gain an entrance after the locking up. You might say: Suppose the criminal had entered the house before the time for locking up and remained concealed until he saw his opportunity? To that I would answer that we [Pg 109]

would have detected his method of departure. He should have left something unfastened behind him unless he had a confederate in the house. That the doors and windows, in every instance, were fast proves that this must be the case."

Fuller nodded his head.

"That's so," said he.

"Now let us take the members of the household one at a time. Miss Corbin——"

Fuller waved his hand.

"Oh, she's out of it," said he.

"Very well," said Ashton-Kirk, his white teeth showing in a smile. "Then let us take up Nanon. Here we have a severely religious woman—one who evidently detested her employer, but who served him well and had been many years in the family."

"It looks as though we'd have to pass her, too," said Fuller. "There is no reason why *she* should murder Dr. Morse that I can see."

Again the other smiled.

"In this you agree with the newspapers, at any rate," said he. "None of them have found occasion to associate her with the matter, either." [Pg 110]

"I also agree with the papers in the matter of Warwick," said Fuller. "I know that it's best to start without preconceived notions, but I can't help thinking that, if he's not exactly the man, he knows quite a bit about it all."

"That he has unaccountably disappeared is a bad point against him," admitted Ashton-Kirk. "And that some one resembling him was seen stealing away in the night, carrying a hand-bag, is another and most damaging one. However, as you say, it is best not to start with preconceived notions; and until we are sure that the unknown *was* Warwick, and that the bag he carried *was* the missing bag, we'd better not accuse him."

There was a pause; the secret agent looked at the stained blood smear for a moment and then continued:

"There is still another person—the fourth and last. This person possessed the marked symptoms of a common complaint—chills followed by fever. To this person I know Dr. Morse gave quinine."

"Well?" asked Fuller, eagerly.

"Chills and fever are indications of malaria—quinine is the invariable remedy for that complaint. And the light blue spots which you see in that smear of blood," pointing to the microscope, "are the germs of that same disease." [Pg 111]

For a moment Fuller stood as though transfixed.

"You have the man!" he cried at last. "You have him beyond the shadow of a doubt! To think," in great admiration, "that he should be found out in such an unusual way. Why, it is one of the——" Here he paused, the enthusiasm died from his face, and he added slowly: "But suppose that blood clot was not left upon the drawer pull at the time you think. The man may have been in the library during the afternoon upon a perfectly legitimate errand."

But Ashton-Kirk shook his head.

"No," said he. "It happened last night about the time of the murder. If it had been earlier the blood would have been dry and hard to the core."

"I see," said Fuller. "I recall that you were surprised at its having retained any softness, even at that. But there is something else. If Miss Corbin is sure that Drevenoff did not descend from the third floor, after once going to his room, how do you account for his presence in the library at that time?"

"Miss Corbin was in position to see Drevenoff as he ascended the back stairs. She did not see him descend, and so concluded that he could not have done so. As a matter of fact he could have gained the first floor without any trouble by passing through some unoccupied rooms upon the third floor, and using the front or main staircase." [Pg 112]

"Then that's it," declared Fuller. "He came down that way while the old servant was in the kitchen seeing to the coffee, did his work and went back to his room by the same route. But," with a puzzled look upon his face, "what in the world ever drew your attention to Drevenoff in the first place—that is, what made you think it might be his blood upon the handle of the drawer?"

"Do you recall that while I was examining the desk I stopped to listen?"

"Yes, and told me to put out the lights."

"The sound that I heard came from the room in the rear of the library; when I asked you to switch off the lights it was because I wanted to open the door between the two rooms without the knowledge of the person who may have made the sound."

"You saw no one?"

"No. But I heard something like quick footsteps going down the hall, and then the soft closing of the street door."

"By George, I heard that, too," said Fuller, remembering.

"Some one had been in the room in the rear of the library," said Ashton-Kirk. "What I heard in the first place was perhaps some sort of sound made as he was stealing away. Drevenoff was the last person I had seen in the hall, and naturally he was suggested to me as the cause of the sounds." [Pg 113]

"But you had told him to go to the police station."

"Told him—yes. But if you will remember, he had not yet gone when we entered the library. He said that the police station was a matter of four blocks; if he had gone at once he would have reached there long before I heard the sound in the back room. I at once went to the 'phone, which I had noticed in the back hall, and called up the station in question. No; he had not yet reached there. Would the sergeant kindly make a private note of when he did? The sergeant would."

"And did he?"

"He whispered it to me as I was leaving the house later. Drevenoff reached the police station less than ten minutes after I called them up—just about the length of time it would take him to get there if it were he who had been in the rear room."

"Ah!"

"The man's actions seemed suspicious, even before I received this apparent verification; also I had not forgotten the intelligence we had gathered concerning his father. So when I came upon the blood clot I naturally had him in mind; the symptoms of malaria and the quinine came back to me, and I at once determined upon this test on the chance that it would turn out as it has." [Pg 114]

"I think you have sufficient evidence to have him taken at once." But Ashton-Kirk shook his head.

"It would be enough to hold him on, at any rate," protested Fuller. "And if he's not arrested now, he may escape, and Dr. Morse's murder will go unavenged."

The secret agent took up his big German pipe.

"The murder of Dr. Morse," said he, "is a most frightful crime against society. I am perfectly willing to do what I can to trace the criminal, but don't forget that the important matter with us is another thing entirely."

"You mean the document, or whatever it was, which was stolen by Drevenoff's father?"

"Which *may* have been stolen by Drevenoff's father. Exactly. The murder of Dr. Morse is only incidental to this." Here the pipe was lighted and heavy clouds of smoke began to rise. "And even though young Drevenoff *should* prove to be the murderer, I don't think we need fear his attempting to escape."

"No?"

"No. For some little time, at any rate, it will be perfectly safe to give him a free foot; indeed, it may prove to be of great advantage to us to do so. He has not yet found the thing of which he is in search. That is plain. If he had, he would have been off before now. So, for a time at least, it will be highly interesting to watch his movements; for who knows but what it is through him that we are to save the government much embarrassment." [Pg 115]

Fuller regarded his employer, the huge pipe and the smoke clouds which rose lazily above both; there was much speculation in his eye.

"You have not lost sight of the Japanese?" said he.

"The Japanese!" Ashton-Kirk took the amber bit from his mouth and his white teeth gleamed as he laughed. "Oh, no! I have not forgotten them. Mr. Okiu and his friend Mr. Humadi interest me exceedingly."

CHAPTER VIII

[Pg 116]

THE HOUSE ON FORDHAM ROAD

It was a few hours later that the big car drew up at the house on Fordham Road. There was a crowd of loiterers at the gate, open-mouthed and marveling at everything they saw; and these at once gathered about the car, scenting a possible sensation.

But Ashton-Kirk, followed by Fuller, pushed his way unceremoniously to the gate; and a few words to the policeman on guard there admitted them to the lawn. One of the first persons they saw at the house was Osborne, the burly central office man, who stood upon the porch smiling expansively and talking with a couple of alert young fellows who listened with interest.

"I see that friend Osborne has the ear of the reporters," said Ashton-Kirk amusedly; "and to all appearances he is not losing any advantages which the situation might have."

"He looks good-natured enough to have had some luck," commented Fuller.

When Osborne caught sight of them he broke into a laugh.

"Hello," cried he. He came forward and shook the secret agent by the hand. "I rather thought you'd poke your learned head above the horizon this morning." [Pg 117]

"It pleases me to be borne in mind," smiled Ashton-Kirk, good-naturedly. "But what are the developments?"

"Oh, several little things have taken occasion to occur," replied Osborne, his broad face beaming. "One of them is that we have nailed the man with the bag. It was Philip Warwick, beyond a doubt."

"Ah!"

"He was seen a block from here, walking rapidly along the road, the bag still in his hand, by a market gardener driving into the city. The gardener knows Warwick very well by sight, having been in the habit of selling greens to the Eastbury people along this way. He says he spoke to the young man in a friendly way as he went by; but Warwick paid no attention; the gardener says he went right on without even turning his head."

"That seems to be definite enough," commented the secret agent.

"But that's not all," stated Osborne, with a widening of his already broad smile. "You see, I got to thinking over what the market man said, and an idea struck me. Warwick was going north, while the Eastbury station is south from here. I asked a question or two and learned that Hastings is the next station north—and a much more important one than this, by the way. A time-table told me that a New York train stopped at Hastings at 11:15. It was about 10:35 that Warwick was seen on the road. Suppose he was making for this train. I called up the Hastings station and found that that's just what he was doing. The night operator sold a ticket to a tall young man, in a light suit, who carried a big leather bag, and boarded the 11:15."

[Pg 118]

"That," said Ashton-Kirk, "sounds rather neat and complete. I congratulate you."

Osborne coughed self-consciously.

"I thought it was rather good myself," he said. "The New York police have a detailed description and are looking out for him. I'm trying to dig up a photograph or two to send them, because they're a little shy of picking people up on a description alone."

Here one of the reporters stepped up to Ashton-Kirk.

"Pardon me," said he. "My name is Evans, and I represent the *Star*."

"Oh, yes." Ashton-Kirk looked at him with attention. "I have noticed your work, as you are permitted to sign it. Your specialty is the comic aspect of things. Are you not somewhat out of your way on a murder case?"

"It is unusual. But then it might not be altogether barren in results. If I can pick up a few points that will bear distortion, I might produce a novel column." He put his hands in his trousers pockets and swayed backward and forward. "I understand that you were here last night before the police arrived. Perhaps you could tell me——"

[Pg 119]

But here Osborne interrupted him with a laugh.

"If you listen to this fellow," said he to Ashton-Kirk, "he'll have you saying things you never meant to say, and he'll be attaching meanings to them that you never meant to give them."

"Now, just for that," said Evans, unruffled, "I'm going to give you a panning."

"All right, my boy," said the big man. "Go ahead. I'm used to all that."

Then Osborne drew the secret agent into the hall.

"I'm glad you've come," said he, his face more serious than it had been all along. "There's a little thing in connection with this case that has me winging. It's all right to put on before them paper fellows out there," with a nod toward the porch, "because it don't do to let the public think the police can be put up a tree. It makes 'em lose confidence, you see."

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"And then, if the department people show a sign of not being as well up on a subject as they might be," went on the detective, "the press gets onto them and maybe puts in pictures, and all that. The funny fellows, like that Evans, are the worst of all. I make believe I don't mind him, but honest, I'd rather go against a second story worker with the swag on and a gun in his fist, than that same young man."

[Pg 120]

There was a pause; and Osborne began shooting the heavy bolt of the hall door backward and forward.

"This is the thing that I can't get," he proceeded, after a little; "these bolts and locks and window fasteners. Every one of them was doing business last night. The whole place was tight as it could be. Are you following me?"

"Go on."

"That this young secretary fellow did for Dr. Morse, I'm positive. But whom did he have in with him? Which one of the other three in the house helped him in the job? One of them did, sure; for somebody had to lock the door or window behind him when he left."

"That is a compact little problem in itself," said Ashton-Kirk. "And the solving of it might be of interest. But why devote so much attention to young Warwick? Don't forget that there may be other aspects to the case?"

Osborne stared at him in astonishment.

"Well, say," spoke he, "you *do* beat all, sometimes! Of course, there's other sides to the case; but Warwick is the center, and my attention is going to stick right there all the way. Once I nab him and get his why and wherefore, all the rest will be plain sailing." [Pg 121]

"We have discussed methods before now," smiled Ashton-Kirk, "and I scarcely think there would be anything gained by going over the ground again. However, I will say this. Nothing is gained by riveting one's attention upon one phase of a matter. The only effect it has is to blind one to everything else; keep your mind open; then you will be ready to accept facts no matter from what point they come."

Osborne smiled broadly.

"You sound good, anyway," said he. "I always did like to listen to you. It's like as if you were reading out of a book. But, just the same, I'm going to stick to Warwick. He's the fellow for my money; the things that we've got on him don't happen just by accident, as you'll find out when the case comes to trial."

The secret agent remained in conversation with the headquarters man for some little time longer. He learned that a deputy coroner had viewed the body and that the inquest was to be held later in the day.

"And say," said Osborne, as they once more went out upon the porch, which was now clear of the newspaper men, "don't think because I don't hold to your way of looking at the matter that I ain't glad to have you in this. The fact is, I'm just as tickled as can be, because you've really got some moves that are rather smooth. I know, because I've watched you work them. But don't waste the good gifts by chucking them all around. Get after Warwick; there's the profitable end of this hunt; take it from me!" [Pg 122]

Osborne then went to speak to the policeman at the gate; and, with Fuller, Ashton-Kirk made his way around upon the north side of the house. Holding to the hedge they slowly skirted the lawn. After a little the secret agent paused.

"So," said he, and Fuller fancied there was a note of surprise in the voice, "our friend Okiu was not drawing entirely upon his imagination. Here," pointing to a ragged place in the top of the hedge, evidently only recently made, "is where Warwick leaped over the fence. His foot caught and he almost fell. See there," pointing, to the opposite side; "the soil is bare and soft and his feet sank deep as he landed."

The lawn was smooth and hard at the front and sides and the grass cut very short; no trace of any sort was to be seen upon it; but at the rear, and especially close to the house, there were a number of bald places.

"Servants are never so careful as the family," said the secret agent.

Here there were numerous tracks, one upon the other. After only a glance, Ashton-Kirk passed on toward the south side of the house. Away from the rear doors the confusion ceased; but some of the footmarks continued. [Pg 123]

"Osborne has been looking about," said Ashton-Kirk, pointing to a broad, blunt-toed impression; "here is his track, apparently coming from the rear door. But he did not put in much time," as the track halted and doubled upon itself. "His coming out at all was merely perfunctory, I suppose; for the fact that the doors and windows were fast before and after the crime was done is enough for him."

They drew nearer to the window which opened from the room in the rear of the library. Then Fuller heard an exclamation, and saw his employer bend close to the ground.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A woman," said Ashton-Kirk.

Fuller examined the ground; sure enough, there were the tracks of a slim, delicately-shod foot, the high heels having sunk deep into the soft earth.

"There's a man's track, too," cried Fuller, as he noted a series of heavier prints.

But Ashton-Kirk made no reply to this; a few rapid steps took him to the window above mentioned, and he searched the low sill.

"It may mean nothing, after all," said Fuller. "Curiosity probably induced some people to venture into the grounds this morning in order——" [Pg 124]

"A man and woman entered the back room by this window," said Ashton-Kirk.

"I don't like to put myself in an attitude of continued protest," said Fuller, "but these low windows are commonly used that way. You see, it's only a step to the lawn."

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"As you say," he agreed, "these low windows are commonly used in that way. But only when the rooms into which they open are also in common use."

"I see what you mean," said Fuller. "This back room is private. Old Nanon said the door was always kept locked." He remained gazing at the other for a moment, apparently pondering the new aspect which this discovery gave the situation. "Well, what do you think it means?"

"A woman and a man entered this room by the window; the latter had been left unfastened because it shows not the slightest indication of having been forced. And when they departed, the

window was refastened—perhaps not at once, but as soon after as possible."

"You think——" Fuller paused, his eyes wide.

"If you heard a slight noise in the back room while you were in the library, some time after the murder, what would you think?" [Pg 125]

"Why, we discussed that this morning," returned Fuller. "It was Drevenoff, beyond a doubt! He waited in the hall after you told him to go to the police station. Then he stole into the rear room and replaced the window catch. And this being so it was he who admitted the woman——"

"And the man?" Ashton-Kirk smiled as he asked the question.

"The man?" Fuller's face grew blank. "Why, the man must have been Warwick! And if it was," after a moment, "why did he require to be admitted to the house by a side window when he could have gone in by the front door?"

If Ashton-Kirk intended to reply to this, he had no time to do so; for at that moment they heard a step behind them and looking around they saw the well-knit figure and expressionless face of Okiu.

CHAPTER IX

[Pg 126]

OKIU ONCE MORE

The Japanese nodded and smiled in his peculiarly meaningless fashion, the black, intent eyes going from one to the other.

"I was getting a breath of air," said he, "and reading a favorite book, when I happened to see you here. I trust you are well?"

"Quite well," returned Ashton-Kirk, with equal politeness.

Okiu laid a heavy book upon a bench, patting it gently as he did so, as though it were a living thing.

"The old books," smiled he, and his voice was soft and purring, "are always hard to handle. The ancient makers did not know their trade as well as these of modern days. But," and the gracefully flexible hands gestured a pardon, "they had something to put into them. The old poets told of wonderful things in most wonderful ways."

"Every age has its own excellences," said the secret agent, "and perhaps mechanical efficiency *is* the high mark of our own."

"I fear that it is," said Okiu, in a gentle, regretful tone. "Even in my own country, once so peaceful and content with the old things, this fierce desire to perform wonders has taken root. Everywhere you see the sign of the times—in the people, in the schools, in the governments, and," here Ashton-Kirk saw the heavy lids quiver over the intent eyes, "in the army and navy." [Pg 127]

"Ah, yes," said the secret agent; "the army and navy. We have heard of them."

"And Russia," said Okiu, softly, "has also heard of them." Fuller, a flush staining his cheeks, was about to reply to this; but a look from his employer restrained him. And after a moment's pause, Okiu went on in another tone: "Last night I offered my services if they were needed; to-day I repeat the offer, sir."

"You are very good," said Ashton-Kirk. "But the police have the matter in hand; and they resent interference, as I have found."

"I have read the morning papers with great attention," said the Japanese. "The matter as a whole is a most singular one. But, no doubt, the arrest of this young man, Warwick, will shed a light upon a great deal that is now shadowy."

"It will explain some things, no doubt."

"Some things!" The Japanese bent his head forward inquiringly. "Then you do not think it will explain all?"

"What I personally think," said Ashton-Kirk, "is of no great consequence." [Pg 128]

The other laughed quietly.

"You are modest," remarked he. "And sometimes, if the real truth were known, the knowledge of the man who says little is of great value." He stood back a trifle, the yellow, finely-kept hands softly clasped; the round, lineless face beaming like that of a child. "And for all I know," he added, purringly, "you may know a great deal."

"You are very kind to think so," said Ashton-Kirk, and the tone was so open and pleasant that Fuller wondered if he had been at fault when he had fancied that he had caught a second meaning in the words of the Oriental.

"I am only a student," resumed Okiu, "but I may be of assistance here. And since there is nothing that I can do for *you*, perhaps the police would——" A gesture finished the sentence.

"Mr. Osborne, who has charge of the matter, is at the gate—or was a few moments ago,"

returned the secret agent.

"Thank you. I will speak to him."

With a nod the Japanese left them and walked around to the front of the house; Ashton-Kirk, without a word of comment upon him or his sayings, bent down and once more studied the foot-prints. One spot in particular seemed to attract him; it was about five feet from the window and the ground seemed a good deal scuffed and trampled. [Pg 129]

"Just here," said the secret agent, "the two who were within there spent some little time in talk. There may have been some sort of an altercation between them; at least the indications are that they stamped about more than is usual in an ordinary talk. After a space the man went around by the rear of the house, for here you see his prints lost in the confusion. But the woman went the other way, as these three sharp impressions indicate," pointing. "However, the grass becomes thicker here and the sod tougher, and the signs fail. We can judge that she continued in that direction only by the fact that we fail to find any returning impressions."

They continued here for a little longer, then they made their way to the rear door and entered the kitchen.

Old Nanon was busily scouring some pans. By the range sat Drevenoff.

"Good-morning," said the secret agent, as he entered.

"Good-morning," they both returned.

Drevenoff arose and stood as though at their service. But the old Breton woman was as severe and erect as ever; her thin-lipped mouth was set firmly, her keen gray eyes looked out from under the thick gray brows.

"I am going to go over the house once more," said Ashton-Kirk, "but," to the old woman, "I shall not ask you to accompany me this time." [Pg 130]

"You are not like the regular police, then," said she. "They had me up and down with them for hours. And the other——"

"The coroner's man," suggested Drevenoff.

"Yes, that is the one. He was even worse than the others. And the questions! Mother of God! I never heard anything like them before."

As the two young men passed through the kitchen Drevenoff spoke again.

"Is there anything new, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Nothing as yet," replied Ashton-Kirk.

"I have read the papers," said the young Pole, "and I am sorry for Mr. Warwick. He was a good-natured man."

"Good-natured!" said the old woman, in a tone of contempt "Ah, yes, good-natured."

"I knew," said Drevenoff, "that he quarreled very often with the doctor toward the last, but I never thought it would come to this."

Here the pan slipped from the old woman's fingers, upset the scouring powder and fell to the floor. Muttering angrily she stooped to pick it up.

"Quarreled!" said Ashton-Kirk. He paused in the doorway and looked at the Pole with interest.

"It was about Miss Stella, I think," said Drevenoff. "To be sure I know very little about it, and——" [Pg 131]

"You know nothing about it, Drevenoff," said the Breton woman. "If you knew Simon Morse," she continued, turning upon the secret agent, "you would not wonder that any one had words with him."

"Ah, no, perhaps not," said Ashton-Kirk, carelessly. "I understand that his temper was not of the sweetest." He was about turning away when he asked of Drevenoff: "How are you getting?"

"I'm better to-day than I have been for a week," was the answer. "But it won't be for long. Before I came here I worked in a construction gang for the Virginia and North Carolina Railroad and the worst of the line was through low country. Sickness is thick down that way."

"I hope I shall not disturb Miss Corbin," said Ashton-Kirk to Nanon. She gestured in the negative.

"She is sitting with Simon in the room opposite the one where he died," said the woman. "She has been there for hours. She does not pray and she does not cry. She just sits and stares."

The secret agent and his aide reached the second floor by the rear stairs; as they paused by a window which overlooked the house occupied by Okiu, Fuller said: [Pg 132]

"There is something which I have been turning over in my mind for the past hour; it occurred to me as soon as we reached here this morning. Do you recall that first drawing which Warwick showed you? It was the one which looked like this."

With his forefinger the young man drew upon the dust of the window glass the design:



"From the very first," said Fuller, "that thing struck me as being a sort of ground plan, so to

Ashton-Kirk looked at the speaker, a curious light in his eyes.

"I wonder," said he, "how far you are from the truth?"

Fuller entered the bathroom to remove the dust from his finger-tips; and as he was toweling briskly away he caught a glimpse, through the partly open door of a closet, of a pair of soiled shoes. In an instant he had them out.

"By George," he breathed, "here's a find."

The shoes were light and made upon a slim, well-shaped last; the heels were high, the instep arched; except for a caking of yellowish looking soil about the edges of the soles they were the quintessence of feminine elegance.

"That is the color of the soil outside there," said Fuller, "and the only person in this house to whom they could belong is Miss Corbin."

Ashton-Kirk took the shoes in his hand and examined them carefully at the bathroom window, which stood open. Fuller, watching him expectantly, saw his lips forming the first words of a reply. But it was never uttered. Something without attracted him, for he put down the shoes and protruded his head from the window. The latter overlooked the north side of the house; and the secret agent leaned from it motionless for some moments.

At length, however, he drew in his head, and Fuller was surprised to see a perplexed look upon the keen face, a baffled eagerness in the singular eyes.

"What is it?" he asked.

Ashton-Kirk indicated the window silently. In turn Fuller looked out, and what he saw almost made him cry out. Okiu stood below; from a window of the room in which Nanon had said she was watching the dead leaned Stella Corbin, and the two were engaged in a low-pitched, earnest conversation.

CHAPTER X

SOME STARTLING INTELLIGENCE

The conversation between Okiu and Miss Corbin was too low voiced for Fuller to catch any of it; and in a few moments he also drew in his head.

"Well," said he, "here's a state of things. First we find tracks which might be hers, then we come upon the shoes which she might have worn when she made them, now we see her engaged in secret conversation with a man whom we know to be——"

But Ashton-Kirk with an impatient gesture stopped him.

"Indications are not proof," said he, as he went into the hall. "Don't forget that *we* ourselves have also made tracks round about the window below, our shoes are also more or less caked with earth, and we have both spoken to Okiu."

"Of course that's so," said Fuller, "but nevertheless the facts are peculiar." He followed the other along the hall and into a room at the front of the house. "But, for that matter, everything having to do with this case is peculiar. I never saw a trail so snarled and crossed and recrossed. First you get the idea of a Japanese. Then Warwick is plunged into the thing so deep that I fail to see how he's ever going to extricate himself. Thirdly, we have enough proof as to Drevenoff's complicity to put him behind the bars; and now the probabilities are that the girl is also concerned."

Ashton-Kirk moved slowly about the room; it was one evidently used by Dr. Morse as a sort of lounging place, for there were sofas and big chairs and many books. At one side near the front window was a narrow antique desk of polished wood; it was open, and its contents had been tumbled about by the police. Ashton-Kirk sat down before it, annoyed and frowning.

"After an Osborne and a deputy coroner have been over the ground, one could drive a herd of mules over it without causing any appreciable difference in its aspect," said he. "They are as heavy handed as draymen."

And while he proceeded with a careful inspection of the contents of the desks, Fuller continued in a complaining tone:

"I'd like to know what we are to make of the whole business. Is it a sort of general conspiracy against Dr. Morse? Are Warwick, Miss Corbin and Drevenoff in league with the Jap for some particular purpose?—are there factions in the matter—each working for its own advantage?—or is every individual laboring for him or herself, and against all the others?"

"Mostly correspondence of a private nature," said Ashton-Kirk, as he ran through the papers.

"Contracts with publishers, notes as to lectures, and negotiations for the delivery of the same."

There were some bits of jewelry of no particular value, a few small books of accounts and various odds and ends.

After some further search he lifted the writing bed of the desk, which was also the lid, and was about to close it; something seemed to attract his attention and he paused.

"Were you ever handed a bulky book and were surprised to find it extremely light?" said he to Fuller. "That oddity of thickness combined with lightness applies also to this lid."

The tip of the long inquiring finger ran along the edge of the lid; the quick, observant glance followed close behind. Instantly Fuller caught the suggestion.

"That's so," said he, eagerly; "it may be hollow."

"On each side of the lock," said Ashton-Kirk, "there is an inlaid strip. Look closely and you will see slight marks at the ends of each where the point of a knife has been inserted from time to time."

As he spoke he brought his own knife into play. Out came one of the inlaid pieces, disclosing a shallow opening. But it was empty. However, the second one revealed a number of sheets of paper. With the aid of the knife blade he managed to work these out; then spreading them upon the desk the two men examined them with attention.

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"Hello," said Fuller, "here is that thing which I said a while ago looked like a ground plan."

"And here are the variously colored versions of the same, just as Warwick described them," said the secret agent. "They are precisely alike, but some are in brown, others in black, still others are in red, while some again are in blue. And here are the ones done upon neutral paper, in white."

"Is it possible, do you think," questioned Fuller, "that anything was meant by the differing colors?"

"There is nothing to convince me that such is not the case," replied Ashton-Kirk. "Chance seldom rules in a matter of consequence."

"Could the change in color not be ascribed merely to the fact that the draughtsman used the one that came first to his hand?"

"It may be. But see here: The design which you say resembles a ground plan differs in color, but is always the same in shape. But here are the other drawings. First there are a number of the crowned woman, all of which are done in brown. Then here are several duplicates of one which I saw the first time we came here. It is a cross, and in each case the down stroke is red and the cross stroke blue. Here the selection of colors never varies, and that there was a reason for clinging to these particular colors seems pretty evident. And that there was an equally good reason for changing the colors in the first design seems to me reasonable."

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"Yes, it would appear so," admitted Fuller, but doubtfully. Then another sheet caught his eye and pointing to it, he inquired: "But what is *that*?"

Ashton-Kirk was reaching for the drawing when the question was asked. The squares of paper were exactly the size of the others, but the design upon it was totally unlike, however, and was done in heavy black. It was a picture of a human heart, and transfixing it were a number of pointed weapons resembling stiletos.

"What a murderous-looking thing!" observed Fuller. "Much like a Black Hand design as illustrated in the evening papers."

Ashton-Kirk did not reply; he bent down over the drawing as though inspecting it closely; then there was a considerable pause in which he did not stir and Fuller, watching, noted the glaze of introspection in the singular eyes. However, this was not for long; he suddenly straightened up; the other designs slowly passed through his hands once more; then he arose, a smile upon his face.

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"More than likely that is it," said he.

"Is—what?" asked Fuller.

But the other allowed the interrogation to go unheeded.

"Away somewhere in our memories," said he, "there are many little bits of information all ticketed and ready to the hand of the person who cares to reach back for them. Those people who go through life with their eyes open possess more of these items of recollection than those who refuse to look beyond the confines of their own affairs. But the impressionable person—the one who makes no conscious effort to retain the things that buzz like bees about him—and yet catches them all much like the record of a phonograph—has the greater resources to draw upon."

"I would not call you one who made no effort," said Fuller. "And things must need be more or less proven to make an impression upon you."

"I make my effort in the particular line along which my interest runs at the time," said Ashton-Kirk. "And it is true that the things which I then accept must be more or less solidly supported by facts. But a newspaper casually picked up, a novel read as a time-killer, a spoken word, the gesture of a stranger in the street, or the unstudied action of a child, may convey a something that will stay with us for life."

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"And just now," said Fuller, curiously, "you came upon one of these little incidents, a sort of unattached thing, which throws some light upon these," and he pointed to the drawings upon the

desk.

Ashton-Kirk nodded; placing the sheets of paper in his coat pocket he closed the desk.

"The police will have little use for these," he said. "Nevertheless, I suppose I had better call Osborne's attention to them."

He spent another half hour in the upper part of the house, but nothing of interest met his eye. Then they descended to the first floor; and as they did so, met Miss Corbin upon the stairs. As she saw them, a startled look came into her face.

"Good-morning," said Ashton-Kirk.

"I did not know that you were here," she said.

"There were a few trifles which I knew only daylight would show us," he returned. "We came more than an hour ago."

"I did not see you go up-stairs," she said; and to Fuller there was a sort of confused resentment in her voice.

"We took the liberty of using the back stairway, that being the nearest," explained the secret agent.

There was a pause. The slim, girlish figure blocked their way; the great dark eyes were fixed upon them observantly. "You were in my uncle's room?" she asked. [Pg 142]

"Yes. We fancied that there might be something there of interest."

"Ah, no doubt," she replied; and again Fuller's attention was called to a peculiar something in her voice. However, she said nothing more; and then as they stood politely aside, she passed on up the stairs.

The telephone bell was ringing furiously as they reached the hall; Osborne hastened from somewhere in the rear to answer it.

There followed the usual one-sided and enigmatic telephone conversation; but this one was interspersed with high-pitched questions, amazed ejaculation and wondering adjectives upon the part of the headquarters man. At last he hung up and turned to Ashton-Kirk.

"Well, what do you think of that?" he cried.

"What is it?"

"That was the chief. He's just had a wire from New York. They got on Warwick's track an hour after hearing from us, and traced him to an up-town hotel."

"Ah! And have they taken him?"

"Two plain clothes men went in and a couple more stood outside. The clerk said yes, he was in his room. Was registered under the name of Gordon. They went up and knocked. No answer. Knocked again. Still no answer. They broke down the door, and found——" [Pg 143]

"What?" asked Fuller.

"That Warwick was gone. On the floor lay a traveling bag like the one he took from here, slashed open and empty, and beside it lay an unknown Japanese—stabbed through the heart."

CHAPTER XI

[Pg 144]

A RAY OF LIGHT

The late editions of the evening-papers ran riot with this latest feature of the Morse case. The New York police, by happy chance, had pounced upon the warm trail as soon as the young Englishman stepped from the train. What followed was so totally unexpected by the authorities that it set them into a violent state of agitation. This they at once communicated to the ever receptive "yellows," and then the public received more than its due share of the developments as served upon scores of front pages.

"Who the Japanese is is a mystery to the police and the hotel people," declared the *Star* in triple-leaded feature type. "How he got into the hotel and up to Warwick's room is, as yet, a thing which, so they claim, has baffled the best efforts of all concerned. But what he meant to do when he reached the room is in the opinion of this journal a matter that will prove infinitely more taxing upon the wit of the detective department."

Fuller read column after column of such comment. The various people who had figured in the matter were separately interviewed and their ideas were given much space. The railway porter, who had sprung into fame by recognizing Warwick and who had had the awesome experience of carrying the much spoken of leather bag from the day coach to the cab outside, related his feelings when he later became aware of his patron's identity, and told of his hunt for the policemen who had given him the young man's description. The cabman also talked thrillingly, as did the clerk and the bell-boy who led the detectives to the door of Warwick's room. As for the police, they appeared to have maintained an attitude of much wisdom. What utterances they condescended to make were of a peculiarly Delphic character; and, as is usual, they hinted at [Pg 145]

astounding revelations which limited periods of time would bring forth.

"They are now deep in the case," stated the *Standard*, hopefully, "and a little time may work wonders. A half dozen experienced man hunters are running out the various fine threads which stretch away in as many directions. Each of them has a hopeful outlook and is confident of ultimate success. And this intelligent force has been recruited by Osborne, a local man of acknowledged parts, who is handling the parent stem, so to speak, of this exotic crime growth. Mr. Osborne will familiarize himself with this new phase of the case and will then be ready to take up his task here with renewed vigor."

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"For experienced people," commented Fuller, as he cast the sheets from him, "I think the publishers of newspapers are the most gullible in the world. Day after day they apparently stand for the same old explanation—day after day they seem to be taken in by the same old conventional lies."

A short man with a bulging chest and surprisingly broad shoulders sat opposite the speaker. He stroked his prominent jaw as he remarked:

"They are as wise as any one else, and they feed that sort of pabulum to the public because they think it wants it. They know how the regular police work; but they say nothing because they don't think their readers are interested in hearing about it. The fellow who takes an evening paper home to read after business would much rather believe that Osborne is a remarkable detective than just a fair mechanic who was dragged away, by ward politics, from his natural job of gas fitting."

"I suppose you are right, Burgess," replied Fuller. "There is more interest in the first, I admit. But between you and me, I don't think Osborne ever cleared up a case yet that he didn't get the rights of just by sheer luck."

"And he knows it," said Burgess. "And what's more, he is firmly convinced that that is the only way a case *can* be cleared. He trusts to luck in every instance."

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"I expected that you would be sent to New York to look up this hotel matter," said Fuller, as he sat back in Ashton-Kirk's lounging chair and stretched his legs out in luxurious comfort.

"Oh, I've been looking up that fellow Karkowsky," said Burgess. "The boss sent O'Neill over on the Warwick end. O'Neill is pretty smooth, you know, and is just the fellow to get along with the regular police, and work all they know out of them—if there *is* anything."

"How does Karkowsky look?" questioned the other.

"I haven't got sight of him yet. Seems to be a queer sort of bird and flies only at night. And now that the police have got so interested in looking for him, he's apt to get more difficult to out-guess than before."

"Have they muddled up the trail?"

"In the usual way," with a disgusted wave of the hand. "Brass band methods, you know. They follow him with drums beating and then wonder why they don't catch him."

At this moment there was a step at the door, and Ashton-Kirk entered. He wore evening clothes with an overcoat over them; a silk hat was on his head, and he carried his gloves and stick as though he had just come in. There was only one light burning in the room, and it threw his gigantic shadow upon the wall.

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"How are you?" he said to Burgess. "Anything to report?"

"There it is in the envelope, as far as I have gone," replied Burgess. "But there is nothing very vital. Karkowsky seems as elusive as any one that I know of."

Ashton-Kirk nodded. He took up the envelope and opened it. There were several closely typed sheets and his eye ran over them quickly. The report was as follows:

"Notes on Karkowsky"

"The keeper of the harness shop at Fourth Street and Corinth Avenue is of the name of Andrew Brekling. He is a Pole and has been in this country for five years. Karkowsky was unknown to his landlord in every way, save that of a lodger. He rented a third-story room and lived in it almost a month. He had few callers. The harness-maker does not remember any one of the name of Drevenoff, and is quite sure that no young man of the description which you gave me of Drevenoff ever came there.

"I made a great many inquiries in the neighborhood, but learned little. A grocer told me that Karkowsky purchased many articles from him and appeared to have plenty of means; he also said that while the Pole was voluble upon most things he never spoke of himself or his affairs.

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"Then I found from the harness-maker that Karkowsky had spent a good bit of his time at a branch of the city library which was no great distance away from his lodgings. Thinking this might, on an off chance, turn some light on the matter, I went there. The young woman in charge recalled Karkowsky perfectly, although she did not know his name. He had always been good-natured and smiling and always read the one kind of books—scientific philosophy of the most modern type. Once he told her that all the other books in the place should be burnt."

Having reached the end of the report, Ashton-Kirk took off his coat and hat and laid the report

upon the table.

"Have you made any further attempts?" he asked of Burgess.

"I've been hunting for some trace of him all day," replied the man. "But it's tough work. He went off without any one seeing him, and I haven't a thing to dig a claw into."

"Was there nothing left in his room—nothing that would indicate what his intentions were?"

"Not a shred of anything. You see, he had rented the place ready furnished. And the police were there ahead of me." [Pg 150]

"Take the matter up again to-morrow; if nothing develops let me know, and we will make a fresh beginning over the same route. Mr. Karkowsky has been, so it appears, an important figure in this matter, and it would be just as well to know where we can put our hands upon him when we want him."

After a brief conversation relating to the details of the work that Burgess had done, that gentleman departed. Ashton-Kirk rolled a cigarette and sat down in the big chair which Fuller had vacated. Then he drew toward him a number of books which lay upon the table.

"These," said he, "were kindly loaned me by Father O'Leary of the Church of the Holy Redeemer. And the information they contain is quaint and most valuable."

"They are rather out of your line, are they not?" questioned the other, as he took up one of the volumes and looked at the title. It was a "Life of St. Simon Stock."

"Nothing is out of my line," said Ashton-Kirk. "I have, as you know, seized some of my most helpful assistance from what might be regarded as a most unpromising source." He took the little book from his aide's hand and ran over its pages. "In what way," asked he, "can a biography of St. Simon Stock help me to save the United States from an international embarrassment and incidentally give me more information upon the subject of the murder of Dr. Morse?" [Pg 151]

Fuller shook his head.

"I don't know," said he. "But if you say it will do so, I'm perfectly willing to believe it."

The other smiled.

"You have been with me for several years, Fuller," he said, "and your clerical work is very complete. Your investigations, when you are given a definite point to work upon, are also satisfying. But you stop there. I should think that by this time you would have begun to weigh the different problems which come up and reason them out for yourself."

Again Fuller shook his head.

"I've got a pretty good kind of a brain," said he; "people who know have considered me a first-class accountant, and I'm a perfect storehouse for certain kinds of facts. But it's not your kind of brain; for ages of effort would pass and not once would I dream of trying to gain information as to the death of a resident of Eastbury from a parcel of books like these."

"I suppose you are right, my boy," said Ashton-Kirk; "different types of mind have different tendencies." He continued fluttering the leaves of the book, the pale smoke of the cigarette drifting formlessly about him. Then he went on: "Perhaps it does seem rather an extraordinary thing to expect a monk of the thirteenth century to aid in solving the present problem. But let us go further into the matter and we may possibly get some light." [Pg 152]

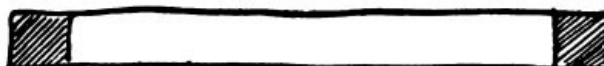
He laid the burnt end in the shell upon the table and rolled another cigarette; and while he did so, he talked.

"Simon Stock was an Englishman, and was a native of Kent. At the age of twelve he is said to have left his home and lived in a hollow tree. The Oriental idea had penetrated the West, and Europe was filled with anchorites. Some monks of the Order of Mount Carmel entered England from the Holy Lands and Simon, now a man of mature years, joined them. There is a legend that he was directed to do so by a supernatural agency, but Catholic scholars seem to pay little attention to this. At any rate time passed and the Kentish man, famous for great piety and virtue, was finally made general of the White Friars, a name by which the Carmelite Order was known.

"Again legend plays its part. As he knelt one day in prayer in his monastery at Cambridge, the Virgin Mary is said to have manifested herself to him and presented him with the scapular."

"I have a sort of hazy notion as to what that is," said Fuller, "but not enough to work on."

"It was originally a sort of habit which the monks wore over their other garments," replied Ashton-Kirk; "but from St. Simon Stock's day it altered in appearance. It became two squares of cloth fastened by two pieces of tape, and was worn around the neck by those persons who desired to benefit by its privileges. When stretched out on a flat surface its appearance," went on the speaker, as he took up a pencil and drew a few rapid lines upon the margin of a newspaper, "was something like this:" [Pg 153]



Fuller's eyes opened in wonder.

"Why," he cried, "that is exactly like the drawing sent so frequently to Dr. Morse!"

Ashton-Kirk laughed quietly.

"Already," said he, "you are beginning to see the use of Father O'Leary's books. And, perhaps, as we go on, your vision will become wider still." There was a moment's pause, then the speaker continued: "There is another scapular beside that of St. Simon; it is the Trinitarian, which was brought forward by an order of that name, founded by John de Matha, and Felix de Valois for the redemption of captives. These religious wore a white habit with a cross upon the breast. A Theatine nun named Ursula Benincasa originated still another scapular, that of the Immaculate Conception, which is of light blue. An Italian order, called the Servites, introduced another, this time of black; and the Sisters of Charity of Paris brought forward still another—of scarlet."

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Ashton-Kirk's pencil tapped upon the drawing which he had made upon the margin of the newspaper.

"Dr. Morse had this design sent to him in all the colors named. First came the brown, then there was blue, white, black and red. When the gamut, so to speak, of colors had been run, he received the picture of the crowned woman, done in brown. This is now very easy to explain. The sender for some reason had called attention to the various sorts of scapulars and was beginning all over again. The Carmelite scapular is of brown and bears a picture of the Virgin Mary—hence the woman wearing the crown. Then came the cross which I was shown upon my first visit to the Morse house; its down stroke of blue and cross stroke of red is the same as the device upon the white scapular of the Trinitarians. But, however, all this would never have been dreamed of by me if it had not been for the third picture as found by us in the secret drawer of Dr. Morse's desk."

With the pencil, Ashton-Kirk sketched a human heart, transfixed by numerous daggers.

"When this caught my eye," he continued, "I could feel the stirring of a memory—one of those which I spoke of as being ticketed and ready to hand," with a smile. "Was it the heart which awoke this dim feeling of familiarity? No. Was it the daggers? Again, no. Then it must be the general idea—a heart pierced by daggers. At this I felt the memory struggle desperately in the brain cell; then suddenly it broke out. I had seen the design upon a bit of laced card in the show window of a religious goods store, when a boy. I recalled the title, printed at the bottom of the card, perfectly. It was 'The Seven Dolours.' The memory of this was specially keen, for I had not known what was meant by dolours, and had gone to a dictionary and found that they represented sorrows or pangs. This all came back like a flash, and instantly I counted the daggers transfixing the heart in the drawing. They were exactly seven."

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"I was now convinced that the whole matter of the drawings had a religious aspect, and looked at them with a different eye. The cross was self-evident; the crowned woman could be none other than the Virgin Mary. However, it was not until I had consulted Father O'Leary that I got to the bottom of the matter. With the other things made plain to him, he instantly recognized this as the outline of the scapular," tapping the marginal sketch upon the newspaper.

For a few moments Fuller was silent. Then he said:

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"That was a clever stroke, and it might go a long distance toward making some other things plain. But," and he shook his head in a rather hopeless way, "I confess that I don't see the reason for all these things being sent to Dr. Morse. In fact, there *doesn't* seem to be any sort of reason *in* it."

Ashton-Kirk arose.

"There is seldom any reason in things which we do not understand," said he. "But it often happens that when we do come to understand them then we find the reasons behind them solid and far-reaching enough."

CHAPTER XII

[Pg 157]

KARKOWSKY GETS SOME ATTENTION

The next morning, contrary to Fuller's expectations, Ashton-Kirk did not start out on a fresh trail. The discovery, as developed the night before, was so curious that the young man was quite sure that it would immediately lead to more surprising revelations. So he was greatly astonished when he reached the old-fashioned house to learn from Stumph that the secret agent had gone into the country.

"He took his fishing rods," explained Stumph, "and went to Jordan's Mills. He said he'd be back to-morrow."

"He's gone down there to think things out," Fuller told himself, other occasions of the same sort fresh in his mind. "A pipe, a green bank under a tree, and a painted float to watch, are fine things to make thoughts run. They just seem to drift along with the current."

Sure enough, the next afternoon Ashton-Kirk came back; there was a keen, vigorous look about him that told of a freshening such as his aide had pictured. He heard what Burgess had to say regarding his hunt for Karkowsky as soon as he arrived, for the man was waiting for him.

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"He's gone completely, so far as I can make out," the broad-shouldered man informed him. "There's not a trace to be found in any direction. I've questioned everybody I could find in the section who was acquainted with him, but they knew only his name and thought him a pretty

good sort of fellow."

Ashton-Kirk said little in reply; but his manner showed that he was far from satisfied. After dinner he smoked and walked about his study. Then he went to his room.

A half hour later a tall, cadaverous-looking person, in a black coat and with a silk hat, the nap of which was well worn, came down the stairs. To Stumph he said:

"I shall be back in a few hours, perhaps. But should any one call, say that I will see him in the morning."

"Very well, sir," said Stumph, gravely.

It was just fading from the late twilight to the early shadows of evening when the cadaverous man turned the corner and headed toward Fourth Street. His shoulders were bent and his gait was shuffling; the thread gloves which he wore were broken in places here and there and the black coat was a trifle short in the sleeves.

But he attracted little or no attention, for in that neighborhood shabby characters were frequent enough. When once he got into his stride it was astonishing to see how he covered the ground, for all the shuffle. At Fourth Street and Corinth Avenue he halted and looked about. [Pg 159]

It was now dark; the street lights were throwing their pale blue rays into the hidden corners of the dirty highways; upon stoop and cellar doors, throngs of soiled-looking men and women were congregated; hordes of children were all about, and their cries were shrill and incessant.

"Brekling?" said a man with a peddler's cart. "Oh, yes, his place is there on the corner."

A yellow gaslight burned dimly in the harness shop when the man in the worn top hat entered. There was a heavy smell of leather and oil; the floor was littered with scraps, and the broken parts of many sets of harness were stacked up in the rear. A small man with round spectacles and a dirty apron came forward; he had been reading a Polish newspaper under the dim light.

"Well, sir," said he, inquiringly, and with a marked accent, "what can I do for you this evening?"

"You have rooms to rent, I believe," said the other in a shaky sort of voice.

Instantly the small man was all attention. He put down his newspaper and beamed through his glasses at the stranger.

"I have one room," said he. "It is on the third floor, but it is a good room and well furnished. Will you look at it?" [Pg 160]

"Yes, if you please," quavered the man with the bent shoulders.

The little harness-maker lighted a candle and led the way to a staircase at the side which opened into the street. A troop of children had possession of it and their shrill outcries as they ran up and down were deafening. Like a fury the Pole ran among them, scattering them right and left.

"But they are good children," he told the prospective tenant, "and they make very little noise."

The room was small and had a window opening upon a court; the furniture was scant and the floor was bare.

"Once," confessed the little harness-maker, "I had a carpet for it; but there were so many holes in it at last, that I took it up. Some day," hopefully, "I shall get another."

The other gave a glance about.

"I shall take it—if it is not too much."

"Six dollars a month is not too much," said the tradesman landlord. "It is worth more."

"I'll give you five," stated the other, in his shaky voice.

The Pole gestured his despair; the candle went up and down and the two huge shadows jiggled grotesquely upon the wall.

"It is worth six," he said. "The last tenant paid that much without a word." [Pg 161]

"He was rich," suggested the other. "No one but a man of means would pay that."

"He was not rich," protested Brekling. "He was as poor as a rat. I know that, for he was a countryman of mine, and there are no rich Poles."

The man with the bent shoulders counted out five dollars in small coin upon a table.

"I will pay a month in advance," said he.

The little man looked at the pile of silver for a moment; unable to resist, he said:

"Very well, I will take it. But the room is worth more."

He scraped up the money and put it away in his pocket; the other took off his hat and laid it upon the table and looked about with the manner of a man at home.

"Have you any other lodgers?" he asked.

"There are three families on the floor below, and then there are a few mechanics on this. But they are all decent people," earnestly. "Sometimes they take a little too much, but not often. You will find that they are quiet enough." Then after a look at his new tenant, "You will move in at once?"

"To-morrow. And now, if you don't mind, I should like to be left alone."

"Of course," said the little harness-maker. "Of course." [Pg 162]

And so he went out and down the stairs to his shop. If he had been a curious man and had loitered on the landing and put his eye to the keyhole, he would have witnessed an unusual sight. For the door had no sooner closed behind him than the cadaverous-looking man altered in appearance like an enchanted prince in a fairy-tale. The bent shoulders disappeared, the tread as he moved swiftly about the room was firm and noiseless, the face became keen and resolute, the eyes alert and eager. He drew off the long black coat and with sleeves tucked up began a searching examination of the room. The closet, the bureau, the wash-stand came first; then the edges of the floor. The contents of a small sheet-iron stove were dragged out; amid the coal ash was much burnt paper, but apparently nothing that brought the searcher any reward. After about an hour, he stood in the center of the room, defeated.

"Friend Karkowsky is a careful man," he muttered. "There is not a scrap of anything."

He put on his coat and hat and left the room. Once outside the door, the shuffle reappeared in his gait, the cadaverous look returned, and the shoulders bent wearily. In the shop, the harness-maker was once more engaged with the Polish newspaper; he looked up as his new tenant came in.

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"Your last lodger was not careful," complained the latter in his shaky voice. "The room is in quite a state."

"But I will fix it," announced the Pole accommodatingly. "I always treat my lodgers right; never has one complained. But *I* often had to complain. Now, that same man—the one that had your room last—gave me much trouble. Would you believe it, the police came at last!"

"Ah, yes. He was a disturber."

"No, no. Indeed, he was very quiet. Even when the other lodgers made a noise he did not get mad. The only person he ever quarreled with was Jackson."

"And who is Jackson?"

"He is the postman. It was something about letters that they fought over. Once Karkowsky called the letter man a dunce. But Jackson only laughed."

An hour later, in his study, Ashton-Kirk took down the telephone receiver and asked for a certain number. When he was connected he asked:

"Is that Postal Station Seven?"

"It is," came the reply.

"Can you give me the address of Postman Jackson, attached to that station?"

"No. But I can tell you where you can get him if you want him to-night."

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"I'll be obliged to you."

"Call up Wonderleigh's place; he's sure to be there at this hour, playing pinochle in the back room. The number's 35-79 Parkside."

In a few moments the secret agent had Mr. Jackson on the wire.

"I want to speak to you about Karkowsky, lately on your route," said he.

There was a laugh at the other end; then the postman answered:

"This ain't the police?"

"Not exactly, but something of the sort."

"Well, I've kind of expected that somebody would ask me about that old scout; they seem to have asked everybody else."

"Would you mind telling me about the trouble you had with him regarding some letters?"

"Oh, that! Sure. You see, Karkowsky for the first while that he lived at Brekling's place received a letter a couple of times a week that always got my attention. It was in a woman's writing—kind of a foreign writing that was mighty hard to make out. It was always a brown, square envelope, and it was always post-marked at Central Station. I couldn't tell you all this about most of the letters I handle, but this one gave me so much trouble at first finding out what the address was that I knew it by heart.

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"One day I handed one of them to Karkowsky, and he threw it back at me.

"'That's not for me,' he said. And sure enough it wasn't. It was for another party a couple of blocks away—a party that was new to my route. This same mistake happened a couple of times—me being so used to the letters that I never looked at 'em twice—and every time old Karkowsky got his back up. One day I kidded him about losing his girl and said I guessed some other fellow had won her out, seeing that he was getting all the letters, and Karkowsky swore. He called me some hard names that day and threatened to report me. So I cut out the jokes."

"When the letters began arriving for the second person they ceased for Karkowsky?"

"Right away. He never got another one."

There was a moment's silence; then the secret agent asked:

"Can you recall this other person's name?"

"Oh, yes. It's Kendreg. He lives on the top floor of 424 Lowe Street."

After Ashton-Kirk had hung up he sat for a few moments, a peculiar expression on his face. Then he pressed one of the row of buttons. While awaiting a response, he penciled a few lines upon a tablet; when Fuller came in he tore off the sheet and handed it to him. [Pg 166]

"Give this to Burgess," he requested. "Have him look this person up quietly. Tell him to work under cover as much as possible; and to especially note if he has any women visitors."

"Very well," said Fuller; and turning he left the room.

CHAPTER XIII

[Pg 167]

OLD NANON SPEAKS

Ashton-Kirk was at breakfast next morning when Fuller entered.

"I beg pardon," said the assistant, "but I've just had a call from Burgess, and I thought you'd like to hear what he had to say."

"Good. Let's have it."

"He went to 424 Lowe Street last night after I gave him your instructions. It's a large building, once used as a factory, but now rearranged as an apartment house. There was a gas-lighted sign over the door which said rooms might be had. Burgess took one on the fourth floor, and in a conversation with the caretaker mentioned that he had a friend, a Pole, who had lived there.

"Do you know Kendreg?' says the caretaker. 'He's right across the hall from you.'

"But Burgess says no, that's not the name. And when the man went away he waited a while, and then knocked at the door opposite. The person who opened in answer to the knock was a middle-aged man, stout and with grayish hair. Burgess says he was enough like the description we had of Karkowsky to be his twin brother."

Ashton-Kirk set down his coffee cup, a smile upon his face. [Pg 168]

"It is Karkowsky himself, just as I expected," said he. "But," glancing at Fuller, "what happened then?"

"Burgess merely asked if he could bother him for a match, which the stout man provided willingly enough, and then promptly closed his door."

"Nothing more?"

"That is all, so far."

"What do the papers report that is new?"

"Nothing, except that Osborne has returned and will now plunge into the intricacies of the case with renewed zeal. They seem to suspect him of having made wonderful discoveries of some sort."

"Have you heard anything from Purvis?"

"Yes. He reports that no one but Drevenoff has made any movement away from the house in Fordham Road, Eastbury. And that *he* has merely walked about a little, apparently for exercise, or gone to the nearest post-box to mail some letters."

"Dr. Morse is to be buried to-day, I believe?"

"Yes, at about noon."

It was at that hour that Stumph entered the study.

"There is a woman below, sir," said he. "She is quite old—and quite remarkable. She wishes to speak to you, and says that I'm to inform you that she is from Dr. Morse's." [Pg 169]

"Bring her up."

Old Nanon came in a few moments later, grim, erect and angular. Her keen eyes seemed somewhat sunken, and her wrinkled face more gaunt; but her glance was as sharp as ever, and her mouth was set in the same stern line.

"You are surprised," she said, when she had seated herself and studied him for a moment. "You thought that because Simon Morse was being carried to the grave that I, an old servant of his family, would remain near him to the last."

"It's the sort of thing that's usually expected," said the secret agent.

"No one who knows would expect it from me," said the old woman. "No one who knows would expect it from me," she repeated, her lips forming the words slowly, and her gray head swaying from side to side. "I knew him from a child. He was evil—possessed of evil; and what he was in the last days of his life, so he was always."

Ashton-Kirk said nothing; he remained gazing at the old Breton woman, his hands clasping his knee and his head tilted so as to rest upon the back of his chair.

"There was never any other in the family like him," she continued. "Not one. I have known them for four generations. His great-grandmother it was who employed me first; I was a girl then, and [Pg 170]

she was good to me. They were *all* good to me, and I remained with them and served them as well as I could. But there must have been something wicked in them somewhere, something hidden and black, and in this son it showed itself." Here her voice lowered and she leaned toward the secret agent. "In Brittany there is a belief that there are those gifted with a strange vision. Have I that, I wonder? Sometimes I have thought so; for it was I alone who saw Simon Morse entirely as he was. To be sure, others have heard him blaspheme, and still others have read his books. But I alone knew him for what he was."

The secret agent still sat attentively silent; if he wondered what all this would eventually lead to, he made no sign.

"I have always been thankful," proceeded Nanon, "that only one of the family was so cursed. All those who had gone before were mild and religious and gentle. And because of this I felt that I should not desert this tainted one, but remain and strive with him, even if it did no good." She paused for a moment, and the bony old hands, with their thick blue veins, were locked tightly together. "Yes," she resumed, "I was always thankful that only one of them was evil of heart, but now," whisperingly, "I am not so sure that I have even that to be thankful for."

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A faint wrinkle showed itself between the eyes of Ashton-Kirk; but other than this he made no sign that he was disturbed.

"Love," said the old woman, after a few moments, "is the one thing which is thought to be the corrector of what is bad. Through love, I have heard it said, the fair-hearted influences the wrong-doer. It is as a bridge between them, over which is passed the saving grace. That is what every one says. But," and there was a note in her voice which was almost savage, "is it true? And if it works one way, why should it not work the other? If good passes between two people because they love each other, why should not evil? And," very slowly, "Simon Morse and his niece were much attached to each other."

Through the open window, the roar of midday arose from the street. The throaty voices of peddlers, the grind of wheels and the warning cries of drivers were ceaseless; and below all this was an undertone, a subdued murmurous undertone such as is made by cautious creatures, each with a private design.

"Sometimes," said the old woman, "things are expected, and when they come they create no surprise. And, again, there are others which are so unexpected that they all but crush one to the earth."

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

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"Something unexpected has happened," he said.

"You shall hear all for yourself," said the old servant. "It was for that purpose that I came to you." She settled herself rigidly in her chair, upright, unbending, full of purpose. "I have read the newspapers," she said. "I have heard the police and the coroner's deputy. They have all said much, and in the end their talk comes to this: Philip Warwick murdered Simon Morse."

"Perhaps," and her gray eyes searched his face, "you too think so. But no matter. I tell you, *and I know*, that he did not do this thing."

There was a moment's silence, then Ashton-Kirk said, quietly:

"Then who did?"

She gestured with both hands.

"Because I say that I know that *he* did not," she replied, "does it follow that I must know who *did*?" She waited for an answer, but as none came, she went on: "You have heard that Philip Warwick and Stella Corbin were to be married? I thought so. He is a very boyish fellow; he was proud of her and told every one. I was glad when I heard it, for I thought them well mated. But Simon was not pleased; the young man perhaps would not follow where he led; at any rate he disliked him. They quite frequently had high words; but Mr. Warwick never allowed himself to go too far in his resentment—at least never until lately. The day that you first visited the house, they almost came to blows; and on the night that Simon was killed, he actually struck his secretary."

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"This was not told to the police," said the secret agent. "Why?"

"I was the only one that saw it," said the old woman, "and I did not tell of it because I knew that it would only make them suspect the young man all the more."

"Go on," said Ashton-Kirk.

"This is how I came to be a witness to what passed between them. I had gone to the front door to answer a ring, but it was only a person to inquire about some one who had lately left a house across the street. As I closed the door, I saw that of the library ajar; and through the opening I saw Dr. Morse and Mr. Warwick standing facing each other."

"Very well, then," Mr. Warwick was saying, 'it shall be done in spite of you.'

"And with that the other lifted his hand, and I heard the sound of the blow even where I stood."

"Did Warwick return it?"

"I think not. I did not wait to see, however, but went on along the hall. I turned, though, as I reached the end, and saw Mr. Warwick step out of the library and walk toward the stairs. He had gone up perhaps three steps when he stopped and was about to turn back; but, though he was fairly shaking with anger, he thought better of it and went on up to his room."

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"At what time was this?"

"Immediately after dinner." If such a thing were possible, the old woman sat more erect than ever, the craggy brows bent over the sharp eyes, and the voice sank a tone lower. "And as Philip Warwick went up the stairs, I saw Miss Stella come out of the room opposite the library; she stood looking after him—and on her face was a look which I had never noticed there before. She had seen what had happened, and for some reason was glad of it.

"There was nothing more, until I left the front door some time later and went to the kitchen to make the coffee. Then I heard something on the back stairs. Thinking it might be Drevenoff, taken bad, I opened the door. But it was Miss Stella and Mr. Warwick. They stood on the landing, and were talking in low tones. I could not help overhearing what they said; and I remember it because I have repeated it over and over to myself a thousand times since then.

"'Is it possible?' Mr. Warwick said. 'Have you really got it?'

"I did not hear what was said in answer; and then he spoke again.

"'But how in the world did you manage it? I know he thinks a great deal of you, but I never dreamed that he'd give——'" [Pg 175]

"Here she must have stopped him by putting her fingers to his lips, a way that she had.

"'Don't stop to talk,' I heard Miss Stella say. 'You must go at once. And no matter what you hear, do not return until I send you word.'

"Then I closed the door softly, as they stole down-stairs; and after a little again came the soft footfalls, this time going up the stairs."

There was a pause, and then the old woman crossed her hands in her lap, her eyes looking sternly into the face of Ashton-Kirk.

"It was only a few minutes after that," she said, "that I found Simon Morse dead in his chair."

CHAPTER XIV

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OKIU WRITES A LETTER

Ashton-Kirk, a short time after the old servant woman left, rang for Fuller. When the latter entered he found his employer writing a telegram.

"Have you heard anything from O'Neill?" asked the secret agent.

"This morning—yes. He merely said that he was still trying to strike the trail of Philip Warwick."

Ashton-Kirk held out the telegram.

"Send him this," said he, briefly.

Fuller glanced at the yellow sheet, and then whistled, amazedly; however, he said nothing, but instantly left the room.

The morning mail lay neglected upon the table. Some were sharp, businesslike envelopes, bearing downright statements as to the senders' identity; others were big and square, while a number were small and dainty. A few were remarkable after the same manner that an oddly dressed man is remarkable; and to one of these latter the eye of the secret agent was first attracted.

"It's hardly to be wondered at," he mused, as he held up the envelope and studied its characteristics, "that the postman should have mentally marked the letters received by Karkowsky. There seems an individuality about each piece of mail that must almost unconsciously impress the person handling it. A strange style of handwriting is like a strange face; the very manner of sticking on a stamp might give very clear indications as to another's mental process." [Pg 177]

He cut open the flap of the envelope; when he unfolded the sheet enclosed, he glanced at the signature; then he lay back in his chair, a smile upon his face.

"Okui," he murmured. "I was beginning to wonder what his first move would be."

Still smiling, he held the letter up once more, and read:

"MY DEAR MR. ASHTON-KIRK:

"I was most happy to meet you upon several occasions recently. But, believe me, I had no actual realization of what you were, or I should have been overcome.

"To think that you know my own language, that you have studied the literature of Nippon, that you have even written a most delightful appreciation of it. And all the time I was ignorant of this!

"It grieves me to think that you might consider me amiss in this, and so I try to make amends. May I not greet you at my house? I can show you some Japanese and Korean manuscripts which no Caucasian has ever laid eyes on before; and also I have rare books which may afford you some pleasure to see." [Pg 178]

"I should be gratified to have you call to-night. If it can be managed, have some one telephone me. And, in the formal way of my country,

"I am, most honorable sir, at your feet,

"OKIU."

For some time Ashton-Kirk lay back in his big chair, the smile still on his lips. Then Fuller came in.

"O'Neill will be astonished when he gets that wire," he said.

Ashton-Kirk tossed him the letter.

"Answer this," said he, lazily. "Say that I'll come."

Fuller read the letter through without comment; then he went to the telephone and did as directed. When he had finished, he turned to the other.

"The Jap has made up his mind to something," he said.

"He made up his mind upon our first meeting," replied Ashton-Kirk. "He has now decided what he will do."

Fuller shook his head.

"Look out for him," he warned. "He's dangerous."

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Ashton-Kirk yawned. "The bird or beast of prey is marked by nature," he said. "And there is no movement they make that is not in itself a warning."

There was nothing more said for some little time. The secret agent read his mail, and indicated upon each letter back what his answer was to be. These he passed to Fuller, who read them over and arranged them for answering. But after finishing this work the young man did not retire at once, as was his custom. He hesitated for a few moments, and then said:

"Don't think I'm taken with the idea that I can run this case better than you; but last night after I left here, I got to going over the matter, and there are some things about it that troubled me."

Ashton Kirk nodded.

"You are not exactly alone in that," he answered. "Several times I have seen what I fancied must be the bottom of the affair; but in almost the next breath, something happened which changed my mind. This morning I was ready to indicate to Osborne what steps to take to secure the assassin of Dr. Morse; but again I received information that brought me to a standstill."

"You found that you were mistaken as to the guilty person?" asked Fuller curiously.

But the other did not reply to this.

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"Just what are the things which you say troubled you?" he asked.

"First of all, the fact that this fellow Drevenoff has the free run of the Eastbury house. Suppose Warwick did not, after all, make off with the state paper you are seeking. Very likely it is still in the house. You know that the Pole is searching for it; at any moment he may find it, and if he does, how easy it would be for him to slip it in an envelope and mail it to a confederate."

"There is very little danger of his coming upon it now," said Ashton-Kirk quietly.

Fuller looked at him swiftly.

"You have learned, then, that it is not in the house!" he said.

Ashton-Kirk shook his head.

"As to that," said he, "I am not sure. But," and the singular eyes half closed as he spoke, "perhaps it does not make a great deal of difference."

CHAPTER XV

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ALMOST

After dinner that evening, Ashton-Kirk looked over the last edition of the papers. About eight o'clock he arose, stretched himself contentedly, and then went to a stand, a drawer of which he pulled open. From this he took several black, squat-looking pistols of the automatic type, and one by one balanced them in his hand. Selecting the one which struck his fancy, he slipped it into his pocket and prepared to go out.

"Shall you leave any word, sir?" asked Stumph, in the lower hall.

The secret agent paused for a moment. Then he scribbled something on a card and gave it to the man.

"If I do not return by morning, get Fuller on the telephone and read this to him," said he.

"Very good, sir."

At the station Ashton-Kirk was forced to wait some little time for a train; and when, finally, he

rang the bell at Okiu's door in Eastbury, it was a trifle past nine o'clock.

There was a delay after he rang; the house was gloomy; not a light showed at any of the windows; from all indications it may have been deserted. But through the tail of his eye he caught a slight stirring of a curtain at a window upon the lower floor.

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"They seem to be very careful," mused the secret agent. "I am much favored, as, apparently, they do not admit any one who is not thoroughly convincing."

After another brief space, the door was opened. Ashton-Kirk saw a dim hall and a short man of enormous girth.

"Mr. Okiu?" asked the secret agent.

"He is at home," replied the fat man. "Who are you?"

The secret agent gave his name, and at once the man stood aside.

"I will tell him that you are here," said he, as Ashton-Kirk entered. "Will you sit down?"

He indicated a hall chair with much politeness; but Ashton-Kirk nodded and remained standing. There was a single incandescent lamp burning in the hall, and its yellow rays barely lit up the dark corners. At the end was a railed stairway which led to the rooms above; and along the hall there was a dark array of tightly-closed doors. However, these things got but a glance from the secret agent. The Japanese who had admitted him attracted his notice.

This latter had a huge, round head and a fat, brutal face, and his immense body gave him the appearance of an overfed animal. His skin glistened with a high-smelling oil; when he moved, its scent was particularly heavy and unpleasant. Everything about him seemed to promise inertia, ponderous movements, shortness of breath. But this promise was not kept, for he passed down the hall with a light, quick step; then he sprang at the staircase and went bounding up like an enormous rubber ball.

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There was something in this so unexpected, so utterly tiger-like, that Ashton-Kirk felt the nerves of his scalp prickle.

"Rather a formidable sort," he murmured, and as he spoke his hand went to his outer coat pocket as though to assure himself that the squat, black pistol was still there. "One might hold him off and hit him to pieces; but let him break down a guard and come to grappling and he'd afford astonishing entertainment."

In a few moments the fat man reappeared. He paused half-way down the stairway, and the light rays were reflected in his slanting eyes as he fixed them upon the secret agent.

"You will come with me, please," he said.

Unhesitatingly Ashton-Kirk followed him up the stairs and along a hall upon the second floor. A door at the rear stood open, and at a round table, under a powerful light, sat Okiu. At sight of the visitor this latter arose, a welcoming smile upon his placid face.

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"Sir," said he, "you are too good. I am delighted beyond measure."

Ashton-Kirk shook the outheld hand.

"I am pleased to be asked here," said he. "I could have hoped for nothing that would have agreed so well with my inclinations."

The heavy lids partially veiled the black searching eyes of the Japanese; but the bland, childlike face was as expressionless as before.

"You are polite," smiled Okiu, still shaking the secret agent's hand. "But I knew you would be so. All persons of real parts are kind and ready to place the stranger at his ease."

Then turning to the other Japanese, who remained waiting in the doorway, he added:

"Sorakicha, give the gentleman a chair."

With rapid, soft, tiger-like steps, Sorakicha advanced; lifting a high-backed chair he placed it at the side of the table opposite where Okiu had been sitting. And when the secret agent walked around the table he came face to face with the man as he was about to leave the room.

"Sorakicha," said Ashton-Kirk, "I think you have been a wrestler."

The brutal face became a mass of yellow corrugations; a set of broad, well-worn teeth shone whitely.

"I have been a champion," said he proudly.

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Ashton-Kirk nodded, and critically his keen eyes ran over the monstrous form before him.

"You are strong," said he. Then darting out one of his slim hands he grasped the thick wrist of the wrestler. Instantly the man caught the meaning of the act and his huge, blubber-like body grew rigid with effort. There was a pause full of striving; the eyes of the two were savage, the teeth shut tightly, the breath swelling in the lungs. Then, slowly, the thick arm of the Oriental bent upward until the clinched hand touched the shoulder; and at this Ashton-Kirk released him and stepped back.

For a moment the amazement which the wrestler felt was plain; but again the fat face broke into yellow corrugations.

"You, too, are strong," said he. "But it was a trick."

"The proper use of strength is made up of tricks," answered Ashton-Kirk, simply.

Okui had witnessed this little incident with a smiling calm. And now he said to his countryman:

"And so, my friend, you have met your match at hand grasps? I told you it would be so. But," and he turned to Ashton-Kirk, "I did not expect to see it in a man like you." There was a curiously speculative look in the half-closed eyes as they examined the tall, well-built form of the white man. "But," he went on, "experience is knowledge, is it not? And to profit by experience," to Sorakicha, gently, "is the sign of wisdom. So remember, my friend," and he smiled as he spoke, "remember that Mr. Ashton-Kirk is strong."

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"I will not forget," replied the wrestler, his well-worn teeth shining. And with that he left the room, the door shutting quietly behind him.

Ashton-Kirk sat down, as did his host. The latter fluttered the pages of a great, uncouthly made book which lay before him; his yellow, beautifully-shaped hands touched the leaves with careful gentleness; it were as though the volume were a child which he was caressing.

"Again," said he, "I will tell you that I am greatly favored by your coming. I had not hoped for so much when I wrote you, for I knew," and here his voice grew even softer than before, "that your time was greatly occupied just now."

"We all have our occupations," replied Ashton-Kirk, suavely, "but even when one is interested, one can always find a little time to devote to others."

"I suppose that is so," said Okui, thoughtfully. "However, I who am a mere idler, so to speak, know very little of the value of time. Day after day, night after night, I spend wandering in the ancient gardens of Nippon. There are no singers like these," and one pointed finger indicated some shelves filled with books and scrolls; "there are no written words quite so full of beauty."

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"The poets of one's own nation are always the most touching," said Ashton-Kirk. "This is especially so of the old poets. Sometimes we take down a dusty, musty old fellow from a top shelf where he has long lain neglected, and being in the humor for it, we are startled by the sweetness of his vision. There is a fragrance about ancient memories which is irresistible. The distance, perhaps, has something to do with it. Yesterday has no perspective for the most of us; but 'yester year' is deep with it, for all."

Okui nodded.

"The ancient peoples had their prophets and their oracles," said he, "and their gods spoke through them. But the shades of the old Nipponese speak to me through the messages of the poets. The virtue of the dead is here accumulated; the wisdom of my holy ancestors leaps up to me from the pages of my books." Caressingly, the wonderful hands touched the faded pages of the volume upon the table. "There are no thoughts so reverent as these," he went on; "there are no gardens so still, so full of quiet odors, so slumberous under the stars. And there is no moon so silent, or so wan and soft in searching out the secret paths beneath the flowering trees, where the shadows walk hand in hand."

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"But," said Ashton-Kirk, "the great bulk of your countrymen have forgotten these dreams of a past time. Modern progress seems to interest them more than anything else."

Again the Japanese nodded.

"Progress was forced upon them," said he, and then with a smile, he added: "It would be strange, would it not, if they should outstrip their teachers?"

"It is a thing which has happened before now."

"Napoleon, I have read, once declined to molest the Chinese because he feared to teach them his own great art, and so put the power in their hands which might eventually crush him and his nation." Okui laughed softly, and his polished nails picked at the edges of the book. "The Corsican, my friend, was not quite so venturesome as your merchants."

"Your history will point out to you the fact that soldiers are seldom so daring as those in quest of trade. In most cases the trader is first upon the ground; and the troops come later."

"In any event," replied Okui, "your merchants desired the trade which the Dutch possessed, and that desire, in the end, made Japan a nation to be reckoned with. The more imitative the people, say your own philosophers, the greater their future development. And no one," gently, "can say that my countrymen have not kept their eyes open."

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Ashton-Kirk smiled.

"It is a way they have," said he. "And people who keep their eyes open learn much."

"But not all," said Okui. "The eyes will not tell us all." He arose and walked to the window; the starlight was but dim, and there was no moon. "Much as I might desire to see what is passing out there," said he, after a moment, "I cannot do so. And it is so with other desires. Many things which we might wish to know are hidden from us, some in one way, some in another."

Ashton-Kirk said nothing in reply to this; there was a marked pause, then the Japanese went on:

"The other night as I stood here, I saw——" he turned upon the secret agent. "You recall what I told you?"

"Very clearly."

"I saw moving shadows, then I saw a man hurrying away. I should have liked to have seen more,

but I could not—and so I went to the house over there to see what a closer look would do for me."

"And to tell Dr. Morse what you had seen."

"As you say, of course. And then I saw you—a friend of the family of—was it two days' duration, or three?"

"Two only."

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"Thank you."

Okiu looked out into the night; his arms were folded, his legs very wide apart, his back turned toward the secret agent. Usually there is something peculiarly disconcerting in a squarely turned back; it is so blank, it tells so little. However, this was not so in the case of Okiu. His bland, lineless face told nothing; whereas in his attitude there was a purpose which Ashton-Kirk read easily. And, reading it, he looked carefully but swiftly about the room.

The table was between himself and the closed door; a pair of heavy curtains hung behind him. To all appearances these protected some open book shelves, but a rapid swing of his light stick showed the secret agent that their real purpose was to conceal a doorway. Calmly he sat back in his chair, nursing his cane, his keen eyes upon the figure at the window.

"I think," now resumed Okiu, "that I remarked at the time how short a space there was between your forming the acquaintance of Dr. Morse and his death. You meet him one night and he dies the next."

The tongue clicked against the roof of the mouth pityingly; it were as though the coincidence excited his grief.

"I have always understood that you Americans were an impatient people. You have the reputation, whether deserved or not, of forcing things which do not happen as promptly as you would have them. This in itself is an excellent trait at times, for it saves one from imposition of many sorts. But it does not always serve." Here Okiu turned and faced the secret agent. His face was as bland and meaningless as ever, and his voice was low pitched and gentle, as he proceeded. "No," said he, "it does not always serve. As it has resulted in this case, Dr. Morse is dead, and you have not benefited in the least."

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Ashton-Kirk looked at him with steady eyes; there was not the slightest surprise in the secret agent's face, and his tone was unruffled as he replied:

"I think I understand."

"I am quite sure that you do," replied Okiu, with equal suavity. He resumed his seat at the table; and once more he began lovingly to flutter the leaves of the ancient book. "That the methods pursued in this case should be resorted to by a barbarous nation," said he, and a gleam of mockery appeared in the slanting eyes, "would be the expected thing; but that a Christian government should so stoop is something of a surprise."

"Oh! You were surprised, then?"

"Only mildly. You see, I have been employed upon many international occasions, and know the requirements of a secret agent. When the case demands it, he does not hesitate. But," and here the smooth hands gestured their disapproval, "this case did not demand it. Nothing was to be gained by the mere death of this Englishman."

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Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"In that," said he, "I agree with you."

"I do not know," continued Okiu, "what put you upon the scent, but that a person possessing sufficient acumen to strike it at all should at the same time be so great a bungler as to do that," and one leveled finger indicated the Morse house, the lights of which could be seen through the window, "astonishes me."

Ashton-Kirk bent the light cane into a bow across his knee; his expression was that of a man waiting for an expected something to be said or done. There was now a pause of some duration. Okiu studied the man before him in the same impersonal fashion with which a man studies a mounted insect, then he resumed:

"I have heard of you very favorably, and had counted upon one day having the pleasure of testing myself against you; but now——" again the remarkable hands gestured, this time to complete the sentence.

"I'm sorry you have been disappointed."

"You are not nearly so sorry as I, believe me." The heavy lids drooped over the piercing eyes in a way which Ashton-Kirk had already come to regard as a warning of something ulterior. "You have been searching the house?" he asked.

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Ashton-Kirk laughed lightly.

"Who has not?" he inquired.

Okiu joined in the laugh.

"It has all been labor wasted," said he. "Dr. Morse was not the man to leave valuable property lying about." Again he regarded the secret agent intently, and once more resumed: "I suppose by this time you have not so much hope of coming on anything as you once had?"

Ashton-Kirk allowed the cane to spring back straight; with a look of unconcern he made reply.

"On the contrary," said he, "I was never quite so sure as I am just now."

Okiu stared, and then came slowly to his feet.

"You have found it?"

"No." And Ashton-Kirk yawned contentedly. "But I could place my hands in a very few moments upon the person who has."

At this the palms of the Japanese came together softly.

"Why," said he, and his voice was full of gentle surprise, "perhaps I have been mistaken in my opinion of you, after all."

"Perhaps," answered Ashton-Kirk.

But for all the secret agent's seeming ease of manner, at the soft slap of the Oriental's hands, his every sense had grown alert; and now his ear caught a rustling behind him which said plainly that some one had stepped quietly into the room. An instant later, a peculiar, high scent as of an Eastern oil reached his nostrils; and though he did not turn his head, he knew that the newcomer was the wrestler, Sorakicha.

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CHAPTER XVI

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IN THE DARK

Though Ashton-Kirk was as sure Sorakicha stood behind him as he would have been had his eyes rested upon him, he did not turn his head. The man's entrance had been effected almost without sound; the rustling of the curtains had been no louder than a lightly drawn breath.

"And now," reflected the secret agent, calmly, "he is waiting behind me until he is told what to do. I trust that I shall be sufficiently fortunate as to catch the signal."

But he continued to lounge back in his chair with crossed legs, balancing the stick lightly between his fingers. Okiu stood regarding him with careful attention.

"Yes," he continued, "I now see that it is probable that you are what I have always understood you to be—a man of exceptional talents. No one," with a slow smile, "cares to admit that he is dull of perception, but I confess, sir, that in this matter, in which I have been judging you, you may have been more successful than I have imagined."

"It is more or less difficult to follow the workings of a mind, the owner of which is not under one's immediate observation," returned Ashton-Kirk, philosophically. "So, looking at the matter from that point of view, you have nothing to chide yourself for."

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But Okiu paid no attention to this; apparently he was grappling with a more concrete matter.

"What you have said interests me," he said. "And so," putting his hands upon the table, and leaning across to the other, "the paper has been found?"

"You might call it finding it, if you were at loss for an expression," replied Ashton-Kirk. "Though on second thought, I confess I should apply another term, myself."

"We will not discuss terms," said Okiu gently. "Let us call the matter of getting the desired thing what you please; there are more important matters to think about just now." He still bent forward, his hands resting upon the table; his expressionless face was held close to that of the secret agent. "And so," said he, "you could place your hand upon the person who now has the paper, could you? That is interesting. And still more interesting is the fact that you could do it in a very few moments."

Ashton-Kirk nodded and smiled.

"It gives us all a certain satisfaction to learn that we are interesting," said he. "This is so almost at any time. But at a moment like this—when interest is created in a person who had utterly lost confidence—it is doubly pleasing."

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"Perhaps," said Okiu, and the purr in his low-pitched voice was more pronounced than the secret agent had ever heard it before, "you have occasion for satisfaction; and then perhaps you have not."

Ashton-Kirk met the black, heavy-lidded eyes squarely.

"Will you be more explicit?" he said.

"I can see no harm that it will do *now*," said the other, and the secret agent quietly noted the emphasis which he laid upon the last word. "So the facts are these. Though I regard you as a sort of fellow workman, and though I have a very definite admiration for your talents, still your interests are arrayed, so to speak, against mine; and this being the case——"

Here he paused. The glittering eyes lifted and darted a look over Ashton-Kirk's shoulder to the waiting Sorakicha. But even then the other maintained his lounging attitude and his manner remained unruffled.



THE GLITTERING EYES LIFTED

"Well?" said he, inquiringly.

"This being the case," said Okiu, smoothly, "I have thought it best to——"

One of the supple hands began to rise; as it stirred, Ashton-Kirk launched a kick at the table which threw it against the Oriental and drove him back several steps. At the same instant as he delivered the kick, the secret agent bent low and leaped forward. The great arms of the wrestler closed above the chair upon empty space; then the light came swished through the air; the globes of the cluster of lights which had hung over the table fell in a shower of fragments, and instantly the room was plunged into darkness.

Softly, and with the catlike quickness of Sorakicha himself, the secret agent gained the door. He had fixed its location in his mind, and so had no trouble finding it in the dark. It opened as he turned the knob; the hall too was dark, and he slipped into it, closing the door behind him.

Carefully, but with some speed, he passed along the hall, his hands outstretched like the antennæ of an insect. From the room which he had just left came the sounds of stumbling feet and the confused outcries of angry men.

Just as the door was thrown open, Ashton-Kirk felt his hand touch the stair-rail; and he softly descended as the feet of the

two Japanese sounded in the hall behind him. The lower hall was also dark; but through a fanlight he caught the gleam of a street lamp.

"The front door," he told himself, as he carefully made his way toward it. But it was fast. Up and down its edges ran his fingers; but there was no bar, chain nor catch; the bolt of the lock was shot, and the key had been removed. He turned with his back to the door and listened; the Orientals were stealing down the stairs.

For the second time that night his hand went into the outside coat pocket in search of the pistol. But, this time, when the hand slipped from the pocket, the weapon came with it. Silently he stood there in the shadows that lurked beneath the fanlight; the creeping sounds from the staircase continued and then paused. There was complete silence.

"They are listening," was Ashton-Kirk's thought. "They think that the fanlight may have attracted me, and desire to make sure."

At any moment he expected a flare of light, but none came; neither did he hear any further sounds. He held the pistol hand close to his body, the muzzle commanding the hall; the fact that ten grim, copper-clad servants of death stood between him and his foes was reassuring, and he continued to await the development of the situation.

For a long time there was silence; then he heard the creeping resumed; his jaw tightened and his grip upon the pistol butt grew more rigid. But another instant told him something else. The Japanese were not advancing as he had expected; instead they were retreating along the upper hall.

"They have made up their minds to the situation," was Ashton-Kirk's explanation. "And as facing a stream of bullets does not enter into their calculations, they are about to try something else."

This latter, of course, would be based upon his remaining where he was; and at once he took steps toward the confusion of things by also moving along the hall in the same direction as the others. He had noticed upon his entrance to the house that the hall was almost bare of furniture, so there was small danger of his colliding with anything. Little by little he went on; now and then he paused and listened intently. But there was no sound, however slight. At length his hands touched a smooth surface. It was a door; cautiously he turned the knob and opened it. The room before him was as dark as the hall; and he halted with the door only a few inches ajar, peering within.

"It's a room on the north side, and well toward the rear," passed through his mind, "and it's only natural to suppose that there are windows in it. The blinds must be tightly drawn, for I can't make out even a glimmer of light."

He waited a little, his pistol held ready, then he stepped into the room. The first thing that attracted him was a thin, bright line which apparently lay upon the floor at his right. He studied this for a moment and then it occurred to him what it was. There was a light in an adjoining room, and the rays were seeping under the door. Again he waited, and listened. It had been his purpose to locate a window, unfasten it, and so make his way to the open air; but the light in the room beyond indicated the presence of someone so close at hand as to make this proceeding perilous.

But as no sound came from the lighted room, he made up his mind to venture nearer. He had taken but one step, however, when a board creaked behind him in the darkness. Poised for the next step he halted and again stood listening. Nothing followed, and the breath slowly exhaled from his lungs, his flexed muscles relaxed, and he settled back upon his feet for another spell of silence. He had just about made up his mind that the creak had been caused by himself, when he

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became aware of another and barely discernible sound. It was soft and hissing, a sort of rubbing, as though one smoothly-surfaced thing were drawn across another. Like a flash the secret agent realized what it was. Some one stood in the doorway with his hands outstretched, as his own had been, and it was their contact with the door frame that made the sound.

Then there came a step, slow, careful, light; a pause followed and then the unknown's breathing could be distinctly heard. Another step followed, cautious, muffled, secret; and again came the pause.

The grip of the secret agent tightened upon the pistol; he faced about softly to meet the newcomer, whom a few steps would bring to his side. [Pg 202]

But now the steps ceased, and though he listened with eager ears, Ashton-Kirk failed to note their resumption. This struck him as odd; there had been no sound, nothing that could have startled the other into a longer pause than formerly; and yet that he was standing stock-still somewhere in the darkness was unquestionable. Then like lightning it occurred to Ashton-Kirk why this was. Judging from the footfalls, he stood between the unknown and the door under which crept the line of light; and the break in this line, caused by his intervening feet, had caught the other's attention.

Gradually the secret agent became aware of the unknown's breathing; at first it was scarcely discernible, but little by little it grew in rapidity and harshness; it became labored, straining and drawn with increasing difficulty; as plainly as words could have done it, it spoke of mounting excitement and a quickly forming purpose.

The automatic pistol began to lift—but too late. Like a wild beast the unknown leaped through the darkness, and a pair of long powerful arms enwrapped the secret agent. The pistol fell to the floor, and there began a desperate struggle for the mastery. By a few swift twists and the free use of his knee, Ashton-Kirk managed to free his arms which had been pinioned at his sides; then he drove one elbow into his opponent's neck, and they went reeling blindly about. [Pg 203]

There was a moment of this, then the attack of the unknown abated; it were as though he had felt his adversary out and found him rather more than a match. And with this discovery came new tactics. Ashton-Kirk felt the rugged grasp grow still slacker; one hand slipped away altogether. This could mean only that it was feeling in unseen pockets for a weapon; and upon this the secret agent began to fight silently, swiftly, desperately.

A series of short jarring blows drove the other back; a short powerful lock lifted him from his feet. But with a frenzied wrench the man broke the hold, and as he did so they both fell with their full weight against the door under which the light was shining. It gave way with a crash, and a flood of illumination poured upon them.

And with the first flash of it, Ashton-Kirk saw a hand armed with a "billy" lifted to strike him; and behind it was the white, desperate face of the man who had followed him into the room—the face of Philip Warwick. And as recognition came, the wrist bent with a quick practised jerk, the leather-covered lead descended, and Ashton-Kirk fell prone upon the floor.

CHAPTER XVII

[Pg 204]

THE SILHOUETTES

When one wakes from a heavy, unsatisfying sleep, it is with a vague memory of flitting shadows, of empty spaces, of strange deeds and peculiar sayings. There is also a painful sort of lethargy and an odd sense of personal defeat which is peculiarly annoying.

It was with some such feeling as this that Ashton-Kirk opened his eyes. The first person whom he saw was old Nanon, and she was bathing his head with cold water. Near at hand stood Drevenoff; and seated by a table was Stella Corbin.

"So," said the old servant in a gentle tone that he had not yet heard her speak, "you are better."

The secret agent sat up; his head felt strangely light, and there was a sharp, shooting pain across his scalp. But, for all, there was a smile upon his face.

"I will not pattern by the young lady in the novel or the play and inquire where I am," said he. "But I *will* ask," and he looked from one to the other, "how I happened to get here."

The old woman gestured toward the Pole.

"Drevenoff found you lying upon the back lawn, unconscious, less than a quarter of an hour ago," she said. [Pg 205]

The young man nodded.

"I did not recognize you at first," said he; "I thought it was some one who had wandered in and fallen there. But when Nanon came with the light, we knew you at once."

"And a good thing it was that he came upon you," said the old servant, shaking her gray head. "You might have bled to death."

There was a moment's silence; then Drevenoff asked, curiously:

"What happened to you?—and how did you come to this?"

The secret agent smiled.

"I was making a call," said he, "and my presence was evidently not altogether appreciated."

Though they waited for more, still he stopped at that; and raising his hand he felt of a wet bandage which was drawn tightly about his head. Stella Corbin during the above had sat quite still; her dark eyes were fixed steadily upon him; their expression was strange and full of speculation.

"It is queer how things chance at times," spoke Drevenoff, addressing Nanon. "If Miss Corbin had not asked me to go to the city for her to-night, I should not have gone out; and if I had not gone out, I should not have found him."

But the old woman paid no attention to the latter part of his speech. She gazed at him for a moment: then her eyes shifted to the girl. [Pg 206]

"You are sending him to the city, then?" she said.

"Yes," answered Stella Corbin.

"Why?"

At this question the girl appeared to stiffen; it seemed as though a curt rejoinder was upon her tongue. But, then, she changed her mind.

"There is an errand that I desired him to do," she replied, meekly enough.

The gray eyes searched her face from beneath the craggy brows; the thin lips were set in their hard, straight line.

"There will be no more trains back to-night," she said. "He cannot return before morning."

"I know," replied the girl.

"Can the matter not wait until then?"

Stella Corbin arose.

"That I wish him to go to-night should be enough," she said, coldly. Then turning to the young Pole, she added, "You remember my instructions?"

"Yes, Miss Corbin."

"Then go at once; the train will reach here before many more minutes, and you must not miss it."

Drevenoff took his hat and went out without any further words. And as the door closed after him, Ashton-Kirk arose, rather unsteadily. [Pg 207]

"If that is the last train to the city," he said to Stella, "I fear that I, also, must make it."

The girl inclined her head ever so little, but said nothing. However, the old servant spoke.

"It is a good walk to the station," she said, "and hurt as you are you could not get there in time. Another thing, it is much better that you should rest for a little. To exert yourself now might start your wound bleeding once more, as I have not yet properly bandaged it."

"You may be right," said the secret agent, and his eyes sought those of the girl. But if he expected her to agree with the old servant he was much mistaken; her face was set, and rather pale; her hands, as she trifled with a brooch at her throat, trembled.

There was a pause; then, as she did not speak, the old servant, who had been watching her fixedly, said:

"Miss Corbin will be pleased to have you stay until morning, of course."

Still the girl's expression did not change, and still she said nothing.

"In that case," said Ashton-Kirk, quietly, "I will venture to trespass upon her kindness. I confess that I feel somewhat shaky, and a night's rest may help me wonderfully."

"It will," said Nanon, but never taking her eyes from the girl's face; "sleep brings the strength back to one. And then," her tone changing, "it will be so much safer to have a man about the place—even though a sick one. Now that Drevenoff is gone for the night, we should have been alone." [Pg 208]

Again there was a pause; then:

"I dare say we should have managed," said Stella. Her manner had suddenly changed, and her tone was even light; she smiled as she turned to Ashton-Kirk and added: "Of course we must not turn you away; and you are very welcome indeed. Please do not think me strange; but so many things have happened of late that I am not altogether myself." Here she turned to old Nanon, the smile upon her white face forced and pathetic. "Of course we should need a protector. I had not thought of that. But you, Nanon," and the look in the great, dark eyes was unfathomable, "you think of everything."

"It is not that," replied the servant woman, meaningly. "It is that I do not forget."

The eyes of the two were fixed upon and held each other steadily for a moment; and Ashton-Kirk, as he sat and quietly watched, smiled and seemed to fall to pondering.

After a few more remarks of a general and impersonal nature addressed to the secret agent, Miss [Pg 209]

Corbin left the room; old Nanon stood for some moments gazing at the closed door through which the girl had passed; then she turned to the table and began stripping up some bandages and preparing a lotion for the guest's wounded head.

"You are not to think her strange," she said in a low tone, "because so many things have happened of late that she is not herself." The keen old eyes turned on Ashton-Kirk a look of significance, and she nodded her head. "Many things *have* happened of late," she commented; "so many that I have often wondered if there were not more of them than I have seen. And who knows if she is now herself, or no? Indeed, perhaps I now see her true self for the first time."

She removed the wet pack from his head and carefully cleaned the wound.

"It is not more than a deep scratch," she said, "but it bled a great deal, and so weakened you. Tomorrow it may feel stiff, and you may have a headache; but that will be all."

Quickly, and with admirable skill, she put the bandages in place. When it was done he surveyed himself ruefully in a mirror.

"With that," remarked he, "there is nothing left for me but my room. So if you will show me there, I shall be obliged to you."

She led the way to the stairs, opened a door upon the second floor and then halted.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she said, "but I shall have to go for a match. I can never remember." [Pg 210]

He produced a metal safe and struck a match. She took it from him, and entering the room, turned on and lighted the gas.

"There is no wiring above the first floor," she said, in explanation; "and I find it confusing at times." She went from one thing to another, seeing that all was right "The room is small," she continued, "but I think you will find it comfortable. And right behind it," opening another door, "there is another room, sir, with fine large windows in case this should get too stuffy for you in the night. You can open the door and the back window, and so get plenty of air and no direct draught."

Ashton-Kirk thanked her and she went out. He took off his coat, sat down in a big cane chair and leaned his wounded head against a cushion.

"Rather a night," said he to himself. "Things seem to have crowded upon me in a rather unexpected sort of a way. And this knock on the head has not just helped to make it all clear, either."

The events of the night, from the moment he rang the bell at Okiu's house, began to pass through his mind in a sort of review; then, little by little, they grew hazy and indistinct; one seemed to melt into another in an unnaturally complete and satisfactory manner, and he found himself accepting weird conclusions with the cheerful ease of a man falling asleep. [Pg 211]

He may have remained so in the chair for an hour; it may have been longer. At any rate he awoke at last with his head throbbing painfully. He sat for some moments gazing at the flaring gaslight; then he heard a clock from somewhere in the house strike once. He glanced at his watch.

"One-thirty," he said. "Phew! I've got a long night to put in."

He got up and looked at the bed. But there was nothing inviting about it; all desire for sleep seemed to have deserted him. As Nanon had suggested, the room *had* grown stuffy; and so he passed into the rear apartment and lifted the window. The stars still burnt palely in the sky as they had some hours before when he looked at them from the window of Okiu's house; small, swift-moving clouds were shifting across their faces; and all about was dark and still and mysterious.

But the night air was cool and he stood drinking it in for a time, and gazing down toward the dark loom made by the house of the Japanese at the far end of the open space. No light, no movement came from that direction. It was for all the world like a place deserted.

At this thought the secret agent smiled.

"That is the second time I've thought that same thing to-night. But not a great deal of movement or light is to be expected of any dwelling at this hour," he said to himself. "However, I should not be surprised if deserted were now the right word, after all." [Pg 212]

He had closed the door leading into the bedroom, and so all was darkness in the apartment in which he stood. The quiet pleased him, and the cool air felt grateful upon his aching head and so he remained at the window for some time.

Then, suddenly, there came something like a dim burst of light. An instant served to show him its nature; upon the lawn was sharply silhouetted the outline of a window, with a blind but a few inches drawn.

"Some one in the hall," he said to himself, "and he has lighted the gas."

Curiously he gazed at the illuminated square upon the grass below; the sash and even the swinging cord of the blind were sharply outlined. But, as he looked, a figure partially filled in the square—the figure of a woman, small, delicate and exceedingly graceful, her back was, apparently, turned to the window, and she was waving one hand in a beckoning motion as though to some one further along the hall. Then a second figure appeared, and the two silhouetted heads bent together in earnest conference.

"So!" said Ashton-Kirk, softly. "I understood that with Drevenoff gone to the city I was the only [Pg 213]

CHAPTER XVIII

[Pg 214]

GONE!

The words of old Nanon, spoken only a few hours before, came back to Ashton-Kirk.

"It will be so much safer to have a man about the place, even though a sick one," she had said. "Now that Drevenoff is gone for the night, we should have been alone."

The two shadows remained with heads held close together for some little time. It was plain to be seen that the woman was doing the greater part of the talking; the man gestured now and then as though in protest.

"She is urging him to something which he does not fancy," thought the secret agent, his keen eyes not missing a movement. "And, as his denials constantly grow fainter, and her urging more insistent, I think she will finally have her way."

Fancifully the two silhouettes went through their parts within the lighted square as cast by the gaslight upon the lawn. The woman pleaded and demanded; the man resisted with wide gestures and violently shaken head.

But, as the secret agent had told himself, the woman proved herself the stronger in the end. Sharp, imperious, even threatening grew her manner; and the man's protests died, his head ceased to shake, until finally his gestures were inquiring only, as of one who consents and desires only to know the best way of going about the matter in hand.

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At this stage the shadow of the woman became still for the first time since it had appeared. It were as though she were endeavoring to recall something, or devise a plan. Then with an impatient gesture she snatched at a hand-bag which hung upon her arm and seemed about to open it. But with a contemptuous sweep of the hand the man waved it aside.

Again the two began their mute debate. This time it was the man who took the initiative; she had failed when she came to the carrying out of what she desired; apparently she had no clear conception of the thing she wanted done, and he was reproaching her for it.

But in the midst of this she stopped him. Her hand darted out, and from the wall she drew something, the shadow of which was so fine that Ashton-Kirk could not, at first, even guess as to its nature. But the way it swung out at her touch finally gave him a clue.

"A folding gas fixture," said he, softly.

Once more the girl took the aggressive; she gestured sharply and indicated frequently a point upon her left, some distance along the hall, and apparently a little above her head. The silhouette of the man remained motionless; what he heard was evidently bearing in upon him; his whole attitude seemed to say: "Here at last is something worth consideration."

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Then there was a pause; the woman also became still; it were as though the two were measuring each other's strength. At length the man stepped toward the gas fixture, the woman drew back, and as she did so her hands went to her face as though she would shut out something repellent. With a handkerchief, the man brushed away any possible dust from the gas-burner; then he reached toward where the valve should be, and the half twist of his hand indicated that he had turned on the gas.

Then the man seemed to be gathering himself for an effort; he applied his lips to the burner and remained motionless and tense; suddenly the picture upon the lawn dimmed and then vanished entirely.

For an instant Ashton-Kirk remained looking out upon the now inky night; if one could have observed his face, a smile would have been seen; but a smile that would not have been an altogether pleasant one.

"It is not the most comforting thing in the world," he mused, "to have one person beckon another along a deserted hall in the small hours of the morning, have the couple pause almost outside one's door and then confer as to the most effective means of taking one's life. And that the one—a woman—should be so urgent in the matter is particularly distressing." He turned from the window and faced toward the closed door of his bedroom. "And a ready-witted young lady she is," he went on. "How very quick she was to note that the gas was burning in my room; and what an instant and murderous idea at once took possession of her. To blow into an open gas-burner means that every jet upon the same line of pipe will go out as soon as the injected air instead of the gas begins to flow through the burners. About now I shall find the light out in my room and," here he opened the bedroom door, saw that it was in complete darkness and stood sniffing the air upon the threshold, "yes, the gas is pouring from the open burner. If I had been asleep——"

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The apartment was thick with the overpowering fumes; he softly raised the windows and closed the valve. It would have seemed natural for a man so circumstanced to have taken some steps to identify and apprehend those who have made so murderous an attempt; but if this thought occurred to Ashton-Kirk he made no attempt to carry it out. However, another idea occurred to him.

"The old woman said that there were nothing but gaslights above the first floor. If another jet should be open in an occupied bedroom, there is still danger of a life being taken." [Pg 218]

With this in his mind he pulled on his coat and opened the hall door. There were no fumes in the hall, and this showed that the burners here had been closed before the two had stolen away. He took out a match and was feeling for the nearest of the hall jets when a sound from the lower floor reached him. It was a continued, grating sort of noise, as though a cautious person were drawing a refractory bolt. He paused, his groping hand still outstretched, and listened with attention. The subdued squeaking ceased, there was a pause, then the street door opened and closed. He took a step or two toward the main staircase, and again he halted. Another sound came from below, the distinct, heavy sounds of falling objects striking the floor. Then came a shrill cry.

Like a shadow he slipped along the intervening space, and down the stairs. The lower hall was also dark; but there was a light in the library, and he gained the door at a bound.

Old Nanon, dressed as he had seen her when she showed him to his room, stood in the center of the library. In her hand she held a large brass candlestick; scattered upon the floor were a number of articles of bric-à-brac which had apparently rested upon a shelf at one side. [Pg 219]

Slowly the woman turned her gaze from the candlestick to the secret agent; her face was rigid and a yellowish white; the gray eyes were hard as flint.

"Ah, it is you," she said in a sort of subdued monotone. "I had forgotten about you."

"What has happened?" asked Ashton-Kirk.

The eyes of the servant woman once more returned to the candlestick, but she made no answer.

"I heard some one cry out," said the secret agent, his glance going about the room in its searching way.

Nanon nodded her head.

"Yes," she returned, "you heard some one cry out. It was I."

"What has occurred?"

Once more the stern old eyes sought his face; and she said:

"She has gone."

"Who has gone?"

"Miss Stella."

Ashton-Kirk thought of the creaking bolt and the closing street door; and his voice was pitched sharply when he again asked the question:

"What has occurred?"

The old servant placed the brass candlestick upon one of the desks; she rubbed her hands secretively with a corner of her apron while she said: [Pg 220]

"I have told you what I fear; I have been as plain as one can be who has no proof. And as the hours passed I have grown more and more suspicious. Not one movement did this girl make that my eyes were not on her; not one word did she speak that I was not seeking behind it for some hidden meaning.

"To-night, as you know, she sent Drevenoff to the city. It was something of which I had heard nothing until the young man spoke. What was this urgent thing that could not wait until morning? Why would not the telephone or telegraph do as well as a messenger? I did not understand it. And then she did not care to have you stay here to-night; that was very plain—you must have noticed it."

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"Go on," said he.

"It does not need a great deal to make me suspicious," resumed the old woman; "and her manner to-night aroused me to wonder if there were not something afoot of which I knew nothing. So when I went to my room I put out the light, left the door ajar and sat listening. After a long time I knew there was a light in the hall below; I stole out and bent over the rail and listened. There was whispering, but I could catch no words. Then I heard some one descending the lower staircase; and so I stole down to the second floor. From the head of the stairs I watched once more; then I saw the light go up here in the library. [Pg 221]

"I had already started to descend when Miss Stella appeared in the library doorway—and in her hand she held," the speaker pointed at the desk, "that candlestick."

Here the old woman paused; and the secret agent, watching her face, saw the yellowish white change to gray.

"Well?" said he.

"She looked along the hall as if afraid of being seen," said the woman; "and all the time her fingers were picking—picking at something in the socket of the candlestick. She was just turning back into the room when she drew something out, looked at it and hid it in her glove. Then the light went out and I heard the bolt being drawn. I rushed down the stairs, but I was too late. The door opened and closed; I turned on the lights, but she was gone."

For a moment Ashton-Kirk stood studying the woman's face; then he stepped quickly to the desk and took up the candlestick. Something in the deep socket of this seemed to attract him and he turned on more lights. Under a cluster of incandescents he bent over the candlestick and examined it minutely; then the magnifying lens came into play as it had upon the broken knob of the highboy. One glance through this and he sprang to the street door. The next instant a piercing whistle shattered the quiet of Fordham Road.

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CHAPTER XIX

[Pg 223]

THE TAXI-CAB

For a few moments after the shrill blast of the whistle filled the suburban street, the secret agent waited upon the door-step. Then a thought seemed to occur to him, and with an angry exclamation he went quickly in and closed the door.

In a moment he was at the telephone, and stood with impatiently tapping foot until he was connected with the number called for; then the sleepy, dry voice of Fuller said complainingly in his ear:

"Hello, who is it?"

The secret agent made reply; and the aide's voice, now containing an eager note, demanded:

"What's up?"

"Get O'Neill at once. It's too late for a train, but call Dixon to get out the car in a hurry. Then come to Morse's, Fordham Road, with all the speed you can."

"All right," replied Fuller. "I'll get Dixon first, and have O'Neill ready when the machine arrives."

Ashton-Kirk hung up, and then turned to Nanon, who stood but a few yards away, still nervously rubbing her hands with the corner of her apron.

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"You saw no one but Miss Corbin a while ago?" he asked.

"No," answered the woman.

"You are sure of that?" His singular eyes searched her face, but she met the look without flinching.

"I am sure," she said. There was a silence; Ashton-Kirk then walked down the hall toward the library door; and as he reached it, he felt her hand touch his shoulder. "You did not see any one?" she asked.

He paused, and turned his head.

"What would you say if I answered—yes?"

The sharp old eyes wavered; she swallowed once or twice spasmodically.

"You did see some one," she said. Then with intense eagerness: "It was not a man?"

He was about to reply when there came heavy footsteps upon the porch and then a loud peal at the bell. Ashton-Kirk smiled.

"A policeman, no doubt," said he. "Let him in."

The woman opened the street door; the hall lights shone upon the buttons and shield of a patrolman.

"I heard the sound of a whistle," said he, with a rich Irish accent. "Is anything the matter?"

Nanon looked toward Ashton-Kirk as though expecting him to answer; he came forward.

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"How are you?" said he. "Will you come in?"

The policeman did so. He was a huge-chested and heavy-limbed fellow, and had a head of fiery red hair. He surveyed Ashton-Kirk with a grin upon his good-natured face.

"Oh, hello," said he. "So it's you, is it? I noticed you the other day with Osborne while I was keeping the gate, outside."

"Sure enough," said the secret agent; "so you were."

"I was on the corner beyant, there," went on the red-haired giant, "and divil the thing was I expecting when the blast of the whistle struck me two ears. Sure, there's seldom anything happens in the place; it's like a graveyard, faith; and to have a thing like that go off all of a sudden fair took my breath."

"It was a call for a man whom I thought was close by," explained the secret agent, as the old woman left them together in the library.

The policeman winked with much elaboration.

"I see, I see," said he. "A friend wid a good eye and a careful manner. Sure, it's meself who's seen him often enough of late; but I thought he was a headquarters man put here by Osborne."

Ashton-Kirk regarded him thoughtfully.

"You say you were standing on the corner when you heard the whistle," said he.

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"There do be a convenient doorway there," smiled the policeman, "and it's often enough I stop there. Sorra the bit of use is there to go pounding about the edges of such a beat as this. A man might as well make himself quiet and easy."

"How long were you there to-night?"

The policeman considered.

"The best part of a half hour," he ventured, at last.

"Did you notice any one go by in that time?"

"There was one postman," said the officer, "a couple of milkmen going to the depot, McGlone's barkeeper on his way to open up for the early gas-house trade—and—yes, there was a girl."

"What sort of a girl?"

"Rather a nice sort—dressed well and wearing a veil. And it's a hurry she was in, for she turned the corner almost at a run."

"In what direction did she go?"

"Toward Berkley Street."

"It is not likely that you paid any further attention to her?"

"Well," replied the red-haired policeman, "maybe at any other time I wouldn't have. But you see, I had my old pipe going in a comfortable kind of a way, and was rather wide awake. Then, the queerness of the hour, and the hurry she was in, made me step out of the doorway and gaze after her."

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"I see," said Ashton-Kirk.

"When she got to the corner of Berkley Street, she stopped for a bit, just as a body will who is not just sure of what they are going to do next. And from the way she looked, this way and that, I got the notion into me head that she might be expecting somebody."

"Ah! And did it turn out so?"

The man shook his head.

"Sure, I dunno," said he. "But no one come along while she stood there, anyway. She stopped for only a little, though; then she went on up Berkley Street."

"Up Berkley Street? Do you mean north on Berkley?"

"I see you do be very exact," grinned the good-natured giant. "Yes; it was north she went."

"Humph! South on Fordham Road, and north on Berkley Street. That seems rather queer."

The policeman looked at him curiously.

"What makes you think so?" asked he.

"Of course she may have changed her mind while she stood on the corner," said Ashton-Kirk. "But it is scarcely likely. Her movements were not left to chance." He paused and then asked:

"If a person goes south on Fordham Road, crosses to Berkley, which is a parallel street, and then proceeds north, what does it mean?"

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The policeman pondered the matter deeply; then a light appeared upon his face.

"I get you," he said. "The woman was for stoppin' somewhere on Berkley Street. That's certain. If she were not, she'd have gone north be Fordham Road and so saved herself the walk av a full block."

The two remained in conversation for some time; but the policeman had nothing more of an interesting nature to impart. After about half an hour he went away, and Ashton-Kirk began to prowl from room to room on the lower floor; though he passed old Nanon frequently, as she sat under a light, her lips muttering over a book of fine print, she did not speak to him. Indeed, she scarcely once lifted her eyes. If the secret agent discovered anything in his mousing about he made no sign; and when there came the strident hoot of a siren in the street, he threw open the door.

"This way, O'Neill," he called.

A smoothly-shaven man of middle age came up the walk and stepped upon the porch.

"How do you do?" said he; then his voice pitched two tones higher as he added: "Good heavens! What's the matter with your head?"

"A little affair in the next street," said Ashton-Kirk. "It is of no great consequence, so we'll not speak of it. I want you to stay here and keep track of everything that goes on; you will be relieved before noon to-morrow."

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"Very good," said the smooth-faced man as the other led him through the hall.

"This man," said Ashton-Kirk to the old servant as they came upon her, still poring over the book, "will remain here to see that everything is well while I am gone."

She merely glanced at O'Neill, and then nodded; bending close over the book, one gaunt finger following each line of the tiny type, she went on reading and muttering in a husked sort of way

that made the newcomer stare.

"Rather a queer old party, I take it," he said, as he followed his employer to the street door.

"Yes; but then," and there was a frankly baffled look in the secret agent's eyes, "all the people in this house appear to be of that kind. I fancied that I had them pretty well gauged; but now I'm beginning to find out that I've been somewhat off the track."

With this he hurried out to the car and gave a quick order to the chauffeur. Fuller, who sat with upturned collar and down-pulled hat, exclaimed solicitously at the sight of the bandaged head, and the investigator in as few words as possible told him what had happened. The eyes of the aide grew round with amazement.

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"Warwick!" he cried. "Well, now that's one ahead of me. I've felt convinced from the first, as you know, that he had a good bit to do with this affair; but I wasn't sure that he was connected with the Jap. And so he is back, eh?" with a knowing nod. "Back and crawling about in the dark, knocking people on the head."

At a word from Ashton-Kirk the driver halted the car at the corner of Berkley Street.

"And this is where Miss Corbin stood, as the policeman told you," said Fuller, looking about. "And then she went northward—northward," with much significance in his tone, "toward Okiu's place."

His employer was looking about, and said nothing in reply; so Fuller went on:

"And what we sought for was hidden in the socket of one of those candlesticks all the time, and ——" here he halted and his hand slapped sharply upon his knee. "But no! By Jove, it was not, for I distinctly recall that you examined all the candlesticks very carefully on the night of the murder."

Ashton-Kirk nodded rather absently; his eyes were traveling the length of Berkley Street.

"Then," cried Fuller, "the paper was placed there since that night. The murderer, fearing to keep it in his or her possession, placed it in one of the candlesticks, knowing very well that they must have been already searched, and feeling that they would not be molested again. You said you were sure that none of those who sought the document had found it," he continued, "but it seems that in this you were mistaken. Unless," as though a fresh idea had come to him, "it should turn out that, after all, it was not the state paper which Miss Corbin took."

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But Ashton-Kirk shook his head.

"I wish I could think so," said he, gravely. "If I could, I should not at this moment be classing myself as a blithering idiot."

"I hardly think I understand," said Fuller.

"Not many hours ago," said Ashton-Kirk, "I told Okiu that I could place my hands upon the person who was possessed of the paper. And to have found the assassin of Dr. Morse would have been no more difficult. Well," somewhat bitterly, "if I had taken a leaf from Osborne's book, and done these things when they became plain to me, I would not at this stage of the affair be circling about like a hound that's lost the scent."

"I see what you mean," said Fuller, "and I scarcely think you could have acted otherwise than you have. The entire Morse household is so entangled in this matter that it *was* the best plan to arrest no one until you had learned the extent of the guilt or innocence of all."

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"That was my idea, of course," said the investigator. "But I am not sure that it was not entirely the idea of a gambler, too confident of his luck. I fancy that I allowed the stake to lie too long upon the board; and now I find myself in a fair way to lose it entirely."

"But," and Fuller came back to the idea which he had expressed a few moments before, "are you quite confident that the object Miss Corbin took from the candlestick was——"

But the other stopped him.

"I have very excellent reasons for being confident. Listen to me." His gaze was still searching the street before them, but the brain behind the eyes seemed to be not at all concerned with what he saw. "Colonel Drevenoff, the commander of the regiment in which Dr. Morse served during the Russo-Japanese war, was a Pole. Most Poles are Roman Catholics. Drevenoff was one, and he wore the scapular."

"Ah," said Fuller, a light beginning to come into his eyes.

"The paper for which we are searching——" here Ashton-Kirk seemed to hesitate.

"And which Colonel Drevenoff stole from the Russian secret embassy," suggested Fuller.

"We are not at all assured that he did so," returned Ashton-Kirk. "However, it was in his possession, no matter how it came there; and he had reasons for desiring to conceal it. The scapular which hung about his neck was a most likely place for this, being but several thicknesses of cloth stitched together. He cut some of these stitches, laid the paper between the layers of cloth and sewed them together once more."

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"And," said Fuller, excitedly, "when he came to give the paper to Dr. Morse, he gave the emblem and all."

"Exactly. And judging from Dr. Morse's lack of light afterward, the elder Drevenoff said nothing about the paper itself. Of course he had an object in entrusting the scapular to the Englishman; this was, doubtless, that it be handed on to some third person, unknown to us."

"Then the Japanese government somehow got wind of the matter; and Okiu, their most acute agent, was assigned to secure the document. Like most artists, Okiu believes, so it seems, in preparing his material before he sets about using it; and this process in his hands has had a peculiarly Oriental tinge. True to his racial instinct his methods took an insidious, indirect form, a sort of preliminary torture, as it were, and this accounts for the series of enigmatic sketches with which Dr. Morse was persecuted during the last weeks of his life."

"But," said Fuller, somewhat at loss, "just how does all this assure you that Miss Corbin now has the paper?" [Pg 234]

"I am coming to that," said Ashton-Kirk. "You recall, I suppose, what I told you regarding the scapulars, their different origins, devices and colors."

"Yes."

"There is one made of scarlet cloth—the 'Scapular of the Passion.' This is the one affected by Colonel Drevenoff; for it was one of this type which Miss Corbin took from its hiding-place. My lens showed me some fine scarlet strands adhering to some fragments of wax at the mouth of the candlestick; and as if this were not enough, I also saw the impression of a row of stitching, such as runs along the scapular's edge, upon a deposit of wax at the bottom of the socket."

"It seems incredible to me," said Fuller, "that a girl of Miss Corbin's sort should have a hand in an affair like this. But then," with a shake of the head, "I suppose her love for this fellow Warwick accounts for it. Many a man has been ruined by love of an unworthy woman, and many a woman, no doubt, by love of an unworthy man."

But to all appearances the secret agent did not follow these moralizings with any great attention. The big lamps upon the car threw their long white rays along Berkley Street; and while his mind was apparently engaged upon other things, the eyes of Ashton-Kirk followed the stretch of illuminated space to the end. Now he got out, and said to the chauffeur: [Pg 235]

"Move ahead very slowly."

With eyes fixed upon the dusty asphalt, the secret agent walked ahead of the car. The lights of the latter threw everything they fell upon into sharp relief. At the curb before Okiu's house, Ashton-Kirk held up his hand, and the car halted.

"What is it?" asked Fuller.

"I caught the tire tracks of another car below there; they were so clear and uncut by other marks that I fancied that they might have been made late at night."

"Do you now think they were?"

"I can't say. But they lead up to this point. A halt was made, then the machine turned and doubled on its tracks."

Some distance up the street on the opposite side, a flare of red and green light caught the speaker's attention. It came from a drug store, and with Fuller he crossed the street and entered. A white-jacketed clerk stood behind a marble covered counter, and served them with the cigars which they asked for. Ashton-Kirk lighted his at a swinging gas flame near the door and drew at it with enjoyment.

"Rather out of the way for an all-night place, isn't it?" he asked [Pg 236]

The clerk shrugged his shoulders.

"It's not a big payer after about nine o'clock," said he. "But you see, it is one of a chain of stores, and the company's policy is to keep open all the time."

"I see."

"We do some business by not closing, but not enough to shatter any records. This isn't the swiftest place on earth, you know."

"I suppose not."

"Your car will make some talk to-morrow," smiled the clerk. "They'll all be wondering who was up at such an hour as this. And those who heard you will feel that they have something on those who did not."

"I shall be a thrilling sort of a person, then," smiled Ashton-Kirk. "I suppose," after a moment, "that you do not have many automobiles pass through Eastbury at night?"

"Not after early evening. But yours is the second to-night—or rather this morning," with a look at the clock.

Fuller darted a rapid glance at the secret agent; but the latter displayed no eagerness. Placing his cigar upon the edge of the counter, he began carefully rearranging a frayed end of the bandage about his head.

"Two, eh?" was all he said. [Pg 237]

"I didn't see the other myself," said the drug clerk. "But *it* stopped over at the Japanese, too, so old Patterson, the watchman, told me. That was a couple of hours ago."

Ashton-Kirk had finished with the bandage and surveyed it, in a mirror, with an air of satisfaction. Then taking up his cigar once more, he remarked:

"Stopped there, too, did it? Humph! I wonder if any one got in?"

"Patterson said there were two persons came out of the house, but only Mr. Okiu got into the taxi. The other one walked up the street. But," and the clerk wagged his head in humorous appreciation, "that's not the funny part of the thing."

"No?"

"It was the girl," said the clerk, a broad smile upon his face.

Again Fuller darted the inquiring look at the secret agent; but even at this he did not display any indications of marked interest.

"There was a girl, was there?" was all Ashton-Kirk said.

The clerk nodded.

"Patterson is a funny old scout, there's no use talking," said he. "He's got such a comic way of looking at things. And where he gets all his expressions is more than I can say."

"I'd like to hear him tell about it," said Ashton-Kirk.

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"He's taking a sleep in the back room," said the clerk, with a wink. "I'll try and get him out."

He disappeared and in a few moments returned, followed by a short, ruddy-faced old man with a short-clipped white moustache.

"Oh, the Jap and the taxi," said he, when the matter was explained to him. "Yes, that was a queer kind of a little thing." He looked at the secret agent in a knowing sort of way, and then proceeded: "You can't keep track of everybody, no matter how hard you try. I've been noticing that Jap, because he *was* a Jap, ever since he came into this neighborhood, but I never give him credit for this."

"Have a cigar?" suggested Ashton-Kirk.

The private watchman bit the end off the cigar and lit it with much care.

"I smoke a pipe most of the time," said he, "but I like a cigar once in a while." He puffed it into a glow, and then went on: "That taxi to-night turns around and starts down the street and around the corner toward Fordham Road. And just as it turns the corner I notices a chicken standing there—regular broiler with a veil on and a little bag in her mit. She starts up Berkley toward where I'm standing, but before she gets half-way I heard the buzzing of the taxi once more; around it came again into Berkley and shot up to the curb abreast of the girl."

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"She stopped like a flash, the Jap threw open the door, and she gave a little yelp as though she was just about as glad as she'd ever been in her life. Then she jumped into the taxi, the door shut and around the corner it whirled and was gone. There's no use talking," said the speaker and he shook his head in a way that convulsed the drug clerk, "you can't never tell anything about human nature."

Ashton-Kirk buttoned up his coat.

"In that," said he, "I thoroughly agree with you. Human nature is a thing which we can base little upon with safety." Then to Fuller he added: "Come! I think we have some work ahead of us."

CHAPTER XX

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FRESH DEVELOPMENTS

On the following morning Ashton-Kirk entered his study; a few moments later Stumph followed him, bearing a cup of coffee. And while his employer sipped this, Stumph gravely remonstrated.

"You should not work. You have had too little sleep."

"Has Purvis come in?" asked the other, heedlessly.

"Yes, he is waiting." Then, not to be deterred, the man added, glancing at the patch of white plaster which covered the wound on his employer's head: "You will be ill—you should rest."

"There is work which must be done," smiled Ashton-Kirk. "You don't always lay up yourself, Stumph, when you are out of sorts."

"No, sir," replied the man, gravely, "but this——"

"Ask Purvis to come in."

A few moments later a young man with a prominent nose and a long chin came into the room.

"Good morning," said he. "I understand from Fuller that you wanted me last night."

"It did not matter, as things turned out."

"My orders," said Purvis, "were to follow any of the household. When Drevenoff left the place I got after him according to instructions. But," with a disgusted air, "would you believe it?—I lost him."

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If Ashton-Kirk was annoyed at this, he did not show it.

"How was that?" he inquired.

"He boarded the train at Eastbury," explained Purvis, "and I did the same. For the life of me I don't know how he did it, for I thought I had my eye on him all along; but when the train reached the city, he was not on it. Perhaps he noticed me and took a desperate chance while the train was moving."

"O'Neill is at the Fordham Road house," said Ashton-Kirk. "I want you to relieve him at noon."

"Very good," said Purvis. "Any instructions?"

"Nothing more than that you are to keep track of anything that may happen. O'Neill is to relieve you again at midnight."

When Purvis had taken his leave, Ashton-Kirk rang for Fuller. That young man entered; in spite of his loss of sleep he looked as brisk as ever.

"What about the motor cab?" asked the secret agent.

"I looked up the various stations. The nearest to Okiu's house is on Collingwood Avenue. I called them on the telephone, but could get no satisfaction. Then I paid them a visit, with better results. Okiu called a cab about midnight. Its driver's name is Freeman, and he lives on Nineteenth Street. Having gone off duty I thought he would probably be at his boarding-house; so I went there and was lucky enough to find him at home. [Pg 242]

"Yes, he recalled the trip to Eastbury, and remembered perfectly that he had run his fare all the way to the city and to the railroad station. Then I went to the station. Again I was fortunate. A Jap answering Okiu's description had been sold two tickets at just about the time the taxi driver said he had reached the station."

"You inquired to what points the tickets were bought?"

"Yes," and here Fuller's face expressed great satisfaction. "They were for Washington."

The secret agent arose to his feet, his singular eyes shining with excitement, his nostrils dilating like those of a thoroughbred facing the barrier. After a few turns up and down the room, he said:

"This looks like the last stage of the chase. We must win now, or never."

"Washington," said Fuller, "is headquarters for such things as that secret document. The embassies just yawn for them."

There was a short pause; Ashton-Kirk halted at a window, and looked down at the eager, grubbing horde in the street. [Pg 243]

"What have you heard from Burgess?" he asked.

"He sent in a long written report this morning. It would seem that the flurry on Fordham Road was not the only one last night—or rather this morning."

Fuller handed the other a number of folded sheets. They ran:

"I am sending this by messenger. Can't leave the job myself. About an hour ago Karkowsky got a call on the telephone. A man came to his room door and began hammering to wake him up. The 'phone is on the first floor; Karkowsky hurried down to answer; and I followed him.

"He went into the booth; I couldn't hear what was said, but I could see him through the glass door; and if ever a man listened to anything with attention, he was that man. As I watched him I could see that he grew more and more excited; then he hung up, and rushed out of the booth. The first thing he did was to snatch down a time-table from a rack; skimming it over he threw it aside and then was off up-stairs. I managed to get possession of the time-table; it was a schedule of Washington trains.

"Just now it looks as though my man were going to jump out for Washington. If he does I'll call you.

"BURGESS."

"So," said Ashton-Kirk, as he laid the report upon the table, "our friend Karkowsky also shows an interest in Washington. Has Burgess called as yet?" [Pg 244]

"Yes, I had a short talk with him a while ago. He was then at the station waiting for the train which Karkowsky was to take. And," continued Fuller, "he told me of something more. It seems while he was waiting at the Lowe Street place for Karkowsky to make a move, he thought he'd like to know who had the Pole on the 'phone and put him into such a state of mind.

"So he called the operator. 'This is such and such a number,' he says. 'What number was that who just called me?'

"'It was so and so number,' says the girl, after a little.

"'All right,' says he, 'give me that.'"

"Well?" said Ashton-Kirk.

"It was a tavern on Fordham Road about a block from Morse's," said Fuller. "The barkeeper answered. The only person he'd seen using the telephone was a young fellow who talked a foreign language—a Pole who lived at Morse's—the place he said where the man was killed a few nights ago. That was enough for Burgess; so he thanked the man and hung up."

"Drevenoff has heard something," smiled Ashton-Kirk. "Altogether he seems a marvelously well- [Pg 245]

posted young man."

There was some further talk between the two; then Fuller went out and Ashton-Kirk continued to stand by the window, gazing down at the thronging, chaffering, noisy crowd. Large horses drew small loads, while small men staggered under large ones; heady cries summoned those at a distance to the spots where bargains in faded vegetables or decaying fish were to be had; the stone steps of the houses were filled with men in hard hats and upturned coat collars; women with their heads wrapped in knitted shawls peered out between the folds in stolid wonder.

At length he turned from the window, sat down in the wide-armed chair and lighted the German pipe; clouds began to gather above his head and to curl into the outer air; the rumble of wheels, the outcries of the drivers and hucksters, the undertone of those cautiously sparring for the advantage in a trade, stole into the room; however, he smoked on, oblivious. But, when his pondering seemed at its deepest and the corrugations between his eyes the most prominent, he suddenly struck the table a blow with his palm and leaped up.

"That's it," he cried, "that's it! What an idiot I was not to think of it before."

Putting aside the pipe he took down a directory and began turning the pages rapidly. Now and then he made a rapid note upon a block of paper. Then he pushed the book away, descended the steps two at a time, and in the lower hall put on his hat. Stumph, hurrying to be of some service, reached the hall just as the street door slammed; and through a window he saw Ashton-Kirk, with eager tread, hurrying up the street.

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CHAPTER XXI

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THE MAN WITH THE DECORATION

It was rather late on the afternoon of the same day that Ashton-Kirk, accompanied by young Fuller, entered a government building at Washington. Apparently the secret agent was expected, for he was ushered into the same superbly appointed office as upon his former visit; and the same ruddy-faced, white-haired official greeted him.

"So," said the latter, "the hunt has brought you here."

Ashton-Kirk tossed his gloves and hat upon the desk and shook hands.

"That," said he, "is now the status of the affair—it's a hunt; and the pack is an assorted one and in full cry."

"We received your wire yesterday, and the department's agents at once went to work."

"Is there any result?"

"Nothing marked."

"But surely they have located the girl?"

"Oh, yes, of course. She did not make the slightest attempt to hide. As soon as she arrived in the city she went to the Tillinghast and placed her own name upon the register. And since arriving there she has not once gone out."

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"Any visitors?"

"No. But about noon a message arrived for her. And our man recognized the messenger as one connected with, curiously enough—the German Embassy."

"The German Embassy!"

A peculiar expression came into the face of Ashton-Kirk. He sat looking at the secretary for a moment; and then the latter saw a slow smile gradually creep about his mouth. He took a notebook from his pocket, and glanced at some memoranda.

"Of course," said he, after a moment, "you have the names and biographies of the various persons attached to the foreign embassies?"

"To be sure."

"If it is not too much trouble, I should like to see a list of the German officials."

The secretary touched a bell; an attendant heard his wants, disappeared, and in a few moments reappeared, placing a small book upon the desk. The secret agent took it up, and his long, inquiring finger ran down a column of names.

"Von Marc," he read, "Stelzner, Konig, Dietz." Then the finger paused. "Von Steinmetz," said he. "Page twenty-nine." He turned the pages until he came to the one indicated; and what he found there he read with attention. When he had finished he laid the volume upon the desk.

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"To have Germany drawn into this matter," said he, "will of course complicate matters."

"You expect that she *will* be drawn into it?" and the secretary looked at him inquiringly. The secret agent nodded, and the secretary continued: "To have a certain document fall into her hands might lead to nothing—and then again it might lead to a great deal."

He sat pondering for a moment; then his ruddy face lighted up, and he said:

"Pardon me a moment."

He called for a number on the telephone and chatted with Ashton-Kirk while he waited. When the connection was made, he said into the receiver:

"Did I understand that you have Stelzner for to-night?" There was a pause while the answer was being made. Then he proceeded, evidently well satisfied: "Very well; then you may expect an additional guest. Good-bye."

He turned from the telephone and settled back in his chair.

"My wife is giving a dinner to-night," said he. "I do not know all her arrangements, but I can promise you an excellent dinner and a most distinguished company. Also," and there was a significant look in his eyes as he said it, "there will be a person present who will interest you a great deal."

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"I shall be delighted to eat your dinner and meet your distinguished company," laughed Ashton-Kirk. "But, above all, I am desirous of meeting the person who will interest me."

At their hotel a little later, Ashton-Kirk discussed the situation with his aide. Fuller listened with amazement.

"But," he cried, when the other had done, "this sounds preposterous! Why should Miss Corbin desire to deal with the German Embassy in a matter which she planned with Okiu?"

"Before we make up our minds that she *did* plan with Okiu," said Ashton-Kirk, "let us look further. As it stands we are not at all assured of it."

"Assured!" Fuller stared in astonishment. "Have you forgotten her secret conference with the Japanese that day at the window? Have you forgotten the talk Nanon heard between the girl and her lover on the stairs? Have you forgotten the presence of that lover in Okiu's house when you were all but trapped, and his desperate attempt upon your life? And surely the girl's own attempt in the matter of the communicating gas pipe has not escaped you! I say 'the girl's own attempt' because it was she who urged the man on. And, above all, the matter of the taxi-cab must be still fresh in your memory. As soon as she was possessed of the paper she made at once for Okiu's. And he was waiting for her. Did she not get into the cab with him? Did they not drive to the railway station? Did he not buy two tickets for Washington? Is she not here?" Fuller was tense with excitement; his eyes snapped as he made each point. "And for all," he added in amazement, "you seem to doubt that she was concerned in the matter with the Japanese."

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Ashton-Kirk smiled at his aide's heat.

"I merely asked if we were assured that she was so concerned," said he, quietly. "No case is built upon appearances alone. They merely point out things which should be examined; the results of this latter are the threads which, when woven together, make the case complete."

An hour or two later the secret agent was set down at the handsome residence of the secretary; and upon entering found that genial gentleman in the midst of a knot of his dinner guests and was warmly greeted by both he and his wife. As soon as he decently could, the host drew Ashton-Kirk aside.

"That round, rosy little man with the decoration upon his coat is your interesting person," suggested he. "We shall put you as close to him as we can."

The secret agent examined the little man, who was possessed of a gleaming bald head, a cheerful manner, and a pronounced German accent; and while he was so doing, the secretary went on:

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"As I said this afternoon, I am not always acquainted with my wife's arrangements. And now I find that we are also to have Matsadi—and Matsadi, if you are not already aware of the fact, is the Japanese minister's right-hand man."

"I have heard him mentioned," said Ashton-Kirk. "And I understand that he is clever."

"He has a wonderful touch—scarcely perceptible, and unusually successful."

At the table Ashton-Kirk found himself near to Matsadi and opposite the rosy little German. The Japanese was spare and narrow-faced; he wore glasses, talked little and ate less. But he seemed keenly alive to all that was said and done; his diffident smile approved of everything.

The little German ate a great deal and drank quite a bit more. And he talked ceaselessly. As the dinner progressed he grew rosier than ever; his eyes and his bald dome seemed trying to out-shine his decoration. There was a chuckle in his voice when he addressed his host, which was often, and his head nodded humorously over what were evidently intended as thickly veiled allusions. But as the secretary paid little attention to his sayings, the German began to direct his remarks to Matsadi. The latter replied with a courteous reserve which seemed to amuse the German vastly; sometimes he shook like a portly mould of gelatine.

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"Ach, himmel!" said he, nodding to Ashton-Kirk, whose eye he happened to catch, "some the sense of humor have not. As for me, always do I laugh, whether the joke is on me or not."

"You are to be envied," replied the secret agent.

The little man cocked his eye at Matsadi in a most knowing manner.

"I have heard it said, 'That the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong,'" he said. "Was it a psalmist, a prophet or a poet of our own time who so spoke? But no matter, it is very good—but not complete. One might add 'That the reward is not always to the industrious.'"

Observing that he was being spoken to, the Japanese leaned forward.

"I beg your pardon?" said he, inquiringly.

"There is philosophy in the wine," observed the German, and he added to the luster of his brilliant scalp by rubbing it with a handkerchief. "And with me its wisdom stays upon the tongue."

The Japanese smiled sedately.

"I have noticed that," said he.

The other laughed and quivered with all his round little body.

"Good," said he. "I was in hopes that you would wake up." Then he went on in a sort of musing tone, but with dancing eyes: "Many a man has toiled early and late to make a plant fruitful; and the result of his work is that some idle one, who laughs and drinks and snaps his fingers at labor, has the ripened fruit fall into his lap."

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Matsadi seemed not to grasp the meaning of this; at any rate he smiled in a vague sort of way and contented himself with nodding his head. Very little passed between them after this, as the Japanese had his attention taken by the lady beside him; but later, in the coat room, Ashton-Kirk heard him say to the German:

"Your simile of the industrious planter and the vagabond was a very excellent one. And it frequently happens so. I was much struck with it."

A young man, wearing a number of Austrian orders, said, as he was being helped on with his coat:

"Are you going on to Von Stunnenberg's, Matsadi? Perhaps I could give you a lift."

"Thank you," said the Japanese. "Yes, I had thought of going."

"I'll wait for you," said the other, as he went out.

Matsadi took up his gloves and hat; he paused before the laughing German.

"Yes," said he, and there was a thoughtful look upon his face, "your parable was a good one. But does the story always end so? As the idle one lifts the fruit to his greedy lips, do I not see the patient toiler reaching out to snatch it from him?"

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And as Matsadi hurried after the Austrian, the portly little man chuckled rapturously.

"They are so like children," said he.

As Ashton-Kirk shook hands with the secretary, the latter said:

"I trust that Stelzner entertained you. He loves to make a parade behind the wall of innuendo and allusion when he is well fed. And, then, I fancied that he might have heard something."

"He was invaluable," said Ashton-Kirk. "And," with a smile, "Matsadi was not without his interesting weaknesses." After a short pause he said: "There is to be something or other to-night at the house of the German ambassador, Von Stunnenberg?"

"Yes, a ball, I believe."

"As a rule I avoid such things," said the secret agent; "but if you could manage to have me received at this one, I should be delighted."

CHAPTER XXII

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THE GERMAN EMBASSY BALL

The street before the German Embassy was thronged with motor-cars and carriages; the windows sparkled with lights; lines of police sharply directed traffic and saw to it that the space before the building was kept open.

It was perhaps eleven o'clock when Ashton-Kirk, accompanied by Fuller, arrived. The latter gazed about the glittering rooms, astonished.

"I'm not sure which it most resembles," he said, "a masked ball without the masks, or an ensemble number in a musical comedy."

The women were magnificent; their gowns shone, their shoulders and arms gleamed under the many lights. The officers attached to the various embassies made a dashing picture in their gorgeous uniforms; the official dress of the diplomats was stately and picturesque. Here was a white-haired old Austrian, his chest aglitter with crosses and orders, engaged with the Turkish envoy; the Chinese minister, his flowing silken robes tucked in about him, sat placidly in the midst of a group of admiring ladies; the flaming scarlet and gold lace of one South American republic contrasted strongly with the white and silver of another; Mexico vied with Russia in splendor, while less spectacular states ran from sober greens and grays to the plain black of conventional dress.

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Plants and lights were everywhere; from the ballroom came the strains of a German waltz; the dancers floated about upon the shining floor.

The handsome Baroness Von Stunnenberg greeted the secret agent and his aide; the ambassador, who was a massive man with a snowy, up-twisted moustache and the stride of a Prussian cavalryman, stood near by.

"I was informed of your coming," he said to Ashton-Kirk. "And although I do not quite understand, still I am pleased to see you."

The secret agent had replied, and Von Stunnenberg was turning away when a delighted voice exclaimed:

"Kirk, old chap, I'm astonished! Here, of all places in the world."

Ashton-Kirk turned and came face to face with a brilliantly beautiful woman, and a young man with a vastly contented look.

"Mrs. Pendleton," said the secret agent, as he took the outstretched hand, "I can only repeat your husband's exclamation, 'Here, of all places in the world.'"

"But what does it mean?" demanded Jimmie Pendleton, as he, too, gripped his friend by the hand. "Here you are—you whom I have heard discourse so wisely about such affairs as this—the folly and the vanity of it, and the——" but he paused, snapped his fingers and turned to his wife. "I know what it is! He's here on business."

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Mrs. Pendleton gestured her dismay.

"Not that, surely," she said. "There can scarcely be anything here to attract your talents," laughingly to the secret agent. "Ambassadors are the frankest of men, and their doings are open to every one."

"The Baroness and Edyth are cronies," Pendleton informed the other, as his wife turned to the hostess. The latter's expression as Mrs. Pendleton spoke to her in a low tone changed formal politeness to one of interest.

"Oh!" she said; "my dear, I'm afraid of him. And so," smiling to Ashton-Kirk, "you are the remarkable person of whom Mrs. Pendleton has spoken so often? Well, if I ever become involved in a mystery, I promise to call in no one but you."

"I shall be flattered by your confidence," said Ashton-Kirk in the same light tone. "But, I warn you, Mrs. Pendleton is scarcely to be depended upon as regards my work. She allowed herself to be dazzled by a trifling dexterity, so to speak, and makes a very wonderful performance of something that was not at all remarkable."

"Oh, these modest men," sighed the Baroness. "The world is so full of them." In turn she spoke a few words to her husband. His big German head reared, and he curled the upstanding points of his moustache.

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"I have heard of you, sir," and his blue eyes searched the secret agent from head to foot.

"The old boy seems somewhat miffed," whispered Pendleton to Fuller; "I wonder what's wrong?"

"He probably does not fancy being interfered with," said Fuller, and he shrugged his shoulders wisely.

"Why," and Pendleton looked astonished, "you don't mean to say that he——" here he paused and his glance was full of inquiry.

"No, nothing directly," answered Fuller. "Just a little affair that seems to have been put up to him, that's all."

There was a brief, low-pitched conversation between Ashton-Kirk and Von Stunnenberg. The latter's manner was one of massive dignity; and not once while he spoke did he take his light-colored eyes from the face of the secret agent. But if he expected to read anything there, he was disappointed. Ashton-Kirk was smilingly candid, genially open. But he said nothing that would throw light upon his errand there that night. The Baron had served under Bismark, and his methods were identical with those of the great chancellor—the sappers worked constantly under cover of a blunt manner and pointed speech.

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But in this case the blunt manner pounded vainly against an impregnable wall of practised assurance; and the pointed speeches met with a flashing defense. Impatiently the old diplomat twisted his white moustache; and rather angrily he drew off his sappers, for they were useless except under cover of their more obvious brethren.

"I thank you, sir," said he, with a bow. "To have seen you is a pleasure. And now you will pardon me, I know."

A little later Ashton-Kirk sat with Mrs. Pendleton in a secluded corner.

"Now," she said, holding up one finger, "tell me all about it. Don't try to deceive me. I know the Baron Von Stunnenberg very well, and have never seen him assume that manner of a few moments ago unless there was something of much importance going forward."

"The Baron flatters me by his manner," smiled Ashton-Kirk. "It puts me in quite a glow to think that I am so noticed in high places."

She laughed musically; but her eyes were not without their gravity.

"I know you of old," she said; "you will tell nothing until you are ready. That characteristic made me afraid of you once; but in the midst of the fear there was a good deal of admiration," she confessed with a nod of her stately head. "If you impress every one as you impressed me—that is,

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every one you are working against—I don't wonder you always succeed. Even while I planned, I knew that I could not hide from you that which you wished to know."

"You were clever," he said; "and you were resourceful. You lacked only experience." While he spoke his eyes went about from place to place as though seeking some one. "Are you acquainted with many here to-night?" he asked.

"Not many," was the answer. She noticed the roving of the singular eyes, and her interest quickened. "Did you expect to see some one?" she inquired.

He nodded.

"I wonder if I know who it is?" She paused for an answer, but he seemed not to hear, and so she went on: "Some one who has done something amiss. Poor thing! Do you know, I feel sorry for him." Then, after a pause: "A man, of course."

He shook his head.

"It's a woman!" Her voice lifted. "It's a woman!" she repeated. "Oh, poor creature!"

She turned upon him two fine eyes filled with concern.

"Perhaps it's a girl," she said. "A girl much like I was—one who can confide in no one, or has no one whom she can trust. Tell me, what is her——"

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Just then, in the midst of a group which was about separating, Ashton-Kirk caught sight of Stella Corbin. Mrs. Pendleton noted his expression; her eyes followed the direction of his own. And when they rested upon the slight, girlish figure and saw the eager, frightened look, she turned upon him.

"For shame," she said, reproachfully. "Oh, for shame!"

"You know her then?" said he quietly.

"I only know that she is an English girl and came here with Madame Steinmetz. But," and her brilliant, challenging glance met his own squarely, "I know that she has done nothing. A girl who looks like that *could* not do anything very wrong."

"It is not always well to judge by appearances," said he, quietly. "Physiognomists place great confidence in their power to read faces; but theirs is scarcely an exact science."

She sat regarding him steadfastly; then nodded and said:

"That is mere evasion. I recognize the ruse, for I have met it once or twice before. You draw upon generalities when questioned in a specific instance; and if your questioner takes that as a direct answer, you do not trouble yourself to put him or her right."

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He smiled.

"I said that you needed only experience," he remarked.

Just then a sleek little form came rolling into view; the rosy face, shining bald head and the decoration were familiar to the secret agent.

"Mrs. Pendleton," said the German, and he nodded and waved his hand, "I am given much pleasure to see you."

"How do you do, Colonel Stelzner?" she replied. Then inquiringly: "You have met Mr. Ashton-Kirk?"

"I have met him, yes, but I have not before caught the name." Colonel Stelzner bowed until his gleaming scalp was fully in view. "It gratifies me, sir, to know so famous a person," he concluded.

"Ah, you, too, have *heard* of him?" Mrs. Pendleton smiled, mischievously. The little German again waved his hand.

"Who has not?" he demanded. "Every one," authoritatively, "on both sides of the ocean. That is," and the hand was held up as though begging a moment's delay in her judgment, "every one who is interested such matters in."

Here Pendleton came up with some friends to whom he presented the secret agent; a few moments later a man-servant approached the latter and said something to him. Ashton-Kirk asked to be pardoned and followed the servant out of the room. But Mrs. Pendleton took no notice of all this; she gave all her attention to the little German. He polished his glittering scalp and chuckled.

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"Most *secret* agents," he went on, "are unknown to the public. They cherish the fancy that they are also unknown to the diplomatic corps; but it is *only* fancy. Those who are unknown personally are recognized by their methods. *Ach ja!* They are as open as the day. A man who no eyes has could see it! But he"—and he indicated the spot where Ashton-Kirk had stood with one plump forefinger—"there is one who is not like the others. No, no," he shook his head and his chuckle grew more pronounced, "he is much different."

Ashton-Kirk returned in a few moments, and was soon talking generally with Pendleton's friends, who were mostly young people who laughed a great deal. And while he did not miss a word of what was said, neither did he once take his eyes from that point where Stella Corbin still sat. With her was a small, vivacious, pretty woman, undoubtedly French, whose gestures were most eloquent and the play of whose eyes alone was almost sufficient to tell a close observer what she was saying. Some little distance away was a heavy jowled man with thick black brows and a slow

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way of turning his small head; in close conversation with him was a slighter man, blond, and with a short, pointed beard. And, for all their apparent occupation in each other's words, their glances kept constantly going toward Miss Corbin and her companion; each movement made by them seemed a matter of intense interest.

And in this they were not alone. Behind where the girl sat ran a massive marble staircase which led to a sort of balcony, palm-lined and used as a resting-place by tired dancers, and a point of vantage by those who merely desired to look on. At the top of the staircase, seated beneath a wide-spreading and flowering plant, were Matsadi, and—yes, it was Okiu!

Fuller caught sight of this latter pair much about the same time as his employer. The secret agent nodded in answer to the young man's low, surprised whisper.

"Yes, I just noticed them," he said.

Fuller turned his glance from Okiu to Stella Corbin; that he was puzzled was frankly shown.

"This is a rather queer situation," he said, in a low, careful tone to Ashton-Kirk. "Japan wanted that paper in the worst way; and this Corbin girl stood in with Okiu in an effort to gain possession of it for that government. And now, with the document in their possession, they begin a flirtation, so to speak, with the Germans."

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But the secret agent made no reply to this except to give his helper a warning look; then he plunged into the conversation which the others were carrying on animatedly.

The eyes of the beautiful Mrs. Pendleton had kept Stella Corbin well within range; both the girl and her companion seemed to interest her greatly.

"And so," she said to Colonel Stelzner, "you think Mr. Ashton-Kirk very different from the other government agents?"

He gestured with both hands.

"As different as the sun from the stars," declared he. "The mastery of his art has been to him given. Every one knows him by sight; every one knows him for what he is. And yet he works in such a way that his hand is not noticed until it has closed," here he pantomimed expansively, "and what he has been seeking is in its grasp."

The dance music came to them in swaying, stirring strains; the low laughter and sound of gliding feet came with it.

"Madame Von Steinmetz," spoke Mrs. Pendleton, after a few moments, "is a remarkably expressive woman."

The eyes of the little German went to the lady who was conversing with Stella Corbin. His shoulders shrugged and his hands opened wide.

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"It is her race," he said. "The French are mostly so. There is her husband, now," and his gaze singled out the man with the pointed blond beard; "he is German, and has little of the characteristics which mark her."

"How long have they been married?" asked Mrs. Pendleton.

"About ten years, I believe."

"So long as that!" She seemed greatly surprised. "I thought that men did not remain in love with their wives for so great a length of time. And yet he is much in love with her. See, he can't keep his eyes from her."

Colonel Stelzner's little round body shook as probably it had never shaken before. He chuckled and gasped; the tears stood in his eyes.

"Oh, you ladies!" he said at last. "Oh, you ladies, you see everything! Nothing escapes you." Again he shook and chuckled and gasped. But finally he recovered, wiped his eyes and went on: "Ah, yes, I suppose Von Steinmetz is desperately in love with madame. And why not? She is charming."

"Who is that with Von Steinmetz?" she asked.

"That? Oh," and the round little colonel nodded his head knowingly, "that is Hoffer."

Her eyes lingered upon the large-jowled man for a moment. She had heard of him.

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"I trust," she smiled, "that Herr Hoffer is not also in love with Madame Von Steinmetz."

Stelzner chuckled.

"It is not possible that you think he might be," he protested.

"Well, he seems inclined to pay her as much attention as her husband. His eyes never move from her."

"Oh," gasped Colonel Stelzner, "you will be the death of me, Mrs. Pendleton; you really will!" And when he had recovered from the fit of laughter into which her observation had thrown him, he added: "But consider, Madame von Steinmetz is not alone. Could it not be possible that Hoffer is interested in the English girl?"

Her fine eyes were fixed directly upon his face, as she said:

"Ah, that is it."

There was something in her tone which drove the laugh from his face; he answered soberly

enough.

"I ask if it were not possible; that is all."

People who talk too much upon subjects regarding which it is best that they be silent often get glimpses of their weakness. And Colonel Stelzner had such a flash of inner vision just then. And while he was, more or less dismayed, thinking it over, Mrs. Pendleton discovered Matsadi and Okiu at the head of the staircase.

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The interest which they displayed in the two women immediately attracted her; and once more she turned to the little colonel.

"The two Japanese now, which of the ladies attracts them—the English or the French?"

The usually rosy face of Stelzner was rather gray as he replied, and the chuckle so habitual to him had given place to a wan smile.

"The Japanese?" said he. "Oh, yes, those two up there, of course. I have found," with the air of a man speaking more or less at random, "that the Occidental types of women interest Orientals. Oh, yes; it is much so. I have known Japanese to admire— Ah, Hoffer, how do you do?"

The heavy man, accompanied by Von Steinmetz, was moving by, and Stelzner grasped at their passing as a shipwrecked seaman might grasp at a spar. Reluctantly, so it seemed, the two men paused; and the beautiful Mrs. Pendleton smiled as she bent her head to the salutation of Von Steinmetz.

"Your wife," she said, "is lovely to-night. We have just been admiring her."

The husband seemed none too pleased at this; he fingered his short, light-colored beard and his small blue eyes went to the lady in question.

"It occurred to me also," he said, "that she looked well. But then," and he smiled a little, "I think she usually looks so."

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"You are a good husband," and Mrs. Pendleton laughed lightly. "Madame should be proud of you. But," and she arched her brows in wonder, "what an exceedingly interesting girl Miss Corbin must be. See how she holds madame's attention! Even the slightest gesture seems loaded with meaning."

The slim fingers of Von Steinmetz tugged at the pointed beard; Hoffer turned his head with his peculiarly slow motion toward the speaker and his eyes searched her face. But there was nothing there but smiles and bright looks and admiration for what she apparently considered a marked talent.

That Madame Von Steinmetz seemed greatly interested in what Stella Corbin said was plain enough; her eloquent hands were still; her eyes had ceased their byplay and centered themselves upon the girl's face. This latter was even paler than usual, and her face seemed a trifle set; her attitude was one that told of suppressed excitement.

In a throaty German which was sharply distressing, Hoffer began relating a heavy anecdote. Both Von Steinmetz and Stelzner gave it much attention, but Mrs. Pendleton, while she listened, never took her eyes from Stella Corbin and her companion.

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For the girl had ceased speaking and leaned back in her chair as though exhausted; Madame Von Steinmetz, her vivacious countenance illumined, was carefully outlining something for the girl's benefit. Hoffer finished the anecdote and his two friends laughed eagerly; Mrs. Pendleton smiled and nodded her appreciation though it is doubtful if she had heard much of it. To Von Steinmetz she said:

"How wonderfully expressive your wife's manner is! See, it is almost as if we could hear what she is saying!"

That Von Steinmetz would have vastly preferred his lady's manner to have been less wonderful was evident; his blue eyes were cold with disapproval; the pointed beard was twisted and tugged painfully.

And while she was manifesting this interest in Miss Corbin and the French woman, Mrs. Pendleton did not altogether lose sight of Ashton-Kirk. She noted that, in a few minutes, he drew away from the group of which her husband made one; and also she noted that his eyes, though they did not seem to do so, never lost a movement made by Stella Corbin.

The two Japanese, as though they had caught sight of some one or something upon the lower floor, had suddenly arisen and descended the staircase.

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"The Senora Maselli," murmured Mrs. Pendleton, as she saw Matsadi speak to a beautiful, dark-eyed woman, evidently an Italian. "He is asking her to sing."

And that Senora Maselli was willing to do so was apparent; for she took Matsadi's arm and they crossed to a room, the door of which was only a few feet from where Miss Corbin and Madame Von Steinmetz sat. Okiu, however, remained behind; and as Matsadi was passing through the door, he turned to look over his shoulder toward his countryman which, to a close observer, seemed full of significance.

Madame Von Steinmetz still talked, eagerly, with her hands, eyes and tongue. It were as though, as Mrs. Pendleton thought, the English girl had pictured some dilemma in which she stood and the French woman was pointing the way out. More than once Miss Corbin's hands had gone toward the bag which hung from her arm; but each time they left it unopened, as though she

were not altogether persuaded.

"But," Mrs. Pendleton told herself with conviction, "she will do it in the end. When one is anxious to take advice, one usually does so."

The dance music had stopped some little time before; now came the notes of a piano, almost immediately followed by the rush and ring of a human voice. Heads were turned, laughter stopped, voices ceased. Then there was a stir. [Pg 273]

"It is Maselli," ran the whisper.

A movement began toward the room from which the singing proceeded. In a moment Mrs. Pendleton's view of Stella Corbin was cut off by the eager and somewhat undignified scamper; through the press she saw the sleek, black head of Okiu and, at no great distance, caught a glimpse of Ashton-Kirk.

A sort of fluttering assailed her ear-drums; it were as though the air were charged with an impending, unseen something. A feeling of suspense filled her; she was astonished to feel herself possessed by an almost irresistible desire to cry out a warning to some indefinite person. And apparently she was not alone in her impression, for now she saw Hoffer, his great jaws rigid, almost thrusting his way forward among the guests; Von Steinmetz and Stelzner were also on the move, and from different directions.

Suddenly there was a pistol shot; startled cries rang out; the throng split as though divided by a great knife. And as it fell asunder there arose another cry, higher and in a different key. The first had been the outcry of those who felt harm impending; the second was that of a single person, and one upon whom the harm had fallen.

It was Miss Corbin; Mrs. Pendleton could see her as she stood white and startled, staring at the silken bag which she held in her hands. Upon one side of her stood Madame Von Steinmetz, aghast, trembling with shock; upon the other stood Ashton-Kirk, imperturbable and keen eyed. [Pg 274]

For an instant the affrighted guests swayed upon the verge of panic; then like oil upon troubled waters, soothing words were spoken and explanations suavely proffered. A young man, who looked very red and foolish, had dropped and exploded a chamber of a newly invented revolver, which he had brought to exhibit to an influential official whom he expected to meet. And in the ensuing excitement, Miss Corbin had lost a cherished trifle which would no doubt be found shortly.

Startled people are always anxious to be convinced that there is no occasion for their alarm; and so, more or less satisfied, Von Stunnenberg's guests broke into laughter and relieved chatter.

Passing through little groups, all absorbed in the enjoyment of relating their mutual sensations, Ashton-Kirk made his way toward the hall. His step was unhurried, his manner nonchalant; he spoke lightly to a number of people as he went by.

As he turned into the hall, Mrs. Pendleton followed; she saw him disappear into the coat room, and reappear a moment later, his overcoat on and his hat in his hand. And at the same instant she saw him confronted by the burly forms of Hoffer and the Baron Von Stunnenberg. [Pg 275]

CHAPTER XXIII

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WHAT VON STUNNENBERG THOUGHT

For a moment the secret agent and the two Germans stood face to face; then the former said, smilingly:

"I am sorry to be forced to go at such an early hour; but," and he lifted his brows in such a way that might mean much or little, "there are certain things which require my attention."

Von Stunnenberg twisted one point of his white moustache, and his blue eyes glinted coldly.

"It would grieve me to keep you from your affairs," said he in his rumbling voice, "but there is a trifling matter which I should like to discuss with you. It will require, perhaps, only a few moments. The length of time altogether depends upon yourself."

"I shall be only too glad," said Ashton-Kirk, agreeably. He glanced at his watch and then added: "But since you say that the length of time depends upon me, I will make it as short as possible. It is more than likely that my presence will be urgently needed quite a little distance from here in perhaps half an hour."

There was a small room at one side, and the German ambassador entered this, followed by the others. [Pg 277]

"Will you sit down?" he asked with grave politeness.

The secret agent did so. Hoffer also seated himself; his small head was drawn down upon his big shoulders, the heavy face worked spasmodically; the veins and cords of his tightly clinched hands stood out in high relief.

"It would be a waste of time for us to indulge in any preamble," spoke Von Stunnenberg, coldly. "I know why you came here to-night; and I know that you have been in some degree successful in

your errand. And so, as that ground is covered, there is no need to go over it again."

Ashton-Kirk leaned back in his chair, and his white, even teeth shone as he smiled.

"I have always found it best to *examine* my ground; leaping over it is seldom satisfactory," said he. "You say that you know why I came here to-night. We will not discuss that if you are opposed to so doing," and again the quick smile showed itself. "But as to your knowing I have been in some degree successful, that is open to debate."

Hoffer protruded his small head, slowly, much as a turtle might do.

"Of course," said he, "we expected you to deny it. But your making a statement and our accepting it are two different matters." [Pg 278]

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"To be sure," said he, calmly.

Hoffer was about to say something more; but his chief held up a hand.

"A certain instrument was about to pass into my possession to-night," said Von Stunnenberg to Ashton-Kirk. "You knew of this and came here to prevent our being entrusted with it if you could. You are an able man, Mr. Ashton-Kirk, but do not forget that we still have the faculty of vision. Neither are we in the habit of allowing things to be taken from beneath our noses."

"You represent a friendly power," said Ashton-Kirk, coldly, "and of course could have no desire in the matter of the instrument in question other than to hand it with your compliments to this government."

Von Stunnenberg nodded.

"Of course," said Hoffer.

"And it was so understood by others and myself," proceeded Ashton-Kirk. "But there was a chance—I am perfectly frank, you see—that there might be a desire upon your part to make sure that the document in question was really what you supposed it. To venture to examine it would be a matter of delicacy," and the speaker's voice was suavity itself, "and so I concluded that it were a rather friendly thing to save you any mental wrench of that sort by anticipating you." [Pg 279]

"That," said Von Stunnenberg, and the smoothness of his voice was not a whit behind that of the other, "was most considerate of you. Accept my thanks. But," and his blue eyes were wide open in the fixity of the look which he directed toward the secret agent, "we would much prefer to assume our own responsibilities."

There was a short pause, then the ambassador leaned a trifle toward the other.

"And so," he resumed, "I should take it as a further expression of your good-will if you would hand the paper to me immediately."

Ashton-Kirk rose and looked at his watch once more.

"My time is short," said he. "So if there is anything of importance, I beg that you mention it at once."

Von Stunnenberg twisted his up-pointing moustache; his blue eyes were like ice, his manner was grim and menacing.

"There is nothing to be gained by this attitude," said he. "We are not children to be so deceived."

"You are not children to be so deceived," Ashton-Kirk smiled as he repeated the ambassador's words. "Perhaps not; but Matsadi apparently fancied it not very difficult when he arranged his little scene a few minutes ago."

Von Stunnenberg cast a quick look at Hoffer. The latter's small head turned slowly upon the secret agent.

"Matsadi *did* arrange the scene," said he, and there was admiration in his voice. "No stage manager could have done better. He had not watched the English girl more than a moment when he saw—as did you and I," with a conclusive wave of the hand, "that the papers desired were in the bag at her side. At sight of the Italian woman he grasped his opportunity for creating a momentary ruffle; in the midst of this, at a signal, his confederate allowed the revolver to explode, so transforming the slight confusion into a panic. During this his agent was to abstract the document."

Ashton-Kirk nodded, after the manner of one workman exchanging experiences with another.

"That was not all that I saw," went on Hoffer. "I saw Matsadi's agent making his way toward Miss Corbin to play his part, before the discharge of the revolver. Also," and the big jaws tightened, "I saw you doing your best to anticipate him."

Ashton-Kirk laughed, and there was an odd expression in his singular eyes.

"Was there nothing more that you noticed?" he asked.

"It was sufficient," put in Von Stunnenberg, grimly, "that he saw you reach the girl's side before [Pg 281]



"MY TIME IS SHORT"

the Japanese. And, if anything more were needed, an instant after you got within reaching distance, Miss Corbin discovered that the papers were gone."

"And that Okiu was baffled," said Hoffer, "one had only to give him a glance to discover. The rage in his face showed that you had beaten them—that you had taken the prize out of their own trap."

Ashton-Kirk laughed once more.

"My dear sir," said he, "you credit me with a dexterity which I do not possess. It is true that I did ——" he paused and then turned to Hoffer. "Aside from Okiu, did you see any one else—of Matsadi's?"

"No."

"Upon the fact that I reached Miss Corbin's side before Okiu you base your belief that I must have secured the paper." Ashton-Kirk placed his finger tips together with great nicety, and then looked placidly at Hoffer. "Have you encountered Matsadi before this?"

"I have," answered the German.

"In that you have the advantage of me. But from what I have heard of him, he is a man who plans with considerable effect. Is it likely," and he bent toward the other slightly, "that he would stop at one man in the crowd?"

The thick jowls of Holler bulged, and a dull red crept into his face.

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"You mean——" he got this far and then stopped. "You think," he continued, after a moment, "that there were more than Okiu?"

"*I know it,*" said Ashton-Kirk. "I counted at least three. Matsadi is not restricted to the use of his own countrymen. The man who dropped the revolver, for example, was an American."

At that moment Fuller, his face wearing an anxious expression, looked into the room. Seeing Ashton-Kirk he hurried to him.

"This," said he, holding out a message, "was just handed in. I told the man that I would look you up."

Ashton-Kirk took the envelope, murmured an apology and tore it open. There were but a few lines, and he read them at a glance; then he handed the paper to Von Stunnenberg and arose.

"It seems," said he, "that everything is about ready for me, and I really must go."

"Saw Matsadi come out just now," read the German ambassador. "Two men who had preceded him signaled from across the street. He joined them and all three hurried to the Japanese Embassy. Have building surrounded and am awaiting you."

"CULBERSON."

Von Stunnenberg lifted a crimson face as he finished the message.

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"The rats!" he cried. "They have beaten me!" He handed the paper back to the secret agent; as he did so his countenance cleared somewhat, and he smiled grimly. "And also," he added with some appreciation, "they have beaten you."

"Not quite," replied Ashton-Kirk, coolly, as he buttoned up his long coat. "I have still a card to play."

"You would not dare——" Hoffer paused as though the act the other had in mind were too daring to even put into words. "Not in a foreign embassy," he added, fearfully.

But the secret agent smiled.

"If the search for what I desire leads me to a foreign embassy, why not?" asked he. "What I ventured in the German surely I shall not hesitate to repeat in the Japanese. And now, gentlemen, I must say good-night."

And with this he left the room and hurried down the hall, Fuller following close behind him.

CHAPTER XXIV

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SURPRISED!

When Ashton-Kirk and his aide reached the sidewalk a man in a cloth cap approached.

"Mr. Culberson is awaiting orders," said he.

"Tell him to call off his men," replied the secret agent promptly.

Without comment, the man in the cloth cap walked away. Fuller was amazed.

"You have changed your plan?"

"Our affairs do not wear the aspect they bore when I called upon the Culberson Agency for help," said the secret agent.

There was an unemployed taxi-cab by the curb a little distance away; they got into this and in a

short time were put down at their hotel. The secret agent asked some question of the clerk, which the latter seemed to answer in the negative; then they ascended to Ashton-Kirk's apartments.

The secret agent threw himself into a comfortable chair and drew a tobacco pouch toward him. As he rolled a cigarette he said:

"We must lie idle until I get a call from Burgess."

"He is in Washington, then?"

"Yes; I had a few words with him over the wire while at Von Stunnenberg's. The secretary told him that I was there." [Pg 285]

Through the open window the drone of the night could be heard. It was now perhaps two o'clock, and the city was deep in sleep. From somewhere in the distance a car could be heard passing now and then; occasionally the smooth hum of a motor, or the sharp "clup-clup" of a cab horse sounded nearer at hand. In silence the two young men sat smoking; half an hour went by and then the telephone rang, brusquely. Ashton-Kirk sprang to the receiver.

"Hello," said he.

The voice of Burgess made reply.

"Everything right," said he. "I followed them from the embassy to the Tillinghast."

"The Tillinghast!"

"Yes, I'm speaking to you from there."

"I will be with you in a very few minutes." Then as an afterthought, the secret agent added, "They are *all* there, I suppose."

"They all came here—yes. And they held a consultation in a small reception room on the second floor. After this the young fellow went out."

"I see."

"Those men of Culberson's came in mighty handy. One of them followed him."

"He has not returned?"

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"Not yet."

"Very well."

Ashton-Kirk hung up the receiver, and reached for his overcoat.

"Is it the Japs?" asked Fuller, expectantly.

But the secret agent shook his head.

"No," said he, "it is not the Japs. But," and the other noted the speculative look come into his singular eyes, "I rather think we shall see something more of those very interesting personages before the night is over."

A cab took them to the Tillinghast in less than a quarter of an hour. It was a huge, ornate place, showily furnished and glaring with lights. In an office floored with marble and rich with gilt and mirrors, they found Burgess, engaged in conversation with a clerk. He greeted Ashton-Kirk eagerly.

"You are just in time," said he. "The young man just came in, and two Japanese were with him."

Ashton-Kirk smiled as though well pleased.

"I rather fancied that he had gone to fetch them when you told me that he had gone out," said he.

"I hope," said the hotel clerk, earnestly, "that this matter is nothing that will harm the credit of the house."

"Not in the least," Ashton-Kirk assured him, smoothly. "It is more than likely that it will never even be heard of outside ourselves." [Pg 287]

The clerk breathed freer.

"In that case," said he, "it's all right. And now, gentlemen, seeing that it is a government affair, if there is anything that I can do, I will do it cheerfully."

"Thank you," replied the secret agent.

As he spoke there came the sound of a buzzer; a youth at a telephone called:

"A waiter in Parlor F."

"That's the parlor your party is occupying," said the clerk, interestedly.

"Hold the waiter until I can speak to him," said Ashton-Kirk. He considered a moment. "This Parlor F," he added, "does it communicate with any other room?"

"Yes, with Parlor G."

"Excellent!" After a few more questions to which the clerk returned pointed answers, Ashton-Kirk gave Fuller and Burgess some low-voiced instructions. "And now," he said to the clerk, "I will see the waiter, if you please."

The man was a Swede with sandy hair and mild blue eyes; and his name was Gustave.

"Gustave," said the secret agent, "how long have you been a waiter?"

"Fifteen years," replied the Swede.

"In that time," said Ashton-Kirk, "you should have learned your business pretty well."

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Gustave grinned mildly.

"Oh, yes," said he.

Ashton-Kirk handed him a coin.

"When you go into Parlor F," said he, "forget what you have learned. Be clumsy. Make a noise. Do something that will draw people's attention to you for a little."

Again Gustave grinned.

"I will forget," said he, slipping the coin into a pocket. "The peoples will not be pleased, but I will forget."

That he kept his promise was evinced by sundry crashes and exclamations which came from Parlor F shortly after; and in the midst of these Ashton-Kirk entered the room adjoining and unlocked the communicating door. Then Gustave retired, followed by a series of remarks in a voice that was strange to the secret agent, and for a few moments there was no sound save the clinking and clash of glasses.

"Such a clown," said the voice, "such a clown to be sent to serve gentlefolks. It could happen in no other country but this."

"Will you please come to the matter in hand?" said the gentle voice of Okiu. "You sent for us for a specific purpose, and we should be greatly obliged if you would hold to that, Mr. Karkowsky."

Karkowsky laughed in the manner of a man who was very well contented with himself.

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"Of course, of course," said he. "Business is always a pleasure to me. Especially very profitable business such as this will prove to be."

"We do not ask your price," said a voice which the secret agent recognized as that of Matsadi. "We merely desire to be certain that the paper is ready for delivery."

"You may rest assured upon that point," replied Karkowsky. "Drevenoff, show him the scapular."

There was a moment's pause, during which the secret agent could well imagine the young Pole drawing the desired object from his pocket.

"There!" said the triumphant voice of Drevenoff. "There it is. And see here where the edge has been opened—the paper."

Karkowsky laughed once more.

"Ah," said he, contentedly, "these little matters! What a time we have in hunting them out—what a chase they sometimes lead us. And how glad we feel when it is all over."

"There would have been no chase in this matter at least," said Matsadi, "if you had lived up to your word in the first place."

"Not my word, my dear sir," spoke Karkowsky. "That has always been good. But one cannot always depend upon the steadfastness of a boy."

"I am as steadfast as you," broke in the voice of Drevenoff. "But blood is thicker than water."

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"I will not deny that," said Karkowsky, soothingly. Then, as though turning to the others, he added: "It happened this way. This was a wild lad. Russia drove him out. He fled to this country. When his father came with Count Malikoff they became reconciled. He was permitted to return home. But he was a Pole; he hated Russia; and beside that, *I* pointed out a chance to make a fortune. He stole the document which we now have here."

"And then," said Okiu, "you opened negotiations with Tokio. And when all had been settled, you would not turn the instrument over to us for the price asked."

"That," said Karkowsky, "was the result of the indiscretion of a very young man. I could not turn it over to you. Drevenoff had given it to his father."

"What else would you have me do?" demanded the young Pole, warmly. "Could I see him wrongfully accused, disgraced? No. I returned the paper, told him what I had done, and stood willing to have him do with me what he would."

"But his father," said Karkowsky, "was afraid to act; he feared for himself and for his son. He hid the paper in his scapular, and when dying gave it to the English physician."

"He was afraid to trust a Russian—he dreaded to risk giving the paper into the hands of one who might profit by it. I know that was his reason, because I knew my father," said Drevenoff. "But the Englishman attached no importance to the scapular; he placed it among his effects and forgot it. If my father gave him any instructions with regard to the disposal of it, he also forgot them."

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"I reasoned out what must have become of the scapular when this young man came to me after his father's death," said Karkowsky. "He was then willing, once more, to join me in the sale of the paper, because," and the man's laugh was full of mockery, "there was no near and dear one who could be harmed by it."

"Because you would sell your soul, Karkowsky," said young Drevenoff, "don't think me a fool if I would not."

"I beg your pardon," said the elder Pole, "I meant no offense. And as to selling my soul for so little money, don't believe it. If I ever come to such a transaction, my dear child, the price will be of some consequence."

"And when you reasoned that the English doctor must have what you desired," said the smooth voice of Okiu, "you began your operations?"

"At once," answered Karkowsky. "We took ship to England, located him at Sharsdale, and went to work on the matter. We tried everything, but with the same lack of success." [Pg 292]

"From what you said a few moments ago," said Matsadi, "you think that Dr. Morse was unaware of the document's existence."

"At first I did not dream of such a thing," said Karkowsky, "and, indeed, it was not until after he had come to America that it occurred to me. On going to Sharsdale I tried to open negotiations with him; I tried the same here. But in neither case did he rise to the bait. But *now* I am convinced that he never knew the thing was in his possession."

Matsadi laughed.

"Then, Okiu," said he, "all your planning was wasted."

"So it would seem," replied Okiu, gently.

"We suspected that you had some hand in the queer communications which Dr. Morse received from time to time," said Karkowsky. "We knew that it was not by chance that you took the house directly behind him. Drevenoff," with a laugh, "tried to get your man to talk many times, but could not."

"Humadi," said the Japanese agent, "never talks."

Here there was a sort of rustling sound; the swish-swish of silken skirts over the floor; then a new voice spoke, a voice which made Ashton-Kirk breathe a quiet sigh of content. [Pg 293]

"I think you have rambled long enough in this thing. It will not benefit any of us in any way to know what the others have done to gain possession of the paper. That it is here is, I think, sufficiently to the point."

There was a subdued clapping of hands at this.

"Bravo, Julia," cried Drevenoff. "To business, I say. That is what we are here for."

"Exactly," spoke Karkowsky. "That is what we are here for. The price——"

"Is what was named before," interrupted Julia. "And the paper is to be delivered when the money is turned over."

"To-morrow?" asked Matsadi.

"To-morrow will do very well," said Karkowsky. "Ready money—no checks, or drafts," cunningly. "They are things not always to be trusted. The hard coin, or the downright bank-note; that is what pleases me in a case like this."

"To-morrow, at noon," said Matsadi, curtly. There was a drawing back of chairs and the sound of several persons arising. "You can be seen here, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Karkowsky. "We will come here. Have the money in large bills, if possible," with a laugh; "we don't care to be loaded down, if it's to be avoided."

"It shall be as you desire," said Matsadi. Then there came the sound of footsteps crossing the floor of Parlor F, and a door opened. "Good-night," said Matsadi. [Pg 294]

"Good-night," replied the others.

Softly Ashton-Kirk opened the communicating door, and stepped into the room. Karkowsky was just about closing the door leading into the hall; at his side was Drevenoff and a girl with flaxen hair. As the door clicked behind the Japanese the girl threw up her hands and laughed triumphantly.

"Alexander," she cried, "it is ours at last! We have won! In spite of all *they* could do—in spite of the clever American, we have won!"

She threw her arms about the neck of Drevenoff; but as she did so there came a queer, throaty cry from Karkowsky; and then for the first time since he had entered the room, she saw Ashton-Kirk.

CHAPTER XXV

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CAUGHT!

The expression upon the faces of the three as they gazed at Ashton-Kirk were of mingled amazement and fear. But the secret agent only smiled in return; the twinkle in his eyes was altogether humorous.

"I know," said he, "that I am exceedingly annoying in happening here—especially at such a time as this. But, you see, we all have our tasks in life, and mine is to convince people that things are

seldom what they seem."

There was no reply; and the secret agent fixing his gaze upon the girl, continued:

"That you think I am clever is a compliment for which I thank you. It is hard," with a smile, "to be indebted to a person and be able to make only a—so to speak—left handed return."

The girl was the first of the three to recover. She stared at the speaker unflinchingly.

"And that is——?" she asked.

"Only that in saying that you have won you made a slight mistake."

"Don't be too sure that it *is* one," she said. Then with a fierce, bitter ring in her tone, she added: [Pg 296]
"There would have been no mistake had I had my way a few nights ago."

The secret agent laughed.

"Ah, no," said he. "I can well believe that. You urged our friend here," nodding toward Drevenoff, "rather strongly, to be sure."

Drevenoff's face was waxen with increased fear; the wide open stare of his eyes grew more marked. He was about to say something, but before he could do so Karkowsky spoke.

"Who," asked the elder Pole, "is this gentleman?"

The girl laughed in a mocking sort of way.

"An amateur policeman," she said. "Perhaps you have heard of him. His name is Ashton-Kirk."

Karkowsky seemed to ponder; but at length he shook his head.

"No," said he, "I do not recall the name." Then to the secret agent: "Would you mind stating your business, sir?"

"You would make an excellent comedian, Mr. Karkowsky," said the other. "I do not recall ever having seen that so well done before. And when one considers how many times the device has been used, that is saying a great deal."

Drevenoff took a step toward the speaker.

"What," demanded he, "did you mean a moment ago when you spoke of my being strongly [Pg 297]
urged?"

"So!" Ashton-Kirk darted a keen look at him. "That attracted your attention, did it?" He remained with his eyes upon the young man for a moment, and then continued: "You seem to have a habit, when dispatched upon messages, of seeing to your own affairs first I recall," reminiscently, "that upon the night of the murder of Dr. Morse I asked you to go for the police."

"I did so," said the Pole.

"Oh, yes, to be sure. But you took occasion first to fasten a window which had been previously neglected."

For an instant it seemed as though Drevenoff would cry out, but with a great effort he held himself in check.

"I don't understand you," he said.

"I sympathize with you in that," said Ashton-Kirk, "because there are many things I do not understand myself. For example," and he wrinkled his brow as though in an attempt to recall something, "I do not understand how you escaped the eye of the man I had at your heels the other night when Miss Corbin sent you to the city. Was it by a leap from the train while it was moving?" He shook his head in strong disapproval. "That was dangerous."

A quick look passed between the three; but the secret agent proceeded: [Pg 298]

"There are some, however, who are willing to take chances, no matter how desperate. Then, again, there are others who dislike to risk anything. You, for example," and he looked once more at the girl, "refuse to run risks of a certain sort. You are one of those who believe in clearing the way of obstacles as you come to them. That," and he nodded appreciatively, "is an admirable method. But to be absolutely effective it should contain a dash of imagination. For, then, if one were planning a murder by illuminating gas, for instance, one would realize the result of a raised blind. A grass plot is an excellent background for the shadows cast by a strong light."

Again the quick glances were interchanged; and then Karkowsky spoke briskly.

"We have listened to you, Mr. Ashton-Kirk, as you must admit, with a great deal of patience. So you will pardon me if I insist upon your stating the nature of your business without further loss of time."

Ashton-Kirk looked at the fresh-faced little man with his frank, well opened eyes and well-fed figure; and a look of amusement came into his face.

"As to that," said the secret agent, "I am entirely at one with you. I desire to finish my business as quickly as I can. I am here upon much the same errand as the two who just left," he continued. [Pg 299]
"But there is this difference. *They* were willing to pay for the paper contained in the scapular; while I expect to have it handed to me for the asking."

Karkowsky sat down and crossed his legs much after the manner of a man who is interested. The young man and the girl remained standing and were silent.

"A paper," said Karkowsky, as he stroked his chin, thoughtfully. "Will you kindly be more explicit?"

"Again I felicitate you upon your talent," said the secret agent; "you were meant for the stage." He sat upon the edge of the table and nursed one knee with his clasped hands. "But let me assure you that you are but wasting your breath and your ability." He paused for a moment and then went on: "If every one concerned in this matter had displayed a like degree of talent, things might not have turned out as they have. Let me suggest to you," to the girl, "that you make an effort to change your style of handwriting; if you continue in your present trade, you can't hope for success while possessing so noticeable a characteristic."

For the first time since his discovery of the secret agent's presence, Karkowsky lost his presence of mind. He uttered an exclamation. [Pg 300]

"The postman," smiled Ashton-Kirk, "told me of Mr. Kendreg of Lowe Street, and it did not take a great deal of time to reason it out that you and he were one, and that the second address was a ruse to throw the police off the track should there be any need of it. The man who had you in charge also had orders to keep an eye out for a woman, for the handwriting which had so attracted the attention of the postman, together with some other little things, had told me that a woman was concerned. But, as a matter of fact, he never had a glimpse of her until you went to meet her at the station and boarded the train for Washington. On the journey here, he occupied a chair in the same car."

"He is a clever man," sneered the girl.

"Quite so. But there are things which are out of his line. For example, he has not been able to find out how you obtained entrance to the Von Stunnenberg house. But that you *did* enter he knew, for he watched you as you went in. And then he called me on the telephone and described you. I knew that I could not mistake you," with a little bow, "for there are not many of your marked type, and if that were not enough, your costume is unique."

"Well?" said she.

"I did not see you take the paper from Miss Corbin," said Ashton-Kirk. "But I was quite sure that you had it, for all that." [Pg 301]

"And you allowed me to go!" The girl sneered once more; but Ashton-Kirk shrugged his shoulders.

"It made no great difference," said he quietly. "The man who watched you enter was watching you when you left. His arrangements were such that only a miracle could have permitted your escape."

For a moment the three were silent; then young Drevenoff spoke.

"You heard what Okiu and the other said while they were here?"

"All that was essential, I think. I know that *you* have the paper, and this being the case, it is to you whom I now direct my attention."

"By that," said Drevenoff, "I suppose you mean that you expect me to give it up."

The secret agent nodded.

"I credit you with some common sense," said he, "and therefore think that you will do so."

The young man was about to answer, but Karkowsky stopped him. The elder then bent toward Ashton-Kirk; his usually good-humored eyes wore an entirely different expression, his round face was set and hard.

"I perceive," said he, in a cold, even voice, "that there is nothing to be gained by further evasion. We *have* the paper of which you speak—we have it after several years of constant effort; and the reward that was to follow the finding of it is all but in our hands." He rose, and his small figure seemed to dilate as he proceeded: "Perhaps you heard this reward mentioned a while ago. It is to be a large sum of money paid by the Japanese government; but do not suppose that we," and he waved his hand so as to include the other two, "hoped for personal profit." [Pg 302]

Ashton-Kirk shook his head.

"I do not suppose so," said he. "Some few facts which I gathered as to your reading at the public libraries gave me an idea as to your purpose."

"Humanity," declared Karkowsky, "its development and progress!—that is our creed. This money was to help fight tyranny as represented by Russia. The Japanese whom we have dealt with know nothing of our intentions; for they, too, are ruled by a tyrant, and we feared that rather than advance our cause, if they knew the truth, they would forego leveling at your own country a blow which they longed to strike.

"We have given ourselves to this thing," he went on, "have stopped at nothing. No chance has been too desperate, no hope too small. And now that, as I have said, the reward is all but in our hands, do you think we will pause—that we will weaken in our purpose—that we will surrender the paper to you because you come here and demand it?" [Pg 303]

"If you do suppose so," said Drevenoff, "you do not know us. You are only one; if we failed before, it does not follow that we will fail again. You were right, Julia," to the girl; "I should have used the revolver you offered me instead of the gas. It would have been sure, and would have saved us further trouble."

"Ah," said the secret agent, "so it was a revolver she offered you. I recall your refusal of it very well. And I also recall," thoughtfully, "that it was a pistol shot which ended the life of Dr. Morse. Perhaps she also offered you the weapon in that instance."

"What!" cried the young Pole. "Do you mean to say——"

But Ashton-Kirk interrupted him.

"I mean to say," said he, "that I know you were in the library on the night of the murder.

"Wait!" As Drevenoff seemed about to interrupt him. "Do you mean to say that you were not in the library that night, secretly? Do you mean to say that you did not steal down the front staircase, unfasten a rear window, and admit a woman? And do you mean to say that you did not make a search, and in doing so cut your hand upon a glass drawer knob?"

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Drevenoff gasped, and a wild look came into his eyes; in a moment the girl was at his side, whispering soothingly to him, all her defiance gone, her manner soft and anxious.

"If I were to tell these things in a court of law," said Ashton-Kirk, and he shrugged his shoulders, "and then followed them up by showing your entire willingness to take human life, as demonstrated by your venture with the illuminating gas, do you think there would be much chance of your escaping conviction for the murder of Dr. Morse?"

Drevenoff shook himself free from the girl; his face was white, and he trembled from head to foot; but the wild look of terror in his eyes had given place to one of desperate resolution. Karkowsky seemed to read the look; and what it told him, apparently, agreed well with his own inclinations at the moment, for his hand stole to his pocket and he took a forward step.

"You would have us into a law court, would you?" asked the younger Pole, in a husky voice. "And you'd put a rope around *my* neck! Well, maybe you would, if you got the chance; but you have not yet done it, and you *will* not!"

With the last word he leaped upon Ashton-Kirk, his hands gripping at his throat, and at the same moment Karkowsky drew a shining object from his pocket. What would have happened would be difficult to say; but at the first sign of violence, Fuller, Burgess and some others burst into the room; Karkowsky was seized and the younger man was torn away from the secret agent.

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The latter readjusted his collar with one hand, and smiled quietly.

"To grip a man by the throat is a very primitive mode of attack, my dear sir," said he. "The very best authorities have set their faces against it, for while you are so engaged, you leave yourself open to more or less deadly counter movements. But as it happened, this," and a scarlet something showed in his hand, "is the only thing that happened to you. I was too seriously engaged in picking your pockets to think of anything else."

What reply Drevenoff made to this did not seem to interest the secret agent a great deal, however; for he turned his back upon them all, and, under a light, began making an examination of his find. They caught the rustle of paper, and saw him place something carefully in his pocketbook. When he finally turned, his aides were about leading the prisoners from the room. At the door there was a halt; the girl turned toward him.

"It's too late to deny anything in which we have had a hand," said she, disregarding the muttered warnings of Karkowsky. "But the one thing with which we had nothing to do I will deny. Neither he," pointing to Drevenoff, "nor I killed Dr. Morse. I admit everything else; but that one thing we did not do."

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Ashton-Kirk said nothing; and the girl went on:

"Drevenoff *did* admit me to the house on the night the doctor was killed. He had searched for the paper everywhere; and knowing that I was clever at such things, he asked me to help him. It was for the same purpose that I was in the house on the night we tried to fix you with the illuminating gas.

"But," and her hands went up dramatically, "we did not lay a hand upon the doctor. He was seated in his chair, dead, when we went into the library. If he was murdered," and her voice sank, "I can indicate the guilty person."

"Who was it?" asked Burgess.

"It was his secretary—Warwick."

"You did not see him do it?" It was Fuller who asked the question.

"No; but after we had searched everywhere, we heard a sound; I was just about to open a bag which I saw on the floor and Drevenoff whispered to me to run. I did so, taking the bag with me. I had stepped out of the window and was looking about, when Warwick leaped out after me and seized the bag. I tried to tear it from him, but could not. Then I ran, leaving it in his hands." There was a silence for a moment, then she added, "What I have just said is the absolute truth. If you are even half as clever a man as you are said to be," to Ashton-Kirk, "you will find this to be so."

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And with that she followed Karkowsky and Drevenoff from the room, each guarded by a stout plain clothes man.

THE TRUTH

Ashton-Kirk, after Burgess led the prisoners away, turned to a telephone and in a moment had the office.

"A gentleman will probably ask to see me in a little while; if so, send him here."

And as he turned toward Fuller, that young man said, in a dubious sort of way:

"What do you think of that story which the girl just now told? Can there be any truth in it?"

"It is all truth," said Ashton-Kirk, quietly.

"All truth!" Fuller opened his eyes to their widest extent. "Then you have made up your mind Warwick is the murderer."

Ashton-Kirk smiled.

"As to that," said he, "we will allow him to speak for himself. I expect him here at any moment."

"Here!"

"Yes," replied the secret agent. And then as a low knock sounded upon the door, he added, "More than likely that is he now."

In response to his "Come in," Philip Warwick entered. Closing the door behind him, he advanced slowly, and then paused facing Ashton-Kirk. [Pg 309]

"I believe," said he, quietly, "that you desire to see me."

He was rather pale and obviously nervous; but for all that he made a good attempt to appear at ease.

"It was very kind of you to come at this hour," said Ashton-Kirk. "Will you sit down?"

The young man did so.

"I did not know just where you were putting up," proceeded Ashton-Kirk, "and so had to call up one hotel after another."

"I was at the Carlton," said Warwick. "I got the call a half-hour ago. And now that I am here," with a squaring of his shoulders, "will you kindly be as brief as possible?"

"Brevity suits me exactly," said Ashton-Kirk. "But before making a beginning, don't you think it advisable to secure the presence of one more person? I think," significantly, "she has returned from Von Stunnenberg's by this."

For an instant Philip Warwick hesitated; then he went to the telephone; and in a very few minutes there came a knock upon the door. Fuller opened it, and Stella Corbin entered swiftly; with a cry she ran to Warwick, and he put his arms about her protectingly, while his eyes seemed to defy the secret agent. [Pg 310]

"And now," said the latter, after the girl had gained control of herself, "suppose we make ourselves as comfortable as possible, and then come at once to that which has brought us together."

When all were seated, he resumed:

"There are a great many points in this case which remain to be cleared up. Some of these," and his eyes searched their faces, "are things upon which you two only can throw a light."

But the girl and the young man remained looking at him coldly and in silence. He smiled.

"Your present attitude is not unfamiliar," said he to Miss Corbin. "I think," reflectively, "that I noted it first upon the day after the murder of your uncle when we met you upon the stairs. And," his brows lifting in polite inquiry, "as you had just finished a somewhat earnest conversation with your neighbor Okiu, I've often wondered just how much he had to do with my loss of your confidence."

"You are right," said Stella Corbin, steadily. "It was Mr. Okiu who first told me what many things have since convinced me is the truth. He was passing the window where I stood that morning and stopped to express his sympathy. We entered into a conversation and he told me of the paper—I had never heard of it before—and he told me that you were endeavoring to become possessed of it. [Pg 311]

"But I believed in you then, and replied that you had been engaged by Mr. Warwick to clear up a mystery which surrounded my uncle. However, he said he knew your methods. You had no doubt in some insidious way caused yourself to be suggested to Mr. Warwick for the——"

"Stella!" cried Warwick, in astonishment.

"Is it so surprising that this should be true?" she asked turning to him. "Have not much more surprising things happened of late?"

Warwick made no reply to this, but directed a look toward the secret agent.

"One would have thought," said the latter, composedly, "that Okiu's being so manifestly an interested person would have weakened the plausibility of his story. But," and he smiled as he

went on, "perhaps he did not divulge the real nature of the paper." He caught the look that came into her face, and added: "I see that he did not. A clever man *would* not, and Okiu is really very clever."

He paused for a few moments as though expecting either one or the other to speak; but as they did not do so, remaining cold faced and unbelieving, he resumed:

"I see that there is very little that I can say that will tend toward reestablishing our first friendly relationship. And this being the case, we shall waste no more time upon the attempt." He took a note-book from his pocket and turning over the leaves, said: "Here I have the main points of the affair of Dr. Morse from the time of your visit to me," nodding to Warwick, "until the time Miss Corbin removed the sought-for document from the candlestick in the library of the house on Fordham Road."

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At this the girl started up with a little startled cry; but Warwick drew her back with a whispered warning.

The secret agent smiled.

"You seem surprised that I should know just where you found the paper," he said. "Do you forget that I was in the house on the night that it was done?" There was another brief pause; then he went on: "However, in tracing out this matter, I have come upon indications and have arrived at conclusions which may surprise you still more." His turning of the pages of the note-book stopped, and with his finger marking a penciled entry, he said to Warwick: "This woman in New York—have you settled your matters with her?"

It was now the young man's turn to show discomposure. But it was for an instant only.

"A woman?" said he, inquiringly. "I don't think I understand."

"Of course," said Ashton-Kirk, with a gesture, "it is your privilege to assume any attitude you choose; but I must say that I consider this one faulty. There *is* a woman! And she insists that she has some sort of a legal claim upon you. This you deny; and Miss Corbin believes you."

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"Mr. Warwick," exclaimed the girl, warmly, "has my utmost confidence."

"Thank you," smiled Ashton-Kirk. "We will now consider the existence of the woman as having been admitted." He settled back in his chair, and went on: "Some time ago Dr. Morse received a number of letters. They were brought to him by a second woman—one whom you," to Warwick, "did not know."

A quick look of surprise passed between the girl and the young man; but they kept silent.

"From that time," said Ashton-Kirk, easily, "there was a decided feeling between Dr. Morse and his secretary. Quarrels were frequent; he was not careful as to his words and you resented his brutality. On the night of the murder he struck you," looking at Warwick. "He struck you in the face; and you," turning his eyes swiftly upon the girl, "saw the blow and were glad."

"Glad!" the girl echoed the word. "Yes, I *was* glad. Because I knew that that would mark the end of your hesitancy," to Warwick. "I knew that you would act—that you would not be content with merely denying."

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Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"If you had read my notes," said he, tapping his book approvingly, "you could not have made a statement more in accord with them." He looked at them for a moment, and then went on: "Dr. Morse had made up his mind finally to interview this woman. He had placed the letters in his hand-bag and was preparing for the trip when you," to Stella, "convinced him that he was making a mistake, and succeeded in obtaining his consent that Warwick make the journey with the letters instead. Am I right?"

"You are," replied Warwick. "I had known this woman," in explanation. "She heard of my intended marriage with Miss Corbin, claimed that she was my wife and forged certain letters to substantiate her claim. The entire matter was absurd, though Dr. Morse chose to regard it seriously. But at last he *did* consent to giving me the letters, permitting me to seek out the woman and force her to tell the truth."

"I see," said Ashton-Kirk. "It was while upon a landing of the back stairs that you were told that the letters were in the hand-bag in the library, and you at once went to get them, meaning to catch the next New York train. Miss Corbin went as far as the lower hall with you, then returned to her room. You entered the library. It was dark. A sound attracted you in the rear room. You went toward it, and as you gained the doorway you saw a woman with the bag in her hand step out of the low window to the lawn."

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"You were there!" cried Warwick.

"No," smiled Ashton-Kirk. "Some of the things which I have told you were seen, or heard. Others I have gathered from signs. I have merely connected all of these by reasoning out what must have occurred to bring about the results that followed."

"I did see a woman step out upon the lawn," said Warwick, "and I followed her."

"Of course," said the secret agent. "You knew it was a woman who had brought the letters to Dr. Morse; and that you had not seen her is shown by the fact that you suspected that the woman with the bag was the same. You fancied that she had somehow learned of Dr. Morse's intention to turn the letters over to you; and in fear of what you might do and knowing that the letters were palpable forgeries, she had effected an entrance to the house and was trying to make off with

them. If it occurred to you that she had been exceedingly quick to gain her information, and had suspiciously little trouble getting into the house, you might have suspected the collusion of Dr. Morse. As you had a deep-seated aversion to him, this thought would have been natural enough."

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"As a matter of fact," said Warwick, slowly, "what you say is practically the truth. But," and there was a strong curiosity in his voice, "it is not possible that you have reasoned your way to this."

Ashton-Kirk smiled.

"Most things to which we are unaccustomed seem difficult," replied he. "This particular conclusion was arrived at very simply. It is based upon the fact that you did not give an alarm. Had you thought the woman was a housebreaker, you would not have contented yourself with taking the bag from her and watching her make away." And as young Warwick was staring, deeply struck by this explanation, the secret agent continued: "But, tell me, what made you reënter by the window after she had gone?"

"To have an understanding with Dr. Morse. But I got no further than the back room when I changed my mind. That would wait, but the railroad wouldn't. If I became involved in a quarrel with him I might miss the train."

"Ah! I saw your tracks upon the window-sill, showing that you had gone in that way as well as come out. But your reasons puzzled me. You will observe," smiling, "there are some things for which I *cannot* supply the answer."

"I passed around the back of the house, just as the newspapers said," spoke Warwick, "and leaped the fence. I did this to save time. I had no idea what the hour was, and did not wish to be late."

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"It was then that the Japanese saw you," said Ashton-Kirk. "Okui sent one of his men to follow you, thinking something was in the wind. It was this man who was afterward found dead in your room at the New York hotel."

"He got into the room during my momentary absence," stated Warwick, who now seemed not at all backward in rendering help. "I came upon him just as he had slashed the bag open and removed the letters. These I snatched from him, and as he leaped at me I knocked him down. In a rage at his defeat he then killed himself, Japanese fashion, before my eyes. Knowing that I should be held for an explanation of this, and not wishing to become involved in a delay at that time, I managed to slip from the hotel without being seen."

"Later I saw the account of Dr. Morse's death in the newspapers and learned that my sudden and secret departure had caused me to be suspected. But I determined not to make my whereabouts known until I completed the business which took me to New York. This I did very effectually after I found the woman I had sought; then I returned."

"First," said Ashton-Kirk, "you communicated with Miss Corbin, made certain arrangements with her on the telephone and then paid a visit. You had probably recognized the Japanese of the hotel room as one whom you had seen about Okui's. This had aroused a suspicion in you that possibly Okui knew more of certain things than any one else."

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"What you have said is quite correct," said the young man, composedly. "First I intended making an open visit to the Japanese, and made my way to his house for that purpose. But I saw you entering at the front door and changed my mind. Miss Corbin had spoken of you with some suspicion over the telephone. I thought it best to take no chances and at the same time I wanted to learn more about the Japanese and your apparent intimacy with them. So I entered secretly from the rear of the house. However, I had not gone further than the first floor when I came upon you in the dark."

Ashton-Kirk laughed and touched the patch of plaster with a finger tip.

"You strike a sharp blow," he said. "But tell me, what had Okui to say when we burst through the door into the lighted apartment?"

Warwick shook his head.

"There was no one there. I saw that it would not do to leave you, so I lifted you and carried you out of the house by the rear door. I meant to call attention to you, and after gaining the lawn behind the house of Dr. Morse, I heard some one opening a door. I placed you upon the ground and stepped back. It was Drevenoff who came out, and he found you almost instantly."

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"I thank you," said Ashton-Kirk, "not only for that good service, but for your willingness to speak." He turned to the girl and added: "Perhaps it would help matters greatly if you were equally willing. Believe me, Okui had his reasons for implanting suspicion in your mind against me. He was quite right if he told you that I was searching for the paper concealed in the scapular; I knew that it was in your uncle's possession after my first visit to Fordham Road, and made up my mind to have it. But murder is not my business. I gain my ends by other means."

"Tell me," said the girl, and she bent a little toward him, "have you gained your end in this case?"

"I have," returned the secret agent.

She gave a little gasp.

"It was you, then, who took the scapular from me at the embassy?"

He laughed and shook his head.

"No," he answered, "it was not. It came to my possession only about a half hour ago." He looked

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at her for a moment, and then went on: "I will not ask how it came into your possession, or rather how you knew of its being in the candlestick, for I already know."

"You know?" She arose, her face white.

He nodded.

"Yes;" and here his voice sank. "I also know who killed your uncle."

Her hand went out, trembling; her face was so bloodless that Warwick sprang up, alarmed.

"You are sure?" she asked, quaveringly.

Again the secret agent nodded.

"I am quite sure," he said.

CHAPTER XXVII

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CONCLUSION

At an early hour next day, Ashton-Kirk paid a visit to the secretary; what passed between them can only be guessed, but that the scarlet scapular and its accompanying document was one of them, is a certainty. Then the secret agent, accompanied by Fuller, boarded a train leaving Washington and went speeding homeward. Fuller, though sorely troubled, managed to contain himself until they had almost finished the journey. Then, as one unable to combat his curiosity any longer, he said:

"I wonder how many of those things which old Nanon suspected regarding the Corbin girl are true?"

Without turning his eyes from the flat country which whirled by the car window, Ashton-Kirk said:

"There are a great many well-meaning people whose views or statements cannot be accepted without great risk. Nanon is one of these."

"Then you do not believe what she told you upon the various occasions when you talked to her?"

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Ashton-Kirk proceeded as though he had not heard the question.

"As we saw at almost the first glance, the woman is a fanatic; she hated 'pagans,' as she termed the Japanese; she feared Morse because of his views; to her mind he was possessed by a spirit of evil. This feeling grew so strong in the course of time that she began to feel that even his surroundings must necessarily be evil, that those who possessed the same blood, or for whom he cared, must be filled with demonic impulses."

"That is probably so," said Fuller. "Something of the sort occurred to me once or twice after you told me of the things she said on the day she visited you." He was silent for some little time; his mind seemed to have turned to a fresh matter for bewilderment, for he finally said: "I heard all you said to Miss Corbin at the Tillinghast and a great deal of it was plain enough. But what I can't understand is the affair of Okiu, Miss Corbin and the taxi-cab. She was seen to enter the cab with the Jap at a time when she had in her possession the thing which he desired most in the world. And, instead of taking it then, he preferred to wait and lay a rather ornate plan which was not at all sure to succeed."

"The story of the old watchman, whom we talked to at the drug store that night, gave me some hours of hard work," said Ashton-Kirk. "And I burned up quite a bit of tobacco before I finally worked the truth out of it." He turned toward his aide lazily and asked: "Suppose there had been two taxi-cabs instead of one that night?"

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"Two?" Fuller did not seem to grasp the suggestion.

"Okui got into one; it turned, and vanished around the corner. Then a second appeared, coming from the direction in which the first had gone. As taxis are unusual in Eastbury at night the watchman never dreamed but that it was the same one returning."

"But," protested Fuller, "he saw the Jap open the taxi door."

"He said so, yes. But after I had considered the matter I went to him and asked a few questions. It was as I thought. He had taken the cab for granted in the first place, and he took the Jap for granted in the second."

"But Okui bought two tickets for Washington."

"One was for his confederate, Humadi, who joined him at the station."

"The second cab, then——" Fuller paused, expectantly.

"I hunted it up. It had been engaged by young Warwick. He and Miss Corbin had agreed over the telephone to meet at a certain hour upon the corner where the policeman noticed the girl waiting. Warwick went to secure the cab to take them to the station, and was delayed in some way. As he did not appear, she evidently became nervous, fancied that she had made a mistake and that he had really named the corner above as the place of meeting. She had started for this,

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when his cab turned the corner, halted and took her up."

"Yes, yes," said Fuller. "I see now that that could very readily have happened. But," with a lift of his brows, "if the Japanese were not in on the finding of the scapular, why did they take it into *their* heads to bolt so suddenly for Washington?"

"The attempt upon me had failed," returned Ashton-Kirk. "They feared to remain without instructions, and so hurried to Washington to lay the facts before their superiors. Burgess noted them upon the train, and was a witness to the amazement they showed at sight of Karkowsky and his friends.

"However, none of the latter saw the Japanese. Okiu, as I think I have said before, is a clever man. He saw that something was ripe, or considered to be so by the Poles, and so he clung to them secretly after they had reached the capital. And within an hour he had learned that Miss Corbin was at the Tillinghast! The observation of all this was a deft piece of observation upon the part of Culberson's fellows. They are much more deserving than I ever gave them credit for."

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There was quiet a long period in which nothing more passed between the two men. Indeed the train was slowing up to stop when Fuller asked:

"You have given up all thought of the girl or Warwick having had any hand in the death of Dr. Morse?"

"I never had any such thought," said Ashton-Kirk. "To be sure," smilingly, "they puzzled me more than a little from time to time. The girl's fear of the police, from the very first, was a thing that interested me. But that may be safely attributed to a natural uncertainty. There was bad blood between her lover and her uncle; perhaps the former in a fit of rage had killed the latter. She feared this possibility, and in consequence dreaded the police."

"And the shoes with the caked soil upon the soles?"

"As I remarked at the time you discovered them, our own shoes were in like condition."

"Okiu is a resourceful, secretive man," said Fuller. "And, being so, why did he tell Miss Corbin of the paper? Her knowledge of its existence could not benefit him in any way, and her possible discovery of it could only have hurt him."

Ashton-Kirk laughed.

"By telling her what he did, he gained a valued aide. He had planted an unwearied searcher in the house which he could in no other way enter. If the girl found the paper, so he figured, she would at once acquaint him with the fact. And I have no doubt but that this is the very thing that would have happened had not Warwick arrived with his newly created suspicions of the Japanese."

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They took a taxi at the station and were speeding toward the house of Ashton-Kirk, when Fuller spoke again.

"Several times," said he, "I have heard you say that you know who killed Dr. Morse. I suppose that to-day will see the arrest of the murderer."

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"Yes," said he, "I suppose so."

The driver of the cab was paid and dismissed and the two entered the house.

"Any one here, Stumph?" asked Ashton-Kirk.

"Mr. O'Neill and Mr. Purvis," replied the man.

These two were seated in a room off the secret agent's study, engaged in conversation.

"How is this?" demanded Ashton-Kirk, rather sharply. "I thought that either one or the other of you was to remain at the Fordham Road place until I called you off."

"Well, seeing that the regular police are there," said O'Neill, "we thought we could ease up a bit."

"The regular police!" exclaimed the secret agent.

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"Then you didn't get my wire. Yes, the regulars are on the job there now. The old servant is dead—died while sitting muttering over her prayer-book. It was perfectly natural, I feel sure, but the police, in view of what has already happened in the house, are going to take no chances."

The two men had gone, and Ashton-Kirk sat smoking a cigar in his big chair.

"A while ago," said he, "you said that you supposed that to-day would witness the arrest of the assassin of Dr. Morse; and I think I agreed that it would. But now——" he stopped and shook his head.

Fuller regarded him for a moment; then an expression of incredulity came upon his face.

"By George!" cried he. "Surely you can't mean that——"

"I mean that it is too late," interrupted Ashton-Kirk. He drew at the cigar reflectively for a space and then continued: "The thing as far as I could learn happened this way:

"One day while still at Sharsdale, Nanon, in turning over her employer's belongings, came upon the scapular given him by Colonel Drevenoff. She was horrified at the thought of so holy an emblem being in the possession of such a blasphemer, and at once all sorts of reasons for his having it occurred to her. She had perhaps heard of the Black Mass, and fancied no doubt that

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she had come upon evidence of some such another sacrilege. She quietly took the scapular, therefore, and hid it."

"And she never told him?"

"Not until the night of his death. Then she was called into the library, as she stated, and in some manner the thing came out. I talked with her as to this later before leaving for Washington, but she could give no clear account of it. However, I think he uttered some sort of a taunt, as was his habit, and she replied in kind. The meaning of the drawings sent by Okiu had gradually dawned upon her, it seems, and she had concluded that the suspense which he suffered because of them was a sort of retribution. She must have put this thought into words, and in an instant the truth was out. In a rage he took a revolver from his desk. She did not know whether it was merely an attempt to frighten her or no; however, she feared for her life and snatched at the weapon. It exploded and he fell back into the chair.

"Yes; it was old Nanon who killed Morse. She concealed the revolver upon her person and went to the front door, where she sat for some time, as she told in her first story. She was calm and self-contained—she felt that she had done no wrong."

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"And so she concluded it would be best to 'find the body' when she brought in the coffee?"

"Yes; and while she was engaged with this Drevenoff stole down the front stairs, admitted his woman confederate to the room back of the library—and discovered the dead body of Dr. Morse. Then followed the fear-filled search; the approach of Warwick added to their fright. They evidently carried a pocket torch, which accounts for the library being dark when Warwick entered. Then the girl, Julia, made an effort to escape with the bag; and while Warwick was in pursuit of her, Drevenoff crept back to his room."

Fuller nodded slowly.

"Yes," said he, "it could very easily have been that way. But tell me this: The old woman knew all the time that she was responsible for the death of Morse; so why did she manifest so much uneasiness whenever Warwick was mentioned in the matter?"

"She was alarmed at his disappearance because she was shrewd enough to know that this would attract attention toward him. There were two reasons for this. She felt kindly toward Warwick, and so disliked his being falsely accused. Then, if he was arrested, she would be forced to confess the truth to save him. She had these things in mind when she withheld the fact that she had seen Morse strike the young man."

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"She claimed to have heard voices in the library while she sat upon the step. Now, Dr. Morse was dead at that time and none of the others had yet gone into the room.

"The voices were a fiction. She thought to mislead the police by the invention. Or perhaps she really thought she heard them; I did not question her very closely upon this point. A woman like that is apt to see and hear things which do not exist. Witness her suspicion of Miss Corbin. She fancied that for some dark reasons the girl was making an effort to have the crime fixed upon Warwick, while professing to love him. That Miss Corbin had been long under the influence of Dr. Morse made this idea, to Nanon's mind, not only possible, but probable.

"This thought grew upon the old woman until it seemed she could scarcely think of anything else. Her constant espionage finally attracted Miss Corbin's attention, as she told me at the Tillinghast after you left the room. In her turn she began to suspect and watch. With the feeling that the scapular should be well hidden, Nanon placed it in one of the candlesticks, cunningly calculating that as the article had once been searched, it would be passed by thereafter."

"And Miss Corbin saw her place it there," suggested Fuller, quickly.

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"Exactly—and awaited an opportunity for obtaining possession of it."

"When did you first come to suspect that Nanon might have the paper?" asked the aide, with curiosity.

"At the time we hit upon the fact that the drawings received by Dr. Morse were meant to represent scapulars. What had actually happened at once began to take form in my mind. And feeling sure that the old woman had the paper safe, without, possibly, knowing of its existence, I made no attempt to obtain possession of it. And I did not fear Drevenoff's finding it, because I was convinced that they would never dream of her having it."

The speaker sat for some time smoking in silence; then he added:

"I was about ready to tell her what I knew, secure the paper and hand her over to Osborne on the day she paid me the visit. But the story she told rather gave the matter the air of further entanglement; and so, to learn first how deep was the apparent involvement of Miss Corbin and Warwick, I postponed the arrest."

"I should think, all things considered," said Fuller, "that you'd be rather glad that it happened so."

"I am," replied the secret agent. "She was without real guilt. And," with a nod to his aide, the meaning of which that young man did not fail to catch, "as there are but a few who are possessed of the facts she will, I think, continue to appear so."

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Other Stories in this Series:

FOOTNOTES:

[1] For the details of the case of the numismatist Hume, see the first book of this series: "Ashton-Kirk, Investigator."

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