

Le Queux William

The Bomb-Makers



William Le Queux
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The Bomb-Makers Being Some Curious Records Concerning the Craft and Cunning of Theodore Drost, an Enemy Alien in London, Together with Certain Revelations Regarding His Daughter Ella

Chapter One. The Devil's Dice

“Do get rid of the girl! Can’t you see that she’s highly dangerous!” whispered the tall, rather overdressed man as he glanced furtively across the small square shop set with little tables, dingy in the haze of tobacco-smoke. It was an obscure, old-fashioned little restaurant in one of London’s numerous byways – a resort of Germans, naturalised and otherwise, “the enemy in our midst,” as the papers called them.

“I will. I quite agree. My girl may know just a little too much – if we are not very careful.”

“Ah! she knows far too much already, Drost, thanks to your ridiculous indiscretions,” growled the dark-eyed man beneath his breath. “They will land you before a military court-martial – if you are not careful!”

“Well, I hardly think so. I’m always most careful – most silent and discreet,” and he grinned evilly.

“True, you are a good Prussian – that I know; but remember that Ella has, unfortunately for us, very many friends, and she may talk – women’s talk, you know. We – you and I – are treading very thin ice. She is, I consider, far too friendly with that young fellow Kennedy. It’s dangerous – distinctly dangerous to us – and I really wonder that you allow it – you, a patriotic Prussian!”

And, drawing heavily at his strong cigar, he paused and examined its white ash.

“Allow it?” echoed the elder man. “How, in the name of Fate, can I prevent it? Suggest some means to end their acquaintanceship, and I am only too ready to hear it.”

The man who spoke, the grey-haired Dutch pastor, father of Ella Drost, the smartly-dressed girl who was seated chatting and laughing merrily with two rather ill-dressed men in the farther corner of the little smoke-dried place, grunted deeply. To the world of London he posed as a Dutchman. He was a man with a curiously triangular face, a big square forehead, with tight-drawn skin and scanty hair, and broad heavy features which tapered down to a narrow chin that ended in a pointed, grey, and rather scraggy beard.

Theodore Drost was about fifty-five, a keen, active man whose countenance, upon critical examination, would have been found to be curiously refined, intelligent, and well preserved. Yet he was shabbily dressed, his long black clerical coat shiny with wear, in contrast with the way in which his daughter – in her fine furs and clothes of the latest mode – was attired. But the father, in all grades of life, is usually shabby, while his daughter – whatever be her profession – looks smart, be it the smartness of Walworth or that of Worth.

As his friend, Ernst Ortmann, had whispered those warning words he had glanced across at her, and noting how gaily she was laughing with her two male friends, a cigarette between her pretty lips, he frowned.

Then he looked over to the man who had thus urged discretion.

The pair were seated at a table, upon which was a red-bordered cloth, whereon stood two half-emptied “bocks” of that light beer so dear to the Teuton palate. They called it “Danish beer,” not to offend English customers.

The girl whose smiles they were watching was distinctly pretty. She was about twenty-two, with a sweet, eminently English-looking face, fair and quite in contrast with the decidedly foreign, beetle-browed features of the two leering loafers with whom she sat laughing.

Theodore Drost, to do him justice, was devoted to his daughter, who, because of her childish aptitude, had become a dancer on the lowest level of the variety stage, a touring company which visited fifth-rate towns. Yet, owing to her discovered talent, she had at last graduated through the hard school of the Lancashire “halls,” to what is known as the “syndicate halls” of London.

From a demure child-dancer at an obscure music-hall in the outer suburbs, she had become a noted revue artiste, a splendid dancer, who commanded the services of her own press-agent, who in turn commanded half-a-dozen lines in most of the London morning papers, both her prestige and increased salary following in consequence. The British public so little suspect the insidious influence of the press-agent in the formation of modern genius. The press-agent has, in the past, made many a mediocre fool into a Birthday Baronet, or a “paid-for Knight,” and more than one has been employed in the service of a Cabinet Minister. Oh what sheep we are, and how easily we are led astray!

On that wintry night, Ella Drost – known to the theatre-going public as Stella Steele, the great revue artiste whose picture postcards were everywhere – sat in that stuffy, dingy little restaurant in Soho, sipping a glass of its pseudo-Danish lager, and laughing with the two unpresentable men before her.

Outside the unpretentious little place was written up the single word “Restaurant.” Its proprietor a big, full-blooded, fair-bearded son of the Fatherland, had kept it for twenty years, and it had been the evening rendezvous of working-class Germans – waiters, bakers, clerks, coiffeurs, jewellers, and such-like.

Here one could still revel in Teuton delicacies, beer brewed in Hamburg, but declared to be “Danish,” the succulent German liver sausage, the sausage of Frankfort – boiled in pairs of course – the palatable sauerkraut with the black sour bread of the Fatherland to match.

“I wish you could get rid of Kennedy,” said Ortmann, as he again, in confidence, bent across the table towards Ella’s father. “I believe she’s in collusion with him.”

“No,” laughed the elder man, “I can’t believe that. Ella is too good a daughter of the Fatherland.” He was one of Germany’s chief agents in England, and had much money in secret at his command.

Ortmann screwed up his eyes and pursed his lips. He was a shrewd, clever man, and very difficult to deceive.

“Money is at stake, my dear Drost,” he whispered very slowly – “big money. But there is love also. And I believe – nay, I’m sure – that Kennedy loves her.”

“Bah! utterly ridiculous!” cried her father. “I don’t believe that for a single moment. She’s only fooling him, as she has fooled all the others.”

“All right. But I’ve watched. You have not,” was the cold reply.

From time to time the attractive Ella, on her part, glanced across at her father, who was whispering with his overdressed companion, and, to the keen observer, it would have been apparent that she was only smoking and gossiping with that pair of low-bred foreigners for distinct purposes of her own.

The truth was that, with her woman’s instinct, feminine cleverness and ingenuity, she, being filled with the enthusiasm of affection for her aviator-lover, was playing a fiercely desperate part as a staunch and patriotic daughter of Great Britain.

The hour was late. She had hurried from the theatre in a taxi, the carmine still about her pretty lips, her eyes still darkened beneath, and the greasepaint only roughly rubbed off. The great gold and white theatre near Leicester Square, where, clad in transparencies, she was “leading lady” in that most popular revue “Half a Moment!” had been packed to suffocation, as indeed it was nightly. Officers and men home on leave from the battle-front all made a point of seeing the pretty, sweet-faced Stella Steele, who danced with such artistic movement, and who sang those catchy patriotic songs of hers, the stirring choruses of which even reached the ears of the Bosches in their trenches. And in many a British dug-out in Flanders there was hung a programme of the revue, or a picture postcard of the seductive Stella.

There were, perhaps, other Stella Steeles on the stage, for the name was, after all, not an uncommon one, but this star of the whole Steele family had arisen from the theatrical firmament since the war. She, the laughing girl who, that night, sat in that obscure, smoke-laden little den of aliens in Soho, was earning annually more than the “pooled” salary of a British Cabinet Minister.

That Stella was a born artiste all agreed – even her agent, that fat cigar-smoking Hebrew cynic who regarded all stage women as mere cattle out of whom he extracted commissions. To-day nobody can earn unusual emoluments in any profession without real merit assisted by a capable agent.

Stella Steele was believed by all to be thoroughly British. Nobody had ever suspected that her real name was Drost, nor that her bespectacled and pious father had been born in Stuttgart, and had afterwards become naturalised as a Dutchman before coming to England. The cigarette-smoking male portion of the khaki-clad crowd who so loudly applauded her every night had no idea that their idol had been born in Berlin. Isaac Temple, the mild-mannered press-agent whom she employed, had always presented her, both to press and public, and sent those artistic photographs of hers to the Sunday illustrated papers, as daughter of a London barrister who had died suddenly, leaving her penniless. Thus had the suspicious connection with Drost been always carefully suppressed, and Ella lived very quietly in her pretty flat in Stamfordham Mansions, situate just off the High Street in Kensington.

Her father – her English mother, whom she had adored, being long ago dead – lived a quiet, secluded life in one of those rather large houses which may be found on the south side of the Thames between Putney and Richmond. Pastor Drost had, it was believed by the Dutch colony in London, been a missionary for some years in Sumatra, and, on more than one occasion, he had lectured upon the native life of that island. Therefore he had many friends among Dutch merchants and others, who all regarded him as a perfectly honest and even pious, if rather eccentric, man.

At times he wore big round horn-rimmed glasses which grossly magnified his eyes, giving him a strange goggled appearance. The world, however, never knew that Pastor Drost’s only daughter was that versatile dancer who, dressed in next-to-nothing, nightly charmed those huge enthusiastic audiences in the popular revue, “Half a Moment!”

Until three months after the outbreak of war Ella had regarded her father’s idiosyncrasies with some amusement, dismissing them as the outcome of a mind absorbed in chemical experiment, for though none save herself was aware of it, the long attic beneath the roof of her father’s house – the door of which Theodore Drost always kept securely locked – was fitted as a great chemical laboratory, where he, as a professor of chemistry, was constantly experimenting.

After the outbreak of war, by reason of a conversation she one day overheard between her father and his mysterious visitor, Ernst Ortmann, her suspicions had become aroused. Strange suspicions they indeed were. But in order to obtain confirmation of them, she had become more attached to her father, and had visited him far more frequently than before, busying herself in his domestic affairs, and sometimes assisting the old widow, Mrs Pennington, who acted as his single servant.

Two years prior to the war, happening upon that house, which was to be sold cheap, Ella had purchased it, ready furnished as it was, and given it as a present to her father as a place in which he might spend his old age in comfort. But until that night when she had overheard the curious conversation – which she had afterwards disclosed in confidence to her lover, Lieutenant Seymour Kennedy, Flight-Commander of the Naval Air Service – she had never dreamed that her father, the good and pious Dutchman who had once been a missionary, was an enemy alien, whose plans were maturing in order to assist a great and desperate conspiracy organised by the secret service of the German Fatherland.

On a certain well-remembered November evening she had revealed to Kennedy the truth, and they had both made a firm compact with each other. The plotter was her father, it was true. But she was a daughter of Great Britain, and it was for her to combat any wily and evil plot which might be formed against the land which had given birth to her adored mother.

She loved Seymour Kennedy. A hundred men had smiled upon her, bent over her little hand, written to her, sent her flowers and presents, and declared to her their undying affection. It is ever so. The popular actress always attracts both fools and fortunes. But Ella, level-headed girl as she was, loved only Seymour, and had accepted the real, whole-hearted and honest kisses which he had imprinted upon her lips. Seymour Kennedy was a gentleman before being an officer, which could not, alas! be said of all the men in the services in war-time.

Ella Drost was no fool, her dead mother had always instilled into her mind that, though born of a German father, yet she was British, an argument which, if discussed legally, would have been upset, because, having, unfortunately, been born in Berlin, she was certainly a subject of the German octopus. At the time of her birth her father had occupied a very important position among professors – half the men in the Fatherland were professors of something or other – yet Drost had been professor of chemistry at the Imperial Arsenal at Spandau – that great impregnable fortress in which the French war indemnity of 1870 had been locked up as the war-chest of golden French louis.

How strange it was! And yet it was not altogether strange. Ella, whose heart – the heart of a true British girl trained at her mother's knee – had discovered a curious "something" and, aided by her British airman lover, was determined to carry on her observations, at all hazards, to the point of ascertaining the real truth.

England was at war at the battle-front – and she, a mere girl, was at war with the enemy in its midst.

Three-quarters of an hour later Ella – whose comfortable car was waiting outside the dingy little place – had driven her father home, but on the way she expressed her decision to stay with him, as it was late and her French maid, Mariette, had no doubt gone to bed.

As they stood in her father's large, well-furnished dining-room, Ella drew some lemonade from a siphon and then, declaring that she was sleepy, said she would retire.

"All right, my dear," replied the old man. "All right. You'll find your room quite ready for you. I always order that it shall be kept ready for you. Let's see! You were here a week ago – so the bed will not be damp."

The girl bent and imprinted a dutiful kiss upon her father's white brow, but, next instant, set her teeth, and in her blue eyes – though he did not see it – there showed a distinct light of suspicion.

Then she switched on the light on the stairs, loosened her furs, and ascended to the well-furnished room that was always regarded as hers.

The room in which Ella found herself was large, with a fine double wardrobe, a long cheval-glass, and a handsome mahogany dressing-table. The curtains and upholstery were in pale-blue damask, while the thick plush carpet was of a darker shade.

Instead of retiring, Ella at once lit the gas-stove, glanced at her wristlet-watch, the face of which was set round with diamonds, and then flung herself into a deep armchair to think, dozing off at last, tired out by the exertion of her dancing.

The striking of the little gilt clock upon the mantelshelf presently aroused her, and, rising, she switched off the light and, creeping upon tiptoe, slowly opened her bedroom door and listened attentively.

Somewhere she could hear the sound of men's voices. One she recognised as her father's.

"That's Nystrom again! That infernal hell-fiend!" she whispered breathlessly to herself.

Then, removing her smart shoes and her jingling bangles, she crept stealthily forth along the soft carpet of the corridor, and with great care ascended the stairs to the floor above, which was occupied by that long room, the door of which was always kept locked – the room in which her father conducted his constant experiments.

From the ray of light she saw that the door was ajar. Within, the two men were talking in low deep tones in German.

She could hear a hard sound, as of metal being filed down, and more than once distinguished the clinking of glass, as though her father was engaged in some experiment with his test-tubes and other scientific paraphernalia which she had seen arranged so methodically upon the two long deal tables.

"What has Ortmann told you?" asked Theodore Drost's midnight visitor, while his daughter stood back within the long cupboard on the landing, listening.

"He says that all is in order. We have a friend awaiting us."

"And the payment – eh?" asked the man Nystrom, a German who had been naturalised as a Swede, and now lived in London as a neutral. As a professor of chemistry he had been well-known in Stockholm and, being a bosom friend of the Dutch pastor's, the pair often delighted in dabbling together in their favourite science.

"I shall meet Ernst on Friday night. If we are successful, he will pay two thousand pounds – to be equally divided between us."

"Good," grunted the other. "We shall be successful, never fear – that is if Ortmann has arranged things at his end. *Himmel!* what a shock it will be – eh, my friend? – worse than the Zeppelins!"

Theodore Drost laughed gleefully, while his daughter, daring to creep forward again, peered through the crack of the door and saw the pair bending over what looked like a square steel despatch-box standing upon the table amid all the scientific apparatus.

The box, about eighteen inches long, a foot wide, and six inches deep, was khaki-covered, and, though she was not aware of it at the time, it was of the exact type used in the Government offices.

Fridtjof Nystrom, a tall, dark-haired man, with a red, blotchy face, rather narrow-eyed and round-shouldered, was adjusting something within the box, while old Drost, who had discarded his shabby black pastor's coat and now wore a dark-brown jacket, took up a small glass retort beneath which the blue flame of a spirit-lamp had been burning, and from it he poured a few drops of some bright red liquid into a tiny tube of very thin glass. Then, taking a small blow-pipe, he blew the flame upon the tube until he had melted the glass and sealed it hermetically.

The blotchy-faced man watched this latter operation with great interest, saying:

"Have a care now, my dear Theodore. The least mishap, and not a piece of either of us would remain to tell the story."

"*Ja!* Leave that to me," answered Ella's father. "We do not, I agree, desire a repetition of the disaster which happened last week."

Ella, hearing those words, stood aghast.

A week before all London had been mystified and horrified by a most remarkable explosion which had occurred one night in a house in one of the outer suburbs, whereby the place had been set on fire and utterly demolished. Whoever were present in the house had been blown to atoms, for no trace of the occupants, or of what had caused the disaster, had been discovered. At first it was believed to have been caused by an incendiary bomb dropped from the air, but expert evidence quickly established the fact that something within the house had exploded.

Was it possible that her father and his dastardly companions possessed knowledge of what had actually occurred there?

Suddenly, Drost having handed the tiny sealed tube to Nystrom, the latter proceeded to place it in position within the box, using most infinite care. Then her father turned upon his heel, and came forward to the door behind which his daughter was standing.

In a second Ella had shrunk back noiselessly into the cupboard, which the old man passed in the darkness, and descended the stairs.

He had passed the door of Ella's room when, having gained the bottom of the stairs, he paused and whistled softly. In a few seconds Nystrom came forth.

"Come, Fridtjof," he urged in a low whisper. "Let us drink to the success of our expedition to-night, and the victory of our dear Fatherland," an invitation which his visitor at once accepted.

Ella heard the two men descend, making but little noise, and a moment later she crept into the long, well-lit laboratory where, upon the table, stood the big official-looking despatch-box.

A second's glance was sufficient to reveal the truth even to her, a woman unversed as she was in such things. It was a most ingeniously-constructed infernal machine which would detonate the quantity of high-explosive which she saw had been placed within.

Though her father had taken the greatest precaution to conceal from his daughter the exact line of his chemical experiments, yet, if the truth be told, Ella and her lover had watched carefully, and Kennedy – who had shared his well-beloved's suspicions – had ascertained, without doubt, that Drost and Nystrom had been engaged in that long, low room beneath the roof, in treating toluene with nitric and sulphuric acid for several days under heat thus producing tri-nitro-toluene – or trotul – that modern high-explosive, of terrible force, which was rapidly superseding picric acid as a base for shell-fillers.

At a glance Ella saw that the square steel bomb, fashioned like an official despatch-box, was filled with this highly dangerous explosive, and that the thin glass tube which, when broken, would explode it, had already been placed in position. Such a bomb, on exploding in a confined space, must work the most terrible havoc.

In those few seconds the girl verified the suspicion which Kennedy had entertained. Some desperate outrage was to be committed. That was quite certain.

A bomb from a Zeppelin could not cause greater injury to life and property than that ingeniously contrived machine, the delicately constructed fuse of which, fashioned on the lathe by her father's own hands, could be arranged to detonate at any given time.

A second's pause, and then the girl, beneath her breath, took a deep oath of vengeance against the ruler of that hated land wherein she had been born.

"Thank Heaven that I am English!" she whispered to herself. "And I will live – and die, if necessary – as an English girl should."

With those words upon her lips she crept away from the laboratory, down the stairs to her room, and, swiftly putting on her fur coat, she went into the basement, from which she let herself out noiselessly, and then hurried through the night, in the direction of Hammersmith Bridge.

On gaining the bridge, she saw the red rear-light of a motor-car, and knew that it was Kennedy's. He had drawn up against the kerb, and had been consuming cigarettes waiting in impatience for a long time.

“Well, darling?” he asked, as they met. “I got your message from the theatre to-night. What is in progress?”

“Something desperate,” was her quick reply. “Let’s get into the car and I’ll explain.”

Both entered the comfortable little coupé, and then Ella explained in detail to her flying-man lover all that she had discovered.

The keen-faced, clean-shaven young officer in uniform who, before he had gone in for aviation duties, had graduated at Osborne, and afterwards been at sea and risen from “snotty” to lieutenant, sat beside her, listening intently.

“Just as we thought, darling,” he remarked. “For me, loving you so dearly, it is a terrible thing to know that your father is such a deadly and ingenious enemy of ours as he is. Truly the German plotters are in our midst in every walk of life, from high society down to the scum of the East End. The brutes are out to win the war by any underhand, subtle, and brutal means in their power. But we have discovered one line of their enemy intentions and, with your aid, dearest, we will follow it up and, without exposing your father and bringing disgrace upon you, we’ll set out to combat them every time.”

“Agreed, dear,” declared the girl with patriotic enthusiasm. “I have told you all along of my suspicions. To-night they are verified. Father, and that devilish scoundrel, Nystrom, mean mischief – for payment too – one thousand pounds each!”

“The infernal brutes!” exclaimed the man at her side. “At least it is to you, dear, that this discovery is due. I had no idea what you were after when you sent me that wire to-night.”

“I suspected, and my suspicions have proved correct,” said the girl. “Shall we wait here and follow them? They must cross the river if they intend to go into London to-night – as no doubt they do.”

“Yes. They believe you to be soundly asleep, I suppose?”

“I locked my door, and have the key in my pocket,” replied his well-beloved with a light laugh.

And she, putting her ready lips to his, sat with him in the car at the foot of the long suspension-bridge, waiting for any person to cross.

They remained there for perhaps half-an-hour, ever eager and watchful. Several taxis passed, but otherwise all was quiet in the night. Now and then across the sky fell the big beams of searchlights seeking enemy aircraft, and these they were watching, when, suddenly, a powerful, dark-painted car approached.

“Look!” cried Ella. “Why, that’s that fellow Benyon’s car – he’s a friend of Dad’s!”

Next moment it flashed past, and beneath the dim light at the head of the bridge they both caught a glimpse of two men within, one of whom was undoubtedly Theodore Drost.

“Quick!” cried Ella. “Let’s follow them! Fortunately you have to-night another car, unknown to them!”

In an instant Seymour Kennedy had started his engine, and slowly he drew out across the bridge, speeding after the retreating car over the river, along Bridge Road to Hammersmith Broadway and through Brook Green, in a direction due north.

Through the London streets it was not difficult at that hour to follow the red tail-light of the car in which Drost sat with his bosom friend George Benyon, a mysterious person who seemed to be an adventurer, and who lived somewhere in York or its vicinity.

“I wonder if they are going up to York?” Ella asked, as she sat in the deep seat of the coupé at her lover’s side.

“We’ll see. If they get on to the North Road we shall at once know their intentions,” was her lover’s reply.

Half-an-hour later the pseudo-Dutch pastor and his companion, driven by rather a reckless young fellow, were on the main Great North Road, and Kennedy, possessing a lighter and superior car, had no misgivings as to overtaking them whenever he wished.

On through the night they went, passing Barnet, Hatfield, Hitchin, the cross-roads at Wansford, and up the crooked pebbled streets of Stamford, until in the grey of morning they descended into Grantham, with its tall spire and quaint old Angel and Crown Hotel.

It was there that Drost and his companion breakfasted, while Ella and her lover waited and watched.

Some devilish plot of a high-explosive nature was in progress, but of its true import they were in utter ignorance. Yet their two British hearts beat quickly in unison, and both were determined to frustrate the outrage, even at the sacrifice of their own lives.

At three o'clock in the afternoon Drost and Benyon drew up at the Station Hotel at York, and there took lunch, while Ella and her lover ate a very hurried and much-needed meal in the railway-buffet in the big station adjoining.

Then, after they had watched the departure of the big mud-spattered car which contained the two conspirators, they were very quickly upon the road again after them.

Out of the quiet old streets of York city, past the Minster, they turned eastward upon that well-kept highway which led towards the North Sea Coast.

An hour's run brought them to the pleasant town which I must not, with the alarming provisions of the Defence of the Realm Act before me, indicate with any other initial save that of J – .

The town of J – , built upon a deep and pretty bay forming a natural harbour with its breakwater and pier, was, in the pre-war days, a popular resort of the summer girl with her transparent blouses and her pretty bathing costumes, but since hostilities, it was a place believed to be within the danger zone.

As they descended, by the long, winding road, into the town, they could see, in the bay, a big grey four-funnelled first-class cruiser lying at anchor, the grey smoke curling lazily from her striped funnels – resting there no doubt after many weeks of patrol duty in the vicinity of the Kiel Canal.

Indeed, as they went along the High Street, they saw a number of clear-eyed liberty men – bluejackets – bearing upon their caps the name H.M.S. *Oakham*.

The car containing Ella's father and his companion pulled up at the Palace Hotel, a big imposing place, high on the cliff, therefore Kennedy, much satisfied that he had thus been able to follow the car for over two hundred miles, went on some little distance to the next available hotel.

This latter place, like the Palace, afforded a fine view of the bay, and as they stood at a window of the palm-lined lounge, they could see that upon the cruiser lights were already appearing.

Kennedy called the waiter for a drink, and carelessly asked what was in progress.

"The ship – the *Oakham* – came in the day before yesterday, sir," the man replied. "There's a party on board this evening, they say – our Mayor and corporation, and all the rest."

Ella exchanged glances with her lover. She recollected that khaki-covered despatch-box. Had her father brought with him that terrible death-dealing machine which he and Nystrom had constructed with such accursed ingenuity?

The hotel was deserted, as east coast hotels within the danger zone usually were in those war days, remaining open only for the occasional traveller and for the continuity of its licence. The great revue star had sent a telegram to her manager, asking that her understudy should play that night, and the devoted pair now stood side by side watching how, in the rapidly falling night, the twinkling electric lights on board the fine British cruiser became more clearly marked against the grey background of stormy sea and sky.

"I wonder what their game can really be?" remarked the young flying-officer reflectively as, alone with Ella, his strong arm crept slowly around her neat waist.

From where they stood they were afforded a wide view of the broad road which led from the town down to the landing-stage, from which the cruiser's steam pinnacle and picket-boat were speeding to and fro between ship and shore. A dozen or so smart motor-cars had descended the road, conveying the guests of the captain and officers who, after their long and unrelaxing vigil in the North Sea, certainly deserved a little recreation. Then, as the twilight deepened and the stars began to shine out over the bay, it was seen that the procession of guests had at last ended.

"I think, Ella, that we might, perhaps, go down to the landing-stage," said Kennedy at last – "if you are not too tired, dear."

"Tired? Why, of course not," she laughed, and after he had helped her on with her coat, they both went out, passing down to the harbour by another road.

For fully an hour they idled about in the darkness, watching the swift brass-funnelled pinnacle which, so spick and span, and commanded by a smart lad fresh from Osborne, was making the journey regularly between ship and quay. Away in the darkness the lights on the cruiser's quarter-deck reflected into the sea, while ever and anon the high-up masthead signal-lamp winked in Morse code to the coastguard station five miles distant across the bay.

While they were watching, the pinnacle came in again, whereupon the smart figure of a naval officer in his topcoat appeared within the zone of light, and descended the steps, shouting in an interrogative tone:

"*Oakham?*"

"Ay, ay, sir!" came a cheery voice from the pinnacle.

"Look!" gasped Ella, clinging to her lover's arm. "Why – it's Benyon – dressed as a naval lieutenant! He's going on board, and he's carrying that despatch-box with him!"

Indeed, he had handed the heavy box to one of the men, and was at that moment stepping into the pinnacle.

"Off to the ship – as quick as you can!" they heard him order, while, next moment, the boat was cast loose and the propeller began to revolve.

"We haven't a second to lose!" whispered Kennedy who, as soon as the pinnacle was around the pier-head, called out "Boat!" In an instant half-a-dozen men, noticing that he was a naval officer, were eagerly crowding around him.

"I want to follow that pinnacle – quick!" he said. "Three men – and you can sail out there. The wind's just right."

In a few moments a boat came alongside the steps, and into it the pair stepped, with three hardy North Sea boatmen.

Quickly sail was set and, favoured by a fresh breeze, the boat slowly heeled over and began to skim across the dark waters.

Already the light on the pinnacle showed far away, it having nearly reached the ship. Therefore Kennedy, in his eagerness, stirred the three men to greater effort, so that by rowing and sailing by turns, they gradually grew nearer the long, dark war-vessel, while Ella sat clasping her well-beloved's hand in the darkness, and whispering excitedly with him.

Those were, indeed, moments of greatest tension, away upon that dark wintry sea beyond the harbour, that wide bay which, on account of its unusual depth and exposed position, was never considered a very safe anchorage.

Their progress seemed at a snail's pace, as it always seems upon the sea at night. They watched the pinnacle draw up, and they knew that the man, Benyon, who, though German-born, had lived in London the greater part of his life – was on board carrying that terrible instrument of death that had been cleverly prepared in such official guise.

At last – after an age it seemed – the boat swung in beside the lighted gangway against the pinnacle, and Kennedy, stepping nimbly up, said to the sentry on board:

“Let nobody pass up or down, except this lady.” Then, seeing the officer on duty, he asked if a lieutenant had arrived on board with a despatch-box.

“Yes. I’ve sent him down to the captain,” was the reply.

“Take me to the captain at once, please,” Kennedy said in a calm voice. “There’s no time to lose. There’s treachery on board!”

In a second the officer was on the alert and ran down the stern gangway which led direct to the captain’s comfortable cabin, with its easy-chairs covered with bright chintzes like the small drawing-room of a country house.

Kennedy followed with Ella, but the captain was not there. The sentry said he was in the ward-room, therefore the pair waited till he came forward eagerly.

“Well,” asked the grey-haired captain with some surprise, seeing an officer and a lady. “What is it?”

“Have you received any despatches to-night, sir?” Kennedy inquired.

“No. What despatches?” asked the captain.

Then, in a few brief words, Kennedy explained how he had watched a man in naval uniform come off in the pinnace, carrying a heavy despatch-box. The man had passed the sentry and been directed below by the officer on duty. But he had never arrived at the captain’s cabin.

The “owner,” as the captain of a cruiser is often called by his brother officers, was instantly on the alert. The alarm was given, and the ship was at once thoroughly searched, especially the ammunition stores, where, in the flat close to the torpedoes on the port side, the deadly box was discovered. The guests knew nothing of this activity on the lower deck, but the two men who found the box heard a curious ticking within, and without a second’s delay brought it up and heaved it overboard.

Then again the boatswain piped, and every man, as he stood at his post, was informed that a spy who had attempted to blow up the ship was still on board. Indeed, as “Number One,” otherwise the first lieutenant, was addressing them a great column of water rose from an explosion deep below the surface, and much of it fell heavily on deck.

Another thorough search was made into every corner of the vessel, whereupon the stranger in uniform was at last discovered in one of the stokeholds. Two stokers rushed across to seize him, but with a quick movement he felled both with an iron bar. Then he ran up the ladder with the agility of a cat, and sped right into the arms of Ella and Kennedy.

“Curse you – I was too late!” he shrieked in fierce anger, on recognising them, and then seeing all retreat cut off, he suddenly sprang over the side of the vessel, intending, no doubt, to swim ashore.

At once the pinnace went after him, but in the darkness he could not be discovered, though the searchlights began to slowly sweep the dark swirling waters.

That he met a well-deserved fate, however, was proved by the fact that at dawn next day his body was picked up on the other side of the bay. Yet long before, Theodore Drost, suspecting that something was amiss by his fellow spy’s non-return, had left by train for London.

Seymour Kennedy was next day called to the Admiralty and thanked for his keen vigilance, but he only smiled and kept a profound secret the active part played by his particular friend, the popular actress – Miss Stella Steele.

Chapter Two. The Great Tunnel Plot

“There! Is it not a very neat little toy, my dear Ernst?” asked Theodore Drost, speaking in German, dressed in his usual funereal black of a Dutch pastor, as everyone believed him to be.

Ernst Ortmann, the man addressed, screwed up his eyes, a habit of his, and eagerly examined the heavy walking-stick which his friend had handed to him.

It was a thick bamboo-stump, dark-brown and well-polished, bearing a heavy iron ferrule.

The root-end, which formed the bulgy knob, the wily old German had unscrewed, revealing in a cavity a small cylinder of brass. This Ortmann took out and, in turn, unscrewed it, disclosing a curious arrangement of cog-wheels – a kind of clockwork within.

“You see that as long as the stick is carried upright the clock does not work,” Drost explained. “But,” – and taking it from his friend’s hand he held it in a horizontal position – “but as soon as it is laid upon the ground, the mechanical contrivance commences to work. See!”

And the man Ortmann – known as Horton since the outbreak of war – gazed upon it and saw the cog-wheels slowly revolving.

“By Jove!” he gasped. “Yes. Now I see. What a devilish invention it is! It can be put to so many uses!”

“Exactly, my dear friend,” laughed the supposed Dutch pastor, crossing the secret room in the roof of his house at Barnes.

It was afternoon, and the sunlight streaming through the skylight fell upon the place wherein the bomb-makers worked in secret. The room contained several deal tables whereon stood many bottles containing explosive compounds, glass retorts, test-tubes, and glass apothecaries’ scales, with all sorts of other apparatus used in the delicate work of manufacturing and mixing high-explosives.

“You see,” Drost went on to explain, as he indicated a large mortar of marble. “I have been treating phenol with nitric acid and have obtained the nitrate called trinitrophenol. I shall fill this case with it, and then we shall have an unsuspecting-looking weapon which will eventually prove most useful to us – for it can be carried in perfect safety, only it must not be laid down.”

Ortmann laughed. He saw that his friend’s inventive mind had produced an ingenious, if devilish, contrivance. He had placed death in that innocent-looking walking-stick – certain death to any person unconscious of the peril.

Indeed, as Ortmann watched, his friend carefully filled the cavity in the brass cylinder with the explosive substance, and placed within a very strong detonator which he connected with the clockwork, winding it to the full. He then rescrewed the cap upon the fatal cylinder, replacing it in the walking-stick and readjusting the knob, which closed so perfectly that only close inspection would reveal anything abnormal in the stick.

“The other stuff is there already, I suppose?”

“I took it down there the night before last in four petrol-tins.”

“The new stuff?”

“Yes. It is a picric acid derivative, and its relative force is twice as great as that of gun-cotton,” was the reply of the grey-haired man. He spoke with knowledge and authority, for had he not been one of the keenest explosive experts in the German arsenal at Spandau before he had assumed the rôle of the Dutch pastor in England?

“It will create some surprise there,” remarked Ortmann, with an evil grin upon his sardonic countenance. “Your girl knows nothing, I hope?”

“Absolutely nothing. I have arranged to carry out our plans as soon as possible, to-morrow night, or the night after. Bohlen and Tragheim are both assisting.”

“Excellent! I congratulate you, my dear Drost, upon your clever contrivance. Truly, you are a good son of the Fatherland, and I will see that you receive your due and proper reward when our brave brothers have landed upon English soil.”

“You are the eyes and brains of Germany in England,” declared Drost to his friend. “I am only the servant. You are the organiser. Yours is the Mysterious Hand which controls, and controls so well, the thousands of our fellow-Teutons, all of whom are ready for their allotted task when the Day of Invasion comes.”

“I fear you flatter me,” laughed Mr Horton, whom none suspected to be anything else than a patriotic Englishman.

“I do not flatter you. I only admire your courage and ingenuity,” was the quiet reply.

And then the two alien enemies, standing in that long, low-ceilinged laboratory, containing as it did sufficient high-explosives to blow up the whole of Hammersmith and Barnes, bent over the long deal table upon which stood a long glass retort containing some bright yellow crystals that were cooling.

Theodore Drost, being one of Germany’s foremost scientists, had been sent to England before the war, just as a number of others had been sent, as an advance guard of the Kaiser’s Army which the German General Staff intended should eventually raid Great Britain. Truly, the foresight, patience, and thoroughness of the Hun had been astounding. The whole world’s history contained nothing equal to the amazing craft and cunning displayed by those who were responsible for Germany’s Secret Service – that service known to its agents under the designation of “Number Seventy, Berlin.”

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