

The Home Reading Circle

THE WHITE THREAD.

By ALLEN UPWARD.

Author of "Secrets of the Courts of Europe."

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PART I.

"Pardon, M. l'Ambassadeur, but here is a piece of thread on the back of your coat."

"We were about to go forth for a stroll on the boulevards and I had just helped his excellency on with his overcoat. As I bent forward to remove the strand of white cotton which had attracted my attention, the ambassador turned his head with a startled movement. I even fancied that he gave a slight shiver as I picked off the thread and cast it away."

"A thousand thanks," he murmured, mechanically, glancing after the thread with a strange expression. But he realized that I had observed his singular agitation, for he immediately went on to say:

"You are yourself, perhaps, what it is that has disturbed me so much in this trivial circumstance? Do me the justice to believe, notwithstanding that I have not been agitated without a real cause?"

"I shall be desolated if I have permitted myself to display any curiosity," I responded.

"He cut me short. "I forbid you to make excuses. It is not for nothing that I have consented to feel emotion. It is because the service which you have just rendered me has caused me to recall a terrible experience through which I once passed, and the memory of which has never been able to efface itself from my mind."

"I was in doubt as to what reply to make, and we walked on in silence for a minute. Then the ambassador resumed, speaking in a more familiar tone:

"But I foresee that you will compel me to explain my allusions. There is, however, one restriction which I am compelled to impose on myself. It is on account of the death of Alphonse Azilz, began his excellency, and I had just been promoted to the rank of charge-d'affaires. In this capacity I was intrusted with the French mission to the court of one of those barbarous principities in the southeast of Europe, which have hardly yet recovered from their centuries of vassalage to the Turks. In these unsettled societies acts of lawlessness and violence are rendered possible at which more civilized countries would be dismayed."

"At the time of my arrival in the principality to the court of which I had been accredited, I found things in a very disorderly condition. As is always the case in these petty states in the region of the Danube, Russia and Austria were intruding for the predominance and the whole population was rent into factions accordingly, which pursued each other with the bitterness of hatred."

"This rivalry between the two powers I have named had even extended to the palace, where the Austrian inclination of George, the reigning prince, were counterbalanced by the Russophile sympathies of his consort, Catherine, a Princess of Russian extraction."

"While I was preparing to walk warily among the pitfalls which surrounded me, I was surprised one day shortly after my arrival by a visit from the Russian minister, Baron Dourenski."

"I have come," he said, as soon as he had taken a seat and exchanged the usual compliments, to inform you that I am obliged to leave for Russia in two days' time. The business which requires my presence is important, and will perhaps detain me four or five weeks."

"I bowed, and murmured a polite expression of regret at the idea of losing the society of the minister for so long a period."

"That is not all, however," he proceeded to say. "I have at the location no one whom I can trust to take my place properly while I am away. Shall I be trespassing too much on your good nature if I ask you to take charge of the interests of Russia for these few weeks?"

"I was not altogether surprised by this request. At these petty courts where there are no experienced secretaries of legation to act during the absence of their chiefs, it is not unusual for diplomats to undertake these services for each other. It was moreover a compliment to me to ask me to act on behalf of a minister, whose rank in the diplomatic body is above that of a charge d'affaires, as you perhaps know."

"Yes, a minister ranks next to an ambassador, does he not?" I said, as his excellency appeared to pause for an answer.

"Exactly. It is only the greater powers which are represented at each other's courts by ambassadors. As I have said, Baron Dourenski's proposal

was natural, and even gratifying. Nevertheless I did not at once give my consent."

"I am too much honored by the confidence you place in me," I said; "but recollect, if you please, my dear Dourenski, that I have only recently arrived in this country, and know nothing of the political situation. Had you not better apply to some colleague of older standing, to Sir Graham, for instance, the British charge d'affaires?"

"He made an emphatic gesture of disapproval as I pronounced the name. "Not for worlds, my dear fellow! That man is a mere tool of the Austrian minister. No, I must have some one whom I can trust, some one of real independence and judgment."

"This pressed I could find no excuse for declining the honor which Dourenski proposed to confer on me. He went on to add:

"There is one thing about which I must ask you to preserve the strictest secrecy. In the mail bag of the legation you will find time to time find letters addressed to M. Starovitch, which you will without doubt find means to transmit to him in a private manner. If the packages are sometimes heavy that is merely because they contain a little gold which it is necessary to distribute among our friends."

"As I was all too familiar with the tangled paths of political intrigues, I could not altogether conceal my astonishment at hearing him pronounce the name of M. Starovitch. This was the prime minister, the head of the prince's government, and I had heard of him with respect and admiration. He was certainly not prepared to find him in the receipt of Russian gold."

"Dourenski smiled at my look of surprise. "The Premier is a discreet man," he observed, cynically. "Should any unexpected difficulty arise while I am away, involving the interests of Russia, you will not do badly to consult him."

"The matter was thus arranged. In due course the Russian handed over the care of his legation to me, and took his departure."

"Shortly after he had left the capital a banquet was given at the palace, to which I received an invitation. The affair was not one of state, but a good many distinguished foreigners were present, including the Austrian minister and M. Starovitch himself."

"I was graciously received by Prince George, and with still more cordially by his beautiful and distinguished consort. When we sat down to dinner I found myself on the left of the princess, who sat between me and the prince, while the prime minister was on my other side. The Austrian minister occupied the post of honor on Prince George's right. I mention these details for a reason which you will presently understand."

"I have said that the banquet was not a state one. Nevertheless the presence of so many high functionaries imparted to it a more or less political air. As the evening advanced I even began to perceive a certain tension in the atmosphere which warned me that this gathering had some hidden significance."

"The prince, who was drinking freely, and had hardly exchanged a word with his wife, since we sat down, while he kept on chattering in long, indistinct way-words with the Austrian minister."

"The princess, on her part, was evidently not at her ease. Whether or not she suspected that something contrary to her wishes was on foot, I am unable to say. But she had continually glanced at the prince with an anxious air, and then turned and conversed with me in a light tone, which was evidently artificial."

"I had not long to wait for the key to all this. As soon as the dessert was placed before us Prince George rose to his feet with an abrupt air, and, filling his glass to the brim, called out, with marked intonation:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to drink to the health of my very good friend and cousin, the Emperor Francis Joseph!"

"It was a demonstration. It was impossible to mistake the significance of these words. They meant that Prince George had arrived at an understanding with the court of Vienna, and that the friends of Russia in the principality were crushed."

"I turned from the exultant face of the Austrian envoy, who saw this triumph of his diplomacy, to Princess Catherine. She had turned as if pale as she rose from her seat in complacency with the prince's example, and slowly lifted her glass to her lips, as if each drop that it contained were the most deadly poison."

"The prime minister managed to conceal his chagrin with forced skill. He drank the toast as though it were a meaningless ceremony, and quietly resumed his seat by my side. But as soon as the attention of those near us was diverted for a moment, he whispered softly in my ear:

"Baron Dourenski is a prudent man. His absence has been well timed. "This was the first suggestion to me that any hidden strategy underlay Dourenski's departure. I began to feel slightly doubtful, and to wish that this astute Russian had not made me the channel of his suspicious reticences to the prime minister."

"My uneasiness was not removed by Starovitch's next words, uttered in the same low tone:

"There are certain precautions which the baron foresaw might become necessary, in the event of anything of this kind taking place. The necessity having now arisen, I am compelled to ask you, as his representative, to come to my assistance. I have in my pocket at this moment an envelope containing certain papers of the highest importance, which it is essential I should intrust to your care for a time."

"You may bring the packet you speak of to my residence tomorrow. If you please, I answered, coldly. "I will put it in a place of safety till my colleague returns."

"M. Starovitch gave a slight frown. "I dare not wait till tomorrow," he

returned, quickly. "I must beg you to let me pass this envelope to you now, under the shelter of the table. We do not know who may be observing us."

"Much annoyed at being asked to take part in these paltry maneuvers, I was nevertheless obliged to give my consent. Thereupon Starovitch placed in conversation with his left hand to turn his back on me and his right hand towards the pocket of his coat."

"Following his example, I also turned and made a show of paying renewed attention to the princess. But the prince, who had perhaps remarked my whispered conference with his minister, now neglected the Australian envoy and commenced to engage me in a friendly discussion, in which the princess also took part."

"While I was endeavoring to give my attention to their highness I became conscious of a light touch on my knee. Affecting to play with my serviette, I gradually allowed my left hand to descend out of sight beneath the table, and my fingers at once came in contact with the envelope of which Starovitch had spoken. I carefully took hold of it, and, seizing the first moment when the prince's eyes were turned away, I managed to get the packet up under my coat and into my breast pocket."

"Shortly afterwards his highness gave the signal to rise, and, giving his arm to his consort, led the company into the drawing room."

"As soon as she had got rid of the Austrian I saw her highness fix her eyes upon me with a look which plainly intimated that she had something of importance to say to me. Presently she came and addressed me in these significant words:

"Pardon me, monsieur, but if you have anything which you wish to put away in safety, do not remain here another moment."

PART II.

"I was overhauled, as you may imagine, at this proof of her acquaintance with the transaction at the dinner table, and it was with difficulty that I restrained myself from allowing my dismay to be visible. At the same time the serious character of the warning which she had given me served to increase the uneasiness which I had labored under for some time. I bowed gravely to show that I understood what to do, and after allowing a short time to elapse, so as to prevent remark, I made my way to where his highness was standing and asked permission to retire."

"The prince was engaged at the moment in talking to Starovitch himself. It was, of course, a breach of etiquette for me to have before his highness accepted the excuse which I had prepared, and made no effort to detain me."

"I fancied that I caught a look in the prime minister's eye as if he would have liked to accompany me but it was, of course, impossible for him to make the suggestion, and I went out of the room, escorted by an eunuch."

"In the vestibule of the palace I paused to put on an overcoat. It was a cold night—one of those nights in that part of the world which remind one of the description of the frozen Danube—doubtless you are familiar with the lines?"

"I have forgotten them, but it is not of the least consequence. You can repeat them to me when you have concluded your story."

"The ambassador smiled at my impatience, with which it was easy to see that he was not displeased."

"As I was drawing on my overcoat," he continued, "the eunuch who had followed me made the remark—almost in the same words which you have used this evening."

"Pardon, baron, but there is a white thread on the back of my coat," I cried, and turned the coat over to look for it. On the back I found a long piece of cotton. It was ordinary enough in appearance, but when

I took hold of one end to remove it, I found to my surprise that it was firmly attached to the material of the coat."

"My tailor must be a very careless fellow," I muttered, as I broke it off short. "It must have come through from the lining."

"I drew my coat on again, thinking no more of this trivial incident, and good night to the eunuch, and started to walk home by myself. There was a bright moon, but the streets were deserted, unusually so, considering that the hour was by no means a late one."

"When I had proceeded some distance, however, I perceived in front of me a miserable-looking creature on crutches, with a bandage over one eye, who boldly stopped me, and began to beg for alms. I gave him a stern refusal, for I never encourage these pests, nevertheless he continued to plant himself in my path and renew his demands."

"While I was trying to shake him off, another man came up from behind. He paused a moment, as if to ascertain what was the matter, whereupon the beggar left me, and commenced to assault the newcomer. I seized the opportunity to make my escape, and reached my house without further incident."

"But the events of the night were no longer forgotten. As soon as I got in, I went straight to my room, and, locking the door, I examined the mysterious packet which had been confided to me by M. Starovitch. As I did so I observed that the envelope was sealed with yellow wax, bearing the name of an imperial army. I then sat down to a quiet game of chess with my attache, to tranquillize my nerves before going to bed."

"We had been playing for some time, and I was just developing my final attack on his position, when we were disturbed by a loud commotion in the street outside. I cannot explain why it was, but this noise caused me the most dreadful shock. I sprang to my feet, pushing away the board, and commenced to rush towards the door, to ascertain the meaning of the disturbance."

"He came back in a minute or two, looking as white as the chessmen he had been playing with."

"Sit," he cried, harshly. "M. Starovitch has just been assassinated. They are carrying the body home."

"A groan of horror escaped my lips. Hardly conscious of what I was doing, I snatched up my hat and coat and began to put them on."

"Where are you going?" demanded Montalambert, in surprise. Montalambert was the young man's name."

"I must go around there at once, and find out how this happened," I answered, distractedly. "I shall be obliged if you will come with me; the streets may not be safe."

"He gave me an incredulous look. "At all events they will do well to remember that we are members of the diplomatic body," he protested, drawing himself up with the pride of an ambassador."

"I made no reply, and he quickly prepared himself. We left the house arm in arm, and in minutes' walk brought us to the prime minister's official residence."

"The street outside the building was blocked by an immense crowd which broke out every moment into fierce groans. As I came nearer I could make out that one part of the crowd was groaning for Austria, while the other was groaning for Russia. On one point they were evidently agreed, namely, the political significance to be attached to the crime which had just taken place."

"This circumstance increased my determination to force my way in, and to speak with the unfortunate victim if he had not yet expired."

"The police on guard at the entrance were at first reluctant to let me pass, without consulting their chief, who had not yet arrived. But I knew the character of these men, and a handful of roubles soon gained me admittance."

"Inside the spacious entrance hall I encountered a frightful spectacle. On the floor, in the center of a crowd of attendants, lay the man who had sat at the dinner table with me an hour before, still extended on the shutter which he must have been brought there from the scene of the crime, and littrally wettering in his blood. Some of his clothes had been removed and flung into a corner, when I arrived, and a doctor who must have preceded me by barely a minute was turning over the body of the unconscious man, in his search for the fatal wound."

"I was just in time to see it—a hideous pit in the back, into which I could have thrust my two fingers, and from which the thick, black blood began to ooze afresh as the doctor shifted the position of the victim."

"The overcoat, coat and waistcoat of the murdered man had apparently been stripped off together and lay on the floor at the foot of the stairs in a confused heap. I stepped towards the spot slowly and looked around. No one was observing my movements; every eye was turned on the dying man. With my foot I softly turned over the clothes, till I came to the overcoat. As I did so I suddenly caught sight of something which caused me to gasp and reel back as if I had been struck a blow."

"There, on the back, within an inch of the bloody rent made by the assassin's knife, was a long, white thread, identical in every respect with the one which I had found on my coat within the very hour!"

"I stepped hastily to his side, and knelt down to catch the faintest whisper."

"Can you speak?" I asked. "If so, tell me how this happened?"

"He made a feeble movement as though to rise. I bent over him with my ear close to his lips."

"The cripple—the papers," he gasped, and ceased."

"That was all. I was destined to hear no more. Corpses make no confessions."

"The ambassador allowed a decent interval to pass, as if to proclaim his respect for the memory of the murdered statesman. Then he resumed:

"Poor Starovitch had hardly drawn his last breath when the chief of police rushed in at the head of a staff of officers. He frowned when his glance encountered me there by the side of the dead man, but instantly softening his expression he advanced respectfully and said to me:

"I perceive that I have arrived too late. Perhaps, M. le Baron, your friend was able to give you some hint as to the author of this abominable crime?"

"I looked him steadily in the face, and replied with the most perfect coolness:

"No, unfortunately M. Starovitch expired, on the contrary, just as he was on the point of commencing a declaration."

"The truth of this assertion was confirmed by the doctor and the other persons who had been present during the scene."

"In that case," said the chief, preserving his composure, "I must proceed to make an investigation from the clues which are already in my possession."

"I bowed in silence and took my departure, returning home with Mont-

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"I bowed in silence and took my departure, returning home with Mont-

alambert, to whom I said nothing about the anxieties which were torturing me. "The moment I had reached my own house, however, I sat down and wrote an order to a certain manufacturer in Vienna with whom I had formerly had dealings, to forward me without delay one of those shirts composed of steel links which are sometimes worn by officers engage in warfare among savage tribes. "You have no doubt already perceived the conclusion at which I had been forced to arrive?" His excellency turned an inquiring look at me as he uttered these words, but continued without giving me time to reply. TO BE CONTINUED.

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