

CHAPTER XXVI - THE LETTER

"This sheet," explained Irene, "is, in fact, but a part of a letter. The first sheets are missing, so we don't know who it was addressed to; but it is signed, at the end, by the initials 'E. de V.'"

"The ambassador!" cried Hathaway, caught off his guard by surprise.

"The same," said O'Gorman triumphantly; "and it is all in his well-known handwriting. Read the letter, my girl."

"The first sentence," said Irene, "is a continuation of something on a previous page, but I will read it just as it appears here."

And then, in a clear, distinct voice that was audible to all present, she read as follows:

"which forces me to abandon at once my post and your delightful country in order to avoid further complications. My greatest regret is in leaving Mrs. Burrows in so unfortunate a predicament. The lady was absolutely loyal to us and the calamity that has overtaken her is through no fault of her own.

"That you may understand this thoroughly I will remind you that John Burrows was in our employ. It was through our secret influence that he obtained his first government position, where he inspired confidence and became trusted implicitly. He did not acquire full control, however, until five years later, and during that time he met and married Beatrice Hathaway, the charming daughter of James J. Hathaway, a wealthy broker. That gave Burrows added importance and he was promoted to the high government position he occupied at the time of his death.

"Burrows made for us secret copies of the fortifications on both the east and west coasts, including the number and caliber of guns, amounts of munitions stored and other details. Also he obtained copies of the secret telegraph and naval codes and the complete armaments of all war vessels, both in service and in process of construction. A part of this information and some of the plans he delivered to me before he died, as you know, and he had the balance practically ready for delivery when he was taken with pneumonia and unfortunately expired very suddenly.

"It was characteristic of the man's faithfulness that on his death bed he made his wife promise to deliver the balance of the plans and an important book of codes to us as early as she could find an opportunity to do so. Mrs. Burrows had previously been in her husband's confidence and knew he was employed by us while holding his position with the government, so she readily promised to carry out his wishes, perhaps never dreaming of the difficulties that would confront her or the personal danger she assumed. But she was faithful to her promise and afterward tried to fulfill it.

"Her father, the James J. Hathaway above mentioned, in whose mansion Mrs. Burrows lived with her only child, is a staunch patriot. Had he known of our plot he would have promptly denounced it, even sacrificing his son-in-law. I have no quarrel with him for that, you may well believe, as I value patriotism above all other personal qualities. But after the death of John Burrows it became very difficult for his wife to find a way to deliver to me the packet of plans without being detected. Through some oversight at the government office, which aroused suspicion immediately after his death, Burrows was discovered to have made duplicates of many documents intrusted to him and with a suspicion of the truth government agents were sent to interview Mrs. Burrows and find out if the duplicates were still among her husband's papers. Being a clever woman, she succeeded in secreting the precious package and so foiled the detectives. Even her own father, who was very indignant that a member of his household should be accused of treason, had no suspicion that his daughter was in any way involved. But the house was watched, after that, and Mrs. Burrows was constantly under surveillance--a fact of which she was fully aware. I also became aware of the difficulties that surrounded her and although impatient to receive the package I dared not press its delivery. Fortunately no suspicion attached to me and a year or so after her husband's death I met Mrs. Burrows at the house of a mutual friend, on the occasion of a crowded reception, and secured an interview with her where we could not be overheard. We both believed that by this time the police espionage had been greatly relaxed so I suggested that she boldly send the parcel to me, under an assumed name, at Carver's Drug Store, where I had a confederate. An ordinary messenger would not do for this errand, but Mr. Hathaway drove past the drug store every morning on his way to his office, and Mrs. Burrows thought it would be quite safe to send the parcel by his hand, the man being wholly above suspicion.

"On the morning we had agreed upon for the attempt, the woman brought the innocent looking package to her father, as he was leaving the house, and asked him to deliver it at the drug store on his way down. Thinking it was returned goods he consented, but at the moment he delivered the parcel a couple of detectives appeared and arrested him, opening the package before him to prove its important contents. I witnessed this disaster to our plot with my own eyes, but managed to escape without being arrested as a partner in the conspiracy, and thus I succeeded in protecting the good name of my beloved country, which must never be known in this connection.

"Hathaway was absolutely stupefied at the charge against him. Becoming violently indignant, he knocked down the officers and escaped with the contents of the package. He then returned home and demanded an explanation from his daughter, who confessed all.

"It was then that Hathaway showed the stuff he was made of, to use an Americanism. He insisted on shielding his daughter, to whom he was devotedly attached, and in taking all the responsibility on his own shoulders. The penalty of this crime is imprisonment for life and he would not allow Mrs. Burrows to endure it. Being again arrested he did not deny his guilt but cheerfully suffered

imprisonment. Before the day set for his trial, however, he managed to escape and since then he has so cleverly hidden himself that the authorities remain ignorant of his whereabouts. His wife and his grandchild also disappeared and it was found that his vast business interests had been legally transferred to some of his most intimate friends--doubtless for his future benefit.

"The government secret service was helpless. No one save I knew that Hathaway was shielding his daughter, whose promise to her dead husband had led her to betray her country to the representative of a foreign power such as our own. Yet Hathaway, even in sacrificing his name and reputation, revolted at suffering life-long imprisonment, nor dared he stand trial through danger of being forced to confess the truth. So he remains in hiding and I have hopes that he will be able--through his many influential friends--to save himself from capture for many months to come.

"This is the truth of the matter, dear friend, and as this explanation must never get beyond your own knowledge I charge you to destroy this letter as soon as it is read. When you are abroad next year we will meet and consider this and other matters in which we are mutually interested. I would not have ventured to put this on paper were it not for my desire to leave someone in this country posted on the Hathaway case. You will understand from the foregoing that the situation has become too delicate for me to remain here. If you can, give aid to Hathaway, whom I greatly admire, for we are in a way responsible for his troubles. As for Mrs. Burrows, I consider her a woman of character and honor. That she might keep a pledge made to her dead husband she sinned against the law without realizing the enormity of her offense. If anyone is to blame it is poor John Burrows, who was not justified in demanding so dangerous a pledge from his wife; but he was dying at the time and his judgment was impaired. Let us be just to all and so remain just to ourselves.

"Write me at the old address and believe me to be yours most faithfully

E. de V.

The 16th of September, 1905."

During Irene's reading the others maintained an intense silence. Even when she had ended, the silence continued for a time, while all considered with various feelings the remarkable statement they had just heard.

It was O'Gorman who first spoke.

"If you will assert, Mr. Hathaway, that the ambassador's statement is correct, to the best of your knowledge and belief, I have the authority of our department to promise that the charge against you will promptly be dropped and withdrawn and that you will be adjudged innocent of any offense against the law. It is true that you assisted a guilty person to escape punishment, and are therefore liable for what is called 'misprision of treason,' but we shall not press that, for, as I said

before, we prefer, since no real harm has resulted, to allow the case to be filed without further publicity. Do you admit the truth of the statements contained in this letter?"

"I believe them to be true," said Mr. Hathaway, in a low voice. Mary Louise was nestling close in his arms and now she raised her head tenderly to kiss his cheek. She was not sobbing; she did not even appear to be humbled or heart-broken. Perhaps she did not realize at the moment how gravely her father and mother had sinned against the laws of their country. That realization might come to her later, but just now she was happy in the vindication of Gran'pa Jim--a triumph that overshadowed all else.

"I'll take this letter for our files," said Officer O'Gorman, folding it carefully before placing it in his pocketbook. "And now, sir, I hope you will permit me to congratulate you and to wish you many years of happiness with your granddaughter, who first won my admiration by her steadfast faith in your innocence. She's a good girl, is Mary Louise, and almost as clever as my Josie here. Come, Nan; come, Agatha; let's go back to Bigbee's. Our business here is finished."