

THE AFFAIR OF THE
BLOODSTAINED
EGG COSY

PROLOGUE

‘How well do you know Adolf Hitler?’

The man who asked the question was short and dapper and wore a military uniform heavy with insignia. He turned away from the window of his office as he spoke and surveyed the only other occupant of the room with a look of slight distaste.

This was an older, somewhat seedy-looking man in a blue serge suit and a dirty collar. He was smoking a cigarette and lazily blowing smoke rings towards the ceiling.

‘Not well at all,’ he said. ‘I’ve met him twice. Why do you ask?’

‘Last week your department supplied me with the transcript of a speech he had just made to a secret meeting of Nazi party officials.’

‘Concerning the Duchy?’

‘Yes.’

‘What about it?’

‘I just wondered if you were able to read between the lines of that speech.’

‘Well, it’s obvious he wants the Duchy.’

‘That has been obvious for a long time. On this occasion, however, he laid considerable stress on her strategic importance – and on her military weakness.’

‘Indicating that he intends to act soon – to annexe her?’

‘We believe so. Which would, of course, be disastrous to our interests.’

‘Would it? Well, if you say so.’

‘I do. It was decided many months ago that if any country was to annexe the Duchy, it had to be ourselves. But there was no great urgency. Because there is an obstacle.’

The older man sucked at his cigarette and puffed three or four smoke rings upwards. ‘England,’ he said.

‘Precisely. Or Britain, to be more accurate. Britain recognises the importance of keeping the Grand Duke on the throne and the Duchy, to put it crudely, on her side. She will certainly be prepared to act to ensure this. Just how much she will be willing to do we’ve never known. However, Hitler’s speech has changed the situation entirely. Now it is essential we act quickly. As the American cowboy films so quaintly put it, we must beat him to the draw. But first of all we have got to find out just how far Britain is prepared to go in the Duchy’s defence.’

‘Which, I suppose, is why I was so peremptorily summoned here this morning.’

The short man sat down in a chair near the other, leant forward, and spoke in a low voice. ‘There is shortly to be a secret meeting between a representative of the Grand Duke – probably Martin Adler himself – and a British government minister. Can you discover where and when

that meeting is to take place – and what is decided at it?’

The older man’s eyes narrowed and he eased himself slowly upright in his chair. ‘That,’ he said, ‘will not be simple.’

‘Of course it won’t be *simple*. But can you do it?’

‘Perhaps.’ The older man was silent for a moment, then added: ‘There is one agent – and one agent only – in the world who might succeed. Not one of my own people – a freelance. If this agent is available, then the answer is probably yes. But it will cost a great deal of money.’

‘The cost is immaterial. Just find out what we want to know.’

‘Which is – precisely?’

‘Exactly what arms and equipment Britain agrees to supply, and – most important – how soon she can deliver: we must know how quickly we have to act. Also, what Britain would do in the event of the Duchy being invaded: would she intervene directly by sending troops? On the answer to these questions depends our course of action. It is entirely up to your department to get them.’

The civilian was still for a few seconds. Then he stubbed out his cigarette and got to his feet. He brushed a few specks of ash from his waistcoat, and ambled towards the door. ‘I’ll be in touch,’ he said, and went out.

CHAPTER ONE

A Resignation

Jane Clifton was fuming. Some customers were absolutely intolerable. And Mrs. Amelia Bottway just about took the cake. Jane replaced the red dress on the hanger, took down a green one, and returned to Mrs. Bottway.

‘Perhaps you would care to try this one, madam.’

‘Oh, really, you are the most stupid girl! I told you distinctly not green.’ She had a piercing voice.

Jane reddened, then swallowed hard. ‘I’m sorry, madam. I didn’t hear you. I’m afraid this is the last one of your size in a bright-coloured satin.’

‘Well it’s no good to me at all. None of them ’ave been. You’ve been wasting my time. It’s disgraceful.’

‘I’ve shown you nine gowns, madam. I’m sorry if none of them is suitable, but—’

‘I shall ’ave to try h’elsewhere. Somewhere where they keep a adequate stock – and employ some h’intelligent girls.’ Mrs. Bottway struggled to her feet and fixed Jane with what was plainly meant to be a withering glance.

Jane looked back at her with revulsion, her face fixed in what she called her painted-doll expression. The foul-

mannered, ugly old barrel, she thought to herself. How dare she speak to me like that?

‘You foul-mannered, ugly old barrel,’ she said loudly and distinctly, ‘how dare you speak to me like that!’

She hadn’t meant to say this: the words had just come. But they were out now, and Jane suddenly felt very much better.

For several seconds Mrs. Bottway did not react at all. Then slowly her face started to go purple. Jane suddenly realised that she was the centre of attention. There were three or four other customers in the shop, and, together with the assistants, they were all staring at her speechlessly.

Mrs. Bottway, whose complexion by now resembled an overripe plum, at last got her mouth open. ‘You—’ she said, ‘you – you – you ’ussy.’

Jane watched her with a cool and curiously detached air. She marshalled her thoughts: might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb.

‘Mrs. Bottway,’ she said, ‘you and your sort sicken me. You are insolent, bad-tempered, and arrogant. You’ve got pots of money and not the first idea how to spend it. You ask for a satin dress in a bright colour. I ask you – with your figure! You’d look even more grotesque than you do now.’

She got no further. For from behind her came a voice raised in a screech. ‘Clifton!’

Jane swung round to confront the proprietor of Mayfair Modes, Monsieur Anton. ‘Clifton – you wicked, wicked girl. You will apologise to madam this instant.’ He was almost hopping with rage.

Jane interrupted quietly. ‘I shall apologise to nobody. I

meant every word of it. Don't bother to say any more. It's too late. You can't fire me. I resign!

And she strode to her cubicle, jammed her hat on her head, grabbed up her coat and handbag, and made for the door. Just inside it, she turned.

'Mr. Anton,' she said loudly, 'I have a week's wages due to me – three pounds, seven shillings and sixpence exactly. But don't bother to send it on. Put it towards the cost of a new wig.' And with her head held high, Jane marched out into Bond Street.

She walked off briskly, struggling into her coat as she did so, and cursing herself for a prize idiot. Fancy throwing up a steady job, walking out without a reference – and no hope of getting one now! – not even claiming what was rightfully hers; when she had just £9 18s 7d in her bank account and 11s 3 1/4d in her purse.

But it had been worth it. Their faces! Jane suddenly laughed out loud – greatly to the surprise of a plump, bowler-hatted little man she happened to be passing.

'Jane – wait!' The voice came from behind her and Jane spun round to see a small, red-haired girl darting along the pavement towards her.

'Gerry!' she exclaimed.

Lady Geraldine Saunders, only daughter of the twelfth Earl of Burford, rushed up to Jane and caught her by both hands. 'Jane – darling – what a simply devastating performance!'

Jane stared. 'You were there?'

'You bet I was there. I called in to ask you to lunch. I was just waiting quietly for you to finish with that ghastly person when you suddenly blew up. It was magnificent. Jane, tell me, does that funny little man really wear a wig?'

‘Not that I know of. But everyone will think he does now, won’t they?’

Gerry gurgled happily. ‘Oh, how priceless. Jane, you must come and lunch with me at the Ritz. It’s ages since I saw you. I’ve got tons to talk about.’

‘You’ll have to treat me, Gerry, if you really want the honour of my company. I’m absolutely stony broke.’

‘Who isn’t, darling? But I can just run to it. Come on. Let’s hail a cab.’

In the taxi Jane reflected ruefully that her friend’s idea of stoniness was quite a different thing from her own. To Gerry it meant trying to stretch to the end of the year an annual allowance of fifteen hundred pounds. It was ironic that there should be such a contrast between the situations of two girls whose families a few generations previously had been of about equal standing – two girls who had gone to the same school, been ‘finished’, and come out together. But whereas the present Earl of Burford was still the proprietor of estates in the West Country and Scotland, a series of disasters and blunders over a period of sixty or seventy years had gradually eroded the Clifton fortune. So that Jane had to fend for herself.

She sighed. ‘Oh, Gerry, why am I such an ass? Why do I keep throwing over all these jobs? I know it’s irresponsible, but I can’t seem to help it.’

‘Well, nobody could put up with being spoken to like that. You had no alternative.’

‘Oh, but I did. To bite my lip, keep smiling, and say I was very sorry if I hadn’t given satisfaction. That’s what any of the other girls would have done. It’s what I’ve done – often.’

‘I don’t know how you stood it for so long.’

‘Because I wanted to eat. It’s as simple as that.’

A minute later the taxi pulled up outside the Ritz. ‘Come along,’ Gerry said, ‘you’ll feel better after a good lunch. No banting today. Let’s forget our figures and have a real blow-out.’

It was while they were drinking their after-lunch coffee that Gerry suddenly said: ‘I say, I’ve just realised you’re a free woman. You can come down to Alderley for a bit.’

‘Oh, it would be heavenly. But I must start job-hunting again.’

‘Bunkum! You needn’t begin straight away. You need a breather first.’

‘But, Gerry, I explained, I’m practically on my beam ends. I can’t afford—’

‘You’re not going to be any worse off by spending a few days with us. It won’t cost you anything to live while you’re there. Look, I’m motoring down in the Hispano-Suiza tomorrow – oh, of course, you haven’t seen her, have you? She’s absolutely my pride and joy. She’s got a nine and a half litre V12 engine. Does over a hundred miles an hour. Pushrod ohv, two twin-choke carbs – sorry, I’m being a bore. Where was I? Oh, yes, you must come with me, you must, you must.’

Jane laughed. ‘All right. It’s terribly sweet of you. Thanks awfully. But I can’t come tomorrow, really. I must put in a few days job-hunting first. Next Thursday OK?’

‘Lovely.’

‘Actually, it’s just what I need. Who else is going to be there?’

‘Oh, some Americans called Peabody. He’s a fabulously rich Texan. Oil, I think. We’ve never met them, but he’s got one of the biggest collections of old guns in the States and he wants to see Daddy’s. No doubt they’ll both be excruciatingly boring the whole time about frizzens and multiple matchlocks and things. Then Richard’s bringing down a couple of foreign diplomats, and a man called Thornton from the Foreign Office. I gather they’re all going to be engaged in some sort of governmental talks. Richard asked if it would be all right and of course Daddy agreed, though why they’ve got to use Alderley, I don’t know.’

‘How – er, how is Richard?’

‘Fine. He comes down about every fourth or fifth week on average. It must be quite a long time since you’ve seen him.’

‘Over two years.’

‘Really? Yes, of course, the two last times you came he was abroad. He’ll be thinking you’ve been avoiding him.’

‘Anyone else expected?’

‘Well, I’m afraid – and you must brace yourself, darling – that Algy is.’

‘Algy Fotheringay? Oh, Gerry, no! What on earth possessed you?’

‘Not me – Daddy. Algy buttonholed him at the Eton and Harrow match. You know how he’s always trying to cadge invitations. Daddy swears he couldn’t get out of it. I’ve just about forgiven him. But I’m afraid we’re all going to have to spend merry hours listening to Algy talk about himself, his rich and fashionable friends – and food.’

‘If you go on like this,’ said Jane, ‘I may well change my mind.’

CHAPTER TWO

Ten Downing Street

The Honourable Richard Saunders sat in the ante-room to the Prime Minister's private study and wondered again why the Old Man had picked him, a junior minister, for this job.

It had happened just two weeks ago. He had been unexpectedly summoned into the Presence and given a surprising little lecture.

'It is highly important that a stable democratic state friendly to Britain be maintained in central Europe as a bulwark against both Fascism and Bolshevism,' the Prime Minister had ended. 'The Duchy fills that rôle admirably. Now, however, she is extremely weak military and is threatened by invasion from several directions. The Grand Duke has approached us for assistance. We want to help; it will be in our interest to do so. However, in the present political climate we cannot be seen wantonly distributing British arms to small states, or committing British troops to war in Europe, without something tangible to show in return. The Grand Duke has indicated his willingness to cede to the British crown certain so far unspecified colonial

territory, where rich mineral deposits have recently been discovered, but which the Duchy herself is not in a position to exploit. He is sending an envoy to negotiate a treaty whereby we will supply military aid in exchange for this territory. What has to be determined is precisely what aid we supply – and how soon – and exactly what land is given in return. Until we can announce full agreement, the negotiations must remain secret. Clearly, neither the Foreign Secretary nor I can be involved. We want you to handle them. Think you can manage?’

Richard, of course, had said yes. But still he wondered – why him? Today he was determined to find out.

‘The Prime Minister will see you now, sir.’

Richard rose and entered the private study.

‘Ah, come in, Saunders.’

The Prime Minister got to his feet and held out his hand as Richard went forward. ‘Do sit down.’

Richard sank into a deep leather chair and waited silently as the Prime Minister lit his pipe, leant back and eyed him keenly from under bushy eyebrows. ‘All set?’

‘I think so, Prime Minister.’

‘The Foreign Secretary and the War Minister have briefed you fully?’

‘They have.’

‘Splendid. There are just one or two points I want to emphasise. Firstly, the importance of speed: this matter must be settled quickly. Intelligence sources tell us that the threat the Duchy faces is very real, and growing. Fortunately, we are in broad agreement with the Grand Duke. Naturally, their envoy will try to obtain from you more than we are able to give, earlier delivery of the

equipment, and so on; and to keep the extent of the territory they hand over to us to a minimum. They may also want British troops stationed permanently within their borders. But we wish to avoid this: you must keep it in reserve as an ultimate concession. Your task is really going to be extremely delicate: obtaining the best possible deal for Britain consistent with assuring the security of the Duchy.'

The Prime Minister reached into his drawer and took out a large envelope, which he handed to Richard. 'Here are the blanks for the draft treaty. Simply fill in the details in accordance with the agreement you reach. The final terms are entirely your responsibility: we will stand by whatever arrangements you make. You'll have Thornton from the FO present as your adviser throughout, of course. You've met him?'

'Yesterday for the first time. He seems very able.'

'He is extremely able. Highly experienced, and with a full knowledge of our capabilities.'

'Which is something I conspicuously lack, I'm afraid. Needless to say, I'm deeply honoured, but I cannot help wondering why you asked *me* to undertake these negotiations.'

'Why do you think I asked you?'

'Well, obviously if outsiders weren't to realise the importance of the talks, you had to pick somebody fairly junior; yet it's patently too important a matter to be handled at Embassy level. But I can't help feeling there are others better qualified than I to deal with it. The only real asset I have seems to be—' He broke off.

'Seems to be what?'

‘Alderley.’

‘How do you mean, Saunders?’

‘Well, I do spend a certain amount of time there with my brother and his family. My sister-in-law gives frequent house parties. Then there are the Alderley collections – foreign visitors do call now and again to examine them. So the visit of two men from a small European country, at the same time as I’m there myself, will cause no talk; while at the same time they will be well out of sight of the press and the diplomatic corps. In addition, the house is extremely secure. From the moment the Foreign Secretary asked if my brother would be willing to entertain a couple of strangers for a few days, I had in mind that that might have been the reason I was chosen.’

The Prime Minister shook his head firmly. ‘No. Those factors did enter into our calculations and Alderley did seem an eminently suitable venue. However, there were others equally suitable. I did not select you because your brother happens to be Earl of Burford, but because you are the best junior minister for the job. All right?’

‘Very much so. Thank you.’

‘Please convey to the Earl and Countess our gratitude for their cooperation. I shall, of course, write when the talks are concluded. There are to be some other guests present, I understand?’

‘Yes, an American couple by the name of Peabody. He’s in oil, I believe.’

‘They are the only ones?’

‘The only ones I know of. My niece, Geraldine, may have some friends of her own down. Why – do you think she ought to be asked to put them off?’

‘By no means. We do not want to give the impression that anything out of the ordinary is taking place there. By the way, how much do you know about your opposite number?’

‘Adler? Only that he’s been very much the power behind the throne in the Duchy in recent years.’

‘Comparatively few people know even that much. The general public have barely heard of him. Have you realised how rarely you see his picture in the papers?’

‘No, I hadn’t. But, of course, it’s quite true.’

‘He’s an American, you know.’

‘Really?’

‘Well, half-American. His mother was American and he lived there most of his life until about ten years ago. He met the present Grand Duke at Harvard and returned to the Duchy with him. Since then he’s never looked back – even though he’s reported to be a highly unconventional kind of diplomat. Apparently he’s the one man in the country who’s got all the facts necessary to conduct the negotiations at his finger tips – without even having to consult notes.’

‘Remarkable. Who is this man Felman who is accompanying him?’

‘Oh, just a young aide or secretary of some kind. We are not, at their request, laying on any official welcome. We do not even know by what means they are travelling to this country. They will make their own way to Alderley.’

The Prime Minister rose. ‘Now I must wish you luck – and assure you that if you succeed in bringing these negotiations to a satisfactory and speedy conclusion, I will not let the fact go unrecognised.’

CHAPTER THREE

Guests

‘I’d just like to see any doggone jewel thief try to lift my Carrie’s diamonds. Even this guy they call the Wraith.’ And Mr. Hiram S. Peabody looked pugnaciously up from the magazine out of which the faces of himself and his wife stared at him.

His secretary, John Evans, who had been the one to bring the magazine to him, gave a sigh. ‘I’m afraid you might get your wish, HS.’

‘Let him. I’ll be ready. My daddy didn’t make half a million bucks, and I didn’t turn it into fifty million, by backing down to cheap crooks.’

The two men were in the sitting-room of Mr. Peabody’s suite at the Savoy Hotel in London. Evans, a thin young man, with hornrimmed glasses and a small toothbrush moustache, was looking harassed. ‘The Wraith is hardly a cheap crook, sir. And I’m not suggesting you should back down to anybody.’

‘Tell me, John, how long have you been with us?’

Evans looked surprised. ‘Nearly twelve months.’

‘For the last four of those we’ve been travelling all over

Europe – Athens, Rome, Venice, Paris, and a whole lot more. All that time Mrs. Peabody has had her necklace with her. You’ve never worried about it before. Why start now?’

‘Well, for one thing, your exact movements – and the facts about the necklace – have never been so publicised in advance before.’

‘But if this Wraith character moves in society, as he’s reputed to, he doesn’t need a newspaper to tell him where the wealthy are, does he?’

‘There’s more to it than that. This magazine lays down a definite challenge. It’s not the sort of thing the Wraith will want to ignore. He’s been inactive for some time now and he’s probably ready for a comeback. This is thoroughly irresponsible journalism, if you ask me.’

‘I’m with you there. Guess I was a mite foolish to speak so freely to that reporter.’

Just then the door opened and Mrs. Peabody sailed in. A smart woman of about fifty, with a round, good-natured face, she was followed by four package-laden page boys. They put down their burdens, were lavishly tipped, and departed. Carrie Peabody turned a beaming face towards her husband. ‘Hiram, you really should have come. I’ve had a dandy morning. And I don’t suppose I’ve spent more than two thousand dollars, either.’

‘That’s swell, Carrie. Come and look at this.’ He held out the magazine to her.

Carrie took it and gave an exclamation of pleasure. ‘My, isn’t that nice? You look truly distinguished, honey.’

‘Read what it says.’

‘Read it to me, will you? Save me putting my eye-

glasses on.’ She passed the magazine back.

Peabody read aloud: ‘Mr. and Mrs. Hiram S. Peabody, who arrived in London this week on the final stages of a European tour. Mr. Peabody is the well-known Texas oil millionaire, and the owner of one of America’s largest collections of antique firearms. Mr. and Mrs. Peabody will be staying for some days at Alderley, the country seat of the Earl and Countess of Burford. His lordship is, of course, well known as the foremost collector of old weapons in England, and Mr. Peabody is anxious to inspect the Alderley collection – and to show Lord Burford one of his own prize possessions, which he recently purchased in Rome.

‘Mrs. Peabody is here seen wearing her famous diamond necklace, which is insured for five hundred thousand dollars. It is perhaps fortunate that Alderley has one of the most elaborate burglar-alarm systems in Britain. Otherwise, we feel the necklace might make an almost irresistible target for the notorious Wraith!’

‘The Wraith?’ Carrie Peabody said sharply. ‘That’s that society jewel thief, isn’t it – the one who always leaves a calling card?’

‘That’s it. A drawing of a sheeted ghost. John figures we should deposit the necklace in the bank before we go to Alderley – just to be on the safe side. What do you think?’

Mrs. Peabody shook her head firmly. ‘Oh no. Definitely not. I’ve never stayed with the English aristocracy before. Our hosts may have a title going back hundreds of years and a famous stately home full of art treasures and antiques. But they don’t have a diamond necklace worth half a million bucks. I must have something to keep Uncle

Sam's end up. I'm taking my necklace – and wearing it.'

Her husband chuckled. 'Good for you, Carrie. That's just what I figured you'd say. Something else our hosts lack, too, is a unique, personally-engraved Bergman Bayard 1910/21 semi-automatic pistol, custom-made as a gift for Tzar Nicholas II just before his assassination. I'm sure looking forward to seeing the Earl's face when I produce it.'

In the smoking-room of his club, Algernon Fotheringay was talking.

'Then, of course, next week I'm toddling off down to jolly old Alderley for a few days. You ever stayed at Alderley?'

His listener, the laziest member, and the only one who hadn't made a hasty withdrawal within moments of Algy's appearance, yawned and shook his head.

'Oh, it's an absolutely topping place. The Earl and Countess are ripping people. So's Gerry, their daughter. I met the Earl at Lord's the other day. He almost begged me to go down. They're having quite an exclusive party, and he said that it wouldn't be the same without me at all.'

'I'm sure that's true.'

'I had several other invitations outstanding, of course, including one to Cliveden. I was tempted, but when it came to making a decision, Alderley won. The grub there's ripping. The cook does a perfectly spiffing steak and kidney pie – and she's a dab hand at soufflés, too, don't you know. The only possible fly in the ointment is that a little bird tells me there are going to be a brace of foreigners there. Some Americans, too, but I don't bar Americans. No

these are a couple of *real* foreigners. Of course, if they turn out to be too hairy at the heel, one can steer clear of them. It's a pretty big place. But the danger is that Lady Burford might be tempted to dish them up some of their national dishes. I was staying once at a place in Norfolk, don't you know. Of all things they had a bally Arab staying there. A sheikh or something. Well, you know, the chief delicacy among those johnnies are sheep's eyes. Well, would you believe it – I say, old man, are you all right?'

But the laziest member was asleep.