BEHIND THE LINES George Creek

Harley, doggedly insistent, was fighting hard to keep the discussion open. "I know

she's an enemy agent."

"Unfortunately, moral certainty doesn't happen to be legal proof." The graying chief of intelligence moved restlessly in his chair. "I'm sorry, Bob, but we've gone as far as we can. Linkham's been in the Countess Marka's home as a butler for a full month now, and reports absolutely nothing of a suspicious nature. Her mail, telegrams, and cables have been put through the mill without result, and tapping the telephone has proved equally barren."

"But look how every leak traces right back to

"More guesswork. Let's admit that the countess makes a specialty of young men in key positions. Nothing very incriminating there, for so does every other hostess in Washington. And suppose that navy fool did confess he babbled to her about depth bombs.'

swore he never breathed a word about the sailing of the transports to a single soul except the

"I'm not forgetting him. Or Jennings, the state department chap But, my dear boy, granting that the lovely countess turned their heads and got them to cough up every official secret they knew or guessed, where does it leave us? Just where we started. There isn't any proof of enemy communication, not even the slightest. That's where our case falls down. Unless communication can be established, the countess stands likes to feel she is on the inside.'

we're bound to trip her up soon. We're bound

"Much more likely to get tripped up ourselves," Marka is not exactly what one would call friendless. Quite a number of senators park their feet under her table, and you know how they'd love derful. to tear us to pieces. This business of espionage is not any too popular up on the Hill, or with the press, for that matter, and if it ever got out about our tampering with her telephone and her mail, I hate to think of the hullaballoo."

"Ten days more? A week?"

"No." The square jaws clamped decisively. "I'm calling everything off this afternoon. If we were on a hot scent, Bob. I'd stick, but it's plain ing eyes took the place of words. "Promfoolish to take the chance of a senatorial investigation on nothing more than a hunch that hasn't

BACK in the autumn of 1914, when the Countess Marka first appeared in Washington, establishing herself in a most imposing mansion, there had been a measure of curious inquiry as to her antecedents. Now, however, after three years guests for a half hour on the moonof delightful and lavish hospitality, only newcomers ventured questions, and they were answered casually and vaguely.

"A Georgian, my dear. Or is it Rumanian? I can never remember the names of those crazy Balkan states. A mere child when she married. A terrible man, so they say. Drink and women, you know. Anyway, he did the handsome thing gills." by dying, leaving her a whole lot of money. Simply oodles! Hates Europe and adores America. So democratic! You must see her. Such dinners! Everybody goes there."

So thought Prof. Charles Donellan, looking down the long table at men and women whose least movement was newspaper copy. At the right of the hostess sat a famous ambassador; at her left a senator from a western state, arguing for the conscription of wealth, pausing only to toss back a lock trained to be unruly, while here and there were diplomats, generals, admirals, and dollar-a-year men, these last enviously eying the decorations that glittered on the chests of the soldiers and sailors.

"Gee!" young Donellan smiled to himself. "If they take a flashlight of this crowd I'll certainly

He had met the Countess Marka only the week before, a signal corps friend taking him to one of her teas, and while the few words given him were cordial, the dinner invitation came as a surprise. Up to date the highlights of his Washington social career had been a luncheon with his congressman and various receptions of a more or less public nature. Nice of her to have remembered him, he glowed, and when the countess, catching his glance, smiled intimately, his heart decency. skipped a beat. That the smile was no accident received proof in the drawing room.

voice spun him around to see her outstretched hand. "How gracious of you to come! And I had so hoped for a real talk. But these massshare her distaste for large dinners. "Do drop in tomorrow. Around five. I insist."

Donellan, presenting himself promptly at the appointed hour, wondered somewhat forlornly if he was to be one of a crowd, but on being led into a garden at the back he found the Countess Marka alone. The night before she had been imperial in her poise, her jewels and beauty, but now, dressed plainly and with climbing roses thick above her head, the effect was of simplicity and unisophistication.

"It is a luxury I refuse to deny myself," she said in greeting. "A quiet afternoon now and then with someone who will make me remember not last." that I have a mind."

"Thanks for the compliment," he answered, mean?" "but it carries a rather heavy obligation. What if I fail?"

You? The so-famous scientist?"

"Another case of mistaken identity," protested Donellan. "You can't mean me."

'I did not intend to embarrass," she smiled, "but if one still in his twenties is called to the The Story of Beautiful Countess Marka, Washington Hostess, and of Young Bob Harley of the Intelligence Department, Who Suspected Her of Espionage, Yet Lacked Proofs to Make His Fears Valid

shoulders completed the sentence. "And your war work. All Washington buzzes with speculation about you.'

"Now, that is plainly absurd."

"Ah. no. my friend. When a distinguished scientist is summoned by the war department and given a guarded building for his experiments, what more natural than excited gossip? But," and her slim, ringless fingers flicked reassuringly "please believe that I am not of the merely curious. As it happens, science was my own early love. Once I had a dream of taking a course at Don't forget Rappard," Harley broke in. "He the Sorbonne," and her words, trailing off into silence gave Donellan an impression of ambition thwarted by family pride and dynastic obligations.

You must tell me of your work, of the great things you are planning and doing. These military men believe that wars are fought only in the open held, but you and I, we know that the real battleground is more often the laboratory."

STIMULATED by Countess Marka's interest and intelligent questions and spurred on by his own devotion to his task, Donellan talked long and well She was right indeed when she said that as nothing more than a rich society woman who the clash of armies was not the decisive factor in modern warfare. The discovery of a new type "I know." Harley nodded uphappily. "But of gun, of a deadlier gas, of anti-submarine devices, of a more powerful motor for airplanes, of a new explosive, any one of these might well outweigh superiority of numbers and turn defeat came back the grim retort. "The Countess into victory It was along these lines that the scientists, technicians, and inventors were working and already their accomplishment was won-

> "Regular miracles," he declared enthusiastically. "How I'd love to be able to tell you about some of the things we're doing!'

> "I understand, of course." The Countess Marka's finger tips, soft as petals, dropped on his own for an instant, and then she rose swiftly "O." she murmured, throwing wide her arms. "it is thrilling. It makes one-" and her shinise me you will come again. Like this?'

It was a promise that Donellan gave joyously and kept even more gladly. In the weeks that followed he became an increasingly frequent visitor at the home of the Countess Marka, now for luncheon a deux, now for tea in the garden, and sometimes staying after other dinner drenched terrace. His open infatuation became a matter of gossip and, with the head of intelligence, a matter of concern.

"Bob," looking up from a batch of papers, he called irritably. "I hear Prof. Charles Donellan is the Countess Marka's latest victim. Hooked right through the

"Correct, sir!" Harley's tone was distinctly blithe. "Feeling runs high in many quarters. The army and navy want martial law declared, and the senate is stronger than ever for recital of his triumph. isolation."

"It's nothing to be funny about. Donellan's of meeting. "Down to the last tedious detail. doing some important work for ordnance, isn't he?

'Rather." Bending down as if afraid the walls might hear. Harley whispered briefly.

'Good Lord!" The exclamation was a groan. "I think I'll chase right on over and see the secretary of war. The damned simpleton!"

"The secretary of war? "Of course not, you ass! That fool Donellan." Protessor Donellan, called up before a less than tartful superior, flamed into resentment when informed that it might be better for the national service if he would quit regarding the home of the Countess Marka as a rest house. He was not aware he said stiffly, that he had entered into any obligation to let the war department pick his friends for him, and rather than submit to such ignominy he would turn in his resignation. Were there proofs of the lady's disloyalty, well and good, but unsubstantiated suspicions called only for reprobation from men with any sense of

And that, as the secretary of war agreed with the head of intelligence, was that. Nobody had "My dear Professor Donellan!" The golden anything on the countess except the fact that she fed short-grass senators instead of letting them perish and there would certainly be the devil to pay if the newspapers discovered that a row was meetings!" With a shrug she invited him to being made about her. Maybe it was nothing but a mare's nest, after ali, and, anyway, Donnellan had been given something to think about.

This was true enough. Donellan did have something to think about, and that night on the will be proof of your faith in me. Can you not terrare his preoccupation was so plain that the reason was soon demanded. A few stumbling evasions, and then the whole story poured forth in a flood of hot, angry words, all they said to him and what he said to them, the damned gossip

"I had the fear of it." The Countess Marka, after a moment of crushed silence, lifted painfilled eyes. "I was too happy. I knew it could

"Last?" echoed Donellan. "What do you

"You must go," she said. "We must not see each other any more. Your career-I could not

"No!" Somehow the young scientist found any gas now in use." The pride of the scientist himself in possession of her hands, and then, swept away all reticence. "One bomb, hurled swaying like a breeze blown blossom, she was in from a special gun, will destroy an entire enemy

chair of chemistry in a great university"-her only, and then she pushed him away, tenderly yet a plane, will wipe out an army. It means the end

"Please!" A whisper as soft as the fall of rose petals from the trellis. "But do not think that I am sorry, dear one. It will be sweet to remember. Always."

"Don't talk like that!" he answered sharply. 'As if you were saying good-by."

"But it is good-by." "Do you love me?" Taking her face between his hands, he looked deep into her eyes.

"Can you ask?' "Then cut out this nonsense about leaving each other." Drawing her close, he kissed her eyes, the corners of her mouth, and the softness of

"But do you not see it is hard, beloved?" Later, when they sat hand in hand, the moon an orange ball above them, she made fresh protest. "You must not talk to me of your work, for it is the great objection of your superiors, and vet, now that we "-leaning swiftly, her lips brushed his cheek-" ah, my interest is bound to be keener than ever. It is not that I am a Paul Pry, only that I do not want to be separated from you in

"Of course we'll talk about my work," scoffed Donellan. "Those fools are spy crazy, that's all. A lot of snoopers with no bigger job than making mountains out of molehills. And it isn't as if we didn't have a mail and cable censorship, the idiots! Suppose spies did discover something; what chance would they have to get it out of the country? That's what makes the whole intelligence business so ridiculous.

"But no" The Countess Marka shook her lovely head. "I will not ask even the one little question. You shall see.

N THE week that followed she held to her word, stopping Donellan's mouth with a kiss when he would have told her of his day. One night, however. Donellan came late, having been unable to attend her dinner for a Pittsburgh steel man, an

exultant Donellan, demanding an audience for the

am 1 tired!"

"It's finished!" he cried, almost in the moment

"Finished?" The Countess Marka clapped her

hands joyously. "Then we will celebrate." Ring-

ing a bell, she took the magnum of champagne

when it had been brought and poured a brimming

glass with her own hand. Twice again she filled

'Now!" Leading him to a couch, she made

'Satisfied?" Donellan laughed excitedly.

him lie down and tucked pillows under his head.

darling, it's the biggest thing yet." A boyish

enthusiasm colored his tone, and in it was also a

by his side. "I know I shouldn't ask, but I can't

help it. All week I have said to myself. You

must make no question.' But it has hurt, dear

one. Hurt terribly. I hate being out of the most

important part of your life, having a door shut in

took her in hercely possessive arms. "Warning

me against you, as though we weren't in love with

each other. Daring to insinuate you might be-

to be told." The dark head raised proudly. "It

see how it has shamed me to be doubted?

poison gas. That's what I've been doing."

of their own choosing. Remember that."

came through dry lips-"is it very deadly?

"Poison gas!"

Those damned idiots!" Donellan, half rising,

There you have the real reason why I want

"I understand," he answered softly. "Of

course it must have hurt. I am a fool not to have

seen it before." Swiftly, impetuously, he drew

her closer. "It's a gas, Marka. A brand new

"I know." Donellan nodded in quick percep-

"And this discovery of yours"—the question

"It has seventy-two times the killing power of

tion of her horror, and his face went somber

my face as though I were a stranger."

Tell me," she implored, dropping on her knees

You are satisfied with the result? Yes?

distinct touch of boyish brag.

'That's enough," he protested laughingly

it, but Donellan waved the fourth away.

don't want to be carried home, you know.'



paused a long mo-

ment to put her arms

insistent knocking a the front door. Irresolution and alarm in every

annihilation." Getting to his feet, he poured a

"Your superiors?" Her voice was flat, lacking

"They haven't had the chance as yet. Only

ironed out the last difficulty an hour ago." Reach-

ing into his coat, he drew forth a bulky envelope.

"You have it with vou?" Her alarm was

instant. "But is it prudent? Are you not afraid

"Don't tell me you're one of those spy maniacs,

Donellan jeered, and now a definite thickness of

tongue blurred his speech "I'd like to see some-

You must go home at once," she insisted,

more than ever white of face. "Come, I will let

you out myself." Disregarding his protests, she

pushed him from the room, but at parting she

"There she is. The last 'i' dotted, the last 't'

its usual rich color. "They are delighted?"

glass of wine and gulped it greedily.

line of her figure, she hurried down 'Who is it?" she asked, ear close to the panel.

"Open the door." It was the voice of Donellan, Whoo!" He expelled his breath noisily. "And hoarse and imperative, and as he thrust in she started back at the sight of the wild eyes. "The envelope! Did you find it?"

"The envelope?" Hands at her breast, she echoed the words sickly, incredulously.

"I must have dropped it in your room." Turning, he leaped up the stairs three at a time, and when she entered it was to find him throwing pillows from the couch and digging desperate fingers into every recess. Like a madman he moved the furniture and raised the rugs, crawling about on hands and knees, the Countess Marka following helplessly, agonizedly,

But you had it when you left," she declared "That word doesn't half express it. Marka at last. "I saw it. Look through your pockets

> No use," muttered Donellan, ghastly with despair. "I've torn my clothes to pieces already." "Outside, then? On the pavement?'

"I had only gone a block when I missed it," he answered dully. "And I went over every inch lan's laugh was as bitter as his face. "It's nothof the ground."

Then—then "-her twisting hands tore at one another-" someone must have picked it up." "That's the only explanation My God!" he

cried whisperingly. "O, my God!" "Don't," she pleaded brokenly. "Don't! It is not as if it were irreparable. You have your notes, your calculations All can be reproduced.'

"And what of the original?" he demanded harshly. "If it falls into enemy hands I have doomed my country to defeat and destruction. A horror of destruction.'

Her arms reached out to the bowed head and a foot raised to go to him, but, halting as if in obedience to some inner command, she turned to stone. slow tears washing her loveliness from her face. To himself Donellan muttered words she could not catch, but in his eyes, suddenly lifted,

the Countess Marka saw a stark resolve take form. "Charles!" She sprang as she screamed, but the automatic cracked before she could stay his "But it isn't as if we were the ones that began hand, and the body, crumpling, slumping, fell face it. We are merely fighting back with a weapon down and was still. At first she stooped, but drew back with a strangling, tearing cry. Unable to wrench her stare away, she crouched, unmoving, frozen, and only stirred at the sound of a and stumbled drunkenly across the room, catching at chairs.

his arms, her lips against his own. For a moment division. Two or three containers, dropped from . By a perceptible, painful effort of will she

poured a glass of wine drained it, and then, her convulsive trembling somewhat quieted, she unlocked the bottom drawer of the escritoire and slowly drew out a telephone. Twice the stricken woman tried for speech before the stiff lips did her bidding, and the voice itself was scarce more

"Come," she breathed into the mouthpiece. "At once. No, no! Come at once, I tell you." Face pressed against the window pane, the of the war. Marka. Either instant surrender or Countess Marka kept her back to the still figure, She skirted the far walls as she left the room.

"What's up?" The tall, fair haired man who entered at her side made no pretense of hiding his anger and alarm. "It is madness for me to come here at this hour."

'It would have been madness for you to stay away. Look!" And she pointed to the huddle on the floor until then hidden from him by the

You have killed him?" The chill blue eyes went hot with rage. "O, you fool!

"He killed himself," she answered levelly. "It was as we thought. He was working on a poison gas deadly beyond belief. He finished tonight and brought the formula with him here. I took body try to get it away from me," he boasted, and the envelope from his pocket as we parted at the laughed foolishly as he slipped the envelope into door.'

"You have it?" Fiercely eager, he sprang to his feet. "Colossal, Marka! Colossal! Give it to me. A pouch leaves tomorrow," he exulted. "What luck! What incredible luck! It means a fortune for us.'

"And what of me? And "-she gestured shudderingly-"that?

"Call the police the minute I leave. Your story is perfectly simple and straightforward. A lovesick idiot who has been pursuing you for weeks. Tonight you told him that his annoying attentions must cease, and he shot himself." Snapping the instructions impatiently he reached out his hand. "The envelope? Where is it?"

CROSSING to the fireplace, her movements those of an automaton, the countess pressed a projection in the oak mantelpiece, and a panel in the upper wall swung open. The man followed close, eyes avid, but as he took the bulging envelope, darting fingers snatched it from his grasp, "Excuse me," warned a mocking voice, "but this happens to be my property.'

For a moment the two stood paralyzed, then spun to see Donellan standing beside them with a revolver in his hand, showing no sign of any deadly wound. The Countess Marka, mouth working spasmodically, eyes mad with terror, uttered no sound, but her companion fell back with a startled curse.

"Sorry to disappoint you," continued Donellan, his tone faintly jeering, "but I made a rotten shot. Missed myself completely." Backing to the window, automatic still leveled, he threw up the sash and called out: "All right, Bob. Come on in. That," he explained politely, "is Captain Harley of intelligence. He has a key I gave him."

Harley, entering the room, whistled softly at the tableau that met his gaze. "So that's the OT five minutes way you worked it. The secretary of a neutral legation." he said to Donellan, flicking a thumb at fore the Countess the tall, fair-haired man. "Slipped his stuff into Marka, in her cham- a diplomatic pouch, and a confederate at the other ber heard a sound of end slipped it out. That right?" he inquired Unaffected, Harley picked up the telephone and examined it interestedly. "Her own private installation, too. No wonder our tapping didn't get

"There's the cache for the secret documents," interrupted Donellan, pointing to the open panel. 'Maybe you can find something that will be

'I'll say so." Harley after absorbed inspection of a sheaf of papers, looked up triumphantly "A code book, and orders that seem to go back as far as 1914. They must have planted her here the minute the war broke out over there Well." and his manner turned brisk, "I reckon that concludes the evening's entertainment. You are now at liberty to go, my dear baron but be sure you head directly for the legation. A couple of men are waiting outside, and they're apt to get preved if you start off at a tangent. We'll be calling on vour minister tomorrow. And you," he said addressing the Countess Marka, "if I may advise, will do well to stay right here until a decision has been reached in your case."

"Give her back the envelope. Harley." Doneling but stuff I copied from a chemistry book. As it happens," and now he whipped the broken woman with mockery. "I'm working on a high explosive. Not poison gas at all."

For a moment the Countess Marka implored him with her eyes, bloodless lips moving soundlessly pitcously, but without another glance Donellan swung on his heel and was gone.

"Good work, Harley Some coup!" The head of intelligence leaped from his chair at the end of the story and gave his aid a rousing clap on the back. "You were right, and I was wrong. As usual, I'm afraid," he muttered ruefully "But how the devil did you ever happen to hit on

'We went to college together," explained Harley, "and I happened to remember he was our best actor in amateur theatricals."

'I'll say he's an actor." Unreserved admiration colored the tone. "I can't give him a medal, unfortunately, but he certainly rates a load of thanks Call him on the telephone and get him

"No use. He won't come."

"Won't come?

"No, sir." Harley's usual blitheness had been low, monotonous whimpering. Finding it was her missing throughout the interview, and now a own, she pressed both hands against her mouth definite shadow darkened the merry face. "He said for all of us to go to hell and he hoped to God he never sees any of us again."

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