

# BEHIND THE LINES

By  
George Creel

"IF YOU'D only give me a little more time," 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 her!"

"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?"

"Don't forget Rappard," Harley broke in. "He swore he never breathed a word about the sailing of the transports to a single soul except the countess."

"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 as nothing more than a rich society woman who likes to feel she is on the inside."

"I know," Harley nodded unhappily. "But we're bound to trip her up soon. We're bound to, sir!"

"Much more likely to get tripped up ourselves," came back the grim retort. "The Countess 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 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 hullabaloo."

"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 foolish to take the chance of a senatorial investigation on nothing more than a hunch that hasn't worked out."

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 of 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 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 eyeing 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 buy one."

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 reception 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 skipped a beat. That the smile was no accident received proof in the drawing room.

"My dear Professor Donellan!" The golden 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 mass-meetings!" With a shrug she invited him to share 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 unostentatiousness.

## 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

chair of chemistry in a great university"—her 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 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 field, but you and I, we know that the real battleground is more often the laboratory."

"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 shining eyes took the place of words. "Promise 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 or tea, now for tea in the garden, and sometimes staying after other dinner guests for a half hour on the moon-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 gills."

"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 isolation."

"It's nothing to be funny about. Donellan's 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." Professor Donellan, called up before a less than tactful 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 decency.

And that, as the secretary of war agreed with the head of intelligence, was that. Nobody had 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 being made about her. Maybe it was nothing but a mare's nest, after all, and, anyway, Donellan had been given something to think about.

This was true enough. Donellan did have something to think about, and that night on the terrace 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 hounds.

"I had the fear of it." The Countess Marka, after a moment of crushed silence, lifted pained eyes. "I was too happy. I knew it could not last."

"Last?" echoed Donellan. "What do you mean?"

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

"No!" Somehow the young scientist found himself in possession of her hands, and then, swaying like a breeze-blown blossom, she was in his arms, her lips against his own. For a moment

only, and then she pushed him away, tenderly yet imperatively.

"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?"

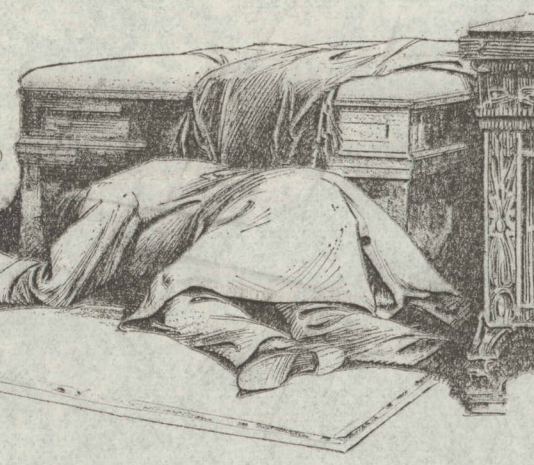
"Then cut out this nonsense about leaving each other." Drawing her close, he kissed her eyes, the corners of her mouth, and the softness of her throat.

"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 yet, now that we're—leaving 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 anything."

"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."

IN 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 recital of his triumph.

"It's finished!" he cried, almost in the moment of meeting. "Down to the last tedious detail. Who!" He expelled his breath noisily. "And am I tired!"

"Finished?" The Countess Marka clapped her hands joyously. "Then we will celebrate." Ringing 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 it, but Donellan waved the fourth away.

"That's enough," he protested laughingly. "I don't want to be carried home, you know."

"Now!" Leading him to a couch, she made him lie down and tucked pillows under his head. "You are satisfied with the result? Yes?"

"Satisfied?" Donellan laughed excitedly. "That word doesn't half express it. Marka darling, it's the biggest thing yet." A boyish enthusiasm colored his tone, and in it was also a distinct touch of boyish brag.

"Tell me," she implored, dropping on her knees 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 my face as though I were a stranger."

"Those damned idiots!" Donellan, half rising, took her in fiercely possessive arms. "Warning me against you, as though we weren't in love with each other. Daring to insinuate you might betray me!"

"There you have the real reason why I want to be told." The dark head raised proudly. "It will be proof of your faith in me. Can you not see how it has shamed me to be doubted?"

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

"Poison gas?"

"I know." Donellan nodded in quick perception of her horror, and his face went somber. "But it isn't as if we were the ones that began it. We are merely fighting back with a weapon of their own choosing. Remember that."

"And this discovery of yours"—the question came through dry lips—"is it very deadly?"

"It has seventy-two times the killing power of any gas now in use." The pride of the scientist swept away all reticence. "One bomb, hurled from a special gun, will destroy an entire enemy division. Two or three containers, dropped from

a plane, will wipe out an army. It means the end of the war, Marka. Either instant surrender or annihilation." Getting to his feet, he poured a glass of wine and gulped it greedily.

"Your superiors?" Her voice was flat, lacking its usual rich color. "They are delighted?"

"They haven't had the chance as yet. Only ironed out the last difficulty an hour ago." Reaching into his coat, he drew forth a bulky envelope. "There she is. The last 'i' dotted, the last 't' crossed."

"You have it with you?" Her alarm was instant. "But is it prudent? Are you not afraid that—"

"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 somebody try to get it away from me," he boasted, and laughed foolishly as he slipped the envelope into a side pocket.

"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 paused a long moment to put her arms about him, a passion of tenderness in the embrace. "Now go," she whispered.

"Tomorrow?" he called back.

"Only if you have slept long and well."

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 way you worked it. The secretary of a neutral legation," he said to Donellan, flicking a thumb at the tall, fair-haired man. "Slipped his stuff into a diplomatic pouch, and a confederate at the other end slipped it out. That right?" he inquired affably, but a savage snarl was his only response. Unaffected, Harley picked up the telephone and examined it interestedly. "Her own private installation, too. No wonder our tapping didn't let anywhere."

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

"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 planned 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 peeved if you start off at a tangent. We'll be calling on your 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." Donellan's laugh was as bitter as his face. "It's nothing 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 pitifully, 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 Donellan?"

"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 over."

"No use. He won't come."

"Won't come?"

"No, sir." Harley's usual blitheness had been missing throughout the interview, and now a 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."

By a perceptible, painful effort of will she