

The Safety of an Empire.

By J. MCRTON LEWIS.

VERULAM and I were seated in the dining-room of our little flat. We had just returned from a fortnight in the country. For nearly a month we had been idle; the Secret Service had not required us.

Verulam fretted at the enforced idleness; his passion for music, which he had indulged to the utmost, did not prevent him suffering from ennui.

The mantle of peace had spread over Europe; a diminutive war in the Balkans had been suppressed in its infancy, and no storm-clouds threatened. It was idyllic, perhaps, but it did not please Verulam.

"It is unnatural," he grumbled to me. Half an hour later events proved the truth of his words.

The gas had just been lit when our maid entered with a message.

A gleam lit up my chief's face as he tore open the envelope. It was from Lord Farquharson, the Foreign Secretary. Verulam read it though, and then wrote a hasty reply.

"I am going to the Foreign Office," he said, when we were alone. "We are wanted again."

He always coupled our names together—indeed, we seldom acted independently. In a couple of hours he had returned. "We must pack our bags at once," he said. "We catch the midnight boat-train from Liverpool Street."

"Where for?" I asked. "Villeshadt—the millennium has not yet come."

There was a lightness in his step, an exuberance about his manner as he preceded me into the bedroom.

In half an hour we were ready. Verulam stood in our dining-room and lighted a cigar.

"Ten o'clock," he said; "we shall have time to go to Vernon's and get some dinner."

Over the meal he was unusually silent; indeed, he hardly spoke a word until we were seated in our carriage and the train had commenced to steam out of Liverpool Street.

He drew up the windows, lighted a cigarette, after passing me his case, then settled himself on the seat.

"I told you," he said, "that the outlook was too calm. The Foreign Office have had a code letter from Mauville Scott at Magenna, saying that information has come to his ears which leads him to suppose that there is a coalition amongst certain of the Powers, and that the end in view is a war against England." Verulam smiled. "We are to be annihilated, and our possessions divided amongst them. The Emperor of Sannubia is the cause of all the trouble. Sannubia has a growing population, and the Emperor's eyes are set upon India. In three days' time there is a secret conference at Magenna; representatives of the acting Powers will be present—"

Verulam paused. "And we are to find out their plans." "Why not Manville Scott?" I asked. "Because he is dead. He was found in one of the back streets of Magenna yesterday, stabbed."

"Because he knew too much?" Verulam flicked the ash off his cigarette.

"Yes, and we must find out ten times more than he ever knew." The first rays of a July morning were breaking as we embarked at Harwich. Sixteen hours later we drew alongside the quay at Villeshadt.

"We have only an hour in which to catch the train to Magenna," said Verulam. "We must have breakfast on board."

The streets of Villeshadt were breaking into life as we drove through them. Once our cab was stopped by a herd of cattle en route for the market. Another time Verulam drew my attention to the figure of a priest whom we overtook; he was a tall, handsome man with iron-grey hair, which curled away from his forehead.

"That is Father Adolphe Leinemann," said Verulam. "I hope he has not seen me, for we have met before—"

"Not as friends," I suggested. Verulam smiled.

"He is the cleverest man in Sannubia,

and the most dangerous. If he wanted to, he could tell us all that we have come to find out."

Leaning back in the shadow of the carriage, Verulam watched Father Leinemann.

"A priest who meddles with politics is a creation of the Devil," he observed.

On reaching the station I hurried to the booking-office and procured a couple of first-class tickets for Magenna, while Verulam had a compartment reserved.

The train was a slow one, taking twenty hours to accomplish the journey. Throughout the whole time Verulam fretted and fumed. The responsibility of the expedition worried him.

"We have exactly twenty-eight hours," he said, as we drew into Magenna station. "By eight o'clock to-morrow night we must have got the information and be ready to leave."

"Have you any plans?" I asked.

"None."

He beckoned to the driver of a carriage and directed him to drive to a certain hotel in the Koln Strasse. It was a small hotel where we had stopped before. The proprietor knew Verulam, and he was a man who could be trusted to keep silence.

He bowed gravely as we entered the hall.

"You will occupy your usual rooms, m'sieu?" he said to Verulam.

"Yes," replied my chief, "and I will have a strong cup of tea prepared at once."

The manager bowed, and Verulam smiled as he hurried away.

"It is a good thing that Gustave is French," he said. "I always trust a Frenchman in Sannubia, just as I trust a Sannubian in France."

We walked upstairs behind the porter bearing our luggage.

Entering the sitting-room, Verulam flung himself down in an easy-chair before the open window which looked upon the Koln Strasse.

For an hour he sat there in silence, only moving once when the tea was brought in. He motioned to me to pour it out.

"No—no milk, thanks," he said, in response to my inquiries.

When he rose he went into the bedroom which had been reserved for our use.

How long he was absent I do not know; it was only a few minutes when the door opened and a typical Sannubian farmer entered.

I rose to expostulate with him, when the countryman smiled, and, despite the disguise, I recognised Verulam.

"To-day is the free day for going over the Chamber of Deputies," he explained, "and I take a great interest in the Chamber of Deputies."

I looked at him for a further explanation.

"It is there they are holding this conclave to-morrow," he said.

"You do not want me to go with you?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"I want you to remain here. We have been recognised. Kruezel has half a dozen men watching this hotel. I do not know when I shall see you again. But I shall manage to get into communication with you. We can act better apart. You here; I—wherever fate takes me." He held out his hand.

"Good luck!" he said, with a cheery laugh. The next moment he had vanished from the room.

All that night, until long past midnight, I sat up waiting for him. I went to bed, leaving strict instructions that any message was to be brought to me at once.

At breakfast time next morning I had heard nothing. All the day, until nearly tea-time, I sat in our sitting-room, smoking, and reading, doing anything I could to pass away the time. The hours dragged wearily by; every passing step I fancied was a message, or perhaps Verulam himself.

Whilst I was sitting down to a solitary tea, wondering what had happened to him, a waiter entered bearing a letter. It was from Verulam, scribbled on a half-sheet of paper:

Am succeeding beyond my expectations. Go as soon as you get this to the Winter Gardens. Leave the hotel

as openly as possible, so that anyone watching it may see you and have time to follow. In the gardens, by the central fountain, you will see a Frenchman looking at the statue of Venus. He will be there about seven. He is a tall, fair man, with a cast in his left eye. Engage him in conversation for a few minutes, on some pretext or other, but be careful; he will not know you. If you can pretend to make some notes whilst you are with him, so much the better. Then drive to the station and book a couple of seats in the night express to Villeshadt. Have our bags taken to the station. I will meet you there, just before the train starts.

H. R. VERULAM.

It was six o'clock when I had finished tea. I waited half an hour, then walked leisurely to the Winter Gardens, and took up a position where I could see the central fountain and the statue to which Verulam had referred.

The gardens were almost deserted. A few minutes before seven I saw a man walk up to the statue and stand looking at it.

Coming nearer, I saw he had a cast in his left eye.

Walking up to him, I inquired the way to the Koln Strasse.

The Frenchman turned sharply round. "I am sorry," he said; "I cannot direct you. I am stranger here myself."

For a few moments I engaged him in conversation, and we fell to discussing the gardens and the statue.

"It is an exquisite piece of work," I said. Taking a note-book from my pocket, I commenced a rough sketch.

A little later he left me. He had not gone many yards when I saw a couple of men emerge from behind a bush and follow him.

As they passed by me one of them touched me on the shoulder.

"You are not allowed to make drawings here," he said. "I must ask you for that book."

"And why?" I asked.

He was dressed in the blue dress of the Sannubian gendarmierie.

"It is against the rules," he said. "You must give me that book."

I handed it to him with a shrug of the shoulders. There was nothing in it except the rough drawing I had made.

He looked through the pages quickly, glanced at me in surprise, then hurried away to overtake his companion.

Leaving the Winter Gardens, I hailed a carriage, drove to the station, and took the two tickets for Villeshadt.

Then I hurried back to the hotel, packed our bags, and had them sent as Verulam had ordered.

It was then half-past seven, and the train started at ten o'clock. Sitting down before the window of our sitting-room, I fell to wondering what part the unknown Frenchman had played in Verulam's plan.

At nine o'clock I paid our bill, and was politely bowed out of the hotel by the dapper little Frenchman, Gustave.

Walking leisurely to the station, I had a compartment reserved, knowing that Verulam would have a lot to say to me on the journey, and would want to travel alone.

Barely a minute before the train started he came hurrying along the platform.

He jumped into the carriage with a smile.

"You have succeeded?" I said, as the train began to move.

"Yes," he replied, and drew out his cigar-case; "but I am dog-tired. I have not had a second's sleep since I saw you yesterday."

"Where have you been?"

"In one of the pieces of armour which adorn the Chamber of Deputies," he replied with a smile. "The armour which once bore Ludwig the Great bore an insignificant member of His Majesty's Government last night and the major portion of to-day. And, my goodness! I would not go through last night again—the Chamber of Horrors in Baker Street is nothing in comparison. I couldn't leave the confounded armour to stretch myself the whole night through, because the Chamber is patrolled every hour or so."

"And how did you get in?"

"For an hour after sunset the hall is left unguarded. I managed to hide whilst the people were being cleared out. The rest was easy. One of the Secret Service men came this morning in disguise, and I handed your letter to him through the vizor. You have done your part. I see!"

"Yes, but the Frenchman?" I asked. Verulam smiled.

"An innocent pawn in the game. I

saw when I left yesterday that our hotel was watched. And all the way to the Chamber of Deputies I was trying to think out how I could divert suspicion from ourselves. Fate threw the Frenchman in my path. He is an innocent little man who had come on a holiday to see Magenna. I advised him to see the Winter Gardens, and especially the statue of Venus. Apparently he took my advice."

"He did," I replied.

"I expect he has been arrested. I only hope he has been able to prove his innocence. I hate to cause anyone inconvenience; but the safety of the British Empire may rest on what we do during the next three days. I have sent Lord Farquharson a long code telegram to his private address, so that it may reach him safely, and asked him to send the Queen to meet us in the roads at Villeshadt to-morrow night."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Gibraltar. If the Emperor of Sannubia has his way, Gibraltar will be blown sky-high on Sunday night. To-day is Tuesday, so we have plenty of time. There is a weak spot in the foundation of the Rock, and a small Sannubian torpedo-boat will leave Villeshadt on Thursday with a consignment of powder large enough to blow the British Isles out of the water. They will creep in under cover of night—it is only a very small vessel—and lay a mine."

"And you are going to prevent it?"

"That all depends on what Lord Farquharson says in his reply to my telegram. Captain Willoughby will bring the answer on the Queen."

Verulam threw his cigar out of the window and lay down full length on the seat.

"I have done a good day's work, and I am tired," he said with a smile. He closed his eyes and in a few minutes was fast asleep.

We had been travelling for nearly ten hours when he awoke. He looked out of the window at the landscape bathed with the early sun, and yawned.

"Ah! a few minutes and we shall be at Gotten. How confoundedly slow this train is!"

"You know this line well?" I said.

"Thanks to the number of times the Emperor of Sannubia enforces me to traverse it every year. It will be a good thing for England when that illustrious monarch is gathered to his forefathers."

Eight hours later we steamed into Villeshadt station. Verulam glanced at the clock, the hands of which pointed to midday.

"At any rate, we are punctual," he said. "To-night, at ten o'clock the Queen should be outside the harbour."

"Then we must hire a boat to go out to her!" I observed.

"I made all the arrangements from Magenna," answered Verulam in his quiet way. "So there remains nothing for us to do but rest—"

We walked through the streets to an hotel. Verulam chose one in a quiet little street near the market-place.

During his career experience had taught him the safest hotels for a member of the Secret Service to frequent, and they were generally the most unpretentious.

The landlord greeted him as an old customer, one to whom deference was due.

In less than an hour from our arrival at Villeshadt we were sitting down to a luncheon of cold chicken.

When it was over, Verulam flung himself down on a couch.

"You must call me when it is time for us to start," he said.

"I had no need to. At half-past eight he opened his eyes, then rose.

"We had better be going," he said.

The quay was deserted save for a couple of men who stood near the custom house; a few yards' deviation from our path took us past them; then Verulam walked to the end of the jetty and whistled softly.

In answer a quickly-veiled green light showed itself some twenty feet beneath us.

"Is that you, Branson?" said Verulam in a low voice.

"Yes, sir," came the answer.

"Stand by—we are coming down!" Verulam turned to me. "We must be careful going down the ladder. It runs perpendicularly down the side. Follow me." He stepped over the side, and in a few seconds disappeared from sight.

I saw him enter the boat, and then followed.

"Has the Queen arrived yet?" he asked, as we sat in the stern of the boat.

"Haven't seen her yet."