

ton Detective Agency," he returned. "They will tell you—I am all I represent myself to be. My name's Nagle."

Julia started. The man before her was the detective whom the county authorities had secured to work on the Marbridge case. He was the sleuth who had ascertained the innocence of Stimson and his woman pal.

"Very well, Mr. Nagle," she said. "Tell Mr. Walters I shall be at Tilton late this afternoon."

Nagle touched his hat.

"You've reached a wise decision, Miss Wharton," he commented. "I shall remain here until you take a train."

As Julia crossed the bridge over the tracks to the down-town side, she fancied Nagle's eyes were upon her back.

All the way to the Dolphin she kept turning over in her mind the morning's events: Spears's reception of her, and its dramatic conclusion; her almost ludicrous pursuit by Nagle, and its amazing climax.

What did they portend for her? Were the police cognizant that she had been with Marbridge on the fatal night? Had Marbridge fully recovered his memory, and so informed them? Or had they merely suspected it?

Had they discovered that she was being hounded by Spears and his satellites, and were they going to offer her their protection against the blackmailers? But in that event they would not have sought her out in the privacy of her own home, instead of setting a Pinkerton man on her trail.

To all appearances, they seemed to connect her, in some fashion, with the shooting of Marbridge. But, if so, why had they not arrested her? Had it been due to a lack of sufficient evidence?

And now, were the police going to corner her in an office and administer what Tom Lansdowne had called the third degree, to force her to tell them all that they imagined she knew?

Perhaps it had been her father's wealth and position which had saved, and would in future save her, from brutal treatment at their hands. The longer Julia thought about it, the more firmly she became convinced that this hypothesis accounted for their delay in approaching her.

How much or how little they actually knew about her brief, but unfortunate, association with Marbridge, Julia, of course, had not the faintest idea; or where they had learned it. But she reflected that she must keep them in absolute ignorance of the machinations of William Vaughan Spears and his gang. If Walters and Young discovered that she was being hounded by blackmailers, they might derive from that fact the last link in the chain of evidence pointing to her as the woman they sought.

As to what Nagle had deduced from shadowing her, she was unable to hazard a single guess; she hoped he had deduced nothing damaging to herself. She would have given a good deal to find out what his thoughts were when he discovered that the woman in black was in reality the daughter of Barclay Wharton.

At all costs, she must keep from Philip Paget, she told herself grimly, the knowledge that the police had summoned her to Tilton. He would glory in that information.

It would make him a good deal bolder. He would then be certain that his surmises about her movements on Tuesday night had a basis in fact, and, believing that the county authorities would be inclined to deal diplomatically with a well-known heiress, he would make his importunities for money more odious than ever.

By the time she had reached the Dolphin, she had abandoned trying to solve the dilemma. Following a hasty lunch, she caught an early train to a station near Pinecrest, in her arms a bundle containing the black dress, veil and hat—she might need them again—and, safely tucked away in a pocket of her skirt, the article which the *Gadfly* had threatened to publish.

The butler intercepted her in the hallway of the Wharton mansion.

"Miss Julia," he said, "the gentleman you spoke to me about called again this morning."

Julia wheeled nervously.

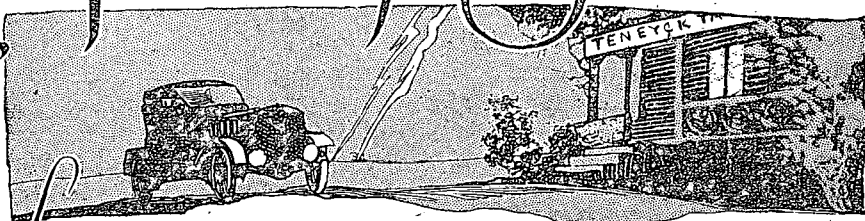
"At what time, John?"

"About ten o'clock."

"What did he have to say?"

"He said, Miss Julia—"

In Fear of Scandal



by Reese James and Laura King

Authors of "In the Blue Limousine."

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED.

JULIA WHARTON, daughter of the wealthy Barclay Wharton, resident of Pinecrest, in North Jersey, loses her way in her roadster, and around midnight stops in a rainstorm at a strange roadhouse, the Ten Eyck Tavern. Here she encounters Reginald Marbridge, whom she has met once at a reception, and he induces her to have some coffee with him while waiting for the storm to let up. Then he directs her on her way and after fancying that she had been pursued by another motorcar she reaches home safely. Next day she is horrified to read in the papers that Marbridge has been shot, is lying unconscious at St. Paul's Hospital in New York, and that detectives are seeking the strange young woman with whom he was seen supping at the Ten Eyck just before the shooting. More, Tom Lansdowne, her best man friend, has been retained by Mrs. Marbridge in her suit for divorce, and meantime one Philip Paget visits Julia and sends her a thinly disguised account of her experience at the Ten Eyck, a proof of an article to appear in the *Social Gadfly*. Realizing this is blackmail, Julia puts on mourning and calls on the editor, who attempts to lift her veil. Fleeing, she senses she is followed by a man who finally tells her that Sheriff Walters and County Prosecutor Young, of Tilton, New Jersey, want to have a talk with her as soon as possible.

CHAPTER XIV.

JOHN GROWS APPREHENSIVE.

JULIA gazed at the man affrightedly. "What do they want to see me about?" she stammered.

He sidled closer.

"I'd rather not tell you here," he responded in an undertone, glancing significantly at the elevator-man, who was regarding them askance as they descended. "And I don't want you to be seen much in my company, Miss Wharton. If you'll promise me to turn up at Sheriff Walters's office, in Tilton, some time this afternoon, I won't trouble you any longer."

"But—but—" Julia began to protest as the elevator billowed to a standstill at the bottom.

The lift-man pulled open the door with a

clang, and Julia and the stranger stepped out once more into the subway.

"I strongly advise you to come," he said. "It will be to your best interests, Miss Wharton."

Was there a covert menace in the man's words?

Of a sudden Julia feared, with a sinking heart, that he might be another member of the *Gadfly* gang, who, by impersonating a detective, was attempting to surprise her into a damaging admission of some sort.

"How do I know you are what you pretend to be?" she demanded of the man. "Can you prove you are in Sheriff Walters's employ?"

He drew back his coat and displayed a nickel-plated badge, which gleamed dully in the lights of the subway.

"If you doubt my word, call up Pinker-

This story began in *The Argosy* for October.

ravine that was profoundly dark. The ravine led straight to the river Mendel. Through the trees beyond the trooper could catch the occasional gleam of moonlit water. Holland lay down yonder, hidden by mist-clad woods. By following the river it was hardly a half-hour's walk to neutral Sluis.

But the deadly barrier lay between!

The uhlan knew perfectly well where he was. He was nearing the wire entanglements whereby with diabolical ingenuity his military leaders had solved the problem of holding a maximum of frontier with a minimum of men. For one hundred and fifty miles the Belgian border was fenced so effectively that from Maastricht to the North Sea the labyrinth was studded with the carcasses of wild and domestic animals.

The soldier clambered to the lip of the ravine and for a long moment peered into the uncertain blackness below, then shaking his head, he turned abruptly to the right, determined to follow the barrier until either he came upon the woman or reached a sentry-box where he could report.

And as he strode through the forest, a pensive warning hummed in his ears. He had heard it many times before.

Just then the thought: "Are my wits wandering?" suddenly received confirmation; for directly he perceived a ghostly countenance, an uncanny face with burning eyeballs that glared up at him from the undergrowth. He rubbed his eyes. He felt sure that it was purely imaginary—this spectral gleam from the shade, yet on the instant the sight of it chilled the uhlan.

"*Wer da? Wer da?*" he gasped.

There was no response. The glimmer vanished. He shrugged irritably.

"*Himmel!*" he growled. "My nerve is broken!"

Of course, he assured himself, it was but a fantasy born of his extreme exhaustion. He had only to approach, reach forward and the thing would dissolve in thin air.

The soldier stepped forward, bent his trembling knees—

"*Ach!*" he snarled, leaping back.

The phantom did not dissolve on his approach but very distinctly wriggled along the ground and vanished at his touch. He heard the whimper of a child not far away.

Again he sprang forward in the darkness.

"By all the fiends of perdition!" he hissed. "I'll throttle you where you crawl, you wooden-legged Dutch sniper!"

But the soldier only clawed at the empty air. As he spoke he tripped over the cripple's crutches and fell heavily—fell fairly upon the singing wires—the diabolically hidden living wires that vibrated melodiously with a spark emitting voltage sufficient to electrocute a regiment.

The uhlan flung his three-fingered fist above his head. With an awful suddenness the hawklike eyes glazed and set in a petrified glare, while a scream of anguish swiftly dwindled into a despairing gurgle and died in his throat.

And Limping Hans, awe-stricken by that frozen countenance, shivered with pity.

"*Ach*, poor man!" he groaned. "I was not his executioner. It was Providence who mixed Three Fingers' mit my crutches when I tried to crawl away."

Shuddering, he turned and disappeared in the dark ravine.

"Onkle Hans! I here—here!" Suddenly it came out of the shadows ahead. It was a child's voice that piped, weary and very sleepy. The outlaw came to himself.

"Du liddle darlin'!" he murmured, and turned in the direction of the voice.

A woman was sitting there on the trunk of a tree. As he drew near she bared her teeth and for an instant stared into his pallid face. Then she sprang forward.

"Give me the joy of seeing the *Boche* dead at my feet!" she hissed.

"*Nein—nein*, Marie! Your account was closed. Der wrath of der goot *Gott* will always overtake der wicked. Nefer forgit dat," he whispered solemnly. "Come. Now we're safe beyond der deadfall we stay until der war was done. Don'd you hear me? Now come to your man in Sluis, where you can be yust so happy what you like."

The obsession of infinite bitterness that encompassed Marie Vermel fell away like a black cloud before the sun. She covered her face with her hands and choked back the sobs that shook her. Then the three derelicts turned and fled—fled like frightened wildlings, out of war's hideous night into the sunlight of freedom's dawn.

crossed the room to her dreaming child. She dropped on her knees beside the wooden box. Once more the dimpled face blossomed in the smiles of blissful innocence. It was the father's face, the father's smile.

In her simple code the honor of an absent father should be upheld by the mother, even unto death. Not to him alone was it her sacred obligation, but to this unfolding flower of their love she owed a debt that only a mother's undying fealty could fully satisfy. Naught could cancel that debt but the utter extinction of this barbarian, who knew no law save the might of frightfulness over right. Joyfully she could have killed the savage while he slept. One thrust of his saber was enough. Why hesitate?

Thus she pondered long while the candle burned low and the fitful embers whitened and grew cold. At last she tiptoed to the chimney-corner and drew the uhlan's saber from its scabbard. It was razor-edged. Without a sound she crept to the side of the sleeping trooper. She paused; she smiled; but her smile was ghastly and terrible to see. She poised the steel above the sleeper. Her fingers clasped the weapon convulsively. "Last night you held the mastery! This night it is I—"

At that instant came a break in her absorption. It was a rude awakening. Even in the act of striking, an iron hand clutched her wrist, and in her ear the voice of Limping Hans whispered:

"Wait, woman, wait! Leave Three Fingers to me. You was not his executioner. Come!"

Instinctively, before she had time for thought, she yielded to him; yielded calmly, very calmly. She looked at the soldier, profoundly slumberous; she looked at her sleeping child; she looked at Limping Hans, still grasping the soldier's blade and eying her dubiously; she glimpsed all without a word, without a tear. Only the lines of her face were tense and upon her ashen features the outlaw read a nameless something which told him that she was ready for the journey, no matter what might threaten.

"Goot!" he whispered. "Now, den, give me liddle Victor."

But already the mother had slung the unawakened child across her own stout

shoulders, just as the Indian mother carries her little one.

"No!" she whispered.

"Oh, well; den keep close mit me," he commanded softly, leading the way. "Der coast was clear yust now. Dem sentry fellers was so sleepy dey snored on their feet when I came by."

"So, when a little before midnight the three-fingered trooper sat up bewildered, and stared around, he did not find the wife of Victor Vermel awaiting him. He was dumb with amazement as the meaning of it dawned slowly. He staggered to his feet and groped his way to the chimney-corner. His weapons were gone. Abruptly the drowsy one got a grip of his wits.

"Ah-ha! Curse the harpy!" he roared. "*Donnerwetter!* A nice mess this!" He paused and tightly clasped his throbbing temples. "She can't be far away," he thought. "*Wunder-bar!* I must be off!"

Whereupon he got into his jacket and boots, picked his uncertain steps to the sheep-shed, which stood out dimly in the moonlight, mounted his horse and, still muttering curses, plunged into the forest.

The soldier's head buzzed like a beehive. His exhausted brain seemed hopeless. He scarcely remembered his orders. What were they? He had to report for patrol duty at midnight. The two hours' truancy he had allowed himself were over, and more, but the fact did not occur to him.

Time stopped when one slept. Yes. First he had got to recover his weapons and then report to the captain of the guard, who would be none the wiser of his indiscretion.

Again and again he halted his horse and listened. The crackle of rotten undergrowth, the sound of a stealthy footfall, the feeble appeal of a woman's voice—that longed-for music. But all the trooper could hear was the restless souging of the wind through the tree-tops—all save the monotonous thud of his horse's hoofs.

"*Himmel!* I might go on this way clear into Holland and every border-runner on the way would hear me coming. *Gott!* What folly."

The uhlan slid out of the saddle and stumbled ahead on foot. At length he struck a bit of a path which sloped into a

"Gracious!" soliloquized the outlaw, lowering his weapon. "Nefer once could I see dat *Boche's* face. I'll stick close by. Maybe Marie needs der cripple," and he hobbled into the seclusion of 'a near-by clump of trees.

At once the newcomer lighted the candle and held it over the rude couch where Marie Vermel lay beside her child, apparently in deep slumber. For a moment he stood and ruminated, studying the motionless woman as an owl might eye a mouse.

"*Himmel!*" he grumbled. "A hungry stomach knows no conscience, ha; then, too, women adore the masterful man. Yoo-hoo, Marie. Wake up!" and he shook her.

The woman sat up. The flare of the candle flickered in her slumberous eyes. She rubbed them dreamily.

"Ah-ha! Asleep, and fully dressed!" exclaimed the trooper. "Come, *madame*, some food and drink then I, too, will sleep, for I am dead tired."

He pulled off his jacket and boots and irritably threw them on a rickety bunk that stood along another side of the room.

Without a word the woman arose, renewed the smoldering embers with fresh fuel and hung the pot in the flame.

The soldier drew up a stool and leaned heavily against the table.

"Well, *mon ami*," he drawled drowsily, "what have you been doing to-day?" Then, seeing the remnants of a feast; he added lightly: "Entertaining good company?"

With true feminine discrimination she said simply:

"Pardon, *monsieur*. The lunch? It is nothing. One of your comrades has honored me with his company."

The uhlan beamed upon her while he greedily devoured the remainder of the mutation, mumbling meanwhile:

"Our friend shall share his food and shelter with me. But this roast, *madame*, is cold. In the name of hospitality bring me something hot."

She brought him a generous bowl of steaming broth.

"At your service, *monsieur*," she said with a cheerful curtsy, serving a fresh loaf of bread for the broth. "How fares it, soldier? All over for the day?"

"*Himmel*—no; curse the luck! On guard duty again at midnight after riding all day with despatches."

"What, *monsieur*, must you do others' duty?"

"Doubled patrol this night. Limping Hans, the border runner, is in the neighborhood. To-night he must be brought in—living or dead."

Marie Vermel smiled, but her smile was not pleasant to see.

"Ah-ha! You must take exceedingly good care of yourself, *monsieur*."

"And you, little one. Aren't you afraid all alone here at night?"

"Not a bit," she replied, still smiling. "Why should I be afraid?"

"That's right; why, indeed?" he agreed, swelling visibly. "Why should you be afraid with me to look after your safety? And now, my angel, be good enough to pour for me the rest of that rare wine, after which I will snatch a couple of hours' sleep. I need it. No sleep last night, you know."

He drank the wine lingeringly, lovingly.

"*Gott!*" he grunted. "That warms me up like a sweetheart's hug. Ah, little one, no grand lady could receive her lover in nicer fashion. Yes, I shall take very good care of you, *Mme. Vermel*."

He peered amorously into his companion's comely face, his eyes of a hawk glittering. Involuntarily she shrank from the touch of his hand.

"And, by the way," he babbled on, "my captain desires to be presented. I shall bring him—maybe to-morrow. You will be greatly honored. My captain is only happy when he is killing men or loving women. Heigho!" The soldier vented a last yawn. "I must get a little sleep. At eleven, *madame*, call me without fail." Whereat he deposited himself comfortably beside his coat and boots.

"Very good, *monsieur*. It shall be as you command." As the woman spoke she took the quilt from her own bed and tucked it snugly around him. Already he was snoring. "In two hours I will call you, of a certainty; never fear," she muttered. "Until then take your utmost rest, my brave defender."

Marie turned away from the sleeper and

terposed with an emphasis that seemed to forbid a refusal, "once for all I tell you about it. Many times haf I crossed over mit runaway prisoners; for much money, too. I was not afraid of dem *Boche* traps. Listen close, den I go.

"Der river Mendel was not more as half a mile away. It flows straight into Holland. I knew der ground, every inch, for miles around. At midnight der patrol was changed. Dem old, sleepy Landsturmiers was always late. Well, den, just before midnight I come mit your door und knock very soft. All was darkness—inside und out. So? Very goot. Liddle Victor sleeps all der time und I pack him mit my back till he vake up in Holland. Maybe on hands and knees we go; oh, ya; you said it."

On her little chair at the cripple's very elbow Marie Vermel hung breathless on the low-spoken words, her brilliant eyes dilating fitfully between solicitude, perplexity, vague uncertainty; but with every glimmer of doubt succeeded by the wistful tenderness of genuine affection for the blunt-speaking, young-old cripple—that melting compassion which good women ever feel for those who suffer.

The woman's head dropped and she faltered:

"I—I don't know; God alone knows what awaits. Starvation, oppression, insult—perhaps death—here; or freedom, home and happiness there." With that the apathetic endurance that so long had sustained her gave way to blinding tears. "Oh, oh, my darling, my child!" she sobbed. "Oh, little son of Victor Vermel! What—what is to become of us?"

"Hush, dere now, now," awkwardly comforted the cripple. "Oh, well! Now don't you cry; don't cry, Marie. You hear what I said. Gracious! Dem tears upsetted Onkel Hans. Sh! You vake der baby. Listen, woman! If you don't cry to-night I bring you und liddle Victor safe mit your man in Sluis."

"No, no, good friend! Not this night!"

She looked around fearfully. What did the woman expect to hear or see?

"Come along, Marie; ya, this very night. Why you so scared?" He paused.

His lean face darkened as he growled angrily: "What! You won't come mit me to your lawful husband?"

"Our Lady of Sorrows!" she murmured.

Involuntarily she stiffened in her chair. Her face blanched.

"Hark!" she cautioned faintly. "Did you not hear it? There—again! Good friend; go!"

The pad-pad of horse-hoofs on soggy leaves sounded more and more distinctly. The outlaw held up his hand.

"Sh!" he whispered. "Quick! Der crutches."

She silently obeyed. He slung the gun over his shoulder and hobbled to the sleeping child. Stooping, he softly kissed the upturned cheek.

"Now der light I put oud," he murmured; then to the trembling woman at the door he whispered: "Remember, Marie, yust before midnight I come."

"My faith! You come to your death!"

"Well, yust der same I come. Maybe you change your mind. It costs you nodding to come mit me. Victor Vermel was a Belgian soldier; he was my comrade; he was my liddle Victor's fader—don'd forgit dat. *Ach!*" he muttered, "I got to bring Marie mit her man!" Still soliloquizing, Limping Hans stumped out of the hut.

These reflections had barely flitted through the outlaw's brain when he glimpsed an object moving under the trees. A horseman was coming straight toward him out of the forest. Lurking in the shadow of the hut Limping Hans was sufficiently near to distinguish his spiked helmet, but he could not make out the rider's features.

"*Ach!* Der uhlan comes mit some mischief," muttered the sniper, taking careful aim, "but I wait till his fingers I can count. If dats Three Fingers—*Gott!*" He smothered a fierce imprecation.

On they came, horse and rider, with drooping heads, as if ending a long and wearisome journey. They crossed the clearing and, the unguided horse unerringly finding Marie Vermel's door, halted. The soldier threw down his bridle-rein, stolidly dropped to the ground and without knocking entered.

not bombard the roof from over one's head, and yet, sometimes at night I feel—well, my friend, you heard the boy!”

“Ya, I know. Dat was Three Fingers who comes in midoud knocking—the same sojer feller what spoiled my leg. *Ach!* I nefer forgit Three Fingers so long what I live!”

“Hark!” The woman suddenly straightened in her chair. “Sh!” she whispered, “I thought I heard a footfall.”

She arose and went to the window. The wind was getting up, blowing cumulous clouds of mist into shreds and scattering the thin wisps over the dark horizon, while almost in the zenith a pale moon cast its fitful radiance upon the lonely hut. After a moment the woman resumed her seat. Evidently her ears had deceived her.

The outlaw turned to her. A gleam of suspicion lighted his keen eyes. He gazed intently upon her anxious face as if he would have read there some sign of an attempt to practise upon his credulity. At length he bluntly said:

“I have seen your husband, Victor Vermel. He was at Sluis, yust over der border, mit dem oder interned Belgians in Holland—my lofely Holland!”

The woman nodded incredulously and widened her round eyes. She clasped and unclasped her hands across her breast convulsively. Save for three brief letters, not since the first week of the war had she received authentic tidings of her husband.

Limping Hans did not wait for an answer, but went on a little hastily, as if afraid of some awkward questioning:

“Ya, oder goot men were dere—all mit experience of der bullets, too; be sure of dat. But of dem Belgians none return to dis side until ends der war; nor can dey write; but, *Gott* be praised! dem Dutchmen was goot neighbors all. More like guests as prisoners our men was treated.”

“You say you met him?”

“*Nein*. I saw him, but he was far away mit der barracks compound. If in dat compound I get, I, too, stay till ends der war.”

“And my Victor wasn’t killed at Liege or Louvain or along der Yser, where so many of our people take their long rest?

Gott! You are quite sure it was my Victor?”

“Ya. Dere was but one Victor Vermel in der whole world. How he could be killed so many times—at Liege, Louvain, along the Yser?”

“And he sent me no message, neither can he come. Ah-h! One might as well be widowed.” She drew a long breath and half-closed her eyes. “No,” she declared. “Never will my husband come back to Belgium; never will there be another Belgium. Ah, my friend, sometimes before I go to sleep at night I pray that my little one and I may die in peace rather than live longer in misery; then, when I awaken, I fall on my knees and ask that soon—soon it all may end and once more my soldier-husband may come to me.”

Limping Hans passed a brawny hand across his forehead as if he would banish the dark frown that still lowered upon his brow. His eyes pierced her through and through. He seemed to be asking himself if he could trust her when he questioned:

“Marie, will you come mit me to your man in Holland?”

“And cross that dreadful dead line? Ah-h! Think of my child!”

“I know der safe way over. Poof! It was nodding mit Onkel Hans!”

“Many have been killed by those heartless deadfalls, no one knows how many; slaughtered after a few seconds of awful torture that must seem an eternity—ach! spitted and cooked like partridges in snares that are never to be found twice in the same place, so cunningly are they hidden—”

“Ya. Poor Schneider!”

“It would be madness to risk it, and yet— My friend, I would go on hands and knees from here to Sluis to be again with my Victor.”

“So? Maybe we haf to go mit hands und knees.”

“For eight years we lived together—my man and I. Together we toiled; together we prospered; together we fought when the invaders came. Nothing troubled us until then. We troubled nobody. Since—ah—since! Starvation for my little one and for me—” She paused and wiped her cheek.

“Now, den, Marie,” Limping Hans in-