

POPEAU INTERVENES

Marie Belloc Lowndes

Table of Contents

<u>POPEAU INTERVENES</u>	1
<u>Marie Belloc Lowndes</u>	2
<u>I</u>	3
<u>II</u>	4
<u>III</u>	7
<u>IV</u>	10

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- I
 - II
 - III
 - IV
-

POPEAU INTERVENES

I

"THIS is dear, delightful Paris! Paris, which I love; Paris where I have always been so happy with Bob. It's foolish of me to feel depressed—I've nothing to be depressed about——"

Little Lady Waverton could hear her voiceless thoughts as she walked through the vast grey Gare du Nord on this hot, airless July night. She formed one of a party of three: the other two being her husband, Lord Waverton, and the beautiful Russian émigrée, Countess Filenska. The three friends had suddenly determined to take a little jaunt to Paris "on the cheap," without maids or valets. It had really been the Countess's idea. She had drawn a delightful picture of an old hostelry on the left bank of the Seine called the Hotel Paragon.

Perhaps the journey had tired the charming, over-refined, delicate woman her friends called Gracie Waverton. Yet this morning she had felt as well and happy as she ever did feel, for she was not a strong woman, and for some time past she had felt that she and her Bob, whom in her quiet, reserved way she loved deeply, were drifting apart. Like all very rich men, Lord Waverton had a dozen ways of killing time in which his wife could play no part. Still, according to modern ideas they were a happy couple.

It did not take long for the autobus to glide across Paris at this time of night, and when they did turn into the quiet cul de sac, across the end of which was the superb eighteenth-century mansion which had been the town palace of the Dukes of Paragon, Lady Waverton lost her vague feeling of despondency. There was something so cheery, as well as truly welcoming, about mine host and his wife. She was enchanted, too, with the high-ceilinged, panelled rooms, which had been reserved for their party, and which overlooked a lovely garden.

POPEAU INTERVENES

II

"Robert! It is too exquisite! You are the most generous man in the world!"

Olga Filenska was gazing at an open white velvet-lined jewel-case containing a superb emerald pendant.

"I'm glad you like it, darling——" Lord Waverton seized her hand and made her put what it contained on the table near which they both stood. Then he clasped her in his arms, and their lips met and clung together.

The secret lovers were standing in the centre of the large, barely-furnished salon which belonged to the private suite, and they felt secure from sudden surprise by the high screen which masked the door.

At last he released her, and then he moodily exclaimed: "Why did you make me bring my wife? It spoils everything, and makes me feel such a cad!"

"Remember my reputation. It is all I have left of my vanished treasures!"

He caught her to him again, and once more kissed her long and thirstily. "Oh, how I love you!" he said in a strangled whisper. "There's nothing, nothing, nothing I wouldn't do to have you for ever as my own!"

"Is that true?" she asked, with a searching look.

"Haven't I offered to give up everything, and make a bolt? It's you who refuse!"

"Your wife," she murmured, in a low, bitter tone, "would never divorce you. She thinks it wicked."

"If I'm willing to give up my country, and everything I care for, for love of you, why shouldn't you do as much for me?"

But to that she made no answer.

What would they both have felt had it suddenly been revealed to them that their every word had been overheard, each passionate gesture witnessed, by an invisible listener and watcher? Yet such was the strange and almost incredible fact. Hercules Popeau, but lately retired on a pension from the C.I.D. branch of the French Police, had long made the Hotel Paragon his home, and his comfortable study lay to the right of the stately drawing-room which terminated Lord and Lady Waverton's suite.

He had lived in the old house for quite a long time before he had discovered—with annoyance rather than satisfaction—that just behind the arm-chair in which he usually sat, and cleverly concealed in the wainscoting, was a slanting sliding panel which enabled him both to hear and to see everything that went on in the next room. This sinister "Judas," as it was well called, dated from the eighteenth century, when a diseased inquisitiveness was the outstanding peculiarity of both the great and the humble, even the King spending his leisure in reading copies of the love-letters, intercepted in the post, of those of his faithful subjects who were known to him.

Hercules Popeau had been closely connected with the British Army during the great war, and he remembered that Lord Waverton had performed an act of signal valour at Beaumont Hamel. That fact had so far interested him in the three tourists as to have caused him to watch the party while they were at dinner the evening following their arrival in Paris. Popeau was very human, and he had taken a liking to fragile-looking Lady Waverton, and a dislike to her lovely friend. The scene he had just witnessed confirmed his judgment of the Countess.

"I wish Gracie were not here!" exclaimed Lord Waverton.

"She is—how you call it?—too much thinking of herself to think of us," was the confident answer.

There came a look of discomfort and shame over his face. "You women are such damn good actresses! Then you think she's really ill this morning?"

"Ill is a big word. Still she is willing to see a doctor. It is fortunate that I know a very good Paris physician. He will be here very soon. But she wants us to start for Versailles now, even before he comes." "All right, I'll go and get ready."

When she believed herself alone, Countess Filenska walked across to the long mirror between the two windows and stood looking at herself there, in the bright light dispassionately.

Hercules Popeau gazed at her, absorbed. What a beautiful woman! While very dark, she had no touch of swarthinness. Her oval face, indeed, had the luminosity of a white petal. She had had the courage to remain unshingled, and the Frenchman, faithful to far-away memories of youth, visioned the glorious mantle her tightly coiled hair must form when unbound. Her figure, at once slender and rounded, was completely revealed, as is the fashion to-day, by her plain black dress. A Russian? Hercules Popeau shook his head. Her southern type of

POPEAU INTERVENES

beauty was unmistakable. He had known an Athenian woman very like this Countess Filenska.

It had been the hidden watcher's lifelong business to guess the innermost thoughts of men and women. But he felt he had no clue as to what was making this beautiful "dark lady" smile in so inscrutable a way to herself.

At last she turned round and left the room, and at once her unseen admirer, and, yes, judge, closed the tiny slit in the panelled wall. What a curious, romantic, and, yes sinister page he had just turned in the great Book of Life! A page of a not uncommon story; that of a beautiful, unscrupulous woman playing the part of serpent in a modern Garden of Eden.

It was clear that Lord Waverton was infatuated with this lovely creature, but there had been no touch of genuine passion in her voice, or even in her apparently eager response to his ardour.

Hercules Popeau had a copy of the latest "Who's Who?" on his writing-table. Eagerly he opened the section containing the letter W. Yes, here was the entry:

"Waverton, Robert Hinchfield, of Liddersfield, York. Second Baron."

And then there came back to him the knowledge that this man's father had been one of the greatest of Victorian millionaires. No wonder he had been able to present the woman he loved in secret with that magnificent jewel!

There came the sounds of a motor drawing up under the huge porte-cochère. Rising, the Frenchman went quickly over to the open window on his right.

Yes, there was a big car, the best money could hire, with his lordship standing by the bonnet. He looked the ideal Milord of French fancy, being a tall, broad man with fair hair, having in it a touch of red. He was obviously impatient and ill at ease. But he had not long to wait. The Countess stepped out into the courtyard. Even in her close motor bonnet she looked entrancingly lovely.

Popeau took a step backward as there floated up the voices of the two people whose secret he now shared.

"Did you see Gracie?" asked Lord Waverton, abruptly.

"Yes, and she was so sweet and kind! She begs us not to hurry back. She is quite looking forward to the visit of my old friend, Dr. Scorpion."

Scorpion? A curious name—not a happy name—for a medical man. Hercules Popeau had once known a doctor of the name.

As the motor rolled out on to the boulevard, he went back to his desk, and taking up the speaking tube, he whistled down it. "Madame Colbec? I have something important to say to you!"

He heard the quick answer, "At your service always, Monsieur."

"A doctor is coming to see Lady Waverton this morning. Before he sees Miladi, show him yourself into my bedroom."

There came a surprised: "Do you feel ill, Monsieur?"

"I am not very well; and I have reason to think this doctor is an old friend of mine. But I do not wish Dr. Scorpion to know that he is not being shown straight into the bedroom of his English lady patient. Have I made myself clear?"

He heard her quick word of assent. Madame Colbec was as sharp as a needle, and she had once had reason to be profoundly grateful to Hercules Popeau. He could trust her absolutely; sometimes he called her, by way of a joke, "Madame Discretion."

Hercules Popeau always did everything in what he called to himself an artistic—an Englishman would have said a thorough—way. Thus, before getting into his bed he entirely undressed and drew together the curtains of his bedroom windows. Thus anyone coming into the room from the sunny corridor outside would feel in darkness, while to one whose eyes were already accustomed to the dim light, everything would be perfectly clear.

He had already been in bed half an hour, when at last the door opened, and he heard Madame Colbec say in a smooth tone, "Entrez, Monsieur le Docteur." His heart gave a leap, for the slight individual who had just been shown into the darkened room was undoubtedly his Scorpion—the man he had known twenty years ago. The doctor had been about thirty when he had got into the very serious trouble which had brought him into touch with the then Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department, so he must now be fifty.

With a sardonic look on his powerful face Hercules Popeau watched his visitor grope forward a little uncertainly.

"Miladi," he said at last, in an ill-assured tone, "I will ask your permission to draw the curtains a little?"

POPEAU INTERVENES

Otherwise I cannot see you!"

He put his hat on a chair as he spoke, and then he went towards the nearest window, and pulled apart the curtains, letting in a stream of light; he turned towards the bed—

"It is a long time since we have met, my good doctor."

For a moment Popeau thought that the man who stood stock–still staring at him, as if petrified, was about to fall down in a faint. And a feeling of regret, almost of shame, came over him, for he was a kindly man, at having played the other such a trick.

But the visitor made a great effort to regain his composure, and at last, with a certain show of valour, he exclaimed: "I have been shown into the wrong room. I am here to see a lady who is ill."

"That is so," said Popeau quietly. "But I, too, feel ill, and hearing that you had been called to this hotel, I thought I would see you first, to ask your advice. I confess I wondered if you were the Dr. Scorpion I had once known?"

To the unfortunate man who stood in the middle of the large room there was a terrible edge of irony in the voice that uttered those quiet words.

"Of course, I know that in the old days you were more accustomed to diagnose the state of an ailing woman than that of a man," went on the ex–police chief pitilessly.

And then he changed his tone. "Come, come!" he exclaimed. "I have no right to go back to the past! Draw a chair close up to my bed, and tell me how you have got on all these years?"

With obvious reluctance the doctor complied with this almost command. "I have now been in very respectable practice for some time." He waited a moment, then he added bitterly. "Can you wonder that seeing you gave me a moment of great discomfort, reminding me of certain errors of my youth for which I have bitterly repented?"

"I am glad to hear you have repented," said Popeau quietly.

In a clearer, calmer tone Scorpion went on, "I made a good marriage; I have a sweet wife and two excellent children."

"Good! Good!"

Hercules Popeau held out his hand. The other took it. And then the detective felt a sensation of violent recoil, for it was as if the hand he held was a dead hand. It was icy cold—an infallible sign of shock. The ex–police chief felt a touch of sharp remorse. He had nothing in him of the feline human being who likes to play with a man or a woman as a big cat plays with a mouse.

POPEAU INTERVENES

III

Lord and Lady Waverton and their friend had arrived on a Sunday night, and Dr. Scorpion's first visit to the hotel had been paid on the Tuesday morning. As the week went on Lady Waverton, while still keeping to her room, became convalescent, though the doctor recommended that her ladyship should go on being careful till the day that she was to leave Paris, that is on the Saturday.

On the Friday morning Madame Colbec herself brought up Hercules Popeau's petit déjeuner. She looked anxious and worried. "Miladi is worse," she said abruptly. "I have already telephoned for the doctor. The countess is greatly distressed! I must hurry, as I have to serve an English breakfast for two in the next room at once."

A few minutes later Popeau, peeping through the slanting "Judas," sat watching Lord Waverton and the Countess Filenska. After having exchanged a long, passionate embrace they had sat down, but the excellent omelette prepared by Madame Colbec remained untasted. It was almost as if they were quarrelling, for the first words uttered by the Englishman were:

"I don't see why you should go to England to-day——"

She said firmly, "It is imperative that I should see the man who is going to Russia on Saturday."

"Well, then, if you go——" he had the grace to look ashamed, "I don't see why I shouldn't go, too! Gracie hates to have me about her when she's ill. I can't help thinking that the sensible thing to do would be to get a trained nurse over from England."

The Countess looked violently disturbed. She was pouring some black coffee into her cup, and Popeau saw that the beautiful hand trembled.

"You cannot do better than leave Gracie in the French doctor's hands," she explained. "He is wonderful!"

There came a knock at the door, and Doctor Scorpion came in.

"I am, indeed, sorry," he began, "to hear that my patient is worse——" but the Countess cut him short. "Let us go to her!" she exclaimed, and together they left the room

A few moments later the Countess came back.

"Gracie is better," she observed. "She will probably be able to go home next Tuesday or Wednesday."

She put her hand caressingly through Lord Waverton's arm. "I will go over to England to-day at four o'clock, and I will be back here by to-morrow night. What do you say of that for devotion?"

Her lover's face cleared. "Does that mean——"

"That I am a foolish woman? That I do not like being away from you even for quite a little while? Yes, it does!"

She submitted—the unseen watcher thought with a touch of impatience—to his ardent caresses. Suddenly the door behind the screen opened. The two sprang apart and, as the doctor edged his way in, Lord Waverton left the room.

Scorpion looked at the Countess fixedly. "Is it true that Madame la Comtesse is going away to England to-day?"

"I shall return to Paris to-morrow," she said evasively.

"I have thought matters over, and I refuse to go on with the treatment before payment, or part payment, is made," he said firmly.

"Come, don't be unreasonable!" she exclaimed.

He answered at once, in a fierce, surly tone, "I cannot risk my head unless it is made worth my while. Cannot you invent something which requires at once an advance from the Milord of, say " he hesitated, then slowly uttered the words, "fifty thousand francs?"

Popeau expected to hear a cry of protest, but the beautiful woman who now stood close to the ugly, clever-looking little doctor opened her hand-bag and said coldly, "I have something here which is worth a great deal more than fifty thousand francs," and she handed him the jewel-case which contained the emerald pendant.

Scorpion opened the case. He looked at the gorgeous stone with glistening, avid eyes. Slowly he shut the jewel-case and put it in his pocket.

"Then you will keep your promise?"

There was a long pause. The doctor produced a loose leaved prescription block. "I will fulfil my promise," he

POPEAU INTERVENES

said firmly, "if you will write on this sheet of paper what I dictate." He handed her a fountain pen:

"My dear friend and doctor,—I beg you to accept the jewel I am sending you, a square-cut emerald, which is my own property to dispose of, in consideration of the great care and kindness you showed me when I was so extremely ill last year.—Your ever grateful, OLGA FILENSKA.

She hesitated for what seemed, both to the invisible watcher and to her accomplice, a long time. But at last she wrote out the words he had dictated.

Scorpion put the sheet of paper in the pocket where already reposed the jewel-case.

"C'est entendu," he exclaimed, and turned towards the door. A moment later Hercules Popeau telephoned to Madame Colbec: "Make some pretext to keep the doctor till I come down!"

He took out of a drawer a large sheet of notepaper headed Prefecture de Police, Paris. On it he wrote as follows.

"Madame,—You are in grave danger. The man you are employing to rid you of your rival is affiliated to the French Police. He has revealed your plot. An affidavit sworn to by him will reach Scotland Yard in the course of to-morrow. A copy of the sworn statement of Dr. Scorpion will also be laid before Lord Waverton, who will be summoned to appear as a witness at the extradition proceedings. An admirer of your beauty thinks it kind to warn you that you will be well advised to break your journey to-day. The value of the jewel which I enclose is eight hundred pounds sterling."

He put the letter in his drawer, and then he ran downstairs.

Scorpion was chatting to Madame Colbec in her tiny office. He looked surprised and disturbed when he saw Hercules Popeau.

"How is your patient, my good Scorpion?"

"Going on fairly," said the other hesitatingly. "Though not well enough to leave the hotel to-morrow, as she hoped to do."

"I have a word to say to you." Popeau's voice had become cold and serious. "We will go upstairs to my rooms."

Scorpion stumbled up the staircase of the grand old house. He was too frightened to know what he was doing, or where he was going. When he reached the landing the other man took hold of his shoulder and pushed him through the door of his study. Then he locked the door, and turning, faced his abject visitor:

"The first thing I ask you to do is to put on the table the emerald which has just been given you as the price of blood."

"The emerald? What do you mean?" he faltered.

"You know well what I mean!"

A look of rage came over the livid face. "Does that woman dare to call me a thief?" he exclaimed. "See what she herself wrote when she gave me this jewel!" And with a shaking hand he drew a folded sheet of paper from his pocket.

"I want that, too."

Scorpion sank down on a chair, and the ex-police chief came and stood over him. "Listen carefully to what I am going to say, Scorpion."

The wretched man looked up, his eyes full of terror, while Popeau went on, tonelessly:

"Once more I am going to allow you to escape the fate which is your due. Last time it was for the sake of your mother. This time it will be for the sake of two women—your good wife, and the unfortunate lady whom you, or perhaps I ought to say your temptress and accomplice, had doomed to a hideous death by poison "

Scorpion stared up at him without speaking; his face had gone the colour of chalk.

"This morning you dictated a letter to your accomplice Scorpion, and I now dictate to you the following confession."

"I, Victor Scorpion, confess to having entered into a conspiracy with a woman I know under the name of the Countess Filenska, to bring about the death of Lady Waverton on——"

Popeau looked fixedly at Scorpion. "What day was she to die?" he asked.

Scorpion stared at his tormentor. He did not, he felt he could not, answer.

At last he said in a whimpering voice, "I did not mean the poor Miladi to die."

"But what day did the Countess expect her to die?"

POPEAU INTERVENES

Popeau had to bend down to hear the words:

Next Monday."

"Write down the proposal put to you."

"I was to receive five hundred pounds sterling on the day of her death, and within six months of the Countess's marriage to Lord Waverton ten thousand pounds sterling, whatever the rate of exchange might be at the time.—(Signed) VICTOR ALGER SCORPION.

"Do allow me to put down that I did not intend to carry out this infamous plan?" he asked pleadingly.

Popeau hesitated. "No," he said, "I will not allow you to do that. But this I will promise. Within a few hours from now you yourself shall do what you wish with that piece of paper."

"And now," he went on, "you can make yourself at home in these two rooms and you will have the use of my bathroom beyond." He smiled genially. "You may also telephone home to your wife, saying you will not be home till late."

POPEAU INTERVENES

IV

The woman whom some of her English friends called "the dark lady" had settled herself very comfortably in a first-class compartment of the Paris-Calais express. She was quite alone, for in July there are few travellers to England. So she was rather taken aback when a big man, dressed in a pale grey alpaca suit, suddenly thrust his body and head through the door leading into the corridor.

"Have I the honour of speaking to the Countess Filenska?" he said.

She hesitated a moment. Then she saw that he held in his hand a bulky envelope, and involuntarily she smiled. From dear, foolish Waverton of course! A billet doux, accompanied, no doubt, by some delightful gift.

She held out her hand, "I am the Countess Filenska," she said pleasantly.

"I have been told to give you this, Madame. I am glad I have had the good fortune to arrive before the train started."

He lifted his hat and walked off.

The train started; slowly she broke the seal of the big envelope. Yes, there was a jewel case! Eagerly she opened it, and then, came mingled disappointment and surprise, for it only contained the emerald which she had given that morning to Scorpion.

With a feeling of sudden apprehension she unfolded the piece of note paper which accompanied it. Slowly, with eyes dilated with terror, she read the terrible words written there.

Could she leap out of the train? No, it was moving too quickly. She could not afford to risk an accident. Feverishly she counted over her money. Yes, she had enough, amply enough, to break her journey at Calais, and go on to——? After a moment's deep thought she uttered aloud the word "Berlin."

Late that same afternoon Madame Colbec opened the door of Hercules Popeau's study.

"Milord Waverton," she murmured in a nervous tone.

The Englishman walked in. He looked uncomfortable even a little suspicious. He felt anxious. Was his wife worse, and was the man who had asked to see him a specialist?

"I have a painful, as well as a serious, communication to make to your lordship," began Hercules Popeau in slow, deliberate tones. "I belong to the French Criminal Investigation Department, and a most sinister fact has just been brought to our notice."

He looked fixedly—it was a long, searching glance—into the other man's bewildered face. And then he felt a thrill of genuine relief. Lord Waverton, so much was clear, was quite unconscious of the horrible plot which had had for object that of ridding him of his wife.

"The fact brought to our notice," went on Popeau quietly, "concerns Lady Waverton."

"My wife? Impossible!"

Lord Waverton drew himself up to his full height. He looked angry, as well as incredulous.

"Lady Waverton," went on the other, "possesses a terrible enemy."

"I assure you," said Lord Waverton coldly, "that the French police have made some absurd mistake. My wife is the best of women, kindness itself to all those with whom she comes in contact. I may have enemies; she has none.

"Lady Waverton has an enemy," said Popeau positively. "And what is more, that enemy intended to compass her death, and, indeed, nearly succeeded in doing so."

The Englishman stared at the Frenchman. He felt as if he was confronting a lunatic.

"This enemy of Lady Waverton's laid her plans—for it is a woman—very cleverly," said Popeau gravely. "She discovered in this city of Paris a man who will do anything for money. That man is a doctor, and for what appeared to him a sufficient consideration he undertook to poison her ladyship."

He waited a moment, then added in an almost casual tone: "Lady Waverton's death was to have occurred next Monday."

"What!" exclaimed Lord Waverton, in a horror-stricken voice, "do you mean the little French doctor who has been attending my wife——"

"Yes," said Hercules Popeau stolidly. "Dr. Scorpion had undertaken to bring about what would have appeared to everybody here, in the Hotel Paragon, a natural death."

POPEAU INTERVENES

Lord Waverton covered his face with his hands.

"Most fortunately for you, my lord, this infamous fellow—countryman of mine grew suddenly afraid, and made a full confession of the hideous plot. He brought with him a written proof, as well as a valuable emerald, which was part of the price the would-be murderess was willing to pay the man she intended should be the actual murderer."

The speaker turned away, for he desired to spare the unhappy man, whose sudden quick, deep breathing showed the awful effect those last words had had on him.

The rest of the blood money—ten thousand pounds sterling—was to be paid when Scorpion's temptress became the second wife of a wealthy English peer."

Lord Waverton gave a strangled cry.

Popeau took out of his pocket the two documents, the deed of gift written out by the Countess and the confession signed by Scorpion himself.

"I will ask you to read these through," he said. And then, after Lord Waverton had read Scorpion's confession he opened the door of the bedroom.

"Come here a moment," he called out, "I have done with that paper I asked you to sign, and I am ready to give it you back the moment you have informed this gentleman that you wrote it. Say in English, 'I, Scorpion, swear that all that I wrote down here is true, and that this is my signature.'"

The man repeated the words in a faltering voice.

Popeau handed him his confession. "Take this piece of paper," he observed, "down into the courtyard; there set a light to it, and watch it burn; then go home and thank the good God and your good wife that you have not begun the long road which leads to the Devil's Island."

After Scorpion had left the room, Hercules Popeau turned to the Englishman. "I trust," he said, "that your lordship will not think it impertinent if I ask you to listen to me for yet another two or three minutes."

Lord Waverton bent his head. His face had gone grey under its tan.

"I am old enough to be your father, and this would I say to you, and I trust that you will take it in good part. There was a time, not long ago, when a man in your position was guarded by high invisible barriers from any terrible dangers. Those barriers are no longer——"

There came a knock at the door. A telegram was handed to Lord Waverton. He tore open the envelope.

"An unexpected chance has come my way of getting back to Russia and of recovering some of my lost property. Good-bye, dear friends. Thank you both for your goodness to an unhappy woman."

As Lord Waverton handed the two slips of paper to his new friend, Hercules Popeau looked much relieved.

"All you have to do," he exclaimed, "is to show Miladi this telegram, and then to give her—how do you say it in English?—a good kiss on her sweet face!"