

The Blonde Countess

by Herbert O. Yardley

READ THIS FIRST:
 POOR JOEL CARTER is secretary to NATHANIEL GREENLEAF, head of the U. S. "Black Chamber," where much of the real wartime secret work was done. She conceals her true identity by assuming the identity of a Scandinavian aristocrat, although she discards the Countess, Joel meets CAPTAIN ANDRE DUVAL, friend of the Countess, accused of being a spy. Duval shoots himself after a confession to his espionage. A servant, JENNIFER, who has been listening with eavesdropping ears, steals away. Next day the Countess asks to work with Greenleaf at the "Black Chamber." He suspects her but listens as she discusses J-S, mysterious woman spy, and the disappearance of Jensen. She answers to advertise for a secretary in home of "rapping J-S." He goes to see Joel.

(NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY)

CHAPTER IS
 "AND YOU think your own view needs to be enlarged?" Greenleaf asked cautiously.
 "It is being enlarged," Joel said in a meditative voice. "Whether I want it to be or not. Last night."
 "Yes, last night?"
 "Well, for me, that was a terrific experience. I suppose for you—"
 "Believe me, Joel," he explained, "things like that don't happen often, thank God. It was worse than I'd anticipated. I didn't expect old Talleyrand to do as he did. That was well—shortly. I reproached myself that I let you in for it."
 "If things like that happen and why shouldn't women know them as well as men? Why shouldn't I know?"
 He looked at her admiringly.
 "If you've not the nerves to stand it I think you should," he said. "Women have to know life too, unless they're to be no more than mere objects of domestic affection. Not but that you'd be a nice object of domestic affection. And some men like their women that way."
 She regarded him speculatively.
 "But not you, I think. You admire women like the Countess, don't you?"
 "In some ways," he assented reluctantly, for he felt sure she'd know of the way lying. "And I'd like, by the way, to know your real judgment of her and of the men you watched last night—if you feel up to it."
 She said rather angrily, "Why shouldn't I be up to it? I thought if I could never endure anything like last night again, that I'd resign my place and do something else, perhaps go home and stay home. And then I knew I couldn't do that and respect myself ever again. I guess it's the same for a girl as for a man really. Isn't it?"
 "You mean they've got to stand up to things?" he asked gravely. "Yes, I think so. The worth while ones do. You're going to be one of that sort."
 She looked at him reflectively.
 "Maybe. I'm not too sure. But I can try to be."
 He leaned over and patted her hand.
 "That's all any of us can do, try to be. And when we're not, try to hide it from others—when we're downright scared."
 She asked, relieved, "Then you're sometimes scared of things too?"
 "My poor child," he said, "lots of the really best people, courageous soldiers and others, are scared to death half the time—but they keep on pushing ahead."
 She smiled for the first time wholeheartedly.
 "You know, it's awfully good to hear you say that, even though I suspect you're exaggerating horribly."



"Then you're sometimes scared too?"
 Well, as to my judgments, I'm not sure they're worth anything. There's the Countess—"
 "You expressed yourself about her," he said.
 "I know, but what I said was largely envy and a kind of jealousy. I was afraid, you know, she was trying to get around you."
 "Maybe she was," he agreed.
 She looked surprised.
 "You knew it? Then, of course, she didn't succeed. I was afraid you'd be carried away by her, she's so beautiful."
 "I have been rather," he said. "Oh, but you know it—and so you're not."
 "That doesn't follow at all. You see, Joel, a man can be carried away with his eyes open, so to speak."
 She examined him sharply and he bore her scrutiny as best he could.
 "I see—I guess I see. No, I don't really—"
 "You've never been in love," Greenleaf said. "Your physical desires have never mastered your better judgment."
 She flushed a little but did not flinch.
 "No," she agreed—and with a little break in her voice asked— "Have I got to learn that, too? Does everyone?"
 He felt for her at those words a compassionate love as for a child that meets suffering bravely.
 "Observation of others will be enough," he said. "We learn lots of things that way. But the Countess, she's tricky, you think?"
 "She made a gesture of contrition. I was envious of her. I supposed she was getting around you, trying to extort something she wanted. Isn't that her way? She is clever, isn't she? Women like that get what they want, I suppose. Perhaps she's only selfish."
 "You think she's to be trusted in a business arrangement? You think she'd play straight?"
 He watched her weighing this question, as curious to see the working of her thought as to hear her answer. She said at last, simply:
 "I don't know. I've never known women like that. Don't think women can't deceive other women. They can. I think I'd have to watch her a long time to know her."
 "That," he said, "seems to me an honest and a sensible answer. I don't know either. We'll find out in time, maybe. Did you think she was in love with Captain Duval?"
 "I didn't think so."
 "Was he her lover, though?"
 "You mean without her really caring for him?"
 He said kindly, "No. I suppose you can't understand that."
 "No," she said firmly. "I can't. I suppose I'm rather innocent."
 He grimaced. "It's a likable quality and not too common. Well—was he in love with her?"
 She nodded.
 "You're sure?"
 "If he'd looked at me as he did at her, just for a moment, I'd have thought so."
 "Good. Now when Talleyrand was cross-examining him, did you think Duval was telling the truth that he spied either for money, or for love of Germany?"
 She shook her head.
 "I thought he was hiding something."
 "A woman?" Greenleaf asked.
 She made a gesture of doubt, frowned, and said, "I don't know. How can anyone know? He took his secret with him as he intended. I thought he was a brave man—not a base man, no matter what he did or was accused of doing."
 It was his own thought. Back of Duval's treachery lay motives unrevealed, motives which now never would be revealed, infatuation for a woman perhaps, the Countess? It might be so, though that afternoon she had seemed straight to Greenleaf. Certainly she had not seemed to seek the place she had previously desired; had seemed, indeed, no longer particularly keen on it. If that was strategy, it was masterly and she had read him better than he knew himself. He had been on the point of refusing to employ her, had been unsure in his own mind. Why then had he?
 He came out of his absorption to meet Joel's half-humorous, half-reproachful glance.
 "I apologize," he said. "Now I'm going to take you home so you can go to bed. I've something on my mind, something I must do. You've been a great help to me and are going to be more."
 She colored with pleasure and he thought impersonally, sometimes this girl in her demure way is as beautiful as the Countess, but very few will think so. Yet it was not of her he was thinking, once he had left her at her door, but of the Countess, all blue and gold emerging from her seductive dressing room with its glimpse of bottles and vials and jars, its colored lotions and cosmetics. Why did that picture especially come to mind?
 (TO BE CONTINUED)

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