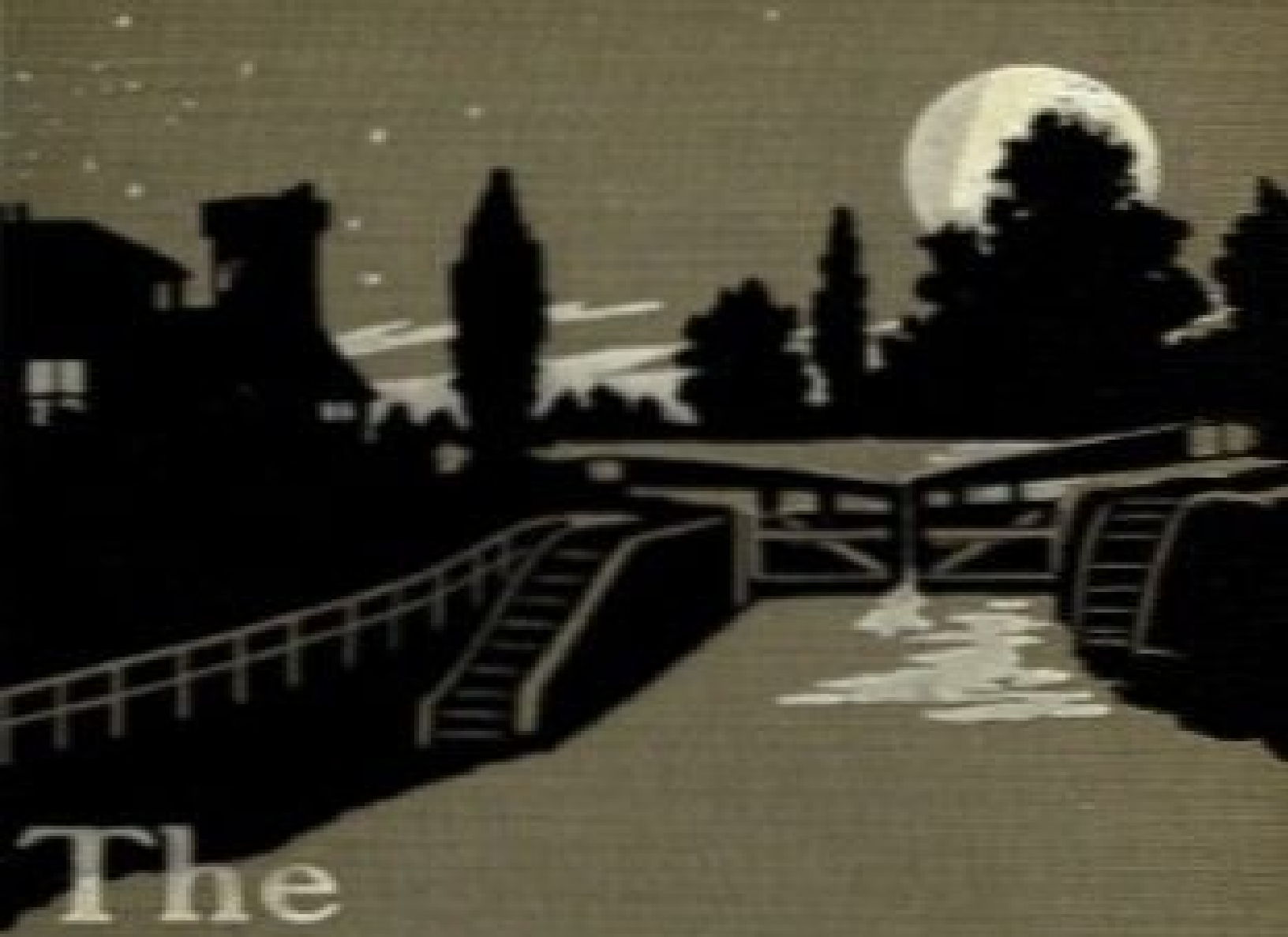

The HOUSE *by The* LOCK

By Mrs. C. N. Williamson

Title: The House by the Lock

Author: C. N. Williamson

Release Date: February 8, 2010 [EBook #31228]

Language: English

Produced by Darleen Dove, Suzanne Shell, and the Online
Distributed Proofreading Team at http://www.pgdp.net

THE HOUSE BY THE LOCK

THE HOUSE BY THE LOCK

By

MRS. C. N. WILLIAMSON

Co-author of
"The Lightning Conductor," "My Lady Cinderella," etc.

emblem

NEW YORK
B. W. DODGE AND COMPANY
1906

PRESS OF
BRAUNWORTH & CO.
BOOKBINDERS AND PRINTERS
BROOKLYN, N. Y.

CONTENTS

THE HOUSE BY THE LOCK

CHAPTER I
The Lady in the Stage Box

"Hullo, old chap! Who would ever have thought of seeing you here to-night? What's brought you back to civilisation again?"

I turned suddenly, surprised by the sound of a familiar voice in my ear. It was the night of Christmas Eve, and I was just entering the lobby of the St. James's, the first time, as it happened, I had seen the inside of a theatre for two years.

For the fraction of a moment I could not remember where I had known the man who addressed me so jovially. My way of knocking about the world brought me into contact with so many people that it was difficult to sort my gallery of faces, and keep each one mentally ticketed. But after a second or two of staring through that convenient medium, my monocle, I was able to place the man who had accosted me. He was a rich mining king from Colorado, by the name of Harvey Farnham, whom I had met in Denver, when I had been dawdling through America three or four years ago.

I pronounced his name with a certain self-satisfaction in having so readily recalled it, and we shook each other by the hand.

"What's brought me back to civilisation?" I echoed, lazily. "I really don't know–unless it was because I'd got tired of the other thing. Adventure–change–that's what I am in search of, my dear Farnham."

"And you come back here from service as war correspondent in Egypt (where I last read of you in the papers as having been carried down a cataract for twenty-six miles before a launch ran out and saved you) in the hope of finding 'adventure' in this workaday close of the nineteenth century? That's too good."

I laughed and shrugged my shoulders. "Yes; why not? Why should there not be as great a possibility of obtaining new sensations, or at least old ones in different form, in London as anywhere else?"

It did not occur to me, as I idly spoke the words, that I was uttering a prophecy.

"How is it," I went on rather curiously, "that you remembered me, 'honouring my draft on sight,' so to speak? It must be four years since that very jolly supper you

gave me in Denver one night, and I fancy I have changed considerably since then."

Farnham smiled in his comical American way, which was a humorous sentence in itself.

"Well, I guess it's not so easy to forget a face like yours. You are a little browner, your eyes rather keener perhaps, your head held a bit higher, your shoulders broader and drawn back more like a soldier's than ever; but, so far as I can see, those are the only changes. You might easily have forgotten me, and I'm immensely flattered that you haven't. But the fact is, my dear boy, you are simply the most interesting man I ever came across, in my own country or any other. You've always seemed like a sort of hero of a tale of adventure to me; and, you see, one don't let a chap like that drop out of one's recollection. I've always eagerly followed your doings, so far as one could follow them in the newspapers, and I read your African book with the greatest interest; but somehow I never got to hear much personal gossip about you. Say, are you married or anything?"

"Many things, but not married," I returned. "I haven't had time to think of women. Besides, if I had, who would take me? No money, no prospects, a man who can't be happy for a fortnight in one place! What a life I should lead a woman!"

"Ah, that's one side of the picture, of course; but here's the other, as the world sees it. You're a sort of popular hero–African traveller, war correspondent, writer of books. Polar explorer, and I don't know what besides, though you can't yet be anywhere near thirty-five. You've got the figure of a soldier, and just the sort of dark, unreadable face that women rave about. What does money matter with a chap like that? Nothing. I wonder you've managed to escape the matchmaking mammas so long. They're quite as keen on a celebrity, in my country at least, as they are on a millionaire."

"Nevertheless, they have not given me much trouble," I said, smiling a little, however, at the remembrance of one or two amusing episodes which I had not the slightest intention of relating. "There, the way to the box-office is clear at last. Once that fat old man is out of the way, it will be my turn. Shall I get your stall for you, and so save time?"

"Yes, by all means, thank you. Are you alone, Stanton?"

"Quite alone. I'd almost forgotten what the theatre was like, and determined to come and refresh my memory."

"I'm by myself, too. Say, old man, would it be a liberty if I asked you to try and get stalls for us together?"

"Delighted, I'm sure," I answered, though, as a matter of fact, I was not quite certain whether I was telling the truth or not. Farnham had been well enough in Denver, but I did not know whether I should care to pass in his society a whole evening, which I had meant to be one of solitary enjoyment. However, he had left me nothing else to say, and I responded with what alacrity I could, little dreaming that my whole future was hanging on my words, and the result of my confab with the man in the box-office.

The play was a popular one, and perhaps on no night of the year, save Christmas Eve or some Lenten fast, could we have obtained two stalls side by side a few minutes before the ringing-up of the curtain. As it was, we were successful, and I walked into the theatre by the side of the tall, thin, smooth-faced American.

We sat down, in the third or fourth row of the stalls, and, as the orchestra had not yet come in, began to talk.

Farnham explained to me that he had "run over" to England on business, intending to sell a certain mine of his, which, though vastly profitable, was the one thing in which he had lost interest. The other mines in which he was part owner were situated in his own state, Colorado, while this particular one, the "Miss Cunningham," was in California, and he was tired of journeying to and fro.

"I've had a good offer," he said; "indeed, I'm visiting in the house of the man who has made it–a wonderful fellow, only one degree less interesting, perhaps, than you. His name is Carson Wildred. Did you ever hear of him?"

"No," I answered, though possibly not to know Mr. Carson Wildred was to argue myself unknown.

"He seems to have plenty of money," explained Farnham, "and though he's a newcomer in London, has got in with a number of good people. He has two houses, one in Sloane Street and one up the Thames, a queer, lonely old place, near Purley Lock, if you know where that is. I'm staying out there with him now, as it happens, though I can't say I'm as fond of the river as he is at this season. But when a few papers and a good round sum of money have changed hands, a couple of days or so from now, I shall bid Wildred and England *au revoir*. I expect to sail for America at the end of the week, and jolly lucky I think myself to have run up against you to-night."

Somehow, as he rattled on about his own affairs, my heart began to warm towards Farnham. He was not a particularly brilliant fellow, though a good business man; but he had such a whimsical face, with its bright eyes, its good-natured mouth, and its laughable, upturned nose! He was so frankly interested in life, so enthusiastic, so outspoken, so boyish in many of his ways, despite his forty years! I found myself almost inclined to be sorry that he was leaving England so soon.

"I should like you to meet Wildred," he went on. "I don't know whether you'd fancy him, but you couldn't help thinking his a remarkable personality. It would be interesting to see you two chaps together. He's at the theatre to-night, by the way, with some friends of his–rather swells. It was an old engagement, made before I went out to his house, but he had to keep it, of course. They'll be in that stage box over there, and as Wildred has been industriously raising my curiosity about the beauty of one of the ladies for the past few days, I concluded to drop in and take the only chance I was likely to get of a look at her. And mighty glad I am that I did so make up my mind, or I should have left England without clapping eyes on someone I'd rather see than all the professional beauties in London."

As he finished speaking the overture, which had now been on for some time, ceased, and the curtain went up on a very pretty bit of stage setting.

There was no curtain-raiser, and the first act was well constructed and interesting from the commencement. It was delightful to me to feel, as I did, that I was no longer *blasé* of town life, or the mimic life of the theatre, and I was inclined to resent the interruption when Farnham nudged me, whispering–

"There's Wildred and his friends just coming into the stage box. By Jove! what a pretty girl!"

I looked up, because I was sure the volatile American would give me no peace until I had done so; and then, having looked up, I promptly forgot the play and its *dramatis personæ*.

Two years I had spent in Africa and Egypt, and I had not seen many fair faces during that time of travel and campaigning. I was in a mood, therefore, to appreciate the delicate loveliness of English women; but, even had I been surfeited with beauty, my eyes would have lingered in a species of wonder on the girl just seating herself in a corner of the stage box. It is possible that I have seen other women as beautiful, many more classically perfect of feature, but never have I looked upon a face so radiant, so bewildering.

For the moment I scarcely glanced at the girl's companions, though I was vaguely conscious that there was an older woman, and that two men were taking chairs in the darker background of the box.

All the other figures on the stage and in the auditorium became meaningless for me. There was the dazzling girl in white, and, so far as I was concerned, no one else in the theatre.

The simple, snowy frock, without jewels or ornamentation of any kind, was the most becoming frame which could have been chosen for the picture. The oval face, with its pearly skin, its curved red lips, its starry, long-lashed eyes (which might have been brown or violet, so far as I could tell), and the aureole of waving, ruddy gold hair were all so vivid in their marvelous effect of colour, that the dead white gown set them off far more artistically than the most carefully-chosen tints could have done.

The girl could not, I thought, have been more than twenty, and every turn of the beautifully-poised little head, every dimpling smile, told that she was full of the joy of life.

"What do you think of Wildred?" whispered Farnham, his lazy American drawl waking me out of a dream.

I did not wish him to see how completely I had been absorbed, how foolishly I had lost my head, and therefore I turned my attention to the two men in the back of the box.

CHAPTER II
The Man with the Pale Eyes

En passant, my eyes dwelt for an instant upon a stout woman of a certain age, whose figure was encased in a sort of armour of steel-grey satin and beads, and whose carefully-arranged head was adorned by a small tiara of diamonds, but they found no temptation to linger.

One of the men was old, grey-haired, and large of girth, with a huge expanse of snowy shirt, and a head guiltless of hair. The other was comparatively young, not many years past my own age, perhaps, and a curious thrill, which I could not myself have explained, passed through me as I looked, through half-shut eyes, at his face. Where had I seen it before? Or did it bear but a haunting resemblance to some other, painted on my memory's retina in lurid, yet partially obliterated, colours?

I had no doubt which of the two was Carson Wildred, Farnham's friend and host. What he had said of the man's personality assured me of his identity.

It was passing strange to me that I should be so strongly impressed by the feeling that I had seen the face before, under startling and disagreeable circumstances, and yet be unable to identify it. Something seemed to be lacking, or changed, which broke the chain of evidence in my mind. Surely I should have been able to remember that peculiar nose, with the flattened bridge, now presented to me in profile.

It would be a sign of a lacking bump of observation to have forgotten the angle of that protruding lower jaw, and the strong contrast between the almost copper-coloured skin, jet black hair, and large, brilliant blue eyes–so light as to appear almost white.

It was impossible, I told myself, that I had met the man before. His remarkable and uncommon cast of features had no niche in my recollection, and yet I *knew* that in some crucial moment I had looked into those pale and scintillating eyes.

A wave of repulsion swept over me. I could not remember when I had experienced two such keen emotions as my surprised admiration for the girl, and the dislike, almost amounting to disgust, which I felt for Farnham's friend,

Carson Wildred. Something deeper than mere annoyance surged in my breast, that that dark personality should lurk so near to the spotless whiteness of the gauzy drapery, which vaguely seemed to me a part of the girl's self.

"Eh? What did you say? How do you like his looks? Peculiar face, isn't it?" queried Farnham, close to my ear.

"Yes, it is peculiar," I answered, mechanically, snatching at the phrase.

"And the girl! Isn't she something rather choice?"

"Very lovely. Who is she?"

"A Miss Karine Cunningham. Same name as the mine that Wildred is going to take off my hands. Merely a coincidence, but I fancy it influenced him in his wish to buy the property, perhaps. He is very much in love with the girl, and rich as he apparently is, she can more than match him, I should say. She's an orphan, whose father, though he came of what you English call a 'good family,' made his pile in trade; and Sir Walter Tressidy, who is in the box with his wife, was her guardian until she came of age, about a year ago. She still lives with them, and Lady Tressidy takes her about. All these things Wildred, who is never so happy as when he is talking of Miss Cunningham, has told me; so you see, I'm pretty well primed as to her antecedents, means, and so on. The girl has thirty thousand pounds a year if she has a penny. Whew! Only think what that means in American money. She could buy and sell me."

I might have truthfully replied that the young lady could have had me without either buying or selling, since–for the first time since my callow days–these few moments had taught me what it was to experience a wild quickening of the pulses under the casual glance of a woman's eyes.

She had seen me. So much satisfaction at least was mine. Wildred had doubtless pointed out his friend, and her gaze had passed on to me–drawn, perhaps, by the compelling magnetism of the strange new feeling which dominated me.

Wishing to avoid the appearance of rudeness, I would have looked away, but I found myself for an instant unable to do so. It was ridiculous to fancy it, and yet I could not help imagining that the girl's exquisite face lighted up with an expression akin to interest as her eyes rested upon mine.

It was for me a moment of intoxication, as I felt that those twin violet lakes received, full in their depths, the involuntary outpouring of my soul. A sensation as of being wrenched away from some safe mooring passed through me as she withdrew her gaze, and, turning her head, whispered to Lady Tressidy, who sat

beside her. The latter then looked at me, and unhesitatingly put up her sparkling lorgnettes.

Farnham had not failed to observe this little pantomime, and was vastly amused thereby.

"This is what comes of being a celebrity!" he chuckled. "They've recognised you from the pictures that were in all the papers a couple of months ago, or perhaps by the photos that were published when your book came out."

"Nonsense!" I said, rather irritably. "They're only annoyed, perhaps, at our staring. Let's turn our attention to the stage."

I set the example which I recommended, but before doing so I gave myself the indulgence of one more lingering glance, and saw that Carson Wildred was eyeing me with undisguised interest.

Was I mistaken–was it only the faint emotion awakened by the mention of a name not quite unknown to the public–or did the man share in my half-recognition of him?

Whatever the feeling excited by the sound of my name or the sight of my face, it was certainly not a pleasant one. The one look I ventured showed me the pale eyes shadowed by a frown, and the gleam of white teeth as they gnawed the lower lip under the slight dark line of the moustache.

He had glanced from me to Farnham, and something in his look told me that, for a reason to me unfathomable, he was displeased at seeing us together.

At the end of the act we went out for a smoke and a breath of fresh air, and as we were returning we met Wildred near the stairway which, at the St. James's, leads to the boxes on one side of the house.

"I was looking for you," he said to Farnham, and the tones of the voice roused the same vague, unpleasant memories that the eyes had stirred.

"And we were just talking of you," Farnham annoyed me by retorting. "I should like to be the means of making you two known to each other. Of course, Wildred, you have heard all about Noel Stanton. This is actually he in the flesh, and he has been telling me that he believes he must have seen you somewhere before."

Mr. Wildred tossed away a cigarette, and followed it with his brilliant eyes. He was smiling, but his lips were tense, as his gaze came back to me.

"It is my misfortune," he said, "to be obliged to assure you that Mr. Stanton is

mistaken. I know him as well as one can do without having met him, through his book, and a world-wide reputation, but beyond that I have not till now had the pleasure."

We looked into each other's eyes, and I knew the man lied, and that he hated me. But the mystery of his personality and my share in his past was as profound a mystery as before.

"Lady Tressidy sent me out particularly," he continued, "in quest of you both, having recognised Mr. Stanton from his numerous counterfeit presentments, and she hopes that you will come and be introduced to her and to Miss Cunningham in their box."

Farnham looked at me doubtfully, fearing perhaps that I would refuse. But, grudgingly as the message was evidently delivered by Wildred, I grasped at the opportunity it gave.

I should speak to Miss Cunningham. I should know her. I might dare to look at her, and I might touch her hand.

I have gone through some queer experiences in rather an eventful life, and have generally managed to keep a cool head in emergencies. But my head was not cool to-night. Everything was dark to me, except the one lovely face raised smilingly towards mine, as some murmured words of introduction were spoken in the box, a little later, giving me the right henceforth to claim Miss Cunningham as an acquaintance.

I suppose I answered coherently when Lady Tressidy addressed me, and talked without openly making an idiot of myself to Sir Walter. But I remember nothing of the conversation between the second and third acts, save the few words spoken by Miss Cunningham, and an invitation from Lady Tressidy to call on one of her "At Home" days.

After I had gratefully accepted, I turned to the girl.

"Lady Tressidy has said I may come and see her," I ventured. "Will you–may I hope to find you with her when I do?"

She looked up with a sudden, illumining smile that answered me. "Come soon," she returned. They were her last words for me that night, and they rang in my head as I left her, dizzy with the memory of her loveliness.

CHAPTER III
A Dead Man's Hand

I had taken rooms temporarily at the Savoy Hotel, not knowing how long it might be ere I should be moved in spirit to desert London; and that night, instead of looking in at the club as I had meant, I went from the theatre straight to the hotel.

There was a fire burning in my room, and I drew up a chair before it to smoke an unlimited number of cigarettes, and to think of Karine Cunningham.

I had parted from Farnham outside the theatre, and had made an appointment to meet him next day at dinner, which he was to eat with me at my hotel.

I felt no inclination for bed, nor was I in the least sleepy, and yet, before an hour had passed, I must have fallen into a doze.

Suddenly I was awakened by the impression of having heard a sound. I looked round me, half dazed still from my dreams. The fire had died down, and I had left myself with no other light. Only a ruddy glow lingered on the hearth, and a small clock on the mantelpiece just above lightly chimed out the hour of two.

I must have dreamed the sound, I told myself, for all was silent in the sleeping hotel, and even the rattle of cabs outside was dulled. Still, the impression lingered, and I could hardly persuade myself that I had not heard Harvey Farnham's voice calling my name, and finishing with a gurgling, despairing cry for help, the horror of which had chilled the blood in my veins, even in my sleep.

Though the fire was dead, the room was still warm, and I hardly knew why I should be so cold. Nevertheless, I felt chilled to the bone, and I was glad enough to get into bed as quickly as I could. Several times I was on the point of falling asleep again, but, at just the critical point between reflectiveness and sinking into the soft depths of slumber, I waked with an almost convulsive start, and a remembrance of the cry I had heard or dreamed. I was sure it must have been the latter, although, I told myself, there might actually have been some fracas in the street which, in my sleep, I had confused with a dream of Harvey Farnham.

Resigning myself to wakefulness at last, I began to plan out the programme of the next week, and wonder how soon I might avail myself of Lady Tressidy's

invitation to call. She was at home on Sundays informally, she had said, whenever she happened to be in town during the winter, though Thursday was her "day" during the season.

Now, the Thursday following would be Christmas Day (this most eventful night being Christmas Eve of last year), but I did not see why I might not look in for a few moments on the ensuing Sunday. It had only been because Sir Walter's affairs rendered a short stay in town necessary, that they were spending Christmas in Park Lane. They would probably go away in a few days, and I could not afford to lose my chance; for, though I had admired many women in my time, I had never yet seen one whom I wished to make my wife, until Karine Cunningham's lovely face had risen–fair and sweet as a new moon that mingled its silver with the rose of sunset–over my horizon.

I had laughed at men who gravely discussed the possibility of love at first sight, but now I began to realise, half shamefacedly, that it was not a thing to be convinced of through argument, but by thrilling, magical experience. I would have staked my life that Karine Cunningham's heart and mind were all that her face presaged of them, and I resolved that, if she were to be won, I would put my very life into the attempt to win her.

So thinking, and so resolving, I fell at last from waking dreams to sleeping ones, hoping dimly, as I slipped over the edge of realities, that they might be of Karine Cunningham. But they were not of her. Hardly had slumber got its hold upon me, when I saw myself by the river, looking down into a swiftly rushing tide. It seemed to be somewhere in the country, though I had little thought for my surroundings; and I was conscious that I was watching anxiously for the appearance of some object, whose nature I did not accurately know. It had been daylight in my vision at first–a cold, grey, wintry daylight–but suddenly night fell, with the rapidity that all changes come and go in dreamland, and the only light was a spot of phosphorescent radiance that lay just under the surface of the water, floating gradually down towards me. I knew, in my sleep, that my eyes were destined to behold some sight of horror, yet I was bound, in a species of frozen fascination, to the spot where I stood, forced to wait for the oncoming of the light and its revelation of mystery.

Slowly it was borne along with the tide, until, having reached a bend in the river opposite the spot where I was standing, it ceased to move. I stooped down and saw that the pale light shone forth from a great white diamond on the finger of a dead man's hand. The body was faintly and darkly outlined; even the floating arm might also have been a floating mass of blackened river weed; but the hand

was white as alabaster, and as I bent over it, staring down, one of the fingers moved and beckoned. Then I woke with a loud cry–"Harvey Farnham!"

I had gone through a good many dangers in my roving life, and had passed through many a queer adventure, believing that I could still boast unshaken nerves. Neither was I used to dreaming, and the hours of sleep were usually for me a long and peaceful interval of complete unconsciousness.

Now, however, my forehead was damp with a cold sweat, and I could hardly shake off the horror of the vision. It was ridiculous, I said to myself, and yet, even with my eyes open, I could see the white awfulness of that dead finger, as it beckoned me, shining palely in the light of the diamond ring.

Exactly why I had shouted the name of Harvey Farnham as I waked, I could not understand, unless–with the odd "hang togetherativeness" of dreams–it was because I had happened to notice during the evening at the theatre that he still wore on the last finger of his left hand a very remarkable ring, which he had also worn, and of which he had told me the history, when we had met four years previously in America. I had thought it perhaps the very finest diamond I had ever seen in the possession of a private person, and he had mentioned that it had been taken from the first mine of which he had ever been the owner. He had had it for some years, and, having grown stouter meanwhile, the gold setting had cut rather deeply into the flesh of his finger.

He had laughingly alluded to this in Denver, saying that he had promised a pretty girl that she should have the stone when he should be obliged to have the ring cut off, and he meant to stick to it as long as he could. Except for the fact of having remarked that he still wore the ring, and that his finger looked as pinched as a woman's waist beneath its clasp, I could not in any way have described Harvey Farnham's hand. I had doubtless a general impression of its shape and contour in my mind, but I did not now recall that there had been any recognisable likeness between it and the dead hand my dream had shown me. Still, though I was able to give myself a perfectly rational explanation of the dream, and even of the impression of Farnham's voice earlier in the night, I could not shake off a curious and unpleasant sensation of there being some duty connected with the vision which I had left unperformed, or which was yet to be exacted of me in the future.

CHAPTER IV
The House by the Lock

I arose on Christmas morning with the same feeling. There was absolutely nothing arranged for me to do that day, as I had informed no one I knew of my presence in London, meaning to be for the present somewhat of a free-lance. I had wished not to be obliged to account to anyone as to my goings and comings. I had not wanted any invitations to family festivities on Christmas Day to "keep me from being lonely." My desire had been to go exactly where the whim of the moment might lead me, and without a moment's hesitation I had declined the invitation to "Christmas dinner" which poor Farnham had dragged for me from his friend, Carson Wildred. It might amuse me, Farnham had thought, as Wildred's house up the river was a queer old place, interesting to anyone who cared for that sort of thing, and they two were dining quite alone. Wildred and he had had some final arrangements to settle up, and as Christmas was such an "off day," so far as amusements were concerned, it had been Wildred's idea that they should utilise it in this manner. The other man took Farnham's hint, and civilly gave the required invitation, of course, but even had it been offered with enthusiasm I should not have been tempted to accept.

Now, however, I felt a curious inclination to call at the House by the Lock, as it was named. I would not dine there, I told myself, but there must be an inn in the neighbourhood, where I could obtain some slight Christmas cheer, if I chose to embark upon the rather mild adventure of going up the river on this wintry holiday.

It was years since I had been in England, and the thought of a solitary stroll by the Thames along a country towing-path was not so dismal as it might have been to those who had not tramped with the equanimity of custom through African jungles.

Once the idea had taken root in my mind, I was impatient to carry it out. I would go, I decided, almost immediately, lunching at the nearest decent inn to Purley Lock, and turning up at Wildred's house at four or five in the afternoon. I would spend an hour there, perhaps, and return to town in time for dinner.

I had not got up particularly early, had breakfasted late, and by the time I was

inclined to start it was past one o'clock. I had over an hour's journey to Great Marlow, the nearest railway station, with a drive of some four miles to follow, before I could reach the Chimes Inn, which I was told was the only one within some distance of Purley Lock.

It was a quaint old hostelry I found, and an agreeable landlord, who had hardly expected guests at so out-of-the-way a place on Christmas Day, and having finished his own midday repast, was very ready for a gossip with me.

Oh, yes, he said, he knew the House by the Lock, quite well. It was in reality situated at some little distance from the Lock itself, quite a quarter-of-a-mile, but then it was the nearest house, and perhaps that was the reason it had got its name. It was a very old place, but Mr. Wildred, since taking it about two years before, had had a great many alterations and improvements made both outside and in. He was something of an architect himself, it seemed–this rich Mr. Wildred; at all events, it was believed that he had made the designs for the alterations, and having a great fad that way, had even helped the chaps he had had down from London to do the indoor work and decorating. There had only been two or three men, so that progress had been slow, and everyone had wondered that such a rich man as Mr. Wildred was reported to be should have had things done in so niggling a manner. But, since then, they had concluded that he must have known what he was about, for everyone who went there came away with great reports of the decorations.

I was not particularly interested in these details that my landlord had to tell me.

Though, after all, there was an indefinable curiosity in my mind regarding everything that concerned Carson Wildred.

I got away from the man's animated gossip in the course of half-an-hour or so. I had a walk of a mile to take, having dismissed my fly, and meaning, after I had paid my rather aimless visit, to tramp all the way back to Marlow again. As I started, a clock on the inn table struck four.

There was a long streak of gold along the horizon of the otherwise dull grey sky, and a rising wind moaned drearily among the bare lower branches of the trees.

The scene looked indescribably desolate, and yet there was a certain beauty in it, too. I had been told exactly how to reach the House by the Lock, and when, after passing the somewhat weedy-looking lock, I began skirting along a species of backwater, and came in sight of a long, low-browed house close to the river, I knew I had reached my journey's end.

The place had the appearance of being only a restored remnant of an ancient abbey fallen into decay.

Indeed, at one end of the house a ruined wall jutted out, with a row of stone window-frames, half filled in with sombre trails of ivy; then in the middle came the habitable part of the old house, with an imposing front door, which might have belonged to some big Gothic Church; magnificent windows, that reminded me of a certain dear old college at Oxford, well-known in younger days; and beyond, to the left, was the wing evidently added by Wildred. It was in wretched taste, I thought, with its pretentiousness and its huge round tower at the end, utterly out of keeping with the rest. Then, as I criticised, my eye was caught by a puff of fiery smoke that suddenly rose above the battlements of the hideous tall tower.

I could not quite understand this phenomenon, for the tower, so far as I could see, had been merely built with the mistaken idea of being ornamental. Though new, it was intended to present the effect of being ruinous, having little dark chinks in lieu of windows.

Still, the smoke was there, belching out sparks not only from the apex of the tower, but stealing in a belated puff or two from the chinks in the wall nearest the top.

I thought of fire, and quickened my steps, meaning to mention to the servant who should open the door what I had seen. The lawn stretched down to the river, which was here, as I said, a mere backwater, and having entered through a gate set in the side of a big brick wall, I walked briskly up the short gravelled path that led to the house.

At least Wildred had had the sense to let this door alone, with its carvings of oak, and its big ornamental hinges and knocker. The only modern innovation was an electric bell, which I touched, and then, grasping the huge knocker, I rapped out an additional summons, which echoed drearily, as though through an empty house.

So near was I to the river, while I stood waiting on the door-stone to be admitted, that I could hear the soft lapping of the water against the shore. Darkness had fallen now, and an ugly recollection of my dream suddenly sprang up in my brain. Just so, I remembered, had I heard the water whispering, as in that hateful vision I had bent over to see the dead man's beckoning hand.

It was long before my ring and knock were answered, so long that I had my finger on the bell again. But at that moment I heard footsteps walking somewhat

uncertainly along an uncarpeted floor within. Still the door remained closed; but at a long narrow window, which was the duplicate of another on the opposite side of the door, I saw for an instant that a face was pressed against the latticework of the glass.

"What ill-trained servants this man keeps," was my thought; and then, somewhat impatiently, I rang again.

The door opened almost immediately into a dimly-lighted hall, when a respectable, middle-aged man, out of livery, evidently a butler, stood revealed. Yet I could have sworn that the face at the window, seen but a second ago, had been that of a *woman, young, pallid, and darkly bright of eye*!

CHAPTER V
Was It a Mystery?

"I should like to see Mr. Wildred and Mr. Farnham," I said, not feeling it necessary to ask if they were at home. I knew that they had definitely arranged to be so.

I glanced round me carelessly as I spoke. The hall was a huge one, dim in the corners, with a fine stairway that ran down in the centre, and was lighted by a great branching candelabrum held up by a bronze figure on either side.

Doors, hung with *portières* of tapestry, opened here and there along the hall, and in a fireplace at one side slow flames crept along a freshly-heaped pile of logs.

"I am sorry, sir," said the servant, respectfully, "but both the gentlemen have gone out for the day."

He did not look me in the face as he delivered this piece of information, but allowed his narrow eyes to drop away shiftily.

"Oh, I am surprised at that," I returned, "for I have come by invitation."

I hardly know by what impulse I mentioned this, and as a matter of fact the invitation could hardly be supposed to stand, as I had last night refused it. Still, it seemed to me extremely improbable that the two men would have changed their minds about the day, after midnight, when I had parted from them. They had mentioned refusing one or two invitations, and there was really so little to do by way of amusement out of one's own house, or somebody else's, on Christmas Day. Somehow, too, I felt impressed that the man was lying. He had perhaps been told to say that his master and guest were away in case of an intrusion, which they might have had reason to fear; but this could hardly stand with me.

The fellow's smug face changed instantly.

"Oh, I see, sir, you are the gentleman Mr. Wildred was expecting. He–they–it is possible they will be in quite shortly. Perhaps you will walk into the room."

"The room," and with such a queer little emphasis on the former word, sounded rather odd. It was but a trifling peculiarity of expression, however, and I did not think much of it as I followed the butler along the hall, passing through a door,

before which he swept the curtain aside with a flourish, and so into a passage which evidently led towards the new wing. We went on for some distance, and presently arrived at a closed door, which the butler threw open for me. "It is here that my master requested you should wait, sir," he said.

I walked in, and he left me, shutting the door. It then struck me that I had neither given him my name nor mentioned the mass of smoke and sparks which I had seen vomited from the tower. I sprang to the door again, meaning to call after the man a word of warning in regard to the fire, but he was already out of sight. He could not have gone back the way that he had come, or I should certainly have seen him walking down the dimly-lighted passage, there being no door save that at the extreme end, which he would not yet have had time to reach. I did not see how he could have disappeared so suddenly, but returning whence I had come, I looked about in vain for a bell.

I was sure now that this room must be situated in that part of the new wing which adjoined the tower. In glancing at the house from outside, I had fancied that the square, squat wall must be that of a studio, as there were no windows, but a high, domed skylight on top. Now I saw that though the outer building was square, the room within was octagon in shape. It was, perhaps, a studio, as I had fancied, but there was something of the free-and-easy negligence of an Oriental smoking-room about it.

The walls were hung with embroidered Indian materials, and a low divan ran down part way. Between the hangings were panels of sandal-wood, ornamented with bits of mirror in the Burmese fashion, and half hidden with curious foreign weapons, daggers, swords, and spears, and even a Zulu assegai or two. On the floor stood a hookah, and on a small inlaid table were a couple of curious little objects which I knew to be opium pipes. In one corner, as though it had been pushed aside, stood an easel with a canvas upon it, which was half covered with a piece of drapery. The skylight was partly concealed with red silk blinds, drawn across the staring glass, and from the centre of the dome was suspended a large jewelled lamp. It was from this that all the light in the studio proceeded at present, and though there was no fireplace, the room was warm–indeed, insufferably hot. This fact, taken together with the studio's proximity to the tower, made me feel more certain than before that some flue in this modern portion of the house had caught fire. I searched the panels for a bell, but found none, and at last lifted several of the curtains that draped the larger part of the octagonal walls. Under the first two that I raised only a blank space of dark wood was visible, but under the third I was surprised to find a small, secretive-

looking door.

There was no knob or ring by way of handle, but close to the edge, and about half-way between top and bottom, I distinguished a diminutive keyhole, outlined with shining metal. I let the curtain drop again, though lingeringly. It could be only a cupboard, or a particularly secure wine cellar, perhaps, behind this dwarfish door, yet had I discovered it in a house not English, but of a country less conventionally civilised than our own, I should have told myself that I had chanced upon the clue to a secret.

There was still a fourth curtained space (the remaining half of the octagons being of the sandal-wood), and this, as it happened, was directly behind the draped easel.

I moved towards it, not intending to pry into Mr. Wildred's domestic economies, but still bent on unearthing an electric bell if I could do so, when my eyes fell upon the partially-covered picture.

It was but a pinky-white, uncovered shoulder that I could see, with a glimpse of red-gold hair at such a distance above as to suggest a massive knot at the back of a woman's head, seen in profile. There was a fraction of fluffy tulle sleeve as well, revealing the outline of a rounded, girlish arm, and though the face was hidden by the drapery, I was as sure as if I had seen it, that should I push aside the curtain my eyes would fall upon the counterfeit presentment of Karine Cunningham.

With half-extended hand I paused. The painting was so far covered, and it was in another man's house. Had I a right to assure myself whether my supposition were correct? As I hesitated my ears were startled by what I can only describe as the beginning of a sound.

It was low and inarticulate, yet it seemed to me that it was uttered by human lips. It commenced with a tremulous, vibrating noise, such as might have been made by a man groaning with closed mouth and between set teeth.

I started, and looked over my shoulder, so close did it seem, that I could almost fancy it had proceeded from a corner of the room behind me. Still it went on, monotonously, and then suddenly rose with ever-increasing volume to a yell of utmost agony.

Never had I heard such a shriek, not even in battle, when men were stabbed or shot, or blown to pieces. So horrible, so long-drawn was it, that I found myself strangely awe-struck and appalled.

"Great heaven!" I exclaimed aloud, sure now that close at hand fire must be raging, and have claimed some inmate of the house as its victim.

Though I knew not where to find the servant who had admitted me, or any other person, I flung open the door through which I had come, and ran down the passage leading towards the main part of the house. In through the second and wider one I went, opening a door here and there, but finding only darkness and emptiness beyond.

I reached the large entrance hall at last, and shouted loudly–"Here, you! John, James!"–not knowing in the absence of the master and his guest whom to call upon.

No one answered, and after the horror of the unearthly cry that I had heard, and now the sound of my own lusty voice, the silence that fell seemed curiously brooding and ominous.

I shouted a second time, and was then rewarded by the sight of the respectable-looking butler. His face appeared–or I imagined it,–even more smug than before in its expression, and there was something suggestive of injured dignity as well.

"Did you call, sir?" he inquired with an irritating meekness.

"I did, indeed," I returned rather sharply. "I've been looking everywhere for a bell, but couldn't find one. I have every reason to believe that this house is on fire, somewhere in the left wing, near the room into which you took me, and it is certain that someone has got caught in the flames. For heaven's sake, show me the entrance to the tower, and come with me to do what can be done!"

The smug look was gone, chased away by one of blank amazement, which did not, however, seem the sort of horrified surprise that might have been expected to follow on my startling announcement.

"I'm sure you must be entirely mistaken, sir," he said. "There is no fire, I'm quite certain of that. There–there may have been a cry, for as it happens there's just been an accident–in the kitchen."

"An accident in the kitchen?" I echoed, incredulously.

"Yes, sir. You see, it was this way, sir" (the fellow stammered and breathed hard between his words, as though he were anxious to gain time for himself, I thought): "The cook–an awkward woman–set some methylated spirit on fire, and upset the stuff over her foot. She–I'm afraid she did give a scream, sir. You know what women are at such times. But it's all right now. The flames were put out on the instant, sir, and one of the other servants is helping cook bind up her foot.

Very kind of you to take this trouble and be anxious, sir, I'm sure."

He was glib enough now, but his shifty eyes were moving about, as though looking with a certain apprehension for someone to arrive.

"I saw smoke and sparks coming out of the tower as I came up to the door," I said, doubtful about accepting this halting explanation.

The fellow flushed to the roots of his black oiled hair as I watched him.

"Did you see that, sir?" he exclaimed, ingenuously. "It's master's laboratory up there, though you'd never think it from the outside, would you? Something's gone wrong with one of the–the apparatuses, sir–I don't know the name for it–and the fact is I did suppose you were the gentleman who had come to examine into the trouble. He was to have arrived to-day, and so I thought—But I see, sir, as you refer to the sparks, and seem not to understand what makes them, I must have been mistaken."

"Yes, you were mistaken," I returned, only half satisfied, yet not caring to allow myself morbidly to scent a mystery where mystery there was none.

"Would you step in here, sir, and wait for my master?" he went on hastily, drawing aside the *portière* from a door close by. "I shouldn't have given you the bother of going so far before, only I thought you'd come on business which would take you to that part of the house. This is the drawing-room, sir, if you'll be pleased to walk in, and I'll fetch you your hat and stick from the studio."

I had no objections to make to this suggested course, though I was conscious of a vague desire to return to the octagon room.

The butler noiselessly preceded me, turning up the lights, which had been dim, and touching a match to four or five candles on the mantelpiece. I saw then that I was in a large, old-fashioned drawing-room, with plenty of ancient blue and white china, Sheraton furniture, and a fireplace suggesting a design of Adams'.

I sat down beside it to finish my time of waiting, not quite sure whether to be crestfallen over having made an unnecessary sensation, or to be distrustful of the butler, with his shifty face. I scarcely heard his decorous footsteps, as he moved away over the polished oak floor of the great hall, but he had not been gone more than a moment or two, when the sound of voices whispering together reached my ears.

I had always particularly sensitive ones, and no doubt my somewhat precarious, wandering life had done much to sharpen them. At all events, I was able to hear that which did not reach the ears of other men less favoured in this regard, and

now I caught a word or two spoken outside in the hall.

"In the drawing-room ... 'tisn't he, after all ... confound your stupidity! ... fool you are.... Well, it can't be helped now ... story will have to do."

An instant later Mr. Carson Wildred had appeared at the door. I got up as he showed himself, and advanced towards him, keenly watching his face. It had been alert at first, as though he were anxious to ascertain who the visitor could be; then, as he identified me, for the fraction of a second a fire of fierce anger blazed in his pale eyes. Before I could more than convince myself that it had actually been there, however, it was gone. He came towards me, smiling cordially, and holding out his hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Stanton?" he said. "This is an unexpected pleasure, after your refusal of our invitation last night, but none the less delightful. I suppose I'm rather late in wishing you a merry Christmas? But better late than never, you know!"

"Thank you," I returned, grudging the necessity for taking the man's hand. It was cold as ice, and he remarked upon it, laughing.

"Rather a chilly welcome that," he exclaimed; "but I've just come in from a walk, and we've very seasonable weather, as they call it, to-day. My butler–the best and most methodical of chaps, by the way–is in a frightful state because you have been annoyed, it seems, while you have been waiting for me. So sorry to have kept you. Accident in the kitchen, it seems. Hope it won't interfere with our getting a decent dinner to-night, for of course you'll stay?"

I fabricated an engagement for the evening on the spot, and explained how I had felt like spending an afternoon in the country, and seeing what the river looked like at Christmas time.

"I've only a few minutes to stay, really," I said, "for I've set my heart on walking back to Marlow. Farnham knows I'm here, I suppose?"

"Oh, that's the pity of it," he ejaculated. "Farnham's away, after all. You know what an erratic fellow he is? Well, he got tired of business, and not dreaming you would come, ran into town to dine with some people who had asked him the other day. The fact is, I fancy there's a fair lady in the case. But he did say something about looking you up at the Savoy, if he had time, and as trains are bad to-day, he meant to spend the night in town."

As Wildred went volubly on with his apologies and explanations, I did not take my eyes from his face. It was as open and candid in expression as a face of his

peculiar type could be, and yet, though there was no earthly reason why I should disbelieve anything he had said, there was a vague doubt in my mind as uncomfortable to bear as a haunting sense of guilt.

CHAPTER VI
An Adventure in the Park

"Farnham promised," I said, "to dine with me to-morrow night, you know. It is very much to be regretted that you have an engagement, but I hope that you will remind him of his to me."

"I will do so, certainly," Wildred returned. "Not that any reminder could be needed, for Farnham is one of your most enthusiastic admirers, I should say."

We were vastly polite to each other during what remained of the conversation, far more ceremoniously so than we should have been likely to be had there been any solid liking on either side under the thin veneer of friendliness.

In a few moments I had got away, despite Wildred's repeated request that I should remain and share his lonely Christmas dinner with him. Somehow, a mouthful of food taken in that house would have choked me, and I left with the echo of the awful cry I had heard still seemingly ringing in my ears.

I half expected that Farnham might look in upon me, as Wildred had suggested, and therefore spent what remained of the evening after my return to town at the hotel. But he did not come, and shortly after midnight I threw down the book in which I had been able to retain no great interest, and went to bed.

It was ridiculously early when I woke, and my first conscious thought was a joyous one, that now only one day intervened between me and the call I promised myself to make at Lady Tressidy's.

I had endeavoured to explain to my own satisfaction the presence of a portrait which I believed to represent Miss Cunningham at the House by the Lock. There were many ways in which it might have found a place there, without betokening any great intimacy between the original of the picture and Carson Wildred. It might have been an Academy success which he had purchased; it might be even that the resemblance was merely one of chance.

Still, try as I might to settle the doubts which, no matter how often discarded, invariably came crowding back to my brain, I was already far too deeply plunged into love to remember with calmness my glimpse of the canvas under the drapery.

Of course it would be impossible for me to refer to it in talking with Lady Tressidy or Miss Cunningham, if I were lucky enough to see them on Sunday; but in some indirect way I might be able to induce one of them to mention it. I could refer to my visit to the House by the Lock perhaps, touching lightly upon my impression of the striking decorations in the studio, or smoking-room, and then, if there were nothing to conceal, and Miss Cunningham were aware that Mr. Wildred possessed her portrait, it would be very natural that a word or two in regard to it might pass her lips.

As I was on my way down to breakfast a little after ten, I met one of the bell boys with a telegram, which he had been on the way to bring to my door.

It was a long and elaborate message, and glancing down to the end of the seven or eight lines I read Farnham's name. I then went back to the beginning again.

"So sorry not to have seen you yesterday," the words ran. "Wildred has come to town, bringing my luggage, on receipt of a wire from me saying I have just heard of important financial business calling me to America at once. Has told me of your visit. Very vexed can't keep engagement with you to-night, and that this must after all be farewell, as am leaving immediately for Southampton by boat train. Good-bye and good luck to you. Will write you soon from other side, addressing Savoy Hotel. Yours, HARVEY FARNHAM."

I cannot say I felt any very deep disappointment at the thought that I should not see my friend from the States again. I liked him, and had found him a pleasant companion, but had it not been for the strange and unpleasant dream which had somehow gifted him with an artificial importance in my mind, I should have cherished few regrets at his sudden flitting. As it was, I had a curious sense of uneasiness, and an inexplicable impression that in some undefined way I had done him an injustice, or been careless of his interests, though in reality I was very sure I had done nothing of the kind.

Still, I could not shake off the feeling, and with an odd restlessness upon me I started almost immediately after breakfast for a long walk.

For some time I went on without paying very much attention to the direction I had taken, but mechanically I had passed along the Embankment, so on through crowded Piccadilly, and thus to the Park.

The dreary stretch of sodden grass, with stripped trees, and here and there a patch of dingy London snow, did not look particularly inviting, but I went in, wondering a little at my own aimlessness of mood.

I had intended to do a good deal of writing during the morning and early afternoon, but I knew that, even had I stayed at home, it would have been impossible for me to put pen to paper.

The ubiquitous cyclist was to be seen in great numbers and to the best advantage. At this time of year the "smart set" was for the most part conspicuous by its absence, but there were some pretty and neatly costumed young women, and as I pursued my way slowly, idly looking at those who passed, there was a flash of red-gold hair as a slender figure in dark grey cloth shot by, and I knew, with a quickening of my heart throbs, that I had seen Miss Cunningham.

She was going very well, and I was admiring the pretty back with its girlish shoulders and slim tapering waist, when suddenly a woman, riding in the opposite direction, swerved across the road on her wheel, before Miss Cunningham had been given either time to slacken her speed or to turn out of the way.

A collision was inevitable, and without waiting for it to happen, as I knew it must, in another instant I ran forward with great springing strides.

It was all over before I could reach the place. Both had fallen, and several passers-by on wheels had stopped and collected in so close a group that I could not see whether one or both had been seriously injured.

In less time than is taken in the telling, however, I had elbowed my way through the well-meaning crowd to find Miss Cunningham sitting on the edge of the grass nursing a twisted ankle, her lovely face looking white and troubled.

The cause of the accident was already on her feet, and in the midst of such voluble apologies and explanations that I could only conclude she, at least, had suffered slightly.

"Miss Cunningham," I said, warning the girl of my presence; and she looked up with a tremulous little cry of surprise and perhaps relief.

"Oh, I am so thankful!" she exclaimed. "I was just wondering what I should do. But–but you will help me, I know."

"If you will let me," I responded, rather too eagerly. "I saw the accident from a distance. I hope you are not much hurt."

"I don't quite know," she said, ruefully.

By this time we had been practically left alone. Seeing that an acquaintance of the young lady's had opportunely appeared upon the scene, the others, whose

proffered assistance could now be dispensed with, had one by one moved away.

"Is it your ankle?" I asked, stooping down over the dainty foot which showed beneath the short bicycling dress.

"Yes; it seemed to turn under me as I fell, somehow. And my poor machine! I know it must have had a terrible smash. I feel far worse about it than I do about myself. But the whole thing is a punishment, I suppose. I oughtn't to have come out alone. Lady Tressidy never allows it, and will be very cross with me when she hears what has happened, I'm afraid. I shan't have a bit more sympathy than I deserve, when it comes out. I hadn't meant her to know at all, you see."

I could not imagine how even a woman could find it in her heart to reproach the owner of those beautiful appealing eyes and exquisite lips, quivering now, between smiles and tears, like those of a mutinous child.

If I had dared tell her how deep was the sympathy I felt! But I was only afraid lest she might read it, and more, in my eyes.

Sympathetic though I was, however, I could not control my joy that, since the accident *had* happened, I–and no other–had been on the spot to offer aid which she might deign to accept.

"Don't mind about your bicycle," I said. "I'm sure it's all right, or can easily be made so again; and if you'll let me enter into the plot, perhaps between us we can think of a road out of the difficulty with Lady Tressidy. But the first thing to do is to get you safely away from this."

"I'm afraid I can't walk!" she warned me, laughing nervously.

"Of course not. A cab's the thing, with the invalided bike on top. But may I be with you? I don't see how it is possible to let you go by yourself."

"It will be very–unconventional, won't it?" she smiled. "But there are times when conventionalities must be thrown aside, and I shall be grateful if you'll take care of me, and do all the planning, please." Then, womanlike, contradicting her own last sentence, she went on, "But I don't see how we can manage about a cab. Of course there won't be any here, and–I don't *very* much want to be left sitting here all alone."

"And you shall not be, for a moment," I said, joyful even at this small sign that my presence was not actually disagreeable to her. "There are plenty of people who will call a cab for us."

And I proceeded to put my statement to the proof.

Within five minutes an unusually presentable four-wheeler had appeared upon the scene, the unfortunate bicycle had been handed up on top, and the young lady had been tenderly helped inside.

"Tell him just to go on slowly for a few minutes while we talk things over," she commanded, more cheerfully. "Do you know, Mr. Stanton, after all I begin to hope my ankle is not so badly hurt; and though, as I told you, I shall be in a sad scrape when I get home, and have to confess, still–there's a spice of adventure in all this that appeals to me, rather. It's a very long time since I have had an adventure of any kind."

Poor child, she little guessed how many awaited her behind the lowered curtain of the future!

"Never have *I* had one which would be so wholly delightful," I boldly said, "if I had not to think that you were in pain."

"Oh, it is really not so dreadful." She blushed brightly, but when the lovely rose tint faded it left her pale even to the lips. "Suppose we talk," she went on more sedately, "about the way in which you are to get me out of my difficulty–for I think you've promised to do that."

I adopted her tone at once. "Let us begin with judicial questioning then. Was Lady Tressidy at home when you came out?"

"No"–laughing–"or I couldn't have come–on my bicycle. She'd gone to an anti-something meeting (Lady Tressidy is very fond of anti-something meetings, as you'll discover for yourself when you know her). She won't be at home to lunch either, and she need never find me out in my iniquity, except that–even though my foot is not so *very* bad–I shall be sure to limp. She will enquire what has happened, and, of course, though my conscience would not reproach me much for silence, if that were possible, I couldn't tell a fib."

I would have been ready to swear that she was not one of the young women who could rattle off what they might call "harmless evasions" with a candidly smiling face.

"Suppose, then," I suggested, "that you allow me to take you at once to a doctor, who will examine your ankle, and perhaps be able to anoint it with some healing lotion, which may prevent the limping you so dread. There used to be a man in this neighbourhood whom I knew by reputation when I was in England last. I remember street and number, and it's not very likely that he's moved away."

"A grand idea," she exclaimed; but though she tried to speak brightly, even merrily, it was plain to see that she was suffering a good deal, whether more physically or mentally I could not tell.

I put out my head and gave directions to the cabman, and when I drew it in again to glance anxiously at the face which already I so passionately loved, I saw that it was even whiter than before. The eyes were drooping and the dark curling lashes almost swept the colourless cheeks. As though she felt my gaze upon her, she looked up instantly, and made an effort to smile; but the mischievous light which had danced in her eyes when she first sank restfully back upon the shabby cushions of the cab had been suddenly and utterly quenched.

"Miss Cunningham!" I exclaimed. "You have made nothing of your pain, but I know that you are ill–that you are suffering."

"I am very foolish," she answered, in a low, unsteady voice. "It isn't my ankle–though, of course, that hurts a little–but I think It must be the shock, which I didn't realise at first. I felt quite bright until a moment ago, but suddenly I am all weak and trembling. The truth is, Mr. Stanton, I wasn't fit to be out this morning, especially alone, and I didn't come simply from sheer bravado, as you might think, and for the sake of doing what I'd been told not to do. I–I felt as though I *must* be out in the air, and in motion. I didn't sleep last night, and I didn't eat any breakfast this morning, which may partly account for this silliness of mine, perhaps. I thought I should feel better out of doors, but it seems that nothing in the world can do me any good. Everything I attempt must always end in disaster, and–oh, Mr. Stanton, I am so very, very unhappy and miserable!"

To my amazement and distress, she covered her face with her little gloved hands, and broke into a storm of sobbing.

CHAPTER VII
Friends

It was all I could do to resist the impulse to take the small trembling hands in my own, to touch the bowed head with its glory of shimmering ripples, to break into passionate words which must have alarmed her, and put an end to my chance of winning her, perhaps for ever.

But to a certain extent I was able to control myself.

"What can I say–what can I do?" I stammered. "If there was only some way in which it might be possible for me to help you."

"Ah, if–if!" she echoed, desolately. "Don't you think it strange that, though we scarcely know each other–though this is only our second meeting, and quite by chance, I turn to you with such a confession? I am ashamed now"–and she impetuously dashed her tears away with a toy of a handkerchief. "But the words spoke themselves before I could stop them. You see, I have no one to talk to–no one to advise me. I think I must be the loneliest girl in all this big preoccupied world."

"I should have thought you would have more friends than you could keep within bounds," I said, hotly.

"Friends? Has anyone many friends? I have plenty of acquaintances, but I think no friends. Let us not talk of this any more, though, Mr. Stanton. I have forgotten myself."

"Forgive me–I can't obey you," I protested. "Just one word. As you said, this is only our second meeting, and I have no right to ask a favour of you, yet I am going to do it. I beg of you, as I never begged anything before, that you will forget how short a time we have known each other, and that you will take me for a friend–a friend in the truest and best sense of that good, much-abused word. I swear to you that you would find me loyal."

She looked up at me in the sweetest way, with eyes that glistened through a sheen of tears.

"I believe that I should find you so," she answered, falteringly. "And, oh, how I

do need a friend–though you may think *me* disloyal to say that, when I have a home with those who–have meant to be kind to me." Her eyes had dropped, but now she raised them again and met mine earnestly. "Yes," she exclaimed–"yes, I *will* have you for a friend."

"Then won't you begin by making use of me at once?" I pleaded with an eagerness I could no longer disguise.

"I–am I not making use of you now? Ah, I know what you mean! You mean I am to tell you the things which I have let you see are troubling me? But much as I need help and advice, *could* I do that now, so soon? You must already think me a very strange girl–half mad perhaps. Well, I have had almost enough of late to drive me mad. Some time, in a few days maybe, when we know each other a little better, I—But the man is stopping. We have come to the doctor's you spoke of, I suppose?"

I neither blessed the cabman nor the doctor at that moment. Still less did I do so afterwards, knowing that, if we had not been interrupted then, it might well have happened that the whole course of our two lives had been changed.

However, there was nothing to be done but ascertain if the eminent man was at home, and able to give his attention to a somewhat urgent case.

The poor girl, too, was evidently suffering, and in a highly nervous state, and it would have been cruel, now that the opportunity had presented itself, to keep her for a single instant from the restoratives doubtless at hand.

Dr. Byrnes was to be seen. I introduced Miss Cunningham to him, described the accident, and left him to do what he could for the injured ankle. Afterwards I had still the joy of driving to Park Lane with her in anticipation.

I was only called when Dr. Byrnes was ready to send his patient away.

"Do you know what was the first thing that this young lady did before I had time to begin my ministrations?" he jocularly enquired, and though the girl looked up at him with imploring eyes, he persisted. "Why, she fainted away, and if she had to do it, she couldn't have chosen a more proper occasion. There I was, with all the known remedies at hand, and I proceeded to use them, with the most satisfactory results, as you may see. I don't think you will have any further trouble in going home; and now that she has been well dosed and well bandaged, the best thing she can do is to eat a hearty luncheon."

Once again settled in the cab, we were but a few moments' drive from Sir Walter Tressidy's house in Park Lane, as I knew to my intense regret. With wily

forethought, however, I suggested going somewhat out of our way to the establishment of a certain bicycle manufacturer and mender, who would send for Miss Cunningham's machine, and repair it before the accident it had met with could be conjectured by those not supposed to know.

Try as I would I could not induce her to continue the conversation which had been broken short. The brief interval that had passed since then had severed the threads of intense emotion which had for the moment united us, and she, evidently repenting her frankness, was visibly ill at ease. It was only at the door that her manner warmed a little towards me again.

"Yes, I believe I am quite all right," she said, in answer to a question. "I shall not even have a suspicion of a limp." She held out her hand to me, and did not try to draw it away, though I grasped it rather longer and more tightly than conventionality might have approved. "You will come–soon–to see Lady Tressidy and–me?" she asked, softly.

"I thought of calling to-morrow afternoon. May I?"

"I shall be glad–very glad. Never shall I forget your kindness to me to-day. Don't think me any more–odd–than you can help. Good-bye."

Before I could begin to tell her how impossible it would be to think any save the most reverent thoughts of her she was gone, and a cloud seemed suddenly to darken my sky.

CHAPTER VIII
An Announcement

I would have given a year of my life to know what was the trouble and anxiety which so wrought upon Karine Cunningham. She was young, and it might be that her youth and her sex caused her mentally to exaggerate what was in reality a trifle; yet, even with my slight knowledge of her, I could not believe this to be the case.

Many conjectures passed in review before me, but that which seemed to carry with it most weight of reason was the idea that her guardian and his wife were attempting to coerce her into some course which was distasteful to her. Naturally, the thought of an objectionable lover occurred to me, and made my blood run the faster through my veins. I could not forgive the unknown and possible for being a lover, even though he were to her an objectionable one.

I longed for the next day to come that I might see the beautiful girl again, but scarcely in the same way that I had longed for it before. There could be no repetition of the half confidences of to-day, the suggestions of friendship (friendship–what a mockery!), the adorable glances which meant trust, and a gratitude which I had not deserved.

Lady Tressidy would unfortunately be present. My visit would ostensibly be paid to her. Already I began to dislike her and fancy that her conduct towards the young girl entrusted to her care must have been mysteriously atrocious.

No, I could not expect much from the call, having been blessed with an unexpected glimpse of heaven which it could not give back to me again. Still, I thought of little else until the coming of the very earliest hour at which I could show myself in Park Lane on the following day.

Yes, Lady Tressidy was at home, vouchsafed a solemn footman. My name was announced, and I scarcely ventured to lift my eyes on entering the drawing-room, lest they should tell me that Karine was not there. Perhaps she was ill. Indeed, it seemed only too likely that she should be so. I wondered I had not mentally confronted that probability before.

There were a number of guests assembled in the room, it seemed to me, despite

the fact that everybody who was anybody was supposed to be spending the Christmas season far away in other people's country houses.

At length, when I had had a few words with my hostess, the crowd resolved itself into a dozen persons at most, and seeing Karine at a far end of the room surrounded by three or four vacuous-looking young men, I desperately resolved to outstay everybody.

I had scarcely more than a glance and a smile from Miss Cunningham, and then I found myself obliged to talk with simulated amiability to a semi-young woman who was anxious I should know how often she had heard of me and my "travels," and that she had read the two or three books I had been idiot enough to write. Half an hour went by. I had been passed on to other ladies, who seemed to my prejudiced eyes to bear an astonishing family likeness, both in mind and face, to the first of the series. Three or four people had gone. One or two new ones had come in, but at last I had had the good fortune to escape from the latest on my list of acquaintances.

I could still see Karine. She had got rid of one of her adorers, but had a couple yet in hand, and it appeared to me that she would not be sorry to bid them adieu.

At all events, her face was pale as a lily petal held against the light, her sweet lips drooped wistfully at the corners, and I thought she spoke but seldom. The smile with which she had greeted me had been fleeting, and even as it lingered there had been an expression in her large soft eyes which it galled me that I should be too dull to read. It had seemed to say, "Something has happened since I saw you last. Why did you offer me your friendship, when it was too late to give me any help?"

No doubt, I told myself, this was but a morbid fancy of mine. If I could have known the true motive of the glance I should have interpreted what appeared like unutterable sadness as mere boredom.

Instead of the earnest appeal or reproach, I imagined at most the eyes intended to say, "I have talked long enough with these stupid men, none of whom have minds above cricket or football. Relieve me of them, please."

But I had not even been able to do that, though I had tried, for as I attempted to oust the boldest of the group in my own favour, Lady Tressidy had swept across the room, with sharp rustling of silken linings and satin skirts, to claim me for an introduction to "an old friend who had longed for years to know me."

At length, however, as I said, I had contrived an escape, and was finding my way

towards Karine, when, before I had reached her, I saw her start, staring past me with a white, frozen look on her face that for the moment blotted out much of its innocent youthfulness and beauty.

She was gazing in the direction of the door, with dark, dilated eyes, and lips tightly closed in a line of scarlet that faded to palest pink.

It was as though into the midst of the gossip and laughter and brilliant light had crept a spectre which she alone could see. Some such look I had seen in the eyes of a dove which had been offered up as food for a constrictor. Involuntarily I turned and glanced behind me.

No name had been announced, though I had heard the opening and closing of the door, and now, as I faced round in that direction, I saw that Sir Walter Tressidy and Carson Wildred had come in together.

Evidently this was not Wildred's first entrance, for like Sir Walter, he had neither hat nor stick. He moved forward by his companion's side with the unmistakably-assured air of the friend of the house, and I instinctively understood that he had lunched with the Tressidys, and since that time had been closeted on some business of importance with his host.

Unreasoningly, I hated him for his privileges. With more of reason, I hated him because I believed the look I had seen for a single instant on Karine Cunningham's face was connected with his presence.

That look was gone now. When I removed my eyes from Wildred, and turned again to her, her delicate, spiritual profile only was visible. Her head was graciously inclined towards the monocled youth who stood nearest her. She appeared no longer to see Wildred or Sir Walter Tressidy.

I was determined that the former should not approach her (as he seemed inclined to do) if I could prevent it.

I hurried to her accordingly, and shut her away from the room, with a pair of broad shoulders, and with an air of monopolising her which I should not have dared at any other time to assume. But was I not her friend? Had I not the right to protect her, if I could, from all that I believed to be distasteful to her?

Presently, the callow youths, whose claims I had hardly considered, seemed to melt away, and I was left alone with her. People were going, and it was getting late, no doubt, but I did not yet mean to follow their example. After all–despite my dismal presages–it did appear that I was to have her for at least a moment or two to myself.

I had kept my word. I had outstayed them all–all but Carson Wildred.

"Have you quite recovered from yesterday's accident?" I asked, glad to share even so insignificant a secret with her.

"Yes, oh, yes!" She spoke hurriedly, and her eyes had moved to the distant group near the fireside–Lady Tressidy, Carson and Sir Walter.

"You haven't reconsidered your promise that I should be your friend?"

She turned to me quickly, and her eyes brimmed with unshed tears. "So many things in my life, though it is not so very long as yet, have come to me *too late*. Even–my friends–sometimes."

Before I could beg her to tell me what she meant, Lady Tressidy had called her name, and she sprang up obediently. I followed suit, of course.

"Come here, my dear girl. Mr. Stanton, this is quite a momentous day for us, and I can't resist the temptation to take you into our circle and our confidence," said the elder woman, graciously. "It is just settled that this sweet adopted child of ours is to leave us–and at short notice too. She and Mr. Wildred *are going to be married*."

CHAPTER IX
Too Late!

"Too late!" the words that Karine had just spoken echoed in my ears like a knell of doom.

For a few tremendous seconds that seemed endless I stood paralysed by Lady Tressidy's announcement, unable to speak. Then I turned and looked at Karine. Her eyes seemed to have been waiting for mine, and for an instant I held them with my gaze, until they fell, and veiled the answer mine had asked, with long shadowy lashes.

Never, I thought, as my thirsty eyes drank in the beauty that was not for me, could there have been another woman so wholly lovely, so altogether desirable. I could have fallen on my knees before her, to touch the hem of her dainty gown with my lips, and cry out my love and longing for her. But instead I was called upon to say something civil, and therefore hypocritical, to the newly-engaged pair, and then, as soon as decency would permit my escape, to go out from her presence for ever, and face the black loneliness of my darkened life.

Only a few days had passed since first I had seen the beauty of her face, but already she dominated my every thought, and I knew that there was no hope of surcease from the aching pain of having lost her.

Had I been obliged to stand by and see her give herself to any other man than Carson Wildred, it seemed to me that the blow would have been more bearable. But with my almost unreasoning aversion for and distrust of him, the thought of a marriage between these two was like the sacrifice of fair virgins to the foul, blood-dripping jaws of the mythical Minotaur.

Slight as was our actual acquaintance, when measured by mere time, it appeared the maddest conceit on my part to believe for a moment that had I come earlier into her life I might have made a difference. But, mad as it was, I did so believe. Some voice within me, which would not be stilled or brook contradiction, cried aloud that I might have won her love, that she might have been mine, that only some devilish tangle of circumstances had circumvented the fate which originally had meant that we two should be all in all to one another.

It was perhaps the hardest task I had ever been forced to perform when after that ominous pause, which doubtless seemed far more prolonged to me than to the others, I held out my hand, as I was expected to do, taking Miss Cunningham's ice-cold fingers in mine, and wishing her happiness.

Then I was obliged to turn to Wildred, in whose eyes I saw, or fancied I saw, a malicious light of comprehension and triumphant defiance. But his hand I would not take.

"It is hardly necessary to congratulate you," I said haltingly. "You are one of the most fortunate men in the world."

"And the most undeserving?" It was he who added the words, as though he had read them in my own mind; and there was a slight, sarcastic rising inflection of the voice at the end of the sentence, as if he put it to me as a question.

Of course, I vouchsafed him no answer, unless he found it in my eyes, which have ever been telltales. But in that moment I would have laid down my life could I have wrenched from my memory that episode of his history, the secret of which it mercilessly withheld from me.

I have a dim recollection of saying something more or less conventional to Sir Walter and Lady Tressidy, and then, at last, I got away.

I had fancied that not to have her face before my eyes, that not to endure the pang of seeing them together, and to escape into the open air, would relieve the tension of my feelings. But it was not so. The moment the door had closed behind me the agony of the thought that I had seen her perhaps for the last time, and the poignancy of my regret that I had not been able to put to her one question which rang in my brain, became well-nigh unendurable.

I walked rapidly away from the house, telling myself that the best thing for me would be to leave England again at once. I had been a fool to fancy myself homesick, and to come back–to *this*. So far my life had been lived contentedly enough apart from the influence or love of women. What strange weakness of the soul had seized me that I should thus have yielded without a struggle to a single glance from a pair of violet eyes?

Yes, assuredly the sooner I got away the better. There had been nothing save a restless desire for home to bring me to my native land. There was *less* than nothing to keep me there.

Never to see her again–never again! I believed that my mind was made up, and yet I think I would have cut off my hand for the chance of one more moment

with her–one more glimpse of her face to take away across the sea, even though she neither saw nor spoke to me.

I walked aimlessly in the darkness, knowing not and caring not where I went. I heard a clock strike eight, realising suddenly that I was far from my hotel, and that I had wearied myself uselessly.

I must write some letters that night, crying off two or three engagements that I had been foolish enough to make, and explaining that I had been suddenly and unexpectedly called away. As I had walked I had made up my mind whither I would go. India would be rather good at this time of year, I thought, and I had always promised myself, when I should find the leisure, to make certain explorations. There had also been an idea smouldering in my mind for a year or two that with my knowledge of the language, and a proper disguise, it might be possible for me to push my way into the jealously guarded Thibet. Now was the very moment for some such experiments as these.

I hailed a cab and drove back to the Savoy, from a distant and more or less (to me) unknown region of London. Try as I might to keep my thoughts from the one absorbing topic by dwelling upon the plans for the future, the effort was useless. Karine's face was before me, and again and again I heard her words, which might have meant so much or so little, "Many things in my life–even my *friends* sometimes–have come to me too late."

As I entered the hotel, my eyes dazzled by the sudden brilliant light, I could hardly for an instant believe that it was not an optical illusion when I saw in the flesh the face which had been haunting me.

But it was indeed she; there was no doubting that. People were coming into the Savoy for dinner, now so fashionable a way of passing the deadly dull London Sunday evening, and in a moment I had guessed that she and her party were of the number. I had even an impression of a sentence begun by Lady Tressidy that afternoon, which would doubtless have ended with the information that she and the others were dining at my hotel in the evening, had she not been interrupted, and so forgotten, as I had done.

There had been a dreary drizzle of rain outside, and I was conscious that my long wanderings through muddy streets had rendered me unpresentable. Still, my wish had been granted me. There stood Karine Cunningham, in white from head to foot; a long soft evening cloak, with shining silver threads straying over its snowy surface, hung loosely about her, for she had fastened it at the throat, and I could see a gleam of bare neck, hung with a rope of pearls, and the delicate folds

of chiffon belted in with jewels at her girlish waist.

Her head was turned aside and slightly bent, a light from above streaming down on her uncovered hair, and transforming the copper into gold.

Sir Walter and Lady Tressidy were close by–not six feet away–and all were evidently waiting for someone–Carson Wildred, no doubt, I bitterly told myself.

None of the party had as yet seen me. Sir Walter and his wife were talking very earnestly together, and had perhaps moved a few steps from the young girl that their words might not be overheard by her.

I knew that, if I were wise, I would at once take myself off without announcing my presence, but a sudden impulse seized and overmastered me. It was a desperate one, doubtless, but none the less alluring and powerful because of that.

CHAPTER X
"If He Had Committed a Crime"

Karine stood, as I said, perhaps a couple of yards distant from her friends, and their backs, at the present moment, were more than half turned to her. It would be just possible for me to speak to her, without being observed by them, if I were both extraordinarily cautious and lucky. At any moment Wildred, who had perhaps gone to rectify some vexatious mistake about a table, might return. If I meant to take the step at all there was no time to be lost in doing so.

Without giving myself a second for further reflection, and with the blood surging to my temples, I found myself, with a few strides, beside her. Mud-stained boots and trousers were forgotten. I would waste no time in apologising for my appearance.

What she must have thought of my pale and eager face, suddenly bent over her, I do not know. I felt that a great crisis in my life, perhaps in hers as well, had arrived, and my eyes must have shown something of that which stirred so passionately in mind and heart, for she started with a look almost of fear as she saw and recognised me.

She uttered no exclamation, however. If she had, Sir Walter and Lady Tressidy would have heard and looked round, and my one chance, so desperately snatched from Fate, would have been gone like a bubble that bursts ere it has fairly expanded.

Without one spoken word I made her see that she must come with me, and the quick realisation of my power over her, as she laid her hand upon my arm unhesitatingly, thrilled me to the very core of my being.

Most women would have refused to come, or at least questioned my sudden appearance and intention, but not so with her. She knew that I had something to say to her which must be said, and it was her will to hear it.

She had been pale as a statue of marble, as she stood leaning listlessly against the wall in her white dress, but as she moved away with me life and colour came back to her face. I led her down the hall to a small public drawing-room, and not once did she hesitate or look back, unconventional as was the adventure in which

she was engaged.

Luckily, the place was empty, save for two elderly French women, who gossiped and gabbled with their heads close together on a sofa in a corner.

"What is it–oh, what is it?" questioned Karine. "Quick! there will only be a moment, I know, for they will see that I have gone, and will soon find me here."

Without any preface I came straight to the asking of the bald, crude question which was in my mind to ask.

"For the sake of–our friendship, Miss Cunningham, forgive me, and tell me whether you love Carson Wildred?"

She started and quivered almost as though I had struck her a blow, and her large, frightened eyes studied mine for a long second without answering. Then she said, simply, "No, my friend, I do not–love him."

"Yet you have promised to marry him?"

"Yes."

"And you mean to carry out that promise?"

"Yes, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Something–happens to prevent me."

"If you do not love him something *shall* prevent. Let me help you. For heaven's sake, let me! Only give me an idea how it can best be done–I ask no more. I will teach you what such a–friendship as mine can have the power to do."

I hoped to give her courage by the passion and force of my words, but, strangely enough, the bright eagerness died out of her face as I spoke. In some way I had missed saying the thing which might have comforted her. If I had only known–if I had only known!

"You are very kind," she said, gently and sadly. "I am not looking forward to any great degree of happiness in my life, but I daresay, after all, I shall get on as well as most women. I don't think anything *will* happen to prevent–what we were speaking of."

"Why, is it to come so soon, then?" I questioned, impetuously.

"In six weeks. It was all arranged to-day"–with a soft little sigh at the end of her sentence.

"Tell me this: Are you in any way being forced into the marriage?"

"Not by people–exactly. Only by *circumstances*. I–I can't tell you any more, though, believe me, I am grateful for all you mean, and all you would do for friendship's sake." There seemed a faint ring of stifled bitterness in the last three words, though wherefore it should come I knew not. If she had resented the warmth of my "friendship" after our brief acquaintance, what would she feel, I dimly wondered, should I forget myself, and be coward and fool enough to tell her of my mad love on the very day of her betrothal to another man?

With all my strength I held my tongue under control, and heaven knows it was no easy victory, with those sweet eyes looking into mine!

"Tell me what *could* prevent it?" I persisted imploringly. "If you found that he was unworthy, would that—"

She half smiled, though without any mirthfulness. "There are so many degrees of unworthiness, aren't there? And I am not near enough to perfection to believe myself a judge."

"If *he had committed a crime*?" I went desperately on. And the words on my own lips made me start as though with a sudden revelation. I seemed to have assured myself of a fact which had actually taken place, rather than uttered a mere suggestion. The conviction grew within me that if Carson Wildred had not successfully altered his face and each characteristic of his personality, I should at once be able not only to remember, but to prove that my haunting half-recollection was intimately connected with some criminal deed done by him.

"Ah, *then*! But it is wrong to wish that he should have been guilty of any wickedness. I think, Mr. Stanton, that as I have promised to be his wife we must talk no more of this–you and I. I have always had a horror of disloyalty."

"I know," I said, "that I have done an unheard-of thing in thus stealing you away from your friends to ask you questions which only the most intimate friends could claim the right to ask, but—"

"Oh," she cried, impulsively. "Somehow you and I have bridged over years. You are good to me–don't think I will misunderstand. I shall always remember you, and–what you would have done for me."

"What I shall try *yet* to do, in spite of all," I amended. "I meant to leave England soon, but now–I shall stay."

"Yes–stay," she faintly echoed; "though you must leave me now. I–I would rather *anything* than that you were with me when they come to me. I will make them

some excuse for having separated myself from them. Only go now–*please* go." As she spoke, outside in the hall we heard voices and footsteps coming nearer.

CHAPTER XI
Wildred Scores

Karine's face grew paler than before.

Throwing up her head with a proud, spirited little gesture, she walked quickly to the door, and passed into the hall.

I knew that this was to prevent her friends from entering and finding us together, as they must otherwise have done; and there was nothing for me to do (cowardly as this seemed) but obey her, and passively submit to the carrying out of her scheme.

It had indeed been Sir Walter and Lady Tressidy and Carson Wildred whose voices we had heard.

"Why did you run away? We have been looking for you everywhere, and wasting *so* much time!" I heard Lady Tressidy say fretfully.

"I was very tired of standing," the girl promptly returned, "and of *waiting*, too"–with a certain imperiousness in her tone. "I wandered away to fill up the time till Mr. Wildred should have straightened matters in the dining-room."

She had contrived to satisfy their curiosity without telling an actual falsehood, of which I knew instinctively she would greatly dislike making herself guilty.

It did not seem to occur to them to enter the drawing-room where she had left me; and when I was sure that they had passed out of sight and hearing I came forth from the ignominious hiding-place to which her command had condemned me.

In the exalted mood which had possession of me the thought of dinner would have been abhorrent. For the rest of the evening I kept my room, meditating many things, and becoming more and more desirous of learning Carson Wildred's secret, if secret indeed he had.

At all events, I still had six weeks in which to work, with the hope ever before me of saving Karine Cunningham from the man whom, by her own confession, she did not love.

Strange and desperate expedients passed in review before me. How was I to accomplish my object? The man had denied ever having met me in old days when it had been mentioned to him that I fancied a previous acquaintance had somewhere existed; and if I were to learn anything satisfactory in regard to his antecedents I felt that it must be from others.

He had made himself a name in a certain set in London, there was no doubt of that; and I set myself to find out, step by step, how he had contrived to do it–what was the actual foundation for the reports of his wealth, his "smartness," his influence on many sides.

On the following day, Monday, I went to my old club, the Wayfarers, which I had not yet troubled with my presence, and picked out a man named Driscoll, who made a business of knowing everybody and everything. Beginning with some conventional talk about the changes in England in general, and London in particular, since I had seen it last, I managed to mention Carson Wildred without appearing to have dragged his name into the conversation for any special purpose of my own.

It sprang from some talk about a British Christmas, and I made as humorous a story as I could about my having gone down to the House by the Lock only to miss my friend and my dinner after all.

"Wildred can entertain royally if he chooses," said Driscoll. "I've been to dinners he gave at the Savoy and Prince's, and Willis's Rooms, don't you know, something really quite original, with flowers alone which must have cost a fortune. People come to his entertainments, too–he can get anybody he wants–from the duchesses down to the music-hall favourites, even if he likes to get up a conventional river party, with a spread down at that queer place of his you speak of–the House by the Lock."

"It is a queer place indeed," I echoed. "I wonder how he came by it?"

"Oh, if the stories are true, in a way as peculiar as the place itself, therefore appropriate. It was owned, I know for a matter of fact, by an Italian whose father was exiled, and came over here to live after '48, a chap by the name of di Tortorelli, belonged to a good family and all that, had the *entrée* everywhere. The son, a nice fellow except that he was weak, loved nothing so well as baccarat. Somehow he and Wildred got acquainted, when Wildred was little known, if at all, in society, and the two played cards on rather a big scale at the house of a mutual friend. Di Tortorelli had bad luck one night, lost a pot of money, and finally, having nothing else left that was worth having, staked the

House by the Lock–very dilapidated, and in a shocking state of repair.

"Well, that's the way Wildred got it, and there are those who do say that after having won almost everything Tortorelli had, Wildred financed him till his marriage with a rich American on the proviso that Tortorelli should get him into the smart set. Those are only Wildred's enemies, of course, for like most men of strong character he has a few, though on the whole his generosity has made him extremely popular."

"Then he knew no one when he first appeared over the social horizon?" I went on questioning.

Driscoll laughed. "I never heard of anyone who knew him before the day when he first blazed forth as a social luminary about three or four years ago. He took a house in town for the season, I remember–it was the Duke of Torquay's–one of the finest in town, and let for a fabulous sum. Then he and Tortorelli gave an entertainment together, somehow securing several royalties, to say nothing of Paderewski and La Belle Otero, and one or two other celebrities, who must each have cost him anywhere from a thousand to two thousand pounds for the one night.

"After that, Wildred was made, of course, for the affair was a brilliant success. By the way, that was the first time he ever met the beautiful Miss Cunningham, who had just made a triumphant *début* as the beauty of the season–in fact, most people think the most beautiful girl who has been seen since the day when Mrs. Langtry created her first sensation in London. Miss Cunningham was at the party with the Tressidys, and *blasé* chap as he was even then, Wildred went down at the first shot from a pair of dark eyes–violet?–brown?–no one ever yet was sure of their colour. Of course she's a great heiress, but the man must be blind and paralysed who couldn't fall in love with Karine Cunningham for herself; and however he gets it, Carson Wildred has no lack of money of his own."

"How does gossip say he gets it?" I went on to enquire with eagerness which I concealed as best I could.

"Oh, gossip doesn't trouble itself much in that way!" Driscoll laughed. "It only concerns itself to eat his dinners, for as a matter of fact, though I can't exactly vouch for it myself, there isn't much secret about the way the money pours in. It's the man's extraordinary luck! He seems to have a lot of relations who are always good-naturedly going off the hooks and leaving Wildred fortunes just when he needs them most. Old fellows in the Antipodes, don't you know, who might really quite as well be dead as not. It's all straight enough, of course, but

the funny thing is that if one hears one day that Wildred has come rather a cropper at Newmarket or the Derby, or somewhere else, the news within the month is pretty sure to be that another Johnny in Australia or elsewhere has conveniently slipped his cable and left Wildred a cool fifty thousand or so at the very least."

Hardly had the laughter prompted by his own words died on Driscoll's lips, when to my astonishment the man of whom we spoke sauntered into the room. He was looking at peace with all the world, and as nearly handsome as it was possible for him to look, the contrast between him and the podgy, elderly gentleman by whom he was accompanied being much to his advantage.

"Talking of angels!" ejaculated Driscoll beneath his breath; "what do you think of that for a coincidence?"

"Is he a member here?" I asked in an equally low voice, for I did not wish Wildred to have the satisfaction of guessing that he had formed the subject of conversation between me and my companion.

"No," Driscoll said, "but he often comes in with old Wigram, who's been a great traveller, you know, and who now goes in no end for dabbling in chemistry. That's Wildred's great fad, and makes the two, who are as different as possible, rather chummy."

As we spoke on, still in somewhat cautious tones, the two newcomers drew nearer to us, greeting several men whom they knew, and finally sat down. The room felt the colder to me for Carson Wildred's presence.

Half an hour dragged along, and I was thinking of moving on, when, as I passed Wildred with a slight inclination in return for his, somewhat to my surprise he followed me.

"How do you do?" he said, with an attempt at an ingratiating smile. "Now, if you won't think me rude for the suggestion, I'd be willing to bet you a hundred pounds to a fiver that you and Driscoll were doing me the honour of discussing some of my affairs, if not myself, when I happened to look in just now."

Here was a good opening for a conversation unweighted by polite fictions, and I unhesitatingly accepted it. "Yes," I replied, quietly, turning more fully towards him, "we were talking of you and your affairs."

"I readily divined that from the look on Driscoll's innocent old mug as I entered. I am remarkably quick at reading other people's faces."

"I have flattered myself that I am the same–when the faces have not been altered

almost (if not quite) beyond recognition."

I looked full into his curious pale eyes as I gave him this hint, but they did not fall before mine, and his dark, sallow skin could scarcely be paler than its wont.

He returned my stare, and was not afraid to show me that my meaning had made itself clearly understood.

"Why speak in riddles, my dear Mr. Stanton?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders a little. "But as we have got upon this subject, suppose we follow it up to the end–bitter or otherwise–and as you may not care to take all your fellow-Wayfarers into your inmost confidence, I suggest that we move out of earshot of the mob. Here are a couple of chairs, and a table, far from the madding crowd. Shall we sit for five minutes or so? Thanks. And won't you let me offer you a cigar? These are not bad ones. A present from the Shahzada last year!"

I courteously refused the offer, watching him with some interest as, pretending to be unconscious of or indifferent to my scrutiny, he struck a match and lighted his cigar.

"I have already frankly assured you, Mr. Stanton," he went on, "that I am not aware of having met you before the other night–Christmas Eve, I think it was–at the theatre with my very good friend Farnham. But you evidently wish me to see that you still firmly believe I am–er–mistaken. Am I not stating the case correctly? But it is certainly far from flattering to me that you should have almost completely forgotten me, to say the least."

"I shall remember you again, sooner or later," I murmured.

"I sincerely hope so, if in any way we have come across each other in the past, unknown to me. But I have been so well acquainted with you by reputation for some years, Mr. Stanton, that I would be ready to swear my memory could not have played me false."

I did not reply, save by a slight upward movement of the eyebrows, but I was conscious that he was gazing at me intently.

"You do not like me," he remarked presently, in the same low, monotonous tone of voice which we had employed so far throughout our disjointed conversation.

It was my turn to shrug my shoulders. "I should not be apt to select you as a friend."

"I wonder"–very slowly and lazily–"whether it be possible that I can in any way, quite inadvertently, *have interfered with your plans*?"

"Rather say," I broke out imprudently, "that it is possible *I* may interfere with yours!"

He laughed. "I wonder how?"

"In no definite way, unless–I should happen suddenly to remember exactly where and how I have met you before. That little accident might slightly hamper your career in general for the future perhaps."

"You are pleased to be insulting. And yet, somehow, I don't want to take offence from you. I would much prefer to argue you out of your somewhat unreasonable prejudice and mistake. Do you suggest, for instance, that I am now concealing my identity under a disguise?"

So speaking he raised his hand with a pretence at carelessness, pushing his dark hair from his forehead in such a way as to assure me without doubt that he did not wear a wig.

"The moustache–allow me to give you an ocular demonstration–is equally genuine," he sneered. "I don't sport a false nose, or I should have procured myself a more desirable one, and my teeth"–with a disagreeable grin–"are my own. Have I convinced you that I have not tampered with Nature's handiwork, such as it is?"

"You might have waited, Mr. Wildred," I returned, "until I had accused you of doing so before trying to prove the contrary. You know the saying, 'He who excuses, accuses himself,' I suppose?"

"I have heard it, though fortunately it does not concern the case. Look here, Mr. Stanton, you and I are sitting here among mutual friends, apparently holding, so far as they can see or hear, an amicable discussion. But the truth is I have wit enough to understand that what you would like and what you mean is–*war to the knife*! Fortunately for me, I am one of Her Majesty's most peaceable, law-abiding subjects, and always have been so. I have as little to hide in my past as any man can possibly have–less than yourself even, it may be–and therefore I do not fear your prying, and can afford to laugh at your impertinence.

"I will even have my family tree brought out for your benefit if you choose, and will engage to show you the diary which I have kept for years, and where you can see exactly how and where my time has been spent for the last decade or so. Anything to please a famous, and therefore privileged, man like yourself. Is it a bargain, Mr. Stanton–will you accept my data if I provide it for you?"

"So great an anxiety to disarm the suspicions of a stranger might tend to confirm

and strengthen them," I said, slowly.

"As you will. I see you don't intend to take my overtures of peace in the spirit in which they were offered. Well, you seem fond of proverbs, so here is a Roland for your Oliver–'*forewarned is forearmed*.' You will not have me for a friend; you are indiscreet enough to advise me that you intend to make mischief for me if you can–*if you can*, mind! My conscience is clear as to my past; and here and now I dare you to do your worst!"

Leaning his elbow on the table, his head upon his hand, he faced me, looking up sideways with a mocking brilliance in his pale eyes.

"It is my turn to give you warning, and it is this: *I make a bad enemy*. Even had I some black secret, jealously guarded for years–which I haven't–you would never drag it from me. I believe myself to be a cleverer man than you, and if I had chosen the *rôle* of villain I should have been a successful one, there is no doubt. You would not, Mr. Stanton. Had I something which it was vital to my interests to conceal, I should have gone about it in such a way that not the devil himself pitted against me should worm my secret from me. Had I elected to commit a crime, it would not have been until after I was ready with an absolutely infallible *alibi*.

"Now, if you are sensible, the very fact that I have made these admissions will prove my innocence to you. It will be a waste of your valuable time if you attempt to stand in my way, in *any quarter whatever*." He rose lazily. "Good-evening, Mr. Stanton," he said, in a louder tone, which he made both cordial and impressive for the benefit of any listening ears. "This has been a most interesting chat with you, one I am not likely soon to forget. I hope it may not be long before I have the pleasure of meeting you again."

He had certainly scored. I was obliged, hot with indignation and self-scorn, mentally to confess as much. He had kept his temper, and he had got the better of me. If my time would only come!

CHAPTER XII
Karine's Engagement Ring

In the first hour of my anguish after hearing that Karine was lost to me, I had come very near to registering a vow that voluntarily I would not see her again. Now, however, since our memorable chance meeting in the hotel, my resolve was different. I determined, on the contrary, that I would see her as often as possible.

Even if I had to follow the Tressidys into the country on a pretence of hunting, or some other flimsy pretext of the sort, I would be near her. I had luckily kept my head sufficiently to breathe no word of love to Karine. I had even dwelt with some emphasis upon my "friendship," as though to assure her that she need fear no more, need dread no persecution at my hands. I believed that she did not suspect my real feeling for her, and certainly Sir Walter and Lady Tressidy had no reason to fancy anything of the kind.

Wildred had suspicions, I was sure, but they could only have been born of quick and jealous intuitions. He could make no charge against me, and it was not likely, I thought, that he would choose deliberately to put such an idea into his *fiancée's* head, unless I were far less cautious in my behaviour than I meant to be.

I could not conceal from myself that the talk I had had with the fellow at the Wayfarers' had somewhat discouraged me as to the ultimate success of my efforts to expose him, and as days went on I found it impossible entirely to shake off the impression made by his words.

His personality was disagreeably magnetic to me. I had to acknowledge its power, and in spite of myself there were moments when I felt daunted by his defiance.

Had he not been very sure of himself he would not have dared to say what he had said. I believed, as firmly as ever, that there was a black spot in his past, upon which I could put my finger if only I could place him in my mental gallery of photographs, in which his portrait had been so mysteriously blurred or changed. But he and Karine Cunningham would in all probability be man and

wife at the end of six weeks; and six weeks was, after all, but a short space in which to tear the mask from so preternaturally clever a scoundrel.

I thought then (and even yet, I trust) that my resolution to save Karine from this man, if I were able to do so, was not all selfishness.

Knowing nothing, yet suspecting much with haunting vagueness, it seemed a horrible desecration to me that the beautiful, gentle girl should be given up to Wildred. I had little enough hope for myself with her, whatever might betide, for even had it been possible, under happier circumstances, that she could have learned to care for me, she and her friends would be sure to misunderstand and condemn my motives in working against the man she had promised to marry.

Should I have the good fortune to show him to her and those in authority over her, as the villain I believed him to be, I could not imagine myself ever attempting to take selfish advantage of his downfall.

What I might do, or try to do, I told myself, must be without any hope of future reward.

I had persuaded myself that the oftener I could see Karine, and impress upon her the strength and disinterestedness of my friendship, silently assuring her of my unforgotten resolve to help, the better it would be for her. She had said once that she had "many acquaintances but no friends," and she had seemed glad to welcome my friendship; so that now I wanted her to see I did not mean to fail her–that, after all, it might not be as she had thought, *too late*. At least, I succeeded in convincing myself that these were my only motives in calling again within the week on Lady Tressidy.

It was Thursday, and the family was to flit away to the country on the following afternoon. I was informed of this by the footman, whose duty it was to tell me that his mistress was superintending her packing at the moment, but would be down almost immediately. Meanwhile, Miss Cunningham was in Lady Tressidy's boudoir, and would see me.

I could scarcely believe in my good luck, and in her courage–or good nature.

She had been writing at a little davenport by the window, but rose to receive me, and extended her hand. To the other–the left–she had transferred the pen, with the ink still wet, and so it was that as she greeted me my eyes fell upon a ring which had not before adorned her finger.

It was the third of the left hand, and to my amazement I recognised the magnificent diamond–still in the old setting–worn for so many years by Harvey

Farnham.

CHAPTER XIII

"Kismet and Miss Cunningham"

Had I paused for an instant's reflection I must have felt that it would be impossible for me to take any open notice of the ring, but so great was my surprise at seeing Harvey Farnham's treasured possession on Miss Cunningham's finger that involuntarily I uttered a slight exclamation.

Biting her lip she hastily withdrew the hand, dashing the pen she had been holding with a petulant little gesture on to the desk where she had been writing.

"Why do you look so astonished," she cried, a certain bitterness in her voice, "at seeing me wear the sign of my bondage?"

She tried to laugh as she spoke, giving an effect of lightness to the words, but the effort was a failure.

I would not let her continue to think that she was right in the guess she had made as to my emotion.

"It was not wholly that, Miss Cunningham," I returned. "Say, rather I was surprised at seeing you wear this particular ring."

"It *is* a remarkable one, isn't it? Far too gorgeous and conspicuous to please me, for myself; but Mr. Wildred was anxious for me to have it. I believe it has been in his family a long time, and has been handed down from generation to generation of betrothed brides–happier than myself." The last three words were spoken almost in a whisper, but I heard and understood them as I would have understood the faintest murmur from those lips so dearly loved.

Some dim awakening thought, scarcely clear to my own consciousness, stirred in my mind at her strange announcement. I could not resist further questioning.

"Did Mr. Wildred tell you that the ring was an heirloom in his family?"

"Yes. There is a romance attached to it."

She sighed faintly, as though at the death of romance in her own young life. Then, more quickly–

"Why, Mr. Stanton? Why do you ask me that?"

I could not tell her why; but my heart was bounding with a new excitement.

"Forgive my curiosity," I said evasively. "I am interested in all that concerns you."

She turned from me, ostensibly to arrange her scattered papers on the little davenport, and, relieved of the thraldom of those lovely eyes, I endeavoured to collect my scattered thoughts.

Somehow I felt that I was on the eve of a discovery which might be of vast importance in both our lives. How had Wildred obtained that ring from Harvey Farnham? Why had he lied about it to Karine? That he was a villain and a schemer I was sure, though I had had no possible means of proving it. What if this seemingly small matter should put a clue into my hands.

So clever a scoundrel should not have committed himself to a lie thus easily disproved, I thought. Only *necessary* lies were worth the risk for a man of acumen such as his. But even the most crafty of mortals is fallible, I reflected, and liable to make some insignificant mistake, which, like one stone wrongly placed in the foundation of a vast building, renders the whole structure unstable. Possibly Wildred had found a stealthy pleasure in weaving a pretty romance round the ring which he had chosen as the sign of his betrothal, and in weaving it he had forgotten that I, as an acquaintance of Farnham's, might have been conversant with its real history. Or, perhaps, he had not counted upon the fact that Karine might retell the version he had given her to me.

I know how greatly Farnham had valued the marvellous diamond, in its quaint setting, and I remembered how, only on the night of our last meeting, he had reiterated to me his determination to keep it. It was too small to be removed save by cutting, he had said, and I had satisfied myself by observation that he had not exaggerated.

He must, then, have gone so far as to have the ring cut from his finger before sailing for America, that he might leave it as a parting pledge of friendship with Carson Wildred.

The rich, red gold circlet hung loosely enough, however, on Karine's slim little finger, and a sudden strong desire that she should allow me to look at it caught hold of me.

"Would it be asking too much," I said, "to have the wonderful heirloom in my hand to examine for a moment?"

Without a word she slipped the ring off and gave it to me, almost as though it

was a relief to feel its absence.

In a flash a certain recollection had leaped into my mind. There was an inscription inside, Harvey Farnham had told me. If the ring had been cut doubtless the words written within would show some trace of the violent treatment to which the band of gold had been subjected; and I wished, for a reason I hardly dared admit to myself, to ascertain if this were the case.

I moved towards the window and, ostensibly catching the light upon the facets of the matchless stone, peeped into the circlet. To my surprise the words inscribed on the gold were "Kismet and Miss Cunningham." They were absolutely unbroken, not a letter blurred, and the surface of the ring gave the appearance of having been untouched since first it was fashioned. I was certain that it had not been cut. This being so, how had the thing been removed from the finger of its owner?

"You are wondering at the words written inside, aren't you?" Karine asked, coming a little nearer to me. "It does seem extraordinary that they should be there, doesn't it, when you think that the ring was made many years ago, and was not intended for me at all? But–Mr. Wildred has explained the mystery, which is a part of the history of the heirloom, and accounts for his being particularly anxious for me to wear it."

I, too, could have explained the "mystery." I had been told by Farnham that the stone had come from the first diamond mine in which he had been interested. It had been fancifully dubbed "Kismet," and the gold mine, which he had lately sold to Carson Wildred, had (as he had informed me that night of our meeting at the theatre) rejoiced in the name of the "Miss Cunningham." Doubtless the inscription was intended to commemorate the fact that the gold forming the ring had been taken from the one mine, the diamond from the other. But, knowing all this, I was none the less anxious to hear what Karine might have to say.

"It does sound an odd coincidence," I remarked. "Will you tell me the story?"

I had a very specific object in carrying on this conversation; but as for Karine, I could feel that her part of it was sustained merely for the sake of keeping me from treading upon more dangerous ground. Yet despite this nervous anxiety of hers, I could see–or I flattered myself–that she was vaguely surprised and piqued that I should be willing to discuss so trifling a subject during the fleeting moments before Lady Tressidy might be expected to appear.

"You may hear the little romance if you like," the girl said, a faint wistfulness in her sweet voice. "Sixty or seventy years ago, Mr. Wildred tells me, a very

dashing ancestor of his fell in love with a Miss Cunningham. That is not a very uncommon name, you know. He was penniless, and she an heiress. Her father would have nothing to do with him, and told him he need not hope to win his daughter unless within a year he could afford to buy her the finest diamond betrothal ring ever seen in the country.

"The lover vowed it was 'Kismet' that he should marry Miss Cunningham, and swore to return and claim her, by slipping such a ring on her finger, exactly twelve months from the day he was sent away.

"He had the most extraordinary adventures in search of a fortune, always ending in failure, until the last month of the appointed time. He was in India, working in the diamond mines, when one day he found this very stone.

"He sailed at once for England, had the ring made, and the words you see engraved inside. As he had said, he arrived on the very day appointed, but only to find the girl coming out from church after her marriage with another man. He threw the ring at her feet, and flung himself away; but at her death it was sent back to him again, and though he never married, he gave it to his brother's bride on her wedding-day. Since then it has remained in the Wildred family."

I could have laughed aloud at this sentimental tale invented by the man (whom I now believed had somehow contrived to steal the jewel) to account for the commonplace words it would have been difficult to erase. Had I laughed, however, my laughter would have been bitter indeed, ending in an even increased desire to save from him and his trickery the girl I loved.

It is needless to say that I did not laugh, but something of what was in my mind must have been visible on my face, for Karine, as she finished her story, looked up at me searchingly. "What are you hiding from me, Mr. Stanton?" she anxiously questioned. "It is about the ring–and if you are my friend, as you say, you will not keep it a secret from me."

"It *is* about the ring, Miss Cunningham," I replied impulsively. "I can't tell you all, for the facts have hardly yet grouped themselves in my own brain. But if they have such bearing upon your happiness as I have some reason to think, you shall know them as soon as I can make them clear to you. Will you trust me meanwhile–will you try to remember that I am striving to collect facts which may help to release you from the necessity for an unworthy marriage? Never for one moment since I saw you last have I let slip the hope of saving you from what you confessed must be a blighted future. Now, I may be mistaken, but I believe that I begin to see my way!"

She looked at the ring, which I had returned to her, with startled, dilating eyes. "Something connected with *this*!" she murmured.

"Yes. It is as if I had placed my eye to that little circlet, looking through it as through a spyglass towards my goal. I shall work after this, Miss Cunningham, as I could not work before, because I have now a fixed starting-point. It may be an intricate tangle that I shall have to unravel, it may be a tedious task, yet—"

"There are only six weeks–*less* than six weeks to do it in!" she murmured, but a faint colour had sprung to her cheeks, a light of hope to her eyes.

"Is it not possible," I begged, "if I find myself near success, yet stopped temporarily midway by some unforeseen obstacle, that you can delay your marriage? Let me have that to hope for. It will help me to win."

She shook her head sadly, and the rose-flush died.

"It is useless to think of it," she said. "You may imagine, since I have confessed so much to you, that it was not *my* plan to name such an early date. It was Mr. Wildred who suggested it–indeed, he insisted, and unfortunately he is in a position to insist."

"Has nothing changed since we met at the Savoy?" I hurriedly asked. "Can't you explain to me the power which you admitted then that this man holds over you?"

"No, *nothing* is changed, Mr. Stanton! The reason that I cannot explain is–a part of his power, if you like to call it that."

"Heaven knows I do *not* like it!" I exclaimed, almost savagely. And as the words fell from my lips Lady Tressidy entered the room. She had finished superintending her packing, and the sight of her was a sudden sharp reminder that next day she would take Karine away.

CHAPTER XIV
An Extra Special

Lady Tressidy was so full of plans for the future–Karine's future with Carson Wildred–that my soul sickened of her chatter, and I took myself off as soon as it was decently possible to do so. With no further chance of private talk with Karine much of my incentive for remaining was gone, at all events, and I was anxious to think out the puzzle regarding the transfer of the ring.

To recapitulate, Farnham had announced his intention of keeping it until the necessity arose for having it cut from his finger. Still, it seemed he had not kept it, and it had not been cut off. The conviction was strong within me that Wildred had obtained the jewel by foul play. Yet how could he have done this, short of severing from the hand the finger that had worn it?

Strange fancies flitted luridly through my brain. In a few days more Harvey Farnham would have landed in New York, and I could reach him there at the hotel he had mentioned as his favourite; or in Denver, Colorado, if he had chosen to pursue his homeward journey without a night's delay.

I counted the hours which must pass before I could attempt any such communication, and they seemed to rise like a high wall between me and my hopes and my suspicions.

As I walked homeward, involuntarily hastening my footsteps, I heard the newsboys crying out some item of intelligence for the evening papers. "Extry Speshul! Extry Speshul!" "Mysterious Discovery in the Thames!"

So preoccupied was I that the words passed into my ears without making any definite impression on my mind; or, if they did, it was the mere rhythm of the different shouting voices that impressed itself upon me.

So often were they repeated from all sides as I walked on that at length the short sentences began to form a species of intoned accompaniment to my thoughts, without assuming a separate importance in my consciousness.

Suddenly, however, a grimy infant of tender years and appalling precocity flourished a pink sheet, smelling of the printer's ink, directly under my eyes.

"Buy a paper, guv-nor!" he cajoled me. "Hall abeout the 'orrid murder and the 'eadless man."

I seldom read evening papers, and to-night, of all nights, I had little inclination for such irrelevant mental diet. But I flung the child a copper, and found the halfpenny journal thrust into my hand.

I would have tossed it from me carelessly, but the headlines relating to the latest sensation caught my eye.

Then, forgetful of the crowds who stared at me in my agitation, I strode nearer to the white ball of electric light which had shone down upon the page.

CHAPTER XV
A Mystery of the Thames

It was the name, Purley Lock, which had fastened my attention. "Horrible Discovery near Purley Lock!" the headline announced. I read on, rapidly, but thoughtfully. Two boys from Great Marlow had, it seemed, been wandering beside the river bank, between that village and Purley Lock. Straying along a small backwater, leading out from a larger one, they had noticed a peculiar object caught among a number of reeds. One of the boys had curiously poked at it with his stick, bringing it nearer to the shore, when it appeared to be a heavy, almost formless, mass sewn up in a rough sack. The boys, being frightened, had run home with their story, and a member of the local police force, going to the spot, had found the children's suspicions confirmed. The unclothed body of a man, partially consumed by fire and lacking the head, as well as otherwise mutilated in a seemingly aimless way, had been doubled up and sewn in the sack. Weights had evidently been attached to the horrible bundle, but had in some manner become detached. So far no clue whatever, either as to the identity of the murdered man, or that of the murderer, had been brought to light. The body had been in the water for some days, but might still have been recognisable had the head not been removed.

The horror of my dream on Christmas Eve came back to me as I read. No doubt there had been many river mysteries and "shocking discoveries" in the Thames, and perhaps I had read of them, dismissing them from my mind with the alacrity with which one does rid one's thoughts of such sordid tragedies, when they do not happen to concern oneself or one's acquaintances. But this tragedy I could not so dismiss.

I could even picture the very spot where the boys must have seen the sack caught among the dry and rattling reeds. "A small backwater leading out of a larger one, between Great Marlow and Purley Lock." The larger one was doubtless that on which Carson Wildred's house was situated; the smaller one–a mere alley of water, leading away under a drooping tangle of willow and chestnut branches–one had to pass in walking from Purley to the House by the Lock. I was sure, as I recalled the place in memory, that the scene of the discovered mystery could have been no other than this.

Having read to the end, I folded up the paper and put it away in a pocket of my greatcoat for future reference. Then I began walking slowly on towards the Savoy Hotel.

Had it not been for the odd chance which had induced two boys to stroll, in the middle of winter, along the bank of an insignificant outlet of a Thames backwater, what a fine place, I told myself, this would have been for the concealment of a crime! Even without the weights, which had probably become detached from the sack by tangling among the roots under the surface of the water, the body might have been expected to remain hidden for months–at least, till the coming of the spring.

Then, as I so reflected, my mind turned to darker thoughts. Had a crime been committed by the inhabitants of the House by the Lock, what a convenient hiding-place would that adjacent waterway have been! I had no reason to fancy that such a crime had been done, and yet–my thoughts went back to the day on which I paid my somewhat memorable visit to Wildred and Farnham.

Suddenly came the recollection of the awful cry I had heard as I waited in the curious octagonal room, looking at the covered portrait of Karine. The sound had been explained, but there had been a certain flurry and clumsiness in the explanation, I had thought, even then.

I remembered the smoke and sparks which had so mysteriously risen from the tower, and the heat of the octagonal room adjoining it. All this, too, had been accounted for. I had not cared at the time to invent romances to fit into the strange appearances, which I had assured myself were doubtless strange only in appearance; but now I could not help dwelling upon them with an almost morbid persistency that would not be set aside.

I thought of the woman's face which had for an instant gazed at me through the narrow window beside the door. I reminded myself of the surprise on the features of the decorous male factotum when he had learned that I was not the man expected by his master, and I went over word for word, as nearly as I could, each sentence whispered by Wildred and his servant in the hall.

What if there were some ghastly connection between the apparent mystery in the House by the Lock and the half-charred, headless body found to-day in the Thames!

I was ready to accuse my own enmity towards Wildred, and my vague suspicions of him, also my merciless desire to fasten some stigma upon the man, of being potent factors in these mental suggestions of mine.

But I could not banish them even if I would. Continually throughout the remainder of the evening and night I pieced together various theories, all more or less defective, and next morning the desire was strong within me to go and see the headless corpse.

There were at least twenty chances to one against my being able to identify it, or finding in the pitiful remains of a tragedy any clue such as I sought. But strange fancies steeped my brain with their potent fumes, and I knew that I should not be able to rest until, at least, I had absolutely proved myself mistaken.

Permission to view the body at the mortuary was easily obtained at the local police station, when I had given my name, and mentioned that I had come for purposes of identification.

Fortunately for my self-control, I had looked upon many a gruesome sight during my somewhat chequered career, though scarcely one more hideous than this which I had deliberately sought.

It would be worse than useless to enter into a detailed description of what my eyes turned from with loathing. There was only one possible way of identification, however, that of finding some mark upon the partially charred body, or *something lacking* which might be suggestive of a theory.

I had a theory, which as yet I had scarcely dared dwell upon in my own mind, so wild, so improbable did it appear at any other time than dead of night, when all strange things seem possible. But now, as I judged what the height and size of the body must have been, and let my glance travel almost fearfully to the left hand, I saw that which tended in a ghastly manner to confirm it. All the four fingers were missing, having been cut off between the second joint and knuckles.

Harvey Farnham had worn the ring given to Karine Cunningham by Wildred on the little finger of the left hand; and in the light of this discovery my dream of Christmas Eve came back to me as a prophetic vision.

CHAPTER XVI
Information Laid by Carson Wildred

The case being one of great local importance, having thrown the countryside into a whirl of excitement, the inspector himself had thought it worth while to accompany me on my journey to the mortuary. My name was familiar to him, he said, with a look of interest and curiosity in his eyes; and this being so, doubtless he had not been averse to the chance of keeping watch upon me when I went to gaze upon the body of the mysteriously murdered man.

If he were interested in me, I was, at least, equally interested in him, or rather in the opinions which he and brother members of the police force might have formed.

Reticence was, of course, supposed to be observed by so important a functionary as the inspector, but I saw that in his round, good-natured face which caused me to hope he might be amenable to a little judiciously applied flattery. I therefore extolled the arrangements of the local authorities, and ended by saying that, as the sight I had just witnessed had considerably upset me, I should be glad if he would do me the favour of having something with me at the private bar of the adjacent inn.

"Well, sir, it's against the rules, you know," he said, smiling sapiently. "But I certainly consider it an honour to be invited by so celebrated a gentleman as you, Mr. Stanton. And–if you'll go first, sir, I'll just look in a little later and find you at the private bar."

I followed the prudent suggestion, and was presently joined by the inspector, who appeared relieved at finding himself shut in and alone with me.

We had whisky and soda *ad libitum*, and then I cautiously began: "The fact is, inspector," I said, "I was particularly anxious for this chance of a little friendly chat with you. I have certain suspicions which may be, of course, without a grain of foundation. What I mean to say is, I have grave fears that the murdered man is the friend I thought it possible I might identify. Who the murderer may be in any case remains to be seen, but if the body is that of the person I have in my mind, I might be able to put a clue into the hands of the police. 'A word to the wise,' you

know, inspector! But first I am hoping for a little help from you before I run the risk of incriminating one who may be innocent. Quite between ourselves, allow me to ask what your police surgeon has had to say regarding his examination?"

The inspector looked dubious, then brightened visibly. "You being the man you are, Mr. Stanton," he said, sociably, over his third glass of old Scotch, "I can't see that there'd be anything amiss in my answering you so far. Our surgeon, Mr. Potter, reported that the corpse was that of a well-nourished man of somewhere between forty and forty-five years of age, all the organs healthy, though there were traces of opium in the system–not, however, enough to have caused death. The head had been severed from the neck by a skilled anatomist, who knew exactly where to strike; but it had been separated after death, not before. Also the mutilation of the left hand had been done in the same way. I suppose that is roughly the sort of thing you wanted to know?"

"Exactly," I returned, "and every detail you have mentioned goes to strengthen my suspicions. Being an amateur, I was obliged to judge principally by size and height. The surgeon's report fits in with my theory precisely. Still, it does not comprise everything. It would be a great assistance if I might know whether the police have yet had any reliable information to work upon."

We had grown very friendly, indeed, almost fraternal now, and the inspector kindly allowed me to refill his glass. "Do you know who Mr. Carson Wildred, of the House by the Lock, is, Mr. Stanton?" he enquired, confidentially.

The question surprised and excited me. Was it possible, I hastily asked myself, that already the police were on the same track that I was following? If so, Wildred must have shown himself a less impenetrable villain than I had had reason to suppose him.

"Yes, I not only know who he is, but have a slight personal acquaintance with him," I said conservatively.

"Well, sir"–slowly, and with some unction–"Mr. Wildred has been the only one so far–not counting what you yourself may have to say presently–who has given any information of value."

"Indeed? *He* has given information?" I could not eliminate the astonishment, and perhaps something of the disappointment, from my voice.

"Yes, sir. As you know Mr. Wildred, you're probably aware that his country house is close by our town, and close, too, to the spot where the body was found. He was in yesterday evening, as soon as the matter had got noised about, and

asked to see the body."

"Incredible!" The word sprang to my lips, but I forced it back, and refrained from uttering it.

"He was unable to identify it, but he spoke to having seen something in the neighbourhood of the small backwater not far from his house, just before Christmas, which seemed likely to throw light on the matter. The surgeon's idea is, as I think I forgot to mention, sir, that the body had been in the water since Christmas time, or thereabouts, which made Mr. Wildred's supposition the more feasible.

"It seems that the gentleman had a friend staying with him at the House by the Lock until a week or so ago–a Mr. Farnham, an American–who has since sailed for home. They were in the habit of taking a daily walk together, whenever they were not in town, and a week before Christmas noticed that close to the little backwater two men were living in a tent.

"It was a quiet place enough in winter time, and the fellows might have expected to escape observation, perhaps, but it was the smell of their smoke which first attracted Mr. Wildred and his friend to the spot, and as it was his land Mr. Wildred at first was inclined to order the chaps away. He thought better of it, though, as he seems a good-natured gentleman, and said it didn't really matter to him whether they stayed or went. A strict watch was kept on all the locks up at the house, however, as it occurred to Mr. Wildred the men might have some queer design. A day or two went by, and the tent was still there, but on Christmas, when Mr. Wildred and Mr. Farnham were walking out, they heard the sound of loud voices, and went near enough to see that the two men were quarrelling outside.

"He says he wishes now he had interfered, but it didn't seem worth while at the time. That night there was an unpleasant smell of burning, which came up to the House by the Lock, with the wind from that quarter, and was noticed by all the servants, as well as Mr. Wildred, who asked the butler about it at dinner. Next day, when Mr. Wildred sent down to find out, the tent and the men were both gone."

"I suppose," I said, "that you have already taken means to ascertain whether there are any remaining traces of such an encampment by the backwater?"

"Certainly we have. That was done immediately, sir, and the ashes left by a big wood fire were found close to the water; also four rough stakes for the tent ropes, and–a coal sack–much of the sort in which the body up there at the

mortuary was sewn. There was something else, too, sir. I wouldn't mention it thus early in the proceedings to anybody for whom I hadn't the respect I have for you; but even as it is, I must have your promise it shan't go any further till it comes out in the proper course of events."

I gave him my promise, hiding my impatience as best I could.

"Well, Mr. Stanton," the inspector went on, lowering his voice, though there was nobody within earshot, "in the wood ashes was found what looks like a most important clue. Nothing less, sir, than the calcined bones of four human fingers, *cut from the left hand*!"

"By Jove!" I ejaculated involuntarily, springing to my feet, and beginning to walk nervously up and down. I hardly knew whether to feel that I had been brought to a dead stop in my operations and suspicions, or to tell myself that Carson Wildred was the most cold-blooded, and, at the same time, the cleverest scoundrel who had ever walked the earth.

CHAPTER XVII
A Disappointment

"You seem surprised, Mr. Stanton!" exclaimed the inspector.

"I am surprised," I echoed, "and I intend to explain why presently. Meanwhile, I suppose you are trying to get on the track of the second man who lived in that tent?"

"That's what we are doing, sir–hard at it."

"You will never find him," I said.

"No, sir? May I ask what makes you so sure of that?"

"Simply because my opinion is that he does not exist–never did exist."

The inspector's jaw dropped. "But–but Mr. Carson Wildred—" he began, when I turned on him and cut him short.

"Did your experience never show you a case where a man, himself a criminal, invented proofs and clues for the purpose of putting the police upon the wrong track?"

He too started from his chair, forgetting to set down his glass of whisky. "Good heavens, sir, you don't mean to accuse—"

"I don't accuse. I am not yet in a position to do that. I only suggest, and should be myself a criminal if I did not try to throw such light upon the matter as I can. Sit down again, inspector, and let me tell you what I know, and what I suspect."

He sat, or rather dropped into his lately-deserted chair, and his horrified expression, his drooping attitude, went far towards showing me what an exalted position Carson Wildred occupied in the esteem of the neighbourhood.

"I can't seem to realise it, Mr. Stanton," ejaculated the inspector. "Such a man as Mr. Wildred! So respected, so charitable, has given so much to the church! Why, you must be making a mistake."

"You shall judge for yourself whether I have any evidence to offer worth building upon," I returned. And then I told him everything, beginning with my chance meeting with Harvey Farnham at the theatre on Christmas Eve. His face

grew graver and graver as I went on, and when at last (having dwelt with due insistence upon the mysterious proceedings attending my call at the House by the Lock) I mentioned the reappearance of the ring on "a young lady's finger," he shook his head regretfully.

"You've made out a fairly good case against Mr. Wildred, sir," he observed. "Would it be indiscreet to ask whether you've any *personal* enmity against the gentleman?"

"I don't like him," I admitted. And then I went on to describe in a few words my haunting impression of having been disagreeably associated with him in the past.

"I would wish," I added hurriedly, "to keep the name of the lady now in possession of the ring entirely out of the question if possible. It must only be brought in, inspector, at the last extremity should no other means remain of detecting a murderer. As for the ring itself, to save trouble in that direction, I think I could if necessary engage to get hold of it, and I am quite ready at any time to swear to its identity with the one worn by my old friend Farnham."

The inspector thoughtfully scratched his head. "It'll be a nasty business to examine Mr. Wildred's house, in case your friend Mr. Farnham should prove to be all right over in the States. But we can't lose any time. What you've told me to-day is very serious, sir, and must be attended to at once. A couple of detectives will call at the House by the Lock with a search-warrant before nightfall. I can assure you of that. Until some definite conclusion is arrived at, Mr. Stanton, I suppose you would prefer that your name didn't appear in the matter?"

"I don't care a hang whether it appears or not," I retorted recklessly. Perhaps if I had been a little less reckless–but it is never profitable to dwell on and brood over the mistakes of one's past.

The inspector assured me that a detective should call that night at the hotel in Great Marlow where I had volunteered to remain, and give me all particulars concerning the examination of the House by the Lock. The appointment made was for eight o'clock, by which time, allowing for obstacles and unforeseen delays, all was sure to be well over.

Though the inspector had promised that the New York police should be communicated with, a great restlessness was upon me, and I resolved myself to cable to America.

It was possible that the *St. Paul*, the ship in which Farnham had been supposed

to sail, was arriving at New York that day, though the chances were, as the weather had been rough, that she would not have made one of her record trips. However, there could be no harm in wiring, and if the ship had got in all waste of time would be avoided.

I wrote out a despatch to the office of the American line in New York, to be answered (reply prepaid) the moment the *St. Paul* got in. In this I enquired whether Mr. Harvey Farnham, of Denver, Colorado, had been among the passengers. And not contenting myself with this I cabled Farnham, both to Denver and New York, and to the manager of the Fifth Avenue Hotel in the latter place, where I had been told that he usually put up.

The answers to these messages I requested to have sent me at the hotel I had chosen for my headquarters in Great Marlow.

The hours which must intervene before I could possibly hope for a return I spent at the Wayfarers', and there I heard of Wildred, who had lunched at the club with his friend Wigram, and later had been interrupted during a game of billiards by a telegram. He had used some strong language, and hurriedly excusing himself, had left in the midst of the game.

Things had evidently been put into train early, I told myself with satisfaction, and I concluded that the despatch had either gone out from police headquarters or been sent by that stealthy-faced, invaluable major-domo of Wildred's.

By half-past five I was in the train again, carrying with me all that I could want for the stay of a day or two in a strange hotel, and before eight o'clock I had dined and was anxiously awaiting the appearance of the detective. I had hardly dared to hope as yet for any answer to my cablegrams, still I was disappointed to find upon my advent in Great Marlow that nothing had arrived.

Every step along the corridor outside the private sitting-room I had taken made me start like a nervous woman, fancying each time that a knock on my door might follow and the wished-for message be handed in to me.

I did not believe that I should hear from Farnham, because my conviction was steadily growing that his murdered body lay unidentified in the mortuary not far away. But I did expect to hear from the ship's company to the effect that no such passenger had been on board the *St. Paul*. Should this intelligence arrive, there would be so great an increase of the circumstantial evidence against Wildred that I believed the police would be justified in making an arrest. Wildred once arrested and obliged to stand his trial for the crime of murder, Karine Cunningham would be saved.

Eight o'clock struck, however, and I was reluctantly obliged to give up all idea of receiving any news from America for the night. Five minutes later, as I restlessly paced the room, the wished-for knock sounded, but there was no cablegram to be presented on a tray. A young, fresh-faced man in plain clothing stood there, who I knew before he spoke must be the expected detective. His information might prove of equal importance with the tidings from America, and I received him cordially.

With his first words, however, my heart went down like lead. It was not that I was eager to see a presumably innocent man proved a murderer for the sake of my own selfish ends, but thoroughly believing Wildred to be a consummate scoundrel, I was anxious that he should be found out in time to prevent disaster.

"I think sir," said the young man of the cheerful countenance, "that we've been on a false scent to-day."

I got him to sit down, and launched him upon the full tide of narrative.

"Mr. Wildred was away when we first arrived at the House by the Lock, sir," he went on, "but we should have made use of our search-warrant without waiting for his return had not the passage and the octagonal room you described, as well as the tower, been shut off from all communication with the older part of the house by a heavy iron door, of which Mr. Wildred invariably carries the key. This his butler explained by saying that the door had been placed on account of his master's chemical experiments, which were sometimes of a slightly dangerous character, unless great precautions were used, and in case of an explosion or other accident the safety of the living-rooms might be assured by means of the iron door. The only way of opening it would have been to employ dynamite, the lock being impregnable; and as the grounds for suspicion against Mr. Wildred were not yet strong enough to resort to such violent means, there was nothing to do but wait. He was wired for to London at once."

"Naturally he would prefer being on the spot," I said, with something like a sneer. "All the same, I am very sure that there *is* another means of communicating with the octagonal room and the tower besides the main door through the passage." And I mentioned the mysterious disappearance of the servant, which had on Christmas Day led me to believe in the existence of a secret way of exit.

"We did look about for something of the sort, and even went down a cellar," said the detective, "but saw not the slightest sign to suggest a hidden door."

"Well, go on then to Mr. Wildred's return," I exclaimed impatiently. "I am

anxious to learn why it has been decided that I put you on the wrong track."

"When he came home he admitted very frankly that he had been annoyed at the bother occasioned by our telegram, but appeared by that time to have recovered from his vexation, and to be inclined to laugh the matter off. He let us know in a moment that he guessed how the information had come, but we said nothing, of course, to confirm his suppositions.

"In the first place he opened the iron door, explained its workings as though he took some pride in its mechanism, which he said he had invented himself. Then he showed us into the octagonal room, which he had had fitted up as a studio and smoking-room combined. The little door you had seen behind the drapery merely led into a cupboard containing boots, an artist's model–a jointed figure of wood–and other odds and ends. It was concealed only because it was not 'an object of beauty,' Mr. Wildred said.

"We then proceeded to the tower, where the chemical experiments are made. There is a small room, reached by mounting a winding skeleton stairway of iron, and there we were shown Mr. Wildred's apparatus. I know something of chemistry myself, having had a fad that way when I was a boy, and I could see that everything he had was straight and above-board. A big fireplace in the room accounts for the sparks you saw when you approached the house that day, and Mr. Wildred voluntarily mentioned that there had been something wrong with the flues, so that his experiments could not be conducted properly, and he had sent for an expert to come down from London to look at everything. The man had been expected on Christmas Eve, then on Christmas, as Mr. Wildred considered the matter urgent, and finally arrived the day after. Mr. Wildred gave us his address without waiting to be asked to do so. That accounted for one more point in your story, sir–the man who was so anxiously looked for, the man the butler seemed at first to take you to be.

"We then said we had been informed that screams or groans had been heard issuing from his house on Christmas Day. Mr. Wildred laughed, remarking that, judging from what he knew of our informant, he had been waiting for us to come to that point.

"And he repeated the explanation which had been given you, asking us also if we would care to see the scar (which was not yet quite healed) made by the burning methylated spirit on the cook's foot or ankle.

"We thought it best to do as he suggested–indeed, if he had not, we should have proposed the same course ourselves, for the sake of making assurance doubly

sure. The cook was sent for, a very handsome young woman, sir, bright and ready with her answers. She described the accident, and whipping off the shoe and stocking from the right foot, showed us a red mark which spread from the ankle down over the whole instep."

"So the cook was a handsome young woman, was she?" I asked, suspiciously, remembering the face which had peered at me through the narrow window by the door. "Had she great black eyes, a very white face, and a quantity of dark hair?"

"She had, sir. That would describe her very well. A woman not more than twenty-five or six, and evidently of a superior class."

I turned this bit of information over in my mind. To be sure, I could not at the moment make anything of it apropos of the case in hand, but afterwards I was to remember it under somewhat startling circumstances.

"So you see, sir," the detective continued, "every point you made was met, and in our opinion, frankly and sufficiently met. Nothing was found which could possibly justify an arrest, and unless unfavourable reports are received from the New York police, the case against Mr. Wildred will have to be dropped. The inspector is having an interview with him to-night, and doubtless some details with which we, in enforcing our search-warrant, had no concern will be satisfactorily cleared up. I mean to say, details relating to the American gentleman, his ring, and his departure for the States. Should we hear from New York that he has not returned, why of course, in spite of appearances at the House by the Lock and failure of circumstantial evidence, suspicion will be renewed again."

There was absolutely nothing more to be said. Deep as was my chagrin, I held my tongue as to my opinion of the way affairs had been managed, and parted with the young detective with apparent nonchalance.

Naturally, I slept little during the night, and was awake even before the early knock which sounded at my door.

"Two cablegrams for you, sir," said the waiter, when I had bidden him come in.

CHAPTER XVIII
A Desperate Remedy

I took the envelopes from the man and told him he might go. Now for it! I thought. Now to see whether the edifice I had builded had but a foundation of sand, or whether Wildred had merely been clever enough to pull wool over the eyes of the police.

My heart was thumping with excitement as I opened the first envelope.

"*St. Paul* in to-night. First-class passenger on board named Harvey Farnham."

I laid the bit of paper down dazedly and took up the other. It was from the manager of the Fifth Avenue Hotel, in New York. "Mr. Farnham telegraphed to keep room for him. Is spending day or two with friends."

I did not know what to think. It all sounded straightforward enough, and it was not credible that either the official in the office of the American liners, or the manager of an hotel, could be in collusion with Carson Wildred. Still, I was far from being satisfied.

For the moment I had done all that I could do. If Farnham was stopping with a friend, whose address was unknown to me, I could not at present expect to receive an answer either to my New York or Denver cable. In a day or two the police would hear something from the other side, and meanwhile I must possess my soul in patience.

This was a thing easier said than done, especially as, when aimlessly glancing at a weekly paper in the club next day, I came across a paragraph which gushed in the conventionally nauseous manner over the forthcoming marriage of the beautiful young heiress, Miss Karine Cunningham, and Mr. Carson Wildred, the "well-known millionaire and popular man of Society."

Days never dragged as they did with me until I received the promised intimation from my friend the inspector that tidings had arrived from the police in New York. It was all right, so far as my friend was concerned, and I need have no further fears regarding his safety. The body found in the Thames was certainly not that of Mr. Harvey Farnham, as he was in New York, and had actually been interviewed there. He had been very ill in crossing, and had had the misfortune

to fall down the companionway on shipboard, in a heavy gale, spraining his ankle. He would not be able to resume his journey and proceed to Denver for some time to come, but had laughed at the idea of any foul play. When questioned on the subject of the ring, he said that he had given it to his friend, Mr. Wildred, at parting, and jokingly added that he had experienced great difficulty in getting it off.

In these circumstances, as there could be no further doubt of Mr. Farnham's living presence in New York, no possible shadow of suspicion need any longer rest upon Mr. Carson Wildred, who had throughout done all in his power to further the investigations. The search for the man from the camp near the backwater would therefore be carried on upon the same lines as before.

A hot sense of injustice burned within me. I had been thwarted on every side, not, I believed, by the revelation of truth, but by Carson Wildred's superior cunning. He had boasted to me that, in the *rôle* of villain, he would have been more successful than I; and I was quite ready to agree with this statement. All things seemed against me, and yet something which I took to be instinct cried aloud that my dream had not deceived. I could not understand how it was that the New York police had been made to believe in the identity of a man falsely representing himself to be Harvey Farnham, yet I was convinced that in some devilish way even they had been cozened. No other man living, perhaps, could have undertaken so huge a scheme, with so many different strings to pull at one and the same time, and successfully carry it through, save Carson Wildred. But Carson Wildred *had* attempted it, I concluded, and having gone so far, there was every reason to suppose he would triumph if I–who alone of all men seemed personally interested–did not set myself to the finding of a new method for blocking his game.

I could, I thought, understand what his motive for so foul a murder might have been. He had just purchased a valuable gold mine from Farnham. Should Farnham be made to vanish without fear of suspicion falling upon Wildred, the latter might not only be the owner of the mine, but repossess himself of the purchase-money, which must have comprised a very large sum.

There was no further hope from the police. They had done their duty, had satisfied themselves on every point, and it would have been unjust to expect that they should continue to exert themselves in favouring my apparently wild view of the situation.

In the midst of the cogitations which followed upon the receipt of the inspector's letter another cablegram was handed in to me. This time it purported to be from

Farnham himself, merely saying, "Many thanks for kind enquiries. Have turned up here smiling, but too seedy to write at present. Glad to hear from you.–Fifth Avenue Hotel."

One more blow aimed at my theory! But I refused to be knocked down by it. For Karine's sake, for my own sake, I would follow my convictions across the sea, and never rest until I had settled all doubts for myself.

It was then Friday. In five minutes after reading this third and apparently conclusive cablegram I had resolved that on the following day, Saturday, I would sail for New York.

It was only by a severe mental wrench that I arrived at this almost desperate decision, for I stood between two fires, either one of which might reduce my hopes to ashes.

Going to America meant leaving Karine Cunningham, at this critical juncture, to the mercy of the enemy. I had offered her friendship, and such protection as I could give, against those who were bent on forcing her inclinations; and with a look in her sweet eyes, and a soft quiver in her voice which I could never forget, she had asked me "not to go away." If I went, and any harm should come to her during my absence, I could never forgive myself, never again know a moment's peace of mind. And yet–if I stayed, what was there to hope for either of us? I had shot all my arrows, and they had glanced off, blunted, from Wildred's apparently invulnerable armour. I had lost the chance of gaining assistance from the police, so far as I could see, and unless some miracle should suddenly come to pass, I should be obliged to stand by while Karine Cunningham gave her unwilling self to Wildred.

Whatever her secret reason for consenting to do so might be, she had plainly let me understand that she meant to marry the man, unless Fate especially intervened in her behalf.

There was no hope that she would let me save her by carrying her away. I had not even the slightest reason to suppose that she cared for me, save as a friend, in the midst of what otherwise she had said would be friendlessness.

My hands were bound, therefore, so long as Carson Wildred was able to hold up his guilty head before the world, and pass himself off as a blameless member of society.

Between the horns of this dilemma–and heaven knows they were both sharp enough–I could only choose the one on which Karine and I seemed less likely to

be torn; and therefore it was that I elected to go to America.

I did not feel that I could bear to leave without a word to her. How could I tell in what light my absence might be made to appear? From the vague hints she had dropped as to her relations with Sir Walter and Lady Tressidy, I hardly considered that it would be safe to write to her. Such a letter as I must send, should I write at all, if read by eyes for which it was not intended, might bring Karine into serious trouble. It was true that Lady Tressidy had appeared to be inclined towards friendliness with me, but she had then no suspicions of my attitude to Karine.

I would go down into the country and call upon Lady Tressidy and Miss Cunningham, I resolved; and if I had no opportunity of speaking with my beautiful girl in private, I would contrive to slip into her own hand a note previously prepared.

My decisions, when made, are usually soon acted upon. Within a couple of hours after receiving the inspector's letter and the message from New York my passage was engaged for the following day. A curious mood was upon me as I began my preparations. Hardly more than a fortnight ago I had been congratulating myself on the prospect of a considerable stay in London. My ideal existence had for the moment been an utterly aimless one. I was sated with excitement and what is popularly called "adventure," and had only wanted to rest and amuse myself. I had meant to be a man about town until I should again tire of the life, drifting agreeably here and there, taking pleasure as it came, troubling myself little either about other people's affairs or my own.

And this was the result of my plan. There seemed a certain unreality about it all. I felt like the puppet of circumstances, or one who moved through strange mazes, half conscious that he merely dreams.

By two o'clock everything was arranged for my departure on Saturday, and I was at Waterloo, taking my ticket for Haslemere, which was the station nearest to Sir Walter Tressidy's country place.

CHAPTER XIX
"Not at Home"

I had a long, dreary drive after leaving the train, though in other circumstances I might have been charmed with the loveliness of one of England's fairest counties. As it was I merely chafed at the endless hill, up which the horse slowly plodded, half inclined to think that after all I should have done better to trust to my own feet or come on a bicycle from town.

The curtain of twilight was falling by the time my fly entered the long avenue that led to the house. Here and there lights shone out from the windows, and as the vehicle drew up before the door I caught a glimpse of something which set my heart throbbing.

It was only a ruddy gleam of firelight on a golden head, which shone for an instant in the warm light like burnished copper; only a rosy glow on a girl's white dress, a shimmer seen between the parted folds of dark, rich window drapings.

For a second, no more, the vision was granted me. A tall, slender form rose from its kneeling position before the fire, and in so moving passed beyond my line of sight. But my pulses leaped, and I rejoiced in the good fortune which had brought me at an hour when Karine was not absent.

I stepped quickly from the cab and would have given much for the right of a greater intimacy–a right to go to the window and knock, begging the girl I loved to let me in, to grant me the heaven of ten minutes alone with her, before the necessities of convention called upon me to ask for Lady Tressidy.

I imagined what it would be to have this right; I pictured myself tapping at the panes of the long French window, I saw the dainty girlish form coming toward me, the start of surprise, the flush which I might read as I would, the raising of the latch, and the two warm little hands held out to me in welcome.

But it was all a dream, vanishing as quickly as the rainbow colours in a bubble, and leaving only the darkness of the dull winter twilight behind. Such privileges were for a happier man than I: I was at best only her "friend." Never could I hope, whether success or failure crowned the effort I was impatient to begin–for

more than that.

Instead I walked soberly up to the door and knocked, telling the cabman that he might wait–and wishing that he might have to wait for long.

Presently in answer to my summons a footman appeared (a fellow I remembered to have seen at the town house when I had called), and it struck me that, as I enquired if Lady Tressidy was at home, he eyed me more piercingly than a well-trained servant usually eyes a guest.

"I am sorry, sir," he answered with a slight hesitation, "that her ladyship is out at present. What name shall I say when she returns?"

"Mr. Stanton," I unsuspectingly replied, though it did dimly occur to me that the man might have left me to give him my card. It seemed almost too good to be true that Lady Tressidy should be away from home, for now I felt practically certain that I should have the unexpected joy of seeing Karine alone, speaking to her far more unrestrainedly than I could do in the presence of her hostess, and explaining in a way satisfactory to us both, my intended absence.

"I am sorry," I hypocritically remarked, "not to see Lady Tressidy; but I have come some distance, and perhaps Miss Cunningham would spare me a few minutes."

"I–I am afraid, sir"–still stammering uncomfortably–"that Miss Cunningham is away with her ladyship."

I was astonished at this piece of information, for I was absolutely sure that it was Karine whose shining halo of hair and white gown I had seen in that rosy space between the window curtains. Of course the footman might honestly believe that she was not at home; but I did not mean lightly to abandon the chance of a few words with her.

"I think you are mistaken about that," I boldly said. "Please be good enough at any rate to enquire."

The fellow's face reddened, contrasting unpleasantly with his powder, but he persisted in his story.

"I am quite sure I am right, sir," he went on more firmly. "Miss Cunningham is with my lady."

My impulse was to slip a couple of sovereigns into his palm, and insist that he should ascertain if Miss Cunningham were not after all at home, for I was beginning to be suspicious of a plot to thwart me. If such an one existed I could

not think that Karine had been a party to it, for though of course she could not care to see me, in at all the same way in which I yearned for a sight of her sweet face, I believed that she would not wish me to be sent away from the house humiliated. My hand was moving toward my pocket, when suddenly I reconsidered. If I took such strong measures to secure a *tête-à-tête* with Karine, it might appear that we were in collusion, and trouble thus be made for her with Lady Tressidy and Sir Walter. I could not risk causing her uneasiness, especially as I was going far away; and with a pang I saw that I was in a trap.

There might be one way out, however, and I took it.

"I will wait," I announced, "until the ladies return. Or possibly Sir Walter—"

"Sir Walter won't be here for a day or two," promptly responded the man.

So thoroughly miserable did he look, though his manner gained confidence, that I thought he must still be new to a service which must foster a certain amount of conventional deceit.

"As for the ladies, sir, unfortunately they are not expected back this evening until–until the last train–too late, as you can understand, sir, to receive any visitors, as at all events they can't reach the house until after eleven."

I bit my lip with futile indignation against Lady Tressidy, and against Fate–never against Karine. It was evident that the footman had received the most stringent orders as to what he must do in case of so undesirable an emergency as a visit from Mr. Noel Stanton. He had probably been asked if he was certain of being able to recognise me again, had answered that he believed he would be so, but on suddenly being called upon to face the responsibility, had made his little bid for ascertaining my name as early as possible in the game, by way of rendering assurance doubly sure.

Of course the dutiful servant was not really to blame for following out his instructions to the letter, yet I felt that I hated his smug face and plastered head, and would have liked to frighten him with menaces and strange foreign oaths.

I dared not give him the note which I had written, meaning if necessary to slip it into Karine's own hand unseen, for it might easily be that, despite any bribe I offered, it would never reach the dear eyes for which it was intended.

"I will write a line on my card, then, to be handed to the ladies, whom I regret not having seen," I said with what dignity I had at my command. And stepping past him into the hall, despite a visible gleam of consternation in his eye, I deliberately took out a pencil and card-case, slowly scribbling a few words.

My hope was that if Karine was really in the drawing-room she would come forth, and the Gordian knot of the dilemma would be cut.

But having mentioned my imminent departure from England on private and urgent business, and added that, though I had been anxious to see Lady Tressidy and Miss Cunningham for the sake of bidding good-bye, it would be, more strictly speaking, only *au revoir*, as I intended returning within the next four weeks, I could think of nothing more to say. And still the drawing-room door, near which I was standing, was not opened.

I should have been glad to underscore the last six words, but did not venture to do so for obvious reasons, and could only hope that Karine might see them or hear them read, and partly understand.

I conspicuously placed a sovereign on the card as I gave it to the footman, remarking quietly that I would wish the latter to be delivered in the presence of both ladies if possible. Then I seemed to have come to the end of my resources, until a desperate idea seized me.

Had I not been virtually certain that Karine was to be kept from seeing me, without her own consent to such an arrangement, naturally I would have accepted my *congé* with a good grace, and gone away, a wiser as well as a sadder man; but as it was, and considering the importance for her future as well as my own, of a hasty explanation between us, I was ready to snatch at almost any expedient, not prejudicial to her, of obtaining a word with Karine Cunningham.

I turned from the door and got into the cab, which the footman politely opened for me as if only too glad to speed the parting guest. The direction, "to the station," was given, the gravel crunched under the wheels and horse's hoofs, the door at which I had been received so inhospitably shut me out of paradise, and no doubt the servant triumphantly watched me drive off. Half-way down the avenue, however, I thrust my stick from the window of the rattle-trap vehicle and stopped the coachman.

"I have forgotten something," I curtly said. "You needn't go back; wait here, and I'll return again in a few moments."

The fly was standing just out of sight from the house, and rapidly leaving it behind me I strode over the frozen grass of the lawn, taking a shorter cut than the avenue would have been.

In considerably less than five minutes I had once more arrived in front of the

window through which I was as positive as ever I had seen Karine. Only a short time ago I had dreamed of doing such a thing as this as a delicious impossibility, only belonging to a world of romance which I could never enter. But here I was actually bent on the accomplishment of the deed.

The falling darkness had protected me, I felt confident, from being seen by anybody in the house as I crossed the lawn, and I approached with boldness, which only left me as I reached the window.

The curtain hung apart as before, and I could see the fireplace with the lights and shadows travelling fantastically along the polished floor and wall. The white irradiated figure was no longer visible, but undiscouraged by this fact I gently tapped, trusting that Karine might be in another part of the room to which my eyes could not reach.

If she were there my knock would startle her perhaps, and she would draw near in curiosity to see what had made the slight suspicious noise; then I could make my presence known, leaving apologies till later, and afterward–well, afterward the rest must depend upon her.

But I knocked once, twice, thrice, each time a little louder, a little more insistently than before, and there was no response, no sound, no movement. After all I was thwarted, and had but one comfort in the midst of gloom–I had not been easily repulsed, I had done what I could, and need not feel, when I was far away, that I had let myself be outwitted, outgeneralled, without an effort to resist.

Fate had decided that I must go to America without a word, without a look into Karine Cunningham's eyes; and drearily returning to my waiting cab I commenced once more the tedious drive to the station.

Never had I felt more utterly disheartened; for, after all, I could not be *quite* sure that Karine had not acquiesced in the order to exclude me from the house. It seemed that she must have heard my voice in the hall, that if she had chosen she might easily have contrived some means of seeing me while I was briskly taxing my ingenuity to reach her. I guessed at Wildred's powerful influence in the affair, and was ready to fancy others; but, as I was to learn long afterward, I brought forward every reason for Karine's mysterious inertness save the right one.

CHAPTER XX
The Quest

It was a piercingly cold day when I landed in New York–such cold as I had not felt since I had finished my last American visit, four years ago.

Everyone else among the many first-class passengers seemed to have some welcoming friend to greet him on shore save only myself. I would not let myself acknowledge that I felt discouragement, but a certain gloomy sense of the hopelessness of my undertaking would obtrude itself, as I rattled over the badly-paved streets of New York in the chill seclusion of my cab.

I had myself driven straight to the Fifth Avenue Hotel, which was becoming almost an old-fashioned hostelry now among its many tall new rivals of incredibly many storeys in height, and walking up to the "office" prepared my most affable manner, to win the confidence of the smart "clerk" or book-keeper.

"Good-day," I began agreeably, wishing that in former visits to New York I had stopped at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, so that now, for my quest's sake, I should be accorded the welcome of an old friend.

"Good-day," was the brisk reply. "You want a room?"

"I should like first to enquire if Mr. Harvey Farnham, of Denver, Colorado, is stopping here," I said. "My principal object in choosing this hotel was to meet him, but if—"

"Gone three days ago," broke in the gentleman with the waxed moustache, who evidently did not wish to waste time on a traveller more inclined to parley than to patronise the house.

This was the first setback I had experienced on American shores, but so many had been my portion on the other side of the Atlantic that I had had time to grow accustomed to them. I had prepared my mind for as numerous rebuffs here, yet in spite of that I felt the bitterness of disappointment settling bleakly down upon me. Already I had been given a sign that Wildred's cleverness had projected itself across the width of ocean.

"Ah, indeed, I'm sorry to hear that he has left. Is he with friends in town, or has

he gone to Denver?" I questioned, with as bland an air as I could well command.

"Can't tell you whether he's gone to Denver, I'm sure, sir. But I think it's almost certain he's not in town, and somehow or other I've got the impression that he mentioned he was going west."

"I suppose his health improved more rapidly than he expected, then," I went on. "I understood before crossing that his accident on shipboard had laid him up for awhile, and that it would be some time before he felt fit to undertake the journey home."

"He did seem rather seedy," vouchsafed the clerk. "But he was pretty well able to take care of himself. Shall I put you down for a room?"

"Yes," I answered indifferently. "I suppose you may as well–for one night."

It was already late in the afternoon, and I had certain investigations to make before I renewed my interrupted journey in the direction Harvey Farnham was believed to have taken–going toward the setting sun.

I knew well enough that I was seriously handicapped as a detective by my complete amateurishness, and possibly a little by my own keen personal anxiety, which did not tend to cool my head or my pulses when coolness was needed; but though I would fain have had advice from some clever professional expert, the reports of the New York police had certainly not been such as would encourage me to seek assistance from the force. It appeared to me that I must "dree my weird" alone.

In the handsome, typically American room that was allotted to me I sat down to map out my future course, as well as I could see it.

Either the brisk-mannered young "clerk" had shown a slight reserve in answering my eager questions regarding Harvey Farnham, or I had been morbidly sensitive enough to fancy it in his face and way of speaking. Doubtless, when the police had been acting in the affair under advices from London, he had been subjected to a previous catechism concerning the western millionaire's movements, and if that were the case it was only natural he should be cautiously inclined. But once I could win his confidence and thoroughly convince him that I had no connection whatever with the police, I ventured to hope there might yet be a chance of learning at least a little more from him than I had been able to glean.

Perhaps it was something in the nature of a sop to Cerberus that I should have asked for one of the best rooms in the house; and then, beside, my name written in the visitors' book (or "hotel register," as it is the fashion to call it in the States)

evidently had some meaning for the young man round whom my hopes centred, for his manner had decidedly changed for the better when I visited him again after dinner.

He was not particularly busy at the moment, and appeared in the humour for conversation, asking me of his own free will if it were possible that I was "Noel Stanton, the traveller."

I did not deny this impeachment, and, moreover, showed myself willing to be "drawn" on the subject of my explorations. I even went so far as to relate an adventure at some length (a thing I am thankful to say I have never been guilty of before or since), told an anecdote which made the young man laugh, and flattered him to the best of my ability, by asking his opinion about an American political crisis of the day. Then, by gradual steps, I led the talk toward the great West in general, Colorado silver mines in particular, and so at last reached the subject of Harvey Farnham, one of the most prominent of the financiers of that State.

"I was much disappointed, I confess, at not finding him here," I remarked, "and shall on his account cut short my visit to New York. Farnham and I have known each other for some years; and, by the way, I remember his saying that in his opinion this was the best-managed hotel in New York. I believe he usually stops here when in town, doesn't he?"

"So it seems, sir," answered the clerk, very civilly now, having decided to be patient with my humour. "However, I had never seen him until he turned up the other day. I haven't been in my present position very long."

"I suppose you did see him though?" I persevered. "How was he looking after his accident–seedy at all?"

"He was very *thin*, if you mean that," laughed my informant. "He limped about with a crutch, too, and as he had bumped his forehead in the same fall which sprained his ankle, he wore a green shade that covered his temples and his eyes." I grew attentive at this. It appeared to me that here was a point in my favour.

"I should like to have a talk with one of his old friends in the hotel," I said; "the manager, for instance. No doubt he knows Mr. Farnham very well."

"He does, but he's out of town on business for a day or two. I think you'll find, though, that our bartender and Mr. Farnham were about as chummy together as anyone in the house."

Apparently at my leisure, really with great impatience, I repaired to the

extremely handsome "barroom" of the Fifth Avenue Hotel, and here the oracle was very communicative.

Having mixed me a peculiarly American drink called "gin fizz," the bartender was willing to chat of Mr. Farnham.

"I guess he must have been pretty bad this last time," he said, in response to my first question, "for he didn't trouble the barroom much."

"He did come in, however, did he not?" I asked anxiously.

"Oh, yes, he came in once or twice, but I thought he acted rather grumpy and queer."

"Did you have a good look at him either time?" I pressed on, with eagerness.

"Pretty good. Almost as close as you are now, I guess."

"And did he appear the same as usual, with the exception of the green shade over his eyes?"

"Well, I reckon he did. I was kind of busy both times, and I don't know as I took much notice."

"Still"–and I called up a laugh–"you'd have known whether it really *was* Mr. Farnham, or a stranger passing himself off in his place?"

The bartender stared at me for an instant, and, had he spoken his inmost thoughts, probably they might have been appropriately expressed in the slang phrase, "Ah, what are you givin' me?" "Well, it might have been his grandfather's ghost, I daresay," he facetiously remarked at length, "but, anyhow, there seemed to be a strong resemblance between Harvey Farnham and him."

I set down my glass untouched. A cold conviction was growing within me that I had been mistaken; that, villain as Carson Wildred was, he had not, after all, been guilty of the one great crime which I had attributed to him. It seemed almost impossible that this keen-eyed man, accustomed to Farnham's comings and goings for several years, could have mistaken another for him.

Next morning when I had put together the few things that I had had occasion to unpack, and was "tipping" the pretty chambermaid who "chanced" to come to my door as I was departing, a sudden inspiration seized me, and I called the young woman back again as she was disappearing.

"By the way," I said, "did you happen to attend a Mr. Harvey Farnham, who was here a few days ago, and who has often stopped in the hotel?"

"Oh, yes, sir," she answered, "I know him quite well, and a very pleasant, generous gentleman he is–or rather" (and her face changed at some recollection), "or rather was."

I caught her up eagerly. "*Was?*" I echoed. "Wasn't he the same as usual this last time?"

"No, that he wasn't, sir. I thought to myself, thinks I, 'Mr. Farnham must have been disappointed in love or something,' he was so grumpy and dull. Always before when he came he had a good word for me, 'How do you do, Ginnie?' or a smile and a nod, but now he went by me without a sign, for all the world as if he'd never seen me before, though I've been here since I was seventeen; that's six years ago. When I spoke to him first, why he looked up and answered in a mumbling way, never even saying my name. But then, poor gentleman, I suppose he was too sick to think of anybody except himself."

"Did he look strangely?" I went on to question.

"Oh, I don't know about that, sir, except for the green shade he had to wear over his eyes; I suppose his face was much the same. Only I didn't get many chances to see it, and all his jolly ways and smiles were gone, so that made a difference. I was so glad when I saw his baggage coming up, for there's never been a gentleman so popular with us girls as Mr. Farnham; but except for his giving me something when he went away, he might almost as well not have been in the hotel."

"Would you have recognised his voice," I asked, "if you had not seen him?"

"I would when he was well and like himself, sir, in a minute, but not this time, because of the bad cold he'd got on the voyage, which he said was the worst he'd ever had. He did nothing but cough and wheeze, and could only speak in a hoarse sort of whisper."

These details were all I could extract from "Ginnie" the chambermaid; but before I left the hotel it occurred to me to examine the visitors' book for Farnham's name, wishing to look at the handwriting which, if his, I felt sure I could not fail to recognise. As I searched the pages vainly I thought with some compunction of Farnham himself, remembering how I had hardly known, on the evening of our unexpected meeting in London, whether or not to be genuinely pleased to see him. I had feared to have too much of his society during the few hours at the St. James's Theatre; yet ever since, by a strange irony of fate, I had been doomed to pursue him, to think of little that was not in some way or other connected with Harvey Farnham and his affairs.

Evidently he had not considered it worth his while to write in the visitors' book on this occasion, though I found that he had scrawled his name when staying in the hotel some months before. This counted for nothing definite, of course; and as for the taciturnity of which the chambermaid complained, the ailments from which my poor friend was reported to have been suffering were quite enough to account for that. Still, through her words and those of the man in the bar, I had gained my only real evidence–if evidence it might be called–and as such I treasured the scanty information.

Having by dint of some exertion found the cabman who had driven Farnham from the hotel to the railway depot, I made sure that his luggage had been "checked" to Denver, and so set forth again with a feeling that I had something to go upon.

Never had a journey seemed to me so endless. After Chicago the interminable plains got upon my nerves, and I looked out eagerly for the first range of the snow-clad Rockies.

The trip had taken the best part of three days, and it was early morning when I arrived in busy Denver, where the dry cold wind and the whirring shrieks of electric trams made me feel that I had left the place but yesterday. Much was changed, and many more tall, handsome blocks of pink stone had been erected during my four years' absence; still I easily found my way to the building where Harvey Farnham had offices.

It was just past breakfast time, but the business world of Denver, Colorado, and the "great West" is astir at an hour which would appear unusual in England. I asked for Mr. Farnham, and was told by a young clerk that he had returned to Denver three or four days previously. He had not been at the offices, as he was somewhat unwell as yet, but if I chose I could see Mr. Bennett, who would tell me when he might be expected.

I remembered Bennett, now that I was reminded of his existence, as an energetic young fellow high in Farnham's confidence, who probably knew as much about the mining and other financial interests as did his employer. I said therefore that I would see Mr. Bennett by all means.

He came in to me briskly in a few moments, surprised, and, he said, delighted to meet me again. Yes, it was quite true that Mr. Farnham had returned, but was as yet unable to be troubled by business affairs.

This settled the matter, then, I assured myself. There was nothing left for me to do but rejoice in Farnham's safety, curse my own idiocy for harbouring fantastic suspicions, despite all evidence which should long ago have overthrown them, and proceed to retrace my six thousand mile journey across the continent and the Atlantic.

I should at all events have the satisfaction, I bitterly reflected, that I had done my best to serve Karine's interests and my own, and I should arrive in England in plenty of time to see her married to the man I had vainly attempted to prove a murderer.

I became for the first moment conscious that I was desperately weary, that I had eaten little during the past few days, and slept less. I had not troubled myself to breakfast that morning–devouring food had seemed so utterly irrelevant–and now for an instant, as Mr. Bennett's words rang in my ears, a curious sudden dizziness overpowered me. I felt sick and faint, and realised that life was a failure, with nothing worth living for in future, since Karine Cunningham would soon be Karine Wildred.

"You look ill, Mr. Stanton," remarked Bennett. "I guess you've had a tiresome journey. I know what a bad run that is between Chicago and Denver."

A nasty run, indeed! But it would be much worse going back again, leaving the house of cards, which I had come so far to see, lying in ruins behind me. Still, I continued to beat into my brains the fact that I rejoiced in poor old Farnham's safety.

"I believe I am a bit knocked out," I said, "though I ought to be able to stand a trifle like that and think nothing of it. I should be glad to see Mr. Farnham. I suppose such an old friend as I might venture to call in on him, even though he isn't feeling as fit as I should like to think him. If he's not likely to turn up here presently I might drive to the house, and he'd give me breakfast, I daresay."

I saw before I had finished my second sentence that Bennett was slightly disturbed. He flushed to the roots of his flaxen hair, and his face wore an expression which betrayed a suppressed desire to whistle.

"You can bet he would give you breakfast, or anything else he had, Mr. Stanton," the trusted man of business said heartily, yet with a certain irresolution. "But the fact is, he ain't at the house this morning. He's gone away again."

"I thought he was unwell," I interpolated, in surprise.

"That's so. He's a sick man, not hardly fit to be about, but for all that he's off. He

ought to be back again in–well, in a few days, however."

"A few days!" I echoed.

"More or less. By George! he will be mad when he knows he's kept you waiting. For, of course, you *will* wait, won't you, Mr. Stanton?"

"I should certainly like to see him before I go back to the East," I said; and I spoke no more than the truth, for, putting my cordial feeling for Farnham out of the question, it might be that valuable information concerning Wildred's past could be wrested from him with due diplomacy. "Still, I hardly feel like hanging about Denver for an indefinite length of time, doing nothing. I shouldn't mind a little journey, as I've come so far. If he's at any of the Colorado mines, perhaps I might run out and join him; I've been there with him before, you may remember."

"You might indeed, sir," returned Bennett, still embarrassed, "if he was in any such place, which he isn't. To tell you the plain truth, Mr. Stanton, as I'm sure Mr. Farnham would wish, if he could dream it was *you* I was talking to, why, this little journey of his is strictly on the 'Q. T.' I guess from what he said there's a lady mixed up in it."

Exactly what Wildred had said, when explaining his friend's absence on Christmas Day from the House by the Lock! I remembered the coincidence, though I could hardly see that it bore with any importance on the present case. Farnham might hold several feminine trump cards to play at the end of a trick for all I knew, or had a right to know.

"I tell you what to do, Mr. Stanton," Bennett continued, recovering his wonted self-possession. "You just go up to the house, and make yourself at home there till Mr. Farnham gets back. You know what a big place it is, and how glad the chief is to fill it with his friends, especially such friends as you. Then, by the end of next week, anyhow—"

I interrupted him impatiently. "What, will he be away till then?"

"I should think it was probable from what he said before he left, sir."

"I wish," I exclaimed desperately, "that you could see your way to making things a little clearer for me. I don't want to pry into Farnham's affairs, of course–that goes without saying. But perhaps, without any betrayal of confidence, you might let me know exactly what he did tell you in regard to his return."

"Well," said Bennett, with a short laugh, "seeing it's you! The fact is, Mr. Stanton, it'll be a considerable relief to my mind to talk over the matter, and ask

your opinion as to one or two points that have been rather troubling me."

He glanced up into my face, almost for the first time since we had begun the discussion, and I saw that I was to hear something which he considered of importance.

Of how great importance it was to prove for me, I did not dare to dream.

CHAPTER XXI
A Picture from the Past

"The fact is," said Bennett, "I haven't quite known what to make of Mr. Farnham since he's been back on this side the herring-pond. Of course he hasn't been well, but that would hardly be enough to account for the change in him. Did you see him, may I ask, Mr. Stanton, when he was in England?"

I informed him that I had done so, not thinking it best to volunteer the statement that I had only met him once.

"And did he seem like himself?"

This was rather turning the tables upon me. I was not prepared to answer many questions, but without hesitation I replied to this one, saying that, in my opinion, Farnham had seemed uncommonly jolly and well.

Bennett looked thoughtful. "He got home here in Denver at night," he said, "after telegraphing from New York he was coming; I went to call at his request–another wire–not a letter–and he saw me in bed. Mr. Farnham is fond of plenty of light and noise as a rule, but in his bedroom he had refused to have the electricity turned on, and there was only a lamp on the table, as far as possible from the bed. I called out, 'How do you do?' in my usual tones, but he answered me almost in a whisper. There were some important papers which had been waiting for him to sign, and I had taken them with me, thinking he'd be anxious to attend to them–he was always so keen and prompt in business–but he seemed quite angry when I suggested it, and said he wasn't to be bothered about anything of the sort for a week.

"Next evening I saw him again for a few moments, and there was the same dim light, the same whispering. He was going away again immediately, he informed me, and when I objected that he didn't seem up to travelling, he answered that when there was a lady in the case there was no question of a man being 'up to' things. I might send his letters to the Santa Anna Hotel, San Francisco, he went on, until further notice, which I should receive by telegraph in about ten days if his plans went well. Just as I was going he said, kind of laughing and yet partly in earnest too, 'Well, Bennett, if you don't hear from me at the end of that time,

you'd better begin to look me up. The game that I mean to try and win is a dangerous one. There are others who want the lady beside myself.'

"Now, if there was a town on the face of the earth that Mr. Farnham used to hate, that town was San Francisco. It was because he hated the journey, and never wanted to take it again, that he sold his mine out in California to the English gentleman, Mr. Wildred. I wouldn't have supposed that there was a woman alive would have got him to go to San Francisco, and I used to think, too, that Mr. Farnham didn't care much for women; but no doubt the longer one lives the more one learns, and the more surprises one gets in such matters. I needn't say much about his being away from Denver for a few days, even at the office, he hinted to me; and with that we parted. Next morning early he left, and not a line have I had except a wire, merely announcing his safe arrival at the Santa Anna Hotel."

I listened in silence. Before Bennett had finished speaking my thoughts were far away–as far as San Francisco.

"By Jove!" I exclaimed aloud, with a rushing of blood to my brain that pulsed to bursting in the little veins at my temples. "*The Santa Anna Hotel!*"

"Do you know it, Mr. Stanton?" enquired Bennett, evidently surprised at my sudden vehemence.

"I was there once many years ago," I said. "The name has brought back an old association to my mind which I had thought was lost."

I knew now where I had seen those strange light eyes of Carson Wildred's, and what was the deed with which they had connected themselves in my mind. After all, perhaps, I had not come to America for nothing!

My memory travelled back over a space of ten years. I had then come back to San Francisco after an expedition into distant wilds with a party of friends shooting grizzlies in the Rockies. I had stopped at the Santa Anna Hotel, a small hostelry lately built, having an English landlord, and therefore greatly frequented by Englishmen.

On the night of my arrival there had been a serious disturbance in the house. Three men who had been stopping at the place got quarrelling over a game of cards which they were playing in a private parlour. Two, who were the hosts, and were entertaining the third, had set upon him with intent to kill, being accused of cheating. I and several of my friends had run out from the billiard-room, hearing a yell for help, just in time to see a man in evening dress stagger, bleeding, from the opposite door. "I'm killed! That devil has murdered me!" he exclaimed, and

fell forward on his face.

At Bennett's mention of the Santa Anna Hotel the whole scene had come up before me as vividly as though it had been enacted but yesterday. The open door, showing a brilliantly-lighted interior; cards scattered on the carpet; a young man–almost a boy–standing, as if frozen with horror, by an overset table; a large bowie knife, common to the country, apparently fallen from his right hand to the floor.

At the door itself an older man, who had followed the victim, no doubt with the intention of keeping him from making an outcry or escaping into the hall. But he had been too late, and the expression of his face as he met our eyes was hideous. Though the knife had to all appearance been used by his companion, it was at *him* that the murdered man had pointed before he fell and died. *He* was the one apostrophised as "that devil" by the death-stricken wretch; and though he had had a high, aquiline nose, red hair, and bristling auburn brows that met across his forehead, the eyes had been those of Carson Wildred.

They were eyes not easy to forget, especially as they blazed defiance into those of the men who sprang forward to lay hands upon him. "There stands the murderer, gentlemen, as you see," he had said, making a gesture towards his young companion, a boy of eighteen or nineteen, who seemed too astonished and horrified to move. Despite the evidence of the fallen knife, however, not one among the men who witnessed the end of the scene believed that the youth was guilty. Murder was in the eyes of the other, and must have betrayed him, even if the last words of the dead man had not accused him.

California was somewhat wilder in those days than it is at present, and men were more ready to act upon impulse. So it was that, as two of us gripped the fierce, red-haired fellow, another of the party flung some whispered word to the boy, who had only spoken to murmur brokenly, "God knows I'm innocent!"

What that whispered word was no one knew save he who spoke it and he to whom it was addressed. But whatever it might have been, it seemed to rouse the young man to life and a realisation of his position. With a leap he was at the long window and had sprung out on to a verandah, which ran round three sides and three stories of the house. The room was on the first floor, and it was easy enough for an active young fellow to let himself down by one of the twisted pillars which supported the verandah of the lower storey.

It could not have been so easy to escape those who half-heartedly followed; but the boy must have found some safe sanctuary near by, for not only did he evade

his pursuers, but was never found or brought to trial.

The other, an Australian, calling himself Willis Collins, known as a gambler, suspected as a card "sharper," was less fortunate. But for the cry of the dying man he might have cleared himself; but his reputation was against him to begin with; it was proved that the other was a young Englishman who had lost his money through Collins, and been duped by him, and altogether matters went hardly with the elder of the two confederates. He was tried and condemned (not for murder, as it happened, but manslaughter), and sentenced to imprisonment for twenty years.

The incident had passed out my mind until, on a visit to America six years later (four years previous to my present one), a man who had been of our bear-shooting party in the Rocky Mountains had chanced to mention that the fellow had very cleverly succeeded in making his escape from the prison where he had been confined.

I had had no personal interest in the affair, and though it had made considerable impression upon me at that time, through being called up at the trial as a witness, I do not suppose I had summoned it to my recollection for many a long day until now, at the mention of the Santa Anna Hotel.

It was no wonder, I told myself, that I had not been able to decide where and how I had seen Carson Wildred previous to the night when Farnham had introduced us to each other at the theatre. Unless I could collect proofs not at present in my possession, it would even now be useless to instill my conviction into the mind of anyone else.

Carson Wildred had a peculiarly flat nose; Willis Collins had had a particularly high one. Carson Wildred's hair was inky black; Willis Collins's had been a bright auburn. Wildred's face was smooth; Collins's mouth and chin had been concealed by a heavy though close-cropped red beard. So far as I knew there was but one man living who could have effected so radical a change, not only in the appearance, but in the actual conformation of features, in the countenance of any human being, and that was an old fellow in Paris, who had gained a reputation and a fortune among men who had reason to cut loose from the moorings of their past. I had met this famous (or infamous) person in a curious way, and had heard some strange stories from his lips. If I had made his acquaintance, why should not Collins or Wildred have done so and profited by the friendship, as fortunately I had neither the desire nor need to do? I determined that, unless my present researches were more successful than I now dared expect them to be, I would, on my return to the other side, run across to

France, and endeavour to piece together the bits of this old but newly-discovered puzzle.

Meanwhile, however, I had other work, and work closer at hand.

"While you've been talking, Mr. Bennett," said I, "I have been coming to a conclusion."

He smiled. "I'm glad of that, sir," he returned. "I have risked betraying Mr. Farnham's confidence that I may ask you what you think of that last hint of his, which, to tell the truth, has troubled me very much, coming, as it did, on top of so many queer actions. Although he was, or pretended to be, half in joke, ought I to let him stay away without taking any measures to find out whether his life really was threatened in California, and trying to help him out of a scrape if necessary? Of course, if it was all straight he'd be furious to have a watch set on his actions, and would never forgive me the indiscretion. Still, I haven't heard from him, as I said, since the day of his arrival, and neither my mind nor my conscience is very easy, Mr. Stanton. The question is, What would you do if you were in my place?"

I was delighted at this, and turned half away, that he might not see my change of countenance.

"It's rather a difficult position," I said, slowly, "for *you*. But there's a simple way out of it, without the necessity for you to run any risk of losing Mr. Farnham's favour. I've been to the Santa Anna Hotel before. There's no reason why I shouldn't go again if I choose, and no reason why I should mention having spoken with you at all if I meet my old friend. I'm something of a nomad, you know, and if I'm in England one month, and turn up in Kamtchatka the next, nobody is ever in the least surprised."

"But have you been thinking of going to California?" asked Bennett, half relieved and half dubious as to the course proposed.

"Oh, yes, I've been thinking of it," I promptly answered. But I neglected to add that it had only been during the past five minutes.

CHAPTER XXII
Face to Face

It was very nearly dinner time, two days later, when I drove up to the Santa Anna Hotel in San Francisco. Far away the bay could be seen and the Seal Rock, with the light of a great yellow moon touching its dark outlines and mingling with the blue, wintry twilight.

The neighbourhood was greatly changed since my last visit, but the hotel remained much the same. My first thought, after greeting the bluff old compatriot who kept the house, was to look at the visitors' book.

My heart gave a quick thump as I came on the name of Harvey Farnham. It was not in his handwriting, which, though I had not seen it for some time, I remembered quite distinctly.

"Ah, gentleman's ill," said the proprietor, when I cautiously questioned him. "Had his arm in a sling–got my clerk to put his name down for him, I recollect, as I was standing by. Mr. Farnham has been out a good deal, however, since he arrived, and, indeed, is out at present. He usually comes in about dinner time though."

This was an incentive to me not to miss that meal. I got into my evening togs in a hurry and was in the dining-room before anyone else, save a hungry-looking old man.

It was not a good season for the "Santa Anna," so the proprietor had confidentially informed me, but two or three dozen people strolled into the room before I had been there for half an hour. Still, I saw no familiar face, and was beginning to think in angry desperation that I had been eluded again, when the door opened to admit a tall and slender figure.

I looked up, my pulses quickening, my breath coming fast.

The man had a green shade over his eyes, was limping slightly, had his right arm in a sling, and altogether presented a somewhat battered appearance. But, I said to myself, if it was not Harvey Farnham it was his twin brother.

With all my eyes I stared at him. Almost as though there had been some

magnetic influence in them to draw him he came towards me, and finally approaching my table, motioned to the attentive waiter to draw out a certain chair.

He sat down, leaned back with an audible sigh, shook out his serviette with his left hand, slightly pushed up the green shade that shadowed his eyes, and began looking carelessly about the room.

As he did so his glance passed over my face. There was not the slightest hint of recognition in it. "Hullo, Farnham!" I said, carefully controlling the agitation in my voice.

He started violently and nearly dropped the soup spoon, which he had picked up with his left hand. Then, pulling himself together by a violent effort, he smiled, without any of the old cordiality. Almost mechanically he had reached up for the green shade, and given it a hasty pull downward.

"Hullo!" he responded in a hoarse voice, following the word with a cough. "This is a surprise, eh?"

"Yes," I replied slowly. "People do run against each other in unexpected places, don't they? Now I will wager something that you've forgotten my name?"

He smiled again, with a relieved expression. "Well"–still hoarsely–"I'm afraid I have, for a moment. It'll come back, no doubt, but would you mind enlightening me, meanwhile?"

"My name is Noel Stanton," I very quietly said. But I could have shouted aloud. Notwithstanding the extraordinary resemblance, this man was no more Harvey Farnham than I was!

CHAPTER XXIII
A Counterfeit Presentment

We had not much talk together. The few questions which I cautiously put evidently rendered him uncomfortable, and I on my part, having made sure of one all-potent fact, was anxious to get away and think the puzzle over.

I was at the last course of my dinner when the man entered, and having finished I rose.

"Are you stopping long in San Francisco?" I asked, with my best air of carelessness.

"A couple of days or so," he said. "See you again to-morrow, I daresay." It was plain that he was glad to get rid of me. Naturally he was afraid of all men, strangers to him, who claimed knowledge of him as Harvey Farnham. He was playing a bold and dangerous game, and no doubt he was aware that, unless he kept himself in hand, and never for an instant lost his presence of mind, any moment might find him beaten.

So dizzy was I with the fumes of my discovery that my brain would not answer to my command. I could not think. I could only say over and over again–"Not Harvey Farnham! The fellow is a mere decoy!"

Out in the open I knew that I should have a better chance of mastering myself. On the way to the door I stepped into the "office" again and glanced at the visitors' book. Harvey Farnham's name was written down opposite the number 249, and I knew, therefore, that his room must be near, and in the same wing in the back as mine.

The glorious salt wind soon restored me to myself, and I wandered through some of the streets I had known and forgotten, thinking busily. I could understand much now that had been dark to me, though even yet far too much for my peace of mind remained hidden.

It was no wonder that this counterfeit presentment of a dead man (for I was certain enough now that poor Farnham was dead) had cumbered himself with bandages, and simulated sprains, and thickened his voice with an alleged bronchitis. There was a wonderful family likeness between voices, when they

only spoke in a rough whisper, and the green shade over the eyes had doubtless proved very advantageous in keeping up the optical illusion on which the man had courageously dared to count, even among Farnham's Denver friends. To be sure he had hurried away as soon as possible from every place where he had stayed since arriving at New York on the *St. Paul*. In each one he had accomplished an object vital to the interest of the plot. He had been able to refute the story of Harvey Farnham's murder, in person, and having evidently been well grounded in all prominent facts connected with Farnham's life, habits, and trip to England, had made a *coup* in his interview with the New York police.

Having done all that was necessary in the east, he had then taken the final and most hazardous step of going to Farnham's home. It was hardly remarkable, therefore, that he had seized the opportunity of escaping so trying an ordeal at once. It seemed to me impossible that he should intend returning to Denver, where, in the light of day, and among old business and domestic associates, he could not long hope to escape detection, perfect as the likeness seemed to be. What, then, would he do, I eagerly asked myself? He had so far been successful in establishing the fact all along his route that Harvey Farnham had not only returned in safety to America, but had shown himself at home. So much having been gained, Wildred must perforce be relieved of all suspicion of the crime which I had tried to fasten upon him, and this being the case, I assured myself that it was Wildred's hand only which had contrived this intricate and ingenious plot. This man, disguised as Farnham, was in Wildred's pay, there could be no doubt of that, and had in all probability been engaged for the purpose he was now carrying out before the murder had taken place.

I tried as I walked to put myself in the place of the schemers, and thus hew out, through an intimate mental process, some idea as to how the loose ends of the mystery were to be disposed of.

"If I were that fellow," I said to myself at last, "I should think it was about time to disappear. I should feel sure I'd come to the end of my tether, and that somehow or other Harvey Farnham, as represented by me, had got to be unostentatiously wiped out."

Farnham, however, was too rich and important a man in the western states of his own country to disappear conveniently and with impunity. There would be a hue and cry, and suspicious facts might somehow be brought to light. The only safe way, I decided, would be for the alleged Harvey Farnham to kill himself; but this it did not appear very likely that the most dazzling bribe could induce him to do. He meant to find some more comfortable way out of the hole into which he had

so deliberately crept than the way of suicide, and it began to seem that the only method by which I could prove my case would be by finding out what that way was to be.

At present, unless I could have the fellow arrested, and such disguise as he might wear dragged off, I should have great difficulty in obtaining credence of my story. The incidents were all so remarkable that they must be certified with the best of evidence, and such evidence as I wanted could only be forthcoming from Bennett, or someone else in Denver who knew Farnham equally well.

What I must do, I thought, would be to keep on the man's track, and never for an hour lose sight of him. I must do this without arousing any suspicion on his part as to my motives until the last moment, when I should be prepared to accuse him.

This conclusion naturally reminded me that at the very moment it was reached I had virtually lost sight of my quarry, and that already I might have missed my chance. Accordingly, I hurried back to the Santa Anna Hotel, and though it was then too late to wire Bennett, I determined to do so early the next morning. I would request him to come on to San Francisco at once on a matter of extreme importance, and–his mind being already disturbed concerning his employer–he would lose no time in obeying. In Bennett, if I could fairly corner the bogus Farnham, I should have the most valuable witness in the world.

My first question was as to whether Mr. Farnham were in the hotel. He had not yet returned from a call which he had gone to make after dinner, and I sat down, therefore, in the corridor inside the front doors, through which he would have to pass on entering.

I pretended to be absorbed in a local paper, but in reality my thoughts were a maelstrom. Suppose he had already escaped me!

At half-past eleven, however, he came in. I did not seem to lift my eyes from the pages before them. He would have to go directly by me on his way upstairs; time enough to appear to observe him then.

"Cablegram for you, Mr. Farnham," said the clerk of the hotel.

"Ah!" The exclamation was one of surprise. He had not, then, been expecting the message.

I could not resist looking up after all to watch him in the act of reading it, and as I did so my eyes caught a gleam from his, under the green shade, as they turned to my face with an expression that was like a hunted animal's. In the instant I

was as positive as though he had told me in so many words that the cablegram he had received was from Carson Wildred, and intimately concerned me. Probably it said, "If a man named Noel Stanton turns up, he is an enemy–beware of him."

I regretted immediately that I had given him my real name when we met at dinner, for, warned now by Wildred, he would be ever on his guard. He was seized with a creditable fit of coughing as he passed me, and having growled out something about being "deuced tired, and sleeping like a log," he went upstairs.

I followed him in time to see him enter his own room, which was only half a dozen doors from mine, and to hear him noisily lock the door. It occurred to me that he was desirous to have me know that he *had* locked it, and I wondered if already he had begun to suspect my motive.

CHAPTER XXIV
Fire!

I went to bed determined not to sleep, but to keep my ears open for any sound in the passage outside. Luckily there was a creaky board on which he had stepped a few minutes ago. If he attempted to go away during the night he would very possibly step on it again. But I was exceedingly tired after my long journey. Before I had been in bed an hour I was dreaming so vividly a pursuit of my quarry through the streets of San Francisco, that I fully believed I had waked, got up, and gone out after him.

In the end the dream seemed to change. The pretender had boarded a railway train, and I was with the engine-driver of another, following at a dare-devil speed. The place was reeking hot. In my dream I choked in the smoke which flew into my face, and was dazzled with the red glare of the fire, on which the engine-driver was piling great pieces of fat bacon. As we flew along the rails the locomotive swayed from side to side, and I could hear a loud rattling of wheels and of window glass.

Suddenly a puff of smoke seemed on the very point of stifling me, and I awoke to find myself sitting up in bed and gasping for breath.

I had not dreamed the rattling of glass, nor the jarring sensation, nor yet the smoke and heat and lurid light. The walls shook with a dull vibration, and the window-panes were like castanets. Through the glass transom over the door I could see a shimmering, ruddy glow that rose and fell, and was brightened by bursting sparks and little darting tongues of yellow flame. Apart from this one lurid spot all was thickly curtained into darkness by a heavy pall of smoke.

Had I lain for a few moments longer I must have suffocated in my sleep. Even as it was, my brain felt dull and stupid, and I could scarcely collect my senses.

Choking and coughing, tears running from my eyes that smarted with the pungent wood smoke, I sprang out of bed, and then sat down again with a slight exclamation, drawing up my feet. The floor was so hot that the touch of it, even for an instant, had almost scorched my skin.

Close at hand were my boots. I drew them on and then fumbled about for one or

two articles of clothing. The wild light that rushed past the transom told me that escape by way of the passage was already cut off, and even as I looked a small, curling tress of flame blew in through the crack between the door and the worn sill.

The window was less easy to find. As I felt for it through the veil of smoke strange conjectures stole into my brain. What if this were the plan of Carson Wildred's wily accomplice for getting safely rid of me?

I had no intention of being got rid of thus easily, however. I found the window and opened the lower sash. With the rush of air from outside my oppressed lungs got relief for a second or two, but the draught drew in the flames that rioted through the hall; the glass in the transom, already cracked, burst with a loud explosive sound, and a torrent of fire and smoke poured in through the aperture.

Had I not leaped on to the window-sill, and without an instant's hesitation let myself swing over, I could not have kept my senses in that raging furnace.

If I had had a room in the main building of the hotel, I should only have had to step on to a verandah outside my window, but in this wing (which I had chosen as my place of residence because I had inhabited it before) there was nothing of the sort, and I had now the space of about ten seconds to decide whether to jump or have my hands burnt off my wrists.

In any case the decision could not have been a difficult one, but, as it happened, the need was rendered the more imperative by the fact that smoke had already begun to pour from the window below. Very shortly escape would be cut off in all directions.

My room was on the second floor, high enough to give me a severe fall, perhaps a fatal one, and I felt that my life was of value now. Cautiously but hurriedly I reached out with one hand to the side of the window, hanging with all my weight from the other, which clutched the sill. My groping fingers came in contact with a twisted rope of creepers; bare of leaves for winter, and serviceable for the use I wished to put it to. I grasped the thick stems for dear life, and went down hand over hand, dimly hearing voices from below cheering me in my descent.

I had been unconscious of the noise until that moment, but as my feet touched the ground I was received with acclamations, and saw that a crowd was rapidly collecting on the spot. The firemen were arriving, and as I reached *terra firma* a great spout of water went up over the burning wing.

The main portion of the house, which was built of stone, save for the

surrounding verandahs was still uninjured, but the wing at the back, which had been a later addition, run hastily up to meet the needs of business, was of frame, and it was burning like tinder. Though it seemed that the alarm had only been given five minutes before my appearance on the scene, already it was beyond saving. My reason for preferring the wing I have already stated, but what the pretended Harvey Farnham's had been I had yet to learn, for so far was the main portion of the hotel from being crowded on this occasion, that we two had been the only ones who slept in the annex. Otherwise the alarm must have been given from inside, instead of by a policeman, who had seen a sudden light leap up while passing on his beat.

Where was Mr. Farnham? That was the question asked by the excited landlord, who, half-dressed, had come out to give what help he could. By this time a sheet of flame was pouring from his windows, so much more violent than in any other portion of the fated wing, that I could but fancy, as I looked up, that the fire must have started thereabouts.

The only hope was to save the main building–the frame addition had been doomed from the first. Everyone had come out, guests and servants alike, in varying stages of deshabille, which might under ordinary circumstances have struck one as comic enough, but the supposed Farnham was nowhere to be seen.

When it became known that there was another occupant of the burning annex, the firemen made heroic efforts to reach the windows on their ladders, but each time they were beaten back by the blinding flame and smoke–a salamander could not have existed there for an instant.

Murmurs of horror and dismay came from the lips of the crowd as they stared with a species of fearful fascination at the flames, which must long ago have destroyed, not only life, but all vestiges of humanity, if indeed a human being had been there when they began their revel. But I said nothing. I thought now that I understood the reason why my friend had taken the room in the frame addition to the Santa Anna Hotel. The plan commenced to take form in my mind, and I believed that the cablegram had only precipitated its execution.

CHAPTER XXV
"It's Dogged as Does It"

Fortunately, to prevent delay and temporary embarrassment, there was plenty of gold for present needs in the pockets of the one garment which I had put on before escaping. Everything else which I had brought to the Santa Anna Hotel was lost; but never, perhaps, was a man more completely indifferent to such loss than I. The only thing on the American side of the Atlantic which now interested me was to find out whether the false Harvey Farnham had actually (by an irony of fate) perished in the flames, or whether–as I more than suspected–he himself was responsible for the fire.

It would be impossible to ascertain the truth until such time as the ruins of the burnt wing of the hotel should have sufficiently cooled to render a search practicable. Even then, if no other measures were taken, the fact might never be absolutely substantiated. If nothing more was ever heard of Harvey Farnham, it would probably be taken for granted that he had met his death in the fire at the Santa Anna Hotel, even though no actual traces of his body were forthcoming. His heirs, whoever they might be, would doubtless claim their inheritance, and even assurance money, if such there were to be had, before many months had passed. Carson Wildred would be for ever safe, and my quest would have ended in nothing but bitterness and disappointment.

This being the case, I could not afford to wait until the burnt building should be ransacked for Harvey Farnham's remains, I must take it for granted that no such remains were there, and go in search of the living, breathing body. I tried to put myself mentally in place of the man who had stolen his identity from the dead. Were I he, I thought, and had I done that of which I believed he had been guilty, I would lose no time in putting myself beyond the reach of possible pursuit. I would have laid my plans with some exactitude, and would have been prepared for the necessity of flight. I would have thrown aside as many details of my likeness to Harvey Farnham as nature had not provided me with, and having set fire to the room I had occupied, I would have got out of the hotel as quietly and quickly as practicable. If it had been comparatively easy for me to escape by means of the creepers down the side of the house, the same means might well have been employed by the man whose movements I was mentally trying to

follow.

Success having attended my movements so far, I should have gone straight to a railway station, and would never have breathed freely until I had left San Francisco well behind me.

So wise, under the given circumstances, did this course of action seem to me, that I promptly decided no other would have been feasible. The thing for me to do, therefore, was to find out what trains left San Francisco during the night time. I thought I might calculate upon the fellow's having boarded a passenger train in an open and ordinary manner as, if his plans had been properly laid, no suspicion could attach to him, and there would be no necessity for more desperate precautions.

He could have had a good start before the fire spread and was discovered, and–still taking it for granted that I was correct in my deductions–the sooner I was on his track the better. My hands were burned, I was practically without clothes, and had suffered a considerable nervous shock, which at another time I might have had leisure to feel and analyse.

But I did neither at the present juncture. I simply procured a stiff portion of brandy neat, drank it at a gulp, purchased a few articles of clothing from an accommodating waiter, dressed myself with all speed, and set off to the principal railway station, or "depot," of San Francisco.

"It's dogged as does it," I quoted to myself, with a certain grimness of resolution, when my spirits began to flag.

As I got inside the station there was a certain bustle and stir of departure or arrival in the air. "Train going out or coming in?" I asked shortly of a sleepy porter.

"Going out–Salt Lake City," grumbled the man in reply.

I don't know why I instantly felt the conviction that the bogus Farnham was in that train, but I did feel it, and so intensely that when I saw the long line of cars beginning to move it seemed to me that not to reach it and jump on board would mean the ruin of my life.

I have a dim recollection of persons shouting at me, of feeling a detaining hand trying to drag me back. I remember, too, thrashing out with considerable force, ridding myself of my would-be preserver. I caught on by the rear platform, and after flying helplessly for an instant like a ribbon in the wind as the train increased its speed, I got a foothold and climbed up the steps.

At the top was a negro night porter, ash-coloured with fright. He helped to pull me on board, and I tipped him generously (when I began to regain my breath and scattered wits) for agreeing not to make an excitement by reporting the affair to the conductor.

I panted out that I wanted a berth, found that there would be a vacant one on board the "sleeper" at my disposal, and sat down in the smoking-room, ostensibly to wait while the bed was made up for me.

I must have been a curious object to look upon in my dishevelled and hybrid costume, not an article of which, save the boots and trousers, had been made for me. But I had no thoughts to waste upon my own appearance. I sat wondering at the unhesitating way in which I had rushed ahead, and staked my all on this one throw of the dice, so to say. If my man had not left San Francisco, or if he *had* left, and in another direction, in great probability I had lost all trace of him for ever. Yet I had flung myself on board this train as though I had had my quarry in my eye, and had but to put out my hand to lay hold upon him. I was now beginning to be very much astonished at myself.

Having come on board, however, I would at once begin a tour of exploration, I resolved, going from one end of the train to the other, and not forgetting a visit (with or without leave) to the "cab" of the engine.

I rose, pulling myself together, and saying again between my teeth, "Yes, it's dogged as does it," when a man came into the smoking-room. I had been alone before.

We looked at each other. He was a tall, slim, young fellow, with a smooth face. At sight of me he stopped short, flushed to the roots of his close-cropped hair, and would precipitately have retired had I not taken one quick step forward and grasped him by the shoulder.

Gone was the curly wig, the beard, and the lump on the nose, which had been modelled after Farnham's; gone was the green shade, the sling, and the limp, but much of the odd resemblance, which had been heightened in so artistic a manner, still remained. At last, after crossing an ocean and a continent to do it, I had got my hands on the man I had come to find, and I didn't mean to let him go.

Yes, it certainly had been "dogged" that had done it.

CHAPTER XXVI
A Tell-tale Ornament

"No, you don't!" I remarked, cheerfully, and with the force of superior muscles I pulled him towards me. "Come, sit down here by me," I said. "I want to talk to you." And somehow it came about that we subsided on the cushioned seat together.

He had recognised me, of course, as the man he had seen in the hotel–the man, Noel Stanton, against whom I did not doubt his cablegram had warned him. He was pale as death, and I could see that this meeting, added, like the piling of Ossa upon Pelion, on top of all that he had already gone through, had robbed him of the shattered remnant of his nerve.

Still, he was ready to "bluff" and brave if out while he could. "Confound you!" he exclaimed. "What are you about? You must be mad to attack a stranger without the slightest provocation. Let me alone, sir, or I'll rouse the car."

"I wouldn't, you know, if I were you," I said coolly, for the more excited he grew the more did my own calmness come back to me. "You've been playing a dangerous game ever since you took your passage in the American liner *St. Paul* (or, rather, since Carson Wildred took it for you), but you've never, perhaps, steered so close to the wind as to-night, when you resorted to incendiarism as a finishing stroke."

The fellow stared at me in simulated nonchalance and defiance, but my hand was on his shoulder still, and I could feel the shudder that ran through his body.

"I say you must be mad," he reiterated.

"So you observed before; but I could very easily prove to you that I'm not, if you were not already sure of it. You can call for assistance if you like, but if you do the story I've got to tell will go flashing over the wires back to 'Frisco, and on to Denver, and you will find yourself in almost as hot a place as if you had stayed at the Santa Anna Hotel, where you wanted the world to think that poor Harvey Farnham had been roasted."

Once more the fit of shivering seized him. He glanced wildly about, as though to find some means of escape, but there was none.

"I am a bigger man and a stronger man than you," I remarked, in a significant and reflective manner. "Better hear the alternative I've got to offer. I know everything, you see–that is, everything that concerns *you*, and the curious game you've been playing.

"I've been just three days behind you everywhere since you left New York. I've got every link in the evidence now, and what with Bennett, of Denver, and the proprietor of the Santa Anna Hotel, and a few others, I can burst your wretched little soap bubble plot in four-and-twenty hours. There's just one way in which you can stay my hand."

"What's that?" He had spoken out impulsively, before he had stopped to think. The instant the words were uttered he saw all that they admitted, and bit his lip. But it was too late; he was completely trapped.

"I'll tell you," I said, keeping my hand on his shoulder, almost caressingly. "I'd listen attentively, if I were in your place. What you can do is to make a clean breast of your story from beginning to end. I'm willing to pay you more for confessing than Wildred did for plotting. Then you must go back to England with me, and stand by while the thing is made public."

As I spoke he did not once take his eyes from me. It was remarkable even yet, now that he was out of his disguise, how strong his likeness was to Farnham. He might have been a younger brother.

When I had finished he sighed and drooped his head. His own hair, which was very closely cut, was of a beautiful reddish golden colour, much the shade of Karine Cunningham's, as the light fell on it from above. I thought of her with a great wave of passionate love, and more of hope than I had dared to feel for many a long day.

Perhaps it was the recollection of her lovely face and the wonderful halo of her hair which caused me for an instant to relax my grasp. I only became conscious of having done so when the fellow twisted himself from under my hand, and springing lithely to his feet would have darted through the swing door had I not leaped after him like a tiger.

We fought together as the car swayed and bounded along its tracks. Once he dived under my arm and was almost out of my clutches, but I caught him by the collar with so fierce a grip that the linen of his shirt tore, and the garment ripped open to the waistcoat.

Something which he wore beneath snapped, as he still struggled to escape me,

and a bright object flashed under my eyes as it fell, and dropped with a slight metallic noise to the floor.

Evidently it was to him an article of value. Impulsively he stooped, forgetful for a second of the object which had animated him, and thus the advantage became all mine again. I had him pinioned fast.

At our feet, I now had time to observe, lay a broken gold chain and a locket.

Twisting my hand firmly in his collar I bent over and picked up the ornaments. "Allow me," I said, smiling. And as I was about to put the locket in his hand I could not avoid seeing the portrait that it framed. It was an open-faced, old-fashioned thing, set round with a rim of pearls. The crystal had been cracked across in the fall, but the delicately painted ivory miniature within was intact, and I gave a slight exclamation as I saw that it represented Karine Cunningham.

If I had been surprised to see her picture in the "studio" at the House by the Lock, I was doubly surprised to see it in a locket worn by a young desperado on the other side of the world. Impulsively I withdrew my hand which held the ornament, with the feeling that the man had no right to it–that I could not return it to him again.

"Give it back to me!" he ejaculated, forgetting his evident fear of me for the first time, and speaking with a certain manly fierceness that thawed the chill of my contempt for him. "If I've got a right to nothing else on earth, I've got a right to that. It's a portrait of my sister."

"*Your sister!* You swear that?"

"Of course I swear it. I don't see why you shouldn't know it–though I haven't done much credit to the name of Cunningham."

I could not doubt him. Not that I had not every reason to believe that he would be willing to lie as fast as he could speak if it happened to suit his purpose, but the ring of sincerity in his voice was unmistakable.

I let go my hold upon him. Such was his astonishment at the manœuvre that he made no attempt to take advantage of his freedom, but simply stood still and stared at me.

"Here is the locket," I said. "I came from England to California to serve Miss Cunningham's interests, and I will not lay my hand upon her brother."

"I don't know what you mean," he said, sullenly.

"I'll tell you," I returned, "if you'll sit down here and listen to me for a few

minutes longer. After that, as far as I am concerned, you are free to do as you choose. You look surprised–but whatever may have been your faults and your offences, I would stake my life you love your sister."

"She is the only being on earth I do love," he replied, still half dazedly.

Then he sat down, his eyes furtively on me, and I seated myself beside him.

"She is sacrificing herself for someone," I remarked. "I think I begin dimly to understand now who that someone may be. I think, too, that circumstances have given me the right to be inquisitive, as I can still further explain to you later on. Is Miss Cunningham going to marry Carson Wildred to save you from any unpleasant consequences of the past, for instance?"

He started as though he had been struck.

"She is *not* going to marry Carson Wildred!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, she is, unless it can be prevented. I see I have even more to tell you than I thought. Is it long, may I ask, since you have seen your sister?"

"Last November," he said drooping his head, and bringing under my eyes again the hair that was like hers.

"Ah, that explains your ignorance. The man had not shown his hand at that time. Now I am going to trust to your affection for Miss Cunningham, to your presumable wish to save her from unhappiness, and talk to you as though we had been allies instead of enemies. Perhaps I may be a fool for my pains; but something seems to say to me—"

"Something says right. Go on!" he ejaculated, gruffly.

No doubt the very most dunder-headed of lawyers or detectives would have told me that I was mad, thus deliberately to give all my good trumps away to the treacherous, hired scoundrel whom I had been hunting down with the dogged ferocity of a bloodhound. On principle, of course, I *was* all wrong, and I knew it; but still I went on.

I told him the strange story of the past few weeks from beginning to end. I commenced with the part which concerned Farnham and Carson Wildred alone. I did not pass over that which had to do with Karine, my hopeless and unrequited love for her, my passionate anxiety to serve her at all costs; and I ended by declaring my certainty that Carson Wildred and Willis Collins were one and the same man.

"He is doubly a murderer," I said. "And yet, unless you and I together can keep

him from it, he will be your sister's husband."

"I'll kill him first!" exclaimed my companion.

"I think the trick can be done without resorting to such extreme measures as that," I returned, "especially if you are willing to come over from his camp to mine."

He looked at me sharply for a moment without answering, then he said:

"You seem pretty quick, I've noticed, in what you've just been telling me at putting two and two together. Well, you say you were at the Santa Anna Hotel the night the murder was committed ten years ago. You knew there were two men mixed up in it. You remembered one of them; would you remember the other?"

"He was a mere boy," I said, "and it's a long time ago. He must have changed almost beyond recognition."

"He's just twenty-nine at present; I've good reason to know, as I'm he."

It was my turn to be astonished, but it was not policy to show it. Therefore I merely said, "Oh, indeed!"

"You see," he went on dully, "that's where Wildred has had his pull over me since he ran across me, by a piece of devil's own luck, in Canada five years ago. As you say, I have changed; but his eyes are like gimlets, they'd pierce a stone wall. It's quite true, as you suspected, that he and Collins are one. I knew him by a queer scar on his hand, shaped like a star–perhaps you've observed it? But he didn't mind. He seemed even to find a sort of pleasure in telling me how he had been to a clever fellow in Paris, and got himself made over into another man, so that he might the more easily turn his back upon various little episodes of the past. I couldn't have proved it if I'd wanted to, he was so different, and had worked up such a new record for himself to travel on. He knew that, and he knew, too, that I was in his power."

"I don't exactly see how *that* came about," I objected.

"Don't you? You're not so quick as usual, then. I'd been accused of the murder at the Santa Anna Hotel. I hooked it, and got over to Mexico, so to Spain and France. I'd always been a black sheep, you know, but that was the first really serious trouble I'd got into. However, as I said, five years later, when Wildred and I met, I was in Canada; I'd turned actor (I'd always a little talent that way), and was doing pretty well. He pointed out to me–and I wasn't very long in seeing his point–that I was not so much changed but what I should easily be recognised

by those who had known me during those wild days when I'd been under his thumb in San Francisco, and the authorities there would still be very glad to hear of me. He didn't happen to want anything of me just then, but he allowed me to understand that it was to my interest to keep sweet with him. And from that day to this he's had his eye on me."

"But it was *he* who was accused of that murder, not you," I said.

"*What!*"

The man seemed either not to believe or understand me.

I repeated the statement, and then, when he stammered his astonishment, his ignorance of all that had taken place in San Francisco after his escape (at which we had all tacitly connived at the time), I went on to explain the true circumstances of the case. Carson Wildred had deceived him into the belief that he alone had been suspected–that if he were caught he would be promptly hanged.

"He has told the same story to your sister, I would swear!" I exclaimed, hotly. "It is for this reason that she has been persuaded into promising to marry him. Believing that he knows your whereabouts, and holds it in his power at any moment to have you punished as a murderer–believing, too, no doubt, that you did commit the murder, she has been ready to save your life by the sacrifice of all that has made hers dear."

"Curse him! I'd take my oath you're right!" he asseverated. "He's sly enough and vile enough for anything."

"Did you ever see Harvey Farnham?" I questioned.

"Yes, years ago I knew him well, and liked him immensely–as he did me, I think. It was in Tuolumne County, California, where he had a gold mine–the Miss Cunningham. It was I who named that, oddly enough it may seem to you, after my sister, of course. He wasn't aware of that, but thought it was just a whim of mine, that probably I'd admired some girl called 'Miss Cunningham,' and wanted to pay her a compliment. You see, no one knew me by my right name even then.

"It was before that hateful time when I got in with Collins, or Wildred, whichever you like to call him, and not long after I'd run away from home and England under the assumed name of Hartley–it was my mother's maiden name. I was only seventeen or eighteen, but I was pretty sharp for my years, I'm afraid, for I'd been among a queer lot already, and one night I would have got into a row with some older man over cards, a row that might have ended badly if it hadn't

been for Mr. Farnham, who had dropped into the place to look on, and who stood by me for all he was worth.

"It seemed he noticed me the moment he entered the room, thinking that I looked enough like him to be his own son. Afterward he took me up, making a lot of me, wanting to find out where I'd come from, and all that. He thought my resemblance to him (which everyone who saw us together invariably remarked) a wonderful joke, and used to call me his 'boy,' and 'sonny,' getting it into his head that I was a sort of 'Mascot,' who brought luck to him in whatever he undertook. That was the principal reason, of course, that he was so keen on having me name his mine for him. I think if I had sowed all my wild oats, and been willing to settle down a bit into a respectable member of society, there was a time when he wouldn't have minded adopting me, for some old, unhappy love affair or other had kept him out of the marriage-market, eligible as he was, and he swore that he never meant to marry, even for the hope of having an heir to all his money. Yes, I might have been that heir if I hadn't been a fool, for Farnham certainly thought the world and all of me in those days. As it was, he did me many a kindness."

"And now, by way of repaying that affection and those kindnesses," I could not help exclaiming, with a returning touch of the old bitter contempt, "you've undertaken to help his murderer to get off scot free. You've been masquerading in the very clothes the poor fellow wore, you've been using his luggage, trading on the likeness to him which once won for you his regard, heightening it in every way by artificial means, so that not only shall Carson Wildred, or Willis Collins, escape suspicion, but that he may enrich himself on the dead man's millions. You even set an hotel on fire to finish the whole fiendish plot with a fine dramatic effect!"

The poor wretch, who had made such a wreck of his young life, was white as death, and shaking like an aspen. I could see the beads of sweat oozing out on his pale forehead. "For God's sake," he implored, "don't say that to me; I can't bear it! Until you told me just now I swear to you by all I hold sacred–by my sister's love, which I so little deserve–that I never dreamed of Harvey Farnham's being dead. You may believe me or not, as you like, but you're *her* friend, so I should be glad that you should believe. And, at least, you owe it to me in common justice to hear what I've got to say.

"Collins always managed to keep his eye on me, and knew my whereabouts and my doings, making me feel that at any moment he could come down on me if he chose. I daresay he had other men in his power like that, men whom he thought

he might wish to make his tools at one time or other. I didn't often hear from him, though I knew myself shadowed, and knew also, only too well, whom I had to thank for it. You can't guess the horror of the feeling, or how it got on my nerves. I fancied it would drive me to madness or suicide one day, always knowing I was watched, that I could never, try as I would, escape that Eye, which was really Willis Collins's, spying me out across the ocean.

"Well, a cablegram came from him commanding rather than asking me to go to England, saying that it would be much to my advantage to do so, and that my fare and all expenses would at once be sent me in advance. There was just a hint that I had better not refuse, which I understood as well as if it had been a definite threat; and, anyhow, there was a certain attractiveness in the idea of going home–I hadn't seen Karine or England for so long.

"I didn't mean to let my sister know of my presence–I would have spared her that–but I fancied myself standing among the crowd in the Park, watching her drive by, or something of that sort. Even a glimpse of her face would have been sweet.

"But when I arrived one of the first things Wildred did was to tell me that he knew the Tressidys, with whom Karine was living, that he had heard my sister often speak of me, and that he would secretly arrange a meeting between us. I couldn't resist the temptation of having a few words with her when it was offered for the asking, and I saw her at the House by the Lock. An excuse was made to bring her and Lady Tressidy there–something about a portrait of Karine that was in a queer room called the 'studio'–and while Wildred was showing Lady Tressidy over the house I saw my sister, and had a talk with her. She felt grateful to Wildred for bringing it about, and fool that I was, I didn't suspect the deep game he meant to play with her, using me as the decoy. I thought he had merely been willing to take the trouble that he might get the more work out of me when he wanted it, though what the work was for which he had brought me to England I didn't yet know.

"After that first meeting with Karine I had given Wildred my word never to try and see her again; now I understand why. He wished to revive all the old love she had felt by the sight of me, awaken her sympathy for my troubles, when she should learn his version of them from his lips, and then keep me from her, lest I should hear that he had asked her to be his wife, threatening to betray me if she did not accept, and so, in spite of my cowardice (for I am a moral coward), setting me against him, to be his slave and tool no more.

"When I had been in England about three or four weeks, keeping out of the way

of anyone who might possibly remember me, Wildred suggested the scheme of my travelling back to America, impersonating Farnham, and finally finishing the plot, as I did finish it to-night. He admitted that it was for this he had sent for me, but swore Farnham himself was in the thing as deep as he; that it meant a fortune to them both, which they were to share, and which could be had in no other way. He explained that Farnham had had bad luck in speculations, was bankrupt, hadn't the pluck to begin over again on the lowest rounds of the ladder, nor to undertake carrying out this plan himself. He would funk the fire business, Wildred said, and might, instead of escaping, actually be burned to death. The object to be gained, of course, I was made to believe, was getting the life assurance. Farnham was supposed to have several policies, each one for an enormous sum; he had left everything of which he should die possessed, life assurance and all the rest, to Wildred, who would actually go halves with Farnham when the money should be secured.

"I have nothing of my own, you know, except what I can make by my wits, for my father disinherited me, and I've had just a little too much pride ever to take anything from Karine. Wildred offered me ten thousand pounds to work this business for him; half to be paid down, half when the thing had been successfully carried through to the close.

"Of course, I had sense enough to know it was a villainous fraud, but I've never been very scrupulous, and it was easy to persuade myself that I owed Harvey Farnham a good turn for what he did for me in the past. Besides, I wanted the money, and there was five thousand in notes (Wildred was too sly to give a cheque) on the table for me to take or leave. I didn't see that I was going to do much harm to anybody except the insurance companies, who are rich enough to lose, as Farnham hadn't a relative in the world; but before heaven, if I'd dreamed of the truth, I'd have let Wildred do his worst before I'd have gone in with him.

"As for the Santa Anna, I knew that every board of the hotel was assured–the landlord would lose nothing, and after I'd kindled the fire I knocked like mad on your door. I fancy, though you didn't know it, it must have been that which first began to rouse you. I didn't give myself much time to get out, after taking off the disguise (which I flatter myself I did pretty well), but I just managed it. I can tell you I was desperate when I walked in here and found you; but now I was never so thankful for anything in the course of my life."

"The present question is, then," I said, "whether you will go straight to England with me and tell all you know about Carson Wildred? If we stopped on this side, to prove things step by step as we went, we should labour under two

disadvantages. It would mean indefinite delay, and you would get into trouble about that business at the hotel to-night. To sail at once for England, and let matters here take care of themselves for the present, is our only plan, I think. What do you say?"

"You are sure that Wildred can't swear my life away?"

"As sure as I am that we are both alive at this moment."

"Then I'm in your hands. I'll save my sister, and I'll get even with Wildred for making a tool and a dupe of me."

"By the time we have landed on the other side," I answered, "there'll still be a clear fortnight to do the first, and I think we may accomplish the latter transaction simultaneously."

CHAPTER XXVII
Too Late!

We had a stormy passage, and arrived at Southampton four-and-twenty hours later than we should have done. It was Cunningham who bought a paper as we got into the train. I was too completely preoccupied to have absorbed a line of news, even had my eyes mechanically perused the printed matter. Cunningham (who was always restless, and could not bear to be left at the mercy of his own thoughts) read incessantly, however, and at the end of half an hour or so handed over his paper to me.

"Look at this," he said, with some eagerness, pointing out a paragraph. I glanced at it carelessly at first, but in an instant I was as keen as Cunningham had been.

"Another Fortune for a Millionaire," the paragraph was headed, and beneath was set forth the interesting fact that Mr. Carson Wildred, who was shortly to marry Miss Cunningham, the celebrated beauty and heiress, had just heard of a legacy of half a million pounds, left him by an American friend, Mr. Harvey Farnham, lately burned to death in a San Francisco hotel.

"So you see it wasn't only the mine, and the money he should have paid for the mine, he wanted," said Cunningham. "Oh, he's a marvellous chap, this Wildred!"

I acquiesced in this opinion, and recalled a remark made in the club by a mutual acquaintance. "Carson Wildred is always inheriting fortunes from chaps that die at the four corners of the globe," he had curiously announced. I wondered grimly, as I remembered the speech, whether all these benefactors had met their death after the manner of poor Harvey Farnham.

Time was pressing now, and our idea was to go straight to Karine, I to appear only as the supporter of her brother. A desire for the punishment of Wildred might have held a prominent place both in Cunningham's mind and mine, but our first thought was to save Karine from becoming the murderer's wife.

She must be disabused of the belief that her brother was in any way in Wildred's power. She must know that, as Cunningham expressed it, the "shoe was on the other foot." She must be shown the black depths of Carson Wildred's villainy, and be dragged back from the brink of the precipice on which she had stood.

Ours was a quick train, and went straight through to London without stopping. After arriving at Waterloo station, therefore, we were obliged to wait for nearly an hour before we could get another which would take us to Haslemere.

A curious feeling that I had passed through all this before came over me, and as we stepped out of our carriage on the platform of the Haslemere station it seemed but yesterday that I had arrived at the same place, intent on bidding Karine that farewell which never had been spoken.

The time of day gave me the only sense of difference. We had left the ship early in the morning, had made our first journey in two hours, and now it was only very little past noon.

I had wished (considering the reception I had met at Sir Walter Tressidy's on my first and last visit at his country house) to remain at an hotel in Haslemere, there to await such news as Cunningham might have to bring. For Karine's sake, I thought, it would be better for me not to appear openly in the matter, unless it proved that the influence of her brother and his narrative were not as potent in their effect as I anticipated. Should he require any attestations from me, I was only too glad to be on the spot and to be called upon to give them.

Cunningham, however, had overruled this programme of mine. No one could tell, he said, how he might be received. He might be sorely in need of me to back him up–perhaps even to prove the truth of his otherwise unsupported assertions.

The Tressidys, he alleged, were peculiar. Though his sister had not confided in him, he knew that she was unhappy with them. They had very little money of their own on which to keep up the appearance they wished to make in the eyes of their world, and Cunningham did not believe that Lady Tressidy would be above accepting a heavy bribe from Wildred for furthering his suit, by almost any means, with poor Karine.

Half against my will, therefore, yet not wholly with reluctance, I must confess, I entered the carriage which was to drive us both to the house where a few weeks ago I had been so ruthlessly repulsed.

"Thank heaven!" I said, as we rattled up the hill (perhaps in the same vehicle which had driven me before), "that the storm wasn't just a degree more severe in crossing. It was touch and go with us one day, at all events, I believe; but a fraction worse, and we shouldn't have been here now to stand between Miss Cunningham and that villain. A week or ten days more, perhaps, and even if we'd reached her we might have been too late."

There was a certain tumultuous joy in my heart, far removed from happiness, yet intoxicating as new wine. Karine might never be mine, but she was saved, and it would be I who had saved her. I could never be regarded by her quite with indifference after this day.

As we drove we made various hurried plans as to what we should do if we were refused admittance. We were determined at least to see Karine, even if we were obliged to force our way into her presence.

As we got out of the carriage and ran up the four or five broad stone steps that led to the front door, something crackled under our feet like exaggerated grains of sand. We were far enough, however, from guessing the nature of the foreign substance that was thus crushed beneath our disregarding boot-soles.

The door was opened by a smiling footman. He was not the man I had previously seen, and evidently, judging from the genial flush on his face and the twinkle in his eye, something agreeable or amusing had recently taken place. He tried to draw his countenance into the conventional lines of footman-like solemnity, but, his eyes lighting upon Cunningham, the expression changed to one of surprise. Very possibly he noted the similarity of colouring between the brother and sister, and a certain vague haunting likeness that would show itself at times.

"If Miss Cunningham is at home, tell her that her brother has come and wishes to see her immediately on a matter of importance," said my companion, valiantly taking the bull by the horns.

"Miss Cunningham is not at home, sir," replied the servant. "She–that is–in fact, sir, she has just left us for good and all. She–she was married, sir, at half-past ten o'clock this morning, and the wedding breakfast's only been over since an hour ago."

The gritty substance under our feet had been the rice thrown, as though in mockery, after Karine as she passed to her carriage on her husband's arm.

CHAPTER XXVIII
A Wild-Goose Chase

"Do you know where the–the bride and groom have gone?" questioned Cunningham, grudgingly.

"No, sir. I heard Lady Tressidy say only this morning that even she hadn't been told. Mr. Wildred had some idea of a surprise, I believe, sir."

The fact that not only had my companion claimed to be the brother of the bride, but that his facial expression and colouring answered for his truth, caused the fellow to feel apparently that we had a right to explanations.

There was no use in endeavouring to make further enquiries. Even if Lady Tressidy or Sir Walter did know the destination of the newly-wedded pair, it was more than improbable that they would be ready to share their knowledge with us. And it was like Carson Wildred to be prepared even for the very emergency which had now arisen, by taking just such precautions as he had.

Had we not been impatient and chosen the steep road, less often travelled than the other, we should no doubt have met the carriage which drove the bridal couple to the Haslemere station. Another exemplification of the old proverb, that "the more haste, the less speed." We could now only repair our mistake, if it still admitted of reparation, by giving chase with such speed as was practicable.

I gave the order to the coachman, "Drive to the station as quick as you can," and in another moment we were off.

Fate seemed to have ordained that I should meet nothing save disappointment at this door; but to-day's experience had brought me something far deeper and more cruel than mere disappointment. I had not counted upon the chance that Wildred would be permitted to hurry on the wedding during my absence, and now I felt as though a chasm had suddenly yawned under my feet. Karine was Carson Wildred's wife!

"What are we to do?" questioned her brother dully. "We can't leave her with him, you know."

Leave her with him! The very fact that I was obliged to answer him gave me

back the power of concentrating thought. A moment before my mind had been a blank, a chaos; but now I returned, unhesitatingly–

"We'll find out where they've gone, and have him arrested and your sister taken from him before nightfall."

"But supposing they've gone abroad–which is what they very likely mean–before we can catch them?"

"We *must* catch them. There won't be a train till later in the afternoon by which they can get away now. They'd have to go by the night boat, if it was France. Somehow or other–though everything seems against us, and we are only two, where there ought to be a dozen going in as many ways at once–we'll circumvent that devil yet."

"You have plenty of confidence in yourself," said Cunningham. "Perhaps you don't know Carson Wildred as well as I do."

I did not answer, though the words rang ominously in my ears. I was very busy with my own thoughts.

As soon as we could find out where Wildred had taken Karine (even within my own mind I would not call her his wife), we must lodge such information with the police that he could be arrested at once, either on English or foreign soil, as the case might be. A man accused of murder, as he would be, could, fortunately, be apprehended anywhere.

At Haslemere station they could only inform us that the party of which we were in search had had tickets for London, and had left about three-quarters of an hour before our arrival.

Even if we could have told our story with sufficient succinctness to have Wildred met at Waterloo by the police, there would have been no time to do so. We must simply follow as we could. Luckily there was a slow train due in a few moments, otherwise I think we (I at least) must have gone mad with the strain of waiting.

At Waterloo we heard of them. A porter had taken their luggage and put it on a cab. The gentleman and lady had driven away in a private carriage. What direction had been given to the coachman or the cabman he had not happened to hear.

I now proposed that Cunningham should proceed immediately to Scotland Yard, while I busied myself elsewhere. He was the one who could tell of the plot by which he had personated Farnham in America, by Wildred's desire, and in the

hope of obtaining a substantial bribe. The authorities were already in possession of such separate information as I could give, and now that they would learn from Cunningham how Farnham had never gone to America at all, a very different and more lurid light would be shed upon the past.

Meanwhile I would drive to Charing Cross, and might yet be in time to intercept the couple if they were intending to depart for France.

At Charing Cross they had not appeared, and hastening to a telegraph office, I sent messages containing Wildred's description and Karine's to every one of the principal railway stations in London. Replies were paid, and were to be received for me at the Charing Cross Hotel. Having done so much, I drove to the piers from which the Holland boats sailed; then, having discovered nothing, back to Charing Cross again. The train which would catch the night boat at Dover was just about going out, but Wildred and Karine were not visible.

When the last moment had come and gone I betook myself to the hotel, where my telegrams were to await me. I also looked for Cunningham, who was to have met me there, after Scotland Yard, and decided upon forthcoming arrangements. Despatches were awaiting me from the head porters of various stations–Victoria, Euston, Paddington, and so on–but no Cunningham had as yet appeared.

I opened the message from Paddington last; the others had no news for me, but it seemed that at Paddington a lady and gentleman, apparently answering the description given, had taken tickets for Maidenhead. All the blood in my body seemed to mount to my head. Unless there had been a mistake in the identity, Wildred must have carried Karine off to the House by the Lock!

It was horrible to me that she should be there. The thought of the house, and what I believed had happened to Harvey Farnham under its roof, was abhorrent. Why had he chosen to take his young bride, on the day of their marriage, to that gloomy and accursed spot? A strange thrill of apprehension, vague, yet none the less dreadful, shook my nerves.

I consulted the latest A.B.C. time-table, which lay in the reading-room of the hotel. In exactly an hour another train would leave Paddington for Maidenhead and Marlow (the nearest stations to Purley Lock), and after that there would not be another until ten o'clock.

I should not have much more than time to catch the former, if I intended to go by it–and I *did* intend to go. Exactly what I was to do, how I was to get Karine away from her husband, I did not dare stop to think, but somehow I would do it. So great was my dread of Wildred as a criminal, and my respect for him as a

schemer, that I even feared dimly for Karine's safety with him. It was madness to entertain such a doubt, I assured myself, for great heiress as she was, Karine was lovely enough and sweet enough to inspire genuine love even in so cold-hearted a villain as Wildred.

He might tire of her in the end, but for the present her life, at least, would be safe with him. So I repeated mentally, over and over again; but still I was pricked with a boding fear for more than her peace of mind. Why had he taken her to that grim, hateful house by the river?

CHAPTER XXIX
At the House by the Lock

I would have wished to wait for Cunningham, both because I wanted him with me, and because I was anxious to hear what he had done at Scotland Yard. However, he did not come, so I wired him to the latter place, left a short note for him also at the hotel, to be kept till called for, and started off in a cab (when I dared delay no longer) at breakneck pace for Paddington station.

I just caught the train I wanted, changed at Maidenhead, and arrived at Marlow by half-past eight o'clock. This time I had neither leisure nor inclination to walk, as upon my first visit to the place on Christmas Day, but took a fly, and offered the man an extra fare if he would make haste.

A little short of the House by the Lock I stopped him. A certain instinct seemed to bid me not be too ostentatious in the manner of announcing my arrival. I got out, and by the light of a round, red moon rising over black trees in the east I glanced at my watch. It was five-and-twenty past nine. The whole day, since my arrival at Southampton in the morning, had gone in searching for Karine, and it might be that I was as far from success now as I had been in the beginning.

A hundred yards away a small yellow light shone steadily through the moon-tinged darkness. I thought it came from the House by the Lock, though the one poor ray made but scant cheer of illumination for a bride's homecoming.

"Wait here for me," I said to the driver. "I may come within half an hour, I may be much longer; but, at all events, wait. Here is a sovereign for you, and you shall have as much again when I return."

The tone of his voice told me that he was suspicious, as well as curious, regarding the mysterious intentions of his fare; but I was sure that he would not fail me. Two pounds were not to be so easily picked up every evening.

I walked on rapidly. As I approached the House by the Lock I lost sight of the yellow gleam which for some time had guided me, but the moon glinted bleakly on the staring panes of dark, upper windows.

Desolate as the place had appeared at the hour of sunset, it had had an air of hospitable welcome at that time compared to that which it wore now. Never, it

seemed to me, had I seen a habitation so grim, so silently suggestive of haunting, evil things. The face of the moon, as it rose, lost the ruddy hue which had coloured it nearer the horizon, and its paling disc was swept by black and ragged storm clouds. The wind moaned through the trees like the wail of a lost soul, and there was a stealthy, monotonous lapping of the dark waters so close at hand.

Other sound there was none, and, though I had seen the small ray from a distance, now–so far as I could ascertain–not a window in the whole gloomy pile was lighted.

I went up the path, knocked, and rang the bell, which sent back jangling echoes, such as belong in one's fancy to an uninhabited house. From a distant kennel a dog began to bay. Otherwise I was not answered, and as I rang and thundered on the knocker again, the animal's voice at length subsided into a protesting whine.

I ought by this time to have been sure that Wildred and Karine were not in the house, but, on the contrary, I was by no means certain of that fact. Mentally I argued that, if the master was absent, a caretaker or servant would certainly have been left, and unless a stone-deaf person had been selected for the post my violent alarms would have brought him to me.

If any reason existed, however, why the door should not be opened, it would be easy to understand how and why the caretaker might be suddenly afflicted with an inability to hear.

Instead of being plunged into discouragement, an ever-kindling fire of rage mounted within me. Rather than go away ignorant as to whether Karine was hidden in this hateful house or not, I would force an entrance. I sprang down the steps and went to one of the bow windows nearest the door.

Not an instant's hesitation had I in kicking in one of the panes of glass, but, as it happened, I had only my trouble for my pains. There were solidly-barred shutters inside, so heavy that even I, strong man as I was, could not break them open.

Furious now, I ran up to the door again, and drove my gloved fist through the glass in one of the curious, six-inch-wide window panes that ran the length of the door on either side. The shivered glass jingled sharply on the polished wood of the floor inside, and I thrust in my arm up to the elbow, hoping to get at the lock on the door within. As I did so footsteps came running in the distance.

"Here! Here! What's the matter with you?" cried an imperative voice.

I had heard it before, I remembered. It was that of the eminently respectable-

looking servant who had so cleverly defended his master's reputation on the occasion of my former visit to the House by the Lock.

"If you're a burglar," remarked the voice, "you'd better go away while you can. I have a revolver, and my hand is on the trigger now."

"I am no burglar," I returned. "This is not exactly the time of night to expect such gentry, is it? But you've kept me waiting long enough. I wish to see your master and mistress, whom I happen to know are here this evening, and I don't mean to go away without doing it."

The man inside chuckled.

"Nice way of announcing yourself, ain't it, sir? But as it happens you'll have to go elsewhere to see my master and the new mistress. I don't know where they are–it ain't likely I should–but I *do* know they aren't in *this* house, where there isn't a solitary soul but me. As for the time of night, that's neither here nor there, so long as I'd chosen to go to bed; and I can't dress all of a minute to please anybody that likes to come banging at the door. You deserve to be had up for damaging the house, that you do, whoever you may be."

There was a ring of virtuous indignation in the voice, and for a few seconds' length I hesitated. Perhaps, after all, the fellow was telling the truth. I was very certain of his capacity for lying, but it might well be that Wildred and Karine had not really come here. Still—

Far away a door slammed sharply, and just in time to decide me. The man *had* lied. He had just told me that he was alone in the house, and this one sound had unmistakably proved the falsehood. It was not the sort of noise with which the wind shuts a door, even had the wind been violent enough to do so, and windows open to admit it. The latch had been lifted by a human hand.

The servant, who was entirely out of my sight, began talking hurriedly, jabbering any nonsense, as though to cover what had happened. I listened intently, and through his chattering I fancied that I could hear–subdued with distance and intervening walls–the sound of a woman's crying.

My heart seemed to leap into my throat. I could feel the blood throbbing almost to bursting at my temples.

"You liar!" I roughly exclaimed. "They *are* here, and I will see them, if I have to break the door down!"

"Try it, then!" the man cried, tauntingly. "Just try it–and you may try all night. Ta, ta! Good-bye, and good luck to you!"

I heard his feet tapping swiftly along the uncovered floor as he ran away. Another door was opened and closed, and he was out of earshot.

Desperately I again endeavoured to find the lock. It was no use. Thrust in my arm as far as I might I could not touch it, and though I broke the narrow pane on the other side as well, the fastenings of the door were beyond my reach.

With all my strength I flung myself against the door, but the heavy wood stood firm as though it had been a sheet of iron. There was evidently no hope in that direction, and dizzy with my own rage and desperation, I began attempting some of the windows. But all were secured with the impregnable shutters and bars inside, and it would have seemed that the inmates of the House by the Lock were prepared to stand a siege.

Whether it was Karine whom I believed I had heard weeping or not, I could not be sure. I could not even have taken my oath that there had been such a sound at all, but I was morally certain of it.

I ran round the house, trying in vain to batter in another door, and was met everywhere by silence and darkness. At the side, however, I came at last upon the extension with the tower, whence I had seen the suspicious smoke and flame pouring on that memorable Christmas afternoon. Over the roof of the low "studio," which possessed no windows, I could see a faint yellow glow, like a luminous halo or crown, and suddenly, as I stood regarding it in some bewilderment, I recollected the skylight which I had observed from within.

If I could in some way climb to the top, break through the glass and let myself down, the problem as to how I should get into the house would be effectually solved.

It now struck me that the studio, as seen from outside, was disproportionately large compared with the room inside, as I remembered it. There had been only the one, which apparently constituted the sole purpose of the building, and yet it appeared to me that there might have been space for two of the same small size.

Low as the erection was it was too high for me to climb, and I began hastily looking about for some means of assistance in carrying out my plan.

In the coach-house, I thought, there might be a ladder, and thither I repaired without delay. But the doors were padlocked, and try them as I might I could not open them.

What was I to do? The more difficulties which encumbered my path, the more did I determine to surmount them. Returning towards the house I noticed a large

rustic seat placed under an ancient apple tree, and it occurred to me that if I could balance the article against the projection of the building I might, by standing it on end, use it as an improvised ladder. If I could only mount for a certain distance I could pull myself up by the ledge of stonework which ran along the edge of the flat roof.

The light which apparently filtered through the skylight had warned me to be cautious in my movements. Whoever was in the house must have known long ago that someone was determined upon forcing an entrance, but, judging by the laughing taunts of the servant, it would be believed that the boast had been a vain one.

If anyone was in the studio it might be as well if, for a few moments at least, I could see without being seen or heard. I therefore went about my preparations as quietly as possible.

I dragged the rustic seat across the grass and set it in an angle between the tower and the low building of the studio, giving it a certain slanting inclination, that it might not fall when burdened with my weight. Then I scrambled up, not venturing to pause for an instant at the top, for I could feel that the thing was slowly beginning to slide from under me.

With a leap I caught the ledge of stone that ran round the roof, and setting my knee against the wall, helped myself up. It may read simply enough when written down in black and white, but it was rather a difficult task in the accomplishment, and I felt that I had reason to congratulate myself on my own success when it was done.

Framed in a margin of dark roof eight to ten feet in width was the skylight, through which penetrated a subdued radiance.

Cautiously, noiselessly, I crawled to the round bubble of glass and looked down. A curtain of embroidered Indian silk was drawn half across, but through the open space that was left I could see something of the interior.

The jewelled lamp which I had previously observed hanging from the centre alone illumined the octagonal room. Now that I was on the roof I was able to appreciate more than ever the smallness of the studio. There was space for a wide passage running all the way round, between the inner walls and the outer walls. I suspected method in this design–a secret which Wildred had cleverly contrived to hide, and which, in conjunction with the mystery of the tower, might account for much that had been dark before.

As I looked a figure passed into my line of vision. It was Wildred walking restlessly up and down with his hands behind him. I could hear the murmur of his voice, though through the glass of the skylight the words were not distinguishable.

Suddenly there came a sharp exclamation in a woman's voice, and my heart gave a responsive bound. Wildred was talking to Karine, and it was she who had answered him with a cry.

I had not expected, when I decided upon trying to enter like a burglar through the skylight, that Karine would be in the studio. It would doubtless frighten her very much if I should suddenly make my appearance beside her amid a shower of broken glass, and I hesitated so to alarm her, unless the man down there was already commencing to use his power to torment her. If she would only go out and leave me to give Wildred a surprise I would have been thankful; but as I could not hope for her to do that, I determined to know what her companion was saying to her, which had caused her to exclaim in astonishment or perhaps in fear.

I took out my pocket-knife, and with great care to avoid all noise I began to loosen one of the small diamond-shaped panes from its leaden setting. As soon as it was released at one end I slipped the point of the knife underneath and so raised it that there might be no danger of its falling downward and startling those within the room.

CHAPTER XXX
Conclusion

I bent my ear over the tiny aperture. It made all the difference in the world. I could now hear every word that Wildred was saying.

"I have always, and with some reason, I think," was the first sentence that I caught, "considered myself a man of more than average mental ability. I am usually prepared for any traps which can possibly be sprung for me; but in this instance I find I have made my one mistake. I believed in a woman's devotion. Probably it serves me right to have been deceived. Since you have found it all out through her, I may as well admit to you that it is true. She did live here. Nobody suspected her presence, or even her existence. She was very useful to me in many ways. If she had proved troublesome I could have rid myself of her at any time, and she knew it. Instead of doing what I ought to have done, I believed that she was willing to go away without betraying me, and I let her go free with a present of a thousand pounds. She could even have asked for more when that was gone, and I would not have refused her. I was a fool ever to marry her, but she was the handsomest woman I had seen at that time, and as you know I was some years younger, some degrees more impulsive than I am now. I was still more of a fool not to have put her out of the way, knowing what she did–but as I remarked, that was the mistake of a lifetime. She has told you such of my secrets as she knew, she has shown you certain things in this house which have very naturally displeased and shocked you. She timed her return very well–jealous idiot!–but she will pay for what she has done."

"How will she pay?"

I could not see Karine, but I could hear her voice, vibrant with the fear and horror that she felt.

"Better not ask; the question doesn't concern you. She will simply become familiarised with the secrets of the House by the Lock in a manner upon which she didn't count, that's all."

"I had never pictured Satan himself so cruel, so horrible as you," cried Karine. "I thank heaven, now that I know through this wretched woman what you really

are, that not I, but she is your wife!"

"Yet you must remain with me, as though you knew nothing but what I would have had you know, for your own sake and your brother's.

"Had it not been for that foolish creature, who has ruined herself in trying to ruin you and me, we might have been happy together, Karine. I admire you more than any woman on earth, for you are certainly the most beautiful, and your coldness to a man of my temperament has only added to your attractions as a girl. As a married woman it would have been different. I meant to make you love me; and even now, Karine, what has happened that need change anything between us? You are not a conventional little fool, as are some women I could name, and the love of a man like me must create some impression on your nature. The obstacle which you think stands between us shall be removed, the marriage ceremony can again be performed over us–secretly, if you choose. No one will be the wiser, and as in any event you must stay here in my house—"

"I will not. Somehow God will help me to escape, and then, when I am free from you, I shall let such friends as I may have left deal with you as you deserve."

"It's difficult to see how you will get away. It's true I did not dream that Marion would be here to greet us or I would not have brought you to this house. But now that you are in it you will stay. No one knows that we are here–no one in your world, at least–and I intend that we shall have a protracted honeymoon. You heard how some vagabond, some tramp who wished to get in, failed just now? Well, it is just as difficult for strangers to *escape* from the House by the Lock as it is for them to effect an entrance. For instance, you and I are now cut off by means of a sliding iron door from the old portion of the house. From this there is absolutely no way out, unless I allow it, save one, and that way two or three people have already found by going through a certain little door hidden behind the hangings. I'll show it to you, if you like, or perhaps the lady who told you so much has told you that as well?"

"She has. She told me all about poor Mr. Farnham, how you made him believe you a friend to be trusted, how you induced him to smoke opium–here in this very room–this awful room–till he was dazed and unconscious, and how he only roused from his stupor just as you were going to burn him alive in your horrible crematory. She told me how the furnace went wrong at the last moment and you had to kill him in a different way from what you had planned–less easy for you, more dangerous of discovery. Oh, the horror of listening to those details, for she spared me nothing–nothing! I heard from her how Mr. Stanton came in the midst of the dreadful happenings on Christmas Day, how she saw him through the

door, and afterwards, when he had spoken to the police, how you bribed her with jewels and money to pretend that she was your cook, that she had screamed with the pain of burning her foot, and how she painted her ankle to look like a red scar when she had to show some proof of her story. She would have been true to you through everything, she said–poor misguided woman–if she had not been taken ill and stopped in London instead of going to France, as she had promised, and so seen in the papers about our coming marriage. What mockery to call it that; and yet, I thank heaven that it need only be mockery–that it is not real.

"I wonder that the shock of finding that woman concealed in my room–waiting for me to come–did not drive me mad. But I am not mad, and such wit as I have I warn you I shall devote to thwarting you, Carson Wildred. Do you think I could go on living under the same roof with you, even if I were in reality your wife? No, you can kill me if you like; it is the only way in which you can keep me here."

He did not answer for an instant, then he said slowly, "Do you remember just putting your name on a paper I asked you to sign for me with my stylographic pen in the train this afternoon? Well, you thought it was merely an order for letters to be sent on to your new address, but it was something rather more important than that. You put your name to a document which leaves all the money of which you die possessed unreservedly to me. I have already had it witnessed by my servant and another. You understand to what this points, perhaps? If you show yourself amenable to reason I shall consider you a wife to be proud of, and there is no ambition which we need cherish in vain if we are to live our lives together. But, on the other hand, unless you will go heart and soul with me, ignoring the past, you have to-day been told too much for my safety or–*your own*. What if you should catch a serious cold here at the House by the Lock? Unfortunately, the place is rather damp, though so charming in many ways. You might have an attack of pneumonia. Only fancy how the world would sympathise with the husband of so beautiful and popular a girl as yourself if he were bereaved of you during the honeymoon?"

"Oh, you are horrible–horrible! It is like death even to listen to you!" cried Karine. "If only there was a soul on earth to help me–but there's none–none!"

His answer, if he had made one, was drowned in the crashing of glass. Better that she should be startled, even to the point of swooning, rather than endure for another second the torture that that fiend was inflicting upon her.

I broke in the skylight with the heavy stick which I had brought up to the roof between my teeth. Then, with hands cut and bleeding, despite the protection of

my gloves, I swung myself down and dropped on to the floor.

There was a cry from Karine, and a sharp exclamation of dismayed astonishment from Wildred, for once outwitted. I had never been a match for him in diplomacy, but when it came to a physical encounter, I had every advantage over him, and I knew it.

He had no time to pull out the knife or revolver, for which his hand flew to his pocket, for I was on him, taking him by the throat and shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat.

I had not stopped even to look at Karine, and yet the vision of her pale face and hands clasped over her bosom had flashed, lightning-like, upon my consciousness. "Thank heaven! thank heaven!" I could hear her sob. I hoped that she did not look–that she had closed her eyes, or covered them with her hands, but Wildred did not give me time to make suggestions. He was more nimble, if he was less strong, than I.

I could feel, through all his writhings, that he was trying to force me along with him towards a certain corner of the room, and, realising it, resolved to thwart him, whatever his object might be. I had come to the knowledge exactly one second too late, however. He had managed to place his foot on a bell concealed under one of the rugs on the floor, and I heard its summons go pealing shrilly out through the house.

I remembered how I had looked for a bell in this room once before; it was scarcely to be wondered at, considering its position, that I had not found it.

In another moment the servant-accomplice would come to the assistance of his master. Had it not been for Karine's presence I felt that I should not have found it difficult in my present mood to have held them both in check, but as it was I should greatly have preferred only one antagonist.

The struggle in which I was engaged with Wildred had degenerated into a species of wrestling match. I had him down on one knee at last, and bending his arms behind him while he poured forth a volley of deadly oaths–his strange, light eyes flashing into mine–I attempted to tie his hands together with my silk handkerchief, wound into a slip-knot I had learned to make at sea.

He was slippery as a serpent in my grasp, and it was taking all I knew to manage him, when a cry from Karine gave me the first warning that I was attacked from behind.

The confidential man had stolen in as noiselessly as I had crept upon the roof

and to the skylight.

"Take that, then!" I heard him snarl savagely, and a low exclamation from my darling told me that in some way he had revenged himself upon her. For an instant I lost my presence of mind and my hold upon Wildred. Involuntarily I turned to go to Karine's rescue, and the movement was a fatal one. Wildred was up like a rod of steel that has been forcibly bent backward. The two threw themselves upon me together. I felt a sharp, hot pain run fiercely through my side, and knew that I had been stabbed. My one thought was for the girl. If they worked their will upon me, and killed me before her eyes, what was to become of her?

"Run, Karine–escape!" I panted. I could not see her, but I was assured that she had not obeyed by the loud screams for help which she was desperately uttering.

Again I got Wildred down, but the other man was on top of me, and for the second time I felt the burning pain, this time in my shoulder. I fought like a mad creature now, with the intent to kill, which I had not had before; but the conviction grew within me that, battle as I might, the effort would be all in vain.

Sparks danced before my eyes, and then everything grew dim. Out of chaos came a shriek from Karine. Could it be a cry of joy? What reason was there for rejoicing?

But there followed a renewed crashing of glass, the muffled thud of feet descending from a height upon the soft surface of rugs, and the sound of men's voices.

It seemed to me that Cunningham's was among them, but a strange, cold pall of darkness enveloped me, and I knew no more.

Afterwards I learned how it was that Cunningham, with two detectives from Scotland Yard, had arrived in the very "nick of time."

His statements to the police authorities had been necessarily so elaborate, and had been deemed so extraordinary, that it had taken some time to create the desired impression at headquarters.

He had been still at "The Yard" when my wire had arrived. When at last he had induced the "powers that be" to grant a warrant for Wildred's arrest on suspicion of having murdered Harvey Farnham, and to send a couple of men to the House by the Lock, where my telegram had announced that he was probably to be found, it was too late to catch anything save the ten o'clock train.

Having reached the door of the grim old mansion, Karine's cries for help, ringing out upon the night through the broken skylight, had told them in which direction to proceed, and they had used the same method of surmounting the obstacles which I had adopted and left for them.

The servant was secured, but Wildred, seeing with his usual quickness that all hope of escape was over, had shot himself through the heart before the officers could reach him. So died a man who had accomplished the death of many another, and through his humble accomplice (who now breaks stones at Portland), and the wretched wife found prisoned in a room upstairs, the secrets of his numerous crimes and the dark House by the Lock were revealed.

It was not for many a day after that night's terrible experience that I heard all the truth. What with the two wounds I had received, and the strain of the past few weeks, which had begun to tell upon me at last, for a time I lay in rather a precarious condition. But one morning I woke to consciousness, and found that the beautiful face which had been near me in my dreams was present in reality. Karine and her brother had nursed me through more than a fortnight's illness.

Had I been quite myself I would have felt that then was not the time to speak of love to the girl who had endured so much. But the words were uttered before my judgment would let me restrain them, as it so often had done in the first sweet, sad days of our acquaintance.

"Forgive me," I said weakly. "I'm a brute. You've been such an angel to me–and I oughtn't to have told you now."

"Oughtn't you?" she answered softly. "Do you remember my saying one evening at the Savoy Hotel that there was only one thing in the world which might even then keep me from making a marriage that was horrible to me?"

"I remember well," I returned. "I remember everything you ever said to me. Will you tell me what that one thing was?"

"I meant *if you had loved me*. Sometimes I–thought you did, but you would never say so. You only asked to be 'my friend.'"

"Oh, if I had but known–if I had but dared!" I exclaimed. "I was perishing of love for you from the first night I ever saw your face. Is it too late now? I don't ask to be your friend, I ask to be everything–your lover, and your husband."

"And I *give* you everything," she said.

So it came about that the sunshine of happiness drove forth the black shadows which would fain have lingered to haunt us like ghosts from the House by the

Lock.

THE END

Transcriber Notes

Spelling and punctuation inaccuracies were silently corrected.

Archaic and variable spelling is preserved.

Author's punctuation style is preserved.

electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation ("the Foundation" or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is in the public domain in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg-tm mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg-tm works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg-tm name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg-tm License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg-tm work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country outside the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg-tm License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg-tm work (any work on which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" appears, or with which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.net

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is derived

from the public domain (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg-tm License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg-tm License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg-tm.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg-tm License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg-tm work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg-tm web site (www.gutenberg.net), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg-tm License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg-tm works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works provided that

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg-tm works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg-tm License. You must require such a user to return or

destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from both the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and Michael Hart, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread public domain works in creating the Project Gutenberg-tm collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH F3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS' WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTIBILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg-tm work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg-tm work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg-tm

Project Gutenberg-tm is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg-tm's goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg-tm collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg-tm and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation web page at http://www.pglaf.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Its 501(c)(3) letter is posted at http://pglaf.org/fundraising. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's principal office is located at 4557 Melan Dr. S. Fairbanks, AK, 99712., but its volunteers and employees are scattered throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887, email business@pglaf.org. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official page at http://pglaf.org

For additional contact information:

Dr. Gregory B. Newby
Chief Executive and Director
gbnewby@pglaf.org

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg-tm depends upon and cannot survive without wide spread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit http://pglaf.org

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg Web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: http://pglaf.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works.

Professor Michael S. Hart is the originator of the Project Gutenberg-tm concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For thirty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as Public Domain in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our Web site which has the main PG search facility:

http://www.gutenberg.net

This Web site includes information about Project Gutenberg-tm, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.