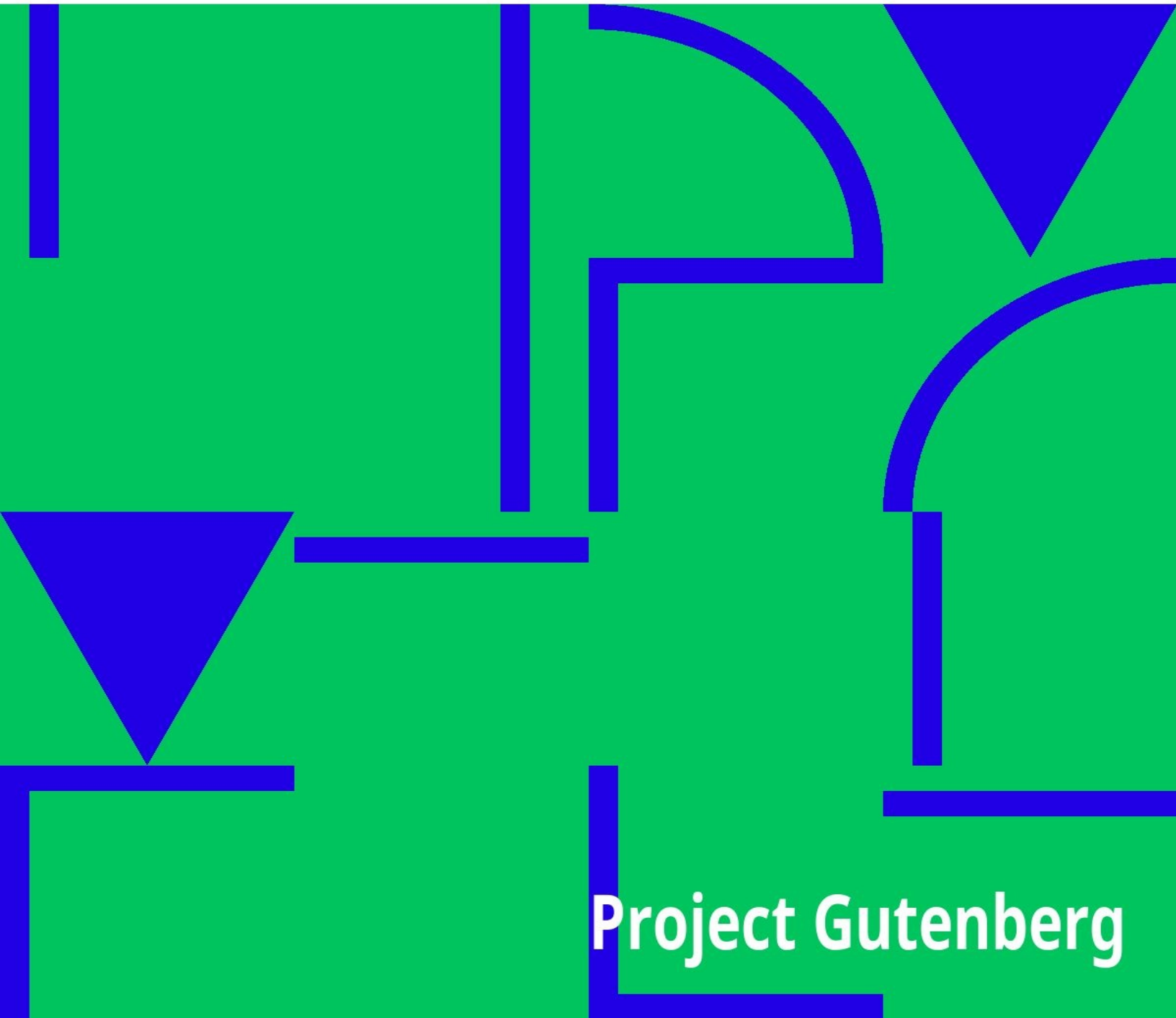
This House to Let

William Le Queux



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Author: William Le Queux

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"This House to Let"

Prologue.

Very early on a July morning in 1919 Constable Brown was on his beat in Kensington, in the immediate neighbourhood of Cathcart Square.

Cathcart Square was an old-fashioned backwater of this highly respectable suburb. It had not been built on any regular lines. Small, narrow houses nestled comfortably by the side of what might be called mansions. At the entrance to the Square itself, a narrow-fronted milk-shop stood next door to a palatial residence. The dairy was very old, and the Square, with its strange agglomeration of houses, had been built round it.

Constable Brown, a tall, strapping young fellow, took his duties easily. He was quite contented with his lot, and not thirsting for promotion; he had no overweening sense of his own abilities. He was friendly with all the cooks on his beat, and from them he received very choice tit-bits. In his case, the policeman's lot was a fairly happy one.

The morning was a very bright one, a somewhat powerful summer sun had just risen, and flooded the streets with light.

He had no need of his lantern, early in the morning as it was. He strolled slowly round the Square, turning observant eyes on all the houses. In his patrol, he met nobody. The busy world of commerce was not yet astir. Only from afar he heard the distant rumbling of market-carts on their way to Covent Garden, market-carts laden with fruit and vegetables.

The Square was sleeping. In a few more hours it would wake to vigorous life. The dairy shop would take down its shutters, and show signs of animation. And when the dairy shop took down its shutters, Constable Brown would be relieved, and go home to enjoy his well-earned rest.

All was quiet in the Square. Brown had patrolled it several times in his nightly vigil, and had discovered no signs of marauders.

He paused opposite Number 10, one of the few big houses. He looked contemplatively at the board announcing in large type—THIS HOUSE TO

LET: FURNISHED—with the agent's name displayed prominently at the foot of the bill.

"Only house to let in the Square," ruminated Brown, as he stood reading the bill for perhaps the hundredth time. "It's been empty now for over three months. It ought to have been snapped up long ago."

He was right. Houses in Cathcart Square did not wait long for tenants. Mr Brown ruminated further, and provided his own solution.

"Old Miles, the caretaker, has got too comfortable quarters, he doesn't want to flit. When people come to view, he talks to them about damp, or ghosts or beetles, and chokes them off. Artful old devil, Miles, and a bit too fond of drink."

Having finished his patrol of the Square itself, he passed along the backs, abutting on a somewhat mean street, for a rather undesirable neighbourhood had built itself around these somewhat stately houses.

His perambulations brought him to the back of Number 10, the house to let. His trained eye, accustomed to take in the smallest details, noticed a broken pane of glass in the scullery window. He climbed over the low railing which shut off the back premises from the mean street on which they looked, and peered at the broken window-pane. From a general point of view there was not much in it. Window-panes are broken every day. But this was an empty house, looked after by a somewhat bibulous caretaker of the name of Miles. A hundred chances to one that Miles had stumbled against it, and broken it with his elbow.

But although Constable Brown was not very brilliant, he was painstaking and methodical; his mind was slow but tenacious. He did not accept facts at their face value.

After peering through the broken pane, he proceeded to further experiments. He lifted the window, and it went up easily. He drew his deductions swiftly. Somebody had entered the empty house. That somebody had smashed the pane in order to get at the latch, had entered the house, later emerged through the window and forgotten to fasten it.

But why enter an empty house, where there was nothing to steal except the heavy furniture left by the late tenant, a Mr Washington, who was abroad? Brown knew for a fact from the caretaker that all silver and plate had been lodged at Mr Washington's bank. It was a puzzle.

One thing was clear: his duty lay straight before him. He must go over that empty house. A careful examination might reveal something or nothing.

But he was a very cautious man, and with no great belief in his own powers. He would not make the examination alone. He blew his whistle for further assistance.

In a few seconds, a fellow constable, a smart young fellow, hurried up to him. Brown pointed to the broken pane, the uplifted window. The smart young man projected himself through the open space. Brown followed, explaining as he went.

They searched the basement, the ground floor, and the floor above—with no result.

"Now for the caretaker," said the younger and the more quick-witted of the two policemen.

"He sleeps up at the top," answered Brown. "He generally comes home half-seas over. If a regiment was hammering at the door he would not wake till his sleep was done."

They went up to the caretaker's room on the top floor. The bed was empty. Miles had evidently taken a holiday.

The young constable grunted. "Seems a reliable sort of chap, doesn't he? I wonder how long he has been away? The house agents can tell us if they have sent any clients to view the house during the last twenty-four hours, and whether they have been able to get in or not. Anyway, for the present, he seems out of this job."

Brown assented. He did not talk as much as his quicker-witted colleague, but his rather slow mind was working at its normal speed.

“We’ve got to examine the other floors, you know. I’ve made up my mind to one thing—whoever came in here, robbery wasn’t the object.”

“There I quite agree,” remarked the younger man.

They made their way down from the top floor, which consisted of three attics. On the floor beneath this, they searched every room and found nothing.

But on the floor underneath their search was rewarded. In a small dressing-room, leading off the bedroom which fronted the square, they found a gruesome sight—the lifeless body of a man, comparatively young, somewhere about thirty-five or so, a deep gash in his throat, in his stiffened hand a razor.

The two men gazed, horrified. It was an early summer morning, the sun was shining through the windows, the birds were twittering in the trees. Shortly the whole world would be astir. And here, in the small room, lay the senseless clay, oblivious of all these signs of awakening life and vigour.

Brown was the first to speak. “Suicide!” he said hoarsely. “The poor devil wanted to make an end of it, and crept in here, knowing it was an empty house.”

The younger man spoke less convincingly. “It looks like it. Suicide, as you say.” He paused a moment, and then spoke slowly: “I think it’s suicide, but it might be—mind you, I only say might be—a very carefully planned murder. And now, let us overhaul his pockets, we may find something to establish identification.”

Together they bent down, and rummaged the dead man’s pockets. They found plenty of material for identification.

As they were engaged in their gruesome task, they heard the sound of a latch-key being put in the front-door. They heard the door banged to, and heavy footsteps ascended the staircase.

“Miles come back after his spree,” whispered Constable Brown to the younger man.

Miles, all unsuspecting of what had taken place during his absence, came heavily up the stairs. It could not be said that he was by any means drunk, but he was not absolutely sober. He was slowly recovering from the previous night's debauch.

Arrived on the floor where the two policemen were conducting their investigations, absolute sobriety came back to him. He saw the open door of the dressing-room, two men in uniform kneeling by the side of an inanimate object. His brain cleared as if by magic. He recognised in one of the kneeling constables his old friend Brown.

He indulged in a little profanity, born of his emotion, which need not be set down here. Shorn of certain expletives, natural to a man of his class, he inquired of Brown what was the matter.

Brown on his side was cool and explicit, and instead of answering the caretaker's questions, he preferred to put a few of his own.

"Nice sort of caretaker you are," he said in a contemptuous voice. "You're paid to look after this house, aren't you? Where were you all last night I should like to know? You can see what has happened. Somebody has got in through the back, either to commit suicide, or with a companion who brought him here to murder him. That's got to be found out before the Coroner."

Miles pulled himself together. He was by no means a fool when sober, and in sight of this ghastly object the fumes of last night's intoxication had absolutely cleared.

"I can show an alibi right enough," he said doggedly.

The younger and readier-witted of the two constables looked up and spoke sharply. "So far, my friend, we have not accused you, but you may as well tell us the details of your alibi."

Miles's explanation, delivered in the somewhat halting way of his class, bore the ring of truth. An old acquaintance of his, whose name and address he gave, had looked him up the day before and asked him to spend a day with him at Shepperton, where the said acquaintance kept a small shop. Miles had succumbed to the temptation.

“It drives a man fair off his blooming chump to be tied by the leg in a hole like this,” he interpolated in the midst of his narrative, “waiting for would-be tenants who never call. I daresay you chaps do your eight or ten hours a day, but you’re out in the open air, not looking on four walls. You see a bit of life, I don’t.”

Constable Brown cut across his narrative swiftly.

“Never mind your grievances, Miles. If you could get a better job, I guess you would take it. Where did you spend the night?”

“At the same old show, down at Shepperton,” replied the unabashed Miles. “My old pal’s a sport, I can tell you. When he shut up his shop, he plied me with some of the best. I wasn’t backward, I admit. I missed the last train back, and slept on the sofa in the back room. When I woke, I remembered things a bit, and got an early train home. Here I am. My old pal Jack will tell you I’m speaking gospel truth.”

Neither of the two men listening to him had any doubt that his narrative was a true one. He was a poor, weak, bibulous creature, but by no stretch of the imagination could he be an accessory to the gruesome happenings at Number 10.

Even had he been at his post, as he should have been on this particular night, he would have been sunk in a stertorous sleep, and have heard nothing.

But to make everything sure, Constable Brown pulled him along and forced him to look at the dead man.

“You have never seen him before, Miles? I mean he has not called to look over the house or anything?”

“No.” Miles, looking shudderingly at the ghastly sight, was ready to swear he had never seen him before.

He turned his frightened gaze away: “It will be all over the town to-night,” he said ruefully. “We shall never let the house after this.”

“It will still be a soft job for you, Miles,” retorted Brown, a little spitefully.

“You won’t have to play up the damp and the beetles. You are here for life, old man.”

“I know,” said Miles in a gloomy tone. “But I shall see him staring at me every minute of the day and night.”

The body was removed to the mortuary. The evening newspapers had flaring headlines: “Gruesome Discovery in Number 10 Cathcart Square.” An enterprising journalist had got hold of Miles, and speedily discovering his weakness, had taken him to the nearest public-house, and plied him plentifully with liquor, with a view to a sensational article.

The enterprising reporter made the best of his material, but it did not amount to much. The caretaker knew nothing about the dead man, he was armed at all points with his alibi. As regards the house itself, invested with so much tragedy, the present tenant was a Mr Washington, a man of considerable means, now abroad. Mr Washington was prepared to let it furnished. The furniture was very valuable.

To a public greedily anxious for the smallest details, the astute journalist served up a nice little article, describing the expensive furniture, and adding a short life-history of Mr Washington, as supplied by the reminiscent Miles. The public swallowed this article eagerly and awaited further developments.

These came with the inquest, and there was a somewhat tame ending to what had promised to be a very sensational case.

Some three months previously, a certain man named Reginald Davis had been suspected of committing a murder while driving a motor-car in Cornwall. The evidence, although circumstantial, had been very convincing. The police had been on his track, but not quickly enough. The man had eluded their vigilance, and rim to earth somewhere.

On the body of the dead man in Cathcart Square, the two constables had found three letters addressed to Reginald Davis. Also a letter, signed Reginald Davis, addressed to the Coroner in which he avowed his intention of committing suicide at the earliest opportunity.

It was fairly evident from this that the wretched man, hunted by the police, and recognising that capture was imminent in the course of a few days, had resolved upon the fatal step, had effected his entrance into the lonely house in Cathcart Square, had found it even more deserted than he imagined, and in that little dressing-room cheated the law.

But, in addition to this overpowering evidence, there was added the fact of identification.

A tall, handsome young woman, giving the name of Caroline Masters, had been to the mortuary, and identified the body as that of her brother, Reginald Davis.

She gave her evidence before the Coroner with commendable composure, broken now and again with a little natural grief. Her disclosures were briefly as follows.

Reginald had always been the black sheep of the family, not naturally vicious, but impetuous, fiery-tempered and ungovernable. If he was guilty of the murder in Cornwall, it had been due to no natural criminal instinct, but to a fit of unbridled passion. Her theory was that remorse had weighed upon him for this unpremeditated crime, and that, through remorse and the fear of justice overtaking him, he had crept into this lonely house and passed sentence on himself.

She made a very great impression on the Court by the calm and dignified way in which she gave her evidence. The Coroner put to her a few questions. She was quite certain that the body was that of her brother, Reginald Davis? Were there any other members of the family who could support her in her identification?

No, there were no other members of the family alive. There was another brother dead, and a sister of whose whereabouts she knew nothing. Her father had been a strange man, he had quarrelled with all the members of his family, and she had never known one of them. Her mother had died some years ago. Her voice broke a little as she related these touching circumstances of her domestic life, more especially when she added she was a widow, her husband having been killed in the Great War.

There seemed but one possible verdict. The dead man, it was clearly

established, was Reginald Davis, first by the letters found upon him, secondly by his sister's identification.

It was also clear that Reginald Davis, hunted by the police, and knowing that it was only a question of days or weeks before he would be rim to earth, had considered the two alternatives of self-destruction or the extreme penalty of the law—and that he had chosen the former.

The verdict was recorded. Mrs Masters was complimented on the way in which she had given her evidence. The Coroner assured her that the sympathy of the Court was with her. The tears welled into her eyes as she listened to the Coroner's well-chosen phrases. She bowed her grateful thanks.

Constable Brown was waiting in the corridor as she came out. Beside him stood the younger policeman who had assisted him on that very well-remembered night in Cathcart Square.

Brown touched his helmet. "A very trying time for you, ma'am," he said, "a very trying time. You went through it bravely."

She smiled wanly. "My poor brother! He had so many good points. But it is better as it is. I shudder to think of what might have been, if he had not done this dreadful thing."

"Much the best way, ma'am, much the best way," corroborated Brown.

She went out, a graceful figure, and Brown turned to his younger colleague.

"A remarkable case, old chap. As we said all along, suicide."

The younger man paused a little before he replied. It may be mentioned that a few months later he was promoted to the detective force in consequence of some rather clever work connected with a gang of coiners in an obscure corner of the West End.

"It looks like it, but I'm not quite as sure as you are," he said laconically.

Brown stared, but made no comment. A verdict was a verdict. His young

colleague had the inexperience and the vanity of youth, and thought he was more clever than other people, perhaps!

But on one thing the young constable had made up his mind, and that was that Miles, the bibulous caretaker, had not told the truth when in the witness-box. He came to this conclusion from his demeanour. Miles swore that he had no knowledge of the dead man, but the constable believed this to be a lie.

And with the tame ending of the Coroner’s inquest, the mystery of Number 10 Cathcart Square ceased to hold the public interest. Plenty of other things came on to attract their attention.

Chapter One.

In the year before the Great War, when to all appearance there was not a cloud upon the horizon, when only a few statesmen felt “profoundly uneasy,” the secret of that uneasiness being carefully locked away in their own breasts, and hidden from the general public—in that year of 1913, in the month of March, the Twenty-fifth Lancers were quartered at the town of Blankfield, in Yorkshire.

The Twenty-fifth was a crack regiment. Most of the officers were members of the aristocracy, a few of the plutocracy, that portion of the plutocracy which on account of its wealth had been adopted into a superior world by marriage with its aristocratic daughters.

They were a fine set of clean-minded, healthy living, sporting young fellows. They rode to hounds, they played polo when there was any going, they shot over the coverts of their friends, they made love to all the pretty girls they came across in a gallant and desultory fashion, loving and riding away.

It cannot be said that they took their professional duties in too serious a fashion. But they were brave as lions, and when the time came to prove their mettle, none of their relatives had cause to blush for their record. The memories of most of them were enshrined deeply in the hearts of wailing mothers and weeping sweethearts, when the great holocaust came.

Foremost amongst this band of gay spirits and resolute sportsmen was a certain Captain Murchison, “Hughie,” as he was always called by his intimates.

“Hughie” was not a pure aristocrat. His father, a man of fabulous wealth, was the head of the great brewing firm of Murchison, Delaroyd and Co., the fourth in succession, for the big brewery had been founded over a hundred years ago.

It is supposed, in the case of self-made men, that it requires three generations to make a gentleman. Anyway, the present Sir Hugh had

won his spurs by the fact of belonging to the fourth. And he had further firmly established his position by marrying Lady Gertrude Marchmont, a daughter of the Earl of Mounthaven. The Marchmonts had blue blood in profusion, they were one of the oldest families in the Kingdom, only just being beaten by such superior people as the Howards, the Talbots, and the Nevilles.

Captain Murchison was, therefore, plutocrat on the father's side, aristocrat of aristocrat on the mother's. But he did not owe his popularity to these adventitious circumstances. The fact that he was the most popular man in his regiment was due to his own sterling qualities.

In the first place, he was a man of the most unbounded generosity and the most serene good-humour. He had captained the Eleven at Eton, and he was one of the best shots, also one of the best polo-players, in England. Needless to say that he was a man's man. The fact that he was also equally a Woman's man can be easily explained. He boasted more than ordinary good looks, and he had a charming, deferential way with Women that captivated them at once.

The Twenty-fifth had a very good time at Blankfield, on the whole. The houses of the "county" were, of course, open to such a distinguished regiment, but perhaps they had a rather jollier time amongst the rather limited circle of rich townsfolk whom they condescended to visit: the people who, at the best, had only a nodding acquaintance with the "county."

Murchison was a born sportsman. Hunting, polo, shooting, cricket, occupied nearly all his Waking thoughts, except those few that were claimed by his professional duties. Popular as he was with women, not a single member of the weaker and more charming sex had made any real impression on him up to the present.

He had had several flirtations with charming girls, of course: he might have indulged in a few sentimental passages with certain more or less detached, or semi-detached, married women. The latter very rarely, for although by no means a saint he was a very clean-minded young man, and held rather rigid notions as to what might be done, and what ought not to be done. Anyway at this particular moment he was quite heart-

whole.

And then, one day, in this rather sleepy town of Blankfield, an adventure befell him. It was not strictly a common or garden adventure, for more than one reason.

The woman, or rather girl, who was concerned in it, for looking at her in a severe light she did not appeal to be more than twenty, bore upon her no marks of the shameless adventuress. It was easy to see that she was not a member of his own World, the World of plutocracy mingled into aristocracy by judicious intermarriage. The “county” would not, of course, open their doors to her. According to her own account, the respectable “villadom” of the sleepy old town had not called upon her, on account of the absence of convincing credentials.

The meeting happened in this way. Hugh found himself with a blank afternoon, an afternoon that had not been filled up. He could call at lots of houses and get tea. But, at this period, he was becoming a little fed-up with the Blankfield teas, the simpering girls, the astute mothers who Wanted to take the heir of the Murchison millions off his guard, and hook him for a son-in-law.

Coming from a long line of successful tradesmen, Hugh had rather less brains than he ought to have acquired by heredity. Still, he was no fool. As long as a proposition was not too complex, he could size it up pretty accurately. And he sized up the Blankfield hospitality at its true worth.

He walked down the High Street, and turned into the first tea-shop. It was a well-known establishment, and the dashing members of the Twenty-fifth were wont to invite hither for tea some of the Blankfield maidens who were not too particular as to chaperonage.

He expected to find here a good few of his brother officers. To his surprise, he did not see one. But the room was very full. To a casual observer, every table seemed occupied. He was about to turn away, when a waitress, who knew him well, touched him on the arm.

“It’s quite all right, Captain Murchison,”—Hugh had arrived at seniority very early: “there’s a table up there at the far end. There’s only a young lady there, and she has very nearly finished her tea.”

The young lady in question was quite young; Hugh decided from the first swift glance at her that she could not be more than twenty. She was exceedingly pretty, with wavy light hair and soft brown eyes. She wore an air of composure remarkable in one so youthful.

The young man knew her well by sight, as did his brother officers. She was frequently to be seen in the High Street, flitting in and out shops, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by a rather common-looking person, some ten years her senior. It was said they were brother and sister and their name was Burton.

They had arrived in Blankfield about a couple of months ago, and taken a moderate-sized house on the London Road, a little in the outskirts of the town. But though they had been here for these two months, they knew nobody. Not a soul had called upon them: for the villadom of Blankfield was very select, and had to know something about newcomers before it stretched out a Welcoming hand. About the Burtons nothing seemed to be known, and until some reliable information was forthcoming, they would be ostracised.

The shop was very crowded, and most girls of her age might have felt embarrassed by her loneliness. But, although many admiring glances were levelled at her from the few masculine occupants, she seemed quite unperturbed and unconscious, looking neither to the right nor the left, but taking in everything that was going on, under lowered eyelids veiling those pretty brown eyes.

She gave him one swift glance as he sat down, and then went on composedly with her tea. There was nothing in the glance that was either provocative or inviting. Of the two, Hugh felt much more embarrassed than she did. He wondered if she was as stand-offish as she looked. If he addressed a remark to her, would she snub him?

Anyway he determined to put it to the proof. “I do hope I am not intruding, but it was Hobson’s choice, you know; this is the only vacant table.”

No, she was not going to snub him. On the contrary, she gave him a very pleasant smile, and he noted with satisfaction that her voice was a refined and pleasant one.

“There is hardly any question of intruding in a public place like this. I cannot expect them to turn customers away in order that I may sit by myself.”

It was not a bad beginning, thought Hugh. It was evident she was not disinclined to enter into a little desultory conversation with a man who she knew was a gentleman, and not likely to take undue advantage of her absence of conventionality.

Hugh went on with growing boldness. He had often said to his great chum Jack Pomfret that it was a thousand pities this pretty girl was not in Blankfield Society, she seemed so much more attractive than the other girls who were in it.

“We haven’t been introduced, of course, but I know you very well by sight. There is hardly a day that I do not meet you about here. And I know your name, too. You are Miss Burton, are you not? And you live with your brother at that nice little house on the London Road.”

“Quite right.” Miss Burton nodded her pretty head. She added with a little silvery laugh: “We can’t be introduced, unless the waitress took the kind office upon herself, for I don’t know a soul in the place. We have been here two months, and we have been let severely alone. I suppose if we stayed here for twenty years it would be the same. Of course, we didn’t expect to get into ‘county’ Society, but we must be quite as good as heaps of people in the town and outskirts.”

Hugh was a little embarrassed by these very frank remarks. He observed lamely that it was a shame, and indulged in some rather inane remarks on the snobbishness of provincial towns.

“You must find it awfully dull,” he ventured after a brief pause. During the short silence, Miss Burton had ordered herself some more tea. It was evident that she was not desirous of abruptly terminating this pleasant *tête-à-tête*. The waitress drew her own conclusions from the further order, and smiled a little as she turned away.

“I should be a hypocrite if I pretended the contrary. Of course, housekeeping takes up a good bit of my time, and I read a good deal, and do a lot of fancy-work. But all the same, it is a state of isolation, not

an outside person to speak to from one week-end to the other. Of course I hear all that is going on from the tradespeople, and I know the names of the principal persons here whom I constantly meet and never speak to. I know, for instance, that you are Captain Murchison. I think I know the names of all your brother officers."

"What made you come here, if it is not a rude question?" asked Hugh bluntly. "It was surely a risky experiment, landing yourself in a town like this, without any introductions."

"I told my brother so when he first proposed it," replied Miss Burton calmly. "But, although he is one of the best fellows in the world, he is frightfully obstinate. He had stayed at an hotel here for a few days some years ago, and he had taken a violent fancy to the place. He was quite sure everybody would make a rush for us, the moment we arrived."

Miss Burton proceeded to draw on her gloves. During this explanatory conversation, she had consumed her second cup of tea. She called the waitress and paid her bill.

"I must be going now," she said. "I have quite enjoyed this little chat, although I am sure you will think very badly of me for having confided so much to a stranger. I really don't know what made me do it—I suppose I got tired of having kept silence for so long."

Yes, he could understand that. Poor, pretty little girl, just at an age when all the pleasures of youth should be open to her, and to have to pass her life in the society of that rather common-looking brother, good fellow as she declared him to be.

"I have enjoyed the meeting immensely, too," said Hugh heartily. "I only wish we could come across each other at some of these Blankfield houses, stupid and dull as they generally are."

And then, the pretty Miss Burton fired her last shot as she rose to leave:

"I have been unconventional enough from the beginning, and if I can do it without blushing, I am going to be more unconventional still. If you cared to come up to Rosemount one afternoon, I am sure my brother would be pleased to see you."

Murchison was very embarrassed by the suggestion, although she did not proffer it in any bold fashion.

“I shall be delighted,” he stammered. “I will run up one afternoon.” Of course when he said this he had very little intention of keeping his promise. To enjoy a mild sort of flirtation with an exceedingly pretty girl was one thing. To go to her house and make the acquaintance of her brother, who he was certain was not a gentleman, was quite a different proposition, and might land him in all sorts of unpleasant complications.

He also had an uneasy conviction that Miss Burton was remarkably self-assured for such a young woman. She had spoken of blushing when she gave him the invitation, but she had not done so. Not the faintest colour showed on her cheek, and the glance that met his was perfectly steady and unwavering. She must either be very innocent, or, young as she was, she had acquired the experience and self-possession of a much older woman. He would like to think it all out.

The girl nodded in a friendly fashion, and tripped away, leaving Hugh Murchison to finish his tea, and ponder over what had happened.

Chapter Two.

When Hugh got back to his quarters the first thing he did was to hunt up his great friend Jack Pomfret. He found that young gentleman stretched in front of a blazing fire—it was a very chilly March—and smoking a cigar nearly as big as himself. Jack Pomfret, it may be said, was quite a small man, of about the size and weight that would be associated with the coxswain of a ’Varsity boat.

Next to Murchison, perhaps Pomfret was the most popular man in the regiment. He was certainly the poorest, for although he came of an aristocratic family, the said family had very little to bless themselves with.

If it had been left to his immediate relatives, Jack would have had to enter a line regiment, and subsist on his pay, supplemented by more or less regular small remittances from his hard-up father.

But fortune had smiled on Jack when he was in his cradle. A rich great-aunt had been his godmother, and from the date of his christening had taken him under her wing. She had been crossed in love when quite a girl, and would never marry. Jack Pomfret had a handsome, but not an extravagant, allowance now, and he would come into his great-aunt’s fortune when she died.

Jack always complained that his aunt was a bit thrifty, and did not fully understand the imperative necessities of a young subaltern in an expensive regiment like the Twenty-fifth.

As a matter of fact, Miss Harding, his mother’s youngest sister, suffered from acute indigestion, existed principally on soda-water and biscuits, lived in a comparatively small house with one manservant and two maids, and saved a great deal every year out of a large income. She loved Jack very much, but she had little or no sympathy with the follies and indiscretions of youth. She had a hazy sort of idea that an officer should live within his pay, as she lived well within her income. Needless to say that Jack had long disabused her of this silly idea.

“Great tidings, old man,” cried Murchison, breaking in upon the meditative

little man, blowing great clouds of smoke. “I’ll give you six guesses.”

“Not in a guessing mood,” returned Jack shortly. “All my brain-power is used up. I am trying to concoct a letter to the dear old aunt—God bless her, she is one of the best!—insinuating gently that a cheque for a couple of hundred would be very convenient at the present moment.”

Murchison took a seat. “Silly old ass,” he said in a kindly tone, “if you want a couple of hundred have it from me, and don’t worry about the aunt. You can pay me when she stumps-up. From what you have told me about your respected relative, it might be a lengthy business. I suppose you will plead debts. She might offer to discharge them, and ask the names of the creditors. In that case, old chap, you wouldn’t handle much personally, would you?”

Pomfret laughed genially. He was always very hard-up, but he was never depressed for very long. There was always a silver lining to every cloud.

“She’s the sweetest, dearest soul on God’s earth,” he said in a tone of conviction. “But you know, Hughie old man, she doesn’t understand—I say emphatically, she doesn’t understand—you know what I mean. She is early Victorian. As to your suggestion, I appreciate it very much, but emphatically, no.” He added, with a whimsical smile: “Yours is a loan, I should have to pay back; Heaven knows when I could do so. The dear old aunt, well, it is a gift, no question of paying back. I haven’t thought it all out yet, but in the early cool of to-morrow morning, I shall write her a beautiful and touching letter. I know by experience it will bring a cheque.”

“You’re an artful young devil, I know,” said Murchison. Straight as a die himself, he was not too appreciative of his friend’s diplomatic methods.

On the other hand, was he justified in criticising? He had a magnificent allowance from his opulent father. Poor Jack, with a somewhat puritanical and niggardly aunt at his back, had just to worry along, and live in this expensive regiment from hand to mouth.

There was no more to be said on this subject.

“Well, Jack, are you in a mood to listen to my news?”

Pomfret leaned forward, and flicked the ash off his cigar. “Yes, I think I am. Begone dull care! I shall write that letter the first thing to-morrow morning.”

“Well, I have made the acquaintance of that pretty Burton girl, whom nobody in Blankfield visits.”

Mr Pomfret emitted a little chuckling sound. “Lucky devil. How did you do it? I thought she was unapproachable. She walks down the High Street, ‘with a haughty stare, and her nose in the air,’ and looks neither to left nor right. How did you manage it, old man?” Hugh laughed. “Oh, as easy as anything. Just dropped in to Winkley’s, expecting to see a lot of you fellows with your best girls. Not a soul there I knew. Room full—every table full, save for one at which Miss Burton was sitting alone—sat at the one table, *vis-à-vis* with Miss Burton. There it is in a nutshell.”

Mr Pomfret grinned broadly. “Oh, Hughie, what I would have given for your chance. You know I am awfully gone on that girl, she is so sweet and dainty, far and away the prettiest girl in Blankfield. What did you make of your chance?”

“As much as could be made in five or ten minutes. She told me a lot about things, her disappointment in finding that the Blankfield people would not call upon her, and that, excepting her brother, she had not a soul to speak to.”

“Poor little soul!” said Mr Pomfret, in a voice of the deepest sympathy. “Poor little soul!” he repeated.

“Well, we talked for some little time, some ten minutes perhaps, I don’t think it could have been much longer. And then—then—you will never believe it, Jack—she asked me to call, and be introduced to her brother.”

Mr Pomfret was quite young, in fact he was the baby of the regiment. But having been educated at a public school, he had learned a certain amount of worldly wisdom rather early. He gave expression to it now.

“If she were living with her mother, or a maiden aunt, Hughie, the thing would be so easy. But the brother, we have seen him walking beside that lovely girl. It would be difficult to class him. It would be perhaps too much

to say he was either a bounder or a cad—he's not boisterous enough for the one or common enough for the other. But clearly, he's not a gentleman or the imitation of one."

"No," answered Hugh. "Your description of the brother quite fits. He is neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red-herring, as the old saw has it. Then the girl is so different. She is, to an extent, frank and unconventional."

"She must be, or she wouldn't have asked you to call upon her," interrupted the astute Mr Pomfret.

"Quite so, I perfectly agree. But upon my soul, Jack, she has the most perfect manners. She does these sort of things in such a way that you cease to wonder why she does them."

"I understand." Mr Pomfret looked very wise. "There's a wonderful fascination about the girl. She radiates it, even when you pass her in the street. By Gad, there's not a young woman in Blankfield who can hold a candle to her. Well, Hughie, what are you going to do about the invitation?"

"I'm in two minds, old man, to go or stay away. There's the brother, you see."

"There's the brother," repeated Mr Pomfret, "and a dashed disappointing sort of a brother, too. If it had only been a mother, or a maiden aunt! What a priceless opportunity! And yet it seems a bit too good to be lost."

"But the brother, what about him?" Hugh insisted.

"The brother is, of course, a stumbling-block. You can't ask him to Mess. 'Old Fireworks' will stand more from you than anybody, but he would never stand Burton. He would be calling him 'Your Grace' or 'Your Worship' or something."

"Old Fireworks," it may be explained, was the nickname of the respected Colonel of the gallant Twenty-fifth Lancers. It had been conferred upon him, on account of his explosive temper. He was also a rigid disciplinarian.

“I shall not go,” said Hugh after a brief pause.

Mr Pomfret was thinking deeply. He pulled at his big cigar in a meditative fashion. Then at length, out of his wisdom, he spoke:

“Let us reason this out, my well-beloved friend. A very pretty girl asks you to go and see her, she is unfortunately hampered by an undesirable brother. You accept their hospitality, but you know he is not a man you can ask to Mess. But you can take him to an hotel, and feed him up there. Tell him the Colonel’s kicked up rough about guests, any lie you like, to save his *amour propre*.”

“A good idea, Jack. Have you anything more to say? Don’t forget that if I go to Rosemount, the news will be all over Blankfield in five minutes.”

Mr Pomfret snapped his fingers. “Who cares a fig for the Blankfield people? Everybody knows, or ought to know, that a soldier loves and rides away. And the Blankfield girls are dull enough, Heaven knows, I wouldn’t give a thought to them.”

“Then you advise me to call, and be introduced to the brother, eh?”

“Of course. We shall be off in another two months, and leave only tender memories behind us.” Mr Pomfret was a practical person, if ever there was one. “Let us seize the passing day. By the way, have you any objection to taking me up to call with you, when you go? Say no, if you have the slightest objection.”

Hugh Murchison looked at him squarely. “No, old chap, not the slightest. The girl interests me in a way, chiefly, I think, because I can’t quite make her out, can’t determine whether she is very cunning or very simple, but I am not attracted in the ordinary sense. I take it you are.”

Pomfret’s look of indifference changed to one of gravity. “Yes, Hughie, I am. I would like to see that girl at close quarters.”

Hugh rose. “Right. We will call together, and in the meantime we will keep it from the other fellows?”

“Good Heavens, I should think so. We should be chaffed to death,” was

Jack’s fervent answer.

A few days later, the two young men walked to Rosemount. It was a villa sort of house, set in a small garden, very carefully kept. The windows were ornamented with boxes of flowers. Small as the establishment was, there was an air of elegance about it, an elegance perhaps of restricted means but of refined taste.

Pomfret nudged his senior officer. “I say, they’ve turned it into a very decent sort of little crib, haven’t they? I should say that is due to the girl.”

Hugh laughed. “Perhaps it is the brother after all. He might be an artist, you know. Artists are often very rum-looking chaps.”

“Artist be hanged,” said Pomfret emphatically. “I’ll bet you a fiver he isn’t an artist, whatever he is. A ‘bookie’ or a ‘bookie’s’ tout, more likely.”

At the end of this short colloquy, they had reached the hall door. A very smart maidservant, in a becoming cap and apron, opened it. In answer to their inquiry, Miss Burton was in.

They were shown into the drawing-room. The young mistress of the house was reclining in an easy-chair; an open book lay on her lap.

She advanced towards them with that peculiar air of self-possession which had so impressed Hugh on his first meeting in the tea-shop. A hostess with years of social experience could not have been more at her ease than this young girl.

“How nice of you to come, after that very vague invitation,” she said, in her clear, silvery voice.

She addressed Murchison first, and then turned swiftly to Pomfret, in whose eyes she doubtless recognised frank admiration of her peculiar attractiveness.

“I know your friend is going to introduce you in proper form. But it is really quite unnecessary. I know you are Mr Pomfret. I have learned the names of all the officers from the tradespeople, also, my only friends in Blankfield. Perhaps Captain Murchison has told you what I confided to

him the other day, that we are as isolated here as if we were on a desert island."

Mr Pomfret sat down beside her on a small Chesterfield. From his vantage point he could gaze into the beautiful eyes, he could note the lustre of that fair, wavy hair.

"A beastly shame," growled the young subaltern, at a loss for appropriate words to express the enormities of Blankfield Society.

She turned away lightly, as if the subject interested her no further.

"I think we will have tea. My brother is engaged in scientific pursuits. When he can tear himself away, he will join us. Captain Murchison, will you kindly ring the bell?"

Truly, she had the manners of a woman of the world. She took the homage of the two men as an accomplished fact. The villadom of Blankfield could not produce such a hostess, so free from fussiness or exaggerated hospitality. You would have to go to the "county" to find her parallel. The two men exchanged appreciative glances. Whatever her origin, Miss Burton could shine in any circle in which she found herself permanently, or temporarily, located.

The tea was served, and over the tea-cups they chatted in desultory fashion. Then the drawing-room door opened, and Mr Burton appeared. From the moment of his appearance, the atmosphere seemed to be changed. He advanced towards them with outstretched hands. His manner was extremely cordial, but it went beyond the limits of good taste. His tones were breezy but blusterous. There was a rasping and a vulgar ring in his voice.

"Welcome to our humble abode, gentlemen. It is very brave of you to come and visit the boycotted ones."

Hugh and Jack Pomfret fidgeted in their chairs. This common-looking young man was a bit too communicative about his private affairs. They had a slight suspicion that he had been indulging in alcohol, his manner was so unrestrained.

Mr Burton sank down in his chair, and took a cup of tea from the hands of his attentive sister. The visitors did not see it, but she shot a warning glance at him, and in face of that warning glance, Mr Burton, by a strong effort, pulled himself together.

“You see, gentlemen, I feel very sore about this matter; my sister has a calmer temperament, and she takes things as they come. Here we came from the North of Ireland, from a little town where we were highly looked up to, where we knew every man, woman and child in the place. We came here, and, as I say, we are boycotted.”

Miss Burton looked at him severely. “George, I do not think it is very good taste of you to inflict your grievances upon these gentlemen, who have just come to make an afternoon call. Don’t you think you could soothe your nerves better by getting back to your laboratory, or whatever you call it?”

Mr Burton accepted the hint, and rose. He waved a genial hand towards the visitors.

“You will excuse me for a few moments. I have a most important experiment on. But I shall be back very shortly: I shall see you again before you leave.”

The two young men devoutly wished that they might not see him again. The man was a confirmed and innate vulgarian. Both he and his sister, no doubt, felt very sore about their social ostracism, but how different were the methods of expression indulged in by the two. She explained the situation with a proud dignity, hiding her chagrin with a show of indifference. He was exposing his gaping wounds to the public eye with an air of ostentation.

“I must ask you to excuse my brother,” said Miss Burton when her ebullient relative had left the room. “He has the true Irish temperament, it is impossible for him to conceal his feelings. He would like to go down the High Street, trailing his coat behind him, and inviting the residents to tread upon it, in real Irish fashion, so that he could indulge in a free fight with them.”

The young men laughed cordially. They felt that a somewhat awkward

situation had been saved by her ready tact, her rather humorous explanation.

But Murchison, the more level-headed of the two, looked at her very fixedly, as he said, “But you are Irish, too. How is it that you have learned to control your feelings so successfully?”

At such a direct question, he would have expected her to flush a little; at any rate, show some slight symptoms of embarrassment. But this remarkably self-possessed girl of twenty or thereabouts was as cool as a cucumber. She laughed her little silvery laugh.

“My brother and I are as wide apart as the North and South Poles,” she said lightly. “Many people have commented on the fact. Would you like to know the reason?”

She directed a rather challenging glance in the direction of Pomfret, whom she rightly judged to be more susceptible to feminine influence than his friend.

“I should like to very much,” was the subaltern’s answer. That eloquent glance had completely subjugated the young man.

“Well, listen. My father was a hard-riding, gambling, hard-drinking Irish squire, who squandered his money and left little but debts behind him. My brother takes after him in certain qualities, thank Heaven not his least desirables ones. My mother was an Englishwoman, rather a puritanical sort of woman, who fell in love, perhaps a little injudiciously, and I think wore her life out in the attempt to curb my father’s unhappy propensities. I take after my mother. You understand? George is really my half-brother by my father’s first wife.”

Pomfret nodded his head gravely. “I quite understand,” he said, and his tone was one of conviction. Murchison preserved a benevolent attitude of neutrality. He was still thinking it all out.

Miss Burton was very pretty, nay, more than pretty, very charming, very attractive, gifted with a marvellous self-possession, very clever, very adroit. But was she as genuine and frank as she seemed? Pomfret evidently thought so, but Murchison was not quite sure.

Mr George Burton, who took after his Irish father in several respects, according to his sister's account, made a re-appearance before the visitors left. There had been just a little suspicion at first that he had been indulging in the hard-drinking habits of his male parent. If so, that suspicion must be at once removed. He was bright, breezy and blusterous, but he was certainly master of himself. He advanced with the most cordial air.

"Gentlemen, I feel I owe you an apology. I had no right to intrude my private grievances upon you, even although I am very possessed with them. Please put it down to my Irish temperament. You will forgive me, I am sure."

He stretched out appealing hands, the hands of the plebeian as Murchison was quick to notice, nails bitten to the quick, coarse fingers and thumbs.

Murchison quietly ignored the outstretched hand. So did Pomfret, subjugated as he was with the charm and attractiveness of Miss Burton. He did not quite feel that he wanted to shake hands with this very terrible brother, who took after his Irish father.

"I apologise most sincerely, gentlemen," he repeated, "for my outburst just now. I had no right to inflict upon you a recital of my private grievances against the inhabitants of this wretched town. But I am a wild, excitable Irishman, whatever is in my mind has to come out. Please forgive me; I know my sister Norah never will."

He looked appealingly at the girl who sat there, calm and self-possessed as always, with a slight expression of contempt upon her charming face.

"I have already made excuses for you to Captain Murchison and Mr Pomfret," she said coldly.

The visitors were very much embarrassed. What could they say to this dreadful person who seemed so utterly lacking in all the qualities of good breeding? Hugh remained silent, Pomfret opened his lips and murmured something about the whole affair being very regrettable.

But these somewhat incoherent remarks were quite enough to restore Mr

Burton to his normal state of easy buoyancy. He smiled affably.

“So that is all over. Well, I am delighted to see you, and it will not be my fault if your first visit is your last. Now, I propose you come round and have a little bit of dinner with us soon, so that we may get to know each other better. Any night that you are at liberty will suit us. *We* are not overwhelmed with invitations, as you can understand from what I have told you.”

If Murchison had been by himself, he would have politely shelved the invitation. Miss Burton, who took after her English mother, was quite decent and ladylike. The brother was insufferable. Vulgarity, so to speak, oozed from him. He was offensive even in his geniality. In short, he was impossible.

But Pomfret took the wind out of his senior’s sails.

“Sorry we are quite full up this week, but hardly anything on next. Shall we say Monday?”

Miss Burton took the matter out of her brother’s hands by turning directly to Murchison.

“Monday, of course, will suit us. Will it suit you?” she asked him pointedly.

Taken by surprise, the unhappy young man could only mutter a reluctant affirmative. A few minutes later they left, pledged to partake of the Burtons’ hospitality on the following Monday.

When they were safely outside, Murchison spoke severely to his brother officer.

“You’ve let us in for a nice thing. If you had left it to me, I would have got out of that dinner somehow.”

“But I didn’t want to get out of it,” replied the unabashed junior. “We knew the brother was pretty bad all along. I don’t know that on the whole he is much worse than we imagined. But she’s a ripping girl. I want to see more of her.”

“You silly young ass,” growled Murchison; “I believe you’ve fallen head over ears in love with her.”

And Pomfret, one of the most mercurial and light-hearted of subalterns, answered quite gravely:

“I rather fancy I have. I’ve never met a girl who appealed to me in quite the same sort of way.”

Chapter Three.

As a result of his visit to Rosemount, Hugh Murchison was very perturbed in his mind. He blamed himself severely for having been tempted into that rather intimate conversation at the tea-shop. Miss Burton was attractive enough, and ladylike enough, to excuse any man for taking advantage of his obvious opportunities, but he had been a fool to go farther. He ought never to have set his foot in the house of people of whom he knew nothing.

It was all Jack Pomfret's fault, he decided hastily. It was his influence, his keen desire to make the girl's acquaintance, that had weighed down his friend's prudence. For, if left to himself, Hugh was quite sure that he would have dallied and dallied till all inclination to call at Rosemount had died down.

And Pomfret had owned to being greatly impressed with the fair young châtelaine. He had admitted that he had never met a girl who had appealed to him in quite the same sort of way. In fact, it was easy to see he had fallen desperately in love with her.

And Jack was just one of those light-hearted, susceptible sort of chaps who have not an atom of common-sense in their composition, who will obey their impulses, regardless of consequences.

And he was not his own master. His career was practically at the disposal of his somewhat puritanical aunt. It was just on the cards that Jack would be mad enough to propose to this girl who had so bewitched him. One could imagine how the aunt would receive such a communication.

There was one little ray of hope, however. If Jack did commit such a crowning folly, he would be far too honourable not to acquaint Miss Burton with his circumstances. Hugh was fairly convinced that the young lady knew how to take care of herself. And, even if she did fall in love with Jack, as he had done with her, and be inclined to make a fool of herself, there was the objectionable brother to be reckoned with. He would certainly not allow his sister to engage herself to a man, except with the consent of that man's family.

All the same, it was as well to avoid any embarrassing entanglements, if possible. It is easy to retrace your steps when you have only just started.

With this object in view, Murchison sought his friend on the Sunday preceding the day on which they were to present themselves at Rosemount.

“Jack, old man, I have been thinking—” he began.

Mr Pomfret lifted a warning finger. “My dear friend and mentor, don’t indulge in such violent processes. It’s very bad for you.”

“Don’t be an ass, Jack. You are not really funny when you say that sort of thing. I’ve been thinking over this business to-morrow, and, frankly, I don’t relish the prospect. We had better cut it out.”

Pomfret’s face took on an obstinate expression. “You are speaking for yourself, of course. For my part, I don’t intend to break my appointment. In my opinion, it would be an awfully low-down thing to do. If you didn’t want to go, you shouldn’t have accepted.”

It was evident the young man was not in a very reasonable frame of mind, equally evident he would require very careful handling.

“Now, Jack, don’t get off the handles. You know you are an awfully impetuous chap, and that I have much the cooler head of the two. I have been thinking it all out the last day or two, and I don’t like the look of it.”

“You informed me just now that you had been thinking,” replied Mr Pomfret in the same sarcastic strain. “There is no need to dwell upon the fact. It is obvious.”

But the elder man was not to be ruffled. If anything unpleasant came of this sudden acquaintance he would lay the blame on himself for having mentioned that little incident of the tea-shop, and inspired the mercurial Jack’s love of the daring and adventurous.

“I don’t know that I did accept, as a matter of fact, except by implication. I was about to return an evasive answer, leave it in the air, so to speak, when you cut in and jumped at the invitation for both.”

This was true, and Mr Pomfret's air lost a little of its jaunty confidence. "Well, if you think I lugged you in, get out of it yourself. Of course you will have to tell some beastly lie that they will see through at once. Anyway I am going, and that's flat."

"If you go, I shall go," said Hugh firmly. "But I would like you to listen to me for a few moments, and put things before you as they present themselves to me."

"Fire away, then," was Pomfret's answer, but it was delivered in a very ungracious tone.

"Of course we are both agreed about the brother," began Hugh mildly.

The other interrupted impatiently: "The brother be hanged. We are not going to the house for the brother's sake, but because of the sister. What's the use of blinking the fact? If you had met him in the tea-shop instead of her, I don't suppose you would have wasted a word on him, no more should I. But I don't see why that pretty girl should be ostracised because of him."

"I don't quite see, under the circumstances, how you can separate them," pursued the obstinate Hugh. "I should like to turn off, just for a moment to the sister, and consider her."

"Go ahead," said Mr Pomfret in a somewhat sullen tone. He was keeping his impulsive and fiery nature under control, out of his great respect for his friend. But it was very doubtful if he would stand much criticism even from one so respected.

"I have not a word to say against her appearance or her manners. I will go further, and say there is not a girl in Blankfield, or for the matter of that in the 'county' itself, who gives the impression of a thorough gentlewoman more convincingly than she does." Pomfret's face brightened at these words. "Oh, then you admit that, and you have knocked about the world a few years longer than I have. I am of the same opinion, but if you say it, it must be so."

"I do say it unhesitatingly, but mind you, I am only judging from outside appearances. Now, how comes it that such a refined and ladylike girl as

that should have such a bounder of a brother? There is a mystery there."

Jack Pomfret prepared to argue. "I don't quite agree that he is a bounder, he is not quite boisterous enough for that. Let us agree on a common definition—namely, that he is bad form. That fits him, I think."

"And the sister is very good form. You can't deny that there is a mystery."

But the young subaltern developed a quite surprising ingenuity in argument.

"She just simply calls him her brother," sharply, "but she has told you he is her half-brother by a first marriage—father a gentleman, mother a common person, hence the bad form. A second time, the father married a woman of his own class, hence Norah Burton. Norah knows him for a good sort, if a bit rough, and sticks to him. That's a reasonable theory, anyway."

"More ingenious than reasonable perhaps," commented Murchison with an amused smile.

Pomfret went on, warming to his subject. "And, hang it all, if we speak of bounders—and mind you, I won't admit he is a bounder in the strict sense of the term—is there a family in England without them?"

"Quite the same sort, do you think?" was Hugh's question.

"Look here, I'm not going to be impertinent, and ask if you can point to any amongst your own connections, but I know something of my own family. I've got a cousin, good blood on both sides. He's been a bounder from the time he learned to talk, sets your teeth on edge; as some fellow said, every time he opens his mouth he puts his foot into it. By Gad, this fellow Burton is a polished gentleman to him. If George showed his nose in this regiment they would send him to Coventry in five minutes."

"As they did that chap last year," remarked Hugh, alluding to an offensive young man who had been compelled to send in his papers, owing to the fact that his general demeanour had not come up to the somewhat exalted standard of the gallant Twenty-fifth.

“Precisely,” assented Pomfret. “But you were going to give me some views about the girl. Again I say, fire away.”

“Well, to go back to that meeting in the tea-shop. It was, to say the least, a little unconventional for a young girl to invite an utter stranger to call upon her.”

“You were not an utter stranger,” retorted Jack doggedly. “She had heard who you were, perhaps from the tradespeople. She knew you were a gentleman, she knew your name, Captain Murchison. Hang it all, if you had met her in one of these dull Blankfield houses, and she had been introduced by a hostess about whom you both knew precious little, and asked you to call, being the mistress of her brother’s house, you would have thought it quite the correct and proper thing. So would every man in the barracks. Don’t people strike up acquaintances in hotels, and sometimes trains?”

“They generally find out something about each other before they pursue the acquaintance,” suggested Murchison. “Look here, old man, you know as well as I do, you are arguing all round the point. It would be precious easy for the Burtons to say who and what they were, and furnish some proper credentials. If they did that, I daresay all Blankfield would call upon them, and swallow the brother for the sake of the very charming sister.”

“Well, I’ll pump her to-night, and get out all you want to know,” retorted Mr Pomfret confidently. “I don’t go so far as to say they will be able to refer us to Burke or Debrett. Decent middle-class people, I expect.”

It was useless to argue with such an optimist. “You’ve accounted for the brother, I remember, by your ingenious theory. Well, you’ve made up your mind to go then?”

“Most certainly I have. You do as you like, but while we are on the subject of good form, it is not a pretty thing to accept an invitation, and then excuse yourself at the eleventh hour by an obvious lie.”

“Under ordinary circumstances, you would be quite right. It has not occurred to you that we were rather rushed into this dinner, then—that we were, so to speak, jumped at?”

“It might look like it at first blush,” admitted Mr Pomfret reluctantly. “But here are two poor devils, marooned, as it were, in this snobbish town, and they naturally jump at the first people who show them the slightest civility. They must simply be aching to exchange a word with their fellow-creatures. Well, I am going to exchange several with them, I promise you.”

Hugh felt it was useless. When Pomfret got in these moods, it was waste of time to reason with him. He felt uneasy, however. He had promised his family to look after him, and he felt a certain responsibility. It was to be hoped the sudden infatuation for a pretty face would expire as quickly as it had been born.

Perhaps a closer association with the bounder brother would produce a chastening influence. But then Jack seemed bounder-proof. Had he not alluded to a well-born cousin, beside whom Burton shone as a polished gentleman?

Anyway, he must not desert his young and very impulsive friend. But it was with considerable reluctance that he accompanied him to Rosemount on the Monday night.

Chapter Four.

Eight o’clock was the hour appointed for dinner, this fact scoring in the Burtons’ favour, as evincing a knowledge of the habits of good society. Even a few of the most select hostesses in Blankfield, who ought to have known better, made a base compromise with half-past seven.

The two men arrived about five minutes before the time. The young hostess was awaiting them in the drawing-room, attired in some filmy creation that made her look very charming and ethereal. Soft lights from shaded lamps played about her, and lent a touch of perfection to the picture.

Mr Burton was attired in the usual conventional evening dress of the English gentleman. One would have guessed him the sort of man who would wear a ready-made tie. Not at all. He had tied the bow himself, and with a masterly hand. Pomfret even, who was admitted to be the Beau Brummel of his regiment, could not have done it better.

It is generally supposed that a common man looks more common still when he dons evening attire. “George” was an exception to the rule. His black clothes became him, and lent him a certain air of dignity, which was wanting when he assumed everyday garments. Even Murchison, prejudiced as he was against him, was forced to admit to himself that the “bounder” for once looked quite respectable. Pomfret, ever leaning to the charitable side, felt quite enthusiastic over him, and contrasted him favourably with his own cousin, who could boast blue blood on both sides.

Norah Burton played the hostess as to the manner born, greeting the visitors with just the right degree of cordiality, quite free from the effusiveness of most of the Blankfield hostesses. And Burton, taking his cue from her, was hearty without boisterousness.

The young subaltern’s heart warmed to her, she was so gracious, so sweet, and about her there hovered such an air of calm dignity. Rosemount, no doubt, was honoured by the introduction of such distinguished visitors, viewed merely from the social point of view, but

she did not permit a suspicion of this to escape her. Rather, judging by her demeanour, the visitors were honoured by being admitted to Rosemount.

“Rather reminds me of a young queen entertaining her subjects,” Pomfret remarked afterwards to his friend in a rather enthusiastic outburst. “I’m not speaking of the ‘county’ of course, but these Blankfield women make you feel they are overwhelmed with your condescension in coming to their houses, that they are hardly fit to sit at the same table with you.”

The dinner was plain, but well-cooked. The appointments were perfect, snowy napery, elegant glass and cutlery. One neat-handed maidservant waited, and waited well. Mr Burton carved the dishes that were carvable, there was no pretence at an *à la Russe* banquet. Their small establishment could not cope with that, and they did not attempt it. There was a generous supply of wines: hock, burgundy and champagne.

And Mr Burton, strangely subdued, was quite a good host, hospitable but not pressing. Murchison thought he must have been having some lessons from his sister, who seemed intuitively to do the right thing Still suspicious, he was sure that she had been steadily coaching him how to comport himself on this important night.

For, after all, it must be a feather in their caps, that after having been coldly cast aside by the *élite* of Blankfield, they had captured for their dining acquaintance two of the most popular officers of the exclusive Twenty-fifth.

And Murchison, ever on the watch for any little sign or symptom to confirm his suspicions, had to admit the pair were behaving perfectly. Not the slightest sign of elation at the small social triumph manifested itself in the demeanour of either. Dinner-parties like this might be a common occurrence for all they showed to the contrary.

The substantial portion of the meal was over. Dessert was brought in, with port, claret and sherry, all of the most excellent vintage. The house was a small one, and not over-staffed, but there was no evidence of lack of means. Perhaps the Burtons were wise people in not keeping up a great show, but spending the greater part of their income on their

personal enjoyments.

While the men were still lingering over their dessert, Miss Burton rose.

“There are no ladies to support me, so I shall feel quite lonely by myself,” she said in her pretty, softly modulated voice. “Shall we have coffee in the drawing-room? You men can smoke. It is quite Liberty Hall here. My brother smokes in every room of the house.”

Murchison noted the subtle difference between the brother and sister. If Burton had given the invitation, he would certainly have said, “you gentlemen.” The beautiful Norah would not make a mistake like that.

Five minutes afterwards, the three men trooped into the pretty drawing-room with its subdued, shaded lights. Norah was sitting at a small table, on which were set the coffee equipage with an assortment of liqueurs. Decidedly, the Burtons knew how to do things when they received guests.

The “bounder” brother, as Hugh always called him to himself, had drunk very heavily at dinner of every wine: hock, burgundy and champagne. But evidently he could carry a big quantity. It would take more than a small dinner-party like this to knock him over. When he entered the drawing-room his mien was as subdued as when he had first received his visitors.

They drank their coffee round the fair-sized octagonal table, and then they broke up. Miss Burton retired to a Chesterfield, whither Pomfret followed her, as he was bound to do.

Burton bustled out of the room, and returned with a huge box of expensive cigars. He offered the box to Hugh, who took one with a deprecating look at the young hostess.

“We dare not, Miss Burton. Think of your curtains in the morning.”

“Don’t trouble, Captain Murchison,” she said, with her charming smile. “The curtains have to take what comes in this house. George doesn’t often sit in this room, but when he does he always smokes cigars. I told you this was Liberty Hall, you know.”

The box was offered to Pomfret, who took one. “Do you smoke, Miss Burton?” he asked.

“Once in a blue moon. I think I will have one to-night, as a little treat. It is terribly tempting, when I see all you men smoking.” The enamoured Pomfret fetched her a cigarette, hovered over her with a match, till it was properly lighted, and settled himself again on the Chesterfield. If that silly old Hugh didn’t butt in, he was going to have a nice little chat with this charming girl, who had played the young hostess to such perfection.

But Hugh was safely out of the way. Burton had piloted him to a comfortable easy-chair at the extreme end of the drawing-room, and these two antipathetic persons were apparently engaged in an interesting conversation. Anyway, Murchison’s laugh rang out frequently.

Pomfret, it must be confessed, was not very great at conversation. If the ball were opened, he could set it rolling, but he lacked initiative. He looked at Miss Burton with admiring eyes, but although he had got her comfortably to himself on that convenient Chesterfield, he could think of nothing to say to her.

And then a brilliant inspiration came to him. “I say, how gracefully you smoke.” The young woman burst into a pleasant peal of quite spontaneous laughter. She always had a ready smile at command, but her laughter was generally a little forced. This time it was perfectly genuine.

“Oh, you are really comical,” she cried. “How can any girl smoke a cigarette gracefully? In the first place, it is a most unfeminine thing to do. All people must smoke them in the same way, and there can never be anything graceful in the act.”

“Women don’t smoke them the same way,” replied the young subaltern, with the air of a man who has observed and learned. “Most of them chew them, and hold them at arm’s length, as if they were afraid of being bitten.”

“It’s because they don’t like smoking, really, and only do it to be in the fashion. Now, when I am quite in the mood, I actually revel in a cigarette. I am in the mood to-night.”

Pomfret leaned forward, with a tender expression on his rather homely, but good-humoured, countenance.

“That means that you feel happy to-night, eh?”

She nodded brightly. “Oh, ever so happy! It is seeing new faces, you know, after weeks of isolation,” she added with a touch of almost girlish gaiety. “It seems such ages since we gave a dinner-party. And you and Captain Murchison are so nice. It seems almost like a family gathering.”

“You like my friend Murchison, then? I am glad, because it is to him I owe the pleasure of your acquaintance.”

“I think he is a dear, he seems so honest, straightforward, and so reliable.” She spoke with apparent conviction. “Were you not dreadfully shocked when he told you, for of course he must have told you, how we got to know each other?”

“Not in the least,” said Mr Pomfret stoutly. “I explained to him that people can become acquainted, without being properly introduced in the conventional sort of way.”

“Ah, then, he had some doubts himself?” flashed Miss Burton. “I expect he was a little shocked, if you were not.”

“Not in the slightest, I assure you,” replied Mr Pomfret easily. He was not above telling a white lie upon occasions. He remembered too well the remarks that his friend had made upon the girl’s unconventional behaviour, but he was not going to admit anything.

Miss Burton spoke softly, after a brief pause.

“You and Captain Murchison are very great friends, are you not?”

“Awful pals,” was the genuine response. “You see, he knows all my family. And when I joined the regiment, they deputed him to look after me. He has got a hard task,” he added with a laugh.

“Oh, not so very hard really, I am sure of that.” Norah’s voice was very sweet, very caressing. “But you and your friend are of very different

temperaments.”

“In what way?”

She smiled. “Oh, in half a hundred ways. Captain Murchison is as true as steel, but also as hard as steel. You, now, are not in the least hard. You are very kind and compassionate, you think the best of everybody.”

“Don’t flatter me too much, please,” interjected the bashful Pomfret.

“Oh, pardon me, I know just the kind of man you are.” The sweet face was very close to his own, the beautiful, rather sad eyes were looking steadily into his. “You are a rich man, or you would not be in this expensive regiment. But, if you were a poor man, and you had only ten pounds in your pocket, you would lend an impecunious friend five of them, and not trouble whether he repaid you or not.”

“I think you have fitted me, Miss Burton. My dear old chum Hugh is never tired of telling me I am an awful ass.”

“You are both right, really,” answered Miss Burton.

“You see, we look at life from two different standpoints.”

“I fancy you come from two different classes?” queried the charming young woman.

Pomfret felt a little embarrassed. He did not want to give away his particular chum. But there were no doubt certain inherited commercial instincts in Hugh that sometimes offended the descendant of a more careless and aristocratic family.

“You see, Hugh has come from the trading class, originally. His ancestors, no doubt, were close-fisted people. Hugh is not close-fisted himself: he is, in a certain way, the soul of generosity, but sometimes the old Adam peeps out in little things.”

He had a swift pang of remorse when he had said this. For he suddenly remembered Hugh’s generous offer of the two hundred which Pomfret, by a very diplomatic letter, was going to cajole out of the octogenarian

great-aunt.

“Believe me,” added he fervently, “Hugh is one of the best. He is a little peculiar sometimes in small things. I ought not to have spoken as I have done. I am more than sorry if I have conveyed a wrong impression of him.”

“But you have not,” cried Norah Burton swiftly. “He would be hard in some things: I am sure—for instance—he would never forgive a really dishonourable action, even in the case of his best friend.”

“No, I am sure he would not,” assented Pomfret. “But I don’t fancy he has been much tried that way. We don’t get many ‘rotters’ amongst our lot.”

“*Noblesse oblige*,” quoted Miss Burton, lightly. Then she added more seriously: “And I am sure he is very kind-hearted and thoughtful. I was impressed with his reluctance to smoke because of the curtains. Of course, he did not remember that it did not matter in the least, as we never have callers.”

She was getting on the theme of their social isolation, but Pomfret was sure that, unlike her brother, strangely subdued to-night from his usual boisterousness, she would handle the subject with her customary tact and good taste.

“Ah, of course, all that is very regrettable. It is not so much your loss, as the loss of Blankfield. I suppose you won’t stay very long here.”

For a moment there came a blazing light in the soft, beautiful eyes. “A few days ago, I advised my brother to pack up and clear out. The snobbish plutocracy of Blankfield had beaten us, made up of retired shopkeepers and merchants. To-night, with you and Captain Murchison as our guests, I think we have beaten Blankfield with its fat mothers and plain daughters.”

She looked superb, as she drew her slender form up to its full height, the glow of indignant triumph blazing on her cheek. At the moment she was extremely beautiful. If Pomfret had been attracted before, he was infatuated now.

“I will help you to beat the Blankfield people, for whom I don’t care a row of pins. I will come, whenever you want me.”

“And your friend Captain Murchison, will he come, too?”

Pomfret smiled whimsically. “Oh yes, he will come, if I make a point of it. Old Hugh thinks he leads me, but I really lead him.” She leaned forward eagerly. “Can you bring some of your brother officers, Mr Pomfret? Please don’t think I am bold and forward and presumptuous. But I do long to be even with these Blankfield people. I would love to make a little sort of *salon* of my own. I know it is useless to expect the women at present, but they might come in time. Mind you, I don’t want them.”

“I will try,” said Pomfret slowly. “I think I may say that Hugh and I are the two most popular men in the regiment; I say it without vanity. And I don’t suppose we care a snap of the fingers about the Blankfield people. Still, I don’t want to raise hopes that may never be fulfilled. I can only say, I will try.” There was a pause. Then she spoke, and there was a far-away look in her eyes. “You hesitate, I see. Oh, I quite believe you when you say you will try. But there is some stumbling-block in the way, isn’t there?” Pomfret had perforce to dissemble. “There is no stumbling-block that I know of, except running the risk of offending Blankfield. That is not a great one, as we shall be out of here in about two months.”

She leaned closer to him, and her voice sank to a whisper. “There is a stumbling-block, I know. You are too kind and generous to state what it is, you could not, as to-night he is your host. It is my brother.”

And then poor, infatuated Pomfret sought no further refuge in subterfuge. He blurted out the truth. “Some of our chaps wouldn’t stand him, you know,” he said simply.

There was a little convulsive movement of the delicate hands. “And he is such a dear good fellow at heart, wanting I know in the little delicacies that mark a real gentleman. You see a great difference between us, don’t you?”

“A very distinct difference,” assented Pomfret.

“I will explain it to you in a few words. My father was a harum-scarum sort

of person, as I told you last time you were here, hard-riding and hard-drinking. When he was a boy of twenty-five he married a woman out of his own class, a shopgirl or a barmaid, I am not quite sure which. George is many years older than myself, as I told you he is really my half-brother. The first wife died, my father married again, this time a lady. I am the daughter of the second marriage. Now, I think you understand."

Pomfret was delighted at this avowal, it proved his own prescience.

"I am so glad you told me, but as it happens, it was just what I guessed."

Miss Burton looked at him with admiring eyes. "You are really very clever, you know. Well, I will not exactly say this is a secret, but you will whisper it about discreetly. You need not be quite so frank as I have been about details, but you can hint at a *mésalliance*. I hate to have to tell you so much, for my brother has been so good to me."

"Ah!" Mr Pomfret's air plainly showed that he was eager for further information.

And Miss Burton was quite willing to gratify him. The young man was a pleasant, comfortable sort of person to talk to. He was an admirable listener, and never broke in with unnecessary, or irritating interruptions.

"When my father died he left little behind him but debts; my mother had preceded him some ten years. Poor George had gone into a stockbroker's office, through the good offices of a distant connection. His salary was very small, but he made a home for me. He would not hear of my earning my own living."

"That could not have been very long ago," remarked Pomfret, "because you are not very old now."

"No, it was not long," answered the girl, not committing herself to any definite dates. "Well, we had a very hard time, as you can imagine. Then suddenly our luck changed. An uncle of George's on his mother's side had gone out to Australia as a boy, and amassed, we won't say a fortune from your point of view, but what we should look upon as wealth. He had never married, and when he died, a will was found in which he left all he was possessed of to his sister's children. George was the only child, so

he took it all."

"So he threw up business and went in for a country life."

"Well, he has thrown it up for a time. I am not quite certain he will not get tired of inactivity, and go back to it. Now that he has capital, it would be easy for him to embark in something that would keep him occupied, and pay him well."

"Not a sportsman, I suppose, he doesn't care for hunting or shooting? The country is slow for a man if he doesn't do something in that line."

The pretty girl smiled; there was a faint touch of humour in the smile. "Oh, he's not rich enough to indulge in luxuries of that sort. Besides," she added hastily, "he has such wretched sight, he would be no good at sport." Pomfret thought it had been a very pleasant, enlightening conversation. Norah seemed to have been perfectly frank about their past and their present position. She did not pretend to be anything but what she was, the daughter of a spendthrift father, living on what was practically the charity of a good-hearted brother. And that brother was indebted for his good fortune to a relative who must have been a man of the people.

While the two young people were having this confidential chat, Mr Burton was making himself agreeable to the other guest, in his doubtless well-meant, but somewhat undiplomatic, fashion.

"I do envy you young fellows when I see you walking about as if the world belonged to you."

Hugh drew himself up stiffly. "I was not in the least aware that any one of us conveyed that impression."

"No offence meant, I assure you." Hugh's tone showed him that he had been guilty of bad taste: a blessing Norah had not heard—she would have given him a bad quarter of an hour later on. "But all army men, I think, get a certain kind of swagger. Oh, nothing overbearing or unpleasant about it, of course. They are made so much of that there is no wonder if they do fancy themselves a bit. I'm sure I should if I were one of them." Murchison made no comment on this frank statement, and the

other man rambled on in desultory fashion.

“It’s the life I wanted. As a boy I longed to grow up quickly and go into the army. There was a fair chance of it then, when the old man had still got a bit of money left. But by the time I was old enough the idea had to be knocked on the head. I had to go into a dingy stockbroking office instead.”

Hugh pricked up his ears at the announcement. He had not suspected that the man would be so communicative about his past. Of course he had gone as a clerk. If his father was not well-off enough to put him in the army neither could he have afforded to buy him a share in a business.

“Yes,” pursued Mr Burton, “it was an awful come down after the dreams I had indulged in.”

“It must have been a very bitter disappointment,” assented Hugh politely, in spite of his firm conviction that the army was the very last profession in the world suited to a man of his host’s obvious peculiarities.

“I should have been awfully keen on soldiering,” pursued Mr Burton, under the impression that he had discovered a sympathetic listener. “Don’t you consider it a splendid life?”

“There are many things in its favour, certainly,” was the rather frigid reply.

“But, after all, I don’t think I should have cared to be in the line; there’s not the same glamour about it, is there? You fellows in the cavalry, in a crack regiment like yours, must see the rosy side of life.” He heaved a sigh. “And, of course, you’ve all got pots of money to grease the wheels.”

Hugh fidgeted perceptibly. How very vulgar the man was, with an innate vulgarity that nothing would ever eradicate. But his host, absorbed in his own reflections, did not observe the movement.

“Of course, we know all about you, about the great house of Murchison, you are tiled-in all right.” He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper: “What about that young chap yonder? I suppose he’s rolling in money, too?”

It was growing insufferable. For two pins Hugh would have got up and bidden him good night then and there, but he shrank from making a scene. What a fool he had been to come here, to allow his kindly feeling for that susceptible young donkey of a Pomfret to expose him to such an ordeal as this.

“Really, Mr Burton,” he said in a cutting voice, “I do not discuss the private affairs of my friends on such a brief acquaintance. If you are really anxious to know, I believe Mr Pomfret has considerable expectations from an old aunt who is fairly wealthy. Those expectations depend, I understand, upon his conforming generally to her wishes in all respects.”

“Ah, I understand,” said the unabashed Burton. “Sorry if my question gave you offence. What really put it in my head was the difference between his position and mine when I was his age.”

There was silence for some little time, while the two men applied themselves steadily to their cigars. Then Burton jumped up suddenly.

“This must be a bit slow for you and your friend, and the night is young. What do you say to a game at bridge?”

Yes, Captain Murchison would welcome a game of bridge, anything as a relief to this vulgarian’s conversation.

They played for over two hours, Murchison keenly alert from certain suspicions that had been forming in his mind. At present there was no foundation for these vague suspicions. They played for small stakes, but the visitors rose up the winners, not by a great amount, but still winners.

It was a fine night, the two men walked back to their quarters.

“How did you get on with the charmer? I saw you seemed very confidential together,” asked the older man.

“Splendidly, old chap. She told me a lot about her history.” Pomfret related all he had been told in full. “And how did you get on with the brother?”

“Don’t ask me,” replied Hugh with a groan. “He’s the most insufferable

creature I ever came across. I don’t really think I can go there again. At the beginning of the evening he started fairly well, but later he reverted to type.”

“Well, I may as well tell you straight, I shall. The next time we go I’ll take a share of the brother.”

When Pomfret spoke in that tone he meant what he said, and Hugh knew he would have his own wilful way.

There was one piece of information which the young subaltern had not imparted to his friend.

It was this—that after much pressing, and more than one refusal, Miss Burton had agreed to meet him to-morrow afternoon at a very sequestered spot about a mile and a half from Blankfield, with the view of pursuing their acquaintance.

Chapter Five.

From the night of that dinner-party Murchison noted a subtle difference in his young friend's demeanour. Pomfret had always been a harum-scarum sort of young fellow, accustomed to follow erratic and injudicious impulses, not absolutely devoid of brains of a certain order, but of imperfect and ill-balanced mentality.

But in his wildest escapades he had always been frank and above-board. And he was ever the first, when he had overstepped the border-line, to admit that he was in the wrong. And on such occasions, far from justifying his exploits, he had been ready to deplore them.

But his frankness seemed to have departed from that night. He seemed rather to avoid than seek the society of his old friend and mentor. When Hugh brought up the subject of the Burtons, Pomfret seemed anxious to avoid it, to say as little as possible. He seemed to shut himself up within his own soul.

Hugh, of course, was profoundly uneasy. Such a transparent creature as Pomfret would not be likely to retire within his own shell unless there were cogent reasons for the withdrawal. And the reasons were inspired by the attractive personality of the fascinating siren at Rosemount, the charming young woman who explained the presence of an undesirable brother by the narrative of her father's first unfortunate marriage.

Pomfret had invited the brother and sister to a dinner at the principal hotel in the place, and Hugh had been his friend's guest. Ladies, of course, could not be asked to the Mess. It had been a happy solution of a somewhat awkward position. Mr Burton no doubt understood, but he accepted the situation with alacrity.

From the dinner they had adjourned to Rosemount. Here they had played cards as before, but they left off fairly even. Hugh's suspicions about card-sharping were dissipated as before. At the same time, he was still resolved to keep a watchful eye upon the pair. It was firmly engrained upon his mind, and only, of course, from the purest instinct, that he did not trust either of them.

Much to his surprise, they left without having been asked to a return dinner. It was the turn of the Burtons. And judging from the haste with which Burton had jumped at them on the first visit, the omission was a little noticeable. It could not be that these new isolated dwellers in Blankfield wanted to shelve an acquaintance which must have brightened their dull and unvisited existence.

Another fact presented itself to Murchison's rather acute intelligence. There seemed already established between Pomfret and the attractive Norah a certain kind of freemasonry, a certain sort of easy relations. And once in the course of the evening he was sure that he heard the young man, in the course of a whispered conversation, address her by her Christian name. They had been sitting together on the Chesterfield, and their remarks to each other had been addressed in a very low tone. But Hugh's hearing was wonderfully acute, and he had surprised a sudden expression of rebuke in Miss Burton's eyes when Pomfret made the slip.

And here, for a moment, this story must leave Hugh Murchison with his honest doubts and suspicions, while it follows the fortunes of his young friend and the attractive Norah Burton.

For, truth to tell, at this particular juncture, young Pomfret, for all his apparent guilelessness, was pursuing a double game. Madly, overwhelmingly, in love with Norah, he was meeting her clandestinely, sometimes at her own house, sometimes in sequestered spots in the surrounding neighbourhood. And of these visits and meetings Hugh knew nothing.

Pomfret was not free from a few pangs of self-reproach, from the fact that he was not running quite straight with good old Hugh, to whom he had always, hitherto, confessed all his difficulties and troubles.

But then Hugh, although one of the best, was such a practical old stick. And if he told him the whole truth, there was no knowing what course Hugh might not think it was his duty to take. He might write to his family and bring them down in an avalanche on him, or even to the octogenarian aunt.

Love taught him deep cunning, and what he lacked in this subtle quality was ably supplemented by Miss Burton, this young girl with the rather sad expression, and the candid eyes that always met your gaze unfalteringly.

From the first clandestine meeting, arranged in whispers on the night of the dinner at Rosemount, Pomfret had made the running very fast. He had given Norah to understand that he thought her the most desirable girl he had ever met, that no other woman had appealed, would or could appeal, to him as she did. There was a good drop of Irish blood in his own veins, and he certainly made a most fervent lover.

Norah listened with a modest bashfulness that enchanted him. He was sure from her demeanour that she had never been made love to before. She seemed so overwhelmed that she could hardly say a word. If one were not so much in love, one might almost have thought she was stupid.

She was not so stupid, however, as not to preserve her wits sufficiently to make another appointment, this time at Rosemount. Pomfret consented gladly, but he made a certain stipulation, which his companion was more than pleased to agree to.

“We mustn’t let old Hugh know about this, though, or he’ll think he’s left out in the cold. You see, it was really through him I knew you. You must tell your brother not to let it out.”

Miss Burton promised that, so far as she and her brother were concerned, Captain Murchison would be none the wiser. It only remained for Mr Pomfret—although entreated to do so, she could not at this early stage address him as “Jack”—to surround his movements with a proper degree of mystery.

When the two parted, and the meeting had been rather a brief one, for it was always a little dangerous lingering long about the environs of Blankfield, in case of unexpected intruders, Miss Burton made a significant remark.

“I am quite sure your friend Captain Murchison does not like me. In fact, I think his real feeling is one of dislike.”

Mr Pomfret was young enough to blush; he did so upon this occasion. He guessed the real truth, that Murchison did not dislike her at all, on the contrary, he rather admired her—but he had a certain distrust of her.

“Fancy on your part, fancy, I’m quite sure,” he answered glibly. “I expect he is a little bit sore, you know, about the whole thing, thinks I have cut him out with you.”

“Perhaps,” assented Norah, easily. But in her own heart she knew it was nothing of the kind. She recognised at once the difference between the two men. Murchison was a thorough gentleman, kind and chivalrous, but he was a man of the world, with a certain hard strain in him, a man who would submit everything to the test of cold, practical reasoning, not to be hoodwinked or led astray.

This poor babbling boy, with his unrestrained impulses, that Celtic leaven in his blood, would fall an easy prey to any woman who was clever enough to cast her spells over him. He would never reason, he would only feel.

After that first meeting, the precursor of many others, the affair progressed briskly. Pomfret made love with great ardour, Norah received his advances with a shy sort of acquiescence that inflamed him the more. He was sure, oh very sure, he was the first who had touched that innocent heart.

From these delightful confidences Murchison was shut out. It would not be wise to ignore him altogether, for such a course of action would have intensified his suspicions. But the invitations to Rosemount from either host or hostess were few and far between.

He was not, however, so easily gulled as the three conspirators thought. Pomfret’s preoccupied mood, the air of a man who had much on his mind, his frequent and unexplained absences, gave to his friend much food for thought. He felt certain that the easy-going, irresponsible young man was entangling himself. But in such a state of affairs he felt powerless. Short of invoking the influence of the Colonel, or writing to the elderly aunt, he could do nothing.

It cannot be said that the course of true love was running very smoothly,

even from the point of view of the ardent and enamoured suitor himself. In spite of his impulsive temperament, his disinclination to look hard facts squarely in the face, there was in him a slight leaven of common-sense.

Save for the bounty and goodwill of this generous, if somewhat narrow-minded, aunt he was an absolute pauper. There was no hope of marrying without her consent. And he was quite sure that in a case like this her consent would never be given. A *fiancée*, to be received by her with approval, must present some sort of credentials.

And there was the difficulty. Poor Jack had exhausted all his simple cunning to extract from them some convincing details of their antecedents. But even he, infatuated as he was, had to admit that they had parried inquiries with great adroitness. They maintained a persistent reticence as to names and places. Even he was forced to conclude that, for some reason or another, they did not choose to be frank about their past.

These obvious facts, however, did not lessen his infatuation. To marry her was the one dominating object of his life, in spite of all that his few remaining remnants of common-sense could urge against such a step.

More than once the rash idea occurred to him that he would marry her in secret, and when the marriage was an accomplished fact, throw himself upon his aunt's forgiveness.

He mooted the idea to Norah, to whom, of course, he had already made a frank statement of his position, as befitted the honourable gentleman he was. But she did not receive the suggestion with enthusiasm, although she professed to fully reciprocate his ardent affection.

"If I were a selfish girl, and only thought of my immediate happiness, I should say 'Yes,'" she said with a little tremulous smile, that made her look more desirable than ever in her lover's eyes. "But I could not allow *you* to run such a terrible risk. Old people are very strange and very touchy when they think they have been slighted. Suppose she cast you off."

"I suppose I could work, as thousands have to do," replied Jack, with a touch of his old doggedness.

She shook her head. “My poor Jack! It is easy to talk of working, but you have got to find an employer. And you have been brought up to an idle life. What could you turn your hand to?” She paused a moment, and then added as an after-thought: “And besides, my brother would never sanction it.”

Even to Pomfret’s slow revolving mind, the worldly taint in her just peeped forth in those sensible remarks.

“If I am prepared to risk my aunt’s displeasure, you can surely afford to risk your brother’s?” he queried angrily.

But Norah disarmed him with one of her sweetest smiles.

“Be reasonable, dearest; we must not behave like a pair of silly children. And besides, there is a certain moral obligation on both sides. You owe everything to your aunt. I owe everything to my brother. It would be very base to ignore them.”

Jack was touched by the nobility of these last sentiments. “You are much better than I am, Norah, much less selfish.”

She caressed his curly head with her hand. “We must have patience, Jack. You have told me as plainly as your dear, kind heart would allow you to tell me that, for reasons which I don’t want you to explain, your aunt would never give her consent to your marriage with me. Well, we must wait.”

In plain English her meaning was that they must possess their souls in patience till such time as this excellent old lady had departed this life. The suggestion was certainly a coldblooded one, but in his present infatuated mood Jack did not take any notice of that. Norah made a feeble attempt to gloss over the callousness of her remarks by adding that, although it was a very horrible thing to have to wait for the shoes of dead people, a person of Miss Harding’s great age must expect to very shortly pay the debt of nature.

Two days later, Jack received a telegram which seemed to give a certain air of prophecy to the young woman’s forebodings. It was dispatched to him from his aunt’s home in Cheshire by the local doctor, who had

attended her for years. It informed him that she was seriously ill and requested his immediate attendance.

He sought the Colonel at once and obtained leave. There was no time to call at Rosemount, but he scribbled a hasty note to Miss Burton explaining matters. On his arrival, he found his aged relative very bad indeed. She had had a severe stroke, the second in two years, and Doctor Jephson was very doubtful as to whether her vitality would enable her to recover. He added that she had a marvellous constitution, and in such a case one could not absolutely say there was no hope. Of a feebler woman he would have said at once a few hours would see the end.

Pomfret stayed there as long as the result was in doubt. At the end of three days the brave old lady rallied in the most wonderful way, and was able to hold a little conversation with her beloved nephew. He did not leave till the doctor assured him that she was out of danger.

“It’s a wonderful recovery,” said Doctor Jephson as he shook hands at parting with the young man. “But it’s the beginning of the end. I don’t give her very long now, a few months at the most. Well, she has had a wonderful life, hardly an ache or a pain till the last few years, and then nothing very severe. But, of course, the machinery is worn out.”

All the way back to Blankfield those words kept repeating themselves in his ears: “I don’t give her very long now, a few months at the most.”

And then an idea began to form in his mind. He was not so callous that he wanted his poor old aunt to die quickly, but it was obvious the time could not be long delayed when he would find himself possessed of her fortune, the master of his own destinies. Was there any reason why he should not forestall that period by the rather daring expedient of a secret marriage? They were both young. Even if the doctor was wrong, and they had to wait four or five years, it was not a great sacrifice of their youth. At least that was his way of looking at it. Of course he did not know how she would take the suggestion.

She appeared to listen to him with deep interest and attention when he unfolded his plans.

He explained that he had a very handsome allowance, which up to the

present he had generally exceeded. Now that could all be altered. He would declare that he was sick of the army, and send in his papers. Through his family influence, he would get some Government appointment which necessitated his living in London. He would take inexpensive chambers for himself, rent a small house for her in some pleasant and not too remote suburb, and spend as much of his time as possible with her.

“You don’t think your aunt would reduce your allowance if you left the army?” was the one pertinent question she put to him when he had finished.

“On the contrary, she would be more likely to increase it,” was the confident rejoinder. “She would always have preferred that I should go in for something that meant real work. She thinks the army is an idle life.”

Miss Burton, no doubt, rapidly calculated the pros and cons of such a daring step. Jack had named a very handsome sum for her maintenance. If she could put up with the clandestine nature of the connection, till such time as a certain event happened, she would be better off than at Rosemount. She begged for time to think it over, and of course she would have to consult her brother before taking such an unusual step.

That was only natural; it was impossible for Jack to insist that she should settle the matter herself without reference to the one person who, whatever his social defects, had behaved to her with unexampled kindness and generosity.

Brother and sister no doubt talked it over very thoroughly, for it was three days before she told her lover that, although George would have preferred a longer period of waiting, he trusted him sufficiently to entrust Norah to his keeping, on the terms proposed.

She did suggest that they should wait till Jack had left the army and settled himself in London. But he fought this idea stubbornly. He was mad to tie her to himself, for fear that somebody else with more immediate prospects might step in and carry her off. A little common-sense, of course, might have told him that if she was as fatally attractive to others as to himself, she would have been carried off before this.

He was so terribly jealous of her, that he had never made the slightest effort to bring any of his brother officers round to Rosemount. He even kept Hugh away as much as he could.

The lovers worked out their little plot very nicely. Miss Burton would leave Blankfield for a couple of weeks, ostensibly to pay a visit to a relative. Her destination would be London. Jack would take a few days' leave of absence in due course, and procure a special licence. They would return on separate days and resume their normal life, until such time as they perfected their after arrangements.

Chapter Six.

Miss Burton arrived home on a Monday by a mid-day train; her attentive brother met her at the station. She was one of those girls who look smart and neat under the most trying circumstances. Although it was a long journey, she bore no signs or stains of travel.

“When does Jack arrive, not too soon, I hope?” commented George, as he assisted her into a cab, and sat down beside her.

“He wanted to come down to-night, but I vetoed that,” responded the girl. “I told him people might put two and two together. He will get here mid-day to-morrow. I shall meet him casually in the High Street. He is going to bring Murchison along with him. And I shall give them an impromptu invitation to dinner.”

“I don’t know that I am very keen on having Murchison to dinner,” remarked Mr Burton in rather a growling tone.

Miss Burton shrugged her shoulders. “And, perhaps, of the two, I am less keen than you are. But we have got to play it pretty quiet down here, till the whole lot of us clear out. Better to let Murchison come. He is pretty suspicious, as it is, but if we shut him out, he’ll be more suspicious still.”

Mr Burton chuckled in a grim fashion.

“Well, our inquisitive friend, the whole lot of them as a matter of fact, can’t do you much harm now. You’ve got him tight enough. And I’ll say this for him, he’s a bit soft and all that sort of thing, but he’ll always play the game.”

The girl did not reply for a moment, then she spoke in a voice that was low and soft:

“Yes, he’s a dear little chap, he’ll always play the game.”

“He can afford to,” was the rather ungracious comment. Clearly Mr Burton was not in one of his best moods to-day.

Mr Pomfret returned from his short leave on the following day, and at once sought his friend.

“Glad to be back, old man, got fed-up with London,” he cried cheerfully. His excuse for his visit was that he had to go up to see his aunt’s solicitors, on some pressing affairs which the old lady had entrusted to him, after her temporary recovery from her dangerous illness.

Now Murchison was pretty quick. He already had a shrewd suspicion that Jack had been making a great many surreptitious visits to Rosemount, that Hugh had been asked there now and again as a blind. And when he happened to be present, he had noticed that Jack and Norah had taken very little notice of each other. Jack had cultivated the brother, and left his friend to entertain the attractive young woman. In itself, this rather obvious attitude was suspicious. It confirmed his impression that there was a private understanding between the young people, and that they were throwing dust in his eyes.

He had already put two and two together, with regard to the concurrent absences. Mr Burton, meeting him in the High Street two days after Norah’s departure, had told him his sister was paying a visit to a married relative who lived at Brighton. He would have not believed Mr Burton on his oath.

And Jack had taken his few days’ leave, with the ostensible object of attending to his aunt’s affairs.

Hugh was pretty certain that the silly young ass, as he affectionately designated Jack in his own mind, had arranged to meet Miss Burton for a day or two in London, in order to enjoy her society, free from interruption or espionage. Of course, he was far from guessing the truth. He would not have thought Pomfret capable of any such daring action.

Jack had just expressed himself fed-up with London, and yet his demeanour was jubilant and hilarious. Of course, Hugh could not dream his attitude was that of the exultant bridegroom, almost intoxicated with the knowledge of having gained his heart’s desire. There had been a couple of lunches, perhaps a couple of dinners with a theatre thrown in. The buoyant Jack was living on these blissful memories.

Later in the day, the two men walked down the High Street, of course in accordance with a pre-arranged plan decided upon by the artful lovers. The first person they met was Miss Burton, sauntering along slowly; Miss Burton, now Mrs Pomfret, as fast as the ecclesiastical law of England could make her.

She welcomed them with her ready and charming smile. “What strangers we are,” she cried gaily. “And how nice to meet my only two friends in Blankfield.”

Pomfret did a little finessing on his own. “I have been away for a few days, too,” he explained glibly. “Had to go up to London to look after some business of my poor old aunt’s; only got back by the mid-day train.”

“Did you enjoy your visit?” inquired Hugh of Norah, with that stiffness which he could never quite dissociate from his manner when addressing either brother or sister.

“Yes and No,” was the answer. “On the whole, I had quite a good time, but I am not sorry to get back to Rosemount, and my little household gods. Knowing you both has made such a difference to my life here.”

She was laying it on a little bit thick, Hugh thought, and he fancied she looked more at Pomfret than himself, as she said it. But he made a suitable and courteous reply.

She was just about to turn away, when a sudden thought seemed to strike her.

“As Mr Pomfret and I have been such wanderers, would it not be nice to celebrate our return? Will you both come to dinner to-night, and we can relate our experiences?”

Pomfret jumped at the invitation, and Hugh had to follow suit. As a matter of fact, he was rather eager to go. They were both playing their parts very well, but he was quite convinced they *were* playing a part. He was more certain about Jack than about her. Jack had been a bit too glib, had over-acted, as it were. They had met in London, if only for a few hours; he would have bet a thousand pounds on that.

Jack declared that he would walk back to Rosemount with Miss Burton. He did not now care a farthing what members of Blankfield Society he met. Very shortly, the army would know him no more, and he would take up a new life with this fearless girl whom he had married on the sly.

Hugh strolled on, and looked in at the various shops. The High Street happened to be rather empty on this particular afternoon, the *élite* of Blankfield Society had not yet turned out for its usual promenade.

Turning away from a jeweller's shop window, where he was inspecting some sleeve-links, he was confronted by a tall, sturdily built man of about fifty years of age, who raised his hat.

"I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Captain Murchison?" he inquired politely.

Hugh directed a swift glance at him. He was not exactly a common person, on the other hand he was certainly not a gentleman. There was something military in his bearing; he might have been a retired Sergeant-Major.

"That is my name," answered Hugh a little curtly. "And who are you, please?"

The tall man took a card from his waistcoat pocket and presented it. "Those are my credentials, sir."

Hugh ran his eye over it swiftly. He saw the name, Davidson, a common one enough, and, in the corner, Scotland Yard. Why the deuce should this agent of the police want to accost him? And how did he know his name was Murchison?

"I think you are acquainted with a family of the name of Burton, brother and sister they call themselves, who live at a house a little way out called Rosemount?"

"Of course I know them, that is to say, in a casual sort of way." Needless to say that Murchison had never been more surprised in his life. "Why are you asking these questions?" Mr Davidson darted a keen glance up and down the comparatively empty High Street. "This is rather an exposed

place in which to talk, but I have something to tell you which I am sure you will be interested to listen to. I am staying at the ‘Anchor,’ in a side street from this. If you will do me the honour to follow me, I can take you into a private room there, where we shall not be observed nor overheard.”

Like a man in a dream, Hugh found himself following Mr Davidson to the “Anchor,” one of the second-class hotels in the town. He was quite sure that this tall, military looking person was going to clear up the mystery of the couple whom Blankfield, in its wisdom, had refused to visit, and whose acquaintance he owed to a random meeting at a tea-shop.

There were only one or two idlers in the entrance-hall of the hotel, which was of what is known as the “Commercial” kind. Murchison was glad to find that he did not seem to attract their observation, as he rapidly crossed over to where his new acquaintance was standing in a rather dark corner.

Davidson piloted him into a little sitting-room which opened out of a long narrow passage. He rang the bell, and ordered refreshments with the manner of a man who was acquainted with the usages of polite society.

It would be quite safe to say that Hugh, the heir to a great fortune, brought up in the lap of luxury, an aristocrat by adoption, if not exactly by birth, had never found himself up till now in such an environment. He could not truthfully declare that it was an experience he wished to repeat.

Still, he could blame nobody but himself, his foolish action in taking up with a couple of persons whom Blankfield, in its superior worldly wisdom, had decided to ignore. As he was in for it, and nothing could undo the past, it was better to go through with it. Let him accommodate himself to the situation, drink his whisky-and-soda in this dingy little parlour of a second-rate hotel, and treat the detective with genial courtesy.

After the first mouthful of his drink, Davidson began to explain.

“Of course, sir, I quite understand this is not the sort of thing or the sort of place to which you are accustomed,” he said, waving a deprecatory hand round the shabby little parlour. “But in this particular case, I and my friend —that friend I may say at the moment is elsewhere taking his

observations—wanted to lie low. It didn't enter into our scheme to put up at a swagger hotel, and run the risk of gossip. It might have reached the ears of those we are after, and scared them off." Hugh listened attentively. There was something very serious in the wind now, and the dwellers at Rosemount were as yet unaware of what was impending.

His surprise expressed itself in the direct question which he shot at the detective: "I take it you are here to arrest them, then?"

"One of them, the man," corrected Mr Davidson, quietly; "we know a good deal about the girl, but we have no evidence that implicates her beyond the fact of her association with him, and from our point of view that means nothing in a Court of Law."

"What is his offence?" asked the startled Hugh.

"Forgery," was the laconic answer. "He belongs to a pretty well-known gang, and we have had our suspicions of him for a long time now, but he was devilish clever and cunning. Several of his pals were caught, but it was always difficult to rope him in. We shouldn't have got him now but for the fact of one of his pals peaching. And even now, although the evidence is strong enough for us, I doubt if it is strong enough to get him more than a comparatively light sentence. If he can lay hold of a clever counsel, and there will be some money at the back of him, if not a great deal, he won't come off so badly."

So Mr Burton was a criminal, and had been living in Blankfield on the proceeds of his nefarious calling. The rich uncle in Australia who had left him a comfortable fortune was a myth.

"I suppose he has been on the 'crook' all his life?" queried Hugh.

"Ever since he has come under our observation," was the reply of the detective. "Before he joined the present gang, a few of whom we have collared from time to time, card-sharping was his lay. Once he rented an expensive flat in Paris, and I believe made a tidy bit out of it. That is where the young lady first appeared upon the scene."

"But how long ago is that? She doesn't look more than twenty."

“I know,” said Mr Davidson. “She looks wonderfully young, that is one of her assets. As a matter of fact I should say she was twenty-four at the least. The Parisian episode occurred about five years ago, making her nineteen at the time. He was there about twelve months, at the end of which time he got an introduction to the forging gang, and chucked the cards in favour of a more remunerative game.”

“She acted, I suppose, as a decoy and confederate?”

“So I am given to understand. She very seldom played herself, but used to signal the opponents’ cards to him.”

“What a precious pair,” groaned Hugh. He had long been doubtful of them, but he had never anticipated this.

“Now, Captain Murchison, there is a little question I want to ask you,” said the detective briskly, after a brief pause. “My pal and I only arrived here yesterday, but we have not been idle, we have picked up a good deal. We have discovered that nobody in Blankfield visits them, except yourself and another officer, a Mr Pomfret. That is true, is it not?”

“Quite true,” assented Murchison.

“You frequently go to their house together. But perhaps I may be telling you something you don’t know when I say that Mr Pomfret more frequently has gone alone.”

“I have had my suspicions some time,” was Hugh’s answer.

“Now tell me, please; I suppose in the evenings you played cards, or roulette, or some game of chance. I thought so. Did you lose much? Had you any suspicions they were rooking you?”

“On my first visit, a suspicion that they might do so crossed my mind. But nothing of the sort was attempted. I should say that, up to the present, my friend and I stand a bit to the good. Evidently, that was not their object.”

“Clearly,” assented the shrewd detective, “they had a deeper game than that on. They wanted to catch this young friend of yours for a husband,

and failing that, to entrap him, so that they could blackmail him on the threat of a breach of promise case."

"It looks as if that was their object."

"Now, Captain Murchison, may I ask you if your friend is a man likely to fall into the trap? I saw him in the High Street this afternoon with you: and if I may say so without offence, he doesn't give me the impression of a very strong or self-reliant person."

Hugh shook his head. "I fear he is very weak, very impulsive, very emotional, a ready prey for a designing woman."

"Have you any idea how far the thing has gone?"

To this question Hugh could only reply in the negative. His one hope was that the foolish boy had seen her so often that there was no necessity to write incriminating letters.

"Well, Captain Murchison, my object in asking you to grant me an interview was two-fold. In the first place, I wanted to know if there had been any card-sharping. Then, as I am aware you go to the house, I wished to tell you that I and my friend are going to take him to-night. It might happen that you would be going there, and of course, you will not want to be on the stage when we play our little comedy."

"We have promised to go to dinner to-night. She asked us both when we met her this afternoon."

"And of course now, you will not go. I will take him before dinner-time, so you need not send round any excuses."

Poor Hugh felt very miserable. What he especially shirked was having to tell this sordid narrative to Pomfret. He expressed to the detective his shrinking from the unwelcome task.

"I quite understand, sir, but it's got to be done," replied the detective, firmly. For a few seconds after he had spoken, he seemed to be thinking deeply. Then he came out with a startling proposition.

“Look here, Captain Murchison, something has just occurred to me. I am not sure whether you will think it a good plan. Just now I thought it would be better for you not to be there. But if this young gentleman is so gone on the girl, it might make a deeper impression on him, bring home to him more strongly the sense of her unworthiness, if he were actually present at the scene. And it would spare you any painful explanations, beforehand. Afterwards you can tell him or not, as you please, about our interview here.”

Hugh made a gesture of disgust. “You propose that we should carry out our original intention of dining there and of sitting at the table of a criminal? I don’t think I could bring myself to it.”

If Mr Davidson did not quite agree with the young man’s scruples, he was open-minded enough to see the matter from Hugh’s point of view.

“I quite understand, sir. But I think I can manage it all right. You say they dine at eight. Get there with your friend a quarter of an hour before. I will be there with my friend at five minutes to, before the dinner is served. You then won’t have to sit at his table, you see.”

Hugh was still hesitating. Mr Davidson proceeded to clinch his argument.

“You see, sir, it will be so much better for Mr Pomfret to see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears. When he has seen us clap the darbies on Burton, and listened to what I can tell him about the girl—you can just give me a lead there, if you don’t mind—I think he will be cured of his calf-love on the spot. As far as he is concerned, we want to make a swift and sudden cure, to kill his affection at once.”

Yes, on the whole, after a little further reflection Murchison was disposed to fall in with this new suggestion. Pomfret, however deep his infatuation, could not resist the evidence of his own senses. He would be much more strongly impressed than by a mere bald narration of the facts as conveyed to his friend by the detective.

So it was settled. Hugh would bring Pomfret to Rosemount at twenty minutes or a quarter to eight. At five minutes to, Davidson and his colleague would present themselves to execute their painful errand.

“Just a word before I go,” said the young man as he turned towards the door. “Is the man’s name really Burton, or only an alias?”

“That is his real name. Of course he has had aliases. His family, I understand, are respectable people of the lower middle-class. He was the black sheep, born with crooked and criminal instincts.”

“And the girl, is she really his sister?”

“On that point, I have no positive information,” replied Davidson. “She has passed as such ever since the Paris days. But I should very much doubt it. I am informed that they are very unlike in manners and appearance, that he is a rough sort of fellow, while she would pass anywhere for a lady.”

Hugh went back to the barracks, more than rejoiced at the fact that the detective seemed to have appeared on the scene in the very nick of time. If marriage was contemplated as the result of this clandestine wooing, what a terrible tragedy would be averted from the unlucky Pomfret!

Chapter Seven.

It was twenty minutes to eight as the two young men rang at the door bell of Rosemount. Pomfret was always a slow dresser. It was only by extraordinary efforts that Hugh had got him off in time.

Brother and sister were awaiting them in the pretty drawing-room, lit with softly shaded lamps. Miss Burton rose to meet them, she extended a hand to each, in her pretty graceful way, as if she looked upon them both as her dearest friends, and would make no difference between them in her greeting.

But Hugh was very wide-awake, after his meeting with the detective, and he did notice that the left hand which she extended to Pomfret lingered a little longer in his responsive clasp than did the right which she had given to him.

Yes, it was obvious that their acquaintance had gone far. There was even, he fancied, an intelligent sympathy in their mutual glances. Pomfret was the lover, Hugh Murchison was simply the friend.

Mr Burton welcomed them heartily. “Just like old times,” he cried in his rough, breezy fashion. “I’ve been like a fish out of water during Norah’s absence. It was just like her to organise a little party, simply us four, to celebrate her return.”

It struck Hugh that his conviviality was just a trifle forced, that he seemed “jumpy” and nervous. Had he by chance spotted those two strangers in the High Street, and wondered what manner of men they were?

Pomfret settled himself on the chesterfield beside Norah, in spite of her rather obvious signals to preserve a more discreet attitude. Ignorant of what was going to happen a few minutes hence, her great object was to conceal the fact that Jack should take the position of an acknowledged lover.

In her secret heart, she was very apprehensive of Murchison. She knew he was suspicious of her, and he had a sort of elder brother affection for

Pomfret. She was not by any means sure as to the lengths to which this fraternal feeling might lead him. It might even inspire him to evoke the assistance of the Pomfret family, and then the security of her present position might be menaced.

The secret marriage was, after all, in the nature of a gamble. If things turned out as she expected, if the old aunt died in reasonable time, the odds were in her favour. She could twist Jack round her little finger. But nobody knew better than this astute young woman of the world that there is many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip. Something that she had not calculated, not foreseen, might happen at any moment, and her house of cards might tumble to the ground. Her adventurous life had taught her never to be too sure of momentary prosperity.

She was a little bit nervous and “jumpy,” like her brother, to-night. Her smile was a little forced, her high spirits rather assumed. The wedding-ring, the marriage certificate hidden from sight, were great assets. And yet, was it all just a little too good to be quite true?

Murchison talked with the brother, desultory sort of talk, hardly conscious of what he was saying. His ears were straining for the sound of that electric-bell which would herald the arrival of Davidson and his colleague.

And it came very quickly. There was a loud, imperative peal. Burton started from his seat, and forgot his assumed good manners.

“Who the devil is that?” he cried fiercely. “Do they want to knock the house down?” It was the vulgar exclamation of a very vulgar man.

Miss Burton was more mistress of herself, but Hugh observed that her cheek went a shade paler. Well, it was only natural. These two had been living in fear of the law for more years than they cared to remember. And they had thought they were safely in harbour. Poor fools!

She turned to Pomfret, and forced a wan smile. “It is really quite alarming, Mr Pomfret, visitors at this time of the evening. And you know so well that nobody in Blankfield, except yourselves, ever crosses our threshold.”

The happy Jack, the husband of a few short hours, was quite

unperturbed. He smiled back at her confidently.

“Somebody come to the wrong house, I should say. Why, you have gone quite pale! What a nervous little thing it is!” He whispered the last sentence in a lover-like tone.

Murchison felt every nerve in his body tingling. Jack was in a state of ignorance. The brother and sister, he was sure, were filled with vague and undefined alarms. He, alone out of the four sitting in that charming little drawing-room awaiting the announcement of dinner, was sure of what was going to happen.

He stole a look across at Pomfret with the happy, fatuous smile of the successful lover on his face. Poor devil! In another couple of minutes he would be terribly disillusioned.

There was a heavy trampling of feet across the hall. The visitors, whoever they were, had pushed past the trim and ladylike parlourmaid.

The drawing-room door was flung open, and the two big men, Davidson and his colleague, advanced towards Burton who was standing in the middle of the room.

The detective spoke in a clear, ringing voice. “It’s all up, Mr Burton, I won’t trouble to recount your various aliases. I’ve a warrant here to arrest you on a charge of forgery. You’ve gone free for some time, but one of your old pals has peached upon you. Hard luck for you, otherwise you might have been playing still, perhaps for ever, this nice little ‘stunt’ at Blankfield. I suppose you will come quietly?”

For a few seconds George Burton indulged in some horrible imprecations. In the same breath he protested his absolute innocence, and denounced the “pal” who had betrayed him. Mr Davidson cut him short, as he fastened the handcuffs on his wrist.

“Stow it, old man! Be a sport. It’s a fair cop, isn’t it? You knew the risk you ran when you went into this business.”

Mr Burton subsided. “Yes, it’s a fair cop,” he growled. “I don’t blame you, you are only doing your duty. I’ve no grudge against you. But by Heaven,

when I come out, I'll do for that swine who has given me away, if I have to swing for it."

Pomfret had risen from his seat on the chesterfield at the dramatic entrance of the two strangers. Norah had risen also. In the few seconds that elapsed between their entrance and the clapping of the handcuffs on Burton, she stretched out appealing arms to him, and cried out in a voice of despair:

"Stand by me, Jack, stand by me. I knew nothing of this. It is as great a surprise to me as to you. Oh, my poor brother! He has done this for love of me."

Murchison heard the impassioned tones, the despairing appeal. They would have melted a heart of stone. What effect would they have upon the unsuspicious Jack?

Pomfret withdrew himself, almost coldly, from the proffered embrace. In a few seconds, as it seemed to Hugh, he had grown from a boy to a man.

He turned to the detective, and Hugh was delighted at the sudden dignity that seemed to have come to him.

"You seem to know a great deal about this man whom you have handcuffed, and who admits you are only doing your duty. Do you know anything about his sister, Miss Burton?"

Mr Davidson glanced significantly at Murchison. They had arranged a little conversation between themselves, but Jack's frankness had rendered this unnecessary.

"What I know of the young lady, sir, I am sorry to tell you, is not to her credit. She has been associated with this man for some years. She started with him in Paris some time ago, when he was a card-sharper, and running a gambling-saloon. But to be fair, she is not in this business with him, and I have nothing against her."

"Are they what they represent themselves to be, brother and sister?" Pomfret's voice was very quiet, but there was in it a suppressed note of agony. How he had loved this girl, and a few hours ago he had clasped

her in his arms as his wife!

The keen eyes of the detective softened as he looked at Jack, who was hiding the most intense agitation under an apparently stoical demeanour.

“I have no accurate information on that point, sir, but I should very much doubt the fact of their relationship.”

While this brief conversation was taking place between Pomfret and Davidson, Norah was still standing with arms outstretched.

Again there came forth the appealing, impassioned cry: “Jack, stand by me! Jack, stand by me!” She sank down on the sofa, and put her hands before her face. “Stay with me, wait till they have all gone, and I will explain everything. I have nothing to do with this.”

But Pomfret stood like a man turned to stone. Then suddenly, Norah gave a little gurgling cry, and fainted. Pomfret made a step towards her, and halted. His great love for her had been killed. Perhaps at this moment he hated her more than he had ever loved her.

The parlourmaid, with a white face, was peeping in the room. Davidson beckoned to her.

“My colleague will help you to take her up to her room. Look after her. She’s as game as they make them, but to-night’s been too much for her. She has been playing for big stakes, and she has lost.”

The maid and Davidson’s burly assistant lifted up the recumbent form. And when they had carried her out, Pomfret’s self-control seemed to give way. He suddenly clutched at his throat and turned to Hugh.

“Old man, I have had as much as I can stand. For Heaven’s sake, take me from this accursed house.”

Hugh put his arm under his to steady him. The boy’s nerve had gone, he was trembling like a man stricken with the ague. There was no cab or taxi to be got in this outlying district. They had to walk back to the barracks.

Hugh planted him in an easy-chair in his own quarters, and mixed him a

stiff peg. Even Dutch courage was better than nothing. Pomfret drank it in two big gulps. Then he pulled himself together.

“I have been an infernal fool, old man,” he gasped, “an infernal fool.”

Hugh spoke soothingly. “Of course you have. But the folly is over. You now know Norah Burton and her rascally brother for what they are, a pair of criminals and adventurers.”

“But you don’t know all,” groaned the unfortunate Jack. “Norah Burton is my wife. I married her secretly the other day, by special licence, while I was up in London.” Hugh leapt to his feet in astonishment. He had his own ideas of that visit to London, coupled with Norah’s absence. But that Pomfret, weak and impressionable as he was, should have made such a fool of himself, was beyond the limits of his comprehension.

In a moment he pulled himself together. The poor lad was in a big mess enough, it was no time to rub it in. “Tell me all about it, old chap,” he said quietly.

And Pomfret told him. He made it clear, perfect gentleman as he was, that Norah had been the least to blame in the matter, that the suggestion had come from himself, that Norah had insisted upon consulting her brother before yielding to his wishes.

Yes, of course, Hugh could understand all that. They had known just the kind of man they were dealing with. They had hooked and landed their fish well. To a woman in her uncertain state, a husband with some prospects was better than her insecure position with a scoundrel like George Burton.

Hugh filled a big pipe full up with a very strong and potent tobacco. He thought better when he was smoking, and this was a situation that demanded a good deal of thought.

After a while he spoke. “Well, Jack, let us look facts in the face. What is done can’t be undone. You have married this woman, and as long as she lives she is entitled to call herself Mrs Pomfret, and you will have to keep her. There is no getting over that.”

The unhappy Jack groaned. There was no getting over that. This attractive, charming young woman, sister or confederate, or whatever relationship she stood in to this wretched criminal, was his legal wife, and, if she chose, she could make things very uncomfortable for him.

“Well, old man, you have made a hash of your life at the very beginning of it. As I say, that can’t be undone. You’ve got to make the best of it. I suppose you have entered into some financial arrangements with her.”

“Seven hundred a year till I come into my aunt’s money. After that, of course, our marriage was to be acknowledged, and we would live together.”

“I see,” said Hugh, assuming a cheerfulness he did not quite feel. “Well, I should not say she would try for more than her seven hundred a year at present. When your aunt dies she will of course fight for a bit more. I take it, after to-night’s work, you will never want to live with her, cajoling and attractive as she is.”

Pomfret shuddered. “After what that fellow said, my love for her died. But, by Heaven, Hugh, I did love her while I believed in her.”

“Of course, of course. Have you signed any document about that seven hundred, by the way?”

“Not yet. My solicitor is sending me the document to-day, it will reach me to-morrow morning.”

“It will make it a little easier to deal with her, then. Are you going to leave yourself in my hands? I don’t think she will be very full of fight for the next few days.”

“Certainly I will, Hugh. Do your best for me. I never want to see her again, of that you may be sure.”

Murchison reflected deeply before he spoke again. “I doubt if she will trouble you very much. It won’t be very difficult to compromise with her, she has too much to hide. And now for yourself.”

“Yes,” groaned the unhappy Pomfret, in a hollow voice. “And now for

myself. What do you suggest?”

“There’s only one thing to do, and that is to put the past behind you. As long as this woman lives, you can never marry. But many men go through life and remain bachelors, and are not altogether unhappy. You must make up your mind to be one of the bachelors, Jack.”

But Jack looked very despairing. The shock had been a terrible one. In spite of the stiff peg he had taken, his face was still livid, and his hands were shaking.

Hugh looked at him anxiously. He was very weak; had the occurrences of this terrible night driven him over the border-line that separates sanity from insanity?

Presently he muttered, almost as if to himself, certain disjointed phrases. Hugh caught a few of them, repeated again and again.

“Tied to her for life, she will outlive me, tied to her for life. She will never let me go. My poor family! I have always been a fool, but up to now have never brought disgrace to them. And God forgive me, I was reckoning on the death of my poor old generous aunt, it is idle to say I did not speculate on it. And for what, for what?—the pretended affection, the bought kisses of this adventuress, a card-sharper’s decoy, who told me lying tales about the way in which her criminal associate had inherited his money.”

He rambled on like this for some quarter of an hour, and Murchison judged it was better to let him ease his mind in such a fashion.

In a way, the poor foolish boy’s brain had cleared up to a point; he was able to look the facts squarely in the face. His infatuation might have been so deep that he might, under these damning circumstances, have fallen a victim to her wiles a second time. She would no doubt have been prepared, if he had given her the opportunity, to have sworn her innocence, to have protested that she was the victim of circumstantial evidence, that she had believed what her brother had told her, that she had never been a partner in, or a confidant of, his criminal schemes.

No, so far the rude shock had cleared his brain, made him see and think

more clearly. But Murchison very much feared that the agonising remorse for his folly was obscuring it in another direction.

He seemed to look upon himself as something unclean in having allowed himself to be contaminated by association with such a wretched adventuress. He was also acutely conscious that, at the best, he would have to take this horrible secret with him to the grave, unless it sprang suddenly to light, as such secrets have a knack of doing. Above all, he keenly felt the disgrace he had inflicted on his family.

There was a great deal more desultory talk, and Hugh gave him the best advice he could under the unhappy circumstances—a reiteration of the "put it behind you and live it down" philosophy. This would have come easy to a man of the rocky and stolid type to which Murchison belonged by temperament. But Jack was highly-strung and impulsive. There was no ballast in him.

Hugh almost had to push him out of the room. But, before doing so, he mixed the boy another stiff peg, with the hope that it would induce sleep and purchase him the oblivion of a few hours.

"Now then, old man, toddle off. Get a good night's rest, and when you wake to-morrow, you will find things look pretty black, but not quite so black as now. If this young woman contemplates a deep game, and wants to insist overmuch on her rights as your wife, I will deal with her on your behalf. I'll warrant I bring her to reason."

The poor distraught boy clasped his friend's hand convulsively. "Hugh, old chap, you are the best friend a man could ever have, true as steel."

"Don't say that," replied Hugh with a little break in his voice. "I am bound to do the best for you. It was owing to my infernal folly that you ever set foot in that cursed house. I am older and stronger than you, I ought to have known better. Well, good old Jack, good-night! I tell you, things won't look quite as black to-morrow."

But to Hugh's intense grief and remorse, there was no morrow for the unhappy boy, whose mind had been quite unhinged by the events of that terrible night. One could only surmise that he had found sleep impossible, and in a fit of frenzy had taken his life to escape from a future so black

and discouraging.

When his servant went to call him in the morning, he found his master lying on the floor, with a bullet-hole in the middle of his forehead. Everybody in the barracks had been fast asleep when the poor boy had fired the shot that was to take him out of his troubles, and nobody had heard the report.

At the inquest, the whole miserable story came out. Of course it came through Hugh, the only person who was in possession of it. He narrated the details of his acquaintance with the Burtons, the introduction of Jack Pomfret to the house, the scene at Rosemount when the two detectives had taken the man, Jack's confession that he had made the girl his wife a few hours previously.

Hugh never forgot that interview with the Colonel, in which "Old Fireworks" poured out his wrath in no measured terms. He roundly called him an infernal fool for mixing himself up with people of whom he knew nothing, and whom Blankfield in its ignorance of their antecedents had declined to visit—and very wisely.

"If it had been poor Jack, a dear lad but a foolish, I could have found it in my heart to forgive him," he ended. "But you are a man of another sort, you have got your wits about you, if you choose to exercise them. I will never pardon you that day's work. You can play with fire and not be scorched, but he couldn't. That poor boy's death lies at your door, sir. I hope you realise it."

Yes, Hugh did realise it. He stood with bowed head, and could not utter a word in self-defence.

The news, of course, was all over the town the next morning, or rather the double news—that George Burton had been arrested by two detectives from Scotland Yard, and that in the early morning of the following day Jack Pomfret had blown out his brains. The evidence at the inquest explained the double event.

The news of her young husband's suicide reached Norah early in the morning. She had gambled and lost. The old adventurous life was in front of her again.

She took the buffets of fate with the stoicism of her kind and class. She had a comfortable little nest-egg put by which stood between her and present want. If only Jack had been less emotional, she would not have troubled him much, been content with quite a little. It is to be feared that, in her bitter disappointment, she felt a little sore against Jack for his moral cowardice in getting comfortably out of it himself, and leaving her in the lurch.

Anyway, she faced the situation with a courage that one could not refuse to admire. By two o'clock that same day the servants had been paid their wages, the keys of the furnished house handed over to the agent, and Mrs Pomfret had departed for London.

Murchison could never forget that terrible time till something came that seemed to dwarf all other things. In August, nineteen hundred and fourteen, there burst the first storm of the war which shook the world to its centre. In the blood-soaked plains of France he forgot everything except his country.

Jack Pomfret and Norah Burton seemed dim memories in those strenuous times of the world's upheaval. And yet, when he had a moment's leisure to think of the past, he felt a savage longing to be even with that fair-faced, smiling adventuress who had driven his poor young friend to a suicide's grave.

Chapter Eight.

“It’s a good proposition, old man. You couldn’t employ a couple of hours better. I have been in London Society of all sorts for the best part of my life, and I tell you that Stella Keane is the most charming girl I have ever met.”

The speaker was little Tommy Esmond, short, genial, and rotund of person. Tommy knew everybody who was anybody, and everybody knew the mercurial Tommy.

Guy Spencer puffed leisurely at his cigar, and regarded his rotund little friend with an amused smile. Spencer was about thirty, Tommy was old enough to be his father. But he wore well.

“Most excellent Tommy, how many times have I heard you say the same thing? Every girl you come across is the most charming you have ever met—until one sees you the next week. And then, the last girl has the super-charm—like the young lady you just mentioned, Miss Stella Keane.”

But Esmond was not to be rebuffed by a clumsy attempt at humour on the part of a young man so much his junior. Besides, Tommy was impervious to humour. It fell off him, like water from a duck’s back. In his way he was a very strenuous little man, he had no time to frivol.

“Don’t try to be funny, old man: it doesn’t suit you. Be sensible, and come round with me to Mrs L’Estrange’s flat and be introduced to Miss Keane.”

“It’s an interesting suggestion, Tommy, but before I decide tell me first—who is Mrs L’Estrange, and secondly, who and what is Miss Keane?”

And Tommy Esmond launched forth on a full flow of narrative. Mrs L’Estrange was the first cousin of a well-known Irish earl, and was—well, in somewhat reduced circumstances, and had a snug little flat in the Cadogan district.

“Mrs L’Estrange is quite satisfactorily explained,” remarked Guy, interrupting his rather voluble friend. “Now what do you really know about

Miss Keane?”

Here, Esmond was a little less precise. Mrs L’Estrange he knew quite well, had known her ever since he had been in London; her ancestry and connections were unimpeachable.

Miss Keane, it would appear, had been suddenly projected into the L’Estrange household, as it were, from space. He understood that she was a distant connection, a far-off cousin, but he could give no particulars.

Tommy, with the born instinct of the true diplomatist, was always ready to present everything in its best light, but he lacked the one essential quality of the born diplomatist—he was not very successful when he came to camouflaging facts.

Spencer’s smile was more amused than ever, as he regarded his genial friend. Spencer was only thirty, and Tommy was at least old enough to be his father. But there were times when the younger man thought he saw more clearly than the elder.

“Let us put it at this, Tommy. Mrs L’Estrange, being in somewhat straitened circumstances, supplements her meagre income by card-playing, at which I have no doubt she is an adept.”

And here, the usually placid Tommy interposed hotly: “You may say of Mrs L’Estrange what you like. But, if you propose to offer any derogatory remarks about Miss Keane, I would rather not listen to them.”

And Spencer kept a curb on his tongue. Was this fat, comical-looking little man, a most unromantic figure, violently in love with Miss Stella Keane, and her sworn champion? Far be it from him to disturb his faith in this seductive siren, if it were so.

“It’s all right, old chap,” he said quietly. “I am not going to make any remarks, derogatory or otherwise, about Miss Keane. I think I will adopt your suggestion. Let us adjourn to Mrs L’Estrange’s flat. If one loses fifty or a hundred one may have a good time.”

“You will see the most charming girl in London,” cried Esmond in

enthusiastic tones. It struck Spencer, as a peculiar phase of his friend's detachment, that, being in love with the girl himself, he should be so anxious to introduce her to a younger man, who might, presumably, be his rival.

For there could be no question of rivalry between the two men, apart from their ages. Spencer was tall, athletic, handsome: Tommy Esmond was—just Tommy Esmond—rotund, comical in appearance, and insignificant.

Moreover, Spencer had other qualifications which are not without their influence on the fair sex. He had a considerable fortune, and he was the next in succession to an ancient earldom. If the Earl of Southleigh, a widower, did not marry again, he would succeed to the title and estates. He was, in every sense of the term, an eligible *parti*.

The long, weary War was drawing to its close. The two men were dining at the fashionable "Excelsior" and were now about half-way through their dinner.

Spencer had the bearing of a soldier, and he would have been at the Front long ago, but no doctor could be found who would pass him. To all appearance, he possessed the thews and sinews of an athlete, but the stalwart, manly frame covered an incurably weak heart, which played him strange tricks at times. He was serving his country in the best way open to him, and doing good, sound clerical work in a Government Office.

"When do you suggest we should put in an appearance at Mrs L'Estrange's?" he asked presently.

"It will take us another half-hour to get through this abundant meal. You will then have your coffee, and you will want a good and long cigar. We began rather late, you will remember. By the time you have got through your smoke, we will make a move. We shall then find them in full swing."

Guy nodded, and went on with his dinner. He was quite willing to go to the L'Estrange flat: he had no other engagement this evening, and it would be something to do. But he was not greatly interested about meeting the most beautiful girl in London. In spite of his friend's almost lyrical outbursts, he expected that Miss Stella Keane would prove a very ordinary young woman.

Suddenly Tommy Esmond uttered an exclamation. “Look, there they are,” he whispered excitedly across the table. “Mrs L’Estrange and her cousin. The man with them is Colonel Desmond, the man who won the Victoria Cross in the Boer War.”

Tommy’s round face was red with pleasurable emotion. Was there any doubt, thought Spencer, that the little man was tremendously smitten by the beautiful Miss Keane? Would it result in a marriage, he wondered? Tommy was well-off, and a person of some importance in his little social world. And if Miss Keane was as lovely as his fond imagination painted her, it was quite evident that she was poor. Penniless young girls have before now accepted the shelter of a safe home, even when offered by comical-looking little elderly men.

The three newcomers moved to a vacant table; Mrs L’Estrange, a woman of middle age, dressed rather more youthfully than was quite in good taste, their escort, a tall figure in khaki, very upright and soldierly in his bearing, in spite of his sixty years, and last, but by no means least, the beautiful Miss Keane.

Yes, at the first glance, the young man decided that she fully deserved his friend’s somewhat extravagant praise. If everybody in London was not raving over her, it was simply due to the fact that her cousin’s circle was not important, and that she had found nobody of sufficient social influence to launch her with the necessary *cachet*.

If she had made her *début* at one of the great houses, stamped with the approval of any one of London’s distinguished hostesses, Society journals would have gone into rhapsodies over her, and she would have been one of the reigning beauties of the hour, far, far beyond the aspirations of little Tommy Esmond.

His own special taste rather inclined towards fair women, his cousin, Lady Nina, of whom he was very fond, being a charming specimen of that type. But he was no bigot in the matter of feminine beauty, and he was prepared to admit that there were some dark women who could compare favourably with their blonde sisters.

But Stella Keane was not very dark. She had soft brown eyes, glossy

dark hair, and a beautiful creamy complexion, a mouth like Cupid's bow, revealing when she smiled, teeth of a dazzling ivory. Her figure would have been pronounced perfect by the most critical and fastidious artist.

"What do you think of her?" asked the delighted Tommy, after he had given his friend a decent time for his inspection.

Tommy was a man whose friends had got into the habit of smiling at him, even when they agreed with him. Spencer smiled at him quite as often as any of his acquaintance, but at this moment he was perfectly grave.

"You are quite right, old man, this time," he said quietly. "She is really beautiful, and her carriage is splendid. She looks like a young Empress—or, rather, she fulfils one's idea of what a young Empress should be."

Tommy beamed. He drank in the words of unstinted praise like wine. The little blue eyes, usually devoid of expression, seemed suffused with a soft emotion. There was something pathetic in his devotion to this radiant young woman who looked like a youthful Empress.

"And she is as good and sweet as she looks," he murmured in a voice that he could not keep steady. "When she talks to you seriously and lets you know what she really thinks and feels, by gad, Spencer, it makes a battered old worldling like myself feel unworthy to be in her presence. For she has a beautiful soul and mind as well as a beautiful body."

Spencer could only look sympathetic. Poor little Tommy, he certainly seemed to talk like a lover. And what did Miss Keane think of it all? She must have more than a mere tolerance for him, or she would not have allowed him those peeps into her mind and soul to which he alluded with such unrestrained rapture.

It was some time before Esmond's intense gaze attracted the attention of the party, and when it did, he was rewarded with a most affable smile from Mrs L'Estrange, and one of quite pronounced friendliness from Miss Keane. The Colonel also bestowed a genial nod.

After a pause, Tommy spoke somewhat ruefully. "I'm afraid this rather upsets our little plans. Mrs L'Estrange is a most conscientious diner: she will be here, at the lowest calculation, for an hour and a half, counting the

coffee and cigarettes. They won't be back at the flat under a couple. You wouldn't care to wait so long."

He looked rather wistfully at his companion. He, for his own part, would have waited half the night.

"Don't let us commit ourselves, old man, but await events. We haven't finished our dinner yet, and the service is deucedly slow. We can put in a lot more time. You can pay your respects at a fitting moment, and perhaps they will ask us to their table. I must confess I should like to see Miss Keane at closer quarters, and talk to her. Although I don't expect she will reveal as much to me as she does to you."

Tommy looked pleased again; he was very bent upon introducing Spencer to his beautiful young friend. It would come about presently: if not here, in the lounge. Already, Mrs L'Estrange had sent a few covert glances in the direction of their table. There was little doubt she knew who his companion was, and would be quite pleased to number him amongst her acquaintance.

"Has Miss Keane many admirers? She should have," remarked Spencer presently. He noticed that Esmond's eyes were always turned in the direction of that particular table.

"Not any serious ones, I fancy. A few young fellows send her flowers, but nothing more. It is quite an unsuitable *ménage* for a girl of her attractions. The majority of the *habitués* are middle-aged men who go there simply to gamble. The few young ones come for a flutter, and disappear when they have had enough."

"Does the young lady play?"

"I have never seen her. She has told me scores of times that she loathes gambling. Her father ruined himself by it. I believe she is really very unhappy there. And I gather Mrs L'Estrange has not the best of tempers, particularly when she has had bad luck."

"Hobson's choice, I expect," suggested Spencer sympathetically. Miss Keane was facing him, giving him ample opportunity to examine the beautiful countenance, and it struck him that there was an underlying

expression of sadness on the perfect features, especially when in repose.

“I fear so,” was Esmond’s answer. “She is very reticent about her own affairs, as any gentlewoman would be. But from certain things she has let drop, I make out her own means are very slender, and her cousin’s hospitality is a boon to her.”

Half an hour passed, and Spencer lit a big cigar. The two men chatted on various topics. Mrs L’Estrange and the Colonel were still doing full justice to the excellent dishes offered them. Miss Keane was apparently satisfied, and sat quietly watching her companions, and throwing in an occasional remark.

And suddenly came the loud sound of maroons. Everybody started. A few seconds later the clamour and roaring of our own guns burst forth. There was no doubt as to what was happening. The Germans were making one of their unwelcome visits.

“By heavens, it’s a raid, and we are in the thick of it,” cried Tommy Esmond, rising excitedly. He was a nervous little man, and his face had grown a shade pale at the sound of the first boom.

In a few moments there was a stampede from the dining-room. The guests hurried as fast as they could to the basement and cellars.

Tommy, in his progress, was impeded by two burly men who were making their way leisurely. Spencer was a few feet in front of him, making for the crowd that surged round the doors. As he looked around the deserted tables, he saw Miss Keane standing alone, her eyes almost rigid with terror, her hands clutching convulsively at the back of the chair on which she had been sitting. It was evident that the Colonel had quickly removed Mrs L’Estrange from the scene of danger, and she had been too panic-stricken to follow them.

He crossed over to her. “Excuse me,” he said gently—“I am a friend of Mr Esmond’s. How is it you are alone? Did your companions desert you?”

“Colonel Desmond took my cousin, and told me to keep close behind them. When I got up, my limbs seemed unable to move. I feel as if I were paralysed.”

He took her arm and put it through his. It was evident she had been rendered immobile by terror.

“I will take care of you,” he said soothingly. “Downstairs you will be quite safe. But we will let this crowd get through first.”

Tommy Esmond came bustling up, all anxiety. Truth to tell, he did not feel over brave, but his anxiety for himself was lost in the contemplation of her white face and stricken eyes.

Slowly, cheered by the presence of the two men, a little colour flowed back into her cheeks, and she smiled wanly.

“I am a fearful coward,” she explained. “I go all to pieces in even the mildest thunderstorm.”

And it was in this wise, amid the crash of falling bombs, and the roar and clamour of our own guns, that Guy Spencer made the acquaintance of Stella Keane.

Chapter Nine.

They found shelter in one of the big cellars of the Restaurant, and Miss Keane by degrees got back some of her courage. There were about twenty other persons in the same refuge, and she probably derived fortitude from their temporary companionship, and common danger. Tommy Esmond recovered himself very quickly, and hastened to observe the conventions.

“It is a queer time and place in which to make introductions,” he remarked genially. “But even in times of peril, one should preserve the usages of good society. I don’t suppose you know the name of your gallant rescuer. Let me make you known, in a formal fashion. Mr Spencer—Miss Keane.”

The beautiful Stella bowed her dark head, and the ghost of a smile flitted over her still pale face.

“I know Mr Spencer very well by sight. When I have recovered my wits, I will thank him properly and prettily. Perhaps he will come and see us at my cousin’s flat.”

“I was bringing him on there to-night, as a matter of fact,” explained Esmond. “But I presume all that is knocked on the head, even supposing we get out of this disgusting hole in reasonable time. Mrs L’Estrange won’t be in a mood to receive visitors, after this disquieting experience, I am sure.”

“I am afraid you don’t know Mrs L’Estrange,” replied the girl, with a little mocking laugh. Her tones were not yet quite steady, but she was rapidly recovering herself. “The card-tables were laid before we started, and we intended to be back early. If we get out safely from this disgusting hole, as you call it, my cousin will resume her ordinary pursuits, as if nothing had occurred to disturb them.”

Desultory conversation, the irresponsible chatter of the drawing-room kind, was almost impossible under the circumstances. And although Miss Keane did her best to assume a brave front, it was easy to see that she was inwardly quivering. At every roar of the guns, she shivered all over,

and her cheek alternately flushed and then grew deadly pale with her inward terror.

“Poor child,” whispered Spencer to his companion; “she must be a bundle of nerves. Every second, she is experiencing the pangs of death in anticipation. By the way, the gallant Desmond doesn’t seem to have troubled himself much about her. If I hadn’t taken her forcibly away, I believe she would be rooted to that chair now.”

Esmond shrugged his shoulders. “Of course, a chap like Desmond doesn’t know the meaning of fear, and he can’t understand the sensation in others. The other woman took possession of him, and dragged him away. No doubt, he thought she was following. Mrs L’Estrange, so far as I can judge, would never think of anything but number one.”

And as Spencer’s glance stole to the fair face, he felt a strange feeling of pity for her. The poignant happenings of the last few moments had revealed to him her loneliness, the tragedy of her dependence upon others. In a supreme moment of peril, she, who ought to have lovers and friends by the score, was left by herself, and thrown upon the compassion of a stranger.

An anxious half-hour passed, and then messengers came down with tidings of a reassuring nature. The raiders had been driven off, after inflicting considerable damage. Gay London was free to pursue its natural course of pleasure.

At once the tension was relaxed. Drooping forms resumed an erect carriage, the roses bloomed again in the pale cheeks of the women. There was a flutter, a stir. They all moved away from the refuge which had been so welcome, and now had become unbearable.

In the hall they encountered the Colonel, cool and collected, as if he were on parade, Mrs L’Estrange fluttering and full of protestations.

“Oh, my poor Stella! I have been distracted about you. Why did you not follow us? I thought you were close behind us all the time, till we got to one of these abominable cellars, and looked back to find you were missing.”

The Colonel pulled at his moustache a little nervously.

“I shall never forgive myself, Miss Keane, not to have assured myself you were with us at the start. I would have come back to search for you, but Mrs L’Estrange was in such a nervous state I could not leave her.” Miss Keane answered him very coldly, and to her cousin she did not vouchsafe any reply.

“Please do not apologise. It was a question of *sauve qui peut*. Fortunately, I found some kind friends who took compassion on a forlorn damsel, shaking and terror-stricken.” She turned to Mrs L’Estrange. “Mr Esmond is, of course, an old friend. But you do not know Mr Spencer who got to me first.”

Mrs L’Estrange was quite equal to the occasion; she extended her perfectly-gloved hand with an air of effusive cordiality.

“A thousand thanks to you both. My darling Stella was fortunate in finding such protectors. We are both terrible cowards, I don’t know which is the greater.”

“I, without question,” flashed out Miss Keane. “Otherwise I should have had the sense to scurry away like yourself. We were both frightened rabbits, but you could run to a place of safety while I stood paralysed.”

Mrs L’Estrange turned away the awkward thrust with a charming smile. “I have made up my mind to one thing,” she remarked with an air of conviction. “Never, so long as the War lasts, will I dine out of my own home. This night’s experience has taught me a lesson. I don’t want a second one.”

At this juncture, Tommy Esmond interposed. “I was going to bring my friend Spencer round to you to-night. But I suppose you feel a bit too shattered, eh? You would like to get home and rest.”

“Oh dear, no!” replied the lady vivaciously. “I never alter my habits for anything or anybody. Let us all go along at once. I will go with Colonel Desmond. You and Mr Spencer can continue your charge of Stella.” But Guy had a small duty to perform. “I think if you will excuse me, I will join you a little later. I want to go round to inquire after my uncle and cousin.

He is a very old man, and I should like to know he is quite safe."

So it was arranged. The others drove off to Mrs L'Estrange's flat, and Spencer, finding he would have some time to wait for a taxi, walked to Carlton House Terrace, where Lord Southleigh had his town house.

The footman who opened the door informed him that his lordship and Lady Nina were still in the dining-room with a small party. The earl had taken it all very calmly, and his daughter, who, unlike poor Stella Keane, was a young woman of remarkable courage, had not been disturbed at all.

"Are they alone, Robert?"

"No, sir, two old friends of his lordship's came to dinner to-night and are still with them. But, of course, they will be glad to see you."

However, his duty being performed, and learning that all was satisfactory, Spencer thought he might, as well get along to the flat. He had been strangely attracted by the beautiful girl, whom even her obvious terror and lack of self-control could not deprive of her charm.

"No, I won't come in. Tell them I called round to make sure they were all safe. And say to her ladyship I will look in to-morrow afternoon about tea-time."

He went into his club for a few moments to see if there were any letters, and half an hour later was at Mrs L'Estrange's door.

She occupied the first floor of an imposing block of flats, recently erected in one of the semi-fashionable quarters of London. She might not be in very affluent circumstances, as Esmond had hinted, but she would have to pay a very handsome rent for her abode.

The door was opened by a decorous-looking butler, with the air of one who had served in good families. A man passed out as Spencer entered. He was a good-looking young fellow of about twenty-five, in khaki. Spencer knew him well by sight as the eldest son and heir of a rich brewer.

His face did not wear a very happy expression. It did not require a Sherlock Holmes to surmise that his visit had been an expensive one, and that he was hurrying away to avoid further temptation.

In the centre of a rather spacious hall, Stella Keane and Tommy Esmond stood chatting.

She greeted the newcomer with a bright and friendly smile. She no longer looked pale, in fact he thought there was a slight suspicion of rouge on the fair cheeks. She was too good-looking to need the aid of art, but perhaps she wanted to conceal the ravages inflicted on her beauty by that terrible time at the “Excelsior.”

“You are not very long after us. I conclude you found your friends were quite safe.”

She had gathered from the garrulous Tommy what she had not known before, that Spencer was next in succession to the earldom, also that Lord Southleigh had a very pretty daughter, who was an accomplished young sportswoman, a daring rider to hounds, an adept at golf, fishing, and other pastimes of a strenuous nature.

She had pricked up her ears at mention of the cousin. Artfully she pumped Tommy as to whether there was any tender feeling between the relatives.

But Tommy could give no information on this point. Spencer was a very reticent man about his private affairs, he explained. Personally, he should not consider him particularly susceptible to female influence. But he had heard that the old earl, who had a shockingly weak heart, and was likely to go off at any moment, would have viewed a marriage between the cousins with favour.

She mused over his words. He did not think him particularly susceptible to female influence. And yet she was sure there was admiration, open, undisguised admiration, in the glances he had bestowed upon her to-night. He was evidently not deeply in love with his pretty sporting cousin, or she would have been Mrs Guy Spencer before now, assuming, of course, that she was ready to obey her father’s wishes.

It was after a short silence that Miss Keane put a somewhat abrupt question to him: “Are you fond of play, Mr Spencer? Everybody is who comes here.”

“Not really. I am a very lukewarm gambler. I don’t mind a little flutter now and then, as a diversion. I always enjoy a small gamble at Monte Carlo, for example, but I never get carried away. When I have lost enough, I stop. Nothing could induce me to stake another *sou*.”

“Can you stop as easily when you are winning? That, I fancy, is where the self-control comes in. But I think I am rather glad you are not one of the infatuated ones. I was brought up in an atmosphere of gambling.”

There was a pathetic shadow in the beautiful brown eyes as she spoke. Spencer’s interest in her, a girl he had only known for a couple of hours, quickened. The glance he turned on her was full of sympathy, although he did not utter a word. It said as plainly as if he had spoken: “Tell me more about yourself, you will find an attentive listener.”

“My father and mother were both desperate gamblers. They staked and lost everything they had at cards, on the race-course, at Monte Carlo. My poor cousin, Mrs L’Estrange, has the same fever in her veins.”

Now that he had invited her confidence, he was a little embarrassed by it. He did not know her well enough to condole with her. By way of relieving the tension, he uttered a few trite remarks on the subject of gambling generally.

“Very sad when people are bitten by it to that extent. In my small experience, and I am only speaking of cards, I have found that, at the end of twelve months, you leave off pretty well where you started, good players or bad. You lose a hundred this week, you win a hundred the next, and so on, and so forth. If you are a good player, you get bad cards; if a duffer, you get good cards. And so the bad player has a pretty even chance with his more skilful opponent.”

Miss Keane threw aside her momentary sadness, and laughed at his scientific exposition.

“You have evidently thought it all out,” she said brightly. “But please don’t

inflict these cheerful theories on my cousin. She is a most tragic being when she loses. She thinks herself, and I believe is, one of the most scientific bridge-players in England, and she cannot be brought to understand why the duffers should have a look in."

At this juncture Tommy Esmond interposed. It may have occurred to him that they were wasting precious time. They had come here for the special purpose of gambling.

"What do you say to joining the others? We are in the very temple of gambling, and I know my young friend would like a little flutter."

"Certainly. When I last peeped in, Amy looked the spirit of despair. I think she must have been losing heavily."

She turned to lead the way, but at that instant the door bell rang, and she halted, in readiness to greet the visitor, whoever it might be; and there entered a florid-looking, stout man, who advanced towards her with effusion, and both hands outstretched.

"My dear Stella, I have been thinking of you ever since the raid began; I know how terribly you suffer when they are on. And I knew you were dining out to-night. I am rejoiced to see you safe and sound. I came round here the moment I could get away." Miss Keane flushed slightly as he took her hands and wrung them impressively to show his gratitude at her escape from peril. Tommy Esmond had given him a cool nod. But she felt Spencer's calm, critical gaze upon this ebullient expression of young English manhood.

It was not so much what he said, as his manner of saying it. Bounder was written all over him, in his appearance, his manners, his gestures.

She answered him very briefly, almost curtly, as if she were administering a cold douche. Then the flush deepened as she turned to Spencer.

"May I introduce my cousin, Mr Dutton?" The florid man bowed with an exaggerated air of cordiality. Spencer, who had taken a violent dislike to him from the first second he saw him, acknowledged the salutation with chilling gravity; and Stella Keane could almost read his thoughts, as his gaze travelled from one to the other.

How could this imperial-looking girl have such an unmitigated bounder for a relative? What was the mystery about her that could make a creature like this claim kinship with her?

Chapter Ten.

Mrs L'Estrange was evidently a great believer in light: the electric bulbs glowed softly, but brilliantly, over the two rooms devoted to the service of the card-players.

On the sideboards were arranged decanters of whisky, and soda-water in bottles and syphons. Whether he lost or won, the gambler, triumphant or despairing, could quaff to his success, or solace his despair.

The elderly, youthfully-dressed woman advanced towards the new visitors, with a beaming expression of countenance.

"Mr Spencer, you will join us. What is your favourite game?"

"Bridge," said Spencer, shortly. He was already a bit in love with Stella Keane, but he was by no means favourably inclined to her gushing, elderly cousin.

He soon formed a party of four, and became absorbed, for the moment, in the game. Tommy Esmond was playing the same game, at a table some distance from him. Tommy was not supposed to be wealthy, but he evidently had money enough to indulge in a quiet gamble now and then.

He remembered every incident of that night. His partner was a subordinate member of the Government, and a good sound player, lacking a little perhaps in the qualities of initiative and rapid decision. His opponents were a young man in the Foreign Office, and a slender, hawk-nosed young woman of about thirty.

All through he held abominable cards, but, truth to tell, he was not very interested in the game. Whether he won or lost a hundred pounds did not interest him very greatly.

But what did interest him, to every fibre of his being, was that Stella Keane hovered about his table. His eyes continually sought hers, and she did not seem to avoid his glance. At times he was sure he could detect a slight smile of intimacy. After all, had he not rescued her, half dead with fright, in the dining-room of the "Excelsior?"

Once she bent over him and whispered, her cool, fragrant breath fanning his cheek: “You are having shocking bad luck. You haven’t held a single decent card.”

He whispered back: “What did I tell you a little time ago? I flatter myself I am a fairly good bridge-player, but what could one do with those cards of mine?”

She fluttered away, with still the shadow of that intimate smile upon her beautiful mouth, the smile that seemed to say they had only known each other for a few hours, under romantic and dramatic circumstances, but there was between them an affinity of spirit.

He played on steadily for over an hour, and then a halt was cried. The young gentleman from the Foreign Office and the hawk-nosed young woman had scored. Guy Spencer rose from the table, the poorer by a hundred and fifty pounds. He wrote his cheque with a light heart. A hundred and fifty pounds was not a great price to pay for the introduction to Stella Keane.

Mrs L’Estrange came impressively towards him.

“Oh, Mr Spencer, I hope you have not lost. If so, I fear you will never come near me again.” His glance roved in the direction of Stella, talking, as it appeared earnestly, to that bounder of a cousin. There came a steely look into his clear, resolute eyes.

“If you will allow me, I shall be delighted to come here often to see you and Miss Keane. I suppose I had better pick up my old friend Tommy Esmond, if he is not too engrossed.” But when he approached Esmond, that little rotund gentleman waved him away, in most genial fashion.

“Run away, dear boy. It is Eclipse first, and the rest nowhere. I am winning hands down.” Certainly he bore the mien of a conqueror. And there, behind his chair, stood Stella Keane.

She welcomed Spencer with that faint, intimate smile which had already stirred his pulses.

“I fear I brought you bad luck,” she said, in her low, caressing voice. “But

to Mr Esmond I have been the harbinger of good fortune. Are you really going?"

"I always go when I have won enough, or lost enough. You remember I gave you a little homily on gambling generally, not so long ago."

She took her hand off Esmond's chair. "Well, I will leave my good influence behind, and look after the parting guest."

She walked leisurely with him in the direction of the hall. It was deserted, but the light was brilliant, as it was in every other corner of the flat.

She held out her hand impulsively. "Mr Spencer, I have not thanked you properly for your kindness to me to-night. Terror-stricken, paralysed with fear, I should have been clinging to that chair now, if you had not rescued me in time. How can I thank you?"

Spencer laughed lightly. "One would think from your excessive gratitude that you had not experienced a great deal of kindness in your life. And yet that would be impossible." She flushed a little; his gaze was perhaps more full of admiration, of frank and open compliment than could be justified by the briefness of their acquaintance. And yet it only expressed what he was inwardly thinking.

Here was a girl who had only to look at her mirror to learn she was endowed with singular beauty. She must also know that she combined with her more than ordinary fairness an unusual charm of manner.

How had it come about that one with such striking qualifications should exhibit a certain underlying sadness, as if the world had already proved a very disappointing place? Youth and good looks usually secure for their owner a good time. Girls with half her attractions could find plenty of admirers. What evil fate dogged her that she had to regard a perfectly common act of kindness as something to be exceptionally grateful for?

"I have never been petted nor spoiled, even as a child," she answered gravely. "My father and mother were ignorant of the duties, as they were of the instincts, of parenthood. And since my poor pretence of a home was broken up, I have been a derelict and a wanderer, sometimes a tolerated guest, rarely, I fear, a very welcome one in the houses of other

people.”

“But you are happy here, surely?” he suggested. After saying so much, she could hardly regard the question as an impertinent one. He longed to hear her history. Well, if he came and cultivated her, and let her see how sympathetic he could be, one day she would tell him.

She shrugged her shoulders with an air of indifference.

“My cousin is peculiar in many ways, and her devotion to play is an obsession. We have very little in common; still, it would not be fair to say she was difficult to get on with. I have been with her now for more than eighteen months, and although we have often held totally different opinions, I cannot remember that we have ever had a real quarrel. And, anyway, it is a home and a shelter, and that is something.”

Not much enthusiasm here, certainly. Mrs L’Estrange had been dismissed with a very negative kind of faint praise. Her excellence seemed to lie rather in the absence of bad qualities than the possession of good ones.

And yet, he could not bring himself to believe that Miss Keane was an ill-natured girl, or of an unresponsive temperament. He had to admit that his impressions of his hostess were not too favourable.

She was outwardly genial, and at times gushing. Yet he fancied he could read behind this plausible exterior the signs of a hard, worldly nature. There was no softness in her glance, no tenderness in her rather hard, staccato tones.

A girl with those glorious eyes, and mobile face, with the delicate complexion that flushed and paled by turns, must surely be sweet and sympathetic, and responsive to affection. How her voice had thrilled with emotion when she thanked him. If she was disappointed in her cousin, it must be the fault of the elder woman, who could not give what was demanded by the younger and more ardent temperament.

He would have lingered longer, trying to pierce the riddle from these disjointed remarks, but they were interrupted by Tommy Esmond, who came bustling into the hall, flushed with victory.

“Never had such luck in my life. Just wiped the floor with them,” he explained excitedly. “You left your good influence behind, Miss Keane. A few minutes sufficed for victory.”

“I am very glad, but I think my powers for good must be very limited, for I brought bad luck to your friend,” was her smiling rejoinder.

He turned briskly to the young man. “It is a perfect night, Spencer. Shall we walk down to the Club to get a breath of fresh air, and turn in there for a quiet smoke?”

Spencer nodded assent, and held out his hand to Miss Keane.

“Well, good-bye for the present.”

“And I hope you will come and see us again soon. Don’t wait for Mr Esmond to bring you: after our thrilling experiences of to-night, we are more than ordinary acquaintances. We are at home nearly every night, if you want to gamble. And, if you would like a little rational chat instead, come in one afternoon to tea.”

“Thanks, I will. My card-playing fit has passed for a little time. Once again, good-bye.”

And, as soon as they were in the street, Esmond burst in with the question he was longing to ask.

“Well, what do you think of her? Did I exaggerate?”

“Not in the least,” answered Spencer, speaking less seriously than he felt, he did not quite know for what reason, unless it was that with a man of his friend’s calibre, he always had a tendency to discuss things lightly. “No, I don’t think you have exaggerated a bit this time; so many of your swans have been geese, but this is a real swan, at last. She is very lovely; even in her terror she looked beautiful, and she has a peculiar, elusive charm. She makes you want to know more of her, and penetrate the mystery which seems to hover around her.”

“I can’t say I see any mystery, myself.” Esmond spoke rather sharply, for

such a good-natured little man.

“Perhaps it is too strong a word. But I take it, you know something of the *ménage*, and can enlighten me on one point. What is her position there: paid companion, a passing guest, or does she share the flat with her cousin on some sort of terms?”

It was a little time before Esmond answered. “I have never rightly got at that myself. Sometimes I have thought one thing, sometimes another. But I am pretty sure she is poor: in fact, she has admitted as much.”

“Poverty is relative after all, and it depends on how she was brought up. She seems to dress well, and that cannot be done without money.”

Yes, Esmond admitted that she was turned out well. But he either could not, or would not express any positive opinion upon the delicate subject of Miss Keane’s finances.

“Does she ever play? She didn’t touch a card while we were there, only flitted about from table to table.”

No, Esmond had never seen her play since he had frequented the house. It was clear, therefore, she did not make any pocket-money out of gambling. He had to admit that she seemed to act as deputy hostess, and, he believed, wrote most of her cousin’s notes; in other words, made herself useful.

All this information, such as it was, he imparted, as it seemed to Spencer, with some reluctance. Perhaps his keen admiration prompted him to hide anything that served to show her in a dependent position. And Spencer desisted from any further cross-examination on this head.

On one point, however, he was determined to elicit a positive expression of opinion from the cautious little man.

“What is the mystery of the bounder cousin? You must admit he has cad stamped all over him, his speech, his person, his gestures.”

Tommy could establish no defence for the gentleman in question. “No, he is past criticism, I allow. The result of some *mésalliance*, I suppose; his

mother a very common person doubtless. But then, many highly respectable people have skeletons like that in their cupboards."

"The mystery is that he finds his way, cousin as he may be, into any decent house. Mrs L'Estrange we know to be a woman of good family. You would think she would lock and bolt the door against a creature like that. What is he supposed to be, if he has any profession beyond that of his intense bounderism?"

"Something in the City, I am told," replied Esmond shortly. "Something connected with finance; stockbroker or something."

"It must be a shady kind of finance, if he has anything to do with it," growled the young man. "To think of his claiming relationship with that exquisite girl."

Chapter Eleven.

It would be idle to assume that a man of Guy Spencer's natural advantages had reached the age of thirty without experiencing a few affairs of the heart. But he had never been deeply touched, and his friend Tommy Esmond was right when he described him as not very susceptible to feminine influence.

The one feeling which had lasted for some years, was a pronounced affection for his cousin Nina. He felt as much at home with her as he would have done with a favourite sister, had he possessed one. But the regard had a warmth in it that is lacking in fraternal relations.

He knew that Lady Nina was not indifferent to him, that she allowed him to assume a certain air of proprietorship in the disposal of dances, in the claim to her society when he was disposed to enjoy it. He knew also that it was a match which would be warmly approved of by his invalid uncle.

Without being guilty of undue vanity, he felt pretty certain that if he proposed he would be accepted. And once or twice he had been very near to taking the decisive step. He never could quite understand what it was that made him hesitate.

The fact of his hesitation proved to himself, as well as to the young lady concerned, that much as he might like his cousin, he was certainly far from being deeply in love with her.

She was a pretty, winsome girl, possessing an upright, straightforward nature, and quite attractive in a simple, frank fashion. There was nothing subtle or mysterious about her, you could read her like an open book. She was a good daughter, she was the type of girl who could not help making a good wife.

Some day, no doubt, he would put the fateful question, and by her acceptance be made, in conventional parlance, the happiest of men. But although he would know he had chosen very wisely, and look forward to a placid kind of happiness, he was doubtful if Nina's smiles and kisses would ever thrill him, if with her he would ever learn the meaning of real

love.

He was not by any means sure that he was capable of very strong attachment. He had indulged in a few fancies, but they had only exercised a very small portion of his thoughts. Up to the present, he had certainly not experienced the wild ecstasies, the mingled joy and pain of the true lover.

For the first time in his life, he had been seriously perturbed by the advent of Stella Keane. He had not fashioned in his imagination any particular ideal, any special type of woman who would make to him an irresistible appeal. But, if she had been Lady Nina, if he had met her in his own world, he would have owned at once this was the girl for whom he had been waiting.

Her image pursued him persistently in his waking and his leisure hours. He could recall every word she had spoken during the short time they had spent together. He could see her a dozen times a day standing in the “Excelsior” dining-room, paralysed with terror.

He remembered the break in her voice, the mist in her beautiful eyes, when she had thanked him. And ever and again, he longed to fathom the mystery of her loneliness, the cause of that sadness that was always lurking underneath.

Was it wise to pursue the acquaintance, with the pretty certain result of intensifying the interest he already felt in her? He had no liking for Mrs L’Estrange, a woman merely on the fringe of his world, or her gambling circle. If he wanted to lose or win money, there were plenty of other houses where he could indulge his fancy.

And he knew nothing of Miss Keane’s antecedents. The only thing he did know was that she had a cousin who was obviously a bounder of the first water. Tommy Esmond knew nothing about her either, or, if he did know, would not tell.

For three days he wavered, one moment eager to rush off to the flat, the next determining that it would be better not to renew the brief acquaintance.

On the fourth day, his impulse conquered his prudence. He told himself soothingly that his visit was due to curiosity, that he merely wanted to penetrate the mystery of her loneliness, her unprotected position.

The bounder cousin was coming out as he entered. Mr Dutton nodded affably to him with a greasy and familiar smile. Spencer acknowledged him in the coolest fashion compatible with bare civility. Why were there people, he wondered, whom you instinctively wanted to kick, for no apparently sufficient reason?

Miss Keane was alone. Mrs L'Estrange, she explained, was in bed with a racking headache. She had lost heavily the night before, and this was the usual penalty she paid for losing.

"Hardly worth the candle, is it?" he said lightly, as he took his cup of tea from her. A slight frown crossed his brow as he observed the empty cup of "the bounder" on the table. Did he come here often? was his thought. Perhaps he was in love with her. But it was surely beyond the limits of possibility that she could ever return the affection of such a creature.

He would see what he could get out of her. "I met your cousin as I came in. I suppose he is a frequent visitor?"

She did not look in the least conscious or embarrassed by the question. "Oh yes, he comes very often. He is about the only one of my relatives I have any acquaintance with. My father's mode of life estranged all the others."

Spencer thought it would have been a good thing if Mr Dutton had been as sensitive to the disqualifications of the late Mr Keane as the rest of her connections. But, of course, he could not say so.

"He is not in the least like you." Then, after a pause, he added boldly, and perhaps a little rudely: "I should never have dreamed you were related."

She quite understood what he meant, and there was a lurking humour in her smile, as she answered:

"Poor old George, he is a good sort, but quite a rough diamond. His mother married a self-made man, of course, for his money. That may

account for a great deal you have noticed." Spencer had the grace to look confused. It was evident he had conveyed his private impression of Mr Dutton very distinctly to her clear young vision. But she did not seem offended, only slightly amused, at the poor figure cut by Cousin George in the estimation of a person in a superior world.

Anyway, that little mystery was explained. There was nothing unusual in poor gentlewomen marrying self-made men, for the sake of money. The noble family of Southleigh had many such *mésalliances* amongst its aristocratic records.

But it was a relief to find Stella herself under no delusions concerning the young man in question. He did not think it possible she could, but as diplomatically as was possible, she admitted that Mr Dutton was not what is, technically called, a gentleman.

"He is the only relative with whom I am on speaking terms," she added, after a pause, "for reasons of which I have already given you a hint. And I think I have grown rather to look forward to his visits."

Her observant eyes noticed a quick stiffening in his manner. She could guess his thoughts. How was it possible for a refined young woman to ever look forward to the visits of a person like Mr Dutton, cousin though he might be?

"You, of course, have heaps of relations; you can pick and choose," she went on, as if eager to explain to his fastidious taste her toleration of a man, so obviously the denizen of an inferior world. "You cannot, I daresay, imagine the loneliness of a girl of my age, debarred, through no fault of her own, from the society of her own kith and kin." Here was an opportunity to engage her in personal talk. He had not hoped she would take him into her confidence on his first visit.

He leaned forward, and there was an eager note in his voice. "I formed an idea of you in the first few moments of our acquaintance, that you were not happy, that you were, in a sense, isolated, and that you had known more of sorrow than joy in your short life."

She mused a moment, and then answered him in grave tones:

“You were quite right. I feel it is the impression I must convey to either friend or stranger, an impression I shall always convey. For, if a great and overwhelming happiness were to come to me to-morrow, I could never forget the past years of sadness.”

“But, surely, you must have some happy memories? There were gleams of brightness in your childhood?”

“No,” she said, and there was a fierce vehemence in her voice. “They were the most miserable—an indifferent mother, a careless father, a roof and a shelter, food and clothing sufficient, if not in abundance, but no home, as it is understood by more fortunate children.”

“And when that home, or the wretched pretence of it, was broken up, you were thrown upon the mercy of the world,” he questioned, “with no kindred, no friends to stretch out a helping hand?”

“Our relatives had long before ceased to take any interest in the daughter of a ruined gambler. I was thrown, in a certain sense, on the mercy of the world. But for a small pittance, which my father could not deprive me of, I should have starved, for he left nothing behind him but debts.”

She was not, then, absolutely penniless. Something had been saved from the wreck. He wondered if Esmond knew this. And yet, if she told a comparative stranger this at their first real interview, she must have told him, who seemed to be on the footing of a friend of the house.

“I had no real friends,” she went on; “but in the course of a wandering life—when my father owed too much in one place he removed to another—I had picked up a few acquaintances. With these I made a home, on and off, for longer or shorter periods.”

“And you have come to anchor here with Mrs L’Estrange, who is your cousin, one of the few relatives who did not visit the sins of the fathers on the children.”

Her voice was a little scornful. “The cousinship is a very distant one. And, as she is an inveterate gambler herself, but more lucky than my father, she could hardly look upon gambling in another as a deadly sin.” He nodded his head in agreement. He did not want to talk himself, for fear he

should interrupt the flow of her reminiscences; she was evidently in a confidential mood this afternoon.

“I saw her a few times when quite a child, and then she vanished like the others. A couple of years ago, we met in Devonshire at the house of a mutual acquaintance. She seemed to take a fancy to me. In the end, she proposed that I should, for the present, make my home with her. She has only one interest in life, *play*. She is a very lazy woman. She hates writing the briefest note, and housekeeping is abhorrent to her. I attend to her correspondence, I order the dinner and look after the servants. I am not exactly eating the bread of charity,” she concluded with a little mirthless laugh, “because I give some work in exchange for my food. My own little pittance provides me with clothes.”

He wondered what the little pittance represented in annual hard cash. She was dressed quietly but in good taste, and he was judge enough of woman’s apparel to know that the material of her dress was expensive. On her slender fingers glittered a few valuable rings, heirlooms probably saved from the clutches of the gambling father. She did not convey the impression of poverty, but perhaps she was clever, and knew how to make the best of a small income.

There was a long silence, and it almost seemed as if she had forgotten his presence. For she sat with a musing look in her beautiful eyes, her thoughts evidently in the past, conjuring up Heaven knows how many painful memories.

Then she came back to herself, and turned to him with an apologetic smile. “I am afraid I have bored you to tears with my stupid personal history, but I will finish by telling you one little thing that may amuse you.”

He protested, of course, that he had not been in the least bored, only too painfully interested.

“Well, I am not a person easily crushed, and although a physical coward and frightened of raids and thunderstorms, I am not a moral one. When I began to review my position, I tried to hit upon some way of making money.”

Was she fond of money, he wondered? Well, perhaps, like most women,

she wanted money to buy herself pretty things. There was nothing unusual in that.

“When I was a schoolgirl, I was supposed to show some artistic talent; I got several prizes. So I set to work and painted some half-a-dozen small things, in what I conceived to be a popular style, and took them round to as many dealers. In a week my hopes were shattered. One straightforward creature told me frankly that they just attained the schoolgirl level of excellence, but that I should never become an artist. It was not in me.”

“A crushing blow, indeed,” said Spencer sympathetically.

“I then turned to writing. Here, at any rate, was a profession that required no previous painful training, only powers of observation, some imagination, and a certain fluency of expression. I wrote some short stories which I thought good, which I still think good. History repeated itself. I sent them to a dozen editors, one after another. In every case, they were declined with thanks.”

“I daresay they were quite good, and they were not taken because you didn’t happen to be in the ring,” was Spencer’s consoling comment.

“Well,” she exclaimed brightly, “there is an end of my reminiscences for to-day. Let us talk of anything and everything else. Have you seen Mr Esmond lately? He has not been near us since the night he came with you.”

Shortly afterwards he took his leave, he had stayed unconsciously long as it was.

“I shall come again soon, if I may, to listen to some more reminiscences,” he said, as he shook hands. And she had given him permission, with the brightest of smiles.

He had not learned half as much as he wanted, but he had gathered something. The bounder cousin was the son of a self-made man, a *parvenu*. And Stella Keane was not absolutely penniless, she had enough money to buy herself clothes. Did Tommy Esmond know as much as this? And if he did, why had he not said so?

Chapter Twelve.

Although unsuspicious by nature, Guy Spencer had mixed much in the world and seen a good deal of life. Attracted as he was by the charming Stella, there was a something about the atmosphere of that flat in Elsinore Gardens which created an unfavourable impression.

Of Mrs L'Estrange's antecedents there was no question. She was a woman of good family, she could produce chapter and verse for her ancestors. And yet, why was she not in a better environment?

Clearly, she was on the downward slope. But was there anything remarkable in that? Heaps of members of aristocratic families were in the same sort of predicament, from various causes, through certain circumstances.

Had he not received a letter a few days ago from the daughter of a well-known earl, imploring him for a loan of ten pounds, for the sake of old friendship?

The writer was some twenty years his senior, and she had tipped him when he was at Eton. She now dated her letter from a suburb in the extreme west of Kensington. If she, with all her advantages of birth and connection, had fallen by the wayside, why not a comparatively obscure person like Mrs L'Estrange?

It was very easy to see it. Mrs L'Estrange was of a Bohemian temperament, and probably a great spendthrift. She had made considerable inroads into whatever fortune she originally possessed, and had developed into an adept card-player, with a view to supplementing the little income that was left to her.

And Stella Keane, that beautiful, sad girl, with the tragic history of worthless parents behind her, was the victim of fate. She was not happy in her cousin's home, amidst this gambling, card-playing set. She, at least, was pure, whoever else might be defiled. On that he would stake his existence.

For a few days he thought a great deal about the subject, and during those few days he kept away from Elsinore Gardens and denied himself the pleasure of listening to a further instalment of Miss Keane's reminiscences of her unhappy history.

If he were going to fall in love, he told himself sternly, he would fall in love with a woman of his own world, not with a girl, however beautiful and interesting she might be, who was only a hanger-on of a woman well-born, but evidently *déclassée*, a woman no longer moving in the sphere to which she had been accustomed. In these reflections, he showed sound sense.

But for a certain event that happened in the course of the next few days, he might have adhered to his good resolutions and have finally dismissed Miss Keane from his serious thoughts. And, in that case, this story would not have been written.

And then the event happened. Returning home to his rooms one night, about twelve o'clock, his man told him that Mr Esmond was waiting for him in the sitting-room.

He found the little rotund man sitting in an easy-chair, white-faced, the marks of agitation written all over his countenance.

Wondering at this unusual spectacle—Tommy was frequently fussy, but always self-contained—Spencer advanced, and held out his hand.

"What's up, Tommy? You're a late visitor, but always welcome." He pointed to the decanters standing on the sideboard. "I hope you have helped yourself?"

To Spencer's great surprise, the little man did not take the proffered hand. He spoke in a hoarse, choking voice, his lips twitching.

"I've helped myself once too often, Spencer. And I can't take the hand of an honest man, for reasons. You've got it at once."

Spencer had average brains, but he was not very quick to realise the meaning of unexpected situations. At first, he thought the little man had been drinking.

“Sit down, Tommy, and get it off your chest. What in the name of wonder is the matter?” he said kindly. He was rather fond of Tommy in a casual sort of way.

Esmond did not sit down at once, but went over to the sideboard, and mixed himself a stiff tumbler of whisky-and-soda. He gulped it down at a draught, and then took an armchair.

“You won’t begrudge me that, I know,” he said, speaking in the same strained, hoarse voice. “It’s the last drink I’ll have in your rooms, the last drink in any house in England, I should say. I’m done for, old man, to-morrow I clear out, eat my heart away in some beastly foreign hole.”

No, Spencer’s first surmise had been incorrect. The man was not drunk, not even elevated. His face was chalk-white, and he was trembling all over as if he had been stricken with palsy. But he was perfectly sober.

Spencer took a chair himself, and spoke a little sternly. “Pull yourself together, old man, and speak out. At first I thought you had had a drop too much. But I see that’s not the case. Out with it. You’ve been waiting some time, my man informs me. You want to tell me something. Tell it.”

Tommy Esmond moistened his dry lips with his tongue, and spoke.

“I don’t quite know what instinct prompted me to come to you. We haven’t known each other so very intimately, after all, but I always felt you were a bit more of a Christian than the other chaps I have known, less of a Pharisee—that you would be more likely to find excuses for a poor devil who had yielded to temptation.”

“Do get on,” said Spencer a little impatiently. He did not at all like the turn the conversation was taking.

Tommy spoke brokenly, he could not put his words together very coherently, it appeared. But his halting utterance was simply due to emotion.

“I was at Elsinore Gardens to-night, playing cards. You know Elsinore Gardens, Mrs L’Estrange’s flat?”

He was quite sober, but his agitation made him wander a bit, or he would not have put the question.

“Of course I know Mrs L’Estrange’s flat. It was you who took me there,” said Spencer.

“Yes, we went there on the night of the raid, but I was not playing at your table. I remember you lost, and I won. Well, somebody has to lose, and somebody else has to win.”

Spencer made no comment on this obvious truism. Tommy Esmond again moistened his dry lips with his tongue. He was a long time in coming to the point, but he came to it at last.

“Well, old man, I was playing with an old pal of mine, with whom I have been in business for years. We had a nice code of signals arranged. I was as cautious as I could be, but my partner had been dining out, and he was a bit indiscreet. There were three or four men watching us, they caught us both, although, as I tell you, I was cautious. But I made one slip, and they were down on me like a knife. You don’t know my partner. It is the end of him. But it is the end of Tommy Esmond also.”

To say that Spencer was disgusted would be to convey a faint idea of his feelings. And yet, as he looked at the huddled, trembling form in the chair, his sentiment was rather one of compassion than loathing. What was there behind? What tragedy of circumstance had driven this apparently light-hearted, butterfly little creature to such crooked ways?

“You’re an old hand, then? It’s not the first time you’ve cheated?”

Tommy Esmond smiled wanly. He did not answer the question at once.

“What age do you guess me, Spencer?”

“At a casual glance, a little over fifty. You may be older. Looking at you closely, you do seem a bit made up, dye and all that sort of thing.”

“My dear sir, I am old enough to be your father. I shall never see sixty again.”

“And when did you take to this game?” Esmond thought a little before he replied, he was evidently counting the years.

“When I was twenty-two I got an *entrée* into society. I was then enjoying an income of two pounds a week, I was a clerk in an insurance office. At twenty-four I left the insurance business and started cheating for a living.”

Spencer uttered a horrified ejaculation. He had never come across anything quite like this, at any rate, in actual experience.

“Would you like to know something of my history, or would you like to kick me out at once, and have done with it?” asked Esmond quietly.

But there were still some remnants of compassion in Spencer. And he was also a little curious. He was dealing, after all, with a human document. Tommy’s revelations would add to his experience of life.

“Tell me all you would like to say,” he said.

“It will be a relief to unbosom myself, after the years I have led this life,” was Esmond’s answer. “When I left Elsinore Gardens with my life in ruins, I felt I could have shrieked it all out to the policeman standing at the corner. I came on here, because I thought you would listen to me, because I felt sure you were not a Pharisee.”

Spencer motioned him to the sideboard. “Mix yourself another stiff peg, and steady your nerves. Then tell me as much as you like.”

Esmond went over and helped himself. After a few seconds the ague-like trembling ceased, and he was able to speak in a fairly steady voice.

“My father was a solicitor in a small way of business in an obscure town in the west of England. There were three children—an elder brother, myself, and a sister. My elder brother succeeded to the practice and is still in the same place, making both ends meet on a microscopic income. My sister is dead.

“My father was a God-fearing, deeply religious man, and did more than his duty by his family. He scraped and pinched to give us a good education, that being the only capital he could leave us. I was placed in

an insurance office, the head of which was a distant connection of my mother's.

"If I had chosen to be content with my lot I daresay in time I might have done fairly well, as I had more than average abilities, and gave complete satisfaction in the performance of my duties.

"Unfortunately, I ran across, by the purest accident, a young man some couple of years my senior. His father, a man of very good family, had died a short time previously and left him a very decent income of about two thousand a year. He had been at a private school with me when we were boys.

"This young man took a violent fancy to me, I was slim and not bad looking in those days. He had the *entrée* to some of the best houses in London through his aristocratic connections. He took me with him everywhere, as his bosom friend. I had certain social instincts, derived from Heaven knows where, and I soon found my feet. In twelve months I was able to run alone, sometimes I was able to get into houses where even he could not gain a footing. He laughingly declared that I had beaten him in the social race, but he was a good-natured fellow, without a particle of envy or meanness in his nature, and he was rather proud than otherwise that the pupil had outstripped the master."

He paused for a moment. It was evident, that having kept silence for so many years, it was an enormous relief to unbosom himself.

In spite of his disgust, Spencer could not but feel interested in this bit of life-history. He had often felt curious as to Tommy Esmond's past, and now that curiosity was going to be satisfied. He understood now why the little man had never made any but the most distant allusions to his home or his relatives.

"The life suited me down to the ground, but there was always the terrible problem of ways and means, good clothes, travelling, expensive flowers, etc, etc. I had got to three pounds a week, but that doesn't go far in the circles to which I had been transplanted. It began to dawn upon me that, delightful as the life was, I was playing the fool, and neglecting the substance for the shadow. People asked me to their big parties, often to

their dinners and to week-ends, but there was no money in it. In fact, I was getting out of my depth. I had already been obliged to borrow small sums from money-lenders to cover my expenses.

“Bitterly I made up my mind that sooner or later I must cut it, and take life seriously, like the poor man I was. I belonged to a good club where I had all my letters addressed. I lodged in a little street in Bloomsbury, in cheap apartments. My friend alone knew this address.

“He would have helped me to a considerable extent, but, strange to say, considering what I did afterwards, I shrank from accepting actual cash from him.”

Spencer interrupted him for a second. “You would not sponge upon your friend, instead you took to cheating your acquaintance. I take it that is what you are going to tell me.”

Esmond nodded. “Quite right. I had made up my mind to cut it, and disappear from a world in which I had no right to intrude. I had even made up my mind as to the exact date at the close of the season when I would disappear, and return to the humdrum life from which my friend roused me.

“A few days before that date, something very strange happened; my life has always been full of surprises. A few weeks before the fixed date, I had made the acquaintance of a young nobleman, a member of one of the best-known families in England. He was then about thirty, very handsome, very popular with both men and women. He is dead now, but, of course, I shall not mention his name, which would startle you if you heard it.

“As I have said, his family was a very distinguished one, but poor for its position. My friend, whom for the sake of convenience I will call Lord Frederick, lived in good style, never seemed short of cash, and paid his debts promptly. Those who knew were sure that he got little or no help from his family, yet he betted at race-meetings, played cards nearly every night, and lived generally the life of a man with a fair income.

“His own explanation was, that he had some intimate friends on the Stock Exchange who put him on to any good thing going. In the course of the

year, according to his own account, he made a considerable sum out of racing.

“Lord Frederick, like my first friend, took considerable notice of me after we had become acquainted. Several times he invited me to his club. Afterwards he told me that he had a premonition I should be useful to him.

“I shall never forget that night when the deadly temptation came to me, when I learned what manner of rascal he was. It was the close of the season. In a very few days more I should have looked my last on this gay and alluring existence, should have ceased to lead this double life of a poor clerk by day, a young man of fashion by night.”

Spencer suddenly interrupted. “But was there not a great risk of detection? Were you never recognised in the City by some chance West End acquaintance.”

“Up to then, no. Of course, I must have been found out in time, if only from the suspicious circumstance that I could never accept any day invitations. This was one of the reasons that weighed most strongly with me in the resolve to give it up. I could not bear the thought that the Tommy Esmond who bore himself so bravely in his new world, who had managed to outlive all curiosity as to his antecedents, should be discovered in his true colours, a poor City drudge in an insurance office.

“To return to my story. I had dined with Lord Frederick at the —. No, I will not give the name of the club, one of the most exclusive in London: it might put you on his track. He had ordered a choice dinner, and he plied me liberally with wine. My heart was very full at the prospect of having to say good-bye to this luxurious life, in a very few days’ time.

“After dinner we went into the smoking-room, which was nearly empty, as most of the members had left London. There were only two other occupants, and they were at the far end of the apartment. Practically, we had the place to ourselves.

“He urged me strongly to take a trip over to Paris as his guest. I should have loved to go, but the wrench had to be made some time, it might as well be made now. Besides, I was heavily in debt, for a poor man, and I

had not the cash to purchase the necessary outfit for such a trip.

“He would not accept my first refusal, but tried to persuade me into reconsidering. When I still persisted, he bluntly asked me my reasons.

“As I have said, I was very depressed that night at the prospect of all I was saying good-bye to. This mood was responsible for my blurting out a great portion of the absolute truth.

“I explained to him that I had already accepted too much of his hospitality, which my circumstances did not enable me to return, that I could no longer take advantage of his generosity.

“After this avowal, he did not speak for some little time, all the while regarding me with an intense gaze that embarrassed me very much.

”‘Thanks for telling me the truth,’ he said at length. ‘Your confidence is quite safe with me.’ He added after a pause, ‘So you are a poor man, in spite of the fact that your appearance does not suggest the fact. Well, I may tell you that from the first moment I made your acquaintance I was pretty certain you were.’

“I told him a little more. ‘I am so poor,’ I said frankly, ‘that I cannot afford to keep up appearances any longer. In a few days I shall leave a world I ought never to have entered. Anyway, it is the last time I shall dine with you, and I don’t suppose we shall ever meet again, unless we run across each other by chance in a very different sphere.’

”‘You have absolutely made up your mind to do this, for the reasons you have given?’ he asked presently.

”‘Absolutely,’ I replied. ‘I may say it is Hobson’s choice. I am heavily in debt. If I cut my wants down to next to nothing, it will take me a year to pay off what I owe.’ I laughed bitterly—‘Unless I turned thief, I could not possibly go on.’

”‘I don’t want to force your confidence,’ was Lord Frederick’s next remark. ‘But having had a taste of this rather glittering world, I presume you will leave it with considerable regret.’

”‘I dare not say what I feel,’ I said with conviction. ‘It seems to me that in the old life to which I am returning I shall suffer the tortures of lost souls.’

“Then he shot at me an extraordinary question. ‘I wonder whether you would care to become a partner in my business?’

“My heart suddenly grew light. Was there a chance that I could still keep on, that through his assistance I could find a decently paid occupation? After all, I only wanted a few hundreds a year more. A bachelor can live in the best society on comparatively little, but he must have that little, and the insurance office did not furnish it.

”‘If I were competent enough,’ I faltered.

“He smiled; I thought there was a little touch of a sneer in that smile. ‘Oh, I think you would be competent enough. But I am not at all sure that you would like the business sufficiently.’

”‘I can’t say positively, of course, till I know the nature of it. But I don’t think I should be very difficult to please, nor do I want any extravagant remuneration, just enough to keep up a decent appearance.’

”‘The share would be half, neither more nor less,’ he said curtly; then he relapsed into a long silence, as if he were thinking very hard.

“When he spoke it was in a low, strained voice. ‘Look here, Esmond, I don’t know very much of you. But I believe you to be a gentleman. The business I am engaged in is a very peculiar one, and it is more than probable it will not appeal to you. If you refuse, you are to give me your word of honour that this conversation between us shall be forgotten.’

“I gave him more than my word, I added my solemn oath that I would never divulge a syllable.

“I had for some little time felt that there was a mystery about him. I hazarded to myself that he was perhaps engaged in some spying work repugnant to any man of fine susceptibilities but quite remunerative.

“I was startled, and to an extent horrified, by what he told me. He was a professional card-sharper, made his living by robbing his rich

acquaintances. He had been at the game since he was twenty-five.

"'I do pretty well, as you can guess, by the way in which I live,' he remarked at the conclusion of his strange confession. 'But with a smart confederate, and I am sure you would prove one, I could quadruple my gains. One is hampered by working alone. It's a scoundrel's business, of course. But I can always persuade myself I am not really doing very much harm, certainly not as much as the swindling sort of company-promoter. I win money from rich fools, rob them, if you like; it does at least as much good in my pockets as theirs.'

"I suppose there was already some moral kink in me waiting to blossom forth under proper encouragement. For though I was very much startled, I cannot say that I was profoundly shocked, as I might have been by a less subtle form of robbery.

"I did not accept or refuse that night, I wanted to think. I knew it was the turning of the ways. On the one hand well-paid roguery, with the accompanying delights of the fashionable world, on the other the deadly, drab life of the poor City drudge. In the morning my mind was made up. I went into partnership with my new friend."

"And you made a fortune, I suppose?" asked Spencer, in a very cold voice.

Esmond shook his head, and Spencer was not at all sure that the next words were truthful ones.

"No, a comfortable living, nothing more. We made a good deal, but we had to lose a good deal, too, in order to avert suspicion."

"Your friend is dead, you say. So you went on with it after his death?"

"Yes, for a little time alone. Then I, too, got in a partner, the man who was with me to-night."

There was a long silence between the two men. Spencer broke it first.

"And what are your plans?" he asked.

“I shall sneak out of the country to-morrow morning and make my way to France. I shall hide myself in some little out-of-the-way village under an assumed name, and rust out.” The little man rose and looked at his former friend with an embarrassed air. “Well, thanks for having listened to me so patiently. It has been a tremendous relief to me to pour it all out.”

He did not offer his hand, for he felt certain it would not be taken. Spencer stopped him as he was at the door.

“You have money, I suppose, something put by out of your—your winnings?”

Esmond’s voice was hesitating. Again it was very doubtful if he was speaking the truth. “Hardly a *sou* out of them. It was lightly come, lightly go, all the time. But my father left me a little bit which will keep me going in a cheap place.”

Spencer did not believe him. The probability was he had put away safely a snug little nest-egg, in view of the detection which might come at any moment of such a hazardous occupation.

“One word before you go,” said the young man finally. “Is there much cheating going on at Elsinore Gardens?”

Esmond turned and looked the speaker straight in the face. This time he certainly seemed to be speaking the truth, but he might be a most accomplished liar.

“None at all, except when I and my partner were there. If there had been, I should have spotted it. I’m awfully sorry for Mrs L’Estrange, for it having happened at her house, for I daresay people will hint nasty things.”

“She didn’t suspect anything, then?”

“Not a bit,” replied Esmond. “We didn’t play there more than about twice a week, and we never went in for high stakes. And, of course, we had to lose pretty often, to make things look square.”

“And Miss Keane suspected nothing either.” As he remembered the girl’s beautiful face, and sad history, Spencer felt almost ashamed of himself

for putting the question.

“Bless your soul, no, a thousand times no.” The little rogue seemed to speak with unusual warmth. “Why, she loathes cards, she never can be got to join in. She has suffered too much from gambling.”

He went out of the room slowly and into the night. Spencer half pitied the poor devil who had made such a hash of his life through his desire to step out of his own class. He sat down and ruminated a long time over the strange history which had been unfolded to him.

The next morning, the fugitive, Tommy Esmond, caught the morning train from Charing Cross. He looked very sad and woebegone, a pitiable figure, friendless and alone.

But not quite friendless. A young woman closely-veiled and dressed very plainly rose up from one of the seats as he came on the platform, and touched him lightly on the arm. He recognised her, and glanced round anxiously.

“It was very dear and sweet of you to come, Stella, but very imprudent. You might be seen by half a dozen people.”

“I know,” answered Miss Keane, for the closely-veiled woman was she. “I got your letter this morning and could not bear you should go without a last good-bye. Well, I can see you are anxious. I will say it, and get back.”

She lifted the veil for a second, and held up her face. The little man kissed her hastily, and then made for his train.

It was evident he had one friend left in the London he was flying from as a fugitive and outlaw, one woman who pitied him.

And, at the same time that Stella was walking swiftly from the station, Guy Spencer was making up his mind that he would pay a visit to Elsinore Gardens in the afternoon, to see how the land lay there.

Chapter Thirteen.

About five o'clock on the afternoon of the day following Esmond's confession, Guy Spencer rang the bell at Mrs L'Estrange's flat in Elsinore Gardens.

The decorous-looking butler opened the door. He seemed to wear a sad and chastened demeanour, as if overborne with the tragic events of the previous night. Of course, all servants know what is going on in the house of their employers. A scandal such as this must have quickly penetrated to them.

"Is Mrs L'Estrange at home?"

The sad-faced butler answered at once; he could tell a lie with as much grace as anybody, but here there was no need to lie.

"Mrs L'Estrange is at home, sir, in a manner of speaking, but she is very ill, as a matter of fact in bed. Of course she cannot see any visitors."

"Oh, I quite understand," said Spencer hastily. "Is Miss Keane in? If so, I would like to see her for a few moments."

The melancholy man in black opened the door a few inches. "Miss Keane is in, sir, but I am afraid she is not very well, either. Will you kindly step in, sir, and I will find out if she can see you?"

It was evident that Tommy Esmond and his equally nefarious partner had cast a gloom over the whole establishment. Spencer was ushered into the pretty drawing-room. In a few moments, Stella Keane came in. She was evidently under the stress of great emotion. There were dark shadows round the eyes, as if she had passed a sleepless night. Even her perfect mouth had a listless droop.

But, in spite of her pallor, the dark shadows round her eyes, and that pathetic droop, she was still very beautiful. Pathos became her. Guy Spencer's heart gave a great leap as he saw her. There was about her an overpowering, an irresistible fascination.

She advanced towards him with outstretched hands. She spoke in a broken voice, the perfectly moulded lips trembled:

“It is so sweet of you to come. Of course you have heard? It is all over the town by now. Oh, this thrice-accursed gambling, the love of which induces decent men to cheat, and become outcasts from their world.”

She spoke with the deepest emotion, her bosom heaving, her voice broken by the catchings of the breath.

“He was such a good little man, he was always so kind to me,” she went on. “And last night those awful happenings. Branded a cheat, he and his friend, and they could not deny it. They had to slink out. I have hardly closed my eyes during the night, Mr Spencer; my poor cousin is prostrated.” She added with a shudder: “My girlhood was passed amidst a gambling set, but I never had an experience like this.”

She collected herself, and rang for tea. “You will sit down,” she said. “You can understand I should have denied myself to anybody but you, I am so terribly upset. It is still like a nightmare.”

Spencer sat down as he was bidden. “I had a visit from Esmond last night,” he said briefly. “He came straight on from Elsinore Gardens. He told me what had happened, he told me the whole history of the terrible thing, how he has been making his living by cheating at cards, since he was a young man.” Miss Keane raised her hands in mute deprecation. “How awful! That, of course, I did not know. I had a letter from him this morning, apologising, if one can apologise for such a thing, telling me he was going to live abroad under an assumed name. It was a very short letter. His chief concern seemed to be that he had, incidentally, made it unpleasant for Mrs L’Estrange.”

“How does Mrs L’Estrange take it?”

Miss Keane shrugged her shoulders. “She is a little bit hysterical, you know. One moment, she vows she will shut up the flat and go abroad, for fear of the nasty things that people will say. The next moment, she says that, confident in her perfect innocence, she will stay and face the music, and give her parties as usual.”

“Has she asked your advice?” queried Spencer.

“She has, and my advice is to go on as usual. It is not her fault that blacklegs have crept into her circle. They creep into the best houses, the best clubs. So long as this curséd gambling goes on, there will be sharpers.”

“That’s true,” remarked Spencer, remembering a few episodes that had occurred in his time. “And, I suppose, you will still cast in your lot with her?”

The look on the beautiful face grew more pathetic than ever.

“What can I do, Mr Spencer? I have told you my position. I wish my cousin were a different woman altogether, I wish she were not so infatuated with this horrible gambling. But I cannot influence her. She is too old and set to turn over a new leaf.”

Every moment the girl’s fascination took a deeper hold of him. She was so very beautiful, so very seductive. But he still kept himself in check.

“Tell me what actually happened last night. How were Esmond and his partner found out?”

There was a little interruption by the solemn-faced butler who brought in tea. Miss Keane busied herself amongst the cups before she replied.

“It is, as I told you, all a nightmare to me. I was wandering aimlessly about; as I have told you before, I never play, I loathe cards too much. Suddenly there was a scene at the table where Mr Esmond and his partner were playing. Three men were standing watching the game, they had come here often, I knew their names.”

“They were friends of Mrs L’Estrange?” queried Spencer.

Just a faint shade of hesitation crept into the low voice.

“Oh yes, friends of my cousin.”

“Straight sort of chaps, of course.”

“I have no doubt of that. They accused Mr Esmond and his partner, Major Golightly, of cheating. Of course the charge was denied, but very half-heartedly. These three men were backed by others who had seen something suspicious. It seems Mr Esmond and his partner had aroused suspicion before. Finally they confessed, and slunk out of the house.”

She paused a moment, and then laid her hand impulsively on his arm.

“That first night you came to our house, you lost. Did you play at the same table with Tommy Esmond? I forget.”

The answer came straight. “No, I lost something, what was it?—something about a hundred and fifty. But Tommy Esmond did not rook me that time, he was playing at another table. I remember he was very cock-a-hoop, he was winning hand over fist. I say, I know I am putting a very impertinent question, but were Tommy Esmond and his partner, this Major Golightly, the only sharpers who came to this flat? Did I lose my hundred and fifty, or whatever it was, quite honestly?”

Miss Keane covered her face with her hands for a few seconds, and when she took them away, he could see that tears were slowly trickling down her cheeks.

“Heaven knows, Mr Spencer, I don’t. My cousin is a strange woman. She is fond of gaiety, of excitement. She asks people about whom she knows nothing to her flat, I think,” she added with an hysterical laugh; “she fancies she is making herself a queen of Society. If she can get her rooms full that is all she wants. When she does that, she fancies herself the Duchess.”

“I think I understand,” said Spencer gravely. “And I take it you would give heaven and earth to get out of this environment?”

“If you only knew how I loathe it,” she cried, in a fervent tone. “Sometimes I think I would rather run away and be a shopgirl or a waitress, to get rid of this horrible atmosphere.”

Guy Spencer was very perturbed. He rose and walked up and down the room—it was his habit to walk about, even in confined spaces, when he was in an emotional mood.

At length he turned, and faced her squarely. “Look here, Miss Keane. It’s rather nonsense talking about being a waitress or a shopgirl. You told me you had a small income saved from the wreck. How much is it? I am asking in no spirit of impertinent curiosity. I have a reason for asking.”

She hesitated for a moment before she replied: “Something like a hundred a year—paid to me quarterly by my cousin, Mr Dutton, who is my trustee.”

“Then you are not exactly a pauper. Shopgirls and waitresses don’t earn that.”

“But it would help,” said Miss Keane, in a stifled voice. “A hundred a year does not go far; with clothes and everything.”

He longed to take her in his arms there and then and ask her to be his wife, so far was he subjugated by her subtle fascination. But certain things occurred to him. He thought of his old ancestry, his uncle whose heir he would be, even a faint idea of his cousin Nina flashed through his mind. What would his relatives say to a marriage like that, the marriage with a girl, however beautiful, picked up in a flat, owned by a woman of good family but doubtful reputation?

But he could not afford to lose her. He was rich, he could indulge any passing whim. Out of his new-born ideas he spoke.

“Miss Keane, I am very interested in you. Will you agree to look upon me as a friend?”

She looked up at him from under downcast eyes.

“Mr Spencer, somehow I have always looked upon you as a friend, as something different from the ordinary man I meet in a place like this.”

“You want to get out of this atmosphere, away from your card-playing cousin, who cannot keep her parties free from disgraceful scandals.”

“I have told you how fervently I long to say good-bye to it all.”

Spencer had made up his mind as to what he was going to do. It was

quixotic, but then he was a quixotic person. And, anyway, he was marking time. He would ask her to marry him in the end, but, at the moment, he did not clearly see his way to do so.

“Suppose a woman friend offered to lend you five hundred pounds, to enable you to get clear of this stifling atmosphere, what would you say? You could go and live where you like and look around.”

“If a woman friend asked me that I think I should say, yes.”

“You have agreed that I am your friend, true, a man friend,” said Guy. “Suppose I made you the same offer, what is your answer?”

“From a man friend I fear my answer must be an unhesitating ‘no,’ even to you.”

He admired her answer. He could gather from it that she respected herself too much to snatch at any offer that came along.

But he would play with her still. “Why?” he asked.

The beautiful eyes, still a little clouded with her tears, met his unfalteringly.

“You know as well as I do,” was her answer. “I am poor, Mr Spencer, but I am very proud.”

He sat down beside her, and took her hand in his.

“I admire you for that answer, Stella. I may call you Stella, may I not? But I am not quite the ordinary type of man. I am going to speak quite plainly to you. If you accept that five hundred pounds, I am not going to ask you for any return. I want you to understand that.”

She shot at him a swift glance from under the downcast eyes.

“You are a man out of a thousand, nay, out of ten thousand,” she said, and in her voice there was a note of great appreciation. If Stella Keane ever felt a good impulse in her life, it was towards this man who was doing his best to befriend her.

“Listen to me,” said Spencer persuasively, her delicate hand still lying in his. “I don’t know that I have done much good to other people in my life, but I do want to help you. I should like to get you out of this beastly hole. My proposal is, that I shall take for you a little furnished flat and supplement your income, or give you the five hundred pounds down, to do what you like with. It is for you to choose.”

“You would do this for me?” said Stella softly. “You must really like me, then! Men don’t do this sort of thing for women unless they like them.”

“I like you very much, Stella, and I want to help you.”

He knew that he could take her in his arms and kiss her at his will. But he forebore. He was not going to spoil this somewhat idyllic wooing.

“It cannot take place for a week or so,” she said presently. “I cannot quite leave my cousin in the lurch. I must give her some sort of notice. Of course, I can make the excuse that the events of last night have completely shattered my nerve.”

“I don’t wonder,” was Spencer’s comment. “Now, about this little matter we have been speaking of. I think it would be better if I paid this money into your bank, and left you to make your own arrangements. I suppose you have a bank?”

Yes, Miss Keane had a banking-account, a very small one. She smilingly remarked that it would give the manager a shock when such a large sum was paid into it.

“I will draw the money in cash to-morrow and bring it to you,” said Spencer. “Then nobody will be able to guess from whom it comes.”

He rose, he could not trust himself to stay very much longer. At any moment his reserve might break down. He might be impelled to change the rôle of the benevolent friend into that of the ardent lover.

And for a long time after he had left, Stella Keane sat absorbed in the most serious thoughts.

There was no doubt he was ardently in love with her. But he was not yet

quite prepared to screw up his courage to the sticking place.

It was easy to understand. The obligations he owed his family were weighing on his mind. The woman he made his wife would one day be the Countess of Southleigh. He had to think of all this. And all he knew about her was learned from her own statement, and she had a cousin who was, from his point of view, certainly not a gentleman.

Above all things, Stella Keane was a very business-like young woman, and never shrank from looking facts squarely in the face. She must play a waiting game. Guy Spencer was very deeply in love, but he was not a hotheaded, impetuous boy, the sort of amorous youth who runs off with a chorus-girl, regardless of consequences. Lovers of this kind were very rarely met with.

If Guy Spencer did marry her, and she could not at the moment be sure he would, he would be fully conscious of the disadvantages to himself entailed by such a marriage. Would her fascination be strong enough to conquer his better judgment?

At any rate, for the present he was prepared to advance her five hundred pounds, and ask nothing but her friendship in return. It was an offer that she would have been a fool to refuse.

Presently she rose and went up to Mrs L'Estrange's bedroom. That sorely perturbed lady had risen, flung on a dressing-gown, and was reclining on a sofa.

"I can't sleep, I only fidget and fidget about," was the explanation. "So I thought I might as well get up."

"Very wise," said Stella calmly. "You're a little bit too hysterical, you know. You should keep your nerves in order as I do mine."

"Not always," was the sarcastic rejoinder. "They go to pieces in thunderstorms and air-raids, don't they?"

"The exception proves the rule, my dear lady. Well, I haven't come up here to indulge in a sparring match. I have some very great news for you. Mr Spencer called this afternoon; he hasn't left me very long." The elder

woman became interested at once. “You don’t mean to say he has asked you to marry him?”

Stella laughed. “No, he hasn’t, although it will not be my fault if he doesn’t later on. It seems Tommy Esmond called on him last night, and made a clean breast of his whole history.”

Mrs L’Estrange frowned. “Then I think he was a great fool. Everybody, of course, will know what actually happened, that he was discovered cheating. But he need not go and tell him more than he would learn from general rumour.”

Stella’s face hardened a little. “You must make some allowances for him. He must have been in a terrible state of tension when he felt that his career was ended. He was so very proud, you know, of the position in society that he had won for himself. He must have felt like a man on the eve of execution. He was hardly responsible for his thoughts or actions. He is very highly-strung.”

Mrs L’Estrange spoke more gently. “Yes, of course. I am sorry I said that, my dear. And after all, it doesn’t make any difference how much he told or how little. The result to him is the same. And now for your great news, what are they? You say Spencer has not asked you to marry him.”

Stella told her of Guy’s suggestion, and her acceptance of it. “It is too good a chance to refuse. So, my dear, I shall have to leave you at the earliest possible moment.”

It was some time before the elder woman seemed quite able to grasp it. When she did, her astonishment seemed unbounded.

“Of all the strange things I have ever heard,” she began, but Stella cut her short with a little mocking laugh.

“Not quite so strange when you think it quietly out,” she said. “If he really knew anything about me, if I could produce a few respectable relatives, if I had some of your blue blood in my veins, he would have proposed this afternoon.”

Mrs L’Estrange nodded her rather dishevelled head. “I think I see.”

“He is very much in love with me,” went on Stella quietly. “Anyway, so much so that he doesn’t want to lose sight of me, while he is making up his mind. Hence his offer.”

“But he could see you here.”

Stella shook her head. “He would loathe this house after what occurred last night, and he thinks I am in an unholy set. He really is an awful dear, you know, so high-minded and upright. His great aim is to get me away from the environment.”

Mrs L’Estrange settled herself comfortably amongst her sofa cushions. She was an excitable and fussy person about trifles, but she took the great things of life with a calm and equal mind.

“Well, my dear, go as soon as it suits yourself. You have been a good pal to me, and I shall be sorry to lose you. But if you have got a decent chance you would be a fool not to take it.”

Miss Keane was strongly of the same opinion. Anyway she was glad the interview was over, that Mrs L’Estrange had taken everything in such good part. She might have turned nasty if the mood had seized her.

Later on, Miss Keane wrote a long letter to Tommy Esmond to an address which he had communicated to her in his note of the morning.

The same evening, she held a long conversation with her cousin and trustee, Mr Dutton, who came to Elsinore Gardens in obedience to an urgent summons on the telephone.

Chapter Fourteen.

Lady Nina Spencer sat in the drawing-room of the big house in Carlton House Terrace, awaiting the few guests who had been invited to a small, informal dinner-party. Her father, very infirm for his years, sat opposite to her in a big easy-chair.

The Earl spoke in his low, quavering voice: “I have nothing to say against the woman herself, judging from what little we have seen of her. She has very perfect manners, just a trifle too perfect. I can quite understand that for the average man she possesses considerable charm, and she has great good looks. Many people would call her beautiful. But I can only repeat what I said on the day I received Guy’s letter announcing his clandestine marriage: ‘The pity of it.’”

Lady Nina was a quiet, robust and practical young person, fond of looking facts in the face, and looking at them very squarely.

She had been as much shocked at her cousin’s rash marriage as the Earl himself, but it was an accomplished fact. Only two courses were open: the first to have nothing more to do with Guy and his wife, the second to admit the wife to a guarded intimacy.

Lord Southleigh had declared warmly, in his first disgust, that he would never look upon his young kinsman’s face again. But Nina had prevailed with milder counsels. Guy was his heir, and in the course of Nature would succeed to the family honours. They would not cut themselves adrift from him, and they must make up their minds to tolerate this wife, of whose antecedents he could give no satisfactory account. The one fact he did mention, that she was a cousin of Mrs L’Estrange, did not weigh much with them.

Mrs L’Estrange came of a fairly good family, so far as birth counted, but it was both impecunious and addicted to making unfortunate alliances. One of her sisters had run away with a good-looking young fellow who had been her father’s valet. She was a woman who would have a good many undesirable relatives knocking about. Miss Stella Keane, the daughter of an impoverished Irishman, might well belong to this band of undesirables.

More especially as Guy's statements about her antecedents were of the most bald and unsatisfactory nature.

It was all very sad and regrettable from every point of view, but, as Nina calmly pointed out, several young heirs to peerages had been running amok lately, in the matrimonial sense, and taking their wives from very questionable quarters. Guy might have married some coarse and common creature from the music-halls. It was unfortunate, in a way, that he had a considerable fortune of his own, and could snap his fingers at the displeasure of his relatives, if they presumed to show it.

But, somehow, knowing Guy as well as she did, Nina did not believe that the future Countess of Southleigh, who would, in due course, wear the family jewels, was likely to be coarse or common. Guy was too fastidious, too innately a gentleman, to be snared by a creature of that kind.

And, on her first introduction, the young wife made a much more favourable impression than might have been anticipated, considering the prejudices arrayed against her.

She was not in the least servile or obsequious in the presence of these two very aristocratic persons, but she bore herself with a certain kind of shrinking modesty, as if asking pardon for having intruded into the family. Her attitude to her husband appeared to be one of shy adoration, tempered with perfect good taste. Her deep affection for him, while not obtrusive or ostentatious, seemed to express itself in her tender glances, the soft cadences of her voice when she addressed him.

Nina made up her mind to one thing, that, if she was not genuinely and devotedly in love with him, she must be one of the most perfect actresses to be met with off the stage.

And Guy was still infatuated. When he had made her that strange offer, he knew that he was drifting, but he had still left some small remnant of self-control. But her fascination had proved too strong. Every day she wove the chains more strongly round him.

And then there came a time when absence from her was unbearable, when he took to counting the hours that elapsed between their next meeting. The end was inevitable. The moment came when he definitely

made up his mind that he could not break away; that existence without her would be intolerable.

They were married quietly before the registrar, a strange wedding for the heir to the Southleigh earldom. No relatives of his were present, as he had forborne to give them any notice of his intention. She was unattended also. Even her cousin, Mr Dutton, did not put in an appearance. Knowing her future husband's dislike of the young man, she had not paid him the compliment of requesting his attendance.

The day before the marriage, she spoke to him in a tremulous voice and with tears in her eyes.

"Guy, darling, I have said very little about this before, but you must not think I am blind to the sacrifices you are making. From to-morrow I bid adieu to my past life, to all the few friends and acquaintances I have made; I know that you will be happier by my doing so. Henceforth I devote my whole life to you. Your people shall be my people, if they will forgive me and have me."

He clasped her to his breast with a lover's rapture. How sweet and womanly she looked as she uttered those words in her low, broken tones. He understood what she meant. For his sake she was going to give up all that shady L'Estrange crew, to see as little of her objectionable cousin as possible. She explained, later on, that she could not ignore him altogether, as he had the management of her small affairs in his hands. But all this could be conducted by correspondence.

Guy was delighted. He knew well enough that his own world would not accept his marriage kindly, that they would never take his wife to their offended bosom. But they would rub along somehow. There were plenty of men he could bring to their house, and perhaps a few decent women who were perfectly respectable, but not too strait-laced. And, anyway, the world was well lost for love like this.

It cannot be said that, on the social side, their existence was a very brilliant one. It did not matter so much to Guy, he had never been over-fond of society. He liked his men friends, and having been a bachelor so long, he was fond of club life. He got quite as much amusement and

distraction as he wanted.

His wife had many lonely hours, but she was wise in this respect that she never sought to chain him to her side. Whenever he came home he found her there waiting for him, affectionate and welcoming. Perhaps, after her stormy and chequered past, what would have been dullness to others seemed to her the peace she had been longing for.

She got on very well with her husband's male friends, most of whom openly expressed amongst themselves their admiration for her. If she had been a woman of a flirtatious temperament she could have had a good time without overstepping the bounds of decorum. But she never exceeded the limits of strict friendship. She never indulged in an intimacy that could have the least element of danger in it. The general vote was, that she was very beautiful, very charming, in a quiet, elusive way, but naturally of a cold and unimpassionable nature. Only for her husband did her glance take on a warmer expression, her voice a tenderer tone.

The few women who came to the house found her unsatisfactory. The impression made upon them—and women are pretty shrewd when dissecting one of their own sex—was that she was a person who lived too much within herself, had a rooted disinclination "to let herself go" in those little confidential chats which are indulged in when no men are present. And for that studied reticence there must be some cogent reason. Above all, she never referred to her girlhood, never made any allusions to her family. The general impression was that Mrs Spencer had something to hide.

Anyway, after many months of married life, Guy was still as much in love with her as ever, and he was always profoundly touched by the pretty and impressive way in which she insisted that all the advantages were on her side, that she could never repay him sufficiently for the sacrifices he had so cheerfully made.

Of course Guy knew nothing of what his friends were saying; the men who admired her beauty, and were disappointed at the negative qualities which accompanied it; the women who found her unsatisfactory and were determined that she had something to hide.

All he knew, and was content in knowing, was this—that after many months of matrimony, for they had been married few weeks before the Armistice was proclaimed—that Armistice which was to be the precursor of a golden era—he was quite happy. She was a perfect wife, from his point of view, and he never looked back with the faintest misgiving. What he had done then, he would do again to-day, in spite of the fact that her reticence with regard to the past was as profound with him as with the various acquaintances who occasionally visited her.

Not even the close intimacy of married life had elicited any of those allusions and confidences which enable one to piece together, in some measure, the life-history of the person who makes them. But Guy had a generous nature, and was one of the least suspicious of men. He attributed this strange reticence to the fact that the past contained nothing but painful memories, that even to the man she loved she could not reopen the old wounds.

On this particular night, Lady Nina was awaiting her guests. It was a little dinner-party to meet the young married couple, six in all, herself and father, Mr and Mrs Spencer, a young woman friend of the hostess, and an old friend of the Southleigh family, Hugh Murchison, already met with in the early chapters of this history.

Murchison was the first arrival. He walked with a slight limp, the result of a bad wound in the leg. He had been laid-up for a very long time at his own home with the effects of shell-shock. He had only been in London for a few days, and it was ages since the Southleighs had seen him. They welcomed him warmly.

After a little desultory conversation Nina spoke:

“You know from my note that you are here to-night especially to meet Guy and his wife, the wife that he sprang upon us in such a sudden and dramatic manner.”

“Yes, I understood that. You know I have been out of the world so long, and more than half the time not in my right senses, that I had heard nothing of the details till, a day or two ago, I picked it up from club gossip. Then I was told that Guy had picked up a girl from nowhere, about whom

nothing was known, and married her on the sly at a registry-office. I suppose it would be too unkind to assume that Guy had gone off his head?"

Lord Southleigh growled out from his easy-chair. "Of course he was off his head when he did it. And the devil of it is he seems just as much off his head now. They are like turtle-doves, my dear boy, after several months of marriage."

Lady Nina laughed. "My dear father gets more cynical every day. He insinuates as a general proposition, anyway it can be deduced from his remarks, that every man who marries a girl for love ought to be disillusioned shortly after the honeymoon. Well, certainly Guy is as much in love as ever, and, to be quite fair, she seems just as much in love with him."

"She's putting it on, I suppose," suggested Hugh, who in a less obtrusive fashion was nearly as cynical as his host. "If she came from nowhere, and nobody knows anything about her, we may safely assume that she married him for his money, and that he was too infatuated to recognise the fact. Is she very bewitching?"

"She is certainly very good-looking," was Nina's reply. "Many people say she is beautiful. From a man's point of view, she would be considered very charming in a subtle and elusive sort of way. Of course, my father hates her, it is a terrible shock to his pride to think she is going to inherit the family honours. Guy could have married anybody, although there would always have been still the danger that he would have been married for his money. When it comes to this point, there is not much difference between the well-born and low-born adventuress."

From which remarks it will be gathered that the Lady Nina Spencer was a young woman of independent opinions, and not too strongly imbued with caste prejudices.

Hugh reflected for a few moments. His thoughts had travelled back to those days at Blankfield, which now seemed so very far off. What folly will not a certain type of man commit for the sake of a pretty woman? Jack Pomfret, in a moment of frenzy, had taken his life when he found he

was tied up to a girl the accomplice and the decoy of a criminal.

And Guy Spencer, a man of a very different type from the easy-going, pleasure-loving Pomfret, had made a hash of his opportunities, flouted his family obligations, to pursue the desire of the moment, to marry out of his own class.

“What I hear is, that there is something very mysterious about her, that she preserves a strange reticence as to her past, makes no allusion to family or relatives. Does Guy know what other people do not know, and is he keeping his mouth shut? It is strange. Even if a man marries a ballet-girl, it comes out sooner or later that her father was a railway porter, or something of that sort.” He pulled himself up suddenly, and added, awkwardly: “I say, you know, I am afraid I have been very indiscreet. I forgot for the moment that she is one of the family now.”

A deep growl came from the Earl’s armchair: “She is not one of the family, she never will be. If the young fool had not been left that money by his godmother he would never have dared to do this disgraceful thing. By gad, Hugh, it is over a hundred years since there was such a *mésalliance* in our family: please Heaven it will be a hundred years before there is another.”

Nina took up the conversation at the point where her angry father left it.

“Of course, Hugh, you can say what you like. You are our old friend; you are Guy’s for that matter, and we are prepared to discuss this thing with you quite frankly. Guy may know more than we imagine; personally, I think he knows very little, and only what she has told him.”

“But surely, she must have given some particulars of herself,” cried Hugh, in amazement that a man like his friend Spencer, endowed with a fair share of common-sense, should take a wife upon trust, as it were. To be sure, Pomfret had done the same thing, but then poor old Jack, possessor of many excellent qualities, was singularly deficient in brain-power. He was one of those who never looked before they leaped.

Nina shrugged her shoulders. “All we know is that she was a Miss Stella Keane, the daughter of a man who gambled away his fortune at cards and on the race-course. As for relatives, she has for cousin a Mrs

L’Estrange, a woman of good birth, but of somewhat shady reputation, who no longer mixes with her own class. There is another cousin, a man whose name I forget. I gather more from what has been omitted than what is actually said, that he is not a very desirable person, and has not visited Mrs Spencer since her marriage. That is all I have learned during these many months.”

“Not much, certainly. And I suppose the lady dries up when you try to approach her on the subject.”

“Oh yes, her manner then is very marked,” was Nina’s answer. “At the slightest question she seems to become frozen, to shut herself up within her shell. You know, Hugh, I was prepared to make the best of it all for Guy’s sake, although, of course, I quite sympathise with my father’s resentment. I have nothing to say against her manners or her appearance. If not a lady, she is most ladylike, and she never offends. But all the same, I can’t take to her. To me there seems something about her secretive and underhand. She appears to adore Guy, but, as you have suggested, that may be very accomplished acting.”

At this point, Miss Crichton, Lady Nina’s friend, was announced. She was not in the inner counsels of the Southleigh family, so no further allusion was made to Guy’s wife.

A few moments later the Spencers arrived. Guy shook his old friend Murchison warmly by the hand, they had met of late years only once or twice during Hugh’s brief leave from the Front. When they had exchanged a few mutual inquiries, the young husband turned to his wife, looking very slender and elegant in a filmy cream confection.

“Stella, one of my oldest friends, Hugh Murchison. We were boys together. You must have heard me speak of him.”

The young woman held out her hand with a charming smile that lighted up the rather sad face, and made her look what so many of her admirers said she was, quite beautiful.

“Yes, Major Murchison, I have heard of you from my husband, and how much you have suffered in this cruel war. You must come and see us, and renew your old friendship.”

For a moment Hugh could not speak. The room seemed suddenly peopled with ghosts of the past, summoned by the soft tones of that charming voice, so low and sweetly modulated. Then, collecting himself with a great effort, he dropped her hand, and made some formal answer. And at that moment the butler announced that dinner was served.

Chapter Fifteen.

Small and informal dinner-parties can be either very lively or very dull, depending, no doubt, upon the careful selection of the guests, also on the personality of the host and hostess, who can sometimes exercise magnetic influence.

Nina was, as a rule, a very vivacious hostess. Her father was uncertain. If he were in a congenial atmosphere, amongst his old friends and comrades, he would radiate geniality. But if there was one guest who did not quite hit it off with him, between whom and himself there was an undefined spirit of personal antagonism, he dried up at once, and became gloomy and morose.

To-night, as his guest of honour, sitting at his right hand, he had the niece-in-law whose entrance into the family he had so bitterly resented. During the long courses he hardly spoke a word. He was rude almost to boorishness.

But although Stella was fully conscious that she was there on sufferance, her admirable self-control enabled her to comport herself with unruffled demeanour. If this spiteful old man hoped that he was annoying her with his churlish behaviour, she would not give him the satisfaction of knowing that she was hurt. She ignored him, as he purposely ignored her.

Miss Crichton, a cheerful, chatty young woman, whose flow of good spirits made her welcome at many houses, sat on the other side of the host. Finding Lord Southleigh disinclined to conversation, and guessing the reason of it, she divided her remarks between Stella Spencer and Murchison, who sat next her.

A good-hearted girl, she felt just a little bit sorry for Stella. Lord Southleigh was not playing the game. His attitude was altogether illogical. It was open to him to refuse to receive his unwelcome niece at all, that would have been perfectly comprehensible. But having admitted her to his house, it was in the worst possible taste to so openly proclaim his dislike and detestation.

Lady Nina talked brightly to her cousin Guy, in the random flashes of her conversation, taking in the others, with the solitary exception of her father, who sat there glum and silent, in one of his blackest and most unapproachable moods. And Miss Crichton did her best, really working very hard to counteract the sombre influence of the taciturn host.

But in spite of the brave efforts of the two young women there was no exhilaration in the air, only a sort of well-defined depression, such as is felt in the atmosphere before the faint rumblings of a thunderstorm. Nobody really felt comfortable, not a single guest would feel anything but relief when the tedious evening drew to a close.

Guy Spencer was relieved, in a way, that his uncle had ostensibly buried the hatchet, but still he never felt happy in that uncle's house. The strong disapproval was there, if suppressed for the sake of politeness.

These little informal dinners, given at long intervals to impress upon him that he was still a recognised member of the family, bored him extremely. They were always strictly limited as to numbers, and the other guests were generally people of no importance, on the outer fringe of that society in which the Southleighs moved.

It was difficult to know what Stella was feeling, for she had such admirable self-control. But if she was a sensitive woman she must have been cut to the heart by the behaviour of her elderly relative. And her suffering must have been more poignant from the fact that this contemptuous behaviour must be apparent to every other member of the party.

While the two young women were chattering away, battling, as it were, against the general depression, Hugh Murchison was trying to collect his thoughts.

Strange that his recollections had harked back to that tragedy at Blankfield while Nina was speaking of the young Mrs Spencer. And, if his memory and his eyesight were not playing him false, he was sitting opposite to the unhappy Pomfret's widow.

Six years make a considerable difference in the personal appearance of any man or woman, and they had made a difference in her. If he had met

her in the street, he would not have known her. Perhaps he would not have known her to-night, but for that sudden accidental throwing back of the memory of old times. In other words, if his mind had not been accidentally diverted to Jack Pomfret, he would have failed to recognise the woman whom he once knew under the name of Norah Burton.

And yet could he be sure? Let him think a little. Six years ago Norah Burton looked twenty, and Davidson the detective assured him she was at least four years older than she looked—the appearance of youth, he had added, was one of her assets.

This young woman did not look a day older than twenty-six, and taking the computation of the years, she must be at least thirty. But if she were Norah Burton, and had retained that priceless asset of youth, she would still have that four years' advantage.

Then Norah Burton's hair was fair and wavy, Stella Spencer's was dark. Still it is easy for a woman to alter the colour or the appearance of her hair. If Stella Keane had arisen, like the phoenix, from Norah Burton, she would alter herself in every detail, so far as Nature permitted her.

Still, it is said that everybody in the world has a double. Often in his own experience he had claimed acquaintance with somebody whom he had mistaken for an old friend, and smilingly apologised for his error. Norah's good looks had been of a rather uncommon kind, but there must be dozens of women in the world more or less like her.

Then, as Miss Crichton's harmless chatter flowed on, he thought of other things. Norah had an obscure past, on which such guarded confidences as she permitted herself to indulge in threw little or no light. It would appear that Stella Keane's history moved much on the same lines. There were only vague intimations, nothing definite, nothing satisfactory.

There was another point of resemblance. Norah had one male relative who came out into the open for inspection, in her case a brother, afterwards discovered to be a criminal. Stella Keane had one male relative also, in her case a cousin, of whom nothing was known, except that he was an undesirable person who had not visited his relative's house since her marriage, no doubt for reasons well-known to himself

and Stella.

Ergo the undesirable cousin was lying low, as George Burton would have lain low, when Jack Pomfret had openly acknowledged Norah as his wife.

And yet—and yet—was there anything in these suspicions? Was he not allowing himself to be misled by a chance resemblance, by random coincidences?

He stole a look at Guy Spencer chatting amiably with his cousin, the cousin whom rumour had persistently designed as the future Countess of Southleigh. He seemed the happy contented young married man; there was no hint of trouble or regret in his assured, placid demeanour. Evidently he was suffering from no self-reproach, no suspicion of the beautiful young woman he had made his wife. The calmness of his aspect gave the lie to any such disquieting suggestions.

And the current of Murchison's thoughts ran swiftly along. They had been married some time now. If Stella Keane was the impostor Hugh suspected her to be, from that striking resemblance to Norah Burton the heroine of that tragic Blankfield episode, surely in the close intimacy of wedded life something would have escaped her that would have aroused her husband's suspicions, have set him inquiring more closely into the past.

Granting that she was a clever actress, still the most accomplished performer in the world could not wear the mask all day. There must come one moment, if not several moments, when that mask would be inadvertently dropped.

No, he must be mistaken. The resemblance must be accidental. The brother in the one case, the cousin in the other, were equally accidental coincidences.

He had got to this frame of mind when the men joined the ladies after dinner. In the spacious drawing-room, the atmosphere seemed to have cleared, the tension to be relaxed, with the change of scene.

This was readily comprehensible. During dinner, Lord Southleigh, frowning and morose, in close juxtaposition with his guests, had in a very

real sense dominated the scene, and communicated a sense of his hostility and displeasure to all round him, not least to the unhappy young woman who had inspired those wrathful feelings.

Upstairs he was less in evidence. He retreated to the far end of the room, flung himself in a deep armchair, and, in a way, removed himself from the proceedings. There was nobody to whom he felt himself constrained to be civil. Murchison he had known from a boy; he could afford to be uncivil, to play the rôle of churlish host. Miss Crichton was more or less a social hanger-on, grateful for invitations to good houses; she did not count. Guy had forfeited all claim to consideration. His wife ought to be made to feel her position every moment of her life.

Murchison gravitated to Miss Crichton. Well-born, she was very poor, and by no means proud. She accepted in a meek spirit the social crumbs that were thrown at her by her wealthy superiors. She was always obliging and amiable. She never grumbled at being asked to join a dinner-party at the eleventh hour, when some other guest had failed. She never resented being put in a small bedroom at a country house-party, while a rich girl with no ancestry was given a luxurious apartment.

On account of this excessive amiability, this indifference to studied and unstudied slights, she was immensely popular. All her friends declared her not only to be amiable, but “so sensible?”

Hugh had known her for years, and in a way he pitied her, much more really than she pitied herself, for she had long since grown accustomed to her lot. But what he did know was, that she was as shrewd as she was amiable, that under that gay and smiling exterior she concealed a very acute intelligence.

He wanted particularly to know her opinion of Mrs Spencer, if she were frank enough to give it, for she had especially developed the bump of caution. She heard a great deal, but what she heard she generally kept to herself. It would have been fatal to her somewhat insecure position if it could have been said of her, with regard to any particular scandal, “Of course, you will never give me away, but Laura Crichton was my informant.”

He replied in a general way, “I was very interested, to-night, in my old friend Guy Spencer’s wife. She is a little bit on the quiet side, but she is very beautiful, and there is certainly a wonderful charm about her. Of course, Lord Southleigh behaved abominably. I rather wonder she did not fling herself out of the room. One can understand his feelings, in a certain way. But why does he not take one attitude or the other? If he elects to receive her, for the sake of avoiding an open breach, he ought to put his hostility in his pocket.”

Miss Crichton smiled her worldly and diplomatic smile: “Dear Lord Southleigh is never very successful at hiding his real feelings.”

“Do you see much of her?” asked Hugh presently.

“Oh, very little. I have met her a few times here, at these little informal gatherings. Lord Southleigh won’t have her at their big parties, as I daresay you know. I have called on her a few times, and she has called back. That is all.”

“Well, you have seen enough to form some opinion of her. I should dearly like to know what that is.”

Miss Crichton looked at him quizzically. “Oh, the artfulness of you men! Do you think I don’t see that you are trying to draw me? Well, I have formed the same conclusion that you have—she is very beautiful, and, from a man’s point of view, has a subtle charm. Will that content you?”

Hugh regarded her with a smile as quizzical as her own. “No, I’m afraid it won’t. Now, look here, we are very old friends,” he said persuasively, “and I am pretty near as discreet as you are, I never repeat what is told me in confidence. I should like to put a plain question to you.”

“Put it: I don’t promise to answer it, you know.”

“Of course not. But I am very much interested in this strange marriage of Guy’s. And, please don’t think I am laying it on with a trowel, but I have very great faith in your judgment, I would trust it more than I would that of nine-tenths of the women I know.”

Of course she knew he was flattering her to obtain his purpose; but then

—was the most sensible woman absolutely impervious to flattery?

“Ask me your question,” she answered briefly.

Hugh sank his voice to a whisper. “We hear a great deal about her reticence as to the past. Do you think, in a few words, that Stella Spencer is a good and straight woman in the general sense in which we understand the expression?”

For a moment Miss Crichton hesitated, then she looked him straight in the face. He had compelled her to a most unusual frankness.

“You will, of course, never breathe a word of this to anybody. Suppose I say I refuse to reply to your question. Will you take that refusal as the answer you really want?”

“I will—a thousand thanks. The subject is closed between us,” was Hugh’s grateful reply.

A diversion was caused by the approach of Guy Spencer.

“Hugh, old man, I am aching for a long crack with you. Come and dine quietly with us next week. I suggest Tuesday if that will suit you?”

“Perfectly; I am free on Tuesday, Guy.”

“Right, then. But to make sure, if Miss Crichton will excuse us, we will go over to Stella and see if I have forgotten something, if we are free that night. I can’t always carry these things in my head.”

They crossed over to the beautiful young woman, who was sustaining a somewhat listless conversation with her young hostess.

“Stella,” cried her husband, “I have asked Hugh to dine with us on Tuesday. My recollection is that we have nothing on for that night. But I thought you had better confirm it. You carry these things in your head so much better than I do.”

Young Mrs Spencer smiled at Hugh her sweet smile, and as she did so her likeness to Norah Burton was overwhelming, the Norah Burton who

had smiled at him in just the same way six years ago, in the tea-shop at Blankfield.

“We are quite free, Major Murchison, and shall be delighted to see you.”

For a few moments he sat down beside her; and very shortly another coincidence happened.

Mrs Spencer made use of a certain word which is always pronounced in a certain way by educated people, and in another way by people who are only partially educated. Norah Burton had pronounced this particular word in the same way as Stella.

Hugh had commented upon the fact to Pomfret, and that easy-going young man had remarked to him that he failed to see it much mattered, that she was at liberty to pronounce the word as she thought fit.

When he got home, he passed a very restless night. When he had gone up into the drawing-room after dinner, he had been half prepared to dismiss the matter from his mind as a mere fantasy. And then had come his brief interview with Laura Crichton, in which she gave him plainly to understand that, in her opinion, Stella Spencer was not a good or a straight woman.

And then had come that corroborative little piece of evidence of the mispronunciation of a certain word, establishing another link in the chain of evidence that Stella Keane and Norah Burton were one and the same person.

And if it were so, what was his duty? If he could prove her to be Norah Burton, and her undesirable relative, George Burton, now freed from jail, could he permit such an adventuress to pass another day in the house of this honest gentleman whom she had so skilfully entrapped, as six years ago she had entrapped the guileless and trusting Jack Pomfret?

The morning dawned and found him still in the throes of anxious thought.

Chapter Sixteen.

As Murchison thought over matters in the cold, clear light of the morning, when the brain is at its freshest, he cursed the fate that ever seemed to mix him up in the private affairs of his friends. First had been that unhappy episode of poor Jack Pomfret, who had not strength of mind to survive the disgrace he had brought upon himself by his impetuous folly.

Now there was this affair of Guy Spencer's, which he felt he must go through with and prove to the bottom. He must find out definitely whether the likeness to Norah Burton was accidental, or whether that scheming adventuress had, for the second time, ensnared a trusting and unsuspicious man.

On Tuesday night when he dined in Eaton Place with the Spencers, he would seize an opportunity of putting to her a few leading questions. They would be of such a nature, that if his suspicions were correct, they would shake her self-possession.

Certainly, she had betrayed no embarrassment at the sight of him, and that was a point in her favour. For, assuming that she was Norah Burton, the name of Murchison would be quite familiar to her, even if she had forgotten his appearance after the lapse of those six years.

In the meantime he would get as much information about Stella Keane as he could before the date of the dinner. There was a man at his club, Gregory Fairfax, a middle-aged gossip, who was to be found in the smoking-room every day at a certain hour.

Fairfax was a man of leisure and means, who had the reputation of knowing more people, and all about them, than anybody in town. He mixed in a dozen different sets: smart, fast, and Bohemian. He was equally at home in Belgravia, Mayfair, South Kensington, and several other quarters. He belonged to most of the best clubs, and many more that had no pretensions to social distinction. His knowledge of the various phases of London life was wide and extensive. He had also a marvellous memory. He never forgot a face or the minutest details of a scandal.

To this gentleman, with whom he was on quite intimate terms, having known him from his first introduction to the London world, Hugh repaired, in the hope of getting to know all there was to know about this mysterious young woman who had so suddenly and clandestinely projected herself into the Southleigh family.

After a few casual remarks, he opened the ball. It was an easy task, for there was nothing pleased Fairfax more than to place his extensive social knowledge at the service of any friend or acquaintance who was in search of details.

“I say, Fairfax, I think you can help me in a little matter, because you have the reputation of knowing everything about everybody.”

Mr Fairfax smiled genially. He was very proud of his profound social knowledge, and nothing pleased him more than to have his well-earned reputation alluded to in flattering terms.

“Fire away, my young friend. I think I have picked up a bit in my twenty-five years of London life. Who is it you want to ask me about?”

“I dined last night with my old friends the Southleighs; and there, for the first time, I met Mrs Guy Spencer. I had heard of the marriage, of course, but no particulars of the young lady until I came to town a little while ago. All I have learned is that she was a Miss Stella Keane, and that she gives no very detailed account of her family history. I gather the general impression is that there is a mystery about her, which she refuses to allow anybody to penetrate. Do you know anything about her yourself?”

Fairfax assumed an air of great gravity and importance. He was now in his element, about to pour out his stores of knowledge to an interested and grateful listener.

“There may be one or two people who know as much as I know—always remembering that there is no first-hand knowledge, but the chances are a hundred to one you would not come across them. It happens that I was a good deal in that rather queer set which frequented Mrs L’Estrange’s flat.”

“She was supposed to be a well-bred woman, was she not?”

“Oh, certainly, so far as family went. But, judging in the light of subsequent events, there is no doubt she was a wrong ’un. The place, from the start, was simply a gambling-saloon. Sometimes, the play was very moderate. I am fond of a bit of a flutter myself, but I must own that I never lost very much, and for a long time I never had any suspicions of foul play.”

“Ah, but you had later on?” interrupted Hugh.

“I’ll come to that before we get on to Miss Stella Keane. Then one night something happened. Do you remember a little chap named Esmond, who used to go about everywhere?”

Yes, Hugh remembered Tommy Esmond, although his acquaintance with him had been of the slightest.

“He was a funny little man, very genial and popular with everybody. Like myself, he didn’t stick to any one particular set, but went into a dozen different ones. One night he would be dining at a swagger club with a peer, the next he would be hobnobbing at a pot-house sort of a place with a fifth-rate actor. Very eclectic was Tommy, and nobody ever knew where the deuce he came from. He had been so long about that people forgot to inquire, and looked upon him as a sort of institution, and took him for granted, as it were.

“Well, one night, one dreadful night, Tommy was discovered cheating by a couple of chaps who were too sharp for him. They were common sort of fellows, might have been crooks themselves for all I know, and kicked up a deuce of a row. They went so far as to insinuate that Mrs L’Estrange was not altogether innocent, and had a hand in the plunder. Result, Tommy had to make a bolt of it.”

“What was your own opinion about it? Was it an accident?”

“I might not have believed it, but a similar thing took place about a couple of months later. Another man was found cheating, and this time Mrs L’Estrange refused to face the music. She closed down, and disappeared from London. I have never met anybody who has seen or heard anything of her since. I expect she’s to be found on the Continent like her friend Tommy.”

“And Miss Keane was an inmate of this suspicious household?”

“Yes, ever since I went to the house, up to a few days after Tommy bolted. She left suddenly, and Mrs L’Estrange was very reticent as to where she had gone to. The next I heard was that she had been married quietly to Guy Spencer.”

“Did any suspicions attach to her?”

“No, it would not be fair to say that they did. She never played herself, but she had a great knack of hovering about the tables. And after the Esmond episode one or two men whispered that she had been hovering about them too much, and that Mrs L’Estrange thought she had better get rid of her. It might be so or not.”

“Did you ever come across a cousin of hers there, a man named Dutton?”

“Oh yes, a dozen or more times, for I went to the flat pretty frequently. A common, under-bred fellow, not in the least like her, for in addition to being remarkably good-looking, her manners and appearance were those of a lady.”

“Do you know what has become of him?”

“Yes, he’s an outside stockbroker, with a small office in the City. I ran against him only last week. I don’t know whether he recognised me or not, but I looked the other way. With one or two exceptions, the L’Estrange *clientèle* was not one that you cared to recognise when outside the flat.”

Fairfax had finished his narrative. Hugh thanked him warmly. Still, he had not learned anything really of importance. There was no evidence that Miss Keane had cheated, or helped others to cheat. The hovering round the card-table was not a particularly suspicious action if taken by itself. She might be signalling to her confederates, of course, but there was no evidence on which to convict her.

A sudden thought struck Murchison which prompted him to put a question to Fairfax.

“She might have been a decoy, to lure rich men to this gambling place, in order that they might be rooked by her accomplices.” The middle-aged man shook his head. “I don’t think so. She had no scope for that sort of game. Mrs L’Estrange hardly knew any body in her own world, for reasons which I daresay could be very satisfactorily explained, I should guess a not too clean or reputable past. She could not get the girl into houses where she would pick up rich men.”

“But you say some men came there who played heavily.”

“A few,” answered Fairfax. “But I always had a notion that Dutton picked those up, in the course of his shady business, a mug here, a mug there, who had a few thousands to throw away either on the Stock Exchange or in gambling. If the flat was run on the crook, and it is even betting it was, I should say the proprietors—or the syndicate, call it what you like—were contented with quite small profits. I daresay a couple of thousand a year would keep Mrs L’Estrange in luxury, and I suppose she must have had a bit of money of her own.”

“And, assuming that they were all in league, Tommy Esmond and others would want their bit,” suggested Hugh.

“Certainly,” assented Fairfax; “but always granting that the show was run on the crook, it wouldn’t be difficult to romp in thirty or forty pounds a night, with even the small players and the occasional mugs who were well-lined. Quite a decent amount to divide at the end of the week.”

“Well, I am awfully obliged for all you have told me, Fairfax.”

“But it doesn’t help you much, eh?” queried the elder man, who detected a certain note of disappointment in his companion’s tone.

“Well, candidly, it doesn’t, but of course, that is no fault of yours. We may dismiss the L’Estrange business, there is no evidence there. She might have signalled to her confederates or not. It might have been a perfectly innocent action. She didn’t play herself, she just hovered round the tables to kill the time.”

“Of course, either theory will fit,” remarked the shrewd man of the world, who had picked up so much knowledge of life in his forty-five strenuous

years.

He paused for a few moments before he spoke again.

“Now look here, Murchison, I can read you like a book. I haven’t told you very much more than you know yourself, or could have pieced together. You are disappointed because I couldn’t tell you anything of her history prior to her appearance in the L’Estrange household. Well, there, I am at fault. And you have a particular reason for wanting to know. In other words, you have some suspicions of your own.”

Hugh felt he must be cautious. In connecting Mrs Spencer with Norah Burton he might be on the wrong track altogether, have been deceived by a striking, but purely accidental, resemblance. He could not be too frank with a man of Fairfax’s temperament. Rumour had it that he would always respect a confidence, but his general reputation was that of a chatterbox. He spoke guardedly.

“Yes, certain undefined ones, quite undefined, please understand that.” Then, speaking a little more frankly, “What I dearly want to know is, was she a straight woman before she charmed my friend Guy Spencer into marrying her.”

Fairfax smiled his slow, wise smile: “I am glad you have put your cards on the table. Of course I guessed from the beginning that it was what you were after. Well, I shan’t breathe a word of this to anybody; I can hold my tongue when I have a mind. You have a deep interest in the matter for the sake of the Southleigh family, eh?”

Hugh had to admit that it was so.

“Well, I am going to tell you something that, up to the present, I have not told to anybody else, and, to tell you the truth, I was not in the least interested in Guy Spencer’s marriage. If he chose to marry a girl without a past, that was his affair. But I see you are keen.”

“Yes, I am very keen.”

“Good! Well, I will give you a little information, from which you can draw your own inferences. They are as open to you as to me, and I shall just

state the bare facts. As you know, Esmond had to bolt to the Continent. On a certain morning I came up from the country by an early train, landing at Charing Cross. I went to the bookstall to buy a few papers. I must tell you that I am one of those persons who have eyes at the back of their head, and see everything going on around them."

Yes, Hugh knew that Fairfax had a wonderful gift of observation, in addition to his many other gifts.

"As I turned away, I saw Esmond slink into the station, glancing furtively from right to left, as fearful of being seen. Of course, I had not heard the news, and I was not present at the *débâcle*, but I guessed something was up from his furtive appearance. As he slunk along, a young woman heavily-veiled walked swiftly forward, and laid her hand upon his arm. They were only together for a few seconds, Esmond was evidently urging her to leave him for fear of recognition. When they parted, she kissed him affectionately. In spite of the heavy veiling, I recognised her."

"Stella Keane, of course," cried Hugh.

"Stella Keane. Fortunately, neither of them saw me, I expect they were both too agitated. Well, there is the fact; as I said just now, you can draw your own inferences, and perhaps answer the question whether she was a good woman before she married your friend."

"It is answered," said Hugh sternly. "A good woman would not trouble to go to the station to say good-bye to a derelict card-sharper, and kiss him affectionately, unless there had been some close and dishonourable relationship between them."

Chapter Seventeen.

Murchison arrived at Eaton Place about twenty minutes before the dinner hour. His expectation was that he would find Mrs Spencer alone in the drawing-room, and in this hope he was not disappointed.

Stella, beautifully gowned, was seated in a luxurious easy-chair, reading. As he was announced, she rose and threw her novel down. She advanced to him with outstretched hand and that ever-charming smile.

“Oh, how sweet of you to come in good time, not rush in just a moment before dinner is served. We can have a comfortable chat before Guy comes. He takes an awful time to dress, you know. His ties bother him really; he discards about half a dozen before he gets the proper bow. Isn’t it silly?”

She was very girlish to-night, quite different from what she had been at the Southleigh party, staid, demure, a little resentful, and averse from conversation.

Murchison’s thoughts flew back to that day at Blankfield when he had met a certain girl by chance at the tea-shop. Norah Burton had been just as girlish then as Mrs Spencer was now, allowing for the six years’ interval.

She crossed over to a Chesterfield, and motioned him to a seat beside her. Hugh obeyed her invitation, but he felt sure that she had done this with a motive. She was about to exercise her subtle fascination on her husband’s friend.

“Now, please tell me all about yourself,” she said. “You are Guy’s friend, and I have a right to know. His friends are mine. I know what you have done in the War: you have suffered very terribly. But before that; please enlighten me.”

It was a challenge. Did she desire to know as much of his past as he desired to know of hers? He looked at her very steadily.

“You know, Mrs Spencer, it is a little difficult to go back to anything before those awful years of war. But I remember, as in a sort of dream, that,

quite as a young man, I was gazetted to the Twenty-fifth Lancers."

"A crack regiment, was it not?" queried Mrs Spencer. "My dear father was in the Twenty-fourth."

She was keeping it up bravely, he thought. He remembered Fairfax's story. The woman who had said good-bye to a fugitive card-sharper at Charing Cross Station, and kissed him affectionately, was hardly likely to be the daughter of an officer in the Twenty-fourth Lancers. He was not sure of very much, but of this one incident he was absolutely positive: Fairfax was a man who was always certain of his facts.

"I can't remember much about the early years; I expect I went through the usual trials and troubles of a young subaltern, was subjected to a good deal of ragging. Well, somehow, promotion came: I was Captain at quite a youthful age. The one thing that sticks in my mind, in those pre-war days, is the fact that we were quartered at Blankfield."

Mrs Spencer lifted calm, inquiring eyes. "At Blankfield! And where is that?"

"You don't mean to say you haven't heard of Blankfield?"

Mrs Spencer shook her dark head. "No; I dare say it shows great ignorance, but I was never good at geography. I was brought up so quietly; I have never travelled. I know next to nothing of my own country, and nothing of any other."

She uttered these remarks with a disarming and appealing smile, as if asking pardon from a man of the world for having led such an uneventful and sequestered life—she, as he thought sardonically, the mysterious cousin of Mrs L'Estrange, the affectionate friend of the card-sharper Tommie Esmond.

"Blankfield is rather a well-known town in Yorkshire; it is also a garrison town. As I said, it was my lot to be quartered there."

"Was it a nice place?" queried Mrs Spencer with an air of polite interest.

"In a way, yes; we had a good time. But my recollections of it are

distinctly unpleasant. For I had the misfortune to assist at a tragedy—nay, more, to play a part in it—which has left an ineffaceable record upon my memory." Stella Spencer leaned forward. There was no momentary change of expression upon the clear-cut, charming face; her eyes met his own with a calm, steady gaze. But he thought—and after all that might be fancy—he detected a restless movement of her hands.

"I shall like to hear about that tragedy, if it is not too painful for you to recall it," she said softly. If she were really what he believed her to be, she was playing the rôle of sympathetic listener to perfection.

"I had a young chum of the name of Pomfret, a mere boy, impulsive, high-spirited, generous, unsuspicious, little versed in the ways of the world, absolutely unversed in the ways of women. I had promised his family to look after him. Looking back at this distance of years, I realise how badly I fulfilled my trust; how, in a sense, I was unwittingly the cause of the tragedy that befell him. I wonder if you ever came across my friend, Jack Pomfret."

"Never; but, of course, I have met so few people. And you know the truth, as well as everybody else, I was not brought up in my husband's world, in your world and that of the Southleighs. I could never claim to be more than respectable middle-class. I take it, your friend was a member of some old family."

The voice was steady, but he thought he noticed an increased restlessness in the movements of the hands. And the admission that she was a member of the respectable middle-class struck him as conveying a false note intentionally. If what she alleged was true, that her father had been an officer in the Twenty-fourth Lancers, she was a grade higher than the respectable middle-class. Clever as she was, she had made a false step there.

"You want to hear the history of that tragedy, of the terrible circumstances which cut short the life of my poor young friend. Well, it is hardly necessary to say that a woman was the cause. Women, I suppose, have been at the bottom of most of the tragedies that have happened to men ever since the days of Eve."

“I know that is the general opinion, but I have always been very doubtful as to whether it is a true one.”

She spoke lightly, but it seemed to him her tone was not quite so assured as it had been a moment ago. Anyway, she was evidently intensely interested in the forthcoming narrative.

“At Blankfield I happened to make the acquaintance of a very charming young woman, who was not received in the Society of the place, for the reason that nothing was known about her. The acquaintance was made in the most unconventional fashion. She asked me to call upon her and her brother. I told all this to Pomfret, who knew the girl by sight, and he asked me to take him along with me. He had met her very often in the High Street, and was immensely attracted by her appearance.”

“And were you attracted, too, by this formidable young lady, Major Murchison?” interrupted Stella.

“In a way. But, honestly, more curious than attracted. Well, to cut my story as short as I can, Pomfret soon arrived at an understanding with the young woman, to a great extent without my knowledge. They were married secretly; there were family reasons why he could not marry her openly.”

“But this—but this,”—was she speaking a little nervously, or was it only his fancy?—“was quite romantic and charming. No doubt they were deeply in love with each other. Surely there was no tragedy to follow such a delightful wooing?”

“But there was. This innocent-faced, charming girl was an adventuress of the first water. She was the accomplice of her criminal brother, if brother he was. A day or two after the wedding, Pomfret and I went to dine with this wretched pair. Before we sat down to dinner, two detectives entered the room and arrested the so-called brother on a charge of forgery.” Mrs Spencer shuddered. “How horrible, how appalling! And what happened to the girl? Was she arrested, too?”

“No; she fainted, and I dragged my friend away. At the time I did not know he had married her. When I got him back to the barracks, he told me his miserable story. That same night, or some time in the next morning, he

shot himself. It was perhaps a cowardly way in which to avoid the consequences of his folly, but then he was always rash and impulsive."

Mrs Spencer spoke, and there was a far-away look in her eyes. "Your poor friend! No wonder that memory haunts you. And yet, he was not very wise. This poor adventuress might have been easy to deal with; she might not have troubled him any further if he had made her some small allowance; would, so to speak, have slunk out of his life. And she might have been innocent herself, unable to break away from this wretched criminal of a brother."

"You are very charitable, Mrs Spencer," said Hugh coldly. "But I fear I cannot agree with you. If the girl had been naturally and innately honest, she would rather have swept a crossing than have lived upon the gains of that creature—brother, or lover, or whatever he was."

Stella spoke with dignity. "You are, I see, very much moved, Major Murchison, and you can judge better than I. I cannot pretend to understand the mentality of adventuresses and their criminal associates," she added with a light laugh, "but I should say that sweeping a crossing is a most uncongenial occupation, especially in the cold weather."

"In other words, if you had been in her place, you would have preferred to live on the earnings of a rogue?" queried Hugh, perhaps a little too warmly. As soon as he spoke, he regretted his words. He had given her an advantage, of which she was not slow to avail herself.

She drew herself up proudly. "Major Murchison, are you not saying a little too much in presuming to place me on the level of the adventuress you have spoken of? I think it will be more consistent with my self-respect to leave your question unanswered."

And then suddenly her proud mood vanished, and a softer one took its place. Her voice trembled as she spoke; there was a suspicious moisture in her eyes.

"I see that I was very wrong when I suffered Guy to persuade me to marry him. I have alienated him from his friends and family, and, alas! I have none of my own to bring him in exchange. His uncle loathes me; Lady Nina is polite and tolerates me. And you—you, his old friend, who

have known him from boyhood—you dislike me also. But,"—and here her voice swelled into a proud note—"my husband loves and trusts me. While he does that, Major Murchison, I can snap my fingers at the rest of the world."

Murchison bowed respectfully; he felt he had got to recover a good deal of lost ground. So far the woman had the advantage, but he did not fail to notice the vulgarity of the last phrase, "snap my fingers."

"I am very sorry if I have offended you, Mrs Spencer, by my indiscreet remarks. If you are secure in Guy's love, as I am sure you are, you have a very happy possession."

She sank back on the sofa, and in a second recovered the composure which had been momentarily disturbed.

"Forgive me if I have spoken a little warmly," she said, "but I could not overlook what you said just now."

And then Hugh shot at her his last bolt. "I have not yet told you the name of the girl who drove my poor young friend Pomfret to his death."

"Tell it me, if you please, but I shall be no more likely to know it than the name of your friend, Mr Pomfret. As I told you, I am a member of the respectable middle-class; I cannot boast that I am acquainted with the aristocracy, except through my husband."

"And yet your father, you told me just now, was an officer in the Twenty-fourth Lancers. Those officers were all recruited from the aristocracy, or at worst the upper middle-class."

"Oh, you are trying to cross-examine me and trap me," she cried bitterly.

But Hugh was inexorable. "The name of that woman was Norah Burton; her accomplice, her brother as she called him, was George Burton; he had other aliases," he thundered.

He had shot his last bolt, but Stella was not shaken. She rose up, quivering a little. He noticed that, but it might be due to the agitation of wronged innocence.

“The name conveys nothing to me. Your attitude during these few minutes has been very strange. You have insinuated that I am an adventuress on the same level with your Miss Norah something. Well, so far, poor dear Guy has not shot himself, and I will take good care he doesn’t.”

“You have much to gain by his living, if you love him—the title and everything. I have no doubt he has made his will. You would gain a good deal by his death. I cannot say, at the moment, which alternative would suit you better.”

“You are intolerable, you are insulting. If I tell my husband this when he comes down, he will kick you out of the house.”

“But I don’t think you will tell your husband,” retorted Hugh coolly.

“And why not? My word will outweigh yours. I have only to tell him that you brand me as an adventuress, of the same class as this Miss Nora Burton, and you will see what he will say.”

“But you will not tell him,” repeated Hugh. “Mrs Spencer, I did not think we should go so far as we have done. But I will put my cards on the table at once, and I do so from certain indications in your demeanour to-night. I will not say all I have in my mind; I am going to collect further evidence first. But I will say this: you are not what you seem.” He had touched her now. Her calm had gone, her breast was heaving, her hands were moving more restlessly.

“Put your cards on the table and have done. I was Stella Keane when I married my husband. I defy you to disprove that.”

“At present, no. You are the same Stella Keane who saw Tommie Esmond, a discovered card-sharper, off at the Charing Cross Station, and kissed him an affectionate farewell. If you were on such intimate terms with that man, you are no fit wife for my friend Guy Spencer.”

He had touched her at last. “How did you find that out?” she gasped, and her face for a second went livid. She was surprised beyond the point of denial.

And at that moment the door opened and Guy Spencer entered. She recovered herself immediately; went up to her husband and laid a caressing hand on his shoulder.

“A perfect tie, dearest; it was worth the time. Your friend, Major Murchison, has been distressing me with a terrible story of some tragedy that happened when he was quartered at Blankfield.”

Guy Spencer smiled cheerfully. “Dear old Hugh is good at stories. He must tell it me after dinner.”

As she looked up into her husband’s face, Hugh noticed the tender light in her eyes. Lady Nina had said that if she was not devotedly in love with Guy, she must be the most consummate actress off the stage. Loving wife or consummate actress, which was she?

Chapter Eighteen.

When Hugh reflected over that interview in the drawing-room before dinner, he came to the conclusion that he had not played his cards very well, that he had been a little too precipitate. Whether she was Norah Burton or not, she was a very clever young woman, and he had just put her on her guard by that rather indiscreet allusion to Tommy Esmond. If he had no further evidence to go on than that incident, she would give her husband a plausible explanation of it. And Hugh believed his old friend Guy was still deeply in love enough with his wife to believe anything she told him.

He could imagine her telling that convincing story to Guy, probably with her arms round his neck, and her pretty eyes looking up to his with the love-light in them. Esmond had been a kind friend to her, had done her many a good turn. Much as she deplored his baseness, she could not bear the thought of his slinking out of the country, a branded fugitive, without a forgiving hand stretched out to him.

Backwards and forwards he revolved the matter in his mind, till he came to the conclusion that the problem was one he could not solve himself. And then he suddenly thought of his old acquaintance, Davidson of Scotland Yard, the tall man of military aspect who had arrested George Burton on that memorable night at Rosemount.

He went round to Scotland Yard, presented his card, and inquired for Mr Davidson. His old acquaintance was dead; a man named Bryant had taken his place. Would Major Murchison care to see him?

In a few seconds Hugh was ushered into Bryant’s room. To his surprise and relief Bryant was the man who had accompanied Davidson to Blankfield. It was pretty certain he would recall to the minutest detail the circumstances of that visit.

“Good-day, Mr Bryant. You know my name by my card, of course, but I am not so sure you remember anything of the time and place where we last met.”

But the detective was able to reassure him on this point.

“In our profession, sir, we remember everything and everybody, and we never forget a face. It is some years ago, it is true, but I recall the incidents of our meeting as if they had happened yesterday. Poor Davidson and I came down to collar that slim rascal George Burton, who, by the way, got off with a light sentence. Davidson saw you in the afternoon and gave you the option of staying away. You talked it over, and came to the conclusion that, for certain reasons, you would rather be in at the finish. Those reasons were connected with your young friend Mr Pomfret, who was infatuated with the young woman.”

“You remember everything as well as I do, Mr Bryant. I must congratulate you on your marvellous memory, for I suppose this is only one out of hundreds of cases.”

Mr Bryant smiled, well pleased at this tribute to his capacity.

“We cultivate our small gifts, sir, in this direction. Well, we took the slim George. The girl fainted. You dragged Mr Pomfret out of the house, and he shot himself in the small hours of the morning. It came out that he had married the young woman a day or two before, and could not face the exposure.” Hugh paid a second tribute to the detective’s marvellous memory. “And now, Mr Bryant, have you any knowledge of what has become of them? People like that are never quite submerged: some day or another, like the scum they are, they will be found floating on the top again.”

Bryant shook his head. “No, sir, I cannot say I have. They have not come under our observation again. Probably they are abroad under assumed names, engaged in rascally business, of course, but doing it very much *sub rosa*.”

“Mind you, at present I have very little to go on,” said Hugh. “I may have been deceived by a chance resemblance. But I have a strong intuition I am on their track.”

Bryant’s attitude became alert at once. “You say you have no evidence. Well, tell me your suspicions, and I will tell you what weight I attach to them.”

“First of all, before I do that, let me know if you would recognise Norah Burton and George Burton again, in spite of the passage of years. Norah had fair hair; the one I am on the track of has dark hair. The man I have not seen; this time he is a cousin, not a brother.”

“Ah!” Mr Bryant drew a deep breath. “If they are the people you think, sir, and I once saw them, no disguises would take me in. Now tell me all you know.”

Thus exhorted, Murchison launched into a copious narrative. He explained that on the night of the dinner with the Southleighs at Carlton House Terrace, he had met for the first time the wife of his old friend Guy Spencer, that he had detected in her an extraordinary likeness to Norah Burton. The marriage had been hastily contracted; next to nothing wap known about the young woman’s antecedents, apart from the very vague details with which she furnished them.

In the background was a cousin, by all accounts a very common fellow, who had never visited the house since the marriage. Then there was the episode of Tommy Esmond being found cheating at cards at the L’Estrange flat, and Stella Keane’s farewell meeting with him at Charing Cross Station.

Mr Bryant made copious notes. When the narrative was finished he made his comments.

“There are, of course, coincidences that may mean nothing or a great deal, Major Murchison. However, assuming that the lady in question is not our old friend Norah Burton, she is evidently not a very estimable member of society. She was in a shady set at Mrs L’Estrange’s, and Tommy Esmond must have been a pretty close pal.”

“Well, I want you to take this case on for me, and find out what you can.”

But Bryant shook his head. “Sorry, sir, but in my position I can’t take on private business. It is not a public matter, you see, unless you can accuse them of anything.” Hugh’s face fell. “I forgot that. What am I to do? Can you recommend me to a private detective?”

“Half a dozen, sir, all keen fellows. But you can’t stir very much without

me, in the first instance. You want me to identify them. Well, I will go so far as that, in memory of the time when we were together in the original job. Mrs Spencer, you say, lives in Eaton Place. I will keep a watch on that house till I see her coming out or going in. If I agree that she was Norah Burton, we have got the first step. Now, what do you know about this cousin, Dutton?"

"Only that he is an outside stockbroker, with an office, or offices, in the City."

"Good." Mr Bryant opened a telephone book and rapidly turned over the pages. "Here he is, right enough—George Dutton—George, mark you—share- and stockbroker, Bartholomew Court. Well, sir, to oblige you, I will run down to the City and get a peep at Mr George Dutton. If my recollection agrees with yours, I will put you on to one of my friends, and you can have the precious pair watched. If they are the persons you think they are, you may depend upon it they won't keep long apart; they will make opportunities of meeting each other. Anyway, they must be pretty thick together, or he would not put up with being excluded from the house."

Hugh left with a great sense of relief. He felt that the matter was in very capable hands. If Bryant told him that he was following a will-o'-the-wisp, then the whole matter could drop. The fact of Mrs Spencer's relations with Tommy Esmond were hardly important enough to justify him in disturbing his friend's domestic felicity.

At the end of three days the detective rang him up. The message was brief: "Come and see me."

Bryant received him in his room. "Well, Major Murchison, your suspicions are quite correct. I have been very close to the interesting pair. Mrs Spencer has camouflaged herself very well, but beyond doubt she is Norah Burton. Our gaol-bird, George Burton, has been less particular. He has not disguised himself at all; the few years have made little or no impression on him. He has hid himself in the City, trusting that nobody he ever knew would come across him."

"Then I was right, after all, Mr Bryant. And now what would you advise

me to do? This woman is the worst type of adventuress card-sharper all through—at least a confederate, in Paris with Burton, in London with Tommy Esmond. To be fair, we cannot say how much or how little she knew of his forgery business."

"Your idea is to turn her out of her husband's house, with or without scandal?" queried the detective.

"Without scandal, if possible. I would prefer that. I suppose you would back me up by saying that you have recognised her and this scoundrel who was yesterday her brother and is to-day her cousin?"

"If you push me to it, I will, Major Murchison, for the sake of our old acquaintance. But, for reasons which I stated last time we met, I don't want to mix myself up in a purely private affair. The woman caught hold of a fool in your friend Pomfret; she has caught hold of another equally silly fool in your friend Mr Spencer. Please forgive my blunt language, but it is so, is it not?"

"You are quite right, Bryant," groaned poor Hugh. "I seem fated to be mixed up in these matters. At the present moment I have a little stunt on, in which I don't require any help. A younger brother of mine has got mixed up with a young harpy in the chorus of a third-rate theatre. The young fool has written compromising letters to her. I am trying to buy these letters. I need hardly tell you she is asking a high price. I can't see her at my own place, for fear of my brother popping in. I have taken rooms in a suburb where I see her to carry on the bargaining."

Mr Bryant raised his hands. "Well, sir, when a woman once begins to twist a man round her little finger there is no knowing to what length he will go."

"Profoundly true, Mr Bryant. Well, what do you advise me to do?"

"For the moment, nothing. Get a little more evidence. When I watched this couple, I took my old friend Parkinson with me. He knows them now. Get him to watch them. He will tell you where they meet, and how often. Here is his card. He will wait on you at your convenience."

"I quite see," said Hugh, as he took the proffered card. "If I can prove that

they are meeting on the sly it will strengthen my hands, eh?”

“That is the idea. Of course, at the moment, I don’t know which you are going to tackle first, the husband or the wife.”

“I can’t say myself, my mind is in such a whirl. But I feel I must avenge poor Jack Pomfret’s death.”

Mr Bryant rose. “You will excuse me, Major Murchison, but I have a very busy day. Make use of Parkinson; he is as keen as mustard. And if it comes to this, that you want me for purposes of identification, I am at your disposal, in Eaton Place or elsewhere.”

Murchison left, but not before he had pressed a substantial cheque into Bryant’s somewhat reluctant hand.

The next day he interviewed Parkinson, a lean, ascetic-looking man of the true sleuth-hound breed. He took his instructions.

“Give me a fortnight, if you please, sir; a week is hardly long enough. I’ll warrant, from what our friend Bryant has hinted to me, I will have something to report.”

And he had. At the end of the fortnight he appeared. He produced a small pocket-book.

“I’m glad you didn’t stipulate for only a week, sir; it was rather a blank one—only one meeting. I expect the lady couldn’t get away comfortably. But the week after I was rewarded. Three meetings in that second week.”

“Ah! Where do they meet?”

“At quite humble little restaurants and queer places in the City. I fancy the bucket-shop business is not very flourishing just now. For on the last two occasions when I followed them in, and sat at a table where I could observe them, I saw Mrs Spencer slip an envelope into his hand.”

“Good Heavens!” cried Murchison in a tone of disgust. “She is keeping this criminal with her husband’s money.”

Mr Parkinson shrugged his shoulders. “A common enough case, sir, if you had seen as much of life as I have.”

Hugh shuddered. The woman was depraved to the core. She could leave her house in Eaton Place, where she had been installed by her devoted and trustful husband, and journey down to some obscure eating-house in the City to meet this criminal who lived upon her bounty.

Well, the chain of evidence was complete. Bryant would swear to the identification, and Parkinson would swear that Mrs Guy Spencer, once Norah Burton, had met George Burton clandestinely four times in a fortnight, and had supplied him with money.

Chapter Nineteen.

It was in his blackest and most grim mood that Hugh Murchison walked to Eaton Place, for the purpose of paying an afternoon call upon Mrs Spencer. He had not been near her since the night of the dinner, had only left cards. And, very fortunately, he had not come across Guy in the interval.

On that particular night he had reproached himself with indiscretion. He had availed himself of Fairfax's information to tax her with meeting Tommie Esmond at Charing Cross Station on the morning of his flight to the Continent.

And at the moment that he had made that dramatic announcement, the drawing-room door had opened to admit the unsuspecting husband. Hugh had left shortly after dinner, on the plea of another engagement. Had Mrs Spencer tried to take the wind out of his sails by volunteering some plausible explanation about her meeting with Esmond? She was a clever young woman; she might try to forestall him. On the other hand, she might sit tight till he forced her hand. Anyway, he was going to force it to-day, armed with the new evidence that had been furnished to him.

Mrs Spencer was not looking well. Her eyes had lost their brightness, her once charming smile was forced and mechanical.

She rose as he was announced, and advanced to him with outstretched hands, with an exaggerated air of cordiality.

"I thought you had forgotten us." She seated herself on the Chesterfield and motioned him to sit beside her. "Major Murchison, I fear I was a little rude to you the other night, you remember, just before Guy came in." She clasped her hands nervously together. "I do trust we are going to be friends."

Hugh looked at her grimly. He had no compassion for this shameless adventuress who had driven the poor foolish Pomfret to his grave, who had ensnared Guy Spencer, a man of stronger fibre, but equally powerless in the hands of an unscrupulous woman.

“Mrs Spencer—to call you by one of the many names by which you are known—we were not friends the last time I was at this house. To-day we are bitter enemies.”

“What do you mean?” she faltered. “You are speaking in riddles. Why should you, the old friend of my husband, be the bitter enemy of his innocent wife?”

“His innocent wife!” repeated Hugh sternly. “Dare you look me in the face and say that my name, even if you fail to recognise me after these years, does not recall to you certain tragic episodes at Blankfield?”

“I know nothing of Blankfield.” The voice was low but very unsteady. “You put that question to me the other night in a roundabout sort of way. My answer is the same—I know nothing of Blankfield.”

There was a long pause. Hugh continued to look at her with his steady and disconcerting gaze. Suddenly she rose, and paced restlessly up and down the long drawing-room.

“Major Murchison, put your cards on the table. You have come into this house, an old friend of my husband’s; I have done my best to make you welcome. But you have some spite against me. Of what do you accuse me?”

“I will put my cards on the table,” answered Hugh in his inflexible voice. “On the night I met you at Carlton House Terrace I had my suspicions; no two women could be so exactly alike. Since that night I have been picking up information here and there. I have now got a complete chain of evidence.”

“Evidence of what?” she gasped, still pursuing her restless walk up and down the room. “Of my having met Tommie Esmond at Charing Cross Station? Would you like to hear the true history of that?”

“I shall be pleased to hear any explanation you like to offer, with the reservation that I must please myself as to whether I accept it or not.”

“You are very hard, Major Murchison. As you are not prepared to believe me, perhaps it would be better if I did not embark on this history. But

Tommie Esmond is really my uncle, my mother's brother. When I was in low water he was very kind to me. I could not turn my back on him in his distress." She spoke with sudden passion. "Of course, you, with your pharisaical way of looking at things, would say I should have forgotten all his previous kindness."

"The Tommie Esmond affair is, comparatively, a trivial one, Mrs Spencer. I am coming in a moment to graver issues. You still say that the name of Murchison conveys nothing to you. Oh, think well before you answer! Remember, I have told you I have overwhelming evidence. And, believe me, the task I have set out upon is far from a welcome one."

"I still say that the name of Murchison conveys nothing to me." She spoke with a certain air of assurance, but he could see that she was quivering all over.

"Carry your memory back to that night at Blankfield when your so-called brother, George Burton, was arrested on a charge of forgery. You had been his decoy and accomplice in a gambling-saloon in Paris. You had inveigled my poor friend, Jack Pomfret, into a clandestine marriage a few days before. Jack, unable to survive his folly and disgrace, blew his brains out. If not in the eyes of the law, you were, morally, a murderess."

"You are mad, raving mad!" she cried, but her voice seemed strangled as she made the bold denial.

"Not mad, Mrs Spencer, but very sane, as I will show you in a few seconds. As I told you, I recognised you that night at the Southleigh dinner-party, in spite of the pains you had taken to camouflage yourself. But I waited for corroborative evidence. The detective who arrested your so-called brother, George Burton, has seen you and is prepared to swear to your identity as Norah Burton."

Then suddenly she gave way, fell on her knees before him, and stretched out appealing hands.

"Oh, you are very clever; I see you have found it all out. But you will be merciful, you will not drive an unhappy woman to despair, just when she has got into safe harbour. Will you be kind enough to listen to my miserable history?"

“I will listen to anything you have got to say.”

“My childhood and girlhood were most wretched and unhappy. At a time when most girls are tasting the sweets and joys of life, I had to live by my wits. I fell under the influence of a good-natured, but very wicked man.”

“In other words, George Burton?” queried Hugh.

“In other words, George Burton,” she repeated in the low, strangled voice that did not move Hugh very much. “I was starving when he met me and took me up. He was genuinely sorry for me. Mind you, I knew nothing of his nefarious schemes. He hid those very carefully away from me.”

“But you were his decoy, if not his confederate, in the gambling-saloon in Paris?”

“His decoy, perhaps, unconsciously, but never his confederate.”

“And when did Tommie Esmond appear on the scene?” queried Hugh.

“Oh, much later. George got into low water and had not enough for himself. I then hunted up my uncle, who received me with open arms.”

Hugh was developing the instincts of a cross-examiner. “And Tommie Esmond, I suppose, introduced you to the card-sharping crew at the Elsinore flat, and you were launched as the cousin of Mrs L’Estrange, who presided over this delectable establishment?”

“I was a distant cousin of Mrs L’Estrange on my dear mother’s side,” was the answer.

She was lying terribly, he felt assured. But he had a card or two up his sleeve yet. Still, it was wise to see how far she would go.

“And when did you part with the so-called brother, George Burton?”

“Oh, very shortly after he came out of prison. I had one interview with him; I could not do less after his kindness to me. And in the meantime I had hunted up poor old Tommie Esmond.”

“And what did you do after that night at Blankfield? I think you cleared out the next day. I heard you had paid everything up.”

“Thank Heaven, yes. There was just a little money left. My life after that was a nightmare. Amongst other humiliations, I was a waitress in a tea-shop.” A smile of vanity broke over the charming face. “The wages were very small, but I got a lot of tips.” Perhaps in this particular instance she was not lying, if it was true that she had been in a tea-shop at all.

There was a little pause, and then Murchison spoke in his stern, inflexible voice:

“And how long is it since you saw George Burton?”

She had answered the question before, but he was hoping to entrap her into some unguarded admission. He could see that she was considerably thrown off her balance, clever and ready as she was, by the extent of his knowledge.

“I told you just now, soon after he came out of prison.”

And then Hugh rose in his wrath. And then she, seeing in his face that he had another and a stronger card to play, got up from her kneeling position and watched him with an agonised countenance.

“I am sorry to use such harsh words to a woman, even such a woman as you are, Mrs Spencer. But when you say that you are lying miserably, and you know it as well as I do.” Her face went livid. She assumed a tone of indignation, but her voice died away in a sob. “How dare you say that?”

“I am not the sort of man to make a statement unless I can prove it up to the hilt. Your so-called cousin, George Dutton, keeps a bucket-shop in the City; from certain evidence in my possession, I should say it was not a very paying business.”

Stella did not attempt to reply to this last shot, but she recognised that he had gone about the business very thoroughly.

“George Dutton, the bucket-shop keeper, is George Burton, the forger, come to life again, still, I take it, on the same criminal tack, perhaps in a

lesser degree. Do you admit," he cried vehemently, "that George Burton and George Dutton are one and the same?"

"Yes, since you seem to have proof, I admit it," was the somewhat sullen answer.

"That is as well; it clears the ground, up to a certain point. You say you parted from Burton soon after his release from prison, and have not seen him since. When was that—how long ago? You met him frequently as George Dutton at Elsinore Gardens."

The courage of despair seemed to come to her, and she ceased to tremble. "I will answer no more questions. Tell me what you allege and I will admit or deny. Of course, you have employed a detective; you have had me watched."

"Of course. I should not presume to cope single-handed with a clever woman like yourself. You have met George Dutton, alias George Burton, four times within the last fortnight at obscure restaurants in the City, and there is a strong presumption that you were handing to him envelopes containing money." She seemed now to recognise that the game was up. Her self-possession returned to her. She sat down, and motioned to him to seat himself.

"You are much too clever for me, Major Murchison. You have handled the matter very well, so well that you have turned your vague suspicions into absolute certainty. Well, what action are you going to take? As a matter of course, you intend to turn me out of my husband's house?"

"If not at the moment, very speedily. You will admit, I think, with your clever brain, that you should not remain under the roof of such an honourable English, gentleman as he is a day longer than necessary."

"I will admit it, from your point of view, if you like. Oh, believe me, I can see your side," replied this remarkable young woman. "But you will forgive me, Major Murchison, if I say that, from my point of view, I would have preferred that you had never been born. Guy is very happy; he believes in me and trusts me. It will be a great blow to him as to me."

"I know. I wish it were in my power to spare him this misery. But, in

common honesty, I cannot."

"And have you thought of what is to become of me when I am turned out of my husband's house?" she inquired in a composed voice. Her adroit mind had evidently adapted itself to the altered circumstances, and was now busied in turning them, as far as possible, to her own advantage.

"You have George Dutton to fall back upon, also Tommie Esmond," was Murchison's retort.

She snapped her fingers in a fashion that was almost vulgar, and she was so free from vulgar actions.

"George is thankful that I can, from time to time, fling him a ten-pound note; his luck has deserted him. Tommie Esmond, I believe, saved a bit out of the wreck, but he has not more than enough to keep body and soul together."

"Guy is not a man to behave ungenerously, however deeply he has been wronged," said Hugh, after he had reflected a few moments. He added more hesitatingly, "And if Guy should take an obdurate attitude, it is possible I might come to your assistance. I have hunted you down, but I do not want to drive you into the gutter."

"But a man must support his wife, even if her past has not been quite so respectable as it might have been," she cried defiantly.

Hugh directed upon her a searching look. "Mrs Spencer, it is in my mind that you may not be Guy's wife after all. If I probed a little deeper, I might get at your real relations with this George Dutton, or rather Burton."

"Oh, this time you are really pursuing a will-o'-the-wisp, I assure you. George has never been anything to me but brother or cousin, as the occasion demanded."

She paused a second, and there was a terrified look in her eyes as she added, "But even if your suspicions were correct, which they are not, you would not go back from your own promise. If Guy proved obdurate, you would not drive me to the gutter. You promised me that."

“I shall keep my promise, Mrs Spencer, and I will give it you in writing, if you wish.”

“It would be as well. And you will want something from me in writing also, I expect,” she concluded shrewdly.

“Certainly I shall,” said Hugh steadily. “I shall draw up a full confession for you to sign, to prevent you from ever troubling your husband again—if, as I suggested just now, he is your husband.”

Mrs Spencer rose. It seemed that there was a sense of relief in the fact that the interview was ending so amicably.

“I would have preferred to remain as I am, but, on the whole, the life doesn’t suit me, luxurious as it is. I am very fond of Guy really, he has been so good to me, but I have alienated him from his friends. And I have to sit here hour after hour by myself, with only my thoughts for company.”

“Let us say one week from now I will have that confession ready to sign.”

“And you will bring it here?” suggested Stella.

“I think not. It will take some time to read through, and we might be interrupted,” was Hugh’s answer.

“At your hotel, then, I suppose?” was the young woman’s next suggestion.

“The same objection applies.”

He scribbled down an address on a piece of paper. “Meet me there this day week at the hour I have appointed. Nobody will interrupt us, I will take care of that.”

And Mrs Spencer lay awake half the night, working out a problem that had suggested itself to her in a flash.

The next day she lunched with George Dutton in the City. The detective might be watching her, but did it matter? Whatever happened at the end of the week, she had burned her boats.

Chapter Twenty.

Two months had elapsed since the meeting between Major Murchison and Stella Spencer, recorded in the last chapter.

A handsome, well-set-up man of about thirty was travelling up from Manchester to London. The reason of his journey was his desire to visit his sister, Caroline Masters, who occupied a small flat in the neighbourhood of King's Cross.

Up to a short time ago this handsome, well-set-up man had been leading a very quiet life in the busy city of Manchester. He was an electrician by trade, and a very clever one. He was civil, well-spoken, intelligent beyond his station, but he had not foregathered much with his fellow-workers, had kept himself very much to himself. And yet, strange to say, this self-isolation had not provoked suspicion or resentment on the part of his daily associates.

Reginald Davis, for such was his name, had been unjustly suspected of murder, and the police had been hot on his track. Then had come the suicide in Number 10 Cathcart Square, and his sister, Caroline Masters, had identified the dead body as that of her brother.

Caroline Masters had always been a plucky, resourceful girl, and devoted to him. The dead man, no doubt, bore some resemblance to himself, and she had taken advantage of the opportunity to swear to a false identification, and remove from him the sleepless vigilance of the police. This much she had conveyed to him in a guarded letter.

Reginald Davis, the man falsely accused of murder, was dead in the eyes of the law: in a sense, he had nothing further to fear. But at the same time, caution must be observed. The few friends he had were in London; at any time he might run across one or more of them. So, taking another name, he had hidden himself in Manchester, and corresponded secretly with the one of the two sisters he could trust, Caroline Masters.

And then, suddenly, the burden had been lifted from his soul. There was a small paragraph in the evening newspapers, afterwards reproduced in

the morning ones, which told him that he need not skulk through the world any longer.

A man lying under sentence of death for a brutal murder and without hope of reprieve, had confessed to the crime of which Davis had been falsely accused. In the paragraph, which was, of course, essentially the same in all the papers, were a few words of sympathy for the unfortunate Reginald Davis who had stolen into Number 10 Cathcart Square and committed suicide, under a sense of abject terror. The police had carefully investigated the statements of the condemned man, with the result that they found the late Reginald Davis absolutely innocent.

The late Reginald Davis, very alive and well, knocked at the door of his sister's flat. She had been apprised of his coming, and greeted him affectionately. She sat him down before a well-cooked supper. He was hungry and ate heartily. She did not disturb him with much conversation till he had finished.

"Well, Reggie, that was a bit of luck indeed." She was, of course, alluding to the confession of the real murderer. "Now you are as free as air. You were always a bit of a bad egg, old boy, but never a criminal to that extent."

"No, hang it all, I am not particular in a general way, but murder was not in my line," he answered briefly. "It was hard lines to get scot-free of the other things, and then to be suspected of that at the end."

He looked at her admiringly. "By Jove! Carrie, you were always the cleverest of the lot of us. That was a brain-wave of yours, walking in and identifying me as the suicide." Mrs Masters smiled appreciatively. "Yes, it came to me in a flash. I read the account in the papers. It struck me I might do something useful. I went up to the court with the tale of a missing brother. I saw the body; the poor creature might have been your twin. Of course, I swore it was you, and gave you a new lease of life." She added severely, "I hope you have taken advantage of what I did, and become a reformed character." Davis spoke very gravely. "Yes, Carrie, I swear to you I have. That shock was the making of me. I have lain very low, worked hard, and put by money."

He pulled out an envelope from his breastpocket, and thrust it into her hand; it was full of one-pound notes.

“Fifty of the best, old girl, for a little nest-egg. I have not forgotten my best pal, you see.”

The tears came into Mrs Masters’ eyes. He had been a bad egg, but he had a good heart at bottom.

“That is very sweet of you, Reggie; it will come in very useful. And now to go back for a moment to Cathcart Square. Who was the poor devil who killed himself there? He was as like you as two peas are like each other.”

“I think we have got to find that out,” said Reginald Davis gravely. “Nor, reading the account in the papers, am I quite sure that it was a suicide.”

“But that was the verdict,” interrupted the sister.

“I know, but there are peculiar things about the case. Letters addressed to Reginald Davis were found on him; there was a letter signed Reginald Davis, addressed to the Coroner, announcing his intention to commit suicide. Those letters had been placed there by the person who murdered him, and that person who murdered him was somebody who knew me, unless it was the accidental taking of a common name.”

“But the razor was clutched in his hand, Reggie!”

“Quite easy,” replied Davis, who, if not a murderer himself, could easily project himself, apparently, into the mind of one. “We will assume, for the moment, it was a man. He cut the poor devil’s throat, and then thrust the razor into his stiffening hand, to convey the idea of suicide.”

“It might be,” agreed Mrs Masters.

“Well, Carrie, one thing I have fixed on, and it is one of the things for which I have come up. I go to Scotland Yard to-morrow, tell them straight I am Reginald Davis, without a stain upon my character, explain to them that you were misled by a close resemblance. We will have that body exhumed. I am firmly convinced it was a murder.”

“Let sleeping dogs lie, Reggie,” advised Mrs Masters, who had a horror of the law and its subtle ways. “Never mind who was the poor devil who was found there, whether he was murdered or committed suicide. It is no affair of yours.”

“It is an affair of mine in this way,” replied Davis in a dogged tone. “The person who murdered the poor devil, as you call him, knew something about me, and took a liberty with my name.”

“It served you a good turn, Reggie, anyway.”

“I know; I admit that. But the murderer did not know he was doing me, thanks to you, a good turn when he killed the other fellow.” Mrs Masters thought deeply for a few moments. “Reggie, you have been a very bad egg, I am sure. I shall never guess a quarter of what you have been guilty of.”

He laid his hand affectionately on her arm. “Well for you, old girl, you can’t. That is all past and done with. By the way, that letter found on the poor chap, announcing his intention to commit suicide, did they ask you to identify my handwriting? Of course, the others addressed to him didn’t matter much. Anybody could have written them. But my letter was a forgery. Did they ask you to identify that particular letter?”

“They did, Reggie, and my brain was in such a whirl that I could hardly read it. I said that I believed it was in your handwriting. It was certainly very like, although, as you can imagine, I looked at it through a sort of mist. Anyway, it was as like your handwriting as the dead man was like you.” Davis ruminated for a few moments. “That letter was forged by somebody who knew me and could imitate my hand to a nicety. I am thinking of all the wrong ’uns I knew in the old days. I think I can fix him.”

“Yes,” said Mrs Masters breathlessly. She was capable of great daring in the cause and the service of those she loved, but she was not habituated to the ways of hardened criminals.

“A man I was a bit associated with in the old days; luckily he didn’t drag me in far enough. He was an expert forger. We used to call him ‘George the Penman.’”

Mrs Masters shuddered. “Oh, you poor weak soul, you were so near it as that?”

“Very near, Carrie. The shock of the false accusation of murder pulled me up straight. I saw where I was drifting, and made up my mind that the straight path was the surest.” At the moment that Mr Davis gave utterance to this honourable sentiment there was a ring at the bell.

Mrs Masters rose at once. “It is Iris. I dropped her a note to say you were coming. She will be so pleased to see you.”

There floated into the small sitting-room a very dainty and ethereal figure, Miss Iris Deane, a charming member of the chorus at the Frivolity Theatre.

She flung her arms round the neck of her handsome brother. “Oh Reggie, dear, what a treat to see you! And all this dreadful thing is lifted from you.”

Iris was not his favourite sister. She was clever in a worldly way, and had made good. But she had not the sterling loyalty of Caroline.

Davis gently checked her enthusiasm. “And how have you been getting on, Iris? Always floating on the top as usual?”

Miss Iris showed her dimples. “Always floating on the top, as you say, dear old boy. A silly, soft chap fell in love with me; wrote most impassioned love-letters. Well, he was too soppy for me to care much about him, and when his rich brother came along, offering me a price for his love-letters, I can tell you I just jumped at the chance.”

“Did you get a good price?” queried her brother.

“I stuck out for ten thousand,” explained the capable Iris; “but this chap was a good bargainer, and I let them go at seven. It was better on the whole. If I had married Roddie, I should have been so fed-up in a month that I should have run away from him, and then Heaven knows where I might have ended.”

Davis looked at his sister approvingly. There was enough of the old Adam

left in him to entertain a slight envy of his sister's chances. Seven thousand pounds, a little fortune in itself, was a good bit of work, a handsome reward for the display of her dimples.

"Roddie who, dear? You might tell us his other name," queried Mrs Masters, who perhaps was also smitten with a sense of envy.

"That's telling," answered the sprightly Iris, who was not given to be too frank about her own affairs. "But if either of you two dear things want a little ready, apply to me. Of course, you will remember I have got to take care of myself, to make provision for my old age."

Davis and Carrie exchanged glances. They knew the volatile Iris of old. As a child she had always been mean and grasping. Not much of the seven thousand would come their way, if they were on the verge of starvation.

Carrie spoke in cold accents. "You are really too generous, Iris. But we shall not have to trespass upon your generosity. I have enough for my humble wants. And Reggie has been able to put by, so much so that he has been kind enough to make me a very handsome money present to-night."

"Dear old Reggie," said the sweetly smiling Iris. "I am so glad you have made good."

And then Davis spoke: "Thanks, in great part, to Carrie, who told that splendid lie about the suicide, or murder, at 10 Cathcart Square. You remember that, of course?"

"Suicide, wasn't it?" said Iris, but her cheek had grown a little pale.

"I don't think so. There was a forged letter purporting to be written by me. I am going to Scotland Yard to-morrow, stating frankly who I am, and urging them to exhume the body. We will find out who the man, buried under the name of Reginald Davis, really was."

And then the agitation of his younger sister became extreme. She clutched convulsively at his arm.

“Reggie, you will not do this. What does it matter to you who the man was? Go under some other name, and let sleeping dogs lie.” Unconsciously she had used the same expression as Mrs Masters, but from different motives.

“I have been under a different name for a longer time than I care to remember,” answered Davis doggedly. “I have a fancy to resume my own, and make a clean breast of it to the police. They have nothing else to charge me with.”

Iris fell on her knees, and the tears rained down her cheeks.

“For my sake, Reggie, if not for your own.”

“And why for your sake? Tell us what you mean,” demanded her brother sternly.

And Iris spoke as clearly as she could speak amidst her strangled sobs.

“If you try and unearth that mystery at Cathcart Square, I might be dragged in, and it might be very awkward for me.”

Chapter Twenty One.

Davis directed a keen glance at his elder sister over the bowed head of Iris. The younger woman was by no means of an emotional nature. Light, frivolous and volatile, she had danced through life, and, on the whole, had had a good time. One could not picture her in a tragic mood.

And yet, she was the personification of deep emotion now. She could hardly speak for those convulsive sobs, and in her frightened eyes there was a deep and haunting terror. At what point, and through what circumstances, had tragedy touched this little selfish, self-centred butterfly, gifted with a certain amount of cunning and sharpness, but utterly brainless.

“What do you know of Number 10 Cathcart Square, except what you gleaned from the newspapers?” demanded her brother sternly. “How can you be implicated in the murder of the unknown man whom Carrie mistook for me?”

“But Carrie did not mistake him for you,” wailed Iris. “She told me afterwards that the idea suggested itself in a flash, and when she read the newspaper she was not sure whether it was you who had crept in there, according to the evidence, and made away with yourself, through fear of the police.”

“Leave Carrie out of it for the moment,” said Davis. “Whatever she did was well thought out. Of course, we both know her object was to identify me, if possible, and put Scotland Yard off the scent. What we want to know is, how did you come to be acquainted with the house? What do you mean by saying that, if further investigations are made, you might be dragged in?”

“I was there on four occasions: on the last a few days before the murder, or suicide, whatever it was.”

Davis gasped, and Carrie lifted her hands in horror. What did this confession mean? It was impossible that this slim, weak girl had herself been the murderess, could have killed a big, powerful man of the same

build as the supposed Davis, with those slim, weak hands.

She saw the horror in their faces, and hastened to reassure them. “Oh no, not that, I swear to you. I am no more a murderess than you were a murderer, Reggie. But if the whole thing is raked up, and the man whom I believe it to be, accurately identified this time, things might look very black for me.”

Davis lifted her from her kneeling position, and placed her in an easy-chair. “Calm yourself, and tell us the whole story of why and how you came to be in Cathcart Square at all.”

Iris waited a few moments till the convulsive sobbing ceased. She spoke with little occasional gasps, but it was very evident it was a relief to unbosom herself.

“It is a very long story,” she began tremulously.

“If the telling of it lasts till midnight, we must have it,” said her brother in an inflexible voice.

And compelled by his resolute manner, the girl, whom they had always regarded as a frivolous butterfly, embarked upon her strange and thrilling narrative.

“It all arose out of the sale of those letters I spoke to you about. Carrie just now asked me the name of the man who wrote them. Well, I didn’t get further than Roddie, which doesn’t carry you very far. If it had not been for your threat of going to Scotland Yard, I should have stopped at that. A still tongue makes a wise head, you know.”

They could quite believe that. In spite of her ceaseless chatter, Iris had always been very reticent about her own affairs. She had seen next to nothing of her brother for a few years, not very much of Carrie Masters. And, on these occasions, she had always avoided, in a marked manner, any allusion to her private affairs.

“I told you of a soppy young chap who started to make love to me last year. I didn’t care a snap for him, but he was very persistent, and at last wrote me most urgent letters imploring me to be his wife. His full name

was Roderick Murchison, a member of the great brewing family; his father has been dead for some time, he died during the War, and Roddie came in for tons of money, although he was not the eldest son. I don't know if you have ever heard of him?"

No, neither Davis nor Carrie had known of the existence of such a young man. They had a hazy idea that there was a big brewing firm of that name, that was all.

"Well, as I say, I didn't care a snap for him, although he was awfully good and generous, overwhelmed me with, all kinds of lovely presents: rings, bracelets, fur coats, etc. In our life, you know, one accepts these things from the mugs who are gone on us without attaching very much importance to the fact." It was evident that Miss Iris had struck out her own line of life, and made a very good thing out of it.

"Well, then, Roddie began to grow desperate, and declared he couldn't live without me. It was all so genuine that at last I began to think seriously of it. There were tons of money, and although I didn't cotton much to the sort of life I should have to lead as his wife, still there were worse things than being Mrs Roderick Murchison, with the future well assured, and a handsome settlement."

Davis and his elder sister exchanged wondering glances. So this butterfly little girl, whom they had always regarded as rather shallow and feather-brained, had had this wonderful chance of marrying a gentleman and a rich man.

"It was difficult to bring myself up to the scratch, in spite of the advantages, for he was so soft and soppy that he irritated me in a thousand-and-one ways, and I knew in a very short time I should grow to hate and despise him. Then one night, after a very excellent champagne supper at the 'Excelsior,' he got me in a yielding mood, and I promised to marry him."

Brother and sister could only marvel at the girl's extraordinary good fortune, reluctant as she seemed to avail herself of it.

"He told me that before he went to bed that night he wrote to his family acquainting them with the news, anticipating fully their objections, but

expressing his strong determination to brook no interference or remonstrance. You see he was his own master, nobody could take his money away from him, and he didn't care whether his relatives were offended or not."

"And how did the family take it?" queried Davis.

"I am coming to that," replied Iris. She was growing much calmer now. It was a relief to unburden her secret to an audience whom she could trust. For she was sure that neither her brother nor sister would ever allow her to put herself into real danger.

"I am coming to that," she repeated. "A few days after he had written those letters, one to his widowed mother, one to his elder brother, who had inherited the bulk of the big fortune, the elder brother called upon me in my flat. He was a very handsome, well-set-up man, although he had been through a good deal in the War. He was very like you, Reggie."

"Ah," ejaculated Mr Davis. He looked at Carrie, keenly watching her sister, with a glance that suggested they would soon be coming to the real pith of this rambling confession.

"He begged the favour of a short conversation. He was perfectly open and above-board. He told me straight he was Roddie's elder brother, and that his name was Hugh Murchison. He pointed out to me very kindly that his brother was an impetuous young ass—a judgment which I privately endorsed—that Roddie had been infatuated, in his short day, with quite a number of other girls, although, perhaps, not to the same extent as with me." Iris, getting back rapidly into her light mind, let her volatile and easily impressed nature peep out in her next words.

"Oh, Hugh Murchison was a darling, so quiet, so sensible, and so strong. If he had been fool enough to ask me to marry him, I would not have given him up for seven thousand pounds."

"But you were prepared to chuck Roddie for that?" suggested her brother quietly.

"I think I let him go a bit too cheap," answered the fair Iris in a reflective voice. "Many girls have got more than I asked for compromising a breach

of promise. But to tell the absolute truth, Hugh Murchison hypnotised me a bit. He was so quiet and yet so strong that I felt he could twist me round his little finger."

"We want to get to Cathcart Square," interjected Davis a little impatiently. "We don't seem to be near it yet."

"I must tell my story my own way, it is no use driving me," replied Iris, pouting a little. "Well, as I tell you, he called that day at my flat—that was the beginning of negotiations. Where were we to meet to discuss details? I couldn't have him at my flat, because Roddie was always popping in and out. He couldn't have me at his hotel, because nobody knew whom we might come across, and Roddie was always coming there. He said he would think out a plan and telephone or wire me."

"Ah," said Carrie, with a sigh of relief: she was a very practical person. "Now, I suppose we are coming to it."

Iris, heedless of the interruption, went on with her story.

"Next day he 'phoned me up, and after ascertaining that I was quite alone, told me to meet him at 10 Cathcart Square to resume our conversation."

"Why, in the name of all that is wonderful—" began Reginald Davis, but his sister motioned him to silence.

"Don't interrupt, please, you will know everything in a few minutes. I went to Number 10 Cathcart Square at the time appointed. He opened the door himself. It was a big house in an old-fashioned square, ages old, I should say, and in the front court was an agent's board, intimating that this particular house was to let, furnished."

"I know Cathcart Square well, it's in an old-world quarter of Kensington," interrupted Davis. He added grimly, "I know it well, although I did not have the misfortune to commit suicide there."

"He told me a very funny story. The afternoon of the day before, he had been up to Kensington to visit an old nurse of the family who lived near by. He had strolled round to Cathcart Square to fill up an idle half-hour.

He had been struck by the appearance of the house, and loitered before it, when suddenly the door opened, and a somewhat bibulous-looking caretaker came out."

Davis indulged in a sigh of relief. "We are really coming to it now, then?"

"Yes, you are coming to it. He told me a sudden idea had occurred to him. Here would be a quiet little spot for our meetings, a place where Roddie would never dream of following us. He accosted the caretaker, evidently a drunken and corrupt creature. He explained that he wanted to rent a couple of rooms where he could receive a certain visitor he was expecting in the course of the next week or fortnight. It was no use going to the house agents for that, they would turn down such a proposition. The caretaker, with a couple of five-pound notes in his hand, took an intelligent view of the situation. He gave Hugh a key, and intimated that, if he had sufficient notice, he would make himself scarce on the occasions when the visitor was expected."

"Of all the mad things—" began Davis, but his sister for the second time motioned her brother to silence.

"Not quite so mad as you think. I fancy I can see into his mind. We could have met at a dozen different restaurants in London, but Roddie was here, there and everywhere: at any moment he might have come across us. He would never get as far as Kensington." David nodded his sagacious head. "I think I see. Go on."

"I met him there, in all four times, the last meeting was a few days before the tragedy."

"And what took place at that meeting?"

"He paid me the seven thousand pounds in notes. I signed a paper agreeing to give Roddie up. I carried out my bargain. I wrote Roddie that same night, giving him his dismissal, and assuring him that nothing he could urge would induce me to reconsider my determination. He sent me frantic telegrams the next day, but I replied to the same effect. After taking his seven thousand pounds, I could not break faith with Hugh, could I?"

Davis was not quite sure that Iris would not break faith with anybody if it suited her purpose. But clearly Hugh Murchison had subjugated her to the extent of respecting an honourable bargain. No doubt she had fallen in love with him, so far as a person of her shallow temperament could fall in love.

“And what has become of Roddie?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. He has bored me to extinction for over nine months. I am glad to be shut of him.”

Davis put a question. “You say Hugh Murchison paid you in notes. What have you done with them? His bank will have the numbers.”

“Will they?” cried Iris, the frightened look again coming into her eyes; she knew nothing of business methods. “I paid them into my own account. Now, you see, if you rake this up I might be implicated.”

“Your opinion is, then, that the man found in Number 10 Cathcart Square was Hugh Murchison?”

“I am as nearly sure as I can be, after reading the caretaker’s evidence. He had some other stunt on beside my own. I was not the only visitor he received.”

Davis thought deeply before he spoke. “If I have him dug up, and he is identified by those who know him, a lot will come to light. Your notes will be traced, for one thing.”

“I am afraid of everything, Reggie. For the love of Heaven, let him rest where he is.” Caroline Masters breathed softly to herself. “You were half in love with him, or perhaps three-quarters, and you don’t want to know the real truth. Oh, you miserable little, paltry soul!”

And then a sudden thought came to Davis. “Now, Iris, you could never think very clearly about things when they got a little bit complicated. You are quite sure the last occasion on which you saw him was a few days before the discovery of the body?”

“I will swear to it,” cried Iris firmly.

“The date of his cheque, which the Bank has, will show that. He probably cashed it himself on the day he paid you, any way the day before. Now, on the day preceding and the day following that tragedy, can you prove where you were?”

Iris began to see light. “Of course I can. The day after I had the notes, I got up a sprained ankle, an obliging doctor, an old (or rather young) friend of mine, sent a certificate to the theatre. I motored down to Brighton with Johnny Lascelles—who, by the way, used to make Roddie fearfully jealous. We joined a jolly little party at ‘The Old Ship.’ I came back the day after the discovery in Cathcart Square.”

Davis rose and gave a great shout: “You have witnesses who can swear to that?”

“Of course,” answered Iris, not even yet comprehending the full drift of the question. “Johnny Lascelles motored me there and drove me back. Then there was Cissy Monteith, Katie Havard, Jack Legard and others who were with me all the time.”

“You silly little idiot,” cried Reginald Davis. “And what the deuce do you mean by saying that you might be implicated?”

“The notes,” she faltered. “My meeting him alone in that empty house. They might suggest I murdered him, if you say he was murdered.”

Davis smote his forehead in impotent anger at her denseness. “How could you have murdered him when you were at Brighton all the time?”

He smote the palms of his hands together.

“I will find out who the dead man was, and also the man who forged my name to that letter to the Coroner.”

He turned to his sister: “As for you, young woman, it may be you will have a bad quarter of an hour, if it all comes out about Roddie. But never mind, you will have a splendid advertisement. The next bunch of letters you get hold of, the price will be twice seven thousand pounds.”

Chapter Twenty Two.

The following morning Reginald Davis, resolved to unearth the mystery of 10 Cathcart Square, stood in the private room of Mr Bryant of Scotland Yard.

He had easily overcome his younger sister's scruples, her terror at having to give evidence in a court of justice, and being forced to disclose certain transactions not too creditable to herself. She had come to see from the point of view artfully suggested by Davis, that, on the whole, it would be a very good advertisement. It might even take her from her place in the chorus to a small acting part, and then her fortune would be made. She might be able to come across another rich man whom she would like well enough to marry, a man quite different from the somewhat invertebrate Roddie.

Bryant looked up from his papers, and regarded the young man with his keen and steady gaze. Davis's good looks, and frank air impressed him favourably.

"Well, my man, what do you want with me? I don't usually see strangers who approach me in such a mysterious fashion. You would neither state your name nor business, only said vaguely that you wanted to interview me on a matter of great urgency."

"I wished to keep my business for your private ear, sir. Can you throw your mind back to a certain gruesome affair that happened at 10 Cathcart Square?"

"Certainly, although I was not in charge of the matter. The man was identified as Reginald Davis, who was wanted on a charge of murder, the circumstantial evidence against him being very strong; the verdict returned was one of suicide. If I recollect rightly, he had broken a pane of glass in one of the back windows of the house, unhasped the latch of the window, and cut his throat upstairs after he got inside. The facts were accepted at the time as conclusive evidence of his guilt."

"And you recollect, sir, what happened a short time ago with regard to the

crime of which Reginald Davis was accused?”

“Perfectly. The real criminal has confessed. And this poor devil, overwhelmed no doubt by the circumstantial evidence which told so strongly against him, acted too hastily.”

“If the police had caught him, he would probably have been hanged by now,” said Davis a little bitterly.

Mr Bryant looked a little uneasy. “I should say it is more than probable from what I remember of the case; well, you know, the law makes mistakes at times, I will admit.”

“And juries at inquests make mistakes at times, also,” remarked Davis quietly. “This particular jury made a mistake. The dead man was no more Reginald Davis than you are.”

It was not easy to startle Mr Bryant, he had been through too many strange experiences for that, but he exhibited a mild surprise as he put the question: “And what authority have you for saying that?”

“I think you will admit the best. I, who stand before you, am the Reginald Davis who was wanted on that false charge of murder, and branded by that intelligent jury as a suicide.”

“You can prove this, of course. I mean that you are the real Reginald Davis.”

“Of course I can, sir; I can bring a dozen witnesses, if necessary, half of whom have known me since a boy.”

Needless to say that a man of Bryant’s experience did not, as a rule, believe one quarter of what he was told. But this man’s face—this man’s tones—convinced him that he was listening to the truth.

He rose from his chair. “Wait here a moment, please, while I hunt up the particulars of this case. As I told you just now, I was not in charge of it, and I should like to refresh my memory as to certain details.”

He came back after a few moments. “I know it all now, from A to Z. You

were identified by a married sister, a Mrs Masters, who gave some details of your career, which did not seem to have been a very healthy one. She was also shown a letter which you were supposed to have written to the Coroner, and she believed it to be in your handwriting. This wants some explanation, I think, Mr Davis, to call you by the name which you say is your right one."

"Quite so, sir," answered Reginald composedly. "It certainly requires a good deal of explanation, but if you will listen to me with a little patience, I think I can convince you that the thing is more natural than it appears." The Inspector threw himself back in his chair: "I have no doubt it was your sister who identified you, but how did she come to mistake the actual suicide for you?"

And Mr Davis gave the explanation which Bryant might believe or not, or believe in part, as he chose.

"My sister Caroline was deeply attached to me. She was in despair when she heard that I was suspected of murder, and was being hunted by the police. As day after day, week after week, went by, and there was no news of my capture, she got it firmly fixed in her mind that I had committed suicide. She hunted the newspapers every morning to find some paragraph that would confirm her fears. And then one day she read about what had happened at Cathcart Square."

Mr Bryant was now deeply interested. He leaned forward in his chair, and his attitude betokened his eagerness.

"It is possible that her mind had become a little unhinged by her anxiety. She expected to find me, and she found a man who might have passed for my twin brother. So she tells me now that I have revealed myself, for, of course, I lay very low until this belated confession of the real murderer."

Bryant only made a brief comment on this particular portion of the narrative which Davis was twisting about with some skill. Of course, Mrs Masters had not been deceived by the accidental resemblance, but in pretending to be she had given that brother a new lease of life.

"You say that the man was so like you that the sister, who had known you

from childhood, was ready to swear he was her brother?”

“There is no doubt, sir, that at the time her mind was clouded. She went there expecting to find me, and as a not altogether unnatural result, she found what she expected.”

“We will let that pass,” said the Inspector drily. “No doubt, under extraordinary circumstances, strange hallucinations are apt to occur. It was very fortunate for you that your sister made that mistake, and that it was accepted. As you admitted just now, if you had been caught and tried it would have gone very hardly with you.”

Whatever Bryant thought in his own mind, it was evident that he was prepared to admit that Mrs Masters had acted in good faith when she swore that the dead man was her brother. Davis could see there would be no trouble on that score.

“Now we come to the letter,” pursued Davis. “I questioned my sister very closely about that last night. She says she was so overwhelmed with the discovery that she read that letter through a mist, as it were, but she is positive that it closely resembled my handwriting.”

“Another hallucination, I suppose, or an accidental resemblance. Well, if you will leave a specimen of your own calligraphy with us, we can compare them,” said Bryant.

“And I suppose, sir, you will have the body exhumed, for the purpose of discovering who the man really was?”

“I suppose so,” replied the Inspector a little unwillingly. “Although I don’t expect we shall ever find out. Nobody came forward at the time when your sister made that mistake. Is it likely anybody will come forward now? Some poor derelict, weary of life I suppose, without kith or kin to claim him at the end. There are scores of suicides in the year, Mr Davis, who are buried unidentified.”

He added, after a moment’s pause: “Of course, before taking any such steps, we must formally prove, from unimpeachable testimony, that not only are you Reginald Davis, but the particular Reginald Davis who was falsely accused of murder.”

“I quite understand,” answered Davis a little stiffly. “Before I leave this room, I will indicate the quarters where you can obtain the information you want.”

“Then, when I have verified that, I will ask you to come and see me again.” Bryant’s manner as he said these words, indicated that the interview was at an end.

But Davis kept his seat, he had not finished yet.

“May I take the liberty of detaining you for a few moments longer, sir, to impress upon you the importance of having that body exhumed? You may be correct in your theory it is that of some poor derelict, but I have a different theory altogether.”

The Inspector looked sharply at him, and drew a deep breath. “Ah, then, you have some knowledge of something: your visit to me has been leading up to this, eh?”

“No actual knowledge, sir, but a surmise that has, I venture to think, some foundation. I have two sisters. The elder one I have already spoken of to you.”

There was a slight note of sarcasm in the Inspector’s voice as he replied, “Yes, Mrs Masters, whose fortunate mistake was of such excellent service to you, during the time you were waiting for the real criminal’s confession.” Davis did not suffer himself to resent this. Of course, a man of the world like Bryant did not believe in this camouflaged story. Mrs Masters was a clever young woman, and had taken advantage of an accidental resemblance to get her brother out of jeopardy.

“My other sister, Iris Deane, is in the chorus of the Frivolity Theatre. I don’t suppose you have ever heard of her?”

Mr Bryant shook his head. He knew a great deal about all classes of criminals, but young ladies in the chorus of the Frivolity, or any other theatre, were not in his line.

“She was at Mrs Masters’s house last night. She came over especially to welcome me, on my re-introduction to the world which I was supposed to

have quitted. She made to us a very startling confession, and that confession is intimately associated with the events at Cathcart Square."

And this time, Bryant was genuinely surprised, and was at no pains to conceal it. Reginald Davis—he was beginning to believe in the man's identity now—was evidently a member of a very remarkable family.

"You astound me, Mr Davis. Yourself and both your sisters mixed up with what happened there! It sounds like a romance. Pray proceed!"

Davis told the story as Iris had told him, carefully concealing the names of the two men concerned in it for the moment. He was careful to point out that on the night of the suicide she could establish a complete and unquestioned alibi.

Bryant turned on him sharply. "It occurs to me that you don't think it was a suicide, Mr Davis."

"I don't, sir, and at present I can't quite tell you why."

"But you must have some reason for thinking that," said Bryant in the same sharp tone.

"My only reason is this—if the man who was buried under the name of Reginald Davis is the man I believe him to be, there was no earthly reason why he should commit suicide. To the best of my belief, he was murdered for some motive that I cannot guess, and the murderer, after cutting his throat, put the razor in his stiffening hand."

"It is a theory worth thinking about," said Bryant, who was beginning to appreciate his visitor very much. "And now, Mr Davis, the name of the man whom your sister met in the empty house?"

"I have kept that to the last, to surprise you. You will know the name, but I don't suppose you ever came across the man. It was Major Hugh Murchison."

At this startling announcement, the Inspector literally jumped from his chair.

“But I do know Major Hugh Murchison,” he cried. “He was in my office not so very long ago. Let me see, when was it?”

He turned to his diary and verified the date, and gave it to Reginald Davis. It was longer back than he thought.

“And you have not seen him since that day?”

“No,” answered the Inspector. “Wait a moment till I ring up my friend Parkinson. I couldn’t undertake the job he called on, as it was quite a private matter. I handed it over to Parkinson.”

He rang up his old friend and former colleague. Davis could gather enough from the conversation on Bryant’s side to be sure that a considerable interval had elapsed since Parkinson had seen his client.

Bryant sat down in his chair. “Mr Davis, I cannot say how much obliged I am to you for your visit, and the information you have given me. Now, I know a great deal more than you do about the proceedings and movements of Major Murchison, I know on what business he was engaged, in addition to that little matter of your sister’s. I will go into the inquiries concerning yourself, and please hold yourself at my disposal, give me an address where I can communicate with you readily.”

Davis did so, and said good-bye to the Inspector.

After he had left, Bryant gave instructions he was not to be disturbed for an hour. And during that hour he did the hardest bit of thinking he had ever done in his life.

And now that Davis had mentioned it, the man did bear a superficial resemblance to Hugh Murchison.

Chapter Twenty Three.

It was a very hard nut he had to crack. Thanks to his peculiar position, he was in possession of reliable and exclusive information from more than one quarter. He held several threads in his capable hands, but would he be able to weave them into a net wide enough for his purpose?

His recent interview with Davis had established the fact that four persons were connected with the mystery of Cathcart Square—Davis himself, Caroline Masters (the elder sister), Iris Deane (the younger sister), and, most important of all, Hugh Murchison.

He dismissed, for the moment, the first three from his mind. But Hugh Murchison, with his resemblance to Reginald Davis, was the connecting link between them and another set of actors.

Murchison had consulted him with the view of identifying Mrs Spencer and George Dutton with the Norah and George Burton of those far-off days at Blankfield, and he had identified them as the same persons. He had then handed over the Major to the astute Parkinson, who would find out as much as he could with regard to the present relations between the precious pair.

Bryant had been very busy of late, and he had almost dismissed the Murchison episode from his mind. But when the Major had completed his investigations he would undoubtedly take steps to turn such a scheming and unscrupulous adventuress out of her husband’s house. As to the way in which he would proceed to accomplish that purpose, Bryant, of course, had no knowledge. Neither did he know which Murchison would approach first, the husband or the wife. Perhaps both together.

One thing stood out pretty clearly, from the evidence of Iris Deane, that she had met Murchison alone at the house in Cathcart Square a few days before the discovery of the dead body.

Another thing also stood out equally clearly, that the dead man bore a remarkable likeness to Reginald Davis. If not, Caroline Masters would not have dared to perjure herself as she had done. And he himself had

recognised the superficial resemblance between the two men.

Assuming that it was a murder, and not a suicide, and Bryant was beginning to incline, like Davis, to the former theory, why had the murderer fixed upon the name of Reginald Davis, and forged a letter to the Coroner? He must have been somebody who had known Davis at some time, and was acquainted with his handwriting. Like Caroline Masters, he must have been inclined to do the hunted fugitive a good turn, and have trusted to his gratitude to keep a silent tongue.

An hour's steady thinking had cleared his brain. The conclusions he arrived at were as follows: Hugh Murchison had been murdered by somebody, and buried as a suicide under the name of Reginald Davis. The next question was who was the murderer, and what was the motive for committing the murder? Here he could make a pretty shrewd guess. If Murchison had gone about his mission in a straightforward, but rather blundering, fashion the motive was clear enough.

With Bryant to think was to act. Davis was having a week's holiday in London, staying with his sister, Mrs Masters. That same afternoon the young man was again in the Inspector's room, in response to an urgent summons on the telephone.

"Now, Mr Davis, I have been thinking deeply over this rather complicated affair of Cathcart Square, and I am beginning to see a streak or two of daylight. I told you this morning I know a bit more about Major Murchison than you do, and there is just a chance you might help me. I take it you have had a somewhat adventurous career, your sister admitted as much at the inquest. She said in fact that you had been the black sheep of the family."

Davis hung his head in a shame-faced fashion. "I have to admit it, sir. It's no use attempting to deny it, when Carrie gave me away like that."

"I have no desire to pry into your past, except so far as it helps me in my present quest. But I expect, in your time, you have associated with a few undesirable characters." Reginald Davis admitted the fact quite frankly.

"Now, of course, it is only just a chance. But did you ever come across a man named George Burton, and a young woman who passed as his

sister? My first knowledge of them is that they ran a gambling-saloon in Paris, she a good-looking girl, acting as decoy. Then he quitted the card-sharping game and went in for more criminal pursuits."

"I did know them, sir. If I tell you what I do know, am I letting myself in for anything?" queried Mr Davis cautiously. "You see, since that awful thing happened, I have turned over a new leaf. Nobody could tempt me to go the least bit on the crook."

"Make your mind quite easy, Davis. We have nothing against you. You know that, or you would have hardly dared to come to life again."

"Well, sir, I did know George Burton pretty intimately at one time, after he left Paris. He was in the forgery business and he tried to drag me in, but I was clever enough to keep out of it. They used, in his own set, to call him 'George the Penman.'"

"Good," said Bryant; "and what did you know about the girl?"

"Not very much, sir. She passed as his sister, but one or two of his pals believed her to be his wife, although there was no evidence of it."

"Did you ever learn anything of her origin?"

"Well, one chap who seemed to know more about them than their other pals, told me that she was by way of being a lady, the illegitimate daughter of a man well-known in London Society."

"Do you know the name of the man?"

Davis tapped his forehead in the effort of recollection.

"It's on the tip of my tongue, sir: it will come to me in a moment—a man who was mixed up in a gambling scandal, and had to leave the country. Ah, I have got it now, he was known familiarly as Tommie Esmond."

Mr Bryant rose. He had got all he could out of his new acquaintance. The threads in his hand were drawing closer into a web.

"Well, Mr Davis, good-day. Many thanks for the information you have

given me, it has been very helpful. I will keep in touch with you."

"And you think, with me, it was a murder, and not a suicide?" questioned Davis as he left.

But Bryant was not the man to express a decided opinion until he was fully justified by the facts. He kept his thoughts to himself till the last moment.

He smiled pleasantly. "Time will show. I shall have that body exhumed, as soon as I have made a few further inquiries."

Davis had to be content with this oracular utterance, and bowed himself out. He solaced himself by narrating all that had occurred to the wondering Carrie.

The matter had now become one for the activities of Scotland Yard. The first thing to be done was to ascertain the whereabouts of Hugh Murchison, that is to say, if he was still in the land of the living. Some time had elapsed since he had communicated with Parkinson. Of course, in itself, there would be nothing strange in that. Parkinson had got the information that was required, been paid for it, and with that payment, their relations had ended.

Bryant went to the hotel where the Major had stayed, at any rate up to the time that the detective had last seen him, and interviewed the manager, whom he had known for some years in his professional capacity. This person, a genial and cosmopolitan Italian, readily answered his questions.

Yes, the Major had stayed there for some little time. When he came, he explained that he was only paying a flying visit to London. Had he brought a servant with him? No, he had not. A somewhat strange omission for a man in his position, was it not? The circumstance was easily explained. The Major had had to dismiss his late valet for theft, and was not in a hurry, for the present, to suit himself with a fresh one. This he had told the manager and he was valeted at the hotel.

He had left some time. How long? The manager would find out the exact date. This he did. On the afternoon of the fourth of July. The Major had

taken his things down to Victoria Station in a cab with the view of depositing them there, as he was going to take an evening train to Brighton.

Bryant brightened up at this information. The discovery of the dead body at Cathcart Square had taken place early on the morning of the fifth.

Now arose the question, had the Major got through his business with the Spencers before the fourth of July? In that case Mrs Spencer was hardly likely to be still living at Eaton Place with her husband.

Inquiries at Eaton Place soon established the fact that Mrs Spencer was still there. What had happened? Had the Major communicated the result of his research to the husband, with the result that, infatuated with his wife, that husband had refused to credit the story and accepted Stella's denials?

It was a fairly plausible theory. When men are deeply in love, women can twist them round their little finger. In that case, it was easy to understand that, disgusted with the failure of his intervention, the Major had made up his mind to leave London at once.

One other thing was to be done, to ascertain if the Major had intimated to any of his friends his intention of leaving London so abruptly. For this purpose, Bryant sought out the brother Roderick, who had rooms in Jermyn Street.

Yes, Roderick had met the Major in Bond Street in the morning, and learned of the proposed journey to Brighton. The young man added that his brother was very erratic in his movements, and sometimes would disappear for weeks at a stretch without communicating with any of his friends or relatives.

There was now one of two theories that stood out: the first one that Guy Spencer had been told, and refused to believe the true facts about his wife. The second was, that the Major had shirked the unpleasantness of a personal interview of such a delicate character, and had gone down to Brighton intending to write privately to Spencer from there.

Further inquiries elicited the fact that the Major had never made that

projected journey to Brighton. His belongings had never been claimed, they were still lying in the cloak room at Victoria Station.

There was now no further doubt as to what steps had to be taken. The Major had disappeared at a date practically coinciding with the discovery of the dead body at Cathcart Square, the dead body which had been wrongly identified as that of Reginald Davis, whose likeness to the Major was so pronounced. Of that fact, Bryant himself was aware.

The authorities were applied to, and gave permission for the body to be exhumed. As the living Reginald Davis had established his identity to the satisfaction of Scotland Yard, it was necessary to find out, if possible, that of the man who had been mistaken for him.

The body was exhumed and pronounced by half-a-dozen people, including Guy Spencer, to be that of the Major.

It had now become clearly a case of murder, and although those in charge of the case had little or no doubt as to the guilty persons, it might have been very difficult to prove, but for one convincing fact, supplied by the murdered man himself.

But this evidence, which was overwhelming, the police kept to themselves for some little time, for their own good reasons.

Chapter Twenty Four.

The luggage which had been left at Victoria Station on the fatal day was, of course, seized by the police. They searched it thoroughly in the hope that they would find something useful to them in the shape of letters or memoranda.

Of letters there were only two, brief ones from Iris Deane, in which she expressed her determination of sticking out for her ten thousand pounds. As we know, in the end she gave way and accepted seven.

But they did find one priceless thing, and that was a diary, bound in red leather, a small volume as to the size of the page, but very bulky. It had evidently been the dead man's habit to keep a fairly close record of his doings, for it was numbered, and contained entries from some date in May 1919 up to July 3rd, the day before he left the hotel, and announced to the manager that he intended to take a late train to Brighton.

For the twentieth time since he had discovered this important piece of evidence, Mr Bryant sat in his room at Scotland Yard, reading and re-reading the entries which he knew almost by heart.

With the entries before the visit to London, Bryant had no concern. They recorded trifling events which had no reference to the tragedy at Cathcart Square. There was, of course, allusion to the letter from Roderick which had so startled his family, the letter announcing his engagement to the chorus-girl, Iris Deane, and his fixed resolve to make her his wife. There was a note of a family council, in which the elder brother was deputed to approach the young woman herself, with the object of buying her off.

There were a few records of his first days in London, after a long absence, his visits to his clubs, his meeting with old pre-war acquaintances, his first interview with Iris Deane, the difficulty of arranging further interviews either at his hotel or her flat, owing to the fear of Roddie popping in unexpectedly.

Then came the whimsical record of his strolling round Kensington, halting opposite the house with the board announcing that it was to be let

furnished, his interview with the accommodating caretaker who, in return for a very handsome *douceur*, gave him a duplicate key to enter the house at any time he liked. He had casually mentioned to Miles that his name was Sanderson.

The Major seemed childishly pleased over what he considered a very astute move, especially the giving of another name. Here in this quiet backwater of the world, for so it would seem to a man of his wealth and position, he could continue his negotiations with the somewhat obstinate Iris. In the portion of the diary concerned with the grasping and frivolous young chorus-girl, Bryant was not greatly interested. He had learned this already from Iris Deane, whom he had interviewed a few times, and Reginald Davis.

He turned from the bulky little volume, the pages of which were covered with the Major's small, rather methodical handwriting, to a slenderer book lying beside him. Into this had been copied all the extracts bearing on the relations between the dead man and Mrs Spencer, otherwise Stella Keane, otherwise Norah Burton.

The first entry recorded the dinner-party at Carlton House Terrace, when he had been struck by the remarkable likeness of his friend's wife to the pretty adventuress at Blankfield, who had driven his old friend, Jack Pomfret, to his death; his endeavours to startle her by allusions to that garrison town.

An important entry was that of his interview with his old acquaintance at the club, Gilbert Fairfax, from whom he had learned something of the atmosphere of the L'Estrange flat in Elsinore Gardens, the branding of Tommie Esmond as a card-sharper, the flight of the fat little man to the Continent, the visit of Stella Keane to Charing Cross Station to bid the detected cheat farewell. There was a comment upon this fact: "Whether she is Norah Burton or not, her intimacy with the L'Estrange set, her solicitude for Tommie Esmond, are sufficient to make her unfit to be the wife of a straight, honest fellow like my old friend Guy Spencer."

There followed further entries, relating his interview with Bryant, the confirmation by the detective that Stella Keane was Norah Burton, that George Dutton, the keeper of the obscure little bucket-shop in the City,

was the same George Burton who had been arrested at Blankfield on a charge of forgery, and who, thanks to one of the cleverest advocates at the criminal bar, had got off with a very light sentence.

There was a full record of the long interview with Mrs Spencer, in which she had been finally confounded, and forced to confession, of her acceptance of his terms, of the words she had uttered when, while rather regretting that things could not go on as they were, lamenting the fact that her accuser had ever been born, she was not at all satisfied with her present environment, and would experience a certain measure of relief in quitting it for a more congenial sphere.

On the day he had parted from her, the day on which she had yielded to his inflexible determination that she must remain under her husband's roof as short a time as possible, he recorded the fact that, up to the present moment, he had not made up his mind as to the precise way in which he was going to bring about the separation. He wanted to choose the way which would least hurt Guy.

There had flashed through his mind that, in addition to the confession she was about to make to him of her whole career, she should confess to her husband that she was not legally his wife, being in reality the wife of George Burton, alias George Dutton. There followed here a note. "I am convinced she and this rascal were married, the sister and cousin dodges were always a fake. I must see Parkinson to find out if he can ferret out anything on that point. But the time is short. In a week I must be ready for action."

A further entry showed that he had called on Parkinson with this object, only to learn that the detective had gone on an important mission abroad, and could undertake no further work till his return, which would be some ten days hence. That idea therefore had to be dismissed. He must think out some other plan.

Then came the last and most important entry of all, dated on the fourth of July, written no doubt a few hours before he took his luggage to Victoria Station.

"I meet Norah Burton, I always think of her by that old name, at Cathcart

Square at six o'clock to-night. I have given the caretaker a holiday to keep him out of the way. I have drawn up two copies of the confession, one of which she is to sign. I have also drawn up an undertaking on my part to keep her from want in case Guy should prove obdurate. But this I am sure he will not do. Besides, if she is his wife, and thinking it over, I have my doubts as to whether she was ever really married to Burton, he would have to support her, in spite of her unsavoury associations."

Bryant paused for a moment as he finished this paragraph to reflect a little. Personally, he did not believe that she was the wife of George Burton; in his opinion, their association had been the result of mutual interests. With this knowledge hanging over her head, she would hardly have been daring enough to go through the ceremony of marriage with two other men. Anyway, it was a debatable point.

Moreover, Burton, like most criminals, would be very wide-awake and calculating. To marry her would be to handicap himself. He could get more out of her by marrying her to a rich man.

Then came the last paragraph of all.

"Now, for my action after the final interview of to-night, when she has signed the confession. I may do one of two things, forbid her to return to her husband's house, and go myself straight to Eaton Place, and break the news to Spencer without any preamble. In that case, I shall take with me some ready money to hand to her, as she will probably have very little upon her.

"And yet I rather shrink from this course; it would be painful for me to watch his agony while I struck such a terrible blow. I will run down to Brighton, drop him a note telling him that an important letter will reach him at his club by registered post to-morrow, that he is on no account to let his wife know he has heard from me till he has read the contents of that registered packet.

"I shall post him the copy of the confession, telling him he can inspect the original at any time he likes, meeting me either in Brighton or London, leaving him to deal with her as he chooses. After all, his is the right to dispose of his private affairs, my duty really ends when I have put him in

possession of the facts. My first method must have the effect of creating open scandal at once, by my insisting upon her not returning to Eaton Place.

“He may wish to devise some plan that will create a scandal less open, to save, as far as he can, the disgrace to himself and his family. If I know the man, and here, perhaps, I am arguing from the knowledge only of my own temperament, I should say his love would turn to hatred after he reads that confession. Jack Pomfret was a weaker man than Guy, but he acted as I should have done under the circumstances, and refused all farther communication with her, refused to give her the opportunity of denial or explanation.

“Still, there is no knowing to what lengths a deep-rooted infatuation for a fascinating woman will lead a man. In this respect, Guy may be less adamant than Pomfret, although I am sure he will never imitate poor Jack’s final weakness. He is too sturdily built for that.

“When confronted with that confession she may plead artfully, and, perhaps to him, convincingly, that while she admits everything contained in it, she was more sinned against than sinning, that she tried to escape from her odious bondage by marrying Jack, and that with his suicide and the frustration of her hopes, she was compelled to return to an environment which she loathed. He might consent to believe and forgive, although to me such a thing seems incredible, impossible.”

Bryant closed the book on the last entry. That little red-leather volume threw a lurid light on the mystery of Cathcart Square. The exhumed body was found to be that of Major Murchison, wrongly identified in the first instance as that of Reginald Davis. It was all very clear.

That meeting had taken place, and the unfortunate man had been done to death by the precious pair, Norah Burton and the scoundrel brother, cousin or life-long lover, whichever he was. Reginald Davis was an old acquaintance of theirs, had been possibly a more intimate one than the cautious Davis was prepared to admit. They took with them letters addressed to their old friend, they forged a letter from him intimating his intention to commit suicide.

If Davis read of all this in the papers, he was too concerned with his own danger to emerge from his hiding-place and publish the truth to the world. He would be thankful that, through the villainy of others, he could take a new lease of life, unmenaced by detection. Of course, they had never thought of the possibility that Davis would be cleared by the confession of the real criminal. Like Scotland Yard, they were sure he was guilty, and his silence was a matter of certainty.

And slowly Bryant, drawing from the stores of his vast experience, began to construct in his own mind the details of the murder, executed by two desperate criminals, almost driven to the verge of madness by the knowledge that their carefully-laid plans were about to be frustrated by the action of one man.

The woman, the weaker of the two, was probably more disposed to yield to the force and strength of circumstances. Once before, in her marriage to Jack Pomfret, she had had the cup snatched from her lips, and bowed to the inevitable. From the few words recorded in the Major's accusing diary, it would seem that, secured of a modest competence, she was ready a second time to accept her fate.

And then, in that week's interval, it was easy to guess what had happened. She had consulted her old partner in crime, George Burton. He had reasoned, as it turned out, a little shallowly, remove Murchison, and the danger will be past. The resemblance of Murchison to Reginald Davis had occurred to the pair, hence the cunningly prepared letters.

And how was the actual murder accomplished? Had they gone to Cathcart Square together, or had Burton followed her, getting in by means of that broken window-pane at the back? And did they know the Major was alone? In that last interview with Mrs Spencer, had he let out the fact that he had given the caretaker a holiday, so that they should not be disturbed?

These were side problems that could not be solved at the moment. Only two persons could solve them, and those two, in all probability, would never speak.

But how had they killed him? The Major was a strong, muscular fellow

who would fight tenaciously for his life. Norah Burton was a slender woman, almost verging on frailness, George Dutton, to call him by his latest name, was certainly of a muscular build, although of only average height.

Well, of course, they had foreseen and prepared for all that. While talking to him, she had sprayed over him the essence of some overpowering and stupefying drug, and while he was staggering about, dazed and blinded, the man had stepped in and done the rest.

Owing to the absence of the caretaker, they had plenty of time. They had rifled his pockets, taking out of them the money which, according to his diary, he had brought along with him, his personal belongings, the ticket which he had received at the luggage room of Victoria Station, and, of course, the confession which Norah Burton had or had not signed. No doubt, they had also examined his linen and underclothing to make sure that his name was not on them. If it had been, they would have dealt with it by stripping the body.

They had carried it out pretty well, on the whole. There were two things they had not reckoned on. One was the resuscitation of Reginald Davis. The other was the fact that Murchison kept a diary, one of the last things that a man of his sort was likely to do.

Bryant, although not a very emotional man, felt very depressed as he came to the result of his meditations. He felt sure that, if Norah Burton could have had her own way, she would have accepted her fate, gone forth on the world again with the slender pittance that either of the two men, her husband or his friend, would have allowed her.

She had suffered herself to be dominated by a more reckless and criminal spirit, with the result that the life of an honourable man had been taken, and she was already standing at the foot of the gallows.

The pair, only knowing that the body had been exhumed and proved to be that of Hugh Murchison—a terribly disturbing thought to them—but ignorant of the discovery of that incriminating diary, were being closely watched. But they felt sure that nothing could be traced to them, they had hidden their tracks so cleverly, as they thought.

It was now only a question of a few hours as to when they should be taken. And Bryant felt that Guy Spencer should know the truth before anybody else. Poor fellow! He would soften the blow to him as much as he could.

That same evening he went round to Eaton Place, about seven o'clock. He reckoned that he would catch Spencer before he went up to dress for dinner. "Poor devil," thought Bryant, "he won't have much appetite for dinner after he has read through that diary!"

Spencer was in the library, and the detective, whom he had met before in connection with the mystery of Cathcart Square, was shown in. Spencer welcomed him with his usual cordiality.

"Good-evening, Mr Bryant. Any fresh light upon this terrible thing?"

The footman had left the library door slightly open, after showing Bryant in, and had retired swiftly to his quarters.

He was hardly out of the hall when Stella opened the front-door with her key, and glided noiselessly in. All her movements were noiseless, suggesting, as somebody had once remarked of her, the silent motions of a snake. She always carried a key, declaring that she could not be kept waiting for servants to answer the door.

The library door was open, through the aperture she heard voices, and one of them she recognised. It was that of the Scotland Yard detective, who had cross-examined her very closely as to her various meetings with the dead man. She had been afraid of Bryant. He had looked at her so searchingly, and his manner always conveyed that he knew so much more than he was prepared to disclose.

Bryant was speaking in a low, but very clear voice. Her hearing was singularly acute, and she could catch every word.

"I am come on a very painful errand, Mr Spencer. There is a small volume here which throws a very clear light on what happened at Cathcart Square on that fatal evening of July the fourth."

Guy's cheerful accents rang out. "You mean you have got a clue, Mr

Bryant. But why painful to me? If you are on the track of the murderer of my poor old friend, nobody will be more rejoiced than I.”

Again the low, grave tones of Bryant:

“Mr Spencer, you will be a very stricken man when you have read through it. Your poor friend left behind him a very copious diary, made up to the morning of the day on which he was murdered. The original is at my office, you can inspect it at any time you like. This is a copy of the entries relating to Cathcart Square. It touches your domestic life very closely, in addition to proving why and by whom he was murdered.”

Stella waited to hear no more. Her face had gone livid, she felt shaking in every limb. That her old enemy, Murchison, had left a diary! They had never thought of that possibility. The game was up. She had staked something on her marriage as Norah Burton with Jack Pomfret, and had lost. This time she had staked everything and lost again, but now she had lost liberty and life in addition. There was but one end. She must seek at once the man who had, in a way, been a good and faithful friend, but also her evil genius.

She stole as quietly out of the hall as she had entered it, and hailed a passing taxi. She knew she would never enter the house at Eaton Place again.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Mrs Spencer had plenty of money in her pocket. She was always accustomed to carry a large sum about her. Her adventurous life had taught her that it was always wiser to have a good amount of cash in her possession. The time might come at any moment when you were in a tight corner. She had promised a handsome reward to the taxi-cab driver if he could get to a certain destination within the speed limit.

That destination was Kew Bridge, where it abuts on a little-known neighbourhood called Strand-on-the-Green.

At the foot of Kew Bridge, the wretched and hunted woman halted, and paid the driver his extravagant fare. What did it matter what she paid to-night? To-morrow she might not be able to pay. She shuddered as she thought of that to-morrow.

The taxi-driver drove slowly out of sight. She waited, from a sense of habitual caution, till he was well out of the way. And then, remembering everything, she smiled bitterly. Was there any need of caution now?

She went down a narrow lane, halted at the door of a small cottage, and rang the front-door bell. As she did so, she was aware of a man a few yards away from her, who seemed to be strolling aimlessly about, a man dressed in ill-fitting clothes, and heavy boots.

A detective certainly! This man had followed her from Eaton Place in a taxi almost as swift as her own. Bryant knew his business, he was not going to lose sight of her, or of her reputed cousin, George Dutton.

The door was opened cautiously by George Dutton, alias George Burton.

It was a small furnished cottage that he had rented for some months past, at a rent commensurate with his means. He kept no servant; a feeble old woman came in the morning to clean him up and prepare his breakfast. When he came back at night from the not very prosperous bucket-shop, he looked after himself, and cooked over a gas-stove his evening meal.

The evenings were drawing in, and it was rather a dark night. He peered for a moment at his visitor, before he recognised her.

“Stella, by all that is wonderful.” He called her by the new name, not the old one of Norah. “Come in, dear, but your arrival in this unexpected fashion does not suggest good news.”

She passed hastily through the open doorway. “Shut it quick,” she said, in a low, hoarse voice. “There is a man watching outside, I am sure he is a detective.”

As a matter of fact, there were two detectives within a few feet of each other, but in her agitation she had not observed the second man, who was deputed to keep watch on the movements of Mr George Dutton.

George Dutton was an old hand, and not to be lightly disturbed by small incidents. But he recognised the significance of this visit. His ruddy colour died away.

“You have bad news,” he said quietly.

“The worst, George. Bryant, the detective, paid a visit to Guy this evening. I came in just in the nick of time. The library door was ajar, I heard what Bryant said. The Major has left a diary behind him, and, of course, he had put it all down, up to the arranged meeting in Cathcart Square. The game is up, you will recognise that.”

Dutton’s mentality was a little bit slower than her own. “Did you hear any extracts read from the diary?”

“What a fool you are!” she cried indignantly. “Why should I wait to hear? If the man kept a diary, is it not easy to guess that he would have related every incident connected with me, from our first meeting at the Southleigh dinner-party? Bryant is watching me, there is a detective waiting outside. No doubt he is watching you, too. He is just waiting to pounce.”

“Then why has he gone to your husband?”

“Oh, you are too dense for worlds. Just to soften the blow. Can’t you

understand that he wants to warn him beforehand of the shame that is going to fall upon him, the discovery that his wife is a murderess?”

And then Mr Dutton understood. He stretched out appealing arms to her. “My poor little girl, my ever faithful pal! And I have brought you to this!”

“You have brought me to this,” she said bitterly. “Did I not implore you upon my knees to accept the Major’s terms, and you were so obstinate, so set. You would insist upon the other way because it seemed better to you. And I, fool that I was, always yielding to your sinister influence, gave way as I always have done.”

Scoundrel and criminal as he was, hardened by years of evil-doing, the man’s self-control gave way at that accusation. He drew her to him, and, strange to say, she did not shrink from his embrace.

“My poor Stella, I have tried to do my best for you always, even sacrificed myself. But the end has come.”

He recognised that, as she did.

“Yes,” she said stoically, “as you say, the end has come. You have always been very adept in falling into holes, and then digging yourself out again. How are you going to dig yourself and me out of this hole, in the face of that incriminating diary?”

Dutton walked up and down, his face working, his hands and his body trembling. He was up against the gravest problem of his adventurous career. The shadow of the prison had always hovered over him, but now there was a more ghastly menace, the shadow of the gallows. From the prison, he could return. There was no return from the other.

He paused in his restless pacing, and came to a halt before the stricken woman. He had recovered himself to a certain extent. He had gambled and lost, he was prepared to accept the fate of the unsuccessful gambler.

“You are brave, old girl?” he asked briefly.

She looked up at him with a wan smile.

“Yes, I think I am brave. I can guess what you are about to suggest, with the detectives watching us outside.” She burst into a little sob. “Oh, you always thought you were so clever, and yet, if I had had the management of affairs, things might have been so different.”

He spoke humbly. “I think you are right, Norah. I was always full of arrogance and self-conceit. You were weaker in character than I was, but you had always more brains. And I was a blind fool not to admit it. Many a time you gave me your advice, and I rejected it.”

“And what do you suggest now?” she asked, in a voice that had sunk to a whisper.

He looked at her steadily. He had screwed up his courage to the sticking point. Could he count upon an equal fortitude in her?

“It is the finish, old girl. You say the detectives are waiting outside. Bryant has got a good case, and the diary will hang us. There is no getting over that.”

“You propose—” she said falteringly.

He spoke quite steadily. The end had come, he had made up his mind, so far as regards himself.

“We neither of us want to hang for the murder of Hugh Murchison?”

She shuddered, and hid her face with her hands. “Oh, that awful evening! It has been like a nightmare ever since.”

“I know,” said Dutton soothingly. “It was one of my fatal mistakes. But it is no use crying over spilt milk. To-night we are face to face with facts. We have gambled, and we have lost, and we have got to pay the penalty.”

The wretched woman rose up, and wrung her hands. “And to think I might have been the Countess of Southleigh.”

“I know; don’t think I am not reckoning up all that,” replied Dutton. “But we have got to deal with facts to-night, with the detectives waiting outside. The game is up, you know that as well as I do. We have only a few hours

before us, perhaps a few minutes, in which to make the choice."

"I know," she answered. "You mean our only alternative is to cheat the law."

He looked at her steadily. "That is the only way. If we suffer ourselves to be taken, we have not got a dog's chance."

Weak woman as she was, she gathered something of his iron resolution. Yes, they must die and die together, to cheat the law. Such was to be the end of the brilliant adventuress who had inveigled two men into marriage, Jack Pomfret and Guy Spencer, with her subtle and elusive charm.

"And what do you suggest, George? You have thought of these things more than I have."

"I have always thought of them," said Dutton gloomily. "Well, there are various ways I can suggest to you. I can shoot you first, and myself afterwards."

She shuddered. "Some other way than that."

"I can give you some tabloids."

"Is there any pain?" she queried.

"Hardly any."

She shuddered again. "Hardly any. That does not sound very convincing."

He proposed a third alternative. "You can come up to my room, and lie on the bed. I will paper up all the doors and cracks and turn up the gas. You will simply go to sleep and never wake."

"That is the best," she said.

"If we had plenty of time. But they may take us in a few minutes. Bryant has seen your husband, he will not wait long after that interview."

“The tabloids, then,” she said firmly.

Yes, it had come to this, she must cheat the law. Twice, she had had her chance, once as the wife of Jack Pomfret, again as the wife of Guy Spencer. And twice had the cup of triumph been snatched from her lips.

She must die, like a rat in a hole, in this obscure little cottage at Strand-on-the-Green, in the company of the man who had always been her evil genius.

Dutton went across to a small cupboard built in the wall of the shabby parlour, and brought out a little bottle filled with capsules. He extracted one and handed it to the shrinking woman.

“Take yours first, dear, I will take mine after.” There was a look of infinite compassion in the scoundrel’s face as he offered it to her.

Bravely she took it, and swallowed it with a great gulp, sitting in the shabby easy-chair. The effect was almost instantaneous, and when Dutton had made sure that she was beyond human aid, he took a similar tabloid himself, with the same result.

An hour later there was a thundering knock at the door of the cottage. One of the detectives had gone to a telephone office and informed Bryant that the woman had come to Strand-on-the-Green, and was with Dutton. The order came back from Bryant, who had only stayed a few minutes at Eaton Place, that the pair were to be arrested at once.

Of course there was no response. After waiting for a few moments, the men broke in the frail door. But they were too late.

Norah Burton, and the man who had been so long associated with her—brother, cousin, lover, whatever he might be—had gone to their judgment.

It was a nine-days’ wonder, and while his friends and acquaintances were still discussing it at clubs and over tea-tables, Guy Spencer slipped quietly abroad. When he returned to England, at the end of twelve months, these tragic happenings had become little more than a memory to his world.

He stayed a week with the Southleighs at their ancestral home in Sussex, and at the end of that week their friends read an important announcement in *The Morning Post*:—

“A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between Mr Guy Spencer and his cousin, Lady Nina, only daughter and child of the Earl of Southleigh.”

The End.

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