Whatsoever a Man Soweth

William Le Queux

Title: Whatsoever a Man Soweth

Author: William Le Queux

Release Date: October 17, 2012 [EBook #41092]

Language: English

Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

William Le Queux

"Whatsoever a Man Soweth"

Chapter One.

Concerns a Proposal of Marriage.

“Then you really don’t intend to marry me, Wilfrid?”

“The honour of being your husband, Tibbie, I must respectfully decline,” I said.

“But I’d make you a very quiet, sociable wife, you know. I can ride to hounds, cook, sew clothes for old people, and drive a motor. What higher qualifications do you want?”

“Well—love, for instance.”

“Ah! That’s what I’m afraid I don’t possess, any more them you do,” she laughed. “It isn’t a family characteristic. With us, it’s everyone for herself,” and she beat a tattoo upon the window-pane with the tips of her slim, white fingers.

“I know,” I said, smiling. “We are old friends enough to speak quite frankly, aren’t we?”

“Of course. That’s why I asked you ‘your intentions’—as the mater calls them. But it seems that you haven’t any.”

“Not in your direction, Tibbie.”

“And yet you told me you loved me!” said the pretty woman at my side in mock reproach, pouting her lips.

“Let’s see—how long ago was that? You were thirteen, I think, and I was still at Eton—eh?”

“I was very fond of you,” she declared. “Indeed, I like you now. Don’t you remember those big boxes of sweets you used to smuggle in to me, and how we used to meet in secret and walk down by the river in the evening? Those were really very happy days, Wilfrid,” and she sighed at

the memory of our youthful love.

We were standing together in the sunset at one of the old diamond-paned windows of the Long Gallery at Ryhall Place, the ancient home of the Scarcliffs in Sussex, gazing away over the broad park which stretched as far as the eye could reach, its fine old avenue of beeches running in a straight line to East Marden village, and the Chichester high road.

My companion, the Honourable Eva Sybil Burnet, third daughter of the late Viscount Scarcliff, was known to her intimates as “Tibbie,” because as a child she so pronounced her Christian name. In the smart set in London and at country houses she was well known as the prettiest of a handsome trio, the other two sisters being Cynthia, who married Lord Wydcombe, and Violet, who a year ago became Countess of Alderholt. Young Lady Wydcombe, who was perhaps one of the smartest women in town, noted for her dinners and her bridge parties in Curzon Street, and her smart house parties up in Durham, had unfortunately taken Tibbie under her care after she had come out, with the result that although unmarried she had prematurely developed into one of the most *blasé* and go-ahead women in town. The gossips talked of her, but the scandal was invented by her enemies.

The country people whispered strange things of “Miss Sybil” and her whims and fancies. The family had been known as “the reckless Burnets” ever since the Georgian days, when the sixth Viscount had, in one night at Crockford’s, gambled away the whole of his vast Yorkshire estate, and his son on the following night lost forty-five thousand guineas at the same table. Dare-devilry ran in the Scarcliff blood. From the Wars of the Roses down to the present day the men had always been fearless soldiers—for some of their armour, and that of their retainers, still stood in long, grim rows in the dark-panelled gallery where we were—and the women had always been notable for their beauty, as proved by the famous portraits by Gainsborough, Lawrence, Lely, Reynolds, Hoppner, and others, that hung in the splendid gallery beyond.

But surely none of those time-mellowed portraits that I could see from where I stood was half so beautiful as the little friend of my youth beside me. In those long-past days of our boy-and-girl affection she had been

very fragile and very beautiful, with wondrous hair of that unusual gold-brown tint, and eyes of clear bright blue. But even now, at twenty-three, she had in no way lost her almost child-like grace and charm. Those deep blue eyes, turned upon me in mock reproach, were still fathomless, her cheeks were perfect in their symmetry, her mouth smiling and sweet, and her brows well arched and well defined, while her chin, slightly protruding, gave her that piquant air that was so delightful.

Though unmarried, she was entirely unconventional, just as the Scarcliffs had ever been. Smart London knew Tibbie well. Some day she would many, people said, but the wiseacres shook their heads and secretly pitied the man who became her husband.

As a friend Tibbie was perfect. She was a man's woman. She could shoot or fish, she would play bridge and pay up honourably, she rode well, and she drove her 60 h.p. "Mercedes" better even than her own chauffeur. Old Lady Scarcliff—a delightful old person—had long ago given her up as hopeless. It was all Cynthia's doing, for, truth to tell, her extravagances and her utter disregard for the *convenances* were the outcome of her residence with the Wydcombes.

I own frankly that I was sorry to see this change in her. The slim, rather prudish little love of my youth had now developed into that loud-speaking, reckless type of smart woman who nowadays is so much in evidence in Society. I much preferred her as I had known her years ago when my father and hers were intimate friends, and when I came so often to stay at Ryhall. True, our friendship had been a firm one always, but alas! I now detected a great change in her. Though so handsome, she was, as I had so very frankly told her, not exactly the kind of woman I should choose as a wife. And yet, after all, when I reflected I often thought her very sweet and womanly at home in the family circle.

My visit to Ryhall was to end on the morrow, and she had promised to drive me up to town on her car.

The men of the party had not yet returned from shooting, and in that calm sunset hour we were alone in the fine old gallery, with its splendid tapestries, its old carved coffers and straight-backed chairs, its rows of antlers and its armour of the dead-and-gone Scarcliffs. High in the long

windows were the rose en soleil of Edward IV, the crown in the hawthorn bush of Henry VII, the wolf's head crowned, the badge of the Scarcliffs, and other armorial devices, while the autumn sunlight slanting in threw coloured reflections upon the oaken floor worn smooth and polished by the feet of generations.

She was dressed in cream serge, a slight, dainty, neat-waisted figure, thrown into relief as she leaned back against the dark old panelling, laughing at my retort.

Her musical voice echoed down the long corridor, that old place that always seemed so far remote from the present day, and where the country folk declared that at night could be heard the footfall of the knight and the rustle of the lady's kirtle.

Ryhall was indeed a magnificent old place, built by Sir Henry Burnet in the Tudor days, and pre-eminent to-day among the historic mansions of England, an architectural triumph that still remained almost the same as it was on the death of its builder. Its great vaulted hall with the wonderful fireplace and carved minstrels' gallery, its fine old tapestries in King James's room, the yellow drawing-room, the red boudoir, and the Baron's hall, full of antique furniture, were all splendid apartments breathing of an age long past and forgotten.

Being something of an antiquary myself, I loved Ryhall, and took a keen delight in exploring its quaint passages and discovering its secret doors in picture-frames and panelling. Tibbie, however, who had no love for old things, hated Ryhall. She preferred everything essentially modern, the art nouveau, art colourings, and the electric light of her mother's house in Grosvenor Street. She only came down to Ryhall when absolutely necessary, and then grumbled constantly, even worrying Jack, her brother—now Lord Scarcliff—to "put some decent new furniture into the place," and declaring to her mother that the house was full of moths and rats.

"Look!" she suddenly exclaimed at last. "The boys are coming home! Can't you see them there, down in the avenue?" and she pointed with her finger. "Well," she added, "you're not a bit entertaining, Wilfrid. You refuse to become my husband, so I suppose I shall have to marry someone

else. The mater says I really must marry somebody."

"Of course, you must," I said. "But who is to be the happy man? Have you decided?"

"M'-well, I don't quite know. Ellice Winsloe is a good fellow, and we're very friendly," she admitted. "The mater approves of him, because he's well off."

"Then she wouldn't approve of me," I laughed. "You know I haven't got very much."

"I've never asked her. Indeed, if you would marry me I shouldn't ask her, I should marry first and ask afterwards."

"But do you really mean to marry Ellice?" I asked seriously. "Is he—well, such a very particular friend?"

"He proposed to me a fortnight ago after the Jardines' dance, and I refused him—I always refuse, you know," and she smiled again.

She was as gay and merry as usual, yet there was about her face a look of strange anxiety that greatly puzzled me.

"Then you've had other offers?"

"Of course, but mostly from the undesirables. Oh! you would laugh if you could hear them laying open their hearts, as they call it," she said gaily. "Why does a man call his love his secret—as though he'd committed some awful crime? It is most amusing, I can assure you. Mason and I have some good laughs over it very often."

"But you surely don't tell your maid such things?" I said, surprised, but knowing well her hoydenish spirit.

"Indeed I do. Mason enjoys the joke just as much as I do."

"Ah! Tibbie," I said reproachfully, "you are a sad breaker of men's hearts! By Jove! you are so good-looking that if I didn't know you I, too, should fall in love with you."

“Why don’t you? That’s just what I want. Then we should marry and live happy ever after. It would be so delightful. I’d marry you to-morrow, dear old boy, if you wished,” she declared unblushingly.

“And regret it the day after,” I laughed. “Why, Tibbie, you know how horribly badly off the poor old governor left me—a bare thousand a year when all expenses of Netherdene are paid. The place is an absolute white elephant, shabby, worn out, dilapidated—certainly not the house to take a bride to. I haven’t been up there for nearly two years. A cotton-spinner in Oldham rents the shoot, and his cheque is always helpful.”

“Yes,” she remarked thoughtfully, gazing down upon the oak floor, “Netherdene certainly isn’t a very cheerful spot. It would make a nice home for incurables, or a lunatic asylum. Why don’t you try and form a company, or something in the City, and run it? Other fellows do.”

“What’s the use?” I asked. “I’m no hand at business; I only wish I were. Then I could make money. Now, I only wander about and spend it.”

“Well, you have a decent time, so what more can you want?” she asked, looking at me with those wonderful eyes that had caused many a man’s head to reel. “You ought, after all, to be satisfied, and thank your stars you’re not worse off.”

“You’re not satisfied yourself, even though you are one of the most popular girls in town?” I said. “You want a husband.”

“I shouldn’t want one if the mater gave me a decent allowance. I hate to be continually borrowing from Cynthia when the mater has plenty and Jack is throwing it away on the Stock Exchange. He’s always learning of good things from his friends, but they generally result in losses.”

A silence fell between us for some moments, broken only by the slow, solemn ticking of the long old clock near by.

“And so, Tibbie, you intend to marry Ellice!” I remarked at last, looking straight into her handsome face. Yes; after all, there was an indescribable sweetness in her manner, whatever the world might say regarding her.

“It’s a secret. I’ve told nobody; therefore you’ll not say a word, will you?”

“Certainly not. But I congratulate you. Winsloe is, I believe, a real good fellow, and I can only hope you will love him.”

“I shall learn to love him in time, I suppose,” she answered. “Look! there he is!”

And glancing down I saw the well-set-up figure, in drab tweeds with his gun across his shoulder, striding over the park, together with her brother Jack, my old friend Eric Domville, Lord Wydcombe, and several ladies of the house-party in shooting kit, followed by the keepers and dogs.

“Tibbie,” I said, seriously, turning to her. “You know we’ve known each other many years. I was your first sweetheart, and afterwards your friend. I am still your firm friend, and as such I may be permitted to give you a single word of advice—to urge you not to marry that man unless you really love him.”

“I know, my dear old Wilfrid,” she said, smiling prettily. “You are such a philosopher. You ought to have been a parson. Nowadays women don’t marry for love. They unfortunately put that away with their short skirts. They marry for convenience.”

And she gazed again out of the lead-lighted window.

“But is it wise of you? Remember I am still your platonic friend, and have every regard for your future happiness. To serve you I am always ready. That you know. Only command me, Tibbie.”

She hesitated for a moment, then turning to me with that strange, anxious look upon her countenance, an expression most unusual for her, she said in a low, intense voice,—

“I wonder if I might actually take you at your word, Wilfrid. I wonder if—if —” and she hesitated, pursing her lips, and I saw that her hand trembled.

“Of course I’m always ready to assist you,” I said, somewhat surprised at her sudden change of manner.

“Ah! no!” she gasped, suddenly pale to the lips, a strange look of terror in her eyes. “My secret! I am very foolish. I cannot tell it to you—you of all

men. It is too terrible. You would hate me!”

“Your secret!” I echoed. “What secret, Tibbie? Tell me?”

But she turned away from me, and covering her white face with her hands, burst into a flood of tears.

Chapter Two.

Reveals a Woman’s Secret.

That evening, as I changed for dinner in the quaint old tapestried room, with its ancient carved four-poster and green silk hangings, I reflected deeply.

What, I wondered, was Tibbie’s secret?

That it was something she feared to reveal to me was quite plain, and yet were we not firm, confidential friends? It had been on the tip of her tongue to tell me, and to ask my help, yet on reflection she realised that her confession would estrange us. What could its nature possibly be?

Her manner had so entirely and quickly changed, that more than once I had wondered whether she had witnessed something, or seen some person from the window, and that the sight had struck terror into her heart. Was she conscience-stricken? I recollected how she had suddenly turned from the window, and how ashen her face had gone in a single instant.

What was her secret?

I, Wilfrid Hughes, confess that I admired her, though I was in no way a lady’s man. I was comparatively poor. I preferred to lead a wandering life as an independent bachelor, pursuing my favourite antiquarian studies, than to settling down to the humdrum existence of a country gentleman with the appended J.P. and D.L. after one’s name. I had just enough to make both ends meet, and while Netherdene was let I occupied, when not travelling on the Continent, a decently comfortable set of chambers in Bolton Street. My friend Tibbie Burnet was, without a doubt, one of the smartest unmarried girls in London, a woman whose utter disregard of all the laws of conventionality would ten years ago have shocked, but which, alas! now was regarded as the height of *chic* and smartness. Half-a-dozen times report had engaged her, but all rumours had proved false, while one could scarcely take up an illustrated paper without finding a photograph or paragraph concerning her. Hundreds of girls envied her, of

course, therefore it was not after all surprising that evil tongues were ready to say bitter things of her. Every woman who is popular, be it in merry Mayfair or tattling Tooting, *blasé* Belgravia or busy Brixton, is sure to make a host of enemies. There is no more bitter enmity in this world of ours than the jealousy between woman and woman.

So I had always dismissed the stories I had heard in various quarters concerning Tibbie as unjust and untrue. One rumour, however, a strange, faint echo, had reached me in a curious roundabout way while staying at a country house up in Yorkshire, and of late it had caused me to pause and wonder—as I still paused and wondered that night. Could it be true? Could it really be true?

I stood looking in the long old-fashioned mirror, gazing unconsciously at my own reflection.

No. What was said was a foul lie. I was quite sure of it. Country yokels are always inventing some story or other concerning the gentlefolk. It was a fable, and I refused to believe it. Tibbie was my friend, and if she was in distress I would help her.

And with that resolve I went down to dinner. I found her in the great oak-panelled hall, where hung the faded and tattered banners of the Scarcliffs, a brilliant figure in pale rose, laughing gaily with her brother-in-law, Lord Wydcombe, her sweet face betraying no sign of either terror or of tears.

She glanced at me, waving her hand merrily as I lounged across the big vaulted apartment to join the tall, distinguished-looking man of thirty-eight, whom she had told me in secret she intended was to be her husband, Ellice Winsloe.

“Why didn’t you come with us this afternoon, old chap?” he asked. “We had excellent sport across at Whitewater.”

“I had letters to write,” I pleaded. “I’ll go with you to-morrow.”

“Tibbie promised to come out to lunch, but didn’t turn up,” he remarked, folding his arms, a habit of his when conversing.

“No. She went out to make a call, I think. She said she had some old people to visit down in the village. She came in half-an-hour before you did,” and then at that moment Adams, the white-headed old butler, announced that dinner was served.

It was a gay party who assembled in the fine old dining-room panelled from floor to ceiling, with the great hearth, the high old Tudor mantelpiece and the white ornamented ceiling with the gilded armorial bearings of the Scarcliffs in the centre. In all we were eleven, including old Lady Scarcliff herself, who, seated at the head of her son’s table, had Eric and Ellice on either hand. My seat was between Lady Wydcombe and a fair-haired, rather pretty young girl named Hilda Tracey, and although the meal was a pleasant one, I noticed that never once did Tibbie address the man who had proposed to her. Indeed, she rather avoided us both. Once or twice I addressed a question directly to her, but she replied briefly, and I saw that she regretted that involuntary outburst of a couple of hours before.

The conversation of the men, keen sportsmen all, was mostly regarding the bag of the day, while the women discussed the forthcoming fancy ball over at Arundel, and made plans for it. Cynthia was a tall, striking brunette, a go-ahead woman who entertained lavishly, and whose husband, a thin, fair-haired, fair-moustached man, disapproved of his wife’s gaiety, but said nothing. He was a keen sportsman, who had shot big game in the Andes and in Somaliland, and who each year gave a good time to his friends up at his fine grouse-moor in the Highlands. Jack, otherwise the tenth Viscount Scarcliff, was a slim, dark-haired young fellow of twenty-five, with a small black moustache, of a rather indolent, easy-going type, who hated town, and whose chief hobbies were speculating on the Stock Exchange and driving his motor.

Three years ago he had been in London, reading for the Bar, or rather making a pretence of reading, when suddenly he found himself possessor of the title and estates with a substantial rent-roll and the wherewithal to lead an easy existence. Therefore he at once cast aside all ideas of the Law and settled down to a country life, which he now thoroughly enjoyed.

Eric Domville was, however, my intimate friend. Although young—for he was not more than thirty-five—“Who’s Who” recorded to him a long

record of distinguished services as traveller, explorer, Government agent and soldier, a man who during the past ten years or so had lived a charmed life in the African forests and in the great burning Sahara. A big, broad-shouldered fellow of that manly, muscular type of Englishman with a hand-grip like iron, a dark, clean-shaven face, bronzed by the Southern suns, and a long swinging stride, he was essentially a leader of men, and yet at the same time a most charming companion. We had been Etonians together, and afterwards at Oxford, but even when he had gone to Africa we had never lost sight of each other, and often on his brief sojourn at home he had been my guest at Bolton Street. To his intrepid courage the Government were indebted for much geographical knowledge, and considerable prestige in those dark, unknown forest lands beyond the Aruwimi, and to his tact with the native tribes the Colonial Office owed certain important treaties, much to the chagrin of the Belgians. He had fought and conquered savages, he had been bitten by venomous snakes, and had been shot in the back by a treacherous slave-trader, yet he still survived, ever and anon turning up in England recounting his thrilling adventures and difficulties, and laughing over them.

And with all he was one of the most modest of men, and never talked of himself before strangers.

The evening passed as the evenings at Ryhall usually passed, with music in the red drawing-room, afterwards a hand at bridge, and billiards and cigars when the ladies had retired. Yet, watching Tibbie as I did all the evening, I did not fail to notice that her spirits were not nearly so high as usual. Though she very cleverly sought to conceal it, I saw that she was nervous and anxious, and that each time Ellice addressed her she shrank from him as though she held him in abhorrence, instead of having decided to accept him as her husband.

She possessed some secret, the knowledge of which held her in fear. Of that I became convinced.

We usually retired rather late at Ryhall. With the other men I had been smoking and gossiping in one of the smaller rooms leading from the billiard-room, a panelled apartment known as Dame Grace’s Room, and at two o’clock in the morning, Jack and his guests having taken their candles, I found myself alone with Eric.

I had just stretched myself yawning in my chair, and remarked that it was quite time we turned in, when my friend rose, closed the door, and returned to me, saying in a very low, mysterious voice,—“Wilfrid, I’ve been waiting all the evening to speak to you, only I couldn’t get you alone. They’ve all gone at last, so we can talk.”

“Well,” I said, throwing away my cigar, and bending towards him eagerly. “What is it, old fellow? Something serious, I know, from your manner.” For I saw that his good-humoured face was now pale and troubled.

“Yes. It is serious—very serious,” he said in a hard, low voice. “It concerns Sybil—your friend.”

“What about her?” I exclaimed, in quick surprise.

“I’ve learnt something to-day—something that utterly amazes me. I feel that it can’t be true. Therefore, I’m bound to confide in you, as you are her friend as well as mine. We must act together.”

“Tell me,” I said anxiously, “what have you heard? Some foolish story concerning her, of course.”

“Well. I know that I may rely on your secrecy, so I’ll relate the whole facts. About three o’clock this afternoon I left the others to try the turnips around Charlton Wood, and while walking on the edge of the thickets that fringe the forest I thought I heard voices. I have a quick ear for sound, you know. Well, wondering who might be there, I resorted to an old trick taught me by the African natives, and leaving my gun, crept in through the undergrowth without stirring a leaf until I was close to the strangers. Then parting the branches I saw to my utter amazement, Tibbie standing there with a man—a tallish fellow in a dark suit.”

“Tibbie!” I gasped. “With a man—in the wood?”

“Yes,” said my friend. “And mere. I overheard some of their conversation. The fellow looked to me like some farmer’s lout, yet he spoke with an air of refinement—he spoke to her, Wilfrid—as her lover!”

“Her lover!” I echoed, bewildered. Then the strange rumour I had heard had actually some foundation! The Honourable Sybil Burnet, one of the

smartest women in London, was in the habit of meeting a lover in secret. I held my breath, utterly confounded.

“Well,” I asked, stunned by the revelation, “and what else—what else did you see?”

“Imagine my utter surprise, my dear old chap, to witness Tibbie—our own Tibbie—allowing the fellow to kiss her! And yet she did, without repelling him. She stood and heard him to the end. He told her that he loved her and that he intended to marry her, whatever the world might say. ‘You are mine, Miss Sybil—mine—mine!’ he kept on repeating, while she stood, allowing him to take her in his arms, and kiss her passionately. Who the fellow is I don’t know. I’m only certain that for some reason she’s in deadly fear of him.”

“Why?” I asked, eagerly.

“Because a lady would surely never allow herself to be caressed by such a rank outsider. Why, my dear old chap, he seemed to be a mere shabby wayfarer with down-at-heel boots, and an old dusty suit. At last, after a quarter of an hour, during which time I learned that he had loved her in secret for two years, she suddenly pushed him from her, and spoke quite seriously, saying, ‘All this is entirely useless, my dear Charles. I may as well tell you the truth at once, and end this folly for ever. I am engaged to Mr Winsloe!’ In an instant the fellow’s affection turned to an ungovernable fury. He raved and threatened, declaring that she was his, and no one else’s, and that she should never marry Winsloe. At all this, however, Tibbie only laughed defiantly, apparently treating his words as mere empty threats, until of a sudden he took her roughly by the shoulders, and glaring into her face said, ‘Sybil! You will marry me, or I will tell the world the truth! You know what I mean. I’m not to be trifled with. Decide.’ Then occurred a terrible scene between them. She openly accused him of attempting to blackmail her, while he, on his part, reiterated his love, declaring that while he lived she should never marry another. I would have gone forward to protect her, but how could I? By so doing I should only have acknowledged myself as a mean eavesdropper. Therefore, overhearing that which I had no desire to hear, I turned and crept back into the field as noiselessly as I came. Then,” and he lowered his voice, and speaking slowly, “then five minutes later, as I was making my way

back to the party I heard a shot from the wood—a revolver shot I knew by the sound. But I went on in wonder and fear. I looked at my watch, and saw that it was just four o'clock."

"And at a little after half-past she was with me in the Long Gallery. Perhaps the fellow fired at her?" I suggested, staring at him.

"Or she at him?" Eric said in a low, very hard tone. "Recollect this ruffian is a lover, and moreover is in possession of some secret which she fears may be revealed. I saw a revolver in her hand, Wilfrid," he added hoarsely. "She threatened him with it. And she shot him! What can we do to save her?"

Scarcely had he whispered this serious question when Rainer, the under-butler, entered to inquire if we desired anything further, and on my replying in the negative, the man said,—

"There's been a terrible affair up in Charlton Wood, sir, John Harris, the keeper, on going his round to-night found a man shot dead. They sent down to the house to telephone to the doctor half-an-hour ago."

"Who's the man?" I gasped, springing up at the servant's startling declaration, while Eric stood rigid.

"Nobody knows. They haven't brought him down to the village yet."

Eric and I exchanged glances. But we were silent—and our silence was surely more expressive than words.

Chapter Three.

Describes a Man and a Mystery.

“It’s probably some poor beggar who’s committed suicide,” I remarked, in order to allay Rainer’s suspicions, if he had noticed the change in our countenances when he made his startling announcement.

“He’s badly-dressed, Harris says. Perhaps he’s a tramp,” remarked the servant.

“Perhaps so. We want nothing more, Rainer, to-night,” I added.

“Very good, sir,” and the man bowed and withdrew, closing the door after him.

“What shall we do?” whispered Eric, quickly, his face pale beneath the sun-tan.

I stood staring at my friend, unable to utter a word.

Was that Sybil’s secret—the secret that she had been so very near revealing to me? I recollected those strange words of hers, “You would hate me!” Yes, her secret was a guilty one.

“Do?” I echoed at last in a low whisper, fearing Rainer might be listening. “Why, we must make our own inquiries before those local busybodies of police step in and bungle the affair. She must be saved—don’t you agree?”

“Yes. At all costs we must save her,” he cried quickly. “Let’s go out and see who the fellow is.”

“Not yet. Wait for half an hour or so, until they’re all gone to bed. The servants’ hall is all in a flutter, it seems, and the maids will be about frightened and whispering. If we are to get away unseen we must slip out of yonder window. All the doors are closed now, and the dogs are loose in the courtyard.”

“You’re right, old fellow. We must wait a bit,” he agreed. “But what’s your private opinion of the affair?”

“I have none,” was my blank reply. “Until I have some proof, I suspect nobody.”

“Quite so. Let’s leave Tibbie entirely out of the question. Remember, not a word to anyone of what I’ve told you, for I’m the principal witness against her. Think, if they called me. My evidence would condemn her!”

“I regard all that you’ve told me, Eric, as unsaid,” I responded. “Tibbie is my friend.”

“But you don’t think I’ve lied, do you?” he asked quickly, not grasping my meaning.

“Of course not. Why should you? We know each other too well to make false charges against our friends,” I answered. “It is a mystery—a complete mystery.”

“Absolutely. I was struck dumb when I discovered her in the arms of the fellow. I couldn’t really believe my own eyes.” Then, after a pause, he asked in a lower tone, “What secret of hers did he hold, I wonder?”

“Ah! what indeed.”

“To me, it is very evident that she met the fellow at that lonely spot under compulsion. She may have reciprocated his affection at one time, but her manner was inert and unresponsive. She allowed him to caress her because she was in deadly fear—I’m absolutely certain of that.”

“Then she didn’t betray any love for him?”

“None whatever. In his reproaches, however, he reminded her of how she had once loved him and allowed him to think that he might aspire to her hand. He reproached her with cruelty and double-dealing, saying that she had betrayed him to his enemies, and that now, in return, he would reveal to the world her dark and terrible secret. This announcement electrified her. Until that moment she apparently had no idea of her peril, but instantly she saw that he held her future entirely in his hands—and—well,

that's all."

I stood upon the hearthrug, my hands deep in my trouser-pockets, my back to the high, old stone overmantel that bore emblazoned the arms of the Scarcliffs, and remained silent. What could I say? What could I think of the woman who was in her room somewhere above in that great old mansion—the woman who was, no doubt, still awake in terror of the morrow?

The stable clock clanged out half-past two, and presently Eric stepped on tip-toe to the door, opened it and looked down the great hall, dark, gloomy and mysterious, with its stands of armour, its tattered banners and its old carved furniture of centuries ago.

Across the hall he crept until lost in the darkness, and a few minutes later returned carrying two hats, and saying that all was quiet in the servants' hall, and that everybody had gone to bed.

Then we closed the door, took a wooden chair to the window, opened it, and scrambled through, dropping noiselessly down upon the grass beyond.

We closed the old window behind us lest the night-watchman should discover it open and raise an alarm, and then started off together straight across the park, in the direction of the Long Avenue that led away for a mile and a half down to the village.

The night was bright and starlit, but over the grass hung a heavy white mist, especially in the hollows.

For a long time neither of us spoke, but presently, as we sped briskly along, Eric said,—

"We must pretend that Rainer has aroused our curiosity, otherwise the villagers will think our visit strange at this hour. Our first object must be to establish the fellow's identity. At present we know his name to be Charles —and that's all."

With this I agreed, and presently we arrived at the fine old Tudor gate-house, and passed out from the park into the broad highway that ran over

Bow Hill to Chichester. Half a mile along the road we entered the quaint, peaceful little village of East Marden, with its ancient church and long row of comfortable cottages, now, however, in darkness. Five miles from the railway, it still preserved its rural traditions. There was no inn, and consequently little distress; the village retired early and rose with the sun, a pleasant little place prosperous under the proprietorship of the Scarcliffs.

Along the deserted little street we searched until we came to the constable's cottage, in the window of which a light was burning, and knocking at the door it was opened by Mr Booth, as the villagers called him, a big, round-faced officer in constabulary uniform.

"Oh! beg pardon, gentlemen!" he exclaimed, recognising us. "I thought it were Dr Richards. They've telephoned from the house to call him. He ought to be here by now."

"What's the matter, Booth? What has happened?" I asked, stepping into his clean little parlour where his wife greeted us with a curtsey. "Rainer came to us and said that somebody had been found dead, so we came out to hear all about it."

"Yes, sir, that's right. John Harris found him some hours ago; but I was out on my beat across at Elsted, and they 'ad to fetch me. I've been up to Charlton Wood and seen 'im, but I've left 'im there till the gov'nor comes. We've strict orders never to move a body without the superintendent sees it first."

"But tell us all about it," I urged. "Who's the man, and what has happened?"

"Well, John Harris was goin' 'is round as usual, when 'is dog found a man lyin' just inside the wood—stone dead. Shot in the chest. The sight, of course, gave 'im a fright, an' he comes down here quick and informs my missis. She told him to keep it dark, as we didn't want the whole village up there, an' sent him up to the house to telephone to Midhurst to the divisional surgeon. Then they came out and found me."

"You don't recognise the dead man?" I asked with trepidation.

“No. ’E’s a stranger—maybe a tramp.”

“You haven’t searched him?”

“Not yet. I’m waiting for the doctor and the gov’nor. I’ve telephoned to him in Chichester, only ’e may be out on inspection-duty.”

“And meanwhile the body is up in the wood? Is anybody there with it?”

“No, sir. We think it better to leave it there alone, otherwise the news’ll spread and they’ll tread out whatever marks of a struggle there maybe there.” In an instant a serious thought occurred to me. Had the dead man on him any letter of Sybil’s or anything to connect her with him?

“Well,” I said a moment later in as unconcerned a tone as I could, “we’re interested to see who the poor fellow is. Therefore we’ll walk on up in the direction of the wood, and when Richards comes you’ll overtake us.”

“Very well, gentlemen,” was the constable’s reply. “But you won’t tell anyone yet, will you? And you won’t go into the wood and tread about? If there’s been murder committed, as there seems to have been, then we must find the guilty party,” he added seriously, this no doubt being the first really grave case he had ever had in all his eighteen years’ career.

“Of course not,” answered Eric. “We shall wait for you, as we don’t know where the body is.”

“Ah! I never thought o’ that,” was Booth’s reply. “All right, gentlemen, I’ll be after you as soon as the doctor comes. He’ll drive me on in his trap.” And we said good-night to Mrs Booth, a rather frail, hard-working little woman, and went once more out into the broad high road.

“We must act quickly. Come, hurry along,” I exclaimed, as soon as we were beyond the village. “We haven’t a second to spare.”

“Why?” asked Domville in some surprise.

“Didn’t you say that we must save Tibbie?” I asked. “Can’t you see her serious peril? The fellow may have on him some letter or something that may incriminate her. We must get there and search him before Booth

brings the doctor. What fortune that the body has been left unattended."

"But is it?" Eric queried. "Don't you think that Harris has spread the news among the other keepers and one or other of them are lurking near out of curiosity? Wouldn't it be infernally awkward for us if we were discovered rifling the dead man's pockets?"

"We must risk everything—for Tibbie's sake—for the sake of the family," I declared decisively, and impelled by my words he hurried along at my side.

"You have given it as your opinion that they were once lovers," I continued. "Therefore, if he had come there to blackmail her, what more natural than that he should carry with him something by which to impress her with his power over her? At all costs, therefore, we must try and satisfy ourselves that there is nothing to incriminate her."

"Ah! my dear Wilfrid," he sighed. "It is really terrible—too terrible."

"This is not the moment to discuss the affair. We must act," I urged, and together we got over a gate and turned into a grass field which was a shorter cut to the wood.

"This way," my friend directed. "The spot is up at that corner," pointing away up the hill, where the wood loomed darkly against the sky.

Truth to tell, I shared Eric's fear that Harris or one of his sons might be lurking in the neighbourhood, yet I said nothing. My only thought was for the woman who had been my friend, my playmate, the dainty love of my early youth. She might be all that her enemies said of her, yet for her mother's sake, for Jack's sake, I meant—if possible—to save her.

Keeping in the shadow of the hedgerows and walls, I allowed my companion to direct my footsteps. With his long practice in those boundless forests of eternal night in Equatorial Africa, he had learnt how to creep along with scarce a sound. He motioned to me to be silent, and presently we crossed the big turnip field and entered the thicket at the point where he had entered it that afternoon.

"This will destroy my track," he whispered. "Tread always on your toes."

His example I followed, malting my way through the brambles and undergrowth until, of a sudden, we came out into a small open space beneath some big trees on the edge of the wood itself, and there upon the ground I saw something lying. In the darkness I could not distinguish what it was, but Eric advanced slowly, and bending, turned to me, saying in a low whisper,—

“Here it is. But how can we search him without a light? If we strike a match it can be seen by anyone coming up the hill.”

I knelt at his side and ran my hands over the cold corpse. Ah! it was a gruesome moment. My eager fingers unbuttoned his jacket that was wet and clammy with blood, and quickly I put my fingers in his inner pocket. Yes! there were papers there. Quick as thought I thrust them into my own pocket, and then in the darkness searched his clothes thoroughly. In his hip-pocket I felt a small leather wallet or card-case, and in his left-hand trousers pocket was a pen-knife, both of which I secured; while Eric, making another search of his waistcoat, discovered an inner pocket which contained some paper or other, which he handed to me.

To search a dead man in the darkness is not the easiest thing, and even though we had gone through his pockets, yet I was not satisfied.

My friend urged me to creep away and go back to meet Booth, but I hesitated. I wanted a light in order to satisfy myself thoroughly that I had overlooked nothing, and I told him so.

In a moment he threw off his jacket, and covering the prostrate figure with it, said, “Strike a match underneath. This will hide the light.”

I did so, and the fickle flame from the wax vesta fell upon the hard white face, a face that in death bore a wild, desperate look that was truly horrifying.

The pockets were, however, my chief concern, and, striking match after match, I made a methodical examination, finding a screwed-up piece of paper, the receipt for a registered letter. In feeling within his vest my hand touched something hard beneath his shirt.

I felt again. Yes, there was something next his skin. Therefore I carefully

opened his saturated shirt, and placing my hand within, drew out something about the size of a penny, a kind of medallion that he wore suspended around his neck by a fine gold chain.

A quick twist broke the latter, and I secured both medallion and chain.

“Make haste!” cried my companion in quick alarm. “Lights are coming up the hill! It’s Richards’s dog-cart with Booth. Let’s fly. We must get back to the road, or they may suspect.”

“A moment!” I cried. “Let me adjust his clothes,” and with eager, nervous fingers I re-buttoned the dead man’s clothing, and carefully rearranged the body as we had found it.

Those moments were exciting ones, for already the trap was coming on at a brisk pace, the lights shining clear along the road, and we yet had two large fields to cross before reaching the point where it was necessary to meet the doctor and constable.

Eric slipped on his coat, and we scrambled through the undergrowth by the way we had come, and then under the shadow of the wall, tore on as quickly as our legs would carry us.

Just, however, as we got out of the turnip field, my companion turned to me, and gasped,—

“Look there—to the left! There’s someone over in that clump of bushes there. By Heaven! old fellow, we’ve been seen!”

“Are you sure?” I cried hoarsely, glancing at the same moment in the direction he had indicated.

“Certain. I saw the figure draw back as we passed. My eyes don’t deceive me in the dark—I’m used to it.”

“Then we’re betrayed!” I said breathlessly.

“Yes. That’s quite certain,” was his hard response. “We’ve been watched —just as I feared.”

Chapter Four.

Is Astounding.

To halt would be to reveal our visit to the wood to the village constable, therefore we sprang across a stile, skirted the grass land, keeping beneath the high hawthorn hedge, and emerging into the roadway just as the lights of the gig came around the bend.

“Halloa! doctor!” I shouted, as he approached with the constable at his side, and the groom behind.

“Who’s that?” he inquired, peering into the darkness.

“Hughes—Wilfrid Hughes,” I answered, and a moment later he pulled up, and both Eric and I greeted him.

“We can go across the fields from here,” Booth remarked. Therefore they all three descended, and leaving the groom with the horse, we allowed ourselves to be guided by the constable to the spot where the body was lying.

“I hope, gentlemen, you haven’t been waitin’ long,” said Booth, addressing us, as he lit the hurricane lamp he had brought.

“Not at all,” declared Eric, quite unconcernedly, “but we’re naturally very anxious to ascertain who the poor fellow is.”

“From what Booth says, it seems a clear case of murder,” remarked Richards, the hard-working country practitioner.

“A mystery, evidently,” said Domville. “Has no weapon been found?”

“We haven’t searched yet, sir,” the constable replied. “We’ll have to wait till daylight.”

And so, our way lit by the officer’s lantern, we went on past the dump of bushes where my friend declared that some person was in hiding. Both of

us glanced across eagerly, but all was quiet—not a leaf stirred.

Who was concealed there, I wondered? I knew Eric Domville too well to doubt that his practised eye had been deceived.

I longed to go forward and search, but that was entirely out of the question. Some unknown person had witnessed our visit to the body. Our actions had been watched.

Presently, when we reached the spot, and the light shone upon the prostrate man, I was enabled to obtain my first clear sight of him.

The face, white and waxen in death, bore a hard, terrible look in the eyes, an expression that caused me to shudder. It was the look of one who shrank in awe and horror from the great Unknown. His clothes, a suit of rough, cheap dark tweed, the vest of which bore a large dark stain, showed evidence of hard wear, frayed at the elbows and cuffs, his linen was not over clean, and his boots bore traces of long tramping.

His cloth golf-cap had fallen off, and lay near, disclosing that his close-cropped dark hair was somewhat curly, while his face was clean-shaven, and around his collar was a dark blue cravat tied in a bow.

“I wonder who he is?” remarked Booth, as he bent down, and, opening his vest, disclosed the small shot-wound.

“I wonder,” I echoed, at the same time feeling in my pocket the papers and other objects which no doubt would establish his identity. I longed to return to the house and examine them.

“Shot clean through the heart!” exclaimed Richards, kneeling upon the carpet of dead leaves and making as thorough an examination as the fickle light afforded. “He must have fallen and died almost instantly.”

“Could it have been suicide?” inquired Booth.

“I think not. Of course, he might have shot himself, but from the position of the wound I think not. Besides, where is the revolver?”

We looked about, but could not discover it, and at the same time Booth

constantly urged upon us not to move about lest we might destroy any footmarks that would lead to a clue.

While Booth was searching the dead man's pockets of course finding nothing, Eric noticed a light approaching up the road, and pointed it out.

"That's the gov'nor on 'is bike," declared the constable. "I left word with my missis to send 'im up 'ere. I'm glad 'e's come."

We awaited the arrival of the superintendent, a short, elderly, thick-set man in a dark suit, who spoke sharply to his officer, listened to the doctor's opinion, and then proceeded to make a methodical examination for himself.

He held the lantern to the dead man's face, and looked for some moments into his features.

"No. He's a perfect stranger to me," the officer declared. "Was there nothing in his pockets?"

"Only some money, sir—a shillin' or two," answered the village policeman.

"On tramp, no doubt," and he examined the palms of both hands, feeling them with his fingers. "Not used to hard work—clean-shaven, too—done it to disguise himself probably. No razor?"

"No, sir."

"Found the revolver?"

"No, sir."

"Not searched yet, I suppose?"

"No, sir. I waited until you came, to hear your instructions."

"Quite right. You'd better move him down to the village, and when it's light we'll search all around." Then, turning to Richards, he added, "There'll have to be an inquest, doctor. Shall we fix it for the day after to-morrow,

at the Spread Eagle at Midhurst? Will that suit you?”

“Yes. I can make the post-mortem to-morrow,” Richards said, and thus it was arranged.

“It’s a mystery—murder without a doubt,” declared the superintendent a few minutes later, while chatting with the doctor. “How long has he been dead, do you think?”

“Eight or nine hours,” I should say.

“Then it was done about dusk, you think?”

“Most probably.”

“He was shot from the front, you notice, not in the back. Therefore, it seems quite evident that some secret meeting took place here before it grew dark. Bear that in mind, Booth, and make every inquiry to find out whether anybody was seen going over the fields.”

“His lordship and his friends were about the farms a-shootin’ all day,” the constable replied.

“Yes,” laughed Eric, “but we didn’t shoot with revolvers,” at which we all three laughed.

I admired my friend for his clever sally, for if anyone actually did see him crossing the turnips there would be no suspicion aroused that he had been witness of any meeting.

The police superintendent made a cursory examination of the surroundings by aid of the lantern, but saw nothing that led him to believe that a struggle had taken place; then eager to return and examine those papers I had in my pocket, we both bade the doctor and policeman good-night, and returned across the fields and along the drift skirting the park, scaling the wall, and so reaching the house by a much shorter route than by re-passing the village.

“I wonder who was in that thicket,” I said, as we walked down the hill, after leaving the scene of the tragedy.

“I saw something white, but whether it was a man’s shirt-front or a woman’s blouse I don’t know,” Eric replied. “Whoever it was may tell the police of our visit there, and we may find ourselves in a most awkward position. It wouldn’t be nice to be charged with trying to defeat the ends of justice, would it?”

“No,” I said, thinking deeply, and recognising the seriousness of the situation. “But how could we have acted otherwise? If we are to save Tibbie we must accept the risk.”

“It’s terrible—terrible,” he murmured. “I wonder who the fellow is?”

“Let’s get back. Come up to my room, and we’ll have a look through what we’ve found,” I said, and then we went on in silence until we managed to reopen the smoking-room window and creep in without attracting the attention of either the dogs or the night-watchman.

Eric mixed two stiff glasses of whisky, and we drank them. I confess that my hand trembled with excitement, while before me as I had walked through the night I saw that staring terror-stricken face—the face of the man who had looked into the Unknown and had been appalled.

Together we crept up to my room, first taking off our boots, as in order to reach the wing in which I was placed we had to pass Jack’s room, and also that of old Lady Scarcliff, who was, I knew, always nervous of burglars. Besides, we had no desire that it should be known that we had been out at that hour—otherwise Sybil might suspect.

Up the Long Gallery we went, past the grim row of armed knights so ghostly in the darkness, past the loudly-ticking old clock, past the deep window-seat wherein Sybil had so nearly betrayed her secret in the sunset hour, and on into my room.

Once within we locked the door, drew the *portière* to shut out the sound of our voices, and I took from my various pockets all that we had secured from the dead man.

It was a strange collection of papers, letters and various odds and ends, rendered gruesome by the stains of a man’s life-blood upon them.

They lay upon the table in the window and I scarce dared to touch them; stolen as they had been from that silent, staring corpse.

I switched on the table-lamp, and we drew chairs eagerly forward, so excited that neither of us spoke.

The first thing I took in my hand was the small circular medallion of gold with the thin chain which I had taken from the dead man's neck. About the size of a penny it was, smooth and polished on either side. I turned it over in wonder, and as I did so noticed that although so thin it was really a locket, one of those which is sometimes worn by ladies upon a long chain.

With trembling fingers I inserted my thumb nail into the slit and prised it open.

Upon one side a small ivory miniature of the Honourable Sybil smiled mockingly at us, and on the other was engraved an inscription.

I put it down and took up a letter folded in half without an envelope, the paper of which was crumpled and blood-stained.

I quickly scanned over what was written there, Eric looking over my shoulder meanwhile.

What I learnt staggered me. It told us the awful truth.

We turned and faced each other, looking into each other's eyes without uttering a word.

The problem was, we saw, far more intricate and amazing than we had ever dreamed.

Yes, there, spread before us, was the dead man's secret!

Chapter Five.

Which Puzzles both of us.

Holding our breath in our eagerness, we turned over the letters and hastily scanned them through, save where the writing was obliterated by those dark stains.

They were a revelation to us both. They told a story which utterly amazed us.

Within the flat circular locket were engraved the words: “From Sybil—August 14th,” but there was no year. It was a love token which the unknown had worn around his neck, a beautiful miniature signed by one of the most fashionable modern miniaturists.

The letters were, for the most part, in a woman’s large, rather sprawling hand, which I at once recognised as Sybil’s, and signed either by her Christian name or by her initials, “S.B.”

The first we read was written on the notepaper of Hethe Hall, in Cumberland, a country house near Keswick, where she often visited. Undated, it ran:—

“I do wish, Ralph, you would be more careful. Your actions every day betray the truth, and I fear somebody may suspect. You know how carefully I am watched and how my every action is noted. Every hour I live in dread. Think what exposure would mean to me. I shall walk down to Braithwaite Station to-morrow evening about 5:30. Do not write to me, as I fear Mason may get hold of one of your letters. She is so very curious. If you are free to-morrow evening perhaps I shall meet you ‘accidentally.’ But I do warn you to be careful for my sake. Till to morrow. —S.”

What was meant by the “truth?” Was that ill-dressed, low-born fellow actually her secret lover? The love token showed that such was actually the case. Yet who was he?

Another note, written hurriedly upon a plain sheet of common notepaper, was as follows:—

“I don’t know if I can escape them. If so, I shall try and get hold of one of Mason’s dresses and hats and meet you in Serle Street, outside Lincoln’s Inn. But it is very risky. Do be careful that you are not followed.”

The next was upon pale green notepaper, bearing in gold the heading, “S.Y. *Regina*,” with the added words, “Off the Faroe Islands:—

“I am longing to be back again in town, but it cannot be for another four or five weeks. We have decided to do the Fiords. Do not write, as your letter must go through so many hands before it reaches me. What you tell me makes me suspicious. Why should they ask you that question if there had not been some whisper? Find out. Remember I have enemies—very bitter ones. It was hazardous of you to come to Glasgow. I saw you on the quay when we sailed. But you may have been recognised. If so, think of my position. Again I do beg of you to be as cautious as I am. From me the world shall never know the truth. I can keep a secret. See if you cannot do so, for my sake.”

Apparently the fellow had preserved all her letters, either because he was so deeply in love with her, or with that ulterior motive of which she had so openly accused him.

“Why did you speak to me on the stairs last night?” she asked, reproachfully, in another hastily-written note upon plain paper. “You imperil me at every moment. You may love me as fervently as you declare you do, but surely you should do nothing that may imperil my good name!”

In another, evidently of more recent date, she wrote:

“I cannot understand you. Our love has been a very foolish romance. Let us part and agree to forget it. I have been injudicious, and so have you. Let us agree to be friends, and I will, I assure you, do all I can for your interests in the future. Sometimes I think that Mason suspects. She may have seen you speak to me, or overheard you. She looks at me so very strangely sometimes, and I’m sure she watches me.”

Again in another communication, which was besmirched by the dead man's blood, writing from the Hotel Ritz, in Paris, she said:—

"We are in deadly peril, both of us—but you more especially. E— knows the truth. Avoid him. He intends to betray you. I met J— in the Bois to-day, and he asked if you were in Paris. I pretended to be ignorant of your very existence, but he told me that E— had explained certain things, and he promised to keep my secret. I send you fifty pounds enclosed. Don't acknowledge it. Burn this letter."

The longest, written on thin blue foreign paper, was even more enigmatical. It was dated from her sister's place up in Durham, and read:—

"You are right when you declared last night that I am very fond of Wilfrid Hughes. It is a pity, perhaps, that I did not marry him three years ago. If I had I should have been spared this awful anxiety and double life that I am now forced to lead. You say that I am giddy and heartless, thoughtless and reckless. Yes. I am all that, I admit. And yet I am only like many women who are seeking to forget. Some take morphia, others drink brandy, and I—well, I try and amuse myself as far as my remnant of a conscience will allow me. Ah! when I look back upon my quiet girlhood down at Ryhall I recollect how happy I was, how easily satisfied, how high were my ideals when I loved Wilfrid Hughes. And now? But will you not give me back my freedom? I ask, I beg, I implore of you to give me liberty—and save my life. You have always said that you loved me, therefore you surely will not continue this cruel persecution of a woman who is defenceless and powerless. I feel that your heart is too noble, and that when we meet to-morrow you will release me from my bond. Up to the present I have been able to close the lips of your enemies, yet how have you repaid me? But I do not reproach you. No. I only crave humbly at your feet."

The last, written from Ryhall, and dated three days before, was brief but to the point:—

"If you are absolutely determined that I should see you then, I will keep your appointment. Recollect, however, that I have no fear of you. I have kept my mouth closed until to-day, and it will remain closed unless you

compel me to open it.—S.”

The other papers, of which we made methodical examination, were mysterious and puzzling. Upon a sheet of ruled sermon paper was drawn in red ink a geometrical device—the plan of a house we took it to be—while another piece of paper was covered with long lists of letters, words and phrases in a masculine but almost microscopic hand, together with their cipher equivalents.

Was this the cipher used by the dead man to communicate with Sybil?

“This will assist us, no doubt,” remarked Eric, scrutinising it beneath the light. “Probably she sent him cipher messages from time to time.”

There was also a man’s visiting card, bearing the name,—

“Mr John Parham, Keymer, Sydenham Hill, S.E.” As I turned it over I remarked, “This also may tell us something. This Mr Parham is perhaps his friend.” The card-case was empty, but a couple of pawn tickets for a watch and ring, showing them to be pawned at a shop in the Fulham Road in the name of Green, completed the miscellaneous collection that I had filched from the dead man’s pockets, and showed that, at any rate, he had been in want of money, even though he had a few shillings upon him at the time of his death.

To say the least, it was a strange, gruesome collection as it lay spread upon the table. To my chagrin one of the blood-stained letters made an ugly mark upon the long hem-stitched linen toilet-cover.

Eric took up letter after letter, and with knit brows re-read them, although he vouchsafed no remark.

Who was the man? That was the one question which now occupied our minds.

“How fortunate we’ve been able to possess ourselves of these!” I remarked. “Think, if they had fallen into the hands of the police!”

“Yes,” answered my friend, “you acted boldly—more boldly than I dare act. I only hope that the person who saw us will not gossip. If he does—

well, then it will be decidedly awkward."

"If he does, then we must put the best face upon matters. He probably didn't see us take anything from the body."

"He may have followed and watched. Most likely."

"We've more to fear from somebody having seen Sybil go to the spot this afternoon. At that hour people would be at work in the fields, and anybody crossing those turnips must have been seen half a mile off."

"Unless they made a *détour* and came through the wood from the opposite side, as I expect she did. She would never risk discovery by going there openly."

"But what shall we do with all this?" I asked.

"Burn the lot; that's my advice."

"And if we've been discovered. What then? It would be awkward if the police came to us for these letters and we had burnt them. No," I declared. "Let us keep them under lock and key—at least for the present."

"Very well, as you like. All I hope is that nobody will identify the fellow," my friend said. "If they do, then his connection with Sybil may be known. Recollect what the letters say about the maid Mason. She suspects."

"That's so," I said, seriously. "Mason must be sent to London on some pretence the first thing in the morning. She must not be allowed to see the body."

"It seems that Sybil held some secret of the dead man's, and yet was loyal to him throughout. I wonder what it was?"

"The fellow was an outsider, without a doubt. Sybil foolishly fell in love with him, and he sought to profit by it. He was an adventurer, most certainly. I don't like that cipher. It's suspicious," I declared.

"Then you'll keep all these things in your possession. Better seal them up

and put them in your bank or somewhere safe."

"Yes," I said, "I'll take them to my bank. At any rate, they'll be put away from prying eyes there."

"And how shall we face her?" Eric asked.

"How will she face us, that's the question?" I said, in a low voice.

Then almost at the same moment we were both startled by hearing a low tapping upon my door.

Eric and I turned and looked inquiringly at each other.

"It's Budd, your man, I expect," he whispered. "He must not see me. Perhaps he's heard of the affair and come to tell you. Look, I'll get in there," and springing across to a big old-fashioned oak wardrobe he slipped inside and I closed the door noiselessly.

Then, quick as thought, I swept up the letters and other articles upon the table, placed them in one of the drawers, and stood awaiting a further summons.

In a moment the low tapping was repeated.

"Who's there?" I inquired, crossing and drawing aside the heavy *portière*.

"Wilfrid!" whispered a low voice. "Can you see me? I must speak with you at once."

I started as though I had received a blow. It was Sybil herself!

Chapter Six.

Contains a Curious Confession.

I unlocked the door, and opening it, met the love of my youth standing there in the darkness.

“Wilfrid!” she gasped, in a low whisper, “I—I want to speak to you. Forgive me, but it is very urgent. Come along here—into the blue room. Come, there is no time to lose.”

Thus impelled, I followed her along the corridor to the small sitting-room at the end, where she had apparently left her candle.

By its light I saw that she was dressed in a black tailor-made gown, and that her face was white and haggard. She closed the door, and noticing that I was still dressed, said,—

“Have you only just come up to bed?”

“Yes,” was my answer. “Eric and I have been gossiping. The others went up long ago, but he began telling me some of his African yarns.”

“But everyone is in bed now?” she inquired, quickly.

“Of course,” I answered, wondering why she had come to me thus, in the middle of the night. She had changed her dinner-gown for a walking dress, but there was still the bow of blue velvet in her gold-brown hair which she had apparently forgotten to remove.

“Wilfrid!” she said, in a low, hard voice, suddenly grasping both my hands. “Although you refused to marry me you are still my friend, are you not?”

“Your friend! Of course I am,” I answered rather hoarsely. “Did I not tell you so before dinner?”

“I know you did, but—” and she dropped her fine eyes, still holding my

hands in hers. Her own hands trembled, and apparently she dared not look me full in the face.

“But what—?” I asked. “What troubles you? Why are you dressed like this?”

“I—I have been very foolish,” she whispered. “I am, after all, a woman, and very weak. Ah! Wilfrid—if I only dare tell you the truth—if I only dare?” she gasped, and I saw how terribly agitated she was.

“Why not? Why not confide in me?” I urged, seriously. “I can keep a secret, you know.”

“No, no,” she cried. “How can I? No, I only beg and implore of you to help me, and not to misjudge me.”

“Misjudge you, why? I don’t understand,” I said, in pretence of ignorance.

“Ah! of course not. But to-morrow you will know everything, and—” but she did not conclude her sentence.

There was a change in her countenance, and I saw that she was fainting. I drew her to a big armchair, and a second later she sank into it unconscious.

Next instant I dashed along to my room for the water-bottle, whispered to Eric what had taken place and ran back to assist my little friend.

Ten minutes later she opened her eyes again and gazed steadily at the candle. Then, finding me at her side, she whispered,—

“Yes, ah—yes, I remember. How very foolish I have been. Forgive me, Wilfrid, won’t you? I miscalculated my strength. I thought myself stronger,” and her soft hand again sought mine, and she looked into my eyes steadily, with a long, earnest gaze.

“You are in distress, Tibbie,” I said, as kindly as I could. “What is it? How can I help you?”

“You can save me,” she said in an intense, earnest voice. “You can save

my life if you will."

"If I will? Why, of course I will," was my quick response.

"Then you will really help me?"

"Only tell me what you wish me to do and I'll do it at once," I replied.

"You will have no fear?"

"Fear of what?"

"Well," she exclaimed, hesitating, "suppose you were suspected of something—that the police believed you to be guilty of a crime?"

"Guilty of a crime?" I echoed, with a forced smile. "Well, they might suspect whatever they like, so long as I was innocent."

"Then you are really prepared to bear any suspicion if it would be for my salvation?"

"Have I not already said that I am quite ready to help you, Tibbie?"

"Ah, yes, because you do not yet realise your grave peril," she said. "If only I dare be frank with you—if only I dare tell you the awful, bitter truth! Yet I can't, and you must remain in ignorance. Your very ignorance will cause you to court danger, and at the same time to misjudge me."

"I shall not misjudge you," I assured her. "But at the present I am, as you say, entirely in the dark. What is it you want me to do?"

For a moment she was silent, apparently fearing to make the suggestion lest I should refuse. At last she looked straight into my face and said,—

"What I ask you to do is to make a great sacrifice in order to save me. I am in peril, Wilfrid, in a grave, terrible peril. The sword of fate hangs over me, and may fall at any instant. I must fly from here—I must fly to-night and hide—I—"

She hesitated again. Her words were an admission of her guilt. She was

a murderess. That unknown man that I had left lying cold and dead beneath the trees had fallen by her hand.

“Well?” I asked, rather coldly, I fear.

“I must hide. I must efface my identity, and for certain reasons—indeed to obtain greater security I must marry.”

“Marry!” I echoed. “Well, really, Sybil, I don’t understand you in the least. Why?”

“Because I can, I hope, save myself by marrying,” she went on quickly. “To-night I am going into hiding, and not a soul must know of my whereabouts. The place best of all in which to hide oneself is London, in one of the populous working districts. They would never search for me there. As the wife of an industrious working-man I should be safe. To go abroad would be useless.”

“But why should you leave so hurriedly?” I asked her.

“Ah! you will know in due course,” was her answer. “Ask me no questions now, only help me to escape.”

“How?”

“Listen, and I will tell you of the plans I have formed. To-night I have thought it all out, and have made resolve. The car is in the shed over against the kennels. I backed it in yesterday, therefore it will run down the hill along the avenue, and right out through the lodge gates without petrol and noiselessly. Once in the Chichester road, I can drive it away without awakening either the house or the Grants who keep the gate. You’ll come with me.”

“Where?”

“To London.”

“And what would people say when it was known that you and I left together in the middle of the night?”

“Oh! they’d only say it was one of Tibbie’s mad freaks. It is useful sometimes,” she added, “to have a reputation for eccentricity. It saves so many explanations.”

“Yes, that’s all very well, but it is not a judicious course in any way.”

Suddenly I recollected the woman Mason whom I saw at all costs must be got out of the way. As a servant she might get a view of the dead man out of curiosity and identify him as her mistress’s lover.

“No,” I added, after a moment’s reflection. “If you really want to escape to London go in exactly the opposite direction. Run across the New Forest to Bournemouth, for instance. Take Mason with you. Go to the Bath Hotel, and then slip away by train say up to Birmingham, and from there to London.”

“Yes, but I can’t take Mason. She must remain in ignorance. She knows far too much of my affairs already.”

“Well, I can’t go with you. It would be madness. And you cannot go alone.”

She was silent, her lips pressed together, her brows knit. Her countenance was hard and troubled, and there was a look of unmistakable terror in those wonderful eyes of hers.

“And if I act on your advice, Wilfrid, will you meet me in secret in London to-morrow or the next day?”

“Certainly. I will do all I can to help you—only accept my advice and take Mason with you. Mislead her, just as you are misleading everyone.”

“You will not think ill of me if I ask you something?” she said, seriously, looking very earnestly up into my face.

“Certainly not. You can be perfectly open and straightforward with me, surely.”

“Then I want you to do something—although I’m almost afraid to ask you.”

“And what’s that?”

“I have no one else I can trust, Wilfrid, as I trust you. You are a man of honour and I am an honest woman, even though my enemies have whispered their calumnies regarding me. You are my friend; if you were not I surely dare not ask you to help me in this,” and her voice faltered as she averted her gaze. “I want you—I want you to pretend that you are my husband.”

“Your husband,” I exclaimed, staring at her.

“Yes,” she cried quickly. “To place myself in a position of safety I must first live in a crowded part of London where I can efface my identity; and secondly, for appearances’ sake, as well as for another and much stronger motive, I must have a husband. Will you, Wilfrid, pretend to be mine?”

Her request utterly nonplussed me, and she noticed my hesitation.

“If you will only consent to go into hiding with me I can escape,” she urged, quickly. “You can easily contrive to live in Bolton Street and pose as my husband in another part of the world; while I—well, I simply disappear. There will be a loud hue and cry after me, of course, but when I’m not found, the mater and the others will simply put my disappearance down to my eccentricity. They will never connect us, for you will take good care to be seen in London leading your usual life, and indeed seriously troubled over my disappearance. They will never suspect.”

“But why must you appear to have a husband?” I asked, extremely puzzled.

“I have a reason—a strong one,” she answered, earnestly. “I have enemies, and my hand will be strengthened against them the instant they believe that I have married.”

“That may be so,” I said, dubiously. “But where do you suggest taking up your abode?”

“Camberwell would be a good quarter,” she responded. “There is a large working-class population there. We could take furnished apartments with

some quiet landlady. You are a compositor on one of the morning newspapers, and are out at work all night. Sometimes, too, you have to work overtime—I think they call it—and then you are away the greater part of the day also. I don't want you to tie yourself to me too much, you see," she added, smiling. "We shall give out that we've been married a year, and by your being a compositor, your absence won't be remarked. So you see you can live in Bolton Street just the same, and pay me a daily visit to Camberwell, just to cheer me up."

"But surely you could never bear life in a back street, Tibbie," I said, looking at her utterly bewildered at her suggestion. "You would have to wear print dresses, cook, and clean up your rooms."

"And don't you think I know how to do that?" she asked. "Just see whether I can't act the working-man's wife if you will only help to save me from—from the awful fate that threatens me. Say you will, Wilfrid," she gasped, taking my hand again. "You will not desert me now, will you? Remember you are the only friend I dare go to in my present trouble. You will not refuse to be known in Camberwell as my husband—will you?"

I was silent. Was any living man ever placed in dilemma more difficult? What could I reply? That she was in real deep earnest I saw from her white, drawn countenance. The dark rings around her eyes told their own tale. She was desperate, and she declared that by acting as she suggested I could save her.

The dead, staring, clean-shaven countenance of that man in the wood arose before me, and I held my breath, my eyes fixed upon hers.

She saw that I hesitated to compromise her and implicate myself.

Then slowly she raised my hand to her lips and kissed it, saying in a strange voice, so low that I hardly caught the words,—

"Wilfrid, I—I can tell you no more. My life is entirely in your hands. Save me, or—or I will kill myself. I dare not face the truth. Give me my life. Do whatever you will. Suspect me; hate me; spurn me as I deserve, but I crave mercy of you—I crave of you life—life!"

And releasing me she stood motionless, her hands clasped in

supplication, her head bent, not daring to look me again in the face.

What could I think? What, reader, would you have thought? How would you have acted in such circumstances?

Chapter Seven.

In which I Play a Dangerous Game.

Well—I agreed.

Yes—I agreed to pose as the hard-working compositor upon a daily newspaper and husband of the Honourable Sybil Burnet, the woman by whose hand the unknown man had fallen.

At first I hesitated, refusing to compromise her, yet she had fallen upon her knees imploring me to help her, and I was bound to fulfil the promise I had so injudiciously made.

There was no love between us now, she had declared. The flame had flickered and died out long ago.

“If you will only consent to act as though I were your wife, then I may be able to save myself,” she urged. “You will do so, will you not?”

“But why?” I had asked. “I cannot see how our pretended marriage can assist you?”

“Leave it all to me,” was her confident reply. “One day you will discern the reason.”

And then, with tears in her beautiful eyes, and kneeling at my feet, she begged again of me to act as she suggested and thus save her life.

So I consented. Yes—you may say that I was foolish, that I was injudicious, that I was still beneath the spell of her exquisite grace and matchless beauty. Perhaps I was: yet I tell you that at the moment so stunned was I by the tragedy, by what Eric had revealed, and by her midnight visit, that I hardly knew what I did.

“Very well, Sybil,” I said at last. “Let it be so. I will help you to escape, and I will act as though I were your husband. For your sake I will do this, although I tell you plainly that I see in it a grave and deadly peril.”

“There is a far greater peril if I remain unmarried,” she answered. “You recollect my question this afternoon. I asked whether you would not really marry me. I asked because I feared that the blow might fall, and that I should have to seek protection.”

“And the blow has fallen?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered, in a low, desperate voice. “And were it not for you I —I should go to my room now and kill myself, Wilfrid! You, however, have promised to save me. There is no time to lose. I must get away at once. You will help me to get out the car?”

“Of course. And you will take Mason? You must take her,” I added.

“Why?”

“Because it is dangerous for her to remain here. She may raise the alarm,” I said, rather lamely. “Take my advice and carry her with you down to Bournemouth.”

“Very well,” she answered, hurriedly, and raising my hand to her soft lips, kissed it before I could prevent her, and said, “Wilfrid, let me thank you. You have given me back my life. An hour ago I was in my room and made preparations to bid adieu to everything. But I thought of you—my last and only chance of salvation. Ah! you do not know—no, no—I—I can never tell you! I can only give you the thanks of a desperate and grateful woman!” And then she slipped out, promising to meet me again there with Mason in a quarter of an hour.

I crept back to my room, and when I had closed the door Eric stepped from his hiding-place.

“She intends to fly,” I explained. “She is going away on the car, and I have persuaded her to take Mason.”

“On the car? At this hour?”

In brief I explained all that had taken place between us, and he listened to me in silence till the end.

“What?” he cried. “You are actually going to make people believe that you’re her husband?”

“I’m going to make people in Camberwell believe it,” I answered.

“But isn’t that a very dangerous bit of business?” he queried. “Suppose any of her people knew it. What would be said?”

I only shrugged my shoulders.

“Well,” he remarked at last, “please yourself, old chap, but I can’t help thinking that it’s very unwise. I can’t see either how being married protects her in the least.”

“Nor can I. Yet I’ve resolved to shield her, and at the same time to try and solve the mysterious affair, therefore, I’m bound to adopt her suggestions. She must get away at once, and we must get Mason out of the neighbourhood—those two facts are plain. The motor will run down the avenue without any noise, so she’ll be miles away when the household awake.”

“Where’s she going?”

I told him, and he agreed that my suggestion had been a good one.

Leaving him in my room, I crept again down the corridor, and presently both she and Mason came noiselessly along in the dark. My little friend had on a thick box-cloth motor coat with fur collar, a motor-cap and her goggles hanging round her neck, while Mason, who often went in the car with her, had also a thick black coat, close cap and veil.

“I hope we sha’n’t get a break-down,” Tibbie said, with a laugh. “I really ought to take Webber with me,” she added, referring to her smart chauffeur. “But how can I?”

“No,” I said. “Drive yourself and risk it. I know you can change a tyre or mend a puncture as well as any man.” Whereat she laughed.

“Very well,” she said, “let us go,” and we crossed the Long Gallery and descended the wide oak stairs, Mason carrying the candle, which she

afterwards blew out.

Upon my suggestion, we made our exit by that same window through which Eric and I had passed earlier in the night. Mistress and maid scrambled through, and I assisted them down upon the grass.

Then we slipped across to where the car was, opened the door, and after Sybil had mounted into her place Mason and I pushed the fine "Mercedes" slowly out, while she steered it down the incline to the avenue.

She let it run twenty yards or so, and afterwards put on the brake to allow her maid to mount beside her. Then after I had tucked the rug round her legs, she gripped my hand tightly and meaningly, saying in a low voice,—

"Thanks so much, Mr Hughes. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," I whispered. "*Bon voyage*."

And slowly the long powerful car glided off almost noiselessly down the incline, and was a moment later lost in the darkness of the great avenue.

I stood peering into the blackness, but in a few moments could hear no further sound. She had escaped, leaving me utterly mystified and wondering.

When, ten minutes later, I returned to Eric and described her silent departure, he said,—

"So you're going to meet her in town—eh?"

"Yes, in secret, on Thursday night. She has made an appointment. She will leave Mason in Bournemouth, and then simply disappear. By the time Mason returns here the dead man will be in his coffin, therefore she won't have any opportunity of identifying him."

"But there'll be a hue and cry after her. The police will think that something has happened to her."

"Let them think. We shall pretend to make inquiries and assist them. In

the meantime, with all these letters and things in our hands, we hold the trump cards."

"If Tibbie knew that we had her letters, I wonder what she would say—how she would act?"

"She no doubt fears that they may fall into the hands of the police. That is why she is disappearing."

"Of course. And for the present she must be allowed to remain in that belief," Eric replied. "I wonder who the man Parham is? We must inquire. On Sydenham Hill are some rather nice houses. I once knew a rather pretty girl who lived in that neighbourhood, and used to take her for evening walks up the hill to the Crystal Palace."

"Yes," I said. "We must discover all we can about the dead man's friends. We must also call and see the pawnbroker in the Fulham Road. He may be able to tell us who pledged the watch and ring. Indeed, we might get them out of pawn and see whether there are any remarks or inscription that will tell us anything."

With my suggestion he entirely agreed, and for a second time we re-read those curious letters of the woman who was now flying into hiding, and whom I had promised to meet and assist.

I had placed myself in a very difficult and dangerous position. Of that I was well aware. I hoped, however, to save her. Too well I knew that she was in desperation, that she had seriously contemplated suicide until she had resolved to make her appeal for my sympathy and help.

Yet she was under the impression that I was as yet in ignorance of this tragedy, although in her white, terrified countenance I saw guilt distinctly written.

I took counsel with Eric. He was entirely against the very dangerous part that I had now promised to play, saying,—"I can't for the life of me see what motive she can have. To hide is all very well—to bury herself in a working-class suburb and pretend to be poor is certainly a much safer plan than endeavouring to slip across to the Continent. But why does she want you to act as her husband? Not for appearances' sake, surely! And

yet if she hadn’t a very strong motive she would not thus run the very great risk of compromising herself. She respects you, too, therefore all the stronger reason why she would never ask you to place yourself in that awkward position. No, old fellow,” he declared, seating himself upon the edge of my bed, “I can’t make it out at all.”

“Of course, it has to do with the affair of yesterday,” I remarked.

“Undoubtedly. It has some connection with it, but what it is we can’t yet discern.”

“I can only act as she suggests,” I remarked.

“I fear you can’t do anything else,” he said, after a pause. “Only you’ll have to be most careful and circumspect, for I can foresee danger ahead. Tibbie’s clever enough, but she is erratic sometimes, and one untimely word of hers may upset everything. I hardly like the idea of you posing as her husband, Wilfrid. I tell you plainly that I have some distinct premonition of evil—forgive me for saying so.”

“I hope not. I’m only consenting to it for her sake.”

“Because you are still just a little bit fond of her, old fellow. Now, confess it.”

“I’m not, Eric. I swear to you I’m not. We could never marry. We are no longer lovers.”

“I hope not,” he said in an altered tone. “But pretended love-making is always dangerous, you know.”

“Well,” I said, pacing up the old tapestried room and down again, “let’s leave love out of the question. What I intend to do is to save Tibbie, and at the same time find out the truth. You, Eric, will help me, won’t you?”

“With all my heart, my dear chap,” he said. “But—well, somehow I have had lately a very faint suspicion of one thing; and that is, I believe Ellice Winsloe is deeply in love with her. I’ve seen it in his face. If so, you and I have to reckon with him.”

“How?”

“Because as soon as she disappears he’ll commence making eager inquiries and trying to trace her. His inquiries may lead him in our direction, don’t you see. Besides, it would be awkward if he found you down at Camberwell.”

I was silent. There was a good deal of truth in what he said. Eric Domville always had a knack of looking far ahead. He was what is vulgarly known as “a far-seeing man.”

“But don’t you think that when I’m a compositor in a well-worn tweed suit and a threadbare overcoat with wages of two pounds a week I’ll be beyond the pale and safe from recognition?”

“That’s all very well, but the working-class are intelligent. They’ll easily see through a gentleman’s disguise.”

“I quite agree,” I said. “There is no more intelligent class than the working-class in London, or indeed in any of the big cities of the North. It is the working-man who is the back-bone of England, after all. The capitalist may direct and public companies may manoeuvre, but it is the skilled labourer who has made England what she is. Yes, I’m quite with you there. I shall have to exert all my tact if I’m to pass as a printer among working-men. Yet Tibbie’s idea that I should be on a morning paper and be out at work at night is an ingenious one, isn’t it?”

“Ingenious? Why, isn’t she one of the very cleverest women in England?” he asked. “I say that she is as unequalled for her ingenuity as for her beauty. Therefore, Wilfrid, have a care. I’ll help you—unknown to Tibbie, of course—but I beg of you to be careful. And now let’s turn in for an hour or so. We must be astir and alert to-morrow, for our work of fathoming the mystery must commence at once. We must be all ears and eyes. We already hold the honours in our hand, it is true; but much very difficult and dangerous work lies before us.”

“Never mind,” I said. “We must save her, Eric. We must save her at all hazards!”

Chapter Eight.

Mainly about the Stranger.

When next morning the tragedy in the wood became known the whole household was agog.

It was discussed at the breakfast-table, and Scarcliff, Wydcombe, Ellice Winsloe and myself agreed to walk down to the village and ascertain the facts. Eric remained behind to drive Lady Wydcombe into Chichester as he had arranged on the previous evening.

About half-past ten we four men walked down the avenue into the village, where we found the constable with two other officers in plain clothes. Great consternation had, of course, been created by the startling news, and the whole village seemed to be gossiping at the doors, and forming wild theories concerning the death of the unfortunate unknown.

After making inquiries of the constables, and hearing details of which I, of course, was already aware, Scarcliff asked leave to view the body.

“Certainly, m’lord,” was Booth’s prompt reply, and we moved off together.

My great fear was that the village constable should remark upon my previous visit to him, therefore I walked with him, keeping him a considerable distance behind the others as we went up the street.

“The superintendent is not here now?” I remarked casually, in order that he should recall our meeting up in the wood while we were alone, and not before my friends.

“No, sir. The guv’nor went back to Chichester about an hour ago,” was his answer, and a few minutes later we turned into a farmyard, where in a barn, the door of which was unlocked by one of the men, we saw the body lying face upwards upon a plank on trestles.

Booth drew the handkerchief from the dead face that seemed to stare at us so grimly in the semi-darkness of the barn, and from my companions

escaped exclamations of surprise and horror.

“Awful!” gasped the young viscount—who was known as “The Scrambler” to his intimates—a name given to him at Eton; “I wonder who murdered him?”

“I wonder!” echoed Ellice Winsloe in a hard, hushed voice.

His strange tone attracted me, and my eyes fell upon his countenance. It had, I was amazed to see, blanched in an instant, and was as white as that of the dead man himself.

The sudden impression produced upon the others was such that they failed to notice the change in Ellice. I, however, saw it distinctly.

I was confident of one thing—that he had identified the victim.

Yet he said nothing beyond agreeing with his companions that a dastardly crime had been committed, and expressing a hope that the assassin would be arrested.

“He’s a stranger,” declared Scarcliff.

“Yes—an entire stranger,” said Winsloe, emphatically, and at the same time he bent forward to get a better view of the lifeless countenance. Standing behind, I watched him closely.

The sight of the body had produced a remarkable change in him. His face was wild and terrified, and I saw that his lips trembled.

Nevertheless he braced himself up with a great effort, and said,—

“Then it’s a complete mystery. He was found by Harris, the keeper, last night?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Booth. “He’d been dead then some hours. Dr Richards says it’s murder. He’s goin’ to make the post-mortem this afternoon.”

“Has the revolver been found?” he asked.

“No, sir. We’ve been searching all the morning, but can find nothing.”

“And what was in his pockets?” inquired Winsloe, his anxiety well disguised.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing at all?” he demanded.

“Oh! a knife, a piece of pencil, a little money and a few odds and ends. But nothing of any use to us.”

“Then you can’t identify him?”

“Unfortunately we can’t, sir,” was the man’s reply.

“We hope to find out who he is, but from all appearances he’s a total stranger in these parts.”

“It’s very evident that the murderer searched the poor fellow’s pockets,” Jack said. “He was afraid lest his victim might be identified.”

“That’s what we think, m’lord,” remarked one of Booth’s companions. “The tab off the back of his jacket, which bore the maker’s name, has been cut out.”

“By the murderer?” asked Wydcombe.

“Probably so, m’lord.”

“Then whoever killed him took good care to remove every scrap of evidence which might lead to his victim’s identification,” Ellice Winsloe remarked, standing with his eyes fixed steadily upon the dead face.

“That’s what our superintendent thinks. He believes that if we establish who the poor fellow is, that we shall have no difficulty in putting our hand upon the guilty person.”

“But did no one hear the shot?” Winsloe inquired.

“Nobody. The doctor thinks the affair took place late in the afternoon,”

answered Booth.

Winsloe pursed his white lips, and turned away. For an instant a haggard, fearsome look crossed his hard countenance—the look of a man haunted by a guilty secret—but a moment later, when Wydcombe turned to join him, his face changed, and he exclaimed lightly,—

“Let’s get out of this. The thing’s a complete mystery, and we must leave it to the police to puzzle it all out. Of course, there’ll be an inquest, and then we may hear something further.”

“At present the affair is a complete enigma,” Jack remarked. Then, bending again towards the dead man’s face, he added, “Do you know, Ellice, I can’t help thinking that I’ve seen him before somewhere, but where, I can’t for the life of me recollect.”

I saw that Winsloe started, and he turned again. “I don’t recognise him in the least,” he said quickly. “A face is always altered by death. He now resembles, perhaps, somebody you’ve known.”

“Ah, perhaps so,” remarked the young viscount. “Yet I certainly have a faint impression of having seen him somewhere before—or somebody very like him.”

“I hope your lordship will try and remember,” urged the village constable. “It would be of the greatest assistance to us.”

“I’ll try and think, Booth. If I recollect I’ll send for you,” he answered.

“Thank you, m’lord,” the constable replied, and as I glanced covertly at Winsloe I saw that his face had fallen.

Would Scarcliff recall who he really was?

“To identify a dead person is always most difficult,” Winsloe remarked with assumed disinterestedness. “I’ve heard of cases where half a dozen different families have laid claim to one dead body—wives, mothers, children and intimate friends. No doubt lots of people are buried from time to time under names that are not their own. Richards, of any doctor, will tell you that a countenance when drawn by death is most difficult to

recognise."

By those remarks I saw that he was trying very ingeniously to arouse doubt within Jack's mind, in order to prevent him making any statement. His attitude increased the mystery a hundredfold.

I recollected the secret Sybil had revealed to me on the previous afternoon when we had stood together in the Long Gallery—how she had told me that she intended to many Winsloe. What he had said now aroused my suspicions.

Winsloe knew the victim. That he had identified him I was fully convinced, and yet he held his tongue. What motive had he in that? Was he, I wondered, aware of the terrible truth?

Fortunately, I held in my possession those injudicious letters of Sybil's, and that miniature; fortunately, too, I knew the real facts, and was thus enabled to watch the impression produced upon Winsloe by sight of the victim.

As we left the barn I walked by his side.

"A queer affair, isn't it?" I remarked. "Strange that a man could be murdered here, close to the village in broad daylight, and nobody hear the shot!"

"But we were shooting until late yesterday afternoon, remember," he said quickly. "The villagers thought it was one of our shots, I expect."

"I wonder who he is?" I exclaimed.

"Ah! I wonder," he said. "He walked a long way, evidently. He's probably some tramp or other. He might have quarrelled with his companion—who knows? Perhaps the police will find out all about him."

"It will be interesting to see if they discover anything," I said, glancing at him at the same instant.

"Yes," he said, "it will," and then he turned to speak with Wydcombe, who was walking at Booth's side.

Whatever his knowledge, his self-command was marvellous. The others, who had not seen that expression on his face when he had first gazed upon the dead countenance, had no suspicion of the truth.

Yes. Ellice Winsloe was playing a double game; therefore I resolved to wait and to watch.

Together we walked up through the park again, discussing the strange affair. Jack advanced more than one theory.

“Charlton Wood doesn’t lead to anywhere,” he pointed out. “Therefore the dead man kept an appointment there. Perhaps he was lured to his death,” he added. “There may have been two or more assassins.”

“No, I rather disagree,” said Wydcombe. “If there had been a plot to kill him they wouldn’t have risked firing a revolver, as it would attract too much attention. No, depend upon it that the affair was not a premeditated one. Did you notice his boots? Although dusty and badly worn they were evidently by a good maker. Besides, I felt his hand. It was as soft as a woman’s.”

“But you surely don’t believe that he was a gentleman, do you?” asked Winsloe. “To me the fellow was more like a tramp.”

“I hardly know what to think, Ellice,” was his lordship’s reply as he lit a cigarette. “It’s a mystery, and that’s all one can say. Whoever killed him was a confoundedly good shot.”

“You don’t think it was suicide?” Winsloe asked slowly, looking the speaker straight in the face.

“Suicide! Of course not. Why don’t you hear? They haven’t found a revolver.”

And with such remarks as these we went back to the house for lunch.

When we had all assembled at table, Eric and Lady Wydcombe alone being absent, old Lady Scarcliff exclaimed suddenly,—

“Tibbie has broken out again. She took Mason and went off in the car

early this morning without telling anyone where she was going. Did anybody hear the car go off?" she inquired, looking around the table.

But all expressed surprise at Tibbie's absence, and of course nobody had heard her departure. Where had she gone, and why, we all asked. Whereupon her ladyship merely replied,—

"I'm sure I can't tell you anything. Simmons brought me a scribbled note at nine o'clock this morning, saying that she had found it in her room. It was from Tibbie to say that as she couldn't sleep she had got up and gone out with Mason. 'Perhaps I shall be back to-morrow,' she says, 'but if I am not, please don't worry after me. I shall be all right and will write.'"

"Gone to see Aunt Clara down at Hove, perhaps," remarked Jack. "She said something about running down there a few days ago."

"But it isn't proper for a young girl tearing about the country by herself and driving her own car," protested the old lady. "She knows that I most strongly disapprove of it."

"And therefore does it all the more," laughed the man who had identified the victim in Charlton Wood.

"Tibbie is really quite incorrigible."

"Quite, Mr Winsloe," declared her ladyship. "My only fear is that one day something terrible may happen to her. The driving of a big car is, I always say, not a proper occupation for a girl. She'll come to grief some day—depend upon it!"

Ellice looked straight at the old lady, without uttering any word of reply. What did he know, I wondered? Was he, too, aware of her secret?

But the others were chattering gaily, and next moment he turned from me and joined in their merry gossip.

That afternoon I remained at home, but he drove out with two ladies of the party to make a call on some people about five miles away.

After he had gone Eric returned, and I told him all that I had seen, and of

my suspicions.

He stood at the end of the grey old terrace, and heard me through to the end, then said,—

“This puts an entirely new complexion upon matters, old fellow. You suspect him of knowing something. If so, then we must act at once, and fearlessly—just as we did last night.”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.”

“He’s out. Therefore we must go to his room and see whether he has anything there—any letters, for instance. To me, it seems plain that he was in expectation of the tragedy, and that he fears lest the dead man should be identified.”

“Then your suggestion is to search his belongings?”

“Certainly. Let’s go up there. There’s no time to lose. He may be back at any moment.”

And so we crossed the great hall and quickly ascended to his room unseen by the servants. Then after looking rapidly through the drawers we found that one of Eric’s keys fitted the strong brown kitbag at the foot of the bed.

In a moment it was open, and a few seconds later its contents were out upon the floor.

Among them we saw something lying which caused us to stare blankly at each other in utter amazement. The sight of it staggered us completely.

Again the mystery was still further increased. It was inexplicable.

I recognised my own grave peril if I dared to carry out Tibbie’s bold and astounding suggestion.

Chapter Nine.

Strictly in Secret.

Thursday night was wet and dismal in London as I stood outside the underground railway station at King's Cross at eight o'clock, keeping my appointment with the Honourable Sybil.

There was a good deal of traffic and bustle in the Pentonville Road; the shops were still open, and the working-class population, notwithstanding the rain, were out with their baskets, making their purchases after their day's labour.

At that spot in the evening one sees a veritable panorama of London life, its humours and its tragedies, for there five of the great arteries of traffic converge, while every two minutes the subterranean railway belches forth its hurrying, breathless crowds to swell the number of passers-by.

The station front towards the King's Cross Road is somewhat in the shadow, and there I stood in patience and in wonder.

What Eric and had discovered in Winsloe's kitbag had rendered the mystery the more tantalising, it being a cheap carte-de-visite photograph of the dead stranger—a picture which showed him in a dark tweed suit and golf-cap stuck slightly askew, as many young men of the working-class wear their caps.

We were both greatly puzzled. How came the portrait in Ellice's possession? And why, if he were not in fear of some secret being divulged, did he not identify the stranger?

Again I recollected well how Sybil had declared her intention to marry Ellice. For what reason? Was it in order to prevent her own secret being exposed?

We had replaced the photograph—which, unfortunately, bore no photographer's name—re-locked the bag, and left the room utterly confounded.

During the two days that followed both of us had watched Winsloe carefully, and had seen his ill-concealed anxiety lest the dead man should be identified by Jack. Once or twice, as was but natural, at table or in the billiard-room, Scarcliff had referred to the strange affair and declared,—

“I’m sure I’ve seen the poor chap before, but where, I can’t for the life of me recollect.”

The face was constantly puzzling him, and thus Winsloe remained anxious and agitated.

In order to watch and learn what I could, I remained Jack’s guest until after the inquest. The inquiry was duly held at the Spread Eagle at Midhurst, with the usual twelve respectable tradesmen as Jurymen, and created great excitement in the little town. Ellice went out shooting with Wydcombe on that day, while Jack, Eric and myself drove over to hear the evidence.

There was very little to hear. The affair was still a complete mystery. According to the two doctors who had made the examination the stranger had been shot through the heart about eight hours prior to his discovery —murdered by an unknown hand, for although the police had made a strict search the weapon had not been discovered.

The fact that not a scrap of anything remained to lead to the dead man’s identity puzzled the police, more especially the absence of the tab from the back of the coat. The two detectives from London sat beside us and listened to the evidence with dissatisfaction. Booth made his statement, and then the inquiry was formally adjourned.

There was nothing else. Both police and public were puzzled and the coroner remarked to the jury that he hoped when they next met some information would be forthcoming which might lead to the stranger’s identity.

We drove back in the dog-cart, and on the way Jack turned to me, saying,—

“I’d give worlds to know the real truth of that affair. I’m quite positive I’ve

seen the face somewhere, but where, I can't fix."

"That's a pity," Eric remarked. "One day, however, it'll come to you, and when it does we may hope to discover the guilty person."

That night in the billiard-room Winsloe asked us what had taken place at the inquest, endeavouring to put his question unconcernedly. Eric and I could, however, see how anxious he was.

"Nobody knows yet who he is," Jack answered, as he chalked his cue preparatory to making a shot. "The police have discovered nothing—except that a woman was seen coming from the wood just about four o'clock."

"A woman!" I cried, staring at him. "Who said so? It was not given in evidence."

"No," he replied. "Booth told me just as we came out that somebody had said so, but that he did not give it in evidence, as he considered it wiser to say nothing."

I held my breath.

"Who was the woman?" asked Winsloe, apparently as surprised as myself.

"He didn't tell me. In fact, I don't think she was recognised. If she had been, he would, of course, have interrogated her by this time."

Ellice Winsloe was silent. I saw as he stood back in the shadow from the table that his brows had contracted and that he was pensive and puzzled. And yet upstairs in his bag he had a portrait of the dead man, and was, therefore, well aware of his identity.

Now that we reflected we agreed that we really knew very little of Ellice Winsloe. He was Jack's friend rather than ours. The son of a Cornishman whose income was derived from his interest in certain tin mines, he had, on his father's death, been left well off. Jack had known him at Magdalen, but had lost sight of him for some years, when of a sudden they met again one night while at supper at the Savoy, and their old friendship had

been renewed. Ellice, it appeared, was well known in a certain set in town, and up to the present moment we had both voted him as a good all-round sportsman, a good fellow and a gentleman. But this secret knowledge which he refused to betray, and his evident fear lest the dead man be identified, aroused our serious suspicions.

“I wonder,” suggested Eric, when we were alone in my room on the night of the inquest, “I wonder whether Ellice was in hiding in those bushes watching us search the body? Do you know, the idea has been in my mind all day,” he added.

“If he was, then we are placed in a very awkward position,” I said. “He may make a statement to the police.”

“No. I don’t think he’ll do that. If he did he would betray his own knowledge,” was my friend’s answer.

The next day passed uneventfully, and beyond the general surprise at Tibbie’s continued absence there was nothing unusual in the household at Ryhall Place.

Late that night Mason returned, saying that her mistress had driven the car to the Bath Hotel, at Bournemouth, and put it into the garage. Three hours later she left the hotel to go for a walk, but did not return. After she had gone the maid had, it seemed, found a letter in which her mistress ordered her to remain there until Wednesday, and telling her that if she did not return then she was to go back to Ryhall and send the chauffeur to Bournemouth for the car.

Mason, used to Tibbie’s erratic ways, thought little of it. Her mistress travelled a great deal, had a very large circle of friends, and besides, was entirely unconventional and knew well how to take care of herself. Therefore the maid had remained until midday on Wednesday and then returned to Ryhall.

“I’m getting a little anxious about Tibbie,” remarked old Lady Scarcliff in the drawing-room that evening. “This kind of thing is not at all proper—flying about the country alone.”

Jack laughed.

“No good worrying about Tibbie, mater. She’ll turn up all right to-morrow, or you’ll get a wire from her. You remember that time she met the Hursts in Nice and went off yachting with them down the Mediterranean, and we didn’t know where she was for three weeks. And then she calmly said she’d quite forgotten to tell us where she was going.”

“Ah, I remember,” said the viscountess, a kind-faced old lady whom I liked immensely. “I do wish she would consider my feelings a little more.”

With that the subject dropped.

Next morning I took leave of them all, and promising to meet Eric a few days later, took the train up to town to keep the secret tryst with my little friend who had so suddenly disappeared.

As I stood at the kerb looking up and down the wet pavement with its busy, hurrying crowd carrying umbrellas, I knew that I had commenced a very dangerous game. Would she keep her appointment? Did she really intend to go into voluntary exile in some mean street in one of the dismal southern suburbs? Was it possible that she who had from her birth been used to every luxury and extravagance could pose successfully as the wife of a compositor with forty shillings a week?

Ah! would not her very voice, her smart expressions, betray her as a lady?

I heard the rumbling of a train below, and once again up the grimy stairs came a long string of eager men and women returning from the City to their homes, tumbling over each other in their anxiety to get back after the day’s toil. They swept past me along the Pentonville Road, and then I stood again, reflecting and watching, until suddenly a figure in neat black halted before me, and I found myself face to face with the fugitive.

“Tibbie!” I cried. “Then you’ve really come, after all?”

“Of course,” was her answer in a low, half-frightened tone. “When I make an appointment I keep it. Where shall we go? We can’t talk here, can we?”

A hansom was passing, and hailing it we got in hurriedly. I told the man to

drive across Waterloo Bridge to the Elephant and Castle, a neighbourhood where we would be both quite unknown. Then, as I sank beside her, she asked, with a pretty, mischievous smile,—

“Well, Wilfrid, and how do you like me as your wife?”

“My wife!” I echoed. “By Jove, yes. I forgot that,” and I recollected the strange game I was playing.

“Don’t Mason’s things fit me well? She’s just my figure. I took this dress, jacket and hat from her box and put them into mine when I left Ryhall in the car. I thought they’d come in useful.”

I looked at her, and saw that with her brown hair brushed severely from her forehead, her small close-fitting hat and slightly shabby black jacket she was quite a demure little figure. The exact prototype of the newly-married wife of a working-man.

“It’s really quite a suitable get-up, I think,” I said, laughing.

“Yes. I’ve decided to explain to the curious that I was a lady’s-maid, and that we’ve been married nearly a year. Recollect that—in order to tell the same story. Where’s the ring? Did you think of that?” Yes, I had thought of it. I felt in my vest pocket, and taking out the plain little band of gold that I had bought in a shop in Regent Street that afternoon, placed it upon the finger, she laughing heartily, and then bending to examine it more closely in the uncertain light of the gas-lamps in Gray’s Inn Road.

“If I told you the truth, Wilfrid, you’d be horribly annoyed,” she said, looking at me with those wonderful eyes of hers.

“No. What is it?” I asked.

“Well—only—only that I wish you were my real husband,” she answered frankly. “If you were, then I should fear nothing. But it cannot be—I know that.”

“What do you fear, Tibbie?” I asked, very seriously. “Tell me—do tell me.”

“I—I can’t—I can’t now,” was her nervous response in a harder voice,

turning her gaze away from mine. “If I did, you would withdraw your help —you would not dare to risk your own reputation and mine, as you are now doing, just because we are old boy-and-girl friends.”

On we went through the streaming downpour along Chancery Lane and the Strand, the driver lowering the window, for the rain and mud were beating into our faces.

“Well,” I said, “and what do you suggest doing?”

“To-night I must disappear. I shall sleep in some obscure hotel across the water, and to-morrow you must call for me, and we’ll go together to fix upon our future ‘home.’” Then she inquired eagerly what impression her absence had produced at Ryhall, and I told her.

For a time she remained serious and thoughtful. Her countenance had changed.

“Then Mason came back, as I ordered her?”

“Yes,” I answered, “but won’t she miss those things of hers you are now wearing?”

“No. Because they were in a trunk that she had packed ready to send up to town. She won’t discover they’ve gone for some weeks, I feel sure.”

She described her night run from Chichester to Bournemouth, how she had escaped from Mason, taken train direct up to Birmingham, remained that night at the Grand, then went on to Leicester, where she had spent a day, arriving in London that evening at seven o’clock. In Bull Street, Birmingham, she had been recognised by a friend, the wife of an alderman, and had some difficulty in explaining why she was there alone.

Our present position was not without its embarrassments. I looked at the pretty woman who was about to pose as my wife, and asked,—

“And what name shall we adopt? Have you thought of one?”

“No. Let’s see,” she said. “How about Morton—Mr and Mrs William Morton?”

“All right, then after to-morrow I shall be known as William Morton, compositor?”

“And I shall be your very loving and devoted wife,” she laughed, her eyes dancing. “In any case, life in Camberwell will be an entirely new experience.”

“Yes,” I said. “I only hope we sha’n’t be discovered. I must be careful—for I shall be compelled to lead a double life. I may be followed one day.”

“Yes, but it is for my sake, Wilfrid,” she exclaimed, placing her small trembling hand upon my arm. “Remember that by doing this you are saving my life. Had it not been for you I should have been dead three days ago. My life is entirely in your hands. I am in deadly peril,” she added, in a low, desperate whisper. “You have promised to save me—and you will, Wilfrid—I know you will!”

And she gripped my arm tightly, and looked into my face.

Notwithstanding her assumed gaiety of manner, she was in terror.

Was that dead, white face still haunting her—the face of the stranger who had, in secret, fallen by her hand?

Chapter Ten.

Explains Certain Important Facts.

That night she remained at a small quiet hotel near Waterloo Station, a place patronised by third-class passengers from the West of England, and at ten o'clock next morning I called for her.

To disguise oneself as a working-man is no easy matter. I had experienced one difficulty which I had not foreseen, namely, how to allay the suspicions of my man, Budd, when he found me going out in the cheap clothes and hat I had purchased at an outfitter's in the Lambeth Road on the previous night.

On getting up I dressed myself in them, and then examined myself in the glass. I cut a figure that was, in my eyes, ridiculous. The suit bore a stiff air and odour of newness that was tantalising, yet I saw no way of altering it, save by pressing out the creases, and with that object I called Budd, who first looked me up and down, and then regarded me as though I had taken leave of my senses.

"Is that a new suit, sir?" he asked, scrutinising it.

"Yes, Budd," I replied. "Now, you see what it is. I want to appear like a working-man," I added confidentially. "The truth is I'm watching somebody, though, of course, you'll say nothing."

"Of course not, sir," he answered discreetly, for he was a reliable servant.

Then I took counsel with him how to take off the palpable newness of the clothes, and he, like the clever valet he was, took them out, and after a while returned with them greatly improved.

So when dressed in a cheap cotton shirt, a dark red tie, a suit of dark grey tweed, and a drab cap, I at last looked the typical working-man from South London wearing his best clothes.

With Budd's ready assistance I slipped out of my chambers into Bolton

Street, and half an hour later arrived by omnibus at the obscure hotel where Tibbie awaited me.

When she saw me she smiled merrily; and when we were alone together in the Waterloo Bridge Road she burst out laughing, saying,—

“What an interesting pair we really do make. Your get-up is delightful, Wilfrid. You look a real compositor. But just put your cap a little on one side—it’s more graceful. What does Budd say?”

“He first thought I’d taken leave of my senses; but I’ve allayed all his suspicions.”

And so we went jauntily on along the wide road to the Obelisk and then up the London Road, where the costermongers’ barrows were ranged and hoarse-voiced men were crying their cheap wares to thrifty housewives.

All was strange to her. She knew nothing of working London, and viewed everything with keen interest. I could not help smiling at her demure little figure in the cheap black dress.

At the bottom of the London Road we entered a tram and went as far as Camberwell Gate, the neighbourhood where she had decided to establish herself as Mrs William Morton.

Leaving the main road we turned down a long, dreary street of uniform smoke-blackened houses with deep areas in search of a card showing “apartments to let furnished,” and at last discovering one, we ascended the steps with considerable trepidation and knocked.

“You talk to them,” I whispered. “You want three rooms furnished,” and next second the door opened and we were face to face with a big, red-faced woman whose bloated countenance was certainly due to the undue consumption of alcohol—probably that spirit so dear to the lower class feminine palate—Old Tom.

Sybil explained that we were in search of apartments, and we were conducted up to the second floor and shown three dirty, badly-furnished rooms, the very sight of which was depressing.

Tibbie’s gaze met mine, and then she inquired the price.

“Of course, you’d want the use of the kitchen. That’s downstairs,” replied the woman.

“Oh! there’s no kitchen, I see,” Tibbie remarked quickly, seizing that defect as a means of escape from the miserable place. “I’m afraid then they won’t suit us. My husband is always so very particular about having the kitchen on the same floor.”

And then with many regrets we withdrew, and found ourselves once more out upon the pavement.

House after house we visited, some very poor but clean, others dirty, neglected and malodorous. Surely there are no more dismal dwelling-places in England than furnished lodgings in South London. Through the Boyson and Albany Roads, through Villa Street and Faraday Street we searched, but discovered no place where Tibbie could possibly live. Tousled-haired women were mostly the landladies, evil-faced scowling creatures who drank gin, and talked with that nasal twang so essentially the dialect of once-rural Camberwell.

At last in Neate Street, a quiet thoroughfare lying between the Camberwell and Old Kent Roads, we saw a card in the parlour window of a small house lying back from the street behind a strip of smoke-dried garden. On inquiry the landlady, a clean, hard-working, middle-aged woman, took us upstairs, and there we found three cheaply-furnished rooms with tiny kitchen all bearing the hall-mark of the hire system.

The woman, who seemed a respectable person, told us that she had been a parlour-maid in the employ of a lady at Kensington, and her husband was foreman in a mineral-water factory in the neighbourhood.

Tibbie was struck with the woman’s homely manner. She was from Devonshire, and the way she spoke of her own village showed her to be a true lover of the country.

“My husband, Mr Morton, is a compositor on a newspaper in Fleet Street and is always away at nights,” Tibbie explained. “We’ve been married nearly a year. I, too, was in service—a lady’s-maid.”

“Ah! I thought you ’ad been,” replied the landlady, whose name was Williams. “You speak so refined.”

So after re-examining the rooms Tibbie seated herself in the wicker armchair of the little parlour, and leaning back suggested that we should engage the apartments.

To this I, of course, agreed, and having given Mrs Williams half a sovereign as deposit, we left promising to take possession with our personal belongings—that same evening.

Outside, Tibbie expressed herself well pleased.

“I rather like that woman. She’s honest and genuine, I’m sure,” she declared. “Now I must buy a second-hand trunk and some clothes suited to my station as your humble and obedient wife,” she laughed.

So we went through into the Old Kent Road, and there purchased two big old travelling trunks, into which we afterwards placed the parcels which she had purchased at a cheap draper’s. Then, just before dusk, we returned to our new abode and entered into possession. We had tea together, prepared for us by Mrs Williams.

“You really make a model husband, Wilfrid,” she laughed when we were alone, holding her cup in her hand. “I suppose you’ll have to go to work very soon. I wonder what time compositors go to work at night?”

“I haven’t the ghost of an idea,” I declared. “I must find out. I suppose about seven or eight. But,” I added, “I hope you will be comfortable, and that you won’t be too dull.”

“I shall work,” she said. “I’ll keep the rooms clean and dusted, and when I’ve got nothing to do there’s always needlework.”

“We must pretend to be very frugal, you know,” I urged. “A compositor’s wages are not high.”

“Of course. Leave that to me. You’ll have to buy some more clothes. A Sunday suit, for instance, and a pair of squeaky boots.”

She had made no mention of the affair in Charlton Wood, but on the excuse that she might be lonely when I had left her, she had bought both the morning and evening papers, although as yet she had not glanced at them.

Besides posing as William Morton I had much else to do, and many inquiries to make. I intended to lose no time in ascertaining who was the man living on Sydenham Hill, and whether he had any acquaintance with the dead unknown.

For quite an hour we were alone in the rather cosy little parlour, the blind down and the gas lit. The furniture was indeed a strange contrast to that at Ryhall, yet the couple of wicker armchairs were decidedly comfortable, and the fire gave out a pleasant warmth as we sat near it.

“Ours is a curious position, Wilfrid, isn’t it?” she whispered at last, looking at me with those wonderful eyes of hers.

“What would the world think if they knew the truth?”

“If they knew the truth,” she said, seriously, “they would admire you for your self-sacrifice in assisting a helpless woman. Yet it is really very amusing,” and Tibbie, so well known and popular in the smart set of London, leaned back and smiled.

I was about to refer to the mystery of her flight, yet I hesitated. There was time for that, I thought, when she was more settled in her hiding-place.

It was certainly a novel experience to pose as the husband of Tibbie—the gay, merry, vivacious Tibbie Burnet, who was the life and soul of the go-ahead set in which she moved, and as we sat chatting we had many a good laugh over the ludicrous situation in which we found ourselves.

“You’ll have to pretend, in any case, to be very fond of me,” she laughed.

“I suppose I ought to call you ‘dear’ sometimes,” I remarked humorously.

“Yes, dear,” she responded, with the final word accentuated. “And I shall call you William—my dear Willie.”

“And what am I to call you?”

“Oh! Molly would be a good name. Yes. Call me Molly,” and she held her new wedding ring before my eyes with a tantalising laugh.

“We shall have to be very careful to keep up the fiction,” I said. “These people will, no doubt, watch us at first.”

“I shall soon make friends of Mrs Williams,” she said. “Leave that to me. I can be circumspect enough when occasion requires. But—oh—I’d so love to smoke a cigarette.”

“A cigarette!” I cried, horrified; “women don’t smoke in this neighbourhood. Whatever you do, don’t smoke when I’m not here, they’ll smell it at once.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “The ideas of the poor people are quite different to ours, aren’t they?” she reflected.

At that moment there was a tap at the door, and the landlady begged leave to introduce her husband, a rather tall, well-set-up man with a closely-cropped dark beard.

He greeted me pleasantly, and expressed a hope that we should be comfortable.

“The missis will do all she can for Mrs Morton, I’m sure,” she said. “I hear you’re on night-work.”

“Yes, unfortunately,” I said, “our work is mostly at night, you know—getting ready the next day’s paper.”

He was affable from the first, and apparently entirely unsuspicious, for he sent his wife downstairs for a jug of ale, and I was compelled to take a glass with him in order to cement our acquaintanceship, after which he and his wife discreetly withdrew with, I hope, the opinion that we were “a very nice, quiet couple.”

At eight o’clock I took leave of Tibbie after we had had a supper of cold meat. She rather missed her dinner, but assured me that she would soon

get used to dining in the middle of the day. Then, after seeing that she was quite comfortable, and that the locks on the doors acted, I shook hands with her.

“Good-bye, Willie dear,” she laughed. “Come home early, won’t you?”

“Of course,” I replied, echoing her laugh, and then as William Morton I went out to my work.

Walking through Trafalgar Road I found myself in the Old Kent Road, and presently hailing a hansom I drove as far as Piccadilly Circus, where I alighted and went on foot to my rooms.

As I entered Eric Domville came to the door of my sitting-room to meet me. He had been awaiting my return.

I saw from his face that something had occurred.

“Why, Eric—you?” I gasped. “What has happened?”

He placed his forefinger to his lips, indicative of silence, and glanced behind me along the hall to the room wherein Budd had disappeared. Then, when I had passed into my own cosy den, he closed the door carefully.

“Yes,” he said, in a low, strained voice, “something has happened, old fellow—something serious. I’ve discovered a fact that puts an entirely new complexion upon the affair. You are both in gravest peril. Listen, and I’ll explain.”

Chapter Eleven.

Shows a Woman's Weakness.

Eric, standing with his back to the mantelshelf, revealed to me a fact that was both extraordinary and startling.

"After you'd left Ryhall yesterday," he said, "I was walking across the park to meet Cynthia, who'd gone out to pay a visit to that thin old parson's wife over at Waltham, when, quite unexpectedly, I came across Ellice standing talking to a rather badly-dressed young woman. She was in shabby black, with a brown straw hat trimmed with violets, and an old fur tippet around her neck. They were under a tree a little aside from the by-path that leads across to Waltham, and were speaking excitedly. I was walking on the grass and they did not hear me approach. Suddenly she made some statement which caused him to hesitate and think. Then he gave her some money hurriedly from his pocket, and after a further conversation they parted, she proceeding towards the high road, while Winsloe went in the direction of the house. I followed at a respectable distance, and that afternoon, when we assembled in the hall for tea, he announced that he had been suddenly recalled to town. In this I suspected something, so when he left by the seven-thirty-five express I followed him here."

"Well?" I asked, looking straight into his face.

"Well, he's in search of Tibbie."

"Of Tibbie! What does he know?"

"That woman who met him in the park told him something. She probably knew of your appointment."

"Why?"

"Because this morning he went to Harker's Hotel in Waterloo Road, and inquired for her. But you had very fortunately taken her away."

“Then if he knows of our appointment he will certainly follow me!” I said, in utter amazement.

“Most certainly he will. You recognise the grave peril of the situation?”

“I do,” I said, for I saw that Sybil must at once be seriously compromised. “But who could have known our secret? Who was the woman?”

“I’ve never seen her before. She’s an entire stranger. But that she is aware of Tibbie’s movements is beyond doubt. You were evidently seen together when you met last night—or how would he know that she slept at Harker’s Hotel?”

I was silent. I saw the very serious danger that now lay before us. Yet why was this man in search of Tibbie? He had proposed to her, she had said, and had been refused.

I recalled to my companion the fact of the photograph of the dead man being found in his bag.

“Yes,” Eric said. “He has recognised the victim but has some secret motive in remaining silent. Is it, I wonder, a motive of revenge?”

“Against whom?”

For a few moments he did not speak. Then he answered—

“Against Tibbie.”

I pursed my lips, for I discerned his meaning. Was it possible that Ellice Winsloe knew the truth?

“Therefore, what are we to do? What do you suggest?” I asked.

“You must not risk going to see Sybil to-morrow. Where is she?”

I briefly explained all that we had done that day, and how and where she had gone into hiding.

“Then you must send her an express letter in the morning. We must not

go to see her. You are certainly watched."

"But think of her," I said. "I am posing as her husband, and she will require my presence there to-morrow in order to complete the fiction."

"It's too risky—far too risky," Eric declared, shaking his head dubiously.

"The only way is for you to keep watch upon Winsloe," I suggested, "and warn me of his movements."

"But the woman—the woman who met him by appointment in the park? She may be in his employ as spy."

"Did Mason overhear anything that night when Sybil came to my room, I wonder," I said.

"Never mind how they got to know," he exclaimed. "I tell you that you mustn't go near Tibbie. It's far too dangerous at this moment."

His words caused me considerable apprehension. How could I leave Sybil there alone? Would not Mrs Williams and her husband think it very strange? No. She had craved my assistance, and I had promised it. Therefore, at all risks I intended to fulfil my promise.

To allay Eric's fears, however, I pretended to agree with him, and made him promise to still keep watch upon Winsloe. Eric was my guest whenever in London; therefore I ordered Budd to prepare his room, and after a snack over at the club we sat smoking and talking until far into the night.

Next morning my companion was early astir. He was in fear of Winsloe ascertaining the whereabouts of Sybil, and went forth to keep watch upon him, promising to return again that same evening. Winsloe had well-furnished rooms in King Street, St. James's Square, was one of a go-ahead set of men about town, and a member of several of the gayest clubs frequented by the *jeunesse dorée*.

It was both risky and difficult for me to get down to Neate Street, Camberwell, in my dress as a printer; yet against Eric's advice I succeeded, travelling by a circuitous route to South Bermondsey Station

and along the Rotherhithe New Road, in reaching Mr Williams' a little after eleven o'clock.

Sybil, looking fresh and neat, was eagerly awaiting me at the window, and when I entered the room she flew across to me, saying in a voice loud enough for the landlady to overhear,—

"Oh! Willie, how very late you are. Been working overtime, I suppose?"

"Yes, dear," was my response; and we grinned at each other as we closed the door.

"The time passes here awfully slowly," she declared in a low voice. "I thought you were never coming. I shall have to get a few books to read."

"I was delayed," I said, taking off my cloth cap and flinging it upon the sofa. "I found Eric Domville awaiting me. He came up from Ryhall to-day and told me some strange news."

"Strange news!" she gasped, turning deathly pale and clutching at the back of a chair in order to steady herself. "What—what news?"

The truth was instantly plain. Her fear was that the mystery of the unknown had been discovered.

I had quite inadvertently struck terror into her heart, for upon her countenance was that same haunted look as on that night when she had left Ryhall in secret.

"What Eric has told me concerns Ellice Winsloe," I said, much surprised, and yet allowing her agitation to pass unnoticed.

"Ellice Winsloe. Is he—has he come to London?" she gasped, staring at me and starting.

"Yes, and more. He knows that you slept the night before last at Harker's. He called to see you an hour after we had left yesterday."

"He knows!" she cried in a low, terrified voice.

“Ellice knows that I was there! Then he has followed me—he—he means to carry out his threat!”

“What threat?”

“Ah, no. I—I’m mad, Wilfrid. I—I don’t know what I’m saying!” she cried, pushing her hair from her brow with both her hands and pacing up and down the room. “But you will help me—won’t you?” she implored, halting before me and looking me straight in the face.

“Help you—of course,” I said. “But I confess I can’t understand. This man only proposed marriage to you a fortnight ago.”

“I know. I know. And I refused him. Ah! Wilfrid. I would rather kill myself than marry that man!”

“Then you know something concerning him that is not in his favour?”

“I know a great deal. I often wonder why Jack and he are such intimate friends.”

“He’s rich, you said, and Lady Scarcliff approved of him.”

“That is so,” she answered thoughtfully. “But the mater is ignorant of it all. Ah! if I only dare tell you. It would astound and stagger you.”

“He is in search of you, that’s very clear,” I said, hoping to induce her to tell me something further.

“But he must not find me,” she declared. “The day he discovers me I shall take my life,” she added in a hard, desperate voice.

“Why? Do you fear him?”

She made no answer, but her chin sank upon her breast.

“Then tell me the truth, Tibbie,” I said. “He tried to compel you to marry him because he held some secret of yours that you do not wish to be known. Am I not right?”

She nodded in the affirmative, and I saw that tears were in her fine eyes.

What was the secret, I wondered? Was it the existence of that low-born lover, a photograph of whom he had carried in his bag? Did he hold over her a threat of exposure because he had become seized by a desire that she should be his wife? Many a woman has been forced into an odious marriage in order to preserve her secret.

I looked into her pale haggard face and wondered. How beautiful she was in her terror and distress. She was in fear of that man, whose life was, when viewed in the plain light of day, somewhat mysterious. But what did she fear? Who was the man who had fallen by her hand?

We had arranged that Mrs Williams should cook for us, and presently she came smilingly to lay the table, simply, but cleanly. Thus, our conversation was interrupted, but when alone again I returned to the subject, and she said, with a serious look,—

“Wilfrid, he must not discover me. If he does—if he does, then all is at an end. Even you cannot save me.”

“But I fear I may be followed here,” I said. “He knew that we met last night, or he would not have been aware that you slept at Harker’s. He, or someone employed by him, is watching me. I must remain away from you.”

“Yes,” she remarked. “I quite foresee the danger, yet I shall be very lonely. And besides, what can I say to Mrs Williams?”

“We’ll have to make an excuse that I’ve been sent into the country to work,” I said. “If I come daily here I’m quite certain Winsloe will discover you. This knowledge of his regarding our meeting the day before yesterday makes me suspicious.”

“You are right,” she declared sadly. “He has means of knowing everything. No secret seems safe from that man, Wilfrid. I sometimes think—sometimes I think that—” and she hesitated.

“That what?”

But she did not reply. She was standing at the window gazing fixedly down into the grey, dismal street. The words she had uttered mechanically, just as though she were speaking to herself.

“You told me, Tibbie, that if I pretended to be your husband that I might save you,” I remarked presently.

“And so you may, providing Ellice Winsloe does not discover me. If he does—then all is useless—quite useless. I shall have compromised myself and placed you in an invidious position, all to no purpose.”

“But by discretion—by my remaining away from you, and only coming here by stealth when I know that Winsloe is not watchful, I may still remain your husband in the eyes of these people.”

“Yes, yes, Wilfrid,” she said eagerly, placing her nervous hand upon my shoulder and looking deeply into my eyes. “That is the only way. I must live here alone—in hiding. They must not find me. Let us have patience—patience always—and we may foil that man’s evil intentions. Ah! If you knew everything you would pity me. But you do not. You believe that I hold some guilty secret. Yes,” she added hoarsely, “it is a guilty secret, and how can I sufficiently thank you for trusting me as blindly as you do? I am very unworthy. You are the best friend, Wilfrid, that woman ever had. Can you wonder at the suggestion I made to you in the Long Gallery the other day?” Then she hesitated, still looking me straight in the face. “But you have forgiven me,” she went on with a sigh. “I thought that you loved me still—yes—I was very foolish. All women are so sometimes—all women who are terrified and unhappy, as I am!”

And the tears again stood in her eyes as she bowed her beautiful head before me.

Chapter Twelve.

In the House of the Parhams.

That evening, when I returned to Bolton Street, I found Eric awaiting me.

Unseen, he had followed Winsloe to various places during the afternoon, but his movements were in no way suspicious. At Harker's Hotel he had, it appeared, lost all trace of Sybil, and had probably employed a private detective to watch my movements.

The adjourned inquest had been held at Midhurst, for in the *Globe* there appeared a four-line paragraph saying that in the case of an unknown man found shot in Charlton Wood, a verdict of wilful murder had been returned, and the matter had been left in the hands of the police. A village tragedy attracts but little notice in London, and all the papers dismissed it in a paragraph of practically the same wording.

That night we dined with two friends at the Trocadero, and next morning I set forth again upon my inquiries, leaving Eric to act as he thought best. My only promise to him was not to go near my pseudo wife.

My first visit was to the pawnbroker's in the Fulham Road, to whom I presented the vouchers I had found upon the dead man, and received on redeeming them a cheap silver Geneva watch and heavy antique gold ring, in which a single ruby was set.

"You don't recollect the gentleman who pledged these, I suppose?" I asked of the assistant.

The young man, a smart, shrewd fellow, reflected a moment, and answered,—

"Well, yes, I do remember something of him. We had an argument about the ring. He wanted five pounds on it, and I wouldn't give it."

"What kind of fellow was he?" I asked, explaining that I had bought the tickets from a third person.

“Oh, youngish—with a short brown beard. Evidently a gentleman who was hard up. We get lots of them in here.”

A brown beard! Had he shaved and disguised himself before his interview with Tibbie?

“Tall?” I asked.

“No. Not very.”

The description did not answer to that of the dead unknown.

“A stranger?”

“Quite. I’d never seen him before. But the truth is I recollect him because that ruby there is a valuable one. I had my doubts at the moment as to its genuineness, and as there were a lot of people waiting I had no time to examine it. So I lent him only a couple o’ quid on it.”

“Then it’s worth more?”

“Yes. If you bought the ticket cheap you’ve got a bargain. The guv’nor here would give you eighty quid for it, and be pleased.”

I looked at it, and saw that it was a very fine stone. To me it seemed evident that the man who had pawned the watch and ring was not the man who had lost his life in Charlton Wood.

“You think he was a gentleman?”

“Well, he spoke like one, and seemed very much afraid of being seen. He hesitated when I asked him his name, so I wrote down the usual one—Green.”

“And the address?”

“I put that in also.”

So finding I could discover nothing further, I carried away both watch and ring to add to the strange collection of objects which the dead man’s

pockets had contained.

Close to the corner of Park Lane I came face to face with Winsloe, dressed sprucely as usual in silk hat and frock coat, and he at once stopped and offered me his hand. Then, after greeting me, he turned on his heel and walked by my side, saying,—

“I’m just strolling back to the Burlington. I’ll come with you.”

“You left the Scarcliffs earlier than you expected, didn’t you?” I remarked.

“Yes. I had some business in town,” was his brief response.

“I see from the papers that they’ve discovered nothing regarding that affair in Charlton Wood.”

“No,” he remarked in a mechanical tone. “And I don’t expect they ever will. The assassin, whoever he was, got away without leaving a trace,” and then he cleverly diverted our conversation into a different channel.

I feared to discuss it further. The man was Sybil’s enemy, and therefore mine. He evidently knew that we had met on that evening of her arrival in London, and was actively at work to trace her.

Indeed, when I afterwards reflected, I saw that in all probability he had watched me that morning, and had purposely encountered me.

To each other we were outwardly still extremely friendly. Indeed I invited him to my rooms that evening to smoke, and he accepted, for he had a motive in so doing, while I, on my part, had resolved to watch him carefully.

I lunched at the Bachelors’, and though anxious to go and see Sybil, I was compelled to content myself with sending her a telegram, saying that I had been ordered by my foreman to go up to Manchester in connection with some new linotype machinery, and must therefore be absent two or three days. I sent the message so that she might show it to Mrs Williams.

Soon after four o’clock I set forth upon another expedition, namely, by train from Victoria to Upper Sydenham Station. The autumn dusk was

falling when I turned into Sydenham Hill, the wide winding road of large detached houses leading from Forest Hill up to the Crystal Palace. Essentially the residence of the wealthy City man, and an eminently respectable district, the houses stand in their own grounds with big old trees around, commanding fine views of South London. I was in search of Keymer, and being directed by a postman, found it a little way higher up than the turning known as Rock Hill, a large old-fashioned red brick place, with fine old elms standing in the grounds. An oak fence divided it from the footway, and as I passed I saw that the pink-shaded electric lamps in the drawing-room were alight, while at the grand piano was sitting a neat female figure in black.

A servant in a smart French cap was letting down the Venetian blinds, and as I watched through the gate I saw that the lady had stopped playing and turned upon the stool to speak to her.

At the same instant the figure of a man stole across the room, a tall, shadowy figure, and came up behind the woman, causing her to start from her seat, while at that moment the blind was lowered, and the artistic interior was suddenly shut out from my view.

One thing caused me to remain there in wonder. Perhaps my eyes had deceived me, but I could not help thinking that when that vague male figure crossed the room the woman started up with a look of terror. From where I stood I could not see distinctly, yet I felt certain that the person who had entered was unwelcome and unexpected.

The other blinds had already been lowered, for it was now nearly dark, and beneath the wide portico a light shone above the door. The grounds were well kept, and the greenhouse beside the drawing-room showed careful attention, while on the gravelled drive were the wheel-marks of carriages. Mr John Parham was evidently well off, in all probability a City man, like most of his neighbours. I sauntered past, wondering by what means I could ascertain something about him.

The doleful sound of the muffin-bell rang in the distance, and far up the road I saw the lamplighter going his round, the street lamps springing up from the darkness at regular intervals. I went towards him, and stopping him, made inquiries regarding the tenant of Keymer.

“’E’s a very nice gentleman, sir,” replied the man. “Always gives good Christmas-boxes.”

“Married?”

“Yes, sir. But ’e has no children. They keep a carriage—one o’ them there open ones.”

“Now I want to know something about him,” I said, slipping a coin into the man’s hand. “Do you happen to know anybody who could tell me?”

The man looked at me suspiciously, and asked,—“Pardon me, sir, but you’re a detective, p’r’aps?”

“No,” I laughed. “Not at all. It is merely private curiosity—over—well, over a little matter of business. I’m a business man—not a policeman.”

“Well,” he said, “there’s ’Arry Laking, what keeps the gate of the Crystal Palace grounds in Palace Park Road. ’E’s their cook’s brother. ’E’d tell you something, for ’e often goes there when the family are out.”

“Where’s Palace Park Road?”

“Go up to the front of the Palace and keep round to the left till you come to the gate. It’s almost the other side of the grounds.”

I acted upon his suggestion, and after walking some distance I came to the turnstile in the wall dividing the Palace grounds from the road, and there I found a middle-aged man in uniform idling over the evening paper, for that gate was little used, save by season-ticket holders.

On inquiry I discovered that he was the man of whom I was in search, and after a little judicious greasing of the palm I induced him to tell me what he knew of his sister’s master and mistress.

“Mr Parham is a wholesale jeweller in the city,” he said. “He often goes abroad for weeks at a time to buy. His wife is young, but Annie tells me she leads a very lonely life. They’re a wealthy, but an unhappy pair, that’s my opinion. Yet they know all the best people in Sydenham, and Mr Parham gives grand at-homes and dinner-parties.”

“She’s unhappy, you say,” I ventured, recollecting the curious scene I had witnessed at the instant of lowering the blinds.

“Yes. Annie has overheard their quarrels. The master, she says, has such a hold over the mistress that she dare not call her soul her own. There was a scene between them about three weeks ago. They quarrelled at the dinner-table, and Mrs Parham left the room, went upstairs, wrote a letter and tried to commit suicide by drinking some sublimate. Her maid got hold of the letter, and then succeeded in saving her mistress’s life, for fortunately the solution wasn’t strong enough. But it made her very ill, and she was in bed a week, while her husband took himself off, and never inquired after her. The servants all pity poor little Mrs Parham, and say that her husband’s a brute to her. There was another terrible row once, when her brother called and overheard Mr Parham threaten her in the next room. They say that the two men came to blows, and that he gave Parham a thorough good hiding, which he richly deserved. Mrs Parham’s brother is not a fellow to be trifled with, they say, for Parham had to plead for his life. Afterwards, the beaten dog vowed vengeance, and the poor wife had a terrible time of it.”

“A rather unhappy household,” I remarked.

“Very. Annie tells me a lot. She wouldn’t stay there—nor would any of the servants—only the wages are so good.”

I saw that the man knew more than he cared to divulge. He was no friend of Parham’s, and was certainly on the side of the ill-used wife.

“Is Parham young or old?”

“Not very old—fat, fairish, rather bald, with a round face and a long nose. Mrs Parham is quite young, about twenty-six, and people call her good-lookin’, but myself I’m no judge o’ women. I’ve my missus, and she’s the best-lookin’ of ’em all in my eyes. Of course, Mrs Parham dresses smartly, and drives in a fine carriage. She comes to the Saturday concerts sometimes.”

“You don’t like Parham,” I said. “Come, tell the truth.”

“No, I don’t,” he declared, after a slight hesitation. “He’s a wrong ’un—I

know that. Only, of course, that's strictly between you and me," he added in confidence.

"I'd like to know your sister," I said, quite frankly. "I'll make it worth her while if she'll ask me in and let me see the house. She might do it when her mistress is out."

He shook his head dubiously.

"I don't think she'd let a stranger see inside, sir."

"Well, there's no harm in trying. Will you take me and introduce me?" I asked. "Take me this evening. When do you go off duty?"

"In about half an hour."

"Then we'll walk down there and call," I suggested. "Here's my card," and I handed him the card of a barrister friend of mine which bore an address in the Temple.

He hesitated, but when he found another half-sovereign in his palm he consented, not, however, without a good deal of curiosity as to my real object.

What he had told me regarding the Parhams, in addition to that strange scene I had witnessed from the roadway, aroused my suspicion. I somehow felt confident that there was some connection between this man who ill-treated his wife so brutally and the unfortunate victim of the tragedy in rural Sussex I waited in a neighbouring bar until Laking came off duty, and then we walked together down Sydenham Hill to the house called Keymer.

My companion entered by the tradesmen's lych-gate, and going up to the kitchen door, rapped at it, whereupon a big buxom woman in an apron opened it, and recognising him, gasped,—

"Oh! 'Arry, I'm so glad you've come! They told you about it, I suppose?"

"About what? I don't know anything," he replied, surprised at her white, scared face and the terrified look of one of the maids who stood behind

her.

“Then go into the drawin’-room and look! It’s awful. There’s a curse on this ’ouse. Go and see for yourself.”

Startled, he hurried quickly through the kitchen and along the big, well-furnished hall, I following closely behind him, eager and bewildered.

And what we saw was amazing.

Chapter Thirteen.

Tells of Another Mystery.

In the drawing-room a startling scene presented itself.

Lying in a heap across the blue silk-covered sofa lay the figure of the lady whom I had seen from without, seated at the piano, while beside her were the gardener and a scared female servant bending over her, and trying to restore her to consciousness.

A short distance away a second female figure was lying face downwards upon the carpet near the window—a young woman in cap and apron whom I recognised as the maid who had lowered the Venetian blinds. Around her face a long black scarf had been twisted tightly, and she lay there motionless.

“Oh! Mr Taking!” gasped the woman, bending over her mistress, “I’m so glad you’re here. There’s been men in the house!”

“Men!” he cried, amazed. “What’s happened to Mrs Parham?”

“We don’t knew. We’ve sent for the doctor and the perlice.”

“But look at Jane!” he exclaimed, crossing to her. “She’ll be suffocated;” and falling on his knees he quickly untied the slip-knot by which the black scarf—a long narrow one with coloured stripes at the ends like an Italian santuzza—had been secured around the girl’s face.

As we turned her over we saw that her drawn countenance was white to the lips. There was no movement that either of us could discover.

I stood gazing at the startling scene, wondering what had occurred.

Mrs Parham was, I saw, a brown-haired, good-looking young lady of about twenty-six. Her black silk blouse was fastened at the throat by a beautiful diamond brooch—one from her husband’s stock perhaps—but she wore no other ring except the badge of matrimony.

Her eyes were closed, and it appeared as though she had fainted, yet across her left cheek from mouth to ear was a deep livid ridge. A scarf somewhat similar to that used to stifle the cries of the maid had been used upon her.

“Tell us what’s happened?” inquired Laking, eagerly. “Who’s done this?”

The housemaid, turning from her mistress, replied,—

“Jane went to pull down the blinds about three-quarters of an hour ago, and I heard the mistress playing the piano in here. Then she suddenly stopped, but knowing that Jane was here I thought she was talking to her. Then I didn’t think any more about it till I found that the hot water hadn’t been put in the mistress’s bedroom, and that the blinds were still up. I went down to the kitchen, but cook said that Jane was still with the mistress. I said she’d been there a long time, and cook said perhaps she was getting a blowing up. It was ’er night out last night, and she was a half-hour late, and Mrs Parham is very particular, as you know.”

“And didn’t you hear anything?” I asked, surprised.

“Not a sound. It was the quietness of the place that first aroused my suspicion,” said the girl. “I crept along the hall and listened at the door to hear what the mistress was saying to Jane. But there was no sound. Then I went back and told cook, and we thought that they’d both gone upstairs perhaps. Presently I went back and tapped at the door, for it was nearly an hour since Jane had gone into the room. Nobody answered, so I pushed the door open, and there, to my horror, saw ’em both lying on the floor with these black things round their faces.”

“And you rushed out and gave the alarm?”

“I called in Lane, who’d just finished work and was going home. Then we hailed a telegraph boy who was passing and sent him for the doctor and the police. At first we thought the poor mistress was dead, but, you see, she’s still breathing, although very slightly. Look!” she added, holding up the scarf, “there’s a funny smell about it.”

“Chloroform!” declared the gardener, Lane. “I ’ad it when I ’ad my operation in the ’orspital. I know that smell well enough.”

“But what was the motive?” I asked, puzzled, glancing around the room and noticing that beyond a chair having been overturned and an antimacassar lying on the floor there was no sign of disorder.

The electric bell rang sharply, the cook went to answer the door, and a few moments later a constable in uniform entered.

To him I briefly explained the circumstances, without, however, telling him of the strange scene I had witnessed when I halted outside the gate. Then after the housemaid and gardener had told their stories, he bent over the prostrate lady, listening intently.

“She’s still alive, that’s quite certain,” was his remark, then crossing over to the girl he knelt beside her.

He made a cursory examination and shook his head dubiously. Like ourselves, he had doubts whether she still breathed. I had placed my hand upon her heart, but could discover no palpitation. There was a rigidity about the body, too, that caused me to suspect that the scarf had been around her mouth too long, and that she had expired under the effects of the drug.

We explained to the constable that a doctor in the vicinity had been called, and while we awaited his arrival I made a tour of the room with the officer.

It was a beautifully furnished apartment in the Louis Quinze style, with massive gold-framed mirrors and consoles, and furniture in gilt and pale blue, a room which betrayed everywhere the hand of a woman of culture and artistic taste.

Upon the wall was a large velvet-lined frame, on which were a number of beautiful old miniatures, and behind the grand piano stood a huge palm that reached nearly to the ceiling. Suddenly as I advanced to the window, close to where the maid had been lying—for the gardener and the cook’s brother had now lifted her on to a small couch—I noticed that there was a little glass-topped table in which were displayed some fine pieces of antique silver, and standing upon it was a cabinet portrait in a dark red leather frame.

The picture caught my eye and caused me to start. I stood glaring at it in utter bewilderment, scarce believing my own eyes.

Was I mistaken in those features? No. It was the same face—undoubtedly the same face!

The portrait was exactly similar, but somewhat larger, than that which Eric and I had discovered in Winsloe's kitbag—the picture of the dead unknown!

A sudden suggestion occurred to me to obtain possession of it. It might be of the greatest use to us in establishing the unfortunate man's identity. I therefore took it up, glanced at it, and in an abstracted manner placed it upon a side table near a curtain, intending later on to transfer it to the pocket of my overcoat—even at the risk of committing the offence of theft. In this I saw no harm. I was seeking to solve a mystery; and surely every mode was fair, now that a man had been done to death.

I recollected Eric's terrible accusation, and held my breath.

Yes, he was Sybil's secret lover without a doubt. Those letters were sufficient proof of that.

And yet was it not strange that Mrs Parham should place the portrait in her room in a position so conspicuous?

The constable was as much puzzled as myself regarding the motive of the attack.

My own theory was that there had been two men lurking in the house, and hearing Mrs Parham playing the piano, they managed to enter the room unobserved, for there was a large Japanese screen before the door. An instant afterwards the maid entered, switched on the light, and let down the blinds, but while doing so, the men so suddenly discovered made a bold attack upon both, deftly twisting the scarves about their faces ere either of them could call for assistance.

The maid had evidently been attacked from behind by one of the men concealed at the back of the curtain at the moment when she had lowered the last blind. From this fact I suspected that the girl knew them

and they feared recognition.

Yet the reason of that bold, desperate attack was surely an entire mystery.

Subsequent examination showed that they must have entered the front door with a duplicate key, probably almost immediately before, otherwise the gardener or Mrs Parham herself must have seen them approaching the house.

But when they had so successfully silenced both mistress and maid, what had been their next action? That was the mystery.

At first my impulse was to explain what I had seen from the pavement, yet I saw, on due reflection, that it was far better to keep that knowledge to myself, more especially if I could manage to obtain possession of that very valuable piece of evidence, the dead man's photograph.

Laking went into the other rooms on the ground floor, and switched on the light in all of them, while the constable and myself made a careful examination in order to see whether any robbery had taken place. As far as we could ascertain, however, nothing had been disturbed. No drawer stood open, and although in both dining-room and library were large glass cases filled with valuable antiques, china, enamels, miniatures and old glass, nothing had apparently been touched.

"I wonder if the men are in the 'ouse now?" suggested the maid-servant suddenly, the word "man" being always very expressive in the vocabulary of the kitchen.

"Not likely," declared the constable. "They've gone long ago. I wonder who they were?"

"Perhaps they thought that only Mrs Parham and Jane were at home," remarked the cook's brother. "And then, when they found Lane, my sister and Emily they got frightened, and cleared out."

"Most probably," was the policeman's reply. "They were disturbed by something; that's very evident. They intended to have the silver, because it's easy got rid of. Perhaps it's the gang what worked Norwood a couple

of months ago. Two of 'em got five years at the Old Bailey last week."

"They were a desperate pair, whoever they were," I said. "Men don't carry scarves like these and chloroform all ready if they don't mean to do some big piece of business. The affair, whatever it was, must have been well planned."

"They had their pals outside this house, no doubt. Men like those don't work without spies watching the house to give alarm."

His words caused me to ponder.

If one of the gang had been outside, then I had certainly been noted, for I had stood before the gate for quite a minute. I had been noticed, without a doubt! They knew that I had seen that thin, tall figure crossing the room so stealthily!

Perhaps I had quite unintentionally frightened them and prevented them from fully carrying out their object! When I had gone the spy outside might have given the signal which caused them to make their escape.

Now that I recollected, I remembered most distinctly that while I had spoken to the lamplighter, somebody a little distance down the road was whistling gaily a music-hall air.

There was a muffin-man, too, who had suddenly commenced to ring his bell as I had stopped to speak and was balancing his tray upon his head as he passed by us, glancing into my face.

Was he the spy?

I was in the study, discussing the affair with the constable, when the doctor was announced.

I followed him into the drawing-room and noted his surprise when he saw Mrs Parham lying there.

Quickly he made his examination and relieved our minds by declaring that she would before long return to consciousness.

Then he crossed to the maid Jane, placed his hand upon her heart, opened her eyes, felt her hands, and bent the fingers.

For a long time he scrutinised her very carefully, taking up a small mirror and holding it close to her mouth, while we stood anxiously awaiting his verdict.

At last he turned to us, shook his grey head, and said,—

“The poor girl is dead?”

Chapter Fourteen.

Relates what we Discovered.

While the doctor occupied himself with restoring the mistress of the house to consciousness, I stood by watching, and then turned to the window abstractedly, and awaiting my opportunity, succeeded in transferring the photograph of the dead unknown to my overcoat pocket.

Suddenly the housemaid, on returning to the room with some water, pointed to a corner, exclaiming,—

“Why? Look there, sir!”

We all glanced in the direction she indicated, and noticed that from the corner of the room the blue carpet had been torn up, and lay back disclosing about a foot of flooring.

Quickly I bent down to examine it, and found to my surprise that one of the boards had been cut across about nine inches from the wainscoting, and was hinged, so that it could be pulled up. There had evidently been a strong fastening which had been forced, for the wood was newly splintered.

After some little difficulty I pulled it up, revealing a small box-like cavity lined with sheet-iron, well designed in order to hide plate or valuables secretly and securely. I placed my hand down, but could feel nothing. It was empty. The men, whoever they were, knew of that secret hiding-place, and had taken whatever it had contained.

I struck a vesta in order to examine the place more closely, and the others grouped eagerly around me, when I distinguished at the bottom of the box a further flap, which I lifted, and saw something concealed in the false bottom. It was a small red morocco jewel-case about four inches square, which I opened very carefully.

Next instant those around me with one breath gave vent to exclamations of surprise and horror. And well they might.

The object which the jewel-case contained was truly startling. I stood staring at it amazed. Since that moment when I had stood with Sybil in the Long Gallery at Ryhall every hour seemed to bring with it some fresh mystery, or some gruesome problem.

That jewel-case contained a most curious and uncommon object, a dark and somewhat shrivelled, but yet well-preserved, human eye!

The doctor, leaving the unconscious woman's side, took it from me, and putting on his pince-nez examined it long and carefully beneath the light.

It was a horrid thing, the white bloodshot, and the pupil a dark leaden grey.

"It's a man's eye," declared the doctor, after long and very careful scrutiny. "It was removed by somebody unskilled in anatomy, and has been treated with some preservative. There's mystery here," he added, looking round at the scared faces of those grouped around him.

"I wonder if the men wanted to get hold of that?" the constable suggested, a theory which Lane and the housemaid at once declared to be a sound one. "At any rate," he added, "I think I'd better report the affair at the station. They'll certainly want to make some inquiry about that eye."

"For the present I'll take possession of it," said the doctor, replacing the ghastly-looking little object in the velvet-lined case, and closing it with a snap.

Then he returned to Mrs Parham, who a few minutes afterwards stirred slightly, while her eyelids quivered. It was a good sign, as he pointed out, and ten minutes later the poor lady opened her eyes and looked wonderingly around.

"Remain quiet, madam," the doctor urged in a gentle voice. "You are not very well."

"No," she gasped faintly. "I—I don't think I—"

Then her jaws became fixed. She could not conclude the sentence, and

lapsed again into unconsciousness.

The constable had sent Lane round to the police station, and an inspector, entering the room, was told what had occurred, and was shown the human eye.

When he saw it he knit his brows. Like ourselves, he scented tragedy, especially as the poor girl Jane was lying dead.

The inspector was also shown the secret cavity beneath the carpet. He examined the windows of all the rooms on the ground floor, made a tour of the exterior of the house, and closely questioned all the servants.

The absence of the master of the house somewhat puzzled him, for the cook explained that Mr Parham returned from the country two days before and remained at home all the afternoon, packed another big travelling bag and left again about seven o'clock, telling his wife that he had to go to Birmingham.

When, a little later, we returned to the drawing-room we found Mrs Parham propped up with pillows and attended by the doctor and the housemaid. She was talking with them, and looked at me inquiringly as I entered with the inspector. She probably took me for a police officer in plain clothes.

"I was sitting at the piano playing when Jane entered and drew down one of the blinds," she said, in a low voice, speaking with some difficulty. "Then she switched on the light and drew down the other blind. At that instant I heard a movement behind me, and turning I saw a man, but next moment something was slipped over my head and eyes. I struggled and at the same time heard Jane cry out. While my assailant held me tightly I heard Jane struggling, therefore there must have been two men in the room at least. A few moments later I lost consciousness and know nothing else until I found you all here standing around me. What has happened?" she inquired, in a refined voice, looking from the doctor across to me.

"We don't quite know yet, mum," answered the police inspector. "It seems as though the men were thieves who being disturbed slipped away."

“Thieves!” she gasped, open-mouthed. “Have they taken anything?”

“We can’t make out. When you feel a little better you must come round the house with us.”

“They’ve opened a place under the floor, across there,” explained the doctor, pointing to the corner where the carpet was still laid back from the boards.

She raised herself quickly upon her elbow and glanced in the direction indicated, staring straight at the spot with a look of terror in her eyes. No word escaped her lips. Her jaws seemed again fixed, her breath held, her fingers clenched into the palms.

She realised that the secret hiding-place had been discovered.

“What have they taken?” she gasped, in a low, terrified tone, when at last she found tongue.

“Apparently everything,” I replied. “The place is empty.”

“Empty!” she echoed, raising herself to her feet with an effort, but reeling unsteadily back to the couch, for her head was still swimming after the effects of the chloroform. “The fiends!” she cried.

“And poor Jane. How is she?”

“I much regret, madam, that the chloroform administered to her has had a fatal effect,” said the doctor, gravely.

“Dead! Jane dead?”

“Yes. They’ve killed her,” declared the inspector. “It’s wilful murder, that’s what it is, mum. Therefore, if you can give us any information as to who these ruffians may be we’ll be very glad. We must arrest them at all costs. Who do you think they might be?”

But Mrs Parham, although a strange look crossed her white, haggard features, made no response to the officer’s question.

“Poor Jane! Poor Jane—the brutes!” she kept on repeating, her wild eyes staring across to where the body of the dead maid-servant was lying.

From her manner I felt convinced that she suspected who the intruders were, now that she knew that their motive had been to search in that secret cavity beneath the floor of the drawing-room, and possess themselves of something concealed there.

Would she denounce them?

The inspector again questioned her, but her answers were evasive.

“My husband is in the country,” she explained. “He is very often away, for his business often takes him on the Continent, to Paris and Amsterdam.”

“But how do you think these men got into the house?” the officer asked. “I notice that the inner glass door of the hall closes with a latch which can only be opened from the inside. Therefore, if they had entered the front door with a false key they could not have passed the inner door.”

This fact was interesting, and one which I had entirely overlooked.

“I have no idea how they could have entered. Perhaps by a window.”

“Or perhaps by the servants’ entrance,” Lane suggested.

“They couldn’t have got in that way, mum, because they’d have to pass through the kitchen, and cook was there all the time. Besides, we’re always very careful that that door is never left ajar.”

“It’s evident that they were concealed in the house,” I remarked, recollecting that tall shadowy figure that had crossed the room on tip-toe at the instant that the blind had been lowered.

“Of course,” agreed the inspector. “But what we want to know is whether this lady has any suspicion of anyone to whose advantage it would be to obtain possession of what was concealed there.”

“I don’t know what was in there,” she declared, in a weak, nervous voice. “My husband made the place himself a few months ago, as he often has

valuable jewellery here. In the City he has a strong room, of course, but here he deemed it best to make a secret hiding-place rather than have a fire-proof safe, which is always discussed by servants, and the knowledge of which in a private house so soon becomes common property."

"Then he used to keep valuables there?" asked the inspector.

"I believe so, but I never looked inside. It opened with a spring, the secret of which he alone knew."

"Who made it? The man who constructed it knew the secret, no doubt. He may be one of those implicated."

"The piece of board with the spring he brought home with him from Paris one day. It was made there, he said. The steel box was made somewhere in Chelsea."

"And who fitted the board so evenly?"

"He did himself. He is an amateur cabinetmaker, and at one time used to make furniture. He made that table over there," she added, pointing to a small round table standing near the corner where was the secret cavity.

"Then no workman was actually employed in fitting it up?" remarked the inspector, disappointedly.

"No. He did it himself, so that nobody should know. And he would not even let me know the secret of the spring."

"Which showed some distrust," remarked the inspector. "He evidently possessed something there which he did not wish you to see."

"Yes. That, however, is not surprising," she remarked. "Many husbands have secrets—family affairs and such like—with which they hesitate to trouble their wives."

"Certainly," he said, glancing dubiously at me, and no doubt recollecting that gruesome object now in the doctor's pocket. "But it seems very strange that thieves should come here so boldly, attack both you and the

maid-servant, and go straight to that secret hiding-place if there was not some very strong motive. They evidently knew there was something there—something of which they desired to obtain possession."

"But they didn't know the secret of the spring, for they prised it open."

I placed my hand in my overcoat pocket, and it came in contact with the portrait which I had succeeded in taking—the picture of the dead unknown.

Why had it been kept in such a prominent position in her room? I longed to question her, but at that moment was unable.

The mystery of the murderous attack in which the maid had lost her life; the mystery of that tall, thin man who crept across the apartment; the mystery of the theft; the mystery of the human eye, were all enigmas utterly beyond solution.

I took Laking aside and obtained a promise from him not to explain the circumstances under which we had met. Then to Mrs Parham I introduced myself later as a casual passer-by who had been alarmed by the startling discovery. I did this because I intended to call again and make the acquaintance of her husband.

Half an hour later, after all inquiry of Mrs Parham had failed to elicit a single fact regarding any person who might have a motive for the outrage and robbery, I left the house, and walked down the dark, deserted suburban thoroughfare accompanied by the police inspector, who was on his way back to the station to telegraph the curious facts to Scotland Yard.

"Well?" I asked, when we were out in the roadway, "and what do you make of the affair?"

"What do I think? Why, the lady is lying. She knows who did it, but fears to tell us the truth. There was something hidden under the floor which those people intended to get, and got it. Mark me! She dare not speak, otherwise she'll ruin her own reputation. When we fathom the mystery of to-night it will be found to be a very interesting one, depend upon it."

“Then you really suspect her?” I remarked. “Yes, I suspect her. She has some secret from her husband—and she fears that through this robbery he may learn the truth.”

“You know Mr Parham, perhaps—I mean you know something about him?”

“Well, yes,” he answered, smiling curiously. “We happen to know Mr Parham—and if what I suspect is true, then the affair of to-night is not surprising. Wait and see. The real facts, when they come to light, will very probably amaze you.”

Chapter Fifteen.

By which Sybil Explains Something.

Three weeks went by—dull, dreary weeks of constant anxiety. With the assistance of Eric—to whom I had, of course, explained the tragic incident in the home of John Parham—I was ever on the alert, compelled to go down to Neate Street at infrequent intervals in secret from Eric and pose for a few hours in the daytime as the husband of little Mrs Morton.

Poor Tibbie led a dreary life in that drab mean street. Mrs Williams was kind and pleasant, pitying the young wife so constantly separated from her husband. But if my work took me away, well, she ought not to grumble, the good woman declared. There were lots of compositors out of work she had heard, now that those linotypes were so universally adopted. And so she cheered Tibbie up, and the latter sought distraction by doing fancy needlework.

Each time I visited her I ran the risk of being followed by some person in the employ of Winsloe, who was, we knew, ever active in his efforts to discover her whereabouts. Her mother had raised a terrible hue-and-cry after a week had passed without news of her. Jack had unfortunately gone to Scotland Yard and given his sister's description, as Cynthia had begun to express a fear that she had met with foul play.

As soon as I heard of this I persuaded Tibbie to write a letter to her mother, assuring her that she was quite well and happy, that she was with friends, and that she would return in the course of a few days. This letter I sent to a friend in Glasgow, and it was posted from there.

Time after time I looked in wonder at the photograph of the dead unknown which I had abstracted from Mr Parham's drawing-room. And time after time I reflected whether it would be wise to suddenly confront Tibbie with it and demand the truth. Sometimes I was sorry that I had not left the portrait where I had found it, for I might, when calling upon Mrs Parham, have made casual inquiry regarding the original. Now that it was in my possession, however, I was unable to approach the subject. Undoubtedly she had missed it, and perhaps believed that in the

confusion of that memorable evening it had been stolen, perhaps for the value of its frame.

One night about ten o'clock, while Eric and I sat by the fire in my chambers, my friend cast aside the *Pall Mall Gazette* which he had been reading, exclaiming,—

"So the Parham affair seems to have concluded to-day. At the adjourned inquest they've returned the usual verdict—wilful murder against someone unknown. Poor girl! She was an entirely innocent victim."

"Yes," I remarked, smoking my pipe reflectively, "strange that the police haven't a scrap of a clue as to who did it."

"We have the only clue that exists," was his answer. "You saw one of the men."

"Yes, but I doubt if I'd recognise him again. It was only like a shadow passing across the room. He was tall and thin, but I was too far away to distinguish his features."

"Mrs Parham has apparently made no statement to the police of any value, and Parham himself is still absent. He fears, I suppose, certain inquiries regarding the possession of that gruesome object which we found in the false bottom of the secret hiding-place."

"I'd like to meet this man Parham," I said. "Recollect that he undoubtedly knew the man who was killed in Charlton Wood."

"Yes," remarked Eric, slowly. "It certainly seems strange that he doesn't turn up again. He may, of course, be travelling abroad, as his wife seems to think he is. She has told the police that he's often abroad, and she frequently does not hear from him for a fortnight or three weeks. It appears that only a short time ago he remarked that he might be compelled to go out to India on business connected with some jewels which an Indian prince has for sale. Perhaps he has gone, and will write to her from Port Said. That is what the police believe."

"And if he does?"

“Well, I should think it most probable that he’ll be detained at Bombay and asked to return at once to London, to explain how the human eye came into his possession.”

“I wish we could get sight of a photograph of Parham,” I said. “It would help us so much.”

“He’s never had his portrait taken—objects to it, I hear. The police told me so. They always look with suspicion upon a man who objects to being photographed.”

I entertained the same suspicions regarding Parham as did the police, and resolved to revisit his wife and endeavour to discover something further.

Next day, however, receiving an urgent express letter from Tibbie, I was compelled to assume the guise of William Morton and travel by a circuitous route down to Camberwell. She had the midday dinner of roast sirloin and vegetables ready prepared for me, cooked by herself, and looked a thoroughly capable housewife in her cheap black gown and white apron. The clothes she had bought were well fitted to the station she had assumed, and beyond a smart saying or two which now and then escaped her, she passed well as the lady’s-maid married to an honest, hard-working compositor.

“The only thing I can’t do,” she confided to me, as we sat together at the clean little dinner-table, “is the washing. I put it out, and I fear that the landlady thinks me horribly extravagant. But the truth is I don’t know how to wash, and if I tried I’d at once betray my ignorance,” she laughed.

I glanced at her hands, now rather red and rough by unaccustomed work, and smiled.

“Let them think what they may,” I said. “You play your part far better than I ever thought you would.”

“Oh, sometimes I find it quite amusing,” she declared. “One sees more of the realities of life in Camberwell than in Mayfair. Here I see how the poor live, and I pity them. I was ignorant of how hard are the lives of the working people; how they have to struggle to keep the wolf from the door,

or of the long hours of work, and the cutting down, of wages. Do you know, Wilfrid, I sometimes hear stories of poverty and distress that make my heart bleed. I want to help them, but how can I? To give them money would be to arouse suspicion against myself. I've found a method, however. I send them groceries and meat from certain shops in the Old Kent Road and Camberwell Road, and pay for it myself. They don't then know where it comes from."

I was somewhat surprised to discover this sympathetic trait in her character. I had never believed that, gay butterfly of fashion as she was, she entertained any thought of the poor seamstress who worked all night upon her ball-dress, or the consumptive shop-girl who danced attendance upon her, compelled to indulge her every whim. The Scarcliffs, if a wild race, were a proud one. They regarded "the people" as being different from themselves and treated all their underlings, save grave old Adams at Ryhall, without thought or consideration.

Yes, the few weeks that Tibbie had lived estranged from her fast, exotic set, and with the example of the workaday world before her eyes, had wrought a great change in her.

Yet, was this really so? To what cause could I attribute this sudden outburst of charitable feeling?

I held my breath as one suggestion occurred to me.

Was it repentance?

I had told her nothing concerning the strange occurrence at Sydenham Hill. The name of Parham had been found in the dead man's pocket, therefore, connected as the two crimes seemed to be, I made no explanation. Without doubt, however, she had read the details in the paper which she took daily, and had that morning seen the verdict given at the adjourned inquest.

How I longed to show her the photograph and to ask her to tell me the truth.

One afternoon, a fortnight ago, she had casually remarked to me that she had seen in the paper the report of a man being found in Charlton Wood,

whereupon I merely replied that I, too, had heard the details, and that I supposed the victim was some unfortunate tramp who had been killed by an enemy.

“He may have been shot accidentally by one of the keepers, who fears to tell the truth,” she suggested.

But I remained silent. I remembered Eric’s terrible denunciation.

I passed that afternoon with her in the cheaply-furnished little sitting-room, smoking and chatting. After she had removed the cloth she threw aside her apron, and sat in the low wicker armchair with a cigarette. Only when I was present dared she smoke, and I saw how thoroughly she enjoyed it.

“You, Wilfrid, seem like a visitor from the other world—the world which nowadays exists only in my dreams,” she said, throwing her head lazily back and blowing a cloud of smoke from her pursed-up lips. “As I sit here alone hour after hour, I wonder how it is that I have lived the life I have. Our foibles and follies and false appearances are, after all, wretchedly insincere, and surely the enemies of a smart woman are the bitterest in the world. Cynthia taught me to believe that our set was the world, but I now know different, for I see that there is happiness, yes, far greater happiness in the poor struggling homes about me here than in our own world of pleasure. Happiness?” she repeated to herself, looking blankly across the room and sighing, “I wonder if I shall ever know what real happiness means?”

“I hope so,” I exclaimed quickly. “Surely there is no reason why you should be unhappy. You are young, wealthy, courted, flattered, and one of the best-looking women in London. You are well aware of that, Tibbie.”

“Aware of it!” she exclaimed hoarsely, in a low, broken voice. “Everyone tells me so. Yes,” she added bitterly, “I have everything except the one thing debarred me—happiness.”

“And why not that?”

“Can one be happy if one does not possess peace of mind? That, alas! I do not possess.”

“Because you hold a secret,” I remarked slowly, looking into her eyes as they suddenly met mine. “Will you never reveal it to me, Tibbie?” I asked. “I could surely assist you.”

But she shook her head, replying,—

“No. The error is mine, and I must bear the punishment. Ah!” she cried, suddenly starting up, placing both palms to her brow, and pacing up and down the little room. “Ah! you don’t know what I suffer. Day and night I sit here and think and think, and wonder, and fear. Yes!” she cried, her eyes starting as she glared at me in her desperation. “I fear! I fear lest I may be discovered by those enemies who have sworn to effect my ruin! But—but you will save me, Wilfrid,” she gasped, suddenly advancing, turning her white face to mine, and clutching my hand. “You will protect me from them, won’t you?”

“Of course,” I answered, greatly surprised at her sudden terror, when only a few moments before she had been so calm in the enjoyment of her cigarette.

“But who are these enemies of whom you are in such fear? Tell me, and I may then act accordingly. Surely it is only just that I should be aware of their identity?” I urged.

“No. I—I—I mean I can’t explain. If I did, I should lose even you, Wilfrid—the only true friend I have in the whole world.”

Her hand holding mine trembled as I looked straight into her white, frightened countenance.

A silence fell between us. I gazed into those wonderful eyes of hers and noted her marvellous beauty now accentuated by her distress.

“Tibbie.” I exclaimed at last in a low, soft voice, scarcely above a whisper, “you are in deadly fear of the man with whom only the other day you contemplated marriage—Ellice Winsloe—the man who now intends to denounce you!”

“Who told you so?” she gasped, drawing back in an instant, and turning paler. “Who—who has betrayed my secret?”

Chapter Sixteen.

Friends and Foes.

At seven o'clock that evening I took the train from Camberwell Gate to Westminster Bridge, like the industrious compositor that I represented myself to be.

In order to assert myself more prominently in the neighbourhood I had accepted the invitation of Williams, the mineral-water foreman, who was my landlord, to have a glass of ale at the neighbouring public-house; and in the bar was introduced by him to several other working-men as his tenant. They seemed a sober, good-humoured set, all having their glass after the thirst of the day's labour.

My landlord remarked that my wife saw little of me, but I explained how my employers sent me to various parts of the country in connection with a new patent type-composing machine in which they were interested.

"Well, my missus does 'er best for Mrs Morton and cheers her up," the man said. "Only it 'ud be more pleasant for 'er if you were at 'ome a bit more. The poor young lady mopes dreadfully sometimes. You needn't say anything, you know, but my old woman has found her a-cryin' to herself lots of times."

I recollected his words as I sat on the top of the tram passing up those long broad roads lit by the flare of costermongers' lights and rendered noisy by the strident cries of the butchers and greengrocers shouting their wares. In South London commercial life seems to commence with the sundown, for thrifty working-class housewives go out shopping after dark.

And Tibbie, the woman whom all smart London knew, who was so brilliant a figure at receptions, balls and weddings, and of whose beauty the ladies' papers so constantly spoke, was living amid that poverty and squalor alone, terrified and crying her heart out.

For what? Had remorse seized her? Was it the awful recollection of that

fatal moment in Charlton Wood, combined with the constant fear that Ellice Winsloe, whom she had now acknowledged as her enemy, would discover her and bring against her the terrible charge?

That night, after I had slipped unrecognised into my chambers, I changed quickly into my own clothes and went along to the Wellington Club to find Domville. The hall-porter had not, however, seen him that day; therefore, after strolling through the rooms, I was just on the point of leaving when, in the hall, I encountered Ellice Winsloe.

“Hulloa! old fellow!” he cried cheerily. “What are you doing to-night? Come along and dine with me at Boodle’s.”

I hesitated. I had no wish for the company of the man who was Tibbie’s secret enemy. Once I had distrusted him; now I hated him, for I saw how ingeniously he had kept observation upon my movements, and how his invitation, so warmly given, was with the ulterior object of ascertaining my movements.

In an instant it occurred to me that I might fight him with his own weapons. I could be as alert as he was. Therefore, I laughed and declared that I had no prior engagement.

“Come along, then,” he said; and we both went out and crossed Hyde Park corner together.

“I was at the Wydcombes this afternoon. It was Lady Wydcombe’s day. They’re till most anxious about Tibbie. Nobody knows where she is,” he added, with a covert glance at my countenance to watch the effect of his words.

“Yes,” I said, “she’s certainly a bit erratic. I hear, however, that she has written to her mother saying that she’s all right.”

“The police think the letter was written under compulsion. Jack took it to Scotland Yard, with the result that the Criminal Investigation Department have redoubled their efforts to trace her. What’s your opinion?”

I shrugged my shoulders. The fellow’s object was to get me to talk; but I knew how to be silent when it suited me, and was determined to tell him

nothing.

“Old Lady Scarcliff is very upset, I hear,” he went on as we walked along Piccadilly to St. James’s Street.

“It is really too bad of Tibbie, don’t you think so? She ought to draw the line at disappearing like this. She may have met with foul play for all one knows. It seems, according to Mason, that she took a lot of her jewellery with her on the night she left Ryhall in the car.”

“Does Mason know or suspect anything?” I asked quite innocently.

“Nothing, as far as I’m aware. The detectives have made every inquiry, but discovered nothing.” Then he added, in a voice which sounded to me to convey a distinct hidden meaning, “They’ve been just as successful regarding Tibbie as they have been in the case of the mystery up in Charlton Wood.”

I said nothing. My object was to allow him to do all the talking.

At Boodle’s we sat down to an excellent dinner, though it was rather late.

As he sat before me, his elbows on the table and his hands clasped as he chatted, I looked into his face and wondered what were the inner workings of his ingenious mind. He made no mention of his call at that obscure hotel in Lambeth in search of Tibbie, but merely expressed a fervent hope that the jewellery which she had carried with her when she left on her midnight motor-drive had not been the cause of any attempt upon her by malefactors.

In order to watch his attitude I suddenly exclaimed,—

“That affair in Charlton Wood seems still a mystery. And yet I hear,” I added, making a bold shot, “that the police have at last found a clue.”

His countenance remained perfectly unchanged. He merely responded,—

“I hope they have. It was a dastardly thing. The poor fellow must have been shot treacherously—murdered in cold blood. Jack is most anxious

to find the culprit, and I don't wonder. It isn't nice to have a murder committed upon one's own estate."

"It's curious that the man has not yet been identified," I said, regarding him keenly.

"And has it not also struck you as strange that Tibbie should suddenly disappear on the night of the murder?" he asked, his eyes fixed upon mine.

"No," I replied, quite unconcernedly. "I had never given that a thought. It is curious, now that you recall it. A mere coincidence, of course."

"Of course," he said, pouring me out a glass of still Moselle. His air of refinement was irritating.

Then, after a brief silence, he said,—

"Do you know, Hughes, I can't help thinking that something serious has happened to Tibbie. The letter Lady Scarcliff received was posted in Glasgow, but of course that was only a blind. She's in London somewhere. I told Wydcombe to-day that they ought to advertise and offer a reward for her."

His suggestion suddenly gave me an idea. In the pockets of the unknown man in Charlton Wood I had found the key to a cipher which he had evidently used to correspond with his friends. Why should I not through the medium of the papers open up some correspondence? Would anyone reply?

"You know how erratic Tibbie always is," I remarked. "I've perhaps known her longer than you have. She was always the same, even as a girl—the despair of the old viscount."

"And yet she is very charming, don't you think so?" asked the man whom she declared to be one of her bitterest enemies.

"Delightfully amusing," I agreed. "The set she mixes with spoils her. If she could only sever herself entirely from Cynthia's friends she would be a very different woman."

“Oh, she’ll marry some day and settle down,” laughed Winsloe. “I used at one time to hear that you were likely to be the lucky man.”

“I think not,” was my quick reply, somewhat annoyed at his remark. “I can’t afford to marry,” whereat he laughed, as though in disbelief of my poverty.

He questioned me with a subtle ingenuity worthy of a counsel at the criminal bar, but my replies were all of them empty ones, while at the same time I was watching him narrowly, noting that this warm friendliness was merely assumed, and that beneath that veneer of good fellowship was a fierce and bitter antagonism that I had never before suspected. Ever since Scarcliff had introduced us eighteen months ago we had been very good friends, and had seen quite a good deal of each other on the Riviera the previous season. I was staying at the Métropole at Monte Carlo, while he was at the Hermitage.

He seemed to have many friends there, well-dressed men whom I did not know. But one’s acquaintances on the Riviera are generally somewhat doubtful, and need not be recognised beyond the confines of the Principality. He became one of Jack’s most intimate friends. They often went over to Paris together, and on such occasions it was believed that young Lord Scarcliff played baccarat at a certain private house in the Avenue Kleber and lost considerable sums. Tibbie had told me so in confidence, but Jack naturally never mentioned his losses. If this were true, then it looked very much as though Ellice Winsloe was a shark, as my friend Domville declared him to be.

In a London club a white shirt and well-cut evening clothes enables many a scoundrel to pass himself off as a gentleman. Few young men who come into their inheritance and lead the fevered life of the West End escape the traps laid for them by those well-dressed blackguards who pose as friends and advisers, and at the same time cleverly contrive to pluck the pigeon. By some clever ruse or other they get him into their power, threatening exposure or the police for some fancied offence, and then the question of hush-money is mooted and the rest is so very easy. The fly is caught in the net, and the spiders grow fat at their leisure.

Ask any official at Scotland Yard, and what he will reveal to you regarding

this will surely astound you.

Sitting with Winsloe and listening to his clever chatter I was rather amused than otherwise. Inwardly I laughed at his shrewd but futile efforts to obtain from me something concerning Tibbie.

We smoked a cigar, and about ten o'clock strolled along to the Empire, where we took a turn round the crowded grand circle. Variety performances, however, possess but little attraction for me, and we soon went out again. In the vestibule a fair-moustached, bald-headed man in evening dress greeted my companion effusively, exclaiming,—

"Why, Ellice—actually! My dear old fellow, how are you?—how are you?" and he wrung his hand in warmest greeting.

"And you, Sidney! Who'd ever thought of finding you in town again? Why, I thought you were still somewhere up the Zambesi."

"Got back yesterday, my dear fellow. And not sorry either, I can tell you. The surveying for the new railroad was a far tougher job than I anticipated. I went down with fever, so they sent me home on six months' leave."

"But you're all right now," Winsloe said, and then introduced his friend as Sidney Humphreys who, he explained, had been out in Africa in connection with the Cape to Cairo railway.

"Where are you fellows going?" asked the newcomer.

"Home, I think," Winsloe replied. "Hughes doesn't care for ballets."

"Come round to my rooms and see the curios I've brought back," he urged. "I've still kept on the old chambers. The things I've got were mostly dug out of the ruins of an ancient city—relics of the time of King Solomon, I believe. You're fond of antiques, Ellice, so come and spend an hour and have a look at them. You'll be interested, I promise you, and I'd like to know your opinion."

Winsloe hesitated for a moment, then, turning to me, said,—

“You’ll come too, won’t you?”

At first I excused myself, for I was anxious to find Eric, but presently I allowed myself to be persuaded, for truth to tell, I, too, was very fond of antiquities, and was therefore anxious to see this latest find.

We drove in a hansom along Regent Street, and then through several side streets, until presently we alighted before the door of a dark, respectable-looking house, into which Humphreys let us with his latchkey.

“Go on up,” he exclaimed, when we were in the hall. “You know your way, Ellice—the old rooms, second floor.”

And so while he held back in the hall looking at some cards that had been left, I climbed the broad old-fashioned stairs with Winsloe.

At the first landing my companion held back for me to go on before, laughing, and saying,—

“Go straight on—the room right before you,” and compelling me to ascend first, he followed.

Suddenly I heard men’s voices raised in angry altercation, apparently proceeding from another room, and what was more, I was struck by a distinct belief that one voice was Eric’s. Yet surely that could not be possible.

“I defy you!” I heard the voice cry. “Say no more. You hear! You may kill me, but I defy you!”

I halted, startled. The voice was so very like Eric’s that I could have sworn it was his.

A sharp cry of pain—a man’s cry—rang out from behind a closed door on the landing I was approaching. Then there followed a long-drawn-out groan, ending almost in a sigh.

A tragedy was being enacted there!

I clapped my hand upon the revolver I always carried in my hip-pocket,

and went forward quickly, eager and puzzled, but just as I placed my feet upon the last steps to gain the landing where the man’s chambers were, four or five of the stairs suddenly gave way beneath me, and I fell feet foremost into the great yawning opening there revealed. I was the victim of a dastardly treachery!

I know that I clutched wildly at air when I felt myself falling down, down to what seemed an unfathomable depth. I held my breath, for at that instant a man’s wild shriek rang in my ears. Then next second I felt my skull crushed, and with it all consciousness became blotted out.

I was entrapped—helpless in the hands of quondam friends who were really my bitterest and most unscrupulous enemies.

Chapter Seventeen.

Is Extraordinary.

The agony was excruciating. A burning bubbling seethed in my brain, as though my skull were filled with molten metal. My mouth was parched, my neck stiff, and my jaws were fixed when I opened my eyes and found myself in a great chasm of cavernous darkness.

How long I had lain there I have no idea.

The thunder of rolling, roaring waters deafened me, and my lower limbs were so benumbed that at first I was unable to move them. I felt my leg, and then discovered the reason. Wet to the skin, I was lying half in water, my head alone being on some slightly higher ground—a fortunate circumstance that had certainly saved me from being drowned.

Where was I?

For fully ten minutes—minutes that seemed hours, I was utterly unable to move, but presently I managed, by dint of supreme effort, to struggle to my feet and grope about me unsteadily, at last finding a smooth arched wall. I lifted my hand above my head and found that I could touch the roof.

In that pitch darkness, with the roaring torrent at my side, I dare not move two paces lest I might lose my foothold.

I felt frantically in my pocket, and my heart leapt when I found that I still possessed a box of wax vestas. The silver box was water-tight. One of these I struck quickly, but its light was lost in that cavernous blackness.

It only showed me the bricked walls, high to the roof, wet and slimy, and revealed to me that I was in one of the main sewers of London! At my side the great black torrent flowed on towards the outfall with deafening roar in that long, interminable tunnel beneath the Metropolis.

Rats, hundreds of them, grey and scuttling, ran helter-skelter on seeing

the fickle light; but I stood motionless leaning against the wall and gazing around at my weird surroundings until the match went out. My head reeled, I feared to walk lest I should stagger into the Stygian stream.

Knowledge of where I was gave me courage, however. My head was very painful with strange fancies dancing through my imagination. I think that the blow had unbalanced my brain.

Which way should I turn? To right or left? Was mortal man ever in such a predicament? I recognised the truth. I remembered one appalling fact. The scoundrels had sent me through into that deadly place, knowing that even if the fall did not kill me outright, I must be drowned when, at regular intervals, the sewer was automatically flushed, and my body washed out to the Thames estuary.

I had seen the walls still wet to the roof from the last flushing, and as I recognised my awful peril, my blood ran cold. At any moment might come that gigantic flood to sweep me away into eternity in an instant. Somewhere, higher up, was that mechanism which at certain hours of day and night automatically let loose the great sweeping wave through the long, black tunnel sweeping to the sea, the cleansing of London.

My only hope was to find safety somewhere, therefore in frantic haste, all forgetful of the pain I was suffering, I turned to the right and groped along the wall by aid of a match, the light of which was not sufficient to show the true dimensions of the sewer.

On, on, I went, how far I have no idea. It seemed to be miles. My matches burned only dimly, so bad was the air. Time after time I came to side channels, small arches belching forth their black stream into the roaring torrent like tributaries of a river, until I suddenly saw something white upon the wall, and, raising my match, discerned the painted words: “Poland Street.”

Then I knew that I was beneath Poland Street, close to Oxford Street.

I was in search of a manhole by which to ascend to the roadway, but, alas! could not discover one. A great terror seized me lest the flush should come before I could gain a place of safety.

I was in the act of striking another match, in order to proceed more quickly, when I felt my head reeling, and in clutching at the wall for support the matchbox fell from my nerveless fingers into the water.

My disaster was thus complete. Without light how could I find a place in which to raise myself above the level of the flood?

My heart stood still. In that moment the recollection of all the sequence of strange and startling events of the past few weeks passed in rapid review before me. My enemies had entrapped me, and I now knew that I was doomed.

Eric's shout of defiance, followed by that groan and shriek, still rang in my ears, but, most tantalising of all, I had no idea where the house to which I had been enticed was situated. It was somewhere off Regent Street, but further than that I had no knowledge.

I saw how cleverly the whole affair had been arranged; how the man introduced to me as Humphreys had met us by appointment in the vestibule of the Empire, and how, knowing my interest in antiques, the bait had been so cleverly placed.

I had now no doubt that Ellice Winsloe was an adventurer, therefore my eager desire was to reveal to Scarcliff the astounding truth.

And yet this was actually the man who had the audacity to propose marriage to Sybil, and she had contemplated accepting him!

To old Lady Scarcliff the fellow had posed as a gentleman of means, and had so ingratiated himself with Jack that the pair had become inseparable. The situation was monstrous.

In sheer desperation I groped forward slowly and carefully, my face to the black, slimy wall, feeling it forward with my hands. If I stumbled the force of the torrent would, I knew, take me off my feet and I should most probably meet with an awful death. Cautiously I crept along, how far I cannot tell. Each moment seemed an hour, and each step a mile, until of a sudden the wall ended!

Only the black swiftly-flowing flood lay before me. I put out my hand in

the darkness, but only grasped the air.

Next moment, however, I discovered that the sewer took a sudden turn, almost at right angles, and that I had come to the corner. Yes. The wall continued! So I groped on and on, my hands travelling over bricks worn smooth by the action of the cleansing flood.

I hoped to encounter one of those men whom I had often seen descend from the street in high boots and carrying a miner's lamp, but I was, alas! alone. The very absence of the workmen told me the terrible truth. It was the time for the automatic flushing!

On I groped in frantic haste, the rats scuttling from my path, the darkness complete; the noise of the black waters deafening. I recollected that as we had driven from the Empire it had commenced to rain, and thus was the torrent accounted for.

Of a sudden, I discerned before me something. What it was I could not distinguish. I crept on, and saw that it was like a small patch of faint grey. Then, approaching nearer, I found that it was a single ray of faint daylight which, penetrating from far above, fell upon the black waters. It was day. I had been in that gruesome place all night.

My heart leapt within me as I went forward to it, finding that above was a round, well-like shaft, which led to the surface, while in the wall were iron footholds.

I gained the bottom, and grasping the small, rusted iron rails commenced a slow and difficult ascent.

Not an instant too soon, however, for ere I had placed my foot upon the first rung of the ladder a noise like thunder sounded from the tunnel, and the black waters rose angrily to meet me, washing about my legs as I climbed higher up, and filling the sewer to its roof.

For a few moments the water remained at that level, and then the torrent slowly receded to its original height as the flushing wave rushed on towards the outfall.

A cold perspiration broke out upon me. I saw how I had been within an

ace of death, and shuddered as I glanced below.

Then, ascending as quickly as my shattered nerves and swimming head would allow, I found above me a closed grating, through which I could hear the roar of the London traffic above.

I shouted, but could attract no attention.

To push up the iron was impossible, for I saw that it was locked.

A woman passed close by, and I shouted to her. She turned and looked in an opposite direction, surprised to see no one. She never suspected anyone being beneath the roadway.

An omnibus rumbled over me, and I saw that it was a green “Bayswater,” from which I concluded that I must be beneath Oxford Street.

Again and again I shouted for help, but could attract no notice. My position was far from secure, compelled to cling on to those iron footholds in the brickwork.

At last I saw a newsboy close to me. My shout startled him, but when he discerned my face beneath the bars he came closer, and asked,—

“’Alloa, guv’nor! What’s up?”

“I’m a prisoner here,” I explained. “Go and fetch a policeman.”

“My gum!” exclaimed the urchin in his surprise. “It’s the first time I’ve ever ’eard of a bloke gettin’ locked down the sewer.” And he went off at once to call a constable.

The officer came quickly, and after a brief explanation he sent the lad somewhere to the house of one of the sewermen, I think, for the key.

Meanwhile, a small crowd quickly collected around the grating, and I was subjected to a good deal of good-humoured banter until the man came with the key, and I once again found myself at the surface, a dirty, dishevelled, pitiable-looking object in evening dress. I was in Oxford Street, at the corner of Hart Street, Bloomsbury.

Both constable and sewer-man were curious to know how I got in, whereupon I explained that I had been the victim of a plot in some house, of the exact situation of which I was unaware.

The two men exchanged glances—meaning glances I saw them to be.

“Was it anywhere near Portland Place?” asked the big fellow in blue jersey and sea-boots.

“I don’t know. I saw Poland Street written up. Why?”

“Well, because there’s something mysterious goes on in a house somewhere near here. Only a month ago we found the body of a young woman drowned in the main sewer at the corner of Charing Cross Road, and the affair is a mystery. The police ’ave kept it out of the papers while they make inquiries. We’re trying to find out what house has direct communication with the sewer, but up to the present we’ve not been successful. It’s a good job,” he added, “that you weren’t caught by the flush, for it must just be going down at this time.”

I explained how narrowly I had escaped death, and then in reply to the constable described the dastardly plot of which I had been the victim.

“Of course, sir, you won’t mind making a full statement at the police station, will you?” the officer said. “The discovery of the poor woman in the sewer the other day has shown that there is some house in which people mysteriously disappear. It is evidently to that house you were invited. You will be able to assist us to identify it.”

I shook my head, saying: “I fear that I’ll never be able to recognise it again, for I really took no notice of its exterior. It lies somewhere east of Regent Street, that is all I know.”

“Depend upon it that more than one person has been swept down by the flush,” declared the sewer-man. “A man’s body was found down at the outfall at Beckton about three months ago. He was in evening dress, and evidently a gentleman, our foreman said, but where he came from was a complete mystery. My own idea is that the house has no direct communication with the sewer, for if it had, we should have discovered it. You say, sir, that you fell through a hole in the stairs?”

I replied in the affirmative.

“Exactly. You dropped down into a cellar or somewhere in the basement, and then, while you were insensible, they put you into the sewer—through some manhole, perhaps, of which they have a duplicate key. The house must be near a manhole. That’s my belief.”

“Then you don’t think that I fell plumb into the sewer?”

“Certainly not. You were thrown into the sewer while insensible down a manhole, without a doubt. It’s lucky you just escaped the flush. The villain evidently knew that the flush is at eight o’clock in the morning, and that we don’t go down till afterwards. And when we go, well, the victim has, of course, disappeared. By Jove! sir,” added the big muscular man, standing astride in his big, high boots, “you’ve had a narrow shave, and no mistake.”

I admitted I had. I was forced to repeat my explanation to a brown-bearded, good-humoured inspector who came up, and who afterwards gave me his name as Pickering. The officer was most interested, therefore promising to call at the Tottenham Court Road police station later I gave him a card and took a hansom back to Bolton Street.

Chapter Eighteen.

Arouses Suspicions Regarding Sybil.

Ellice Winsloe believed me dead.

There was no doubt about that. And knowing what I now did, I intended that he should remain secure in that belief.

Domville had not returned, a fact which caused me the gravest apprehensions. I recollected that defiant voice in the night. Had he also fallen a victim?

Budd called in my doctor, who dressed the wound in my head and carefully bandaged it. He was curious to know the cause, but I merely explained that I had sustained a rather bad fall. Perhaps he attributed it to too much wine on the previous night—probably he did.

“You’ll have to rest for a day or two,” he said, “you had a nasty blow.”

But I was uncommunicative, therefore he soon afterwards left.

Budd was, of course, inquisitive, but my explanation was that I had had an accident, and had fallen in the mud. My clothes were, of course, ruined, my hands grazed and torn, and across my eye was a nasty gash where I must have struck a sharp stone.

My brain was awhirl, and after the doctor’s departure I swallowed some brandy and lay down on the bed awaiting Eric.

Had he shared the same fate? If so, to try and find him in the sewer was useless. The flush had passed, and would sweep him away to his death.

Of course, I had no real proof that he had been in that house other than overhearing his voice. I recalled every word, and now more than ever was I convinced that he had been behind that closed door, held by enemies.

From Budd I learned that my friend had gone out about two o'clock, and had not returned. He had, however, left me a message to say that I was not to be alarmed by his absence. He was still making inquiries, I supposed. What I had related regarding the strange affair at Sydenham Hill had puzzled him greatly. Perhaps he had gone down there.

I gave my man strict instructions to say to everyone that I too was absent from home.

"Tell everybody that I went out to dinner last night and have not yet returned," I said. "Express surprise and anxiety. I want to pretend to be missing—you understand, Budd?"

"Yes, sir," was the man's prompt response. "You expect somebody will call and inquire, and to everyone I am to know nothing."

"I went out to the club last night and haven't been seen since."

"I quite understand, sir. But what about the doctor?"

"He doesn't matter. The person whom I wish to believe in my absence does not know the doctor. I shall remain indoors for a day or two. Mind nobody knows I'm here."

"I shall take good care of that, sir," was the man's reply; and I knew that I could trust him.

I scribbled a line to Inspector Pickering explaining my inability to make the statement on account of my injured head, but promising to call in a few days. I urged him not to send to me, as my chambers were probably watched. This note I sent by express messenger.

Then thoroughly exhausted I dropped off to sleep.

It was evening when I awoke, but Eric had not made his appearance. I was now thoroughly alarmed. Who were the men whom he had defied in that house of mystery?

He always carried a revolver, and was a dead shot; but what is a weapon against such black treachery as that to which I had been subjected? He

was fearless, and would fight to the last; yet after my experience in that house I was apprehensive lest he should, like myself, have fallen a victim.

Many a man and woman disappears in this roaring metropolis of ours and is never again heard of; many an undiscovered crime takes place within a stone's-throw of the great London thoroughfares; and many a death-cry is unheard in the hum of traffic and unheeded in the bustle of our everyday life. The London sewers hold many a secret, and the London chimneys have smoked with the cremated remains of many an innocent victim.

I wrote to Tibbie an affectionate letter explaining that my absence was due to the fact that I had fallen and met with a slight accident to the head, and signed it "Willie" in order that, if necessary, she might show it to her landlady. It was strange to write to her with so much affection when inwardly I was aware of her terrible secret. Yet had I not promised to save her? Had I not given her that foolish pledge which had been the cause of all my exciting adventures and my narrow escape from death?

Night came. I sat alone in the armchair before the fire listening for my old friend's footstep, but all in vain. Something had happened, but what the something was I feared to contemplate.

I unlocked a drawer in my old-fashioned bureau, a quaint old piece of Queen Anne furniture from Netherdene, and took out the paper with the cabalistic jumble of figures and letters which I had found on the body of the dead man in Charlton Wood.

For a long while I sat and studied the cipher and its key, finding it very ingeniously contrived—evidently a secret code established for some evil purpose, a code that had been given to the dead man to enable him to have secret communication with some persons who desired to remain unseen and unknown.

My curiosity aroused, my eye chanced to fall upon the morning's paper and I took it up and turned to the "agony column," where I saw several cipher advertisements. One of them I endeavoured to read by the aid of the dead man's key, but was unable. Therefore I tried the second, and

afterwards the third. The latter only consisted of two lines of a meaningless jumble of letters and numerals, but taking a pencil I commenced to write down the equivalent of the cipher in plain English.

In a few moments my heart gave a bound.

I had deciphered the first word of the message, namely, “White.”

Very carefully, and after considerable search and calculation, I presently transcribed the secret message thus:—

“White Feather reports W.H. gone home. Nothing to fear.”

That was all. But was it not very significant? The initials were my own, and did not the announcement that I had “gone home” mean that I had gone to my death. There was nothing to fear, it was plainly stated.

They therefore had feared us, and that was the motive of their ingenious crime.

For whose eyes was that curious advertisement intended, I wondered. Who was “White Feather?”

Ah! If I could only discover, then I should obtain a clue to the mystery that was now puzzling me and driving me to despair.

At two o’clock Eric was still absent, therefore I turned in. My head troubled me. It was very painful, and the horrors of that past night ever rose before me, while my unbalanced brain was distracted by wonder at the reason of that desperate attempt upon my life. Man of the world that I was, I knew well enough that there was some deep motive. They feared me—but why?

Next morning, there being no word from Eric, my anxiety was greatly increased. My friend might have shared the same fate as myself and remained unconscious till the flood had overwhelmed him. If so, then all trace of him might have disappeared and his body was now floating slowly out to sea.

Those hard defiant words of his still rang in my ears. What did he mean?

Who were the persons who held him in their power?

To remain inactive was impossible. Every moment I remained increased the danger of my discovery by Winsloe and his companions. I could, of course, have gone forth to King Street with a constable and given him in charge for the attempt upon me. Indeed, that was my first impulse, yet on reflection I saw that by adopting such a course I might imperil Sybil. Without a doubt the fellow knew her secret, and for that reason was in such active search of her.

Therefore I decided to remain patient and watchful. Winsloe believed that I was dead, and perhaps it was as well, for I should now be afforded an opportunity of watching his movements.

For three whole days I was compelled to remain a prisoner on account of my annoying bandages, which were too conspicuous to allow me to go forth. I had several callers, including Jack and Lord Wydcombe, but to everyone Budd replied that both his master and Mr Domville were absent, where, he had no idea.

My anxiety for Eric increased hourly, yet what could I do?

The doctor, at my request, removed the bandages so that my wound was hidden when I wore a golf-cap, and about eleven o’clock that same night, dressed in my working clothes, I crept forth into Bolton Street unseen, and in Piccadilly mingled with the crowd homeward bound from the theatre.

I went into Regent Street confident in my excellent disguise, and taking one of the streets to the right, wandered on and on in search of the house with the fatal stairs. On that disastrous night the villainous pair had engaged me deeply in conversation as we drove along, in order to take my attention off the route we were traversing, therefore I own that I was absolutely without any landmark. All I knew was that we had turned off Regent Street about half-way up and that the house was situated in a quiet, rather dark street, an old-fashioned house of three storeys.

Eagerly in search of the place from which I had so narrowly escaped with my life I wandered in the night up and down those narrow thoroughfares, that puzzling maze of streets that lie between Regent Street and Soho

Square—Brewer Street, Bridle Lane, Lexington Street, Poland Street and Berwick Street. I could not, however, find any house answering to the very vague impression I retained of it, though I went on and on until far into the night.

Fearing to return to Bolton Street, I took a bed at an obscure hotel in the Euston Road, and next morning went over to Camberwell, where Tibbie warmly welcomed me. I attributed the cut on my head to a fall on the kerb, and when we sat together I saw how thoroughly resigned she had become to her strange surroundings.

With womanly enthusiasm she told me of the kindness of the landlady, who would not allow her to mope there alone. She had taken her out to see her friends, wives of working-men like herself, and they had gossiped, had high tea and discussed the affairs of the neighbourhood.

“Tibbie,” I said, presently, after we had been chatting some time, “I am compelled to leave London, and I confess I am very apprehensive on your behalf.”

“Leave London!” she exclaimed. “Why?”

“It is imperative. Winsloe is watching me, and is doing all he can to discover you. Every time I come here I run a great risk.”

“I know,” she said, frowning. “His spies are no doubt dogging your footsteps everywhere.”

“Then your position here is unsafe. You would do better to escape from London now, and hide in the country—say in one of the larger towns in the north.”

“Yes; but the police are in search of me, remember. The mater and Jack have raised a hue and cry. They think I’ve met with foul play.”

“Then all the more reason why you should slip out of London. The country police are slower, and you will stand less chance of recognition.”

She sighed, exclaiming,—

“Ah, Wilfrid! It is cruel—cruel of them to hunt me down as they are now doing. Where shall I go? Where do you intend going?”

“Anywhere—out of London. What about Leeds? Neither of us know anyone there.”

She was silent a moment. Then said, “I am in your hands entirely, Wilfrid, and will go to Leeds if you think I can travel without being recognised.”

“If I anticipated any risk I would not allow you to undertake it,” I said. “We will go this evening by the 5:45 from King’s Cross—‘Oswin’s train,’ as they call it, because he is the caterer for the dining-car.”

“Very well,” she answered. “As you wish. But before we go will you do me a favour? Go to the *Daily Telegraph* office and put in an advertisement for me.”

“An advertisement!” I exclaimed, in surprise.

“Yes,” she laughed, rather nervously. “I want to—I mean it is necessary that I should communicate with a friend.”

I said nothing, but stood watching her as she took out half a sheet of notepaper and commenced to print three lines of jumbled capitals and numerals—an advertisement apparently in the cipher which I had taken from the dead unknown.

Her action astounded me, but I managed to remain as though interested but ignorant.

“Why in this cipher?” I asked, when she handed it to me, requesting me to go to Fleet Street after our midday dinner.

“Because—well, because I don’t wish it to be read by other people. It is for the eye of one person only.”

I placed it in my pocket without further comment, and after we had eaten together I went out to do her bidding.

While seated in the tram-car in the Old Kent Road I took out the mystic

message she had written, and with the key which I had fortunately carried away with me from Bolton Street I deciphered the words she had penned.

They read,—

“To Nello.—Will make appointment when safe for us to meet. Note that Eric is in Paris. I still trust you.—S.”

I sat staring at the paper like a man in a dream.

Was Tibbie, the woman I had promised to save and for whose sake I was sacrificing everything, reputation, honour, even my life, actually playing me false?

How did she know that Eric was in Paris? Was that really true?

And who was Nello to whom she sent that message of trust?

Chapter Nineteen.

Gives a Message to Nello.

A little after ten o'clock that same evening, in our guise as working people, we walked along the Briggate, in Leeds, and presently found a small eating-house, where Tibbie obtained accommodation for the night.

Dressed as we were, Tibbie's trunk at the station, and a small bag in my hand, I was unable to go to any of the larger hotels. Therefore, after supping off a chop and tomatoes, washed down with a tankard of ale, I bade her good-night and went off to find a bed round in Commercial Street.

Next day, in the dull grey morning, we walked the busy streets of Leeds—Kirkgate, Bond Street, Albion Street, and the neighbouring thoroughfares—and took counsel with each other. Her advertisement, which I saw printed in that morning's *Telegraph* puzzled me. Yet I could not admit knowledge of the cipher without also admitting that I was in possession of the key.

I showed it to her in the paper, but she only smiled and thanked me, saying,—

"I suppose you suspect that I am communicating with some lover—eh?"

"Well, Tibbie," I remarked, in as calm a voice as I could command, "I must admit that I'm much surprised. You seem, somehow, to be misleading me."

"Because I am compelled to do so," was her frank, outspoken answer.

I longed to ask right out who was the man Nello—brief for Lionel—the man to whom she sent a secret message of trust.

We were passing St. John's Churchyard towards North Street, and had been discussing the advisability of her taking a furnished room in one of the respectable houses in Roundhay Road, where we had seen

“Apartments to let: Furnished,” when, catching her countenance, I suddenly said,—

“Eric has disappeared. He left Bolton Street some days ago, and I’ve heard nothing of him. I’m getting very anxious.”

“Eric!” she echoed. “Well, he’s hardly the kind of a man to disappear, is he? I’ve often heard from his friends that he goes away abroad frequently and forgets to write. Perhaps he’s abroad now.”

She did not tell me that he was in Paris, the statement which she made in secret to the man she called Nello.

I discussed the subject further, but she steadfastly refused to admit that she knew of his whereabouts. By her attitude I was much mystified.

Neither the Sussex Constabulary nor the Scarcliffs themselves entertained the slightest suspicion that the sudden departure of the Honourable Sybil from Ryhall had any connection with the mysterious affair in Charlton Wood. I had made careful inquiry when I had visited old Lady Scarcliff at Grosvenor Street, and young Lady Wydcombe, visits which I had purposely made in town in order to allay any suspicion that I was aware of Tibbie’s place of hiding.

The whole family were, of course, extremely anxious, and I was compelled to play a double game, pretending to make every inquiry in those quarters in London where she was so well known. I had even invented stories as to her having been seen at Oddenino’s at supper, with two other ladies, and accompanied by both ladies on the departure platform at St. Pancras, stories concocted with a dual purpose, to reassure Jack and his mother that she was well, and also to mislead those who were so eagerly in search of her.

As we walked side by side through that busy centre of commercial life, all of which was so strange to her, I expressed regret that she could tell me nothing further.

“If I knew the truth,” I said, “it would enable me to steer clear of pitfalls, and render your life happier and brighter.”

“You are posing as my husband,” she said, looking straight into my face with those wonderful eyes of hers. “Your self-sacrifice is surely great, Wilfrid, for one who entertains no affection. When a man loves he will do anything—he will ruin himself for the sake of a woman, as so many do. But when love is absent it is all so different.”

And she sighed and turned her head away. She was a neat, demure little figure in her cheap black dress, her small toque, and her black cotton gloves, with the false badge of matrimony underneath.

“I cannot for the life of me imagine what safeguard I am to you—pretending to be your husband.”

“Ah?” she said. “You will know everything some day—some day you will realise my awful peril,” and her mouth closed tightly as tears welled in her eyes. Did she refer to the crime in Charlton Wood? That afternoon we engaged apartments in what seemed to be a pleasant little house in Roundhay Road, kept by an honest old Yorkshire woman, who spoke broadly and welcomed us warmly. Therefore Tibbie obtained her trunk from the cloak-room, and took up her abode there, while I explained my enforced absence from my wife, saying that I was compelled to go to Bradford. Instead of that, however, I returned to my quarters in Commercial Street, and met her in Kirkgate at eleven o’clock next morning.

Ours was a strange, adventurous life in the days that followed, and were it not for the veil of mystery upon everything, and the grave suspicion which I still entertained of my dainty little companion, it would have all been very pleasant.

In order to kill time, as well as to avoid being met in Leeds together by our landlady, we visited the various outlying places of interest, Kirkstall with its ruined abbey and its umbrageous landscapes, the old church of Adel with the pretty glen, *par excellence* a walk for lovers, Cookridge Hall, Chapeltown, the village on the Great North Road where one obtains such magnificent views, and lastly the splendid old mansion of Temple Newsham, where walking in the park one sunny, afternoon Tibbie halted, and looking away to the distant Tudor mansion, said,—

“How strange life is, Wilfrid. Only two years ago I was staying here with Cynthia, and now you and I come here as working-class holiday makers. Ah!” she sighed, bitterly, “I was happy then, before—” and she did not conclude her sentence.

“Before what?” I asked, standing at her side beneath the great old elm with the sheep grazing quietly around.

“Before evil fell upon me,” she said, hoarsely, with poignant bitterness.

We remained in Leeds a week, and although I had given Budd my address at the post-office I received no word from him concerning Eric.

Day by day I watched the columns of the *Telegraph* until one morning there came an answer to Tibbie’s cipher advertisement, a reply which I read as,—

“To S.—You have been betrayed! Exercise caution, and escape at once, the instant you see this.—Your Friend.”

I lost no time in seeking her, and with affected carelessness handed her the paper, making a casual remark upon the news of the day. I watched her, however, and saw that she at once turned to the column which held the greatest interest for her.

Her eyes fell upon the reply to her secret message. In a few moments she had deciphered it, and sat with the journal still in her hand, staring straight before her.

“Wilfrid!” she exclaimed, in a low, strained voice when she at length found tongue, “I must leave here at once. Every moment’s delay increases my peril. I must escape.”

“Why?”

But again she refused any explanation, merely saying that her departure from Leeds was imperative, and expressing despair that her enemies would never relinquish their hot pursuit. They were hounding her down, she said in despair, and they must sooner or later triumph over her.

“No,” I exclaimed. “Hope on, Tibbie. You must escape—you will escape. They shall never harm you as long as I have strength to be your protector.”

“Ah!” she cried. “How can I thank you, Wilfrid. To you I owe my very life. Without you I should have ended it all long ago.”

“Never mind that now,” I urged. “You must escape. Where shall you go?”

“Anywhere. It is just the same to me,” was her answer.

“Then I suggest you take the midday train up to Newcastle. There’s a quiet hotel where you may live comfortably and unnoticed, the Douglas, in Grainger Street West. Remain there a few days, and then move on across to Carlisle.”

“I know Carlisle,” she said. “I’ve broken the journey there often when going to Scotland.”

“But you are not known there?”

“Only at the County Hotel. I can go somewhere else, of course. But are you not coming?” she asked, quickly. “Remember my whole future depends upon you passing yourself off as my husband, William Morton.”

“For the next few days I think it would be as well for us to remain apart,” I replied, for truth to tell I had suddenly formed a plan, and was now anxious to make a flying visit up to London in order to put it into execution.

Her face fell.

“But you will return to me?” she asked, very anxiously.

“Yes—I will meet you in Carlisle in a week’s time. Go to Newcastle for four days, and thence to Carlisle. Indeed, change your address constantly. In Newcastle assume another name, and in Carlisle another. Do not go in the name of Morton again until we meet. I shall write to you at the post-office in Carlisle. To-day is Tuesday. Next Tuesday you shall hear from me.”

“Why do you leave me alone?” she pouted. “How can I spend a whole week wandering about without a companion?”

“Don’t you see, Tibbie, that it is very necessary that I should show up to your mother and Jack in order to still pretend to make an effort to find traces of you?” I asked.

“Ah! yes,” she sighed. “I suppose you are right. You do all you can in my interests, so I ought not to complain.”

“I am glad you are convinced that my return to London is with the object of averting suspicion,” I said. “Go up to Newcastle and escape these enemies of yours—whoever they are. Travel constantly if possible. You have money. If not I can give you some.”

“Thanks—I have plenty,” was her reply; and then she reluctantly commenced packing her trunk preparatory to her hurried departure.

And at noon we had grasped hands on the platform and I had seen her into a third-class compartment of the express bound for Newcastle.

“*Au revoir*,” she said, bending to me from the carriage window. “Remember, next Tuesday in Carlisle. You are my friend—promise you will not desert me.”

“Next Tuesday,” I repeated, lifting my cloth cap. “I promise. Till then, adieu.”

And she smiled sadly as the express glided out of the station.

Half an hour later I was on my way to London again, and a little after five o’clock entered the offices of the *Daily Telegraph* and handed in a cipher advertisement, which read,—

“To Nello.—Meet me outside Baker Street Station to-night at eight. Very urgent. Nothing to fear.—S.”

I was convinced that the mysterious Nello lived in London, and therefore would see the paper next morning. I was determined to ascertain who it was in whom Tibbie placed such implicit trust.

I feared to approach Bolton Street; therefore I took a room at the Caledonian Hotel on Adelphi Terrace and sent a note to Budd to come and see me.

In an hour my man stood before me, telling me of the eager inquiries made for me by Mr Ellice Winsloe, and the message he had left, asking me to call and see him as soon as ever I returned.

The scoundrel never believed that I would return. He expected that my body was far out to sea by this time, just as other bodies had been despatched from that house of mystery.

Budd brought me some clean linen and my letters, but I still retained my guise as a working-man, for I had yet a very difficult and delicate task before me, namely, the watching of the man whom Tibbie addressed as Nello.

At noon next day I received a telegram from the woman upon whom rested the dark shadow of a secret crime, telling me of her safe arrival in Newcastle, and reminding me of my promise to return. Then I went forth and lounged about the Burlington in the hope of catching a glimpse of the man who was her enemy as well as mine.

He generally strolled through the Arcade about five o'clock, for he went daily to old General Taylor, in the Albany. I knew his haunts well, therefore, keeping away from his path, I watched until I saw him pass in deep conversation with a man of his own age, whose sharp, clean-shaved face gave me the impression that he was a barrister. Winsloe looked more refined, more fashionably dressed, with his frock coat cleanly brushed and his glossy silk hat apparently only that moment out of the ironer's hands.

I pretended to be deeply interested in a hosier's window as he passed. But even had we met face to face I doubt if he would have recognised me in the disguise of a working-man.

His face was harder and more evil-looking and his shifty eyes were everywhere. From the way the pair were talking, I could not resist the conviction that the clean-shaven fellow was one of his associates or accomplices.

To that elegant man who passed as a gentleman, and was invited to half the best houses in London, I owed all my present distress and anxiety, while at the same time he was Sybil's enemy, the man who held her future in his merciless hands.

I watched him out of sight, and then turning upon my heel went back citywards.

That night, just before eight, I strolled along the Marylebone Road, and slowly passed Baker Street Station and along by Madame Tussaud's, without, however, seeing traces of anyone. A couple of newsboys were idling on the kerb gossiping, but all else was bustle, and there were no lingerers.

I could not well remain there fearing lest Winsloe or any of his associates who knew me might recognise me. Therefore I was compelled to stroll up and down on the opposite side of the way, my eyes eager to discern any man who halted there in expectation.

One man dressed like a City clerk came to a sudden standstill just after eight, looked at his watch and peered inside the station. But I was disappointed, for a few moments later a young woman, in brown, probably his sweetheart, met him, and they both walked away in company. Again a second man emerged from the station and stood for a long time in indecision. He, too, was keeping an appointment, for he was joined presently by a much older man, and they went into a neighbouring saloon-bar.

Half-past eight struck; even nine o'clock. But the appointment was not kept. Perhaps the mysterious Nello had not seen the message?

I was beginning to fear that such was the case, or that my ruse had failed, when a dark-eyed rather handsome young girl, dressed plainly, like a shop assistant, alighted from a hansom about a hundred yards from the station, paid the driver, and hurriedly approached the spot where I stood.

She took no notice of my presence, but crossing the roadway entered the station and searched eagerly everywhere as though she were late for her appointment.

She came forth again upon the pavement, looked up and down, and then strolled patiently along the kerb.

She never gave me a single glance. This fact I noted, causing me to wonder if she were not waiting for a woman.

Was she awaiting Sybil? Could she be a messenger from the mysterious Nello, in whom my dainty little friend seemed to place such implicit trust?

I crossed the road and idled past her in order to get a good look at her face.

Then I sauntered on, wondering and perplexed.

Chapter Twenty.

Contains Another Surprise.

For some twenty minutes or so I watched her, undecided whether she were actually the representative of the mysterious Nello, or whether she was merely a shop-girl in the vicinity who expected to meet a friend.

Time after time, although she was ignorant of the constant observation I kept upon her, I managed to get close sight of her, and after a time began to doubt whether she really was a shop assistant. Her black coat and skirt was of some cheap but effective material, and the boa about her neck was of the type usually worn by the employees of Westbourne Grove; yet once as she passed, my eyes caught a gleam beneath the sleeve of her coat, and I saw that she wore, only half-concealed, one of those curious New Zealand bracelets of pale green stone which are so shaped upon the wrist that they can never be removed. Solid and circular, it was a strange, almost barbarous-looking ornament and yet very striking, for in one part was a small band of gold, wherein was set a single diamond, the gleam of which had attracted my attention.

Now if she were a shop assistant, I argued, she could not sell ribbons and laces with such an ornament upon her wrist. No employer would allow such personal adornment. And as she could not remove it there was doubt that she really was what she appeared to be.

It commenced to rain and she put up her umbrella. It was old, and in it were several slits.

I was in half a mind to raise my hat, wish her good-evening, and inquire if she were there in response to the advertisement addressed to Nello, yet on reflection I saw that such a movement would be very indiscreet, and that if she were really there as Nello’s representative then I could gain more by watching her. So, unnoticed, I stood within the station, my back turned to her, and my head buried in an evening paper. To her I was, I suppose, only an ordinary working-man, and if I had approached her she would have at once snubbed me.

Fortunately I so constantly changed my position that she never gave me a look, and was entirely unconscious of being watched. Greater part of the time I stood apart some distance, on the opposite side of the street at the corner of York Place.

From the eager way in which she watched every female approaching, I knew that she was waiting for a woman.

At last she became convinced that her vigil was in vain. The rain had ceased, she closed her umbrella and entered an omnibus which had pulled up before the station, and an instant afterwards moved on towards the Edgware Road.

It passed close to where I was standing on the kerb, and a few moments afterwards I was in a hansom following it at a respectable distance, my head again hidden in a newspaper. Down Edgware Road, past the Marble Arch and along Park Lane we went to Victoria Station, where the dark-eyed girl alighted, and entering the Chatham and Dover terminus passed through the barrier with the return half of a first-class ticket.

Without reflection I went to the booking-office, obtained a third for Loughborough Junction, a station through which most trains passed, and five minutes later was seated in a compartment near her. If she had really responded to my invitation, then it was my duty to discover her destination and learn something concerning her.

For half an hour I sat in the train looking out at every stopping-place, but seeing nothing of her.

At last, at a half-lit suburban station she descended and hurried out. I followed quickly, handing the collector a two-shilling piece as excess fare.

I glanced at the name on the station lamp. It was Lordship Lane.

Outside was the foot of Sydenham Hill.

I allowed her to get on well in front and then followed her along the silent ill-lit suburban road for half a mile up the steep hill, flanked on either side by large detached houses. For some reason best known to herself she had not gone on to the next station, Upper Sydenham. Perhaps she was

too well known there.

Half-way up the hill I walked more quickly and gained upon her, so that I saw into which gateway she went.

She disappeared through the gate of the house called Keymer—the house of the mysterious John Parham!

Then I was, of course, convinced that she had kept the appointment on behalf of the unknown Nello.

I had not called upon Mrs Parham since that tragic incident which I had witnessed from the pavement, and longed now to follow the dark-eyed girl and learn the reason of her presence at Baker Street. But a visit at that hour was entirely out of the question. Besides, my disguise as a working-man would arouse suspicion.

Therefore I was compelled to retrace my steps, return to my hotel in Adelphi Terrace, and send a line to Budd, ordering him to bring me a hat and a decent suit of clothes in a kitbag.

Eric's complete silence now alarmed me. How did Tibbie know that he was in Paris? Surely she possessed some means of communication with certain persons of which I was in entire ignorance. There might be other advertisements in other journals which I had not seen—by pre-arrangement in some obscure country journal possibly.

Jack and Lord Wydcombe were now anxious regarding the absence of both of us from London, and must, of course, regard our silence as curious. Yet so far as I could gather they never for one moment connected my absence with Tibbie's disappearance. Tibbie they regarded as erratic and utterly uncontrollable, just as she had ever been from the time she was expelled from her school at Versailles for defying the principal, and causing the other pupils to revolt over some fancied grievance.

Next day about twelve, risking recognition by any person who might know me, I assumed my frock coat, silk hat and gloves and visited Keymer.

Mrs Parham was in the drawing-room, arranging some flowers in a vase,

and turned to me quickly when I was announced.

“Forgive me for calling, madam, but you will, of course, recollect me,” I said. “I was in this neighbourhood and thought I would pay my respects and ascertain how you were.”

“Ah! of course,” she exclaimed. “I remember you perfectly—on that night—that night when they came here,” she faltered, rather tamely, I thought, and she motioned me to a chair and seated herself.

“The poor girl has, of course, been buried,” I said. “I saw accounts of the inquest in the papers.”

“Yes. They brought in a verdict of murder, but up to the present the police have discovered nothing, it appears. Ah!” she sighed. “They are so very slow. It’s monstrous that such a thing could happen here, in the centre of a populated district. Out in the lonely country it would be quite another thing. I should have left the house at once, only I feared that my husband would be annoyed. He is abroad, you know.”

“And have you had no word from him?”

“Not a line. I’m expecting a letter from India by every mail. He is in India, I know, as he told one of his City friends that he was going. He sailed on the *Caledonia* from Marseilles nearly five weeks ago. He may have written me from Paris and the letter miscarried. That’s the only explanation I can think of.”

I recollected that I had never given her a card, therefore she very fortunately did not know my name, and I did not intend that she should, if concealment were at all possible.

There was a mystery about that house and its occupants which caused me to act with circumspection.

I looked around the room. Nothing had been altered save that the couch upon which they had laid the dead girl was now gone, and the corner of the carpet which had been torn up had been re-nailed down. The piano at which my hostess had sat when attacked was still in its place, and the table whereon had stood the photograph which I had stolen still

contained that same silver and *bric-à-brac*.

As Mrs Parham was speaking the door suddenly opened, and the dark-eyed young girl whom I had watched on the previous night came gaily into the room. The instant I saw her I recognised that she was a lady. In a clean, fresh cotton blouse and neat tailor-made skirt she presented a much smarter appearance them in that cheap black coat and skirt as she stood in the muddy roadway. The green stone bracelet was still upon her wrist, the one object which alone had showed me that she was no shop assistant.

“This is Miss O’Hara,” my hostess exclaimed, introducing us; “she has kindly come to stay with me until my husband’s return.”

And as we bowed to each other I saw that the newcomer had no previous knowledge of me.

“I was present at the unfortunate affair,” I said. “Mrs Parham must have been very upset by it.”

“She was,” declared the girl, in a quiet, refined voice. “But she’s getting over it now. The worst shock was the maid’s death. It was a most dastardly piece of business, and moreover, no one knows with what motive it was done.”

“To get possession of something which Mr Parham had concealed here,” I said.

“That may be, but as far as Mrs Parham is aware they took nothing beyond a few of her husband’s private papers.”

“Nothing except a photograph that stood on the table over there,” remarked my hostess.

“A photograph!” I exclaimed, in pretended surprise. “Of whom?”

“Of a friend,” was the vague response, and I saw that the two women looked at each other meaningly.

They intended to keep the identity of the original of the stolen portrait a

secret. Yet they were in utter ignorance that it was in my possession.

Why had this Miss O'Hara gone to meet Sybil in Nello's place? I wondered.

I chatted with them both for a long time, but without being able to discover any additional fact. They were both clever women, and knew how to hold their tongues.

Presently Mrs Parham said suddenly,—

"I'm sure my husband will feel very indebted to you when he knows all the facts. I have not the pleasure of your name."

"Morton," I said, "William Morton," and feeling in my pocket expressed regret that I had forgotten my card-case.

A quarter of an hour later I took my leave and was walking down Sydenham Hill when I suddenly encountered my friend the police inspector of the night of the strange affair at Keymer.

He glanced at me, and our recognition was mutual.

Then when he had greeted me he turned on his heel and walked in my direction. After some conversation regarding the mysterious attempt and its fatal termination, he said in a hard voice,—

"Our people are rather surprised at your attitude, you know."

"My attitude! What do you mean?" I exclaimed, looking at him in surprise.

"Well. You might have given information when you knew that we wanted to question that man Parham."

"Information of what?"

"Of his whereabouts. You were seen one evening not long ago talking to him."

"Where?"

“In the entrance to the Empire,” replied the inspector. “One of our plain-clothes men saw you with Parham and another man. But the fellow managed to get away, as he always does.”

I stood aghast.

“Was he a fair bald-headed man?”

“Of course.”

I was silent. The truth was plain, the revelation a staggering one. Winsloe had introduced his accomplice, John Parham, to me as the traveller and engineer named Humphreys!

It was in John Parham’s house that the dastardly attempt had been made upon my life—in his house that other persons had met with mysterious and untimely ends.

Chapter Twenty One.

What Occurred in Dean’s Yard, Westminster.

That same evening, attired in my working clothes, I watched Winsloe’s chambers in King Street at the hour when I knew his habit was to return to dress for dinner.

From five o’clock till half-past seven I lingered in the vicinity; then returning to my hotel in the Adelphi I there met Budd, whom I sent round to the man’s chambers to inquire when he would be in.

Half an hour later my valet returned with the information that Mr Winsloe was out of town, and was not expected back for several days. He had gone to the north, his man believed, but he had no instructions to forward letters.

Gone north! Had he discovered Tibbie’s whereabouts and gone after her?

Mine was a tantalising position, unable to return to my own rooms for fear that Winsloe and Parham should discover that I was still alive. They believed me to be dead—that I had “gone home,” as “White Feather” reported.

That night I spent several hours wandering through those streets behind Regent Street, trying to recognise the house with the fatal stairs. All, however, was to no purpose. I had, I think, mistaken the direction which we had taken. Tired and worn out, I ate supper about ten o’clock in a small and rather uncleanly little foreign restaurant in Dean Street, and then returned to the Adelphi, where I sat a long time in my room overlooking the Embankment and the Thames, lost in the mazes of mystery that now presented themselves.

Where was Eric Domville? Where was Ellice Winsloe? Where was John Parham, *alias* Humphreys?

Tibbie evidently knew a great deal more than she would admit. She had

told me that my friend was in Paris. How could she know if she held no communication with anyone?

No—the more I reflected the more evident did it become that she was playing a double game.

As I sat at the window with the dark deserted gardens below me, the row of gas-lamps and the wide river before me, I tried to analyse my real feelings towards the dainty little love of my youth.

She was a woman guilty of the terrible crime of murder, and yet I had promised to shield her because she had declared that her enemies intended to crush her. Had I really acted rightly? I asked myself. Truly, I was endeavouring to defeat the ends of justice. Nevertheless, I recollected her wild earnest appeal to me, how she had fallen upon her knees and implored my help and protection. I remembered, too, that in her desperation she would have taken her own life rather than face her enemies.

What did it all mean?

So extraordinary had been the sequence of amazing events that my mind failed to grasp the true significance of all the facts.

Of one truth, however, I was well aware, namely, that the dull life of workaday Camberwell had worked a wonderful change in my little friend. She was more sedate, more composed, more womanly, while her calmness accentuated her sweetness of manner. Yet why did she wish to pose as a married woman? What did she fear beyond the exposure of her crime?

She was fascinating, I own that. But upon her beauty and grace was resting that dark, gruesome shadow, the shadow of the sword of retribution, which hung over her, and from which she, alas! would never escape.

What did the family think of her prolonged absence? What did the police think?

I knew well that both old Lady Scarcliff and Jack were leaving no stone

unturned to try to discover her, while Wydcombe had left word with Budd that as soon as ever I returned he wished to see me. I would dearly have liked to have gone round to Curzon Street, but by doing so, I saw that Jack would know I had been there, and he might mention my visit to Winsloe, who, without doubt, was still his friend.

My cipher advertisement had been so successful that, after due consideration, I resolved to try and draw “White Feather,” and ascertain the identity of that mysterious person.

Therefore I sat at the table, and after half an hour had reduced to the cipher the following announcement,—

“To White Feather.—Must see you. Very urgent. Meet me to-night at entrance to Dean’s Yard, Westminster, at nine, without fail.—S.”

If “White Feather” was in London he or she would certainly keep the appointment with Sybil. My only fear was that she might see the paper up in Newcastle, and detect the forgery.

Before midnight I handed in the advertisement at the newspaper office in Fleet Street, and next morning had the satisfaction of seeing it in print.

The day I spent in comparative idleness. Budd, to whom I explained my strange conduct by saying that I was still engaged in watching someone, called with my letters and executed several commissions for me. I wrote to “Mrs William Morton” at the post-office at Carlisle, and spent the afternoon reading in the hotel. Budd had instructions to let me know immediately anything was heard of Eric, and was now acting as my secret agent, eager to serve me in every particular.

It was a wet, unpleasant night, as, a little before nine, I alighted from an omnibus in Victoria Street, and passing up Great Smith Street, approached Dean’s Yard from the Great College Street side, the opposite entrance to the spot where the appointment was to be kept.

Dean’s Yard is a quiet square of ancient smoke-blackened houses, a cloister of the abbey in the old days, quiet and secluded even in these modern go-ahead times. In all Westminster there is no quieter, old-world spot, frequented in the daytime only by the few persons who use it as a

short cut to Tufton Street and Horseferry Road, and at night quiet and deserted.

Entering the small secluded square from the opposite side, I slipped along half-way on the south side to a position where I could have a good view of the great arched gate communicating with Victoria Street, and there found a deep, dark doorway which afforded me admirable concealment.

I stood and waited. Scarcely had I settled myself there when the chimes of Big Ben rang out the hour, and then I strained my eyes towards the great ill-lit Gothic gateway.

Not a soul was in the place, not even a policeman. Presently a poor woman with a shawl over her head hurried past in the falling rain, and afterwards came the postman, who, very fortunately, had no letters for the door where I stood concealed in the shadow. The place seemed dark, mysterious, almost ghostly, in the dead silence of the night.

The quarter chimed, but no person lingered at the gateway. Perhaps the advertisement had not been seen; or, more likely, “White Feather” was absent from London.

At last, however, I heard the rattle of a four-wheeled cab outside the gateway. I saw it stop, and a man alighted. Then the vehicle moved on slowly, and again stopped, as though awaiting him. A dark figure in black overcoat and low felt hat loomed up in the darkness of the gateway, and entering the Yard glanced eagerly around.

Next moment another person, a rather taller man, entered and passed him by, but without speaking. Indeed, they passed as strangers, the second man strolling slowly along the pavement in the direction of where I was in hiding. He passed by me, and as the street lamp shone upon his face I saw that he was young and his features were aquiline, dark and evil-looking. I had never to my knowledge seen him before. He seemed well-dressed, for his overcoat did not conceal the fact that he was wearing evening clothes. His collar was turned up, but he went on heedless of the rain, his sharp eyes searching everywhere. My hiding-place was a most excellent one, however, and he failed to detect my

presence.

A few minutes later a third man entered the Yard, a youngish man with the air of the Cockney from the East End. He wore a hard hat of the usual costermonger type, a red woollen comforter about his neck, and his trousers were bell-bottomed and adorned with pearl buttons. He, however, gave no sign to either of the other two, although it was apparent that they were acquainted, for sorely three men could not be keeping appointments at that unfrequented spot at the same moment.

The first comer still stood in the gateway, but too far away to allow me to clearly distinguish his features. He stood back in the shadow, his face turned expectantly out to the open roadway, where ever and anon I saw the lights of cabs passing and re-passing. Meanwhile, the two men in the quiet little square had walked to the opposite gateway, and there halted, though at a respectable distance from each other.

The man who had arrived in a cab stood for a long time in patience, the other two giving no sign whatever of their presence. At first I was half inclined to think that the trio were strangers to each other, but on watching their movements I saw that something was premeditated—but what it was I could not gather.

While the man dressed as a costermonger—or perhaps he was a real costermonger—remained near the exit to the Yard ready to give warning of anyone approaching, the man in evening clothes slowly re-passed me, while at the same time the watcher at the gate came forward in his direction.

When not far from me he halted and struck a vesta in order to light a cigarette. The fickle flame betrayed his countenance.

It was the man John Parham, the person believed by his wife to be in India.

What was contemplated? The four-wheeled cab was still in waiting in the little open space which divides Dean’s Yard from Victoria Street, while the exit to Great College Street was being watched, and the thin-faced man lurked there ready for Sybil’s arrival.

Within myself I smiled to think that all their elaborate arrangements were futile, and wondered if Parham was the man who signed himself “White Feather?” In that fellow’s house were the fatal stairs, therefore if I followed him I should now be enabled to fix the actual place to which I had, on that never-to-be-forgotten night, been enticed.

While the costermonger remained on vigil, Parham and his companion passed and re-passed, but still without acknowledging each other.

Once the costermonger suddenly began to whistle a popular music-hall air, and turning I saw that it was a preconcerted signal. A man had entered the Yard from Great College Street and was crossing to where Parham was standing.

For fully three-quarters of an hour they waited patiently until ten o’clock struck. Then Parham approached his companion, and they stood in earnest conversation.

Almost at the same moment a female figure in deep black came swiftly through the gateway into the Yard, causing both to start quickly and draw back. Next instant, however, Parham started off briskly, walking past me to where the costermonger was standing, while his thin-faced accomplice slipped past the newcomer and disappeared into Victoria Street.

It was evident that the woman’s appearance had instantly upset all their calculations.

The newcomer stopped, glanced around and strained her eyes into the darkness. She wore a close black hat, a long mackintosh, and carried an umbrella, yet so swiftly had Parham disappeared that she had not noticed his presence in the Yard, while the other man had so cleverly slipped past her and out through the gateway that she had not seen his face.

For a few moments she stood expectant. I could see that she had hurried, in fear of being too late.

Then, as she approached me, I discerned that she was the girl O’Hara.

And of her, Parham and his lurking accomplices were evidently in fear, as they separated and disappeared.

I watched her standing there and wondered why she had come. Was it in order to save Sybil from some plot that had been prepared for her?

Was it their intention to take her to that dark, mysterious house with the fatal stairs?

I felt convinced that it was. The truth was plain. There was a plot against Sybil. The cab had been in waiting there to convey the victim to her grave!

Chapter Twenty Two.

Is an Echo from Charlton Wood.

My bitterest regret was that I had not been able to follow Parham and trace him to the house of doom, but at the moment of his disappearance I had been unable to emerge from my hiding-place, otherwise the girl O'Hara would have seen me. Perhaps, indeed, she might have recognised me. So, by sheer force of adverse circumstances, I was compelled to remain there and see the trio escape under my very nose.

I had learnt one important fact, however, namely, that a deep conspiracy was afoot against Sybil.

It was beyond comprehension how Tibbie, daughter of the noble and patrician house of Scarcliff, could be so intimately associated with what appealed to me to be a daring gang of malefactors. The treatment I had received at their hands showed me their utter unscrupulousness. I wondered whether what the police suspected was really true, that others had lost their lives in that house wherein I had so nearly lost mine. What was the story of Tibbie's association with them—a romance no doubt, that had had its tragic ending in the death of the unknown in Charlton Wood.

To me, it seemed plain that he was a member of the gang, for had he not their secret cipher upon him, and did not both Winsloe and Parham possess his photograph?

I recollected the receipt for a registered letter which I had found among the letters in the dead man's pocket, and next morning told Budd to go and unlock the drawer in my writing-table and bring it to me. He did so, and I saw that the receipt was for a letter handed in at the post-office at Blandford in Dorset, addressed to: "Charles Denton, 16b Bolton Road, Pendleton, Manchester."

I turned over the receipt in my hand, wondering whether the slip of paper would reveal anything to me. Then, after some reflection, I resolved to break my journey in Manchester on my return to Tibbie in Carlisle, and

ascertain who was this man to whom the dead unknown had sent a letter registered.

Next afternoon I passed through Salford in a tram-car, along by Peel Park, and up the Broad Street to Pendleton, alighting at the junction of those two thoroughfares, the one leading to aristocratic Eccles and Patricroft, and the other out to bustling Bolton.

The Bolton road is one over which much heavy traffic passes, and is lined with small houses, a working-class district, for there are many mills and factories in the vicinity. I found the house of which I was in search, a small, rather clean-looking place, and as I passed a homely-looking woman was taking in the milk from the milkman.

Without hesitation I stopped, and addressing her, exclaimed,—

“Excuse me, mum, but do you happen to know a Mr Charles Denton?”

The woman scanned me quickly with some suspicion, I thought, but noticing, I supposed, that although a working-man I seemed highly respectable, replied bluntly, in a pronounced Lancashire dialect,—

“Yes, I do. What may you want with him?”

“I want to see him on some important business,” was my vague reply. “Is he at home?”

“No, he ain’t,” was the woman’s response. “Mr Denton lodges with me, but ’e’s up in London just now, and ’e’s been there this four months.”

“In London!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, but I don’t know his address. When he goes away ’e never leaves it. He’s lodged with me this two years, but I don’t think ’e’s been here more than six months altogether the whole time.”

“Then you have a lot of letters for him, I suppose?”

“Yes, quite a lot,” answered the good woman. The letter sent by the dead man might be among them!

“It was about a letter that I wanted to see Mr Denton—about a registered letter. I’ve come from London on purpose.”

“From London!” ejaculated the woman, a stout, good-humoured person.

“Yes. I wonder whether you’d mind me looking at the letters, if it is among them I’d know he had not received it. The fact is,” I added in confidence, “there’s a big lawsuit pending, and if he hasn’t got the letter then the other side can’t take any action against him.”

“Then you’re on his side?” she asked shrewdly.

“Of course I am. I came down to explain matters to him. If I can ascertain that he didn’t get the letter then that’s all I want. I’m a stranger, I know,” I added, “but as it is in Mr Denton’s interest I don’t think you’ll refuse.”

She hesitated, saying she thought she ought to ask her husband when he returned from the mill. But by assuring her of her lodger’s peril, and that I had to catch the six-thirty train back to London, I at last induced her to admit me to the house, and there in the small, clean, front parlour which was given over to her lodger when he was there, she took a quantity of letters from a cupboard and placed them before me.

Among the accumulated correspondence were quite a number of registered letters, and several little packets which most likely contained articles of value.

While I chatted with the woman with affected carelessness, pretending to be on very friendly terms with her lodger, I quickly fixed upon the letter in question, a registered envelope directed in a man’s educated hand, and bearing the Blandford post-mark.

In order, however, to divert her attention, I took up another letter, declaring that to be the important one, and that the fact of his not having received it was sufficient to prevent the action being brought.

“I’m very glad of that,” she declared in satisfaction. “Mr Denton is such a quiet gentleman. When he’s here he hardly ever goes out, but sits here reading and writing all day.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “he’s very studious—always was—but a very excellent friend. One of the very best.”

“So my husband always says. We only wish he was here more.”

“I saw him in London about a month ago,” I remarked, in order to sustain the fiction.

How I longed to open that letter that lay so tantalisingly before me. But what could I do? Such a thing was not to be thought of. Therefore, I had to watch the woman gather the correspondence together and replace them in the cupboard.

I rose and thanked her, saying,—

“I’m delighted to think that Charlie will escape a very disagreeable affair. It’s fortunate he wasn’t here to receive that letter.”

“And I’m glad, too. When he returns I’ll tell him how you came here, and what you said. What name shall I give him?”

“Williams—Harry Williams,” I answered. “He will know.”

Then as I walked round to the window I examined the room quickly, but to my disappointment saw that there were no photographs. He might, I thought, keep the portraits of some of his friends upon the mantelshelf, as so many men do. Was this Denton one of the conspirators, I wondered? His absence without an address for four months caused me to suspect that he was.

Just as I had given her my assumed name, somebody knocked at the door, and she went to open it.

Next instant a thought flashed across to me. Should I take that letter? It was a theft—that I recognised, yet was it not in the interests of justice? By that communication I might be able to establish the dead man’s identity.

There was not a second to lose. I decided at once. I heard the woman open the door and speak to someone, then swift as thought I opened the

cupboard, glanced at the packet of letters, and with quickly-beating heart took the one which bore the Blandford post-mark.

In a moment it was in my pocket. I re-closed the cupboard, and sprang to the opposite side of the room just as the good woman re-entered.

Then, with profuse thanks and leaving kind messages to the man of whom I spoke so familiarly as “Charlie,” I took my leave and hurried along the broad road into Salford, where I jumped upon a tram going to the Exchange.

I was in the train alone, in a third-class compartment, travelling north to Carlisle, before I dared to break open the letter.

When I did so I found within a scribbled note in cipher written on the paper of the Bear Hotel, at Devizes. After some difficulty, with the aid of the key which the writer had evidently used in penning it, I deciphered it as follows:—

“Dear Denton,—I saw you in the smoking-room of the Midland at Bradford, but for reasons which you know, I could not speak. I went out, and on my return you had gone. I searched, but could not find you. I wanted to tell you my opinion about Ellice and his friend. They are not playing a straight game. I know their intentions. They mean to give us away if they can. Sybil fears me, and will pay. I pretend to know a lot. Meet me in Chichester at the Dolphin next Sunday. I shall put up there, because I intend that she shall see me. Come and help me, for I shall have a good thing on, in which you can share. She can always raise money from her sister or her mother, so don’t fail to keep the appointment. Ellice has already touched a good deal of the Scarcliffs’ money from young Jack, and I now mean myself to have a bit. She’ll do anything to avoid scandal. It’s a soft thing—so come.—Yours,—

“R.W.”

The dead man was, as I had suspected, one of the gang, and he was a blackmailer. He had compelled her to meet him and had made demands which she had resisted. Yes—the letter was the letter of a barefaced scoundrel.

I clenched my hands and set my teeth.

Surely I had done right to endeavour to protect Sybil from such a band of ruffians. Once I had pitied the dead man, but now my sympathy was turned to hatred. He had written this letter to his friend Denton, suggesting that the latter should assist him in his nefarious scheme of blackmail.

He confessed that he “pretended” to know a lot. What did he pretend to know, I wondered? Ah! if only Sybil would speak—if only she would reveal to me the truth.

Yet, after all, how could she when that man, the fellow who had written that letter, had fallen by her hand?

The letter at least showed that her enemies had been and were still unscrupulous. Winsloe, even now, was ready to send her to her grave, just as I had been sent—because I had dared to come between the conspirators and their victim. And yet she trusted Nello—whoever the fellow was.

Who was the man Denton, I wondered? A friend of the mysterious “R.W.,” without a doubt, and a malefactor like himself.

I placed my finger within the linen-lined envelope, and to my surprise found a second piece of thin blue paper folded in half. Eagerly I opened it and saw that it was a letter written in plain English, in bad ink, and so faint that with difficulty I read the lines.

It was in the scoundrel’s handwriting—the same calligraphy as that upon the envelope.

I read the lines, and so extraordinary were they that I sat back upon the seat utterly bewildered.

What was written there complicated the affair more than ever. The problem admitted of no solution, for the mystery was by those written lines rendered deeper and more inscrutable than before.

Was Sybil, after all, playing me false?

I held my breath as the grave peril of the situation came vividly home to me.

Yes—I had trusted her; I had believed her.

She had fooled me!

Chapter Twenty Three.

Places Matters in a New Light.

The words upon the second slip of paper were,—

“Ellice believes that Sybil still loves Wilfrid Hughes. This is incorrect. Tell him so. The girl is merely using Hughes for her own purposes. She loves Arthur Rumbold. I have just learnt the truth—something that will astonish you.”

Rumbold! Who was Arthur Rumbold? I had never heard mention of him. This was certainly a new feature of the affair. Sybil had a secret lover of whom I was in ignorance. She was no doubt still in communication with him, and through him had learnt of Eric’s whereabouts and other facts that had surprised me.

I read and re-read the letter, much puzzled. She was only using me for her own purposes—or in plain English she was fooling me!

I was angry with myself for not being more wary.

The train stopped at Preston, and then rushed north again as I sat alone in the corner of the carriage thinking deeply, and wondering who was this man Rumbold.

At Carlisle another surprise was in store for me, for I found a hurried note from Sybil saying that she had unfortunately been recognised by a friend and compelled to leave. She had gone on to Glasgow, and would await me there at the Central Station Hotel. Therefore, by the Scotch express at two o’clock that morning I travelled up to Glasgow, and on arrival found to my chagrin that she had stayed there one night, and again left. There was a note for me, saying that she had gone to Dumfries, but that it would be best for me not to follow.

“Return to Newcastle and await me,” she wrote. “My quick movements are imperative for my own safety. I cannot tell you in a letter what has happened, but will explain all when we meet.”

“By what train did the lady leave?” I inquired of the hall-porter who had handed me the letter.

“The six-twenty last night, sir,” was the man’s answer. “I got her ticket—a first-class one to Fort William.”

“Then she went north—not south,” I exclaimed, surprised.

“Of course.”

Sybil had misled me in her letter by saying that she had gone to Dumfries, when really she had travelled in the opposite direction. She had purposely misled me.

“The lady left hurriedly, it would appear.”

“Yes, sir. About five o’clock a gentleman called to see her, and she met him in the hall. She was very pale, I noticed, as though she was surprised at his visit, or rather upset. But they went out together. She returned an hour later, wrote this letter, which she told me to give to you if you called, and then left for Fort William.”

“And did the man call again?”

“Yes. She said he would, and she told me to tell him that she had gone to Edinburgh. I told him that, and he seemed very surprised, but went away. He was in evening dress, and it seemed as though they had intended dining together. She seemed,” added the man rather sneeringly, “to be more like a lady’s-maid than a lady.”

“But the gentleman, describe him to me.”

“Oh! he was a rather short, podgy man, fair, with a baldish head.”

Was it Parham? the description suited him.

“He gave no card?”

“No. He met the young lady here in the hall. My idea was that his presence was very unwelcome, as she seemed in great fear lest he

should return before she could get away.”

“Has the man left Glasgow?”

“I think so. I saw him on the platform about nine, just before the Edinburgh express left. He’s probably gone on there. He seemed quite a gentleman.”

“They appeared to be friendly?”

“Perfectly. Only she evidently did not expect to meet him. She asked the name of a hotel at Fort William, and I told her to go to the Station.”

“Then she’s there!” I exclaimed quickly.

“Probably. She arrived there this morning.”

I tipped the man, and after idling in Glasgow some hours, left for Fort William, determined to disobey Sybil’s order to go back to Newcastle.

It was a long but picturesque journey. When I arrived I went at once to the hotel to inquire if Mrs Morton were there.

The manageress shook her head, saying,—

“There was a Mrs Morton, a young woman like a lady’s-maid, who arrived here yesterday morning, and left here last evening. A lady was awaiting her—her mistress, I think.”

“What was her name?”

“Mrs Rumbold,” was the answer, after referring to the visitors’ book.

“Rumbold!” The name of the secret lover.

“Was she old or young?”

“Elderly, with grey hair. A rather stiff, formal kind of person.”

“Where have they gone?”

“I heard Mrs Rumbold say that she wanted to go to Oban. So perhaps they’ve gone there.”

There was a boat down to Oban in three hours’ time, therefore I took it, passed down the beautiful Loch and by the island of Lismore, places too well known to the traveller in Scotland to need any description, and that same evening found myself in Oban, the Charing Cross of the Highlands. I had been there several times before, and always stayed at the Great Western. Therefore I took the hotel omnibus, and on alighting asked if a Mrs Rumbold was staying there.

The reply was a negative one, therefore I went round to several other hotels, finding at last that she and “her maid” had taken a room at the Alexandra that morning, but had suddenly changed their plans, and had left at two o’clock by train for the south, but whether for Glasgow or Edinburgh was not known.

I therefore lost track of them. Sybil had apparently successfully escaped from her male visitor at Glasgow, while at the same time Mrs Rumbold—probably the mother of the man she loved in secret—had awaited her up at Fort William.

For what reason? Why was she now masquerading as maid of the mother of her lover?

Again, if her visitor in Glasgow was really Parham, he must have very quickly obtained knowledge of her whereabouts, for only a few days before I had watched him arrange that ingenious plot against her in Dean’s Yard—a plot which would have no doubt been carried into execution if Sybil had been present.

I hesitated how to act.

If they had gone south, it was useless for me to remain in Oban. Her appointment with me was in Newcastle, and it seemed certain that she would sooner or later seek me there. But at that moment my curiosity was aroused regarding this Mrs Rumbold, as to who and what she was, and further, as to the identity of Arthur, about whom the dead man had known so much.

I left Oban and went back to Glasgow. My friend, the hall-porter at the Central Station, was talkative, but had not seen the lady again. It struck me that as the bald-headed man had met her in Glasgow, and as she had left a message for him that she had gone to Edinburgh, she would naturally avoid both places, or at any rate not halt there.

Had she gone on to Dumfries? She had left a message for me that she was there. Would she now go there in order to see if I were awaiting her instead of at Newcastle?

Dumfries, the town of Burns, was on my way down to Carlisle, therefore I resolved to make a halt there for an hour or two to inquire.

I remained the night in Glasgow, for I was fagged out by so much travelling, and next day, just before twelve, I alighted at Dumfries. I had never been there before, but outside the station I saw the Railway Hotel, and entering, asked whether Mrs Rumbold was staying there.

Yes, she was. Did I wish to see her? asked the lady clerk in the bureau.

I replied in the affirmative, and sent her my name, “Mr Morton,” written on a slip of paper.

The waiter returned with a curious look upon his face. I saw in an instant that something had occurred and was not surprised when he said,—

“Mrs Rumbold has a bad headache, sir, and would be glad if you’d call again about five or six. The chambermaid says she’s lying down.”

“Is there another person with her?” I inquired. “Her own maid, I mean.”

“No, sir. She’s alone.”

“Are you quite sure of that?”

“Quite. I took her name when she arrived in the hotel. She has no maid.”

“And no lady friend?”

“No. She’s entirely alone.”

That surprised me. Had Sybil parted from her and gone straight on to Newcastle in order to find me? There was nothing to be done but to wait till half-past five, and call again on Mrs Rumbold. I therefore took a room at the hotel, and lunched in the coffee-room.

The woman's excuse made me suspicious that she wished to avoid meeting me, and that when I returned at six I should find her gone.

So I passed the time in writing letters, and remained in patience until half-past five, when I sent up again to know if she would receive me. The answer came back that she was still too unwell, and I sent word to her that I could wait, as I wished to see her upon a very important matter.

My determination showed her that I did not intend that she should escape; therefore, just before the dinner gong rang the waiter came to me and said that the lady was in the small drawing-room upstairs and would see me.

I ascended the stairs wondering what would be the outcome of my interview. I wanted to ascertain who the woman was and the nature of the relations between her and Sybil.

When I entered the room a rather elderly lady with whitish hair severely brushed back and attired in deep black rose to meet me, bowing stiffly and saying—

"I have not the honour of your acquaintance, Mr Morton, and am rather curious to know what you want with me."

"Well, madam," I replied, "the fact is I want to ask you a question. The Honourable Sybil Burnet has been travelling with you dressed as a lady's-maid, and I am here to learn where she has now gone."

The woman started in surprise, and glared at me. She probably, from my disguise as a working-man, put me down as a detective.

"And my reply to you, sir, is that Miss Sybil's destination is her own affair. We parted, and she has gone south. That is all I know."

"But you also know the reason why she is masquerading as a maid; why

at Fort William and at Oban you made people believe she was your maid. You had a motive, and I think you may as well admit it."

"I do not see your right to question me about my private affairs!" she exclaimed angrily. "This is monstrous!"

"I have no desire to pry into your affairs, madam," I answered, quite coolly. "The Honourable Sybil is a friend of mine, and I am anxious to know her whereabouts," I said.

"But I cannot tell you what I don't know myself. She went on to Carlisle—that's all I know."

"She parted from you suddenly. Why?" I asked. "Shall I tell you? Because she is in fear of being followed," I exclaimed, and, smiling, added, "I think, madam, that I hold greater knowledge of the family than perhaps even you do yourself. I have known the Scarcliffs all my life. Old Lady Scarcliff is greatly upset regarding Sybil's protracted absence. They are beginning to think that something has happened to her. I can now tell her that she has been with you, masquerading as your maid, and that you refuse all information concerning her. You know, I daresay, that the police are actively trying to find her on the application of her brother, Lord Scarcliff?"

My threat caused her some consternation. I could see that from the way she fumed and fidgeted.

"To tell Lady Scarcliff such a thing would only be to throw a blame upon myself of which I am entirely innocent," she protested. "I assure you that if I knew where she had gone, I would tell you."

"No, pardon me, madam. You would not. You believe that I'm a detective."

"Your actions certainly betray you," she exclaimed resentfully. "You've been watching us closely—for what reason?"

"Well," I replied slowly. "The fact is, I am fully aware of the secret love existing between Sybil Burnet and Arthur Rumbold."

"Sybil and Arthur?" she cried, turning pale and looking me straight in the

face. “What do you mean? Arthur—my boy, Arthur!”

I nodded in the affirmative.

“Who are you?” she exclaimed, starting up breathlessly from her chair. She was in fear of me, I saw. “Who are you that you should know this?” she gasped.

“William Morton,” was my cool reply. “I thought I sent my name up to you this morning!”

Chapter Twenty Four.

Complications and Confessions.

Next morning, after a night journey, I called at the Douglas Hotel, in Newcastle, and was informed that Mrs Morton had arrived on the previous evening.

At last I had run her to earth.

She sent word that she would see me in half an hour, therefore I idled along Grainger Street West, killing time until she made her appearance. She approached me in the hall of the hotel smiling merrily and putting out her hand in welcome. Her black dress seemed slightly the worse for wear owing to her constant travelling, yet she was as neat and dainty as ever, a woman whose striking beauty caused every head to be turned as she passed.

We went out, turning to walk towards Blackett Street, and then amid the bustle of the traffic began to talk. She asked me when I had arrived, and how I had fared in London.

I told her nothing of the success of my advertisements, or the discovery of the plot so ingeniously formed against her, and allowed her to believe that I had only just arrived from London. I was waiting to see whether she would explain her journey to Scotland, and her companionship with Mrs Rumbold.

But she said nothing. We walked on together through Albion Place, and presently found ourselves in Leazes Park, that pretty promenade, gay in summer, but somewhat cheerless on that grey wintry morning.

“You were recognised in Carlisle,” I exclaimed after we had been chatting some time. “Tell me about it. I was surprised to get your note, and I confess I was also somewhat alarmed. Was the person who recognised you an enemy or a friend?”

“A friend,” was her prompt reply. “But his very friendliness would, I knew,

be fatal to my interests, so I had to fly. He recognised me, even in this dress, stopped me in the street, raised his hat and spoke. But I discerned his intention, therefore I passed on with affected indignation and without answering. Had I opened my mouth my voice might have betrayed me. I went on to Glasgow."

"And there? What happened?"

She glanced at me in quick suspicion. I saw she was embarrassed by my question.

"Happened?" she echoed, nervously. "What do you mean?"

We were in the Park, and quite alone, therefore I halted, and looking her straight in the face exclaimed,—

"Something happened there, Sybil. Why don't you tell me?"

"Sybil," she said in a tone of reproach. "Am I no longer Tibbie to you, as of old? You are changed, Wilfrid—changed towards me. There is something in your manner so very unusual. What is it?"

"I desire to know the truth," I said in a hard voice. "You are trying to keep back things from me which I ought to know. I trust you, and yet you do not trust me in return. Indeed, it seems very much as though you are trying to deceive me."

"I am not," she protested. "You still misjudge me, Wilfrid, and merely because there are certain things which it would be against my own interests to explain at this moment. Every woman is permitted to have secrets; surely I may have mine. If you were in reality my husband, then it would be different. Hitherto, you have been generosity itself towards me. Why withdraw it now, at the critical moment when I most require your aid and protection."

"Why?"

"Because in Glasgow I was recognised by one of my enemies," she said. "Ah! you don't know what a narrow escape I had. He traced me—and came from London to hunt me down and denounce me. Yet I managed to

meet him with such careless ease that he was disarmed, and hesitated. And while he hesitated I escaped. He is still following me. He may be here, in Newcastle, for all I know. It we meet again, Wilfrid," she added in a hoarse, determined voice, "if we meet again it will all be hopeless. My doom will be sealed. I shall kill myself."

"No, no," I urged. "Come, don't contemplate such a step as that!"

"I fear to face him. I can never face him."

"You mean John Parham."

"Who told you?" she started quickly. "How did you know his name?"

"I guessed it. They told me at the hotel that you had had a visitor, and that you had soon afterwards escaped to the north."

"Do you actually know Parham?"

"I met him once," was my reply, but I did not mention the fellow's connection with the house with the fatal stairs.

"Does he know that we are friends?"

"How can I tell? But why do you fear him?"

"Ah, it is a long story. I dare not face that man, Wilfrid. Surely that is sufficient."

"No. It is not sufficient," I replied. "You managed to escape and get up to Fort William."

"Ah! The man at the hotel told you so, I suppose," she said. "Yes, I did escape, and narrowly. I was betrayed."

"By whom?"

"Unwittingly betrayed by a friend, I think," she replied, as we walked on together towards the lake. On a winter's morning there are few people in Leazes Park, therefore we had the place to ourselves, save for the

keeper strolling idly some distance away.

“Sybil,” I exclaimed presently, halting again, and laying my hand upon her shoulder, “why are you not straightforward and outspoken with me?”

I recollected the postscript of the dead man’s letter which I had secured in Manchester—the allegation that she was playing me false.

Her eyes were cast down in confusion at my plain question, yet the next instant she assumed a boldness that was truly surprising.

“I don’t understand you,” she declared with a light nervous little laugh.

“Then I suppose I must speak more plainly,” I said. “It is a pity, Sybil, that you did not tell me the truth from your own lips.”

She went pale as her eyes met mine in quick anxiety.

“The truth—about what?”

“About your love for Arthur Rumbold,” I said very gravely, my gaze still fixed steadily upon hers.

In an instant her gloved hands clenched themselves, her lips twitched nervously, and she placed her hand upon her heart as though to stop its wild beating.

“My love?” she gasped blankly—“my love for Arthur Rumbold?”

“Yes, your love for him.”

“Ah! Surely you are cruel, Wilfrid, to speak of him—after—after all that has lately happened,” she burst forth in a choking voice. “You cannot know the true facts—you cannot dream the truth, or that man’s name would never pass your lips.”

“No,” I said gravely. “I do not know the truth. I am in utter ignorance. I only know that you met Mrs Rumbold at Fort William and travelled back with her to Dumfries.”

“That is quite true,” she answered. “I have no wish to conceal it.”

“But your love for her son—you have concealed that!”

“A woman who loves truly does not always proclaim it to the world,” was the reply.

“Then if you love him why are you in hiding? Why are you masquerading as my wife?” I demanded seriously. I was, I admit, piqued by her attitude, which I perhaps misjudged as defiant.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly, but met my gaze unflinchingly.

“You promised me your assistance,” she sighed. “If you now regret your promise I willingly release you from it.”

“I have no wish to be released,” I answered. “I only desire to know the truth. By a fortunate circumstance, Sybil, I have discovered your secret love for Arthur Rumbold—and yet at Ryhall you said you had decided to marry Ellice Winsloe.”

“A woman does not always marry the man she really loves,” she argued. “It is a regrettable fact, but horribly true.”

“Then you love this man, Arthur Rumbold? Come, do not tell me an untruth. We are old enough friends to be frank with each other.”

“Yes, we are. I am frank with you, and tell you that you have blamed yourself for assisting me, now that you have discovered my folly.”

“Folly of what?”

“Of my love. Is it not folly to love a man whom one can never marry?”

“Then he is already married, perhaps?”

She was silent, and glancing at her I saw that tears stood in her magnificent eyes. She was thinking of him, without a doubt.

I recollected those words penned by the dead man; that allegation that

she was fooling me. Yes. What he said was correct. The scales had now fallen from my eyes. I read the truth in her white countenance, that face so very beautiful, but, alas! so false.

Who was Nello, the man with whom she corresponded by means of that cipher—the man she trusted so implicitly? Was he identical with Arthur Rumbold? Had she killed the writer of that extraordinary letter because he knew the truth—because she was in terror of exposure and ruin?

My knowledge of Rumbold had entirely upset all her calculations. In those moments of her hesitancy and confusion she became a changed woman. Her admission had been accompanied by a firm defiance that utterly astounded me.

I noticed how agitated she had become. Her small hands were trembling; and she was now white to the lips. Yet she was still determined not to reveal her secret.

“Ah! you can never know, Wilfrid, what I have suffered—what I am suffering now,” she said in a deep intense voice, as we stood there together in the gardens. “You have thought me gay and careless, and you’ve often told me that I was like a butterfly. Yes, I admit it—I admit all my defects. When I was old enough to leave the schoolroom, society attracted me. I saw Cynthia, the centre of a smart set, courted, flattered, and admired, and like every other girl, I was envious. I vied with her successes, until I, too, became popular. And yet what did popularity and smartness mean? Ah! I can only think of the past with disgust.” Then, with a sigh, she added, “You, of course, cannot believe it, Wilfrid, but I am now a changed woman.”

“I do believe you, Tibbie,” was my blank reply, for want of something else to say.

“Yes,” she went on, “I see the folly of it all now, the emptiness, the soul-killing wear and tear, the disgraceful shams and mean subterfuges. The woman who has success in our set stands alone, friendless, with a dozen others constantly trying to hurl her from her pedestal, and ever ready with bitter tongues to propagate grave insinuations and scandal. It is woman to woman; and the feuds are always deadly. I’m tired of it all, and have

left it, I hope, for ever."

"Then it was some adventure in that gay circle, I take it, that is responsible for your present position?" I said slowly.

"Ah!" she sighed in a low, hoarse voice, "I—I never dreamed of the pitfalls set for me, and in my inexperience believed in the honesty of everyone. But surely I was not alone! Beneath a dress shirt beats the heart of many a blackguard, and in our London drawing-rooms are to be found persons whose careers, if exposed, would startle the world. There are men with world-famous names who ought to be in the criminal dock, but whose very social position is their safeguard; and women with titles who pose as charity patrons, but are mere adventuresses. Our little world, Wilfrid, is, indeed, a strange one, a circle of class and criminality utterly inconceivable by the public who only know of us through the newspapers. I had success because, I suppose, of what people are pleased to call my good looks, but—but, alas! I fell a victim—I fell into a trap ingeniously set for me, and when I struggled to set myself free I only fell deeper and deeper into the blackguardly intrigue. You see me now!" she cried after a brief pause, "a desperate woman who cares nought for life, only for her good name. I live to defend that before the world, for my poor mother's sake. Daily I am goaded on to kill myself and end it all. I should have done so had not Providence sent you to me, Wilfrid, to aid and counsel me. Yet the blow has again fallen, and I now see no way to vindicate myself. The net has closed around me—and—and—I must die!"

And she burst into a sudden torrent of tears.

Were they tears of remorse, or of heart-broken bitterness?

"There is no other way!" she added in a faint, desperate voice, her trembling hand closing upon my wrist. "You must leave me to myself. Go back to London and remain silent. And when they discover me dead you will still remain in ignorance—but sometimes you will think of me—think of me, Wilfrid," she sobbed, "as an unhappy woman who has fallen among unscrupulous enemies."

"But this is madness!" I cried. "You surely will not admit yourself vanquished now?"

“No, not madness, only foresight. You, too, are in deadly peril, and must leave me. With me, hope is now dead—there is only the grave.”

She spoke those last words so calmly and determinedly that I was thoroughly alarmed. I refused to leave her. The fact that Parham had discovered her showed that all hope of escape was now cut off. This she admitted to me. Standing before me, her countenance white and haggard, I saw how terribly desperate she was. Her chin then sank upon her breast and she sobbed bitterly.

I placed my hand tenderly upon her shoulder, full of sympathy.

“The story of your unhappiness, Tibbie, is the story of your love. Is it not?” I asked, slowly.

Her chest rose and fell slowly as she raised her tearful eyes to mine, and in reply, said in a low, faltering voice,—

“Listen, and I will tell you. Before I die it is only right that you should know the truth—you who are my only friend.”

And she burst again into a flood of tears, stirred by the painful remembrance of the past.

I stood there holding her for the first time in my arms. And she buried her face upon my shoulder, trembling and sobbing as our two hearts beat in unison.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Makes Plain a Woman's Fear.

"Tell me," I said at last, full of sympathy for her in her dire unhappiness, "tell me, Tibbie, about this man Rumbold."

For some moments she was silent. Her pale lips trembled.

"What is there to tell?" she exclaimed hoarsely. "There was nothing extraordinary in our meeting. We met at a country house, as I met a hundred other men. Together we passed some idle summer days, and at last discovered that we loved each other."

"Well?"

"Well—that is all," she answered in a strange, bitter voice. "It is all at an end now."

"I never recollect meeting him," I remarked, reflectively.

"No—you never have," she said. "But please do not let us discuss him further," she urged. "The memories of it all are too painful. I was a fool!"

"A fool for loving him?" I asked, for so platonic were our relations that I could speak to her with the same frankness as her own brother.

"For loving him!" she echoed, looking straight at me. "No—no. I was a fool because I allowed myself to be misled, and believed what I was told without demanding proof."

"Why do you fear the man who found you in Glasgow?"

"Ah! That is quite another matter," she exclaimed quickly. "I warn you to be careful of John Parham. A word from me would place him under arrest; but, alas! I dare not speak. They have successfully closed my lips!"

Was she referring, I wondered, to that house with the fatal stairs?

“He is married, I suppose?”

“Yes—and his wife is in utter ignorance of who and what he is. She lives at Sydenham, and believes him to be something in the City. I know the poor woman quite well.”

It was upon the tip of my tongue to make inquiry about Miss O’Hara, but by so doing I saw I should admit having acted the spy. I longed to put some leading questions to her concerning the dead unknown in Charlton Wood, but in view of Eric’s terrible denunciation how could I?

Where was Eric? I asked her, but she declared that she was in ignorance.

“Some time ago,” she said, “I heard that he was in Paris. He left England suddenly, I believe.”

“Why?”

“The real reason I don’t know. I only know from a friend who saw him one day sitting before a *café* in the Boulevard des Italiens.”

“Your friend did not speak to him?” I inquired quickly.

“No.”

“Then it might have been a mistake. The person might, I mean, have merely resembled Eric Domville. Was your informant an intimate friend?”

“A friend—and also an enemy.”

“Ah! Many of us have friends of that sort!” I remarked, whereat she sighed, recollecting, no doubt, the many friends who had played her false.

The wild, irresponsible worldliness, the thoughtless vices of the smart woman, the slangy conversation and the loudness of voice that was one of the hall-marks of her go-ahead circle, had now all given place to a quietness of manner and a thoughtful seriousness that utterly amazed me. In her peril, whatever it was, the stern realities of life had risen before

her. She no longer looked at men and things through rose-coloured spectacles, she frankly admitted to me, but now saw the grim seriousness of life around her.

Dull drab Camberwell had been to her an object-lesson, showing her that there were other peoples and other spheres beside that gay world around Grosvenor Square, or bridge parties at country houses. Yet she had, alas! learned the lesson too late. Misfortune had fallen upon her, and now she was crushed, hopeless, actually seriously contemplating suicide.

This latter fact caused me the most intense anxiety.

Apparently her interview with Arthur Rumbold's mother had caused her to decide to take her life. The fact of Parham having found her in Glasgow was, of course, a serious *contretemps*, but the real reason of her decision to die was the outcome of her meeting with Mrs Rumbold.

What had passed between the two women? Was their meeting at Fort William a pre-arranged one, or was it accidental? It must have been pre-arranged, or she would scarcely have gone in the opposite direction to that of which she left word for me.

The situation was now growing more serious every moment. As we stood together there I asked her to release me from my imposture as her husband, but at the mere suggestion she cried,—

"Ah! no, Wilfrid! You surely will not desert me now—just at the moment when I most need your protection."

"But in what way can this pretence of our marriage assist you?"

"It does—it will," she assured me. "You do not know the truth, or my motive would be quite plain to you. I have trusted you, and I still trust in you that you will not desert or betray me."

"Betray you? Why, Tibbie, what are you saying?" I asked, surprised. Could I betray her? I admired her, but I did not love her. How could I love her when I recollected the awful charge against her?

"Do you suspect that I would play you false, as some of your friends have

done?” I asked, looking steadily into her fine eyes.

“No, no; forgive me, Wilfrid,” she exclaimed earnestly, returning my gaze. “I sometimes don’t know what I am saying. I only mean that—you will not leave me.”

“And yet you asked me to go back to London only a few minutes ago!” I said in a voice of reproach.

“I think I’m mad!” she cried. “This mystery is so puzzling, so inscrutable, and so full of horror that it is driving me insane.”

“Then to you also it is a mystery!” I cried, utterly amazed at her words. “I thought you were fully aware of the whole truth.”

“I only wish I knew it. If so, I might perhaps escape my enemies. But they are much too ingenious. They have laid their plans far too well.”

She referred, I supposed, to the way in which those scoundrels had forced money from her by threats. She was surely not alone in her terrible thraldom. The profession of the blackmailer in London is perhaps one of the most lucrative of criminal callings, and also one of the safest for the criminal. A demand can cleverly insinuate without making any absolute threat, and the blackmailer is generally a perfect past-master of his art. The general public can conceive no idea of the widespread operations of the thousands of these blackguards in all grades of society. When secrets cannot be discovered, cunning traps are set for the unwary, and many an honest man and woman is at this moment at the mercy of unscrupulous villains, compelled to pay in order to hush up some affair of which they are in reality entirely innocent. No one is safe. From the poor squalid homes of Whitechapel to the big mansions of Belgravia, from garish City offices to the snug villadom of Norwood, from fickle Finchley to weary Wandsworth, the blackmailer takes his toll, while it is calculated that nearly half the suicides reported annually in London are of those who take their own lives rather than face exposure. The “unsound mind” verdict in many instances merely covers the grim fact that the pockets of the victim have been drained dry by those human vampires who, dressed smugly and passing as gentlemen, rub shoulders with us in society of every grade.

I looked at Sybil, and wondered what was the strange secret which she had been compelled to hush up. Those letters I had filched from the dead man were all sufficient proof that she was a victim. But what was the story? Would she ever tell me? I looked at her sweet, beautiful face, and wondered. We moved on again, slowly skirting the picturesque lake. She would not allow me to release myself from my bond, declaring that I must still pose as William Morton, compositor.

“But everyone knows we are not married,” I said. “Mrs Rumbold, for instance!”

“Not everyone. There are some who believe it, or they would not hesitate to attack me,” was her vague and mysterious response.

“For my own part, Tibbie, I think we’ve carried the masquerade on quite long enough. I’m beginning to fear that Jack, or some of his friends, may discover us. Your description is circulated by the police, remember; besides, my prolonged absence has already been commented upon by your people. Jack and Wydcombe have been to my rooms half a dozen times, so Budd says.”

“No. They will not discover us,” she exclaimed, quite confidently.

“But walking here openly, and travelling up and down the country is really inviting recognition,” I declared. “You were recognised, you’ll remember, in Carlisle, and again in Glasgow. To-morrow you may be seen by one of your friends who will wire to Jack. And if we are found together—what then?”

“What then?” she echoed. “Why, I should be found with the man who is my best—my only friend.”

“But a scandal would be created. You can’t afford to risk that, you know.”

“No,” she answered slowly in a low, hard voice, “I suppose you are right, I can’t. Neither can you, for the matter of that. Yes,” she added, with a deep sigh, “it would be far better for me, as well as for you, if I were dead.”

I did not reply. What could I say? She seemed filled by a dark foreboding

of evil, and her thoughts now naturally reverted to the action over which she had perhaps for weeks or months been brooding.

I had endeavoured to assist her for the sake of our passionate idyllic love of long ago, but all was in vain, I said. I recognised that sooner or later she must be discovered, and the blow—the exposure of her terrible crime—must fall. And then?

She had killed the man who had held her in thraldom. That was an undoubted fact. Eric had fully explained it, and could testify to the deed, although he would, I knew, never appear as witness against her. The unknown blackguard scorning her defiance had goaded her to a frenzy of madness, and she had taken her revenge upon the cowardly scoundrel.

Could she be blamed? In taking a life she had committed a crime before God and man, most certainly. The crime of murder can never be pardoned, yet in such circumstances surely the reader will bear with me for regarding her action with some slight degree of leniency—with what our French neighbours would call extenuating circumstances.

And the more so when I recollected what the dead unknown had written to his accomplice in Manchester. The fellow had laid a plot, but he had failed. The woman alone, unprotected and desperate, had defended herself, and he had fallen dead by her hand.

In my innermost heart I decided that he deserved the death.

Why Ellice Winsloe had recognised the body was plain enough now. The two men were friends—and enemies of Sybil Burnet.

I clenched my fingers when I thought of the dangerous man who was still posing as the chum of young Lord Scarcliff, and I vowed that I would live to avenge the wrong done to the poor trembling girl at my side.

She burst into hot tears again when I declared that it would be better for us to return again to the obscurity of Camberwell.

“Yes,” she sobbed. “Act as you think best, Wilfrid. I am entirely in your hands. I am yours, indeed, for you saved my life on—on that night when I fled from Ryhall.”

We turned into the town again through Gallowgate when she had dried her eyes, and had lunch at a small eating-house in New Bridge Street, she afterwards returning to her hotel to pack, for we had decided to take the afternoon train up to King’s Cross.

She was to meet me at the station at half-past three, and just before that hour, while idling up and down Neville Street awaiting the arrival of her cab, of a sudden I saw the figure of a man in a dark travelling ulster and soft felt hat emerge from the station and cross the road to Grainger Street West.

He was hurrying along, but in an instant something about his figure and gait struck me as familiar; therefore, walking quickly after him at an angle before he could enter Grainger Street, I caught a glimpse of his countenance.

It was John Parham! And he was going in the direction of the Douglas Hotel.

He had again tracked her down with an intention which I knew, alas! too well could only be a distinctly evil one.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Takes me a Step Further.

We were back again in Neate Street, Camberwell.

In Newcastle we had a very narrow escape. As Parham had walked towards the hotel, Sybil had fortunately passed him in a closed cab. On her arrival at the station she was in entire ignorance of the fellow's presence, and as the train was already in waiting we entered and were quickly on our way to London, wondering by what means Parham could possibly have known of her whereabouts.

Was she watched? Was some secret agent, of whom we were in ignorance, keeping constant observations upon us and reporting our movements to the enemy? That theory was Sybil's.

"Those men are utterly unscrupulous," she declared as we sat together in the little upstairs room in Camberwell. "No secret is safe from them, and their spies are far better watchers than the most skilled detectives of Scotland Yard."

At that moment Mrs Williams entered, delighted to see us back again, for when we had left, Tibbie had, at my suggestion, paid rent for the rooms for a month in advance and explained that we were returning.

"Two gentlemen came to inquire for you a week ago, Mr Morton," she exclaimed, addressing me. "They first asked whether Mrs Morton was at home, and I explained that she was away. They then inquired for you, and appeared to be most inquisitive."

"Inquisitive? About what?" asked my pseudo wife.

"Oh! all about your private affairs, mum. But I told them I didn't know anything, of course. One of the men was a foreigner."

"What did they ask you?" I inquired in some alarm.

“Oh, how long you’d been with me, where you worked, how long you’d been married—and all that. Most impudent, I call it. Especially as they were strangers.”

“How did you know they were strangers?”

“Because they took the photograph of my poor brother Harry to be yours—so they couldn’t have known you.”

“Impostors, I expect,” I remarked, in order to allay the good woman’s suspicions. “No doubt they were trying to get some information from you in order to use it for their own purposes. Perhaps to use my wife’s name, or mine, as an introduction somewhere.”

“Well, they didn’t get much change out of me, I can tell you,” she laughed. “I told them I didn’t know them and very soon showed them the door. I don’t like foreigners. When I asked them to leave their names they looked at each other and appeared confused. They asked where you were, and I told them you were in Ireland.”

“That’s right,” I said, smiling. “If they want me they can come here again and find me.”

Then, after the landlady had gone downstairs, I asked Tibbie her opinion.

“Did I not tell you that inquiries would be made to ascertain whether I were married?” she said. “The woman evidently satisfied them, for she has no suspicion of the true state of affairs.”

“Then you are safe?”

“Safe only for the present. I may be in increased peril to-morrow.”

“And how long do you anticipate this danger to last?” I asked her seriously, as she sat there gazing into the meagre fire.

“Last! Until my life’s end,” she answered very sadly. Then turning her wonderful eyes to mine she added, “I know you cannot sacrifice your life for me in this way much longer, Wilfrid. Therefore it must end. Yet life, after all, is very sweet. When I am alone I constantly look back upon my

past and recognise how wasted it has been; how I discarded the benefits of Providence and how from the first, when I came out, I was dazzled by the glitter, gaiety, and extravagance of our circle. It has all ended now, and I actually believe I am a changed woman. But it is, alas! too late—too late."

Those words of hers concealed some extraordinary romance—the romance of a broken heart. She admitted as much. Why were these men so persistently hunting her down if they were in no fear of her? It could only be some desperate vendetta—perhaps a life for a life!

What she had said was correct. Mine was now a most invidious position, for while posing as William Morton, I was unable to go to Bolton Street or even call upon Scarcliff or Wydcombe for fear that Winsloe and his accomplices should learn that I was still alive. Therefore I was compelled to return to the Caledonian Hotel in the Adelphi, where Budd met me in secret each evening with my letters and necessaries.

Another week thus went by. The greater part of the day I usually spent with Tibbie in that dull little room in Neate Street, and sometimes, when the weather was fine, we went to get a breath of air in Greenwich Park or to Lewisham or Dulwich, those resorts of the working-class of South London. At night, ostensibly going to work, I left her and spent hours and hours carefully watching the movements of Ellice Winsloe.

To Lord Wydcombe's, in Curzon Street, I followed him on several occasions, for he had suddenly become very intimate with Wydcombe it appeared, and while I stood on the pavement outside that house I knew so well my thoughts wandered back to those brilliant festivities which Cynthia so often gave. One night, after Winsloe had dined there, I saw the brougham come round, and he and Cynthia drove off to the theatre, followed by Jack and Wydcombe in a hansom. On another afternoon I followed Winsloe to the Scarcliffs in Grosvenor Place, and later on saw him laughing with old Lady Scarcliff at the drawing-room window that overlooked Hyde Park Corner. He presented a sleek, well-to-do appearance, essentially that of a gentleman. His frock coat was immaculate, his overcoat of the latest cut, and his silk hat always ironed to the highest perfection of glossiness.

Tibbie, of course, knew nothing of my patient watchfulness. I never went near my chambers, therefore Ellice and Parham certainly believed me dead, while as to Domville's hiding in Paris, I confess I doubted the truth of the statement of Tibbie's friend. If the poor fellow still lived he would most certainly have written to me. No! He was dead—without a doubt. He had fallen a victim in that grim house of doom.

Again and again I tried to find the gruesome place, but in vain. Not a street nor an alley in the neighbourhood of Regent Street I left unexplored, yet for the life of me I could not again recognise the house. The only plan, I decided, was to follow Parham, who would one day go there, without a doubt.

I called on Mrs Parham at Sydenham Hill, and found that her husband was still absent—in India, she believed. Miss O'Hara, however, remained with her. What connection had the girl with those malefactors? I tried to discern. At all events, she knew their cipher, and they also feared her, as shown by their actions on that dark night in Dean's Yard.

My own idea was that Parham was still away in the country. Or, if he were in London, he never went near Winsloe. The police were in search of him, as admitted by the inspector at Sydenham, therefore he might at any moment be arrested. But before he fell into the hands of the police I was determined to fathom the secret of that house of mystery wherein I had so nearly lost my life.

For Tibbie's personal safety I was now in constant and deep anxiety. They were desperate and would hesitate at nothing in order to secure their own ends. The ingenuity of the plot to seize her in Dean's Yard was sufficient evidence of that. Fortunately, however, Tibbie had not seen my cipher advertisements.

Another week passed, and my pretended wife had quite settled down again amid her humble surroundings. It amused me sometimes to see the girl, of whose beauty half London had raved, with the sleeves of her cotton blouse turned up, making a pudding, or kneeling before the grate and applying blacklead with a brush. I, too, helped her to do the housework, and more than once scrubbed down the table or cleaned the windows. Frequently we worked in all seriousness, but at times we were

compelled to laugh at each other's unusual occupation.

And when I looked steadily into those fine, wide-open eyes, I wondered what great secret was hidden there.

Time after time I tried to learn more of Arthur Rumbold, but she would tell me nothing.

In fear that the fact of her disappearance might find its way into the papers, she wrote another reassuring letter to her mother, telling her that she was well and that one day ere long she would return. This I sent to a friend, a college chum, who was wintering in Cairo, and it was posted from there. Jack naturally sent out a man to Egypt to try and find her; and in the meantime we allayed all fears that she had met with foul play.

Days and weeks went on. In the security of those obscure apartments in Neate Street, that mean thoroughfare which by day resounded with the cries of itinerant costermongers, and at evening was the playground of crowds of children, Sybil remained patient, yet anxious. Mrs Williams—who, by the way, had a habit of speaking of her husband as her "old man"—was a kind, motherly soul, who did her best to keep her company during my absences, and who performed little services for her without thought of payment or reward. The occupation of compositor accounted not only for my absence each night during the week, but on Sunday nights also—to prepare Monday morning's paper, I explained.

I told everybody that I worked in Fleet Street, but never satisfied them as to which office employed me. There were hundreds of compositors living in the neighbourhood, and if I made a false statement it would at once be detected. With Williams I was friendly, and we often had a glass together and a pipe.

Our life in Camberwell was surely the strangest ever led by man and woman. Before those who knew us I was compelled to call her "Molly," while she addressed me as "Willie," just as though I were her husband.

A thousand times I asked her the real reason of that masquerade, but she steadfastly declined to tell me.

"You may be able to save me," was all the information she would

vouchsafe.

Darkness fell early, for it was early in February, and each night I stole forth from the Caledonian Hotel on my tour of vigilance. The hotel people did not think it strange that I was a working-man. It was a quiet, comfortable place. I paid well, and was friendly with the hall-porter.

With the faithful Budd's assistance—for he was friendly with Winsloe's valet—I knew almost as much of the fellow's movements as he did himself. I dogged his footsteps everywhere. Once he went down to Sydenham Hill, called upon Mrs Parham, and remained there about an hour while I waited outside in the quiet suburban road. When he emerged he was carrying a square parcel packed in brown paper, and this he conveyed back to Victoria, and afterwards took a cab to his own chambers.

He had not been there more than a quarter of an hour, when along King Street came a figure that I at once recognised as that of the man I most wanted to meet—John Parham himself.

I drew back and crossed the road, watching him enter Winsloe's chambers, of which he apparently had a latchkey.

Then I waited, for I meant, at all hazards, to track the fellow to his hiding-place, and to discover the true identity of the house where I had been so ingeniously entrapped.

At last he emerged carrying the square packet which his friend had obtained at Sydenham, and behind him also came Winsloe. They walked across St. James's Square and up York Street to the Trocadero, where, after having a drink together, they parted, Winsloe going along Coventry Street, while his companion, with the packet in his hand, remained on the pavement in Shaftesbury Avenue, apparently undecided which direction to take.

I was standing in the doorway of the Café Monico opposite, watching him keenly, and saw that he was evidently well known at the Trocadero, for the gold-laced hall-porter saluted him and wished him good-evening.

A few moments later he got into a cab and drove away, while in a few

seconds I had entered another cab and was following him. We went up Shaftesbury Avenue, turning into Dean Street and thus reaching Oxford Street opposite Rathbone Place, where he alighted, looked around as though to satisfy himself that he was not followed, and walked on at a rapid pace up Rathbone Place, afterwards turning into many smaller thoroughfares with which I was unacquainted. Once he turned, and I feared that he had detected me, therefore I crossed the road and ascended the steps of a house, where I pretended to ring the door-bell.

He glanced back again, and finding that he was not being followed increased his pace and turned the corner. I was after him in an instant, and still followed him at a respectable distance until after he had turned several corners and was walking up a quiet, rather ill-lit street of dark old-fashioned houses, he glanced up and down and then suddenly disappeared into one of the door-ways. My quick eyes noted the house and then, five minutes afterwards, I walked quickly past the place.

In a moment I recognised the doorway as that of the house with the fatal stairs!

Returning, on the opposite side of the road, I saw that the place was in total darkness, yet outwardly it was in no way different to its neighbours, with the usual flight of steps leading to the front door, the deep basement, and the high iron railings still bearing before the door the old extinguishers used by the ink-men in the early days of last century. I recognised the house by those extinguishers. The blinds had not been lowered, therefore I conjectured that the place was unoccupied.

The street was, I found, called Clipstone Street, and it lay between Cleveland Street and Great Portland Street, in quite a different direction than that in which I had imagined it to be.

After a quarter of an hour Parham emerged without his parcel, closed the door behind him, and walked on to Portland Place, where, from the stand outside the Langham, he took a cab to Lyric Chambers, in Whitcomb Street, opposite Leicester Square, where I discovered he had his abode.

My heart beat wildly, for I knew that I was now on the verge of a discovery. I had gained knowledge that placed the assassins of Eric

Domville in my hands.

I lost not a moment. At the Tottenham Court Road Police Station I was fortunate in finding Inspector Pickering on duty, and he at once recognised me as the hero of that strange subterranean adventure.

As soon as I told him I had discovered the mysterious house he was, in an instant, on the alert, and calling two plain-clothes men announced his intention of going with me at once to Clipstone Street to make investigations.

“Better take some tools with you, Edwards, to open the door, and a lantern, each of you,” he said to them. Then turning to me, he added,—

“If what we suspect is true, sir, there’s been some funny goings-on in that house. But we shall see.”

He took a revolver from his desk and placed it in his pocket, and afterwards exchanged his uniform coat for a dark tweed jacket in order not to attract attention in the neighbourhood.

Then we all four went forth to ascertain the truth.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The House of Doom.

On arrival at Clipstone Street our first inquiry was to ascertain whether the place was inhabited.

While we waited around the corner in Great Portland Street, one of Pickering's men approached and rang the bell, but though he repeated the summons several times, there was no response. Then, with easy agility, he climbed over the railings and disappeared into the area.

Leaving the second man to give us warning if we were noticed, Pickering and myself sauntered along to the house.

It was nearly eleven o'clock, and there were few passers-by, yet we did not wish to be discovered, for our investigations were to be made strictly in secret, prior to the police taking action.

Was I acting judiciously, I wondered? Would the revelation I had made reflect upon Sybil herself? Would those men who used that house hurl against her a terrible and relentless vendetta?

Whether wisely or unwisely, however, I had instituted the inquiry, and could not now draw back.

The inspector himself took the small bag containing a serviceable-looking housebreaker's jemmy and other tools, and as we came to the area handed it down to the man below. Then both of us scrambled over the locked gate and descended the steps to the basement door by which it had been decided to enter.

The plain-clothes man was something of a mechanic, I could see, for he was soon at work upon the lock, yet although he tried for a full quarter of an hour to open the door, it resisted all his efforts.

"It's bolted," he declared at last, wiping the perspiration from his brow. "We must try the front door. That's no doubt only on the latch. If we force

this they'll know we've been here, while if we force the latch we can put that right again before we leave."

"Very well, Edwards," was the inspector's reply. "Go up alone and do it. It won't do for us both to be up with you. Force the latch, and let us trust to luck to be able to put it right again. We'll have to lay a trap here—of that I feel sure."

The man ascended to the door above us, but scarcely had he done so when we heard the hoarse cry of "*Star*—extrar spe-shall!" from the further end of the street—the pre-arranged signal warning us of someone approaching.

Edwards therefore slipped down the steps and walked in the opposite direction until the two men who had entered the street had passed. Then Edwards sprang up the steps again, and after trying the lock with a number of keys we suddenly heard a low crack, and then there was silence.

"All right," he whispered to us over the railings, and a minute later we were standing inside the dark hall of the house wherein I had so nearly lost my life. Edwards closed the door behind us noiselessly, and we were compelled to grope forward in the pitch darkness, for the inspector deemed it wise to draw down the blinds before lighting our lanterns, for fear our movements should attract notice from without.

Edwards entered the front room on the right, stumbling over some furniture, and pulled down the dark holland blind, while a moment later a rapping on the front door announced the arrival of the man who had been watching to cover our movements.

The policemen's lanterns, when lit, revealed an old-fashioned room furnished solidly in leather—a dining-room, though there were no evidences of it having been recently used. Behind it, entered by folding doors, was another sitting-room with heavy well-worn furniture covered with old-fashioned horsehair. In the room was a modern roll-top writing-table, the drawers of which Pickering reserved for future investigation.

"Be careful of the stairs," I said, as Edwards started to ascend them. "The dangerous ones are nearly at the top of the second storey. There's no

danger on the first floor."

"All right, sir," replied the man. "I'll be wary, you bet!" and we climbed to the first floor, the rooms of which, to our surprise, were all empty, devoid of any furniture save two or three broken chairs. In one room was a cupboard, which, however, was locked.

Again we turned to the stairs, Edwards and his companion ascending each stair slowly and trying the one higher with their hands. They were covered with new carpet of art green, different to the first flight, which were covered in red.

When a little more than half-way up to the top landing, Edwards suddenly exclaimed,—

"Here it is, sir!" and instantly we ascended to his side.

Kneeling on the stairs, he pressed his hands on the step above, whereupon that portion of the stairway up to the landing swung forward upon a hinge, disclosing a black abyss beneath.

I looked into it and shuddered. Even Pickering himself could not restrain an expression of surprise and horror when he realised how cunningly planned was that death-trap. The first six stairs from the top seemed to hang upon hinges from the landing. Therefore with the weight of a person upon them they would fall forward and pitch the unfortunate victim backwards before he could grasp the handrail, causing him to fall into the pit below.

"Well," remarked Pickering, amazed, as he pushed open the stairs and peered into the dark blackness below, "of all the devilish contrivances I've ever seen in my twenty-one years' experience in London, this is one of the most simple and yet the most ingenious and most fatal?"

"No doubt there's a secret way to render the stairs secure," I remarked.

"No doubt, but as we don't know it, Edwards, one of you had better go down and get something to lay over the stairs—a piece of board, a table—anything that's long enough. We don't want to be pitched down there ourselves."

“No, sir,” remarked Edwards’ companion, whose name was Marvin. “I wouldn’t like to be, for one. But I daresay lots of ’em have gone down there at times.”

“Most probably,” snapped the inspector, dismissing the man at once to get the board.

“Bring up the jemmy as well,” he added, over the banisters. “We may want it.”

A few minutes later the two men brought up a long oak settle from the hall, and bridging the fatal gulf, held it in position, while we passed over, not, however, without difficulty, as the incline was so great. Then when we were over we held it while they also scrambled up.

To the left was a closed door—the room from which had come the sound of Eric’s voice on that fatal night. I recognised it in a moment, for it was pale green, picked out in a darker shade.

I opened it, and Pickering shone his lamp within. The blinds were up, but Edwards rushed and pulled them down. Then, on glancing round, I saw it was a pretty well-furnished room, another sitting-room, quite different from those below, as it was decorated in modern taste, with furniture covered with pale yellow silk and comfortable easy chairs, as though its owner were fond of luxury. The odour of stale cigars still hung in the curtains. Perhaps it was the vampire’s den, a place where he could at all events be safe from intrusion with those fatal stairs between him and the street.

I explained my theory to the inspector, and he was inclined to agree with me.

Upon the floor lay a copy of an evening paper nearly a month old, while the London dust over everything told us that at least it had not been occupied recently.

In that room poor Eric had defied his captors. I looked eagerly around for any traces of him. Yes. My eye fell upon one object—a silver cigarette-case that I had given him two years ago!

The tell-tale object was lying upon the mantelshelf unheeded, tossed there, perhaps, on the night of the crime.

I handed it to Pickering and told him the truth.

“A very valuable piece of evidence, sir,” was the inspector’s reply, placing it in his pocket. “We shall get at the bottom of the affair now, depend upon it. The only thing is, we mustn’t act too eagerly. We must have them all—or none; that’s my opinion.”

Then, with his two men, he methodically searched the room, they carefully replacing everything as they found it in a manner which showed them to be expert investigators of crime. Indeed, while Pickering was an inspector of police, the two men were sergeants of the branch of the Criminal Investigation Department attached to the station. They examined quite a heterogeneous collection of things—the usual things one finds in a man’s rooms. From a drawer in a kind of sideboard I took out a quantity of letters, beneath which I found a woman’s necklace, a magnificent antique thing in diamonds and emeralds, which had apparently been hurriedly concealed there, and perhaps forgotten.

Pickering took it in his hand and examined it close to his lamp.

“Real, without a doubt, and a costly one, too! Been taken off some rich woman, perhaps. See! the snap has been broken. Perhaps they are afraid to get rid of it at once, so are keeping it. For the present let’s put it back.”

As I replaced it I saw in the corner of the drawer a ring—a gold one with an engraved amethyst. This I at once recognised as poor Eric’s signet ring! Concealed among papers, pamphlets, string, medicine bottles and other odds and ends, were other articles of jewellery mostly costly, as well as several beautiful ropes of pearls.

Were they, we wondered, the spoils of the dead? What had been the fate of Eric Domville? Had he been entrapped there, despoiled, as others had been, and then allowed to descend those fatal stairs to his doom?

That was Pickering’s opinion, just as it was mine.

I longed to be allowed time to inspect the few letters beneath which the emerald necklace had been concealed, but Pickering urged me on, saying that we had yet much to do before morning.

So we entered the other rooms leading from the landing, but all were disappointing—all save one.

The door was opposite that wherein Eric had faced his enemies, and when we opened it we saw that it was a dirty faded place which had once been a bedroom, but there was now neither bedstead nor bedding. Upon the floor was an old drab threadbare carpet, in the centre of which was a large dark stain.

“Look!” I cried, pointing to it and bending to examine it more closely.

“Yes, I see,” remarked the inspector, directing his lamp full upon it. “That’s blood, sir—blood without the least doubt!”

“Blood!” I gasped. “Then Domville was probably invited in here and struck down by those fiends—the brutes!”

Edwards went on his knees, and by the aid of his lamp examined the stain more carefully, touching it with his fingers.

“It’s hardly quite dry, even now,” he remarked. “It’s soaked right in—through the boards, probably.”

I stood appalled at the sight of that gruesome evidence of a crime. I was not familiar with such revolting sights, as were my companions.

How, I wondered, had Eric been struck down? What motive had Sybil’s friend in reporting that he was alive and in Paris, when he was not?

Pickering, in the meanwhile, made a tour of the room. From a chair that had recently been broken he concluded that the person attacked had defended himself with it desperately, while there was a great rent in one of the dirty lace curtains that hung at the window, and it was slightly blood-stained, as though it had got caught in the struggle.

The last room we examined, which lay at the rear of the house,

presented another peculiar feature, inasmuch as it was entirely bare save a table, a chair and a meagre bed, and it showed signs of rather recent occupation. Beside the grate was a cooking-pot, while on the table a dirty plate, a jug and a knife showed that its occupant had cooked his own food.

Pickering made a tour of the place, throwing the light of his lantern into every corner, examining the plate and taking up some articles of man's clothing that lay in confusion upon the bed. Then suddenly he stopped, exclaiming,—

"Why, somebody's been kept a prisoner here! Look at the bars before the window, and see, the door is covered with sheet-iron and strengthened. The bolts, too, show that whoever was put in here couldn't escape. This place is a prison, that's evident," and taking up a piece of hard, stale bread from the table he added, "and this is the remains of the prisoner's last meal. Where is he now, I wonder?"

"Down below," suggested the detective Edwards.

"I fear so," the inspector said, and taking me to the window showed me how it only looked out upon the roof of the next house and in such a position that the shouts of anyone confined there would never be heard.

"They probably kept their victims here to extort money, and then when they had drained them dry they gave them their liberty. They went downstairs," he added grimly, "but they never gained the street."

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Brings us Face to Face.

Pickering was essentially a man of action.

“We must go down that hole and explore,” he said determinedly. “We must know the whole of the secrets of this place before we go further. Edwards, just slip round to the station and get that rope-ladder we used in the Charlotte Street affair. Bring more rope, as it may be too short. And bring P.C. Horton with you. Tell him to take his revolver. Look sharp.”

“Very well, sir,” replied the man, who clambered over the settle and down the stairs, leaving us there to await his return.

Time passed slowly in that dark, gruesome house, and at each noise we halted breathlessly in expectation of the return of Parham or one of his friends.

Returning to the room wherein Eric Domville had so gallantly defied his enemies, we resumed our search, and from beneath the couch the constable drew forth the square brown-paper parcel which Winsloe had obtained from the house called Keymer, and handed over to Parham.

Pickering, in a trice, cut the string with his pocket-knife, and within found a small square wooden box nailed down. The jemmy soon forced it open, when there was revealed a large packet of papers neatly tied with pink tape, which on being opened showed that they were a quantity of negotiable foreign securities—mostly French.

“The proceeds of some robbery, most certainly,” declared Pickering, examining one after the other and inquiring of me their true character, he being ignorant of French.

“I expect the intention is to negotiate them in the City,” I remarked after I had been through them and roughly calculated that their value was about twenty thousand pounds.

“Yes. We’ll put them back and see who returns to fetch them. There’s evidently a widespread conspiracy here, and it is fortunate, Mr Hughes, that you’ve been able at last to fix the house. By Jove!” the inspector added with a smile, “we ourselves couldn’t have done better—indeed, we couldn’t have done as well as you did.”

“I only hope that we shall discover what has become of my friend Domville,” I said. “I intend that his death shall not go unavenged. He was in this room, I’ll swear to that. I’d know his voice among ten thousand.”

“We shall see,” remarked the officer, confidently. “First let us explore and discover how they got rid of their victims. I only hope nobody will return while we are below. If they do, Horton and Marvin will arrest them. We’ll take Edwards down with us.”

While the constable Marvin repacked the precious box to replace it, Pickering and myself went to the drawer and looked over the letters. Many of them were unimportant and incomprehensible, until one I opened written upon blue-grey notepaper bearing the heading: “Harewolde Abbey, Herefordshire.” It was in the well-known handwriting of Sybil Burnet! Amazed, I read eagerly as follows:—

“Yes. Fred Kinghorne is here. He is an American, and beyond the Marstons has, I believe, no friends in England. He is an excellent bridge player and has won heavily this week. He has told me that he is engaged to a girl named Appleton, daughter of a Wall Street broker, and that she and her mother are to meet him in Naples on the twentieth, for a tour in Italy. He leaves here next Saturday, and will stay at the Cecil for ten days prior to leaving for Italy. He is evidently very well off, and one of the reasons he is in England is to buy some jewellery as a wedding present for his bride. The Marstons tell me that he is the son of old Jacob Kinghorne, the great Californian financier. I hope this information will satisfy you.—S.”

Harewolde, as all the world knows, was one of the centres of the smart set. The Marstons entertained the royalties frequently, and there were rumours of bridge parties and high stakes. Why had Sybil given this curious information? Had the young man Kinghorne been marked down as one of the victims and enticed to that fatal house?

There was no envelope, and the commencement of the letter was abrupt, as though it had been enclosed with some unsuspicious communication.

Having read it, I laid it down without comment, for it was my last desire to incriminate the poor unhappy woman, who, shorn of her brilliancy, was now leading such a strange and lowly life in that dull South London street.

Yet could it be possible that she had acted for these blackguards as their secret agent in society?

The suggestion held me stupefied.

At last Edwards ascended the stairs with Horton and another constable in plain clothes, and scrambled across the settle to where we stood. He carried in his hand a strong ladder of silken rope—which Pickering incidentally remarked had once been the property of Crisp, the notable Hampstead burglar—together with another lantern, a ball of string and a length of stout rope.

Marvin and Edwards recrossed the improvised bridge, while Pickering, Horton and myself remained upon the landing. Then, when we drew the settle away the two men pressed upon the stairs, causing the whole to move forward upon the hinges at the edge of the landing and disclosing the black abyss. As soon as the pressure was released, however, the stairs swung back into their place again, there being either a spring or a counter-balancing weight beneath.

This was the first difficulty that faced us, but it was soon overcome by inserting the settle when the stairs were pushed apart, thus keeping them open. To the stout oak pillar which formed the head of the banisters Pickering fixed the rope-ladder firmly, and with Marvin tried its strength.

“I’ll go down first, sir,” volunteered Edwards. “You’ve got the lantern. Will you light it and let it down by the string after me?”

So with all of us breathlessly excited the silken ladder was thrown across to Edwards, whose round face beamed at the project of subterranean exploration. Then, when the lamp was lit and tied upon the string, he put his foot into the ladder, swung himself over the edge of the stairs and

descended into the darkness, Pickering lowering the lamp after him.

We stood peering down at his descending figure, but could discern but little save the glimmering of the light and the slow swinging of the ladder, like a pendulum.

“Great Moses!” we heard him ejaculate in amazement.

Yet down, down, down he went until it became apparent that he must have reached the end of the ladder, and now be sliding down the extra length of rope which Pickering had attached.

“All right, sir!” came up his voice, sounding cavernous from the pitch darkness. “It’s a jolly funny place down here, an’ no mistake. Will you come down? I’m releasing the lantern. Send down another, please. We’ll want it.”

Pickering hauled in the string, attached Marvin’s bull’s-eye to it, and let it down again at once. The pit was of great depth, as shown by the length of cord. Then with an agility which would have done credit to a much younger man, he swung himself over on to the ladder.

“If you’d like to come down, Mr Hughes, you can follow me,” he exclaimed, as he disappeared into the darkness. “Horton, hold your light over me. You two stay here. If anybody enters the place, arrest them quickly.”

“Very well, sir,” answered the man Horton, and the inspector went deeper down until only the trembling of the ladder betokened his presence there.

“All right, Mr Hughes. Come down, but be careful,” he cried up presently, his voice sounding far away. “You’ll have to slide down the rope for the last twelve feet or so. Cling tight, and you’ll be all right.”

I grasped the ladder, placed my foot into the first loop, and then with the light held over me, went down, down, first into a place which seemed large and cavernous, and presently down a kind of circular well with black slimy walls which seemed to descend into the very bowels of the earth.

Below I could hear the sound of rushing waters, but above them was the

inspector’s encouraging voice, crying, “All right. Now then, take the rope in your legs and slip straight down.”

I did so, and a moment later found myself up to my knees in an icy cold stream, which swept and gurgled about me.

Pickering and his assistant stood at my side, their lamps shining upon the dark subterranean flood.

“Is this the place you remember?” asked the inspector, shining his bull’s-eye around and revealing that we were at the bottom of a kind of circular well which had on either side two low arches or culverts. From the right the water rushed in with a swirling current, and by the opposite culvert it rushed out, gurgling and filling the arch almost to its keystone. I saw that all the black slimy masonry was of long flat stones—a relic of ancient London it seemed to be.

“This isn’t the place where I found myself,” I said, much surprised.

“No, I suppose not,” remarked the inspector. “This is fresh water, from a spring somewhere, and through that ancient culvert there’s probably a communication with the main sewer. When you fell, you were swept down there and out into the main sewer at once—like a good many others who have come down here. It’s an awful death-trap. Look up there,” and he shone his lamp above my head.

“Don’t you see that a bar of iron has been driven into the wall—and driven there recently, too, or it would have rusted away long ago in this damp.”

“Well?” I said, not quite following him.

“That’s been put there so that the victims, in falling from the great height, should strike against it and be rendered unconscious before reaching the water. Look. There’s a bit of white stuff on it now—like silk from a lady’s evening dress!”

And sure enough I saw at the end of that iron bar a piece of white stuff fluttering in the draught, the grim relic of some unfortunate woman who had gone unconsciously to her death! The dank, gruesome place

horrified me. Its terrible secrets held all three of us appalled. Even Pickering himself shuddered.

“To explore further is quite impossible,” he said. “That culvert leads into the main sewer, so we must leave its exploration to the sewermen. Lots of springs, of course, fall into the sewers, but the exact spots of their origin are unknown. They were found and connected when the sewers were constructed, and that’s all. My own opinion,” he added, “is that this place was originally the well of an ancient house, and that the blackguards discovered it in the cellar, explored it, ascertained that anything placed in it would be sucked down into that culvert, and then they opened up a way right through to the stairs.”

The inspector’s theory appeared to me to be a sound one.

I expressed fear of the rising of the water with the automatic flushing of the sewers, but he pointed out that where we stood must be on a slightly higher level, judging from the way the water rushed away down the culvert, while on the side of the well there was no recent mark of higher water, thus bearing out his idea of a spring.

Edwards swarmed up the rope and managed to detach the piece of silk from the iron bar. When he handed it to us we saw that though faded and dirty it had been a piece of rich brocade, pale blue upon a cream ground, while attached was a tiny edging of pale blue chiffon—from a woman’s corsage, Pickering declared it to be—perhaps a scrap of the dress of the owner of that emerald necklet up above!

After a minute inspection of the grim ancient walls which rose from a channel of rock worn smooth by the action of the waters of ages, Pickering swarmed up the dangling rope, gained the ladder and climbed back again, an example which I quickly followed, although my legs were so chilled to the bone by the icy water that at first I found considerable difficulty in ascending.

Having gained the landing and been followed by Edwards, we drew up the ladder, removed the settle, allowed the fatal stairs to close again, and then bridged it over as before.

While we had been below Horton, who was a practised carpenter, had

mended the latch of the front door, so that there should be no suspicion of our entry. We all clambered across the settle, descended the stairs to the basement, and were soon engaged in searching the downstairs rooms and cellar. We had found that the communication between the head of the well and the top of the house was a roughly-constructed shaft of boards when, of a sudden, while standing at the foot of the kitchen stairs we were startled by hearing the sharp click of a key in the lock of the front door above.

In an instant we were silent, and stood together breathless and listening. The dark slide slipped across the bull's-eye.

It was truly an exciting moment.

Pickering, followed by Edwards and Marvin, crept noiselessly up the stairs, and while the person entering apparently had some difficulty with the lock they waited in the darkness.

I stood behind the inspector, my heart beating quickly, listening intently. It was an exciting moment standing ready in the pitch blackness of that silent house of doom.

The latch caught, probably on account of its recent disarrangement, but at last the key lifted it, the door opened, somebody entered the hall, and quietly re-closed the door.

Next instant Pickering sprang from his hiding-place, crying,—

"I arrest you on suspicion of being implicated in certain cases of wilful murder committed in this house!"

Horton at that same moment flashed his lamp full upon the face of the person who had entered there so stealthily, and who, startled by the dread accusation, stood glaring like some wild animal brought to bay, but motionless as though turned to stone.

The lamp-flash revealed a white, haggard countenance. I saw it; I recognised it!

A loud cry of horror and amazement escaped me. Was I dreaming? No. It

was no dream, but a stern, living reality—a truth that bewildered and staggered me utterly—a grim, awful truth which deprived me of the power of speech.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Lifts the Veil.

The man under arrest was not, as I had expected, John Parham—but Eric Domville!

I stood glaring at him, utterly staggered.

Then I sprang forward to greet him—to welcome him as one returned from the grave, but next instant drew back. His face was changed—the expression upon it was that of terror—and of guilt!

“You are arrested,” continued Pickering, in a calm, matter-of-fact way, adding that phrase of patter which is spoken each time a person is taken into custody, “and I warn you that whatever statement you may now make will be taken down in writing and used in evidence against you at your trial.”

“I have no statement to make. I can do that later,” faltered the unhappy man whom I had, until that moment, regarded as my warmest friend.

The revelation struck me of a heap. At first I was unable to realise that I was awake, and in my right senses, yet there Domville stood, with a detective on either side of him, crushed and resistless. He had not even denied the truth of Pickering’s awful allegation.

Certainly in no man had I been more deceived them in him. I had given him hospitality; I had confided my secrets in him because we had been friends ever since our youth. Indeed, he had assisted me to shield Sybil, and yet the police had charged him with implication in the grim tragedies that had undoubtedly been enacted within those silent walls where we now stood.

“Is this true, Domville?” I cried at last, when I found tongue. “Speak.”

“True!” he echoed, with a strange, sickly smile, but in a low, hoarse tone. “The police are fools. Let them do as they like. They’ll soon find out that

they've got hold of the wrong man. You surely know me well enough, Wilfrid, not to believe these fellows without proof."

"Yes," I cried, "I do, Eric. I believe you are innocent, and I'll help you to prove it."

Pickering smiled, saying, "At present, Mr Hughes, we must send this gentleman round to the station. We may discuss his innocence later on." Then turning to Edwards he said in quick, peremptory tones, "Get a cab, you and Marvin, and take him round to the station. Then come back here. Tell Inspector Nicholls that I'll charge him myself when I come round."

"Yes, sir," replied the man, and ten minutes later the prisoner and the two detectives drove off in a four-wheeled cab.

"Pardon me, Mr Hughes," said Pickering, after he had gone, "but is it not injudicious to presuppose that man's innocence, especially when guilt is so plainly written on his face? Some men's faces are to us as open as the columns of a newspaper. That man's is. He is guilty—he is one of the gang. What proof have you that he is not?"

"He is my friend," I protested.

"And may he not be a criminal at the same time? Of many of our friends we are utterly unaware what lives they lead in secret. Charles Peace, the daring burglar, as you will probably remember, taught in a Sunday-school. Therefore, never judge a man by his outward profession, either of friendship or of piety."

"But I heard the villains threaten him in that upstairs room," I exclaimed. "He was in peril of his life."

"Because they had quarrelled—perhaps over the distribution of the spoils. Criminals more often than not quarrel over that, and in revenge give each other away to us. No, Mr Hughes, before you jump to any conclusion in this matter just wait a bit, wait, I mean, till we've concluded our inquiries. Depend upon it a very different complexion will soon be placed upon the whole affair."

Edwards and Marvin returned half an hour after wards.

“He made no statement,” Edwards said. “He’s one of ’em, that’s certain.”

“Why?” I asked. “How are you so positive?”

“Well, sir, we can generally pretty well tell, you know. He was a bit too resigned to be innocent.”

Through the whole night, until the cold grey of the wintry dawn, we sat in the back sitting-room, with one single bull’s-eye lantern turned on, awaiting the arrival of any of the others who might make a midnight visit there. I, of course, knew the addresses of both Parham and Winsloe, and had given them to Pickering; but he preferred that night to wait, and if possible arrest them actually in that house of doom.

Just as the faint dawn began to show through the chinks of the closed shutters, and Pickering was giving his men instructions before returning to the station, we distinctly heard another key rattle in the latch.

We were all on the alert in an instant.

“We’ll let him go upstairs if that’s his intention,” whispered the inspector with satisfaction.

Again the newcomer had the same difficulty with the latch, but at length the door opened, letting in a flood of grey light into the hall, and then closed again. We had drawn back behind the half-closed door of the room wherein we had kept our night vigil, and standing there scarcely daring to breathe, we watched a dark-haired young man in a brown tweed suit ascend the stairs. He wore a thick travelling coat, a flat cloth cap, and carried a well-worn brown handbag. Evidently he had just come off a night journey, for he sighed wearily as humming to himself he ascended those fatal stairs.

Fortunately we had removed the settle back to its place, but on arrival on the first landing we heard him halt and pull a creaking lever somewhere—the mechanism by which the six stairs were held fast and secure. Then he went on up to the top and entered that well-furnished little sitting-room.

For ten minutes we allowed him to remain there undisturbed—“Just to

allow him to settle himself," as Pickering whispered grimly. Then one by one the officers crept noiselessly up until we had assembled on the landing outside the closed door.

Then, of a sudden, Pickering drew his revolver, threw open the door, and the sleek-haired newcomer was revealed.

He fell back as though he had received a blow.

"We are police officers," explained Pickering, "and I arrest you."

Then we saw that from his bag he had taken out a suit of clothes and some linen, which were flung upon a chair, while upon the table were two packets of German bank-notes, amounting to a considerable sum. A third packet he still held in his hand, for he had been in the act of counting them when surprised.

His dark eyes met mine, and the fellow started.

"I know you!" he cried to me. "You are not a detective at any rate. You are Wilfrid Hughes."

"I have, I regret, not the pleasure of your acquaintance," was my quick answer, somewhat surprised at his declaration.

"That woman has betrayed us—that woman, Sybil Burnet," he cried angrily, his eyes flashing at us. "She shall pay for this—by heaven, she shall! She defied me, but I have not yet said my last word. Arrest me to-day, and to-morrow she will be arrested also," he laughed, triumphantly.

"My name's Ralph Vickers—if you must know," he said to Pickering in reply to a question.

"And you're just back from Germany—eh? Arrived by the night mail *via* the Hook of Holland."

"Well, what of that?"

"And you've been to Germany to dispose of stolen property, and this money is the price you received for it. Am I not correct?"

“Find out,” was the smooth-haired young man’s insulting response.

“Take him to the station, Edwards, and ask Inspector Nicholls to step round here with two plain-clothes men. I’ll wait for him. Search the prisoner, and I’ll charge him—when I come round.”

And the young man, without a word, was conducted down the stairs. Then the inspector began counting the German notes rapidly, taking a note of the number in each of the packets secured by pins.

“We’ve done a good night’s work, I think, Mr Hughes,” he said afterwards, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. “Thanks to you we’re on the track of one of the biggest criminal conspiracies that London has known for years. But,” he added, “who’s the woman that fellow mentioned—Sybil Burnet? He seems to know something against her—alleges that she’s also a member of the gang. I think we’d better arrest her, or in any case keep her under observation, for the instant she hears of the arrests she’ll, of course, fly.”

I held my breath, and I think I must have turned pale at this unforeseen result of my information against the malefactors. I recollected the affair in Charlton Wood. What could I reply?

“It is true, Inspector Pickering, that I am acquainted with Miss Sybil Burnet, but I have reason for being confident of her innocence.”

“As you are confident of the innocence of your friend Domville—eh?” he asked dubiously with a sarcastic smile.

“Well,” I said, desperately, “I am going now, at once, to see her. And if you leave the matter in my hands and promise that I shall not be followed, I, on my part, will promise that later she shall reply to any questions you may put to her.”

He was only half-convinced.

“You take a great responsibility upon yourself, Mr Hughes,” he remarked. “Why are you so anxious that this woman’s whereabouts should not be known?”

“To avoid a scandal,” I said. “She is a gentlewoman.”

Pickering smiled again.

“Well, Mr Hughes,” he said with great reluctance, “that man Vickers has made a direct charge against her, and it must be investigated, as you quite understand, whether she be a gentlewoman or not. But I leave you to question her, on the understanding that you prevent her from warning the other two men still at liberty—Parham and Winsloe. Probably they will come here to-day to meet Vickers on his return from Germany—at any rate, we shall be here in waiting for them.”

What might not this terrible exposure mean to Sybil?

Chapter Thirty.

In which Sybil Speaks.

Sybil saw me from the window as I walked up Neate Street at ten o'clock that morning. Then, letting myself in with the latchkey, I ascended the stairs, finding her as usual, fresh and dainty, although she was engaged in the prosaic operation of dusting the room.

"Why, Wilfrid!" she gasped, "what's the matter? You're not well, surely!" she cried in anxiety, coming forward towards me.

I threw my cap upon the couch, and halting upon the hearthrug, said in a low, serious voice,—

"Sybil, I think I may speak to you plainly, without preamble. I want to ask you a simple question. Who is Ralph Vickers?"

The light died out of her face in an instant. She went pale and her white lips trembled at mention of that name.

She was silent. She made no response. The blow that she had so long dreaded had fallen!

"Tell me, Sybil," I urged in a low, kindly tone. "Who is this man?"

"Ah! no, Wilfrid!" she gasped at last, her face cast down as though in shame. "Don't ask that. How—how can I, of all women, tell you?"

"But you must," I said firmly. "All is known. The brutal devilish conspiracy of those men Parham, Winsloe and Vickers is exposed."

"Exposed! Then they know about that—about that awful house in Clipstone Street?" she gasped, her eyes starting from her head in abject terror.

"The horrible truth has been discovered. The police went to the house last night."

“The police!”

“Yes, and Vickers, who is under arrest, has denounced you as one of their accomplices. Tell me,” I cried hoarsely, “tell me, Sybil, the real honest truth.”

“I knew he would denounce me,” she cried bitterly. “He has been my bitterest enemy from the very first. To that man I owe all my sorrow and degradation. He and his friends are fiends—veritable fiends in human shape—vampires who have sucked the blood of the innocent, and cast them away in secret in that dark house in Clipstone Street without mercy and without compunction. He carried out his threat once, and denounced me, but he did not succeed in effecting my ruin. And now, when arrested he has told the police what—what, Wilfrid, is, alas! the truth.”

“The truth!” I gasped, drawing away from her in horror. “The truth, Sybil. Then you are really guilty,” I wailed. “Ah! Heaven—I believed you were innocent!”

She stood swaying to and fro, then staggering unevenly to the table, gripped it to save herself from falling.

Her countenance was bloodless and downcast.

“I—I thought to hide my secret from you, of all men,” she faltered. “I feared that if you knew all you would hate and despise me, therefore my lips were sealed by fear of those men on the one hand, and on the other because I still strove to retain you as my friend and protector. I have remained silent, allowing you to form your own conclusions—nay,” she added bitterly, “allowing you to place yourself in a position of great personal peril, for I knew how they entrapped you in that awful place, and how they believed you dead like the others.” And she paused, her nervous fingers twisting the cheap jet brooch at her throat.

“But you will tell me now,” I urged quickly, “you will tell me the truth, Sybil.”

“Yes—yes. I will confess everything,” she exclaimed with an effort. “Surely there is no woman so sad and unhappy in all London as I am at this moment—as I have been these past two years! It commenced long

ago, but I'll relate it all as clearly and briefly as I can. You know how, in order to finish my education, I was sent to Madame Perrin's at Versailles. Well, on one of my journeys home for the summer holiday I met in the train between the Gare du Nord and Calais an extremely agreeable young Englishman, resident in Paris, who spoke to me, and afterwards gave me his card, expressing a hope that when I returned to Versailles I should manage to meet him again. A sweetheart in secret is always an attraction to the schoolgirl, and surely I was no exception. With the connivance of three other girls, whom I let into my secret, I contrived to meet him often in the narrow, unfrequented Allée des Sabotiers that runs down to La Croix, and wrote him letters of girlish affection. This continued for nearly a year, when one evening, about a month before I left Madame Perrin's for ever, I met him for a few moments close behind the school in the Rue du Parc de Clagny, and he surprised me by remarking that my uncle was Vice-Admiral Hellard, a high official at the Admiralty in London, or Second Sea-Lord as he was called, I believe. He asked me to do him a great favour when I returned to London, and take a little present of a dozen Bohemian liqueur glasses to deliver into his, the Admiral's hand, personally. This I, of course, consented to do, and a few weeks later I found him at the Gare du Nord on my departure. Calling me aside, he handed me a little box about a foot long, and six inches deep, whispering that probably the Admiral would acknowledge the receipt of the gift, and therefore he would be in London a week later, meet me, and receive my uncle's reply. But he urged me to give the present into the hands of no person other than the Admiral himself. He was most particular on that point.

"Well," she continued in a low voice, almost as though she were speaking to herself, "three days later I called at Albert Gate, saw my uncle alone, and handed him the little box, which he seemed much surprised at receiving, and which he took into an adjoining room and opened. When he returned to me he was greatly excited, and asked me if I was aware what the box contained. I told him that they were a set of liqueur glasses. He smiled. Then he asked me who gave it to me, and I told him a young gentleman whom I knew slightly, and that if there was any reply I would hand it to him myself. 'You shall have the reply for him to-morrow, Sybil,' was the old man's answer. 'I can only say that you've brought me the most valuable present that I've ever received in all my life.' My curiosity was at once aroused, and I asked to see the glasses, but he refused,

saying that they did not concern me. Two days later I returned, and he handed me a sealed letter addressed to ‘Ralph Vickers, Esquire,’ and—”

“Vickers!” I gasped. “The sleek-haired fellow who was arrested this morning?”

“The same,” she answered hoarsely. “He was the man who met me in Paris, and into whose unscrupulous hands and those of his associates I so innocently fell. A few days after receiving the note from the Admiral, Vickers was, I found, in London, and late one evening I slipped out of the house to the corner of Berkeley Square, and there delivered the Admiral’s reply into his hands. He remained in England, but somehow—why I really can’t tell—I began to suspect that his mode of life was not altogether honest. Perhaps it was because one day the Admiral, who came to stay with us at Ryhall, was very inquisitive about him, and added that he sincerely hoped I had broken off the acquaintanceship. At any rate, although I sometimes met him I no longer entertained any affection for him. My girlish idol was, indeed, broken sadly when just as I made my *début* in society he began to write letters compelling me to meet him, and commenced to seek information from me concerning the habits and movements of certain people whom I met in our set in London. Well,” she sighed, “this went on for about a year. I hated him now, for I had detected how false he was. Yet moving with Cynthia in the gay set I saw that I could never afford to allow the fellow to disclose those foolish letters I had written to him. At this juncture, while I was staying up in Durham, came a note which placed Ralph Vickers in his true light—that of a blackguard. In guarded language he explained that he had, previous to making my acquaintance, done three years in prison, and that as he was now without funds I must obtain money for him—indeed, pay him in order to keep the secret of those letters—the secret that I had loved a gaol-bird! In reply, however, I openly defied him. In response he came up to Durham, and I was compelled to meet him in secret. The object of his visit was truly a brutal one. Finding that I resisted his demands, he revealed to me the contents of that box which I had conveyed to my uncle. It had contained a French naval secret—a copy of the secret plans and specifications of the new French submarine boat then being built at Brest, for which the British Admiralty had paid him three thousand pounds, a draft for this amount being contained in my uncle’s sealed letter. He had, he acknowledged, obtained the plans from a French naval

lieutenant, and the pair had divided the proceeds. He was a spy, as well as a blackmailer. I asked what this had to do with me, whereupon he revealed to me an appalling fact, which utterly stunned me. Till then, I was in total ignorance of how entirely and completely I had fallen beneath his unscrupulous influence. But when he explained I saw in an instant that my future was hopeless; that escape was impossible. I was bound irrevocably to him and to his blackguardly accomplices."

"And what did he reveal?" I inquired anxiously, as her terrified eyes met mine.

"He pointed out, with brutal frankness, that although in England the French law could not reach him, yet in my own case it was different. The French Government could apply for my arrest and extradition for selling a State secret, because, in the eyes of the French law, I was a French subject, I having been born at my father's villa at Cannes, and had never taken out letters of naturalisation as a British subject. I saw his intention. If unable to raise money to supply his needs he would give information against me in Paris, and cause my arrest. He feared nothing for himself, he said, as he was a British-born subject. I alone would suffer. What could I do in face of such a terrible eventuality? He pointed out that although a person born of British parents abroad is under English law British, yet if wanted for a crime committed in the country of birth, the person may be arrested and extradited. I heard him to the end, and saw that I was helpless in his hands. He had entrapped me, and I was as a fly in a spider's web. I saw my peril; therefore, in order to avoid scandal and arrest I was compelled to send him money from time to time. Moreover, he also compelled me to furnish secret information about persons whom I met in society, for what purpose I could only guess—blackmail. Gradually, I thus became a tool of Vickers and those fiends whom I felt were in association with him, although for some time the latter never betrayed themselves. This went on for nearly a couple of years until Ellice Winsloe proposed marriage to me. I was driven desperate, always wanting to reveal to you the truth and ask your advice, Wilfrid, and yet always in fear lest you should turn your back upon me as an associate of a gang of blackmailers. One autumn day, while motoring with Cynthia from London up to visit the Beebys at Grantham, and without a chauffeur, I had a tyre-burst near a place called Stretton, on the Great North Road, and a young man passing on a bicycle very kindly offered to change the

cover for me. He was a rather good-looking young fellow and evidently a gentleman. A week later we met again at a party at Belton, when I discovered that his name was Arthur Rumbold, and that he was son of Canon Rumbold, of Lincoln, who held the living of Folkingham. He was a medical student at Guy's, and home for the vacation. We met again and accidentally, at a dance in town; and although I am no more of a flirt than other girls, I confess that he attracted me. In fact, after a couple of months he fell desperately in love with me, when suddenly I discovered a most amazing and alarming fact, namely, that he actually occupied furnished rooms in the same house in Vincent Square, Westminster, where lodged Ralph Vickers. He knew the fellow well, he said, but was unaware, of course, of how he lived.

"Meanwhile," she went on, her face slightly flushed by the effort of speaking, "Vickers was constantly pressing me for more money, threatening that if he did not get it he would hand me over to the French police. I was desperate, and at last one dark winter's night, when walking with Arthur in one of the quiet streets in Kensington where we would not be recognised, I made a clean breast of my girlish foolishness and my present difficulties. He promised to at once help me, but it was three weeks afterwards when he wrote to me while I was at Ryhall, saying that he had searched the rooms of his fellow-lodger, had found my letters, and was bringing them to me. He had, he said, secretly watched Vickers, and found that he was in association with Parham, Winsloe and Domville in a great ruthless conspiracy of blackmail, and further that he had seen persons enter the house in Clipstone Street and never emerge again! Think of the effect this amazing statement had upon me. Winsloe and Domville were our guests at that moment, and the last-named was your most intimate friend. Three days previously I had received a letter from Vickers demanding that I should meet him in secret in the park, and I had replied making an evening appointment. Then, to Arthur I replied that I would meet him in the afternoon in Charlton Wood, a lonely spot where we had met before, telling him to bring the letters, and to explain everything to me. Well," she said hoarsely, after a pause, "we met. He told me of his suspicion of that house in Clipstone Street and I at once saw to what dastardly use had been put the information regarding certain persons which these men had forced from me. But as he was telling me the truth a man rushed wildly out from the trees and sprang between us threatening to kill him if he uttered another word. He naturally defied his

assailant, who in a moment drew a revolver and shot him dead before my eyes. Then turning to me the assassin said, calmly, ‘Of this affair you know nothing, remember. Otherwise, you’ll quickly find yourself arrested for the affair in Paris. Besides,’ he added, ‘you met the fellow here. He was your lover, and you’ve rid yourself of him. You see how the circumstantial evidence against you stands. Go. And you’d better leave Ryhall as soon as you can.’ Then he disappeared into the thicket while I stood half dazed, staring at the body of the man lying stark and dead before me.”

“But who was the man who fired the fatal shot?” I demanded breathlessly.

She refused to answer!

Chapter Thirty One.

Contains the Conclusion.

I repeated my question, looking straight into her face.

“Your friend, Eric Domville.”

“Eric!” I gasped, starting forward. “Why, he told me that you had killed him. He described in detail how he had been an eye-witness of your crime!”

“Ah, of course!” she said, bitterly. “In order to throw suspicion off himself. But I swear to you, before Heaven, that it was he who killed Arthur Rumbold—they killed him because they knew he had discovered the truth concerning the house in Clipstone Street. Among Vickers’s effects Arthur had found certain letters which had given him the clue to the awful truth. Your friend Domville was, you will remember, often absent for long periods in Africa. But I now have reason for knowing that he lived in Paris with Vickers as agent of the gang, and sometimes up in Manchester, where he passed as Charles Denton. Some of his absences from his friends, too, were due to certain periods of imprisonment which he had, from time to time, served. He was not the real Eric Domville, the African traveller, for the latter has his home in Cape Town, and had not been in London for twelve years or so.”

“Sybil,” I faltered, “what you have just revealed to me places an entirely new complexion upon the astounding affair. I see now how cleverly Domville planned to cast the guilt of Arthur Rumbold’s death upon you. I found upon him the letters you had written to Vickers, and naturally concluded that the dead man was a scoundrel and a blackmailer. Besides, he wore your miniature and there was in my mind no question that you had loved him. Therefore I took counsel with Domville, and we agreed to keep your secret. Ah!” I cried, “how cleverly I was deceived! I ought to have detected that he was not my old friend Eric. That man was possessed of the devil’s cunning! But tell me, why did you fly that night—why did you ask me to pose as your husband?”

“For the simple reason that, appalled by the vengeance that they had dealt out to poor Arthur, I sought to escape them. Domville might accuse me of the murder in the wood, or Vickers might give my secret to the Prefect of Paris Police. In either case I would be in deadly peril. I saw one way out of the latter—which seemed to me the secret mode by which they would eventually attack me—and that was to make pretence that I had a husband—that I had hidden myself and married a working-man.”

“Why? How did that safeguard you?”

“Because I had discovered that by marriage a woman follows her husband’s nationality, so that if I married you I should at once become a British subject, and beyond the influence of French law,” was her frank answer. “Don’t you remember that while we were in the north two men called at Neate Street, made inquiries about us, and went away satisfied. They were agents of the French Police, and from what Mrs Williams told them they believed that you were my husband, therefore they went away, hesitating to apply for my arrest. So you see Vickers actually carried out his threat. Since the day after poor Arthur was killed Vickers has been in Germany to dispose of a quantity of stolen jewellery, therefore Domville had no opportunity of telling him the truth that you were posing as my husband, while your friend on his part deemed it to their interests to allow us both to remain in fear and in hiding. Of course I had no knowledge that Domville was aware of your having assumed the character of William Morton, and our position has all along been rendered the more perilous on that account. For us, however, it was most fortunate that Vickers has been abroad and that Domville kept his knowledge to himself. By your aid, Wilfrid, I was saved from those French agents, but now that the secret of Clipstone Street is out I fear that they may discover I am not married, and return. If they do,” she sighed, “if they do, then I must stand in a criminal dock, and bear the scandal that these villains have heaped upon me in order to hold me as their unwilling accomplice. Ah! Wilfrid!” she gasped, terrified, “I shudder when I think of the awful doom of those unfortunate ones about whom I once gave secret information so innocently. It is horrible—horrible,” and she covered her drawn, haggard countenance with her slim, white hands.

“Never shall I forget that moment when poor Arthur Rumbold fell dead at my feet—shot down mercilessly because he was in the act of revealing to

me the terrible truth," she cried. "The memory of that ghastly moment lives ever within me—the dead face still stares at me, and I never seem able to get away from it. He had an intuition that his enemies, having found out that he had discovered the grim secret of the house in Clipstone Street, were following him with the intention of killing him in secret. They had obtained his photograph, and intended that he should die. Therefore, knowing that he was followed he had come, ill-dressed and disguised, by a circuitous route to Charlton Wood. Naturally the police, when they found him dead, believed him to be a tramp, while I, of course, was in hourly terror that the letters he had secured from Vickers's rooms and my miniature, which I knew he wore, would be found upon him, and thus connect me with the crime. In breathless dread I existed for days and days, and never knew until now that you had secured them prior to the arrival of the police."

"You addressed in cipher a message in an advertisement to someone whom you called 'Nello,'" I said. "Who was he?"

"The man John Parham. He had always expressed pity for me. To the others he was known as Nello, his real name being Lionel. I was mistaken, however. He was no better than the others. The cipher they had given to me in order that I could communicate with them in secret if occasion demanded."

At six o'clock that same evening, after Sybil had returned to her mother's house in Grosvenor Street, I entered the Tottenham Court Road Police Station, and there found Pickering anxiously awaiting me.

"I wasn't far wrong, Mr Hughes," he exclaimed quickly. "Parham came to Clipstone Street just before noon, and dropped into Nicholls' hands. Winsloe somehow got wind of the affair, and has bolted—on his way to the Continent, probably. We've circulated his description and hope to get him. But he's a wily bird, it seems, from all accounts. Your friend Domville was a pretty tough customer, too," he added.

"Why? I don't quite follow you."

"Well, when I got back here and went to his cell I found him stone dead. He'd poisoned himself! Swallowed a strychnine pill."

“Because he was the murderer of Arthur Rumbold,” I answered. “Miss Burnet will later on explain everything.”

“H’m,” he grunted. “A pretty complicated bit of business, when all the threads are gathered up.”

There were still a few other matters to investigate, I pointed out, and an hour later we went out to Sydenham Hill, and there saw Mrs Parham and Miss O’Hara. When we told the poor lady of her husband’s arrest, and the charge against him, she fainted. Then, presently, when she came to, she confessed that soon after her marriage she had had certain suspicions aroused, for she discovered that her husband was wanted by the French police for some offence committed in Bordeaux. The secret cavity had been made in the drawing-room floor by him, and in it he kept his private papers. Her own opinion was that the agents of French police wanted to search there for certain evidence, the evidence of that gruesome eye, no doubt, but knowing that no English magistrate would grant them a search-warrant they resolved to make a raid on the place, as though they were thieves. Though they overlooked the strange eye which, with some ulterior motive Parham had preserved, they nevertheless secured sufficient evidence to warrant them in applying for the man’s extradition for the murder of a banker at Bordeaux, which indeed the French Consulate-General had done three weeks previously. Miss O’Hara, it appeared, had accidentally discovered the cipher hidden behind a heavy wardrobe in one of the bedrooms, and by its means had read my messages and gone to Baker Street and to Dean’s Yard out of sheer curiosity.

Surely I need not dwell upon the boundless delight with which poor, ill-judged and helpless Sybil was hailed on her return to Grosvenor Street, or the sensation when that same evening in the drawing-room, before her mother, Jack, Cynthia and Lord Wydcombe, she repeated the whole of the strange circumstances, just as she had related them to me.

Jack was furious, for he saw how cleverly he had been fleeced by Ellice Winsloe, while I, on my part, turned to the little love of my youth, saying frankly,—

“As Tibbie seems to be still in fear that the French police may apply for

her extradition on account of the sale of the naval secret to our Admiralty, she may be inclined to change her nationality in real earnest. She can do this by marriage, easier than by letters of naturalisation, and as we are man and wife and poor in the eyes of Camberwell, so, if Tibbie consents, will we become the same in the eyes of Society."

For answer she clung to me quickly with a cry of joy, and allowed me to kiss away the tears from her dear face, while Jack clapped me heartily upon the shoulder and said,—

"Wilfrid, old fellow! It's just as it should be. Tibbie's loved you for years. Everybody who wasn't blind has seen that. You've saved her, and you've a right to her."

And five minutes later my well-beloved and I were receiving the congratulations of the whole family.

What else need I say?

To tell you that we are now living in our pretty rose-embowered home near Amersham, in Buckinghamshire, which Lady Scarcliff bought and gave to Tibbie as a wedding present, and that we are supremely happy in each other's love is only to tell you what you already know. The smart set know Tibbie no more, for she is content with her simple, healthful country life. And she is all in all to me—my love.

Winsloe, who has been traced to Buenos Ayres, has not yet been arrested, although Pickering is still confident of success, but Parham and Vickers are now awaiting trial on the very serious charges of blackmail, robbery and murder. Very little evidence was given before the magistrate at Bow Street, but at the next sessions of the Central Criminal Court, London will surely be startled by the sensational evidence which the police will give concerning that grim dark house in Clipstone Street—the House of Doom.

Death sentences await both prisoners, without a doubt.

"*Whatsoever a Man Soweth, that shall he also Reap*."

The End.

End of Project Gutenberg's Whatsoever a Man Soweth, by William Le Queux

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK WHATSOEVER A MAN SOWETH ***

***** This file should be named 41092-h.htm or 41092-h.zip *****
This and all associated files of various formats will be found in:
http://www.gutenberg.org/4/1/0/9/41092/

Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

Updated editions will replace the previous one--the old editions
will be renamed.

with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg-tm License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg-tm License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg-tm.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg-tm License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg-tm work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg-tm web site (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg-tm License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg-tm works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works provided that

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg-tm works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg-tm License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from both the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and Michael Hart, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread public domain works in creating the Project Gutenberg-tm collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be

interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg-tm work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg-tm work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg-tm

Project Gutenberg-tm is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg-tm's goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg-tm collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg-tm and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's principal office is located at 4557 Melan Dr. S. Fairbanks, AK, 99712., but its volunteers and employees are scattered throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

For additional contact information:

Dr. Gregory B. Newby
Chief Executive and Director
gbnewby@pglaf.org

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg-tm depends upon and cannot survive without wide spread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be

freely distributed in machine readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg Web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works.

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg-tm concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as Public Domain in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our Web site which has the main PG search facility:

www.gutenberg.org

This Web site includes information about Project Gutenberg-tm, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.