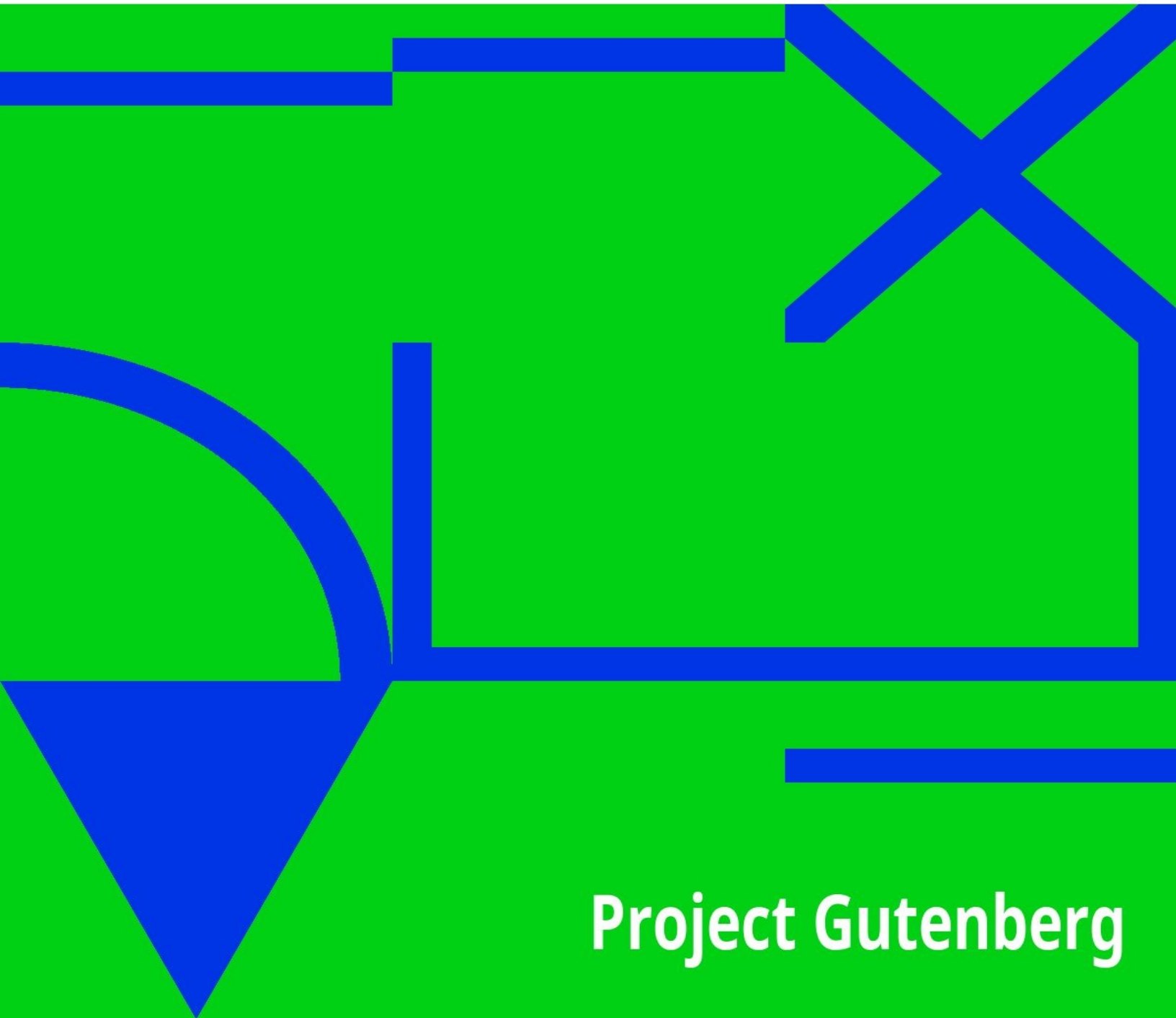
Devil's Dice

William Le Queux



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Author: William Le Queux

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"Devil's Dice"

Chapter One.

Queen of the Unknown.

Let me gaze down the vista of the tristful past.

Ah! there are things that cannot be uttered; there are scenes that still entrance me, and incidents so unexpected and terrible that they cause me even now to hold my breath in horror.

The prologue of this extraordinary drama of London life was enacted three years ago; its astounding dénouement occurred quite recently. During those three weary, anxious years the days have glided on as they glide even with those who suffer most, but alas! I have the sense of having trodden a veritable Via Dolorosa during a century, the tragedy of my life, with its ever-present sorrow, pressing heavily upon me perpetually. Yet my life's journey has not always been along the barren shore of the sea of Despair. During brief moments, when, with the sweet childlike angel of my solitude, heaven and earth have seemed to glide slowly into space, I have found peace in the supreme joy of happiness. My gaze has been lost in the azure immensity of a woman's eyes.

In this strange story, this astounding record of chastity of affection and bitter hatred, of vile scheming, of secret sins and astounding facts, I, Stuart Ridgeway, younger son of Sir Francis Ridgeway, Member for Barmouth and banker of the City of London, am compelled to speak of myself. It is indeed a relief to be able to reason out one's misfortunes; confession is the lancet-stroke that empties the abscess. The Devil has thrown his dice and the game is up. I can now lay bare the secret of my sorrow.

Away south in the heart of the snow-capped Pyrenees, while idling away a few sunny weeks at Bagnères-de-Luchon, that quaint little spa so popular with the Cleopatras of the Boulevards, nestling in its secluded valley beneath the three great peaks of Sacrous, de Sauvegarde, and de la Mine, a woman first brought sweetness to the sadness of my melancholy days. Mine was an aimless, idle life. I had left behind me at college a reputation for recklessness. I was an arrant dunce at figures,

and finance had no attraction for me. I had lived the semi-Bohemian life of a law student in London, and grown tired of it I had tried art and ignominiously failed, and, being in receipt of a generous allowance from an indulgent father, I found myself at the age of twenty-eight without profession, a mere world-weary cosmopolitan, wandering from place to place with the sole object of killing time.

Having taken up my quarters alone at the Hotel des Bains, that glaring building with its dead-white façade in the Allee d'Etigny—the magnificent view from which renders it one of the finest thoroughfares in the world—I soon became seized by ennui.

The place, filled with the *haut ton* of Paris, was gay enough, but somehow I met no one at the table d'hôte or elsewhere whom I cared to accept as companion. Sick of the utter loneliness amid all the mad gaiety, I was contemplating moving to Biarritz, where a maiden aunt resided, when one evening, while seated in the picturesque Casino Garden listening to the band, I saw in the crowd of chattering, laughing promenaders a woman's face that entranced me. Only for a second in the faint light shed by the Chinese lanterns, strung from tree to tree, was I able to distinguish her features. In that brief moment, however, our eyes met, yet next second she was gone, lost in one of the gayest crowds in Europe.

The next night and the next I sat at the same little tin table taking my coffee and eagerly scanning the crowd passing and re-passing along the broad gravelled walk until once again I saw her. Then, held in fascination by her marvellous beauty, attracted as a needle by a magnet, I rose and followed her. Like myself she was alone, and a trivial accident, of which I eagerly availed myself, gave me an opportunity of introducing myself. Judge my joyful satisfaction when I found that she was English, although her dress and hat bore the unmistakable stamp of the Rue de la Paix, and her chic was that of the true Parisienne. As we walked together in the shadows beyond the public promenade, she told me that her home was in London; that on account of her father having been compelled to return suddenly, she had been left alone, and she admitted that, like myself, she had become dull and lonely.

Apparently she had no objection to my companionship, although she

strove to preserve a British rigidity of manner and respect for the convenances. Yet after the reserve of the first half-hour had worn off we sat down together under a tree near the band-stand, and I gave her a card. She, however, refused to give me one.

“Call me Sybil,” she said smiling.

“Sybil!” I repeated. “A name as charming as its owner. Is your name Sybil —only Sybil?”

“My surname is of no consequence,” she answered quickly, with a slight haughtiness. “We are merely English folk thrown together in this place. To-morrow, or the next day perhaps, we shall part, never to meet again.”

“I trust not,” I said gallantly. “An acquaintanceship commenced under these strange conditions is rather romantic, to say the least.”

“Romantic,” she repeated mechanically, in a strange tone. “Yes, that is so. Every one of us, from pauper to peer, all have our little romances. But romance, after all, is synonymous with unhappiness,” and she drew a long breath as if sad thoughts oppressed her.

A moment later, however, she was as gay and bright as before, and we chatted on pleasantly until suddenly she consulted the tiny watch in her bangle and announced that it was time she returned. At her side I walked to her hotel, the Bonnemaison, and left her at the entrance.

We met frequently after that, and one morning she accompanied me on a drive through the quaint old frontier village of St. Aventin and on through the wild Oo Valley as far as the Cascade.

As in the bright sunshine she lounged back in the carriage, her fair, flawless complexion a trifle heightened by the pink of her parasol, I gazed upon her as one entranced. The half-lights of the Casino Garden had not been deceptive. She was twenty-two at the most, and absolutely lovely; the most bewitching woman I had ever seen. From beneath a marvel of the milliner’s art, tendrils of fair hair, soft as floss silk, strayed upon her white brow; her eyes were of that clear childlike blue that presupposes an absolute purity of soul, and in her pointed chin was a single dimple that deepened when she smiled. Hers was an adorable face, sweet, full of an

exquisite beauty, and as she gazed upon me with her great eyes she seemed to read my heart. Her lithe, slim figure was admirably set off by her gown of soft material of palest green, which had all the shimmer of silk, yet moulded and defined its wearer like a Sultan's scarf. It had tiny shaded stripes which imparted a delicious effect of myriad folds; the hem of the skirt, from under which a dainty bronze shoe appeared, had a garniture in the chromatics, as it were, of mingled rose and blue and green, and the slender waist, made long as waists may be, was girdled narrow but distinctive.

As I sat beside her, her violet-pervaded chiffons touching me, the perfume they exhaled intoxicated me with its fragrance. She was an enchantress, a well-beloved, whose beautiful face I longed to smother with kisses each time I pressed her tiny well-gloved hand.

Her frank conversation was marked by an ingenuousness that was charming. It was apparent that she moved in an exclusive circle at home, and from her allusions to notable people whom I knew in London, I was assured that her acquaintance with them was not feigned. Days passed —happy, idle, never-to-be-forgotten days. Nevertheless, try how I would, I could not induce her to tell me her name, nor could I discover it at her hotel, for the one she had given there was evidently assumed.

"Call me Sybil," she always replied when I alluded to the subject.

"Why are you so determined to preserve the secret of your identity?" I asked, when, one evening after dinner, we were strolling beneath the trees in the Allee.

A faint shadow of displeasure fell upon her brow, and turning to me quickly she answered:

"Because—well, because it is necessary." Then she added with a strange touch of sadness, "When we part here we shall not meet again."

"No, don't say that," I protested; "I hope that in London we may see something of each other."

She sighed, and as we passed out into the bright moonbeams that flooded the mountains and valleys, giving the snowy range the aspect of

a far-off fairyland, I noticed that her habitual brightness had given place to an expression of mingled fear and sorrow. Some perpetual thought elevated her forehead and enlarged her eyes, and a little later, as we walked slowly forward into the now deserted promenade, I repeated a hope that our friendship would always remain sincere and unbroken.

“Why do you speak these words to me?” she asked suddenly, in faltering tones. “Why do you render my life more bitter than it is?”

“Because when your father returns and takes you away the light of my life will be extinguished. Don’t be cruel, Sybil; you must have seen—”

“I am not cruel,” she answered calmly, halting suddenly and looking at me with her great clear eyes. “During the past fortnight we have—well, we have amused each other, and time has passed pleasantly. I know, alas! the words I have arrested on your lips. You mistake this mild summer flirtation of ours for real love. You were about to declare that you love me—were you not?”

“True, Sybil. And I mean it. From the first moment our eyes met I have adored you,” I exclaimed with passionate tenderness. “The brightness of your face has brought light into my life. You have showed me at all times the face of an adorable woman; you have peopled my desert, you have filled me with such supreme joy that I have been lost in profound love.”

“Hush! hush!” she cried, interrupting me. “Listen, let me tell you my position.”

“I care naught for your position; I want only you, Sybil,” I continued earnestly, raising her hand to my lips and smothering it with kisses. “I have adored you in all the different forms of love. You, who have sufficed for my being; you, whose wondrous beauty filled me with all the chastity of affection. Between you and the horizon there seems a secret harmony that makes me love the stones on the very footpaths. The river yonder has your voice; the stars above us your look; everything around me smiles with your smile. I never knew until now what it was to live, but now I live because I love you. Each night when we part I long for morning; I want to see you again, to kiss your hair, to tell you I love you always—always.”

Her bosom rose and fell quickly as I spoke, and when I had finished, her little hand closed convulsively upon mine.

“No, no,” she cried hoarsely. “Let us end this interview; it is painful to both of us. I have brought this unhappiness upon you by my own reckless folly. I ought never to have broken the convenances and accepted as companion a man to whom I had not been formally introduced.”

“Ah! don’t be cruel, Sybil,” I pleaded earnestly; “cannot you see how madly I love you?”

“Yes; I think that perhaps you care more for me than I imagined,” she answered, endeavouring to preserve a calmness that was impossible. “But leave me and forget me, Stuart. I am worthless because I have fascinated you when I ought to have shunned you, knowing that our love can only bring us poignant bitterness.”

“Why? Tell me,” I gasped; then, half fearing the truth, I asked. “Are you already married?”

“No.”

“Then what barrier is there to our happiness?”

“One that is insurmountable,” she answered hoarsely, hot tears welling in her eyes. “The truth I cannot explain, as for certain reasons I am compelled to keep my secret.”

“But surely you can tell me the reason why we may not love? You cannot deny that you love me just a little,” I said.

“I do not deny it,” she answered in a low, earnest voice, raising her beautiful face to mine. “It is true, Stuart, that you are the only man I have looked upon with real affection, and I make no effort at concealment; nevertheless, our dream must end here. I have striven to stifle my passion, knowing full well the dire result that must accrue. But it is useless. Our misfortune is that we love one another; so we must part.”

“And you refuse to tell me the reason why you intend to break off our acquaintanceship,” I observed reproachfully.

“Ah, no!” she answered quickly. “You cannot understand. I dare not love you. A deadly peril threatens me. Ere six months have passed the sword which hangs, as it were, suspended over me may fall with fatal effect, but—but if it does, if I die, my last thought shall be of you, Stuart, for I feel that you are mine alone.”

I clasped her in my arms, and beneath the great tree where we were standing our lips met for the first time in a hot, passionate caress.

Then, panting, she slowly disengaged herself from my arms, saying:

“Our dream is over. After to-night we may be friends, but never lovers. To love me would bring upon you a disaster, terrible and complete; therefore strive, for my sake, Stuart, to forget.”

“I cannot,” I answered. “Tell me of your peril.”

“My peril—ah!” she exclaimed sadly. “Ever present, it haunts me like a hideous nightmare, and only your companionship has lately caused me to forget it for a few brief hours, although I have all the time been conscious of an approaching doom. It may be postponed for months, or so swiftly may it descend upon me that when to-morrow’s sun shines into my room its rays will fall upon my lifeless form; my soul and body will have parted.”

“Are you threatened by disease?”

“No. My peril is a strange one,” she answered slowly. “If I might tell you all my curious story I would, Stuart. At present, alas! I cannot Come, let us go back to the hotel, and there bid me farewell.”

“Farewell! When do you intend to leave me?” I cried dismayed, as we turned and walked on together.

“Soon,” she said, sighing, her hand trembling in mine—“it will be imperative very soon.”

“But may I not help you? Cannot I shield you from this mysterious peril?”

“Alas! I know not. If your aid will assist me in the future I will communicate

with you. I have your London address upon your card."

There was a long and painful pause. But in those silent moments during our walk I became conscious of the grand passion that consumed me.

"And you will think of me sometimes with thoughts of love, Sybil?" I said disconsolately.

"Yes. But for the present forget me. Some day, however, I may be compelled to put your affection to the test."

"I am prepared for any ordeal in order to prove that my passion is no idle midsummer fancy," I answered. "Command me, and I will obey."

"Then good-night," she said, stretching forth her hand, for by this time we were in front of the Bonnemaison. I held her hand in silence for some moments, my thoughts too full for words.

"Shall I see you to-morrow?" I asked.

"Yes, if—if my doom does not overwhelm me," she answered with a choking sob. "If it does, then adieu, my love, adieu forever!"

"No, not adieu, Sybil," I said, drawing her beneath the shadow of a tree and once again imprinting a passionate kiss upon her lips. "Not adieu! Let as at least meet to-morrow, even if it must be for the last time."

She burst into a flood of tears, and turning from me walked quickly to the steps leading to the hotel, while I, mystified and full of sad thoughts, strode onward along the silent moonlit Allee towards my hotel.

Little sleep came that night to my eyes, but when my coffee was brought in the morning a perfumed note lay upon the tray. I tore it open eagerly, and read the following words hastily scribbled in pencil and blurred by tears:

"I am in deadly peril and have been compelled to leave unexpectedly. Do not attempt to find me, but forget everything.—Sybil."

I dashed aside the curtains and, like a man in a dream, stood gazing

away at the white mountains, brilliant in the morning sunlight I had lost her; the iron of despair had entered my heart.

Chapter Two.

Sin or Secret?

Six months passed. Left forlorn, with only the vivid memory of a charming face, I had travelled to rid myself of the remembrance, but in vain. Sometimes I felt inclined to regard my mysterious divinity as a mere adventuress; at others I became lost in contemplation and puzzled over her words almost to the point of madness. I knew that I had loved her; that, fascinated by her great beauty and enmeshed in the soft web of her silken tresses, she held me irrevocably for life or death.

Unhappy and disconsolate, heedless of London's pleasures or the perpetual gaiety of the "smart" circle in which my friends and relations moved, I spent the gloomy December days in my chambers in Shaftesbury Avenue, endeavouring to distract the one thought that possessed me by reading. My companions chaffed me, dubbing me a misanthrope, but to none of them, not even Jack Bethune, the friend of my college days and greatest chum, did I disclose the secret of my despair.

Thus weeks went by, until one morning my man, Saunders, brought me a telegram which I opened carelessly, but read with breathless eagerness, when I saw the signature was "Sybil."

The words upon the flimsy paper caused me such sudden and unexpected delight that old Saunders, most discreet of servants, must have had some apprehension as to my sanity. The telegram, which had been despatched from Newbury, read:

"Must see you this evening. In Richmond Terrace Gardens, opposite the tea-pavilion, is a seat beneath a tree. Be there at six. Do not fail.—Sybil."

Almost beside myself with joyful anticipation of seeing her sweet, sad face once again, I went out and whiled away the hours that seemed never-ending, until at last when twilight fell I took train to the place named.

Ten minutes before the hour she had indicated I found the seat in the Terrace Gardens, but there was no sign of the presence of any human being. It was almost closing time, and the Terrace was utterly deserted. All was silent save the rushing of a train, or the dull rumbling of vehicles passing along the top of the hill, and distant sounds became mingled with the vague murmurs of the trees. The chill wind sighed softly in the oaks, lugubriously extending their dark bare arms along the walk like a row of spectres guarding the vast masses of vapour spreading out behind them and across the valley, where the Thames ran silent and darkly in serpentine wanderings, and the lights were already twinkling. Even as I sat the last ray of twilight faded, and night, cloudy and moonless, closed in.

Suddenly a harsh strident bell gave six hurried strokes, followed by half a dozen others in different keys, the one sounding far distant across the river, coming, I knew, from Isleworth's old time-stained tower, with which boating men are so familiar.

It had seemed years full of sad and tender memories since we had parted, yet in ecstasy I told myself that in a few moments she would be again at my side, and from her eyes I might, as before, drink of the cup of love to the verge of intoxication.

A light footstep sounded on the gravel, and peering into the darkness I could just distinguish the form of a man. As he advanced I saw he was tall, well-built, and muscular, nearly forty years of age, with a slight black moustache and closely cropped hair that was turning prematurely grey. He wore the conventional silk hat, an overcoat heavily trimmed with astrakhan, and as he strode towards me he took a long draw at his cigar.

"Good-evening," he said courteously, halting before me as I rose, "I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Mr Stuart Ridgeway, have I *not*?"

"That is my name," I answered rather brusquely, not without surprise, for I had expected Sybil to keep her appointment.

"I am the bearer of a message," he said in slow, deliberate tones. "The lady who telegraphed to you this morning desires to express her extreme

regret at her inability to meet you. Since the telegram was sent, events have occurred which preclude her attendance anywhere," and he paused. Then he added with sadness: "Anywhere—except before her Judge."

"Her Judge!" I gasped. "What do you mean? Speak! Is she dead?"

"No," he answered solemnly, "she still lives, and although overshadowed by a secret terror, her only thought is of you, even in these very moments when she is being carried swiftly by the overwhelming flood of circumstances towards her terrible doom."

"You speak in enigmas," I said quickly. "We are strangers, yet you apparently are aware of my acquaintance with Sybil. Will you not tell me the nature of her secret terror?"

"I cannot, for two reasons," he replied. "The first is, because I am not aware of the whole of the circumstances; the second, because I have given her my promise to reveal nothing. Hence my lips are sealed. All I can tell you is that a great danger threatens her—how great you cannot imagine—and she desires you to fulfill your promise and render her your aid."

"Whatever lies in my power I will do willingly," I answered. "If she cannot come to me will you take me to her?"

"Upon two conditions only."

"What are they?"

"For your own sake as well as hers, it is imperative that she should still preserve the strictest incognito. Therefore, in driving to her house, you must allow the blinds of the carriage to be drawn, and, however curious may appear anything you may witness in her presence, you must give your word of honour as a gentleman—nay, you must take oath—not to seek to elucidate it. Mystery surrounds her, I admit, but remember that any attempt to penetrate it will assuredly place her in graver peril, and thwart your own efforts on her behalf."

"Such conditions from a stranger are, to say the least, curious," I

observed.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, smiling, “your reluctance to accept is but natural. Well, I can do no more, I have fulfilled my mission. The woman you love has staked her young life—and alas! lost. She has counted upon your aid in this hour of her extremity and despair, yet if you withhold it I must return and tell her.”

“But I love her,” I said. “Surely I may know who she is, and why she is haunted by this secret dread!”

For a few seconds he was silent. Then he tossed his cigar away with a gesture of impatience.

“Time does not admit of argument. I have merely to apologise for bringing you down here to a fruitless appointment, and to wish you good-evening,” he said in a tone of mingled annoyance and disappointment, as turning on his heel he walked away.

His words and manner aroused within me a sudden dislike, a curious hatred that I could not describe, yet ere he had gone a dozen paces I cried:

“Stop! I have reconsidered my decision. I must see her, for I promised her assistance, and am ready to give it in whatever manner she desires.”

“You know the conditions,” he said, sauntering carelessly back to me, “Do you accept them absolutely?”

“Yes.”

“Then swear.”

He had drawn from his pocket a Testament, and held it towards me. I hesitated.

“You may be tempted to break your word. You will never violate your oath,” he added, in the same slow, deliberate tone in which he had first addressed me. Still I was not prepared for this strange proceeding, and not until he urged me to hasten and declared that my oath was

imperative, did I move.

Taking the book, I slowly raised it until it touched my lips.

Next second I regretted my action. I had a vague, indefinable feeling that I had subjected myself to him; that I had foolishly placed myself under his thrall.

Yet, as we walked together up the steep path and gained the Terrace, he chatted gayly upon various topics, and the strange presage of evil that I had first experienced was soon succeeded by lively anticipations of seeing once again the beautiful woman I adored.

In Hill Rise, close to that row of glaring new semi-aesthetic houses known as Cardigan Gate, a neat brougham drawn by a magnificent pair of bays was in waiting, and before we entered, the footman carefully drew down the blinds, then saluted as he closed the door.

The interior of the carriage would have been dark had not a tiny glimmering lamp been placed there, and this showed that, in addition to the blinds drawn down, heavy curtains had also been arranged, so that to see outside was impossible. My strange companion was affable, even amusing, but the drive occupied quite an hour and a half, although we travelled at a pretty smart pace.

Presently my companion turned to me, saying: “There is still one small thing more. Before we alight you must allow me to tie my handkerchief across your eyes.”

“In order that I may not note the exterior of the house—eh?” I suggested, laughing.

He nodded, and a strange cynical smile played upon his lips.

“Very well,” I said. “It is useless, I suppose, to protest.”

He did not answer, but folding a silk handkerchief he placed it over my eyes and tied it tightly at the back. Almost at the moment he had completed this the conveyance stopped, the door was opened, and, led by my mysterious companion, I alighted.

Taking his arm, we crossed the pavement and ascended a short flight of steps. There were three. I counted them. I could also hear the wind in some trees, and found myself wondering whether we were in town or country.

A door opened, and we stepped into a hall, which, owing to the echo of my conductor's voice, I concluded was a spacious one, but ere I had time to reflect, the man whose arm I held said:

"Just a moment. You must sign the visitors' book—it is the rule here. We'll excuse bad writing as you can't see," he added with a laugh.

At the same moment I felt a pen placed in my fingers by a man-servant, who guided my hand to the book. Then I hastily scrawled my name.

It was strange, I thought; but the events of the evening were all so extraordinary that there was nothing after all very unusual in signing a visitors' book.

Again he took my arm, leading me up a long flight of stairs, the carpet of which was so thick that our feet fell noiselessly. In the ascent I felt that the balustrade was cold and highly polished, like glass. Confused and mysterious whisperings sounded about me, and I felt confident that I distinctly heard a woman's sob quite close to me, while at the same moment a whiff of violets greeted my nostrils. Its fragrance stirred my memory—it was Sybil's favourite perfume. Suddenly my guide ushered me into a room and took the handkerchief from my eyes. The apartment was a small study, cozy and well furnished, with a bright fire burning in the grate, and lit only by a green-shaded reading-lamp.

"If you'll take off your overcoat and wait here a few moments I will bring her to you," he said; adding, "you can talk here alone and undisturbed," and he went out, closing the door after him.

Five eager minutes passed while I listened for her footstep, expecting each second to hear her well-known voice; but gradually the atmosphere seemed to become stifling. In my mouth was a sulphurous taste, and the lamp, growing more dim, at last gave a weak flicker and went out. Rushing to the door, I found, to my astonishment, it was locked!

I dashed to the window and tried to open it, but could not. In despair I beat the door frantically with my fists and shouted. But my muffled voice seemed as weak as a child's. I doubted whether it could be heard beyond the walls.

Flinging myself upon my knees, I bent to examine the small fire, glowing like a blacksmith's forge, and discovered to my horror that the chimney had been closed, and that the grate was filled with burning charcoal. Quickly I raked it out, but the red cinders only glowed the brighter, and, even though I dashed the hearthrug upon them, I could not extinguish them.

In desperation I tried to struggle to my feet, but failed. My legs refused to support me; my head throbbed as if my skull would burst. Then a strange sensation of nausea crept over me; my starting eyes smarted as if acid had been flung into them, my tongue clave to the roof of my parched mouth, my chest seemed held in contraction by a band of iron, as half rising I fell next second, inert and helpless, a sudden darkness obliterating all my senses.

What time elapsed I have no idea. Gradually I struggled back to consciousness, and as I made desperate endeavour to steady my nerves and collect my thoughts, I suddenly became painfully aware of a bright light falling full upon me. My eyes were dazzled by the extraordinary brilliancy. I closed them again, and tried to recollect what had occurred.

"Pull yourself together, my dear fellow. You are all right now, aren't you?" asked a voice in my ear.

I recognised the tones as those of my strange guide.

"Yes," I answered mechanically. "But Sybil—where is she?"

He made no reply.

I tried to open my eyes, but again the light dazzled me. About me sounded soft sibilations and the frou-frou of silk, while the warm air seemed filled with the sickly perfume of tuberoses. My left hand was grasping the arm of a capacious saddle-bag chair, wherein I was evidently sitting, while in my right I held something, the nature of which I

could not at first determine.

My trembling fingers closed upon it more tightly a moment later, and I suddenly recognised that it was the hand of a woman! Again opening my heavy eyes, I strained them until they grew accustomed to the brightness, and was amazed to discover myself sitting in a spacious, richly-furnished drawing-room, brilliant with gilt and mirrors, while two men and two women in evening dress were standing around me, anxiety betrayed upon their pale faces. In a chair close beside mine sat a woman, whose hand I was holding.

Springing to my feet, my eyes fell full upon her. Attired in dead-white satin, a long veil hid her face, and in her hair and across her corsage were orange-blossoms. She was a bride!

Behind her—erect and motionless—was the man who had conducted me there, while at her side stood a grave, grey-haired clergyman, who at that moment was gabbling the concluding portion of the marriage service. The veil failed to conceal her wondrous beauty; in an instant I recognised her.

It was the woman I adored. A wedding-ring was upon the hand I had held!

“Speak, Sybil!” I cried. “Speak! tell me the reason of this!”

But she answered not. Only the clergyman’s droning voice broke the silence. The hand with the ring upon it lay upon her knees and I caught it up, but next second dropped it, as if I had been stung. Its contact thrilled me!

Divining my intention, the man who had brought me there dashed between us, but ere he could prevent me, I had, with a sudden movement, torn aside the veil.

Horror transfixed me. Her beauty was entrancing, but her blue eyes, wide open in a stony stare, had lost their clearness and were rapidly glazing; her lips, with their true *arc de Cupidon*, were growing cold, and from her cheeks the flush of life had departed, leaving them white as the bridal dress she wore.

I stood open-mouthed, aghast, petrified.

Sybil, the woman I loved better than life, was dead, and I had been married to her!

Chapter Three.

Ghosts of the Past.

Horrified and appalled, my startled eyes were riveted upon the flawless face that in life had entranced me.

“See! She’s dead—dead!” I gasped wildly, when a few seconds later I fully realised the ghastly truth.

Then throwing myself upon my knees, heedless of the presence of strangers, I seized her clammy hand that bore the wedding-ring, and covered it with mad, grief-impassioned caresses. In her breast was a spray of tuberoses, flowers ineffably emblematic of the grave. Faugh! how I have ever since detested their gruesome, sickly odour. There is death in their breath.

The despairing look in her sightless eyes was so horrible that I covered my face with my hands to shut it out from my gaze. The secret terror that she had dreaded, and to which she had made such veiled, gloomy references, had actually fallen. Her incredible presage of evil, which in Luchon I had at first regarded as the fantastic imaginings of a romantic disposition, had actually become an accomplished fact—some dire, mysterious catastrophe, sudden and complete, had overwhelmed her.

The woman I adored was dead!

In those moments of desolation, stricken down by a sudden grief, I bent over the slim, delicate hands that had so often grasped mine in warm affection, and there came back to me memories of the brief joyous days in the gay little mountain town, when for hours I walked by her side in rapturous transports and sat with her each evening under the trees, charmed by her manner, fascinated by her wondrous fathomless eyes, held by her beautiful countenance as under a spell. There had seemed some mysterious rapport between her soul and mine. The sun shone more brightly for me on the day she came into my world, and my heart became filled with a supreme happiness such as I, blasé and world-weary, had never known. Heaven had endowed her with one of those

women's souls embodying pity and love, a ray of joy-giving light from a better world, that consoled my being, softened my existence, and aroused within me for the first time the conviction that in this brotherhood of tears there existed one true-hearted, soft-voiced woman, who might be the sweet companion of my future life. Through those few sunny days we had been forgetful of all earth's grim realities, of all the evil thoughts of the world. We had led an almost idyllic existence, inspired by our love-making with great contempt for everything, vainly imagining that we should have no other care than that of loving one another.

Ah! how brief, alas! had been our paradise! How sudden and complete was my bereavement! how bitter my sorrow!

True, Sybil had spoken of the mysterious spectral terror which constantly held her in a paroxysm of fear; yet having been satisfied by her declaration that she was not already married, I had continued to love her with the whole strength of my being, never dreaming that her end was so near. Dead! She could no longer utter those soft, sympathetic words that had brought peace to me. No longer could she press my hand, nor smile upon me with those great eyes, clear and trusting as a child's. Only her soulless body was before me; only her chilly form that ere long would be snatched from my sight forever.

No, I could not realise that she had departed beyond recall. In mad desperation I kissed her brow in an attempt to revivify her. At that moment her sweet voice seemed raised within me, but it was a voice of remembrance that brought hot tears to my eyes.

A second later I sprang up, startled by a loud knocking at the door of the room. The unknown onlookers, breathless and silent, exchanged glances of abject terror. "Hark!" I cried. "What's that?"

"Hush!" they commanded fiercely. For a few seconds there was a dead silence, then the summons was repeated louder than before, as a deep voice outside cried:

"Open the door. We are police officers, and demand admittance in the name of the law."

Upon the small assembly the words fell like a thunderbolt.

“They have come!” gasped one of the women, pale and trembling. She was of middle age, and wore an elaborate toilette with a magnificent necklet of pearls.

“Silence! Make no answer,” the man who had conducted me from Richmond whispered anxiously. “They may pass on, and we may yet escape.”

“Escape!” I echoed, looking from one to the other; “what crime have you committed?”

A third time the knocking was repeated, when suddenly there was a loud crash, and the door, slowly breaking from its hinges, fell, with its silken portiere, heavily into the room as three detectives, springing over it, dashed towards us.

“See! there she is!” cried one of the men authoritatively, pointing to Sybil. “Arrest her!”

The two others dashed forward to execute their inspector’s orders, but as they did so the clergyman stepped quickly before her chair, and, raising his bony hand, cried:

“Back, I command you! Back! The lady for whose arrest I presume you hold a warrant has, alas! gone to where she is not amenable to the law of man.”

The men halted, puzzled.

“What do you mean?” cried the inspector.

“Look for yourselves, gentlemen,” the man answered calmly. Then, in a voice full of emotion he added, “She is dead!”

“Dead! Impossible!” all three echoed dismayed, as next second they crowded around her, gazed into her calm, sweet face, and touching her stiffening fingers, at last satisfied themselves of the terrible truth. Then they removed their hats reverently, and, aghast at the sudden and unexpected discovery, stood eagerly listening to the grave-faced man who had made the amazing announcement.

“Yes,” he continued, preserving a quiet demeanour. “Such an occurrence is undoubtedly as unexpected by you as it is bitterly painful to us. This intrusion upon the death-chamber is, I know, warranted by certain unfortunate circumstances; nevertheless it is my duty, as the officiating priest, to inform you that shortly before this lady expired she was united in matrimony by special licence to this gentleman, Mr Stuart Ridgeway, and of course if you wish you can inspect the register, which I think you will find duly in order.”

“The marriage does not concern us,” the red-faced inspector answered, murmuring in the same breath an apology for causing us unnecessary pain by forcing the door. “The lady is dead, therefore we must, of course, return our warrant unexecuted.”

The others also expressed regret at their hasty action, and, having quite satisfied themselves that Sybil was not merely unconscious, they consulted among themselves in an undertone, and afterwards withdrew with disappointment plainly portrayed upon their features.

“What is the meaning of this?” I demanded angrily of the clergyman when they had gone.

“Unfortunately I can make no explanation,” he replied.

“But while I have been unconscious you have, without my knowledge or consent, performed the ceremony of marriage, uniting me to a dead bride. You have thus rendered yourself distinctly liable to prosecution, therefore I demand to know the reason at once,” I exclaimed fiercely.

Unconcernedly he shrugged his shoulders, answering: “I regret extremely that it is beyond my power to satisfy you. No doubt all this appears exceedingly strange; nevertheless, when the truth is revealed, I venture to think you will not be inclined to judge me quite so harshly, sir. I was asked to perform a service, and have done so. This lady is your wife, although, alas! she no longer lives.”

“But why was I entrapped here to be wedded to a dying woman?”

“I have acted no part in entrapping you—as you term it,” he protested with calm dignity. “I had but one duty; I have performed that faithfully.”

“Then I am to understand that you absolutely refuse to tell me the name of my dead wife, or any facts concerning her?”

“I do.”

“Very well, then. I shall invoke the aid of the police in order to fully investigate the mystery,” I said. “That all of you fear arrest is evident from the alarm betrayed on the arrival of the officers. What guarantee have I that Sybil has not been murdered?”

“Mine,” interposed one of the men, bald-headed and grey-bearded, who had until then been standing silent and thoughtful. “I may as well inform you that I am a qualified medical practitioner, and for two years have been this lady’s medical attendant. She suffered acutely from heart-disease, and the hurry and excitement of the marriage ceremony under such strange conditions has resulted fatally. I think my certificate, combined with my personal reputation in the medical profession, will be quite sufficient to satisfy any coroner’s officer.”

Approaching my dead bride as he spoke, he tenderly closed her staring eyes, composed her hands, and, taking up the veil I had torn aside, folded it and placed it lightly across her white face.

I was about to demur, when suddenly the man who had acted as my guide placed his hand upon my shoulder, saying in a calm, serious tone:

“Remember, you have taken your oath never to attempt to elucidate this mystery.”

“Yes, but if I have suspicion that Sybil has been murdered I am justified in breaking it,” I cried in protest.

“She has not been murdered, I swear,” he replied. “Moreover, the doctor here stakes his professional reputation by giving a certificate showing natural causes.”

This did not satisfy me, and I commented in rather uncomplimentary terms upon the unsatisfactory nature of the whole proceedings.

“But before coming here you accepted my conditions,” the man said,

thrusting his hands deep into his pockets. “Sybil sought your aid to save her from a deadly peril, and you were willing to assist her. You have done so, although alas! all our efforts have been unavailing. You have had the unique experience of having been a bridegroom and a widower within ten minutes. Although I admit that there are many mysterious circumstances surrounding your tragic union, yet for the present it is impossible to give my explanation. Indeed, as I have already told you, any inquiries must inevitably increase your burden of sorrow and unhappiness. Therefore preserve silence and wait until I am able to render you full satisfaction. When the true facts are exposed, you will find that the only safeguard to ourselves lies in the present preservation of our secret.”

I observed that he was fully alive to my suspicions, that he divined them, and anxiously followed my words. I surprised a swift gleam in his eye that revealed the instinctive terror of the animal attacked at the moment of its fancied security. I felt convinced that a crime had been committed. At thought of it my heart-beats were quickened, and my nerves thrilled. Again he placed his hand upon my shoulder, but I shrank with unconquerable repugnance from that contact. “I intend to elucidate this mystery,” I said firmly. “Neither threats nor oaths shall deter me from seeking the truth.”

“Very well,” he replied hoarsely; “if you intend to violate your oath, taken before your Creator, do so. Nevertheless, I and my friends warn you of the penalty for so doing.”

“Well, and what is the penalty, pray?”

He shrugged his shoulders, but no answer passed his lips.

His face had strong individuality and vivid expression. As he stood there between the two handsomely-dressed women, in his grey furtive eyes, too wide apart, and always seeming to shun observation; in his prematurely grey hair, in his mouth set round with deep wrinkles; in his dark, blotched, bilious complexion, there seemed to be a creature of another race. What passions had worn those furrows? What vigils had hollowed those eyeballs? Was this the face of a happy man who had known neither the wearying cares of ambition, the toil of money-getting, nor the stings of wounded self-love? Why did all these marks of trouble

and exhaustion suddenly strike me as effects of a secret cause, and why was I astonished that I had not sooner sought for it?

“Then you threaten me?” I said slowly, after a moment’s pause.

“I threaten nothing,” he answered, raising his dark eyebrows, and adding, “There is no reason, as far as I can see, why we should be enemies, but rather let us be friends. Sybil’s death has brought to my heart grief quite as poignant as that which you are suffering; therefore in our mourning for one who was pure and good, should we not be united? I have given you my word that I will elucidate the mystery as soon as I feel confident that no catastrophe will follow. I consider that this should satisfy you for the present, and that your own discretion should induce you to wait at least with patience.”

As he spoke there were some little details—the quick flutter of the eyelids, the rapidly dismissed expression of disagreeable surprise when I announced my intention of breaking my oath—that did not escape me. But was it not the same with myself? I could have sworn that at the same moment he experienced sensations exactly similar to those which were catching me at the breast and in the throat. Did this not prove that a current of antipathy existed between him and me?

Why had the police held a warrant for Sybil’s arrest? Why had such care been taken to conceal her identity? Why had I been married to her so mysteriously? Why had she so suddenly passed to that land that lies beyond human ken? Had a fatal draught been forced between her lips; or had she, too, been placed in that room where I had so narrowly escaped asphyxiation?

“Since I have been in this house,” I said, “an attempt has been made to kill me. I have therefore a right to demand an explanation, or place the matter in the hands of the police.”

“There was no attempt to injure you. It was imperative that you should be rendered unconscious,” the man said.

“And you expect me to accept all this, and make no effort to ascertain the true facts?” I cried. “Sybil feared an unknown terror, but it appears to me more than probable that she lived in constant dread of assassination.”

The man frowned, and upon the faces of those about him settled dark, ominous expressions.

“It is useless to continue this argument in the presence of the dead,” he said. “I have your address, and, if you desire it, I will call upon you to-morrow.”

“As you wish,” I replied stiffly. “I have no inclination to remain in this house longer than necessary.”

Crossing to where the body of Sybil reclined, I slowly raised the veil, gazing for some moments upon her calm, pale face, as restful as if composed in peaceful sleep. Bending, I pressed my lips to her clammy brow, then taking a piece of the drooping orange-blossom from her hair, I replaced the veil, and, overcome with emotion, walked unsteadily out over the fallen door, followed by the man whom I felt instinctively was my enemy.

Together we descended the fine staircase, brilliantly lit by a huge chandelier of crystal and hung with large time-mellowed paintings, into a spacious hall, in which a footman with powdered hair awaited us. Half dazed, my senses not having recovered from the shock caused to them, first by the charcoal fumes and secondly by the appalling discovery of Sybil’s death, I remember that when the flunkey threw open the door a hansom was awaiting me, and that my strange companion himself gave the cabman my address. I have also a distinct recollection of having refused to grasp my enemy’s proffered hand, but it was not until I found myself seated alone before the dying embers of the fire in my chambers in Shaftesbury Avenue, my mind troubled to the point of torment, that it suddenly occurred to me that in leaving the mysterious mansion I had been culpably negligent of the future.

I had actually failed to take notice either of the exterior of the house, or of the thoroughfare in which it was situated!

I had, I knew, driven along Oxford Street eastward to Regent Street, and thence home, but from what direction the conveyance had approached the Marble Arch I knew not. In blank despair I paced my room, for I saw I should be compelled to search London for a house, of which all I knew of

the exterior was that it had a wide portico in front and was approached from the pavement by three steps.

My omission to take notice of its aspect overwhelmed me with despair, for there were thousands of similar houses in the West-End, and I knew that, while I prosecuted my inquiries, those responsible for Sybil's death would be afforded ample time to effect their escape.

That such a search was beset with difficulty I was well aware. But nervousness gave way to determination, at once feverish and fixed, and it was in a mood of perfect self-mastery that, after a long period of mental conflict, I flung myself upon my couch with my plan of operations clearly laid out, and lay thinking over them until the yellow light of the wintry dawn struggled in between the curtains.

Chapter Four.

A Deepening Mystery.

As the cheerless morning wore on, I sat after breakfast gloomily smoking, trying to verify my first impression that Sybil had been the victim of foul play in the hope of dispelling it. But it was, on the contrary, deepened.

Either I was wrong to think thus; and at any price I was determined to convince myself by facts that I was wrong, or I was right. The sole resource henceforth remaining to me for the preservation of my self-respect and the unburdening of my conscience was ardent and ceaseless search after certainty.

Each hour as I pondered I was plunged more profoundly into the gulf of suspicion. Yet the very position of the intricate problem which I had before me seemed to forbid all hope of discovering anything whatsoever without a formal inquiry. With foolish disregard for the future, I had taken an oath to seek no explanation of what I might witness within that mysterious house; I had placed myself irrevocably under the thrall of the strange, cynical individual who had acted as Sybil's messenger! Yet, now that Sybil was dead and everything pointed to a crime, I was fully justified in seeking the truth, and had resolved upon bringing the assassin to punishment.

During this debauch of melancholy the door opened and my old friend and college chum, Captain Jack Bethune, burst into the room exclaiming:

"Mornin', Stuart, old chap. That ancient servitor of yours, Saunders, told me that you're a bit seedy. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I said, languidly grasping his hand. "Sit down. To what good or evil fortune do I owe the honour of a visit at this unearthly hour?"

"Good fortune, old chap, good fortune!" he laughed, flinging off his overcoat and throwing himself back in the capacious armchair. "The best fortune that could befall a man. Congratulate me, Stuart."

“Upon what? Have you finished a new book, or has your publisher been unduly generous?”

“Neither. It isn’t a book; it’s a woman!”

“A woman?” I inquired, puzzled.

“I’m engaged to be married, old fellow.”

“To Dora Stretton?”

“To Dora Stretton, the most adorable girl in the world.”

I sighed; not because I regretted his choice. Far from it. Truth to tell, I envied him his happiness.

“With all my heart I congratulate you, Jack,” I cried next second, springing up and grasping his hand. “I wish you every prosperity. I have known Dora ever since a child, and although she may move in a smart set, yet I have had opportunities that you have not of observing her true-heartedness and—what shall I say?—her hatred of the hollow shams and artificiality by which she is surrounded.”

“Yes, you know her far better than I do,” he admitted, lighting a cigarette and adding, “I’d take your opinion upon a woman’s character before anybody else’s. As a novelist, I have gained a reputation for portraying female character, yet I assure you my ability in that direction only exists in the imaginations of my reviewers. I can write about women, but, hang it, old chap, I’m absolutely ignorant of them in real life. You, a calm philosopher, can analyse a woman’s nature and lay every fibre of it bare as if by the scalpel; while I, finding my conclusions always hopelessly at fault when attempting to study from life, have written merely what I have believed to be artistic.”

“Your books are popular, so I suppose your confession proves that pure fiction pays better without an admixture of fact,” I laughed.

“Yes,” he said; “I’m afraid that is so,” and then went on smoking with an expression of joyful contentment.

John Bethune, known as the “soldier-novelist,” was a handsome, well-built fellow about thirty-two, with dark hair, a carefully-trimmed moustache, and a pair of merry brown eyes that were an index to the genuine bonhomie which was the chief trait of his character. Though he entertained none of the idiosyncrasies or eccentricities of dress common to many writers, he was, although a smart officer, nevertheless a true Bohemian—always gay and light-hearted and the most popular man in his regiment.

A thoroughly good fellow, he deserved every bit of the success he had attained. The son of a struggling barrister, he had graduated, then joined the army, afterwards becoming an anonymous contributor to a Scotch review of hypercritical trend, edited by the distinguished critic, Mr Goring. Having turned his attention to novel-writing in combination with soldiering, he had made a brilliant success with his first book, which had been increased by each other that had been issued. On both sides of the Atlantic the newspapers were full of paragraphs regarding his sayings and doings, many of their writers being fond of alluding to him as “one of Mr Goring’s young men,” and for the past three years he had been recognised as one of the leading “younger novelists,” whose wondrous insight into the complexities and contradictions of woman’s nature had earned for him a world-wide reputation.

As he chatted about the woman to whom he had become engaged, I expressed genuine satisfaction at his announcement. The honourable Dora Stretton, although sister of the Countess of Fyneshade, one of the smartest women in England, was altogether sweet and adorable, with a winning manner and a face voted pretty wherever she appeared. She hated town life, for, being a splendid horsewoman, she loved all outdoor sport, and was never so happy as when riding with the Fitzwilliam pack, or driving her spanking bays over the broad level Lincolnshire highways. Outwardly she was a smart woman of to-day, but, as her childhood’s friend, I knew that beneath her tightly-laced Parisian corset and the veneer that she was compelled to assume, there beat a true heart that yearned for the honest love of a man.

So I congratulated Jack, explaining how Blatherwycke, old Lady Stretton’s estate in Northamptonshire, joined that of my father, and how Dora, her sister Mabel, now Countess of Fyneshade, and myself had

known each other ever since the time when our nurses gossiped. Cruel-tongued scandalmongers had said that her ladyship, finding her estates impoverished on the death of her husband, the Viscount, gave Mabel in marriage to the Earl of Fyneshade, a widower nearly twice her age, in exchange for a service he rendered her by paying off a certain mortgage upon the property. But, be that how it might, Dora had five thousand a year in her own right, and this, together with Jack's fair income from his royalties, would suffice to keep them in comfort, if not in affluence.

"I had heard that Dora was likely to become the wife of old Lord Wansford," I observed at last.

"Yes," he answered in a low tone. "Don't mention it to anybody, but her ladyship is simply furious because Dora and I love each other. She had set her mind on her daughter marrying a peer."

"Then you haven't yet obtained her ladyship's consent—eh?"

"No. We love each other, and Dora says she intends to marry me, therefore we have agreed to defy the maternal anger."

"Quite right, old chap," I said. "Under the circumstances you are justified. Besides, knowing the unhappiness in the Fyneshade menage, Dora is not likely to marry anybody she does not love."

"True," he said. Then tossing his cigarette into the grate he rose, and declaring he had a business appointment, he struggled into his overcoat and, grasping my hand in adieu, said:

"You seem confoundedly glum to-day. Shake yourself up, old fellow. We shall soon be hearing of your marriage!"

"My marriage!" I gasped, starting. His jovial words cut me to the quick. They had an ominous meaning. "My marriage!"

"Yes," he said. "We shall soon be hearing all about it."

"Never, I hope—never."

"Bah! I was of the same mind until a month ago. Some day you, like

myself, will discover one woman who is not a coquette. Ta-ta for the present," and he strode airily out, whistling a gay air, and leaving me alone with my bitter sorrow.

Once or twice during our conversation I had been sorely tempted to disclose the whole of the dismal circumstances and seek his advice, but I had hesitated. He was perhaps too full of his newly-found joy to trouble himself over my grief, and, after all, he might consider me a fool for allowing myself to become fascinated by a mere chance-met acquaintance about whom I knew absolutely nothing, and whose principal efforts were directed towards enveloping herself in an impenetrable veil of mystery. No; I resolved to preserve my own secret and act upon the plans I had already formulated. With bitterness I sat and brooded over Burns' lines:

> Pleasures are like poppies spread.
> You seize the flower, its bloom is shed.
> Or like the snowflake on the river,
> A moment white—then gone forever.

At noon I roused myself and started forth on the first stage of a search after truth, a search which I swore within myself I would not relinquish until I had learnt Sybil's true history; nay, I had resolved to make the elucidation of the mystery of her tragic end the one object in my life.

It occurred to me that from the police I might at least ascertain her name and the nature of the information upon which the warrant had been issued; therefore I walked to New Scotland Yard and sought audience of the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department. For half an hour I aired my heels in a bare, cheerless waiting-room at the end of a long stone corridor on the first floor, until at last a secretary entered with my card, and an intimation from the Chief that he regretted he had "no information to give on the subject."

Argument with the secretary proved unavailing, therefore I left, feeling that I could hope for no assistance from the police.

Next it occurred to me to search the record of special marriage licences at Doctors' Commons, and, taking a cab there, I was not long in obtaining

what appeared to be the first clue, for at the Faculty Office I was shown the affidavit that had been made in application for a special licence, which read as follows:

“Canterbury Diocese, December 8, 1891.

“Appeared personally, Sybil Henniker, spinster, of Hereford Road, Bayswater, and prayed a special licence for the solemnisation of matrimony between her and Stuart Ridgeway, bachelor, of 49, Shaftesbury Avenue, London, and made oath that she believed that there is no impediment of kindred or alliance, or any other lawful cause, nor any suit commenced in any Ecclesiastical Court, to bar or hinder the proceedings of the said matrimony according to the tenor of such licence.

“Sworn before me,—

“John Hatchard (Registrar).”

The special licence had, it appeared, been granted on the following day, but the clerk said the applicant had been seen by his colleague, now absent.

Feeling that at least I should know the whereabouts of the strange company who held in their charge the lifeless form of the woman I loved, I drove rapidly to Bayswater, but when the cab turned from Westbourne Grove into Hereford Road, and I saw that the house for which I was searching, the number of which appeared in the licence, was a small tobacconist and newsvendor’s, my heart again sank within me.

I alighted and made inquiry of the shopkeeper, but she knew of no young lady named Sybil, nor of any person named Henniker. Once again, then, I was foiled; the address given in the affidavit was false.

For hours I drove aimlessly about the streets and squares lying between Praed Street and Oxford Street, vaguely looking for a house I had never distinctly seen, until at last it grew dark; then, cold and wearied, I returned to my chambers.

As day succeeded day I continued my search, but could not grasp a single certainty. At Somerset House I could discover no facts regarding

either the marriage or the death, and advertisements I inserted in various newspapers, inquiring for the cabman who drove me home on the fatal morning, elicited no reply.

Jack Bethune dropped in to see me daily and pestered me with inquiries regarding the cause of my gloominess. Little, however, did he imagine that I had been engaged through a whole fortnight in searching patiently and methodically the registers of the great metropolitan cemeteries. To Kensal Green, Highgate, Abney Park, Nunhead, Dulwich, Brompton, Norwood, Crystal Palace, Lee, and elsewhere I went, always searching for the names of Sybil Henniker or Sybil Ridgeway. This investigation proved long and, alas! futile. I could obtain no clue whatever, all trace of her had been so carefully hidden as to defy my vigilance.

At last, however, a month after that fatal night and just when the prospect of misery which my future offered seemed too terrible for endurance, I suddenly made a discovery. It was in the London office of the Woking Cemetery Company that I found in the register an entry of an interment on the second day following the midnight ceremony, of “Sybil Ridgeway, wife of Stuart Ridgeway, of Shaftesbury Avenue.” The address whence the body was removed was not given, but, taking the next train from Waterloo to Woking, I was not long in finding, by aid of the cemetery-keeper’s plan, away in a far corner of the ground a newly-made grave.

Overcome with emotion, I stood before it in the fast-falling wintry twilight, and saw lying upon the mound of brown earth a magnificent wreath of white immortelles. Attached to it was a limp visiting-card. Eagerly I took it up and inspected it.

Upon it, traced in ink that had become blurred and half-effaced by the rain, there appeared some words. As I read them they seemed to glow in letters of fire; they held me spell-bound.

I lost courage to pursue my cold, calm, reasonable deductions; a kind of hallucination came upon me—a mental picture of her tragic end—and I felt my reason reel.

A vertigo of terror seized me, as though the breath of destiny swept over my brow.

The card secured to the great wreath was my own—the one I had given Sybil on the first evening we had met in the Casino Garden—but the words written upon it amazed me. I stood breathless, dumbfounded, holding it between my trembling fingers, utterly unable to realise the truth.

A portion of the writing upon it was in a well-formed man's hand, the remainder in a heavy calligraphy totally different. The rains had rendered the writing faint and brown, yet in the fast-falling gloom I was enabled to decipher that one side bore the inscription—

"From your heart-broken husband—Stuart."

Then, turning it over, I read in a distinctly feminine hand the strange exhortation—

"Seek, and you may find."

What did it mean? Was it an actual message to me from the grave? Did it not appear like a declaration from my dead love herself that some mysterious crime had been committed, and that she left its elucidation in my hands? I became lost in bewilderment.

The inscription, purporting to be written by myself, was not in my handwriting, and I was puzzled to divine its meaning. That it had been penned at a date prior to the mysterious woman's words appeared certain, as the lines were almost obliterated. Yet on reflection I saw that this fact might be accounted for if that side of the card had been uppermost, and thus more exposed. But the mysterious words, "Seek, and you may find," were written in a different ink, upon which the action of the weather had had but little effect. The exhortation stood out plainly before my wondering eyes. By whose hand had it been traced? True, it was not addressed personally to me, yet so ominous were the words that I could not rid myself of the conviction that they were meant as an appeal to me.

Why the wreath had been so carefully placed upon the grave, as if it were a tribute from myself, was an inscrutable mystery; and the five firmly-written words on the reverse of the card contained a mystic meaning that I could not follow.

For a long time I remained there until night closed in and the wintry mists gathered; then, detaching the card and placing it in my pocket-book, I wended my way between the white, ghostly tombs towards the cemetery gate, plunged deep in thought.

Suddenly, as I turned a corner sharply, I came face to face with an ill-dressed man, who had apparently been lurking behind a great marble monument. In the gloom I could not distinguish his features, and as he turned and walked in the opposite direction I concluded that he was a grave-digger or gardener, so dismissed the incident from my mind. Yet half an hour later, while waiting on the platform of Woking Station, a man who passed me beneath a lamp gave me a swift inquisitive look. His strange expression attracted my attention, and as I turned and watched his retreating figure it seemed familiar. Then I remembered. It was the same individual who had apparently been watching my movements beside Sybil's grave. Was he "shadowing" me?

Again I passed him, but he was wary, and bent feigning to eagerly scan a time-table, thereby hiding his features. Nevertheless, before the train arrived I managed by means of a ruse to obtain an uninterrupted view of his pale, sad-looking countenance.

At first I was prompted to approach him boldly and demand the reason he watched my actions, but on reflection I became convinced that my suspicions were groundless, and that after all he was merely a lonely mourner like myself. Perhaps he, too, had come from London to visit the last resting-place of some dearly-loved friend; perhaps, even while I viewed him with unjust suspicion, he had actually been sympathising with me. No, I felt certain that my apprehensions were absurd, and that the man had no sinister motive.

Alone in my room some hours later I placed the card carefully in the fender to dry, and sat smoking and thinking over the strangely ominous words upon it.

I could not rid myself of the conviction that my well-beloved had been the victim of foul play. The words "Seek, and you may find" rang for ever in my ears, yet in face of the declaration of the doctor I had no proof that murder had actually been committed. I could discover no report of an

inquest having been held, and as the police had declined to assist me I knew that I must work single-handed and unaided.

Noticing that the card was now dry, I knocked the ashes from my pipe, then slowly stooping, picked it up. I turned it over to re-read the mysterious words of entreaty, but a cry of dismay escaped me when next instant I found the back of the card a perfect blank. On that side not a trace of writing remained.

The puzzling mystic sentence had faded. The words had been wholly obliterated as by some unseen hand.

The card fell from my nerveless fingers.

Presently it occurred to me that by again damping it the mysterious entreaty might be rendered visible, and, taking the ewer that Saunders had placed beside the tantalus stand, I dipped the precious document in water. For half an hour I alternately wetted it and carefully dried it with my handkerchief, but all effort to restore the writing proved unavailing. The surface became rubbed by continued immersions, but the words had utterly vanished, as if by magic.

Some hours afterwards I found myself doubting if I had ever actually seen those strange words, and wondering whether after all they were not a mere chimera of my disordered imagination. So strangely ominous were they that I could not help feeling a trifle uncertain that they had actually existed, and I remember that as I sat brooding over my sorrow I feared lest I had been the victim of one of those strange hallucinations which I had heard were precursory of insanity.

Twice I visited the grave of my dead love, but inquiries of the cemetery-keeper elicited no clue. Times without number I felt prompted to explain the strange circumstances to Jack Bethune, but always hesitated, deeming silence the best course. Whether this secrecy regarding my heart-sorrow was beneficial to my interests, I cannot say, but the occurrence of at least one incident caused me self-congratulation that my friends were unaware of the strange drama that wrecked my happiness and overshadowed my life. It is, alas! true, as François Coppee has said, “*Pour le mélancolique, le soleil se couche déjà le matin*.”

Chapter Five.

Dora’s Engagement.

One night Jack dashed into my chambers and carried me off to a reception at the house of John Thackwell, the well-known Lancashire millionaire, at Hyde Park Gate. He would hear no excuses, for Dora was to be there, and he pointed out that I had not yet congratulated her upon her engagement. This fact alone induced me to accompany him, but, truth to tell, I had only once before accepted Thackwell’s hospitality, and on that occasion had been terribly bored.

Thackwell had risen from a carding-hand to be sole proprietor of extensive mills at Oldham, and a dozen other great spinning mills in the neighbourhood of Manchester. This Lancashire cotton-king was bluff, honest, and unassuming, and still retained all the peculiarities of the dialect of his youth. He had tried to enter the gate of Society by the Parliamentary pathway, but the electors of Bamborough had returned a young sprig of the aristocracy by a narrow majority, notwithstanding the fact that the cotton-king had built a fresh wing to one of the hospitals, and presented the town with a brand new red-brick free library. In chagrin he had come to London, bought one of the finest mansions overlooking Hyde Park, and was now endeavouring to enter the charmed circle by entertaining all and sundry on a scale lavish even for millionaires.

Although the bluff old bachelor was fond of placing his “J.P.” after his name, dropping his “h’s,” and referring on inopportune occasions to the fact that when a lad he had assisted to build his great mill at Oldham by carrying hods of mortar up a ladder, he was nevertheless popular among a certain set. Many scheming and impecunious mothers with titles and marriageable daughters coveted his wealth, and it was no secret that several of the men registered in “Debrett,” who “looked in” at his monthly functions, were indebted to him for substantial financial assistance.

On arrival, we found the great magnificently-furnished rooms crowded almost to suffocation by a brilliant but decidedly mixed throng. Some of the men who nodded to us were high-priests of Mammon, officers who lounged in clubs without any visible means of subsistence, and idlers

about town; but there was also a fair sprinkling of those leisurely well-dressed people who constitute what is known as London, and I noticed at once that on the whole the guests were of a much better set than when I had before partaken of the millionaire's hospitality. Society resembles a bal masqué, where the women never unmask themselves.

At the moment we were announced, Thackwell, a burly, florid-faced, grey-bearded man in ill-fitting clothes, and with an enormous diamond solitaire in the centre of his crumpled shirt-front, was talking loudly with old Lady Stretton, who was congratulating him upon the completion of the beautiful frescoes by the Italian artists he had employed. As I approached, I heard the millionaire reply:

"It's shaping gradely weel, but after all I get no more pleasure out of life than when I wor a journeyman. Yet a chap with any spirit likes to get on, and when he has put his heart into a job, feels as if he would raythер dee than be bet. It's cost me a sight o' money, but it doesn't pay to scamp."

Then, noticing me, he gripped my hand heartily, and to Bethune cried:

"Well, Jack, lad, how goes it?"

"Jack, lad," smiled as he made polite reply, but did not seem to greatly admire this style of greeting, albeit the soldier-novelist knew the cotton-king intimately. Truly, old Thackwell was an incongruity in Society.

Lady Stretton smiled pleasantly, and bowed to us as we pushed our way forward among the crowd, and we were not long in discovering the Honourable Dora, Jack's adored, comfortably ensconced in a cosy-corner, chatting with three men we knew.

"Halloa, Ridgeway!" cried one, a club acquaintance. Then dropping his voice he added: "Unusual to find you in the cotton-palace, isn't it?"

"I've been here once before," I replied briefly, as, turning to Dora, I sank into a low chair near her and began to chat. Soon the others left, and Jack and I were alone with her. When I offered her my congratulations, she clutched my arm quickly, whispering:

"Don't let anyone overhear you. Remember, no announcement has yet

been made, and Ma is quite inexorable."

"I'm looking for it in the Morning Post each day," I laughed, while as punishment she playfully tapped me with her ostrich-feather fan.

Though three years had elapsed since she had kissed the hand of her Sovereign, Society had not spoiled her. She was just as fresh, light-hearted, and ingenuous as I remembered her in her hoyden days at Blatherwycke, and as she sat talking with her lover and myself I saw how thoroughly charming and brilliant she was.

Her fund of vivacity was, I knew, inexhaustible. When she wished to do honour to a melancholy occasion, her vivacity turned any slight sorrow she had into hysterical weeping; when the occasion was joyful, it became a torrent of frivolity that is delightful when poured forth by a happy girl of twenty-two. This evening the occasion was distinctly joyful. Men had complimented her upon her dress, and she had a large sense of success.

When she spoke to Jack there was a love-look in her dark brilliant eyes that was unmistakable, and she was altogether handsome and fascinating. Small-featured, hers was a delicately-moulded oval face with pointed chin and pouting lips, while at the back of her well-poised head, her maid had deftly coiled her wealth of dark-brown hair, wherein a diamond aigrette glittered. Her smart gown was of pale pink chine silk, patterned in green and darker pink. The coat bodice of darker pink moiré boasted diamond buttons, kilted frills of ivory lace, the sleeves of kilted pale-green chiffon, and a large bow of green chiffon with draped ends to the waist over a jabot of ivory lace.

Many turned and looked at her as they passed. The glow of excitement and success burned brightly in her cheeks, and no one accused Dora of using rouge. Lady Stretton eyed us viciously once or twice; nevertheless, Jack held in conversation the girl he loved, and they laughed happily together. He was telling us of an amusing incident that had occurred during the exercise of the troopers on Hounslow Heath that morning, and I was feeling myself de trop when Dora, looking up suddenly, exclaimed:

"Why, here's Mabel!"

Turning quickly I found her elder sister, the Countess of Fyneshade, in a

marvellous creation in yellow, leaning over my chair.

“I’ve come across to talk to you, Mr Ridgeway,” she exclaimed, smiling. “I saw that Jack had quite monopolised Dora. Their public love-making is really becoming a scandal.” Then she seated herself in a dimly-lit corner close by, and motioned me to a chair near her.

Chapter Six.

The Countess of Fyneshade.

Three years Dora's senior, the Countess was dark, strikingly handsome, an accomplished horsewoman, and accredited one of the smartest women in Society. Wedded to an elderly peer, she flirted outrageously, and always had one or two younger cavaliers in her train. Fyneshade was scarcely ever seen with his wife, and many were the stories afloat regarding the serious differences existing between them. Outwardly, however, the Countess was always gay, witty, and brilliant. She displayed exquisite taste, and men voted her "capital company." It is true that beside her pretty women seemed plain and middle-aged, and well-dressed women looked dowdy, but since her marriage she had become just a trifle too smart for my taste.

Dora was no doubt pleased that her sister had taken me off, so that she might exchange confidences with Jack, but I confess I was not one of the drivelling crowd that admired Fyneshade's wife.

When I had known her at Blatherwycke, in the days before her presentation, she had been as frank and merry as her sister, but since her union with the Earl she had sadly changed, acquiring an artificiality and a penchant for flirtation, apparently living only to be flattered and admired. True, she moved in one of the most select circles, and no really smart house-party was complete without her; but, knowing her as intimately as I did, it was not surprising perhaps that I had long ago arrived at the conclusion that her gaiety and recklessness were feigned, and I felt some sorrow for her.

She was lounging back talking nonsense at the highest possible speed, for ever exchanging greetings and salutations in the same breath, and as I calmly contemplated her I wondered whether her domestic unhappiness was the sole cause of the secret trouble which she strove to mask.

"Jack and Dora are really too absurd," she was saying, glancing over to them. "They are childishly fond of one another, but what the result will be I dread to think."

“The result? Why, marriage,” I said laughing.

She shrugged her shoulders, causing the diamonds at her white throat to sparkle, elevated her dark arched brows, and exclaimed:

“Of course Jack is popular, and has a fair income, and everybody likes him, but Ma is absolutely determined that Dora shall marry a title.”

“Which means a loveless union with an elderly husband, and no happiness within her own home—eh?”

She looked at me inquiringly, and her lips quivered slightly.

“You are cruel, Stuart,” she answered seriously. “You mean that I am an illustration of the victim of a loveless marriage.”

I nodded. Then I said: “We are such old acquaintances, Mabel, that I feel myself permitted to speak candidly. I have watched you for a long time, and I know that you do not, you cannot love Fyneshade; you are unhappily married, and all the pleasure of life lies beyond your own home. Gossips’ tongues try to wound your reputation—well, that’s not my affair, but—”

“Gossips’ tongues!” she echoed hoarsely. “What care I for the lies of scandalmongers? True, men admire me, flatter me, and say pretty things that please me, but surely I am mistress of my own actions? If I chose to flirt with my coachman it would be of no concern to anybody except Fyneshade.”

“You misconstrue my meaning,” I said quietly. “It was my intention to ask you whether you would desire Dora to lead a life similar to yours, or whether you would allow her to seek happiness with the man she loves.”

In hesitation she opened and closed her fan. At last, in a harsh, strained voice, quite unusual to her, she answered:

“Now that you have spoken so plainly, Stuart, I am compelled to admit the truth,” and with a sigh she continued: “You are quite right when you say that mine was a loveless marriage, but even you cannot imagine how bitter is my misery. Once I was as happy as my sister there, and believed

that I could love a man as devotedly as she does Jack, but my mother led me to believe that wealth brought love, and I sacrificed myself to rescue her from her creditors. The result has been three long years of wretchedness and duplicity, of sorrow, misery, and despair. Wealth and luxury are mine, it is true, and my diamonds are the envy of the feminine half of London, but—but I have no happiness, no object in life, no love. I hate everything, and most of all I hate myself."

"And why do you hate yourself?" I asked sympathetically.

"For reasons known only to myself," she answered evasively. "Ah! you little dream, Stuart, what a life mine is—at least, the life I am leading now. Another year of it will kill me, or drive me mad."

"Am I then to understand by your words that there is truth in this gossip about Prince Starikoff and yourself at Royat?" I asked seriously.

She drew a deep breath and bit her lip. I saw I had approached a delicate subject. Her words had aroused my suspicions that there was some foundation for the scandal freely circulated regarding a fracas that had taken place at the little French watering-place of Royat, a month or so before, between Fyneshade and a Russian Prince named Starikoff.

"You have no right, Stuart, to question me upon my private affairs," she said frigidly. "*Les calomnies n'ennuient jamais*. I know the Prince, it is true, but I had no intention that my words should convey the meaning you choose to put upon them, and I have no wish that we should pursue the subject further."

"I bow to your desire, of course," I said. "My sole object in speaking to you thus was to urge you to plead Jack's cause with your mother. I know well enough that Lord Wansford admires Dora, and that Lady Stretton looks upon him with favour. But surely his is an unenviable reputation. If you were a man I could speak more plainly, but to you I can only say that I would never allow a sister of mine to become his wife. I would rather see her marry an honest working man."

The Countess' seriousness suddenly vanished, and she laughed lightly as she answered:

“I really believe that after all, dear old boy, you are in love with Dora yourself. I know you used to be rather fond of her in the old days, and am inclined to think that in reality you are Jack’s rival.”

“No, not at all,” I said. “Bethune is my friend; so is Dora. I merely desire to see them happy, and if I can save your sister from a life of wretchedness with Wansford, I shall feel that at least I have acted as her friend.”

“Rubbish!” the Countess exclaimed impatiently. “Marriage nowadays is a mere commercial transaction; very few people marry for love. An affectionate husband is apt to be jealous, and jealousy is decidedly bourgeois. Besides, Jack hasn’t the means to keep Dora as she should be kept. It would mean a red-brick villa in a remote suburb with a couple of servants, I suppose. Why, she would leave him in six months.”

“No,” I said. “Surely love and sufficient to provide comfort is better than loathing and thirty thousand a year! Scarcely a man in England or America is better known than Jack Beaune.”

“I was only aggravating you,” she said with a tantalising smile a moment later. “I quite admit the force of your argument, but to argue is useless. Mother has set her mind upon Lord Wansford, and, although I should like to see Dora marry Jack, I’m afraid there’s but little chance of the match—unless, of course, they throw over the maternal authority altogether and —”

The words froze upon her lips. With her eyes fixed beyond me, she started suddenly and turned deathly pale, as if she had seen an apparition. Alarmed at her sudden change of manner, and fearing that she was about to faint, I turned in my chair, and was just in time to come face to face with a tall military-looking man who was sauntering by with a fair, insipid-looking girl in pink upon his arm.

For an instant our eyes met. It was a startling encounter. We glared at each other for one brief second, both open-mouthed in amazement. Then, smiling cynically at Mabel, he hurried away, being lost next second in the laughing, chattering crowd.

I had recognised the face instantly. It was the mysterious individual who had met me at Richmond and conducted me to Sybil! My first impulse

was to spring up and dash after him, but, noticing the Countess was on the point of fainting, I rushed across to Dora and borrowed her smelling-salts. These revived my companion, who fortunately had not created a scene by losing consciousness, but the unexpected encounter had evidently completely unnerved her, for she was trembling violently, and in her eyes was a wild, haggard look, such as I had never before witnessed.

“That man recognised you,” I said a few moments later. “Who is he?”

“What man?” she gasped with well-feigned surprise. “I was not aware that any man had noticed me.”

“The fellow who passed with a fair girl in pink.”

“I saw no girl in pink,” she replied. “The heat of this crowded room upset me—it caused my faintness.” Then, noticing my expression of doubt, she added, “You don’t appear to believe me.”

“I watched him smile at you,” I answered calmly.

“He smiled! Yes, he smiled at me!” she said hoarsely, as if to herself. “He is the victor and I the vanquished. He laughs because he wins, but—” She stopped short without finishing the sentence, as if suddenly recollecting my presence, and annoyed that she should have involuntarily uttered these words.

“Tell me, Mabel, who he is,” I inquired. “I have met him before, and to me he is a mystery.”

“To me also he is a mystery,” she said, with knit brows. “If he is your friend, take my advice and end your friendship speedily.”

“But is he not your friend?” I asked.

“I knew him—once,” she answered in a low voice; adding quickly: “If I remain here I shall faint. Do take me to my carriage at once.”

She rose unsteadily, bade good-night to her sister and Jack, then taking my arm accompanied me downstairs to the great hall.

It was an entirely new phase of the mystery that the Countess of Fyneshade should be acquainted with my strange, sinister-faced conductor. That she feared him was evident, for while there had been an unmistakable look of taunting triumph in his face, she had flinched beneath his gaze and nearly fainted. Her declaration that she had recognised no man at that moment, her strenuous efforts to remain calm, and her subsequent admission that he was her enemy, all pointed to the fact that she was well acquainted with him; and although, as we stood while her carriage was being found, I asked her fully a dozen times to disclose his name or something about him, she steadily refused. It was a secret that she seemed determined to preserve at all hazards.

When she grasped my hand in farewell she whispered, “Regard what I have told you as a secret between friends. I have been foolish, but I will try to make amends. Adieu!” Then she stepped into her carriage, and I went up into the drawing-room in search of the mysterious dark-visaged guest, whose appearance had produced such a sudden, almost electric effect upon her. Through several rooms, the great conservatory, and the corridors I searched, but could neither discover my strange companion on that eventful night, nor the pale-faced girl in pink. For fully half an hour I wandered about, my eager eyes on the alert, but apparently they had both disappeared on being recognised.

Did this strange individual fear to meet me face to face?

Though my mind was filled with memories of that fateful night when I had been joined in matrimony to my divinity, I nevertheless chatted with several women I knew, and at last found myself again with Dora, “Jack, lad,” being carried off by our energetic old host to be introduced to the buxom daughter of some Lancashire worthy.

Dora pulled a wry face and smiled, but we talked gayly together until the soldier-novelist returned. Soon afterwards, however, old Lady Stretton came up to us and carried off her daughter, while Jack shared my cab as far as his chambers, where we parted.

Chapter Seven.

On Life’s Quicksands.

At home I cast myself in my chair and threw myself into an ocean of memories. I did not switch on the light, but mused on, gazing into the darkness, now and then lit up by the ruddy flames as they shot forth from the grate and cast great quivering shadows, like dancing spectres, on the walls and ceiling. Ever and anon a momentary flash would hover about the antique silver ewer or glint along the old oak sideboard, which, like a vague dark mass, filled up an angle in the room, or play about the set of old china or the pair of antique vases on the mantelshelf. This prevailing gloom, penetrated by fitful gleams, was soothing after the glare and glitter of what had irreverently been termed the cotton-palace, and as the fickle light fell in spectral relief about the gloom-hidden furniture, I mused on in coldest pessimism.

As I sat thinking what I had lived through, scenes in many climes and pictures of various cities rose before my mind, but one face alone stood out boldly before me, the sweet countenance of the woman I had loved.

I recollected the strange events of that fateful night of grief and terror, and reflected upon the recognition between the Countess and the unknown man whom she had admitted was her enemy. How suddenly and completely he had disappeared! Yet it was apparent that he held some strange influence over Fyneshade’s wife, for she feared to tell me his name or disclose her secret. Even though he had brushed past me and his cold, glittering eyes had gazed into my face, he had again eluded me. The expression of triumph upon his dark countenance was still plainly before me, a look full of of portent and evil.

I met Dora several times, once riding in the Park, once at the theatre with Lady Stretton, and once in Park Lane with her lover. From her I learnt that the Countess had been very unwell ever since that evening at Thackwell’s, and had not been out. Her doctor had recommended complete rest for a week, and suggested that she should afterwards go to the Riviera for a change.

Was this extreme nervousness from which she was suffering the result of the unexpected encounter with the man she held in dread? I felt inclined to call at Eaton Square, but doubted whether, if she were ill, she would receive me.

One bright dry morning, about ten days later, I was strolling aimlessly along Regent Street with Jack Bethune, who, knowing that Dora would be out shopping, had come out to look for her. About half-way along the thoroughfare some unknown influence prompted me to halt before a photographer's window and inspect a series of new pictures of celebrities, when suddenly my eye fell upon an object which, placed in the most prominent position in the centre of the window, caused me to utter a cry of surprise.

Enclosed in a heavy frame of oxidised silver was a beautifully-finished cabinet portrait of Sybil!

The frame, a double one, also contained the portrait of a young pleasant-faced man of about twenty-five, who wore his moustache carefully curled, and about whose features was a rather foreign expression. The picture of my dead love riveted my attention, and as I stood gazing at it with my face glued to the glass, Jack chaffed me, saying:

"What's the matter, old chap? Who's the beauty?" His flippant words annoyed me.

"A friend," I snapped. "Wait for me. I'm going in to buy it."

"On the stage, I suppose?" he hazarded. "Awfully good-looking, whoever she is."

"No, she's not on the stage," I answered brusquely, leaving him and entering the shop.

At my request the frame was brought out of the window, and in response to my inquiries regarding it the manager referred to his books, an operation which occupied considerable time. Meanwhile Jack, who had found Dora, had rushed in, announced his intention of calling on me in the evening, and left.

At last the photographer's manager came to me, ledger in hand, saying: "Both photographs were taken at the same time. I remember quite distinctly that the young lady accompanied the gentleman, and it was at her expense and special request that they were framed together and exhibited in our window. The prints were taken hurriedly because the gentleman was going abroad and wanted to take one with him."

"What name did they give?"

"Henniker."

"And the address?" I demanded breathlessly.

The photographer consulted his book closely, and replied: "The prints appear to have been sent to Miss Henniker, 79 Gloucester Square, Hyde Park."

Upon my shirt cuff I scribbled the address, and having paid for both the portraits, was about to leave, congratulating myself that at last I had probably obtained a clue to the house to which I had been conducted, when it suddenly occurred to me to ask the date when the photographs were taken.

"They were taken on January 12th last," he replied.

"Last year, you mean," I said.

"No, the present year. This ledger was only commenced in January."

"What?" I cried amazed. "Were these portraits actually taken only six weeks ago? Impossible! The lady has been dead fully three months."

"The originals of the portraits gave us sittings here on the date I have mentioned," he said, handing me the packet courteously, putting aside the frame, and leaving me in order to attend to another customer.

The announcement was incredible. It staggered belief. Emerging from the shop, I jumped into a cab and gave the man the address in Gloucester Square. Then, as we drove along, I took out the photograph of my well-beloved and examined it for a long time closely. Yes, there was no

mistake about her identity. The same sweet, well-remembered face, with its clear, trusting eyes looked out upon me, the same half-sad expression that had so puzzled me. I raised the cold, polished card to my lips and reverently kissed it. Presently the cab drew up suddenly, and I found myself before a wide portico extending across the pavement to the curb, in front of a rather gloomy, solid-looking mansion. Alighting, I crossed to the door, and as I did so counted the steps. There were three, the same number that I remembered ascending on that eventful night I had raised my hand to ring the visitors' bell when suddenly a voice behind me uttered my name. It sounded familiar, and I looked round hastily. As I turned, the Countess of Fyneshade, warmly clad in smart sealskin coat and neat seal toque trimmed with sable, confronted me. Standing upon the pavement beneath the wide gloomy portico, she was smiling amusedly at the sudden start I had given on hearing my name.

"I declare you've turned quite pale, Stuart," she cried with that gay, irresponsible air and high-pitched voice habitual to her. "You gave such a jump when I spoke that one would think you had been detected in the act of committing a burglary, or some other crime equally dreadful."

"I really beg your pardon," I exclaimed quickly, descending the steps and raising my hat. "I confess I didn't notice you." Then, for the first time, I observed standing a few yards from her a slim, well-dressed young man in long dark overcoat and silk hat.

"Gilbert," she said, turning to him, "you've not met Mr Ridgeway before, I believe. Allow me to introduce you—Mr Gilbert Sternroyd, Mr Stuart Ridgeway, one of my oldest friends."

We uttered mutual conventionalities, but an instant later, when my eyes met his, the words froze upon my lips. The Countess's companion was the original of the photograph that had been exhibited at my dead love's request in the same frame as her own.

Of what words I uttered I have no remembrance. Bewildered by this strange and unexpected encounter, on the very threshold of the mysterious house that for months I had been striving in vain to discover, I felt my senses whirl. Only by dint of summoning all my self-possession I preserved a calm demeanour. That Mabel should have admitted

acquaintance with the strange and rather shady person who had met me at Richmond was curious enough, but her friendship with Sybil's whilom companion was a fact even more incomprehensible.

An hour ago I had discovered the picture of this man called Sternroyd, yet here he stood before me in the flesh, accompanied by the one person of my acquaintance who knew that nameless man who had inveigled me to this house of shadows. Heedless of Mabel's amusing gossip, I surveyed her companion's face calmly, satisfying myself that every feature agreed with the counterfeit presentment I carried in my pocket. The portrait was strikingly accurate, even his curiously-shaped scarf-pin in the form of a pair of crossed daggers with diamond hilts being shown in the picture. He was tall, fair, of fresh complexion, aged about twenty-four, with grey eyes rather deeply set, and a scanty moustache a little ragged. Lithe, active, and upright, his bearing was distinctly athletic, although his speech was a trifle languid and affected. What, I wondered, had been the nature of his relations with Sybil? The horrifying thought flashed across my mind that he might have been her lover, but next second I scorned such a suggestion, convinced that she had been devoted to me alone.

Yet how could I reconcile the statement of the photographer that the portrait had only been taken a few weeks with my own personal investigation that she at that time was dead? Had I not, alas! kissed her cold brow and chafed her thin dead hands, hoping to bring back to them the glow of life? Had I not raised her gloved arm only to find it stiffening in death? The remembrance of that fateful night chilled my blood.

"Who are you calling upon, Stuart?" the Countess asked, her light words bringing me at last back to consciousness of my surroundings.

"Upon—upon friends," I stammered.

"Friends! Well, they can't live here," she observed incredulously.

"They do," I answered. "This is number seventy-nine."

"True, but the place is empty." She laughed.

I glanced at the doorway, and my heart sank within me when I noticed

that the unwhitened stones were littered with drifting straws and scraps of paper, the flotsam and jetsam of the street, that the glass of the wide fanlight was thickly encrusted with dirt, and that the board fixed over the door, announcing that the “imposing mansion” was to let, had, judging from its begrimed, blistered, and weather-stained appearance, been in that position several years.

To reassure myself, I glanced at my cuff and inquired of the cabman whether the house was not Number 79 Gloucester Square.

“Quite right, sir,” answered the plethoric driver. “This ’ere’s Radnor Place, but these ’ouses fronts into the square. This row ’ain’t got no entrances there, but the front doors are at the back here. I’ve known these ’ouses ever since I was a nipper. This ’ere one’s been to let this last four years. A French gentleman lived ’ere before.”

“I fancy you’ve mistaken the number,” drawled the Countess’s companion, putting up his single eye-glass to survey the place more minutely. “So confoundedly easy to make mistakes, don’t yer know,” and he laughed, as if amused at his witticism.

I resented this apparent hilarity, and with difficulty restrained some hot words that rose quickly to my lips. It had occurred to me that if I preserved silence and gave no sign, I might perhaps discover the identity of this foppish young man. The mansion, silent, dismal, and deserted, was drab-painted and of unusually imposing proportions. The drawing-room on the first floor was evidently of vast extent, running the whole width of the house and commanding in front a wide view across the square, while at the rear it opened upon a fine domed conservatory constructed over the great portico.

“If you can’t find your friends, Stuart, I’ll give you a lift homeward. My carriage is at the corner,” Mabel said, evidently anxious to get away. “I’m going down to the Reform, to fetch Fyneshade.”

In this invitation I saw an opportunity of obtaining some further knowledge of her mysterious companion, and, after settling with my cabman, lost no time in embracing it. A few moments later the Countess’s smart victoria drew up, and entering, I took the place beside her, while Sternroyd

seated himself opposite.

As we drove around Southwick Crescent in the direction of Park Lane, Mabel, in the course of conversation, let drop the fact that Gilbert, a protégé of her husband's, was spending a few days at Eaton Square prior to returning to his studies at Oxford.

"Yes," he drawled. "A fellow appreciates town after poring over musty volumes, as I unfortunately am compelled to do. Beastly bore!"

Then he told me he was at Balliol—my old college—and our conversation afterwards turned mainly upon dons and duns.

"I always have such jolly times with Mab—Lady Fyneshade—each time I come to town," he said. "Whenever I go back I feel absolutely miserable."

"Yet memories of the past are sometimes painful," I observed, smiling. At the same time I glanced at Mabel, knowing that the strange circumstances in which we had parted at the cotton-king's reception must still be fresh in her mind. Darting at me a swift look of inquiry, she picked at the buttons of her pearl-grey glove, laughed lightly, and exclaimed flippantly:

"We have no memories when we arrive at years of discretion. Idle memory wastes time and other things. The moments as they drop must disappear and be simply forgotten as a child forgets. Nowadays one lives only for the future, and lets the past be buried."

"And if the past refuses to be interred?" I asked.

She started visibly, and a frown of annoyance rested for a brief moment upon her handsome countenance. I fancied, too, that her companion looked askance at me, but not waiting for either to reply, I said:

"I myself find it difficult to altogether forget. Some incidents in each of our lives are indelibly engraven upon our minds, and there are some tender memories that in our hours of melancholy we love to linger over and brood upon. At such times we find solace in solitude and sup on vain regrets."

“That’s only when we have been in love,” the Countess laughed, patting the large pug beside her. “Gilbert has never been in love; have you, Gilbert?”

“Never,” he answered, grinning.

“With one exception,” she observed with mock gravity.

“Yourself, you mean?” he drawled, twirling his flaxen moustache and smiling.

“Certainly not,” she cried with feigned indignation. “How dare you attempt to be complimentary at my expense? No, if I remember aright there was one woman who in your eyes was a veritable angel, who—”

“Ah!” he said gravely, in a tone quite natural and unaffected. “Yes, you are right. There was one woman.” And he sighed as if painful memories oppressed him.

One woman! Did he allude to Sybil? If so, it was apparent that Mabel must be well aware of his acquaintance with the woman I had loved. Silent I sat while the conversation quickly turned from grave to gay, as it always did when the Countess chattered.

Suddenly, as we were passing into Piccadilly, it became impressed vividly upon my mind that they were hiding some secret from me. Two prominent facts aroused within me suspicion that their conversation was being carried on in order to mislead me. The first was, that although I had asked them what had brought them to Radnor Place neither of them had given any satisfactory reply; the second was, that although Sternroyd must have been associated in some mysterious way with that silent house to which the photographs had been sent, he had made no allusion whatever to it, nor did he make any observation when he noticed my dismay at discovering it untenanted.

It was evident some secret understanding existed between them, and the more I reflected upon it the more probable did it appear that they had actually called at this house, and had only just left it when I arrived. In order to ascertain my object in visiting it, and to learn the extent of my knowledge regarding it, the Countess had greeted me with her usual

gaiety, and was now carrying me triumphantly back. I had, of course, no proof; nevertheless, I had an intuition, strange and distinct, that in close concert with my dead love's whilom friend, Sternroyd, she was playing a deep mysterious game with considerable tact and consummate ingenuity. But she was a most remarkable woman. Always brilliant and fascinating, always sparkling with wit and bubbling with humour, she was thoroughly unconventional in every respect. Society had long ago ceased to express surprise at any of her eccentric or impetuous actions. She held licence from Mother Grundy to act as, she pleased, for was she not admitted on all hands to be "the smartest woman in London?" She had a watchful confidence not only in a multitude of men, but in a multitude of things.

She dropped me outside the New Lyric Club, close to Piccadilly Circus, not, however, before she had expressed regret at Dora's unhappiness.

"What has occurred?" I asked concernedly.

"Oh! there has been a terrible upset at home about Jack Bethune," she answered. "I've done my level best with Ma, but she absolutely forbids Jack to pay his addresses to Dora."

"Because, as you have already told me, she wants her to marry a man she can never love," I said gravely.

"Yes," she said hurriedly. "But here's your club. Captain Bethune is certain to tell you all about it. Goodbye! I shall be at Lady Hillingdon's to-morrow night, then we'll resume our chat."

"Good-bye!" I said, alighting and grasping her hand; then as the commissionaire swung the club door open her companion raised his hat and the carriage was driven rapidly away.

Chapter Eight.

Secret Understanding.

Idle memory shortens life, or shortens the sense of life, by linking the immediate past clingingly to the present. In this may be found one of the reasons for the length of time in our juvenile days and the brevity of the time that succeeds. The child forgets, habitually, gayly, and constantly. Would that I had never acquired the habit of recall!

Jack, in a well-worn velvet lounge coat, was seated at his writing-table absorbed in his work when I entered, a couple of hours after I had left Mabel. His small den, lined with books, contained but little furniture beyond the big oak writing-table in the window, a heavy old-fashioned horse-hair couch, and several easy-chairs. Littered with newspapers, books, magazines, and those minor worries of an author's life, press-cuttings, the apartment was nevertheless snug, the bright fire and the green-shaded reading-lamp giving it a cosy appearance.

"Halloa, old chap!" he cried, throwing down his pen gayly and rising to grip my hand. "So glad you've looked in. Have a weed?" and as we seated ourselves before the fire he pushed the box towards me.

"I met Mabel to-day," I said at last, after we had been chatting and smoking for some minutes.

"Did you? Well? What's the latest fad? Teas for poor children, bicycling, golf, old silver, or what?"

"She's much concerned regarding Dora," I answered. "And she has hinted that there are strained relations between Dora's mother and yourself. I've come to hear all about it."

He hesitated, tugging thoughtfully at his moustache.

"There's not very much to tell," he replied, rather bitterly. "The old lady won't hear of our marriage. When I mentioned it yesterday she went absolutely purple with rage, and forbade me to enter her house again, or

hold any further communication with the woman I love."

"Which you will disregard, eh? Have you seen Dora to-day?"

"No. I've been waiting at home all day expecting a note, but none has arrived," he said disappointedly; adding, "Yet, after all, there is no disguising the fact, old chap, that I really haven't enough money to marry a girl like Dora, and perhaps the sooner I recognise the truth and give up all hope of marriage, the better for us both."

"No, no. Don't take such a gloomy view, Jack," I said sympathetically. "Dora loves you, doesn't she?"

"Yes. You know well enough that I absolutely adore her," he answered with deep earnestness.

I had known long ago that his avowed intention had been never to marry. Until he became noted as a novelist his periods of life in town had been few and fleeting. Not that he felt awkward or ill at ease in society; his name was a passport, while his well-bred ease always insured him a flattering welcome; but for the most part Society had no charm for him. Sometimes, when among his most intimate friends, he would give the reins to his high spirits, and then, gayest of the gay, he would have smoothed the brow of Remorse itself. Private theatricals, dinner-parties, dances, or tennis-matches, he was head and front of everything. Then suddenly he would receive orders to remove with his regiment to another town, and good-bye to all frivolity—he was a cavalry officer again, and no engagement had power to keep him.

If he ever made any impression on the fair sex, he had remained unscathed himself until a few months ago, and the eagerness with which he obeyed each call to duty had been proof of the unfettered state of his heart. His ardent love for his profession was, he used to be fond of declaring, incompatible with domestic life. "The first requisite for a good officer," he had told me dozens of times, "is absolute freedom from all ties;" but now, having entered the profession of letters and having discovered the power of the pen, he had paid Dora Stretton a chivalrous attention that had developed into ardent and passionate devotion. She was his goddess; he worshipped at her shrine.

“Well, having received the maternal congé, what do you intend doing?” I inquired after a long silence.

“What can I do?” he asked despondently, gazing sadly into the fire. “I love her with all my heart and soul, as you are aware, yet what can I do?”

“Why, marry her all the same,” cried a musical voice gayly, and as we both jumped up, startled, we were surprised to find Dora herself standing in the doorway, laughing at our discomfiture.

“You!” cried Jack, gladly rushing forward and grasping her hand. “How did you get in?”

“I forbade your woman to announce me, because I wanted to surprise you,” she laughed. “But I—I had no idea that Mr Ridgeway was with you. She ought to have told me,” she added, blushing.

“I’m surely not such a formidable person, am I?” I asked.

“Well, no,” she answered. Then looking round the little book-lined room rather timidly, she said, “I don’t know that I ought to have come here, but I wanted to see Jack. I’m supposed to be at Mabel’s, dining. I drove there in the brougham, and then came along here in a cab.”

“Won’t you sit down?” her lover asked. “Now you are here we must try and make you as cosy as possible, providing you’ll excuse the Bohemianism of my quarters.”

“Why apologise, Jack?” she asked, as he unclasped her cape, revealing her handsome dinner-dress cut a trifle décolleté. “If Ma will not let us meet openly, then we must see each other surreptitiously.”

“Well spoken,” I exclaimed, laughing, and when she had seated herself in Jack’s armchair, with her little satin shoes placed coquettishly upon the fender, she told us how she had ingeniously arranged with her sister to return to Eaton Square in a cab, and then drive home in the carriage, as if she had been spending the whole evening with Mabel.

We laughed, and as I sat gazing at her, memories of Sybil, the woman I had loved and lost, crowded upon me. Even though Lady Stretton’s

consent was withheld, they were nevertheless happy in each other's love. The love-look upon their faces told me how intense was the passion between them, and I envied my friend his happiness. Dora was indeed as charming to the sight as eyes could desire. Her bare shoulders, well set-off by her black bespangled dress trimmed with pale-green chiffon, were a trifle narrow, but that lent her a childish grace, and it was the one fault that could be found with her; all the rest was perfect, and the greatest charm of all that, unlike her sister, she was totally unconscious of her loveliness.

In the warm atmosphere of their love and confidence their characters had unfolded, and they had learned to know one another perfectly. Jack, although he held a world-wide reputation for keen analysis of character on paper, had been amazed at all the delicate susceptibilities cherished in Dora's heart, at the freshness and innocent pleasures of which it was capable, and not a little at the vein of malicious fun he had wholly unsuspected.

I sat silent while they chatted, reflecting upon the strange discovery of the photograph of my lost love, and the more remarkable encounter that afternoon, I had called on Jack for the purpose of making a clean breast of the whole affair, but Dora's arrival precluded me from so doing. My sorrow, however, lost none of its bitterness by keeping, and I resolved to return to him on the morrow, show him the portraits, and ask his advice.

Jack had been admiring her gown, and the conversation had turned upon the evergreen topic of dress. But she spoke with the air of a philosopher rather than of a Society girl.

"Everyday life needs all the romance that can be crowded into it," she said. "Dress, in my opinion, is a duty to ourselves and to others—is a piece of altruism unsoured by sacrifice, a joy so long as it may last to wearer and beholder, doing good openly nor blushing to find itself famous."

"Your view is certainly correct," I said, smiling at her sedate little speech. "You are a pretty woman, and without committing yourself to affectation or eccentricity, you may choose the mode that shall best become you, whether born of Worth's imagination or founded on some picturesque

tradition. You may be severe or splendid, avenante or rococo, with equal impunity."

"Really you are awfully complimentary, Mr Ridgeway," she answered, with just the faintest blush of modesty. "You are such a flatterer that one never knows whether you are in earnest."

"I'm quite in earnest, I assure you," I said. "Your dresses always suit you admirably. On any other woman they would look dowdy."

"I quite endorse Stuart's opinion," said Jack with enthusiasm. "In writing it is often my misfortune to be compelled to describe feminine habiliments, therefore I've tried to study them a little. It seems to me that the ball-dress may be festal, the dinner-dress majestic, and the outdoor frock combine the virtues of both; but romance must always centre in the tea-gown. Before the advent of the tea-gown, the indoor state of woman was innocent of comfort and beggared of poetry."

"Yes," she replied, clasping her hands behind her head and looking up at him with her soft brown eyes, "the tea-gown is always ingenuous in sentiment and not wanting in charm, even though its hues may be odious or sickly. Once it was looked upon with disfavour as a garment too graceful to be respectable, and stern parents, I believe, forbade its use. But time, taste, and the sense of fitness have put Puritanism to shame, and the useful tea-gown; bears witness now to our proficiency in the long-lost art of living."

Her reference to stern parents caused me to refer to what Mabel had told me regarding the attitude of her mother.

"Ah! I remember that you were discussing it when I interrupted you as I came in," she said frankly. "Ma wants me to make a rich marriage, it is true, but I love Jack, and I'm determined not to have any other man. I've seen enough of the tragedy of rich unions."

"I know you are true to me, Dora," my old friend said, grasping her hand, and looking into her eyes as he stood beside her chair. "I've waited all day expecting a note from you, for I felt confident you would write or see me after last night's scene."

“Don’t refer to that again,” she said quickly, putting up her little hand as if to arrest his words. “It was too cruel of Ma to speak as she did. She tried to wound my feelings, because I told her I would marry the man of my own choice. She wants me to be smart, with a penchant for flirtation, like Mabel,” and her lips quivered with emotion.

“If you marry me, darling,” he said, with an utter disregard for my presence, “I will strive to provide you with fitting supplies, but if you were poorer than Mabel you would at least love your husband dearly and be his idol.”

“I do not doubt it, Jack,” she answered, her love-darting eyes fixed earnestly upon his. “I love no man but yourself.”

“Then nothing shall part us, dearest—nothing,” he declared.

I sat gazing into the fire, thinking of some excuse whereby I might leave them alone. The memories of my own love were too vivid, and this passionate scene was to me painful. Alas! all that remained of the ashes of my own romance was the photograph in my pocket. I had not torn aside the veil of mystery that had surrounded Sybil; I did not even know her true name.

“Stuart, old fellow, you will excuse us speaking in this manner,” my friend said apologetically. “If you had ever loved you would know the depths of our feelings in this hour when estrangement seems probable.”

If I had ever loved! The thought was galling. Was he taunting me?

“Ill go,” I stammered, stifling with difficulty a sob that very nearly escaped me. “Though your exchange of confidences may be made before me, your old friend, without fear of their betrayal, it is best that you should be alone,” and stretching forth my hand I bade Dora adieu.

“No, don’t go, Mr Ridgeway,” she exclaimed concernedly. “As children, you and I often played at being lovers. When I was a child you were like a big brother, and I confess I then admired you. I regard you now as Jack’s firm and sincerest friend—as my own friend.”

“I am gratified by your esteem,” I said; “that you both may be happy is my

heartfelt desire. If I can be of any assistance to Jack or to yourself, command me."

"We—we may want assistance," she said. Then she paused, plainly stopped by the beating of her heart, for her breast rose and fell convulsively as tears forced themselves up to her long eyelashes.

Bethune was leaning over her. The light of those brown eyes, seen through the bright brimming tears, affected him in a manner strange and touching.

"If we ask Stuart to help us I know he will do all in his power," he assured her. "Ours must be a secret marriage if her ladyship will not consent. Do you trust me?"

"Implicitly, Jack. I trust you because—because I love you."

"Then after all I have no need to be jealous of Gilbert Sternroyd," the soldier-novelist said smiling.

"Gilbert Sternroyd!" I cried amazed. "Who is Gilbert Sternroyd?"

"Dora will answer your question," my friend replied.

I looked eagerly at her, and her eyes met mine with a look full of surprise and mild reproach.

"He admires me, and because he is wealthy, Mabel has suggested that a marriage is possible," she answered.

"He admires you!" I echoed. "Who is he? what is he?"

With some surprise she regarded me, perhaps alarmed at the fierce manner in which I had demanded an explanation.

"I really know very little except that his income is fabulously large, and that he is regarded by many mothers as a substantial matrimonial prize," she replied, adding, "I really don't know his—well, I—"

"Suppose we go into the next room," Jack interposed, evidently to hide

Dora’s embarrassment. “There is a piano there, although I’m afraid you’ll find it sadly out of tune.”

“A piano! I really can’t play to-night.”

“Oh, but you must,” I said laughing. “Remember, you came here to spend the evening, and the penalty for coming to a man’s chambers is to bring brightness to his life.”

We had both risen. With seeming reluctance she also rose, and together we went into an adjoining room, well furnished with a few handsome pieces of old oak, a quantity of bric-à-brac, and many strange arms and curios which their owner had picked up in out-of-the-way corners of the world.

The apartment was half dining-room, half drawing-room, with dark upholstered chairs, the walls papered a dull red, the effect of the whole being so severe that the shaded lamps seemed to cast no radiance around, but to die out like water drunk up by sand.

Jack, noticing the inconvenient position of the piano, dragged it toward the fire, then bringing a music-stool, he placed a fire-screen behind it, and falling back into an easy-chair, said, “Now we are ready to listen.”

She blushed again, overcome with proof of his solicitude, but sat down with murmured thanks; then, after a moment’s pause, she turned to me, exclaiming:

“It is not enough for you to say you like music. What is your favourite style? Classical or modern?—grave or gay?”

“Whatever you please,” I answered.

She thought for a moment, reviewing in her mind the works she knew, then began a nocturne by Chopin. Then another and another, passing on abruptly to the celebrated impromptu whose tempo agitato and vehement bursts suddenly tone down into a movement of exquisite softness.

After the first few bars, Jack, rising, had gone to lean over the end of the piano, attracted alike by the charm of the caressing touch and by the

strangeness of the music that pleased his ears. From where he stood his eyes wandered over her, from the brown of her hair, softened still more by the shaded light of the candles, to her bust, so white, frail, and elegant. Even to me it seemed that what she was playing was as much her own as her loveliness, and I fell into a reverie until her rich contralto voice suddenly broke forth in Tosti's song:

"If in your heart a corner lies that has no place for me. You do not love me as I deem that love should ever be."

Then, when she had concluded and risen, and I had thanked her, Jack suddenly stooped over her tiny hand and kissed it, as he said in a low, tender voice, "Thanks to the little fingers that have charmed me."

Chancing to glance at my watch, I found it was already past eight o'clock. Enchanted by our fair visitor, neither of us had thought of dinner, but a private room at Verrey's was quickly suggested by Jack, and we went thither in a cab without waiting to dress and there concluded an enjoyable evening, Dora's lover afterward escorting her back to Eaton Square, while I strolled home.

Alone in my chambers that night I carefully examined the portraits of Sybil and Gilbert Sternroyd, but the mystery surrounding them grew hourly more puzzling. That Jack knew something of Sternroyd was evident, therefore I resolved to call on him on the morrow, show him the pictures, and seek his advice.

Chapter Nine.

Who is Her Ladyship?

When I sought Jack on the following morning I was informed by the hall-porter that he had left a message for any callers that he had been compelled to go to Barracks unexpectedly, and would be back from Hounslow in the evening. Disappointed, I went into the City and had a long talk with my father at the bank on the subject of finances, then finished the day gossiping in the club and strolling in the Park. At night, remembering the Countess' promise to be at Lady Hillingdon's dance, I went there, but, in a marvellous gown of old rose, she was the centre of a gay crowd of admirers, and I could obtain but few words with her. I wanted to learn more of Sternroyd, but alas! I saw that anything like a private conversation was out of the question, and was compelled to content myself with waltzing and chatting with various women I knew, for the most part gay, brainless butterflies.

In my state of mind the glare and glitter were nauseating and the music jarred upon my nerves, therefore soon after one o'clock I left and drove to Jack's chambers, anxious to seek the truth.

The outer door was shut, for the hall-porter had retired, but, as the key of my own chambers had on many previous occasions opened it, I quickly gained admittance. Mounting the great staircase to the door of his flat, I rang twice, but Mrs Horton did not reside there and my summons was not answered. Jack had evidently not returned, therefore the thought suggested itself to enter with my key and leave a note, as I had done many times before. Acting upon this suggestion, I went in, groping my way down the small passage to his den, where the glimmering light told me that his reading-lamp was burning; but just on the threshold of the room my feet struck something in the darkness, and, grasping wildly at air, I fell forward on my face, unable to save myself.

I knew it was the prostrate body of a man, and a wild cry escaped me when next second I raised myself and found my hands smeared with something damp and sticky.

“Jack! Speak, old fellow, speak!” I cried, but in the darkness there was neither sound nor movement.

Rushing into the study, I snatched up the light, and as its soft radiance fell upon the blanched features I made a discovery so startling that the lamp nearly fell from my trembling hand.

The man lying there was not Jack Bethune, as I had believed, but Gilbert Sternroyd. He had been shot through the heart!

Placing the lamp upon the floor, I knelt and thrust my hand eagerly beneath his shirt-front, but there was no movement of the heart. His hands were cold; he must have been dead several hours.

His coat and vest were disarranged, as if the murderer had hurriedly searched his victim’s pockets, and on the mat outside the bedroom door lay the shining weapon. I recognised the army revolver as Jack’s.

Horrified, I took up the lamp again and stood gazing into the white drawn face of the mysterious friend of the Lady Fyneshade, utterly at a loss how to act. My first impulse was to raise an alarm, but I saw that such a course must imperil my friend. I could not realise the terrible truth, yet all the evidence pointed to the person who had perpetrated the crime. Had he not, only on the previous night, admitted himself jealous of this young man?

With uneven steps and scarce daring to tread lest I should create a noise and betray my presence, I returned to the study. As I entered I noticed for the first time that some of the drawers in the writing-table were open, and that many letters were strewn about, evidently tossed aside in rapid search. There was a strong smell of burnt paper in the room, and as I bent toward the grate I found it full of dead, black tinder.

The murderer, before his flight, had destroyed a number of documents. Examining the drawers, I discovered to my surprise that they had been forced. If Jack had destroyed any implicating evidence would he not have used his keys? Some of the papers in the grate were not quite consumed, and, picking them up, I examined the fragments under the lamp. They were portions of letters in feminine handwriting, the characteristics of which were unfamiliar to me.

I gathered them up, together with a whole letter that was lying at the side of the table, evidently overlooked, and thrust them into my pocket. In presence of the murdered man the darkness seemed filled with a spectral horror, and even the noises I myself created startled me. The reading-lamp gave scarcely sufficient light to illuminate the corners of the room, and I knew not whether the murderer might still be lurking there. Appalled by the ghastly discovery and at the sight of blood, I knew that if discovered there I might be charged with the crime, therefore, after a final glance at the dead man's face, I extinguished the light and stole softly out, hurrying down the stairs and gaining the street in fear lest any of the other tenants might encounter me.

But all was quiet. I escaped unobserved.

On arrival at my own chambers I cleansed my hands of Sternroyd's blood, and entering my sitting-room turned up the gas. My eyes caught sight of my own face in the mirror. It was pale and haggard as that of the victim of the secret tragedy.

Having gulped down a stiff glass of brandy to steady my nerves, I proceeded in breathless eagerness to examine the fragments of private papers which effort had been made to destroy.

The first I inspected were apparently portions of a legal document. In a firm clerk's hand were the words "...and the said John Arthur Bethune on this fourteenth day of..." upon one, and on the other "...undertake to preserve this secret knowledge until after my death..."

The other scraps were parts of letters, but the words I deciphered conveyed to me no meaning. They contained no endearing terms, and were evidently not billets-doux. One of them contained the passage "...to give credence to these absurd rumours which I assure you are totally unfounded..." and another, "...I look to you as my friend to preserve the reputation of a defenceless woman..." The name "Markwick" occurred several times, and once it was "that vile, despicable coward, Markwick."

"That vile, despicable coward, Markwick," I repeated aloud. I reflected deeply, but remembered no one of that name. I could find no signature upon these scraps of yellow, half-charred paper, neither was there

anything to show when they had been written. On both sides of each portion there were words, but very few of them had context, and consequently Conveyed no knowledge of their purport.

One of the scraps, however, held my eyes in fascination. It bore my own name. The writing was a hand I knew, and the words decipherable were "...desire that your friend Stuart Ridgeway should remain in ignorance of the fact. He is your friend and mine, therefore I..."

"Great Heaven!" I cried aloud, "the writing is Sybil's!" I recognised the hand. It was the same in which she had written me the cruel note of farewell in Luchon, and this had been in Jack's possession! Even these half-charred words brought back to me memories of those few days when we were happy in each other's love.

At last I took up the letter that had been overlooked by the murderer in his mad haste. The envelope bore a superscription in a fine regular Italian hand and showed that it had been sent to Hounslow Barracks, the postrnark being dated three days before. Taking out the sheet of notepaper in eager expectancy, I opened it and read the following words —"Tuesday—Dear Sir,—Her ladyship wishes me to write and say that she will arrive at Feltham Station by the train leaving Waterloo at 3:08 on Friday afternoon. She desires to see you on a most important matter, and hopes you will make the meeting apparently accidental, in case there may be at the station any person known to her. Her ladyship also urges that you should keep this appointment in order to avoid some unpleasantness that appears imminent. If, however, you cannot meet her, kindly telegraph to me personally.—Yours truly, Annie Ashcombe."

Thrice I read the letter through and stood holding it between my fingers silent and puzzled. Who, I wondered, was "her ladyship?" Was it old Lady Stretton, or was it Mabel? The writer was evidently a lady's maid, and, as she signed her name, it seemed to me that she might be traced by means of an ingeniously-worded advertisement. But this would necessarily occupy time.

I had never heard of any maid named Ashcombe. Old Lady Stretton's maid, Frewen, I had known for years, while Mabel's was a French girl, named Celestine, all vivacity, frills, and ribbons. Feltham was, I

remembered, a small old-world village about a mile and a half from Hounslow Barracks, on the line between Twickenham and Staines, a quiet, unfrequented place whereat few trains stopped. On several occasions when I had visited Jack in Barracks, I had returned to town from there, and its choice as a place of meeting, combined with the words of Jack's correspondent, showed that "her ladyship," whoever she was, took every precaution to conceal her movements. What could be the important matter upon which the fair patrician desired to consult him; of what nature the unpleasantness that seemed imminent? Again, if he could not keep the appointment he was urged to communicate not with her ladyship, but with her maid. Was Jack Bethune this woman's lover? Was he playing a double game?

I stifled these thoughts instantly. No! Although it was apparent that he was aware of my love for Sybil and was her confidant, I would not believe ill of him until I held absolute proof.

"Proof," I murmured aloud. "What greater proof can I have than the evidence of the fearful tragedy I have discovered?"

I flung myself into my chair and thought over the strange discovery of a portion of Sybil's letter. Apparently a secret had existed between them.

From whatever standpoint I viewed the crime and its mysterious surroundings I could not rid myself of the terrible suspicion that Jack Bethune, the popular officer and celebrated writer, had fired the fatal shot. If he were innocent why had he hurriedly destroyed his papers?

He had admitted himself jealous of Gilbert Sternroyd, and had betrayed his hatred of the young man by his refusal to explain who he was and his eagerness to avoid discussion regarding him. The words he used recurred to me, and I now detected in his manner how intensely bitter was his feeling.

Again and again I examined the scattered fragments that lay upon my table, but from them could gather no further information. The message from the mysterious lady seemed to contain some important clue, yet its true significance was unintelligible. Somehow I felt confident that the meeting at Feltham had some direct connection with the tragedy. Mabel

was Sternroyd's friend, for while driving me from Gloucester Square he had inadvertently referred to her as "Mab;" therefore, after all, it seemed highly probable that she was the mysterious woman who spoke in such veiled terms of "unpleasantness."

The fire died down and went out, the clock upon the mantelshelf chimed hour after hour on its musical bell, but I heeded not time. I was wondering who was Markwick, the "vile, despicable coward," and dreading the result of the discovery of the crime. I feared to telegraph to Hounslow to ascertain Jack's whereabouts, lest by so doing I should betray my knowledge of the tragedy. I held in my possession what might perhaps prove to be evidence of a most important character, evidence that might convict him of a foul murder, and I was determined to keep it secret, at least for the present, and by that means assist my friend, even if he were guilty, to escape.

In a few hours, I told myself, Mrs Horton and her daughter would go there to do the cleaning, and would find the body. Then the police would raise a hue and cry, and by noon the gloating gutter journals would be full of "Another West-End Mystery."

I felt that by preserving my secret I was shielding an assassin, perhaps assisting him to escape, but, dumbfounded at the overwhelming evidence of Jack's guilt, I sat shuddering, awe-stricken, inanimate.

I dropped off to sleep in my chair and did not awake until Saunders entered, and I found it was morning. My breakfast went away untouched, but I scanned the paper and was gratified at my inability to find mention of the ghastly discovery. Neither telegram nor letter came from Jack, though I waited at home until afternoon. Oppressed by my terrible secret, inactivity maddened me and I went out, feeling that I wanted air or the companionship of friends. After a short walk I turned into the club and ascended to the smoking-room, panelled in black oak, on the first floor, where I expected to find someone with whom to gossip and pass the time. When I entered I found several city men had grouped themselves around the fire, and, lounging back in their chairs, were discussing some deep scheme of company-promoting, in which I had no interest. I sat down to scribble a note, caring not for their Stock Exchange jargon, until suddenly the name of Fyneshade caused me to prick up my ears.

“Bah! he’d become one of our directors at once if we made it worth his while,” an elderly man observed, sitting with hat tilted back and a long cigar between his lips.

“I doubt it,” another voice exclaimed. “His name carries weight, but he’s not in want of fees.”

“If he isn’t at this moment he very soon will be,” the other answered knowingly. “He’s now got scarcely a fiver to bless himself with.”

“I don’t believe that,” the others cried in chorus.

“My dear fellows,” answered the elder man. “His pretty wife has absolutely ruined him. Another year, and he’ll be in the Bankruptcy Court.”

“Well, she’s cutting a pretty brilliant figure just now,” exclaimed one. “I saw her at the Gaiety the other night and she looked simply magnificent. She had some young fellow in her box, a fair, insipid-looking youth. Nobody knew who he was.”

“The latest lover, I suppose,” laughed the man who had announced the Earl’s impending bankruptcy. “If report speaks true she’s rather addicted to flirtation.”

“No doubt,” observed one of his companions. “But we’re discussing business just now, not scandal. The virtues or shortcomings of the Countess don’t concern us; what we want is to get Fyneshade on our board. Can it be done?”

“Yes,” promptly answered the man who had first spoken. “I’ll manage it.”

“If you do, then we need have no fear as to the future of the Great Watersmeet Mining and Exploration Company. The Earl’s name carries weight, and, bankrupt or solvent, his influence will be extremely beneficial to us.”

“Very well. I’ll call on him to-morrow,” the man said, blowing a cloud of smoke upward. Then their conversation quickly turned upon some technicalities regarding the property they had acquired somewhere in

Mashona-land.

Their suggestion that Mabel had already caused her husband financial difficulties was new to me. If true, it was certainly a startling fact, and as I sat making pretence of continuing my letter, I could not help feeling that there might be a good deal of truth in what I had overheard. That Mabel was recklessly extravagant; that her entertainments were among the most popular in London; and that her smart circle included many of the Royalties and the wealthiest, were facts known to everybody. She was a leader of fashion, and her bills at Worth's and Redfern's since her marriage must have been as large as those of an empress. Toward women she was unmerciful. With her, dowdiness was a crime, and the wearing of a hat or gown a little out of date an unforgivable offence against Society's laws. She had lately been living at such a terrific rate that her extravagance had become notorious; but I had always believed the rent-roll of Fyneshade to be enormous, and such an eventuality as the Bankruptcy Court had never once entered my mind. This man, a Jew company promoter, apparently had good grounds for his assertion, and his words caused me to ponder deeply, as I descended the stairs and went out with the intention to call at Lady Stretton's, and ascertain whether Dora had heard from her lover.

Who was this mysterious Sternroyd who had admired Mabel and who now lay dead, shot by an unknown hand? What connection could he have had with my adored one, or with that grim untenanted mansion in Gloucester Square? I took the portrait from my pocket and in the fading light glanced at it as I slowly walked. Yes, there was no mistaking the features, nor the oddly-shaped scarf-pin. It was undoubtedly the same man.

Chapter Ten.

Tattle and Tragedy.

When half-an-hour later I sat drinking tea *en famille* with Lady Stretton and her daughter, I confess I felt ill at ease, notwithstanding their light and pleasant gossip.

“I really don’t think you are looking very well, Stuart,” the old lady was saying, as the footman handed her her cup. “Town life does not agree with you, perhaps.”

“No,” I said. “I always prefer the country.”

“So do I. If it were not for dear Dora’s sake, I think I should live at Blatherwycke altogether.”

“You would very soon tire of it, mother,” her daughter laughed. “You know very well when we are down there you are always wanting to see your friends in town.” Lady Stretton looked always stiff and formal in her rich satins. Nearly sixty, with a profusion of white hair and a rather red face, she brimmed over with corpulence, and still preserved some remnant of the beauty that was half sunken beneath her grossness. To me she was always complimentary and caressing. But she said “My dear” to everybody, spoke in a high-pitched voice, and played the child with that doleful languor characteristic of corpulent persons. She loved secrets, made everything a matter of confidence, talked gossip, and was fond of speaking in one’s ear. She pitied others; pitied herself; she bewailed her misfortunes and her physical ills. Nothing could have been more pathetic than her constant attacks of indigestion. She took a very real interest in the career of her friends, for it was part of her completeness to be the centre of a set of successful people.

“We are going to Blatherwycke the day after to-morrow,” she said. “The hunting this season has been excellent. Have you been out yet?”

“Not once,” I replied. “I haven’t been home this season, but I mean to go down in a week or so and have a run with the hounds.”

“Oh, that will be awfully jolly,” Dora exclaimed, gleefully. “We’re having a house-party, so we shall hope to see something of you.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Memories of our many runs are distinctly pleasant, so I hope we may be companions again.”

“Of course. Why, the papers always speak of you as one of the familiar figures in the field,” she said. “The hounds are out three days a week now, and foxes are awfully plentiful about Rockingham Forest and away beyond Apethorpe.”

“Let’s hope we shall obtain a few brushes,” I said, and then our conversation was mainly upon past recollections of rapid runs, of the artfulness displayed by various reynards, and of spills, amusing and serious.

No woman who rode with the Fitzwilliam hounds sat her horse so magnificently as Dora Stretton. Even my old friend William Raven, of King’s Cliffe, for many years one of the most prominent figures in hunting circles in North Northamptonshire, but now of venerable age, white-bearded, and unable to ride to the meet; a thorough hunting man of the old school, who, when the hounds pass his window, rises from his warm armchair, thrusts his hands deep into his pockets, and sighs wistfully because he is not longer agile enough to take part in the sport that he loves; an outspoken critic of all things pertaining to the hunt, and never tired of comparing the splendid riding of twenty years ago with the sloppy form now displayed by foppish youngsters who come down from town and hunt “because it is the thing, you know,” was compelled to acknowledge the grace, daring, and firmness always displayed by Lady Stretton’s youngest daughter. Her pace was usually a hot one; she took dangerous leaps with a recklessness that was astounding, thought nothing of fatigue, and was almost invariably in at the death.

The prospect of mad, exhilarating gallops with her was to me very pleasant, for I was passionately fond of the saddle. But alas! my anticipations were chilled by the knowledge of the fearful secret in my inner consciousness.

Dora sat in her low chair, bright, radiant, and happy. Her hair was a trifle

disarranged, but it is the prettiest hair that sheds the most hairpins. What if I told her the terrible nature of my discovery, of the awful suspicion that the man who was her hero was a murderer, and had fled?

But I chatted to them about mutual acquaintances, discussed Jack's latest book, "The Siren of Strelitz," which the reviewers were declaring to be the novel of the season, and talked of art at the Grosvenor and the New, without scarcely knowing what words I uttered or what opinion I endorsed. The mention of "The Siren of Strelitz" caused Lady Stretton some little annoyance, and I could not help feeling amused. What, I wondered, would this haughty woman of the world say when in a few brief hours, the papers raised a hue and cry for the popular soldier-novelist, in whose room a man had been found shot dead?

Even as I sat calmly gossiping over the tea-cups the police wires might already be at work and the detectives lounging at the ports of departure aroused from their cat-like lethargy to stand with keen eye, watching every person embarking on Channel and other steamers. I had no interest in her ladyship's idle talk; I was only waiting for her to go out of the room so that I might ask a hurried question of her daughter.

At last, the corpulent old lady rose with an effort and a rustling of silk, and left us.

"Well," I said, rising and taking up a position before the fire, "have you seen anything of Jack to-day?"

"No," she replied, a faint blush suffusing her cheeks. "I was in the Row this morning and looked out for him, but he was not there. I expect he is still at Hounslow."

"Did he tell you he was going to Hounslow?" I asked. "Yes, he sent me a note yesterday morning, saying that one of his brother-officers had been compelled to obtain leave unexpectedly, and that he was going down to do duty for him."

"For how long?"

"He said he would be back again last night," and placing her hand in her pocket she drew forth the letter, and read it to reassure herself that she

had made no mistake.

“I want to see him on a most important matter; if he does not return I shall have to run down to Hounslow,” I said. Then, as if suddenly remembering, I added, “Oh, by the way, do you know any maid named Ashcombe—Annie Ashcombe?”

“Ashcombe,” she repeated, puzzled. “Why do you want to know the names of servant-maids? What interest have you in her?”

“I—er—well, I want to find her, that’s all. If I can discover her she’ll hear something to her advantage, as the solicitors’ advertisements say.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help the young person to her good fortune,” she laughed. “However, I’ll bear the name in mind, and if I come across her I won’t fail to let you know.”

“Thanks,” I said. “It is most important that I should find her as quickly as possible, so you might render me a real service if you would make inquiries among your friends.”

“Of course, I’ll do anything to oblige you,” she said frankly. “Ashcombe—I shall remember the name.”

“And you will let me know as soon as you hear from Jack?”

“Certainly,” she answered. “I’ll send you word at once.”

At that moment our tête-à-tête was interrupted by the reappearance of Lady Stretton, who said:

“Dora and I are going to the Lyceum first night. If you’ll join us in our box we shall be charmed.”

“Thanks very much,” I replied. “I shall be delighted.” I had no especial desire to witness an Irving play, but in my gloomy frame of mind any diversion seemed better than the loneliness of my own chambers.

“Very well. Run home and dress, return and dine with us, and we will go along together. We shall meet Mr Gilbert Sternroyd there. Do you know

him?” her ladyship asked.

The mention of the name caused me to start, and I felt that a sudden pallor overspread my face.

“Mabel introduced me,” I stammered.

“Charming young fellow! So wealthy, too,” exclaimed Lady Stretton, a remark which was received with a little grimace by Dora, at that moment standing behind her mother.

“I know very little of him,” I said in a strained voice. “I only met him once.”

Then I left, went home, dressed and returned. Dinner was served with that old-fashioned stateliness that characterised everything in the Stretton household, and I was thoroughly glad when dessert was reached. Afterward, we drove to the theatre, and found in several boxes and scattered over the stalls many mutual acquaintances. Several men and women came to us and exchanged greetings, and more than once her ladyship observed:

“I wonder why Mr Sternroyd does not come, Dora? He promised me faithfully.”

“I don’t know, mother,” answered her daughter unconcernedly. “I suppose he is better engaged at his club, or elsewhere.”

“Well, it is decidedly ungentlemanly not to have sent a line of regret,” the old lady observed, sniffing angrily.

Did they perceive by my silence and my face that their talk was torturing me? Did they expect a dead man to seat himself in the vacant chair awaiting him? These constant references to the victim of the tragedy unnerved me. What would they think if they knew that the young man who had promised to escort them was now lying stiff and cold?

The play proceeded, the calls were taken, the curtain fell, and when the usual bouquets had been presented to Miss Terry, the great actor addressed a few well-chosen words to his admirers. All was brilliant, everyone was enthusiastic; the play was voted an unqualified success.

Yet I, the most lethargic, conscience-stricken wretch amid that gay, well-dressed, bejewelled throng, was oppressed by the knowledge of an awful secret, for upon me had been forced by Dora's words increased suspicion that one of the most popular writers of the day was an assassin.

Outside, under the portico, the vendors of "extra specials" were shouting the latest news, varying their strident cries with the monotonous question, "Keb or kerridge?" In eagerness I listened to their words and glanced at the contents-bills—pink, green, amber, and white—thrust under my nose, but in a few moments reassured myself that the tragedy still remained undiscovered.

The Stretton carriage quickly drew up, and as the ladies were handed in I thanked them for a pleasant evening and bade them good-night, not, however, before I had managed to whisper to Dora, "If you hear from Jack, telegraph at once to my chambers."

"You don't seem quite yourself to-night," she had replied. "I believe something has happened."

"No," I stammered, "nothing unusual has occurred." Then I excused myself by adding, "The heat of the theatre has been rather oppressive, that's all."

The night air refreshed me, and as I strolled along the Strand westward I suddenly overtook Thackwell, the cotton-king, also returning from a theatre. His greeting was as usual, bluff and hearty, and we had supper together at the National Liberal Club, of which institution he was one of the shining lights.

I congratulated him upon the success of his recent reception, but he smiled rather sadly, saying:

"Ay, ay, lad, it's only because aw've got a bit o' brass. Creawn a foo, an' folk'll goo deawn o' their knees to him. Society's all very well, if it's nobbut to see heaw th' nobs carry'n on, but a man is a sight more happy as a journeyman than when he can reckon in millions. What saysta?"

"But money makes the world hum," I said.

“Aw’ll tell thee what, lad, for me it hums the wrong tune,” he said, and upon his frank, wrinkled face there settled a look of despondency. “It’s true the fine folk flatter me and teem warm wayter deawn my back, makkin’ it itch where it has no’ been bitten, but my gowd is mixed wi’ brass and pain wi’ pleasure. Awm a lonely mun, and aw find cross looks among smiles and friendship wi’ a bit o’ suspicion o’ booath sides.”

I described minutely the strange man I had encountered in his rooms on the night of the reception, and his girlish companion in pink, hoping to obtain some clue to their identity, but although he was unusually, confidential, his mind at this point seemed a perfect blank.

“Aw never know who’s invited,” he declared smiling. “They’re all welcome, all the folk, but they come to meet each other, and doant care a bobbin for their host. Half of ’em come out o’ sheer curiosity to see my place, because they’ve ’eard from th’ papers heaw mich it cost me. Hawe, lad, awm baffled in every effort to improve my social standing; while in business—in business everything aw touch turns to gowd.”

When we entered the great smoking-room a little later I felt for my match-box—a small gold one with my initials engraved upon it, that I wore suspended from my watch-chain—but it was gone. I valued it highly, as it was a present from my mother, and was much concerned regarding its loss. On reflection I could not remember having used it that day, and suddenly the possibility occurred to me that I might have dropped it when I had stumbled and fallen over the body of Gilbert Sternroyd. If it were found beside the corpse, I might be suspected of the crime. I had no clear proof that I had dropped it there, but an impression of dread gripped my heart. There is an infinite distance between our fancies, however precise they may be, and the least bit of reality. The discovery of the crime had stirred my being to its utmost depths, and summoned up tragic pictures before my eyes. Even after I had read the letter, and the half-burnt writing in Sybil’s hand repeatedly, I had cherished a secret hope that I was mistaken, that some slight proof would arise and dispel suspicions that I denounced as senseless, perhaps because I had a foreknowledge of the dreadful duty which must devolve upon me when the body was discovered.

Excusing myself by lame apologies, I left the millionaire and went straight

to my chambers.

“Saunders,” I cried as I entered, “you handed me my watch and chain this morning. Did you notice anything remarkable about it?”

“Yes, sir,” my man answered promptly. “I noticed your match-box was not there.”

“Then, confound it, I’ve lost it—I must have lost it last night,” I gasped. “I remember distinctly using it once or twice during the evening.”

“I thought you had taken it off and put it in your waistcoat-pocket,” he said. “You do sometimes.”

“Yes,” I answered. “But look here, the swivel has snapped from the box,” and taking off the chain I handed it to him to examine.

On my sitting-room table lay a note, and as I took it up I saw the envelope bore a coronet and the wyvern’s head couped at the neck vert, the crest of the Strettons.

“That came by boy-messenger a quarter of an hour ago, sir,” Saunders said, as I eagerly tore it open.

It was a hurried scribble from Dora in pencil, and read as follows: “Dear Mr Ridgeway,—I have found on my return a letter from Jack. I must have your advice at once, and will therefore call at your chambers at eleven o’clock to-morrow. The letter was posted at Dover this morning.—Yours sincerely, Dora Stretton.”

“I shall want nothing more, Saunders,” I said, as calmly as I could, and the man wishing me good-night withdrew.

“Posted from Dover!” I echoed. “Then he has decamped. Jack is a murderer!”

I sank into my chair and re-read Dora’s note carefully. What should my course be if he were guilty? I put this question to myself plainly, and perceived all the horror of the situation. Yes, I must see Dora and ascertain the nature of this letter, but how could I bear to tell her the truth,

to strike her such a cruel blow, bright, fragile being that she was? The first glimpse of the double prospect of misery and scandal which the future offered, if my suspicions proved just, was too terrible for endurance, and I summoned all my strength of will to shut out these gloomy anticipations. I dreaded to meet Dora; I was already shrinking from the pain that my words must inflict upon her.

What if detectives found my match-box beside the corpse? Might I not be suspected? Might they not dog my footsteps and arrest me on suspicion? If the slightest suspicion attached itself to me, I should be precluded entirely from assisting my friend.

It was clear that I had lost it on that fatal night, for I now remembered distinctly that as I fell my stomach struck heavily against some hard substance. I could indeed still feel the bruise. That my lost property was in Jack’s chambers was evident. If I intended to clear myself and assist him I should be obliged to act upon a resolution.

Chapter Eleven.

The Locked Room.

At first I dared not look the exigency in the face. For fully an hour I paced the room in nervous agitation, but the imperative necessity of recovering the box impressed itself every moment more deeply upon me. The crime was, as yet, still undiscovered; therefore, might I not enter, search, find the piece of evidence that would link me with the terrible tragedy, and return in the same manner as on the previous night? Undoubtedly the body was lying silent and ghastly where I left it, and if only I could get in and out of the flat unobserved, I should be free to assist the wretched man who was my friend, and who had held in his possession the extraordinary letter from Sybil.

The mantel-clock told me it was nearly three. At that hour there would be little likelihood of meeting anyone on the staircases, therefore I decided to go.

Taking one of the candles from the piano and a box of matches, I put on my overcoat and walked quickly along the deserted streets, avoiding the gaze of each constable I met, and eagerly scanning every dark nook as I went forward to the entrance of the imposing pile of flats in which Bethune resided.

My heart beat quickly as I placed my key in the lock and gained admittance. Then, scarce daring to breathe, I sped swiftly upstairs, and carefully unlocking the door of the flat, entered and closed it again. For a moment I stood breathless. A piano sounded somewhere overhead. The darkness unnerved me, for I knew I was in the presence of the ghastly dead.

With trembling hands I drew forth the candle and lit it, afterwards creeping silently forward toward the room in the doorway of which I had discovered the body of the man whose association with my dead love was so mysterious. By death his lips were sealed.

A loose board creaked ominously, and as I passed down the small

narrow hall a long grandfather’s clock vibrated and startled me. In those moments of terror every sound became magnified, and I could hear the rapid thumping of my own heart.

Dreading to gaze upon the corpse, I held my breath and at last peered round the corner to the study door, but judge my amazement when I realised that the body was no longer there!

The crime had been discovered!

I dashed forward into the little book-lined den. It presented the same appearance as when I had left it. Nothing had been disturbed. Only the body had been removed, and all trace of the tragedy obliterated.

I bent to examine more closely the spot where the victim had fallen, when suddenly the sound of someone moving appalled me. There was a stealthy footstep in the hall.

Instantly I blew out the candle. But too late! I had been discovered.

In the impenetrable darkness the footsteps approached with soft stealthiness. Drawing myself up I placed my back resolutely against the wall, prepared to defend myself. The body of young Gilbert Sternroyd had been secretly removed, but I had been detected in the act of examining the spot, and had therefore betrayed knowledge of the crime. The murderer might commit a second crime to hide the first. The suggestion held me motionless.

Unarmed, I stood helpless against the unseen assassin, with only my clenched fist uplifted to ward off a blow.

“Who are you?” cried a voice. “Speak! or by Heaven, I’ll fire!” The voice was that of my friend Bethune.

“Jack!” I gasped. “Don’t you know my voice—Stuart?”

“You—old chap!” he exclaimed laughing. “What on earth do you mean by frightening a fellow out of his senses at this hour? I thought you were one of—” and he hesitated. “I thought you were a burglar,” he added quickly.

Then in a few moments we entered the study, and I saw how pale and haggard he looked. His coat was off, and his sleeves were rolled up as if he had been at work. There were dark rings about his bright fevered eyes, and his complexion seemed a yellow clay-colour. In his trembling hand gleamed a deadly weapon—the revolver that had caused the death of Mabel's mysterious friend.

Startled by this sudden discovery I stood staring at him, unable to utter a word. He laid the revolver upon the table, and gazed at me with eyes in which was an expression of abject terror. In those brief moments it flashed through my mind that some violent exertion had caused the beads of perspiration that stood upon his cold, pale brow; that the body might be still lying in the flat, and that I had entered just at a time when he was in the act of concealing it Guilt was betrayed upon his face; he appeared suspicious and utterly unnerved.

Yet he was my friend, and although I could scarce believe he had stained his hands with blood, I nevertheless resolved to ascertain the truth at all hazards. For a single instant I felt inclined to turn and leave him abruptly, but I quickly realised the necessity of not betraying suspicion if I desired to penetrate the mystery.

We had discovered each other in compromising attitudes. Neither of us dared to speak.

"Well," I said at last, after a desperate effort to remain calm, "how is it that you bring out a revolver to welcome your visitors—eh?"

"Visitors!" he echoed bitterly. "At this hour? You let yourself in with your own key? Ah! I had never thought of that," he gasped, as if the sudden recollection that my key fitted his door terrified him.

"Yes. I have been out late to-night, and not having seen or heard anything of you for a couple of days, I dropped in just to see if you were alive."

"Why shouldn't I be alive?" he snapped. "I've been down to barracks. Thatcher got leave on account of his father's illness, and I had to do duty for him. I wrote to Dora."

“I had no line from you. That’s why I looked you up,” I said, as carelessly as I could.

“Then all I’ve got to say, Stuart, is that you might have waited until morning, and not creep in and frighten a fellow just as he’s going to roost.”

“I had no intention of frightening you. In fact, I did not know you were at home.”

“Then why did you come in?” he asked, with emphasis. I at once saw I had inadvertently made a declaration that might arouse his suspicions, and sought to modify it.

“Well,” I said, “I came in order to leave a note for you. In the passage I heard something fall, and was looking for it. I am leaving town early in the morning.”

“You are?” he cried eagerly. “Where are you going?”

“To Wadenhoe, for some hunting. My object in leaving the note was to ask you to run down and stay with us for a week or so. My people will be awfully glad to see you, and as Dora and her mother are going to entertain a house-party at Blatherwycke, you won’t be lonely.”

“Well, thanks, old fellow, it’s exceedingly good of you,” he answered, evidently reassured. “I should be charmed to have a few runs with the Fitzwilliam, for I’ve most pleasant recollections of three weeks last season in your country. When shall I come?”

“Next Saturday.”

“Very well. Give my compliments to your mother, and thank her for her kind invitation. I’ll be down on Saturday.”

“But why were you so scared when you discovered me?” I asked, leaning on the edge of the table and regarding him with feigned amusement.

“I don’t think I was very scared, was I?” he asked, with a hollow laugh. “There’s a bit of a scandal in the regiment that has upset me, and I don’t

feel quite myself just now. A night's rest, you know, will set me right. Besides, I've been writing a good deal lately and it always takes the nerve out of me."

He drew forth the spirit stand and poured out some whisky. At first I could not bear the thought of drinking with a murderer, but again it was impressed upon my mind that, to successfully solve the mystery of the murder of Gilbert Sternroyd, I must act with discretion and arouse no suspicion that I had actually discovered the body. Therefore we drank together, while Jack's demeanour quickly became calmer. It was apparent that he had no idea of my previous visit, and it was also equally manifest that the light-hearted gaiety succeeding his intense nervousness was forced and quite unnatural. He was striving to hide from me his terrible secret!

He flung himself into a chair while I stood upon the hearthrug, and our conversation drifted mainly upon our proposed runs with the hounds. I had not expected to find him at home nor to meet him with a revolver in his hand, but now I had made the discovery I understood all its importance. Yet his demeanour had in a few minutes so entirely changed; he seemed so calm and reassured that I relapsed into discouraging uncertainty.

Nevertheless, if he came to Wadenhoe I should have better opportunity of observing him, and of ascertaining whether the murdered man was an acquaintance. I could then test him by making observations and watching his face; I could worm from him his secret. I had trusted this man as my best friend, but now that I was half convinced he was an assassin I was filled with a feeling of revulsion, and was determined that Dora's life should never be wrecked by an alliance with one whose hands were stained with blood.

Lying back in the American rocking-chair, with his hands clasped behind his head, he was laughing tightly as he told me an amusing story he had heard at mess that night, entirely forgetting the strange circumstances of our meeting, and having apparently overlooked the extreme lameness of my excuses. His appearance had been so unexpected that I had been quite unprepared to answer his questions and my invitation had been given entirely without previous contemplation. But I knew I had acted

wisely, and that I had entirely allayed any suspicions I had aroused.

Then I thought of my missing match-box. He had no doubt not yet discovered it, and if he found it subsequently he would believe I had lost it during my present visit. Good! I was in the position of a detective holding an important clue, upon which I might work, and either clear or convict him.

Presently, when I announced my intention to depart, he rose, exclaiming with a laugh:

“When you call next time, old chap, you might ring, and not enter with your key. It was a narrow squeak that I didn’t wing you.”

“Are you so fond of shooting at people?” I asked meaningly.

“Shooting! What do you mean?” he asked with a sickly smile. “As a soldier I have to practice with the revolver, of course.”

“But not upon your visitors, I hope,” I said laughing as we were passing along the narrow hall.

We were outside the door of the dining-room, which, being ajar, showed there was no light inside, when suddenly there came from the room a distinct sound.

“Halloa!” I cried gayly. “Who have you got in there? Let’s have a look.”

I placed my hand upon the door to push it open, but with an agile movement he sprang towards me and stood resolutely with his back to the door, deathly pale in alarm.

“No, Stuart,” he gasped. “You must not enter.”

“Why? Who’s your friend? You arouse my curiosity,” I said.

“I forbid you to enter,” he replied firmly, standing with his arms akimbo and brows knit in determination.

“What’s the meaning of this confounded secrecy?” I asked seriously.

“It means—well, it means that I have a visitor who has called to see me privately.”

“Male or female?”

“I refuse to answer any such question regarding my personal affairs,” he replied brusquely.

“Come, don’t humbug. Let me go in and ascertain who it is,” I said, trying to push him aside and enter. But within a second he shut the door, locked it, and removed the key, saying:

“I absolutely decline to allow you to enter that room, Stuart. Indeed, your actions this evening are so strange and extraordinary that I’m almost inclined to think you are not accountable for them.”

“Then you refuse absolutely to tell me who your mysterious visitor is?”

“I do. It is neither my desire nor intention to compromise any person who endeavours to do me a service, even to gratify this idle curiosity of my best friend.”

Such caustic words, uttered in a tone of bitter resentment, showed plainly that he was resolved to preserve the secret of his visitor’s identity.

Was it some person who was assisting him to get rid of the hideous evidence of the crime?

His hands trembled perceptibly as he stood before the locked door, and there had returned to his ashen face that wild, haggard expression of intense fear so noticeable when he had first discovered me.

“You speak of the person being compromised if discovered by me,” I said. “Then I presume your visitor is a woman?”

“You are at liberty to entertain whatever conviction you please. I shall, however, tell you nothing.”

“You refuse?”

“Yes, I refuse.”

“Even though I should tell Dora that I found, in the middle of the night, a mysterious woman in your rooms?”

“Even then I shall refuse to compromise my visitor,” he answered, with firmness that completely astounded me.

“Very well,” I said abruptly. “Good-night. Remember your appointment, and come down to Wadenhoe next Saturday.”

“Good-night. Next time we meet I hope you will not be quite so inquisitive,” he replied, as he closed the door after me and I descended the stairs.

Chapter Twelve.

In Strict Confidence.

My first impulse was to remain outside and watch for any person who might emerge, but I knew that his front windows commanded a wide view of the street and he would soon detect me; and again, if anyone did come out, I should not know whether they came from one of the other flats in the same building. Slowly I walked round to my chambers, contemplating the best course to pursue, and at length came to the conclusion that a midnight vigil would be useless, for it might possibly further arouse my friend's suspicions and so thwart my own efforts.

His refusal to disclose the identity of his guest and his firm determination to keep the visit a secret, convinced me more than ever that by his hand Gilbert Sternroyd had fallen, and that he was endeavouring to get rid of the evidence of his crime. That night I slept but little, and in the morning, remembering Dora's appointment, I resolved to run round and see him before she called. It was my intention to make pretence that I had a conviction that his visitor was a woman, and wished to give him a chance of explaining to me. If he again refused, then I would impart my suspicions to the woman who loved him. I had no desire to cause her pain, but felt it best that she should know the truth. Sooner or later the blow must fall, and I knew alas! that it would crush her.

Just before ten I stood again outside Bethune's door and rang. My summons was answered by Mrs Horton, who in reply to my question whether Captain Bethune was in, answered:

"No, sir. The Captain hasn't been home these three days, sir. He's at barracks, I believe."

"For three days!" I echoed. It was evident that he had returned and again left unknown to this woman. Then I asked whether she had been there every day.

"No sir. I've been down in Hampshire, sir, to bury my poor niece. The Captain said he would be away, so my daughter went with me."

In answer to further questions she told me that she had returned to work at eight that morning, and that the Captain was still absent. It was evident, too, that she had no suspicion of the tragedy, every trace of which had now been carefully removed.

Making an excuse that I wanted to obtain a paper from the rack in the dining-room, I entered and looked around. Nothing had apparently been disturbed, but on the mantelshelf I saw a plain gold signet ring that had evidently been overlooked. Taking it up, I examined it, and found engraved on the inside the initials “G.S.” It was evidently a ring from the dead man’s finger.

I put it down, scrutinised the room carefully, looked in the grate, but saw nothing, then taking up a paper, went out, wishing Mrs Horton “good-day.”

Punctually at the hour appointed, Saunders ushered Dora into my room. She was elegantly dressed in a smart tailor-made gown of dove-grey cloth with a large black hat with feathers, and wore a flimsy veil that rather enhanced than concealed her beauty.

“I feel I’m becoming awfully reckless in making this visit,” she commenced with a laugh when she had seated herself in my chair, “but when I got home last night I received such a strange letter from Jack that I felt compelled to seek your advice.”

“If I can be of any service I shall be delighted,” I said.

She seemed nervously agitated, and her eyes were, I thought, unduly heavy, as if she were unusually anxious.

“Thanks, you are always kind,” she said. “Both Mabel and myself always look upon you as our big brother. We often wonder why you never marry. We shall hear of it, however, some day.”

“Never, I hope,” I answered with a forced smile, remembering the grim tragedy of my marriage, and recollecting that her lover had once made the very same remark to me.

“Why never? If you had a wife you would be far happier. At present you have only your man to look after your personal comforts, and surely your

dinners at your club can never be so pleasant as if you dined at home in company with a pretty wife."

"Upon my word," I cried, laughing, "I shall believe that you actually intend to propose to me next, Dora. I think if it were not—well, if it were not for an obstacle whose name is Jack Bethune, I should be inclined to offer you marriage."

"Oh! Don't talk like that," she protested with a demure look. "You quite misconstrue my words. Once you and I were lovers, when we were in our teens, but all that is past. We have both seen the world now, and have met others whom we could love better."

"I don't know that I have," I said reflectively. She was one of the most charming girls of the season, and I believe were it not for the fact that I had already loved and lost, and that my feelings toward the opposite sex had become sadly embittered by what I felt was unnecessary pain that had been heaped upon me, I should have asked her to renounce her lover and let me take his place.

But only during a few moments did I entertain such foolish thoughts, for I quickly saw that she adored the soldier-novelist, and that I had no right to be disloyal to a friend, even though that friend might be a murderer.

"I'm afraid our conversation is drifting towards a rather dangerous topic," she said. "But you are such a confirmed bachelor that I always feel I can talk to you without fear that you will go down on your knees or perform some other equally absurd antic."

"I'm sure I'm greatly gratified to know that I'm held in such high esteem," I observed laughing. "But under the eyes of a pretty woman like yourself, men are sometimes fascinated, you know."

"Yes, but fascination is not love. When a man is fascinated by a woman, either the latter is an adventuress, or the former a fool." And she threw back her handsome head and laughed at my discomfiture.

I had been fascinated by Sybil. Had she been an adventuress, I wondered; or had I been a fool?

“True,” I answered, earnestly. “But woman’s beauty exercises a most powerful influence over man.” Then I added—“I confess that if I was not aware of your love for Jack I should think of you tenderly, and very possibly I should perform one of those gymnastic antics you denounce as absurd.”

“Then I’m very pleased you know of our attachment,” she answered with a coquettish laugh. “I mean to marry Jack, as you are aware, therefore I can never be any more to you than a friend, but friend I will be always, if you will allow me?”

“Of course,” I said. “The many years we have known one another—I mustn’t count them or I shall mention your age, which won’t be polite—give us licence to talk with freedom without falling in love—eh? But there, a truce to joking, what about this extraordinary letter from Jack? Where is he?”

“Well, he writes from Dover,” she said, drawing a note from her perfumed muff. “Shall I read you an extract?”

“Certainly. I suppose I mustn’t read it myself because it is all ‘darling’ love and kisses.”

She blushed, saying: “I have read somewhere—in one of Jack’s books, I think—the proverb, *Les hommes aiment par jalousie, mais les femmes sont jalouses par amour*. If you loved a woman, you too would call her darling, and I know you would kiss her. Every man does.”

“Your own experience—eh?” I laughed. “Perhaps I should make crosses in representation of kisses. But if you intend to convey the idea of male impossibilities I think those of your own sex are certainly more numerous. It has always occurred to me that feminine impossibilities would make a very remarkable and interesting study. For instance, woman can’t for the life of her make head nor tail out of a time-table; she can’t be jolly and appreciate the most enjoyable function if she thinks her hair is a little out of curl; she can’t help gauging a woman by her clothes, even though experience has taught her that beggars sometimes ride in fine carriages, and she can’t, when it’s a question between Cupid and herself, help saying ‘No’ where she means ‘Yes’ and vice versa.”

“And man, when he sees a woman’s pretty face, no matter if the complexion is added by the hare’s foot or the glorious tresses false, must straightway flirt with her if he has a chance, just as you are doing now.”

Then she laughed heartily, and clapped her small gloved hands gleefully, knowing that she had successfully turned my own sarcasm against myself.

This I was compelled to admit. She was apparently in the highest spirits. Little, alas! did she dream of the terrible truth that the man she loved was an assassin. After more good-humoured banter she pursed her lips in pretty affectation, then opened the treasured letter, saying:

“Now, this is what puzzles me. Jack, who gives no address, the postmark only showing that it was posted at Dover, says: ‘I came up from Hounslow intending to call and see you. I only had sufficient time, however, to drive to Charing Cross and catch the night mail to the Continent. I am writing this in the train, and shall post it at Dover before crossing. I may be absent only a week, or I may be away a month or so. If I can I will write, but I can give no address for I shall be constantly moving. Therefore if you love me do not attempt to communicate with me. I am sorry it is not possible for me to see you and explain, but immediately you receive this letter destroy it, and if anyone inquires after me—whoever they may be—tell them you know nothing. Do not mention my letter to a soul. Trust in me, and when I return I will explain. Good-bye.’”

“What else?” I asked.

“Good-bye, darling,” she said in a low voice, blushing deeply.

“Certainly it is very strange—very strange,” I said. “But if I were you I should not trouble about it. It may be that he has been sent on some special mission abroad.”

“Oh, I shall not worry,” she answered reassuringly. “In a week or two he will return and explain.”

It was upon my lips to tell her the sad news that he would never return, but I stifled the words, and said instead:

“Of course. There is nothing very extraordinary in his omission to give an address. If he is travelling quickly to an uncertain destination, as I have done sometimes, letters are quite out of the question.”

“Yes, I know. But there is yet a stranger fact,” she said. “Last night when we got home Lord Wansford came to supper with some other people, and he told me he had a few hours before seen Jack at Victoria Station talking to a lady who was leaving with a quantity of luggage.”

This new feature was startling, but I saw it was best to scout the idea.

“Old Wansford is rather short-sighted,” I observed. “No doubt he was mistaken. Jack would not wilfully deceive you like that.”

“No. I feel confident he wouldn’t,” she replied, toying with the letter. “My opinion is the same as yours, that he mistook someone else for Jack.”

“No doubt. I’ve been round to his chambers half an hour ago, and seen Mrs Horton. She says he has not been home for three days and that fully bears out his letter.”

“Do you think,” she said hesitatingly a few moments later, “do you think that if I went down to Hounslow I could find out where he has gone? I know Major Tottenham quite well.”

“No. If I were you I would not go. Had he known his destination he would certainly have put it in his letter. I will endeavour to find out for you, but in the meantime do not let his absence trouble you. I have invited him down to Wadenhoe, so you will meet, and—”

“Oh, what a good angel you are,” she cried joyously. “I’ve been wondering how I could get him down there for the hunting now that Ma declines to ask him.”

“Well, I have asked him because I knew you wanted to have him near you. So do not let your spirits flag nor trouble yourself regarding his journey. He will be back soon, and you can have some jolly spins across country together.”

“I don’t know how to thank you sufficiently,” she said, rising slowly and

stretching forth her small hand. “You are an awfully good friend both to Jack and to myself. But I must go, for I have to call at the dressmaker’s with Ma at twelve, and I’ve only just time to get back.”

“Good-bye, Dora,” I said earnestly. “If we do not meet again in town I shall call on you at Blatherwycke. Then we can arrange plans.”

We shook hands and she left, leaving behind her a delightful breath of some subtle perfume that stirred my senses. Her beauty always brought back to me sad memories of Sybil, the adorable woman who came into my life, the one ray of happiness, brief and fleeting, as sunshine on an April day. Like Dora, she had been bright, radiant, and happy, but the grave, alas! had claimed her, and she had left me alone, gloomy and forgotten.

I took her portrait—the one I had bought in Regent Street—from its hiding-place, and as I gazed upon the pictured face, my throat contracted and a mist rose before my eyes—the tearful mist caused by life’s bitterness.

Chapter Thirteen.

Between the Dances.

I delayed my departure for nearly a fortnight in an endeavour to learn something of Bethune but could glean no tidings, so at last went down to the home of my childhood. My grandfather had purchased it in the early part of the century because the county was a hunting one and the neighbours a good set. I had spent the greater part of my youth there, and my parents still resided there at frequent intervals. Situated midway between Oundle and Deenethorpe, near Benefield village, Wadenhoe Manor was a great rambling old place, a typical English home, half hidden by ivy, with quaint gables and Elizabethan chimneys. As in the fading sunlight I drove up to it I thought I had never seen the old place looking so peaceful. Perhaps it was because my own mind was so perturbed by recent events that the solitude seemed complete. From the old mullioned windows the yellow sunset flashed back like molten gold and the birds in the chestnuts were chattering loudly before roosting. On the hill-slope farther down lay the quiet hamlet, a poem in itself. By the grey tower of its church stood two tall poplars, like guardian angels, the golden green of their young foliage all a-shimmer in the sunlight Beneath them was the sombre shade of one old yew, while a line of dark cypress trees, marshalled like a procession of mourners, stood along the grey old wall, and here and there showed the brown thatch of cottage roofs.

At home I found quite a party of visitors and the warmest welcome awaited me. My parents, who had not enjoyed good health, had remained there nearly all the winter, my father only coming to town now and then on pressing business, so I had not seen my mother for several months. The visitors, mostly friends from London, were a gay and pleasant company and dinner was bright and enjoyable, while there was plenty of brilliant chatter in the drawing-room afterwards.

Every one was full of expectancy of the meet on the morrow at Glapthorn, and the ball that was to be given by Lady Stretton at Blatherwycke in the evening, therefore all retired early, and were about again betimes.

The meet was a great success, and at night I accompanied our party to the dance, not because I felt in any mood for dancing, but because I wanted to get a chat with Dora and hear if she had received news of her lover.

Blatherwycke Hall was situated at a beautiful spot. I knew the place almost from the time I could toddle. It was a very ancient house. Its massive walls and dark oak timbers, its open hearths and spacious chimneys, its heavy doors with their antique locks and bars and hinges went back to the Armada days when the Stretton who held it was, in the words of a ballad of the time, “A hard-riding devil.” As old as the Hall, too, were the barns that clustered around it, the thatch of whose pointed gables was weathered to every shade of brown and grey, green with moss and golden with clinging lichens. Beyond was the green woodland, musical with streams, its stately pine trees springing straight and tall, its noble oaks just breaking into leaf, its larch and elm and hawthorn in all the pride of their young beauty.

From without it looked warm and cheerful with its brightly-lit windows, and within all was warm, comfortable, and brilliant. The party was a large one, for all the best people in the county came to Lady Stretton’s dances, and as I entered the great oak-panelled ballroom with its stands of armour and its quaint old chiming clock, I looked eagerly around and saw Dora in a ravishing toilette with skirt and sleeves of soft white satin, a bodice of rose-pink velvet, with the front lightly traced with jet, talking to several men, while at that moment I heard my name uttered by a well-known voice and turned to greet Mabel who, standing with her husband, the Earl, was attired in a marvellous gown of palest heliotrope.

As soon as dancing commenced, however, I managed to speak with Dora, and found she had saved me several dances. Many of the guests were my friends, and we spent altogether a most delightful night. Lady Stretton always entertained in first-rate style, and this was no exception. Outside, in the old-world garden, Chinese lanterns were hung in the arched walks, and in the smaller paths similarly arched crossing the central one at intervals those who desired air could find cool alleys, where the starlight filtered through the trees.

Along one of these I wandered with Dora after we had been waltzing, and

finding a seat, we sat down to rest heedless of the chill air.

“Well,” I exclaimed at length, “have you heard from him?”

“Yes,” she answered rather gloomily. “Only three lines. I have brought it in my pocket so that you may see,” and producing a crumpled envelope, she handed it to me.

Striking a vesta I opened the note and read the few words it contained, written hurriedly in pencil; the message ran: “I cannot return yet, but tell no one you have heard from me. I still love you, darling, better than my life. Jack.” Then I looked at the postmark, and found it had been posted at Bardonnechia, an obscure village on the Italian frontier.

“He reassures you,” I said, after a moment’s silence. “We must wait.”

“Wait,” she echoed, sadly. “We can do nothing else. It is strange that he desires his absence to be concealed,” she continued. “Curiously enough only this morning a well-dressed man called just as I was going to the meet and saw me privately. He gave his name as Captain Allen, of Jack’s regiment, and said he had come from London to ask me his address, as he wished to send him a telegram on some important business. I told him I did not know. Then he asked if I had heard from him, and I told him—”

“You told him what?” I gasped, starting up.

“I told him that the letter I received yesterday was posted at Bardonnechia.”

I sank back upon the seat, nerveless, paralysed.

“Did he not tell you that if you loved him you must remain silent?” I demanded, fiercely. “Don’t you know what you’ve done?”

“No,” she gasped, alarmed. “What—what have I done? Tell me. What will happen?”

But I knew I had nearly betrayed myself, and quickly recovering my self-possession, said:

“You have—well, if he is on a secret mission, as I expect he is, it may be that you may have placed those who desire to thwart its success in a position to do so.”

“Ah! Heaven! I never thought of that,” she cried in despair. “Now, I remember, the man spoke with a rather foreign accent.”

“Yes,” I said, severely. “By disobeying his injunctions you may have placed him in the hands of his enemies!” She sat silent, her hands clasped before her, and sighing heavily, she shuddered.

Then rising slowly she left me. I did not follow, for I saw she walked unevenly with bent head, in order to hide her emotion.

Chapter Fourteen.

The Deeper Indiscretion.

During a quarter of an hour I sat alone smoking a cigarette in thoughtful silence under the trellis, when suddenly I heard the sound of passionate voices on the other side of the ivy. Two persons had evidently seated themselves in close proximity to myself, and I was, so to speak, in the middle of a scene before I realised that I was listening.

“You shall not do this thing,” cried a woman’s voice. “By God! you shan’t —you shall listen to reason. He has been murdered, foully done to death, and—”

“Well, what of that? Can’t you whisper, you fool?” and I heard an imprecation from between a man’s set teeth.

Stealthily, in order not to attract attention, I turned and parting the foliage saw directly behind me the gleam of a light dress in the darkness. At first I could not distinguish its wearer, but almost at that moment her companion struck a match to light his cigar, and its fickle flame illuminated both their faces.

The woman in the light dress was the Countess of Fyneshade, and the man, wearing a heavy fur travelling-coat, and with several days’ growth of beard on his dark, frowning face, was the mysterious individual who had met me on the night I had been married to Sybil.

“So you have come from Marseilles, for what purpose?” exclaimed Mabel angrily. “Merely to run risk of compromising me, and to tell me absolutely nothing. You must think me an idiot?”

“Have I not already told you the result of my inquiries into the movements of Bethune?”

“I have surreptitiously read each letter that Dora has received from him, and I was well aware of your devilish cunning, for I have already had experience of it myself.”

“So you entertain a suspicion that Gilbert Sternroyd has been murdered—eh?” he said, with a low laugh, not deigning to remark upon the uncomplimentary terms in which she had spoken. “Surely a young man may—er—disappear for a week or so, without any great harm coming to him?”

“Mine is not a mere suspicion,” she declared quickly. “I am absolutely certain he has met with foul play.”

“Why?”

“Because three days before his disappearance he told me in confidence that an enemy, whom he would not name, had threatened him.”

“But if he had really been murdered, surely his body would have been found by this time?” he observed. “You have, I am well aware, communicated your suspicions to the police, and they have made every inquiry, but without avail. In passing through London this morning I called at Scotland Yard on your behalf and was informed that they had succeeded in tracing the missing man to the Army and Navy Club on the night of his disappearance. He left there at midnight to walk home, but since that moment nothing has been heard of him.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing except the curious fact that on the following morning a check for five thousand five hundred pounds in favour of some mysterious individual, named Charles Collinson, was handed in at the Temple Bar branch of the London and Westminster Bank, endorsed in an illiterate hand by the bearer, and duly cashed. After that all traces are lost. He has disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him.”

“I care nothing for police theories,” Mabel said firmly. “I feel convinced that he has been brutally murdered.”

“But who were his enemies?”

“As far as I am aware, he had none,” she answered. “The discovery of the check, however, is a curious fact, and if this Collinson could be found

he could, no doubt, give the police a clue."

"I think not," her companion replied dubiously. "The check was dated three days before, and therefore, in all probability, had no connection whatever with his disappearance."

"But now, with regard to Bethune. Where is he?"

"At the Trombetta at Turin, under the name of Harding. I had a telegram concerning him this morning. At your instigation a detective has followed him, but I confess I can see no object in this, because no warrant can be obtained, for the simple reason that the police have no knowledge that Sternroyd is actually dead. He may, after all, be keeping out of the way for some purpose or another. The most exhaustive inquiries have been made, but have failed to elicit any solution of the mystery. Even a careful examination of Bethune's chambers, made by two most expert officers, has failed to show that any tragedy has been enacted. It is true that the Captain destroyed some papers before leafing, but they were mostly billets-doux which he apparently thought might prove compromising to some of his fair correspondents. Thoughtful of him, wasn't it?"

"Very. He was a friend of Sybil's, I believe?"

"Yes, and was very much attached to her at one time, if reports are true," the man answered, with a low, coarse laugh.

Sybil! The mention of her name thrilled me; the words pierced my strained ears, causing me to remain dumbfounded and open-mouthed in expectation.

"Were any of her letters discovered?" Mabel asked in a low tone.

"None. Fortunately all were carefully destroyed."

"But why should he have left so mysteriously if he were in no way connected with Gilbert's disappearance? I suspect him of murder, therefore I gave instructions to have him watched. I care nothing for the cost, or for any scandal that may accrue, so long as I bring the assassin to justice. Gilbert entrusted me with the secret of his fear, and it is therefore my duty to seek out the murderer."

“Even at the risk of Dora’s happiness?” he inquired. “Yes. At risk of her happiness. At present she must know nothing—nothing beyond the fact with which she is already well acquainted, namely, that marriage with Bethune is entirely out of the question. But listen! Someone is coming! It’s Fyneshade! Go! he must not see you. Quick!”

The man jumped up quickly and slipped away in the darkness, while the Countess also rose with a frou-frou of silk, and went forward to meet her husband, laughing aloud, saying:

“Ah! you dear old boy, I knew you would be looking for me. The rooms are so awfully hot that I came out to get a breath of air. It’s simply delightful out to-night.”

“Yes,” he answered dryly, turning and walking back with her, uttering some rapid, earnest words that I could not catch as they crossed the lawn.

That the Countess had been acquainted with Sybil was a fresh revelation. The strange sinister-looking individual whose identity was enshrouded in mystery, and with whom she appeared to be on such intimate terms, had aroused in my heart fresh suspicions that I had been duped. He had declared that Jack Bethune, the man I had trusted as a friend, and whom I was now striving to shield, had been one of Sybil’s lovers! The thought was maddening. I sprang to my feet, clenched my fists, and walked forward in a sudden outburst of fury. If Mabel had known her, was it not highly probable that she was fully aware of the secret of my marriage and the true story of her fate? The strange words inscribed upon the wreath that had been so mysteriously placed upon the grave recurred to me. “Seek and you may find.” Those words danced before my eyes in letters of fire. The whole enigma was one which grew more puzzling daily, and, try how I would, I was unable to solve it.

From what I had overheard I had learnt more than one fact of the highest importance. If no warrant had been issued against Bethune why should not this be communicated to him; why indeed should I not seek of Mabel the truth about the woman I had loved?

This course, after some consideration, commended itself to me, and I

walked on with firm resolve to obtain from the smart Society leader some facts regarding Sybil's tragic end. With that object I again wandered among the dancers in search of the striking study in heliotrope. I could not, however, find her, but discovering Dora flushed by waltzing, fanning herself, and enduring the inane chatter of an insipid young sprig of the Stock Exchange, I managed to take her aside.

"Now, Dora, tell me," I said, when we were standing together alone on the veranda, "do you really want Jack back again?"

"Want him back!" she cried in wistful tones. "If you can induce him to return you will render me a service that I can never forget—a service that will bring happiness to us both."

Happiness! I sighed, remembering the man who had fallen cold and stiff in the narrow passage in Bethune's chambers. How could I allow her, bright, pure and good, to marry a murderer? But was I not selfish? I confess that in those moments of anguish and suspicion I cared for nought save myself. I was determined to know the truth regarding his relations with Sybil, and intended with that object to bring him back, even at risk of his subsequent arrest.

"Very well," I said quietly, "within a week he shall be with you."

"But how will you induce him to return? Besides, we cannot communicate with him."

"Leave all to me," I answered. "In a week he will be at your side, and I—I—"

"And you will receive my most heartfelt thanks," she said in low, earnest tones, laying her hand upon my arm and looking into my face. "You know, Stuart, how I have suffered these long dreary days; how intensely I love him. You are my friend. Yes, you have always proved yourself my friend, although I fear I have on more than one occasion ridiculed you as a confirmed bachelor with a heart of adamant."

"I also loved once," I said.

"Who was the woman?"

“Ah! it is a secret,” I answered. “But I sympathise with you, because I, alas! have experienced all that poignant bitterness, the dregs of life’s unhappiness that are too often the lot of the lover. I loved, ah! I adored, one woman. She was my life, my very soul was hers, but she has gone, gone, and I am left alone with nothing but the memory of her face that comes back to me constantly in my day-dreams.”

“She married someone else, I suppose?” she observed gloomily.

“Death parted us,” I answered huskily, for the memory of her sad, sweet countenance always caused a lump to rise in my throat.

Dora echoed my sigh and was silent, deeply absorbed in thought, gazing away to where the moonbeams shimmered on the lake.

“Dead! then all is of the past,” she said presently. “I never suspected that you had really loved. I never knew that you had been guilty of any deeper indiscretion than the mild flirtation which used to be carried on between us in the old days. Now that you have told me your secret, I can well understand why pretty women have no longer attraction for you, and the reason you have become something of a misanthrope.”

“Misanthrope. Yes, you are right, Dora. I am not old in years, but unfortunately I have grown world-weary early, and have been overwhelmed by a catastrophe that has warped my life and sapped my youthful spirits. But do not let us discuss it further. You are young, and Jack Bethune is deeply attached to you. Therefore I will do my best to induce him to return.”

She turned to me, and taking my hand in hers went on: “I can only express my gratitude, and—and hope that into your life may enter some other woman who may be as worthy honest love as the one whose sad death has struck this chord of tragedy in your heart.”

“Thank you, Dora,” I answered with earnestness, looking into her eyes. “But I am afraid I am doomed to bachelorhood. As I have observed on a previous occasion, if it were not for Jack’s existence I should, in all probability, go down on my knees and kiss this hand of yours.”

“How foolish!” she cried in a strained voice. “I love Jack!”

“For that very reason I have not endeavoured to perform what you once dubbed as an absurd antic,” I said gallantly.

“And for that reason also you ought not to speak quite so frankly,” she replied coquettishly. “But, nevertheless, you will be a perfect angel if you really bring Jack back again. Indeed, I almost feel prompted to kiss you now.”

“I am sure I have no objection,” I answered laughing. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“No, but now I’m a woman kissing isn’t proper,” she answered, with a little *moue*, and laughing brightly, added: “I think our conversation is drifting as usual into a dangerous channel. Come, let us go back.”

We turned, and as we re-entered the room, which buzzed with the soft sibilation of Society small-talk, a partner claimed her for a waltz at that moment commencing, and as she was whirled away she laughed lightly at me across his shoulder.

Chapter Fifteen.

Beneath the Rouge.

In no mood to participate in the gaiety, I went to the library and wrote a long telegram which I addressed to “Harding, Hotel Trombetta, Turin,” explaining that if he feared arrest for any crime his fears were groundless, as no warrant was out, and urging him to return to Dora if only for a few days. This I despatched by my own man to Gretton station, to be transmitted the first thing in the morning. Afterward I again sought Mabel.

When I found her I brought her to the library, closed the door, and as she sank into a comfortable armchair and opened her great fan, she regarded me, I think, with some little surprise.

“Well,” she said, lifting her fine eyes to mine with an undisguised expression of amusement, “why all this secrecy? Don’t you think it would be best if we allowed the door to be open?”

“No, Mabel,” I answered. “What I am about to utter is for no other ears than yours.”

She started, and I fancied I detected a slight paleness beneath the faint suspicion of rouge upon her cheeks. Next second, however, she recovered her self-possession and declared that she was all attention. She was always an admirable actress.

“We have been friends, Mabel, for many years, and this fact allows me to speak with greater freedom,” I said, seating myself carelessly upon the edge of the table before her. “To-night I have made a discovery. I discovered the Countess of Fyneshade speaking with a man who—”

“And you overheard!” she gasped, starting to her feet. “You—you listened to what I said?”

“I certainly did hear. But pray calm yourself, for I am neither your enemy nor a blackmailer. Your secret, I assure you, is in safe keeping.”

Sinking back in her chair she sat pale and silent, gazing fixedly into the dying fire.

“You will remember,” I continued, “that you introduced me to young Sternroyd, the man who is missing—the man who has been murdered.”

“Murdered? How do you know?” she snapped.

I saw I had nearly betrayed my knowledge, but quickly correcting myself I said: “Murdered, according to your belief. Well, it strikes me as curious that you should take such an intensely keen interest in the missing man; that you have thought fit to urge the police to arrest my friend, Captain Bethune; nay, that you yourself should employ a private detective to watch his movements. When you told me, on the occasion on which you introduced us, that Sternroyd was a protégé of your husband’s, you lied to me!”

She frowned, bit her lip, but no word escaped her. “Fyneshade knows no more of Sternroyd than he does of this man whom you have met in the garden to-night,” I continued. “Therefore, when the mystery surrounding the young man’s disappearance is cleared up, no doubt it will make some exceedingly interesting matter for the newspapers.”

“You insinuate that I love Sternroyd!” she cried, starting up again suddenly, and facing me with a look of defiance. “Well, all I can say is, Mr Ridgeway, that you are very much mistaken in your surmise. You are quite at liberty to go to my husband and explain the circumstances under which you were introduced to Gilbert. Tell him that Gilbert was my lover, and see what he says,” she added laughing.

“If he were not your lover I scarcely think you would take so much trouble to ascertain his present whereabouts,” I observed with sarcasm.

“He is not my lover, I say,” she cried angrily. “I hated and detested him. It is not love that prompts me to search for his assassin.”

I smiled incredulously, saying: “Your denial is but natural. If it is not love that causes you to seek the truth regarding Sternroyd’s disappearance, what is it?”

“I refuse to answer any such impertinent question,” she replied haughtily. “I am absolute mistress of my own actions, and my husband alone has a right to inquire my reasons.”

“Very well,” I said calmly, surprised at her denial and sudden defiance. “I have no desire whatever to ascertain facts that you desire to conceal; on the other hand, you must admit that I have acted quite openly in telling you that I overheard your conversation with your strange visitor, who, if I am not mistaken, I have met before.”

“Where?” she answered quickly.

“Have you already forgotten that evening at old Thackwell’s, where you met him with a thin, scraggy girl in pink?” I asked. “On that occasion you were deeply embittered against him, and urged me to avoid him. You said that you knew him ‘once.’ I presume your friendship has now been resumed?”

“Only because it has been imperative,” she declared, speaking mechanically, her face hard set and haggard.

“But is he a desirable acquaintance for a woman like yourself, whose every action is chronicled by Society gossips, and who is surrounded by jealous women who would ruin your reputation if only they had half a chance?”

“I do not seek him,” she answered. “He comes to me because my interests are his.”

“In what direction?”

“I cannot tell you. It is really unfair to ask. You are aware of my acquaintance with this man, and I merely tell you that it is absolutely compulsory.”

She was standing before me, with jewels upon her neck and arms flashing in the lamplight, one of the handsomest of women, yet upon her face was a wild and wearied expression such as I had never before seen. Assuredly some great and terrible secret lay hidden in her heart. “I heard you mention to your friend that Jack Bethune once knew a woman—a

woman named Sybil. Who was she?" I asked at last.

"Sybil! Sybil!" she repeated, with a puzzled look, as if trying to recall the conversation. "Oh, yes! you mean Sybil Houston."

"Who was she?"

"The daughter of a retired naval officer, I believe. I never met her, but I understood that she acted as Jack's amanuensis. She was, however, engaged to some impossible person or other, whom she married."

"Are you sure he knew no other woman named Sybil?" I asked eagerly.

"My dear Mr Ridgeway, however should I know? Jack did not tell me all his little affairs of the heart, for, remember, I am Dora's sister, and he feared probably that I might tell her," and she gave vent to a harsh, discordant laugh.

I remembered, with a sudden pang, that the letter I had discovered was undoubtedly in my dead bride's handwriting, and felt half inclined to disbelieve her; yet she had spoken so frankly that it seemed as though she had told all she knew. It was only her strange laugh, almost hysterical, that aroused doubts within me.

"If anyone should know something of Jack Bethune's female friends it is yourself. I know you are his confidant," she added.

"He has no female friends now but Dora," I observed, "and he loves her dearly."

"Yes, I know, but they must both see the absurdity of it all," she said petulantly. "They can never marry, so I cannot see why Dora should trouble her head about him. I declare she has been going about looking quite pale and wretched during the past week. People are beginning to talk."

"And why can't they marry?" I asked.

"We've discussed the question before," she replied impatiently. "First, he hasn't sufficient money, for Dora would ruin him in a year; secondly—"

and she paused.

“Well—secondly?”

“Secondly, my sister shall never marry a murderer!” she said in a hoarse half-whisper, first glancing at the door to ascertain that it was still closed.

“But if he returns, and is able to prove that he has had no hand in the sudden disappearance of Gilbert Sternroyd?”

“He cannot. I shall be able to prove to the contrary. Let him return to England, and each step he takes will be towards the gallows,” she declared vehemently.

“Your words betray you,” I said severely. “Although you have pretended that Sternroyd is merely missing, you know he has been murdered!”

She started violently, clutching at the edge of the table to steady herself.

“And—and your words also show that you are aware! of the truth, that he has been foully done to death, and that your friend Bethune is guilty of the crime!” she gasped when, in a few moments, she recovered her self-possession. “Let him come, let him face me if he can.” There was a wild look in her bright eyes, an expression of terrible murderous hatred as her fingers worked convulsively, and her bare chest with its diamonds heaved and fell quickly, causing the gems to glitter with dazzling brilliancy. Her face was that of a woman haunted by the shadow of a crime.

“Very well,” I said, quickly. “We will not prolong this very painful interview. He will return, either to prove his innocence or be convicted; either to pay the penalty or marry Dora.”

Walking to the door I threw it open, and as I did so she tottered across the room towards it and almost fell. I caught her quickly, but she only laughed hysterically, saying:

“I am a little faint and shall not dance again. If you see Fyneshade, tell him—say that I have gone to my room,” and, with a cold, haughty bow she swept suddenly past me with hurried, uneven steps.

Chapter Sixteen.

The Mysterious Mr Markwick.

The daily ride was a regular institution at Wadenhoe, whither Dora came frequently to visit my mother, and during the few days following the dance we went out each morning. We chose early hours for riding; starting betimes to enjoy to the full the poetry of those bright mornings, and often the sounds of our horses' hoofs were the first to awaken the echoes along the roads and lanes. From the brown fields would be rising in white clouds the filmy mist, gossamers would be gently waving, reflecting all the colours of the rising sun, while on every tuft and blade of grass stood glistening dewdrops. Then as we reached the woods the air would become fresher, and from all sides would arise the pleasant smell of damp moss and wood, of wild thyme, and of the many little spring flowers that filled the air with woodland fragrance, seeming to blossom out altogether as if anxious not to lose an instant of the opening day.

It was then that I felt mostly under her influence, the influence of a true, honest woman. The way was narrow, and we had to go in single file—Dora going first, entirely absorbed in holding up her horse, who would occasionally stumble over the slippery stumps; I following, leaving my horse to follow his own way, my attention fixed upon the lithe, graceful figure in straw hat and perfectly-fitting habit before me.

Alas! an undefined sense of trouble remained to me, and now that I was questioning myself and trying to read my heart, I was so astonished at my own feelings that I endeavoured to give them any name, to explain them by any possibility, rather than resolve them into a single word.

I knew that my admiration was almost akin to love. That instinctive feeling which attends all affection, the need of reciprocity, had awakened in my heart. The only event that could save me from falling actually in love with her would, I knew, be the advent of Jack Bethune. Six days had already passed, but I had received no word from him. Possibly the fugitive had left Turin before my telegram arrived, or, more likely, he had regarded it as a ruse on the part of the police to induce him to return, and thus save the complicated process of extradition.

Yet each morning as we rode together she discussed the prospect of seeing him, and wondering why he had neither arrived nor telegraphed, while I endeavoured to console her by anticipating his arrival each evening. Foolishly I clung to those hours of ignorance, and, like a man who shuts his eyes because he will not see, I forced my mind and heart not to remember or forebode. I would snatch from Fate yet one more day, one single day longer of that vague, ill-defined uneasiness which I could treat as foolishness until the voice of authority had pronounced it to be well-founded. Once more I would feel without alloy that I was young, happy, beloved.

She, too, was happy in the expectation of having the man she loved again by her side. She was ignorant that he was suspected of murder; and I felt myself utterly unable to begin attacking so deep and tranquil a happiness, linked so firmly into what seemed an endless chain of bliss.

We were riding together one morning on the road between Thrapston and Aldwinkle, and when near the cross-road that leads to Titchmarsh, Dora suddenly uttered an exclamation of joy and pointed on before. I looked, and saw upon the road a familiar figure in a tweed suit and grey felt hat. With one accord we galloped forward, and in a few minutes were shaking Jack Bethune heartily by the hand.

But in those glad moments I could not fail to notice how changed he was. His unshaven face was pale and thin, and in his eyes was a curious expression; indeed, he seemed to avoid my gaze. Then again there fell upon me the suspicion that this man had been Sybil's lover. Yet I gripped his hand in welcome.

"I received your telegram, old fellow," he said, turning to me after he had greeted the woman he loved. "How did you ascertain I was in Turin?"

I laughed, but vouchsafed no satisfactory reply, and as we all three walked towards Wadenhoe the conversation grew animated. Jack, suppressing the truth that he had feared arrest, made it appear to Dora that he had been sent abroad on a secret mission and had been compelled to move rapidly from place to place. At breakfast he related how he had received my telegram late at night, after travelling to Asti, and had packed up and left immediately.

“But why have you not written oftener?” Dora asked. “Your letters were couched so strangely that I confess I began to fear you had done something dreadfully wrong.”

I watched the effect of those innocent words upon him. He started guiltily, his thin lips compressed, and his face grew pale.

“You are not very complimentary, dearest,” he stammered. “I have never been a fugitive, and I hope I never shall be. I suppose the papers have been saying something about me. They always know more about one than one knows one’s self. The statements I read in my press-cuttings are simply amazing.”

“As far as I am aware the papers have not commented upon your absence,” she answered. “It was merely a surmise of my own, and, of course, absolutely absurd. Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” he answered, rather dryly.

“No, nothing,” I said; then turning to him I added: “Dora has been talking daily of you, and wondering when you would return.”

“I obeyed your commands immediately,” he observed, with an expression that was full of mystery.

“And you have acted wisely,” I said. I saw it was not judicious to continue the conversation further, therefore we rose from the table, and during the morning I left Dora and her lover to wander in the garden and talk together.

After luncheon, on the pretext of playing billiards, I took Jack alone to the billiard-room, where I knew we should be undisturbed. Instead of taking up the cues we sat together smoking in the deep old-fashioned bay-window that overlooked the broad pastures and the winding Nene.

“Well,” I said at length. “Now be frank with me, Jack, old fellow; what does all this mean? Why did you leave the country so suddenly and cause all this talk?”

“What has been said about me? Have the papers got hold of it?” he

inquired quickly.

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Thank Heaven!” he gasped, with a sigh of relief. “Then I am safe up to the present.”

Up to the present! He feared the future. This was a confession of his guilt! The fingers that held his cigar trembled slightly as he spoke.

“But you have not told me the reason of your flight. What is it you fear?” I inquired.

“The reason is a secret,” he said, as if speaking to himself, looking away fixedly across the meadows and the sun-illumined river. “Some incidents have occurred that, although they have happened in real life, are even more startling and extraordinary than any I have ever imagined in fiction.”

“Cannot you explain them to me, your friend?”

“No. I cannot—I—I dare not, believe me. For the present I must preserve my secret,” and he shook his head sadly.

“Why?”

“Because my whole future depends upon my ability to remain silent.”

For some minutes I did not speak; my bitter thoughts were wandering back to the conversation I had overheard in the garden at Blatherwycke. At last I resolved to attack him point-blank.

“Jack,” I exclaimed earnestly, looking into his pale, pained face. “Answer me one question. Did you ever know a woman named Sybil?”

For an instant his brow contracted, and his breath seemed to catch. His hand again trembled as he removed the cigar from his mouth.

“Sybil!” he echoed, his face paler than before. “Yes, it is true, I—I once knew someone of that name. You have discovered the secret of—”

“Captain Bethune,” interrupted my father’s man, who, followed by Dora, had entered the billiard-room unobserved, and who stood before us holding a card on a salver.

“Yes,” answered Jack, turning sharply.

“A gentleman has called to see you, sir.”

Jack took the card, glanced at it for an instant, and then starting suddenly to his feet, stood with clenched fists and glaring eyes.

“My God, Stuart! He is here! Save me, old fellow! You are my friend. Save me!”

Next second he sank back again into his chair with his chin upon his breast, rigid and motionless as one dead.

Noticing Dora’s look of surprise at the words he uttered, he set his teeth, steadied himself by dint of great effort, and turning to the man ordered him to show the visitor in. Then, addressing the woman he loved, he added hoarsely:

“I must see this man alone, dearest.”

“You wish me to leave?” she inquired, her pretty face clouded by a sudden expression of bewilderment. He nodded, without replying, and as she moved slowly towards the door, I followed.

“No, Stuart,” he cried anxiously. “No, stay, old fellow, stay! You are my friend, stay!”

Dora turned, glanced at her lover and then disappeared through the doorway, while I returned slowly to where he was standing, staring like one fallen under some occult influence.

“Who is this visitor?” I asked, but before he could reply, the man appeared at the door, and announced:

“Mr Francis Markwick.”

At the same moment there advanced into the room the mysterious individual who had been my conductor on the night of my marriage; the man whose intimate acquaintance with Lady Fyneshade was so puzzling! He was well-groomed and sprucely-dressed in a well-cut frock-coat, tightly-buttoned, and wore a flower and grey suede gloves.

“Ah! my dear Bethune!” he cried, walking towards him with extended hand, without apparently noticing me. “I heard you were back, and have taken the earliest opportunity of calling. Where have you been all this time?” But Jack, thrusting his hands into his pockets, made no reply to this man’s effusiveness. His greeting was frigid, for he merely inclined his head. Suddenly the remembrance of those partially charred letters I had found in Jack’s chambers on the night of the murder of Sternroyd flashed through my brain. In them the name “Markwick” occurred several times, and the writer of one had referred to him as “that vile, despicable coward.” Who had penned these words? Sybil had no doubt written one of the letters I had discovered, but did this condemnation emanate from her? I stood watching him and wondering.

When he found Bethune disinclined to enter into any conversation, he turned to me and with a slight start recognised me for the first time.

“I believe, Mr Markwick, we have the pleasure of mutual acquaintance,” I said, bowing.

He looked at me in silence for a few seconds, then, with an expression of perplexity, replied:

“You really have the advantage of me, sir. I cannot recall where we have met before.”

I was certainly not prepared for this disclaimer, but his eyes were unwavering, and there was no sign of confusion. His sinister face was a perfect blank.

“Come,” I said, rather superciliously, “you surely remember our meeting one night at Richmond, our strange journey together and its tragic result!”

“Strange journey—tragic result!” he repeated slowly, with well-feigned ignorance. “I confess I have no knowledge of what you mean.”

“Complete loss of memory is advantageous sometimes,” I remarked dryly. “But if you deny that you did not meet me one night in the Terrace Gardens at Richmond, that you did not induce me to go to a certain house to have an interview with the woman I loved, and that while in that house an event occurred which—”

“How many whiskies have you had this morning?” he asked with a laugh. His impassibility was astounding.

“I tell you if you deny these facts you lie!” I cried angrily.

“I certainly do deny them,” he answered firmly. “And what is more, I have never set eyes upon you before to-day.”

“Then you will deny that Lady Fyneshade had a visitor who met her clandestinely—in the shrubbery at Blatherwycke the other night—and that that visitor was yourself? You will deny that you have acted as the Countess’s inquiry agent; that you followed my friend, Captain Bethune, to the Continent, dogged his footsteps through France, Germany and Italy, and made such arrangements that he could be arrested at any moment—”

“What for?” cried Bethune, amazed. “What crime is alleged against me?”

There was silence. Markwick flashed a rapid glance at me.

“None,” I said at last I saw that this man Markwick was too wary to show his hand.

“Then if what you say is true, why should this man act as spy upon me?” demanded Jack fiercely.

“Ask him,” I replied. “From his own lips I heard him report to his employer, Lady Fyneshade, the result of his investigations.”

“Mabel! then she, too, is my enemy,” he exclaimed furiously. “She has endeavoured all along to part me from Dora, but she shall not—by God! she shan’t.”

“And what proof have you?” asked Markwick, addressing me. “What

proof have you, pray, that I had been employed—as you so delicately put it—by the Countess?”

“Your own words. I overheard you. It was highly interesting, I assure you,” I answered, smiling as I watched the effect of my words.

Suddenly Jack, pale with anger, started with a sudden impulse towards him, crying:

“You have spied upon me and endeavoured unsuccessfully to give me into the hands of the police. Well, it is a fight between us. Were it not for the fact I am a guest in a friend’s house I would horsewhip you as a cad and a coward. As it is, you shall go free. I shall, however, be armed against you; these revelations by my friend Ridgeway have proved what I long ago suspected, and—”

“This friend of yours, who desires to claim acquaintance with me, lies!” he said with calm indifference.

“Go! Tell the Countess, whose lover you may be for aught I know, that the man she suspects is innocent, and that if necessary he will prove it,” Bethune answered bitterly.

“I knew you were innocent, Jack!” I cried. “Prove it, old fellow! Don’t delay a moment.”

He turned quickly, and asked me frigidly: “Then you also suspect me—of what?”

I saw that my involuntary exclamations had again betrayed my suspicions. Ere I could reply, Markwick, who had flung himself into an armchair and was sitting in an indolent attitude with legs outstretched, had cried:

“Innocent—bah!”

“What crime then do you allege?” Jack demanded. His face blanched as he strode up to his strange visitor with clenched fists.

Chapter Seventeen.

Attack and Defence.

Springing to his feet and tearing open his coat, Markwick, the man designated by one of Bethune's fair correspondents as "that vile, despicable coward," drew from his breast-pocket a folded newspaper, saying:

"This newspaper, the Daily News of this morning, will perhaps refresh your memory. Listen while I read. I promise not to bore you," and opening the paper quickly a cynical smile played about his thin lips as he read as follows:—

"'Yesterday, at Bow Street Police Court, Mr J Arthur Price, barrister, made an extraordinary application to the magistrate. He stated that three years ago Sir Henry Sternroyd, Knight, the well-known Wigan ironfounder, died at Cannes, leaving his entire fortune, amounting to about three millions, to his son Gilbert. Two years ago Gilbert Sternroyd, who had been educated at Bonn, received the property, and took up his residence in London. He was a member of several good clubs, and soon became well-known and popular with a rather smart set. On March 12 last he went to the Empire Theatre alone, had supper with a friend at the New Lyric Club, and from there went to the Army and Navy. He left there about half-past twelve alone, and walked in the direction of his chambers. Since that hour nothing whatever has been seen or heard of him. On the following morning a check for a rather large amount was presented for payment, but, as this check was drawn three days before, it is not thought by the police to have any connection with his mysterious disappearance. One fact, counsel pointed out, was strange, namely, that although the check was dated three days before, the check-book containing the counterfoil had not been discovered in his chambers, and it is therefore presumed that he had it upon him at the time of his disappearance. The case, counsel continued, presented many extraordinary and even sensational features, one of which was the fact that a will had been discovered, properly executed by the missing man's solicitors, by which the whole of his extensive fortune is bequeathed to a

lady well-known in society, the much-admired wife of a peer. It is feared that the young man has met with foul play, and it was counsel's object in making the application on behalf of the relatives to direct public attention to the case, and express a hope that any person possessed of information as to his whereabouts would not fail to communicate with the police. The magistrate observed that the Press would no doubt take notice of counsel's application.'"

Markwick paused, his small eyes glistening with a revengeful fire as he gazed at Jack Bethune.

"Does not this statement bring back to your memory the incidents of that night?" he asked slowly, without taking his eyes off him.

With sinking heart I saw that my friend visibly trembled, and noticed that he started as each mention of the name of the murdered man stabbed his conscience. His face was bloodless; the dark rings around his eyes gave his ashen countenance an almost hideous appearance. The statement about the will was a new and amazing phase of the mystery, for it pointed conclusively to the fact that the dead man had left his wealth to Mabel, a fact that accounted for the seemingly unreasonable interest which the Countess had taken in his disappearance.

"I—I really don't know why the report of the sudden disappearance of a man whom I knew but very slightly should be of paramount interest to me," Jack answered, but the haggard expression on his face told only too plainly the effect caused by the mine his enemy had suddenly sprung upon him.

"It may one day be of vital interest to you," Markwick said menacingly, as he carefully refolded the paper and placed it again in his pocket.

Jack gave vent to a dry, hollow laugh, saying: "It is certainly a strange affair altogether, but surely this is not news to you. I heard of Sternroyd's disappearance weeks ago."

"You were perhaps the first person aware of it—eh?" observed Markwick caustically.

"By that remark you insinuate that I possess knowledge which I have not

disclosed," Jack answered brusquely. "Both the Countess and yourself have perfect liberty to form your own conclusions, and they would be amusing were it not for the gravity of the question involved, namely, whether or not Gilbert Sternroyd has met with foul play."

"He has met with foul play," cried Markwick sternly. "And you alone know the truth."

This direct accusation startled me. I glanced at my friend. He was standing upright, rigid, silent, his terrified eyes gazing fixedly into space.

But for a moment only. Suddenly, he again sprang towards his accuser, and facing him boldly, cried:

"You're endeavouring to fasten upon me the responsibility of young Sternroyd's disappearance! Well, do what you will. I do not fear you," and a strange laugh escaped his lips. "Arrest me, put me in a criminal's dock, bring forward your array of counsel, your evidence, and the results of your accursed espionage, then, when you have finished I will speak. But before you do this, before you advance one step further upon the dangerous course you are now pursuing, remember that slander is an offence against the law; remember that in such evidence as must be given in an assize court certain persons must be seriously compromised, and do not forget that the very weapon by which I shall defend my own honour will be one that must prove disastrous to yourself. I have said enough. Go!"

Markwick was amazed at this unexpected outburst. He, like myself, had apparently expected Jack to confess to the crime of which we both suspected him, but by this firm declaration of innocence it almost seemed as though we were both mistaken. Yet in that brief moment I remembered his refusal to allow me to enter the room in which he had undoubtedly concealed the body. I reflected upon the many suspicions that had been aroused within me. No! I was still convinced of his guilt, notwithstanding his denial. The fact seemed apparent that he possessed a secret of Markwick's, and felt secure because he knew that this man dare not risk the dire consequences of its revelation.

"Then am I to understand that you absolutely defy us?" asked the

mysterious friend of Sybil.

“Us?” echoed Bethune indignantly. “By that word you mean Lady Fyneshade and yourself. Yes, I defy you both! Act if you dare; but I warn you the peril will be yours.”

“Very well,” the man answered, bowing haughtily with a coolness that was astounding. “Defiance is of little avail in a criminal’s cell.”

Jack placed his hand upon the bell and rang it violently.

“I have endeavoured to save the honour of more than one person in this affair, but if you wish for exposure you can, of course, make known many ugly facts,” he said.

“But you declare emphatically you are innocent,” Markwick said hastily.

“Neither you nor Ridgeway have alleged any specific charge against me,” he answered. “If any crime is alleged to have been committed by me, then after my arrest it will be time for me to prepare my defence. Until then I shall remain silent.”

“And the day is not far distant when you will be compelled to speak,” the other said in a tone of impatience and annoyance, while at that moment my father’s man appeared in answer to Jack’s summons.

“No further discussion is necessary,” my friend said in a tone more quiet than before. “I decline to enter into details.” Then, turning to the servant, he said:

“Show this gentleman out.”

Markwick uttered not a word. Biting his lip viciously, he glanced threateningly from my guest to myself, drew a deep breath, and turning on his heel followed the man out, and a few moments later passed below the window and disappeared down the drive.

The interview had been an extraordinary one. Markwick, who had with such well-feigned ignorance declared himself unacquainted with me, possessed a most remarkable personality. The mystery that surrounded

him was as impenetrable as that which had enveloped Sybil, but I was compelled to admit within myself that I shared his suspicion as to Bethune's guilt. Yet my friend's open defiance was absolutely bewildering. He had engaged his enemy with his own weapons, and for the present, at any rate, had vanquished him.

Chapter Eighteen.

A Revelation and its Price.

No word was exchanged between Jack and myself regarding the interview with Markwick. It was a subject we both avoided, and, as he was happy with Dora, I hesitated to inquire into the antecedents of the mysterious individual who had repudiated all knowledge of me with such consummate impudence. Among my letters one morning a week later, however, I found a note from Mabel dated from her town house, asking me to run up and call upon her at once, and requesting me to keep the fact a strict secret. “I want to consult you,” she wrote, “about a matter that closely concerns yourself, therefore do not fail to come. I shall be at home to you at any time. Do not mention the matter to either Jack or Dora.”

During my ride with our two visitors I pondered over this summons, which was rather extraordinary in view of our last interview, and at length resolved to take the mid-day train to town.

Soon after five o’clock that evening I was ushered into the Fyneshade drawing-room, a great handsome apartment resplendent with gilt furniture and hangings of peacock-blue silk, where I found Mabel alone, seated on a low chair before the fire reading a novel.

“Ah! I received your wire,” she exclaimed, casting her book aside, and rising quickly to meet me. “It is awfully good of you to come.”

She looked very handsome in a wondrous tea-gown of silk and chiffon, and as I sat down opposite her and she handed me a cup, I reflected that the journalistic chroniclers were not far wrong in designating her “one of the prettiest women in London.”

“On the last occasion we met, on the night of the ball at Blatherwycke, you uttered some rather bitter personalities, Stuart,” she commenced, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin upon her palms as she crouched by the fire. The evening was chilly, and when I had shaken her hand I noticed how icy it seemed. “I’ve been thinking over your words,”

she added after a short pause.

“Well, I only said what I thought,” I answered. “I’m often accused of abruptness.”

“Yes, but it was not to scold you that I asked you to call,” she went on. “The fact is I’m in a terrible difficulty,” and she hesitated as if half fearing to admit the truth.

“Of what nature?” I asked.

“Fyneshade has left me!” she answered suddenly, in a strange half-whisper.

“Left you!” I cried. “Why, whatever do you mean?”

“I mean that I have acted foolishly, and that he has left this house with a declaration upon his lips that while I inhabit it he will never again cross its threshold. To-day, I have had a letter from his solicitors suggesting that I should have an interview with them for the purpose of coming to some financial arrangement. He offers me Fyneshade Hall for the remainder of my life.”

“Where is he?”

“In Paris, I believe.”

“And the cause of this disagreement? Tell me.”

“No. For the present I must say nothing. It will get into the papers soon enough, I expect, for the public gaze is as acute upon a fashionable woman as upon a prime minister in these days of scurrilous journalism and irresponsible personal paragraphs,” she answered rather sadly.

I felt sorry for her, but I knew that the open manner in which she had carried on flirtation had been a public scandal, and after all I was not really surprised that at last Fyneshade should resolve to end it.

“When did he leave?” I inquired.

“Four days ago. I have not been out since, and am at my wits’ ends how to act so as to allay any suspicions of the servants. He took his valet with him.”

“But why make me your confidant?”

“Because I want you, if you will, to render me one small service,” she answered with deep earnestness. Then after a pause, during which time she took down a feather hand-screen and held it between her face and the fire, she said: “I have already heard that Jack and Dora are together again, and—”

“And you desire to part them,” I hazarded seriously.

“No, I think you misjudge me,” she answered with a winning smile. “I am merely anxious that my sister should not make a disastrous marriage.”

“Then you think marriage with Bethune would prove disastrous?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” she answered, sighing. “Already I know what transpired at the interview between Jack and Francis Markwick on the day of the former’s arrival at Wadenhoe.”

“You have again seen your mysterious friend, I suppose, and he has told you everything, eh?”

“Yes, and further, let me confess that it was owing to this interview that Fyneshade, who has suddenly become outrageously jealous, took umbrage, and went away in a passion.”

“I should have thought,” I said, “that the narrow escape you had of detection in the shrubbery at Blatherwycke ought to have already served as warning.”

“Ah! That is the matter upon which I want especially to consult you,” she said suddenly. “Markwick has related to me how you told him of your presence in the shrubbery on that night. It is evident also that Fyneshade suspected that I met someone there clandestinely, and if the truth comes out and our conversation repeated, you must recognise how very seriously I may be compromised.”

I nodded, and slowly sipped my tea.

“Now,” she continued in an earnest, appealing tone. “You, Stuart, have always been my friend; if you choose you can shield me. Before long you may be cross-examined upon that very incident, but what is there to prevent you from saying that it was you yourself and not Markwick who was sitting with me?”

“You ask me to lie in order to save you?” I exclaimed severely.

“Well, to put it very plainly, it amounts to that.”

“But who will cross-examine me? In what form do you dread exposure?”

“I only dread the scandal that must arise when it becomes known that I am acquainted with this man,” she answered quickly. “As I have before told you, there is no thought of affection or regard between us. While hating him, I have been compelled to seek his assistance by untoward circumstances.”

“When do you anticipate these attempted revelations?” I asked calmly.

She was silent. The flames shot high in the grate, illuminating the great handsome apartment and were reflected in the many mirrors, while outside a neighbouring clock slowly struck six. The mansion seemed strangely quiet and dismal, now that its master, the Earl, had parted from his smart wife.

“Bethune will be tried for murder. Some awkward questions will then be asked,” she answered at last.

“Markwick is quite resolved, then,” I cried, starting up.

“Quite. I, too, have every reason to believe that Gilbert fell by Bethune’s hand.”

“Yet you have no proofs,” I observed.

“I did not say that Certain proofs will be forthcoming at the trial.”

“But I presume you are aware that Jack strenuously denies the allegation?”

“Of course. It is but natural. He fancies himself secure and is confident we dare not cause his arrest for fear he should make a revelation regarding a strange and startling incident that occurred recently. But he is quite mistaken. I intend to establish the fact that Gilbert was murdered, and further, that he fell by the hand of your friend.”

“And the reason for this, Mabel,” I exclaimed, bitterly; “the reason for this is because you have received information that the foolish youth executed a will under which, in the event of his death, you inherit three millions. This fact is already common gossip, although your name has not yet transpired in the newspapers. It is but natural that you should wish to prove his death, even though you may have loved him.”

“He was a foolish boy, and pretended to admire me, but I swear, on my honour, that I gave him no encouragement. I treated him kindly, as the married woman usually treats a love-sick youth.”

“And he has left you three millions because you were kind to him,” I said. “Well, of course you are anxious to prove that he is not merely ill or abroad and likely to turn up again; in fact, it is to your own interest to show that he was murdered.”

“I will prove it, even if I have to face a cross-examination in the witness-box,” she exclaimed with firm determination. “All I ask you is, for the sake of our long friendship, not to reveal the conversation you overheard in the shrubbery.”

“You wish me to assist you against my friend?” I said. “No, Mabel, I cannot give you my promise. What I overheard was suspiciously like a conspiracy formed to convict Jack of murder, and if I am asked I shall speak the truth.”

Her lips quivered. With a pretty woman’s wilful egotism she had anticipated that I would perjure myself to shield her, and her disappointment and chagrin were apparent. Her face was turned toward the fire, and for a long time neither of us uttered a word.

“Because my husband has gone and I am defenceless,” she said at last with much bitterness, “all my whilom friends will, I suppose, now unite in maligning me. You, of all men, know the tragedy of my marriage,” she continued appealingly. “I married for money and a coronet, but ere my honeymoon was over, I discovered that to love my husband was impossible, and further that his reputed wealth existed entirely in the imagination; for truth to tell he has been on the verge of bankruptcy ever since our marriage. No, my life during these past three years has been a wretchedly hollow sham; but because I am Countess of Fyneshade, and am considered smart, I have been flattered and courted. Put yourself for a moment in my place, and see whether you would prefer the misery of your husband’s great, empty, comfortless home to the many happy, well-filled, and brilliant houses always open to you, houses where you are deemed the centre of attraction, and where admiration and flattery greet you on every hand. Think, think deeply for a moment, and I feel assured you will not condemn me so unmercifully as you have.”

“I do not condemn you, Mabel,” I said quietly, “On the contrary, you have my most sincere sympathy. If there is anything I can do that will induce Fyneshade to return and thus avoid the scandal, I will do it willingly, but, understand, once and for all, I will not perjure myself in a court of justice.”

“Ah, you are cruel and hard-hearted, for you refuse to allay his suspicions, even though you must know from the character of our conversation that at least there is not one iota of affection between Markwick and myself. Is it because of Jack that you refuse?”

“Yes,” I answered point-blank. “It is because I don’t believe he is guilty.”

Slowly she rose from her low chair and stood before me, tall and erect, a bewitching figure against the fitful firelight.

“Then let me tell you one fact that may induce you to alter this opinion,” she said. “You will remember that you went to his chambers alone in the darkness, and met him there. You suspected him, but gave him no inkling of your suspicions, yet when you wanted to enter one of his rooms he refused to allow you.”

“Yes,” I said, amazed. “How do you know that?”

“It matters not by what means I have gained this knowledge; but I tell you further that in that room at the moment you desired to enter, there was stretched upon the floor the body of Gilbert Sternroyd!”

Her words came upon me as a bolt from the blue. How she had become aware of my visit was an entire mystery, but her allegation fully bore out my horrible suspicion that the murderer was at that moment hiding the ghastly evidence of his crime.

“Such, then, is the nature of the evidence you intend to adduce against him,” I said, when I had fully contemplated her startling announcement. “You will, however, be compelled to prove that he committed the crime. If you are aware that the body was concealed in that room, you probably know where it is at the present time.”

“My proofs I retain until the trial,” she said. “Gilbert has been murdered, and I am but doing my best to bring the culprit to justice. You think I am acting strangely; that my husband perhaps is, under the circumstances, justified in leaving me to face a scandal and the derision of the women who have envied me. Well, you are welcome to your opinion. I can tell you, however, that when the truth is out, although my reputation may be blighted, some revelations will be made that will amaze you.”

“I do not blame you for endeavouring to solve this mystery, Mabel,” I said rather sympathetically, “but remember Jack Bethune is my friend, and Dora loves him dearly—”

“Because, poor girl, she is ignorant of the terrible truth,” she interrupted.

“Then let her remain in ignorance until his guilt be proved,” I urged. “She is happy; do not disturb what unfortunately may be but a brief period of joy.”

“You may rely on me,” she answered. “I shall tell my sister nothing. But if Bethune is arrested do not be surprised.”

“I do not anticipate his arrest,” I observed. “For when he is brought to trial, the revelations of which you have spoken will implicate too many people.”

“How do you know? What has he told you?” she inquired quickly.

“Nothing. I have learnt much from my own observations.”

“Now, tell me,” she said, suddenly placing her hand softly upon my arm. “Will you not take upon yourself the identity of Markwick for that brief quarter-of-an-hour in the shrubbery—that is, of course, providing you are asked? I—I appeal to you,” she added in a low tone, panting with emotion. “I appeal to you, as a woman clinging to one last hope, to remove this unfounded suspicion attaching to me. Speak, Stuart. Tell me you will remain my friend!”

I was silent. The darting flames showed her hand some face upturned to mine, pale, haggard, anxious. Her breast rose and fell beneath its silk and chiffon, and her white hand grasped my arm convulsively.

“I—I have been reckless,” I admit, she went on, brokenly. “My recklessness has been caused by an absence of love for my home or my husband, but I swear that Fyneshade’s suspicions are utterly groundless. Ah!—if you knew the terrible secret in my heart you would pity me—you would shield me, I know you would,” and some other words that she uttered were lost in a sudden fit of hysterical sobbing.

“What is your secret?” I asked calmly, when struggling with her emotion, she again looked up to my face.

“You will remember when we were in the library at Blatherwycke, you asked me if I ever knew a woman named Sybil.”

“Yes,” I cried eagerly. “Yes. Did you know her?”

“I—I lied to you when I denied all knowledge of her,” she answered. “I am well aware of the strange manner in which you became acquainted with her and of your marriage, but even though these incidents are startling, the secret of her life and death is far more astounding.”

“Tell me, Mabel. Tell me all,” I cried breathlessly.

“No,” she answered. “No, not until you have promised to swear that you sat with me in the shrubbery, and that Markwick was not present. Only in

exchange for your aid will I reveal to you the secret.”

Chapter Nineteen.

The Earl’s Suspicions.

“Will you—will you swear?” she implored, grasping my hands, her white agitated countenance still lifted to mine in earnest appeal.

I had felt confident long ago that she must know something of Sybil, from the fact that Sternroyd’s photograph had been placed with that of my dead wife, but was entirely unprepared for this strange offer. I was to commit perjury and thus shield this mysterious scoundrel Markwick as well as herself, in order to learn some facts about the woman I had loved. At first, so intense was my desire to obtain a clue to the inscrutable mystery that had enveloped Sybil, that I confess my impulse was to give my promise. But on reflection I saw the possibility that she desired to shield Markwick, and not herself; and I also recognised the probability that her promised revelation might, after all, be entirely untrue. These thoughts decided me.

“No,” I answered with firmness. “I will not commit perjury, even though its price be the secret of my wife’s life.”

“You will not?” she wailed. “Not for my sake?”

“No,” I answered, gravely. “Much as I desire to solve the enigma, I decline to entertain any such offer.”

“Then you, too, are my enemy!” she cried wildly, with a sudden fierceness, staggering back from me a few paces.

“I did not say so. I merely refused to be bribed to perjury,” I answered as she released my hands.

“And you will not help me?” she said, hoarsely, standing before me and twirling the ribbons of her gown between her nervous bejewelled fingers.

“I will assist you in any way I can, but I will not swear that I have not seen that man,” I replied.

“Ah! you are prejudiced,” she said with a deep sigh. Then in a meaning tone she added, “If you knew the secret that I am ready to divulge in exchange for your silence, you might perhaps have cause for prejudice.”

She uttered these words, I knew, for the sole purpose of intensifying my curiosity. It was a woman’s wile. Fortunately, however, I remained firm, and answered a trifle indifferently perhaps:

“If I can only learn the truth at such cost, then I prefer to seek a solution of the mystery from some other source.”

“Very well,” she said, her eyes suddenly flashing with suppressed anger at my blank refusal. “Very well. You refuse to render me a service, therefore I decline to impart to you knowledge that would place your enemies within your power. Speak the truth if you will, but I tell you that ere long you will regret your refusal to enter into the compact I have suggested—you will come to me humbly—yes, humbly—and beg of me to speak.”

“Of what?”

“To tell you the truth,” she said quickly, a heavy frown of displeasure crossing her pale brow. “I am fully aware of the many strange adventures that have occurred to you during the past few months; those incidents that have puzzled and mystified you, as indeed they would any person. I could, if I chose, give you an explanation that would astound you, and place in your hands a weapon whereby you might defeat the evil machinations of those who seek your ruin—nay, your death.”

“My death!” I echoed. “Who seeks my death?”

“Your friends,” she replied with a low cynical laugh, as taking up an unopened note that lay unheeded upon the table, she glanced at its superscription and eagerly concealed it in the pocket of her tea-gown.

For a moment she paused, walking slowly toward the fireplace, but suddenly turning back to me, stretched forth both hands, and with a quiver of intense emotion in her voice, made a final appeal urging me to hide from everyone all knowledge of the interview in the garden at Blatherwycke.

My mind was, however, made up. I shook my head, but no word passed my lips. I regretted deeply that I had responded to her summons.

“You are not more generous than the rest,” she cried suddenly between her set teeth. “No. You would ruin me, drive me to a suicide’s grave! But you shall not. Ha! ha! ha!” she laughed hysterically. “We are enemies now; you and I. Well, let it remain so.”

“It must be so if you desire it,” I answered briefly, and not desiring to prolong the interview, I bowed and turning upon my heel, strode from the room, closing the door behind me.

As I stepped into the hall I encountered a person so suddenly that I almost stumbled over him, yet so quickly did he motion me to silence, that my expression of surprise died from my lips. The appearance of the man under these circumstances was certainly as unexpected as it was puzzling, for it was none other than the Earl of Fyneshade. It was not surprising that he should loiter in his own house, attired in hat and coat, but it was more than passing strange that while his wife was deploring the fact that he had deserted her, and that a scandal would thereby be created, he had actually been standing at the door, and in all probability listening to a conversation which must have been intensely interesting.

This thought flashed in an instant upon me. If he had overheard his wife’s appeal would it not convince him more than ever that his suspicions were justifiable? Yet a few moments later, when he motioned me to step into an adjoining room, the door of which he closed quietly and turned to me in a manner quite friendly and affable, these fears were at once dispelled. Evidently he had heard nothing, for in explanation of his mysterious conduct he told me that he wished his wife to believe he was out of town, and that he had entered with his latch-key in order to obtain some money.

“I was afraid you would greet me aloud,” he said laughing. “Fortunately you didn’t. The fact is Mabel and I have had some little differences, and for the present our relations are rather strained. Did she ask you to call?”

“Yes,” I replied; adding, “she wanted to speak to me about Dora.”

“Ah! poor Dora!” Fyneshade exclaimed rather sadly. “Most lamentable affair that engagement of hers. She’s a charming girl, but I’m afraid the

course of true love will not run very smoothly for her!”

“Why?”

“Well, Bethune is hardly the man one would wish for a husband for one’s daughter,” he answered. “There are ugly rumours afloat regarding his sudden disappearance.”

“But he has now returned to face his traducers,” I answered hastily.

“Yes, yes, I know. But does not his uneasiness strike you as—well, at least as curious?”

His words were an admission that he suspected Jack. Had Mabel, I wondered, told him of her suspicions?

“I really don’t know,” I said, with affected indifference. He smiled rather incredulously, I thought, and lowering his voice, evidently fearing that he might be overheard, he inquired—

“There is a question I want to ask you, Stuart. Are you acquainted with a man named Markwick?”

“He is not an acquaintance of mine,” I answered promptly, determined to show no sign of surprise. “I have seen him at Thackwell’s, but have only spoken to him twice.”

“Do you know who he really is?” he asked, with a strange intensity of tone that surprised me.

“I’ve known him as Markwick, but if he has another name I am utterly unaware of it. To me he has always appeared a rather shady individual whose past is veiled by obscurity.”

“And to me also. For weeks I’ve been trying to discover who the fellow really is, but no one knows. He has been living at the Victoria recently, and before that he made the Savoy his head-quarters. He appears to have plenty of money, but according to the information I have gathered, his movements are most erratic, and their object a profound mystery. He met my wife at some reception or another and called on her the other

day.” Then, bending toward me he asked: “Do you think—I mean—well, would you suspect him of being a detective?”

I regarded him keenly. His question was a strange one.

“No,” I replied. “From my observations I feel perfectly confident that he is not a detective. He is more likely an adventurer.”

“Are you absolutely sure he is not connected with the police?”

“I feel certain he’s not,” I answered. “From one fact that came under my notice I have been led to the conclusion that he is an adventurer of the first water.”

“A criminal?”

“No, I don’t go quite so far as that. All I know is that he has an utter contempt for the law.”

“Then he has, to your knowledge, committed some offence?” Fyneshade cried quickly, with undisguised satisfaction.

“Not exactly. His action might, however, bring him within the pale of the law.” I had no desire to impart to this thin, dark-faced peer the wretched story of my marriage.

“What was the nature of his action?” he demanded eagerly. “Tell me.”

“Oh, it was really of no interest,” I replied quite flippantly. “I may have been mistaken after all.”

“In other words, you refuse to tell me—eh?” he observed with a sickly smile.

“I cannot explain any matter of which I have no knowledge,” I retorted, well-knowing that he was endeavouring to worm from me facts to use as weapons against his enemy, and at the same time feeling convinced that in order to discover the secret hinted at by his wife, I must act warily, and with the most careful discretion. This strange encounter with the Earl, his curious actions in his own house, and his eagerness to learn something

detrimental to the mysterious Markwick, formed a bewildering problem. Nevertheless by some intuition I felt that by silence and watchfulness I should at last succeed in finding some clue to this ever-deepening mystery.

While we listened we heard the Countess emerge from the drawing-room and call to her pug as, with a rustle of silk, she mounted the stairs. Then Fyneshade's conversation drifted into other channels. But he made no further mention of his disagreement with Mabel, and never once referred to the strange disappearance of Gilbert Sternroyd. Though I exerted all my ingenuity to lead up to both subjects, he studiously avoided them, and having waited until all seemed quiet and none of the servants were moving, we both crept out, the Earl closing the front door silently by means of his key.

In the street he glanced swiftly around in order to see if he had been observed, then suddenly gripping my hand, he wished me a hurried adieu, and walked quickly away, leaving me standing on the curb. His usual courteous manner seemed to have forsaken him, for he offered no excuse for leaving me so abruptly, nor did he apparently desire my company any longer. Therefore I turned and pursued my way engrossed in thought Truly the Earl and Countess of Fyneshade were an ill-assorted pair, and their actions utterly incomprehensible.

Chapter Twenty.

An Evening's Amusement.

Saunders met me on entering my chambers with the surprising announcement that a lady had called during my absence, and had desired to see me on pressing business.

"Did she leave a card?"

"No, sir. She hadn't a card, but she left her name. Miss Ashcombe, sir."

"Ashcombe?" I repeated. "I don't know anyone of that name," and for a few moments I tried to recollect whether I had heard of her before, when it suddenly burst upon me that on a previous occasion I had been puzzled by a letter bearing the signature "Annie Ashcombe." The note I had found in Jack's room on the night of the tragedy and which requested Bethune to meet "her ladyship" at Feltham, had been written by someone named Ashcombe!

"What kind of lady was she, Saunders?" I inquired eagerly. "Ancient?"

"About thirty-five, I think, sir. She was very excited, dark, plainly dressed in black, and wore spectacles. She seemed very disappointed when I said you had only just returned from Wadenhoe, and had gone out again. She wanted to write a note, so I asked her in and she wrote one, but afterward tore it up and told me to mention that she had called to see you on a matter of the most vital importance, and regretted you were not in."

"Did she promise to call again?"

"She said she was compelled to leave London immediately, but would try and see you on her return. When I asked if she could make an appointment for to-morrow, she replied, 'I may be absent only three days, or I may be three months.'"

"Then she gave no intimation whatever of the nature of her business?"

“Not the slightest, sir. I think she’s Irish, for she spoke with a slight accent.”

“You say she tore up her note. Where are the pieces?” He went to the waste-paper basket, turned over its contents, and produced a handful of fragments of a sheet of my own notepaper. These I spread upon the table, and when he had left the room I eagerly set to work placing them together. But the paper had been torn into tiny pieces and it was only after long and tedious effort that I was enabled to read the words, hastily written in pencil, which as far as I could gather, were to the following effect:—

“Dear Sir.—The matter about which I have called to see you is one of the highest importance both to yourself and one of your friends. It is not policy, I think, to commit it to paper; therefore, as I am compelled to leave London at once I must, unfortunately, postpone my interview with you.

“Yours truly,—

“Annie Ashcombe.”

I unlocked the little cabinet and taking therefrom the strangely-worded letter I had found in Jack’s room I compared minutely the handwriting and found peculiarities identical. The “Annie Ashcombe” who had called to see me was also the writer of the message from the unknown lady who had taken the precaution of journeying to Feltham in order to secure a private interview with Jack Bethune. Annoyed that I had been absent, and feeling that I had been actually within an ace of obtaining a most important clue, I cast the fragments into the grate with a sigh and replaced the letter in the cabinet. The situation was most tantalising; the mystery inexplicable. From her I might have learnt the identity of Jack’s lady friend, and she could have very possibly thrown some light upon the causes that had led to the tragedy, for somehow I could not help strongly suspecting that “her ladyship” referred to in the note was none other than Mabel. But my visitor had gone, and I should now be compelled to await her return during that vague period which included any time from three days to three months.

A fatality seemed always to encompass me, for my efforts in search of

truth were constantly overshadowed by the jade Misfortune. I was baffled at every turn. To discover the identity of “her ladyship” was, I had long recognised, a most important fact in clearing or convicting Jack, but, at least for the present, I could hope for no further explanation.

Having dressed, I went to the Club, dined with several men I knew, and afterward descended to one of the smoking-rooms, where I accidentally picked up an evening paper. The first heading that confronted me was in bold capitals the words, “Sternroyd Mystery: Supposed Clue. The Missing Man’s Will.”

Breathless with eagerness I devoured the lines of faint print. They seemed to dance before my excited vision as I learnt from them that a reporter who was investigating the strange affair, had ascertained that a clue had been obtained by the detectives.

“The mystery,” continued the journal, “is likely to develop into one of the most sensational in the annals of modern crime. We use the word crime because from information our representative has obtained, it is absolutely certain that the young millionaire Sternroyd met with foul play. How, or where, cannot yet be ascertained. At Scotland Yard, however, they are in possession of reliable information that Mr Sternroyd had for some time actually anticipated assassination, and had confided this fact to a person who has now come forward and is actively assisting the police. Another extraordinary feature in the case is, that although Mr Sternroyd has a mother and a number of relatives living, he made a will, only a few weeks before his disappearance, bequeathing the whole of his enormous fortune to a lady well-known in London society. The police are most actively engaged in solving the mystery, and now that it has been ascertained that the missing man anticipated his end at the hand of another, it is confidently believed that in the course of a few hours the police will arrest a person suspected.”

The secret was out! Mabel had evidently placed her theory before the police and explained what Gilbert had told her regarding his fears. She was Jack’s enemy, and had placed the detectives on the scent. This, then, was the reason she had endeavoured to silence me regarding her interview with Markwick at Blatherwycke. When she had striven to induce me to swear secrecy, she had without doubt already informed the police

of her suspicions, and well knew that ere long I should be called as a witness to speak as to Bethune's movements. Our friendship had been broken. Fortunately I had promised nothing, and was free to speak.

The pink news-sheet I cast from me, congratulating myself that I had not fallen into the trap the Countess had so cunningly baited.

Even at that moment some men opposite me were discussing the mysterious affair, and as I smoked, my ears were on the alert to catch every syllable of their conversation. It was only now that I fully realised what widespread sensation Sternroyd's disappearance had caused. Having been absent in the country, I was quite unaware of the intense public interest now centred in the whereabouts or fate of the young millionaire whose little peccadilloes and extravagances had from time to time afforded food for gossip and material for paragraphists in society journals.

"There is a woman in the case," one of the men was saying between vigorous pulls at his cigar. "I knew Gilbert well. He wasn't a fellow to disappear and bury himself in the country or abroad. Whatever he did, he did openly, and no better-hearted young chap ever breathed. He was awfully good to his relations. Why, dozens of them actually lived on his generosity."

"I quite agree," said another. "But I heard something in the Bachelors' last night that seems to put quite a different complexion on the affair."

"What is it?" inquired half-a-dozen eager voices in chorus.

"Well, it is now rumoured that he admired the Countess of Fyneshade, and that he was seen with her on several occasions just prior to his disappearance. Further, that the will about which to-night's papers give mysterious hints, is actually in her favour. He's left everything to her."

The other men gave vent to exclamations of surprise, but this piece of gossip was immediately seized upon as a text for many theories of the weird and wonderful order, and when I rose and left, the group were still as far off solving the mystery to their own satisfaction as they had been half an hour before.

Wandering aimlessly along to Piccadilly Circus, I turned into the Criterion expecting to find a man I knew, but he was not there, and as I started to leave, I suddenly confronted a tall, well-dressed man who had been lounging beside me at the bar, and who now uttered my name and greeted me with a breezy “Good-evening, Mr Ridgeway.”

Unnerved by the constant strain of excitement, this suddenness with which we met caused me to start, but in an instant I told myself that I might learn something advantageous from this man, therefore called for more refreshment, and we began to chat.

The man’s name was Grindlay. He was a detective who owed his position of inspector in the Criminal Investigation Department mainly to my father’s recommendation. About six years previous a great fraud, involving a loss of something like thirty thousand pounds, was perpetrated upon my father’s bank by means of forged notes, and Grindlay, at that time a plain-clothes constable of the City Police, stationed at Old Jewry, succeeded, after his superiors had failed, in tracing the manufacturer of the notes to Hamburg and causing his arrest, extradition, and conviction. The ingenuity of the forger was only equalled by the cunning displayed by the detective, and in consequence of a question my father addressed to the Home Secretary in the House, Grindlay was transferred to Scotland Yard and soon promoted to an inspectorship. Therefore it was scarcely surprising that he should always show goodwill toward my family, and on each occasion we met, he always appeared unusually gentlemanly for one of his calling, and full of genuine bonhomie.

Immediately after the strange adventures of that memorable night on which I had been married to a lifeless bride, I had sought his counsel, but had been informed that he was absent in South America. It was now with satisfaction that I again met him, although I hesitated to speak to him upon the subject. Truth to tell I felt I had been ingeniously tricked, and that now after the lapse of months, even this astute officer could not assist me. No, as I stood beside him while he told me briefly how he had had “a smart run through the States, then down to Rio and home” after a fugitive, I resolved that my secret should still remain my own.

“Yes,” I said at length. “I heard you were away.”

“Ah! they told me at the Yard that you had called. Did you want to see me particularly?” he asked, fixing his dark-brown eyes on mine. He was a handsome fellow of middle age, with clear-cut features, a carefully twisted moustache and upon his cheeks that glow of health that seems peculiar to investigators of crime. In his well-made evening clothes and crush hat, he would have passed well for an army officer.

“No,” I answered lightly: “I happened to be near you one day and thought I would give you a call. What are you doing to-night?”

“Keeping observation upon a man who is going to the Empire,” he answered, glancing hurriedly at his watch. “Come with me?”

For several reasons I accepted his invitation. First because I wanted some distraction, and secondly because it had occurred to me that I might ascertain from him something fresh regarding the murder of Gilbert Sternroyd.

We lit fresh cigars, and, strolling to the Empire Theatre, entered the lounge at that hour not yet crowded. As we walked up and down, his sharp, eager eyes darting everywhere in search of the man whose movements he was watching, I inquired the nature of the case upon which he was engaged.

“Robbery and attempted murder,” he answered under his breath so that passers-by should not hear. “You remember the robbery of diamonds in Hatton Garden a year ago, when a diamond merchant was gagged and nearly killed, while the thief got clear away with every stone in the safe. Well, it’s that case. I traced the stones back to Amsterdam, but failed to find the thief until three weeks ago.”

“And he’ll be here to-night?”

“Yes, I expect him. But don’t let’s talk of it,” he said under his breath. “Somebody may spot me. If you chance to meet any of your friends here, and am compelled to introduce me, remember I am Captain Hayden, of the East Surrey Regiment.”

“Very well,” I answered smiling, for this was not our first evening together, and I had already been initiated into some of the wiles of members of the

Criminal Investigation Department.

For fully an hour we lounged at the bars, watched the variety performance, and strolled about, but my friend failed to discover his man. While standing at one of the bars, however, several men I knew passed and repassed, among them being the Earl of Fyneshade accompanied by Markwick and another man whom I had never before seen. The latter, well-dressed, was apparently a gentleman.

“Do you know that tall man?” I asked Grindlay as they went by, and we happened to be looking in their direction.

“No,” he answered. “Who is he?”

“The Earl of Fyneshade.”

“Fyneshade? Fyneshade?” he repeated. “Husband of the Countess, I suppose. She’s reckoned very beautiful, isn’t she? Do you know them?”

“Yes,” I replied. “They are friends of my family.”

“Oh,” he said, indifferently. “Who are the other men?”

I told my companion that the name of one was Markwick, and our conversation then quickly drifted to other topics. Presently, however, when the Earl repassed along the lounge, he said—

“Have you met his lordship recently? He doesn’t appear to have noticed you.”

“I saw both the Earl and the Countess this afternoon,” I said. “I called at Eaton Square.”

Almost before the words had left my lips, Fyneshade and his friends entered the bar, the trio speaking loudly in jovial tones, and in a moment he recognised me. Markwick and I exchanged glances, but neither of us acknowledged the other. It was strange, to say the least, that he of all men should be spending the evening with Mabel’s husband.

“Hulloa, Ridgeway!” cried the Earl, coming forward. “Didn’t expect to see

you here. Where did you dine?”

“At the club,” I answered, and turning, introduced Grindlay as Captain Hayden.

“Good show here, isn’t it,” Fyneshade exclaimed enthusiastically to the detective. “Juniori is excellent to-night. Her last song, ‘Trois Rue du Pan,’ is immense. It’s the best thing she has ever sung, don’t you think so?” Grindlay agreed, criticised the vivacious dark-eyed chanteuse with the air of a blasé man-about-town, and chatted with his new acquaintance with well-bred ease and confidence. In a few minutes, however, Fyneshade returned to rejoin his friends at the other end of the small bar, while Grindlay and myself strolled out again on our watchful vigil.

At last, after a diligent search, my friend suddenly gripped my arm, whispering—

“See that man with the rose in his coat. You would hardly suspect him of a diamond robbery, would you?”

“No, by Jove!” I said. “I never should.” As we passed I looked toward him and saw he was aged about fifty, with hair slightly tinged with grey; he wore evening clothes, with a fine pearl and emerald solitaire in his shirt, and upon his hands were lavender gloves. In earnest conversation with him was a short, stout, elderly man, with grey scraggy beard and moustache, about whose personality there was something striking, yet indefinable.

“Oh!” exclaimed Grindlay, when we were out of hearing. “I had not suspected this!”

“Suspected what?” I asked, eagerly; for tracking criminals was to me a new experience.

“I did not know that our friend there was acquainted with the little man. I’ve seen his face somewhere before, and if I’m not very much mistaken, we hold a warrant for him with the offer of a reward from the Belgian Government.” Then placing his cigar in his mouth and puffing thoughtfully at it for a moment, he added, “Let’s saunter back. I must get another look at him.”

We turned, strolling slowly along, and as we passed, Grindlay left me and went close to him to take a match from the little marble table near which the pair was standing. Leisurely he lit his cigar, then returning to me, said briefly:

“I’m not yet certain, but I could almost swear he’s the man. If he is, then I’ve fallen on him quite unexpectedly, and shall arrest him before he leaves this place. But I must first run down to the Yard and refresh my memory. Come with me?”

I assented, and we went out, driving to the offices of the Criminal Investigation Department in a hansom. Through the great entrance hall, up two wide stone staircases and down a long echoing corridor, he conducted me until we entered a large room wherein were seated several clerks. He had thrown away his cigar, his keen face now wore a strange pre-occupied look, and as he approached a shelf, took down a large ledger, and opened it before him, he glanced up at the clock remarking as if to himself—

“I’ve got an hour. They are certain to remain until the end.”

His eye ran rapidly down several columns of names, until one arrested his attention and he closed the index-book, replaced it, and left me for a few moments, observing with a laugh—“I won’t keep you long, but here—there’s something to amuse you.”

Taking from one of the unoccupied desks a large, heavily-bound volume, he placed it before me, adding—“The people in there are mostly foreigners wanted for crimes abroad, and believed to be living in free England.” And he went out, leaving me to inspect this remarkable collection of photographs. Each portrait, mounted in the great album, bore a number written in red ink across it, and I soon found myself highly interested in them. Presently Grindlay returned hurriedly with a similar album, the leaves of which he turned over one by one, carefully scrutinising each picture on the page in his eager search for the counterfeit presentment of the man who, unsuspicious of detection, was calmly enjoying the ballet at the Empire.

“Anything there to interest you?” he inquired presently without looking up,

as we stood side by side.

“Yes,” I answered, “Are these all foreigners?”

“Mostly. They are wanted for all kinds of crime, from fraud to murder,” he replied.

They were indeed a most incongruous set. Many were photographs taken by the French and German and Italian police after the criminal’s previous conviction, and the suspects were often in prison dress; but the portraits of others were in cabinet size, bearing the names of well-known Paris, Berlin, and Viennese photographers.

“Have any of these people been arrested?” I inquired.

“No. When they are, we take out the picture and file it. If there is any reason why they should not be arrested it is written below.”

And he went on with his careful but rapid search while carelessly I turned over leaf after leaf. A few of the men appeared quite refined and gentlemanly. Some of the women were quiet and inoffensive-looking, and one or two of them stylishly dressed and exceedingly pretty, but it could be distinguished that the majority bore the stamp of crime on their brutal, debased faces.

I had glanced at a number of leaves mechanically, and had grown tired of inspecting the motley crowd of evildoers, when suddenly an involuntary cry of abject amazement escaped my lips.

My eyes had fallen upon two portraits placed side by side among a number of others whose physiognomy clearly betrayed the fact that they were malefactors. Stupefied by the discovery I stood aghast, staring at them, scarcely believing my own eyes.

The two portraits were those of Sybil and myself!

Sybil’s picture was similar to the one I had purchased in Regent Street, and was by the same photographer, while mine had evidently been copied from one that had been taken in Paris two years before.

Of what crime had we been suspected? Here was yet another phase of the inexplicable mystery of Sybil's marriage and death. Some words were written beneath her portrait in red ink and initialled. I bent to examine them and found they read—"Warrant not executed—Death."

I raised my head slowly and turned to Grindlay.

Chapter Twenty One.

Grindlay's Tactics.

The detective, bending over the album, was so deeply engrossed in contemplating a photograph he had just discovered, that he failed to notice my exclamation of surprise, or if he heard it he vouchsafed no remark.

I turned to him for the purpose of seeking some explanation regarding the portrait of myself and my dead bride, but in an instant it occurred to me that he knew nothing regarding the strange circumstances of my marriage, or of the fact that Sybil was "wanted," otherwise he would not have been so indiscreet as to give me this book of photographs to inspect. By directing his attention to it I should be compelled to explain how ingeniously I had been tricked.

No. Again silence was best.

I decided that I would keep my own counsel, at least for the present, and watch the progress of events. At the other portraits on the page I glanced, then turned over leaf after leaf in search of another face I had cause to remember—that of the mysterious Markwick. But he was not included. Only Sybil and myself were suspected. What, I wondered, could be the crime for which our arrest was demanded. Why, indeed, if I had been "wanted," had I not been arrested long ago?

The discovery was astounding.

Grindlay, extracting the photograph from the book, left me hurriedly with a word of apology, and while he was absent I again turned to the strange assortment of foreign criminals, among whom I figured so prominently. Again and again I read the endorsement beneath Sybil's photograph. Her bright eyes looked out at me sadly. Her beautiful countenance bore the same strange world-weary look as on that evening when she had first passed me in the half-lights of the Casino Garden in the far-off Pyrenean valley. But alas! the one word "death" written below was a sad reality. She was lost to me, and had died with her inscrutable secret locked within her

heart.

Presently the detective returned, thrusting some ominous-looking papers in his breast-pocket as he walked, and closing the book I followed him out a few moments later.

“I have the warrant,” he said calmly, as we entered a cab together. “I shall make the arrest at once.”

“Shall you arrest both men?”

“No,” he replied, laughing. “The situation is rather critical. I don’t want to arrest the first man at present, only his companion. If I arrest the latter the diamond thief will no doubt abscond. I shall therefore be compelled to wait until they have parted.”

“What’s the charge against the other?” I inquired, much interested.

“Jewel robbery,” he answered sharply. “He’s one of a gang who have their head-quarters in Brussels. I must keep him under observation, for he’s a slippery customer, and has already done several long stretches. Where he’s been lately, goodness knows. The police of Europe have been looking out for him for fully two years, and this seems to be his first public appearance. It was quite by a fluke that I spotted him, for he can’t hide the deformity of his hand, even though he is wearing gloves.”

“What deformity?” I inquired. “I did not notice any.”

“No,” he laughed. “You are not a detective. The deformity consists in two fingers of his left hand being missing. It was this fact that first attracted my attention toward him.”

Across Leicester Square we dashed rapidly, and, pulling up before the Empire, were soon strolling again in the lounge, having been absent about three-quarters of an hour. The crowd was now so great that locomotion was difficult, nevertheless the detective, having lit a fresh cigar, walked leisurely here and there in search of the pair of criminals, while I confess my interest was divided between them and the Earl of Fyneshade. Why the latter should now fraternise with the man of whom only a few hours ago he had been so madly jealous was

incomprehensible, and my eyes were everywhere on the alert to again discover them and watch their actions. Fyneshade had left his wife because of her friendship with this sinister-faced individual, yet he was actually spending the evening with him. It was a curious fact, and one of which Mabel evidently did not dream. What, I wondered, could be the motive? Had Markwick sought the Earl's society with some evil design? Or had the Earl himself, determined to ascertain the truth, stifled his feelings of jealousy, and for the nonce extended the hand of friendship to the man he hated?

The performance was drawing to a close, the bars and foyer were crowded, and the chatter and laughter so loud that neither song nor music could be heard. Although we struggled backward and forward, and peered into the various bars, Grindlay could not discover the men for whom he was in search, neither could I find the Earl and his companions.

"I'm very much afraid they've left," the detective said to me presently, when he had made a thorough investigation.

"What shall you do?"

"Oh, I know where I can find the first man, therefore the second; being in London, it will not be a very difficult matter to get scent of him again," he answered lightly, adding, "But I haven't seen your friend the Earl. He's gone also, I suppose."

"I believe so. I haven't noticed him since we returned."

"You said you knew that man who was with him," he observed.

"The tall man," I repeated. "You mean Markwick. Yes, I've met him once or twice. But I don't know much of him."

"Foreigner, isn't he?"

"I don't think so. If he is, he speaks English amazingly well."

"Ah! I thought he had a foreign cast in his features," he said, striking a vesta to relight his cigar. "I've seen him about town of late, and wondered who and what he was; that's why I asked."

“Well, I don’t exactly know what he is. All I know is that he is a friend of the Earl and his wife, and that he visits at one or two good country houses. Beyond that I am ignorant.”

The detective did not reply. He was too occupied in searching for the jewel thieves. Time after time we strolled up and down, descended to the stalls, ascended to the grand circle, and had peered into every nook, but without success, until at length we entered one of the bars to drink. While we stood there, I inquired whether he had the warrant for the arrest of the man in his pocket, to which he replied in the affirmative.

“Let me have a look at it,” I urged. “I’ve never seen a warrant.”

But he shook his head, and laughing good-naturedly replied:

“No, Mr Ridgeway; you must really excuse me. It is a rigid rule in our Department that we never show warrants to anybody except the person arrested. The ends of justice might, in certain cases, be defeated by such an injudicious action; therefore it is absolutely forbidden. The warrant is always strictly secret.”

I smiled, assured him that it was only out of curiosity I had asked to see it, and then, mentioning the strange disappearance of Gilbert Sternroyd, asked him whether he had been engaged in that inquiry.

“Yes,” he said, “I have—in an indirect manner. It’s an extraordinary case, most extraordinary. Murder, without a doubt.”

“With what object?” I asked.

“As far as we can ascertain, there was absolutely no object,” he answered.

“Do they expect to make an arrest?”

“They hope to, of course,” he replied vaguely. “Personally, I know but little about it beyond what I’ve read in the newspapers. It is a strange feature in the case that the body has not been found.”

“What about the will?”

“Ah! another very curious point; but I don’t attach much importance to it. Many hare-brained, wealthy young fools make wills in favour of women they admire. It is an everyday occurrence, only they generally revoke or destroy the will, or else spend all their money before they die. No; there is little in that, and certainly no clue. By the way, the lady to whom he has left his money is the wife of your friend the Earl. You knew Sternroyd, then?”

I was unprepared for this, but, affecting ignorance, answered:

“I saw him in the street one day. Lady Fyneshade introduced me. That is all I knew of him.”

The detective, apparently satisfied, did not press his question further; but a few minutes later, the performance having concluded and the theatre rapidly emptying, he suggested it was time to go, and outside, in Leicester Square, we shook hands and parted.

“Good-night,” he said heartily, as he turned to leave. “I shall be astir early to-morrow, and see if I can find the man who has eluded me to-night.”

“Good-night,” I laughed. “I shall look for the case in the papers.”

Then he buttoned his overcoat and strolled rapidly away along Cranbourne Street, while I made my way home in the opposite direction, my mind full of strangely dismal forebodings.

Somehow—I know not by what means—it had been impressed upon me during the last quarter of an hour I had been with Grindlay, that this shrewd police officer was not searching for the diamond thief, for, on reflection, I had a faint suspicion that, as we alighted from the cab and entered the vestibule, one of the men he suspected had actually passed us, and that my friend had stared him full in the face. I was too excited at the prospect of witnessing an arrest in the theatre to notice the incident at that moment, and, strangely enough, it was only when walking home absorbed in thought I remembered it.

Why had Grindlay allowed these men to thus slip through his fingers?

No! I felt absolutely convinced that the detective was searching for an

entirely different person. Indeed, the suggestion passed through my mind, as I recollected his apparently artless questions, that after all I might be suspected. Perhaps someone had seen me leave Jack's chambers on that fatal night; perhaps the name upon the warrant, which he refused to show me, was actually my own.

Again, the discovery of my portrait in that gallery of criminals was amazing, and seemed to have some hidden connection with the disappearance of the young millionaire. Perhaps Grindlay had purposely given me the album to inspect in order to watch how I was affected by the discovery. In any case, the curious events of that evening had rendered the problem even more complicated than before.

Chapter Twenty Two.

A House of Shadows.

My mother, I ascertained from a letter a few days later, had invited Dora to remain with her a week, and Jack, still my father's guest, was therefore basking in the smiles of the woman he loved. How long would this continue, I wondered. Suspected and surrounded by spies and enemies, Jack Bethune must, I felt certain, sooner or later betray his terrible secret, either by word or deed, and then the assize court would be the portal to the gallows. I pitied Dora, well-knowing what a crushing blow must sooner or later fall to dispel her day-dreams and shatter her air-built castles. I pitied Jack, because I had seen in his haggard, care-worn face only too plainly the terrible pangs of conscience that, torturing him by day and night, were goading him towards his doom.

Beauty is one of the rarest and most desirable things in nature. Dora Stretton, with her calm beauty, with its hints of animation and passion, with her accomplishment of form and sweetness of voice, was one of those ravishing creatures for whose smiles men do great deeds, for whom men fight and die, through whom they feel that sudden throb of the heart that lifts them beyond the common round. The sweet, bright-eyed woman who loved this murderer was one of those who make the joy, the poetry, the tragedy of life. Alas! that it should have been so.

The papers were full of laudatory reviews of Bethune's new book, "The Siren of Strelitz," and while everywhere the opinion was expressed that the "soldier-novelist" had never done better work, the popular author himself was clinging to the last hours of his happiness with Dora, trembling at each approaching footstep, and expecting arrest at any moment. A dozen, nay, a hundred, times I sat and calmly reflected whether I had the slightest shadow of doubt in my own mind that he was Gilbert's murderer; but I could find none. I alone had, by strange mischance, discovered the body, and when I had returned he refused to allow me to enter one of the rooms. He had locked the door in my face. In there the body had been hidden, and thence, by the exercise of some deep cunning, the nature of which I was unaware, he had removed it and

disposed of it in such a manner that discovery was impossible. He had hidden every trace of this terrible deed, and there remained only myself as witness against him.

I had seen the body. My evidence alone might send him to a murderer's grave.

But if, finding himself cornered, he wove a web about me, in what plight should I find myself? This startling thought impressed itself upon me one morning as, sitting alone in my chambers, I had been reading a half-column of "Latest Details" hashed up by an enterprising reporter who had carefully "written around the facts" without carrying his reader any further. There was just a chance that Bethune might give information against me and cause my arrest. In such circumstances it would, I realised not without alarm, be very easy for him to give some damning circumstantial evidence. Yet he could not allege that he had found me searching the spot where the body had lain, otherwise his evidence would show that he had previous knowledge of the crime, and some awkward cross-examination would follow regarding the disposal of the body. No! Careful consideration of any evidence that might be given against me brought me to the gratifying conclusion that he dare not adopt the bold course of accusing me of firing the fatal shot I had determined to seek a solution of the mysterious link that I felt more than ever convinced connected the tragic end of Gilbert Sternroyd with my strange marriage and Sybil's death; yet I knew not in what direction to seek. The Countess had admittedly been acquainted with her; Markwick had, I knew from personal knowledge, held some mystic influence over her; and the murdered man had known her so intimately that, at her own desire, their photographs had been exhibited together in Regent Street. Either Mabel or Markwick could, if they chose, tear aside the veil and present the facts undistorted; but from neither could I hope for any assistance, for the man had disclaimed all knowledge of me prior to our formal introduction at Wadenhoe, while Lady Fyneshade made perjury the price of her secret.

I had, therefore, to act on my own initiative, as before, and again at this time the strange words written on my card that had been attached to the wreath in Woking Cemetery urged me to still prosecute my search after truth. The mysterious message, apparently from the dead and intended no doubt for me, had read, "Seek and you may find." That hour I renewed

my search with increased vigour and a keen desire to revenge the death of Sybil, which I felt convinced had been brought about by foul play.

For many days I wandered aimlessly about London, expecting to hear of Jack's arrest, and scarcely daring to glance at the contents bills of the evening papers lest my eyes should fall upon the words I dreaded there to see.

Since my meeting with Sybil and the inexplicable and startling events that had followed I had become so utterly world-weary that I cared nothing for the festivities I attended. I accepted invitations merely out of habit, but truth to tell, had it not been for the keen desire to elucidate the ever-deepening mystery I should have returned to the country or gone abroad. I felt, however, that in London alone a clue might be discovered, therefore I remained; but, although day after day, I racked my brains in an endeavour to form some plan of action, I could see no ray of light through the impenetrable veil. On several occasions I had met Grindlay accidentally, and had tried in vain to learn from him whether any further evidence had been obtained against Bethune. He always affected ignorance, and the only point on which he deigned to enlighten me was that the two men he had pointed out to me at the Empire had successfully succeeded in eluding him.

Dora, having remained three weeks at Wadenhoe, had returned to Lady Stretton at Blatherwycke, and was daily expected in town for the season; Jack had left and gone to North Wales, for the purpose of getting local colour for a new historical romance dealing with life in Wales in the sixteenth century; and, as far as I could ascertain, the Earl of Fyneshade had gone to the Continent. I had not seen Mabel for nearly a month, and had not the slightest desire to meet her, but I heard rumours that she went about a good deal with Markwick, who was a constant visitor at her house. The Earl's friendship with this man on that memorable evening at the Empire was extraordinary. There was some deep motive underlying his feigned good-nature, but what it was I was utterly unable to discover. That it must be of a sinister character I knew, but further I could surmise nothing.

Alone, my brain ever racked by the torments of this tantalising mystery, I strove with every endeavour to learn something of the movements of the

polished adventurer who had been designated as a “vile, despicable coward,” but could hear little beyond the fact that Mabel and he were close friends.

She had distinctly denied the insinuation that there was a liaison between them, and I confess I believed her words were true. If he had not been attracted by her beauty then his friendship meant conspiracy. The conversation I had overheard at Blatherwycke was sufficient proof of this.

It was in a despairing, uncertain state of mind when, alone in my room one afternoon, I reverently drew Sybil’s portrait from its hiding-place and looked lingeringly at it. Her grave eyes peered forth with just that sweet expression of sadness that had puzzled me in that gay little mountain town where we had first met. What strange secret was hidden in her mind? What suspicion, deep rooted, terrible perhaps, had caused that woeful look upon her flawless countenance? Through my brain there floated memories of the past—sweet, tender memories of the few brilliant sun-lit idle days among the mountains; sad, bitter memories of a never-to-be-forgotten night, each event of which was photographed indelibly upon my memory. All recurred to me. The meeting with Markwick at Richmond, his devilish cunning, and the weird and tragic ceremony in that mysterious mansion. The recollection of the house in Gloucester Square caused me to deeply ponder. I remembered that I had set out to inspect the place on one occasion, and the persons who had prevented me had been Mabel and her murdered admirer, Gilbert. Was there any reason why she had met me at the door? Could it have been possible that she had followed me with the determination that I should not enter there? On calm reflection it certainly seemed as if such had actually been the case, even though I remembered there was a board up announcing that the great house was to let.

I locked the photograph away and sat motionless for a long time thinking, at last resolving to revisit the house. I had a morbid desire to again stand in that great drawing-room wherein I had been married, and where Sybil had died; I wanted to inspect the house and refresh my memory as to its details. The solution of the mystery was now the sole object of my life. All previous effort having failed, I determined to revert again to the very beginning.

That afternoon I drove past the house in a cab, and taking notice of the address of the firm of estate agents who, according to the notice-board, had the letting of it, went on to their office in Sloane Street, arriving there just as they were closing. I ascertained that the house had been let six months before to an Indian merchant, named Fryer, who had signed an agreement for five years. I observed that the house was still empty and the board had not been removed, whereupon the clerk told me that the new tenant had, before returning to India, said it was probable that he would not return to take possession for perhaps another year.

“I have a very keen desire to go over the place,” I said disappointedly, after he had told me that they had given up the key. “Some relatives of mine once lived there, and the house has so many pleasant memories for me. Is it absolutely impossible to obtain entrance to it?”

“I’m afraid so, sir,” the man answered. “The tenant has possession. It is his own fault that the board has not been removed.”

“Come,” I said, bending over the counter towards him, “I feel sure the tenant would not object to me going over the place. Here is my card, and if there are any little out-of-pocket expenses I’m prepared to pay them, you know.”

He smiled and glanced at me with a knowing air, as if calculating the amount of the “tip” that I might be expected to disburse, and then exclaimed in a low tone so that his fellow-clerks should not overhear:

“The case is rather peculiar. Although this Mr Fryer has taken the house and we have given up the key, yet to effect an entrance would really be easy enough. You must keep secret from the firm what I tell you, but the fact is when the house was first put into our hands, some years ago, we had a caretaker who did not live on the premises, and as we required to keep a key here in case anyone called to go over the house, we had to have a duplicate key made for him. We have that key still in our possession.”

Slowly I drew from my waistcoat-pocket a sovereign and slipped it unobserved into his palm, saying: “Lend me that key until to-morrow.”

He walked away with a businesslike air in order to disarm any suspicion

that he had been bribed, returned with a ledger, commenced to recommend other houses, and subsequently gave me a latch-key, with one stipulation, that it must be returned to him at 9:30 next morning.

While hurrying along Knightsbridge I met Fyneshade unexpectedly, and wishing to hear about Mabel and Markwick, accepted his invitation to dine at the St. Stephen's Club, instead of going on direct to Gloucester Square. During the meal I learnt that since the evening I had left him stealing from his house like a thief, he had not returned there. Only that morning he had arrived back from Rome, and knew nothing of Mabel or of the man who, according to her statement, had been the cause of their estrangement. Finding that he could give me no information, I excused myself soon after dinner, and purchasing a cheap bull's-eye lantern and a box of matches in a back street in Westminster, entered a hansom.

Had it not been for the fact that I had promised to return the key to the house-agent's clerk at that early hour in the morning, I would have gladly postponed my investigations until daylight, but hindered as I had been by Fyneshade, it was nearly half-past nine when I alighted from the cab at the corner of Hyde Park and walked to Radnor Place, where the front entrance of the houses forming one side of Gloucester Square are situated. Halting under the great dark portico of number seventy-nine, I glanced up and down the street. The lamps shed only a dim sickly light, the street was deserted, and the quiet only broken by the monotonous tinkling of a cab-bell somewhere in Southwick Crescent, and the howling of a distant dog.

I am not naturally nervous, but I confess I did not like the prospect of entering that great gloomy mansion alone. This main entrance being at the rear, only one or two staircase-windows looked out upon the street in which I stood, and all were closely barred. About the exterior, with its grimy conservatory, mud-bespattered door, and littered steps, there seemed an indescribable mysteriousness. I found myself hesitating.

What profit could an intimate knowledge of this place be to me? I asked myself. But I answered the question by reflecting that the place was empty, therefore there was at least nothing to fear as long as I got in unobserved. If the police detected me I should, in all probability, be compelled to go to the nearest station and submit to a cross-examination

by an inspector.

All was quiet, and, having no time to lose, I therefore slipped out the key, inserted it in the heavy door, and a few seconds later stood in the spacious hall with the door closed behind me. For a moment the total darkness unnerved me, and my heart thumped so quickly that I could hear its beating. I remembered how, while on a similar night search, I had discovered the body of Gilbert Sternroyd.

Quickly I lit my lantern, and by its welcome light stole along, making no sound. The darkness seemed to envelope me, causing me to fear making any noise. There was a close, musty smell about the place, a combined odour of dirt and mildew; but as I flashed my lamp hither and thither into the most distant corners, I was surprised to discover the size of the hall, the magnificence of the great crystal chandelier, and the beauty of the crystal balustrades and banisters of the wide handsome staircase. The paintings in the hall were old family portraits, but over them many spiders had spun their webs, which also waved in festoons from the chandelier and from the ceiling. Years must have elapsed since the place had been cleaned, yet it was strange, for on my visit on the night of Sybil's death I had not noticed these signs of neglect.

The place had then been brilliantly lit; now all was dark, squalid, and funereal.

Room after room on the ground-floor I entered. The doors of most of them were open, but all the apartments were encrusted by the dust and cobwebs of years. The furniture, some of it green with mildew, was slowly decaying, the hangings had in many places rotted and fallen, while the lace curtains that still remained at the closely-shuttered windows, were perfectly black with age.

It was a house full of grim shadows of the past. The furniture, of a style in vogue a century ago, was handsome and costly, but irretrievably ruined by neglect. Fully half an hour I occupied in exploring the basement and ground-floor, then slowly I ascended the wide staircase in search of the well-remembered room wherein I had unwittingly been one of the contracting parties to as strange a marriage ceremony as had ever been performed.

Chapter Twenty Three.

In Silent Company.

As I ascended, my feet fell noiselessly upon the thick carpet, raising clouds of dust, the particles of which danced in the bright ray from my lamp, like motes in a streak of sunlight. The ceiling of the hall had been beautifully painted, but portions of it had now fallen away, revealing ugly holes and naked laths.

The first room I entered on reaching the landing was, I discovered, the small study into which I had been ushered on that night. It was much cleaner than the other apartments, but, on going to the grate and bending to examine it, I found the chimney still closed by an iron plate, and in the fireplace there remained a quantity of burnt charcoal. It was covered with dust, and was no doubt the same that had been used to render me unconscious. The window, too, was shuttered and barred, and on the door-lintel I could still trace where the crevices had been stopped.

As I turned, after examining the room thoroughly, I saw, standing on a small table near the window, a cheap photograph frame in carved white wood. The portrait was of an old lady, and did not interest me, but the frame riveted my attention. I recognised it. Across the top it had the single word “Luchon” carved. I took it up and examined it closely. Yes! It had belonged to Sybil. I had been with her when, attracted by its quaintness, she had purchased it for three francs.

As I put it down there surged through my mind a flood of memories of those pleasant bygone days. Suddenly a sound caused me to start.

Not daring to move, I listened. It was the rustle of silk! Some one was ascending the stairs!

In an instant I blew out my light, and waited just inside the door. The noise approached rapidly, and in a few moments a slim, graceful woman, in an evening gown, and carrying in her hand a red-shaded lamp, passed the door.

As she went by the crimson glow did not sufficiently illuminate her face, but her appearance gave me a sudden start. Had she entered with sinister design; or was this weird, neglected place her home? Thinking only of the elucidation of the mystery that had surrounded Sybil, I crept on noiselessly after her. Apparently she was no stranger to the place, for, passing the first room on the left, she entered the second, which proved to be the great drawing-room where I had once stood beside my lost bride. Passing to the end, her thin evening shoes making no noise on the thick dust-covered carpet, she crept like a thief to the opposite end of the spacious apartment, and placed the lamp upon a little table. Then, for the first time, I saw that behind it was a door, and I crept back into the shadow so that she could not detect my presence.

For a moment she hesitated, placing her hand upon her breast, as if to stay the wild beating of her heart. Then, slowly and noiselessly, she turned the handle of the door, and a flood of brilliant light streamed forth.

She peered in, but next second drew back terrified. The scene within the room had held her spell-bound with horror, which seemed to grasp her heart as if with icy fingers. Her trembling hands tightly clenched, she prepared to enter. One long, deep breath she drew, and set her teeth in desperation; but at that moment, as with her hand she pushed back the hair from her clammy brow, her face was turned full towards the lamp.

I looked, and stood stupefied. It was Dora!

I sprang forward to arrest her progress, but at that instant a frightful blow fell upon the back of my skull, crushing me, and I fell senseless like a log.

How long I remained unconscious, or what events occurred during the oblivion that fell upon me, I have no idea.

My only recollection is that I felt the presence of some person near me, and I heard words uttered. But upon my ears they fell as if spoken so far away as to be indistinguishable. Scenes strangely distorted, sad and humorous, pleasing and horrible, flitted through my mind as I lay dozing, half-conscious, striving to think, but unable even by the dint of greatest effort, to sufficiently collect my senses to reflect with reason.

In this half-dreamy stupor I must have remained a very long time. Hours

passed. I lay as one dead—unable to move, unable to think.

Gradually, however, I found my mind growing clearer. Thoughts, that at first were hopelessly mixed, slowly shaped themselves; and I remember trying to recall the startling events that had preceded the cowardly blow dealt me by some unknown hand. Thus, painfully and with the utmost difficulty, I struggled to regain knowledge of things about me.

Opening my eyes at last, I found myself in darkness, save for a glimmer of faint grey light that crept in over the top of what I imagined to be heavy closely-barred shutters. It was about ten o'clock at night when I had been struck down; it was now already morning. Stretching forth my cold, nerveless fingers, I groped to feel my surroundings on either side, discovering myself still lying on the floor, but whereas the drawing-room in which I had encountered Dora had been well-carpeted, this room seemed bare, for I was lying upon cold flags. With a sudden movement I put out my hands and raised my head, in an endeavour to regain my feet. But this action brought vividly to my mind that the injury I had received was serious.

A pain shot through my head. So excruciating was it that I fainted.

During the hours that followed all was again blank. When I reopened my hot fevered eyes I saw that the streak of dawn—the one welcome ray that inspired hope within me—was now a thin golden bar of sunshine, that gave just sufficient light to enable me to distinguish my strange surroundings. Endeavouring to reflect calmly, my eyes were fixed upon the blackened ceiling. At first I wondered what had caused it to become so sooty, and calculated the number of years during which spiders had festooned their dust-laden webs upon it, when suddenly my eyes clearly distinguished that the ceiling was arched—that it was unplastered, and of bare begrimed brick.

Eagerly I looked on either side. The walls also were of bare brick I was in a cellar!

Struggling unsteadily to my feet I stood amazed. Who, I wondered, had conveyed me to this place? Surely not Dora! If I had been murderously attacked, might not she also have fallen a victim? But why had she come

here; by what means had she obtained an entrance? As I recalled the startling encounter of the previous night I recollected that she had been dressed as if for a dance, and it was therefore probable that she had slipped away from home on some errand that was imperative. Her visit there placed a new complexion upon the remarkable current of circumstances.

These and a thousand other puzzling thoughts filled my brain as I stood in that gloomy, subterranean, vermin-infested place into which I had been thrust. It was not large, but half filled by a great heap of lumber piled up to the roof. There was something about the place that I could not understand. I felt stifled; my nostrils were filled by a strange sickening odour. Towards the window I walked to obtain fresh air, but found what I had at first imagined to be shutters were not shutters at all; the streak of welcome light came through a little barred aperture about three inches wide in the pavement above. The pains in my head caused me giddiness and nausea.

What if I had been imprisoned here? The horrifying prospect of slow starvation in an empty, deserted house appalled me, and I sprang towards the heavy door, that had at some time or other been strengthened by bands of iron.

I turned the handle. It was locked!

Staggering back, I gave vent to an exclamation of despair. The pain in my skull was terrible, and as I placed my hand at the back of my head I felt my hair stiff and matted by congealed blood. One thought alone possessed me. I knew that my life depended on my escape. Again I tried to recollect minutely every incident of the previous night, but it all seemed like some terrible nightmare. In fact, in my nervous anxiety to free myself, I was unable to realise that Dora had actually been present, and tried to convince myself that it had been merely some strange chimera produced by my unbalanced imagination.

Yet so vividly did it all recur to me that there seemed no room for doubt. The one fear uppermost in my mind was that Dora herself had met with foul play. I remembered the firm look of desperation upon her face, and I tried to imagine what scene of horror she had witnessed in that brilliantly-

lit inner room that should cause that look of horror upon her countenance. Evidently she had entered this weird, neglected house with a firm resolve, but what her purpose had been I failed to imagine.

Had I been placed in that cellar by my assailant, who, finding me unconscious, had been under the apprehension that he had committed murder? This seemed at least a reasonable surmise. Yet it was utterly inexplicable.

But the necessity for freedom impressed itself upon me. The nauseating odour that filled the place choked me; I gasped for fresh air. The small opening in the further wall, near the roof, did not admit any air, as there was a piece of thick, dirt-begrimed glass before it so high up that I could not reach to break it. The door was the only means of exit, but when I again endeavoured to open it I found all efforts unavailing. True, the great thickly-rusted lock with its formidable socket was on the inside, but it was of such dimensions that to break it was utterly impossible.

I knew that I had been conveyed to that place by some unknown enemy, who had either believed me dead, or who intended that I should remain there to starve; therefore, to escape without delay before darkness fell was absolutely imperative. By the meagre light afforded by the single ray of sunshine I made a careful examination of the lock, but was compelled to admit that in order to break it I should require a heavy hammer or a chisel. Both lock and hinges had evidently been freshly oiled, probably in order that the door could be opened and shut without creaking.

For a considerable time I was engaged in searching among the lumber for some instrument with which to effect my escape, but could discover none. There were a large number of empty wine cases, old books, broken furniture, discarded wearing apparel, a table with one leg missing, and a variety of miscellaneous domestic articles; but none of these could I utilise for the purpose of breaking out of my prison. At last, hidden away beneath a pile of old boxes, I discerned a large black old-fashioned travelling trunk, with long iron hinges. Pulling away some of the rubbish piled about it, I felt the iron clamps, and it occurred to me if I could only detach one of them they were heavy enough to use as a hammer to break off the socket of the lock. Unlike the other boxes, which were dry, the wood of this trunk was damp, mildewed and rotting. Along the side

was a great crack, into which I could have placed my hand, and the side had bulged as if the trunk had been burst open by some terrific force. With care I felt one of the iron fastenings, and before long came to the conclusion that to remove it would be an easy task. Therefore, without delay, I threw down the boxes piled above it; but in doing so, the big heavy trunk also lurched over, and before I could steady it, fell with a crash upon the flags.

The fall loosened the iron clamp, and kneeling upon the box, exerting all my efforts, I succeeded at last in tearing it bodily from the wet decaying wood.

As I did so, however, my weight upon the trunk caused part of the damaged side to fall out, and thus the lid, that had once been securely locked, became unloosened. Out of sheer curiosity to see what it contained, I pulled it aside and gazed in.

“My God!” I cried next second, thrilled with horror.

I had recklessly thrust my hand into the trunk, thinking it to contain some old wearing apparel, and my fingers had, with startling suddenness, come into contact with a cold, lifeless human hand.

The sun had been obscured, and there was not sufficient light to enable me to discern distinctly the lifeless form therein concealed. I could, however, see that it was a body, the clenched hand of which, stretched above, pointed to the suggestion that the person had been doubled up and placed there before the spark of vitality had been extinguished. The fingers showed in what terrible paroxysm of agony the victim’s last breath had been drawn.

This discovery appalled me. I stood with the long iron hinge still in my hand, gazing awe-stricken at the box in which the body was concealed. I now realised how, by decomposition of the contents, the wood had rotted; how, by the accumulation of gases, it had been rent asunder, and that the sickening stifling odour that nauseated me emanated from this hidden evidence of a crime.

Around this cellar that had been converted into a charnel-house I gazed half fearfully, my eyes penetrating its darkest recesses, dreading to meet

some spectral form or to face the unknown person who had made such a violent attempt upon my life on the previous night. Once again I summoned courage to peer into the decaying trunk, but could distinguish little in that tantalising darkness. Repugnance prevented me from turning over the box, and emptying its gruesome contents on the flags; therefore, I replaced the lid and waited a few moments to recover myself. The appalling discovery had filled me with an indescribable fear, and weakened as I had been by the injuries to my head, my senses reeled.

At last, summoning a firm resolution to arm myself against this terror and misfortune, I doubled the hinges back together so as to strengthen them, and walking to the door, made a carefully directed but frantic attack upon the socket holding the lock. Although old and very rusty, it seemed that no effort of mine was strong enough to break it, for it withstood all attack, and the damage I did consisted in merely knocking off a little of the incrustation. Again and again I rained blows upon it with my improvised hammer, but the iron itself was strong, and four large screws that secured it to the woodwork remained unloosened.

Presently my weakness compelled me to pause to regain breath, as with failing heart I was forced to acknowledge myself utterly baffled. Again I examined it long and earnestly. After another quarter of an hour’s effort, however, the thought momentarily flashed through my mind that by the exercise of patience I could utilise one end of the hinge which was narrow and thin, as a screw-driver, and by its aid remove the screws.

This had not before occurred to me, but in a few moments I was kneeling at the lintel, and, using the hinge deftly, had half removed the first screw. Within ten minutes I succeeded in extracting them all, and, taking off the socket, emerged into the passage, afterwards closing the entrance to the gruesome place.

Passing down the stone passage in the basement, which I remembered having explored on the previous night, I ascended at last into the spacious gloomy hall and walked towards the street door. As I did so an unusual noise startled me. I halted, listening with breathless anxiety.

It came from above. Through the deserted mansion it once again resounded, clearly distinct and dismal. It was a wild, shrill cry—a

woman’s despairing shriek!

My first impulse was to rush upstairs and resume my investigations, but, a sudden fear seizing me, I opened the door and fled precipitately from the weird house of hidden mysteries.

Chapter Twenty Four.

A Confession.

Hatless, hungry and half fainting, I drove in a cab to my old friend Dr Landsell in Kensington, who examined my wound, pronounced that it was not dangerous, bathed and dressed it. I accepted his invitation to lunch, but, although he expressed surprise how I could have received such a blow, I did not deem it wise to satisfy his curiosity. We parted about three o'clock, for I had resolved to see Grindlay, and was anxious to tell him of my discovery and seek his aid.

I was compelled, however, to call at my chambers to obtain a hat and exchange my torn coat for another, and as I alighted in Shaftesbury Avenue I recollected that before consulting the detective I ought first to ascertain whether Dora had returned home. The mysterious shriek of despair I had heard might have been hers! She might still be imprisoned in the house!

Ascending the stairs, I entered my chambers with my latch-key, and strode straight towards my sitting-room. To my amazement two persons were awaiting me. Upon the threshold I stood gazing inquiringly at them.

Ensconced in my armchair sat Lady Fyneshade, while on the opposite side of the room, his bony hands clasped behind his back, stood her companion Markwick.

As I entered Mabel gave vent to a cry that betrayed alarm, and rose quickly to her feet, while her companion stood staring at me open-mouthed, with an expression of mingled fear and astonishment. Both glared at me as if I were an apparition.

But only for a single instant. Markwick's face relaxed into a forced smile, while Mabel, laughing outright, stretched forth her hand frankly, exclaiming:

"Here you are at last, Stuart! How are you?"

I greeted her rather coldly, but she chattered on, telling me that Saunders had asked them in, saying that he expected me to return every moment. They had, it seems, already waited half an hour, and were just about to depart. Few words I addressed to the man who had first led me to the mysterious house in Gloucester Square. I merely greeted him, then turned again to Mabel. The strange expression on both their faces when I had entered puzzled me. There was, I felt certain, some deep motive underlying their call.

But successfully concealing my suspicions and addressing Mabel, I said as pleasantly as I could:

“It is not often you favour me with a visit nowadays.”

“My time is unfortunately so much taken up,” she answered, with a smile. “But I wanted to see you very particularly to-day.”

“What about?” I asked, seating myself on the edge of the table, my back towards her silent escort, while she in her turn sank back into her chair.

“About Fyneshade,” she answered. “You remember all I told you on the afternoon when you called on me. Well, I have discovered he is back in London, but he has not returned home, and a letter to his club has elicited no reply.”

“You want to see him?”

“I do. If he will hear me I can at once clear myself. You are one of my oldest friends and know the little differences that exist between us, therefore I seek your assistance to obtain an interview with him. Invite him here, send me word the day and hour, and I will come also.”

I hesitated. Her request was strange, and more curious that it should be made before the very man who, although hated by Fyneshade, was nevertheless his friend.

“I have no desire to interfere between husband and wife,” I answered slowly. “But if any effort of mine will secure a reconciliation, I shall be only too pleased to do my best on your behalf.”

“Ah!” she cried, a weight apparently lifted from her mind. “You are always loyal, Stuart; you are always generous to your friends. I know if you ask Fyneshade he will call on you. A letter to White’s will find him.” Markwick, his hands still clasped behind his back, seeming taller and more slim than usual in his perfect-fitting, tightly-buttoned frock-coat, had crossed to the window, and was gazing abstractedly out upon the never-ceasing tide of London traffic below. He took no interest whatever in our conversation, but fidgeted about as if anxious to get away.

Mabel and I talked of various matters, when I suddenly asked her about Dora.

“Ma is coming to town with her this week,” the Countess answered. “I had a letter from her a few days ago, and it appears that the house-party at Blatherwycke has been an unqualified success.”

“Bethune has been there, I suppose,” I hazarded, laughing.

“Bethune!” she echoed. “Why, haven’t you heard of him lately?”

“Not for several weeks. He is somewhere in Wales.”

“I think not,” she said. “From what I have heard from Ma, he arrived late one night at Blatherwycke, met Dora clandestinely somewhere on the Bulwick Road, and, wishing her farewell, left next day for the Continent. Since that nobody has heard a single word about him.”

“Not even Dora?” I inquired, greatly surprised that Jack should have left again without a word to me.

“No. Dora, silly little goose, is crying her eyes out and quite spoiling her complexion. Their engagement is absolutely ridiculous.”

“She loves him,” I observed briefly.

“Nowadays a woman does not marry the man she loves. She does not learn to love until after marriage, and then, alas! her flirtation is not with her husband.”

I sighed. There was much truth in what this smart woman of the world

said. It is only among the middle classes that persons marry for love. The open flirtation in Belgravia would be voted a scandal if it occurred in Suburbia. There is one standard of morals in Mayfair, another in Mile End.

By dint of artful questioning I endeavoured to glean from her whether she knew the reason of Jack's departure, but either by design or from ignorance she was as silent as the sphinx.

"The only other fact I know beyond what I have already told you," she replied, "was contained in a paragraph in the Morning Post, which stated that Captain Bethune, the well-known soldier-novelist, had left London for the Balkan States, in order to obtain material for a new romance upon which he is actively engaged. Really, novelists obtain as much advertisement and are quite as widely known as princes of reigning houses."

Markwick at that moment turned quickly and expressed a fear that he must be going, as he had an appointment in the City, while Mabel, rising, stretched forth her small hand in farewell, and urging me not to forget to arrange a meeting with Fyneshade, accompanied her companion out.

When they had gone I stood for a long time gazing down into the street, pondering deeply. I could not discern the object of their visit, nor why that curious expression should have crossed their faces when I appeared. The reason they had called was, however, quite apparent half an hour later, for, to my abject dismay, I found that the little cabinet in which I had kept the fragments of paper I had discovered in Jack's chambers on the night of the tragedy had been wrenched open, the papers turned over hurriedly, and the whole of the letters abstracted.

Markwick had stolen them! I now recollected, quite distinctly, that at the moment I entered he had his hands behind his back endeavouring to conceal something.

I started forward to go and inform the police, but remembering that ere long I should place Grindlay in possession of all the tangled chain of facts, I rang the bell for Saunders instead.

"What time did Lady Fyneshade arrive," I asked, when he had responded

to my summons.

“About half an hour before you returned, sir.”

“Were they alone in this room the whole time?”

“Yes, sir. Her ladyship went to the piano and played several songs.”

His words convinced me. Mabel had strummed on the piano in order to drown the sound of the breaking open of the cabinet.

For what reason, I strove to imagine, had Markwick obtained the letters? How, indeed, could he have known their hiding-place, or that they were in my possession?

I felt absolutely certain that, having satisfied themselves of my absence, they had entered in order to obtain possession of those half-charred letters, and that on my unexpected return Mabel, in order to cover their confusion, had skillfully concocted an object for their visit. She had tricked me cleverly, and although half mad with anger at my loss, I could not help admiring her extraordinary self-possession and the calm circumstantial manner in which she had lied to me.

Business London had drawn its whirling fevered day to a close when I entered one of the bare waiting-rooms at New Scotland Yard, and sent my card to Inspector Grindlay. I had not long to wait, for in a few minutes he came in, greeting me bluffly with a hearty hand-shake, expressing pleasure that I had called.

“I want to consult you, Grindlay,” I said seriously. “I have made a discovery.”

“A discovery!” he laughed. “What is it, some mechanical invention?”

“No. A body!”

“A body!” he echoed, arching his thick, dark brows, and regarding me keenly.

“Yes,” I said. “I want to tell you all about it, for I’ve come to seek your

assistance. Shall we be disturbed?”

He crossed the room, locked the door, and then, motioning me to a chair, took one himself on the opposite side of the small table, and announced his readiness to hear my story.

Commencing at the beginning, I described my meeting with Sybil at Bagnères de Luchon, my love for her, the midnight marriage, and her death.

“What name did she give you?” he inquired interrupting me.

“I understood that her name was Henniker,” I replied. “Sybil Henniker.”

He inclined his head. Proceeding I told him of the subsequent strange events, the finding of the wreath upon her grave with my card, whereon was written the words, “Seek and you may find,” of the discovery of her photograph in the shop in Regent Street, together with that of Gilbert Sternroyd.

“Ah! Sternroyd!” he repeated, as soon as I mentioned the name. “And you bought those portraits. Have you still got them?”

I drew them from my pocket and handed them across to him. As he gazed at Sybil’s picture he twirled his moustache, thoughtfully knitting his brow.

But my tongue’s strings were now loosened, and I confessed how I had discovered the young millionaire lying dead in Jack Bethune’s flat, and how, on my second visit to the place, I found the body removed, and afterward encountered my friend, who would not allow me to enter one of his rooms.

“You think he was concealing the body there?” he asked, glancing up from the paper whereon he had scribbled some brief memoranda.

“I fear to think anything, lest it should add to the evidence against him. He has left England again.”

“Yes,” the detective replied; “we are aware of that. He has eluded us.”

“Then you also suspect him?” I cried.

For answer he only shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows.

Continuing my story, I detailed the conversation I had overheard at Blatherwycke between Markwick and the Countess, described my visit to the house in Gloucester Square, my encounter with Dora, the subsequent discovery of a body, and the theft of the half-burnt letters from my own room.

When I had concluded he was silent for a long time. My story was evidently more startling and complicated than he had expected, and he was apparently weighing the evidence against the man suspected.

“You say you still have the key of this house in your possession.” I nodded.

“Very well. We will search the place as a preliminary.”

“When?”

“At once. I must have a few words with the Chief first; but if you don’t mind waiting ten minutes or so. I’ll be ready to go with you.”

He brought me a newspaper, and for about a quarter of an hour I idled over it, until he again returned, accompanied by one of his men, who carried in his hand a small crowbar, a police bull’s-eye, and a box of matches. These he placed carefully in his pocket, while Grindlay glanced through some papers, and in a few minutes we all three entered a cab, and drove rapidly to Radnor Place, alighting at some little distance from the house.

Noiselessly I opened the great hall-door and we entered. When I had closed the door again, the inspector turned to his companion, saying:

“Remain here, and make no noise. It seems to me probable that some person may be concealed here. Detain anyone who attempts to get out.”

“Very well, sir,” the man answered, giving his superior the crowbar, lantern, and matches; and in a few moments I led Grindlay down to the

cellar in which I had been imprisoned.

We found it without difficulty, and on entering I saw that the trunk containing the body was in the same position in which I had left it. Eagerly the detective advanced, pushed the lid aside, and directed the light upon its contents.

“It’s been put in face downwards,” he said, as I stood back, dreading to gaze upon a sight that I knew must be horrible. “It’s a man, evidently, but in a fearful state of decomposition. Come, lend me a hand. We must turn the box over, and get out of this place quickly. The smell is enough to give anybody a fever.”

Thus requested, I placed my hand at the end of the box, and together we emptied it out upon the flags.

The sight was awful. The face was so terribly decomposed that it was absolutely unrecognisable; but the detective’s keen eye noticed a gleam of gold amid the horrible mass of putrefaction, and, stooping, drew forth from the mass of decaying clothes a watch and chain. He rubbed the watch upon a piece of old rag lying on the rubbish heap, then held it close to the light. The back was elaborately engraved, and I saw there was a monogram.

“Initials,” exclaimed the detective calmly. “This watch has already been described. It is his watch, and the letters are ‘G.S.’—Gilbert Sternroyd.”

“Gilbert!” I gasped. “Can it really be Sternroyd?” I cried, my eyes fixed upon the black awful heap.

“No doubt whatever. The man is in evening dress. On his finger, there—can’t you see it glittering?—is the diamond ring that Spink’s supplied him with six weeks before his disappearance. This discovery at least proves the theory I have held all along, that he has been murdered.”

“By whom?”

“We have yet to discover that,” he rejoined. “Do you know what connection your friend Bethune had with this house?”

“None, as far as I am aware,” I replied.

“It is apparent though, that he was well acquainted with the lady to whom you were married here.”

I admitted the truth of these words, but he did not pursue the subject further.

Kneeling beside the body he took from its withered hand the ring he had indicated and slipped it into his pocket, afterward examining the remains rather minutely. Then, rising, he made a cursory examination of the heap of lumber, looked at the narrow crevice above, and at last suggested that we should set forth to make a thorough search of the place.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Most Remarkable.

My former experiences had unnerved me, so I armed myself, with the crowbar, and together we went through the basement rooms, where only rats and dirt attracted our attention. Regaining the hall, Grindlay urged the necessity for making no noise, and having whispered the query “All right?” to his subordinate, receiving an assurance in the affirmative from the man on guard, we together ascended the great flight of stairs.

The place was silent as the grave, but our footsteps awoke no echoes as we gained the staircase and softly crept into the once handsome, but now faded, moth-eaten drawing-room.

Crossing the great apartment we came to the small door that Dora had opened at the moment I had been struck down. The crimson-shaded lamp, now burned out, still stood upon the table, but the door leading to the inner chamber, wherein some unknown sight had so strangely affected her, was closed and secured by a wide, strong iron bar placed right across in the manner that window shutters are barred.

“Hulloa! What’s this?” whispered the detective when he noticed it. “There’s some mystery here. Hold the lamp and lend me the jemmy.”

I handed him the tool, and inserting the pronged end between the woodwork and one of the great sockets he gave it such a sudden wrench that the socket snapped.

In an instant he had unbarred the door, and, throwing it open, dashed forward.

I followed, but a cry of amazement escaped my lips. The room into which the detective and myself effected a forced entrance was small and shabby. It had apparently once been a boudoir, but the greater part of the furniture had long ago been removed, and what remained was dusty, faded and decaying. The shutters were closed, and secured by a heavy padlocked bar, and the cheap white-shaded lamp that burned dimly upon

the table did not shed sufficient light to fully illuminate the place.

Suddenly, as Grindlay took the bull's-eye from my hand and turned its light upon the opposite side of the room, we were both amazed to discover lying upon one of those cheap convertible chair-bedsteads that are the delight of lower-class housewives, a female form in a light dress. With one accord we both advanced toward her. The woman's face was turned from us, but our entrance apparently aroused her, and she slowly moved and raised her head.

From my lips there escaped an anguished cry of amazement.

The blanched features were familiar, but upon them was such a strange, wild look that I stopped short to assure myself that this strange scene was not merely imaginary.

"My God!" I cried. "Dora, is it you?"

Raising herself upon her elbow with a sudden movement she pushed her hair from her white brow, glared for a few moments at me with an unnatural fire in her eyes, then, without replying to my question, gave vent to a long, loud, discordant laugh.

"Speak!" I urged, rushing toward her, grasping her hand. "Tell me how it is that we discover you here, locked in this room?"

But she answered not. The light in her clear eyes grew more brilliant as she fixed her gaze inquiringly upon me. She did not recognise me. Her face was drawn and haggard, around her eyes were dark rings, and her features that had been so admired seemed now almost hideous, while the dress she wore, soiled and tumbled, was the same handsome evening gown in which I had seen her determinedly entering that room.

"Go!" she screamed suddenly. "Do not torture me, you brute! Let me die, I say! Let me kill myself!" and as she uttered the words she tore at her throat with both hands in an attempt to strangle herself.

Grindlay flew to her side and with difficulty gripped her hands. But she seemed possessed of demon strength, and even the detective, muscular and athletic as he was, found he had a hard task to hold her down.

“Do you know her?” he gasped at last, turning to me. “Who is she?”

“An old friend,” I answered, with poignant sorrow. “Her name is Dora; she is younger daughter of Lady Stretton.”

“Lady Stretton—Stretton,” the detective repeated thoughtfully. “The name is familiar. Ah! I remember. The lady who benefits so largely by the murdered man’s will is eldest daughter of her ladyship, isn’t she?”

I nodded in the affirmative, but the violent struggles of the would-be suicide interrupted our conversation, and our combined efforts were necessary in order to prevent her from accomplishing her purpose.

The melancholy fact could not be disguised that Dora, whose beauty had been so frequently commented upon by Society journals, and whose appearance in ballrooms since she “came out” had never failed to cause a sensation, was actually insane. The bright fire of madness was in her eyes as she wildly accused me of unknown crimes. She did not address me by name, but evidently in her hallucination believed me to be an enemy of whom she had just cause for the bitterest hatred. When I tried to seize her hands she shrank from me as if my contact stung her, and when I gripped her determinedly she fought and bit with a strength of which I had never believed a woman capable.

In the fierce straggle the lamp was nearly overturned, and at length Grindlay, finding that all attempts to calm her proved futile, slipped a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and with a murmur of apology for treating any friend of mine, and especially a lady, with such indignity, he locked them upon her slender wrists.

“It is the only way we can manage her,” he said. “We must, however, be careful of her head.”

Already she was swaying her head from side to side, uttering strings of wild, incoherent words, and after brief consultation it was arranged that the detective should call up his assistant, who had remained on guard below, and we should then convey the unfortunate girl to her home.

After two shrill blasts upon the inspector’s whistle we were quickly joined by his assistant, who, without betraying any surprise at this discovery,

recognised the position of affairs at a glance, and at once held Dora's head, in order to prevent her injuring herself.

"Remain here, and keep a sharp eye on her while we search the place," Grindlay commanded; and taking up the lantern and jemmy we returned together to the spacious, faded room wherein the strange marriage ceremony had taken place. The boudoir had no other door leading out of it, except the one communicating with the larger apartment that we had burst open, and with its window closely shuttered, the cries of any person held captive were not likely to be heard, for the window overlooked the garden, and there were no passers-by.

From the floor whereon we had made this amazing discovery we ascended, searching diligently, even to the garrets, but found nothing noteworthy. Each room was dusty, neglected, and decaying, but they showed plainly that the mansion had once been furnished in luxurious tasteful style, and that its splendour had long ago departed.

When we had arrived at the topmost garret, Grindlay, who had moved quickly, almost silently, poking into every corner, and leaving no place uninspected large enough for any person to conceal himself, paused, and, turning to me, said:

"This affair is, I confess, a most remarkable one! In the same house, to all appearances closed and uninhabited, we find the body of the murdered man concealed, and the sister of the woman he admired insane, apparently held captive."

"By whom?" I queried.

"Ah! We must ascertain that," he said, flashing his lantern suddenly into a far corner, but finding nothing. "There must be some exceptionally strong motive for keeping your young lady friend away from her home. Has she, as far as you are aware, ever before shown signs of insanity?"

"Never; I have known her ever since a child, and her mind has been always normal. She was particularly intelligent, an excellent pianist, and a fair linguist."

"Some sight unusually horrible, a paroxysm of bitter grief, or some great

terror, may have temporarily unhinged her mind. Let us hope it is not incurable," he said, sympathetically.

"Do you think she is really demented?" I asked eagerly. "Will she never recover?"

"I really can't tell you; I'm not a mental specialist," he answered. "It's true that I've seen two similar cases among women."

"And did they recover?"

He hesitated, then looking at me gravely he answered: "No; unfortunately they did not One woman, whose symptoms were similar, had murdered her child. The other had so severely injured her husband by throwing a lighted lamp at him that he is incurable. Both are now at Woking Asylum."

"Is there no hope for them?"

"None. In each case I made the arrest, and the doctor afterward told me that their condition of mind was consequent upon the realisation of the enormity of their crimes."

Dora's symptoms were the same as those of murderesses. Such suggestion was appalling.

"Do you then suspect that Lady Stretton's daughter, Mabel, is—has committed a crime?"

"Hardly that," he replied, quickly. "We must, I think, seek for the guilty one in another quarter." He seemed to speak with conviction.

"In which quarter?" I eagerly inquired.

"I have formed no definite opinion at present," he replied quietly. "If we can induce your lady friend to speak rationally for a few minutes she may confirm or dispel my suspicions. Our discoveries this evening have made one fact plain, and they will be the cause of the withdrawal of one warrant," he added, looking at me with a curious smile.

"For whose arrest?"

“Your own.”

“A warrant for my arrest!” I cried in dismay. “What do you mean? I have committed no offence.”

“Exactly. I have already proved that to my entire satisfaction, and that is the reason the warrant in my pocket will to-morrow be cancelled.”

“But why was it ever issued?” I demanded.

“Because certain suspicions attached themselves to you. Did it never occur to you that it was you yourself upon whom I was keeping observation on that evening we spent together at the Empire?”

“It did; but the suggestion seemed so preposterous that I cast it aside. Now, however, I see that the reason you took me to Scotland Yard was to show me two photographs in your book. One was a picture of myself, and the other that of a woman I loved—”

“You loved her—eh?” he interrupted.

“Yes. But why do you speak in that tone?” I inquired. “You seem to suggest that my affection was misdirected.”

“Pardon me,” he said politely. “I suggest nothing—nothing beyond the fact that it was an indiscretion, as was surely proved by later events.”

“Later events!” I echoed. “Then you know the truth, Grindlay! Tell me—tell me all, if you are my friend.”

“Before we make an arrest our clues are secret,” the inspector said, not unkindly. “By divulging any of them the ends of justice may be defeated. All I can tell you at present is, that we held a warrant for the arrest of that lady whose portrait adorns our collection, and it was not executed, for the reason stated below it in red ink.”

“Because she died. Yes; I am aware of it,” I said. “I was present when she breathed her last, when the police burst into this house, and when they retired on finding the person ‘wanted’ was no longer alive. But for what offence was that warrant issued? Surely I, her husband, have a

right to know?”

“I regret, Mr Ridgeway, I am unable to tell you,” he replied evasively. “You must be well aware that I was abroad at the time, and the warrant, therefore, did not pass through my hands.”

I saw in this a polite refusal to give me the information I sought, and was piqued in consequence. Soon we descended the stairs to the room where Dora remained, still uttering incoherent sentences, and after consultation the two police officers called a cab, and having placed the unfortunate girl in it we all drove to Lady Stretton’s, the inspector having first taken the precaution to send to the nearest police station for a “plain-clothes man” to mount guard over the house wherein the body of the murdered man was lying.

Our arrival at Lady Stretton’s caused the greatest consternation among the servants, her ladyship, and her two lady visitors. Lady Stretton herself fainted, the family doctor, a noted mental specialist, was quickly summoned, and Dora taken to her room. From the servants I gathered that Dora had only been absent from home for two days, and that very little anxiety had been felt on her account, for it was believed that having had some disagreement with her mother, and having announced her intention of visiting some friends in Yorkshire, she had gone thither.

It was, however, a most severe blow to all when she returned in the custody of two police officers a raving lunatic.

The doctor, who could obtain no rational reply to any of his questions, summoned another great specialist on mental ailments, who quickly pronounced the case as extremely grave, but not altogether incurable. Insanity of the character from which she was suffering frequently, he said, took a most acute form, but he was not without hope that, with careful and proper treatment, the balance of her mind might again be restored. The family were instructed not to allow, on any account, any question to be put to her regarding the manner in which the attack had commenced. The strain of endeavouring to recollect would, the doctor assured us, do her incalculable harm.

Grindlay remained with me at Lady Stretton’s for an hour or more, and

when we left we drove together as far as my chambers, where I alighted, while he went on to Scotland Yard.

“Remember,” he said, before I wished him good-night, and promised to see him on the morrow, “not a word to a soul that we have discovered the body. Only by keeping our own counsel, and acting with the greatest discretion and patience, can we arrest the guilty one.”

“Grindlay, you suspect my friend, Captain Bethune,” I said. “It’s useless to deny it.”

“It is the privilege of a man in my profession to suspect, and his suspicions often fall on innocent persons,” he said, with a faint smile. “The body has now been discovered, and we know a crime has been committed. Therefore, we can obtain a warrant against any person upon whom suspicion may rest.”

I pursued the subject no further, but sat back in the cab, fully convinced by these words of his intention to arrest Jack on a charge of murder.

Chapter Twenty Six.

The Fugitive.

In my own room I sat for a long time silent in deep reverie. Saunders glided in and out, brought me a brandy-and-soda that went flat, untasted, and placed at my elbow my letters, with a deferential suggestion that some of them might be important. Glancing at their superscriptions, I tossed them aside, in no mood to be bothered with cards of invitation or tradesmen's circulars.

Two hours passed, and the ever-watchful Saunders retired for the night. Then, after pacing the room for a long time in hesitation, I at last determined to write to Jack, who had returned home, warning him of his peril. I knew that by shielding a murderer from justice I accepted a great moral responsibility; nevertheless, I had formed a plan which I meant at any hazard to pursue. It was, I felt certain, my last chance of obtaining the knowledge I had so long and vainly sought, therefore I sat down, wrote a hurried note to him, in which I urged him to fly and hide himself for a time; but, after obtaining a hiding-place, to telegraph to me, using the name of a mutual friend, as I desired to see him at the earliest possible moment. This note I took across to the Club, and gave it to the commissionaire, with strict injunctions to deliver it personally.

Three-quarters of an hour later the old pensioner returned, saying that he had placed the letter in Captain Bethune's hand, and as I strolled again homeward I pondered over the serious responsibility of my action. In my heart I felt convinced that my friend had killed Sternroyd. Indeed, every fact was plain. I knew that he was a murderer, and my previous esteem had now been transformed into a deep-rooted repugnance. If he were innocent he could never have been so suspicious of me as he had been since that memorable night when he found me in his chambers. Within myself I admitted that I had no right in his rooms; nevertheless the old adage, "Murder will out," forcibly occurred to me. If there was one witness who could bring Captain Bethune to the gallows it was myself.

Ah, how quickly things had changed! A few brief weeks ago Jack was the popular soldier and brilliant writer hailed by the Press as one of the

greatest living novelists; while Dora, charming and radiant, was courted, flattered, and admired at home, in the Park, in the ballroom—everywhere. Now the one was a murderer, hounded by the police; and the other, alas! demented.

Patience and discretion. It was Grindlay's motto, and I would take it as mine. Already, as I walked through the silent, deserted streets, Bethune was, I knew, preparing for hurried flight somewhere out of reach. I alone had frustrated Grindlay's plans, but only as a means to attain my own end.

Next day passed, and in the evening Saunders brought in the Inspector's card. When Grindlay entered his first words were:

"Your friend Bethune has returned and again bolted."

I feigned surprise, but in the course of the conversation that ensued he sought my advice on the most likely places to find him. I suggested Hounslow, but the detective had already made inquiries there, and could glean nothing.

"The curious part of the affair is that he should, after his recent extraordinary show of bravado in returning to England, suddenly become suspicious just at the moment when we meant to take him," he said, after we had been discussing the matter. "I suppose you have no further suggestions to offer as to any likelihood of his whereabouts?"

"None. I should not expect him to try and escape abroad again after his last futile attempt to elude you."

"No. The ports are watched, and he might as well walk into the Yard at once as to attempt to cross the Channel," remarked the detective, smiling. "But I must be going. If you hear anything let me know at the Yard at once."

I promised, and the inspector, taking one of my cigars, lit it and left.

A week went by, but no word of the discovery of the ghastly evidence of the crime found its way into the papers. For reasons of their own the police obtained the postponement of the inquest, although the body had

been removed to the mortuary, and the house still remained in the possession of a plain-clothes' man. The theory of the Criminal Investigation Department was that the house would be visited by someone who, unaware of the discoveries that had been made, would walk straight into the arms of an officer of the law.

But it proved a waiting game. Another week passed. Several times I called at Lady Stretton's, only to learn, alas! that Dora had not improved in the slightest degree. She recognised no one—not even her mother. Her ladyship was prostrate, while Mabel, whom I met one morning when I called, seemed haggard and particularly anxious regarding her sister.

The thought did not escape me that Mabel herself had, at least on one occasion, most probably visited that strange house that had its entrance in Radnor Place, and I was on the point of mentioning it to her, but decided to wait and see whether she alluded to it. She, however, did not. When I asked her for news of Fyneshade she replied, snappishly, that she neither knew nor cared where he was. In fact, she treated me with a frigid reserve quite unusual to her.

About noon one day Saunders brought me a telegram. Opening it, I found the words:

"Tell Boyd to sell Tintos.—Roland. Post, Alf, Moselle."

It was from Bethune. Roland was the name we had arranged. So he had, notwithstanding all the precautions taken by the police, succeeded in again escaping to the Continent, and was now in hiding at the post-house of the little riparian village of Alf. I knew the place. It was far in the heart of the beautiful Moselle country on the bank of the broad river that wound through its vine-clad ruin-crested hills, altogether a quaint Arcadian place, quiet, restful, and unknown to the felt-hatted horde of tourists who swarm over the sunny Rhineland like clouds of locusts.

Three days after receiving the telegram I alighted from a dusty, lumbering fly at the door of the building, half post-house, half inn, and was greeted heartily by my friend, who spoke in French and wore as a disguise the loose blue blouse so much affected by all classes of Belgians. Alone in the little dining-room he whispered briefly that he was going under the

name of Roland, representing himself to be a land-owner from Chaudfontaine, near Liège. None of the people in the inn knew French; therefore, his faulty accent passed unnoticed. When there were listeners we spoke in French to preserve the deception, and I am fain to admit that his disguise and manner were alike excellent.

Together we ate our evening meal with the post-house keeper and his buxom, fair-haired wife; then, while the crimson sunset still reflected upon the broad river, we strolled out along the bank to talk.

All the land around on this south side is orchard—great pear and cherry trees linked together by low-growing vines, and in the spring months they make a sea of blossom stretching to the river's edge. The noise of the weir is loud, but the song of the myriad birds can be heard above it. Away eastward, down the widening, curving stream, above the vines there arise, two miles off, the blackened, crumbling towers of mediaeval strongholds. To the north lies the Eifel, that mysterious volcanic district penetrated by few; to the south the Marienburg and the ever-busy Rhine. The vale of the Moselle on that brilliant evening was a serene and sylvan scene, glorious in the blaze of blood-red sunset, and when we had walked beyond the village, cigar in mouth, with affected indifference, Bethune turned to me abruptly, saying:

"Well, now, after all this infernal secrecy, what in the name of Heaven do you want with me?"

"You apparently reproach me for acting in your interests rather than in my own," I answered brusquely.

"I acted upon your so-called warning and left England—"

"Without seeing Dora?" I inquired.

"She's away in the country somewhere," he snapped. It was evident that he was entirely ignorant of the dire misfortune that had befallen her.

"My warning was justified," I said quietly. "That a warrant is out for your arrest I am in a position to affirm, and—"

"A warrant issued on your own information, I presume," he interrupted

with a sneer.

“I have given no information,” I replied. “I obtained the truth from the detective who held the warrant, and sent word to you immediately.”

“Extremely kind, I’m sure. You’ve done all you can to prejudice me, and now it seems that for some unaccountable reason you have altered your tactics and are looking after my interests. I place no faith in such friends.”

“My tactics, as you are pleased to term them, are at least legitimate,” I answered, annoyed. “I deny, however, that I have ever acted in opposition to your interests. During these past weeks of anxiety and suspicion I have always defended you, and show my readiness to still do so by contriving your escape thus far.”

“Bah! What have I to fear?” he exclaimed, turning on me defiantly.

I looked straight into his face, and with sternness said—“You fear arrest for the murder of Gilbert Sternroyd.” He frowned, and his eyes were downcast. There was a long silence, but no answer passed his tight-drawn lips. Presently I spoke again, saying—

“Now listen, Bethune. We have been friends, and I regret to the bottom of my heart that it is no longer possible under these circumstances to again extend to you the hand of friendship.”

“I don’t want it,” he growled. “I tell you plainly that you are my enemy—not my friend.”

“I have never been your enemy. It is true that the police of Europe are searching for you; that your description is in the hands of every official charged with criminal investigation from Christiania to Gibraltar, and that the charge against you is that you murdered a young millionaire. It is true also that it lays in my power to shield or to denounce you. Think, think for a moment the nature of the evidence against you. One night I entered your flat with my key, stumbled across something, and discovered to my horror that it was the body of Sternroyd, who had been shot.”

“You lie!” he cried, turning upon me fiercely, with clenched fists. “You lie! you never saw the body!”

“I tell you I did,” I replied quite calmly, as in the same tone I went on to describe the exact position in which it lay.

My words fell upon him as a thunderbolt. He had entertained no suspicion that the body had been actually discovered before its removal, and never before dreamed that I had entered his flat on that fatal night and witnessed the evidence of the crime. By this knowledge that I held he was visibly crushed and cowed.

“Well, go on,” he said mechanically, in a hoarse tone. “I suppose you want to drive me to take my life to avoid arrest—eh?”

“Think of the nature of my evidence,” I continued. “I entered your flat again on the following night to find you present, the body removed, and you met my request to search one of the rooms by quickly locking the door and pocketing the key. I ask you whether there is not sufficient circumstantial evidence in that to convict you of the crime?”

He remained silent, his chin almost resting upon his breast.

“Again,” I said, “in addition to this, I may as well tell you that the body you sought to hide has been discovered.”

“Discovered!” he gasped. “Have they found it?”

“Yes. It was carefully hidden, but traces of murder are always difficult to hide.”

“Who searched? Who discovered it?”

“The police.”

“And they therefore obtained a warrant for me?”

I nodded. We walked slowly on, both silent and full of bitter thoughts. Now that I had convinced myself of his guilt I felt certain of the success of my next move.

Turning to him presently, I said: “I have a confession to make, Bethune. On the night of the tragedy I found that you had torn up and destroyed a

number of letters before leaving, and among them I discovered one from a woman named Sybil. Now tell me frankly who and what she was. I have no wish that you should reveal to me anything regarding her relations with you that you desire to keep secret, but I merely ask you to act openly and tell me what you know of her."

"I know nothing—nothing," he answered, in a low tone.

"That's a lie!" I exclaimed angrily. "She wrote to you on apparently the most intimate terms, yet you declare you are not acquainted with her."

"Well, I was acquainted with her."

"And with Sternroyd?"

"And with Sternroyd."

"Then you can tell me something of her parentage, her social position, and why the police desired her arrest?"

"No; I cannot tell you that," he answered firmly. "Why?"

"Because I refuse."

"You know that I hold your liberty in my hand, and you fear to tell the truth because it would incense me?"

"I do not fear to tell the truth," he retorted.

"Then why do you decline?"

"Because I respect the confidences she made to me, and in preserving silence I am but obeying the command contained in that letter."

His reply nonplussed me. I remembered the puzzling, disjointed words I had read a hundred times before. They were: "...desire that your friend, Stuart Ridgeway, should remain in ignorance of the fact." Yes; he was correct. By refusing, he was obeying her injunctions.

"Will you tell me nothing regarding her?" I asked persuasively.

“I am not at liberty to say anything.”

“Remember, Bethune, I was married to her. Surely if any man has a right to know who and what she was, I have,” I urged.

“I’m well aware of your strange marriage. You were fascinated by her extraordinary beauty, as other men had been, and—”

“Is that meant as an insinuation against her good name?” I cried fiercely.

“Take it as you please, the truth is the same,” he answered, with a sneering smile. “You fell in love with her, and were caught, like a fly in a trap.” And he laughed harshly at my discomfiture.

“Then you will tell me nothing about her?” I exclaimed angrily. “You refuse to assist me in recognition of the service I have done you in avoiding your arrest. Help me, and I will help you. If not, well—there is already within hail one into whose hands if you once fall you will never extricate yourself.”

“Death?”

“No; an officer of police.”

“Bah! I fear the former no more than the latter,” he cried, in a tone of banter. “Denounce me—let them arrest me. I am ready to face my traducers; but even in exchange for my liberty, I will tell you nothing of Sybil.”

“Very well,” I said. “Then the warrant shall be executed without delay.”

And I turned and left him.

What his blank refusal portended I had yet to learn.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Mabel’s Penitence.

My first impulse had been to give information to the German police of Bethune’s whereabouts, and thus cause his arrest; yet somehow I could not bring myself to do so. Grindlay and his men would, sooner or later, trace the fugitive; therefore I left the work to them, and returned to London.

As I calmly contemplated the affair in all its phases I became convinced of the strange fact that the mystery surrounding Sybil was the one pivot upon which the whole circumstances revolved. Once I could penetrate the veil, the motive for Sternroyd’s murder would, I felt certain, become apparent. But with tantalising contrariness, all my efforts during these dark, anxious days had been absolutely futile. Even though I had, on more than one occasion, to work with the care and caution of a trained detective, I had failed to glean anything further than what my well-beloved had told me herself at the little Pyrenean spa where first she had brought brightness to my life.

Later events had rendered the enigma increasingly bewildering, rather than simplifying it, and I was compelled to acknowledge myself baffled in every attempted elucidation.

When I arrived home about eight o’clock one morning, having travelled by the night service via Antwerp and Harwich, the industrious Saunders, who, wearing his apron of green baize, was busy cleaning some plate, handed me my letters, and told me that Lady Fyneshade had called on the previous evening. She had desired to see me on some important matter, and had expressed great disappointment at my absence. She, however, left a message asking me to telegraph to Eaton Square the moment I returned, and make an appointment for her to call upon me. This I did, and about eleven o’clock the same morning she was ushered in. She was quietly dressed in black, and her face bore unmistakable traces of a restless night. She looked more anxious and worried than I had ever before seen her, and as she seated herself in her armchair and raised her veil, I felt inclined to ask her to give some explanation of her

extraordinary conduct on the occasion of her last visit. But she allowed me no time to question her, for with a light laugh she burst forth—

“I’m glad you’re back so quickly. Your man told me you were away, and that the date of your return was quite uncertain.”

“So it was,” I replied. “Very uncertain.”

“You have, I suppose, been following your friend Captain Bethune?”

“How did you know that?” I asked, surprised, believing myself the only person aware of his escape.

“I have certain sources of information that are secret,” she laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

“But you suspect him of the crime,” I said. “Why, if you know his whereabouts, have you not caused his arrest?”

“Like yourself, I have certain reasons,” she answered carelessly, readjusting one of the buttons of her glove.

“And your reason is that you fear exposure if he were placed in a criminal’s dock—eh?”

She winced visibly as my abrupt words fell upon her. “You are generous to everyone except myself, Stuart,” she observed presently, pouting like a spoiled child. “We have known each other since children and have always been the best of friends, yet just at the moment when I am most in need of the aid of an honest man, even you forsake me.”

“You have never rendered me any assistance whatever,” I exclaimed reproachfully. “Indeed, on the last occasion you visited me, your companion committed a mean, despicable theft, which makes him liable to prosecution.”

“A theft!” she echoed, with unfeigned astonishment, “Of what?”

“Of certain fragments of private letters that were in my keeping,” I answered angrily, adding, “Surely it must throw discredit upon any lady to

be the associate of a thief?”

“Mr Markwick would never descend to such an action,” she cried indignantly. “I am absolutely certain that he never took your papers, whatever they were.”

“And I am equally convinced that he did,” I said in as quiet a tone as I could command. I had suspected her of complicity in the tragedy, and her words and demeanour corroborated my worst suspicions.

“But what motive could he have to possess himself of them? Were they of any value?”

“To me, yes. To others they were utterly worthless,” I replied, standing with my hands clasped behind me regarding her closely. Evidently she was ill at ease, for her gloved fingers toyed nervously with the ribbon decorating the silver handle of her sunshade and her tiny shoe peeping from beneath her plain tailor-made skirt impatiently tapped the carpet. “You are a strange woman, Mabel, as variable as the wind,” I added after a pause. “One day you declare that man Markwick to be what he really is, an adventurer, while on the next you defend him as strongly as if he were your lover.”

“Lover!” she cried, her face crimsoning. “You are constantly making reflections upon my character and endeavouring to destroy my good name.”

“Remember I assert nothing,” I declared. “But your extraordinary friendship for this man must strike everyone who is aware of it as—well, to say the least, curious.” During a few moments she was silent; then, lifting her face to me, said in faltering tones:

“I—I admit all that, Stuart. People may misjudge us as they will. It is, unfortunately, the way of the world to play fast and loose with a smart woman’s reputation, and I have, therefore, long ago ceased to care what lies my traducers may amuse themselves by uttering. To you I have on a previous occasion spoken the truth of my relations with Markwick. Can you never believe me?”

“You admit, then, that Fyneshade was justified in his notion that he is

your lover?”

“I tell you he is not my lover!” she cried fiercely. Then hoarsely she added: “I—I fear him, it’s true. I am fettered to him because—well, truth to tell, I am powerless to rid myself of his attentions because he has possessed himself of a great and terrible secret that is mine alone, one that if betrayed would crush me.”

I regarded her steadily. Her face was a trifle paler, and in her eyes I thought I detected signs of tears.

“Is this really the truth, Mabel?” I asked with earnestness. She had deceived me before, and I was determined not to accept any of her statements without verification.

“It is the absolute truth,” she declared huskily. “I swear I am unable to treat the man as I should wish because I fear he may make known the truth.”

“Is it so serious, then? Is yours a secret of so terrible a nature that you dare not face exposure? It is not like you, Mabel, to flinch,” I said.

“But I cannot let this man speak—I dare not.”

“You do not love him?”

“I hate him, but must treat him with tact and discretion. Did I not tell you when we met him unexpectedly at Thackwell’s to beware of him? Already I knew how he and certain accursed parasites who surround him had misled you, and had entrapped you into an impossible marriage. I—”

“Impossible?” I echoed. “Why do you use that word? Do you insinuate that Sybil was an impossible person?”

“Yes; when you know the truth about her it will amaze you. Indeed, were it not for the fact that I have witnessed certain things with my own eyes I myself would never believe the story if related to me.”

“But tell me, Mabel; tell me more of her,” I urged. “Ever since my strange marriage, under circumstances of which you are apparently well aware, I

have been groping in the dark, seeking always, but finding nothing. I have tried to penetrate the mystery of her past, but, alas! cannot."

"Ah! that is not surprising. The precautions taken to prevent you ascertaining the truth are indeed elaborate, every possible contingency having been provided for."

"Do you mean that I am never to obtain the knowledge I seek; that I am always to remain in ignorance?"

"With Markwick's sanction you will never know. He is implicated far too deeply."

"How implicated?"

"I am not yet in possession of the whole of the facts. If I were I should not be compelled, as I now am, to purchase his silence by risking my own reputation. But it is for that very reason I sought you this morning. If I dared, I would tell you all I know of Sybil; but by doing so I should bring upon my head the exposure that I dread."

What, I wondered, was the nature of the secret which she feared Markwick would betray? Only one solution of the problem occurred to me, and it rooted itself firmly in my mind. The secret was none other than the fact that she had either lured young Sternroyd to his death or had actually fired the fatal shot herself. The thought was startling, but her words and manner showed conclusively her guilt, and in those brief moments, during which a silence fell between us, I told myself that two persons must be associated in the murder of the young millionaire, and that their names were Mabel, Countess of Fyneshade, and Captain John Bethune.

Hers was unmistakably the face of one whose conscience was borne down by a guilty secret, and I felt instinctively to shrink from her as next second she stretched forth her gloved hand and laid it gently on my arm.

"I am powerless, Stuart, utterly powerless to tell you what you desire to know about the woman who was so strangely married to you," she said. "For reasons already explained I am forced to remain silent; but further, I cast myself upon your generosity. I beseech you once again to help a

woman friendless among enemies, who seek her degradation and social ruin."

"Well, what do you want?" I asked rather roughly.

"I have told you why I am compelled to still remain friendly with this man Markwick, a person hated by both of us. He has threatened me; he has declared that he will disclose my secret if I cannot obtain your silence regarding that interview in the garden at Blatherwycke. To-day I come to you to beg, nay, to pray to you to reconsider your decision." She spoke so earnestly that I confess myself surprised.

"Upon that interview there apparently rests some very important development," I observed, thoughtfully, after a pause. "He must have some exceedingly strong motive if he attempts to secure secrecy by such means. What is it?"

"I have no idea," replied the Countess, quickly. "He does not desire that his friendship should compromise me, I suppose."

"But has it not already compromised you in the eyes of Fyneshade?" I suggested, in a tone of suspicion.

"True; but your testimony, the word of a man of honour, will go a long way toward dispelling whatever absurd notions my husband has got into his head," she urged.

"His notions, viewed by the light of later events, are not altogether surprising. To say the least, the circumstances are suspicious."

"Ah! I quite admit that. It is for that very reason I cast myself upon your generosity and beg of your assistance. If I do not secure your silence, he—the man who holds me in his power—will not hesitate to denounce and crush me. Your promise may save me."

"Save you? I cannot see how," I said, mechanically, for I was thinking of the probability that she was the actual culprit.

"Ah! you do not—you cannot, understand," she cried, impatiently. "I would prefer death to exposure. If he betrays my secret, then I—I will kill

myself.”

“Come, come,” I said, sympathetically. “This is wild talk. Suicide is mere cowardice.”

“But it would avert the greater scandal. If you knew everything you would not be surprised at my rash words, nay, you would wonder how I have endured all this mental anguish so long, rather than yield to the temptation of taking at one draught the contents of a tiny bottle I have locked away in my room.”

I saw that she was genuinely in earnest; she spoke with a gesture that told me plainly she had confessed the truth. Was it that, seized by bitter remorse at the consequences of her act, she preferred suicide to arrest? This was but natural, I argued. She knew that if Jack Bethune fell into the hands of the police, revelations must ensue that would implicate her deeply, and that she would be placed in the dock beside him. I loathed her for the vile, despicable part she had played in the death of her young admirer, yet I felt an indescribable pity for her as she sat trembling before me in an attitude of utter dejection, her fate hanging upon my words.

For a brief moment I looked into her great tearful eyes, then gravely I said —

“It is not within my province to judge you, Mabel, for I am unaware of your offence, still, although I will never swear that Markwick was not with you on that night, I will grant your request. I promise to assist you in concealing the truth you wish to hide.”

“And you will say I was with you?” she cried eagerly, jumping to her feet joyfully, grasping my hand with a sudden impulse.

“I will not swear it, remember,” I said. “I will, however, let it be understood that you and I met clandestinely.”

“Ah! you are a real, generous friend, Stuart,” she cried, smiling through her tears. “I knew when you had heard the truth about my misery you would not fail to render me help. Mine has been an existence full of wretched, hollow shams; but in future I mean to act without duplicity, to abandon the schemes I had long ago formed, and to try and lead a better

life. To the world I am gay and happy, for am I not acknowledged one of the smartest women in England? Yes, alas! and the penalty for all this is an agony of mind that is torturing me hour by hour, moment by moment, while the temptation to destroy myself allures me until I fear that, sooner or later, I must yield."

"No, no; do nothing of the kind," I exclaimed pityingly. "Your confession has pained me, but arm yourself against your enemies, and at the same time count upon my friendship. If you have spoken falsely to me—if I find that you have lied—then ask no further favour, for assuredly I shall be your most bitter enemy, and seek to bring upon you the punishment merited by your acts."

"Punishment!" she gasped, gazing fixedly across the room with wild, wide-opened eyes. Her lips moved, but she was voiceless. The single word transfixed her.

"Is it the absolute truth that you were unaware of the theft committed in these rooms by Markwick?" I demanded, after a brief, painful pause.

"I swear I knew nothing of it," she replied frankly, without hesitation. "He invited me to play the piano while we waited for your return, and while my back was turned he must have abstracted them. But you will do one thing further to appease him, won't you? You'll give me a line assuring him of your intention not to betray his presence at Blatherwycke?"

I hesitated. My promise was verbal, yet she desired an undertaking in writing. This was a fresh development of the affair: there was a strong element of suspicion in it.

She argued, coaxed and urged me until, as the only way of satisfying her, I took a sheet of notepaper and upon it made a declaration of my intention. Having watched me sign it, she placed it carefully in an envelope, transferred it to her pocket, and, after a further brief conversation, thanked me and withdrew, leaving me leaning against the mantelshelf absorbed in thought.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

A Promise.

While in the Club that afternoon the page-boy handed me a card, uttering the stereotyped phrase, “Gentleman to see you, sir.”

I took it, and, to my surprise, found it was Markwick’s. When he entered, a few moments later, he was wearing a crimson flower in the button-hole of his grey frock-coat, and carrying his cane with a jaunty air. His swift glance ran round the room, to assure himself that we were alone, as he greeted me with an air of gay nonchalance.

My recognition was, I am afraid, very frigid; but, tilting his hat, he cast himself into one of the saddle-bag chairs, and, comfortably settling himself, tapped the sole of his varnished boot with his cane, exclaiming:

“I was just passing, don’t you know, and thought I’d look you up. We haven’t met for an age,” and taking out a silver case, he selected a cigarette and lit it.

“I think,” I said dryly, “it would have been better for me had we never met at all.”

He smiled sardonically, moved uneasily, and, turning towards me, exclaimed:

“My dear fellow, you entirely misjudge me. I was, I admit, unconsciously the cause of a rather grave catastrophe in your life; but surely that is all of the past. Why think more of one who is dead?”

“Then, at last, you do now admit that you enticed me to that house? Once you denied it.”

“I know,” he said, smiling. “From diplomatic motives I was compelled; nevertheless, no blame attaches to me, I assure you. This I shall prove to you before long, I hope.”

“Why not now?” I urged eagerly. “Why not tell me what you know of Sybil? That you were intimately acquainted with her is certain; and if you wish to assure me of your honesty of purpose, there can be no better way of doing so than explaining who and what she was.”

“Ah! unfortunately I am unable, at least for the present,” he said, watching his cigarette smoke curl towards the dark oak-beamed ceiling. “I may add, however, that, in return for your assistance in the little matter concerning Lady Fyneshade, I will before long render you a service of a character that will, perhaps, astonish you.”

“Then she has already seen you?” I exclaimed.

“She has,” he said, nodding. “And she has given me your note. It is for that I looked in to thank you.”

We exchanged glances. His thin pimply face wore an expression of perfect composure. There were no signs of mental agitation, but rather confidence and extreme self-satisfaction.

“Will you not, in return for my silence, tell me something of the woman to whom I was so strangely wedded?” I asked at last.

“No. If it were possible I would, but I am precluded by certain circumstances, the nature of which you shall be later on made aware. At present be patient. The mystery that puzzles you will before long be elucidated, and I will keep my promise made to you on the night we met.”

“To tell me all?”

“To explain everything. But, by the way,” he added suddenly, “have you any knowledge where your friend Bethune is?”

“Why?”

“Surely you’ve seen the morning papers, haven’t you?” Replying in the negative I took up the Standard that lay within reach, and found it opened at one of the inside pages. Almost the first thing that caught my eyes were the startling head-lines, “The Murder of a Millionaire: Discovery of the Body.”

The papers had obtained knowledge of the truth at last.

Eagerly I read the jumble of distorted facts which the representative of a press agency had gathered from an apparently unreliable source, and found to my amazement a statement appended, to the effect that after the discovery of the remains a warrant had been issued against a well-known person who had absconded and was now in Germany. The police, however, were fully cognisant of his whereabouts, and his arrest was only a matter of a few hours.

When I lifted my face from the paper my glance met the calm face of my visitor.

“Well,” he asked, “what do you think of it? It points to Bethune. The police seem at last to be on the right scent. They’ve muddled the whole thing, or they would have arrested him long ago.”

“Upon that point I can express no opinion,” I observed. “He has evidently, however, failed to get away unnoticed.”

“If ever there was a cowardly crime it was the shooting of Gilbert Sternroyd,” the man said bitterly. “His generosity kept a whole school of bounders and hangers-on, and only because he refused to be blackmailed and bled they spread damning reports about his admiration for Lady Fyneshade. Truly the life of a millionaire, young or old, is not exactly a bed of roses.”

“Then you believe implicitly in Bethune’s guilt?” I inquired.

“Most decidedly; no sane man who watched him as I watched him when he fled immediately after the crime can doubt that he is the culprit. It is written on his face.”

With this opinion I was unfortunately compelled to agree, and although I endeavoured by dint of some artful questions to “draw” him upon several points, he parried my attacks with consummate skill and tantalising smiles, and left me after promising to see me again in a few days.

The reason he had called was only too evident. He desired to ascertain what facts I knew regarding the crime, for he, like others, was unaware

that I had actually been the first to discover it, and although one or two of his questions were artfully directed, I detected the trend of his strategy, and combated all his crafty efforts to “pump” me. He was admittedly an adventurer of the worst type, and his presence always filled me with anger which I found difficult of control.

That day was one of interviews, for shortly after four o’clock, while writing a letter at the club, Saunders brought me a note, observing that as Miss Stretton’s maid had delivered it, stating that it was very urgent, he had come with it at once. An excellent man was Saunders. I paid him well, and he was untiring in his efforts to secure me comfort and freedom from the minor worries of life. Having dismissed him I opened the letter, finding to my surprise and intense satisfaction that it was a sanely-worded note from Dora saying that she had been dangerously ill, but was now very much better, and desired to see me without delay if I could make it convenient to call that afternoon.

Almost instantly I set forth to respond to her invitation, and half an hour later found her in her mother’s drawing-room, radiant and quite herself again. Lady Stretton was not present, therefore she greeted me in her frank, hoydenish way, as of old, led me to a seat, and taking one herself, proceeded to describe her malady.

“But, of course, you have heard how unwell I’ve been, so I need not tell you,” she added. “I’m quite right again now. For days my head was strangely muddled, and I had no idea that I was at home. I fancied myself in some queer horrid place surrounded by all sorts of terrors; but suddenly, early yesterday morning, this feeling—or hallucination it was, I suppose—left me, and the doctor to-day said I was recovering rapidly. Where is Jack? Have you seen him?”

This was a question I had been momentarily expecting and feared to answer.

“Yes,” I said hesitatingly; “I have seen him.”

“Then tell me quickly,” she cried excitedly; “tell me, is it true what the papers say, that the police are trying to arrest him, and that he has fled abroad?”

She had read in the papers what I had feared to tell her, lest her mind should again become unhinged.

“Yes, Dora,” I said sympathetically. “I am afraid it is true.”

She knit her brows, and her nervous fingers hitched themselves in the lace trimming of her dress.

“They would arrest him for the murder of Gilbert Sternroyd, I understand,” she said. “The police think that Jack shot him.”

“They have, unfortunately, evidence in support of their theory, I believe.”

“Do you suspect him?” she asked, looking seriously into my eyes.

“I am his friend, Dora. I cannot give an impartial opinion.”

“Ah! I understand; you, like the others, think he is guilty,” she said in a tone of bitter reproach. “Some enemy has denounced him and set the bloodhounds of the law upon him. They will follow the scent, and soon discover him. But is he guilty?”

“I can only tell you one fact, Dora, much as I regret it,” I answered. “The detective who has the case in hand, one of the most renowned experts in his profession, holds evidence against him of a most conclusive character.”

“In what way? What is the nature of the evidence?” she demanded.

“There is a witness,” I replied slowly. “A person discovered Gilbert lying dead in Jack’s chambers immediately after the crime. On the following night the same person visited the place secretly, and there met Jack, who was apparently engaged in getting rid of all traces of the murder. This witness desired to enter one of the rooms, but Jack locked the door in his face. In that room it will be proved the body of the murdered man was still lying.”

“It will not be so easy to prove that last fact as you imagine,” she said very seriously.

“Then Jack has already told you the truth!” I exclaimed.

“He told me something before—before I fell ill,” she answered.

It was on my lips to ask her for an explanation of the cause that led to her brain-trouble, but, remembering the strict injunctions of the great specialist, I deferred my question.

“Then you believe he is innocent?” I asked eagerly.

“The police may bring forward an array of whatever witnesses they choose, but I will show them that Jack is no murderer,” she said firmly. “I do not wonder that you, in common with others, suspect him, but when the truth is made clear you will be amazed at the villainy that has been resorted to by those responsible for Sternroyd’s death.”

“Do you, then, allege that there was more than one person?”

“That point will be made clear at the trial,” she answered briefly. “But tell me, you know something of Jack’s movements. When do you anticipate he will be arrested?”

“To-night most probably,” I said. “Perhaps he is already detained.”

“He is at some little out of-the-world place in Germany, isn’t he?”

“Yes; how did you ascertain that?”

“I had a letter from him to-day,” she replied; “but we have no time to lose. Ah!” And she stood with both hands suddenly pressed to her brow. “My head throbs so painfully now and then. Sometimes it seems as if my forehead must really burst.”

“Can I assist you?” I asked, rising quickly and standing beside her, but as I did so the door opened and the Earl of Fyneshade was announced.

“Ah! my dear Dora,” he cried effusively, as he strode into the room. “I only returned from Paris this morning, and hearing you were unwell came along to inquire. The account I had of you was that you were delirious, with all sorts of other complications, but I’m glad you are not so ill as

reported."

"Thanks very much," she said, shaking his hand. "I'm very much better to-day."

Then I exchanged greetings with the Earl. He looked spruce and well, and by his casual question whether Mabel had been there often during his absence, no one would have suspected him of any serious disagreement with his young wife. For a quarter of an hour we chatted, when, finding Lady Stretton was out driving, he rose and left.

"I'm so thankful he's gone," Dora exclaimed with a grimace, as soon as the door had closed. "He's such a dreadful old bore. I wonder Mabel ever fell in love with him; but there, ill-disposed persons say she didn't."

And we both laughed.

"But we haven't any time to gossip," she exclaimed, rising with a sudden impetuosity. "You will go with me, won't you?"

"Where?"

"Not far. I want to convince you that what I have said regarding Jack's innocence is the absolute truth."

"I am, of course, open to conviction," I said eagerly. "If I could only see him cleared of this terrible suspicion I should be happy."

"Then you shall," she said, laying her hand tenderly on my arm, and adding with earnestness, "Stuart, you told me on one occasion that you had loved a true, honest woman, and that your life had been blighted by her death."

"Yes," I said, "I remember I spoke to you once of her."

"Have you ceased to remember her?" she asked mysteriously.

"Never. Daily, hourly she is in my thoughts. There has, alas! been no brightness in my life since the well-remembered day when I lost her," I exclaimed fervently.

“If what I hear be true, she puzzles you. You knew nothing of her parentage, of her past, of the reason for the strange ceremony of your marriage,” she said in a soft voice.

“Nothing. I have ever since sought to penetrate the mystery and ignominiously failed in every effort.”

She paused and, looking steadfastly into my face, exclaimed in a strange voice full of suppressed excitement: “Then to-night I will take you to a place where you may ascertain the truth. At all hazards I will save Jack the indignity of falling into the hands of the police, and at the same time reveal to you certain facts that will astound you.”

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Reconciliation.

Of her French maid, who appeared in answer to her summons, Dora ordered her hat and coat, but ere these could be brought she again placed her hands convulsively to her brow and, pacing the room in feverish haste, complained of the recurrence of excruciating pains.

Not knowing how to relieve her I stood watching, fearing lest she should be seized with another attack of mental aberration. She pushed her hair back from her brow, and suddenly halting before me, said:

“It is as I feared. My head is reeling and I cannot think. My mind is growing as confused as it was the other day. I—I cannot imagine what ails me.”

“Shall I send for Dr Fothergill?” I suggested anxiously. She had promised to make a revelation, and I foresaw the possibility that if her mind became unhinged I should learn nothing.

“No,” she answered, wearily sinking into a chair. “Forgive me. I am afraid I miscalculated my strength. I thought I had quite recovered, but the slight exertion of trying to recall the past brings back those fearful pains that have of late so tortured me. The blow must have injured my brain.”

“The blow! What blow?” I cried.

“Cannot you see?” she said, placing her hand to her hair and parting it at the side.

I bent to examine, and there saw, half concealed by the skillful manner in which her hair had been dressed by her maid, unmistakable signs of a terrible blow that had been dealt her. It was strange. I also had been felled at the moment I had discovered her creeping silently into that mysterious room in Gloucester Square. Had she also fallen by the same unknown hand? Evidently the injury to her brain was the result of the crushing blow she had received.

“Who caused this?” I inquired. “You have been struck from behind!”

“Yes, by an enemy. But ask me nothing, ask me nothing,” she groaned. “I —cannot think—I cannot talk. The place goes round—round.”

The neat maid entered with her young mistress’s hat at that moment, but seeing her mistress lying back in the chair pale and motionless, the girl halted on the threshold, scared.

“Send a messenger at once for Dr Fothergill,” I commanded. “Miss Dora has been taken ill again,” and while she flew to execute my orders I crossed to the recumbent invalid and tenderly chafed her hands. They seemed cold and clammy. Her wild staring eyes were fixed upon me and she shuddered, but to my questions she gave incoherent replies, lapsing gradually into a state of semi-insensibility.

On the eve of revealing the secret of Sybil, she had been thwarted by mental weakness. Full of pain and anxiety I watched her, reflecting that this added one more to the string of misfortunes consequent upon my strange union. Even my friends seemed by the conspiring vagaries of Fate prevented from rendering me any aid.

Within a quarter of an hour the great specialist arrived, being followed almost immediately by Lady Stretton, haughty, fussy and rapidly fanning herself. The doctor, after hearing from me how Dora had suddenly been attacked, and having examined her carefully, said, with a sigh:

“Ah! Just as I expected; just what I feared. She has had a relapse, and a very serious one. But she will always be subject to these spasmodic attacks, unless by chance she experiences some great unexpected joy or sorrow, which may restore her mind to its proper balance. We can only hope,” he added, turning to Lady Stretton who stood beside him. “Hope!”

“But cannot you cure her?” her ladyship asked. “Surely hers is not such a very serious case?”

“The injury to the brain was very serious,” he answered slowly. “Her case is a most perplexing one and full of the gravest complications. Speaking with candour, I cannot say with any degree of certainty that she will ever completely recover.”

“Oh, my child! My poor child!” Lady Stretton exclaimed with a sudden outburst of maternal love quite unusual to her, as she bent over her daughter, imprinting a fervent kiss upon her cold brow. The face was bloodless, the eyes closed, the cheeks sunken; she seemed inanimate, as one dead.

“There is, I cannot help thinking, some great weight upon her mind,” the doctor presently exclaimed, speaking in dry businesslike tones. “Once or twice during the past week, in her more lucid moments, she has expressed anxiety regarding a mysterious crime recently committed, in which a wealthy young man was murdered. Did she know that young man; or is she a diligent reader of the newspapers?”

“She has, I believe, taken an unusual interest in the mystery, for the young man was a personal friend of her sister, Lady Fyneshade, and I think she met him at dinner on one occasion at Eaton Square,” her ladyship answered.

“Ah! then that would account for her morbid fascination towards the details of the mysterious affair. In her frame of mind any such event would absorb all her thoughts. I will call again after dinner,” and rising, he took leave of her ladyship, an example I also followed a few minutes later.

Dora’s object had been to prevent Jack’s arrest, but her plans, whatever they were, had been frustrated by this sudden attack. Without doubt she had gained knowledge of my curious marriage. But how? Her promise to take me to some place where I could ascertain the truth was remarkable, yet throughout that evening I found myself half convinced that her words were merely wild, hysterical utterances precursory of the attack that had followed. No! It was absolutely impossible to place any credence in such a promise, for the probability would be that when she regained her normal condition she would immediately disclaim all knowledge of uttering those words.

Next day was Sunday. In the afternoon I called at Lady Stretton’s, only to ascertain that Dora, having recovered consciousness, was found to be light-headed and distracted. She had spoken no rational sentence since those she had uttered to me on the previous day. I left the house sadly,

walking alone in the Park for a long time; then returning I dined and spent the evening at home. A cloud rested upon me always, dark and palpable; it entered into my life; it shadowed and destroyed all my happiness.

The next day and the next passed uneventfully. Eagerly I scanned the papers morning and evening to ascertain whether Jack had been arrested, but there was no news of the fact, and I began to believe that my friend had after all succeeded in eluding the vigilance of the police. That he was guilty I could not doubt. Dora's words were but passionate utterances, such as might have been expected of a woman who loves an accused man. Indeed, as time went by I reproached myself for my egregious folly in giving her declaration credence and listening to it attentively. It was, however, impossible to let the matter stand as she had left it. Her mention of my lost well-beloved had whetted my curiosity, and some further inquiry must take place, although I saw that so long as she remained in her present state I could do nothing.

Impatient, with head full of cogent arguments I had raised against myself, I waited in agony of mind indescribable. I lived for one purpose alone, to solve the inscrutable mystery.

A discovery I made accidentally struck me as curious. One afternoon, while in the Park, I saw Fyneshade and his wife driving together. Sitting beside her husband, with an expression of perfect contentment and happiness, Mabel's attention had been attracted in the opposite direction, therefore she did not notice me. That there had been a reconciliation was apparent, and it gave me intense satisfaction, for I knew that no questions would now be asked me regarding that clandestine meeting in the grounds of Blatherwycke.

Curiously enough, on the following day I received an invitation from Mabel to dine *en famille* at Eaton Square, and believing that she had some strong motive in this I accepted.

The meal was served with stateliness even though the Earl and his wife had no other visitor. It had been a breathless day in London, and was still light when dinner ended and Mabel rose and left us. The eastern sky was growing from blue to a violet dusk, and even then the crimson-shaded candles upon the table were merely ornamental.

We had been smoking and gossiping some time, and as I sat opposite my host I thought I somehow observed a change in him. Some anxiety seemed reflected in his clear-cut features, the expression upon which was a trifle stern and moody. It had softened a little while his wife kept up her light amusing chatter, but when she left there again settled upon his countenance the troubled look that puzzled me. It was caused no doubt by his suspicions of Mabel's faithlessness.

He had been describing a new play he had seen produced in Paris, when suddenly he turned to me, exclaiming, as he wiped his single eye-glass and readjusted it: "Dora's illness is most unfortunate, isn't it? The whole thing seems enshrouded in mystery. Even Mabel is either ignorant, or desires to keep the cause of her sister's affliction a secret. What do you know about it?"

I removed my cigar from my lips very slowly, for I hesitated whether I should unbosom myself and explain the strange circumstances in which I had discovered her. But in that brief moment I saw that if I did so I might become an unwilling witness in the tragedy. I knew the Earl as an inveterate gossip at his club, and having no desire that my name should be bruited all over London in connection with the affair, I therefore affected ignorance.

He plied me with many questions regarding Bethune's movements, but to these also I remained dumb, for I could detect the drift of his conversation.

"Well," he said at length, "he killed young Sternroyd undoubtedly, though from what motive it is impossible to imagine."

"I suppose it will all come out at the trial," I observed.

"All come out! What do you mean?" he asked, moving slightly to face me.

"I mean that his motive will then be made clear."

"Ah! yes, of course," he said smiling. "You see this wretched business is most unfortunate for us; it so closely affects my wife, and therefore worries me beyond measure. Even now there are many people evil disposed enough to couple Mabel's name with his, merely because of the

will; but he was a mad-brained young fool, and only those who knew him personally can imagine the irresponsibility of his actions."

"Were you acquainted with him?" I asked, eagerly seizing upon this opportunity to dear up a point on which I had been in doubt.

"Oh, yes! I knew him quite well. His father was my friend when a young man, but what induced Gilbert to leave all his money to Mabel I really cannot understand."

"Perhaps he did it in accordance with his father's instructions. He may have been under some obligation to you. Had not Gilbert any relatives?"

"I believe he had some direct relatives; but by some means they seriously offended him before his father's death. Of course, one cannot disguise the truth that such a large sum would be very acceptable were it not for the melancholy facts surrounding it," and an expression of sadness crossed his heavy brow as he added with a touch of sorrow: "Poor lad—poor lad!"

"Yes, he seemed a good-hearted young fellow," I said. "I met him on one occasion with Mabel."

"Where?" he inquired, quickly. "Where were you?"

"In Radnor Place."

"Radnor Place? What took you there?" he demanded with undisguised anxiety.

"I went there to try to find a certain house."

"And did you discover it?"

"Yes."

"And you met them there!" he cried, as if a sudden amazing thought occurred to him.

"Certainly, I met them there. The carriage was waiting, and together we

drove towards the Reform to call for you. I alighted, however, at Piccadilly Circus."

"They—they gave you no explanation—I mean you did not enter this house you speak of?" he added, bending towards me, restlessness portrayed on his countenance.

"On that occasion, no. But I have been inside since."

"You have! And—and you found her there—you saw her!"

"No," I replied calmly; "I have never seen Mabel in the house. But why are you so upset at these words of mine? Was it not within your knowledge that Gilbert was seen in public with your wife, that—"

"Of course it was. I'm not an idiot, man," he cried, as, crimson with anger, he rose and paced the room in feverish haste. "But I have been misled, fooled, and by heaven! those who have deceived me shall pay dearly. I won't spare them. By God! I won't," and he brought down his fist so heavily upon the dining-table that some flowers were jerked from the épergne.

Then halting unsteadily, and pouring out some brandy into a liqueur glass, he swallowed it at one gulp, saying:

"Let us go to the drawing-room, but remember, not a word to her. She must not know that you have told me," and he led the way to where his wife awaited us.

He entered the room jovial and smiling as if no care weighed upon his mind, and throughout the evening preserved a pleasant demeanour, that seemed to bring full happiness to Mabel's heart.

I knew she longed to declare her contentment, now that a public scandal was avoided and they were reconciled, and although she was unable, I recognised in her warm hand-shake when I departed an expression of thanks for my promise to conceal the truth.

Chapter Thirty.

One Thousand Pounds.

The enigma was maddening; I felt that sooner or later its puzzling intricacies must induce mania in some form or other. Insomnia had seized me, and I had heard that insomnia was one of the most certain signs of approaching madness. In vain I had striven to penetrate the mystery of my union and its tragic sequel, at the same time leaving undisturbed that cold, emotionless mask which I had schooled myself to wear before the world.

Days had passed since my visit to Eaton Square, and through all my pain the one thought had been dominant—I must obtain from Dora the revelation she had promised. It seemed that blindly, willingly I had resigned every hope, joy, and sentiment that made life precious; I had, like Faust, given my soul to the Torturer in exchange for a few sunny days of bliss and fleeting love-dreams.

Wearied, despondent, and anxious I lived through those stifling hours with but one thought, clinging tenaciously to one hope; yet after all, what could I expect of a woman whose mind was affected, and whose lover accused of a capital offence? In this distracted mood I was wandering one evening along the Strand and arriving at Charing Cross Station turned in mechanically to purchase a paper at the bookstall. The hands of the great clock pointed to half-past eight, and the continental train stood ready to start. Porters who had wheeled mountains of luggage stood, wiped their brows and pocketed the tips of bustling tourists about to commence their summer holiday. City clerks in suits of cheap check and bearing knapsacks and alpenstocks were hurrying hither and thither, excited over the prospect of a fortnight in Switzerland for a ten-pound note, while constant travellers of the commercial class strode leisurely to their carriages smoking, and ladies already seated peered out anxiously for their husbands. The scene is of nightly occurrence after the London season, when everyone is leaving town, and I had witnessed it many times when I, too, had been a passenger by the night mail. As I stood for a moment watching I heard two men behind me engaged in excited

conversation in French.

“I tell you it’s impossible,” exclaimed one in a decisive tone.

“Very well, then, you shall not leave London,” the other said, and as I turned I was surprised to find that one of them was Markwick, the other a short, rather elderly, shabbily-dressed little Frenchman, whose grey beard and moustache were unkempt, whose silk hat was sadly rubbed and whose dark eyes were keen and small. In an attitude of firm determination he held Markwick by the arms and glared for a moment threateningly into his face. The latter, too occupied to notice my presence, retorted angrily—

“Let me go, you fool. You must be mad to act like this, when you know what we both have at stake.”

“No, no,” the irate Frenchman cried. “No, I am not mad. You desire to escape, but I tell you that you shall not unless you give me the money now, before you go.”

“How much, pray?” Markwick asked with a dark, severe look.

“What you promised. One thousand pounds. Surely it is not a great price.”

“You shall have it to-morrow—I’ll send it to you from Paris.”

“Ah! no, m’sieur, you do not evade me like that! You are playing a deep game, but you omitted me from your reckoning. The ticket you bought this morning was not for Paris, but for New York via Havre.”

“How—how do you know my intentions?” Markwick demanded, starting. “You confounded skunk, you’ve been spying upon me again!”

But the little Frenchman only grinned, exhibited his palms, and with a slight shrug of his shoulders, said:

“I was not at the police bureau in Paris for fifteen years without learning a few tricks. You are clever, M’sieur, shrewd indeed, but if you attempt to leave to-night without settling with me, then you will be arrested on arrival

at Dover. Choose—money and liberty; no money and arrest."

"Curse you! Then this is the way you'd blackmail me?" Markwick cried, his face livid with rage. "I secured your services for a certain fixed sum, which I paid honourably, together with three further demands."

"In order to secure my silence," the Frenchman interrupted. "Because you were well aware of your future if I gave information."

"But you will not—you shall not," answered the man who had met me in the garden at Richmond on that memorable night. His face wore a murderous look such as I had never before seen. It was the face of an unscrupulous malefactor, a countenance in which evil was portrayed in every line. "If it were not that we are here, in a public place, I'd wring your neck like a rat."

"Brave words! brave words!" exclaimed the other, laughing contemptuously. "A sign from me and the prison doors would close behind you for ever. But see! The train will leave in a few moments. Will you pay, or do you desire to stay and meet your accusers?"

Markwick glanced at the train wherein all the passengers had taken their scats. The guards were noisily slamming the doors, and the ticket-examiners, passing from end to end, had now finished their work. He bit his lips, glanced swiftly up at the dock, and snatching up his small bag said, with a muttered imprecation:

"I care nothing for your threats. I shall go."

Shaking off the Frenchman's hand he moved towards the barrier, but his opponent, too quick for him, sprang with agility before him, barring his path.

This action attracted the attention of several bystanders, who paused in surprise, while at the same moment the engine gave vent to a whistle of warning and next second the train slowly moved away. Markwick, seeing himself thus thwarted and the centre of attraction, turned to the little foreigner, and cursing him audibly strode quickly out of the station, while his irate companion walked away in the opposite direction.

In the yard Markwick jumped into a hansom and was driven rapidly away, and as I watched I saw almost at the same moment a tall, well-dressed man spring into another cab, give the driver rapid directions, and then follow the conveyance Markwick had taken.

As the stranger had mounted into the cab and conversed with the man his face was turned full towards me, and in that instant I recognised him. It was Grindlay! He, too, had evidently watched unseen.

That this ex-detective held Markwick's secret was evident, and as Grindlay—whom I had imagined far away in Germany—was taking such a keen interest in the doings of the man I hated, the thought occurred to me that by following the Frenchman I might be of some assistance. I therefore turned suddenly on my heel, crossed the station-yard, and hurried along the Strand citywards in the direction he had taken. Before long I had the satisfaction of seeing him walking rapidly before me muttering imprecations as he went. By his own admissions he was a blackmailer and had had no doubt a hand in Markwick's schemes, yet it occurred to me that if judiciously approached he might possibly throw some light upon the events of the past few months. Markwick, himself an adventurer, was not the kind of man to submit to blackmail unless his enemy held him beneath his thumb. The scene I had witnessed proved conclusively that he went in mortal fear of this Frenchman, otherwise he would have treated his importunities with contempt, and left in the train by which he apparently had intended to escape by a roundabout route to America. Therefore, in order to learn more of this latest denunciation of the man whose presence always filled me with hatred and loathing, I kept close behind the angry foreigner. The Strand was crowded with theatre-goers at that hour, but this facilitated my movements, for according to his own statement he had had experience in Paris as an officer of police, and I saw it might be somewhat difficult to follow him without attracting his attention. I had a strong desire to accost him then and there, but on reflection felt certain that it would be best to find out where he went, and afterwards leave him to the tactful Grindlay. A single impolitic question might arrest any revelation that he could make; or if he found himself followed his suspicions might be aroused, and he himself might fly ere I could communicate with my friend the detective. So, exercising every caution, I carefully dogged his footsteps. It was not yet dark and I was therefore enabled to keep him well in view, although at a respectable

distance. At the same rapid pace he passed along the Strand, up Bow Street and Endell Street to Oxford Street, which he crossed, continuing up Gower Street. When near the Euston Road he turned into a short dismal thoroughfare bearing the name of University Street, and there entered one of the rather dingy blackened houses by means of a latch-key. When he had disappeared I passed and repassed the house several times, taking careful note of its number and of the appearance of its exterior, then, determined to communicate as early as possible with Grindlay, I returned home and wrote him a note which I sent to Scotland Yard by Saunders.

Shortly before eleven o'clock that night a messenger brought me a hastily-scribbled note from him asking me to come round to his office at once. I went, was ushered into his presence without delay, and related what I had witnessed at the railway station, and what I had overheard.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "their altercation when I arrived had almost ended. I had been keeping close observation on Markwick all the afternoon, but he had eluded me, and it was only by the merest chance that I went along to Charing Cross to see if his intention was to decamp. So you tracked down that wild little Frenchman, did you? Excellent. Why, you are a born detective yourself," he added, enthusiastically. "Nothing could be better. Now we shall know something."

"Did Markwick elude you again?" I inquired.

He smiled. "Scarcely," he answered. "But his acquaintance with Jules De Vries is quite unexpected, and puts an entirely different complexion on affairs."

"You know the Frenchman then?"

"Yes. He was, before his retirement last year, one of the smartest men in the Paris detective force. During eighteen months before he was pensioned he was head of the section charged with the inquiries into the anarchist outrages."

"But he was apparently endeavouring to levy blackmail!" I observed.

"Oh! there's a good deal of corruption among the French police," he

answered, laughing. “Perhaps, living retired, he is seeking to make money out of the secrets entrusted to him in his professional capacity. That is often the case.”

Our conversation then turned upon the inquest upon the body of Gilbert Sternroyd, which had now been fixed, and to which I was summoned to give evidence regarding the discovery of the body at Gloucester Square. Grindlay, in answer to my question, admitted that Jack had not yet been arrested, but that as soon as certain inquiries then in active progress were complete the German police would detain him for extradition.

“Then you still believe him guilty,” I observed with sadness.

“Can anyone doubt it?” he asked. “I ought to say nothing about the matter, but as you are a witness I may as well tell you that our inquiries show conclusively that your friend Bethune committed the murder, although the circumstances under which the fatal shot was fired were of such an astounding character that I leave you to hear them officially. It is sufficient for me to say that the murder of young Sternroyd is the strangest and most complicated crime that in the course of my twenty-four years’ experience I have ever been called upon to deal with. But I must be off. I am due at eleven-thirty at Shepherd’s Bush, so you must excuse me. We will meet again soon. Good-bye.”

A moment later we parted, and I returned to my chambers.

Soon after eleven o’clock next morning Saunders entered my sitting-room and announced a visitor. I took the card. It was Dora’s!

Rushing forward I greeted her gladly, and bringing her in, enthroned her in my big armchair, the same in which she had sat on a previous occasion when she had called upon me.

She was dressed simply but with taste in light grey alpaca with a large black hat and veil, but the face which was disclosed when the veil was raised was pale as death, lit by two large lustrous eyes. For a moment she regarded me with a sad, wistful expression, as if imploring me not to reproach but to pity her. Then a sad, quiet smile slowly dawned upon her countenance, and she stretched forth her hand towards me.

“Stuart,” she murmured, in a low voice like the subdued wail of an aching heart. “Stuart, are you displeased with me? Are you angry that I should come to you?”

“Displeased! Angry!” I exclaimed, quickly grasping her extended hand between my own. “No, no! Dora. I only hope you have recovered, that you are now strong and well again.”

“Yes. I—I feel better,” she said. “But what of him—tell me. Has he yet cleared himself? At home they affect ignorance of everything—everything.”

I shook my head sadly, remembering Grindlay’s words. “No, alas! He has not cleared himself, and to-day, or at least to-morrow, he will, I fear, be arrested.”

“Then it is time to act—time to act,” she repeated excitedly. “I promised I would reveal some strange facts—facts that will amaze you—but I was prevented by illness. Now, while there is still time you will help me, will you not? You will come with me and see with your own eyes, hear with your own ears. Then only can you justly judge. I confess that long ago,” she added in a low half-whisper bending towards me, “long ago I loved you, and wondered why you never uttered words of love to me. But now I know. I have ascertained the wretched duplicity of those about you, their evil machinations, and the purity of the one beautiful woman whom you loved. There has been a conspiracy of silence against you, rendered imperative by strange circumstances, but it shall continue no longer. You shall accompany me and know the truth. Come.”

She rose suddenly. Obeying her I sought my hat, and together we descended the long flight of stone stairs into the busy thoroughfare below.

At last the promised revelation was to be made.

Chapter Thirty One.

The Scent of Violets.

In accordance with Dora's instructions I hailed a cab, and although she would give me no inkling of our destination, she ordered the man to drive with all haste to Paddington. At the station she told me to book to Didcot, the junction for Oxford, and about an hour later we alighted there.

From a neighbouring inn we obtained a fly, and together drove out across a level stretch of country some two miles, until we passed a crumbling stone cross, and turning suddenly entered a peaceful old-world village, which I understood by her order to the driver to be East Hagbourne. It consisted of one long straggling street of cottages, many of them covered with roses and honeysuckle, with here and there some good sized, quaint-gabled house, or lichen-covered, moss-grown barn, but when nearly at the further end of the little place the man pulled up suddenly before a large, rambling house of time-mellowed red brick, half hidden by ivy and creepers. It stood near the road with a strip of well-kept lawn in front and an iron railing, quite an incongruity in those parts. When we alighted our summons was responded to by a neat maid whom Dora addressed as Ashcombe, and who at once led the way to a long, low room, oak-beamed, panelled and very comfortably furnished.

"Who lives here?" I inquired in a half-whisper when the domestic had gone, but my question was answered by the sudden appearance of its occupant, who next second stood silent upon the threshold, motionless, statuesque.

Astonishment held me dumb. I sprang from the chair whereon I had been seated agape, amazed, my eyes riveted upon the figure standing silent before the dark portiere curtain.

Words froze on my lips; my tongue refused to articulate. Had insanity, the affliction I most dreaded, at last seized me, or was it some strange chimera, some extraordinary trick of my warped imagination? It was neither. The figure that had passed into the room swiftly and noiselessly while I had for an instant turned to question Dora was that of a living

person—a person whose presence roused within my heart a tumult of wonder and of joy.

It was Sybil!

Yes, there was the delicately-poised head, the same flawlessly beautiful face that had entranced me in the little Southern mountain town, the same candid forehead, the same half-parted lips, the same dimpled cheeks that I had so often kissed with a mad passion such as I had never experienced before or since. She wore a grey silk gown; at her throat was one simple rose of deepest crimson. Her little white hand bore a wedding-ring—the one I had placed upon it—the lace on her skirt and bodice, the delicate pale tint of her face, bore testimony to the elegant and opulent indolence of her existence.

Yet was she not dead? Had I not been present when her soul and body parted? Had I not stood before the spot where she slept beneath a willow planted years ago by pious hands that had raised a neighbouring tomb? That willow had, I remembered, never grown vigorous and free in the strength of its sap. I knew how sadly its yellow foliage drooped, the ends of its branches hung down like heavy, weary tears. I recollected how, when first I saw it, I had thought that its roots went down and absorbed from my dead love's heart all the bitterness of a life thrown away. And the roses near her grave bore large blossoms as white as milk and of a deep red. The roots penetrated to the depths of the coffin, the sweet-smelling blooms took their whiteness from a virgin bosom and their crimson from a wounded heart.

I had held her cold hand and kissed her icy lips. Yet here she stood before me in the flesh, grave-eyed, dove-robed, and something wan and pale, an inner beauty shining from her face.

At last my tongue's strings became loosened. I stammered her name. For answer she uttered in a well-remembered voice, one word:

"Stuart!"

Next instant with a shriek of joy she was locked in my embrace, and my eager lips pressed passionately her dimples, those nests for kisses. In those joyful, dreamy moments we left remembrances unuttered, and

nothing mingled with the sound of our kisses but a whispered word from Dora. When one finds living and well one's love who was long ago lowered to the grave there is no need for the voice; a single look says more than a long speech.

Through the open windows the garden looked quite gay. The lawn grew thick and strong with its well-kept beds of crimson, white, scarlet and blue. Fresh air came in abundance from the open country, with puffs of all the pleasant perfumes of the flowers. The sweet scents seemed to fill Sybil with lassitude. She leant upon my arm quite faint, as if the smell had sent her off to sleep with love.

I glanced at her pale cheek and shell-like ear as her handsome head pillowed itself upon my breast. So delicate they seemed that, were it not for the rising and falling of her bosom, I should have believed she was of wax. But presently, struggling with the emotion that she had striven in vain to suppress, she raised her blue eyes to mine. They were still clear and trustful, childlike in their purity. I fancied I could read her reverie in their blue depths as she smiled upon me with sad sweetness.

"At last!" she murmured dreamily, her little hand gripping my arm convulsively. "At last you have come, Stuart!"

Her words caused a flood of memories to surge through my brain, and as she stood before me still pre-occupied, still mysterious, I felt myself doubting, even then, the reality of my joy. But, no! her presence was a tangible, inexplicable fact. Even at that moment a breath of violets filled my nostrils and again stirred my memory. Away in the Pyrenees long ago her chiffons had exuded that odour. Was it not her favourite perfume? The violets of spring, those modest blossoms snatched from the woods to droop and die in the hands of London flower-sellers, had always brought back to me memories of brief summer days when we had wandered up those distant mountain paths side by side, hand in hand, like children. I had thought of those distant things amidst the dust and clatter and gaiety of the great city, and ofttimes bought a bunch of those flowers, offspring of the dew and rising sun, and wore them in my coat so that I might feast my full on the bitter recollections of those days bygone when I had first seen the sun of a woman's wondrous beauty.

But in my sudden ecstasy at finding her actually in my embrace, enraptured by her beauty and transported by her passionate kisses, I trod enchanted ground, knowing not what words fell from my lips.

Our questions were naïve and tender, our explanations brief and full of regrets and surprises. Happy in each other's love, we uttered no word of reproach.

Suddenly I was conscious that Dora had approached, and was speaking.

"I bring him to you, Sybil, because the secret may not be longer preserved," she said slowly, with emphasis. "It has been sought to fix guilt upon an innocent man who, fearing to betray you, has allowed the newspapers to adjudge him a murderer. Speak, then; tell Stuart, who has, I know, never ceased to love you and revere your memory, the secret that has sealed your lips, the secret which when revealed will bring a terrible Nemesis upon the guilty ones."

In a moment Sybil withdrew herself from my embrace; then with a sudden impulse she took a few hurried steps forward, and grasping the hand of the woman who had thus spoken, exclaimed:

"Dora, forgive me! I had imagined that you were my rival. I was told that Stuart was your lover, and had positive proof that you had on more than one occasion gone to his rooms alone. I believed that after he had supposed me dead he loved you, but I find that the same lying, scandalous tongue that wounded my reputation tried to wound yours. Instead of my enemy, I know you are still my devoted friend. Forgive me, Dora—forgive me!"

"Say no more, Sybil," the other answered sympathetically. "All that is now of the past. Stuart and myself have, it is true, been friends—true, platonic friends—and were it not for his exertions on my behalf you would not to-day be in a position to ruthlessly cast off the trammels that have fettered you, preventing you occupying your true position as his wife. Without fear you may now lay bare the secret of your life and divulge facts that will thwart the evil machinations of your enemies. You have waited long and been faithful, both of you, but your triumph will be swift, crushing, complete."

“Yes,” said my well-beloved, “I have already heard of the suspicion that has fallen upon Captain Bethune, and—”

“Bethune!” I cried, remembering her letter that I had found in his rooms. “Tell me, do you know him?”

“I do, Stuart,” she answered, turning her soft eyes to mine. “He has been my friend, and from time to time has brought me here, in my lonely retreat, news of the one man I loved—yourself.”

“But Markwick is trying to escape,” Dora exclaimed quickly.

“Then he has again deceived me!” Sybil cried. “He shall not elude us! No! the day of denunciation has dawned, and I will lay bare the strange facts so that punishment may fall upon the guilty ones,” and she placed her hand upon her breast where her heart throbbed wildly. “It is a wretched story of duplicity and crime, Stuart,” she added, standing before me with eyes downcast. “When you have heard my confession, perhaps—perhaps you will spurn and hate me for bringing upon you all this terrible anxiety and unhappiness; but I swear before Heaven that secrecy was imperative, that I have been under the control of one evil and unscrupulous, who has held my destiny for life or death. Yes, yes, it is the ghastly truth,” she said, her voice dropping to a scarcely-audible whisper. “I deceived you even though I loved you, yet since that time I have lived tortured by a remorse that knows no night, driven almost to desperation by a knowledge of your unhappiness and an inability to tell you that I still lived.”

“Why were you unable to communicate with me?” I asked in wonder.

“Because I dared not. Ah! Do not judge me prematurely!” she pleaded, clutching my arm. “When you know the truth, you will see there are extenuating circumstances. Tell me that you will hear me to the end before you condemn me as an adventuress.”

“Sybil,” I said, as calmly as I could, my fingers closing over hers, “I love you as I have always loved you. Explain everything, let me act for you in settling accounts with those who have held you in bondage, and then, when all is plain, when the secret of this strange life of yours is explained, then will we resume that perfect but abruptly terminated happiness of the

old never-to-be-forgotten days at Luchon."

"Ah, Stuart! I knew you loved me!" she cried, dinging to me passionately. "I knew that you would hear me, because you are loyal and generous to a woman, as you always were. Yes; now, owing to a combination of circumstances, I am at last free to speak, and will conceal nothing. Our enemies parted us cruelly, deceiving us both, and acting with a cunning that was amazing. Therefore you, the principal sufferer, shall have the satisfaction of exposing their trickery and bringing them to justice. Even upon you, at one time, they heaped suspicion so that you might be made their scapegoat, while against myself the police also held a warrant for an offence I committed without the least criminal intent. Ah! my story is a strange one; stranger than any have imagined."

"Yes," observed Dora, "the little I know of it astounds me. When the true facts are made known and the murderer of Gilbert Sternroyd arrested, what a scandal it will cause!"

"Then who is the culprit?" I inquired, in breathless anxiety to solve the inscrutable mystery that had so long puzzled me.

"Be patient for a moment," Sybil answered, "and I will explain events in their sequence. Then you will see plainly by whose hand Gilbert fell."

"You knew him, did you not?" I asked.

"Ah!" she said smiling. "You purchased my photograph—the one I had caused to be placed in the shop-window in Regent Street, so that you should notice it, and on buying it, as I knew you must, you would learn that I still lived."

"Yes. But I could not believe the truth," I said hastily. "It was so incredible that I came to the conclusion that the photographer had made some mistake about the date." Then I added: "Why was Sternroyd placed beside you?"

"There was a reason, which you will shortly see," she replied. "I knew Gilbert, it is true. Do not, however, for a moment imagine he was ever fond of me. He was engaged to someone else."

She had taken a few steps backward and sunk upon a low chair, while Dora had crossed to the fireplace and ensconced herself in a corner, where she sat in silence, watching us with undisguised satisfaction. I, too, had seated myself in an armchair, so near that of Sybil that I could hold and caress her tiny hand.

“Your ring,” I exclaimed, noticing her wedding-ring, “is that the one I placed upon your finger?”

She smiled and sadly shook her head, replying:

“No, you did not place it there.”

“What!” I cried amazed. “Are you not my wife? Is not that your wedding-ring?”

“No, Stuart,” she answered very gravely. “This is my wedding-ring, it’s true, but you are not my husband.”

“Then you have—you’ve married someone else!” I gasped, starting up. But she gripped my wrist, forcing me firmly back into my chair, saying:

“Did you not, a moment ago, promise you would hear me without question? Have patience, and you shall know everything—everything.”

Then, sighing heavily, she pushed the tendrils of fair hair from her white, open brow, while I sank back among the cushions impatient and perplexed.

“Only to-day, a few hours ago, the chains of the thraldom under which I have lived were drawn so tightly around me, galling me to the quick,” she said, in a low, hurried voice, after sitting a few moments silent and agitated. “Only this morning I saw how hopeless was the effort to elude that thraldom in the smallest degree that my whole being ached in torture, and I hated the world and wished to escape from it; yet the two events for which I have longed through all these dreary, wearying days have now occurred. I am free to speak, and you have come to me with forgiveness on your lips.”

I waited expecting her to continue, but she remained silent.

“Speak, why do you pause?” I asked, impatiently I am afraid.

“I paused, Stuart, because I am doubtful as to how you will take what I am about to say.”

“As you mean it, be assured,” I answered.

“Then listen, and I will tell you.” Again she hesitated, pressing her hand upon her eyes, the while her soft bust heaved with a troublous emotion. Presently, in the same low, faltering voice as before, she said: “You will remember, Stuart, that I fled from you in Luchon with a cold formal note of farewell. On that day, blindly, willingly I took upon myself the burthen of another’s sin. Blindly I resigned myself to a fate worse than that of the doomed. Although I loved you fondly, I was forced to bow my head calmly and submit to be branded with a very leprosy of guilt. Because I loved you and permitted your attentions I was to be a painted puppet, to move about with a curse riveted around my life, to move about and even feel that curse fretting and gnawing at my soul, and yet without the power to win a moment’s peace save in the grave. There, only there, might I find rest.”

“This is terrible,” I cried. “Surely you deceive yourself. There is no power on earth that could have held you thus.”

“Ah! yes. The chain was there—there, clasped around my heart, crushing out every gleam of hope. I was light-hearted and heedless; I could not see the life of torture to which I was yielding myself, so innocently I fell into the trap my enemies had cunningly baited, that ere I realised the truth the bonds were irrevocably welded around my life. At first they sat lightly upon me, and I scarcely felt them; but slowly I became conscious that there hung a deep shadow upon my every step; slowly I became conscious that my every act and word must be in unison with the thraldom under which I moved. At last I knew that I had passed beyond your ken; I knew that I must renounce all thought of you, and I became cold and, I sometimes think, callous. But I prayed, I begged of Heaven that I might lose the feelings of a woman since I had lost her privileges.”

She spoke in a hot, dry feverish tone—a tone that I would not have recognised as that of the low, musical voice of my love. Dora, rising from

her seat, stood near her, gazing in wonder at her friend from whose agony these revelations were wrung.

“When I met you, Stuart, I was giddy and thoughtless,” she went on, feverishly. “Towards you my whole soul yearned. Heart, soul and life were all yours; for I loved, I loved! But, alas! our supreme happiness was not for long. In fear of my liberty, I was compelled to fly from you and allow you to believe I had forgotten. Thus in the first moment almost, when a sweet vision of joy flashed upon me, the door of my dungeon was closed, the chains were clasped tightly around my soul, and I was wrenched back from happiness.”

Low tremulous sobs interrupted each word, and every moment it seemed as if she were about to lose control over herself.

“Those who needed me knew well when they might best use me to their advantage. They had seen me waver in my allegiance under the influence of that mad love for you, and they dreaded lest some accident should make me betray their trust. I had entered the closet of their secret, and once in, they were resolved that there should be no loophole for my escape. But I must begin at the beginning, and tell you who and what I am. First, the name I gave you was not assumed, as you must have believed. I am Sybil Henniker, a French subject, born in Paris of a French father and an English mother. My father, a wealthy Deputy, was killed while hunting, and my mother shortly afterwards married an Englishman, but she, too, died within a year, leaving the whole of her fortune to my sister Ethel, who was a year my senior. Another Englishman, a crafty, sycophantic lickspittle of my stepfather, married her, having made a secret compact, by which the two men shared the estate. At that time we were living in Paris, and there came to our house Gilbert Sternroyd, a rich young Englishman of Socialistic tendencies. He had become imbued with Anarchist ideas, and soon developed into an ardent disciple of Ravachol. His theories he expounded to me almost daily, until at length I joined their brotherhood and furnished small sums of money when required. Ah! you will condemn me, I know. It was, I admit, foolish, but remember I did not dream that they would use my money in their attempts to take the lives of innocent persons by means of bombs. It was represented to me that money was required to diffuse Anarchist literature. With secret murder I had no sympathy, I swear. I was in Luchon with my stepfather when he

was suddenly recalled to Paris; then I met you and we spent some happy days together, until—until a telegram in cipher reached me one night and the blow that I feared fell—a warrant was out for my arrest. There had been on the previous afternoon a terrible Anarchist outrage at the Chamber of Deputies, and the police, in make some domiciliary visits to suspected Anarchists, had discovered one of my letters which was undoubtedly incriminating. I scribbled you a hasty line of farewell, packed my trunk and left by the first train in the morning, travelling first to Bayonne, then to Madrid and Seville, whence some weeks later I went to London. I thought to escape by getting to England, and intended to at once write to you, but in London I found my brother-in-law and stepfather awaiting me. Then, for the first time, I realised the truth. I had been caught in the net they had so cunningly prepared!"

Again there was silence, broken only by her sobs. I saw only Sybil before me, with all the old love warm upon her pale tear-stained face. I saw her struggle with the secret that held her aloof from me. I witnessed the struggle and knew its meaning. I knew that she was suffering even as I suffered.

There was another pang thrust into my heart in knowing of her torture.

"My stepfather and his unctuous confederate, cowards that they were, claimed my help, claimed it in the name of all that had been done for me in effecting my escape, and—and I could not deny them." As she spoke she clung tremblingly to Dora, as if fearful of her own words. There was a bewildered expression in her eyes as her gaze was fixed beyond me, staring blankly through the open window.

"Well," I questioned softly, "why did you not follow the true impulse of your heart?"

She started, her eyes glistening, her whole frame convulsed, as she answered wildly:

"I was hunted by the Paris police as a dangerous Anarchist, and they would have sent me to New Caledonia to work among criminals for the remainder of my life. The two knaves under whose thrall I had fallen knew this, but they had a deeper game to play. It was part of their

scheme to entrap me thus, and then coerce me into assisting them. They took me to that dismal, neglected house in Gloucester Square that had belonged to my mother, and there unfolded plans that for perfidious ingenuity were assuredly unequalled. First, they impressed upon me the impossibility of eluding the police for any length of time, and I was compelled to admit that I feared arrest. Then they explained their infamous scheme, well-knowing that my offence made it imperative for me to obediently assist them in their shameful fraud and preserve a silence begotten of fear. My sister Ethel, who was almost the image of myself, was mortally ill, dying slowly, poor girl! of consumption, and knew little of what was transpiring. The miscreant pair, however, knew that when she died the revenue from the vast estates in Savoy would pass back to some relatives of my mother in France; therefore they resolved at all hazards to continue to divide the money, and had formed an ingenious plan to that end. Briefly, they had told me that I must die instead of Ethel."

"Die?" I ejaculated.

"To the world," she went on quickly. "My stepfather told me that on Ethel's death I must pose as the wife of his friend, that I must preserve their secret at all costs, at least for a year or eighteen months, until they could devise some other plan to preserve the fortune to themselves. On their part they promised, on their oaths, to free me and allow me to again seek you. At first I refused with indignation to be party to such an imposition, but they convinced me that the police were already at my heels, and in return for rendering them this service promised to secure me immunity from arrest. My stepfather was powerful, with many influential friends in Paris, and I believed he could do this if he chose. They did not tell me the means they intended to employ to secure this end, but urged me to consent. For a long time I held out, but they pictured to me on the one hand arrest and transportation to a Pacific island, with common murderesses and the scum of Paris; on the other, my return to you after eighteen months, marriage and happiness. So at last—at last I agreed to the compact—I allowed them to fasten the bonds upon me and draw me under their terrible thraldom," and she bent forward sobbing bitterly, while Dora, kneeling quickly at her side, threw her arms around her, endeavouring to console her.

Chapter Thirty Two.

The Secret.

Presently she resumed in a sad voice full of emotion, lifting her face to mine, saying: “I did not dream, Stuart, of the trickery to which they resorted in order to change my personality and secure me from falling into the dragnet of the police, but my lips were already sealed when I afterwards learnt how my stepfather exerted his influence, and obtained a special licence from the Archbishop to allow your marriage to take place in that weird old house in Gloucester Square, how you were conducted there, and how you and the police were imposed upon by the body of my unfortunate sister being passed off as that of myself. It was not until weeks after that eventful night, when by bribery and influence the pair had buried my identity, that I learned the truth. Then, unable to come to you, fearing even to make my existence known, I could only watch and wait.”

“But why did they marry me in that manner?” I asked, amazed at her remarkable story.

“There were reasons,” she answered. “The police had tracked me, and it was imperative for the success of their scheme that I should remain free. Again, although Ethel was dying it was uncertain what time would elapse ere the spark of life would flicker and die out. They therefore resolved, in order that failure should be rendered impossible, upon effecting a master-stroke by marrying Ethel in my name, because by marriage with you I should change my nationality, and as a British subject it would be impossible to arrest me for a political offence committed in France. This they did, with the result you are already aware, but further, my poor sister expired during the ceremony; thus the police, in bursting in, were doubly baffled. Afterwards, they caused her to be buried as your wife, and upon the grave actually placed a wreath bearing your card, with an inscription purporting to have been written by you. Upon the back of that card I also wrote a message, urging you to prosecute inquiries, hoping that it would fall into your hands.”

“It did,” I said. “I found it, and your words have ever since been

uppermost in my mind.”

“It was part of the compact that, posing as the wife of my dead sister’s husband, I should remain here and not visit London. As this man’s wife I was compelled to revive some of my late mother’s relatives, whom I had never before seen. These were the rightful owners of her wealth now that Ethel was no more, but to them I was forced to keep up the wretched deception that I was Ethel, and they, never having seen her since a child, returned to France with any suspicions they had entertained entirely allayed. I remained here alone with my maid Ashcombe as sole companion, and with the cold mask of honesty and indifference upon my face, thinking always of you. If they would only have let me tell you that I was innocent of that cruel deception, only let me show you that I was not the base adventuress you must have imagined, I think—I think I could have borne the rest. When I could not bear it any longer I prayed to them to let me see you, I prayed for one little grain of pity. Circumstances, however, seemed to conspire to thwart their plans, for a person whom they feared threatened to denounce them. Therefore they became desperate and would show me no mercy. At this time, too, I made the astounding discovery that my stepfather had married again unknown to me, two years before, a vain haughty girl young enough to be his daughter. He had kept this fact from me because he knew I had been acquainted with her in my girlhood days, and feared I might reveal his villainy. When I heard of this I wrote to Captain Bethune, who had been a mutual friend, and from him learned facts about yourself and her. I heard of your anxiety, of your futile search after the truth, and of your continual inquiry to fathom the mystery of my life. But our enemies had taken every precaution to prevent your discovering anything, and by threatening to give me up to the police they kept me still enthralled and silent. They, however, saw that the one man who had, by some unknown means, discovered their chicanery, might sooner or later expose the fraud; therefore, they grew reckless, and on one occasion my stepfather threatened my life if I gave you a single sign of my existence. It was after that, that I discovered the crime.”

“The crime!” I cried. “What crime?”

“I had but one friend, Captain Bethune,” she said in the same low, faltering tones, “and after this threat I went to his chambers late one night

to seek his counsel and aid. I wanted to give you a sign that I still lived, but I was held powerless by fear of the terrible vengeance they threatened. I—I found him at home with two other men in his company—one was my stepfather, the other Gilbert Sternroyd. There was no quarrel, no word of anger, but I was witness to the terrible crime. Gilbert, happy and unsuspecting, was shot dead by a coward's hand—he—"

"You actually saw the shot fired?" I cried, starting up quickly. "Then you also saw the murderer? Speak! name him! Let me know the truth."

"The man who shot Gilbert Sternroyd," she said in a hard, firm voice, "the man who drew a revolver secretly from his pocket and fired full upon him as he stepped from the room, was my stepfather! I gripped his arm, but too late. Gilbert fell, and the coward fled."

"His name?" I demanded.

"He is known to you," she replied, slowly twisting her handkerchief between her fingers, and with a manner of subdued, fierce vengefulness she laughed a little hard laugh; but it was more significant of inward agony than any words could have been. "He is known to you, to the world, as the Earl of Fyneshade!"

"Fyneshade!" I gasped dumbfounded. "And he is your stepfather?"

"Yes," she answered. "Seek him, and give him into the hands of the police, for he is the assassin."

"But the motive?" I cried. "What was it?"

"Twofold. Sternroyd had obtained knowledge of the fraud perpetrated by substituting my personality for Ethel's, and came to me declaring his intention of exposing it. Besides this he was an ardent admirer of Mabel, my stepfather's young wife, and although she gave him no encouragement he was infatuated, and had made a will leaving his immense wealth to her. Fyneshade knew this, and saw that by getting rid of him he would preserve his guilty secret, and at the same time enrich his wife and consequently himself. He suggested this to my pseudo-husband, Francis Markwick, who—"

“Markwick!” I gasped. “Was it that scoundrel who assisted in the fraud and posed as your husband?”

“The same. I myself overheard the two men in consultation upon the benefits to be derived from the young millionaire’s death, and afterwards warned him and also told Mabel. Therefore, from the first, Lady Fyneshade and your friend Bethune knew the truth.”

“But why did not Bethune inform the police instead of acting so suspiciously?” I queried in doubt.

“Because he feared to compromise me. He swore he would not speak until I gave him permission. This I could not give until assured of my own immunity from arrest.”

“How would this disclosure compromise you?”

“In the first place, I was present when the murder was committed. Secondly, you will remember you entered Jack’s chambers by stealth on the following night and found the body removed.”

“Yes,” I said quickly. “He locked one of the rooms and would not allow me to enter.”

“Because I was in that room, Stuart,” she explained. “I had again called upon him to ask his advice, not knowing how to act. Suddenly you entered, and to conceal me became imperative.”

“But the body was also concealed there, was it not?”

“No, it had been removed to Gloucester Square early in the morning following the murder, after which Jack, in accordance with his promise to shield me, fled from England in order that suspicion might fall upon himself. If he had at once caused the arrest of the murderer I should have been compromised. But Markwick denounced Jack to Mabel, who, of course, already guessed the truth, and very soon your friend was amazed to find circumstantial evidence woven around him in a most serious and amazing manner.”

“But I had all along been aware of his innocence,” Dora interrupted, sick

at heart for her friend's misery. "Sybil had told me."

"Yes," continued the woman I loved, turning to her. "Even when the police were hunting for him I feared to speak, knowing that by so doing I must implicate myself, and that the part I had innocently played in the dynamite affair and in the subsequent fraud would inevitably be disclosed. Once," she continued, again turning to me, "once I sent my maid Ashcombe to you to ascertain secretly how you fared, but you were out, and as it was imperative that she should leave that night for Paris to prosecute some inquiries, she failed to see you and you therefore remained in ignorance."

"My sister, too, has suffered terrible anguish," Dora said. "She knew from the first that her husband was an assassin, yet to remove suspicion from him and avoid the terrible scandal, she was compelled to act a part that was to her revolting. That she had no thought for Gilbert and that she was faithful to her husband I am confident, yet in order to obtain confirmation of her suspicions of Fyneshade's schemes she was compelled to court the friendship of Markwick, the man she most hated, while her husband, to avert suspicion that he had murdered Sternroyd, affected to be jealous of his confederate."

"But my marriage," I said, "it is astounding."

"The plans of this base pair were indeed deeply laid and ingeniously formed," she went on. "The crafty manner in which you were entrapped and wedded is but one illustration of their marvellous ingenuity and utter unscrupulousness. In securing the handsome revenue from my mother's estates they provided for every eventuality, but by a conspiracy of circumstances Gilbert Sternroyd obtained knowledge of their secret, of how they had compelled me to pose as Markwick's wife, and how they had married you to my dead sister. He sympathised with Mabel as wife of this titled adventurer, and, in order to rid her of him, intended to give him up to the police. My stepfather saw that only by death could he be silenced, and he therefore foully murdered him. Yes, Stuart, your marriage was an amazing one, secured by a scoundrel whose influence was far-reaching; but even that event was not one whit more astounding than those that followed."

"True," I said, amazed and bewildered at her disclosures.

“Towards me, also, Fyneshade has acted desperately, with double cunning.” Dora exclaimed fiercely, turning to me. “You remember on that night when, for the first time after your strange marriage, you visited the ghostly deserted house in Gloucester Square, I was there also. I knew that Fyneshade, supposed to be in Paris, was in hiding there, so I entered determined to face him and obtain liberty for Sybil, for Jack, nay for all, by compelling him to fly from the country and renounce all claim to return. I was prepared to offer him secrecy in exchange for this. But he detected us. He felled you from behind and dragged you down to the cellar, while he also stunned me, causing concussion of the brain; then locked me in that inner room. Probably I should have gone hopelessly insane and eventually starved had you not discovered me.”

“His villainy is revolting,” I exclaimed angrily. “His own action led to my discovery of the body, but I confess these disclosures put a complexion on the affair such as I had never dreamed;” and turning to Sybil, who had slowly risen and passed to the window, I asked, “Tell me the reason you are now constrained to make this confession.”

The air from the garden fanned her pale cheeks soothingly. She was leaning forward gazing fixedly across the lawn, but turned slowly at my words, and I saw her face was as beautiful as when we had first met.

“Because I no longer fear,” she answered calmly, and one would have doubted that this was the same woman who had been so wildly agitated only a few moments previously, she spoke so quietly. “Yesterday the French Government adopted an amnesty to political offenders, therefore the warrant cannot now be reissued against me. As to the ingenious fraud to which I have been a party, I can prove that I was merely a tool in the hands of these two malefactors who held me in their toils. From this moment I renounce the name of Markwick, to which I have no right, and again resume my maiden name, Sybil. I may be prosecuted—well, I am ready to take my trial—I—I am ready to face all, if only I can think that you believe me innocent, Stuart—if only I may dare to hope we may even be man and wife.”

Next second she was in my embrace, sobbing again with her head upon my shoulder.

“Rest assured,” I said tenderly, “that the innocent shall not suffer, and upon the guilty shall fall punishment swift and certain. If it becomes necessary for you to face a criminal trial, remember that I love you just as fondly as I have ever done.”

“Then you do not hate me for the despicable part I have been forced to act?” she cried joyfully, raising her earnest, tear-stained face.

“No, Sybil. Like myself, you have suffered at the hands of these merciless scoundrels, and before Heaven I swear they shall pay for it,” I cried with fierce anger. Turning to Dora, I added, “This has indeed proved that Jack, loyal and true-hearted, is in every way worthy the affection of the pure honest woman who has befriended us both.”

“I have but endeavoured to repay you for the small services you have rendered to Jack and myself,” she answered with a sweet smile. “I know that at one time you suspected him, but that was only natural, for he intended that you should. Already he is on his way home, and to-night will be in London. He will be present to bear witness with Sybil as to the tragic end of Gilbert Sternroyd.” Then, with a lingering glance at us, Dora rose and discreetly left on pretence of speaking to Ashcombe, while Sybil and I, alone, clasped in each other’s arms, repeated those vows of undying love we had exchanged far away at that little southern spa, overshadowed by its purple mountains with their eternal snows.

During several hours I remained joyful and content with my loved one, and the sun had already disappeared when we all three entered the fly to drive back to Didcot and catch the train for London. The earth, veiled in a soft shadow, seemed half slumbering, pensive and melancholy. A white opaque sky overhung the horizon, and lucent haze of colourless pearl-grey filled the valley. A time of palpable sadness comes each evening, when although not yet night the light is fading slowly, almost regretfully; and each of us in this silent farewell feels strange anxiety, a great need of hope and faith in his heart Song comes to one’s lips with the first rays of morning, tears to one’s eyes with the last ray of evening light Perhaps it is the dispiriting thought of labour constantly resumed, unceasingly abandoned; the eager wish, mingled with dread, for eternal rest. Perhaps, indeed, it is the resemblance of everything human to that agony of light and sound.

Sybil was seated beside me as we sped along the straight open road. A star shone above the dark line of distant trees amid the evanescence of earth and sky. We both looked at this consoling light.

It pierced with a ray of hope the mournful veil of twilight.

Chapter Thirty Three.

A Family Council.

From Didcot station I sent a telegram to Grindlay making an appointment with him to meet us at Lady Stretton's later that night, and when we arrived there we found both the Inspector and Jack Bethune awaiting us.

Closeted together, Lady Stretton being present, Sybil told her story to the astonished police officer in a plain, matter-of-fact manner, describing minutely the circumstances of the tragedy as she had witnessed it, and eulogising Jack for the self-sacrifice he had made in order to shield her. Her confession was much the same as that she had made to me, and when she had concluded the detective turned, offered his hand to Jack, apologising for regarding him with undue suspicion, to which the other responded generously, saying:

"It was my fault; entirely my fault. I intended you should believe me guilty. But arrest the culprit; do not let him escape."

"No, he shall not," Grindlay said with a mysterious smile. "Very soon we shall have him under lock and key. But this affair is simply astounding," he continued, turning to me. "I felt certain there must be some very suspicious circumstances connected with your secret marriage, but the intricacies of this extraordinary plot never occurred to me. I knew that only by the exertion of great influence could such a marriage as yours be procured, and certainly the substitution of Miss Henniker's sister for herself was one of the most ingenious and neatly-executed pieces of trickery that has ever come under my notice. Indeed, the truth is even more remarkable than the mystery. The Earl and his precious confederate must be an inventive pair, otherwise they would not have succeeded in tricking us so neatly. When perpetrating the fraud and the murder, the Earl secured the silence of witnesses by devices evidently carefully planned. Since I last saw you I have learnt the truth from De Vries, the French ex-detective, who endeavoured to levy blackmail upon Markwick. It appears as though their scheme would never have been exposed had not he, while making inquiries into the causes of the Chamber of Deputies explosion, found himself balked by the strange

marriage. The relatives away in Savoy, to whom the estate rightly belonged, had had their suspicions aroused by some slight incident, and had caused inquiry to be made by the police. De Vries, having both matters in hand, at length understood that an important object was to be attained by preventing Ethel from dying. This, however, was after his retirement from the Paris police. Nevertheless, an adept at criminal investigation, he prosecuted his inquiries out of sheer curiosity, and possibly with the hope of a reward, until he obtained confirmation of his suspicion that Miss Sybil was not dead. Finding he could glean nothing further he therefore resolved to obtain money for his silence, and blackmailed Markwick, compelling him to part with various sums of money. De Vries was, it appears, a friend of Sternroyd's, and in a moment of expansiveness imparted to him the secret. Thereupon Sternroyd set diligently to work, discovered Sybil, and would—if not foully done to death—have exposed the whole conspiracy. But I have sent a messenger for De Vries, and expect him here every moment."

Almost as he spoke the diminutive Frenchman was ushered in by one of the stately, powdered footmen of the Stretton household. He entered, smiling and bowing, and when Grindlay had explained what he had told us he turned to me, and in broken English, reiterated with much gesticulation how he had been commissioned by Monsieur Goron, the head of the Paris police, to investigate the dynamite explosion in the Chamber, and how, at the house of the noted Anarchist Mercuvel, an incriminating letter signed by Sybil Henniker had been discovered. She was traced, application was made to the London police for her arrest and extradition, and he himself came over and had actually accompanied the officers when they burst into the room wherein the marriage ceremony had taken place. Returning to Paris, baffled by the death of the woman supposed to be one of the guiding spirits of the apostles of dynamite, another inquiry was soon afterwards placed into his hands. It was made by a family named Langon, living near Chambéry, regarding the sister of Sybil Henniker. This aroused his suspicion, but having fallen into disfavour at head-quarters he found himself compelled to resign his official appointment Afterwards he returned to London, investigated the matter thoroughly, and arrived at the conclusion that it was Sybil who was passing herself off as the wife of Markwick, and that the Langon family were entitled to claim the late Madame Henniker's property. The detective's shrewdness had obtained for him hush-money to the extent of

over a thousand pounds when, fearing Markwick would escape and thus his source of income might disappear, he coolly claimed another thousand in return for his liberty, a request which was refused.

When this family council terminated, and the bell was rung that refreshments might be served to Grindlay and the Frenchman, it was already near midnight. The footman on entering that abode of garish luxury passed at once across to Lady Stretton, saying in a low tone:

“Lord Fyneshade called an hour ago, your ladyship, and—”

“Fyneshade!” all echoed in a tone of awe.

“And what did you tell him, Stebbings?” cried Lady Stretton, growing crimson with excitement.

“I told him your ladyship was engaged with Captain Bethune, Mr Ridgeway and a French gentleman,” the flunkey answered, astonished at the sensation his announcement had produced.

“Well, what then?”

“He glanced at Monsieur’s card lying in the hall, and then left hurriedly, first asking me whether a strange, fair-haired young lady had accompanied Mr Ridgeway. I told him that she had, and he then said I was not to disturb you or mention that he had called.”

“By Heaven! He’s bolted!” cried Grindlay, springing to his feet. “But he must not escape. Come with me, De Vries. We must find him before he has time to leave London.”

“But Markwick!” I cried. “What of him?”

“He has unfortunately already gone,” the Frenchman answered as he passed through the door. “I missed him this morning, after watching his lodgings at Notting Hill for nearly three weeks. He has eluded me, and I fear got clean away.”

A few moments later Grindlay and his companion jumped into a cab, and I heard a voice shout to the driver:

“Scotland Yard. Quick!”

Chapter Thirty Four.

Guilt.

A last beam of the sun gliding over the surface of the river transformed it into a ribbon of creamy gold as, accompanied by Sybil and Grindlay, I was driven over the old moss-grown bridge on the way from the station to Fyneshade Hall, one of the most historic mansions in Sussex.

Throughout the length and breadth of the land telegraphic information had reached the police that the Earl of Fyneshade was wanted on a charge of murder. In every town, in almost every village, constables and detectives were on the alert. The search in London during the day had proved futile, for after leaving Lady Stretton's all trace of his lordship had been lost, and it was supposed that, finding De Vries present, he had become alarmed and had hidden himself. At Eaton Square, Grindlay had ascertained that Mabel had been away at the country seat during the past three days, and nothing had been seen there of the Earl for a week. Inquiries at his clubs and elsewhere elicited no clue to the direction he had taken, but about five o'clock Grindlay had called upon me hurriedly, saying that he intended to go to Fyneshade, whereupon I resolved to accompany him, and Sybil, being also present, pleaded that she might be taken also.

Therefore we had left Victoria, and two hours later found ourselves at a small wayside station with four miles to drive. It was an anxious journey, and during those last four miles scarcely a word was exchanged between us, so full were our thoughts, for the Inspector had ascertained from the station-master that his lordship had arrived from London by the first train that morning, and, no fly being available, had walked up to the Hall.

At last we were gaining upon him.

Was it any wonder, then, knowing the fate awaiting him, that we were silent?

When, having passed the lodge-gates and driven up through the spacious, well-wooded park wherein the birds were gayly chattering, we

alighted before the great stone portico of the quaint, rambling, ivy-covered mansion, a man-servant came forward.

“I wish to see Lady Fyneshade!” I said.

“Yes, sir. Her ladyship is at home, sir. Please step this way,” and taking my card he led us through the great hall of polished oak, with its windows of stained glass and stands of armour, into a pleasant sitting-room with diamond panes and deep window-seats commanding a wide sweep of the park and lake beyond. Here, as through the mansion, there was a lulling quietude, and an atmosphere of voluptuous luxury. The sense became oppressed with the richness of the surroundings, and the quietude added to the oppression.

Almost before the door had closed a rustling of silk reached our ears, and when it opened again Mabel stood before us. Her face was deathly pale; around her eyes, swollen as if by tears, were dark rings that told only too plainly the distressing anxiety of that breathless day.

“You?” she gasped, steadying herself by clutching at the handle of the door, and gazing fixedly at Sybil. Then, turning her haggard eyes upon Grindlay, she said half reproachfully:

“You have come for him!”

The Inspector, standing by the window, advanced a few steps, and bowing answered:

“It is unfortunately my painful duty, my lady.”

“Ah! I knew it—I knew it!” she wailed, with a wild passion, bursting again into a torrent of hot tears. “He arrived here at ten o’clock this morning—and—and—”

“Did he leave again?” Grindlay quickly asked.

“No,” she replied, in a harsh discordant tone, her pallor becoming more apparent. “He is still here. He came home, and without seeing me went to his room. My maid—my maid told me that he—”

She had almost become calm, but the marks of a storm of agitation were very palpable in her pale countenance and her disordered dress. She paused, her words seemed to choke her, and she started with a cold shudder, as if some unseen hand had touched her. Then with a fierce effort she drew herself up and continued:

“My maid, whom I sent to him asking him to see me, returned with a message that he was busy, and when I went to his room a few minutes later I found he had again gone out.”

For an instant she paused, then as if a sudden wild impulse seized her she rushed across the room and threw open wide the door leading to an adjoining apartment.

“An hour later he returned,” she cried hoarsely. “See!”

We all three dashed forward, but an instant later, with one accord, uttered cries of horror.

Lying upon a couch in a room that had been almost cleared of furniture was the Earl of Fyneshade, fully dressed. From his wet, slime-covered clothes water still dripped slowly, forming a pool upon the carpet, and even as we looked his wife withdrew the handkerchief reverently placed upon the upturned face, so that we gazed upon the closed eyes, white sunken cheeks, and muddy lips.

“They brought him home to me dead,” Mabel said in an agonised tone, that told of the terrible pent-up anguish in her breast. “One of the gardeners saw him deliberately throw himself into the lake, and although he tried to save him was unable.”

Then, as slowly as she had removed the covering from the rigid features, she carefully wiped some of the green slime from his lips and replaced it.

A long, deep-drawn sigh was the only sound that broke the silence, and, by the crumpling of paper next moment, I knew that Grindlay had crushed the warrant in his hand.

No word was spoken, but as we passed slowly back into the comfortable sitting-room, Mabel fell upon the neck of my well-beloved and they both

wept bitterly.

The scene was intensely painful, and Grindlay, with a murmur of excuse, withdrew, leaving me alone to whisper sympathy and courage. The assassin’s end, though tragic, was merciful, for, at least, his young wife would be spared the torture of being branded as the unhappy widow of a man who had been executed.

He had thrown dice with the Devil, and lost. By his own volition he had released Mabel from a hateful marital tie, at the same time paying the penalty for his sins.

Chapter Thirty Five.

Conclusion.

Leaving the house of mourning, where the grave-faced servants moved on tip-toe, I walked slowly at Sybil's side, feeling in each breath of fresh wind puffs of inspiring youth. Once again, after our long and gloomy separation, we were at last alone, confiding lovers, full of all the joyful hopes of life. I knew that I belonged to her, to her alone, to her tenderness, to her dream.

Together, as we slowly strolled along that endless avenue through the great park, it seemed as though we were both advancing towards the unknown, indifferent to everything, finding our pleasure as in bygone days in losing ourselves in the depths of the discreet darkness, where each leafy recess hid our kisses and smothered our love chat.

Though months, nay, years had passed—years of bitterness, anxiety and doubt, shattered hopes and blank despair—her remembrance, the only joy on which my heart reposed, had unceasingly urged me on and given me courage. The glamour of love mingled with the soft moonbeam reflected in her eyes until they twain seemed the only realities.

"Do you remember, dearest," I exclaimed, halting and pressing her in fond embrace, "do you remember that bright summer evening at Luchon, the evening of our farewell, so full of love and sadness? You despatched me to the fight with a kiss upon the brow like a fond sweetheart who desires to see the soldier she loves conquer. That kiss I have ever remembered. Lonely and mystified through those long weary days I only thought of you, I could only speak of you, for you lived within me."

"Oh, Stuart!" she answered, her beautiful, calm face upturned to mine, "I, too, thought ever of you. In those dark hours when, fearing that finding me dead you loved another, those charming rambles among the mountains were fresh in my memory. Hour by hour, day by day, my mind was filled by those recollections of a halcyon past, yet I feared to let you know of my existence lest you should attempt to claim me from the man whose wife I was forced against my will to represent. That ever-present

thought of you wore my life away; I became heavy with weariness, and some nights so broken down that I felt a cowardly desire to die. Yet that sweet thought that past delight leaves within one urged me to hope, even though ours was a dark night to be followed by an unknown dawn. You, dear one, seemed but a shadow that had disappeared in the solitude where the dear phantoms of our dreams reside, but I hoped and hoped, and ever hopeless hoped."

Then upon my breast the pent-up feelings of her heart found vent in big tears and quick spasmodic sobs.

And the rest—well, the rest is that happiness is mine. I have laid my conscience quite bare, being anxious to conceal nothing, and now having found my well-beloved the days seem an eternity of joy.

Yes, we have married. My father has died and Wadenhoe has passed into our possession, while our near neighbour at Fotheringhay is Captain Jack Bethune, who, on his marriage with Dora, resigned his commission in order to devote himself entirely to her and to literature. Her brain-trouble is now completely cured and her happiness complete. The newspapers teem with eulogistic paragraphs about her husband's life and work, for he is at the present moment one of the most popular of our writers of romance. As for Francis Markwick, although he succeeded in escaping to Rio de Janeiro he did not live long to enjoy his freedom, for within a few weeks of landing in that malarial city he was attacked by yellow fever, to which he succumbed.

Sometimes when day is dying the fresh breeze rises from the river and a soft light falls from the sky, the open valley stretching before our windows expands peaceful and transparent like a dark, shoreless ocean. It is in those idle, restful moments of adoration, when earth and sky are fathomless, that the pure sweet voice of my well-beloved, the voice that recalled me to the joys of life, raises a recollection within me, a remembrance that ofttimes brings tears to my eyes—the remembrance of the strange inviolable secret of Sybil.

The End.

| Chapter 1 | | Chapter 2 | | Chapter 3 | | Chapter 4 | | Chapter 5 | | Chapter 6 | | Chapter 7 | | Chapter 8 | | Chapter 9 | | Chapter 10 | | Chapter 11 | | Chapter 12 | | Chapter 13 | | Chapter 14 | | Chapter 15 | | Chapter 16 | | Chapter 17 | | Chapter 18 | | Chapter 19 | | Chapter 20 | | Chapter 21 | | Chapter 22 | | Chapter 23 | | Chapter 24 | | Chapter 25 | | Chapter 26 | | Chapter 27 | | Chapter 28 | | Chapter 29 | | Chapter 30 | | Chapter 31 | | Chapter 32 | | Chapter 33 | | Chapter 34 | | Chapter 35 |

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