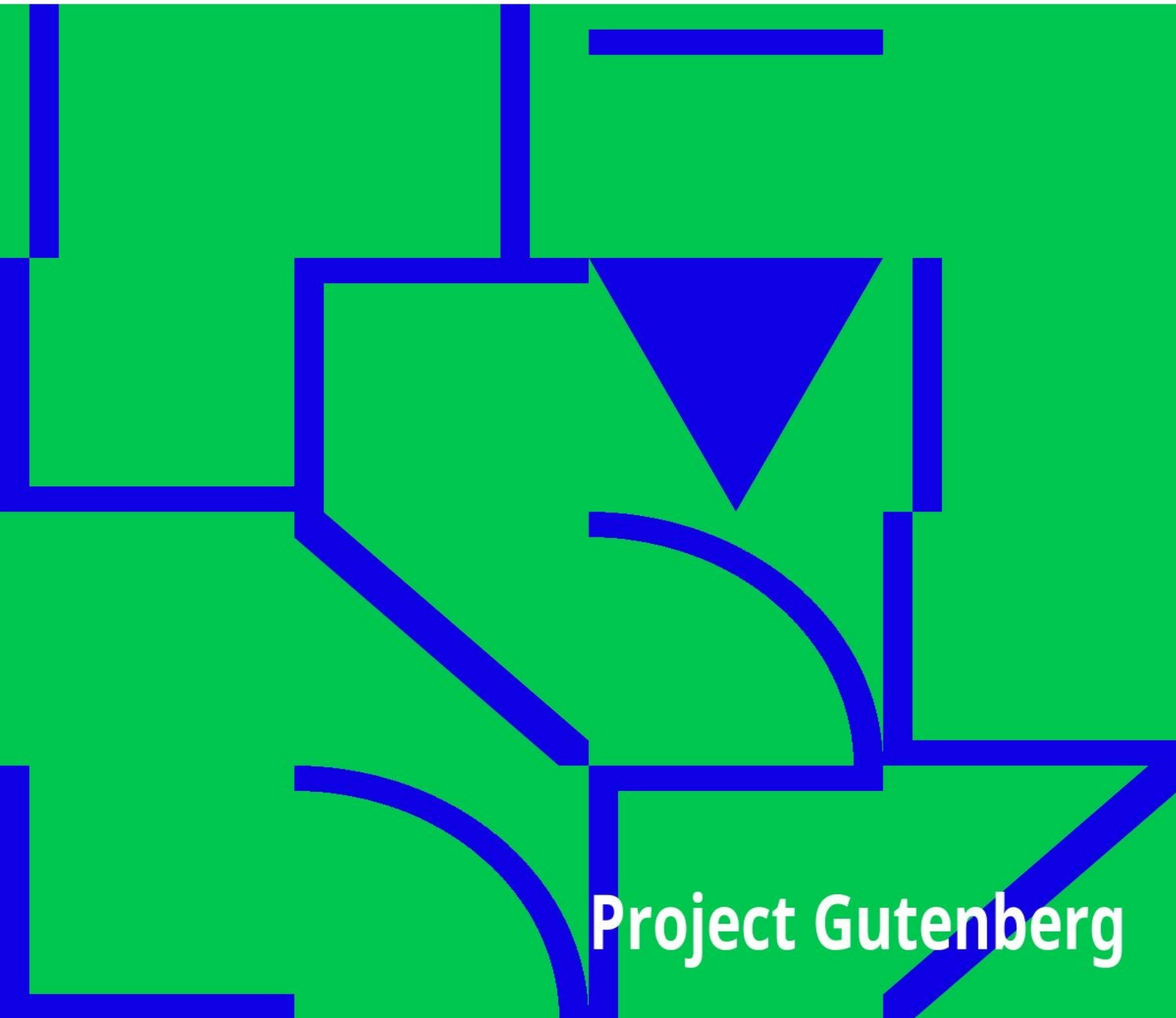
The Lost Million

William Le Queux



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"The Lost Million"

Chapter One.

Describes a Man and his Secret.

“See! It’s—it’s in my kit-bag, over there! The thing—the Thing at which the whole world will stand aghast!”

The thin, white-faced, grey-bearded man lying on his back in bed roused himself with difficulty, and with skinny finger pointed at his strong but battered old leather bag lying in the corner of the small hotel bedroom.

“The keys—on my chain—Mr Kemball—” he gasped faintly, his face slowly flushing. “Open it, quick!—ah no! you can’t deceive me, my dear fellow. I’m dying! I heard what the doctor told you—though he only whispered. But, Mr Kemball, although you are a young man, I—I’m going to trust you with a—with a strange responsibility. I—I trust you because you were so very kind to me on board. They all shunned me—all save you! They didn’t know my real name,”—and the old man chuckled bitterly to himself—“and they were not likely to!”

“You were unwell on the voyage, Mr Arnold, and it was surely my duty to —”

“Duty! What duty do you owe to me?—a perfect stranger—an adventurer for aught you know!” cried the old fellow with whom I had formed such a curious friendship. “No, Mr Kemball, you have acted as a real man, as a friend—one of the few friends one meets in this hard, workaday world,” and he clutched wildly at his throat, while his sunken cheeks slowly assumed a hectic flush. “Unlock the bag—get it out—before—before I lose my senses,” he added.

I took from the dressing-table the bunch of keys attached to his steel watch-chain, and was crossing the room towards the bag when he exclaimed—

“Listen, Mr Kemball! I’m a dying man. Will you make a solemn promise to me? Will you grant me one last earnest request? In half an hour—perhaps before—I shall be lying here dead. But I’m still alive—a man who

has seen much, who knows strange things—a man who has lived through much, and who has stood by and seen men die around him like flies. God! If I dare only tell you half—but—”

“Well, Mr Arnold,” I asked quietly, returning to the bedside and looking into the pinched grey face, “how do you wish me to act?”

“I have already written it here—I wrote it on board ship, after my first seizure,” he said, slowly drawing a crumpled and bulky envelope from beneath his pillow and handing it to me with trembling fingers. “Will you promise not to open it until after I have been placed in the grave, and to act as I have requested?”

“Most certainly, Mr Arnold,” was my reply. “A promise given to one who is about to pass to the Beyond is sacred.”

His thin fingers gripped my hand in silent acknowledgment. He did not speak, but the expression in his eyes told of his profound thankfulness. I placed the letter in my breast-pocket. Something seemed to be enclosed within.

“Go and open the bag,” he whispered, after a brief silence.

I did so, and within, to my great surprise, found two huge bundles of fifty and hundred pound Bank of England notes, each packet several inches thick and tied with faded pink tape.

He beckoned me to bring them to him, and when I again stood near the bed, he selected one note, and then said—

“I wish you to destroy all of them—burn them there in the grate—so that I can watch you,” and he gave vent to a harsh, unnatural laugh, a hideous laugh of despair.

I looked at him in hesitation. The poor old fellow was surely mad. In my hands I held notes to the value of an enormous sum. And yet he wished to ruthlessly destroy them!

He noticed my hesitation, and in a quick, impatient tone, asked whether I would not carry out his wishes, at the same time handing me the note he

had taken, telling me that it was to pay for his interment.

“As you desire,” I said, with some reluctance.

“But is it just—with so much distress here, in London—to deliberately destroy money like this?”

“I have a reason, Mr Kemball, a very strong reason,” he answered in a low tone.

So I was compelled to untie the bundles, and, separating the notes, placed them in the grate and commenced a fire, which I fed on and on, until the last note had been consumed, and there remained only a grate full of blackened tinder. I confess that I found myself wishing that I had the numbers of some of the notes, in order to reclaim their equivalent from the Bank.

The old man’s wild eyes, full of unnatural fire, watched the flames die down, and as they did so he gave a sigh of distinct relief.

Then, with difficulty, he turned to me and, putting out his hand, said—

“In the bag—at the bottom—you will find a sealed cylinder of metal.”

I searched as he directed, and drew forth a heavy ancient cylinder of bronze, about a foot and a half long and three inches in diameter. The top had, I saw, been welded down, but a long time ago, because of the green corrosion about it.

When I had carried it across to him, he looked me straight in the face with those deep-set glassy eyes, which haunted me for long afterwards, and said—

“I trust you with that, Mr Kemball, because—because—I feel assured that you will act as I direct. Do not attempt to seek—to discover what is within. That secret must be withheld—from you. In this I hope—that you will respect my desire—I hope so, for—for your own sake.”

I held the mysterious cylinder in my hand in wonder. Evidently he treasured it even far greater than his riches, and had brought it to London

with some distinct purpose which he was now—owing to his heart-trouble—unable to accomplish.

“There are other things—other things in the bag. Bring them to me,” he said, in a low, weak voice, speaking with the greatest difficulty.

I brought the bag over to him and turned its contents pell-mell upon the floor. Among the several articles of clothing were a few old letters which, at his direction, I burned amid the tinder of the banknotes. Then, on searching further, I found a small, and evidently very antique, statuette of a figure standing, holding a kind of spear. It was about seven inches high, much worn, with a square base, and of solid gold. Around it I noticed an inscription in hieroglyphics.

“That,” my dying friend managed to gasp, “is an ancient image—of the Egyptian God Osiris, son of Seb, and Nut, or Heaven and Earth, and married to Isis. He was held to have gone through sufferings—to have died—to have risen again, and finally to have become the Judge of the Dead, His mysteries and rites were—were the most important part of Egyptian wisdom. The inscription upon it shows that it was made by one Mersekha, in the reign of King Radadef, in the Fourth Dynasty—or about three thousand five hundred years before the Christian era. Take it for yourself, Mr Kemball,” added the old man, his voice distinctly weaker. “It will serve as your mascot and will perhaps remind you of the friendless man whom you have to-day befriended.”

I stood by in silence, for I saw a distinct change had crept over him.

I took a glass in which the doctor had placed some drug, giving me instructions to administer it to him, and I forced a few drops of it between his teeth.

The evening was warm and oppressive. Twilight was just falling, and through the open window came the low hum of the motor traffic a few hundred yards away in the Strand. The hotel in which we were was a quiet, unostentatious little place in Surrey Street, to which, on leaving the ship two days before, he had persuaded me to accompany him. Some one had recommended him to go there, he said, in preference to the Savoy or Carlton.

On board the *Miltiades*, which he had joined at Naples, he had displayed no outward sign of wealth—or that he possessed money to burn. Indeed, his dress was mean and shabby, and by the wardrobe contained in his two ragged bags, one would certainly never put him down as a man of means. It is generally dangerous, however, to judge a man by his clothes.

The old clock of St. Clement Danes struck eight, and a few moments later there came a low tap at the door, and the doctor again reappeared, and bent over his patient anxiously.

He gave him a few more drops of the medicine, but the old man made an impatient gesture, and refused to swallow more.

What request, I wondered, was contained in that crumpled and rather bulky letter which I held in my breast-pocket?

Outside, in the corridor, the doctor told me that the end was quite near, and suggested that I should obtain something from him concerning his friends.

“Mr Arnold has already told me,” I replied. “He possesses no friends.”

And at that the doctor shrugged his shoulders and descended the stairs.

Back at the bedside in the fast-fading light of the hot day of early June, I took the old man’s bony hand in silent farewell.

He turned his eyes upon me, gazing at me with a strange intense look, as though trying to read my very soul.

He endeavoured to speak, but though I bent my ear to his mouth, I could catch no words. His thin nervous hands clenched themselves, his grey beard moved, and he struggled violently to communicate with me, but without avail. Then with his right hand, he made a sign that he wished to write.

Instantly I obtained a pen and scrap of paper which I placed before him.

For a long time his hand trembled, so that he could make no intelligible writing. At last, however, he managed slowly, and with infinite difficulty, to

trace very unevenly the words—

“*Remember the name Harford—be friendly, but beware of him and the Hand*.”

He watched my face eagerly as I read.

Of a sudden, the light went out of his grey countenance, the pen dropped from his thin, nerveless fingers, a scarlet spot fell upon the paper, and a deep, long-drawn sigh escaped his ashen lips.

Then a great stillness fell—a great silence broken only by the low roar of the London traffic.

And I knew that Melvill Arnold, the man of mystery, was dead.

Chapter Two.

Contains Several Surprises.

For some moments I stood gazing upon the dead man's changed face, not knowing how to act.

I, Lionel Kemball, had, perhaps very unwisely, accepted a strange responsibility. I had acted with complete indiscretion.

On my way home from Australia, where I had been for a voyage for my health, the liner had called at Naples, and Mr Melvill Arnold had joined us. On the day after we had sailed I heard that he had had a sudden heart seizure, and was confined to his cabin, therefore—why, I can't exactly tell—I sought him out, and spent a good many hours chatting with him, and keeping him company.

Perhaps it was that, having been something of an invalid myself, I knew the weary monotony of being confined to bed; I could sympathise with anybody who was ill.

From the first I realised that Arnold was a man of no ordinary stamp. Possessed of a clear and quick intelligence, he was a cultured man notwithstanding his rather rough exterior, and full of a quiet sound philosophy. To me, it appeared as though he had lived abroad a good many years, and was consequently out of touch with England. Whence he had come he never told me, save to casually mention that he had been a great traveller and had "lived out in the wilds for years." The possession of the golden god seemed to point to the fact that he had come from Egypt.

"London has nowadays no attraction for me," he told me one day. "I only go there merely because I am forced to do so. I finished with London long, long ago."

Surely, as I, a prosaic man-of-the-world, sat in that narrow cabin as we steamed up the Mediterranean towards Gibraltar, I had never dreamed that in his old kit-bag, smothered as it was with faded hotel labels, there

reposed a fortune in banknotes.

He had been perfectly frank on one point. He was a man without a single friend. And now I knew that he had an enemy—and that his name was Harford.

Presently I bent to the dead man's bag—and examining it thoroughly, discovered that one letter had remained unburned—a letter which, by the London postmark upon it, had been written two years ago. It was addressed in a fine, angular, woman's hand to "Arnold Edgcumbe, Esquire, Post Office, Kingswear, South Devon."

The name caused me to ponder. Had not he admitted that Melvill Arnold was not his real name? Was it not to be supposed that his actual name was Edgcumbe?

The letter was, to say the least, a curious communication. It bore no address, but on the half-sheet of paper was written, in the same feminine hand, the words: "You, no doubt, saw the newspapers of 6th September, and the sentence of the Court upon the person they know as Lancaster. Rest assured that her betrayal will not go unrevenged by—Her Friend."

I stood gazing at the missive which the dead man had evidently believed that I had burned. It would not be difficult to search the files of the newspapers for 6th September 1908, and ascertain for what crime a prisoner named Lancaster had been sentenced. The information might, perhaps, lead me to some further discovery.

I placed the letter carefully aside and made a most minute search of the dead man's clothes, and of his other belongings, but found absolutely nothing. Then, crossing the wasted hands, and placing the sheet tenderly over the white face, I left the room, and, descending, informed the hotel manager of what had occurred, while he, in turn, telephoned to an undertaker.

The effects of the deceased were taken possession of by the hotel manager pending the opening of the letter of instructions, while I conveyed to my own room the ancient bronze cylinder and the golden image that was to be my mascot.

Death in an hotel is always the cause of unpleasantness with the management, who declare it to be injurious to the reputation of the establishment, hence the body was conveyed away by night to await interment, while I moved to the Cecil.

But that same night a man from the undertaker's came to me and asked me somewhat mysteriously what I knew concerning the dead man.

"He was my friend," I replied. "Why do you make this inquiry?"

"Well, sir," he answered, "the guv'nor sent me round to say that he's found he wore a false beard. It fell off!"

The man's statement mystified me, more especially when he added—

"The body is that of a much younger man than the gentleman appeared to be. The guv'nor fancies there's a bit of a mystery about him."

"Probably he's right," I said, but the judicious administration of a golden coin quickly put matters straight, and my visitor bowed himself out.

Sorely was I tempted to tear open that letter which the mysterious man, now dead, had with calm forethought prepared, yet on the envelope was boldly written the words: "Not to be opened until after my burial." That plain injunction deterred me.

Yet on the following morning I went down Fleet Street to the office of the *Daily Telegraph*, and there asked to see the file of the paper for September 1908.

It was not long before I was turning over the pages of the news of the day in question. For some time I searched, until my eye at last caught the name of Lancaster in the report of a trial at Old Bailey.

The report was headed—

"LADY LETTICE LANCASTER

"Amazing Life-Story of an Adventuress.

“The story of a woman adventuress is always interesting, and that of Lettice Earnshaw, *alias* Lady Lettice Lancaster, is no exception. She is a woman of mystery. Born thirty-four years ago in the West of England, she has lived the greater part of her life more or less by her wits. Always a woman of mystery, she has used many names and lived in many districts, generally changing her name and abode when the attentions of her creditors became too pressing. Many attempts have been made to trap her, but she has always escaped, until yesterday, when she was convicted at the Old Bailey of removing furniture in order to cheat her creditors, and was sent to gaol for nine months.

“The discoveries made by the police reveal a remarkable romance. Her birth has always been shrouded in mystery, but it is probable that she was to a certain extent entitled to rise the name Lancaster. Her father, believed to have been a distant relative of a well-known man of title, married an actress. Needless to say, trouble was occasioned by the advent of a child. The family naturally attempted to hush up the marriage, and the little infant was sent to Camborne in Cornwall, where her mother had a brother who was a policeman. Lettice grew up into a knowing and pretty child, looking much older than her real age, and in 1890 she met a medical student, who was staying in the neighbourhood. Although at this time she was only fifteen, she looked some years older, and on 9th April she was married at Exeter, to the student, whose name was given as Henry Earnshaw.

“At this youthful age the young bride started her long list of aliases. According to the marriage register she was nineteen years of age—a jump of four years—and her name was given as Edith Jane Lucy Haddon, the surname being that of her nurse’s daughter. Her actual life immediately after marriage is not known, but about a year later she was living at Manchester, where, according to the prosecuting counsel in the case heard yesterday, she was obtaining her living by acting in a pantomime. Her stay in that city was perhaps her longest in any one district, and she did not obtain notoriety until some years later. In Manchester she was known as the Hon. Lucy Huntingdon, and also as Lady Ella Earnshaw. The Hon. Lucy was unmarried, but Lady Ella had entered the bonds of wedlock.

“With her many aliases and a husband and foster-brother, who

conveniently changed places as the occasion demanded, Lady Lettice Lancaster, to give her the name by which she is best known, has nearly always contrived to enjoy life at the expense of others. When the bills began to arrive, she denied responsibility, the husband or brother to whom the creditors were referred was not to be found, and yet, when a suitable opportunity occurred, she herself disappeared, only to bob up elsewhere, and continue the same game. The story of this amazing woman's extraordinary life has never been published, but we are now in a position to give many interesting facts as to her career.

"The name Lady Lettice Lancaster was not used until about six years ago, when she blossomed out in London, took a flat in Hyde Park Court, and was frequently seen driving in the West End. She then started a more clever system of defrauding her creditors.

"Here is a list of some of her abodes, each of which she left somewhat hurriedly—

"1903.—Tufnell House, Teddington.
1903.—Skelton, York.
1903.—St. Catherine's, Guildford.
1904.—Hackthorn, Lincoln.
1904.—Kiltoon, Athlone.
1905.—Saham Toney, Thetford.
1906.—Gloucester Terrace, London.
1907.—St. John's, Woking.
1907.—Stuston Hall, Chelmsford.
1908.—Portleven Mansions, Maida Vale.
1908.—Brancaster, Norfolk.

"It was while golfing at Brancaster that Lady Lettice was arrested and brought to London under the Debtors Act in connection with her stay at Maida Vale.

"While she had many residences, they were few in comparison to her different aliases. Here are some of the names by which the extraordinary woman has been known—

"Lady Lettice Lancaster, Lady Ella Earnshaw, Hon. Lucy Huntingdon,

Hon. Mary Trelawnay, Mrs Emily Dewar, Mrs Gertrude Curtis, Mrs Evans, Mrs Shaw, Lettice Leyton, Alice Lethbridge, Grace Fane, Grace Fitzjames.

“Each of these names was used by her, while she had a habit of giving one of the other names as reference. In the case for which she has now been convicted, she was using the name of Mrs Gertrude Curtis, and had given Lady Ella Earnshaw as a reference.”

The report then went on to give an example of the clever way in which this extraordinary woman escaped paying her creditors, which showed what a remarkable adventuress she was.

“Early last year,” the journal continued, “she took a fine furnished mansion, Stuston Hall, near Chelmsford, in the name of Mrs Gertrude Curtis, and almost immediately afterwards a man who was known in the village as Hoare, and was thought to be her groom, arrived on the scene. About two months later Mrs Curtis came down from town, but by this time there was a considerable sum of money owing. Certain sums were paid on account, but before very long the tradespeople were getting anxious about their money, and a number of county court summonses were issued. These were allowed to go by default, and after judgment had been given, the woman and a man, who was known as Ralph Lancaster, and was said to be her foster-brother, were found to have removed the furniture and antiques to London, where it was sold. The defence to the charge was that Hoare was really Earnshaw, the woman’s husband, and that he was responsible for the debts, which were on his account, he having given the orders.

“In the witness-box, Mrs Curtis admitted that Hoare was her husband, and that his real name was Earnshaw. She took the house in the name of Curtis because she was anxious to get away from her husband, who when drunk was very cruel, and on one occasion broke her arm. He, however, found her out, and, as a matter of fact, went down to Stuston Hall, a long time before her advent there. She claimed to have ‘a moral right’ to use the name Lady Lettice Lancaster, but ‘for family reasons’ refused to divulge why. If she did, her income would be discontinued. She added that she was receiving five pounds per week from a firm of solicitors in London. The defence did not prevail, and both the woman

and Ralph Lancaster were sent to gaol for nine months.

“The way the three persons mixed up their relationship is decidedly interesting. Earnshaw or Hoare is the son of an officer who held high rank in the Navy, and was known as groom, butler, chauffeur, husband, or foster-brother, while Ralph Lancaster was referred to as foster-brother, husband, or stepbrother. The real husband was nearly always treated as if he were the groom, and when the three were living in Yorkshire, Lady Lettice was summoned for keeping a man-servant without a licence—the man-servant was her husband! This was not the only occasion on which the Inland Revenue took action against Lady Lettice. Once when the woman was prosecuted for keeping a dog without a licence, Lancaster represented her at the police-court. He then said he did not know whether she was the daughter of a Duke or of an Earl, but she was his wife.

“While living near Lincoln, the woman came into prominence for an unusual assault on a butcher’s salesman, who had been sent to obtain payment of an account. He found the gate of the house locked, and rattled it to attract attention. Lady Lettice then came out of the house with a hunting-crop in her hand, and shouted to her daughter: ‘Let loose the dogs, and they will kill and devour him.’ The dogs, however, neither killed nor devoured him, but the woman hit him on the head with a hunting-crop, and knocked him over his bicycle. This little amusement cost her two pounds and costs at the subsequent police proceedings.

“Lady Lettice was always interested in horses, and she generally had some good animals in her stables. For some years she, in conjunction with Ralph Lancaster, had been running a riding-school in the West End, and it is stated that her income from this source was nearly 500 a year. When at Woking, in 1907, she was known as the ‘lady horse-dealer,’ and was very popular locally, until pressing creditors caused her to seek fresh fields and pastures new. When she was at Stuston Hall, she stated that she had taken the place for the purpose of teaching riding, and receiving hunting guests. But although she had several horses there, the only persons to use them were Lady Lettice, the two men, and the children. The eldest of the children, a girl of sixteen, frequently attracted attention by her plucky riding, and she is now earning money as a rider.

“While Lady Lettice was living at Stuston Hall, the house was regarded more or less as a house of mystery, and strange tales are told of how the woman disregarded the canons of convention during the hot weather. Moreover, the hours kept were hardly regarded as usual by her neighbours. Stuston, being a small village, is generally asleep fairly early, but if the statements made to callers are to be accepted as correct Lady Lettice frequently retired for the night as early as six o’clock. Nevertheless, it is stated that she was sometimes seen walking in the grounds during the night in a garb that can only be described as scanty. Naturally the house was watched by the local tradespeople with some care, and it was due to this watching that the removal of the furniture was discovered. The local postman and grocer, to whom she owed nearly ten pounds, saw the furniture being removed, and followed it to London, where it was sold. The police, in the course of the evidence, also hinted at the probability of other and more serious charges of crime being preferred against them on the expiration of their sentences.”

In the centre of the report was given the photograph of “Lady Lettice,” taken by one of the news agencies, the picture being the head and shoulders of a good-looking woman, smartly dressed in tweed country-hat and tailor-made coat—a woman whose type of features was certainly aristocratic, and would never be adjudged an adventuress.

When I had finished reading the report—which I here reproduce in order that you shall be more thoroughly acquainted with every detail of the strange adventures which befell me—I purchased a copy of the paper, and carried it back with me to my room at the Hotel Cecil.

Who was that mysterious correspondent of the dead man who had sworn vengeance. Who was the friend of Lettice Lancaster? For what reason had that letter been written? What connection could the quiet-mannered, unassuming old gentleman have with such a trio of clever swindlers?

It was fortunate, perhaps, that the letter had not been burned, for it had, at least, placed me in possession of some curious facts which must otherwise have been hidden.

During the next three days I was greatly occupied by my own affairs, which had been neglected by my year’s absence at the Antipodes. Yet

time after time I felt the keenest anxiety as to what could be contained in the dead man’s letter of instruction, and in that corroded cylinder of bronze.

At last, however, I followed the mortal remains of my mysterious friend to Highgate Cemetery, the sole mourner, and after I had seen the coffin committed to the grave I returned to the hotel, where the statue of Osiris stood upon my table, and there, with impatient fingers, tore open the letter.

I read it through.

Then I stood staring at the unevenly scribbled words—staring at them like a man in a dream.

What I read there held me aghast, amazed, stupefied.

Chapter Three.

What Mr Arnold Left Behind.

The letter, written upon the notepaper of R.M.S. *Miltiades*, was dated four days prior to our arrival in London.

Perhaps I cannot do better than reproduce it in its entirety.

“To Lionel Kemball, Esquire.

“Dear Mr Kemball,—Now, after my death, I desire here to place on record my great indebtedness to you for your kindness and sympathy. You knew nothing of me, yet you took pity upon my lonely and unfortunate self. You have, in addition, made solemn promise to me to act as I direct. At the outset I desire to be perfectly frank with you and to confess that I was not what I represented myself to be. Certain chapters of my eventful life must be for ever hidden, even from you, who are acting as my friend. This I greatly regret, but to reveal all must only bring unhappiness upon one who is innocent. For that reason I die carrying my secret with me.

“How long I shall continue to live after penning this request I cannot know. Therefore, I will make matters as plain as possible, and earnestly request you to act as follows:—

“To be present at the railway station of Totnes in Devon at five o’clock on the evening of the 20th of June next, and there meet a certain man who will come in secret in search of you. He will wear a red tie, a carnation in his coat, and will carry an ebony walking-stick. He may be watched, therefore do not approach him unless he unbuttons his gloves and removes them. To him hand the enclosed letter, and if you wish further to serve the interests of one who herein expresses his deepest and most heartfelt gratitude, watch him, become his helper, and act as he directs—but do not trust him implicitly.

“Some of the circumstances may strike you as extraordinary and unwarrantable, but I beg of you not to attempt to solve mysteries which must, for ever, be hidden. The person in question may be in sore need of

a friend to give assistance and advice, therefore rest assured that such favour shown to him will not go unrewarded.

“As regards the bronze cylinder, be extremely careful of it, and in all security hold it unopened in trust for me until six months from the date of this letter—namely, on 3rd November—when you will hand it without question to the person who comes to you and lays claim to it.

“What is enclosed addressed to yourself please accept as a trifling token of the great esteem in which you have been held by the lonely and forgotten man who, in later life, was known as—

“Melvill Arnold.”

I tore open the envelope addressed to myself, and therein found four Bank of England notes for five hundred pounds each. My mysterious fellow-traveller who had money to burn had presented me with the sum of two thousand pounds.

The other enclosure, a letter secured by three seals of black wax, was addressed to “Arthur Dawnay, Esquire.”

My trust was indeed a strange one, increased by the dead man’s request that I should befriend a man who was friendless, and at the same time warning me against placing too great a trust in him.

I tried to conjure up in my mind what kind of person I was to meet so mysteriously away in Devonshire. Why, I wondered, could not Mr Arnold’s affairs be settled in a proper manner by his lawyers? But perhaps, so mysterious was he, that to trust solicitors would be to reveal his identity. One thing, however, was evident. He had already made a secret appointment with Mr Dawnay. In all probability he had travelled to England expressly to see him.

From him I should probably learn something concerning the Man from Nowhere who had made me that very welcome present of two thousand pounds.

That the grey beard was not his own, and that he was somewhat younger than the age he had assumed, were, in themselves, facts which caused

me a good deal of deep reflection. He was a complete mystery, and more could not be said.

Many times had I taken the ancient cylinder in my hand wondering what it really contained. As far as I could judge it was of metal, half an inch thick, for the cylinder was well made, and had apparently been drilled out of a solid block. The welded end had been very carefully and neatly closed, and it had evidently lain in the damp, or more probably under water, for many years, judging from the rough corrosion upon it.

My instructions were to guard it with all zeal, yet I was to hand it without question to whoever, on the 3rd of November, should ask for it.

I turned it over in my hands time after time, wondering what could be the nature of this, the greatest treasure of a man, who had undoubtedly been wealthy.

I confess to you that I entertained certain misgivings. Out of mere pity I had made the acquaintance of Melvill Arnold, never dreaming that I should be led into so strange an executorship. Again, there being no will, I began to wonder what was my actual position in law.

The mystery surrounding the dead man had been increased both by the discovery of his disguise and by the frankness of his letter, in which he plainly admitted that he was not what he had represented himself to be. Why had that letter been sent to him threatening revenge for the sentence upon the adventuress who called herself Lady Lettice Lancaster? What connection could he have had with such swindlers?

The whole affair formed a complete enigma. Perhaps I had acted very foolishly in mixing myself up with a perfect stranger, and as day succeeded day this thought became the more and more impressed upon me.

I suppose in order that you should understand matters aright I ought here to say something concerning myself.

I, Lionel Kemball, was aged twenty-seven. My father, a well-known London surgeon, who had been knighted for his services in the interests of surgical science, had died two years ago, leaving me with a

comfortable old house, called Upton End, near Newport Pagnell, in Buckinghamshire, and an income of about a couple of thousand a year. Three years prior to his death he had retired and given up the house in Cavendish Square, preferring life in healthier and quieter surroundings. I had studied medicine, and had passed my preliminary examinations at Edinburgh, when I found myself troubled slightly with my lungs, and had been advised to take a trip to Australia. To my satisfaction I had returned in the very pink of health and perfectly cured.

I had visited Ceylon, the cities of Sydney, Brisbane, and Perth, had witnessed some of the wonders of New Zealand, and now, on my return, had become involved in this most curious and perplexing romance.

The day on which I opened Mr Arnold's strange letter was the 8th of June, therefore twelve days had to elapse before I could go down to Devonshire to meet the mysterious Mr Dawnay.

Those were hot, exciting days. Such blazing weather in June had not been experienced in London for years. It was hot by day, succeeded by oppressive, breathless evenings, with that red dust-haze seen only in our great metropolis. The Derby had been run and London hotels were crammed. The colossal Cecil, at which it was my habit to stay, was filled to overflowing by crowds of Americans, and the West End ran riot with gaiety and extravagance, as it always does each season.

Perhaps fortunately for me, for it prevented my mind being too much concentrated upon my remarkable trust, I found myself involved in some trouble concerning some land down at Upton End, and I had a number of interviews with my late father's solicitors. A lawsuit was threatened, and it looked much as though I should be the loser by several hundreds a year.

My mother died when I was but ten, and though I was fond of a country life, yet, somehow, since my father's decease, I had not cared for the loneliness and solitude of the quaint old house. It was certainly a delightful old place, with several oak-panelled chambers, and clinging to it were all sorts of quaint legends of Roundheads and Cavaliers. Its old bowling-green and its gardens ablaze in summer with crimson ramblers were charming; yet it was, after all, only a white elephant to me, a bachelor. So I had kept on a couple of the old servants, who together with

Tucker, the head-gardener, and his assistant, kept the place going—for I had secret thoughts of letting it furnished.

My trouble over the ownership of the piece of land forming a portion of the farm attached to the house, and several other matters which had been neglected owing to my absence in Australia, kept my hands pretty full; nevertheless, I found time one evening to take a taxi up to Highgate Cemetery in order to see that the grave of my dead friend had been properly closed and put in order.

It was about six o'clock in the evening when I arrived, and there were many friends and relatives tenderly watering the flowers on the graves of their loved ones. Without much difficulty I found the newly made mound of brown earth, but to my surprise I also saw that a magnificent cross of white flowers had been laid upon it.

This I eagerly examined, but no card was attached.

Surely whoever had placed it there had mistaken the grave, for Mr Arnold possessed no friends, and I had been the only follower. His decease had not been advertised; therefore surely none could know of his death.

For a few minutes I stood there, gazing upon the emblem, and pondering.

Suddenly I saw the cemetery-keeper, and walking up to him pointed out the grave and asked him if he knew anything of the cross that had been placed upon it.

"Oh, you mean Mr Arnold's grave, I suppose, sir," exclaimed the man.

"How do you know it is Mr Arnold's!" I asked.

"Well, sir, the day after the funeral a young lady came to me and inquired where a Mr Melvill Arnold had been buried. So I looked it up in the books and told her. She's been here every day since, and put fresh flowers there."

"A young lady! What was she like?" I inquired. "Oh, well, she's about twenty, I should say—pretty, with dark hair, and dressed in mourning," he replied. "She comes each day about five, generally in a private motor-car

—a big grey car. The flowers cost her a tidy lot, I should think, for they're not common ones."

"About five o'clock!" I exclaimed. "Has she been here to-day?"

"No. And she didn't come yesterday either," was the man's reply. "Perhaps she'll come later on. We don't close till half-past seven just now."

So I waited in patience in the vicinity, eagerly watching for the advent of the one person beside myself and the undertaker who knew of the last resting-place of the mysterious man who had deliberately destroyed his fortune.

I wandered among the graves for a full hour, until of a sudden the cemetery-keeper approached me, and in a low voice said—

"Look, over yonder, sir! That tall young lady in black with the chauffeur carrying the wreath: that's the lady who comes daily to Mr Arnold's grave."

I looked, but, curiously enough, she had turned and was leaving the spot without depositing the wreath she had brought.

"Somebody's watching her, sir," remarked the man, "Perhaps she recognises you. She's taking the wreath away again!"

The chauffeur was walking close behind her along the central avenue as though about to leave the burial-ground, when of a sudden she crossed the grass to a newly made grave, and there her man deposited the wreath.

She had detected somebody watching—perhaps she had suspicion of the keeper in conversation with myself; at any rate, she resorted to the ruse of placing the wreath upon the grave of a stranger.

Fortunately, I had been able to obtain a good look at her handsome, refined features, and I decided that hers was a countenance which I should recognise again anywhere.

I looked around, but could see no one in the vicinity to arouse her suspicion—nobody, save myself.

Why did she hold me in fear? By what manner had she been aware of the mysterious man's death, or that I had been his friend?

I watched her turn and leave the cemetery, followed by her motor-driver.

Why did she hold the dead man in such esteem that she came there each day and with tender hands placed fresh flowers upon his grave? What relation could she be? And why did she thus visit his last resting-place in secret?

Chapter Four.

The Man with the Red Cravat.

Of necessity I went down to Upton End in order to see old Tucker and his wife, who had acted as caretakers in my absence.

Thomas Tucker—a tall, thin, active, grey-moustached man of sixty-five—was a servant of the old-fashioned faithful school. For thirty-two years—ever since the day of his marriage—he had lived in the pretty rose-embowered lodge, and had been taken over by my father as part of the estate. Indeed, in such high esteem did the governor hold him that he was given an entirely free hand in all outside matters; while his wife—a well-preserved, round-faced woman, equally devoted to her master—was entrusted with the care of the servants and other domestic affairs.

Hence, when I found myself possessor of the place, I too reposed the same confidence in the faithful pair as my father had done. But now that he was dead and I was alone, Upton End seemed, alas! very grim and silent. True, the old place, with its quaint corners and historic associations, its dark panelling, polished floors, and antique furniture, its high box hedges, level lawns, and wealth of roses, would have delighted the artist or the antiquarian; but modern man that I was, I failed to find very much there to attract me.

It was a house built for entertainment, and was only tolerable when filled by a gay house-party. The lawns, gardens, and park were looking their best in those balmy days of June; yet as I walked about, listening to Tucker as he showed me some improvements in tree-planting and in the green-houses, I found myself already reflecting whether, after all, it was worth while keeping the place up further, now that I scarcely ever visited it.

The rural quiet of the place palled upon me—so much so, indeed, that while sitting on the wide veranda smoking in the sunset on the third evening after my arrival I made up my mind to leave again next day. This I did, much to Tucker’s regret.

The old fellow watched me climb into the dog-cart, and touched his straw hat in respectful silence. I knew how the poor old fellow hated his master to be absent.

Again in London, I waited in eager impatience until the nineteenth of the month, when I left Paddington for Totnes, in Devon. It was, I found, a quaint old town among green hills through which wound the picturesque Dart—a town with a long, steep high street, a city gateway, with shops built over the footpath, like those in the Borgo Largo in Pisa.

The Seymour Hotel, where I took up my quarters, was situated by the bridge, and faced the river—a well-known resort of anglers and summer tourists. But of such things as fishing or scenery I cared nothing on that well-remembered day—the day appointed for me to keep the strange tryst made by the man now dead.

The wording of Mr Arnold's injunction was "to be present at the railway station of Totnes at five o'clock." It did not mention the platform or the booking-office. Examination of the time-table showed that no train arrived at or left Totnes between the hours of four p.m., when the Plymouth train arrived, and the five-fifteen up-train to Exeter and Taunton. There were several expresses, of course, Totnes being on the Great Western main line between Plymouth and London.

By this fact it seemed that the mysterious man whom I was to meet would already be in Totnes, and would come to the station in order to meet me. All day, therefore, my eyes were open for sight of a man wearing a red tie or a carnation in his coat.

Mr Arnold had held suspicion that he might be watched. Why? What did he fear?

I was not to approach him unless he unbuttoned his gloves and removed them.

All that well-remembered day I idled by the cool rippling river, lingered by the rushing weir, watching the fishermen haul in their salmon-nets, and strolled about the quiet old-world streets of the rather sleepy place, eager for the arrival of five o'clock.

The station being some distance from the town, I walked down to it about half-past four. The afternoon was blazing-hot, and scarcely anyone was astir, even the dogs were asleep in the shadows, and the heat-slumber was over everything.

A hundred times had I tried to picture to myself what Mr Arthur Dawnay could be like. In the High Street, earlier in the day, I had seen a young man in tweed Norfolk jacket, obviously a tourist, wearing a red tie, but no carnation, and had followed him unnoticed to a house out on the outskirts of the town, where he was evidently lodging. Was his name Dawnay, I wondered! If he were actually the man whom I was to meet, then he certainly was a very prosaic looking person.

Still I possessed my soul in patience, and with the dead man's letter in my breast-pocket I walked through the booking-office and on to the platform.

Several persons were about—ordinary looking individuals, such as one sees every day at the station of a small provincial town—but there was no man wearing either a red cravat or a carnation.

I lit a cigarette and strolled up and down the platform where the booking-office was situated. The gate of the up-platform being kept locked, he would be compelled to pass through the booking-office.

Twice expresses with ocean mails from Plymouth to London roared through, and slowly the hands of the big clock approached the hour of five.

The appointment must have been made long ago by the man now dead —weeks ago, when he was still abroad; for the letter, I recollected, had been written on board the liner between Naples and London. But the principal point which puzzled me was the reason why the dead man's letter should be delivered in such secrecy.

A man with a red tie is very easily distinguishable, and I flatter myself that I possess a very keen eyesight; yet though minute after minute went by till it was already a quarter-past the hour, still no man answering the description given by the late Mr Arnold put in an appearance.

Presently, on the opposite platform, the express from Plymouth to Bristol came in; and suspecting that he might arrive by it, I dashed up the stairs, two steps at a time, and across the footbridge. When halfway down the stairs I halted, for I could see all over the up-platform.

Few passengers had alighted, but among them I instantly discerned a man wearing a cravat of scarlet satin. He was smartly dressed in a grey lounge-suit, and in his coat he wore a pink carnation. In his hand was an old-fashioned black ebony cane with silver knob.

He was standing looking up and down the platform, as though in search of somebody. Therefore I sped down the remaining stairs and quickly approached him, though I had not seen his face distinctly.

Suddenly, as I was within six yards of him, I recollected the dead man's written words, and halted short.

He was still wearing grey suède gloves. He had not removed them; therefore he was suspicious of being watched!

I lit another cigarette, and with careless air sauntered past him in order to gain a good view of his features.

He was, I saw, of middle height, and aged about fifty. His clean-shaven face, with heavy, square jaws, was pimply and rather bloated—a face which somehow filled me with repugnance, for it was the countenance of one who was a fast liver and who indulged a little too freely in alcohol. His grey suit, grey soft felt hat, and grey gloves gave to him a certain air of smartness and distinction; yet those small brown eyes, with a peculiar, indescribable expression searching up and down the platform, were the eyes of a man full of craft and double cunning.

From the first moment I turned my gaze upon him I held him in distinct suspicion; while he, it appeared, in turn held somebody else in suspicion. I looked around, but could not discern anybody who might arouse his misgivings. About us were all honest Devon folk.

The fact that he had not taken off his gloves still remained. My injunctions were not to approach him if he failed to remove them. He had the air of a *bon vivant*, even to the manner in which he tucked his ebony cane

beneath his arm in order to light a choice cigar.

Most of the passengers crossed the bridge on their way out, while others made their exit by the little wicket, some of them entering the dusty motor-'bus which plies to Paignton.

Once, only once, his small narrow brown eyes met mine, and I saw in them a look of quick inquiry and shrewd cunning.

Then, still wearing his gloves as sign to me to hold aloof, he leisurely crossed the bridge to the down-platform, and strolled along the hot, dusty road into the town.

As far as I could discern, nobody was watching his movements at all; nevertheless, I could only suppose that he had great cause for precaution, otherwise he would have allowed me to approach and speak to him.

True, there was a queer, insignificant-looking old lady in rusty black, who had been on the platform when I had arrived, who had crossed the bridge and waited for the train from Plymouth, and who was now making her way back into Totnes in the direction we were walking.

Could it be possible that he feared her?

It struck me that he might have recognised that I had travelled there to meet him in place of the man now deceased; therefore I hurried on and got in front so that he might, if he so wished, follow me to the Seymour Hotel.

But judge my chagrin when at last we entered the main street, and while I turned down towards the bridge, he turned in the opposite direction, thus showing that he had not detected my anxiety to speak with him. And the old lady had followed in his footsteps.

Suddenly a thought occurred to me. It was surely more than probable that Mr Dawnay was there to meet the man Arnold, in ignorance of his death. Therefore, having allowed him to get on some distance, I turned upon my heel and followed him.

His movements were certainly curious. He was undoubtedly avoiding the unwelcome attentions of the old lady, who now seemed to be acting in conjunction with a dark-haired, middle-aged man with beetling brows, who wore a shabby brown suit and a last year's straw hat.

The man with the red cravat entered an inn in Fore Street, and remained there a full hour, the other man watching in the vicinity. Then, on emerging, he went to a chemist's, and afterwards turned his footsteps back towards the station.

I saw that his intention was to leave Totnes. Therefore, in preference to following on foot, I drove to the station in a fly.

He had never once removed those grey suède gloves, though the day was so hot, for on the up-platform the man in the straw hat was still idling behind him. A number of people were waiting for the train, and I, discerning Mr Dawnay's intention of travelling, entered the booking-office and bought a ticket for Exeter.

At last the London express came roaring into the station, when the man whom I was there to meet quickly entered a first-class corridor compartment, and while I remained vigilant, I saw the mysterious watcher enter a carriage a little way behind. Then, just as the train was leaving, I sprang into the compartment next that of Mr Dawnay.

I allowed the train to travel for about ten minutes, and as we slowly ascended the steep incline to Stony Coombe, between Totnes and Newton Abbot, I passed along the corridor and entered the compartment of the fugitive.

His quick, wary eyes were upon me in an instant, and I saw him start visibly in alarm, as I shut the door behind me leading to the corridor.

"I believe," I exclaimed next moment, "that you are Mr Arthur Dawnay?"

In an instant—before, indeed, I was aware of it—I found myself looking down the big barrel of a heavy Browning pistol.

"Well?" asked the man with the red tie, without moving from his seat, yet covering me with his weapon. "And what if I am, eh?"

Upon his face was a hard, evil grin, and I saw that he certainly was not a man to be trifled with.

“You think you’ve cornered me this time, eh?” he said in a hard, dry voice. “But raise a finger, and, by Gad! I’ll put a bullet through you. So you’d best own yourself beaten, and let me slip out at Newton Abbot. Understand?”

Then, next moment, the train unfortunately entered the tunnel, and we were plunged in complete darkness.

Chapter Five.

The Sign of the Gloves.

Those moments of security seemed hours as I sat there with the pistol turned upon me.

Truly his was a strange greeting.

At length, however, daylight showed again as we commenced to descend the incline towards Newton Abbot, yet I saw that his hand—practised, no doubt, with a weapon by the manner he had whipped it forth—was still uplifted against me.

“Really, sir, you have no cause for alarm,” I assured him, with a laugh. “I could not approach; you openly, so I adopted the ruse of travelling with you in order to speak. You came to Totnes to-day in order to meet me, did you not?”

“No, I certainly did not,” he said, the expression upon his countenance showing him to be much puzzled by my words.

“Then perhaps you came to meet Mr Melvill Arnold?” I suggested.

“And why do you wish to know that, pray?” he asked, in the refined voice of a gentleman, still regarding me with antagonism. His small, closely set eyes peered forth at me with a ferret-like expression, while about his clean-shaven mouth was a curious hardness as his hand still held the weapon pointed in my direction.

“Because you are wearing the signs—the scarlet tie, the carnation, and I see that you carry the ebony walking-stick,” was my cool reply. I was trying to prevent myself from flinching before that grim, business-like weapon of his.

“And what if I am? What business is it of yours?” he asked resentfully, and in evident alarm.

“My business is with you if your name is Alfred Dawnay,” I said. “Mr Melvill Arnold is, I regret to say, dead, and—”

“Dead!” he gasped, lowering his weapon and staring at me, the colour dying from his face. “Arnold dead! Is this the truth—are you quite certain?”

“The unfortunate gentleman died in my presence.”

“Where? Abroad, I suppose?”

“No; in a small hotel off the Strand,” was my reply.

The news I had imparted to him seemed to hold him amazed and stupefied.

“Poor Arnold! Dead!” he repeated blankly to himself, sitting with both hands upon his knees—for he had flung the pistol upon the cushion. “Ah!” he exclaimed suddenly, raising his eyes to mine.

“Forgive me for receiving you in this antagonistic manner, sir, but—but you don’t know what Mr Arnold’s death means to me. It means everything to me—all that—” But his lips closed with a snap without concluding his sentence.

“A few moments before he died he gave me this letter, with instructions to meet you at Totnes to-day,” and I handed him the dead man’s missive.

Eagerly, with trembling fingers, he broke open the black seals; but the letter was in a second envelope, also carefully sealed with black wax. This he also tore open, and breathlessly read the closely scribbled lines which it contained—the message from the dead.

He bit his full red lips, his cheeks went ashen pale, and his nostrils dilated.

“I—I wish to thank you for carrying out Arnold’s injunctions,” he managed to gasp. “I went to Totnes for the purpose of meeting him, for he had made the appointment with me three months ago. Yet it seemed that he must have had some presentiment that he could not keep it himself, or he

would not have suggested me wearing a red tie, a carnation, and carrying this old-fashioned ebony stick which he gave me long ago."

Briefly I recounted my meeting with him when he came on board at Naples, his sudden illness, and its fatal termination in the Strand hotel.

"Ah, yes," sighed the man Dawnay—the man whom I was to help, but not to trust. "Poor Arnold was a great traveller—ever on the move; but for years he knew that he had a weak heart."

I was about to make further inquiry regarding the man who had so strangely left me a legacy, but Dawnay suddenly exclaimed—

"You and I must not be seen together, Mr Kemball—for I notice by this letter that that is your name."

"Where can I meet you again?" I inquired; for I recollected the dead man's words that my strange companion might be in sore need of a friend.

"I hardly know," was his hasty answer, as he replaced his pistol in his pocket. "I am closely watched. Probably you saw the man—a fellow in a straw hat."

"Yes—and the old woman."

"Ah! then you are observant, Mr Kemball," he exclaimed, with a slight grin. "Yes, I am in danger—grave danger at this moment; and how to escape I know not."

"Escape from what?"

"From arrest."

"Is that young-looking man a police-officer?" I asked, much surprised.

"Yes; he's older than he looks. I ought never to have dared to go to Totnes."

"Why not Totnes?" I asked.

“I was lying low—for a certain reason, Mr Kemball. All of us have to wash in dirty water sometimes, you know,” he smiled grimly. “You are an honest man, no doubt—I too was, once.”

“And now the police are in search of you—eh?”

I asked. So my estimate of the man was not very far wrong.

He nodded slowly in the affirmative.

A silence fell between us. This discovery, coupled with Arnold’s mysterious connection with the trial of the adventuress who called herself Lady Lettice Lancaster, caused me to ponder. Arnold had warned me not to trust him entirely.

The train was now rushing down the incline, and in a few moments would be at Newton Abbot, the junction for Torquay.

Without a word, my companion suddenly sprang to his feet, and taking a railway key from his pocket, went out into the corridor and locked both doors at either end of the carriage so that no one could pass along.

Then, returning to me, he said—

“Perhaps it would be better, Mr Kemball, if you went into the next compartment while we are stopping. We must not appear to have knowledge of each other.”

Scarcely had I time to enter the adjoining compartment when the train pulled up. I lit a cigarette, and sat gazing lazily out of the window, when, sure enough, the man in the straw hat who had travelled in the rear of the train strolled aimlessly along, and as he passed the compartment occupied by Dawnay glanced in to satisfy himself that he was still there.

The wait was long, for the corridor coaches from Torquay for London were being joined on. But at last we moved off again, and as soon as we did so I returned to the mysterious fugitive.

“Tell me, Mr Dawnay, something concerning Mr Arnold,” I urged earnestly, without preamble. “He did me the honour of entrusting me with certain

purely personal matters, but gave me no information as to who or what he was."

"Melvill Arnold was a most remarkable person," declared the man in the red tie. "He divided his time between life in London and exploring the remains of the extinct civilisation in Egypt."

"Then he lived in Egypt?"

"Mostly in the deserts. His knowledge of Egyptology was, perhaps, unequalled. The last letter I received from him was from El Fasher, in Darfur."

"Arnold was not his real name?"

"Not exactly his baptismal one," laughed Dawnay, lightly. "It would hardly have suited him to use that!"

"What was it? Is there any reason why I should not know?"

"Yes. I am scarcely likely to betray my dead friend, Mr Kemball."

I was silent beneath his stern rebuke. At one moment I felt repulsion when I gazed upon his pimply face, yet at the next I experienced a curious sense of fascination. The mystery of it all had become most tantalising. Thought of the bronze cylinder and what it might contain flashed across my mind, whereupon I asked whether Arnold had had any permanent address in London.

"No. I usually wrote to him to the Poste Restante at Charing Cross. He was an elusive man always, and when in London—which was on very rare occasions—seemed to change his abode each day. He boasted that he never slept two nights running in the same bed. He had reasons for that—the same reasons, truth to tell, that I had."

"He feared the police—eh?"

Dawnay's fat face relaxed again into a grim smile. "But now that Arnold is dead I have to secure my own safety," he exclaimed quickly. "I'm in an infernal trap here in this train. I may be arrested when I step out of it—

who knows?”

“And would arrest entail serious consequences?” I asked slowly, my eyes fixed upon his.

“Yes, very serious consequences. For myself I don’t care very much, but for another—a woman—it would, alas! be fatal,” he added hoarsely.

A woman! Did he refer to that remarkable adventuress, details of whose strange career I had read in that old copy of the newspaper?

I remembered that Arnold, in his letter to me, had appealed to me to assist this man—who was evidently his very intimate friend.

“You must evade this person who is watching,” I said. “How can it be done?”

He shrugged his shoulders with an expression indicative of bewilderment.

A sudden thought occurred to me.

“You and I are about the same build. Could we not exchange clothes?” I suggested. “At Exeter, you could walk up to the front of the train and escape away, and out of the station, while I will still sit here, my back turned towards the window. The detective will believe you to be still in the train.”

“Capital?” he cried, starting up. “A splendid plan, Mr Kemball! By Jove! you are resourceful!” And he began quickly divesting himself of coat and trousers. “This train is express to Exeter, therefore we shall not stop at either Teignmouth or Dawlish.” I threw off my coat, vest, cravat, and trousers, and in five minutes had exchanged my garments for his, and had assumed the scarlet tie in place of my own, while he, on his part, got into my suit, which, however, seemed slightly tight for him. He laughed heartily as we stood regarding each other so quickly transformed.

I assumed the grey suède gloves, slightly large for me, tilted the smart grey hat a little over my eyes, and then ensconced myself against the corridor, so that my back only could be visible when the train drew up at St. David’s Station in Exeter.

Dawnay went out into the corridor to observe the effect critically.

“Capital!” he cried. “Capital! Won’t the fellow be done in the eye!”

“Yes,” I laughed; “it will be really amusing to watch his face when he comes to arrest me.”

“But he may not come until you get to Paddington—after midnight. And what excuse shall you make for changing clothes with me?”

“Oh, don’t bother about that,” I said, rather enjoying the prospect of a joke, but little dreaming of the serious predicament in which I was placing myself. “Where shall I meet you again?”

“Ah! Be careful—be very careful, Mr Kemball. You will no doubt be watched. They will suspect you of an intention to meet me again in secret, and for that reason will keep strict surveillance upon you. Use the name Hamilton Davis, and write to me at the Poste Restante at Charing Cross. That is as safe as anywhere. I shall be in London; but I must be off now, and the moment the train stops I shall be out and away. There’s sure to be a crowd upon Exeter platform. Ah! You can’t tell what a great service you have rendered me in assuming my identity this evening—you have saved me. Good-bye—and a thousand thanks.”

Then, with a wave of his hand and a merry smile, the elusive person—for such he no doubt was—went forth into the corridor and disappeared.

I took up my previous position, so that when the train ran into Exeter I was seated with my back to the window, one leg upon the cushion, lazily reading a newspaper which I had found in Dawnay’s pocket.

Much bustle was going on outside on the platform, and I knew that the police-officer had passed in order to reassure himself that I had not escaped. For perhaps ten minutes I sat there in lazy indolence, until at last the train moved off again, and once more I was free from observation.

I could not for the life of me discern why the man had feared to be seen in my company. Arnold must have somehow foreseen that his friend would be watched, and had therefore prearranged the sign of the gloves.

Perhaps he had expected that another enemy, not the police, would be watching. Yet even there, in the train, Dawnay had expressed fear lest we be observed together. It was a point the full meaning of which I failed to grasp.

At Taunton we stopped again, and I assumed my attitude just as before, with my back to the window, when of a sudden the carriage door was flung open unceremoniously, and a man's voice exclaimed—

"Alfred Dawnay, I am a police-officer and I hold a warrant for your arrest!"

I roused myself slowly and, facing the man who had addressed me, remarked in a cool voice—

"I think you've made a slight mistake—eh? My name is not Dawnay."

The man in the straw hat uttered an ejaculation of surprise and stood staring at me dumbfounded, while a man at his side, evidently one of the Taunton police in plain clothes, looked at us both in wonder.

"If you are not Dawnay, then where is Dawnay?" demanded the detective quickly.

"How do I know?"

"But you are wearing his clothes! You assisted him to escape, therefore you will have to make some explanation."

"I have no explanation to offer," I said. "If you want Dawnay you'd better go and look for him. You have no warrant to arrest me merely because I happen to be wearing clothes resembling Dawnay's."

"Perhaps not, my dear sir," replied the detective, greatly annoyed at being thus outwitted. "But I tell you it will be better for you to be quite frank and outspoken with us. When did Dawnay leave this train—tell me?"

"I don't know," I replied, which was really the truth. And the chagrin of the two police-officers was now fully apparent.

"But you've rendered yourself liable to prosecution, don't forget that," said

the man with the straw hat. “That man, Alfred Dawnay, *alias* Day, is wanted on a very serious charge.”

“Of what?” I asked quickly.

“Never mind what. You’ve assisted him to escape, and you’ll have to answer for it.”

And he closed the door angrily, for the train was again about to move off towards London.

What, I wondered, was the serious charge against Alfred Dawnay?

Chapter Six.

The Quick and the Dead.

On my return to London I had the very unpleasant experience of being closely watched by detectives, just as the fugitive had foreseen. It was quite evident that the police intended to rediscover Dawnay through my instrumentality.

I wrote to “Mr Hamilton Davis,” at the Poste Restante, Charing Cross, giving him my London address at the Hotel Cecil, and also my address at Upton End, hoping that he would send me an appointment. Yet he had shown himself so wary that I hardly believed he would at once reveal his hiding-place. I was extremely anxious to meet him again, for I hoped to learn more from him and solve the mystery of the man whom I had known as Melvill Arnold.

In order to evade the unwelcome attentions of detectives, I went down to Upton End for a few days, for I knew that if any stranger were lurking in the vicinity old Tucker would certainly know of it. Not three days had I been there, indeed, before one morning he lingered over watering the plants in the conservatory when I came down to breakfast, to declare that he was much puzzled over the fact that a man—“a decent-looking man” he described him—seemed to be for ever passing and repassing the lodge.

“I can’t think, sir, what can be his business,” he said. “I don’t like the looks of him at all. Maybe he’s one of a gang who intends to rob the house, sir. Therefore I’ve told Thomas and Mason to keep their eyes open.” He referred to the groom and the under-gardener. “I’ve half a mind to set the dogs on ’im,” he added. “Only let ’im come into the drive and I’d let Prince after ’im. His whole suit of clothes wouldn’t be worth sixpence afterwards.”

“Some inquisitive fellow, I suppose, Tucker,” I said, in an endeavour to treat the incident with utter unconcern. “I don’t fancy burglars would come here.”

“Don’t you believe it, sir. There’s lots of things—pictures and curios which your father, the late Sir Lionel, collected—which would fetch a big price in London, you know, sir.”

“Well,” I laughed, “if burglars really do pay us a visit, Prince will see to them. I’d be sorry to face the dog if I were a thief.”

“So would I, sir. Only there’s such a thing as a dose o’ strychnine on a bit o’ meat, you know.”

“Abroad, yes. In Italy it is the favourite ruse of burglars, Tucker. But here in England we are much more secure.”

And then, watering-can in hand, the faithful old fellow passed out, while I sat down to my lonely breakfast.

A week after I had written to the Charing Cross Post Office I received a note, dated from the Hôtel de la Boule d’Or at Provins, a small town some sixty miles east of Paris.

“I am delighted to have your address,” it read. “At the present moment my movements are very uncertain, but as soon as I can see you again I will write to Upton End. Be careful, however, that when you meet me you are not watched. I fear you may be troubled by unwelcome watchers. If you are, pray forgive me, and recollect how grateful I am to you for the service which you have rendered me, and which one day I hope to repay.”

That was all. There was no signature.

And so I was compelled to wait for a further communication from the man who was undoubtedly in hiding in that obscure old town in the valley of the Voulzie.

Time after time I took out that corroded cylinder—wherein was something which the dead man had declared would cause the whole world to stand aghast—and held it in my hand full of wonder. Upon the table, in the big old-fashioned library, stood the weird little figure of the ancient god of the Egyptians—the great Osiris. Sight of it, each time that I entered there, recalled to me that sunset hour in the little hotel off the Strand, the hour

when Melvill Arnold had passed silently to the Beyond.

Three weeks went by in eager expectancy. By careful inquiry and judicious watchfulness, I came to the conclusion that the surveillance set upon me by Scotland Yard had been withdrawn. Hence it seemed to me that they had found traces of the fugitive they sought. Probably, if he were a known criminal, his presence in France had been reported through the Prefecture of Police in Paris. It was part of the international police system to do so.

Was Alfred Dawnay again in peril of arrest, I wondered?

One morning, however, I received the long-expected message, for among my letters I found a note asking me to be alone outside Lathbury—a small hamlet a little way out of Newport Pagnell, on the Northampton Road—at three o'clock that afternoon. The heavy handwriting was the same as the letter from Provins, and I knew it to be from Dawnay.

Therefore, with considerable eagerness, I set out about two o'clock to walk to the place appointed for meeting. I passed up the long street of Newport Pagnell, but nobody followed me. It was early-closing day, and the place was sleepy and deserted. Out again upon the dusty high road I met nobody save a middle-aged man on a motor-cycle, who dashed past me at a tearing pace, and who, as later on I approached the inn at Lathbury, had pulled up to make some repair.

Suddenly I regarded him with suspicion. Was it possible that he was following me to watch my movements?

As I went by he looked up, full into my face, and then I felt certain that I had seen him somewhere before. But where I could not recollect.

I had half a mind to turn back and thus throw him off the scent if he were a detective; nevertheless, compelled as I was to act warily, I strolled on through the village, and out upon the open road, up the hill in the direction of Gaythurst.

I glanced at my watch and found it already a quarter-past three. But nobody was yet in sight. Probably Dawnay was standing concealed somewhere behind the hedge in order to satisfy himself that the coast

was quite clear before approaching me.

Behind, at some distance away, I heard the hum of an approaching motor-car, and, stepping to the side of the road, prepared to be suffocated by the thick white dust.

The car swung through the village and rushed up the hill, but as it came behind me slowed down, until it passed me at quite a slow pace. Then I saw it was a powerful limousine, painted and upholstered in stone-grey, and within sat a woman alone.

A few yards in front of me it stopped dead, and the woman leaned out of the door, when, to my utter amazement, I recognised her to be the same pretty young girl whom I had seen in Highgate Cemetery—the mysterious person who had so tenderly placed fresh flowers upon the grave of Melvill Arnold.

“Excuse me!” she exclaimed, addressing me in a musical voice, as she opened the door. “I believe you are Mr Kemball, are you not?”

“That certainly is my name,” I said, raising my straw hat instinctively.

“Well, I—I’ve come here to meet you,” she laughed merrily. “Would you come inside, and then I can tell you all.”

So at her invitation I got in beside her, when the ear moved off swiftly again, and next moment we were swinging along towards Northampton, the driver evidently having already received his instructions.

“I suppose I ought to explain, Mr Kemball, that Mr Harvey Shaw, the gentleman known to you as Dawnay, deemed it wiser not to come and meet you in person, because—well—” and she laughed sweetly, displaying even rows of pearly teeth. “I think you probably realise the reason.”

“Fully,” I answered, quite taken aback by the ruddiness of her appearance. “But I had suspicion as I came along of a motor-cyclist who stopped before the inn. He is a man I have seen somewhere before.”

“Oh, he is a friend. He is there as scout for us,” she said. “He has been

watching you, and has signalled that all is clear, and so we may proceed without fear. Mr Shaw has asked me to take you to him."

"Where is he?"

"At Rockingham, beyond Kettering," was her reply, and as she turned her splendid brown eyes upon me, I judged her to be about nineteen or twenty, and saw that hers was a face more perfect in its beauty than ever I had before gazed upon. Her sombre black heightened the pallor of her complexion, yet her lips were full and red, her soft cheeks dimpled and perfect in their contour, while her large splendid eyes revealed an inexpressible sweetness and charm. From the first moment I realised that she was full of good-humour, with a bright, cheerful disposition, and yet quiet of manner and full of exquisite refinement. The expression in her great wide-open eyes was perhaps just a trifle too shrewd, and she seemed, as I began to chat with her, possessed of a ready wit and a quaint philosophy.

Of her wondrous and striking beauty there could be no two opinions. She was perfect, from the crown of her neat little straw motor-bonnet to the top of her brown glacé shoe. Her hands were small and well-gloved, and her pointed chin gave to her sweet delicate face an air of piquant irresponsibility that added greatly to her attractiveness.

Between the smart chauffeur and ourselves the window was closed; therefore we could converse without being overheard.

"Mr Shaw told me how generously you assisted him when you met at Totnes," she exclaimed at last. "Ah, Mr Kemball!" she added, suddenly growing very serious, "you cannot tell how great a service you rendered us then."

"Us?" I echoed. "Then I presume you are a relation?"

"His daughter," she replied, "or, to be quite correct, his adopted daughter. My name is Asta—Asta Seymour. So perhaps I may be permitted to thank you, Mr Kemball, for the generous assistance you gave in securing my foster-father's escape."

"No thanks are needed, Miss Seymour, I assure you," I declared. "But tell

me, why is he in dread of the police?”

“Of that you will learn soon enough, I fear,” she replied in a hard, changed voice, which had a distant touch of sadness in it.

“Yes. But is there not a grave danger in returning to England?”

“He was compelled to do so—first in order to meet you at Totnes, and now for a second reason, in connection with the unfortunate death of poor Mr Melvill Arnold.”

“You, of course, knew Mr Arnold,” I said. “It is your hand that has placed those fresh flowers upon his grave.”

She was silent. Then in a low voice she said—

“I admit that I have done so, for he was always my friend—always. But please say nothing to my father regarding what I have done.”

“To me a great mystery enshrouds Mr Arnold,” I said. “Cannot you tell me something concerning him—who and what he was? By my very slight knowledge of him, I feel instinctively that he was no ordinary person.”

“And your estimate was surely a perfectly correct one, Mr Kemball. He was one of the most remarkable of men.”

“You knew of his death. How?”

“I knew he was in London, for he scribbled me a note telling me his address, but requesting me to reveal it to nobody, not even my father,” she said, in a low, hoarse voice. “I called to see him upon some urgent business—because he wished to see me, but, alas! they told me at the hotel that he had died only a few hours before. So I went away, fearing to reveal myself to you, who they told me was his friend. Two days later I made inquiries, and learned where they had buried him. Then, in tribute to the memory of the man of whose greatness of heart and remarkable attainments the world has remained in ignorance, I laid flowers upon his grave.”

“Why did you fear to reveal yourself to me, Miss Seymour?” I asked

earnestly, looking straight into her soft brown eyes as the car rushed along.

But she avoided my gaze, while a flush overspreading her cheeks betrayed her embarrassment.

“Because—well, because I did not know how far you might be trusted,” was her frank, open response, after a moment’s hesitation. “Indeed, I do not even now know whether you would still remain our friend and preserve the secret if the ugly truth became revealed to you!”

Chapter Seven.

Dawnay Makes Confession.

Her curious reply greatly puzzled me. What could be “the ugly truth” to which she had referred?

At her side I sat in silence for some time. The car was tearing along a wide straight main road between dusty hedges and many telegraph wires, and as I glanced at her I saw that she was staring straight before her fixedly, with a strange hard look upon her beautiful countenance.

Perhaps I might have been mistaken, but at my mention of the dead man I felt certain that I saw in her eyes the light of unshed tears.

Through the busy town of Northampton we went, and out again on the road to lettering—a road I knew well, having motored over it many times. In the centre of the latter town we turned sharply to the left, and, taking the Oakham Road, soon passed through the village of Great Oakley, and suddenly descending a very steep hill, on the summit, of which a castle was perched, we found ourselves in the wide straggling main street of Rockingham village.

My fair companion spoke but little. She seemed suddenly to have become strangely preoccupied. Indeed, it struck me as though she had been seized by some sudden apprehension, by a thought which had crossed her mind for the first time. Her manner had completely changed.

“Your father has been away in France since I met him?” I remarked, for want of something else to say.

“Yes,” she responded; “he has been moving rapidly from place to place for reasons to which I need not refer.”

“But why has he returned if there is still danger?” I queried.

“I scarcely think there is further danger—at least at present,” she answered. I was puzzled at her reply, but not for long, as I will relate.

The car slipped through Rockingham, and when about two miles farther on swung abruptly through a handsome pair of lodge-gates and into a broad, well-timbered park, at last pulled up before a long, old-fashioned Jacobean mansion which commanded from its grey stone terrace fine views of the green undulating hills and rich pastures around. The old ivy-clad place, with its pointed gables and mullioned windows, was a good type of the stately English home, and as the car drew up at the porch the great door was flung open by a neat man-servant, who bowed low as we entered the fine hall, where the stone slabs were, I noticed, worn hollow by the tread of generations.

The place was built in a quadrangle, two-storeyed, with handsome heraldic devices in the stained windows. There seemed to be roomy corridors, leading by stout oak doors to roomier apartments within, some oak-panelled, others with moulded ceilings and carved stone fireplaces. The whole place had a cloak and rapier look about it, built probably when the old Cavalier was poor and soured and had sheathed his sword, but nevertheless was counting the months when the King should come to his own again.

I followed Asta Seymour along the hall, and turning into a corridor on the left, suddenly found myself in a pleasant sitting-room wherein the man I knew as Dawnay stood, his hands behind his back, awaiting me.

As we entered she closed the door behind us. The room bore an old-world air, with chintz-covered furniture and filled with the perfume of pot-pourri.

“At last, Mr Kemball! At last?” cried the fugitive, crossing quickly to me and taking my hand in warm welcome. “So Asta found you all right, eh?”

“Her appearance was certainly a surprise,” I said. “I expected you to meet me yourself.”

“Well,” he laughed, his small narrow-set eyes filled with a merry twinkle. “It would hardly have been a judicious proceeding. So I sent Asta, to whom, I may as well tell you, I entrust all matters of strictest confidence. But sit down, Mr Kemball. Give me your hat and stick.”

And he drew forward for me a comfortable chair, while the girl, excusing

herself, left us alone.

When she had gone, my friend looked me in the face, and burst out laughing, exclaiming—

“I suppose, Mr Kemball, this is rather a surprise to you to find that Harvey Shaw, the occupier of Lydford Hall, and Alfred Dawnay are one and the same person, eh?”

“It is,” I admitted. “I have passed the edge of your park many times in my car, but I never dreamed that you lived here.”

“Well,” he said, “I rely upon your secrecy. You were extremely good to me the other day, so I see no reason why I should not be just a little frank with you.”

“Your affairs are, of course, no business of mine,” I declared. “But whatever you may reveal to me I shall certainly treat with the strictest confidence.”

“Ah! I feel sure that you will. Melvill Arnold would never have taken you into his confidence if he had not been certain that he could trust you. He was one of the very shrewdest men in all England, or he would not have been so enormously successful.”

From the long windows, with their small leaded panes, I could see from where I sat far away across the park with its fine beech avenue. Over the wide fireplace were carved many heraldic devices in stone, while against the dark oak-panelling the bright chintzes showed clean and fresh. Taste was displayed everywhere—the taste of a refined man.

Mr Shaw, as he was apparently known there, was dressed very different from the occasion when we had met at Totnes. Then he had assumed the appearance of a racing man, but in his guise of country gentleman he was dressed in morning-coat of a rather old-fashioned cut, and pepper-and-salt trousers, an attire which gave him a quiet and somewhat distinguished appearance.

I sat before him, wondering at his remarkable dual personality—the man hunted by the police, and the wealthy occupier of that fine country

mansion.

His small, shrewd eyes seemed to realise the trend of my thoughts as he lounged back in his chair near the window, regarding me lazily.

“I promised, Mr Kemball, that I would see you again as soon as opportunity offered,” he said; “and feeling assured of the spirit of good fellowship existing between us, I have this afternoon let you into the secret of my double life. That evening at Exeter I had a very narrow squeak of it—by Gad! one of the narrowest in all my life. An enemy—one whom I had believed to be my friend—gave me completely away. The police evidently expected to find me through you, for you were watched constantly. Everywhere you went you were followed.”

“You know that?”

“I do,” he said. “The fact is I have a personal guardian who constantly watches over me, and warns me of danger. You saw him on his cycle at Lathbury. He watched you while I was absent in France shaking off those bloodhounds of the law.”

“And you have now shaken them off, I presume?”

“I think so. Scotland Yard has, happily, never yet associated Harvey Shaw, Justice of the Peace for the County of Rutland, and one of the visiting justices of Oakham Gaol, with Alfred Dawnay, alias Day, whom they are so very eager to arrest,” and he laughed grimly. “Mine is an amusing situation, I assure you, to sit on the Bench and try prisoners, well knowing that each police-officer who appears as witness would, if he knew, be only too eager to execute the warrant outstanding.”

And his broad, good-humoured face again expanded into a smile.

“Certainly. I quite see the grim humour of the situation,” I said.

“And if you had not assisted me, Mr Kemball, I should, at this moment, have been under detention in His Majesty’s prison at Brixton,” he said. “By the way, I have to return the suit of clothes you so very kindly lent to me. My man has them upstairs ready packed. I shall send them to you by parcel-post. Gates was, I think, rather surprised to find another man’s

clothes among my kit. But fortunately he's used to my idiosyncrasies, and regards them as mere eccentricities on the part of his master. But he is always discreet. He's been with me these ten years."

"How long have you lived here, Mr—er—"

"Shaw here," he interrupted quickly.

"Mr Shaw. How long have you lived here? I thought the place belonged to Lord Wyville?"

"So it does—at least to the late lord's executors. I've rented it for the past three years. So in the county I'm highly respectable, and I believe highly respected."

"The situation is unusual—to say the least," I declared.

"Perhaps I'm a rather unusual man, Mr Kemball," he said, rising and crossing the room. I saw that in his dark green cravat he wore a fine diamond, and that his manner and bearing were those of a well-born country gentleman. Truly, he was an unusual person.

"I hope," he went on, halting suddenly before me, "that as you have associated yourself with my very dear and intimate friend, Melvill Arnold, you will now become my friend also. It is for that reason I venture to approach you as I have done to-day."

"Well," I said, my natural sense of caution exerting itself as I recollected the dead man's written injunction, "I must admit, Mr Shaw, that I am sorely puzzled to fathom the mystery of the situation. Ever since my meeting with poor Mr Arnold I seem to have been living in a perfect maze of inexplicable circumstances."

"I have no doubt. But all will be explained in due course. Did Arnold make no explanation?"

"None. Indeed, in his letter to me, which I opened after his burial, he admitted to me that he was not what he had pretended to be."

"Few of us are, I fear," he laughed. "We are all more or less hypocrites

and humbugs. To-day, in this age of criminality and self-advertisement, the art of evading exposure is the art of industry. Alas! the copy-book proverb that honesty is the best policy seems no longer true. To be dishonest is to get rich quick; to remain honest is to face the Official Receiver in the Bankruptcy Court. A dishonest man amasses money and becomes great and honoured owing to the effort of his press agent. The honest man struggles against the trickery of the unscrupulous, and sooner or later goes to the wall."

"What you say is, I fear, too true," I sighed. "Would that it were untrue. Virtue has very little reward in these days of unscrupulous dealing in every walk of life, from the palace to the slum."

"Then I take it that you do not hold in contempt a man who, in dealing with the world, has used his opponents' own weapons?" he asked.

"How can I? In a duel the same weapons must be used."

"Exactly, Mr Kemball, we are now beginning to understand each other, and—"

At that moment the door opened without warning, and Asta re-entered. She had changed her frock, and was wearing a pretty muslin blouse and skirt of dove-grey.

"Shall you have tea in here, Dad—or out on the lawn?" she inquired.

"Oh, on the lawn, I think, dear. I just want to finish my chat with Mr Kemball—if you don't mind."

"I'm awfully sorry I intruded," she laughed. "I thought you'd finished." And with a sweet smile to me she closed the door and again left us.

How very dainty she looked; how exquisite was her figure! Surely her grace was perfect.

"Really," my companion said, "I don't know what I'd do without Asta. She's all I have in the world, and she's a perfect marvel of discretion and diplomacy."

“She’s indeed very charming,” I said, perfectly frankly.

“I’m glad you find her so. She has plenty of admirers, I can assure you. And I fear they are spoiling her. But as I was saying, Mr Kemball,” he went on, “I hope we now understand each other perfectly. Poor Arnold was such a dear and intimate friend of mine, and we were equally interested in so many financial schemes that it has puzzled me greatly that he should have sought an obscure burial as he has done, and that his affairs are not in the hands of some responsible lawyer. Did he mention anything to you concerning the terms of his will?”

“He never breathed a word regarding it. Indeed, I have no idea whether he had made one.”

“Ah!” sighed my companion; “so like poor Arnold. He always was fond of postponing till to-morrow what could be done to-day. His will—if he made one—would be interesting, no doubt, for his estate must be pretty considerable. He was a wealthy man.”

I recollected the incident of the burning of the banknotes, and that set me pondering.

“Do you anticipate that he made a will?” I asked. “I think not,” was Shaw’s answer. “He had a strong aversion to making a will, I know, because he feared that after his death the truth might be revealed.”

“The truth concerning what?”

“Concerning a certain chapter of his life which for years had been very carefully hidden. The fact is, Mr Kemball, that he feared exposure!”

“Of what?”

“Of some rather ugly facts. And for that reason he carefully avoided making much explanation to you as to who he really was. He had reasons—very strong reasons—for concealing his actual identity.”

“May I not know them?” I asked very slowly, fixing my eyes upon his.

“Some day,” was the rather strained reply. “Not now—some day—some

day. I hope to be in a position to explain all to you—to reveal to you certain matters which will hold you utterly dumbfounded and amazed.”

Chapter Eight.

The Story of the Cylinder.

I was taking tea beneath the trees with my host and Asta, when there approached a tall, dark-haired athletic young fellow in grey flannels and straw hat. He was smiling merrily, and the sudden light in the girl's eyes when she saw him was sufficient to reveal to me that they were intimate friends.

They grasped hands, while Shaw exclaimed in his slow deliberate drawl —

"Hulloa, Guy! I thought you had gone up to town?"

"No. I had a wire which put off my appointment until Thursday, so I've come over for a cup of tea." Then she introduced the young fellow to me as Guy Nicholson.

He seated himself in one of the long cane deckchairs, and as Asta handed him some tea the pair began to chat about a tennis tournament which was to be held at a neighbouring house. Presently he turned to me, and we had a long conversation. He had the distinct bearing of a gentleman, smart, spruce, and upright, his handsome smiling face bronzed by the sun, while he seemed brimming over with good-humour.

From the first I instinctively liked him. Shaw explained that the young fellow was a near neighbour, whose father, an ironmaster in the North, had died a couple of years ago, leaving him a handsome fortune.

"He's always about with Asta," he added confidently in a low voice. "And I have suspicion that she has grown very fond of him."

As I glanced across at the pair I saw how well suited they were to each other. She looked the personification of all that is lovely. Her cool muslin blouse and grey skirt fell to her young form prettily; her dark wavy hair shadowed the great brown eyes now that she had removed her motor-bonnet, making them seem to hold in their depths a vague knowledge

that should never come to the ken of man, save perhaps at that moment when love would drag from them their slumbering secrets.

But that was only one of Asta's moods, and almost before I had taken notice of it she was laughing merrily with her companion as she handed him the cake.

I saw that her eyes did not flinch from the steady gaze of those others, but I knew that there was a certain quick thumping beneath the pretty blouse that made her realise she was not quite so adamant as she had believed.

She believed that her secret was her own. It did not matter about her heart. No one could see, and so no one knew.

When we had finished tea the pair rose and strolled away together through the rosery, towards the flower-garden ablaze with bright blossoms. And as they passed beneath the arches of crimson ramblers and were lost to sight, my host exclaimed, with a sigh and a sad smile—

"Ah! How delightful it would be to find oneself young again—young again like you, Mr Kemball!"

I laughed, and we lit cigarettes and began to chat. I confess that the mystery surrounding this man who had so openly admitted to me that he was an adventurer as well as a county magistrate greatly attracted me. I found myself fascinated by the whole unusual circumstances. One curious fact I had noted was that while Asta was aware of Arnold's death she had never told the man whom she knew as father. What motive had she in concealing the truth? Again, it seemed very evident that the young man Nicholson little dreamed that Mr Harvey Shaw was anything else than the wealthy idler which he pretended to be. And surely Asta had not undeceived him.

As together we strolled about the beautiful well-kept grounds, and as he showed me his motor garage, wherein stood four cars of various types, his electric lighting plant and electric pumps for the water supply, I tried to obtain from him some further information regarding the man Arnold.

But to all my ingenious inquiries he remained dumb.

Therefore I turned my attention to Asta, and discovered that he had adopted her when she was left alone a little child of eight.

“My life, Mr Kemball, has been very full of change and variety. Sometimes for months I have been compelled to live in strict seclusion—sometimes in places hardly civilised. I spent a year in the mountains of Northern Albania, for instance, living with one of the mountain tribes; and on another occasion necessity compelled me to live for eight months in an obscure village in Corfu. But through it all little Asta has been my companion—ah, yes!—and how often she has cheered my lonely, solitary life!”

I saw that, whatever might be this man’s character, he was devoted to her. While she, on her part, had shown herself to be ever watchful of his interests.

“Then she really is quite a cosmopolitan!” I exclaimed.

“Certainly. She speaks three languages perfectly. Few girls of her age have, like her, seen life in all its various phases, from that of the peasant hut to life here in an English home. But,” he added, “when Arnold spoke to you in confidence did he tell you nothing?”

“Of what?” I asked.

“Nothing concerning his past?”

“Nothing.”

“He did not mention me—eh?” asked my companion.

“Only to urge me to carry that letter to you at Totnes.”

“And he gave you nothing else? I understood you to say that he treated you with a certain amount of confidence,” and he looked me narrowly in the face.

“He gave me two objects,” I replied. “A small golden figure of the Egyptian god Osiris—a very ancient relic—and a curious and much corroded cylinder of bronze.”

“Great Heavens! The bronze cylinder!” he gasped, starting and standing before me open-mouthed. His face was blanched at mention of it.

“Yes.”

“He gave you that, eh?” he cried in distinct alarm. “And you accepted the trust—you were fool enough to do that?”

“Of course I did. Why?”

“Ah! You would not have done so had you but known the terrible evil which must now threaten you,” he said in a low, hoarse voice, his manner changing to one of great alarm. He seemed agitated and nervous.

“I don’t quite follow you,” I said, much puzzled at his manner.

“You are, of course, in ignorance, Mr Kemball. But by the acceptance of that executorship—by the holding in your possession of that cylinder you are a doomed man.”

“Doomed? How?” I asked, with an incredulous smile.

“I tell you this quite openly and frankly, because you have already proved yourself my friend,” he said, his face now entirely transformed. We were standing together at the edge of the square croquet lawn, once the bowling-green, where the great old box-trees were clipped into fantastic shapes, while at the end was the long stone terrace with the open park beyond.

“I think you told me that he made you a present in banknotes?” Shaw went on. “Ah! Melvill Arnold knew only too well what dire unhappiness and misfortune, what deadly peril, possession of that cylinder must entail. He therefore made you that payment by way of a little recompense. Did he instruct you what to do with the thing,” he inquired.

“On a certain day I am to hand it over to a person who will come to me and ask for it.”

“To hand it over without question?”

“Yes, without question.”

Shaw was silent for some moments. His brows were knit, and he was thinking deeply, his arms folded as he stood.

“Well,” he exclaimed suddenly, at last, “I never dreamed that he had entrusted the cylinder to you. You, of course, still hold it in your possession?”

“Yes.”

“Then, if I were you, I should be very anxious for the arrival of the appointed day when you are to be relieved of its heavy responsibility. The history of that metal tube is a record of ruin, disaster, and death, for misfortune in one form or another always overtakes its possessor. Its story is surely the weirdest and most terrible that could be related. I knew that Arnold was in Egypt, but I never dreamed that he would dare at last to take the cylinder from its hiding-place and convey it here—to England!”

I recollected how my friend had just before his death declared that its contents would amaze the world, and I made quick inquiry concerning it.

“What it contains I do not know,” he replied. “Only Arnold himself knows, and he has unfortunately carried his secret to the grave. It was found, I believe, in the tomb of King Merenptah, the Pharaoh under whom the exodus of the Israelites took place some twelve hundred years before the Christian era. Arnold himself discovered it at Abydos, but on opening it, dreaded to allow the thing to see the light of day, and in order to preserve its influence from mankind, he again buried it in a certain spot known only to himself; but, no doubt, somewhere near the great Temple of Amon-Ra, at Karnak.”

“Why did he wish to preserve his discovery from mankind?” I asked, much interested.

“How can I tell? After his discovery he returned post-haste to England, an entirely changed man. He would never reveal to me, his most intimate friend, what the cylinder actually contained, save that he admitted to me that he held it in awe—and that if he allowed it to go forth to the world it would have caused the greatest sensation in our modern civilisation, that

the world would stand still in amazement."

"What could he have meant by that?"

"Ah!" replied my companion, "I cannot tell. All I know is, that together with the cylinder he discovered some ancient papyri recounting the terrible fate which would befall its possessors, and warning any one against handling, possessing, or opening it."

"A favourite method of the ancients to prevent the rifling of their tombs," I remarked with a laugh.

"But in this case Arnold, who was a great archaeologist, and could decipher the hieroglyphics no doubt, investigated the weird contents of the cylinder and satisfied himself that they were such that no mortal eye should gaze upon without bewilderment. Those were the very words he used in describing them to me."

"And did anything terrible happen to him as a result?" I asked.

"From the moment of that investigation misfortune dogged his footsteps always. His friends died one by one, and he himself was smitten by that infection of the heart, which, as you know, has terminated fatally."

"How long ago is it since he made this discovery in King Merenptah's tomb?" I asked.

"About four years," was Shaw's reply, and I saw that he was trembling with excitement. "And from that day until the day of his death poor Melvill Arnold was, alas! never the same man. What he found within the Thing, as he used to call it, made such a terrible impression upon him that he, bold and fearless and defiant as he used to be, became suddenly weak, timid, and nervous, lest the secret contained in the cylinder should be revealed. That message of the hieroglyphics, whatever it was, haunted him night and day, and he often declared to me that, in consequence of his foolish disobedience of the injunction contained in the papyri, he had become a doomed man,—doomed, Mr Kemball!" he added, in a low, strange voice, looking straight and earnestly into my lace—"doomed, as I fear, alas! that you too are now doomed!"

Chapter Nine.

Reveals Guy's Suspicions.

All endeavour to discover from Shaw something further concerning the mysterious cylinder proved unavailing. Apparently he was entirely in ignorance of its actual contents—of the Thing referred to by the man now dead.

Later I had an opportunity of chatting with Guy Nicholson as we strolled about the beautiful gardens in the sunset. He was a bright, merry, easy-going fellow, who had been a year or two in a cavalry regiment, had retired on the death of his father, and who now expressed an ambition for foreign travel. He lived at Titmarsh Court, between Rockingham and Corby, he explained, and he invited me over to see him.

Long ago, I had heard of old Nathaniel Nicholson, the great Sheffield ironmaster, who had purchased the place from a bankrupt peer, and who had spent many thousands on improvements. My father had known him but slightly, for they met in the hunting-field, and now I was much gratified to know his son.

From the first I took to him greatly, and we mutually expressed friendship towards each other. We were both bachelors, and I saw that we had many tastes in common. His airy carelessness of manner and his overflowing good-humour attracted me, while it was plain that he was the devoted slave of the pretty Asta.

Wheaton, the butler, a grey-faced, grey-haired, and rather superior person, called Shaw in to speak on the telephone, and I was left alone with Nicholson on the terrace.

"Have you known Asta long?" he asked me suddenly.

My reply was a little evasive, for I could not well see the motive of his question—if he were not jealous of her.

"I understand from Shaw that you have known him quite a long time, eh?"

“Oh yes,” I replied lamely. “We’ve been acquainted for some little time.”

Nicholson looked me straight in the face with his deep-set eyes unusually serious. Then, after a pause, he said—

“Look here, Kemball, you and I are going to be friends as our fathers were. I want to speak very frankly with you.”

“Well?” I asked, a trifle surprised at his sudden change of manner.

“I want to ask you a plain honest question. What is your opinion of Harvey Shaw?”

“My opinion,” I echoed. “Well, I hardly know. He’s rather a good fellow, I think, as far as I know. Generous, happy—”

“Oh yes, keeps a good cellar, is hospitable, very loyal to his friends, and all that,” he interrupted. “But—but what I want you to tell me is, what you really think of him. Is his rather austere exterior only a mask?”

“I don’t quite follow your meaning,” was my reply.

“May I speak to you in entire confidence?”

“You certainly may. I shall not abuse it.”

“Well, for some time I have wanted to discuss Shaw with somebody who knows him, but I have had no opportunity. Because he gives money freely in the district, supports everything, and never questions a tradesman’s bill, he is naturally highly popular. Nobody will say a word against him. Harvey Shaw can do no wrong. But it is the same everywhere in a rural district. Money alone buys popularity and a good name.”

“Why should any word be said against him?”

I queried. “Is he not your friend, as well as mine?”

“Granted, but—well, he has been here several years, and I have known Asta all the time. Indeed, I confess I am very fond of her. But were it not

for her I would never darken his doors."

"Why?" I asked, much surprised.

"Well," he said with hesitation, lowering his voice. "Because there's something wrong about him."

"Something wrong? What do you mean?"

"What I allege. I take a great interest in physiognomy, and the face of Harvey Shaw is the face of a worker of evil."

"Then you have suspicion of him, eh? Of what?"

"I hardly know. But I tell you this perfectly openly and frankly. I do not like those covert glances which he sometimes gives Asta. They are glances of hatred."

"My dear fellow," I laughed. "You must really be mistaken in this. He is entirely devoted to her. He has told me so."

"Ah, yes! He is for ever making protestations of parental love, I know, but his face betrays the fact that his words do not come from his heart. He hates her?"

"Why should he? She has, I believe, been his companion for years, ever since her childhood."

"I know. You are Shaw's friend, and, of course, pooh-pooh any suspicion there may be against him. Asta is devoted to his interests, and hence blind to the bitter hatred which he is so cleverly concealing."

"But what causes you to suspect this?" I asked, looking at him very seriously, as he stood leaning upon the old lichen-covered wall, his dark thoughtful face turned towards the setting sun.

"Well, I have more than suspicion, Kemball. I have proof."

"Of what?"

“Of what I allege,” he cried, in a low, confidential tone. “This man Shaw is not the calm, generous, easy-going man he affects to be.”

I was silent. What could he know? Surely Asta had not betrayed her foster-father! Of that I felt confident.

“But you say you have proof. What is the nature of the proof?”

“It is undeniable. This man, under whose guardianship Asta has remained all these years, has changed towards her. There’s evil in his heart.”

“Then you fear that—well, that something may happen, eh?—that he might treat her unkindly. Surely he is not cruel to her!”

“Cruel? Oh dear, no, not in the least. He is most indulgent and charming always. That is why she believes in him.”

“But you say that you have actual proof that he is not the generous man he pretends to be.”

“Yes, I have. My suspicions were aroused about two months ago, for behind his calm exterior he seemed ever nervous and anxious about something, as though he were concealing some great secret.”

I held my breath. What could he know?

“Well?” I asked, with an effort to restrain my own anxiety.

“I watched, and my suspicions were more than ever confirmed. His frequent and mysterious absences had long ago puzzled me, more especially when Asta refused to give me any reason for them. Sometimes for months at a time she has been left in this big place alone, with only the servants. Why did he disappear and reappear so suddenly? Then two months ago—I tell you this, of course, in the strictest confidence—I was going home on my motor-cycle from Corby station one dark wet night, when I overtook a poor miserable-looking man, ill-clad, and drenched to the skin. I wished him good-night, and in his response I was startled to recognise the voice of Harvey Shaw. So presently I dismounted to repair my machine, so that he might again approach. But

he held back, yet near enough for me to recognise his features as I turned my acetylene lamp back along the road. Next day I made casual inquiry of Asta as to his whereabouts, but she told me he was in Paris on business, and he certainly did not return here until a fortnight afterwards."

"Well, and what do you make out from that incident?" I asked.

"That he visited the place in secret that night, though Asta believed him to be on the Continent."

"But the disguise?"

"Ah! there you are! Surely a gentleman doesn't go about in shabby clothes and trudge miles through the mud and rain without some sinister motive. The express from London had stopped at Corby twenty minutes before, therefore I concluded that he had arrived by that, and was making his way to pay a secret visit."

"Are you quite sure that Asta was in ignorance of it?"

"Quite confident."

"You told her nothing?"

"Of course not. I have kept my own counsel and remained with my eyes very wide-open. Every day has rendered it more plain that our friend is not what he pretends to be."

The situation was, I saw, a most critical one. The young man loved Asta very devotedly, and, suspecting some undefined evil of Shaw, was now watching his movements as narrowly as a cat watches a mouse. This was curious, having regard to Arnold's written words of caution. The latter's suspicion seemed to have been aroused after his arrival in London.

"Have you mentioned this to anybody?" I asked him.

"Not to a soul."

"Then if I may be permitted to advise," I said, "I should say no word to

anybody—not even to Miss Seymour. I will assist you, and we will continue to watch and act together."

"Good!" he cried. "Your hand upon it, Kemball." And we grasped hands.

"I somehow fear that something will happen to Asta," he said in a low hoarse voice. "I may be foolish and unjust in my suspicions, yet I seem to have a distinct presage of evil."

"Personally, I don't think you need have any uneasiness upon that score," I said. "Miss Seymour is his sole companion—probably his confidante—for he has but few friends."

"Exactly. But perhaps she knows just a little too much, eh?"

I had not looked at the matter in that light. My companion's discovery was certainly one that must cause anybody to pause and think, but suspicion of Shaw's hatred of Asta was, I felt, too absurd. But when a man is in love he is very prone to jump to hasty conclusions.

"Well," I said, "now that you have been frank with me so far, and have taken me into your confidence, Nicholson, will you not tell me what you really do suspect?"

"You are Shaw's friend. Perhaps I ought not to have spoken as I have," he said.

"I am no more his friend than you are," I replied, recollecting Arnold's warning regarding the Hand—whatever that might be. "Have I not agreed with you that the circumstances are suspicious, and have I not promised to help you to watch? What actual conclusions have you formed?"

"H-s-s-h!" he said, and next moment I heard a light footstep behind me, and turning, found myself face to face again with Asta.

"They're worrying Dad on the telephone from London," she exclaimed, laughing merrily. "He gets so out of patience with it. But really it is awfully trying sometimes. They ring you up and then keep you half an hour waiting."

“I know,” laughed Guy. “My own experience is exactly the same. Why, only the other day I wanted to ring you up, and it took nearly half an hour.”

As she stood there with the sunlight full upon her face she looked inexpressibly dainty and charming. Truly Guy Nicholson was a lucky man. They were not actually engaged, it seemed, for he had not yet asked Shaw for her hand. Probably Guy hesitated because of the dark suspicion which had entered his mind.

I saw the love-light in her magnificent brown eyes, she stood laughing with him, while he took from his case a cigarette, tapped its end lightly, as is the habit of some men, and lit it.

A few moments later Shaw joined us, smiling merrily, and as he came up he clapped Guy on the back heartily, saying—

“You two fellows will stay and have dinner, won’t you? I’m glad you are friends, as you ought to be.”

“I really think I must go,” I said. “It will take me hours to get home by train.”

“Train! Why, Gray will drive you back, of course,” he cried. “No, never mind about dressing. Asta will excuse us, and you’ll stay.”

So, having glanced at each other meaningly, we both accepted, and very soon were seated in the long handsome dining-room, where the table, laden with splendid old silver, was decorated tastefully with roses.

Wheaton served us with due stateliness, yet as I sat watching his grey clean-shaven face, I felt somehow that there was a strange mysterious craftiness in its expression, unusual in the countenance of a gentleman’s servant. The manner in which he performed his service was, however, perfect. More than once, during the merry meal, I glanced across at Guy Nicholson, and wondered what were his thoughts.

Fortunately he betrayed nothing in his face, for he joked and laughed with his host, and praised the excellent claret which Wheaton had served with such dignity.

The girl had eyes only for her lover, while Shaw himself, seated at the head of the table, was full of fun and overflowing geniality. How very strange was the situation!

After dinner we took our coffee and liqueurs on the verandah, for the night was breathless and balmy, and the air full of the sweet scent of the flowers.

Then after a long gossip alone with Shaw, at half-past ten the car was ordered for me and came round to the front entrance.

Before leaving I managed to obtain a word alone with Nicholson.

“You’ll come over and see me,” I asked. “Now, don’t disappoint me, will you?”

“No, I won’t.” Then he whispered quickly: “I told you that I had certain proofs. I’ve been upstairs. When I come I will show them to you. They will astound you, and they are fully corroborated by what I have noticed to-night. Perhaps it escaped you. Beware of Wheaton. He’s only been here six months, but I know something—have *seen* something?”

And we shook hands and parted.

Chapter Ten.

The Evil of the Ten Plagues.

In the days that followed I was intensely anxious to visit Lydford Hall again, but I had received a warning note from Shaw, urging me not to do so without taking every precaution. I might be followed, for the danger of detection was not yet at an end.

Therefore I remained in eager expectancy of Guy's visit. He had vaguely promised to come over "in a day or two." But as a week passed and I heard nothing from him, I wrote, and by return of post received a reply that he would motor over and lunch with me on Sunday.

"I have something of greatest importance to tell you," his letter concluded; "so I hope you can make it convenient to be in on that day."

I received the letter on Thursday morning, and at once replied that I would be at home. I would await his visit with keenest impatience.

The warm breathless days at Upton End passed but slowly. Truth to tell, I found life there extremely dull. I had many friends in the neighbourhood, but they were mostly elderly persons, or angular girls of superior education. I had little in common with them, and already found myself longing to travel again.

More than once when smoking my lonely cigar before going to bed, I had taken out the mysterious cylinder from the big safe built in the wall of the library and held it in my hand pondering. What could be the Thing it contained—the thing which would amaze the world!

The weird story told to me by Shaw concerning it haunted me; yet what evil could its possession bring upon me? I had heard, of course, of authenticated stories of certain Egyptian mummies which have brought disaster and death to those who disturbed their long sleep; yet in my case I had become the unwilling agent of another.

On the night of receiving Nicholson's letter, after every one had retired, I

was sitting as usual smoking, with the long window open to the verandah, for the air was close and oppressive. Outside the night was glorious, the moon shone brightly, and not a breath of wind stirred.

I opened the steel door in the wall by the fireplace, and from the safe took out the dead man's letter to me with the heavy cylinder. It was a curious fancy of mine to handle and examine it.

I read and re-read that letter traced by the hand of the man whom I had known as Arnold, but whose real name seemed most probably to have been Edgcumbe. Then I read that strange letter threatening vengeance, and held in my hand the old copy of the newspaper which told the curious story of Lady Lettice Lancaster.

It was all mysterious, but surely most mysterious of all was that bronze cylinder. Why should the dead man have feared to expose its contents to the world?

Civilisation would be staggered by the revelation, it was declared. What terrible secret of ages past could be therein contained? Why had the dead man called it a Thing? Was it really some living thing imprisoned in that strong unbreakable casing?

I carried it across to the green-shaded lamp upon my writing-table, and taking up a strong magnifying glass examined it closely, and at last determined that the welding by which it had been closed had been done ages ago. As far as I could detect it had never been opened. How, therefore, could Arnold have known what it contained?—unless the papyri that had been discovered with it had given an explanation.

Suddenly it occurred to me that the existence of any papyri of great interest would probably be known in the Egyptian Department of the British Museum. Therefore by inquiry there I might perhaps learn something. So I resolved, after Guy's visit, to run up to London and see one of the officials. As Arnold was an Egyptologist, he would, no doubt, be known and his discoveries noted.

I was holding the cylinder in my hand, carrying it across the room to replace it in the safe, when my eye caught a dark shadow thrown across the lawn. So quickly, however, did it disappear that I stood half inclined to

believe it to exist only in my imagination. It seemed to be a long shadow, as though some person had crossed in the moonlight the high bank on the opposite side. Yet my collie, who would bark at the slightest sound in the night, lay near and uttered neither bark nor growl. I went out to the verandah and looked about me; but all was perfectly still. The world lay asleep beneath the great full moon.

For a few moments I stood puzzled. No intruder should be there at that hour. Yet the fact that Prince had not been disturbed reassured me, so I closed the window, locked the cylinder and the correspondence carefully in the safe, and then went upstairs to bed.

My room was directly over the library, and something prompted me to watch. So I extinguished my light and sat peering through the chink between the blind and the window-sash. For nearly half an hour I waited, my eyes fixed upon the great wide, moonlit lawn.

Suddenly I saw the shadow again, plainly and distinctly—the dark silhouette passed bade again.

It was probably a poacher from the wood beyond. I knew that my rabbits were being trapped with wires; therefore resolving to tell Johnson, the keeper, in the morning, I retired to bed.

Next day, among my letters, I found one from my solicitors, which made it necessary for me to go at once to London; and after doing my business in Bedford Row, I strolled along to the British Museum.

I had but little difficulty in discovering Professor Stewart, whose knowledge of Egyptology is probably the widest of any living man.

Without telling him too many details, I related the story I had heard of the finding of a bronze cylinder in the tomb of King Merenptah, and that certain papyri were discovered with it. Could he give me any information upon the subject.

“Well—a little,” replied the tall, grey-bearded, bald-headed man, looking at me through his spectacles with great deliberation. “It is true, I believe, that an interesting cylinder of metal was found in the tomb of Merenptah, coeval with Moses, and with it were some fragments of papyri fairly well-

preserved, but on examination they were found not to be of the nineteenth dynasty, as would have been expected."

"Who examined them?" I asked eagerly.

"I did myself, about two years ago, if I recollect aright," replied the Professor. "They were brought to me one day for my opinion by a man whose name I now forget. He was elderly, grey-bearded, and apparently possessed considerable knowledge of Egyptian subjects. He left them with me, so that I might decipher them, as he wished to compare his own decipher with mine. But, curiously enough, I have never seen him since. The papyri I have still locked away, awaiting his return."

"Then they are here?" I cried eagerly.

"Certainly. Would you like to see them?"

I replied eagerly in the affirmative, and he left me for some minutes, returning with a big cardboard portfolio, which he opened, showing half a dozen pieces of brown crumbling paper-like substance covered with puzzling hieroglyphics. With them were several sheets of blue foolscap, upon which he had written his translation.

"Here is what the record contains," he said.

"Perhaps, if you are interested in such matters, you would like to read it. It is a curious piece of literature of apparently the Pharaonic dynasty of the Ptolemies—or 323-30 B.C., which ended with Cleopatra."

I took the folios of modern paper in my hand and from them read as follows, written in the Professor's own crabbed writing:—

"...For of a Verity death, sickness, and sorrow, who knoweth which, may fall upon thee. Therefore, beware of the wrath of Ra, beware lest this cylinder of bronze be opened and its secret be revealed to men, for therein lieth the Thing that shall not speak until the Day of Awakening.

"For:

"He that seeketh knowledge of that which is hidden is accursed of Amon

with the ten plagues and doeth so at his own risk, and must meet his fate being cursed of the wolf-god Osiris, ruler of the underworld. Truly, cutting off the head of, or the forsaking life is better than the satisfaction of curiosity of what is therein contained.

“Touch not the cylinder with thine hand, for if...

“Let it remain here in the tomb of the Great Merenptah, King of Kings, Lord... wherein it has been placed to slumber until released by Osiris, to whom all kings and princes bow the knee and to whom...

“Observe, He is all-glorious, on whose pleasure fortune waiteth, in whose valour victory, and in whose anger death.

“Since:

”...a gem be tied at the feet and a piece of glass be worn upon the head, yet still glass is glass, and gems are gems.

“It is said:

“Wisdom is of more consequence than strength. The want of it is a state of misery. And as in the night darkness is kept at a distance by the lord of shades (the moon) thus love by seeing and being seen delights the young. The woman...

“Again:

“Women are never to be rendered faithful and obedient; no, not by gifts, nor by honours, nor by sincerity, nor by services, nor by severity, nor by precept!... What women eat is twofold; their cunning fourfold; their perseverance sixfold; their passions eightfold; and their patience tenfold. Wherefore the understanding which upon unexpected occurrences remaineth unaffected, may pass through the greatest difficulties. He who hath sense and worshippeth the Sun-God hath strength. Where hath he strength who wanteth judgment? Where hath...

“To the unkind the ruin of the worthy bringeth delight, and...

“It is not proper to be alarmed at a mere sound when the cause of that

sound is unknown.

“For:

“Upon the great river the city of Thebes there was in the days of Sekhomab a city where... called Aa-tenen, the inhabitants of which used to believe that a certain giant crocodile, whom they called Nefer-biu, infested the waters. The fact was this: a thief, as he was swimming away with a bell he had stolen, was overcome and devoured by a crocodile, and the bell, falling from his hand, was washed upon the river-bank there and picked up by some apes, who every now and then used to ring it in the trees by the river... The people of the town, finding a man had been killed there, and hearing continually the noise of the bell, used to declare that the giant Nefer-biu, being enraged, was devouring a man and ringing a bell, so that the city was abandoned by all the principal inhabitants.

“And so...

“At length, guided by the god Horus... of Stars of Sopdu, a certain poor woman, having considered the subject, discovered that the bell was rung by the apes. She accordingly went unto King Sekhomab, loved of Ra, favourite of Mentu, and before the priests of Amon, and said: ‘If, O King. Lord of both Lands, I may expect a very great reward, I will engage to silence this Nefer-biu.’ The King was exceedingly well pleased, and gave her some silver. So having described some circles and exhibited the worship of strange gods in a conspicuous manner, she secretly provided such fruits as she conceived the apes were fond of and went unto the river; where, strewing them about, they presently quitted the bell and attached themselves to the fruit. The poor woman, in the meantime, took away the bell and carried it into Sekhomab, who honoured her and gave her great reward. And in the city of Aa-tenen she became an object of adoration to its inhabitants, and her cartouche was inscribed upon the Temple of Amon-Ra... and of the Sun-God...

“Wherefore I say that it is not proper to be alarmed at a mere sound when the cause of that sound is unknown.

“And wherefore, I repeat that, for fear of great disaster to thyself, let not thine hand touch this brazen cylinder which containeth the Thing which

shall remain imprisoned therein in the realms of Tuat (the underworld) until released by Osiris on the Day of Awakening... this 25th of the month Tybi.

“Be ye therefore warned, for by disobedience assuredly the anger of the Sun-God and of Osiris the Eternal will fall heavily upon thee. And Harnekht shall smite them.

“May disaster happen but in the house of thine enemies. May traitors, day by day, be led by Time to their destruction, and may they remain for ever in Amentet, the place of gloom...”

“Curious,” I said, looking up to the Professor’s grave bearded face as he peered over to me through his glasses.

“Yes. The fable is very interesting. I have not yet decided the actual date of the papyri. But it is certainly much later than King Merenptah,” he said. “We have many cartouches of his time here in the Museum, and there are many others about Europe, as St. Petersburg and Darmstadt. But in certain ways the hieroglyphics are different. Hence I am of opinion that the bronze cylinder referred to—if it has been found and still exists—was placed with these papyri in the tomb at a much later date.”

“You have no knowledge of the person who brought this to you?” I asked.

“Only that his name was Arnold—I see that I made a note at the time—and that he was staying at the Savoy Hotel.”

“Strange that he did not return to claim his find.”

“Very. My own idea is that he may have been called abroad suddenly, and will return one day. He seemed extremely intelligent.”

“And the cylinder. What do you think it could have contained—what is the Thing to which the papyri refers!”

The old professor shrugged his shoulders.

“How can we tell if the cylinder is non-existent? Probably it was rifled from the royal tomb a thousand years ago and broken open by

sacrilegious persons who were unable to decipher these writings, and who cared nothing for the curse of the ten plagues placed upon them," he laughed.

Then Mr Arnold had evidently not revealed to the Professor the existence of the cylinder. Why? Because he had already again hidden it in fear.

"We have many records of objects concealed, but most of the things referred to in the papyri have disappeared ages ago," added the great Egyptologist, who, taking me along the gallery, showed me the mummy of the great Pharaoh Merenptah himself, in whose tomb the fragments of papyri were found.

The Professor was extremely kind, and lent me his decipher to copy them. After finding that I could obtain nothing further concerning the man Arnold, and that he was not known as an Egyptologist, I thanked him and left without telling him of the existence of the cylinder.

That same night, I returned to Upton End with intention to show Guy Nicholson the curious record when he visited me on Sunday.

Next morning—which was Saturday—I opened my newspaper, which, as usual, I found on the library table after breakfast, when my eyes fell upon a heading which caused my heart to stand still.

The printed words danced before my bewildered eyes. For a second I stood like a mail in a dream. I held my breath and eagerly read the half a dozen lines of brief announcement—a report which caused me to clap my hand to my fevered brow, and to involuntarily ejaculate the words—

"My God! It can't be true—*it can't be true*!"

Chapter Eleven.

A Sensation in the County.

The paragraph I read was truly a startling one, brief, but amazing.

Apparently few details had arrived in London, for it read thus—

“Mr Guy Nicholson, son of the late Mr Nathaniel Nicholson, the well-known ironmaster of Sheffield, and for twenty-five years Member for South Cheshire, was yesterday morning found dead under somewhat remarkable circumstances. It appears that he entertained some guests at dinner at his house, Titmarsh Court, near Corby, Northamptonshire, and the last of his friends to depart left about midnight. About two o’clock in the morning a friend who was staying in the house, and whose room was directly over the library, was awakened by a man’s piercing shrieks, as though of horror. He listened, and heard a loud thumping sound below. Then all was quiet. It being the first time he had been a guest there, he did not alarm the household, but after lying awake for over an hour dropped off to sleep again. In the morning, however, the maid who went to clean the library found the door locked on the outside, as usual, but, on entering, was horrified to discover her master lying upon the carpet, he had been dead some hours. Considerable mystery attaches to the affair, which has created a great sensation in the neighbourhood, where the young man was well-known and highly popular.”

What could actually have happened!

I read and re-read that paragraph. Then I rang up Stokes, my chauffeur, on the telephone, and we were soon tearing along the Northampton Road.

Within a couple of hours we turned into the big lodge-gates of Titmarsh Court, which I found was a fine old place, upon which huge sums must have been spent by Guy’s father in the way of improvements. It was a splendid specimen of the old, moated manor-house, situated in well-timbered grounds and approached by a long shady avenue of chestnuts, which met overhead.

A young man-servant opened the door, and was inclined to be uncommunicative, until suddenly I caught sight of Shaw's grey car standing against the garage, and inquired for him.

In a few moments he came forward, sedate and grave, and somewhat surprised, I think, at my presence there.

"This is really a most terrible thing, my dear Kemball," he exclaimed, his face pale. "I only knew of it late last night. The police and doctors seem to have kept the affair secret as long as they could."

"I saw it in the paper, and came over at once," I said. "What is your opinion?" I asked eagerly. "Is foul play suspected?"

"I really don't know," was his vague answer, as he stood in the wide, old-fashioned hall. "It's a terrible thing, however. Poor Asta! she is overcome with grief, poor girl."

"Ah yes?" I sighed. "She was very fond of him; I realised that the other day."

Together we walked into a handsomely furnished sitting-room—the morning-room I supposed it to be—and there I was introduced to a fussy elderly man in tweeds named Redwood, the local doctor from Corby. He was a bluff, red-faced, clean-shaven man, a good type of the fox-hunting doctor of the grass-country.

"Well, Mr Shaw," he exclaimed briskly, "Doctor Petherbridge, from Northampton, and myself have made a post-mortem, and we have come to the conclusion that death was due to natural causes—inflammation of the brain. We have made most minute examination, but can discover no trace whatever of foul play."

"Nor of suicide—by poison, for instance?" asked Shaw, leaning with his back against the table, while the sun shone brightly across the pale blue carpet.

"Certainly not. We have had that in mind, but fail to find any trace whatsoever, though Petherbridge is taking the contents of the stomach into. Northampton for analysis, in order to thoroughly satisfy ourselves.

Our conclusions are, however, that probably while seated in his armchair in the library reading his paper, as was his habit before going to bed, he was suddenly attacked, shrieked with pain, and quickly collapsed. Such fatal seizures are by no means uncommon."

"But, doctor, the papers say that a noise of hammering was heard," I remarked.

"Captain Cardew, who heard the shriek, is not actually certain about the hammering, it seems," replied Shaw. "The poor fellow was in the best of spirits and quite well when Asta and I left him about a quarter-past eleven. We dined here with some people named Sweetman, the Vanes from Oundle, and Mr Justice Michelmore, who is staying with them. The judge was talking with him on the steps when we left."

"Nobody who partook of the dinner felt any unusual symptoms, or one might suspect ptomaine poisoning," remarked the doctor from Northampton, a short, grey-headed little man, who had at that moment entered the room. "My distinct opinion is that, though the affair appears most mysterious, yet it is due to perfectly natural causes."

"And I suppose that is the evidence you will give before the Coroner to-morrow, eh?" Shaw asked.

"Precisely. I shall have a searching analysis of the stomach, of course. Indeed, I'm just off to Northampton for that purpose. But I do not anticipate finding anything. Young Nicholson was not the kind of fellow to take his own life."

"No," I said; "he certainly did not strike me as having any tendencies towards suicide. Yet, from what the papers say, the affair is most mysterious."

"Oh, the papers!" laughed Shaw, derisively. "They're always sensational. A good story means hundreds of pounds to them. But," he added, "I must be off, Kemball. I was just going when you came. I have to be on the Bench this morning at twelve."

"Please express my most sincere condolence with Miss Seymour," I said. "You and I will meet again soon, no doubt."

“My dear fellow, just come over whenever you like. Better ring me on the ’phone to see if we are at home, for we’re often out in the car this fine weather.”

And, taking my hand, the man who in his dual life was a county magistrate, and was about to sit and administer justice from the Bench, gripped my hand and went out, followed by the Northampton doctor, who a moment later I saw with two large glass jam-jars in his hand. Yet almost directly after I heard a low, peculiar whistle emanating from an adjoining room. Shaw was whistling to himself—even though the house was a house of mourning!

Left alone with Doctor Redwood I began to question him, explaining that I was a friend of the man now dead.

“Well,” he said, “I can’t tell you very much, Mr Kemball. Captain Cardew, who was Nicholson’s guest, is in the library. At least I left him there a little time ago; let’s go and find him.”

So he conducted me along a well-carpeted corridor where the doors, I noticed, were of polished mahogany, and opening one, I found myself in a long, low, old-fashioned room, lined with brown-backed books from the floor to the panelled ceiling. At the table a tall, fair-haired, military-looking young man was seated writing letters.

I introduced myself, whereupon he rose, and expressed his readiness to answer any questions, as I was poor Guy’s friend, the doctor, having some matters to attend to with his colleague, leaving us alone. When he had gone I closed the door. Then, turning to the dead man’s guest, I said in a low voice—“I wonder, Captain Cardew, if I might speak to you in absolute confidence?”

“Certainly,” he said; “we are mutual friends of poor Guy’s.”

“Well,” I exclaimed; “first, will you tell me, frankly, your private opinion of this terrible affair? Has there been foul play?”

I saw that he hesitated.

“Well,” he replied, “there are certain curious circumstances which no

doubt point to such a conclusion, although I understand that the doctors have had no hesitation in pronouncing death to be due to natural causes."

"Would you mind describing to me, as far as you are able, what you heard in the night?" I said. "I have a reason for asking this. No doubt you have already several times told your story."

"Yes. To the medical men and also to the police," he said. "Well, it was like this. I'm quartered at Canterbury, and Guy, who was in my regiment and retired a year or so ago, asked me to spend a few days with him. I came here three days ago and found him in the highest of spirits, and very keen about tennis. He took me over to see a man named Shaw, and his daughter, of whom he was, I know, very fond. The night before last he gave a little dinner to a few people, and Shaw and the girl were here. After dinner we all went out on to the lawn for coffee. The place was hung with Chinese lanterns and looked charming, but all Guy's attention was devoted towards entertaining Shaw's daughter. I saw them cross the lawn in the moonlight and stroll into the grounds together; and when they came back I overheard Shaw expressing his annoyance to her at her absence. Shaw chatted with Justice Michelmore a good deal, while I had a Mrs Vane, a rather stout person, put upon me for the evening. I tell you I envied Guy, for the girl is really delightful."

"Was there any bridge?"

"Yes, for about an hour in the drawing-room. Shaw and the Judge did not play. Before eleven the guests began to depart, and the Vanes, the last to leave, went about midnight. After they had gone I sat in the library with Guy for half an hour, and had a cigar. He was full of Asta Seymour, and when I asked him why he did not propose to her he reflected a moment, and then told me, in strict confidence, that he would do so at once—but for a certain circumstance."

"Did he explain that circumstance?" I asked eagerly.

"No. I pressed him, but he refused to tell me. 'It is my secret, Teddy,' he said. 'A secret which, alas! bars my happiness for ever.' As we smoked, I noticed that, contrary to the rule, the long window yonder was open, and

remarked upon it. He rose, and saying that the servant had probably forgotten it, closed it himself and barred the shutters. You'll see they are strong shutters, and they were found in the morning closed and barred just as he had left them. Indeed, I unbarred them myself."

"Then you left him here?" I asked.

"No. He turned off the light and came out with me, locking the door after him, for it seems he's always careful to have every door on the ground floor locked at night. He came upstairs with me, wished me a cheery good-night outside my own door, and, promising to motor me into Oakham on the morrow, went along to his room. That is the last time he was seen alive."

"What did you next hear?"

"I was awakened by a loud, piercing shriek—a man's shriek of intense horror, it seemed. No one else slept in this wing of the house, or they must certainly have heard it. I roused myself at the unusual sound, for I was thoroughly startled and awakened by it. The clock on my mantelshelf struck two. I waited for some minutes, when I heard a noise which seemed to be below in the library, as though some one were moving about trying the door and hammering upon it. This caused me to wonder, and I held my breath to listen further. I suppose I must have lain like that for fully an hour. It was my intention if I heard anything further to go along to Guy's room. I had, of course, some hesitation in arousing the household. But as I heard nothing further, I suppose I fell asleep, for the sun was shining when I awoke again. I got up, and was crossing to the window to look out when I heard a woman's cry for help. So I rushed out in my pyjamas, and, descending the stairs, found poor Guy lying just here," and he crossed to a spot about four yards from the door, and pointed to the red carpet.

"Was the room in any disorder?" I asked.

"Not as far as I could see. The shutters yonder were closed and barred, so I opened them and then tried to rouse my friend. But, alas! I saw by the ashen look upon his face that he was already dead. He was still in his dinner-jacket—just as I had left him. Of course you can well imagine the

scene and the horror of the servants. Poor Guy—he was one of the very best."

"What is your theory, Captain Cardew?"

"Theory! Well, I hardly know. I was a fool, and I shall never forgive myself for not raising an alarm when I first heard his shriek. I ought to have known that something was wrong. But there are moments in one's life when one, being awakened suddenly, acts foolishly. It was so with me."

Chapter Twelve.

The Cry in the Night.

“After leaving you at the door of your room he must have returned to the library,” I said to Cardew. “Were all the lights out when he came up with you?”

“By Jove! No, they were not,” he replied. “He didn’t turn out the light in the passage here just outside the library door. I have not remembered that point until this moment!”

“Did you see any newspaper about?”

“Yes, there was one lying near that armchair over there,” and he pointed to a big saddle-bag chair in dark green plush, where a large embroidered cushion of pale violet velvet lay crushed and crumpled, just as the unfortunate man had arisen from it.

“Then it is probable that after leaving you he made up his mind to return to the library and read his paper as usual,” I said. “He did so, and, lighting up again, flung himself into his favourite chair to read.”

“And while reading, he had the fatal seizure—eh? That, at least, is the theory of the police,” the Captain said.

“But you say that the housemaid, when she came to clean the room, found the door locked from the outside?” I remarked. The reason I cannot tell, but somehow, while we had been speaking, I thought I had detected a curious mysterious evasiveness in the Captain’s manner. Was he telling all he knew?

“Yes,” he said. “It was undoubtedly locked from the outside—a most mysterious fact.”

“Why mysterious?” I queried. “If Nicholson wished to commit suicide in mysterious circumstances, he could easily have arranged that he should be found behind locked doors. He had only to pass out by the door, lock

it, and re-enter by the library window again, and bar that. I noticed as I came in that there is a spring-lock on the front door—so that it locks itself when closed!"

"Ah! I had not thought of that," the Captain declared. "Of course, by such proceeding he would have been found locked in."

"But you have suspicion of foul play," I said; "you may as well admit that, Captain Cardew."

"Well, I see no good in concealing it," he said, with a smile. "To tell the truth now, after well weighing the facts for more than twenty-four hours, I have, I admit, come to a rather different conclusion to that of the medical men."

"And I agree with you," I declared. "One point we have to consider is what occupied poor Guy from the time when he left you until two o'clock. He would not take an hour and a half to read a newspaper."

"No, but he might have been reading something else. He was not writing letters, for the same thought occurred to me, and I searched for any letters he might have written, but I could find none."

"The question arises whether he returned to the library in order to meet somebody there in secret," I exclaimed. "They may have passed in by the window to meet him, and afterwards out by the door, and eventually by the front door."

His round face, with the slight fair moustache, instantly changed.

"By Jove! I've never thought of that!" he gasped. "Then your theory is that from half-past twelve till two he was not alone, eh? What causes you to suspect that he did not die of natural causes, Mr Kemball? I've been quite frank with you; will you not be equally straightforward with me?"

"Well, I have strong reasons for believing that it was to the interest of certain persons that he should die suddenly," I said; "that's all."

"Will you not name the persons?" he asked.

“Not until I obtain proof. I may be mistaken. I may be grossly misjudging perfectly innocent persons, therefore I make no specific charge against anybody,” was my calm reply, as I stood gazing around the large sombre old room, whence a beautiful view of the long avenue and the park was spread. It was a quiet, silent, restful apartment, in which the previous owner—a great politician and writer—had spent many studious hours.

“But if you entertain any well-founded suspicions, ought you not to put them to the police?”

“And allow the local constables to bungle a very difficult and delicate inquiry! Scarcely, I think,” I replied, with a smile, still looking about me, and wondering what had really happened in that long, old-world room during the silent watches of that fatal night.

“Nothing has been touched here,” Cardew remarked. “I picked up the newspaper, but everything is left just as I found it when I rushed down at hearing the housemaid’s horrified cry.”

The room was certainly in no disorder. On the big square table, covered by a green plush cloth, were a number of new books, and in the centre a great silver bowl filled with roses. The writing-table—an old-fashioned mahogany one—was, I noticed, littered with letters, bills, and receipts, the neglected correspondence of a careless man, and as I stood there I noted that the great easy-chair wherein he had sat was placed exactly opposite the window, while within reach, upon a small neat shaft affixed to the wall, was the telephone instrument. Strange that, if he felt himself suddenly ill, and had been unable to summon assistance, he did not ring up on the telephone.

“The hammering you heard—was it quite distinct?” I inquired.

“Quite. It seems entirely feasible now that he was striving to get out of this locked room.”

The point that the door had been locked from the outside puzzled me considerably. But a fresh suggestion arose within me—namely, that after every one had retired, a servant, remembering that the window was open and the door unlocked, had gone down and seen to them. Yet she would in that case have found her master in the room, with the light still burning.

No: the only explanation was that the key had been turned by one of the servants while passing along the corridor after her master's return there, and while on her way to bed.

Yet, however one viewed the tragic affair, it was full of most remarkable features. There was mystery—a great and inexplicable mystery—somewhere.

And that mystery I now intended, at all hazards, to solve.

With that object in view, I interviewed the housemaid who found the body of her young master, and listened to her story from her own lips. Probably the whole household considered me to be highly inquisitive; nevertheless, I pointed out to them the earnest necessity of clearing up the matter to everybody's satisfaction, and both to the housekeeper, a witty woman, and to the other servants, I declared that the facts were full of grave suspicion.

The inspector of County Constabulary was not highly intelligent, and as soon as the medical men had given their opinion he ceased to take any further professional interest in the affair. It was a sudden death, and with such occurrences the police have only to attend the inquest and formally report.

The officer was, I think, rather piqued at the persistency of my inquiries, for when I pointed out to him the suspicious circumstance of the locked door, he point-blank told me that the medical declaration was quite sufficient for him.

The girl, Kate Hayes, who discovered her master—a dark-haired, good-looking maid, about twenty-six—had been eight years at Titmarsh Court. It was Mr Guy's habit always to read his paper before going to bed, she told me, as we stood in the long servants' hall.

"I often find the library door unlocked before I go to my room, sir, and the night before last it was unlocked."

"Did you lock it?" I asked quickly.

"No, sir. I once locked Mr Guy in, so I always look inside now, before

securing it," she replied. "I looked inside, and found Mr Guy there. He was then taking a book down from one of the shelves near the window. I apologised for intruding, and wished him good-night. 'Good-night, Hayes,' he replied, and I closed the door and left him. I heard nothing in the night. But when I went to the library door next morning I found it locked. I recollect it was locked, because at first the key would not turn. At last I succeeded in opening the door, when the first sight that met my eyes in the faint grey light through the chinks of the shutters was poor Mr Guy lying crouched up, his knees nearly touching his chin and quite dead."

"You are absolutely certain that the window was quite securely closed?" I asked.

"Captain Cardew opened it, sir. I ran away to fetch the other servants."

Here again the Captain showed some disinclination thoroughly to probe matters, for he interrupted, saying—

"I don't see how questioning the servants will assist us. We already know all that they know."

"What we want to discover is whether poor Nicholson received any visitor clandestinely during the early hours of the morning," I said. "To me, it seems very much as though he did."

"Then you are directly opposed to the medical theory?" he exclaimed.

"And so are you, are you not?" I remarked.

"In a manner, yes—but not altogether. We must credit doctors with a certain amount of knowledge where death is concerned."

"I credit them with every knowledge," I hastened to assure him; "only in this case, I fear they have not sufficiently weighed over all the known and indisputable facts."

"If there had actually been foul play, there would be traces of it," he said.

"Not always," I replied. "Many cases of secret assassination have been declared by doctors to have been deaths from natural causes."

I saw that the servants, all country-bred, ridiculed my suspicions. Doctor Redwood had said that their master had died of brain disease, and that was sufficient. The police, too, were quite satisfied, and the young man's relations, two of whom arrived in hot haste while I was there, of course accepted the verdict of the medical men—the evidence which would be given at the inquest on the following day.

To me, it was a curious circumstance that Cardew, when he heard the shriek, had not attempted to investigate its cause. True, he had listened, and the cry was not repeated. I should have regarded his apathy as suspicious if I myself had not more than once, when dreaming, awakened suddenly, believing that I had heard a cry of distress.

The shriek of terror—nay, of horror, Cardew described it—was, in itself, a most peculiar circumstance. There is a distinct difference between a cry of pain and a shriek of horror.

No; I felt certain that the medical men had not sufficiently considered that very singular point. But when I tried to argue with the Captain, he merely declared that the cause of the shriek would never be explained. Perhaps it was the sudden knowledge that he was dying that had terrified him.

I intended, however, to seek further explanation. It was ever upon my mind that the man who had died so mysteriously intended to visit me on Sunday, and to reveal to me something—something concerning Harvey Shaw.

Shaw was a guest that evening, but it was proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that he had left the house two and a half hours before, accompanied by Asta. It was therefore my intention at once to satisfy myself whether Shaw could have returned, unknown to the girl, and re-visited Titmarsh Court.

I confess openly and frankly that I suspected a crime. Hence, I spared no effort in thoroughly investigating the curious circumstances—in doing work which the police would have done had not the declarations of the two doctors been so very positive and emphatic.

I saw the body of my friend lying in a darkened bedroom upstairs, and covered with a sheet. I did not remove the shroud. I was too horrified. A

post-mortem had been made, and the corpse was waiting for the arrival of the coffin.

What had the dead man intended to reveal to me? He had evidently discovered something detrimental to Shaw. Of that I felt assured, for had he not admitted as much?

“Did poor Guy appear his usual self before the affair?” I asked Cardew some half-hour later, as we again stood together in the long sombre room wherein he had died. The atmosphere was heavy with the oppressive scent of the roses, and about the silent apartment there seemed an air of mystery.

“Well, to tell the truth, I did not notice anything unusual in his manner at the time. But since—now that I have reflected—I recollect that he seemed extremely anxious concerning Shaw’s daughter—as though he were apprehensive of something, and was in despair.”

At that moment the Captain was called out by one of the servants, who told him that the police superintendent from Northampton would like to see him. Therefore I was left alone in the room, and was thus afforded opportunity to examine it.

I looked at the big comfortable chair in which the unfortunate man had sat, and tried to picture to myself what had occurred there, in the silent watches of the night. Why had he given vent to that shriek of horror? What had he seen?

Surely he had received some fearful, appalling shock, or such a piercing, heartrending shriek would never have escaped a man’s lips.

I examined the window, the shutters, the lock on the heavy door of polished mahogany; but nothing caused me curiosity—nothing had been tampered with.

My own theory was that Guy Nicholson, whilst reading his newspaper, had seen something, and that, after shrieking in horror, he had beaten with his hands upon the door, in frantic endeavour to escape from that room. Imprisoned there, he had received some fatal blow before he had time to unbar the window, and had sunk upon the floor and expired in

agony.

But what was the something which had cost a man his Life?

Chapter Thirteen.

One Point is Made Clear.

On the following day twelve respectable inhabitants of Corby and the neighbourhood assembled around the long dining-table at Titmarsh Court, and decided, upon the evidence of the two doctors, that its young master had died of natural causes.

I was present, and heard a solicitor representing the relatives put a query to the Coroner regarding that cry in the night. But the official coldly declared that the jury were there only to decide the cause of death, and that, whatever the circumstances might be, they could only weigh the medical evidence.

Doctor Petherbridge, of Northampton, assisted by the county analyst, had, it seemed, examined the contents of the stomach and made the Dragendorff test for strychnine, applied the Stas process for alkaloids and the Pettenkofer test for mineral acid, as well as searching for arsenic with the Marsh apparatus. The result in all cases had been negative. Mr Guy Nicholson had certainly not died of poison.

After the verdict of “death from natural causes,” I drove Shaw, who had also been present, back to Lydford, and there saw poor Asta, looking wan and pale in her deep mourning. She was seated in a low chair in her own pretty room, full of books and flowers—an artistic, cosy little apartment leading from the big drawing-room and upholstered in pale blue.

The blind was down, for the sun was blazing-hot outside. But as she took my hand I saw that her eyes had dark rings around them, and that she had recently been crying.

I hardly know what words of sympathy and condolence I uttered as I held her small hand in mine. Her heart, however, was too full for words, and she burst into a flood of tears.

Shaw, unable to bear the sight of her grief, placed his hand tenderly upon

her shoulder and urged her to bear up; but she only shook her head sadly in her profound sorrow.

I stood there, not knowing what to say; but a few moments later, when Shaw had left the room and we were alone, I too placed my hand upon her shoulder and strove to calm her.

“You have all my most heartfelt sympathy, Miss Seymour,” I said. “I have ventured to come here to-day to see if I could be of any service to you.”

“Ah, what service can you render me, Mr Kemball, now that poor Guy is, alas! dead—dead!” she cried hoarsely, staring straight before her. “The inquest was held to-day. What have they decided?”

“That the poor fellow died of natural causes. He suffered from an unsuspected disease of the brain.”

“Ah, yes,” she sighed. “I expected they would say something like that. But —” and she broke off short without concluding her sentence.

“You dined with him only a few hours before,” I remarked; for I had gone there on purpose to question her, and I hardly knew how to commence, fearing lest, in my anxiety, I might blunder.

“Yes. Who would have thought that when I parted from him I should never see him again?”

“You left before the Vanes, did you not?”

“Yes. My father, just before eleven, told me that he was not feeling very well, so I ordered the car, and we came home, after a most delightful evening. The weather was bright, and everything had been done to perfection. On the way home Dad complained of bad pains in his head, and I became alarmed. Indeed, when we got here he seemed so very queer that I tried to persuade him to let me telephone for Doctor Redwood. But he would not hear of it. He begged me to go to bed, but I remained with him in the smoking-room until nearly three o’clock.”

“Until three o’clock?” I echoed. “And you did not leave him at all?”

“No. Because he seemed so very queer. I mixed him some brandy and water several times, and he tried to smoke, but could not.”

“What was his objection against summoning the doctor?”

“Oh, he said that he would be all right presently, and that it was only a bad headache. Long ago, when he was abroad, he had been subject to such attacks, he said. But he had not had one for years past.”

“And after three o’clock you retired to bed?”

“It was half-past three, and getting quite light, when I saw him as far as his room. He looked fearfully pale and worn—quite unlike his usual self. He said he had fits of extreme nervousness, and I noticed that at times his limbs were trembling. I remarked upon it, but my comments seemed to irritate him. So I said nothing further. At nine o’clock next morning he came down to breakfast quite well. Then—then—just after ten o’clock last night—Captain Cardew telephoned to him telling him of the—the awful discovery at Titmarsh?”

Her story made one fact entirely plain—namely, that Shaw, whatever he might be, was perfectly free from suspicion.

“Is it not curious that your father was taken ill?” I asked. “Did he not tell the doctors?”

“No. Because long ago, when he was in South America, he was subject to such attacks, and his illness could not have had any connection with poor Guy’s death, he said.”

She spoke very gravely, her sad, tearful eyes fixed upon the blue carpet. A slim, pathetic little figure she presented in her deep black, which, however, only served to heighten her wonderful beauty.

I questioned her further regarding the events of that fatal night, and convinced myself that Shaw had had no opportunity of returning to Titmarsh Court after he had once bade good-night to poor Nicholson.

Any suspicions I had entertained had now been swept away. Her statement, plain and straightforward, showed how solicitous she was of

the welfare of the man whom she had always looked upon as her father. She had taken me into her confidence on the first day we had met, and she was certainly not deceiving me.

As I stood near, watching her, I became bewildered by the strange circumstances of the death of the man who had promised to come to me, and in confidence make certain revelations. My feelings towards Shaw had been mixed ones. He had been open and straightforward with me, and had told me that he was leading a double life. Asta had treated me as a friend; therefore I had intended to protect their secret from Nicholson as far as possible. Nevertheless, I had been consumed by curiosity to know what he had actually discovered—how far he had ascertained the truth.

His meaning words to Cardew on the night of his death showed that, owing to his discovery, he hesitated to ask Asta to become his wife. He loved her most passionately; and when a man loves as he did, then it must be a very serious bar which prevents him throwing prudence to the winds and marrying the girl of his choice.

Shaw re-entered the room presently, asking me to stay to luncheon, which I did. But the meal was, alas! a very dismal one. Asta, full of thoughts of her dead lover, hardly spoke a word, while Shaw himself seemed preoccupied and thoughtful.

“The Coroner was an idiot,” I declared in the course of our discussion of the events of the morning. “He would scarcely allow any mention of poor Guy’s cry of horror heard by Cardew.”

“Ah, my dear Kemball,” my friend replied, “in many cases inquests are worse than useless. Coroners so often override the jury and instruct them as to what verdict they should return. In almost every case you will find that the jury, ignorant for the most part, though perfectly honest in their meaning, return a verdict in accordance with the evidence of the local doctor, who, in so many cases, happens to be the man who attends themselves and their families. If they are ill, they call him in and accept his dictum. They do just the same at a Coroner’s inquest. They never analyse or weigh the facts for themselves.”

“Asta has just been telling me that you too were very unwell that night,” I said suddenly; and I noticed that, on hearing my words, he glanced across at the girl in annoyance.

“Yes,” he said, with a light laugh. “I didn’t feel over grand—a bad headache, just as I used to have years ago. But it was nothing. It didn’t arise from anything I ate or drank. I knew that, and for that reason did not ’phone to Redwood. Yes,” he added, “I spent a rather poor night. Asta became quite alarmed.”

“Well,” I exclaimed, “what is your theory regarding the poor fellow’s death?”

“Theory! Well, after the medical evidence and the verdict of the jury, what can one think?” he asked. “There are certainly many curious points in the affair, and the chief one, to my mind, is the fact that he was found locked in the room.”

“That’s just my point. He could not have locked himself in.”

“Yet, remember that we only have the evidence of the girl Hayes that he was locked in. In her hurry to enter the room she seems to have fumbled at the lock, and, of course, in her alarm at the discovery, may have been deceived, and thought the key had been turned.”

I had not before regarded her statement from that point of view, and his suggestion caused me to ponder. But next second I asked—

“If the door was not locked, then why should he have hammered to get out?”

“But did he hammer?” queried Shaw. “Sounds in the night are always distorted, remember.”

“Please don’t discuss the horrible affair further, Dad,” cried Asta, appealingly.

“My dear, I beg your pardon,” he exclaimed, turning to her hastily. “I know I ought not to have mentioned the matter. Both Kemball and myself deeply condole with you in your grief. You never mentioned to me your

affection for Guy, but I had guessed it long ago. I told Kemball about it, didn't I?" and he glanced across at me.

"Yes, you did," I said.

"Ah, poor Guy!" he sighed. "He was such a thorough sterling fellow, and I had hoped, Asta, that you would marry and be happy. But, alas! the Fates have willed it otherwise."

"I—I feel bewildered, Dad," exclaimed the girl. "I can't believe that he is really dead," and rising suddenly, she again burst into tears, and with uneven steps left the room.

"Poor child!" remarked Shaw in a low voice, when she had gone. "It is indeed a terrible blow for her. I had no idea that she was so devoted to him. She had many admirers in the neighbourhood, but he was evidently the one to whom she was most attached. And, between ourselves, Kemball," he added, in a low voice, his wineglass poised between his white fingers, "he was one of the most eligible young fellows in the whole county—eight thousand a year, as well as a half-share in Nicholson Brothers of Sheffield. I had dreams of seeing Asta mistress of Titmarsh Court. But, of course, I never told her so. I believe in allowing a girl to make her own choice in life. Love affairs, if interfered with by elders, invariably turn out badly."

And so he chatted on as we smoked our cigarettes; and as I gazed into those small queer eyes of his, I became more and more convinced that my suspicions of the previous day had been unfounded. He could not possibly have had any hand in the poor fellow's untimely end.

He could not know of Guy's secret intention to make certain revelations to me—and even if he did, he knew quite well that I was already aware that he was leading a double life. No; when I carefully weighed over the whole of the facts, I came to the conclusion that the man before me—mysterious though he might be—had every motive that Guy Nicholson should live. I do not think my intelligence was much above that of the ordinary man, yet I felt that if he were an adventurer, as already seemed proved, then what more natural than that he should secure Nicholson as husband for Asta, and afterwards judiciously bleed him. It certainly was

not to his interest that the fellow should die.

The circumstances were full of suspicion, I admit; but the hard facts certainly disproved that Harvey Shaw had had any hand in the strange affair.

Still, what was the Something which had held poor Guy horror-stricken, and which had produced symptoms so near akin to the affection of the brain that the doctors had been deceived by it and the Coroner and jury misled?

The opinion I still held was that Guy Nicholson did not die a natural death. Therefore I intended to leave no stone unturned in my endeavour to probe the extraordinary mystery, and to ascertain the truth of what had actually occurred in that long old room during the silent watches of that fateful night.

Chapter Fourteen.

Contains Another Suggestion.

A week went by—a breathless, anxious week.

I had attended poor Guy's burial in the pretty churchyard of Titmarsh village, and as I turned from the grave I could not help wondering about what he had intended to tell me, had he but lived to speak.

Yet his lips were sealed. Some one had known of his intentions, and had forced silence upon him.

My mind was ever full of dark thoughts and black suspicions, and yet I had so clearly proved that Harvey Shaw, against whom his intention was to speak, had had no hand in the matter. Of one thing, however, I was convinced: poor Nicholson had been cruelly murdered.

About eight days after the funeral, Shaw, one hot afternoon, drove over alone in his car, and found me smoking in a deck-chair beneath a tree. The object of his visit was to tell me of Guy's will. It had been found, he said, that the young man had bequeathed the sum of ten thousand pounds to Asta.

"He was infatuated with her, poor fellow," Shaw declared, in a tone of slight annoyance. "Of course she will not touch a penny of it. How could she? Ah! when he made that will, only two months ago, he never dreamt that he would meet with such a sudden end."

"No," I sighed, my mind full of wonder. At that moment many strange things flitted across my brain. "We all of us foolishly believe that we have many years to live."

"As soon as Asta heard of the legacy, she declared that she would not accept it," he remarked, "But I suppose she must, even though she transfers it to some charity, as is her intention."

"I can quite understand her reluctance to take the dead man's present," I

said. “It is only natural. Is she still very upset?”

“Very. I scarcely know what to do with her. She suffers from insomnia, and sits for hours moping and sobbing. I’ve been wondering if a trip abroad would bring about forgetfulness. But she declared that she’s had enough travelling, and prefers her own home. Therefore I’m half afraid to take her away. Redwood advises a journey through Hungary and Roumania, which would be fresh ground for her. But at present I’m undecided.”

He remained with me for a couple of hours, and afterwards left, when that same evening I was called by telephone up to London to see my lawyer regarding the pending action concerning a portion of my land.

Fortunately, at the inquest, I had met the dead man’s solicitor, Mr Sewell, and in order to ascertain whether Shaw’s statement was correct, I called upon him in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. From what I gathered it seemed that the bulk of the property had passed to a cousin, and that Asta had declined to accept her legacy, and had given instructions for it to be divided between three London hospitals.

The solicitor, like myself, disagreed with the finding of the Coroner’s jury. Yet he could form no theory as to the manner in which his client had met with his untimely end.

On the afternoon of my return to Upton End, four days later, I was in the library scribbling a letter to catch the post, when a card was brought to me bearing the name, “Mrs Charles Olliffe.”

“The lady has come by car, sir, and wishes very particular to see you,” the girl said.

I was not over-pleased to have a visitor at that moment; nevertheless, I ordered her to be shown in, and in a few moments found myself confronted by a tall, well-built, good-looking, well-dressed woman of about forty-five, wearing a smart motor-bonnet and dust-coat. The latter was open, revealing a fine diamond brooch in her white silk blouse.

As our eyes met, I held my breath; but next moment I managed to recover myself, and bowing, offered her a chair.

“I hope, Mr Kemball, that you will pardon my intrusion. I am a stranger to you, but I wished to see you upon a matter of the greatest importance to myself.”

“There is no necessity for apology,” I assured her. “I am at your service.”

My eyes were fixed upon her in wonder, for I had, on the instant I had seen her, recognised her as the original of the newspaper photograph I had locked away in my safe—the picture of Lady Lettice Lancaster!

She certainly had the air and manner of a lady, and surely none would have suspected her to be a convicted criminal. Notwithstanding her age, she was extremely well-preserved. She spoke low and with refinement, whilst her bearing was that of a well-bred woman. Her smile, too, as she spoke to me, was good-humoured, almost fascinating.

“The fact is, Mr Kemball,” she said, as I seated myself and bent towards her in attention, resolved not to betray my knowledge of her identity, “I believe you were a friend of a very great friend of mine.”

“Who is that?” I asked quickly.

“Mr Melvill Arnold.”

Across my mind there flashed the recollection of that threatening letter through which I had discovered the truth concerning the ingenious Lady Lettice.

“Yes. It is true that I knew Mr Arnold,” I said slowly.

“It is about him that I have ventured to call. I live near Bath, but I motored over to-day in the hope of seeing you,” she said. “I heard from a mutual friend that you were present at Mr Arnold’s death, and that he entrusted you with certain matters concerning his estate. It was an honour, I assure you, for he trusted nobody.”

Recollecting that strange letter threatening vengeance, I was not very communicative. She plied me with many clever questions, to which I carefully avoided giving satisfactory answers. She was “pumping” me, I knew. But I could see no motive. Hence I exercised every care in my

replies.

Through what channel had she become aware of my acquaintance with the man now dead? I had believed that only Shaw and his daughter were aware of it, but she denied any knowledge of them.

I, however, found myself compelled to describe the circumstances of his death, for, after carefully reviewing the situation, I saw that the most diplomatic course was to profess frankness, and by so doing I might be able to learn some further facts concerning the man whose past was so completely hidden.

I recognised that she was an exceedingly shrewd and clever woman. The manner in which she put her questions, her well-feigned carelessness, and her deep regret at his death, all showed marvellous cunning. Yet, from that letter, it seemed to me evident that the man about whose end she was now so anxious had actually betrayed her into the hands of the police.

And this refined, soft-spoken, elegant woman had spent some months in prison! It seemed utterly incredible.

Like Shaw, she seemed extremely anxious to know if I were aware whether Arnold had made a will. But I told her that, so far as I knew, there was none, and, further, I was unaware of the name of his lawyer.

“I fear that Mr Arnold had no solicitors,” she said. “He would not trust them.”

“Then who is in charge of the dead man’s estate?” I asked, hoping for some information.

“Ah! That’s a complete mystery, Mr Kemball,” was her reply. “That Mr Arnold was wealthy—tremendously wealthy—there is no doubt. Yet he was as mysterious himself as was the source of his enormous income. It was derived in the East somewhere, but of its true source even the Commissioners of Income Tax are unaware.”

“He was a complete mystery in many ways.”

“In every way. I was one of his most intimate friends, but I confess that I was most puzzled always. He lived in secret, and it appears that he has died in secret,” replied Mrs Olliffe. “I had hoped, Mr Kemball, that you could perhaps throw some light upon the manner in which he has disposed of his property.”

“Unfortunately, I know nothing,” was my reply. “He merely asked me to perform several little services for him after his death; and having done them, there my knowledge ends.”

She looked me steadily in the face for a few moments with her shrewd, deep-sunken eyes, and then with a smile said—

“I expect you think that I am hoping to benefit under his will. But, on the contrary, I know full well that I should not. All I can tell you, Mr Kemball, is that if you have accepted any trust of Melvill Arnold’s, then only evil can result.”

“Why?” I asked quickly, remembering the character of the woman before me.

“Because Arnold was a worker of evil.”

“Then you were not his friend, eh?”

“Yes, I was. Only I have warned you,” was her quick reply.

Curious that Harvey Shaw should have also made a similar assertion. Had he not told me that the bronze cylinder which reposed in the safe just behind where she was seated had brought evil upon those who had held it in their possession?

I found Mrs Olliffe distinctly interesting. As I sat chatting with her, I recollected the strange stories told of her at the Old Bailey, and of her curiously romantic life. Now that she was free, she was, without doubt, again carrying on her old game. Once a woman is an adventuress, she remains ever so until the grave.

Though she had denied all knowledge of Shaw, it seemed to me that only through him could she have learnt of my existence and my acquaintance

with the dead man Arnold.

More and more it appeared plain that the man who had died in that hotel off the Strand was possessed of great wealth, yet the source of it was a mystery complete and profound. She had known him intimately, yet she would tell me very little concerning him.

“He was, of course, very eccentric,” she declared. “One of his fads was that he scarcely ever slept in the same bed twice in succession. He was constantly changing his address, and he preferred to present the appearance of being poor.”

“Where did he live usually?” I asked.

“Half his time he was abroad—in Tunis, Algeria, or Egypt. He seemed extremely fond of North Africa. Why, I could never discover.”

I tried to turn the conversation upon Shaw and Asta, but she was far too wary to be drawn into an admission that she knew them, and presently, after she had taken tea with me, she left.

Upon her card I found her address, and resolved to make a few inquiries concerning her. Therefore, two days later, I took train to Bath, and found that she lived in a fine old mansion called Ridgehill Manor, near Kelston, about three miles out of the city.

At the little old-fashioned inn at Kelston village I had tea in the best room, and began to chat about the people in the neighbourhood.

“Ah, yes. Mrs Olliffe’s a widow,” said the stout, white-bearded landlord, when I mentioned the Manor. “She’s been here close on two years now. Everybody likes her. Last year she kept a host of company always, lots of well-known folk, but this summer there haven’t been very many visitors. Scarcely anybody except Mr Nicholson—and he’s always there, more or less.”

“Nicholson!” I cried, startled at mention of the name. “Was he Mr Guy Nicholson, from Titmarsh?”

“I don’t know where he comes from, sir, but his name is Guy, sir. He

hasn't been here for a week or two now. He often comes over on his motor-cycle. Sometimes he calls in here, for I do all the station-work for Mrs Olliffe. He's a very nice, affable young gentleman. I only wish there were a few more of his sort about."

"He's a friend of Mrs Olliffe's, you say? Has he been coming here for long?"

"Ever since she's been here. They used to say he came to see Miss Farquhar, a young lady who was staying up at the Manor. But he comes just as much since she's left. Ah!" he added, "now I recollect. Only a week ago I took a parcel to the station from the Manor addressed to Mr Nicholson at Titmarsh, near Corby, I think it was."

I asked the landlord to describe the young man we were discussing, and he gave me an exact description of Guy himself.

When it grew dark, I trudged along the dusty high road up the hill for a mile, and obtained a good sight of the Manor. It was, I found, a splendid old Tudor mansion, standing on the side of a hill in a finely timbered park, and in full view from the high road. Would the country folk have held its occupier in such high esteem had they but known the curious truth?

While standing there gazing across the broad park to the old, gabled, ivy-clad house, with its pointed roofs and twisted chimneys, I heard the hum of an approaching motor-car, and I was only just in time to draw back into a hedge. In it sat Mrs Olliffe herself.

But the discovery I had made had opened up an entirely new train of thought.

Guy had been that undesirable woman's friend. Was it possible that she had been implicated in the poor fellow's mysterious end?

That night I lay awake in the York House Hotel in Bath, thinking—thinking very deeply.

Chapter Fifteen.

Contains some Fresh Facts.

I was in London again a few days later, and Captain Cardew lunched with me at the club.

“You were poor Guy’s intimate friend,” I remarked as we sat together. “Have you ever heard him speak of a Mrs Olliffe, who lives somewhere near Bath?”

“Oh yes,” was his reply, as he sat twisting his wineglass by the stem. “He knew her. She had a niece or something, a Miss Farquhar, living with her, and he was rather sweet on her at one time, I believe.”

“Have you ever met the widow?” I asked.

“Guy introduced me to them one night at the Savoy.”

“Where is the young lady now?”

“Somewhere in India, I think. Her father’s a civilian out there.”

“But this Mrs Olliffe,” I said. “Don’t you know any thing about her?”

“Only that she is a widow, and very well off; has some fine pheasant shooting, I believe, and gives some gay week-end parties.”

“What was her husband?”

“I fancy he was a banker, or something.”

I smiled within myself at his reply.

“She’s evidently in rather a good set,” Cardew went on, “for I’ve often seen in the *Morning Post* accounts of her parties, which seem to include quite a number of distinguished people.”

“Well,” I said, “as you know, Cardew, I am busy making my own inquiries.

It is a slow, tedious process, but I am hopeful of success. I intend to discover by what means poor Guy was killed; therefore his friends interest me—especially his women friends. For that reason I am trying to discover all I can concerning Mrs Olliffe."

He was silent for a moment; then, bending across the table to me, said—

"It has never occurred to me before, Kemball, but somehow, now that I reflect, I can see that Guy appeared to be in fear of the lady we have just been discussing."

"In fear of her?"

"Yes. One circumstance made it quite plain. A little over a month ago, I was staying with him at the Grand at Eastbourne, and wanted him to come with me to Brighton for the week-end, but he told me he had an appointment on the Sunday which he could not break. I urged him to go, but he would not, and on Sunday night he went out about nine o'clock, and did not return until two in the morning. I chaffed him next morning. But he was pale and haggard, and his reply was significant. 'No, old chap,' he said. 'Sometimes a fellow gets into a bit of a hole. I'm in one—a woman, as you can guess. And I had to keep that appointment. I couldn't refuse her, for we had some serious business to transact. Ah,' he sighed, 'if I could only think that I'd never see her again, by Gad! I'd be a different man!'"

"And you guessed that he met the widow?" I said.

"I know that he did, for later that same morning he let a remark drop casually that he had to see Mrs Olliffe off in Hastings."

"Then she had some hold upon him?"

"Apparently so. But Guy was always very close about his personal affairs."

"That was over a month ago, eh?"

"Perhaps six weeks."

I was silent. Was it possible that the tragedy had been the outcome of that secret midnight meeting in Eastbourne? Yet why should they meet in such secrecy when he had been in the habit of going to Ridgehill Manor so openly? By the discovery I had thus made mystery had been piled upon mystery.

We dropped the subject, and took our coffee and liqueurs in the big smoking-room which looked out upon Piccadilly and the Park. Then, when he had gone, I cast myself into an easy-chair in the silence-room and pondered deeply.

I reviewed all the facts just as I had done a thousand times through those long sleepless nights, and came to the conclusion that Asta, loving the dead man as she did, was the only person capable of assisting me to bring the culprit to justice.

The stumbling-block was that I could form no theory as to how Guy Nicholson had been killed, such subtle means had been used in the accomplishment of the crime.

Cardew expressed himself ready and eager to assist me in my inquiries.

“If you want any help, my dear Kemball, you have only to wire to me. I’ll get leave and come to you, wherever you may be,” he said.

I thanked him, and soon afterwards I waved my hand to him as he descended the steps of the club.

It occurred to me that I should attempt to become on friendly terms with Mrs Olliffe. By that means I might perhaps learn something.

Therefore, one afternoon a few days later, I was shown into the pretty, old-fashioned, chintz-covered drawing-room at Ridgehill Manor, where the widow, in a cool gown of figured muslin, rose to meet me. With her was a grey-moustached man of military appearance, and a young girl of twenty or so, and they were taking tea.

From my interesting hostess I received a pleasant welcome, and, after being introduced, was handed a cup of tea. Yes, I actually took it from the hand that I suspected of striking down the poor fellow at Titmarsh!

Yet in her handsome, well-preserved face, as she chatted and laughed with her friends, evidently near neighbours, there was surely no trace of guilt. That countenance fascinated me when I recollected her extraordinary career and the ingenuity and cunning she had displayed in her efforts to live upon the credulity of others.

The girl was talking of tennis, and gave her hostess an invitation to a party on the following day.

“Sir Charles will be there, so do come,” the girl urged.

“I’m afraid I have to go to the Reids’ with my brother,” the widow replied. “He accepted their invitation a month ago.”

And almost as she said this, a tall, distinguished-looking, clean-shaven man of forty-five entered, and was introduced to me as her brother, George King. As I bowed I wondered if this man were the accomplice of whom the police had spoken at the Old Bailey—the husband Earnshaw, who sometimes posed as her brother, sometimes as her husband, and sometimes as a servant!

As he seated himself near me and began to chat, I realised that he was just as clever and refined as his alleged sister. He had just returned from six months in Russia and the Caucasus, he told me, and described the pleasant time he had had.

When at last Mrs Olliffe’s visitors rose and left, I requested a word with her alone.

“Certainly,” she said—not, however, without a slightly startled glance, which I did not fail to notice. “Come in here;” and she led me through to her own little sitting-room—a charming, cosy place, very tastefully furnished and restful.

When we were seated, I began without preamble—

“You will recollect, Mrs Olliffe, that we had some conversation concerning the late Melvill Arnold. You were anxious to learn facts connected with his death.”

“Yes,” she said, with a strange look upon her handsome face. “My object, I may as well tell you, Mr Kemball, was to satisfy myself that he died a natural death; that—well, that he was not the victim of foul play.”

“Foul play!” I gasped, staring at her. “Do you suspect that?”

She shrugged her well-shaped shoulders without replying.

“Had he any enemies—any person who would benefit by his death?” I asked quickly.

“Yes.”

“And you suspect them of—”

“I suspect nobody,” she hastened to assure me. “Only his sudden and mysterious end is extremely suspicious.”

“Well, I can assure you that you need have no suspicion,” I said. “I was with him on board ship when he was suddenly taken ill, and I remained with him nearly the whole time until the end.”

“Nearly. You were absent sometimes.”

“Of course. I was not with him both night and day.”

“And therefore you can’t say with absolute certainty that his enemies had no access to him,” she said.

“But even if they had, they can have profited nothing,” I said.

“How do you know? Melvill Arnold was extremely wealthy. Where is it all? Who knows but that he was not robbed of it in secret, and death brought upon him in order to prevent the truth from being revealed.”

I shook my head and smiled.

“I fear, Mrs Olliffe, that your imagination has run just a trifle wild. Arnold died a natural death, and the doctor gave a certificate to that effect.”

“I’ll never believe it,” she declared. “If there had not been foul play, the

whereabouts of his great wealth would be known. He was a friend, a great friend, of mine, Mr Kemball, so please forgive me for speaking quite frankly."

"You are, of course, welcome to your own opinions, but I, who know the facts so well, and who was present at his death, am able to state with authority that his end was due to natural causes."

"It is curious that he should have trusted you—a perfect stranger," she said, with coolness. "You did not explain the nature of your trust."

"It was upon that very point, Mrs Olliffe, that I called to see you to-day," I said. "Mr Arnold gave me a letter addressed to a certain Mr Alfred Dawnay, and—"

"To Alfred Dawnay!" she gasped, starting to her feet as all the colour faded from her face. "He wrote to him?" she cried. "Then—"

She stopped short, and with one hand clutching her breast, she grasped the edge of the table with the other, for she swayed, and would have fallen.

I saw that what I had told her revealed to her something of which she had never dreamed—something which upset all her previous calculations.

"Tell me, Mr Kemball," she exclaimed at last, in a hard, strained voice, scarce above a whisper, "tell me—what did he write?"

"Ah! I do not know. I was merely the bearer of the letter."

"You have no idea what Arnold told that man—what he revealed to him?"

"I have no knowledge of anything further than that, after Arnold's death, I opened a packet, and found the letter addressed to Dawnay."

"To Dawnay! His worst enemy and his—"

"Was Dawnay an enemy?" I asked. "I took him, of course, to be the dead man's friend and confidant."

The woman laughed bitterly as she stood there before me with deep-knit brows, her mouth hard, and a determined look upon her cunning countenance.

“Poor fool, he believed Dawnay to be his friend. Ah! what fatal folly to have written to him—to have placed trust in him. And yet, is not this my vengeance—after all these years?” She laughed hysterically.

“Is this man Dawnay such a very undesirable person?” I asked quietly.

“Undesirable!” she cried, with flashing eyes. “If Arnold had known but half the truth, he would never have reposed confidence in him.”

“But the letter may not, after all, have been one of friendship,” I suggested.

“It was. I can see through it now. Ah! why did I not know a week or two ago! How very differently I would then have acted,” she murmured in a tone of blank despair. Her face was deadly pale and her lips were trembling.

“Was Dawnay aware of Arnold’s identity?” I asked. It was upon the tip of my tongue to speak of the mysterious cylinder of bronze, but I hesitated, recollecting that this woman was not a person to be trusted.

“How can I tell?” she said hoarsely. “Yet, from facts that have recently come to my knowledge, I now realise how Arnold must have foolishly disclosed the secret to his worst enemy.”

“What secret?” I demanded anxiously.

But she was distrustful and evasive.

“An amazing secret which, it is said, if revealed to the public, would cause the whole world to stand aghast,” replied the woman, in a low, hollow voice.

Strange! Arnold, I recollected, had himself referred to the precious contents of that ancient cylinder in almost exactly the same terms!

What could that secret be?

Chapter Sixteen.

The Sign of the Hand.

The problem grew daily more intricate. Try how I would, I could obtain no knowledge of the identity of the man known to me as Melvill Arnold. His name might be Edgcumbe, as it seemed from the letter I found in his possession, yet in the learned circles of Egyptologists he was unknown.

Certain facts were, however, plain, I argued. First, that he was wealthy was without doubt. Perhaps those big bundles of banknotes which he had compelled me to destroy before his death constituted his fortune. Perhaps he preferred to destroy them lest they fell into other hands. Secondly, it seemed certain that the woman now known as Mrs Olliffe had been arrested and convicted through some revelation made by him. Thirdly, this same woman was in active search of the whereabouts of the dead man's riches; and fourthly, it was more than likely that Harvey Shaw was really Arnold's friend and not his enemy, as the woman had alleged. Had not Arnold written to him in secret? Ah! What would I not have given for knowledge of the contents of that letter!

I called at Lydford Hall several times, and was gladly welcomed. Whatever Shaw might be, he was with me perfectly candid and straightforward, and gradually I became on most friendly terms with both him and Asta. Often they motored over to Upton End and lunched or dined with me, while I, on my part, became a frequent visitor in those long summer days. But I confess my friendship had for its object the elucidation of the strange mystery in which I found myself enveloped.

Asta was, alas! still inconsolable. Poor child! Time, instead of healing the wound caused by Guy's sudden end, only served to aggravate it. She seemed to grow paler and more sad each day. Sometimes I endeavoured to console her, but she only shook her head in grief and silence.

To me she appeared unusually nervous and apprehensive. The least sound seemed to cause her to start and turn almost in terror. It appeared as though she had something upon her conscience—some secret which she feared moment by moment might be betrayed.

One afternoon, while sitting by the open window of the smoking-room at Lydford, I remarked upon her condition to Shaw.

“Yes,” he sighed, “you are quite right, my dear Kemball. I’ve noticed it too. Poor girl! It was a terrible blow for her. She wants a change. I urged her to go abroad long ago, but she would not hear of it. Now, however, I’ve induced her at last to go for a motor-tour in France. We are starting next week, and go by Folkestone to Boulogne, thence by Beauvais, and, avoiding the *pavé* of Paris, by Versailles, Melun, Joigny, Chagny and Lyons across to Aix-les-Bains. Have you ever been there?”

“No. It must be a very fine run,” I said.

“Then why don’t you come with us?” he suggested. “I’m taking the sixty, and there’ll be plenty of room.”

I reflected. The days were warm and bright, and I loved motoring. My own car, being only a fifteen, was not capable of doing such a journey.

“Ah!” he laughed, noticing my indecision. “Of course, you’ll come. Asta will be delighted. Do keep us company, my dear fellow.”

“Very well,” I said, “I’ll come, if you really mean that there’ll be room.”

And so it was arranged.

When he told Asta a few minutes later her face brightened, and she turned to me, saying—

“Well, this is really good news, Mr Kemball. Dad has often been on the Continent with the car, but he has never taken me before. He as thought that the long runs might be too fatiguing.”

“Any thing, my dear, to get you out of this place,” he said, with a laugh. “You must have a change, or else you’ll be ill.”

Later on, a young man and a girl called, and we played tennis for an hour. Then when the visitors had gone, I sat for a little while with Asta in the drawing-room to get cool. She looked very sweet in her simple lace blouse, short white skirt, and white shoes. Exertion had heightened the

tint of her cheeks, and something of the old expression had returned to her eyes.

As we sat chatting, a peculiar low whistle suddenly reached our ears.

I listened. The call was repeated, and seemed to come from the room above.

“It’s Dad,” the girl said. “Of late he seems to have taken to whistling like that. Why, I can’t tell, for we have no dogs.”

We listened again, and it was repeated a third time, a short shrill call of a peculiar note. Apparently he was in his room directly over the drawing-room—which was the bedroom—and the window being open we could hear distinctly.

Again it was repeated, when Asta rose, and, going to the window, shouted up—

“Who are you calling, Dad?”

“Oh, nobody, dear,” was his reply. “I—I didn’t know you were there. I thought you were with Mr Kemball in the garden.”

The incident held me speechless for a few minutes, for I had suddenly recollected that after I had encountered Shaw at Titmarsh, on the occasion of the discovery of poor Guy, I had heard an exactly similar whistle. It was a peculiar note which, once heard, was not quickly forgotten.

We met Shaw outside on the lawn a few minutes later, when Asta exclaimed—

“Why have you got into the habit of whistling so horribly, Dad? One could understand it if we had dogs. But to whistle to nothing seems so idiotic.”

“All, so it is, dear,” he replied, laughing. “But I was not whistling to nothing. I was trying to call Muir, the gardener, from the window. I could see him at work over by the croquet lawn, but the old fellow gets very deaf nowadays.”

Such was Shaw's explanation. It was surely not an unusual circumstance, yet it was full of meaning when regarded in the light of what afterwards transpired.

As I walked with him, and he discussed our projected trip over those fine level roads of France, I could not help wondering why he had uttered that peculiar call on that well-remembered morning at Titmarsh Court.

A fortnight later, in the crimson of the glorious afterglow, we swung down the hill into the quaint old-world village of Arnay-le-Duc, in the Côte d'Or, a quiet, lethargic place built around its great old château, now, alas! in ruins since the Huguenots gained their victory there under Coligny in 1570. Scarcely had we entered the silent village street, the echoes of which were awakened by our siren, when we pulled up before the long, low-built Hôtel de la Poste, a building painted grey, with *jalousies* of the same colour, and high sloping roof of slate, like many of those ancient hostelries one finds on the great highways of France—the posting houses of the days of Louis Quatorze, which nowadays bear the golden double A of the Automobile Association.

We were quite a merry trio, for since leaving England Asta had become almost her old self. The complete change of surroundings had wrought in her a wonderful improvement, and she looked sweet and dainty in her pale mauve motor-bonnet and silk dust-coat. Shaw wore dark spectacles, pleading that the whiteness of the roads pained his eyes. But I had shrewd suspicion that they were worn for disguise, for, curiously enough, of an evening he never removed them.

What did he fear in France?

That morning we had left Melun, where we had spent the night at the Grand Monarque, and after driving through the delightful Fôret de Fontainebleau, had lunched at the Hôtel de l'Épée in busy Auverre, and then spun away over the straight wide *route nationale* through Vermenton, Avallon, and quiet old Saulieu, in the midst of the rich vinelands, until we had accomplished the steep hills between that place and Arnay-le-Duc.

It was our intention to get on to Mâcon, a hundred kilometres farther, that

night, but while we were sitting at dinner, in the unpretentious little *salle à manger*, eating a tasty meal of trout and cutlets, washed down by an old and perfect bottle of Beaune, Harris, the chauffeur, who had been hired for the tour because he knew the French roads, came and informed us of a slight breakdown of the engine, which would take him at least a couple of hours or so to repair.

“Then we can’t get on to Mâcon to-night, that’s very certain,” remarked Shaw.

“That’s a pity, Dad,” exclaimed Asta, “for I wanted to spend a few hours there. I’ve heard it is a wonderful place to buy antiques, and I want some old crucifixes to add to my collection.”

“Never mind, dear,” he said, “we will lunch there to-morrow. We can’t expect to go through France without a single mishap. Very well, Harris,” he added, “we’ll stay here to-night.”

Three travellers in the wine trade, men who tucked their serviettes into their collars, and who ate and drank heartily, were our table companions, and soon we were all chatting merrily in French, while Madame and her two daughters waited upon us.

The room was at the back, and looked out upon the spacious old courtyard into which, in days bygone, the dusty Lyons mail used to rumble over the cobbles. It was bare, with highly polished oak floor, a mirror on the walls, and an old buffet, as is the style in French inns, while when we ascended to our rooms we found the same bareness and cleanliness pervading.

My window looked out upon the village street. The floor was carpetless and polished, the bed an old-fashioned wooden one, and besides a chair, a chest of drawers, and a washstand, the only other furniture was a japanned iron stand of hooks upon which to hang coats—that article which is common in every hotel from Archangel to Reggio, and from Ekaterinburg to Lisbon.

After a wash, we met below and strolled about the village, which, three hundred kilometres distant from Paris, and two hundred from Lyons, was, we found, a charming old-world place, once important, but now, alas!

decayed and forgotten in the mad hurry of our modern world. In the heart of the wine-country, with the vines in lines with great regularity everywhere, it is still a place with a certain amount of commerce, but surely not so important or busy as in the days when on an average two hundred travelling coaches passed through daily.

We idled in the old courtyard watching Harris making his repairs, and after a final smoke upon the bench outside, we all retired about ten o'clock, at which hour the whole village seemed already in profound slumber.

Shaw's room was, I found, next to mine, but the communicating door was shut and bolted, while Asta was at the farther end of the corridor. The long journey and the fresh air had caused a great drowsiness to overcome me, and I was exceedingly glad to turn in. A peal of old bells were clanging somewhere as I blew out my candle, and a few minutes later I must have dropped off to sleep.

How long I slept I know not, but I awoke suddenly by feeling a strange touch upon my cheek, soft, almost imperceptible, yet chilly—a peculiar feeling that I cannot adequately describe. The contact, whatever it was, thrilled me, and as I opened my eyes I saw the grey light of dawn was just appearing. My face was towards the window, and as I looked I saw distinctly upon my pillow the silhouette of a dark and shadowy hand—a hand with weird, claw-like fingers.

Startled, I sat up in bed, but when I looked it had vanished.

It was as though the hand of the Angel of Death himself had touched me! At that instant I recollected the words written by Melvill Arnold before he died.

Holding my breath, and wondering at first whether I had not been dreaming, I looked about me. But there was nothing—absolutely nothing.

My first impulse was to shout, alarm Shaw, and tell him of my uncanny experience, but I could hear him snoring soundly in the adjoining room. So I crept out of bed and examined the communicating door. It was still bolted, just as I had left it.

Yet I still recollected most distinctly that touch upon my cheek. And I still had the black silhouette of that phantom hand photographed indelibly upon my memory.

I tried to persuade myself that the incident was but a mere chimera of my overwrought imagination, but, alas! to no avail.

I had actually seen Something with my own eyes!

But what could that weird Something have been?

Of what evil had Melvill Arnold desired to warn me when he had scrawled those curious final words before expiring?

Chapter Seventeen.

A Further Problem.

I had seen the sign of the Hand against which Melvill Arnold had warned me with final effort before he expired.

I could not close my eyes again. Thoroughly awakened, I lay trying to convince myself that it was but a bad dream. Yet so distinct had been that touch, that I still felt the repulsive contact that had thrilled me and left upon me such a lasting impression.

In the uncertain light of early morning one's brain is often full of weird fancies, and as I lay there wondering, a thousand curious unreal conjectures floated through my mind.

I was not old, yet in my life I had probably travelled more, and seen more, than most men of my age. Of little love affairs I had had, of course, one or two. None of them had been serious—none, until the present.

Yes, I may as well here confess it. I loved Asta Seymour.

From the first moment that she had met me in that lonely country road, and I had sat by her side in the car, she had exercised over me a strange and fatal fascination. I found myself beneath the spell of her bewitching beauty.

I was drawn towards her by some strange, irresistible, unknown power—drawn to her as the moth is drawn towards the candle.

Fascinated alike by the mystery surrounding her foster-father and by her sweet pensive face, I had been constantly in her company. My thoughts were ever of her, to the oblivion of all else in the world. She was all in all to me, and I was now involuntarily her slave, so entangled had I become in the net of her sweet and wondrous charm. Ah yes! I loved her—loved her with all the strength of my being, with all the passion of my soul.

But I had not spoken. My secret was as yet my own.

Nevertheless, it was in order to be near her that I, like Nicholson, had accepted Shaw's invitation; in order also to protect her, for, knowing what I did of the man's peril of arrest, I had been seized by a strange presage of evil that might befall her.

I lay awake, listening to the clanging of the old bells of a monastery near by, and thinking it all over. Yes, in those few weeks I had grown to love her, even though she undoubtedly was in possession of some strange if not guilty secret.

Yet how could I reveal my heart to her while recollections of poor Guy still, filled her mind? No, I must wait and watch in patience, my heart tortured constantly by the burning fires of unspoken love.

Thinking, reflecting, pondering, resolving, I still lay there, when suddenly I became conscious that my friend in the adjoining room was no longer snoring.

I heard a curious sound. He gave a quick, loud gasp, as though of alarm, followed by a murmured growl. Was he speaking in his sleep? I listened attentively until my ears caught another sound. He had risen and was moving about his room.

I was rather pleased than otherwise, for it relieved the tension, and I breathed more freely. The apparition of that claw-like hand before my face had, I believe, somewhat upset my nerves.

"Is that you, Shaw?" I called out, but there was no response.

All was quiet. The movement in the adjoining room had ceased.

Already I had satisfied myself that nobody could enter my room, both doors being bolted on the inside, but I slipped again out of bed, and, going to the communicating door, rapped upon it, crying—

"Shaw! Shaw! Are you asleep?"

"Hulloa?" growled a sleepy voice. "Why, what's up, eh?"

"Nothing," I laughed. "Are you still in bed?"

“Of course I am, why? What’s the matter? Anything wrong?”

“No, nothing,” I replied. “Only I heard you groaning, that’s all. Talking in your sleep, I expect.”

“I—I didn’t know,” he said. “Sorry, Kemball, if I disturbed you.”

“All right,” I laughed, and then returned to bed again.

I pondered over the fact that while he certainly had been upon, his feet—for I distinctly heard the creaking of the beeswaxed boards—a moment before I called, yet he made pretence of being asleep. The only explanation was that, while asleep, he had got out of bed, a not unusual circumstance with some people, and with that surmise I had to be content.

Truly, that night had been fraught with a strange inexplicable terror. Though dawn spread slowly, and from where I lay I could see the first flush of crimson in the sky heralding the sun’s coming, yet I could not rid myself of that phantom hand, those thin skeleton fingers that had touched my cheek and left a chilly impression upon it.

I rose and looked into the tiny oval toilet-glass, startled when I saw evidence that my experience was an actual tangible one.

Upon my left cheek was a faint red mark, almost like a scratch, where the chilly hand had touched me!

Carefully I examined it, but there seemed no abrasion of the skin. By the deadly contact it had been irritated, inflamed—seared, it seemed, by the chill finger of the dreaded Unknown.

Moving without a sound, so as not to attract Shaw’s attention, I made a minute survey of the apartment, examining the walls to assure myself of no hidden doorway such as are common in old houses of that description. But there was none. The only modes of ingress were both securely locked and bolted.

Soon after six o’clock I dressed and went out. I could remain in that chamber no longer. I wandered through the quaint old village, already

agog, for Arnay-le-Duc retires early and is astir with the rising of the sun. Ascending the hill, I had a look at the round frowning towers of the ancient stronghold of the Counts d'Arnay, now, alas! grey, weather-beaten, and ruined. In them a last stand was made by a party of the 79th Regiment of Infantry against the Prussians in 1870, when the latter brought some field-pieces to bear upon the place and completed the ruin which time had long ago begun. Part of the village had afterwards been burned by the enemy, who had already devastated the whole of the smiling countryside of the Côte d'Or, and laid bare the valley of the Yonne with fire and sword.

As I stood beneath the battered walls where great ugly holes showed as mute evidence of the destruction wrought by the German guns, a beautiful panorama of sloping wine-lands, of river and rich pastures spread before me, while behind lay the long open road to Lyons, fringed on each side by high poplars planted at regular intervals and running straight as an arrow across the blue distant plain to old-world Mâcon.

Over that road we sped two hours later at a speed which would never be allowed in England, and raising a perfect wall of dust behind us. Asta, seated between Shaw and myself, seemed unusually bright and happy, for she laughed merrily, and declared herself delighted with the novelty and change of the journey.

"What was the matter with you early this morning, Kemball?" inquired my host presently with a laugh.

"You woke me up suddenly, and I believed that you were unwell!"

"No," I said. "On the contrary, I was awake, and I heard you sigh and groan, therefore I believed you were ill."

"You were awake?" he echoed, regarding me sharply through his dark spectacles. "Then—then I must have had the nightmare or something, eh?"

"Probably you had," I said. Then I added, "I didn't pass a very good-night myself."

"I hate sleeping in strange beds," Asta declared.

“One has to get used to them on a motor-tour,” remarked Shaw, leaning back again, his face set straight before him.

I was half inclined to relate my weird experience, yet I felt that if I did Asta might only regard me as a frightened fool.

Therefore the subject dropped when next moment, as the road ran over the hillside, we burst forth into admiration of the wide and magnificent panorama with a splendid old château with numberless round-slated turrets, perched upon a huge rock rising from the valley in the foreground—a huge, mediaeval fortress, yet still inhabited. Below clustered the sloping roofs of a small village within the ponderous walls of the château, entrance to which was by two ancient gates, with guard-houses built above them—a place which long ago had been the stronghold of one of the robber-barons of the Yonne.

Truly the Lyons road is full of variety and picturesqueness, running, as it does, through those rich vinelands and mountains of the Côte d’Or, before descending to the valley where the broad Saone flows south to join the mighty Rhone.

Passing through the beautiful Saussey forest, where the thick trees met in many places overhead, we shot through Ivry village, and, fifty kilometres after leaving Arnay-le-Duc, were compelled to slow down on entering the busy agricultural town of Chalons-sur-Saone. There we came to the river-bank, following it through a number of villages well-known in the wine-country, St. Loup, Beaumont, Tournus, and Fleurville, until at last we found ourselves passing slowly over the uneven cobbles and among the curious high-gabled houses of old-world Mâcon.

There, at the Hotel Terminus, we lunched, and afterwards, while Shaw sat smoking, I went forth with Asta to an antiquarian, to whom we were recommended, in order to buy antique crosses.

In the musty old shop, down in the older part of the town, kept by a short, bald-headed, but urbane Frenchman, we found several treasures, beautiful old crucifixes of carved ivory and mother-of-pearl which Asta at once purchased in great delight and at moderate prices.

I bought an old thumb-ring and a couple of other trifles, and having plenty

of time at our disposal we strolled into the old cathedral and had a look round the market-place.

Ah! how delightful it was to be her escort; how sweet to have her even for one single hour alone!

As we retraced our way to the hotel with halting steps, I resolved to tell her of my weird experience of the previous night.

“A curious thing happened to me last night—or rather very early this morning,” I said, turning to her as we walked.

She looked quickly into my face and her lips were pressed together. But only for a second.

“What was that? Tell me,” she said.

“Well. Do you see upon my left cheek a long red mark? It’s going away now, but it was very plain this morning,” I said.

“Yes,” she replied. “I noticed it when we started. It hardly shows at all now.”

“Well, its cause is quite inexplicable—a mystery,” I said. “I am in no way superstitious, and I am no believer in the supernatural, but in that inn at Arnay-le-Duc there is a Something—something uncanny. I was sound asleep when, just before night gave place to day, a cold hand touched my cheek—a phantom hand that left the mark which you see?”

“A hand?” she gasped, staring at me, her lips pale and cheeks suddenly blanched. “Explain it. I—I can’t understand.”

“I awoke quickly at the chill death-like contact, and saw the hand a few inches from my face—thin, claw-like, and yet a dark shadowy phantom which disappeared in an instant, even before I, so suddenly awakened, could realise what it actually was. But it was a hand—of that I am absolutely positive.”

“Yes,” she said slowly, in a low, hoarse voice, nodding her head and pausing as though reflecting deeply. “Yes, Mr Kemball, you were not

mistaken. I—I, too, strangely enough, had a very similar experience about six weeks ago, while staying up at Scarborough with Louise Oliver, an old schoolfellow of mine. I, too, saw the terrible Thing—the Hand!”

“You!” I gasped, staring at her. “You have seen it!”

In response she nodded, her eyes set straight before her, but no word escaped her white, pent-up lips.

Chapter Eighteen.

I Make a Discovery.

The Terminus Hotel at Lyons is, as you know, a large, artistically furnished place at the Perrache Station, an hotel with a huge and garish restaurant below, decorated in the style known as *art nouveau*. It is a busy spot, where rushing travellers are continuously going and coming, and where the excitable Frenchman, fearing to lose his train, is seen at his best.

It was there we arrived about six o'clock, and at seven we sat together, a merry trio, at dinner. The cooking was perfect, the wines excellent, and after dinner Shaw mentioned that he had letters to write. Therefore I seized the opportunity to stroll out with Asta, for it was pleasant to walk after so many hours in the car.

She was dressed neatly in black coat and skirt, and a small straw hat trimmed with black ribbon—mourning for Guy Nicholson—and as we wandered out our careless footsteps led us across that wide square called the Cours du Midi, and down upon the Quai de la Charité beside the broad, swiftly flowing Rhone, the water of which ran crimson in the brilliant afterglow.

A hot, breathless evening, in which half Lyons seemed to be taking an airing along the Quais of that winding river-bank which traverses the handsome city. We had turned our backs upon the high railway bridge which spans the river, and set our faces towards the centre of the city, when I noticed that Asta seemed again very silent and thoughtful.

I inquired the reason, when she replied—

"I've been thinking over your curious experience of last night. I—I've been wondering."

"Wondering what?"

"I've been trying to discern what connection your experience had with my

own up in Yorkshire," she said. "I saw the hand distinctly—a thin, scraggy hand just as you saw it. But I have remained silent because—well, because I could not convince myself that such a thing was actually a reality."

"Describe the whole circumstance," I urged. "On the occasion when you saw it, was the door of your room locked?"

"Most certainly," was her reply. "Louise, who is married to a solicitor in Scarborough, invited me up to stay a week with her, and I went alone, Dad having gone to London. The house was on the Esplanade, one of the row of big grey houses that face the sea on the South Cliff. The family consisted only of Louise, her husband, three maids, and myself, as visitor. My room was on the second floor, in the front facing the sea, and my experience was almost identical with that of yourself last night. I was awakened just before dawn by feeling a cold touch upon my cheek. And opening my eyes I saw the hand—it seemed to be the horrible hand of Death himself!"

"Most extraordinary!" I ejaculated.

"Since then, Mr Kemball, I have wondered whether; that touch was not sent as warning of impending evil—sent to forewarn me of the sudden death of the man I loved!"

I was silent. The circumstances, so curiously identical, were certainly alarming. Indeed, I could see that the narration of my extraordinary experience had terrified her. She seemed to have become suddenly most solicitous regarding my welfare, for after a slight pause she exclaimed anxiously—

"Do, Mr Kemball, take every precaution to secure your own safety. Somehow I—well, I don't know how it is, but I feel that the hand is seen as warning—a warning against something which threatens—against some evil of which we have no expectation, or—"

"It warned you of the terrible blow which so soon afterwards fell upon you," I interrupted. "And it has warned me—of what?"

She shook her head.

“How can we tell?” she asked.

In a flash the remembrance of that bronze cylinder and the dire misfortune which had befallen every one of its possessors occurred to me. I recollected the ancient hieroglyphics upon the scraps of brown crinkled papyri, and their translation. But surely the apparition of the Hand could have no connection with what had been written long ago, before our Christian era?

“Did you actually feel the cold touch of the Hand?” I asked her in eagerness.

“Yes. It awakened me, just as it awakened you.”

“And there was no one else in the house but the persons you named. I mean you are positive that you were not a victim of any practical joke, Miss Seymour?” I asked.

“Quite certain. The door of my room was locked and bolted. It was at the head of the stairs. There were four rooms on that floor, but only mine was occupied.”

“The window? If I recollect aright, most of the houses on the Esplanade at Scarborough have balconies,” I remarked.

“Mine had a balcony, it is true, but both windows were securely fastened. I recollected latching them before retiring, as is my habit.”

“Then nobody could possibly have entered there!”

“Nobody. Yet I have a distinct recollection of having been touched by, and having actually seen, the hand being withdrawn from my pillow. I rushed out of the room and alarmed the house. In a few moments every one came out of their rooms, but when I told my story they laughed at me in ridicule, and Louise took me back to bed, declaring that I must have had a bad dream. But I could sleep there no longer, and returned home next day. I did not tell Dad, because I knew that he would only poke fun at me.”

For some moments I did not speak. Surely ours was a strange

conversation in that busy modern thoroughfare, amid the café idlers seated out in the roadway, and the lounging groups enjoying the cool air from the river after the heat and burden of the day.

Strange it was—very strange—that almost the same inexplicable circumstances had occurred to her as to me.

Had I been superstitious I certainly should have been inclined to the belief that the uncanny hand—which was so material that it had left its imprint upon my flesh—was actually some evil foreboding connected with the bronze cylinder—the Thing which the papyri decreed shall not speak until the Day of Awakening. Was not the curse of the Wolf-god placed upon any one who sought knowledge of the contents of that cylinder, which had been placed for security in the tomb of the Great Merenptah, King of Kings? Even contact with the human hand was forbidden under pain of the wrath of the Sun-god, and of Osiris the Eternal.

As I walked there I recalled the quaint decipher of those ancient hieroglyphics.

Yes, the incident was the most weird and inexplicable that had ever happened to me. The whole problem indeed defied solution.

I had not attempted to open the cylinder, nor to seek knowledge of what was contained therein. It still reposed in the safe in the library at Upton End, together with that old newspaper, the threatening letter, and the translation of the papyri.

We wandered along the quay, Asta appearing unusually pale and pensive.

“I wonder you did not recount your strange experience to your father,” I exclaimed presently.

“It happened in the house of a friend, and not at home. Therefore I resolved to say nothing. Indeed I had grown to believe that, after all, it must have been mere imagination—until you described what happened to you last night. That has caused me to; think—it has convinced me that what I saw was material and real.”

“It’s a mystery, Miss Seymour,” I said; “one which we must both endeavour to elucidate. Let us say nothing—not even to your father. We will keep our own counsel and watch.”

When we returned to the hotel we found Shaw awaiting us. Asta, being fatigued, retired to her room, and afterwards he and I strolled down to one of those big cafés in the Place Bellecour. A string band was playing a waltz, and hundreds of people were sitting out upon the pavement drinking their *bock* or *mazagran*.

Darkness had fallen, and with it the air became fresher—welcome indeed after those long hours on the white, dusty road of the Bourgogne. My host, in the ease of straw hat and grey flannel suit, still wore his dark glasses, and as we sat together at one of the tin tables near the kerb a man and a woman at the adjacent table rose and left, so that we were comparatively alone and in the shadow.

After we had been chatting merrily—for he seemed in the best of spirits and full of admiration of the way in which the French roads were kept—he removed his spectacles and wiped them.

As he did so he laughed across at me, saying in a low voice—

“It’s a nuisance to be compelled to wear these—but I suppose I must exercise caution. One has always to bear the punishment of one’s indiscretion.”

“Why?”

He smiled grimly, but remained silent.

Even though he had admitted that he was not what he represented himself to be; even though I knew that he was an adventurer, and even though the dead man Arnold had urged me not to trust him implicitly, yet I somehow could not help liking him. He was always so full of quiet humour, and his small eyes twinkled merrily when those quaint remarks and caustic criticisms fell from his lips.

“I thought that the danger which existed that evening in Totnes had passed,” I remarked.

“Only temporarily, I fear. Thanks to your generous aid, Kemball, I was able to slip through their fingers, as I have done on previous occasions. But I fear that the meshes of the net may one day be woven a trifle too closely. I shouldn’t really care very much if it were not for Asta. You know how devoted I am to her,” he added, leaning his arms upon! the small table and bending towards me as he spoke.

“And if any little contretemps did happen to you?” I asked.

“Asta would, alas! be left alone,” he said in a low, hoarse voice. “Poor girl! I—I fear she would find a great change in her circumstances.”

It was upon the tip of my tongue to acknowledges to him how madly I loved her, and of my intention of asking her to be my wife, yet somehow I hesitated, fearing, I think, lest he might scorn such a proposition, for I remembered how, after all, she was his sole companion, and that without her he would be lonely and helpless. She was the one bright spot in his soured life, he had declared to me more than once. Though scarcely yet out of her teens, she directed the large household at Lydford with all the genius and economy of an experienced housewife. Yes! hers had been a strange career—the adopted daughter of a man who was so often compelled to go into hiding in strange guises and in strange places.

“Let us hope nothing will happen,” I said cheerfully. “Why should it?”

His face broadened into a meaning grin, and he readjusted his hideous round spectacles and lit a fresh cigar.

“Really, Mr Shaw,” I said, “your dark forebodings and your strange declarations puzzle me. True, I have endeavoured to serve your interests, and I regard you as a friend, heedless of what I cannot help suspecting. Yet you are never open and frank with me concerning one thing—your friendship with Melvill Arnold.”

He started at mention of the name—a fact which caused me to ponder.

“I hardly follow you.”

“Well,” I said. “Shortly before leaving England I received a visit from a certain Mrs Olliffe—a lady living near Bath. I believe you know her?”

“Yes!” he gasped, grasping the edge of the table and half rising from his seat. “Then she has seen you!” he cried. “What did she tell you?”

“Several things,” I replied. “She alleges that you were not Arnold’s friend—but his fiercest enemy.”

“She has told you that!” he cried bitterly. “And what else has that woman said against me?”

“Nothing much.”

“Come,” he exclaimed boldly. “Tell me, Kemball, man to man, all that woman has said.”

I saw that his manner had changed, his small eyes were flashing with fire, while upon his pale cheeks showed two scarlet patches.

Through my brain surged recollections of the woman’s allegations, but, seeing him in such anger, I did not desire to irritate him further, therefore I declared that whatever the lady had said was in no way derogatory to him.

“You are not telling me the truth, Kemball,” he declared, looking straight into my eyes. “I know her too well. She has lied to you about me.”

“Probably,” was my reply. “I happen by a curious chance to know the character of the lady, and it is hardly such as would inspire me with confidence.”

“You know her then!” he exclaimed, staring at me hard.

“I know that at one time she passed as Lady Lettice Lancaster, and was sentenced to penal servitude as an adventuress.”

“Who told you that? How do you know that?” he asked quickly.

“It is surely common knowledge,” was my reply. “Therefore please dismiss from your mind that anything she might say to your detriment would impair our friendship.”

“Ah yes!” he cried suddenly, taking my hand and wringing it warmly. “I know, Kemball, that you, being my friend, will refuse to be influenced in any way by evil report. That woman is, as you rightly say, an unscrupulous adventuress. I knew her once—before her conviction—but I have since lost sight of her. Yet, I know she is my enemy, and—well, if it were to her interest she would have no compunction in giving me away to Scotland Yard.”

“Then she is your enemy?”

“My worst enemy.”

“Ah! Then I understand the reason of her allegations,” I said, and a moment later the subject dropped.

We returned to the hotel just before midnight, and I ascended in the lift to my room. Shaw shook my hand and turned into his own room.

From my window I found that I commanded a wide, view of the great Place Carnot and the adjacent streets, picturesque with their many lights. I had not switched on my light, and was standing gazing below, when, of a sudden, I distinguished Shaw hurrying out of the hotel again and crossing the Place towards the Pont du Midi, the iron bridge on the right which spans the Rhone.

He had in a moment changed both hat and coat, I noticed, and therefore his sudden exit, after having led me to believe he was about to turn in, struck me as curious. So, without hesitation, I, too, slipped on another coat, and putting on a golf cap descended in the lift, and was soon speeding away in the direction he had taken.

When halfway across the bridge I saw him walking slowly before me, therefore I held back and watched. I followed him across the river, when he suddenly turned to the left along the Quai Claude Bernard, until at the foot of the next bridge, the Guillotière, he turned to the left along the Cours Gambetta until he came to a small square, the Place du Pont.

There he suddenly halted beneath a lamp and glanced at his watch. Then he idled across to the corner of one of the half-dozen dark, deserted streets which converged there, as though awaiting some one.

For a quarter of an hour he remained there calmly smoking, and quite unsuspicious of my proximity.

But his patience was at last rewarded, because from the shadow there emerged a female figure in dark jacket and skirt, to which after a moment’s hesitation he went forward with words of greeting.

They met beneath the light of a street lamp, and from where I stood, hidden in a doorway, I was sufficiently close to get a view of her countenance.

I held my breath.

It was that of the woman who had stood in the dock of the Old Bailey and been convicted of fraud—the woman who now lived in such style at Ridgehill Manor, and who was known in Bath as Mrs Olliffe.

For a moment they stood there in the night, their hands clasped, neither uttering a single word.

And yet Shaw had only an hour before declared her to be his most bitter and dangerous enemy!

Chapter Nineteen.

Falling Shadows.

I watched Shaw strolling slowly with, the woman through the ill-lit back streets of Lyons, speaking rapidly with her. She, however, appeared to listen in silent obstinacy.

He grew angry, yet she seemed to remain obdurate.

She was dressed plainly in tweed skirt and blouse *à la touriste*, and wore a hat with a long veil in the fashion so often adopted by American women visiting Europe.

They traversed the working-class district on the eastern side of the Rhone, where from behind the dingy red blinds of the cafés came the sounds of music and laughter, and where many groups of factory hands were idling about enjoying the cool night air. It was a noisy bizarre district, which favoured me, for I could watch the pair unobserved.

At the corner of the Place Morand they halted for a few moments, while he emphasised his words by striking his palm with his clenched fist, and she stood listening, her gaze turned towards the ground. Then, together, they crossed the big square to the left and traversed the bridge, passing beneath the deep shadows of the high, handsome Hôtel de Ville.

Though at times I was quite near them, yet I could not, of course, catch a single word uttered by either. Only by their actions and gesticulations could I judge, and it appeared plain that she had met him under compulsion, and was refusing to act as he desired.

And yet he had only that very evening declared the woman to be his worst and most dangerous enemy!

I reflected as I strode slowly on, keeping the two dark figures in sight. Shaw had, after all, never concealed from me the fact that he was wanted by the police for some offence. His sportsmanlike attitude, combined with his deep devotion to Asta, caused me involuntarily to like

him. Perhaps it was because I loved her and he was her foster-father, always kind, indulgent, and solicitous for her welfare, that I really held him in esteem, even though he might be an adventurer.

Yet why had this woman Olliffe—as she now called herself—declared that Shaw had been Arnold's bitterest enemy? Surely it had been through my host himself that the woman knew of my existence, and my friendship with the dead man of mystery!

But even while I watched them turn the corner by the Hôtel de Ville, and stroll up that broad, deserted thoroughfare—in day so busy with its rows of fine shops, but now quiet and deserted—towards the Place Bellecour, my thoughts reverted to Asta, she who had lost her lover, but whom I had grown to love so truly and so well.

Suddenly I turned upon my heel and abandoned pursuit of the pair. What mattered it to me? Their affairs, whatever they might be, were their own. I loved Asta. Indeed, because of my deepening affection for her I had accompanied them upon that tour which had for its object my love's forgetfulness of the black tragedy which had so suddenly overshadowed her young life.

Guy Nicholson had promised to reveal something to me in strictest confidence, but, alas! his lips had been mysteriously closed before he had had opportunity. Closed by whom?

I turned down upon the quays and, following the Rhone bank, was soon back at the hotel.

I left my hat in my own room and, on entering our private sitting-room found, to my delight, that Asta was still there. She had been reading and had just risen as I entered, for she stood by the pale-green curtains at the window, holding a fold of them in her hand, and looking forth into the starlit night, her slim young figure clearly outlined against their dull soft green, a becoming rose-flush upon her cheeks, her lips slightly parted, and her eyes bewitchingly bright.

"I've been waiting for Dad, Mr Kemball," she said. "Do you know where he is?"

“Out, I think,” was my reply. “I suppose he’s smoking in one of the cafés. He believed that you had gone to bed, I expect.”

And I threw myself lazily into a chair.

I thought that her eyes filled with tears as she turned back towards the long open windows and gazed out into the Place below. And I confess that this surprised me.

“You are upset!” I said softly, rising and standing at her side. “What’s the matter, Miss Seymour? Tell me, confide in me—your friend.”

“I—I hardly know,” she faltered, in a strange hoarse voice. I took her hand, and found it trembling. “But—”

“But what?” I asked. Her face was turned away from me towards the night.

“Well,” she said, after a long pause, as though reluctant to tell me, “I fear that Dad has gone out to meet some one. When we arrived in this hotel I saw among his letters a handwriting which I recognised.”

“The writing of a woman, eh?”

She started, turning to me quickly.

“How did you know?” she gasped.

“Well—I guessed,” I laughed.

“You guessed correctly. And I have suspicion that he has gone out to-night to meet her in secret—to—”

I waited for her to conclude her sentence, but her lips closed with a snap. The colour had left her cheeks while in her eyes was a strange wild look of fear.

“In confidence, Miss Seymour, I may as well tell you that I saw him half-an-hour ago walking with a lady—a person who lives near Bath under the name of Olliffe.”

“Then my suspicions are correct!” she cried. “That woman has regained her power over him. My poor Dad! He has fallen into her clutches. Ah, Mr Kemball, if you only knew all!” she added. “If only I dare tell you!”

“Why not tell me? Surely I am your friend! You may trust me not to betray any secret,” I said in deep earnestness.

“They have met to-night. There is some mischief brewing. She is cruel, evil, unscrupulous.”

“I know—and a convicted criminal.”

“You know her, then?” she asked quickly, looking into my eyes.

“Yes. I am acquainted with Lady Lettice Lancaster, as she was once called, and I know that she was sentenced at the Old Bailey for a series of remarkably ingenious frauds. Is she an associate of your father’s?”

“She was once, I believe—before her sentence,” replied the girl. “She exercised over him a strange, incomprehensible fascination, as an evil woman so often can over a man. He acted at her bidding, and—well, I know but little, Mr Kemball, but, alas! what I know is, in itself, too much. I am surprised that Dad, knowing the woman’s character, should dare to again associate himself with her.”

“She introduced me to her brother, George King. Do you know him?”

“Yes. He sometimes passes as her brother and sometimes as butler or chauffeur. But he is her husband, Henry Earnshaw, sometimes known as Hoare.”

“And your father assisted them in their frauds, eh?”

“That is my supposition. I have no actual knowledge, for it was several years ago, when I was but a girl,” was her reply.

“And you fear that the outcome of the meeting to-night may be another mutual arrangement?”

She nodded sadly in the affirmative.

“The combination of Dad and these people would, indeed, be a formidable one,” she said. “Ah! if he would only take my advice and end it all! He has sufficient to live upon comfortably. Why does he court disaster in this way? He has always been, so very good to me, ever since I was a tiny child, that I cannot help loving him.”

I did not reply. What could I say? I longed to speak frankly to her and take her out of that atmosphere of evil. Yet what could I do? How could I act?

“I have a suspicion that poor Mr Arnold was a friend of that woman,” I said a few moments later, as she stood against the table before me.

“Yes,” was her reply. “He was her friend and benefactor, I believe. He did all he could for her defence before the judge, but to no avail.”

“Somebody betrayed her into the hands of the police?”

“Dad told me so once. He believes it to have been her own husband, the man Earnshaw.”

I did not speak for a few moments. I was thinking of that strange letter which had threatened vengeance against the mysterious scholar, Mr Arnold. The latter had been accused of what he had not done, yet that very accusation had given me a clue to some very curious circumstances, and had forewarned me as to the true character of the wealthy widow of Ridgehill Manor.

“Has your father any ground for declaring the woman’s conviction to be due to Earnshaw?”

“Yes, I believe so; but he has never told any one, except myself.”

“But if he and Mrs Olliffe become on friendly terms again, he will doubtless reveal what he knows.”

“Probably. Then the man Earnshaw will turn against her—and against Dad also. In that lies the great peril for Dad which I apprehend.”

I realised how far-seeing she was, how carefully she had weighed all the consequences, and how anxious she was for her father’s safety. On the

other hand, however, Shaw was certainly not a man to run any unnecessary risks. From what I had seen of him, he appeared full of craft and cunning, as became one who lived upon his wits.

“Tell me what you know concerning Mr Arnold’s association with this woman of a hundred different names,” I urged. “I have a reason for my curiosity.”

“I know but little. Once, when I was about fifteen, Dad and I travelled with Mr Arnold from Vienna to Territet, and met her at the Hôtel des Alpes there. She was very affable and nice to me, and she told me what an excellent friend Mr Arnold had been to her. I recollect the incident quite well, for on that day she bought me a little chain bracelet as a present. I have it now.”

“Your father quarrelled with Arnold, I believe?”

“Yes,” she said. “They had some difference. I never, however, ascertained the real facts. He evidently wished to see me, for he wrote to me making an appointment; and when I went to the hotel for that purpose, I learnt, alas! that he was dead.”

“Had he lived, his intention was to meet your father in secret at Totnes in Devonshire. Why in secret, I wonder?”

“That same question has been puzzling me for a long time, Mr Kemball,” she said quickly. “I have arrived at the conclusion that he feared lest Mrs Olliffe might know of his arrival in England and set some one to watch his movements. He feared her.”

“Then there may have been some reason why the woman desired that they should not meet, eh?”

“Apparently so.”

I reflected. Mrs Olliffe now knew that I had borne a message to Shaw from the dead man who had destroyed a fortune. Did she fear its results, and was she, for that reason, holding out to Shaw the olive branch of peace?

I suggested that to Asta, and she was inclined to agree with me.

“We must do what we can to break off your father’s friendship with this woman,” I declared. “It is distinctly dangerous for him.”

“Yes, Mr Kemball,” she cried. “I only wish we could! I only wish—”

Her sentence was interrupted by a sound which startled both of us. We listened, looking into each other’s serious face without uttering a word. The sound emanated from the next room—Shaw’s bedroom—the door of which was closed.

It was that low, peculiar whistle which I had first heard on the morning I had visited Titmarsh after poor Guy’s mysterious death, and had heard on a second occasion when visiting at Lydford.

“There’s Dad again?” she cried, in a strained voice. “He evidently doesn’t know we are still up.” The whistle was again repeated—a low, long-drawn, peculiar sound, in a high shrill note.

It was not the unconscious whistle of a man thinking, but a sound full of meaning—a distinct call, which even as we listened in silence was repeated a third time.

Chapter Twenty.

The Man with the Crimson Button.

Pale and startled, she raised her finger in a gesture of silence, and we both stole noiselessly from the room, closing the door behind us.

Upon the thick carpet of the corridor we crept past Shaw's door, and Asta disappeared into her own chamber, which adjoined, while I went on to mine.

I could not get that peculiar whistle out of my ears. It seemed as though it were a signal to somebody; yet though I went back to Shaw's door and listened there for a full hour, I heard no sound of any movement. The room was in darkness, and he was, no doubt, already asleep.

When I turned in, I lay a long time thinking over the reason of Shaw's friendship with the woman Olliffe. What Asta had told me only seemed to increase the mystery, rather than diminish it.

I must have dropped off to sleep about two o'clock, puzzled and fagged out by the long hours on the road, when I was suddenly awakened by hearing a loud, shrill scream.

I started up and listened. It was Asta's voice shrieking in terror.

I sprang out into the corridor without a second's hesitation and rapped upon the door, crying—

"What's the matter. Let me in."

In a few seconds she unbolted the door, and opening it I encountered her in a pale pink *robe-de-chambre*, her luxuriant chestnut hair falling about her shoulders, her large dark brown eyes haggard and startled, her hands clenched, her countenance white to the lips.

"What has happened, Miss Seymour?" I asked, glancing quickly around the room.

“I—I hardly know,” she gasped in breathless alarm. “Only—only,” she whispered, in a low voice, “I—I’ve seen the hand—the Hand of Death—again!”

“Seen it again!” I echoed; but she raised her finger and pointed to her father’s door.

“Tell me the circumstances,” I whispered. “There is something very uncanny and unnatural about this which must be investigated. Last night it appeared to me a hundred and twenty miles away, and now you see it to-night. Are you quite sure you saw it.”

I asked the latter question because it was still dark, and she had switched on the electric light.

“I felt a cold rough contact with my cheek, and waking saw the hand again! I burn a night-light—as you see,” and she pointed across to a child’s night-light in a saucer upon the washstand.

“And it vanished as before?”

“Instantly. I thought I heard a slight sound afterwards, but I must have been mistaken.”

“Yes,” I said, making a quick examination of the room, and looking beneath the bed. “There is certainly nothing here.”

I noted that the communicating door between her room and her father’s was still secured by the small brass bolt.

“Well,” I declared, “it is utterly inexplicable.” My voice evidently awakened Shaw, for we heard him tap at the door and ask in a deep, drowsy voice —

“What’s the matter in there, Asta?”

“Oh, nothing at all, Dad,” was the girl’s reply. “Only I fancy there must be a rat in my room—and Mr Kemball is looking for it.”

“Didn’t you scream?” he asked wearily.

“Yes,” I said, as she unbolted the door, and her father entered. “Miss Seymour’s scream woke me up.”

“Did you see the rat?” Shaw asked me.

“No,” I laughed, in an endeavour to conceal our fear. “I expect if there is one it has got away down its hole. I’ve searched, but can find nothing.”

“Ah!” growled the man awakened from his sleep. “That’s the worst of these confounded Continental hotels. Most of them are overrun with vermin. I’ve often had rats in my room. Well, dear,” he added, turning to Asta, “go to bed again, and leave your electric light on. They won’t come out then.”

The girl and I exchanged glances, and after a hearty laugh at the frightened spectacle we all three presented, we again parted, and I returned to my room.

What was the meaning of that inexplicable apparition of the hand? Why had the dying man warned me of it?

I could quite see Asta’s reluctance to tell her father what she had seen, knowing well how he—plain, matter-of-fact man—would laugh at her and declare that she had been dreaming.

But it was no dream. I myself had seen the Thing with my own eyes, while my own cheek only a few hours before had borne witness to its actual existence.

I saw how horrified she was at its reappearance, and what a terrible impression it had produced upon her already overwrought nerves. I knew that she would not again retire that night—and indeed, feeling that some unknown evil was present, I slipped on my clothes and spent the remainder of the night in an armchair, reading a French novel.

Dawn came at last, and as soon as the sun rose I descended, and went out for a long, invigorating walk beside the Rhone.

On my return I met Asta strolling alone under the trees in the Place near the hotel, and referred to the weird incident of the night.

“Ah, Mr Kemball, please do not recall it!” she implored. “It is too horrible! I —I can’t make out what it can be—except that it is a sign to us of impending evil.”

“A sign to us both,” I said. “But whom are we to fear?”

“Perhaps that woman.”

“Is she still in Lyons, I wonder?”

“Probably. About seven o’clock this morning Dad sent an express message to somebody. He called a waiter, and I heard him give the letter, with instructions that it was to be sent at once.”

I said nothing, but half an hour later, by the judicious application of half a louis to the floor waiter, I ascertained that the note had been sent to a Madame Trelawnay, at the Hôtel du Globe, in the Place Bellecour.

Trelawnay was, I recollected, one of the names used by the pseudo Lady Lettice Lancaster. Therefore, after my *café au lait* I excused myself, stepped over to the hotel, and there ascertained that Madame, who had been there for two days, had received the note, packed hurriedly, and an hour later had left the Perrache Station by the Paris express.

On returning I told Asta this, and at eleven o’clock we were again on the white dusty highway—that beautiful road through deep valleys and over blue mountains, the Route d’Italie, which runs from Lyons, through quiet old Chambéry, to Modane and the Alpine frontier. In Chambéry, however, we turned to the left, and ere long found ourselves in that scrupulously clean and picturesque summer resort of the wealthy, Aix-les-Bains.

Shaw, who was in the best of spirits, had laughed heartily over Asta’s adventure with the rat, and as we arrived at our destination he turned to me, expressing a hope that we all three would enjoy “a real good time.”

I had been in Aix several years before, and knew the life—the bains, the casino, the Villa des Fleurs, the fêtes and the boating on the Lac du Bourget, that never-ending round of gaiety amid which the wealthy idler may pass the days of warm sunshine.

And certainly the three weeks we spent at the old-fashioned Europe—in preference to a newer and more garish hotel—were most delightful. I found myself ever at Asta's side, and noted that her beauty was everywhere remarked. She was always smartly but neatly dressed—for Shaw was apparently most generous in the matter of gowns, some of which had come from a well-known dressmaker in the Place Vendôme.

I wondered sometimes, as we sat together in the big *salle à manger* or idled together under the trees in the pretty garden, whether she still thought of poor Guy Nicholson—or whether she was really pleased when alone with me. One fact was quite plain—that the visit had wrought a beneficial change in her. Her large dark eyes were again full of life and sparkle, and her lips smiled deliciously, showing how she enjoyed the brightness and gaiety of life.

Shaw had met accidentally at the Grand Cercle a Frenchman he knew named Count d'Auray, who had a château on the edge of the Lake, and one day he went over to visit him, leaving us to have luncheon together alone.

As we sat on the verandah of the hotel to take our coffee afterwards, I glanced at her. Never had I seen her looking so charming. She was entirely in cream serge, relieved with the slightest touches of pale blue, with a large white hat, long white gloves, and white shoes,—the personification of summer itself. Ah, yes! she was exquisite, I told myself. Yet how strange that she should be the adopted daughter of a man who, though actually a Justice of the Peace, was nevertheless an undesirable.

Time after time had I tried to induce her to reveal to me the reason why Shaw went in such terror of arrest. But she would not betray his secret. For that I admired her—for was she not devoted to him? Did she not owe everything to his kindness and his generosity? Like many another man, I suppose he had been fooled or tricked by a woman, and had, in consequence, to lead a celibate life. In order to bring brightness and youth into his otherwise dull home, he had adopted little Asta as his daughter.

We had been speaking of a forthcoming fête on the following day when, of a sudden, she turned in her chair towards me, and with a calm, serious

look upon her face said—

“Do you know, Mr Kemball, I am greatly worried?”

“Over what?” I asked quickly.

“Well, this morning, when I was walking back from the milliner’s, I saw Earnshaw—that woman’s husband. Fortunately, he did not see me. But she is, I suspect, here in Aix-les-Bains.”

“Why should you fear even if she is?” I asked.

“I—well, I really do not know,” she faltered.

“Only—to tell you in confidence—I believe some evil work is in progress—some base conspiracy.”

“What causes you to suspect that? You do not believe that your father is implicated in it?”

“How can I tell?” she exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. “I am filled with fear always—knowing in what peril he continually exists.”

“I know,” I said. “Why he does not act more judiciously I cannot think. At home, at Lydford, he is surely unsuspected, and in security.”

“I am always telling him so, but, alas! he will not listen.”

“You said that he is now under the influence of that woman.”

“I fear so,” was her low reply, as she sighed despairingly.

We rose and strolled out together to the car which was waiting to take us for a run over the hills and among the mountains by the Pont de la Caille to Geneva, seventy kilometres distant. The afternoon was glorious, and as we sat side by side we chatted and laughed merrily, both of us forgetting all our apprehensions and our cares.

Ah, yes! those days were truly idyllic days, for I loved her devotedly, and each hour I passed in her society the bond became stronger and more

firmly forged.

But could she reciprocate my affection? Ay, that was the great and crucial question I had asked myself—yea, a thousand times. I dared not yet reveal to her the secret of my heart, for even still she thought and spoke of that honest, upright fellow whose untimely end was so enshrouded in mystery.

We dined at Geneva, in the huge *salle à manger* of the Beau Rivage, which overlooked the beautiful lake, tranquil and golden in the sunset, with Mont Blanc, towering and snow-capped, showing opposite against the clear evening sky. We strolled for half an hour on the terrace, where the English tourists were taking their coffee after dinner, and then, in the fading twilight, Harris drove us back again to Aix, where we arrived about ten o'clock, after a day long to be remembered.

Asta held my hand for a moment in the hall, raising her splendid eyes to mine, and then wishing me good-night, mounted in the lift to her room. Afterwards I went along to the *fumoir* to find Shaw, but could not discover him. Later, however, the hall-porter said he had complained of feeling unwell, and had gone to his room.

I threw myself into a cane chair in the hall, and lit a cigar, for it was yet early. I suppose I must have remained there perhaps half an hour, when a waiter brought me a note. Tearing it open, I found in it a scribbled message, in pencil, from Asta.

"There is danger, as I suspected," she wrote. "Be careful. Do not approach us, and know nothing. Destroy this.—Asta."

I crushed the letter in my pocket and dismissed the servant. What could it mean?

Not more than a quarter of an hour later, as I still sat smoking and pondering, a tall, dark-bearded, pale-faced, rather elegant-looking Frenchman, wearing the crimson button of the Legion d'Honneur in his coat, entered the hall from the street, and glancing round quickly, advanced to the bureau.

A moment later he came towards me and, halting, bowed and exclaimed

in good English—

“Pardon, m’sieur, but I have the honour to speak with Monsieur Kemball. Is that not so?”

“That is my name,” I replied.

“I have something of importance to communicate to Monsieur,” he said, very politely, holding his grey felt hat in his hand and glancing quickly around. “May I speak with you privately?”

“Certainly,” I replied; and recollecting a small salon off the hall on the left, led the way thither, and switched on the light.

Then, when he had carefully closed the door and we were alone, he said with a pleasant smile—

“I had perhaps better at once introduce myself to Monsieur. I am Victor Tramu, inspector of the first division of the *brigade mobile* of Paris, and I have called at the risk of inconveniencing you to put a few questions concerning two associates of yours living in this hotel—namely, Monsieur Harvey Shaw and Mademoiselle Asta Seymour.”

“Associates!” I echoed resentfully. “They are my friends!”

The police-officer smiled as he caressed his silky brown beard—a habit of his.

“Excellent. Then certainly you will be able to give me the information I require.”

“Of what?”

“Of their recent movements, and more especially of their place of residence.”

I was silent, recollecting Asta’s injunctions to know nothing; but the man stood regarding me with calm, searching, impudent glance.

“By what right, pray, do you subject me to this cross-examination?” I

demanded in French, full of resentment, as I stood in the centre of the room facing him.

“Ah! so Monsieur is disinclined to betray his friends, eh?” laughed Tramu, whom I afterwards found out to be one of the most famous detectives in France. “You arrived *en automobile* from Lyons together, and previously from Versailles,” he remarked. “In Lyons your friend Shaw met other of his associates, and again here—yesterday at the Villa Reyssac. You see, I know a good deal of what has transpired and what is just now in progress. Indeed, I travelled from Paris for that purpose.”

“Well, it surely does not concern me!” I exclaimed.

“Pardon. I must differ from Monsieur,” he said, bowing slightly, his hands behind his back. “I desire to know something concerning these persons—of where they live.”

“You had better ask them yourself,” I replied. “It is scarcely likely that I shall give information to the police concerning my friends,” I added, in defiance.

“*Bien*! Then shall I be frank with you, m’sieur? The fact is that we have suspicions, very grave ones, but we are not absolutely certain of their identity.”

“Then why trouble me?”

“Because you can so easily establish it beyond a doubt.”

“Well, Monsieur Tramu, I flatly refuse to satisfy your curiosity, or assist you against my friends,” I replied, and turned abruptly upon my heel to leave the room.

“Then it is to be regretted. In that case, Monsieur Kemball, you must please consider yourself under arrest as an accomplice and associate of the two individuals in question,” he said, very coolly but determinedly; and as he uttered the words two men, police-officers in plain clothes, who had evidently been listening without, opened the door unceremoniously and entered the apartment.

The situation was both startling and unexpected. I was now faced with a most difficult problem. I was under arrest; my silence had cost me my liberty!

Asta and her stepfather must also have both already fallen into the hands of the police, for were they not upstairs? Truly the *coup* had been very swiftly and cleverly effected, as it seemed were all *coups* made by the renowned Tramu, the trusted lieutenant of Monsieur Hamard of the Sûreté in Paris.

The misfortune so long dreaded by Asta had, alas! fallen.

What must the result be? Ay, what indeed! What could be the charge against them?

Chapter Twenty One.

More Mystery.

Ignorant of the fate of my friends, I was unceremoniously bundled into a fiacre and driven to the police bureau, where for nearly three hours I was closely questioned regarding my own identity and my knowledge of Harvey Shaw.

Aix-les-Bains being a gambling centre, it attracts half the *escrocs* in Europe; hence, stationed here and there are several of the smartest and shrewdest police officials which France possesses. At the hands of Victor Tramu and two of his colleagues I was subjected to the closest interrogation in a small bare room with threadbare carpet and walls painted dark green, the headquarters of the Sûreté in that district. The population of Aix in summer is much the same as that of Monte Carlo in winter—a heterogeneous, cosmopolitan collection of wealthy pigeons and hawks of both sexes and all nationalities.

From the thousand and one questions with which I fenced I tried to gather the nature of the offence of which Harvey Shaw was culpable, but all to no avail. I asked Tramu point-blank if he and his foster-daughter had been arrested, but no information would he give.

“I am asking questions—not you, m’sieur,” was his cold reply.

All the interrogation seemed directed towards ascertaining the hiding-place of Shaw in England.

“You knew him in England,” remarked Tramu, seated at a table upon which was a telephone instrument, while I stood between the two agents of police who had arrested me. “Where did you first meet him?”

“At a railway station.”

“Under what circumstances?”

“I had a message to deliver—a letter from a dead friend.”

Tramu smiled incredulously, as did also the two other officials at his side.

“And this dead friend—who was he?” asked the renowned detective.

“A man whom I had met on a steamer between Naples and London. He was a stranger to me, but being taken ill on board, I tried to do what I could for him. He died in London soon after our arrival.”

“His name?”

“Melvill Arnold.”

Victor Tramu stroked his brown beard.

“Arnold! Arnold!” he repeated. “Melvill Arnold—an English name. He was an Englishman, of course?”

“Certainly.”

“Arnold! Arnold!” he repeated, gazing blankly across the room. “And he was a friend of the suspect Shaw, eh?”

“I presume so.”

“Arnold!” he again repeated reflectively, as though the name recalled something to his memory. “Was he an elderly, grey-haired man who had lived a great deal in Egypt and was an expert in Egyptology eh?”

“He was.”

Tramu sprang to his feet, staring at me, utterly amazed.

“And he is dead, you say?”

“He is—he died in my presence.”

“Arnold!” he cried, turning to his colleagues. “All, yes. I remember now. I recollect—a most remarkable and mysterious mail. *Dieu*! what a colossal brain! What knowledge—what a staunch friend, and what a formidable enemy! And he is, alas! dead. Describe to me the circumstances in which he died, Monsieur Kemball,” he added, in a voice full of regret and

sympathy.

In response, I briefly told him the story, much as I have related it in these pages, while all listened attentively.

“And he actually compelled you to burn the banknotes, eh?” asked the officer of the Sûreté. “He wilfully destroyed his fortune—the money which I had hoped to recover—the money which he— But, no! He is dead, so we need say no more.”

“Then you knew poor Arnold, Monsieur Tramu?” I remarked.

“Quite well,” laughed the brown-bearded man seated at the table. “For years the police of Europe searched for him in vain. He was far too wary and clever for us. Instead of enjoying the pleasures of the capitals, he preferred the desert and his studies of Egyptian antiques. He moved about so quickly, and with so many precautions, that we never could lay hands upon him. Indeed, it is said that he kept two ex-agents of police, whose duty it was to watch us, and keep him informed regarding our movements. His was, indeed, a master mind—a greater man than your associate, Harvey Shaw.”

“What were the charges against Arnold?” I asked eagerly. “Why were you so anxious to secure his arrest?”

“Oh, there were a dozen different charges,” he replied. “But now he is dead, let his memory as a very remarkable man rest in peace. Our present action concerns the man Shaw. Where did you visit him in England?”

“He visited me at my house, Upton End.”

“And you did not visit him?”

“I saw him twice at the Carlton Hotel in London, and once at the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool.”

“And you declare that you have no knowledge of his offences?” asked the official shrewdly.

“If I had, I certainly should not have accepted his invitation to come here on a motor-tour,” was my quick reply.

“And the girl? You mean to say that you have no suspicion of her offence?”

“Her offence!” I cried. “Tell me—I beg of you to tell me!—what allegation there is against her.”

“Ah, my dear m’sieur, of that you will know soon enough,” replied the detective, again stroking his beard. “I fear that, if your ignorance of the truth is not feigned, the revelations forthcoming will—well, greatly astonish you.”

“But surely Mademoiselle is not a criminal!” I cried, staring at him in dismay.

“Wait and hear the evidence against her.”

“I will not believe it.”

“Ah! because you are enamoured of her—eh, Monsieur Kemball?” exclaimed the great detective, with a shrewd twinkle in his large brown eyes. “A man is always loath to believe that his well-beloved can do wrong. *Bien*! I urge you to wait and see what the revelations bring forth—to carefully weigh over the hideous story before giving further thought to her.”

“I need no advice. Monsieur,” I protested angrily. “If you make allegations, you should surely tell me their nature.”

“That is for you to discover,” he answered, with a crafty smile. “You have refused to assist me; therefore I, in turn, refuse to satisfy your curiosity.”

“You have arrested me because I happen to be on friendly terms with this man and his daughter. Therefore surely I may be told the offence alleged against them,” I protested in anger.

“The fact you have revealed—namely, that Shaw and Melvill Arnold were friends—is quite sufficient to prove what I really suspected. The man’s

identity is made entirely plain, even though you refused to give me information."

"They are my friends," I remarked resentfully.

"Perhaps they will be so no longer when you know the actual truth concerning them," he said, smiling grimly.

"And what is this terrible charge against them, pray?"

"Have I not already told you that you will know quite soon enough?" was the prompt reply of the renowned detective, whose name was as a household word in France; and his two companions smiled.

The telephone bell rang, and one of them took up the receiver and listened.

Then he handed it to Tramu, who, from his words, I gathered, was speaking with the commissary of police at the Gare du Lyon, in Paris, asking that an incoming train should be carefully watched.

"Thank you. Advise me as soon as it arrives," he added, and placing the receiver down, he rang off.

Again he returned to the attack, endeavouring to discover from me where in England Shaw had hidden himself. But I was just as evasive as he was himself. I was fighting for the woman I loved. I told him vaguely that they lived in the North of England in order to mislead him, but I declared I did not know their actual place of residence.

But he only smiled incredulously, replying—

"Monsieur is enamoured of Mademoiselle. I have watched you both for two days past, and I know that you are aware of her address in England."

This man had actually been watching us, while we had been all unconscious of espionage! Fierce anger again rose within me. I admitted to myself that I had acted foolishly in associating with a man whom I knew to be a fugitive from justice; but it certainly never occurred to me that I might be subjected to such an ordeal as that I was undergoing.

Alternatively threatening, coaxing, warning, and gesticulating, Tramu, a past-master in the art of interrogation, cross-examined me until the first rose-flush of dawn showed through the window. But he obtained nothing more from me. I told him frankly that, as he refused to give me any information, I, on my part, would remain dumb.

His annoyance was apparent. He had expected me to meekly relate all I knew, but instead he found that I could be as evasive in my answers as he was clever in putting his questions. In turn quite half a dozen police officials entered the room and regarded me with considerable curiosity, until in anger I cried—

“This action of yours, Monsieur Tramu, is disgraceful! I know this is your abominable French police system, but I demand that word of my arrest be sent to the British Consul, with whom I shall lodge complaint.”

“My dear m’sieur,” laughed the man with the tiny red button in his lapel, “that will be quite unnecessary. I think at this late hour we may now! dispense with your further presence. You are free to go;” and addressing a man in uniform, he added, “Bring in the chauffeur.”

I turned upon my heel and left the room, but as I went along the corridor I saw at the farther end Harris seated between two uniformed officers.

Surely they would obtain no information from him, for he had only been engaged for the tour, and knew nothing further of Harvey Shaw or of Asta except—ah! he might know their address at Lydford!

So I shouted along the corridor to him:

“Harris! Don’t tell them Mr Shaw’s address in England, whatever you do.”

“Right you are, sir,” he replied cheerily. “This is a funny job, ain’t it, sir? They arrested me in bed.”

“Where’s Mr Shaw?”

“Don’t know, sir. I suppose he and Miss Asta are in here somewhere,” was his reply, as they ushered him into the room where the great Tramu awaited him.

On my return to the hotel the sleepy night-porter admitted me.

No; he had seen nothing of Monsieur Shaw or of Mademoiselle.

Hastily I ascended the stairs to our suite of apartments, but they were not there. The beds had not been slept in, but their baggage had been piled up—evidently by the police, in readiness for removal and examination. The drawers and wardrobes had evidently been searched after their arrest, for the rooms were in great disorder.

In my own room, during my absence, everything had been turned topsy-turvy. The lock of my steel dispatch-box had been broken and its contents turned out upon the bed. In France, when the police make a domiciliary visit, they certainly do it most thoroughly.

Was it possible that in examining the effects of Shaw and Asta the police had ascertained the address of their hiding-place in England?

I stood in the centre of the room gazing at the heap of papers and letters upon the bed, apprehensive and bewildered.

Returning below, I induced the big Swiss night-porter to rouse the manager; and some ten minutes later the latter came to me in trousers and coat, evidently not in a very good-humour at being disturbed.

He seemed surprised to see me there, and I said with a laugh—

“I suppose you believed I had been arrested?”

“Well,” he replied, “the police took you away.”

“For interrogation only,” I replied. “But I am in search of my friends.”

“And the police are in search of them also, I believe,” he replied abruptly. “It does no good to the reputation of the hotel to have such visitors, m’sieur.”

“Then they have not been arrested!” I cried in delight.

“No. Mademoiselle, I believe, must have recognised the inspector of the

Sûreté from Paris as she was coming downstairs. She rushed back and told her father, and hastily seizing her dressing-case, while he took a small bag, they both descended the service stairs and made their exit by the back premises. There was a door below which is always kept locked, but Monsieur Shaw had somehow provided himself with a key in case of emergency, for we found it in the lock. When the police, after arresting you, went upstairs to take the pair, they found they had already flown. They must have rushed down to the station and caught the Paris night express, which was due just about the time they would arrive there."

"And the police are furious," I said. "They must be."

"They have, I believe, just missed a most important, capture."

"What was the charge against them?" I inquired "Ah, they would not tell me," was his reply. "They seemed to be acting with great caution and secrecy. They made a careful examination of everything, and only left about three-quarters of an hour ago."

And with that I was compelled to remain satisfied.

Chapter Twenty Two.

The Secret of Harvey Shaw.

For three days I remained in Aix, awaiting some news or message from the fugitives—but none came.

Tramu called and saw me twice, evidently astounded at the channel of escape which Shaw had so cunningly prepared. He had, no doubt, obtained an impression of one of the servants' master keys, and had one cut to fit the locked door which prevented visitors from passing out by any other way save by the front hall. He had anticipated that flight might be necessary, and the fact that he had prepared for it showed that he was both cunning and fearless.

Asta's injunctions to me to say nothing showed plainly that they intended still to keep their hiding-place a secret. And if Shaw was the adventurer I believed, it was not likely that either he or she would carry anything by which to reveal their more respectable identity.

So at length, full of grave apprehensions, I left Aix, sickened by its music and summer gaiety, and travelled home, halting one night at the Grand in Paris, and duly arrived at the Cecil in London. There I found a batch of letters sent on to me from Upton End, and among them was a formal letter from a firm of solicitors called Napier and Norman, 129, Bedford Row, W.C., stating that they were acting for the late Mr Guy Nicholson of Titmarsh Court, and asking me to call upon them without delay.

Exercising caution lest I should be watched, I had immediately on arrival telephoned from my hotel bedroom to Lydford, but the response came back it a woman's voice that "the master" and Miss Asta were still abroad. Therefore about noon on the morning following my return I went round to Bedford Row in a taxi, and was quickly shown into the sombre private room of an elderly, quiet-spoken man—Mr George Napier, head of the firm.

"I'm extremely glad you have called, Mr Kemball," he said, as he leaned back in his chair. "I believe you were present at Titmarsh very soon after

the unfortunate death of our client, Mr Guy Nicholson. Indeed, I remember now that we met at the inquest. Well, Mr Nicholson, with his father and grandfather! before him, entrusted his affairs in our hands, and, naturally, after his decease we searched his effects for any papers that were relative to his estate, or any private papers which should not fall into anybody's hands. Among them we found this letter, sealed just as you see it, and addressed to you. He evidently put it aside, intending to post it in the morning, but expired in the night."

And taking a letter from a drawer in his writing-table, he handed it across to me.

I glanced at the superscription, and saw that it was addressed ready for the post and that a stamp was already upon it.

"Poor Nicholson's death was a most mysterious one," I exclaimed, looking the solicitor full in the face; "I don't believe that he died from natural causes."

"Well, I fear we cannot get away from the medical evidence," replied the matter-of-fact, grey-faced man, peering through his spectacles. "Of course the locked door was a most curious circumstance—yet it may be accounted for by one of the servants, in passing before retiring, turning the key. Or, as you suggested at the inquest, the servant who entered the library in the morning may have thought the door was locked. It might have caught somehow, as locks sometimes do."

I shook my head dubiously, and with eager fingers tore open the message from the dead.

From its date, it had evidently been written only a few hours prior to his untimely end, and it read—

"Strictly Private.

"Dear Mr Kemball,—I fear, owing to the fact that I have promised Asta to take her motoring on Sunday, that I may not be able to keep my appointment with you. Since my confidential conversation with you, I have watched and discovered certain things at Lydford which cause me the keenest apprehension. Shaw is not what he pretends to be, and

many of his movements are most mysterious. By dint of constant watching both while I have been guest there and also by night when they have believed me to be safely at home, I have ascertained several very remarkable facts.

“First. In secret and unknown to any—even to his gardeners—he sets clever traps for small birds, which he visits periodically at night, and takes away the unfortunate creatures he finds therein.

“Secondly. He is in the habit of going forth in the night and walking through Woldon Woods to a spot close to Geddington village, at the corner of the road from Newton, and there meeting a middle-aged man who frequently stops at the inn. Once I followed them and overheard some of their conversation. They were planning something, but what I could not make out. However, I feel sure that they both discovered my presence, and hence he seems in fear of me and annoyed whenever I visit Lydford.

“Thirdly. In his bedroom there is a cupboard beside the fireplace. The door is enamelled white, and at first is not distinguishable from the rest of the panelling. Examine it, and you will see that it is secured by two of the most expensive and complicated of modern locks. What does that cupboard contain? The contents are not plate or valuables, for there is a large fireproof safe downstairs. Some mystery lies there.

“Fourthly. Though he makes most clever pretences of devotion to Asta, he hates her. Poor girl, she loves him, and cannot see those black, covert looks he so often gives her when her back is turned. But I have seen them, and I know—at least, I have guessed—the reason.

“Fifthly. If you are a frequent guest there, you will hear him sometimes utter a strange shrill whistle for no apparent purpose, as though he does it quite unknowingly. But it is with a purpose. What purpose?

“I feel that Asta is in danger, and it is therefore my duty to protect her and elucidate the mystery of the strange conspiracy which I feel convinced is now in progress. It is to discuss these matters, and to combine to keep vigilant watch, that I am anxious to spend a few hours with you. Think carefully over these five points, and if I am unable to come on Sunday I

will motor over on Monday about eleven in the morning.

“Meanwhile be careful not to show that you either know or suspect anything. I know Shaw suspects me, and therefore by some means I must remove his suspicions.

“That, however, will be a matter for us to discuss seriously when we meet.

“Asta has told me of a strange and extremely weird incident which occurred to her one night a little while ago in the house of a friend—the apparition of a black shadowy hand. I believe I have the solution of the mystery—a most remarkable and terrible one.

“I ask your assistance in this affair, and am eager to meet you to discuss it fully. Kindly destroy this letter.—Yours very sincerely,—

“Guy Nicholson.”

I sat dumbfounded. It was just as I had believed. The man struck down so suddenly had discovered the actual truth! He had watched in patience and learned some strange and startling facts.

The reference to the hand filled my mind with the hideous recollection of what I had seen in that roadside inn at Arnay-le-Duc—and of Arnold’s strange warning. Who was Harford—the name I was to remember. Asta had told her lover of her own experience, and he had solved the mystery!

Yet he had not been spared to reveal it to me. His lips had been closed by death. The name of Harford was still unknown to me.

How long I sat there staring at the closely written letter in my hand I know not. But I was awakened to a consciousness of where I was by Mr Napier’s quiet voice exclaiming—

“I see that my late client’s letter has made a great impression upon you, Mr Kemball. I presume it is of a purely private character, eh?”

“Purely private,” I managed to reply. “It does not concern his affairs in any way whatsoever, and it is marked ‘strictly private.’”

“Oh, very well. I, of course, have no wish whatever to inquire into your private affairs with my dead client,” replied the solicitor. “I believed that it might contain something important, and for that reason hesitated to send it through the post.”

“Yes,” I said meaningly, “it does contain something important—very important, Mr Napier. Had this been placed in my hand in time, my poor friend’s life might have been saved.”

“What do you mean?” he asked quickly, staring at me across the table. “Have you evidence—evidence of foul play?”

“No evidence, but I find a distinct motive.”

“Anything upon which we could work in order to bring the culprit to justice—if Mr Nicholson did not really die a natural death?”

“I tell you he did not!” I cried angrily. “The village jury were impressed by the medical evidence, as all rustic juries are. Your client, Mr Napier, discovered another man’s secret, and the latter took steps to close his lips.”

“But can you prove this? Can you name the man?”

“Yes,” I said, “I can name the man. And one day I shall prove it.”

“You can! Why not place the matter in the hands of the police, together with what is revealed in that letter?” he suggested. “Allow me to act.”

“I shall act myself. At present it is not a matter for the police. Certain facts have come to my knowledge which, if told at Scotland Yard, would not be believed. Therefore at present I intend to keep my knowledge strictly to myself,” and replacing the dead man’s message in its envelope, I put it safely into my breast-pocket, and, taking leave of the solicitor, was soon in my taxi whirling along Holborn.

Why had Nicholson suspected that Shaw’s affection for his foster-daughter was only feigned? Why did he allege that Shaw hated her? Why was he in such mortal terror lest some evil should befall her?

Perhaps, after all, in watching so closely he had, as is so easy, discovered certain circumstances and misjudged them, for certainly as far as I could see Shaw was entirely devoted to the girl who had been his constant companion ever since her childhood days. Nevertheless, that strange letter, penned by the man whose intention it had been to reveal to me the secret of the weird shadow of the night, had caused me to determine to continue the vigil which had been so abruptly ended.

I, too, would watch closely as soon as I learnt of their hiding-place, as closely as the dead man had done. If Asta were in actual peril, then I would stand as her protector in place of the upright, honest young fellow who, it seemed, had lost his life in the attempt.

But the days, nay weeks, went on. September ended and October came with rain and chilly wind, and though I returned to Upton End, and frequently made inquiry over the telephone to Lydford, yet, though I wrote to Davis at the Poste Restante at Charing Cross, I could learn no news of them. They had descended those back stairs of the hotel at Aix, and disappeared as completely as though the earth had swallowed them up.

One day in the middle of October, with sudden resolve to carry out Nicholson's injunction to investigate, I drove over to Lydford, and on arrival, about noon, found all smart and well-kept as though its owner were in residence.

I told a rather lame story to the housekeeper, who, knowing me, came to me in the long, chintz-covered drawing-room, the blinds of which were down. She had not heard from her master for a month past, the pleasant-faced woman explained. He was then in Aix. I said that I had left him there and returned to England, and was now anxious to discover where he was.

Then, after a brief chat, I exhibited my left forefinger enveloped in an old glove, and told her that on my way I had some engine-trouble and had hurt my finger.

"I believe Mr Shaw keeps up in his room a small medicine chest," I said, for I recollected that he once told me that he kept one there. "I wonder if I might go up and try and find a piece of bandage."

“Certainly,” replied Mrs Howard, and she led me upstairs to the apartment over the drawing-room, which I had come to Lydford for the purpose of examining. It was a large, airy, and well-furnished room, with a big book-case at one end and a canary in a cage at the window.

Without much difficulty she discovered the small black japanned box, containing various surgical drugs and bandages, and I at once sent her down to obtain a small bowl of warm water.

Then, the instant she had gone, I sought for the cupboard indicated by the dead man’s letter.

Yes, it was there, a long, narrow cupboard beside the fireplace, secured by two large locks of a complicated character such as one finds on safe or strongroom doors.

I bent and examined them thoroughly.

The bed, I noticed, was set so that the eyes of any one lying in it would be upon that door.

What secret could be concealed there? What had the dead man suspected? Ay, what indeed?

Chapter Twenty Three.

“A Foreigner.”

I remained a long time attending to my damaged finger—which in reality had been injured a week before—at the same time thoroughly investigating the missing man’s apartment. Except for the cupboard, secured so mysteriously by those combination locks, there was nothing extraordinary about it. The outlook was pleasant across the wide undulating park, and the chairs with soft cushions and couch showed plainly that Harvey Shaw loved to take his ease.

In no hurry to depart, I chatted affably to Mrs Howard, wandering about the big, old-fashioned home, into regions I had never been before.

“Poor Mr Nicholson used to stay here sometimes, didn’t he?” I inquired presently, in a casual way.

“Oh yes, sir, the master used to delight in having the poor young gentleman here, sir. He used to have the blue room, nearly opposite Mr Shaw’s—the one which looks out over the front drive. Poor Mr Nicholson! We all liked him so much. Wasn’t it sad, sir?”

“Very sad, indeed,” I said. “The blow must nearly have broken Miss Asta’s heart.”

“Ah! It did, sir. At first I thought the poor child would have gone out of her mind. She was so devoted to him. Mr Shaw was also very fond of him, I know, for I once heard him say that he was the only man he would choose as Miss Asta’s husband.”

“When did he say that?”

“He was sitting in the smoking-room with a friend of his—one of the justices—Sir Gilbert Campbell, one evening after dinner, about a fortnight before the poor young gentleman died. I happened to be; passing and overheard his words.”

I pondered for a moment. Either Shaw was a past-master in the art of preparing a *coup*, or else Guy's surmises were wrong. Here, in the intimacy of the family, it was declared that Shaw was devoted to Asta. Certainly my own observations went to confirm that supposition.

"I wonder who knows Mr Shaw's whereabouts?" I said presently. "I want to communicate with him upon a very important matter."

"Well, sir, it's very funny that he hasn't written to me. He's never been silent so long before."

"How long have you been with him?"

"Oh, about three years now, sir."

Then together we descended the broad oak staircase, and I went forth into the beautiful gardens chatting with the old white-bearded head-gardener, and going through the grape and peach houses, all of which were most perfectly kept.

How strange, I reflected; what would this large staff of superior servants think if they knew the truth—that their master, a man of mystery, was a fugitive from justice—that he and Asta had crept down the back stairs of an hotel and disappeared into the night while the police had entered from the front.

As I drove back in the evening through those autumn-tinted lanes, with smiling meadows everywhere, I calmly reviewed the situation. After all, there was really no actually mysterious fact in Harvey Shaw having in his bedroom a cupboard so securely locked. He, upon his own admission, led a double life, therefore it was only to be supposed that he possessed a good many papers, even articles of clothing, perhaps, which he was compelled to hide from the prying eyes of his servants.

I recalled the whole of Guy's letter, and found that the chief point was the fact that he had solved the weird mystery of that strange hand—that shadowy Something which I myself had witnessed, and against which I had been warned by Arnold.

What was it?

But I put aside the puzzle. My chief thought was of Asta. Where could she be? Why had she not sent me word in secret of her hiding-place? She had, by tacit agreement, accepted me as her friend, hence I was disappointed at receiving no word from her.

That night, after reading my London paper over a cigar, as was my habit, I left the library about eleven o'clock and retired to my room.

I must have been sound asleep when, of a sudden, the electrical alarm which my father years ago had had placed upon the door of the big safe in the library for greater security went off with a tremendous clatter, and I jumped up, startled.

Taking my revolver from a drawer in the dressing-table, I rang the bell in the servants' quarters and switched on my electric hand-lamp. But already the household was alarmed, and the dogs were barking furiously at the intruders, whoever they were.

Accompanied by my man Adams, I descended the front stairs and, revolver in hand, entered the library, the window of which stood open, while below the safe door there lay upon the carpet a cheap bull's-eye lantern with two cylinders containing gas and some other paraphernalia, showing that the thieves were men of scientific method, for their intention had, I saw, been to use the oxy-hydrogen blow-pipe. The heads of some of the rivets had been removed and a small hole drilled through the chilled steel three-quarters of an inch thick.

All had gone well until they had touched the handle of the safe door, which had set off the alarm, the existence of which they had never suspected. Then their only safety lay in flight, and they had escaped, leaving behind them the objects I have enumerated.

Adams telephoned for the police, while Tucker came up from the Lodge, and I let loose the dogs and went outside into the drive. But, unfortunately, the thieves were already safely away, and were not likely to be caught, for in response to the telephonic message I was told that the rural constable was out on his beat, and was not expected back for another couple of hours.

We three men, with several of the maid-servants, stood outside on the

lawn discussing the affair with bated breath in the dead stillness of the night when, of a sudden, we distinctly heard in the far distance down in the valley beyond the King's Wood the starting of a motor-car and the gradual faintness of the sound as it receded along the high road.

"There they go!" I cried. "They came in a car, and it was awaiting them at the foot of the hill near the Three Oaks crossways."

Then I rushed to the telephone instrument and spoke to the police-sergeant on duty in Newport Pagnell, asking him to stop any car approaching from my house, informing him what had occurred.

But half an hour later he rang up to tell me that no car had entered the town from any direction; therefore it was apparent that in preference to passing through Newport Pagnell it had been turned into one of the side roads and taken a cross-country route to some unknown destination.

I said nothing, but to me it was quite apparent that the object of the attempt upon my safe was the mysterious bronze cylinder, which I held in trust from Melvill Arnold.

When alone in the room I opened the safe with my key, and to my satisfaction saw the battered ancient object still reposing there, together with the letters and the translation of the hieroglyphics.

Once again I took out the heavy cylinder, the greatest treasure of the strange old fellow who had deliberately destroyed a fortune, and held it in my hand filled with wonder and bewilderment. What could it contain that would astonish the world? Surely nothing nowadays astonishes this matter-of-fact world of ours. We have become used to the demonstrations of wonders, from the use of steam to the development of aviation, the telephonic discovery and the application of wireless telegraphy.

How I longed to call in a blacksmith, cut through the metal, and ascertain what was therein contained. But I did not dare. I held the thing in trust for some unknown person who, on Thursday, the third day of November, would come to me and demand its possession.

All that I had been told of the misfortunes which had fallen upon its

possessor, and the mysterious fate which would overtake any who attempted to tamper with it, flashed through my brain. Indeed, in such train did my thoughts run that I began to wonder if possession of the thing had any connection with the appearance of that mysterious hand.

Presently, however, I put the cylinder back into its place and relocked the safe, for the police from Newport Pagnell had arrived, and I bade them enter.

They made a minute examination of the room and took possession of the objects left behind by the intruders, but upon them no finger-prints could be found. My visitors were evidently expert thieves, for they had worn gloves. And they had, no doubt, been in the house a full hour before they had tried the safe handle and unconsciously set off the alarm.

Had they applied the powerful jet to the steel door, and fused a hole through it, then they might have accomplished their object without disarranging the alarm at all.

Next day, however, packing the cylinder, the old newspaper, and the letters in the bag, I took them up to London, where I placed them in a box in the Safe Deposit Company's vaults in Chancery Lane. Afterwards I lunched at my club and returned again to Upton End the same evening.

Suddenly it occurred to me while I sat alone eating my dinner that night that if Harvey Shaw and Mrs Olliffe were actually friends then the latter would probably be aware of his whereabouts.

The suggestion aroused me to activity, and it being a fine bright evening with the prospect of a full moon later, I got out my thick motor-coat, packed a small bag, and after tuning up the car set out on the long run towards Bath.

My way lay through Fenny Stratford and Bicester, through Oxford, and down to Newbury. When I passed the Jubilee clock in the latter town it was a quarter-past two, while in the broad street of Marlborough, eighteen miles farther on, I stopped to examine the near tyre. It had, as I expected, a puncture. Therefore I leisurely put on my Stepney, and with thirty odd miles before me drove out upon the old highway over the hill through Calne, and up Black Dog Hill, to Chippenham, where in the

market-place stood a constable, with whom I exchanged greetings.

There is a certain weird charm in motoring at night, when every town and village is dark and in slumber. Yet it is surprising how many people are out at an early hour. Even ere the first flush of dawn one finds sturdy men going to work with their day's food in the bag upon their backs and teams of horses being driven to the fields.

It was nearly half-past five when I sped down the steep incline of Box Hill, and, slipping through Box Village and Batheaston, found myself winding round that leafy road with the city of Bath lying picturesquely below.

At six I was once again at the York House Hotel, and after a wash went for an early-morning stroll in the town. Then, after breakfast, I took my hat and stick and strolled out for nearly three miles along the road to the inn at Kelston, where I called for a glass of ale, and sat down to chat with the white-bearded landlord, who at once recognised me as having been a customer on a previous occasion.

For a long time, as I sat in the cosy little parlour, the table of which was dark and polished with the ale of generations spilt upon it, we chatted about the weather, the prospects of harvest, and the latest iniquity of taxation, until in a careless way I remarked—

"I suppose in summer you have lots of visitors down from London.—I mean the people who have big houses about here entertain a lot?"

"Oh, I dunno!" replied the old fellow, sipping his glass which he was taking with me. "The Joiceys do have a lot o' visitors, and so do the Strongs, but Mrs Olliffe's been away, an' has only just come back."

"And Mr King?"

"He's been away too. Ridgehill's been shut up and half the servants away on 'oliday."

"And they are back now?"

"Yes; Mrs Olliffe's been abroad—so the butler told me yesterday. But there—" and his lips closed suddenly, as though he had something to

say, but feared to utter it.

“Rather a funny lot—so I’ve heard, eh?” I remarked.

“Yes. Nobody can quite make ’em out—to tell the truth. Only the night before last, or, rather, about a quarter to five in the morning, Mrs Olliffe, her brother and another gentleman went by ’ere in a car on their way ’ome. They’d been out all night, so the chauffeur told me yesterday. Mr King drove the car.”

“Out all night!” I echoed, in sudden wonder.

“Yes. And they’d been a long way, judging from the appearance of the car. I ’appened to get up to see the time, and looked out o’ my window just as they came past. It isn’t the first time either that they’ve been out all night. The village knows it, and every one is asking where they go to, and what takes ’em out o’ their beds like that.”

“Who was the gentleman with them?” I inquired eagerly.

“Ah! I couldn’t see ’im very well. He was in a big frieze coat, and wore a black-and-white check cap. I didn’t catch his face, but, by his clothes, he was a stranger to me.”

“You’ve only seen him on that occasion.”

“Only that once, sir. The chauffeur told me, however, that ’e isn’t staying at Ridgehill, and that nobody saw him. So ’e must ’ave got out after passing through the village. Perhaps it was somebody they were givin’ a lift to. I’ve seen Mrs Olliffe a-takin’ notice of some queer people sometimes. And funnily enough, only yesterday a gentleman came in ’ere and was a-making a lot of inquiries after her. ’E was a foreigner—a Frenchman, I think.”

“A Frenchman!” I cried. “What was he like?”

“Oh! Like most Frenchman. ’E ’ad finnikin’ ways, was middle-aged, with a brown beard which he seemed always a-strokin’. ’E ’ad lunch ’ere, and stayed all the afternoon smokin’ cigarettes and lookin’ through this window as though he hoped to see ’er pass. ’E was so inquisitive that I

was glad when ’e’d gone. I suppose,” the man added, “’e’s somebody she’s met abroad, eh?”

But I knew the truth. His inquisitive visitor was Victor Tramu!

Chapter Twenty Four.

A Woman's Word.

A hot, dusty walk took me beside the telegraph wires back to Bath, and the remainder of the day I spent in idleness in the hotel.

If the great French detective were in the vicinity then I had no desire to be seen by him. Therefore I deemed it best to lie quite low until nightfall.

At four o'clock, after great delay I got on to Tucker on the telephone, and inquired if there had been any letters or messages for me.

"The police have been here again, and there's a telephone message, sir," replied the old man's voice. "It came about eleven o'clock, from a lady, sir. I took it down."

"Read it over," I said.

Then, listening intently, I heard the old man's voice say—

"The message, sir, is: 'Please ask Mr Kemball to ring up, if possible, 802 Bournemouth—the Royal Bath Hotel—at six o'clock this evening—from Miss Seymour.'"

My heart gave a bound of delight.

"Nothing else, Tucker?"

"No, sir. That's all the lady said. She seemed very anxious indeed to speak to you."

"All right, Tucker. I'll be back in a day or two. By the way, send on my letters to the Grand Hotel, Bournemouth."

"Very well, sir."

"And tell the police not to worry any further over the burglary. Tell them I will see the inspector in Newport Pagnell on my return."

“All right, sir.”

And then I hung up the receiver and rang off.

Asta was at Bournemouth! My first impulse was to start at once to see her, but recollecting the reason I had come there to Bath, I managed to curb my impatience, eat my dinner in the quiet, old-fashioned coffee-room, and afterwards wait until darkness fell.

I had no fixed plans, except to approach the Manor-House unobserved. I longed to call boldly upon the woman whom I knew to be an adventuress, but I could not see what benefit would accrue from it. If any conspiracy were in progress, she would, of course, deny all knowledge of Shaw’s whereabouts.

Therefore I bought some cigars, which I placed in my case, and when the autumn twilight had deepened into night I put on my motor-cap, and taking my stick, set out again to cover the three miles or so which lay between the hotel and the residence of the wealthy widow.

I did not hurry, and as I approached the village and passed the inn with the red blinds I kept a wary eye, fearing lest Tramu might be in the vicinity.

That it was he who had been making inquiry of the landlord there was no doubt. In what manner the French police had gained knowledge of the woman Olliffe’s address I knew not, and why he was in England watching her, was equally a mystery. One fact was evident—namely, that the Paris Sûreté had some serious charge against her; and further, that she must be all unconscious of the presence of the renowned police-agent.

Should I discover any hint or gain anything by giving her warning? I asked myself.

No; she was far too clever for that. If, as I had suspected, she had had any hand in poor Guy’s death, then it was only right that the inquiries and action of the police should not be interfered with. Again, was it not a highly suspicious circumstance that, with her husband—the man King, who posed as her brother—together with a stranger, she had returned home at that early hour in a car, a few hours after a car had left the King’s

Wood, half a mile from my own house?

I passed through the village unobserved, and out again up the steep hill, until I came to that low wall behind which lay the part surrounding Ridgehill Manor—that same wall from which a few weeks before I had obtained my first sight of the house of the adventuress. Fortunately, the night had become cloudy, threatening rain, and the moon was hidden. So, mounting the wall, I entered the park and walked across towards the broad lawn in front of the manor. A dry ditch separated the lawn from the park to prevent cattle from approaching, and this I presently negotiated, at last standing upon the lawn itself. Near by, I saw a weeping ash, and beneath its bell-like branches I paused and there waited.

From where I stood I could see into the big lighted drawing-room, the blinds of which were up, but there was no one within, though the French windows stood open.

I could hear voices—of the servants, most probably—and the clatter of dishes being washed after dinner. But the night was very still; not a leaf stirred in the dark belt of firs which lay on my left, and which presently afforded me better shelter, allowing me to approach nearer the house.

The night-mists were rising, and the air had become chilly. Certainly this woman of many adventures, even though she were a convicted criminal, managed to live amid delightful surroundings.

As the evening wore on I caught a glimpse of her crossing the room in a black low-cut dinner-dress edged with silver—a truly handsome gown. She swept up to the piano, and next moment there fell upon my ear the music of one of the latest waltzes of musical comedy.

Then her husband, cigar in hand and in well-cut evening-dress, came to the French window, looked out upon the night, and retired again.

But after that I saw nothing until an hour later, when the butler closed the window carefully and bolted it, and then one by one the lights in the lower portion of the fine mansion disappeared and those upstairs were lit. Two windows, evidently the double windows of a corner-room opposite me, were lit brilliantly behind a green holland blind, but half an hour later they also were extinguished.

I glanced at my watch. It was then half-past eleven, and the house was in total darkness. Yet I still waited, wondering vaguely if Tramu were still in the vicinity.

I found an old tree-stump, and sitting upon it, waited in watchful patience, wondering if the agent of French police would make his appearance. Suddenly, however, a bright stream of light, evidently from an electric torch, shot from one of the upstairs windows, and continued for some seconds. Then it was shut off again, only to be renewed about a minute later.

It was a signal, and could be seen from the high road!

My curiosity was now thoroughly aroused, and I moved cautiously across the lawn to such a position that I could see any one leaving or approaching the house by the drive.

Again I waited for fully twenty minutes, when a slight movement caused me to turn, and I saw the figure of a woman hurrying along the side of the lawn in the shadow of the belt of firs. At first I was puzzled as to who it might be, but presently, when she was compelled to pass out of the shadow into the grey light cast by the clouded moon, I saw that it was the woman who called herself Olliffe. She wore a dark dress with a dark shawl thrown over her head.

In her eager hurry she had not noticed my presence as I stood there in the shadow; therefore, when she had passed out into the misty park with its dark clump of trees, I quickly followed with noiseless tread over the dewy grass.

She had evidently signalled to somebody, unknown to her husband!

Straight across the wide grass-lands I followed until she gained a spot where a stile gave entrance to a dark wood on the opposite side of the park. There she halted, and I was only just in time to draw back in the shadow and hide myself.

I watched, and a few minutes later I was startled at hearing that peculiar whistle of Shaw’s, and next moment he emerged from the wood and joined her.

“Well, what’s the fear?” I heard him ask her quickly. “I had your wire this morning, and got to Bath by the last train. Couldn’t you have written?”

“No; it was highly dangerous,” was her low response; and then she uttered some quick explanation which I could not catch.

Was it possible that she had learnt of Tramu’s visit, for I distinctly heard him cry—

“You fool! Why did you bring me here? Why weren’t you more wary?”

But in her reply she turned her back upon me, so that I could not distinguish her words.

They stood close together in the darkness, conversing in low tones, as though in earnest consultation, while I, holding my breath, strove in vain to catch their words.

The only other sound was the mournful hooting of an owl in the trees above; for the dead stillness of the night was now upon everything.

“Exactly,” I heard the woman say. “My own opinion is that he suspects. Therefore you must act quickly—as before.”

“I—I am hesitating,” the man’s voice replied. “I can’t bring myself to do it. I really can’t!”

“Bosh! Then leave it to me,” she urged, in a hard, rasping voice. “You’re becoming timid—chicken-hearted. It isn’t like you, surely.”

“I’m not timid,” he protested. “Only I foresee danger—great danger.”

“So do I—if you don’t act promptly. Get her away from Bournemouth. Go anywhere else you like.”

They were speaking of Asta! I strained my ears, but her further words were inaudible.

In a moment, however, I became conscious of a slight stealthy movement in the bushes near where I was standing, and turned my head quickly.

The next second I realised that only a few yards distant from me the dark figure of a man had come up through the undergrowth, but so carefully that he had made no noise.

He stood ten yards away, peering out at the pair, but all unconscious of my presence there. He was watching intently, and by his silhouette in the darkness I recognised the bearded face of none other than the great agent of the Paris Sûreté, Victor Tramu!

Chapter Twenty Five.

In the Night.

Fearing lest his quick eye should detect my presence, I stood there motionless as a statue.

The pair, in earnest conversation, suddenly strolled away over the fallen leaves at the edge of the wood, whereupon Tramu emerged silently from his hiding-place and crept after them, I being compelled to remain where I was.

So the French police had traced Shaw to his place of concealment!

I longed to give him warning, but was unable. What should I do? How should I act?

Asta was at the Bath Hotel at Bournemouth. At least I could ring her up on the telephone, and tell her what I had seen! So the watcher and the watched having disappeared, I hurried across the park until at length I gained the main road, and went on at a brisk pace till I was back again at my hotel.

It took me a full hour to get on to Bournemouth, and after long delay I at last heard her sweet, well-remembered voice at the instrument.

I expressed regret at awakening her, but told her that I was leaving by motor in half an hour to meet her.

“Where is your father?” I inquired.

“I don’t exactly know. He left me at Burford Bridge Hotel, at Box Hill, last Monday, and I came here to await him. Five days have gone, and I’ve had no letter.”

“Then he hasn’t been to Bournemouth?”

“No.”

“Well,” I said, “do not go out of the hotel until I arrive, will you?”

“Not if you wish me to remain in,” was her reply; and then, promising I would be with her at the earliest moment, as I wished to see her on a matter of gravest importance, I rang off. Half an hour afterwards I paid my bill, even though it were the middle of the night, and going out to the garage, started my engine, and with my bag in the back of the car sped away in: the drizzling rain eastward out of Bath.

I chose the road through Norton St. Philip, Warminster, and Wilton to Salisbury, where I had an early breakfast at the old White Hart, and then, striking south, I went by Downton Wick and Fordingbridge, through Ringwood and Christchurch, past the grey old abbey church and on through suburban Boscombe until, just after nine o’clock, I pulled up before the big entrance to the Bath Hotel in Bournemouth.

Into the pretty palm-court, where I waited, Asta, my lost love, came at last with outstretched hand, smiling me a welcome greeting. She looked dainty in blue serge skirt and muslin blouse, and there being no one else in the place at that early hour,—the idlers not yet having arrived to read the papers and novels,—we sat together in a corner to chat.

By the pallor of her soft, delicate countenance, I saw that she was nervous and troubled, though she showed a brave front, and affected a gay lightheartedness that was only feigned.

“Tell me, Miss Seymour,” I said presently, bending to her very seriously, “what happened to you on that night in Aix?”

“Happened!” she echoed, her dark eyes opening widely. “Ah! It was, indeed, a narrow escape. Had Dad not provided himself with a key to the back stairs in readiness for emergencies, we should have both been arrested—just as you were.”

“Yes,” I smiled. “But I was released. What happened to you?”

“We caught the Paris express—only just as it was leaving; but Dad, fearing that our flight had been telephoned to Paris, decided to get out at Laroche, where we stopped to change engines, and from there we took train by Troyes and Nancy to Strassbourg. Then, once in Germany, we

could, of course, escape Tramu's attentions," and she smiled.

"And from Germany?"

"We remained a week in Berlin; thence we went to Copenhagen by way of Kiel and Korsor, and ten days ago crossed from Hamburg to Harwich —home again."

"Your father is certainly extremely clever in evading the police," I said, with a laugh.

"Our only fear was for you," she said; "whether they would learn any thing by watching you."

"They learnt nothing, even though they submitted me to a very close examination. But," I added, "how did you know Tramu was in Aix?"

"I was ascending in the lift that evening, and as we passed the first floor I saw him talking with the hotel manager. Dad had once pointed him out to me at Monte Carlo. So I suspected the reason of his visit there, and scribbled you a line of warning before we took our bags and slipped away."

"But for what reason is he so anxious to secure your arrest?" I asked, looking straight into her face. "Cannot you tell me the truth, Miss Seymour? Remember, I am your friend," I added earnestly.

"Please do not ask me," she urged. "I cannot betray the man who has been father to me all these years," she added in a low, pained voice.

"But are you quite certain that he is as devoted to you as he professes?" I asked very gravely.

"Absolutely. Am I not the only real friend he has?"

I recollected that letter written by the man who had loved her, and the allegations he had made.

"Do you know," I said, "the other night I had burglars at my home. They tried to break open the safe which contains that mysterious cylinder given

into my charge by Mr Melvill Arnold."

"The cylinder!" she gasped, instantly turning pale as death. "Ah! that hateful cylinder, which brings upon its possessor misfortune and disaster. Why don't you get rid of it, Mr Kemball?"

"I have. It is now in the Safe Deposit Company's vaults in Chancery Lane."

She held her breath, her gaze fixed upon me. Then involuntarily she laid her slim white hand upon my coat-sleeve, and said—

"I—I always fear for your safety, Mr Kemball, while that thing is in your possession. Give it away. Destroy it—anything—only get rid of it!"

"But I cannot until the third of November. I accepted a sacred trust, remember, given by a dying man," I said.

"Yes—but—"

"But what?" I asked. Then in a low voice, as I bent towards her, I added: "Miss Seymour, I have deep suspicion that your father—a friend of Arnold's—knows what the cylinder contains, and is extremely eager to get possession of it. Is not that so?"

She was silent. Her lips moved nervously. Her indecision to speak told me the truth. We were friends, therefore she could not deliberately lie to me.

A faint smile overspread her pale, refined features. That was all, but it told its own tale.

"Well," I said, "the burglars, whoever they were, were experts, and only the electric alarm prevented the theft. What the ancient cylinder really contains I cannot imagine. Indeed, I am filled with anxiety and impatience for the dawn of November the third, when, without doubt, I shall learn the truth."

"Yes, no doubt," she said in a slow, tremulous tone. "And the truth will surely be a stranger one than you have ever dreamed."

Our *tête-à-tête* was suddenly interrupted by a woman entering the lounge; therefore, as Asta had her hat and coat with her, I suggested that we should walk down to the beach, an idea which she readily adopted.

Then, when there was no one to overhear, I told her of my adventure in the night, of Tramu's inquiries in the neighbourhood of Ridgehill Manor, and of his surveillance of the movements of Mrs Olliffe and her father.

"Tramu!" she gasped, her face white as death. "Then he has found poor Dad! Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because I had no wish to alarm you unduly, Miss Seymour," I said very quietly.

"But Dad may be arrested!" she cried. "Ah! how fatal to associate again with that accursed woman."

"She is certainly no friend of yours."

"But she makes great pretence of friendship. I have often been her guest."

"For the last time, I trust."

"Yes. But what can we do? How can I warn Dad?" she asked in deep anxiety.

"Ah, Miss Seymour," I said, after a brief silence, "I fear that you think a little too much of your foster-father, and too little of your own self."

"Why?" she asked quickly, with some resentment. Again I hesitated. We had wandered upon the pier, but it was as yet early, and few people, save the early-morning exercise men, were about.

"Let us sit here a moment," I suggested at last. "It is pleasant in the sunshine. I have something to show you."

Without a word she seated herself where I suggested, on a seat near the empty band-stand, and then I drew from my pocket the letter which Guy Nicholson had written to me on the night of his tragic death and handed it

to her.

I watched her sweet face, so pale and anxious. In an instant she recognised the writing of the hand now dead, and read it through eagerly from end to end.

I explained how it had come so tardily into my possession, whereupon she said—

“It is true. He disliked Dad for some inexplicable reason.”

“Apparently he had become aware of some extraordinary truth. It was that truth which he had intended to explain to me, but, poor fellow, he was prevented from doing so by his sudden death.”

Sight of that letter had recalled to her visions of the man whom she had loved so fondly, and next instant I hated myself for having acted injudiciously in showing her the curious missive.

Ah, how deeply, how devotedly I loved her! and yet I dared not utter one single word of affection. That calm, sweet countenance, with those big, wonderful eyes, was ever before me, sleeping or waking, and yet I knew not from hour to hour that she might not be arrested and placed in a criminal dock, as accomplice of that arch-adventurer Shaw—that man who led such a strange dual existence of respectability and undesirability.

“I cannot understand what he discovered regarding the apparition of the hand,” she exclaimed at last, still gazing upon the letter in a half-dreamy kind of way.

“It seems as though, by some fact accidentally discovered, he arrived at the solution of the mystery,” I said. “It was to explain this to me that he intended to come over to Upton End, but was, alas! prevented.”

“But why didn’t he tell me?” she queried. “It surely concerned myself for I had seen it, not in our own house, remember, but in the house of a friend at Scarborough.”

“And I saw it in an obscure French inn,” I said; “and previously I had been warned against it.”

“Yes, I agree, Mr Kemball. It is a complete mystery. Ah! how unfortunate that poor Guy never lived to tell you his theory concerning the strange affair. But,” she added, “our present action must concern dear old Dad. What do you suggest we should do? How can we give him warning?”

“I can suggest nothing,” was my reply. “Tramu is watching them both. Probably he is fully aware of some ingenious conspiracy in progress.”

“Ah! I foresaw danger in his association with her,” the girl declared, pale and anxious in her despair.

“But why has not your father returned to Lydford? Surely while his whereabouts could be preserved from Tramu he would be safer there than anywhere!”

“You might be watched, and if you visited us, you might be followed. Tramu is, as you know, one of the most famous detectives in Europe.”

“And he has, in your father, one who is a past-master in the art of evasion. But,” I added, “tell me frankly, Miss Seymour, do you anticipate that he is anxious to possess himself of the bronze cylinder?” She hesitated again.

“Well—yes. As you ask me for a plain reply, I tell you that I believe his intention is to gain possession of it.”

“Why?”

“Because of the great secret therein contained.”

“And of what nature is this remarkable secret?” I demanded eagerly, much puzzled by her response.

“Ah! how can we tell? It is a secret from all, save to the person who shall dare break it open and examine it.”

“And dare you break it open, Miss Seymour?” I asked.

“No—a thousand times no!” she cried, alarmed at the very suggestion. “I would rather see it taken up and cast deep into the sea. Why don’t you

do that, Mr Kemball? Take it out in a boat and sink it deep in the waters, where no man—not even divers—could ever recover it. Sink it deeply," she urged, "so that all fears may be dispelled, and peace and love may reign."

But I shook my head, expressing regret at my utter inability to accede to her desire.

And then very slowly we retraced our steps back to the hotel, where an unexpected surprise was, we found, awaiting us.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Contains an Ominous Message.

As we re-entered the pretty winter garden the hall-porter gave Asta a telegram, which she tore open hastily and read, afterwards handing it to me in silence.

To my surprise, I found it to be from Shaw, informing her that he was on his way to Lydford, and asking her to return home that day. The message had been handed in at Bath Railway Station, therefore it appeared that he was already on his way.

“Is there not danger, distinct danger, in this, Mr Kemball?” she queried, in great anxiety. “If Tramu were watching last night, then he will be followed home!”

“I don’t see how we can prevent him from going to Lydford now,” I said. “We have no address where a telegram would reach him.”

Truly the situation was a critical one. Harvey Shaw, all unconscious of being watched, was actually returning to his highly respectable home.

“Oh, if I could only warn him!” Asta cried, wringing her hands. Yet, personally, I was not thinking of the man’s peril so much as hers. If she went to Lydford, would not she also fall into the drag-net of the police?

Yet what was the mysterious charge against her—the charge which the French police had refused to reveal to me?

While she changed her dress and packed her small trunk I had a look around my engine, and an hour later, with her sitting beside me, we were already buzzing along the Salisbury road, returning by that level way I had followed earlier that morning. From Salisbury we travelled the whole day by way of Andover, Newbury, and Oxford, the same road that I had traversed in the night on my way to Bath.

It was delightful to have her as companion through those sunny hours on

the road, and she looked inexpressibly dainty in her close-fitting little bonnet, fur coat, and gauntlet gloves. An enthusiastic motorist, she often drove her father's car, which I now understood they had been compelled to abandon in the garage at Aix. The police had taken possession of it, but as both the French and English numbers it bore were false ones no clue to the address of its owner would be obtained.

Yet though she charmed me by her voice, though her sweet beauty filled my whole being and intoxicated my senses, nevertheless I somehow experienced a strange presage of evil.

Had Harvey Shaw once again exercised those precautions against disaster and managed to elude the vigilance of the great French police-agent? That was the main question in my mind as I drove the car hard, for Asta seemed all eagerness to get home. If Shaw had been unsuspicious, what more natural than that he should be followed by Tramu to that hiding-place where he assumed the rôle of country gentleman.

The autumn afternoon wore on, and I could not help noticing that the nearer we approached her home the paler and more anxious became the girl at my side. And I loved her, ah yes! I loved her more than my pen has power to describe. She possessed me body and soul. She was all in all to me.

That she was reflecting upon the letter penned by Guy almost immediately before his death I knew by her several references to it.

"I wonder what is the solution of that shadowy hand which we both have seen, Mr Kemball?" she exclaimed suddenly, after sitting in silence for some time, her eyes fixed upon the muddy road that lay before us.

"You mean the solution at which Nicholson apparently arrived?" I said.

"Yes."

"How can we tell? He evidently discovered, something—something of extreme importance which he wished to communicate to me."

"I wonder why he makes those extraordinary statements about Dad—and

the locked cupboard in his room?”

“I don’t know. Have you ever seen inside that cupboard?” I asked quickly, my eyes still upon the road.

“Never. But poor Guy seems to have regarded it as a kind of Bluebeard’s cupboard, doesn’t he?”

“He seems to have entertained a curious suspicion concerning your father,” I admitted. “Of course, he did not know half that I know.”

“Of course not,” she sighed. “He simply believed—as others do—that he is a country gentleman. And he would have been if—”

“If what?”

“If—if it had not been for that horrible woman,” she added, in a low hard voice. “Ah, Mr Kemball, if only you could know the truth—if only I dare tell you. But I can’t—I can’t betray the man who has been so good and kind to me all my life.”

“But could I not, if I knew the actual truth, be of service to him?” I suggested. “Could I not be of service to him for your sake?” I added, in a low earnest tone, my eyes fixed upon her pale, troubled countenance.

She looked at me in sharp, startled surprise. Her cheeks flushed slightly. Then, lowering her eyes, she turned her glance away, straight before her again, and in pretence that she had not understood my meaning, replied simply—

“If the heavy hand of disaster falls upon him, then I fear it must fall upon me also.”

How sweet she looked—how serious and pensive her beautiful countenance.

“I must act as your friend and use my best endeavours to ward it off,” I said.

“Did you not do so in Aix, Mr Kemball? We have to thank you for

everything. They expected to learn a good deal through you, and while you engaged their attention we were enabled to make a hurried exit. It is, indeed, fortunate that I recognised Victor Tramu!"

"Then I suppose you have had previous narrow escapes?"

"One or two," she replied, smiling. "But Dad is always so very wary. He is generally forewarned."

"By whom?"

"By the man who watches him always—a man named Surridge, who never allows his identity to be known, but who acts as our watchdog, to give us warning of any unwelcome watcher."

"But he failed at Aix."

"Because Dad foolishly sent him upon an errand to somebody in Paris."

"He is a friend of your father's, I suppose?"

"Yes, a great friend. He was once in the London detective police, but on his retirement he found his present post a very lucrative one—the personal guardian of one for whom the police are ever in search! You saw him on his cycle on the afternoon I overtook you in the car—the first time we met?" and she smiled as she spoke. "His vigilance is never relaxed," she added, "and his true *métier* never suspected. No doubt he is near my father now on his journey back to Lydford."

"Then he would not allow him to go if he were still being watched by Tramu?"

"Certainly not. We can, I think, after all, make our minds quite easy upon that score," she replied.

And as I sat at the steering-wheel I found myself wondering whether any other man had loved in circumstances so curious and so unusual.

At the hotel in Bournemouth we had carefully concealed our destination, telling the hall-porter we were going to London, lest any inquiry be made

after our departure. We had tea at the Randolph at Oxford, and it was nearly half-past seven before we drew up before the grey stone front of Lydford Hall, where the butler threw open the door.

The sound of the car brought Shaw out in surprise, and as soon as we had washed we all three sat down to dinner in the fine old dining-room.

About Shaw there was no trace of the least anxiety, yet when the man had gone and I told him in a whisper of what I had seen when watching in the park at Ridgewell, he started, and his face underwent a change.

“I was a fool to have gone there,” he said. “But it was unfortunately of necessity. Surridge was in Bath, but did not know that I went out to Ridgehill.”

“Tramu may have had you watched, Dad.”

“No fear of that, child,” he laughed. “Surridge arranged for a hired car for me to-day from Bath to Westbury, where I took train to Newbury, and the ‘sixteen’ met me there and brought me here. So for Tramu to follow is out of the question. I have not seen Surridge, but merely carried out his arrangements. He may, of course, have had a motive in them.”

“No doubt he had, Dad.”

The butler at that moment returned with the next course, therefore our intimate conversation was abruptly interrupted.

As I sat at that table, lavishly spread and adorned with a wealth of flowers and a profusion of splendid old Georgian silver my eyes wandered to the sweet-faced girl who, in a low-cut gown of palest *eau-de-nil* chiffon, with velvet in her hair to match, held me so entirely and utterly entranced.

Later that evening, while I had a cigar alone with Shaw, who lay back lazily in his chair, I detected his annoyance that I should have watched him meet the woman Olliffe. And yet how cleverly he concealed his anger, for he was, on the contrary, apologetic for the abrupt ending of our motor-tour, and profuse in his thanks to me for my silence when interrogated by the police at Aix.

Was this actually the man who had made the attempt to break open my safe and secure the bronze cylinder of Melvill Arnold?

No! I could not believe it. He was an adventurer, without a doubt, but men of his stamp are invariably loyal to those who show them friendship. What, I wondered, had caused Guy Nicholson to doubt his affection for Asta? I certainly could detect nothing to cause me to arrive at such conclusion.

The girl entered the room to obtain a book, whereupon, removing his cigar from his mouth, he said, in a low voice—

“Come and sit here, dear. I haven’t been with you lately. I fear you must have found Bournemouth dreadfully dull.”

“Well, I did rather. Mr Kemball’s unexpected arrival was most welcome, I assure you,” she declared, sinking into a chair and placing both hands behind her beautiful head as she leaned back upon the yellow silk cushion.

“I confess I had no suspicions that Mr Kemball was in Bath,” declared her father, with a smile. Then turning to me, he added: “I feared to communicate with you, lest Tramu might be watching your correspondence. He is one of the few really intelligent police officials that France possesses.”

“He is evidently extremely anxious to make your acquaintance,” I laughed.

“I believe so. And I am equally anxious to avoid him. While I remain here, however, I am quite unsuspected and safe. It is really surprising,” he added, “what an air of respectability a little profuse charity gives to one in a country district. Become a churchwarden, get appointed a justice of the peace, sit upon the board of guardians, give a few teas and school-treats, and subscribe to the church funds, and though you may be an entire outsider you can do no wrong in the eyes of the country folk. I know it from experience.”

“Ah! you are a little too reckless sometimes, Dad,” exclaimed the girl, shaking her head. “Remember that when you’ve not taken Surridge’s

advice, you've run into danger."

But the man with the small, shrewd eyes smiled at the girl's words of wisdom.

Again and again there recurred to me those strange expressions in the letter of poor Guy. Ah! if he only had lived! And yet if he were still alive my love for the girl before me must have been a hopeless one. Only on those last weeks had she abandoned her deep! black. That she often sat for hours plunged in bitter memories I knew full well. Would she ever sufficiently forget to allow me to take his place in her young heart?

Knowing her nature, her honest, true, open-hearted disposition, I sometimes experienced a strange heart-sinking that, after all, she could never reciprocate my love. Yet now, as the weeks had gone on, my affection had become stronger and stronger, until I was seized by a passion akin to madness. I loved her with my soul, as truly and as well as ever man has loved a woman through all ages.

Yet, for what reason I cannot even now determine, I felt a strange foreboding that evil was pursuing her. I experienced exactly the same feeling that Guy Nicholson had felt when he penned that letter to me, the delivery of which was, alas! so long delayed.

Presently, when Asta had risen again and left the room, Shaw turned to me and said—

"Poor girl, Guy's death was a great blow to her, but she is gradually getting over it—don't you think so? I should never have risked going to the Continent had it not been for her sake—in order to give her a change. But in these last few weeks we've had sufficient change, in all conscience. She's always so cool and level-headed that I feel lost without her, Kemball."

His words were surely not those of an enemy. No, more than ever was I convinced of his devotion to the girl who, as a tiny child, he had adopted as his own daughter.

Mention of Nicholson, however, afforded me opportunity to tell him how tardily I had received a letter from the dead man.

“It was written only an hour before he died,” I added.

“Written, I suppose, after his guests had left, eh?” asked Shaw, his face a little hard and changed, I thought. “He mentioned me. What did he say? What did he tell you?”

“Nothing,” I replied, sorry that I had spoken so injudiciously.

“Poor Guy didn’t like me, I fear,” declared my host quietly. “He didn’t know what you know, and hence he viewed me with suspicion. I couldn’t very well tell him the truth—or he would have cast poor little Asta aside.”

“I quite understand,” I said.

“Well, what did he say against me?” he asked, looking at me strangely with those small, mysterious eyes of his.

“Nothing whatever.”

“You are deceiving me. I know what he has told you. He has revealed to you something—something—”

“He has revealed nothing,” I declared. “Why should he?”

But the man lying back in his chair drew at his cigar hard and contemplatively, a strange smile overspreading his broad features. I saw that he was unconvinced, and that upon his countenance was a curious dark expression such as I had never before seen.

Yet it was only for an instant, for next moment he was smiling, and invited me, as I was, to remain there the night.

I, however, declined, for I expected some important business letters at home, and was compelled, therefore, to return to Upton End, towards which destination I set forth about ten o’clock.

I had travelled about ten miles, when three miles the other side of Corby village, a double calamity befell me. Not only did one of my back tyres burst, but something went wrong with my magneto. Hence in the darkness, and with rain beginning to fall, I was brought to a complete

standstill. Midnight passed. I was several miles from anywhere, and magnetos are tricky things. I could not get the car to budge, even though I had put on my Stepney wheel.

I must, I suppose, have been pottering about for fully three hours, and not a soul had passed me in either direction. The distant chimes of a church somewhere had struck two, and when just about to give up the attempt to readjust the magneto, I suddenly heard the sound of a galloping horse approaching in the darkness.

As it came up I saw it was ridden by a youth, and I was just about to hail him and ask him to fetch assistance when, with the perversity of such instruments, the magneto started again quite merrily. Therefore I once again mounted at the wheel, and flashing past the lonely horseman, pushed on through the rain over the many weary miles till I at last reached my own home.

Next morning, while seated alone at breakfast, I heard a sound, and, to my great surprise, recognised the same young horseman, muddy and wearied, coming up the drive. With curiosity I went forth to meet him, when he handed me a note, saying—

“Miss Seymour, of Lydford, asked me to bring this at once, sir. It is very important. I’ve been riding all night.”

“Yes,” I cried. “Why, I remember I passed you in my car!”

I tore open the letter, and found in it some scribbled words in pencil, which read—

“*I am in deadly peril! If you are my friend come here at once, and save me*!—Asta.”

Chapter Twenty Seven.

In the Balance.

“How did you get this?” I asked the youth. “Who are you?”

“I’m John May, sir,” was his answer. “I work in the gardens at Lydford, an’ last night, soon after eleven, as I was a-comin’ home from Rockingham, I met Miss Asta out in the drive. She was like a mad thing. She ’ad the letter and wanted it delivered at once. So I went to the stables and, sayin’ nothink, came away.”

“Then she had written this note, and gone out in the hope of finding some one to deliver it?” I exclaimed, glancing at his horse, and noticing that it was absolutely done up after an all-night ride.

“I didn’t know it was you, sir, that passed me in a motor-car,” the young gardener went on.

“No,” I said, re-reading the mysterious summons for help. “But you and your horse must remain here and rest. I shall return to Lydford in the car.”

Full of anxiety, I put on my mackintosh and cap, for it was raining steadily, and within a quarter of an hour of receiving the note I was already on my way along the autumn-tinted roads.

The morning was that of the first of November. Regardless of speed-limits or of police-traps, I tore along until, just before eleven, I again pulled up at the ancient stone porch of the Hall.

A maid-servant opened the door, and I eagerly inquired for Miss Seymour.

“She’s very ill, sir,” was the girl’s reply. “Mr Shaw’s been called on the Bench this morning, but he’ll be back in an hour. Doctor Redwood is here, sir.”

“Redwood! Then what’s the matter?” I gasped.

“I hardly know, sir. But here’s Mrs Howard!” and looking along the wide hall I saw the grave-faced woman in black standing out of the light.

“Oh, Mrs Howard?” I cried, walking up to her. “What’s happened to Miss Asta? Tell me. Is she ill?”

“Very, I’m afraid, sir,” replied the housekeeper in a low voice. “The doctor is upstairs with her. What happened in the night was most extraordinary and mysterious.”

“Tell me—tell me all, I beg of you,” I cried quickly.

“Well, sir, it was like this,” said the woman. “Last night, about eleven, I heard Miss Asta go along the corridor past my room, and downstairs into the servants’ quarters. She was gone, perhaps, twenty minutes, and then I heard her repass again to her room and lock the door. I know she did that, because I heard it lock distinctly. Miss Asta sleeps at the other end of the corridor to where I sleep—just at the corner as you go round to the front staircase. Well, I suppose, after that I must have dropped off to sleep. But just after two o’clock we were all awakened by hearing loud, piercing screams of terror. At the first moment of awakening I was too frightened to move, but realising that it was Miss Asta I jumped up instantly, slipped on a dressing-gown, and ran along to the door of her room. Several of the other servants, awakened by the cries, were out in the corridor. She had, however, locked her door, and we could not get in. I shouted to her to open it, for she was still shrieking, but she did not do so. At that moment Mr Shaw came along in his dressing-gown, greatly alarmed, and with his assistance we burst in the door.”

“Then he helped you to do that?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the woman. “Inside, we found the poor young lady in her nightdress crouched down on the floor by the ottoman at the foot of the bed. She was still crying hysterically and quivering with fear from head to foot. I bent, and taking her in my arms asked her what was the matter, for as we had entered, somebody had switched on the electric light. For a moment she looked at me fixedly with a strange intense expression, as though she did not recognise me. Then she gasped the words: ‘Death!—hand!— hand!’ That was all. Next moment she fell back

in my arms, and I thought her dead. Mr Shaw was beside himself with grief. He helped to lift her on to her bed and tried all he could to restore her with brandy and sal volatile, but without avail. In the meanwhile I had telephoned to Doctor Redwood, who arrived about half an hour later, and he's been here ever since."

"And how is Miss Asta now?" I inquired eagerly. "Still unconscious. The doctor has, I fear, but little hope of her recovery, sir. She has, he declared, received some great and terrible shock which has affected her heart."

The circumstances were strangely parallel with those of Guy Nicholson's mysterious end.

"No one has formed any conclusion of what caused the shock?"

"No, sir. None of us, not even the doctor, can guess what 'hand' and 'death' could signify more than the usual figure of speech," the woman replied. "To me, when she spoke, she seemed to be strangely altered. Her poor face seemed thin, pinched, and utterly bloodless, and when she fell back into my arms I was convinced that the poor thing had gone."

"You are quite certain the door of her room was locked?"

"Absolutely. I heard her lock it, as was her habit, and being the first person there on hearing the screams for help, I tried the door and found it still secured on the inside. Mr Shaw is half demented, and would not at first leave the poor young lady's side—until compelled to go to the Petty Sessions. It seems that there is an important case, and no other magistrate is at home to take his place on such short notice. But I'm expecting him back at any moment now."

"And is Miss Asta still in her room?" I asked. "I think you said that the door was broken open."

"Yes, sir. For that reason we've carried her into the green guest-room, which is lower down the corridor, nearer to my own."

"Thank you, Mrs Howard," I said. "I'll go up and find the doctor. I know my way." Then, in quick anxiety, I breathlessly ascended the broad, thickly

carpeted oak staircase, and a few moments later was in the room which I knew, by the door, was the apartment in which the weird occurrence had taken place.

I recollected only too vividly my own terrible experience, and by those ejaculations which had so puzzled everybody, I knew that she had again witnessed that claw-like hand.

The room, cosy, well-furnished and upholstered in pretty cretonne, was in great disorder. The bed—a brass one, with cretonne hangings over the head to match the furniture—was tumbled with half the clothes upon the floor, while the green satin down-quilt had been tossed some distance away. A chair lay overturned, and water and towels were about, showing the attempts at restoration.

Upon a little wicker-table near the bed stood a shaded electric light, and a novel which my love had evidently been reading on the previous night, lay open. Yet though I investigated the room with careful deliberation, fearing every moment lest Shaw should return, I could detect nothing to account for the singular phenomenon.

The window stood slightly open, but Mrs Howard had explained how it had been unlatched by herself.

I examined the lock of the door. The key was still on the inside, while the hasp was broken; while the hasp of a small brass safety-bolt above had also been forced off. Hence the door must have been both locked and bolted. Certainly there could have been no intruder in that room.

One object caused me curiosity, and my heart beat quickly. Upon the mantelshelf was a little framed snapshot of myself and her father which she had one day taken outside the Casino at Aix.

But what had she seen within that room to cause her such a shock—nay, to produce upon her almost exactly the same symptoms which in the case of Guy Nicholson had terminated fatally?

I heard a footstep in the corridor, and emerging from the room came face to face with the fussy old doctor in his rough tweeds.

My unexpected appearance caused him to utter an exclamation of surprise, but when I asked breathlessly for news of his patient, he looked very grave and said—

“A weak heart, and brain trouble, my dear Mr Kemball. To tell you frankly, alas! I fear the worst.”

“Come here a moment,” I said, taking him by the arm and pulling him into the disordered bedroom. “Now,” I added, as I pushed the door to as well as it would go. “Tell me truthfully. Doctor Redwood, what do you make of this affair?”

“Nothing at present,” he replied with a peculiar sniff, a habit of his, “Can’t make it out at all. But I don’t like the symptoms. Only once she has spoken. In her delirium she whispered something about a hand. She must have *seen* something or other—something uncanny, I think. And yet what can there be here?” he asked, gazing amazedly round the apartment.

“Look here, Redwood,” I exclaimed firmly, “the facts are very similar to those at Titmarsh. Poor Nicholson saw *Something*, you’ll recollect. And he had locked himself in—just as Miss Seymour did.”

The doctor stroked his ruddy, clean-shaven chin.

“I quite admit that in many of the details it is quite a parallel case. But I am hoping to get the young lady round sufficiently to describe what happened. The servants say that the screams were loud piercing ones of horror and terror. Shaw himself told me that he had the greatest difficulty in breaking down the door. They found her crouched down in fear—yonder, behind the ottoman. And she shrieked out something about a hand. To what could she have referred, do you think? She’s quite sane and of perfectly sound mind, or I should attribute the affair to some hallucination.”

“It was more than hallucination,” I assured him, recollecting my own experience, yet determined not to assist him towards the elucidation of the mystery. The dead man had evidently made a discovery immediately, before his fatal seizure. I recollected that brief urgent note of Asta’s. Had she, too, made a similar discovery?

Yes. There could be no evasion of the fact. The two cases were in every way identical.

For nearly a quarter of an hour I stood discussing the amazing affair with Redwood. I could see that he was both mystified and suspicious, therefore I extracted from him a pledge of secrecy, and promised to assist him towards a solution of the extraordinary problem. I made no mention to anybody of Asta's message to me, which I intended should remain a secret.

At my earnest appeal he allowed me to creep on tiptoe into the darkened chamber, wherein still lay unconscious the woman I loved so profoundly —she who was all the world to me.

I bent over the poor white face that presented the waxen transparency of death, and touched the thin, soft hand that lay outside the coverlet. Then, with eyes filled with tears, and half choked by the sob which I was powerless to restrain, I turned away and left the room.

"Will she recover?" I managed to ask the doctor. But he merely raised his thick eyebrows in blank uncertainty.

What devil's work had been accomplished within that locked room? Ay, what indeed?

Against the man Shaw, who had so cleverly misled her into the honest belief that he adored her, there arose within me a deep and angry hatred. Why was he not there, knowing Asta's precarious condition? His excuse of enforced attendance at the Petty Sessions was no doubt an ingenious one. Little did he dream that before the occurrence Asta had summoned me, and for that reason I was there at her side.

So strange had been all the circumstances from that moment when the man of mystery—Melvill Arnold—had breathed his last, that I had become utterly bewildered. And this amazing occurrence in the night now staggered me. Only one person had solved the mystery of the shadowy hand, and he, alas I had not lived to reveal what, no doubt, was a terrible truth.

In the corridor I stood discussing my beloved's condition in low, bated

whispers with the fussy country practitioner, a man of the old fox-hunting school—for nearly every one rides to hounds in that grass-country. He had already telephoned for Doctor Petherbridge, in Northampton, to come for consultation, and was now expecting him to come over in his car.

“I have done all I can, Mr Kemball,” he said. “But as we don’t know the cause, the exact remedy is rather difficult to determine. Every symptom is of brain trouble through fright.”

“Exactly the same symptoms as those you observed in Nicholson!” I remarked. Whereat he slowly nodded in the affirmative, and again stroked his rosy, clean-shaven chin.

“Well, doctor,” I said, “I intend to make it my business to investigate the cause of this peculiar phenomenon.”

And I sat down and wrote an urgent telegram to Cardew, who was, I knew, now stationed at Aldershot.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Another Revelation.

The dark anxious hours of that dismal autumn morning went slowly by.

Doctor Petherbridge arrived in hot haste from Northampton, and had a long and earnest consultation with Redwood. Both men were greatly puzzled. I met them after a long and eager wait, when they emerged in silence from the sick-room.

“We are doing all we can, Mr Kemball,” declared Petherbridge. “The young lady is, I regret to say, in a most precarious condition—in fact, in a state of collapse.”

I begged him to remain, and he did so. For several hours they were constantly at her bedside, while Mrs Howard, anxious and solicitous for the welfare of her young mistress, expressed surprise that Mr Shaw did not return.

My own suspicion was that he had already fled, yet it proved ungrounded, for at half-past two he arrived in eager haste, in a hired carriage, his car having broken down. Both doctors came forward and explained that the condition of Miss Asta had in no way improved. She was suffering from some obscure malady which they had diagnosed as affecting both heart and brain.

“Poor girl! Poor girl!” he cried, tears welling in his eyes. “Do your best for her, I pray of you both,” he added. “She’s all the world to me. Can’t we summon a specialist?”

“Sir George Mortimer, in Cavendish Square, might see her,” remarked the doctor from Northampton.

“Let’s wire to him at once,” urged Shaw, eagerly. “I accept your diagnosis entirely, yet I would like to have a specialist’s opinion.”

Both medical men acquiesced, and a telegram was dispatched to the

great specialist on brain trouble.

As Redwood, seated at the library table, wrote the telegram, his close-set eyes met mine. The glance we exchanged was significant.

“How did you know of this terrible affair, Kemball?” asked Shaw, abruptly, a little time afterwards.

“I came over to invite you both to dine next Wednesday,” I said, of course concealing the secret message I had received from the woman I had grown to love.

In response, he gave a grunt of dissatisfaction, and walked down the hall in hasty impatience. Was his impatience an eagerness to hear of the poor girl’s end?

Surely that could not be, for was he not utterly devoted to her! And yet her seizure and her symptoms were exactly similar to those of poor Guy Nicholson!

The whole day I remained there, watching closely Shaw’s demeanour and his movements.

Once, when he found me alone looking forth from the window of the morning-room, he came up beside me, and, looking at me with those small quick eyes of his, said—

“This is a terrible blow for me, Kemball. I have been quite frank with you, therefore be frank with me. I’ve not been blind. I’ve noticed that you’ve been in love with the poor child, and—well, to tell the truth, I secretly hoped that one day you would propose marriage to her. My own position is, as you know, one of hourly insecurity, and my keenest wish was to see her happily settled before—before the crisis.”

“You guessed the truth,” was my reply. “I do love her—I love her more than I can tell.”

He sighed deeply, a sigh that echoed through the big silent room.

“Well,” he said, “our grief must be mutual, I fear. Petherbridge has just

told me that they do not believe she can live another hour."

Hardly had those words left his mouth when Mrs Howard ushered in a tall, thin, white-haired man, the eminent specialist, Sir George Mortimer.

Without delay he was taken to the poor girl's room, and then a long period of anxious waiting, while the trio of medical men remained with the door closed.

I suppose it must have been about an hour afterwards when, on passing along the carpeted corridor near Shaw's room, next that of Asta, I saw that the door was shut, but as I passed I heard him utter that peculiar whistle, yet so very low that it was only just audible. Twice I heard it, and halting, found myself involuntarily copying him. He was whistling so softly that it could scarcely be overheard beyond the walls of his own room.

What was the meaning of that sound? Probably it only escaped his lips when deep in thought. Some men invariably whistle softly or hum tunes while dressing. Yet in any case it was curious that he should do this while Asta lay dying.

All was chaos and disorder in that usually calm, well-ordered household. Just about seven o'clock Redwood came to me and called me to one of the upstairs rooms, where the great specialist awaited me alone.

"I believe that a friend of yours, a Mr Nicholson, died a little time ago in somewhat similar circumstances to the present case," said Sir George, standing upon the hearthrug with his arms folded. "Now, as far as I can make out, the young lady's illness is due to brain trouble, brought on perhaps by fright. I have seen several similar cases in my experience—and I have treated them."

"But Miss Seymour—will she live?" I asked in frantic anxiety.

"Ah! That I cannot foretell," he replied calmly, in his soft-spoken voice. "I have administered two injections, and I'm glad to tell you that she is infinitely better. Indeed, I expect her very soon to regain consciousness, and we may hope for a turn."

"Thank God!—thank God!" I cried, with over burdened heart. "She is very

dear to me, Sir George," I added with emotion, "and I thank you deeply for your efforts to save her."

"I understand—I quite understand, my dear sir," he said with professional calmness. "Yet, from what my two colleagues have told me, I can't help thinking that there is—well, a little mystery somewhere, eh?"

"A little mystery?" I echoed. "Ah, Sir George, there is a very great mystery, one which I intend at all hazards to investigate—now that Asta has fallen a victim."

But as I spoke the door was unceremoniously pushed open, and Shaw, who had put on a dark blue suit, and who looked unusually pale and haggard, entered, and inquired for the latest bulletin of the patient.

"I'm glad to tell you, Mr Shaw, that she will probably recover," replied the eminent man. "In an hour we trust to have her conscious again, and then she will, I hope, tell us what happened—what she indicated when, in her fright, she made mention of this mysterious hand."

The hand! I recollected those written words of Melvill Arnold.

"She was delirious, I suppose, poor girl!" Shaw said. "But this is real good news that she is getting better! You are quite sure that she will not be taken from us?"

"I hope not. I have treated similar cases."

"Ah! then there is nothing abnormal in this?" he cried eagerly.

"I cannot exactly say that, Mr Shaw. When the poor young lady recovers she will be able to tell us what really occurred to cause her mysterious seizure," Sir George replied gravely.

"Yes," said Shaw. "I hope she will be able to clear up the mystery. You think in an hour or so she will be conscious again?"

"I sincerely hope so."

And then both men left the room together. Towards nine o'clock the

crafty-faced butler came to inform me that Captain Cardew wished to see me, and, a few seconds later, I grasped hands with Guy Nicholson's friend.

The dining-room was empty, for, though the table had been laid, nobody had thought of dinner. Contrary to expectations, alas! Asta had not recovered consciousness. Only ten minutes before I had seen Redwood, who admitted that she had taken a slight turn for the worse, and that their anxiety had been considerably increased thereby.

I had then sought Shaw, but could not find him. He had gone over to the garage for a moment, Mrs Howard told me.

As soon as I got Cardew alone, however, I told him as briefly as I could what had occurred.

"Then Miss Seymour's case and Guy's are practically identical!" he cried, staring at me.

"Yes. And I want you to stay here with me and investigate," I said. Then I related how, on the door of her room being burst in, she had, before losing consciousness, made reference to some mysterious hand.

"That's distinctly curious," Cardew declared. "I wonder what she could have meant?"

"Ah! that remains to us to discover. Will you assist me?"

"Of course," cried the Captain enthusiastically. "Only I hope the poor young lady will recover. Surely the doctors ought to be able to diagnose something!"

"They can't say anything definite. It's for you and me to furnish proofs."

"What do you suspect, Kemball?" he asked, looking straight into my face.

"Wait and see," I replied. "At eleven o'clock, if Asta is not then conscious, we will go and investigate the room in which she was lying when seized."

We ate some cold meat and drank a glass of claret, for I had touched

nothing that day, while he had had a long journey from Aldershot. Then again we sought news of my beloved.

Her precarious condition had not altered, and she remained still unconscious. Afterwards I was told by Mrs Howard that Shaw was in the library, writing. He was greatly upset at the girl's continued unconsciousness, and had expressed a desire not to be disturbed. As I passed the door I heard him speaking over the telephone to some one. All I heard was the number—the number of the woman Olliffe! I tried to gather what he said, but was unable. He was purposely speaking in a low voice—so as not to be overheard.

When the long old grandfather's clock in the hall had chimed eleven, I ascended the wide staircase with Cardew, and with an electric torch which I had several hours ago found in the library, we gained the landing.

Redwood brushed past in haste, and in reply to my question gave but little hope of my poor love's recovery. "Mortimer is about to make a last effort with another injection," he said. "But I fear, Mr Kemball, that we must now abandon all hope."

My heart stood still. His words fell upon me as though he had struck me a blow.

"No hope?" I managed to gasp.

"No, none, Mr Kemball," replied the doctor, and he hurried away to fetch something from the servants' quarters.

I made no further remark. Mere words failed me. If Asta were lost to me, then it was my duty to avenge her death. Therefore I drew Cardew into the dark bedroom in which the dying girl had witnessed the hideous apparition of the hand, and then, with difficulty—for one hinge was broken—I closed the door.

Afterwards, I switched on the electric light and we made a minute and careful examination of the apartment. But we discovered nothing. Before entering there I noticed that the door of Shaw's room adjoining was closed, for he was still downstairs writing.

Presently, when we had satisfied ourselves that in the room was nothing suspicious, I pointed out to my friend that if we remained quietly in the darkness, without speaking, no one would suspect us of being there.

“Now,” I added, “I’m going to lie on that bed while you sit in yonder armchair in the corner; you take the torch, and at sign of the slightest movement flash on a light at anything you may see. Don’t hesitate, for—well, perhaps my life may be in danger, like Guy’s. Who knows?”

I had taken from the corner Asta’s small ash walking-stick which she sometimes used when tramping about the country, and with this in my hand I lay down upon the pillow, fully dressed as I was.

Then Cardew, breathless with excitement, switched off the electric light, plunging the room in darkness.

Gradually, when our eyes became used to it, we could distinguish a faint grey light from the window, but it was not sufficient for me to distinguish my friend, seated as he was in the corner with light and weapon ready.

An hour passed, but nothing happened. We were waiting there, every nerve strained to the utmost tension, but in vain.

At last a sudden suggestion crossed my mind, and leaving Cardew in the room, with his torch ready, I went next door into Shaw’s room, which was still dark, and, having closed the door, imitated that peculiar whistle of his. Three or four times I whistled, surprised that I could imitate him so exactly. Then I waited, listening intently.

I could hear nothing.

So I crept back again to the bed in Asta’s room, for I think Cardew was now becoming impatient. Then, while lying upon the bed, I cautioned him to be very careful.

“Open your light at the slightest sound, remember.”

I held my breath, and could hear my own heart beating in the dead silence. Then after the lapse of a few moments—for we were both listening to the hum of a receding motor-car, and wondering whose it was

—I suddenly gave vent to that low, curious whistle.

Once, twice, thrice I repeated it, low and cautious, so that any one passing the door might not be attracted by it.

Then I listened again with bated breath.

A few seconds went by—seconds of intense anxiety.

Then, of a sudden, my quick ears caught a curious ticking sound, and next moment a flood of white light fell upon the bedclothes close to my head.

I sprang up with a shriek, for there—close to me—I saw *Something*—the terrible claw-like Hand!

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Discloses Shaw's Secret.

The Thing was ugly, hairy, and horrible—a huge dark brown tarantula, the size of a man's palm, which, the instant it was discovered, turned and sped across the bedclothes and disappeared in the darkness.

Cardew had jumped to his feet with a wild, startled ejaculation of horror, having switched on the light, but though we rapidly searched the room high and low, yet nowhere could we find the horrible arachnid. But the secret was out! The revolting hairy thing, which had on that night in Arnay-le-Duc appeared to me like a weird hand, was that huge venomous spider whose bite was as fatal as that of a cobra!

Armed with sticks, Cardew and I groped into every hole and corner of that room, but it had vanished so suddenly that we could not decide in which direction it had gone.

"Well!" gasped my friend, amazed. "By Gad! I never expected that!"

"Neither did I," was my breathless reply. "But the reason of poor Guy's death is now vividly apparent. He was bitten by that arachnid, which Shaw, in all probability, purposely left in his young friend's library, prior to returning home on that fatal night. I think I realise the truth!" I cried. "This particular species of lycosa tarantula is, I have read, found in the primeval forests of Peru, and will only attack human beings when they are motionless or asleep. Its bite is most deadly. It causes stupor, followed by coma or paralysis, and the victim rapidly dies. Yet if the mark of its bite be concealed and unsuspected, as it may easily be in the hair, then the symptoms are identical with those of inflammation of the brain—the disease which from poor Guy is supposed to have died!"

"Then you suspect Shaw of having kept the horrible thing as a pet—eh!" he gasped, staring at me amazed.

"Both as a pet and as an instrument of murder," I replied. "The thing being nocturnal in its habits would, if introduced into a room, remain

carefully hidden all day, and only attack the victim at night while he is sleeping. I had a narrow escape while motoring in France with Shaw,"—and then, in a few words, I described my own experience, and also Asta's previous sight of what had appeared to both of us as a weird, uncanny hand.

"Then this scoundrel Shaw evidently intended that you should die!" he exclaimed. "By Jove! old chap, you have had a narrow escape!"

"Yes. He must have carried his dangerous pet in secret in a box, I suppose. And must have taken it away with him when he fled from Aix."

Then, suddenly recollecting that curious whistle of his, I realised how Shaw had used it in order to recall the great spider.

"Put out the light, Cardew," I said. "Have your torch ready. I have an idea."

"But—" he hesitated, in apprehension.

"Have no fear. We want to see the hideous thing again—and to kill it," I said.

The next second the room was once more in darkness, and after a few moments I began to imitate softly that peculiar whistle that I had learnt from Shaw.

Then we waited in breathless silence, not moving a muscle.

Again and again I whistled, but we could hear no movement. The huge spider was, we felt assured, somewhere in the room, but where we could not discover.

"Switch on the light," I cried at last, and in a second the place became illuminated again, when, to our surprise, halfway down the pink-and-white cretonne curtains at the head of the bed the ugly arachnid, with its long claws, stood revealed and startled at the sudden turning on of the light.

He had crept slowly down from the small canopy above the bed, seeking the place where I had lain.

In an instant he turned to ascend the curtain again, but we were too quick for him, for with two or three sharp cuts with our sticks we brought him down, and he was quickly stretched dead upon the floor.

I went forth boldly to search for Shaw, but could not find him. His room was in disorder, for he had apparently seized some things, packed hurriedly and left.

The car we heard leaving the house while we were in Asta's bedroom had evidently been his!

He had escaped at the very moment when we had discovered the ingenious means by which he had committed his crimes.

We called the three doctors and showed them the huge dead spider. Then, in a moment, all three agreed that Guy Nicholson had succumbed to its bite, and examination of poor unconscious Asta's hair showed plainly where she, too, had been bitten just above the right ear. The trio of medical men stood utterly astounded. No time, however, was lost by Sir George in applying various antidotes and restoratives, and by dawn he came to me with the joyful news that she had taken a turn for the better.

Our knowledge of the real cause of the ailment had only been gained in the very nick of time.

Further examination of the walls of Asta's room resulted in the amazing discovery that the door of a cupboard in the wall beside the fireplace was warped and when closed left a space of an inch open at the bottom. The cupboard was lined inside with wood panelling, and in one panel at the back a tiny trapdoor about four inches square had been cut, so that it could be removed from within the corresponding cupboard which was in Shaw's room adjoining.

Investigation showed that the cupboard in question was the one secured by those two patent locks, and on breaking it open we found that in it Shaw had kept the venomous spider, for both water and food were there, as well as a thick india-rubber glove which he no doubt used when he wished to handle his hideous pet, and a small wire cage in which it could be carried.

In order to release it into Asta's room he had only to move the small piece of cut panel in the back of its place of imprisonment, and, glad to escape, the thing would pass through, as no doubt it had done on the night when my well-beloved had been attacked.

To recall it, Shaw had only to whistle. The spider knew the call.

After the attack upon Asta the scoundrel had evidently lost the reptile in the confusion, and disliking the light it had found refuge on the small cretonne canopy fixed against the ceiling, over the head of the bed.

Knowledge that its bite had not proved fatal, as in Nicholson's case, and that Asta might recover and describe what she had seen, together with the fact that he had been unable to induce his pet to return to him, had terrified him, and he had escaped.

Quickly I telephoned to the police in Northampton, and very soon two officers came out on bicycles, and to them we made a statement. Then, an hour later, a hue-and-cry was flashed across the wires for the assassin's arrest.

Slowly—very slowly—Asta recovered consciousness, but I was not allowed to see her, nor was she allowed, indeed, to speak.

Yet the knowledge that my beloved would again be given back to life was, in itself, all-sufficient for me.

I had at least solved two points in that amazing mystery of avarice and cunning. I had discovered the cruel ingenious manner in which Guy Nicholson had been killed because of the knowledge he had accidentally gained, and I had also established the fact that Shaw intended that poor Asta should succumb.

But what was the motive of this double crime? That point was, in itself, the most puzzling point of all.

Chapter Thirty.

The Third of November.

Through the whole of the following day I remained at the Hall, but as may be imagined the consternation was great when it became known to the servants, and through them to the countryside, that Mr Harvey Shaw, the eminently respectable county magistrate, was being searched for by the police.

Curious how quickly popularity disappears at the first breath of scandal. The very persons who had been loudest in Shaw's praises were now the first to hint at dark things and declare that they had all along suspected him of leading a double life.

Sir George remained, but the two local practitioners went forth to do their daily rounds. Asta had greatly improved, and though ordered not to refer to the tragic events of the past few hours, I was allowed to see her for five minutes about seven o'clock.

Wan and very pale, she was in a blue silk dressing-jacket, propped up with pillows. As I entered, she put out her small white hand and a single trembling word, my name, escaped her lips.

I saw in the shaded light that her big eyes were filled with tears—tears of joy by which mine were also dimmed.

"I've—I've had such a bad dream!" she managed to say. "But, oh! Mr Kemball, how glad I am that it is only a dream, and that the doctor says I am getting better."

"I hope, Miss Seymour, that you'll be quite right and about again within a week," exclaimed Sir George cheerily.

And hearing those words she turned her wonderful eyes full on mine.

What words of sympathy and congratulation I uttered I scarcely know. How can I remember! I only recollect that when the great specialist

touched me upon the shoulder as sign to leave her bedside, I bent and kissed her soft white hand.

All through the day and all that evening I remained eagerly expecting to hear news of Shaw's arrest. Yet, knowing what a past-master he was in the art of evading the police, I despaired that he would ever be caught and brought up for punishment.

As I sat smoking in his armchair in the big morning-room I reflected deeply, and saw with what marvellous cunning and forethought he had misled Nicholson, Asta, myself—and, indeed, everybody—into a belief that he was devoted to the girl whom, so many years ago, he had adopted and brought up as his own daughter.

That decision to kill her lover and afterwards kill her was no sudden impulse, but the result of a carefully thought-out and ingenious plan. Whether the huge tarantula had been put into my room at that French inn with evil intent, or whether it had got loose, and had concealed itself there, I could not determine. Yet in the case of Guy and Asta there must, I decided, have been some very strong incentive—a motive which none had ever dreamed. As regards the incident at Scarborough, he must have placed the tarantula in Asta's room in secret, and have succeeded in regaining possession of it. Indeed, inquiry I afterwards made showed that he had bribed one of the maid-servants while every one was absent to show him the house, his explanation being that he thought of purchasing it.

Shaw was a master-criminal. Bold and defiant, yet he was at the same time ever ready with means for escape, in case he was cornered. His exploit in the hotel at Aix showed how cunning and clever he was in subterfuge. He preserved a cloak of the highest respectability, and had even succeeded in being placed on the roll of Justices of the Peace—he, the man who regarded murder as the practice of a science, had actually sentenced poachers, wife-beaters, tramps, and drunkards to terms of imprisonment?

And yet so clever had he been that the Criminal Investigation Department had never recognised in the wealthy tenant of Lydford Hall the fugitive for whom they had so long been in search.

A second night I remained there, so as to be near the woman I loved so fervently.

Sir George gave me an assurance, as we sat together before we turned in for a few hours' sleep, that his patient was progressing favourably, and that I might again see her the next day. Cardew also remained, and as we three sat smoking we discussed the strange affair, wondering what motive the man Shaw could possibly have in attempting so ingeniously and in such cold blood a second crime. But we could arrive at no definite conclusion. The whole affair was entirely shrouded in mystery.

In the morning I was permitted to see Asta again. She seemed much better and spoke quite brightly.

"Mr Kemball," she said, after we had been chatting for some minutes, "I—I—I want to tell you something—something very important—when we are alone."

"No, not now. Miss Seymour," interrupted Sir George, shaking his finger at his patient, and laughing. "Later on—a little later on. You must not excite yourself to-day."

And so, with a pretty pout, she was compelled to remain silent at the doctor's orders.

I suppose I must have been there a full quarter of an hour, though the time passed so rapidly that it only appeared like a few moments. Then I bade her be of good cheer and went forth again.

She had made no mention of the man who was a fugitive.

The only poignant remark she had made was a warning.

"Be careful when you go into my bedroom. There is something in there," she had said. But I had only laughed and promised her that I would not intrude.

About eleven o'clock Redwood arrived, and as he met me in the hall he pushed a copy of that day's *Times* under my nose, asking—

“Seen this, Mr Kemball? It concerns you, I fancy. That’s the name you mentioned yesterday, isn’t it?”

Eagerly I scanned the lines which he indicated. It was an advertisement, which read—

> “*Re* Melvill, Arnold.—Will the gentleman to whom Mr Melvill Arnold has entrusted a certain ancient object in bronze kindly deliver it according to promise, first communicating with Messrs Fryer and Davidson, solicitors, 196 London Wall, London, E.C.”

I read it again and again.

Then of a sudden I recollected that it was the third of November. On that day I had instructions to deliver the bronze cylinder to the first person who made application for it!

The low, soft-spoken words of the dying man as he had handed me the heavy cylinder, bidding me keep it in safe custody, recurred to me as I stood there with the newspaper in my hand. So I resolved to go at once to London, and call upon the firm who had advertised.

Soon after three o’clock, therefore, I ascended in the lift of a large block of offices in London Wall, and entered the swing doors of Messrs Fryer and Davidson.

When asked by the clerk for my name, I gave a card, adding that I had called in response to the advertisement, and a few moments later found myself in a comfortable private room with a thin, clean-shaven, thin-faced, alert-looking man of middle age, who introduced himself as Mr Cyril Fryer, the head of the firm.

After thanking me for my call he said—

“Perhaps, Mr Kemball, I may tell you briefly what I know of our client Mr Melvill Arnold’s rather eccentric action. He lived mostly abroad in recent years for certain private reasons, and one day, early this year, we received from him a somewhat curious letter upon the notepaper of the Carlton Hotel, saying that he had returned to England unexpectedly, and that he had entrusted a certain bronze cylinder, containing something

very important, to the care of a friend. That friend was, curiously enough, not named, but he instructed us to advertise to-day—the third of November. We made inquiry at the Carlton, but he was unknown there. To-day we have advertised, according to our client's instructions, and you are here in response."

"There is considerable mystery surrounding this affair, Mr Fryer," I exclaimed in reply.

"I do not doubt it. Our client, whom I have known for a good many years, was a very reserved and mysterious man," replied the solicitor, leaning back in his padded chair.

"Well," I said, "I met him on board ship between Naples and London," and then in detail described his sudden illness, how he had induced me to accept the trust, and his death, a narrative to which Mr Fryer listened with greatest interest.

"Then the letter must have been written on the afternoon of his arrival in London. He probably wrote it in the smoking-room of the Carlton. But why he should seek to mislead us, I cannot imagine," exclaimed the solicitor.

"I recollect," I said. "I was with him in a taxi, when he stopped at the Carlton and went inside, asking me to wait. I did so, and he returned in about a quarter of an hour. In the meantime he must have written to you. He was very ill then, and that same evening he died."

"He did not mention us?"

"He made no mention whatever of any friends, save one—a Mr Dawnay, to whom I afterwards delivered a note."

"Dawnay?" repeated Mr Fryer. "You mean Harvey Shaw?"

"Exactly. So you know him, eh?"

The solicitor nodded in the affirmative, the deep lines upon his thin face becoming more accentuated.

I then told him of his client's wilful destruction of a large quantity of

English banknotes which he had compelled me to burn, whereat the man seated at his table laughed grimly, saying—

“I do not think we need regret their destruction. They were better burnt.”

“Why?”

“Well—because they were not genuine ones.”

“But surely—your client was not a forger!” I cried.

“Certainly not. He was a great man. Cruelly misjudged by the public, he was compelled in recent years to hide his real identity beneath another name, and live in strictest retirement. His actions were put down as eccentricities, but he was a great thinker, a wonderful organiser, marvellously modern among modern men, a man whose financial schemes brought millions into the pockets of those associated with him, yet whose knowledge of ancient Egypt and dry-as-dust Egyptology was perhaps unique. But above all he was ever honest, upright and just.”

“He was a complete enigma to me,” I declared. “As he was to most people. I who have been his legal adviser and friend through much adversity, alone understood him. I was not even aware of his death. If he took a liking to you I shall not be surprised to find that he has left you a substantial legacy.”

“He gave me a present before he died,” I said, and told him of the banknotes I had found in the envelope, and also that I held the cylinder in the security of the Safe Deposit Company’s vaults in Chancery Lane.

Finding the solicitor was perfectly frank and open with me, I related the curious and startling circumstances which had occurred within my knowledge since I had made the acquaintance of Mr Harvey Shaw. As I sat in the fading light of that November afternoon I narrated the facts in their proper sequence just as I have herein set them down in the foregoing pages of this personal history.

The man before me sat with folded arms in almost complete silence, listening intently to every word. The twilight faded and darkness fell quickly, as it does in November in the City. He had given orders that we

were not to be disturbed, and he sat silent, so transfixed by my strange story that he did not rise to switch on the light.

I told him all, everything—until I described to him the discovery of that venomous tarantula in Asta's bedroom. Then he suddenly struck his table with his fist, and sprang to his feet, crying—

"Ah! I've been expecting to hear of this all along. The scoundrel meant to kill the poor girl! There were reasons—very strong reasons—for doing so."

"What were they?" I demanded quickly. "I have told you everything, Mr Fryer. Now, be quite frank with me, I beg you—and tell me the whole truth."

He was silent. I could hardly distinguish his thin, deeply lined face seated as he was in the shadows, his back to the window, so dark had it now become.

Presently, he rose and turned on the light, saying as he did so—

"Well, Mr Kemball, as you seem to have been so intimately associated with the closing scenes of poor Melvill Arnold's career, I will explain the whole truth to you—even at the risk of a breach of professional confidence. My client is dead, but the dastardly attempt upon Miss Asta Seymour must be avenged—that man Harvey Shaw shall be brought to justice. Listen, and I will tell you a story stranger than most men have ever listened to—a romance of real life of which, however, every word is the truth."

"The cylinder!" I cried. "Are you aware of what is contained in it?"

"I have not the slightest knowledge," he declared. "That we will investigate together later—after you have heard the strange romance of the man whom you knew as Melvill Arnold."

Chapter Thirty One.

The Truth Concerning Arnold.

“The real name of your friend was—as you have guessed from the threatening letters addressed to him at Kingswear, in Devon—Arnold Edgecumbe,” the solicitor commenced, leaning his elbows upon his table and looking me straight in the face. “My firm acted for his father—a wealthy manufacturer in Bradford, who, upon his death, left his son an ample fortune. Twenty years ago he married an extremely pretty woman. It was purely a love-match, and one daughter was born. Six months after that event, however, poor little Mrs Edgecumbe died of phthisis, and her husband was inconsolable over his loss. He was devoted to his wife, and the blow proved a terrible one. Soon, in order to occupy his mind, he turned his attention to financial affairs in the City, and went into partnership with a man named Henry Harford.”

“Harford!” I ejaculated. “Why, that was the man against whom he warned me! The words he wrote down are still in my possession.”

“He had strong reasons for doing so,” went on the man sitting at his table. “The combination of the pair—both of whom were fearless and successful speculators—soon raised the firm to the position of one of the best-known financial houses in London. They dealt in millions, as others deal in thousands, and both men, in the course of a few years, amassed great fortunes. Suddenly, when just in the zenith of their prosperity, a great and terrible exposure was made. It was found that they had, by promoting certain bogus companies, which had been largely taken up, netted huge profits. The shareholders, numbering many thousands of widows, clergymen, retired officers, and such-like persons, who are ever ready to swallow the bait of a well-written prospectus, became furious, and the Public Prosecutor took up the matter actively. Though my client was, I assure you, utterly blameless in the matter, and afterwards paid back every penny he had received from the transaction, nevertheless such public outcry was made against him as a swindler, that, victim of circumstances, he was compelled to fly the country. Trusting implicitly to his partner, Harford—who, by a very shrewd move, cleared himself,

although he was, no doubt, the actual culprit—he, on the night of his flight, placed his little daughter, to whom he was entirely devoted, in his care, urging him to adopt her, and not to allow her to know her real father's name."

"What?" I cried, starting suddenly to my feet as the amazing truth flashed upon me for the first time. "Then Asta is Edgecumbe's daughter, and Shaw's real name is Harford!"

"Exactly. With these facts in your mind you will be able to follow me more closely."

Again I sank back into my chair astounded.

"Well," he went on, "ingeniously as did Harford endeavour to cover his connection with the bogus promotions—of which the Britannia Banking Corporation, which you will remember, perhaps, was one—yet the Public Prosecutor, after the accounts and books had been examined, decided that he was also a culprit, and two months after his partner's disappearance a warrant was also issued for his arrest. Harford, always wary, had, however, on the day previously, taken little Asta with him and left for Greece, with which country we have no treaty of extradition. Meanwhile, Edgecumbe had a younger sister who had married a man of bad character, an expert forger of banknotes, named Earnshaw, and who sometimes went in the name of King, and the pair had, to a great extent, assisted Harford in his fraudulent schemes entirely unknown to Edgecumbe. The woman and her husband were adventurers of the most ingenious class, and with Harford, reaped a golden harvest in the circulation on the Continent of the clever imitations of Bank of England notes. Edgecumbe was all unconscious of this, and, indeed, only became aware of the transactions by accident. It seems that on the night of his flight from England he went to the office after it had been locked up, in order to get some cash for his journey. There was only forty pounds in the safe, but on breaking open a drawer in his partner's table he found a big roll of new notes. He took them, and left on the table a memorandum of what he had done. Ere he arrived at Dover, however, suspicion grew upon him that the notes were not genuine. So he kept them, and said nothing. It was his first suspicion that Harford was playing a double game. Through all the years that elapsed from that day till his death they

remained in his possession as evidence against Earnshaw and his accomplice, but in order that after his death they should not be found in his possession, he apparently got you to destroy them."

"But this man Harford—or Shaw? Who was he?" I inquired eagerly.

"Of that I know very little, except that, before meeting Edgecumbe, he had lived for many years in Ecuador and Peru, where he had been engaged in the adventurous pursuit of collecting orchids and natural history specimens. Probably while there, he knew of the giant venomous tarantula, and had trained one to answer to his call," was Mr Fryer's reply. "Apparently, from what you have told me concerning the threatening letter, Edgecumbe's sister suspected him of betraying her to the police, and, after serving her sentence for swindling, she and her husband again became on friendly terms with Harford, who, in the name of Harvey Shaw, was then posing as a county magnate, deriving his income partly from the proceeds of his financial transactions, and partly from the passing at various banks on the Continent the bogus notes printed in secret in a room at Ridgehill Manor. It was for that reason the police of Europe have, for the last ten years, been in search of Harford—the English police because of the charges against him in the City, and the European police because he has defrauded hundreds of *bureaux-de-change* all over the Continent by exchanging thousands of his marvellous imitations of Bank of England notes for foreign notes or gold. Yet being a man of such colossal ideas, such a splendid linguist, and possessing such marvellous powers of invention and clever evasion, he acted so boldly and sustained his rôle of English gentleman so well, that he often passed beneath the very noses of those in active search of him."

"Then Edgecumbe was in entire ignorance of the true character of his late partner?" I exclaimed.

"Absolutely—until too late. He only became convinced on the day of his death. He wished you to assist him, though he warned you against him. Apparently, by slow degrees, during his rare visits to England, he had become cognisant of Harford's criminal instincts, and of the fact that he was in possession of that venomous pet which the man had once—I believe—boastingly described as his 'Hand,' yet Edgecumbe was diplomatic enough not to quarrel with him. Asta, ignorant of her

parentage, looked upon Harford as her father and held him in highest esteem. For Edgecumbe to denounce him would be to disillusion the girl in whom all his hopes were centred, and who regarded him, not as a father, but as a very dear friend. On arrival in England he seems to have written immediately to her, urging her to meet him, unknown to Harford, yet, when she went to the hotel it was only to discover, that he was dead."

"But the terrible tarantula—the 'Hand,' as Harford termed it—surely Edgecumbe must have suspected something?" I said.

"He probably was unaware that the thing was so deadly venomous, and he never dreamed to what use the scoundrel would put it," said the solicitor. "The truth only dawned upon him when too late! Remember he placed the utmost confidence in you—and in you alone—a stranger."

"Yes. He gave me that bronze cylinder. I wonder what it can possibly contain?"

"Let us take a taxi down to Chancery Lane," Mr Fryer suggested. "Let us carry it up here, open it—and ascertain."

Chapter Thirty Two.

A Heart's Secret.

"Mr Edgecumbe was always of an antiquarian turn of mind, and when he left England he took up the study of Egyptology in order to occupy his time," said the solicitor, as we sat in the taxi whirling along Newgate Street. "He spent many years in Egypt, and being, of course, in possession of ample funds, he was enabled to make very extensive explorations, for which he was granted special privileges by the Khedive. Many of his discoveries have enriched the British Museum, the Louvre, and other museums on the Continent, while, stored here in London—in a place of which I hold the key—is a magnificent and valuable collection of objects from the period of Shaaru, down to that of the first Amenhotep, all of which will pass into the possession of his daughter, Miss Asta. Even the collection in the British Museum cannot compare with them in value or interest. Every object in our late client's collection is absolutely unique."

"As is the bronze cylinder," I added.

"Yes. I confess I have been filled with wonder as to what it can contain ever since the receipt of the letter asking us to advertise on the third of November for an unknown person—yourself, Mr Kemball. Whatever where the actions of the late Mr Edgecumbe, we must not lose sight of the main fact that the death of his wife, whom he adored, caused in him certain eccentricities. He was devoted to his little daughter Asta, and in order that she should never know that her father had been accused and compelled to fly from justice, he induced his partner to adopt her—only to discover afterwards that he was a criminal and unscrupulous, and was, moreover, in association with a man and woman who were, undoubtedly, criminals. Yet having taken the step he had done ten years before, he could not well draw back. I advised him, as soon as exposure came, to stay and face the music. But the death of his wife had utterly broken him, and his only reply was to say that he was tired of an active business life, and preferred obscurity and study abroad. Yes, Mr Kemball," added the man at my side, "Arnold Edgecumbe was a decidedly remarkable man—

a man of great talent and attainments, of wondrous perception, and honest as few men in this city of London are honest nowadays. He knew that Harford's arrest would bring disgrace upon Asta, and for that reason urged you to become his friend. The situation was, indeed, unique."

On arrival at the Safe Deposit vaults we found, unfortunately, that they had been closed a quarter of an hour, therefore there was nothing to do but to wait till next morning.

So, after some final words with Fryer, I left him, promising to return on the morrow, and then drove straight to St. Pancras, and went down to Lydford, arriving there soon after nine o'clock.

Asta was, I found, so much better that she had been left in charge of a nurse whom Sir George had summoned from London that day. And at my urgent request she allowed me to see her patient alone.

As I stood beside her bed, our hands clasped in meaning silence, I saw that she smiled gladly at my arrival.

Then, presently, when she had motioned me to a chair and I had congratulated her upon her rapid progress towards recovery, I related in as quiet a voice as I could all that I had learned that day in London.

"Mr Arnold was my father!" she cried, looking at me amazed and stupefied. "I never knew that—I—I can't believe it—and yet how kind he has always been to me—what beautiful presents he used to buy for me when I was a child—and how tenderly he used to kiss me when we met. Ah yes!" she cried, "I ought to have known; I ought to have guessed. Poor dear father—and he died without betraying to me the secret of my birth."

"He was a lonely man, Asta," I said in a low voice, calling her by her Christian name for the first time. "He loved your mother and revered her memory. And he kept from you the secret that he had been cruelly misjudged as a shark and a swindler. He entrusted you to the man I know as Shaw, believing him to be upright and a friend. But, alas! how greatly his confidence has been abused."

Her eyes were filled with tears.

“You alone, Mr Kemball, have stood my friend,” she said scarcely above a whisper, as she turned her bright gaze upon me. “When I saw that terrible spider in my room I sent word to you, after chasing it out into the corridor. A vague suspicion that it had been placed there purposely crept over me. But Shaw must have allowed it to pass into my room again, after I had dropped off to sleep.”

“I was your father’s friend,” I replied, “and I hope—”

“Poor dear father! Why did he not tell me? He wrote to me to come to the hotel, urging me to say nothing to Mr Shaw. Perhaps he had something to tell me—ah! who knows?” she exclaimed reflectively. “But I arrived there, alas! too late—too late!”

“He probably intended to reveal to you the truth,” I remarked, looking into her pale, wan countenance. “But had he done so perhaps—perhaps you and I would not have been such close friends as we are to-day.”

“Perhaps not,” she sighed. “I remember how, when we motored to Aix, Shaw was very careful of a little box. Ah yes! I owe more to you than I can ever repay.”

“No,” I said softly. “But—but let me make a confession to you, Asta,” and I took the tiny hand that lay outside the down-quilt. “When I first knew you I grew jealous of poor Guy for—ah, forgive me—because—because, Asta, I loved you!”

Her pale face reddened, and her eyes were downcast. She tried to withdraw her hand from mine.

“But I knew what a good honest fellow he was, and I determined to become his friend. Alas! his friendship for me, because he intended to consult me and tell me what he had discovered, cost him his life.”

“Ah no!” she cried, “do not recall that. It is all too terrible—too terrible!”

“I know what a blow it was for you,” I went on madly. “I suffered all your poignant grief because I loved you—”

“No, no?”

“Let me finish—let me tell you, Asta, now, once and for all, what I feel and what is in my heart. I knew that, with memories of poor Guy still upon you, that you could care nothing for me—perhaps barely like me. I know that at first you almost felt you hated me, yet I have kept my secret to myself, and I have loved you, Asta—loved you better than mere words of mine can tell.”

And I bent and drew her gently to me.

She made no response. Only she looked at me swiftly, and a long sigh escaped her lips.

“In all my life I have never loved any woman but you—so long as I live I never shall,” I declared, in a fervent voice. “If you are not my wife, Asta, then no other woman will ever be. I could not speak before—I dared not. I could not think that you even liked me, and I should have to take time to teach you the sweet lesson I longed to teach you. But to-night, my beloved, I have thrown hesitation to the winds. Now that you are to live, I have told you—I ask you, my love, to be my wife!”

“And I—I thought—”

“Yes,” I said, tightening my hold upon her hand and placing my arm softly about her neck.

“I—I never thought that you loved me,” she said suddenly. But the look in her splendid eyes, the tone of her voice, the rare sweet smile which parted her lips in sheer gladness, unconsciously shown at my confession, told me more than a whole volume of words could have told me.

And slowly my lips met hers in a long kiss—a long, long kiss of ecstatic love—a kiss that changed my whole life from that moment.

“I love you, dearest. I love you with all my soul,” I said, looking down at the pale, thin little face that rested upon my shoulder as she lay.

“You love me?” Her words were scarcely a breath, but I heard them clearly enough in the silence of the room.

“I love you,” I repeated, with fervour and simplicity. “I love you, Asta, as I

have never loved, and as I shall never love again. But you—it is of you that I have had the doubt; it is your love that I have feared I might not yet have won. Have you nothing to say to me? You rest here in my arms. You have let me kiss your lips—”

Through the room there sounded a half laugh, half sob that silenced me. Two soft arms wound themselves about my throat and lay softly there; two sweet tear-dimmed eyes looked straight into mine with something in their depths that held me silent for sheer joy; and two warm lips lifted to mine gave me back, shyly, one out of my many caresses.

“Yes, Lionel, I do love you,” she said at last, so low that I had to bring my ear close to her lips to catch the words. “And—and if you really mean that you want me for your wife—”

“Really mean it!” I echoed. “My dear love, cannot you understand that I live for you alone—only you—that for you to be my wife is the greatest, almost the only wish of my life?”

“Then it shall be as you wish,” she said softly. What passionate words escaped me I do not remember. All I know is that our lips met again and again many, many times, and we sat in each other’s embraces childishly blissful in our new-born happiness.

For a long time, indeed, no further word was spoken between us. Our minds were too full for mere uttered phrases.

Thus we sat until recalled to a sudden consciousness of the situation by the nurse’s light tap upon the door.

Then, before I left that room, and heedless of the presence of the nurse, I bent and kissed fondly upon the lips my wife who was to be.

Ah! can I adequately describe my feelings that evening, my heart-bursting to tell to some intimate friend the secret of our love? No, I will leave you who have loved to imagine the boundless joy I felt at the knowledge that Asta loved me after all, and that we were betrothed.

Chapter Thirty Three.

Plot and Counter-Plot.

In London next day I met Mr Fryer by appointment at half-past eleven at the Holborn Restaurant, being near Chancery Lane, and together we went to the Safe Deposit Company's vaults, where we obtained the ancient cylinder from the strong box in which I had placed it, and then entered a taxi and drove to the City.

Across Holborn, in Red Lion Street, we found a locksmith, and took him with us to Fryer's office in London Wall. He brought with him some tools, but when he seated himself and examined the mysterious cylinder he shook his head, remarking—"This'll be a pretty tough job. It's been very well welded together. I'll have to file it off!"

"Is it ancient welding?" I asked.

"Oh no, sir. It's a very ancient bit o' bronze, but the top's been off of late, and when, welded on it's been painted over green to imitate the patina of the old bronze. Whoever did it was one of those fakers of antiques, I should say."

"Well," said the solicitor, "make a start on it, and get it open."

The mechanic seated himself at the table and, taking up a long sharp file, began to cut into the hard metal, while we stood aside watching him intently.

What could it be that was so securely concealed therein—the Thing that had been withheld even from Mr Fryer, the dead man's confidant in everything?

For a quarter of an hour the man worked hard, but made little or no impression upon the ancient metal. So the solicitor took me into an adjoining room, where after a brief chat he said—

"Since our conversation last night I've been carefully weighing matters.

The motive of the cruel and ingenious assassination of your friend Nicholson is perfectly plain. Harford knew that there was a will in existence, for now I recollect Mr Edgecumbe, after getting me to make it, told me that he had revealed its provisions to his friend. They are that his daughter should inherit the whole of his very substantial fortune, but in the event of her death while unmarried it was to go to Harford himself, in recognition of his friendship and of his kindness to Miss Asta. Now if Nicholson had married her, the money would have passed beyond his control. Therefore, aided, no doubt, by Earnshaw and his wife, they killed him by a method which fully bears out my estimate of the craft and cunning of my client's late partner. Edgecumbe, not long before his death, had somehow become aware of the existence of the huge spider, kept as a pet, and having suspicions as to what use it might be put to, warned you of it with his last effort. Nicholson, against whom it is more than probable an unsuccessful attempt was made one night while sleeping at the Hall, also discovered Harford's secret. He intended to reveal it to you, but was attacked, and succumbed before he could call upon you. Harford next feared lest you might propose marriage to his ward, hence the fact that he carried his pet to the Continent with him, and you saw the terrible 'Hand' and narrowly escaped its fatal grip on that night in the old French inn. Yes, Mr Kemball," Fryer added, "depend upon it that Harford played his last card when he allowed the terrible spider to pass into Miss Asta's bedroom. He intended that she should die, and that Arnold Edgecumbe's fortune should be his—a plot which would, alas! have been successfully accomplished, had your suspicions not been providentially aroused."

A sudden call from the locksmith caused us to return hastily to Fryer's room, and there we saw that the top of the ancient cylinder had been filed entirely off.

"There's something inside, sir," said the man, addressing the solicitor. "Perhaps you'd like to take it out yourself."

And Mr Fryer drew forth a portion of an ancient leather thong, attached to which was a large old seal of clay with an ancient Egyptian cartouche impressed upon it.

Chapter Thirty Four.

What the Cylinder Contained.

Mr Fryer then took the cylinder in his hand, and with eager fingers first drew forth a piece of modern paper about six inches long, folded lengthways many times. When he opened it I saw that parts of it were brown as though scorched, while it bore at its base one of the long green stamps used in the Consular service, obliterated together with attesting signatures.

At a glance he recognised its nature.

“Why!” he exclaimed. “This is a fresh will signed a year ago before the British Consul-General at Naples! Ah!” he went on, reading it swiftly. “I see. His disillusion regarding Harford, whom he believed to be his friend, caused him to revoke his previous will, and by the terms of this he leaves his entire fortune, as well as what may accrue from the enclosed knowledge, unconditionally to his daughter Asta, but in the event of her death, it is to go to found a sanatorium for the treatment of destitute consumptive patients.”

“Then he must certainly have had suspicions of Harford!”

“Without a doubt. In order to warn Asta of the existence of that deadly spider, and probably to make other provisions for her, he came to England from Egypt, but unfortunately died on the day prior to her call at the hotel. When he wrote to me he, no doubt, felt a presage of imminent death, for he knew well that he suffered from heart-affection and might expire quite suddenly. He intended, by making this new will in secret and placing it in your hands, that should Asta expire mysteriously, the assassin would receive a shock at finding that the money did not revert to him after all. And see,” he said. “Read what is written here.”

I peered over his shoulder and read the lines of small but clear handwriting at the foot of the document, evidently penned after it had been completed at the Consulate.

“Memorandum made by me this Fourth day of February, 1909:—In case of the sudden or mysterious death of my dear daughter Asta before the opening of this cylinder, I desire that the circumstances of her death be fully investigated. The man Harford, alias Harvey Shaw, in whose charge I injudiciously placed my beloved daughter, keeps as pet a specimen of the lycosa tarantula of Ecuador, which is most venomous and dangerous, and will attack human beings when they are asleep. In Ecuador and Peru, on account of its size and formation, it is known as ‘The Death Hand.’ Inquiries I have made show that a bite causes inflammation of the brain, so that medical men in South America are very frequently deceived. I have suspicions that the man Harford intends to use his pet for purposes of secret assassination, and hereby place my strong convictions upon record for my above-named executor, Mr Cyril Fryer, to use at his own will and discretion. Signed by me, Arnold Edgecumbe.”

“By Jove!” I said. “That’s a pretty plain allegation.”

“Yes, and not far short of the truth,” replied my friend. “With these suspicions in his mind I wonder what could have been the nature of his letter to Harford which you delivered at Totnes Station?”

“It was addressed in the name of Dawnay.”

“One of the names he used—one of his actual Christian names. It is evident, however, that, in it, he gave Harford no cause to suspect that he was aware of the existence of the strange pet, otherwise he would not have made that too successful attempt upon Nicholson.”

“Yes, but by its delivery he knew that its writer was dead,” I said. “Your client, perhaps, acted with some indiscretion in sending it. It at once placed Asta in peril.”

“He had a motive, no doubt—but it imperilled Asta. Yet if he had not sent it you would never have met the young lady, or been instrumental in exposing the clever and ingenious plot from which she has so narrowly escaped with her life,” the solicitor remarked.

The locksmith had been paid and retired. So we were again alone together.

“The wording of this latest will is peculiar,” Mr Fryer went on. “It refers to ‘all that may accrue from the enclosed knowledge.’ What enclosed knowledge, I wonder?”

And taking up the cylinder he again looked into it. “Why, there’s something else here?” he exclaimed, and inserting a long steel letter-opener he succeeded in drawing forth a small roll of ancient brown papyri which, very tender and crumbling, was covered by puzzling Egyptian hieroglyphics.

“This, in all probability,” he exclaimed, “is what the cylinder originally contained when he discovered it in the tomb of the Great Merenptah. We must obtain a translation.”

“Yes,” I cried eagerly. “Let us take it to the British Museum. Professor Stewart will be able to decipher it at once.”

So, replacing the papyri in its bronze case, we took it with us in a taxi, and half an hour later sat in the room of the professor, the same eminent Egyptologist whom I had seen on my previous visit there.

The great scholar put on his spectacles very leisurely, and with great care opened the crumbled relic out before him as he sat at this table and placed a sheet of glass over it.

Then for a long time he pored closely over the queer, crude drawings. At last he broke the silence as he looked up at us through his round glasses, saying—

“This, I may as well tell you, is one of the most remarkable and interesting records that have ever come out of Egypt, and, like the papyri which I deciphered for Mr Arnold, and which was found accompanying this cylinder, it is in the hieroglyphics in use during the period after Alexander the Great had delivered Egypt and it was ruled by Ptolemy and his descendants. Ptolemy the First, you will remember, perhaps, reigned from 323 to 285 B.C., and was succeeded by twelve other kings of his dynasty. The famous Cleopatra was daughter of Ptolemy the Eleventh, and in 43 B.C. became Queen of Egypt. Here we have before us, upon this piece of papyri, a most important record concerning that famous woman. This was written at Thebes by one Sanehat, or Sa-nehat, son of

the sycamore, a general and a royal favourite in the year and month of Antony's death. Listen, and I will decipher one or two extracts to show you its purport," and carefully wiping his spectacles the celebrated Egyptologist readjusted them; and then, examining the half-faded lines of hieroglyphics, said—

"The opening is a long one in which Sanehat, son of the sycamore—probably from his having been born or living at some place where there was a celebrated sacred sycamore—describes the love between Cleopatra and Antony, and the great treasures of the wonderful palace of the Ptolemies, which stood about in the centre of the shore of the eastern bay of Alexandria. He relates how Antony and Octavian fought desperately for the possession of the world at the Battle of Actium, and how, after that wonderful royal banquet which Athenaeus has already described to us in his writings, Antony sank deeper and deeper in the flood of his wild passion for Cleopatra. We have the Queen's marvellous beauty, her fascinations—her limbs like gold and her hair like lapis lazuli, so precious in Egypt in those days—and her sins here described by the hand of one who was her most trusted general—and who, by the way, is mentioned in at least two other records of this period, one now preserved at St. Petersburg, and the other at Berlin, published in facsimile in the *Denkmaler* of Lepsius. It tells us of the gorgeous life led by this most brilliant Queen of Queens, of the wealth and favours she lavished upon Antony and his captains, and of how she built her tomb near the temple of Isis Lochais, at the eastern end of the harbour where Fort Silsileh stands to-day. All this is most intensely interesting, coming as it does from the hand of the Queen's trusted favourite, but there is something more—something which certainly arouses our curiosity and which must be investigated. Listen, and I will read just the most important extracts."

Then again he paused for a few moments, and halfway down the crinkled papyri he read a disjointed decipher as follows:—

"*The Horus, life of births, lords of crowns, life of births, king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Kheper-ha-ra, son of the Sun, Amen-em-hat, ever rising into eternity. Order for those who read. Behold this order of the Queen is sent to thee to instruct thee of her will*...

"*Cleopatra, whose ruling passion was to be a monarch of a greater Egypt*

and to enlarge the borders of the South, remained in the Palace of her fathers, but Antony was valiantly defending the fortress of Pelusium against Octavian. In dead of night I was called by the Lord Steward unto the pearl chamber of the Queen, and she, reclining upon her bed of pearl and gold with censers of sweet perfumes burning, commanded me to silence, and sent away her slaves. She had received Neb-ka-n-ra as messenger from Antony telling her of Octavian's strength... She therefore commanded me with my captains User-ref and Hordedef to repair unto the treasury of the while house and take possession of the greatest of her jewels and place them in a place of safety, lest the accursed Octavian conquering, the Palace be attacked.

"*In obedience I called my two most trusted captains, and went in secret unto the white house, and opening it with the Queen's own key, obtained therefrom much gold and precious stones... with the great jewels of Sotor of Euegates, and of Ruddidet... and the sacred sapphires of Amen-em-hat... and next night we concealed them. Five times did we journey, under cover of night, unto the treasury, and in baskets of green tamarisk took therefrom... strings of emeralds and of pearls and electrum and new malachite... the hundred rubies the size of pigeons' eggs... the goblets of gold and stones and the great bowls of gold encrusted with jewels which were served at the banquet to Antony... Know ye that fifteen basketsful of precious stones of ka, statues of gold, breast ornaments of emeralds, beads of lapis lazuli, and pearls of great price did we take and conceal in the place where Octavian—whose name be accursed—should not know*.

"*...And at dawn, when our work was completed, I went again unto the Queen and kneeling told her of the place where we had hidden them. And Ra had spread fear over the land; his terrors in every place, and the Queen was greatly pleased, and rewarded me with fifty talents. And she commanded me to write this record and to place it where it should remain through the ages, so that if death consumed her, the whereabouts of her treasure shall not be utterly lost unto the world*.

"*Know, therefore, ye who dareth to open this tube of bronze which she gave unto me and to face the wrath of the Sun-God, and of Osiris the Eternal, that the pit where we have dug... and wherein we have concealed the great treasure and gold and lazuli and heart scarabs and khulal stones set in gold of our Queen Cleopatra the Magnificent, lieth*

three hundred cubits and seven towards the sunrise from the eastern angle of the Temple of Denderah, which our Queen hath founded and which beareth her image graven by Uba-aner upon its wall. With thy back unto the eye of her image pace three hundred cubits and seven, and the gold and jewels which our Queen secured for Antony... shall there be found hidden...

"*I, Sanehat, make this record lest the great treasure of Cleopatra be lost for all time. I write this so that he beloved of Ra, of Horus, and of Hathor, who readeth this my message, may seek and may find... for Antony fought well, and went from battle unto death by his own hand because he heard falsely that his Queen was already dead. Yea, in their splendour but one moon ago, they founded the synapothano menoi (the people who are about to die together), and so Antony took his life when he heard that his Queen was dead*.

"*Two suns have not set since User-ref and Hordedef, my loyal and well-beloved captains, were put to death by the Queen's orders, the month Paophi... the seventh day the god entered his horizon... so that they may not betray the hiding-place of her jewels, and I have fled here unto Thebes, for, alas! her hand is now uplifted against me for the same cause... and this written record will I place in the tomb of the Great Merenptah, that it shall remain there through generations in the keeping of Ra, till it be discovered by one of courage who cometh after me, and upon whom may the blessing of our great Osiris for ever rest. Excellently finished in peace. He who destroyeth this roll may Tahuti smite him*."

"How curious!" I exclaimed, utterly astounded.

"Does this Temple of Denderah still exist?"

"Most certainly," replied the professor. "I myself have seen the graven image of Cleopatra upon its wall, as well as that of her child Caesarion. As far as I can distinguish, this record, which has reposed in its cylinder for nearly two thousand years, is perfectly genuine, and as it is known that the marvellous Egyptian queen must have possessed untold treasures, this record of Sanehat should certainly be investigated. It was evidently written on the day of Cleopatra's death, but before the news that the gorgeous queen had committed suicide rather than be carried

captive to Rome had become known."

"But does this wonderful collection of gems still exist, do you anticipate?" inquired Fryer.

"Well, after reading such an authentic document as this, I am certainly inclined to believe that it may very possibly be found. I recall that the vicinity of the temple is desert, and that the ground at the spot indicated certainly shows no signs of recent excavation."

"Then knowledge of this papyri must be kept a profound secret, and the Egyptian Government approached in confidence with a view to allowing exploration in the vicinity," Fryer said, his business instinct at once asserting itself.

"Most certainly," replied the professor. "I am, of course, most intensely interested in this matter, and if I can be of any assistance I shall only be too happy. Personally, I believe that by this important papyri the great treasures which Cleopatra was known to possess, and of which history gives us no account after her death, may actually be recovered."

Chapter Thirty Five.

Conclusion.

Twelve months have passed.

The days have slipped away rapidly since that well-remembered morning when I stood beside Professor Stewart and watched him, peering through his glasses, decipher those puzzling hieroglyphics which Sanehat had penned two thousand years before.

No doubt you read the newspapers and, of course, have seen the interesting results of the excavations made and still being continued by the Egypt Exploration Fund, under the auspices of the Egyptian Government, with whom Mr Fryer, as the late Arnold Edgecumbe's executor, came to a mutual arrangement.

Professor Stewart has, for some months past, been out at the Temple of Denderah, that cyclopean pile which Cleopatra built for herself, and though from time to time vague reports have found their way into the papers of important discoveries close to that famous edifice, yet, truth to tell, we are endeavouring to keep the actual extent of the discoveries as private as possible for the present. All I can say is that ancient jewels, worth many thousands of pounds, taken from the spot have already reached London—jewels, ornaments, and heart scarabs which once adorned the person of Egypt's most gorgeous queen.

But it is of my own sweet-faced queen that I think the most—she who sits here in silent love beside me at Upton End as I now pen these final lines. We have already been man and wife for eight months, and, after a delightful honeymoon spent beside the Nile, during which we paid a visit, of course, to Cleopatra's temple, where Professor Stewart was superintending operations, have returned home and settled down in peace and happiness—a rural bliss, perfect and entire, that will last always.

The hated name of Harvey Shaw is never mentioned between us. And little wonder, indeed. Within a month after his flight from Lydford, two

men, one a foreigner, called at night at a lonely cottage near Hexworthy, far away on wild Dartmoor, and asked to see the tenant, a gentleman who had recently taken the place furnished.

The broad-speaking, old Devon housekeeper went upstairs to inform her master of his visitors, but she found the door locked. Shaw, for it was he, had recognised the voice of Victor Tramu, and knew instantly that he had at last been run to earth.

The second visitor, a well-known officer from New Scotland Yard, rushed upstairs and called upon the accused to open the door, but on doing so they heard the report of a revolver, and, bursting in, found the assassin of poor Guy Nicholson lying shot through the head and quite dead.

It appeared, too, that on the day following Harford's flight Ridgehill Manor was found by the police to be tenantless, and Earnshaw and his clever wife have not yet been found. The police, however, are confident that, possessing only slight funds, they must be heard of again ere long at their old game of passing forged notes to Continental money-changers.

Asta, instead of existing upon the charity of a criminal and unwittingly exchanging forged notes for genuine ones and gold, as she had done so many times, is now wealthy in her own right, while Mr Fryer has received a very handsome legacy as executor. Cardew, fond of adventure, got six months' leave to assist in the excavations in Egypt, and recently, on his return, has been here at Upton End on a visit, and has told us much of interest concerning what has of late been found there. And as evidence of the genuineness of that half-faded record—penned by the trusted general of Cleopatra whom she afterwards desired to kill in order to protect her secret of her treasure, and preserved for so long in that bronze cylinder—there stand before me with the gold statuette of Osiris beneath domes of glass upon a side-table in the library wherein I am this evening writing, a canopic jar of alabaster and four ancient golden goblets varying from seven to ten inches in height thickly encrusted with magnificent rubies, sapphires and emeralds—the actual cups which once held the wine drunk at those gorgeous bacchanalian feasts which the great queen gave to Antony, over whom she exercised that fatal fascination.

They represent but a specimen of what has already been recovered and is later on to be divided between the Egyptian Government, the British Museum and Asta herself. Though we are extremely careful to conceal the real facts from the papers, extensive works of examination are at this moment in progress, for it seems that the queen's enormous wealth was buried hurriedly beneath stones in a watercourse which has ages ago dried up. The action of the water scattered the loose gems, as, from the sifting of the sand each day, precious stones, cut and uncut, are now being recovered.

Never in these our modern days of progress and discovery has such a flutter of excitement been caused in archaeological circles, and certainly never has such a magnificent and authentic treasure, the lost million of Cleopatra, been located.

Arnold Edgecumbe, always attracted to the study of Egyptian archaeology, had devoted the last seventeen years of his broken life to studies in Upper Egypt, and, truly, the discovery he made in the tomb of Merenptah has resulted in the recovery of great numbers of the gems and ornaments actually worn by Cleopatra herself.

Every national museum in Europe has eagerly offered to purchase specimens, hence the estate of the late Arnold Edgecumbe, the man so cruelly misjudged and hunted down by the investing public, will be greatly enriched by the remarkable discovery, which, on that evening of his death, he predicted to me would astound this our prosaic modern world.

Often have I congratulated myself upon my narrow escape from a sudden end on that night in the old French inn, for surely the cunning ingenuity and truly devilish resourcefulness of Asta's foster-father from the moment when he so successfully cast the blame of fraud upon his friend Arnold Edgecumbe and caused him to flee to Egypt until that night when he so nearly succeeded in taking the young girl's life, showed him to be a veritable master-criminal.

But the days of darkness, insecurity and despair are happily over. The clouds have parted, and the sunshine of happiness now falls upon the dear, sweet girl who, eight months ago, knelt beside me at the altar of that grey, square-spired village church which, here as we sit in the

summer sunset, we can see peeping beyond the old elm avenue across the park.

“Yes, my darling, I am at last truly happy,” she whispers softly in my ear, bending over to kiss me in reply to a question. “So happy that I cannot adequately describe what I feel amid this perfect peace.”

And so, with her sweet lingering caress upon my lips, a kiss more full of love and holy passion than ever Cleopatra gave Antony beside the Nile, I embrace her with all the tenderness of my affection, with all the strength of my very soul, and while so doing conclude this my strange personal narrative, and write—

The End.

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