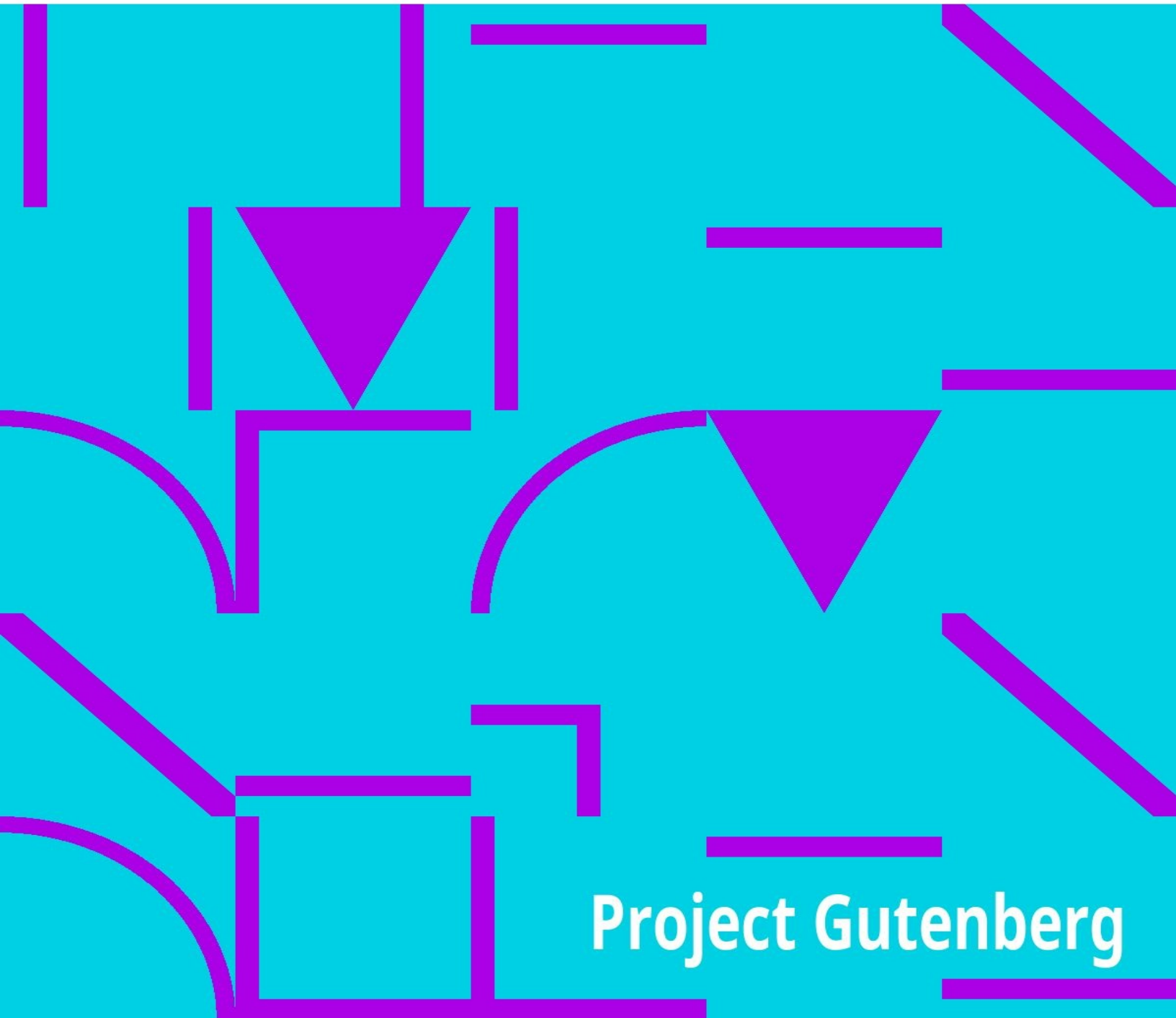
The Mysterious Mr. Miller

William Le Queux



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"The Mysterious Mr. Miller"

Chapter One.

A Stranger in Shepherd's Bush.

"Why! Look! he's dead, doctor!" I gasped, standing aghast.

The sudden change in the thin sallow face, the lack of expression in the brilliant eyes, and the dropping of the jaw were sufficient to convince me that the stranger's life had ebbed away.

The doctor bent, placed his hand upon the prostrate man's breast for a moment, and then, straightening himself, he turned to me and answered gravely:—

"Yes, Godfrey; it is as I feared from the first. Nothing could save him. Remember what I told you this morning—it was simply a matter of hours."

"He appears to have been a rather strong, athletic man," I remarked, looking down upon the wan, furrowed face.

"Unusually so. The disease, however, has thoroughly wrecked his constitution. He was addicted to the morphia habit of late." And pulling down the sheet he pointed to the marks of recent punctures upon the dead man's forearm.

We were standing together in the small shabby bedroom of the boarding-house wherein I lived in Granville Gardens, facing the recreation ground close to Shepherd's Bush Railway Station. The stifling July day was at an end, and the narrow room was lit by the soft hazy glow of the fast-fading London sunset.

Through the open window came the shouts of children at play upon the "green" opposite, mingled with the chatter of the passers-by and the ever-increasing whirr of the electric trams. Within that faded, smoke-grimed chamber of the dead was silence. Upon the bed between us lay the dead stranger—the man who was a mystery.

"Well, has he told you anything after all?" inquired my friend, Dr Tulloch.

“Very little,” was my reply. “He was uncommunicative. He had a reason, I believe, for concealing his identity.”

“Perhaps we shall discover something when we search his things,” my friend remarked.

“We’ll do that to-morrow,” I said. “It isn’t decent to do so at once.”

Then, as Tulloch bent again, to reassure himself that his patient was actually lifeless, a silence once more fell between us. The glow of the summer sunset deepened, shining through the smoke-haze, and lighting up those dead features for a moment, but next instant the doctor, having been satisfied that no spark of life remained, tenderly drew the sheet over the white sphinx-like countenance.

The unfortunate man was a perfect stranger to us all.

On the previous day, at a little before six o’clock in the evening, he had called upon old Mrs Gilbert, who with her daughter kept the boarding-house where I chanced to be staying, and had, it appeared, taken a top room, where his two leather portmanteaux were placed. I knew nothing of the man’s advent until Miss Gilbert had tapped at the door of the sitting-room and informed me that she had a new guest, a foreign gentleman who could speak only a few words of broken English.

“This is his name,” she said, handing me a scrap of paper whereon he had written “Michele Massari.”

“An Italian,” I remarked. “There is a noble family of the Massari, in Ferrara. He may belong to it.”

“It’s fortunate, Mr Leaf, that you speak Italian,” Miss Gilbert said, laughing. “You’ll help us if we are in any difficulty, won’t you?”

“Most certainly,” I assured her, for I knew that a foreigner is often a great trouble in a purely English *pension*. Many people speak French or German, but few know Italian.

Then the landlady’s daughter, a pleasant-faced, florid young woman of about thirty, thanked me and withdrew.

The reason I found myself at Mrs Gilbert's *pension* was in order to be near my old schoolfellow, Sammy Sampson, who had made the place his *pied-à-terre* in town for several years past. I had to spend six months in London upon business affairs, therefore we had agreed to share his sitting-room, a cosy little bachelor's den leading from his bedroom at the back of the house.

An hour later at dinner the stranger made his appearance and, with my consent, was placed next to me. There were eleven guests in all—two married couples of the usual *genre* to be found in London boarding-houses of that order, and the rest men with various occupations "in the City." We were usually a merry party, with Miss Gilbert at the head of the long table, and the chatter was generally amusing.

The advent of the stranger, however, awakened every one's curiosity, and as he took his seat, glancing sharply around, there fell a dead silence.

He was a tall, thin, wiry man with sharp aquiline features, hair with silver threads in it, and fierce black moustaches carefully waxed. His eyes were black and penetrating, his complexion sallow, his cheeks sunken, and the glance he gave at his fellow-guests was quick and apprehensive, as though he feared recognition.

He wore evening dress, which was out of place at Mrs Gilbert's, and also showed that he was not used to boarding-houses of that class. And as he bowed towards me and seated himself, I saw that upon his lean, claw-like hand was a fine diamond ring.

All eyes were directed upon him, and at once I detected that, being a foreigner, he was viewed with considerable disfavour and distrust. The guests at Mrs Gilbert's were not cosmopolitan. The only foreigners accepted at their own estimation in London boarding-houses are the Indian law students. Every girl believes her "tar-brush" table-companion to be a prince.

Signor Massari ate his tinned soup in silence. He had tucked the end of his napkin into his collar in true Italian fashion, and from the fact that attached to his watch-chain was a small golden hand with the index-

finger pointing, I put him down as a superstitious Tuscan. That hand was the survival of a mediaeval Tuscan charm to avert the evil eye.

Having spent some years of an adventurous youth in old-world Tuscany, and being well acquainted with the soft musical tongue of the flower-scented land, I ventured presently to make a casual remark with my c's well aspirated, as became the true-born Florentine.

My companion started, looking at me in quick suspicion. In his keen piercing eyes was a glance of sharp apprehension and inquiry—but only for a moment. Sight of me seemed instantly to dispel his fears, and his countenance resumed its normal appearance. But his response was a rather cold and formal one—in the *patois* of the Genoese. He evidently desired that I should not put him down as Tuscan.

Though somewhat puzzled I allowed the incident to pass. Yet I made a mental note of it. Signor Massari, I decided, was a somewhat queer customer. He was a man with enemies—and he feared them. That fact was quite evident.

We chatted in Italian, much to Miss Gilbert's fussy satisfaction, but our conversation was rather formal and strained. He had no intention, it seemed, to have anything to do with his fellow-guests, and he only tolerated me because it would have been uncivil not to do so.

A friend in Italy had recommended him to Mrs Gilbert's, he explained. He had only arrived from the Continent at 4:50 that evening, and had come straight there in a cab.

"Then this is your first visit to London?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "I was here once before—long ago." And I thought he sighed slightly, as though the recollection of the previous visit was painful.

His was a sad face; hard, furrowed—a countenance that bore trouble written indelibly upon it. He ate but little, and drank only a glass of mineral water.

I tried to get him to tell me from what province of Italy he came, but he

studiously avoided all my ingenious questions. He spoke of Italy vaguely, and yet with the tenderness of one who loved his fatherland. Among all the nations of Europe, the Italian is surely the most patriotic and the most eager to serve his country.

On several occasions remarks, meant to be courteous, were addressed to him in English by my companions, but it was plain that he did not understand our tongue. Or if he did, he gave no sign.

Therefore, from the very first moment of his entry into our boarding-house circle we put him down as a complete mystery.

Sammy Sampson, my irresponsible friend, sat opposite me and, as usual, kept the table laughing at his clever witticisms. Once I saw the Italian scowl in displeasure, and wondered whether he had conceived the idea that my friend was joking at his expense.

The stranger was not aware that I had detected the fierce look of hatred that, for a single instant, showed in his dark shining eyes. It was an expression that I did not like—an expression of fierce, relentless, even murderous resentment.

I was about to assure him of Sammy's utter disinclination to poke fun at any foreigner, when I saw that if I did so I should only aggravate the situation. Therefore I let it pass.

The Italian was a man of refinement, exquisite of manner towards the ladies as was all his race, and though I cannot explain it he struck me as being well-born, and superior to those sitting at table with him. Yet he vouchsafed but little as regards himself. Italy was his home—that was all. And Italy is a great place; a country of a hundred nations. The Venetian is of a different race from the Sicilian, the Tuscan from the Calabrian. I still suspected he was a Tuscan, yet he spoke the Italian tongue so well that at one moment I put him down as a born Florentine, while at the next as a Livornese or a Roman.

He saw that I knew Italy and the Italians, and was purposely endeavouring to mislead me.

That same night, just after midnight, Jane, one of the maids-of-all-work,

rapped at my door, saying:—

“Please, sir, the Italian gentleman’s been taken awful ill. We can’t make out what ’e wants. Would you kindly go to ’im?”

I dressed hurriedly, and, ascending to the stranger’s room, asked, in Italian, permission to enter.

A faint voice responded, and a moment later I was at the stranger’s bedside. The feeble light of the single candle showed a great change in his countenance, and I saw that he was suffering severely and seemed to be choking.

“I—I thank you very much, signore, for coming to me,” he said, with considerable difficulty. “I am having one of my bad attacks—I—I—”

“Had you not better see a doctor? I’ll call a friend of mine, if you’ll allow me.”

“Yes. Perhaps it would really be best,” was his reply, and I saw that his hands were clenched in sudden pain.

Therefore, after telling Sammy of the foreigner’s illness, I put on my hat and went round into the Holland Road for my friend Tulloch.

The latter came with me at once, and as soon as I had interpreted the stranger’s symptoms, and he had made a careful examination, he turned to me and said in English:—

“The man’s very bad—cancer in the stomach. He’s evidently been near death half a dozen times, and this will probably prove fatal. Don’t frighten him, Godfrey, but just put it to him as quietly as you can. Tell him that he’s really very much worse than he thinks.”

“Is it worth while to tell the poor fellow the truth?” I argued. “It may only have a bad effect upon him.”

“His other doctors have, no doubt, already warned him. Besides it’s only fair that he should know his danger. I never keep the truth from a patient when things are desperate, like this.”

“Then you hold out but little hope of him?”

Bob Tulloch, who had been with me at Charterhouse, stroked his dark beard and replied in the negative, while the stranger, who had been watching us very closely, said in Italian in a low faint voice:—

“I know! I know! I’m dying—dying!” and he laughed curiously, almost triumphantly. “I’m dying—and I shall escape them. Ah! signore,” he added, with his bright black eyes fixed upon mine, “if you only knew the truth—the terrible, awful truth—you would pity me—you would, I am convinced, stand my friend. You would not believe the evil that men say of me.”

“Then tell me the truth,” I urged quickly, bending down to him in eagerness.

But he only shook his head and clenched his even white teeth.

“No,” he said, with a fierce imprecation in Italian. “Mine is a secret—her secret—a secret that I have kept until now—a secret that none shall know!”

Chapter Two.

Touches a Woman’s Honour.

Tulloch left half an hour later, and Sammy, whose curiosity had been aroused concerning the foreigner, entered the room and inquired after the patient.

But hoping to learn more from the stricken man, I sent my friend back to bed and remained there through the night, administering to the patient what my friend Tulloch had ordered.

The long hours dragged on in silence. Only the ticking of the cheap American clock broke the quiet. Lying upon his back the stranger fixed his dark eyes upon me, until his hard gaze caused me quite an uncomfortable feeling. It is unpleasant to have a dying man’s eyes fixed so attentively upon one. Therefore I shifted my chair, but even then I could not escape that intent penetrating gaze. He seemed as if he were reading my very soul.

If I spoke he answered only in low monosyllables. Whenever I attempted to put a question he made a quick gesticulation, indicating his impossibility to reply. And so passed the whole long vigil until day broke in brightening grey, and the sun shone forth again.

Yet the man’s hard stony stare was horrifying. Somehow it utterly unnerved me.

Had Tulloch not declared that the fellow was dying, I should certainly have left him; yet I felt it was my duty as a man to remain there, for was I not the only person in that household acquainted with the Italian tongue?

Ever and anon he clenched his teeth tightly and drew a long hard breath, as though bitterly vengeful at thought of some incident of the past.

“*Accidenti*!” was an ejaculation that escaped his lips now and then, and by it I knew that he was praying that an accident might befall his enemies —whoever they were. He uttered the most bitter curse that an Italian

could utter.

Presently, about five o’clock, just as the sun’s rays entering through the opening between the dingy old rep curtains fell across the threadbare carpet in a golden bar, he became quiet again.

“Ah, signore,” he said gratefully, “it is really extremely good of you to put yourself out on my account—a perfect stranger.”

“Nothing, nothing,” I assured him. “It is only what you would do for me if I were ill in a foreign country where I could not speak the language.”

“Ay, that I would,” he declared. And after a pause he added: “Nearness to death causes us to make strange friendships—doesn’t it?”

“Why?” I asked, somewhat puzzled.

“Well—in me, for instance, you are making a strange friend,” he said, with a queer, harsh laugh.

“Why strange?”

“Because you are utterly unaware of who or what I am.”

“I know your name—that is all,” I responded quietly. “You know the name by which I choose to be known here. It is not likely that I should disclose my real identity.”

“Why not?”

“Because—well, there are strong reasons,” was his vague answer, and his mouth shut with a snap, as though he discerned that he had already said too much. Then a moment later he added: “As I’ve already told you, you have made a strange acquaintance in me. You will probably be surprised if ever you really do ascertain the truth, which is, however, not very likely, I think. At least I hope not.”

I recollected that he had spoken of a secret—some woman’s secret—which he intended, at all hazards, to preserve. What was it, I wondered?

The thin drawn face upon the white pillow wore a wild, desperate expression. The stranger had actually laughed in triumph at the suggestion of death. A man must be desperate ere he can face the open grave with a smile upon his lips.

After a few minutes he raised his thin yellow finger beckoning me closer, and in a fainter voice said:—

“You are the only friend I have in this great capital, Signor Leaf,”—for at table I had told him my name and something about my wandering life on the Continent—“you will not allow them to bury me as a pauper? There is money—see, in that left-hand top drawer—over there. Will you get my purse?”

I rose, opened the drawer he indicated, and handed him a bulky red morocco wallet, one of those in which Italians carry their paper currency.

He opened it and I saw that it was crammed with hundred-franc and even thousand-franc notes. In the wallet there was probably over a thousand pounds.

“Will you take charge of it?” he asked, handing it back. “I shall never want it again. Pay all the expenses, and I would ask of you one favour. Upon the stone over my grave put no name—only the words: ‘In Memory of one who was Unfortunate’—that is all.”

“And the balance of the money—to whom shall I hand that?”

He thought a few moments, his eyes fixed upon the low, smoke-blackened ceiling.

“If there is no just claimant within one year take five thousand francs as a souvenir of me, and present the remainder to a hospital—whatever hospital in London you think the most deserving. You will also find the directions for obtaining certain securities deposited in Italy. Obtain them and deal with them as you deem advisable.”

“But have you no relations?” I inquired, foreseeing a great difficulty in carrying out these verbal instructions.

“Relations! Bah! what are relations?” he cried excitedly. “Only an infernal encumbrance. I suppose I have some somewhere—everybody has more or less.”

“And don’t you know where yours are?”

“No, nor do I wish to know,” he snapped. “I am alone—you understand—entirely alone. And, moreover, I trust that if you are my friend, as you seem to wish to be, you will so far respect my memory as not to believe all that will probably be said against me. To you only I admit that I am not what I have represented myself to be—that is all. I accept your kindness, but, alas! with considerable shame.”

I drew the Italian notes from the wallet, and counted them.

“There are twenty-eight thousand lire here,” I remarked, “one thousand one hundred and twenty pounds.”

“What does it concern me how much there is?” he asked, smiling. “Use it as I’ve directed. Indeed,” he added, after a pause, “you need not tell any one that you have it.”

“I shall tell my friend Sampson, or people may think that I’ve stolen it,” I said.

“Yes,” he remarked hoarsely, with a sigh, “people are always ready to think ill of one, are they not?”

And then, as the bar of sunlight crept slowly across the worn-out carpet, a deep silence again fell, broken only by the stranger’s fierce, vengeful mutterings which to me conveyed no distinct meaning.

“*Madonna mia*!” he cried aloud once, cringing in excruciating pain. “How I suffer! I wonder how long it must be before I give out. *Dio*! Is this the punishment of hell?”

Then he turned his eyes upon me—those wide-open, horrified eyes—in a look the remembrance of which is even to-day still before me, the recollection of which I shall carry with me to the grave.

There was something indescribable about that expression, uncanny, fascinating, inhuman. They were the eyes of a man who, though still alive, was obtaining his first glance into the awful mysteries of the eternity.

At half-past seven Tulloch returned and brought him a soothing draught, so that he slept, and I then left the sick-room to dress and breakfast.

With Mrs Gilbert, Sammy and I agreed that no word of the painful affair should be told to our fellow-guests, because illness in a boarding-house always causes the visitors to make excuses for departure. So we said nothing.

Sampson had some urgent business with his solicitor in the City that day, therefore I remained at home, acting as nurse to the unfortunate man whose end was now so near.

Three times during the day Tulloch returned, but all he did proved unavailing. The stranger could not possibly live, he said. It was a wonder that he had had strength to withstand the journey to England. It was the reaction that was proving fatal—internal haemorrhage.

Just before six o'clock, when I crept on tiptoe back to the mysterious man's darkened room to see if he still slept, he called me eagerly in a low whisper, saying that he wished to speak to me in strict confidence.

I therefore seated myself at his bedside and bent down, so that the effort of speaking should be as little as possible.

"There is still one further favour I would beg of you, Signor Leaf. I wonder whether—whether you would grant it?" he asked very feebly, stretching out his thin hand until it rested upon my wrist.

"If it is within my power, I will," I assured him.

"Then you see this!" he exclaimed, drawing from beneath his pillow a small flat packet in white paper about four inches square and secured by three large black oval seals evidently impressed by some old monastic seal of the middle ages.

“I want you,” he said, “to accept the responsibility of this. They are papers of considerable value to certain relatives in Italy. Will you take charge of it, and three years after my death hand it intact to the Italian Ambassador? I appeal to you to do so, for you are my only friend, and I am dying,” he added, in a tone of intense earnestness.

“If you wish,” I said, somewhat reluctant, however, to undertake such responsibility. And I took the packet, and, after examining the seals, transferred it to my pocket.

The mysterious Massari firmly declined my offer to go to the Italian Church in Hatton Garden and fetch a priest.

“I don’t wish to see anybody,” he snapped. “I have a reason. At least let me die in peace.”

And an hour later, just as Tulloch returned, he again fixed those bright staring eyes upon me and silently passed away, carrying with him his secret to the grave.

It concerned a woman. That much he had admitted. Who was the woman, I wondered? What was her secret?

“This man had a strange history, I feel convinced,” I remarked in a low voice to Tulloch as we left the chamber of death together and quietly closed the door.

“Yes,” he said. “He seemed a queer fellow. But in my profession, old chap, we often meet strange people, you know. Men, when they are dying, frequently have curious fancies and extraordinary hallucinations.”

And then we went down into Mrs Gilbert’s sitting-room to inform her of the unfortunate occurrence in her house.

I locked the sealed packet and the bulky wallet safely away in my despatch-box, and when Sammy returned a little later I told him all that had occurred.

My friend, a short, fair-haired, round-faced fellow of thirty-eight, a splendid type of the muscular athletic Englishman, flung himself into the

big leather armchair with a cigarette and listened. Like mine, his life had been full of adventure. Some years before he had thrown up his commission in the Scots Greys in order to go on active service, anywhere so long as there was fighting. He had been through three South American revolutions; had served with the Americans in Cuba; had been mentioned in despatches for his services before Ladysmith, and was now contemplating volunteering for service against the Mad Mullah. Possessed of comfortable private means he was soldier, traveller, big-game hunter and champion tennis-player, a good all-round man bubbling over with good-humour, and a great favourite with the ladies.

“Well, Godfrey, old chap,” he remarked, stretching himself out when I had concluded my story. “Certainly the fellow’s a bit of a mystery. Do you know, I watched him very closely at table last night, and it somehow struck me that he feared to be recognised. Each time the door opened he started and looked apprehensively in its direction. Besides, a man of his stamp doesn’t usually come to a boarding-house of this sort. He’d go to the Savoy, or the Cecil. Depend upon it he had a motive in coming here, and that motive was in order to hide himself. He may have done something wrong in Italy and fled to London, as so many do. Who knows?”

Truth to tell, my friend’s suggestion exactly coincided with my own suspicion. Jane, the maid-of-all-work, had told me, to my surprise, that when she had entered his room that morning during my absence he had spoken to her in most excellent English! The fact, too, that he had refused to see a priest seemed to point to a fear lest his hiding-place might be discovered.

But he was dead, and I had, rather unwisely perhaps, accepted a curious responsibility. Even the money he had placed in my charge might be the proceeds of some theft!

That night I arranged with a neighbouring undertaker that the remains of the stranger should be taken away on the following night when the whole house was asleep, a service for which I received the heartfelt gratitude of Mrs Gilbert.

About seven o’clock the next evening when I returned from the club, Miss

Gilbert met me excitedly in the hall, and asked whether I would mind stepping into her mother's sitting-room for a moment.

Seated within, I found a tall, dark-haired, sweet-faced girl in neat black who looked at me with shy inquiry as I entered. I saw she was very beautiful. Her delicately moulded features were perfect, and upon her cheeks was the fresh bloom of youth. I judged her to be about twenty-five, with slim, narrow-waisted, graceful figure, eyes of soft dark brown, well-defined brows and tiny shell-like ears. Her air and manner was of the *chic* Parisienne, rather than the Londoner. The instant our gaze met I saw that she was a woman of exquisite sweetness—perhaps one of the most attractive I had ever seen in all my wide wanderings over the face of the globe.

"This lady desires to see you, Mr Leaf," explained the landlady's daughter. "She has called with regard to our friend, Signor Massari."

I bowed to her, and as I did so she said quickly in English:—

"I am in active search of Signor Massari, and have come post-haste across Europe in order to find him. This lady says he has been here, but has left. You, I understand, speak Italian and have had several conversations with him?"

I glanced quickly at Miss Gilbert. She had not told the visitor the sad truth, therefore I was compelled to sustain the fiction that the dead man had left.

The landlady's daughter, apparently unable to further evade her visitor's eager questions, excused herself and left us alone together.

The instant she had gone the visitor rose with a quick *frou-frou* of silken underskirts, and closing the door turned to me with a deep earnest look, saying in a low voice scarcely above a whisper:—

"Let me confess the truth, sir! I am in a most deadly peril, and yet utterly defenceless. I have come direct from Rome in order to overtake the man who has called himself Massari. I must find him, at all hazards. If he chooses to speak—to tell the truth—then he can save my life. If not, I'm lost. Will you help me to discover him? Perhaps you know where he has

gone? I throw myself upon your sympathy—upon your mercy. See!" she cried hoarsely, with a wild look in her beautiful eyes, for she was indeed desperate, "I am begging of you, a perfect stranger, begging for my freedom, for my woman's honour—nay for my life!"

I stood before her stunned.

What could I reply? What would you have replied in such circumstances?

Chapter Three.

Gives some Explanations.

Her voice was soft and refined. She was evidently a lady.

The mysterious stranger had held the secret which might liberate her, yet he had carried it with him to the grave!

Who was he? Who was she?

The situation was certainly one of the most difficult in which a man could find himself. Miss Gilbert, in order to conceal the fact that a death had occurred in her boarding-house, had pretended that Massari had left. I saw, however, that the pale-faced girl before me was desperate, and felt convinced that the melancholy truth should be revealed to her.

The man's death sealed her doom. She had made that entirely plain to me.

I now distinguished that her dress was dusty, her dark hair slightly dishevelled, and she bore traces of long travel. She had evidently, on arrival from the Continent, come straight from Charing Cross out to Shepherd's Bush. Therefore, by some secret means, she knew of Massari's intention of hiding himself at Mrs Gilbert's.

"You do not reply," she said, in a voice full of reproach. "Do you really refuse to render me assistance, sir? Remember, I am a helpless woman who begs her life of you. You have seen and spoken with that man. Where is he now?"

For a moment I hesitated. Then seeing that she must sooner or later know the truth I drew my breath and said:—

"Come, follow me." And opening the door we ascended the stairs.

"Ah!" she cried excitedly. "He is still here! That woman lied when she told me he had gone, eh? He is still in the house!"

I made no reply, but went on, she following closely behind.

Then a few moments later, having gained the top landing, I threw open the door of the darkened chamber of death and drew aside the curtains.

She dashed to the bed and tore the sheet from the dead, white face.

Then she staggered back as though she had received a blow.

“My God!” she cried. “Too late!—*too late*!”

Dull, dazed, she stood there, with the stare of blank despair in her eyes and pale as ashes. The dead white face seemed to wear a smile—the smile of cheerful resignation, as though his body had parted with its spirit in gladness and in triumph.

For a little while she stood stock-still and speechless—the living dead! Suddenly—ah! it is nothing in the telling; one should have heard and seen to realise—suddenly there welled up from the depths of her heart the sigh of its aching, the sob of its breaking. Then she shrieked with the ghastly laughter of despair. Then she lashed out to a cursing of the dead man and all his deeds; and her execrations were the most shocking because they proceeded from the tongue of a sweet-mouthed woman.

Of a sudden her eyes fell upon the stranger’s two portmanteaux, and dashing across she knelt to open them.

“No,” I said quietly, “I cannot permit you to touch anything there.”

“You cannot permit—*you*!” she cried, facing me.

“And who, pray, are you? Have I not more right to know what he has here than you?”

And with a sudden wrench she broke the hasp of the weak, foreign-made lock, and next instant turned the whole of the contents, clothes and papers, out upon the floor.

Quickly she searched among the quantity of papers, as though looking for something. Yet she was disappointed.

I took up several of the folded documents and found that they were bonds and other securities. It almost seemed as though the mysterious Massari had fled at an instant's warning and taken all the valuables he had at hand.

The second portmanteau resisted her efforts to break it open, therefore I handed her the key. If, as she said, that man had held her future in his hands, she certainly had a right to look through what he had left behind.

In her eagerness she tossed the papers hither and thither, now pausing to scan a letter and now breaking open a sealed envelope and hastily ascertaining the contents.

"No," she cried hoarsely at last, turning fiercely to where the dead body lay. "You have left no written record. Brute! coward! assassin!" she hissed between her teeth, shaking her fist in the dead man's face. "You refused to give me my freedom—to clear my honour—you laughed in my face—you who knew the truth but refused to speak!"

The scene was terrible, the living execrating the dead. I took her by the arm and tried to lead her away. But she shook me off, crying:—

"He has died of the terrible disease with which God had afflicted him. He knew, too well, that after his death I should be helpless and defenceless. He was wealthy, but what did all his wealth serve him—compelled to fly at night and hide himself here, hoping that I should not discover him. He little dreamed that I knew of his hiding-place."

"Then he could have cleared you of some false charge, had he been so inclined?" I inquired, hoping that she would reveal the truth to me.

"Yes. A foul dastardly charge has been made against me—one of the cruellest and blackest that can be laid against a woman," she answered. "By a word he could have established my innocence. He knew I was innocent, yet he refused—he laughed in my face, and told me that he would not lift a little finger to help either me or my father."

"Why not?"

"Because the establishment of my innocence would have given me my

happiness.”

“And he denied it to you. He had a motive, I suppose?”

“Yes—oh yes!” she said. “Even my tears did not move him. I went upon my knees and begged him to speak, but he was obdurate. That was eight days ago. And how soon has Fate overtaken him! Two days later he was compelled to fly in secret in order to avoid arrest, and to-day he is lying there dead—his lips, alas! sealed.”

“Ah! unfortunately,” I sighed, “he can no longer bear witness on your behalf, miss—I have not the pleasure of your name?” I said, hesitating purposely.

“Miller—Lucie Miller,” she replied. “And yours?”

“Godfrey Leaf.”

“Yes, Mr Leaf, it is unfortunate for me,” she said, with a dark look of desperation. “I am a doomed woman!”

“Oh, no, you must not speak like that,” I urged. “Surely the charge against you is not so very serious!” To me it seemed impossible that such a sweet-faced girl should have any grave imputation against her.

“I have enemies, bitter, relentless enemies,” was her brief response. She had grown a little calmer, and I had replaced the sheet over the cold, lifeless countenance of the man who had refused to tell the world the truth and thus save her.

“Have you travelled from Rome alone?” I inquired.

“No. I had a companion,” she answered, but did not satisfy me whether it was a male or female.

“You live in Rome, perhaps?” I asked, for I saw that she had a cosmopolitan air which was not that of an English-bred woman.

“No. I generally live in Leghorn.”

“Ah! in Tuscany. I know Leghorn quite well—the Brighton of Italy, a very gay place in summer. Pancaldi’s at four o’clock in the season is always bright and amusing.”

“You really know Pancaldi’s?” she exclaimed, brightening. “Only fancy! We have so very few English in Leghorn. They prefer Vallombrosa or the Bagni di Lucca. Indeed an Englishman in Leghorn, beyond the shipping people, is quite a rarity.”

“And this man Massari—it was not his real name?” I said.

“No. But I regret that I am not permitted to tell you who he really was. He was a person very well-known in Italy—a person of whom you read frequently in the newspapers. That is all I may tell you.”

“Well, really, Miss Miller, all this is very mystifying,” I said. “Why did he come here?”

“Because he thought that he would be able to live in hiding. He feared lest I might follow him.”

“But you said that he also feared arrest.”

“That is so. He was compelled to escape. His enemies laid a trap for him, just as he did for my father and myself.”

“But why did he refuse to give you back your happiness by clearing you of the charge? To me it seems almost incredible that a man should thus treat an innocent woman.”

“Ah! Mr Leaf, you didn’t know him. He was one of the most unscrupulous and hard-hearted men in the whole of Italy. Every *soldo* he possessed bore upon it the blood and tears of the poor. He lent money at exorbitant interest to the *contadini*, and delighted to ruin them from the sheer love of cruelty and oppression. Those papers there,” and she pointed to the securities she had scattered upon the dingy carpet, “and every franc he possessed are accursed.”

And he had given me the sum of two hundred pounds for accepting the responsibility of his funeral and of the sealed packet.

“You mean that he was, by profession, a moneylender?”

“Oh, dear no. He lent money merely for the purpose of ruining people. He was heartless and cruel by nature, and if a man committed suicide—as many did because he had ruined them—he would laugh at the poor fellow as a fool, and take the very bread from the mouths of the widow and family.”

“The brute! A Jew, I suppose?”

“No. The people believed him to be one, but he was not. In his methods he was more fiendish than any Hebrew. He did not lend money for profit, but in order to bring misery to others. The one kind, generous action he might have performed towards me, the giving back to me my honour, he refused. To him, it was nothing; to me, everything. It meant my life.”

And I saw in her eyes a desperate look that deeply impressed me.

“I wish you would be more explicit, Miss Miller. If I can be of any service to you or assist you in any way, I shall be delighted. Really I don’t like to hear you talk as you do. If you are in a quandary there must be some way out of it, and two heads, you know, are always better than one.”

She sighed, and raising her fine eyes to mine, replied:—

“Ah! I fear, Mr Leaf, that your kind assistance would be unavailing, although I thank you all the same. That man yonder held my life in his hand. One word from him would have saved me. But he refused, and before I could overtake him Death had claimed him.”

“He told me that he felt no regret in having to die,” I said.

“Of course not. Had he lived the truth would have been revealed, and he would have dragged out his remaining days in a convict prison. I know that truth—a strange and startling one—a truth which would assuredly amaze and astound you. But he is dead,” she added, “and though he refused to give me back my honour and my life I will never seek a vendetta upon one whom the Avenger has already claimed—one whom God Himself has justly judged.”

And together we turned, and left the silent chamber wherein lay the remains of the man who was a mystery.

Chapter Four.

Arouses Certain Suspicions.

Sammy chanced to be out, therefore I conducted her to our cosy little sitting-room at the back of the house on the first floor, and after a few minutes she had so far recovered from the shock of seeing her dead enemy that she seated herself and allowed me to talk further to her.

I told her of the request which Massari had made respecting his epitaph, and of his fearless encounter with death.

“Naturally. He was unfortunate, and he wished to die,” she said, quite coolly. “Had he lived he would only have fallen into disgrace and been placed in the criminal dock.”

“Towards me he was very pleasant, though not very talkative.”

“Ah! you have had a narrow escape,” she said, with her dark eyes fixed upon me mysteriously.

“A narrow escape? What of, pray? I don’t understand you.”

“Of course not,” she answered, smiling strangely.

“Tell me more,” I said eagerly. “This statement of yours is very puzzling, and has aroused my curiosity. Do you mean that Massari had some sinister design upon me?”

She fixed her dark eyes upon me for a few moments, then said:—

“You were once, about three years ago, in Pisa—at the Minerva, I think?”

I stood before her open-mouthed. What did this sweet-faced woman know regarding that closed page of my life’s history?

Mention of that hotel in the quiet old marble-built city where stands the wonderful Leaning Tower recalled to me a certain unsavoury incident that I would fain have forgotten, yet could never put from me its

remembrance.

“Well?” I asked at last, summoning all my strength to remain calm. “What of it?”

She was silent for a moment, gazing straight into my eyes.

“Something occurred there, did it not?” she said slowly.

“And he knew of that?”

Then I recollected how the dying man had fixed his eyes upon me with that hard, intense look; how his gaze had followed me about the room, and I saw his fierce hatred and deep regret that while he himself was dying I still lived.

Perhaps he had intended that our positions should be reversed, but God had willed it otherwise.

Did Lucie Miller herself know what had taken place in Pisa?

I asked her point-blank, but from her replies I became reassured that she was entirely ignorant of the real facts. She knew that some extraordinary incident that concerned me had taken place there—that was all.

By what means had the stranger obtained knowledge of my secret? To me, her allegation that I had had some narrow escape seemed incredible. I could not discern sufficient motive. Yet she repeated her allegation, adding:—

“His motives were always hidden ones.”

“Well,” I declared, “to me the thing is really beyond credence. I can’t see what I can have done to injure him. Was it in connection with the affair in Pisa, do you think?”

“I believe it was, but of course I’m not quite certain,” was her somewhat vague reply. Perhaps she desired to mislead me.

The position was certainly a strange one. Had the dead man been a

secret enemy of both of us?

The sweet face had changed as she sat with her neat patent-leather shoe stretched forth upon the shabby hearth-rug. It was even paler and more serious, while her eyes were fixed upon mine with a curious, intense gaze that caused me surprise.

“You have fortunately escaped,” she said mechanically, after a brief pause. “I am, however, a victim, and doomed.”

And sighing her eyes fell upon the carpet.

“But you will be able to clear yourself of this charge against you, Miss Miller—you must—you will. If the brute refused to clear you, then you must find other means. Why did he refuse? What had he to gain by refusing?”

“Everything,” was her low, hoarse answer. “If he had spoken the truth and cleared me then a terrible vengeance would have fallen upon him. But death overtook him instead.”

I wondered whether I should tell her of the commission he had entrusted to me, but decided that, for the present, I would say nothing.

“Are you returning at once to Italy?” I inquired presently, for our mutual connection with the dead man had aroused my curiosity concerning her. I longed to know who she was, and who was the man who lay in that darkened upstairs room.

“I hardly know what my future movements are to be,” she replied. “I came post-haste to London to face him and to compel him to speak and clear me of the foul imputation against me. Now that all is in vain—now that the future holds no hope for me—I don’t know what I shall do.”

“You have friends in England, of course?”

“I have an aunt living in the country. Perhaps I shall go to her. I must first hear what my father counsels, now that our enemy is dead.” Then after a pause she raised her eyes to mine and added: “I think you are acquainted with a certain lady named Hardwick, are you not?”

I started. She seemed to be aware of all my private affairs. It was extraordinary. Surely these people had not spied upon me?

“I knew a lady of that name some time ago.”

She smiled mysteriously, for she had watched my face and seen my expression of surprise.

“And the recollection of her is not a very pleasant one, eh?”

“How did you know that?” I asked quickly.

She shrugged her shoulders with that foreign air which showed her to be a born cosmopolitan and laughed, but made no reply. That she knew more concerning me than she admitted was quite plain.

“And what has the woman Hardwick to do with the affair?” I asked in surprise.

“She is not your friend,” she answered, in a low, serious voice. “You have seen her lately, I presume.”

“I met her last while at supper at the Savoy about a fortnight ago,” I said. “She then pressed me to go and dine with her.”

“Of course. Hitherto you had not seen her for several months.”

“No. She has been abroad, I understand.”

“Yes. In Italy.”

“And she invited me with some sinister motive?” I exclaimed in surprise.

“She wishes to resume your acquaintance, and to regain your confidence. It was, I think, part of an intrigue.”

“I refused her invitation,” I said. “I had long ago discovered that she was not my friend.”

“That is fortunate. Otherwise you might have cause to deeply regret it. The woman is an adventuress of the worst type—a fact which I daresay

you are already aware of."

"I discovered it by mere accident, and for that reason I dropped her acquaintance. But what you have told me is utterly astounding."

"That man's end relieves you of all further anxiety, yet at the same time it dooms me to shame—and to death!" she remarked hoarsely, rising suddenly to her feet with quick resolution.

I made no remark. What she had revealed to me was so bewildering. That the woman, before me had interests in common with myself was now plain. She was in deep distress—in fear of what the dark future held in store for her, abandoned by the one man who could clear her of this mysterious allegation, so infamous that she dare not repeat it to me, a stranger.

Her grace and beauty, too, were assuredly incomparable. Truly she was one of the prettiest women I had ever met—yet at the same time the most despairing. I saw tragedy in her countenance—the shadow of death was in her eyes, and I stood before her silent and fascinated by the mystery which enveloped her.

"I must go, Mr Leaf," she said. "I must telegraph to my father and inform him of the *contretemps* which has occurred. He will direct me how to act. But before I go I would like to thank you very very much for your great kindness and sympathy towards me. I am sure that, if possible, you would seek to assist me. But it is out of the question—entirely out of the question. What must be, must be."

And she put out her small hand to me in farewell.

"There must, I am sure, be some way in which to evade this misfortune which you apprehend," I said. "At any rate we may meet again, may we not? Where shall you stay in London?"

"I really don't know," she said, in a vague, blank manner which showed that she wished to evade me, fearing perhaps lest I might make unwelcome inquiries concerning her. "As to our meeting again, I hardly think such a course would be wise. My friendship might imperil you still further, therefore let us end it now, as pleasantly as it has commenced."

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You will know what I mean, Mr Leaf, some day,” she answered, with a strange look in her dark eyes. Then sighing she added: “Farewell.”

And I was compelled to take the hand she offered. Refusing to tell me where she lived, and holding out no fixed promise of returning, she at once went down with me to the front door.

After I had bowed farewell and she had descended the steps, I closed the door, and was returning along the hall when suddenly Sammy emerged from the dining-room, where he had evidently been standing, and facing me with a strange, serious expression upon his features, such as I had never seen there before, asked:—

“Godfrey! what’s that woman doing here—in this house? Do you know who she is? By Jove, you don’t, that’s certain, otherwise you would never have let her cross this threshold. Why has she dared to come here?”

Chapter Five.

The Villa Du Lac.

“Look here, Sammy!” I exclaimed, when we were together in our little den a few minutes later, “what’s the good of beating about the bush? Why don’t you tell me straight out what you have against her?”

“My dear fellow! surely it isn’t for me to cast a slur upon any lady’s character. I merely warn you that she has a very queer reputation—that’s all.” And he stretched out his legs and blew a cloud of smoke from his lips.

“Every woman seems to enjoy a reputation more or less queer nowadays,” I declared. “Have you ever come across a woman about whom something detrimental was not whispered by her enemies? I haven’t.”

“Perhaps you’re right there, Godfrey,” was my friend’s reply. “You discovered the truth concerning Ina Hardwick, and that was a hard blow for you, eh? But didn’t I give you a hint long before which you refused to take?”

“And now you give me a hint regarding Lucie Miller. Well, tell me straight out—who and what she is.”

“First tell me why she came to see you.”

“She certainly didn’t come to see me,” I protested. “She came to see the stranger—she’s a friend of the dead man’s.”

He turned, knit his brows, and stared straight into my face.

“A friend of Massari’s! Who told you so?”

“She did.”

Sammy smiled incredulously. He was a man who had passed through life

having singularly escaped all the shadows that lie on it for most men; and he had far more than most what may be termed the faculty for happiness.

“H’m. Depend upon it she came here more on your account than to visit the mysterious Italian.”

“But she saw Miss Gilbert and asked for Massari!” I exclaimed. “It was Miss Gilbert who called me and introduced me. I took her up to the dead man’s room, and the sight of him was a terrible shock to her. She’s not exactly his friend; more his enemy, I think.”

“How could she know Massari was here, pray?”

“Ah! I don’t know that. The Italian was probably followed here after his arrival at Charing Cross.”

“Did she explain why the fellow came here?”

“Yes, she told me various things that have utterly stupefied me,” I answered. “She hints that the Italian and the woman Ina Hardwick were in league to take my life.”

“Your life?” he cried. “What absurd romance has she been telling you? Why you didn’t know Massari until yesterday!”

“That’s just it. But nevertheless there’s some truth in what she alleges. Of that I’m quite convinced.”

“Why?”

“For several reasons. One is because she is aware of one curious incident in my life, one of which even you, Sammy, are in ignorance. It is my secret, and I thought none knew it. Yet Massari was aware of it, and she also knows something about it, although, fortunately, not the whole of the details.”

Sammy twisted his small, fair moustache, and was puzzled.

“She actually knows a secret of yours, eh? Then depend upon it she intends to profit by it. Be careful of her, that’s all, Godfrey. She may have

known Massari, for she's mixed up with a very queer lot. But it's quite evident that she came really to see you. Did she enlist your sympathies in any way; did she ask you to do anything for her—any service, I mean?"

For a few moments I hesitated; then, in order to further convince him, I told him all that had occurred, and repeated her strange story of how the man we knew as Massari had refused to tell the truth and liberate her.

"He probably had sufficient reason," declared Sammy, in a hard voice, quite unusual to him. "The truth, however, is quite plain. She has spread out her net for you, and you bid fair to fall an easy prey, old fellow."

"But, my dear chap, I'm pretty wary. Remember I'm thirty-two and am past the adolescence of youth."

"She's uncommonly good-looking. You've told me so yourself. Admiration is the first stage always," he sneered.

"But tell me what you know of her," I urged. "Where did you first come across her?"

"At Enghien, just outside Paris, nearly three years ago. They lived in a rather fine villa, the grounds of which went down to the lake. You know Enghien—a gay little place, with pretty villas and a casino on the lake. Brunet, the dramatic critic of the *Temps*, introduced her father to me in the American bar at the Grand, and he invited me to go down to his place and dine. I did so, and found several other male guests, men of the smartest sporting set in Paris—mostly Frenchmen. At first I believed Mr Miller was a person of means, but one day a man who said he had known him, told me that he was a 'crook'. I admit I could not discover what was the source of his income. I only knew that his friends were mostly rich racing men and *chevaliers d'industrie*, and that he frequently gave very delightful dinners. Though she never dined with her father's friends, Lucie was often to be seen. She seemed then to be a mere slip of a girl of nineteen or so, extremely pretty, with her dark hair dressed low and tied with a broad bow of black ribbon. The men who frequented the place always addressed her as '*Bébé*,' and would sometimes take her boxes of chocolate. One evening after dinner somebody suggested a hand at cards, when suddenly I caught Miller doing a trick, and I stood up

and openly denounced him. It may have been foolish of me, but I spoke without reflecting. He denied my accusation fiercely, and was supported by his friends. Therefore I took my hat and left the house, now convinced that the fellow was a ‘crook’. After that I made inquiries about him of a man who had been in the Paris *sûreté* whom I know very well, with the result that I found the Englishman enjoyed half a dozen aliases and was undoubtedly a queer character. His associates were mostly persons known to the police. Even his butler at the villa was a man who had ‘done’ five years for burglary. The theory of my friend, the ex-detective, was that he was allied with a gang of international thieves, those clever gentry of means who operate in the principal cities throughout Europe, and who are so ingenious that they in most cases outwit the police. Though there was not sufficient evidence to justify any direct allegation it was strongly suspected that the source of Mr Miller’s wealth at that moment was the proceeds of a very cleverly planned robbery at the Commercial Bank in Bordeaux. When I told my friend how I had denounced Miller’s trick, he looked grave and said: ‘That was very injudicious. Those people might seek revenge.’ I laughed in derision, but he was so serious, and so strongly urged me to be careful, that I began to repent my boldness in making the charge. Miller and his friends were, so my friend told me, a dangerous lot.”

“But if Lucie has the misfortune to have a father who is a scoundrel, it surely is no reason why she herself should be bad?” I remarked.

“You can’t touch pitch without being soiled, my dear fellow. Think of the life of a young girl among such a crowd as that! Ah! you’ve never seen them—you can have no idea what they’re like.”

“But what direct charge do you allege against her?” I asked. “Speak quite plainly, for I’m neither her friend nor her enemy. She has to-day told me certain things that have held me bewildered, and naturally I’m all curiosity to ascertain something concerning her.”

“Well,” he said, casting himself again into the big chair and smoking vigorously, “it was like this. One day about a month afterwards there came to stay with me at the Continental a wealthy young Chilian, Manuel Carrera by name, whom I had first met when, two years before, we had fought side by side in the streets of Valparaiso during the revolution. He

and I were partisans of the Government, of which his father was Minister of the Interior. Now that the Government had been restored he occupied a very important post in the Treasury, and had come to Paris to transact some business with the Banque de France. At first we were together every evening, and very often the greater part of the day, but of a sudden he seemed to prefer to go about Paris alone, for he had, he told me, met some other friends. For a fortnight or so I had very little of his company; but one afternoon he surprised me by saying that he was going down to Enghien to make a call. I offered to accompany him, saying that I could amuse myself at a café while he was calling, and that we might afterwards dine together at the Casino. Truth to tell, I had not been to Enghien since that well-remembered night, and I wanted to see whether the Villa du Lac was still occupied. To my surprise, his destination proved to be that very villa. He left me and entered the big gates before I had time to warn him of Miller, therefore I turned on my heel and took a cab to the café of the Casino situated on the opposite shore of the lake. Where I sat, at one of the little ‘tin’ tables beneath the trees, the water stretched before me, and beyond a green, well-kept lawn and the big white villa were shining through the trees. I lit a cigar and sat wondering. Suddenly across the lawn I saw two figures strolling slowly. One was a slim young girl in a white muslin dress girdled with pale blue, her companion a man in grey flannels and a panama. Then the truth was plain. My friend had fallen in love with Lucie Miller. His frequent absences were thus accounted for. I watched them as they sat together upon the garden seat facing the lake, and saw that he was telling her something to which she was listening very attentively, her head bowed as though in deep emotion. Was he declaring his love, I wondered? For fully half an hour they sat there, when at last he rose, threw off his coat, and then both stepping into the boat at the bottom of the lawn he slowly rowed her away up the lake until behind the island they passed from my sight.”

Sammy was silent, thinking deeply. A sigh escaped him.

“And then?”

“What happened immediately afterwards will probably never be known,” he said, in a hard, hoarse voice. “I only know that somewhere about nine o’clock that same evening Carrera’s despatch-box in his room at the Continental was opened with its proper key, and Chilian Government

securities which he had only that day redeemed from the bank and intended to carry back to Valparaiso as well as a lot of negotiable bonds were all abstracted, together with a large sum in French bank-notes—the value altogether being about eighty thousand pounds. At midnight the poor fellow lay in the same room with a bullet in his brain. He realised how he had been tricked; how the key had been taken from his jacket pocket while he had taken the fair Lucie out upon the lake, and in a fit of chagrin and despair he took his revolver and ended his life."

"He committed suicide!" I gasped. "Didn't you see him after he went out upon the lake; didn't you warn him?"

"No. I meant to. But, alas! I was too late. I waited an hour at the Casino; then returned to Paris; and imagine my horror when I discovered next morning what had happened."

"What did you do?"

"I went at once to the Prefecture of Police and gave information. With three detectives I went down to Enghien, but we found the Villa du Lac uninhabited. The mysterious Mr Miller and his pretty daughter had already flown. That was three years ago, and from that afternoon until half an hour ago I have never set eyes upon the dark-eyed girl who so cleverly assisted her father in his ingenious schemes."

"But are you sure she is the same?" I asked. "You admit that she has changed."

"She has. She's grown more beautiful, but she is the same, my dear fellow—the same. Is it any wonder that I hate her?"

Chapter Six.

The Truth about the Stranger.

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

In the past twenty-four hours, through no fault or seeking of my own, I had suddenly been plunged into a maze of mystery, and there had been revealed to me a grave personal peril of which I had been in utter ignorance.

What the sweet, open-faced girl had divulged to me had caused me much amazement, yet this extraordinary story of Sammy's was utterly dumbfounding. I could not bring myself to believe that the girl who had so simply confessed to me her distress had wilfully assisted her father in robbing young Carrera, thereby causing him to take his life. To me it was utterly incredible.

Yet the fact that she had any connection with the mysterious Italian now lying dead above caused me to ponder. She knew the secret of that incident in quiet old Pisa. Yes. She was a mystery.

Had she told me the actual truth? That was the question which greatly puzzled me.

Through the following day and the next when, with Sammy, I followed the Italian to his lonely grave at Highgate, I recalled every incident of that strange sequence of circumstances, and longed again to see and question her.

Sammy, with that easy irresponsibility which was one of his chief characteristics, declared that Lucie, for obvious reasons, would not show herself again. But, on the other hand, I argued that if his allegation that she had come to Granville Gardens in order to meet me were correct, then she would return. She had, I pointed out, no suspicion that he was there and had recognised her. Therefore there was nothing to prevent her seeking me.

The whole circumstances were both romantic and puzzling.

The very man who she had alleged had plotted with the woman Hardwick against me had entrusted his most valuable possessions to me. Why? Had the small kindness I had shown him turned his heart towards me? Certainly he had paid me for my services—the sum of two hundred pounds.

Once or twice I wondered how I stood legally. The man was dead, yet I had a faint suspicion that I had no legal right whatsoever to administer his estate. There might be a will somewhere, and if legatees came forward I might one day find myself in a very queer and awkward position.

But I told Sammy nothing of this. I deemed it best to preserve silence both as regards the money and the curious packet that I was to keep three years.

A week went by. The man who had given his name as Massari had been interred, the expenses paid, and life at Mrs Gilbert's had resumed its normal quiet. Indeed, not until three days after the funeral were the other guests let into the tragic secret of the stranger's sudden death. Then for a day or two the whole place was agog and various theories formed. In London a foreigner is always viewed with a certain amount of suspicion, perhaps on account of our insular proclivities, perhaps because the majority of Londoners know no other language beyond a smattering of elementary French.

Often and often, when alone in our little den at the back of the house, Sammy and I discussed the curious affair, but neither of us was able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion.

To be in order, I called in a solicitor named Price whom I knew, and a week after Massari's death we opened his portmanteaux together and examined the contents.

They presented several surprises. Sammy was, of course, with us, taking an eager interest in the affair and helping to examine the documents which we found. He was of little use, however, for they were mostly in Italian, a language of which both my companions were almost entirely ignorant.

The first fact I established was that the name of the deceased was not Massari but Giovanni Nardini. This surprised us all, for Nardini was very well-known in Italy, having held the portfolio of Justice in the Ministry overthrown only a week before, and having made himself conspicuous in his perpetual war with the Socialist party in the Chamber. Only two days ago I had read telegrams from Rome in the morning papers saying that there were serious charges against the Minister of appropriating the public funds while in office, and that the Government were considering what steps they should take for his prosecution.

I had never connected the notorious Minister of Justice Nardini with the stranger who had died so suddenly. Yet had not Lucie Miller told me that he was a person well-known in Italy?

“He was a thief who absconded, that’s very evident,” Sammy remarked dryly. “We shall perhaps find something interesting presently.”

The lawyer Price and myself were seated at the table in the room where the ex-Minister had died, and we both carefully examined paper after paper, I reading aloud a rough translation.

Many of the documents were, I recognised, of extreme importance to the Government. Some were the official records of sentences pronounced by the Tribunal upon various persons and had evidently been extracted from the archives of the Ministry.

“I wonder what he intended to do with these?” Price remarked presently. “Perhaps his idea was to sell them to the persons who had been condemned to enable them to destroy the record.”

“Or perhaps he held them for the purposes of levying blackmail?” Sammy suggested. “No man, if he were leading an honest life, would like to have his police record hawked about.”

“But here,” I said, holding up a paper, “here are the confidential notes of the President of the Court of Assizes at Milan concerning two very important cases, showing the lines on which the prosecution was to be conducted. These would surely be of the utmost value to the prisoners, for upon them they could form a complete defence. The prosecution is a political one, and the weak points in the evidence are indicated and

commented upon. Yes," I added, "all these official documents have been carried off because they could easily be turned into money. We shall be compelled to restore them to the Italian Government."

"His Excellency, when he fled from Rome, took care to carry away all he could that was of value," remarked the solicitor. "Fate, however, very quickly overtook him before he had time to negotiate any of the documents."

The letters occupied us some considerable time. They were in two packets secured by broad elastic bands, and all were, without exception, letters from poor unfortunate victims who were in his clutches financially and who begged for further time in which to pay. Some of them, written in illiterate calligraphy, were heartrending appeals for wife, family, honour—even life. They were the collection of a hard-hearted man whose delight it was to crush and oppress rich and poor alike. The letters showed that. More than one was full of bitter reproach and withering sarcasm, revealing plainly that what the English girl had said concerning him was the actual truth.

And yet in my short acquaintance with him prior to his decease I had never dreamed that his character was as such.

Nevertheless at that moment, as I afterwards discovered, the Italian press was full of bitter abuse of the man who for the past four years or so had been one of the most popular in Italy. But he had been found out, and in ignorance of his death they were now hounding him down and appealing to the Government to arrest and prosecute him.

We had nearly completed our investigation, Price taking a careful inventory of the contents of the portmanteaux, when I discovered an envelope in which was a large yellow printed form filled in with a quantity of microscopic writing.

Within was a folded sheet of grey notepaper—a letter in Italian which I read eagerly, holding my breath, for what was contained there staggered me.

My companions watched my change of countenance in wonder. And well, indeed, they might, for it was the appeal of a desperate woman, a letter

that revealed to me an amazing truth—a letter signed “Lucie.”

And when I had finished reading it, I sat there, staring as the written lines danced before my eyes, amazed, unable to utter a single word in response to their questions.

Chapter Seven.

Describes some Confidential Documents.

I had no right to divulge the girl's secret to my two companions. I recognised this in an instant.

She had told me in confidence, and here was plain proof of what she had explained.

"What is it?" asked Price. "Something that surprises you?"

"Well, yes," I answered as carelessly as I could. "It's a letter from a woman."

"From Lucie Miller!" cried Sammy, whose sharp eyes had caught the signature. "What does she say? Tell us," he asked eagerly.

"No," I said firmly. "Recollect that whatever or whoever this man is, he is dead. Therefore let his private affairs rest. It is surely no concern of ours."

"No—of yours, perhaps," my friend laughed. "Remember what I told you about her."

"I recollect every word."

"And yet you are all the time anxious to meet her again, Godfrey! Do you know, I really believe the girl has captivated you—like she has so many others."

"You don't take me for a fool—do you?" I snapped, rather annoyed. "She was in distress and I am wondering if she has yet extricated herself."

Price made inquiry as to whom we were discussing, but in a few quick sentences I satisfied his curiosity.

"I should be very sorry if she ever comes here again," declared Sammy. "I have no wish to meet her. The memory of my poor friend Carrera is far too painful."

“You believe, then, that his death was due to her—that she induced him to leave his jacket upon the lawn?”

“I make no direct charge, my dear fellow. I only say that she’s daughter of one of the most ingenious ‘crooks’ in Europe—a member, if not the actual leader, of one of the cleverest of the international gangs. They are possessed of ample means, and the police are no match for their ingenuity.”

“You have your opinion, my dear old chap; I have mine,” I said, glancing round the room and recollecting vividly how she had stood there and looked upon the white drawn face of the man who had refused to extricate her from her deadly peril.

He took up the yellow paper, glanced it over, and put it down again without being able to make anything out of it.

I said I would translate it later, and placed it aside, together with the strange letter of appeal.

Neither of my companions was very well satisfied, I could see. They wished to know what the mysterious Lucie had written, while I, on my part, was equally determined not to tell them. It was surely not fair to her to divulge what had been meant for Nardini’s eye alone; therefore, I intended to keep possession of the letter, and to hand it to her to destroy, should we ever meet again.

Now that I recall those hours following the stranger’s decease and the English girl’s mysterious visit I cannot even now explain why I so suddenly commenced to take an interest in her. She was beautiful, it was true, but man-of-the-world that I was, and a constant wanderer across the face of Europe, I knew dozens of women quite as graceful, if not even more beautiful. Besides, there was the dark stigma upon her which Sammy had alleged, and which, by what I had now discovered, seemed fully borne out.

No. I think the mystery of the affair was responsible for my undue interest in her. Sammy, of course, put it down to her personal attractions, but he was decidedly and distinctly in error. She had told me of her perilous position, and of the dead man’s refusal to assist her. Therefore it was but

natural that I was curious to know how she fared.

Again, was she not in some mysterious way acquainted with a secret of my own life? Perhaps it was also that fact which caused me a longing to know the real truth concerning her.

There was certainly nothing of the adventuress about her. She was quiet, refined, graceful, neatly dressed, and spoke with easy, well-bred accents that were essentially those of a lady.

I do not think my worst enemy has ever declared me to be impressionable where women were concerned, for truth to tell, an incident that had occurred four years before had soured my life, and caused my resolution to ever remain a bachelor.

Ah! It was all over—the old story of the mad passion of a man for one who proved—well, unworthy. Ah! how I had adored my Ella; how I worshipped the very ground upon which she trod; how I would have conquered the very world for her sake. Yes. I saw her now, so young in her white muslin dress with her gold-brown hair falling upon her shoulders, her laughing blue eyes, and the red rose in her breast as we walked that June afternoon along those white English cliffs with the blue Channel at our feet. That never-to-be-forgotten afternoon we pledged our love, our hot lips met in their first fierce caress, our hearts beat in unison. She was my all in all. For months we lived in a world that was entirely our own—a bright rosy world of high ideals and ineffable sweetness, for we loved, ay we loved in a manner, I believe, that man and maiden never loved before. Even the remembrance of it now was sweet and yet—ah! so intensely bitter.

But why need I trouble you with that incident of long ago? Suffice it to say that my little Ella preferred money to a man’s love, and she became engaged to a stout, grey-haired fellow old enough to be her father. Six months later she sickened, and then I heard that she was dead. Ah! the blow was to me terrible! I became from that day a changed man.

Since my little Ella preferred money to my love, I had again been wandering hither and thither, a careless, aimless man, just as I had wandered before meeting her. If I had had a profession it would have

been different, but my father committed the unpardonable folly of leaving me comfortably off, therefore I simply developed into an idler, preferring life at the gay continental resorts—now in Monte Carlo, now in Paris, now in Rome, or elsewhere, just as my inclinations led me—to the dull humdrum existence of chambers in London. Ella—Ella! I thought of none save of my sweet dead love, now lost to me for ever.

Therefore, when Sammy hinted that I had become bewitched by Lucie Miller I firmly and frankly denied such assertion. Four years is a breach in a man's life, but even four years had not caused me to forget my first and only true passion—the passion that had ended so tragically. Sometimes life does not count by years. Some suffer a lifetime in a day, and so grow old between the rising and the setting of the sun.

When Price had concluded the inventory of the dead man's papers, I sorted out all those which had any official bearing. Perhaps I ought to have communicated at once with the Italian Consulate, seeing that the dead man was an Italian subject, but at the time it never occurred to me. The papers which had so evidently been abstracted from the archives of the Ministry of Justice in Rome I tied up in a bundle and placed them apart. The others, with the exception of the yellow folio and the letter of appeal, we replaced in the portmanteaux.

Later that afternoon, when alone, I drew out the letter again and re-read it. Translated into English it was as follows:—

> "Your Excellency Signor Nardini—For the last time I throw myself upon your charity and ask you to speak and clear me of this disgraceful allegation they have made against me. You alone know that I am entirely innocent. You alone know that on the evening of the affair I was at the Villa Verde. Therefore, how could I have been in Rome? How can I be culpable? A single word from you will vanquish these lying, unscrupulous enemies of mine who have thus attacked my honour and seek to connect me with an affair of which I swear I am in utter ignorance.
>
> "Surely you will not refuse to make this one single declaration to save me! Reflect well all that it means to me—this disgraceful accusation against my honour. I know your reluctance. You fear that

your own admission that I was at your villa out at Tivoli on that night may give rise to some scandalous gossip. But will you not risk it in order to save a woman's life? Shall I not suffer more than you—a man? Yet I am quite ready to face the scandal of our names being connected in order to free myself from this most disgraceful charge. Say what you wish concerning me—tell all you know, if it suits your purpose—only I pray of you to shield me from these fierce, relentless enemies of mine.

"I, a defenceless and desperate woman, beg of you to speak the truth and clear me. Will you not hear my appeal?

"To-morrow, at noon, I shall call upon you personally for a reply.

"Speak—speak, I beg of you most humbly and with all my heart. You are the only person who can save me, and I pray that God in His justice may direct your action of mercy. Lucie."

Was not the truth plainly written there? Surely she had not misled me in her motive in coming to England, to make one final appeal to the man whose lips had, alas! been closed by death!

I re-read the piteous letter, sighing the while. Every word of it showed her mad desperation at being unable to prove her innocence of this mysterious allegation. The reason of the man's silence was now obvious. If he had spoken he would have had to tell the truth—which from her letter appeared to be an unpleasant one and likely to cause scandal. Yet she asserted that she was fearless of anything the world might say; therefore did not that very fact suggest that there was no ground for any scandal?

Then I opened the yellow official paper which had been preserved with the letter of appeal.

Headed "*Amministrazione di Pubblica Sicurezza*" and bearing the number 28,280, it was, I saw, the Italian police record regarding an Englishman named James Harding Miller, son of William Miller, born at Studland, in Dorsetshire, widower, and resident in Rome. After the name and the statement that he was sometimes known as Milner, a minute description was given of the person whom the record concerned, and in

that column headed “Connotati,” or personal appearance, was the following:—

Statura: alto.
Corporature: secco.
Colorito: bruno.
Capelli: castagna.
Barba: c.
Occhi: c.
Naso: greco.
Bocca: reg.
Fronte: guista.
Segni: porta lenti.

The meaning of this was that Mr Milner, or Miller, was tall of stature, dark complexion, chestnut beard, hair and eyes, Greek nose, and that he habitually wore pince-nez. In fact upon the back of the document were pasted four photographs, taken in different positions, and probably by different photographers.

The information contained in the record was, however, of more interest to me, and I read it through very carefully from end to end.

Briefly, what was chronicled there was to the effect that the Englishman Miller had on several occasions been suspected of being implicated in various schemes of fraud in association with certain persons against whom were previous convictions. It appeared that so strong were the suspicions concerning him in the case of an extensive fraud upon French’s bank in Florence by means of forged securities two years before that Miller was arrested, but after exhaustive inquiries was allowed his freedom as there was insufficient evidence.

The lines of even writing went on to state: “The man’s daughter, Lucie Lilian Miller, is constantly with him, and may participate in his schemes. There is, however, no direct allegation against her.” Miller, it continued, evidently possessed a secret source of income which was believed to be derived from dishonest sources, though the actual truth had not yet been discovered. The record ended with the words added as a postscript in another handwriting: “After exhaustive inquiries made by the Questura in

Rome, in Florence and in Leghorn, it is now established beyond doubt that the Englishman is in active communication with a clever international association of ‘sharpers’.”

After reading that I was compelled to accept the truth of Sammy’s statement. The man Miller had evidently plotted and obtained the securities in the young Chilian’s despatch-box.

Yet had Lucie, I wondered, any knowledge of that dastardly conspiracy which had ended in a tragedy?

Chapter Eight.

“The Mysterious Mr Miller.”

On the following day, about noon, I took a cab to the Italian Embassy, that fine stone-built mansion in Grosvenor Square.

A tall footman with powdered hair asked me into the great reception-room where, at one end, hung a great portrait of the late King Humbert, the other end of the room opening upon a large conservatory where stood a grand piano. It was a sombre apartment, furnished with solid, old-fashioned taste and embellished with a number of photographs of noteworthy persons presented to the popular Ambassador and his wife in the various cities wherein His Excellency had represented his sovereign.

Like most London reception-rooms, it looked its best at night under the myriad electric lamps. At noon, as I sat there, it looked a trifle too dull and gloomy. Presently one of the staff of the Embassy, a short, pleasant-faced, elderly Italian of charming manner, and speaking perfect English, greeted me courteously and inquired the object of my request to see His Excellency.

“I have called,” I said, “in order to give some confidential information which may be of interest to His Excellency. The fact is I have been present at the death of the ex-Minister for Justice Nardini.”

“His death!” exclaimed the pleasant official. “What do you mean? Is he dead?”

“He died here, in London, and unrecognised. It was only on searching his papers that I discovered his identity. He came to an obscure boarding-house in Shepherd’s Bush, giving the name of Massari, but on the following day he died. He had for a long time been suffering from an internal complaint and suddenly collapsed. The effort of the rapid journey from Rome and the anxiety were evidently too great for him.”

“This is astounding! We had no idea he was here! There were orders given for his arrest, you know,” remarked the Embassy archivist, for such

I afterwards found him to be—a trusted official who for many years has held that position, and is well-known and popular in the diplomatic circle in London. “But,” he added suddenly, “how were you enabled to establish his identity?”

“By these,” I answered, drawing out a packet of official papers from my pocket, opening them and handing him one of them to read.

The instant his eyes fell upon it he started, turned it over, and looked up at me amazed.

“I presume you know Italian?” he asked quickly.

I nodded in the affirmative.

“Then you are aware what these papers are—most important Government documents, abstracted from the archives of the Ministry of Justice in Rome?”

“I know,” I replied briefly. “That is why I secured them, and why I have brought them to His Excellency. They certainly should not be allowed to go into the hands of any one, for they contain much confidential information regarding certain well-known persons.”

“Of course,” he said. “His Excellency will, I’m sure, be extremely indebted to you for acting with such discretion. Had they fallen into the hands of the London police they might have been copied, and the secret of our methods known. Besides, in any case, it surely would be most detrimental to our prestige, if the public knew that confidential reports of this character were being allowed to pass from hand to hand for any one to read.”

“I viewed the matter from exactly the same standpoint,” I said. “My own opinion is that Nardini intended either to sell them, or to levy blackmail by their means.”

But the official only shrugged his shoulders in ignorance. It was not likely that he would condemn his own compatriot, even though at heart he despised both the man and his dishonest methods.

Each paper he examined carefully, and once or twice gave vent to ejaculations of surprise when he read facts concerning certain persons in high positions in Rome which amazed him.

“At this moment His Excellency is unfortunately out, but I trust, Mr Leaf, you will leave these with me,” he suggested. “We shall send them back under seal to Rome.”

“Of course, that was my intention,” I said. And then, in reply to some further questions, I described to him the circumstances in which Nardini had died. Of course I made no mention of Lucie Miller nor of her strange story of the dead man’s mysterious hatred of myself. I only apologised that I had not thought of communicating with the Italian Consulate, and expressed a hope that the restoration of these documents might partly atone for my remissness.

“There is, I suppose, nothing else among the dead man’s belongings to interest us?” he asked seriously. “You have, of course, made careful search?”

“Yes. I have had an inventory made by a solicitor. There is nothing else,” I answered; and after giving my courteous friend my club address, and chatting for some ten minutes longer, I received his renewed thanks, and departed.

My one thought now was of Lucie Miller, the woman whose piteous appeal to the fugitive had been in vain. Several matters puzzled me and held me mystified.

Sammy now seemed reluctant to discuss the matter any farther. Light-hearted, easy-going and irresponsible, he declared that he wasn’t going to trouble his head about mysteries. The Italian was dead and buried, and there let him rest. And as for Lucie, he had told me the truth concerning her, and it ought to suffice me.

But it did not suffice me.

That desperate appeal she had written to the man who had held her future in his hands showed me that she was in dire straits. What could be the allegation against her?

As day succeeded day and she did not return I became convinced that it was not her intention to do so. From the Embassy I received an official letter of thanks signed by His Excellency himself, but it was evident that they had not revealed the truth to the press, for the newspapers were still full of hue-and-cry after the absconding ex-Minister.

I recollected that the desperate girl had told me that she had an aunt "living in the country," but she had not told me in what locality, and "the country" was a big place in which to search, more especially as I did not know the lady's name. She had told me also that she lived in Leghorn where, being English, it would be easy to find her. Yet somehow I held a strong belief that she had not returned to Italy.

The police record gave Miller's place of birth as Studland, in Dorsetshire, therefore I began to wonder whether, if I went there, I should be able to discover any of the family. Surely somebody would know some facts concerning the family. From the *Gazetteer* I discovered that the place was a small village on the sea, not far from Swanage, and on the following morning, without saying anything to Sammy, I took train from Waterloo. At Swanage I hired a fly from that hotel which faces the bay so pleasantly with grounds sloping to the water, and an hour later I descended at the inn in Studland village.

It was a quiet, quaint old-world place, I found, with a queer ancient little church hidden away among the trees at the back. In the bar-parlour of the "Lion" I ordered some tea, and then, in the course of a chat with the stout, cheery old publican I casually inquired after some friends of mine named Miller.

"Oh! yes," he said. "Old Miss Miller lives 'ere still—at the Manor 'Ouse just beyond the village. You passed it just before you came down the hill from Swanage way. They're one of the oldest families 'ere in Studland. One of the Millers—Sir Roger 'e was called—was governor of Corfe Castle under Queen Elizabeth, so I've 'eard say."

"Then the Millers have always lived at the Manor?" I remarked.

"Of course. The property really belongs to Mr James, but 'e's always abroad, so 'is sister, old Miss Catherine, lives in the 'ouse and looks after

it.”

“Is this Mr Miller named James Harding Miller?” I asked.

“Yes. That’s ’im. They calls ’im the mysterious Mr Miller. ’E always was a wild rascal when ’e wor a boy, they say. The old gentleman could do nothing with him, so ’e was sent abroad, and has lived there mostly ever since.”

“Has he any children?”

“A girl. The servants at the Manor talk a lot about ’er, and say she’s very nice. She’s often ’ere.”

“He’s well off, I suppose?”

“Oh, dear no, sir,” declared the innkeeper. “The Millers are as poor as church mice. The value of land’s gone down so of late years. The old place is mortgaged up to the hilt to some Jews in London, an’ it’s a pity—a thousand pities.”

All this, together with other facts and gossip which the garrulous old fellow revealed to me, was of extreme interest, and I congratulated myself upon the success of my first investigation.

“When did you last see that mysterious Mr Miller, as you call him?”

“Oh! It’s a long time now ’e ’aven’t been in Studland. Once, about three years ago, ’e came without any luggage they say—and stayed over a twelvemonth. ’E’s a queer man. ’E never speaks to the likes of us.”

I resolved to act boldly and call upon old Miss Miller and inquire after her niece. Therefore I went out and up the hill in the bright sunshine until I came to the old and rather tumble-down lodge gate, and then, after walking a short distance up the drive, I came within sight of a large old Elizabethan mansion, long and rambling and time-mellowed—a typical English home surrounded by great trees in the centre of a small park.

A neat maid answered my summons, and I was at once ushered into a quaint old oak-panelled room off the hall, the furniture of which was

undoubtedly Elizabethan, with rich old brocades dropping to pieces with age. I examined everything with interest, and then walked to the deep diamond-paned window and was looking across the park admiring the delightful vista when, of a sudden, I heard a movement behind me, and turning, confronted a tall, thin, dark-haired man, slightly grey, with bony features, a pair of sharp, closely-set eyes and scraggy brown beard. He was dressed in dark grey tweeds, and wore white spats over his boots.

“Mr Leaf?” he inquired, glancing at the card I had sent in. “I am Miss Miller’s brother,” he explained. “My name is James Harding Miller. Do you wish to see my sister very urgently? She has a headache, and has sent me to make her apologies.”

I started when he introduced himself.

I was actually face to face with the ingenious scoundrel whom Sammy had denounced, and whom the Italian police so strongly suspected to be the leader of one of the cleverest gangs of malefactors in Europe.

Chapter Nine.

Contains a Surprise.

James Harding Miller was a thoroughgoing cosmopolitan of most gentlemanly exterior. His grey face was deeply lined and bore that curious washed-out look of a man who had lived many years in a hot climate. After ten years or so the fiery Italian sun no longer tans the face of the northerner, but on the contrary his hair goes prematurely grey, and each year as the burning summer comes he is less able to withstand the heat of the “lion” days. His leanness, his foreign-cut clothes, and the slight gesticulation as he spoke all showed him to be a man more at home in the bright Italian land of song and sunlight than there, in an English village, the proprietor of that charming old home of his honourable ancestors.

In reply to his question I was rather evasive, saying that I happened to be in Swanage, and had driven out to pay a complimentary call upon his sister. She was not to put herself out of the way in the least, I urged. I should remain in Swanage for some days and hoped to have the pleasure of calling again.

Then turning and glancing around, I exclaimed:—“What a delightful old room! To me it is a real pleasure to enter a thoroughly English home, as this is.”

“Why?” he inquired, eyeing me with some surprise. “Because I live almost always on the Continent, and after a time foreign life and foreign ways jar upon the Englishman. At least I’ve found it so.”

“Ah!” He sighed, rather heavily I thought. “And I, too, have found it so. I quite agree with you. One may travel the world over, as I have done these past twenty years, yet there’s no place like our much-abused old England, after all.”

“Oh, then you’ve been a rolling stone, like myself,” I remarked, delighted at the success of my ruse.

“Yes. And I still am,” was his answer, given rather sadly. “Ever since my poor wife’s death, now nearly twenty years ago, I’ve been a wanderer. This place is mine, but I’m scarcely ever here. Why? I can’t for the life of me tell you. I’ve tried to settle down, but cannot. After a week here in this quiet rural dulness, the old fever sets up in my blood, a longing for action, a longing to go south to Italy—the country which seems to hold me in a kind of magnetism which I have never been able to resist.”

“And I, too, love Italy,” I said. “Is it not strange that most of us who have lived any length of time in that country of blossoming magnolias and gentle vines always desire to return to it. We may abuse its defects, we may revile its people as dishonest idlers, we may execrate its snail-like railways and run down its primitive hotels, yet all the same we have a secret longing to return to that glowing land where life is love, where art is in the very atmosphere, where the sun brings gladness to the heaviest heart, and the night silence is broken by love *stornelli* and the mandoline.”

“You are right,” he said, gazing straight out of the old leaded window and speaking almost as though to himself. “Byron found it so, Shelley, Smollet, Trollope, the Brownings and hosts of others. They were fascinated by the fatal beauty of Italy—just as a man is so often drawn to his doom by the face of a beautiful woman. And after all we are but straws on the winds of the hour.”

Then, turning to a cabinet, I bent and admired a fine old Lowestoft tea-set and a collection of old blue posset-pots, whereupon he said:—

“Ah! I see you are interested in antiques. Do you care for pictures? I have one or two.”

“I do. I should delight to see them,” I answered with enthusiasm; therefore he led me across the low old-fashioned hall with its great oak beams and open fireplace into a long gallery where the floor was polished, and along one side was hung a choice collection of masters of the Bolognese, Tuscan and Venetian schools.

At a glance I saw that they were of considerable value, and as I walked along slowly examining them I half feared lest I might come face to face

with the daughter of the house.

Mine was a bold adventure, and surely it was fortunate for me that old Miss Catherine had a headache.

Through room after room he conducted me with all the pride of a collector showing his treasures. Indeed, I was amazed to find such a perfect museum of Italian art hidden away in that picturesque old Manor House. “Yes,” he said presently, as we entered the long old-fashioned drawing-room upholstered in antique rose-pattern chintz, “I’ve collected in Italy for a good many years. One can pick up bargains, even now, in the less frequented towns, say Ravenna, Verona, Bologna or Rimini; while in Leghorn there are still lots of genuine Sheraton and Chippendale which was imported from England by the English merchants of that time. I once made a splendid find of seventeenth-century English silver—two porringers and some spoons—in the Ghetto in Leghorn.”

I was at the moment looking at a circular Madonna on panel, evidently of the Bolognese school of the cinquecento, hanging at the end of the long pleasant old room when, in glancing round, my eye fell upon two small tables where stood photographs in frames.

In an instant I bent over one and recognised it as that of the girl who had come to me so mysteriously at Shepherd’s Bush.

“That is my daughter,” he remarked.

“Curious,” I said, feigning to reflect. “I think I’ve met her somewhere abroad. Perhaps it was in Italy. Could it have been in Leghorn?”

“You know Leghorn?”

“I’ve been there many times. I know the Camerons, the Davises, the Matthews, and most of the English colony there.”

“Then you may possibly have met her there,” he said. “We have a small flat on the sea-front, and my daughter often plays tennis.”

“Of course!” I exclaimed, as though the mention of tennis brought back to me full recollection of the incident. “It was at tennis that I saw her—last

season when I was at the Palace Hotel. I remember now, quite well. Our Mediterranean fleet were lying there at the time, and there were lots of festivities, as there are every summer. Is your daughter now in England?"

"Oh, yes. She's up in London, but returns to-morrow."

"And are you going back to Italy soon?" I inquired.

"I hardly know. My movements are never very certain. I'm quite a creature of circumstances, and nowadays drift about with the wind of chance," he laughed.

"But this is a lovely old place," I remarked. "If I had it I should certainly not prefer a flat in a sun-baked Italian town, like Leghorn."

"Circumstances," he remarked simply, with a mysterious smile upon his grey face.

What, I wondered, was his meaning?

Did he really intend to convey that the circumstances of his dishonourable profession compelled him to hide himself in a small flat in that somewhat obscure town—obscure as far as English life went?

When he learnt that I knew some of his friends in Leghorn he became enthusiastic, and began to discuss the town and its notabilities. What did I think of the English parson? And whether I did not think that seeing the small English congregation the church ought not to be removed to some town with a larger English colony. It was absurd to keep a parson there for half a dozen people.

And while my sharp eyes were busy examining the photographs set among vases of fresh-cut flowers, I made replies and sometimes laughed at his witty criticisms of persons known to both of us in "the Brighton of Italy."

"What a contrast is the quiet rural life here, with all its old-world English tranquillity, to that of the gay, garish, sun-blanched *passeggiata* of Leghorn, with its bright-eyed women, its oleanders, its noise, movement, the glare and strident music of the *café-chantants*, and the brightness of

the newly discovered spa," I said.

He sighed, pursing his lips.

"Yes, Mr Leaf, you are quite right," he answered. "I love Italy, but I confess I very often long to be back here at Studland, in my own quiet old home. Lucie is always begging me to forsake the Continent and return. But it is impossible—utterly impossible."

"Why impossible?" I asked, looking into his deeply furrowed face.

"Well—there is a reason," was his response. "A strong reason, one of health, which induces—nay, compels me to live abroad. And I greatly prefer Italy to any other country."

Little did he dream that I had that secret document of the Italian Detective Department in my possession, or that I had learnt the truth from my friend Sampson, the friend of the young Chilian Carrera.

We were chatting on, having halted at the open window which looked across the old-fashioned garden with its rose arbours, moss-grown terrace and grey weather-beaten sundial, away to the park beyond, when I suddenly crossed to another table, whereon were other photographs.

One of them I thought I recognised even in the distance.

Yes! I was not mistaken! I took it in my trembling hand with a word of apology, and looked into the picture intently. Sight of it staggered me.

"Who is this?" I asked hoarsely, and my host must, I think, have noticed the great change in my countenance.

"A friend of my daughter's, I think. Do you know her?"

"I knew her," I replied in a hard, low tone, for sight of that smiling face brought back to me all the bitter remembrance of a part that I would have fain forgotten. "It is Ella Murray!"

"Ah!—yes, that's her name. I recollect now," he said; and I saw by his face that he was interested. "I think they were at school together."

Again I looked upon the portrait of my dear dead love, my eyes fascinated, for I beheld there, at her throat, the small brooch I had given her on her birthday, a green enamelled heart with two hearts in diamonds entwined upon it.

Those sweet, wide-open eyes, clear blue and wondering like a child's, gazed out upon me; her well-formed lips were slightly parted, as though she were speaking again, uttering those soft words that had so charmed me when she was mine, and mine only. I recollected the dress, too, one she had worn one night at dinner at the big country-house where we had been fellow-guests. Every feature of that lovely face was indelibly photographed upon my memory. Through those dark years, after that paroxysm of grief that had overtaken me when I discovered her false, I had, sleeping and waking, seen that smiling countenance as before my vision. Even in death Ella was still mine.

That smile! Ah! did it not mock me? Had not Avarice and Death cheated me out of Happiness? A great darkness was over my mind, like the plague of an unending night.

I set my teeth, swallowed the lump that arose in my throat, and with a sigh replaced the photograph upon the table.

"A pretty face," remarked the man whose police record was in my possession.

"Yes, very," I remarked casually.

Ah! what a storm of bitter recollections surged through my burning brain.

Had she but lived and loved how different would my own wasted, aimless life have been!

Yes. She was, after all, my dear dead love—my Ella!

Chapter Ten.

My Own Confession.

The “Lion” Inn was a pleasant, old-fashioned little hostelry overlooking the bay, with Bournemouth beyond the distant haze. My room was small and clean, with white dimity curtains and hangings, and framed religious texts upon the walls. As I sat at the window in the hour before my dinner was ready, I reflected upon the strange incidents of those past few days —a chain of curious circumstances that seemed to enmesh and to entangle me.

Lucie Miller—the girl whose peril was such a mysterious and yet deadly one—had actually known my Ella. That very fact seemed somehow as a further link between us. What, I wondered, did she know of those later days of my dead love’s life? To me they were shrouded in mystery.

That cold winter’s night in damp, dismal London, when I had met her in secret at the corner of Queen’s Gardens, would ever remain in my memory. She was staying with an aunt in Porchester Terrace, and we had always preserved the secret of our affection. She came dressed in black, wearing a thick veil and carrying a muff in which was a bunch of violets. Her voice, when I greeted her, was, alas! not the same. Quick to recognise that something had occurred, I inquired the reason. Had she had any difference with her father or her aunt—as she sometimes had? No, she said, shaking her head, it was not that.

And then, almost in silence, we strolled on side by side over those wet shining London pavements through the quieter streets and squares of Bayswater, while I glanced wonderingly at her face showing pale behind her spotted veil. At last her trembling hand suddenly rested upon my wrist, and halting she turned to me. In hoarse tones quite unusual to her she blurted forth the truth—the bitter truth that froze my heart. I remember even the spot where we stood, beside a red letter-box at the corner of Chepstow Place. There the greatest blow of all my life fell upon me; and we parted.

I went straight along the Westbourne Grove, blinded by tears. She was to

wed the very last man she ought to have chosen. The coarse, fat-necked parvenu had bought her from her father with his gold won in gambles on the Stock Exchange. Yes, my Ella, my sweet-faced love, was not satisfied with the prospect of being the wife of a man comfortably off. Like so many other girls who are dazzled by the lights of life, she longed to shine as a hostess, to wear Paquin frocks and have her portraits in the papers. I was deeply disappointed with her, for, fool that I was, I really believed that she honestly loved me. How often, alas! is a man deceived! I was but one of thousands, after all. And yet I had adored her with all my heart and all my soul.

Away in the country the very song of the birds seemed to be in praise of her—she whose beauty was sweet and delicate as the petals of the flowers; chaste and sweet as the rose itself. Love to the looker-on may be blind, unwise, unworthily bestowed, a waste, a sacrifice, a crime; yet none the less is love the only thing that, come weal or woe, is worth the loss of every other thing; the one supreme and perfect gift of earth in which all common things of daily life become transfigured and divine.

I was crushed, benumbed, broken. At first my brain refused to accept her declaration that that meeting was to be our last, until she told me the truth in all its hideous detail, and that on the morrow her engagement was to be announced in the *Morning Post*. I opened my lips to upbraid her, but my tongue refused to utter a syllable of reproach. I only bit my lips in silence. Ah! yes, I loved her!—I loved her!

From that moment we never again met. Next day I saw the announcement in the papers, and, disappointed and heart-broken, I went abroad, and it was a year after when one of my intimate friends, Jack Davies, a lieutenant on board the *Cornwall*, in a letter which I received at a lonely post-house on the snow-bound road in the extreme north of Russia, wrote those words which caused my heart to burst within me:—

“You recollect little Ella Murray, who was, with her stepmother, up at the Grainger’s shoot two years ago? The poor little girl was engaged to some City fellow, an entire outsider, I heard, but I hear she caught typhoid at a hotel in Sheringham and died six months ago. A pity, isn’t it? I rather liked her—so did you, I remember.”

I stood at the door of that filthy, log-built place with the letter in my hand, gazing across the great snow-covered plain with its long row of telegraph-wires and verst-posts stretching away from Pokrovskoi to the grey horizon. My big bearded driver whispered to the post-house keeper, for both saw that I had received bad news. The man in sheepskins who kept the place went in without a word and returned with a glass of vodka. I recognised his kindly thought, gulped down the spirit, and mounting into the sledge drove on—on, whither I did not care. Ella—my own dear Ella was dead!

All this came back vividly to me on that evening as I ate my dinner alone in the little inn at Studland, and then in the golden sunset strolled by the sea—that same wide, mysterious sea beside which I had so long ago declared my love. She lived then, smiling, sighing, loving. But now, alas! she was no more. Of her memory there only remained that shadowy picture that I had seen in Miller's drawing-room, the portrait of the dead that smiled upon me in such mocking happiness.

I threw myself upon a bank and watched the glorious crimson and purple of the summer afterglow. Yes, the face of the world was for me now changed. The past had been full enough of bitterness, what, I wondered, did the future contain? Ah! if I could have but known at that moment! Yet perhaps after all the Divine power is merciful in keeping from us the happiness and tragedy that lie before.

Till the summer twilight darkened into night I sat therefore before the sea, smoking and thinking. The dark vista of silent waters before me harmonised with my thoughts. Mine was, alas! a wasted, useless life, I had never known one moment's financial worry, and yet I had somehow never found happiness. In my life where I might be, at home or abroad, there was always something wanting—the love of a good woman.

Through the following day I idled, mostly in the Lion, for it was too hot for walking. But at half-past two I sauntered to the station and, unseen by Lucie, I saw her alight from the train from London, climb into the smart dogcart that was awaiting her, and drive away in the direction of the Manor.

Then when I returned and had my tea I remarked casually to the stout,

round-faced innkeeper:—

“I hear that Mr Miller is at the Manor House just now. I learnt so yesterday.”

“An’ so did I,” was his reply. “Dear me! wonders ’ull never cease. Fancy Mr Miller coming back again! An’ they say that Miss Lucie’s a-comin’, too.”

“Is she his daughter?” I inquired, as though in ignorance.

“Of course she is; an’ a very good girl, too. When she’s ’ere—which ain’t very often, more’s the pity—she does a great deal of good in the village—visits the old people, looks after the coal club, and gives away quite a lot of money to the deserving people who are destitute. I only wish there were more like ’er in these ’ere parts.”

“Does she often come here?”

“Oh! two or three times a year,” answered the landlord. “Some say she lives up in London with ’er aunt, and others declare that she’s mostly abroad with ’er father. I believe the latter story. She ’as a foreign way about ’er, and I’ve ’eard the servants say as ’ow all ’er things are made abroad.”

“Then nobody knows her address?” I said.

“Seems not. But she’s very fond of ’er father, and no doubt is always with him.”

“Do they have many friends at the Manor when Mr Miller and his daughter are at home?”

“Not many. Dr Haviland often dines with ’em.”

“I don’t mean local friends—visitors from London.”

“Very few. I’ve known one or two, but they’ve all been forriners. Mr Miller seems to like them forriners some’ow. But I don’t,” declared the old fellow. “They’re too infernal polite and sleeky for me. I wouldn’t trust any

of ’em for a pint o’ beer.”

“They were gentlemen, I suppose?”

“Oh, dear, yes—full of fine graces and fine manners. They wore shoes like women, and shirts pleated like women’s blouses—great swells, I can assure you.”

“You never heard of any of their names?”

“No, how was I to ’ear? Once two of ’em came in one hot day and jabbered, sayin’ ‘*boch! boch*!’ an’ grinnin’ all over their faces. It was quite a long time before I discovered that they wanted two half-pints o’ bitter. I suppose *boch* is what they calls it in French.”

“Yes,” I laughed. “You’re quite right.”

The strangers had evidently been French, I reflected. Had they been Italian they would have asked for *birra*.

Regarding Lucie, I learnt that on several occasions, while she had been at home, a young, black-moustached foreigner had been guest at the Manor, and that she frequently drove him out in the dogcart. My host did not know the visitor’s name. He described him, however, as tall and thin with a narrow hatchet face, black eyes and moustaches that turned up at the ends.

“They passed up and down the village once or twice on their way to the post-office, and I ’eard ’em talking in some gibberish,” added the old fellow, as he raised his tankard to his lips. Like all his race in the rural districts, he had no love for the foreigner, be he whatever he might. In his estimation every person from beyond the Channel was “a froggie.”

That evening I went for my usual lonely stroll by the sea, while all next day I spent in watchful vigil in the vicinity of the Manor. Though for hours I idled concealed in the park, within view of the stately old home of the Millers, my patience was unrewarded. No sign of Lucie did I see, either at any of the windows or in the old rose-garden.

Next evening, however, having learnt from the landlord that she was

much interested in a decrepit old woman who had been her nurse, and who lived in a cottage at the farther end of Studland, I idled in wait for her in a narrow green lane which ran at the back of the church, and was at length rewarded by seeing her approaching. She was dressed in white muslin with a large lace garden hat, and beside her walked her pet dog, a beautiful fawn collie.

Boldly I went towards her, my hat in my hand in respectful greeting.

In an instant she recognised me, and drew back, half in surprise, half in alarm.

Her countenance went white as death.

“You—Why—Mr Leaf!” she gasped, attempting to smile. “Only fancy—to meet you here!”

“Miss Miller,” I said calmly, taking the hand she offered me, and glancing around in order to see that we were not observed, “I came here on purpose to meet you—to speak with you!”

“With me?” she cried in cold surprise, her brows contracting in marked displeasure. “What have you to say? Explain quickly, for we must not be seen together here.” And I recognised from her trembling lips how anxious and agitated she had become. She was in some great fear. I was convinced of that.

She tried to smile me welcome, but it died from her white lips. The expression upon her face told me that she was in deadly fear lest I should discover her secret.

I was, I felt certain, the very last person whom she desired to meet.

The very fact of my presence there told her that I knew something concerning her—something concerning the past that she intended at all costs to hide from me.

Chapter Eleven.

Lucie is Confidential.

“This is not altogether an accidental meeting, Miss Miller,” I confessed at once to her. “The fact is I have waited in vain for your return to Granville Gardens, and at length have thought it wise to come here in search of you.”

“Who told you that we lived here?” she inquired breathlessly.

“No one told me, I discovered the fact quite accidentally,” was my answer. “Remember that your family is an old one, and in Debrett, therefore it was easy to find out the home of the Dorsetshire Millers.” My rather plausible explanation apparently satisfied her, for looking sharply around, she said: —

“If we are to talk, Mr Leaf, let us cross yonder stile and slip across the fields. We shall not be seen there.” So I helped her over the stile she indicated and we passed together along a steep path beside a high hawthorn hedge, and a few minutes later descended into the hollow where the village and sea were lost to view.

“I certainly expected you to return,” I said, half reproachfully. “I believed that you would wish to hear something further regarding the dead man. You refused to tell me his name, but I have discovered it. He was Nardini, the absconding ex-Minister of Justice in Rome.”

“Who told you so?” she inquired, looking at me with considerable suspicion.

“I took possession of his papers. They explained everything,” I replied simply. “And now,” I added, “the reason I am here is to inquire if I can assist you in any way, and to repeat my readiness to do so.”

“No,” she answered, shaking her head sadly. “No assistance that you could render me, Mr Leaf, would, I regret to say, be of any avail,” and I saw tears welling in her eyes.

“But you must not give up like this,” I urged. “You must endeavour to shield yourself, even if you fail, after all. The man is dead; his mouth is closed.”

“Ah, yes. That is just it. If he lived he might, perhaps, have had compassion upon me.”

“He refused to tell the truth—that you were at his villa at Tivoli on that evening, and therefore could not have been in Rome, eh?”

She halted, glaring at me open-mouthed. She saw that I knew the truth, and after a few moments’ silence with her eyes fixed upon mine, she exclaimed in a low, hoarse voice:—

“He preserved silence because he dared not tell the truth. He was a cur and a coward.”

“And also a thief, it would seem,” I added.

“Yes—you have seen what the papers are saying about him, I suppose? The police are searching for him all over Europe. They have no idea that he is already dead and buried.”

“Perhaps it is as well; otherwise the papers would have fallen into their hands. As it is I took possession of them all and restored them to the Italian Embassy—all but this,” and I drew out her letter of appeal, and, opening it, handed it to her.

She glanced at it, crushed it in her hand with a sigh, her dark eyes still fixed upon mine, as though she were trying to read my innermost thoughts.

“Who are your enemies?” I asked in a kindly tone of sympathy. “Tell me, Miss Miller, what have they alleged against you?”

Her brows again contracted. She set her lips hard but remained silent, determined not to satisfy me regarding the charge against her.

I pressed her to speak, but she was firm and quite immovable.

“Now that Nardini is dead I am helpless in the hands of my unscrupulous enemies,” was her low, inert answer.

“That letter is best destroyed,” I said. Then with murmured thanks she tore it into tiny fragments and scattered it to the wind which carried the pieces away across the wide field of ripe corn.

I told her nothing of the yellow document, that hideous record which Nardini had preserved with her letter.

On the contrary, I implored her pardon for my visit and for my piece of audacious imposture, and, as we walked on together, explained how her father and myself had become friends.

At first she seemed full of fear and suspicion, but gradually, as I gave a full description of how Miller had taken me over the house to see the pictures and antiques, and she saw how enthusiastic I was over the beautiful old place, she became reassured. Did she know the secret of her father’s double life? In any case I could see that she was prepared to go to any length in order to shield him.

“I expect my aunt has been very much puzzled by your card,” she said. “She will probably be wondering whoever you can be.”

“If you so desire, Miss Miller, you can explain to your aunt that I am a friend of yours, and that by a mistake of the servant the card was sent to her.”

“A most excellent excuse,” she laughed. “I’ll tell her so, and then if you are still remaining here over to-morrow, perhaps you will call.”

“I shall be only too delighted,” I assured her. “Your father I found a most charming man—almost as charming as his daughter.”

“Now no compliments please, Mr Leaf,” she exclaimed, flushing slightly.

“It is not an idle one, I assure you,” I said. “The compliment is equally to your father as to yourself.” And then we strolled forward again along the banks of a small rippling brook overhung by willows and hawthorns. Was it possible that she, so full of grace and sweetness, was actually the

woman who Sammy had declared her to be? No, I could not bring myself to believe it. She spoke with such feeling and sympathy, and she was so full of an ineffable charm that I refused to believe that she was a mere adventuress assisting her father in his direction of some ingenious gang of thieves who worked in secret.

Her father, too, was the very last man whom I should have believed to be an adventurer had not the proof been so plain. Was not that appeal of Lucie's to Nardini an ugly and suspicious truth?

The more suspicious, too, that she would give me no idea of the allegation against her. She evidently feared lest I should make inquiry and discover the disgraceful truth.

Presently, as we came to a bend in the stream where the water was deeper, its unruffled surface shining like a mirror, I halted, and looking straight into her face, said:—

"Miss Miller, yesterday at your house I made a discovery—one that utterly astounded me."

Her countenance went ashen grey.

"A discovery!" she faltered. "What—what do you mean?"

Instantly I saw that I had quite unintentionally alarmed her and hastened to set her at her ease.

"I saw upon a table in your drawing-room the photograph of a very dear friend—Ella Murray. She was your friend, so your father told me. How curious that we should both have been acquainted with her!"

"Oh! Ella! Did you really know poor Ella?" she exclaimed quickly, reassured that my discovery was not of a compromising character.

"I knew her very well indeed," was my slow response. "When were you acquainted with her?"

"Oh! years ago. We were together at the Sacré Coeur at Evreux, and both left the convent the same year. She was my most intimate friend,

and once or twice came with me here, to Studland, when we had our holidays together."

"She actually visited here!" I exclaimed in surprise.

"Several times. Mr Murray was my father's friend. As you know, he lived at Wichenford, in Worcestershire. Then we went to reside entirely abroad, and for quite a long time, a year or more, I lost sight of her. She was very beautiful. From a child her wonderful face was everywhere admired. In the convent we girls nicknamed her 'The Little Madonna,' for she bore a striking likeness to the Van Dyck's Madonna in the Pitti in Florence, a copy of which hung in the convent chapel."

"Ah, of course!" I cried. Now that she recalled that picture, I recognised the extraordinary likeness. Perhaps you, who read this chronicle of strange facts, know that small canvas a foot square which hangs in a corner of one of the great gold-ceilinged salons, almost unnoticed save by the foreign art enthusiast. The expression of sweetness and adoration distinguishes it as a marvellous work. "What do you know further concerning her?" I asked. "Tell me all—for she was my friend."

"About a year before we went to live at Enghien, near Paris, Mrs Murray died. Then her father let Wichenford Place to an American, and went to Australia for a sea-trip, leaving Ella in charge of an old aunt who lived in London. I saw her once, at her aunt's house in Porchester Terrace. She was very unhappy, and when I asked her the reason she told me in bitter tears that she loved a man who adored her in return. She would not tell me the man's name, but only said that her father and her aunt were compelling her to marry a wealthy elderly man who was odious, and whom she hated. Poor little Ella! I pitied her, and tried to comfort her, but it was quite useless, for that very evening her father, who was then back in London, compelled her to go out and meet her secret lover and give him his *congé*. Who he was or what became of him I do not know. I only know that she loved him as dearly as any woman has ever loved a man—poor little Ella!"

I stood before her motionless, listening to those words. Was this true? Had Fate any further shaft of bitterness to thrust into my already broken heart?

“Miss Miller!” I managed to exclaim, in a very low voice I fear, “what you tell me is utterly astounding. You know the man who loved Ella Murray. He was none other than myself—I who loved her, ay better than my own life—I who received that dismissal from the sweet lips that I so adored—the lips that I now know were compelled to lie to me.”

“You—Mr Leaf!” she cried. “Impossible. You were actually Ella’s secret lover!”

“Ah, yes! God alone knows how I have suffered all these years,” I said, half-choked. “You were her friend, Miss Miller, therefore you will forgive me if even to-day I wear my heart upon my sleeve. You will say, perhaps, that I am foolish, yet when a man loves a woman honestly, as I did, and he craves for affection and happiness, the catastrophe of parting is a very severe one—often more so to the man than to the woman. But,” I added quickly, “pardon me, I am talking to you as though you were as old as myself. You, at your age, have never experienced the bitterness of a blighted love.”

“Unfortunately I have,” she answered, in a low, trembling voice. “I, too, loved once—and only once. But, alas! after a few short weeks of affection, of a bliss that I thought would last always, the man I loved was cruelly snatched from me for ever.” And she sighed and tears welled in her fine eyes, as she looked aimlessly straight before her—her mind filled with painful recollections.

She told me no more, and left me wondering at the secret love romance that, to my great surprise, seemed to have already hardened her young heart.

Every girl, even in her school years, has her own little affair of the heart, generally becoming hopelessly infatuated with some man much her senior, who is in ignorance of the burning he is awakening within the girlish breast. But hers was, I distinguished, a real serious affection, one which, like my own, had ended in black grief and tragedy.

But she had told me one truth—a ghastly truth. I had misjudged my dear dead love! She had still loved me—she had still been mine—in heart my own!

Chapter Twelve.

In which a Strange Thing Happens.

“If your love has ended in tragedy, as mine has done, then we can surely sympathise with each other, Miss Miller,” I said, looking into her tearful eyes. “You know well how I have suffered. I believed that Ella really preferred that man to myself, and what you have now told me amazes me. I believed that she was false to me—and yet you tell me that she was true. Ah! how dearly I loved her! I do not believe that any man ever loved a woman so fondly, and with such fierce passion as I did. I was hers—body and soul. My love for her was that deep, all-consuming affection which sometimes makes a man as wax in a woman’s hands—to be moulded for good or for evil as she wills it. I lost all count of time, of friends, of everything, for I lived only for her. The hours when we were parted were to me like years, her words were music, her smiles the sunlight of my life, her sighs the shadows, her kisses the ecstatic bliss of terrestrial paradise in which I lived. Ah! yes, you who have loved and lost can well understand all that her love meant to me—you can understand why one dark foggy night I stood upon Charing Cross platform and swore an oath that never again would I put foot in the country which, though my native land, held for me only a poignant memory.”

“Yes,” she answered, with a slight sigh, “I quite understand how you must have suffered. Yet how strange it is that you should actually have been Ella’s lover—the man who she declared to me was the only one she would ever love. I did not know you, of course, yet I sympathised with you when she told me that she was going that evening to meet you, and to lie to you under compulsion.”

“But why—why did she consent to do this?” I asked.

“She confessed to me the reason. She spoke in confidence, but now that it is all past, I may surely tell you. The fact was that her father, owing to the great depreciation in the value of land, had got into the hands of the Jews, and was on the verge of bankruptcy. Blumenthal, who had lent him a large sum upon mortgage, had offered to return the deeds on the day that he married Ella.”

“Then she actually sacrificed herself to save her father!” I cried.

“Without a doubt. And what a sacrifice! She loved you, Mr Leaf, and yet she dismissed you in order to save her father from ruin.”

“Blumenthal was a brute to have ever suggested such a condition,” I declared savagely. “I never saw him. What kind of man was he? Did you meet him?”

“Yes. He was at Porchester Terrace on the afternoon when I called,” she replied. “A short, stout, black-whiskered man, of a decidedly Hebrew cast. He was dressed loudly and wore a white waistcoat with heavy gold albert—a typical City man such as one sees in Cornhill or Lothbury.”

“She showed no sign of affection towards him?”

“None whatever. He was introduced to me by Mr Murray as Ella’s affianced husband, and I was, of course, amazed that she should entertain a spark of affection for him. But half an hour later, when we were alone, she confessed in tears everything to me, just as I have related it to you.”

“Well, you utterly astound me,” was all I could exclaim.

What she had revealed to me placed my little Ella in an entirely new light. I never dreamed of her self-martyrdom. I sighed heavily, and a big lump arose in my throat as I reflected that, perhaps, after all death was preferable to life with a man whom she could not love.

The calm twilight was deepening into night, and the silence was broken only by the low murmuring of the water, the swift swish of some rat or water-hen in the rushes startled at our presence, and the dismal cry of a night-bird in the willows on the opposite bank.

“Did you hear nothing more of Ella after that day at Porchester Terrace—that 12th of November that was, alas! fatal to my happiness?”

“She wrote to me twice. One letter I received in Rome a month afterwards, and the second followed me about some weeks, and at last found me at Lindau, on the Lake of Constance. Both letters were full of

her own unhappiness. In the first she reproached herself bitterly for having lied to the man she really loved—though she never mentioned your name—and said that she was back at Wichenford, but for her the world was dead. The man whom she had dismissed had left her in disgust and despair and had gone abroad, whither she knew not. A friend of yours had, it seemed, told her that you had gone to Algeria, and her letter concluded with the words: ‘I am alone to blame for this, yet how could I, in the circumstances, have acted otherwise?’”

“And the second letter?” I asked eagerly.

“It was written a month later, from Blumenthal’s shooting-box near Blair Athol. She and her father were guests there at the great house-party consisting mostly of wealthy City men and their wives. She described it and said how she hated it all. She had, she told me, tried to escape. She had even thought of writing to you to tell you the truth and ask your counsel, yet what use was it when she knew that she must save her father from the ruin that threatened. Wichenford Place had been the home of the Murrays ever since the days of James the First, when the King himself, granted it to his faithful partisan, Donald Murray of Parton, in Dumfriesshire. No Murray had ever before mortgaged it, therefore it was clearly her duty to her family to redeem it from the hands of usurers and vandals, even at cost of her own happiness.”

“A noble sacrifice!” I sighed.

“Yes, Mr Leaf. She was a noble girl,” declared my handsome companion. “I, who knew her through ten years or so, knew her, perhaps, better than even you yourself did. The Little Madonna was never accused of an unkind or unjust action.”

“And after that letter?”

“A few months later she came to visit us at Enghien. She and her father were in Paris, where she was buying her trousseau. But she made no mention of Blumenthal. Afterwards we were continually moving from place to place, and if she wrote, her letter never reached me. I heard no more.”

A long deep silence fell between us. We were still standing there in the

grey twilight at a small gate that led into the next field, our path still continuing beside the stream.

“Strange that it should be I who should tell you the truth,” she remarked, almost as though speaking to herself. “You, a perfect stranger, offered to do me a service—indeed you have done me a very great service by restoring that letter to me—and in return, I have been able to tell you the truth regarding your lost love,” and she looked into my face with her sad, serious eyes.

“Yes, it is indeed curious,” I said. “Our circumstances are, in a measure, identical. We have both been the victims of dire misfortunes, both broken by the tragedy of an unhappy love. But you have told me hardly anything concerning yourself,” I added.

The laces of her muslin blouse rose slowly and fell again. In that dim light I detected a hardness at the corners of her mouth, a hardness that, to me, was all-sufficient proof of the bitterness wearing out her young heart.

“Myself!” she echoed sadly. “What need I say about myself? It is of the past, and the memory of it all is a very bitter one. Like you, I believed that happiness was to be mine, the more so, because my father entirely approved of our union. He made confidential inquiries concerning him, and found that he was all that he represented himself to be. But love and happiness were not for me. I, alas! am one of those who are debarred the sweetness of life,” she added hoarsely, her small white hands clenching themselves, as thoughts of the past crowded upon her.

For some time we were again silent. I was anxious to know the truth of the love romance of my sweet-faced little friend—the girl whom Sammy had denounced as an adventuress. Yet surely there was nothing of the adventuress about her as she stood there in her plain white frock amid that purely English scene. I glanced at her countenance and saw that it was pale and agitated, and that her nervous lips were trembling. Her chin had sunk upon her breast and she stood deep in thought as though unconscious of my presence.

“Where did it occur? Here?”

“No, abroad,” she answered, in a thin, mechanical voice. “I met him when

we were living at Enghien, and from the first moment of our meeting we discovered that by some strange magnetism we were drawn irresistibly together. He was a foreigner, it is true, but his mother had been English, and his father was a Chilian."

"Chilian!" I cried, in a voice of surprise. But she never guessed the reason of my amazement.

"Yes. My father discovered that we met in secret, and then invited him to dine with us. From that evening he came daily out from Paris, and we used to spend each afternoon boating on the lake or playing tennis on the island. Before long we had pledged our love, and then commenced days of bliss such as I had never before experienced. I knew at last what was meant by perfect happiness, for we adored each other. I loved him just as dearly as Ella loved you. I would have died for him. Yet in all too short a time the blow fell upon me—the blow that has crushed all life from me, that has already made me a world-weary woman before my time."

"And what was the end?" I asked with deep sympathy, yet, alas! knowing too well the story of the tragedy.

"The end—ah?" she sighed. "How can I tell you? On the very night when we had secretly fixed the date of our marriage—a night when my father invited several friends to dine—he returned to Paris, and—" but she broke off short and burst into a wild passion of tears.

For some time I waited, my hand placed tenderly upon her shoulder, striving to comfort her, and urging her to bear up against her heavy burden of trouble. Then at last when she grew calm again, she said in a hard tone:—

"On his return to Paris he found that during his absence thieves had obtained access to his room at the hotel, and securities for a very large amount, for the safe custody of which he was personally responsible, had been stolen. He saw that his own honour was at stake, that he alone was to blame for not leaving them in the bank, and in a fit of despondency—a mad paroxysm of temporary insanity—he took out his revolver and ended his life. I only knew of it four days after, when I chanced to read of it in the *Indépendance Belge*, for early on the morning following the dinner, my

father had received a telegram and been compelled to go to Brussels, and I accompanied him. Before I knew the awful truth, poor Manuel was already dead and buried! Since that day," she added bitterly, "all hope of happiness has been crushed within me. I know now that the love of an honest man is not for me."

I made no response. I was too absorbed in my own thoughts. Every word of hers bore out Sammy's story, yet I saw that she herself was innocent of the foul plot which had, as a sequel, the suicide of the poor girl's lover.

Miller knew the truth; he was, indeed, in all probability the instigator of the ingenious theft that had had such a tragic sequel.

In silence I held the small gate open for her, and together we passed on along the path beside the winding stream. Both our hearts were too full for words after that unusual exchange of confidences.

Of a sudden before us, advancing in our direction, there appeared the figure of some one in the shadow beneath the trees.

Lucie detected it at the same instant as myself, and halting drew back in quick alarm.

"We must not be seen here together," she gasped. "People would talk, and it would quickly get to my father's ears."

"And what harm if it did?" I asked, but ere she could reply a strange thing happened—an incident more startling and more amazing than any I could have ever imagined in my wildest dreams.

I held my breath, and stood rooted to the spot.

Chapter Thirteen.

Beneath the Love-Light.

What followed was amazing, mystifying.

With a loud cry that startled me the grey figure had come swiftly towards us, and I then saw that it was a woman.

My companion and she flew into each other's arms and exchanged wild joyful greetings, while I, catching sight of her face, stood there open-mouthed, breathless in sheer astonishment.

At that moment I doubted whether I were actually sane and in possession of all my senses. I doubted even my own eyes. And had you been there, in my place, I think you also would have been dumbfounded.

"Fancy you—of all persons in this whole world!" Lucie cried, then turning to me after kissing the newcomer with wild enthusiasm, she laughed, adding:—

"This gentleman is not altogether a stranger, I believe?"

The woman turned her flushed countenance to mine, and in the dim twilight our eyes met.

She started back with a loud cry, then, next instant, dashed forward to me, grasping both my hands.

"Ella!" I ejaculated. It was all I could say.

"Godfrey!—you?"

And she looked from me to Lucie inquiringly, for having met us walking at that hour by that lonely brook she doubtless believed us to be lovers.

"I am Godfrey Leaf," I said, grasping both her hands. "Yes, I cannot realise that you are really Ella—my own Ella—from the grave?" And I still stood there stupefied.

“From the grave? What do you mean?” she asked, surprised.

“They told me that you were dead,” I cried quickly. “They said that you had caught typhoid, and that it ended fatally.”

“It is true that I had a bad attack of fever, and the doctors gave me up, yet somehow—I suppose by the perverseness of Fate, because I had no further desire to live—I recovered. But you were abroad constantly, and therefore heard nothing of me.”

“I was in Russia when I received news of your death, Ella,” I said in a low voice, for there, in the presence of my love, I had become a changed man. “I have mourned for you until to-day.”

“I had no idea of this!” she exclaimed. “I have been living in Ireland with my father. I have scarcely ever been in London since—since that night when we parted,” she faltered, lowering her eyes, as though fearing to meet my reproachful gaze.

“And how came you here?” Lucie asked, as amazed as I was at her appearance.

“We came over from Bournemouth to Swanage this afternoon, and it suddenly occurred to me to come and see if you were in England. I wanted to see the dear old Manor again—the house where you and I have spent so many very happy hours long ago. Minton did not recognise me at first, but when he did he told me that you had gone out to the village two hours ago. I then made inquiries as to the direction you had taken, and fortunately found you here.”

“Then your father is now at Swanage?”

“Yes. We are staying the night there. To-night a motor-car belonging to a friend of my father’s is coming from Winchester to take us for a trip through Devonshire and Cornwall.”

“Well, Ella, you certainly gave us both a turn, appearing so suddenly,” declared Lucie. “Only half an hour ago we were speaking of you, and, like every one else, believed that you were dead.”

“I wonder who started such a report?” she said. “Why did they say that I had died?”

“To trace the source of a false report is always difficult,” I said. “Somebody surmises something and tells some one else, and the second person, in recounting it, declares the surmise to be the truth. It is almost always so.”

“There certainly could be no motive in saying that Ella was dead, as far as I can see,” Lucie declared. “But,” she added, “why let us worry about the past? You have come back to us—back really from the grave.”

“Yes,” I said, still holding her hand. “I believed, Ella, that you were dead long ago. The memory of that last night when we walked through the wet streets of Bayswater has ever remained a bitter one.”

“No, no,” she cried. “Do not recall it. I, too, have suffered agonies of regret. Why is it that we meet again—like this?” and I noted that her splendid eyes were turned upon her friend in askance.

Yes. She suspected that Lucie and I were lovers, and such a conclusion was, after all, but natural.

“You are surprised, no doubt, to meet us together,” laughed Lucie. “But if you knew the truth regarding our acquaintance you would be even more surprised.”

“Then Godfrey is not—”

“He is certainly not my lover,” she exclaimed. “I may as well make that quite clear to you at once, dear. We came here because he had something to explain to me, and we naturally had no desire that the villagers should gossip.”

My Ella turned again to me, and I saw that all anxiety had faded from her beautiful countenance. She was sweet and smiling—her old delightful self again.

What had happened in those years I knew not. My love might be married, for aught I knew. She wore gloves, therefore I could not tell if her hand

bore a wedding ring. She made no mention of Blumenthal, and I could not well inquire of him. So we were both of us somewhat restrained, neither knowing of the exact position of the other.

I only knew that all the great passion I had entertained for her swelled within my heart, filling it to overflowing. The touch of her had thrilled me and I longed to kiss those sweet red lips once again—to repeat to her my love and to assure her that I was still unchanged.

But with Lucie present I could say nothing. I could ask no question, nor could I make any declaration. Yet in those few moments I had been lifted from the depths of despair and despondency to the pinnacle of happiness.

Ella, my well-beloved, still lived! And while she lived she was still mine in heart, even though, perish the thought, she might be wife of another.

Darkness was now falling, yet there was still sufficient light to reveal her wondrous beauty. As she stood before me in her pale grey dress and large black hat I recognised that she had grown even more beautiful than she had been in the days of our love romance. Her figure was perfect in its symmetry; her countenance so lovely that even the uncommon beauty of Lucie paled before her. Those blue eyes that I knew were so unfathomable were turned upon me, and even there I saw in them the love-light that was unmistakable, that expression mysterious and indescribable that no woman is ever able to feign—the look, often unconscious, that tells a man that he is the object of passionate affection.

My heart leapt within me with wild ecstasy, yet I could not speak.

I only grasped her hand more tightly. Then in order to cover the emotion that I saw was rising within her, I turned and made a casual remark to Lucie that it was almost time we returned.

“Of course,” she said quickly, recognising the situation. “You two have much to talk over alone. Let us go.”

And together we moved forward along the path by, which my lost love had returned to me.

How can I describe to you my feelings in those moments? Sometimes I found myself doubting whether it was not all some dream or some strange chimera of my unbalanced brain. But I held her hand, and found that it was real flesh and blood. My well-beloved still lived; she for whom I had mourned so long had returned, even more sweet and beautiful.

The village bells were pealing, the ringers practising probably.

“Hark!” I said, as I walked at her side, treading on air from sheer buoyancy of spirits. “They are joy bells, Ella. They ring because you have returned to me.” She laughed, turning those dear, wide-open eyes to mine, and said:—

“How often have I wondered where you were, and whether—” and she paused without completing the sentence.

“Whether what?”

“Well—whether you had, after all, forgotten me,” she said. “I never dreamed that you believed me dead. I thought, of course, that if you really loved me, as you used to say, that you would surely write to me or endeavour to see me when you knew that, after all, I had not married that man.”

“Then you did not marry Blumenthal after all!” I cried quickly. “Was the engagement broken off?”

“Yes. Because of his ill-health. He released me when the doctors told him the truth—that he had only a few months to live. He died three months later.” And she grew silent again, and yet it seemed as if she wished to tell me something further. Indeed she was about to do so, but checked herself.

“Well!” I asked, in order to allow her an opportunity to speak.

“He was generous to me after all,” she went on. “The day before he died he sent for me, and I went and sat at his bedside. He knew his end was near, and after he had expressed deep regret that he had come between us—for he knew quite well that I loved you very dearly—he drew from beneath his pillow a large sealed envelope, making me promise to take it

home, but not to open it until the day after his decease. Next day he died, and on the day following I broke the seals and discovered, to my amazement and joy, that he had presented me with the mortgage deeds of Wichenford. Some years before my father had mortgaged our old home to him, and those very deeds he had made my price as his wife."

"Then for the great injustice he did you, Ella, the fellow endeavoured to atone," I said. "The mortgage, therefore, does not now exist."

"Of course not. I gave the deeds at once to my father, and they were that day destroyed, much to the chagrin of the heirs of the estate, who had long been scheming to become possessors of Wichenford."

"A most generous action," Lucie declared.

"Yes, whatever I may have said of him, and however much I have hated him in the past, I cannot help acknowledging that before his death he rendered me the greatest service."

"Yet you were prepared to perform a noble self-sacrifice, Ella," I said, in a low, serious voice. "You kept your secret, and before we parted told me what was untrue. But Lucie has revealed to me the astounding truth. Only to-night, for the first time, have I realised all that your self-martyrdom meant—only to-night have I discovered that, after all, you still loved me just as fondly and with a passion just as fierce as my own—that even though engaged to Blumenthal your dear heart was still my own."

Chapter Fourteen.

Cruel Destiny.

James Harding Miller was seated alone in a long cane deck-chair on the terrace that ran the whole length of the beautiful old house. He had drawn it out through the French windows of the smoking-room, and was idly drawing out a cigar in the semi-darkness.

“Father!” cried Lucie, rushing forward as we approached, “do you recognise our visitor?”

Instantly he jumped up, exclaiming:—

“Why Ella—Ella after all this time! Minton told me that you had called and had gone in search of Lucie. And how is your father?”

“He’s very well, thanks,” was my love’s reply. “I left him at Swanage, and drove out to see if Lucie was at home.”

“And Mr Leaf,” exclaimed Lucie. “I think you have met him before, father?”

“Certainly,” Miller said pleasantly, extending his hand to me. “You are staying here, in Studland?”

“For a couple of days or so,” I answered.

“You mentioned that you had met my daughter,” he remarked, and then after welcoming Ella and pressing her to remain there the night, he ordered Minton to bring us chairs, and pushed the cigars across to me.

To Miller, Ella gave the same account of herself as she had given to us. The identity of the person who had spread the false report concerning her death—a report which had passed from mouth to mouth among all her friends—was a mystery, and Miller was just as surprised and just as pleased as ourselves at her reappearance.

As we sat there in the starlight I listened to Ella's account of her free, open-air life in County Galway, for Wichenford was still let to the wealthy American; and her father, she said, preferred Ireland as a place of residence when he could not live on his own estate.

"But you never wrote to us," Miller remarked. "Often we have spoken of you, and regretted that you were no longer with us. Indeed, your portrait is still yonder in the drawing-room. Only the day before yesterday Mr Leaf noticed it, and inquired whether I knew you."

My love's eyes met mine in a long wistful look.

"I believed that you were always abroad," she answered him. "And—well, to tell the truth, I had an idea that you had altogether forgotten me."

"Forgotten you, dear?" cried Lucie. "We have never forgotten you. How could I ever forget my dearest friend—and more especially when I knew what a terrible self-sacrifice you had made?"

"What's that?" inquired Miller, quickly interested.

"Shall I tell him?" asked Lucie, turning to me.

"If you wish. It is only right, I think, that Mr Miller should know the truth."

Therefore, receiving Ella's consent as well, Lucie explained to her father how I had been her friend's secret lover, and how she had broken off our affection by force of circumstance, sacrificing herself in order to save her father from ruin.

He listened to his daughter in surprise, then sighing heavily, turned to Ella, saying sympathetically:—

"How noble of you! Ah! what you both must have suffered! You need not tell me, either of you, for I know myself what it is to lose the woman one loves. I recollect my poor dear wife and still adore her memory." And this from a man who was suspected of being leader of a gang of international criminals!

"The bitterness of the past," I said, "will perhaps render the joy of the

present all the sweeter."

"It certainly ought to. Surely your delight at finding Ella alive and well when you, like all of us, believed her dead, must be beyond bounds?"

"It is! It is!" I cried. "I, who believed that she preferred wealth to my honest love; I, who have these long years been filled with a thousand regrets and reproaches, now know the truth. I have misjudged her!"

The soft hand of my well-beloved sought my wrist and gripped it. That action conveyed more to me than any words of hers could have done.

Presently it grew chilly, and we went into the long old-fashioned drawing-room, where we found Miss Miller, a pleasant grey-faced old lady, in a cap with cherry-coloured ribbons, idling over a book.

Upon the table still stood the portrait of my dear heart, the picture which only two days before had awakened within me such bitter remembrances. The silk-shaded lamps shed a soft light over everything, illuminating for the first time my Ella's beautiful face. In the twilight by the river I had seen that she had become even more beautiful, yet the light that now fell upon her revealed a calmness and sweetness of expression that I had not hitherto been able to distinguish. She was far more lovely than I had believed—more beautiful even than in those days of our secret love.

Those great blue eyes looked out upon me with that same love-flame as of old—eyes that were clear and bright as a child's, the glance of which would have made any man's head reel—cheeks that were more delicately moulded than the marbles of Michael Angelo, and a grace that was perfect, complete, adorable.

And she was mine—still my own!

Strange that this sudden happiness was actually the sequel of a tragedy!

"It is really delightful to be back here again," she remarked to Lucie, glancing round the room. "How well I remember the old days when, in the holidays, I came and stayed with you. Nothing has changed. The dear old place is just the same."

“Yes,” replied Lucie. “I only wish we lived here more. But father and I are always abroad—always moving from place to place through France, Germany, Spain, Italy, just as the fit takes us. Nowadays, dear old dad is really like the Jew-errant. He can’t remain more than a few days in one place—can you, dad?” she asked, laughing across at him.

“No, my dear,” was his response in a strange voice. “I must travel—travel—always travel. To keep moving is part of my nature, I believe.”

“Only fancy! he’s here in England!” she remarked to Ella. “It’s really wonderful!”

While this conversation was in progress I was afraid that old Miss Miller might refer to my call upon her; but fortunately she either did not catch my name when introduced, or did not connect me with her mysterious visitor.

The owner of Studland Manor was, I saw, somewhat uneasy when his daughter began to explain how constantly they travelled. He seemed a little annoyed that Lucie should tell us that they were constantly moving, instead of living quietly by the Mediterranean outside Leghorn, as he would have me believe.

The old-fashioned Empire clock beneath its glass shade, standing on the chimney-piece, struck eleven, and I rose resolutely to take my leave. I had expressed pleasure at my new-found happiness, shook hands all round, and asked leave to call on the morrow.

“Certainly—most certainly,” answered Miller, in that breezy manner that he had sometimes assumed towards me on our last meeting. He was essentially a man of moods, sometimes brooding and strange, at others full of buoyant good-humour, “You are always welcome here, remember. Perhaps you’ll dine with us—just pot-luck—at seven to-morrow night? I don’t expect you get much that’s worth eating down at the ‘Lion’. We’ll induce Ella to stay over to-morrow, eh?”

My love protested that she would be compelled to return to Swanage in the morning, but we would not hear of it.

Then Miller, with a delicacy which further showed that he had taken a

fancy to me, suggested that Ella might, perhaps, like to accompany me as far as the lodge-gates, and a few moments later I went forth with my love into the darkness.

For the first hundred paces, until we entered the black shadows of the old beech hedge, we walked hand-in-hand, uttering no single word.

After that long interval of mourning and black despair, I was again at her side—alone. I was beside myself for very joy.

We halted. It seemed an almost involuntary action. Then taking her tenderly in my arms I pressed my lips to hers in a first long passionate caress.

“My love!” I murmured, with heart overflowing, “my dearest love—you for whom I have mourned, and whose dear memory I have ever revered—God has given you back to me. We have met again—you have been given to me from the grave, never to part—never—*never*!”

To my blank amazement she turned her pale white face from mine, without reciprocating my passionate kisses. She sighed, and a shiver ran through her slight frame. Her lips were cold, and with her hands she pushed me from her with averted face.

“Ella!” I gasped, holding her, and looking into her fine eyes, though I could see no expression there, so dark was it. “Ella! Darling, may I not at least kiss you welcome on your return to me? Are you not mine—my own?”

She made no response, only pushing me farther from her very firmly, although I felt that her tiny hands trembled. She was overcome with emotion, which she was in vain striving to suppress.

I held my breath—startled at her sudden and unaccountable change of manner. My heart was bursting. What did it mean?

“Speak, dearest!” I implored. “Tell me the reason of this? Are you not still my love? Are you not mine—as you were in the old days?”

Slowly she shook her head, and in a faltering voice, hoarse and low,

responded:—

“No, Godfrey! After to-night we must never again meet. Forgive me, but I thought you had long ago forgotten me as utterly worthless.”

“I have never forgotten, darling. You are my own dear Ella, as always. Therefore we are now inseparable—we *shall* meet again.”

“Impossible!” she declared decisively in that same hard tone, her voice so entirely changed. “I am no longer your love, Godfrey. I may as well confess to you the bitter truth at once—*I am another’s*!”

Chapter Fifteen.

Betrays some Hidden Intrigue.

I fell back at Ella's words, as though I had received a blow full in the chest.

"You—you are married!" I gasped.

"No—not yet," was her low answer, in the same blank, mechanical voice.

"Then you love another man!" I cried fiercely.

"In a month's time I am to be married."

"But you shall not, Ella!" I exclaimed quickly and determinedly. "You are mine. Surely I have a prior claim to you! You loved me in the old days—you surely cannot deny that!"

"I do not deny it, Godfrey," she said, in that same sweet, soft voice that had so long rung in my ears. "Unfortunately I did not know that you still retained any affection for me. I made inquiries, but no one knew where you were, except that you were always abroad. For aught I knew you might already be married. Therefore, I am not altogether to blame."

"Who is the man?" I asked, with a fierce jealousy rising within me. Was this fellow, whoever he might be, to rob me, after all, of my love, whom I had so fortunately rediscovered?

"I regret it, but I cannot tell you his name."

"Not tell me his name!" I cried. "Why not? What mystery need there be if you are to be married?"

"I have promised to say nothing until we are man and wife," she answered. "You alone, Godfrey, have I told because—well, because I dare not again deceive you."

"Then you still love me!" I exclaimed quickly. "Confess the truth."

“What is the use of discussing affection?” she asked. “The die is cast. At the very moment when we meet again after this long separation, we find ourselves debarred from happiness. We can never become man and wife.”

“Why not?”

“Because I must marry this man.”

“Must?”

“Yes,” she whispered hoarsely.

“But you were in that position regarding Blumenthal,” I remarked, much puzzled. In the darkness I could not distinguish the expression of her countenance, but from her voice I knew that she was in desperation, and that she was actually telling me a hideous truth.

“Misfortune seems to follow upon me,” was her somewhat enigmatical answer.

“Then be frank with me, Ella. This man whom you will not name is forcing you to marry him.”

She was, however, silent. Either she feared to commit herself, or she was reflecting upon how much she dare tell me.

I heard her breath going and coming in quick gasps, and I could distinguish that her pointed chin had sunk upon her chest in an attitude of deep dejection.

“Why not tell me everything, darling?” I went on, hoping to persuade her to confess. “Remember what I am to you; remember that our lives have for so long been linked together, that ever in these years of our separation you have been mine always, in heart and soul. I have smiled upon no other woman but your own sweet self, and never once has my heart been stirred by the zephyr of love since that dark wet night when we parted in London, and I went forth into the wide grey ocean of despair. Ella, you—”

“Enough! Enough!” she cried, suddenly interrupting me. “Do not recall the past. All is too bitter, too melancholy. Every single detail of our last interview I have lived over and over again—I, who lied to you, even though my heart was breaking. Blumenthal gave me my freedom—and yet—”

“And yet,” I said very slowly, in a low, intense voice—“and yet you have again fallen the victim of a man’s ingenious wiles. Tell me the truth, dearest. You have been entrapped—and you see no way of escape.”

But she only shook her head sadly, saying:—

“No, I can say nothing—not even to you, Godfrey.”

“Why?” I cried, dismayed. “Why all this secrecy and mystery? Surely I may, at least, know the man’s name?”

“That I cannot tell you.”

“Then he has forbidden you to reveal his real identity?”

She nodded in the affirmative.

“Which plainly shows that the fellow is in fear of something. He’s afraid of exposure in some way or other. I will not allow you, my own dear love, to become the victim of this fellow!” I said fiercely. “He may be an adventurer, for all you know—a man with an evil past. He has, without doubt, ascertained that on your father’s death Wichenford will be yours. No, Ella, I will not allow you to marry this man who forbids you to reveal his name.”

“But what will you do?” she cried in alarm.

“What will I do? I will tell him to his face that you are mine—that he has no right to you. And you will refuse to become his wife.”

“Ah!—yes—but you must not do that,” she declared. “Why not?”

“No. I beg of you to do nothing rash,” she urged in breathless anxiety, laying her hand upon my arm.

“But I will not allow you—my own well-beloved—to become the wife of another!”

“Godfrey,” she said, in so low a voice that it was scarcely above a whisper, “you must. There is no way of escape for me.”

“Then you are a victim of this nameless man!”

She nodded in the affirmative.

“Who is he? Tell me,” I demanded. “I have a right to know.”

“Yes, you have, indeed, a right, but I have given my word of honour to say nothing. I cannot tell his name—even to you.”

The mystery of it all somehow aroused my suspicions. Was she deceiving me? Had she invented this nameless lover with some ulterior object? No man can ever fathom the ingenuity of a woman who intends to deceive.

“Permit me to say so, Ella, but you are not frank with me,” I exclaimed reproachfully. “Why do you not tell me the whole truth, and allow me to take what steps I think proper? Cannot you realise all I feel at the thought of losing you again—for the second time? The past has been black enough, but the future for me will be even darker if I go away in the knowledge that you are the victim of a man unworthy of you. Tell me, dearest, do you doubt my love?”

“No,” she sighed. “I have never doubted it, Godfrey. I know how passionate is your affection; that you love me truly and well. Yet it is all to no purpose. We have met again, it is true, and under the strangest circumstances. It would almost seem as though Fate has brought us together, merely in order to tear us apart. For us, Godfrey, there, alas! can be no happiness,” she added sadly, with a deep-drawn sigh.

“Why not?”

For a few moments she did not reply. I repeated my question, again kissing the cold lips.

“Because—because,” she faltered, “I am compelled to marry this man.”

“He is compelling you, eh?” I asked, between my teeth.

“Yes.”

“And may I not stand as your champion? May I, who love you so dearly, extricate you from this trap?”

She shook her head slowly.

“It is not a trap, Godfrey,” she answered. “Rather call it force of circumstances. Those who told you I was dead lied to you, while I, hearing nothing from you, naturally concluded that you had forgotten. Therefore it is best for us to part again at once—to-night—for the memories of the past are to us both too painful.”

“Part from you, Ella!” I cried. “Never—never. You must be mad. While you breathe and live I shall remain near you as your friend, your protector, nay, your lover—the man who loves you better than his own life!” I declared, taking her small hand and raising it reverently to my lips. “It is cruel of you, darling, to suggest us parting.”

“No, it is the more merciful to both of us. We must part—so the sooner the better.”

“You told me this on that never-to-be-forgotten night in London,” I said reproachfully. “Therefore I cannot think that you are now in earnest.”

“I am, Godfrey,” she declared quickly. “I do not deny to you that I love you, but love between us is debarred. I am unhappy—ah! God alone knows what trials I have borne—what horrors have been mine to witness—and now to fill the cup of my grief I have met you only to find that you still love me,” she cried hoarsely, in a voice broken by emotion.

I held her trembling hand, and again kissed her cold, hard lips.

But she drew herself from me firmly, saying in a low, broken voice, full of pathos:—

“No, Godfrey. Let us say good-night here. Let both of us go our own way, as we have done before; both of us, however, now confident in each other’s love, even though our lives lie far apart. Remember me only as an unhappy woman who, through no fault of her own, is prevented from becoming your wife. Think of me still as your Ella of the old sweet days, and I will remember you, my Godfrey—the—the man I love. I—”

But she could utter no further word, for she burst into a flood of bitter tears.

Chapter Sixteen.

Introduces Mr Gordon-Wright.

Next morning, after a night of dark reflections, spent at the dormer window of the village inn, I called at the Manor House as early as the convenances would permit.

Lucie, cool in a white blouse and piqué skirt, met me in the hall, and, to my surprise, told me that Ella had already departed. At seven o'clock she asked that she might be driven back to Swanage to rejoin her father, as they were leaving early on the motor-car.

She was as surprised as I myself was at this sudden decision to leave, for she expected that she would remain there for another day at least, now that we had again met.

"Didn't she tell you that she was leaving early?" Lucie asked, looking me straight in the face.

"No. I certainly expected to find her here," I said, as she led me into the old-fashioned morning-room sweet with the odour of pot-pourri in the big Oriental punch-bowls.

I was utterly taken aback by her announcement.

When I had parted from my love she had declared that to meet again was useless, but I had assured her that in the morning I would call—that now we had met I would not again leave her. Had she not confessed her love for me? Did we not love each other with a fond, mad passion? And yet my darling had, it appeared, fallen beneath the influence of some nameless fellow, who was, no doubt, a scoundrel and an adventurer! Should I calmly stand by and allow her to ruin her life and mine? No. A thousand times, no. And as I stood there in silence in the low-ceilinged old room with Lucie Miller at my side, I made a firm and furious resolve that my Ella should not again escape me. Our love, however, seemed ill-fated. The remembrance of that night in Bayswater ever arose within my memory. Again how curious it was, that through the dead I had found the

living. By the death of Nardini I had rediscovered my lost love.

I wondered whether I should confide in Lucie and explain what my love had told me, or whether it was best to allow her, at least for the present, to remain in ignorance? I decided, after due reflection, upon the latter course.

“I, of course, thought that she had wished you good-bye, and made an appointment for another meeting,” Lucie said. “In fact, both my father and myself were greatly surprised when she came and asked that the horse might be put to. And yet—” and without finishing her sentence, she looked mysteriously into my face.

“And yet what?” I asked.

For a few moments she was silent, hesitating to explain. I saw by her face that something had puzzled her. We had so quickly become friends, and our friendship had been cemented by our mutual acquaintanceship with Ella Murray, that we had found ourselves speaking perfectly frankly as though we had known each other for years.

“Well—will you pardon me for asking you a rather impertinent question, Mr Leaf?” she said.

“Why, certainly.”

“You’ll perhaps think me curiously inquisitive, but how long were you with Ella in the avenue after you left last night?”

“About half an hour.”

“Not more?”

“No. I can fix it, because I noted the time by that long grandfather clock in the hall as we went out, and I looked at my watch when I got back to the inn. I was three-quarters of an hour in getting back to Studland.”

“That’s rather strange,” she remarked, with a distinct note of suspicion in her voice.

“Why?”

“Well—because Ella was gone nearly two hours and a half. My father went to bed, and I remained up for her. Wasn’t she with you?”

“Certainly not,” was my prompt answer, much surprised at her statement.

“Then something must have occurred after she left you,” my companion said.

“After she left me! What do you mean?”

“A very long time elapsed before her return,” Lucie remarked. “She may have been alone—but I think not.”

“Who was with her?”

“How can we tell?”

“But what causes you to think that Ella was not alone?”

“By her strange manner when she returned. She was pale and breathless, as though she had been hurrying, and although she had pinned it up I noticed that the sleeve of her blouse was torn, and that her wrist bore dark marks as though she had had a desperate struggle with some one.”

“Was she attacked by some tramp or other, I wonder?” I cried, amazed.

“She refused to tell me anything save that she was rather upset. She seemed in great fear that my father should have knowledge of the affair, and made me faithfully promise not to tell him. Her hair was awry, and some of the lace at the throat was torn as though some person had seized her and tried to strangle her. Indeed, while speaking to me she placed her hand at her throat, as if it pained her. Alarmed at her appearance, I inquired what was the matter, but she would only tell me vaguely that she was not very well. I at once jumped to the conclusion that you had quarrelled.”

“We certainly had no quarrel, Miss Miller,” I quickly reassured her.

“Then it is evident that she was attacked by some one! Yet it is curious that, intimate friends that we are, she would tell me nothing of the incident.”

“She wished to shield her assailant, perhaps,” I remarked, much puzzled.

“It certainly seems so. Seeing her so pale, and believing her about to faint, I took her to the dining-room and gave her some brandy. She sipped it, and a moment afterwards burst into tears. I sat with her for nearly half an hour trying to learn the mystery of her unhappiness. I asked her quite frankly if she had quarrelled with you, but she replied in the negative. Under the light, as she sat in the dining-room, I remarked the great change in her. Her countenance was pale as death, her lips white, and her eyes bore a look of terror in them. She was undoubtedly in great fear. But of what, I am unable to tell.”

“Your surmise is, no doubt, correct. She met some one unexpectedly—some one who attacked her. I wonder who it is?”

“She was evidently followed here this evening, and was, perhaps, seen walking with you. Your conversation, as you walked down to the lodge, might have been overheard.”

“Probably. But surely, Miss Miller, the incidents of last night were very remarkable ones. I followed you and I met my love. And then, just at the moment of my re-found happiness, she has gone again without a word. Indeed, when I reflect, the incidents of last night hardly seem real. I find myself doubting whether it was not all a dream, and would really hesitate to believe in its reality if you, too, had not been present—if you, too, had not seen and spoken with her.”

“Yes, it is curious—very curious. I was quite as startled by her sudden appearance as you were. It is inexplicable. I, too, believed she was dead. I heard so from half a dozen people, and I can’t help thinking, Mr Leaf, that there was some deep ulterior motive in spreading such a report concerning her.”

“She’s a mystery,” I declared; “a complete mystery.”

“She is—and yet do you not find her far more beautiful than in the old

days? I do."

"Perhaps her beauty is fatal—like that of so many women," I sighed. "The source of many a woman's unhappiness is to be found in her face."

"Last night tragedy was written deeply upon hers," my companion said, in a low, sympathetic voice. "I wonder what has occurred?"

I, too, wondered. Her firm refusal to allow me to kiss her upon the lips showed her either to be in deadly fear of the jealousy of another; or that she was true to the vow she had given, even though she still loved me. Yet who could be this person whom she had undoubtedly met after we had parted? Why had he attacked her? Why had she fled again so quickly? Was she in fear of some one who was still lurking in the vicinity? A sense of deadly chilliness stole over me.

The whole affair was, indeed, a mystery, yet not so utterly bewildering as were certain of the events which followed—events which were so strange and startling that they formed a problem that was for so long beyond solution.

Being so passionately devoted to Ella I determined to follow her, demand an explanation of the attack upon her and seek to discover the identity of her unknown lover—the man whom she had admitted to me she was to marry under compulsion.

I had risen from my chair, expressing my intention of driving into Swanage in the hope that she had not already left, when the door opened, and a dark, well-dressed man about forty, clean-shaven, having the appearance of a naval officer and dressed in a dark grey flannel suit, came forward with extended hand to my companion, wishing her good-morning.

From his easy manner I saw that he was a guest in the house, although on the previous night I had not seen him.

"Will you allow me to introduce you?" Lucie said, and next instant presented the newcomer to me as "My father's friend, Mr Gordon-Wright."

The visitor turned to take the hand I extended to him, and raised his eyes to mine.

The conventional greeting and assurance of pleasure at the meeting froze upon my lips.

We had met before—under circumstances that were, to say the least, both startling and strange.

In that instant I recognised how that the mystery had deepened a thousandfold.

Chapter Seventeen.

What Happened in the Night.

Whether the recognition had been mutual I was unable to decide.

If it had the newcomer made no sign, but extended his hand and greeted me, while I, striving to remain unconcerned, returned his welcome.

“Your father tells me he’s driving over to Swanage at half-past ten, Miss Lucie. Are you coming with us?” he asked, as he lounged with his hands deep in his jacket pockets, and an after-breakfast cigarette between his lips.

“I don’t think so,” was her reply. “I’m lunching with the Strong girls.”

“Oh, do come,” urged the dark-faced man. “You’d be back before one. You promised me yesterday that you’d drive me somewhere.”

“So I will—to-morrow, perhaps.”

I watched the man’s thin shaven face, and looked into his grey eyes in silence. His was a countenance striking on account of its clear-cut features, its mobile mouth, its high intellectual forehead, and its protruding jaws—an eminently clever, good-humoured face, and yet the expression in the eyes was, somehow, out of keeping with the rest of the countenance.

He laughed lightly, making some chaffing remarks, whereat the slight flush that arose in Lucie’s cheeks told me that she was not altogether averse to his evident admiration. He was a pleasant fellow—but, nevertheless, a mystery.

His appearance there had, for two reasons, startled me. The first was because I had no idea that Miller had a male visitor, and the second was because I recognised him as a person whom I had long desired to rediscover.

The last occasion I had seen him he had called himself Lieutenant Shacklock, R.N. It was in very different circumstances. He had worn a moustache and beard, and affected a gold-rimmed monocle. His personal appearance as he stood there laughing with Lucie was, however, very different, yet those cold grey, close-set eyes were the same. They wore an expression that could never be altered or disguised.

We spoke together once or twice, and I began to feel convinced that he was unaware of our previous meeting.

“Yes,” he remarked to me. “Beautiful old place this. I wonder my friend Miller doesn’t live here more. If I were in his place I’m sure I’d prefer it to wandering about the Continent.”

“You’ve been here before, I suppose?”

“Many times. Miller, when he’s home, generally invites me,” and then he turned to Lucie, by whom he was undoubtedly attracted. Little wonder, indeed, when one recognised how handsome she was.

I again stood silent, my eyes turned upon the spruce man’s face—the face that brought back to my mind a curious and mysterious incident in my wandering life abroad.

When one travels on the Continent as I had travelled, spending years of aimless wandering and lazy idling in the halls and smoking-rooms of hotels of the first order, making passing acquaintances of men and women of all grades and all nations, listening to music in illuminated gardens, and sometimes wandering with some fair *table-d’hôte* acquaintance beneath the stars, one meets with some queer adventures. I had met with a good many. One of them I now found myself recalling.

Three winters before I found myself, after the brilliant season at Monte Carlo, at a little sea-side resort called Nervi, which, as travellers know, is a few miles beyond Genoa, on the way to Rome. You have possibly looked out of the train and there obtained a glimpse of the blue Mediterranean beating upon its brown rocks; you have admired the splendid white villas of the Genoese merchants, and you have, probably, noticed behind the little railway station a great hotel garden, with green lawns and a splendid avenue of spreading palms.

In that garden one April night after dinner I was strolling and smoking with two men, who were friends. We had met casually in the hotel a few days before; a pleasant word or two, cocktails in company, a proffered cigar, and we at once became acquaintances, as is the way of cosmopolitans. The elder was named Blenkap, a man of sixty, a wealthy ironmaster from Pittsburg; while Shacklock, the other, was much younger, smart, and had just retired from the Navy.

That night we wandered through the gardens to the sea, which lay like glass beneath the light of the white Italian moon, with the waves sighing softly upon the shingle. But Blenkap, after half an hour, complained of being rather unwell, and while the lieutenant went into the town to purchase some cigarettes I accompanied his friend back to the hotel.

It was then about ten o'clock, and refusing to allow me to call a doctor, the American went to his room. At two o'clock in the morning I was awakened by the night-porter, who said that number ninety-seven had asked him to call me. Hastily I dressed, and, on going along the corridor, found Blenkap in bed in a state of collapse.

"I'm very ill; the pains in my head are terrible," he whispered to me. "Will you call a doctor—somebody who speaks English, if possible?"

His white face alarmed me, and I left him and went along to the lieutenant's room at the other end of the corridor. To my knock there was, however, no response, but on turning the handle and opening the door, I found the room in darkness and empty. He had not returned. Therefore I hurried out, and in half an hour returned with an Italian doctor who spoke a little English.

On entering the room I noticed that the doctor sniffed the air mysteriously as he crossed to the patient, who I now saw was unconscious. He examined him, asked me a few brief questions, and then fixing his eyes upon me, exclaimed in Italian:—

"This is a rather curious affair, signore."

"Why?" I inquired. "The gentleman was taken this evening while we were walking together. He complained of bad pains in his head and stomach."

“Yes, but who gave him the anaesthetic?” asked the doctor.

“Anaesthetic!” I exclaimed. “Why nobody, as far as I know.”

“Well, chloroform has been given him, and quite recently. He struggled against it—don’t you see?” and he indicated the American’s clenched hands and the disordered bed. “How long were you absent?”

“About half an hour.”

“Then some one must have come here while you were away,” the doctor declared, stroking his dark beard very thoughtfully. At first I was alarmed lest the unfortunate American might die, but the doctor, after due examination, assured me that there was really no danger. For half an hour we sat and waited, until at length the man to whom the anaesthetic had been so mysteriously administered regained consciousness. It was a slow recovery, but when at length his dull eyes fell upon me he beckoned me to him and with excited gestures pointed to a leather-covered box beneath a table opposite. I pulled it out and tried the lock. It was still secure, and he nodded in satisfaction. Presently the doctor left, and I returned to bed, but imagine my blank amazement next morning when, just as I was sipping my coffee in my room, Blenkap dashed in, crying:—

“I’ve been robbed! That fellow, Shacklock, did it! He must have crept into my room while you were away, rendered me senseless, took the key from the gold chain I always wear around my neck, opened the box, extracted the whole of the money and jewellery, relocked the box, and then had the audacity to replace the chain around my neck!”

“But he is your friend?” I exclaimed, with astonishment.

“I only met him a fortnight ago at the Grand at San Remo,” he answered. “He was there with a friend of his—probably a thief also. But he came on here alone with me. The fellow has taken over eighty thousand dollars!”

I hurried with him to the *questore*, or chief of police, and telegrams were quickly despatched hither and thither, but the thief had evidently got back to Genoa by the train at three o’clock in the morning, and embarked at once upon some ship for a Mediterranean port—Naples, Marseilles or Algiers. At any rate, though I remained a month in Nervi, we never heard

further either of the easy-going naval man, or of the eighty thousand dollars in American notes and negotiable securities. Without doubt it was intended by the thief, or thieves, to throw the first suspicion upon myself, but fortunately the night-porter stated most positively that he had seen the lieutenant coming from his friend, Blenkap's room, ten minutes before my return with the doctor. The man had left the main door of the hotel ajar in order to admit us, and it was evident that by that means the thief got away unnoticed.

The robbery had been an ingenious and audacious one, and showed the clever cunning of a master-hand.

As you have, no doubt, already guessed, the man who so cleverly got hold of Blenkap's money, and who had escaped so swiftly, I now recognised as the affable Lieutenant Shacklock, the intimate friend and guest of James Harding Miller.

Was not his presence in that house sufficient to convince me that what had been suspected of Miller was more than a mere surmise? It had been declared that Lucie's father, though a county gentleman, was also head of the most daring association of criminals in Europe. It seemed to me that Gordon-Wright, alias Shacklock, was one of his ingenious lieutenants whom he was entertaining in his cosy retreat—planning some new scheme perhaps—and who was, at the same time, an ardent admirer of the beautiful girl whose unhappiness and deadly peril was so great a mystery.

Chapter Eighteen.

Plight and Pursuit.

I left the Manor with my eyes dim and my heart beating fast with a sickening pain. I moved down the road without quite well knowing where I went.

My well-beloved had again escaped me. It was my duty to follow her, to learn the truth, to save her—my duty to her, as well as to myself.

Mystery followed upon the back of mystery. In those brief days, since the advent of the fugitive Italian at Shepherd's Bush, I had become enmeshed in a veritable web of entangled events which seemed to grow more extraordinary and more inexplicable every hour.

My meeting with the man Shacklock proved, beyond doubt, the source of Mr Miller's income. Finding Lucie's father such an affable and gentlemanly man, I had entirely refused to credit Sammy's story. Nevertheless, Lucie herself had corroborated it, inasmuch as she had described her love at Enghien and its tragic sequel; while I, myself, had recognised in Gordon-Wright the clever international thief who had decamped with Blenkap's valuables. And this man was actually Miller's most intimate friend!

To Lucie I made no mention of my intention, but half an hour later I was in a dogcart hired from the "Lion," driving at a furious pace over the Ballard Down into Swanage, where, at the hotel I had previously visited on my arrival, I inquired for Miss Murray.

"The lady left with a party in a motor-car an hour ago," was the reply of the young person in black satin, whose duty appeared to be to keep the books and order about the waiters.

"Gone!" I ejaculated. "Where?"

"Well, when people go off in a car we don't generally know their destination. Motor-cars are so very uncertain, you see."

“Did they arrive here on the car?” I inquired eagerly. “No. Mr Murray and his daughter came over by boat from Bournemouth. The motor arrived last night with a gentleman, a lady and the chauffeur.”

“Pardon me,” exclaimed a man’s voice at my elbow—the hotel proprietor who had overheard all our conversation. “Are you a detective?” he asked, in a rather low, confidential tone.

“No. Why?”

“Well—” he hesitated. “Only because there seemed to be something rather funny about Mr Murray—that’s all.”

“Something funny about him? How?”

“Well, from the moment he came here, till the moment he went away, he never came out of his room. And when he did, he was wearing a motor-coat with the collar turned up around his chin and goggles which entirely disguised him.”

“Not at all a suspicious circumstance, surely?” I remarked, though inwardly much interested. “On these white dusty roads every one must wear goggles.”

“Of course. But when people come to Swanage they generally go out and look about the town and the bay. Mr Murray, however, shut himself up and saw nobody, while his daughter drove over to Studland, where she stayed the night and returned about an hour before the motor started.”

“I’m going to follow that motor. I have a reason,” I said. “Don’t you think the chauffeur might have told one of the stable-hands or garage-men—if you have a garage here—as to his destination? There’s a kind of freemasonry among chauffeurs, by which all of them know each other’s roads.”

“I’ll see,” replied the obliging proprietor. “Come with me.”

He conducted me through to the back of the house, where a large courtyard had been recently converted into a garage. There were several cars in the coach-houses around, while in the centre of the yard a clean-

shaven young man was turning a hose upon a dark red 16-horse “Fiat.”

“Gibbs, where has that blue car gone to this morning—the one that left an hour ago?”

“The 40 ‘Mercédès,’ sir? Gone to some place beyond Exeter, sir. They’re on a big tour.”

“You don’t know the name of the place?” I asked the man anxiously.

“The chauffeur did tell me, but it was a funny name, an’ I’ve forgotten.”

“They’ve gone direct to Exeter, in any case?”

“Yes—by Dorchester, Chard and Honiton. ’E asked me about the road.”

“How far is it to Exeter?”

“About seventy-eight or eighty miles.”

“I could get there by train before they arrived,” I remarked.

“Ah! I doubt it, sir,” was the man’s reply. “That’s a good car they’ve got, and if you went by train you’d ’ave to go right up to Yeovil. They’d be through Exeter long before you got there.”

“That’s so,” remarked the hotel proprietor. “From here to Exeter by rail is a long cross-country journey.”

“Then could I get a car? Is any one of these for hire?”

“This one ’ere belongs to Saunders, down in the town. ’E lets it out sometimes,” replied Gibbs, indicating the red car he had been cleaning.

“Then I’ll have it—and you’ll drive me, eh? We must overtake them.”

“Very good, sir,” replied the man, and then I returned to the hotel to telephone to the owner and fix the price.

Gibbs quickly filled the tank with petrol, poured water into the radiator, examined the tyres, pumping one that he found a little down; then he

washed himself, put on his leather jacket and cap, and mounted to the wheel.

A quarter of an hour after I had first entered the garage I was sitting at the chauffeur's side as the car slowly made its way up the crooked quaint old-fashioned main street of Swanage and out on the big white road that ran up hill and down valley, the picturesque highway to Dorchester. Up to Corfe Castle the way was nearly all uphill, but the "Fiat" ran splendidly, and in the narrow winding road where we met many pleasure parties in *chars-à-banc* Gibbs quickly showed himself a competent driver.

Seldom he blew his horn, yet he handled the car with a care that at once convinced me that he was a reliable chauffeur.

As we skirted the great mound upon which stood the cyclopean walls of Corfe, magnificent relics of the bygone feudal age, and ran again out of the little village and up on to Purbeck Hill, he handed me a pair of goggles, saying:—

"You'd better have these, sir. We're going through a lot of dust presently, and we've a dead head-wind."

I put them on, and as I did so he increased the speed, remarking:—

"Fortunately, there ain't any police traps 'ere. We aren't like they are in Surrey. I got fined a fiver at Guildford a month ago, an' I was only goin' fourteen miles an 'our. But it ain't any good defendin'. The police are always in the right," he added, with a sigh.

"Do you think that we shall overtake them?" I inquired anxiously, for at all hazards I wanted to see and speak again with Ella. What she had told me excited my curiosity and aroused my determination that she should make no further self-sacrifice.

"It all depends," was his vague answer. "They've got a 'forty,' you know, an' can do these hills much better than we can. But they may get a puncture or a tyre-burst."

"But as to speed. They won't go quicker than we are travelling?" I inquired.

“Not if they don’t want to get ’ad up,” he grinned, and I then recognised that we were on a wide flat road, travelling at nearly forty miles an hour, and raising a perfect wall of dust behind us. “There’s one or two level-crossings, too, that may delay ’em.”

“And us also, eh?”

“Perhaps,” he said. “But what I’m going to do is to go at a greater speed than they’ve gone. We’ve got nearly an hour and a half to make up, by some means or other.”

And lowering his head he set his shoulders in his seat and still increased the speed until we flew at a pace such as I had never before travelled in any motor-car. The engines ticked away with rhythmical music, the machinery hummed with that even tone which tells the practised motorist that his cylinders are working properly, and without once pulling up, we soon found ourselves slowing down to enter the quiet old county town of Dorchester.

At Charminster, where the two high-roads parted, we had news of the blue car we were following. A man breaking stones at the roadside informed us that it had passed about half an hour in front of us.

“It was going at a terrible speed,” he added, in broad Dorset dialect. “They’ll get summoned—you see.”

This caused us to put on more pace, heedless of whether any pair of constables—or hedgehogs as motorists call them—were lurking near the road. Gibbs put on all the speed he could get out of his engines, and we literally flew through Stratton and Frampton. He was, it seemed, determined to earn the couple of sovereigns I had promised him as reward if successful.

The afternoon went slowly by. The sky became overcast, and there was a slight shower, but we did not pull up, tearing ever onward through Chard, over the Devonshire border and round the big hill of Dumpdon to old-fashioned but unpicturesque Honiton.

We had now only seventeen miles or so before reaching Exeter. Slowly we descended the main street which dropped very steeply to a bridge

over a small stream, and then out again upon the broad white undulating road, fringed almost continuously by trees and whitewashed and thatched cottages—the main road that runs from London through Hounslow to the west.

Suddenly we dipped beneath a railway bridge, and the road rising again our eager eyes saw about a mile in front of us a travelling cloud of dust. As we looked the car before us went round a slight bend in the flat open road, and there showed a flash of bright blue.

“Look!” cried Gibbs excitedly, “that’s the car! We must overtake them,” and setting his teeth again he put on all speed possible.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, we seemed to be overtaking my fugitive love who was, of course, all unconscious of being followed, when, just as we ran over the bridge which crosses the Clyst, there was a loud report like a pistol shot, and Gibbs was compelled to instantly apply the brake, uttering a loud exclamation of disappointment and chagrin.

Our off rear tyre had burst!

My love would be in Exeter and beyond reach long before we could put on a new tube and tyre.

I stood watching the fast receding car, my heart sinking within me. Ella was before my very eyes, escaping me—never to return.

I knew that the intention was to evade me in future. And yet how madly I loved her. No matter what she said or what she did, she was still mine—mine!

Chapter Nineteen.

The Blue Motor-Car.

Gibbs was the first to speak. He examined the burst critically, glanced at the fast disappearing car, and, turning to me, asked:—

“Shall we still try, sir? If you’ll help me we’ll be on the road again in twenty minutes.”

“Yes,” I cried, “let’s try,” and throwing off my coat, I began in earnest to take out the spare tyre while he got out the jack and tools.

While I unscrewed the bolts, he jacked up the car, and in ten minutes the burst tyre was off, and we were adjusting the new one. A new inner tube I found under the front seat, and we soon adjusted it, Gibbs pumping it up while I put away the tools and strapped on the broken tyre.

I glanced at the clock on the car, and saw that we had been just eighteen minutes, then up we got, and, without much preliminary, moved away again tearing at breakneck speed through Ottery St. Mary and a dreary little place called Honiton Clyst, then over a bad road among small and dingy houses from Heavitree into Exeter. At the Gordon memorial-lamp we took the right-hand road, found the tram-line and passed up Paris Street into High Street, and on to the cathedral, where we pulled up before the “Clarence,” hoping to obtain some news of the blue “Mercédès.”

It, however, had not been seen. At Pople’s, at the “Globe” and the “Half Moon” we inquired, but without success. The car had not been seen in any of the main streets of the city, therefore we could only conclude that it had passed round the outskirts and taken either the Crediton or the Teignmouth road. From south of the city a dozen different ways lead off the Okehampton road, therefore it seemed certain that our unfortunate accident had negatived all our attempts to overtake Mr Murray and his party.

Again we were thwarted, until Gibbs suddenly recollected that in Paris

Street we had passed a cycle works where petrol was sold, and we turned the car and made eager inquiry there.

Yes. A big blue car had stopped there, and refilled its tank about an hour before. The chauffeur had inquired the road to Plymouth, and the manager had advised him to take the road by Bickington, Buckfastleigh and Ivybridge. The distance to Plymouth, we were told, was forty-four miles, therefore thanking our informant we reversed the car and were soon out again on the old coach-road through Alphington and Shillingford, hoping that some similar mishap to that which had occurred to us might delay the party we were endeavouring to overtake.

Again we raced along against time, up over the Great Haldon hills where we had grand views across the open country, through old-fashioned villages of the true Devon type, past a quaint old mill with high sloping roof, and narrowly escaping a collision with a farmer's cart just as we were entering Bickington.

Twice we inquired of men we met on the road whether they had seen the car, and each reply was in the affirmative. Therefore we kept an eager look-out far ahead to distinguish the receding cloud of dust which would betray its presence.

At full speed we tore along, the motor humming its rhythmic music and the dust rising in a dense column behind. I shrewdly suspect that before starting Gibbs had smeared a little oil across part of the number both front and rear, in order that the dust should render it puzzling to any lurking constable.

"If we don't get fined for this, sir, we ought to," declared Gibbs, with a laugh, looking at me through his goggles, as we sped across a wide-open stretch of moor with the head-wind blowing the white dust full in our faces. Down a steep hill we ran until, rounding a sudden bend in the road, an exclamation of joy escaped us both, as we saw the car that had evaded us so long, stationary.

The chauffeur was in the act of putting in a new inner tube to one of the back tyres, while the passengers had descended and were walking about the road. A couple of farm labourers were looking on, their hands stuck

idly in their pockets, and as we approached all turned to look.

My first impulse was to stop and greet Ella, but next instant it occurred to me that as I wore goggles, and an overcoat that she had never seen, I was effectively disguised.

“Slow down, but don’t stop,” I said to Gibbs, and a few moments later we passed the party, without, however, taking any notice of them.

The car was, as the man beside me had said, a splendid “Mercédès” of the latest type, one of the best I had ever seen upon the road. The chauffeur was a smart fellow in uniform, probably French, and the party who were awaiting the repairs consisted of Ella—in a neat champagne-coloured motor-coat, with flat hat and a veil of the same colour with a plate of talc in front instead of glasses—a dark-haired lady somewhat older, also in motor clothes, a youngish man with a round boyish clean-shaven face, and lastly Mr Murray. The latter had so altered that had I met him in the street I should certainly not have recognised him. His beard was now white, his hair grey, and upon his face was a hard careworn look, in place of the easy nonchalant air he wore in those well-remembered days when I had been a welcome guest at Wichenford.

Ella was seated upon a stile chatting to her female companion, while her father was standing on the road some distance away, in earnest conversation with the young man.

Owing to my disguising dark goggles, I was able to look straight into their faces without fear of recognition. This was fortunate, for at present I had no intention of revealing my identity.

Could that round-faced, fresh-complexioned man be the fellow who, according to my love’s own admission, held her in his power?

The very suspicion maddened me, causing my blood to rise.

Murray appeared to be speaking to him in confidence, giving him certain instructions to which he was enlisting attentively, with brows knit, as though what he heard was far from reassuring.

Who was the man?

His identity and his relation towards my well-beloved I determined to ascertain.

“Let’s go on slowly into the next place, whatever it is,” I said.

“We’re about five miles from Ashburton, sir,” Gibbs replied.

“I want them to overtake us, and then we can follow them to their destination,” I said.

“They’re going to Plymouth. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go on there an’ wait for ’em?” suggested the man. “It’s now five o’clock, and they’ll probably put up there for the night.”

“No. They are going farther than Plymouth,” I said. “It’s a thousand pities you can’t remember where the chauffeur said they were going.”

“Perhaps the ladies ’ull want tea. If so, they’ll probably pull up at the ‘Golden Lion,’ just as we go into Ashburton. It’s the place where the coaches stop.”

“Then let’s stop there. If they also pull up, well and good. If they don’t, we can follow them,” I said, and five minutes later we came to a standstill before the inn where, at the back, I found a delightful garden sloping down towards the valley, where the blaze of colour and the scent of flowers were refreshing after the heat and dust of the great highway. Without removing my goggles I cast myself into a seat, and ordered a glass of “shandygaff.” Gibbs I had left outside with the car, ordering him to come and tell me when the party passed. That peaceful old garden was just the place in which to sit on a hot summer’s afternoon with all sight and sound of town shut out; only the green hills opposite and their all-pervading fragrance.

Suddenly, from where I sat, I heard the whirr of an approaching car which came to a standstill before the inn. Would Ella come through into the garden?

I did not wish to meet her with her friends. It was my desire to see her alone. Therefore I jumped to my feet and walked away to the farther end of the garden.

As I expected they came, all four of them, seated themselves at the table I had just vacated, and ordered tea.

For five minutes or so I watched them. Ella, with her veil raised, was talking and laughing merrily with the round-faced young man, while he, bending towards her across the table, appeared fascinated by her glance.

I bit my lip, and turning, made my way through the inn and out into the road, where both cars were standing, and both chauffeurs were gossiping.

For another five minutes I waited, then Gibbs, approaching me, touched his cap, and inquired if I were ready, adding under his breath:—

“I’ve found out where they’re goin’, sir. There’s some mystery about them, I believe. I’ll tell you when we get away.”

Chapter Twenty.

Reveals the Truth.

“They’re goin’ to a place called Upper Wooton, about half way between Saltash and Callington, on the Launceston road. I know the village—quite a tiny place,” Gibbs said, as we went up the picturesque street of Ashburton.

“Then we’d better go straight on there.”

“They’re goin’ through Plymouth, but the most direct way, and much shorter, is through Tavistock, which would bring us right into the cross-roads at Callington. We’d save a couple of hours by that, and, after all, they’ve got a ‘forty,’ you know, while ours is only a ‘sixteen’. They’ll make better pace than us up the hills.”

“Very well,” I said, “I leave it to you. We must be there first, in any case. Are they staying the night there?”

“Their man says so. ’E’s a stranger, however, and ’e says they’re a rum party.”

“Oh! Why?” I asked in quick surprise.

“Well—sir,” responded Gibbs, somewhat reluctantly, “it ain’t for me to repeat what ’e said, seein’ as they’re friends o’ yourn.”

“Oh! whatever you say will make no difference,” I assured him. “Besides, they’re not exactly my friends. Two of them I’ve never seen before in my life. So you can speak quite frankly. Indeed, I’m very anxious to hear what makes their man think they are mysterious.” I recollected that Murray’s reticence had aroused the curiosity of the hotel proprietor at Swanage, and wondered what else had occurred to cause the chauffeur to suspect that something was wrong.

“The car belongs to somebody named Rusden, who lives in Worcestershire, and the chauffeur is in his employ. Mr Rusden has lent

the car to the party," Gibbs explained. "The chauffeur started from Stourbridge yesterday morning, with orders to meet a lady and gentleman at Chippenham station at midnight last night, and take 'em on all through the night to Swanage. There 'e picked up the gentleman and the young lady, and after two hours' rest was ordered to drive on down to Plymouth with all possible speed."

"But what makes him think there's any mystery about them? He, no doubt, received orders from his master."

"No, 'e didn't. That's just it. Mr Rusden told him to go to Chippenham and take the lady and gentleman to Aylesbury, whereas they gave him orders entirely different. An' besides that, the chauffeur overheard something this morning."

"What did he overhear?"

"The two men were talking together, and the elder said 'e hoped as 'ow they wouldn't be followed, or the whole show 'ud be give away."

"Curious," I remarked. "Very curious."

"Yes, sir. 'E told me as 'ow all along the road they've been urgin' 'im to go faster, but 'e wasn't goin' to risk being caught by a 'heg'og'. 'E's evidently rather troubled, because 'e don't know what 'is master 'ull say at 'im comin' down here. Perhaps they're flyin' from the police—who knows?"

I laughed his suggestion into ridicule, yet at heart I was much puzzled. What could it mean?

Why were they in such fear of being followed?

"Well," I said, "at any rate we'll push on to Upper Wooton, and see what they're going to do there."

"Then we'll go by Tavistock. The road is just off on the right, about a mile or so farther on," my companion said. "We ought to be there before dark, if we get no punctures," and he drew down his goggles from his cap and increased the speed of the car.

Once or twice I looked back, but saw no sign of the blue car following us. Murray and his friends were, no doubt, quietly having their tea in that pretty old garden.

For nearly an hour I sat in rigid silence, as one so often does for long periods when motoring. Was that round-faced fellow upon whom Ella had smiled actually her lover? Who, I wondered, was the elder woman? And why had they come to Chippenham at midnight to be met by a motor-car and drive on through the night? There was certainly some motive in that long night ride.

Was it possible that they were really escaping? It certainly seemed very much like it.

Ella's movements in leaving Lucie and her father so suddenly, and in flying from me when she had confessed that she still loved me, were all suspicious. Some very strong and sinister motive underlay it all—of that I felt absolutely convinced.

Darker clouds gathered over the hills between Two Bridges and Tavistock, and another sharp shower fell, making us uncomfortably wet, but we never, for one moment, slackened speed. The rain laid the dust, for which we were thankful. At Gunnislake, just as the twilight was falling, we crossed the Cornish border, and by lighting-up time we were at the cross-roads outside Callington, with only four miles farther to negotiate.

This we quickly accomplished, at last running into a quaint old-world Cornish village which Gibbs informed me was the destination of the suspicious quartette.

There was but one inn, "The Crown," and putting the car into the coach-house there, we ordered dinner. Cold meat and beer were all that the landlord could offer, but I ate ravenously, my ears all the while keenly on the alert for the hum of the car which we had outstripped.

After I had eaten I went out into the semi-darkness and looked round the quiet peaceful old village street of snug thatched cottages, the row broken by a red brick chapel and a corrugated iron church-room.

Only one gentleman lived in the vicinity, so the landlord informed me. His

name was Mr Gordon-Wright, a London gentleman, and he lived at the “Glen,” which we had passed about half a mile before entering the village. Gordon-Wright! And this was his hiding-place!

Twilight had deepened into night as I sat upon a rough bench outside the inn, my ears still strained in order to catch sound of the approach of the car.

Gibbs’ theory was that they had probably stopped to dine in Plymouth, and certainly that seemed a very feasible one.

Would they put up at the inn, I wondered? Or were they making their way to Gordon-Wright’s? Out of curiosity, and in order to kill time, I rose and strolled along the village across the bridge and up the steep hill on to the road down which we had descended.

In passing in the car I had no recollection of having noticed a house, but as I now approached on foot I saw on the left a large clump of trees, surrounding a big white house.

On nearer approach the “Glen” proved to be one of those ugly, inartistic, early Georgian structures which a later generation had covered with stucco, surrounded by a large but ill-kept flower-garden, and beyond a thick spinney, all being allowed to run wild and unattended.

The garden was shut off from the high-road by a high wall of red brick, but the gates were iron, and through them, as I passed, I could obtain a good view of the house, inasmuch as the drawing-room windows were open, and the lamps beneath their white silk shades revealed that the place was cheaply upholstered in a rather gaudy chintz. The hall door, too, was open, and within I recognised an air of need. The hall of every house is an index to the state of the finances of its owner.

I halted for a moment and peered through the gate. From what I saw I at once concluded that either the house had been let furnished for the summer or that Mr Gordon-Wright, alias Lieutenant Shacklock, was not overburdened with surplus wealth.

As I looked, a middle-aged and most respectable, but round-shouldered old man-servant crossed the hall, carrying a tray. He was evidently laying

the dinner table.

A moment later a shadow within the drawing-room betrayed the presence of some one there, while to my nostrils came the fragrant smell of a very good cigar.

A suit-case had been deposited in the hall, and the man-servant, on his return, caught it up and disappeared with it up the red-carpeted stairs.

All this I was watching with idle curiosity, having nothing better to do, when of a sudden the distant note of a motor-horn reached my ear, causing me to start away from where I stood and turn back a few steps in the direction of the village.

My heart leaped within me. Far off I could see the reflection of the head-lights as the car came tearing through the village and up the road at headlong pace.

Was it the blue car? Would it pass on, and leave me behind, after all?

In a few moments the white lights swept into full view, and I stepped to the side of the road to allow them to pass, when, to my joy, the driver began to blow his horn violently, as though to announce his approach.

Yes! They were halting at the “Glen,” after all!

With loud trumpeting that echoed among the trees the car flashed past me, and came to a sudden stop before the iron gates, but ere it did so the gates were flung open wide by the servant, and a man came out of the house shouting them a warm and cheery welcome.

The bright rays from the head lamps shone full upon him, dazzling him and preventing my presence being revealed.

I saw his face, and my eyes became riveted upon it.

And while I stood there, breathless and stupefied, the party descended, laughing boisterously and exchanging greetings.

I looked again. Was it only some strange chimera of my vision? Could it

be the amazing truth? What further bitterness had life in store for me?

My Ella was standing enfolded in the arms of the man who had greeted them, and he was at that moment kissing her fondly upon the lips before them all.

And the man? His countenance was, alas! only too familiar to me.

He was the fellow I had met only that very morning under Miller’s roof—the man whom I had known in Nervi as Lieutenant Shacklock, R.N.!

Chapter Twenty One.

The Peril of Ella Murray.

In an instant the bewildering mystery of it all became apparent.

The fellow Shacklock, the dark-faced man whom I could at once denounce to the police as a rogue and a thief, held her enthralled!

“Welcome, dearest!” he said, as his lips touched hers. “I hope you are not too tired.”

But I saw that she was pale, and that she shrank from his touch. Ah! yes! she loathed him.

Standing there in the shadow of the overhanging trees, I watched them all disappear into the house.

The servant in black, after carrying up their luggage, shut the gate, therefore I crept forward and peered into the drawing-room. It was, however, empty, for they had all passed upstairs to remove the stains of travel before sitting down to dinner.

A thousand weird thoughts surged through my brain. That man Gordon-Wright was my enemy, and I intended that he should not win my love.

The whole position of affairs was utterly incomprehensible. This man, whom I could prove to be a clever international thief, was the most intimate friend of James Harding Miller, gentleman, of Studland. While he had been visiting there, Ella had escaped from her father and gone to Studland, in all probability to see him, or to consult him upon some important matter. She had made no sign to the Millers that she was previously acquainted with their guest. The conclusion, therefore, was that both Lucie and her father were in utter ignorance of the curious truth. Ella had left suddenly and travelled by motor-car to Upper Wooton, while he must have left immediately after my departure from Studland, and travelled by train by way of Yeovil.

To Mr Murray and the rest of the party he appeared as though he had not been away from home. Only Ella knew the truth, and she was silent. That there was some extraordinary manoeuvre in progress I was convinced. The Murrays of Wichenford were one of the county families of Worcestershire, and Ella's father had always been an upright, if rather proud man. He was, I knew, the very last person to associate with a man of Shacklock's stamp had he but known his real character.

On the contrary, however, he had grasped the man's hand warmly when he descended, saying:—

"Why, my dear fellow, it's quite two months since we met! How are you?"

And the pseudo-lieutenant was equally enthusiastic in his welcome in return. He was the host; "the London gentleman" known locally as Mr Gordon-Wright.

This was by no means extraordinary. In our country villages and their vicinity hundreds of people are, at this moment, occupying big houses, and under assumed names passing themselves off for what they are not. Summer visitors to the rural districts are often a queer lot, and many a gentleman known as Mr Brown, the smug attendant at the village church, is in reality Mr Green whose means of livelihood would not bear looking into. From time to time a man is unmasked, and a paragraph appears in the papers, but such persons are usually far too wary when it is a matter of effacing their identity under the very nose of the police, and enjoy the confidence and esteem of both the villagers and "the county."

So it evidently was with "Mr Gordon-Wright."

Consumed by hatred, and longing to go forward and unmask him as the ingenious swindler who stole Blenkap's money, I stood at the gate, eager to obtain another glimpse of the woman who he intended should be his victim.

What was the nature of his all-powerful influence over her, I wondered? She loved me still. Had she not admitted that? And yet she dare not break from this man whose life was one long living lie!

"Fortunately I've discovered you," I said, between my teeth, speaking to

myself. “You shall never wreck her happiness, that I’m determined! A word from me to Scotland Yard, and you will be arrested, my fine gentleman.” And I laughed, recollecting how entirely his future was in my hands.

He had already dressed for dinner before the arrival of the party, and I overheard him shouting to Murray not to trouble to change, it being so late. Then he came along the hall, and stood at the door, gazing straight in my direction, his hands in the pockets of his dinner-jacket, awaiting his guests.

He could not see me, I knew, for the roadway was rendered very dark at that point by the trees that almost met overhead. Therefore I watched his thin clean-shaven face, and saw upon its evil features an expression of intense anxiety which was certainly not there when we had met earlier that day in Dorsetshire.

Ella was the first to descend. She had exchanged her dark dress for a gown of pale blue Liberty silk, high at the throat, and, though simply made, it suited her admirably. The fellow turned at the sound of her footstep, and hurrying towards her, took her hand, and led her outside upon the gravelled drive.

“The others, of course, have no idea that I’ve been to Studland!” I heard him whisper to her anxiously as they stood there together in the shadow, away from the stream of light that shone from the open door.

“I told them nothing,” was her calm answer, in a voice that seemed inert and mechanical.

“I only arrived here an hour ago. I feared that you might be here before me. You, of course, delayed them by excuses, as I suggested.”

“Yes. We had tea on the way, and we came the longer way round, by Plymouth, as you told me.”

“It was lucky for you that you left the Millers as early as you did,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because they had a visitor. He came an hour or so after you’d gone. I found him talking to Lucie, and she introduced me. His name was Leaf.”

I saw that she started at mention of my name. But with admirable self-control she asked:—

“Well, and what did he want?”

“Wanted to see you. And what’s more, Lucie told me after he’d gone that he had once been engaged to you. Is that true?”

“I’ve known him a good many years,” was my loved one’s evasive answer, as though she feared to arouse his anger or jealousy by an acknowledgment of the truth.

“I ask you, Ella, a simple question—is what Lucie Miller has said true? Were you ever engaged to that man?” he asked very seriously.

“There was not an actual engagement,” was her answer, and I saw that she feared to tell him the truth.

What right had the fellow to question her? I had difficulty in restraining myself from rushing forward and boldly exposing him as the thief and adventurer he was.

“Lucie, in answer to my question, told me that you had lost sight of each other for several years, and that you believed him dead.”

“That is so.”

“And that he has been travelling on the Continent the whole time?”

“I believe he has,” was her reply, whereupon he remained in silence for some moments, as though reflecting deeply. Was it possible that, after all, he had recognised me as the man who he had intended should be his cat’s-paw in the Blenkap affair?

I felt certain that he was endeavouring to recall my face.

“Your father knows nothing of my friendship with Miller?” he asked

suddenly, with some apprehension.

“I have told him nothing, as you forbade me.”

“Good. He must not know. It’s better not.”

“Why?”

“Well, because your father has a long-standing quarrel with Miller, has he not? If he knew we were friends he might not like it. Some men have curious prejudices,” he added.

His explanation apparently satisfied her, but he, on his part, returned to his previous questions regarding myself.

“Tell me,” he urged, “who is this fellow Leaf? If you were fond of him I surely have a right to know who and what he is?”

“He’s a gentleman whom I first knew years ago, soon after I came home from school.”

“And you fell in love with him, like every school-girl does, eh?”

She nodded in the affirmative, but vouchsafed no further information.

“Well,” he said, in a tone of authority, “you will not meet him again under any consideration. I forbid it. Remember that.”

She was silent, her head downcast, for in that man’s hands she was as wax. He held her in some thraldom that I saw was as complete as it was terrible. His very presence seemed to cause her to hold her breath, and to tremble.

“Last night,” he continued, “you crept downstairs after you had gone to your room, and you listened at the door of the smoking-room, where I was talking with Miller,” and he laughed as he saw how she started at his accusation. “Yes, you see I know all about it. The faithful Minton, who saw you, told me,” he went on in a hard voice. “You overheard something —something that has very much surprised you. Now there’s an old adage that says listeners never hear any good of themselves. Therefore we

must come to a thorough understanding as soon as we can get a quiet half-hour alone together."

"I think it is perfectly unnecessary," she said, with some attempt at defiance.

"There, I beg to differ," he answered. "You have learnt a secret, and I must have some adequate guarantee that that secret is kept—that no single word of it is breathed to a living soul. You understand, Ella," he added, in a low, fierce half-whisper, lowering his dark clean-shaven face to hers. "You understand! *My life depends upon it*!"

Chapter Twenty Two.

At Dawn.

The dark-haired woman who had accompanied Ella in the motor-car came forth and joined the pair, preventing any further confidences, and a few minutes later the dinner-gong sounded, and all three went in to join Mr Murray and his companion.

The windows of the dining-room were closed almost immediately, therefore I neither saw nor heard anything more of that strange household.

My one desire was to see Ella alone, but how could I give her news of my presence?

I turned on my heel and strolled slowly back down the dark road in the direction of the village. The first suggestion that crossed my mind was to send her a telegram making an appointment for the following morning, but on reflection I saw that if they had fled in secret, as they seemed to have done, then the arrival of a telegram would arouse Mr Gordon-Wright's suspicions. Indeed he might actually open it.

I was dealing with a queer fish, a man who was a past-master in alertness and ingenious conspiracy. As Minton, at the Manor, was in the confidence of Miller, so that round-shouldered old fellow was, no doubt, Gordon-Wright's trustworthy sentinel.

A dozen different modes of conveying a note to her suggested themselves, but the one I adopted was, perhaps, the simplest of them all. I returned to the inn, scribbled upon a small piece of paper a few lines to my well-beloved asking her to meet me at a spot I indicated at six o'clock next morning, and then I called Gibbs, took him into my confidence, and gave him instructions to take the pair of lady's gloves with fur gauntlets that I had found in one of the pockets of the car, go boldly to the house, ask to see "the young lady who had just arrived by motor-car," and tell her a fictitious story how he had found the gloves where they had stopped at Plymouth, and as he was passing through Upper Wooton on

the way to Launceston he thought he would like to restore them to her.

“She’ll, of course, at once deny that they are hers,” I said. “But in handing them to her you must contrive to slip this little bit of folded paper into her hand—so,” and I gave him a lesson in pressing the small note, folded until it was only the size of a sixpence, into her palm.

He quickly entered into the spirit of the adventure, and three-quarters of an hour later re-entered the low-ceilinged little sitting-room announcing triumphantly that he had been successful.

“At first, sir, their man said I could not see the lady, as she was at dinner, but on pressing him that I wished to see her particularly, he went an’ told her,” he explained. “My request seemed to create quite a hubbub among ’em, for as I stood in the ’all, I heard the conversation suddenly break off, and a chap with a clean-shaven face come to the door an’ had a good straight look at me. Seein’, however, that I was only a chauffeur, he went back, and a minute later the young lady herself appeared alone. I told ’er the story, slipped the bit o’ paper into her hand, and gave her the gloves. The instant she felt the paper in her palm she started and looked at me, surprised like. Then, carryin’ the gloves into the drawing-room, as if to examine them, she glanced at what you’d written, and when she returned a few seconds afterwards, she whispered: ‘Tell the gentleman all right’. Then, sayin’ aloud that the gloves wasn’t hers, she thanked me, an’ dismissed me.”

I congratulated him on his success. So far, so good. I had to wait in patience until six o’clock on the following morning.

That night I slept but little, but when daylight came a certain hope and gladness came with it. At half-past five I went out, and strolled along to the cross-roads I had noticed between the “Glen” and the village. The roads traversing the highway were merely green lanes leading to adjoining fields, and with high hedges on either side were admirably adapted for a secret meeting.

Not without fear of being noticed by some yokel on his way to work, I idled there until the clock from the old ivy-clad church tower below struck the hour. For the first ten minutes I saw no sign of her, and every moment

increased my peril of being noticed and my presence commented upon. The villagers were certainly not used to seeing a gentleman wait at the cross-roads at six o'clock in the morning.

Presently, however, my heart leaped with sudden joy, for I saw her in a fresh pale blue cotton dress hurrying towards me, and in order not to be seen meeting her in the main road I withdrew into the lane.

Five minutes later we were standing side by side, in a spot where we could not be observed, she panting and breathless, and I full of eager questions as to the reason of her flight.

"So you actually followed me all the way here, Godfrey!" she exclaimed anxiously, turning those dear eyes upon me, those eyes the expression of which was always as wondering and innocent as a child's.

"Because I am determined that you shall not again escape me, Ella," was my answer, grasping her hand and raising it with reverence to my lips.

Are we ever truly read, I wonder, save by the one that loves us best? Love is blind, the phrase runs; yet, I would rather say Love sees as God sees, and with infinite wisdom has infinite pardon.

What was it I felt? I hardly know. I acted without knowing—only stung into a bitter, burning, all-corroding jealousy that drove me like a whip of scorpions.

"You should never have done this," she answered calmly, though her voice trembled just a little. "Have I not already told you that—that our meeting was unfortunate, and that we must again part?"

"But why?" I demanded fiercely.

"It is imperative," she faltered. "I can never be yours."

"But you shall—Ella!" I cried fiercely, "in this past twenty-four hours I have discovered a great deal. Unknown to me there was a man staying with Miller at Studland. The real object of your visit there was to speak with him in secret. You did so and left by motor car, while he travelled here by train. Your father has no idea that he and Miller are friends nor has he

any idea of his true identity. He believes him to be Gordon-Wright, yet I know him under the name of Lieutenant Harold Shacklock."

"You—you know him?" she gasped.

"Yes. After you left the Manor I called, and Lucie introduced me—as though I needed any introduction to him," I laughed bitterly.

"Then where have you met him before?" she asked, deeply anxious.

"Abroad. I know who and what he is, Ella," I said determinedly. "And you shall never be his wife."

"But I must," she declared. "It is all arranged. I cannot break my engagement. I dare not."

"Then I shall simply go to the police and tell them what I know. I will never allow you to wreck your happiness because this fellow holds some mysterious power over you. You are mine, Ella—remember—mine!"

"I know! I know!" she gasped, her face pale, her eyes terrified. "But you must not say a word. I beg you, if you really love me, not to say a word."

"Why not?"

"Because he would revenge himself upon me. I know certain of his secrets—secrets that I discovered by the merest chance. Any information given to the police he would suspect of coming from me. Therefore, don't you see that any such attempt to free me will only bring upon me disaster—even death!"

"You fear he may take your life!" I gasped. "Ah! I see! He might even kill you, in order to close your lips!"

And I recollected the fellow's ominous words I had overheard on the previous night, when he had told her that upon her secrecy his very life depended.

He was as ingenious and unscrupulous a criminal as there was in the whole length and breadth of the kingdom.

I saw in what deadly peril was my sweet well-beloved. She was in fear of him. Perhaps he, on his part, held some secret of hers. From her attitude I suspected this. If so, then any word of mine to the police would bring to her only ruin and disgrace!

Chapter Twenty Three.

Children of Circumstance.

Was any man more pitiful, more foolish, more pathetically lonely, more grotesquely fooled by Fate than I?

Was all the world a lie?

Upon the face of my love was a trouble that for once clouded its wondrous beauty. I tried to touch her hair, but she avoided me by a gesture that made me shrink a little.

The years, the tranquil sorrow of my late life dropped from me; I became again only the fierce, fearless, thoughtless lover; the man who had walked with her and adored her beside that summer sea so long ago.

A madness of determination came to me. At all hazards she should be mine. Shacklock was a liar and a schemer, a thief and an adventurer. I would bear witness against him, even at risk of the vendetta which would inevitably fall upon me.

She saw my changed face, and for the first time clung to me.

“Godfrey!” she whispered hoarsely, “have pity upon me, and remain silent. Any word from you must reflect upon myself.”

“I will not allow you to make this self-sacrifice,” I cried fiercely. “Remember Blumenthal.”

“It was for my father’s sake,” she replied. “To save him.”

“And now?”

She did not answer for several moments. Then in a low voice broken by emotion she said:—

“To save myself.”

“But it is madness!” I cried. “In what manner can you be in the power of such a man? You surely know what he is?”

“Alas! I do—too well. If he had one grain of sympathy or feeling he would surely release me.”

“And your father approves of this shameful engagement?”

“He does, because he is ignorant of the truth.”

“Then I will tell him,” I said. “You shall never fall into that man’s hands. I love you, Ella—I love you with all the strength of my being—with all my soul. If you are beneath the thrall of this adventurer, it is my duty to extricate you.”

“Ah! you can’t—you can’t,” she cried. “If you only could, how gladly would I welcome freedom—freedom to love you, Godfrey!” and she clung to me tremblingly. “But it is all a vague dream of the unattainable,” she went on. “My whole life is on fire with shame, and my whole soul is sick with falsehood. Between your life and mine, Godfrey, there is a deep gulf fixed. I lied to you long ago—lied to save my dear father from ruin, and you have forgiven. And now—Oh! God! I shudder as I think—my life will be alone, all alone always.”

I held her trembling hand in silence, and saw the tears streaming down her white cheeks. I could utter no word. What she had said thrust home to me the bitter truth that she must bow to that man’s will, even though I stood firm and valiant as her champion. My defiance would only mean her ruin.

I had met my love again only to lose her in that unfathomable sea of plot and mystery.

All the dark past, those years of yearning and black bitterness, came back to me. I had thought her dead, and lived with her sweet tender remembrance ever with me. Yet in future I should know that she lived, the wife of an adventurer, suffering a good woman’s martyrdom.

My heart grew sick with dread and longing. Again I would mourn the dead indeed; dead days, dead love. It pressed upon my life like lead. What

beauty now would the daybreak smile on me? What fragrance would the hillside bear for me as I roamed again the face of Europe?

I should see the sun for ever through my unshed tears. Around me on the summer earth of Italy or the wintry gloom of the Russian steppe there would be for ever silence. My love had passed beyond me.

Unconsciously we moved forward, I still holding her hand and looking into the tearful eyes of her whom I had believed dead. Was it not the perversity of life that snatched her again from me, even though we had met to find that we still loved one another? Yes, it was decreed that I should ever be a cosmopolitan, a wanderer, a mere wayfarer on the great highways of Europe, always filled with longing regrets of the might-have-been.

I remembered too well those gay Continental cities wherein I had spent the most recent years of my weary life; cities where feasts and flowers reign, where the golden louis jingle upon the green cloth, where the passionate dark faces of the women glow, where voices pour forth torrents of joyous words, where holiday dresses gleam gaily against the shadows; cities of frolic and brilliancy, of laughter and music, where vice runs riot hand in hand with wealth, and where God is, alas! forgotten. Ah! how nauseous was it all to me. I had lived that life, I had rubbed shoulders with those reckless multitudes, I had laughed amid that sorry masquerade, yet I had shut my eyes to shut out from me the frolic and brilliancy around, and stumbled on, sad, thoughtful, and yet purposeless.

The gladness made me colder and wearier as I went. The light and laughter would have driven me homeward in desolation, had I a home to shelter me.

But, alas! I was only a wanderer—and alone.

“Tell me, darling,” I whispered to my love, my heart bursting, “is there absolutely no hope? Can you never free yourself from this man?”

“Never,” was her despairing response.

And in that one single word was my future written upon my heart.

I spoke to her again. What I uttered I hardly knew. A flood of fierce, passionate words arose to my lips, and then bending I kissed her—kissed her with that same fierce passion of long ago, when we were both younger, and when we had wandered hand in hand beside the lapping waves at sunset.

She did not draw back, but, on the contrary, she kissed me fondly in return. Her thin white hand stroked my brow tenderly, as though she touched a child.

No words left her lips, but in her soft dear eyes I saw the truth—that truth that held me to her with a band that was indivisible, a bond that, though our lives lay apart, would still exist as strong as it had ever been.

“Ella,” I whispered at last, holding her slight, trembling form in my embrace, and kissing her again upon the lips, “will you not tell me the reason you dare not allow me to denounce this fellow? Is it not just that I should know?”

She shook her head sadly, and, sighing deeply, answered:—

“I cannot tell you.”

“You mean that you refuse?”

“I refuse because I am not permitted, and further, I—”

“You what?”

“I should be revealing to you his secret.”

“And what of that?”

“If you knew everything, you would certainly go to the police and tell them the truth. They would arrest him, and I—I should die.”

“Die? What do you mean?” I asked quickly.

“I could not live to face the exposure and the shame. He would seek to revenge himself by making counter-charges against me—a terrible

allegation—but—but before he could do so they would find me dead."

"And I?"

"Ah! you, dear one! Yes, I know all that you must suffer. Your heart is torn like my own. You love just as fondly as I do, and you have mourned just as bitterly. To you, the parting is as hard as to myself. My life had been one of darkness and despair ever since that night in London when I was forced to lie to you. I wrecked your happiness because circumstances conspired against us—because it was my duty as a daughter to save my father from ruin and penury. Have you really in your heart forgiven me, Godfrey?"

"Yes, my darling. How can I blame you for what was, after all, the noblest sacrifice a woman could make?"

"Then let me go," she urged, speaking in a low, distinct voice, pale almost to the lips. "We must part—therefore perhaps the sooner the better, and the sooner my life is ended the more swiftly will peace and happiness come to me. For me the grave holds no terrors. Only because I leave you alone shall I regret," she sobbed.

"And yet I must in future be alone," I said, swallowing the lump that arose in my throat. "No, Ella!" I cried, "I cannot bear it. I cannot again live without your presence."

"Alas! you must," was her hoarse reply. "You must—you must."

Wandering full of grief and bitter thoughts, vivid and yet confused, the hours sped by uncounted.

To the cosmopolitan, like I had grown to be, green plains have a certain likeness, whether in Belgium, Germany or Britain. A row of poplars quivering in the sunshine looks much alike in Normandy or in Northamptonshire. A deep forest all aglow with red and gold in autumn tints is the same thing, after all, in Tuscany, as in Yorkshire.

But England, our own dear old England, has also a physiognomy that is all her own; that is like nothing else in all the world; pastures intensely green, high hawthorn hedges and muddy lanes, which to some minds is

sad and strange and desolate and painful, and which to others is beautiful, but which, be it what else it may, is always wholly and solely English, can never be met with elsewhere, and has a smile of peace and prosperity upon it, and a sigh in it that make other lands beside it seem as though they were soulless and were dumb.

We had unconsciously taken a path that, skirting a wood, ran up over a low hill southward. To our left lay the beautiful Cornish country in the sweet misty grey of the morning light. The sun was shining and the tremulous wood smoke curled up in the rosy air from a cottage chimney.

Was that to be our last walk together, I wondered? I sighed when I recollected how utterly we were the children of circumstance.

Beside her I walked with a swelling heart. I consumed my soul in muteness and bitterness, my eyes set before me to the grey hills behind which the sun had risen.

Chapter Twenty Four.

“I am not Fit!”

Of a sudden, she turned her head and glanced full in my eyes. Her thoughts were, like mine, of the past—of those glad and gracious days.

I stood still for a moment, and catching her hands kissed them; my own were burning.

We went on by the curving course outside the wood quite silent, for the gloom of the future had settled upon us.

The past! Those days when my Ella was altogether mine! I loved to linger on those blissful days, for they were lighted with the sweetest sunlight of my life. Never since, for me, had flowers blossomed, and fruits ripened, and waters murmured, and grasshoppers sung, and waves beat joyous music as in the spring and summer of that wondrous time.

To rise when all the world was flushed with the soft pink of the earliest dawn, and to go hand in hand with her through the breast-high corn with scarlet poppies clasping the gliding feet; to see the purple wraith of rain haunting the silvery fairness of the hills; to watch the shadows chase the sun rays over the wide-open mysterious sea; to feel the living light of the cloudless day beat us with a million pulses amid the hum of life all around; to go out into the lustre of the summer’s night; to breathe the air soft as the first kisses of our own new-found love, and rich as wine with the strong odours of a world of flowers. These had in those never-to-be-forgotten days been her joys and mine, joys at once of the senses and the soul.

I loved her so—God knows! and yet almost I hated her. She had, on that night in Bayswater, deceived me! She had deceived me!

This was the iron in my soul. It is an error so common. Women lie to men—and men to women for the matter of that—out of mistaken tenderness or ill-judged compassion, or that curious fear of recrimination from which the firmest courage is not exempt. A woman deceives a man with untruth,

not because she is base, but because she fears to hurt him with the truth; fears his reproaches; fears a painful scene, and even when he is quite worthless she is reluctant to wound his weakness. It is an error so common in this everyday life of ours: an error that is fatal always.

Had she been quite frank with me on that night when we had parted we might not have found ourselves fettered as we now were—she held to a man who was clearly an adventurer and a blackguard to boot.

Yet how could I reproach her for what was a great and complete self-sacrifice. No. She had done what was, perhaps, strictly her duty, even though both our lives had been wrecked in consequence.

“My love!” I murmured passionately, as with a cry I caught her in my arms, and held her close to me, as a man will hold some dear dead thing. And was she not, alas! now dead to me?

Our lips met again, but she was still silent. How many moments went I do not know; as there are years in which a man does not live a moment, so there are moments in which one lives a lifetime.

Her soft blue eyes closed beneath my kisses, my sense grew faint, the world became dark, all light and life shut out from me—all dark. But it was the sweet warm darkness, as though of the balmy night in June; and even then I know I prayed, prayed to Him that she might still be mine.

The trance of passion passed. How long it lasted I cannot tell.

After a while, the cloud that had enveloped my senses seemed suddenly to lift; the sweet unconsciousness died away. I lifted my head and strained myself backward, still holding her, and yet I shivered as I stood.

I remembered.

She, with a quick vague fear awakening in her eyes, held herself from me.

“Why look at me like that?” she cried. “I—I cannot bear it. Let us part now—at once. I must return, or my absence will be known and I shall be questioned.”

I do not know what I said in answer. All madness of reproach that ever man's tongue could frame left my lips in those blind cruel moments. All excuse for her; all goodness in her I forgot! Ah! God forgive me, I forgot! She had deceived me; that was all I knew, or cared to know.

In that mad moment all the pride in me, fanned by the wind of jealousy, flamed afresh, and burned up love. In that sudden passion of love and hate my brain had gone.

Yet she stood motionless, pale as death, and trembling, her eyes filled with the light of unshed tears.

I do not know what she said in response to my cruel bitter reproaches.

All I know is that I next became suddenly filled with shame. I knelt then before her, asking forgiveness, kissing her hands, her dress, her feet, pouring out to her in all the eager impetuousness of my nature the rapture, the woe, the sorrow, the shame and the remorse that turn by turn had taken possession of my heart.

"I love you, Ella!" I cried. "I love you and as I love am I jealous. Mine is no soulless vagary or mindless folly. You are mine—mine though you may be bound to this blackguard whose victim you have fallen. I am jealous of you, jealous of the wind that touches you, of the sun that shines upon you, of the air you breathe, of the earth you tread, for they are with you while I am not."

Her head was bowed. She shut her ears to the pleading of my heart. She wrenched her hands from me, crying:—

"No, no, Godfrey! Enough—enough! Spare me this!"

And she struggled from my arms.

"My darling!" I cried, "I know! I know! Yet you cannot realise all that I suffer now that we are to part again and for ever. I hate that man. Ah! light of my eyes, when I think that you are to be his I—I would rather a thousand times see you lying cold and dead at my feet, for I would then know that at least you would be spared unhappiness."

It seemed that she dared not trust herself to look on me. She flung back her head and eluded my embrace.

“My love!” I cried, “all life in me is yearning for your life; for the softness of silent kisses; for the warmth of clasped hands; for the gladness of summer hours beside the sea. Do you remember them? Do you remember the passion and peace of our mutual love that smiled at the sun, and knew that heaven held no fairer joys than those which were its own, at the mere magic of a single touch?”

“Yes, dear,” she sighed, “I remember—I remember everything. And you have a right to reproach me as you will,” she added very gently.

She was still unyielding; her burning eyes were now tearless, and she stood motionless.

“But you have forgiven me, my love?” I cried humbly. “I was mad to have uttered those words.”

“I have forgiven, Godfrey,” she answered. A heavy sigh ran through the words and made them barely audible.

“And you still love me?”

All the glow and eagerness and fervour or passion had died off her face; it grew cold and colourless and still, with the impenetrable stillness of a desperate woman’s face that masks all pain.

“Do you doubt I loved you—I?”

That reproach cut me to the quick. I was passionate with man’s passion; I was cruel with children’s cruelty.

My face, I felt, flushed crimson, then grew pale again. I shrank a little, as though she had struck me a blow, a blow that I could not return.

“Then—then why should we part?” I asked, as all my love for her welled up in my faint heart. “Why should we not defy this man and let him do his worst? At least we should be united in one sweet, sacred and perfect faith—our love.”

For a few moments she made no reply, but looked at me very long—very wistfully, with no passion in those dear eyes, only a despair that was so great that it chilled me into speechless terror.

“No, no,” she cried at last, covering her face with her white hands, as though in shame, and bursting into a flood of tears. “You do not know all—I pray that you, the man I love so fondly, may never know! If you knew you would hate me and curse my memory. Therefore take back those words, and forget me—yes, forget—for I am not fit to be your wife!”

Chapter Twenty Five.

By the Tyrrhenian Waters.

Ella was all mine—all mine! Mine all the glad fearless freedom of her life; mine all the sweet kisses, the rapturous tenderness, the priceless passion of her love; mine all! And I had lost them.

The grave had given her back for those brief hours, but she was, alas! dead to me.

I stood there as a man in a dream.

I, athirst for the sound of her sweet voice as dying men in deserts for the fountains of lost lands.

But all was silence, save the lark trilling his song high above me in the morning air.

I turned upon my heel, and went forward a changed man.

At the inn I made further inquiries regarding the tenant of the “Glen.”

The stout yellow-haired maid-of-all-work who brought me in my breakfast was a native of the village and inclined to be talkative. From her I learned that Mr Gordon-Wright had had the place about four years. He spent only about three months or so each summer there, going abroad each year for the winter. To the poor he was always very good; he was chairman of the Flower Show Committee, chairman of the Parish Council, and one of the school managers as well as a church-warden.

I smiled within myself at what the girl told me. He was evidently a popular man in Upper Wooton.

He had friends to stay with him sometimes, mostly men. Once or twice he had had foreign gentlemen among his visitors—gentlemen who had been in the post-office and could not speak English.

“My sister was ’ousemaid there till last Michaelmas,” she added. “So I’ve often been up to the ‘Glen’. When old Mrs Auker had it she used to ’ave us girls of the Friendly Society there to tea on the lawn.”

“I think that a friend of mine comes to visit Mr Gordon-Wright sometimes. His name is Miller. Do you remember him?”

“Mr Miller—a tall middle-aged gentleman. Of course, sir. ’E was here in the spring. I remember the name because ’e and Mr Wright gave a treat to the school children.”

“Was a lady with him—a young lady?”

“Yes, sir. His daughter, Miss Lucie.”

The girl knew little else, except, as she declared, Mr Gordon-Wright was a rich man and “a thorough gentleman.”

An hour later, while I was out in the yard of the inn watching Gibbs going round the car, we suddenly heard the whirr of an approaching motor, and down the street flashed the blue car which we had pursued so hotly on the previous day. It carried the same occupants, with the addition of one person—Mr Gordon-Wright.

The latter, in peaked cap and motor-coat, was driving, while behind were the two strangers, with Mr Murray and Ella.

The latter caught sight of me as she flashed past. Our eyes met for an instant, and then she was lost to me in a cloud of dust—lost for ever.

“They’re going back again, it seems,” I remarked to Gibbs.

“No, sir. I saw their man this morning. They’re going to Bristol. He’s heard from ’is master that it’s all right. The young gentleman and the lady are his master’s friends, after all—even though they’re such a queer pair,” and then he added: “Did you think of startin’ this morning, sir?”

“Yes. As soon as you are ready.”

“Where to, sir?”

“Back to Swanage.”

We ran across Devon and Dorset at a somewhat lower speed to what we had travelled when overtaking the 40 “Mercédès.” Gibbs had no desire to put in an appearance before any local bench. Indeed nowadays lit is useless to make an appearance. So prejudiced are magistrates, and such hard swearing is there on the part of the police, that motorists must pay up cheerfully. There is no justice for the pioneers of locomotion.

We returned by another road, which proved better than that by which we had come, and just before eleven at night I descended from the car at the “Lion,” and after some supper with the fat genial landlord, who took a deep interest in my journey and hardly credited that I had been into Cornwall and back, I went up to the room I had previously occupied.

Tired after the heat and dust of the road I slept well, but was up betimes, and at half-past nine walked out to the Manor House.

A maid-servant came to the door in response to my ring. “Mr Miller and the young lady have gone away, sir,” the girl replied to my inquiry. “They went up to London yesterday.”

“Are they staying in London?” I asked eagerly. “I’m sure I don’t know, sir.”

“Is Miss Miller at home? If so, I’d like to see her.” And I handed her my card.

I was shown into the morning-room, and in a few minutes Miller’s sister appeared.

“I’m so sorry, Mr Leaf,” she said, in her thin, weak voice, “but my brother and his daughter left quite suddenly yesterday. He received a telegram recalling him.”

“Where?”

“To Italy. He left by the mail from Charing Cross last night—direct for Leghorn, I believe.”

“Is he likely to be away long?”

“He won’t be back, I suppose, before the spring.”

“And Miss Lucie has gone with him?”

“Of course. She is always with him.”

It was upon my tongue to ask her brother’s address in Leghorn, but I hesitated, for I recollected that, being an Englishman, he could be easily found.

The receipt of that telegram was suspicious. What new conspiracy was in progress, I wondered? Evidently something had occurred. Either he had been warned that the police were in search of him, and had escaped back to the Continent, or else certain of his plans had been matured earlier than he anticipated.

As I sat there in the old-fashioned room, with its punch-bowls full of sweet-smelling roses, I resolved to travel south to the Mediterranean, see Lucie, and endeavour to find some way in which to rescue my love from her father’s accomplice.

From that Dorsetshire village to the old sun-blanched port of Leghorn is a far cry—thirty-six hours in the express from Calais on the road to Rome—yet that night I was back in Granville Gardens; and hastily packing up my traps, chatting with Sammy the while, I next morning left London for Italy.

I told my friend but little. The circumstances were too complicated and puzzling, and the tragedy of it all was so complete that I preferred to remain silent.

I was going south, upon one of those erratic journeys I so very often took. I might return in a fortnight, or in six months. All depended upon the mood in which I found myself.

Therefore he accepted my explanation, knowing well as a constant traveller and thoroughgoing cosmopolitan himself, and he saw me off from Charing Cross, wishing me *bon voyage*.

The journey by way of Calais, Paris, Modane and Turin you yourself have done often, so why need I describe it? You have lunched between Calais

and Paris, dined at the Gare de Lyon, turned into your narrow sleeping berth between Paris and the frontier, lunched in the *wagon-restaurant* between Modane and Busseleno, scrambled through your dinner in the big buffet at Genoa, and cursed those stifling tunnels between Genoa and Spezia, where between them you get your first glimpses of the moonlit Mediterranean, and you have alighted at old marble-built Pisa, the quaint dead city that contains one of the wonders of the world—the Leaning Tower.

From Pisa you have gone on to Rome, or to Florence, but I question if you have ever travelled over that ten-mile branch line down to the ancient seaport of the Medici, Leghorn. The English, save the mercantile marine and a stray traveller or two, never go to Livorno, as it is called in Italian, and yet it is in summer the Brighton of Italy, and one of the gayest places in Europe during the bathing season.

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning when I alighted at the "Palace," that great white hotel on the sea-front, and went to the room allotted to me—one with an inviting balcony overlooking the promenade and the fashionable bathing establishment of Pancaldi.

Livorno was full, the night-porter informed me. It was the height of the season, and there was not another vacant bed in any hotel in the town that night.

I knew the place well, therefore early next morning I went forth, and took a turn across at Pancaldi's, which is a kind of stone pier built out upon the rocks into the clear sunlit waters. Though so early there were already quite a number of smartly dressed people; the men in clean white linen suits and the women in white muslins, mostly of the Italian aristocracy from Florence, Bologna, Milan and Rome.

It was delightful there, seated in a chair with the waves lapping lazily at one's feet, and the brown sails of the anchovy and sardine boats showing afar against the dark purple island of Gorgona in the distance. On every hand was the gay chatter of men—for Italians are dreadful chatterboxes—the light laughter of pretty dark-eyed women, or the romping of a few children in the care of their nurses.

I was fatigued after my journey, and as I idled there my eyes were open about me to recognise any friends.

Suddenly, approaching me, I saw a stout elderly lady in white, accompanied by a slim young girl of seventeen, whom I recognised as the Countess Moltedo and her daughter Gemma. I rose instantly, removed my hat, and drawing my heels together in Italian fashion, bowed.

“Ah! my dear Signor Leaf!” cried the Countess in English merrily, for she was American born, and like so many other countesses in Italy had been attracted by a title, and had long ago found her husband to be a worthless fellow who had married her merely in order to replenish his impoverished purse. “Why, this is a surprise! Gemma was speaking of you only the other day, and wondered if you had deserted Italy entirely.”

“No, Countess,” I replied. “Once one really knows Italy, she is one’s mistress—and you can never desert her.”

And I took the young girl’s hand she offered, and bowed over it.

“You are here at your villa at Antigniano, I suppose?” I went on.

“Yes. We’ve been here already two months. It is too hot still to return to Rome. The season has been a most gay one, for the new spa, the Acque della Salute, has, they say, attracted nearly twenty thousand persons more than last year.”

“Leghorn in summer is always charming,” I said, as I drew chairs for them at the edge of the water, and they seated themselves. “And your villa is so very delightful, out there, beyond the noise and turmoil.”

“Yes, we find it very nice. Myself, I prefer the quiet village life of Antigniano to this place. We only come up here at rare intervals, when Gemma gets dull.”

The pretty dark-eyed young girl laughing at me said:—

“Mother likes all the old fogies, Mr Leaf, while I like to see life. Out yonder at Antigniano they are all old frumps, and the men never remain there.

They always take the tram and come into Leghorn."

Like a flash it occurred to me to make an inquiry of them.

"By the way," I said, "you know all the Americans and English here. Do you happen to know a man named Miller?"

"Miller? No," was the American woman's reply.

"Haven't you mistaken the name? There's a man named Milner, who has a daughter, a tall, rather smart dark-haired girl."

"Milner," I repeated, recognising at once that in Leghorn the final "r" was added. "Yes, perhaps that's the name. He's a tall elderly man—a gentleman. His daughter's name is Lucie."

"I know her," exclaimed Gemma quickly. "We've met them lots of times. They live in a flat at the other end of the promenade, towards the town."

"I want to call. Do you know the number?"

"Number nine in the Viale," replied the Countess promptly, with her slight American accent. "Second floor. Where did you meet them?"

"In England. I returned from London only last night."

"I don't think they are here," she said. "The week we arrived at the villa, nearly two months ago, Lucie called and said that they were going to spend the summer up at Roncegno, in the Trentino, a place that is becoming quite fashionable with the Italians. They left Leghorn, and I haven't seen them since."

"I believe they are back," I said. "Anyhow I will leave a card."

"Because the handsome Lucie has attracted you, eh?" asked the Countess, laughing mischievously.

"Not at all," I protested. "I'm a confirmed bachelor, as you've known long ago."

“Ah! men always say so,” she remarked. “Why do you take such an intense interest in Milner and his daughter?”

“Because they were kind to me in England,” I replied briefly.

“Well—he’s a peculiar man,” she said. “They have very few friends, I believe. He’s a gentleman, no doubt, but in very reduced circumstances. My own idea is that when Lucie’s dresses are paid for he has very great difficulty in making both ends meet. He’s a bit of a mystery, they say.”

“You surprise me,” I said. “I had no idea he was as poor as that.”

It was evident that James Harding Miller feigned poverty in Leghorn, in order to conceal his true calling.

“The house is sufficient indication that they are not overburdened by money. In fact, a couple of years ago Lucie used to give English lessons to Baroness Borelli’s two girls. Nowadays, however, Milner himself is away a great deal. I’ve often met him in the Corso in Rome, idling about outside the Aragno, and in Florence, Milan and other places, while Lucie stays at home with their old servant Marietta.”

“Why do you say he’s a peculiar man?”

“Well—I have heard it whispered among the Italians here that he associates with some queer people sometimes. Of course, he’s an Inglese, and quite in ignorance of what they really are. The better-class Italians have nothing to do with him, and as the English colony here is so very small, poor Lucie’s life can’t be a very gay one. Indeed, I’m often sorry for the girl. Except for visiting us sometimes, and going to the houses of two or three of the English business people here, they go nowhere. Milner, when he’s here, spends each morning alone on the Squarci baths, reading the newspaper, and in the evening takes one turn up and down the promenade.”

“Yes,” declared her daughter. “He’s a most lonely, melancholy man.”

“There’s some mystery behind him, I suppose,” remarked the Countess. “We have so many queer English and Americans out here nowadays. Italy is really becoming the dumping-ground for all people who, from

some reason or other, find their own country too sultry for them. Take Rome, for instance: why, the place is simply full of people one can't possibly know, while Florence is proverbial for undesirables."

"But you don't think this man Milner is an undesirable, do you? I mean you've never heard anything against him?"

"Well, nothing absolutely direct," was her answer. "Only if I were you I wouldn't be too friendly with them. It will go very much against you, more especially in Italian society."

"Italian society, Countess, doesn't interest me really very much," I exclaimed. "I know you think me a terrible barbarian, but remember I'm only a wanderer and a Bohemian at that."

"Ah!" she sighed, "you men are free. It is unfortunately not so with us women, especially with a woman like myself, who, though I love freedom, am compelled to exist in this narrow-minded little world of the Italian aristocracy. I need not tell you how exclusive we all are—you know us too well. Why, when an English royal prince or princess comes to an Italian city hardly any one ever goes out of his way to call. They actually wait for the royalty to make the first call! And if you hear three school-girls of fourteen talking together, you will most certainly hear them discussing the *nobiltà*, and sneering at their schoolfellows whose parents are without titles. Yes, Mr Leaf," she sighed, "ours is a strange complex life here, in modern Italy."

The Countess was, I knew, "hipped" and embittered. Her husband, a good-looking good-for-nothing fellow, who spent his days idling in the Via Tornabuoni, in Florence, and his nights gambling at the Florence club, possessed a large estate with a fine old castle, away in the Cresentino, but every metre of the land was mortgaged, and in order to redeem the place had married Mary Plant, of Boston, Mass., the daughter of a rich coal-owner. Within three years they had been separated, and now only at rare intervals they met, sometimes finding themselves at the same entertainment in one or other of the palaces in Rome or Florence and greeting each other as comparative strangers. Like thousands of other similar cases in Italy, she had bought her title very dearly, and now bitterly regretted that she had ever been attracted by a handsome face and

elegant manner, that she had been entrapped by a man who had never entertained one single spark of affection for her, and who had, in his heart, despised her on account of her readiness to sacrifice herself and her money for the sake of becoming a Countess.

We continued to chat, for it was delightful there, with the clear blue waves lapping close to our feet. In the course of conversation she and her daughter told me several other interesting facts concerning the Millers. They had lived in Rome for two successive winter seasons, the Countess said, in a little furnished flat in the Via Grottino, one of those narrow streets that lead off the Corso.

Was it while there, I wondered, that Lucie had become acquainted with the great politician, Nardini—the man who had died refusing to give her her liberty?

I longed to approach the subject, yet there were matters upon which I could not touch while Gemma was present.

So I sat there idling, laughing and chatting, and recalling the last occasion we had met, up in the pine woods of Camaldoli in the previous August, when I was staying at their hotel, where we had many mutual friends.

I had known the Countess fully ten years, when Gemma was but a child in the nursery, and when she was still a very pretty young woman.

Somehow I saw that she was anxious that I should not know the Milners. Why, I could not discern.

“If I were you,” she said, in a low, confidential tone, when she had sent her daughter along to the kiosque for a newspaper, “I shouldn’t call upon that man. I haven’t told Gemma, but I’ve dropped the girl. After she called upon me the last time I sent her a letter hinting that I should prefer that she did not call again.”

“Why?” I asked, much surprised.

“Well, I have a reason,” was her response. “Quite lately I’ve discovered something that requires a good deal of explaining away. To tell you the

truth, I believe Milner is sailing under entirely false colours, and besides I have no intention that Gemma should associate with his daughter any further. Take my advice, Godfrey, and don't go near them."

"Then what have you heard?"

"I've heard a good deal that surprises me," replied the Countess. "In fact, the whole affair is a very grave scandal, and I, for one, don't mean to be dragged into it."

Chapter Twenty Six.

The Home of the Mysterious Englishman.

At half-past five o'clock that same afternoon, heedless of the Countess Moltedo's mysterious warning, I was standing by Lucie's side at the long French window that opened upon the balcony. Below, hundreds of visitors, mostly dressed in white, as is the mode of Leghorn, were promenading in the little pine wood that lies between the roadway and the sea, while beyond stretched the broad glassy Mediterranean aglow in the fiery rays of the Tuscan sunset, the mystic islands showing dark purple on the far-off horizon.

It was the hour when all Leghorn was agog after the *siesta*, that period from two o'clock till five, when all *persiennes* are closed, the streets are silent and deserted, and the city dazzlingly white lies palpitating beneath the blazing sun that blanches everything—the hour for the evening bath, and the stroll and gossip before dinner.

Perhaps nowhere else in all Europe can be seen such a living panorama of beautiful girls as there, upon the Passeggio at Leghorn on a summer's evening at six o'clock, those dark-haired, dark-eyed, handsome-featured children of the people walking in twos and threes, with figure and gait perfect, and each with her *santuzza*, or silken scarf of pale blue, mauve, pink, or black, twisted around her head with the ends thrown carelessly over the shoulders.

As the white veil is part of the costume of the Turkish woman so is the *santuzza* part of that of the merry, laughing coral-pickers, milliners and work-girls of Leghorn. It enhances their marvellous beauty and is at the same time the badge of their servitude.

Of all the people in the whole of proud old Tuscany assuredly none were so easy-going and vivacious, none so light-hearted and full of poetry as those Livornese people passing to and fro below us. The more I had dwelt among the Tuscan people the more I loved them. There is surely no other people on the face of the earth so entirely lovable, even with their many sad faults, as they; none so gregarious, so neighbourly, so

courteous, kindly or poetic, none so content upon the most meagre fare that ever held body and soul together.

Your *popolano* even in his rags will bring a flower to a woman with the air of a king, and he will resent an insult with a withering scorn to which no regal trappings could lend further dignity. It is the land where Love still reigns just as supreme as it did in the days of La Fiammetta, of Beatrice, of Laura, or of Romeo—the Land of *Amore*—the sun-kissed land where even in this prosaic century of ours men and women live and die—often by the knife-thrust, be it said—for "*amore*," that king who is greater and more powerful even than good Vittorio Emanuele himself.

At Lucie's side I stood in silence, gazing down upon the gay scene below. In those people's eyes were always dreams, and in the memories there was always greatness.

A writer has asked with deep truth, who, having known fair Tuscany, can forsake her for lesser love? Who, having once abode with her, can turn their faces from the rising sun and set the darkness of the Pisan mountains betwixt herself and them?

Yes. I had been back again in Tuscany for those few brief hours only, yet the glamour of Italy had again fallen upon me, that same glamour that holds so many of the English-speaking race—irrevocably compelling them to return again and again to those amethystine hills and mystical depths of seven-chorded light—the land that is grey-green with sloes and rich with trailing vines, the land of art and antiquity, of youth and of loveliness.

"And your father went on from Pisa?" I said at last, turning to my neat-waisted little companion. "He did not come home with you?"

"No. He has some urgent business down in Rome, and sent me back here to wait for him."

"When does he arrive?"

"He does not know. His business is very uncertain always. Sometimes when he goes away he's absent only three days, and at other times three months. Dear old dad is awfully tiresome. He never writes, and Marietta

and I wait and wait, and wonder what's become of him."

"Is he staying with friends in Rome?"

"With Dr Gavazzi, a great friend of ours."

"You left Studland very suddenly," I said.

"Because of a telegram. We left at once, with hardly an hour to pack up. But how did you know we had gone to Italy?"

"I called after you had left, and your aunt told me. I wanted to speak to you, Miss Miller," I added, turning to her seriously. "I came here to Leghorn purposely to see you."

"It's surely a long way to travel," she said, turning her soft dark eyes upon mine and regarding me with wonder.

"Yes. But the reason I am here is to consult you regarding something which very closely concerns myself—regarding Ella."

"Ah! It was strange that she left us so suddenly," she remarked, "and stranger still the events of that night. I wonder who attacked her? She recognised her assailant, otherwise she would have said something to me. I've thought over it several times. The whole thing is an utter enigma. She evidently left us because she feared that her assailant would either call to see her, or perhaps make another attempt upon her."

"Then she said nothing to you?"

"Absolutely not a word, even though when she came in she was half fainting. I naturally concluded that you and she had had some words, and therefore I made no inquiry."

"We had no words, Miss Miller," I said, in a low, serious voice. "Our hearts were too full of tragedy for that."

"Of tragedy?" she cried. "What do you mean?"

"Ella is already engaged to be married."

“Engaged?” she cried. “Why, I thought she was to be yours? I was congratulating you both!”

“No,” I answered, my heart sinking. “Though we have come together again after that long blank in both our lives, we are yet held apart by a cruel circumstance. She is already engaged to be married to another man.”

“But she will break it, never fear. Ella loves you—you can’t doubt that.”

“I know. I know that. But it is an engagement she cannot break. She will be that man’s wife in a month.”

“You absolutely amaze me. She told me nothing of this, but on the contrary led me to believe that she was still free, and that you were to be her affianced husband.”

“There is some reason—some secret reason why I cannot be,” I said. “It was to discuss this point with you that I have travelled from London. I must ask you to forgive me, Miss Miller, for troubling you with my private affairs, but you are, you know, Ella’s most intimate and most devoted friend.”

“You are not troubling me in the least,” my companion declared. “We are friends, you and I, and if I can help you, I will with pleasure do so.”

“Then I want to ask you a few questions,” I said eagerly. “First, tell me how long you have known Mr Gordon-Wright?”

“Oh! ever since I was quite a little girl. He used to give me francs and buy me bon-bons long ago in the old days in Paris. Why?”

“Because I had an idea that he might perhaps be a new acquaintance.”

“Oh, dear no. My father and he have been friends for many years. He comes here to stay, sometimes for a couple of months at a time. He has bad health, and his London doctor often orders him abroad.”

“Who is he?”

“A gentleman. He was in the Navy on the China station, I think. He’s a most amusing companion, full of droll anecdotes, and seems to know everybody. Dad says that he’s one of the most popular men about London. He has a splendid steam yacht and once or twice he has taken us for cruises. It was in port here for a week at the beginning of the year.”

“Where does he live?”

“In Half Moon Street in London.”

“Has he a country place?”

“I never heard of it.”

Then she was unaware, I saw, that he lived on the Cornish border. Her father, of course, knew the truth, and kept it concealed from her. The fact that he came there to hide for months at a time, and that he travelled about in a steam yacht were sufficient to show that he was one of the clever and ingenious band who had, during the past ten years, effected certain *coups* so gigantic that they had startled Europe.

“When I met him how long had he been staying with you at the Manor?”

“Only one day. He came on the previous morning, and he left an hour after you did. He wished to consult my father about something—some securities he contemplates purchasing, I think.”

“Was Ella acquainted with him?”

“No. Ella never saw him. He was upstairs in his room, you remember, when we brought her home, and she left in the morning before he was up.”

“You don’t think that it was he who met her in the park after she left me?” I suggested.

She looked at me strangely, as though endeavouring to read my innermost thoughts.

“No, I hardly think that. Why should he, of all men, attack a woman who

was a perfect stranger to him?”

“But was Ella a perfect stranger?” I queried. “How do you know that?”

“Of course we can’t say so. He might have met her somewhere else before,” the dark-eyed girl was forced to admit.

“Do not the circumstances all point to the fact that she fled, fearing to face him?” I said.

“Well, it certainly is a theory—but a very strange one,” she answered, her eyes fixed thoughtfully away to the distant horizon. “But what you have told me is so extraordinary. Ella is engaged to be married in a month. To whom? You have not told me that.”

I was silent for a moment, wondering whether I should tell her. So complete were the confidences now between us that I saw I need conceal nothing from her. We entertained a mutual sympathy for each other—I broken and despairing, and she a woman with the mark of fate upon her countenance.

“She is to marry Gordon-Wright,” I said in a low, hard voice.

“Gordon-Wright!” she gasped, drawing back and staring at me open-mouthed. “Ella to marry that man! Impossible!”

“The fellow is compelling her to become his wife. He holds her in his power by some mysterious bond which she fears to break. She is in terror of him. Ella—my own Ella—is that man’s victim.”

“But—but you mustn’t allow this, Mr Leaf!” she cried quickly, and from the anxious expression in her countenance I saw that my announcement had struck her a-heap in amazement. “Ella must never marry him!” she added. “But are you sure of this—are you quite sure?”

“She had admitted it to me with her own lips.”

“Then she must be warned—she cannot know.”

“Know what?”

“Know the facts that are known to me. She is in ignorance, or she would never consent to become that man’s wife!”

“She has been entrapped. She admitted as much.” My companion made no answer. Her brows were knit in thought. What I had revealed to her was both unexpected and puzzling. She evidently knew Gordon-Wright’s true character, though it was hardly likely she would admit it to me.

Yet I wondered, as I had lately very often wondered, whether she were actually in ignorance of her father’s true profession.

“If she has been entrapped, Mr Leaf,” she said slowly, “then she must find a way in which to extricate herself. We must never allow her to become that man’s wife.”

“He is your father’s friend, and yet you hold him in little esteem?” I remarked.

“What I know is my own affair,” was her hard response. “It is sufficient for us to say that Ella is yours, and must be yours.”

“Ah! yes,” I sighed in despair, “if only she could be. Yet I fear that it is impossible. This fellow for some mysterious reason holds her future in his hands. She refuses to reveal anything to me, except that to break away from him is impossible. Indeed, the real reason of her flying visit to you at Studland was to consult him. She knew he was visiting there, and slipped away from her father in order to call upon you.”

“But we had no idea that they were acquainted,” Lucie declared.

“After she had gone to bed your father and Gordon-Wright remained up, talking, she crept back downstairs, I believe, and overheard their conversation.”

“She did!” she gasped, her cheeks going pale. “She heard what they said! Are you quite sure of this?”

“Yes.”

“Then—then she really came to spy upon Gordon-Wright—to spy upon

us indeed!”

“Not with any sinister motive,” I hastened to assure her. “She is evidently endeavouring to discover something concerning this man who holds her so utterly powerless in his hands. It is but natural, is it not? It is only what you or I would do in similar circumstances.”

My companion’s face had changed. She was pale and anxious, eager to learn all that I had ascertained.

“She told you this—how she had overheard my father talking to him?”

“No, Gordon-Wright himself charged her with eaves-dropping—and she admitted it.”

“Ah! Then if this be true, Mr Leaf, she had better marry him.”

“Marry him!” I cried. “Why?”

“Because I have a suspicion that she knows something concerning my father. What it is sorely puzzles me.”

“I—I don’t quite understand you,” I said.

“Well—I thought I had spoken plainly enough,” she answered. “You have told me that she admitted to him that she overheard his conversation with my father.”

“Well, and what if she did?” I asked. “Was the consultation between your father and his friend of such a secret nature?”

She hesitated a moment, then lifting her eyes to mine, said:—

“I believe it was.”

“You believe,” I echoed. “You must know, if you are prepared to sacrifice Ella to that man!”

“He probably is in possession of some secret of hers,” she remarked slowly.

“And she on her part, it appears, is in possession of some secret of his.”

“And of my father’s.”

“What is it she knows?” I asked. “Come, give me some hint of it,” I urged. “A moment ago you were my friend, prepared to assist poor Ella to escape—yet now you declare that they must marry.”

“Yes,” was her hard response. “I did not know that she had acted the spy in my father’s house—that she was in love with Gordon-Wright and had come to see him while he was under our roof.”

“She’s not in love with him,” I protested. “She denies it. Unfortunately she is his victim.”

“She deceived you once, remember. Why do you still trust her?”

“Her deception was one for self-sacrifice—to save her father.”

“And my refusal to assist you in saving her from Gordon-Wright is from the same motive.”

“To save your father?”

“How do I know? I tell you I am puzzled.”

“Then the secret is perhaps a guilty one?” I said seriously.

“She must marry this man,” was all her response.

“And this from you, Miss Miller—you, who have always posed as her friend!” I exclaimed reproachfully, for her change of manner had utterly confounded me. I had relied upon her as my friend.

“I am certainly not her enemy,” she hastened to assert. “To see her the wife of Gordon-Wright is my very last desire. Yet it is unfortunately imperative for—” and she stopped short, without concluding her sentence.

“For what?”

“For—well—for my peace of mind,” she said, though I was sure that she had intended saying something else.

“You have already told me that this fellow is unfitted to be her husband,” I exclaimed. “Surely you, her oldest friend, will never allow her to commit this fatal error—to wreck her own happiness and mine, without lifting a finger to save her. Need I repeat to you what I told you at the riverside at Studland, with what a fierce passion I adore her, how that she is mine—my very life?”

“I know,” my companion said, in a voice slightly more sympathetic. “I admit that she ought to marry you—that she is yours in heart. Yet in her secret engagement to Gordon-Wright there is a mystery which makes me suspicious.”

“Suspicious of what?”

She sighed, and moving forward rested her hands upon the balcony, gazing again towards the fiery sunset.

“Well—to put it plainly—that she is deceiving both of us.”

“Deceiving us! In what way?”

“Ah! that is what we have not yet discovered,” replied the girl. “Think of her ingenuity in coming to our house in order to see that man in secret, of how cleverly she made us believe that they were strangers—of her listening to my father’s words when he spoke with Gordon-Wright! All this proves to me that she is working with some mysterious end.”

“She has been endeavouring to effect her emancipation from that scoundrel,” I protested hotly. “She has been trying to break away from him, but in vain. Her motive, Miss Miller, is not an evil one as regards either your father or yourself, you may rest assured. She only desires freedom—freedom to live and to love, the freedom that you, if you will, can assist her to obtain.”

“I—” she cried. “How can I?”

“You know who this fellow Gordon-Wright really is. If you will, you can

save her.”

“I can’t. That’s just where the difficulty lies.”

“Then if you will not, I will!” I cried, angry at her sudden withdrawal after all the sympathy I had shown her, and goaded by thoughts of my love’s martyrdom. “Fortunately I happen to know that Gordon-Wright alias Lieutenant Shacklock is wanted by the police of half a dozen different countries, as well as certain of his associates, and a word from me will effect his arrest.” She started, and her face went ashen pale. She saw that I knew the truth, and in an instant held me in dread.

“You—” she gasped. “You would do this—*you*?”

Chapter Twenty Seven.

From a Woman's Lips.

The handsome, dark-haired girl had placed her hand upon my arm, and stood with her eyes anxiously fixed upon mine.

"Do you really mean this?" she asked, in a hoarse, strained voice.

"I have told you quite frankly my intention," was my answer. "I know that scoundrel—in fact I am myself a witness against Him."

"In what manner?" she asked naïvely.

"That man is one of a clever gang of thieves who for years have eluded the police," I replied. "In England he lives in security in a Cornish village under the name of Gordon-Wright, while here, on the Continent, he frequents the best hotels, and with his friends makes enormous hauls of money and jewels."

"A thief!" she exclaimed, with amazement that I thought well feigned. "And can you really actually prove this?"

"The coward robbed a friend of mine who, being ill, could not take care of himself," I said. "I have only to say one single word to the nearest police office and they will arrest him wherever he may be. And now, to speak quite openly, I tell you that I mean to do this."

"You will have him arrested?"

"Yes, and by so doing I shall at least save Ella. The thing is really very simple after all. I intend to defy him. Ella is mine and he shall not snatch her from me."

"Then you know him—I mean you knew him before I introduced you?" she asked, after a brief pause.

"I know him rather too well," I answered meaningly. "It is curious, Miss

Miller," I added, "that your father should be the intimate friend of a man of such bad reputation. He surely cannot be aware of his true character."

She knit her brows again, for she saw that she was treading on dangerous ground. She was not an adventuress herself but a sweet and charming girl, yet I had no doubt but that she participated in her father's many guilty secrets. Perhaps it was her easy-going cosmopolitan air that suggested this, or perhaps it may have been owing to her earnest desire that Ella should marry that man, and thus be prevented from betraying what she had learnt on that fateful night at Studland.

"Dear old dad always makes friends far too easily," was her evasive reply, the response of a clever woman. "I've told him so lots of times. Travelling so much as he does, half over Europe, he is for ever making new acquaintances, and queer ones they are, too, sometimes, I can tell you. We've had visitors here, in this flat, of all grades, from broken-down English jockeys and music hall artists trying to borrow their fare third-class back to England, to lords, earls, Stock Exchange men and company promoters whose names are as household words in the halfpenny papers. Yet I suppose it's so with many men. They are big-hearted, make friends easily, and everybody takes advantage of their hospitality. It is so with my father. All his friends impose on him without exception."

"Well, it's a pity that he's intimate with the man I knew as Lieutenant Shacklock, for when he is in the hands of the police some curious revelations will be made—revelations that will reveal the existence of a most ingenious and daring Continental gang. You see," I added, with a smile, "I'm not making a mere idle statement—I know. These men once robbed a friend of mine, and it is only just to him that, having discovered Shacklock, I should give information against him."

"You mean you will win Ella by freeing her of that man?" said my companion, apparently following me for the first time.

"Exactly. If he holds any secret of hers, he is quite welcome to speak. Neither I nor Ella will fear anything, you may depend upon that. A man of his stamp always seeks some low-down revenge. It is only what may be expected. Perhaps I may as well tell you that I recognised him when you

introduced us, and that I have already been down to Cornwall and seen the smug scoundrel at his home. He's a church-warden, a parish councillor and all the rest of it, and the people believe he's worth thousands. He poses as a philanthropist in a mild way, opens local bazaars, and makes speeches in support of the local habitation of the Primrose League. All this is to me most amusing. The fellow little dreams that he sits upon the edge of a volcano that to-morrow may engulf him—as it certainly must."

"But is this worth while—to denounce such a man? You'll be compelled to support your allegations," she said.

"Oh! I can do that, never fear," I laughed. "I shall bring his victim forward—the man he robbed so heartlessly. English juries have no compassion for the swell-mobsman or the elegant hotel-thief."

I watched her face as I spoke, and saw the effect my words were having upon her. If I denounced him her own father would at once be implicated. Hers were alarming apprehensions, no doubt.

I saw that I was gradually gaining the whip-hand over circumstance. She recognised now that her father was in deadly peril of exposure.

And yet did she know the truth, after all? If she actually knew that the young Chilian Carrera, the man she loved when they lived outside Paris, had met with his death through her own father's treachery, she surely would not hold him in such esteem.

Yet was it likely that such skilled scoundrels as the mysterious Miller, Milner—or whatever he chose to call himself—and Gordon-Wright alias Lieutenant Harold Shacklock would risk exposure by betraying their true occupation to a sweet high-minded girl such as Lucie really was? Had she been their decoy; had there, indeed, been any suspicion that she had assisted them in their clever conspiracies of fraud then it would have been different.

There was, however, no suspicion except that she had spoken of her father's "secret," which she feared that Ella had learned when she overheard her father's conversation with his friend. That was a curious and unaccountable feature. She knew that her father held some secret

that was shared by Gordon-Wright, that gallant ladies'-man who had wormed himself into the confidence of so many English and American women travelling on Continental railways, women whose jewels and valuables had subsequently disappeared.

She, however, held her father in the highest regard and esteem, and that fact in itself was sufficient to convince me that she was after all in ignorance of his true profession.

She might have entertained suspicions of the lieutenant, suspicions that were verified by the denunciation I had just made, but as I looked into her pale dark face I could not bring myself to believe that she knew her father's true source of income. There was some secret of her fathers, a secret that she knew must be kept at any cost. It was that which she feared Ella might betray, and for that reason she deemed it best that my love should be allowed to become the false lieutenant's wife.

Thus I argued within myself as I stood there beside her with the blood-red light of the dying day streaming in from across the sea.

I recollected Sammy's warning; I recollected, too, the strange circumstances of Nardini's death in Shepherd's Bush, and of what had been told me by this woman now at my side. She was doomed, she said —and, true enough, there was black despair written in that dark face, now so pale and agitated.

She was as much a mystery as she had been on that first day when we had met—even though through her instrumentality the mystery of my well-beloved's self-effacement had actually been cleared up.

That she detested the lieutenant had been palpable from the first mention I had made of him. Therefore I argued that she suspected him of playing her father false, even though she might be unaware of their real relationship. Indeed it was not natural for a father of Miller's stamp to allow his daughter to know of his shameful calling. She had told me that she remained at home with old Marietta—the grey-haired Tuscan woman who had admitted me—while her father travelled hither and thither across Europe. Those unscrupulous "birds of prey," known to the police as international thieves, migrate in flocks, travelling swiftly from one frontier

to another and ever eluding the vigilance of the agents in search of them. The international thief is a veritable artist in crime, the cleverest and most audacious scoundrel of the whole criminal fraternity.

“I quite understand your feelings and all that you must suffer, Mr Leaf,” she said at last in a mechanical voice. “I know how deeply you love Ella, and, after all that has passed, it is not in the least surprising that you will not stand by and see her married to such a man as Gordon-Wright. Yet is it really prudent to act without carefully considering every point? That she is about to become that man’s wife shows that she is in his power—that he possesses some mysterious hold over her. And suppose you denounced him to the police, would he not, on his part, revenge himself upon her?”

“Probably. But I will risk that.”

“Personally I think that Ella will be the greater sufferer from such an injudicious action.”

Curious. Her words bore out exactly what Ella herself had said. Yet she surely could know nothing of the secret between them. Until half an hour ago, when I had told her, she was not even aware that Gordon-Wright was acquainted with the woman who had been betrothed to me.

“But I do not intend that she shall fall the victim of this adventurer,” I said quickly, for I recognised in her words a fear that her father’s secret might be exposed.

“If he really possesses a hold over her sufficient to compel her to marry him, any attempt to rescue her may only cause her complete ruin,” she said. “Have you any idea of the nature of this extraordinary influence he seems to have over her?”

“None. I am in entire ignorance.”

“When we met that night at Studland I certainly was deceived,” she went on. “I believed that she was beside herself with delight at finding you again, and still unmarried—I never dreamed that she was engaged to another—and to Gordon-Wright of all men.”

“Why do you say ‘of all men’?”

“Because—well, because he’s the last man a girl of her stamp should marry.”

“Then you know more about him than you care to admit, Miss Miller?”

“We need not discuss him,” was her brief answer. “It is Ella we have to think of, not of him.”

“Yes,” I said, “we have to think of her—to extricate her from the horrible fate that threatens her—marriage to a scoundrel.” Then turning again to my pretty companion I said, in a voice intended to be more confidential: “Now, Miss Miller, your position and mine are, after all, very curious. Though we have been acquainted so short a time, yet the fact of your having been Ella’s most intimate friend has cemented our own friendship to an extraordinary degree. We have exchanged confidences as old friends, and I have told you the secrets of my heart. Yet you, on your part, have not been exactly open with me. You are still concealing from me certain facts which, if you would but reveal, would, I know, assist me in releasing Ella from her bondage. Why do you not speak plainly? I have travelled here, across Europe, to beg of you to tell me the truth,” I added, looking straight into her pale serious face.

“How can I tell you the truth when I am ignorant of it myself?” she protested.

“What I have told you this evening concerning Ella’s engagement to that blackguard has surprised you, and it has also shown you that the mysterious secret of your father’s of which you have spoken may be imperilled, eh?”

She nodded. Then, after some hesitation, she said:—“Not only that, but something further. That Gordon-Wright should aspire to Ella’s hand is utterly mystifying.”

“Why?”

“Well—you recollect what I told you regarding—regarding that man who died in the house where you were living in London,” she said, in a low,

faltering voice.

“You mean the ex-Minister of Justice, Nardini?”

She nodded an affirmative.

“I remember perfectly all that you told me. He refused to speak the truth concerning you.”

“He laughed in my face when I asked him to make a confession that would save me,” she said hoarsely, her dark eyes flashing with a dangerous fire. “He was a coward; he sacrificed me, a woman, because he feared to speak the truth. Ah!” she cried, clenching her hands, “you see me here wearing a mask of calm and tranquillity, but within my heart is a volcano of bitterness, of scorn for that wretched embezzler who carried his secret to the grave.”

“I can quite understand it, and fully sympathise with you,” I said, in a kindly tone, recollecting all that had passed between us after she had discovered the mysterious Italian dead in that upstairs room at Shepherd’s Bush. “But I hope you are not still disturbed over what may, after all, be merely an ungrounded fear?”

“Ungrounded!” she cried. “Ah! would to Heaven it were ungrounded. No. The knowledge that the blow must fall upon me sooner or later—to-day, to-morrow, in six months’ time, or in six years—holds me ever breathless in terror. Each morning when I wake I know not whether I shall again return to my bed, or whether my next sleep will be within the grave.”

“No, no,” I protested, “don’t speak like this. It isn’t natural.” But I saw how desperate she had now become.

“I intend to cheat them out of their revenge,” she said, in a low whisper, the red glow of the sundown falling full upon her haggard face. “They shall never triumph over me in life. With my corpse they may do as they think proper.”

“They? Who are they?”

“Shall I tell you?” she cried, her starting eyes fixing themselves upon

mine. “That man Gordon-Wright is one of them.”

“He is your enemy?” I gasped.

“One of my bitterest. He believes I am in ignorance, but fortunately I discovered his intention. I told Nardini, and yet he refused to speak. He knew the peril in which I existed, and yet, coward that he was, he only laughed in my face. He fled from Rome. I followed him to England only to discover that, alas! he was dead—that he had preserved his silence.”

“It was a blackguardly thing,” I declared. “And this fellow, Gordon-Wright, or whatever he calls himself, though your father’s friend, is at the same time your worst enemy?”

“That is unfortunately so, even though it may appear strange. To me he is always most charming, indeed no man could be more gallant and polite, but I know what is lurking behind all that pleasant exterior.”

“And yet you are opposed to me going to the police and exposing him?” I said in surprise.

“I am opposed to anything that must, of necessity, reflect upon both Ella and myself,” was her answer. “Remember the lieutenant knows that you and I are acquainted. I introduced him to you. If you denounced him as a thief he would at once conclude that you and I had conspired to effect his ruin and imprisonment.”

“Well—and if he did?”

“If he did, my own ruin would only be hastened,” she said. “Ah! Mr Leaf, you have no idea of the strange circumstances which conspired to place me in the critical position in which I to-day find myself. Though young in years and with an outward appearance of brightness, I have lived a veritable lifetime of woe and despair,” she went on, in a voice broken by emotion.

“In those happy days at Enghien I loved—in those sweetest days of all my life I believed that happiness was to be mine always. Alas! it was so short-lived that now, when I recall it, it only seems like some pleasant dream. My poor Manuel died and I was left alone with a heritage of woe

that gradually became a greater burden as time went on, and I was drawn into the net that was so cleverly spread for me—because I was young, because I was, I suppose, good-looking, because I was inexperienced in the wickedness of the world. Ah! when I think of it all, when I think how one word from Giovanni Nardini would have liberated me and showed the world that I was what I was, an honest woman, I am seized by a frenzy of hatred against him, as against that man Gordon-Wright—the man who knows the truth and intends to profit by it, even though I sacrifice my own life rather than face their lying denunciation without power to defend myself. Ah! you cannot understand. You can never understand!" and her eyes glowed with a thirst for revenge upon the dead man who had so unscrupulously thrust her back into that peril so deadly that she was hourly prepared to take her own life without compunction and without regret.

"But all this astounds me," I said, in deep sympathy. "I am your friend, Miss Miller," I went on, taking her slim hand in mine and holding it as I looked her straight in the face. "This man, Gordon-Wright, is, we find, our mutual enemy. Cannot you explain to me the whole circumstances? Our interests are mutual. Let us unite against this man who holds you, as well as my loved one, in his banal power! Tell me the truth. You have been compromised. How?"

She paused, her hand trembled in mine, and great tears coursed slowly down her white cheeks. She was reflecting whether she dare reveal to me the ghastly truth.

Her thin lips trembled, but at first no word escaped them. Laughter and the sound of gaiety came up from the promenade below.

I stood there in silence in the soft fading light await her confession—confession surely of one of the strangest truths that has ever been told by the lips of any woman.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

The Voice in the Street.

At last she spoke.

But in those moments of reflection her determination had apparently become more fixed than ever.

Either she feared to confess lest she should imperil her father, or else she became seized with a sense of shame that would not allow her to condemn herself.

“No,” she said, in a firm voice, “I have already told you sufficient, Mr Leaf. My private affairs cannot in the least interest you.”

My heart sank within me, for I had hoped that she would reveal to me the truth. I was fighting in the dark an enemy whose true strength I could not gauge. The slightest ray of light would be of enormous advantage to me, yet she steadily withheld it, even though she lived in hourly danger, knowing not when, by force of circumstances, she might be driven to the last desperate step.

She was a woman of strong character, to say the least, although so sweet, graceful and altogether charming.

I was disappointed at her blank refusal, and she saw it.

“If it would assist you to extricate Ella, I would tell you,” she assured me quickly. “But it would not.”

“Any fact to the scoundrel’s detriment is of interest to me,” I declared.

“But you have already said that you yourself are a witness against him,” she remarked. “What more do you want? The evidence which you and your friend whom you say he robbed could give would be sufficient to send him to prison, would it not?”

“I know. But I must prove more. Remember he has entrapped my Ella. She is struggling helplessly in the web which he has woven about her.”

“Much as I regret all the circumstances, Mr Leaf, I can see that it is against my own interests if I say anything further,” was her calm reply. “I have already given you an outline of the strange combination of circumstances and the unscrupulousness of two villains which has resulted in my present terrible position of doubt in the present and uncertainty of the future. The story, if I related it, would sound too strange to you to be the truth. And yet it only illustrates the evil that men do, even in these prosaic modern days.”

“Then you intend to again leave me in ignorance, even though my love’s happiness is at stake?”

“My own life is also at stake.”

“And yet you refuse to allow me to assist you—you decline to tell me the truth by which I could confound this man who is your bitterest enemy!”

“Because it is all hopeless,” was her answer. “Had Nardini but spoken, I could have defied him. His refusal has sealed my doom,” she added, in a voice of blank despair.

“But your words are so mysterious I can’t understand them!” I declared, filled with chagrin at her refusal to make any statement. She was in fear of me, that was evident. Why, I could not for the life of me discern.

“I have merely told you the brief facts. The details you would find far more puzzling.”

“Then to speak frankly, although you have never openly quarrelled with the lieutenant, you fear him?”

“That is so. He can denounce me—I mean he can make a terrible charge against me which I am unable to refute,” she admitted breathlessly.

“And yet you will not allow me to help you! You disagree with my plan to denounce the scoundrel and let him take his well-deserved punishment! I must say I really can’t understand you,” I declared.

“Perhaps not to-day. But some day you will discern the reason why I decline to confess to you the whole truth,” was her firm reply.

And I looked at her slim tragic figure in silence and in wonder.

What was the end to be? Was she aware that her father was the leader of that association of well-dressed thieves, or was she in ignorance of it? That was a question I could not yet decide.

I thought of Ella—my own Ella. It was she whom I had determined to save. That was my duty; a duty to perform before all others, and in defiance of all else. She loved me. She had admitted that. Therefore I would leave no stone unturned on her behalf, no matter how it might affect the stubbornly silent girl at my side.

I saw that I could not serve them both. Ella was my chief thought. She should, in future, be my only thought.

“I much regret all this,” I said to Lucie somewhat coldly. “And pardon me for saying so, but I think that if you had spoken frankly this evening much of the trouble in the future would be saved. But as you are determined to say nothing, I am simply compelled to act as I think best in Ella’s interests.”

“Act just as you will, Mr Leaf,” was her rather defiant response. “I trust, however, you will do nothing rash nor injudicious—nothing that may injure her, instead of benefit her. As for myself, to hope to assist me is utterly out of the question. The die is cast. Nardini intended that disgrace and death should fall upon me, or he would have surely spoken,” and sighing hopelessly she added: “I have only to await the end, and pray that it will not be long in coming. This suspense I cannot bear much longer, looking as I daily do into the open grave which, on the morrow, may be mine. Heaven knows the tortures I endure, the bitter regrets, the mad hatred, the wistful longing for life and happiness, those two things that never now can be mine. Place yourself in my position, and try and imagine that whatever may be your life, there is but one sudden and shameful end—suicide.”

“You look upon things in far too morbid a light,” I declared, not, however, without some sympathy. ”There is a bright lining to every cloud’ the old

adage says. Try and look forward to that."

She shook her head despairingly.

"No," she answered, with a short bitter laugh. "Proverbs are for the prosperous—not for the condemned."

I remained with her for some time longer, trying in vain to induce her to reveal the truth. In her stubborn refusal I recognised her determination to conceal some fact concerning her father, yet whether she knew the real truth or not I was certainly unable to determine.

The revelation that Ella was acquainted with Gordon-Wright alias the Lieutenant held her utterly confounded. She seemed to discern in it an increased peril for herself, and yet she would tell me nothing—absolutely nothing.

The situation was tantalising—nay maddening. I intended to save my well-beloved at all costs, yet how was I to do so?

To denounce the adventurer would, she had herself declared, only bring ruin upon her. Therefore my hands were tied and the cowardly blackguard must triumph.

The soft Italian twilight fell, and the street lamps along the broad promenade below were everywhere springing up, while to the right the high stone lighthouse, that beacon to the mariner in the Mediterranean, shot its long streams of white light far across the darkening sea.

From one of the open-air *café-chantants* in the vicinity came up the sound of light music and the trill of a female voice singing a French *chansonette*, for a rehearsal was in progress. And again a youth passing chanted gaily one of those *stornelli d'amore* which is heard everywhere in fair Tuscany, in the olive groves, in the vineyards, in the streets, in the barracks, that ancient half dirge, half-plaintive song, the same that has been sung for ages and ages by the youths in love:—

Mazzo di fiori!
Si vede il viso, e non si vede il core
Tu se' un bel viso, ma non m'innamori.

Lucie heard the words and smiled.

The song just described my position at that moment. I saw her face but could not see her heart. She was beautiful, but not my love.

And as the voice died away we heard the words:—

Fiume di Lete!
Come la calamita mi tirate,
E mi fate venir dove velete.

Old Marietta, the Tuscan sewing-woman, entered and lit the gas. She looked askance at me, wondering why I remained there so long I expect.

“It is growing late,” I exclaimed in Italian; “I must go. It is your dinner-hour,” and glancing round the room, carpetless, as all Italian rooms are in summer, I saw that it was cheaply furnished with that inartistic taste which told me at once that neither she nor her father had chosen it. It struck me that they had bought the furniture just as it had stood from some Italian, perhaps the previous occupier.

Old Marietta was a pleasant, grey-faced old woman in cheap black who wore large gold rings in her ears and spoke with the pleasant accent of Siena, and who, I saw, was devoted to her young mistress.

“This is Mr Leaf,” she explained in Italian. “He is an English friend of my father’s.” Then turning to me she said, laughing, “Marietta always likes to know who’s who. All Italians are so very inquisitive about the friends of their *padrone*.”

The old woman smiled, showing her yellow teeth and wished me *buona sera*, to which I replied in her own tongue, for the position of servants in Italy is far different from their position with us. Your Tuscan house-woman is part of the family, and after a few years of faithful service is taken into the family council, consulted upon everything, controls expenditure, makes bargains, and is, to her *padrone*, quite indispensable. Old Marietta was a typical *donna di casa*, one of those faithful patient women with a sharp tongue to all the young men who so continuously ran after the young *padrona*, and only civil to me because I was a friend of the “signore.”

She was shrewd enough to continue to be present at our leave-taking, though it was doubtful whether she knew English sufficiently to understand what passed between us. I saw that Marietta intended I should go, therefore I wished her young *padrona* adieu.

She held her breath for a moment as our hands clasped, and I saw in her brown eyes a look of blank despair.

“Be courageous,” I said, in a low voice. “The future may not hold for you such terrors as you believe.”

“Future!” she echoed. “I have no future. *Addio*.” And I went down the wide, ill-lit stone staircase full of dismal foreboding, and out from the secret lair of the thief who was notorious, but whom the police of Europe had always failed to arrest.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Contains Another Surprise.

I dined at a small table alone in the big crowded *table-d'hôte* room of the hotel. About me were some of the most exclusive set in Italy, well-dressed men and women, Roman princes, marquises and counts, with a fair sprinkling of the Hebrew fraternity. At the table next mine sat a young prince of great wealth together with the fair American girl to whom he was engaged to be married, and the young lady's mother. The prince and his fiancée were speaking Italian, and the old lady from Idaho City, understanding no other language but her own, seemed to be having anything but an amusing time.

All this, however, interested me but little. I was reflecting upon the events of that afternoon, trying to devise some means by which to solve the enigma that was now driving me to desperation.

My well-beloved was in a deadly peril. How could I save her?

I saw that rapid and decided action was necessary. Should I return to England and watch the actions of the man I had known as Lieutenant Shacklock, or should I go on to Rome and try and discover something both regarding the object of Miller's journey there and the part of the Italian who, prior to his death, had consigned to me that mysterious packet?

As I ate my dinner in silence I decided to first take a flying visit to Rome. I could return to England afterwards. Ella's marriage was not for three weeks or so, therefore I might, in that time, succeed in solving the enigma as far as Miller was concerned, and by doing so obtain further information against his accomplice, Gordon-Wright.

Therefore at midnight I left Leghorn by way of Colle Salvetti, and through the night travelled across the Maremma fever-marshes, until at nine o'clock next morning the train drew into the great echoing terminus of the "Eternal City."

I went to the Hotel Milano, where it was my habit to stay. I knew Rome well and preferred the Milano—which, as you know, is opposite the Chamber of Deputies in the Piazza Colonna—to the Grand, the Quirinale, or the new Regina. At the Milano there was an unpretentious old-world comfort appreciated too by the Italian deputies themselves, for many of them had their *pied-à-terre* there while attending to their parliamentary duties in the capital.

Rome lay throbbing beneath the August heat and half deserted, for every one who can get away in those breathless blazing days when the fever is prevalent does so. Numbers of the shops in the Corso and the Via Vittorio were closed, the big doors and *persiennes* of the palaces and embassies were shut, showing that their occupants were away at the sea, or in the mountains, in France, Switzerland or England for cool air, while the cafés were deserted, and the only foreigners in the streets a few perspiring German and American sightseers.

Unfortunately I had not inquired of Lucie her father's address and knew nothing except that he was staying with a doctor named Gavazzi. Therefore at the hotel I obtained the directory and very soon discovered that there was a doctor named Gennaro Gavazzi living in the Via del Tritone, that long straight thoroughfare of shops that run from the Piazza S. Claudio to the Piazza Barberini.

It was about midday when I found the house indicated by the directory, a large palazzo which in Italian style was let out in flats, the ground floor being occupied by shops, while at the entrance an old white-haired hall-porter was dozing in a chair.

I awoke him and inquired in Italian if the Signore Dottore Gavazzi lived there.

"*Si signore. Terzo piano*," was the old fellow's reply, raising his forefinger to his cap.

"Thank you," I said, slipping five francs into his ready palm. "But by the way," I added as an afterthought, "do you know whether he has an English signore staying with him—a tall dark-haired thin man?"

"There's a gentleman staying with the Signore Dottore, but I do not think

he is an Englishman. He spoke perfect Italian to me yesterday."

"Ah, of course, I forgot. He speaks Italian perfectly," I said. "And this Dottore Gavazzi. How long has he lived here?"

"A little over a year. He acted as one of the private secretaries to His Excellency the Minister Nardini—he who ran away from Rome a little time ago, and hasn't since been heard of."

"Oh! was he," I exclaimed at once, highly interested. "Nardini played a sharp game, didn't he?"

"Embezzled over a million francs, they say," remarked the porter. "But whenever he came here, and it was often, he always gave me something to get a cigar with. He was very generous with the people's money, I will say that for him," and the old fellow laughed. "They say there was a lady in the case, and that's why he fled from Rome."

"A lady! Who was she?"

"Nobody seems to know. There's all sorts of reports about, of course. I hope the police will find him. They must arrest him some day, don't you think so, signore?"

"Perhaps," I said, thinking deeply. "But I'm interested to hear about the lady. What is it you've heard?"

"Only very little. According to the rumour, the police found at the Villa Verde, out at Tivoli, after he had gone, the dead body of a young lady locked in the study. It was at once hushed up, and not a word of it has been allowed to get into the papers. The Government gave orders to the police, I suppose, to suppress it, fearing to make the scandal graver. I heard it, however, on very good authority from my son who is in the *carabinieri* and stationed at Tivoli. The body, he says, was that of a well-dressed young lady about twenty-six or seven. When the carabineers went with the *commissario* to seal up the fugitive's effects, they found the body lying full length on the carpet. She still had her hat on and seemed as though she had suddenly fallen dead. Another curious thing is that the doctors discovered no wound, and don't seem to know what was the cause of her death."

“That’s strange!” I remarked. “I suppose they photographed the body?”

“Of course. But the portrait hasn’t been published because the police are compelled to hush up the affair.”

“Does your son know any further particulars, I wonder?”

“No more than what he’s told me. He says that quite a number of secret police agents have been over to Tivoli trying to establish the lady’s identity, and that they think they know who she was. He was here only yesterday and we were talking about it.”

“And who do they think she was?”

“Well, my son has, of course, a lot to do with the police, and a few days ago a friend of his of the *squadra mobile* told him that they had established the fact that the dead girl was English.”

“English! Do they know her name?”

“No, only they say that she was in Rome a great deal last winter, and was seen generally in the company of a tall, dark, English girl, her friend. Indeed, they say that both of them were seen in the Corso, accompanied by a middle-aged English gentleman, about a week before Nardini took to flight. They had apparently returned to Rome.”

“And they know none of their names?”

“They’ve found out that the English signore stayed at the Grand, they don’t know where the young ladies were living, probably at some small pension. They are now doing all they can to find out, but it is difficult, as most of the pensions are closed just now. They’ve, however, discovered the name of the dead girl’s friend—through some dressmaker, I think. It was Mille—Milla—or some name like that. The English names are always so puzzling.”

“Miller!” I gasped, staring at the old fellow, as all that Lucie had admitted to me regarding her visit to the villa at Tivoli flashed through my bewildered brain. “And she was the intimate friend of this unknown girl who has been found dead in the empty house and whose tragic end has

been officially hushed up!”

Chapter Thirty.

Some Discoveries in Rome.

The mysterious flight of Nardini, the prominent politician and Minister for Justice, was, it seemed, still the one topic of conversation in the “Eternal City”, Only that morning I had read a paragraph in the *Tribuna* that the fugitive was believed to have reached Buenos Ayres. The Embassy in London had evidently kept the secret I had divulged, and even the Italian police were in ignorance that the man wanted for that gigantic embezzlement—for the sum stated to have disappeared was now known to be a very large one—was already in his grave.

The mysterious discovery at the dead man’s villa out at Tivoli, that pleasant little town with the wonderful cascade twenty miles outside Rome, greatly complicated the problem. And the girl who had been found in such strange circumstances was actually an intimate friend of Lucie Miller! The whole thing was assuming a shape entirely beyond my comprehension.

I presently thanked the old porter for his information, slipped another tip into his hand, and walked back to the Corso, hugging the shade, and reflecting deeply upon what the old fellow had told me.

Two or three facts were quite plain. The first was that Miller would most certainly not be in Rome if he had the slightest suspicion that the police were in search of Lucie. Therefore, although the doctor had acted as the fugitive’s secretary, he was in ignorance of the discovery made at the Villa Verde. Again, had not Nardini himself for some reason abstracted from the archives of the Questura the official record of Miller, his description and the suspicions against him?

Therefore I saw that the police were hampered in their inquiries, because they were without information. Again, the name of Gennaro Gavazzi, though not an uncommon one in Italy, struck me as familiar from the first moment that Lucie had uttered it in Leghorn.

Now, as I walked the streets of Rome, I remembered. It came upon me

like a flash. It had been written in that confidential police record that the doctor was a Milanese, and that he was suspected of being an accomplice of the Englishman.

And yet Nardini, being aware of this, had actually appointed him one of his private secretaries!

That latter fact was one that showed either conspiracy or that Nardini, crafty and far-seeing, employed the doctor with some ulterior motive.

I was anxious to see what sort of person this Gavazzi might be.

I begrudged every moment I spent in Rome, anxious as I was to be back near my well-beloved and shield her from the blackguard who held her in his power. Yet this new development of the mystery held me anxious and eager.

Already I was in possession of greater knowledge of the affair than the police themselves; therefore I hoped that I might, by careful action and watching, learn the truth.

Somehow, by instinct it might have been, I felt that if I could but elucidate the mystery of the Villa Verde I should gain some knowledge that would release my love from her hideous bondage. I don’t know why, but it became a fixed idea with me. Therefore I resolved to remain in Rome at least a few days and carefully watch Miller and his friend.

Every moment, every hour, I thought of my sweet one who I knew loved me as passionately as I loved her, and yet who was now separated from me by a gulf which I was determined to bridge. She was ever in my thoughts, her beautiful face with those dear sad eyes ever before me, the music of her voice ever ringing in my ears. Yes. She should be mine—mine if I died myself in order to save her!

Towards evening I loitered up and down the Via del Tritone hoping to catch sight of the doctor and his English visitor, for I calculated that their probable habit was to dine at a restaurant. From the porter I had learnt that Gavazzi was a bachelor, therefore he probably had arrangements *en pension* at one or other of the restaurants, in the manner of most single men in Rome.

Though I waited nearly two hours, from half-past six to half-past eight, I saw nothing of Miller or of his host. The old porter noticed me, therefore having gauged his character pretty accurately I crossed to him and explained that I was waiting to see the doctor come out, as I was not certain whether he was the Dr Gavazzi whom I had known in Venice some years ago. This little fiction, combined with another small tip, satisfied the old man, and I went forth into the street again, fearing that if I remained in the entrance Miller, in passing, might recognise me.

It was a weary vigil, and one that required constant attention, for on a summer's evening the streets of Rome are crowded by the populace who come out to enjoy the cool air after the blazing heat of the day. Another hour passed without sign of them. In any case they must have dined in their rooms—perhaps sent a servant out to a neighbouring cook-shop.

Therefore I went round to the Piccolo Borsa, the small restaurant in the Via della Mercede, at which I always ate when in Rome, and there snatched a hasty meal.

Shortly before ten I returned to my vigil and learnt from my friend the porter that the doctor was still *in casa*. Therefore I idled in patience, glancing from time to time up at the windows of the apartment in question. There were lights there, but the green *persiennes* were still closed, as they had been all day.

As the night wore on the street became extra full of idling promenaders, for it was *festa* and all Rome was out to gossip, to lounge and to obtain a breath of the *bel fresco*. Men were crying the evening newspaper in loud strident tones, and here and there walked the police in couples, with their epaulettes and *festa* plumes. Before every café the chairs overflowed into the roadway, and every table was occupied by men and women, mostly in white cotton clothes, sipping sirops. Rome is cosmopolitan only in winter. Rome is the Roman's Rome in summer, bright, merry and light-hearted by night; silent and lethargic by day—a city indicative of the Italian temperament and the Italian character.

I was just about to relinquish my watch, believing that the doctor and his English friend did not intend to come forth that evening, when I suddenly saw Miller in a white linen suit and straw hat emerge from the big

doorway into the street, accompanied by a short, black-bearded, dark-faced Italian of about thirty-five, who also wore a straw hat, fashionably-cut suit of dark cloth, and a drab cotton waistcoat across which was a thick gold albert.

They turned towards the Piazza Colonna, and I at once followed, keeping them well in sight. The doctor appeared to be something of a dandy, for he carried yellow gloves, notwithstanding the oppressive heat, and the crook of his walking-stick was silver gilt. He wore a red cravat, a high collar, and his jacket was cut narrow at the waist with ample skirts, slit up at the back, and turned-over cuffs.

He was a typical Roman elegant, but his face had craft and cunning plainly written upon it. Those dark searching eyes were set too closely together, and although there was a careless, easy-going expression upon his countenance I could see that it was only feigned.

What, I wondered, was the urgent business which had brought Mr Miller post-haste from England?

Deep in conversation they passed up the Corso for a little distance, then turning at the Puspoli Palace they traversed the small streets leading to the Tiber until they reached the Via di Repetta, up which they continued until they suddenly turned into a narrow, ill-lit, dirty street to the right and disappeared into an uninviting wine-shop, one of those low little drinking-houses which abound in the poorer quarters of Rome.

That it was a low neighbourhood I could see at a glance. I had never explored that part of the “Eternal City” before, and had not had time to notice the name of the street.

A few moments after the two men had disappeared I sauntered past and glanced inside. The ceiling was low, and blackened by the lamp suspended in the centre. Upon shelves around were many rush-covered flasks of wine, while at the end was a pewter counter where a coarse tousled-haired woman was standing washing glasses.

At the table three forbidding-looking men, with their felt hats drawn over their eyes, were drinking and throwing dice, shouting excitedly at each throw, while one man rather better dressed was sitting apart writing a

letter, with a long cigar between his lips.

There was, however, no sign of the doctor and his companion who, it seemed, had passed straight into the room beyond. It was hardly the place in which one would have expected to find the owner of that Dorsetshire manor, and I now saw the reason why the doctor had, ever and anon, looked round as though in suspicion that they might be followed.

They had an important appointment there, without a doubt. And, moreover, they were no strangers to the place.

I would have given worlds to have been able to get a peep behind that closed door.

I was, however, forced to remain idling up and down the street, watched and commented upon by the groups of women gossiping at their doors, and scowled at by the men who seemed to lurk smoking in the shadows. They recognised by my clothes and my walk that I was a *forestiero*, a stranger, and wondered probably whether I was not an agent of police.

After half an hour Miller and his friend came out, accompanied by a young girl, hatless, as is the mode among the people, and with a bright yellow scarf twisted around her neck. She was about seventeen, good-looking, wore big gold ear-rings and showed an even set of white teeth as she spoke to Miller and laughed.

Together they set off along the Lugo Tevere, crossed the Ponte S. Angelo, and plunged into that labyrinth of narrow dirty streets that lay between the river and St. Peter’s. Presently, in a dark street off the Borgo Pia, the girl left them, and halting they stood talking together after lighting cigarettes.

The girl hurried on and was lost in the darkness, yet they were evidently awaiting her return.

My own position was a difficult one, for I feared that at any moment Gavazzi’s quick eyes might detect me and point me out to Miller who would recognise me. For fully a quarter of an hour the pair remained there, until at last the girl returned, bringing with her a young man about

twenty-two, a low-born swaggering young fellow who wore his soft grey hat askew, and walked with his hands in his pockets, a man of distinctly criminal type who had probably never done an honest day's work in his life. By the light of the street lamp I saw that he bore across his cheek an ugly cicatrice from an old knife-wound, and that upon his chin was a mole upon which the hair was allowed to grow. The latter was significant—it was the mark of that powerful secret society of criminals, the Camorra.

The girl, who was probably his *inamorata*, introduced them, whereupon he lifted his hat with his finger and thumb and swung it back upon his head with a twist—an action by which one Camorrist betrays his allegiance to the initiated.

For a few moments they conversed together, then the girl, wishing the trio *buona sera*, sped away, and passing me was again lost in the darkness, while the men, walking together slowly, came on in my direction. The doctor was conversing with the young man in low whispers, and it seemed to me that he was giving him certain instructions. But I could not, of course, approach sufficiently near to overhear what was said. Miller was listening, but said nothing, except when addressed by his friend.

Outside the massive Castel S. Angelo there is a cab-rank, and all three entered a closed cab.

That there was some dark conspiracy in progress I could not doubt. The presence of that young swaggerer—a man capable of committing any crime I could see—was distinctly suspicious. Besides they dare not be seen with him; therefore they took a closed cab, the only one upon the rank on that hot night.

They moved off across the bridge, and when they were a hundred yards away I got into one of the open cabs and told the driver to follow, for I was determined at all hazards to ascertain what cunning scheme was in progress.

Fortunately, on account of my linen suit being dirty, I had exchanged it for one of dark blue serge, therefore I was not so conspicuous in the darkness as was Miller. To my surprise they drove direct to the railway station, where they alighted and the doctor went to take tickets. Noticing

this, I told my driver to jump down and overhear their destination, promising him five francs for the information.

In a moment he was gone, while I minded his horse.

Five minutes later he returned, saying:—

“The Signore has taken three second-class tickets to Tivoli.”

Tivoli! What, I wondered, was their object in going out to Tivoli at that hour?

I watched them pass the barrier on to the platform; then I myself took a ticket for the same destination, passed through, and entered an empty compartment of the waiting train. I saw, however, that while Miller and his friend were in a second-class carriage, the young man in the grey felt hat was in a third-class compartment. They were evidently taking precautions not to be seen in his company.

I was sorely tempted to slip across to the police office and ask the *delegato* to allow a detective to accompany me. Yet if I did this I should only be giving Miller into the hands of the police, and thus quite ruin all my chances of discovering the truth. No. If I wished to find out what was in progress I was, I saw, compelled to continue fearless and alone.

Something desperate was in progress, otherwise they would never have sought the services of that young Camorrist. Miller was far too gentlemanly a rascal to associate with common criminals.

The train was a slow omnibus one, and it was past midnight before we drew into the station of Tivoli. I held back, allowing all three to alight before me, and saw that, on the platform, they separated and passed out singly, as though unacquainted. A detective was idling at the barrier as is always the case in Italy, but their appearance did not attract him and they took the dark road leading towards the ancient town which in the daytime commands such beautiful views of Rome and the Campagna, the town that has always been a popular summer resort even since the Augustan age when Maecenas, Hadrian and the Emperor Augustus himself had their villas there, and gave their marvellous fêtes.

As I followed the trio, who still walked separately, I could hear the quiet of the night was broken by the thunder of the giant waterfalls, for me a fortunate circumstance, as the sounds of my footsteps were deadened. In Miller a strange transformation had been effected. He had been conspicuous in his suit of white, yet now he was in dark clothes. He had adopted the trick often practised by malefactors of wearing one suit over the other, so as to be able to enter a place wearing a light suit and gay-coloured scarf, and leave it three minutes afterwards dressed entirely differently. He had simply slipped off his white cotton suit while in the train and had either thrown it out of the window, or left it beneath the seat of the railway-carriage.

Railway searchers and platelayers, even in England, find complete suits of clothes more often than one would imagine.

From the station at Tivoli the road to the town, part of the ancient Valeria, runs down to the St. Angelo Gate. There it branches out in two ways, one entering the town across a high bridge, and the other continuing up the hill and out into the country.

The three men took this latter road, a winding tortuous one which led up past an ancient castle and away to the heights behind. There were no lights, but the night was not exactly dark, and I could distinctly see the white road before me and the figures moving forward. One had gone on rapidly in front, while the other two also walked separately as though strangers.

Suddenly I saw the figure nearest me leave the road and pass into a vineyard. Then a few minutes later, as I went on, I lost sight of the other two and at the same time found that we had reached a splendid old *cinquecento* villa, an enormous place the back of which abutted on to the road. Its great square windows were closely barred as they had been in those old turbulent days when every house had been a fortress, and from the great entrance gate with its crumbling stone lions on either side ran a long dark cypress avenue. The ponderous gate was covered with sheet iron so that I could see only the tops of the trees within.

This was, I supposed, the Villa Verde, the country-house of the man who had died unrecognised in the boarding-house in Shepherd’s Bush.

There was no door leading to the roadway save the great entrance gate. Through that Miller and his companions had certainly not passed, therefore I concluded that they had reached the house by a secret way through the vineyard.

Careful to remain always in the shadow, and moving with greatest caution, I retraced my steps, entered the vineyard at the point where I had seen one figure disappear, and after a few moments discovered a narrow path through the trailing richly laden vines which led through an open gate to a small side door in a wing of the great old building.

I tried it. The handle yielded. They had passed through there, without a doubt!

Should I enter there? Was I not perhaps risking my life in so doing? They were a desperate trio. I knew well my fate, if they discovered that I had learned their secret.

I held my breath. Then with sudden resolve, I slowly pushed the door open and peered eagerly within.

Next instant I drew back aghast.

What I saw there staggered me. I was not prepared for it.

I could distinctly hear my own heart beating within me.

Chapter Thirty One.

The Secret of the Villa Verde.

The unexpected sight that met my eyes within that narrow stone passage was truly horrifying.

An oil lamp shed a faint light at the farther end of the narrow tunnel-like place, and revealed the body of a man lying in a heap in such a position that I saw, in an instant, that some tragedy had occurred.

Creeping forward I bent beside him and touched his hand. It was still warm, yet I saw across the stones a large dark pool—a pool of blood, and at the same moment discovered that it issued from an ugly knife-wound just over the heart.

He was a respectably dressed man of forty, robust, heavily built, with dark moustache and shaven chin. As I touched his hand, which lay helpless at his side, my fingers came into contact with something hard, and I found that strapped around his waist he carried a revolver.

Quickly I took it out, for I had no weapon myself, and at a glance saw that it was the regulation pattern as supplied to the agents of police.

The man who had been stabbed to the heart so unerringly was probably a detective who had been left in charge of the villa after the police had taken possession of the place. Hearing a summons at the door he had perhaps gone to open it, when the ready knife had struck him down, and the desperate trio had passed over his body and entered the villa to prosecute their mysterious object.

I listened. There was no sound. The intruders, whatever their object, were in the main building; for it seemed that this narrow passage merely gave entrance to the servants' quarters. The place was an enormous, rambling one, built, as I afterwards found, by Prince Torlonia in the days of the Borgia Pope, once full of splendour and magnificence, but sadly neglected and degenerated in these modern days.

Again I examined the prostrate man, placing my hand upon his heart but failing to detect any movement. He was dead without a doubt.

Noiselessly I crept forward, my ears strained to catch every sound, my hand gripping the dead man's revolver. If I were discovered I could now, at least, make a fight for life. The fearless way in which they had struck down the detective was sufficient to show me that they would hesitate at nothing.

Those were exciting moments, for at the end of the narrow stone passage I passed through a door, and found myself in a great dark chamber which seemed to be unfurnished. The faint grey light that struggled in through the barred windows was sufficient to allow me to see that it opened into a great square hall, around which was set a number of ancient high-backed chairs of the same epoch as the house itself. The rooms were lined with ancient tapestries falling to decay, and there was everywhere a damp mouldy smell as though that wing of the place had long been closed and uninhabited.

Passing along another corridor, I opened a door at the farther end and found myself at once in the modernised portion of the place, in a corridor where, upon the thick dark red carpet, my feet fell noiselessly, and where a candle which the intruders had probably lit was set upon a table.

Again I listened. I fancied I caught the sound of voices, but was not quite certain.

For some moments I remained there, holding my breath in hesitation. To search for them in that great place was full of danger and difficulty. And yet, having gone so far, I was determined that I would ascertain their object in coming there.

At last, reassuring myself that the voices I had heard were only sounds in my imagination, I went forward again through an open door into a fine long picture-gallery, well carpeted as was the corridor. At the end showed another faint light, for the men had, I now saw, lit a child's night-light which they had probably brought with them.

In that portion of the house there was evidence of wealth and luxury everywhere. Nardini had probably spent a good deal of the public money

upon embellishing that fine old place with its wonderful sculptured fireplaces and frescoed and gilt ceilings.

Still scarcely daring to breathe lest my presence be detected, I went forward again, until of a sudden voices, plain and unmistakable, broke upon my ear, causing me to halt suddenly and stand motionless as a statue.

They were in some room in the vicinity. But where? It was quite dark where I stood, but from a door slightly open at some distance before me shone a thin streak of faint light, evidently from a candle.

Dare I approach and peep within?

At first I hesitated, for the risk was very great, but at last summoning courage I moved across the thick carpet to the open door and peered in.

It was a great salon, I found, a huge, high-roofed place with old gilt furniture upholstered in red silk brocade and some marvellous buhl cabinets full of rare china and *bric-à-brac*. The place was in darkness, save for the single night-light placed upon a chair—the intruders fearing, of course, to ignite the lamps as the light would shine outside and perhaps attract attention.

The great salon led into an inner room, and in there I saw their moving figures by the light of two candles that had been put upon the carpet. They were conversing only in low whispers and seemed to be groping about the floor in the farther corner of the room, as though in search of something.

I slipped into the big salon, and creeping from table to chair, bending double so as to be concealed the whole time, I managed to approach near the door of the inner room, and took up a position where I could both observe their movements and overhear their words.

Now that I reflect upon my actions of that night, I see how utterly reckless of life I was. A single slip, a cough, a sneeze, and I should be lost. And yet, holding my breath, I knelt behind that big gilt armchair wherein the princes of the *cinquecento* had once sat, and watched those men at their mysterious work.

The heavy red plush curtains had been drawn across the long windows, and I recognised that the apartment was a library or study, for there were big cases filled with old parchment-covered volumes, and set before one of the windows was a big carved writing-table. As I watched, the doctor lit the gas-lamp upon it, removing the green silk shade so as to give a better light in the room, and as he did so the young man in the grey hat, who had thrown off his coat and was on his hands and knees on the floor, suddenly picked up something which he handed to Miller, saying in Italian with a grin:—"This looks a little suspicious, does it not, signore?" Miller took the object in his hand, and started. Then I saw that it was a narrow gold bangle—a woman's bracelet. He took it to the light, and read some words inscribed in the inside. Then he stood in silence and wonder.

"What's the matter?" inquired Gavazzi, in broken English. "What is it?"

His friend handed it to him without a word.

But the doctor only shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and handed back the bangle.

At that moment the truth flashed across my mind—the truth unknown to those men. In that room—if that were Nardini's study—the mysterious discovery had been made. The body of an unknown young Englishwoman had been found there.

Was that bangle her property? Miller had certainly recognised the inscription upon it, and knew its owner.

I saw that he stood there with knit brows, still glancing at the bracelet, as though mystified.

"Come," urged Gavazzi, in the brisk businesslike way which appeared to be natural to him. "We have no time to lose if we really intend to be successful." And he went down upon his knees in the farther corner of the room, carefully feeling the surface of the blue velvet-pile carpet with his hands.

"We'd better have it up," he declared at last. "I feel sure it's somewhere in this corner."

“Then you never actually saw it?” remarked Miller, a trifle disappointed.

“No. But it isn’t likely he would ever reveal to me where he kept his most private secrets. We were friends, intimate friends, but Giovanni Nardini was not the man to reveal to even his own father what he considered was a secret. See this!” And rising he walked to the oak-panelled wainscotting, touched a spring, and there was revealed a small secret door leading down to a short flight of steps in the wall somewhere into the cellars below—a secret mode of egress.

Again he went to a book-case, part of which proved false, and there on pulling it away revealed a large iron safe let into the wall.

“You see I am aware of some of his secrets. The police think they’ve searched the place, but they’ve never discovered either of these, that’s very certain,” he laughed.

Then, with the younger man, he proceeded to tear up the carpet, showing that the floor, unlike that in most Italian houses, was boarded and not of mosaic.

All three moved the furniture and gradually rolled the carpet back until they had half-uncovered the room. It was heavy, exciting work, and the perspiration rolled from their brows in great beads.

Once the chair behind which I was concealed moved a little and the wheel squeaked.

Miller’s quick ear caught the sound.

“Hark!” he cried, starting up. “What’s that?”

“A mouse,” exclaimed the doctor, laughing. “I heard it. Don’t worry yourself, my dear James, we are safe enough now with that guard out of the way.”

By the aid of the candles they examined every floorboard, trying each to see if it were movable. But they were all fast, and gave no sign of covering any place of concealment. They seemed to be in search of some cavity where something they believed was concealed.

With their knuckles they tapped all over the floor, but the sound emitted was exactly the same everywhere.

For a full hour they searched until suddenly the doctor, who had been indefatigable, while running his hand along the floor close to the oak wainscoting quite near the writing-table, made a discovery which instantly brought his companions upon their knees at his side.

“Look!” he cried. “See! There is a little piece of a different wood let in here —round like a large wooden stud! I wonder what it is?” He pressed it with his fingers, but to no avail. Therefore he took out his pocket-knife and with the end pressed down hard, throwing all his weight upon his hand. “It gives!” he cried excitedly. “There’s some spring behind it! You are stronger,” he exclaimed, turning to the younger man. “Try. Push down, so!”

Chapter Thirty Two.

The Ticking of the Clock.

The man with the grey hat took the pocket-knife, knelt over the spot, placed the knife in position, and pressed with all his might, when slowly a panel of the oak wainscoting about two feet square fell forward until it lay flat at right angles, disclosing a small locked door behind.

“This is it, no doubt!” cried the doctor, tugging at the door. It yielded, disclosing a secret cupboard.

A clock set upon a cabinet on the side of the room near where I was hidden was ticking. I had not noticed that sound before, and I thought it strange.

Miller held the candle while the others peered within. They all had their backs turned to me, and in my eagerness I bent forward in order to obtain a better view of what was concealed there.

“See!” cried Gavazzi. “I was not mistaken! I knew he had some secret hiding-place here. In this room he spent days, sometimes with me, but more often locked in here alone. Fortunately for us, the police know nothing of this.”

“Yes,” exclaimed Miller. “Let us see what his treasures are. I wonder what he would say if he saw us handling his secrets,” he added, with a short dry laugh. “The papers to-day say that he’s been seen in Bahia.”

Evidently Lucie had for some reason kept her knowledge of the fugitive’s death from her father.

“He was always methodical,” remarked the Italian. “And he seems to have carried out his methods here. Look at all these pigeon-holes! Made by himself, it seems, from their roughness. He dared not call in a carpenter. But he was of a very mechanical turn of mind, and probably constructed the whole thing himself.”

“It certainly would escape observation,” remarked the young man, examining the thick old panel of polished oak that had fallen back.

The doctor had drawn from one of the pigeon-holes a bundle of official-looking papers folded and secured with tape. He glanced at them with critical eye and cast them aside as being without interest. Another, and another, he drew out, but none of them attracted his attention for more than a few moments.

“They are merely secret information collected against various politicians and personages—information that he thought might one day be useful,” said Gavazzi.

“And profitable, eh?” added Miller, with a laugh.

“Quite so. We may find it equally profitable to us one day,” remarked his companion. “They will prove interesting reading when we have time to go through them.”

They were evidently in search of something else. Surely they had not deliberately sacrificed a man’s life to obtain those few dusty papers? What, I wondered, was contained in that precious packet which the owner of that villa had given me before his death?

Two large matrices of official seals Miller drew out and examined.

“Ah! yes!” exclaimed Gavazzi, “I suspected he had those. They are copies of the seal of the Ministry, and with them he fabricated quite a number of official documents. By means of those he sent an order to the convict prison at Volteria to release Rastelli, the forger, who was a friend of his. The Governor at once set him at liberty, and does not know to this day that the order was a forgery. Indeed, I believe that, for a consideration, he used to give out these orders.”

“And he made them himself!” Miller laughed. “A pretty profitable business!” And he turned over the brass seals in his hand, while the little clock ticked on.

“Of course. If he had only been satisfied and not attempted too much, he would have remained years in office without any suspicion falling upon

him. I, however, knew something of what was in progress, and yet he defied me and absolutely refused to let me share. Well—you know the rest," he laughed. "I didn't see why he should take all the profits and I do the work."

"But you managed to be pretty well paid," his friend remarked.

"I merely looked after myself. Yet, if Giovanni had not been a fool and taken me into the affair when he knew that I'd discovered everything, we might have run the Ministry as a joint concern until—well, until the next Cabinet crisis or King Umberto dismissed us. It's a pity—a thousand pities—he was such a fool. But you see he got unnerved, he was afraid of his enemies, and so he acknowledged his peculations by bolting."

"A fatal mistake," Miller declared. "I wonder he didn't get across to Greece. The police couldn't have touched him there. He knew the law of extradition quite as well as you or I. To go to South America is simply running into the arms of the police."

"I question whether he is in America," the doctor said, examining deliberately the contents of another of the pigeon-holes. "The report may have been circulated by the police themselves—as reports so often are—to put the fugitive off his guard. No, I should think that he is more likely in Paris, or Vienna, or Berlin. He could reach either capital by the through train from Rome. He probably put on a suit of workman's clothes and travelled third-class with a stick and a bundle. That's the safest way to get out of the country—don't you think so? We've both done it more than once," he laughed.

There was something distinctly humorous to me in the owner of the Manor at Studland travelling as an Italian labourer among the unwashed third-class passengers and passing the guards at the frontier with his worldly belongings tied up in a dirty handkerchief.

And yet that is a course very often adopted by the international thief as the safest way in which to pass from one country to another.

"*Gran Dio*!" ejaculated Gavazzi a moment later, as he held a small packet open in his hand. "Money! Look!"

Both men bent eagerly, and I saw that the doctor held in his hand a thick packet of yellow bank-notes secured by an elastic band—thousand-franc notes they were, and there could not be less than fifty of them.

“What good fortune!” cried Miller. “It was worth doing after all.”

“I told you it was. This was his secret bank. Probably there’s more inside.”

In an instant the three men tore out the contents of the pigeon-holes and scattered them upon the floor in their eagerness to secure what the dead man had hidden there.

“Here’s another lot!” exclaimed the young man, holding up a second packet, while a few minutes later Miller himself discovered two fat packets, each note for one thousand francs. A fourth packet was discovered containing English twenty-pound notes and some German paper money.

Those were exciting moments. The men scrambled and snatched the packets from each other, tearing them open in their fierce eagerness to ascertain whether they contained notes. In the eyes of all three was that terrible lust for gold that impels men to great crimes, that fierce passion that renders men unconscious of their actions.

Time after time smaller packets were discovered, which they thrust into their pockets uncounted.

There was wealth there—wealth that would place all three of them beyond the necessity of those subterfuges by which they had previously lived—an ill-gotten hoard of bank-notes which I calculated to be of the value of many thousands of English pounds sterling.

And I was witness of their unexpected good fortune, for which the poor unfortunate man in charge had been foully done to death.

Miller suddenly discovered a large packet of thousand-franc notes in the back of the cupboard and pocketed them—a packet double the size of the first—whereupon a fierce quarrel instantly ensued.

Both the doctor and the young man declared that the money should be properly divided, while Miller flatly refused.

Hot words arose—quick accusations and recriminations, the men raising their voices all unconsciously, when of a sudden something entirely unexpected occurred.

The men were silent in an instant—silent in awe.

The clock, hitherto unnoticed by them, had stopped ticking.

Chapter Thirty Three.

Certain Persons are Inquisitive.

The half-open door through which I had been watching the men's mysterious movements, and the discovery of the fugitive's hidden wealth, suddenly closed of its own accord, with the heavy clang of iron.

Besides startling me, it left me in semi-darkness in the great salon.

I heard them rush frantically towards it, trying to open it, but their efforts were unavailing. Loud imprecations escaped them, for they believed that some person had imprisoned them. If they succeeded in escaping they would certainly discover me, therefore my position was one of extreme peril.

But I recollected the strange ticking of that clock which had commenced when the secret cupboard had been opened. The ticking had now ceased, therefore the door had closed automatically upon the intruders. By some clever contrivance Nardini had connected his secret hiding-place with the door that had been strengthened and lined with steel, enamelled white to match the wood-work of the salon. By a clockwork arrangement the door would evidently close upon the inquisitive person who opened the cupboard at a certain time afterwards.

When the little clock standing upon the pearl-inlaid cabinet had suddenly broken the silence by ticking it had attracted my attention, but I quickly forgot it in watching the trio so narrowly. The study window was evidently strongly barred, as were all the windows of the ground floor of the villa, the bars being built into the wall outside the house in such a manner that they could only be filed through, an operation which would take considerable time even with proper tools.

They hammered upon the door and threw their weight upon it, but it did not budge. Evidently by the same mechanical contrivance several strong steel bolts had been shot into their sockets.

The trio at the very moment of their sudden acquisition of Nardini's

dishonestly obtained wealth had been entrapped.

“We’re discovered!” I heard Miller cry in English.

“Whoever has found us has locked us in!”

It never occurred to them that the cupboard and the door were connected, or that Nardini had invented such an ingenious contrivance in order to entrap any thief who might discover his secret.

“We must get out of this as quickly as possible!” Gavazzi exclaimed breathlessly. “Let’s make the division of the money afterwards.”

“The window!” suggested the younger man, but a rapid examination proved it to be too strongly barred.

I heard them within the room consulting with each other as to what could be done, and was amused at their chagrin, having discovered the dead man’s hoard only to be so unexpectedly imprisoned with the wealth upon them.

The two Italians showered fierce imprecations upon whoever had bolted them in, and vowed that the police should never take them alive. They knew, too well, the serious charge they would have to face, for they knew that the body of the detective left in charge would be discovered behind the side door.

A heavy piece of furniture was brought to play upon the study door, but the sound made as they battered with it revealed to them that they were endeavouring to break down iron.

“Hush!” cried Miller suddenly. “We mustn’t make a noise like that. There are probably *contadini* living in the vicinity, and it will awaken them.”

“Bah!” responded the doctor. “They’ll only believe that it’s a ghost. Here the *contadini* are most superstitious.”

“But the *carabinieri* are not,” remarked the young accomplice apprehensively. “My own idea is that we’ve been followed. I noticed a man in a dark suit looking very hard at us when we left the train.”

“What kind of man?” the doctor inquired quickly.

“Looked like an Inglese signore, rather tall, about thirty, and wore a dark suit.”

“Why in the name of Fate didn’t you mention it to us at the time?” cried Miller. “An Inglese! Who could he possibly be? Have you ever seen him before?”

“Never.”

“Then he may have followed us here and alarmed the *carabinieri*!” gasped the doctor. “We must escape—before they arrest us!”

I saw that the young thief had noticed me when I had followed them out into the darkness from the station at Tivoli. He would therefore recognise me if we met again.

They would, no doubt, make a desperate attempt at escape. Yet should I raise the alarm and call the police? Was it policy on my part to do so? If Lucie’s father were arrested, Lucie herself must surely be implicated, and perhaps through Gordon-Wright my own dear love might also find herself in the criminal’s dock.

The mystery had grown so complicated and so inexplicable that I feared to take any step towards the denunciation of the thieves.

My only policy was to wait and to watch.

I recollected Ella’s appeal to me to remain silent concerning the scoundrel under whose banal thrall she had so mysteriously fallen, and I feared that if I made my statement it might lead to the fellow’s arrest.

What, I wondered, was the true explication of the mystery of the unknown girl being found in that room wherein the three thieves were entrapped? Who was she? What did Lucie know concerning her?

A great fear possessed me that the police, in searching, would discover Lucie in Leghorn, though in Italy the detectives always find more difficulty in tracing foreigners than the Italians themselves. Every Italian, when he

moves his habitation even from one street to the other, is compelled to give notice to the police. But not so the large foreign floating population who are for ever moving over the face of what is essentially a tourists' country.

Another great crash upon the door awakened me to a sense of my peril, should these men succeed in escaping. With as little compunction as they had struck down the guard, they would, I knew, strike me down, and even though I had a revolver they were three to one. Besides, a pistol is no use against a knife in the hands of such an expert as the young thief in the grey hat whom they had so swiftly taken into their confidence.

With regret that they had seized that large amount in money, and yet in the hope that they might regain their liberty and remain for some time longer—at least until I had learned the truth concerning my well-beloved—I crept softly back along the great salon, feeling my way before me with my hands. So thick was the carpet that my feet fell noiselessly, and my escape was rendered all the more easy by the noise the men were making by trying to batter down the door.

Swiftly I retraced my steps along the corridors, through the picture-gallery and the older wing of the great house, until I came to the long dim stone corridor. I shuddered as I passed into it, for there lay still undiscovered, and in the same position in which the assassins had left it, the body of the unfortunate police agent who had been left in charge of the fugitive's property which had been seized by the Government. On tiptoe I approached it, and bending, replaced the revolver.

Then with a final glance at the evidence of a horrible deed—a deed committed for the lust of gold—I crept out into the early morning air which blew fresh and cool from over the mountains, causing the leaves of the vines to rustle while a loose sun-shutter creaked mournfully as it swung to and fro overhead.

Retracing my steps through the vineyard I gained the high-road, when the fancy took me to ascend to the back of the villa and listen if I could hear the imprisoned intruders.

Hardly had I reached the top of the hill when the truth was revealed to

me, as I expected. Their voices could be distinctly heard, for one of those strongly barred windows that looked out upon the roadway was that of the room wherein the absconding ex-Minister had concealed the money he had filched from the public purse.

I halted in the darkness beneath the window, trying to catch the drift of the conversation, and even while I stood there one of them pulled aside the heavy curtains and allowed a stream of light to fall across the roadway. It was surely an injudicious action, yet they could not examine the bars without so doing.

Standing back in the shadow I saw them open the window and feel the strength of that thick prison-like grating, the defence in those turbulent days when the place had been a miniature fortress.

“Without a file, it’s impossible to break them,” declared Gavazzi, in a tone of deep disappointment. “But we must get out somehow. Every moment’s delay places us in graver peril. What shall we do?”

I saw that their position was utterly hopeless. They had been caught like rats in a trap. Therefore I crept along under the old stone wall of the villa and made my way down the hill in the direction of where the electric street lamps of the town of Tivoli were shining.

It was, I saw by my watch, already half-past two.

After walking near half a mile, at a bend in the road two carabineers in uniform, with their guns slung upon their shoulders, emerged suddenly upon me and called me to halt.

Imagine my confusion. I held my breath, and perhaps it was fortunate for me that the darkness hid the pallor of my face.

“Who are you?” demanded one of the rural guards in Italian, with a strong northern accent. He was Piedmontese, I think.

“I am an Englishman,” I answered, quite frankly, but making a strenuous effort to remain calm.

“So I hear by your speech,” the man replied gruffly. “And what are you

doing here? The English don’t usually walk about here at this hour?”

“I’ve walked from Palestrina, and lost myself in the darkness. Is that Tivoli down yonder?”

“Yes it is. But what’s your name?” he inquired, as though my quick reply had aroused his suspicions. I regretted my words next instant. I intended to mislead the man, but he evidently did not believe me. I saw that if I was not now perfectly frank I might be arrested on suspicion and detained in the carabineer barracks until morning.

I recognised into what deadly peril my intrepidity had now led me. If they detained me the discovery of the tragedy and robbery at the Villa Verde would certainly be made, and I should find myself implicated with those three assassins. The circumstantial evidence against me would be very strong, and it might be many months before I regained my freedom. In such circumstances I should, alas! lose my Ella for ever!

“My name is Godfrey Leaf, native of London,” was my reply.

“And what brings you here? You certainly haven’t walked from Palestrina. You’d be more dusty than you are.”

“Of course he would,” remarked the man’s companion, shifting his carbine to his other shoulder. “He’s lying.”

“Well,” I said, feigning to be insulted by the fellow’s inquiries, “why should I tell you my business? It is no affair of yours, surely. Do you think I’m an assassin, or on my way to rob some *contadini* of his poultry?”

“We can never tell a man by his dress. Besides, how are we to know who you are—that you are really the person you say?”

I was silent. His question was an awkward one. But suddenly I recollected.

“Well, perhaps this will convince you that I’m a respectable person, eh?” And taking from my pocket-book my Italian revolver licence I handed it to him. He opened it suspiciously, then said; “Come farther down with us, to that light, and let’s have a good look at you.”

Now an Italian licence to carry a revolver is a very different document from that in England. It is issued only in very rare cases by the police themselves to responsible persons who first have to show that they are in danger of their lives from *vendetta* or some other cause, and that to carry a weapon is for them personal defence. Upon the licence is the minute police description of the person to whom it is issued, as well as his signature, while the document is also countersigned by the Prefect of the city whence it is issued. It is therefore the best of all identification papers.

Obeying the guards, I walked with them down to the light at the town gateway where they read the official permit, closely scrutinising me as they reached each individual description, colour of hair and eyes, shape of nose, forehead and head, and the dozen other small details, all of which they found tallied with the licence.

“Born in London and domiciled in Milan, I see,” remarked the carabineer.

“I was living in Milan when I applied to the Public Security Department for the permit.”

“Well,” he said, “it’s lucky for you you had it upon you, otherwise you might have spent a day or two in prison for the untruth you told us.” And he handed back the licence to me with a grim smile. “Perhaps you’ll tell me now where you really have been?”

I saw it necessary to alter my tactics, therefore I answered with a laugh: —

“To tell the truth I came out from Rome last night to keep an appointment —a secret one—with a lady—if you really must know.”

“Then you’d better go back again to Rome,” was his answer, apparently well satisfied, and believing that story more probable. “There’s a train in twenty minutes or so, and we’ll see you into it. We are on our way to the station.”

From that moment we grew friendly, for the carabineers are a splendid body of picked men, and are always polite to the foreigner.

“You were coming down from the villa yonder,” explained the man who

had interrogated me half apologetically. “Therefore we had to ascertain who you were.”

“What villa do you mean?”

“The Onorovele Nardini’s. He’s absconded, as I daresay you’ve heard.”

“Ah?” I said, “I did read in the English journals something about it. And did he live up there?”

“Yes. At the big villa. You must have passed it. He used to live here a great deal, and every one believed him to be an honest man.”

“Wasn’t he?”

“*Dio* no! He got a million francs of the public money, and no one knows what has become of it.” Was either of these men the son of the old concierge in the Via del Tritone, I wondered? I longed to ask them, but dare not. They, of course, told me nothing regarding the mysterious discovery of a woman’s body in the ex-Minister’s study. Perhaps, indeed, they, like all others outside the confidential branch of the police service, were ignorant of it.

“And doesn’t any one know where he is?” I asked, as we strolled at length upon the dark platform of the railway station.

“Oh! He’s *in estero* somewhere. We shall never get him, you may be sure. When once a man like that gets over the frontier he’s gone for ever.”

What, I wondered, would these two men think when, on the morrow, the truth of what had occurred at the Villa Verde became revealed! The body of the detective would be found, and another mystery would succeed the one which was being so carefully suppressed.

Both men accepted cigarettes from my case as we idled up and down the platform awaiting the train for Rome. It was their duty to meet all the night trains and note all arrivals and departures, therefore we passed an idle half-hour gossiping pleasantly until the train drew up, and entering a first-class compartment I bade them farewell and breathed freely again as we

moved off towards the “Eternal City.”

The instant the train was clear of the station I saw my imminent peril. By ill-fortune these guards had met me, they had read my name, seen my description, and knew me well. As soon as the discovery was made in the Villa Verde—indeed, at any moment—they would telegraph those details all over the country and eagerly seek to arrest me as an accomplice. Whether Miller and his friends were arrested or not, they would naturally connect me with the affair. That was but natural.

Fortunately I had succeeded in impressing upon them that I was a respectable person, but I recognised that if I desired to retain my liberty—my liberty to free my love from that mysterious bond which held her to a scoundrel—I must escape from Italy both immediately and secretly.

Before arrival in Rome I took off the gold pince-nez I habitually wore, discarded my collar and cravat, tied my handkerchief around my neck in attempt at disguise, and so passed the barrier. Afterwards I walked some distance, and then took a cab to the hotel.

At eight o’clock, with a ticket for Florence by way of Pisa, I was in the express for the frontier at Modane. I purposely took a ticket for Florence, and then from Pisa, at two o’clock in the afternoon, I took another ticket to Turin. If my departure had been noted, they would search for me in Florence.

That journey was, perhaps, one of the most exciting in all my life. I travelled third-class, attired in an old suit, old boots, and a handkerchief tied about my neck. In Turin I had four hours to wait, as the express to Paris did not convey third-class passengers, and those four hours passed slowly, for being a constant traveller I was known by sight by the waiters in the buffet and many officials. Therefore I was compelled to avoid them. Besides, was I not still in Italy? The police had no doubt already discovered what had occurred at the Villa Verde, and from Rome my description had probably been telegraphed along every line of railway.

Next morning, however, before it was light, I descended from the omnibus-train that had crawled up the Alpine slopes and through the Mont Cenis tunnel, and found myself upon the long dreary platform at the

French frontier, Modane.

I had now to face the pair of scrutinising Italian detectives who I knew stood at the door of the Custom House watching every one who leaves the country.

It was a breathless moment. If I passed them without recognition I should be free. If not—well it would mean disaster, terrible and complete, both for me and to the woman I so dearly loved.

I was risking all, for her sake, because she was mine. I was striving to solve the mystery, and to gain knowledge that would place her beyond the reach of that blackguard who held her so irrevocably in his power.

Summoning all my courage I gripped the bundle which contained a few necessaries—for the remainder of my luggage I had sent direct to Charing Cross and posted the receipt for it to my club—and went forward into the Custom House, displaying my belongings to the French *douanier*.

They had been viséd, I had tied them up again in the big handkerchief, and was passing out.

Another moment and I should be upon French territory.

Suddenly, however, a heavy hand was placed upon my shoulder, and a voice exclaimed in Italian:—

“One moment! Excuse me. I have a word to say to you!”

Turning with a start I faced a short man in a light tweed suit, while behind him stood the two detectives.

My heart sank within me. I knew that the affair at the Villa Verde had been discovered, and that I was lost!

Chapter Thirty Four.

Love in Fetters.

“Just step in here one moment,” said the man in the grey suit. “I want to ask you a question.” And he conducted me to a small office at the farther end of the platform, the bureau of the Italian police.

“Now who are you?” he asked, fixing me with his keen dark eyes, while the two detectives, who had evidently been expecting my arrival and identified me from the telegraphed description, stood by watching.

“My name is Sampson—Samuel Sampson,” was my prompt reply, for during the whole of the previous day I had gradually concocted a story in readiness for any emergency.

“Oh!” exclaimed the *delegato* in disbelief. “And what are you?”

“Under-steward on board the *Italia* of the Anchor Line between Naples and New York. I landed yesterday morning at Leghorn, and am going home on a holiday to London. Why?” I asked, with feigned surprise.

“You left Rome yesterday,” he said, “and your name is Godfrey Leaf,”—he pronounced it “Lif.”

“Oh!” I laughed, “that’s something new. What else? If you doubt me here’s my passport. It’s an English passport with the Italian visé, and I fancy it ought to be good enough for you.”

And I handed him Sammy Sampson’s passport which had been in the writing-book in my suit-case for close upon a year—ever since he and I had taken a short trip to San Sebastian, over the Spanish border.

The police inspector opened the document, glanced at the visa of the Italian Consulate-General in London, and carefully spelt the name of Sampson.

“There is no description or profession,” he remarked dubiously.

“Well,” I said, “I suppose that is not the first English passport you’ve seen, is it? But I don’t think you have ever seen one different, or with fuller detail than that!”

“Then you are not Godfrey ‘Lif’?” he asked, still dubious.

“I’m what I’ve already told you. What do you suspect of me? I’m an Englishman travelling home, I’ve committed no crime or offence against the law, and I don’t see why I should suffer this indignity! But if you desire to be satisfied, you are perfectly at liberty to search me and my belongings.” And I handed him my bundle.

“We’ve already seen it when it was examined in the *dogana*,” remarked one of the detectives.

My revolver licence, card-case, cigarette-case and other articles that might betray me I had been careful to put in my trunk which was registered through to London. Therefore I had thoroughly assumed my friend’s identity. English passports are so vague and lax that the greatest abuses are often committed with them.

I was quick to notice that my prompt reply to the questions rather nonplussed my interrogator. He took the official telegram from the table, read what it contained very carefully, and then looked long and earnestly at me.

I remained firm and unmoved, well knowing that all my future happiness depended upon my calm indifference. Yet indifference at such a moment was a matter of extreme difficulty.

He began to put other questions to me, in the hope, it appeared, of making me commit myself to a falsehood. But I was now thoroughly on the alert, and gave quick, unhesitating replies.

Had the inspector been an Englishman he would probably have detected by my speech that I was not an under-steward, but being Italian he was thus handicapped. Indeed, so circumstantial an account did I give of getting two months’ leave from my ship to visit my mother in London, and in addition presenting a passport perfectly in order, that just before the train was leaving for France he and his companions, filled with doubt as

to whether I was actually the person wanted, allowed me to walk out again upon the platform—a free man!

Five minutes later I had mounted into an empty third-class compartment, but I dare not breathe before the train slowly moved away in the "direction de Paris."

The terrible anxiety of those moments will surely live with me until my dying day, for I had both love and life at stake; my own love, my well-beloved's life!

After thirty hours of slow travelling and constant stoppages and shuntings I arrived at the Gare de Lyon, and again resuming the luxury of a collar and cravat I purchased a ready-made suit of blue serge, a hard felt hat and a few necessaries, for no longer I needed the disguise of a workman.

Contrary to my usual custom of going to the Grand, I put up at the Athenée, which is greatly patronised by Americans, and where I had a New York friend staying at that moment. Then, after dinner, I telegraphed to Leghorn to Lucie Miller telling her that I had left Italy, and that if she wished to communicate with me she should write or telegraph. My idea was that if her father had been arrested, as he most probably had been, she would certainly require the assistance of some friend, and might probably prefer me. Of course she would not willingly admit to me her father's disgrace, yet by her own actions I should be pretty well able to judge what had taken place.

I was eager to be back near Ella, yet before I crossed to England I determined to await a reply to my message to Lucie.

For three days I remained in suspense, idling with my American friend in cafés and restaurants, and showing him Paris in a mild kind of way.

I had searched the French and English newspapers diligently to learn any details of the affair at the Villa Verde, but in vain, until one evening in the reading-room of the hotel I came across a copy of the *Corriere della Sera*, the journal of Milan, in which was a long telegram from Rome, headed: "The Escape of the Minister Nardini: Mysterious Tragedy at the Villa Verde."

In breathless eagerness I read how the police, on going in the morning to relieve the guard placed at the villa, found the unfortunate man lying dead with a knife-wound in his heart. Thieves had evidently entered the house by the window of the study which looked out upon the roadway, for the iron bars had been filed through and a space made sufficient to admit a man. Nothing, however, had been taken, as far as could be ascertained. The study was in complete order, and the police theory was that the man in charge, hearing the noise, had entered the room only to be confronted by several men. He then fled across the house intending to get out and raise the alarm, when he was overtaken in the passage and stabbed.

The theory was, of course, quite a natural one.

The thieves had, it seemed, before their escape placed the room in order, closed the secret cupboard, replaced the panel, and put down the carpet as they had found it. The action of reclosing the panel had, of course, released the bolts that held the door, but they had already, by some means or other, cut through the bars. Probably they escaped without knowing that the door had been automatically released.

In any case they were clear away with a sum amounting to many thousands of pounds sterling—probably the greatest haul Miller had made in all his career.

There was, however, a second telegram which stated that two carabineers patrolling the road near the villa had stopped and questioned a mysterious Englishman who was now suspected to be one of the assassins, and after whom the police were in active search.

Miller and his companions were actually scot-free—and with their enormous booty!

No word was published regarding the mysterious discovery previously made in that house. The police were still hushing up the affair that was so shrouded in mystery, yet at the same time they evidently connected the two curious circumstances, and regarded them as a problem altogether beyond solution. Little, however, did they dream that the missing man’s secret hoard had been carried off in its entirety!

Next morning, when the waiter brought my coffee, a telegram lay upon the tray. It was from Lucie, despatched the previous day from the Swiss frontier at Chiasso, announcing that she and her father were on their way to Paris and would arrive that night at the Hôtel de Grand, which proved to be a modest little place in the Rue de la Michodière, near the Boulevard des Italiens.

Miller was escaping with those thick packets of thousand-franc notes which I had seen him secure, though Lucie was, of course, in entire ignorance of what had occurred.

Next morning I anxiously sought her. She came to me in the little salon of the unpretending hotel, a neat figure in her blue serge travelling-dress and smart little toque. Greeting me enthusiastically, she exclaimed:—

“How suddenly you went from Leghorn! I sent down to the Palace Hotel, for I wanted to see you again, but you had gone. I wanted to tell you that I’ve heard from Ella. The tenant of Wichenford has been recalled suddenly to America, and she and Mr Murray are back there for a little while. I thought you would like to know this.”

“Know it? Of course I do. I shall leave Paris to-night,” I said, glad to have news of my well-beloved.

“We also leave to-night. We are on our way back to Studland. Father wired me to meet him in Milan, and I did so. Then he explained that we were going home again, and that we should not return to Italy till the spring.”

He would probably never return to Italy, I thought, though I said nothing, except to congratulate her upon the prospect of spending a few months in Dorsetshire at the old home she loved so well.

At that moment Miller himself entered, surprised to find me there, but shaking my hand warmly said:—“Why, my dear Leaf! who would have thought to find you here? I believed you were in England.”

“Miss Lucie sent me word that you were passing through Paris,” I explained, “so it was my duty to call and pay my compliments.”

“We’ve just been on a flying visit to Italy,” he said. “I had some rather pressing affairs to attend to in Rome. To-night, however, we go back to Studland.”

“Mr Leaf is also crossing with us,” remarked his daughter.

“Oh! excellent!” exclaimed the man whom I had last seen cramming those ill-gotten notes into his pockets, his face flushed with the eager lust for wealth, his voice raised loudly in angry protest against an equal division of the booty. “We’ll meet at the Gare du Nord, eh?”

Calm, grey-faced, distinguished-looking and of gentlemanly bearing, surely no one would have ever dreamed that his character was such as it really had been proved to be. He offered me a cigarette, lit one himself, and all three of us went out for a stroll along the Boulevard and the Rue de la Paix. We lunched together in one of the little restaurants in the Palais Royal, but neither by word nor deed did Miller display any fear of recognition.

I wondered in what direction Gavazzi had fled; and would have given a good deal to know how they had managed to get through those formidable bars which I had believed unbreakable.

Lucie’s father being with us the whole time, I had no opportunity of speaking to her alone. At three o’clock I left them at the hotel, and at nine that evening joined them in the night-mail for Calais and London.

On board the steamer, Miller went below, while I got Lucie a deck-chair, wrapped her in an oilskin borrowed from a seaman, and sat beside her.

The night was a perfect one, with a bright full moon shining over the Channel, and as we sat we watched the flashing light of Calais slowly disappearing at the stern.

“Your father seems to be returning quite unexpectedly to England,” I said presently, after she had been admiring the reflection of the moon upon the glittering waters.

“Yes. I was quite surprised. He gave me no warning. Poor old dad is always so very erratic. He told me to meet him at the Metropole in Milan,

and hardly gave me time to get there. I had to leave the house within an hour of receiving his wire."

"Did he telegraph from Rome?"

"No. From Ancona, on the Adriatic."

So he had escaped at once to the other side of Italy without returning to Rome.

"What has Ella told you in her letter?"

"Nothing more than what I have already explained. She makes no mention of—of the man whom we need not name."

"I am now going home to expose him," I said determinedly. "I have fully considered all the risks, and am prepared to run them."

"Ah!" she cried, turning to me in quick alarm, "do not do anything rash, I beg of you, Mr Leaf! There is some mystery—a great mystery which I am, as yet, unable to fathom—but to speak at this juncture would assuredly only implicate her. Of that I feel sure from certain information already in my possession."

"You've already told me that. But surely you don't think I can stand by and see her go headlong to her ruin without stretching forth a hand to save her. It is my duty, not only as her lover but also as a man. The fellow is a thief and a scoundrel."

When we love much we ourselves are nothing, and what we love is all.

"I only beg of you to be patient and be silent—at least for the present," she urged.

Was she in fear, I wondered, lest any revelation I made should implicate her father? Was it possible that she had any suspicion that he was at that moment seeking asylum in his comfortable English home?

All the disjointed admissions which she had made regarding her acquaintance with the dead Minister for Justice, her appeal to him to

speak the truth and clear her of some mysterious stigma, and her mention of the Villa Verde out at Tivoli crowded upon me. When we suffer very much everything that smiles in the sun seems cruel.

Beneath that beautiful face, pale in the bright moonbeams shining upon it, was mystery—a great unfathomable mystery. Was she not daughter of one of the cleverest thieves in Europe? And, if so, could she not most probably keep a secret if one were entrusted to her?

For some ten minutes or so I was silent. The engines throbbed, the dark waters hissed past, and swiftly we were heading for the lights of Dover.

At any moment Miller, who had gone below to get a whisky and soda with a friend he had met, a gentlemanly-looking Englishman, might return. I wondered whether it were judicious to tell her one fact.

At last I spoke.

“You recollect, Miss Miller, that you once mentioned the Villa Verde, at Tivoli, where, I think, Nardini lived the greater part of the year?”

“Yes,” was her rather mechanical answer. “Why? What causes you to recollect that?”

“Because—well, because the other day I learnt something in confidence concerning it.”

“Concerning the villa!” she gasped, starting and turning to me with a changed expression of fear and apprehension. “What—what were you told? Who told you?”

“Well, probably it is a fact of which you are unaware, for only the police know it, and they have hushed it up,” I said. “After the flight of Nardini the police who went to search the villa and seize his effects made a very startling discovery.”

“Discovery! What did they find?” she inquired eagerly, her face now blanched to the lips.

“The body of a young woman—the young Englishwoman who was your

friend!” I said, with my eyes fixed upon her.

She started forward, glaring at me open-mouthed. She tried to speak, but no sound escaped her lips. Her gloved hands were trembling, her dark eyes staring out of her head.

“Then the police have searched!” she gasped at last.

“They know the truth! I—I am—”

And she fell back again into the long deck-chair, rigid and insensible.

Chapter Thirty Five.

An Evening at Hyde Park Gate.

When Miller returned and found his daughter conscious but prostrate, he naturally attributed it to *mal-de-mer*, and began to poke fun at her for being ill upon such a calm sea.

She looked at me in meaning silence.

Then, when he had left us to walk towards the stern, she said in a low, apologetic voice:—

“Forgive me, Mr Leaf. I—I’m so very foolish. But what you have told me is so amazing. Tell me further—what have the police found at the villa?”

I wondered whether she had seen in any of the Italian papers an account of the second discovery—the man who had been so brutally done to death.

“Well, from what I gather the police found a dead woman locked in Nardini’s study.”

“And has she been identified?” she asked eagerly.

“I believe not. All that is known about her is that she was your friend.”

“Ah, yes!” she sighed, as though she had previous knowledge of the tragedy. “And they know that—do they? Then they will probably endeavour to find me, eh?”

“Most probably.”

“Perhaps it is best that I should return to England, then,” she remarked, as though speaking to herself. “I wonder if they will discover me here?”

“I understand that they know your name, but are ignorant of where you reside. Besides, in England your name is not an uncommon one.”

“I hope they’ll never find me, for I have no desire to answer their inquiries. The affair is an unpleasant one, to say the least.”

“The police have some ulterior object in view by hushing it up,” I remarked.

“Yes. But how did you know?”

“A friend told me,” was my vague reply. She, of course, never dreamed that I had been in Rome.

“He told you my name?”

“He was an Italian, therefore could not pronounce it properly. The police evidently do not know, even now, that Nardini is dead.”

“No, I suppose not,” she said. “But—well, what you’ve told me is utterly staggering.”

“Then you were not aware of the mysterious affair?”

“Aware of it! How should I be?”

“Well, you were Nardini’s friend. You were a frequent visitor at the Villa Verde. You told me so yourself, remember.”

She did not reply, but sat staring straight before her at the stream of moonlight upon the rolling waters.

Whether she were really acquainted with the details of the tragic affair or not, I was unable to decide. She, however, offered me no explanation as to who the unknown woman was, and from her attitude I saw that she did not intend to reveal to me anything. Perhaps the mere fact that I had gained secret knowledge caused her to hold me in fear lest I should betray her whereabouts.

The situation was hourly becoming more complicated, but upon one point I felt confident, namely, that she held no knowledge of the second tragedy at the villa—a tragedy in which her father was most certainly implicated.

The tall grey-faced man in the long overcoat—the mysterious Mr Miller who was carrying thousands of pounds in stolen notes upon him—returned to us, and a few minutes later we had landed at Dover and were seated in the train for Charing Cross.

I got my pretty travelling companion a cup of tea, and soon after we had started she closed her eyes, and, tired out, dropped off to sleep. Miller, however, as full of good-humour as ever, kept up a continual chatter. Little did he dream that I had been an eye-witness of that wild scene of excitement when the dead man's hoard had been discovered, or that I knew the truth concerning the unfortunate guard who had been struck down by a cowardly but unerring hand.

"Oh!" he sighed. "After all, it's good to be back again in England. A spell at home will do Lucie good. She's growing far too foreign in her ways and ideas. For a long time she's wanted to spend a year or so in England, and now I'm going to indulge her."

"Then you won't be returning abroad for some time?"

"Not for a year, I think. This winter I shall do a little hunting up in the Midlands, I know a nice hunting-box to let at Market Harborough. Years ago I used to love a run with the hounds, and even now the sight of the pink always sends a thrill through me."

"Does Lucie ride?"

"Ride, of course. She's ridden to hounds lots of times. She had her first pony when she was eight."

"Then she'll enjoy it. There's very good society about Market Harborough, I've heard."

"Oh! yes. I know the hunting lot there quite well, and a merry crowd they are. The Continent's all very well for many things, but for real good sport of any kind you must come to England. In the Forest of Fontainebleau they hunt with an ambulance waggon in the rear!" he laughed.

And in the same strain he chattered until just after dawn we ran into Charing Cross, where we parted, he and Lucie going to the Buckingham

Palace Hotel, while I took a cab out to Granville Gardens, Shepherd's Bush.

When I walked into Sammy's room at seven o'clock he sat up in bed and stared at me.

"Why? What on earth has brought you back so soon, old chap? I thought you were going to be away all the autumn and winter!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, got a bit sick of travelling, you know," I laughed, "so I simply came back, that's all. They can give me a room here, I hear, so I'll stay."

"You'll stay here till you go away again, eh?" my friend laughed, for he knew what an erratic wanderer I was.

I sat on the edge of the bed and chatted to him while he shaved and dressed.

While we breakfasted together in his sitting-room he suddenly said:—

"There was a fellow here the other day making inquiries regarding our dead Italian friend."

"Oh, what was he? A detective?"

"No. I don't think so. Miss Gilbert referred him to me. He was a thin-faced, clean-shaven chap, and gave his name as Gordon-Wright."

"Gordon-Wright!" I gasped, starting to my feet. "Has that fellow been here? What did you tell him?"

"Well, I told him nothing that he wanted to know. I didn't care about him, somehow, so I treated him to a few picturesque fictions," Sammy laughed.

"You didn't tell him that the dead man was Nardini?"

"Not likely. You recollect that you urged me to say nothing, as the Italian Embassy did not wish the fact revealed."

“Ah! That’s fortunate!” I cried, much relieved. “What did you tell him?”

“I said that it was true an Italian gentleman did die here, but he was a very old man named Massari. Before he died his son joined him, and after his death took all his belongings away. Was that right?”

“Excellent.”

“The stranger made very careful inquiries as to the appearance of the man who died, and I gave an entirely wrong description of him. I said that he had white hair and a long white beard, and that he walked rather lame, with the help of a stick. In fact I showed him a stick in the hall which I said belonged to the dead man. He was also very inquisitive regarding the man’s son who I said had taken away all his belongings. I described him as having a short reddish beard, but a man of rather gentlemanly bearing. The fellow Gordon-Wright struck me as an awful bounder, and that’s why I filled him up with lies. Do you know him? Is he a friend of yours?”

“Friend!” I echoed. “No, the reverse. I wonder what he wanted to discover. You didn’t mention me, I suppose?”

“No. Why should I?”

“I’m glad of that, for there’s evidently some fresh conspiracy in progress.”

“Probably there is. He’s a shrewd fellow without a doubt.”

“An outsider, my dear Sammy,” I declared. “That fellow’s a thief—a friend of Miller’s.”

“Of Miller’s!” he cried, in his turn surprised. “Is he really one of the gang?”

“Certainly he is. Moreover, I happened to be present when he robbed an American in a hotel at Nervi, near Genoa, and if I said a word to the police he’d ‘do time,’ depend upon it.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“Because just at the present time it doesn’t suit my purpose,” was my

reply. “I want first to find out the reason of his visit here.”

“Wants to establish the death of the fugitive, I suppose. He certainly, however, got nothing out of me. You know me too well, and can trust me not to give away anything that’s a secret.”

“Was he alone?”

“Yes. He came here alone, but Miss Gilbert says that a lady was waiting for him in a hansom a few doors along the road—a young lady, she thinks.”

Was it my Ella, I wondered? If so, she might be in London staying with her aunt, as she so frequently did in the old days.

“How long ago did all this occur?” I asked.

“On Saturday—that would be four days ago. He came about five in the afternoon. When Miss Gilbert referred him to me he apparently resented it, believing that he could induce her to tell him all he wanted.”

“But even she doesn’t know that it was the notorious Nardini who died up stairs.”

“No, but I don’t fancy she’s such a ready liar as I am, old chap,” laughed Sammy. “He started the haw-haw attitude, and with me that don’t pay—as you know. I did the haw-haw likewise, and led him to believe that I was most delighted to be of any assistance to him in helping him to trace his friend.”

“His friend! Did he say that Nardini was his friend?”

“He didn’t mention his name. He only said that an intimate friend of his, an Italian from Rome, had, he knew, arrived in London and suddenly disappeared. He had prosecuted most diligent search, and having ascertained from the registrar of deaths that an Italian had died there he wondered whether it might not be his friend. Whereupon I at once described a man something like Father Christmas without his muff and holly, and at length he went away quite satisfied that the man who died upstairs was not the person he was in search of.”

“He didn’t say where he was living, or leave any address?”

“He wasn’t likely to if he’s one of Miller’s crowd,” my friend exclaimed. “But I wonder what’s in the wind? He has some distinct object in establishing Nardini’s death.”

“Probably fears some revelation which the fugitive might make if he had fallen into the hands of the police,” I suggested. “The ex-Minister wasn’t a very bright specimen himself from all accounts and from those papers we discovered. He was a blackmailer and a brute, as well as an embezzler.”

“Well,” declared Sammy, “if you really have direct evidence against this fellow Gordon-Wright, I should just tell the truth at Scotland Yard. I’d dearly love to see Miller in the dock, too, for if any one deserves to pick oakum for a few years, he does. But he’s such a cunning knave, and passes so well as a gentleman, that nobody ever suspects.”

“They say he’s dined and slept at half the best country-houses in Dorsetshire and Devonshire, and I believe he’s going to hunt from Market Harborough this coming season.”

“The deuce he is! What infernal audacity! I feel myself like denouncing him.”

“Better not—at least at present, my dear fellow. Besides—for his daughter’s sake.”

“Daughter be hanged! She’s as bad as her father, every bit.”

“No, I disagree with you there,” I protested. “The girl is innocent of it all. She believes implicitly in her father, but beyond that she is in some deadly fear—of what I can’t yet make out.”

“Then you’ve seen her lately, eh?”

“Quite recently,” I replied, though I told him nothing of the exciting events of the past seven or eight days. The knowledge I had gathered I intended to keep to myself, at least for the present.

About four o’clock that afternoon I called upon Ella’s aunt, a widow

named Tremayne, who lived in a comfortable house in Porchester Terrace. I was ceremoniously shown into the drawing-room by the grey-headed old butler, and presently Mrs Tremayne, an angular old person in a cap with yellow ribbons, appeared, staring at me through her gold-rimmed spectacles and carrying my card in her hand.

I had met her on one occasion only, in the days when Ella and I used to meet in secret in those squares about Bayswater, and I saw that she did not recollect me.

“I have called,” I said, “to ask if you can tell me whether your brother, Mr Murray, is in London. I heard that he and Miss Ella have gone back to Wichenford, but I think that they may possibly be in town just now. I have only to-day returned from abroad, and do not want to journey down to Worcestershire if they are in London.”

She regarded me for a few moments with a puzzled air, then said in a hard, haughty voice: “Your name is somehow familiar to me. Am I right in thinking that you were the Mr Leaf whom my niece knew two or three years ago?”

“I am,” I replied. “I have met Miss Murray again, and our friendship has been resumed.”

“Then if that is so, sir,” replied the old lady, glaring at me, “I have no information whatever to give you concerning her. I wish you good-afternoon.” And the sour old lady touched the bell.

“Well, madam,” I said, in rising anger, “I believed that I was calling upon a lady, but it seems that I am mistaken. I fail to see any reason for this treatment. You surely can tell me if your brother is in town?”

“I refuse to say anything. My brother’s affairs are no concern of mine, neither are yours. There was quite sufficient unpleasantness on the last occasion when you were running after Ella. It seems you intend to resume your tactics.”

“On the contrary, I hear that your niece is engaged to be married to a gentleman named Gordon-Wright.”

“That is so,” she answered, thawing slightly and readjusting her glasses. “They are to be married very soon, I believe. The wedding was fixed for Thursday week, but it has been postponed for a short time. My brother is much gratified at the engagement. Mr Gordon-Wright is such a nice gentleman, and just fitted to be her husband. He dined here a week ago, but has now gone abroad.”

“And you found him charming?” I asked, though I fear that my voice betrayed my sarcasm.

“Most charming. They appear to be an extremely happy couple.”

“And because you think I have an intention to come between them, Mrs Tremayne, you refuse to answer a simple question!”

“I am not bound to answer any question put to me by a stranger,” was her haughty reply.

“Neither am I bound to return civility for incivility,” I said. “I congratulate this Mr Gordon-Wright upon his choice, and at the same time will say that when we meet again, madam, you will perhaps be a trifle less insulting.”

“Perhaps,” she said; and as the butler was standing at the open door I was compelled to bow coldly and follow him out.

As he opened the front door I halted a moment and said, as though I had forgotten to make inquiry of his mistress:—

“Miss Ella is staying here—is she not?”

“Yes, sir,” was the man’s prompt reply. “She came up from the country yesterday.”

I thanked the man, descended the steps, and walked along Porchester Terrace wondering how best to act. Of love there is very little in the world, but many things take its likeness.

I must see my love at all costs. She had continued to postpone her marriage so as to allow me time to unmask her enemy and free her from the peril which threatened.

Gordon-Wright was abroad. Therefore a secret meeting with Ella was all the easier. Yes, I would keep watch upon that house, as I had done in the days long ago, and see if I could not meet her and make an appointment. To write to her would be unwise. It was best that I should see her and reassure her.

Therefore through all the remainder of the afternoon I waited about in the vicinity, but in vain. Even if she went out to dine, or to the theatre, she certainly would return to her aunt's to dress, and, sure enough, just before seven, she came along in a hansom in the direction of the Park.

I was about to raise my hat as my dear one passed, when I suddenly discovered that she was not alone. By her side, elegant in silk hat and frock-coat, sat the clean-shaven man who held her enthralled.

He was therefore not abroad, as the snappy old woman had said.

I turned my face quickly to the wall, so that neither should recognise me, and passed on.

For three days in succession I kept almost constant watch along that wide-open thoroughfare. Several times I saw Mr Murray, but hesitated to come forward and greet him. Mrs Tremayne drove out each afternoon in her heavy old landau and pair, but curiously enough I saw nothing further either of Ella or of the man to whom she was betrothed.

The hours of that vigil were never-ending. I wanted my dear one to know that I was awaiting her. Time after time I passed the house in the hope that she would recognise me from the window, but never once did I catch sight of her.

One afternoon I received a telegram from Miller asking me to call at the hotel. I did not know that they were still in London. On arrival I found him with Lucie. There was another caller, a middle-aged American named George Himes, who appeared to be an intimate friend. After some conversation we all four went out together, and subsequently Mr Himes, who seemed a very amusing type of shrewd New Yorker, invited all of us to his rooms to dinner—to take pot-luck, as he called it.

At first I declined, feeling myself an interloper. Miller's friends were such a

mixed lot that one never knew whether they were thieves, like himself, or gentlemen. Himes appeared to be a gentleman. Therefore on being pressed to join the party I consented, and later on we drove to a cosy little flat at Hyde Park Gate, where we dined most excellently, Lucie joining us when we smoked our cigars.

Himes, a rather stout rosy-faced man, seemed a particularly pleasant companion and full of a keen sense of humour, therefore the evening passed quite merrily. Miller and he were old friends, I gathered, and had not met for quite a long time.

“You won’t go for a minute or two, Mr Leaf,” he said, when, soon after eleven o’clock, Miller drained his glass and with Lucie rose to leave. “You’ll get home to Shepherd’s Bush quickly from here.” And thus persuaded, I remained and joined him in a final glass of whisky and soda.

We were alone in the pretty little smoking-room, lounging in the long low cane chairs. My host was lazily blowing rings of smoke towards the ceiling and remarking what a very excellent fellow Miller was, when I raised my whisky to my lips and took a gulp. It tasted curious, yet I did not like to spit it out or to make any remark.

My host, I noticed, had his eyes fixed strangely upon me, as though watching my countenance.

In an instant I grew alarmed. His face had changed. Its good-humour had given place to an expression of hatred and triumph.

At the same moment I felt a strange sensation of nausea creeping over me, a chill feeling ran down my spine, while my throat contracted, and my limbs became suddenly paralysed.

“You scoundrel!” I cried, staggering to my feet and facing him. “I know now! You’ve poisoned me—you devil!”

“Yes,” he laughed, with perfect sangfroid. “You are one of Jimmy Miller’s crowd, and one by one I shall exterminate the lot of you! I owe this to you!”

I swayed forward as I drew my revolver to defend myself, but next instant

he had wrenched it from my nerveless grasp.

I saw his grinning exultant face in mine. There was the fire of murder in his eyes.

Then I sank to the floor and knew no more. He had mistaken me for one of Miller’s accomplices, and I was helpless in his revengeful hands.

Chapter Thirty Six.

Two Mysteries.

My first recollections were of endeavouring to see through a blood-red cloud that hid everything from my distorted vision.

The pains in my head and through my spine were excruciating, while my throat burned as though it had been skinned by molten lead poured down it. I tried to speak, but my tongue refused to move. I could articulate no sound.

I felt the presence of persons about me, people who moved and spoke softly as though in fear of awaking me. My eyes were, I believe, wide-open, and yet I could not see.

Some liquid was forced between my teeth by an unseen hand, and I drank it eagerly, for it was deliciously cold and refreshing.

Then I fell asleep again, and I believe I must have remained unconscious for a long time.

When at last I opened my eyes, I found myself in a narrow, hospital bed. A row of men in other beds were before me, and a nurse in uniform was approaching from the opposite side of the ward.

I turned my head, and saw that a rather plain-faced nurse was seated beside me, holding my hand, her finger, I believe, upon my pulse, while on the opposite side sat a bald-headed man in uniform—a police constable.

“Where am I?” I managed to ask the nurse.

“In St. George’s Hospital, and you may congratulate yourself that you’ve had a very narrow escape. Whatever made you do such a thing?”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Take poison.”

“Take poison? What do you mean?”

“Well, sir,” exclaimed the constable, in a not unkind tone, “I found you the night before last on a seat in Kensington Gardens. There was this empty bottle beside you,” and he held up a small dark blue phial.

“Then you think that I attempted suicide!” I exclaimed, amazed.

“I didn’t think you’d only attempted it—I believed you’d done the trick,” was the man’s reply. “You’ve got the ’orspitel people to thank for bringing you round. At first they thought you a dead ’un.”

“And I do thank them,” I said. “And you also, constable. I suppose, however, I’m in custody for attempted suicide, eh?”

“That’s about it, sir. At least that’s why I’m on duty ’ere!”

“Well,” I exclaimed, smiling, “I wonder if you’d like me to make a statement to your inspector. I could tell him something that would interest him.”

“Not now, not now,” protested the nurse. “You’re not strong enough. Go to sleep again. You’ll be better this evening.”

“Well, will you ask the inspector to come and see me this evening?” I urged.

“All right, sir. I’ll see ’im when I go off duty, and tell ’im what you say.”

Then the nurse shook a warning finger at me, and gave me a draught, after which I fell again into a kind of dreamy stupor.

It was evening when I awoke, and I found a grey-bearded inspector at my bedside.

“Well?” he said gruffly. “You want to see me—to say something? What is it?”

“I want to tell you the truth,” I said.

“Oh! yes, you all want to do that. You go and make a fool of yourself, and then try and get out of it without going before the magistrate,” was his reply.

“I have not made a fool of myself,” I declared. “A deliberate attempt was made upon my life by an American named George Himes, who had a flat at Hyde Park Gate. I never went into Kensington Gardens. I must have been taken there.”

“Oh!” he exclaimed, rather dubiously. “Do you know what you’re saying? Just tell me your story again.”

I repeated it word for word, adding that I dined at the American’s flat with my friend James Harding Miller and his daughter, who were staying at the Buckingham Palace Hotel.

“I want to see Miss Miller. Will you send word to her that I am here?”

“You say then that she and her father can testify that you dined at Hyde Park Gate. Can they also testify that you were given poison?”

“No. They left previous to Himes giving me the whisky.”

“And why did he do it?”

“I think because he mistook me for another man.”

“Poisoned you accidentally, eh?” he said, in doubt.

“Yes.”

“Very well,” he answered, with some reluctance, “I’ll make inquiries of these people. What’s your name and address?”

I told him, and he wrote it down in his pocket-book. Then he left, and so weak was I that the exertions of speaking had exhausted me.

My one thought was of Ella. I cared nothing for myself, but was filled with

chagrin that just at the moment when I ought to be active in rescuing her from the trap into which she had fallen I had been reduced to impotence. Through the whole night I lay awake thinking of her. Twice we were disturbed by the police bringing in “accidents,” and then towards morning, tired out, I at length fell asleep.

My weakness was amazing. I could hardly lift my hand from the coverlet, while my brain was muddled so that all my recollections were hazy.

I was, of course, still in custody, for beside my bed a young constable dozed in his chair, his hands clasped before him and his tunic unloosened at the collar. Just, however, before I dropped off to sleep another constable stole in on tiptoe and called him outside. Whether he came back I don’t know, for I dozed off and did not wake again until the nurse came to take my temperature, and I found it was morning.

I was surprised to see that the constable was no longer there, but supposed that he had gone outside into the corridor to gossip, as he very often did.

At eleven o’clock, however, the inspector came along the ward, followed by two men in plain-clothes, evidently detectives.

“Well,” he commenced, “I’ve made some inquiries, and I must apologise, sir, for doubting your word. Still suicides tell us such strange tales that we grow to disbelieve anything they say. You notice that you’re no longer in custody. I withdrew the man at five this morning as soon as I had ascertained the facts.”

“Have you found that fellow Himes?”

“We haven’t been to look for him yet,” was the inspector’s reply. “But—” And he hesitated.

“But what?” I asked.

“Well, sir, I hardly think you are in a fit state to hear what I think I ought to tell you.”

“Yes. Tell me—tell me everything.”

“Well, I’ll do so if you promise to remain quite calm—if you assure me that you can bear to hear a very extraordinary piece of news.”

“Yes, yes,” I cried impatiently. “What is it? Whom does it concern?”

He hesitated a moment, looking straight into my eyes. “Then I regret to have to give you sad news, concerning your friend.”

“Which friend?”

“Mr Miller. He is dead.”

“Miller dead!” I gasped, starting up in bed and staring at him.

“He died apparently from the effects of something which he partook of at the house of this American.”

“And Lucie, his daughter?”

“She is well, though prostrated by grief. I have seen and questioned her,” was his answer. “She is greatly distressed to hear that you were here.”

“Did you give her my message?”

“Yes. She has promised to come and see you this afternoon. I would not allow her to come before,” the inspector said. “From her statement, it seems that on leaving the house in Hyde Park Gate she and her father walked along Kensington Gore to the cab-rank outside the Albert Hall, and entering a hansom told the man to drive to the Buckingham Palace Hotel. Ten minutes later, when outside the Knightsbridge Barracks, Mr Miller complained of feeling very unwell, and attributed it to something he had eaten not being quite fresh. He told his daughter that he had a strange sensation down his spine, and that in his jaws were tetanic convulsions. She grew alarmed, but he declared that when he reached the hotel he would call a doctor. Five minutes later, however, he was in terrible agony, and the young lady ordered the cab to stop at the next chemist’s. They pulled up before the one close to the corner of Sloane Street, but the gentleman was then in a state of collapse and unable to descend. The chemist saw the gravity of the case and told the man to drive on here—to this hospital. He accompanied the sufferer, who, before

his arrival here, had breathed his last. The body was therefore taken to the mortuary, where a *post-mortem* was held this morning. I've just left the doctor's. They say that he has died of some neurotic poison, in all probability the akazza bean, a poison whose reactions must resemble those of strychnia—in all probability the same as was administered to you."

"Poor Miller!" I exclaimed, for even though he were a thief he possessed certain good qualities, and was always chivalrous where women were concerned. "Could nothing be done to save him?"

"All was done that could possibly be done. The chemist at Knightsbridge gave him all he could to resuscitate him, but without avail. He had taken such a large dose that he was beyond human aid from the very first. The doctors are only surprised that he could walk so far before feeling the effects of the poison."

"It was a vendetta—a fierce and terrible revenge," I said, in wonder who that man Himes might be. That he owed a grudge against Miller and his accomplices was plain, but for what reason was a mystery.

"A vendetta!" exclaimed one of the detectives who had been listening to our conversation. "For what?"

"The reason is an enigma," I replied, with quick presence of mind. "When I accused him of poisoning me, he merely laughed and said he would serve all Miller's friends in the same way. It was the more extraordinary, as I had not known the fellow more than four or five hours."

"And you were not previously acquainted with him?" asked the detective.

"Never saw him before in my life," I declared.

"Well, you've had a jolly narrow squeak of it," the plain-clothes officer remarked. "Whatever he put into Miller's drink was carefully measured to produce death within a certain period, while that given to you was perhaps not quite such a strong dose."

"No. I only took one drink out of my glass. Miller, I remember, swallowed his at one gulp just before leaving. It was his final whisky, and Himes

mixed them both with his own hand."

"He had two objects, you see, in inducing you to stay behind, first to prevent you both being struck down together, and secondly he intended that it should appear that you had committed suicide. Miss Miller does not recollect the number of the house—do you?"

"No. I never saw the number, but would recognise it again. Besides, Hyde Park Gate is not a large place. You could soon discover the house."

"He probably lived there under another name."

"He had only recently come over from America, he told us," I said.

"And in all probability is by this time on his way back there," laughed the detective. "At any rate we'll have a look about the neighbourhood of Hyde Park Gate and gather what interesting facts we can. We want him now on charges of wilful murder and of attempted murder."

"How long will it be before I can get out?" I asked. "Well, the doctor last night said you'd probably be in here another fortnight, at the least."

"A fortnight!" What might not happen to Ella in that time! Would Miller's death change the current of events, I wondered?

For poor Lucie I felt a deep sympathy, for she had regarded her father as her dearest friend, and had, I think, never suspected the dishonest manner in which he made his income.

Himes was a clever scoundrel, without a doubt. He had thoroughly misled a shrewd, far-seeing man like Miller, as well as myself, by his suave manner and easy-going American *bonhomie*.

"And now you'd better rest again," said the inspector to me. "Don't worry over the affair any more to-day. Leave it to us. When we find this interesting American, who gives his friends poisoned whisky, we'll let you know."

I thanked all three, and they withdrew.

A moment later, however, the detective who had spoken returned to me, and leaning over the bed said in a low, confidential whisper so that none could hear:—

“The dead man—Mr Miller—he bore rather a bad reputation, didn’t he? Was a bit of a mystery, I mean? Now, tell me the truth.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, in feigned surprise.

“Well, you know what we mean when we say that,” he exclaimed, smiling. “I don’t know how intimate you were with him, but the fact is that the body’s been identified as that of a man we’ve wanted for a very long time. He was generally known as Milner, and lived on the Continent a good deal. The French police sent us his photograph and description nearly three years ago. This is it.” And he showed me in secret an unmounted police portrait taken in two positions, full face and side face.

“This surprises me,” I said. “Of course I’ve never had anything to do with his business. Indeed, although I knew his daughter well, I only knew him very slightly.”

“Oh, his daughter’s all right. We have no suspicion of her.”

“Then for her sake I hope you won’t reveal to her the truth concerning her father. If he is wanted she need never know. What use is it to revile the dead?”

“Of course not, Mr Leaf,” replied the officer. “I’ve got a daughter of her age myself, therefore if the truth can possibly be kept from her I’ll keep it. Rely on me. Now,” he added, lowering his voice, “tell me—did you ever suspect Miller of being a thief?”

“Well,” I said hesitatingly, “to tell you the truth I did. Not so much from his actions as from the friends he kept. Besides, a friend of mine once declared to me that he was a black sheep.”

“My dear sir, if our information is true, he was wanted upon twenty different charges, of fraud, forgery, theft, and other things. A report from Italy is that he was chief of a very dangerous international gang. Himes may have been one of his accomplices, and quarrelled with him. In fact

that’s my present theory. But we shall see.”

“Remember your promise regarding Miss Lucie,” I urged.

“I’ll not forget, never fear,” was the detective’s answer, and he turned and rejoined the other at the end of the ward.

I had only admitted my suspicions in order to make friends with the officer, and in the hope of preventing him revealing the truth to poor Lucie.

About six o’clock that evening I opened my eyes and found my neat little friend, pale and tearful, standing by my bedside.

She tried to speak, but only burst into a flood of tears.

I took her hand and held it, while the nurse, realising the situation, placed a chair for her.

“You know the terrible blow that has fallen upon me!” she faltered, in a low voice. “My poor father!”

“They have told me,” I answered, in sympathy. “How can I sufficiently express my regret!”

She shook her head in sorrow, and her great dark eyes met mine.

“Blow after blow has fallen upon me,” she sighed. “This is the heaviest!”

“I know, Miss Lucie,” I said. “But you must bear up against the terrible misfortune. We were both victims of an ingenious blackguard. What did you know of the fellow? I was under the impression that he was your friend?”

“Friend!” she echoed. “He always pretended to be—and yet he killed my poor father in secret, and tried also to take your life.”

“He believed me to be a friend of your father’s,” I said, “He told me so when I accused him of having poisoned me—he said his intention was to kill all your father’s friends, one by one.”

“He said that!” she gasped. “He actually told you that!”

“Yes. He admitted that he had poisoned me, and laughed in my face,” I answered. “But who is he? Where did you know him?”

“He was once my father’s most intimate friend.”

And while she bent over my bed, her blanched, haggard face near mine as she spoke, another figure came between myself and the light.

I turned, and saw that it was my friend the detective, while Lucie also recognised and greeted him instantly.

“As I was passing, I thought I’d just drop in and tell you, feeling sure you’d be interested,” he said, addressing me; “the fact is that this afternoon we’ve made a most amazing discovery. Perhaps you will be able to throw some light upon it. At present it is a complete and profound mystery.”

Chapter Thirty Seven.

Needs some Explanation.

“What is it?” I asked anxiously.

“Well,” said the officer, looking meaningly at me, “I would rather speak with you alone.”

“You mean that you want me to go away,” exclaimed Lucie quickly. “Have you discovered anything further regarding my poor father’s death?”

“No, miss. Unfortunately not. I want to consult Mr Leaf in private—only for a few minutes.”

“Certainly,” she said; and, rising, passed along the ward and out into the corridor.

“Well?” I inquired. “What is it?”

“Something that closely concerns yourself, Mr Leaf,” he said, with a curious expression upon his face. “Perhaps you will explain it.”

“Explain what?”

“The reason the Italian people have sent an agent over here to apply for your arrest and extradition upon the charge of murdering a police officer in a villa at Tivoli, near Rome.”

“They’ve done that!” I gasped, recollecting, however, that I had showed my revolver licence to the carabineer, and therefore they knew my proper name and description.

“Yes. And there is a second point which requires clearing up,” he said, rather severely. “You told me that you were only slightly acquainted with this man Miller, whereas it has been established by the Italian police that he was at that villa with you.”

“How established?”

“It appears, as far as we can gather from the police agent sent from Rome, that a young man of very bad character was seen in the vicinity of the villa on the night of the affair, and was afterwards arrested in Rome. He gave the description of one of his accomplices, an Englishman, and it proves to have been the man Miller, whom the Italian police, like ourselves, have wanted for a long time. So you see what a serious charge there is against you.”

“I quite see it,” I answered, utterly amazed that I should find such an allegation against me, after I had congratulated myself upon my clever escape.

“The Italian police ask for the arrest of both yourself and Miller.”

“Well, they won’t arrest him, at any rate,” I said. “And I doubt whether they will arrest me when I tell the whole story. You say they have made only one arrest in Rome?” I added.

“Only one.”

Then Dr Gavazzi was still at liberty. He had decamped and was in some place of safety with those packets of bank-notes with which his pockets had bulged.

It certainly seemed as though I was to be placed under arrest a second time. Formal application had been made to Scotland Yard, and the fact that I had admitted acquaintance with Miller, a known thief, did not allow them any alternative but to obey.

The detective told me that, whereupon I asked to speak with the Italian Agent.

“I’ll bring him to you in an hour’s time, or so,” was the inspector’s answer, and when he had gone Lucie returned to my side.

“You are upset, Mr Leaf. What has he discovered? Anything startling?”

“No,” was my response. “Only a fact that surprises me. Really nothing which has any important bearing upon the affair. Ah!” I sighed, “how I long to be strong enough to leave this place and to see Ella. Will you

endeavour to see her? Tell her I am here. I must see her—must, you understand."

"I'll go straight to Porchester Terrace," she promised. "But if you see that man Gordon-Wright say nothing. Do not mention me, remember."

"I quite understand." And as the nurse approached, Lucie took my hand, bending for a moment over my bed, and then left me.

An hour later my friend the detective was again at my bedside, accompanied by a short, thick-set, black-bearded little man, typically Italian.

"I hear you have been sent to England to effect my arrest," I exclaimed in his own language.

"That is so, signore, though I much regret it."

"You need not regret. You are only doing your duty," I said. "But I merely wish to assure you that I have no intention of trying to escape you. In fact, I couldn't walk the length of this room at present to save my life. I'm too weak. But before you place a constable on duty here, I would ask you one favour."

"What is that?"

"To convey a letter for me to the secretary at the Italian Embassy in Grosvenor Square. He will give you instructions regarding me."

"Then you are known at the Embassy!" the police agent exclaimed, in surprise.

"I think you will find that I am."

The nurse brought a pen, ink and a sheet of paper, upon which after great difficulty I wrote a note recalling my confidential visit regarding Nardini's death, and explaining that the police were in error in thinking that I had any hand in the death of the guardian of the Villa Verde. I had been at the villa, I admitted, but out of curiosity, as I had watched the action of Miller and his companions. If any one were sent to me from the

Embassy, I said, I would make a confidential statement.

When I had sealed the letter, the police agent took it, and next morning I received a call from the official with whom I had had a chat on the occasion of my visit to the Embassy. To him I explained the whole circumstances in strictest confidence, and described the secret hiding-place in the dead man's library where were concealed a number of official papers that were evidently of great importance.

He heard me to the end, and afterwards reassured me by saying:—

"We have already given the police *commissario* instructions not to take any further steps against you, Mr Leaf. We quite accept your explanation, and at the same time thank you for this further information you are able to give us. A search shall be made at the spot you indicate."

And then I took a piece of paper and pencil, and drew a plan of the concealed cupboard and how to open the panel.

Shortly after the Embassy official had left the police agent again visited me, presented his apologies for having disturbed me, and then throughout the day I remained alone with my own apprehensive thoughts regarding Ella.

She was prevented from coming to me on account of that man in whom she went in such deadly terror. Nothing had yet got into the papers concerning the dastardly attempt upon me, for the police had been very careful to keep it from those inquisitive gentlemen-of-the-press who called at the hospital every few hours to gather news of the latest accidents or tragedies. But if Lucie had told her I knew how alarmed and anxious she would be. She loved me—ah, yes, she loved me. Of that I felt confident.

Yet would she ever be mine? Was it the end—the end of all? Was the old sweet life of that summer beside the sea dead and gone for evermore? Should I never see a red rose, her favourite flower, bloom upon its bush without this sickness of soul upon me? Should I never smell the salt of the sea, or drink the cornfields' breaths on a moonlit night without this madness of memory that is worse than all death?

Was she lost to me—lost to me for ever?

I forgot that the inquest upon Miller was to be held that afternoon, and that Lucie was the principal witness. The Coroner, a sharp-featured, grey-bearded man, came to my bedside, and with a clerk and the foreman of the jury, put me upon oath and took my evidence—evidence to the effect that I had dined in company with the deceased at the American's flat. I explained how our host had mixed those final drinks—draughts that he intended should be fatal.

Then when I had concluded by declaring that I had no previous knowledge of Himes, the Coroner made me sign the statement, and returned to where the jury awaited him.

The Coroner's officer, a police-sergeant in uniform, told me that they were taking precautions to keep the affair out of the papers, as they feared that the publication of the evidence might defeat their efforts to trace Himes.

Shortly after five o'clock Lucie came again, looking pale and agitated after the ordeal of giving evidence. A verdict of "death from poison wilfully administered" had been returned.

The Coroner and jury had questioned her closely regarding her father's mode of life and his recent movements. Of the latter she was, of course, unaware. She only knew that he had been called unexpectedly to Rome, and had returned direct to England. Of the reason of his flying visit to Italy she was entirely unaware. He seldom, she said, ever told her about his own affairs, being naturally a close man regarding everything that concerned himself.

"They asked me about the man Himes," she said, as she sat by my bedside, "and I was compelled to tell them how he had once been poor dad's most intimate friend."

"Did he ever meet Ella, do you think?" I asked suddenly.

"Never to my knowledge. Why?"

"I was only wondering—that's all. Perhaps he knew Gordon-Wright."

“I believe he did. They met one night when we were living in rooms at Fulham, if I recollect aright, and about six months later they went for a holiday together in Germany.”

“Did you ever meet that Italian doctor Gennaro Gavazzi who lived in Rome?”

She looked at me with a quick suspicion that she was unable to disguise.

“Why do you ask that?” she inquired, without reply to my question.

“Because he was a friend of your father’s. You told me so. I once knew him slightly,” I added, in order to reassure her.

“And you didn’t know much good concerning him, eh?” she asked, looking at me apprehensively.

“He was private secretary to Nardini, I believe, was he not?”

“Yes, and his factotum. He did all his dirty work—a scoundrel of the very first water.”

“And yet your father was very friendly with him. He has been staying in Rome with him.”

“I believe he did. But I could never discover why poor dad was so fond of that man’s society. To me, it was always a mystery.” And then she went on, in a low, broken voice, to describe to me all that had occurred at the inquest.

“There was a short, dark-bearded Italian present who asked me quite a number of questions regarding poor old dad. I wonder who he was.”

“One of your father’s Italian friends most probably,” I said, reassuring her, for I did not wish her to learn that the man was a police agent from Rome seeking to establish the dead man’s identity. “But,” I added, suddenly changing the subject because she had grown despairing, “you have told me nothing of Ella. Did you go to Porchester Terrace last night, as you promised?”

“I did, but she has left London with her father. She returned to Wichenford the day before yesterday.”

“Gone! And where is Gordon-Wright?”

“All I’ve been able to find out is that he is absent from London. I called myself at his rooms in Half Moon Street, and his man told me that he was out of town—on the Continent, he believes, but is not certain.”

“Or he may be with my love,” I remarked bitterly, clenching my hands in my fierce antagonism. For me nothing lived or breathed save one life, that of my love; for her alone the sun shone and set.

The days dragged wearily by, for I was still kept in the hospital. The shock my system had suffered had been a terrible one, and according to the doctors it had been little short of a miracle that my life had been saved.

The funeral of Mr Miller, attended by his sister and three other friends, had taken place, and Lucie had accompanied her aunt back to Studland, taking with her all the dead man’s effects.

She had said nothing about the large sum in Italian bank-notes that must have been in his possession, and this somewhat puzzled me. The proceeds of the great theft at the Villa Verde must be concealed somewhere—but where?

As soon as I was able to travel I went down to Worcester, and hiring a dogcart drove out six miles along the Tenbury Road through a picturesque and fertile country glorious in its autumn gold, when of a sudden the groom raised his whip, and pointing to the left across the hedgerow to a church spire on rising ground in the distance said:—

“That’s Wichenford yonder, sir. The Place is a mile and a half farther on.”

I had never been to Ella’s home, and was wondering what kind of house it was.

At about two miles along a road to the left we came to fine lodge-gates that swung open to allow us to pass, and then driving up a long beech

avenue there suddenly came into view a splendid old Tudor mansion of grey stone half covered with ivy. It had no doubt gone through some changes in modern times, but the older parts, including the Great Hall and the Tapestry Gallery, certainly were of pure Tudor structure. To me it seemed probable that the original purpose was to erect a manor house of the E form, so common in Tudor times; but if that was the intention it was never carried out, for only one block with the central projection had been completed, and the house must have taken its present form about the time of Charles the First, when two wings had been added in the rear of the then existing building.

In any case I had no idea that Wichenford Place, the home of the Worcestershire Murrays for the past three centuries, was such a magnificent old mansion.

The great oak door was open, therefore, after ringing the bell, I passed through the porch, entered the hall and glanced around, finding it most quaint and interesting, and full of splendid old furniture. Its high flat ceiling was of large size and excellent proportions, the panelling was of oak, rich in character and colouring, with beautiful carving along the top in many places. The fireplace I noticed had fluted pilasters of an early type and a mantel surmounted by arches of wood finely carved with caryatid figures supporting the frieze. The ancient fire-back bore the date 1588, while in the old armorial glass of the long windows could be seen the rose of the Tudors with the Garter and the shield of the Murrays emblazoned with various quarterings. It was a delightful old home, typically English.

Above the panelling hung many time-mellowed old family portraits, while at the far end a fine old long clock in marquetrie case ticked solemnly, and the door was guarded by the figure of a man armed cap-à-pie.

A clean-shaven man-servant in livery came along the hall towards me, and I inquired for Mr Murray.

“Not at home, sir,” was his prompt answer.

“Miss Ella?”

“What name, sir?”

I gave the man a card, and he disappeared through another door.

Three minutes later I heard a bright voice calling me:—

“Godfrey! Is it actually you!” And looking up, I saw my well-beloved standing upon the oak minstrels’ gallery, fresh and sweet in a white serge gown, and little changed from those old well-remembered days when we had met and wandered together beside the sea. Ah! how my heart leapt at sight of her.

She ran swiftly down the stairs, and next moment I held both her soft hands in mine and was looking into those beautiful blue eyes that for years had been ever before me in my day-dreams. Assuredly no woman on earth was fairer than she! Love does not come at will; and of goodness it is not born, nor of gratitude, nor of any right or reason on the earth.

“Fancy!” she cried. “Fancy your coming here. But why have you come?” she asked anxiously. “You don’t know in what peril your presence here places me.”

“Have you seen Lucie?” I asked.

“Not since she went to Italy. Has she returned?”

“Yes. I am here in order to tell you something.”

“Then let’s go into the garden. My father has gone in the car to Bewdley.” And she led me through the old stone-paved corridor and across the quiet ancient courtyard and out into a beautiful rose-garden where the high box-hedges were clipped into fantastic shapes, and the roses climbed everywhere upon their arches.

“What a delightful place!” I exclaimed. “I had no idea that Wichenford was like this.”

“Hadn’t you?” she laughed. Then sighing, she added: “Yes. I love it just as much as dear old dad does. Let us sit here.” And she sank upon an old seat of carved stone, grey and lichen-covered. It was in a spot where we were hidden by the foliage, yet before us spread the beautiful gardens

with the long terrace, and beyond the broad undulating park with the great old oaks in all their autumn glory.

There in the quiet tranquillity, the silence only broken by the song of the birds, I briefly told my love of the attempt made upon my life and of the death of Lucie's father—a story which held her speechless in amazement.

We sat there hand in hand.

"I had no idea that you were ill, otherwise I should have, of course, gone at once to see you," she said, with the old love-looking in her dear eyes as she looked at me.

"Ah! I knew you would, my darling!" I cried, raising her hand to my lips. "I dare not write for fear that my letter might fall into that man's hands. I called upon your aunt, and she told me that you are to be married shortly. Is that really so?" I asked huskily.

"Alas! Godfrey, it is," she murmured. "I have tried and struggled and schemed, but I cannot escape. Ah! if my father only knew the truth concerning him! But I am compelled to wear a mask always—always. It is horrible!" And she covered her face with her hands.

"Yes, horrible!" I echoed. "Why don't you let me stand before that thief and accuse him?"

"And reveal my secret to my father. Never—never! I would die rather than he should know." And her face grew pale and hard, and her small hand trembling in mine.

"Ella!" I cried, kissing her passionately on her cold white lips. "How can I save you? How can I gain you for my own? This awful suspense is killing me."

"Godfrey," she answered, in a low, distinct voice, "we can never be man and wife—impossible, why therefore let us discuss it further? We love each other with a fond true love, it is true, fonder than man and woman ever loved before, yet both of us are longing for the unattainable," she sighed. "My future, alas! is not in my own hands."

“Ah! yes!” I cried in despair. “I see it all! Your fear prevents you from allowing me to unmask this man—you fear that your father should learn your secret!”

“I fear that you, too, should learn it—that instead of loving me,” she said, with a wild look in her splendid eyes, “you would hate me!”

Chapter Thirty Eight.

Tells the Truth.

In the rich glow of the autumn evening we sat together for some time, our hearts too full of grief for words. The future of both of us was filled with blank despair. My presence there brought back to her all the sweet recollections of those long-past days when she was free, and when to save her father from ruin she had so nobly sacrificed her love.

Presently the whirr of the motor-car announced Mr Murray's return, and rising we went into the house to greet him. He welcomed me, but none too warmly I noticed. Probably he did not approve of my calling upon Ella now that she was engaged to marry the man who had so firmly established himself in his confidence.

Nevertheless, he asked me to remain to dinner, which I did gladly. He was a slow-speaking gentlemanly man, dark-eyed and dark-bearded, whom I had always liked.

From him I learned that Ella's marriage was to take place in the village church of Wichenford in the first week in October, and that the honeymoon was to be spent in St. Petersburg. His words cut me like a knife.

"Gordon-Wright is down at his country place just now," he remarked an hour later, as we all three sat at table in the great old panelled dining-room with the wax candles burning in the antique Sheffield candelabra. "We go to town next week, and he meets us there. He's a good fellow. Do you know him?"

"I met him quite casually once," I replied, glancing across at my well-beloved who had now exchanged her white dress for a black lace dinner gown, in the corsage of which was a single red rose—her favourite flower.

Ah! as I looked at her my heart was aflame. I loved her better than my life. Alas! She could never now be mine—never.

I left early and drove back to Worcester through the pelting rain—with her rose that she had slipped into my hand at parting, a silent pledge that spoke volumes to me.

“Good-bye, dear heart!” she whispered. “We shall perhaps meet again in London.”

“Yes,” I said earnestly. “We must meet once again before your marriage. Promise me you will—promise?”

“I’ll try. But you know how very difficult it is to see you when I’m at Porchester Terrace. Aunt Henrietta is such an impossible person.”

“You must,” I whispered. And I would have clasped her to my heart and kissed her in adieu had not the statuesque man-servant stood by to hand me the mackintosh which Murray had lent me.

“Adieu!” she said again, and then touching her hand I mounted into the cart and went forth into the rain and darkness—into the night that was so like my own life.

After my return to Shepherd’s Bush ten weary days passed—each day bringing my love nearer that odious union. One morning I received an unexpected note from Lucie Miller, saying that she and her aunt were in London again, at the Hotel Russell, in order to see her late father’s lawyers.

I called and left a card, for they were out.

Next day, just as I rose from Mrs Gilbert’s luncheon table and was about to enjoy a pipe in Sammy’s den—he being away at the club—visitors were announced.

It was Lucie, flushed and agitated, and with her was Ella, who, the instant the door of the little sitting-room was closed, fell upon my neck, and without a word burst into a passion of tears.

“What does this mean?” I asked of Lucie, utterly taken aback.

“This will explain it.” And she drew out a green evening newspaper, one

of those editions published at eleven o’clock in the morning. “Read for yourself,” she added, pointing to a bold headline.

I swiftly scanned the lines, and stood staring at them both.

What was printed there was utterly bewildering. I held my breath. Could it actually be true?

I cried aloud for joy, and pressing my love to my breast covered her pale sweet face with passionate kisses.

“Is this a fact?” I cried. “Is it really true?”

“Yes,” answered Lucie. “I have been to Half Moon Street myself and made inquiries. Mr Gordon-Wright, it appears, returned home late last night after supper at the Savoy. He must have met some friends afterwards, for the hall-porter says he did not return till nearly two o’clock, and then seemed dazed and incoherent in his speech. He frequently saw gentlemen like that, and therefore pretended to take no notice. At eight o’clock this morning, when his valet took him his early tea, he found him half-dressed doubled up on the bed quite dead. Death from poisoning, the doctor has declared. To us the truth is quite plain. He is another victim of Himes’ terrible revenge!”

“And you, my darling, are free—actually free!” I cried, again kissing my dear heart’s face and beside myself with an unexpected joy.

Himes was evidently keeping his vow to exterminate all Miller’s friends—for what reason, however, was still an enigma.

The situation now became utterly bewildering. In an instant I recognised the exact position. My well-beloved was not so enthusiastic as myself. She seemed terrified at the man’s terribly sudden end, and at the same time she held herself aloof from me. She held a secret, one which, as she had frankly told me, she would never divulge—not even to me. How could there be perfect love without perfect confidence? Again another difficulty was presented.

“I saw the report upon the posters in the streets, bought a paper, and learnt the truth,” explained Lucie. “I then took a cab at once to Porchester

Terrace in search of Ella, and brought her straight here to you."

"The fellow has got his deserts," I said, in triumph. "He richly deserved such an ignominious end."

"He supped with my father and myself at the Savoy last night, and drove home with us," Ella said. "He left us about one o'clock, and promised to call and take me shopping in Bond Street at ten this morning, but never came."

"And he will never trouble you more, darling," I exclaimed, amazed that Himes should have acted with such daring so quickly after his terrible revenge upon Miller. It showed how unscrupulous and determined he was to carry out the threat that had escaped his lips. "You are mine at last—mine! *mine*!" I cried, pressing her again to me and covering her lips with kisses.

But she did not return my caresses. She only pushed me forcibly from her, saying huskily:—

"It is true that man is dead, Godfrey—that I have no further fear of him—that my secret is safe. But you must give me time to think, Godfrey."

"Yes," urged her friend. "You must allow her time. The news of the fellow's sudden end has upset her. The release has been so sudden that she cannot yet realise it. Release has also come to me," she added. "Ah! you do not know the truth, Mr Leaf—it is surely stranger than any fiction ever written."

"And may I not know it?" I asked quickly. "Remember that you have taken me into your confidence up to a certain point. Is Ella aware of the truth?"

"I think not," she faltered, with a hard expression on her face. "It is a disgraceful truth. Since my poor father's death I have made certain startling discoveries that place matters in an entirely new light. I have been examining his private papers, and they have revealed to me facts which, so infamous, cause me to hide my face from you in shame. I—I am not fit to be your associate or friend of Ella," she added, in a hoarse painful whisper. "I confess to you both, because you have been my friends. I confess everything, even the fact that I learnt only three days

ago.”

“What’s that?” I inquired.

“That I am, after all, what the world calls an adventuress—the daughter of an international thief!” was her low answer, her chin sunk upon her breast in an attitude of shame. “My poor father, whom I adored, was only a thief!” and she burst into tears.

For some moments I was silent. The door opened behind us, and Sammy, who had returned, stood upon the threshold, surprised that I had visitors.

I motioned to him to enter and close the door. Then I said:—

“Mr Sampson is my friend; we can speak before him, Miss Miller. Were you entirely unaware of your father’s real profession?”

“I swear that I was. I had no idea of it until three days ago, when I discovered proof positive that he was in association with certain men who were expert thieves.”

“Then your association with the fugitive Nardini was in no way connected with your father’s dishonesty?” I asked. “You have just said that Gordon-Wright’s death has set you at liberty. Will you not now tell us the truth, so that all may be open and straightforward?”

She hesitated, and I saw that she naturally felt disinclined to condemn the man of whom she had all her life been so fond, and in whom she had so implicitly trusted. Many fathers act mysteriously in the eyes of their children. Mr Miller had ever been a mystery, and yet with filial affection she had never once suspected him of leading a double life.

“Yes,” urged Ella, “tell us all. Half an hour ago you told me that you are at last free—that the man who held me so entirely in his power also held you in his unscrupulous hands.”

Sammy said nothing. He had already condemned Lucie, and in his eyes she was but a mere adventuress.

“If I confess, Mr Leaf, I wonder if you and Ella will forgive me?” she exclaimed at last, in a hard, strained voice. “I assure you that I, like yourselves, have been merely a victim of circumstances.”

“Explain the truth,” I said, in a voice of sympathy, for I saw by the shame upon her countenance that she had been an innocent victim.

“Well,” she said, “it happened like this. We had been living at Enghien, outside Paris. The man I loved, Manuel Carrera, a young Chilian, had committed suicide because thieves had stolen a large sum of money of which he had accepted the responsibility, and I was broken-hearted and grief-stricken. We had left Paris and were in Brussels when the news reached me; therefore, when my father proposed that we should go on to Salsomaggiore, I welcomed the change. I never wished to place foot in Paris again. We had kept on the little apartment we had in Rome, where we usually spent the winter, but before going there we decided to take the cure. About a week after our arrival at the hotel at Salsomaggiore there came one of Italy’s best known statesmen, the Onorevole Giovanni Nardini, Minister of Justice, accompanied by his private secretary, a doctor named Gavazzi. My father—whom I have since discovered had obtained private information of Nardini’s shady financial transactions—at once cultivated his acquaintance, as well as that of Gavazzi, and while we were taking the cure we became quite intimate friends.

“On our return to Rome His Excellency often invited us to his fine house in the Via Vittorio Emanuele, and several times we went out to luncheon at the Villa Verde at Tivoli. Two years went by and each winter we saw a great deal of His Excellency. Last January a pretty fair-haired English girl named Alice Woodforde, niece of Gavazzi—she being daughter of Gavazzi’s sister who married a civil engineer in London named Woodforde—came out to Rome for the winter, and as Gavazzi was a bachelor we offered her the hospitality of our house. She was a delightful girl, about nine years older than myself, and we soon became inseparable.

“Before very long I discovered the true situation. Nardini had met and fallen violently in love with his secretary’s niece, while Gavazzi himself was contemplating that, by such a marriage, he himself would reap considerable benefit. Though much older than Alice, Nardini was a

pleasant companion, and occupying as he did one of the highest positions in the kingdom, it was but natural that she should be flattered by his attentions. I, however, who had watched closely and heard certain facts from my father, knew well that the pleasant exterior only concealed a character that was cruel, dishonest, and utterly unscrupulous. The motive of my father's friendship with Nardini was, I regret to admit it, no doubt a dishonest one, while he, on his part, with clever cunning intended eventually to make use of my father in certain blackmailing operations which he contemplated. There was no limit to Nardini's ingenuity or power. Rich and poor alike knew him to be cruel and heartless. He somehow learnt the truth regarding my father, and desired to get me also into his power. There was no charge he could make against me, therefore he resorted to a fiendish conspiracy which was characteristic of the man.

"Late one afternoon last April I was crossing the Piazza di Spagna in Rome when I was stopped by two police agents who asked me to accompany them to the Questura, where, to my speechless amazement, a cruel and wicked charge was made against me. I was accused of robbing a commercial traveller of Milan of a portfolio containing eighteen thousand francs! At first I laughed in the Commissary's face, but when, an hour later, the Italian, a man whom I had never before seen in my life, was brought and identified me, I was stupefied. The charge was infamous. It was against my honour! The man, a loudly dressed person of Hebrew type, stated that on the previous evening he was in the Café Colonna and spoke to me. He afterwards invited me to dinner at Bordoni's, in the Via Nazionale, and after we parted he found that his portfolio had been stolen. A waiter at Bordoni's also identified me, and an agent of police also declared that I was known to them. The whole charge was false, and I stood speechless when I heard their disgraceful accusations. I had never been in either the Colonna or in Bordoni's in all my life. Yet there was still something more extraordinary to follow. The detectives went to our apartments, and, having searched, found the empty portfolio concealed at the bottom of a drawer in my room. I saw at once that it was the work of some secret enemy. Yet who had done it was, to me, a complete enigma.

"I at once wrote a line of appeal to His Excellency explaining that the police had made a terrible mistake. At first he regretted that he could not

assist me, but after a second appeal he sent a line to the Questore, or chief of police, giving me my liberty until my trial, which is to take place at the assizes next November. I at once went to Nardini and asked him to speak the truth—namely, that on the evening in question I was at the Villa Verde at Tivoli, where I had gone on a message to him from my father and had found him there alone. But he refused to make this statement, ostensibly because he did not wish the fact known that he had received a lady visitor alone, but in reality because he himself had trumped up the whole of the infamous charge against me.

“To my chagrin, also, I found that Lieutenant Shacklock—as Gordon-Wright was known in Rome—knew of the charge. He was an intimate friend of my father’s, but a man utterly without principle. I had to beg him not to tell my father. For Nardini, who had so many creatures in his pay, such an allegation was so very easy. As I afterwards established, the portfolio was placed in my drawer by a man who entered on pretence of examining the electric light. Nardini’s object was to hold me in his power, to compel me to do his bidding, and assist in certain schemes he was contemplating before his fall. Surely it was the gravest charge that could have been made against a woman. It touched my honour, and that is the reason why when he fled I followed post-haste here to beg of him to say the word which must put an end to the proceedings pending against me. But, although I was successful in tracing him here, alas! I was too late. He died without clearing my honour, and on the third of November the charge against me will be heard by the Tribunal. How, now, can I hope to escape an unjust condemnation?”

“Why didn’t you make this explanation before?” I asked. “I might have assisted you to clear yourself.”

“How could I while Gordon-Wright lived? He was present in our apartment when the police found the portfolio, and even though Nardini might have caused the accusation to have been withdrawn he would have still been a witness against me.”

“But you knew who and what he was?”

“Not at that time. I only knew that he was a great friend of my father’s and lived at the Grand Hotel. But in looking through my father’s private letters

I have learned the ghastly truth—that he and Himes who were such constant visitors to our flat, both in Rome, Leghorn, or in fact anywhere where we took up our abode, were expert thieves working under my father's directions. True, I held both of them in dislike, but I never dreamed that living apart, Shacklock at the Grand and Himes at the Quirinale, they were in such active accord."

"Then this charge against you will be made in Rome in November?" Sammy said, addressing her for the first time.

"Yes," she sighed despairingly. "I shall be condemned in my absence, for how can I now hope to prove that I am innocent—that I was not even in Rome on that evening?"

"Nardini was a blackguard!" Sammy cried. "If I had known that I'd have rung the truth out of him before he died—by Jove, I would! A man who plots against a woman's honour like that is the worst cad conceivable."

"Ah, yes!" cried the unhappy girl. "It is that—it is my honour that is at stake. The man alleges that he found me alone in a common café—and —and—"

She burst into tears.

I had listened to Lucie's extraordinary statement like a man in a dream.

Ella tried to comfort her, but with very little avail. She had utterly broken down.

"I am surely the most unhappy of girls!" she sobbed. "They have killed my poor father, and now they will take from me my honour as a woman!" Then, after a pause, she added:—

"You remember what I told you regarding the woman Hardwick? Nardini knew of that scandal long ago in Pisa, when you accidentally met Ina's married sister travelling, and were forced into the Divorce Court by her husband to give evidence against her. As Minister of Justice, he knew well all the secrets of hushed-up scandals, and often turned them to his own profit."

“Miss Miller,” Sammy exclaimed, in a soft tone now full of sympathy for the poor suffering girl, “you mentioned just now the unfortunate death of my friend Manuel Carrera, in Paris. You recollect that I—”

“Manuel Carrera!” cried Ella, suddenly releasing Lucie and facing Sammy. “Was he your friend? Then let me also tell you the truth! Hear my confession, Godfrey, and then you shall judge me!”

Chapter Thirty Nine.

Unites Two Hearts.

The revelations amazed me. I held my breath and faced her. There was a terrible eloquence in the silence of that room.

“Listen,” exclaimed my well-beloved, her pale, desperate, but beautiful countenance turned full towards me. “Listen, and I’ll tell you everything, just as it occurred.

“About three years ago, very soon after I parted from you on that memorable night in Bayswater, my father and I were staying at the Hotel Continental in Paris, and received a call from Mr Miller and Lucie. I was of course delighted to see my old schoolfellow again, but only once was your name mentioned—with regret—for I was already engaged to marry Mr Blumenthal. Mr Miller asked us down to his house at Enghien, and we went several times, generally finding there a young Chilian, Manuel Carrera, for a great affection had sprung up between Lucie and him. The young fellow chanced to be staying at the same hotel as ourselves in Paris, and sometimes we returned by the same train together. At Mr Miller’s we also met Himes, in whom I must say I was much mistaken. I believed him to be an American gentleman, but I now know that he was what is known as a ‘sharp.’ One night my father and I dined at the Villa du Lac, Carrera being also invited. He left rather early, for some reason or other, and when we went an hour or so later Lucie asked me to deliver to him a secret message which she had forgotten—a request that he would meet her at the Gare du Nord at eleven o’clock next morning, as she was going shopping and would be alone.

“On arrival at the hotel just after midnight, I saw my father into his room, and then slipped along to the farther end of the corridor and tapped at the young man’s door. There was no reply. Again I tapped, but without response. Then, intending to leave a note for him, I turned the handle and entered. Judge my horror when I saw him standing before the mirror in a frenzy of despair with a revolver in his hand. I dashed in, for I saw his intention was to commit suicide. I grasped his wrist and tried to wrench the weapon from his grasp. For several moments we struggled

desperately, but, alas! he was the stronger, and with an imprecation he placed the barrel of the weapon in his mouth and fired. Ah! it was awful!

“I twisted the revolver from his hand, but, alas! too late. He fell to the floor in a helpless heap, and I stood dazed and horrified at the awful tragedy. A moment later I heard a movement behind me, and started to see a stranger standing there—an Englishman. He had closed the door behind him, and we were alone with the dead man. ‘I charge you with the murder of my friend,’ he said gravely. ‘I saw you fire. You did this out of jealousy. You met at Nice eighteen months ago. Manuel is the lover of the girl who lives at Enghien, and is your friend! I saw you together yesterday in the Rue Rivoli!’

“I fell back and stared at him utterly speechless. Then I protested that he had committed suicide, but he pointed out that I still held the revolver. ‘No,’ he added, ‘I saw you fire! I am witness that you murdered poor Manuel, who met you on the Riviera and fell violently in love with you.’ I asked the stranger if he really meant what he alleged, but he only smiled mysteriously and said:—‘As no one seems to have been awakened, perhaps it will save you much trouble if you place the revolver near the body and allow the authorities to believe in your theory of suicide. I am English, like yourself, and in our country no gentleman betrays a woman.’ ‘Then you withdraw this allegation?’ I asked. But he urged me to fly quickly, while there was time, and taking the weapon he placed it on the floor close to the dead man’s right hand. Because I allowed him to do this, I committed myself, and was lost. But at that moment I was so upset that I knew not what I did. I slipped out of the door and down the corridor, and from that instant I never saw the mysterious stranger again until—until about four months ago.”

“And who was he?” I asked eagerly. “What was his name?”

“He proved to be Gordon-Wright alias Lieutenant Shacklock, and many other names. He called upon me in Ireland and claimed acquaintance. Then, judge my astonishment when, a week later, he told me that I must marry him or he would denounce me to Lucie as the murderess of her lover!”

“The scoundrel!” I cried. “Then he actually held both of you enthralled?”

“Yes, Godfrey,” she exclaimed, in that soft sweet voice that always charmed me so. “It was true that I had previously met Manuel Carrera in Nice, but he certainly was never my lover, as he alleged. But now I have told you the truth you can easily see why I dare not speak while he lived, for he would have brought against me a cruel charge of jealous murder which he might easily have substantiated.”

Our eyes met, and her gaze wavered.

“Why—how could he?” inquired Sammy.

“Because early next morning I found out the number of his room and most foolishly wrote to him urging him to keep the secret that I had been in the dead man’s room. This letter, combined with his testimony, would have been, no doubt, sufficient to condemn me. Again, the night you met me at Studland he followed me out and found me almost the moment after we parted. He taunted me with that letter, and we struggled for its possession.”

“I recollect!” Sammy exclaimed. “It was I who was one of the first to enter poor Carrera’s room, and I remember the revolver lay in a position that much puzzled the police. They questioned the servants if it had been moved. That fellow Shacklock, who was living in the hotel, evidently stole the contents of the poor fellow’s despatch-box and handed them to Himes, who came that evening to call upon him. It is an old trick of hotel thieves: the man who commits the theft remains in the hotel and expresses the greatest indignation and sympathy with the victim, while his accomplice gets safely away across the frontier with the booty.”

“And this is the actual truth!” I cried, staring at her amazed.

“The truth, Godfrey—the whole truth!” declared Ella, in a faltering tone, her cheeks flushed with shame. “You must have mistrusted me, but though bound to that blackguard by a secret my love for you has, I swear, ever been unwavering. Surely you must have seen what I have suffered,” she cried. “That man who has now met with such an untimely end wished to marry me for my position, and because—”

“Because you are beautiful, my sweetheart!” I said, holding her in my arms and kissing her fondly. “I know. I see it all now.”

“And—and you really forgive me, Godfrey?” she asked seriously.

“For what?”

“For refusing to tell you this.”

“You were silent, darling, because you were that man’s victim. You feared to speak. But his own enemy has fortunately released you. The thieves have quarrelled among themselves—and fatally. We can now afford to watch in silence.”

Our hands clasped, our lips met, and our hearts beat in unison—hearts that were true to each other with a love that was real love.

“Lucie,” I said at last, turning to the despairing girl, who now knew, for the first time, her father’s shameful secret, “there is one point which is still a mystery. Have you any explanation to offer? At the Villa Verde, after Nardini’s flight, a young lady, said to be a friend of yours, was found dead in his study. Who was she?”

“It was Alice Woodforde,” she replied promptly. “Nardini had fallen deeply in love with her, and knowing that revelations and downfall were imminent, and that he would be compelled to fly, he gave her in secret this address in London. He begged her to return to England where they would marry, and she, still in ignorance of his true character, gave her promise. She showed me the address he had written down, asking me if I knew in what part of London it was, and thinking it strange I made a mental note of it. I saw that His Excellency was playing a double game, and suspected that he contemplated flight. In addition to this, one evening, when her uncle the doctor was dining with my father and myself she related, with her natural innocence, how one afternoon, when a guest at the Villa Verde, she had entered the study unexpectedly and had discovered His Excellency with a secret cupboard in the wainscot opened, into which he was in the act of placing a packet of bank-notes.

“Now, Gavazzi, who had narrowly watched the situation, daily expected His Excellency to fly from Italy. He knew that his enemies had gained the ascendency, and that revelations to King Humbert were only a matter of hours. Therefore the moment his master had left Rome he went out to Tivoli and discharged all the servants at the villa, paying them all off

handsomely. On the following day, as I understand from a letter I have found among my father's papers, he went out there on the pretext of a necessity of obtaining certain important documents, taking Alice with him. He entered the villa with his key, and when in the study suddenly demanded that she should reveal the spot where the notes had been concealed. Being loyal to Nardini, whom she had promised to marry, she refused. They were alone in the great house, and she, in defiance of him, declared that she would tell the man who was to be her husband. A violent scene then ensued. He threatened her and she grew furious, when of a sudden she fell back in a dead faint. He laughed, and awaited her recovery, still hoping to obtain from her the secret of the Minister's hoard. He waited until, in alarm, he saw a sudden change in her. She grew white and rigid. She suffered from a weak heart from her birth, and died of syncope. Poor Alice! the excitement had proved fatal!"

"But I can't understand this fellow Himes. Why is he so full of a fierce revenge?" asked Sammy, whose manner towards Lucie was now entirely changed. He saw that she had been the victim of a scoundrel, just as my dear love had been.

"Well, I think I can also explain that," she said. "My father, in order that nothing compromising might be found if the police ever searched our apartments abroad, kept all his private papers in an old bureau at Studland. For several days I have been going through them, and they throw light upon many things which have hitherto been to me mysteries. The reason of his rapid journeys hither and thither, the motives of his friendships and the causes of his hatreds are explained.

"Last winter, while we were in Rome, Lieutenant Shacklock, as he called himself, lived in style at the Grand, while Himes had a room at the Quirinale. To every one they appeared as strangers to each other, and only met at our house. They both had committed a number of clever robberies of jewels and money, when Shacklock managed to ingratiate himself with a wealthy American widow, a Mrs Clay Hamilton, and after giving several little dinner-parties and escorting her here and there he succeeded, by a clever piece of trickery, in passing over her jewel-case full of valuable gems to Himes. The theft was quickly discovered, but no suspicion ever rested upon him. Indeed he actually went himself to the Questura with Mrs Clay Hamilton and reported the theft to the police! The

jewel-case was, however, already at our house when, on the following night, the two men met.

“I was out at the theatre with Dr Gavazzi and Alice, but I can only suppose there must have been a violent quarrel over the distribution of the booty. At any rate, Himes declared that he would have nothing further to do with either my father or Shacklock, and next day left Rome for Paris. My father and Shacklock suspected that, out of spite, he meant to expose them to Nardini or to the Rome police, therefore, knowing with what object he had gone to Paris, Shacklock followed him and gave certain secret information at the Prefecture. The result of this was that Himes was arrested red-handed while committing an audacious robbery at Asnières, and sent to prison. He, of course, suspected that the friends with whom he had quarrelled had given information, yet he could not absolutely prove it. His first impulse was to retaliate by revealing all he knew regarding his late associates, but this was not enough for a man of his criminal instincts.

“In his heart there rankled through those long months of his confinement a murderous revenge. He swore that he would kill the men who betrayed him—and he has kept his vow!”

“Yes,” I said. “And he evidently believed that, being on such intimate terms with your father and yourself, I, too, was the latest recruit.”

“Ah! Your escape, dear, was a most fortunate one!” declared Ella, gazing up into my eyes with that love-look that told me volumes.

“I wonder where Himes is now?” queried Sammy. “He certainly seems absolutely fearless in his revenge.”

“What matters?” I said. “Let us remain silent. If he is captured, well and good. If not, we at least know the truth.”

“He killed my father—recollect,” Lucie remarked, in a hard voice.

“And was it not through your father—whose memory we should bury from to-day—that my poor friend and your lover, Manuel Carrera, died?” asked Sammy gravely.

Then a silence fell between all four of us. I was looking into the clear blue eyes of my well-beloved. All of us were preoccupied by our own thoughts. From out the dark tragedy had at last shone the light of truth.

After those years of grief and bitterness, of loneliness and yearning, Ella, my dear one, had been given back to me once more. She no longer wore the iron mask that she had borne so staunchly.

Our lips met again. She gazed into my eyes, and then she burst into tears—tears of joy. The fetters that bound her to the man she hated had been broken, and she stood there, sweet, pure, innocent and free—free to be mine—mine for ever.

“My love,” I said, heedless that we were not alone, “this affection of ours is greater than death, great as eternity itself; a love that shall leave earth with us when our souls leave our bodies and reach its uttermost perfection in other lives, in other worlds; a love that time cannot chill, nor any woe appal, nor any man unsever. God Himself has united us, and none can now place us asunder.”

Chapter Forty.

Conclusion.

To-day I am seated in the long old library at Wichenford where, at the big writing-table set in the deep window, I have spent so many hours putting down in black and white this curious chronicle of the evil that men do. The last blank folios lie before me.

What more need I tell you?

To describe the perfect happiness that now is mine would require still another volume. Ella—my own sweet Ella who was so nearly lost to me—became my wife a little over a year ago. She is seated in a long wicker chair at my side, while the summer sunset falling through the high old diamond-panes shines upon her fresh open countenance and tints her beautiful hair with gold.

It is the evening of a calm day, and a similar tranquillity seems to have fallen upon our lives, for a great peace has come to us in this stately old place that everywhere speaks mutely of the dignity of the Murrays.

Delightful indeed it is to be back again in England and no longer a wanderer, for Mr Murray has given over Wichenford to us for our home, and he in his turn is travelling in the Far East.

Of Dr Gavazzi we heard news not long ago. He is in Vienna, living, we suppose, upon his share of that money taken from his master's secret hiding-place, while Himes, having returned to America, was, we saw in the papers, two months ago sentenced in New York to three years with hard labour for stealing a dressing-bag from a lady while travelling on the "Chicago Limited."

A week after the death of Gordon-Wright and that eventful meeting at Granville Gardens when the enigma was solved, Lucie discovered in an old kit-bag of her father's, at Studland, the packets of bank-notes obtained from the Villa Verde, and, suspecting them to be the proceeds of some robbery, she brought them to me. I suggested that as the money

was not hers she should devote the whole of it to charity in Italy. Although fearing to put her foot on Italian soil again owing to the false and infamous charge against her, she at once adopted my suggestion, with the result that an orphan home at Poggio Imperiale, outside Florence, which she founded and endowed, now bears her name.

And the end? Well, I think you will agree that it is as it should be.

About three months after our return from our honeymoon in Norway Sammy came to me and made an announcement which caused me to clap him heartily on the back and grip his hand. He had discovered that he had misjudged poor Lucie, that he loved her, and they were now already engaged.

To-day as I pen this final page they have been man and wife already three whole months. Not long, it is true, but sufficient to show us how happy they are in each other's love. They have taken "The Cedars," a charming old ivy-covered house a mile from Melton Mowbray, for both are passionately fond of hunting, and both are looking forward to good runs this next season.

The summer sun is sinking lower. Over everywhere is a faint ethereal golden mist that rises from the water and the woods; the colour deepens; the scent of the blossoms grows stronger. The charm of perfect freedom and perfect faith are ours. This modern world sneers at the isolation and absorption of passion as an egotism, but surely it is its highest sublimity. Love that remembers aught save the one beloved may be affection, but it certainly is not love.

And while Ella and I are leading a life of peace undisturbed and of love infinite—a God-given love that surpasses any that man has known within his heart—Italian police agents in various parts of the world are still in active search of Giovanni Nardini, and Scotland Yard is still sorely puzzled over the antecedents and tragic end of the Mysterious Mr Miller.

The End.

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