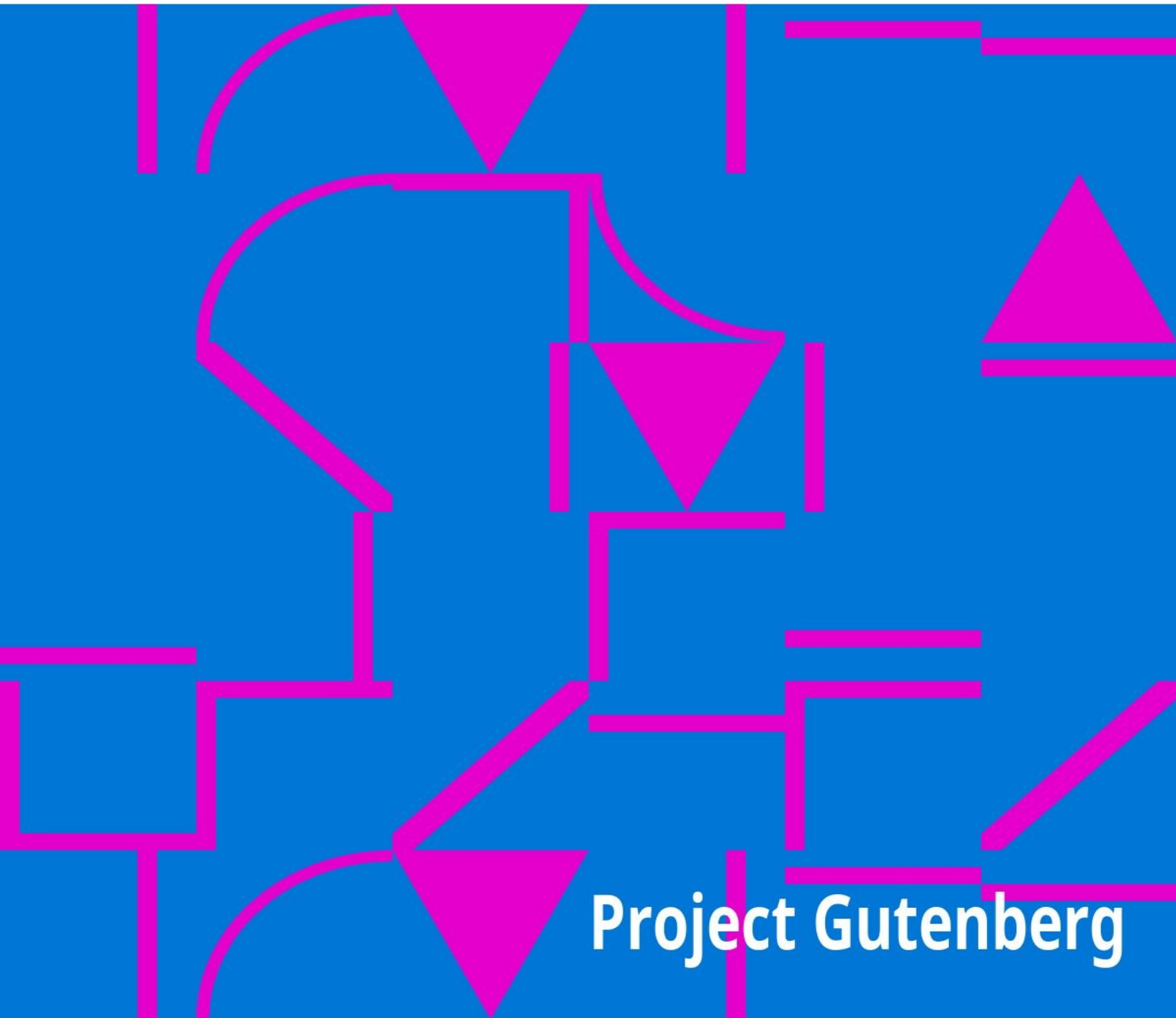
Hushed Up! A Mystery of London

William Le Queux



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HUSHED UP!

A MYSTERY OF LONDON

BY

WILLIAM LE QUEUX

LONDON
EVELEIGH NASH
1911

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE PAGE

I IS MAINLY SCANDALOUS 7

II CONCERNS TWO STRANGERS 18

THE STORY OF OWEN BIDDULPH

CHAP.

I BESIDE STILL WATERS 35

II TOLD IN THE NIGHT 46

III THE CLERGYMAN FROM HAMPSHIRE 58

IV THE PERIL BEYOND 68

V THE DARK HOUSE IN BAYSWATER 79

VI A GHASTLY TRUTH 89

VII THE FLAME OF THE CANDLE 99

VIII PRESENTS ANOTHER PROBLEM 107

IX FACE TO FACE 117

X CONTAINS A FURTHER SURPRISE 125

XI WHAT THE POLICE KNEW 136

XII THE WORD OF A WOMAN 145

XIII THE DEATH KISS 156

XIV OF THINGS UNMENTIONABLE 165

XV FORBIDDEN LOVE 175

XVI THE MAN IN GOLD PINCE-NEZ 185

XVII THE MAN IN THE STREET 196

XVIII PROOF POSITIVE 206

XIX THROUGH THE MISTS 215

XX THE STRANGER IN THE RUE DE RIVOLI 225

XXI DESCRIBES AN UNWELCOME VISIT 234

XXII	MORE MYSTERY	242
XXIII	IN FULL CRY	253
XXIV	AN UNFORTUNATE SLIP	263
XXV	MORE STRANGE FACTS	272
XXVI	“SOME SENSATIONAL REVELATIONS”	281
XXVII	A CONTRETEMPS	291
XXVIII	THE FRENCHMAN MAKES A STATEMENT	298
XXIX	FURTHER REVELATIONS	307
XXX	CONCLUSION	313

HUSHED UP!

PROLOGUE

I

IS MAINLY SCANDALOUS

“And he died mysteriously?”

“The doctors certified that he died from natural causes—heart failure.”

“That is what the world believes, of course. His death was a nation’s loss, and the truth was hushed up. But you, Phil Poland, know it. Upon the floor was found something—a cigar—eh?”

“Nothing very extraordinary in that, surely? He died while smoking.”

“Yes,” said the bald-headed man, bending towards the other and lowering his voice into a harsh whisper. “He died while smoking a cigar—a cigar that had been poisoned! You know it well enough. What’s the use of trying to affect ignorance—*with me*!”

“Well?” asked Philip Poland after a brief pause, his brows knit darkly and his face drawn and pale.

“Well, I merely wish to recall that somewhat unpleasant fact, and to tell you that I know the truth,” said the other with slow deliberation, his eyes fixed upon the man seated opposite him.

“Why recall unpleasant facts?” asked Poland, with a faint attempt to smile. “I never do.”

“A brief memory is always an advantage,” remarked Arnold Du Cane, with a sinister grin.

“Ah! I quite follow you,” Poland said, with a hardness of the mouth. “But I tell you, Arnold, I refuse to lend any hand in this crooked bit of business you’ve just put before me. Let’s talk of something else.”

“Crooked business, indeed! Fancy you, Phil Poland, denouncing it as crooked!” he laughed. “And I’m a crook, I suppose,” and he thoughtfully caressed his small moustache, which bore traces of having been artificially darkened.

“I didn’t say so.”

“But you implied it. Bah! You’ll be teaching the Sunday School of this delightful English village of yours before long, I expect. No doubt the villagers believe the gentleman at the Elms to be a model of every virtue, especially when he wears a frock-coat and trots around with the plate in church on Sundays!” he sneered. “My hat! Fancy you, Phil, turning honest in your old age!”

“I admit that I’m trying to be honest, Arnold—for the girl’s sake.”

“And, by Jove! if the good people here, in Middleton, knew the truth, eh—the truth that you——”

“Hush! Somebody may overhear!” cried the other, starting and glancing apprehensively at the closed door of his cosy study. “What’s the use of discussing the business further? I’ve told you, once and for all, Arnold, that I refuse to be a party to any such dastardly transaction.”

“Ho! ho!” laughed Du Cane. “Why, wasn’t the Burke affair an equally blackguardly bit of business—the more so, indeed, when one recollects that young Ronald Burke had fallen in love with Sonia.”

“Leave my girl’s name out of our conversation, Arnold, or, by Gad! you shall pay for it!” cried the tall, dark-haired, clean-shaven man, as he sprang from his chair and faced his visitor threateningly. “Taunt me as much as ever it pleases you. Allege what you like against me. I know I’m an infernal blackguard, posing here as a smug and respectable churchgoer. I admit any charge you like to lay at my door, but I’ll not have my girl’s name associated with my misdeeds. Understand that! She’s pure and honest, and she knows nothing of her father’s life.”

“Don’t you believe that, my dear fellow. She’s eighteen now, remember, and I fancy she had her eyes opened last February down at the Villa Vespa, when that unfortunate little trouble arose.”

Arnold Du Cane, the round-faced man who spoke, was rather short and stout, with ruddy cheeks, a small moustache and a prematurely bald head—a man whose countenance showed him to be a *bon vivant*, but whose quick, shifty eyes would have betrayed to a close observer a readiness of subterfuge which would have probably aroused suspicion. His exterior was that of a highly refined and polished man. His grey tweed suit bore evidence of having been cut by a smart

tailor, and as he lolled back in his big saddle-bag chair he contemplated the fine diamond upon his white, well-manicured hand, and seemed entirely at his ease.

That August afternoon was stiflingly hot, and through the open French windows leading into the old-world garden, so typically English with its level lawns, neatly trimmed box-hedges and blazing flowerbeds, came the drowsy hum of the insects and the sweet scent of a wealth of roses everywhere.

The pretty house in which his host, Philip Poland, alias Louis Lessar, lived, stood back a little distance from the London road, two miles or so out of the quiet market-town of Andover, a small picturesque old place surrounded by high old elms wherein the rooks cawed incessantly, and commanding extensive views over Harewood Forest and the undulating meadow-lands around, while close by, at the foot of the hill, nestled a cluster of homely thatched cottages, with a square church-tower, the obscure village of Middleton.

In that rural retreat lived the Honourable Philip Poland beneath a cloak of highest respectability. The Elms was, indeed, delightful after the glare and glitter of that fevered life he so often led, and here, with his only child, Sonia, to whom he was so entirely devoted, he lived as a gentleman of leisure.

Seldom he went to London, and hardly ever called upon his neighbours. With Sonia he led a most retired existence, reading much, fishing a little, and taking long walks or cycling with his daughter and her fox-terrier, “Spot,” over all the country-side.

To the village he had been somewhat of a mystery ever since he had taken the house, three years before. Yet, being apparently comfortably off, subscribing to every charity, and a regular attendant at Middleton church, the simple country-folk had grown to tolerate him, even though he was somewhat of a recluse. Country-folk are very slow to accept the stranger at his own valuation.

Little did they dream that when he went away each winter he went with a mysterious purpose—that the source of his income was a mystery.

As he stood there, leaning against the roll-top writing-table of his prettily furnished little study and facing the man who had travelled half across Europe to see him, Phil Poland, with clean-shaven face and closely-cropped hair tinged with grey, presented the smart and dapper appearance of a typical British naval officer, as, indeed, he had been, for, prior to his downfall, he had been first lieutenant on board one of his Majesty’s first-class cruisers. His had been a

strangely adventurous career, his past being one that would not bear investigation.

In the smart, go-ahead set wherein he had moved when he was still in the Navy opinion regarding him had been divided. There were some who refused to believe the truth of the scandals circulated concerning him, while others believed and quickly embellished the reports which ran through the service clubs and ward-rooms.

Once he had been one of the most popular officers afloat, yet to-day—well, he found it convenient to thus efface himself in rural Hampshire, and live alone with the sweet young girl who was all in all to him, and who was happy in her belief that her devoted father was a gentleman.

This girl with the blue eyes and hair of sunshine was the only link between Phil Poland and his past—that past when he held a brilliant record as a sailor and had been honoured and respected. He held her aloof from every one, being ever in deadly fear lest, by some chance word, she should learn the bitter truth—the truth concerning that despicable part which he had been compelled to play. Ah, yes, his was a bitter story indeed.

Before Sonia should know the truth he would take his own life. She was the only person remaining dear to him, the only one for whom he had a single thought or care, the only person left to him to respect and to love. Her influence upon him was always for good. For the past year he had been striving to cut himself adrift from evil, to reform, to hold back from participating in any dishonest action—for her dear sake. Her soft-spoken words so often caused him to hate himself and to bite his lip in regret, for surely she was as entirely ignorant of the hideous truth as Mr. Shuttleworth, the white-headed parson, or the rustic villagers themselves.

Yes, Phil Poland’s position was indeed a strange one.

What Du Cane had just suggested to him would, he saw, put at least twenty thousand pounds into the pockets of their ingenious combination, yet he had refused—refused because of the fair-headed girl he loved so well.

Within himself he had made a solemn vow to reform. Reformation would probably mean a six-roomed cottage with a maid-of-all-work, yet even that would be preferable to a continuance of the present mode of life.

Bitter memories had, of late, constantly arisen within him. Certain scenes of

violence, even of tragedy, in that beautiful flower-embowered villa beside the Mediterranean at Beaulieu, half-way between Nice and Monte Carlo, had recurred vividly to him. He was unable to wipe those horrible visions from the tablets of his memory. He had realized, at last, what a pitiless blackguard he had been, so he had resolved to end it all.

And now, just as he had made up his mind, Arnold Du Cane had arrived unexpectedly from Milan with an entirely new and original scheme—one in which the risk of detection was infinitesimal, while the stakes were high enough to merit serious consideration.

He had refused to be a party to the transaction, whereupon Du Cane had revived a subject which he had fondly believed to be buried for ever—that terrible affair which had startled and mystified the whole world, and which had had such an important political bearing that, by it, the destinies of a great nation had actually been changed.

A certain man—a great man—had died, but until that hour Phil Poland's connection with the tragedy had never been suspected.

Yet, from what Arnold Du Cane had just said, he saw that the truth was actually known, and he realized that his own position was now one of distinct insecurity.

He was silent, full of wonder. How could Arnold have gained his knowledge? What did he know? How much did he know? The strength of his defiance must be gauged upon the extent of Arnold's knowledge.

He set his teeth hard. The scandal was one which must never see the light of day, he told himself. Upon the suppression of the true facts depended the honour and welfare of a nation.

Arnold Du Cane knew the truth. Of that, there could be no doubt. Did he intend to use this knowledge in order to secure his assistance in this latest dastardly scheme?

At last, after a long silence, Poland asked in as cool a voice as he could—

"What causes you to suspect that Sonia knows anything?"

"Well," replied this crafty, round-faced visitor, "considering how that young Russian let out at you when you were walking with her that moonlight night out in the garden, I don't think there can be much doubt that she is fully aware of the

mysterious source of her father's income."

"Sonia doesn't know Russian. The fellow spoke in that language, I remember," was his reply. "Yet I was a fool, I know, to have taken her over that accursed place—that hell in paradise. She is always perfectly happy at the Hôtel de Luxembourg at Nice, where each season she makes some pleasant friends, and never suspects the reason of my absences."

"All of us are fools at times, Phil," was his visitor's response, as he selected a fresh cigar from the silver box upon the table and slowly lit it. "But," he went on, "I do really think you are going too far in expecting that you can conceal the truth from the girl much longer. She isn't a child, you must recollect."

"She must never know!" cried the unhappy man in a hoarse voice. "By Gad! she must never know of my shame, Arnold."

"Then go in with us in this new affair. It'll pay you well."

"No," he cried. "I—I feel that I can't! I couldn't face her, if she knew. Her mother was one of the best and purest women who ever lived, and——"

"Of course, of course. I know all that, my dear fellow," cried the other hastily. "I know all the tragedy of your marriage—but that's years ago. Let the past bury itself, and have an eye to the main chance and the future. Just take my advice, Phil. Drop all this humbug about your girl and her feelings if she learnt her father's real profession. She'll know it one day, that's certain. You surely aren't going to allow her to stand in your way and prevent you from participating in what is real good solid business—eh? You want money, you know."

"I've given my answer," was the man's brief response.

Then a silence fell between the pair of well-dressed cosmopolitans—a dead, painful silence, broken only by the low hum of the insects, the buzzing of a fly upon the window-pane, and the ticking of the old grandfather clock in the corner.

"Reflect," urged Du Cane at last, as he rose to his feet. Then, lowering his voice, he said in a hoarse whisper, "You may find yourself in a corner over that affair of young Burke. If so, it's only I and my friends who could prove an alibi. Remember that."

"And you offer that, in return for my assistance?" Poland said reflectively, hesitating for a moment and turning to the window.

His visitor nodded in the affirmative.

Next second the man to whom those terms had been offered quickly faced his friend. His countenance was haggard, blanched to the lips, for he had been quick to realize the full meaning of that covert threat.

“Arnold!” he said in a hoarse, strained voice, full of bitter reproach, “you may turn upon me, give me away to the police—tell them the truth—but my decision remains the same. I will lend no hand in that affair.”

“You are prepared to face arrest—eh?”

“If it is your will—yes.”

“And your daughter?”

“That is my own affair.”

“Very well, then. As you will,” was the bald-headed man’s response, as he put on his grey felt hat and, taking his stick, strode through the open French windows and disappeared.

Phil Poland stood rigid as a statue. The blow had fallen. His secret was out.

He sprang forward towards the garden, in order to recall his visitor. But next instant he drew himself back.

No. Now that the friend whom he had trusted had turned upon him, he would face the music rather than add another crime to his discredit and dishonour.

Philip Poland, alias Louis Lessar and half-a-score of other names, halted, and raised his pale, repentant face to Heaven for help and guidance.

II

CONCERNS TWO STRANGERS

That night Phil Poland glanced longingly around the well-furnished dining-room with its white napery, its antique plate, and its great bowl of yellow roses in the centre of the table between the silver candelabra with white silk shades. Alone he sat at his dinner, being waited upon by Felix, the thin-faced, silent Frenchman in black who was so devoted to his master and so faithful in his service.

It was the last time he would eat his dinner there, he reflected. The choice of two things lay before him—flight, or arrest.

Sonia was on a visit to an old school-fellow in London, and would not return until the morrow. For some reasons he was glad, for he desired to be alone—alone in order to think.

Since the abrupt departure of his visitor he had become a changed man. His usually merry face was hard and drawn, his cheeks pale, with red spots in the centre, and about his clean-shaven mouth a hardness quite unusual.

Dinner concluded, he had strolled out upon the lawn, and, reclining in a long deck-chair, sipped his coffee and curaçao, his face turned to the crimson sundown showing across the dark edge of the forest. He was full of dark forebodings.

The end of his career—a scandalous career—was near. The truth was out!

As he lay back with his hot, fevered head upon the cushion of the long cane chair, his dead cigar between his nerveless fingers, a thousand bitter thoughts crowded upon him. He had striven to reform, he had tried hard to turn aside and lead an honest life, yet it seemed as though his good intentions had only brought upon him exposure and disaster.

He thought it all over. His had, indeed, been an amazing career of duplicity. What a sensation would be caused when the truth became revealed! At first he had heaped opprobrium upon the head of the man who had been his friend, but now, on mature consideration, he realized that Du Cane’s motive in exposing

him was twofold—in order to save himself, and also to curry favour in certain high quarters affected by the mysterious death of the young Parliamentary Under-Secretary who had placed to his lips that fatal cigar. Self-preservation being the first instinct of the human race, it surely was not surprising that Arnold Du Cane should seek to place himself in a position of security.

Enormous eventualities would be consequent upon solving the mystery of that man's death. Medical science had pronounced it to have been due to natural causes. Dare the authorities re-open the question, and allege assassination? Aye, that was the question. There was the press, political parties and public opinion all to consider, in addition to the national prestige.

He held his breath, gazing blankly away at the blood-red afterglow. How strange, how complicated, how utterly amazing and astounding was it all. If the truth of that dastardly plot were ever told, it would not be believed. The depths of human wickedness were surely unfathomable.

Because he, Phil Poland, had endeavoured to cut himself adrift from his ingenious friends, they were about to make him the scapegoat.

He contemplated flight, but, if he fled, whither should he go? Where could he hide successfully? Those who desired that he should pay the penalty would search every corner of the earth. No. Death itself would be preferable to either arrest or flight, and as he contemplated how he might cheat his enemies a bitter smile played upon his grey lips.

The crimson light slowly faded. The balmy stillness of twilight had settled upon everything, the soft evening air became filled with the sweet fragrance of the flowers, and the birds were chattering before roosting. He glanced across the lawns and well-kept walks at the rose-embowered house itself, his harbour of refuge, the cosy place which Sonia loved so well, and as his eyes wandered he sighed sadly. He knew, alas! that he must bid farewell to it for ever, bid farewell to his dear daughter—bid farewell to life itself.

He drew at his dead cigar. Then he cast it from him. It tasted bitter.

Suddenly the grave-faced Felix, the man who seldom, if ever, spoke, and who was such a mystery in the village, came across the lawn, and, bowing, exclaimed in French that the curé, M'sieur Shuttleworth, had called.

"Ah! yes," exclaimed his master, quickly arousing himself. "How very foolish of

me! I quite forgot I had invited Mr. Shuttleworth to come in and smoke to-night. Ask him to come out here, and bring the cigars and whisky."

"Oui, M'sieur," replied the funereal-looking butler, bowing low as he turned to go back to the house.

"How strange!" laughed Poland to himself. "What would the parson think if he knew who I am, and the charge against me? What will he say afterwards, I wonder?"

Then, a few moments later, a thin, grey-faced, rather ascetic-looking clergyman, the Reverend Edmund Shuttleworth, rector of Middleton, came across the grass and grasped his host's hand in warmest greeting.

When he had seated himself in the low chair which Poland pulled forward, and Felix had handed the cigars, the two men commenced to gossip, as was their habit.

Phil Poland liked the rector, because he had discovered that, notwithstanding his rather prim exterior and most approved clerical drawl, he was nevertheless a man of the world. In the pulpit he preached forgiveness, and, unlike many country rectors and their wives, was broad-minded enough to admit the impossibility of a sinless life. Both he and Mrs. Shuttleworth treated both chapel and church-going folk with equal kindliness, and the deserving poor never went empty away.

Both in the pulpit and out of it the rector of Middleton called a spade a spade with purely British bluntness, and though his parish was only a small one he was the most popular man in it—a fact which surely spoke volumes for a parson.

"I was much afraid I shouldn't be able to come to-night," he said presently. "Old Mrs. Dixon, over at Forest Farm, is very ill, and I've been with her all the afternoon."

"Then you didn't go to Lady Medland's garden-party?"

"No. I wanted to go very much, but was unable. I fear poor old Mrs. Dixon may not last the night. She asked after Miss Sonia, and expressed a great wish to see her. You have no idea how popular your daughter is among the poor of Middleton, Mr. Poland."

"Sonia returns from London to-morrow afternoon," her father said. "She shall go

over and see Mrs. Dixon."

"If the old lady is still here," said the rector. "I fear her life is fast ebbing, but it is reassuring to know she has made peace with her Maker, and will pass happily away into the unknown beyond."

His host was silent. The bent old woman, the wife of a farm-labourer, had made repentance. If there was repentance for her, was there not repentance for him? He held his breath at the thought.

Little did Shuttleworth dream that the merry, easy-going man who sat before him was doomed—a man whose tortured soul was crying aloud for help and guidance; a man with a dread and terrible secret upon his conscience; a man threatened by an exposure which he could never live to face.

Poland allowed his visitor to chatter on—to gossip about the work in his parish. He was reviewing his present position. He desired some one in whom he could confide; some one of whom he might seek advice and counsel. Could he expose his real self in all his naked shame; dare he speak in confidence to Edmund Shuttleworth? Dare he reveal the ghastly truth, and place the seal of the confessional upon his lips?

Twilight deepened into night, and the crescent moon rose slowly. Yet the two men still sat smoking and chatting, Shuttleworth somewhat surprised to notice how unusually preoccupied his host appeared.

At last, when the night wind blew chill, they rose and passed into the study, where Poland closed the French windows, and then, with sudden resolve and a word of apology to his visitor, he crossed the room and turned the key in the lock, saying in a hard, strained tone—

"Shuttleworth, I—I want to speak to you in—in strictest confidence—to ask your advice. Yet—yet it is upon such a serious matter that I hesitate—fearing ——"

"Fearing what?" asked the rector, somewhat surprised at his tone.

"Because, in order to speak, I must reveal to you a truth—a shameful truth concerning myself. May I rely upon your secrecy?"

"Any fact you may reveal to me I shall regard as sacred. That is my duty as a minister of religion, Poland," was the other's quiet reply.

“You swear to say nothing?” cried his host eagerly, standing before him.

“Yes. I swear to regard your confidence,” replied his visitor.

And then the Honourable Philip Poland slowly sank into the chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, and in brief, hesitating sentences related one of the strangest stories that ever fell from any sane man’s lips—a story which held its hearer aghast, transfixed, speechless in amazement.

“There is repentance for me, Shuttleworth—tell me that there is!” cried the man who had confessed, his eyes staring and haggard in his agony. “I have told you the truth because—because when I am gone I want you, if you will, to ask your wife to take care of my darling Sonia. Financially, she is well provided for. I have seen to all that, but—ah!” he cried wildly, “she must never know that her father was——”

“Hush, Poland!” urged the rector, placing his hand tenderly upon his host’s arm. “Though I wear these clothes, I am still a man of the world like yourself. I haven’t been sinless. You wish to repent—to atone for the past. It is my duty to assist you.” And he put out his strong hand frankly.

His host drew back. But next instant he grasped it, and in doing so burst into tears.

“I make no excuse for myself,” he faltered. “I am a blackguard, and unworthy the friendship of a true honest man like yourself, Shuttleworth. But I love my darling child. She is all that has remained to me, and I want to leave her in the care of a good woman. She must forget me—forget what her father was——”

“Enough!” cried the other, holding up his hand; and then, until far into the night, the two men sat talking in low, solemn tones, discussing the future, while the attitude of Philip Poland, as he sat pale and motionless, his hands clasped upon his knees, was one of deep repentance.

That same night, if the repentant transgressor could but have seen Edmund Shuttleworth, an hour later, pacing the rectory study; if he could have witnessed the expression of fierce, murderous hatred upon that usually calm and kindly countenance; if he could have overheard the strangely bitter words which escaped the dry lips of the man in whom he had confided his secret, he would have been held aghast—aghast at the amazing truth, a truth of which he had never dreamed.

His confession had produced a complication unheard of, undreamed of, so cleverly had the rector kept his countenance and controlled his voice. But when alone he gave full vent to his anger, and laughed aloud in the contemplation of a terrible vengeance which, he declared aloud to himself, should be his.

“That voice!” he cried in triumph. “Why did I not recognize it before? But I know the truth now—I know the amazing truth!”

And he laughed harshly to himself as he paced his room.

Next day Philip Poland spent in his garden, reading beneath the big yew, as was his wont. But his thoughts ever wandered from his book, as he grew apprehensive of the evil his enemy was about to hurl upon him. His defiance, he knew, must cost him his liberty—his life. Yet he was determined. For Sonia’s sake he had become a changed man.

At noon Shuttleworth, calm and pleasant, came across the lawn with outstretched hand. He uttered low words of encouragement and comfort. He said that poor Mrs. Dixon had passed away, and later on he left to attend to his work in the parish. After luncheon, served by the silent Felix, Poland retired to his study with the newspaper, and sat for two hours, staring straight before him, until, just after four o’clock, the door was suddenly flung open, and a slim, athletic young girl, with a wealth of soft fair hair, a perfect countenance, a sweet, lovable expression, and a pair of merry blue eyes, burst into the room, crying—

“Hallo, dad! Here I am—so glad to be back again with you!” And, bending over him, she gave him a sounding kiss upon the cheek.

She was verily a picture of youthful beauty, in her cool, pale grey gown, her hair dressed low, and secured by a bow of black velvet, while her big black hat suited her to perfection, her blue eyes adoring in their gaze and her lovely face flushed with pleasure at her home-coming.

Her father took her hand, and, gazing lovingly into her eyes, said in a slow voice —

“And I, too, darling, am glad to have you at home. Life here is very dull indeed without you.”

That night, when seated together in the pretty old-fashioned drawing-room before retiring to bed—a room of bright chintzes, costly knick-knacks, and big blue bowls of sweet-smelling pot-pourri—Sonia looked delightful in her black

net dinner-gown, cut slightly *décolleté*, and wearing around her slim white throat a simple necklace of pale pink coral.

“My dear,” exclaimed her father in a slow, hesitating way, after her fingers had been running idly over the keys of the piano, “I want to speak very seriously to you for a few moments.”

She rose in surprise, and came beside his chair. He grasped her soft hand, and she sank upon her knees, as she so often did when they spoke in confidence.

“Well—I’ve been wondering, child, what—what you will do in future,” he said, with a catch in his voice. “Perhaps—perhaps I may have to go away for a very, very long time—years perhaps—on a long journey, and I shall, I fear, be compelled to leave you, to——”

“To leave me, dad!” gasped the girl, dismayed. “No—surely—you won’t do that? What could I do without you—without my dear, devoted dad—my only friend!”

“You will have to—to do without me, dearest—to—to forget your father,” said the white-faced man in a low, broken voice. “I couldn’t take you with me. It would be impossible.”

The girl was silent; her slim hand was clutching his convulsively; her eyes filled with the light of unshed tears.

“But what should I do, dad, without you?” she cried. “Why do you speak so strangely? Why do you hide so many things from me still—about our past? I’m eighteen now, remember, dad, and you really ought to speak to me as a woman—not as a child. Why all this mystery?”

“Because—because it is imperative, Sonia,” he replied in a tone quite unusual. “I—I would tell you all, only—only you would think ill of me. So I prefer that you, my daughter, should remain in ignorance, and still love me—still——”

His words were interrupted by Felix, who opened the door, and, advancing with silent tread, said—

“A gentleman wishes to speak with m’sieur on very urgent business. You are unacquainted with him, he says. His name is Max Morel, and he must see you at once. He is in the hall.”

Poland's face went a trifle paler. Whom could the stranger be? Why did he desire an interview at that hour?—for it was already eleven o'clock.

"Sonia dear," he said quietly, turning to his daughter, "will you leave me for a few moments? I must see what this gentleman wants."

The girl followed Felix out somewhat reluctantly, when, a few seconds later, a short, middle-aged Frenchman, with pointed grey beard and wearing gold pince-nez, was ushered in.

Philip Poland started and instantly went pale at sight of his visitor.

"I need no introduction, m'sieur. You recognize me, I see," remarked the stranger, in French.

"Yes," was the other's reply. "You are Henri Guertin, chief inspector of the sûreté of Paris. We have met before—once."

"And you are no doubt aware of the reason of my visit?"

"I can guess," replied the unhappy man. "You are here to arrest me—I know. I ——"

The renowned detective—one of the greatest criminal investigators in Europe—glanced quickly at the closed door, and, dropping his voice, said—

"I am here, not to arrest you, M'sieur Poland—but to afford you an opportunity of escape."

"Of escape!" gasped the other, his drawn countenance blanched to the lips.

"Yes, escape. Listen. My instructions are to afford you an easy opportunity of—well, of escaping the ignominy of arrest, exposure, trial, and penalty, by a very simple means—death by your own hand."

"Suicide!" echoed Poland, after a painful pause. "Ah! I quite understand! The Government are not anxious that the scandal should be made public, eh?" he cried bitterly.

"I have merely told you my instructions," was the detective's response, as, with a quick, foreign gesture, he displayed on his left hand a curious old engraved amethyst set in a ring—probably an episcopal ring of ages long ago. "At midnight I have an appointment at the cross-roads, half-a-mile away, with

Inspector Watts of Scotland Yard, who holds a warrant for your arrest and extradition to France. If you are still alive when we call, then you must stand your trial—that is all. Trial will mean exposure, and——”

“And my exposure will mean the downfall and ruin of those political thieves now in power—eh?” cried Poland. “They are not at all anxious that I should fall into the hands of the police.”

“And you are equally anxious that the world—and more especially your daughter—shall not know the truth,” remarked the detective, speaking in a meaning tone. “I have given you the alternative, and I shall now leave. At midnight I shall return—officially—when I hope you will have escaped by the loophole so generously allowed you by the authorities.”

“If I fled, would you follow?”

“Most certainly. It would be my duty. You cannot escape—only by death. I regret, m’sieur, that I have been compelled to put the alternative so bluntly, but you know full well the great issues at stake in this affair. Therefore I need say nothing further, except to bid you *au revoir*—till midnight.”

Then the portly man bowed—bowed as politely as though he were in the presence of a crowned head—and, turning upon his heel, left the room, followed by his host, who personally opened the door for him as he bade him good-night.

One hour’s grace had been given Philip Poland. After that, the blackness of death.

His blanched features were rigid as he stood staring straight before him. His enemy had betrayed him. His defiance had, alas! cost him his life.

He recollected Shuttleworth’s slowly uttered words on the night before, and his finger-nails clenched themselves into his palms. Then he passed across the square, old-fashioned hall to the study, dim-lit, save for the zone of light around the green-shaded reading-lamp; the sombre room where the old grandfather clock ticked so solemnly in the corner.

Sonia had returned to the drawing-room as he let his visitor out. He could hear her playing, and singing in her sweet contralto a tuneful French love-song, ignorant of the hideous crisis that had fallen, ignorant of the awful disaster which had overwhelmed him.

Three-quarters of an hour had passed when, stealthily on tiptoe, the girl crept into the room, and there found her father seated by the fireplace, staring in blank silence.

The long old brass-faced clock in the shadow struck three times upon its strident bell. Only fifteen minutes more, and then the police would enter and charge him with that foul crime. Then the solution of a remarkable mystery which had puzzled the whole world would be complete.

He started, and, glancing around, realized that Sonia, with her soft hand in his, was again at his side.

“Why, dad,” cried the girl in alarm, “how pale you are! Whatever ails you? What can I get you?”

“Nothing, child, nothing,” was the desperate man’s hoarse response. “I’m—I’m quite well—only a little upset at some bad news I’ve had, that’s all. But come. Let me kiss you, dear. It’s time you were in bed.”

And he drew her down until he could print a last fond caress upon her white open brow.

“But, dad,” exclaimed the girl anxiously, “I really can’t leave you. You’re not well. You’re not yourself to-night.”

As she uttered those words, Felix entered the room, saying in an agitated voice —

“May I speak with you alone, m’sieur?”

His master started violently, and, rising, went forth into the hall, where the butler, his face scared and white, whispered—

“Something terrible has occurred, m’sieur! Davis, the groom, has just found a gentleman lying dead in the drive outside. He’s been murdered, m’sieur!”

“Murdered!” gasped Poland breathlessly. “Who is he?”

“The gentleman who called upon you three-quarters of an hour ago. He’s lying dead—out yonder.”

“Where’s a lantern? Let me go and see!” cried Poland. And a few moments later master and man were standing with the groom beside the lifeless body of Henri

Guertin, the great detective, the terror of all French criminals. The white countenance, with its open, staring eyes, bore a horrified expression, but the only wound that could be distinguished was a deep cut across the palm of the right hand, a clean cut, evidently inflicted by a keen-edged knife.

Davis, on his way in, had, he explained, stumbled across the body in the darkness, ten minutes before.

Philip Poland had knelt, his hand upon the dead man's heart, when suddenly all three were startled by the sound of footsteps upon the gravel, and next moment two men loomed up into the uncertain light of the lantern.

One was tall and middle-aged, in dark tweeds and a brown hat of soft felt; the other, short and stout, wearing gold pince-nez.

A loud cry of dismay broke from Poland's fevered lips as his eyes fell upon the latter.

"Hallo! What's this?" cried a sharp, imperious voice in French, the voice of the man in pince-nez, as, next moment, he stood gazing down upon the dead unknown, who, strangely enough, resembled him in countenance, in dress—indeed, in every particular.

The startled men halted for a moment, speechless. The situation was staggering.

Henri Guertin stood there alive, and as he bent over the prostrate body an astounding truth became instantly revealed: the dead man had been cleverly made-up to resemble the world-renowned police official.

The reason of this was an entire mystery, although one fact became plain: he had, through posing as Guertin, been foully and swiftly assassinated.

Who was he? Was he really the man who came there to suggest suicide in preference to arrest, or had that strange suggestion been conveyed by Guertin himself?

The point was next moment decided.

"You see, m'sieur," exclaimed Poland defiantly, turning to the great detective, "I have preferred to take my trial—to allow the public the satisfaction of a solution of the problem, rather than accept the generous terms you offered me an hour ago."

“Terms I offered you!” cried the Frenchman. “What are you saying? I was not here an hour ago. If you have had a visitor, it must have been this impostor—this man who has lost his life because he has impersonated me!”

Philip Poland, without replying, snatched at the detective’s left hand and examined it. There was no ring upon it.

Swiftly he bent beside the victim, and there, sure enough, upon the dead white finger was revealed the curious ring he had noticed—an oval amethyst engraved with a coat-of-arms surmounted by a cardinal’s hat—the ring worn by the man who had called upon him an hour before!

THE STORY OF OWEN BIDDULPH

CHAPTER ONE

BESIDE STILL WATERS

If I make too frequent use of the first person singular in these pages, I crave forgiveness of the reader.

I have written down this strange story for two reasons: first, because I venture to believe it to be one of the most remarkable sequences of curious events that have ever occurred in a man's life; and secondly, by so doing, I am able to prove conclusively before the world the innocence of one sadly misjudged, and also to set at rest certain scandalous tales which have arisen in consequence.

At risk of betraying certain confidences; at risk of placing myself in the unenviable position of chronicler of my own misfortunes; at risk even of defying those who have threatened my life should I dare speak the truth, I have resolved to recount the whole amazing affair, just as it occurred to me, and further, to reveal completely what has hitherto been regarded as a mystery by readers of the daily newspapers.

You already know my name—Owen Biddulph. As introduction, I suppose I ought to add that, after coming down from Oxford, I pretended to read for the Bar, just to please the dear old governor—Sir Alfred Biddulph, Knight. At the age of twenty-five, owing to his unfortunate death in the hunting-field, I found myself possessor of Carrington Court, our fine Elizabethan place in North Devon, and town-house, 64a Wilton Street, Belgrave Square, together with a comfortable income of about nine thousand a year, mostly derived from sound industrial enterprises.

My father, before his retirement, had been a Liverpool ship-owner, and, like many others of his class, had received his knighthood on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Jubilee. My mother had been dead long since. I had but few relatives, and those mostly poor ones; therefore, on succeeding to the property, I went down to Carrington just to interview Browning, the butler, and the other servants, all of them old and faithful retainers; and then, having given up all thought of a legal career, I went abroad, in order to attain my long-desired ambition to travel, and to "see the world."

Continental life attracted me, just as it attracts most young men. Paris, with its glare and glitter, its superficial gaiety, its bright boulevards, and its feminine beauty, is the candle to the moth of youth. I revelled in Paris just as many a thousand other young men had done before me. I knew French, Italian and German, and I was vain enough to believe that I might have within me the making of a cosmopolitan. So many young men believe that—and, alas! so many fail on account of either indolence, or of narrow-mindedness. To be a thorough-going cosmopolitan one must be imbued with the true spirit of adventure, and must be a citizen of all cities, a countryman of all countries. This I tried to be, and perhaps—in a manner—succeeded. At any rate, I spent nearly three whole years travelling hither and thither across the face of Europe, from Trondhjem to Constantinople, and from Bordeaux to Petersburg.

Truly, if one has money, one can lead a very pleasant life, year in, year out, at the various European health and pleasure resorts, without even setting foot in our dear old England. I was young—and enthusiastic. I spent the glorious golden autumn in Florence and in Perugia, the Tuscan vintage in old Siena; December in Sicily; January in Corsica; February and March at Nice, taking part in the Carnival and Battles of Flowers; April in Venice; May at the Villa d'Este on the Lake of Como; June and July at Aix; August, the month of the Lion, among the chestnut-woods high up at Vallombrosa, and September at San Sebastian in Spain, that pretty town of sea-bathing and of gambling. Next year I spent the winter in Russia, the guest of a prince who lived near Moscow; the early spring at the Hermitage at Monte Carlo; May at the Meurice in Paris; the summer in various parts of Switzerland, and most of the autumn in the high Tatra, the foot-hills of the Carpathians.

And so, with my faithful Italian valet, Lorenzo, a dark-haired, smart man of thirty, who had been six years in my service, and who had, on so many occasions, proved himself entirely trustworthy, I passed away the seasons as they came and went, always living in the best hotels, and making a good many passing acquaintances. Life was, indeed, a perfect phantasmagoria.

Now there is a certain section of English society who, being for some reason or another beyond the pale at home, make their happy hunting-ground in the foreign hotel. Men and women, consumptive sons and scraggy daughters, they generally live in the cheapest rooms *en pension*, and are ever ready to scrape up acquaintance with anybody of good appearance and of either sex, as long as they are possessed of money. Every one who has lived much on the Continent knows them—and, be it said, gives them a wide berth.

I was not long before I experienced many queer acquaintanceships in hotels, some amusing, some the reverse. At Verona a man, an Englishman named Davis, who had been at my college in Oxford, borrowed fifty pounds of me, but disappeared from the hotel next morning before I came down; while, among other similar incidents, a dear, quiet-mannered old widow—a Russian, who spoke English—induced me at Ostend to assist her to pay her hotel bill of one thousand six hundred francs, giving me a cheque upon her bank in Petersburg, a cheque which, in due course, was returned to me marked “no account.”

Still, I enjoyed myself. The carelessness of life suited me, for I managed to obtain sunshine the whole year round, and to have a good deal of fun for my money.

I had a fine sixty horse-power motor-car, and usually travelled from place to place on it, my friend Jack Marlowe, who had been at Oxford with me, and whose father’s estates marched with mine on the edge of Dartmoor, frequently coming out to spend a week or two with me on the roads. He was studying for the diplomatic service, but made many excuses for holidays, which he invariably spent at my side. And we had a merry time together, I can assure you.

For nearly three years I had led this life of erratic wandering, returning to London only for a week or so in June, to see my lawyers and put in an appearance for a few days at Carrington to interview old Browning. And I must confess I found the old place deadly dull and lonely.

Boodles, to which I belonged, just as my father had belonged, I found full of pompous bores and old fogeys; and though at White’s there was a little more life and movement now they had built a new roof, yet I preferred the merry recklessness of Monte Carlo, or the gaiety of the white-and-gold casinos at Nice or Cannes.

Thus nearly three years went by, careless years of luxury and idleness, years of living *à la carte* at restaurants of the first order, from the Reserve at Beaulieu to the Hermitage at Moscow, from Armenonville in the Bois to Salvini’s in Milan —years of the education of an epicure.

The first incident of this strange history, however, occurred while I was spending the early spring at Gardone. Possibly you, as an English reader, have never heard of the place. If, however, you were Austrian, you would know it as one of the most popular resorts on the beautiful mountain-fringed Lake of Garda, that deep blue lake, half in Italian territory and half in Austrian, with the quaint little town

of Desenzano at the Italian end, and Riva, with its square old church-tower and big white hotels, at the extreme north.

Of all the spring resorts on the Italian lakes, Gardone appeals to the visitor as one of the quietest and most picturesque. The Grand Hotel, with its long terrace at the lake-side, is, during February and March, filled with a gay crowd who spend most of their time in climbing the steep mountain-sides towards the jealously guarded frontier, or taking motor-boat excursions up and down the picturesque lake.

From the balcony of my room spread a panorama as beautiful as any in Europe; more charming, indeed, than at Lugano or Bellagio, or other of the many lake-side resorts, for here along the sheltered banks grew all the luxuriant vegetation of the Riviera—the camellias, magnolias, aloes and palms.

I had been there ten days or so when, one evening at dinner in the long restaurant which overlooked the lake, there came to the small table opposite mine a tall, fair-haired girl with great blue eyes, dressed elegantly but quietly in black chiffon, with a band of pale pink velvet twisted in her hair.

She glanced at me quickly as she drew aside her skirt and took her seat opposite her companion, a rather stout, dark, bald-headed man, red-faced and well-dressed, whose air was distinctly paternal as he bent and handed the menu across to her.

The man turned and glanced sharply around. By his well-cut dinner-coat, the way his dress-shirt fitted, and his refinement of manner, I at once put him down as a gentleman, and her father.

I instantly decided, on account of their smartness of dress, that they were not English. Indeed, the man addressed her in French, to which she responded. Her coiffure was in the latest mode of Paris, her gown showed unmistakably the hand of the French dressmaker, while her elegance was essentially that of the Parisienne. There is always a something—something indescribable—about the Frenchwoman which is marked and distinctive, and which the English-bred woman can never actually imitate.

Not that I like Frenchwomen. Far from it. They are too vain and shallow, too fond of gaiety and flattery to suit my taste. No; among all the many women I have met I have never found any to compare with those of my own people.

I don’t know why I watched the new-comers so intently. Perhaps it was on account of the deliberate and careful manner in which the man selected his dinner, his instructions to the *maître d’hotel* as to the manner the entrée was to be made, and the infinite pains he took over the exact vintage he required. He spoke in French, fluent and exact, and his manner was entirely that of the epicure.

Or was it because of that girl?—the girl with eyes of that deep, fathomless blue, the wonderful blue of the lake as it lay in the sunlight—the lake that was nearly a mile in depth. In her face I detected a strange, almost wistful look, an expression which showed that her thoughts were far away from the laughter and chatter of that gay restaurant. She looked at me without seeing me; she spoke to her father without knowing what she replied. There was, in those wonderful eyes, a strange, far-off look, and it was that which, more than anything else, attracted my attention and caused me to notice the pair.

Her fair, sweet countenance was perfect in its contour, her cheeks innocent of the Parisienne’s usual aids to beauty, her lips red and well moulded, while two tiny dimples gave a piquancy to a face which was far more beautiful than any I had met in all my wanderings.

Again she raised her eyes from the table and gazed across the flowers at me fixedly, with just a sudden inquisitiveness shown by her slightly knit brows. Then, suddenly starting, as though realizing she was looking at a stranger, she dropped her eyes again, and replied to some question her father had addressed to her.

Her dead black gown was cut just discreetly *décolleté*, which well became a girl not yet twenty, while at her throat, suspended by a very thin gold chain, was a single stone, a splendid ruby of enormous size, and of evident value. The only other ornament she wore was a curious antique bracelet in the form of a jewelled snake, the tail of which was in its mouth—the ancient emblem of Eternity.

Why she possessed such an attraction for me I cannot tell, except that she seemed totally unlike any other woman I had ever met before—a face that was as perfect as any I had seen on the canvases of the great painters, or in the marbles of the Louvre or the Vatican.

Again she raised her eyes to mine. Again I realized that the expression was entirely unusual. Then she dropped them again, and in a slow, inert way ate the crayfish soup which the waiter had placed before her.

Others in the big, long room had noticed her beauty, for I saw people whispering among themselves, while her father, leaning back in his chair on placing down his spoon, was entirely conscious of the sensation his daughter had evoked.

Throughout the meal I watched the pair carefully, trying to overhear their conversation. It was, however, always in low, confidential tones, and, strain my ears how I might, I could gather nothing. They spoke in French, which I detected from the girl's monosyllables, but beyond that I could understand nothing.

From the obsequious manner of the *maître d'hotel* I knew that her father was a person of importance. Yet the man who knows what to order in a restaurant, and orders it with instructions, is certain to receive marked attention. The epicure always commands the respect of those who serve him. And surely this stranger was an epicure, for after his dessert I heard him order with his coffee a *petit verre* of gold-water of Dantzig, a rare liqueur only known and appreciated by the very select few who really know what is what—a bottle of which, if you search Europe from end to end, you will not find in perhaps twenty restaurants, and those only of the very first order.

The eyes of the fair-haired girl haunted me. Instinctively I knew that she was no ordinary person. Her apathy and listlessness, her strangely vacant look, combined with the wonderful beauty of her countenance, held me fascinated.

Who was she? What mystery surrounded her? I felt, by some strange intuition, that there was a mystery, and that that curious wistfulness in her glance betrayed itself because, though accompanied by her father, she was nevertheless in sore need of a friend.

When her father had drained his coffee they rose and passed into the great lounge, with its many little tables set beneath the palms, where a fine orchestra was playing Maillart's tuneful "Les Dragons de Villars."

As they seated themselves many among that well-dressed, gay crowd of winter idlers turned to look at them. I, however, seldom went into the nightly concert; therefore I strolled along the wide corridor to the hall-porter, and inquired the names of the fresh arrivals.

"Yes, monsieur," replied the big, dark-bearded German; "you mean, of course, numbers one hundred and seventeen and one hundred and forty-six—English, father and daughter, arrived by the five o'clock boat from Riva with a great deal of baggage—here are the names," and he showed me the slips signed by them on

arrival. “They are the only new-comers to-day.”

There I saw, written on one in a man’s bold hand, “Richard Pennington, rentier, Salisbury, England,” and on the other, “Sylvia Pennington.”

“I thought they were French,” I remarked.

“So did I, monsieur; they speak French so well. I was surprised when they registered themselves as English.”

CHAPTER TWO

TOLD IN THE NIGHT

Sylvia Pennington! The face, the name, those wistful, appealing eyes haunted me in my dreams that night.

Why? Even now I am at a loss to tell, unless—well, unless I had become fascinated by that strange, mysterious, indescribable expression; fascinated, perhaps, by her marvellous beauty, unequalled in all my experience.

Next morning, while my man Lorenzo was waiting for me, I told him to make discreet inquiry regarding the pair when in the steward's room, where he ate his meals. Soon after noon he came to me, saying he had discovered that the young lady had been heard by the night-porter weeping alone in her room for hours, and that, as soon as it was dawn, she had gone out for a long walk alone along the lake-side. It was apparent that she and her father were not on the very best of terms.

"The servants believe they are French, sir," my man added; "but it seems that they tell people they are English. The man speaks English like an Englishman. I heard him, half-an-hour ago, asking the hall-porter about a telegram."

"Well, Lorenzo," I said, "just keep your eyes and ears open. I want to learn all I can about Mr. Pennington and his daughter. She hasn't a maid, I suppose?"

"Not with her, sir," he replied. "If she had, I'd soon get to know all about them."

I was well aware of that, for Lorenzo Merli, like all Italians, was a great gossip, and quite a lady-killer in the servants' hall. He was a dark-haired, good-looking young man whose character was excellent, and who had served me most faithfully. His father was farm-bailiff to an Italian marquis I knew, and with whom I had stayed near Parma, while before entering my service he had been valet to the young Marchese di Viterbo, one of the beaux of Roman society.

When I reposed a confidence in Lorenzo I knew he would never betray it. And I knew that, now I had expressed an ardent desire for information regarding the man Pennington and his daughter, he would strain every effort to learn what I

wanted to know.

The pair sat at their usual table at luncheon. She was in a neat gown of navy blue serge, and wore a pretty cream hat which suited her admirably. Her taste in dress was certainly wonderful for an Englishwoman. Yet the pair always spoke French together, and presented no single characteristic of the British whatsoever.

Because of his epicurean tastes, the stout, bald-headed man received the greatest attention from the waiters; but those splendid eyes of his daughter betrayed no evidence of either tears or sleeplessness. They were the same, wistful yet wonderful, with just that slightest trace of sadness which had filled me with curiosity.

After luncheon he strolled along the broad palm-lined terrace in the sunshine beside the water's edge, while she lolled in one of the long cane chairs. Yet, as I watched, I saw that she was not enjoying the warm winter sunshine or the magnificent view of snow-capped mountains rising on the far horizon.

Presently she rose and walked beside her father, who spoke to her rapidly and earnestly, but she only replied in monosyllables. It seemed that all his efforts to arouse her interest utterly failed.

I was lounging upon the low wall of the terrace, pretending to watch the arrival of the little black-and-white paddle-steamer on its way to Riva, when, as they passed me, Pennington halted to light a cigar.

Suddenly he glanced up at me with a strangely suspicious look. His dark eyes were furtive and searching, as though he had detected and resented my undue interest in his daughter.

Therefore I strolled down to the landing-stage, and, going on board the steamer, spent the afternoon travelling up to Riva, the pretty little town with the tiny harbour at the Austrian end of the lake. The afternoon was lovely, and the panorama of mountain mirrored in the water, with picturesque villages and hamlets nestling at the water's edge, was inexpressibly grand. The deep azure of the unruffled water stood out in contrast to the dazzling snow above, and as the steamer, hugging the shore, rounded one rocky point after another, the scene was certainly, as the Italian contadino puts it, "a bit of Paradise fallen from heaven upon earth."

But, to you who know the north Italian lakes, why need I describe it?

Suffice it to say that I took tea in the big hall of the Lido Palace Hotel at Riva, and then, boarding the steamer again, returned to Gardone just in time to dress for dinner.

I think that Pennington had forbidden his daughter to look at me, for never once during dinner the next evening, as far as I could detect, did she raise her eyes to mine. When not eating, she sat, a pretty figure in cream chiffon, with her elbows upon the table, her chin upon her clasped hands, talking to her father in that low, confidential tone. Were they talking secrets?

Just before they rose I heard him say in English—

“I’m going out for an hour—just for a stroll. I may be longer. If I’m not back all night, don’t be anxious. I may be detained.”

“Where are you going?” she asked quickly.

“That is my affair,” was his abrupt reply. Her face assumed a strange expression. Then she passed along the room, he following.

As soon as they had gone my mind was made up. I scented mystery. I ascended in the lift to my room, got my coat, and, going outside into the ill-lit road beyond the zone of the electric lights in front of the hotel, I waited.

The man was not long in coming. He wore a golf-cap and a thick overcoat, and carried a stout stick. On the steps of the hotel he paused, lit his cigar, and then set off to the left, down the principal street—the highroad which led to the clean little town of Salo and the southern end of the lake.

I lounged along after him at a respectable distance, all curiosity at the reason why, in that rural retreat, he intended to be absent all night.

He went along at a swinging pace, passing around the lake-front of the town which almost adjoins Gardone, and then began to ascend the steep hill beyond. Upon the still night air I could scent the aroma of his cigar. He was now on his way out into a wild and rather desolate country, high above the lake. But after walking about a mile he came to a point where the roads branched, one to Verona, the other to Brescia.

There he halted, and, seating himself upon a big stone at the wayside, smoked in patience, and waited. I advanced as near as I could without risk of detection, and watched.

He struck a match in order to look at his watch. Then he rose and listened intently. The night was dark and silent, with heavy clouds hanging about the mountains, threatening rain.

I suppose he had waited fully another quarter of an hour, when suddenly, far away over the brow of the hill in the direction of Brescia, I saw a peculiar light in the sky. At first I was puzzled, but as it gradually grew larger and whiter I knew that it came from the head-lights of an approaching motor-car. Next moment the hum of the engine fell on my ears, and suddenly the whole roadway became illuminated, so suddenly, indeed, that I had only just time to crouch down in order to avoid detection.

Pennington shouted to the driver, and he instantly pulled up. Then two men in thick overcoats descended, and welcomed him warmly in English.

“Come along, old man!” I heard one of them cry. “Come inside. We must be off again, for we haven’t a moment to spare. How’s the girl?”

Then they entered the car, which was quickly turned, and a few moments later disappeared swiftly along the road it had come.

I stood, full of wonder, watching the white light fade away.

Who were Pennington’s friends, that he should meet them in so secret a manner?

“How’s the girl?” Had that man referred to Sylvia? There was mystery somewhere. I felt certain of it.

Down the hill I retraced my steps, on through the little town, now wrapped in slumber, and back to the Grand Hotel, where nearly every one had already retired to bed. In a corner of the big lounge, however, Pennington’s daughter was seated alone, reading a Tauchnitz novel.

I felt in no humour to turn in just then, for I was rather used to late hours; therefore I passed through the lounge and out upon the terrace, in order to smoke and think. The clouds were lifting, and the moon was struggling through, casting an uncertain light across the broad dark waters.

I had thrown myself into a wicker chair near the end of the terrace, and, with a cigarette, was pondering deeply, when, of a sudden, I saw a female figure, wrapped in a pale blue shawl, coming in my direction.

I recognized the cream skirt and the shawl. It was Sylvia! Ah! how inexpressibly charming and dainty she looked!

When she had passed, I rose and, meeting her face to face, raised my hat and spoke to her.

She started slightly and halted. What words I uttered I hardly knew, but a few moments later I found myself strolling at her side, chatting merrily in English. Her chiffons exuded the delicate scent of Rose d'Orsay, that sweet perfume which is the hall-mark of the modern well-dressed woman.

And she was undoubtedly English, after all!

"Oh no," she declared in a low, musical voice, in response to a fear I had expressed, "I am not at all cold. This place is so charming, and so warm, to where my father and I have recently been—at Uleaborg, in Finland."

"At Uleaborg!" I echoed. "Why, that is away—out of the world—at the northern end of the Gulf of Bothnia!"

"Yes," she declared, with a light laugh. "It is so windy and cold, and oh! so wretchedly dull."

"I should rather think so!" I cried. "Why, it is almost within the Arctic Circle. Why did you go up there—so far north—in winter?"

"Ah!" she sighed, "we are always travelling. My father is the modern Wandering Jew, I think. Our movements are always sudden, and our journeys always long ones—from one end of Europe to the other very often."

"You seem tired of it!" I remarked.

"Tired!" she gasped, her voice changing. "Ah! if you only knew how I long for peace, for rest—for home!" and she sighed.

"Where is your home?"

"Anywhere, now-a-days," was her rather despondent reply. "We are wanderers. We lived in England once—but, alas! that is now all of the past. My father is compelled to travel, and I must, of necessity, go with him. I am afraid," she added quickly, "that I bore you with this chronicle of my own troubles. I really ought not to say this—to you, a stranger," she said, with a low, nervous little laugh.

“Though I may be a stranger, yet, surely, I may become your friend,” I remarked, looking into her beautiful face, half concealed by the blue wrap.

For a moment she hesitated; then, halting in the gravelled path and looking at me, she replied very seriously—

“No; please do not speak of that again.”

“Why not?”

“Well—only because you must not become my friend.”

“You are lonely,” I blurted forth. “I have watched you, and I have seen that you are in sore need of a friend. Do you deny that?”

“No,” she faltered. “I—I—yes, what you say is, alas! correct. How can I deny it? I have no friend; I am alone.”

“Then allow me to be one. Put to me whatever test you will,” I exclaimed, “and I hope I may bear it satisfactorily. I, too, am a lonely man—a wanderer. I, too, am in need of a friend in whom I can confide, whose guidance I can ask. Surely there is no friend better for a lonely man than a good woman?”

“Ah, no,” she cried, suddenly covering her face with both her hands. “You don’t know—you are ignorant. Why do you say this?”

“Why? Shall I tell you why?” I asked, gallantly bending to her in deep earnestness. “Because I have watched you—because I know you are very unhappy!”

She held her breath. By the faint ray of the distant electric light I saw her face had become changed. She betrayed her emotions and her nervousness by the quick twitching of her fingers and her lips.

“No,” she said at last very decisively; “you must abandon all thought of friendship with me. It is impossible—quite impossible!”

“Would my friendship be so repugnant to you, then?” I asked quickly.

“No, no, not that,” she cried, laying her trembling fingers upon my coat-sleeve. “You—you don’t understand—you cannot dream of my horrible position—of the imminent peril of yours.”

“Peril! What do you mean?” I asked, very much puzzled.

“You are in grave danger. Be careful of yourself,” she said anxiously. “You should always carry some weapon with you, because——” and she broke off short, without concluding her sentence.

“Because—why?”

“Well, because an accident might happen to you—an accident planned by those who are your enemies.”

“I really don’t understand you,” I said. “Do you mean to imply that there is some conspiracy afoot against me?”

“I warn you in all seriousness,” she said. “I—well, the fact is, I came out here—I followed you out—in order to tell you this in secret. Leave here, I beg of you; leave early to-morrow morning, and do not allow the hotel people to know your new address. Go somewhere—far away—and live in secret under an assumed name. Let Owen Biddulph disappear as though the earth had swallowed him up.”

“Then you are aware of my name!” I exclaimed.

“Certainly,” she replied. “But do—I beg of you for your own sake—heed my warning! Ah! it is cruel and horrible that I—of all women—have to tell you this!”

“I always carry a revolver,” I replied, “and I have long ago learned to shoot straight.”

“Be guarded always against a secret and insidious attack,” she urged. “I must go in—now that I have told you the truth.”

“And do you, then, refuse to become my friend, Miss Pennington?” I asked very earnestly. “Surely you are my friend already, because you have told me this!”

“Yes,” she answered, adding, “Ah! you do not know the real facts! You would not ask this if you were aware of the bitter, ghastly truth. You would not ask my friendship—nay, you would hate and curse me instead!”

“But why?” I asked, amazed at her words. “You speak in enigmas.”

She was silent again. Then her nervous fingers once more gripped my arm, as, looking into my face, her eyes shining with a weird, unusual light, she replied in quick, breathless sentences—

“Because—because friendship between us must never, never be; it would be fatal to you, just as it would be fatal to me! Death—yes, death—will come to me quickly and swiftly—perhaps to-night, perhaps to-morrow, perhaps in a week’s time. For it, I am quite prepared. All is lost—lost to me for ever! Only have a care of yourself, I beseech of you! Heed what I say. Escape the cruel fate which your enemies have marked out for you—escape while there is yet time, and—and,” she faltered in a low, hoarse voice, full of emotion, “some day in the future, perhaps, you will give a passing thought to the memory of a woman who revealed to you the truth—who saved you from an untimely end—the unhappy woman without a friend!”

“But I will be your friend!” I repeated.

“No. That can never be—*never*!” and she shuddered. “I dare not risk it. Reflect—and escape—get away in secret, and take care that you are not followed. Remember, however, we can never be friends. Such a course would be fatal—yes, alas! *fatal*!”

Instinctively she put out her tiny white hand in frank farewell. Then, when I had held it for a second in my own, she turned and, drawing her shawl about her, hurried back to the big hotel.

Utterly dumbfounded, I stood for a few seconds dazed and wondering, the sweet odour of Rose d’Orsay filling my nostrils. What did she know?

Then suddenly I held my breath, for there I saw for the first time, standing back in the shadow of the trees, straight before me, motionless as a statue, the tall, dark figure of a man who had evidently watched us the whole time, and who had, no doubt, overheard all our conversation!

CHAPTER THREE

THE CLERGYMAN FROM HAMPSHIRE

What was the meaning of it all? Why had that tall, mysterious stranger watched so intently? I looked across at him, but he did not budge, even though detected.

In a flash, all the strange warnings of Sylvia Pennington crowded upon my mind.

I stood facing the man as he lurked there in the shadow, determined that he should reveal his face. Those curious words of the mysterious girl had placed me upon my mettle. Who were the unknown enemies of mine who were conspiring against me?

Should I take her advice and leave Gardone, or should I remain on my guard, and hand them over to the police at first sign of attack?

The silent watcher did not move. He stood back there in the darkness, motionless as a statue, while I remained full in the light of the moon, which had now come forth, causing the lake and mountains to look almost fairy-like.

In order to impress upon him the fact that I was in no hurry, I lit a cigarette, and seated myself upon the low wall of the terrace, softly whistling an air of the café chantant. The night was now glorious, the mountain crests showing white in the moonlight.

Who was this man, I wondered? I regretted that we had not discovered his presence before Sylvia had left. She would, no doubt, have recognized him, and told me the reason of his watchfulness.

At last, I suppose, I must have tired him out, for suddenly he hastened from his hiding-place, and, creeping beneath the shadow of the hotel, succeeded in reaching the door through which Sylvia had passed.

As he entered, the light from the lounge within gave me a swift glance of his features. He was a thin, grey-faced, rather sad-looking man, dressed in black, but, to my surprise, I noticed that his collar was that of an English clergyman!

This struck me as most remarkable. Clergymen are not usually persons to be

feared.

I smiled to myself, for, after all, was it not quite possible that the reverend gentleman had found himself within earshot of us, and had been too embarrassed to show himself at once? What sinister motive could such a man possess?

I looked around the great lounge, with its many tables and great palms, but it was empty. He had passed through and ascended in the lift to his room.

Inquiry of the night-porter revealed that the man's name was the Reverend Edmund Shuttleworth, and that he came from Andover, in England. He had arrived at six o'clock that evening, and was only remaining the night, having expressed his intention of going on to Riva on the morrow.

So, laughing at my fears—fears which had been aroused by that strange warning of Sylvia's—I ascended to my room.

I did not leave next morning, as my fair-faced little friend had suggested, neither did Pennington return.

About eleven o'clock I strolled forth into the warm sunshine on the terrace, and there, to my surprise, saw Sylvia sitting upon one of the seats, with a cream sunshade over her head, a book in her lap, while by her side lounged the mysterious watcher of the night before—the English clergyman, Mr. Shuttleworth of Andover.

Neither noticed me. He was speaking to her slowly and earnestly, she listening attentively to his words. I saw that she sighed deeply, her fine eyes cast upon the ground.

It all seemed as though he were reproaching her with something, for she was silent, in an attitude almost of penitence.

Now that I obtained a full view of the reverend gentleman's features in full daylight they seemed less mysterious, less sinister than in the half-light of midnight. He looked a grave, earnest, sober-living man, with that slight affectation of the Church which one finds more in the rural districts than in cities, for the black clerical straw hat and the clerical drawl seem always to go together. It is strange that the village curate is always more affected in his speech than the popular preacher of the West End, and the country vicar's wife is even more exclusive in her tea-and-tennis acquaintances than the wife of the lord bishop himself.

For a few moments I watched unseen. I rather liked the appearance of the Reverend Edmund Shuttleworth, whoever he might be. He had the look of an honest, open, God-fearing man.

Yet why was he in such earnest consultation with the mysterious Sylvia?

With his forefinger he was touching the palm of his left hand, apparently to emphasize his words, while she looked pale, even frightened. She was listening without comment, without protest, while I stood watching them from behind. Many other visitors were idling about the terrace, reading letters or newspapers, or chatting or flirting—the usual morning occupations of a fashionable lake-side hotel far removed from the strenuous turmoil of the business or social worlds.

Suddenly she objected to some words which he uttered, objected strongly, with rapid interruption and quick protest.

But he laid his hand quietly upon her arm, and seemed to convince her of the truth or justice of his words.

Then, as she turned, she recognized me, and I raised my hat politely in passing.

Shuttleworth's eyes met mine, and he stared at me. But I passed on, in pretence that I had not recognized him as the watcher of the previous night.

I idled about the terrace and the little landing-stage till noon, when the steamer for Riva came up from Desenzano; and Shuttleworth, taking leave of Sylvia, boarded the little craft with his two kit-bags, and waved her farewell as the vessel drew away, making a wide wake upon the glassy surface of the deep blue waters.

When he had gone, I crossed to her and spoke. She looked inexpressibly charming in her white cotton gown and neat straw sailor hat with black velvet band. There was nothing ostentatious about her dress, but it was always well cut and fitted her to perfection. She possessed a style and elegance all her own.

"Ah! Mr. Biddulph!" she exclaimed reproachfully. "Why have you not heeded my words last night? Why have you not left? Go!—go, before it is too late!" she urged, looking straight into my face with those wonderful eyes of hers.

"But I don't understand you, Miss Pennington," I replied. "Why should I leave here? What danger threatens me?"

“A grave one—a very grave one,” she said in a low, hoarse whisper. “If you value your life you should get away from this place.”

“Who are these enemies of mine?” I demanded. “You surely should tell me, so that I can take precautions against them.”

“Your only precaution lies in flight,” she said.

“But will you not tell me what is intended? If there is a conspiracy against me, is it not your duty, as a friend, to reveal it?”

“Did I not tell you last night that I am not your friend—that our friendship is forbidden?”

“I don’t understand you,” I said. “As far as I know, I haven’t an enemy in the world. Why should I fear the unknown?”

“Ah! will you not take heed of what I have told you?” she cried in desperation. “Leave here. Return to England—hide yourself—anywhere—for a time, until the danger passes.”

“I have no fear of this mysterious danger, Miss Pennington,” I said. “If these secret enemies of mine attack me, then I am perfectly ready and able to defend myself.”

“But they will not attack openly. They will strike at a moment when you least expect it—and strike with accuracy and deadly effect.”

“Last night, after you had left me, I found a man standing in the shadow watching us,” I said. “He was the clergyman whom I saw sitting with you just now. Who is he?”

“Mr. Shuttleworth—an old friend of mine in England. An intimate friend of my father’s. To him, I owe very much. I had no idea he was here until an hour ago, when we met quite accidentally on the terrace. I haven’t seen him for a year. We once lived in his parish near Andover, in Hampshire. He was about our only friend.”

“Why did he spy upon us?”

“I had no idea that he did. It must have been only by chance,” she assured me. “From Edmund Shuttleworth you certainly have nothing to fear. He and his wife are my best friends. She is staying up at Riva, it seems, and he is on his way to

join her.”

“Your father is absent,” I said abruptly.

“Yes,” she replied, with slight hesitation. “He has gone away on business. I don’t expect he will be back till to-night.”

“And how long do you remain here?”

“Who knows? Our movements are always so sudden and erratic. We may leave to-night for the other end of Europe, or we may remain here for weeks yet. Father is so uncertain always.”

“But why are you so eager that I shall leave you?” I asked, as we strolled together along the terrace. “You have admitted that you are in need of a friend, and yet you will not allow me to approach you with the open hand of friendship.”

“Because—ah! have I not already explained the reason why—why I dare not allow you to show undue friendship towards me?”

“Well, tell me frankly,” I said, “who is this secret enemy of mine?”

She was silent. In that hesitation I suspected an intention to deceive.

“Is it against your own father that you are warning me?” I exclaimed in hesitation. “You fear him, evidently, and you urge me to leave here and return to England. Why should I not remain here in defiance?”

“In some cases defiance is distinctly injudicious,” she remarked. “It is so in this. Your only safety is in escape. I can tell you no more.”

“These words of yours, Miss Pennington, are remarkably strange,” I said. “Surely our position is most curious. You are my friend, and yet you conceal the identity of my enemy.”

She only shrugged her shoulders, without any reply falling from her lips.

“Will you not take my advice and get back to England at once?” she asked very seriously, as she turned to me a few minutes later. “I have suggested this in your own interests.”

“But why should I go in fear of this unknown enemy?” I asked. “What harm have I done? Why should any one be my bitter enemy?”

“Ah, how do I know?” she cried in despair. “We all of us have enemies where we least suspect them. Sometimes the very friend we trust most implicitly reveals himself as our worst antagonist. Truly one should always pause and ponder deeply before making a friend.”

“You are perfectly right,” I remarked. “A fierce enemy is always better than a false friend. Yet I would dearly like to know what I have done to merit antagonism. Where has your father gone?”

“To Brescia, I believe—to meet his friends.”

“Who are they?”

“His business friends. I only know them very slightly; they are interested in mining properties. They meet at intervals. The last time he met them was in Stockholm a month ago.”

This struck me as curious. Why should he meet his business friends so clandestinely—why should they come at night in a car to cross-roads?

But I told her nothing of what I had witnessed. I decided to keep my knowledge to myself.

“The boat leaves at two o’clock,” she said, after a pause, her hand upon her breast as though to stay the wild beating of her heart. “Will you not take my advice and leave by that? Go to Milan, and then straight on to England,” she urged in deep earnestness, her big, wide-open eyes fixed earnestly upon mine.

“No, Miss Pennington,” I replied promptly; “the fact is, I do not feel disposed to leave here just at present. I prefer to remain—and to take the risk, whatever it may be.”

“But why?” she cried, for we were standing at the end of the terrace, and out of hearing.

“Because you are in need of a friend—because you have admitted that you, too, are in peril. Therefore I have decided to remain near you.”

“No,” she cried breathlessly. “Ah! you do not know the great risk you are running! You must go—do go, Mr. Biddulph—go, for—*for my sake*!”

I shook my head.

“I have no fear of myself,” I declared. “I am anxious on your behalf.”

“Have no thought of me,” she cried. “Leave, and return to England.”

“And see you no more—eh?”

“If you will leave to-day, I—I will see you in England—perhaps.”

“Perhaps!” I cried. “That is not a firm promise.”

“Then, if you really wish,” she replied in earnestness, “I will promise. I’ll promise anything. I’ll promise to see you in England—when the danger has passed, if—if disaster has not already fallen upon me,” she added in a hoarse whisper.

“But my place is here—near you,” I declared. “To fly from danger would be cowardly. I cannot leave you.”

“No,” she urged, her pale face hard and anxious. “Go, Mr. Biddulph; go and save yourself. Then, if you so desire, we shall meet again in secret—in England.”

“And that is an actual promise?” I asked, holding forth my hand.

“Yes,” she answered, taking it eagerly. “It is a real promise. Give me your address, and very soon I shall be in London to resume our acquaintanceship—but, remember, not our friendship. That must never be—*never*!”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PERIL BEYOND

My taxi pulled up before my own white-enamelled door in Wilton Street, off Belgrave Square, and, alighting, I entered with my latch-key.

I had been home about ten days—back again once more in dear, dirty old London, spending most of my time idling in White's or Boodle's; for in May one meets everybody in St. James's Street, and men foregather in the club smoking-room from the four ends of the earth.

The house in Wilton Street was a small bijou place which my father had occupied as a *pied-à-terre* in town, he being a widower. He had been a man of artistic tastes, and the house, though small, was furnished lightly and brightly in the modern style. At Carrington he always declared there was enough of the heaviness of the antique. Here, in the dulness of London, he preferred light decorations and modern art in furnishing.

Through the rather narrow carpeted hall I passed into the study which lay behind the dining-room, a small, cosy apartment—the acme of comfort. I, as a bachelor, hated the big terra-cotta-and-white drawing-room upstairs. When there, I made the study my own den.

I had an important letter to write, but scarcely had I seated myself at the table when old Browning, grave, grey-faced and solemn, entered, saying—

"A clergyman called to see you about three o'clock, sir. He asked if you were at home. When I replied that you were at the club, he became rather inquisitive concerning your affairs, and asked me quite a lot of questions as to where you had been lately, and who you were. I was rather annoyed, sir, and I'm afraid I may have spoken rudely. But as he would leave no card, I felt justified in refusing to answer his inquiries."

"Quite right, Browning," I replied. "But what kind of a man was he? Describe him."

"Well, sir, he was rather tall, of middle age, thin-faced and drawn, as though he

had seen a lot of trouble. He spoke with a pronounced drawl, and his clerical coat was somewhat shabby. I noticed, too, sir, that he wore a black leather watch-guard."

That last sentence at once revealed my visitor's identity. It was the Reverend Edmund Shuttleworth! But why had he returned so suddenly from Riva? And why was he making secret inquiry concerning myself?

"I think I know the gentleman, Browning," I replied, while the faithful old fellow stood, a quaint, stout figure in a rather tight-fitting coat and grey trousers, his white-whiskered face full of mystery. I fancy Browning viewed me with considerable suspicion. In his eyes, "young Mr. Owen" had always been far too erratic. On many occasions in my boyhood days he had expressed to my father his strong disapproval of what he termed "Master Owen's carryings-on."

"If he should call again, tell him that I have a very great desire to renew our acquaintance. I met him abroad," I said.

"Very well, sir," replied my man. "But I don't suppose he will call again, sir. I was rude to him."

"Your rudeness was perfectly justifiable, Browning. Please refuse to answer any questions concerning me."

"I know my duty, sir," was the old man's stiff reply, "and I hope I shall always perform it."

And he retired, closing the door silently behind him.

With my elbows upon the table, I sat thinking deeply.

Had I not acted like a fool? Those strange words, and that curious promise of Sylvia Pennington sounded ever in my ears. She had succeeded in inducing me to return home by promising to meet me clandestinely in England. Why clandestinely?

Before me every moment that I now lived arose that pale, beautiful face—that exquisite countenance with the wonderful eyes—that face which had held me in fascination, that woman who, indeed, held me now for life or death.

In those ten days which had passed, the first days of my home-coming after my long absence, I knew, by the blankness of our separation—though I would not

admit it to myself—that she was my affinity. I was hers. She, the elegant little wanderer, possessed me, body and soul. I felt for her a strong affection, and affection is the half-and-half of love.

Why had her friend, that thin-faced country clergyman, called? Evidently he was endeavouring to satisfy himself as to my *bona fides*. And yet, for what reason? What had I to do with him? She had told me that she owed very much to that man. Why, however, should he interest himself in me?

I took down a big black volume from the shelf—*Crockford's Clerical Directory*—and from it learned that Edmund Charles Talbot Shuttleworth, M.A., was rector of the parish of Middleton-cum-Bowbridge, near Andover, in the Bishopric of Winchester. He had held his living for the past eight years, and its value was £550 per annum. He had had a distinguished career at Cambridge, and had been curate in half-a-dozen places in various parts of the country.

I felt half inclined to run down to Middleton and call upon him. I could make some excuse or other, for I felt that he might, perhaps, give me some further information regarding the mysterious Pennington and his daughter.

Yet, on further reflection, I hesitated, for I saw that by acting thus I might incur Sylvia's displeasure.

During the three following days I remained much puzzled. I deeply regretted that Browning had treated the country parson abruptly, and wondered whether I could not make excuse to call by pretending to express regret for the rudeness of my servant.

I was all eagerness to know something concerning this man Pennington, and was prepared even to sink my own pride in order to learn it.

Jack Marlowe was away in Copenhagen, and would not return for a week. In London I had many friends, but there were few who interested me, for I was ever thinking of Sylvia—of her only and always.

At last, one morning I made up my mind, and, leaving Waterloo, travelled down to Andover Junction, where I hired a trap, and, after driving through the little old-fashioned town out upon the dusty London Road for a couple of miles or so, I came to the long straggling village of Middleton, at the further end of which stood the ancient little church, and near it the comfortable old-world rectory.

Entering the gateway, I found myself in pretty, well-wooded and well-kept

grounds; the house itself, long, low, and covered with trailing roses, was a typical English country rectory. Beyond that lay a paddock, while in the distance the beautiful Harewood Forest showed away upon the skyline.

Yes, Mr. Shuttleworth was at home, the neat maid told me, and I was ushered into a long old-fashioned study, the French windows of which opened out upon a well-rolled tennis-lawn.

The place smelt of tobacco-smoke. Upon the table lay a couple of well-seasoned briars, and on the wall an escutcheon bearing its owner's college arms. Crossed above the window was a pair of rowing-sculls, and these, with a pair of fencing-foils in close proximity, told mutely of long-past athletics. It was a quiet, book-lined den, an ideal retreat for a studious man.

As my eyes travelled around the room, they suddenly fell upon a photograph in a dark leather frame, the picture of a young girl of seventeen or so, with her hair dressed low and secured by a big black bow. I started at sight of it. It was the picture of Sylvia Pennington!

I crossed to look at it more closely, but as I did so the door opened, and I found myself face to face with the rector of Middleton.

He halted as he recognized me—halted for just a second in hesitation; then, putting out his hand, he welcomed me, saying in his habitual drawl—

"Mr. Biddulph, I believe?" and invited me to be seated.

"Ah!" I exclaimed, with a smile, "I see you recognize me, though we were only passers-by on the Lake of Garda! I must apologize for this intrusion, but, as a matter of fact, my servant Browning described a gentleman who called upon me a few days ago, and I at once recognized him to have been you. He was rather rude to you, I fear, and——"

"My dear fellow!" he interrupted, with a hearty, good-natured laugh. "He only did his duty as your servant. He objected to my infernal impertinence—and very rightly, too."

"It was surely no impertinence to call upon me!" I exclaimed.

"Well, it's all a question of one's definition of impertinence," he said. "I made certain inquiries—rather searching inquiries regarding you—that was all."

“Why?” I asked.

He moved uneasily in his padded writing-chair, then reached over and placed a box of cigarettes before me. After we had both lit up, he answered in a rather low, changed voice—

“Well, I wanted to satisfy myself as to who you were, Mr. Biddulph,” he laughed. “Merely to gratify a natural curiosity.”

“That’s just it,” I said. “Why should your curiosity have been aroused concerning me? I do not think I have ever made a secret to any one regarding my name or my position, or anything else.”

“But you might have done, remember,” replied the thin-faced rector, looking at me calmly yet mysteriously with those straight grey eyes of his.

“I don’t follow you, Mr. Shuttleworth,” I said, much puzzled.

“Probably not,” was his response; “I had no intention to obtrude myself upon you. I merely called at Wilton Street in order to learn what I could, and I came away quite satisfied, even though your butler spoke so sharply.”

“But with what motive did you make your inquiries?” I demanded.

“Well, as a matter of fact, my motive was in your own interests, Mr. Biddulph,” he replied, as he thoughtfully contemplated the end of his cigarette. “This may sound strange to you, but the truth, could I but reveal it to you, would be found much stranger—a truth utterly incredible.”

“The truth of what?”

“The truth concerning a certain young lady in whom, I understand, you have evinced an unusual interest,” was his reply.

I could see that he was slightly embarrassed. I recollected how he had silently watched us on that memorable night by the moonlit lake, and a feeling of resentment arose within me.

“Yes,” I said anxiously next moment, “I am here to learn the truth concerning Miss Pennington. Tell me about her. She has explained to me that you are her friend—and I see, yonder, you have her photograph.”

“It is true,” he said very slowly, in a low, earnest voice, “quite true, Son—er,

Sylvia—is my friend," and he coughed quickly to conceal the slip in the name.

"Then tell me something about her, and her father. Who is he?" I urged. "At her request I left Gardone suddenly, and came home to England."

"At her request!" he echoed in surprise. "Why did she send you away from her side?"

I hesitated. Should I reveal to him the truth?

"She declared that it was better for us to remain apart," I said.

"Yes," he sighed. "And she spoke the truth, Mr. Biddulph—the entire truth, remember."

"Why? Do tell me what you know concerning the man Pennington."

"I regret that I am not permitted to do that."

"Why?"

For some moments he did not reply. He twisted his cigarette in his thin, nervous fingers, his gaze being fixed upon the lawn outside. At last, however, he turned to me, and in a low, rather strained tone said slowly—

"The minister of religion sometimes learns strange family secrets, but, as a servant of God, the confidences and confessions reposed in him must always be treated as absolutely sacred. Therefore," he added, "please do not ask me again to betray my trust."

His was, indeed, a stern rebuke. I saw that, in my eager enthusiasm, I had expected him to reveal a forbidden truth. Therefore I stammered an apology.

"No apology is needed," was his grave reply, his keen eyes fixed upon me. "But I hope you will forgive me if I presume to give you, in your own interests, a piece of advice."

"And what is that?"

"To keep yourself as far as possible from both Pennington and his daughter," he responded slowly and distinctly, a strange expression upon his clean-shaven face.

"But why do you tell me this?" I cried, still much mystified. "Have you not told

me that you are Sylvia’s friend?”

“I have told you this because it is my duty to warn those in whose path a pitfall is spread.”

“And is a pitfall spread in mine?”

“Yes,” replied the grave-faced, ascetic-looking rector, as he leaned forward to emphasize his words. “Before you, my dear sir, there lies an open grave. Behind it stands that girl yonder”—and he pointed with his lean finger to the framed photograph—“and if you attempt to reach her you must inevitably fall into the pit—that death-trap so cunningly prepared. Do not, I beg of you, attempt to approach the unattainable.”

I saw that he was in dead earnest.

“But why?” I demanded in my despair, for assuredly the enigma was increasing hourly. “Why are you not open and frank with me? I—I confess I——”

“You love her, eh?” he asked, looking at me quickly as he interrupted me. “Ah, yes,” he sighed, as a dark shadow overspread his thin, pale face, “I guessed as much—a fatal love. You are young and enthusiastic, and her pretty face, her sweet voice and her soft eyes have fascinated you. How I wish, Mr. Biddulph, that I could reveal to you the ghastly, horrible truth. Though I am your friend—and hers, yet I must, alas! remain silent! The inviolable seal of The Confessional is upon my lips!”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DARK HOUSE IN BAYSWATER

Edmund Shuttleworth, the thin-faced, clean-shaven Hampshire rector, had spoken the truth. His manner and speech were that of an honest man.

Within myself I could but admit it. Yet I loved Sylvia. Why, I cannot tell. How can a man tell why he loves? First love is more than the mere awakening of a passion: it is transition to another state of being. When it is born the man is new-made.

Yet, as the spring days passed, I lived in suspicion and wonder, ever mystified, ever apprehensive.

Each morning I looked eagerly for a letter from her, yet each morning I was disappointed.

It seemed true, as Shuttleworth had said, that an open gulf lay between us.

Where was she, I wondered? I dared not write to Gardone, as she had begged me not to do so. She had left there, no doubt, for was she not a constant wanderer? Was not her stout, bald-headed father the modern incarnation of the Wandering Jew?

May lengthened into June, with its usual society functions and all the wild gaiety of the London season. The Derby passed and Ascot came, the Park was full every day, theatres and clubs were crowded, and the hotels overflowed with Americans and country cousins. I had many invitations, but accepted few. Somehow, my careless cosmopolitanism had left me. I had become a changed man.

And if I were to believe the woman who had come so strangely and so suddenly into my life, I was a marked man also.

Disturbing thoughts often arose within me in the silence of the night, but, laughing at them, I crushed them down. What had I possibly to fear? I had no enemy that I was aware of. The whole suggestion seemed so utterly absurd and far-fetched.

Jack Marlowe came back from Denmark hale and hearty, and more than once I was sorely tempted to explain to him the whole situation. Only I feared he would jeer at me as a love-sick idiot.

What was the secret held by that grey-faced country parson? Whatever it might be, it was no ordinary one. He had spoken of the seal of The Confessional. What sin had Sylvia Pennington confessed to him?

Day after day, as I sat in my den at Wilton Street smoking moodily and thinking, I tried vainly to imagine what cardinal sin she could have committed. My sole thoughts were of her, and my all-consuming eagerness was to meet her again.

On the night of the twentieth of June—I remember the date well because the Gold Cup had been run that afternoon—I had come in from supper at the Ritz about a quarter to one, and retired to bed. I suppose I must have turned in about half-an-hour, when the telephone at my bedside rang, and I answered.

“Hulloa!” asked a voice. “Is that you, Owen?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Jack speaking—Jack Marlowe,” exclaimed the distant voice. “Is that you, Owen? Your voice sounds different.”

“So does yours, a bit,” I said. “Voices often do on the ’phone. Where are you?”

“I’m out in Bayswater—Althorp House, Porchester Terrace,” my friend replied. “I’m in a bit of a tight corner. Can you come here? I’m so sorry to trouble you, old man. I wouldn’t ask you to turn out at this hour if it weren’t imperative.”

“Certainly I’ll come,” I said, my curiosity at once aroused. “But what’s up?”

“Oh, nothing very alarming,” he laughed. “Nothing to worry over. I’ve been playing cards, and lost a bit, that’s all. Bring your cheque-book; I want to pay up before I leave. You understand. I know you’ll help me, like the good pal you always are.”

“Why, of course I will, old man,” was my prompt reply.

“I’ve got to pay up my debts for the whole week—nearly a thousand. Been infernally unlucky. Never had such vile luck. Have you got it in the bank? I can pay you all right at the end of next week.”

“Yes,” I said, “I can let you have it.”

“These people know you, and they’ll take your cheque, they say.”

“Right-ho!” I said; “I’ll get a taxi and be up with you in half-an-hour.”

“You’re a real good pal, Owen. Remember the address: Althorp House, Porchester Terrace,” cried my friend cheerily. “Get here as soon as you can, as I want to get home. So-long.”

And, after promising to hurry, I hung up the receiver again.

Dear old Jack always was a bit reckless. He had a good income allowed him by his father, but was just a little too fond of games of chance. He had been hard hit in February down at Monte Carlo, and I had lent him a few hundreds to tide him over. Yet, by his remarks over the ’phone, I could only gather that he had fallen into the hands of sharpers, who held him up until he paid—no uncommon thing in London. Card-sharpers are generally blackmailers as well, and no doubt these people were bleeding poor Jack to a very considerable tune.

I rose, dressed, and, placing my revolver in my hip pocket in case of trouble, walked towards Victoria Station, where I found a belated taxi.

Within half-an-hour I alighted before a large dark house about half-way up Porchester Terrace, Bayswater, standing back from the road, with small garden in front; a house with closely-shuttered windows, the only light showing being that in the fanlight over the door.

My approaching taxi was being watched for, I suppose, for as I crossed the gravel the door fell back, and a smart, middle-aged man-servant admitted me.

“I want to see Mr. Marlowe,” I said.

“Are you Mr. Biddulph?” he inquired, eyeing me with some suspicion.

I replied in the affirmative, whereupon he invited me to step upstairs, while I followed him up the wide, well-carpeted staircase and along a corridor on the first floor into a small sitting-room at the rear of the house.

“Mr. Marlowe will be here in a few moments, sir,” he said; “he left a message asking you to wait. He and Mr. Forbes have just gone across the road to a friend’s house. I’ll send over and tell him you are here, if you’ll kindly take a seat.”

The room was small, fairly well furnished, but old-fashioned, and lit by an oil-lamp upon the table. The air was heavy with tobacco-smoke, and near the window was a card-table whereat four players had been seated. The cigar-ash bore testimony to recent occupation of the four chairs, while two packs of cards had been flung down just as the men had risen.

The window was hidden by long curtains of heavy moss-green plush, while in one corner of the room, upon a black marble pedestal, stood a beautiful sculptured statuette of a girl, her hands uplifted together above her head in the act of diving. I examined the exquisite work of art, and saw upon its brass plate the name of an eminent French sculptor.

The carpet, of a peculiar shade of red which contrasted well with the dead-white enamelled walls, was soft to the tread, so that my footsteps fell noiselessly as I moved.

Beside the fireplace was a big inviting saddle-bag chair, into which I presently sank, awaiting Jack.

Who were his friends, I wondered?

The house seemed silent as the grave. I listened for Jack’s footsteps, but could hear nothing.

I was hoping that the loss of nearly a thousand pounds would cure my friend of his gambling propensities. Myself, I had never experienced a desire to gamble. A sovereign or so on a race was the extent of my adventures.

The table, the cards, the tantalus-stand and the empty glasses told their own tale. I was sorry, truly sorry, that Jack should mix with such people—professional gamblers, without a doubt.

Every man-about-town in London knows what a crowd of professional players and blackmailers infest the big hotels, on the look-out for pigeons to pluck. The American bars of London each have their little circle of well-dressed sharks, and woe betide the victims who fall into their unscrupulous hands. I had believed Jack Marlowe to be more wary. He was essentially a man of the world, and had always laughed at the idea that he could be “had” by sharpers, or induced to play with strangers.

I think I must have waited for about a quarter of an hour. As I sat there, I felt overcome by a curious drowsiness, due, no doubt, to the strenuous day I had had,

for I had driven down to Ascot in the car, and had gone very tired to bed.

Suddenly, without a sound, the door opened, and a youngish, dark-haired, clean-shaven man in evening dress entered swiftly, accompanied by another man a few years older, tall and thin, whose nose and pimply face was that of a person much dissipated. Both were smoking cigars.

“You are Mr. Biddulph, I believe!” exclaimed the younger. “Marlowe expects you. He’s over the road, talking to the girl.”

“What girl?”

“Oh, a little girl who lives over there,” he said, with a mysterious smile. “But have you brought the cheque?” he asked. “He told us that you’d settle up with us.”

“Yes,” I said, “I have my cheque-book in my pocket.”

“Then perhaps you’ll write it?” he said, taking a pen-and-ink and blotter from a side-table and placing it upon the card-table. “The amount altogether is one thousand one hundred and ten pounds,” he remarked, consulting an envelope he took from his pocket.

“I shall give you a cheque for it when my friend comes,” I said.

“Yes, but we don’t want to be here all night, you know,” laughed the pimply-faced man. “You may as well draw it now, and hand it over to us when he comes in.”

“How long is he likely to be?”

“How can we tell? He’s a bit gone on her.”

“Who is she?”

“Oh! a little girl my friend Reckitt here knows,” interrupted the younger man. “Rather pretty. Reckitt is a fair judge of good looks. Have a cigarette?” and the man offered me a cigarette, which, out of common courtesy, I was bound to take from his gold case.

I sat back in my chair and lit up, and as I did so my ears caught the faint sound of a receding motor-car.

“Aren’t you going to draw the cheque?” asked the man with the pimply face.

“Marlowe said you would settle at once; Charles Reckitt is my name. Make it out to me.”

“And so I will, as soon as he arrives,” I replied.

“Why not now? We’ll give you a receipt.”

“I don’t know at what amount he acknowledges the debt,” I pointed out.

“But we’ve told you, haven’t we? One thousand one hundred and ten pounds.”

“That’s according to your reckoning. He may add up differently, you know,” I said, with a doubtful smile.

“You mean that you doubt us, eh?” asked Reckitt a trifle angrily.

“Not in the least,” I assured him, with a smile. “If the game is fair, then the loss is fair also. A good sportsman like my friend never objects to pay what he has lost.”

“But you evidently object to pay for him, eh?” he sneered.

“I do not,” I protested. “If it were double the amount I would pay it. Only I first want to know what he actually owes.”

“That he’ll tell you when he returns. Yet I can’t see why you should object to make out the cheque now, and hand it to us on his arrival. I’ll prepare the receipt, at any rate. I, for one, want to get off to bed.”

And the speaker sat down in one of the chairs at the card-table, and wrote out a receipt for the amount, signing it “Charles Reckitt” across the stamp he stuck upon it.

Then presently he rose impatiently, and, crossing the room, exclaimed—

“How long are we to be humbugged like this? I’ve got to get out to Croydon—and it’s late. Come on, Forbes. Let’s go over and dig Marlowe out, eh?”

So the pair left the room, promising to return with Jack in a few minutes, and closed the door after them.

When they had gone, I sat for a moment reflecting. I did not like the look of either of them. Their faces were distinctly sinister and their manner overbearing. I felt that the sooner I left that silent house the better.

So, crossing to the table, I drew out my cheque-book, and hastily wrote an open cheque, payable to “Charles Reckitt,” for one thousand one hundred and ten pounds. I did so in order that I should have it in readiness on Jack’s return—in order that we might get away quickly.

Whatever possessed my friend to mix with such people as those I could not imagine.

A few moments later, I had already put the cheque back into my breast-pocket, and was re-seated in the arm-chair, when of a sudden, and apparently of its own accord, the chair gave way, the two arms closing over my knees in such a manner that I was tightly held there.

It happened in a flash. So quickly did it collapse that, for a moment, I was startled, for the chair having tipped back, I had lost my balance, my head being lower than my legs.

And at that instant, struggling in such an undignified position and unable to extricate myself, the chair having closed upon me, the door suddenly opened, and the man Reckitt, with his companion Forbes, re-entered the room.

CHAPTER SIX

A GHASTLY TRUTH

Ere I could recover myself or utter a word, the pair dashed towards me, seized my hands deftly and secured them behind the chair.

“What do you mean by this, you infernal blackguards!” I cried angrily. “Release me!”

They only grinned in triumph. I struggled to free my right hand, in order to get at my revolver. But it was held far too securely.

I saw that I had been cleverly entrapped!

The man with the pimply face placed his hand within my breast pocket and took therefrom its contents with such confidence that it appeared certain I had been watched while writing the cheque. He selected it from among my letters and papers, and, opening it, said in a tone of satisfaction—

“That’s all right—as far as it goes. But we must have another thousand.”

“You’ll have nothing from me,” I replied, sitting there powerless, yet defiant. “I don’t believe Marlowe has been here at all! It’s only a trap, and I’ve fallen into it!”

“You’ve paid your friend’s debts,” replied the man gruffly; “now you’ll pay your own.”

“I owe you nothing, you infernal swindler!” I responded quickly. “This is a pretty game you are playing—one which you’ve played before, it seems! The police shall know of this. It will interest them.”

“They won’t know through you,” laughed the fellow. “But we don’t want to discuss that matter. I’m just going to write out a cheque for one thousand, and you’ll sign it.”

“I’ll do nothing of the sort!” I declared firmly.

“Oh yes, you will,” remarked the younger man. “You’ve got money, and you can

easily afford a thousand."

"I'll not give you one single penny," I declared. "And, further, I shall stop that cheque you've stolen from me."

Reckitt had already seated himself, opened my cheque-book, and was writing out a draft.

When he had finished it he crossed to me, with the book and pen in hand, saying —

"Now you may as well just sign this at first, as at last."

"I shall do no such thing," was my answer. "You've entrapped me here, but you are holding me at your peril. You can't frighten me into giving you a thousand pounds, for I haven't it at the bank."

"Oh yes, you have," replied the man with the red face. "We've already taken the precaution to find out. We don't make haphazard guesses, you know. Now sign it, and at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning you shall be released—after we have cashed your cheques."

"Where is Marlowe?" I inquired.

"With the girl, I suppose."

"What girl?"

"Well," exclaimed the other, "her photograph is in the next room; perhaps you'd like to see it."

"It does not interest me," I replied.

But the fellow Forbes left the room for a moment and returned with a fine panel photograph in his hand. He held it before my gaze. I started in utter amazement.

It was the picture of Sylvia! The same that I had seen in Shuttleworth's study.

"You know her—eh?" remarked Reckitt, with a grim smile.

"Yes," I gasped. "Where is she?"

"Across the road—with your friend Jack Marlowe."

"It's a lie! A confounded lie! I won't believe it," I cried. Yet at that moment I

realized the ghastly truth, that I had tumbled into the hidden pitfall against which both Shuttleworth and Sylvia had warned me.

Could it be possible, I asked myself, that Sylvia—my adored Sylvia—had some connection with these blackguards—that she had been aware of their secret intentions?

“Sign this cheque, and you shall see her if you wish,” said the man who had written out the draft. “She will remain with you here till eleven to-morrow.”

“Why should I give you a thousand pounds?” I demanded.

“Is not a thousand a small price to pay for the service we are prepared to render you—to return to you your lost lady-love?” queried the fellow.

I was dying with anxiety to see her, to speak with her, to hold her hand. Had she not warned me against this cunningly-devised trap, yet had I not foolishly fallen into it? They had followed me to England, and run me to earth at home!

“And supposing that I gave you the money, how do I know that you would keep faith with me?” I asked.

“We shall keep faith with you, never fear,” Reckitt replied, his sinister face broadening into a smile. “It is simply for you to pay for your release; or we shall hold you here—until you submit. Just your signature, and to-morrow at eleven you are a free man.”

“And if I refuse, what then?” I asked.

“If you refuse—well, I fear that you will ever regret it, that’s all. I can only tell you that it is not wise to refuse. We are not in the habit of being met with refusal—the punishment is too severe.” The man spoke calmly, leaning with his back against the table, the cheque and pen still in his hand.

“And if I sign, you will bring Sylvia here? You will promise me that—upon your word of honour?”

“Yes, we promise you,” was the man’s reply.

“I want to see Marlowe, if he is here.”

“I tell you he’s not here. He’s across the way with her.”

I believe, if I could have got to my revolver at that moment, I should have shot

the fellow dead. I bit my lip, and remained silent.

I now felt no doubt that this was the trap of which Sylvia had given me warning on that moonlit terrace beside the Italian lake. By some unaccountable means she knew what was intended against me. This clever trapping of men was apparently a regular trade of theirs!

If I could but gain time I felt that I might outwit them. Yet, sitting there like a trussed fowl, I must have cut a pretty sorry figure. How many victims had, like myself, sat there and been “bled”?

“Come,” exclaimed the red-faced adventurer impatiently, “we are losing time. Are you going to sign the cheque, or not?”

“I shall not,” was my firm response. “You already have stolen one cheque of mine.”

“And we shall cash it when your bank opens in the morning, my dear sir,” remarked Forbes airily.

“And make yourselves scarce afterwards, eh? But I’ve had a good look at you, remember; I could identify you anywhere,” I said.

“You won’t have that chance, I’m afraid,” declared Reckitt meaningly. “You must think we’re blunderers, if you contemplate that!” and he grinned at his companion.

“Now,” he added, turning again to me; “for the last time I ask you if you will sign this cheque I have written.”

“And for the last time I tell you that you are a pair of blackguards, and that I will do nothing of the sort.”

“Not even if we bring the girl here—to you?”

I hesitated, much puzzled by the strangeness of the attitude of the pair. Their self-confidence was amazing.

“Sign it,” he urged. “Sign it in your own interests—and in hers.”

“Why in hers?”

“You will see, after you have appended your signature.”

“When I have seen her I will sign,” I replied at last; “but not before. You seem to have regarded me as a pigeon to pluck. But you’ll find out I’m a hawk before you’ve done with me.”

“I think not,” smiled the cool-mannered Reckitt. “Even if you are a hawk, you’re caged. You must admit that!”

“I shall shout murder, and alarm the police,” I threatened.

“Shout away, my dear fellow,” replied my captor. “No sound can be heard outside this room. Shriek! We shall like to hear you. You won’t have opportunity to do so very much longer.”

“Why?”

“Because refusal will bring upon you a fate more terrible than you have ever imagined,” was the fellow’s hard reply. “We are men of our word, remember! It is not wise to trifle with us.”

“And I am also a man of my word. You cannot obtain money from me by threats.”

“But we offer you a service in return—to bring Sylvia to you.”

“Where is her father?” I demanded.

“You’d better ask her,” replied Forbes, with a grin. “Sign this, and see her. She is anxious—very anxious to meet you.”

“How do you know that?”

“We know more than you think, Mr. Biddulph,” was the sharper’s reply.

His exterior was certainly that of a gentleman, in his well-cut dinner jacket and a fine diamond stud in his shirt.

I could only think that the collapsible chair in which I sat was worked by a lever from outside the room. There was a spy-hole somewhere, at which they could watch the actions of their victims, and take them unawares as I had been taken.

“And now,” asked Reckitt, “have you fully reflected upon the serious consequences of your refusal to sign this cheque?”

“I have,” was my unwavering reply. “Do as you will, I refuse to be

blackmailed."

"Your refusal will cause disaster to yourself—and to her! You will share the same fate—a horrible one. She tried to warn you, and you refused to heed her. So you will both experience the same horror."

"What horror? I have no fear of you," I said.

"He refuses," Reckitt said, with a harsh laugh, addressing his accomplice. "We will now let him see what is in store for him—how we punish those who remain defiant. Bring in the table."

Forbes disappeared for a moment and then returned, bearing a small round table upon which stood a silver cigar-box and a lighted candle.

The table he placed at my side, close to my elbow. Then Forbes took something from a drawer, and ere I was aware of it he had slipped a leathern collar over my head and strapped it to the back of the chair so that in a few seconds I was unable to move my head from side to side.

"What are you doing, you blackguards?" I cried in fierce anger. "You shall pay for this, I warrant."

But they only laughed in triumph, for, held as I was, I was utterly helpless in their unscrupulous hands and unable to lift a finger in self-defence, my defiance must have struck them as ridiculous.

"Now," said Reckitt, standing near the small table, "you see this!" and, leaning forward, he touched the cigar-box, the lid of which opened with a spring.

Next second something shot quite close to my face, startling me.

I looked, and instantly became filled with an inexpressible horror, for there, upon the table, lay a small, black, venomous snake. To its tail was attached a fine green silken cord, and this was, in turn, fastened to the candle. The wooden candle-stick was, I saw, screwed down to the table. The cord entered the wax candle about two inches lower than the flame.

I gave a cry of horror, whereat both men laughed heartily.

"Now," said Reckitt, "I promised you an unexpected surprise. There it is! In half-an-hour the flame will reach the cord, and sever it. Then the snake will strike. That half-hour will give you ample time for reflection."

“You fiends!” I cried, struggling desperately to free myself. In doing so I moved my head slightly, when the snake again darted at me like a flash, only falling short about an inch from my cheek.

The reptile fell back, recoiled itself, and with head erect, its cruel, beady eyes watching me intently, sat up ready to strike again.

The blood froze in my veins. I was horrified, held there only one single inch from death.

“We wish you a very good night,” laughed Forbes, as both he and his companion walked towards the door. “You will have made a closer acquaintance with the snake ere we cash your cheque in the morning.”

“Yes,” said Reckitt, turning upon me with a grin. “And Sylvia too will share the same fate as yourself, for daring to warn you against us!”

“No!” I cried; “spare her, spare her!” I implored.

But the men had already passed out of the room, locking the door securely after them.

I lay back silent, motionless, listening, not daring to move a muscle because of that hideous reptile closely guarding me.

I suppose ten minutes must have passed—ten of the most awful minutes of terror and disgust I have ever experienced in all my life—then a sound broke the dead stillness of the night.

I heard a woman’s loud, piercing scream—a scream of sudden horror.

Sylvia’s voice! It seemed to emanate from the room beyond!

Again it was repeated. I heard her shriek distinctly—

“Ah! No, spare me! Not that—*not that*!”

Only a wall divided us, yet I was powerless, held there face to face with a terrible and revolting death, unable to save her, unable to raise my hand in self-defence.

She shrieked again, in an agony of terror.

I lay there breathless, petrified by horror.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FLAME OF THE CANDLE

I shuddered at the horrible fate to which those scoundrels had abandoned me.

Again the cruel flat head of the snake darted forth viciously to within a single inch of my left cheek. I tried to draw back, but to move was impossible, held as I was by that leathern collar, made expressly for securing the head immovable.

My eyes were fixed upon the steady candle-flame. It was burning lower and lower each moment. I watched it in fascination. Each second I grew nearer that terrible, revolting end.

What had happened to Sylvia? I strained my ears to catch any further sound. But there was none. The house was now silent as the grave.

That pair of scoundrels had stolen my cheque, and in the morning, after my death, would cash it and escape with the proceeds!

I glanced around that weird room. How many previous victims had sat in that fatal chair and awaited death as I was waiting, I wondered? The whole plot betrayed a devilish ingenuity and cunning. Its very character showed that the conspirators were no ordinary criminals—they were past-masters in crime.

The incidents of the night in London are too often incredible. A man can meet with adventures in the metropolis as strange, as exciting and as perilous as any in unknown lands. Here, surely, was one in point.

I remember experiencing a strange dizziness, a curious nausea, due, perhaps, to the fact that my head lay lower than my body. My thoughts became muddled. I regretted deeply that I had not signed the cheque and saved Sylvia. Yet were they not absolute blackguards? Would they have kept faith with me?

I was breathless in apprehension. What had happened to Sylvia?

By slow, imperceptible degrees the candle burned lower. The flame was long and steady. Nearer and nearer it approached that thin green cord which alone separated me from death.

Again the serpent hissed and darted forth, angry at being so near its prey, and yet prevented from striking—angry that its tail was knotted to the cord.

I saw it writhing and twisting upon the table, and noted its peculiar markings of black and yellow. Its eyes were bright and searching. I had read of the fascination which a snake's gaze exercises over its prey, and now I experienced it—a fatal fascination. I could not keep my eyes off the deadly reptile. It watched me intently, as though it knew full well that ere long it must be victorious.

Victorious! What did that mean? A sharp, stinging pain, and then an agonizing, painful death, my head swollen hideously to twice its size, my body held there in that mechanical vice, suffering all the tortures of the damned!

The mere contemplation of that awful fate held me transfixed by horror.

Suddenly I heard Sylvia's shriek repeated. I shouted, but no words came back to me in return. Was she suffering the same fearful agony of mind as myself? Had those brutes carried out their threat? They knew she had betrayed them, it seemed, and they had, therefore, taken their bitter and cowardly revenge.

Where was Pennington, that he did not rescue her?

I cursed myself for being such an idiot. Yet I had no idea that such a cunningly-devised trap could be prepared. I had never dreamed, when I went forth to pull Jack out of a hole, that I was deliberately placing my head in such a noose.

What did it all mean? Why had these men formed this plot against me? What had I done to merit such deadly vengeance as this?—a torture of the Middle Ages!

Vainly I tried to think. As far as I knew, I had never met either Forbes or Reckitt before in all my life. They were complete strangers to me. I remembered there had been something about the man-servant who admitted me that seemed familiar, but what it was, I could not decide. Perhaps I had seen him before somewhere in the course of my wanderings, but where, I knew not.

I recollected that soon after I had entered there I had heard the sound of a motor-car receding. My waiting taxi had evidently been paid, and dismissed.

How would they dispose of my body, I lay wondering? There were many ways of doing so, I reflected. They might burn it, or bury it, or pack it in a trunk and consign it to some distant address. When one remembers how many persons are

every year reported to the London police as missing, one can only believe that the difficulties in getting rid of the corpse of a victim are not so great as is popularly imagined.

Speak with any detective officer of the Metropolitan Police, and, if he is frank, he will tell you that a good many people meet with foul play each year in every quarter of London—they disappear and are never again heard of. Sometimes their disappearance is reported in the newspapers—a brief paragraph—but in the case of people of the middle class only their immediate relatives know that they are missing.

Many a London house with deep basement and a flight of steps leading to its front door could, if its walls had lips, tell a tragic and terrible story.

For one assassination discovered, ten remain unknown or merely vaguely suspected.

How many thousands of pounds had these men, Forbes and Reckitt, secured, I wondered? And how many poor helpless victims had felt the serpent's fang and breathed their last in that fatal chair I now occupied?

A dog howled dismally somewhere at the back. The men had told me that no sound could be heard beyond those walls, yet had I not heard Sylvia's shrieks? If I had heard them, then she could also hear me!

I shouted her name—shouted as loud as I could. But my voice in that small room somehow seemed dulled and drowned.

"Sylvia," I shouted, "I am here! I—Owen Biddulph! Where are you?"

But there was no response. That horrible snake rose erect, looking at me with its never-wavering gaze. I saw the pointed tongue darting from its mouth. There—before me—soon to be released, was Death in reptile form—Death the most revolting and most terrible.

That silence appalled me. Sylvia had not replied! Was she already dead—stricken down by the fatal fang?

I called again: "Sylvia! Sylvia!"

But there came no answer. I set my teeth, and struggled to free myself until the veins in my forehead were knotted and my bonds cut into the flesh. But, alas! I

was held as in the tentacles of an octopus. Every limb was gripped, so that already a numbness had overspread them, while my senses were frozen with horror.

Suddenly the lamp failed and died out, and the room was plunged in darkness, save for the zone of light shed by the unflickering flame of the candle. And there lay the weird and horrible reptile coiled, awaiting its release.

It seemed to watch the lessening candle, just as I myself watched it.

That sudden failure of the light caused me anxious reflections.

A moment later I heard the front door bang. That decided me. It was as I had feared. The pair of scoundrels had departed and left me to my fate.

The small marble clock upon the mantelshelf opposite struck three. I counted the strokes. I had been in that room nearly an hour and a half.

How did they know of Jack Marlowe and his penchant for cards? Surely the trap had been well baited, and devised with marvellous cunning. That cheque of mine would be cashed at my bank in the morning without question. I should be dead—and they would be free.

For myself, I did not care so very much. My chief thought was of Sylvia, and of the awful fate which had overtaken her because she had dared to warn me—that fate of which she had spoken so strangely on the night when we had talked on the hotel terrace at Gardone.

That moonlit scene—the whole of it—passed through my fevered, unbalanced brain. I lived those moments of ecstasy over again. I felt her soft hand in mine. I looked again into those wonderful, fathomless eyes; I heard that sweet, musical voice; I listened to those solemn words of warning. I believed myself to be once more beside the mysterious girl who had come into my life so strangely—who had held me in fascination for life or death.

The candle-flame, still straight and unflickering, seemed like a pillar of fire, while beyond, lay a cavernous blackness. I thought I heard a slight noise, as though my enemies were lurking there in the shadow. Yet it was a mere chimera of my overwrought brain.

I recollected the strange bracelet of Sylvia's—the serpent with its tail in its mouth—the ancient symbol of Eternity. And I soon would be launched into

Eternity by the poisonous fang of that flat-headed little reptile.

Thoughts of Sylvia—that strange, sweet-faced girl of my dreams—filled my senses. Those shrieks resounded in my ears. She had cried for help, and yet I was powerless to rescue her from the hands of that pair of hell-fiends.

I struggled, and succeeded in moving slightly.

But the snake, maddened by its bond, struck again at me viciously, his darting tongue almost touching my shrinking flesh.

A blood-red mist rose suddenly before my eyes. My head swam. My overwrought brain, paralyzed by horror, became unbalanced. I felt a tightness in the throat. In my ears once again I heard the hiss of the loathsome reptile, a venomous, threatening hiss, as its dark shadow darted before me, struggling to strike my cheek.

Through the red mist I saw that the candle burned so low that the edge of the wax was on a level with the green silk cord, that slender thread which withheld Death from me.

I looked again. A groan of agony escaped me.

Again the angry hiss of the serpent sounded. Again its dark form shot between my eyes and the unflickering flame of the candle.

That flame was slowly but surely consuming the cord!

I shrieked for help in my abject despair.

The mist grew more red, more impenetrable. A lump arose in my throat, preventing me from breathing.

And then I lapsed into the blackness of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PRESENTS ANOTHER PROBLEM

When, by slow degrees, I became aware of things about me, I found myself in total darkness, save that, straight before my eyes, some few feet away, showed a thin, narrow line of light.

Next second, a flood of the most horrible recollections surged through my brain. I dare not move a muscle, fearing that the reptile was lurking near my face. My senses seemed dulled and dazed, yet my recollections were quite clear. Every detail of those moments of awful terror stood out clear and fearsome in my mind.

Slowly, so slow, indeed, as to be imperceptible, I managed to turn my head aside, and glance at the small table. But it was in darkness. I could distinguish nothing. To my surprise, I discovered, however, that though I still remained in that position, my legs higher than my head, yet the arms of the chair had unclasped, and my bonds had been freed!

What had happened?

In fear of bringing the watchful reptile upon me, I moved slightly. But there was no movement from that table in the darkness.

I waited, dreading lest I should be suddenly attacked. Then, summoning courage, I suddenly sprang out of the chair on the side opposite the table, and dashed across to where showed that narrow streak of light.

I saw that it came through the lower crevice of the heavy wooden shutters. With frantic haste my hands slid over them. I found an iron bar, and, this unlatched, I threw them back, and let in the broad light of day.

For a moment my eyes were dazzled by the sunlight.

Then, on looking behind me, I saw that upon the table the candle had burned itself to its socket, while on the floor, near by, lay the small black reptile stretched out motionless.

I feared at first to approach it. To its tail the cord was still attached, but it had been severed. I crept towards it, and, bending down, realized with great relief that it was dead.

The leathern collar which had secured my head had been loosened and the mechanism of the chair reversed, allowing me my freedom. I looked around the room in wonder. There stood the littered card-table and the empty glasses of the previous night, while the air was still heavy with the odour of stale cigars.

Making quite certain that the reptile was dead, I turned my attention to the chair, and noted how cleverly the devilish mechanism had been hidden. It could, as I had suspected, be worked from without. The victim, once seated there, had no chance whatever of escape.

In the light of day, the room—that fatal apartment wherein more than one innocent man had, no doubt, met with a horrible end—looked very shabby and dingy. The furniture was cheap and tawdry, and the carpet very dirty.

There, upon the card-table, stood the ink, while the pen used by Reckitt lay upon the floor. My wallet lay open near by. I took it up quickly to glance through its contents. As far as I could discover, nothing had been taken except the cheque I had written out, believing I was to assist Jack Marlowe.

Eagerly I glanced at my watch, and found it was already a quarter past ten.

The scoundrels had, no doubt, already been to the bank, cashed my cheque, and were by this time clear away!

Remembering Sylvia, I drew my revolver, which still remained in my hip-pocket, and, finding the door unlocked, went forth to search for her. The fact that the door was now unlocked showed that some one had entered there during my unconsciousness, and released me. From the appearance of the snake, it seemed to have been killed by a sharp blow across its back.

Some one had rescued me just in the nick of time.

I entered the front room on the same floor, the room whence those woman’s screams had emanated. It was a big bare drawing-room, furnished in the ugly Early Victorian style, musty-smelling and moth-eaten. The dirty holland blinds fitted badly and had holes in them; therefore sufficient light was admitted to afford me a good view of the large apartment.

There was nothing unusual there, save upon a small work-table lay some embroidery work, where apparently it had been put down. An open novel lay near, while close by was a big bowl filled with yellow roses. Yet the apartment seemed to have been long closed and neglected, while the atmosphere had a musty odour which was not dispelled by the sweet perfume of the flowers.

Had Sylvia been in this room when she had shrieked?

I saw something upon the floor, and picked it up. It proved to be a narrow band of turquoise-blue velvet, the ornament from a woman's hair. Did it belong to her?

In vain I looked around for a candle—for evidences of the same mediæval torture to which I had been submitted, but there were none.

In fear and trepidation I entered yet another room on the same floor, but it was dusty and neglected—a kind of sitting-room, or perhaps boudoir, for there was an old-fashioned high-backed piano in it. Yet there was no sign that anybody had entered there for weeks—perhaps for months. In the sunlight, I saw that there were cobwebs everywhere. Surely it was a very strange house. It struck me that its owner had perhaps died years ago, and since then it had remained untenanted. Everywhere the style of furniture was that of sixty years ago, and thick dust was covering all.

On entering the previous night I had not noticed this, but now, in the broad light of day, the place looked very different. I saw, to my surprise, that the windows had not been cleaned for years, and that cobwebs hung everywhere.

Revolver in hand, I searched the place to the basement, but there was no evidence of occupation. The doors of the kitchens had not, apparently, been opened for years!

Upstairs, the bedrooms were old-fashioned, with heavy hangings, grey with dust, and half hidden by festoons of cobwebs. In not a single room was a bed that had been slept in. Indeed, I question if any one had ascended to the second floor for several years!

As I stood in one of the rooms, gazing round in wonder, and half suffocated by the dust my footsteps had disturbed, it suddenly occurred to me that the pair of assassins, believing that I had died, would, no doubt, return and dispose of my body. To me it seemed certain that this was not the first occasion that they had

played the dastardly and brutal game. Yes, I felt positive they would return.

I searched the place to find a telephone, but there was none. The bogus message sent to me had been sent from elsewhere.

The only trace of Sylvia I could find was that piece of velvet ribbon, the embroidery which had so hastily been flung down, and the bowl of fresh roses.

Why had she been there? The book and the embroidery showed that she had waited. For what? That bowl of roses had been placed there to make the room look fresh, for some attempt had been made to clean the apartment, just as it had been made in the room wherein I had suffered such torture.

Why had Sylvia uttered those screams of horror? I recollected those words of hers. I recognized her voice. I would, indeed, have recognized it among the voices of a thousand women.

I returned to the drawing-room, and gazed around it in wonder. If, as it seemed, Reckitt and Forbes had taken unlawful possession of an untenanted house, then it was probable they would not return to get rid of my remains. The whole affair was incomprehensible. It seemed evident that Sylvia had not fallen a victim to the vengeance of the pair, as I had feared, but that perhaps I had owed my life to her.

Could it be that she had learned of my peril, released me, killed the venomous reptile, and escaped?

Suddenly, as my eyes wandered about the dingy old room, I caught sight of something shining. A golden bangle of curious Indian design was lying upon the mantelshelf. I took it up, and in a moment recognized it as one I had seen upon her wrist one evening while she sat at dinner at Gardone.

I replaced it, stood for a moment deep in thought, and then, with sudden resolve, returned to the chamber of horror, obtained my hat, and, descending the stairs, went forth into Porchester Terrace.

I had to walk as far as Bayswater Road before I could find a taxi. The sun was now shining brightly, and there were many people about in the streets. Finding a cab at last, I told the man to drive with all speed to my bank in Oxford Street.

It was just eleven when I went up to the counter to one of the paying cashiers I knew, and asked him breathlessly if a cheque of mine had been paid to a person

named Reckitt. He saw by my manner that I was in hot haste.

“I’ve cashed it not a moment ago, Mr. Biddulph,” was his reply. “Why, you must have passed the man as you came in! He’s only this moment gone out.”

Without a word I dashed back to the swing-doors, and there, sure enough, only a few yards away, I caught sight of Forbes, in a smart grey flannel suit, entering a taxi. I shouted, but the taxi man did not hear me. He was facing westward, and ere I could attract his attention he was slowly moving in the direction of the Marble Arch.

The quick eyes of Forbes had, however, detected me, and, leaning out, he said something to his driver. Quickly I re-entered my cab, and told my man to turn and follow, pointing out the taxi in front. Mine was open, while that in which the assassin sat was closed.

In his pocket the scoundrel carried over a thousand pounds of my money.

My first impulse was to stop and inform a police-constable, but if I did so I saw that he must escape. I shouted to my driver to try and see the number of the cab, but there was a lot of traffic, and he was unable to see it clearly.

I suppose I must have cut a sorry figure, dishevelled as I was by my night’s weird experience, and covered with the dust of that untenanted house. What the bank-clerk must have thought, I know not.

It was an exciting chase. For a moment we were held up by the police at Regent Circus, for there was much traffic, but only for a brief space; then we tore after the receding cab at a pace which made many passers-by stare. The cab in which Forbes was, being closed, the driver did not see us, but I knew that the assassin was watching us from the tiny window in the back, and was giving his driver instructions through the front window.

My man had entered fully into the spirit of the chase.

“That fellow in yonder taxi has just stolen a thousand pounds!” I told him.

“All right, sir,” replied my driver, as he bent over his wheel; “we shall catch him presently, never fear. I’m keeping my eye upon him all right.”

There were many taxis coming into the line of traffic from Bond Street and from the other main thoroughfares crossing Oxford Street—red taxis, just like the one

in which Forbes was escaping. Yet we both kept our eyes fixed upon that particular one, the driver of which presently bent sideways, and shot back a glance at us.

Then he put on speed, and with marvellous dexterity threaded in and out of the motor-buses and carts in front of him. I was compelled to admire his driving. I could only suppose that Forbes had offered him something handsome if he got safely away.

At the Marble Arch he suddenly turned down Park Lane, where the traffic was less, and there gaining upon us, he turned into one of the smaller streets, through Upper Grosvenor Street, winding in and out the intricate thoroughfares which lay between Grosvenor Square and Regent Street. Across Hanover Square and along Hanover Street we sped, until, passing out on to the opposite side of Regent Street, the driver, evidently believing that he had outwitted us, slowed down, and then pulled up suddenly before a shop.

Ere the fugitive could escape, indeed ere the door could be opened, we had pulled up a few yards away, and I dashed out and up to the door of the cab, my revolver gripped in my hand.

My driver had descended also, and gained the other side of the cab almost as soon as I had.

I opened the door, and met the fugitive boldly face to face.

Next second I fell back as though I had received a blow. I stood aghast.

I could utter no word. The mystery had, I realized in that second, been increased a hundredfold.

CHAPTER NINE

FACE TO FACE

On opening the door of the taxi I stood amazed to find that the occupant was not a man—but a woman.

It was Sylvia!

She started at sight of me. Her countenance blanched to the lips as she drew back and sat erect, a cry of dismay escaping her lips.

“You!” I gasped, utterly dumbfounded.

“Why—Mr. Biddulph!” she cried, recovering herself in a moment and stretching forth her small gloved hand; “fancy meeting you like this!”

What words I uttered I scarcely knew. This sudden transformation of the scoundrel Forbes into Sylvia Pennington held me bewildered. All I could imagine was that Sylvia must have been awaiting the man in another cab close to the bank, and that, in the course of our chase, we had confused the two taxis. Forbes had succeeded in turning away into some side street, while we had followed the cab of his companion.

She had actually awaited him in another cab while he had entered the bank and cashed the stolen cheque!

My taxi-driver, when he saw that a lady, and not a man, occupied the fugitive cab, drew back, returning to his seat.

“Do you know!” exclaimed the girl, with wonderful calmness, “only yesterday I was thinking of you, and wondering whether you were in London!”

“And only yesterday, too, Miss Pennington, I also was thinking of you,” I said meaningly.

She was dressed very quietly in dead black, which increased the fairness of her skin and hair, wearing a big black hat and black gloves. She was inexpressibly smart, from the thin gauzy veil to the tips of her tiny patent-leather shoes, with a

neat waist and a figure that any woman might envy. Indeed, in her London attire she seemed even smarter than she had appeared on the terrace beside the blue Italian lake.

“Where is your father?” I managed to ask.

“Oh!—well, he’s away just now. He was with me in London only the other day,” she replied. “But, as you know, he’s always travelling.” Then she added: “I’m going into this shop a moment. Will you wait for me? I’m so pleased to see you again, and looking so well. It seems really ages since we were at Gardone, doesn’t it?” and she smiled that old sweet smile I so well remembered.

“I’ll wait, of course,” I replied, and, assisting her out, I watched her pass into the big drapery establishment. Then I idled outside amid the crowd of women who were dawdling before the attractive windows, as is the feminine habit.

If it had been she who had rescued me from death and had released me, what a perfect actress she was. Her confusion had only lasted for a few seconds. Then she had welcomed me, and expressed pleasure at our re-encounter.

I recollected the bow of ribbon-velvet which reposed in my pocket, and the Indian bangle I had found. I remembered, too, those agonized, terrified cries in the night—and all the mysteries of that weird and silent house!

When she came forth I would question her; I would obtain from her the truth anent those remarkable happenings.

Was it of that most ingenious and dastardly plot she had warned me? Was her own conviction that she must suffer the penalty of death based upon the knowledge of the deadly instrument, that venomous reptile used by the assassins?

Could it be that Pennington himself—her own father—was implicated in this shameful method of obtaining money and closing the lips of the victims?

As I stood there amid the morning bustle of Regent Street out in the broad sunshine, all the ghastly horrors of the previous night crowded thickly upon me. Why had she shrieked: “Ah! not that—*not that*!” Had she, while held prisoner in that old-fashioned drawing-room, been told of the awful fate to which I had been consigned?

I remembered how I had called to her, but received no response. And yet she

must have been in the adjoining room.

Perhaps, like myself, she had fainted.

I recalled her voice distinctly. I certainly had made no mistake. She had been actually present in that house of black torture. Therefore, being my friend, there seemed no doubt that, to her, I owed my mysterious salvation. But how? Aye, that was the question.

Suddenly, as I stood there on the crowded pavement, I became conscious that I was attracting attention. I recollected my dusty clothes and dirty, dishevelled face. I must have presented a strange, dissipated, out-all-night appearance. And further, I had lost a thousand pounds.

Up and down before the long range of shop-windows I walked, patiently awaiting her reappearance. I was anxious to know the truth concerning the previous night's happenings—a truth which I intended she should not conceal from me.

I glanced at my watch. It was already past eleven o'clock. Morning shopping in Regent Street had now commenced in real earnest. The thoroughfare was lined with carriages, for was it not the height of the London season?

In and out of the big drapery establishment passed crowds of well-dressed women, most of them with pet dogs, and others with male friends led like lambs to the slaughter. The spectacle of a man in silk hat out shopping with a lady friend is always a pitiable one. His very look craves the sympathy of the onlooker, especially if he be laden with soft-paper parcels.

My brain was awhirl. My only thought was of Sylvia and of her strange connection with these undesirable persons who had so ingeniously stolen my money, and who had baited such a fatal trap.

Anxious as I was to get to a telephone and ring up Jack, yet I could not leave my post—I had promised to await her.

Nearly an hour went by; I entered the shop and searched its labyrinth of "departments." But I could not distinguish her anywhere. Upstairs and downstairs I went, inquiring here and there, but nobody seemed to have seen the fair young lady in black; the great emporium seemed to have swallowed her up.

It was now noon. Even though she might have been through a dress-fitting

ordeal, an hour was certainly ample time. Therefore I began to fear that she had missed me. There were several other exits higher up the street, and also one which I discovered in a side street.

I returned to her taxi, for I had already paid off my man. The driver had not seen his “fare.”

“I was hailed by the lady close to Chapel Street,” he said, “and I drove ’er to Oxford Street, not far from Tottenham Court Road. We stood at the kerb for about ten minutes. Then she ordered me to drive with all speed over ’ere.”

“Did you see her speak with any gentleman?”

“She was with a dark, youngish gentleman when they hailed me. She got in and left ’im in Chapel Street. I heard ’im say as we went off that he’d see ’er again soon.”

“That’s all you know of her?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve never seen ’er before,” replied the driver. Then he added with a smile, “Your man’s been tellin’ me as how you thought I had a bank-thief in my cab!”

“Yes, but I was mistaken,” I said. “I must have made a mistake in the cab.”

“That’s very easy, sir. We’re so much alike—us red ’uns.”

Sylvia’s non-appearance much puzzled me. What could it mean? For another half-hour—an anxious, impatient, breathless half-hour—I waited, but she did not return.

Had she, too, cleverly escaped by entering the shop, and passing out by another entrance?

Another careful tour of the establishment revealed the fact that she certainly was not there.

And so, after a wait of nearly two hours, I was compelled to accept the hard and very remarkable fact that she had purposely evaded me, and escaped!

Then she was in league with the men who had stolen my thousand pounds! And yet had not that selfsame man declared that she, having betrayed him, was to meet the same terrible fate as that prepared for me?

For a final five minutes I waited; then annoyed, disappointed and dismayed, entered the taxi, and drove to Wilton Street.

On entering with my latch-key, Browning came forward with a puzzled expression, surprised, no doubt, at my dishevelled appearance.

“I’ve been very anxious about you, Mr. Owen,” exclaimed the old man. I was always Mr. Owen to him, just as I had been when a lad. “When I went to your room this morning I found your bed empty. I wondered where you had gone.”

“I’ve had a strange adventure, Browning,” I laughed, rather forcedly I fear. “Has Mr. Marlowe rung me up?”

“No, sir. But somebody else rang up about an hour ago, and asked whether you were in.”

“Who was it?”

“I couldn’t quite catch the name, sir. It sounded like Shuffle—something.”

“Shuttleworth!” I cried. “Did he leave any message?”

“No, sir. He merely asked if you were in—that’s all.”

As Sylvia was in London, perhaps Shuttleworth was in town also, I reflected. Yet she had cleverly made her escape—in order to avoid being questioned. Her secret was a guilty one!

I called up Jack, who answered cheerily as usual.

“You didn’t ring me up about one o’clock this morning, did you?” I inquired.

“No. Why?” he asked.

“Oh—well, nothing,” I said. “I thought perhaps it might have been you—that’s all. What time shall you be in at White’s?”

“About four. Will you be there?”

“Yes.”

“Right-ho! Good-bye, old man,” and he rang off.

I ascended to my room, changed my clothes, and made myself respectable. But during the time I was dressing I reflected whether I should go to Scotland Yard

and relate my strange experience. Such clever fiends as Reckitt and Forbes deserved punishment. What fearful crimes had been committed in that weird, neglected house I dreaded to think. My only hesitation, however, was caused by the thought that perhaps Sylvia might be implicated. I felt somehow impelled to try and solve the problem for myself. I had lost a thousand pounds. Yet had I not fallen into that trap in utter disregard of Sylvia's warning?

Therefore, I resolved to keep my own counsel for the present, and to make a few inquiries in order to satisfy my curiosity. So, putting on a different suit, a different collar, and a soft felt hat which I never wore, in a perhaps feeble attempt to transform myself from my usual appearance, I went forth again.

My first visit was to the bank, where I saw the manager and explained that the cheque had been stolen from my pocket, though I did not expose the real facts. Then, after he had condoled with me upon my loss, and offered to send the description of the thief to the police at once, I re-entered the taxi, and drove back to Porchester Terrace, alighting a short distance from Althorp House.

CHAPTER TEN

CONTAINS A FURTHER SURPRISE

It was nearly one o’clock, and the sun was high, as I walked beneath the dingy brick walls which separate each short garden from the pavement. In some gardens were stunted trees, blackened by the London smoke, while the houses were mostly large and comfortable, for it is still considered a “genteel,” if somewhat decayed neighbourhood.

Before that house of horror I paused for a moment. The dingy blinds of yellow holland were drawn at each of the soot-grimed windows, blackened by age and dirt. The garden was weedy and neglected, for the grass grew high on the patch of lawn, and the dead leaves of the tulips and daffodils of spring had not been removed.

The whole place presented a sadly neglected, sorry appearance—a state of uncared-for disorder which, in the darkness of night, I had, of course, not noticed.

As I looked within the garden I saw lying behind the wall an old weather-beaten notice-board which bore the words “To be let, Furnished,” and giving the name of a well-known firm of estate agents in Pall Mall.

The house next door was smart and well kept, therefore I resolved to make inquiry there.

Of the tall, thin, old man-servant who answered my ring, I inquired the name of the occupant of Althorp House.

“Well, sir,” he replied, “there hasn’t been an occupant since I’ve been in service here, and that’s ten years last March. An old lady lived there, I’ve heard—a rather eccentric old lady. They’ve tried to let it furnished, but nobody has taken it. It is said that the old lady left instructions in her will that the furniture was to be left just as it was for twenty years after her death. I expect the place must be fine and dirty! An old woman goes there once every six weeks or so, I believe, just to open the doors and let in a little air. But it’s never cleaned.”

“And nobody has been over it with a view to renting it?”

“Not to my knowledge, sir.”

“There’s never been anybody going in or out—eh?”

“Well, I’ve never seen them, sir,” was the man’s reply.

“But there have been people coming and going, have there not?”

The man hesitated for a moment, apparently slightly puzzled at my question.

“Well, sir, to tell the truth, there’s been a very funny story about lately. It is said that some of the old woman’s relatives have returned, and they’ve been seen going in and out—but always in the middle of the night.”

“What sort of people?” I asked quickly.

“Oh! two men and a woman—so they say. But of course I’ve never seen anybody. I’ve asked the constables on night duty, and they’ve never seen any one, or they would, no doubt, have reported it.”

“Then who has seen them?”

“I really don’t know. I heard the gossip over in the Royal Oak. How it originated, or whether it had any foundation in fact, I can’t find out.”

“I see the board has fallen down.”

“Yes, that’s been down for a couple of months or more—blown down by the wind, I suppose.”

“You haven’t heard cabs stopping outside at night, for instance?”

“No, sir. I sleep at the back, and should therefore not hear.”

I could see that he was a little uncertain as to the reason of my inquiries, therefore I made an excuse that having been struck by the appearance of the house so long neglected my curiosity had been aroused.

“You’ve never heard of cabs stopping there at night?” I asked, a few moments later.

“Well, this morning the cook, who sleeps upstairs in front, funnily enough, told me a curious story of how in the night a taxi stopped and a gentleman got out

and entered the house. A few minutes later another man came forth from the house, paid the taxi-driver, and he moved off. But," laughed the man-servant, "I fancy cook had been dreaming. I'm going to ask the constable when he comes on duty to-night if he saw any strangers here."

I smiled. The man whom the cook saw had evidently been myself.

Then, after a further chat, I pressed half-a-crown into his ready palm and left.

My next visit was to the estate agents in Pall Mall, where, presenting myself as a possible tenant, the clerk at whose table I had taken a seat said—

"Well, sir, Althorp House is in such a bad, neglected state that we do not now-a-days send clients to view it. Old Mrs. Carpenter died some thirteen years ago, and according to her will the place had to be left undisturbed, and let furnished. The solicitors placed it in our hands, but the property until the twenty years have elapsed, is quite untenantable. The whole place has now gone to rack and ruin. We have a number of other furnished houses which I will be most delighted to give you orders to view."

In pretence that I wanted a house I allowed him to select three for me, and while doing so learnt some further particulars regarding the dark house in Porchester Terrace. As far as he knew, the story of Mrs. Carpenter's relatives taking secret possession was a myth.

The caretaker had been withdrawn two years ago, and the place simply locked up and left. If burglars broke in, there was nothing of value for them to take, he added.

Thus the result of my inquiries went to confirm my suspicion that the ingenious pair of malefactors had taken possession of the place temporarily, in order to pursue their nefarious plans.

There was a garden at the rear. Might it not also be the grave wherein the bodies of their innocent victims were interred?

That afternoon, at four, I met Jack Marlowe in White's, and as we sat in our big arm-chairs gazing through the windows out into the sunshine of St. James's Street, I asked him whether he would be prepared to accompany me upon an adventurous visit to a house in Bayswater.

The long-legged, clean-shaven, clean-limbed fellow with the fairish hair and

merry grey eyes looked askance for a moment, and then inquired—

“What’s up, old man? What’s the game?” He was always eager for an adventure, I knew.

“Well, the fact is I want to look around a house in Porchester Terrace, that’s all. I want to search the garden when nobody’s about.”

“Why?”

“In order to satisfy myself about something.”

“Become an amateur detective—eh, Owen?”

“Well, my curiosity has certainly been aroused, and I intend to go to the house late to-night and look round the garden. Will you come?”

He was one of the best of good fellows, overflowing with good humour and good nature. His face seemed to wear a perpetual smile of contentment.

“Of course. But tell me more,” he asked.

“I will—afterwards,” I said. “Let’s dine together somewhere, and turn in at the Empire afterwards. We don’t want to get to Bayswater before midnight, as we mustn’t be seen. Don’t dress. I’ll bring an electric torch.”

“I’ve got one. I’ll bring mine also,” he replied, at once entering into the spirit of the adventure. “Only you might tell me what’s in the wind, Owen,” he added.

“I’ll tell you afterwards, old chap,” I promised.

And then we separated, agreeing to meet at eight at a well-known restaurant which we often patronized.

That night, when the curtain fell at the Empire, we both went forth and strolled along to St. James’s Street to get a drink at the club. The later we went forth on our nocturnal inquiry, the better.

I recollected that look of terror and astonishment on Forbes’s countenance when his gaze had met mine outside the bank—a look which showed that he had believed me to be safely out of the way. He had never dreamed I was still alive! Hence it seemed to me certain that the pair of malefactors, having secured the money, would at once make themselves scarce. How, I wondered, could they have known of Jack Marlowe, unless they had watched us both in secret, as

seemed most likely.

That they would not return again to that house of horror in Bayswater seemed certain.

Towards one o’clock we took a taxi off the stand outside White’s and drove to Porchester Terrace, alighting some distance from our destination. We passed the constable strolling slowly in the opposite direction, and when at last we gained the rusty iron gate we both slipped inside, quietly and unobserved.

The street lamp in the vicinity lit up the front of the dingy house, therefore fearing observation from any of the servants next door, we moved noiselessly in the shadow of the bushes along the side of the premises, past a small conservatory, many panes of glass of which were broken, and so into the darkness of the small back garden, which seemed knee-deep in grass and weeds, and which, from its position, hemmed in by blank walls, could not be overlooked save from the house itself.

All was silence. The scene was weird in the extreme. In the distance could be heard the faint hum of the never-ceasing traffic of London. Above, showed the dark windows of that grim old place wherein I had so nearly lost my life.

“I want to examine this garden thoroughly,” I whispered to Jack, and then I switched on my torch and showed a light around. A tangle of weeds and undergrowth was revealed—a tangle so great that to penetrate it without the use of a bill-hook appeared impossible.

Still we went forward, examining everywhere with our powerful electric lights.

“What will the people say?” laughed Jack. “They’ll take us for burglars, old chap!”

“The place is empty,” I replied. “Our only fear is of the police. To them we would be compelled to make an explanation—and that’s just what I don’t want to do.”

For some time we carefully searched, conversing only in whispers. My hands were scratched, and stung by nettles, and Jack had his coat badly torn by thorns. The garden had been allowed to run wild for all the years since old Mrs. Carpenter’s death, and the two ash trees had spread until their thick branches overshadowed a large portion of the ground.

Beneath one of these trees I suddenly halted as an ejaculation escaped me. Near the trunk, and in such a position that it would not be seen even from the windows of the house, yawned a hole, and at its side a mound of newly-dug earth.

“Ah!” I cried. “This is what I’ve been in search of!” The discovery revealed a ghastly truth. I shuddered at the sight of it.

“What, that hole?” asked Jack, in a low voice as we approached and peered into it. I judged it to be about three feet or so in depth. “What a funny thing to search for!”

“That hole, Jack, was intended for a man’s grave!” I whispered hoarsely, “and the man intended was *myself*!”

“You!” he gasped. “What do you mean, Owen?”

“I mean that that grave yonder was dug in order to conceal my dead body,” was my low, meaning answer. “And I fear—fear very much—that the remains of others who have met with foul play have been concealed here!”

“You mean that murder was actually intended!” he exclaimed in astonishment. “When?”

“Last night. I was entrapped here and narrowly escaped.”

“How? Tell me all about it,” he urged.

“Later on. Not here,” I said. “Let us see if there is any further evidence of recent digging,” and together we examined the ground beneath the second tree.

Presently Jack in the course of searching about, came to a spot where the ground seemed perceptibly softer. My stick sank in, while in other parts the ground seemed hard. Beneath the trees the weeds and grass grew thinly, and I presumed that the miscreants could work there under the canopy of leaves without fear of observation.

I bent down and carefully examined the surface, which, for about four feet square, bore plain traces of having recently been moved.

Something had evidently been interred there. Yet tiny fresh blades of green were just springing up, as though grass-seed had been sprinkled over in order to obliterate traces of the recent excavation.

“What do you think of it?” I inquired of my companion.

“Well, perhaps somebody has really been buried here—eh?” he said. “Don’t you think you ought to go and tell the police at once?”

I was silent, in bewilderment.

“My own opinion is, Owen, that if a serious attempt has been made upon you, and you really suspect that that hole yonder was prepared to receive you, then it is your duty to tell the police. Others may fall into the trap,” Jack added.

“Not here,” I said. “The assassins will not return, never fear. They know of their failure in my case, and by this time they are, in all probability, out of the country.”

“But surely we ought to examine this spot and ascertain whether the remains of any one is concealed here!” exclaimed my old friend.

Yet I still hesitated, hesitated because I feared that any exposure must implicate that sweet little girl who, though my friend, had so ingeniously escaped me.

At the same moment, however, our ears both caught a slight movement among the tangled shrubs under the wall at the extreme end of the garden. Instantly we shut off our lamps, and stood motionless, listening.

At first I believed it to be only the scrambling of a cat. But next second Jack nudged my arm, and straining my eyes I saw a dark figure moving stealthily along, half crouching so as to be less conspicuous, but moving slowly towards that side of the house which was the only exit.

Fearing discovery there, our examination being so thorough, the intruder was slowly creeping off, endeavouring to escape observation.

For an instant I remained motionless, watching the dark, crouching figure. Then, drawing my revolver, I made a dash straight in its direction.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHAT THE POLICE KNEW

As I pushed my way through the tangle of weeds and undergrowth, Jack followed closely at my heels.

The dark figure leapt away in an instant, and dashed round the corner by the ruined conservatory, but I was too quick for him. I caught him up when he gained the front of the house, and there, in the light of the street-lamp, my eyes fell upon a strange-looking object.

He proved to be a ragged, hunchbacked youth, so deformed as to be extremely ugly, both in face and figure. His hair, long and lank, hung about his shoulders, while his dark eyes stood out in terror when I ordered him to halt, and covered him with my shining weapon.

His was the most weird figure that I had seen for many a day. I judged him to be about eighteen or nineteen, though he looked older. His legs were short, his head seemed far too big for his crooked body, while his arms were long and ape-like, and his fingers thin, like talons.

“Now then, what are you doing here?” I demanded in a firm, commanding voice.

But he only quivered, and crouched against the wall like a whipped dog.

“Speak!” I said. “Who are you?”

He gave vent to a loud, harsh laugh, almost a screech, and then grinned horribly in my face.

“Who are you?” I repeated. “Where do you live?”

But though his mouth moved, as though he replied, no sound escaped him.

I spoke again, but he only laughed wildly, his thin fingers twitching.

“Ho! ho! ho!” he ejaculated, pointing back to the neglected garden.

“I wonder what he means!” exclaimed Jack.

“Why, I believe he’s an idiot!” I remarked.

“He has every appearance of one,” declared my companion, who then addressed him, with the same negative result.

Again the weird, repulsive youth pointed back to the garden, and, laughing hideously, uttered some words in gibberish which were quite unintelligible.

“If we remain here chattering, the constable will find us,” I remarked, so we all three went forth into the street, the ugly hunchback walking at my side, quite tractable and quiet.

Presently, unable to gather a single intelligible sentence from him, Jack and I resolved to leave him, and afterwards follow him and ascertain where he lived.

Why had he pointed to the garden and laughed so hilariously? Had he witnessed any of those nocturnal preparations—or interments?

At last, at the corner of Bishop’s Road, we wished him farewell and turned away. Then, at a respectable distance, we drew into a gateway to watch. He remained standing where we had left him for some ten minutes or so, until a constable slowly approached, and, halting, began to chat to him.

Apparently he was a well-known figure, for we could hear the policeman speaking, and could distinguish the poor fellow laughing that queer, harsh, discordant laugh—the laugh of the idiot.

Presently the constable moved forward again, whereupon I said—

“I’ll get on and have a chat with the policeman, Jack. You follow the hunchback if he moves away.”

“Right-ho,” replied my friend, while I sped off, crossing the road and making a detour until I met the constable.

Having wished him good-night, I inquired the identity of the deformed youth.

“Oh, sir,” he laughed, “that’s Mad ’Arry. ’E’s quite ’armless. ’E’s out most nights, but we never see ’im in the day, poor chap. I’ve known ’im ever since he was about nine.”

“Does no work, I suppose?”

“None. ’Ow can ’e? ’E’s as mad as a hatter, as the sayin’ goes,” replied the

constable, his thumbs hitched in his belt as he stood.

“A kind of midnight wanderer, eh?”

“Yes, ’e’s always a-pryin’ about at night. Not long ago ’e found burglars in a ’ouse in Gloucester Terrace, and gave us the alarm. We copped four of ’em. The magistrate gave ’im a guinea out o’ the poor-box.”

“Ah! so he’s of use to you?”

“Yes, sir, ’e’s most intelligent where there’s any suspicious characters about. I’ve often put ’im on the watch myself.”

“Then he’s not quite insane?”

“Not on that point, at any rate,” laughed the officer.

“Where does he live?”

“’Is father’s a hackney-carriage driver, and ’e lives with ’im up in Gloucester Mews, just at the back of Porchester Mews—I don’t know if you know it?”

I was compelled to confess ignorance of the locality, but he directed me.

“Are you on night-duty in Porchester Terrace, constable?” I asked a few moments later.

“Yes, sir, sometimes. Why?”

“You know Althorp House, of course?”

“Yes, the ’aunted ’ouse, as some people call it. Myself, I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Neither do I,” I laughed, “but I’ve heard many funny stories about that place. Have you ever heard any?”

“Lots, sir,” replied the man. “We’re always being told of strange things that ’ave ’appened there, yet when we ’ave a look around we never find anything, so we’ve ceased to trouble. Our inspector’s given us orders not to make any further inquiries, ’e’s been worried too often over idle gossip.”

“What’s the latest story afloat concerning the place?” I asked. “I’m always interested in mysteries of that sort.”

“Oh, I ’eard yesterday that somebody was seen to get out of a taxi-cab and enter. And ’e ’asn’t been seen to come forth again.”

“That’s curious,” I said. “And haven’t you looked over the place?”

“I’m not on duty there. Perhaps my mate ’as. I don’t know. But, funnily enough,” added the officer, “Mad ’Arry has been tellin’ me something about it a moment ago—something I can’t understand—something about the garden. I suppose ’e’s been a-fancyin’ something or other. Everybody seems to see something in the garden, or at the windows. Why, about a week ago, a servant from one of the ’ouses in the Terrace came up to me at three o’clock in the afternoon, in broad daylight, and said as how she’d distinctly seen at the drawin’-room window the face of a pretty, fair-haired girl a-peerin’ through the side of the dirty blind. She described the girl, too, and said that as soon as she saw she was noticed the inmate of the place drew back instantly.”

“A fair-haired girl!” I exclaimed, quickly interested.

“Yes; she described her as wearin’ a black velvet band on her hair.”

“And what did you do?” I asked anxiously.

“Why, nothing. I’ve ’eard too many o’ them kind o’ tales before.”

“Yes,” I said reflectively. “Of course all kinds of legends and rumours must naturally spring up around a house so long closed.”

“Of course. It’s all in people’s imagination. I suppose they’ll say next that a murder’s been committed in the place!” he laughed.

“I suppose so,” I said, and then, putting a shilling in his hand, wished him good-night, and passed along.

Jack and the idiot had gone, but, knowing the direction they had taken—for the youth was, no doubt, on his way home—I was not long before I caught up my friend, and then together we retraced our steps towards the Bayswater Road, in search of a taxi.

I could not forget that curious statement that a girl’s face had been seen at the drawing-room window—a fair-headed girl with a band of black velvet in her hair.

Could it have been Sylvia Pennington?

It was past three o’clock in the morning before I retraced my steps to Wilton Street. We were unable to find a cab, therefore we walked down Park Lane together.

On the way Jack had pressed me to tell him the reason of my visit to that weird house and the circumstances in which my life had been attempted. For the present, however, I refused to satisfy his curiosity. I promised him I would tell him the whole facts of the case some day.

“But why are you at home now?” he asked. “I can’t really make you out lately, Owen. You told me you hated London, and preferred life on the Continent, yet here you are, back again, and quite settled down in town!”

“Well, a fellow must come here for the London season sometimes,” I said. “I feel that I’ve been away far too long, and am a bit out of touch with things. Why, my tailor hardly knew me, and the hall-porter at White’s had to look twice before he realized who I was.”

“But there’s some attraction which has brought you to London,” he declared. “I’m sure there is!”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him how cleverly the two scoundrels had used his name wherewith to entrap me on the previous night. But I refrained. Instead, I asked—

“Have you ever met two men named Reckitt and Forbes, Jack?”

“Not to my knowledge,” was his prompt reply. “Who are they? What are they like?”

I gave him a minute description of both, but he apparently did not recognize them.

“I suppose you’ve never met a fellow called Pennington—eh? A stoutish, dark-haired man with a baldish head and a reddish face?”

“Well,” he replied thoughtfully, “I’ve met a good many men who might answer to that description. What is he?”

“I don’t exactly know. I’ve met him on the Continent.”

“And I suppose some people one meets at Continental hotels are undesirables, aren’t they?” he said.

I nodded in the affirmative.

Then I asked—

“You’ve never known a person named Shuttleworth—Edmund Shuttleworth? Lives at a little village close to Andover.”

“Shuttleworth!” he echoed, looking straight into my face. “What do you know of Edmund Shuttleworth?” he asked quickly.

“Very little. Do you know him?”

“Er—well—no, not exactly,” was his faltering reply, and I saw in his slight hesitation an intention to conceal the actual knowledge which he possessed. “I’ve heard of him—through a friend of mine—a lady friend.”

“A lady! Who’s she?” I inquired quickly.

“Well,” he laughed a trifle uneasily, “the fact is, old chap, perhaps it wouldn’t be fair to tell the story. You understand?”

I was silent. What did he mean? In a second the allegation made by that pair of scoundrels recurred to me. They had declared that Sylvia had been in a house opposite, and that my friend had fallen in love with her.

Yet he had denied acquaintanceship with Pennington!

No doubt the assassins had lied to me, yet my suspicions had been aroused. Jack had admitted his acquaintance with the thin-faced village rector—he knew of him through a woman. Was that woman Sylvia herself?

From his manner and the great curiosity he evinced, I felt assured that he had never known of Althorp House before. Reckitt and Forbes had uttered lies when they had shown me that photograph, and told me that she was beloved by my best friend. It had been done to increase my anger and chagrin. Yet might there not, after all, have been some foundation in truth in what they had said? The suggestion gripped my senses.

Again I asked him to tell me the lady’s name.

But, quite contrary to his usual habit of confiding in me all his most private affairs, he steadfastly refused.

“No, my dear old chap,” he replied, “I really can’t tell you that. Please excuse

me, but it is a matter I would rather not discuss.”

So at the corner of Piccadilly we parted, for it was now broad daylight, and while he returned to his rooms, I walked down Grosvenor Place to Wilton Street, more than ever puzzled and confounded.

Was I a fool, that I loved Sylvia Pennington with such an all-absorbing passion?

It was strangely true, as Shuttleworth had declared, the grave lay as a gulf between us.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE WORD OF A WOMAN

A week went by—a week of keen anxiety and apprehension.

Jack had spoken the truth when he had declared that it was my duty to go to Scotland Yard and reveal what I had discovered regarding that dark house in Bayswater.

Yet somehow I felt that any such action on my part must necessarily reflect upon my fair-haired divinity, that sweet, soft-spoken girl who had warned me, and who, moreover, was my affinity.

Had you found yourself in such a position, how would you have acted?

Remember that, notwithstanding the veil of mystery which overspread Sylvia Pennington, I loved her, and tried to conceal the truth from myself a hundred times, but it was impossible. She had warned me, and I, unfortunately, had not heeded. I had fallen into a trap, and without a doubt it had been she who had entered and rescued me from a fate most horrible to contemplate.

I shuddered when I lived that hour of terror over again. I longed once more to see that pale, sweet, wistful face which was now ever in my dreams. Had not Shuttleworth told me that the grave lay between my love and myself? And he had spoken the truth!

Jack met me at the club daily, but he only once referred to our midnight search and the gruesome discovery in the neglected garden.

Frequently it crossed my mind that Mad Harry might have watched there unseen, and witnessed strange things. How many men reported to the police as missing had been interred in that private burying-ground of the assassins! I dreaded to think of it.

In vain I waited for Mr. Shuttleworth to call again. He had inquired if I were at home, and, finding me absent, had gone away.

I therefore, a week later, made it an excuse to run down to Andover and see him,

hoping to obtain from him some further information regarding Sylvia.

The afternoon was bright and warm, and the country looked its best, with the scent of new-mown hay in the air, and flowers everywhere, as I descended from the station fly and walked up the rectory garden to the house.

The maid admitted me to the study, saying that Mr. Shuttleworth was only “down the paddock,” and would be back in a few minutes. And as I seated myself in the big, comfortable arm-chair, I saw, straight before me, in its frame the smiling face of the mysterious woman I loved.

Through the open French windows came the warm sunlight, the song of the birds, and the drowsy hum of the insects. The lawn was marked for tennis, and beyond lay the paddock and the dark forest-border.

I had remained there some few minutes, when suddenly I heard a quick footstep in the hall outside; then, next moment, the door was opened, and there, upon the threshold, stood Sylvia herself.

“You!” she gasped, starting back. “I—I didn’t know you were here!” she stammered in confusion.

She was evidently a guest there, and was about to pass through the study into the garden. Charming in a soft white ninon gown and a big white hat, she held a tennis-racket in her hand, presenting a pretty picture framed by the dark doorway.

“Sylvia!” I cried, springing forward to her in joy, and catching her small white trembling hand in mine. “Fancy you—here!”

She held her breath, suffering me to lead her into the room and to close the door.

“I had no idea you were here,” I said. “I—lost you the other day in Regent Street —I——”

She made a quick gesture, as though she desired me to refrain from referring to that incident. I saw that her cheeks were deadly pale, and that in her face was an expression of utter confusion.

“This meeting,” she said slowly in a low voice, “is certainly an unexpected one. Mr. Shuttleworth doesn’t know you are here, does he?”

“No,” I replied. “He’s down in the paddock, I believe.”

“He has been called out suddenly,” she said. “He’s driven over to Clatford with Mrs. Shuttleworth.”

“And you are here alone?” I exclaimed quickly.

“No. There’s another guest—Elsie Durnford,” she answered. “But,” she added, her self-possession at once returning, “but why are you here, Mr. Biddulph?”

“I wanted to see Mr. Shuttleworth. Being a friend of yours, I believed that he would know where you were. But, thank Heaven, I have found you at last. Now,” I said, smiling as I looked straight into her fathomless eyes, “tell me the truth, Miss Pennington. I did not lose you the other morning—on the contrary, you lost me—didn’t you?”

Her cheeks flushed slightly, and she gave vent to a nervous little laugh.

“Well,” she answered, after a moment’s hesitation, “to tell the truth, I did. I had reasons—important ones.”

“I was *de trop*—eh?”

She shrugged her well-formed shoulders, and smiled reproachfully.

“But why?” I asked. “When I found you, it was under very curious circumstances. A man—a thief—had just cashed a cheque of mine for a thousand pounds, and made off with the proceeds—and——”

“Ah! please do not refer to it, Mr. Biddulph!” she exclaimed quickly, laying her slim fingers upon my arm. “Let us speak of something else—anything but that.”

“I have no wish to reproach you, Miss Pennington,” I hastened to assure her. “The past is to me of the past. That man has a thousand pounds of mine, and he’s welcome to it, so long as——” and I hesitated.

“So long as what?” she asked in a voice of trepidation.

“So long as you are alive and well,” I replied in slow, meaning tones, my gaze fixed immovably on hers. “In Gardone you expressed fear for your own safety, but so long as you are still safe I have no care as to what has happened to myself.”

“But——”

“I know,” I went on, “the ingenious attempt upon my life of which you warned

me has been made by those two scoundrels, and I have narrowly escaped. To you, Miss Pennington, I owe my life."

She started, and lowered her eyes. Apparently she could not face me. The hand I held trembled within my grasp, and I saw that her white lips quivered.

For a few seconds a silence fell between us. Then slowly she raised her eyes to mine again, and said—

"Mr. Biddulph, this is an exceedingly painful subject to me. May we not drop it? Will you not forget it—if you really are my friend?"

"To secure your further friendship, I will do anything you wish!" I declared. "You have already proved yourself my friend by rescuing me from death," I added.

"How do you know that?" she asked quickly.

"Because you were alone with me in that house of death in Bayswater. It was you who killed the hideous reptile and who severed the bonds which held me. They intended that I should die. My grave had already been prepared. Cannot you tell me the motive of that dastardly attack?" I begged of her.

"Alas! I cannot," she said. "I warned you when at Gardone that I knew what was intended, but of the true motive I was, and am still, entirely ignorant. Their motives are always hidden ones."

"They endeavoured to get from me another thousand pounds," I exclaimed.

"It is well that you did not give it to them. The result would have been just the same. They intended that you should die, fearing lest you should inform the police."

"And you were outside the bank with Forbes when he cashed my cheque!" I remarked in slow tones.

"I know," she answered hoarsely. "I know that you must believe me to be their associate, perhaps their accomplice. Ah! well. Judge me, Mr. Biddulph, as you will. I have no defence. Only recollect that I warned you to go into hiding—to efface yourself—and you would not heed. You believed that I only spoke wildly—perhaps that I was merely an hysterical girl, making all sorts of unfounded assertions."

“I believed, nay, I knew, Miss Pennington, that you were my friend. You admitted in Gardone that you were friendless, and I offered you the friendship of one who, I hope, is an honest man.”

“Ah! thank you!” she cried, taking my hand warmly in hers. “You have been so very generous, Mr. Biddulph, that I can only thank you from the bottom of my heart. It is true an attempt was made upon you, but you fortunately escaped, even though they secured a thousand pounds of your money. Yet, had you taken my advice and disappeared, they would soon have given up the chase.”

“Tell me,” I urged in deep earnestness, “others have been entrapped in that dark house—have they not? That mechanical chair—that devilish invention—was not constructed for me alone.”

She did not answer, but I regarded her silence as an affirmative response.

“Your friends at least seem highly dangerous persons,” I said, smiling. “I’ve been undecided, since discovering that my grave was already prepared, whether to go to Scotland Yard and reveal the whole game.”

“No!” she cried in quick apprehension. “No, don’t do that. It could serve no end, and would only implicate certain innocent persons—myself included.”

“But how could you be implicated?”

“Was I not at the bank when the cheque was cashed?”

“Yes. Why were you there?” I asked.

But she only excused herself from replying to my question.

“Ah!” she cried wildly a moment later, clutching my arm convulsively, “you do not know my horrible position—you cannot dream what I have suffered, or how much I have sacrificed.”

I saw that she was now terribly in earnest, and, by the quick rising and falling of the lace upon her bodice, I knew that she was stirred by a great emotion. She had refused to allow me to stand her friend because she feared what the result might be. And yet, had she not rescued me from the serpent’s fang?

“Sylvia,” I cried, “Sylvia—for I feel that I must call you by your Christian name—let us forget it all. The trap set by those blackguards was most ingenious, and in innocence I fell into it. I should have lost my life—except for you. You were

present in that house of death. They told me you were there—they showed me your picture, and, to add to my horror, said that you, their betrayer, were to share the same fate as myself."

"Yes, yes, I know!" she cried, starting. "Oh, it was all too terrible—too terrible! How can I face you, Mr. Biddulph, after that!"

"My only desire is to forget it all, Sylvia," was my low and quiet response. "It was all my fault—my fault, for not heeding your warning. I never realized the evil machinations of those unknown enemies. How should I? As far as I know, I had never set eyes upon them before."

"You would have done wiser to have gone into hiding, as I suggested," she remarked quietly.

"Never mind," I said cheerily. "It is all past. Let us dismiss it. There is surely no more danger—now that I am forearmed."

"May they not fear your reprisals?" she exclaimed. "They did not intend that you should escape, remember."

"No, they had already prepared my grave. I have seen it."

"That grave was prepared for both of us," she said in a calm, reflective voice.

"Then how did you escape?" I inquired, with curiosity.

"I do not know. I can only guess."

"May I not know?" I asked eagerly.

"When I have confirmed my belief, I will tell you," she replied.

"Then let us dismiss the subject. It is horrible, gruesome. Look how lovely and bright the world is outside. Let us live in peace and in happiness. Let us turn aside these grim shadows which have lately fallen upon us."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, with a sigh, "you are indeed generous to me, Mr. Biddulph. But could you be so generous, I wonder, if you knew the actual truth? Alas! I fear you would not. Instead of remaining my friend, you would hate me—just—just as I hate myself!"

"Sylvia," I said, placing my hand again tenderly upon her shoulder and trying to calm her, and looking earnestly into her blue, wide-open eyes, "I shall never hate

you. On the contrary, let me confess, now and openly," I whispered, "let me tell you that I—I love you!"

She started, her lips parted at the suddenness of my impetuous declaration, and stood for a moment, motionless as a statue, pale and rigid.

Then I felt a convulsive tremor run through her, and her breast heaved and fell rapidly. She placed her hand to her heart, as though to calm the rising tempest of emotion within her. Her breath came and went rapidly.

"Love me!" she echoed in a strange, hoarse tone. "Ah! no, Mr. Biddulph, no, a thousand times no! You do not know what you are saying. Recall those words—I beg of you!"

And I saw by her hard, set countenance and the strange look in her eyes that she was deadly in earnest.

"Why should I recall them?" I cried, my hand still upon her shoulder. "You are not my enemy, Sylvia, even though you may be the friend of my enemies. I love you, and I fear nothing—nothing!"

"Hush! Do not say that," she protested very quietly.

"Why?"

"Because—well, because even though you have escaped, they——" and she hesitated, her lips set as though unable to articulate the truth.

"They what?" I demanded.

"Because, Mr. Biddulph—because, alas! I know these men only too well. You have triumphed; but yours is, I fear, but a short-lived victory. They still intend that you shall die!"

"How do you know that?" I asked quickly.

"Listen," she said hoarsely. "I will tell you."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE DEATH KISS

Sylvia sank into a chair, while I stood upon the hearth-rug facing her, eager to hear her explanation.

Her hands were clasped as she raised her wonderful blue eyes to mine. Yes, her beauty was perfect—more perfect than any I had ever seen in all my wandering, erratic life.

“Why do those men still intend that I shall die?” I asked. “Now that I know the truth I shall remain wary.”

“Ah, yes,” she responded. “But they will take you unawares. You do not know the devilish cunning and ingenuity of such men as they, who live upon their wits, and are utterly unscrupulous.”

“Well, what do they now intend?” I asked, much interested, for it seemed that she knew very much more than she would admit.

“You have escaped,” she said, looking straight into my face. “They naturally fear that you will tell the police.”

“I shall not do that—not at present, at least,” I replied. “I am keeping my own counsel.”

“Yes. But cannot you see that while you live you are a menace to their dastardly plans? They dare not return to that deserted house in Bayswater.”

“Where are they now?”

“Abroad, I believe. They always take care to have an outlet for escape,” she answered. “Ah! you don’t know what a formidable combination they are. They snap their fingers at the police of Europe.”

“What? Then you really admit that there have been other victims?” I exclaimed.

“I have no actual knowledge,” she declared, “only suspicions.”

“Why are you friendly with them?” I asked. “What does your father say to such acquaintances?”

“I am friendly only under compulsion,” she answered. “Ah! Mr. Biddulph, you cannot know how I hate the very sight or knowledge of those inhuman fiends. Their treatment of you is, in itself, sufficient proof of their pitiless plans.”

“Tell me this, Sylvia,” I said, after a second’s pause. “Have you any knowledge of a man—a great friend of mine—named Jack Marlowe?”

Her face changed. It became paler, and I saw she was slightly confused.

“I—well, I believe we met once,” she said. “His father lives somewhere down in Devonshire.”

“Yes,” I said quickly. “What do you know of him?”

“Nothing. We met only once.”

“Where?”

“Well—our meeting was under rather curious circumstances. He is your friend, therefore please pardon me if I do not reply to your question,” was her vague response.

“Then what do you anticipate from those men, Reckitt and Forbes?” I asked.

“Only evil—distinct evil,” she replied. “They will return, and strike when you least expect attack.”

“But if I do not go to the police, why should they fear me? They are quite welcome to the money they have stolen—so long as they allow me peace in the future.”

“Which I fear they will not do,” replied the girl, shaking her head.

“You speak very apprehensively,” I said. “What is there really to fear? Perhaps it would be best if I went to the police at once. They would then dig over that neglected garden and reveal its secrets.”

“No!” she cried again, starting wildly from her chair as though in sudden terror. “I beg of you not to do that, Mr. Biddulph. It would serve no purpose, and only create a great sensation. But the culprits would never be brought to justice. They are far too clever, and their conspiracies are too far-reaching. No, remain patient.

Take the greatest care of your own personal safety—and you may yet be able to combat your enemies with their own weapons."

"I shall be able, Sylvia—providing that you assist me," I said.

She held her breath, and remained silent. She evidently feared them.

I tried to obtain from her some details of the occurrences of that night of horror, but she refused to satisfy my curiosity. Apparently she feared to incriminate herself. Could it be possible that she had only learnt at the last moment that it was I who was embraced in the next room by that fatal chair!

Yet it was all so puzzling, so remarkable. Surely a girl with such a pure, open, innocent face could not be the accomplice of dastardly criminals! She was their friend. That much she had admitted to me. But her friendship with them was made under compulsion. She urged me not to go to the police. Why?

Did she fear that she herself would be implicated in a series of dark and terrible crimes?

"Where is your father?" I inquired presently.

"In Scotland," was her prompt reply. "I heard from him at the Caledonian Hotel, at Edinburgh, last Friday. I am staying here with Mr. Shuttleworth until his return."

Was it not strange that she should be guest of a quiet-mannered country parson, if she were actually the accomplice of a pair of criminals! I felt convinced that Shuttleworth knew the truth—that he could reveal a very remarkable story—if he only would.

"Your father is a friend of Mr. Shuttleworth—eh?" I asked.

She nodded in the affirmative. Then she stood with her gaze fixed thoughtfully upon the sunlit lawn outside.

Mystery was written upon her fair countenance. She held a dread secret which she was determined not to reveal. She knew of those awful crimes committed in that dark house in Bayswater, but her intention seemed to be to shield at all hazards her dangerous "friends."

"Sylvia," I said tenderly at last, again taking her hand in mine, "why cannot you be open and frank with me?" She allowed her hand to lie soft and inert in mine,

sighing the while, her gaze still fixed beyond as though her thoughts were far away. “I love you,” I whispered. “Cannot you see how you puzzle me?—for you seem to be my friend at one moment, and at the next the accomplice of my enemies.”

“I have told you that you must never love me, Mr. Biddulph,” was her low reply, as she withdrew her hand slowly, but very firmly.

“Ah! no,” I cried. “Do not take offence at my words. I’m aware that I’m a hopeless blunderer in love. All I know, Sylvia, is that my only thought is of you. And I—I’ve wondered whether you, on your part, can ever entertain a spark of affection for me?”

She was silent, her white lips pressed close together, a strange expression crossing her features. Again she held her breath, as though what I had said had caused her great surprise. Then she answered—

“How can you love me? Am I not, after all, a mere stranger?”

“I know you sufficiently well,” I cried, “to be aware that for me there exists no other woman. I fear I’m a blunt man. It is my nature. Forgive me, Sylvia, for speaking the truth, but—well, as a matter of fact, I could not conceal the truth any longer.”

“And you tell me this, after—after all that has happened!” she faltered in a low, tremulous voice, as I again took her tiny hand in mine.

“Yes—because I truly and honestly love you,” I said, “because ever since we have met I have found myself thinking of you—recalling you—nay, dreaming of happiness at your side.”

She raised her splendid eyes, and looked into mine for a moment; then, sighing, shook her head sadly.

“Ah! Mr. Biddulph,” she responded in a curious, strained voice, “passion may be perilously misleading. Ask yourself if you are not injudicious in making this declaration—to a woman like myself?”

“Why?” I cried. “Why should it be injudicious? I trust you, because—because I owe my life to you—because you have already proved yourself my devoted little friend. What I beg and pray is that your friendship may, in course of time, ripen into love—that you may reciprocate my affection—that you may really love

me!”

A slight hardness showed at the corners of her small mouth. Her eyes were downcast, and she swallowed the lump that arose in her throat.

She was silent, standing rigid and motionless.

Suddenly a great and distressing truth occurred to me. Did she believe that I pitied her? I hoped not. Any woman of common sensibility would almost die of shame at the thought of being loved out of pity; and, what is more, she would think none the better of the man who pitied her. The belief that “pity melts the heart to love” is an unfounded one.

So I at once endeavoured to remove the wrong impression which I feared I had conveyed.

What mad, impetuous words I uttered I can scarcely tell. I know that I raised her soft white hand to my lips and kissed it fervently, repeating my avowal and craving a word of hope from her lips.

But she again shook her head, and with sadness responded in a low, faltering tone—

“It is quite impossible, Mr. Biddulph. Leave me—let us forget all you have said. It will be better thus—far better for us both. You do not know who or what I am; you——”

“I do not know, neither do I care!” I cried passionately. “All I know, Sylvia, is that my heart is yours—that I have loved only once in my life, and it is now!”

Her slim fingers played nervously with the ribbon upon her cool summer gown, but she made no response.

“I know I have not much to recommend me,” I went on. “Perhaps I am too hulking, too English. You who have lived so much abroad are more used, no doubt, to the elegant manners and the prettily turned compliments of the foreigner than the straight speech of a fellow like myself. Yet I swear that my only thought has been of you, that I love you with all my heart—with all my soul.”

I caught her hand and again looked into her eyes, trying to read what response lay hidden in their depths.

I felt her tremble. For a moment she seemed unable to reply. The silence was unbroken save for the drowsy hum of the insects in the summer heat outside, while the sweet perfume of the flowers filled our nostrils. In the tension of those moments each second seemed an hour. You who have experienced the white heat of the love-flame can only know my eager, breathless apprehension, the honest whole-heartedness of my declaration. Perhaps, in your case, the flames are all burnt out, but even now you can tell of the white core and centre of fire within you. Years may have gone, but it still remains—the sweet memory of your well-beloved.

“Tell me, Sylvia,” I whispered once more. “Tell me, will you not break down this strange invisible barrier which you have set up between us? Forget the past, as I have already forgotten it—and be mine—my own!”

She burst into tears.

“Ah!” she cried. “If I only could—if I only dared!”

“Will you not dare to do it—for my sake?” I asked very quietly. “Will you not promise to be mine? Let me stand your friend—your champion. Let me defend you against your enemies. Let me place myself beside you and defy them.”

“Ah, no!” she gasped, “not to defy them. Defiance would only bring death—death to both of us!”

“Your love, Sylvia, would mean life and happiness, not death—to me—to both of us!” I cried. “Will you not give me your promise? Let our love be in secret, if you so desire—only let us love each other. Promise me!” I cried, my arm stealing around her narrow waist. “Promise me that you will try and love me, and I, too, will promise to be worthy of your affection.”

For a moment she remained silent, her handsome head downcast.

Then slowly, with a sweet love-look upon her beautiful countenance, she raised her face to mine, and then for the first time our lips met in a fierce and passionate caress.

Thus was our solemn compact sealed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

OF THINGS UNMENTIONABLE

I remained in that cosy, book-lined den for perhaps an hour—one whole hour of sweet, delightful ecstasy.

With her fair head buried upon my shoulder she shed tears of joy, while, time after time, I smothered her white brow with my kisses. Ah! yes, I loved her. I closed my eyes to all. I put away all my dark suspicions, and lived only for the present in the knowledge that Sylvia was mine—*mine!*

My hot, fevered declarations of affection caused her to cling to me more closely, yet she uttered but few words, and those half-incoherent ones, overcome as she was by a flood of emotion. She seemed to have utterly broken down beneath the great strain, and now welcomed the peace and all-absorbing happiness of affection. Alone and friendless, as she had admitted herself to be, she had, perhaps, longed for the love of an honest man. At least, that is what I was egotistical enough to believe. Possibly I might have been wrong, for until that moment I had ever been a confirmed bachelor, and had but little experience of the fantastic workings of a woman's mind.

Like so many other men of my age, I had vainly believed myself to be a philosopher. Yet are not philosophers merely soured cynics, after all? And I certainly was neither cynical nor soured. Therefore my philosophy was but a mere ridiculous affectation to which so many men and women are prone.

But in those moments of ecstasy I abandoned myself entirely to love, imprinting lingering, passionate kisses upon her lips, her closed eyes, her wide white brow, while she returned my caresses, smiling through her hot tears.

Presently, when she grew calmer, she said in a low, sweet voice—

"I—hardly know whether this is wise. I somehow fear——"

"Fear what?" I asked, interrupting her.

"I fear what the future may hold for us," she answered. "Remember I—I am poor, while you are wealthy, and——"

“What does that matter, pray? Thank Heaven! I have sufficient for us both—sufficient to provide for you the ordinary comforts of life, Sylvia. I only now long for the day, dearest, when I may call you wife.”

“Ah!” she said, with a wistful smile, “and I, too, shall be content when I can call you husband.”

And so we sat together upon the couch, holding each other’s hand, and speaking for the first time not as friends—but as lovers.

You who love, or who have loved, know well the joyful, careless feeling of such moments; the great peace which overspreads the mind when the passion of affection burns within.

Need I say more, except to tell you that our great overwhelming love was mutual, and that our true hearts beat in unison?

Thus the afternoon slipped by until, of a sudden, we heard a girl’s voice call: “Sylvia! Sylvia!”

We sprang apart. And not a moment too soon, for next second there appeared at the French windows the tall figure of a rather pretty dark-haired girl in cream.

“I—I beg your pardon!” she stammered, on recognizing that Sylvia was not alone.

“This is Mr. Biddulph,” exclaimed my well-beloved. “Miss Elsie Durnford.”

I bowed, and then we all three went forth upon the lawn.

I found Sylvia’s fellow-guest a very quiet young girl, and understood that she lived somewhere in the Midlands. Her father, she told me, was very fond of hunting, and she rode to hounds a good deal.

We wandered about the garden awaiting Shuttleworth’s return, for both girls would not hear of me leaving before tea.

“Mr. and Mrs. Shuttleworth are certain to be back in time,” Sylvia declared, “and I’m sure they’d be horribly annoyed if you went away without seeing them.”

“Do you really wish me to stay?” I asked, with a laugh, as we halted beneath the shadow of the great spreading cedar upon the lawn.

“Of course we do,” declared Elsie, laughing. “You really must remain and keep

us company, Mr. Biddulph. Sylvia, you know, is quite a stranger. She's always travelling now-a-days. I get letters from her from the four corners of the earth. I never know where to write so as to catch her."

"Yes," replied my well-beloved, with a slight sigh. "When we were at school at Eastbourne I thought it would be so jolly to travel and see the world, but now-a-days, alas! I confess I'm already tired of it. I would give anything to settle down quietly in the beautiful country in England—the country which is incomparable."

"You will—one day," I remarked meaningly.

And as she lifted her eyes to mine she replied—

"Perhaps—who knows?"

The village rector returned at last, greeting me with some surprise, and introducing his wife, a rather stout, homely woman, who bore traces of good looks, and who wore a visiting gown of neat black, for she had been paying a call.

"I looked in to see you the other day in town, Mr. Biddulph," he said. "But I was unfortunate. Your man told me you were out. He was not rude to me this time," he added humorously, with a laugh.

"No," I said, smiling. "He was profuse in his apologies. Old servants are sometimes a little trying."

"Yes, you're right. But he seems a good sort. I blame myself, you know. He's not to blame in the least."

Then we strolled together to a tent set beneath the cedar, whither the maid had already taken the tea and strawberries, and there we sat around gossiping.

Afterwards, when Shuttleworth rose, he said—

"Come across to my study and have a smoke. You're not in a great hurry to get back to town. Perhaps you'll play a game of tennis presently?"

I followed him through the pretty pergola of roses, back into the house, and when I had seated myself in the big old arm-chair, he gave me an excellent cigar.

"Do you know, Mr. Biddulph," he said after we had been smoking some

minutes, “I’m extremely glad to have this opportunity of a chat with you. I called at Wilton Street, because I wished to see you.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, for several reasons,” was his slow, earnest reply. His face looked thinner, more serious. Somehow I had taken a great fancy to him, for though a clergyman, he struck me as a broad-minded man of the world. He was keen-eyed, thoughtful and earnest, yet at the same time full of that genuine, hearty bonhomie so seldom, alas! found in religious men. The good fellowship of a leader appeals to men more than anything else, and yet somehow it seems always more apparent in the Roman Catholic priest than in the Protestant clergyman.

“The reason I called to-day was because I thought you might wish to speak to me,” I said.

He rose and closed the French windows. Then, re-seating himself, he removed his old briar pipe from his lips, and, bending towards me in his chair, said very earnestly—

“I wonder whether I might presume to say something to you strictly in private, Mr. Biddulph? I know that I ought not to interfere in your private affairs—yet, as a minister of religion, I perhaps am a slightly privileged person in that respect. At least you will, I trust, believe in my impartiality.”

“Most certainly I do, Mr. Shuttleworth,” I replied, somewhat surprised at his manner.

“Well, you recollect our conversation on the last occasion you were here?” he said. “You remember what I told you?”

“I remember that we spoke of Miss Sylvia,” I exclaimed, “and that you refused to satisfy my curiosity.”

“I refused, because I am not permitted,” was his calm rejoinder.

“Since I saw you,” I said, “a dastardly attempt has been made upon my life. I was enticed to an untenanted house in Bayswater, and after a cheque for a thousand pounds had been obtained from me by a trick, I narrowly escaped death by a devilish device. My grave, I afterwards found, was already prepared.”

“Is this a fact!” he gasped.

“It is. I was rescued—by Sylvia herself.”

He was silent, drawing hard at his pipe, deep in thought.

“The names of the two men who made the dastardly attempt upon me were Reckitt and Forbes—friends of Sylvia Pennington,” I went on.

He nodded. Then, removing his pipe, exclaimed—

“Yes. I understand. But did I not warn you?”

“You did. But, to be frank, Mr. Shuttleworth, I really did not follow you then. Neither do I now.”

“Have I not told you, my dear sir, that I possess certain knowledge under vow of absolute secrecy—knowledge which it is not permitted to me, as a servant of God, to divulge.”

“But surely if you knew that assassination was contemplated, it was your duty to warn me.”

“I did—but you took no heed,” he declared. “Sylvia warned you also, when you met in Gardone, and yet you refused to take her advice and go into hiding!”

“But why should an innocent, law-abiding, inoffensive man be compelled to hide himself like a fugitive from justice?” I protested.

“Who can fathom human enmity, or the ingenious cunning of the evil-doer?” asked the grey-faced rector quite calmly. “Have you never stopped to wonder at the marvellous subtlety of human wickedness?”

“Those men are veritable fiends,” I cried. “Yet why have I aroused their animosity? If you know so much concerning them, Mr. Shuttleworth, don’t you think that it is your duty to protect your fellow-creatures?—to make it your business to inform the police?” I added.

“Probably it is,” he said reflectively. “But there are times when even the performance of one’s duty may be injudicious.”

“Surely it is not injudicious to expose the methods of such blackguards!” I cried.

“Pardon me,” he said. “I am compelled to differ with that opinion. Were you in

possession of the same knowledge as myself, you too, would, I feel sure, deem it injudicious."

"But what is this secret knowledge?" I demanded. "I have narrowly escaped being foully done to death. I have been robbed, and I feel that it is but right that I should now know the truth."

"Not from me, Mr. Biddulph," he answered. "Have I not already told you the reason why no word of the actual facts may pass my lips?"

"I cannot see why you should persist in thus mystifying me as to the sinister motive of that pair of assassins. If they wished to rob me, they could have done so without seeking to take my life by those horrible means."

"What means did they employ?" he asked.

Briefly and vividly I explained their methods, as he sat silent, listening to me to the end. He evinced neither horror nor surprise. Perhaps he knew their mode of procedure only too well.

"I warned you," was all he vouchsafed. "Sylvia warned you also."

"It is over—of the past, Mr. Shuttleworth," I said, rising from my chair. "I feel confident that Sylvia, though she possessed knowledge of what was intended, had no hand whatever in it. Indeed, so confident am I of her loyalty to me, that to-day—yes, let me confess it to you—for I know you are my friend as well as hers, to-day, here—only an hour ago, I asked Sylvia to become my wife."

"Your wife!" he gasped, starting to his feet, his countenance pale and drawn.

"Yes, my wife."

"And what was her answer?" he asked dryly, in a changed tone.

"She has consented."

"Mr. Biddulph," he said very gravely, looking straight into my face, "this must never be! Have I not already told you the ghastly truth?—that there is a secret—an unmentionable secret——"

"A secret concerning her!" I cried. "What is it? Come, Mr. Shuttleworth, you shall tell me, I demand to know!"

"I can only repeat that between you and Sylvia Pennington there still lies the

open gulf—and that gulf is, indeed, the grave. In your ignorance of the strange but actual facts you do not realize your own dread peril, or you would never ask her to become your wife. Abandon all thought of her, I beg of you," he urged earnestly. "Take this advice of mine, for one day you will assuredly thank me for my counsel."

"I love her with all the strength of my being, and for me that is sufficient," I declared.

"Ah!" he cried in despair as he paced the room. "To think of the irony of it all! That you should actually woo her—of all women!" Then, halting before me, his eye grew suddenly aflame, he clenched his hands and cried: "But you shall not! Understand me, you shall hate her; you shall curse her very name. You shall never love her—never—I, Edmund Shuttleworth, forbid it! It must not be!"

At that instant the *frou-frou* of a woman's skirts fell upon my ears, and, turning quickly, I saw Sylvia herself standing at the open French windows.

Entering unobserved she had heard those wild words of the rector's, and stood pale, breathless, rigid as a statue.

"There!" he cried, pointing at her with his thin, bony finger. "There she is! Ask her yourself, now—before me—the reason why she can never be your wife—the reason that her love is forbidden! If she really loves you, as she pretends, she will tell you the truth with her own lips!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FORBIDDEN LOVE

I stood before Shuttleworth angry and defiant.

I had crossed to Sylvia and had taken her soft hand.

“I really cannot see, sir, by what right you interfere between us!” I cried, looking at him narrowly. “You forbid! What do I care—why, pray, should you forbid my actions?”

“I forbid,” repeated the thin-faced clergyman, “because I have a right—a right which one day will be made quite plain to you.”

“Ah! Mr. Shuttleworth,” gasped Sylvia, now pale as death, “what are you saying?”

“The truth, my child. You know too well that, for you, love and marriage are forbidden,” he exclaimed, looking at her meaningly.

She sighed, and her tiny hand trembled within my grasp. Her mouth trembled, and I saw that tears were welling in her eyes.

“Ah! yes,” she cried hoarsely a moment later. “I know, alas! that I am not like other women. About me there have been forged bonds of steel—bonds which I can never break.”

“Only by one means,” interrupted Shuttleworth, terribly calm and composed.

“No, no!” she protested quickly, covering her face with her hands as though in shame. “Not that—never that! Do not let us speak of it!”

“Then you have no right to accept this man’s love,” he said reproachfully, “no right to allow him to approach nearer the brink of the grave than he has done. You know full well that, for him, your love must prove fatal!”

She hung her head as though not daring to look again into my eyes. The strange clergyman’s stern rebuke had utterly confused and confounded her. Yet I knew she loved me dearly. That sweet, intense love-look of hers an hour ago could

never be feigned. It spoke far more truly than mere words.

Perhaps she was annoyed that I had told Shuttleworth the truth. Yes, I had acted very foolishly. My tongue had loosened involuntarily. My wild joy had led me into an injudicious confession—one that I had never dreamed would be fraught with sorrow.

“Mr. Shuttleworth,” I said at last, “please do not distress yourself on my account. I love Sylvia, and she has promised to be mine. If disaster occurs, then I am fully prepared to meet it. You seem in close touch with this remarkable association of thieves and assassins, or you would hardly be so readily aware of their evil intentions.”

“Ah!” he responded, with a slight sigh, “you are only speaking in ignorance. If you were aware of the true facts, you would, on the contrary, thank me for revealing the peril in which love for this young lady will assuredly place you.”

“But have I not already told you that I am fearless? I am prepared to meet this mysterious peril, whatever it is, for her sake!” I protested.

A curious, cynical smile overspread his grey, ascetic face.

“You speak without knowledge, my dear sir,” he remarked. “Could I but reveal the truth, you would quickly withdraw that assertion. You would, indeed, flee from this girl as you would from the plague!”

“Well,” I said, “your words are at least very remarkable, sir. One would really imagine Miss Pennington to be a hell-fiend—from your denunciation.”

“You mistake me. I make no denunciation. On the other hand, I am trying to impress upon you the utter futility of your love.”

“Why should you do that? What is your motive?” I asked quickly, trying to discern what could be at the back of this man’s mind. How strange it was! Hitherto I had rather liked the tall, quiet, kind-mannered country rector. Yet he had suddenly set himself out in open antagonism to my plans—to my love!

“My motive,” he declared, “is to protect the best interests of you both. I have no ends to serve, save those of humanity, Mr. Biddulph.”

“You urged Miss Pennington to make confession to me. You implied that her avowal of affection was false,” I said, with quick indignation.

“I asked her to confess—to tell you the truth, because I am unable so to do,” was his slow reply. “Ah! Mr. Biddulph,” he sighed, “if only the real facts could be exposed to you—if only you could be told the ghastly, naked truth.”

“Why do you say all this, Mr. Shuttleworth?” protested Sylvia in a low, pained voice. “Why should Mr. Biddulph be mystified further? If you are determined that I should sacrifice myself—well, I am ready. You have been my friend—yet now you seem to have suddenly turned against me, and treat me as an enemy.”

“Only as far as this unfortunate affair is concerned, my child,” he said. “Remember my position—recall all the past, and put to yourself the question whether I have not a perfect right to forbid you to sacrifice the life of a good, honest man like the one before you,” he said, his clerical drawl becoming more accentuated as he spoke.

“Rubbish, my dear sir,” I laughed derisively. “Put aside all this cant and hypocrisy. It ill becomes you. Speak out, like a man of the world that you are. What specific charge do you bring against this lady? Come, tell me.”

“None,” he replied. “Evil is done through her—not by her.”

And she stood silent, unable to protest.

“But can’t you be more explicit?” I cried, my anger rising. “If you make charges, I demand that you shall substantiate them. Recollect all that I have at stake in this matter.”

“I know—your life,” he responded. “Well, I have already told you what to expect.”

“Sylvia,” I said, turning to the pale girl standing trembling at my side, “will you not speak? Will you not tell me what all this means? By what right does this man speak thus? Has he any right?”

She was silent for a few moments. Then slowly she nodded her head in an affirmative.

“What right has he to forbid our affection?” I demanded. “I love you, and I tell you that no man shall come between us!”

“He alone has a right, Owen,” she said, addressing me for the first time by my Christian name.

“What right?”

But she would not answer. She merely stood with head downcast, and said—

“Ask him.”

This I did, but the thin-faced man refused to reply. All he would say was—

“I have forbidden this fatal folly, Mr. Biddulph. Please do not let us discuss it further.”

I confess I was both angry and bewildered. The mystery was hourly increasing. Sylvia had admitted that Shuttleworth had a right to interfere. Yet I could not discern by what right a mere friend could forbid a girl to entertain affection. I felt that the ever-increasing problem was even stranger and more remarkable than I had anticipated, and that when I fathomed it, it would be found to be utterly astounding!

Sylvia was unwavering in her attachment to myself. Her antagonism towards Shuttleworth’s pronouncement was keen and bitter, yet, with her woman’s superior judgment, she affected carelessness.

“You asked this lady to confess,” I said, addressing him. “Confess what?”

“The truth.”

Then I turned to my well-beloved and asked—

“What is the truth? Do you love me?”

“Yes, Owen, I do,” was her frank and fervent response.

“I did not mean that,” said Shuttleworth hastily. “I meant the truth concerning yourself.”

“Mr. Biddulph knows what I am.”

“But he does not know who you are.”

“Then you may tell him,” was her hoarse reply. “Tell him!” she cried wildly. “Tear from me all that I hold sacred—all that I hold most dear—dash me back into degradation and despair—if you will! I am in your hands.”

“Sylvia!” he said reproachfully. “I am your friend—and your father’s friend. I

am not your enemy. I regret if you have ever thought I have lifted a finger against you."

"Are you not standing as a barrier between myself and Mr. Biddulph?" she protested, her eyes flashing.

"Because I see that only misfortune—ah! death—can arise. You know full well the promise I have made. You know, too, what has been told me in confidence, because—because my profession happens to be what it is—a humble servant of God."

"Yes," she faltered, "I know—I know! Forgive me if I have spoken harshly, Mr. Shuttleworth. I know you are my friend—and you are Owen's. Only—only it seems very hard that you should thus put this ban upon us—you, who preach the gospel of truth and love."

Shuttleworth drew a deep breath. His thin lips were pursed; his grey eyebrows contracted slightly, and I saw in his countenance a distinctly pained expression.

"I have spoken with all good intention, Sylvia," he said. "Your love for Mr. Biddulph must only bring evil upon both of you. Surely you realize that?"

"Sylvia has already realized it," I declared. "But we have resolved to risk it."

"The risk is, alas! too great," he declared. "Already you are a marked man. Your only chance of escape is to take Sylvia's advice and to go into hiding. Go away—into the country—and live in some quiet, remote village under another name. It is your best mode of evading disaster. To remain and become the lover of Sylvia Pennington is, I tell you, the height of folly—it is suicide!"

"Let it be so," I responded in quiet defiance. "I will never forsake the woman I love. Frankly, I suspect a hidden motive in this suggestion of yours; therefore I refuse to accept it."

"Not to save your own life?"

"Not even to save my life. This is surely my own affair."

"And hers."

"I shall protect Sylvia, never fear. I am not afraid. Let our enemies betray their presence by sign or word, and I will set myself out to combat them. They have already those crimes in Bayswater to account for. And they will take a good deal

of explaining away."

"Then you really intend to reveal the secret of that house in Porchester Terrace?" he asked, not without some apprehension.

"My enemies, you say, intend to plot and encompass my death. Good! Then I shall take my own means of vindication. Naturally I am a quiet, law-abiding man. But if any enemy rises against me without cause, then I strike out with a sledgehammer."

“You are hopeless,” he declared.

“I am, where my love is concerned,” I admitted. “Sylvia has promised to-day that she will become my wife. The future is surely our own affair, Mr. Shuttleworth—not yours!”

“And if her father forbids?” he asked quite quietly, his eyes fixed straight upon my well-beloved.

“Let me meet him face to face,” I said in defiance. “He will not interfere after I have spoken,” I added, with confidence. “I, perhaps, know more than you believe concerning him.”

Sylvia started, staring at me, her face blanched in an instant. The scene was tragic and painful.

“What do you know?” she asked breathlessly.

“Nothing, dearest, which will interfere with our love,” I reassured her. “Your father’s affairs are not yours, and for his doings you cannot be held responsible.”

She exchanged a quick glance with Shuttleworth, I noticed.

Then it seemed as though a great weight were lifted from her mind by my words, for, turning to me, she smiled sweetly, saying—

“Ah! how can I thank you sufficiently? I am helpless and defenceless. If I only dared, I could tell you a strange story—for surely mine is as strange as any ever printed in the pages of fiction. But Mr. Shuttleworth will not permit it.”

“You may speak—if you deem it wise,” exclaimed the rector in a strangely altered voice. He seemed much annoyed at my open defiance. “Mr. Biddulph may as well, perhaps, know the truth at first as at last.”

“The truth!” I echoed. “Yes, tell me the truth,” I begged her.

“No,” she cried wildly, again covering her fair face with her hands. “No—forgive me. I can’t—*I can’t!*”

“No,” remarked Shuttleworth in a strange, hard, reproachful tone, and with a cruel, cynical smile upon his lips. “You cannot—for it is too hideous—too disgraceful—too utterly scandalous! It is for that reason I forbid you to love!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE MAN IN GOLD PINCE-NEZ

For a whole month our engagement was kept a profound secret.

Only Shuttleworth and his wife knew. The first-named had been compelled to bow to the inevitable, and for him, it must be said that he behaved splendidly. Sylvia remained his guest, and on several days each week I travelled down from Waterloo to Andover and spent the warm summer hours with her, wandering in the woods, or lounging upon the pretty lawn of the old rectory.

The rector had ceased to utter warnings, yet sometimes I noticed a strange, apprehensive look upon his grave countenance. Elsie Durnford still remained there, and she and Sylvia were close friends.

Through those four happy weeks I had tried to get into communication with Mr. Pennington. I telegraphed to an address in Scotland which Sylvia had given me, but received no reply. I then telegraphed to the Caledonian Hotel in Edinburgh, and then learned, with considerable surprise, that nobody named Pennington was, or had been, staying there.

I told Sylvia this. But she merely remarked—

“Father is so erratic in his movements that he probably never went to Edinburgh, after all. I have not heard from him now for a full week.”

I somehow felt, why, I cannot well explain, that she was rather disinclined to allow me to communicate with Pennington. Did she fear that he might forbid our marriage?

Without seeing him or obtaining his consent, I confess I did not feel absolute security. The mystery surrounding her was such a curious and complicated one that the deeper I probed into it, the more complex did it appear.

Some few days later, in reply to my question, she said that she had heard from her father, who was at the Midland Grand Hotel in Manchester. He would not, however, be in London for two or three weeks, as he was about to leave in two days’ time, by way of Hook of Holland, for Berlin, where he had business.

Therefore, early the following morning, I took train to Manchester, and made inquiry at the big hotel.

“We have no gentleman of that name here, sir,” replied the smart reception clerk, referring to his list. “He hasn’t arrived yet, I expect. A lady was asking for a Mr. Pennington yesterday—a French lady.”

“You don’t know the name, then?”

He replied in the negative.

“No doubt he is expected, if the lady called to see him?”

“No doubt, sir. Perhaps he’ll be here to-day.”

And with that, I was compelled to turn disappointed away. I wandered into the restaurant, and there ate my lunch alone. The place was crowded, as it always is, mostly by people interested in cotton and its products, for it is, perhaps, one of the most cosmopolitan hotels in the whole kingdom. Sick of the chatter and clatter of the place, I paid my bill and passed out into the big smoking-lounge to take my coffee and liqueur and idle over the newspaper.

I was not quite certain whether to remain there the night and watch for Pennington’s arrival, or to return to London. As a matter of fact, so certain had I been of finding him that I had not brought a suit-case.

I suppose I had been in the lounge half-an-hour or so, when I looked up, and then, to my surprise, saw Pennington, smartly dressed, and looking very spruce for his years, crossing from the bureau with a number of letters in his hand. It was apparent that he had just received them from the mail-clerk.

And yet I had been told that he was not staying there!

I held my paper in such position as to conceal my face while I watched his movements.

He halted, opened a telegram, and read it eagerly. Then, crushing it in his hand with a gesture of annoyance, he thrust it into his jacket pocket.

He was dressed in a smart dark grey suit, which fitted him perfectly, a grey soft felt hat, while his easy manner and bearing were those of a gentleman of wealth and leisure. He held a cigar between his fingers, and, walking slowly as he opened one of the letters, he presently threw himself into one of the big arm-

chairs near me, and became absorbed in his correspondence.

There was a waste-paper basket near, and into this he tossed something as valueless. One of the letters evidently caused him considerable annoyance, for, removing his hat, he passed his hand slowly over his bald head as he sat staring at it in mystification. Then he rang the bell, and ordered something from a waiter. A liqueur of brandy was brought, and, tossing it off at a gulp, he rose, wrote a telegram at the table near him, and went quickly out.

After he had gone I also rose, and, without attracting attention, crossed, took up another paper, and then seated myself in the chair he had vacated.

My eye was upon the waste-paper basket, and when no one was looking I reached out and took therefrom a crumpled blue envelope—the paper he had flung away.

Smoothing it out, I found that it was not addressed to him, but to "Arnold Du Cane, Esq., Travellers' Club, Paris," and had been re-directed to this hotel.

This surprised me.

I rose, and, crossing to the mail-clerk, asked—

"You gave some letters and a telegram to a rather short gentleman in grey a few minutes ago. Was that Mr. Du Cane?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "He went across yonder into the lounge."

"You know him—eh?"

"Oh yes, sir. He's often been here. Not lately. At one time, however, he was a frequent visitor."

And so Sylvia's father was living there under the assumed name of Arnold Du Cane!

For business purposes names are often assumed, of course. But Pennington's business was such a mysterious one that, even against my will, I became filled with suspicion.

I resolved to wait and catch him on his return. He had probably only gone to the telegraph office. Had Sylvia wilfully concealed the fact that her father travelled under the name of Du Cane, in order that I should not meet him? Surely there

could be no reason why she should have done so.

Therefore I returned to a chair near the entrance to the smoking-lounge, and waited in patience.

My vigil was not a long one, for after ten minutes or so he re-entered, spruce and gay, and cast a quick glance around, as though in search of somebody.

I rose from my chair, and as I did so saw that he regarded me strangely, as though half conscious of having met me somewhere before.

Walking straight up to him, I said—

“I believe, sir, that you are Mr. Pennington?”

He looked at me strangely, and I fancied that he started at mention of the name.

“Well, sir,” was his calm reply, “I have not the pleasure of knowing you.” I noted that he neither admitted that he was Pennington, nor did he deny it.

“We met some little time ago on the Lake of Garda,” I said. “I, unfortunately, did not get the chance of a chat with you then. You left suddenly. Don’t you recollect that I sat alone opposite you in the restaurant of the Grand at Gardone?”

“Oh yes!” he laughed. “How very foolish of me! Forgive me. I thought I recognized you, and yet couldn’t, for the life of me, recall where we had met. How are you?” and he put out his hand and shook mine warmly. “Let’s sit down. Have a drink, Mr.—er. I haven’t the pleasure of your name.”

“Biddulph,” I said. “Owen Biddulph.”

“Well, Mr. Biddulph,” he said in a cheery way, “I’m very glad you recognized me. I’m a very bad hand at recollecting people, I fear. Perhaps I meet so many.” And then he gave the waiter an order for some refreshment. “Since I was at Gardone I’ve been about a great deal—to Cairo, Bucharest, Odessa, and other places. I’m always travelling, you know.”

“And your daughter has remained at home—with Mr. Shuttleworth, near Andover,” I remarked.

He started perceptibly at my words.

“Ah! of course. The girl was with me at Gardone. You met her there, perhaps—eh?”

I replied in the affirmative. It, however, struck me as strange that he should refer to her as “the girl.” Surely that was the term used by one of his strange motoring friends when he kept that midnight appointment on the Brescia road.

“I had the pleasure of meeting Miss Sylvia,” I went on. “And more, we have become very firm friends.”

“Oh!” he exclaimed, opening his eyes widely. “I’m delighted to hear it.”

Though his manner was so open and breezy, I yet somehow detected a curious sinister expression in his glance. He did not seem exactly at his ease in my presence.

“The fact is, Mr. Pennington,” I said, after we had been chatting for some time, “I have been wanting to meet you for some weeks past. I have something to say to you.”

“Oh! What’s that?” he asked, regarding me with some surprise. “I suppose Sylvia told you that I was in Manchester, and you came here to see me—eh? This was not a chance meeting—was it?”

“Not exactly,” I admitted. “I came here from London expressly to have a chat with you—a confidential chat.”

His expression altered slightly, I thought.

“Well?” he asked, twisting his cigar thoughtfully in his fingers. “Speak; I’m listening.”

For a second I hesitated. Then, in a blundering way, blurted forth—

“The fact is, Mr. Pennington, I love Sylvia! She has promised to become my wife, and I am here to beg your consent.”

He half rose from his chair, staring at me in blank amazement.

“What?” he cried. “Sylvia loves you—a perfect stranger?”

“She does,” was my calm response. “And though I may be a stranger to you, Mr. Pennington, I hope it may not be for long. I am not without means, and I am in a position to maintain your daughter properly, as the wife of a country gentleman.”

He was silent for a few moments, his brows knit thoughtfully, his eyes upon the

fine ring upon his well-manicured hand.

“What is your income?” he asked quite bluntly, raising his keen eyes to mine.

I told him, giving him a few details concerning my parentage and my possessions.

“And what would you be prepared to settle on my daughter, providing I gave my consent? Have you thought of that matter?”

I confessed that I had not, but that I would be ready, if she so desired, to settle upon her twenty thousand pounds.

“And that wouldn’t cripple you—eh?”

“No, I’m pleased to say it would not. I have kept my inheritance practically intact,” I added.

“Well, I must first hear what Sylvia has to say,” he said; then he added airily, “I suppose you would make over the greater part of your estate to her, in case of your death? And there are life assurances, of course? One never knows what may happen, you know. Pardon me for speaking thus frankly. As a father, however, it is my duty to see that my daughter’s future is safeguarded.”

“I quite understand all that,” I replied, with a smile. “Of course, Sylvia would inherit all I could legally bequeath to her, and as for life assurances, I would insure myself for what sum you suggest.”

“You are young,” he said. “Insure for ten thousand. The premiums would be not so very heavy.”

“As you wish,” I replied. “If I carry out your desires, I understand that I have your consent to pay my attentions to Sylvia?”

“If what you tell me proves, on inquiry, to be the truth, Mr. Biddulph, I shall have the greatest pleasure in welcoming you as my son-in-law. I can’t say more,” he replied. “Here’s my hand,” and as I took his, he gripped me heartily. “I confess I like you now,” he added, “and I feel sure I shall like you more when I know more concerning you.”

Then he added, with a laugh—

“Oh, by the way, I’m not known here as Pennington, but as Du Cane. The fact is,

I had some unfortunate litigation some time ago, which led to bankruptcy, and so, for business reasons, I'm Arnold Du Cane. You'll understand, won't you?" he laughed.

"Entirely," I replied, overjoyed at receiving Pennington's consent. "When shall we meet in London?"

"I'll be back on the 10th—that's sixteen days from now," he replied. "I have to go to Brussels, and on to Riga. Tell Sylvia and dear old Shuttleworth you've seen me. Give them both my love. We shall meet down at Middleton, most certainly."

And so for a long time we chatted on, finishing our cigars, I replying to many questions he put to me relative to my financial and social position—questions which were most natural in the circumstances of our proposed relationship.

But while we were talking a rather curious incident arrested my attention. Pennington was sitting with his back to the door of the lounge, when, among those who came and went, was a rather stout foreigner of middle age, dressed quietly in black, wearing a gold pince-nez, and having the appearance of a French business man.

He had entered the lounge leisurely, when, suddenly catching sight of Sylvia's father, he drew back and made a hurried exit, apparently anxious to escape the observation of us both.

So occupied was my mind with my own affairs that the occurrence completely passed from me until that same night, when, at ten o'clock, on descending the steps of White's and proceeding to walk down St. James's Street in the direction of home, I suddenly heard footsteps behind me, and, turning, found, to my dismay, the Frenchman from Manchester quietly walking in the same direction.

This greatly mystified me. The broad-faced foreigner in gold pince-nez, evidently in ignorance that I had seen him in Manchester, must have travelled up to London by the same train as myself, and must have remained watching outside White's for an hour or more!

Why had the stranger so suddenly become interested in me?

Was yet another attempt to be made upon me, as Shuttleworth had so mysteriously predicted?

I was determined to show a bold front and defy my enemies; therefore, when I had crossed Pall Mall against St. James's Palace, I suddenly faced about, and, meeting the stranger full tilt, addressed him before he could escape.

Next moment, alas! I knew that I had acted injudiciously.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE MAN IN THE STREET

I had asked the Frenchman, rather angrily I fear, why he was following me, whereat he merely bowed with the exquisite politeness of his race, and replied in good English—

“I was not aware of following m’sieur. I regret extremely if I have caused annoyance. I ask a thousand pardons.”

“Well, your surveillance upon me annoys me,” I declared abruptly. “I saw you spying upon me in Manchester this afternoon, and you have followed me to London!”

“Ah, yes,” he replied, with a slight gesticulation; “it is true that I was in Manchester. But our meeting here must be by mere chance. I was unaware that monsieur was in Manchester,” he assured me in a suave manner.

“Well,” I said in French, “yours is a very lame story, monsieur. I saw you, and you also saw me talking to Mr. Pennington in the Midland Hotel. Perhaps you’ll deny that you know Mr. Pennington—eh?”

“I certainly do not deny that,” he said, with a smile. “I have known Monsieur Penning-ton for some years. It is true that I saw him at the Midland.”

“And you withdrew in order to escape his observation—eh?”

“Monsieur has quick eyes,” he said. “Yes, that is quite true.”

“Why?”

“For reasons of my own.”

“And you deny having followed me here?”

He hesitated for a second, looking straight into my face in the darkness.

“Come,” I said, “you may as well admit that you followed me from Manchester.”

“Why should I admit what is not the truth?” he asked. “What motive could I have to follow you—a perfect stranger?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I’m a bit suspicious,” I declared, still speaking in French. “Of late there was a desperate attempt upon my life.”

“By whom?” he inquired quickly. “Please tell me, Monsieur Biddulph; I am greatly interested in this.”

“Then you know my name?” I exclaimed, surprised.

“Certainly.”

“Why are you interested in me?”

“I may now have a motive,” was his calm yet mysterious reply. “Tell me in what manner an attempt has been made upon you?”

At first I hesitated, then, after a second’s reflection, I explained the situation in a few words.

“Ah! Of course, I quite see that monsieur’s mind must be filled by suspicion,” he responded; “yet I regret if I have been the cause of any annoyance. By the way, how long have you known Monsieur Penning-ton?”

“Oh, some months,” I replied. “The fact is, I’m engaged to his daughter.”

“His daughter!” echoed the Frenchman, looking at me quickly with a searching glance. Then he gave vent to a low grunt, and stroked his grey pointed beard.

“And it was after this engagement that the attempt was made upon you—eh?” he inquired.

“No, before.”

The foreigner remained silent for a few moments. He seemed considerably puzzled. I could not make him out. The fact that he was acquainted with my name showed that he was unduly interested in me, even though he had partially denied it.

“Why do you ask this?” I demanded, as we still stood together at the bottom of St. James’s Street.

“Ah, nothing,” he laughed. “But—well, I really fear I’ve aroused your

suspicions unduly. Perhaps it is not so very extraordinary, after all, that in these days of rapid communication two men should catch sight of each other in a Manchester hotel, and, later on, meet in a street in London—eh?"

"I regard the coincidence as a strange one, monsieur," I replied stiffly, "if it is really an actual coincidence."

For aught I knew, the fellow might be a friend of Pennington, or an accomplice of those rascally assassins. Had I not been warned by Shuttleworth, and also by Sylvia herself, of another secret attempt upon my life?

I was wary now, and full of suspicion.

Instinctively I did not like this mysterious foreigner. The way in which he had first caught sight of my face as I descended the steps of White's, and how he had glided after me down St. James's Street, was not calculated to inspire confidence.

He asked permission to walk at my side along the Mall, which I rather reluctantly granted. It seemed that, now I had addressed him, I could not shake him off. Without doubt his intention was to watch, and see where I lived. Therefore, instead of going in the direction of Buckingham Palace, I turned back eastward towards the steps at the foot of the Duke of York's Column.

As we strolled in the darkness along the front of Carlton House Terrace he chatted affably with me, then said suddenly—

"Do you know, Monsieur Biddulph, we met once before—in rather strange circumstances. You did not, however, see me. It was in Paris, some little time ago. You were staying at the Grand Hotel, and became acquainted with a certain American named Harriman."

"Harriman!" I echoed, with a start, for that man's name brought back to me an episode I would fain forget. The fact is, I had trusted him, and I had believed him to be an honest man engaged in big financial transactions, until I discovered the truth. My friendship with him cost me nearly one thousand eight hundred pounds.

"Harriman was very smart, was he not?" laughed my friend, with a touch of sarcasm.

Could it be, I wondered, that this Frenchman was a friend of the shrewd and

unscrupulous New Yorker?

“Yes,” I replied rather faintly.

“Sharp—until found out,” went on the stranger, speaking in French. “His real name is Bell, and he——”

“Yes, I know; he was arrested for fraud in my presence as he came down the staircase in the hotel,” I interrupted.

“He was arrested upon a much more serious charge,” exclaimed the stranger. “He was certainly wanted in Berlin and Hanover for frauds in connection with an invention, but the most serious charge against him was one of murder.”

“Murder!” I gasped. “I never knew that!”

“Yes—the murder of a young English statesman named Ronald Burke at a villa near Nice. Surely you read reports of the trial?”

I confessed that I had not done so.

“Well, it was proved conclusively that he was a member of a very dangerous gang of criminals who for several years had committed some of the most clever and audacious thefts. The organization consisted of over thirty men and women, of varying ages, all of them expert jewel thieves, safe-breakers, or card-sharpers. Twice each year this interesting company held meetings—at which every member was present—and at such meetings certain members were allotted certain districts, or certain profitable pieces of business. Thus, if half-a-dozen were to-day operating in London as thieves or receivers, they would change, and in a week would be operating in St. Petersburg, while those from Russia would be here. So cleverly was the band organized that it was practically impossible for the police to make arrests. It was a more widespread and wealthy criminal organization than has ever before been unearthed. But the arrest of your friend Harriman, alias Bell, on a charge of murder was the means of exposing the conspiracy, and the ultimate breaking up of the gang.”

“And what of Bell?”

“He narrowly escaped the guillotine, and is now imprisoned for life at Devil’s Island.”

“And you saw him with me at Paris?” I remarked, in wonder at this strange

revelation. “He certainly never struck me as an assassin. He was a shrewd man—a swindler, no doubt, but his humorous bearing and his good-nature were entirely opposed to the belief that his was a sinister nature.”

“Yet it was proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that he and another man killed and robbed a young Englishman named Burke,” responded the Frenchman. “Perhaps you, yourself, had a narrow escape. Who knows? It was no doubt lucky for you that he was arrested.”

“But I understood that the charge was one of fraud,” I said. “I intended to go to the trial, but I was called to Italy.”

“The charge of fraud was made in order not to alarm his accomplice,” replied the stranger.

“How do you know that?” I inquired.

“Well”—he hesitated—“that came out at the trial. There were full accounts of it in the Paris *Matin*.”

“I don’t care for reading Assize Court horrors,” I replied, still puzzled regarding my strange companion’s intimate knowledge concerning the man whose dramatic and sudden arrest had, on that memorable afternoon, so startled me.

“When I saw your face just now,” he said, “I recognized you as being at the Grand Hotel with Bell. Do you know,” he laughed, “you were such a close friend of the accused that you were suspected of being a member of the dangerous association! Indeed, you very narrowly escaped arrest on suspicion. It was only because the reception clerk in the hotel knew you well, and vouched for your respectability and that Biddulph was your real name. Yet, for a full week, you were watched closely by the *sûreté*.”

“And I was all unconscious of it!” I cried, realizing how narrowly I had escaped a very unpleasant time. “How do you know all this?” I asked.

But the Frenchman with the gold glasses and the big amethyst ring upon his finger merely laughed, and refused to satisfy me.

From him, however, I learned that the depredations of the formidable gang had been unequalled in the annals of crime. Many of the greatest jewel robberies in the European capitals in recent years had, it was now proved, been effected by them, as well as the theft of the Marchioness of Mottisfont’s jewels at Victoria

Station, which were valued at eighteen thousand pounds, and were never recovered; the breaking open of the safe of Levi & Andrews, the well-known diamond-merchants of Hatton Garden, and the theft of a whole vanload of furs before a shop in New Bond Street, all of which are, no doubt, fresh within the memory of the reader of the daily newspapers.

Every single member of that remarkable association of thieves was an expert in his or her branch of dishonesty, while the common fund was a large one, hence members could disguise themselves as wealthy persons, if need be. One, when arrested, was found occupying a fine old castle in the Tyrol, he told me; another—an expert burglar—was a doctor in good practice at Hampstead; another kept a fine jeweller's shop in Marseilles, while another, a lady, lived in style in a great château near Nevers.

"And who exposed them?" I asked, much interested. "Somebody must have betrayed them."

"Somebody did betray them—by anonymous letters to the police—letters which were received at intervals at the Préfecture in Paris, and led to the arrest of one after another of the chief members of the gang. It seemed to have been done by some one irritated by Bell's arrest. But the identity of the informant has never been ascertained. He deemed it best to remain hidden—for obvious reasons," laughed my friend at my side.

"You seem to know a good many facts regarding the affair," I said. "Have you no idea of the identity of the mysterious informant?"

"Well"—he hesitated—"I have a suspicion that it was some person associated with them—some one who became conscience-stricken. Ah! M'sieur Biddulph, if you only knew the marvellous cunning of that invulnerable gang. Had it not been for that informant, they would still be operating—in open defiance of the police of Europe. Criminal methods, if expert, only fail for want of funds. Are not some of our wealthiest financiers mere criminals who, by dealing in thousands, as other men deal in francs, conceal their criminal methods? Half your successful financiers are merely successful adventurers. The *dossiers* of some of them, preserved in the police bureaux, would be astounding reading to those who admire them and proclaim them the successful men of to-day—kings of finance they call them!"

"You are certainly something of a philosopher," I laughed, compelled to admit the truth of his argument; "but tell me—how is it that you know so much

concerning George Harriman, alias Bell, and his antecedents?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PROOF POSITIVE

I was greatly interested, even though I was now filled with suspicion.

Somehow I had become impressed with the idea that the stranger might have been one of the daring and dangerous association, and that he had related that strange story for the purpose of misleading me.

But the stranger, who had, in the course of our conversation, told me that his name was Pierre Delanne, only said—

“You could have read it all in the *Matin*, my dear monsieur.”

His attitude was that of a man who knew more than he intended to reveal. Surely it was a curious circumstance, standing there in the night, listening to the dramatic truth concerning the big-faced American, Harriman, whom I had for so long regarded as an enigma.

“Tell me, Monsieur Delanne,” I said, “for what reason have you followed me to London?”

He laughed as he strode easily along at my side towards the Duke of York’s steps.

“Haven’t I already told you that I did not purposely follow you?” he exclaimed.

“Yes, but I don’t believe it,” was my very frank reply. He had certainly explained that, but his manner was not earnest. I could see that he was only trifling with me, trifling in an easy, good-natured way.

“*Bien!*” he said; “and if I followed you, Monsieur Biddulph, I assert that it is with no sinister intent.”

“How do I know that?” I queried. “You are a stranger.”

“I admit that. But you are not a stranger to me, my dear monsieur.”

“Well, let us come to the point,” I said. “What do you want with me?”

“Nothing,” he laughed. “Was it not you yourself who addressed me?”

“But you followed me!” I cried. “You can’t deny that.”

“Monsieur may hold of me whatever opinion he pleases,” was Delanne’s polite reply. “I repeat my regrets, and I ask pardon.”

He spoke English remarkably well. But I recollected that the international thief—the man who is a cosmopolitan, and who commits theft in one country to-night, and is across the frontier in the morning—is always a perfect linguist. Harriman was. Though American, with all his nasal intonation and quaint Americanisms, he spoke half-a-dozen Continental languages quite fluently.

My bitter experiences of the past caused considerable doubt to arise within me. I had had warnings that my mysterious enemies would attack me secretly, by some subtle means. Was this Frenchman one of them?

He saw that I treated him with some suspicion, but it evidently amused him. His face beamed with good-nature.

At the bottom of the broad flight of stairs which lead up to the United Service Club and Pall Mall, I halted.

“Now look here, Monsieur Delanne,” I said, much puzzled and mystified by the man’s manner and the curious story he had related, “I have neither desire nor inclination for your company further. You understand?”

“Ah, monsieur, a thousand pardons,” cried the man, raising his hat and bowing with the elegance of the true Parisian. “I have simply spoken the truth. Did you not put to me questions which I have answered? You have said you are engaged to the daughter of my friend Penning-ton. That has interested me.”

“Why?”

“Because the daughter of my friend Penning-ton always interests me,” was his curious reply.

“Is that an intended sarcasm?” I asked resentfully.

“Not in the least, m’sieur,” he said quickly. “I have every admiration for the young lady.”

“Then you know her—eh?”

“By repute.”

“Why?”

“Well, her father was connected with one of the strangest and most extraordinary incidents in my life,” he said. “Even to-day, the mystery of it all has not been cleared up. I have tried, times without number, to elucidate it, but have always failed.”

“What part did Sylvia play in the affair, may I ask?”

“Really,” he replied, “I scarcely know. It was so utterly extraordinary—beyond human credence.”

“Tell me—explain to me,” I said, instantly interested. What could this man know of my well-beloved?

He was silent for some minutes. We were still standing by the steps. Surely it was scarcely the place for an exchange of confidences.

“I fear that monsieur must really excuse me. The matter is purely a personal one—purely confidential, and concerns myself alone—just—just as your close acquaintanceship with Mademoiselle Sylvia concerns you.”

“It seems that it concerns other persons as well, if one may judge by what has recently occurred.”

“Ah! Then your enemies have arisen because of your engagement to the girl—eh?”

“The girl!” How strange! Pennington’s mysterious friends of the Brescia road had referred to her as “the girl.” So had those two assassins in Porchester Terrace! Was it a mere coincidence, or had he, too, betrayed a collusion with those mean blackguards who had put me to that horrible torture?

Had you met this strange man at night in St. James’s Park, would you have placed any faith in him? I think not. I maintain that I was perfectly justified in treating him as an enemy. He was rather too intimately acquainted with the doings of Harriman and his gang to suit my liking. Even as he stood there beneath the light of the street-lamp, I saw that his bright eyes twinkled behind those gold pince-nez, while the big old-fashioned amethyst he wore on his finger was a conspicuous object. He gave one the appearance of a prosperous merchant

or shopkeeper.

“What makes you suggest that the attempt was due to my affection for Sylvia?” I asked him.

“Well, it furnishes a motive, does it not?”

“No, it doesn’t. I have no enemies—as far as I am aware.”

“But there exists some person who is highly jealous of mademoiselle, and who is therefore working against you in secret.”

“Is that your opinion?”

“I regret to admit that it is. Indeed, Monsieur Biddulph, you have every need to exercise the greatest care. Otherwise misfortune will occur to you. Mark what I —a stranger—tell you.”

I started. Here again was a warning uttered! The situation was growing quite uncanny.

“What makes you expect this?”

“It is more than mere surmise,” he said slowly and in deep earnestness. “I happen to know.”

From that last sentence of his I jumped to the conclusion that he was, after all, one of the malefactors. He was warning me with the distinct object of putting me off my guard. His next move, no doubt, would be to try and pose as my friend and adviser! I laughed within myself, for I was too wary for him.

“Well,” I said, after a few moments’ silence, as together we ascended the broad flight of steps, with the high column looming in the darkness, “the fact is, I’ve become tired of all these warnings. Everybody I meet seems to predict disaster for me. Why, I can’t make out.”

“No one has revealed to you the reason—eh?” he asked in a low, meaning voice.

“No.”

“Ah! Then, of course, you cannot discern the peril. It is but natural that you should treat all well-meant advice lightly. Probably I should, *mon cher ami*, if I were in your place.”

“Well,” I exclaimed impatiently, halting again, “now, what is it that you really know? Don’t beat about the bush any longer. Tell me, frankly and openly.”

The man merely raised his shoulders significantly, but made no response. In the ray of light which fell upon him, his gold-rimmed spectacles glinted, while his shrewd dark eyes twinkled behind them, as though he delighted in mystifying me.

“Surely you can reply,” I cried in anger. “What is the reason of all this? What have I done?”

“Ah! it is what monsieur has not done.”

“Pray explain.”

“Pardon. I cannot explain. Why not ask mademoiselle? She knows everything.”

“Everything!” I echoed. “Then why does she not tell me?”

“She fears—most probably.”

Could it be that this strange foreigner was purposely misleading me? I gazed upon his stout, well-dressed figure, and the well-brushed silk hat which he wore with such jaunty air.

In Pall Mall a string of taxi-cabs was passing westward, conveying homeward-bound theatre folk, while across at the brightly-lit entrance of the Carlton, cabs and taxis were drawing up and depositing well-dressed people about to sup.

At the corner of the Athenæum Club we halted again, for I wanted to rid myself of him. I had acted foolishly in addressing him in the first instance. For aught I knew, he might be an accomplice of those absconding assassins of Porchester Terrace.

As we stood there, he had the audacity to produce his cigarette-case and offer me one. But I resentfully declined it.

“Ah!” he laughed, stroking his greyish beard again, “I fear, Monsieur Biddulph, that you are displeased with me. I have annoyed you by not satisfying your natural curiosity. But were I to do so, it would be against my own interests. Hence my silence. Am I not perfectly honest with you?”

That speech of his corroborated all my suspicions. His motive in following me,

whatever it could be, was a sinister one. He had admitted knowledge of Harriman, the man found guilty and sentenced for the murder of the young English member of Parliament, Ronald Burke. His intimate acquaintance with Harriman's past and with his undesirable friends showed that he must have been an associate of that daring and dangerous gang.

I was a diligent reader of the English papers, but had never seen any mention of the great association of expert criminals. His assertion that the Paris *Matin* had published all the details was, in all probability, untrue. I instinctively mistrusted him, because he had kept such a watchful eye upon me ever since I had sat with Sylvia's father in the lounge of that big hotel in Manchester.

"I don't think you are honest with me, Monsieur Delanne," I said stiffly. "Therefore I refuse to believe you further."

"As you wish," laughed my companion. "You will believe me, however, ere long —when you have proof. Depend upon it."

And he glanced at his watch, closing it quickly with a snap.

"You see——" he began, but as he uttered the words a taxi, coming from the direction of Charing Cross, suddenly pulled up at the kerb where we were standing—so suddenly that, for a moment, I did not notice that it had come to a standstill.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, when he saw the cab, "I quite forgot! I have an appointment. I will wish you *bon soir*, Monsieur Biddulph. We may meet again —perhaps." And he raised his hat in farewell.

As he turned towards the taxi to enter it, I realized that some one was inside—that the person in the cab had met the strange foreigner by appointment at that corner!

A man's face peered out for a second, and a voice exclaimed cheerily—

"Hulloa! Sorry I'm late, old chap!"

Then, next instant, on seeing me, the face was withdrawn into the shadow.

Delanne had entered quickly, and, slamming the door, told the man to drive with all speed to Paddington Station.

The taxi was well on its way down Pall Mall ere I could recover from my

surprise.

The face of the man in the cab was a countenance the remembrance of which will ever haunt me if I live to be a hundred years—the evil, pimply, dissipated face of Charles Reckitt!

My surmise had been correct, after all. Delanne was his friend!

Another conspiracy was afoot against me!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THROUGH THE MISTS

It was now the end of September.

All my fears had proved groundless, and I had, at last, learned to laugh at them. For me, a new vista of life had been opened out, for Sylvia had now been my wife for a whole week—seven long dreamy days of perfect love and bliss.

Scarce could we realize the truth that we were actually man and wife.

Pennington had, after all, proved quite kind and affable, his sole thought being of his daughter's future happiness. I had invited them both down to Carrington, and he had expressed delight at the provision I had made for Sylvia. Old Browning, in his brand-new suit, was at the head of a new staff of servants. There were new horses and carriages and a landaulette motor, while I had also done all I could to refurnish and renovate some of the rooms for Sylvia's use.

The old place had been very dark and dreary, but it now wore an air of brightness and freshness, thanks to the London upholsterers and decorators into whose hands I had given the work.

Pennington appeared highly pleased with all he saw, while Sylvia, her arms entwined about my neck, kissed me in silent thanks for my efforts on her behalf.

Then came the wedding—a very quiet one at St. Mary Abbot's, Kensington. Besides Jack Marlowe and a couple of other men who were intimate friends, not more than a dozen persons were present. Shuttleworth assisted the vicar, but Pennington was unfortunately ill in bed at the Hôtel Métropole, suffering from a bad cold. Still, we held the wedding luncheon at the Savoy, and afterwards went up to Scarborough, where we were now living in a pretty suite at the Grand Hotel overlooking the harbour, the blue bay, and the castle-crowned cliffs.

It was disappointing to Sylvia that her father had not been present at the wedding, but Elsie Durnford and her mother were there, as well as two or three other of her girl friends. The ceremony was very plain. At her own request, she had been married in her travelling-dress, while I, man-like, had secretly been

glad that there was no fuss.

Just a visit to the church, the brief ceremony, the signature in the register, and a four-line announcement in the *Times* and *Morning Post*, and Sylvia and I had become man and wife.

I had resolved, on the morning of my marriage, to put behind me all thought of the mysteries and gruesomeness of the past. Now that I was Sylvia's husband, I felt that she would have my protection, as well as that of her father. I had said nothing to her of her strange apprehensions, for we had mutually allowed them to drop.

We had come to Scarborough in preference to going abroad, for my well-beloved declared that she had had already too much of Continental life, and preferred a quiet time in England. So we had chosen the East Coast, and now each day we either drove out over the Yorkshire moors, or wandered by the rolling seas.

She was now my own—my very own! Ah! the sweet significance of those words when I uttered them and she clung to me, raising her full red lips to mine to kiss.

I loved her—aye, loved her with an all-consuming love. I told myself a thousand times that no man on earth had ever loved a woman more than I loved Sylvia. She was my idol, and more, we were wedded, firmly united to one another, insunderably joined with each other so that we two were one.

You satirists, cynics, misogamists and misogynists may sneer at love, and jeer at marriage. So melancholy is this our age that even by some women marriage seems to be doubted. Yet we may believe that there is not a woman in all Christendom who does not dote upon the name of "wife." It carries a spell which even the most rebellious suffragette must acknowledge. They may speak of the subjection, the trammel, the "slavery," and the inferiority to which marriage reduces them, but, after all, "wife" is a word against which they cannot harden their hearts.

Ah! how fervently we loved each other. As Sylvia and I wandered together by the sea on those calm September evenings, avoiding the holiday crowd, preferring the less-frequented walks to the fashionable promenades of the South Cliff or the Spa, we linked arm in arm, and I often, when not observed, kissed her upon the brow.

One evening, with the golden sunset in our faces, we were walking over the

cliffs to Cayton Bay, a favourite walk of ours, when we halted at a stile, and sat together upon it to rest.

The wide waters deep below, bathed in the green and gold of the sinking sun, were calm, almost unruffled, unusual indeed for the North Sea, while about us the birds were singing their evening song, and the cattle in the fields were lying down in peace. There was not a breath of wind. The calmness was the same as the perfect calmness of our own hearts.

“How still it is, Owen,” remarked my love, after sitting in silence for a few minutes. From where we sat we could see that it was high tide, and the waves were lazily lapping the base of the cliffs deep below. Now and then a gull would circle about us with its shrill, plaintive cry, while far on the distant horizon lay the trail of smoke from a passing steamer. “How delightful it is to be here—alone with you!”

My arm stole round her slim waist, and my lips met hers in a fond, passionate caress. She looked very dainty in a plain walking costume of cream serge, with a boa of ostrich feathers about her throat, and a large straw hat trimmed with autumn flowers. It was exceptionally warm for the time of year; yet at night, on the breezy East Coast, there is a cold nip in the air even in the height of summer.

That afternoon we had, by favour of its owner, Mr. George Beeforth, one of the pioneers of Scarborough, wandered through the beautiful private gardens of the Belvedere, which, with their rose-walks, lawns and plantations, stretched from the promenade down to the sea, and had spent some charming hours in what its genial owner called “the sun-trap.” In all the north of England there are surely no more beautiful gardens beside the sea than those, and happily their good-natured owner is never averse to granting a stranger permission to visit them.

As we now sat upon that stile our hearts were too full for words, devoted as we were to each other.

“Owen,” my wife exclaimed at last, her soft little hand upon my shoulder as she looked up into my face, “are you certain you will never regret marrying me?”

“Why, of course not, dearest,” I said quickly, looking into her great wide-open eyes.

“But—but, somehow——”

“Somehow, what?” I asked slowly.

“Well,” she sighed, gazing away towards the far-off horizon, her wonderful eyes bluer than the sea itself, “I have a strange, indescribable feeling of impending evil—a presage of disaster.”

“My darling,” I exclaimed, “why trouble yourself over what are merely melancholy fancies? We are happy in each other’s love; therefore why should we anticipate evil? If it comes, then we will unite to resist it.”

“Ah, yes, Owen,” she replied quickly, “but this strange feeling came over me yesterday when we were together at Whitby. I cannot describe it—only it is a weird, uncanny feeling, a fixed idea that something must happen to mar this perfect happiness of ours.”

“What can mar our happiness when we both trust each other—when we both love each other, and our two hearts beat as one?”

“Has not the French poet written a very serious truth in those lines: ‘*Plaisir d’amour ne dure qu’un moment; chagrin d’amour dure toute la vie*’?”

“Yes, but we shall experience no chagrin, sweetheart,” I assured her. “After another week here we will travel where you will. If you wish, we will go to Carrington. There we shall be perfectly happy together, away in beautiful Devonshire.”

“I know you want to go there for the shooting, Owen,” she said quietly, yet regarding me somewhat strangely, I thought. “You have asked Mr. Marlowe?”

“With your permission, dearest.”

But her face changed, and she sighed slightly.

In an instant I recollected the admission that they had either met before, or at least they knew something concerning each other.

“Perhaps you do not desire to entertain company yet?” I said quickly. “Very well; I’ll ask your father; he and I can have some sport together.”

“Owen,” she said at last, turning her fair face again to mine, “would you think it very, very strange of me, after all that you have done at beautiful old Carrington, if I told you that I—well, that I do not exactly like the place?”

This rather surprised me, for she had hitherto been full of admiration of the fine, well-preserved relic of the Elizabethan age.

“Dearest, if you do not care for Carrington we will not go there. We can either live at Wilton Street, or travel.”

“I’m tired of travelling, dear,” she declared. “Ah, so tired! So, if you are content, let us live in Wilton Street. Carrington is so huge. When we were there I always felt lost in those big old rooms and long, echoing corridors.”

“But your own rooms that I’ve had redecorated and furnished are smaller,” I said. “I admit that the old part of the house is very dark and weird—full of ghosts of other times. There are a dozen or more legends concerning it, as you know.”

“Yes, I read them in the guide-book to Devon. Some are distinctly quaint, are they not?”

“Some are tragic also—especially the story of little Lady Holbrook, who was so brutally killed by the Roundheads because she refused to reveal the whereabouts of her husband,” I said.

“Poor little lady!” sighed Sylvia. “But that is not mere legend: it is historical fact.”

“Well,” I said, “if you do not care for Carrington—if it is too dull for you—we’ll live in London. Personally, I, too, should soon grow tired of a country life; and yet how could I grow tired of life with you, my own darling, at my side?”

“And how could I either, Owen?” she asked, kissing me fondly. “With you, no place can ever be dull. It is not the dulness I dread, but other things.”

“What things?”

“Catastrophe—of what kind, I know not. But I have been seized with a kind of instinctive dread.”

For a few moments I was silent, my arm still about her neat waist. This sudden depression of hers was not reassuring.

“Try and rid yourself of the idea, dearest,” I urged presently. “You have nothing to fear. We may both have enemies, but they will not now dare to attack us. Remember, I am now your husband.”

“And I your wife, Owen,” she said, with a sweet love-look. Then, with a heavy sigh, she gazed thoughtfully away with her eyes fixed upon the darkening sea,

and added: “I only fear, dearest—for your sake.”

I was silent again.

“Sylvia,” I said slowly at last, “have you learnt anything—anything fresh which has awakened these strange apprehensions of yours?”

“No,” she faltered, “nothing exactly fresh. It is only a strange and unaccountable dread which has seized me—a dread of impending disaster.”

“Forget it,” I urged, endeavouring to laugh. “All your fears are now without foundation, dearest. Now we are wedded, we will fearlessly face the world together.”

“I have no fear when I am at your side, Owen,” she replied, looking at me pale and troubled. “But when we are parted I—I always fear. The day before yesterday I was full of apprehension all the time you had gone to York. I felt that something was to happen to you.”

“Really, dear,” I said, smiling, “you make me feel quite creepy. Don’t allow your mind to run on the subject. Try and think of something else.”

“But I can’t,” she declared. “That’s just it. I only wish I could rid myself of this horrible feeling of insecurity.”

“We are perfectly secure,” I assured her. “My enemies are now aware that I’m quite wide awake.” And in a few brief sentences I explained my curious meeting with the Frenchman Delanne.

The instant I described him—his stout body, his grey pointed beard, his gold pince-nez, his amethyst ring—she sat staring at me, white to the lips.

“Why,” she gasped, “I know! The description is exact. And—and you say he saw my father in Manchester! He actually rode away in the same cab as Reckitt! Impossible! You must have dreamt it all, Owen.”

“No, dearest,” I said quite calmly. “It all occurred just as I have repeated it to you.”

“And he really entered the taxi with Reckitt? He said, too, that he knew my father—eh?”

“He did.”

She held her breath. Her eyes were staring straight before her, her breath came and went quickly, and she gripped the wooden post to steady herself, for she swayed forward suddenly, and I stretched out my hand, fearing lest she should fall.

What I had told her seemed to stagger her. It revealed something of intense importance to her—something which, to me, remained hidden.

It was still a complete enigma.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE STRANGER IN THE RUE DE RIVOLI

From Scarborough we had gone up to the Highlands, spending a fortnight at Grantown, a week at Blair Atholl, returning south through Callander and the Trossachs—one of the most glorious autumns I had ever spent.

Ours was now a peaceful, uneventful life, careless of the morrow, and filled with perfect love and concord. I adored my young beautiful wife, and I envied no man.

I had crushed down all feelings of misgivings that had hitherto so often arisen within me, for I felt confident in Sylvia's affection. She lived only for me, possessing me body and soul.

Not a pair in the whole of England loved each other with a truer or more fervent passion. Our ideas were identical, and certainly I could not have chosen a wife more fitted for me—even though she rested beneath such a dark cloud of suspicion.

I suppose some who read this plain statement of fact will declare me to have been a fool. But to such I would reply that in your hearts the flame of real love has never yet burned. You may have experienced what you have fondly believed to have been love—a faint flame that has perhaps flickered for a time and, dying out, has long been forgotten. Only if you have really loved a woman—loved her with that all-consuming passion that arises within a man once in his whole lifetime when he meets his affinity, can you understand why I made Sylvia my wife.

I had the car brought up to meet us in Perth, and with it Sylvia and I had explored all the remotest beauties of the Highlands. We ran up as far north as Inverness, and around to Oban, delighting in all the beauties of the heather-clad hills, the wild moors, the autumn-tinted glades, and the broad unruffled lochs. Afterwards we went round the Trossachs and motored back to London through Carlisle, the Lakes, North Wales and the Valley of the Wye, the most charming of all motor-runs in England.

Afterwards, Sylvia wanted to do some shopping, and we went over to Paris for ten days. There, while at the Meurice, her father, who chanced to be passing through Paris on his way from Brussels to Lyons, came unexpectedly one evening and dined with us in our private salon.

Pennington was just as elegant and epicurean as ever. He delighted in the dinner set before him, the hotel, of course, being noted for its cooking.

That evening we were a merry trio. I had not seen my father-in-law since the morning of our marriage, when I had called, and found him confined to his bed. Therefore we had both a lot to relate to him regarding our travels.

“I, too, have been moving about incessantly,” he remarked, as he poised his wine-glass in his hand, regarding the colour of its contents. “I was in Petersburg three weeks ago. I’m interested in some telegraph construction works there. We’ve just secured a big Government contract to lay a new line across Siberia.”

“I’ve written to you half-a-dozen times,” remarked his daughter, “but you never replied.”

“I’ve never had your letters, child,” he said. “Where did you address them?”

“Two I sent to the Travellers’ Club, here. Another I sent to the Hôtel de France, in Petersburg.”

“Ah! I was at the Europe,” he laughed. “I find their cooking better. Their sterlet is even better than the Hermitage at Moscow. Jules, the chef, was at Cubat’s, in the Nevski, for years.”

Pennington always gauged a hotel by the excellence of its chef. He told us of tiny obscure places in Italy which he knew, where the rooms were carpetless and comfortless, but where the cooking could vie with the Savoy or Carlton in London. He mentioned the Giaponne in Leghorn, the Tazza d’Oro in Lucca, and the Vapore in Venice, of all three of which I had had experience, and I fully corroborated what he said. He was a man who ate his strawberries with a quarter of a liqueur-glass of maraschino thrown over them, and a slight addition of pepper, and he always mixed his salads himself.

“Perhaps you think me very whimsical,” he laughed across the table, “but really, good cooking makes so much difference to life.”

I told him that, as an Englishman, I preferred plainly-cooked food.

“Which is usually heavy and indigestible, I fear,” he declared. “What, now, could be more indigestible than our English roast beef and plum pudding—eh?”

My own thoughts were, however, running in an entirely different channel, and when presently Sylvia, who looked a delightful picture in ivory chiffon, and wearing the diamond necklet I had given her as one of her wedding presents, rose and left us to our cigars, I said suddenly—

“I say, Pennington, do you happen to know a stout, grey-bearded Frenchman who wears gold-rimmed glasses—a man named Pierre Delanne?”

“Delanne?” he repeated. “No, I don’t recollect the name.”

“I saw him in Manchester,” I exclaimed. “He was at the Midland, and said he knew you—and also Sylvia.”

“In Manchester! Was he at the Midland while I was there?”

“Yes. He was dressed in black, with a silk hat and wore on his finger a great amethyst ring—a rather vulgar-looking ornament.”

Pennington’s lips were instantly pressed together.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, almost with a start, “I think I know who you mean. His beard is pointed, and his eyes rather small and shining. He has the air of a bon-vivant, and speaks English extremely well. He wears the amethyst on the little finger of his left hand.”

“Exactly.”

“And, to you, he called himself Pierre Delanne, eh?”

“Yes. What is his real name, then?”

“Who knows? I’ve heard that he uses half-a-dozen different aliases,” replied my father-in-law.

“Then you know him?”

“Well—not very well,” was Pennington’s response in a rather strange voice, I thought. “Did he say anything regarding myself?”

“Only that he had seen you in Manchester.”

“When did you see him last?”

“Well,” I said, “as a matter of fact he met me in London the same night, and I fancy I have caught sight of him twice since. The first occasion was a fortnight ago in Princes Street, Edinburgh, when I saw him coming forth from the North British Hotel with another man, also a foreigner. They turned up Princes Street, and then descended the steps to the station before I could approach sufficiently close. I was walking with Sylvia, so could not well hasten after them. The second occasion was yesterday, when I believe I saw him in a taxi passing us as we drove out to tea at Armenonville.”

“Did he see you?” asked Pennington quickly.

“I think so. I fancy he recognized me.”

“Did Sylvia see him?” he asked almost breathlessly.

“No.”

“Ah!” and he seemed to breathe again more freely.

“Apparently he is not a very great friend of yours,” I ventured to remark.

“No—he isn’t; and if I were you, Biddulph, I would avoid him like the plague. He is not the kind of person desirable as a friend. You understand.”

“I gathered from his conversation that he was something of an adventurer,” I said.

“That’s just it. Myself, I always avoid him,” he replied. Then he turned the conversation into a different channel. He congratulated me upon our marriage and told me how Sylvia, when they had been alone together for a few moments before dinner, had declared herself supremely happy.

“I only hope that nothing may occur to mar your pleasant lives, my dear fellow,” he said, slowly knocking the ash from his cigar. “In the marriage state one never knows whether adversity or prosperity lies before one.”

“I hope I shall meet with no adversity,” I said.

“I hope not—for Sylvia’s sake,” he declared.

“What is for Sylvia’s sake?” asked a cheery voice, and, as we both looked up in surprise, we found that she had re-entered noiselessly, and was standing laughing

mischievously by the open door. “It is so dull being alone that I’ve ventured to come back. I don’t mind the smoke in the least.”

“Why, of course, darling!” I cried, jumping from my chair and pulling forward an arm-chair for her.

I saw that it was a bright night outside, and that the autos with their sparkling lights like shooting stars were passing and repassing with honking horns up and down the Rue de Rivoli. For a moment she stood at my side by the window, looking down into the broad thoroughfare below.

Then, a second later, she suddenly cried—

“Why, look, Owen! Do you see that man with the short dark overcoat standing under the lamp over there? I’ve seen him several times to-day. Do you know, he seems to be watching us!”

“Watching you!” cried her father, starting to his feet and joining us. The long wooden sun-shutters were closed, so, on opening the windows which led to the balcony we could see between the slats without being observed from outside.

I looked at the spot indicated by my wife, and then saw on the other side of the way a youngish-looking man idly smoking a cigarette and gazing in the direction of the Place de la Concorde, as though expecting some one.

I could not distinguish his features, yet I saw that he wore brown boots, and that the cut of his clothes and the shape of his hat were English.

“Where have you seen him before?” I asked of her.

“I first met him when I came out of Lentheric’s this morning. Then, again, when we lunched at the Volnay he was standing at the corner of the Rue de la Paix and the Rue Daunou. He followed us in the Rue Royale later on.”

“And now he seems to have mounted guard outside, eh?” I remarked, somewhat puzzled. “Why did you not tell me this before?”

“I did not wish to cause you any anxiety, Owen,” was her simple reply, while her father asked—

“Do you know the fellow? Ever seen him before, Sylvia?”

“Never in my life,” she declared. “It’s rather curious, isn’t it?”

“Very,” I said.

And as we all three watched we saw him move away a short distance and join a taller man who came from the direction he had been looking. For a few moments they conversed. Then the new-comer crossed the road towards us and was lost to sight.

In a few seconds a ragged old man, a cripple, approached the mysterious watcher with difficulty, and said something to him as he passed.

“That cripple is in the business!” cried Pennington, who had been narrowly watching. “He’s keeping observation, and has told him something. Some deep game is being played here, Biddulph.”

“I wonder why they are watching?” I asked, somewhat apprehensive of the coming evil that had been so long predicted.

Father and daughter exchanged curious glances. It seemed to me as though a startling truth had dawned upon them both. I stood by in silence.

“It is certainly distinctly unpleasant to be watched like this—providing, of course, that Sylvia has not made a mistake,” Pennington said.

“I have made no mistake,” she declared quickly. “I’ve been much worried about it all day, but did not like to arouse Owen’s suspicions;” and I saw by her face that she was in dead earnest.

At the same moment, however, a light tap was heard upon the door and a waiter opened it, bowing as he announced—

“Monsieur Pierre Delanne to see Monsieur Biddulph.”

“Great Heavens, Sylvia!” cried Pennington, standing pale-faced and open-mouthed. “It’s Guertin! He must not discover that I am in Paris!” Then, turning to me in fear, he implored: “Save me from this meeting, Biddulph! Save me—if you value your wife’s honour, I beg of you. I’ll explain all afterwards. *Only save me!*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DESCRIBES AN UNWELCOME VISIT

Pennington's sudden fear held me in blank surprise.

Ere I could reply to him he had slipped through the door which led into my bedroom, closing it after him, just as Delanne's stout figure and broad, good-humoured face appeared in the doorway.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "Meester Biddulph!" and he bowed politely over my hand.

Then, turning to Sylvia, who stood pale and rigid, he put forth his hand, and also bowed low over hers, saying in English: "My respects—and heartiest congratulations to madame."

His quick eyes wandered around the room, then he added—

"Meester Pennington is here; where is he? I am here to speak with him."

"Pennington was here," I replied, "but he has gone."

"Then he only went out this moment! I must see him. He is in the hotel!" my visitor exclaimed quickly.

"I suppose he is," I replied rather faintly; "we had better ask the waiter. He is not stopping here. He merely came to-night to dine with us."

"Of course," said Delanne. "He arrived by the 2.37 train from Bruxelles, went to the Hôtel Dominici, near the Place Vendôme, sent you a *petit-bleu*, and arrived here at 6.30. I am here because I wish to see him most particularly. I was in Orleans when the news of my friend's arrival in Paris was telephoned to me—I have only just arrived."

I opened the door leading to my bedroom, and called my father-in-law, but there was no response. In an instant Delanne dashed past me, and in a few seconds had searched the suite.

"Ah, of course!" he cried, noticing that the door of my wife's room led back to the main corridor; "my friend has avoided me. He has passed out by this way.

Still, he must be in the hotel."

He hurried back to the salon, and, opening the shutters, took off his hat.

Was it some signal to the watchers outside? Ere I could reach his side, however, he had replaced his hat, and was re-entering the room.

"Phew! this place is stifling hot, my dear friend," he said. "I wonder you do not have the windows open for a little!"

Sylvia had stood by in silence. I saw by her face that the Frenchman's sudden appearance had caused her the greatest alarm and dismay. If Delanne was her father's friend, why did the latter flee in such fear? Why had he implored me to save him? From what?

The Frenchman seemed highly disappointed, for finding the waiter in the corridor he asked him in French which way the Englishman had fled.

The waiter, however, declared that he had seen nobody in the corridor, a reply which sorely puzzled Delanne.

"Where is he?" he demanded of Sylvia.

"I have no idea," was her faltering reply. "He simply went into the next room a few moments ago."

"And slipped out in an endeavour to make his exit, eh?" asked the man, with a short, harsh laugh. "I quite expected as much. That is why I intended to have a straight business talk with him."

"He is in no mood to talk business just now," said my wife, and then—and only then—did I recollect that this man was the associate of the assassin Reckitt.

This fact alone aroused my antagonism towards him. Surely I was glad that Pennington had got away if, as it seemed, he did not wish to meet his unwelcome visitor.

"He *shall* talk business!" cried the Frenchman, "and very serious business!"

Then turning, he hurried along the corridor in the direction of the main staircase and disappeared.

"What does all this mean?" I asked Sylvia, who still stood there pale and panting.

“I—I don’t know, Owen,” she gasped. Then, rushing across to the window, she looked out.

“That man has gone!” she cried. “I—I knew he was watching, but had no idea of the reason.”

“He was evidently watching for your father,” I said.

“He was watching us—you and I—not him.”

We heard two men pass the door quickly. One of them exclaimed in French—

“See! The window at the end! It would be easy to get from there to the roof of the next house.”

“Yes!” cried his companion. “He has evidently gone that way. We must follow.”

“Hark!” I said. “Listen to what they are saying! Delanne is following your father!”

“He is his worst enemy,” she said simply. “Do you not remember that he was watching him in Manchester?”

The fact that he was an associate of Reckitt puzzled me. I felt highly resentful that the fellow should have thus intruded upon my privacy and broken up my very pleasant evening. He had intruded himself upon me once before, causing me both annoyance and chagrin. I looked forth into the corridor, and there saw the figures of two men in the act of getting through the window at the end, while a waiter and a *femme-de-chambre* stood looking on in surprise.

“Who is that man?” I asked of Sylvia, as I turned back into our salon.

“His real name is Guertin,” she replied.

“He told me that he knew you.”

“Perhaps,” she laughed, just a trifle uneasily, I thought. “I only know that he is my father’s enemy. He is evidently here to hunt him down, and to denounce him.”

“As what?”

But she only shrugged her shoulders. Next instant I saw that I had acted wrongly

in asking Sylvia to expose her own father, whatever his faults might have been.

Again somebody rushed past the door and then back again to the head of the staircase. The whole of the quiet aristocratic hotel seemed to have suddenly awakened from its lethargy. Indeed, a hue and cry seemed to have been started after the man who had until a few moments before been my guest.

What could this mean? Had it not been for the fact that Guertin—or Delanne, as he called himself—was a friend of the assassin Reckitt, I would have believed him to have been an agent of the *sûreté*.

We heard shouting outside the window at the end of the corridor. It seemed as though a fierce chase had begun after the fugitive Englishman, for yet another man, a thin, respectably-dressed mechanic, had run along and slipped out of the window with ease as though acquired by long practice.

I, too, ran to the window and looked out. But all I could see in the night was a bewildering waste of roofs and chimneys extending along the Rue de Rivoli towards the Louvre. I could only distinguish one of the pursuers outlined against the sky. Then I returned to where Sylvia was standing pale and breathless.

Her face was haggard and drawn, and I knew of the great tension her nerves must be undergoing. Her father was certainly no coward. Fearing that he could not escape by either the front or back door of the hotel his mind had been quickly made up, and he had made his exit by that window, taking his chance to hide and avoid detection on those many roofs in the vicinity.

The position was, to me, extremely puzzling. I could not well press Sylvia to tell me the truth concerning her father, for I had noticed that she always had shielded him, as was natural for a daughter, after all.

Was he an associate of Reckitt and Forbes, as I had once suspected? Yet if he were, why should Delanne be his enemy, for he certainly was Reckitt’s intimate friend.

Sylvia was filled with suppressed excitement. She also ran along the corridor and peered out of the window at the end. Then, apparently satisfied that her father had avoided meeting Delanne, she returned and stood again silent, her eyes staring straight before her as though dreading each second to hear shouts of triumph at the fugitive’s detection.

I saw the manager and remonstrated with him. I was angry that my privacy

should thus be disturbed by outsiders.

“Monsieur told the clerk that he was a friend,” he replied politely. “Therefore he gave permission for him to be shown upstairs. I had no idea of such a contretemps, or such a regrettable scene as this!”

I saw he was full of regret, for the whole hotel seemed startled, and guests were asking each other what had occurred to create all that hubbub.

For an hour we waited, but Delanne did not return. He and the others had gone away over the roofs, on what seemed to be an entirely fruitless errand.

“Were they the police?” I heard a lady ask anxiously of a waiter.

“No, madame, we think not. They are strangers—and entirely unknown.”

Sylvia also heard the man’s reply, and exclaimed—

“I hope my father has successfully escaped his enemies. It was, however, a very narrow shave. If they had seen him, they would have shot him dead, and afterwards declared it to have been an accident!”

“Surely not!” I cried. “That would have been murder.”

“Of course. But they are desperate, and they would have wriggled out of it somehow. That was why I feared for him. But, thank Heaven, he is evidently safe.”

And she turned from the window that looked forth into the Rue de Rivoli, and then made an excuse to go to her room.

I saw that she was greatly perturbed. Her heart beat quickly, and her face, once pale as death, was now flushed crimson.

“How your father got away so rapidly was simply marvellous!” I declared. “Why, scarcely ten seconds elapsed from the time he closed that door to Delanne’s appearance on the threshold.”

“Yes. But he instantly realized his peril, and did not hesitate.”

“I am sorry, dearest, that this exciting incident should have so upset our evening,” I said, kissing her upon the brow, for she now declared herself much fatigued. “When you have gone to your room, I shall go downstairs and learn what I can about the curious affair. Your father’s enemies evidently knew of his

arrival from Brussels, for Delanne admitted that word of it was telephoned to Orleans, and he came to Paris at once."

"Yes, he admitted that," she said hurriedly. "But do not let us speak of it. My father has got away in safety. For me that is all-sufficient. Good-night, Owen, dear." And she kissed me fondly.

"Good-night, darling," I said, returning her sweet caress; and then, when she had passed from the room, I seized my hat and descended the big flight of red-carpeted stairs, bent on obtaining some solution of the mystery of that most exciting and curious episode.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MORE MYSTERY

Nothing definite, however, could I gather from the hotel people.

They knew nothing, and seemed highly annoyed that such an incident should occur in their quiet and highly aristocratic house.

Next day Sylvia waited for news of her father, but none came.

Delanne called about eleven o'clock in the morning, and had a brief interview with her in private. What passed between them I know not, save that the man, whose real name was Guertin, met me rather coldly and afterwards bade me adieu.

I hated the fellow. He was always extremely polite, always just a little sarcastic, and yet, was he not the associate of the man Reckitt?

I wished to leave Paris and return to London, but Sylvia appeared a little anxious to remain. She seemed to expect some secret communication from her father.

"Thank Heaven!" she said, on the day following Delanne's call, "father has escaped them. That was surely a daring dash he made. He knew that they intended to kill him."

"But I don't understand," I said. "Do you mean they would kill him openly?"

"Of course. They have no fear. Their only fear is while he remains alive."

"But the law would punish them."

"No, it would not," she responded, shaking her head gravely. "They would contrive an 'accident.'"

"Well," I said, "he has evaded them, and we must be thankful for that. Do you expect to hear from him?"

"Yes," she replied, "I shall probably receive a message to-night. That is why I wish to remain, Owen. I wonder," she added rather hesitatingly, "I wonder

whether you would consider it very strange of me if I asked you to let me go out to-night at ten o'clock alone?"

"Well, I rather fear your going out alone and unprotected at that hour, darling," I responded.

"Ah! have no fear whatever for me. I shall be safe enough. They will not attempt anything just now. I am quite confident of that. I—I want to go forth alone, for an hour or so."

"Oh, well, if it is your distinct wish, how can I refuse, dear?"

"Ah!" she cried, putting her arm fondly about my neck, "I knew you would not refuse me. I shall go out just before ten, and I will be back long before midnight. You will excuse my absence, won't you?"

"Certainly," I said. And thus it was arranged.

Her request, I admit, puzzled me greatly, and also caused me considerable fear. My past experience had aroused within me a constant phantom of suspicion.

We lunched at the Ritz, and in the afternoon took a taxi into the Bois, where we spent an hour upon a seat in one of the by-paths of that beautiful wood of the Parisians. On our return to the hotel, Sylvia was all eagerness for a message, but there was none.

"Ah! he is discreet!" she exclaimed to me, when the *concierge* had given her a negative reply. "He fears to send me word openly."

At ten o'clock that night, however, she had exchanged her dinner gown for a dark stuff dress, and, with a small black hat, and a boa about her neck, she came to kiss me.

"I won't be very long, dearest," she said cheerily. "I'll get back the instant I can. Don't worry after me. I shall be perfectly safe, I assure you."

But recollections of Reckitt and his dastardly accomplice arose within me, and I hardly accepted her assurance, even though I made pretence of so doing.

For a few moments I held her in my arms tenderly, then releasing her, she bade me *au revoir* merrily, and we descended into the hall together.

A taxi was called, and I heard her direct the driver to go to the Boulevard

Pereire. Then, waving her hand from the cab window, she drove away.

Should I follow? To spy upon her would be a mean action. It would show a lack of confidence, and would certainly irritate and annoy her. Yet was she not in peril? Had she not long ago admitted herself to be in some grave and mysterious danger?

I had only a single moment in which to decide. Somehow I felt impelled to follow and watch that she came to no harm; yet, at the same time, I knew that it was not right. She was my wife, and I dearly loved her and trusted her. If discovered, my action would show her that I was suspicious.

Still I felt distinctly apprehensive, and it was that apprehension which caused me, a second later, to seize my hat, and, walking out of the hotel, hail a passing taxi, and drive quickly to the quiet, highly respectable boulevard to which she had directed her driver.

I suppose it was, perhaps, a quarter of an hour later when we turned into the thoroughfare down the centre of which runs the railway in a deep cutting. The houses were large ones, let out in fine flats, the residences mostly of the professional and wealthier tradesman classes.

We went along, until presently I caught sight of another taxi standing at the kerb. Therefore I dismissed mine, and, keeping well in the shadow, sauntered along the boulevard, now quiet and deserted.

With great precaution I approached the standing taxi on the opposite side of the way. There was nobody within. It was evidently awaiting some one, and as it was the only one in sight I concluded that it must be the same which Sylvia had taken from the hotel.

Some distance further on I walked, when, before me, I recognized her neat figure, and almost a moment afterwards saw her disappear into a large doorway which was in complete darkness—the doorway of what seemed to be an untenanted house.

I halted quickly and waited—yet almost ashamed of myself for spying thus.

A moment later I saw that, having believed herself unobserved, she struck a match, but for what reason did not seem apparent. She appeared to be examining the wall. She certainly was not endeavouring to open the door. From the distance, however, I was unable to distinguish very plainly.

The vesta burned out, and she threw it upon the ground. Then she hurriedly retraced her steps to where she had left her cab, and I was compelled to bolt into a doorway in order to evade her.

She passed quite close to me, and when she had driven away I emerged, and, walking to the doorway, also struck a light and examined the same stone wall. At first I could discover nothing, but after considerable searching my eyes at last detected a dark smudge, as though something had been obliterated.

It was a cryptic sign in lead pencil, and apparently she had drawn her hand over it to remove it, but had not been altogether successful. Examining it closely, I saw that the sign, as originally scrawled upon the smooth stone, was like two crescents placed back to back, while both above and below rough circles had been drawn.

The marks had evidently some prearranged meaning—one which she understood. It was a secret message from her father, without a doubt!

At risk of detection by some agent of police, I made a further close examination of the wall, and came upon two other signs which had also been hurriedly obliterated—one of three double triangles, and another of two oblongs and a circle placed in conjunction. But there was no writing; nothing, indeed, to convey any meaning to the uninitiated.

The wall of that dark entry, however, was no doubt the means of an exchange of secret messages between certain unknown persons.

The house was a large one, and had been let out in flats, as were its neighbours; but for some unaccountable reason—perhaps owing to a law dispute—it now remained closed.

I was puzzled as to which of the three half-obliterated signs Sylvia had sought. But I took notice of each, and then walked back in the direction whence I had come.

I returned at once to the hotel, but my wife had not yet come back. This surprised me. And I was still further surprised when she did not arrive until nearly one o’clock in the morning. Yet she seemed very happy—unusually so.

Where had she been after receiving that secret message, I wondered? Yet I could not question her, lest I should betray my watchfulness.

“I’m so sorry to have left you alone all this long time, Owen,” she said, as she entered the room and came across to kiss me. “But it was quite unavoidable.”

“Is all well?” I inquired.

“Quite,” was her reply. “My father is already out of France.”

That was all she would vouchsafe to me. Still I saw that she was greatly gratified at the knowledge of his escape from his mysterious enemies.

The whole situation was extraordinary. Why should this man Delanne, the friend of Reckitt and no doubt a member of a gang of blackmailers and assassins, openly pursue him to the death? It was an entire enigma. I could discern no light through the veil of mystery which had, all along, so completely enshrouded Pennington and his daughter.

Still I resolved to put aside all apprehensions. Why should I trouble?

I loved Sylvia with all my heart, and with all my soul. She was mine! What more could I desire?

Next evening we returned to Wilton Street. She had suddenly expressed a desire to leave Paris, perhaps because she did not wish to again meet her father’s enemy, that fat Frenchman Guertin.

For nearly a month we lived in perfect happiness, frequently visiting the Shuttleworths for the day, and going about a good deal in town. She urged me to go to Carrington to shoot, but, knowing that she did not like the old place, I made excuses and remained in London.

“Father is in Roumania,” she remarked to me one morning when she had been reading her letters at the breakfast-table. “He sends his remembrances to you from Bucharest. You have never been there, I suppose? I’m extremely fond of the place. There is lots of life, and the Roumanians are always so very hospitable.”

“No,” I said, “I’ve never been to Bucharest, unfortunately, though I’ve been in Constanza, which is also in Roumania. Remember me to your father when you write, won’t you?”

“Certainly. He wonders whether you and I would care to go out there for a month or two?”

“In winter?”

“Winter is the most pleasant time. It is the season in Bucharest.”

“As you please, dearest,” I replied. “I am entirely in your hands, as you know,” I laughed.

“That’s awfully sweet of you, Owen,” she declared. “You are always indulging me—just like the spoilt child I am.”

“Because I love you,” I replied softly, placing my hand upon hers and looking into her wonderful eyes.

She smiled contentedly, and I saw in those eyes the genuine love-look: the expression which a woman can never feign.

Thus the autumn days went past, happy days of peace and joy.

Sylvia delighted in the theatre, and we went very often, while on days when it was dry and the sun shone, I took her motoring to Brighton, to Guildford, to Tunbridge Wells, or other places on the well-known roads out of London.

The clouds which had first marred our happiness had now happily been dispelled, and the sun of life and love shone upon us perpetually.

Sometimes I wondered whether that ideal happiness was not too complete to last. In the years I had lived I had become a pessimist. I feared a too-complete ideal. The realization of our hopes is always followed by a poignant despair. In this world there is no cup of sweetness without dregs of bitterness. The man who troubles after the to-morrow creates trouble for himself, while he who is regardless of the future is like an ostrich burying its head in the sand at sign of disaster.

Still, each of us who marry fondly believe ourselves to be the one exception to the rule. And perhaps it is only human that it should be so. I, like you my reader, believed that my troubles were over, and that all the lowering clouds had drifted away. They were, however, only low over the horizon, and were soon to reappear. Ah! how differently would I have acted had I but known what the future—the future of which I was now so careless—held in store for me!

One night we had gone in the car to the Coliseum Theatre, for Sylvia was fond of variety performances as a change from the legitimate theatre. As we sat in the

box, I thought—though I could not be certain—that she made some secret signal with her fan to somebody seated below amid the crowded audience.

My back had been turned for a moment, and on looking round I felt convinced that she had signalled. It was on the tip of my tongue to refer to it, yet I hesitated, fearing lest she might be annoyed. I trusted her implicitly, and, after all, I might easily have mistaken a perfectly natural movement for a sign of recognition. Therefore I laughed at my own foolish fancy, and turned my attention again to the performance.

At last the curtain fell, and as we stood together amid the crush in the vestibule, the night having turned out wet, I left her, to go in search of our carriage.

I suppose I was absent about two or three minutes, but on my return I could not find her.

She had vanished as completely as though the earth had swallowed her up.

I waited until the theatre was entirely empty. I described her to the attendants, and I had a chat with the smart and highly popular manager, but no one had seen her. She had simply disappeared.

I was frantic, full of the wildest dread as to what had occurred. How madly I acted I scarcely knew. At last, seeing to remain longer was useless, now that the theatre had closed, I jumped into the brougham and drove with all haste to Wilton Street.

“No, Mr. Owen,” replied Browning to my breathless inquiry, “madam has not yet returned.”

I brushed past him and entered the study.

Upon my writing-table there lay a note addressed to me.

I recognized the handwriting in an instant, and with trembling fingers tore open the envelope.

What I read there staggered me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

IN FULL CRY

The amazing letter which I held in my nerveless fingers had been hurriedly scribbled on a piece of my wife's own notepaper, and read—

"DEAR OWEN—I feel that our marriage was an entire mistake. I have grossly deceived you, and I dare not hope ever for your forgiveness, nor dare I face you to answer your questions. I know that you love me dearly, as I, too, have loved you; yet, for your own sake—and perhaps for mine also—it is far best that we should keep apart.

"I deeply regret that I have been the means of bringing misfortune and unhappiness and sorrow upon you, but I have been the tool of another. In shame and deepest humiliation I leave you, and if you will grant one favour to an unhappy and penitent woman, you will never seek to discover my whereabouts. It would be quite useless. To-night I leave you in secret, never to meet you again. Accept my deepest regret, and do not let my action trouble you. I am not worthy of your love. Good-bye. Your unhappy—SYLVIA."

I stood staring at the uneven scribbled lines, blurred as they were by the tears of the writer.

What had happened? Why had she so purposely left me? Why had she made that signal from the theatre-box to her accomplice?

She admitted having grossly deceived me, and that she was unworthy. What did she mean? In what manner had she deceived me?

Had she a secret lover?

That idea struck me suddenly, and staggered me. In some of her recent actions I read secrecy and suspicion. On several occasions lately she had been out shopping alone, and one afternoon, about a week before, she had not returned to dress for dinner until nearly eight o'clock. Her excuse had been a thin one, but, unsuspicious, I had passed it by.

Had I really been a fool to marry her, after all? I knew Marlowe's opinion of our

marriage, though he had never expressed it. That she had been associated with a shady lot had all along been apparent. The terrors of that silent house in Porchester Terrace remained only too fresh within my memory.

That night I spent in a wild fever of excitement. No sleep came to my eyes, and I think Browning—to whom I said nothing—believed that I had taken leave of my senses. The faithful old servant did not retire, for at five in the morning I found him seated dozing in a chair outside in the hall, tired out by the watchful vigil he had kept over me.

I tried in vain to decide what to do. I wanted to find Sylvia, to induce her to reveal the truth to me, and to allay her fear of my reproaches.

I loved her; aye, no man in all the world ever loved a woman better. Yet she had, of her own accord, because of her own shame at her deception, bade farewell, and slipped away into the great ocean of London life.

Morning dawned at last, cold, grey and foggy, one of those dispiriting mornings of late autumn which the Londoner knows so well. Still I knew not how to act. I wanted to discover her, to bring her back, and to demand of her finally the actual truth. All the mystery of those past months had sent my brain awhirl.

I had an impulse to go to the police and reveal the secret of that closed house in Porchester Terrace. Yet had she not implored me not to do so? Why? There was only one reason. She feared exposure herself.

No. Ten thousand times no. I would not believe ill of her. Can any man who really loves a woman believe ill of her? Love is blind, it is true, and the scales never fall from the eyes while true affection lasts. And so I put suspicion from my mind, and swallowed the cup of coffee Browning put before me.

The old man, the friend of my youth, knew that his mistress had not returned, and saw how greatly I was distressed. Yet he was far too discreet a servant to refer to it.

I entered the drawing-room, and there, in the grey light, facing me, stood the fine portrait of my well-beloved in a silver frame, the one she had had taken at Scarborough a week after our marriage.

I drew it from its frame and gazed for a long time upon it. Then I put it into an envelope, and placed it in my pocket.

Soon after ten o’clock I returned to the Coliseum, and showed the portrait to a number of the attendants as that of a lady who was missing. All of them, both male and female, gazed upon the picture, but nobody recognized her as having been seen before.

The manager, whom I had seen on the previous night, sympathized with me, and lent me every assistance. One after another of the staff he called into his big office on the first floor, but the reply was always the same.

At length a smart page-boy entered, and, on being shown the portrait, at once said to the manager—

“Why, sir, that’s the lady who went away with the gentleman who spoke to me!”

“Who was he?” I demanded eagerly. “What did he say? What was he like?”

“Well, sir, it was like this,” replied the boy. “About a quarter of an hour before the curtain fell last night I was out in the vestibule, when a tall dark gentleman, with his hair slightly grey and no moustache, came up to me with a lady’s cloak in his hand—a dark blue one. He told me that when the audience came out a fair young lady would come up to me for the cloak, as she wanted to get away very quickly, and did not want to wait her turn at the cloak-room. There was a car—a big grey car—waiting for her outside.”

“Then her flight was all prepared!” I exclaimed. “What was the man like?”

“He struck me as being a gentleman, yet his clothes seemed shabby and ill-fitting. Indeed, he had a shabby-genteel look, as though he were a bit down on his luck.”

“He was in evening clothes?”

“No, sir. In a suit of brown tweeds.”

“Well, what happened then?”

“I waited till the curtain fell, and then I stood close to the box-office with the cloak over my arm. There was a big crush, as it was then raining hard. Suddenly a young lady wearing a cream theatre-wrap came up to me hastily, and asked me to help her on with the cloak. This I did, and next moment the man in tweeds joined her. I heard him say, ‘Come along, dear, we haven’t a moment to lose,’ and then they went out to the car. That’s all I know, sir.”

I was silent for a few moments. Who was this secret lover, I wondered? The lad's statement had come as an amazing revelation to me.

"What kind of car was it?" I asked.

"A hired car, sir," replied the intelligent boy. "I've seen it here before. It comes, I think, from a garage in Wardour Street."

"You would know the driver?"

"I think so, sir."

It was therefore instantly arranged that the lad should go with me round to the garage, and there try to find the man who drove the grey car on the previous night.

In this we were quickly successful. On entering the garage there stood, muddy and dirty, a big grey landaulette, which the boy at once identified as the one in which Sylvia had escaped. The driver was soon found, and he explained that it was true he had been engaged on the previous night by a tall, clean-shaven gentleman to pick up at the Coliseum. He did so, and the gentleman entered with a lady.

"Where did you drive them?" I asked quickly.

"Up the Great North Road—to the George Hotel at Stamford, about a hundred miles from London. I've only been back about a couple of hours, sir."

"The George at Stamford!" I echoed, for I knew the hotel, a quiet, old-fashioned, comfortable place much patronized by motorists to and fro on the north road.

"You didn't stay there?"

"Only just to get a drink and fill up with petrol. I wanted to get back. The lady and gentleman were evidently expected, and seemed in a great hurry."

"Why?"

"Well, near Alconbury the engine was misfiring a little, and I stopped to open the bonnet. When I did so, the lady put her head out of the window, highly excited, and asked how long we were likely to be delayed. I told her; then I heard her say to the gentleman, 'If they are away before we reach there, what shall we do?'"

“Then they were on their way to meet somebody or other—eh?”

“Ah! that I don’t know, sir. I drew up in the yard of the hotel, and they both got out. The lady hurried in, while the gentleman paid me, and gave me something for myself. It was then nearly four o’clock in the morning. I should have been back earlier, only I had a puncture the other side of Hatfield, and had to put on the ‘Stepney.’”

“I must go to Stamford,” I said decisively. Then I put something into his palm, as well as into that of the page-boy, and, entering a taxi, drove back home.

An hour later I sat beside my own chauffeur, as we drove through the steadily falling rain across Hampstead Heath, on our hundred-mile journey into Lincolnshire.

We both knew every inch of the road, having been over it many times. As it was wet, police-traps were unlikely, so, having negotiated the narrow road as far as Hatfield, we began to “let her out” past Hitchin, and we buzzed on over the broad open road through Stilton village. We were hung up at the level-crossing at Wansford, but about half-past three in the afternoon we swept over the brow of the hill beneath the high wall of Burghley Park, and saw beneath us the roofs and many spires of quiet old Stamford.

Ten minutes later we swung into the yard of the ancient George, and, alighting, entered the broad hall, with its splendid old oak staircase, in search of the manageress.

She related a rather curious story.

On the previous night, about eleven o’clock, there arrived by car two well-dressed gentlemen who, though English, conversed together in French. They took rooms, but did not retire to bed, saying that they expected two friends who were motoring, and who would arrive in the night. They sat over the fire in the lounge, while the staff of the hotel all retired, save the night-boots, an old retainer. The latter stated that during the night, as he passed the door of the lounge, he saw through the crack of the door the younger of the two men examining something which shone and sparkled in the light, and he thought to be diamonds. This struck him as somewhat curious; therefore he kept a watchful eye upon the pair.

One he described as rather stout, dark, and bald-headed—the exact description

of Pennington—and the other description the man afterwards gave to me caused me to feel confident that the second man was none other than the scoundrel Reckitt. What further piece of chicanery had they been guilty of, I wondered?

“About four in the morning a grey car drove up, sir,” went on the boots, “and a lady with a dark cloak over her evening dress dashed in, and they both rose quickly and welcomed her. Then, in order that I should not understand, they again started talking in some foreign language—French I expect it was. A few moments later the gentleman came in. They welcomed him warmly, addressing him by the name of Lewis. I saw the bald-headed man wring his hand heartily, and heard him exclaim: ‘By Jove! old man, you can’t think how glad we are to see you back again! You must have had a narrow squeak! Not another single living man would have acted with the determination and bravery with which you’ve acted. Only you must be careful, Lewis, old man—deuced careful. There are enemies about, you know.’ Then the gentleman said: ‘I know! I’m quite aware of my peril, Arnold. You, too, had a narrow shave in Paris a short time ago—I hear from Sonia.’ ‘Yes,’ laughed the other, ‘she acted splendidly. But, as you say, it was a very close thing. Have you seen Shuttleworth yet?’ he asked. The other said: ‘He met me, in the Ditches at Southampton, two nights ago, and told me all that’s happened.’ ‘Ah! And Sonia has told you the rest, I suppose?’ he asked; to which the other man replied in the affirmative, adding: ‘It’s a bad job, I fear, for Owen Biddulph—a very bad job for the fellow!’ That was all the conversation that I overheard at that time, for they then rang the bell and ordered whisky and sodas.”

“And what else did you see or hear?” I asked eagerly, much puzzled by his statement.

“They struck me as rather a suspicious lot, sir,” the man said. “After I had taken them in their drinks they closed the door, and seemed to hold some sort of a consultation. While this was going on, two men drove up in another car, and asked if a Mr. Winton was here. I told him he was—for the bald-headed gentleman had given the name of Douglas Winton. They were at once welcomed, and admitted to the conference.”

“Rather curious—to hold a conference in such a manner and at such an hour!” I remarked.

“Yes, sir. It was a secret meeting, evidently. They all spoke in another language. The two men who last arrived were no doubt foreigners.”

“Was one of them stout and wore gold-rimmed glasses?” I inquired quickly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

AN UNFORTUNATE SLIP

“No, sir,” the boots replied, “both were youngish men, with dark moustaches. They wore heavy coats, and were in an open car. They came from York way, and had evidently driven some distance.”

“You saw nothing of what went on at their mysterious meeting?”

“Well, sir, the fact is, when I had had my suspicions aroused, I crept out into the yard, and found that I could see into the lounge through the chink between the blind and the window. They were all seated round the table, the head of which had been taken by the gentleman who had arrived from London with the lady. He seemed to be chairman, and he talked in a low, deliberate, and very earnest tone, being listened to with greatest interest. He evidently related something which amazed them. Then a map, or plan, was placed upon the table, and each examined it in turn. Afterwards two photographs were produced by Mr. Winton and handed around the assembly. Each man looked long and steadily at the pictures—both were of women. The young lady present refused to take any part in the discussion, and I noticed that she passed on the photographs without comment—without even glancing at them.”

“Did she appear to be present there against her will?” I asked breathlessly.

“No, not exactly. She seemed very friendly with all the gentlemen. The two foreigners were strangers to her—for she was introduced to them.”

“By name?”

“Yes, sir. Miss Sonia Poland.”

I bit my lip. Had she already dropped my name, and was now passing under an alias?

“Sonia Poland!” I echoed. “Was it for the purpose of concealing her identity from the foreigners, do you think?” I asked.

“No, sir. Because Winton and his companion addressed her as Sonia Poland

when she arrived."

"And you believed it to be her real name?"

"I suppose it is, sir," was the man's reply, for I fear my manner somewhat mystified him.

"Well, and what further did you see at this early morning consultation?" I asked, mindful that his curiosity had no doubt been aroused by sight of something sparkling in the strange visitor's hand.

"The gentleman called Mr. Lewis wrote out a paper very carefully and handed it round. Every one signed it—except the lady. They asked her to do so, but she protested vigorously, and the matter was not pressed. Then the photograph of a man was shown to the two foreigners, and the lady tried to prevent it. Curiously enough, sir, I caught a good sight of it—just a head and shoulders—and the picture very much resembled you yourself, sir!"

"Me!" I cried. "And they showed it to the two young foreigners—eh?"

"Yes, sir. One of them took it and put it into his pocket. Then the mysterious Mr. Lewis, as chairman of the meeting, seemed to raise a protest. The two foreigners gesticulated, jabbered away, and raised their shoulders a lot. I dearly wish I could have made out a word they said. Unfortunately I couldn't. Only I saw that in Mr. Lewis's face was a look of fierce determination. They at first defied him. But at last, with great reluctance, they handed back the photograph, which Mr. Lewis himself burned on the fire."

"He burned my photograph!"

"Yes, sir. I think it was yours, sir—but of course I can't be quite positive."

"And what else?"

"Mr. Winton said something, whereupon all of them glanced at the door and then at the window. One of the foreigners came to the window, but did not notice that there was a slight crack through which I could see. Then he turned the key in the door. After he had returned to his chair, the man who had arrived with Mr. Winton took from his pocket something that shone. My heart beat quickly. It was a diamond necklet—the object I had seen in his hand earlier. He passed it round for the admiration of the others, who each took it and closely examined it beneath the light—all but the young lady. She was standing aside, near the

fireplace, watching. Now and then she placed her hand to her forehead, as though her brain were weary."

"And after that?"

"After the necklet had been passed round the elder of the two foreigners wrapped it carefully in his handkerchief and placed it in his pocket. Then Mr. Lewis gave them a long address, emphasizing his words with his hand, and they listened to him without uttering a word. Suddenly Mr. Winton sprang up and wrung his hand, afterwards making what appeared to be some highly complimentary remarks, for Mr. Lewis smiled and bowed to the assembly, who afterwards rose. Then the young lady rushed up to Mr. Lewis and implored him to do something, but he refused. She stood before him, pale-faced and determined. Her eyes seemed starting from her head. She seemed like one horrified. But he placed his hand tenderly upon her shoulder, and uttered some quick low words which instantly calmed her. Very shortly after that the party broke up, and the door was re-opened. The two foreigners hurriedly swallowed a liqueur-glass of brandy each, and then, passing into the yard, wished their companions adieu and drove away in their car—in the direction of London."

"Carrying with them the diamond necklet which the other man had brought there?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what became of the young lady?" I inquired very anxiously.

"She first had a long and private conversation with the gentleman named Winton —the bald-headed man."

This, it will be remembered, was the person whose description tallied exactly with that of her father.

"They went outside together," said the boots, "out into the yard, and there conversed alone in half-whispers. Afterwards they rejoined the others. Mr. Lewis seemed very annoyed with her; nevertheless, after a cup of tea each, about half-past five the four of them got into the car in which Winton had arrived and drove away in the direction of Grantham. Winton gave me a sovereign for myself—an unusually generous gift, I can assure you, sir," he laughed.

"And now what is your own opinion concerning them?" I asked.

“Why, there can only be one opinion, sir—that they are wrong ’uns. I felt half a mind to tell Mr. Pearson, the police-constable who lives across in Water Lane, but I didn’t like to without consulting somebody. And I didn’t want to wake up the manageress.”

“Ah! and it may now be too late, Cross,” said the lady in question, who had been standing by all the time. Then, addressing me, she said—

“The whole affair seemed most mysterious, sir, therefore I went round and saw the inspector of police this morning, and told him briefly of our strange visitors. I’m rather glad they’re gone, for one never likes unpleasantness in a hotel. Yet, of course, the fault cannot be that of the hotel-keeper if he takes in an undesirable.”

“Of course not. But what view did the inspector hold?”

“Inspector Deane merely expressed the opinion that they were suspicious persons—that’s all.”

“So they seem to have been,” I remarked, without satisfying her as to who I really was. My story there was that I had business relations with Mr. Lewis, and had followed him there in the hope of catching him up.

We were in the manageress’s room, a cosy apartment in the back of the quaint old hostelry, when a waitress came and announced Inspector Deane. The official was at once shown in, whereupon he said abruptly—

“The truth is out, Miss Hammond, regarding your strange visitors of last night.” And he glanced inquiringly at myself.

“You can speak openly before this gentleman,” she said, noticing his hesitation.

“The fact is, a circular-telegram has just been sent out from Scotland Yard, saying that by the express from Edinburgh due at King’s Cross at 10.45 last night the Archduchess Marie Louise, niece of the Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria, was a passenger. She had been staying at Balmoral, and travelled south in a special saloon. When the luggage came to be collected a dressing-case was missing—it evidently having been stolen in transit by somebody who had obtained access to the saloon while on the journey. The corridor was open between York and London, so that the restaurant could be reached, and it is believed that the thief, or thieves, managed to pass in unobserved and throw the bag out upon the line to some confederate awaiting it. The bag contained a

magnificent diamond necklet—a historic heirloom of the Imperial family of the Hapsburgs—and is valued at fifty thousand pounds!”

“And those people who met here were the thieves!” gasped the manageress, turning instantly pale.

“Without a doubt. You see, the Great Northern main line runs close by us—at Essendine. It may be that the thieves were waiting for it near there—waiting for it to be dropped out in the darkness. All the platelayers along the line are now searching for the bag, but we here are certain that the thieves spent the night in Stamford.”

“Not the thieves,” I said. “The receivers.”

“Exactly.”

“But the young foreigner has it!” cried the boots. “He and his friend set off for London with it.”

“Yes. They would reach London in time to catch one of the boat-trains from Victoria or Charing Cross this morning, and by this time they’re safely out of the country—carrying the necklet with them. Ah! Scotland Yard is terribly slow. But the delay seems to have been caused by the uncertainty of Her Highness as to whether she had actually brought the dressing-case with her, and she had to telegraph to Balmoral before she could really state that it had been stolen.”

“The two men, Douglas Winton and his friend, came here in a motor-car,” I remarked. “They had evidently been waiting somewhere near the line, in order to pick up the stolen bag.”

“Without a doubt, sir,” exclaimed the inspector. “Their actions here, according to what Miss Hammond told me this morning, were most suspicious. It’s a pity that the boots did not communicate with us.”

“Yes, Mr. Deane,” said the man referred to, “I’m very sorry now that I didn’t. But I felt loath to disturb people at that hour of the morning.”

“You took no note of the number of either of the three cars which came, I suppose?”

“No. We have so many cars here that I hardly noticed even what colour they were.”

“Ah! That’s unfortunate. Still, we shall probably pick up some clue to them along the road. Somebody is certain to have seen them, or know something about them.”

“This gentleman here knows something about them,” remarked the manageress, indicating myself.

The inspector turned to me in quick surprise, and no doubt saw the surprise in my face.

“I—I know nothing,” I managed to exclaim blankly, at once realizing the terrible pitfall into which I had fallen.

“But you said you knew Mr. Lewis—the gentleman who acted as president of that mysterious conference!” Miss Hammond declared, in all innocence.

“I think, sir,” added the inspector, “that the matter is such a grave one that you should at once reveal all you do know. You probably overlook the fact that if you persist in silence you may be arrested as an accessory.”

“But I know nothing,” I protested; “nothing whatever concerning the robbery!”

“But you know one of the men,” said Cross the boots.

“And the lady also, without a doubt!” added the inspector.

“I refuse to be cross-examined in this manner by you!” I retorted in anger, yet full of apprehension now that I saw myself suspected of friendship with the gang.

“Well, sir, then I regret that I must ask you to walk over the bridge with me to the police-station. I must take you before the superintendent,” he said firmly.

“But I know nothing,” I again protested.

“Come with me,” he said, with a grim smile of disbelief. “That you’ll be compelled to prove.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MORE STRANGE FACTS

Compelled against my will to accompany the inspector to the police head-quarters in the High Street, I made a statement—a rather lame one, I fear.

I concealed the fact that the lady of the previous night's conference was my wife, and explained my visit to Stamford, and my inquiries at the George, by the fact that I had met the man Lewis abroad, and had had some financial dealings with him, which, I now suspected, were not altogether square. So, hearing that he had motored to the north, I had followed, and had inquired at several of the well-known motoring hotels for news of him, being unsuccessful until I had arrived at Stamford.

This story would, of course, not have held water had Miss Hammond, the manageress, been present. Happily, however, she had not accompanied me, hence I was able to concoct a somewhat plausible excuse to the local superintendent.

"Then you actually know nothing concerning these people?" he asked, regarding me shrewdly.

"Nothing beyond the fact of meeting Lewis abroad, and very foolishly trusting in his honesty."

The superintendent smiled. I think he regarded me as a bit of a fool. Probably I had been.

"They are a clever gang, no doubt," he declared. "The Archduchess's necklace must have been stolen by some one travelling in the train. I've been on to Scotland Yard by telephone, and there seems a suspicion because at Grantham—the last stopping-place before London—a ticket-collector boarded the train. He was a stranger to the others, but they believed that he had been transferred from one or other of the branches to the main line, and being in the company's uniform they, of course, accepted him. He collected the tickets *en route*, as is sometimes done, and at Finsbury Park descended, and was lost sight of. Here again the busy collectors came and demanded tickets, much to the surprise of the

passengers, and the curious incident was much commented upon."

"Then the bogus collector was the thief, I suppose?"

"No doubt. He somehow secured the dressing-bag and dropped it out at a point between Grantham and Essendine—a spot where he knew his accomplices would be waiting—a very neatly-planned robbery."

"And by persons who are evidently experts," I said.

"Of course," replied the grey-haired superintendent. "The manner in which the diamonds have been quickly transferred from hand to hand and carried out of the country is sufficient evidence of that. The gang have now scattered, and, for aught we know, have all crossed the Channel by this time."

"Well," I assured him; "I know nothing more of the affair than what I have told you. If I were an accomplice I should hardly be here—making inquiries concerning them."

"I don't know so much about that," he replied, rather incredulously. "Such an action has been known before, in order to place the police upon a wrong scent. I fear I must ask you to remain here, in Stamford, until this evening, while I make some inquiry into your *bona fides*, sir."

"What!" I cried. "You intend to detain me!"

"There is no indignity," he declared. "You may go about the town where you will—providing you do not attempt to leave it. I regret, but it is my duty to ascertain who and what you are, Mr. Biddulph."

I had given him my card, and he, seeing the look of annoyance upon my face, added—

"I can only express apologies, sir. But you will see it is my duty. You have admitted knowledge of at least one of the mysterious gang."

"Very well," I replied reluctantly; "make what inquiries you will." And I gave him the address of my solicitors and my bankers.

Then, walking out of the office, I strolled down the quiet old High Street into the market place, full of evil forebodings.

Who was this man Lewis—or Louis—with whom my wife had escaped?

He was a blackguardly adventurer, anyhow. He had addressed her as “dear,” and had been solicitous of her welfare throughout! To him she had signalled from her box in the theatre, well knowing that he was making secret preparations for her elopement. Indeed, she had written that note and placed it upon my blotting-pad before we had gone forth together, she well knowing that she would never again re-cross my threshold.

Ah! The poignant bitterness of it all had gripped my heart. My cup of unhappiness was now assuredly full.

How brief had been my joy; how quickly my worst fears had been realized.

About the quiet, old-world decaying town I wandered, hardly knowing whither I went. When, every now and then, in the fading light, I found myself going into the country I turned back, mindful of my promise not to leave the place without permission.

About six I returned to the George and sat beside the fire in the lounge—in that selfsame chair where my fugitive wife had sat. I was eager to renew the chase, yet until I received word from the police I was compelled to remain helpless.

Old Cross, the boots, became inquisitive, but I evaded his questions, and ate my dinner alone in the small cosy coffee-room, awaiting the reappearance of Inspector Deane. I had given my chauffeur liberty till eight o’clock, but I was all anxiety to drive back to London.

Still, if I returned, what could I do? Sylvia and her companions had driven away—whither was a mystery.

The Criminal Investigation Department had already issued an official description of the persons wanted, for while I had been at the police-office the inspector had been closely questioning the man Cross and Miss Hammond.

Already the police drag-net was out, and the combined police forces of Europe would, in an hour or two, be on the watch for Sylvia and her mysterious companions.

So far as the United Kingdom was concerned sixty thousand officers, detectives and constables would be furnished with a complete description of those who had held that secret consultation. The tightest of tight cordons would be drawn. Every passenger who embarked at English ports for abroad would be carefully scrutinized by plain-clothes men. Every hotel-keeper, not only in London, but in

the remote villages and hamlets would be closely questioned as to the identity and recent movements of his guests. Full descriptions of Sylvia and her friends would be cabled to America, and the American police would be asked to keep a sharp look-out on passengers arriving on all boats from Europe. Descriptions would also be sent to the police head-quarters in every European capital.

In face of that, what more could I do?

The situation had become unbearable. Sylvia's unaccountable action had plunged me into a veritable sea of despair. The future seemed blank and hopeless.

Just before eight o'clock I strolled back to the police-office and reported myself, as it were. The superintendent expressed himself perfectly satisfied with the replies he had received from London, and, with apologies, gave me leave to depart.

"Inquiry is being made along the roads in every direction from here," he said. "We hear that the three men and the woman called at the Bell, at Barnby Moor, and had some breakfast. Afterwards they continued northward."

"Barnby Moor!" I echoed. "Why, that's near Doncaster."

"Yes, sir. Motorists patronize the place a good deal."

"And is that all that is known?" I inquired eagerly.

"All at present," he said. Therefore I left and, returning to the garage, mounted the car and, with head-lamps alight, drove out into the pitch darkness in the direction of Grantham. We sped along the broad old coach-road for nearly three hours, until at last we pulled up before an ancient wayside inn which had been modernized and adapted to twentieth-century requirements.

The manager, in reply to my eager questions, said it was true that the Doncaster police had been there making inquiries regarding four motorists—three gentlemen and a lady—who had called there that morning and had had breakfast in the coffee-room.

The head-waiter who had attended them was called, and I questioned him. I think the manager believed me to be a detective, for he was most courteous, and ready to give me all information.

“Yes, sir,” replied the tall, slim head-waiter. “They came here in a great hurry, and seemed to have come a long distance, judging from the way the car was plastered with mud. The lady was very cold, for they had an open car, and she wore a gentleman’s overcoat and a shawl tied around her head. The tallest of the gentlemen drove the car. They called him Lewis.”

“Did you hear them address the lady?” I asked eagerly.

“They called her Sonia, sir.”

“And you say she seemed very fatigued?”

“Very. She went upstairs and changed her evening gown for a stuff dress, which was brought out of the car. Then she came down and joined the others at breakfast.”

“They gave you no indication as to their destination, I suppose?”

“Well, sir, I think they were returning to London, for I heard one of the gentlemen say something about catching the boat-train.”

“They may have meant the Harwich boat-train from the north,” I remarked.

“Very likely, sir. One portion of that train comes through Doncaster in the afternoon to Peterborough and March, while the other comes down to Rugby on the North-Western, and then goes across to Peterborough by way of Market Harborough.”

“Then they may have joined that, and if so they would just about be leaving Parkeston Quay by now!”

“If so, the police are certain to spot them,” laughed the waiter. “They’re wanted for the theft of a princess’s jewels, they say.”

What should I do? It was now long past ten o’clock, and I could not possibly arrive at Parkeston before early morning. Besides, if they had really gone there, they would, no doubt, be arrested. The man with the pimply face whose description so closely tallied with that of Reckitt, was surely too clever a criminal to run his neck into a noose by going to any port of embarkation. Therefore I concluded that whatever had been said at table had been said with the distinct object of misleading the waiter. The very manner in which the diamonds had been stolen showed a cunning and a daring unsurpassed. Such men were certainly not easily trapped.

My sole thought was of Sylvia. I could not bring myself to believe that she had wilfully forsaken her home and her husband. Upon her, I felt confident, some species of blackmail had been levied, and she had been forced away from me by reasons beyond her control.

That incident of the photograph—the picture believed to have been of myself—which the foreigner tried to secure but which the man Lewis had himself destroyed, was incomprehensible. What had been intended by the foreigner?

I gathered all the information I could in the hotel, and then, after a hasty meal, re-entered the car and set out upon the dark, cold return journey to London.

Where was Sylvia? Who were her mysterious friends? And, chief of all, who was that man Lewis who addressed her in such endearing terms?

What could possibly be the solution of the mystery?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“SOME SENSATIONAL REVELATIONS”

The days dragged by. The papers were full of the robbery, declaring that it had been executed so neatly as to betray the hand of experts.

A gang of Continental thieves was suspected, because, as a matter of fact, a robbery similar in detail had, six months before, taken place on the night express between Cologne and Berlin. In that case also a strange ticket-inspector had been seen. The stolen property had, no doubt, been thrown from the train to accomplices. Such method was perfectly safe for the thief, because, unless actually detected in the act of tossing out a bag or parcel, no evidence could very well be brought against him.

Therefore the police, and through them the newspapers, decided that the same gang was responsible for the theft of the Archduchess’s necklace as for the robbery in Germany.

Myself, I read eagerly every line of what appeared in the morning and evening press.

Many ridiculous theories were put forward by some journalists in working up the “story,” and more than once I found cruel and unfounded reflections cast upon the sole female member of the party—my dear wife.

This was all extremely painful to me—all so utterly incomprehensible that, as I sat alone in the silence of my deserted home, I felt that no further misfortune could fall upon me. The iron of despair had entered my very soul.

Marlowe called one afternoon, and I was compelled to make excuse for Sylvia’s absence, telling him she was down at Mrs. Shuttleworth’s.

“You don’t look quite yourself, old man,” he had said. “What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing,” I laughed faintly. “I’m a bit run down, that’s all. Want a change, I suppose. I think I shall go abroad.”

“I thought your wife had had sufficient of the Continent,” he remarked.

“Curiously enough,” he added, as he sat back and blew a cloud of cigarette-smoke from his lips, “I thought I saw her the day before yesterday standing on the railway platform at Banbury. I was coming down from Birmingham to Oxford, and the train slowed down in passing Banbury. I happened to be looking out at the time, and I could have sworn that I saw her.”

“At Banbury!” I ejaculated, leaning forward.

“Yes. She was wearing a dark blue dress, with a jacket to match, and a small dark blue hat. She was with an elderly lady, and was evidently waiting for a train. She gave me the impression that she was starting on a journey.”

“How old was her companion?”

“Oh, she was about forty, I should think—neatly dressed in black.”

“It couldn’t have been she,” I said reflectively.

“My dear Owen, Mrs. Biddulph’s beauty is too marked for one to be mistaken—especially a friend, like myself.”

“Then you are quite certain it was she—eh, Jack?”

My tall friend stretched his long legs out on the carpet, and replied—

“Well, I’d have bet a hundred to a penny that it was she. She wasn’t at home with you on that day, was she?”

I was compelled to make a negative reply.

“Then I’m certain I saw her, old man,” he declared, as he rose and tossed his cigarette-end away.

It was upon my tongue to ask him what he had known of her, but I refrained. She was my wife, and to ask such a question would only expose to him my suspicions and misgivings.

So presently he went, and I was left there wretched in my loneliness and completely mystified. The house seemed full of grim shadows now that she, the sun of my life, had gone out of it. Old Browning moved about silent as a ghost, watching me, I knew, and wondering.

So Sylvia had been seen at Banbury. According to Jack, she was dressed as though travelling; therefore it seemed apparent that she had hidden in that quiet

little town until compelled to flee owing to police inquiries. Her dress, as described by Jack, was different to any I had ever seen her wear; hence it seemed as though she had disguised herself as much as was possible. Her companionship with the elder woman was also somewhat strange.

My only fear was that the police might recognize her. While she remained in one place, she would, no doubt, be safe from detection. But if she commenced to travel, then most certainly the police would arrest her.

Fortunately they were not in possession of her photograph, yet all along I remained in fear that the manager of the Coliseum might make a statement, and this would again connect me with the gang.

Yes, I suppose the reader will dub me a fool to have married Sylvia. Well, he or she may do so. My only plea in extenuation is that I loved her dearly and devotedly. My love might have been misplaced, of course, yet I still felt that, in face of all the black circumstances, she was nevertheless true to those promises made before the altar. I was hers—and she was mine.

Even then, with the papers raising a hue-and-cry after her, as well as what I had discovered regarding her elopement, I steadfastly refused to believe in her guilt. Those well-remembered words of affection which had fallen from her lips from time to time I knew had been genuine and the truth.

That same night I read in the evening paper a paragraph as follows—

“It is understood that the police have obtained an important clue to the perpetrators of the daring theft of the diamond necklet belonging to the Archduchess Marie Louise, and that an arrest is shortly expected. Some highly sensational revelations are likely.”

I read and re-read those significant lines. What were the “sensational revelations” promised? Had they any connection with the weird mystery of that closed house in Porchester Terrace?

I felt that perhaps I was not doing right in refraining from laying before the Criminal Investigation Department the facts of my strange experience in that long-closed house. In that neglected garden, my own grave lay open. What bodies of other previous victims lay there interred?

I recollected that in the metropolis many bodies of murdered persons had been found buried in cellars and in gardens. A recent case of the discovery of an

unfortunate woman's body beneath the front doorsteps of a certain house in North London was fresh within my mind.

Truly the night mysteries of London are many and gruesome. The public never dream of half the brutal crimes that are committed and never detected. Only the police, if they are frank, will tell you of the many cases in which persons missing are suspected of having been victims of foul play. Yet they are mysteries never solved.

I went across to White's and dined alone. I was in no mood for the companionship of friends. No one save myself knew that my wife had disappeared. Jack suspected something wrong, but was not aware of what it exactly was.

I went down to Andover next day and called upon the Shuttleworths. Mrs. Shuttleworth was kind and affable as usual, but whether my suspicions were ungrounded or not, I thought the rector a trifle brusque in manner, as though annoyed by my presence there.

I recollected what the man Lewis had told his friends—that he had seen Shuttleworth down in the Ditches—one of the lowest neighbourhoods—of Southampton. The rector had told him all that had transpired!

Why was this worthy country rector, living the quiet life of a remote Hampshire village, in such constant communication with a band of thieves?

I sat with him in his well-remembered study for perhaps an hour. But he was a complete enigma. Casually I referred to the great jewel theft, which was more or less upon every one's tongue.

"I seldom read newspaper horrors," he replied, puffing at his familiar pipe. "I saw something in the head-lines of the paper, but I did not read the details. I've been writing some articles for the *Guardian* lately, and my time has been so fully occupied."

Was this the truth? Or was he merely evading the necessity of discussing the matter?

He had inquired after Sylvia, and I had been compelled to admit that she was away. But I did so in such a manner that I implied she was visiting friends.

Outside, the lawn, so bright and pleasant in summer, now looked damp and

dreary, littered by the brown drifting leaves of autumn.

Somehow I read in his grey face a strange expression, and detected an eagerness to get rid of me. For the first time I found myself an unwelcome visitor at the rectory.

“Have you seen Mr. Pennington of late?” I asked presently.

“No, not for some time. He wrote me from Brussels about a month ago, and said that business was calling him to Spain. Have you seen him?” he asked.

“Not very recently,” I replied vaguely.

Then again I referred to the great robbery, whereat he said—

“Why, Mr. Biddulph, you appear as though you can’t resist the fascination that mysterious crime has for you! I suppose you are an ardent novel-reader—eh? People fond of novels always devour newspaper mysteries.”

I admitted a fondness for healthy and exciting fiction, when he laughed, saying —

“Well, I myself find that nearly half one reads in some of the newspapers now-a-days may be classed as fiction. Even party politics are full of fictions, more or less. Surely the public must find it very difficult to winnow the truth from all the political lies, both spoken and written. To me, elections are all mere campaigns of untruth.”

And so he again cleverly turned the drift of our conversation.

About five o’clock I left, driving back to Andover Junction, and arriving at Waterloo in time for dinner.

I took a taxi at once to Wilton Street, but there was no letter from Sylvia. She gave no sign. And, indeed, why should she, in face of her letter of farewell?

I dressed, and sat down alone to my dinner for the first time in my own dining-room since my wife’s disappearance.

Lonely and sad, yet filled with fierce hatred of those blackguardly adventurers, of whom her own father was evidently one, I sat silent, while old Browning served the meal with that quiet stateliness which was one of his chief characteristics. The old man had never once mentioned his missing mistress, yet

I saw, by the gravity of his pale, furrowed face, that he was anxious and puzzled.

As I ate, without appetite, he chatted to me, as had been his habit in my bachelor days, for through long years of service—ever since I was a lad—he had become more a friend than a mere servant. From many a boyish scrape he had shielded me, and much good advice had he given me in those reckless days of my rather wild youth.

His utter devotion to my father had always endeared him to me, for to him there was no family respected so much as ours, and his faithfulness was surely unequalled.

Perhaps he did not approve of my marriage. I held a strong suspicion that he had not. Yet old servants are generally apt to be resentful at the advent of a new mistress.

I was finishing my coffee and thinking deeply, Browning having left me alone, when suddenly he returned, and, bending, said in his quiet way—

“A gentleman has called, Mr. Owen. He wishes to see you very particularly.” And he handed me a card, upon which I saw the name: “Henri Guertin.”

I sprang to my feet, my mind made up in an instant. Here was one actually of the gang, and I would entrap him in my own house!

I would compel him to speak the truth, under pain of arrest.

“Where is he?” I asked breathlessly.

“I have shown him into the study. He’s a foreign gentleman, Mr. Owen.”

“Yes, I know,” I said. “But now, don’t be alarmed, Browning—just stay outside in the hall. If I ring the bell, go straight to the telephone, ring up the police-station, and tell them to send a constable here at once. My study door will be locked until the constable arrives. You understand?”

“Perfectly, Mr. Owen, but——” And the old man hesitated, looking at me apprehensively.

“There is nothing whatever to fear,” I laughed, rather harshly perhaps. “Carry out my orders, that’s all.”

And then, in fierce determination, I went along the hall, and, opening the study

door, entered, closing it behind me, and as I stood with my back to it I turned the key and removed it.

“Well, M’sieur Guertin,” I exclaimed, addressing the stout man in gold pince-nez in rather a severe tone, “and what, pray, do you want with me?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A CONTRETEMPS

The stout, round-faced Frenchman rose, and, bowing with his irritating politeness, answered—

“I wish to consult you, Monsieur Biddulph, upon a confidential matter concerning your wife.”

“What does my wife concern you, pray, sir?” I asked angrily.

“Ah! calm yourself, m’sieur,” he said suddenly, dropping into French; “I am here as your friend.”

“I hardly believe that,” I replied incredulously. “My friend cannot be the accomplice of my enemies. You are acquainted with Reckitt and with Pennington—the men implicated in the recent theft of the diamonds of the Archduchess Marie Louise!”

He started and looked at me quickly.

“What do you know of that?” he inquired, with rather undue eagerness.

“I know more concerning you than you think,” was my firm reply. “And I give you an alternative, Monsieur Guertin. Either you will reveal to me the whole truth concerning those men Reckitt and Forbes and my wife’s connection with them, or I shall telephone to the police, and have you arrested as a member of the gang.”

“My dear monsieur,” he replied, with a good-humoured smile, “I can’t tell you facts of which I possess no knowledge. I am here to make inquiry of you—to ____”

“To mislead me further!” I cried angrily. “You and your friends may be extremely clever—you have succeeded in enticing my wife away from her home, and you expect to befool me further. Remember that I nearly lost my life in that grim house in Bayswater. Therefore at least I can secure the arrest of one member of the gang.”

“And you would arrest me—eh?” he asked, looking me straight in the face, suddenly growing serious.

“Yes, I intend to,” I replied, whipping out my revolver from my hip pocket.

“Put that thing away,” he urged. “Be reasonable. What would you profit by arresting me?”

“You shall either speak—tell me the truth, or I will hand you over to the police. I have only to touch this bell”—and I raised my hand to the electric button beside the fireplace—“and a telephone message will call a constable.”

“And you really would give me in charge—eh?” laughed my visitor.

“I certainly intend doing so,” I answered angrily.

“Well, before this is done, let us speak frankly for a few moments,” suggested the Frenchman. “You tell me that you nearly lost your life in some house in Bayswater. Where was that?”

“In Porchester Terrace. What is the use of affecting ignorance?”

“I do not affect ignorance,” he said, and I saw that a change had completely overspread his countenance. “I only wish to know the extent of your knowledge of Reckitt and Forbes.”

“I have but little knowledge of your friends, I’m pleased to say,” was my quick rejoinder. “Let us leave them out of the question. What I desire to know is the whereabouts of my wife.”

He shrugged his broad shoulders.

“I regret that I have no knowledge of where madame may be.”

“But you have!” I cried, facing him angrily. “She is probably with Pennington, her father, who seems to be one of your undesirable fraternity.”

“No, she is not with him, most certainly,” my visitor declared. “I know that for a fact. She is probably with Lewis.”

“And who is this fellow Lewis?” I demanded.

For a moment he was silent.

“I think you had better ask madame, your wife,” he replied at last.

“Do you intend to cast a slur upon her?” I cried, facing him resentfully.

“Not in the least,” was his cool answer. “I have merely replied to your question.”

“And have given me most impertinent advice! Will you, or will you not, tell me who the fellow is?”

“At present, monsieur, I must refuse.”

“Then I shall press the bell, and give you into custody.”

“Ah!” he laughed, “that will be distinctly amusing.”

“For me, perhaps—not for you.”

“Monsieur is at liberty to act as he deems best,” said my visitor.

Therefore, irritated by the fellow’s manner, and in the hope that he would at the eleventh hour relent, I pressed the bell.

It rang loudly, and I heard old Browning go to the telephone beneath the stairs. In a few minutes the constable would arrive, and at least one member of the dangerous gang would be secured.

“Perhaps you will let me pass,” he said, crossing towards the door immediately after I had rung the bell. But I placed myself against it, revolver in hand, preventing him and holding him at bay.

“Very well,” he laughed. “I fear, Mr. Biddulph, that you are not acting judiciously. You refuse to accept my statement that I am here as your friend!”

“Because you, on your part, refuse to reply to my questions.”

But he only shrugged his shoulders again without replying.

“You know quite well where my wife is.”

“Alas! I do not,” the fellow declared emphatically. “It was to obtain information that I called.”

“You cannot deny that you know that pair of criminals, Reckitt and Forbes?”

“I have surely not denied knowledge of them!”

“Yet you refuse to tell me who this man is who enticed my wife from my side—the man who presided over that secret council at the George Hotel at Stamford!”

“I am prepared to be frank with you in return for your frankness, monsieur,” he answered.

But I saw in his evasive replies an intention to mislead me into a belief that he was actuated towards me by friendly motives. Therefore my antagonism increased. He had defied me, and I would give him into custody.

Presently there came a loud knocking at the door, and, upon my opening it, a police-sergeant stood upon the threshold.

“I give this man into custody,” I said, addressing him and pointing to the Frenchman.

“Upon what charge, sir?” asked the burly officer, whose broad shoulders filled the doorway, while I saw a constable standing behind him.

“On suspicion of being associated with the theft of the diamonds of the Archduchess Marie Louise,” I replied.

“Come, monsieur,” laughed my visitor, speaking again in English, “I think we have carried this sufficiently far.” And, placing his hand in his breast-pocket, he produced a small folded yellow card bearing his photograph, which he handed to me. “Read that!” he added, with a laugh of triumph.

I saw that the printed card was headed “Préfecture de Police, Ville de Paris,” and that it was signed, countersigned, and bore a large red official seal.

Quickly I scanned it, and, to my abject dismay, realized that Henri Guertin was chief of the first section of the *sûreté*—he was one of the greatest detectives of France!

I stammered something, and then, turning to the sergeant, red and ashamed, I admitted that I had made a mistake in attempting to arrest so distinguished an official.

The two metropolitan officers held the card in their hands, and, unable to read French, asked me to translate it for them, which I did.

“Why,” cried the sergeant, “Monsieur Guertin is well known! His name figures in the papers only this morning as arresting two Englishmen in Paris for a

mysterious murder alleged to have been committed in some house in Bayswater!”

“In Bayswater!” I gasped. “In Porchester Terrace?”

“Yes,” replied the famous French detective. “It is true that I know Reckitt and Forbes. But I only knew them in order to get at the truth. They never suspected me, and early yesterday morning I went to the snug little apartments they have in the Rue de Rouen, and arrested them, together with two young Frenchmen named Terassier and Brault. Concealed beneath a loose board in the bedroom of the last-named man I found the missing gems.”

“Then Terassier and Brault were the two men who met the others in Stamford, and carried the diamonds across to the Continent, intending to dispose of them?”

“Exactly. There was a hitch in disposing of them in Amsterdam, as had been intended, and though the diamonds had been knocked from their settings, I found them intact.”

He told me that Forbes was the actual thief, who had so daringly travelled to Finsbury Park and collected the tickets *en route*. He had practically confessed to having thrown the bag out to Reckitt and Pennington, who were waiting at a point eight miles north of Peterborough. They had used an electric flash-lamp as they stood in the darkness near the line, and the thief, on the look-out for the light, tossed the bag out on to the embankment.

“Then my father-in-law is a thief!” I remarked, with chagrin, when the sergeant and constable had been dismissed. “It was for that reason my wife dare not face me and make explanation!”

“You apparently believe Arnold Du Cane, alias Winton, alias Pennington, to be Sylvia’s father—but such is not the case,” remarked the great detective slowly. “To his career attaches a very remarkable story—one which, in my long experience in the unravelling of mysteries of crime, has never been equalled.”

“Tell me it,” I implored him eagerly. “Where is my poor wife?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE FRENCHMAN MAKES A STATEMENT

“Ah! I regret, m’sieur, that I do not know,” replied the Frenchman. “And yet,” he added, after a second’s hesitation, “I do not exactly regret. Perhaps it is best, after all, that I should remain in ignorance. But, Monsieur Biddulph, I would make one request on your wife’s behalf.”

“On her behalf!” I gasped. “What is it?”

“That you do not prejudge her. She has left you because—well, because she had good reason. But one day, when you know the truth, you will certainly not judge her too harshly.”

“I do not judge her harshly,” I protested. “How can I, when I love her as devotedly as I do! I feel confident that the misfortunes she has brought upon me were not of her own seeking.”

“She very narrowly escaped the vengeance of those two assassins,” Guertin said; “how narrowly, neither you nor she will ever know. For months I have watched them closely, both here and in France and Germany, in order to catch them red-handed; but they have been too clever for me, and we must rely upon the evidence which that back-garden in Porchester Terrace will now yield up. The gang is part of a great criminal association, that society of international thieves of which one member was the man you knew as Harriman, and whose real name was Bell—now at Devil’s Island for the murder of the rising young English parliamentary Under-Secretary Ronald Burke. The murder was believed to have been committed with a political motive, and through certain false evidence furnished by the man Pennington, a person named Louis Lessar, chief of the band, was first arrested, and condemned by the Assize Court of the Seine. Both were sent to Devil’s Island for life, but recently Lessar escaped, and was daring enough to come to England as Mr. Lewis.”

“Lewis!” I gasped. “That was the fellow with whom my wife escaped—the man who presided over the secret deliberations of the gang at their assembly at Stamford!”

“Yes. Once a British officer, he had been leader of the great criminal organization before his arrest. They were the most formidable in Europe, for they always acted on scientific principles, and always well provided with funds. Some of their coups were utterly amazing. But on his arrest and imprisonment the society dwindled under the leadership of Pennington, a low-bred blackguard, who could not even be loyal to his associates.”

“Excuse me, sir,” remarked the sergeant, again shown into the room by Browning. “Our C.I.D. men have been at work all day in the garden behind that house in Porchester Terrace. A big hole was found dug there, and already they’ve turned up the remains of two persons—a man and a woman. I ought to have told you that we had it over the telegraph at the station about an hour ago. Superintendent Mayhew and Professor Salt have been there to examine the remains recovered.”

“Two victims!” I exclaimed. “The open grave found there was prepared for me!”

“No doubt,” exclaimed Guertin. “When I first communicated with your Scotland Yard, they refused to believe my allegations against Reckitt and Forbes. But I had had my suspicions aroused by their actions in Paris, and I was positive. But oh! your police methods are so very painfully slow!”

Then the sergeant again withdrew.

“But of Pennington. Tell me more of him,” I urged.

“He was your worst enemy, and Sylvia’s enemy also, even though he posed as her father. He wished her to marry Forbes, and thus, on account of her great beauty, remain the decoy of the gang. But she met you, and loved you. Her love for you was the cause of their hatred. Because of her affection, she risked her life by revealing to me certain things concerning her associates, whom she knew were plotting to kill you. The very man who was posing as her father—and who afterwards affected friendship for you—told that pair of unscrupulous assassins, Reckitt and Forbes, a fictitious story of how Sonia—for that is her real name—had denounced them. This aroused their hatred, and they decided to kill you both. From what I heard afterwards, they entrapped you, and placed you in that fatal chair beside the venomous reptile, while they also tortured the poor girl with all the horrors of the serpent, until her brain became deranged. Suddenly, however, they became alarmed by discovering a half-witted lad wandering in the garden where the bodies of previous victims lay concealed, and, making a quick escape, left you and her without ascertaining that you were dead. Eventually she

escaped and rescued you, hence their fear that you would inform the police, and their frantic efforts to secure the death of both of you. Indeed, you would probably have been dead ere this, had I not taken upon myself the self-imposed duty of being your protector, and had not Louis Lessar most fortunately escaped from Devil's Island to protect his daughter from their relentless hands."

"His daughter!" I gasped, staring at him.

"Yes. Sonia is the daughter of Phil Poland, alias Louis Lessar, the man who was falsely denounced by Pennington as an accomplice in the assassination of the young Under-Secretary, Mr. Burke, on the Riviera. After I had arrested her father one night at the house where he lived down near Andover, Pennington compelled the girl to pass as his daughter for a twofold reason. First, because he believed that her great beauty would render her a useful decoy for the purpose of attracting young men into their fatal net, and secondly, in order that Forbes should secure her as his wife, for it was realized how, by her marriage to him, her lips would be sealed."

"But they all along intended to kill me."

"Of course. Your life was, you recollect, heavily insured at Pennington's suggestion, and you had made over a large sum of money to Sonia in case of your demise. Therefore it was to the interests of the whole gang that you should meet with some accident which should prove fatal. The theft of the jewels of the Archduchess delayed the conspiracy from being put into execution, and by that means your life was undoubtedly spared. Ah! monsieur, the gang recently led by Arnold Du Cane was once one of the most daring, the most unscrupulous, and the most formidable in the whole of Europe."

"And my dear wife is actually the daughter of the previous leader of that criminal band!" I exclaimed apprehensively.

"Yes. She escaped with him because she was in fear of her life—because she knew that if she were again beneath her own father's protection, you—the man she loved—would also be safe from injury. For Phil Poland is a strong man, a perfect past-master of the criminal arts, and a leader whose word was the command of every member of that great international organization, the wide ramifications of which I have so long tried in vain to ascertain."

"Then Poland is a noteworthy man in the world of crime?"

“He is a very prince of thieves. Yet, at the same time, one must regard him with some admiration for his daring and audacity, his wonderful resourcefulness and his strict adhesion to fair play. For years he lived in France, Italy and Spain, constantly changing his place of abode, his identity, his very face, and always evading us; yet nobody has ever said that he did a mean action towards a poor man. He certainly suffered an unjust punishment by that false accusation made against him by the man who was apparently jealous of his leadership, and who desired to become his successor.”

“Then you are of opinion that my wife left me in order to secure my protection from harm?”

“I am quite certain of it. You recollect my meeting with her at the Hôtel Meurice in Paris. She told me several things on that occasion.”

“And Pennington very nearly fell into your hands.”

“Yes, but with his usual cleverness he escaped me.”

“Where is he now? Have you any idea?” I asked.

“I have no exact knowledge, but, with the arrest of four of his accomplices, it will not be difficult to find out where he is in hiding,” he laughed.

“And the same may be said of Poland—eh?”

“No; on the contrary, while the man Pennington, alias Du Cane, is hated—and it will be believed by those arrested that he has betrayed them in order to save himself—yet Poland is beloved. They know it was Du Cane who made the false charge connecting Poland with Harriman, and they will never forgive him. The hatred of the international thief is the worst and most unrelenting hatred existing in the whole world. Before Poland came to live in retirement here in England at Middleton, near Andover, his association consisted only of the most expert criminals of both sexes, and he controlled their actions with an iron hand. Once every six months the members from all over Europe held a secret conference in one capital or another, when various tasks were allotted to various persons. The precautions taken to prevent blunders were amazing, and we were baffled always because of the widespread field of their operations, and the large number of experts engaged. The band, broken up into small and independent gangs, worked in unison with receivers always ready, and as soon as our suspicions were aroused by one party they disappeared, and another, complete strangers, came in

their place. Premises likely to yield good results from burglary were watched for months by a constant succession of clever watchers, and people in possession of valuables sometimes engaged servants of irreproachable character who were actually members of the gang. Were their exploits chronicled, they would fill many volumes of remarkable fact, only some of which have appeared in recent years in the columns of the newspapers. Every European nationality and every phase of life were represented in that extraordinary assembly, which, while under Poland's control, never, as far as is known, committed a single murder. It was only when the great leader was condemned and exiled, and the band fell away, that Pennington, Reckitt and Forbes conceived the idea of extorting money by means of the serpent, allowing the reptile to strike fatally, and so prevent exposure. By that horrible torture of the innocent and helpless they must have netted many thousands of pounds."

"It was you, you say, who arrested Poland down in Hampshire."

"Yes, nearly three years ago. Prior to Harriman's arrest, I went there with my friend Watts, of Scotland Yard, and on that evening a strange affair happened—an affair which is still a mystery. I'll tell you all about it later," he added. "At present I must go to Porchester Terrace and see what is in progress. I only arrived in London from Paris two hours ago."

I begged him to take me along with him, and with some reluctance he consented. On the way, Guertin told me a strange story of a dead man exactly resembling himself at Middleton village on the night of Poland's arrest. Arrived at the house of grim shadows, we found a constable idling outside the gate, but apparently nobody yet knew of what was transpiring in the garden behind the closed house. At first the man declined to allow us to enter, but, on Guertin declaring who he was, we passed through into the tangled, weedy place where the lights of lanterns were shining weirdly, and we could see men in their shirt-sleeves working with shovel and pick, while others were clearing away the dead rank herbage of autumn.

In the uncertain light I saw that a long trench some four feet in depth had been dug, and into this the men were flinging the soil they carefully removed in their progress in a line backwards.

Beneath a tree, close to where was an open trench—the one prepared for the reception of my body—lay something covered with a black cloth. From beneath there stuck out a hideous object—a man's muddy patent-leather shoe!

Even while I stood amid that weird, never-to-be-forgotten scene, one of the excavators gave an ejaculation of surprise, and a lantern, quickly brought, revealed a human arm in a dark coat-sleeve embedded in the soil.

With a will, half-a-dozen eager hands were at work, and soon a third body—that of a tall, grey-haired man, whose face, alas! was awful to gaze upon—was quickly exhumed.

I could not bear to witness more, and left, gratified to know that the two fiends were already safely confined in a French prison.

Justice would, no doubt, be done, and they would meet with their well-merited punishment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

FURTHER REVELATIONS

If you are a constant reader of the newspapers, as probably you are, you will no doubt recollect the great sensation caused next day on the publication of the news of the gruesome find in that, one of the most aristocratic thoroughfares of Bayswater.

The metropolitan police were very reticent regarding the affair, but many of the papers published photographs of the scene of the exhumations, the exterior of the long-closed house, and photographs of the various police officials. That of Guertin, however, was not included. The famous investigator of crime had no wish for the picture of his face, with its eyes beaming benignly through his gold glasses, to be disseminated broadcast.

The police refused to make any statement; hence the wildest conjectures were afloat concerning the series of tragedies which must have taken place within that dark house, with its secluded, tangled garden.

As the days went by, the public excitement did not abate, for yet more remains were found—the body of a young, fair-haired man who had been identified as Mr. Cyril Wilson, a member of the Travellers' Club, who had been missing for nearly nine months. The police, impelled by this fresh discovery, cut down the trees in the garden and laid the whole place waste, while crowds of the curious waited about in the neighbourhood, trying to catch a glimpse of the operations.

And as time wore on I waited in daily expectation of some sign from the woman I so dearly loved.

Guertin, who still remained in London, assured me that she was safe in hiding with her father, Phil Poland.

"And you will, of course, arrest him when you can discover him," I remarked, as I sat with the famous detective in his room at the Grand Hotel in Trafalgar Square.

"I do not wish to discover him, my dear Monsieur Biddulph," was his kind reply.

“I happen to know that he has deeply repented of his wrongdoing, and even on his sudden reappearance at Stamford with the remaining portion of his once invulnerable gang, he urged them to turn aside from evil, and become honest citizens. He has, by his wrongful conviction of murder, expiated his crimes, and hence I feel that he may be allowed a certain leniency, providing he does not offend in future.”

“But a warrant is out for him, of course?”

“Certainly. His arrest is demanded for breaking from prison. His escape is one of the most daring on record. He swam for five miles in the sea on a dark night, and met with most extraordinary adventures before a Dutch captain allowed him to work his passage to Rotterdam.”

“But he will not dare to put foot in London, I suppose. He would be liable to extradition to France.”

“Who knows? He is one of the most fearless and ingenious men I have ever known. He can so alter his appearance as to deceive even me.”

“But the metropolitan police, knowing that Sylvia—I mean Sonia—is his daughter, may be watching my house!” I exclaimed in alarm.

“That is more than likely,” he admitted. “Hence, if you want to allow madame, your wife, an opportunity to approach you, you should go abroad somewhere—to some quiet place where you would not be suspected. Let me know where you go, and perhaps I can manage to convey to them the fact that you are waiting there.”

The hotel at Gardone—that fine lake-side hotel where I had first seen Sonia—occurred to me. And I told him.

“Very well,” he said cheerfully. “I shall return to Paris to-morrow, and if I can obtain any information from either of the prisoners, I will manage to let Poland know that his son-in-law awaits him.”

Then I thanked the great detective, and, shaking hands warmly, we parted.

What Guertin had told me regarding the strange discovery of a man who closely resembled him outside Poland’s house on the night of the latter’s arrest held me much puzzled. Even he, the all-powerful chief of the *sûreté,* had failed to solve the enigma.

Next afternoon Shuttleworth called upon me in Wilton Street, and for a long time sat chatting.

At last he looked at me gravely, and said—

“I dare say you have been much puzzled, Mr. Biddulph, to know why I, a clergyman of the Church of England, have apparently been mixed up with persons of shady character. But now that four of them are under arrest, and a fifth, we hope, will shortly be apprehended, I will explain. As you perhaps know, Sonia was the daughter of the Honourable Philip Poland, who came to live at the Elms, which is close to the rectory at Middleton. We became great friends, until one evening he made a strange confession to me. He told me who he was—Louis Lessar, who had been the leader of a dangerous band of international thieves—and he asked my advice in my capacity of spiritual guide. He had repented, and had gone into retirement there, believing that his sins would not find him out. But they had done, and he knew he must shortly be arrested. Well, I advised him to act the man, and put aside the thoughts of suicide. What he had revealed to me had—I regret to confess it—aroused my hatred against the man who had betrayed him—a man named Du Cane. This man Du Cane I had only met once, at the Elms, and then I did not realize the amazing truth—that this was the selfsame man who had stolen from me, twenty years before, the woman I had so dearly loved. He had betrayed her, and left her to starve and die in a back street in Marseilles. I concealed my outburst of feeling, yet the very next evening Poland was arrested, and Sonia, ignorant of the truth, was, with a motive already explained by Monsieur Guertin, taken under the guardianship of this man whom I had such just cause to hate—the man who subsequently passed as her father, Pennington. It was because of that I felt all along such a tender interest in the unhappy young lady, and I was so delighted to know when she had at last become your wife.”

“You certainly concealed your feelings towards Pennington. I believed you to be his friend,” I said.

“I was Sonia’s friend—not his, for what poor Poland had told me revealed the truth that the fellow was an absolute scoundrel.”

“And you, of course, know about the incident of a man closely resembling the French detective Guertin being found dead outside the door of the Elms?”

“Certainly,” was his reply; “that is still a complete mystery which can only be solved by Poland himself. He must know, or else have a shrewd idea of what

occurred.”

As we chatted on for a long time, he told me frankly many things of which I had not the least suspicion, at the same time assuring me of Sonia’s deep devotion towards me, and of his confidence that she had left me because she believed being at her father’s side would ensure my own safety.

And now that I knew so much of the truth I longed hourly to meet her, and to obtain from her—and perhaps from the lips of Philip Poland himself—the remaining links in that remarkable chain of facts.

CHAPTER THIRTY

CONCLUSION

About ten days afterwards I one morning received by post a brief note from Guertin, written from the Préfecture in Paris, urging me to go at once to the Victoria Hotel at Varenna, on the Lake of Como, where, if I waited in the name of Brown, my patience would be rewarded.

And there, sure enough, six days later, as I sat one evening in my private sitting-room, the door suddenly opened and my well-beloved, in a dark travelling gown, sprang forward and embraced me, sobbing for very joy.

Can I adequately describe the happiness of that reunion. Of what I uttered I have no recollection, for I held her closely in my arms as I kissed her hot tears away.

A man stood by—a tall, silent, gentlemanly man, whose hair was grey, and whose face as he advanced beneath the strong light showed traces of disguise.

“I am Philip Poland—Sonia’s father,” he exclaimed in a low voice. Whereupon I took the hand of the escaped prisoner, and expressed the utmost satisfaction at that meeting, for he had risked his liberty to come there to me.

“Sonia has told me everything,” he said; “and I can only regret that those blackguards have treated you and her as they have. But Guertin, who is a humane man, even though he be a detective, has tracked them down, and only yesterday I heard Du Cane—the man who made that false charge against myself, and stepped into my shoes; the man who intended that my poor girl should marry that young scoundrel Forbes—has been discovered in Breslau, and is being extradited to England.”

“On the night of your arrest, Mr. Poland, a mystery occurred,” I said presently, as we sat together exchanging many confidences, as I held my dear wife’s soft little hand in mine.

“Yes,” he replied. “It was only while I was out at Devil’s Island that I learnt the truth. Du Cane, intending to get me out of the way, hit upon a very ingenious plan of sending a man made up as Guertin—whom I only knew by sight—to see

me and suggest suicide rather than arrest. This man—a person named Lefevre—came and made the suggestion. He did not know that Du Cane had written anonymously to the Préfecture, and never dreamed that Guertin himself would follow him so quickly. On leaving, he apparently hung about watching the result of his dastardly mission, when Harriman—or Bell as we knew him—walked up the drive, in order to call in secret upon me. He espied a man whom he recognized as Guertin peering in at the window, and, creeping up behind him, struck him down before he could utter a word. Afterwards he slipped away, believing that he had killed our arch-enemy, the chief of the *sûreté*. Presently, however, the body of the unfortunate Lefevre was found by Guertin himself, who had come to arrest me."

"And Harriman admitted this!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. He admitted it to me upon his death-bed. He died of fever a week before I made my dash for liberty. But," he added, "Sonia has told me of that dastardly attempt which those hell-fiends Reckitt and Forbes made upon you in Porchester Terrace, and how they also tortured her. But they were fortunately alarmed and fled precipitately, leaving Sonia unconscious."

"Yes," declared my sweet wife. "When I came to myself I recollected, in horror, what they had told me concerning the fate to which they had abandoned you in the adjoining room, and with a great effort managed to free myself and seek you. I cut the straps which bound you, and succeeded in killing the snake just in time to save you. Then I stole away and left, fearing that you might suspect me of having had some hand in the affair."

"And you saved my life, darling!" I exclaimed, kissing her fondly on the lips.

Then, turning to Poland, I said—

"The police are hunting for you everywhere. Cannot you get to some place where you are not liable to be taken back to France?"

"To-morrow, if I am fortunate," he said, with a faint smile, "I return to the modest little villa I have rented on the hill-side outside Athens. In Greece one is still immune from arrest for offences abroad."

"And I shall return to London with you, Owen. Father and I have travelled to Trieste, and thence here, in order that I should rejoin you, now that the danger is past."

“Ah! darling,” I cried. “I never for one moment doubted you! Yet I admit that the circumstances once or twice looked very black and suspicious.”

“Alas! I could not prevent it,” she declared; “I left you and joined Dad at the Coliseum, because I went in fear of some further attempt being made upon us, and I felt you and I would be safe if I were with him. He had no idea when he met the others at Stamford that Forbes and Reckitt and Du Cane had effected that *coup* with the Archduchess’s jewels.”

“No. I had no idea of it,” said Poland. “My meeting with them was one of farewell. I had already severed my connection with them three years ago, before my arrest.”

And then, after some further explanations, I clasped my loved one in my arms and openly repeated my declaration of fervent love and fond affection.

Of the rest, what need be said?

Sonia is now very happy, either down at Carrington or at Wilton Street, for the black clouds which overshadowed the earlier days of our marriage have rent asunder, and given place to all the sunshine and brightness of life and hope.

No pair could be happier than we.

Twice we have been to Athens as the guest of the tall, grey-haired Englishman who is such a thorough-going cosmopolitan, and who lives in Greece for the sake of the even climate and the study of its antiquities. No one in the Greek capital recognizes Mr. Wilfrid Marsh as the once-famous Louis Lessar.

And dear old Jack Marlowe, still our firm and devoted friend, is as full of good-humoured philosophy as ever, and frequently our visitor. He still leads his careless existence, and is often to be seen idling in the window of White’s, smoking and watching the passers-by in St. James’s Street.

You who read the newspapers probably know how Arnold Du Cane, alias Pennington, alias Winton, was recently sentenced at the Old Bailey to fifteen years, and the two young Frenchmen, Terassier and Brault, to seven years each, for complicity in the robbery on the Scotch express.

And probably you also read the account of how two mysterious Englishmen named Reckitt and Forbes, who had been arrested in Paris, had, somehow, prior to their extradition to England, managed to obtain possession of blades of safety-

razors, and with them had both committed suicide.

In consequence of this there was no trial of the perpetrators of those brutal crimes in Porchester Terrace.

The whole affair was but a nine days' horror, and as the authorities saw that no good could accrue from alarming the public by further publicity or inquiry, it was quickly "Hushed up."

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