

BLACK WILLIAM

STAND FAST,
CRAIG-ROYSTON!
(VOLUME III)

William Black

**Stand Fast, Craig-
Royston! (Volume III)**

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CHAPTER I

IN VAIN – IN VAIN

One evening Mr. Courtney Fox, the London correspondent of the *Edinburgh Chronicle*, was as usual in his own room in the office in Fleet-street, when a card was brought to him.

"Show the gentleman up," said he to the boy.

A couple of seconds thereafter Vincent Harris made his appearance.

"Mr. Fox?" said he, inquiringly.

The heavy-built journalist did not rise to receive his visitor; he merely said —

"Take a chair. What can I do for you?"

"No, thanks," said Vincent, "I don't wish to detain you more than a moment. I only wanted to see if you could give me any information about Mr. George Bethune."

"Well, that would be only fair," said the big, ungainly man, with the small, keen blue eyes glinting behind spectacles; "that would be only a fair exchange, considering I remember how Mr. Bethune came down here one night and asked for information about you."

Vincent looked astonished.

"And I was able," continued Mr. Fox, "to give him all the information he cared for — namely, that you were the son of a very rich man. I presume that was all he wanted to know."

There was something in the tone of this speech — a familiarity bordering on insolence — that Vincent angrily resented; but he was wise enough to show nothing: his sole anxiety was to have news of Maisrie and her grandfather; this man's manner did not concern him much.

"I do not ask for information about Mr. Bethune himself; I dare say I know him as well as most do," said he with perfect calmness. "I only wish to know where he is."

"I don't know where he is," said the burly correspondent, examining the stranger with his small shrewd eyes, "but I guarantee that, wherever he is, he is living on the best. Shooting stags in Scotland most likely — "

"They don't shoot stags in December," said Vincent, briefly.

"Or careering down the Mediterranean in a yacht — gad, an auxiliary screw would come in handy for the old man," continued Mr. Fox, grinning at his own gay facetiousness; "anyhow, wherever he is, I'll bet he's enjoying himself and living on the fat of the land. Merry as a cricket — bawling away at his Scotch songs: I suppose that was how he amused himself when he was in Sing Sing — perhaps he learnt it there — "

"I thought you would probably know where he is," said Vincent, not paying much heed to these little jocosities, "if he happened to be sending in to you those articles on the Scotch ballads — "

"Articles on Scotch ballads!" said Mr. Fox, with a bit of a derisive laugh. "Yes, I know. A collation of the various versions: a cold collation, I should say, by the time he has got done with them. Why, my dear sir, have you never heard of Professor Childs, of Harvard College?"

"I have heard of Professor Child," said Vincent.

"Well, well, well, well, what is the difference?" said the ponderous correspondent, who rolled from side to side in his easy-chair as if he were in a bath, and peered with his minute, twinkling eyes. "And indeed it matters little to me what kind of rubbish is pitchforked into the *Weekly*. If my boss cares to do that kind of thing, for the sake of a 'brother Scot,' that's his own look-out. All I know is that not a scrap of the cold collation has come here, or has appeared in the *Weekly* as yet; so there is

no clue that way to the whereabouts of old Father Christmas, old Santa Claus, the Wandering Scotch Jew – if that is what you want."

"I am sorry to have troubled you," said Vincent, with his hand on the door.

"Stop a bit," said Mr. Fox, in his blunt and rather impertinent fashion. "You and I might chance to be of use to each other some day. I like to know the young men in politics. If I can do you a good turn, you'll remember it; or rather you won't remember it, but I can recall it to you, when I want you to do me one. Take a seat. Let's make a compact. When you are in the House, you'll want the judicious little paragraph sent through the provinces now and again: I can manage all that for you. Then you can give me an occasional tip: you're in – 's confidence, people say – as much as any one can expect to be, that is. Won't you take a seat? – thanks, that will be better. I want to know you. I've already made one important acquaintanceship through your friend Mr. Bethune: it was quite an event when the great George Morris condescended to visit this humble office – "

"George Morris!" said Vincent.

"Perhaps you know him personally?" Mr. Fox said, and he went on in the most easy and affable fashion: "I may say without boasting that I am acquainted with most people – most people of any consequence: it is part of my business. But George Morris, somehow, I had never met. You may imagine, then, that when he came down here, to ask a few questions, I was precious glad to be of such service as I could; for I said to myself that here was just the man for me. Take a great scandal, for example – they do happen sometimes, don't they? – even in this virtuous land of England: very well – I go to George Morris – a hint from him – and there I am first in the field: before the old mummies of the London press have had time to open their eyes and stare."

Vincent had brought a chair from the side of the room, and was now seated: there was only the table, littered with telegrams and proofs, between those two.

"Did I understand you to say," he asked, with his eyes fixed on this man, "that George Morris had come to you to make inquiries about Mr. Bethune?"

"You understood aright."

"Who sent him?" demanded Vincent, abruptly – for there were strange fancies and still darker suspicions flying through his head.

But Courtney Fox smiled.

"George Morris, you may have heard, was not born yesterday. His business is to get out of you what he can, and to take care you get nothing out of him. It was not likely he would tell me why he came making these inquiries – even if I had cared to ask, which I did not."

"You told him all you knew, of course, about Mr. Bethune?" Vincent went on, with a certain cold austerity.

"I did."

"And how much more?"

"Ah, very good – very neat," the spacious-waisted journalist exclaimed with a noisy laugh. "Very good indeed. But look here, Mr. Harris, if the great solicitor was not born yesterday, you were – in a way; and so I venture to ask you why you should take such an interest in Mr. Bethune's affairs?"

Vincent answered him without flinching.

"Because, amongst other things, certain lies have been put in circulation about Mr. Bethune, and I wished to know where they arose. Now I am beginning to guess."

For an instant Mr. Courtney Fox seemed somewhat disconcerted; but he betrayed no anger.

"Come, come," said he, with an affectation of good humour, "that is a strong word. Morris heard no lies from me, I can assure you. Why, don't we all of us know who and what old George Bethune is! He may flourish and vapour successfully enough elsewhere; but he doesn't impose on Fleet-street; we know him too well. And don't imagine I have any dislike towards your venerable friend; not the slightest; in fact, I rather admire the jovial old mountebank. You see, he doesn't treat me to too much of his Scotch *blague*; I'm not to the manner born; and he knows it. Oh, he's skilful

enough in adapting himself to his surroundings – like a trout, that takes the colour of the pool he finds himself in; and when he gets hold of a Scotchman, I am told his acting of the rugged and manly independence of the Scot – of the Drury Lane Scot, I mean – is splendid. I wonder he doesn't go and live in Edinburgh. They take things seriously there. They might elevate him into a great position – make a great writer of him – they're in sore need of one or two; and then every now and again he could step out of his cloud of metaphysics, and fall on something. That's the way the Scotchmen get hold of a subject; they don't take it up as an ordinary Christian would; they fall on it. We once had an English poet called Milton; but Masson fell on him, and crushed him, and didn't even leave us an index by which to identify the remains. Old Bethune should go back to Scotland, and become the Grand Lama of Edinburgh letters: it would be a more dignified position than cadging about for a precarious living among us poor southrons."

Vincent paid but small heed to all this farrago: he was busily thinking how certain undoubted features and circumstances of old George Bethune's life might appear when viewed through the belittling and sardonic scepticism of this man's mind; and then again, having had that hue and shape conferred upon them, how would they look when presented to the professional judgment of such a person as Mr. George Morris?

"The Scotch are the very oddest people in all the world," Mr. Fox continued, for he seemed to enjoy his own merry tirade. "They'll clasp a stranger to their bosom, and share their last bawbee with him, if only he can prove to them that he, too, was born within sight of MacGillicuddy's Reeks – "

"MacGillicuddy's Reeks are in Ireland," said Vincent.

"Well, MacGillicuddy's Breeks – no, that won't do; they don't wear such things in the north. Any unpronounceable place – any kind of puddle or barren rock: to be born within sight of that means that you own everything of honesty, and manliness, and worth that's going – yes, worth – worth is a sweet word – manly worth – it is the prerogative of persons who have secured the greatest blessing on earth, that of being born north of the Tweed. Now, why doesn't old George Bethune go away back there; and wave his tartan plaid, and stamp, and howl balderdash, and have monuments put up to him as the White-haired Bard of Glen-Toddy? That surely would be better than hawking bogus books about London and getting subscriptions for things that never appear; though he manages to do pretty well. Oh, yes, he does pretty well, one way and another. The cunning old cockroach – to take that girl around with him, and get her to make eyes at tradesmen, so as to swindle them out of pounds of tea!"

But at this a sudden flame seemed to go through the young man's brain – and unhappily he had his stick quite close by. In an instant he was on his feet, his right hand grasping the cane, his left fixed in the coat-collar of the luckless journalist, whose inert bulk he was attempting to drag from the chair.

"You vile hound!" Vincent said with set teeth – and his nostrils were dilated and his eyes afire, "I have allowed you to insult an old man – but now – now you have gone too far. Come out of that – and I will break every bone in your body – !"

Down came the stick; but by a fortunate accident it caught on the back of the chair, and the force of the blow sent it flying in two.

"For God's sake – stop!" the other cried – but in a terrified whisper – and his face was as white as death. "What are you doing! – are you mad! – I beg your pardon – can I do more? I beg your pardon – for God's sake, have a little common sense!"

Vincent looked at the man: more abject cowardice he had never beheld than was displayed in every trembling limb of his huge carcass, in every feature of the blanched face. He flung him from him – in disdain.

"Yes," said Mr. Fox, with a desperate effort at composure, and he even tried to put his coat collar to rights, though his fingers were all shaking, and himself panting and breathless. "You – you may thank me – for – for having saved you. If – I had touched that bell – if I had called out – you would have been ruined – ruined for life – a pretty story for – to hear – about his favourite protégé

– increase your chances of getting into Parliament, wouldn't it? Can't you take a bit of a joke? – you're not a Scotchman!"

Vincent was still standing there, with lowering brow.

"When you are busy with your jokes," said he, "I would advise you to keep any friends of mine out of them – especially a girl who has no one to defend her. But I am glad I came here to-night. I begin to understand in whose foul mind arose those distortions, and misrepresentations, and lies. So it was to you George Morris came when he wanted to know about Mr. Bethune and his granddaughter? An excellent authority! And it was straight from you, I suppose, that George Morris went to my father with his wonderful tale – "

"One moment," said Courtney Fox – and he appeared to speak with a little difficulty: perhaps he still felt the pressure of knuckles at his neck. "Sit down. I wish to explain. Mind you, I could make this a bad night's work for you, if I chose. But I don't, for reasons that you would understand if you were a little older and had to earn your own living, as I have. It is my interest to make friends – "

"And an elegant way you have of making them," said Vincent, scornfully.

" – and I want to assure you that I never said anything to George Morris about Mr. Bethune that was not quite well-known. Nor had I the least idea that Morris was going to your father; or that you had the least interest or concern in the matter. As for a bit of chaff about Scotland: who would mind that? Many a time I've had it out with Mr. Bethune himself in this very room; and do you suppose he cared? – his grandiloquent patriotism soared far away above my little Cockney jests. So I wish you to perceive that there was no enmity in the affair, no intention to do harm, and no misrepresentation; and when you see that, you will see also that you have put yourself in the wrong, and I hope you will have the grace to apologise."

It was a most creditable effort to escape from a humiliating position with some semblance of dignity.

"Apologise for what?" said Vincent, staring.

"Why, for your monstrous and outrageous conduct of this evening!"

– "I am to apologise?" said Vincent, with his brows growing dark again. "You introduce into your scurrilous talk the name of a young lady who is known to me – you speak of her in the most insulting and gratuitous fashion – and – and I am to apologise! Yes, I do apologise: I apologise for having brought such a fool of a stick with me: I hope it will be a heavier one if I hear you make use of such language again."

"Come, come, threats will not serve," said Mr. Fox – but he was clearly nervous and apprehensive. "Wouldn't it be better for you, now, to be a little civil – and – and I could promise to send you Mr. Bethune's address if I hear of it? Wouldn't that be better – and more reasonable? Yes, I will – I promise to send you his address if it comes in any way to this office – isn't that more reasonable?"

"I thank you," said Vincent, with formal politeness; and with an equally formal 'Good night' the young man took his leave. Mr. Courtney Fox instantly hid the broken portions of the cane (until he should have a chance of burning them), and, ringing the bell, called in a loud and manly voice for the latest telegrams.

So Vincent was once more thrown back on himself and his own resources. During these past few days he had sought everywhere for the two lost ones; and sought in vain. First of all he had made sure they had left Brighton; then he had come to London; and morning, noon, and night had visited their accustomed haunts, without finding the least trace of them. He went from this restaurant to that; in the morning he walked about the Parks; he called at the libraries where they were known; no sign of them could be found anywhere. And now, when he thought of Maisrie, his heart was no longer angry and reproachful: nay, he grew to think it was in some wild mood of self-sacrifice that she had resolved to go away, and had persuaded her grandfather to take her. She had got some notion into her head that she was a degraded person; that his friends suspected her; that no future as between him

and her was possible; that it was better they should see each other no more. He remembered how she had drawn up her head in maidenly pride – in indignation, almost: his relatives might be at peace: they had nothing to fear from her. And here was the little brooch – with its tiny white dove, that was to rest on her bosom, as if bringing a message of love and safety – all ready for her; but her place was empty; she had gone from him, and perhaps for ever. The very waiters in the restaurants, when he went there all alone, ventured to express a little discreet surprise, and make enquiries: he could say nothing. He had the sandal-wood necklace, to be sure; and sometimes he wore it over his heart; and on the way home, through the dark thoroughfares, at times a faint touch of the perfume reached his nostrils – but there was no Maisrie by his side. And then again, a sudden, marvellous vision would come before him: of Maisrie, her hair blown by the winds, her eyes piteous and full of tears, her eyebrows and lashes wet with the flying spray; and she would say 'Kiss me, Vincent, kiss me!' as if she had already resolved to go, and knew that this was to be a last, despairing farewell.

The days passed; and ever he continued his diligent search, for he knew that these two had but little money, and guessed that they had not departed on any far travel, especially at this time of the year. He went down to Scotland, and made enquiries among the Edinburgh newspaper offices – without avail. He advertised in several of the London daily journals: there was no reply. He told the head-waiter at the Restaurant Mentavisti, that if Mr. Bethune and his granddaughter – who were well-known to all in the place – should make their appearance any evening, and if he, the headwaiter, could manage to send some one to follow them home and ascertain their address, that would mean a couple of sovereigns in his pocket; but the opportunity never presented itself. And meanwhile this young man, taking no care of himself, and fretting from morning till evening, and often all the sleepless night through as well, was gradually losing his colour, and becoming like the ghost of his own natural self.

Christmas came. Harland Harris and Vincent went down to pass the holidays with Mrs. Ellison, at Brighton; and for the same purpose Lord Musselburgh returned to the Bedford Hotel. The four of them dined together on Christmas evening. It was not a very boisterous party, considering that the pragmatism and pedantic voice of the man of wealth was heard discoursing on such light and fanciful themes as the payment of returning officers' expenses, the equalisation of the death duties, and the establishment of state-assisted intermediate schools; but Musselburgh threw in a little jest now and again, to mitigate the ponderosity of the harangue. Vincent was almost silent. Since coming down from London, he had not said a single word to any one of them about Mr. Bethune or his granddaughter: no doubt they would have told him – and perhaps rejoiced to tell him – that he had been betrayed. But Mrs. Ellison, sitting there, and watching more than listening, was concerned about the looks of her boy, as she called him; and before she left the table, she took up her glass, and said —

"I am going to ask you two gentlemen to drink a toast – and it is the health of the coming member for Mendover. And I'm going to ask him to pull himself together, and show some good spirits; for there's nothing a constituency likes so much as a merry and good-humoured candidate."

It was clear moonlight that night: Vin's room faced the sea. Hour after hour he sat at the window, looking on the wide, grey plain and the faint blue-grey skies; and getting no good of either; for the far-searching doves of his thoughts came back to him without a twig of hope in their bill. The whole world seemed empty – and silent. He began to recall the time in which he used to think – or to fear – that some day a vast and solitary sea would come between Maisrie and himself; it was something he had dreamed or imagined; but this was altogether different now – this blank ignorance of where she might be was a far more terrible thing. He went over the different places he had heard her mention – Omaha, Chicago, Boston, Toronto, Montreal, Quebec: they only seemed to make the world the wider – to remove her further away from him, and interpose a veil between. She had vanished like a vision; and yet it was but the other day that he had found her clinging tight to his arm, her beautiful brown hair blown wet about her face, her eyes with love shining through her tears, her lips – when he kissed them – salt with the flying spray. And no longer – after that first and sudden outburst of indignant wrath – did he accuse her of any faithlessness or treachery: rather it was himself whom he

reproached. Had he not promised, at the very moment when she had made her maiden confession to him, and spoken to him as a girl speaks once only in her life, had he not promised that always and always he would say to himself 'Wherever Maisrie is – wherever she may be – she loves me, and is thinking of me?' This was the Mizpah set up between those two; and he had vowed his vow. What her going away might mean he could not tell; but at all events it was not permitted him to doubt – he dared not doubt – her love.

As for these repeated allegations that old George Bethune was nothing less than a mendicant impostor, what did that matter to him? Even if these charges could be substantiated, how was that to affect Maisrie or himself? No association could sully that pure soul. Perhaps it was the case that Mr. Bethune was not over-scrupulous and careful about money matters; many otherwise excellent persons had been of like habit. The band of private inquiry agents had amongst them discovered that the old man had allowed Vincent to pay the bill at the various restaurants they frequented. Well, that was true. Among the vague insinuations and assumptions that had been pieced together to form an indictment, here was one bit of solid fact. And what of it? Of what importance were those few trumpety shillings? It was of little moment which paid: here was an arrangement, become a habit, that had a certain convenience. And Vincent was proud to set against that, or against any conclusions that might be drawn from that, the incident of old George Bethune's stopping the poor woman in Hyde Park, and handing over to her all he possessed – sovereigns, shillings, and pence – so that he did not even leave himself the wherewithal to buy a biscuit for his mid-day meal. Perhaps there were more sides to George Bethune's character than were likely to occur to the imagination of Messrs. Harland Harris, Morris, and Company?

The white moon sailed slowly over to the west; the house was still; the night outside silent; but there was no peace for him at all. If only he could get to see Maisrie – for the briefest moment – that he might demand the reason of her sudden flight! Was it some over-strung sensitiveness of spirit? Did she fear that no one would understand this carelessness of her grandfather about money-matters; and that she might be suspected of complicity, of acquiescence, in certain doubtful ways? Was that the cause of her strange sadness, her resignation, her hopelessness? Was that why she had spoken of her 'degradation' – why she had declared she could never be his wife – why she had begged him piteously to go away, and leave this bygone friendship to be a memory and nothing more? 'Can you not understand, Vincent!' she had said to him, in heart-breaking accents, as though she could not bring herself to the brutality of plainer speech. Well, he understood this at all events: that in whatever circumstances Maisrie Bethune may have been placed, no contamination had touched *her*; white as the white moonlight out there was that pure soul; he had read her eyes.

The next morning Lord Musselburgh was out walking in the King's Road with the fair young widow who hoped soon to be re-transformed into a wife.

"That friend of yours down at Mendover," said she, – "what is his name? – Gosford? – well, he seems an unconscionable time dying. I wish he'd hurry up with his Chiltern Hundreds and put an end to himself at once. That is what is wanted for Vin – the novelty and excitement of finding himself in the House of Commons. Supposing Mr. Gosford were to resign at once, how soon could Vin be returned? There's some procedure, isn't there? – the High Sheriff or somebody, issues a writ, or something – ?"

"I really cannot say," her companion answered blandly. "I belong to a sphere in which such violent convulsions are unknown."

"At all events, Parliament will meet about the middle of February?" she demanded.

"I presume so," was the careless answer.

"I wish the middle of February were here now, and Vin all securely returned," said she. "I suppose that even in the case of a small borough like Mendover, one's constituents can keep one pretty busy? They will watch how you vote, won't they? – and remonstrate when you go wrong; and pass resolutions; and expect you to go down and be cross-examined. Then there are always public meetings

to be addressed; and petitions to be presented; and people wanting admission to the Speaker's Gallery – "

"Why, really, Madge, there's a sort of furious activity about you this morning," said he. "You quite take one's breath away. I shouldn't be surprised to see you on a platform yourself."

"It's all for Vin's sake I am so anxious," she exclaimed. "I can see how miserable and sad the poor boy is – though he bears it so bravely – never a word to one of us, lest we should ask him if he believes in those people now. I wonder if he can. I wonder if he was so blinded that even now he will shut his eyes to their true character?"

"They are quite gone away, then?" her companion asked.

"Oh, yes," she made answer. "I hope so. Indeed, I know they are. And on the whole it was opportune, just as this election was coming on; for now, if ever, Vin will have a chance of throwing off an infatuation that seemed likely to be his ruin, and of beginning that career of which we all hope such great things."

She glanced round, cautiously; and lowered her voice.

"But, oh, my goodness, if ever he should find out the means we took to persuade them to go, there will be the very mischief to pay: he will tear us to pieces! You know how impetuous and proud he is; and then those people have appealed to him in a curious way – their loneliness – their poverty – and their – Yes, I will admit it – certain personal qualities and characteristics. I don't deny it; any more than I would deny that the girl was extremely pretty, and the old man picturesque, and even well-mannered and dignified in his way. All the more dangerous – the pair of them. Well, now they are gone, I breathe more freely. While they were here, no argument was of any avail. Vin looked into the girl's appealing face – and everything was refuted. And at all events we can say this to our own conscience – that we have done them no harm. We are not mediæval tyrants; we have not flung the venerable patriot and the innocent maiden into a dungeon, to say nothing of breaking their bones on a rack. The venerable patriot and the innocent maiden, I have no doubt, consider themselves remarkably well off. And that reminds me that Harland Harris, although he is of opinion that all property should be under social control – "

"Not all property, my dear Madge," said Lord Musselburgh, politely. "He would say that all property should be under social control – except his property."

"At all events, it seems to me that he occasionally finds it pretty convenient to have plenty of money at his own individual command. Why, for him to denounce the accumulation of capital," she continued, with a pretty scorn, "when no one makes more ostentatious use of the power of money! Is there a single thing he denies himself – one single thing that is only possible to him through his being a man of great wealth? I shouldn't wonder if, when he dies, he leaves instructions to have the electric light turned on into his coffin, just in case he should wake up and want to press the knob."

"Come, come, Madge," said Musselburgh. "Be generous. A man cannot always practice what he preaches. You must grant him the privilege of sighing for an ideal."

"Harland Harris sighing for an ideal," said Mrs. Ellison, with something of feminine spite, "would make a capital subject for an imaginative picture by Watts – if my dear brother-in-law weren't rather stout, and wore a black frock-coat."

Meanwhile, Vincent returned to London, and renewed his solitary search; it was the only thing he felt fit for; all other employments had no meaning for him, were impossible. But, as day by day passed, he became more and more convinced that they must have left London: he knew their familiar haunts so well, and their habits, that he was certain he must have encountered them somewhere if they were still within the great city. And here was the New Year drawing nigh, when friends far separated recalled themselves to each other's memory, with hopes and good wishes for the coming time. It seemed to him that he would not have felt this loneliness so much, if only he had known that Maisrie was in this or that definite place – in Madrid – in Venice – in Rome – or even in some huge steamship ploughing its way across the wide Atlantic.

But a startling surprise was at hand. About half-past ten on the last night of the old year a note was brought upstairs to him by a servant. His face grew suddenly pale when he saw the handwriting, which he instantly recognised.

"Who brought this?" he said, breathlessly.

"A man, sir."

"Is he waiting?"

"No, sir; he said there was no answer."

"What sort of man?" asked Vincent, with the same rapidity – and not yet daring to open the letter.

"A – a common sort of man, sir."

"Very well – you needn't wait."

The moment that the servant had retired, Vincent tore open the envelope; and the first thing that he noticed, with a sudden sinking of the heart, was that there was no address at the head of the letter. It ran thus – the handwriting being a little tremulous here and there —

'DEAR VINCENT,

When you receive this, we shall be far away; but I have arranged that you shall get it just before the New Year, and it brings my heart-felt wishes for your happiness, as well as the good-bye that I cannot say to you personally now. What I foresaw has come to pass; and it will be better for all of us, I think; though it is not with a very light heart that I write these few lines to you. Sometimes I wish that we had never met each other; and then again I should never have known all your kindness to me and to my grandfather, which will always be something to look back upon; and also the companionship we had for a time, which was so pleasant – you would understand how pleasant to me, if you had known what had gone before, and what is now likely to come after. But do not think I repine: more has been done for me than ever I can repay; and as I am the only one to whom my grandfather can look now for help and sympathy, I should be ungrateful indeed if I grudged it.

Forgive me, dear friend, if I speak so much of myself; my thoughts are far more often concerned about you than with anything that can happen to me. And I know that this step we are taking, though it may pain you for a little while, will be salutary in the end. You have a great future before you; your friends expect much of you; you owe it to yourself not to disappoint them. And after a little while, you will be able to go back to the places where we used to go; and there will be nothing but friendly recollections of pleasant evenings; and I am sure nothing need ever come between us (as you feared) I mean in the way of having kind thoughts of each other, always and always; and when you marry no one will more heartily wish you every happiness and blessing than I shall. This is to be my last letter to you; I have promised. I wish I could make it convey to you all I think; but you will understand, dear Vincent, that there is more in it than appears in these stiff and cold words. And another kindness I must beg of you, dear friend, before saying good-bye – and farewell – it is this, Would you try to forget a *little* of what I said to you that morning on the pier? If you thought anything I said was a little more than a girl should have confessed, would you try to forget it, dear Vincent? I was rather miserable – I foresaw we should have to say good-bye to each other, when you would not see it, for you were always so full of courage and confidence; and perhaps I told you more than I should have done – and you will try to forget that. I don't want you to forget it *all*, dear Vincent; only what you think was said too frankly – or hurriedly – at such a moment.

And now, dearest friend, this is good-bye; and it is good-bye for ever, as between you and me. I will pray for your happiness always.

MAISRIE.

P.S. – There was one thing I said to you that you *promised* you would not forget.

M.'

Was he likely to forget it, or any single word she had uttered, on that wild, wind-tossed morning? But in the meantime the immediate question was – How and whence had this letter come? For one thing, it had been brought by hand; so there was no post-mark. Who, then, had been the messenger? How had he come to be employed? What might he not know of Maisrie's whereabouts? Was there a chance of finding a clue to Maisrie, after all, and just as the glad New Year was coming in?

It was barely eleven o'clock. He went down into the hall, whipped on overcoat and hat, and the next moment was striding away towards Mayfair; he judged, and judged rightly, that a boon companion and poet was not likely to be early abed on such a night. When he reached the lodging-house in the little thoroughfare off Park-street, he could hear singing going forward in the subterranean kitchen: nay, he could make out the raucous chorus —

Says Wolseley, says he,
To Arabi,
You can fight other chaps, but you can't fight me.

He rapped at the door; the landlady's daughter answered the summons; she showed him into a room, and then went below for her father. Presently Mr. Hobson appeared – quite creditably sober, considering the occasion.

"Did you bring a note down to me to-night, Hobson?" was the young man's first question.

"I did, sir."

His heart leapt up joyously: his swift surmise had been correct.

"And has Miss Bethune been here recently?" he asked, with the greatest eagerness.

"No, no, sir," said Hobson, shaking his head. "That was giv me when they was going away, and says she, 'Hobson,' says she, 'I can trust you; and there's never a word to be said about this letter – not to hany one whatever; and the night afore New Year's Day you'll take it down yourself, and leave it for Mr. Harris.' Which I did, sir; though not waitin,' as I thought there wasn't a answer; and ope there's nothing wrong, sir."

Vincent was standing in the middle of the room – not listening.

"You have heard or seen nothing, then, of Mr. Bethune or of Miss Bethune, since they left?" he asked, absently.

"Nothing, sir – honly that I took notice of some advertisements, sir, in the papers – "

"I know about those," said Vincent.

So once more, as on many and many a recent occasion, his swiftly-blossoming hopes had been suddenly blighted; and there was nothing for him but to wander idly and pensively away back to Grosvenor Place. The New Year found him in his own room – with Maisrie's letter before him; while, with rather a careworn look on his face he studied every line and phrase of her last message to him.

But the New Year had something else in store for him besides that. He was returned, unopposed, for the borough of Mendover. And about the first thing that his constituents heard, after the election, was that their new member proposed to pay a visit to the United States and Canada, and that at present no date had been fixed for his coming back.

CHAPTER II

BEYOND SEAS

Out here on the deck of this great White Star Liner – with the yellow waters of the Mersey lapping in the sunlight, and a brisk breeze blowing, and the curious excitement of departure thrilling through all the heterogeneous crowd of passengers – here something of hope came to him at last. This was better than haunting lonely restaurants, or walking through solitary streets; he seemed to know that Maisrie was no longer in the land he was leaving; she had fled away across the ocean – gone back to the home, to some one of the various homes, of her childhood and girlhood. And although it appeared a mad thing that a young man should set out to explore so vast a continent in search of his lost love, it was not at all the impossible task it looked. He had made certain calculations. Newspaper offices are excellent centres of intelligence; and Scotch-American newspaper offices would still further limit the sphere of his inquiries. He had dreamed of a wide and sorrowful sea lying between him and her; but instead of that imaginary and impassable sea, why, there was only the familiar Atlantic, that nowadays you can cross in less than a week. And when he had found her, and seized her two hands fast, he would reproach her – oh, yes, he would reproach her – though perhaps there might be more of gladness than of anger in his tones... 'Ah, false love – traitress – coward heart – that ran away! What Quixotic self-sacrifice was it, then, that impelled you? – what fear of relatives? – what fire of wounded pride? No matter now: you are caught and held. You gave yourself to me; you cannot take yourself away again; nor shall any other. No more sudden disappearances – no more trembling notes of farewell – while I have you by the hand!'

The last good-byes had been called by the people crowded on the deck of the tender, the great ship was cautiously creeping down the stream, and the passengers, having done with the waving of handkerchiefs (and here and there a furtive drying of eyes) set about preparing for the voyage – securing their places at table, investigating their cabins, and getting their things unpacked. These occupations kept most of them in their state-rooms until close on dinner-time, so that they had not much chance of examining each other; but it is wonderful how rumour runs in a ship – especially if the Purser be a cheerful and communicative sort of person; and so it was that when all were assembled in the long and gorgeous saloon, two things had already become known; first, that the tall and handsome young Englishman who seemed to have no companion or acquaintance on board was the newly-elected member for Mendover; and second, that the extremely pretty woman who had the seat of honour at the Captain's table was a Mrs. de Lara, a South American, as might have been guessed from her complexion, her eyes, and hair. It appeared to be a foregone conclusion that Mrs. de Lara was to be the belle of the ship on this voyage; such things are very soon settled; perhaps one or two of the commercial gentlemen may have crossed with her before, and seen her exercise her sway. As for Vin Harris, his unopposed return for such an insignificant place as Mendover would not have secured much notice throughout the country had it not been that, immediately after the election, the great – had been kind enough to write to the new member a charming note of congratulation, which, of course, had to be published. It was a significant pat on the back, of which any young man might very well have been proud; and Mrs. Ellison bought innumerable copies of that morning's newspapers, and cut the letter out, and sent it round to her friends, lest they should not have seen it. Mr. Ogden was also so condescending as to send a similar message – but that was not published.

Now during the first evening on board ship, strangers mostly remain strangers to each other; but next morning things become different – especially if the weather be fine, and everyone is on deck. Small courtesies are tendered and accepted; people get introduced, or introduce each other, on the smallest pretence – except the old stagers, the wary ones, who hang aloof, in order to pick and choose. As for Vincent, he was well content with his own society, varied by an occasional chat with

the Purser, when that ubiquitous official could spare a few moments. He was not anxious to make acquaintances. His thoughts were far ahead. He saw – not the thin, blue line of the Irish coast that actually was visible on the horizon – but the shallow waters at Sandy Hook, the broad bay, the long dusky belt of the city, with its innumerable spires jutting up into the white sky. He was wondering how long ago it was since Maisrie and her grandfather had crossed the Newfoundland Banks: it was a long start, but he would overtake them yet. Perhaps, when he was down in the big and busy town, making his inquiries from one newspaper-office to another he might suddenly find himself face to face with the splendid old man, and the beautiful, pensive-eyed girl... 'Ah, Maisrie, you thought you would escape? – but I have you now – never to let you go again! And if you would rather not return to England – if your pride has been wounded – if you are indignant at what has been said or suspected of you and your grandfather – well, then, I will remain with you here! My love is more to me than my home: we will fight the world together – the three of us together: remaining here, if that pleases you better – only, no further thought of separation between you and me!'

On this brisk and bracing morning he was leaning idly with his elbows on the rail, and looking towards the distant line of the Irish coast that was slowly becoming more definite in form, when Mr. Purser Collins came up to him.

"There's a very charming lady would like to make your acquaintance," said the officer. "Will you come with me, and I will introduce you?"

"Oh, very well," Vincent said, but with no great eagerness. "Tell me her name now that I may make sure of it."

"You are favoured – Mrs. de Lara."

"Oh, really," he said, indifferently. "She seems to me to have had half the men on the ship fetching and carrying for her all the morning."

And indeed, when he followed the Purser in order to be introduced to this lady, he found her pretty well surrounded by assiduous gentlemen; and 'if you please – if you please,' Mr. Collins had to keep repeating, before he could bring the new comer into the august presence. Mrs. de Lara – who, on closer inspection, turned out to be quite a young woman, with a pale, clear, olive complexion, softly-lustrous dark eyes that could say a good deal, a pretty smile and dimple, and magnificent hair – received him very graciously; and at once, and completely, and without the slightest compunction, proceeded to ignore the bystanders who had been so officiously kind to her. Of course their conversation was at first the usual nothings. Wonderful weather. Might be midsummer, but for the cold wind. Captain been on the bridge ever since Liverpool, poor man; get some rest after leaving Queenstown. Was she a good sailor? – Some ladies remained in their berths all the way over. Dry champagne, and plenty of it, the only safe-guard? Crossed many times? And so forth. But at length she said —

"Couldn't you find a chair, and bring it along?"

Now the assiduous gentlemen had managed to find a very snug corner for Mrs. de Lara, where there was just room for two deck chairs – her own and that of her companion and friend, Miss Martinez; and Vincent, being rather shy, had no intention of jamming himself into this nook. He made some little excuse – and remained standing with the others: whereupon Mrs. de Lara said to her companion —

"Isabel, will you go and see that the letters I left in my cabin are all properly stamped and put in the post-bag for Queenstown. Thank you, dear!"

Then, the moment her faithful friend was gone, she said, with something of a French manner —

"Here is a seat for you: come, tell me what the news of the ship is!"

Vincent could not very well refuse; though the result of her open preference and selection was that her other obsequious admirers fell away one by one, under some pretence of playing rope-quoits or shovel-board: so that, eventually, he and she were left alone together, for Miss Martinez did not return.

"Now," said the young grass-widow, whose very pretty chin was cushioned on abundant furs, "I am going to make you happy. But first of all I must tell you – you are in love."

"Oh, really?" said Vincent.

"Ah, yes, yes, yes," she said, with a charming insistence. "I have watched you. I know. You keep apart; you look far away; you speak to no one. And then I said to myself that I would make you happy. How? By asking you to tell me all about her."

Whereupon Vincent said to himself, 'You're a very impertinent woman – although you've got pretty eyes.' And again he said, 'But after all you are a woman; and perhaps from you I may learn something more about Maisrie.' So he said aloud —

"The deck of a steamer is hardly the place for secrets."

"Why not?" she protested. "Besides, it is no secret – to anyone with eyes. Come, tell me all about her – and be happy! I wish to interest you; I wish you to interest me; and so let us talk about the only thing that is worth talking about – that is, love. No, there are two things, perhaps – love, and money; but love is so full of surprises; it is the perpetual miracle that no one can understand; it is such a wonderful, unexpected, desperate kind of thing, that it will always be the most interesting. Now!"

"Well," said he – for there was something catching in the mad audacity of this young matron – "it must be secret for secret. My story for yours!"

She laughed long and heartily – until her merriment brought tears to her eyes.

"Why, I'm an old married woman!" she exclaimed. "Ah, I see what your bargain means. You only want to put me off. You think the time and place are not romantic enough; some night – out in mid-Atlantic – with perhaps a moon – and you'll be more communicative, when you forsake the smoking-room for half-an-hour, and send me a little message to meet you. Very well. Perhaps there are too many people tramping up and down. Shall we have a tramp too? Sitting still so stiffens one. There – can you pull off the rugs, do you think? They've swathed me up like a mummy. Now give me your arm; and mind you don't let me go flying – I'm never steady on my feet for the first day or two."

Well, he found the grass-widow a most charming companion – bright, loquacious, and happy, until, indeed, they steamed into the entrance to Cork Harbour. Here, as most of the passengers were going on board the tender, for a scamper ashore, while the ship waited for the mails to arrive, Mrs. de Lara began to look a little wistful. All of a sudden it occurred to him that he ought, if only in common gratitude for her marked condescension, to ask her if she would care to go also.

"Oh – Mrs. de Lara," said he, "wouldn't you like to go ashore, and have a look round Queenstown?"

Her face lighted up in an instant; but there was a curious, amused expression in her eyes.

"I couldn't go alone with you, you know," said she.

"Why not?" said he.

She did not answer that question.

"If you like to ask Miss Martinez as well as myself," she continued, "I'm sure we should be delighted – and it would be very kind of you."

"Of course I will!" he said – and at once he went off in search of the needful companion. A few minutes thereafter the three of them were on board the tender, along with the rest of this crowd of eager, chattering passengers.

And a very pleasant visit it was they paid to the picturesque watering-place and its wide-stretching bay. First of all he took his two guests to a hotel, and gave them an excellent lunch, at which Mrs. de Lara made merry like an enfranchised schoolgirl; then he got an open carriage, and they were driven all about the place; and he bought them such fruit and flowers as he could find, until they were quite laden by the time they got back to the tender. They were in plenty of time; the mails were late. When they eventually returned on board the steamer, Vincent was on the whole very well pleased with that little excursion; only he hoped that the new acquaintanceship that had

been formed had not been too conspicuously displayed, for people are given to talking during the *longueur* of an Atlantic voyage.

And indeed it very soon appeared that after this little adventure ashore Mrs. de Lara meant to claim him as her own. When she came on deck for the usual promenade before dinner, she sent for him (though there were plenty of gentlemen only too anxious to wait on her), and she took his arm during that perfunctory march up and down. Then she said to him —

"Would you think me very rude if I asked you to come and sit at our table? The fact is, I want somebody to be good to me, and to look after me; and the Captain, although he is a most delightful man when he happens to be there, is nearly always away, on duty, no doubt. I hate sitting next an empty chair — that throws me on to Miss Martinez and she and I have exhausted all our subjects long ago. You've no particular friend, have you? Come to our table!"

"But I couldn't think of turning anybody out!" he protested.

"Oh, that's all right!" she made answer, cheerfully enough. "Miss Martinez will get a place somewhere else — Mr. Collins will arrange that — I dare say she will be rather pleased to be set free."

And so it came to pass that at dinner Vincent found himself in the seat that had been vacated by the useful Isabel; and perhaps his promotion provoked a few underhand comments and significant glances at certain of the other tables, for very small trifles are noted on board ship. At all events he only knew that Mrs. de Lara was as engaging, and complaisant, and loquacious as ever; and that she talked away with very little regard as to who might overhear her. Nor was she any longer the merry, rattle-pated creature of the Queenstown hotel. Oh, no. Her conversation now was of a quite superior order. It was literary; and she had caught up plenty of the phrases of the rococo school; she could talk as well as another of environments, conditions, the principal note, style charged with colour, and the like. Nay, she ventured upon an epigram now and again — or, at least, something that sounded like an epigram. "England," she said, "was a shop; France a stage; Germany a camp; and the United States a caucus." And again she said, "There are three human beings whom I wish to meet with before I die: a pretty Frenchwoman, a modest American, and an honest Greek. But I am losing hope." And then there was a tirade against affectation in writing. "Why should the man thrust himself upon me?" she demanded. "I don't want to know him at all. I want him to report honestly and simply what he has seen of the world and of human nature, and I am willing to be talked to, and I am willing to believe; but when he begins to posture and play tricks, then I become resentful. Why should he intrude his own personality at all? — he was never introduced to me; I have no wish for his acquaintance. So long as he expresses an honest opinion, good and well; I am willing to listen; but when he begins to interpose his clever little tricks and grimaces, then I say, 'Get away, mountebank — and get a red-hot poker ready for pantaloons.'" And in this way she went on, whimsical, petulant, didactic by turns, to the stolid astonishment of a plethoric and red-faced old lady opposite, who contributed nothing to the conversation but an indigestion cough, and sate and stared, and doubtless had formed the opinion that any one who could talk in that fashion before a lot of strangers was no better than she should be.

But it was not of literature that Mrs. de Lara discoursed when Vincent returned that evening to the saloon, after having been in the smoking-room for about an hour, watching the commercials playing poker and getting up sweepstakes on the next day's run. When she caught sight of him, she immediately rose and left the group of newly-formed acquaintances with whom she had been sitting — in the neighbourhood of the piano — and deliberately came along and met him half-way.

"Let us remain here," said she; "and then if we talk we shan't interfere with the music."

She lay back in her chair as if waiting for him to begin; he was thinking how well her costume became her — her dress of black silk touched here and there with yellow satin — the sharp scarlet stroke of her fan — the small crescent of diamonds in her jet-black hair. Then the softened lamplight seemed to lend depth and lustre to her dark eyes; and gave something of warmth, too, to the pale and clear complexion. She had crossed her feet; her fan lay idle in her lap; she regarded him from under those long, out-curving lashes.

"They cannot hear you," she said – perhaps thinking that he was silent out of politeness to the innocent young damsels who were doing their best at the piano – "and you cannot hear them, which is also fortunate. Music is either divine – or intolerable; what they are doing is not divine; I have been listening. But good music – ah, well, it is not to be spoken of. Only this; isn't it strange that the two things that can preserve longest for you associations with some one you have been fond of are music and scent? Not painting – not any portrait; not poetry – not anything you have read, or may read: but music and scent. You will discover that some day."

He laughed.

"How curiously you talk! I dare say I am older than you – though that is not saying much."

"But I have seen the world," said she, with a smile, almost of sadness.

"Not half of what I have seen of it, I'll answer for that."

"Oh, but you," she continued, regarding him with much favour and kindness, "you are an *ingénu*– you have the frank English character – you would believe a good deal – in any one you cared for, I mean."

"I suppose I should," he said, simply enough. "I hope so."

"But as I say," she resumed, "the two things that preserve associations the longest – and are apt to spring on you suddenly – are music and scent. You may have forgotten in every other direction; oh, yes, forgetting is very easy, as you will find out; for 'constancy lives in realms above,' and not here upon earth at all: well, when you have forgotten the one you were fond of, and cannot remember, and perhaps do not care to remember all that happened at that too blissful period of life – then, on some occasion or another there chances to come a fragment of a song, or a whiff of scent, and behold! all that bygone time is before you again, and you tremble, you are bewildered! Oh, I assure you," she went on, with a very charming smile, "it is not at all a pleasant experience. You think you had buried all that past time, and hidden away the ghosts; you are beginning to feel pretty comfortable and content with all existing circumstances; and then – a few notes of a violin – a passing touch of perfume – and your heart jumps up as if it had been shot through with a rifle-ball. What is your favourite scent?" she asked, somewhat abruptly.

"Sandal-wood," said he (for surely that was revealing no secret?)

"Then she wore a string of sandal-wood beads," said Mrs. de Lara, with a quick look.

He was silent.

"And perhaps she gave them to you as a keep-sake?" was the next question.

Here, indeed, he was startled; and she noticed it; and laughed a little.

"No, I am not a witch," she said. "All that has happened before now: do you think you are the first? Why, I'm sure, now, you've worn those beads next your heart, in the daytime, and made yourself very uncomfortable; yes, and you've tried wearing them at night, and couldn't sleep because they hurt you. Never mind, I will tell you what to do: get them made into a watch chain, with small gold links connecting the beads; and when you wear it with evening dress, every woman will recognise it as a love-gift – every one of them will say 'A girl gave him that.'"

"Perhaps I might not wish to make a display of it," said Vincent.

"Then you're in the first stage of inconstancy," said she, promptly. "If you're not madly anxious that the whole world should know you have won her favour, then you've taken the first step on the downward road to indifference; you are regarding certain things as bygone, and your eyes are beginning to rove elsewhere. Well, why not? It's the way of the world. It's human nature. At the same time I want to hear some more about the young lady of the sandal-wood necklace."

"I have told you more than I intended," he answered her.

"You haven't told me anything: I guessed for myself."

"Well, now, I am going to ask your advice," said he – for how could he tell but that this bright, alert, intrepid person, with her varied experience of the world, might be able to help him? She was

far different from Maisrie, to be sure; different as night from day; but still she was a woman; and she might perhaps be able to interpret a nature wholly alien from her own.

So she sate mute and attentive, and watching every expression of his face, while he put before her a set of imaginary circumstances. It was not his own story; but just so much of it as might enable her to give him counsel. And he had hardly finished when she said —

"You don't know where to find her; and yet you have never thought of a means of bringing her to you at once?"

"What means?" said he.

"Why, it is so simple!" she exclaimed. "Have you no invention? But I will tell you, then. As soon as you land in New York, get yourself knocked over by a tram-car. The accident to the rich young Englishman who has just arrived in America will be in all the papers, and will lose nothing in the telling. Your father's name is known; you have recently been elected a member of Parliament; they will make the most of the story — and of course you needn't say your life is *not* in danger. Then on the wings of love the fair one comes flying; flops down by the side of your bed, in tears; perhaps she would even consent to a marriage — if you were looking dreadfully pale; then you could get well again in double quick time — and live happy ever after."

She was still watching him from under her long, indolent lashes; and of a sudden she changed her tone.

"Are you vexed? You find me not sympathetic? Perhaps I am not. Perhaps I am a little incredulous. You have told me very little; but I surmise; and when a young lady remains away from her lover, and does not wish it to be known where she is, then I confess I grow suspicious. Instead of 'Seek the woman,' it is 'Find the man' — oh, I mean in most cases — I mean in most cases — not in all — you must not misunderstand me!"

"In this case you are mistaken, then," said Vincent, briefly.

Indeed the gay young grass-widow found that she could not get very far into Vincent's confidence in this matter; and when she indulged in a little pleasantry, he grew reserved and showed a disposition to withdraw; whereupon she thought it better to give up the subject altogether. But she did not give him up; on the contrary, she took possession of him more completely than ever; and made no secret of the favour she bestowed on him. For example, there was an amateur photographer on board; and one morning (everybody knew everybody else by this time) he came up to Mrs. de Lara, who was seated in her deck-chair, with a little band of devoted slaves and admirers surrounding her.

"Mrs. de Lara," said he, "I've taken nearly everybody on board except you. Aren't you going to give me a chance?"

"Oh, yes," said she. "Yes, certainly." Then she looked round, and added, in the most natural way in the world — "But where is Mr. Harris?"

"He's in the saloon writing letters — I saw him there a minute ago," said one of the bystanders.

"Won't somebody go and fetch him?" she continued. "We ought to be all in — if Mr. Searle can manage it."

Accordingly Vincent was summoned from below, and forthwith made his appearance.

"You come and sit by me, Mr. Harris," said the young matron. "It would look absurd to have one sitting and all the others standing."

"Oh, no — this will do," said Vincent, seating himself on a signal-cannon that was close to the rail, while he steadied himself by putting a hand on the shrouds.

"Not at all," she protested, with a certain imperious wilfulness. "You're too far over; you'll be out of the picture altogether. There is Isabel's chair over there: fetch that."

And, of course, he had to do as he was bid; though it was rather a conspicuous position to assume. Then, when that negative was taken, she would have the grouping altered; Vincent had to stand by her side, with his arm on her chair; again he had to seat himself on the deck at her feet; whatever suggestions were made by the artist, she managed somehow that she and Vincent should

be together. And when, next day, the bronze-brown proofs were handed about, they were very much admired – except, perhaps, by the lady-passengers, who could not understand why Mrs. de Lara should pose as the only woman on board the steamer.

But it was not Mrs. de Lara who was in his thoughts when, early one morning, he found himself on the upper deck, just under the bridge, with his eyes fixed on a far strip of land that lay along the western horizon. Not a thin sharp line of blue, but a low-lying bulky mass of pale neutral tint; and there were faint yellow mists hanging about it, and also covering the smooth, long-undulating surface of the sea. However, the sunrise was now declared; this almost impalpable fog would soon be dispersed; and the great continent behind that out-lying coast would gradually awaken to the splendour of the new day. And in what part of its vast extent was Maisrie now awaiting him? – no, not awaiting him, but perhaps thinking of him, and little dreaming he was so near?

They cautiously steamed over the shallow waters at Sandy Hook; they sailed up the wide bay; momentarily the long flat line of New York, with its towering buildings and steeples jutting up here and there, was drawing nigh. Mrs. de Lara, rather wistfully, asked him whether she was ever likely to see him again; he answered that he did not know how soon he might have to leave New York; but, if she would be so kind as to give him her address, he would try to call before he went. She handed him her card; said something about the pleasant voyage they had had; and then went away to see that Isabel had not neglected anything in her packing.

They slowed into the wharf; the luggage was got ashore and examined – in this universal scrimmage he lost sight of Mrs. de Lara and her faithful companion: and by and by he was being jolted and pitched and flung about in the coach that was carrying him to the hotel he had chosen. With an eager curiosity he kept watching the passers-by on the side-walk, searching for a face that was nowhere to be seen. He had heard and known of many strange coincidences: it would only be another one – if a glad and wonderful one – were he to find Maisrie on the very first day of his arrival in America.

As soon as he had got established in his hotel, and seen that his luggage had been brought up, he went out again and made away for the neighbourhood of Printing House Square. It needs hardly be said that the *Western Scotsman* was not in possession of a vast white marble building, with huge golden letters shining in the afternoon sun; all the same he had little difficulty in finding the small and unpretentious office; and his first inquiry was for Mr. Anstruther. Mr. Anstruther had been there in the morning; but had gone away home, not feeling very well. Where did he live? – over in Brooklyn. But he would be at the office the next day? Oh, yes; almost certainly; it was nothing but a rather bad cold; and as they went to press on the following evening, he would be pretty sure to be at the office in the morning.

Then Vincent hesitated. This clerk seemed a civil-spoken kind of young fellow.

"Do you happen to know if – if a Mr. Bethune has called at this office of late?"

"Bethune? – not that I am aware of," was the answer.

"He is a friend of Mr. Anstruther's," Vincent went on, led by a vague hope, "an old gentleman with white hair and beard – a handsome old man. There would be a young lady with him most probably."

"No, sir; I have not seen any one of that description," said the clerk. "But he might have called on Mr. Anstruther at his home."

"Oh, yes, certainly – very likely," said Vincent. "Thank you. I will come along to-morrow morning, and hope to find Mr. Anstruther quite well again."

So he left and went out into the gathering dusk of the afternoon; and as he had nothing to do now, he walked all the way back to his hotel, looking at the various changes that had taken place since last he had been in the busy city. And then, when he reached the sumptuous and heavily-decorated apartment that served him at once as sitting-room and bed-room, he set to work to put his things in order, for they had been rather hurriedly jammed into his portmanteau on board ship.

He was thus engaged when there came a knock at the door.

"Entrez!" he called out, inadvertently (with some dim feeling that he was in a foreign town.)

The stranger needed no second invitation. He presented himself. He was a small man, with a sallow and bloodless face, a black beard closely trimmed, a moustache allowed to grow its natural length, and dark, opaque, impassive eyes. He was rather showily dressed, and wore a pince-nez.

For a second he paused at the door to take out his card-case; then, without uttering a word, he stepped forward and placed his card on the table. Vincent was rather surprised at this form of introduction; but of course he took up the card. He read thereon. '*Mr. Joseph de Lara.*'

"Oh, really," said he (but what passed through his mind was – 'Is that confounded woman going to persecute me on shore as well as at sea?'). "How do you do? Very glad to make your acquaintance."

"Oh, indeed, are you?" the other said, with a peculiar accent, the like of which Vincent had never heard before. "Perhaps not, when you know why I am here. Ah, do not pretend! – do not pretend!"

Vincent stared at him, as if this were some escaped lunatic with whom he had to deal.

"Sir, I am here to call you to account," said the little foreigner, in his thick voice. "It has been the scandal of the whole ship – the talk of all the voyage over – and it is an insult to me – to me – that my wife should be spoken of. Yes, you must make compensation – I demand compensation – and how? By the only way that is known to an Englishman. An Englishman feels only in his pocket; if he does wrong, he must pay; I demand from you a sum that I expend in charity – "

Vincent who saw what all this meant in a moment, burst out laughing – a little scornfully.

"You've come to the wrong shop, my good friend!" said he.

"What do you mean? What do you mean?" the little dark man exclaimed, with an affectation of rising wrath: "Look at this – I tell you, look at this!" He drew from his pocket one of the photographs which had been taken on board the steamer, and smacked it with the back of his hand. "Do you see that? – the scandal of the whole voyage! My wife compromised – the whole ship talking – you think you are to get off for nothing? No! No! you do not! The only punishment that can reach you is the punishment of the pocket – you must pay."

"Oh, don't make a fool of yourself!" said Vincent, with angry contempt. "I've met members of your profession before. But this is too thin."

"Oh – too thin? You shall find out!" the other said, vindictively – and yet the black and beady eyes behind the pince-nez were impassive and watchful. "There, on the other side of my card, is my address. You can think over it. Perhaps I shall see you to-morrow. If I do not – if you do not come there to give the compensation I demand, I will make this country too hot to hold you – yes, very much too hot, as you shall discover. I will make you sorry – I will make you sorry – you shall see – "

He went on vapouring in this fashion for some little time longer, affecting all the while to become more and more indignant; but at length Vincent, growing tired, walked to the door and opened it.

"This is the way out," he said curtly.

Mr. de Lara took the hint with a dignified equanimity.

"You have my address," he said, as he passed into the corridor; "I do not wish to do anything disagreeable – unless I am compelled. You will think over it; and I shall see you to-morrow, I hope. I wish to be friendly – it will be for your interest, too. Good night!"

Vincent shut the door and went and sat down, the better to consider. Not that he was in the least perturbed by this man's ridiculous threats; what puzzled him – and frightened him almost – was the possible connection of the charming and fascinating Mrs. de Lara with this barefaced attempt at blackmail. But no; he could not, he would not, believe it! He recalled her pretty ways, her frankness, her engaging manner, her good humour, her clever, wayward talk, her kindness towards himself; and he could not bring himself to think that all the time she had been planning a paltry and despicable conspiracy to extort money, or even that she would lend herself to such a scheme at the instigation

of her scapegrace husband. However, his speculations on these points were now interrupted by the arrival of the dinner-hour; and he went below to the table d'hôte.

During dinner he thought that a little later on in the evening he would go along to Lexington Avenue, and call on a lawyer whose acquaintance he had made on a former visit to New York. He might by chance be at home and disengaged; and an apology could be made for disturbing him at such an unusual hour. And this, accordingly, Vincent did; found that Mr. Griswold was in the house; was shown into the study; and presently the lawyer – a tall, thin man, with a cadaverous and deeply-lined face and cold grey eyes – came in and received his unexpected visitor politely enough.

"De Lara?" said he, when Vincent had told his story. "Well, yes, I know something of De Lara. And a very disagreeable fellow he is to have any dealings with."

"But I don't want to have any dealings with him," Vincent protested, "and I don't see how there should be any necessity. The whole thing is a preposterous attempt at extortion. If only he were to put down on paper what he said to me this evening, I would show him something – or at least I should do so if he and I were in England."

"He is not so foolish," the lawyer said. "Well, what do you propose to do? – compromise for the sake of peace and quietness?"

"Certainly not," was the instant reply.

"He's a mischievous devil," said Mr. Griswold, doubtfully. "And of course you don't want to have things said about you in newspapers, however obscure. Might get sent over to England. Yes, he's a mischievous devil when he turns ugly. What do you say now? – for the sake of peace and quietness – a little matter of a couple of hundred dollars – and nobody need know anything about it –"

"Give a couple of hundred dollars to that infernal scoundrel? – I will see him d – d first!" said Vincent, with a decision that was unmistakable.

"There's no reason why you should give him a cent – not the slightest," the lawyer went on. "But some people do, to save trouble. However, you will not be remaining long in this city; I see it announced that you are going on a tour through the United States and Canada."

"The fact is, Mr. Griswold," said Vincent, "I came along – at this unholy hour, for which I hope you will forgive me – not to ask you what I should do about that fellow's threats – I don't value them a pin's-point – but merely to see if you knew anything about those two –"

"The De Lara's?"

"Yes, what does he do, to begin with? What's his occupation – his business?"

"Nominally," said Mr. Griswold, "he belongs to my own profession; but I fancy he is more mixed up with some low-class newspapers. I have heard, indeed, that one of his sources of income is levying black-mail on actresses. The poor girls lose nerve, you understand: they won't fight; they would rather 'see' him, as the phrase is, than incur his enmity."

"Well, then, what I want to know still more particularly," the young man proceeded, "is this: is Mrs. de Lara supposed to take part in these pretty little plans for obtaining money?"

The lawyer smiled.

"You ought to know her better than I do; in fact, I don't know her at all."

Vincent was silent for a second.

"No; I should not have imagined it of her. It seems incredible. But if you don't know her personally, perhaps you know what is thought of her? What is her general reputation?"

"Her reputation? I can hardly answer that question. I should say," Mr. Griswold went on, in his slow and deliberate manner, "that there is a kind of – a kind of impression – that, so long as the money was forthcoming, Mrs. de Lara would not be too anxious to inquire where it came from."

"She was at the Captain's table!" Vincent exclaimed.

"Ship captains don't know much about what is going on on shore," was the reply. "Besides, if Mrs. de Lara wanted to sit at the Captain's table, it's at the Captain's table you would find her,

and that without much delay! In any case why are you so anxious to find out about Mrs. de Lara's peculiarities – apart from her being a very pretty woman?"

"Oh," said Vincent, as he rose to apologise once more for this intrusion, and to say good-night, "one is always meeting with new experiences. Another lesson in the ways of the world, I suppose."

But all the same, as he walked slowly and thoughtfully back to his hotel, he kept saying to himself that he would rather not believe that Mrs. de Lara had betrayed him and was an accomplice in this shameless attempt to make money out of him. Nay, he said to himself that he would refuse to believe until he was forced to believe: though he did not go a step further, and proceed to ask himself the why and wherefore of this curious reluctance.

CHAPTER III

WEST AND EAST

When Vincent went along the next morning to the office of the *Western Scotsman*, he was at once shown into the editorial room, and there he found before him a short, thick-set man with a leonine profusion of light chestnut hair thrown back from a lofty forehead, somewhat irregular features, and clear blue eyes that had at present something of a cold scrutiny in them. To any one else, the editor of the *Western Scotsman* might have appeared a somewhat commonplace-looking person; but to Vincent he was far from commonplace. Here was one who had befriended the two world-wanderers; who had known them in the bygone years; perhaps Maisrie herself had sat, in this very room, patiently waiting, while the two men talked. And yet when he asked for news of old George Bethune and his granddaughter, Mr. Anstruther's manner was unaccountably reserved.

"No," said he, "I know nothing of them, nothing whatever; but I can well understand that George Bethune might be in New York, or might have passed through New York, without calling on me."

"Why?" said Vincent in surprise.

"Oh, well," said the Editor, with some touch of asperity and even of indignation, "I should like to believe the best of an old friend; and certainly George Bethune always seemed to me a loyal Scot – proud of his country – proud of the name he bears, as well he might; but when you find him trying to filch the idea of a book – from a fellow-countryman, too – and making use of the letter of introduction I gave him to Lord Musselburgh to get money – "

"But that can all be explained," said Vincent, eagerly – and he even forgot his immediate disappointment in his desire to clear away those imputations from Maisrie's grandfather. "The money was repaid to Lord Musselburgh as soon as it was found that the American book was coming out; I know it was – I am certain of it; and when the volume did come out, no one was so anxious to welcome it, and give it a helping hand, as Mr. Bethune himself. He wrote the review in the *Edinburgh Chronicle*– "

"Oh, did he?" said the Editor, with some slight alteration in his tone. "I am glad of that. I could see it was written by some one with ample knowledge: in fact, I quoted the article in the *Scotsman*

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