LE QUEUX WILLIAM

THE HOUSE OF WHISPERS

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE LAIRD OF GLENCARDINE

"Why, what's the matter, child? Tell me."

"Nothing, dad—really nothing."

"But you are breathing hard; your hand trembles; your pulse beats quickly. There's something amiss—I'm sure there is. Now, what is it? Come, no secrets."

The girl, quickly snatching away her hand, answered with a forced laugh, "How absurd you really are, dear old dad! You're always fancying something or other."

"Because my senses of hearing and feeling are sharper and more developed than those of other folk perhaps," replied the grey-bearded old gentleman, as he turned his sharp-cut, grey, but expressionless countenance to the tall, sweet-faced girl standing beside his chair.

No second glance was needed to realise the pitiful truth. The man seated there in his fine library, with the summer sunset slanting across the red carpet from the open French windows, was blind.

Since his daughter Gabrielle had been a pretty, prattling child of nine, nursing her dolly, he had never looked upon her fair face. But he was ever as devoted to her as she to him.

Surely his was a sad and lonely life. Within the last fifteen years or so great wealth had come to him; but, alas! he was unable to enjoy it. Until eleven years ago he had been a prominent figure in politics and in society in London. He had sat in the House for one of the divisions of Hampshire, was a member of the Carlton, and one year he found his name among the Birthday Honours with a K.C.M.G. For him everybody predicted a brilliant future. The Press gave prominence to his speeches, and to his house in Park Street came Cabinet Ministers and most of the well-known men of his party. Indeed, it was an open secret in a certain circle that he had been promised a seat in the Cabinet in the near future.

Then, at the very moment of his popularity, a terrible tragedy had occurred. He was on the platform of the Albert Hall addressing a great meeting at which the Prime Minister was the principal speaker. His speech was a brilliant one, and the applause had been vociferous. Full of satisfaction, he drove home that night to Park Street; but next morning the report spread that his brilliant political career had ended. He had suddenly been stricken by blindness.

In political circles and in the clubs the greatest consternation was caused, and some strange gossip became rife.

It was whispered in certain quarters that the affliction was not produced by natural causes. In fact, it was a mystery, and one that

had never been solved. The first oculists of Europe had peered into and tested his eyes, but all to no purpose. The sight had gone for ever.

Therefore, full of bitter regrets at being thus compelled to renounce the stress and storm of political life which he loved so well, Sir Henry Heyburn had gone into strict retirement at Glencardine, his beautiful old Perthshire home, visiting London but very seldom.

He was essentially a man of mystery. Even in the days of his universal popularity the source of his vast wealth was unknown. His father, the tenth Baronet, had been sadly impoverished by the depreciation of agricultural property in Lincolnshire, and had ended his days in the genteel quietude of the Albany. But Sir Henry, without betraying to the world his methods, had in fifteen years amassed a fortune which people guessed must be considerably over a million sterling.

From a life of strenuous activity he had, in one single hour, been doomed to one of loneliness and inactivity. His friends sympathised, as indeed the whole British public had done; but in a month the tragic affair and its attendant mysterious gossip had been forgotten, as in truth had the very name of Sir Henry Heyburn, whom the Prime Minister, though his political opponent, had one night designated in the House as "one of the most brilliant and talented young men who has ever sat upon the Opposition benches."

In his declining years the life of this man was a pitiful tragedy,

his filmy eyes sightless, his thin white fingers ever eager and nervous, his hours full of deep thought and silent immobility. To him, what was the benefit of that beautiful Perthshire castle which he had purchased from Lord Strathavon a year before his compulsory retirement? What was the use of the old ancestral manor near Caistor in Lincolnshire, or the town-house in Park Street, the snug hunting-box at Melton, or the beautiful palm-shaded, flower-embowered villa overlooking the blue southern sea at San Remo? He remembered them all. He had misty visions of their splendour and their luxury; but since his blindness he had seldom, if ever, entered them. That big library up in Scotland in which he now sat was the room he preferred; and with his daughter Gabrielle to bear him company, to smooth his brow with her soft hand, to chatter and to gossip, he wished for no other companion. His life was of the past, a meteor that had flashed and had vanished for ever.

"Tell me, child, what is troubling you?" he was asking in a calm, kind voice, as he still held the girl's hand in his. The sweet scent of the roses from the garden beyond filled the room.

A smart footman in livery opened the door at that moment, asking, "Stokes has just returned with the car from Perth, Sir Henry, and asks if you want him further at present."

"No," replied his blind master. "Has he brought back her ladyship?"

"Yes, Sir Henry," replied the man. "I believe he is taking her to the ball over at Connachan to-night."

"Oh, yes, of course. How foolish I am! I quite forgot," said the Baronet with a slight sigh. "Very well, Hill."

And the clean-shaven young man, with his bright buttons bearing the chevron *gules* betwixt three boars' heads erased *sable*, of the Heyburns, bowed and withdrew.

"I had quite forgotten the ball at Connachan, dear," exclaimed her father, stretching out his thin white hand in search of hers again. "Of course you are going?"

"No, dad; I'm staying at home with you."

"Staying at home!" echoed Sir Henry. "Why, my dear Gabrielle, the first year you're out, and missing the best ball in the county! Certainly not. I'm all right. I shan't be lonely. A little box came this morning from the Professor, didn't it?"

"Yes, dad."

"Then I shall be able to spend the evening very well alone. The Professor has sent me what he promised the other day."

"I've decided not to go," was the girl's firm reply.

"I fear, dear, your mother will be very annoyed if you refuse," he remarked.

"I shall risk that, dear old dad, and stay with you to-night. Please allow me," she added persuasively, taking his hand in hers and bending till her red lips touched his white brow. "You have quite a lot to do, remember. A big packet of papers came from Paris this morning. I must read them over to you."

"But your mother, my dear! Your absence will be commented upon. People will gossip, you know."

"There is but one person I care for, dad—yourself," laughed the girl lightly.

"Perhaps you're disappointed over a new frock or something, eh?"

"Not at all. My frock came from town the day before yesterday. Elise declares it suits me admirably, and she's very hard to please, you know. It's white, trimmed with tiny roses."

"A perfect dream, I expect," remarked the blind man, smiling. "I wish I could see you in it, dear. I often wonder what you are like, now that you've grown to be a woman."

"I'm like what I always have been, dad, I suppose," she laughed.

"Yes, yes," he sighed, in pretence of being troubled. "Wilful as always. And—and," he faltered a moment later, "I often hear your dear dead mother's voice in yours." Then he was silent, and by the deep lines in his brow she knew that he was thinking.

Outside, in the high elms beyond the level, well-kept lawn, with its grey old sundial, the homecoming rooks were cawing prior to settling down for the night. No other sound broke the stillness of that quiet sunset hour save the solemn ticking of the long, old-fashioned clock at the farther end of the big, book-lined room, with its wide fireplace, great overmantel of carved stone with emblazoned arms, and its three long windows of old stained glass which gave it a somewhat ecclesiastical aspect.

"Tell me, child," repeated Sir Henry at length, "what was it that upset you just now?"

"Nothing, dad—unless—well, perhaps it's the heat. I felt rather unwell when I went out for my ride this morning," she answered with a frantic attempt at excuse.

The blind man was well aware that her reply was but a subterfuge. Little, however, did he dream the cause. Little did he know that a dark shadow had fallen upon the young girl's life—a shadow of evil.

"Gabrielle," he said in a low, intense voice, "why aren't you open and frank with me as you once used to be? Remember that you, my daughter, are my only friend!"

Slim, dainty, and small-waisted, with a sweet, dimpled face, and blue eyes large and clear like a child's, a white throat, a well-poised head, and light-chestnut hair dressed low with a large black bow, she presented the picture of happy, careless youth, her features soft and refined, her half-bare arms well moulded, and hands delicate and white. She wore only one ornament—upon her left hand was a small signet-ring with her monogram engraved, a gift from one of her governesses when a child, and now worn upon the little finger.

That face was strikingly beautiful, it had been remarked more than once in London; but any admiration only called forth the covert sneers of Lady Heyburn.

"Why don't you tell me?" urged the blind man. "Why don't you tell me the truth?" he protested.

Her countenance changed when she heard his words. In her blue eyes was a look of abject fear. Her left hand was tightly

clenched and her mouth set hard, as though in resolution.

"I really don't know what you mean, dad," she responded with a hollow laugh. "You have such strange fancies nowadays."

"Strange fancies, child!" echoed the afflicted man, lifting his grey, expressionless face to hers. "A blind man has always vague, suspicious, and black forebodings engendered by the darkness and loneliness of his life. I am no exception," he sighed. "I think ever of the might-have-beens."

"No, dear," exclaimed the girl, bending until her lips touched his white brow softly. "Forget it all, dear old dad. Surely your days here, with me, quiet and healthful in this beautiful Perthshire, are better, better by far, than if you had been a politician up in London, ever struggling, ever speaking, and ever bearing the long hours at the House and the eternal stress of Parliamentary life?"

"Yes, yes," he said, just a trifle impatiently. "It is not that. I don't regret that I had to retire, except—well, except for your sake perhaps, dear."

"For my sake! How?"

"Because, had I been a member of this Cabinet—which some of my friends predicted—you would have had the chance of a good marriage. But buried as you are down here instead, what chances have you?"

"I want no chance, dad," replied the girl. "I shall never marry."

A painful thought crossed the old man's mind, being mirrored upon his brow by the deep lines which puckered there for a few

brief moments. "Well," he exclaimed, smiling, "that's surely no reason why you should not go to the ball at Connachan to-night."

"I have my duty to perform, dad; my duty is to remain with you," she said decisively. "You know you have quite a lot to do, and when your mother has gone we'll spend an hour or two here at work."

"I hear that Walter Murie is at home again at Connachan. Hill told me this morning," remarked her father.

"So I heard also," answered the girl.

"And yet you are not going to the ball, Gabrielle, eh?" laughed the old man mischievously.

"Now come, dad," the girl exclaimed, colouring slightly, "you're really too bad! I thought you had promised me not to mention him again."

"So I did, dear; I—I quite forgot," replied Sir Henry apologetically. "Forgive me. You are now your own mistress. If you prefer to stay away from Connachan, then do so by all means. Only, make a proper excuse to your mother; otherwise she will be annoyed."

"I think not, dear," his daughter replied in a meaning tone. "If I remain at home she'll be rather glad than otherwise."

"Why?" inquired the old man quickly.

The girl hesitated. She saw instantly that her remark was an unfortunate one. "Well," she said rather lamely, "because my absence will relieve her of the responsibility of acting as chaperon."

What else could she say? How could she tell her father—the kindly but afflicted man to whom she was devoted—the bitter truth? His lonely, dismal life was surely sufficiently hard to bear without the extra burden of suspicion, of enforced inactivity, of fierce hatred, and of bitter regret. So she slowly disengaged her hand, kissed him again, and with an excuse that she had the menus to write for the dinner-table, went out, leaving him alone.

When the door had closed a great sigh sounded through the long, book-lined room, a sigh that ended in a sob.

The old man had leaned his chin upon his hands, and his sightless eyes were filled with tears. "Is it the truth?" he murmured to himself. "Is it really the truth?"

CHAPTER II
FROM OUT THE NIGHT

There are few of the Perthshire castles that more plainly declare their feudal origin and exhibit traces of obsolete power than does the great gaunt pile of ruins known as Glencardine. Its situation is both picturesque and imposing, and the stern aspect of the two square baronial towers which face the south, perched on a sheer precipice that descends to the Ruthven Water deep below, shows that the castle was once the residence of a predatory chief in the days before its association with the great Montrose.

Two miles from the long, straggling village of Auchterarder, in the centre of a fine, well-wooded, well-kept estate, the great ruined castle stands a silent monument of warlike days long since forgotten. There, within those walls, now overgrown with ivy and weeds, and where big trees grow in the centre of what was once the great paved courtyard, Montrose schemed and plotted, and, according to tradition, kept certain of his enemies in the dungeons below.

In the twelfth century the aspect of the deep glen was very different from what it is to-day. In those days the Ruthven was a broad river, flowing swiftly down to the Earn, and forming, by reason of a moat, an effective barrier against attack. To-day, however, the river has diminished into a mere burn meandering

through a beautiful wooded glen three hundred feet below, a glen the charms of which are well known throughout the whole of Scotland, and where in summer tourists from England endeavour to explore, but are warned back by Stewart, Sir Henry's Highland keeper.

A quarter of a mile from the great historic ruin is the modern castle, built mainly of stone from the ancient structure early in the eighteenth century, with oak-panelled rooms, many quaint gables, stained glass, and long, echoing corridors—a residence well adapted for entertaining on a lavish scale, the front overlooking the beautiful glen, and the back with level lawns and stretch of undulating park, well wooded and full of picturesque beauty.

The family traditions and history of the old place and its owners had induced Sir Henry Heyburn, himself a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, to purchase it from Lord Strathavon, into whose possession it had passed some forty years previously.

History showed that William de Graeme or Graham, who settled in Scotland in the twelfth century, became Lord of Glencardine, and the great castle was built by his son. They were indeed a noble race, as their biographer has explained. Ever fearless in their country's cause, they sneered at the mandates from impregnable Stirling, and were loyal in every generation.

Glencardine was a stronghold feared by all the surrounding nobles, and its men were full of valour and bravery. One story of them is perhaps worth the telling. In the year 1490 the all-

powerful Abbot of Inchaffray issued an order for the collection of the teinds of the Killearns' lands possessed by the Grahams of Glencardine in the parish of Monzievaird, of which he was titular. The order was rigorously executed, the teinds being exacted by force.

Lord Killearn of Dunning Castle was from home at the time; but in his absence his eldest son, William, Master of Dunning, called out a number of his clansmen, and marched towards Glencardine for the purpose of putting a stop to the abbot's proceedings. The Grahams of Glencardine, having been apprised of their neighbour's intention, mustered in strong force, and marched to meet him. The opposing forces encountered each other at the north side of Knock Mary, about two miles to the south-west of Crieff, while a number of the clan M'Robbie, who lived beside the Loch of Balloch, marched up the south side of the hill, halting at the top to watch the progress of the combat. The fight began with great fury on both sides. The Glencardine men, however, began to get the upper hand and drive their opponents back, when the M'Robbies rushed down the hill to the succour of the Killearns. The tables were now turned. The Grahams were unable to maintain their ground against the combined forces which they had now to face, and fled towards Glencardine, taking refuge in the Kirk of Monzievaird. The Killearns had no desire to follow up their success any farther, but at this stage they were joined by Duncan Campbell of Dunstaffnage, who had come across from Argyllshire to avenge

the death of his father-in-law, Robert of Monzie, who, along with his two sons, had a short time before been killed by the Lord of Glencardine.

An arrow shot from the church fatally wounded one of Campbell's men, and so enraged were the besiegers at this that they set fire to the heather-thatched building. Of the one hundred and sixty human beings who are supposed to have been in the church, only one young lad escaped, and this was effected by the help of one of the Killearns, who caught the boy in his arms as he leaped out of the flames. The Killearns did not go unpunished for their barbarous deed. Their leader, with several of his chief retainers, was afterwards beheaded at Stirling, and an assessment was imposed on the Killearns for behoof of the wives and children of the Grahams who had perished by their hands.

The Killearn by whose aid the young Graham had been saved was forced to flee to Ireland, but he afterwards returned to Scotland, where he and his attendants were known by the name of "Killearn Eirinich" (or Ernoch), meaning Killearn of Ireland. The estate which he held, and which is situated near Comrie, still bears that name. The site of the Kirk of Monzievaird is now occupied by the mausoleum of the family of Murray of Ochtertyre, which was erected in 1809. When the foundations were being excavated a large quantity of charred bones and wood was found.

The history of Scotland is full of references to the doings at Glencardine, the fine home of the great Lord Glencardine,

and of events, both in the original stronghold and in the present mansion, which have had important bearings upon the welfare of the country.

In the autumn of 1825 the celebrated poetess Baroness Nairne, who had been born at Gask, a few miles away, visited Glencardine and spent several weeks in the pleasantest manner. Within those gaunt ruins of the old castle she first became inspired to write her celebrated "Castell Gloom," near Dollar:

Oh Castell Gloom! thy strength is gone,
The green grass o'er thee growin';
On Hill of Care thou art alone,
The Sorrow round thee flowin'.

Oh Castell Gloom! on thy fair wa's
Nae banners now are streamin';
The howlit flits amang thy ha's,
And wild birds there are screamin'.

Oh, mourn the woe! oh, mourn the crime
Frae civil war that flows!
Oh, mourn, Argyll, thy fallen line,
And mourn the great Montrose!

The lofty Ochils bright did glow,
Though sleepin' was the sun;
But mornin's light did sadly show
What ragin' flames had done!

Oh, mirk, mirk was the misty cloud
That hung o'er thy wild wood!
Thou wert like beauty in a shroud,
And all was solitude.

A volume, indeed, could be written upon the history, traditions, and superstitions of Glencardine Castle, a subject in which its blind owner took the keenest possible interest. But, tragedy of it all, he had never seen the lovely old domain he had acquired! Only by Gabrielle's descriptions of it, as she led him so often across the woods, down by the babbling burn, or over the great ivy-covered ruins, did he know and love it.

Every shepherd of the Ochils knows of the Lady of Glencardine who, on rare occasions, had been seen dressed in green flitting before the modern mansion, and who was said to be the spectre of the young Lady Jane Glencardine, who in 1710 was foully drowned in the Earn by her jealous lover, the Lord of Glamis, and whose body was never recovered. Her appearance always boded ill-fortune to the family in residence.

Glencardine was scarcely ever without guests. Lady Heyburn, a shallow and vain woman many years younger than her husband, was always surrounded by her own friends. She hated the country, and more especially what she declared to be the "deadly dullness" of her Perthshire home. That moment was no exception. There were half-a-dozen guests staying in the house, but neither Gabrielle nor her father took the slightest interest in any of them. They had been, of course, invited to the ball

at Connachan, and at dinner had expressed surprise when their host's pretty daughter, the belle of the county, had declared that she was not going.

"Oh, Gabrielle is really such a wayward child!" declared her ladyship to old Colonel Burton at her side. "If she has decided not to go, no power on earth will persuade her."

"I'm not feeling at all well, mother," the girl responded from the farther end of the table. "You'll make nice excuses for me, won't you?"

"I think it's simply ridiculous!" declared the Baronet's wife. "Your first season, too!"

Gabrielle glanced round the table, coloured slightly, but said nothing. The guests knew too well that in the Glencardine household there had always been, and always would be, slightly strained relations between her ladyship and her stepdaughter.

For an hour after dinner all was bustle and excitement; then, in the covered wagonette, the gay party drove away, while Gabrielle, standing at the door, shouted after them a merry adieu.

It was a bright, clear, moonlit night, so beautiful indeed that, twisting a shawl about her shoulders, she went to her father's den, where he usually smoked alone, and, taking his arm, led him out for a walk into the park over that gravelled drive where, upon such nights as that, 'twas said that the unfortunate Lady Jane could be seen.

When alone, the sightless man could find his way quite well with the aid of his stick. He knew every inch of his domain.

Indeed, he could descend from the castle by the winding path that led deep into the glen, and across the narrow foot-bridges of the rushing Ruthven Water, or he could traverse the most intricate paths through the woods by means of certain landmarks which only he himself knew. He was ever fond of wandering about the estate alone, and often took solitary walks on bright nights with his stout stick tapping before him. On rare occasions, however, when, in the absence of her ladyship, he enjoyed the company of pretty Gabrielle, they would wander in the park arm-in-arm, chatting and exchanging confidences.

The departure of their house-party had lifted a heavy weight from both their hearts. It would be dawn before they returned. She loved her father, and was never happier than when describing to him things—the smallest objects sometimes—which he himself could not see.

As they strolled on beneath the shadows of the tall elms, the stillness of the night was broken only by the quick scurry of a rabbit into the tall bracken or the harsh cry of some night-bird startled by their approach.

Before them, standing black against the night-sky, rose the quaint, ponderous, but broken walls of the ancient stronghold, where an owl hooted weirdly in the ivy, and where the whispering of the waters rose from the deep below.

"It's a pity, dear, that you didn't go to the dance," the old man was saying, her arm held within his own. "You've annoyed your mother, I fear."

"Mother is quite happy with her guests, dad; while I am quite happy with you," she replied softly. "Therefore, why discuss it?"

"But surely it is not very entertaining for you to remain here with a man who is blind. Remember, you are young, and these golden days of youth will very soon pass."

"Why, you always entertain and instruct me, dad," she declared; "from you I've learnt so much archaeology and so much about mediaeval seals that I believe I am qualified to become a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, if women were admitted to fellowship."

"They will be one day, my dear, if the Suffragettes are allowed their own way," he laughed.

And then, during the full hour they strolled together, their conversation mostly consisted of questions asked by her father concerning some improvements being made in one of the farms which she had visited on the previous day, and her description of what had been done.

The stable-clock had struck half-past ten on its musical chimes before they re-entered the big hall, and, being relieved by Hill of the wraps, passed together into the library, where, from a locked cabinet in a corner, Gabrielle took a number of business papers and placed them upon the writing-table before her father.

"No," he said, running his thin white hands over them, "not business to-night, dear, but pleasure. Where is that box from the Professor?"

"It's here, dad. Shall I open it?"

"Yes," he replied. "That dear old fellow never forgets his old friend. Never a seal finds its way into the collection at Cambridge but he first sends it to me for examination before it is catalogued. He knows what pleasure it is to me to decipher them and make out their history—almost, alas! the only pleasure left to me, except you, my darling."

"Professor Moyes adopts your opinion always, dad. He knows, as every other antiquary knows, that you are the greatest living authority on the subject which you have made a lifetime study—that of the bronze seals of the Middle Ages."

"Ah!" sighed the old man, "if I could only write my great book! It is the pleasure debarred me. Years ago I started to collect material; but my affliction came, and now I can only feel the matrices and picture them in my mind. I see through your eyes, dear Gabrielle. To me, the world I loved so much is only a blank darkness, with your dear voice sounding out of it—the only voice, my child, that is music to my ears."

The girl said nothing. She only glanced at the sad, expressionless face, and, cutting the string of the small packet, displayed three bronze seals—two oval, about two inches long, and the third round, about one inch in diameter, and each with a small kind of handle on the reverse. With them were sulphur-casts or impressions taken from them, ready to be placed in the museum at Cambridge.

The old man's nervous fingers travelled over the surfaces quickly, an expression of complete satisfaction in his face.

"Have you the magnifying-glass, dear? Tell me what you make of the inscriptions," he said, at the same time carefully feeling the curious mediaeval lettering of one of the casts.

At the same instant she started, rose quickly from her chair, and held her breath.

A man, tall, dark-faced, and wearing a thin black overcoat, had entered noiselessly from the lawn by the open window, and stood there, with his finger upon his lips, indicating silence. Then he pointed outside, with a commanding gesture that she should follow.

Her eyes met his in a glance of fierce resentment, and instinctively she placed her hand upon her breast, as though to stay the beating of her heart.

Again he pointed in silent authority, and she as though held in some mysterious thraldom, made excuse to the blind man, and, rising, followed in his noiseless footsteps.

CHAPTER III
SEALS OF DESTINY

Ten minutes later she returned, panting, her face pale and haggard, her mouth hard-set. For a moment she stood in silence upon the threshold of the open doors leading to the grounds, her hand pressed to her breast in a strenuous endeavour to calm herself. She feared that her father might detect her agitation, for he was so quick in discovering in her the slightest unusual emotion. She glanced behind her with an expression full of fear, as though dreading the reappearance of that man who had compelled her to follow him out into the night. Then she looked at her father, who, still seated motionless with his back to her, was busy with his fingers upon something on the blotting-pad before him.

In that brief absence her countenance had entirely changed. She was pale to the lips, with drawn brows, while about her mouth played a hard, bitter expression, as though her mind were bent upon some desperate resolve.

That the man who had come there by stealth was no stranger was evident; yet that between them was some deep-rooted enmity was equally apparent. Nevertheless, he held her irresistibly within his toils. His clean-shaven face was a distinctly evil one. His eyes were set too close together, and in his physiognomy was

something unscrupulous and relentless. He was not the man for a woman to trust.

She stepped back from the threshold, and for a few seconds halted outside, her ears strained to catch any sound. Then, as though reassured, she pushed the chestnut hair from her hot, fevered brow, held her breath with strenuous effort, and, re-entering the library, advanced to her father's side.

"I wondered where you had gone, dear," he said in his low, calm voice, as he detected her presence. "I hoped you would not leave me for long, for it is not very often we enjoy an evening so entirely alone as to-night."

"Leave you, dear old dad! Why, of course not!" She laughed gaily, as though nothing had occurred to disturb her peace of mind. "We were just about to look at those seals Professor Moyes sent you to-day, weren't we? Here they are;" and she placed them before the helpless and afflicted man, endeavouring to remain undisturbed, and taking a chair at his side, as was her habit when they sat together.

"Yes," he said cheerfully. "Let us see what they are."

The first of the yellow sulphur-casts which he examined bore the full-length figure of an abbot, with mitre and crosier, in the act of giving his blessing. Behind him were three circular towers with pointed roofs surmounted by crosses, while around, in bold early Gothic letters, ran the inscription

+ S. BENEDITI . ABBATIS . SANTI . AMBROSII . D'RANCIA +

Slowly and with great care his fingers travelled over the raised letters and design of the oval cast. Then, having also examined the battered old bronze matrix, he said, "A most excellent specimen, and in first-class preservation, too! I wonder where it has been found? In Italy, without doubt."

"What do you make it out to be, dad?" asked the girl, seated in the chair at his side and as interested in the little antiquity as he was himself.

"Thirteenth century, my dear—early thirteenth century," he declared without hesitation. "Genuine, quite genuine, no doubt. The matrix shows signs of considerable wear. Is there much patina upon it?" he asked.

She turned it over, displaying that thick green corrosion which bronze acquires only by great age.

"Yes, quite a lot, dad. The raised portion at the back is pierced by a hole very much worn."

"Worn by the thong by which it was attached to the girdle of successive abbots through centuries," he declared. "From its inscription, it is the seal of the Abbot Benedict of the Monastery of St. Ambrose, of Rancia, in Lombardy. Let me think, now. We should find the history of that house probably in Sassolini's *Memorials*. Will you get it down, dear?—top shelf of the fifth case, on the left."

Though blind, he knew just where he could put his hand upon all his most cherished volumes, and woe betide any one who put a volume back in its wrong place!

Gabrielle rose, and, obtaining the steps, reached down the great leather-bound quarto book, which she carried to a reading-desk and at once searched the index.

The work was in Italian, a language which she knew fairly well; and after ten minutes or so, during which time the blind man continued slowly to trace the inscription with his finger-tips, she said, "Here it is, dad. 'Rancia, near Cremona. The religious brotherhood was founded there in 1132, and the Abbot Benedict was third abbot, from 1218 to 1231. The church still exists. The magnificent pulpit in marble, embellished with mosaics, presented in 1272, rests on six columns supported by lions, with an inscription: "*Nicolaus de Montava marmorarius hoc opus fecit.*" Opposite it is the ambo (1272), in a simple style, with a representation of Jonah being swallowed by a whale. In the choir is the throne adorned by mosaics, and the Cappella di San Pantaleone contains the blood of the saint, together with some relics of the Abbot Benedict. The cloisters still exist, though, of course, the monastery is now suppressed.'"

"And this," remarked Sir Henry, turning over the old bronze seal in his hand, "belonged to the Abbot Ambrose six hundred and fifty years ago!"

"Yes, dad," declared the girl, returning to his side and taking the matrix herself to examine it under the green-shaded reading-lamp. "The study of seals is most interesting. It carries one back into the dim ages. I hope the Professor will allow you to keep these casts for your collection."

"Yes, I know he will," responded the old Baronet. "He is well aware what a deep interest I take in my hobby."

"And also that you are one of the first authorities in the world upon the subject," added his daughter.

The old man sighed. Would that he could see with his eyes once again; for, after all, the sense of touch was but a poor substitute for that of sight!

He drew towards him the impression of the second of the oval seals. The centre was divided into two portions. Above was the half-length figure of a saint holding a closed book in his hand, and below was a youth with long hands in the act of adoration. Between them was a scroll upon which was written: "Sc. Martine O.P.N.," while around the seal were the words in Gothic characters:

+ SIGIL . HEINRICHI . PLEBANI . D' DOELSC'H +

"This is fourteenth century," pronounced the Baronet, "and is from Dulcigno, on the Adriatic—the seal of Henry, the vicar of the church of that place. From the engraving and style," he said, still fingering it with great care, now and then turning to the matrix in order to satisfy himself, "I should place it as having been executed about 1350. But it is really a very beautiful specimen, done at a time when the art of seal-engraving was at its height. No engraver could to-day turn out a more ornate and at the same time bold design. Moyes is really very fortunate in securing this. You must write, my dear, and ask him how these latest treasures came into his hands."

At his request she got down another of the ponderous volumes of Sassolini from the high shelf, and read to him, translating from the Italian the brief notice of the ancient church of Dulcigno, which, it appeared, had been built in the Lombard-Norman style of the eleventh century, while the campanile, with columns from Paestum, dated from 1276.

The third seal, the circular one, was larger than the rest, being quite two inches across. In the centre of the top half was the Madonna with Child, seated, a male and female figure on either side. Below were three female figures on either side, the two scenes being divided by a festoon of flowers, while around the edge ran in somewhat more modern characters—those of the early sixteenth century—the following:

+ SIGILLVM . VICARIS . GENERALIS . ORDINIS . BEATA . MARIA . D' MON . CARMEL +

"This," declared Sir Henry, after a long and most minute examination, "is a treasure probably unequalled in the collection at Cambridge, being the actual seal of the Vicar-General of the Carmelite order. Its date I should place at about 1150. Look well, dear, at those flower garlands; how beautifully they are engraved! Seal-making is, alas! to-day a lost art. We have only crude and heavy attempts. The company seal seems to-day the only thing the engraver can turn out—those machines which emboss upon a big red wafer." And his busy fingers were continuously feeling the great circular bronze matrix, and a moment afterwards its sulphur-cast.

He was an enthusiastic antiquary, and long ago, in the days when the world was light, had read papers before the Society of Antiquaries at Burlington House upon mediaeval seals and upon the early Latin codices. Nowadays, however, Gabrielle acted as his eyes; and so devoted was she to her father that she took a keen interest in his dry-as-dust hobbies, so that after his long tuition she could decipher and read a twelfth-century Latin manuscript, on its scrap of yellow, crinkled parchment, and with all its puzzling abbreviations, almost as well as any professor of palaeography at the universities, while inscriptions upon Gothic seals were to her as plain as a paragraph in a newspaper. More than once, white-haired, spectacled professors who came to Glencardine as her father's guests were amazed at her intelligent conversation upon points which were quite abstruse. Indeed, she had no idea of the remarkable extent of her own antiquarian knowledge, all of it gathered from the talented man whose affliction had kept her so close at his side.

For quite an hour her father fingered the three seal-impressions, discussing them with her in the language of a savant. She herself examined them minutely and expressed opinions. Now and then she glanced apprehensively to that open window. He pointed out to her where she was wrong in her estimate of the design of the circular one, explaining a technical and little-known detail concerning the seals of the Carmelite order.

From the window a cool breath of the night-wind came in, fanning the curtains and carrying with it the sweet scent of the

flowers without.

"How refreshing!" exclaimed the old man, drawing in a deep breath. "The night is very close, Gabrielle, dear. I fear we shall have thunder."

"There was lightning only a moment ago," explained the girl. "Shall I put the casts into your collection, dad?"

"Yes, dear. Moyes no doubt intends that I should keep them."

Gabrielle rose, and, passing across to a large cabinet with many shallow drawers, she opened one, displaying a tray full of casts of seals, each neatly arranged, with its inscription and translation placed beneath, all in her own clear handwriting.

Some of the drawers contained the matrices as well as the casts; but as matrices of mediaeval seals are rarities, and seldom found anywhere save in the chief public museums, it is no wonder that the bulk of private collections consist of impressions.

Presently, at the Baronet's suggestion, she closed and locked the cabinet, and then took up a bundle of business documents, which she commenced to sort out and arrange.

She acted as her father's private secretary, and therefore knew much of his affairs. But many things were to her a complete mystery, be it said. Though devoted to her father, she nevertheless sometimes became filled with a vague suspicion that the source of his great income was not altogether an open and honest one. The papers and letters she read to him often contained veiled information which sorely puzzled her, and which caused her many hours of wonder and reflection. Her

father lived alone, with only her as companion. Her stepmother, a young, good-looking, and giddy woman, never dreamed the truth.

What would she do, how would she act, Gabrielle wondered, if ever she gained sight of some of those private papers kept locked in the cavity beyond the black steel door concealed by the false bookcase at the farther end of the fine old restful room?

The papers she handled had been taken from the safe by Sir Henry himself. And they contained a man's secret.

CHAPTER IV
SOMETHING CONCERNING JAMES FLOCKART

In the spreading dawn the house party had returned from Connachan and had ascended to their rooms, weary with the night's revelry, the men with shirt-fronts crumpled and ties awry, the women with hair disordered, and in some cases with flimsy skirts torn in the mazes of the dance. Yet all were merry and full of satisfaction at what one young man from town had declared to be "an awfully ripping evening." All retired at once—all save the hostess and one of her male guests, the man who had entered the library by stealth earlier in the evening and had called Gabrielle outside.

Lady Heyburn and her visitor, James Flockart, had managed to slip away from the others, and now stood together in the library, into which the grey light of dawn was at that moment slowly creeping.

He drew up one of the blinds to admit the light; and there, away over the hills beyond, the glen showed the red flush that heralded the sun's coming. Then, returning to where stood the young and attractive woman in pale pink chiffon, with diamonds on her neck and a star in her fair hair, he looked her straight in the face and asked, "Well, and what have you decided?"

She raised her eyes to his, but made no reply. She was hesitating.

The gems upon her were heirlooms of the Heyburn family, and in that grey light looked cold and glassy. The powder and the slight touch of carmine upon her cheeks, which at night had served to heighten her beauty, now gave her an appearance of painted artificiality. She was undeniably a pretty woman, and surely required no artificial aids to beauty. About thirty-three, yet she looked five years younger; while her husband was twenty years senior to herself. She still retained a figure so girlish that most people took her for Gabrielle's elder sister, while in the matter of dress she was admitted in society to be one of the leaders of fashion. Her hair was of that rare copper-gold tint, her features regular, with a slightly protruding chin, soft eyes, and cheeks perfect in their contour. Society knew her as a gay, reckless, giddy woman, who, regardless of the terrible affliction which had fallen upon the brilliant man who was her husband, surrounded herself with a circle of friends of the same type as herself, and who thoroughly enjoyed her life regardless of any gossip or of the malignant statements by women who envied her.

Men were fond of "Winnie Heyburn," as they called her, and always voted her "good fun." They pitied poor Sir Henry; but, after all, he was blind, and preferred his hobbies of collecting old seals and dusty parchment manuscripts to dances, bridge-parties, theatres, aero shows at Ranelagh, and suppers at the Carlton or Savoy.

Like most wealthy women of her type, she had a wide circle of male friends. Younger men declared her to be "a real pal," and with some of the older beaux she would flirt and be amused by their flattering speeches.

Gabrielle's mother, the second daughter of Lord Buckhurst, had been dead several years when the brilliant politician met his second wife at a garden-party at Dollis Hill. She was daughter of a man named Lambert, a paper manufacturer, who acted as political agent in the town of Bedford; and she was, therefore, essentially a country cousin. Her beauty was, however, remarked everywhere. The Baronet was struck by her, and within three months they were married at St. George's, Hanover Square, the world congratulating her upon a very excellent match. From the very first, however, the difference in the ages of husband and wife proved a barrier. Ere the honeymoon was over she found that her husband, tied by his political engagements and by his eternal duties at the House, was unable to accompany her out of an evening; hence from the very first they had drifted apart, until, eight months later, the terrible affliction of blindness fell upon him.

For a time this drew her back to him. She was his constant and dutiful companion everywhere, leading him hither and thither, and attending to his wants; but very soon the tie bored her, and the attractions of society once again proved too great. Hence for the past nine years—Gabrielle being at school, first at Eastbourne and afterwards at Amiens—she had amused herself

and left her husband to his dry-as-dust hobbies and the loneliness of his black and sunless world.

The man who had just put that curious question to her was perhaps her closest friend. To her he owed everything, though the world was in ignorance of the fact. That they were friends everybody knew. Indeed, they had been friends years ago in Bedford, before her marriage, for James was the only son of the Reverend Henry Flockart, vicar of one of the parishes in the town. People living in Bedford recollected that the parson's son had turned out rather badly, and had gone to America. But a year or two after that the quiet-mannered old clergyman had died, the living had been given to a successor, and Bedford knew the name of Flockart no more. After Winifred's marriage, however, London society—or rather a gay section of it—became acquainted with James Flockart, who lived at ease in his pretty bachelor-rooms in Half-Moon Street, and who soon gathered about him a large circle of male acquaintances. Sir Henry knew him, and raised no objection to his wife's friendship towards him. They had been boy and girl together; therefore what more natural than that they should be friends in later life?

In her schooldays Gabrielle knew practically nothing of this man; but now she had returned to be her father's companion she had met him, and had bitter cause to hate both him and Lady Heyburn. It was her own secret. She kept it to herself. She hid the truth from her father—from every one. She watched closely and in patience. One day she would speak and tell the truth. Until

then, she resolved to keep to herself all that she knew.

"Well?" asked the man with the soft-pleated shirt-front and white waistcoat smeared with cigarette-ash. "What have you decided?" he asked again.

"I've decided nothing," was her blank answer.

"But you must. Don't be a silly fool," he urged. "You've surely had time to think over it?"

"No, I haven't."

"The girl knows nothing. So what have you to fear?" he endeavoured to assure her.

Lady Heyburn shrugged her shoulders. "How can you prove that she knows nothing?"

"Oh, she has eyes for nobody but the old man," he laughed. "To-night is an example. Why, she wouldn't come to Connachan, even though she knew that Walter was there. She preferred to spend the evening here with her father."

"She's a little fool, of course, Jimmy," replied the woman in pink; "but perhaps it was as well that she didn't come. I hate to have to chaperon the chit. It makes me look so horribly old."

"I wish to goodness the girl was out of the way!" he declared. "She's sharper than we think, and, by Jove! if ever she did know what was in progress it would be all up for both of us—wouldn't it? Phew! think of it!"

"If I thought she had the slightest suspicion," declared her ladyship with a sudden hardness of her lips, "I'd—I'd close her mouth very quickly."

"And for ever, eh?" he asked meaningly.

"Yes, for ever."

"Bah!" he laughed. "You'd be afraid to do that, my dear Winnie," added the man, lowering his voice. "Your husband is blind, it's true; but there are other people in the world who are not. Recollect, Gabrielle is now nineteen, and she has her eyes open. She's the eyes and ears of Sir Henry. Not the slightest thing occurs in this household but it is told to him at once. His indifference to all is only a clever pretence."

"What!" she gasped quickly; "do you think he suspects?"

"Pray, what can he suspect?" asked the man very calmly, both hands in his trouser-pockets, as he leaned back against the table in front of her.

"He can only suspect things which his daughter knows," she said.

"But what does she know? What can she know?" he asked.

"How can we tell? I have watched, but can detect nothing. I am, however, suspicious, because she did not come to Connachan with us to-night."

"Why?"

"Walter Murie may know something, and may have told her."

"If so, then to close her lips would be useless. It would only bring a heavier responsibility upon us—and–" But he hesitated, without finishing his sentence. His meaning was apparent from the wry face she pulled at his remark. He did not tell her how he had, while she had been dancing and flirting that night, made his

way back to the castle, or how he had compelled Gabrielle to go forth and speak with him. His action had been a bold one, yet its result had confirmed certain vague suspicions he had held.

Well he knew that the girl hated him heartily, and that she was in possession of a certain secret of his—one which might easily result in his downfall. He feared to tell the truth to this woman before him, for if he did so she would certainly withdraw from all association with him in order to save herself.

The key to the whole situation was held by that slim, sweet-faced girl, so devoted to her afflicted father. He was not quite certain as to the actual extent of her knowledge, and was as yet undecided as to what attitude he should adopt towards her. He stood between the Baronet's wife and his daughter, and hesitated in which direction to follow.

What did she really know, he wondered. Had she overheard any of that serious conversation between Lady Heyburn and himself while they walked together in the glen on the previous evening? Such a *contretemps* was surely impossible, for he remembered they had taken every precaution lest even Stewart, the head gamekeeper, might be about in order to stop trespassers, who, attracted by the beauties of Glencardine, tried to penetrate and explore them, and by so doing disturbed the game.

"And if the girl really knows?" he asked of the woman who stood there motionless, gazing out across the lawn fixedly towards the dawn.

"If she knows, James," she said in a hard, decisive tone, "then

we must act together, quickly and fearlessly. We must carry out that—that plan you proposed a year ago!"

"You are quite fearless, then," he asked, looking straight into her fine eyes.

"Fearless? Of course I am," she answered unflinchingly. "We must get rid of her."

"Providing we can do so without any suspicion falling upon us."

"You seem to have become quite white-livered," she exclaimed to him with a harsh, derisive laugh. "You were not so a year ago—in the other affair."

His brows contracted as he reflected upon all it meant to him. The girl knew something; therefore, to seal her lips was imperative for their own safety. She was their enemy.

"You are mistaken," he answered in a low calm voice. "I am just as determined—just as fearless—as I was then."

"And you will do it?" she asked.

"If it is your wish," he replied simply.

"Good! Give me your hand. We are agreed. It shall be done."

And the man took the slim white hand the woman held out to him, and a moment later they ascended the great oak staircase to their respective rooms.

The pair were in accord. The future contained for Gabrielle Heyburn—asleep and all unconscious of the dastardly conspiracy—only that which must be hideous, tragic, fatal.

CHAPTER V
THE MURIES OF CONNACHAN

Elise, Lady Heyburn's French maid, discovered next morning that an antique snake-bracelet was missing, a loss which occasioned great consternation in the household.

Breakfast was late, and at table, when the loss was mentioned, Gabrielle offered to drive over to Connachan in the car and make inquiry and search. The general opinion was that it had been dropped in one of the rooms, and was probably still lying there undiscovered.

The girl's offer was accepted, and half an hour later the smaller of the two Glencardine cars—the "sixteen" Fiat—was brought round to the door by Stokes, the smart chauffeur. Young Gellatly, fresh down from Oxford, begged to be allowed to go with her, and his escort was accepted.

Then, in motor-cap and champagne-coloured dust-veil, Gabrielle mounted at the wheel, with the young fellow at her side and Stokes in the back, and drove away down the long avenue to the high-road.

The car was her delight. Never so happy was she as when, wrapped in her leather-lined motor-coat, she drove the "sixteen." The six-cylinder "sixty" was too powerful for her, but with the "sixteen" she ran half-over Scotland, and was quite a common

object on the Perth to Stirling road. Possessed of nerve and full of self-confidence, she could negotiate traffic in Edinburgh or Glasgow, and on one occasion had driven her father the whole way from Glencardine up to London, a distance of four hundred and fifty miles. Her fingers pressed the button of the electric horn as they descended the sharp incline to the lodge-gates; and, turning into the open road, she was soon speeding along through Auchterarder village, skirted Tullibardine Wood, down through Braco, and along by the Knaik Water and St. Patrick's Well into Glen Artney, passing under the dark shadow of Dundurn, until there came into view the broad waters of Loch Earn.

The morning was bright and cloudless, and at such a pace they went that a perfect wall of dust stood behind them.

From the margin of the loch the ground rose for a couple of miles until it reached a plateau upon which stood the fine, imposing Priory, the ancestral seat of the Muries of Connachan. The aspect as they drove up was very imposing. The winding road was closely planted with trees for a large portion of its course, and the stately front of the western entrance, with its massive stone portico and crenulated cornice, burst unexpectedly upon them.

From that point of view one seemed to have reached the gable-end of a princely edifice, crowned with Gothic belfries; yet on looking round it was seen that the approach by which the doorway had been reached was lined on one side with buildings hidden behind the clustering foliage; and through the archway on the left one caught a glimpse of the ivy-covered clock-tower

and spacious stable-yard and garage extending northwards for a considerable distance.

Gabrielle ran the car round to the south side of the house, where in the foreground were the well-kept parks of Connachan, the smooth-shaven lawn fringed with symmetrically planted trees, and the fertile fields extending away to the very brink of the loch.

The original fortalice of the Muries, half a mile distant, was, like Glencardine, a ruin. The present Priory, notwithstanding its old-fashioned towers and lancet windows, was a comparatively modern structure, and the ivy which partially covered some of the windows could claim no great antiquity; yet the general effect of the architectural grouping was most pleasing, and might well deceive the visitor or tourist into the supposition that it belonged to a very remote period. It was, as a matter of fact, the work of Atkinson, who in the first years of the nineteenth century built Scone, Abbotsford, and Taymouth Castle.

With loud warning blasts upon the horn, Gabrielle Heyburn pulled up; but ere she could descend, Walter Murie, a good-looking, dark-haired young man in grey flannels, and hatless, was outside, hailing her with delight.

"Hallo, Gabrielle!" he cried cheerily, taking her hand, "what brings you over this morning, especially when we were told last night that you were so very ill?"

"The illness has passed," exclaimed young Gellatly, shaking his friend's hand. "And we're now in search of a lost bracelet—

one of Lady Heyburn's."

"Why, my mother was just going to wire! One of the maids found it in the boudoir this morning, but we didn't know to whom it belonged. Come inside. There are a lot of people staying over from last night." Then, turning to Gabrielle, he added, "By Jove! what dust there must be on the road! You're absolutely covered."

"Well," she laughed lightly, "it won't hurt me, I suppose. I'm not afraid of it."

Stokes took charge of the car and shut off the petrol, while the three went inside, passing into a long, cool cloister, down which was arranged the splendid collection of antiques discovered or acquired by Malcolm Murie, the well-known antiquary, who had spent many years in Italy, and died in 1794. In cases ranged down each side of the long cloister, with its antique carved chairs, armour, and statuary, were rare Etruscan and Roman terra-cottas, one containing relics from the tomb of a warrior, which included a sword-hilt adorned with gold and a portion of a golden crown formed of lilies *in relievo* of pure gold laid upon a mould of bronze; another case was full of bronze ornaments unearthed near Albano, and still another contained rare Abyssinian curios. The collection was renowned among antiquaries, and was often visited by Sir Henry, who would be brought there in the car by Gabrielle, and spend hours alone fingering the objects in the various cases.

Sir George Murie and Sir Henry Heyburn were close friends; therefore it was but natural that Walter, the heir to the Connachan

estate, and Gabrielle should often be thrown into each other's company, or perhaps that the young man—who for the past twelve months had been absent on a tour round the world—should have loved her ever since the days when she wore short skirts and her hair down her back. He had been sorely puzzled why she had not at the last moment come to the ball. She had promised that she would be with them, and yet she had made the rather lame excuse of a headache.

Truth to tell, Walter Murie had during the past week been greatly puzzled at her demeanour of indifference. Seven days ago he had arrived in London from New York, but found no letter from her awaiting him at the club, as he had expected. The last he had received in Detroit a month before, and it was strangely cold, and quite unusual. Two days ago he had arrived home, and in secret she had met him down at the end of the glen at Glencardine. At her wish, their first meeting had been clandestine. Why?

Both their families knew of their mutual affection. Therefore, why should she now make a secret of their meeting after twelve months' separation? He was puzzled at her note, and he was further puzzled at her attitude towards him. She was cold and unresponsive. When he held her in his arms and kissed her soft lips, she only once returned his passionate caress, and then as though it were a duty forced upon her. She had, however, promised to come to the ball. That promise she had deliberately broken.

Though he could not understand her, he made pretence of unconcern. He regretted that she had not felt well last night—that was all.

At the end of the cloister young Gellatly found one of Lady Murie's guests, a girl named Violet Priest, with whom he had danced a good deal on the previous night, and at once attached himself to her, leaving Walter with the sweet-faced, slim-waisted object of his affections.

The moment they were alone in the long cloister he asked her quickly, "Tell me, Gabrielle, the real reason why you did not come last night. I had looked forward very much to seeing you. But I was disappointed —sadly disappointed."

"I am very sorry," she laughed, with assumed nonchalance; "but I had to assist my father with some business papers."

"Your mother told everyone that you do not care for dancing," he said.

"That is untrue, Walter. I love dancing."

"I knew it was untrue, dearest," he said, standing before her. "But why does Lady Heyburn go out of her way to throw cold water upon you and all your works?"

"How should I know?" asked the girl, with a slight shrug. "Perhaps it is because my father places more confidence in me than in her."

"And his confidence is surely not misplaced," he said. "I tell you frankly that I don't like Lady Heyburn."

"She pretends to like you."

"Pretends!" he echoed. "Yes, it's all pretence. But," he added, "do tell me the real reason of your absence last night, Gabrielle. It has worried me."

"Why worry, my dear Walter? Is it really worth troubling over? I'm only a girl, and, as such, am allowed vagaries of nerves —and all that. I simply didn't want to come, that's all."

"Why?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I hate the crowd we have staying in our house. They are all mother's friends; and mother's friends are never mine, you know."

He looked at her slim figure, so charming in its daintiness. "What a dear little philosopher you've grown to be in a single year!" he declared. "We shall have you quoting Friedrich Nietzsche next."

"Well," she laughed, "if you would like me to quote him I can do so. I read *Zarathustra* secretly at school. One of the girls got a copy from Germany. Do you remember what Zarathustra says: 'Verily, ye could wear no better masks, ye present-day men, than your own faces,' Who could recognise you?"

"I hope that's not meant to be personal," he laughed, gazing at the girl's beautiful countenance and great, luminous eyes.

"You may take it as you like," she declared with a delightfully mischievous smile. "I only quoted it to show you that I have read Nietzsche, and recollect his many truths."

"You certainly do seem to have a gay house-party at Glencardine," he remarked, changing the subject. "I noticed

Jimmy Flockart there as usual."

"Yes. He's one of mother's greatest friends. She makes good use of him in every way. Up in town they are inseparable, it seems. They knew each other, I believe, when they were boy and girl."

"So I've heard," replied the young man thoughtfully, leaning against a big glass case containing a collection of *lares* and *penates*—images of Jupiter, Hercules, Mercury, &c., used as household gods. "I expected that he would be dancing attendance upon her during the whole of the evening; but, curiously enough, soon after his arrival he suddenly disappeared, and was not seen again until nearly two o'clock." Then, looking straight in the girl's fathomless eye, he added, "Do you know, Gabrielle, I don't like that fellow. Beware of him."

"Neither do I. But your warning is quite unnecessary, I assure you. He doesn't interest me in the least."

Walter Murie was silent for a moment, silent as though in doubt. A shadow crossed his well-cut features, but only for a single second. Then he smiled again upon the fair-faced, soft-spoken girl whom he loved so honestly and so well, the woman who was all in all to him. How could he doubt her—she who only a year ago had, out yonder in the park, given him her pledge of affection, and sealed it with her hot, passionate kisses? Remembrance of those sweet caresses still lingered with him. But he doubted her. Yes, he could not conceal from himself certain very ugly facts—facts within his own knowledge. Yet

was not his own poignant jealousy misleading him? Was not her refusal to attend the ball perhaps due to some sudden pique or unpleasantness with her giddy stepmother? Was it? He only longed to be able to believe that it might be so. Alas! however, he had discovered the shadow of a strange and disagreeable truth.

CHAPTER VI
CONCERNS
GABRIELLE'S SECRET

Along the cloister they went to the great hall, where Walter's mother advanced to greet her. Full of regrets at the girl's inability to attend the dance, she handed her the missing bracelet, saying, "It is such a curious and unusual one, dear, that we wondered to whom it belonged. Brown found it when she was sweeping my boudoir this morning. Take it home to your mother, and suggest that she has a stronger clasp put on it."

The girl held the golden snake in her open hand. This was the first time she had ever seen it. A fine example of old Italian workmanship, it was made flexible, with its flat head covered with diamonds, and two bright emeralds for the eyes. The mouth could be opened, and within was a small cavity where a photo or any tiny object could be concealed. Where her mother had picked it up she could not tell. But Lady Heyburn was always purchasing quaint odds and ends, and, like most giddy women of her class, was extraordinarily fond of fantastic jewellery and ornaments such as other women did not possess.

Several members of the house-party at Connachan entered and chatted, all being full of the success of the previous night's entertainment. Lady Murie's husband had, it appeared, left that

morning for Edinburgh to attend a political committee.

A little later Walter succeeded in getting Gabrielle alone again in a small, well-furnished room leading off the library—a room in which she had passed many happy hours with him before he had gone abroad. He had been in London reading for the Bar, but had spent a good deal of his time up in Perthshire, or at least all he possibly could. At such times they were inseparable; but after he had been "called"—there being no necessity for him to practise, he being heir to the estates—he had gone to India and Japan "to broaden his mind," as his father had explained.

"I wonder, Gabrielle," he said hesitatingly, holding her hand as they stood at the open window—"I wonder if you will forgive me if I put a question to you. I—I know I ought not to ask it," he stammered; "but it is only because I love you so well, dearest, that I ask you to tell me the truth."

"The truth!" echoed the girl, looking at him with some surprise, though turning just a trifle paler, he thought. "The truth about what?"

"About that man James Flockart," was his low, distinct reply.

"About him! Why, my dear Walter," she laughed, "whatever do you want to know about him? You know all that I know. We were agreed long ago that he is not a gentleman, weren't we?"

"Yes," he said. "Don't you recollect our talk at your house in London two years ago, soon after you came back from school? Do you remember what you then told me?"

She flushed slightly at the recollection. "I—I ought not to have

said that," she exclaimed hurriedly. "I was only a girl then, and I—well, I didn't know."

"What you said has never passed my lips, dearest. Only, I ask you again to-day to tell me honestly and frankly whether your opinion of him has in any way changed. I mean whether you still believe what you then said."

She was silent for a few moments. Her lips twitched nervously, and her eyes stared blankly out of the window. "No, I repeat what —I—said —then," she answered in a strange hoarse voice.

"And only you yourself suspect the truth?"

"You are the only person to whom I have mentioned it, and I have been filled with regret ever since. I had no right to make the allegation, Walter. I should have kept my secret to myself."

"There was surely no harm in telling me, dearest," he exclaimed, still holding her hand, and looking fixedly into those clear-blue, fathomless eyes so very dear to him. "You know too well that I would never betray you."

"But if he knew—if that man ever knew," she cried, "he would avenge himself upon me! I know he would."

"But what have you to fear, little one?" he asked, surprised at the sudden change in her.

"You know how my mother hates me, how they all detest me —all except dear old dad, who is so terribly helpless, misled, defrauded, and tricked—as he daily is—by those about him."

"I know, darling," said the young man. "I know it all only too well.

Trust in me;" and, bending, he kissed her softly upon the lips.

What was the real, the actual truth, he wondered. Was she still his, as she had ever been, or was she playing him false?

Little did the girl dream of the extent of her lover's knowledge of certain facts which she was hiding from the world, vainly believing them to be her own secret. Little did she dream how very near she was to disaster.

Walter Murie had, after a frivolous youth, developed at the age of six-and-twenty into as sound, honest, and upright a young man as could be found beyond the Border. As full of high spirits as of high principles, he was in every way worthy the name of the gallant family whose name he bore, a Murie of Connachan, both for physical strength and scrupulous honesty; while his affection for Gabrielle Heyburn was that deep, all-absorbing devotion which makes men sacrifice themselves for the women they love. He was not very demonstrative. He never wore his heart upon his sleeve, but deep within him was that true affection which caused him to worship her as his idol. To him she was peerless among women, and her beauty was unequalled. Her piquant mischievousness amused him. As a girl, she had always been fond of tantalising him, and did so now. Yet he knew her fine character; how deeply devoted she was to her afflicted father, and how full of discomfort was her dull life, now that she had exchanged her school for the same roof which covered Sir Henry's second wife. Indeed, this latter event was the common talk of all who knew the family. They sighed and pitied poor Sir

Henry. It was all very sad, they said; but there their sympathy ended. During Walter's absence abroad something had occurred. What that something was he had not yet determined. Gabrielle was not exactly the same towards him as she used to be. His keen sensitiveness told him this instinctively, and, indeed, he had made a discovery that, though he did not admit it now, had staggered him.

He stood there at the open window chatting with her, but what he said he had no idea. His one thought—the one question which now possessed him—was whether she still loved him, or whether the discovery he had made was the actual and painful truth. Tall and good-looking, clean-shaven, and essentially easy-going, he stood before her with his dark eyes fixed upon her—eyes full of devotion, for was she not his idol?

She was telling him of a garden-party which her mother had arranged for the following Thursday, and pressing him to attend it.

"I'm afraid I may have to be in London that day, dearest," he responded. "But if I may I'll come over to-morrow and play tennis. Will you be at home in the afternoon?"

"No," she declared promptly, with a mischievous laugh, "I shan't. I shall be in the glen by the first bridge at four o'clock, and shall wait for you there."

"Very well, I'll be there," he laughed. "But why should we meet in secret like this, when everybody knows of our engagement?"

"Well, because I have a reason," she replied in a strained voice

—"a strong reason."

"You've grown suddenly shy, afraid of chaff, it seems."

"My mother is, I fear, not altogether well disposed towards you, Walter," was her quick response. "Dad is very fond of you, as you well know; but Lady Heyburn has other views for me, I think."

"And is that the only reason you wish to meet me in secret?" he asked.

She hesitated, became slightly confused, and quickly turned the conversation into a different channel, a fact which caused him increased doubt and reflection.

Yes, something certainly had occurred. That was vividly apparent. A gulf lay between them.

Again he looked straight into her beautiful face, and fell to wondering. What could it all mean? So true had she been to him, so sweet her temperament, so high all her ideals, that he could not bring himself to believe ill of her. He tried to fight down those increasing doubts. He tried to put aside the naked truth which had arisen before him since his return to England. He loved her. Yes, he loved her, and would think no ill of her until he had proof, actual and indisputable.

As far as the eligibility of Walter Murie was concerned there was no question. Even Lady Heyburn could not deny it when she discussed the matter over the tea-cups with her intimate friends.

The family of the Muries of Connachan claimed a respectable antiquity. The original surname of the family was De Balinhard,

assumed from an estate of that name in the county of Forfar. Sir Jocelynus de Baldendard, or Balinhard, who witnessed several charters between 1204 and 1225, is the first recorded of the name, but there is no documentary proof of descent before that time; and, indeed, most of the family papers having been burned in 1452, little remains of the early history beyond the names and succession of the possessors of Balinhard from about 1250 till 1350, which are stated in a charter of David II. now preserved in the British Museum. This charter records the grant made by William de Maule to John de Balinhard, *filio et heredi quondam Joannis filii Christini filii Joannis de Balinhard*, of the lands of Murie, in the county of Perthshire, and from that period, about 1350, the family has borne the name of De Murie instead of De Balinhard. In 1409 Duthac de Murie obtained a charter of the Castle of Connachan, possession of which has been held by the family uninterruptedly ever since, except for about thirty years, when the lands were under forfeiture on account of the Rebellion of 1715.

Near Crieff Junction station the lands of Glencardine and Connachan march together; therefore both Sir Henry Heyburn and his friend, Sir George Murie, had looked upon an alliance between the two houses as quite within the bounds of probability.

If the truth were told, Gabrielle had never looked upon any other man save Walter with the slightest thought of affection. She loved him with the whole strength of her being. During that twelve long months of absence he had been daily in her thoughts,

and his constant letters she had read and re-read dozens of times. She had, since she left school, met many eligible young men at houses to which her mother had grudgingly taken her—young men who had been nice to her, flattered her, and flirted with her. But she had treated them all with coquettish disdain, for in the world there was but one man who was her lover and her hero—her old friend Walter Murie.

At this moment, as they were together in that cosy, well-furnished room, she became seized by a twinge of conscience. She knew quite well that she was not treating him as she ought. She had not been at all enthusiastic at his return, and she had inquired but little about his wanderings. Indeed, she had treated him with a studied indifference, as though his life concerned her but little. And yet if he only knew the truth, she thought; if he could only see that that cool, unresponsive attitude was forced upon her by circumstances; if he could only know how quickly her heart throbbed when he was present, and how dull and lonely all became when he was absent!

She loved him. Ah, yes! as truly and devotedly as he loved her. But between them there had fallen a dark, grim shadow—one which, at all hazards and by every subterfuge, she must endeavour to hide. She loved him, and could, therefore, never bear to hear his bitter reproaches or to witness his grief. He worshipped her. Would that he did not, she thought. She must hide her secret from him as she was hiding it from all the world.

He was speaking. She answered him calmly yet mechanically.

He wondered what strange thoughts were concealed beneath those clear, wide-open, child-like eyes which he was trying in vain to fathom. What would he have thought had he known the terrible truth: that she had calmly, and after long reflection, resolved to court death—death by her own hand—rather than face the exposure with which she had that previous night been threatened.

CHAPTER VII
CONTAINS CURIOUS CONFIDENCES

A week had gone by. Stewart, the lean, thin-faced head-keeper, who spoke with such a strong accent that guests from the South often failed to understand him, and who never seemed to sleep, so vigilant was he over the Glencardine shootings, had reported the purchase of a couple of new pointers.

Therefore, one morning Lady Heyburn and her constant cavalier, Flockart, had walked across to the kennels close to the castle to inspect them.

At the end of the big, old-fashioned stable-yard, with grey stone outbuildings ranged down either side, and the ancient mounting-block a conspicuous object, were ranged the modern iron kennels full of pointers and spaniels. In that big, old, paved quadrangle, the cobbles of which were nowadays stained by the oil of noisy motor-cars, many a Graham of Glencardine had mounted to ride into Stirling or Edinburgh, or to drive in his coach to far-off London. The stables were now empty, but the garage adjoining, whence came the odour of petrol, contained the two Glencardine cars, besides three others belonging to members of that merry, irresponsible house-party.

The inspection of the pointers was a mere excuse on her

ladyship's part to be alone with Flockart.

She wished to speak with him, and with that object suggested that they should take the by-road which, crossing one of the main roads through the estate, led through a leafy wood away to a railway level-crossing half a mile off. The road was unfrequented, and they were not likely to meet any of the guests, for some were away fishing, others had motored into Stirling, and at least three had walked down into Auchterarder to take a telegram for their blind host.

"Well, my dear Jimmy," asked the well-preserved, fair-haired woman in short brown skirt and fresh white cotton blouse and sun-hat, "what have you discovered?"

"Very little," replied the easy-going man, who wore a suit of rough heather-tweed and a round cloth fishing-hat. "My information is unfortunately very meagre. You have watched carefully. Well, what have you found out?"

"That she's just as much in love with him as before—the little fool!"

"And I suppose he's just as devoted to her as ever—eh?"

"Of course. Since you've been away these last few days he's been over here from Connachan, on one pretext or another, every day. Of course I've been compelled to ask him to lunch, for I can't afford to quarrel with his people, although I hate the whole lot of them. His mother gives herself such airs, and his father is the most terrible old bore in the whole country."

"But the match would be an advantageous one—wouldn't it?"

suggested the man strolling at her side, and he stopped to light a cigarette which he took from a golden case.

"Advantageous! Of course it would! But we can't afford to allow it, my dear Jimmy. Think what such an alliance would mean to us!"

"To you, you mean."

"To you also. An ugly revelation might result, remember. Therefore it must not be allowed. While Walter was abroad all was pretty plain sailing. Lots of the letters she wrote him I secured from the post-box, read them, and afterwards burned them. But now he's back there is a distinct peril. He's a cute young fellow, remember."

Flockart smiled. "We must discover a means by which to part them," he said slowly but decisively. "I quite agree with you that to allow the matter to go any further would be to court disaster. We have a good many enemies, you and I, Winnie—many who would only be too pleased and eager to rake up that unfortunate episode. And I, for one, have no desire to figure in a criminal dock."

"Nor have I," she declared quickly.

"But if I went there you would certainly accompany me," he said, looking straight at her.

"What!" she gasped in quick dismay. "You would tell the truth and—and denounce me?"

"I would not; but no doubt there are others who would," was his answer.

For a few moments her arched brows were knit, and she remained silent. Her reflections were uneasy ones. She and the man at her side, who for years had been her confidant and friend, were both in imminent peril of exposure. Their relations had always been purely platonic; therefore she was not afraid of any allegation against her honour. What her enemies had said were lies—all of them. Her fear lay in quite a different direction.

Her poor, blind, helpless husband was in ignorance of that terrible chapter of her own life—a chapter which she had believed to be closed for ever, and yet which was, by means of a chain of unexpected circumstances, in imminent danger of being reopened.

"Well," she inquired at last in a blank voice, "and who are those others who, you believe, would be prepared to denounce me?"

"Certain persons who envy you your position, and who, perhaps, think that you do not treat poor old Sir Henry quite properly."

"But I do treat him properly!" she declared vehemently. "If he prefers the society of that chit of a girl of his to mine, how can I possibly help it? Besides, people surely must know that, to me, the society of a blind old man is not exactly conducive to gaiety. I would only like to put those women who malign me into my place for a single year. Perhaps they would become even more reckless of the *convenances* than I am!"

"My dear Winnie," he said, "what's the use of discussing such

an old and threadbare theme? Things are not always what they seem, as the man with a squint said when he thought he saw two sovereigns where there was but one. The point before us is the girl's future."

"It lies in your hands," was her sharp reply.

"No; in yours. I have promised to look after Walter Murie."

"But how can I act?" she asked. "The little hussy cares nothing for me—only sees me at table, and spends the whole of her day with her father."

"Act as I suggested last week," was his rejoinder. "If you did that the old man would turn her out of the place, and the rest would be easy enough."

"But–"

"Ah!" he laughed derisively, "I see you've some sympathy with the girl after all. Very well, take the consequences. It is she who will be your deadliest enemy, remember; she who, if the disaster falls, will give evidence against you. Therefore, you'd best act now, ere it's too late. Unless, of course, you are in fear of her."

"I don't fear her!" cried the woman, her eyes flashing defiance. "Why do you taunt me like this? You haven't told me yet what took place on the night of the ball."

"Nothing. The mystery is just as complete as ever."

"She defied you—eh?"

Her companion nodded.

"Then how do you now intend to act?"

"That's just the question I was about to put to you," he said.

"There is a distinct peril—one which becomes graver every moment that the girl and young Murie are together. How are we to avert it?"

"By parting them."

"Then act as I suggested the other day. It's the only way, Winnie, depend upon it—the only way to secure our own safety."

"And what would the world say of me, her stepmother, if it were known that I had done such a thing?"

"You've never yet cared for what the world said. Why should you care now? Besides, it never will be known. I should be the only person in the secret, and for my own sake it isn't likely that I'd give you away. Is it? You've trusted me before," he added; "why not again?"

"It would break my husband's heart," she declared in a low, intense voice. "Remember, he is devoted to her. He would never recover from the shock."

"And yet the other night after the ball you said you were prepared to carry out the suggestion, in order to save yourself," he remarked with a covert sneer.

"Perhaps I was piqued that she should defy my suggestion that she should go to the ball."

"No, you were not. You never intended her to go. That you know."

When he spoke to her this man never minced matters. The woman was held by him in a strange thraldom which surprised many people; yet to all it was a mystery. The world knew nothing

of the fact that James Flockart was without a penny, and that he lived—and lived well, too—upon the charity of Lady Heyburn. Two thousand pounds were placed, in secret, every year to his credit from her ladyship's private account at Coutts's, besides which he received odd cheques from her whenever his needs required. To his friends he posed as an easy-going man-about-town, in possession of an income not large, but sufficient to supply him with both comforts and luxuries. He usually spent the London season in his cosy chambers in Half-Moon Street; the winter at Monte Carlo or at Cairo; the summer at Aix, Vichy, or Marienbad; and the autumn in a series of visits to houses in Scotland.

He was not exactly a ladies' man. Courtly, refined, and a splendid linguist, as he was, the girls always voted him great fun; but from the elder ones, and from married women especially, he somehow held himself aloof. His one woman-friend, as everybody knew, was the flighty, go-ahead Lady Heyburn.

Of the country-house party he was usually the life and soul. No man could invent so many practical jokes or carry them on with such refinement of humour as he. Therefore, if the hostess wished to impart merriment among her guests, she sought out and sent a pressing invitation to "Jimmy" Flockart. A first-class shot, an excellent tennis-player, a good golfer, and quite a good hand at putting a stone in curling, he was an all-round sportsman who was sure to be highly popular with his fellow-guests. Hence up in the north his advent was always welcomed

with loud approbation.

To those who knew him, and knew him well, this confidential conversation with the woman whose platonic friendship he had enjoyed through so many years would certainly have caused greatest surprise. That he was a schemer was entirely undreamed of. That he was attracted by "Winnie Heyburn" was declared to be only natural, in view of the age and affliction of her own husband. Cases such as hers are often regarded with a very lenient eye.

They had reached the level-crossing where, beside the line of the Caledonian Railway, stands the mail-apparatus by which the down-mail for Euston picks up the local bag without stopping, while the up-mail drops its letters and parcels into the big, strong net. For a few moments they halted to watch the dining-car express for Euston pass with a roar and a crash as she dashed down the incline towards Crieff Junction.

Then, as they turned again towards the house, he suddenly exclaimed, "Look here, Winnie. We've got to face the music now. Every day increases our peril. If you are actually afraid to act as I suggest, then tell me frankly and I'll know what to do. I tell you quite openly that I have neither desire nor intention to be put into a hole by this confounded girl. She has defied me; therefore she must take the consequences."

"How do you know that your action the other night has not aroused her suspicions?"

"Ah! there you are quite right. It may have done so. If it has,

then our peril has very considerably increased. That's just my argument."

"But we'll have Walter to reckon with in any case. He loves her."

"Bah! Leave the boy to me. I'll soon show him that the girl's not worth a second thought," replied Flockart with nonchalant air. "All you have to do is to act as I suggested the other night. Then leave the rest to me."

"And suppose it were discovered?" asked the woman, whose face had grown considerably paler.

"Well, suppose the worst happened, and it were discovered?" he asked, raising his brows slightly. "Should we be any worse off than would be the case if this girl took it into her head to expose us—if the facts which she could prove placed us side by side in an assize-court?"

The woman—clever, scheming, ambitious—was silent. The question admitted of no reply. She recognised her own peril. The picture of herself arraigned before a judge, with that man beside her, rose before her imagination, and she became terrified. That slim, pale-faced girl, her husband's child, stood between her and her own honour, her own safety. Once the girl was removed, she would have no further fear, no apprehension, no hideous forebodings concerning the imminent future. She saw it all as she walked along that moss-grown forest-road, her eyes fixed straight before her. The tempter at her side had urged her to commit a dastardly, an unpardonable crime. In that man's hands

she was, alas! as wax. He poured into her ear a vivid picture of what must inevitably result should Gabrielle reveal the ugly truth, at the same time calmly watching the effect of his words upon her. Upon her decision depended his whole future as well as hers. What was Gabrielle's life to hers, asked the man point-blank. That was the question which decided her—decided her, after long and futile resistance, to promise to commit the act which he had suggested. She gave the man her hand in pledge.

Then a slight smile of triumph played about his cruel nether lip, and the pair retraced their steps towards the castle in silence.

CHAPTER VIII
CASTING THE BAIT

Loving and perishing: these have tallied from eternity. Love and death walk hand-in-hand. The will to love means also to be ready for death.

Gabrielle Heyburn recognised this truth. She had the will to love, and she had the resolve to perish—perish by her own hand—rather than allow her secret to be exposed. Those who knew her—a young, athletic, merry-faced, open-air girl on the verge of budding womanhood, so true-hearted, frank, and free—little dreamed of the terrible nature of that secret within her young heart.

She held aloof from her lover as much as she dared. True, Walter came to Glencardine nearly every day, but she managed to avoid him whenever possible. Why? Because she knew her own weakness; she feared being compelled by his stronger nature, and by the true affection in which she held him, to confess. They walked together in the cool, shady glen beside the rippling burn, climbed the neighbouring hills, played tennis, or else she lay in the hammock at the edge of the lawn while he lounged at her side smoking cigarettes. She did all this because she was compelled.

Her most enjoyable hours were the quiet ones spent at Her father's side. Alone in the library, she read to him, in French,

those curious business documents which came so often by registered post. They were so strangely worded that, not knowing their true import, she failed to understand them. All were neatly typed, without any heading to the paper. Sometimes a printed address in the Boulevard des Capucines, Paris, would appear on letters accompanying the enclosures. But all were very formal, and to Gabrielle extremely puzzling.

Sir Henry always took the greatest precaution that no one should obtain sight of these confidential reports or overhear them read by his daughter. Before she sat down to read, she always shot the small brass bolt on the door to prevent Hill or any other intruder from entering. More than once the Baronet's wife had wanted to come in while the reading was in progress, whereupon Sir Henry always excused himself, saying that he locked his door against his guests when he wished to be alone, an explanation which her ladyship accepted.

These strangely worded reports in French always puzzled the Baronet's daughter. Sometimes she became seized by a vague suspicion that her father was carrying on some business which was not altogether honourable. Why should he enjoin such secrecy? Why should he cause her to write and despatch with her own hand such curiously worded telegrams, addressed always to the registered address: "METEFOROS, PARIS"?

Those neatly typed pages which she read could be always construed in two or three senses. But only her father knew the actual meaning which the writer intended to convey. For hours

she would often be engaged in reading them. Sometimes, too, telegrams in cipher arrived, and she would then obtain the little, dark-blue covered book from the safe, and by its aid decipher the messages from the French capital.

Questions, curious questions, were frequently asked by the anonymous sender of the reports; and to these her father replied by means of his private code. She had become during the past year quite an expert typist, and therefore to her the Baronet entrusted the replies, always impressing upon her the need of absolute secrecy, even from her mother.

"My affairs," he often declared, "concern nobody but myself. I trust in you, Gabrielle dear, to guard my secrets from prying eyes. I know that you yourself must often be puzzled, but that is only natural."

Unfamiliar as the girl was with business in any form, she had during the past year arrived at the conclusion, after much debate within herself, that this source of her father's income was a distinctly mysterious one. The estates were, of course, large, and he employed agents to manage them; but they could not produce that huge income which she knew he possessed, for had she not more than once seen the amount of his balance at his banker's as well as the large sum he had on deposit? The source of his colossal wealth was a mystery, but was no doubt connected with his curious and constant communications with Paris.

At rare intervals a grey-faced, grey-bearded, and rather stout Frenchman—a certain Monsieur Goslin—called, and on such

occasions was closeted for a long time alone with Sir Henry, evidently discussing some important affair in secret. To her ladyship, as well as to Gabrielle, the Frenchman was most courteous, but refused the pressing invitations to remain the night. He always arrived by the morning train from Perth, and left for the south the same night, the express being stopped for him by signal at Auchterarder station. The mysterious visitor puzzled Gabrielle considerably. Her father entrusted him with secrets which he withheld from her, and this often caused her both surprise and annoyance. Like every other girl, she was of course full of curiosity.

Towards her Flockart became daily more friendly. On two occasions, after breakfast, he had invited her to spend an hour or two fishing for trout in the burn, which was unexpectedly in spate, and they had thus been some time in each other's company.

She, however, regarded him with distinct distrust. He was undeniably good-looking, nonchalant, and a thorough-going man of the world. But his intimate friendship with Lady Heyburn prevented her from regarding him as a true friend. Towards her he was ever most courteous, and paid her many little compliments. He tied her flies, he fitted her rod, and if her line became entangled in the trees he always put matters right. Not, however, that she could not do it all herself. In her strong, high fishing-boots, her short skirts hemmed with leather, her burberry, and her dark-blue tam-o'-shanter set jauntily on her chestnut hair, she very often fished alone, and made quite

respectable baskets. To wade into the burn and disentangle her line from beneath a stone was to her quite a small occurrence, for she would never let either Stewart or any of the under-keepers accompany her.

Why Flockart had so suddenly sought her society she failed to discern. Hitherto, though always extremely polite, he had treated her as a child, which she naturally resented. At length, however, he seemed to have realised that she now possessed the average intelligence of a young woman.

He had never repeated those strange words he had uttered when, on the night of the ball at Connachan, he returned in secret to the castle and beckoned her out upon the lawn. He had, indeed, never referred to his curious action. Sometimes she wondered, so changed was his manner, whether he had actually forgotten the incident altogether. He had showed himself in his true colours that night. Whatever suspicions she had previously held were corroborated in that stroll across the lawn in the dark shadow. His tactics had altered, it seemed, and their objective puzzled her.

"It must be very dull for you here, Miss Heyburn," he remarked to her one bright morning as they were casting up-stream near one another. They were standing not far from a rustic bridge in a deep, leafy glen, where the sunshine penetrated here and there through the canopy of leaves, beneath which the burn pursued its sinuous course towards the Earn. The music of the rippling waters over the brown, moss-grown boulders mingled with the rustle of the leaves above, as now and then the soft

wind swept up the narrow valley. They were treading a carpet of wild-flowers, and the air was full of the delicious perfume of the summer day. "You must be very dull, living here so much, and going up to town so very seldom," he said.

"Oh dear no!" she laughed. "You are quite mistaken. I really enjoy a country life. It's so jolly after the confinement and rigorous rules of school. One is free up here. I can wear my old clothes, and go cycling, fishing, shooting, curling; in fact, I'm my own mistress. That I shouldn't be if I lived in London, and had to make calls, walk in the Park, go shopping, sit out concerts, and all that sort of thing."

"But though you're out, you never go anywhere. Surely that's unusual for one so active and—well"—he hesitated—"I wonder whether I might be permitted to say so—so good-looking as you are, Gabrielle."

"Ah!" replied the girl, protesting, but blushing at the same time, "you're poking fun at me, Mr. Flockart. All I can reply is, first, that I'm not good-looking; and, secondly, I'm not in the least dull—perhaps I should be if I hadn't my father's affairs to attend to."

"They seem to take up a lot of your time," he said with pretended indifference, but, to his annoyance, landed a salmon parr at the same moment.

"We work together most evenings," was her reply.

The question which he then put as he threw the parr back into the burn struck her as curious. It was evident that he

was endeavouring to learn from her the nature of her father's correspondence. But she was shrewd enough to parry all his ingenious cross-questioning. Her father's secrets were her own.

"Some ill-natured people gossip about Sir Henry," he remarked presently, as he made another long cast up-stream and allowed the flies to be carried down to within a few yards from where he stood. "They say that his source of income is mysterious, and that it is not altogether open and above-board."

"What!" she exclaimed, looking at him quickly. "And who, pray, Mr.

Flockart, makes this allegation against my father?"

"Oh, I really don't know who started the gossip. The source of such tales is always difficult to discover. Some enemy, no doubt. Every man in this world of ours has enemies."

"What do you mean by the source of dad's income not being an honourable one?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "I really don't know," he declared. "I only repeat what I've heard once or twice up in London."

"Tell me exactly what they say," demanded the girl, with quick interest.

Her companion hesitated for a few seconds. "Well, whatever has been said, I've always denied; for, as you know, I am a friend of both Lady Heyburn and of your father."

The girl's nostrils dilated slightly. Friend! Why, was not this man her father's false friend? Was he not behind every sinister

action of Lady Heyburn's, and had not she herself, with her own ears, one day at Park Street, four years ago, overheard her ladyship express a dastardly desire in the words, "Oh, Henry is such a dreadful old bore, and so utterly useless, that it's a shame a woman like myself should be tied up to him. Fortunately for me, he already has one foot in the grave. Otherwise I couldn't tolerate this life at all!" Those cruel words of her stepmother's, spoken to this man who was at that moment her companion, recurred to her. She recollected, too, Flockart's reply.

This hollow pretence of friendship angered her. She knew that the man was her father's enemy, and that he had united with the clever, scheming woman in some ingenious conspiracy against the poor, helpless man.

Therefore she turned, and, facing him boldly, said, "I wish, Mr. Flockart, that you would please understand that I have no intention to discuss my father or his affairs. The latter concern himself alone. He does not even speak of them to his wife; therefore why should strangers evince any interest in them?"

"Because there are rumours—rumours of a mystery; and mysteries are always interesting and attractive," was his answer.

"True," she said meaningly. "Just as rumours concerning certain of my father's guests possess an unusual interest for him, Mr. Flockart. Though my father may be blind, his hearing is still excellent. And he is aware of much more than you think."

The man glanced at her for an instant, and his face darkened. The girl's ominous words filled him with vague apprehension.

Was it possible that the blind man had any suspicion of what was intended? He held his breath, and made another vicious cast far up the rippling stream.

CHAPTER IX
REVEALS A MYSTERIOUS BUSINESS

In the few days which followed, Lady Heyburn's attitude towards Gabrielle became one of marked affection. She even kissed her in the breakfast-room each morning, called her "dear," and consulted her upon the day's arrangements.

Poor Sir Henry was but a cipher in the household. He usually took all his meals alone, except dinner, and was very seldom seen, save perhaps when he would come out for an hour or so to walk in the park, led by his daughter, or else, alone, tapping before him with his stout stick. On such occasions he would wear a pair of big blue spectacles to hide the unsightliness of his gray, filmy eyes. Sometimes he would sit on one of the garden seats on the south side of the house, enjoying the sunshine, and listening to the songs of the birds, the hum of the insects, and the soft ripples of the burn far below. And on such occasions one of his wife's guests would join him to chat and cheer him, for everyone felt pity for the lonely man living his life of darkness.

No one was more full of words of sympathy than James Flockart. Gabrielle longed to warn her father of that man, but dared not do so. There was a reason—a strong reason—for her silence. Sir Henry had declared that he was interested in the

man's intellectual conversation, and that he rather liked him, though he had never looked upon his face. In some things the old gentleman was ever ready to adopt his daughter's advice and rely upon her judgment; but in others he was quite obstinate and treated her pointed remarks with calm indifference.

One day, at Lady Heyburn's suggestion, Gabrielle, accompanied by Flockart and another of the guests, a retired colonel, had driven over in the big car to Perth to make a call; and on their return she spent some hours in the library with her father, attending to his correspondence.

That morning a big packet of those typed reports in French had arrived in the usual registered, orange-coloured envelope, and after she had read them over to the Baronet, he had given her the key, and she had got out the code-book. Then, at his instructions, she had written upon a yellow telegraph-form a cipher message addressed to the mysterious "Meteforos, Paris." It read, when decoded:—

"Arrange with amethyst. I agree the price of pearls. Have no fear of Smithson, but watch Peters. If London refuses, then Mayfair. Expect report of Bedford."

It was not signed by the Baronet's name, but by the signature he always used on such telegraphic replies: "Senrab."

From such a despatch she could gather nothing. At his request she took away the little blue-covered book and relocked it in the safe. Then she rang for Hill, and told him to send the despatch by messenger down to Auchterarder village.

"Very well, miss," replied the man, bowing.

"The car is going down to take Mr. Seymour to the station in about a quarter of an hour, so Stokes will take it."

"And look here," exclaimed the blind man, who was standing before the window with his back to the crimson sunset, "you can tell her ladyship, Hill, that I'm very busy, and I shan't come in to dinner to-night. Just serve a snack here for me, will you?"

"Very well, Sir Henry," responded the smart footman; and, bowing again, he closed the door.

"May I dine with you, dad?" asked the girl. "There are two or three people invited to-night, and they don't interest me in the least."

"My dear child, what do you mean? Why, aren't Walter Murie and his mother dining here to-night? I know your mother invited them ten days ago."

"Oh, why, yes," replied the girl rather lamely; "I did not recollect.

Then, I suppose, I must put in an appearance," she sighed.

"Suppose!" he echoed. "What would Walter think if you elected to dine with me instead of meeting him at table?"

"Now, dad, it is really unkind of you!" she said reprovingly. "Walter and I thoroughly understand each other. He's not surprised at anything I do."

"Ah!" laughed the sightless man, "he's already beginning to understand the feminine perverseness, eh? Well, my child, dine here with me if you wish, by all means. Tell Hill to lay the table

for two. We have lots of work to do afterwards."

So the bell was rung again and Hill was informed that Miss Gabrielle would dine with her father in the library.

Then they turned again to the Baronet's mysterious private affairs; and when she had seated herself at the typewriter and re-read the reports—confidential reports they were, but framed in a manner which only the old man himself could understand—he dictated to her cryptic replies, the true nature of which were to her a mystery.

The last of the reports, brief and unsigned, read as follows:—

"Mon petit garçon est très gravement malade, et je supplie Dieu à genoux de ne pas me punir si severement, de ne pas me prendre mon enfant.

"D'apres le dernier bulletin du Professeur Knieberger, il a la fièvre scarlatine, et l'issue de la maladie est incertaine. Je ne quitte plus son chevet. Et sans cesse je me dis, 'C'est une punition du Ciel.'"

Gabrielle saw that, to the outside world, it was a statement by a frantic mother that her child had caught scarlet-fever. "What could it really mean?" she wondered.

Slowly she read it, and as she did so noticed the curious effect it had upon her father, seated as he was in the deep saddle-bag chair. His face grew very grave, his thin white hands clenched themselves, and there was an unusually bitter expression about his mouth.

"Eh?" he asked, as though not quite certain of the words.

"Read it again, child, slower. I—I have to think."

She obeyed, wondering if the key to the cryptic message were contained in some conjunction of letters or words. It seemed as though, in imagination, he was setting it down before him as she pronounced the words. This was often so. At times he would have reports repeated to him over and over again.

"Ah!" he gasped at last, drawing a long breath, his hands still tightly clenched, his countenance haggard and drawn. "I—I expected that. And so it has come—at last!"

"What, dad?" asked the girl in surprise, staring at the crisp typewritten sheet before her.

"Oh, well, nothing child—nothing," he answered, bestirring himself.

"But the lady whoever she is, seems terribly concerned about her little boy. The judgment of Heaven, she calls it."

"And well she may, Gabrielle," he answered in a hoarse strained voice.

"Well she may, my dear. It is a punishment sent upon the wicked."

"Is the mother wicked, then?" asked the girl in curiosity.

"No, dear," he urged. "Don't try to understand, for you can never do that. These reports convey to me alone the truth. They are intended to mislead you, as they mislead other people."

"Then there is no little boy suffering from scarlet-fever?"

"Yes. Because it is written there," was his smiling reply. "But it only refers to an imaginary child, and, by so doing, places a

surprising and alarming truth before me."

"Is the matter so very serious, dad?" she asked, noticing the curious effect the words had had upon him.

"Serious!" he echoed, leaning forward in his chair. "Yes," he answered in a low voice, "it is very serious, child, both to me and to you."

"I don't understand you, dad," she exclaimed, walking to his chair throwing herself upon her knees, and placing her arms around his neck. "Won't you be more explicit? Won't you tell me the truth? Surely you can rely upon my secrecy?"

"Yes, child," he said, groping until his hand fell upon her hair, and then stroking it tenderly; "I trust you. You keep my affairs from those people who seek to obtain knowledge of them. Without you, I would be compelled to employ a secretary; but he could be bought, without a doubt. Most secretaries can."

"Ford was very trustworthy, was he not?"

"Yes, poor Ford," he sighed. "When he died I lost my right hand. But fortunately you were old enough to take his place."

"But in a case like this, when you are worried and excited, as you are at this moment, why not confide in me and allow me to help you?" she suggested. "You see that, although I act as your secretary, dad, I know nothing of the nature of your business."

"And forgive me for speaking very plainly, child, I do not intend that you should," the old man said.

"Because you cannot trust me!" she pouted. "You think that because I'm a woman I cannot keep a secret."

"Not at all," he said. "I place every confidence in you, dear. You are the only real friend left to me in the whole world. I know that you would never willingly betray me to my enemies; but–"

"Well, but what?"

"But you might do so unknowingly. You might by one single chance-word place me within the power of those who seek my downfall."

"Who seeks your downfall, dad?" she asked very seriously.

"That's a matter which I desire to keep to myself. Unfortunately, I do not know the identity of my enemies; hence I am compelled to keep from you certain matters which, in other circumstances, you might know. But," he added, "this is not the first time we've discussed this question, Gabrielle dear. You are my daughter, and I trust you. Do not, child, misjudge me by suspecting that I doubt your loyalty."

"I don't, dad; only sometimes I–"

"Sometimes you think," he said, still stroking her hair—"you think that I ought to tell you the reason I receive all these reports from Paris, and their real significance. Well, to tell the truth, dear, it is best that you should not know. If you reflect for a moment," went on the old man, tears welling slowly in his filmy, sightless eyes, "you will realise my unhappy situation—how I am compelled to hide my affairs even from Lady Heyburn herself. Does she ever question you regarding them?"

"She used to at one time; but she refrains nowadays, for I would tell her nothing."

"Has anyone else ever tried to glean information from you?" he inquired, after a long breath.

"Mr. Flockart has done so on several occasions of late. But I pleaded absolute ignorance."

"Oh, Flockart has been asking you, has he?" remarked her father with surprise. "Well, I suppose it is only natural. A blind man's doings are always more or less a mystery to the world."

"I don't like Mr. Flockart, dad," she said.

"So you've remarked before, my dear," her father replied. "Of course you are right in withholding any information upon a subject which is my own affair; yet, on the other hand, you should always remember that he is your mother's very good friend—and yours also."

"Mine!" gasped the girl, starting up. Would that she were free to tell the poor, blind, helpless man the ghastly truth! "My friend, dad! What makes you think that?"

"Because he is always singing your praises, both to me and your mother."

"Then I tell you that his expressions of opinion are false, dear dad."

"How?"

She was silent. She dared not tell her father the reason; therefore, in order to turn the subject, she replied, with a forced laugh, "Oh, well, of course, I may be mistaken; but that's my opinion."

"A mere prejudice, child; I'm sure it is. As far as I know,

Flockart is quite an excellent fellow, and is most kind both to your mother and to myself."

Gabrielle's brow contracted. Disengaging herself, she rose to her feet, and, after a pause, asked, "What reply shall I send to the report, dad?"

"Ah, that report!" gasped the man, huddled up in his chair in serious reflection. "That report!" he repeated, rising to straighten himself. "Reply in these words: 'No effort is to be made to save the child's life. On the contrary, it is to be so neglected as to produce a fatal termination.'"

The girl had seated herself at the typewriter and rapidly clicked out the words in French—words that seemed ominous enough, and yet the true meaning of which she never dreamed. She was thinking only of her father's misplaced friendship in James Flockart. If she dared to tell him the naked truth! Oh, if her poor, blind, afflicted father could only see!

CHAPTER X
DECLARES A WOMAN'S LOVE

At nine o'clock that night Gabrielle left her father, and ascended to her own pretty room, with its light chintz-covered furniture, its well-filled bamboo bookcases, its little writing-table, and its narrow bed in the alcove. It was a nest of rest and cosy comfort.

Exchanging her tweed dress, she put on an easy dressing-gown of pale blue cashmere, drew up an armchair, and, arranging her electric reading-lamp, sat down to a new novel she intended to finish.

Presently Elise came to her; but, looking up, she said she did not wish to be disturbed, and again coiled herself up in the chair, endeavouring to concentrate her thoughts upon her book. But all to no purpose. Ever and anon she would lift her big eyes from the printed page, sigh, and stare fixedly at the rose-coloured trellis pattern of the wall-paper opposite. Upon her there had fallen a feeling of vague apprehension such as she had never before experienced, a feeling that something was about to happen.

Lady Heyburn was, she knew, greatly annoyed that she had not made her appearance at dinner or in the drawing-room afterwards. Generally, when there were guests from the neighbourhood, she was compelled to sing one or other of her

Italian songs. Her refusal to come to dinner would, she knew, cause her ladyship much chagrin, for it showed plainly to the guests that her authority over her step-daughter was entirely at an end.

Just as the stable-clock chimed half-past ten there came a light tap at the door. It was Hill, who, on receiving permission to enter, said, "If you please, miss, Mr. Murie has just asked me to give you this"; and he handed her an envelope.

Tearing it open eagerly, she found a visiting-card, upon which some words were scribbled in pencil. For a moment after reading them she paused. Then she said, "Tell Mr. Murie it will be all right."

"Very well, miss," the man replied, and, bowing, closed the door.

For a few moments she stood motionless in the centre of the room, her lover's card still in her hand. Then she walked to the open window, and looked out into the hot, oppressive night. The moon was hidden behind dark clouds, and the stillness was precursory of the thunderstorm which for the past hour or so had threatened. Across the room she paced slowly several times, a deep, anxious expression upon her pale countenance; then slowly she slipped off her gown and put on a dark stuff dress.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.