

LE QUEUX WILLIAM

THE CZAR'S SPY

William Le Queux
The Czar's Spy

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36094717
The Czar's Spy: The Mystery of a Silent Love:*

Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	25
CHAPTER III	44
CHAPTER IV	64
CHAPTER V	84
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	93

William Le Queux

The Czar's Spy: The Mystery of a Silent Love

CHAPTER I

HIS BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S SERVICE

"There was a mysterious affair last night, signore."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "Anything that interests us?"

"Yes, signore," replied the tall, thin Italian Consular-clerk, speaking with a strong accent. "An English steam yacht ran aground on the Meloria about ten miles out, and was discovered by a fishing-boat who brought the news to harbor. The Admiral sent out two torpedo-boats, which managed after a lot of difficulty to bring in the yacht safely, but the Captain of the Port has a suspicion that the crew were trying to make away with the vessel."

"To lose her, you mean?"

The faithful Francesco, whose English had mostly been acquired from sea-faring men, and was not the choicest vocabulary, nodded, and, true Tuscan that he was, placed his

finger upon his closed lips, indicative of silence.

"Sounds curious," I remarked. "Since the Consul went away on leave things seem to have been humming—two stabbing affrays, eight drunken seamen locked up, a mutiny on a tramp steamer, and now a yacht being cast away—a fairly decent list! And yet some stay-at-home people complain that British consuls are only paid to be ornamental! They should spend a week here, at Leghorn, and they'd soon alter their opinion."

"Yes, they would, signore," responded the thin-faced old fellow with a grin, as he twisted his fierce gray mustache. Francesco Carducci was a well-known character in Leghorn; interpreter to the Consulate, and keeper of a sailor's home, an honest, good-hearted, easy-going fellow, who for twenty years had occupied the same position under half a dozen different Consuls. At that moment, however, there came from the outer office a long-drawn moan.

"Hulloa, what's that?" I enquired, startled.

"Only a mad stoker off the *Oleander*, signore. The captain has brought him for you to see. They want to send him back to his friends at Newcastle."

"Oh! a case of madness!" I exclaimed. "Better get Doctor Ridolfi to see him. I'm not an expert on mental diseases."

My old friend Frank Hutcheson, His Britannic Majesty's Vice-Consul at the port of Leghorn, was away on leave in England, his duties being relegated to young Bertram Cavendish, the pro-Consul. The latter, however, had gone down with a bad

touch of malaria which he had picked up in the deadly Maremma, and I, as the only other Englishman in Leghorn, had been asked by the Consul-General in Florence to act as pro-Consul until Hutcheson's return.

It was in mid-July, and the weather was blazing in the glaring sun-blached Mediterranean town. If you know Leghorn, you probably know the Consulate with its black and yellow escutcheon outside, a large, handsome suite of huge, airy offices facing the cathedral, and overlooking the principal piazza, which is as big as Trafalgar Square, and much more picturesque. The legend painted upon the door, "Office hours, 10 to 3," and the green persiennes closed against the scorching sun give one the idea of an easy appointment, but such is certainly not the case, for a Consul's life at a port of discharge must necessarily be a very active one, and his duties never-ending.

Carducci had left me to the correspondence for half an hour or so, and I confess I was in no mood to write replies in that stifling heat, therefore I sat at the Consul's big table, smoking a cigarette and stretched lazily in my friend's chair, resolving to escape to the cool of England as soon as he returned in the following week. Italy is all very well for nine months in the year, but Leghorn is no place for the Englishman in mid-July. My thoughts were wandering toward the English lakes, and a bit of grouse-shooting with my uncle up in Scotland, when the faithful Francesco re-entered, saying—

"I've sent the captain and his madman away till this afternoon,

signore. But there is an English signore waiting to see you."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know him. He will give no name, but wants to see the Signor Console."

"All right, show him in," I said lazily, and a few moments later a tall, smartly-dressed, middle-aged Englishman, in a navy serge yachting suit, entered, and bowing, enquired whether I was the British Consul.

When he had seated himself I explained my position, whereupon he said—

"I couldn't make much out of your clerk. He speaks so brokenly, and I don't know a word of Italian. But perhaps I ought to first introduce myself. My name is Philip Hornby," and he handed me a card bearing the name with the addresses "Woodcroft Park, Somerset — Brook's." Then he added: "I am cruising on board my yacht, the *Lola*, and last night we unfortunately went aground on the Meloria. I have a new captain whom I engaged a few months ago, and he seems an arrant fool. Very fortunately for us a fishing-boat saw our plight and gave the alarm at port. The Admiral sent out two torpedo-boats and a tug, and after about three hours they managed to get us off."

"And you are now in harbor?"

"Yes. But the reason I've called is to ask you to do me a favor and write me a letter of thanks in Italian to the Admiral, and one to the Captain of the Port—polite letters that I can copy and send to them. You know the kind of thing."

"Certainly," I replied, the more interested in him on account of the curious suspicion that the port authorities seemed to entertain. He was evidently a gentleman, and after I had been with him ten minutes I scouted the idea that he had endeavored to cast away the *Lola*.

I took down a couple of sheets of paper and scribbled the drafts of two letters couched in the most elegant phraseology, as is customary when addressing Italian officialdom.

"Fortunately, I left my wife in England, or she would have been terribly frightened," he remarked presently. "There was a nasty wind blowing all night, and the fool of a captain seemed to add to our peril by every order he gave."

"You are alone, then?"

"I have a friend with me," was the answer.

"And how many of the crew are there?"

"Sixteen, all told."

"English, I suppose?"

"Not all. I find French and Italians are more sober than English, and better behaved in port."

I examined him critically as he sat facing me, and the mere fact of his desire to send thanks to the authorities convinced me that he was a well-bred gentleman. He was about forty-five, with a merry round, good-natured face, red with the southern sun, blue eyes, and a short fair beard. His countenance was essentially that of a man devoted to open-air sport, for it was slightly furrowed and weather-beaten as a true yachtsman's should be. His speech

was refined and cultivated, and as we chatted he gave me the impression that as an enthusiastic lover of the sea, he had cruised the Mediterranean many times from Gibraltar up to Smyrna. He had, however, never before put into Leghorn.

After we had arranged that his captain should come to me in the afternoon and make a formal report of the accident, we went out together across the white sunny piazza to Nasi's, the well-known pastry-cook's, where it is the habit of the Livornese to take their ante-luncheon vermouth.

The more I saw of Hornby, the more I liked him. He was chatty and witty, and treated his accident as a huge joke.

"We shall be here quite a week, I suppose," he said as we were taking our vermouth. "We're on our way down to the Greek Islands, as my friend Chater wants to see them. The engineer says there's something strained that we must get mended. But, by the way," he added, "why don't you dine with us on board to-night? Do. We can give you a few English things that may be a change to you."

This invitation I gladly accepted for two reasons. One was because the suspicions of the Captain of the Port had aroused my curiosity, and the other was because I had, honestly speaking, taken a great fancy to Hornby.

The captain of the *Lola*, a short, thickset Scotsman from Dundee, with a barely healed cicatrice across his left cheek, called at the Consulate at two o'clock and made his report, which appeared to me to be a very lame one. He struck me as being

unworthy his certificate, for he was evidently entirely out of his bearings when the accident occurred. The owner and his friend Chater were in their berths asleep, when suddenly he discovered that the vessel was making no headway. They had, in fact, run upon the dangerous shoal without being aware of it. A strong sea was running with a stiff breeze, and although his seamanship was poor, he was capable enough to recognize at once that they were in a very perilous position.

"Very fortunate it wasn't more serious, sir," he added, after telling me his story, which I wrote at his dictation for the ultimate benefit of the Board of Trade.

"Didn't you send up signals of distress?" I Inquired.

"No, sir—never thought of it."

"And yet you knew that you might be lost?" I remarked with recurring suspicion.

The canny Scot, whose name was Mackintosh, hesitated a few moments, then answered—

"Well, sir, you see the fishing-boat had sighted us, and we saw her turning back to port to fetch help."

His excuse was a neat one. Probably it was his neglect to make signals of distress that had aroused the suspicions of the Captain of the Port. From first to last the story of the master of the *Lola* was, I considered, a very unsatisfactory one.

"How long have you been in Mr. Hornby's service?" I inquired.

"Six months, sir," was the man's reply. "Before he engaged

me, I was with the Wilsons, of Hull, running up the Baltic."

"As master?"

"I've held my master's certificate these fifteen years, sir. I was with the Bibbys before the Wilsons, and before that with the General Steam. I did eight years in the Mediterranean with them, when I was chief mate."

"And you've never been into Leghorn before?"

"Never, sir."

I dismissed the captain with a distinct impression that he had not told me the whole truth. That cicatrice did not improve his personal appearance. He had left his certificates on board, he said, but if I wished he would bring them to me on the morrow.

Was it possible that an attempt had actually been made to cast away the yacht, and that it had been frustrated by the master of the felucca, who had sighted the vessel aground? There certainly seemed some mystery surrounding the circumstances, and my interest in the yacht and its owner deepened each hour. How, I wondered, had the captain received that very ugly wound across the cheek? I was half-inclined to inquire of him, but on reflection decided that it was best to betray no undue curiosity.

That evening when the fiery sun was sinking in its crimson glory, bathing the glassy sea with its blood-red light and causing the islands of Gorgona and Capraja to loom forth a deep purple against the distant horizon, I took a cab along the old sea-road to the port where, within the inner harbor, I found the *Lola*, one of the most magnificent private vessels I had ever

seen. Her dimensions surprised me. She was painted dead white, with shining brass everywhere. At the stern hung limply the British flag, while at the masthead the ensign of the Royal Yacht Squadron. The yellow funnel emitted no smoke, and as she lay calmly in the sunset a crowd of dock-loungers and crimps leaned upon the parapet discussing her merits and wondering who could be the rich Englishman who could afford to travel in a small liner of his own—for her size surprised even those Italian dock-hands, used as they were to seeing every kind of craft enter the busy port.

On stepping on deck Hornby, who like myself wore a clean suit of white linen as the most sensible dinner-garb in a hot climate, came forward to greet me, and took me along to the stern where, lying in a long wicker deck-chair beneath the awning, was a tall, dark-eyed, clean-shaven man of about forty, also dressed in cool white linen. His keen face gave one the impression that he was a barrister.

"My friend, Hylton Chater—Mr. Gordon Gregg," he said, introducing us, and then when, as we shook hands, the clean-shaven man exclaimed, smiling pleasantly—

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Gregg. You are not a stranger by any means to Hornby or myself. Indeed, we've got a couple of your books on board. But I had no idea you lived out here."

"At Ardenza," I said. "Three miles along the sea-shore. Tomorrow I hope you'll both come and dine with me."

"Delighted, I'm sure," declared Hornby. "To eat ashore is quite a treat when one has been boxed up on board for some time. So we'll accept, won't we, Hylton?"

"Certainly," replied the other; and then we began chatting about the peril of the previous night, Hornby telling me how he had copied the two letters of thanks in Italian and sent them to their respective addresses.

"Phil blasphemed like a Levant skipper when he copied those Italian words!" laughed Chater. "He had made three copies of each letter before he could get all the lingo in accordance with your copy."

"I've been the whole afternoon at them—confound them!" declared the owner of the *Lola* with a laugh. "But, of course, I didn't want to make a lot of errors in spelling. These Italians are so very punctilious."

"Well, you certainly did the right thing to thank the Admiral," I said. "It's very unusual for him to send out torpedo-boats to help a vessel in distress. That is generally left to the harbor tug."

"Yes, I feel that it was most kind of him. That's why I took all the trouble to write. I don't understand a word of Italian, neither does Chater."

"But you have Italians on board?" I remarked. "The two sailors who rowed me out are Genoese, from their accent."

Hornby and Chater exchanged glances—glances of distinct uneasiness, I thought.

Then the owner of the *Lola* said—

"Yes, they are useful for making arrangements and buying things in Italian ports. We have a Spaniard, a Greek, and a Syrian, all of whom act as interpreters in different places."

"And make a handsome thing in the way of secret commissions, I suppose?" I laughed.

"Of course. But to cruise in comfort one must pay and be pleasant," declared the man with the fair beard. "In Greece and the Levant they are more rapacious than in Naples, and the Customs officers always want squaring, otherwise they are for ever rummaging and discovering mares' nests."

"Did you have any trouble here?" I inquired.

"They didn't visit us," he said with a smile, and at the same time he rubbed his thumb and finger together, the action of feeling paper money.

This increased my surprise, for I happened to know that the Leghorn Customs officers were not at all given to the acceptance of bribes. They were too well watched by their superiors. If the yacht had really escaped a search, then it was a most unusual thing. Besides, what motive could Hornby have in eluding the Customs visit? They would, of course, seal up his wines and liquors, but even if they did, they would leave him out sufficient for the consumption of himself and his friends.

No. Philip Hornby had some strong motive in paying a heavy bribe to avoid the visit of the *dogana*. If he really had paid, he must have paid very heavily; of that I was convinced.

Was it possible that some mystery was hidden on board that

splendidly appointed craft?

Presently the gong sounded, and we went below into the elegantly fitted saloon, where was spread a table that sparkled with cut glass and shone with silver. Around the center fresh flowers had been trailed by some artistic hand, while on the buffet at the end the necks of wine bottles peered out from the ice pails. Both carpet and upholstery were in pale blue, while everywhere it was apparent that none but an extremely wealthy man could afford such a magnificent craft.

Hornby took the head of the table, and we sat on either side of him, chatting merrily while we ate one of the choicest and best cooked dinners it has ever been my lot to taste. Chater and I drank wine of a brand which only a millionaire could keep in his cellar, while our host, apparently a most abstemious man, took only a glass of iced Cinciano water.

The two smart stewards served in a manner which showed them to be well trained to their duties, and as the evening light filtering through the pale blue silk curtains over the open port-holes slowly faded, we gossiped on as men will gossip over an unusually good dinner.

From his remarks I discerned that, contrary to my first impression, Hylton Chater was an experienced yachtsman. He owned a craft called the *Alicia*, and was a member of the Cork Yacht Club. He lived in London, he told me, but gave me no information as to his profession. It might be the law, as I had surmised.

"You've seen our ass of a captain, Mr. Gregg?" he remarked presently. "What do you think of him?"

"Well," I said rather hesitatingly, "to tell the truth, I don't think very much of his seamanship—nor will the Board of Trade when his report reaches them."

"Ah!" exclaimed Hornby, "I was a fool to engage him. From the very first I mistrusted him, only my wife somehow took a fancy to the fellow, and, as you know, if you want peace you must always please the women. In this case, however, her choice almost cost me the vessel, and perhaps our lives into the bargain."

"You knew nothing of him previously?"

"Nothing."

"And he engaged the crew?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Are they all fresh hands?"

"All except the cook and the two stewards."

I was silent. I did not like Mackintosh. Indeed, I entertained a distinct suspicion of both master and crew.

"The captain seems to have had a nasty cut across the cheek," I remarked, whereupon my two companions again exchanged quick, apprehensive glances.

"He fell down the other day," explained Chater, with a rather sickly smile, I thought. "His face caught the edge of an iron stair in the engine-room, and caused a nasty gash."

I smiled within myself, for I knew too well that the ugly wound in the captain's face had never been inflicted by falling on the

edge of a stair. But I remained silent, being content that they should endeavor to mislead me.

After dessert had been served we rose, and in the summer twilight, when all the ports were opened, Hornby took me over the vessel. Everywhere was abundant luxury—a veritable floating palace. To each of the cabins of the owner and his guests a bathroom was attached with sea-water or fresh water as desired, while the ladies' saloon, the boudoir, the library, and the smoking-room were furnished richly with exquisite taste. As he was conducting me from his own cabin to the boudoir we passed a door that had been blown open by the wind, and which he hastened to close, not, however, before I had time to glance within. To my surprise I discovered that it was an armory crammed with rifles, revolvers and ammunition.

It had not been intended that I should see that interior, and the reason why the Customs officers had been bribed was now apparent.

I passed on without remark, making believe that I had not discerned anything unusual, and we entered the boudoir, Chater having gone back to the saloon to obtain cigars.

The dainty little chamber was upholstered in carnation-pink silk with furniture of inlaid rosewood, and bore everywhere the trace of having been arranged by a woman's hand, although no lady passenger was on board.

Just as we had entered, and I was admiring the dainty nest of luxury, Chater shouted to his host asking for the keys of the cigar

cupboard, and Hornby, excusing himself, turned back along the gangway to hand them to his friend, thus leaving me alone for a few moments.

I stood glancing around, and as I did so my eyes fell upon a quantity of photographs, framed and unframed, that were scattered about—evidently portraits of Hornby's friends. Upon a small side table, however, stood a heavy oxidized silver frame, but empty, while lying on the floor beneath a couch was the photograph it had contained, which had apparently been taken hastily out, torn first in half and then in half again, and cast away.

Curiosity prompted me to stoop, pick up the four pieces and place them together, when I found them to form the cabinet portrait of a sweet-looking and extremely pretty English girl of eighteen or nineteen, with a bright, smiling expression, and wearing a fresh morning blouse of white piqué. Her hair was dressed low and fastened with a bow of black ribbon, while the brooch at her throat was in the form of a heart edged with pearls. Whether it was her sweet expression, or whether the curious look in her eyes had attracted my attention and riveted the face upon my memory, I know not. Perhaps it was the mystery of why it should have been so hastily torn from its frame and destroyed that held my attention.

It seemed as though it had been torn up surreptitiously by someone who had been sitting on that couch, and who had had no opportunity of casting the fragments away through the port-hole into the water.

I looked at the back of the torn photograph, and saw that it had been taken by a well-known and fashionable firm in New Bond Street.

About the expression of that pictured face was something which I cannot describe—a curious look in the eyes which was at the same time both attractive and mysterious. In that brief moment the girl's features were indelibly impressed upon my memory.

Next second, however, hearing Hornby's returning footsteps, I flung the fragments hastily beneath the couch where I had discovered them.

Why, I wondered, had the picture been destroyed—and by whom?

The face of the empty frame had been purposely turned towards the panelling, therefore when he entered he did not notice that the picture had been destroyed; but after a brief pause, explaining that that cosy little place was his wife's particular nook, he conducted me on through the ladies' saloon and afterwards on deck, where we flung ourselves into the long chairs, took our coffee and certosina, that liqueur essentially Tuscan, and smoked on as the moon rose and the lights of the harbor began to twinkle in the steely night.

As I sat talking, my thoughts ran back to that torn photograph. To me it seemed as though some previous visitor that day had sat upon the couch, destroyed the picture, and cast it where I had found it. But for what reason? Who was the merry-faced girl

whose picture had aroused such jealousy or revenge?

I purposely led the conversation to Hornby's family, and learned from him that he had no children.

"You'll get the repairs to your engines done at Orlando's, I suppose?" I remarked, naming the great shipbuilding firm of Leghorn.

"Yes. I've already given the order. They are contracted to be finished by next Thursday, and then we shall be off to Zante and Chio."

For what reason, I wondered, recollecting that formidable armory on board. Already I had seen quite sufficient to convince me that the *Lola*, although outwardly a pleasure yacht, was built of steel, armored in its most vulnerable parts, and capable of resisting a very sharp fire.

The hours passed, and beneath the brilliant moon we smoked long into the night, for after the blazing sunshine of that Tuscan town the cool sea-wind at night is very refreshing. From where we sat we commanded a view of the whole of the sea-front of Leghorn and Ardenza, with its bright open-air café-concerts and restaurants in full swing—all the life and gayety of that popular watering-place.

Presently, when Hornby had risen to call a steward and left me alone with Hylton Chater, the latter whispered to me in confidence—

"If you find my friend Hornby a little bit strange in his manner, Mr. Gregg, you must take no notice. To tell the truth, he is a man

who has become suddenly wealthy beyond the wildest dreams of avarice, and I fear it has had an effect upon his brain. He does very queer things at times."

I looked at my companion in surprise. He was either telling the truth, or else he was endeavoring to allay my suspicions by an extremely clever ruse. Now I had already decided that Philip Hornby was no eccentric, but a particularly level-headed and practical man. Therefore I instantly arrived at the conclusion that the clean-shaven fellow who looked so much like a London barrister had some distinct and ulterior purpose in arousing within my mind suspicion of his host's sanity.

It was past midnight when, having bade the strange pair adieu, I was put ashore by the two sailors who had rowed me out and drove home along the sea-front, puzzled and perplexed.

Next morning, on my arrival at the Consulate, old Francesco, who had entered only a moment before, met me with blanched face, gasping—

"There have been thieves here in the night, signore! The Signor Console's safe has been opened!"

"The safe!" I cried, dashing into Hutcheson's private room, and finding to my dismay the big safe, wherein the seals, ciphers and other confidential documents were kept, standing open, and the contents in disorder, as though a hasty search had been made among them.

Was it possible that the thieves had been after the Admiralty and Foreign Office ciphers, copies of which the Chancelleries

of certain European Powers were ever endeavoring to obtain? I smiled within myself when I realized how bitterly disappointed the burglars must have been, for a British Consul when he goes on leave to England always takes his ciphers with him, and deposits them at the Foreign Office for safekeeping. Hutcheson had, of course, taken his, according to the regulations.

Curiously enough, however, the door of the Consulate and the safe had been opened with the keys which my friend had left in my charge. Indeed, the small bunch still remained in the safe door.

In an instant the recollection flashed across my mind that I had felt the keys in my pocket while at dinner on board the *Lola*. Had I lost them on my homeward drive, or had my pocket been picked?

Carducci, with an Italian's volubility, commenced to hurl imprecations upon the heads of the unknown sons of dogs who dared to tamper with his master's safe, and while we were engaged in putting the scattered papers in order the door-bell rang, and the clerk went to attend to the caller.

In a few moments he returned, saying—

"The English yacht left suddenly last night, signore, and the Captain of the Port has sent to inquire whether you know to what port she is bound."

"Left!" I gasped in amazement "Why, I thought her engines were disabled!"

A quarter of an hour later I was sitting in the private office of

the shrewd, gray-haired functionary who had sent this messenger to me.

"Do you know, Signor Commendatore," he said, "some mystery surrounds that vessel. She is not the *Lola*, for yesterday we telegraphed to Lloyd's, in London, and this morning I received a reply that no such yacht appears on their register, and that the name is unknown. The police have also telegraphed to your English police inquiring about the owner, Signor Hornby, with a like result. There is no such place as Woodcroft Park, in Somerset, and no member of Brook's Club of the name of Hornby."

I sat staring at the official, too amazed to utter a word. Certainly they had not allowed the grass to grow beneath their feet.

"Unfortunately the telegraphic replies from England are only to hand this morning," he went on, "because just before two o'clock this morning the harbor police, whom I specially ordered to watch the vessel, saw a boat come to the wharf containing a man and woman. The pair were put ashore, and walked away into the town, the woman seeming to walk with considerable difficulty. The boat returned, and an hour after, to the complete surprise of the two detectives, steam was suddenly got up and the yacht turned and went straight out to sea."

"Leaving the man and the woman?"

"Leaving them, of course. They are probably still in the town. The police are now searching for traces of them."

"But could not you have detained the vessel?" I suggested.

"Of course, had I but known I could have forbidden her departure. But as her owner had presented himself at the Consulate, and was recognized as a respectable person, I felt that I could not interfere without some tangible information—and that, alas! has come too late. The vessel is a swift one, and has already seven hours start of us. I've asked the Admiral to send out a couple of torpedo-boats after her, but, unfortunately, this is impossible, as the flotilla is sailing in an hour to attend the naval review at Spezia."

I told him how the Consul's safe had been opened during the night, and he sat listening with wide-open eyes.

"You dined with them last night," he said at last. "They may have surreptitiously stolen your keys."

"They may," was my answer. "Probably they did. But with what motive?"

The Captain of the Port elevated his shoulders, exhibited his palms, and declared—

"The whole affair from beginning to end is a complete and profound mystery."

CHAPTER II

WHY THE SAFE WAS OPENED

That day was an active one in Questura, or police office, of Leghorn.

Detectives called, examined the safe, and sagely declared it to be burglar-proof, had not the thieves possessed the key. The Foreign Office knew that, for they supply all the safes to the Consulates abroad, in order that the precious ciphers shall be kept from the prying eyes of foreign spies. The Questore, or chief of police, was of opinion that it was the ciphers of which the thieves had been in search, and was much relieved to hear that they were in safekeeping far away in Downing Street.

His conjecture was the same as my own, namely, that the reason of Hornby's call upon me was to ascertain the situation of the Consulate and the whereabouts of the safe, which, by the way, stood in a corner of the Consul's private room. Captain Mackintosh, too, had taken his bearings, and probably while I sat at dinner on board the *Lola* my keys had been stolen and passed on to the scarred Scotsman, who had promptly gone ashore and ransacked the place while I had remained with his master smoking and unsuspecting.

But what was the motive? Why had they ransacked all those confidential papers?

My own idea was that they were not in search of the ciphers at all, but either wanted some blank form or other, or else they desired to make use of the Consular seal. The latter, however, still remained on the floor near the safe, as though it had rolled out and been left unheeded. As far as Francesco and I could ascertain, nothing whatever had been taken. Therefore, we re-arranged the papers, re-locked the safe and resolved not to telegraph to Hutcheson and unduly disturb him, as in a few days he would return from England, and there would be time enough then to explain the remarkable story.

One fact, however, we established. The detective on duty at the railway station distinctly recollected a thin middle-aged man, accompanied by a lady in deep black, passing the barrier and entering the train which left at three o'clock for Colle Salvetti to join the Rome express. They were foreigners, therefore he did not take the same notice of them as though they had been Italians. Inquiries at the booking-office showed, however, that no passengers had booked direct to Rome by the train in question. To Grosseto, Cecina, Campiglia, and the other places in the Maremma, passengers had taken tickets, but not one had been booked to any of the great towns. Therefore it was apparent that the mysterious pair who had come ashore just prior to the sailing of the yacht had merely taken tickets for a false destination, and had re-booked at Colle Salvetti, the junction with that long main line which connects Genoa with Rome.

The police were puzzled. The two fishermen who sighted

the *Lola* and first gave the alarm of her danger, declared that when they drew alongside and proffered assistance the captain threatened to shoot the first man who came aboard.

"They were English!" remarked the sturdy, brown-faced toilers of the sea, grinning knowingly. "And the English, when they drink their cognac, know not what they do."

"Did you get any reward for returning to harbor and reporting?" I asked.

"Reward!" echoed one of the men, the elder of the pair. "Not a soldo! The English only cursed us for interfering. That is why we believed that they were trying to make away with the vessel."

The description of the *Lola*, its owner, his guest, and the captain were circulated by the police to all the Mediterranean ports, with a request that the yacht should be detained. Yet if the vessel were really one of mystery, as it seemed to be, its owner would no doubt go across to some quiet anchorage on the Algerian coast out of the track of the vessels, and calmly proceed to repaint, rename and disguise his craft so that it would not be recognized in Marseilles, Naples, Smyrna, or any of the ports where private yachts habitually call. Thus, from the very first, it seemed to me that Hornby and his friends had very cleverly tricked me for some mysterious purpose, and afterwards ingeniously evaded their watchers and got clean away.

Had the Italian Admiral been able to send a torpedo-boat or two after the fugitives they would no doubt soon have been overhauled, yet circumstances had prevented this and the *Lola*

had consequently escaped.

For purposes of their own the police kept the affair out of the papers, and when Frank Hutcheson stepped out of the sleeping-car from Paris on to the platform at Pisa a few nights afterwards, I related to him the extraordinary story.

"The scoundrels wanted these, that's evident," he responded, holding up the small, strong, leather hand-bag he was carrying, and which contained his jealously-guarded ciphers. "By Jove!" he laughed, "how disappointed they must have been!"

"It may be so," I said, as we entered the midnight train for Leghorn. "But my own theory is that they were searching for some paper or other that you possess."

"What can my papers concern them?" exclaimed the jovial, round-faced Consul, a man whose courtesy is known to every skipper trading up and down the Mediterranean, and who is perhaps one of the most cultured and popular men in the British Consular Service. "I don't keep bank notes in that safe, you know. We fellows in the Service don't roll in gold as our public at home appears to think."

"No. But you may have something in there which might be of value to them. You're often the keeper of valuable documents belonging to Englishmen abroad, you know."

"Certainly. But there's nothing in there just now except, perhaps, the registers of births, marriages and deaths of British subjects, and the papers concerning a Board of Trade inquiry. No, my dear Gordon, depend upon it that the yacht running

ashore was all a blind. They did it so as to be able to get the run of the Consulate, secure the ciphers, and sail merrily away with them. It seems to me, however, that they gave you a jolly good dinner and got nothing in return."

"They might very easily have carried me off too," I declared.

"Perhaps it would have been better if they had. You'd at least have had the satisfaction of knowing what their little game really was!"

"But the man and the woman who left the yacht an hour before she sailed, and who slipped away into the country somewhere! I wonder who they were? Hornby distinctly told me that he and Chater were alone, and yet there was evidently a lady and a gentleman on board. I guessed there was a woman there, from the way the boudoir and ladies' saloon were arranged, and certainly no man's hand decorated a dinner table as that was decorated."

"Yes. That's decidedly funny," remarked the Consul thoughtfully. "They went to Colle Salvetti, you say? They changed there, of course. Expresses call there, one going north and the other south, within a quarter of an hour after the train arrives from Leghorn. They showed a lot of ingenuity, otherwise they'd have gone direct to Pisa."

"Ingenuity! I should think so! The whole affair was most cleverly planned. Hornby would have deceived even you, my dear old chap. He had the air of the perfect gentleman, and a glance over the yacht convinced me that he was a wealthy man traveling for pleasure."

"You said something about an armory."

"Yes, there were Maxims stowed away in one of the cabins. They aroused my suspicions."

"They would not have aroused mine," replied my friend. "Yachts carry arms for protection in many cases, especially if they are going to cruise along uncivilized coasts where they must land for water or provisions."

I told him of the torn photograph, which caused him some deep reflection.

"I wonder why the picture had been torn up. Had there been a row on board—a quarrel or something?"

"It had been destroyed surreptitiously, I think."

"Pity you didn't pocket the fragments. We could perhaps have discovered from the photographer the identity of the original."

"Ah!" I sighed regretfully. "I never thought of that. I recollect the name of the firm, however."

"I shall have to report to London the whole occurrence, as British subjects are under suspicion," Hutcheson said. "We'll see whether Scotland Yard knows anything about Hornby or Chater. Most probably they do. Not long ago a description of men on board a yacht was circulated from London as being a pair of well-known burglars who were cruising about in a vessel crammed with booty which they dared not get rid of. They are, however, not the same as our friends on the *Lola*, for both men wanted were arrested in New Orleans about eight months ago, without their yacht, for they confessed that they had deliberately sunk it

on one of the islands in the South Pacific."

"Then these fellows might be another pair of London burglars!" I exclaimed eagerly, as the startling theory occurred to me.

"They might be. But, of course, we can't form any opinion until we hear what Scotland Yard has to say. I'll write a full report in the morning if you will give me minute descriptions of the men, as well as of the captain, Mackintosh."

Next morning I handed over my charge of the Consulate to Frank, and then assisted him to go through the papers in the safe which had been examined by the thieves.

"The ruffians seem to have thoroughly overhauled everything," remarked the Consul in dismay when he saw the disordered state of his papers. "They seem to have read every one deliberately."

"Which shows that had they been in search for the cipher-books they would only have looked for them alone," I remarked decisively. "What on earth could interest them in all these dry, unimportant shipping reports and things?"

"Goodness only knows," replied my friend. Then, calling Cavendish, a tall, fair young man, who had now recovered from his touch of fever and had returned to the Consulate, he commenced to check the number of those adhesive stamps, rather larger than ordinary postage-stamps, used in the Consular service for the registration of fees received by the Foreign Office. The values were from sixpence to one pound, and they were kept

in a portfolio.

After a long calculation the Consul suddenly raised his face to me and said—

"Then six ten shilling ones have been taken!"

"Why? There must be some motive!"

"They are of no use to anyone except to Consuls," he explained. "Perhaps they were wanted to affix to some false certificate. See," he added, opening the portfolio, "there were six stamps here, and all are gone."

"But they would have to be obliterated by the Consular stamp," remarked Cavendish.

"Ah! of course," exclaimed Hutcheson, taking out the brass seal from the safe and examining it minutely. "By Jove!" he cried a second later, "it's been used! They've stamped some document with it. Look! They've used the wrong ink-pad! Can't you see that there's violet upon it, while we always use the black pad!"

I took it in my hand, and there, sure enough, I saw traces of violet ink upon it—the ink of the pad for the date-stamp upon the Consul's table.

"Then some document has been stamped and sealed!" I gasped.

"Yes. And my signature forged to it, no doubt. They've fabricated some certificate or other which, bearing the stamp, seal and signature of the Consulate, will be accepted as a legal document. I wonder what it is?"

"Ah!" I said. "I wonder!" And the three of us looked at each

other in sheer bewilderment.

"The reason the papers are all upset is because they were evidently in search of some blank form or other, which they hoped to find," remarked my friend. "As you say, the whole affair was most carefully and ingeniously planned."

We crossed the great sunlit piazza together and entered the Questura, that sun-blached old palace with its long cool loggia where the sentry paces day and night. The Chief of Police, whom we saw, had no further information. The mysterious yacht had not put in at any Italian port. From him, however, we learned the name of the detective who had seen the two strangers leave Leghorn by the early morning train, and an hour afterwards the police-officer, a black-eyed man short of stature, but of an intelligent type, sat in the Consulate replying to our questions.

"As far as I could make out, signore," he said, "the man was an Englishman, wearing a soft black felt hat and a suit of dark blue serge. He had hair just turning gray, a small dark mustache and rather high cheek-bones. In his hand he carried a small bag of tan leather of that square English shape. He seemed in no hurry, for he was calmly smoking a cigarette as he went across to the ticket office."

"And his companion?" asked the Consul.

"She was in black. Rather tall and slim. Her hair was fair, I noticed, but she wore a black veil which concealed her features."

"Was she young or old?"

"Young—from her figure," replied the police agent. "As she

passed me her eyes met mine, and I thought I saw a strange fixed kind of glare in them—the look of a woman filled with some unspeakable horror."

Next day the town of Leghorn awoke to find itself gay with bunting, the Italian and English flags flying side by side everywhere, and the Consular standard flapping over the Consulate in the piazza. In the night the British Mediterranean fleet, cruising down from Malta, had come into the roadstead, and at the signal from the flagship had maneuvered and dropped anchor, forming a long line of gigantic battleships, swift cruisers, torpedo-boat destroyers, torpedo-boats, despatch-boats, and other craft extending for several miles along the coast.

In the bright morning sunlight the sight was both picturesque and imposing, for from every vessel flags were flying, and ever and anon the great battleship of the Admiral made signals which were repeated by all the other vessels, each in turn. Lying still on those calm blue waters was a force which one day might cause nations to totter, the overwhelming force which upheld Britain's right in that oft-disputed sea.

A couple of thousand British sailors were ashore on leave, their white caps conspicuous in the streets everywhere as they walked orderly in threes and fours to inspect the town. In the square outside the Consulate a squad from the flagship were setting up a temporary band-stand, where the ship's band was to play when evening fell, while Hutcheson, perspiring in his uniform, drove with the Admiral to make the calls of courtesy

upon the authorities which international etiquette demanded.

Myself, I had taken a boat out to the *Bulwark*, the great battleship flying the Admiral's flag, and was sitting on deck with my old friend Captain Jack Durnford, of the Royal Marines. Each year when the fleet put into Leghorn we were inseparable, for in long years past, at Portsmouth, we had been close friends, and now he was able to pay me annual visits at my Italian home.

He was on duty that morning, therefore could not get ashore till after luncheon.

"I'll dine with you, of course, to-night, old chap," he said. "And you must tell me all the news. We're in here for six days, and I was half a mind to run home. Two of our chaps got leave from the Admiral and left at three this morning for London—four days in the train and two in town! Gone to see their sweethearts, I suppose."

The British naval officer in the Mediterranean delights to dash across Europe for a day at home if he can get leave and funds will allow. It is generally reckoned that such a trip costs about two pounds an hour while in London. And yet when a man is away from his *fiancée* or wife for three whole years, his anxiety to get back, even for a brief day, is easily understood. The youngsters, however, go for mere caprice—whenever they can obtain leave. This is not often, for the Admiral has very fixed views upon the matter.

"Your time's soon up, isn't it?" I remarked, as I lolled back in the easy deck-chair, and gazed away at the white port and its

background of purple Apennines.

The dark, good-looking fellow in his smart summer uniform leaned over the bulwark, and said, with a slight sigh, I thought—"Yes. This is my last trip to Leghorn, I think. I go back in November, and I really shan't be sorry. Three years is a long time to be away from home. You go next week, you say? Lucky devil to be your own master! I only wish I were. Year after year on this deck grows confoundedly wearisome, I can tell you, my dear fellow."

Durnford was a man who had written much on naval affairs, and was accepted as an expert on several branches of the service. The Admiralty do not encourage officers to write, but in Durnford's case it was recognized that of naval topics he possessed a knowledge that was of use, and, therefore, he was allowed to write books and to contribute critical articles to the service magazines. He had studied the relative strengths of foreign navies, and by keeping his eyes always open he had, on many occasions, been able to give valuable information to our naval *attachés* at the Embassies. More than once, however, his trenchant criticism of the action of the naval lords had brought upon his head rebukes from head-quarters; nevertheless, so universally was his talent as a naval expert recognized, that to write had never been forbidden him as it had been to certain others.

"How's Hutcheson?" he asked a moment later, turning and facing me.

"Fit as a fiddle. Just back from his month's leave at home. His wife is still up in Scotland, however. She can't stand Leghorn in summer."

"No wonder. It's a perfect furnace when the weather begins to stoke up."

"I go as soon as you've sailed. I only stayed because I promised to act for Frank," I said. "And, by Jove! a funny thing occurred while I was in charge—a real first-class mystery."

"A mystery—tell me," he exclaimed, suddenly interested.

"Well, a yacht—a pirate yacht, I believe it was—called here."

"A pirate! What do you mean?"

"Well, she was English. Listen, and I'll tell you the whole affair. It'll be something fresh to tell at mess, for I know how you chaps get played out of conversation."

"By Jove, yes! Things slump when we get no mail. But go on—I'm listening," he added, as an orderly came up, saluted, and handed him a paper.

"Well," I said, "let's cross to the other side. I don't want the sentry to overhear."

"As you like—but why such mystery?" he asked as we walked together to the other side of the spick-and-span quarter-deck of the gigantic battleship.

"You'll understand when I tell you the story." And then, standing together beneath the awning, I related to my friend the whole of the curious circumstances, just as I have recorded them in the foregoing pages.

"Confoundedly funny!" he remarked with his dark eyes fixed upon mine. "A mystery, by Jove, it is! What name did the yacht bear?"

"The *Lola*."

"What!" he gasped, suddenly turning pale. "The *Lola*? Are you quite sure it was the *Lola*—*L-O-L-A*?"

"Absolutely certain," I replied. "But why do you ask? Do you happen to know anything about the craft?"

"Me!" he stammered, and I could see that he had involuntarily betrayed the truth, yet for some reason he wished to conceal his knowledge from me. "Me! How should I know anything about such a craft? They were thieves on board evidently—perhaps pirates, as you say."

"But the name *Lola* is familiar to you, Jack! I'm sure it is, by your manner."

He paused a moment, and I could see what a strenuous effort he was making to avoid betraying knowledge.

"It's—well—" he said hesitatingly, with a rather sickly smile. "It's a girl's name—a girl I once knew. The name brings back to me certain memories."

"Pleasant ones—I hope."

"No. Bitter ones—very bitter ones," he said in a hard tone, striding across the deck and back again, and I saw in his eyes a strange look, half of anger, half of deep regret.

Was he telling the truth, I wondered? Some tragic romance or other concerning a woman had, I knew, overshadowed his life in

the years before we had become acquainted. But the real facts he had never revealed to me. He had never before referred to the bitterness of the past, although I knew full well that his heart was in secret filled by some overwhelming sorrow.

Outwardly he was as merry as the other fellows who officered that huge floating fortress; on board he was a typical smart marine, and on shore he danced and played tennis and flirted just as vigorously as did the others. But a heavy heart beat beneath his uniform.

When he returned to where I stood I saw that his face had changed: it had become drawn and haggard. He bore the appearance of a man who had been struck a blow that had staggered him, crushing out all life and hope.

"What's the matter, Jack?" I asked. "Come! Tell me—what ails you?"

"Nothing, my dear old chap," he answered hoarsely. "Really nothing—only a touch of the blues just for a moment," he added, trying hard to smile. "It'll pass."

"What I've just told you about that yacht has upset you. You can't deny it"

He started. His mouth was, I saw, hard set. He knew something concerning that mysterious craft, but would not tell me.

The sound of a bugle came from the further end of the ship, and immediately men were scampering along the deck beneath as some order or other was being obeyed with that precision that

characterizes the "handy man."

"Why are you silent?" I asked slowly, my eyes fixed upon my friend the officer. "I have told you what I know, and I want to discover the motive of the visit of those men, and the reason they opened Hutcheson's safe."

"How can I tell you?" he asked in a strained, unnatural voice.

"I believe you know something concerning them. Come, tell me the truth."

"I admit that I have certain grave suspicions," he said at last, standing astride with his hands behind his back, his sword trailing on the white deck. "You say that the yacht was called the *Lola*—painted gray with a black funnel."

"No, dead white, with a yellow funnel."

"Ah! Of course," he remarked, as though to himself. "They would repaint and alter her appearance. But the dining saloon. Was there a long carved oak buffet with a big, heavy cornice with three gilt dolphins in the center—and were there not dolphins in gilt on the backs of the chairs—an armorial device?"

"Yes," I cried. "You are right. I remember them! You've surely been on board her!"

"And there is a ladies' saloon and a small boudoir in pink beyond, while the smoking-room is entirely of marble for the heat?"

"Exactly—the same yacht, no doubt! But what do you know of her?"

"The captain, who gave his name to you as Mackintosh, is an

undersized American of a rather low-down type?"

"I took him for a Scotsman."

"Because he put on a Scotch accent," he laughed. "He's a man who can speak a dozen languages brokenly, and pass for an Italian, a German, a Frenchman, as he wishes."

"And the—the man who gave his name as Philip Hornby?"

Durnford's mouth closed with a snap. He drew a long breath, his eyes grew fierce, and he bit his lip.

"Ah! I see he is not exactly your friend," I said meaningly.

"You are right, Gordon—he is not my friend," was his slow, meaning response.

"Then why not be outspoken and tell me all you know concerning him? Frank Hutcheson is anxious to clear up the mystery because they've tampered with the Consular seals and things. Besides, it would be put down to his credit if he solved the affair."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I'm mystified myself. I can't yet discern their motive."

"But at any rate you know the men," I argued. "You can at least tell us who they really are."

He shook his head, still disinclined, for some hidden reason, to reveal the truth to me.

"You saw no woman on board?" he asked suddenly, looking straight into my eyes.

"No. Hornby told me that he and Chater were alone."

"And yet an hour after you left a man and a woman came

ashore and disappeared! Ah! If we only had a description of that woman it would reveal much to us."

"She was young and dark-haired, so the detective says. She had a curious fixed look in her eyes which attracted him, but she wore a thick motor veil, so that he could not clearly discern her features."

"And her companion?"

"Middle-aged, prematurely gray, with a small dark mustache."

Jack Durnford sighed and stroked his chin.

"Ah! Just as I thought," he exclaimed. "And they were actually here, in this port, a week ago! What a bitter irony of fate!"

"I don't understand you," I said. "You are so mysterious, and yet you will tell me nothing!"

"The police, fools that they are, have allowed them to escape, and they will never be caught now. Ah! you don't know them as I do! They are the cleverest pair in all Europe. And they have the audacity to call their craft the *Lola*—the *Lola*, of all names!"

"But as you know who and what the fellows are, you ought, I think, in common justice to Hutcheson, to tell us something," I complained. "If they are adventurers, they ought to be traced."

"What can I do—a prisoner here on board?" he argued bitterly. "How can I act?"

"Leave it all to me. I'm free to travel after them, and find out the truth if only you will tell me what you know concerning them," I said eagerly.

"Gordon, let me be frank and open with you, my dear old

fellow. I would tell you everything—everything—if I dared. But I cannot—you understand!" And his final words seemed to choke him.

I stood before him, open-mouthed in astonishment.

"You really mean—well, that you are in fear of them—eh?"

I whispered.

He nodded slowly in the affirmative, adding: "To tell you the truth would be to bring upon myself a swift, relentless vengeance that would overwhelm and crush me. Ah! my dear fellow, you do not know—you cannot dream—what brought those desperate men into this port. I can guess—I can guess only too well—but I can only tell you that if you ever do discover the terrible truth—which I fear is unlikely—you will solve one of the strangest and most remarkable mysteries of modern times."

"What does the mystery concern?" I asked, in breathless eagerness.

"It concerns a woman."

CHAPTER III

THE HOUSE "OVER THE WATER"

The Mediterranean Squadron, that magnificent display of naval force that is the guarantee of peace in Europe, after a week of gay festivities in Leghorn, had sailed for Gaeta, while I, glad to escape from the glaring heat, found myself back once more in dear old London.

One passes one's time in the south well enough in winter, but after a year even the most ardent lover of Italy longs to return to his own people, be it ever for so brief a space. Exile for a whole year in any continental town is exile indeed; therefore, although I lived in Italy for choice, I, like so many other Englishmen, always managed to spend a month or two in summer in our temperate if much maligned climate.

London, the same dear, dusty old London, only perhaps more dear and more dusty than ever, was my native city; hence I always spent a few weeks in it, even though all the world might be absent in the country, or at the seaside.

I had idled away a pleasant month up in Buxton, and from there had gone north to the Lakes, and it was one hot evening in mid-August that I found myself again in London, crossing St. James's Square from the Sports Club, where I had dined, walking towards Pall Mall. Darkness had just fallen, and there was that

stifling oppression in the air that fore-tokened a thunderstorm. The club was not gay with life and merriment as it is in the season, for everyone was away, many of the rooms were closed for re-decoration, and most of the furniture swathed in linen.

I was on my way to pay a visit to a lady who lived up at Hampstead, a friend of my late mother's, and had just turned into Pall Mall, when a voice at my elbow suddenly exclaimed in Italian—

"Ah, signore!—why, actually, my padrone!"

And looking round, I saw a thin-faced man of about thirty, dressed in neat but rather shabby black, whom I instantly recognized as a man who had been my servant in Leghorn for two years, after which he had left to better himself.

"Why, Olinto!" I exclaimed, surprised, as I halted. "You—in London—eh? Well, and how are you getting on?"

"Most excellently, signore," he answered in broken English, smiling. "But it is so pleasant for me to see my generous padrone again. What fortune it is that I should pass here at this very moment!"

"Where are you working?" I inquired.

"At the Restaurant Milano, in Oxford Street—only a small place, but we gain discreetly, so I must not complain. I live over in Lambeth, and am on my way home."

"I heard you married after you left me. Is that true?"

"Yes, signore. I married Armida, who was in your service when I first entered it. You remember her? Ah, well!" he added,

sighing. "Poor thing! I regret to say she is very ill indeed. She cannot stand your English climate. The doctor says she will die if she remains here. Yet what can I do? If we go back to Italy we shall only starve." And I saw that he was in deep distress, and that mention of his ailing wife had aroused within him bitter thoughts.

Olinto Santini walked back at my side in the direction of Trafalgar Square, answering the questions I put to him. He had been a good, hard-working servant, and I was glad to see him again. When he left me he had gone as steward on one of the Anchor Line boats between Naples and New York, and that was the last I had heard of him until I found him there in London, a waiter at a second-rate restaurant.

When I tried to slip some silver into his hand he refused to take it, and with a merry laugh said—

"I wonder if you would be offended, signore, if I told you of something for which I had been longing and longing?"

"Not at all."

"Well, the signore smokes our Tuscan cigars. I wonder if by chance you have one? We cannot get them in London, you know."

I felt in my pocket, laughing, and discovered that I had a couple of those long thin penny cigars which I always smoke in Italy, and which are so dear to the Tuscan palate. These I handed him, and he took them with delight as the greatest delicacy I could have offered him. Poor fellow! As an exiled Italian he

clung to every little trifle that reminded him of his own beloved country.

When we halted before the National Gallery prior to parting I made some further inquiries regarding Armida, the black-eyed, good-looking housemaid whom he had married.

"Ah, signore!" he responded in a voice choked with emotion, dropping into Italian. "It is the one great sorrow of my life. I work hard from early morning until late at night, but what is the use when I see my poor wife gradually fading away before my very eyes? The doctor says that she cannot possibly live through the next winter. Ah! how delighted the poor girl would be if she could see the padrone once again!"

I felt sorry for him. Armida had been a good servant, and had served me well for nearly three years. Old Rosina, my housekeeper, had often regretted that she had been compelled to leave to attend to her aged mother. The latter, he told me, had died, and afterwards he had married her. There is more romance and tragedy in the lives of the poor Italians in London than London ever suspects. We are too apt to regard the Italian as a bloodthirsty person given to the unlawful use of the knife, whereas, as a whole, the Italian colony in London is a hard-working, thrifty, and law-abiding one, very different, indeed, to those colonies of aliens from Northern Europe, who are so continually bringing filth, disease, and immorality into the East End, and are a useless incubus in an already over-populated city.

He spoke so wistfully that his wife might see me once more

that, having nothing very particular to do that evening, and feeling a deep sympathy for the poor fellow in his trouble, I resolved to accompany him to his house and see whether I could not, in some slight manner, render him a little help.

He thanked me profusely when I consented to go with him.

"Ah, signor padrone!" he said gratefully, "she will be so delighted. It is so very good of you."

We hailed a hansom and drove across Westminster Bridge to the address he gave—a gloomy back street off the York Road, one of those narrow, grimy thoroughfares into which the sun never shines. Ah, how often do the poor Italians, those children of the sun, pine and die when shut up in our dismal, sordid streets! Dirt and squalor do not affect them; it is the damp and cold and lack of sunshine that so very soon proves fatal.

A low-looking, evil-faced fellow opened the door to us and growled acquaintance with Olinto, who, striking a match, ascended the worn, carpetless stairs before me, apologizing for passing before me, and saying in Italian—

"We live at the top, signore, because it is cheaper and the air is better."

"Quite right," I said. "Quite right. Go on." And I thought I heard my cab driving away.

It was a gloomy, forbidding, unlighted place into which I would certainly have hesitated to enter had not my companion been my trusted servant. I instinctively disliked the look of the fellow who had opened the door. He was one of those hulking

loafers of the peculiarly Lambeth type. Yet the alien poor, I recollected, cannot choose where they shall reside.

Contrary to my expectations, the sitting-room we entered on the top floor was quite comfortably furnished, clean and respectable, even though traces of poverty were apparent. A cheap lamp was burning upon the table, but the apartment was unoccupied.

Olinto, in surprise, passed into the adjoining room, returning a moment later, exclaiming—

"Armida must have gone out to get something. Or perhaps she is with the people, a compositor and his wife, who live on the floor below. They are very good to her. I'll go and find her. Accommodate yourself with a chair, signore." And he drew the best chair forward for me, and dusted it with his handkerchief.

I allowed him to go and fetch her, rather surprised that she should be well enough to get about after all he had told me concerning her illness. Yet consumption does not keep people in bed until its final stages.

As I stood there, gazing round the room, I could not well distinguish its furthest corners, for the lamp bore a shade of green paste-board, which threw a zone of light upon the table, and left the remainder of the room in darkness. When, however, my eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, I discerned that the place was dusty and somewhat disordered. The sofa was, I saw, a folding iron bedstead with greasy old cushions, while the carpet was threadbare and full of holes. When I drew the old rep

curtains to look out of the window, I found that the shutters were closed, which I thought unusual for a room so high up as that was.

Olinto returned in a few moments, saying that his wife had evidently gone to do some shopping in the Lower-Marsh, for it is the habit of the denizens of that locality to go "marketing" in the evening among the costermongers' stalls that line so many of the thoroughfares. Perishable commodities, the overplus of the markets and shops, are cheaper at night than in the morning.

"I hope you are not pressed for time, signore?" he said apologetically. "But, of course, the poor girl does not know the surprise awaiting her. She will surely not be long."

"Then I'll wait," I said, and flung myself back into the chair he had brought forward for me.

"I have nothing to offer you, signer padrone," he said, with a laugh. "I did not expect a visitor, you know."

"No, no, Olinto. I've only just had dinner. But tell me how you have fared since you left me."

"Ah!" he laughed bitterly. "I had many ups and downs before I found myself here in London. The sea did not suit me—neither did the work. They put me in the emigrants' quarters, and consequently I could gain nothing. The other stewards were Neapolitans, therefore, because I was a Tuscan, they relegated me to the worst post. Ah, signore, you don't know what it is to serve those emigrants! I made two trips, then returned and married Armida. I called on you, but Tito said you were in London. At first I got work at a café in Viareggio, but when the

season ended, and I was thrown out of employment, I managed to work my way from Genoa to London. My first place was scullion in a restaurant in Tottenham Court Road, and then I became waiter in the beer-hall at the Monico, and managed to save sufficient to send Armida the money to join me here. Afterwards I went to the Milano, and I hope to get into one of the big hotels very soon—or perhaps the grill-room at the Carlton. I have a friend who is there, and they make lots of money—four or five pounds every week in tips, they say."

"I'll see what I can do for you," I said. "I know several hotel-managers who might have a vacancy."

"Ah, signore!" he cried, filled with gratification. "If you only would! A word from you would secure me a good position. I can work, that you know—and I do work. I will work—for her sake."

"I have promised you," I said briefly.

"And how can I sufficiently thank you?" he cried, standing before me, while in his eyes I thought I detected a strange wild look, such as I had never seen there before.

"You served me well, Olinto," I replied, "and when I discover real sterling honesty I endeavor to appreciate it. There is, alas! very little of it in this world."

"Yes," he said in a hoarse voice, his manner suddenly changing. "You have to-night shown me, signore, that you are my friend, and I will, in return, show you that I am yours." And suddenly grasping both my hands, he pulled me from the chair in which I was sitting, at the same time asking in a low intense

whisper: "Do you always carry a revolver here in England, as you do in Italy?"

"Yes," I answered in surprise at his action and his question. "Why?"

"Because there is danger here," he answered in the same low earnest tone. "Get your weapon ready. You may want it."

"I don't understand," I said, feeling my handy Colt in my back pocket to make sure it was there.

"Forget what I have said—all—all that I have told you to-night, sir," he said. "I have not explained the whole truth. You are in peril—in deadly peril!"

"How?" I exclaimed breathlessly, surprised at his extraordinary change of manner and his evident apprehension lest something should befall me.

"Wait, and you shall see," he whispered. "But first tell me, signore, that you will forgive me for the part I have played in this dastardly affair. I, like yourself, fell innocently into the hands of your enemies."

"My enemies! Who are they?"

"They are unknown, and for the present must remain so. But if you doubt your peril, watch—" and taking the rusty fire-tongs from the grate he carefully placed them on end in front of the deep old armchair in which I had sat, and then allowed them to fall against the edge of the seat, springing quickly back as he did so.

In an instant a bright blue flash shot through the place, and

the irons fell aside, fused and twisted out of all recognition.

I stood aghast, utterly unable for the moment to sufficiently realize how narrowly I had escaped death.

"Look! See here, behind!" cried the Italian, directing my attention to the back legs of the chair, where, on bending with the lamp, I saw, to my surprise, that two wires were connected, and ran along the floor and out of the window, while concealed beneath the ragged carpet, in front of the chair, was a thin plate of steel, whereon my feet had rested.

Those who had so ingeniously enticed me to that gloomy house of death had connected up the overhead electric light main with that innocent-looking chair, and from some unseen point had been able to switch on a current of sufficient voltage to kill fifty men.

I stood stock-still, not daring to move lest I might come into contact with some hidden wire, the slightest touch of which must bring instant death upon me.

"Your enemies prepared this terrible trap for you," declared the man who was once my trusted servant. "When I entered into the affair I was not aware that it was to be fatal. They gave me no inkling of their dastardly intention. But there is no time to admit of explanations now, signore," he added breathlessly, in a low desperate voice. "Say that you will not prejudge me," he pleaded earnestly.

"I will not prejudge you until I've heard your explanation," I said. "I certainly owe my life to you to-night."

"Then quick! Fly from this house this instant. If you are stopped, then use your revolver. Don't hesitate. In a moment they will be here upon you."

"But who are they, Olinto? You must tell me," I cried in desperation.

"*Dio!* Go! Go!" he cried, pushing me violently towards the door. "Fly, or we shall both die—both of us! Run downstairs. I must make feint of dashing after you."

I turned, and seeing his desperate eagerness, precipitately fled, while he ran down behind me, uttering fierce imprecations in Italian, as though I had escaped him.

A man in the narrow dark passage attempted to trip me up as I ran, but I fired point blank at him, and gaining the door unlocked it, and an instant later found myself out in the street.

It was the narrowest escape from death that I had ever had in all my life—surely the strangest and most remarkable adventure. What, I wondered, did it mean?

Next morning I searched up and down Oxford Street for the Restaurant Milano, but could not find it. I asked shopkeepers, postmen, and policemen; I examined the London Directory at the bar of the Oxford Music Hall, and made every inquiry possible. But all was to no purpose. No one knew of such a place. There were restaurants in plenty in Oxford Street, from the Frascati down to the humble coffeeshop, but nobody had ever heard of the "Milano."

Even Olinto had played me false!

I was filled with chagrin, for I had trusted him as honest, upright, and industrious; and was puzzled to know the reason he had deceived me, and why he had enticed me to the very brink of the grave.

He had told me that he himself had fallen into the trap laid by my enemies, and yet he had steadfastly refused to tell me who they were! The whole thing was utterly inexplicable.

I drove over to Lambeth and wandered through the maze of mean streets off the York Road, yet for the life of me I could not decide into which house I had been taken. There were a dozen which seemed to me that they might be the identical house from which I had so narrowly escaped with my life.

Gradually it became impressed upon me that my ex-servant had somehow gained knowledge that I was in London, that he had watched my exit from the club, and that all his pitiful story regarding Armida was false. He was the envoy of my unknown enemies, who had so ingeniously and so relentlessly plotted my destruction.

That I had enemies I knew quite well. The man who believes he has not is an arrant fool. There is no man breathing who has not an enemy, from the pauper in the workhouse to the king in his automobile. But the unseen enemy is always the more dangerous; hence my deep apprehensive reflections that day as I walked those sordid back streets "over the water," as the Cockney refers to the district between those two main arteries of traffic, the Waterloo and Westminster Bridge Roads.

My unknown enemies had secured the services of Olinto in their dastardly plot to kill me. With what motive?

I wondered as I crossed Waterloo Bridge to the Strand, whether Olinto Santini would again approach me and make the promised explanation. I had given my word not to prejudge him until he revealed to me the truth. Yet I could not, in the circumstances, repose entire confidence in him.

When one's enemies are unknown, the feeling of apprehension is always much greater, for in the imagination danger lurks in every corner, and every action of a friend covers the ruse of a suspected enemy.

That day I did my business in the city with a distrust of everyone, not knowing whether I was not followed or whether those who sought my life were not plotting some other equally ingenious move whereby I might go innocently to my death. I endeavored to discover Olinto by every possible means during those stifling days that followed. The heat of London was, to me, more oppressive than the fiery sunshine of the old-world Tuscany, and everyone who could be out of town had left for the country or the sea.

The only trace I found of the Italian was that he was registered at the office of the International Society of Hotel Servants, in Shaftesbury Avenue, as being employed at Gatti's Adelaide Gallery, but on inquiry there I found he had left more than a year before, and none of his fellow-waiters knew his whereabouts.

Thus being defeated in every inquiry, and my business at last

concluded in London, I went up to Dumfries on a duty visit which I paid annually to my uncle, Sir George Little. Having known Dumfries since my earliest boyhood, and having spent some years of my youth there, I had many friends in the vicinity, for Sir George and my aunt were very popular in the county and moved in the best set.

Each time I returned from abroad I was always a welcome guest at Greenlaw, as their place outside the city of Burns was called, and this occasion proved no exception, for the country houses of Dumfries are always gay in August in prospect of the shooting.

"Some new people have taken Rannoch Castle. Rather nice they seem," remarked my aunt as we were sitting together at luncheon the day after my arrival. "Their name is Leithcourt, and they've asked me to drive you over there to tennis this afternoon."

"I'm not much of a player, you know, aunt. In Italy we don't believe in athletics. But if it's out of politeness, of course, I'll go."

"Very well," she said. "Then I'll order the victoria for three."

"There are several nice girls there, Gordon," remarked my uncle mischievously. "You have a good time, so don't think you are going to be bored."

"No fear of that," was my answer. And at three o'clock Sir George, his wife, and myself set out for that fine old historic castle that stands high on the Bognie, overlooking the Cairn waters beyond Dunscore, one of the strongholds of the Black Douglas in those turbulent days of long ago, and now a splendid

old residence with a big shoot which was sometimes let for the season at a very high rent by its aristocratic if somewhat impecunious owner.

We could see its great round towers, standing grim and gray on the hillside commanding the whole of the valley, long before we approached it, and when we drove into the grounds we found a gay party in summer toilettes assembled on the ancient bowling-green, now transformed into a modern tennis-lawn.

Mrs. Leithcourt and her husband, a tall, thin, gray-headed, well-dressed man, both came forward to greet us, and after a few introductions I joined a set at tennis. They were a merry crowd. The Leithcourts were entertaining a large house-party, and their hospitality was on a scale quite in keeping with the fine old place they rented.

Tea was served on the lawn by the footmen, and afterwards, being tired of the game, I found myself strolling with Muriel Leithcourt, a bright, dark-eyed girl with tightly-bound hair, and wearing a cotton blouse and flannel tennis skirt.

I was apologizing for my terribly bad play, explaining that I had no practice out in Italy, whereupon she said—

"I know Italy slightly. I was in Florence and Naples with mother last season."

And then we began to discuss pictures and sculptures and the sights of Italy generally. I discerned from her remarks that she had traveled widely; indeed, she told me that both her father and mother were never happier than when moving from place to

place in search of variety and distraction. We had entered the huge paneled hall of the Castle, and had passed up the quaint old stone staircase to the long banqueting hall with its paneled oak ceiling, which in these modern days had been transformed into a bright, pleasant drawing-room, from the windows of which was presented a marvelous view over the lovely Nithsdale and across to the heather-clad hills beyond.

It was pleasant lounging there in the cool old room after the hot sunshine outside, and as I gazed around the place I noted how much more luxurious and tasteful it now was to what it had been in the days when I had visited its owner several years before.

"We are awfully glad to be up here," my pretty companion was saying. "We had such a busy season in London." And then she went on to describe the Court ball, and two or three of the most notable functions about which I had read in my English paper beside the Mediterranean.

She attracted me on account of her bright vivacity, quick wit and keen sense of humor, therefore I sat listening to her pleasant chatter. Exiled as I was in a foreign land, I seldom spoke English save with Hutcheson, the Consul, and even then we generally spoke Italian if there were others present, in order that our companions should understand. Therefore her gossip interested me, and as the golden sunset flooded the handsome old room I sat listening to her, inwardly admiring her innate grace and handsome countenance.

I had no idea who or what her father was—whether a wealthy

manufacturer, like so many who take expensive shoots and give big entertainments in order to edge their way into Society by its back door, or whether he was a gentleman of means and of good family. I rather guessed the latter, from his gentlemanly bearing and polished manner. His appearance, tall and erect, was that of a retired officer, and his clean-cut face was one of marked distinction.

I was telling my pretty companion something of my own life, how, because I loved Italy so well, I lived in Tuscany in preference to living in England, and how each year I came home for a month or two to visit my relations and to keep in touch with things.

Suddenly she said—

"I was once in Leghorn for a few hours. We were yachting in the Mediterranean. I love the sea—and yachting is such awfully good fun, if you only get decent weather."

The mention of yachting brought back to my mind the visit of the *Lola* and its mysterious sequel.

"Your father has a yacht, then?" I remarked, with as little concern as I could.

"Yes. The *Iris*. My uncle is cruising on her up the Norwegian Fiords. For us it is a change to be here, because we are so often afloat. We went across to New York in her last year and had a most delightful time—except for one bad squall which made us all a little bit nervous. But Moyes is such an excellent captain that I never fear. The crew are all North Sea fishermen—father will

engage nobody else. I don't blame him."

"So you must have made many long voyages, and seen many odd corners of the world, Miss Leithcourt?" I remarked, my interest in her increasing, for she seemed so extremely intelligent and well-informed.

"Oh, yes. We've been to Mexico, and to Panama, besides Morocco, Egypt, and the West Coast of Africa."

"And you've actually landed at Leghorn!" I remarked.

"Yes, but we didn't stay there more than an hour—to send a telegram, I think it was. Father said there was nothing to see there. He and I went ashore, and I must say I was rather disappointed."

"You are quite right. The town itself is ugly and uninteresting. But the outskirts—San Jacopo, Ardenza and Antigniano are all delightful. It was unfortunate that you did not see them. Was it long ago when you put in there?"

"Not very long. I really don't recollect the exact date," was her reply. "We were on our way home from Alexandria."

"Have you ever, in any of the ports you've been, seen a yacht called the *Lola*?" I asked eagerly, for it occurred to me that perhaps she might be able to give me information.

"The *Lola*!" she gasped, and instantly her face changed. A flush overspread her cheeks, succeeded next moment by a death-like pallor. "The *Lola*!" she repeated in a strange, hoarse voice, at the same time endeavoring strenuously not to exhibit any apprehension. "No. I have never heard of any such a vessel. Is

she a steam-yacht? Who's her owner?"

I regarded her in amazement and suspicion, for I saw that mention of the name had aroused within her some serious misgiving. That look in her dark eyes as they fixed themselves upon me was one of distinct and unspeakable terror.

What could she possibly know concerning the mysterious craft?

"I don't know the owner's name," I said, still affecting not to have noticed her alarm and apprehension. "The vessel ran aground at the Meloria, a dangerous shoal outside Leghorn, and through the stupidity of her captain was very nearly lost."

"Yes?" she gasped, in a half-whisper, bending to me eagerly, unable to sufficiently conceal the terrible anxiety consuming her. "And you—did you go aboard her?"

"Yes," was the only word I uttered.

A silence fell between us, and as my eyes fixed themselves upon her, I saw that from her handsome mobile countenance all the light and life had suddenly gone out, and I knew that she was in secret possession of the key to that remarkable enigma that so puzzled me.

Of a sudden the door opened, and a voice cried gayly—

"Why, I've been looking everywhere for you, Muriel. Why are you hidden here? Aren't you coming?"

We both turned, and as she did so a low cry of blank dismay involuntarily escaped her.

Next instant I sprang to my feet. The reason of her cry was

apparent, for there, in the full light of the golden sunset streaming through the long open windows, stood a broad-shouldered, fair-bearded man in tennis flannels and a Panama hat—the fugitive I knew as Philip Hornby!

I faced him, speechless.

CHAPTER IV IN WHICH THE MYSTERY INCREASES

Neither of us spoke. Equally surprised at the unexpected encounter, we stood facing each other dumbfounded.

Hornby started quickly as soon as his eyes fell upon me, and his face became blanched to the lips, while Muriel Leithcourt, quick to notice the sudden change in him, rose and introduced us in as calm a voice as she could command.

"I don't think you are acquainted," she said to me with a smile. "This is Mr. Martin Woodroffe—Mr. Gordon Gregg."

I bowed to him in sudden resolve to remain silent in pretense that I doubted whether the man before me was actually my host of the *Lola*. I intended to act as though I was not sufficiently convinced to openly express my doubt. Therefore we bowed, exchanging greetings as strangers, while, carefully watching, I saw how greatly the minds of both were relieved. They shot meaning glances at each other, and then, as though reassured that I was mystified and uncertain, the man who called himself Woodroffe explained to my companion—

"I've been over to Newton Stewart with Fred all day, and only got back a quarter of an hour ago. Aren't you playing any more to-day?"

"I think not," was her reply. "We've been out there the whole afternoon, and I'm rather tired. But they're still on the lawn. You can surely get a game with someone."

"If you don't play, I shan't. I returned to keep the promise I made this morning," he laughed, standing before the big open fireplace, holding his tennis racquet behind his back.

I examined his countenance, and was more than ever convinced that he was actually the man who gave me the name of Hornby and the false address in Somerset. The pair seemed to be on familiar terms, and I wondered whether they were engaged. In any case, the man seemed quite at home there.

As he chatted with the daughter of the house, he cast a quick, covert glance at me, and then darted a meaning look at her—a look of renewed confidence, as though he felt that he had successfully averted any suspicions I might have held.

We talked of the prospects of the grouse and the salmon, and from his remarks he seemed to be as keen at sport as he had once made out himself to be at yachting.

"My friend Leithcourt is awfully fortunate in getting such a splendid old place as this. On every hand I hear glowing accounts of the number of birds. The place has been well preserved in the past, and there's plenty of good cover."

"Yes," I said. "Gilrae, the owner, is a keen sportsman, and before he became so hard up he spent a lot of money on the estate, which, I believe, has always been considered one of the very best in the southwest. There's salmon, they say, down in the

Glen yonder—but I've never tried for any."

"Certainly there is. I've seen several. I hope to try one of these days. The Glen is deep and shady—an ideal place for fish. The only disappointment here, as far as I can make out, is the very few head of black-game."

"Yes, but every year they are getting rarer and rarer in this part of Scotland. A really fine black-cock is quite an event nowadays," I said.

While we were talking, or rather while I was carefully watching the rapid working of his mind, Leithcourt himself entered and joined us. He had been playing tennis, and had come in to rest and cool.

Host and guest were evidently on the most intimate terms. Leithcourt addressed him as "Martin," and began to relate a quarrel which his head-gamekeeper had had that day with one of the small farmers on the estate regarding the killing of some rabbits. And while they were talking Muriel suggested that we should stroll down to the tennis-courts again, an invitation which, much as I regretted leaving the two men, I was bound to accept.

It seemed as though she wished purposely to take me away from that man's presence, fearing that by remaining there longer my suspicions might become confirmed. She was acting in conjunction with the man whom I had known as Hornby.

There were still a good many people watching the game, for it was pleasant in those old-world gardens in the sunset hour. The dried-up moat was now transformed into a garden filled with

rhododendrons and bright azaleas, while the high ancient beech-hedges, the quaint old sundial with its motto: "Each time ye shadowe turneth ys one daye nearer unto dethe," and the old stone balustrades gray with lichen, all spoke mutely of those glorious days when the fierce horsemen of the Lairds of Rannoch were feared across the Border, and when many a prisoner of the Black Douglas had pined and died in those narrow stone chambers in the grim north tower that still stood high above.

Among the party strolling and lounging there prior to departure were quite a number of people I knew, people who had shooting-boxes in the vicinity and were my uncle's friends. In Scotland there is always a hearty hospitality among the sporting folk, and the laws of caste are far less rigorous than they are in England.

I was standing chatting with two ladies who were about to take leave of their hostess, when Leithcourt returned, but alone. Hornby had not accompanied him. Was it because he feared to again meet me?

In order to ascertain something regarding the man who had so mysteriously fled from Leghorn, I managed by the exercise of a little diplomacy to sit on the lawn with a young married woman named Tennant, wife of a cavalry captain, who was one of the house-party. After a little time I succeeded in turning the conversation to her fellow guests, and more particularly to the man I knew as Hornby.

"Oh! Mr. Woodroffe is most amusing," declared the bright

little woman. "He's always playing some practical joke or other. After dinner he is usually the life and soul of our party."

"Yes," I said, "I like what little I have seen of him. He's a very good fellow, I should say. I've heard that he's engaged to Muriel," I hazarded. "Is that true?"

"Of course. They've been engaged nearly a year, but he's been abroad until quite lately. He is rather close about his own affairs, and never talks about his travels and adventures, although one day Mr. Leithcourt declared that his hairbreadth escapes would make a most exciting book if ever written."

"Leithcourt and he are evidently most intimate friends."

"Oh, quite inseparable!" she laughed. "And the other man who is always with them is that short, stout, red-faced old fellow standing over there with the lady in pale blue, Sir Ughtred Gardner. Mr. Woodroffe has nicknamed him 'Sir Putrid.'" And we both laughed. "Of course, don't say I said so," she whispered. "They don't call him that to his face, but it's so easy to make a mistake in his name when he's not within hearing. We women don't care for him, so the nickname just fits."

And she gossiped on, telling me much that I desired to know regarding the new tenant of Rannoch and his friends, and more especially of that man who had first introduced himself to me in the Consulate at Leghorn.

Half an hour later my uncle's carriage was announced, and I left with the distinct impression that there was some deep mystery surrounding the Leithcourts. What it was, however,

I could not, for the life of me, make out. Perhaps it was Philip Leithcourt's intimate relation with the man who had so cleverly deceived me that incited my curiosity concerning him; perhaps it was that mysterious intuition, that curious presage of evil that sometimes comes to a man as warning of impending peril. Whatever the reason, I had become filled with grave apprehensions. The mystery grew deeper day by day, and was inexplicable.

During the week that followed I sought to learn all I could regarding the new people at the castle.

"They are taken up everywhere," declared my aunt when I questioned her. "Of course, we knew very little of them, except that they had a shoot up near Fort William two years ago, and that they have a town house in Green Street. They are evidently rather smart folks. Don't you think so?"

"Judging from their house-party, yes," I responded. "They are about as gay a crowd as one could find north of Carlisle just at present."

"Exactly. There are some well-known people among them, too," said my aunt. "I've asked them over to-morrow afternoon, and they've accepted."

"Excellent!" I exclaimed, for I wanted an opportunity for another chat with the dark-eyed girl who was engaged to the man whose alias was Hornby. I particularly desired to ascertain the reason of her fear when I had mentioned the *Lola*, and whether she possessed any knowledge of Hylton Chater.

The opportunity came to me in due course, for next afternoon the Rannoch party drove over in two large brakes, and with other people from the neighborhood and a band from Dumfries, my aunt's grounds presented a gay and animated scene. There was the usual tennis and croquet, while some of the men enjoyed a little putting on the excellent course my uncle, a golf enthusiast, had recently laid down.

As I expected, Woodroffe did not accompany the party. Mrs. Leithcourt, a slightly fussy little woman, apologized for his absence, explaining that he had been recalled to London suddenly a few days before, but was returning to Rannoch again at the end of the week.

"We couldn't afford to lose him," she declared to my aunt. "He is so awfully humorous—his droll sayings and antics keep us in a perfect roar each night at dinner. He's such a perfect mimic."

I turned away and strolled with Muriel, pleading an excuse to show her my uncle's beautiful grounds, not a whit less picturesque than those of the castle, and perhaps rather better kept.

"I only heard yesterday of your engagement, Miss Leithcourt," I remarked presently when we were alone. "Allow me to offer my best congratulations. When you introduced me to Mr. Woodroffe the other day I had no idea that he was to be your husband."

She glanced at me quickly, and I saw in her dark eyes a look of suspicion. Then she flushed slightly, and laughing uneasily said, in a blank, hard voice—

"It's very good of you, Mr. Gregg, to wish me all sorts of such

pleasant things."

"And when is the happy event to take place?"

"The date is not exactly fixed—early next year, I believe," and I thought she sighed.

"And you will probably spend a good deal of time yachting?" I suggested, my eyes fixed upon her in order to watch the result of my pointed remark. But she controlled herself perfectly.

"I love the sea," she responded briefly, and her eyes were set straight before her.

"Mr. Woodroffe has gone up to town, your mother says."

"Yes. He received a wire, and had to leave immediately. It was an awful bore, for we had arranged to go for a picnic to Dundrennan Abbey yesterday."

"But he'll be back here again, won't he?"

"I really don't know. It seems quite uncertain. I had a letter this morning which said he might have to go over to Hamburg on business, instead of coming up to us again."

There was disappointment in her voice, and yet at the same time I could not fail to recognize how the man to whom she was engaged had fled from Scotland because of my presence.

How I longed to ask her point-blank what she really knew of the yachtsman who was shrouded in so much mystery. Yet by betraying any undue anxiety I should certainly negative all my efforts to solve the puzzling enigma, therefore I was compelled to remain content with asking ingeniously disguised questions and drawing my own conclusions from her answers.

As we passed along those graveled walks it somehow became vividly impressed upon me that her marriage was being forced upon her by her parents. Her manner was that of one who was concealing some strange and terrible secret which she feared might be revealed. There was a distant look of unutterable terror in those dark eyes as though she existed in some constant and ever-present dread. Of course she told me nothing of her own feelings or affections, yet I recognized in both her words and her bearing a curious apathy—a want of the real enthusiasm of affection. Woodroffe, much her senior, was her father's friend, and it therefore seemed to me more than likely that Leithcourt was pressing a matrimonial alliance upon his daughter for some ulterior motive. In the mad hurry for place, power, and wealth, men relentlessly sell their daughters in the matrimonial market, and ambitious mothers scheme and intrigue for their own aggrandizement at sacrifice of their daughter's happiness more often than the public ever dream. Tragedy is, alas! written upon the face of many a bride whose portrait appears in the fashion-papers and whose toilette is so faithfully chronicled in the paragraph beneath. Indeed, the girl in Society who is allowed her own free choice in the matter of a husband is, alas! nowadays the exception, for parents who want to "get on" up the social scale have found that pretty daughters are a marketable commodity, and many a man has been placed "on his legs," both financially and socially, by his son-in-law. Hence the marriage of convenience is fast becoming common, while in the same ratio

the divorce petitions are unfortunately on the increase.

I read tragedy in the dark luminous eyes of Muriel Leithcourt. I knew that her young heart was over-burdened by some secret sorrow or guilty knowledge that she would reveal to me if she dared. Her own words told me that she was perplexed; that she longed to confide and seek advice of someone, yet by reason of some hidden and untoward circumstance her lips were sealed.

I tried to question her further regarding Woodroffe, of what profession he followed and of his past.

But she evidently suspected me, for I had unfortunately mentioned the *Lola*.

She wanted to speak to me in confidence, and yet she would reveal to me nothing—absolutely nothing.

Martin Woodroffe did not rejoin the house-party at Rannoch.

Although I remained the guest of my uncle much longer than I intended, indeed right through the shooting season, in order to watch the Leithcourts, yet as far as we could judge they were extremely well-bred people and very hospitable.

We exchanged a good many visits and dinners, and while my uncle several times invited Leithcourt and his friends to his shoot with *al fresco* luncheon, which the ladies joined, the tenant of Rannoch always invited us back in return.

Thus I gained many opportunities of talking with Muriel, and of watching her closely. I had the reputation of being a confirmed bachelor, and on account of that it seemed that she was in no way averse to my companionship. She could handle

a rook-rifle as well as any woman, and was really a very fair shot. Therefore we often found ourselves alone tramping across the wide open moorland, or along those delightful glens of the Nithsdale, glorious in the autumn tints of their luxurious foliage.

Her father, on the other hand, seemed to view me with considerable suspicion, and I could easily discern that I was only asked to Rannoch because it was impossible to invite my uncle without including myself.

Leithcourt, who perhaps thought I was courting his daughter, was ever endeavoring to avoid me, and would never allow me to walk with him alone. Why? I wondered. Did he fear me? Had Woodroffe told him of our strange encounter in Leghorn?

His pronounced antipathy towards me caused me to watch him surreptitiously, and more closely than perhaps I should otherwise have done. He was a man of gloomy mood, and often he would leave his guests and take walks alone, musing and brooding. On several occasions I followed him in secret, and found to my surprise that although he made long detours in various directions, yet he always arrived at the same spot at the same hour—five o'clock.

The place where he halted was on the edge of a dark wood on the brow of a hill about three miles from Rannoch—a good place to get woodpigeon, as they came to roost. It was fully two miles across the hills from the high road to Moniaive, and from the break the gray wall where he was in the habit of sitting to rest and smoke, there stretched the beautiful panorama of Loch Urr

and the heatherclad hills beyond.

Leithcourt never went direct to the place, but always so timed his walks that he arrived just at five, and remained there smoking cigarettes until half-past, as though awaiting the arrival of some person he expected. Once or twice his guests suggested shooting pigeons at sundown, but he always had some excuse for opposing the proposal, and thus the party, unsuspecting the reason, were kept away from that particular lonely spot.

In my youth I had sat many a quiet hour there in the darkening gloom and shot many a pigeon, therefore I knew the wood well, and was able to watch the tenant of Rannoch from points where he least suspected the presence of another.

Once, when I was alone with Muriel, I mentioned her father's capacity for walking alone, whereupon she said—

"Oh, yes, he was always fond of walking. He used to take me with him when we first came here, but he always went so far that I refused to go any more."

She never once mentioned Woodroffe. I allowed her plenty of opportunity for doing so, chaffing her about her forthcoming marriage in order that she might again refer to him. But never did his name pass her lips. I understood that he had gone abroad—that was all.

Often when alone I reflected upon my curious adventure on that night when I met Olinto, and of my narrow escape from the hands of my unknown enemies. I wondered if that ingenious and dastardly attempt upon my life had really any connection with

that strange incident at Leghorn. As day succeeded day, my mind became filled by increasing suspicion. Mystery surrounded me on every hand.

Indeed, by one curious fact alone it was increased a hundredfold.

Late one afternoon, when I had been out shooting all day with the Rannoch party, I drove back to the castle in the Perth-cart with three other men, and found the ladies assembled in the great hall with tea ready. A welcome log-fire was blazing in the huge old grate, for in October it is chilly and damp in Scotland and a fire is pleasant at evening.

Muriel was seated upon the high padded fender—like those one has at clubs—which always formed a cosy spot for the ladies, especially after dinner. When I entered, she rose quickly and handed me my cup, exclaiming as she looked at me—

"Oh, Mr. Gregg! what a state you are in!"

"Yes, I was after snipe, and slipped into a bog," I laughed. "But it was early this morning, and the mud has dried."

"Come with me, and I'll get you a brush," she urged. And I followed her through the long corridors and upstairs to a small sitting-room which was her own little sanctum, where she worked and read—a cosy little place with two queer old windows in the colossal wall, and a floor of polished oak, and great black beams above. When the owner had occupied the house that room had been disused, but it had, I found, been now completely transformed, and was a most tasteful little nest of luxury with its

bright chintzes, its Turkey rugs and its cheerful fire on the old stone hearth.

She laughed when I expressed admiration of her little den, and said—

"I believe it was the armory in the old days. But it makes quite a comfy little boudoir. I can lock myself in and be quite quiet when the party are too noisy," she added merrily.

But as my eyes wandered around they suddenly fell upon an object which caused me to start with profound wonder—a cabinet photograph in a frame of crimson leather.

The picture was that of a young girl—a duplicate of the portrait I had found torn across and flung aside on board the *Lola*!

The merry eyes laughed out at me as I stood staring at it in sheer bewilderment.

"What a pretty girl!" I exclaimed quickly, concealing my surprise. "Who is she?"

My companion was silent a moment, her dark eyes meeting mine with a strange look of inquiry.

"Yes," she laughed, "everyone admires her. She was a schoolfellow of mine—Elma Heath."

"Heath!" I echoed. "Where was she at school with you?"

"At Chichester."

"Long ago?"

"A little over two years."

"She's very beautiful!" I declared, taking up the photograph

and discovering that it bore the name of the same well-known photographer in New Bond Street as that I had found on the carpet of the *Lola* in the Mediterranean.

"Yes. She's really prettier than her photograph. It hardly does her justice."

"And where is she now?"

"Why are you so very inquisitive, Mr. Gregg?" laughed the handsome girl. "Have you actually fallen in love with her from her picture?"

"I'm hardly given to that kind of thing, Miss Leithcourt," I answered with mock severity. "I don't think even my worst enemy could call me a flirt, could she?"

"No. I will give you your due," she declared. "You never do flirt. That is why I like you."

"Thanks for your candor, Miss Leithcourt," I said.

"Only," she added, "you seem smitten with Elma's charms."

"I think she's extremely pretty," I remarked, with the photograph still in my hand. "Do you ever see her now?"

"Never," she replied. "Since the day I left school we have never met. She was several years younger than myself, and I heard that a week after I left Chichester her people came and took her away. Where she is now I have no idea. Her people lived somewhere in Durham. Her father was a doctor."

Her reply disappointed me. Yet I had, at least, retained knowledge of the name of the original of the picture, and from the photographer I might perhaps discover her address, for to me

it seemed that she was somehow intimately connected with those mysterious yachtsmen.

What Muriel told me concerning her, I did not doubt for a single instant. Yet it was certainly more than a coincidence that a copy of the picture which had created such a deep impression upon me should be preserved in her own little boudoir as a souvenir of a devoted school-friend.

"Then you have heard absolutely nothing as to her present position or whereabouts—whether she is married, for instance?"

"Ah!" she cried mischievously. "You betray yourself by your own words. You have fallen in love with her, I really believe, Mr. Gregg. If she knew, she'd be most gratified—or at least, she ought to be."

At which I smiled, preferring that she should adopt that theory in preference to any other.

She spoke frankly, as a pure honest girl would speak. She was not jealous, but she nevertheless resented—as women do resent such things—that I should fall in love with a friend's photograph.

There was a mystery surrounding that torn picture; of that I was absolutely certain. The remembrance of that memorable evening when I had dined on board the *Lola* arose vividly before me. Why had the girl's portrait been so ruthlessly destroyed and the frame turned with its face to the wall? There was some reason—some distinct and serious motive in it. Had Muriel told me the truth, I wondered, or was she merely seeking to shield the suspected man who was her lover?

Hour by hour the mystery surrounding the Leithcourts became more inscrutable, more intensely absorbing. I had searched a copy of the London Directory at the Station Hotel at Carlisle, and found that no house in Green Street was registered as occupied by the tenant of Rannoch; and, further, when I came to examine the list of guests at the castle, I found that they were really persons unknown in society. They were merely of that class of witty, well-dressed parasites who always cling on to the wealthy and make believe that they are smart and of the *grande monde*. Rannoch was an expensive place to keep up, with all that big retinue of servants and gamekeepers, and with those nightly dinners cooked by a French *chef*; yet Leithcourt seemed to possess a long pocket and smiled upon those parasites, officers of doubtful commission and younger sprigs of the pseudo-aristocracy who surrounded him, while his wife, keen-eyed and of superb bearing, was punctilious concerning all points of etiquette, and at the same time indefatigable that her mixed set of guests should enjoy a really good time.

But I was not the only person who could not make them out. My uncle was the first to open my eyes regarding the true character of certain of the men staying at Rannoch.

"I think, Gordon, that one or two of those fellows with Leithcourt are rank outsiders," he said confidentially to me one night after we had had a hard day's shooting, and were playing a hundred up at billiards before retiring. "One man, who arrived yesterday, I know too well. He was struck off the list

at Boodle's three years ago for card-sharpping—that thin-faced, fair-mustached man named Cadby. I suppose Leithcourt doesn't know it, or he wouldn't have him up here among respectable folk." And my uncle, chewing the end of his cigar, sniffed angrily, seeming half inclined to give his friend a gentle hint that the name Cadby was placed beyond the pale of good society.

"Better not say anything about it," I urged. "It's Leithcourt's own affair, uncle—not ours."

"Yes, but if a man sets up a position in the country he mustn't be allowed to ask us to meet such fellows. It's coming it a little too thick, Gordon. We men can stand the women of the party, but the men—well, I tell you candidly, I shan't accept his invites to shoot again."

"No, no, uncle," I protested. "Probably it's owing to ignorance. You'll be able, a little later on, to give him valuable tips. He's a good fellow, and only wants experience in Scotland to get along all right."

"Yes. But I don't like it, my boy, I don't like it! It isn't playing a fair game," declared the rigid old gentleman, coloring resentfully. "I'm not going to return the invitation and ask that sharper, Cadby, to my house—and I tell you that plainly."

Next day I shot with the Carmichaels of Crossburn, and about four o'clock, after a good day, took leave of the party in the Black Glen, and started off alone to walk home, a distance of about six miles. It was already growing dusk, and would be quite dark, I knew, before I reached my uncle's house. My most direct way

was to follow the river for about two miles and then strike straight across the large dense wood, and afterwards over a wide moor full of treacherous bogs and pitfalls for the unwary.

My gun over my shoulder, I had walked on for about three-quarters of an hour, and had nearly traversed the wood, at that hour so dark that I had considerable difficulty in finding my way, when—of a sudden—I fancied I distinguished voices.

I halted. Yes. Men were talking in low tones of confidence, and in that calm stillness of evening they appeared nearer to me than they actually were.

I listened, trying to distinguish the words uttered, but could make out nothing. They were moving slowly together, in close vicinity to myself, for their feet stirred the dry leaves, and I could hear the boughs cracking as they forced their way through them.

Of a sudden, while standing there not daring to breathe lest I should betray my presence, a strange sound fell upon my eager ears.

Next moment I realized that I was at that place where Leithcourt so persistently kept his disappointed tryst, having approached it from within the wood.

The sound alarmed me, and yet it was neither an explosion of fire-arms nor a startling cry for help.

One word reached me in the darkness—one single word of bitter and withering reproach.

Heedless of the risk I ran and the peril to which I exposed myself, I dashed forward with a resolve to penetrate the mystery,

until I came to the gap in the rough stone wall where Leithcourt's habit was to halt each day at sundown.

There, in the falling darkness, the sight that met my eyes at the spot held me rigid, appalled, stupefied.

In that instant I realized the truth—a truth that was surely the strangest ever revealed to any man.

CHAPTER V

CONTAINS CERTAIN CONFIDENCES

As I dashed forward to the gap in the boundary wall of the wood, I nearly stumbled over a form lying across the narrow path.

So dark was it beneath the trees that at first I could not plainly make out what it was until I bent and my hands touched the garments of a woman. Her hat had fallen off, for I felt it beneath my feet, while the cloak was a thick woolen one.

Was she dead, I wondered? That cry—that single word of reproach—sounded in my ears, and it seemed plain that she had been struck down ruthlessly after an exchange of angry words.

I felt in my pocket for my vestas, but unfortunately my box was empty. Yet just at that moment my strained ears caught a sound—the sound of someone moving stealthily among the fallen leaves. Seizing my gun, I demanded who was there.

There was, however, no response. The instant I spoke the movement ceased.

As far as I could judge, the person in concealment was within the wood about ten yards from me, separated by an impenetrable thicket. As, however, I stood out against the sky, my silhouette was, I knew, a well-defined mark for anyone with fire-arms.

It seemed evident that a tragedy had occurred, and that the

victim at my feet was a woman. But whom?

Of a sudden, while I stood hesitating, blaming myself for being without matches, I heard the movement repeated. Someone was quickly receding—escaping from the spot. I listened again. The sound was not of the rustling of leaves or the crackling of dried sticks, but the low thuds of a man's feet racing over softer ground. He had scaled the rough stone dyke and was out in the turnip-field adjacent.

I sprang through the gap, straining my eyes into the gloom, and as I did so could just distinguish a dark figure receding quickly beneath the wall of the wood.

In an instant I dashed after it. But the agility of whoever the fugitive was, man or woman, was marvelous. I considered myself a fairly good runner, but racing across those rough turnips and heavy, newly-plowed land in the darkness and carrying my gun soon caused me to pant and blow. Yet the figure I was pursuing was so fleet of foot and so nimble in climbing the high rough walls that from the very first I was outrun.

Down the steep hill to the Scarwater I followed the fugitive, crossing the old footbridge near Penpont, and then up a wild winding glen towards the Cairnsmore of Deugh. For a couple of miles or more I was close behind, until, at a turn in the dark wooded glen where it branched in two directions, I lost all trace of the person who flew from me. Whoever it was they had very cleverly gone into hiding in the undergrowth of one or other of the two glens—which I could not decide.

I stood out of breath, the perspiration pouring from me, undecided how to act.

Was it Leithcourt himself whom I had surprised?

That idea somehow became impressed upon me and I suddenly resolved to go boldly across to Rannoch and ascertain for myself. Therefore, with the excuse that I was belated on my walk home, I turned back down the glen, and half an hour afterward entered the great well-lighted hall of the castle where the guests, ready dressed, were assembling prior to dinner.

I was welcomed warmly, as I was always by the men of the party, who seeing my muddy plight at once offered me a glass of the sportsman's drink in Scotland, and while I was adding soda to it Leithcourt himself joined his guests, ready dressed in his dinner jacket, having just descended from his room.

"Hulloa, Gregg!" he exclaimed heartily, holding out his hand. "Had a long day of it, evidently. Good sport with Carmichael—eh?"

"Very fair," I said. "I remained longer with him than I ought to have done, and have got belated on my way home, so looked in for a refresher."

"Quite right," he laughed merrily. "You're always welcome, you know. I'd have been annoyed if I knew you had passed without coming in."

And Muriel, a pretty figure in a low-cut gown of turquoise chiffon, standing behind her father, smiled secretly at me. I smiled at her in return, but it was a strange smile, I fear, for

with the knowledge of that additional mystery within me—the mystery of the woman lying unconscious or perhaps dead, up in the wood—held me stupefied.

I had suspected Leithcourt because of his constant trysts at that spot, but I had at least proved that my suspicions were entirely without foundation. He could not have got home and dressed in the time, for I had taken the nearest route to the castle while the fugitive would be compelled to make a wide detour.

I only remained a few minutes, then went forth into the darkness again, utterly undecided how to act. My first impulse was to return to the woman's aid, for she might not be dead after all.

And yet when I recollected that hoarse cry that rang out in the darkness, I knew too well that she had been struck fatally. It was this latter conviction that prevented me from turning back to the wood. You will perhaps blame me, but the fact is I feared that if I went there suspicion might fall upon me, now that the real culprit had so ingeniously escaped.

If the victim were dead, what aid could I render? A knife had, I believed, been used, for my foot caught against it when I had started off after the fugitive. The only doubt in my own mind was whether the unfortunate woman was actually dead, for if she were not then my disinclination to return to the scene of the tragedy was culpable.

Whether or not I acted rightly in remaining away from the place, I leave it to you to judge in the light of the amazing truth

which afterwards transpired.

I decided to walk straight back to my uncle's, and dinner was over before I had had my tub and dressed. I therefore ate my meal alone, Davis, the grave old butler, serving me with that stateliness which always amused me. I usually chatted with him when others were not present, but that night I remained silent, my mind full of that strange and startling affair of which I alone held secret knowledge.

Next day the body would surely be found; then the whole countryside would be filled with horror and surprise. Was it possible that Leithcourt, that calm, well-groomed, distinguished-looking man, held any knowledge of the ghastly truth? No. His manner as he stood in the hall chatting gayly with me was surely not that of a man with a guilty secret. I became firmly convinced that although the tragedy affected him very closely, and that it had occurred at the spot which he had each day visited for some mysterious purpose, yet up to the present he was in ignorance of what had transpired.

But who was the woman? Was she young or old?

A thousand times I regretted bitterly that I had no matches with me so that I might examine her features.

One sudden thought that struck me as I sat there at table caused me to lay down my fork and pause in breathless bewilderment. Was the victim that sweet-faced young girl whose photograph had been so ruthlessly cast from its frame and destroyed? The theory was a weird one, but was it the truth?

I longed for the coming of the dawn when the Rannoch keepers would most certainly discover her. Then at least I should know the truth, for I might go and see the body out of curiosity without arousing any suspicion.

I tried to play my usual game of billiards with my uncle, but my hand was so unsteady that the old gentleman began to chaff me.

"It's the gun, I suppose," I remarked. "I've been carrying it all day, and am tired out. I walked all the way home from Crossburn."

"The Carmichaels are very thick with the Leithcourts, I hear," my uncle remarked. "Strange they didn't ask Leithcourt to their shoot."

"They did, but he'd got another engagement—over at Kenmure Castle, I think."

I retired to my room that night full of fevered apprehension. Had I acted rightly in not returning to that lonely spot on the brow of the hill? Had I done as a man should do in keeping the tragic secret to myself?

I opened my window and gazed away across the dark Nithsdale, where, in the distant gloom, the black line of wood loomed up against the stormy sky. The stars were no longer shining and the rain clouds had gathered. I stood with my face turned to the dark indistinct spot that held the secret, lost in wonderment.

At last I closed the window and turned in, but no sleep came

to my eyes, so full was my mind of the startling events of those past few months and of that gruesome discovery I had made.

Had the fugitive actually recognized me? Probably my voice when I had called out had betrayed me. Hour after hour I lay puzzling, trying to arrive at some solution of that intricate problem which now presented itself. Muriel could tell me what I wished to know. Of that I was certain. Yet she dared not speak. Some inexpressible terror held her dumb—she was affianced to the man Martin Woodroffe.

Again I rose, lit the gas, and tried to read a novel. But I could not concentrate my thoughts, which were ever wandering to that strange mystery of the wood. At six I shaved, descended, and went out with the dogs for a short walk; but on returning I heard of nothing unusual, and was compelled to remain inactive until near mid-day.

I was crossing the stable-yard where I had gone to order the carriage for my aunt, when an English groom, suddenly emerging from the harness-room, touched his cap, saying—

"Have you 'eard, sir, of the awful affair up yonder?"

"Of what?" I asked quickly.

"Well, sir, there seems to have been a murder last night up in Rannoch Wood," said the man quickly. "Holden, the gardener, has just come back from that village and says that Mr. Leithcourt's under-gamekeeper as he was going home at five this morning came upon a dead body."

"A dead body!" I exclaimed, feigning great surprise.

"Yes, sir—a youngish man. He'd been stabbed to the heart."

"A man!"

"Yes, sir—so Holden says."

"Call Holden. I'd like to know all he's heard," I said. And presently, when the gardener emerged from the grape-house, I sought of him all the particulars he had gathered.

"I don't know very much, sir," was the man's reply. "I went into the inn for a glass of beer at eleven, as I always do, and heard them talking about it. A young man was murdered last night up in Rannoch Wood. The gamekeeper thought at first there'd been a fight among poachers, but from the dead man's clothes they say he isn't a poacher at all, but a stranger in this district."

"The body was that of a man, then?" I asked, trying to conceal my utter bewilderment.

"Yes—about thirty, they say. The police have taken him to the mortuary at Dumfries, and the detectives are up there now looking at the spot, they say."

A man! And yet the body I found was that of a woman—that I could swear.

After lunch I took the dog-cart and drove alone into Dumfries.

When I inquired of the police-constable on duty at the town mortuary to be allowed to view the body of the murdered man, he regarded me, I thought, with considerable suspicion. My request was an unusual one. Nevertheless, he took me up a narrow alley, unlocked a door, and I found myself in the cold, gloomy chamber of death. From a small dingy window above the light fell upon

an object lying upon a large slab of gray stone and covered with a soiled sheet.

The sight was ghastly and gruesome; the body lay there awaiting the official inquiry into the cause of death. The silence of the tomb was unbroken, save for the heavy tread of the policeman, who having removed his helmet in the presence of the dead, lifted the end of the sheet, revealing to me a white, hard-set face, with closed eyes and dropped jaw.

I started back as my eyes fell upon the dead countenance. I was entirely unprepared for such a revelation. The truth staggered me.

The victim was the man who had acted as my friend—the Italian waiter, Olinto.

I advanced and peered into the thin inanimate features, scarce able to realize the actual fact. But my eyes had not deceived me. Though death distorts the facial expression of every man, I had no difficulty in identifying him.

"You recognize him, sir?" remarked the officer. "Who is he? Our people are very anxious to know, for up to the present moment they haven't succeeded in establishing his identity."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.