

LE QUEUX WILLIAM

THE DOCTOR OF PIMLICO:
BEING THE DISCLOSURE
OF A GREAT CRIME

William Le Queux

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the Disclosure of a Great Crime**

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"Enid Drew Back In Terror"

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH CERTAIN SUSPICIONS ARE EXCITED

A grey, sunless morning on the Firth of Tay.

Across a wide, sandy waste stretching away to the misty sea at Budden, four men were walking. Two wore uniform—one an alert, grey-haired general, sharp and brusque in manner, with many war ribbons across his tunic; the other a tall, thin-faced staff captain, who wore the tartan of the Gordon Highlanders. With them were two civilians, both in rough shooting-jackets and breeches, one about forty-five, the other a few years his junior.

"Can you see them, Fellowes?" asked the general of the long-legged captain, scanning the distant horizon with those sharp grey eyes which had carried him safely through many campaigns.

"No, sir," replied the captain, who was carrying the other's mackintosh. "I fancy they must be farther over to the left, behind those low mounds yonder."

"Haven't brought their battery into position yet, I suppose," snapped the old officer, as he swung along with the two civilians beside him.

Fred Tredennick, the taller of the two civilians, walked with a gait decidedly military, for, indeed, he was a retired major, and as the general had made a tour of inspection of the camp prior to walking towards where the mountain battery was manœuvring, he had been chatting with him upon technical matters.

"I thought you'd like to see this mountain battery, Fetherston," exclaimed the general, addressing the other civilian. "We have lots of them on the Indian frontier, of course, and there were many of ours in Italy and Serbia."

"I'm delighted to come with you on this tour of inspection, General. As you know, I'm keenly interested in military affairs—and especially in the reorganisation of the Army after the war," replied Walter Fetherston, a dark, well-set-up man of forty, with a round, merry face and a pair of eyes which, behind their gold pince-nez, showed a good-humoured twinkle.

Of the four men, General Sir Hugh Elcombe and Walter Fetherston were, perhaps, equally distinguished. The former, as all the world knows, had had a brilliant career in Afghanistan, in Egypt, Burmah, Tirah, the Transvaal, and in France, and now held an appointment as inspector of artillery.

The latter was a man of entirely different stamp. As he spoke he gesticulated slightly, and no second glance was needed to realise that he was a thorough-going cosmopolitan.

By many years of life on the Continent he had acquired a half-foreign appearance. Indeed, a keen observer would probably have noticed that his clothes had been cut by a foreign tailor, and that his boots, long, narrow and rather square-toed, bore the stamp of the Italian boot-maker. When he made any humorous remark he had the habit of slightly closing the left eye in order to emphasise it, while he usually walked with his left hand behind his back, and was hardly ever seen without a cigarette. Those cigarettes were one of his idiosyncrasies. They were delicious, of a brand unobtainable by the public, and made from tobacco grown in one of the Balkan States. With them he had, both before the war and after, been constantly supplied by a certain European sovereign whose personal friend he was. They bore the royal crown and cipher, but even to his most intimate acquaintance Walter Fetherston had never betrayed the reason why he was the recipient of so many favours from the monarch in question.

Easy-going to a degree, full of open-hearted *bonhomie*, possessing an unruffled temper, and apparently without a single care in all the world, he seldom, if ever, spoke of himself. He never mentioned either his own doings or his friends'. He was essentially a mysterious man—a man of moods and of strong prejudices.

More than one person who had met him casually had hinted that his substantial income was derived from sources that would not bear investigation—that he was mixed up with certain financial adventurers. Others declared that he was possessed of a considerable fortune that had been left him by an uncle who had been a dealer in precious stones in Hatton Garden. The truth was, however, that Walter Fetherston was a writer of popular novels, and from their sale alone he derived a handsome income.

The mystery stories of Walter Fetherston were world-famous. Wherever the English language was spoken this shrewd-eyed, smiling man's books were read, while translations of them appeared as *feuilletons* in various languages in the principal Continental journals. One could scarcely take up an English newspaper without seeing mention of his name, for he was one of the most popular authors of the day.

It is a generally accepted axiom that a public man cannot afford to be modest in these go-ahead days of "boom." Yet Fetherston was one of the most retiring of men. English society had tried in vain to allure him—he courted no personal popularity. Beyond his quiet-spoken literary agent, who arranged his affairs and took financial responsibility from his shoulders, his publishers, and perhaps half a dozen intimate friends, he was scarcely recognised in his true character. Indeed, his whereabouts were seldom known save to his agent and his only brother, so elusive was he and so careful to establish a second self.

He had never married. It was whispered that he had once had a serious affair of the heart abroad. But that was a matter of long ago.

Shoals of invitations arrived at his London clubs each season, but they usually reached him in some out-of-the-world corner of Europe, and he would read them with a smile and cast them to the winds.

He took the keenest delight in evading the world that pressed him. His curious hatred of his own popularity was to everyone a mystery. His intimate friends, of whom Fred Tredennick was one, had whispered that, in order to efface his identity, he was known in certain circles abroad by the name of Maltwood. This was quite true. In London he was a member of White's and the Devonshire as Fetherston. There was a reason why on the Continent and elsewhere he should pass as Mr. Maltwood, but his friends could never discover it, so carefully did he conceal it.

Walter Fetherston was a writer of breathless mystery—but he was the essence of mystery himself. Once the reader took up a book of his he never laid it down until he had read the final chapter. You, my reader, have more than once found yourself beneath his strange spell. And what was the secret of his success? He had been asked by numberless interviewers, and to them all he had made the same stereotyped reply: "I live the mysteries I write."

He seemed annoyed by his own success. Other writers suffered from that complaint known as "swelled head," but Walter Fetherston never. He lived mostly abroad in order to avoid the penalty which all the famous must pay, travelling constantly and known mostly by his assumed name of Maltwood.

And behind all this some mystery lay. He was essentially a man of secrets.

Some people declared that he had married ten years ago, and gave a circumstantial account of how he had wedded the daughter of a noble Spanish house, but that a month later she had been accidentally drowned in the Bay of Fontarabia, and that the tragedy had ever preyed upon his mind. But upon his feminine entanglements he was ever silent. He was a merry fellow, full of bright humour, and excellent company. But to the world he wore a mask that was impenetrable.

At that moment he was shooting with his old friend Tredennick, who lived close to St. Fillans, on the picturesque Loch Earn, when the general, hearing of his presence in the neighbourhood, had sent him an invitation to accompany him on his inspection.

Walter had accepted for one reason only. In the invitation the general had remarked that he and his stepdaughter Enid were staying at the Panmure Hotel at Monifieth—so well known to golfers—and that after the inspection he hoped they would lunch together.

Now, Walter had met Enid Orlebar six months before at Biarritz, where she had been nursing at the Croix Rouge Hospital in the Hôtel du Palais, and the memory of that meeting had lingered with him. He had long desired to see her again, for her pale beauty had somehow attracted him—

attracted him in a manner that no woman's face had ever attracted him before. Hitherto he had held cynical notions concerning love and matrimony, but ever since he had met Enid Orlebar in that winter hotel beside the sea, and had afterwards discovered her to be stepdaughter of Sir Hugh Elcombe, he had found himself reflecting upon his own loneliness.

At luncheon he was to come face to face with her again. It was of this he was thinking more than of the merits of mountain batteries or the difficulties of limbering or unlimbering.

"See! there they are!" exclaimed the general, suddenly pointing with his gloved hand.

Fetherston strained his eyes towards the horizon, but declared that he could detect nothing.

"They're lying behind that rising ground to the left of the magazine yonder," declared the general, whose keen vision had so often served him in good stead. Then, turning on his heel and scanning the grey horizon seaward, he added: "They're going to fire out on to the Gaa between those two lighthouses on Buddon Ness. By Jove!" he laughed, "the men in them will get a bit of a shock."

"I shouldn't care much to be there, sir," remarked Tredennick.

"No," laughed the general. "But really there's no danger—except that we're just in the line of their fire."

So they struck off to the left and approached the position by a circuitous route, being greeted by the colonel and other officers, to whom the visit of Sir Hugh Elcombe had been a considerable surprise.

The serviceable-looking guns were already mounted and in position, the range had been found; the reserves, the ponies and the pipers were lying concealed in a depression close at hand when they arrived.

The general, after a swift glance around, stood with legs apart and arms folded to watch, while Fetherston and Tredennick, with field-glasses, had halted a little distance away.

A sharp word of command was given, when next instant the first gun boomed forth, and a shell went screaming through the air towards the low range of sand-hills in the distance.

The general grunted. He was a man of few words, but a typical British officer of the type which has made the Empire and won the war against the Huns. He glanced at the watch upon his wrist, adjusted his monocle, and said something in an undertone to the captain.

The firing proceeded, while Fetherston, his ears dulled by the constant roar, watched the bursting shells with interest.

"I wonder what the lighthouse men think of it now?" he laughed, turning to his friend. "A misdirected shot would send them quickly to kingdom come!"

Time after time the range was increased, until, at last, the shells were dropped just at the spot intended. As each left the gun it shrieked overhead, while the flash could be seen long before the report reached the ear.

"We'll see in a few moments how quickly they can get away," the general said, as he approached Fetherston.

Then the order was given to cease fire. Words of command sounded, and were repeated in the rear, where ponies and men lay hidden. The guns were run back under cover, and with lightning rapidity dismounted, taken to pieces, and loaded upon the backs of the ponies, together with the leather ammunition cases—which looked like men's suit cases—and other impedimenta.

The order was given to march, and, headed by the pipers, who commenced their inspiring skirl to the beat of the drums, they moved away over the rough, broken ground, the general standing

astraddle and watching it all through his monocle with critical eye, and keeping up a fire of sarcastic comment directed at the colonel.

"Why!" he cried sharply in his low, strident voice, "what's that bay there? Too weak for the work—no good. You want better stuff than that. An axle yonder not packed properly! . . . And look at that black pony—came out of a governess-cart, I should think! . . . Hey, you man there, you don't want to hang on that pack! Men get lazy and want the pony to help them along. And you—" he cried, as a pony, heavily laden with part of a gun, came down an almost perpendicular incline. "Let that animal find his way down alone. Do you hear?"

Then, after much manœuvring, he caused them to take up another position, unlimber their guns, and fire.

When this had been accomplished he called the officers together and, his monocle in his eye, severely criticised their performance, declaring that they had exposed themselves so fully to the enemy that ere they had had time to fire they would have been shelled out of their position.

The spare ammunition was exposed all over the place, some of the reserves were not under cover, and the battery commander so exposed himself that he'd have been a dead man before the first shot. "You must do better than this—much better. That's all."

Then the four walked across to the Panmure Hotel at Monifieth.

Walter Fetherston held his breath. His lips were pressed tightly together, his brows contracted. He was again to meet Enid Orlebar.

He shot a covert glance at the general walking at his side. In his eyes showed an unusual expression, half of suspicion, half of curiosity.

Next instant, however, it had vanished, and he laughed loudly at a story Tredennick was telling.

CHAPTER II

THE COMING OF A STRANGER

Enid was standing on the steps of the hotel when the men arrived.

For a second Walter glanced into her splendid eyes, and then bowed over her hand in his foreign way, a murmured expression of pleasure escaping his lips.

About twenty-two, tall and slim, she presented a complete and typical picture of the outdoor girl, dressed as she was in a grey jumper trimmed with purple, a short golfing skirt, her tweed hat to match trimmed with the feathers of a cock pheasant.

Essentially a sportswoman, she could handle gun or rod, ride to hounds, or drive a motor-car with equal skill, and as stepdaughter of Sir Hugh she had had experience on the Indian frontier and in Egypt.

Her father had been British Minister at the Hague, and afterwards at Stockholm, but after his death her mother had married Sir Hugh, and had become Lady Elcombe. Nowadays, however, the latter was somewhat of an invalid, and seldom left their London house in Hill Street. Therefore, Enid was usually chaperoned by Mrs. Caldwell, wife of the well-known K.C., and with her she generally spent her winters on the Continent.

Blanche, Sir Hugh's daughter by his first wife, had married Paul Le Pontois, who had been a captain in the 114th Regiment of Artillery of the French Army during the war, and lived with her husband in France. She seldom came to England, though at frequent intervals her father went over to visit her.

When Walter Fetherston took his seat beside Enid Orlebar at the luncheon table a flood of strange recollections crowded upon his mind—those walks along the Miramar, that excursion to Pampeluna, and those curious facts which she had unwittingly revealed to him in the course of their confidential chats. He remembered their leave-taking, and how, as he had sat in the *rapide* for Paris, he had made a solemn vow never again to set eyes upon her.

There was a reason why he should not—a strong but mysterious reason.

Yet he had come there of his own will to meet her again—drawn there irresistibly by some unseen influence which she possessed.

Was it her beauty that had attracted him? Yes—he was compelled to admit that it was. As a rule he avoided the society of women. To his intimates he had laid down the maxim: "Don't marry; keep a dog if you want a faithful companion." And yet he was once again at the side of this fair-faced woman.

None around the table were aware of their previous meeting, and all were too busy chattering to notice the covert glances which he shot at her. He was noting her great beauty, sitting there entranced by it—he, the man of double personality, who, under an assumed name, lived that gay life of the Continent, known in society in twenty different cities, and yet in England practically unknown in his real self.

Yes, Enid Orlebar was beautiful. Surely there could be few fairer women than she in this our land of fair women!

Turning upon him, she smiled gaily as she asked whether he had been interested in seeing a mountain battery at work.

Her fresh face, betraying, as it did, her love of a free, open-air life, was one of those strangely mysterious countenances met only once in a lifetime. It seemed to be the quintessence of pain and passion, conflict and agony, desire and despair. She was not one of those befrilled, fashion-plate dolls that one meets at the after-war crushes and dances, but was austere simple in dress, with a face which betrayed a spiritual nobility, the very incarnation of modern womanhood, alive with modern self-knowledge, modern weariness and modern sadness.

Her beautiful hair, worn plain and smooth, was black as night—wonderful hair. But still more wonderful were those great, dark, velvety eyes, deep and unfathomable. In them the tragedy of life was tumultuously visible, yet they were serene, self-possessed, even steady in their quiet simplicity. To describe her features is not an easy task. They were clear-cut, with a purity of the lines of the nose and brow seldom seen in a woman's face, dark, well-arched eyebrows, a pretty mouth which had just escaped extreme sensuousness. Cheeks soft and delicately moulded, a chin pointed, a skin remarkable for its fineness and its clear pallor, the whole aspect of her face being that of sweetness combined with nobility and majesty. In it there was no dominant expression, for it seemed to be a mask waiting to be stirred into life.

Fetherston had known Sir Hugh slightly for several years, but as Enid had been so much abroad with Mrs. Caldwell, he had never met her until that accidental encounter in Biarritz.

"We've been up here six weeks," she was telling Fetherston. "Father always gets a lot of golf up here, you know, and I'm rather fond of it."

"I fear I'm too much of a foreigner nowadays to appreciate the game," Walter laughed. "Last season some Italians in Rome formed a club—the usual set of ultra-smart young counts and marquises—but when they found that it entailed the indignity of walking several miles they declared it to be a game only fit for the populace, and at once disbanded the association."

The men were discussing the work of the battery, for four of the officers had been invited, and the point raised was the range of mountain guns.

Walter Fetherston glanced at the general through his pince-nez with a curious expression, but he did not join in the conversation.

Enid's eyes met his, and the pair exchanged curiously significant glances.

He bent to pick up his serviette, and in doing so he whispered to her: "I must see you outside for a moment before I go. Go out, and I'll join you."

Therefore, when the meal had concluded, the girl went forth into the secluded garden at the rear of the hotel, where in a few moments the man joined her at a spot where they could not be overlooked.

She turned towards him, separate, remote, incongruous, her dark eyes showing an angry flash in them.

"Why have you come here?" she demanded with indignation. The whole aspect of her face was tragic.

"To see you again," was his brief reply. "Before we parted at Biarritz you lied to me," he added in a hard tone.

She held her breath, staring straight into his eyes.

"I—I don't understand you!" she stammered. "You are here to torment—to persecute me!"

"I asked you a question, Enid, but in response you told me a deliberate lie. Think—recall that circumstance, and tell me the truth," he said very quietly.

She was silent for a moment. Then, with her mouth drawn to hardness, she replied: "Yes, it is true—I lied to you, just as you have lied to me. Remember what you told me that moonlit night when we walked by the sea towards the Grotto of Love. I was a fool to have believed in you—to have trusted you as I did! You left me, and, though I wrote time after time to your club, you refused to send me a single line."

"Because—because, Enid, I dared not," replied her companion.

"Why not?" she demanded quickly. "You told me that you loved me, yet—yet your own actions have shown that you lied to me!"

"No," he protested in a low, earnest, hoarse voice; "I told you the truth, Enid, but—"

"But what?" she interrupted in quickly earnestness.

"Well," he replied after a brief pause, "the fact is that I am compelled to wear a mask, even to you, the woman I love. I cannot tell you the truth—I cannot, dearest, for your own sake."

"And you expect me to believe this lame story—eh?" she laughed. She was pale and fragile, yet she seemed to expand and to dilate with force and energy.

"Enid," he answered in a low voice, with honesty in his eyes, "I would rather sacrifice my great love for you than betray the trust I hold most sacred. So great is my love for you, rather would I never look upon your dear face again than reveal to you the tragic truth and bring upon you unhappiness and despair."

"Walter," she replied in a trembling voice, looking straight into his countenance with those wonderful dark eyes wherein her soul brimmed over with weary emotion and fatigued passion, "I repeat all that I told you on that calm night beside the sea. I love you; I think of you day by day, hour by hour. But you have lied to me, and therefore I hate myself for having so foolishly placed my trust in you."

He had resolved to preserve his great secret—a secret that none should know.

"Very well," he sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "These recriminations are really all useless. Ah, if you only knew the truth, Enid! If I only dared to reveal to you the hideous facts. But I refuse—they are too tragic, too terrible. Better that we should part now, and that you should remain in ignorance—better by far, for you. You believe that I am deceiving you. Well, I'm frank and admit that I am; but it is with a distinct purpose—for your own sake."

He held forth his hand, and slowly she took it. In silence he bowed over it, his lips compressed; then, turning upon his heel, he went down the gravelled walk back to the hotel, which, some ten minutes later, he left with Fred Tredennick, catching the train back to Dundee and on to Perth.

He was in no way a man to wear his heart upon his sleeve, therefore he chatted gaily with his friend and listened to Fred's extravagant admiration of Enid's beauty. He congratulated himself that his old friend was in ignorance of the truth.

A curious incident occurred at the hotel that same evening, however, which, had Walter been aware of it, would probably have caused him considerable uneasiness and alarm. Just before seven o'clock a tall, rather thin, middle-aged, narrow-eyed man, dressed in dark grey tweeds, entered the hall of the hotel and inquired for Henry, the head waiter. He was well dressed and bore an almost professional air.

The white-headed old man quickly appeared, when the stranger, whose moustache was carefully trimmed and who wore a ruby ring upon his white hand, made an anxious inquiry whether Fetherston, whom he minutely described, had been there that day. At first the head waiter hesitated and was uncommunicative, but, the stranger having uttered a few low words, Henry's manner instantly changed. He started, looked in wonder into the stranger's face, and, taking him into the smoking-room—at that moment unoccupied—he allowed himself to be closely questioned regarding the general and his stepdaughter, as well as the man who had that day been their guest. The stranger was a man of quick actions, and his inquiries were sharp and to the point.

"You say that Mr. Fetherston met the young lady outside after luncheon, and they had an argument in secret, eh?" asked the stranger.

Henry replied in the affirmative, declaring that he unfortunately could not overhear the subject under discussion. But he believed the pair had quarrelled.

"And where has Mr. Fetherston gone?" asked his keen-eyed questioner.

"He is, I believe, the guest of Major Tredennick, who lives on the other side of Perthshire at Invermay on Loch Earn."

"And the young lady goes back to Hill Street with her stepfather, eh?"

"On Wednesday."

"Good!" was the stranger's reply. Then, thanking the head waiter for the information in a sharp, businesslike voice, and handing him five shillings, he took train back from Monifieth to Dundee, and went direct to the chief post-office.

From there he dispatched a carefully constructed cipher telegram to an address in the Boulevard Anspach, in Brussels, afterwards lighting an excellent cigar and strolling along the busy street with an air of supreme self-satisfaction.

"If this man, Fetherston, has discovered the truth, as I fear he has done," the hard-faced man muttered to himself, "then by his action to-day he has sealed his own doom!—and Enid Orlebar herself will silence him!"

CHAPTER III

INTRODUCES DOCTOR WEIRMARSH

Three days had elapsed.

In the dingy back room of a dull, drab house in the Vauxhall Bridge Road, close to Victoria Station in London, the narrow-eyed man who had so closely questioned old Henry at the Panmure Hotel, sat at an old mahogany writing-table reading a long letter written upon thin foreign notepaper.

The incandescent gas-lamp shed a cold glare across the room. On one side of the smoke-grimed apartment was a shabby leather couch, on the other side a long nest of drawers, while beside the fireplace was an expanding gas-bracket placed in such a position that it could be used to examine anyone seated in the big arm-chair. Pervading the dingy apartment was a faint smell of carbolic, for it was a consulting-room, and the man so intent upon the letter was Dr. Weirmarsh, the hard-working practitioner so well known among the lower classes in Pimlico.

Those who pass along the Vauxhall Bridge Road know well that house with its curtains yellow with smoke—the one which stands back behind a small strip of smoke-begrimed garden. Over the gate is a red lamp, and upon the railings a brass plate with the name: "Mr. Weirmarsh, Surgeon."

About three years previously he had bought the practice from old Dr. Bland, but he lived alone, a silent and unsociable man, with a deaf old housekeeper, although he had achieved a considerable reputation among his patients in the neighbouring by-streets. But his practice was not wholly confined to the poorer classes, for he was often consulted by well-dressed members of the foreign colony—on account, probably, of his linguistic attainments. A foreigner with an imperfect knowledge of English naturally prefers a doctor to whom he can speak in his own tongue. Therefore, as Weirmarsh spoke French, Italian and Spanish with equal fluency, it was not surprising that he had formed quite a large practice among foreign residents.

His appearance, however, was the reverse of prepossessing, and his movements were often most erratic. About his aquiline face was a shrewd and distrustful expression, while his keen, dark eyes, too narrowly set, were curiously shifty and searching. When absent, as he often was, a young fellow named Shipley acted as locum tenens, but so eccentric was he that even Shipley knew nothing of the engagements which took him from home so frequently.

George Weirmarsh was a man of few friends and fewer words. He lived for himself alone, devoting himself assiduously to his practice, and doing much painstaking writing at the table whereat he now sat, or else, when absent, travelling swiftly with aims that were ever mysterious.

He had had a dozen or so patients that evening, but the last had gone, and he had settled himself to read the letter which had arrived when his little waiting-room had been full of people.

As he read he made scribbled notes on a piece of paper upon his blotting-pad, his thin, white hand, delicate as a woman's, bearing that splendid ruby ring, his one possession in which he took a pride.

"Ah!" he remarked to himself in a hard tone of sarcasm, "what fools the shrewdest of men are sometimes over a woman! So at last he's fallen—like the others—and the secret will be mine. Most excellent! After all, every man has one weak point in his armour, and I was not mistaken."

Then he paused, and, leaning his chin upon his hand, looked straight before him, deep in reflection.

"I have few fears—very few," he remarked to himself, "but the greatest is of Walter Fetherston. What does he know?—that's the chief question. If he has discovered the truth—if he knows my real name and who I am—then the game's up, and my best course is to leave England. And yet there is another way," he went on, speaking slowly to himself—"to close his lips. Dead men tell no tales."

He sat for a long time, his narrow-set eyes staring into space, contemplating a crime. As a medical man, he knew a dozen ingenious ways by which Walter Fetherston might be sent to his grave in circumstances that would appear perfectly natural. His gaze at last wandered to the book-case opposite, and became centred upon a thick, brown-covered, dirty volume by a writer named Taylor. That book contained much that might be of interest to him in the near future.

Of a sudden the handle of the door turned, and Mrs. Kelsey, the old housekeeper, in rusty black, admitted Enid Orlebar without the ceremony of asking permission to enter.

The girl was dressed in a pearl grey and pink sports coat, with a large black hat, and carried a silver chain handbag. Around her throat was a white feather boa, while her features were half concealed by the veil she wore.

"Ah, my dear young lady," cried Weirmarsh, rising quickly and greeting her, while next moment he turned to his table and hastily concealed the foreign letter and notes, "I had quite forgotten that you were to consult me. Pray forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive," the beautiful girl replied in a low, colourless voice, when the housekeeper had disappeared, and she had seated herself in the big leather arm-chair in which so many patients daily sat. "You ordered me to come here to you, and I have come."

"Against your will, eh?" he asked slowly, with a strange look in his keen eyes.

"I am perfectly well now. I do not see why my stepfather should betray such anxiety on my account."

"The general is greatly concerned about you," Weirmarsh said, seated cross-legged at his writing-chair, toying with his pen and looking into the girl's handsome face.

"He wished me to see you. That is why I wrote to you."

"Well," she said, wavering beneath his sharp glance, "I am here. What do you wish?"

"I wish to have a little private talk with you, Miss Enid," he replied thoughtfully, stroking his small greyish moustache, "a talk concerning your own welfare."

"But I am not ill," she cried. "I don't see why you should desire me to come to you to-night."

"I have my own reasons, my dear young lady," was the man's firm response, his eyes fixed immovably upon hers. "And I think you know me well enough to be aware that when Dr. Weirmarsh sets his mind upon a thing he is not easily turned aside."

A slight, almost imperceptible, shudder ran through her. But Weirmarsh detected it, and knew that this girl of extraordinary and mysterious charm was as wax in his hands. In the presence of the man who had cast such a strange spell about her she was utterly helpless. There was no suggestion of hypnotism—she herself scouted the idea—yet ever since Sir Hugh had taken her to consult this man of medicine at a small suburban villa, five years ago, he had entered her life never again to leave it.

She realised herself irresistibly in his power whenever she felt his presence near her. At his bidding she came and went, and against her better nature she acted as he commanded.

He had cured her of an attack of nerves five years ago, but she had ever since been beneath his hated thralldom. His very eyes fascinated her with their sinister expression, yet to her he could do no wrong.

A thousand times she had endeavoured to break free from that strong but unseen influence, but she always became weak and easily led as soon as she fell beneath the extraordinary power which the obscure doctor possessed. Time after time he called her to his side, as on this occasion, on pretence of prescribing for her, and yet with an ulterior motive. Enid Orlebar was a useful tool in the hands of this man who was so unscrupulous.

She sighed, passing her gloved hand wearily across her hot brow. Strange how curiously his presence always affected her!

She had read in books of the mysteries of hypnotic suggestion, but she was far too practical to believe in that. This was not hypnotism, she often declared within herself, but some remarkable

and unknown power possessed by this man who, beneath the guise of the hard-working surgeon, was engaged in schemes of remarkable ingenuity and wondrous magnitude.

He held her in the palm of his hand. He held her for life—or for death.

To her stepfather she had, times without number, expressed fear and horror of the sharp-eyed doctor, but Sir Hugh had only laughed at her fears and dismissed them as ridiculous. Dr. Weirmarsh was the general's friend.

Enid knew that there was some close association between the pair, but of its nature she was in complete ignorance. Often the doctor came to Hill Street and sat for long periods with the general in that small, cosy room which was his den. That they were business interviews there was no doubt, but the nature of the business was ever a mystery.

"I see by your face that, though there is a great improvement in you, you are, nevertheless, far from well," the man said, his eyes still fixed upon her pale countenance.

"Dr. Weirmarsh," she protested, "this constant declaration that I am ill is awful. I tell you I am quite as well as you are yourself."

"Ah! there, I'm afraid, you are mistaken, my dear young lady," he replied. "You may feel well, but you are not in quite such good health as you imagine. The general is greatly concerned about you, and for that reason I wished to see you to-night," he added with a smile as, bending towards her, he asked her to remove her glove.

He took her wrist, holding his stop-watch in his other hand. "Hum!" he grunted, "just as I expected. You're a trifle low—a little run down. You want a change."

"But we only returned from Scotland yesterday!" she cried.

"The North does not suit such an exotic plant as yourself," he said. "Go South—the Riviera, Spain, Italy, or Egypt."

"I go with Mrs. Caldwell at the end of November."

"No," he said decisively, "you must go now."

"Why?" she asked, opening her eyes in astonishment at his dictatorial manner.

"Because—" and he hesitated, still gazing upon her with those strangely sinister eyes of his. "Well, Miss Enid, because a complete change will be beneficial to you in more ways than one," he replied with an air of mystery.

"I don't understand you," she declared.

"Probably not," he laughed, with that cynical air which so irritated her. She hated herself for coming to that detestable house of grim silence; yet his word to her was a command which she felt impelled by some strange force to fulfil with child-like obedience. "But I assure you I am advising you for your own benefit, my dear young lady."

"In what way?"

"Shall I speak plainly?" asked the man in whose power she was. "Will you forgive me if I so far intrude myself upon your private affairs as to give you a few words of advice?"

"Thank you, Dr. Weirmarsh, but I cannot see that my private affairs are any concern of yours," she replied with some hauteur. How often had she endeavoured in vain to break those invisible shackles?

"I am a very sincere friend of your stepfather, and I hope a sincere friend of yours also," he said with perfect coolness. "It is because of this I presume to advise you—but, of course—" And he hesitated, without concluding his sentence. His eyes were again fixed upon her as though gauging accurately the extent of his influence upon her.

"And what do you advise, pray?" she asked, "It seems that you have called me to you to-night in order to intrude upon my private affairs," she added, with her eyes flashing resentment.

"Well—yes, Miss Enid," he answered, his manner changing slightly. "The fact is, I wish to warn you against what must inevitably bring disaster both upon yourself and your family."

"Disaster?" she echoed. "I don't follow you."

"Then let me speak a little more plainly," he replied, his strange, close-set eyes staring into hers until she quivered beneath his cold, hard gaze. "You have recently become acquainted with Walter Fetherston. You met him at Biarritz six months ago, and on Monday last he lunched with you up at Monifieth. After luncheon you met him in the garden of the hotel, and—"

"How do you know all this?" she gasped, startled, yet fascinated by his gaze.

"My dear young lady," he laughed, "it is my business to know certain things—that is one of them."

She held her breath for a moment.

"And pray how does that concern you? What interest have you in my acquaintances?"

"A very keen one," was the prompt reply. "That man is dangerous to you—and to your family. The reason why I have asked you here to-night is to tell you that you must never meet him again. If you value your life, and that of your mother and her husband, avoid him as you would some venomous reptile. He is your most deadly enemy."

The girl was silent for a moment. Her great, dark eyes were fixed upon the threadbare carpet. What he told her was disconcerting, yet, knowing instinctively, as she did, how passionately Walter loved her, she could not bring herself to believe that he was really her enemy.

"No, Dr. Weirmarsh," she replied, raising her eyes again to his, "you are quite mistaken. I know Walter Fetherston better than you. Your allegation is false. You have told me this because—because you have some motive in parting us."

"Yes," he said frankly, "I have—a *strong motive*."

"You do not conceal it?"

"No," he answered. "Were I a younger man you might, perhaps, accuse me of scheming to wriggle myself into your good graces, Miss Enid. But I am getting old, and, moreover, I'm a confirmed bachelor, therefore you cannot, I think, accuse me of such ulterior motives. No, I only point out this peril for your family's sake—and your own."

"Is Mr. Fetherston such an evil genius, then?" she asked. "The world knows him as a writer of strictly moral, if exciting, books."

"The books are one thing—the man himself another. Some men reflect their own souls in their works, others write but canting hypocrisy. It is so with Walter Fetherston—the man who has a dual personality and whose private life will not bear the light of publicity."

"You wish to prejudice me against him, eh?" she said in a hard tone.

"I merely wish to advise you for your good, my dear young lady," he said. "It is not for me, your medical man, to presume to dictate to you, I know. But the general is my dear friend, therefore I feel it my duty to reveal to you the bitter truth."

Thoughts of Walter Fetherston, the man in whose eyes had shone the light of true honesty when he spoke, arose within her. She was well aware of all the curious gossip concerning the popular writer, whose eccentricities were so frequently hinted at in the gossipy newspapers, but she was convinced that she knew the real Fetherston behind the mask he so constantly wore.

This man before her was deceiving her. He had some sinister motive in thus endeavouring to plant seeds of suspicion within her mind. It was plain that he was endeavouring in some way to secure his own ends. Those ends, however, were a complete and inexplicable mystery.

"I cannot see that my friendship for Mr. Fetherston can have any interest for you," she replied. "Let us talk of something else."

"But it has," he persisted. "You must never meet that man again—you hear! never—otherwise you will discover to your cost that my serious warning has a foundation only too solid; that he is your bitterest enemy posing as your most affectionate friend."

"I don't believe you, Dr. Weirmarsh!" she cried resentfully, springing to her feet. "I'll never believe you!"

"My dear young lady," the man exclaimed, "you are really quite unnerved to-night. The general was quite right. I will mix you a draught like the one you had before—perfectly innocuous—something to soothe those unstrung nerves of yours." And beneath his breath, as his cruel eyes twinkled, he added: "Something to bring reason to those warped and excited senses—something to sow within you suspicion and hatred of Walter Fetherston."

Then aloud he added, as he sprang to his feet: "Excuse me for a moment while I go and dispense it. I'll be back in a few seconds."

He left the room when, quick as lightning, Enid stretched forth her hand to the drawer of the writing-table into which she had seen the doctor toss the foreign letter he had been reading when she entered.

She drew it out, and scanned eagerly a dozen or so of the closely-written lines in Spanish.

Then she replaced it with trembling fingers, and, closing the drawer, sat staring straight before her—dumbfounded, rigid.

What was the mystery?

By the knowledge she had obtained she became forearmed—even defiant. In the light of that astounding discovery, she now read the mysterious Dr. Weirmarsh as she would an open book. She held her breath, and an expression of hatred escaped her lips.

When, a moment later, he brought her a pale-yellow draught in a graduated glass, she took it from his hand, and, drawing herself up in defiance, flung its contents behind her into the fireplace. She believed that at last she had conquered that strangely evil influence which, emanating from this obscure practitioner, had fallen upon her.

But the man only shrugged his shoulders and, turning from her, laughed unconcernedly. He knew that he held her in bonds stronger than steel, that his will was hers—for good or for evil.

CHAPTER IV

REVEALS TEMPTATION

"I tell you it can't be done—the risk is far too great!" declared Sir Hugh Elcombe, standing with his back to the fireplace in his cosy little den in Hill Street at noon next day.

"It must be done," answered Dr. Weirmarsh, who sat in the deep green leather arm-chair, with the tips of his fingers placed together.

The general glanced suspiciously at the door to reassure himself that it was closed.

"You ask too much," he said. Then, in a decisive voice, while his fingers toyed nervously with his monocle, he added, "I have resolved to end it once and for all."

The doctor looked at him with a strange expression in those cold, keen eyes of his and smiled, "I fear, Sir Hugh, that if you attempt to carry out such a decision you will find insuperable difficulties," he said quietly.

"I desire no good advice from you, Weirmarsh," the old general snapped. "I fully realise my position. You have cornered me—cut off my retreat—so I have placed my back against the wall."

"Good! And how will such an attitude benefit you, pray?"

"Understand, I am in no mood to be taunted by you!" the old man cried, with an angry flash in his eyes. "You very cleverly enticed me into the net, and now you are closing it about me."

"My dear Sir Hugh," replied the doctor, "ours was a mere business transaction, surely. Carry your thoughts back to six years ago. After your brilliant military career you returned from India and found yourself, as so many of your profession find themselves, in very straitened circumstances. You were bound to keep up appearances, and, in order to do so, got into the hands of Eli Moser, the moneylender. You married Lady Orlebar, and had entered London society when, of a sudden, the scoundrelly usurer began to put the screw upon you. At that moment you—luckily, I think, for yourself—met me, and—well, I was your salvation, for I pointed out to you an easy way by which to pay your creditors and rearrange your affairs upon a sound financial basis. Indeed, I did it for you. I saved you from the moneylender. Did I not?"

He spoke in a calm, even tone, without once removing his eyes from the man who stood upon the hearthrug with bent head and folded arms.

"I know, Weirmarsh. It's true that you saved me from bankruptcy—but think what penalty I have paid by accepting your terms," he answered in a low, broken voice. "The devil tempted me, and I fell into your damnable net."

"I hardly think it necessary for you to put it that way," replied the doctor without the least sign of annoyance. "I showed you how you could secure quite a comfortable income, and you readily enough adopted my suggestion."

"Readily!" echoed the fine-looking old soldier. "Ah! you don't know what my decision cost me—it has cost me my very life."

"Nonsense, man," laughed the doctor scornfully. "You got out of the hands of the Jews, and ever since that day you haven't had five minutes' worry over your finances. I promised you I would provide you with an ample income, and—"

"And you've done so, Weirmarsh," cried the old general; "an income far greater than I expected. Yet what do I deserve?"

"My dear General," said the doctor quite calmly, "you're not yourself to-day; suffering from a slight attack of remorse, eh? It's a bad complaint; I've had it, and I know. But it's like the measles—you're very nearly certain to contract it once in a lifetime."

"Have you no pity for me?" snarled Sir Hugh, glaring at the narrow-eyed man seated before him. "Don't you realise that by this last demand of yours you've driven me into a corner?"

Weirmarsh's brows contracted slightly, and he shot an evil glance at the man before him—the man who was his victim. "But you must do it. You still want money—and lots of it, don't you?" he said in a low, decisive voice.

"I refuse, I tell you!" cried Sir Hugh angrily.

"Hush! Someone may overhear," the doctor said. "Is Enid at home?"

"Yes."

"I saw her last night, as you wished. She is not well. Her nerves are still in an extremely weak state," Weirmarsh said, in order to change the topic of conversation. "I think you should send her abroad out of the way—to the South somewhere."

"So she told me. I shall try and get Mrs. Caldwell to take her to Sicily—if you consider the air would be beneficial."

"Excellent—Palermo or Taormina—send the girl there as soon as ever you can. She seems unstrung, and may get worse; a change will certainly do her good," replied the man whose craft and cunning were unequalled. "I know," he added reflectively, "that Enid dislikes me—why, I can never make out."

"Instinct, I suppose, Weirmarsh," was the old man's reply. "She suspects that you hold me in your power, as you undoubtedly do."

"Now that is really a most silly idea of yours, Sir Hugh. Do get rid of it. Such a thought pains me to a great degree," declared the crafty-eyed man. "For these past years I have provided you with a good income, enabling you to keep up your position in the world, instead of—well, perhaps shivering on the Embankment at night and partaking of the hospitality of the charitably disposed. Yet you upbraid me as though I had treated you shabbily!" He spoke with an irritating air of superiority, for he knew that this man who occupied such a high position, who was an intimate friend and confidant of the Minister of War, and universally respected throughout the country, was but a tool in his unscrupulous hands.

"You ask me too much," exclaimed the grey-moustached officer in a hard, low voice.

"The request does not emanate from me," was the doctor's reply; "I am but the mouthpiece."

"Yes, the mouthpiece—but the eyes and ears also, Weirmarsh," replied Sir Hugh. "You bought me, body and soul, for a wage of five thousand pounds a year—"

"The salary of one of His Majesty's Ministers," interrupted the doctor. "It has been paid you with regularity, together with certain extras. When you have wished for a loan of five hundred or so, I have never refused it."

"I quite admit that; but you've always received a *quid pro quo*," the general snapped. "Look at the thousands upon thousands I put through for you!"

"The whole transaction has from the beginning been a matter of business; and, as far as I am concerned, I have fulfilled my part of the contract."

The man standing upon the hearthrug sighed. "I suppose," he said, "that I really have no right to complain. I clutched at the straw you held out to me, and saved myself at a cost greater than the world can ever know. I hate myself for it. If I had then known what I know now concerning you and your friends, I would rather have blown out my brains than have listened to your accursed words of temptation. The whole plot is damnable!"

"My dear fellow, I am not Mephistopheles," laughed the narrow-eyed doctor.

"You are worse," declared the general boldly. "You bought me body and soul, but by Heaven!" he cried, "you have not bought my family, sir!"

Weirmarsh moved uneasily in his chair.

"And so you refuse to do this service which I requested of you, yesterday, eh?" he asked very slowly.

"I do."

A silence fell between the two men, broken only by the low ticking of the little Sheraton clock upon the mantelshelf.

"Have you fully reflected upon what this refusal of yours may cost you, General?" asked the doctor in a slow, hard voice, his eyes fixed upon the other's countenance.

"It will cost me just as much as you decide it shall," was the response of the unhappy man, who found himself enmeshed by the crafty practitioner.

"You speak as though I were the principal, whereas I am but the agent," Weirmarsh protested.

"Principal or agent, my decision, Doctor, is irrevocable—I refuse to serve your accursed ends further."

"Really," laughed the other, still entirely unruffled, "your attitude to-day is quite amusing. You've got an attack of liver, and you should allow me to prescribe for you."

The general made a quick gesture of impatience, but did not reply.

It was upon the tip of Weirmarsh's tongue to refer to Walter Fetherston, but next instant he had reflected. If Sir Hugh really intended to abandon himself to remorse and make a fool of himself, why should he stretch forth a hand to save him?

That ugly revelations—very ugly ones—might result was quite within the range of possibility, therefore Weirmarsh, whose craft and cunning were amazing, intended to cover his own retreat behind the back of the very man whom he had denounced to Enid Orlebar.

He sat in silence, his finger-tips again joined, gazing upon the man who had swallowed that very alluring bait he had once placed before him.

He realised by Sir Hugh's manner that he regretted his recent action and was now overcome by remorse. Remorse meant exposure, and exposure meant prosecution—a great public prosecution, which, at all hazards, must not be allowed.

As he sat there he was actually calmly wondering whether this fine old officer with such a brilliant record would die in silence by his own hand and carry his secret to the grave, or whether he would leave behind some awkward written statement which would incriminate himself and those for whom he acted.

Suddenly Sir Hugh turned and, looking the doctor squarely in the face as though divining his inmost thoughts, said in a hoarse voice tremulous with emotion: "Ah, you need not trouble yourself further, Weirmarsh. I have a big dinner-party to-night, but by midnight I shall have paid the penalty which you have imposed upon me—I shall have ceased to live. I will die rather than serve you further!"

"Very well, my dear sir," replied the doctor, rising from his chair abruptly. "Of course, every man's life is his own property—you can take it if you think fit—but I assure you that such an event would not concern me in the least. I have already taken the precaution to appear with clean hands—should occasion require."

CHAPTER V

IN WHICH ENID ORLEBAR IS PUZZLED

That night, around the general's dinner-table in Hill Street, a dozen or so well-known men and women were assembled.

Sir Hugh Elcombe's dinners were always smart gatherings. The table was set with Georgian silver and decorated daintily with flowers, while several of the women wore splendid jewels. At the head sat Lady Elcombe, a quiet, rather fragile, calm-faced woman in black, whose countenance bore traces of long suffering, but whose smile was very sweet.

Among the guests was Walter Fetherston, whom the general had at last induced to visit him, and he had taken in Enid, who looked superb in a cream décolleté gown, and who wore round her throat a necklet of turquoise matrices, admirably suited to her half-barbaric beauty.

Fetherston had only accepted the general's invitation at her urgent desire, for she had written to White's telling him that it was imperative they should meet—she wished to consult him; she begged of him to forget the interview at Monifieth and return to her.

So, against his will, he had gone there, though the house and all it contained was hateful to him. With that terrible secret locked within his heart—that secret which gripped his very vitals and froze his blood—he looked upon the scene about him with horror and disgust. Indeed, it was only by dint of self-control that he could be civil to his host.

His fellow-guests were of divers types: a couple of peers and their womenkind, a popular actor-manager, two diplomats, and several military men of more or less note—two of them, like the host, occupying high positions at the War Office.

Such gatherings were of frequent occurrence at Hill Street. It was popularly supposed that Sir Hugh, by marrying His Majesty's Minister's widow, had married money, and was thus able to sustain the position he did. Other military men in his position found it difficult to make both ends meet, and many envied old Hugh Elcombe and his wealthy wife. They were unaware that Lady Orlebar, after the settlement of her husband's estate, had found herself with practically nothing, and that her marriage to Sir Hugh had been more to secure a home than anything else. Both had, alas! been equally deceived. The general, believing her to be rich, had been sadly disillusioned; while she, on her part, was equally filled with alarm when he revealed to her his penurious position.

The world, of course, knew nothing of this. Sir Hugh, ever since his re-marriage, had given good dinners and had been entertained in return, therefore everybody believed that he derived his unusually large income from his wife.

As he sat at table he laughed and chatted merrily with his guests, for on such occasions he was always good company. Different, indeed, was his attitude from when, at noon, he had stood with Weirmarsh in his own den and pronounced his own fate.

The man who held him in that strange thrall was seated at the table. He had been invited three days ago, and had come there, perhaps, to taunt him with his presence in those the last few hours of his life.

Only once the two men exchanged glances, for Weirmarsh was devoting all his attention to young Lady Stockbridge. But when Sir Hugh encountered the doctor's gaze he saw in his eyes open defiance and triumph.

In ignorance of the keen interest which the doctor across the table felt in him, Walter Fetherston sat chatting and laughing with Enid. Once the doctor, to whom he had been introduced only half an hour before, addressed a remark to him to which he replied, at the same time reflecting within himself that Weirmarsh was quite a pleasant acquaintance.

He was unaware of that mysterious visit of inquiry to Monifieth, of that remarkable cipher telegram afterwards dispatched to Brussels, or even of the extraordinary influence that man in the well-worn evening suit possessed over both his host and the handsome girl beside him.

When the ladies had left the table the doctor set himself out over the cigarettes to become more friendly with the writer of fiction. Then afterwards he rose, and encountering his host, who had also risen and crossed the room, whispered in a voice of command: "You have reconsidered your decision! You will commit no foolish and cowardly act? I see it in your face. I shall call to-morrow at noon, and we will discuss the matter further."

The general did not reply for a few seconds. But Weirmarsh had already realised that reflection had brought his victim to a calmer state of mind.

"I will not listen to you," the old man growled.

"But I shall speak whether you listen or not. Remember, I am not a man to be fooled by talk. I shall be here at noon and lay before you a scheme perhaps a little more practicable than the last one." And with that he reached for some matches, turned upon his heel, and rejoined the man against whom he had warned Enid—the only man in the world whom he feared.

Before they rose Weirmarsh had ingratiated himself with his enemy. So clever was he that Fetherston, in ignorance as to whom his fellow-guest really was, save that he was a member of the medical profession, was actually congratulating himself that he had now met a man after his own heart.

At last they repaired to the pretty old-rose-and-gold drawing-room upstairs, an apartment in which great taste was displayed in decoration, and there several of the ladies sang or recited. One of them, a vivacious young Frenchwoman, was induced to give Barrois's romance, "J'ai vu fleurir notre dernier lilas!"

When she had concluded Enid, with whom Walter was seated, rose and passed into the small conservatory, which was prettily illuminated with fairy lights. As soon as they were alone she turned to him in eager distress, saying: "Walter, do, I beg of you, beware of that man!"

"Of what man?" he asked in quick surprise.

"Of Doctor Weirmarsh."

"Why? I don't know him. I never met him until to-night. Who is he?"

"My stepfather's friend, but my enemy—and yours," she cried quickly, placing her hand upon her heart as though to quell its throbbing.

"Is he well known?" inquired the novelist.

"No—only in Pimlico. He lives in Vauxhall Bridge Road, and his practice lies within a radius of half a mile of Victoria Station."

"And why is he my enemy?"

"Oh, that I cannot tell."

"Why is he your stepfather's friend?" asked Fetherston. "They certainly seem to be on very good terms."

"Doctor Weirmarsh's cunning and ingenuity are unequalled," she declared. "Over me, as over Sir Hugh, he has cast a kind of spell—a—"

Her companion laughed. "My dear Enid," he said, "spells are fictions of the past; nobody believes in them nowadays. He may possess some influence over you, but surely you are sufficiently strong-minded to resist his power, whatever it may be?"

"No," she replied, "I am not. For that reason I fear for myself—and for Sir Hugh. That man compelled Sir Hugh to take me to him for a consultation, and as soon as I was in his presence I knew that his will was mine—that I was powerless."

"I don't understand you," said Fetherston, much interested in this latest psychic problem.

"Neither do I understand myself," she answered in bewilderment. "To me this man's power, fascination—whatever you may term it—is a complete mystery."

"I will investigate it," said Fetherston promptly. "What is his address?"

She told him, and he scribbled it upon his shirt-cuff. Then, looking into her beautiful countenance, he asked: "Have you no idea of the nature of this man's influence over Sir Hugh?"

"None whatever. It is plain, however, that he is master over my stepfather's actions. My mother has often remarked to me upon it," was her response. "He comes here constantly, and remains for hours closeted with Sir Hugh in his study. So great is his influence that he orders our servants to do his bidding."

"And he compelled Sir Hugh to take you to his consulting room, eh? Under what pretext?"

"I was suffering from extreme nervousness, and he prescribed for me with beneficial effect," she said. "But ever since I have felt myself beneath his influence in a manner which I am utterly unable to describe. I do not believe in hypnotic suggestion, or it might be put down to that."

"But what is your theory?"

"I have none, except—well, except that this man, essentially a man of evil, possesses some occult influence which other men do not possess."

"Yours is not a weak nature, Enid," he declared. "You are not the sort of girl to fall beneath the influence of another."

"I think not," she laughed in reply. "And yet the truth is a hard and bitter one."

"Remain firm and determined to be mistress of your own actions," he urged, "and in the meantime I will cultivate the doctor's acquaintance and endeavour to investigate the cause of this remarkable influence of his."

Why did Doctor Weirmarsh possess such power over Sir Hugh? he wondered. Could it be that this man was actually in possession of the truth? Was he aware of that same terrible and hideous secret of which he himself was aware—a secret which, if exposed, would convulse the whole country, so shameful and scandalous was it!

He saw how pale and agitated Enid was. She had in her frantic anxiety sought his aid. Only a few days ago they had parted; yet now, in the moment of her fear and apprehension, she had recalled him to her side to seek his advice and protection.

She had not told him of that mysterious warning Weirmarsh had given her concerning him, or of his accurate knowledge of their acquaintanceship. She had purposely refrained from telling him this lest her words should unduly prejudice him. She had warned Walter that the doctor was his enemy—this, surely, was sufficient!

"Try and discover, if you can, the reason of the doctor's power over my father, and why he is for ever directing his actions," urged the girl. "For myself I care little; it is for Sir Hugh's sake that I am trying to break the bonds, if possible."

"You have no suspicion of the reason?" he repeated, looking seriously into her face. "You do not think that he holds some secret of your stepfather's? Undue influence can frequently be traced to such a source."

She shook her head in the negative, a blank look in her great, dark eyes.

"No," she replied, "it is all a mystery—one which I beg of you, Walter, to solve, and"—she faltered in a strange voice—"and to save me!"

He pressed her hand and gave her his promise. Then for a second she raised her full red lips to his, and together they passed back into the drawing-room, where their re-entry in company did not escape the sharp eyes of the lonely doctor of Pimlico.

CHAPTER VI

BENEATH THE ELASTIC BAND

Walter Fetherston strolled back that night to the dingy chambers he rented in Holles Street, off Oxford Street, as a *pied-à-terre* when in London. He was full of apprehension, full of curiosity, as to who this Doctor Weirmarsh could be.

He entered his darkling, shabby old third-floor room and threw himself into the arm-chair before the fire to think. It was a room without beauty, merely walls, repapered once every twenty years, and furniture of the mid-Victorian era. The mantelshelf in the bedroom still bore stains from the medicine bottles which consoled the final hours of the last tenant, a man about whom a curious story was told.

It seems that he found a West End anchorage there, not when he had retired, but when he was in the very prime of life. He never told anyone that he was single; at the same time he never told anyone he was married. He just came and rented those three rooms, and there his man brought him his tea at ten o'clock every morning for thirty years. Then he dressed himself and went round to the Devonshire, in St. James's Street, and there remained till closing time, at two o'clock, every morning for thirty years. When his club closed in the dog-days for repairs he went to the club which received him. He never went out of town. He never slept a night away. He never had a visitor. He never received a letter, and, so far as his man was aware, never wrote one.

One morning he did not go through his usual programme. The doctor was called, but during the next fortnight he died.

Within twelve hours, however, his widow and a family of grown-up children arrived, pleasant, cheerful, inquisitive people, who took away with them everything portable, greatly to the chagrin of the devoted old manservant who had been the tenant's single home-tie for thirty years.

It was these selfsame, dull, monotonous chambers which Walter occupied. The old manservant was the selfsame man who had so devotedly served the previous tenant. They suited Walter's purpose, for he was seldom in London, so old Hayden had the place to himself for many months every year. Of all the inhabitants of London chambers those are the most lonely who never wander away from London. But Walter was ever wandering, therefore he never noticed the shabbiness of the carpet, the dinginess of the furniture, or the dispiriting gloom of everything.

Like the previous tenant, Walter had no visitors and was mostly out all day. At evening he would write at the dusty old bureau in which the late tenant had kept locked his family treasures, or sit in the deep, old horsehair-covered chair with his feet upon the fender, as he did that night after returning from Hill Street.

The only innovation in those grimy rooms was a good-sized fireproof safe which stood in the corner hidden by a side-table, and from this Walter had taken a bundle of papers and carried them with him to his chair.

One by one he carefully went through them, until at last he found the document of which he was in search.

"Yes," he exclaimed to himself after he had scanned it, "so I was not mistaken after all! The mystery is deeper than I thought. By Jove! that fellow, Joseph Blot, alias Weirmarsh, alias Detmold, Ponting and half a dozen other names, no doubt, is playing a deep game—a dangerous customer evidently!"

Then, again returning to the safe, he took out a large packet of miscellaneous photographs of various persons secured by an elastic band. These he went rapidly through until he held one in his hand, an unmounted *carte-de-visite*, which he examined closely beneath the green-shaded reading-lamp.

It was a portrait of Doctor Weirmarsh, evidently taken a few years before, as he then wore a short pointed beard, whereas he was now shaven except for a moustache.

"No mistake about those features," he remarked to himself with evident satisfaction as, turning the photographic print, he took note of certain cabalistic numbers written in the corner, scribbling them in pencil upon his blotting-pad.

"I thought I recollected those curious eyes and that unusual breadth of forehead," he went on, speaking to himself, and again examining the pictured face through his gold pince-nez. "It's a long time since I looked at this photograph—fully five years. What would the amiable doctor think if he knew that I held the key which will unlock his past?"

He laughed lightly to himself, and, selecting a cigarette from the silver box, lit it.

Then he sat back in his big arm-chair, his eyes fixed upon the fire, contemplating what he realised to be a most exciting and complicated problem.

"This means that I must soon be upon the move again," he murmured to himself. "Enid has sought my assistance—she has asked me to save her, and I will exert my utmost endeavour to do so. But I see it will be difficult, very difficult. She is, no doubt, utterly unaware of the real identity of this brisk, hard-working doctor. And perhaps, after all," he added slowly, "it is best so—best that she remain in ignorance of this hideous, ghastly truth!"

At that same moment, while Walter Fetherston was preoccupied by these curious apprehensions, the original of that old *carte-de-visite* was seated in the lounge of the Savoy Hotel, smoking a cigar with a tall, broad-shouldered, red-bearded man who was evidently a foreigner.

He had left Hill Street five minutes after Fetherston, and driven down to the Savoy, where he had a rendezvous for supper with his friend. That he was an habitué there was patent from the fact that upon entering the restaurant, Alphonse, the *maître d'hôtel*, with his plan of the tables pinned upon the board, greeted him with, "Ah! good evening, Docteur. Table vingt-six, Docteur Weirmarsh."

The scene was the same as it is every evening at the Savoy; the music, the smart dresses of the women, the flowers, the shaded lights, the chatter and the irresponsible laughter of the London world amusing itself after the stress of war.

You know it—why, therefore, should I describe it? Providing you possess an evening suit or a low-necked dress, you can always rub shoulders with the *monde* and the *demi-monde* of London at a cost of a few shillings a head.

The two men had supped and were chatting in French over their coffee and "triplesec." Gustav, Weirmarsh called his friend, and from his remarks it was apparent that he was a stranger to London. He was dressed with elegance. Upon the corner of his white lawn handkerchief a count's coronet was embroidered, and upon his cigar-case also was a coronet and a cipher. In his dress-shirt he wore a fine diamond, while upon the little finger of his left hand glittered a similar stone of great lustre.

The lights were half extinguished, and a porter's voice cried, "Time's up, ladies and gentlemen!" Those who were not habitués rose and commenced to file out, but the men and women who came to the restaurant each night sat undisturbed till the lights went up again and another ten minutes elapsed before the final request to leave was made.

The pair, seated away in a corner, had been chatting in an undertone when they were compelled to rise. Thereupon the doctor insisted that his friend, whose name was Gustav Heureux, should accompany him home. So twenty minutes later they alighted from a taxi-cab in the Vauxhall Bridge Road, and entered the shabby little room wherein Weirmarsh schemed and plotted.

The doctor produced from a cupboard some cognac and soda and a couple of glasses, and when they had lit cigars they sat down to resume their chat.

Alone there, the doctor spoke in English.

"You see," he explained, "it is a matter of the greatest importance—if we make this coup we can easily make a hundred thousand pounds within a fortnight. The general at first refused and became

a trifle—well, just a trifle resentful, even vindictive; but by showing a bold front I've brought him round. To-morrow I shall clinch the matter. That is my intention."

"It will be a brilliant snap, if you can actually accomplish it," was the red-bearded man's enthusiastic reply. He now spoke in English, but with a strong American accent. "I made an attempt two years ago, but failed, and narrowly escaped imprisonment."

"A dozen attempts have already been made, but all in vain," replied the doctor, drawing hard at his cigar. "Therefore, I'm all the more keen to secure success."

"You certainly have been very successful over here, Doctor," observed the foreigner, whose English had been acquired in America. "We have heard of you in New York, where you are upheld to us as a model. Jensen once told me that your methods were so ingenious as to be unassailable."

"Merely because I am well supplied with funds," answered the other with modesty. "Here, in England, as elsewhere, any man or woman can be bought—if you pay their price. There is only one section of the wonderful British public who cannot be purchased—the men and women who are in love with each other. Whenever I come up against Cupid, experience has taught me to retire deferentially, and wait until the love-fever has abated. It often turns to jealousy or hatred, and then the victims fall as easily as off a log. A jealous woman will betray any secret, even though it may hurry her lover to his grave. To me, my dear Gustav, this fevered world of London is all very amusing."

"And your profession as doctor must serve as a most excellent mask. Who would suspect you—a lonely bachelor in such quarters as these?" exclaimed his visitor.

"No one does suspect me," laughed the doctor with assurance. "Safety lies in pursuing my increasing practice, and devoting all my spare time to—well, to my real profession." He flicked the ash off his cigar as he spoke.

"Your friend, Elcombe, will have to be very careful. The peril is considerable in that quarter."

"I know that full well. But if he failed it would be he who would suffer—not I. As usual, I do not appear in the affair at all."

"That is just where you are so intensely clever and ingenious," declared Heureux. "In New York they speak of you as a perfect marvel of foresight and clever evasion."

"It is simply a matter of exercising one's wits," Weirmarsh laughed lightly. "I always complete my plans with great care before embarking upon them, and I make provision for every contretemps possible. It is the only way, if one desires success."

"And you have had success," remarked his companion. "Marked success in everything you have attempted. In New York we have not been nearly so fortunate. Those three articles in the *New York Sun* put the public on their guard, so that we dare not attempt any really bold move for fear of detection."

"You have worked a little too openly, I think," was Weirmarsh's reply. "But now that you have been sent to assist me, you will probably see that my methods differ somewhat from those of John Willoughby. Remember, he has just the same amount of money placed at his disposal as I have."

"And he is not nearly so successful," Heureux replied. "Perhaps it is because Americans are not so easily befooled as the English."

"And yet America is, *par excellence*, the country of bluff, of quackery in patent medicines, and of the booming of unworthy persons," the doctor laughed.

"It is fortunate, Doctor, that the public are in ignorance of the real nature of our work, isn't it, eh? Otherwise, you and I might experience rather rough handling if this house were mobbed."

Weirmarsh smiled grimly. "My dear Gustav," he laughed, "the British public, though of late they've browsed upon the hysterics of the popular Press, are already asleep again. It is not for us to arouse them. We profit by their heavy slumber, and this will be a rude awakening—a shock, depend upon it."

"We were speaking of Sir Hugh Elcombe," remarked the other. "He has been of use to us, eh?"

"Of considerable use, but his usefulness is all but ended," replied the doctor. "He will go to France before long, if he does not act as I direct."

"Into a veritable hornet's nest!" exclaimed the red-bearded man. He recognised a strange expression upon the doctor's face, and added, "Ah, I see. This move is intentional, eh? He has served our purpose, and you now deem it wise that—er—disaster should befall him across the Channel, eh?"

The doctor smiled in the affirmative.

"And the girl you spoke of, Enid Orlebar?"

"The girl will share the same fate as her stepfather," was Weirmarsh's hard response. "We cannot risk betrayal."

"Then she knows something?"

"She may or she may not. In any case, however, she constitutes a danger, a grave danger, that must, at all costs, be removed." And looking into the other's face, he added, "You understand me?"

"Perfectly."

Just before two o'clock Gustav Heureux left the frowsy house in Vauxhall Bridge Road and walked through the silent street into Victoria Street.

He was unaware, however, that on the opposite side of the road an ill-dressed man had for a full hour been lurking in a doorway, or that when he came down the doctor's steps, the mysterious midnight watcher strolled noiselessly after him.

CHAPTER VII

CONCERNING THE VELVET HAND

On the rising ground half-way between Wimborne and Poole, in Dorsetshire, up a narrow by-road which leads to the beautiful woods, lies the tiny hamlet of Idsworth, a secluded little place of about forty inhabitants, extremely rural and extremely picturesque.

Standing alone half-way up the hill, and surrounded by trees, was an old-world thatched cottage, half-timbered, with high, red-brick chimneys, quaint gables and tiny dormer windows—a delightful old Elizabethan house with a comfortable, homely look. Behind it a well-kept flower garden, with a tree-fringed meadow beyond, while the well-rolled gravelled walks, the rustic fencing, and the pretty curtains at the casements betrayed the fact that the rustic homestead was not the residence of a villager.

As a matter of fact it belonged to a Mr. John Maltwood, a bachelor, whom Idsworth believed to be in business in London, and who came there at intervals for fresh air and rest. His visits were not very frequent. Sometimes he would be absent for many months, and at others he would remain there for weeks at a time, with a cheery word always for the labourers on their way home from work, and always with his hand in his pocket in the cause of charity.

John Maltwood, the quiet, youngish-looking man in the gold pince-nez, was popular everywhere over the country-side. He did not court the society of the local parsons and their wives, nor did he return any of the calls made upon him. His excuse was that he was at Idsworth for rest, and not for social duties. This very independence of his endeared him to the villagers, who always spoke of him as "one of the right sort."

At noon on the day following the dinner at Hill Street, Walter Fetherston—known at Idsworth as Mr. Maltwood—alighted from the station fly, and was met at the cottage gate by the smiling, pleasant-faced woman in a clean apron who acted as caretaker.

He divested himself of his overcoat in the tiny entrance-hall, passed into a small room, with the great open hearth, where in days long ago the bacon was smoked, and along a passage into the long, old-world dining-room, with its low ceiling with great dark beams, its solemn-ticking, brass-faced grandfather clock, and its profusion of old blue china.

There he gave some orders to Mrs. Deacon, obtained a cigarette, and passed back along the passage to a small, cosy, panelled room at the end of the house—the room wherein he wrote those mystery stories which held the world enthralled.

It was a pretty, restful place, with a moss-green carpet, green-covered chairs, several cases filled to overflowing with books, and a great writing-table set in the window. On the mantelshelf were many autographed portraits of Continental celebrities, while on the walls were one or two little gems of antique art which he had picked up on his erratic wanderings. Over the writing-table was a barometer and a storm-glass, while to the left a cosy corner extended round to the fireplace.

He lit his cigarette, then walking across to a small square oaken door let into the wall beside the fireplace, he opened it with a key. This had been an oven before the transformation of three cottages into a week-end residence, and on opening it there was displayed the dark-green door of a safe. This he quickly opened with another key, and after slight search took out a small ledger covered with dark-red leather.

Then glancing at some numerals upon a piece of paper he took from his vest pocket, he turned them up in the index, and with another volume open upon his blotting-pad, he settled himself to read the record written there in a small, round hand. The numbers were those upon the back of the old *carte-de-visite* which had interested him so keenly, and the statement he was reading was, from the expression upon his countenance, an amazing one.

From time to time he scribbled memoranda upon the scrap of paper, now and then pausing as though to recall the past. Then, when he had finished, he laughed softly to himself, and, closing the book, replaced it in the safe and shut the oaken door. By the inspection of that secret entry he had learnt much regarding that man who posed as a doctor in Pimlico.

He sat back in his writing-chair and puffed thoughtfully at his cigarette. Then he turned his attention to a pile of letters addressed to him as "Mr. Maltwood," and made some scribbled replies until Mrs. Deacon entered to announce that his luncheon was ready.

When he went back to the quaint, old-fashioned dining-room and seated himself, he said: "I'm going back by the five-eighteen, and I dare say I shan't return for quite a month or perhaps six weeks. Here's a cheque for ten pounds to pay these little bills." And he commenced his solitary meal.

"You haven't been here much this summer, sir," remarked the good woman. "In Idsworth they think you've quite deserted us—Mr. Barnes was only saying so last week. They're all so glad to see you down here, sir."

"That's very good of them, Mrs. Deacon," he laughed. "I, too, only wish I could spend more time here. I love the country, and I'm never so happy as when wandering in Idsworth woods."

And then he asked her to tell him the village gossip while she waited at his table.

After luncheon he put on a rough suit and, taking his stout holly stick, went for a ramble through the great woods he loved so well, where the trees were tinted by autumn and the pheasants were strong upon the wing.

He found Findlay, one of the keepers, and walked with him for an hour as far as the Roman camp, where alone he sat down upon a felled tree and, with his gaze fixed across the distant hills towards the sea, pondered deeply. He loved his modest country cottage, and he loved those quiet, homely Dorsetshire folk around him. Yet such a wanderer was he that only a few months each year—the months he wrote those wonderful romances of his—could he spend in that old-fashioned cottage which he had rendered the very acme of cosiness and comfort.

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