

Dowling Richard

The Last Call: A Romance
(Vol. 3 of 3)



Richard Dowling
The Last Call: A
Romance (Vol. 3 of 3)

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23151707

The Last Call: A Romance (Vol. 3 of 3):

Содержание

Part II. – Continued.	4
CHAPTER IX	4
CHAPTER X	10
CHAPTER XI	16
CHAPTER XII	22
CHAPTER XIII	29
CHAPTER XIV	36
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	42

Dowling Richard

The Last Call: A Romance (Vol. 3 of 3)

Part II. – Continued.

THE LAST CALL

CHAPTER IX

At half-past six a train left Rathclare for Dublin. The evenings were now cold and short. It was getting near winter, the end of autumn. As the train was about to start from the platform, a man with the collar of a large boat-cloak turned up about his ears, and a soft felt hat pressed low over his brows, stepped into an unoccupied first-class compartment, and took his seat. He did not speak to the guard who checked his ticket, nor had the guard any opportunity of seeing his face, as the man in the cloak kept his face carefully averted. He sat muffled up in the corner without moving, hour after hour, as the train sped on through the darkness. Every time the speed slackened and they drew near a station at which they were to stop, he shook himself

slightly, straightened his hat down over his eyes, and pushed up the collar of his cloak. All the way from Rathclare to Dublin fortune favoured him, if he desired to be alone. For, although they stopped several times, and came to a junction where he had to change, he succeeded in making his journey in solitude. On three occasions the door of the compartment in which he sat had been opened, and a passenger was about to step in. On each occasion that passenger drew back, repelled by the motionless, dark figure, and by a sense of solitude surrounding that figure. Not one of the three passengers knew what it was which gave the air of this solitude, and yet each had felt that around that motionless figure were gloom and loneliness which startled and repelled. Yet the reason was very simple. Between that muffled form and the surrounding world there was no link, no band of union, however slight. There was an absolute figure, set in the absolute vacuity of the compartment. Beside, above, or beneath that figure was no article such as is usually seen by a traveller. No baggage of any kind; no stick; no umbrella; no newspaper; no rug; no book; no bag. Nothing but the bare figure and the bare compartment. Under that hat and cloak a form of terror or of danger might lie hidden, and it would not be pleasant to sit there, when practically beyond human aid, speculating on what that hat and that cloak hid. It would be still less pleasant if suddenly that cloak and that hat revealed what they hid, and it was found to be a figure of menace or of danger. At the Kingsbridge Terminus, Dublin, the solitary man got into a cab, and said briefly to

the driver: "Westland Row Station." When he arrived there he learned he was a couple of hours too soon for the Holyhead mail. He paid the cabman, and went to a hotel close by, where travellers may wait up for the mail, and have food and drink while they wait. Here he ordered some light refreshment, and getting into a corner of the large coffee-room, and turning his back to the room, he ate and drank without removing his cloak or hat. When it was announced that it was time to be stirring for the mail, the cloaked man rose, walked rapidly to the station, and took a first-class single ticket to Euston. When he got on board the boat he secured a berth, lay down, and did not move until the passengers were summoned for landing. Late in the forenoon he got into the train at Holyhead. Here he was not so fortunate as he had been in his Irish journey. He had to share a compartment with three others. Still he remained muffled up, silent, motionless. Hour after hour went by, and he never moved, beyond occasionally adjusting the collar of his cloak or his soft felt hat. On his arrival in London he seemed undecided for a while as to what he should do, for he walked up and down the platform at Euston until all the other passengers had left. He spoke to no one. He did not answer any of the porters who asked him if he wanted a cab, and, finally, he left the terminus on foot, and, taking a southerly direction, walked straight on for half-an-hour. It was now quite dark, and had been dark for some time. He did not look to the right or the left, but kept straight on through a line of dingy third-class streets. Then, coming out on a busy thoroughfare, he took

a hansom and gave the address of a quiet hotel in the City. When he arrived at his destination he said he needed no refreshment, and desired to be shown at once to a bedroom. Had the gentleman no luggage? No luggage. The man seemed to hesitate. At this the traveller held out a handful of gold, saying: "Take some of this; I shall be here a few days." The man still seemed to waver. "Be good enough to keep five pounds for me until I want them, and let me have a bed at once." He was then shown to a room. He bolted and locked the door on the inside, and no more was heard of him till morning. Then he rang his bell, and asked if he could have breakfast in a private room. He was told he could. He ordered his breakfast, and came down at the time he was told it would be ready for him. He remained in all that day, and passed the time in reading newspapers of the current day and of a few days back. When it was night he went out, drove to a street off the Strand, and asked at a house there if Mr. Dominique Lavirotte was in. Mr. Lavirotte was not in. He was still in the hospital, and would not be home until the third day from that. The traveller, still wearing the cloak and hat, drove back to his hotel, and spent the remaining three days indoors reading the newspapers. In the meantime, the inquest on the body of Lionel Crawford had taken place. The jury had returned an open verdict, and the mortal remains of Lionel Crawford had been committed to earth under the management of Mr. John Cassidy. Lavirotte had been brought from the hospital to where the inquest was held, and told his story. The medical evidence was that there was no

sign of violence before death on the body. The cuts and bruises discovered were consistent with Lavirotte's story-that is to say, they might have been inflicted after death by the falling stones and wood. But the police were not quite satisfied. They had ascertained from the police at Glengowra the particulars of the case in which Lavirotte had played a part some months ago. They shook their heads, deplored the fact that the medical evidence was in accord with Lavirotte's story, and had grave suspicions that what the medical evidence called syncope might have been the result of a drug and not of mere unaided nature. In fact, the police inclined to the belief there had been foul play. At about seven o'clock on the evening of the fourth, day after the traveller called first at Lavirotte's lodgings he once more drove there, and without sending up a name asked if he might see Mr. Dominique Lavirotte. Word came down that the gentleman was to be shown up. When he was shown into the room, where Lavirotte sat alone in an easy-chair, he threw aside his hat and cloak and said: "Dominique Lavirotte, you are suspected of murdering Lionel Crawford, as you are suspected of having attempted to murder my son. As I came along this street, and while I was delayed at the door, I saw two men idling about-I took them for detectives." "For God's sake, what do you mean, Mr. O'Donnell?" "That the police are watching you; that in all likelihood you will swing for the murder of that old man in that lonely tower; and that you deserve to swing for your attempt to murder my son, and your deliberate trifling with me in my cruel necessity." "I never trifled

with you, Mr. O'Donnell," cried Lavirotte feebly. "You lie, sir!" cried the old man, suddenly flushing up, drawing his right hand from his back pocket and placing the muzzle of a revolver within three feet of Lavirotte's breast.

CHAPTER X

For a while neither James O'Donnell nor Dominique Lavirotte moved. At last the old man said: "Whether I shoot you or not is a matter of perfect indifference to me. There would be no pity, no shame in doing so. I look on myself as a dead man, and I am not only dead in my own eyes, but also dishonoured. I do not say you were the cause of my dishonour, but you are a criminal with regard to my son, and an unprincipled liar with regard to myself. I do not know why I am talking to you. The sight of your dead body would be better for me than those shaking limbs and that craven face. Shall I put you out of your pain? Shall I fire?" "For God's sake, Mr. O'Donnell, put down that dreadful thing, and let us talk like men." "You a man!" cried the old man, in a low, scoffing voice. "Who, in the darkness of the night, sprang upon an unarmed man, who had never done you any harm, and sought to stab him to death without giving him one chance for his life! You, who not only did this, but did this to your greatest friend, call yourself a man! You are a low, mean, cowardly hound, and shooting is too good for you!" A queer look came into Lavirotte's eyes. "If you put down that revolver," he said more collectedly, and with a ghastly smile, "I will tell you how all that thing happened. How is it that, although, as you say-to my shame I confess it-I made a murderous assault upon my dear good friend Eugene-" "If you wish to live a few

minutes longer," said James O'Donnell, "you had better give up that horrible, lying slang of dear good friend Eugene. I am in no humour to dry the crocodile's tears of an arch-blasphemous hypocrite like you." Laviotte seemed gaining courage. With a wave of his hand he put aside the old man's violent interruption and proceeded: "How is it that, after an occurrence such as you describe, Eugene forgave me?" "Because he is too noble and good a fellow for a cowardly wretch like you to know." Laviotte now smiled a smile of self-assurance and ease. "Mr. O'Donnell," he said, making a motion towards a chair, "have the goodness to sit down. This house is not all my own. I rent only two rooms, this one and the one behind. I do not think it would be fair of you to disturb the quiet of this house with anything so rude as a pistol-shot, or to shock the susceptibilities of my good friends here with anything so revolting as a murder. But if you will drop that revolver I'll tell you something about that affair with your son you never heard before, and which, perhaps, even to your blind and bigoted mind, may put a new aspect on the matter." The old man dropped his arm in mute amazement at this attack. He had come there with the intention of shooting Laviotte, after reproaching him violently for the injuries he had inflicted and the hopes he had betrayed. And now, here was Laviotte coolly turning on him, abusing him instead of sitting mutely under his reproaches, and smiling with as much assurance as though he were the person with the grievance who was about to extend mercy. "It would be," said Laviotte, "more convenient and comfortable if you sat

down. I am scarcely strong enough to stand. You say you are a dead man. I am a man only very slightly alive." "I will never, sir," said the old man, "sit down in the presence of a scoundrel such as you, again." "I was never very intimate with you, Mr. O'Donnell-" "Never, thank Heaven, sir." "Because I always had a natural aversion from fools." "Fool, sir! Fool! Do you mean to say I am a fool?" "Yes, a pitiable fool. Who but a pitiable fool would entrust the savings of a lifetime to a sanctimonious old swindler like Vernon? I never yet met a man who made a parade of his religion that was not as great a villain as his courage would allow. But I am getting away from the point. I was saying a little while ago does it not seem strange to you that Eugene should forgive me utterly after I had attempted to murder him?" "I said no, sir. The boy was always distinguished by his generosity." "Does it not seem strange to you that I, being Eugene's great friend, should have made a murderous attack upon him without any cause known to you?" "No, sir; it does not seem strange. It would seem strange to me if you had acted according to any ordinary principle of honour or honesty." "But why, in the name of reason, should I attack Eugene, my dearest and best friend?" "Because he was your dearest and best friend, and it satisfied the demands of your vile nature that you should sacrifice the man who was your most intimate friend." "No; that was not the reason. That is what a shallow-pated fool might think. Something of greater moment than the virtues or vices I possess was the cause of it." "Ay, some foolish quarrel between two young men.

Perhaps you were both heated in argument; perhaps you had both been too free with liquor. But, however you put it, or however high the anger of you both may have gone, only a coward and scoundrel would take a man unawares and attempt to stab him. Young men may have their quarrels; but in these countries, sir, young men do not in their quarrels use the knife!" The old man was still standing a few feet distant from the chair in which Lavirotte sat. His left hand was clenched behind his back. His right hung down by his side, holding the revolver. "There was no quarrel of any kind. We had not even been together that night. I waited for him. I lay in hiding for him, and as he was passing by I sprang at him and tried to kill him without a word of warning." "Infamous monster," cried the old man, shaking with rage. "Do you mean to tell his father this?" James O'Donnell's hand tightened on the revolver, and without raising his wrist he threw the muzzle slightly upward. "Keep your hand still, sir. Keep your hand still. You came here to shoot me because I had failed to keep a promise which I had every reason to hope I could keep. You came here to shoot me, because, through no fault of mine, but through your own stupid wrong-headedness, you, in the decline of life, found yourself commercially a ruined man. You have had a long and prosperous career. I have had nothing but struggles and difficulties and disappointments all my life, short as it is. Suppose for a moment that Eugene, without knowing it, ruined all my life, all my future." "I can suppose nothing so absolutely absurd." "Then, sir, your want of imagination in

this thing only confirms my former opinion of you—you are a fool. Keep your hand quiet. It might be a satisfaction for you to murder me when you came in first, and when your faith in my wickedness was without a flaw. But it will not do now, and you would have no more comfort in shooting me at this moment than you would in facing all the widows and orphans made by that bank, that rotten concern which you in your infatuation believed to be sound, which paid you heavy dividends for your money and your consent to be stupid, and which in the end reduced thousands of simple, thrifty folk to penury. Sir, will you put that pistol down on the table and take a chair?" This was even a still more unexpected attack than the former one. Mr. O'Donnell's mind was thrown into some confusion by finding that he was not only opposed in the field where he had made sure of success, but that his flanks were turned while he had been announcing victory to himself. Never in the whole course of his life had anyone before seriously questioned even his judgment, not to say the foundations of his honesty. And here was the very man for whom he entertained the greatest contempt and loathing, calmly assuming a superior tone and impugning the honesty of one who had hitherto been regarded as impeccable. In a dazed, stupid way he put the revolver on the table and took the chair, as he had been asked. "Now, sir, it is time you knew all. Your son is now happily married to a woman I once madly loved. Remember, I am not using the word 'madly' in any figurative or poetic sense; I am talking the commonest and most ordinary prose. I loved her

madly, notwithstanding the fact that I was engaged to be married to another woman. And without knowing that he did it, and to tell the truth, after I had been rejected by her, he made love to her and succeeded. Then it was that something rose within me, which you have to-night called by a variety of names, which others would call hate, jealousy, revenge, but perhaps which might be called insanity more truly than anything else. I am sure I must have been mad at the time. I remember nothing of it but a hurry in my head, a tumult in my blood, a wild desire to do something that I knew was not right, and yet which I knew I must do. Then I remember no more until I awoke healed of the fever of madness and hurt in the encounter with Eugene." He rose from his chair heavily as he spoke, crossed to the table where the revolver lay, took up the weapon, and said: "A capital revolver-a splendid revolver, sir-a six-chamber one. According to our own showing neither of us has much to live for; and according to your showing the hangman would be the only person seriously injured if I committed suicide. If you are disposed to have half of this I promise to take the other half, and then we shall both be quits." "Are you mad again?" "Not yet; but I feel it coming on."

CHAPTER XI

"Personally," continued Lavirotte, "I have no desire to shoot you. You are at perfect liberty to live. But as you were so sure a little while ago that you were a dead man, and I was one also, it doesn't make much difference who pulls the trigger. Yet I think, before we take our final leave of the world, it would be just as well we had a quiet little chat." "You don't mean to say," cried James O'Donnell, "that you would murder me in cold blood?" "How can I murder you in cold blood, or in heat, since you say you are already dead? When a man is dead to the law, as in the case of a man sentenced to death, no one ever thinks of calling the hangman's office that of a murderer. Viewing your case from my point, I cannot see that death would be any grievous harm to you. By your stupid folly you have ruined yourself, your family, and been accessory to the ruin of hundreds. You are old, and have no reason to hope for any great prolongation of life. Outside your own business you never have been remarkable for any quality which could now bring you bread. Candidly, Mr. O'Donnell, I don't see any reason why you shouldn't die, and why I shouldn't shoot you." The old man was paralysed with horror, and did not speak. In the fury of his disappointment and despair it was easy for him to think he would come to London and kill Lavirotte and then himself, but since he had entered that room, and Lavirotte had spoken, a change had come over the whole aspect of affairs.

He was no longer quite sure that he would be justified, morally or humanly, in killing Lavirotte. He was no longer quite sure that he had any grievance at all against Lavirotte. An hour before he was quite sure. He felt fortified by ten thousand reasons in the opinion that he was called upon to kill the man who had attempted to kill his son, and who had led him himself into a fool's paradise. Now the notion of death was hateful to him. Although every penny of his fortune might be lost in the gulf of Vernon and Son, and although his mill and other places of business would inevitably be sold, he might be appointed manager of the business; for no doubt it would be carried on by someone, and no one could be so fitted to manage it as he who had created it. The thought of his wife and his son came strongly back upon him, now that he found himself face to face with an armed man who had owned he was subject to fits of insanity, an armed madman towards whom he had, a few moments ago, used the strongest language. He now felt, for the first time, that what he had contemplated towards Lavirotte would have been a crime, and serious doubts began to arise in his mind as to whether his own life was in reality ended. The first shock caused by the news Eugene gave him had now passed away, and he was able to see with clearer vision what had been, what was, and what might be. At last he mustered courage enough to say: "Whatever may have occurred before, Mr. Lavirotte, supposing you were justified in your attack upon my son, and in the promise you made to me of material help in my great difficulty, there could

not be the shadow of a justification for your taking my life." "I don't seek for justification," said Lavirotte. "You have no reason to suppose I desire justification. A while ago you used the vilest language towards me. It may suit me to take ample revenge for such language, when I may do so with safety." "Safety!" cried the old man; "safety! How can you talk of safety? You told me a few minutes ago that there were other people in the house. If you fired they would hear the shot-" "Shot," said Lavirotte, with a sinister smile, "there are six here;" tapping the revolver, which he held in his right, with the forefinger of his left hand. "Shots!" repeated the old man with a shudder. "Good God! you don't mean to say you could shoot a man with that smile on your face!" "That is a question quite apart from the matter we are discussing," said Lavirotte, smiling still more. "Yes, they would hear the shots." "Then there are the men I saw outside watching the place. They also would hear, and knowing that you and I were not friends-" "How should they know we are not friends? We have been friends up to this. Your secret designs upon my life have not been, I assume, communicated to anyone." "Yes, but they would come then and find me wounded, perhaps dead. They would find you here. They would know that you have had some unaccountable connection with the assault upon my son, were found in the vault with the dead body of that man Crawford, and are now found here with another injured man, and with a revolver in your hand. All this would be strong enough, I am sure, to convince people that I had been the victim of foul play." "Up

to a certain point, sir, I quite agree with you; and if the facts were to be exactly as you have described them, I have no doubt whatever that an intelligent jury would string me up. But there is a slight difference between what you fancy would occur and what seems to me likely to happen. I will describe to you briefly what, to my mind, would occur. I would hold this revolver thus and pull twice, sending one bullet through the head to insure instant insensibility, sending a second through the cavity of the chest to secure ultimate death. Then I would take this revolver and put it in your hand." Lavirotte held the weapon in his right hand, and pointed at James O'Donnell's head. With his left hand he touched the barrel as he spoke. "For God's sake put that thing down!" Lavirotte laughed. "You have not yet been so long under the magic ordeal of its glance as I was a little while ago. Within a minute some persons would be in this room. They would find me in a state of terrible excitement. They would find me calling for help at the door and at the window. They would find me a man absolutely distracted. They would find you either sitting in that chair dead or dying, or lying on the floor. They would find this revolver-your own revolver-in your hand, or close by, where you let it fall after committing suicide." "Suicide!" "They would hear from me how you received news that I could not help you, although I had hoped to be able to do so; that you came over here to learn from me personally if there were not some chance of my being able to aid you, and that upon my telling you there was not, you, to my grief and horror, put an end to yourself. You see,

sir," said Lavirotte, lowering the revolver and throwing himself back in his chair, "your story could not be heard. Mine would be the only one forthcoming, and on each of the six sides of the cube of my story is the hall-mark of truth." "But surely, Mr. Lavirotte," said the merchant, "anything I may have said or done would not be a sufficient excuse for your committing so terrible a crime as making away with an old man who had never done you any serious injury. I may have said violent, unjustifiable things; I own I have. But I said them in heat and in ignorance. You can understand that I spoke under tremendous excitement, and in the belief that you had, without provocation, assailed my son, and that you had, for no reason known to me, promised me aid in my great trial and forsaken me in the moment of peril." "Then, sir, am I to assume that you hold me at my word, and that you believe when I attacked your son I was suffering under extreme excitement and not responsible for my actions?" "I believe what you say." "And that when I promised to help you out of the money I made certain I was about to receive, I was sincere?" "That," said the old man, with some hesitancy, "is a question I am not yet qualified to answer." "Will you, sir, say that you are now as open to believe I was in good faith when I promised to help you as you were to believe I had committed an unprovoked assault upon your son when you came in here?" "I see no reason why I should not say so." "Then, sir, we may take it that we have arrived at the end of what might have been a fatal talk. Let us put an end to any further chances of fatality thus." He cocked the revolver,

placed the butt of the weapon on the floor, held the barrel in his left hand, and placing the heel of his right foot on the hammer, he tore it out from its place, and flung the weapon on the table, saying: "Now, sir, a child may play with it in safety." The old man rose up in supreme relief, and said: "I have often thought hard things of you. I shall never think them again. When I came in I believed I had matters all my own way, and that I should shoot you like a dog. I had the merciless intention of shooting you as you were. You then got the upper hand of me and had me at your mercy. I cannot now but believe all you have told me. Will you shake hands?" "Very gladly indeed," said Lavirotte, with the tears in his eyes. "This is one of the happiest moments of my life. Now it is only fair I should tell you upon what I grounded my hopes of being able to help you." Lavirotte told James O'Donnell the whole history of the treasure and St. Prisca's Tower. When it was over, the old man said: "Why, in the name of goodness, did you not get twenty men to dig instead of risking both your lives in such a silly way?" "We did not wish that anyone beyond ourselves should know. We did not want to share our good luck with the Crown." "There was no need to share your luck with the Crown. The law of Treasure Trove has lately been altered." "Good Heavens!" cried Lavirotte. "To think it is so, and that poor old Crawford should have lived all his life and died the death he did, without knowing this!"

CHAPTER XII

The crash at last came on the firm of O'Donnell. The business was sold; but the creditors would not be as severe on the old man as he would be on himself. They refused to leave him absolutely penniless; and when the whole affair was wound up he found he had a sum of money which, if carefully invested, would secure the declining years of his wife and himself against absolute want. Eugene was offered the managership of the old business, but would not take it, saying, with words of gratitude for the offer, that he would rather seek his fortune in another field, and that Rathclare would always in his mind be haunted by the ghost of their more prosperous years. He told his personal friends that while he was abroad on his honeymoon he had had his voice tried, and competent judges told him that, with study, he could make a living by it. He had always a desire to go on the stage. He was not too old to begin now. He intended selling up all his immediate personal belongings, and on the proceeds of the sale he calculated that he and his wife could, with great thrift, manage to live until he was able to earn money by singing. Three months after the last call, James O'Donnell and his wife had given up their large house in Rathclare, and taken a modest cottage in Glengowra, where they purposed passing the remainder of their days, and Eugene O'Donnell and his wife were settled in lodgings in London. By this time, all that had hitherto been concealed

by Lavirotte was revealed. He had anticipated Cassidy's story by himself telling Dora of the infatuation he had once experienced for Nellie Creagh; and having explained to her that this condition of mind or heart had immediately preceded the onslaught he made on O'Donnell, she adopted his view, namely, that the whole thing was the outcome of an abnormal mental condition likely to arise once in the lifetime of the average man. He explained to her that upon certain occasions the sanest and greatest of men had behaved like idiots or poltroons, and that the very desperation of his circumstances at the time had left him to drift into a flirtation, which had never gone beyond a dozen civil words on one particular occasion. She believed all he said; and once she got over the first shock of the affair, banished it for ever from her mind, as though it had no longer any more existence than the moonlight of last month. Lavirotte and O'Donnell were now as inseparable as ever. They attended the same lessons together, and Dora waited for Lavirotte with Nellie at Eugene's lodgings, where the two unmarried lovers now met, when they met indoors. Lavirotte had still some of the money Lionel Crawford gave him, and when the affairs of the dead man were investigated it was found that he had some money left. This naturally became Dora's. Eugene's reverse of fortune arose at a time when his father believed matters would still come right, and that there would be no risk in his son's marrying. But the reverse of fortune, or rather the disappointment of expectations, had come upon Lavirotte before he was married, and while there was yet time

to prevent a headlong plunge of their two lives into an uncertain future. He had put the whole matter cogently to Dora. He had told her that both he and Eugene were advised by the best judges to study music in Italy for about two years before appearing on the stage. To ensure success this was essential. Would it not then be wiser that they should wait as they now were, until he came back from Italy fully qualified to take his place in the front rank of tenors? Everyone said his voice was excellent. Everyone said it required training. He proposed to go to Italy with the O'Donnells, and he suggested that she should stay where she was, in the lodgings she now occupied, until his return. Eugene approved of this he said. Nellie thought it hard on her, Dora. Dora smiled faintly, and sighed and said: "No doubt the men knew best. They were sure to be wiser over the affair than she." He said they were both very young still, and could afford to wait in order to be sure of success. When he was gone she wept to think that her life seemed destined to be one of delays in love. After all had been settled between her and Dominique, he had been compelled to leave her, to leave London, and to live hundreds of miles away. The sea, and weary leagues of miles, had separated them long; and often in those early days of dereliction she had imagined that the space was bridgeless, and that he would never stand by her side again, take her hand in his, call her his own. Then he had come to London, and that tyranny of search for the treasure had come between them and parted them again. Before she knew, in that London period, what absorbed Dominique's time, she had

taken it for granted that it was something upon which there was little or no need to fear the risks. Now, this separation between her and Dominique, which would necessitate his going to Italy, seemed of greater import than any which had occurred before. Ireland was a portion of these kingdoms in which people spoke the same language as she did. She had the average knowledge of school-girl French, and could speak to him, after a fashion, in his own tongue. Now he was to go among people of whom she knew little, and be subject to conditions with which she was wholly unfamiliar. What could be harder on a girl than that she should love as she loved, and be so constantly, so completely denied? It seemed to her that, notwithstanding his professions of unmixed devotion, there was always something which occupied more of his attention than thoughts of her. This was a cruel reflection for her, who could think of nothing but him all day, all night. He was the sun, the moon, of her existence. How could he, if she were to take his words literally, love her as she loved him, when he could say he loved her above all other things on earth, and yet could neglect her for the ordinary pursuits of material advancement? She did not understand such matters. She heard that love in woman was an essence, in man an accident. This she believed now. But why could not the accident of his love be complete, even for a while? Why could not his regard for her be so all-absorbing as to make everything else seem small; her love for him dwarfed all other things when brought into comparison with it? But there was now no use in thinking, no

use in even mental protest. He, being a man, was naturally wiser than she, being a woman, and there could be no doubt this going of his to Italy was approved of by all other men, who were also wiser than she. It was in sorrowful mood she parted from him. The slenderness of their means, and the great distance between London and Milan, made it unlikely he should return more than once or twice during the two years or so. He, however, promised faithfully to come back at the end of the first year, if not before, and on this understanding they parted; he, Eugene O'Donnell, and Nellie getting into the train at Charing Cross, with brave words and encouraging gestures; she weeping a little there and then, and much after. They had arranged between them that each was to write to the other once a week. He was much better than this, for during the first two or three months he wrote her always twice, and sometimes thrice a week. Then his letters dropped to once a week, and after that to once a fortnight. He playfully explained to her that as during the earlier portion of their separation he had exceeded his promise, he was persuaded she would now allow him a little latitude out of consideration of that. To this she answered in a cheerful letter that she was quite willing to adopt his suggestion. She wept in writing her cheerful letter, and cried in posting it. "If he wrote me twenty times a week," she cried, "when he first went away, I want to hear forty times a week from him now." As time went on, the letters from Dominique to her decreased in frequency. A whole month passed without a line. Then six weeks. Then two months, and by the end

of the first year he had not written to her for three whole months, although during that time she had never failed to write to him every week. At the end of the first year, Eugene O'Donnell said to his wife one day: "I don't think the godfather of our boy" – they had now a little son, a few months old-"is quite as attentive as he should be to Dora, and I greatly fear he has got entangled, in some other affair. You know Luigia?" "What!" cried Mrs. O'Donnell, in astonishment. "You don't mean that handsome flower-girl?" "Yes," said Eugene, "that handsome flower-girl to whom we took such a liking." For a moment Mrs. O'Donnell looked perplexed. "It would hurt me to the heart," she said, "to think that poor Dora should have any further reason to suspect him. I do not like him, you know. How can it be that he who made love to Dora, who is dark, should care for this handsome Italian girl, who is fair-skinned and light-haired?" "The unusualness, partly," said Eugene, "and partly, Nellie, that she-" He paused, and did not finish the sentence. "That she what?" said the young wife, with a perplexed look upon her face. "That she resembles you." "Good Heavens, Eugene! what a horrible thought! I shall never be able to look with patience at Lavirotte again. Who is this coming here?" "I don't know; I will go and see." After a few moments, Eugene returned. "A telegram," he said, "with bad news, Nellie." "My mother? Your father? Your mother? Who is it?" she cried. "I know someone is dead." "Yes," he said quietly, "but none of those." "Then, in God's name, who?" "Dora." She had come out of the sunlight, which pierced the windows of that tower, and had

fallen swiftly beneath the shadow of the old man's arms.

CHAPTER XIII

The news of Dora's death was a great shock to the O'Donnells. The girl's landlady had telegraphed to them in order that they might break it to Lavirotte. Of late, O'Donnell had begun to think that Lavirotte was not treating Dora very well, and Nellie was distinctly of opinion that his conduct towards the poor girl was very far from what it ought to be. Neither knew exactly to what extent his neglect had gone. He spoke little of Dora of late. They knew she wrote to him regularly every week, and in palliation of the tone which he took when speaking of her, O'Donnell said: "Smooth water runs deep. He may be fonder of her than ever. It may be only his way of trying her constancy." At this Mrs. O'Donnell would become very wroth, and cry out: "Trying her constancy indeed! That is an odd way for you who know everything about him to put it. Whether is it he or she is more likely to be inconstant?" If Lavirotte had had any notice that Dora was ill, he had kept it to himself. The telegram was very brief. It simply stated that the girl died after a few days' illness, and that they were to break the news to Lavirotte. In the face of her sad end, both their hearts softened towards the Frenchman. Whatever may have been his past, even if he had been a little careless of her, and had carried on an undignified flirtation with the flower-girl, Luigia, it never occurred to either of them he had the faintest notion of finally abandoning Dora.

Now there was but one thing to be thought of, and that was how they could best break the sad news. They sent for him, and it was agreed before he came that O'Donnell should speak to him alone. "Something wrong?" said Lavirotte, on entering the room where he found Eugene. "I wanted to see you particularly," said the other. "Are you prepared for any unpleasant news?" Lavirotte started and coloured, and looked uneasily about the room. "Has anyone come from London? I swear to you, Eugene, there is nothing in that Luigia affair. I know I shouldn't have started even a flirtation. I am sure you did not tell Dora. She has come to Milan, and is with your wife? Am I not right?" "No, Dominique. No, my dear Dominique. I wish she were." "Then, the girl is dead?" cried Lavirotte. "My Dora is dead! Tell me so at once, and put me out of pain, Eugene!" "I had a telegram, Dominique." "Yes, yes. I know. You need say no more," said the Frenchman, as he threw himself on a chair. "I am accursed! Poor girl! Poor child!" He covered his face with his hands and sobbed. Eugene put his hand softly on the shoulder of his friend as a token of his sympathy, and then stole quietly out through the window into the little garden behind the house. He thought he would leave Lavirotte alone in the first burst of his grief. In a few minutes O'Donnell came back to the room and found it empty. He consulted for a short time with his wife, and they came to the conclusion that it was better not to follow Lavirotte, but to leave him in solitude and grief. The afternoon passed away, and it was late in the evening before they decided that Eugene

should look him up at his lodgings. Here again the Irishman drew a blank. The Signor had left that day for his country, for England, and would be away for example, a day for every finger-one, two, three, four, five. The Signor had not said why he was going. He had taken nothing whatever with him but his purse, out of which he had given her, the landlady, before the Signor went away, this gold piece, which was over and above the money due to her. He seemed in great grief and spoke to himself, not in Italian, and it seemed to her, who now spoke English somewhat, not in English. It may have been French. It seemed as though he cursed and threatened, for he ground his teeth and shook his fists, thus, and thus, and again in this manner, the last greatly terrifying her, the landlady. And she left the room, fearing he might, without reason, take vengeance on her, who had done nothing. For he seemed as one distraught, as one mad, who might easily strike one who had done no harm. Ah! Was it so? His sweetheart dead! In that far-away country! Then, perhaps, when he recovered from this he would marry Luigia, who had the most wonderful hair in the world, and was so fair, as to seem as though she had come from the place where his, Signor O'Donnell's, wife had come from. Luigia was a good girl, and not like others, and if the Signor did marry her, she would make him a good wife; for having been poor she would know the value of his money. But the poor Signor who had gone away that day was in no humour to think of marriage now. Only of death and the grave. Did Signor O'Donnell know of the sweetheart of the other? Yes.

And she was also fair, like the Signora and Luigia? No; dark. Ah, how strange. How incomprehensible. Here in this country they were nearly all dark, and when a fair woman came among them, no dark woman had a chance against her. But if what people said was true, there were the dark and the fair in the place from which the Signora came, and a man could choose, after his liking, the dark or the fair. Yet the poor Signor, who had lost his sweetheart, had chosen, in his own country, a dark woman for a sweetheart, and here, for a sweetheart, a fair woman. He was fickle in love. Had Signor O'Donnell noticed that Luigia had a strong resemblance to the Signora? Luigia was a good girl. God keep her from harm. Eugene came back and told Nellie that Lavirotte had suddenly left for London, without, as far as he knew, saying a word to anyone. According to what his landlady had said, Lavirotte must have gone straight home, and gone from his lodgings to the railway station. What an odd fellow he was, not to say a word, not to take a portmanteau or even hand-bag with him, but dash off across Europe just as they had seen him last. "You know, Nellie," said Eugene, putting his arm round his wife's waist, "I often told you I thought there was a screw loose in Lavirotte, and every day that goes over confirms me more and more in this belief. It is a curious fact that some great-great-grandfather or other had a mania for mania, and wrote a book about something or other connected with the mind. Of late Lavirotte has said a lot to me about the injudiciousness of trusting to a voice for a living. He has told me, what is quite true, that until

a voice has been tested on the stage and in front of an audience, no one can tell what it is going to be. It is just like an unacted play. It may be worth five pounds a week, or it may be worth five hundred. Then he has said to me that he thinks his natural bent was towards medicine, and only that he had given up so much time now to the cultivation of his voice, he would certainly, if he had the money, become a doctor. "Eugene," said Nellie, "you have told me something of this before. All this talk about the impossibility of deciding the value of a voice until it is tested in front of an audience, seems to me to have a good deal to do with the fact that people, both here and in England, say your voice is better than his. Whatever may be on the surface of his talk about his voice, I am sure at the bottom of it there is jealousy of yours." "Nonsense, Nellie!" cried Eugene, good-naturedly. "You know what you are saying is absurd. Such jealousy as you speak of is a lost art. As Uncle Toby said to the fly, Lavirotte might say to me: 'Go, go, poor devil! Get thee gone-why should I hurt thee? This world is surely wide enough to hold both thee and me.' How could two men of second or third-rate voices, such as we have, even clash. There are hundreds of towns which want third-class tenors, and once we have taken to the boards there is no more likelihood of our meeting and clashing than of two twenty-fifth-rate comets meeting in space." "He is jealous by nature, Eugene; and he is jealous of you." "If he is jealous of me, darling, it must be in regard to you." He pressed her to him, and kissed her forehead as he spoke. "You may put it what way you will,

Eugene, but you are a truer friend to him than he is to you." "God bless my soul!" cried her husband, "how *can* you say so? Did he not nearly lose his life in trying to get that treasure, with a view to saving our house?" "I suppose *I* must believe that he believed he would get that money, and so be able to do you a service, but I do not know anything harder to credit." "Why, he not only nearly lost his life, but he certainly injured his health in some way in that unfortunate undertaking at St. Prisca's Tower. The day he got the letter from me about the money for the last call, he fell asleep or fainted in a chair at his lodgings, and he tells me that ever since, his chest now and then feels strange." "According to what your father told us afterwards, it is very wonderful that neither of these men should have known anything about the law. For my part, Eugene, I believe poor old Mr. Crawford was a sincere, half-witted man, and that Lavirotte seemed to adopt the delusion of the old man in order that he might pose as your patron or benefactor, to balance the injury he had done you that dreadful night at the cove." "Nonsense!" cried her husband. "Men do not carry farces so far as to injure their health permanently." "If you were to talk till morning," said she, decisively, "you could not convince me he is not jealous." "Of my voice?" "I don't say of that only." "Of you?" "I don't say that either." "In the name of Heaven, then, what is he jealous of? Of baby?" laughed the husband. "Do you think he is jealous of our having little Mark?" At that moment the door opened, and a young Italian girl entered, carrying the baby. "You needn't be so absurd, Eugene," said the

young mother, fondly taking her infant from the girl. "And yet," she added, kissing the child, "anyone might well be jealous of us about you, darling." "Nellie, dear, you have capped the climax of absurdity."

CHAPTER XIV

Before leaving Milan, Lavirotte had telegraphed to London, saying he would be over for the funeral. When he got to London he drove straight to Charterhouse Square. The landlady thought he looked wild, and two or three other sympathetic people who lived in the house said he ought to be looked after. But his words were sane, and he made only one request, which, under the circumstances, was reasonable—namely, that he might be allowed some time in the room alone with her. He went into that silent room where the dead girl lay, and closed the door softly behind him. It was broad daylight, and although Charterhouse Square is, at the busiest time of the day, comparatively quiet for a place in the City, he could hear the great muffled rumble of traffic that overhung the whole place, like a cloud that lay around on all sides, like a soft cushion against which silence beat. He drew down the lid and looked at the dead, the lovely dead. So like, and so absolutely unlike. All was here, and yet nothing. Here was a mask, the pallid mask of his dearest love, his sweetest girl. Here was the sleeping form round which his arms had often clung lovingly, tenderly, hopefully, with joyous anticipation of long years full of happiness, spent by them together. Now all the charm was gone; all the sacredness had departed. There was nothing more worthy of his regard in these still, silent features, than in the wooden box which was to be the mute and viewless

partner of their decay. Here was the hair with which he had so often played, the unwrinkled brow which he had so often, with supererogatory fingers, smoothed. The eyes were closed; there was no longer any light in them. The light had gone out for ever. There was here a cessation of light, such as had occurred in that vault when the lantern failed. In those veiled eyes lay the darkness of the tomb, as in that vault, veiled from the light of heaven, had lain the darkness of the nether deep. The lips were closed and bloodless and placid. Those were the lips that he had loved to kiss, that he had hoped to think were his for ever. The sculptor would have seen little change, the painter much, the poet more, the lover all. Nothing was that had been. What had happened to the trustful spirit, quiet laughter, the quick irritability to smiles, the joyous movements of approach, when he was there, the sweet confidence, the gentle voice, the hand that came forth, anxious to be clasped, the yielding form? All, all the qualities, which had in time to him stood as divine expression of a beautiful decree, had passed into nothingness, had left no more behind than the wind leaves on the rock. All that was sweet and pure, guileless and joyous, vital and fresh, had gone away for ever, and left nothing. Why should he call this Dora? It could not hear him. It could not answer him. He might as well throw up his arms and plead his piteous grief into the vacant air. Dora was dead, and this thing here was no more than the mask of Dora. Only the mask of Dora, and yet a mask which he could not preserve. To-morrow they would take this coffin away and put it somewhere or other,

he knew not, he cared not where. There would be a ceremony, at which people would look solemn, out of a general sense of fitness, rather than because of individual grief. They would lower that coffin down nine feet or so into the solid earth, and cover it up, and then come away. And the men whose business it was to attend to the material portions of the burial would stop at the first public-house and have a drink, after they had buried his Dora. Buried his Dora! No, they could not. They could never bury her. They might bury this thing here-this phantom-this mask-this statue. They might put this away for ever, and in the inviolate darkness of the tomb it might crumble away and be no more to the future than a few old bones of an unknown woman. But for him they could never bury Dora. They could never bury his darling Dora! What! Could it be that these pallid lips now lying smooth and close together had moulded his name, had whispered into his ear, had taken his kisses as the rich guerdon offered there for admission to the citadel of her heart, as the supreme offer of a subdued nature at the final barrier of an opulent town? Those the lips, those the material lips, those the substantial lips which his lips had touched, and which, with such excellent flattery to his love, allowed themselves to be touched by his, not shrinking from his, not even seeming to shrink from his, but even slowly and modestly advancing to his with the whole head, the whole neck, the whole form- Were they now going to bury these lips, this head, this neck, this form? Darling, where are you? I am here. Is there any place but here, where you may be? You have

left something behind you as you went away. They have put it in a coffin. It is no good to me. Why did it not go with you? Why am I here? Where am I? Who am I that am here? I am not he that loved you once any more than this here is what I once loved. I shall wait until I go away before I love again. And when I have gone away as you have gone away I will love only you. And here upon the lips that are not yours, but which are the likest yours I ever saw, I swear this oath. So help me, God. When he left that room, when he had taken farewell of his dead sweetheart, he left the house, saying no more words than were absolutely necessary to the occasion. The funeral was to be the next morning. He said he would be there in time, but gave no other indication of his future actions. Out of Charterhouse Square, he struck in a southerly direction until he reached Porter Street. Into this he turned, and, walking rapidly, did not pause until he came to St. Prisca's Tower, the new door of which he opened. He entered the tower. Little had as yet been done to the interior since last he saw it. Above him yawned the vacant space which had formerly been cut in two by the fallen loft. That loft, in its fall, had carried with it the ladder which had run round the walls, and it was no longer possible to gain the second loft by the old means. But an ordinary slater's ladder had been used by Crawford and him of old, to descend into the pit, and this would be long enough, if placed upon a projecting mass of masonry on a level with the street, to reach the second loft. He had brought a candle with him, had lit it, and stuck it against the wall. The light from this was, however,

feeble. It reached but a short distance into the pit below; but a short distance into the vault above. How was he to drag up this heavy ladder from its position against the wall, into which it had been thrust by the falling loft? He caught the sides of the ladder, and with all his force sought to move it. In vain. It would not stir. He tried again and again. It resisted him implacably. Then he descended it, finding in so doing that a few of the rungs had been knocked out of it by the falling loft. When he got down he stood on some of the wreckage, caught a rung close to his feet with both his hands, and threw the whole force of his body into one fierce, upward strain. The ladder still remained immovable. He let go the rung, drew himself up, and leaned against the ladder, panting hard. "My strength is gone," he said. "My strength is buried in this accursed hole. May the place be for ever accursed! I must get help." He mounted the ladder, opened the door of the tower, and accosted two men who were leaning against the opposite wall. They were willing to help, and followed him into the tower. One of them caught hold of the ladder, and shook it easily in its place, drawing it upward a foot or so. "I could have done that once," thought Lavirotte. "I shall be able to do anything like that no more." Under Lavirotte's instructions, the two porters placed the ladder in the position he desired. He paid them and they left. Then he ascended the ladder, and, following the upward way of the remaining stairs, reached what had been formerly his room. He felt greatly fatigued. The long journey from Milan, the anxiety of mind, the vigil by the side of the dead Dora, had all,

no doubt, he thought, been too much for him. He looked around. The humble furniture of the place was all covered thick with dust. With a brush he removed the accumulation of months from the couch, and lay down. Yes, he was very tired, and there was that dull, dead pain in his side—in his chest, here. He wondered what it could be. In the old days he must have strained himself when working in this place. And yet he did not remember any particular strain. This pain might really be nothing more than the result of the overwork he endured here more than a year ago. This was the first time he had rested since he had last spoken to O'Donnell. It was very pleasant to rest here, secure from the sound and bustle of this tumultuous city. But Dora was resting even more quietly than he. There was no comparison between the blessed quiet of her beautiful young face and the harassed quiet he now endured. Oh, God! what a pain! What was that? For a moment he thought it might be death.

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.