

Dowling Richard

The Last Call: A Romance (Vol. 2 of 3)



Richard Dowling

**The Last Call: A
Romance (Vol. 2 of 3)**

«Public Domain»

Dowling R.

The Last Call: A Romance (Vol. 2 of 3) / R. Dowling — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Part I. – Continued.	5
CHAPTER XX	5
CHAPTER XXI	7
CHAPTER XXII	10
CHAPTER XXIII	12
CHAPTER XXIV	15
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

Dowling Richard

The Last Call: A Romance (Vol. 2 of 3)

Part I. – Continued.

THE LAST CALL

CHAPTER XX

When Dora Harrington released herself from old Crawford's arms, he led her to a chair, and said: "I have no longer the shadow of a doubt that you are the daughter of my Dora. It was, indeed, a lucky chance which made me in my despair last night turn my steps towards the river. And now," he added, "the next thing is to get some nice comfortable place for you. This old rookery would never suit. Let us go and try if we cannot find a suitable, homely place, somewhere outside the City." "I told you, sir," said the girl timidly, "that when yesterday I found out all my money was lost in the bank, I had not a shilling to send a message to him." "To Lavirotte?" "Yes, sir." The old man took out a leather bag and handed it to her, saying: "This will be enough for the present. When it is all gone let me know." "But, sir," said the girl, holding the bag in her hand without opening it, "I do not want all this. A shilling will be sufficient for the present, if you will only let me go to the nearest telegraph office." "Nonsense, child," he said. "You cannot be without money in London. There is more where that came from. If you wish to go immediately to the telegraph office, you may as well start now. I will meet you in an hour at Ludgate Circus." The young girl descended the ladders through the gloom of the tower, and opening the deep sunken door, emerged into the broad morning sunlight. She went to the telegraph office and wrote out the following message:

"Cannot say how sorry you are not well. Could not telegraph yesterday. Would go over, but have no money."

When she had written out this message, she untied the string of the bag and poured the contents into her hand. She had expected to find a few shillings. She started with surprise. "Gold! All gold!" She counted. "Twelve pounds!" Then for a moment she stood in thought, tore up the telegram she had written, and walked quickly back to the tower. Here a difficulty presented itself. How was she to summon the old man from the top or from the pit? If he was above, the feeble sound of her hand beating against that door would never be heard, even at night. But now in the day, owing to the roar of traffic around, she could not make herself heard if he was in the pit beneath. What was she to do? This was the only door. Under the circumstances she did not care to ask the aid of any passer-by, lest it might anger the old man. Notwithstanding her conviction that the effort would be fruitless, she did knock at the massive door with her hand. There came no response. For a quarter of an hour she stood and knocked unavailingly. Then she turned to go, and hastened to Ludgate Circus. She had taken no heed of time, and when she got to the Circus she was horrified to find herself twenty minutes behind the time appointed. She glanced hastily round, but could not see the old man. Then she carefully examined with her eye each of the four sections that make up the Circus. She found no one she knew. The hurrying crowd and throng of vehicles 'confused her senses and her mind. The old man had not indicated to her the section in which he would meet her, and to her eyes, unaccustomed as they were to the ceaseless turmoil of traffic in the City, it seemed almost impossible to find anyone in that place. She waited half-an-hour vainly. Then she began to despair. Whither should she turn? That tower in Porter Street now seemed as inaccessible to her as the centre of the Great Pyramid. This dereliction of to-day was harder to bear than that of yesterday; for since her desperate resolve

the previous night she had found a friend-nay, more, a close relative-who was also the friend of the man she loved, and who was willing and able to help her. Had she not with her the proof of this willingness and this ability? Then, as she betook herself once more in the direction of St. Prisca's Tower, she remembered he had said the money he gave her that morning would do for the present. She was therefore, of course, at liberty to employ the money as she chose. It was hers to use, for a grandfather had of course a perfect right to give his grand-daughter money, and the granddaughter had a perfect right to accept it. Once more she found herself in the doorway of the tower. She stood a while looking up and down the busy way, when all at once, to her great joy, she saw the old man approaching. "My dear child, where have you been? I have been greatly frightened about you." She then explained to him what had occurred-how she had not noticed the time slipping by, and how, when she found herself in Ludgate Circus, she was twenty minutes too late. "Well, there's no harm done so far," said Crawford. "You sent your telegram, and now we shall go and look for a lodging." "No," she said, "I did not send it. I wrote it out and then tore it up. Did you know, sir, that all the money in this bag is gold?" "Yes," he said, "I keep my change loose always. Did you expect to find notes?" "Oh no, sir; but I thought as you were good enough to give this money you might perhaps allow me to do with it what I would most like. That is the reason I tore up my telegram." "Certainly," he said. "You may do with it exactly what you please." "Well then," said the girl, "will you consent to my going to Ireland this evening?" The old man started for a moment. "I suppose you mean," he said, "to Glengowra, to see Laviotte." She coloured, and said: "Yes. If you do not object. He is ill, you know." "It is a long way for a young girl to go alone; too long I fear." "I am used to travelling," pleaded the girl, "I do not mind travelling in the least. I have travelled a great deal alone." "Give me a little time to think," said the old man. "I cannot decide at the moment. This is no place to stand any longer. Let us sit down somewhere. Come with me." Crawford led the way to a quiet room, where he ordered some light refreshment, and where they could speak without effort or restraint. They talked the matter over a little. At last he made up his mind. "I have resolved," he said, "that you should not go alone so long a journey." The girl looked disappointed; her eyes filled with tears. "Oh!" she cried, "I wish you would give me leave." "Nevertheless," said the old man, not heeding the interruption, "you shall go to Ireland this evening. I will go with you." They were alone. She took his dark, wrinkled hand in hers and kissed it, and cried, "Thank you, grandfather," and burst into tears. It was the first time the old man had been called grandfather, and the name seemed to re-awaken in his breast echoes of his old tenderness. He placed his other hand on her head, and drew her head down on his shoulder, saying softly: "Weep, if it is good for your heart, my child. These are healing tears. You are, as far as I know, the one human being saved to me out of the shipwreck of my life. I will go with you to-night. He will recover speedily, you may be sure, and I will afterwards do all I can for you and him." Then the detail of their journey was arranged. She was to get what things she required in lieu of those left with her landlady. He had some preparations to make too. That evening they both set out for Dublin on their way to Glengowra.

CHAPTER XXI

The gold and silver plate and the jewels of the great Lord Tuscar were the wonder and admiration of Europe. Sovereigns envied him for their possession. They had not been the result of one generation. The Tuscars had for a couple of centuries been generals, admirals, statesmen, lawyers. They had, in fact, occupied every favourable position for earning high rewards and for wholesale plundering. They had plundered with a will. And now, in addition to fine estates in three English counties and a large slice out of "settled" Ulster, and one of the finest houses in London, Lord Tuscar had the largest collection of plate and jewels owned by any nobleman in the three kingdoms. No one had ever attempted even to estimate the value of his treasures. His house was situated close to the river, at no great distance from St. Prisca's Church. Those were times of troubles and dangers. Great houses had been ruined and great houses made in an incredibly short space of time. Men who had been at the zenith of power and riches yesterday were penniless exiles to-day, and the men who had subsisted upon the charity of foreign courts and foreign nobles a week ago, were now environed with all the circumstance and pomp of power and all the splendour of wealth. Now, one of the most remarkable things in connection with the great Tuscar treasure was, that for some years no one had seen more of it than the meaner exigencies of a great house required. Some said the great lord had pawned it. At this most people laughed; for was it not known that, gorgeous as was the state and luxury with which he surrounded himself, his income exceeded his expenses? Others said that although the time was over when monarchs playfully adopted the treasures of their nobles, the great earl had misgivings, and although one of the most favoured courtiers of the Merry Monarch, he had a morbid dread that his Majesty might unjustly covet those precious stores. Then there was an idea that as the Tuscars had been enthusiastic Royalists, and as the present earl was notoriously timid, he had, in dread of a second Commonwealth, sent his plate and gems over seas. However the matter stood, there could be no doubt that the treasure was not now at Tuscar House; and, moreover, it was alleged that only his lordship and one confidential person could tell the whereabouts of the hoard. It was towards the end of summer, and night. Most of London had retired to rest. A strong wind was blowing from the east. The city was ill-lighted where it was lighted at all, and the streets dangerous after dark; so that most people who were honest and had anything to lose kept indoors. It was not a fashionable part of the city, but it was not unprosperous. As the night went on the wind increased, until about ten o'clock. Then it blew fiercely. All at once in front of the shop of one, Farryner, baker to the King, was raised a cry: "Fire!" That was the beginning of it. In an incredibly short time, aided by the wind, Farryner's house was burned out; but, before it was finally reduced to ashes, most of Pudding Lane was in flames. Many of the houses were of wood, and offered no protest whatever against the development of the conflagration. An hour from the outbreak of the flames it was known Farryner was burned out. Two hours later it was known that London was in flames. Now it could be seen that this was no incidental fire, to be dismissed finally at the end of the nine-days' wonder. This was a fire that would be remembered for years. Three hours after midnight it was obvious that, if the wind continued in its present quarter for any great length of time, the fire would become a matter which history could never ignore. By this time a large portion of the population in the neighbourhood afflicted were afoot. Now the fire leaped from street to street, as though with the agility of trained experience. Now, when new material came in its way, it shot upward in spires of flame. Later, these spires, bending under the pressure of the wind, made radiant viaducts for the fire across the darkened streets. And when they had done their deadly work, and the buildings opposite crackled and glowed, these huge beams of molten gold contracted as the source upon which they had fed failed them, and finally they made one wild, aspiring rush upwards when the roof fell, and the four walls of each house formed the crater of an iridescent volcano, which belched forth one huge mass of co-mingled smoke, and flame, and sparks, and flakes, and wands of fire. About this time the vast house owned by the great Lord Tuscar

was threatened, touched, and fired. He, his suite and retinue, escaped by the river; and in a brief time, before the daylight yet broadened in the east, already red with the flames, Tuscar House was beyond hope. Now terror had fully seized the people. No efforts were made to save the buildings. Those who could escape with their lives, and a few of the most portable of their worldly goods, were considered lucky. Men and women might be seen hurrying through the streets frantically, moving west, carrying such of their possessions as could be borne a great distance. For now they had come to the conclusion that it was impossible to set a limit to the flames, and that the whole of London in a westerly direction might succumb. There had been a long, hot, dry season, and the houses burned bravely. They seemed but to need a touch from the fiery wind flying by to kindle them. Despair reigned supreme. Men and women went shrieking through the streets. The roar of the conflagration shook the air. The crash of falling houses made the solid ground tremble. People would not leave their homes until the flames had touched the walls, until the last ray of hope was obscured. Then such as were not encumbered with children or goods flew through the streets, shrieking like demented beings. One of those most alarmed by the magnitude of the calamity and the terrors of that night was the great Earl of Tuscar. When he entered his barge to row up the river his feet trembled, and he could scarcely keep himself upright. He was elderly, and had been in failing health for some time. Before they arrived at the stairs at Westminster he complained of feeling faint; and when at last the barge ran alongside, they had to carry the great Earl out, for he was dead. As the attendants were bearing the body of the great Earl from his barge, a solitary man stood on the leads of the tower belonging to St. Prisca's Church, watching the progress of the flames. Evidently he was very anxious, for his head and eyes moved continually from right to left. As each spot, which, a moment before had been black, sprang into flame, he shifted his feet restlessly like one feeling he ought to be gone, and yet daring to hope there was no need for flight. "If anything is to be saved," he said, "there is no time to lose." Again he ran his eye over the increasing area of the fire. "The walls of the tower may stand," he thought. "They are much thicker than is common. But the church itself must go if the wind does not abate. The Earl has already left, of course. The fire did not spare his stout walls, nor respect his greatness. He and I alone know where his treasure is hid. He will, of course, take measures to secure it after the fire. It could be nowhere safer than it is at present. No one suspects it is in the vault. People who saw the chests come believed they contained only the rescued archives of an abbey destroyed by Cromwell. But let me see. Supposing anything should have happened to him; supposing he was overtaken by the flames; suppose, from some cause or other, he should not be able to communicate the secret to anyone, how then could this treasure be discovered? How could it be so arranged that the secret might fall into no other hands than those entitled to know it, for may not I too perish in this terrible disaster?" He turned around, and leaving the embrasure in which he had stood, descended quickly to the room below. Here a light was burning, and it could be seen that he who had watched the fire from the roof was a clergyman. "How is it to be done?" he thought, and pondered some seconds. At last he lifted a small box, and, going to some bookshelves, took out a few volumes. In two of these volumes he wrote something. "It will not do," he thought, "to make this matter so plain that anyone may understand it. If the Earl is alive, by noon he will surely take some steps with regard to his treasure. If he is not alive, and I too have perished, it will be necessary some record should be left behind." He placed a copy of Chaucer, in which he had written something, in the bottom of the box, then a few indifferent books, and then "Mentor on Hawking," in which he had written something also; then a few more indifferent books, and finally a piece of paper bearing these words:

"Search diligently if you would know what John Henry Plantagenet James, eighth earl, knew, if he be dead." On the outside of the box he fastened a piece of parchment on which he wrote: "A box of books. Take this at once to the Earl of Tuscar, who will reward the bearer." Then he locked the box, and, putting it on his shoulder, descended the ladders of St. Prisca's Tower. As he did so he said to himself: "I have not been too soon. The air here is already hot. I can smell the fire close by." As he was about half-way down, a sudden light in one of the openings attracted his attention. He

started, and cried: "The flames have already struck the church." Ere he reached the next loft it was but too plain the tower was already in flames. "My retreat cut off!" he exclaimed in despair. He looked down into the next loft. The floor and the foot of the ladder were alight, and exit was impossible. If there was any hope for him it must be upon the roof. He hastened thither. During the time he had been occupied with the books and writing, and in descending and ascending, the fire had made rapid, terrible progress. It had touched the Church of St. Prisca, and the smoke was already coming up the opening in the roof. It was quite plain now to the man on the leads that he was doomed. There were people in the streets below, but they were as helpless as he. "I must die," he said. "Nothing can save me. There is but one chance for my preserving the secret." He approached an embrasure on the western side, and dropped the box into the street below. The box shot downward and was shattered into atoms. Some paltry pilferer, a few minutes later, snatched up the books and put them into his bag. The label on the box and the manuscript-slip inside were never seen afterwards. The books were carried to Kensington, whither a good deal of the salvage of the fire was brought; and the clergyman, who had tried to save the Earl's secret, fell a victim to the Great Fire of London on the 3rd of September, 1666.

CHAPTER XXII

It was evening when Lionel Crawford and his grand-daughter arrived at Glengowra. Much of the excitement had by this time disappeared, and a tone of gentle disgust was to be observed among the inhabitants of that little town. Was it not provoking, townfolk thought, that such a splendid opportunity for invective and commiseration should be wholly wasted? Who could throw stones at Lavirotte if young O'Donnell did not? Who could pity young O'Donnell if he consented to receive the friendly overtures of Lavirotte. The whole thing was an abominable conspiracy against comfortable living in Glengowra. There was something to be grateful for, no doubt, in the first blush of that event at the cove, but it had led to nothing worthy of its parts; and a circumstance which had gone up the very largest of rockets, seemed destined to come down the most insignificant of sticks. When Lionel Crawford and Dora Harrington arrived in Glengowra and went to Maher's hotel, a new fillip was given to public curiosity. It was known by the speech of the grandfather and his grand-daughter that they were not of Irish bringing up. There was, of course, no reason why they should be in any way connected with the great event of that week. Yet, still it had been noised abroad that Lavirotte had telegraphed to a Miss Harrington in London, and here now had arrived an old man and a young girl with unfamiliar accents. The shrewd people of Glengowra made a connection between these facts, and came, in about ten minutes, to the conclusion that the young girl was Miss Harrington. In the back room of the Confectionery Hall, a man who had come out by the same train with the newly-arrived pair brought all news and surmises concerning them; and here, out of gratitude for small mercies, the company were for a time solaced by the fact that no one could offer a rational explanation of who the old man was. When Crawford and Dora were safely inside Maher's hotel, the old man asked to be shown to a private sitting-room. "For," said he to Dora, "I have been so long accustomed to the solitude of St. Prisca's Tower, that I cannot endure the company or curious gaze of strangers." He had no means of knowing up to this that Lavirotte's illness was not a natural one, or that he and his grand-daughter were the subjects of peculiar interest to the good folk of Glengowra. He rang the bell, and when the waiter came, said: "I should very much like to see the landlord, if you think he would oblige me by coming here." In a few minutes the proprietor entered the room. The old man lost no time in stating his case. He said: "We have come a long journey, and are tired. We are both deeply interested in a gentleman who is now lying ill here, Mr. Lavirotte, and are most anxious to know his present condition." The landlord looked from one to the other in some perplexity. "May I ask," said he, "the nature of the interest you take in Mr. Lavirotte?" The old man smiled, and said: "An Irishman's answer." "An Irishman's answer," said Maher, "is often kindly meant." He glanced significantly, first at the old man, and then at the young girl. "Perhaps you know," said Crawford, "that Mr. Lavirotte telegraphed to a lady in London, in whose affairs he is interested?" "I wrote out the message myself." He paused a moment. "Have I the honour of seeing Miss Harrington?" "This is Miss Harrington." "And you are, sir-?" He paused here. "Her grandfather." "May I ask you, sir," said Maher, "to step out with me for a moment?" "Oh, sir, he is worse," cried the girl, looking appealingly at the old man. Maher turned quickly upon her, saying: "I pledge you my word of honour, Miss Harrington, that, on the contrary, Mr. Lavirotte is much better; and that he has continued to improve ever since I telegraphed to you." "Then," said the girl, "his illness must have been sudden." "Rather sudden. If you, sir," he continued, turning to the grandfather, "will accompany me just down to the strand, I should feel greatly obliged. Miss Harrington will, if you approve of it, remain in this room until we come back, with my most emphatic assurance that Mr. Lavirotte is out of danger and getting on very well." Maher did not wish the girl to meet even a chambermaid, lest the whole of the story might reach her at the one time, and give her a most painful and unnecessary shock. The substance of the conversation between the two clerks at the back of the Confectionery Hall had by this time become public property; and, of course, the hotel proprietor was one of the first men to hear all news.

Jaded as the old man was, he rose with alacrity, and accompanied Maher. As soon as they were in the open air Crawford turned on his companion, and said: "I am sure, sir, your intention is kindly. There is kindness in your manner and face; but I hope you are not, through some benevolent motive, deceiving that child we have left behind." "I-deceiving her!" cried the landlord. "I am not deceiving her." "I do not understand," said the old man, "what you mean by laying such emphasis on the word *I*." "I mean, sir, that although I am not deceiving her now (Lavirotte is really getting better), someone else may be deceiving her." "You perplex and disturb me," said the old man. "I have no clue whatever to your meaning. Pray, if you would be kind, be plain." "I take it for granted, sir, that you know Mr. Lavirotte." "I know Mr. Lavirotte, but not very well." For a moment or two the landlord was silent. His position was one of great delicacy and difficulty. He now held a profound hatred for Lavirotte, and the look of that gentle, confiding young girl had touched him keenly. He pitied her. "I hope, sir," he said, "if I am bold enough to ask you a few questions, you will be so kind as not to fancy it is through curiosity." "I will do anything," said the old man, "if you will only go on." "There is a rumour here, which may be true or false, that Mr. Lavirotte met Miss Harrington in London, and that they were good friends there." "I see what you are driving at. They are engaged to be married." "Precisely. You have not for some months past heard much of Mr. Lavirotte, have you?" "Absolutely nothing, except your telegram. Has he been ill all that time?" "No. He was not taken ill until a few hours before I sent that message to London." "What is the nature of his illness?" "He received an injury in a mysterious way, in a quarrel with another man, and neither he nor the other man will say anything about the quarrel, or the cause of it. But, of course, as in all cases of this kind, there is a general notion of what it was about. People say that jealousy led to it." "Jealousy of Miss Harrington? I did not understand there was any likelihood of his being jealous of her." "Nor is he, as far as rumour goes. The facts are that he attacked a young man in this place, and, after stabbing the young man, was rendered insensible himself, no one knows how." "Stabbing!" exclaimed the old man with horror. "Are you sure of that!" "There is no evidence he did. There is no doubt he did." "I am old," said Mr. Crawford, "and have lived a long time out of the ways of the world. I am slow, and do not understand. Out of pity to my infirmities, be simple with me. I know something very unpleasant is coming. Let me hear it at once." The two men had now reached the roadway that ran inside the storm wall. "It will rest you, sir, if we stand here and lean upon the wall. I will tell you everything I know in a few words. "The prettiest girl in this neighbourhood is a Miss Creagh. She is now in my house. One of the finest young fellows within twenty miles is Mr. Eugene O'Donnell. He is now lying in my house. He is the man Lavirotte stabbed. They were bosom friends. The story goes that about two months ago Lavirotte made love to Miss Creagh and was rejected. A little later O'Donnell made love, and was accepted. The wedding was to be in about a month, and to prevent it Lavirotte tried to murder young O'Donnell." "Good God!" said the old man, "what a dreadful story, and what a scoundrel he must be! It is the most horrible thing that ever came near me in all my life." "It is very bad, sir, indeed. You will now, sir, understand why I wished to speak to you alone. Shall we go back? I left orders that no one was to enter the private room, so that you can act now as you think best, and be quite certain that the young lady knows nothing of this most miserable affair. It is only right you should know that young O'Donnell is also doing very well, and no fears are felt about his recovery." In perfect silence the two men walked back to the hotel.

CHAPTER XXIII

Lionel Crawford did not go straight to the room where Dora was. He turned into the coffee-room, and there stood a while pondering. Though he was a visionary, a dreamer, a philosopher, he had, before he became immersed in his present studies and pursuits, been, comparatively speaking, a man of the world. For although he had never mingled much in society, he had a tolerable knowledge of what people said and did. What would people say of such conduct as Lavirotte's? They would call it abominable. What would people say of Lavirotte? They would call him a scoundrel. Here was a dilemma. If this strange, this unknown girl, were not to marry Lavirotte but the other man, there seemed on the face of it to be no reason why he might not still marry Dora. It was quite certain his grand-daughter had no hint that Lavirotte's affections had strayed from her. This liking for Miss Creagh might have been only the errant fancy of an hour-of a day-of a week. It might turn out that the landlord had exaggerated the position of Miss Creagh in the matter, and that the encounter had been the result of heated blood, arising from some other cause. If things had only run on smoothly, without this wretched interruption of the fight, how satisfactory all would be. Here was Lavirotte, the owner of the tower, and he, the seeker for the treasure, already bound together in a kind of business contract. And here, then, as a second bond of union between the two, had come Dora. His grand-daughter was to be the other's wife if things had not been disturbed. If Lavirotte and he had shared the treasure equally between them, and then these two young people were married, the whole of the enormous fortune hidden under St. Prisca's Tower would, when he died, be theirs. It would be a thousand pities that such a match should be broken off. The most ordinary prudence pointed at the absurdity of such a step. It would be his duty to his grand-daughter, Lavirotte, and himself, to take care that no such misfortune might befall. The agreement which existed between him and Lavirotte had never been reduced to writing. Neither of them had desired that it should. He knew that such an agreement would not be binding in law. If the finding and retaining of all the treasure was contrary to the law, no instrument embodying the disposal of all the property between him and Lavirotte would hold for one moment. It would be a cruel shame if, after all his years of inquiry and anxiety, when he was working on the mere traditional rumour that a great hoard was concealed somewhere in the city, the labour of that time and the labour of his later years in the tower should all go for nothing, or next to nothing. Lavirotte had been sceptical as to the existence of the treasure; had given him to understand he would not sink a penny in the speculation. If any difficulty arose between him and the owner of the tower now, that door might remain shut for a hundred years, until they were all dead, until the clue to the secret had been destroyed for ever. By some means or other this catastrophe must be avoided. It was too hideous even to think of. He must prevent it at any cost. How was he to prevent it? It was plainly his first business to see Lavirotte and ascertain all he could from him. No doubt the Frenchman would be more communicative to him than to others in whom he had no interest whatever. Of course Lavirotte would not recognise in him the grandfather of Dora, but they had been acquainted some time and were partners in his secret, in his great undertaking. No doubt by this time the girl was becoming impatient for news of some kind. He would go to her first and reassure her, and then seek an interview with Lavirotte. When he entered the room where Dora was, she came to him eagerly and caught his hand and said: "Have you seen him-is he better? What did he say?" "I have not seen Dominique yet," said the old man, using the other's Christian name for the first time. "Oh, you are good to call him Dominique. You have something to tell me." "I have nothing very new to tell you. It is quite true he is progressing most favourably, and there is no cause for alarm. This place is full of strangers, and the landlord thinks you will be most comfortable if you remain in this room a little longer until I see Dominique." "You will not be long. I am so impatient to know all-to see him if I may." "I will make all the haste I can," and with these words the old man left the room. When Lionel Crawford entered the injured man's room the latter was prepared to see him, as

word had been sent up before that Crawford was coming. "It was exceedingly kind of you to come, Mr. Crawford," said the wounded man; "but, in the name of all that is mysterious, how did you find out I was hurt, or are you here merely by some extraordinary coincidence?" "Let us not waste time now," said the old man, "with idle matters. I am in a hurry. By a mere accident, which I will explain to you later, I found out you were ill. I lost no time in coming, as, for several reasons, I was anxious to see you." "I suppose," said Lavirotte, "you heard something of what has occurred since you came to this place?" "I will be candid with you," said Crawford, "and tell you all I heard." When he had finished, he said: "Is it true in substance?" The prostrate man admitted it was true in substance, and went on to explain: "I will tell you a little more about it than you seem to have heard, and what I am going to tell you will lessen me a good deal in your regard, for it will show you that the wind is constant compared to me. It is true I was engaged to someone in London. It is true that while I was engaged I fell in love with Miss Creagh. She would not have me. She accepted my dearest friend, Eugene O'Donnell, and in a moment of absolute madness I tried to take his life. He has forgiven me. We are friends again, and now I have only one great fear. It is that what has occurred may come to the ears of the girl I am engaged to in London, and so prejudice me in her opinion. For, you see, when I proposed to her she had a fortune of five thousand pounds, and now she has lost all that fortune in the terrible crash of Vernon and Son. If she heard of all this, it might make her think—in fact, it would look like it—that I made love to her when she had a fortune, and gave her up as soon as I found it swept away." "So that," said the other anxiously, "if you were up and about once more, and were free to travel, you would go to London, and, if you were in a position to do so, marry Miss Harrington." "That," said Lavirotte eagerly, "is the only thing I could do which would atone to her in any way for my vile fickleness. It would, at the same time, prove to my dear friend, O'Donnell, that I had not only abandoned all my pretensions to Miss Creagh, but that by marrying and going to London I had put a final barrier between myself and her, and gone into voluntary exile as a punishment for my crime. But, you see, as to marrying at present, that is completely out of the question. I was too poor before this affair, and now the whole town will turn against me, and I shall be obliged to leave the place. There will be no getting a crust for me here now." "But," said the old man, enthusiastically, "we must be very near our great fortune now. I work day and night, night and day. By day in the pit, by night on the top of the tower. I cannot be far off now. Another six months and I surely must reach the chests in which the great treasure is hidden." His voice had fallen to a whisper, and the intense excitement with which he contemplated his final triumph had caused the sweat to break out upon his forehead. He grasped the counterpane convulsively. He could scarcely breathe. This was the first time for years he had spoken of the matter. It was the second time in all his life. "You shall be rich," he said. "And I shall be rich. I have tried over and over again to estimate what may be the value of that hoard, and the more I think of it the greater, I am persuaded, it must be. At first I thought two hundred thousand pounds might be the outside limit. But the more I read the more it grew, until at last I have come to the conclusion that it must be somewhere between a million and a million and a half." The excitement of the old man was intense. His eyes were fixed, his attitude and manner that of one fascinated by some glorious vision. The splendour of the image he had conjured up drew him wholly away from the present time and his surroundings. He had forgotten Lavirotte, his own long journey, Dora, everything but the one colossal figure of wealth triumphant gleaming before his mental vision. The wounded man shook his head sadly and slowly on his pillow. "If I am to wait, Mr. Crawford," said he, dreamily, "until we reach the goal at which you aim, I greatly fear I must starve. This illness will exhaust all the money I have. Popular opinion will drive me from this town. I see nothing before me but ruin." The words seemed to recall the old man to the immediate circumstances of his position, but he did not clearly recover all he had said to Lavirotte before. "All my money is not yet gone. Does no means suggest itself to you of putting a little capital to some advantage? I don't think you can hope for much from your present occupation. Without any danger to our great project I could, I think, find a few hundred pounds if they would be of any permanent use to you." "A little

while ago," said Lavirotte, in a melancholy tone, "I thought if I could get a few hundred pounds I should be able to put it to very profitable use. I have a voice, if this accident has not taken it away, and all my friends said that if I could devote a couple of years exclusively to its cultivation, I might succeed as a singer." "You are not yet too old," said the other, with interest. "Take the money and try the experiment." "But I can have no excuse for taking from you money which I may never be able to repay." "You want no excuse," said Lionel Crawford, catching the injured man's hand. "Why should I not help the future husband of my grandchild?" "Your grandchild!" cried Lavirotte, in astonishment. "Who is she?" "Dora Harrington."

CHAPTER XXIV

This announcement of Lionel Crawford had an electrical effect upon Dominique Lavirotte. Notwithstanding Dr. O'Malley's strict orders to the contrary, the Frenchman sat bolt upright in the bed, looking ghastly in his bandages, and stared at the old man. "*You, Dora's grandfather!*" he cried. His eyes starting in their sockets, and bloodless lips remaining open when he had spoken. "*You, Dora's grandfather! You are telling me a hideous lie. For what purpose are you telling me this hideous lie?*" "Hush!" cried the old man, alarmed lest Lavirotte in his excitement should make allusion in similarly loud tones to his great secret. "You must not excite yourself. Someone may hear you, and then how should we be?" Lavirotte stared still, but uttered no word. The power of speech was taken from him by the nature of the statement made by the other man. Had this dark-visaged ogre come here to worm the history of his perfidy to Dora from him, in order to be avenged on him out of a confession from his own mouth? Was this man about to add to his mental tortures a storm of intolerable abuse, or, taking advantage of his helpless state, finish the work which the night of that encounter had left undone? "You seem to misunderstand my intention altogether. I assure you all I have said and have to say is for your good, for our good, for the good of our great object." Like all other men who have ever been possessed by the idea of discovering hidden treasure, all pursuits and considerations seemed of comparatively little moment compared with the thought which possessed him. Like all other such men, he dreaded more than anything else the chance that his secret might become known to anyone not absolutely essential to success. Lavirotte fell back, relieved and exhausted. There was no mistaking the wild earnestness of this strange-eyed enthusiast. "Go on," he said faintly. "There can be nothing simpler or, I think, better, than I suggest," continued Lionel Crawford. "I cannot say, I do not know, how long yet it may take me to get down to where the plate and jewels lie buried. It may be a year, it may be more or less, six months at least, and not farther off than a year-and-a-half. You are, unfortunately, sceptical of the existence of any such treasure. I am as sure it is there as though I myself had buried it." "Why not then use the money you speak of in employing men to dig for it under your superintendence?" asked Lavirotte, peevishly. "Do not talk so loud." Lavirotte had, because of his weakness, spoken almost in a whisper. "Do not talk such nonsense. Employ men to dig, and have the whole thing town-talk in twenty-four hours! Let a lot of mere day labourers within the magic spell, within touch of the thing I have brooded over and kept secretly apart from all the rest of the world for years and years! What profanation! I would rather forego all hope of ever enjoying final triumph than let the shrine of my dreams be defiled by unsympathetic hands!" The old man was once again back in dreamland, and unconscious that the present had any real existence, save that it was the roadway to the future. "But if there is any likelihood of long delay in-in finding this treasure" (Lavirotte believed his visitor would come on the chests of precious articles belonging to the great Lord Tuscar on the same day that someone else found the philosopher's stone), "you will want all the money you have, and cannot afford to give it to me for the purpose of spending it on a speculation which may be as likely to succeed as-, " he was about to say "your own," but substituted, "the search for the North Pole. It seems to me that there is no earthly use in my even thinking of such a thing. I am beaten by fate, and the best thing I can do is to give in." This speech instantly recalled the old man to the subject in hand and the immediate surroundings of the case. Apart from his ruling passion-the hidden gold and stones-he was simple, almost childlike. But anything which touched his darling project roused up in him a fiery spirit of intelligence no one under ordinary circumstances could anticipate. "No, no!" cried he. "You must not even think of giving in. You must make up your mind to succeed. You must succeed, not only for your own sake, but for the sake of Dora as well." A faint smile came over Lavirotte's face. "Tell me more. Tell me more. You give me hope. You make me aspire." The peevishness was fading out of Lavirotte's manner and face. "It may be possible for me to redeem my character and my credit yet." "Of course it is quite possible, quite easy for you to do so. There is

not the least difficulty about the matter. Is it a bargain?" After a little more talk it was arranged that Lavirotte should take the money as an advance on his share of the great Tuscar hoard. "And now," said Lavirotte, "dear Mr. Crawford, don't you think that in this matter of making love to one girl while I was engaged to another, I deserved the very severest instead of the most merciful treatment at your hands?" "Well," said the old man, "that's all past and gone now, and we all grow wiser as we grow older. It will, I suppose, be some days before you are up and about again. The landlord of this place has been very wise, and by his aid I have been able to keep all knowledge of the circumstances of your case from Dora. There is no need why she should hear anything about it now, and as you are on the way to recovery, and we need not be anxious about your health, I fancy the best thing we can do is to get her away as quickly as possible from this. What do you think?" "I don't know," said Lavirotte, gloomily. "You see, if she does not hear the truth now it will be like practising another deceit upon her. I shall have to act a part, and not a very creditable one." Crawford became uneasy. He knew too little of Dora to be able to judge how she would receive the whole story, and it seemed now to him a matter of the first importance that he should lose no possible hold of Lavirotte. "You see," said he, "she will be shocked to learn that you have been hurt in an encounter, and are not ill in a natural way as she supposes. Then you will have to explain almost everything, and it might be better that portion of the explanation should be postponed." Lavirotte moved restlessly. "It is very difficult," he said. "I own it is very difficult. One hardly can know what to do. I want to spare her, of course, if I can; and I want to put myself right with her if I can." "Then," said the old man, with a sudden gleam of intelligence in his eyes, "let mercy for her prevail. You see you have been in fault. Suffer your own explanation to lie over for the present in order to spare her feelings. Later on you can put yourself right with her." Lavirotte sighed, and then asked, languidly: "What do you propose?" "That I should take her back with me to London at once, telling her that you are not allowed to see her in your present state of health; but that immediately on your recovery you will follow us to London, and that, in the meantime, I will take care of her." "Perhaps, after all," said the injured man, "that is the best plan." Now that the prospect of an immediate meeting between him and Dora grew dim, he lost interest in the conversation, and the excitement of anticipation being withdrawn, the weakness of his condition asserted itself. After some more talk, it was finally agreed between the two men that Lionel Crawford's suggestion should be carried out. Then it became the duty of the latter to inform Dora of this decision. He found the girl in a state of the greatest excitement and anxiety. "Oh!" she cried, "I thought you would never come. May I not see him now?" The old man took her by the hands and led her back to the seat she had risen from on his entrance. "My dear child," he said, "there is not the least cause for your anxiety about Dominique's health. He is progressing most favourably. But it would be exceedingly unwise that he should see you now." "But you said I might see him. You promised I might see him!" "Since I told you so I have been with him and learned more of his case. Although he is most anxious to see you, he is persuaded that doing so would be injurious now. He will be all right in a few days. We have talked the whole matter over. I intend assisting him to a much better position than he now holds. I am authorised by him to make all preparations for your marriage." The young girl coloured, partly by surprise and partly by bashfulness. Lionel Crawford saw that these words had made an impression favourable to his views. "If we want to get him well and make him happy soon," he continued, "he and I agree that the best thing to be done is that you and I should instantly set out for London." "But it is very hard to have to go without seeing him," said the girl, confused by the new and unexpected turn affairs had taken, and elated by the assurance that the difficulties of her lover's worldly position were at an end, and that when next they met it would be to part no more. The old man saw that he had carried his point. He rose briskly, and said: "The sooner we are off the better. There is no use in our staying here an hour. Being so near him when you may not see him would only add to your uncomfortableness. I will go and see at once how and when we are to get back. Wait for me here." As he reached the bar, he found two young men there. One was in the employment of the railway at Rathclare, the other in the post-office of that town. Their backs were towards him, and

they did not hear him entering the room. "Maher told me," said the Railway, "that an old man and a young girl have come to see Lavirotte. That's the girl, no doubt, he made love to in London. Maher wouldn't tell me their names; but I'll find out all about them when I get to London." "You may not find it so easy, my young man," thought Lionel Crawford. "I have kept a secret for years."

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.