

Le Queux William

Hushed Up! A Mystery of London



William Le Queux

Hushed Up! A Mystery of London

«Public Domain»

Le Queux W.

Hushed Up! A Mystery of London / W. Le Queux — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

PROLOGUE	5
I	5
II	9
THE STORY OF OWEN BIDDULPH	16
CHAPTER ONE	16
CHAPTER TWO	20
CHAPTER THREE	25
CHAPTER FOUR	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	33

Le Queux William

Hushed Up! A Mystery of London

PROLOGUE

I IS MAINLY SCANDALOUS

“And he died mysteriously?”

“The doctors certified that he died from natural causes – heart failure.”

“That is what the world believes, of course. His death was a nation’s loss, and the truth was hushed up. But you, Phil Poland, know it. Upon the floor was found something – a cigar – eh?”

“Nothing very extraordinary in that, surely? He died while smoking.”

“Yes,” said the bald-headed man, bending towards the other and lowering his voice into a harsh whisper. “He died while smoking a cigar – a cigar that had been poisoned! You know it well enough. What’s the use of trying to affect ignorance —*with me!*”

“Well?” asked Philip Poland after a brief pause, his brows knit darkly and his face drawn and pale.

“Well, I merely wish to recall that somewhat unpleasant fact, and to tell you that I know the truth,” said the other with slow deliberation, his eyes fixed upon the man seated opposite him.

“Why recall unpleasant facts?” asked Poland, with a faint attempt to smile. “I never do.”

“A brief memory is always an advantage,” remarked Arnold Du Cane, with a sinister grin.

“Ah! I quite follow you,” Poland said, with a hardness of the mouth. “But I tell you, Arnold, I refuse to lend any hand in this crooked bit of business you’ve just put before me. Let’s talk of something else.”

“Crooked business, indeed! Fancy you, Phil Poland, denouncing it as crooked!” he laughed. “And I’m a crook, I suppose,” and he thoughtfully caressed his small moustache, which bore traces of having been artificially darkened.

“I didn’t say so.”

“But you implied it. Bah! You’ll be teaching the Sunday School of this delightful English village of yours before long, I expect. No doubt the villagers believe the gentleman at the Elms to be a model of every virtue, especially when he wears a frock-coat and trots around with the plate in church on Sundays!” he sneered. “My hat! Fancy you, Phil, turning honest in your old age!”

“I admit that I’m trying to be honest, Arnold – for the girl’s sake.”

“And, by Jove! if the good people here, in Middleton, knew the truth, eh – the truth that you – ”

“Hush! Somebody may overhear!” cried the other, starting and glancing apprehensively at the closed door of his cosy study. “What’s the use of discussing the business further? I’ve told you, once and for all, Arnold, that I refuse to be a party to any such dastardly transaction.”

“Ho! ho!” laughed Du Cane. “Why, wasn’t the Burke affair an equally blackguardly bit of business – the more so, indeed, when one recollects that young Ronald Burke had fallen in love with Sonia.”

“Leave my girl’s name out of our conversation, Arnold, or, by Gad! you shall pay for it!” cried the tall, dark-haired, clean-shaven man, as he sprang from his chair and faced his visitor threateningly. “Taunt me as much as ever it pleases you. Allege what you like against me. I know I’m an infernal blackguard, posing here as a smug and respectable churchgoer. I admit any charge you like to lay at

my door, but I'll not have my girl's name associated with my misdeeds. Understand that! She's pure and honest, and she knows nothing of her father's life."

"Don't you believe that, my dear fellow. She's eighteen now, remember, and I fancy she had her eyes opened last February down at the Villa Vespa, when that unfortunate little trouble arose."

Arnold Du Cane, the round-faced man who spoke, was rather short and stout, with ruddy cheeks, a small moustache and a prematurely bald head – a man whose countenance showed him to be a *bon vivant*, but whose quick, shifty eyes would have betrayed to a close observer a readiness of subterfuge which would have probably aroused suspicion. His exterior was that of a highly refined and polished man. His grey tweed suit bore evidence of having been cut by a smart tailor, and as he lolled back in his big saddle-bag chair he contemplated the fine diamond upon his white, well-manicured hand, and seemed entirely at his ease.

That August afternoon was stiflingly hot, and through the open French windows leading into the old-world garden, so typically English with its level lawns, neatly trimmed box-hedges and blazing flowerbeds, came the drowsy hum of the insects and the sweet scent of a wealth of roses everywhere.

The pretty house in which his host, Philip Poland, alias Louis Lessar, lived, stood back a little distance from the London road, two miles or so out of the quiet market-town of Andover, a small picturesque old place surrounded by high old elms wherein the rooks cawed incessantly, and commanding extensive views over Harewood Forest and the undulating meadow-lands around, while close by, at the foot of the hill, nestled a cluster of homely thatched cottages, with a square church-tower, the obscure village of Middleton.

In that rural retreat lived the Honourable Philip Poland beneath a cloak of highest respectability. The Elms was, indeed, delightful after the glare and glitter of that fevered life he so often led, and here, with his only child, Sonia, to whom he was so entirely devoted, he lived as a gentleman of leisure.

Seldom he went to London, and hardly ever called upon his neighbours. With Sonia he led a most retired existence, reading much, fishing a little, and taking long walks or cycling with his daughter and her fox-terrier, "Spot," over all the country-side.

To the village he had been somewhat of a mystery ever since he had taken the house, three years before. Yet, being apparently comfortably off, subscribing to every charity, and a regular attendant at Middleton church, the simple country-folk had grown to tolerate him, even though he was somewhat of a recluse. Country-folk are very slow to accept the stranger at his own valuation.

Little did they dream that when he went away each winter he went with a mysterious purpose – that the source of his income was a mystery.

As he stood there, leaning against the roll-top writing-table of his prettily furnished little study and facing the man who had travelled half across Europe to see him, Phil Poland, with clean-shaven face and closely-cropped hair tinged with grey, presented the smart and dapper appearance of a typical British naval officer, as, indeed, he had been, for, prior to his downfall, he had been first lieutenant on board one of his Majesty's first-class cruisers. His had been a strangely adventurous career, his past being one that would not bear investigation.

In the smart, go-ahead set wherein he had moved when he was still in the Navy opinion regarding him had been divided. There were some who refused to believe the truth of the scandals circulated concerning him, while others believed and quickly embellished the reports which ran through the service clubs and ward-rooms.

Once he had been one of the most popular officers afloat, yet to-day – well, he found it convenient to thus efface himself in rural Hampshire, and live alone with the sweet young girl who was all in all to him, and who was happy in her belief that her devoted father was a gentleman.

This girl with the blue eyes and hair of sunshine was the only link between Phil Poland and his past – that past when he held a brilliant record as a sailor and had been honoured and respected. He held her aloof from every one, being ever in deadly fear lest, by some chance word, she should learn

the bitter truth – the truth concerning that despicable part which he had been compelled to play. Ah, yes, his was a bitter story indeed.

Before Sonia should know the truth he would take his own life. She was the only person remaining dear to him, the only one for whom he had a single thought or care, the only person left to him to respect and to love. Her influence upon him was always for good. For the past year he had been striving to cut himself adrift from evil, to reform, to hold back from participating in any dishonest action – for her dear sake. Her soft-spoken words so often caused him to hate himself and to bite his lip in regret, for surely she was as entirely ignorant of the hideous truth as Mr. Shuttleworth, the white-headed parson, or the rustic villagers themselves.

Yes, Phil Poland's position was indeed a strange one.

What Du Cane had just suggested to him would, he saw, put at least twenty thousand pounds into the pockets of their ingenious combination, yet he had refused – refused because of the fair-headed girl he loved so well.

Within himself he had made a solemn vow to reform. Reformation would probably mean a six-roomed cottage with a maid-of-all-work, yet even that would be preferable to a continuance of the present mode of life.

Bitter memories had, of late, constantly arisen within him. Certain scenes of violence, even of tragedy, in that beautiful flower-embowered villa beside the Mediterranean at Beaulieu, half-way between Nice and Monte Carlo, had recurred vividly to him. He was unable to wipe those horrible visions from the tablets of his memory. He had realized, at last, what a pitiless blackguard he had been, so he had resolved to end it all.

And now, just as he had made up his mind, Arnold Du Cane had arrived unexpectedly from Milan with an entirely new and original scheme – one in which the risk of detection was infinitesimal, while the stakes were high enough to merit serious consideration.

He had refused to be a party to the transaction, whereupon Du Cane had revived a subject which he had fondly believed to be buried for ever – that terrible affair which had startled and mystified the whole world, and which had had such an important political bearing that, by it, the destinies of a great nation had actually been changed.

A certain man – a great man – had died, but until that hour Phil Poland's connection with the tragedy had never been suspected.

Yet, from what Arnold Du Cane had just said, he saw that the truth was actually known, and he realized that his own position was now one of distinct insecurity.

He was silent, full of wonder. How could Arnold have gained his knowledge? What did he know? How much did he know? The strength of his defiance must be gauged upon the extent of Arnold's knowledge.

He set his teeth hard. The scandal was one which must never see the light of day, he told himself. Upon the suppression of the true facts depended the honour and welfare of a nation.

Arnold Du Cane knew the truth. Of that, there could be no doubt. Did he intend to use this knowledge in order to secure his assistance in this latest dastardly scheme?

At last, after a long silence, Poland asked in as cool a voice as he could —

“What causes you to suspect that Sonia knows anything?”

“Well,” replied this crafty, round-faced visitor, “considering how that young Russian let out at you when you were walking with her that moonlight night out in the garden, I don't think there can be much doubt that she is fully aware of the mysterious source of her father's income.”

“Sonia doesn't know Russian. The fellow spoke in that language, I remember,” was his reply. “Yet I was a fool, I know, to have taken her over that accursed place – that hell in paradise. She is always perfectly happy at the Hôtel de Luxembourg at Nice, where each season she makes some pleasant friends, and never suspects the reason of my absences.”

“All of us are fools at times, Phil,” was his visitor’s response, as he selected a fresh cigar from the silver box upon the table and slowly lit it. “But,” he went on, “I do really think you are going too far in expecting that you can conceal the truth from the girl much longer. She isn’t a child, you must recollect.”

“She must never know!” cried the unhappy man in a hoarse voice. “By Gad! she must never know of my shame, Arnold.”

“Then go in with us in this new affair. It’ll pay you well.”

“No,” he cried. “I – I feel that I can’t! I couldn’t face her, if she knew. Her mother was one of the best and purest women who ever lived, and – ”

“Of course, of course. I know all that, my dear fellow,” cried the other hastily. “I know all the tragedy of your marriage – but that’s years ago. Let the past bury itself, and have an eye to the main chance and the future. Just take my advice, Phil. Drop all this humbug about your girl and her feelings if she learnt her father’s real profession. She’ll know it one day, that’s certain. You surely aren’t going to allow her to stand in your way and prevent you from participating in what is real good solid business – eh? You want money, you know.”

“I’ve given my answer,” was the man’s brief response.

Then a silence fell between the pair of well-dressed cosmopolitans – a dead, painful silence, broken only by the low hum of the insects, the buzzing of a fly upon the window-pane, and the ticking of the old grandfather clock in the corner.

“Reflect,” urged Du Cane at last, as he rose to his feet. Then, lowering his voice, he said in a hoarse whisper, “You may find yourself in a corner over that affair of young Burke. If so, it’s only I and my friends who could prove an alibi. Remember that.”

“And you offer that, in return for my assistance?” Poland said reflectively, hesitating for a moment and turning to the window.

His visitor nodded in the affirmative.

Next second the man to whom those terms had been offered quickly faced his friend. His countenance was haggard, blanched to the lips, for he had been quick to realize the full meaning of that covert threat.

“Arnold!” he said in a hoarse, strained voice, full of bitter reproach, “you may turn upon me, give me away to the police – tell them the truth – but my decision remains the same. I will lend no hand in that affair.”

“You are prepared to face arrest – eh?”

“If it is your will – yes.”

“And your daughter?”

“That is my own affair.”

“Very well, then. As you will,” was the bald-headed man’s response, as he put on his grey felt hat and, taking his stick, strode through the open French windows and disappeared.

Phil Poland stood rigid as a statue. The blow had fallen. His secret was out.

He sprang forward towards the garden, in order to recall his visitor. But next instant he drew himself back.

No. Now that the friend whom he had trusted had turned upon him, he would face the music rather than add another crime to his discredit and dishonour.

Philip Poland, alias Louis Lessar and half-a-score of other names, halted, and raised his pale, repentant face to Heaven for help and guidance.

II CONCERNS TWO STRANGERS

That night Phil Poland glanced longingly around the well-furnished dining-room with its white napery, its antique plate, and its great bowl of yellow roses in the centre of the table between the silver candelabra with white silk shades. Alone he sat at his dinner, being waited upon by Felix, the thin-faced, silent Frenchman in black who was so devoted to his master and so faithful in his service.

It was the last time he would eat his dinner there, he reflected. The choice of two things lay before him – flight, or arrest.

Sonia was on a visit to an old school-fellow in London, and would not return until the morrow. For some reasons he was glad, for he desired to be alone – alone in order to think.

Since the abrupt departure of his visitor he had become a changed man. His usually merry face was hard and drawn, his cheeks pale, with red spots in the centre, and about his clean-shaven mouth a hardness quite unusual.

Dinner concluded, he had strolled out upon the lawn, and, reclining in a long deck-chair, sipped his coffee and curaçao, his face turned to the crimson sundown showing across the dark edge of the forest. He was full of dark forebodings.

The end of his career – a scandalous career – was near. The truth was out!

As he lay back with his hot, fevered head upon the cushion of the long cane chair, his dead cigar between his nerveless fingers, a thousand bitter thoughts crowded upon him. He had striven to reform, he had tried hard to turn aside and lead an honest life, yet it seemed as though his good intentions had only brought upon him exposure and disaster.

He thought it all over. His had, indeed, been an amazing career of duplicity. What a sensation would be caused when the truth became revealed! At first he had heaped opprobrium upon the head of the man who had been his friend, but now, on mature consideration, he realized that Du Cane's motive in exposing him was twofold – in order to save himself, and also to curry favour in certain high quarters affected by the mysterious death of the young Parliamentary Under-Secretary who had placed to his lips that fatal cigar. Self-preservation being the first instinct of the human race, it surely was not surprising that Arnold Du Cane should seek to place himself in a position of security.

Enormous eventualities would be consequent upon solving the mystery of that man's death. Medical science had pronounced it to have been due to natural causes. Dare the authorities re-open the question, and allege assassination? Aye, that was the question. There was the press, political parties and public opinion all to consider, in addition to the national prestige.

He held his breath, gazing blankly away at the blood-red afterglow. How strange, how complicated, how utterly amazing and astounding was it all. If the truth of that dastardly plot were ever told, it would not be believed. The depths of human wickedness were surely unfathomable.

Because he, Phil Poland, had endeavoured to cut himself adrift from his ingenious friends, they were about to make him the scapegoat.

He contemplated flight, but, if he fled, whither should he go? Where could he hide successfully? Those who desired that he should pay the penalty would search every corner of the earth. No. Death itself would be preferable to either arrest or flight, and as he contemplated how he might cheat his enemies a bitter smile played upon his grey lips.

The crimson light slowly faded. The balmy stillness of twilight had settled upon everything, the soft evening air became filled with the sweet fragrance of the flowers, and the birds were chattering before roosting. He glanced across the lawns and well-kept walks at the rose-embowered house itself, his harbour of refuge, the cosy place which Sonia loved so well, and as his eyes wandered he sighed sadly. He knew, alas! that he must bid farewell to it for ever, bid farewell to his dear daughter – bid farewell to life itself.

He drew at his dead cigar. Then he cast it from him. It tasted bitter.

Suddenly the grave-faced Felix, the man who seldom, if ever, spoke, and who was such a mystery in the village, came across the lawn, and, bowing, exclaimed in French that the curé, M'sieur Shuttleworth, had called.

"Ah! yes," exclaimed his master, quickly arousing himself. "How very foolish of me! I quite forgot I had invited Mr. Shuttleworth to come in and smoke to-night. Ask him to come out here, and bring the cigars and whisky."

"Oui, M'sieur," replied the funereal-looking butler, bowing low as he turned to go back to the house.

"How strange!" laughed Poland to himself. "What would the parson think if he knew who I am, and the charge against me? What will he say afterwards, I wonder?"

Then, a few moments later, a thin, grey-faced, rather ascetic-looking clergyman, the Reverend Edmund Shuttleworth, rector of Middleton, came across the grass and grasped his host's hand in warmest greeting.

When he had seated himself in the low chair which Poland pulled forward, and Felix had handed the cigars, the two men commenced to gossip, as was their habit.

Phil Poland liked the rector, because he had discovered that, notwithstanding his rather prim exterior and most approved clerical drawl, he was nevertheless a man of the world. In the pulpit he preached forgiveness, and, unlike many country rectors and their wives, was broad-minded enough to admit the impossibility of a sinless life. Both he and Mrs. Shuttleworth treated both chapel and church-going folk with equal kindness, and the deserving poor never went empty away.

Both in the pulpit and out of it the rector of Middleton called a spade a spade with purely British bluntness, and though his parish was only a small one he was the most popular man in it – a fact which surely spoke volumes for a parson.

"I was much afraid I shouldn't be able to come to-night," he said presently. "Old Mrs. Dixon, over at Forest Farm, is very ill, and I've been with her all the afternoon."

"Then you didn't go to Lady Medland's garden-party?"

"No. I wanted to go very much, but was unable. I fear poor old Mrs. Dixon may not last the night. She asked after Miss Sonia, and expressed a great wish to see her. You have no idea how popular your daughter is among the poor of Middleton, Mr. Poland."

"Sonia returns from London to-morrow afternoon," her father said. "She shall go over and see Mrs. Dixon."

"If the old lady is still here," said the rector. "I fear her life is fast ebbing, but it is reassuring to know she has made peace with her Maker, and will pass happily away into the unknown beyond."

His host was silent. The bent old woman, the wife of a farm-labourer, had made repentance. If there was repentance for her, was there not repentance for him? He held his breath at the thought.

Little did Shuttleworth dream that the merry, easy-going man who sat before him was doomed – a man whose tortured soul was crying aloud for help and guidance; a man with a dread and terrible secret upon his conscience; a man threatened by an exposure which he could never live to face.

Poland allowed his visitor to chatter on – to gossip about the work in his parish. He was reviewing his present position. He desired some one in whom he could confide; some one of whom he might seek advice and counsel. Could he expose his real self in all his naked shame; dare he speak in confidence to Edmund Shuttleworth? Dare he reveal the ghastly truth, and place the seal of the confessional upon his lips?

Twilight deepened into night, and the crescent moon rose slowly. Yet the two men still sat smoking and chatting, Shuttleworth somewhat surprised to notice how unusually preoccupied his host appeared.

At last, when the night wind blew chill, they rose and passed into the study, where Poland closed the French windows, and then, with sudden resolve and a word of apology to his visitor, he crossed the room and turned the key in the lock, saying in a hard, strained tone —

“Shuttleworth, I – I want to speak to you in – in strictest confidence – to ask your advice. Yet – yet it is upon such a serious matter that I hesitate – fearing – ”

“Fearing what?” asked the rector, somewhat surprised at his tone.

“Because, in order to speak, I must reveal to you a truth – a shameful truth concerning myself. May I rely upon your secrecy?”

“Any fact you may reveal to me I shall regard as sacred. That is my duty as a minister of religion, Poland,” was the other’s quiet reply.

“You swear to say nothing?” cried his host eagerly, standing before him.

“Yes. I swear to regard your confidence,” replied his visitor.

And then the Honourable Philip Poland slowly sank into the chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, and in brief, hesitating sentences related one of the strangest stories that ever fell from any sane man’s lips – a story which held its hearer aghast, transfixed, speechless in amazement.

“There is repentance for me, Shuttleworth – tell me that there is!” cried the man who had confessed, his eyes staring and haggard in his agony. “I have told you the truth because – because when I am gone I want you, if you will, to ask your wife to take care of my darling Sonia. Financially, she is well provided for. I have seen to all that, but – ah!” he cried wildly, “she must never know that her father was – ”

“Hush, Poland!” urged the rector, placing his hand tenderly upon his host’s arm. “Though I wear these clothes, I am still a man of the world like yourself. I haven’t been sinless. You wish to repent – to atone for the past. It is my duty to assist you.” And he put out his strong hand frankly.

His host drew back. But next instant he grasped it, and in doing so burst into tears.

“I make no excuse for myself,” he faltered. “I am a blackguard, and unworthy the friendship of a true honest man like yourself, Shuttleworth. But I love my darling child. She is all that has remained to me, and I want to leave her in the care of a good woman. She must forget me – forget what her father was – ”

“Enough!” cried the other, holding up his hand; and then, until far into the night, the two men sat talking in low, solemn tones, discussing the future, while the attitude of Philip Poland, as he sat pale and motionless, his hands clasped upon his knees, was one of deep repentance.

That same night, if the repentant transgressor could but have seen Edmund Shuttleworth, an hour later, pacing the rectory study; if he could have witnessed the expression of fierce, murderous hatred upon that usually calm and kindly countenance; if he could have overheard the strangely bitter words which escaped the dry lips of the man in whom he had confided his secret, he would have been held aghast – aghast at the amazing truth, a truth of which he had never dreamed.

His confession had produced a complication unheard of, undreamed of, so cleverly had the rector kept his countenance and controlled his voice. But when alone he gave full vent to his anger, and laughed aloud in the contemplation of a terrible vengeance which, he declared aloud to himself, should be his.

“That voice!” he cried in triumph. “Why did I not recognize it before? But I know the truth now – I know the amazing truth!”

And he laughed harshly to himself as he paced his room.

Next day Philip Poland spent in his garden, reading beneath the big yew, as was his wont. But his thoughts ever wandered from his book, as he grew apprehensive of the evil his enemy was about to hurl upon him. His defiance, he knew, must cost him his liberty – his life. Yet he was determined. For Sonia’s sake he had become a changed man.

At noon Shuttleworth, calm and pleasant, came across the lawn with outstretched hand. He uttered low words of encouragement and comfort. He said that poor Mrs. Dixon had passed away,

and later on he left to attend to his work in the parish. After luncheon, served by the silent Felix, Poland retired to his study with the newspaper, and sat for two hours, staring straight before him, until, just after four o'clock, the door was suddenly flung open, and a slim, athletic young girl, with a wealth of soft fair hair, a perfect countenance, a sweet, lovable expression, and a pair of merry blue eyes, burst into the room, crying —

“Hallo, dad! Here I am – so glad to be back again with you!” And, bending over him, she gave him a sounding kiss upon the cheek.

She was verily a picture of youthful beauty, in her cool, pale grey gown, her hair dressed low, and secured by a bow of black velvet, while her big black hat suited her to perfection, her blue eyes adoring in their gaze and her lovely face flushed with pleasure at her home-coming.

Her father took her hand, and, gazing lovingly into her eyes, said in a slow voice —

“And I, too, darling, am glad to have you at home. Life here is very dull indeed without you.”

That night, when seated together in the pretty old-fashioned drawing-room before retiring to bed – a room of bright chintzes, costly knick-knacks, and big blue bowls of sweet-smelling pot-pourri – Sonia looked delightful in her black net dinner-gown, cut slightly *décolleté*, and wearing around her slim white throat a simple necklace of pale pink coral.

“My dear,” exclaimed her father in a slow, hesitating way, after her fingers had been running idly over the keys of the piano, “I want to speak very seriously to you for a few moments.”

She rose in surprise, and came beside his chair. He grasped her soft hand, and she sank upon her knees, as she so often did when they spoke in confidence.

“Well – I’ve been wondering, child, what – what you will do in future,” he said, with a catch in his voice. “Perhaps – perhaps I may have to go away for a very, very long time – years perhaps – on a long journey, and I shall, I fear, be compelled to leave you, to – ”

“To leave me, dad!” gasped the girl, dismayed. “No – surely – you won’t do that? What could I do without you – without my dear, devoted dad – my only friend!”

“You will have to – to do without me, dearest – to – to forget your father,” said the white-faced man in a low, broken voice. “I couldn’t take you with me. It would be impossible.”

The girl was silent; her slim hand was clutching his convulsively; her eyes filled with the light of unshed tears.

“But what should I do, dad, without you?” she cried. “Why do you speak so strangely? Why do you hide so many things from me still – about our past? I’m eighteen now, remember, dad, and you really ought to speak to me as a woman – not as a child. Why all this mystery?”

“Because – because it is imperative, Sonia,” he replied in a tone quite unusual. “I – I would tell you all, only – only you would think ill of me. So I prefer that you, my daughter, should remain in ignorance, and still love me – still – ”

His words were interrupted by Felix, who opened the door, and, advancing with silent tread, said —

“A gentleman wishes to speak with m’sieur on very urgent business. You are unacquainted with him, he says. His name is Max Morel, and he must see you at once. He is in the hall.”

Poland’s face went a trifle paler. Whom could the stranger be? Why did he desire an interview at that hour? – for it was already eleven o’clock.

“Sonia dear,” he said quietly, turning to his daughter, “will you leave me for a few moments? I must see what this gentleman wants.”

The girl followed Felix out somewhat reluctantly, when, a few seconds later, a short, middle-aged Frenchman, with pointed grey beard and wearing gold pince-nez, was ushered in.

Philip Poland started and instantly went pale at sight of his visitor.

“I need no introduction, m’sieur. You recognize me, I see,” remarked the stranger, in French.

“Yes,” was the other’s reply. “You are Henri Guertin, chief inspector of the sûreté of Paris. We have met before – once.”

“And you are no doubt aware of the reason of my visit?”

“I can guess,” replied the unhappy man. “You are here to arrest me – I know. I – ”

The renowned detective – one of the greatest criminal investigators in Europe – glanced quickly at the closed door, and, dropping his voice, said —

“I am here, not to arrest you, M’sieur Poland – but to afford you an opportunity of escape.”

“Of escape!” gasped the other, his drawn countenance blanched to the lips.

“Yes, escape. Listen. My instructions are to afford you an easy opportunity of – well, of escaping the ignominy of arrest, exposure, trial, and penalty, by a very simple means – death by your own hand.”

“Suicide!” echoed Poland, after a painful pause. “Ah! I quite understand! The Government are not anxious that the scandal should be made public, eh?” he cried bitterly.

“I have merely told you my instructions,” was the detective’s response, as, with a quick, foreign gesture, he displayed on his left hand a curious old engraved amethyst set in a ring – probably an episcopal ring of ages long ago. “At midnight I have an appointment at the cross-roads, half-a-mile away, with Inspector Watts of Scotland Yard, who holds a warrant for your arrest and extradition to France. If you are still alive when we call, then you must stand your trial – that is all. Trial will mean exposure, and – ”

“And my exposure will mean the downfall and ruin of those political thieves now in power – eh?” cried Poland. “They are not at all anxious that I should fall into the hands of the police.”

“And you are equally anxious that the world – and more especially your daughter – shall not know the truth,” remarked the detective, speaking in a meaning tone. “I have given you the alternative, and I shall now leave. At midnight I shall return – officially – when I hope you will have escaped by the loophole so generously allowed you by the authorities.”

“If I fled, would you follow?”

“Most certainly. It would be my duty. You cannot escape – only by death. I regret, m’sieur, that I have been compelled to put the alternative so bluntly, but you know full well the great issues at stake in this affair. Therefore I need say nothing further, except to bid you *au revoir*– till midnight.”

Then the portly man bowed – bowed as politely as though he were in the presence of a crowned head – and, turning upon his heel, left the room, followed by his host, who personally opened the door for him as he bade him good-night.

One hour’s grace had been given Philip Poland. After that, the blackness of death.

His blanched features were rigid as he stood staring straight before him. His enemy had betrayed him. His defiance had, alas! cost him his life.

He recollected Shuttleworth’s slowly uttered words on the night before, and his finger-nails clenched themselves into his palms. Then he passed across the square, old-fashioned hall to the study, dim-lit, save for the zone of light around the green-shaded reading-lamp; the sombre room where the old grandfather clock ticked so solemnly in the corner.

Sonia had returned to the drawing-room as he let his visitor out. He could hear her playing, and singing in her sweet contralto a tuneful French love-song, ignorant of the hideous crisis that had fallen, ignorant of the awful disaster which had overwhelmed him.

Three-quarters of an hour had passed when, stealthily on tiptoe, the girl crept into the room, and there found her father seated by the fireplace, staring in blank silence.

The long old brass-faced clock in the shadow struck three times upon its strident bell. Only fifteen minutes more, and then the police would enter and charge him with that foul crime. Then the solution of a remarkable mystery which had puzzled the whole world would be complete.

He started, and, glancing around, realized that Sonia, with her soft hand in his, was again at his side.

“Why, dad,” cried the girl in alarm, “how pale you are! Whatever ails you? What can I get you?”

“Nothing, child, nothing,” was the desperate man’s hoarse response. “I’m – I’m quite well – only a little upset at some bad news I’ve had, that’s all. But come. Let me kiss you, dear. It’s time you were in bed.”

And he drew her down until he could print a last fond caress upon her white open brow.

“But, dad,” exclaimed the girl anxiously, “I really can’t leave you. You’re not well. You’re not yourself to-night.”

As she uttered those words, Felix entered the room, saying in an agitated voice —

“May I speak with you alone, m’sieur?”

His master started violently, and, rising, went forth into the hall, where the butler, his face scared and white, whispered —

“Something terrible has occurred, m’sieur! Davis, the groom, has just found a gentleman lying dead in the drive outside. He’s been murdered, m’sieur!”

“Murdered!” gasped Poland breathlessly. “Who is he?”

“The gentleman who called upon you three-quarters of an hour ago. He’s lying dead – out yonder.”

“Where’s a lantern? Let me go and see!” cried Poland. And a few moments later master and man were standing with the groom beside the lifeless body of Henri Guertin, the great detective, the terror of all French criminals. The white countenance, with its open, staring eyes, bore a horrified expression, but the only wound that could be distinguished was a deep cut across the palm of the right hand, a clean cut, evidently inflicted by a keen-edged knife.

Davis, on his way in, had, he explained, stumbled across the body in the darkness, ten minutes before.

Philip Poland had knelt, his hand upon the dead man’s heart, when suddenly all three were startled by the sound of footsteps upon the gravel, and next moment two men loomed up into the uncertain light of the lantern.

One was tall and middle-aged, in dark tweeds and a brown hat of soft felt; the other, short and stout, wearing gold pince-nez.

A loud cry of dismay broke from Poland’s fevered lips as his eyes fell upon the latter.

“Hallo! What’s this?” cried a sharp, imperious voice in French, the voice of the man in pince-nez, as, next moment, he stood gazing down upon the dead unknown, who, strangely enough, resembled him in countenance, in dress – indeed, in every particular.

The startled men halted for a moment, speechless. The situation was staggering.

Henri Guertin stood there alive, and as he bent over the prostrate body an astounding truth became instantly revealed: the dead man had been cleverly made-up to resemble the world-renowned police official.

The reason of this was an entire mystery, although one fact became plain: he had, through posing as Guertin, been foully and swiftly assassinated.

Who was he? Was he really the man who came there to suggest suicide in preference to arrest, or had that strange suggestion been conveyed by Guertin himself?

The point was next moment decided.

“You see, m’sieur,” exclaimed Poland defiantly, turning to the great detective, “I have preferred to take my trial – to allow the public the satisfaction of a solution of the problem, rather than accept the generous terms you offered me an hour ago.”

“Terms I offered you!” cried the Frenchman. “What are you saying? I was not here an hour ago. If you have had a visitor, it must have been this impostor – this man who has lost his life because he has impersonated me!”

Philip Poland, without replying, snatched at the detective’s left hand and examined it. There was no ring upon it.

Swiftly he bent beside the victim, and there, sure enough, upon the dead white finger was revealed the curious ring he had noticed – an oval amethyst engraved with a coat-of-arms surmounted by a cardinal's hat – the ring worn by the man who had called upon him an hour before!

THE STORY OF OWEN BIDDULPH

CHAPTER ONE BESIDE STILL WATERS

If I make too frequent use of the first person singular in these pages, I crave forgiveness of the reader.

I have written down this strange story for two reasons: first, because I venture to believe it to be one of the most remarkable sequences of curious events that have ever occurred in a man's life; and secondly, by so doing, I am able to prove conclusively before the world the innocence of one sadly misjudged, and also to set at rest certain scandalous tales which have arisen in consequence.

At risk of betraying certain confidences; at risk of placing myself in the unenviable position of chronicler of my own misfortunes; at risk even of defying those who have threatened my life should I dare speak the truth, I have resolved to recount the whole amazing affair, just as it occurred to me, and further, to reveal completely what has hitherto been regarded as a mystery by readers of the daily newspapers.

You already know my name – Owen Biddulph. As introduction, I suppose I ought to add that, after coming down from Oxford, I pretended to read for the Bar, just to please the dear old governor – Sir Alfred Biddulph, Knight. At the age of twenty-five, owing to his unfortunate death in the hunting-field, I found myself possessor of Carrington Court, our fine Elizabethan place in North Devon, and town-house, 64a Wilton Street, Belgrave Square, together with a comfortable income of about nine thousand a year, mostly derived from sound industrial enterprises.

My father, before his retirement, had been a Liverpool ship-owner, and, like many others of his class, had received his knighthood on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Jubilee. My mother had been dead long since. I had but few relatives, and those mostly poor ones; therefore, on succeeding to the property, I went down to Carrington just to interview Browning, the butler, and the other servants, all of them old and faithful retainers; and then, having given up all thought of a legal career, I went abroad, in order to attain my long-desired ambition to travel, and to "see the world."

Continental life attracted me, just as it attracts most young men. Paris, with its glare and glitter, its superficial gaiety, its bright boulevards, and its feminine beauty, is the candle to the moth of youth. I revelled in Paris just as many a thousand other young men had done before me. I knew French, Italian and German, and I was vain enough to believe that I might have within me the making of a cosmopolitan. So many young men believe that – and, alas! so many fail on account of either indolence, or of narrow-mindedness. To be a thorough-going cosmopolitan one must be imbued with the true spirit of adventure, and must be a citizen of all cities, a countryman of all countries. This I tried to be, and perhaps – in a manner – succeeded. At any rate, I spent nearly three whole years travelling hither and thither across the face of Europe, from Trondhjem to Constantinople, and from Bordeaux to Petersburg.

Truly, if one has money, one can lead a very pleasant life, year in, year out, at the various European health and pleasure resorts, without even setting foot in our dear old England. I was young – and enthusiastic. I spent the glorious golden autumn in Florence and in Perugia, the Tuscan vintage in old Siena; December in Sicily; January in Corsica; February and March at Nice, taking part in the Carnival and Battles of Flowers; April in Venice; May at the Villa d'Este on the Lake of Como; June and July at Aix; August, the month of the Lion, among the chestnut-woods high up at Vallombrosa, and September at San Sebastian in Spain, that pretty town of sea-bathing and of gambling. Next year I spent the winter in Russia, the guest of a prince who lived near Moscow; the early spring at the

Hermitage at Monte Carlo; May at the Meurice in Paris; the summer in various parts of Switzerland, and most of the autumn in the high Tatra, the foot-hills of the Carpathians.

And so, with my faithful Italian valet, Lorenzo, a dark-haired, smart man of thirty, who had been six years in my service, and who had, on so many occasions, proved himself entirely trustworthy, I passed away the seasons as they came and went, always living in the best hotels, and making a good many passing acquaintances. Life was, indeed, a perfect phantasmagoria.

Now there is a certain section of English society who, being for some reason or another beyond the pale at home, make their happy hunting-ground in the foreign hotel. Men and women, consumptive sons and scraggy daughters, they generally live in the cheapest rooms *en pension*, and are ever ready to scrape up acquaintance with anybody of good appearance and of either sex, as long as they are possessed of money. Every one who has lived much on the Continent knows them – and, be it said, gives them a wide berth.

I was not long before I experienced many queer acquaintanceships in hotels, some amusing, some the reverse. At Verona a man, an Englishman named Davis, who had been at my college in Oxford, borrowed fifty pounds of me, but disappeared from the hotel next morning before I came down; while, among other similar incidents, a dear, quiet-mannered old widow – a Russian, who spoke English – induced me at Ostend to assist her to pay her hotel bill of one thousand six hundred francs, giving me a cheque upon her bank in Petersburg, a cheque which, in due course, was returned to me marked “no account.”

Still, I enjoyed myself. The carelessness of life suited me, for I managed to obtain sunshine the whole year round, and to have a good deal of fun for my money.

I had a fine sixty horse-power motor-car, and usually travelled from place to place on it, my friend Jack Marlowe, who had been at Oxford with me, and whose father's estates marched with mine on the edge of Dartmoor, frequently coming out to spend a week or two with me on the roads. He was studying for the diplomatic service, but made many excuses for holidays, which he invariably spent at my side. And we had a merry time together, I can assure you.

For nearly three years I had led this life of erratic wandering, returning to London only for a week or so in June, to see my lawyers and put in an appearance for a few days at Carrington to interview old Browning. And I must confess I found the old place deadly dull and lonely.

Boodles, to which I belonged, just as my father had belonged, I found full of pompous bores and old fogeys; and though at White's there was a little more life and movement now they had built a new roof, yet I preferred the merry recklessness of Monte Carlo, or the gaiety of the white-and-gold casinos at Nice or Cannes.

Thus nearly three years went by, careless years of luxury and idleness, years of living *à la carte* at restaurants of the first order, from the Reserve at Beaulieu to the Hermitage at Moscow, from Armenonville in the Bois to Salvini's in Milan – years of the education of an epicure.

The first incident of this strange history, however, occurred while I was spending the early spring at Gardone. Possibly you, as an English reader, have never heard of the place. If, however, you were Austrian, you would know it as one of the most popular resorts on the beautiful mountain-fringed Lake of Garda, that deep blue lake, half in Italian territory and half in Austrian, with the quaint little town of Desenzano at the Italian end, and Riva, with its square old church-tower and big white hotels, at the extreme north.

Of all the spring resorts on the Italian lakes, Gardone appeals to the visitor as one of the quietest and most picturesque. The Grand Hotel, with its long terrace at the lake-side, is, during February and March, filled with a gay crowd who spend most of their time in climbing the steep mountain-sides towards the jealously guarded frontier, or taking motor-boat excursions up and down the picturesque lake.

From the balcony of my room spread a panorama as beautiful as any in Europe; more charming, indeed, than at Lugano or Bellagio, or other of the many lake-side resorts, for here along the sheltered banks grew all the luxuriant vegetation of the Riviera – the camellias, magnolias, aloes and palms.

I had been there ten days or so when, one evening at dinner in the long restaurant which overlooked the lake, there came to the small table opposite mine a tall, fair-haired girl with great blue eyes, dressed elegantly but quietly in black chiffon, with a band of pale pink velvet twisted in her hair.

She glanced at me quickly as she drew aside her skirt and took her seat opposite her companion, a rather stout, dark, bald-headed man, red-faced and well-dressed, whose air was distinctly paternal as he bent and handed the menu across to her.

The man turned and glanced sharply around. By his well-cut dinner-coat, the way his dress-shirt fitted, and his refinement of manner, I at once put him down as a gentleman, and her father.

I instantly decided, on account of their smartness of dress, that they were not English. Indeed, the man addressed her in French, to which she responded. Her coiffure was in the latest mode of Paris, her gown showed unmistakably the hand of the French dressmaker, while her elegance was essentially that of the Parisienne. There is always a something – something indescribable – about the Frenchwoman which is marked and distinctive, and which the English-bred woman can never actually imitate.

Not that I like Frenchwomen. Far from it. They are too vain and shallow, too fond of gaiety and flattery to suit my taste. No; among all the many women I have met I have never found any to compare with those of my own people.

I don't know why I watched the new-comers so intently. Perhaps it was on account of the deliberate and careful manner in which the man selected his dinner, his instructions to the *maître d'hotel* as to the manner the entrée was to be made, and the infinite pains he took over the exact vintage he required. He spoke in French, fluent and exact, and his manner was entirely that of the epicure.

Or was it because of that girl? – the girl with eyes of that deep, fathomless blue, the wonderful blue of the lake as it lay in the sunlight – the lake that was nearly a mile in depth. In her face I detected a strange, almost wistful look, an expression which showed that her thoughts were far away from the laughter and chatter of that gay restaurant. She looked at me without seeing me; she spoke to her father without knowing what she replied. There was, in those wonderful eyes, a strange, far-off look, and it was that which, more than anything else, attracted my attention and caused me to notice the pair.

Her fair, sweet countenance was perfect in its contour, her cheeks innocent of the Parisienne's usual aids to beauty, her lips red and well moulded, while two tiny dimples gave a piquancy to a face which was far more beautiful than any I had met in all my wanderings.

Again she raised her eyes from the table and gazed across the flowers at me fixedly, with just a sudden inquisitiveness shown by her slightly knit brows. Then, suddenly starting, as though realizing she was looking at a stranger, she dropped her eyes again, and replied to some question her father had addressed to her.

Her dead black gown was cut just discreetly *décolleté*, which well became a girl not yet twenty, while at her throat, suspended by a very thin gold chain, was a single stone, a splendid ruby of enormous size, and of evident value. The only other ornament she wore was a curious antique bracelet in the form of a jewelled snake, the tail of which was in its mouth – the ancient emblem of Eternity.

Why she possessed such an attraction for me I cannot tell, except that she seemed totally unlike any other woman I had ever met before – a face that was as perfect as any I had seen on the canvases of the great painters, or in the marbles of the Louvre or the Vatican.

Again she raised her eyes to mine. Again I realized that the expression was entirely unusual. Then she dropped them again, and in a slow, inert way ate the crayfish soup which the waiter had placed before her.

Others in the big, long room had noticed her beauty, for I saw people whispering among themselves, while her father, leaning back in his chair on placing down his spoon, was entirely conscious of the sensation his daughter had evoked.

Throughout the meal I watched the pair carefully, trying to overhear their conversation. It was, however, always in low, confidential tones, and, strain my ears how I might, I could gather nothing. They spoke in French, which I detected from the girl's monosyllables, but beyond that I could understand nothing.

From the obsequious manner of the *maître d'hotel* I knew that her father was a person of importance. Yet the man who knows what to order in a restaurant, and orders it with instructions, is certain to receive marked attention. The epicure always commands the respect of those who serve him. And surely this stranger was an epicure, for after his dessert I heard him order with his coffee a *petit verre* of gold-water of Dantzic, a rare liqueur only known and appreciated by the very select few who really know what is what – a bottle of which, if you search Europe from end to end, you will not find in perhaps twenty restaurants, and those only of the very first order.

The eyes of the fair-haired girl haunted me. Instinctively I knew that she was no ordinary person. Her apathy and listlessness, her strangely vacant look, combined with the wonderful beauty of her countenance, held me fascinated.

Who was she? What mystery surrounded her? I felt, by some strange intuition, that there was a mystery, and that that curious wistfulness in her glance betrayed itself because, though accompanied by her father, she was nevertheless in sore need of a friend.

When her father had drained his coffee they rose and passed into the great lounge, with its many little tables set beneath the palms, where a fine orchestra was playing Maillart's tuneful "Les Dragons de Villars."

As they seated themselves many among that well-dressed, gay crowd of winter idlers turned to look at them. I, however, seldom went into the nightly concert; therefore I strolled along the wide corridor to the hall-porter, and inquired the names of the fresh arrivals.

"Yes, monsieur," replied the big, dark-bearded German; "you mean, of course, numbers one hundred and seventeen and one hundred and forty-six – English, father and daughter, arrived by the five o'clock boat from Riva with a great deal of baggage – here are the names," and he showed me the slips signed by them on arrival. "They are the only new-comers to-day."

There I saw, written on one in a man's bold hand, "Richard Pennington, rentier, Salisbury, England," and on the other, "Sylvia Pennington."

"I thought they were French," I remarked.

"So did I, monsieur; they speak French so well. I was surprised when they registered themselves as English."

CHAPTER TWO

TOLD IN THE NIGHT

Sylvia Pennington! The face, the name, those wistful, appealing eyes haunted me in my dreams that night.

Why? Even now I am at a loss to tell, unless – well, unless I had become fascinated by that strange, mysterious, indescribable expression; fascinated, perhaps, by her marvellous beauty, unequalled in all my experience.

Next morning, while my man Lorenzo was waiting for me, I told him to make discreet inquiry regarding the pair when in the steward's room, where he ate his meals. Soon after noon he came to me, saying he had discovered that the young lady had been heard by the night-porter weeping alone in her room for hours, and that, as soon as it was dawn, she had gone out for a long walk alone along the lake-side. It was apparent that she and her father were not on the very best of terms.

“The servants believe they are French, sir,” my man added; “but it seems that they tell people they are English. The man speaks English like an Englishman. I heard him, half-an-hour ago, asking the hall-porter about a telegram.”

“Well, Lorenzo,” I said, “just keep your eyes and ears open. I want to learn all I can about Mr. Pennington and his daughter. She hasn't a maid, I suppose?”

“Not with her, sir,” he replied. “If she had, I'd soon get to know all about them.”

I was well aware of that, for Lorenzo Merli, like all Italians, was a great gossip, and quite a lady-killer in the servants' hall. He was a dark-haired, good-looking young man whose character was excellent, and who had served me most faithfully. His father was farm-bailiff to an Italian marquis I knew, and with whom I had stayed near Parma, while before entering my service he had been valet to the young Marchese di Viterbo, one of the beaux of Roman society.

When I reposed a confidence in Lorenzo I knew he would never betray it. And I knew that, now I had expressed an ardent desire for information regarding the man Pennington and his daughter, he would strain every effort to learn what I wanted to know.

The pair sat at their usual table at luncheon. She was in a neat gown of navy blue serge, and wore a pretty cream hat which suited her admirably. Her taste in dress was certainly wonderful for an Englishwoman. Yet the pair always spoke French together, and presented no single characteristic of the British whatsoever.

Because of his epicurean tastes, the stout, bald-headed man received the greatest attention from the waiters; but those splendid eyes of his daughter betrayed no evidence of either tears or sleeplessness. They were the same, wistful yet wonderful, with just that slightest trace of sadness which had filled me with curiosity.

After luncheon he strolled along the broad palm-lined terrace in the sunshine beside the water's edge, while she lolled in one of the long cane chairs. Yet, as I watched, I saw that she was not enjoying the warm winter sunshine or the magnificent view of snow-capped mountains rising on the far horizon.

Presently she rose and walked beside her father, who spoke to her rapidly and earnestly, but she only replied in monosyllables. It seemed that all his efforts to arouse her interest utterly failed.

I was lounging upon the low wall of the terrace, pretending to watch the arrival of the little black-and-white paddle-steamer on its way to Riva, when, as they passed me, Pennington halted to light a cigar.

Suddenly he glanced up at me with a strangely suspicious look. His dark eyes were furtive and searching, as though he had detected and resented my undue interest in his daughter.

Therefore I strolled down to the landing-stage, and, going on board the steamer, spent the afternoon travelling up to Riva, the pretty little town with the tiny harbour at the Austrian end of the

lake. The afternoon was lovely, and the panorama of mountain mirrored in the water, with picturesque villages and hamlets nestling at the water's edge, was inexpressibly grand. The deep azure of the unruffled water stood out in contrast to the dazzling snow above, and as the steamer, hugging the shore, rounded one rocky point after another, the scene was certainly, as the Italian contadino puts it, "a bit of Paradise fallen from heaven upon earth."

But, to you who know the north Italian lakes, why need I describe it?

Suffice it to say that I took tea in the big hall of the Lido Palace Hotel at Riva, and then, boarding the steamer again, returned to Gardone just in time to dress for dinner.

I think that Pennington had forbidden his daughter to look at me, for never once during dinner the next evening, as far as I could detect, did she raise her eyes to mine. When not eating, she sat, a pretty figure in cream chiffon, with her elbows upon the table, her chin upon her clasped hands, talking to her father in that low, confidential tone. Were they talking secrets?

Just before they rose I heard him say in English —

"I'm going out for an hour – just for a stroll. I may be longer. If I'm not back all night, don't be anxious. I may be detained."

"Where are you going?" she asked quickly.

"That is my affair," was his abrupt reply. Her face assumed a strange expression. Then she passed along the room, he following.

As soon as they had gone my mind was made up. I scented mystery. I ascended in the lift to my room, got my coat, and, going outside into the ill-lit road beyond the zone of the electric lights in front of the hotel, I waited.

The man was not long in coming. He wore a golf-cap and a thick overcoat, and carried a stout stick. On the steps of the hotel he paused, lit his cigar, and then set off to the left, down the principal street – the highroad which led to the clean little town of Salo and the southern end of the lake.

I lounged along after him at a respectable distance, all curiosity at the reason why, in that rural retreat, he intended to be absent all night.

He went along at a swinging pace, passing around the lake-front of the town which almost adjoins Gardone, and then began to ascend the steep hill beyond. Upon the still night air I could scent the aroma of his cigar. He was now on his way out into a wild and rather desolate country, high above the lake. But after walking about a mile he came to a point where the roads branched, one to Verona, the other to Brescia.

There he halted, and, seating himself upon a big stone at the wayside, smoked in patience, and waited. I advanced as near as I could without risk of detection, and watched.

He struck a match in order to look at his watch. Then he rose and listened intently. The night was dark and silent, with heavy clouds hanging about the mountains, threatening rain.

I suppose he had waited fully another quarter of an hour, when suddenly, far away over the brow of the hill in the direction of Brescia, I saw a peculiar light in the sky. At first I was puzzled, but as it gradually grew larger and whiter I knew that it came from the head-lights of an approaching motor-car. Next moment the hum of the engine fell on my ears, and suddenly the whole roadway became illuminated, so suddenly, indeed, that I had only just time to crouch down in order to avoid detection.

Pennington shouted to the driver, and he instantly pulled up. Then two men in thick overcoats descended, and welcomed him warmly in English.

"Come along, old man!" I heard one of them cry. "Come inside. We must be off again, for we haven't a moment to spare. How's the girl?"

Then they entered the car, which was quickly turned, and a few moments later disappeared swiftly along the road it had come.

I stood, full of wonder, watching the white light fade away.

Who were Pennington's friends, that he should meet them in so secret a manner?

“How’s the girl?” Had that man referred to Sylvia? There was mystery somewhere. I felt certain of it.

Down the hill I retraced my steps, on through the little town, now wrapped in slumber, and back to the Grand Hotel, where nearly every one had already retired to bed. In a corner of the big lounge, however, Pennington’s daughter was seated alone, reading a Tauchnitz novel.

I felt in no humour to turn in just then, for I was rather used to late hours; therefore I passed through the lounge and out upon the terrace, in order to smoke and think. The clouds were lifting, and the moon was struggling through, casting an uncertain light across the broad dark waters.

I had thrown myself into a wicker chair near the end of the terrace, and, with a cigarette, was pondering deeply, when, of a sudden, I saw a female figure, wrapped in a pale blue shawl, coming in my direction.

I recognized the cream skirt and the shawl. It was Sylvia! Ah! how inexpressibly charming and dainty she looked!

When she had passed, I rose and, meeting her face to face, raised my hat and spoke to her.

She started slightly and halted. What words I uttered I hardly knew, but a few moments later I found myself strolling at her side, chatting merrily in English. Her chiffons exuded the delicate scent of Rose d’Orsay, that sweet perfume which is the hall-mark of the modern well-dressed woman.

And she was undoubtedly English, after all!

“Oh no,” she declared in a low, musical voice, in response to a fear I had expressed, “I am not at all cold. This place is so charming, and so warm, to where my father and I have recently been – at Uleaborg, in Finland.”

“At Uleaborg!” I echoed. “Why, that is away – out of the world – at the northern end of the Gulf of Bothnia!”

“Yes,” she declared, with a light laugh. “It is so windy and cold, and oh! so wretchedly dull.”

“I should rather think so!” I cried. “Why, it is almost within the Arctic Circle. Why did you go up there – so far north – in winter?”

“Ah!” she sighed, “we are always travelling. My father is the modern Wandering Jew, I think. Our movements are always sudden, and our journeys always long ones – from one end of Europe to the other very often.”

“You seem tired of it!” I remarked.

“Tired!” she gasped, her voice changing. “Ah! if you only knew how I long for peace, for rest – for home!” and she sighed.

“Where is your home?”

“Anywhere, now-a-days,” was her rather despondent reply. “We are wanderers. We lived in England once – but, alas! that is now all of the past. My father is compelled to travel, and I must, of necessity, go with him. I am afraid,” she added quickly, “that I bore you with this chronicle of my own troubles. I really ought not to say this – to you, a stranger,” she said, with a low, nervous little laugh.

“Though I may be a stranger, yet, surely, I may become your friend,” I remarked, looking into her beautiful face, half concealed by the blue wrap.

For a moment she hesitated; then, halting in the gravelled path and looking at me, she replied very seriously —

“No; please do not speak of that again.”

“Why not?”

“Well – only because you must not become my friend.”

“You are lonely,” I blurted forth. “I have watched you, and I have seen that you are in sore need of a friend. Do you deny that?”

“No,” she faltered. “I – I – yes, what you say is, alas! correct. How can I deny it? I have no friend; I am alone.”

“Then allow me to be one. Put to me whatever test you will,” I exclaimed, “and I hope I may bear it satisfactorily. I, too, am a lonely man – a wanderer. I, too, am in need of a friend in whom I can confide, whose guidance I can ask. Surely there is no friend better for a lonely man than a good woman?”

“Ah, no,” she cried, suddenly covering her face with both her hands. “You don’t know – you are ignorant. Why do you say this?”

“Why? Shall I tell you why?” I asked, gallantly bending to her in deep earnestness. “Because I have watched you – because I know you are very unhappy!”

She held her breath. By the faint ray of the distant electric light I saw her face had become changed. She betrayed her emotions and her nervousness by the quick twitching of her fingers and her lips.

“No,” she said at last very decisively; “you must abandon all thought of friendship with me. It is impossible – quite impossible!”

“Would my friendship be so repugnant to you, then?” I asked quickly.

“No, no, not that,” she cried, laying her trembling fingers upon my coat-sleeve. “You – you don’t understand – you cannot dream of my horrible position – of the imminent peril of yours.”

“Peril! What do you mean?” I asked, very much puzzled.

“You are in grave danger. Be careful of yourself,” she said anxiously. “You should always carry some weapon with you, because – ” and she broke off short, without concluding her sentence.

“Because – why?”

“Well, because an accident might happen to you – an accident planned by those who are your enemies.”

“I really don’t understand you,” I said. “Do you mean to imply that there is some conspiracy afoot against me?”

“I warn you in all seriousness,” she said. “I – well, the fact is, I came out here – I followed you out – in order to tell you this in secret. Leave here, I beg of you; leave early to-morrow morning, and do not allow the hotel people to know your new address. Go somewhere – far away – and live in secret under an assumed name. Let Owen Biddulph disappear as though the earth had swallowed him up.”

“Then you are aware of my name!” I exclaimed.

“Certainly,” she replied. “But do – I beg of you for your own sake – heed my warning! Ah! it is cruel and horrible that I – of all women – have to tell you this!”

“I always carry a revolver,” I replied, “and I have long ago learned to shoot straight.”

“Be guarded always against a secret and insidious attack,” she urged. “I must go in – now that I have told you the truth.”

“And do you, then, refuse to become my friend, Miss Pennington?” I asked very earnestly. “Surely you are my friend already, because you have told me this!”

“Yes,” she answered, adding, “Ah! you do not know the real facts! You would not ask this if you were aware of the bitter, ghastly truth. You would not ask my friendship – nay, you would hate and curse me instead!”

“But why?” I asked, amazed at her words. “You speak in enigmas.”

She was silent again. Then her nervous fingers once more gripped my arm, as, looking into my face, her eyes shining with a weird, unusual light, she replied in quick, breathless sentences —

“Because – because friendship between us must never, never be; it would be fatal to you, just as it would be fatal to me! Death – yes, death – will come to me quickly and swiftly – perhaps to-night, perhaps to-morrow, perhaps in a week’s time. For it, I am quite prepared. All is lost – lost to me for ever! Only have a care of yourself, I beseech of you! Heed what I say. Escape the cruel fate which your enemies have marked out for you – escape while there is yet time, and – and,” she faltered in a low, hoarse voice, full of emotion, “some day in the future, perhaps, you will give a passing thought

to the memory of a woman who revealed to you the truth – who saved you from an untimely end – the unhappy woman without a friend!”

“But I will be your friend!” I repeated.

“No. That can never be —*never!*” and she shuddered. “I dare not risk it. Reflect – and escape – get away in secret, and take care that you are not followed. Remember, however, we can never be friends. Such a course would be fatal – yes, alas! *fatal!*”

Instinctively she put out her tiny white hand in frank farewell. Then, when I had held it for a second in my own, she turned and, drawing her shawl about her, hurried back to the big hotel.

Utterly dumbfounded, I stood for a few seconds dazed and wondering, the sweet odour of Rose d’Orsay filling my nostrils. What did she know?

Then suddenly I held my breath, for there I saw for the first time, standing back in the shadow of the trees, straight before me, motionless as a statue, the tall, dark figure of a man who had evidently watched us the whole time, and who had, no doubt, overheard all our conversation!

CHAPTER THREE

THE CLERGYMAN FROM HAMPSHIRE

What was the meaning of it all? Why had that tall, mysterious stranger watched so intently? I looked across at him, but he did not budge, even though detected.

In a flash, all the strange warnings of Sylvia Pennington crowded upon my mind.

I stood facing the man as he lurked there in the shadow, determined that he should reveal his face. Those curious words of the mysterious girl had placed me upon my mettle. Who were the unknown enemies of mine who were conspiring against me?

Should I take her advice and leave Gardone, or should I remain on my guard, and hand them over to the police at first sign of attack?

The silent watcher did not move. He stood back there in the darkness, motionless as a statue, while I remained full in the light of the moon, which had now come forth, causing the lake and mountains to look almost fairy-like.

In order to impress upon him the fact that I was in no hurry, I lit a cigarette, and seated myself upon the low wall of the terrace, softly whistling an air of the café chantant. The night was now glorious, the mountain crests showing white in the moonlight.

Who was this man, I wondered? I regretted that we had not discovered his presence before Sylvia had left. She would, no doubt, have recognized him, and told me the reason of his watchfulness.

At last, I suppose, I must have tired him out, for suddenly he hastened from his hiding-place, and, creeping beneath the shadow of the hotel, succeeded in reaching the door through which Sylvia had passed.

As he entered, the light from the lounge within gave me a swift glance of his features. He was a thin, grey-faced, rather sad-looking man, dressed in black, but, to my surprise, I noticed that his collar was that of an English clergyman!

This struck me as most remarkable. Clergymen are not usually persons to be feared.

I smiled to myself, for, after all, was it not quite possible that the reverend gentleman had found himself within earshot of us, and had been too embarrassed to show himself at once? What sinister motive could such a man possess?

I looked around the great lounge, with its many tables and great palms, but it was empty. He had passed through and ascended in the lift to his room.

Inquiry of the night-porter revealed that the man's name was the Reverend Edmund Shuttleworth, and that he came from Andover, in England. He had arrived at six o'clock that evening, and was only remaining the night, having expressed his intention of going on to Riva on the morrow.

So, laughing at my fears – fears which had been aroused by that strange warning of Sylvia's – I ascended to my room.

I did not leave next morning, as my fair-faced little friend had suggested, neither did Pennington return.

About eleven o'clock I strolled forth into the warm sunshine on the terrace, and there, to my surprise, saw Sylvia sitting upon one of the seats, with a cream sunshade over her head, a book in her lap, while by her side lounged the mysterious watcher of the night before – the English clergyman, Mr. Shuttleworth of Andover.

Neither noticed me. He was speaking to her slowly and earnestly, she listening attentively to his words. I saw that she sighed deeply, her fine eyes cast upon the ground.

It all seemed as though he were reproaching her with something, for she was silent, in an attitude almost of penitence.

Now that I obtained a full view of the reverend gentleman's features in full daylight they seemed less mysterious, less sinister than in the half-light of midnight. He looked a grave, earnest, sober-

living man, with that slight affectation of the Church which one finds more in the rural districts than in cities, for the black clerical straw hat and the clerical drawl seem always to go together. It is strange that the village curate is always more affected in his speech than the popular preacher of the West End, and the country vicar's wife is even more exclusive in her tea-and-tennis acquaintances than the wife of the lord bishop himself.

For a few moments I watched unseen. I rather liked the appearance of the Reverend Edmund Shuttleworth, whoever he might be. He had the look of an honest, open, God-fearing man.

Yet why was he in such earnest consultation with the mysterious Sylvia?

With his forefinger he was touching the palm of his left hand, apparently to emphasize his words, while she looked pale, even frightened. She was listening without comment, without protest, while I stood watching them from behind. Many other visitors were idling about the terrace, reading letters or newspapers, or chatting or flirting – the usual morning occupations of a fashionable lake-side hotel far removed from the strenuous turmoil of the business or social worlds.

Suddenly she objected to some words which he uttered, objected strongly, with rapid interruption and quick protest.

But he laid his hand quietly upon her arm, and seemed to convince her of the truth or justice of his words.

Then, as she turned, she recognized me, and I raised my hat politely in passing.

Shuttleworth's eyes met mine, and he stared at me. But I passed on, in pretence that I had not recognized him as the watcher of the previous night.

I idled about the terrace and the little landing-stage till noon, when the steamer for Riva came up from Desenzano; and Shuttleworth, taking leave of Sylvia, boarded the little craft with his two kit-bags, and waved her farewell as the vessel drew away, making a wide wake upon the glassy surface of the deep blue waters.

When he had gone, I crossed to her and spoke. She looked inexpressibly charming in her white cotton gown and neat straw sailor hat with black velvet band. There was nothing ostentatious about her dress, but it was always well cut and fitted her to perfection. She possessed a style and elegance all her own.

“Ah! Mr. Biddulph!” she exclaimed reproachfully. “Why have you not heeded my words last night? Why have you not left? Go! – go, before it is too late!” she urged, looking straight into my face with those wonderful eyes of hers.

“But I don't understand you, Miss Pennington,” I replied. “Why should I leave here? What danger threatens me?”

“A grave one – a very grave one,” she said in a low, hoarse whisper. “If you value your life you should get away from this place.”

“Who are these enemies of mine?” I demanded. “You surely should tell me, so that I can take precautions against them.”

“Your only precaution lies in flight,” she said.

“But will you not tell me what is intended? If there is a conspiracy against me, is it not your duty, as a friend, to reveal it?”

“Did I not tell you last night that I am not your friend – that our friendship is forbidden?”

“I don't understand you,” I said. “As far as I know, I haven't an enemy in the world. Why should I fear the unknown?”

“Ah! will you not take heed of what I have told you?” she cried in desperation. “Leave here. Return to England – hide yourself – anywhere – for a time, until the danger passes.”

“I have no fear of this mysterious danger, Miss Pennington,” I said. “If these secret enemies of mine attack me, then I am perfectly ready and able to defend myself.”

“But they will not attack openly. They will strike at a moment when you least expect it – and strike with accuracy and deadly effect.”

“Last night, after you had left me, I found a man standing in the shadow watching us,” I said. “He was the clergyman whom I saw sitting with you just now. Who is he?”

“Mr. Shuttleworth – an old friend of mine in England. An intimate friend of my father’s. To him, I owe very much. I had no idea he was here until an hour ago, when we met quite accidentally on the terrace. I haven’t seen him for a year. We once lived in his parish near Andover, in Hampshire. He was about our only friend.”

“Why did he spy upon us?”

“I had no idea that he did. It must have been only by chance,” she assured me. “From Edmund Shuttleworth you certainly have nothing to fear. He and his wife are my best friends. She is staying up at Riva, it seems, and he is on his way to join her.”

“Your father is absent,” I said abruptly.

“Yes,” she replied, with slight hesitation. “He has gone away on business. I don’t expect he will be back till to-night.”

“And how long do you remain here?”

“Who knows? Our movements are always so sudden and erratic. We may leave to-night for the other end of Europe, or we may remain here for weeks yet. Father is so uncertain always.”

“But why are you so eager that I shall leave you?” I asked, as we strolled together along the terrace. “You have admitted that you are in need of a friend, and yet you will not allow me to approach you with the open hand of friendship.”

“Because – ah! have I not already explained the reason why – why I dare not allow you to show undue friendship towards me?”

“Well, tell me frankly,” I said, “who is this secret enemy of mine?”

She was silent. In that hesitation I suspected an intention to deceive.

“Is it against your own father that you are warning me?” I exclaimed in hesitation. “You fear him, evidently, and you urge me to leave here and return to England. Why should I not remain here in defiance?”

“In some cases defiance is distinctly injudicious,” she remarked. “It is so in this. Your only safety is in escape. I can tell you no more.”

“These words of yours, Miss Pennington, are remarkably strange,” I said. “Surely our position is most curious. You are my friend, and yet you conceal the identity of my enemy.”

She only shrugged her shoulders, without any reply falling from her lips.

“Will you not take my advice and get back to England at once?” she asked very seriously, as she turned to me a few minutes later. “I have suggested this in your own interests.”

“But why should I go in fear of this unknown enemy?” I asked. “What harm have I done? Why should any one be my bitter enemy?”

“Ah, how do I know?” she cried in despair. “We all of us have enemies where we least suspect them. Sometimes the very friend we trust most implicitly reveals himself as our worst antagonist. Truly one should always pause and ponder deeply before making a friend.”

“You are perfectly right,” I remarked. “A fierce enemy is always better than a false friend. Yet I would dearly like to know what I have done to merit antagonism. Where has your father gone?”

“To Brescia, I believe – to meet his friends.”

“Who are they?”

“His business friends. I only know them very slightly; they are interested in mining properties. They meet at intervals. The last time he met them was in Stockholm a month ago.”

This struck me as curious. Why should he meet his business friends so clandestinely – why should they come at night in a car to cross-roads?

But I told her nothing of what I had witnessed. I decided to keep my knowledge to myself.

“The boat leaves at two o’clock,” she said, after a pause, her hand upon her breast as though to stay the wild beating of her heart. “Will you not take my advice and leave by that? Go to Milan, and

then straight on to England,” she urged in deep earnestness, her big, wide-open eyes fixed earnestly upon mine.

“No, Miss Pennington,” I replied promptly; “the fact is, I do not feel disposed to leave here just at present. I prefer to remain – and to take the risk, whatever it may be.”

“But why?” she cried, for we were standing at the end of the terrace, and out of hearing.

“Because you are in need of a friend – because you have admitted that you, too, are in peril. Therefore I have decided to remain near you.”

“No,” she cried breathlessly. “Ah! you do not know the great risk you are running! You must go – do go, Mr. Biddulph – go, for —*for my sake!*”

I shook my head.

“I have no fear of myself,” I declared. “I am anxious on your behalf.”

“Have no thought of me,” she cried. “Leave, and return to England.”

“And see you no more – eh?”

“If you will leave to-day, I – I will see you in England – perhaps.”

“Perhaps!” I cried. “That is not a firm promise.”

“Then, if you really wish,” she replied in earnestness, “I will promise. I’ll promise anything. I’ll promise to see you in England – when the danger has passed, if – if disaster has not already fallen upon me,” she added in a hoarse whisper.

“But my place is here – near you,” I declared. “To fly from danger would be cowardly. I cannot leave you.”

“No,” she urged, her pale face hard and anxious. “Go, Mr. Biddulph; go and save yourself. Then, if you so desire, we shall meet again in secret – in England.”

“And that is an actual promise?” I asked, holding forth my hand.

“Yes,” she answered, taking it eagerly. “It is a real promise. Give me your address, and very soon I shall be in London to resume our acquaintanceship – but, remember, not our friendship. That must never be —*never!*”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PERIL BEYOND

My taxi pulled up before my own white-enamelled door in Wilton Street, off Belgrave Square, and, alighting, I entered with my latch-key.

I had been home about ten days – back again once more in dear, dirty old London, spending most of my time idling in White’s or Boodle’s; for in May one meets everybody in St. James’s Street, and men foregather in the club smoking-room from the four ends of the earth.

The house in Wilton Street was a small bijou place which my father had occupied as a *pied-à-terre* in town, he being a widower. He had been a man of artistic tastes, and the house, though small, was furnished lightly and brightly in the modern style. At Carrington he always declared there was enough of the heaviness of the antique. Here, in the dulness of London, he preferred light decorations and modern art in furnishing.

Through the rather narrow carpeted hall I passed into the study which lay behind the dining-room, a small, cosy apartment – the acme of comfort. I, as a bachelor, hated the big terra-cotta-and-white drawing-room upstairs. When there, I made the study my own den.

I had an important letter to write, but scarcely had I seated myself at the table when old Browning, grave, grey-faced and solemn, entered, saying —

“A clergyman called to see you about three o’clock, sir. He asked if you were at home. When I replied that you were at the club, he became rather inquisitive concerning your affairs, and asked me quite a lot of questions as to where you had been lately, and who you were. I was rather annoyed, sir, and I’m afraid I may have spoken rudely. But as he would leave no card, I felt justified in refusing to answer his inquiries.”

“Quite right, Browning,” I replied. “But what kind of a man was he? Describe him.”

“Well, sir, he was rather tall, of middle age, thin-faced and drawn, as though he had seen a lot of trouble. He spoke with a pronounced drawl, and his clerical coat was somewhat shabby. I noticed, too, sir, that he wore a black leather watch-guard.”

That last sentence at once revealed my visitor’s identity. It was the Reverend Edmund Shuttleworth! But why had he returned so suddenly from Riva? And why was he making secret inquiry concerning myself?

“I think I know the gentleman, Browning,” I replied, while the faithful old fellow stood, a quaint, stout figure in a rather tight-fitting coat and grey trousers, his white-whiskered face full of mystery. I fancy Browning viewed me with considerable suspicion. In his eyes, “young Mr. Owen” had always been far too erratic. On many occasions in my boyhood days he had expressed to my father his strong disapproval of what he termed “Master Owen’s carryings-on.”

“If he should call again, tell him that I have a very great desire to renew our acquaintance. I met him abroad,” I said.

“Very well, sir,” replied my man. “But I don’t suppose he will call again, sir. I was rude to him.”

“Your rudeness was perfectly justifiable, Browning. Please refuse to answer any questions concerning me.”

“I know my duty, sir,” was the old man’s stiff reply, “and I hope I shall always perform it.”

And he retired, closing the door silently behind him.

With my elbows upon the table, I sat thinking deeply.

Had I not acted like a fool? Those strange words, and that curious promise of Sylvia Pennington sounded ever in my ears. She had succeeded in inducing me to return home by promising to meet me clandestinely in England. Why clandestinely?

Before me every moment that I now lived arose that pale, beautiful face – that exquisite countenance with the wonderful eyes – that face which had held me in fascination, that woman who, indeed, held me now for life or death.

In those ten days which had passed, the first days of my home-coming after my long absence, I knew, by the blankness of our separation – though I would not admit it to myself – that she was my affinity. I was hers. She, the elegant little wanderer, possessed me, body and soul. I felt for her a strong affection, and affection is the half-and-half of love.

Why had her friend, that thin-faced country clergyman, called? Evidently he was endeavouring to satisfy himself as to my *bona fides*. And yet, for what reason? What had I to do with him? She had told me that she owed very much to that man. Why, however, should he interest himself in me?

I took down a big black volume from the shelf —*Crockford's Clerical Directory*— and from it learned that Edmund Charles Talbot Shuttleworth, M.A., was rector of the parish of Middleton-cum-Bowbridge, near Andover, in the Bishopric of Winchester. He had held his living for the past eight years, and its value was £550 per annum. He had had a distinguished career at Cambridge, and had been curate in half-a-dozen places in various parts of the country.

I felt half inclined to run down to Middleton and call upon him. I could make some excuse or other, for I felt that he might, perhaps, give me some further information regarding the mysterious Pennington and his daughter.

Yet, on further reflection, I hesitated, for I saw that by acting thus I might incur Sylvia's displeasure.

During the three following days I remained much puzzled. I deeply regretted that Browning had treated the country parson abruptly, and wondered whether I could not make excuse to call by pretending to express regret for the rudeness of my servant.

I was all eagerness to know something concerning this man Pennington, and was prepared even to sink my own pride in order to learn it.

Jack Marlowe was away in Copenhagen, and would not return for a week. In London I had many friends, but there were few who interested me, for I was ever thinking of Sylvia – of her only and always.

At last, one morning I made up my mind, and, leaving Waterloo, travelled down to Andover Junction, where I hired a trap, and, after driving through the little old-fashioned town out upon the dusty London Road for a couple of miles or so, I came to the long straggling village of Middleton, at the further end of which stood the ancient little church, and near it the comfortable old-world rectory.

Entering the gateway, I found myself in pretty, well-wooded and well-kept grounds; the house itself, long, low, and covered with trailing roses, was a typical English country rectory. Beyond that lay a paddock, while in the distance the beautiful Harewood Forest showed away upon the skyline.

Yes, Mr. Shuttleworth was at home, the neat maid told me, and I was ushered into a long old-fashioned study, the French windows of which opened out upon a well-rolled tennis-lawn.

The place smelt of tobacco-smoke. Upon the table lay a couple of well-seasoned briars, and on the wall an escutcheon bearing its owner's college arms. Crossed above the window was a pair of rowing-sculls, and these, with a pair of fencing-foils in close proximity, told mutely of long-past athletics. It was a quiet, book-lined den, an ideal retreat for a studious man.

As my eyes travelled around the room, they suddenly fell upon a photograph in a dark leather frame, the picture of a young girl of seventeen or so, with her hair dressed low and secured by a big black bow. I started at sight of it. It was the picture of Sylvia Pennington!

I crossed to look at it more closely, but as I did so the door opened, and I found myself face to face with the rector of Middleton.

He halted as he recognized me – halted for just a second in hesitation; then, putting out his hand, he welcomed me, saying in his habitual drawl —

“Mr. Biddulph, I believe?” and invited me to be seated.

“Ah!” I exclaimed, with a smile, “I see you recognize me, though we were only passers-by on the Lake of Garda! I must apologize for this intrusion, but, as a matter of fact, my servant Browning described a gentleman who called upon me a few days ago, and I at once recognized him to have been you. He was rather rude to you, I fear, and – ”

“My dear fellow!” he interrupted, with a hearty, good-natured laugh. “He only did his duty as your servant. He objected to my infernal impertinence – and very rightly, too.”

“It was surely no impertinence to call upon me!” I exclaimed.

“Well, it’s all a question of one’s definition of impertinence,” he said. “I made certain inquiries – rather searching inquiries regarding you – that was all.”

“Why?” I asked.

He moved uneasily in his padded writing-chair, then reached over and placed a box of cigarettes before me. After we had both lit up, he answered in a rather low, changed voice —

“Well, I wanted to satisfy myself as to who you were, Mr. Biddulph,” he laughed. “Merely to gratify a natural curiosity.”

“That’s just it,” I said. “Why should your curiosity have been aroused concerning me? I do not think I have ever made a secret to any one regarding my name or my position, or anything else.”

“But you might have done, remember,” replied the thin-faced rector, looking at me calmly yet mysteriously with those straight grey eyes of his.

“I don’t follow you, Mr. Shuttleworth,” I said, much puzzled.

“Probably not,” was his response; “I had no intention to obtrude myself upon you. I merely called at Wilton Street in order to learn what I could, and I came away quite satisfied, even though your butler spoke so sharply.”

“But with what motive did you make your inquiries?” I demanded.

“Well, as a matter of fact, my motive was in your own interests, Mr. Biddulph,” he replied, as he thoughtfully contemplated the end of his cigarette. “This may sound strange to you, but the truth, could I but reveal it to you, would be found much stranger – a truth utterly incredible.”

“The truth of what?”

“The truth concerning a certain young lady in whom, I understand, you have evinced an unusual interest,” was his reply.

I could see that he was slightly embarrassed. I recollected how he had silently watched us on that memorable night by the moonlit lake, and a feeling of resentment arose within me.

“Yes,” I said anxiously next moment, “I am here to learn the truth concerning Miss Pennington. Tell me about her. She has explained to me that you are her friend – and I see, yonder, you have her photograph.”

“It is true,” he said very slowly, in a low, earnest voice, “quite true, Son – er, Sylvia – is my friend,” and he coughed quickly to conceal the slip in the name.

“Then tell me something about her, and her father. Who is he?” I urged. “At her request I left Gardone suddenly, and came home to England.”

“At her request!” he echoed in surprise. “Why did she send you away from her side?”

I hesitated. Should I reveal to him the truth?

“She declared that it was better for us to remain apart,” I said.

“Yes,” he sighed. “And she spoke the truth, Mr. Biddulph – the entire truth, remember.”

“Why? Do tell me what you know concerning the man Pennington.”

“I regret that I am not permitted to do that.”

“Why?”

For some moments he did not reply. He twisted his cigarette in his thin, nervous fingers, his gaze being fixed upon the lawn outside. At last, however, he turned to me, and in a low, rather strained tone said slowly —

“The minister of religion sometimes learns strange family secrets, but, as a servant of God, the confidences and confessions reposed in him must always be treated as absolutely sacred. Therefore,” he added, “please do not ask me again to betray my trust.”

His was, indeed, a stern rebuke. I saw that, in my eager enthusiasm, I had expected him to reveal a forbidden truth. Therefore I stammered an apology.

“No apology is needed,” was his grave reply, his keen eyes fixed upon me. “But I hope you will forgive me if I presume to give you, in your own interests, a piece of advice.”

“And what is that?”

“To keep yourself as far as possible from both Pennington and his daughter,” he responded slowly and distinctly, a strange expression upon his clean-shaven face.

“But why do you tell me this?” I cried, still much mystified. “Have you not told me that you are Sylvia’s friend?”

“I have told you this because it is my duty to warn those in whose path a pitfall is spread.”

“And is a pitfall spread in mine?”

“Yes,” replied the grave-faced, ascetic-looking rector, as he leaned forward to emphasize his words. “Before you, my dear sir, there lies an open grave. Behind it stands that girl yonder” – and he pointed with his lean finger to the framed photograph – “and if you attempt to reach her you must inevitably fall into the pit – that death-trap so cunningly prepared. Do not, I beg of you, attempt to approach the unattainable.”

I saw that he was in dead earnest.

“But why?” I demanded in my despair, for assuredly the enigma was increasing hourly. “Why are you not open and frank with me? I – I confess I – ”

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.