

Le Queux William

If Sinners Entice Thee



William Le Queux
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Chapter One

Zertho

“No, Zertho. You forget that Liane is my daughter, the daughter of Brooker of the Guards, once an officer, and still, I hope, a gentleman.”

“Gentleman!” sneered the other with a curl of his lip.

Erle Brooker shrugged his shoulders, but did not reply.

“Yet many women would be eager enough to become Princess d’Auzac if they had the chance,” observed the tall, dark-bearded, handsome man, speaking English with a slight accent as he leaned easily against the edge of the table, and glanced around the shabby, cheaply-furnished little dining-room. Sallow-faced, dark-eyed, broad-shouldered, he was aged about forty – with full lips and long tapering hands, white as a woman’s.

“Both of us know the world, my dear fellow,” answered Captain Erle Brooker at last, standing astride before the fireplace in which a gaudy Japanese umbrella had been placed to hide its ugliness. “Surely the five years we spent together were sufficient to show us that there are women – and women?”

“Of course, as I expected,” the other cried cynically. “Now that you’re back again in England, buried in this sleepy country village, you are becoming sentimental. I suppose it is respectable to be so; but it’s hardly like you.”

“You’ve prospered. I’ve fallen upon evil days.”

“And you could have had similar luck if only you would have continued to run with me that snug little place in Nice, instead of showing the white feather,” he said.

“It was entirely against my grain to fleece those beardless boys. I’ll play fair, or not at all.”

“Sentiment again! It’s your curse, Brooker.”

“The speculation no doubt proved a veritable gold mine, as of course it must. But I had a second reason in dissolving our partnership.”

“Liane urged you?”

“Yes.”

“And you took her advice, the advice of a mere girl!” he laughed contemptuously.

“Luck is always with her,” the Captain answered. “She sat beside me and prompted me on the occasion of my last big coup at roulette.”

“A sort of sorceress, eh?”

Brooker smiled coldly, but again made no reply. “Well,” continued his companion. “Do you intend to accept my proposal?”

“Certainly not,” replied the luckless gamester. “I’ll never sacrifice my daughter’s happiness.”

“Rubbish!”

“I have already decided.”

Zertho was silent; his features became fierce and authoritative. His was an arrestive face, indicating rare, possibly prodigious, mental and also bodily activity, an activity that, unless curbed and restrained by carefully cultivated habits, might become distorted, and thus become injurious to himself as well as to others. Two rows of strong white teeth redeemed a large mouth from the commonplace, but those teeth were seldom seen – never, indeed, unless their owner laughed, and if smiles were rare, laughter still more rarely disturbed the steady composure of that saturnine

countenance. Yet there was an individuality about the man which produced interest, though not always an agreeable interest, much less liking. He made an impression; he produced an effect upon the imagination that was not easily forgotten. Again, regarding the Captain keenly, he asked:

“Don’t you think I’m straight?”

“As straight as you ever were, Zertho,” the other answered ambiguously, with a light laugh. “But if you want a wife, surely you can fancy some other girl besides Liane. I’m afraid we know a little too much of each other to trust one another very far.”

There was another long silence. The golden sunset streamed in at the open window, which revealed an old-fashioned garden filled with fragrant roses, and a tiny lawn bounded by a hedgerow beyond. Through the garden ran a paved path to the white dusty road. The afternoon had been hot and drowsy. Upon the warm wind was borne in the sound of children at play in the village street of Stratfield Mortimer, while somewhere in the vicinity the shoe-smith’s hammer fell upon his anvil with musical clang. The house stood at the east end of the long straggling village, towards Reading, a small, old-fashioned cottage, picturesque in its ivy mantle, with deep mullions, diamond panes, and oaken doors. A year ago an old maiden lady, who had resided there for a quarter of a century, had died, and the village had been thrown into a state of commotion, as villages are wont to be, by the arrival of new comers – Captain Erle Brooker, his daughter Liane, and Nellie Bridson, her companion. The latter was daughter of Jack Bridson, a brother officer of Brooker’s. Left an orphan at nine years of age she had been brought up by the Captain, and throughout her whole life had been Liane’s inseparable friend. Soon, however, the village gossips found food for talk. The furniture they brought with them bore the distinct impress of having been purchased secondhand, the maid-of-all-work was a buxom Frenchwoman who bought stuff, for soups and salads, and the two girls habitually spoke French when together, in preference to English. Hence they were at once dubbed “fine, finnikin’ foreigners,” and regarded with suspicion by all the country folk from Beech Hill away to Silchester.

The thin-faced vicar made a formal call, as vicars will, but, as might be expected, received but a cold welcome from the ex-cavalry officer, and this fact spreading rapidly throughout the district, no one else ever crossed their threshold. This social ostracism annoyed Brooker, not for his own sake, but for that of the girls. The reason he had decided to live in the country in preference to London, was, first because it was cheaper, and secondly, because he had a vague idea that both girls would enter a pleasant and inexpensive circle where the dissipations would be mainly in the form of tea and tennis. In this, however, he and they had been sorely disappointed.

Zertho had spoken the truth. Stratfield Mortimer was indeed deadly dull after Ostend or the Riviera. He was getting already tired of posing as a half-pay officer, and speaking to nobody except the postmistress or the garrulous father of the local inn-keeper. Yet the one thing needful was money, and since he had renounced gambling, he had had scarcely sufficient to live from hand to mouth. Yet, although he had hardly a sou in his pocket, his imperturbable good humour never deserted him. His career had, indeed, been full of strange vicissitudes; of feast and fast, of long nights and heavy play, of huge stakes won and lost with smile or curse, of fair game and sharpening, of fleecing youngsters and bluffing his elders in nearly every health-resort in Europe. Easy-going to a fault, he bore his fifty years merrily, with scarcely a grey hair in his head, and although his ruddy, well-shaven face bore no sign of anxiety it was a trifle blotchy, caused by high living and long nights of play, while twenty years of an existence on his wits, had so sharpened his intelligence that in his steel-grey eyes was a keen penetrating look that had long become habitual. As careless and indolent now as he had ever been, he nevertheless dressed just as carefully, walked as lightly, and held his head just as high as in the days of his prosperity when a smart cavalry officer, younger son of a well-known peer, he could draw a cheque for thirty thousand. When he reflected upon his present position, hampered by the two girls dependent upon him, he merely laughed a strange cynical laugh, the same that he had laughed across the roulette-table when he had flung down and lost his last louis.

“What’s your game, burying yourself in this abominable hole?” inquired his whilom partner, presently. “I called at the National Sporting Club as soon as I got to London, expecting to see something of you, but the hall-porter told me that you lived down in this Sleepy-Hollow, and never came to town. So I resolved to run down and look you up.”

“Can’t afford to live in London,” the Captain answered, rolling a cigarette carefully between his fingers, before lighting it.

“Hard up! yet you refuse my offer!” observed Zertho, laughing. “You’re an enigma, Brooker. Money would put you on your legs again, my dear fellow.”

“I don’t doubt it,” the other replied. “But I have reasons.”

Zertho d’Auzac knit his dark brows, glancing at the Captain with a look of quick suspicion.

“You have expectations for Liane – eh?”

No reply escaped Brooker’s lips. He was thinking deeply.

“Any other man wouldn’t make you such an offer,” the other continued, in a tone of contempt. Instantly there was an angry glint in the Captain’s eyes.

“I tell you, Zertho, I’ll never let my daughter marry you. You, of all men, shall not have her – no, by Heaven! not for a hundred thousand pounds.”

The other’s face darkened in anger. But he turned away, giving vent to a short, harsh laugh, and with feigned good humour advanced towards the window, and whistling softly, took out his cigarette-case, a plain silver one, whereon his coronet and monogram were engraved.

At that moment two graceful, bright-faced girls entered the gate from the road, sauntering leisurely up the path towards the house. Dressed alike in dark well-made skirts, cool-looking blouses of cream crêpon and straw sailor hats with black bands, they walked together, the sound of their laughter ringing through the room. The taller of the pair was Liane Brooker, slim, with infinite grace, a face undeniably beautiful, a pair of clear grey eyes the depths of which seemed unfathomable, nose and mouth that denoted buoyancy of spirits and sincerity of heart, hair dressed neatly in the latest mode, and that easy swing about her carriage peculiar alone to Frenchwomen. Her warmth of Southern blood and large expressive eyes she inherited from her mother, who came from St Tropez in the Var, and her strange cosmopolitan education had already made her a thorough woman of the world. Her character was altogether a curiously complex one. Though fresh, bright and happy, she, the daughter of an adventurer, had seen a good deal of the seamy side of life, where the women were déclassé, and the men rogues and outsiders; yet, in fairness to her father, it must be admitted that, even in his most reckless moments, he had always exerted towards both girls keen solicitude. Her beauty was peerless. Hundreds of men had said so among themselves. Such a face as hers would have made a fortune on the stage; therefore it was little wonder that she should be desired as wife by Prince Zertho d’Auzac, the man who under the plain cognomen of Zertho d’Auzac was once a fellow blackleg with her father, and now a wealthy personage by reason of his inheritance of the great family estates in Luxembourg. Well he knew what a sensation her beauty would create in Berlin or St Petersburg, and with the object of obtaining her he had travelled to England. Pure and good, full of high thoughts and refined feeling, Liane Brooker existed amid strangely incongruous surroundings. She had been reared in the worst atmosphere of vice and temptation to be found in the whole of Europe, yet had passed through unscathed and uncorrupted.

Her companion was fair, with bright pink-and-white complexion, rosy, delicate cheeks, and merry blue eyes. Nelly was scarcely as handsome perhaps as Liane, yet hers was an almost perfect type of English beauty. Her hands were not quite so small or refined as her friend’s, and in contrast with the latter’s carriage hers was not quite so graceful, nor was her figure so supple; yet the mass of fluffy blond curls that peeped beneath her hat, straying across her brow, gave softness to her features, and her delicate pointed chin added a decided piquancy to a face that was uncommonly pretty and winning.

Both girls, catching sight at the same moment of Zertho's heavy watch-chain at the window, muttered together in an undertone. That day the Prince had arrived unexpectedly to lunch, sat down to their meagre dish of cold mutton, as he had often done in the old days when funds had been low, and having indicated his desire to talk business alone with the Captain, they had gone out together to post a letter at the little grocery store at the opposite end of the village.

When they discovered him still there, both pulled wry faces. He had never been a favourite of either. Liane had always instinctively disliked this man, who was the scapegrace of a noble family. His cynical look and sly manner had caused her to distrust him, and it had been mainly on this account that her father had dissolved his partnership in the private gaming-house they had carried on during the previous winter in Nice, an institution remembered with regret by many a young man who had gone to the Riviera for health and pleasure, only to return ruined. Zertho was not entirely unconscious of Liane's antipathy towards him; he well knew that without her father's aid his cause must be foredoomed to failure. But he never on any single occasion acted in undue haste. It was his proud boast that if ever he set his heart upon doing a thing he could quietly possess his soul in patience, for years if necessary, till the right moment arrived when he could execute his plans with success. Judging from the light, pleasant greeting he gave both girls as they entered, it was the tactics of craft and cunning he now intended to follow.

He chaffed Liane upon becoming a village belle, whereupon she, quick at repartee, tossed her handsome head, her heart beating fast, almost tumultuously, as she answered:

"Better that than the old life, M'sieur."

"Oh, so you, too, have settled and become puritanical!" he laughed. "You English, you are always utterly incomprehensible. Have you yet joined the Anti-Gambling League?"

"We are very happy here," she replied, heedless of his taunt. "I have no desire to return to the Continent, to that old life of feast one day and fast the next."

"Nor I," chimed in Nellie, full of fun and vivacity. "This place is sometimes horribly dull, it's true; but we always get our dinner, which we didn't on many occasions when we were abroad. Look at our house! Surely this place, with its little English garden, is better than those dingy rooms on the third floor in the Rue Dalpozzo in Nice. Besides, the Captain never swears now."

"Very soon he'll become a teacher in the local Sunday School, I suppose," sneered Zertho.

"I cannot understand your reason for coming here to jeer at our poverty," Liane exclaimed angrily, drawing herself up quickly. "At least my father lives honestly."

"I sincerely beg your pardon, and your father's also, mademoiselle," answered the Prince, bowing stiffly in foreign manner. "If my remarks have annoyed you I'm sure I will at once withdraw them with a thousand apologies. I had no intention, I assure you, of causing one instant's pain. I was merely joking. It all seems so droll."

"I know you well enough, Zertho, not to be annoyed at anything you may say," the Captain interrupted, good-humouredly as always. "However, speak what you have to say to me alone, not before the girls."

"The ladies will, I know, forgive me if I promise not to again offend," the Prince said. His eager eyes scanned Liane with such intense anxiety that they seemed to burn in their sockets, yet mingled with this fiery admiration, there was a strange covered menace in their expression. Taking out his watch a second later he added, "But I'm late, I see. Ten minutes only to catch my train back to London, and I don't know the way. Who'll guide me to the station? You, Liane?"

"No," answered her father. "Nelly shall go. I want Liane to deliver a message for me."

Prince d'Auzac bit his lip. But next instant he laughed gaily and saying: "Then come along Nelly," shook hands with Liane and her father, bade them "Au revoir" with a well-feigned bonhomie, and lounged out of the room.

Meanwhile, Nelly wheeled out her cycle, and announcing her intention of piloting their visitor to the station, and afterwards riding over to Burghfield village to make some purchase, mounted her machine and rode slowly on besides the Prince, chatting merrily.

As soon as they had left, Liane inquired of her father what she should do; but he told her briefly that it had been merely an excuse to prevent her going to the station, as he knew she disliked Zertho's society.

"Yes, father," she answered with a slight sigh, "I think him simply hateful. I'm convinced that he's neither your friend, nor mine."

Then glancing at the clock, she passed out of the house humming to herself as she walked slowly down the garden path, into the white dusty high road.

For a long time Brooker stood twirling his moustache, gazing aimlessly out into the crimson blaze of the dying day.

"I can't think why Zertho should have taken this trouble to look me up again," he murmured to himself. "I had hoped that he had cut me entirely, and believed that terrible incident was forgotten. The excuse about Liane is all very well. But I know him. He means mischief – he means mischief."

And his face grew ashen pale as his eyes were lost in deep and serious contemplation.

A sudden thought had flashed across his mind. It held him petrified, for he half-feared that he had guessed the bitter, ghastly truth.

Chapter Two

A Beggar on Horseback

Sir John Stratfield, of Stratfield Court, lay dying on that afternoon. For years he had been a confirmed invalid, and in the morning the two renowned doctors who had been telegraphed for from London had declared his recovery impossible. The Court, a fine old pile with grey time-worn walls half-hidden by ivy, stood in its spacious park about a mile from Stratfield Mortimer, on the hill between that village and Burghfield.

As the rays of crimson sunset slanted in through the one unshaded window there was a profound stillness in the sick-room. At the bedside stood four solemn-faced men, patiently watching for the end. The spark of life flickered on, and now and then the dying man uttered words low and indistinct. Two of the men were doctors, the third Richard Harrison, of the firm of Harrison and James, solicitors, of Bedford Row, and the fourth George Stratfield, the Baronet's younger son.

The haggard man had spoken once or twice, giving certain instructions to his solicitor, but at last there was a long silence, unbroken save by the rustling of the stiff grey gown of the nurse, who entered for an instant, then left again in silence.

The eccentric old man, whose reputation throughout Berkshire was that of a tyrannical landlord, a bigoted magistrate and a miserly father, at last opened his dull filmy eyes. The white bony fingers lying on the coverlet twitched uneasily, as, glancing at his son, he beckoned him forward.

Obediently the young man approached.

"Promise me one thing, George," the dying man exclaimed with an effort, in a voice so low as to be almost indistinguishable. "Promise me that you will never marry that woman."

"Why, father? Why are you so bitterly prejudiced against Liane?"

"I have my reasons," was the answer.

"But I love her," the young man urged. "I can marry no one else."

"Then go abroad, forget her, and remain a bachelor. Erle Brooker's daughter shall never become a Stratfield," was the harsh reply, uttered with considerable difficulty.

George, a tall well-built young fellow, with fair hair, a fair moustache and blue eyes, was a typical specimen of the English gentleman, still in his well-worn riding breeches and tweed coat, for that morning before the arrival of the doctors he had, in order to get a prescription made up, ridden hard into Reading. He made no reply to his father's words, he did not wish to offend the Baronet, yet he could not give a pledge which he intended to break.

"Will you not promise?" Sir John again demanded, a strange look overspreading his haggard ashen features.

Again a deep silence fell.

"No," answered his son at last. "I cannot promise to give up Liane, for I love her."

"Love! Bah. I tell you that woman shall never be your wife. If John were here, instead of with his regiment in India, he would fully endorse every word I say. Brooker's girl shall never enter our family."

"What do you know against her?" the son asked dismayed. "Why, you have never set your eyes upon either father or daughter! Some confounded eavesdropper must have been telling you of our clandestine meetings, and this has annoyed you."

"I am aware of more than you imagine," the dying man answered. "Will you, or will you not, promise to obey my wish?"

There was a look of firm determination in the old man's countenance; a look which the son did not fail to notice.

"No, father," he answered. "Once for all, I decline."

“Then if such be your decision you must take the consequences. You are an unworthy son.”

“In the matter of my marriage I shall follow my own inclinations entirely,” the young man said calmly.

“Very well,” the Baronet answered, and making a sign to his solicitor, Harrison, commanded his son to leave the room.

At first George demurred; but in accordance with the suggestion of the doctors that the wishes of their patient should be respected at that crisis-time, he went out, and passing downstairs to the library threw himself back in one of the roomy leather chairs.

Yes, he loved Liane. With her vivacious half-English, half-French mannerisms, her sweet musical accent, her dark beauty and grey trusting eyes, she was unlike any other woman he had ever beheld. They had met by chance on Mortimer Common a few months before. One morning, while riding towards Upton, he had found her at the roadside endeavouring to re-adjust her cycle, which had met with a slight accident. His proffered services were gratefully accepted, and from that moment their friendship had ripened into passionate and devoted love. Almost daily they took long walks and rides together, but so secret had been their meetings that until half-an-hour ago he had no idea that his father was aware of the truth. He had purposely kept the matter from Sir John because of his severe illness, yet someone, whom he knew not, must have watched him and gone to the Baronet with some foul libellous story.

As he lay back in the chair, his gaitered legs crossed, his sun-browned hands clasped behind his head, gazing up to the old panelled ceiling, he reflected that in a few hours the Court would no longer be his home. His elder brother, Major Stratfield, who for the past five years had been in India with his regiment, the East Surrey, had been telegraphed for, and in a few weeks would arrive and become Sir John Stratfield, while he, dogged by the misfortune attendant on being a younger son, would go forth from the old place with an income the extent of which he could not know until after the will had been read.

George's life had certainly not been a happy one. Since his mother's death a few months after his birth, his father had become a hard man, irritable and misanthropic. He kept no company, begrudged every penny his son cost him at college, and appeared to take a delight in obtaining the ill-will of all his neighbours. He knew that scarcely a person in the parish would regret his decease, and used frequently to comment with self-satisfaction upon the unenviable reputation he had gained. This was merely eccentricity, people said; but for George it was decidedly unpleasant, for while he was welcomed in every house, his father was never invited. Sometimes this fact impressed itself forcibly on the old man's mind, but on such occasions he would only laugh contemptuously, saying:

“Ah, the Stratfields of Stratfield can afford to treat with contempt these mushroom merchants without breeding, and without pedigree.”

At whatever George had achieved the baronet had never shown the slightest sign of satisfaction. His career at Balliol had been brilliant, he had eaten his dinners at Lincoln's Inn and been duly called to the Bar, but all to no purpose, for almost as soon as he had been “called,” his father, strangely enough, refused to grant him any further allowance unless he gave up his chambers and returned to live at Stratfield. This he had been forced to do, although much against his inclination, for he preferred his friends of the Common Room to the society of his eccentric parent. However, it had after all turned out for the best, he reflected, because a month after he had come back he had met the grey-eyed girl whose beauty held him entranced, and whom he intended to ask to become his wife. From the very first it had been arranged between them that they should keep their acquaintance secret, only Nelly Bridson being aware of it, and it was she who met George with notes from Liane when, on rare occasions, the latter was unable to keep her appointments. He had found both girls extremely pleasant companions, and through the sunny months the bright, halcyon days had passed happily.

In obedience to Liane's wish he had refrained from calling upon Captain Brooker. Truth to tell, the refined, ingenuous girl, with her French chic and charming manner, was ashamed of their

shabby home, of her father's frayed but well-cut clothes, of the distinct evidences of their poverty, and feared lest her lover should discover the secret of her father's rather ignominious past. She had told him that the Captain was a half-pay officer, and that her mother had been French; but she had been careful never to refer to the polyglot society in which they had moved on the Continent, nor to the fact that she was daughter of a man well-known in all the gaming establishments in Europe. All that was of the past, she had assured herself. If George knew the truth, then certainly he would forsake her. And she loved him no less than he adored her. Hence her lover had been puzzled not a little by her steadfast refusal to tell him anything definite regarding her earlier life, and the equal reticence of her foster sister. Of course, he could not fail to recognise behind this veil of mystery some family secret, yet in his buoyant frame of mind, happy in his new-found love, it troubled him but little. Liane, his enchantress, loved him; that was sufficient.

For more than half-an-hour he sat in the old brown library in the same position, plunged deep in gloomy reflection. The sunset streamed in through the big windows of stained glass whereon were the arms of the Stratfields with the motto, "Non vi, sed voluntate," which his ancestors had borne through six centuries. The ancient room, lined from floor to ceiling with the books of past generations, seemed in that calm silent hour aglow with many colours.

The suddenness with which the storm-cloud had broken away, and the sun's last rays again shone forth, aroused him. He glanced at his watch. It was already seven o'clock, and Liane was awaiting him beneath the railway bridge in Cross Lane, fully a mile away.

He made a movement to rise, but next moment, reflecting that he could not leave the house while his father lay dying, sank back into his chair again. Liane knew of his father's illness, and would undoubtedly wait, as she had often waited before.

Yet why was he sitting there inactive and patient? The bitter truth recurred to him. He had refused to give his pledge, and had therefore been banished from his father's presence. And this because he loved her!

He rose, and gazed out down the long shady avenue of chestnuts, that led across the broad Park towards the village. Yes, he loved Liane, and come what might he would marry her. Soon his father would pass away; then he would be free to act as he chose. After all, he was pleased that he had not given a false pledge to a dying man. At least he had been frank.

His brother John had never been his friend, therefore he knew that soon he must leave Stratfield. One thing he regretted to part from was the library, that fine old room in which he now stood, where he had spent so many long and studious days, and where he had sought refuge almost daily from his father's ill-temper. With hands deep in his pockets, he gazed slowly around the old place with its cosy armchairs and big writing-table, then sighed heavily.

He was thinking of his father's angry declaration, "Erle Brooker's daughter shall never become a Stratfield." What did he mean? Were those words uttered because of some absurd prejudice, or was he actually aware of something which both Liane and Nelly had carefully striven to conceal? Again he glanced at his watch. The hour was fleeting. Soon his well-beloved would weary of waiting and return home.

He pressed the electric button, and at once his summons was answered by a neat maid.

"Tell Morton to saddle the bay mare and hold her ready. I may want to ride," he said.

"Yes, sir," the girl answered, surprised at his unusual brusqueness.

The door closed, and again he was alone.

"At least I'll try and overtake her," he murmured. "I must see her to-night at all hazards," and as the sunlight faded he paced the room from door to window, his chin resting upon his breast.

Soon the door again slowly opened, and the old solicitor entering, closed it after him.

"It is my painful duty to tell you, Mr George, that your father has passed quietly away," he said, with that professionally solemn air that lawyers can assume when occasion demands.

The young man standing with his back turned, gazing out upon the Park, made no response.

“Before he drew his last breath I asked him three times whether he would see you again, but he firmly declined. You caused him the most intense displeasure by your refusal to grant his request,” the solicitor continued.

“Am I not my own master, Harrison?” the young man snapped, turning to him sharply.

“Certainly,” the other answered, raising his grey eyebrows. “I admit that I have no right whatever to interfere with your private affairs, but I certainly cannot regard your attitude and your father’s subsequent action without considerable regret.”

“What do you mean?”

“Apart from my professional connection with the Stratfield estate I have been, you will remember, a friend of your father’s through many years, therefore it pains me to think that in Sir John’s dying moments you should have done this.”

George Stratfield glanced quickly at the white-haired lawyer. Then he said, —

“I suppose my father has treated me badly at his death, as he did throughout his life.”

“Yes.”

“Well, let me know the worst,” the young man exclaimed, sighing; “Heaven knows, I don’t expect very much.”

“When the will is formally read you will know everything,” the other answered drily.

“A moment ago you said you were a friend of my father’s. Surely if you are you will not keep me in suspense regarding my future.”

“Suspense is entirely unnecessary,” answered the lawyer, his sphinx-like face relaxing into a cold smile.

“Why?”

“Well, unfortunately, you need not expect anything.”

“Not anything?” gasped the young man, blankly. “Then am I penniless?”

The solicitor nodded, and opening a paper he had held behind him on entering, said, —

“When you had left the room half-an-hour ago Sir John expressed a desire to make an addition to his will, and entirely against my inclination made me write what you see here. He signed it while still in his right mind, the two doctors witnessing it. It is scarcely a professional proceeding to show it to you at this early stage, nevertheless, perhaps, as you are the son of my old friend, and it so closely concerns your future welfare, you may as well know the truth at once. Read for yourself.”

George took the paper in his trembling fingers and read the six long lines of writing, the ink of which was scarcely yet dry. Three times he read them ere he could understand their exact purport. The cold formal words crushed all joy from his heart, for he knew, alas! that the woman he loved could never be his.

It was the death-warrant to all his hopes and aspirations. He could not now ask Liane to be his wife.

With set teeth he sighed, flung down the will upon the table with an angry gesture, and casting himself again into his armchair, sat staring straight before him without uttering a word.

In addition to being cruel and unjust the codicil was certainly of a most extraordinary character. By it there was bequeathed to “my son George Basil Stratfield” the sum of one hundred thousand pounds on one condition only, namely, that within two years he married Mariette, daughter of a certain Madame Lepage, whose address was given as 89, Rue Toullier, Paris. If, however, it was discovered that Mariette was already married, or if she refused to accept the twenty thousand pounds that were to be offered her on condition that she consented to marry his son, then one-half the amount, namely, 50,000 pounds, was to be paid by the executors to George, and the remaining 50,000 pounds, together with the 20,000 pounds, was to revert to his elder brother.

“It certainly is a most extraordinary disposition,” old Mr Harrison reflected aloud, taking up the will again, and re-reading the words he had written at his dead client’s dictation.

“How does my father think I can marry a woman I’ve never seen?” cried the son. “Why, the thing’s absolutely absurd. He must have been insane when he ordered you to write such a preposterous proposal.”

“No, he was entirely in his right mind,” answered the elder man, calmly. “I must confess myself quite as surprised as you are; nevertheless, it is certain that unless you offer marriage to this mysterious young person you will obtain nothing.”

“It is my father’s vengeance,” the son cried, in a tone full of bitterness and disappointment. “I desire to marry Liane, the woman I adore, and in order to prevent me he seeks to bind me to some unknown Frenchwoman.”

“Well, in any case, effort must be made to find her,” Harrison observed. “You surely will not let fifty thousand pounds slip through your fingers. There is a chance that she is already married, or that she will refuse the twenty thousand pounds which I shall be compelled to offer her.”

“But I will only marry Liane,” George cried, impetuously.

“My dear young man, yours is a mere foolish fancy. You cannot, nay you must not, render yourself a pauper merely because of this girl, who happens to have attracted you just for the moment. In a year’s time you will regard the matter from a common-sense point of view. Your proper course is to give up all thought of the young lady, and unite with me in the search for this mysterious Mariette Lepage.”

“I decline to abandon Liane,” George answered with promptness. “If I am a pauper, well, I must bear it. My ruin is, I suppose, the last of my father’s eccentricities. I’m the scapegoat of the family.”

“It is, nevertheless, my duty to advise you,” the elder man went on, standing before the empty fireplace with his arms folded. “In any case I shall be compelled to find this woman. Have you never heard your late father speak of any family of the name of Lepage?”

“Never. He has not been out of England for twenty years, therefore I suppose it’s someone he knew long ago. What could have been his object?”

“As far as I could glean it was twofold. First, he believed that the fact of having left this sum just beyond your reach would cause you intense chagrin; and, secondly, that if you did not marry this unknown woman, you will still be unable to marry the girl against whom he held such a strange deep-rooted objection.”

“Why did he object to her, Harrison? Tell me confidentially what you know,” urged the young man earnestly.

“I only know what he told me a few days ago,” the solicitor replied. “He said he had ascertained that you had taken many clandestine walks and rides with Liane Brooker, and he declared that such a woman was no fitting wife for you.”

“Did he give any further reason?” the other demanded.

“None. He merely said that if you declined to abandon all thought of her you should not have a penny.”

“And he has kept his word,” observed George, gloomily.

“Unfortunately it appears so.”

“He was unjust – cruelly unjust!” George protested. “I strove hard at the Bar, and had already obtained a few briefs when he recalled me here to be his companion. He would not allow me to follow my profession, yet he has now cast me adrift without resources.”

“You certainly have my entire sympathy,” the old lawyer declared, kindly. “But don’t take the matter too much to heart. The woman may be already married. In this case you will receive fifty thousand.”

George’s face relaxed into a faint smile.

“I have no desire to hear of or see the woman at all,” he answered. “Act as you think fit, but remember that I shall never offer her marriage – never.”

“She may be a pretty girl,” suggested the elder man.

“And she may be some blear-eyed old hag,” snapped the dead man’s son. “It is evident from the wording of the clause that my father has heard nothing of either mother or daughter for some years.”

“That’s all the more in your favour; because if she is thirty or so, the chances are that she is married. At all costs we must discover her.”

“The whole thing is a confounded mystery,” George observed. “Who these people are is an enigma.”

“Entirely so,” the solicitor acquiesced. “There is something exceedingly mysterious about the affair. The combined circumstances are bewildering in the extreme. First, the lady you admire bears a French name, next your father hates her because of some fact of which he is aware regarding her family, and thirdly, in order to prevent you marrying her, he endeavours by an ingenious and apparently carefully-planned device, to induce you to wed a woman whose existence is unknown to us all. He was not a man who acted without strong motives, therefore I cannot help suspecting that behind all this lies some deep mystery.”

“Mystery! Of what character?”

“I have no idea. We must first find Mariette Lepage.”

“My future wife,” laughed George bitterly, rising wearily from his chair.

“Yes, the woman who is to receive twenty thousand pounds for marrying you,” repeated the solicitor smiling.

“No, Harrison,” declined the young man as he moved slowly across the room with head slightly bent. “I’ll never marry her, however fascinating she may be. Liane is pure and good; I shall marry only her.”

And opening the door impatiently he snatched up his cap, strode along the hall, and out to where his man held the bay mare in readiness.

“Ah, well!” Harrison muttered aloud when he was alone. “We shall see, young man. We shall see. I thought myself as shrewd as most men, but if I’m not mistaken there’s a mystery, strange and inexplicable, somewhere; a mystery which seems likely to lead to some amazing developments. It’s hard upon poor George, very hard; but if my client was so foolish as to desire the family skeleton to be dragged from its chest his kith and kin must of necessity bear the consequences.”

With a word to Morton, most exemplary of servants, George sprang into the saddle, and a moment later was galloping down the long straight avenue. The brilliant afterglow had now faded, dusk had fallen, and he feared that Liane, having kept the appointment, would have left disappointed and returned home. Therefore he spurred the mare onward, and was soon riding hard towards the unfrequented by-road known as Cross Lane.

With a heavy heart he told himself that he must say good-bye to love, good-bye to hope, good-bye to ambition, good-bye to all of life except the dull monotonous routine of empty days, and a restless empty heart.

“I can’t tell her I’m a pauper,” he murmured aloud, after galloping a long way in dogged silence. “She’ll know, alas! soon enough. Then, when the truth is out, she’ll perhaps discard me; while I suppose I shall go to the bad as so many fellows have done before me. Of what use am I without the means to marry? To love her now is only to befool her. Henceforth I’m sailing under false colours. Yet I love her better than life; better than anything on earth. I’m indeed a beggar on horseback!”

And he laughed a hollow bitter laugh as he rode along beneath the oaks where the leafy unfrequented lane dipped suddenly to pass below the railway, the quiet lonely spot where, unobserved, he so often met his well-beloved. So engrossed had he been in his own sad thoughts that the stumbling of the mare alone brought him back to a consciousness of things around. The light had paled suddenly out of the evening atmosphere; the gloom was complete. Eagerly he looked ahead, half expecting to catch a glimpse of her well-known neat figure, but in disappointment he saw her not. It was too late he knew. She had evidently waited in vain, and afterwards returned to the village when the dusk had deepened.

Still he rode forward, the mare's hoofs sounding loudly as they clattered beneath the archway, until suddenly, as he emerged on the other side, a sight met his gaze which caused him to pull up quickly with a loud cry of dismay.

In the centre of the road, hidden from view until that instant, by reason of the sudden bend, a girl was lying flat with arms outstretched, her face in the thick white dust, while beside her was her cycle, left where it had fallen.

Instantly he swung himself from the saddle, dashed towards her, and lifted her up. Her straw hat had fallen off, her fair hair was dishevelled, and her dark skirt covered with dust. But there was yet another thing which held him transfixed with horror. In the dim fast-fading light he noticed that her blouse bore at the neck a small stain of bright crimson.

It was Nelly Bridson. She was rigid in death. The pallor of her refined, delicate face was rendered the more ghastly by the blood that had oozed from the corners of her arched mouth. Her small gloved hands were tightly clenched, her features haggard, convulsed and drawn by a last paroxysm of excruciating agony.

In her soft white neck was an ugly bullet wound. She had been shot by an unknown hand.

Chapter Three

“We must not Marry!”

George Stratfield stood aghast and horrified. It was nearly dark, but there still remained sufficient light to reveal the terrible truth that Nelly Bridson, his gay, vivacious friend, had been foully murdered. Tenderly he lifted her, and placed his hand upon her heart. But there was no movement. It had ceased its beating.

Her face, with its hard drawn features so unlike hers, was absolutely hideous in death. Her hair was whitened by the dust, while her blue eyes were wide open, staring fixedly into space with a look of inexpressible horror.

For some moments, still kneeling beside her inanimate form, George hesitated. Suddenly his eager eyes caught sight of some round flat object lying in the dust within his reach. He stretched forth his hand and picked it up, finding to his surprise that it was an exquisitely-painted old miniature of a beautiful woman, set round with fine brilliants. He held it close to his eyes, examining it minutely until convinced of a fact most amazing. This miniature was the very valuable portrait by Cosway of Lady Anne Stratfield, a noted beauty of her time, which for many years had been missing from the collection at Stratfield Court. It corresponded exactly in every particular with the description his father had so often given him of the missing portrait, the disappearance of which had always been a mystery.

He remained speechless, dumbfounded at the discovery. At length a thought flashed across his mind, that by prompt action the assassin might perhaps be discovered. He could not bear the appalled agonised gaze of those glazed, stony eyes which seemed fixed despairingly upon him, therefore he closed them and prepared to move the body to the roadside. Suddenly he recollected that such action would be unwise. The police should view the victim where she had fallen. Therefore in breathless haste he sprang again into the saddle, and tore down into Stratfield Mortimer, a distance of a mile and a half, as hard as the mare could gallop.

Quickly he summoned the village constable and the doctor. The former, before leaving for the scene scribbled a telegram to Reading requesting the assistance of detectives; then both returned with him to the spot. When they reached it they found the body still undisturbed, and a cursory examination made by the doctor by aid of the constable's lantern quickly corroborated George's belief that the unfortunate girl had been shot through the throat.

Nearly an hour the three men waited impatiently for the arrival of the detectives, speaking in hushed tones, examining the recovered miniature and discussing the tragedy, until at last the lights of a trap were seen in the distance, and very soon two plain-clothes officers joined them, inspected the body and the tiny portrait, and made a close examination of the road in every direction. In the dust they found the mark of her tyre, and followed it back beneath the railway arch and up upon the road towards Burghfield. With the rays of their lanterns upon the dust they all followed the track, winding sometimes but distinct, for about three hundred yards, when suddenly, instead of proceeding along the lane, it turned into a gateway leading into a field.

This fact puzzled them; but soon, on examining the rank grass growing between the gate and the road, they found it had been recently trodden down. There were other marks too, in the thick dust close by, but, strangely enough, these were not footprints. It seemed as if some object about a foot wide had been dragged along from the gate into the lane. Long and earnestly the detectives searched over the spot while the others stood aside, but they found nothing to serve as a clue. It was, however, evident that the unfortunate girl had approached, on her return from Burghfield, and dismounting, had wheeled her cycle up to the gate and placed it there while she rested. Here she had undoubtedly been joined by someone – as the grass and weeds bore distinct traces of having been trodden upon

by two different persons – and then, having remounted, she rode down beneath the railway bridge, and while ascending towards Stratfield Mortimer, had been foully shot.

The position in which both the body and the cycle were found pointed to the conclusion that she was riding her machine when fired at, but dismounting instantly she had staggered a few uneven steps, and then sank dying.

From the gateway the mark of the cycle could be traced with ease away towards Burghfield; indeed, a few yards from where the unknown person had apparently met her there were marks of her quick footsteps where she had dismounted. For fully a quarter of an hour the detectives searched both inside and outside the gate trying to distinguish accurately the footprints of the stranger whom she had met, and in this they were actively assisted by the village constable and George, all being careful not to tread upon the weeds and dust themselves. But to distinguish traces of footprints at night is exceedingly difficult; therefore they searched long and earnestly without any success, until at last something half-hidden in some long rank weeds caught George's eye.

"Why, what's this?" he cried, excitedly, as putting out his hand he drew forth a purely feminine object – an ordinary black hairpin.

The detectives, eager for anything which might lead to the discovery of the identity of the assassin, took it, examining it closely beneath the light of one of their bull's-eyes. It was a pin of a common kind, and what at first seemed like a clue was quickly discarded, for on taking it back to where the body was lying and taking one of the pins that held the unfortunate girl's wealth of fair hair, it was at once seen in comparison to be of the same thickness and make, although of a slightly different length.

Half a dozen pins were taken one by one from her hair and compared, but strangely enough all were about half an inch shorter than the one discovered by George.

"Anything in this, do you think?" one of the detectives asked the other, evidently his superior.

"No," the man answered promptly. "Women often use hairpins of different lengths. If you buy a box they are often of assorted sizes. No, that pin evidently fell from her hair when she put up her hands to tidy it, after dismounting."

So the vague theory that the person who joined her was a woman was dismissed. George had said nothing of his appointment with Liane at that spot, deeming it wiser to keep his secret, yet he was sorely puzzled by the fact that Nelly should have been there at the same hour that Liane had arranged to meet him. Perhaps his well-beloved had sent her with a message, as she had on previous occasions. If not, why had she returned from Burghfield by that lonely lane instead of riding direct along the high road, which was in so much better condition for cycling? He had only known her to ride along Cross Lane once before. Indeed, both she and Liane had always denounced that road with its flints and ruts as extremely injurious to cycles.

The assassin had got clean away without leaving the slightest trace. Even his footsteps were indistinguishable where all others were plainly marked, for during the day the dust had been blowing in clouds, carpeting the unfrequented lane to the depth of nearly half an inch, so that every imprint had been faithfully retained.

The detectives, after spending nearly two hours in futile search, were compelled at length to acknowledge themselves baffled, and preparations were made to acquaint Captain Brooker with the sad news, and to remove the body of Nelly Bridson to his house. At first it was suggested that George should go and break the sad tidings to the Captain, but he at once declined. He had never yet met Captain Brooker, and shrank from the unpleasantness of such a first interview with the man whose daughter he intended marrying. The duty therefore devolved upon the police, and the village constable was despatched with strict injunctions from George not to tell Miss Liane, but request to see the Captain himself alone. He knew what a blow it must prove to his well-beloved to thus lose under such terrible circumstances the fair-faced girl who had been her most intimate companion and confidante

through so many years; therefore he endeavoured to spare her any unnecessary pain. Her father would, no doubt, break to her the sad truth best of all.

George thought it useless to seek her that night, therefore when the constable had left he took a long farewell glance at the white upturned face, and mounting, turned the mare's head towards the Court. Onward he rode in the darkness across the open country to Broomfield Hatch, then turning to the right into the Grazely Road, cantered down the hill towards the lodge gates of Stratfield Court.

"It's a strange affair," he muttered aloud. "Strange indeed, that Nelly should have ridden along that bad road if not with the intention of meeting someone by appointment. Yet she would scarcely make an appointment at that spot, knowing that I had arranged to meet Liane there. No, poor girl, I can't help feeling convinced that she was awaiting me to tell me of Liane's inability to be there. Again, how came she possessed of the missing miniature? What motive could anyone possibly have in murdering her? Ah! what motive, I wonder?"

Deep in thought, he allowed his mare to jog onward beneath the beeches which at that point nearly met overhead, rendering the road almost pitch dark. Once he thought he detected a slight movement in the impenetrable gloom, and pulling up, strained his eyes into the high bushes at the roadside. For a few moments he sat perfectly still in the saddle listening intently. Then, hearing nothing, he started forth again muttering:

"I could have sworn I saw something white fluttering over there; but bah! I'm unnerved, I suppose, to-night, and after all it was mere fancy."

Once he turned to glance back; then resolutely set his face along the dark avenue of chestnuts, homeward.

Little sleep came to his eyes that night. He was thinking of his own future, of Liane's love, and of her sad bereavement. Times without number he tried to formulate some theory to account for the miniature being in Nelly's possession, and the foul assassination of the bright, happy girl, whose merry laughter had so often charmed him. Yet it was a mystery, absolute and complete.

The great house was quiet, for its irascible master was dead, and its son, held in esteem by all the servants from butler to stable lad, was ruined. The very clocks seemed to tick with unaccustomed solemnity, and the bell in the turret over the stables chimed slowly and ominously as each long hour passed towards the dawn. At last, however, still in his clothes, George slept, and it was not until the morning sun was streaming full into his room that he awoke. Then, finding that the two doctors had returned to London, he went to the library and wrote a brief note to Liane, asking her to meet him at the lodge gates at eleven o'clock. Sir John was now no more, therefore in the Park they might walk together unobserved. At first he hesitated to invite her there so quickly, but on reflection he saw that he must see her at once and endeavour to console her, and that the leafy glades of his dead father's domain were preferable to the highways, where they would probably be noticed by the village gossips.

At nine he sent the note down to the village by one of the stable lads, who brought back two hastily scribbled lines, and at the hour appointed she came slowly along the dusty road, looking cool and fresh beneath her white sunshade.

Their greeting was formal while within sight of the windows of the lodge, but presently, when they had entered the Park by the winding path which led through a thick copse, he halted, took her in his arms and imprinted upon her soft cheek a long passionate kiss. Her own full lips met his in a fierce affectionate caress, but their hearts were too full for words. They stood together in silence, locked in each other's arms.

Then he noticed for the first time that her eyes were swollen, and that she wore a white tulle veil to conceal their redness. She had no doubt spent the night in tears. The tiny gloved hand trembled in his grasp, and her lips quivered.

At last he spoke softly, first lifting her hand reverently to his lips.

"Both of us have experienced bereavement since last we met, two days ago, Liane. You have my sincerest sympathy, my darling."

“Is Sir John dead?” she inquired in a low husky voice.

He nodded.

“Then our losses are both hard to bear,” she said, sighing. “Poor Nelly! I – I cannot bear to think of it. I cannot yet realise the terrible truth.”

“Nor I, dearest,” he answered, echoing her sigh. “But we must nevertheless face the facts if we desire to discover the assassin.”

“They told me that it was you who first discovered her,” she said falteringly, her eyes overflowing with tears. “Tell me how it all happened.”

“There is very little to tell,” he responded. “I found her lying on the road dead, and went at once for the doctor and the police.”

“But what were you doing in Cross Lane?” she inquired.

“I went out to meet you as we had arranged.”

“But surely you knew that I could not meet you,” she exclaimed, looking at him quickly.

“How could I?”

“I sent you a letter telling you that my father had an unexpected visitor, and that we must therefore postpone our meeting until this evening.”

“A letter!” he cried, puzzled. “I have only this moment left the Court, and no letter has yet arrived.”

“But I gave it to Nelly to post before half-past twelve yesterday morning, therefore you should have received it at five. She must have forgotten to post it.”

“Evidently,” he said. “But have you yet ascertained why she went down Cross Lane? To the police the fact of her having ridden down there in preference to the high road is an enigma.”

“No. According to the inquiries already made it has been ascertained that she went to Talmey’s at Burghfield, purchased some silk, and had returned nearly to Stratfield Mortimer when she suddenly turned, went back about half a mile, and then entered Cross Lane. She was seen to turn by two labourers coming home from their work on Sim’s Farm.”

“She was alone, I suppose?”

“Entirely,” Liane answered. “Like myself, she had no horror of tramps. I’ve ridden along these roads at all hours of the day and night, and have never been once molested.”

“The tragedy was no doubt enacted in broad daylight, for the sun had not quite set when, according to the doctor, she must have been shot while riding. Have you any idea that she had incurred the animosity of anybody?”

“No; as you well know, she was of a most amicable disposition. As far as I am aware, she had not a single enemy in the world.”

“A secret lover perhaps,” George suggested.

“No, not that I am aware of. She had no secrets from me. Since we came to England she has never spoken of any man with admiration.”

“Then abroad she had an admirer? Where?”

“In Nice. Charles Holroyde, a rich young Englishman, who was staying last winter at the Grand Hotel, admired her very much.”

“And you were also living in Nice at the time?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know his address in England?” he inquired.

“No. Nelly may have done, but I did not. I met him with her on the Promenade several times, and he seemed very pleasant and amusing. The diamond brooch she wore he gave her as a present last carnival.”

“Now that I recollect,” George exclaimed, “she was not wearing that brooch when I discovered her.”

“No,” answered his well-beloved. “Strangely enough, that has been stolen, although no attempt was made to take the watch and bunch of charms she wore in her blouse.”

“Are the police aware of that?”

“Yes,” Liane answered. “I told one of the detectives this morning, and gave him a minute description of the brooch. At the back are engraved Nelly’s initials, together with his, therefore it is likely it may be traced.”

“If so, it will be easy to find the murderer,” George observed, as they strolled slowly along together beneath the welcome shade, for the morning was perfect, with bright warm sun and a cloudless sky into which the larks were everywhere soaring, filling the air with their shrill, joyous songs. “Have you any idea whether poor Nelly has corresponded with this man Holroyde since leaving Nice?” he inquired, after a pause.

“I think not.”

“Why?”

“Well, they had a slight quarrel – I have never exactly known the cause – they parted, and although he wrote several times, she did not answer.”

George scented suspicion in this circumstance. The fact that this brooch, one of considerable value, should alone have been stolen was, to say the least, curious; but discarded lovers sometimes avenge themselves, and this might perchance be a case of murder through jealousy. As he strolled on beside the handsome girl, with her pale, veiled face, he reflected deeply, trying in vain to form some theory as to the motive of the crime.

“Did the police tell you that beside her I discovered an old miniature of Lady Anne which has been missing from the Court for twenty years or more?” he asked.

“Yes, they showed it to my father and myself. We have, however, never seen it before. How it came into her possession we are utterly at a loss to imagine,” she answered. “It is a heavy blow to lose her,” she continued, in a low, intense voice. “We have always been as sisters, and now the fate that has overtaken her is enshrouded in a mystery which seems inexplicable. Father is dreadfully upset. I fear he will never be as happy as before.”

“But you have me, Liane,” her lover said, suddenly halting and drawing her towards him. “I love you, my darling. I told you nearly two months ago that I loved you. I don’t know that I can add anything to what I said then.”

She was silent, looking straight before her.

His breath came more quickly. The colour rose to his cheeks. At this decisive moment the words died in his throat, as they must for every honest lover who would fain ask the momentous question of her whom he loves. He remembered that he now had no right to ask her to be his wife.

“Do you know,” he said at last, again grasping her hand impetuously, “that I think you the sweetest, most charming woman in the world? I want you to be my wife, and help me to make my life all it should be, only – only I dare not ask you.”

Liane did not withdraw her fingers. She remained perfectly still without meeting his glance. Yet, strangely enough, she shuddered.

“I have not the power to say all I feel. My words sound so harsh and cold; but, Liane, Liane, I love you! God made not the heart of man to be silent, but has promised him eternity with the intention that he should not be alone. There is for me but one woman upon earth. It is you.”

He looked imploringly into her face.

“Yes, George, I feel that you love me,” she said, with a sweet smile behind her veil. “It is very nice to be loved.”

He covered her hand with eager kisses; but she withdrew it softly, her lips compressed.

“My darling!” His arm was about her waist, and he kissed her lips. He spoke in strong suppressed agitation; his voice trembled. He recollected he was penniless.

She freed herself from his embrace. “No, no,” she murmured. “We may love, but we must not marry. There are so many other girls who would make you far happier than I should.”

He went on to tell her how much he revered her character, how good and pure and lovely she was, and how completely she fulfilled his ideal of what a woman ought to be.

Slowly she shook her head. “That shows you know so little of me, George.”

“I know only what you have told me, dearest,” he answered.

Then a moment later he regretted that he had not adhered to his resolve and exercised more self-control. Was he not without means? Yet he had asked her to marry him! Could he tell her in the same breath that he was penniless? No, he dared not, lest she might cast him aside.

Liane stood like one in a dream, her beautiful face suffused by blushes, her eyes downcast, her breast slowly heaving.

He could resist his own passion – he could keep back what he felt – no longer.

“I love you!” cried he.

She stretched out her hands in a sort of mute appeal, and seemed as if she would fall; but in that instant she was again clasped to his heart, and held there with a tender force that she had neither the power nor the will to withstand.

He wished to marry her! Was it possible? And she loved him. With that thought her face was hidden on his shoulder, and she yielded herself to those protecting arms. He felt the shy loving movement as she nestled close to him, and her frame was shaken by a sob.

“My darling – my darling – my own darling!” he cried, triumph in his voice, and passionate joy in his eyes. “You love me – you love me!”

But again she drew herself away from him, then turned aside, held her breath, and shuddered. The lace ruffles on her bosom slowly rose and fell. The movement was as though she were shrinking from him with repulsion. But it was only momentary, and he did not notice it. Next instant she again turned, lifting her clear grey eyes to his with their frank innocent gaze.

“Yes,” she said, almost in a whisper, “I love you.”

Chapter Four

Hairpins

The tragedy caused the greatest excitement in the neighbourhood. Journalistic artists, those industrious gentlemen who produce such terribly distorted portraits, came from London and sketched the spot in Cross Lane and the exterior of Captain Brooker's house. One had the audacity to call and request him to lend them a photograph of the murdered girl. This he declined, with a few remarks more forcible than polite, for he had been greatly annoyed by the continual stream of interviewers, who continually rang his bell. Hundreds of persons walked or drove over from Reading to view the spot where Nelly had been found, and in addition to the local detectives, Inspector Swayne, a well-known officer from Scotland Yard, had been sent down to direct the inquiries.

At the inquest, held at the King's Head, two days later, it was expected by everybody that some interesting facts would be brought to light. Erle Brooker had never troubled to earn the good will of his neighbours, therefore they were now spitefully eager for any scandal that might be elicited, and long before the hour for which the jury had been summoned, congregated around the village inn. It was known that on the day following the tragedy the Captain had paid a mysterious visit to London, and the object of this trip had been a subject of much discussion everywhere. The murder of his adopted daughter had been a terrible blow to him, and when seen on his way to the station it was noticed that his face, usually smiling and good-humoured, wore a heavy, preoccupied look.

As he walked with Liane from his cottage to the inn, the crowd, gaping and hushed, opened a way for them to pass in; then, when they had entered, there was an outburst of sympathy and sneers, many of the latter reaching the ears of George Stratfield when, a few moments later, he followed them.

After a long wait, the Coroner at length took his seat, the jury were duly sworn, and the witnesses, ordered out of the crowded room, were ushered into a small ante-room, the table of which had recently been polished with stale beer. Here Liane introduced her lover to her father, and the men exchanged greetings. George, however, did not fail to notice the rustiness of the Captain's shabby frock-coat, nor the fact that his black trousers were shiny at the knees; yet as they grasped hands, the ring of genuine bonhomie about his voice favourably impressed him. By his tone and manner George instinctively knew that Erle Brooker, the man against whom his dead father entertained such an intense dislike, was a gentleman.

"Our meeting is in very tragic circumstances, Mr Stratfield," the Captain observed huskily, his grave face unusually pale. "They told me that you had discovered poor Nelly, but I had not the pleasure of your acquaintance, although I had, of course, heard of you often from the villagers."

Liane and George looked at one another significantly.

"I must regret your sad bereavement, and both you and Liane have my sincerest sympathy," the young man answered.

The Captain glanced quickly at the Baronet's son with a strange, puzzled expression. He had spoken of his daughter familiarly by her Christian name, and evidently knew her well. He had not before suspected this.

At that moment, however, the door opened, and a constable putting his head inside called his name. In obedience to the policeman's request he rose and followed him into the room wherein the court of inquiry had assembled. Having advanced to the table and been sworn, the Coroner addressing him, said, —

"Your name is Captain Erle Brooker, late of the Guards, I believe?"

"Yes."

"And you identify the body of the deceased. Who was she?"

“Helen Mary Bridson, daughter of a brother officer, Captain Bridson. She was left an orphan eleven years ago, and I brought her up.”

“Did her father die in London?”

“No, on the Continent.”

“Had she no relatives on her mother’s side?”

The Captain slowly stroked his moustache, then answered.

“I knew of none.”

“Were you acquainted with her mother?”

“No, I was not,” he replied after a moment’s reflection.

“And you have no suggestion to make, I suppose, regarding any person who might have entertained ill-will towards the unfortunate girl?” inquired the grey-haired Coroner.

“None whatever.”

“When did you last see her alive?”

“On Monday evening, when she accompanied a visitor to the station to see him off on his return to London. She rode her cycle, and announced her intention of going on to Burghfield to make a purchase. She was found later on,” he added, hoarsely.

“Who was this visitor? What was his name?”

“He was a friend, but I decline to give his name publicly,” the Captain replied firmly. “I will, however, write it for your information, if you desire,” and taking a pencil from his pocket he wrote the name of Prince Zertho d’Auzac and handed it to the Coroner.

The eager onlookers were disappointed. They had expected some sensational developments, but it seemed as though the crime was too enshrouded in mystery to prove of any very real interest. They did not, however, fail to notice that when the Coroner read what the Captain had written, an expression of astonishment crossed his face.

“Are you certain that the – this gentleman – left by the train he went to catch?” he asked.

“Quite,” answered Brooker. “Not only have the police made inquiry at my instigation, but I have also accompanied a detective to London, where we found my visitor. Inspector Swayne, as a result of his investigations, was entirely satisfied.”

“Had the unfortunate young lady any admirer?”

“I think not.”

“Then you can tell us absolutely nothing further?” observed the Coroner, toying with his quill.

“Unfortunately I cannot.”

The Captain, after signing his depositions, was directed to one of a row of empty chairs near the Coroner’s table, and his daughter was called.

Liane, pale and nervous, neatly dressed in black, entered quietly, removed her right glove, and took the oath. Having given her name, the Coroner asked, —

“When did you last see the deceased, Miss Brooker?”

“When she set out to go to the railway station,” she answered, in a low faltering voice.

“Have you any idea why she should have gone to Cross Lane? It was entirely out of her way home from Burghfield to Stratfield Mortimer, was it not?”

“I cannot tell,” Liane replied. “We went along that road on our cycles only on one occasion, and found it so rough that we agreed never to attempt it again.”

“I presume, Miss Brooker, that the deceased was your most intimate friend?” observed the Coroner. “She would therefore be likely to tell you if she had a lover. Were you aware of the existence of any such person?”

“No,” she replied, flushing slightly and glancing slowly around the hot, crowded room.

“You had a visitor whose name your father has just given me upon this paper,” observed the Coroner. “Was that visitor known to the deceased?”

The eyes of the father and daughter met for a single instant as she glanced around upon the long lines of expectant countenances.

“Oh, yes,” she replied. “The gentleman who came unexpectedly to see us has been known to us all for fully five or six years.”

“And has always been very friendly towards the unfortunate girl?”

“Always.”

“The only thing taken from the young lady appears to have been a diamond brooch. Do you know anything of it?”

“Of what?” gasped Liane nervously, her face paling almost imperceptibly behind her black veil.

“Of the brooch, of course.”

“I only know that she prized it very much, as it was a present from a gentleman she had met while on the Riviera eighteen months ago.”

“He was not her lover?” inquired the grave-faced man, without looking up from the sheet of blue foolscap whereon he was writing her statement.

“Not exactly. I have no knowledge of her possessing any admirer.”

The Coroner at last paused and put down his quill. “And this miniature, which was discovered beside the body, have you ever before seen it in the possession of the deceased?” he asked, holding it up to her gaze.

“No,” she answered. “Never.”

The jury not desiring to ask any questions, Liane was then allowed to retire to a chair next her father, and the doctor was called.

“Will you kindly tell us the result of the *post mortem*, Dr Lewis?” the Coroner requested, when the medical man had been sworn.

At once the doctor explained in technical language the injuries he had discovered, and described the exact position in which he had found the body when he reached the spot.

“And what, in your opinion, was the cause of death?” asked the Coroner in dry, business-like tones.

“She was shot at close quarters while ascending the incline leading from the railway arch towards Stratfield Mortimer. The weapon used was an Army revolver. I produce the bullet I have extracted,” he answered, taking it from his vest-pocket and handing it across the table. “The deceased’s assailant stood on her left-hand side, and must have shot her as she rode along. She evidently mounted her cycle at the commencement of the incline, and having run down swiftly and passed beneath the arch, was again descending when the shot was fired.”

“Was death instantaneous?” inquired the foreman of the jury.

“Scarcely,” answered the doctor. “Such a wound must, however, cause death. Immediate attention could not have saved her.”

A thrill of horror ran through the crowded court. Nearly everyone present had seen Nelly Bridson, with her smiling happy face, riding about the village and roads in the vicinity, and the knowledge that she had met with an end so terrible yet mysterious, appalled them.

Some further questions were put to the doctor, after which George Stratfield entered. As he raised the greasy copy of Holy Writ to his lips, his eyes fell upon Liane. She was sitting, pale and rigid, with a strange haggard expression upon her beautiful countenance such as he had never before beheld. He gazed upon her in alarm and surprise.

The Coroner’s questions, however, compelled him to turn towards the jury, and in reply he explained how, on that fateful evening after his father’s death, he was riding along Cross Lane, and was horrified by discovering the body of Nelly Bridson. In detail he described every incident, how he had lifted her up, and finding her quite dead, had ridden on into the village to obtain assistance.

Liane listened to his story open-mouthed. Her hands were closed tightly, and once or twice, when questions were put to him by Coroner or jury, she held her breath until he had answered. She

was as one paralysed by some unknown fear. Their gaze met more than once, and on each occasion he fancied he detected, even through her veil, that her eyes were dark and haggard, like one consumed by some terrible dread.

"You have, I believe, some knowledge of this miniature," the Coroner observed, again taking the small oval bejewelled portrait in his hand.

"Yes," he answered. "It is undoubtedly the one which has been missing from my late father's collection for more than twenty years. It was supposed to have been stolen, but by whom could never be ascertained. My father had several times offered handsome rewards for its recovery, as it is a family portrait."

"You have no idea, I suppose, by what means it could have come into the unfortunate girl's possession?"

"None whatever. The unexpected discovery amazed me."

"You have not told us what caused you to ride along Cross Lane on that evening," the foreman of the jury observed presently.

Again Liane held her breath.

"I had an appointment," he answered, not without considerable hesitation, "and was proceeding to keep it."

"Did you know Miss Bridson?"

"We had met on several occasions."

The detective from Scotland Yard bent across the table and uttered some words, after which the Coroner, addressing George, said, —

"Inspector Swayne desires to ascertain whether it was with the deceased you had an appointment?"

"No," he replied promptly.

Again the Coroner and the inspector exchanged some hurried words.

"Who was the person you intended to meet?" the Coroner asked, looking inquiringly at the witness.

"A lady."

"Am I right in presuming that it was Miss Brooker?"

George paused for an instant, bit his lip in displeasure at being thus compelled to publicly acknowledge his clandestine meetings with Liane, and then nodded in the affirmative.

"Then you were about to meet Miss Brooker, but instead, found Miss Bridson lying in the roadway dead?" the Coroner observed.

"I did."

"Are you aware that Miss Brooker wrote to you expressing her inability to keep the appointment?" the Coroner asked.

"She has told me so," he answered. "The letter was given, I believe, to the unfortunate young lady to post, but I have not received it."

"There appears to be some mystery about that letter," the Coroner said, turning to the jury. "I have it here. It was discovered in fragments yesterday by the police, thrown into a ditch at the roadside not far from where the body was found;" and taking from among his papers a sheet of foolscap whereon the pieces of Liane's letter had been pasted together, he handed it to the jury for their inspection.

At that instant a sudden thought occurred to George. This last fact pointed alone to one conclusion, namely, that Nelly being given the letter by Liane, and knowing its contents, kept the appointment herself, desiring to speak to him alone upon some subject the nature of which he could not, of course, guess. This would not only account for her presence at the spot where he found her, but also for her dismounting and resting at the gateway where they had discovered the curious marks in the dust, and for the fragments of the letter being recovered near.

A similar theory appeared to suggest itself to the minds of the jury, for a moment later the foreman asked —

“Would the deceased have any definite object in seeking an interview with you?”

“None whatever,” he promptly replied, puzzled nevertheless that the remains of Liane’s note should have been recovered in Cross Lane.

“You assisted the police to search the road for any traces of the assassin, I believe, Mr Stratfield,” continued the Coroner. “Did you discover anything?”

George raised his eyes and met the curious gaze of the woman he loved. At that moment her veil failed to hide the strange look of dread and apprehension in her face, so intense it was. Her lips, slightly parted, quivered, the pallor of her cheeks was deathlike, and her whole attitude was that of one who feared the revelation of some terrible truth.

“During my search I discovered a lady’s hairpin lying in the grass at the roadside,” George replied, after a silence, brief but complete. He was not thinking of the question, but was sorely puzzled at the extraordinary change in the woman who had promised to become his wife. The transformation was amazing.

“That pin is here,” the Coroner explained to the jury, passing it across for their inspection. “I will call Henry Fawcett, hairdresser, of Reading, who will give evidence regarding it.”

The man referred to was called in, and in reply to a formal question, took the hairpin in his hand, saying, —

“I have, at the instigation of the police, minutely compared this pin with those worn by the young lady at the time of her death, and also those found upon her dressing-table. I find that although apparently the same make it is nevertheless entirely different. Some of them found upon her dressing-table were of similar length and size, but while the pins she used were of the ordinary kind, such as may be purchased at any draper’s, this one is of very superior quality. By the shape of its points, together with its curve, I can distinguish that this is the pin manufactured solely by Clark and Lister, of Birmingham, and sold by first-class hairdressers.”

“Your theory is that this pin was never worn by the deceased?” the Coroner said, thoughtfully stroking his grey beard.

“I feel confident it never was, for the pin is quite new, and they are sold in large boxes,” was the reply.

“In that case it seems probable that another woman was with her immediately before her death,” observed the foreman to his brother jurors.

George looked again at Liane. Her eyes were still staring into space, her lips were trembling, her face was ashen pale. She started at the ominous words which fell upon her ear, then feigned to busy herself in re-buttoning the black glove she had removed before taking the oath.

“It, of course, remains for the police to prosecute further inquiries and to discover the owner of that hairpin,” the Coroner said. “Most of us are aware that ladies frequently use various kinds of pins in dressing their hair, but in this case not a single one of the peculiar sort found on the spot was discovered in the deceased’s possession; and this fact in itself certainly lends colour to a suggestion that immediately prior to the tragedy Miss Bridson was not alone.”

George having concluded his evidence, had taken a seat beside his well-beloved. Only once she glanced at him, then evaded his gaze, for in her grey eyes was an expression as though she were still haunted by some unknown yet terrible dread. His statement regarding the hairpin had unnerved her. Did she, he wondered, wear similar pins in her own dark, deftly-coiled tresses?

Instantly, however, he laughed the wild, absurd idea to scorn. That she feared lest some startling truth should be elucidated was apparent; but the suspicion that a pin from her own hair had fallen unheeded upon the grass he dismissed as utterly preposterous. Was she not his enchantress? Surely he had no right to suspect her of all women, for he loved her with all his soul. Yet neither police, jury,

nor he himself had inquired where she had been at the hour the tragedy was enacted. The thought held him appalled.

While these and similar reflections passed through his mind some words of the Coroner suddenly arrested his attention. The court was at once hushed in expectation, every word being listened to with eager attention.

“In the dress-pocket of the deceased has been found this letter, of a somewhat extraordinary character. As it is written in French it may be best if I read an English translation,” he said, spreading out the missive before him. “It is on superior note-paper of English make, bears traces of having been written by an educated person, and was sent to the post office, Stratfield Mortimer, where the police have ascertained that the deceased called for it about ten days ago. No address is given, and the envelope is missing, but the communication is to the following effect: – ‘Dear Nelly, – The cord is now drawn so tight that it must snap ere long. England is safer than the south, no doubt, but it will not be so much longer. Therefore I remain here, but fortunately not “en convalescence.” Do not tell Liane anything, but remember that the matter must be kept a profound secret, or one or other of us must pay the penalty. That would mean the end. For myself, I do not care, but for you it is, of course, entirely different. We are widely separated, yet our interests are entirely identical. Remember me, and be always on your guard against any surprise. Au revoir.’ It will be noticed, gentlemen, by those of you who know French,” the Coroner added, “that the words ‘en convalescence’ occur here in a rather curious sense. It is, in fact, nothing less than thieves’ argot, meaning under police surveillance; and it is strange that it should be written by one who otherwise writes well and grammatically. The name of the dead girl’s mysterious correspondent is a rather uncommon one – Mariette Lepage.”

“Mariette Lepage!” George cried aloud in a tone of dismay, causing not a little consternation among those assembled.

The strange-sounding foreign name was only too deeply impressed upon his memory. The writer of that curious letter, with its well-guarded expression in the argot of the Paris slums, was the unknown woman to whom, under his father’s will, he was compelled to offer marriage.

Chapter Five

Captain Brooker's Objection

As everyone expected, the Coroner's jury, after hearing Zertho's evidence at the adjourned inquest, returned the usual verdict of "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown." It was the only conclusion possible in such a case, the mystery being left for the police to solve. Later that afternoon Inspector Swayne was closeted with George and Mr Harrison at Stratfield Court, and after an hour's consultation regarding the curious letter found in Nelly's pocket, the detective left for London.

While that conversation was taking place Liane and her father, having returned from the inquest, were sitting together in the little dining-room. Brooker had cast off his shiny frock-coat with a sigh of genuine relief, assumed his old well-cut tweed jacket, easy and reminiscent of the past, while his daughter, having removed her gloves and veil, sat in the armchair by the fireplace still in her large black hat that gave a picturesque setting to her face. The windows were open, the blinds down, and the room, cool in the half-light, was filled with the sweet perfume of the wealth of old-world flowers outside.

"Our ill-luck seems to follow us, even now, my dear," he observed, thrusting his hands deep into his empty pockets and lazily stretching out his legs. "That inquisitive old chap, the Coroner, was within an ace of raking up all the past. I was afraid they intended to adjourn again."

"Why afraid?" asked Liane in surprise. "You surely do not fear anything?"

"Well, no, not exactly," her father answered, with a quick glance at her. "But some facts might have been then elicited which are best kept secret."

Liane looked at the Captain, long and steadily, with eyes full of sadness, then said, earnestly, —

"What caused you to suspect Zertho, father?"

"Suspect him. I never suspected him!"

"Do not deny the truth," she answered, in a tone of mild reproach. "I know that before you went to London you sent him a message which, had he been guilty, would have allowed him time to escape."

"But he was entirely unaware of the tragedy," her father answered, rolling a cigarette with infinite care. "Zertho could have had no object in murdering Nelly. Besides, it had already been proved by the station-master that he had left by the train he saw him enter."

"Then why did you take the trouble to go to London?" she inquired.

"My motive was a secret one," he replied.

"One that even I must not know?" she inquired, in genuine surprise.

"Yes, even you must not know, Liane," he answered. "Women are apt to grow confidential towards their lovers, and if the secret were once out, then my plans would be thwarted."

"You suspect someone?" she asked, in a low, harsh voice.

"Well," he answered, regarding his unlit cigarette intently, "I will not say that I actually suspect someone, but I have a theory, strange though it may be, which I believe will turn out to be the correct one."

Liane started. Father and daughter again exchanged quick glances. She fancied she saw suspicion in his eyes.

"May I not assist you?" she asked. "You know that in the past I've many times brought you luck at the tables."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "In this I must act entirely alone. George Stratfield no doubt occupies all your thoughts." She thought she detected a touch of sarcasm in his tone.

The girl blushed deeply, but did not answer. Her father, inveterate smoker that he was, lit his cigarette and sat silent and self-absorbed for a long time. He was thinking of the bright happy girl who, cold and dead in her tiny room upstairs, was the victim of a foul, terrible, and mysterious crime.

"How long have you known this man?" the Captain inquired at last.

"Three months."

"And has he proposed to you?"

"He has," she faltered, blushing more deeply.

He drew a long breath, rose slowly, and pulling aside the white blind, looked out as if in search of something. In truth, he was hesitating whether he should speak to her at once, or wait for some other opportunity. Turning to her at last, however, he said briefly, in a low, pained tone, —

"You must break off the engagement, Liane. You cannot marry him."

"Cannot!" she gasped, her face turning pale. "Why?"

"Listen," he continued huskily, coming closer to her, laying his big hand upon her shoulder, and looking down upon her tenderly. "Through all these years of prosperity and adversity you alone have been the one bright joy of my life. Your existence has kept me from going to the bad altogether; your influence has prevented me from sinking lower in degradation than I have already sunk. For me the facile pleasures of a stray man have ceased, because, for your sake, Liane, I gave up the old life and returned here to settle and become respectable. I admit that our life in England is a trifle tame after what we've been used to, but it will not, perhaps, be always so. At present my luck's against me and we must wait in patience; therefore do not accept the first man's offer of marriage. Life's merely a game of *rouge-et-noir*. Sometimes you may win by waiting. Reflect well upon all the chances before you stake the maximum."

"But George loves me, dad, and his family are wealthy," she protested, meeting her father's earnest gaze with her large grey eyes, in which stood unshed tears.

"I don't doubt it, my girl," he answered huskily. "I was young once. I, too, thought I loved a woman — your mother. I foolishly believed that she loved me better than anyone on earth. Ah! You wring from me my confession, because — because it should serve you as a lesson." And he paused with bent head, while Liane held his strong but trembling hand. "It is a wretched story," he went on in a low, harsh voice, "yet you should know it, you who would bind yourself to this man irrevocably. At the time this woman came into my life I was on leave down in the South of France, with wealth, happiness and bright prospects. I loved her and made her my wife. Then I went with my regiment to India, but already my future was blasted, for within a year of my marriage the glamour fell from my eyes and I knew that I had been duped. A fault committed by her threw such opprobrium upon me that I was compelled to throw up my commission, leave her and go back to England. I could not return to my friends in London, because she would discover and annoy me; therefore I have drifted hither and thither, falling lower and lower in the social scale, until, ruined and without means, I became a common blackleg and swindler. But it belongs to the past. It is dead, gone — gone for ever. Those years have gone and my youth has gone. I've lived like other men since then. Heaven knows it has not been a life to boast of, Liane. There have been days and years in it when I dared not trust myself to remember what had been — days of madness and folly, and months of useless apathy. Ah!" he sighed, "I was straight enough before my marriage, but my life was wrecked solely by that woman."

His daughter listened intently, and when he had finished she echoed his deep sigh. Her father had never before told her the tragic story. She had always believed that her mother died of fever in India a year after marriage.

"Then my mother is not dead?" she observed reflectively.

"I do not know. To me she has been dead these eighteen years," he answered, with a stern look upon his hard-set features. A lump rose in his throat, and in his eye there was a suspicion of a tear.

"Was she like me?" Liane asked softly, still holding her father's hand and looking up at him.

“Yes, darling,” he replied. “Sometimes when you look at me I shrink from you because your eyes are so like hers. She was just your age when I married her.”

There was a long and painful silence. The hearts of father and daughter were too full for words. They were indeed an incongruous pair. He was a reckless gamester, a cunning adventurer, whose career had more than once brought him within an ace of arrest, while she, although prematurely versed in the evil ways of a polyglot world, where the laws of rectitude and morality were lax, was nevertheless pure, honest and good.

“But, dear old dad, why may I not marry George?” she asked when, after thinking deeply over the truth regarding her parentage, her mind reverted to thoughts of the man she loved.

“I cannot sufficiently explain the reason now,” he answered vaguely. “Some day, when I am aware of all the facts, you shall know.”

“But I can love no other man,” she exclaimed decisively, with eyes downcast.

“You know my wish, Liane,” her father answered rather coldly. “I feel sure you will endeavour to respect it.”

“I cannot, father! I really cannot!” she cried starting up. “Besides, you give me no reason why I should not marry.”

“I am unable to explain facts of which I am as yet unaware,” he said, withdrawing his hand.

“We love each other, therefore I cannot see why you should object.”

“I do not doubt that there is affection between you, but my objection is well based, I assure you, as some day you will be convinced.”

“Have you any antipathy against George personally?”

“None whatever; I rather like him,” he said. “I only tell you in plain, straightforward terms that your marriage with him is impossible, therefore the sooner you part the better,” and opening the door, he slowly left the room.

Deep in thought, Liane stood leaning against the table, in the same position as Zertho had stood when he had asked the captain for her hand. Evidently her father entertained some deep-rooted prejudice against the Stratfields; nevertheless, after calm reflection, she felt confident that sooner or later she could over-rule his objection, and persuade him to adopt her view, as she had done on previous occasions without number.

On the following afternoon a double funeral attracted hundreds of persons to the churchyard of Stratfield Mortimer, where Nelly Bridson was laid to rest in a plain grave, beneath a drooping willow, and the body of Sir John Stratfield, fourteenth baronet, was placed in the family vault, among his ancestors. When the interments were over, George met Liane and managed to whisper a few words to her. It was an appointment, and in accordance with his request, she went at sundown along the chestnut avenue to the Court, and was at once shown to the library, where her lover awaited her.

Her mourning became her well. His quick eyes detected that her black dress, though not new, bore the unmistakable cut of the fashionable dressmaker. Her figure, perfect in symmetry, was shown to advantage by her short, French corset, and the narrow band of black satin that begirt her slim waist.

“I have to offer my apologies to you, dearest,” he said, when the servant had closed the door. “At the inquest I was bound to openly confess that we had met clandestinely.”

“What apology is needed?” she asked, smiling. “We love each other, and care nothing for what the world may think.”

“That is true,” he answered, deep in thought. “But I – I have an announcement to make to you, which I fear must cause you pain.”

“An announcement! What?”

“I must leave you.”

She stood before him, looked quickly into his face, and turned pale.

“Leave me!” she gasped.

“Yes. I find, alas, I am compelled to go.”

“And only the day before yesterday you asked me to become your wife!” she cried, reproachfully. “What have I done that you should treat me thus?”

“Nothing. You have done nothing, Liane, only to fascinate me and hold me irrevocably to you,” he answered, looking earnestly into her clear, beautiful eyes. He paused. His soul was too full for utterance. Then at length he said, “I have asked you here this evening to tell you everything, for when I leave here, I fear it will be never to return.”

“Why?” she asked, looking him full in the face, with a puzzled expression.

“Because I am not wealthy, as is generally believed,” he replied, colouring deeply as he met her searching gaze. “It is useless to deceive you, therefore I must tell you the hideous truth. My father has thought fit to leave his whole fortune to my brother, and allow me to go penniless. I am therefore unable to marry.”

Liane’s lips had grown white with fear and astonishment. “And that is the reason you now intend to forsake me!” she gasped.

He bowed his head.

She passed her hand over her eyes. Her soul was in a tumult. She, too, fondly wished to believe that he actually loved her, to trust the evidence of what she saw. His words were a trifle ambiguous, and that was sufficient to fill her with uncertainty. Jealous of that delicacy which is the parent of love, and its best preserver, she checked the overflowings of her heart, and while her face streamed with tears, placed her hand protestingly upon his arm.

“Forgive me!” he cried with increased earnestness. “I know I have wronged you. Forgive me, in justice to your own virtues, Liane. In what has passed between us I feel I ought to have only expressed thanks for your goodness to me; but if my words or manner have obeyed the more fervid impulse of my soul, and declared aloud what should have been kept secret, blame my nature, not my presumption. I am ruined, and I dare not look steadily on any aim higher than your esteem.”

“Ah! do not speak to me so coldly,” the girl burst forth passionately. “I cannot bear it. You said you loved me,” and she sobbed bitterly.

“I have loved you, dear one, ever since we first met,” he answered quickly. “I love you now, even better than my life. But alas! a mysterious fate seems to govern both of us, and we are compelled to part.”

“To part!” she wailed. “Why?”

“Ere long my brother will come to take possession of this place, for it is no longer my home,” he answered, in a low, pained tone. “I shall go away to London and try to eke out a living at the Bar. For a young man without means the legal profession is but a poor one at best,” he sighed; “therefore marriage being out of the question, I am compelled to tell you the plain honest truth, and release you.”

“Release me!” she echoed wildly. “I do not desire release. I love you, George.”

“But you do not love me sufficiently to wait through the long, dark days that are at hand?” he cried, surprised at her passionate declaration! “Remember, I am penniless, without hope, without prospects, without anything save my great affection for you!”

The slanting rays of the sunset streaming through the stained glass fell upon her, gilded her hair, and illumined her anxious face with a halo of light. She looked lovely, with her dark eyelashes trembling, her soft eyes full of love, and the colour of clear sunrise mounting on her cheeks and brow.

“Wealthy or poor,” she answered, in a low, sweet tone, “it matters not, because I love you, George.”

“And although we must part; although I must go to London and exchange this free, open, happy life with you daily beside me for the dusty dinginess of chambers wherein the sun never penetrates, yet you will still remain mine?” he cried half doubtingly. “Do you really mean it, Liane?”

“I do,” she answered, in a voice trembling with emotion, and with a look all tenderness and benignity. “It is no fault of yours that you are poor, therefore be of stout heart, and when you return to London remember that one woman alone thinks ever of you, because – because she loves you.”

With the large tears in her beautiful eyes – tears which seemed to him to rise partly from her desire to love him with the power of his love – she put her pure, bright lips, half-smiling, half-prone to reply to tears, against his brow, lined with doubt and eager longing.

“Dearest darling, love of my life,” he whispered through her clouds of soft, silky hair. “I know I, an Englishman, with my blunt manners, must grate upon you sometimes, with your delicate, high-strung feelings. We are as different as the day is from the night. But, Liane, if truth and honesty, and a will so to use my life as to become one of the real workers and helpers in the world – a wish to be manly and upright, strong of heart, and clean of conscience before God and man – if these can atone for lack of culture and refinement, then I hope you will not find me wanting. When I am absent there will be plenty besides me to love you, but I will not believe that any can love you better than I do, or few as truly.”

She hesitated for a single instant as he spoke. She lifted her face from her hands and looked up at him. He was not much taller than she; it was not far. But as she looked another face came between them – a pale, refined face: a face with more poetry, more romance, more passion.

Its sight was to her as a spectre of the past. It held her dumb in terror and dismay.

George saw her hesitation, and the strange horrified look in her eyes. Puzzled, he uttered not a word, but watched her breathlessly.

Liane opened her pale lips, but they closed and tightened upon each other; from beneath her narrowed brows her eyes sent short flashes out upon his, and her breath came and went long and deep, without sound.

“Why are you silent?” he whispered at last.

Her lips relaxed, her form drooped, she lifted her face to reply, but her mouth twitched; she could not speak.

“If you truly love me and are prepared to wait, I will do my best,” he declared passionately, surprised at her change of manner, but little dreaming of its cause.

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