

Le Queux William

In White Raiment



William Le Queux
In White Raiment

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Le Queux W.

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Содержание

Prologue	5
Chapter One	6
Chapter Two	10
Chapter Three	15
Chapter Four	19
Chapter Five	23
Chapter Six	27
Chapter Seven	31
Chapter Eight	35
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	36

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Prologue

Yes; it was utterly inexplicable.

So strange, indeed, were all the circumstances, and so startling the adventures that befell me in my search after truth, that until to-day I have hesitated to relate the narrative, which is as extraordinary as it is unique in the history of any living man.

If it were not for the fact that a certain person actively associated with this curious drama of our latter day civilisation, has recently passed to the land that lies beyond the human ken, my lips would have perforce still remained sealed.

Hitherto, my literary efforts have been confined to the writing of half-illegible prescriptions or an occasioned contribution to one or other of the medical journals; but at the suggestion of the one who is dearest to me on earth, I have now resolved to narrate the whole of the astonishing facts in their due sequence, without seeking to disguise anything, but to lay bare my secret, and to place the whole matter unreservedly before the reader.

Every doctor has a skeleton in his cupboard. I am no exception.

Any dark or mysterious incident, however trivial, in the life of a medical man, is regarded as detrimental by his patients. It is solely because of that I am compelled to conceal one single fact – my true name.

For the rest, reader, I shall be quite straightforward and open in my confession, without the affectation of academic phrases, even though I may be a physician whose consulting-room in Harley Street is invariably full, whose fees are heavy, and whose name figures in the public prints as the medical adviser of certain leaders of society. As Richard Colkirk, M.D., M.R.C.S., M.R.C.P., F.R.S., specialist on nervous disorders, I am compelled to keep up appearances and impress, with a sense of superior attainments, the fashionable world who seek my advice; but as Dick Colkirk, the narrator of this remarkable romance, I can at all times be frank and sometimes confidential.

In the wild whirl of social London there occur daily incidents which, when written down in black and white, appear absolutely incredible. Amid the fevered rush of daily life in this, our giant city of violent contrasts, the city where one is oftentimes so lonely among millions, and where people starve and die in the very midst of reckless extravagance and waste, one sometimes meets with adventures quite as astounding as those related by the pioneers of civilisation – adventures which, if recounted by the professional novelist, must of necessity be accepted with considerable reserve.

Reader, I am about to take you into my confidence. Think for a moment. Have you not read, in your daily paper, true statements of fact far stranger than any ever conceived by the writer of fiction? Have you not sat in a dull, dispiriting London police-court and witnessed that phantasmagoria of comedy, tragedy, and mystery as presented to that long-suffering public servant, the Metropolitan Stipendiary?

If you have, then you will agree that romance is equally distributed over Greater London. Love is as honest and hearts beat as true in Peckham, Paddington, or Plaistow as in that fashionable half-mile area around Hyde-park Corner; life is as full of bitterness and broken idols in Kensington as it is in Kentish Town, Kennington, or the Old Kent Road. The two worlds rub shoulders. All that is most high and noble mingles with all that is basest and most criminal; therefore it is not surprising that the unwary frequently fall into the cunningly-devised traps prepared for them, and even then most prosaic persons meet with queer and exciting adventures.

Chapter One

Mainly about People

My worst enemy – and, alas! I have many – would not accuse me of being of a romantic disposition.

In the profession of medicine any romance, acquired in one's youth or college days, is quickly knocked out of one by the first term at the hospital. The medical student quickly becomes, in a manner, callous to human suffering, and by the time he obtains his degree he is generally a shrewd and sympathetic observer, but with every spark of romance crushed dead within his heart. Thus, there is no bachelor more confirmed than the celibate doctor.

I had left Guy's a year. It is not so very long ago, for I am still under forty – young, they say, to have made my mark. True, success has come to me suddenly, and very unworthily, I think, for I confess that my advancement has been more by good luck than by actual worth.

At Guy's I had been under Lister and other great men whose names will ever remain as medical landmarks, and when I left with my degree I quickly discovered that the doctor's calling was anything but lucrative.

My first engagement was as assistant to a country practitioner at Woodbridge, in Suffolk; a man who had a large but very poor practice, most of his patients being club ones. Upon the latter I was allowed to exercise my maiden efforts in pills and mixtures, while my principal indulged freely in whisky in his own room over the surgery. He was a hard drinker, who treated his wife as badly as he did his patients, and whose habit it was to enter the cottages of poor people who could not pay him, and seize whatever piece of family china, bric-à-brac, or old oak which he fancied, and forcibly carry it away as payment of the debt owing. By this means he had, in the course of ten years, made quite a presentable collection of curios, although he had more than once very narrowly escaped getting into serious trouble over it.

I spent a miserable year driving, by day and by night, in sunshine and rain, far afield over the Suffolk plains, for owing to my principal's penchant for drink, the greater part of the work devolved upon myself. The crisis occurred, however, when I had been with him some eighteen months. While in a state of intoxication he was called out to treat a man who had met with a serious accident in a neighbouring village. On his return he gave me certain instructions, and sent me back to visit the patient. The instructions – technical ones, with which it is useless to puzzle the reader – I carried out to the letter, with the result that the poor fellow's life was lost. Then followed an inquest, exposure, censure from the coroner, a rider from the jury, and my employer, with perfect *sang froid*, succeeded in fastening the blame upon myself in order to save the scanty reputation he still enjoyed over the countryside.

The jury were, of course, unaware that he was intoxicated when he attended the man and committed the fatal blunder, while I, in perfect innocence, had obeyed his injunctions. It is useless, however, to protest before a coroner; therefore I at once resigned my position, and that same night returned to London, full of indignation at the treatment I had received.

My next practice was as an assistant to a man at Hull, who proved an impossible person, and through the five years that followed I did my best to alleviate human ills in Carlisle, Derby, Cheltenham, and Leeds respectively.

The knowledge I obtained by such general and varied practice, being always compelled to dispense my own prescriptions, was of course invaluable. But it was terribly uphill work, and a doctor's drudge, as I was, can save no money. Appearances have always to be kept up, and one cannot put by very much on eighty or one hundred pounds a year. Indeed, one night, seven years after leaving

Guy's, I found myself again in London, wandering idly along the Strand, without prospects, and with only a single sovereign between myself and starvation.

I have often reflected upon that memorable night. How different the world seemed then! In those days I was content to pocket a single shilling as a fee; now they are guineas, ten or more, for as many minutes of consultation. It was an unusually hot June, and the night was quite stifling for so early in summer. Although eight o'clock, it was not yet dark; but, as I strolled westward past the Adelphi, there was in the sky that dull purple haze with which Londoners are familiar, the harbinger of a storm. I had sought several old friends of hospital days, but all were out of town. June was running out, and the season was at an end.

London may be declared empty, and half a million persons may have left to disport themselves in the country or by the sea, yet the ebb and flow in that most wonderful thoroughfare in the world – the Strand – is ever the same, the tide in the dog-days being the same as in December. It is the one highway in London that never changes.

I had strolled along to the corner of Bedford Street, down-hearted and low-spirited, I must confess. Ah! to know how absolutely lonely a man can be amid those hurrying millions, one must be penniless. In the seven years that had passed, most of my friends had dispersed, and those who still remained cared little for a ne'er-do-well such as myself. In that walk I calmly reviewed the situation. Away in quiet old Shrewsbury my white-haired, widowed mother lived frugally, full of fond thoughts of her only boy. She had brought herself to the verge of poverty that I might complete my studies and become a doctor. Poor mother! She believed, like so many believe, that every doctor makes a comfortable income. And I had worked – nay, slaved – night and day, through seven whole years, for less wage than an average artisan.

I had not dined, for, truth to tell, I had hesitated to change my last sovereign; but the pangs of hunger reminded me that nothing had passed my lips since the breakfast in my dingy lodgings, and knowing of a cheap eating-house in Covent Garden, I had paused for a moment at the corner.

Next instant I felt a hearty slap on the back, and a cheery voice cried —

“Why, Colkirk, old fellow, what's up? You look as though you're going to a funeral?”

I turned quickly and saw a round, fresh-coloured, familiar face before me.

“By Jove!” I exclaimed in pleasant surprise. “Raymond! is it really you?” And we grasped hands heartily.

“I fancy so,” he laughed. “At least, it's what there is left of me. I went out to Accra, you know, got a sharp touch of fever, and they only sent back my skeleton and skin.”

Bob Raymond was always merry and amusing. He had been the humourist of Guy's, in my time: the foremost in practical joking, and the most backward in learning. The despair of more than one eminent lecturer, he had, nevertheless, been one of the most popular fellows in our set, and had occupied diggings in the next house to where I lodged in a mean street off Newington Butts.

“Well,” I laughed, “if you left your flesh behind you on the West Coast, you've filled out since. Why, you're fatter than ever. What's your beverage? Cod-liver oil?”

“No; just now it's whisky-and-seltzer with a big chunk of ice. Come into Romano's and have one. You look as though you want cheering up.”

I accepted his invitation, and we strolled back to the bar he had mentioned.

He was a short, fair-haired, sturdily-built fellow with a round face which gave him the appearance of an overgrown boy, a pair of blue eyes that twinkled with good fellowship, cheeks that struck me as just a trifle too ruddy to be altogether healthy, a small mouth, and a tiny, drooping, yellow moustache. He wore a silk hat of brilliant gloss, a frock-coat, as became one of “the profession,” and carried in his hand a smart ebony cane with a silver crook. I noticed, as we stood at the bar, that his hat bulged slightly on either side, and knew that in it was concealed his stethoscope. He was therefore in practice.

Over our drinks we briefly related our experiences, for we had both left the hospital at the same term, and had never met or heard of each other since. I told him of my drudgery, disappointment, and despair, to which he listened with sympathetic ear. Then he told me of himself. He had gone out to Accra, had a narrow squeak with a bad attack of fever, returned to London to recover, and became assistant to a well-known man at Plymouth.

“And what are you doing now?” I inquired.

“I’ve started a little practice over in Hammersmith,” he answered. “I’ve been there a year; but Hammersmith seems such a confoundedly healthy spot.”

“You haven’t got many patients – eh?” I said, smiling.

“Unfortunately, no. The red lamp doesn’t seem to attract them any more than the blue lamp before the police-station. If there was only a bit of zymotic disease, I might make a pound or two; but as it is, gout, indigestion, and drink seem to be the principal ailments at present.” Then he added, “But if you’re not doing anything, why don’t you come down and stay a day or two with me? I’m alone, and we’d be mutual company. In the meantime you might hear of something from the *Lancet*. Where’s your diggings?”

I told him.

“Then let’s go over there now and get your traps. Afterwards we can go home together. I’ve got cold mutton for supper. Hope you don’t object.”

“Very digestible,” I remarked. And, after some persuasion, he at length prevailed upon me to accept his hospitality.

He had established himself, I found, in the Rowan Road – a turning off the Hammersmith Road – in an ordinary-looking, ten-roomed house: one of those stereotyped ones with four hearth-stoned steps leading to the front door, and a couple of yards of unhealthy-looking, ill-kept grass between the bay window and the iron railings.

The interior was comfortably furnished, for Bob was not wholly dependent upon his practice. His people were brewers at Bristol, and his allowance was ample. The dining-room was in front, while the room behind it was converted into a surgery with the regulation invalid’s couch, a case of secondhand books to lend the place an imposing air, and a small writing-table whereat my hospital chum wrote his rather erratic ordinances.

Bob was a good fellow, and I spent a pleasant time with him. Old Mrs Bishop, his housekeeper, made me comfortable, and the whole day long my host would keep me laughing at his droll witticisms.

Patients, however, were very few and far between.

“You see, I’m like the men in Harley Street, my dear old chap,” he observed one day, “I’m only consulted as a last resource.”

I did not feel quite comfortable in accepting his hospitality for more than a week; but when I announced my intention of departing he would not hear of it, and therefore I remained, each week eager for the publication of the *Lancet* with its lists of assistants wanted.

I had been with him three weeks, and assisted him in his extremely small practice, for he sometimes sought my advice as to treatment. Poor old Bob! he was never a very brilliant one in his diagnoses. He always made it a rule to sound everybody, feel their pulses, press down their tongues and make them say, “Ah?”

“Must do something for your money,” he would say when the patient had gone. “They like to be looked at in the mouth.”

One afternoon, while we were sitting together smoking in his little den above the surgery, he made a sudden suggestion.

“Do you know, Dick – I scarcely like to ask you – but I wonder whether you’d do me a favour?”

“Most certainly, old chap,” I responded.

“Even though you incur a great responsibility?”

“What is the responsibility?”

“A very grave one. To take charge of this extensive practice while I go down to Bristol and see my people. I haven’t been homesick a week.”

“Why, of course,” I responded. “I’ll look after things with pleasure.”

“Thanks. You’re a brick. I won’t be away for more than a week. You won’t find it very laborious. There’s a couple of kids with the croup round in Angel Road, a bedridden old girl in Bridge Road, and a man in Beadon Road who seems to have a perpetual stomach-ache. That’s about all.”

I smiled. He had not attempted to diagnose the stomach-ache, I supposed. He was, indeed, a careless fellow.

“Of course you’ll pocket all the fees,” he added, with a touch of grim humour. “They’re not very heavy – bobs and half-crowns – but they may keep you in tobacco till I come back.”

And thus I became the *locum tenens* of the not too extensive practice of Robert Raymond, surgeon, for he departed for Paddington on the following evening, and I entered upon my somewhat lonely duties.

The first couple of days passed without incident. I visited the two children with the croup, looked in upon the bedridden relict of a bibulous furniture-dealer, and examined the stomach with the perpetual pain. The latter proved a much more serious case than I had supposed, and from the first I saw that the poor fellow was suffering from an incurable disease. My visits only took an hour, and the rest of the day I spent in the little den upstairs, smoking furiously and reading.

On the third morning, shortly before midday, just as I was thinking of going out to make my round of visits, an unusual incident occurred.

I heard a cab stop outside, and a moment later the surgery bell was violently rung. I started, for that sound was synonymous with half a crown.

A middle-aged woman, in black, evidently a domestic servant, stood in the surgery, and, as I confronted her, asked breathlessly —

“Are you the doctor, sir?”

I replied in the affirmative, and asked her to be seated.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, sir,” she said, “but would you come round with me? My mistress has been taken worse.”

“What’s the matter with her?” I inquired.

“I don’t know, sir,” answered the woman, in deep distress, “But I do beg of you to come at once.”

“Certainly I will,” I said. And leaving her, ascended, put on my boots, and placing my case of instruments in my pocket, quickly rejoined her, and entered the cab in waiting.

On our drive along Hammersmith Road, and through several thoroughfares lying on the right, I endeavoured to obtain from her some idea of the nature of the lady’s ailment; but she was either stupidly ignorant, or else had received instructions to remain silent.

The cab at last pulled up before a fine grey house with a wide portico, supported by four immense columns, before which we alighted. The place, standing close to the entrance to a large square, was a handsome one, with bright flowers in boxes before the windows, and a striped sun-blind over the balcony formed by the roof of the portico. The quilted blinds were down because of the strong sun, but our ring was instantly answered by a grave-looking footman, who showed me into a cosy library at the end of the hall.

“I’ll tell my master at once that you are here, sir,” the man said. And he closed the door, leaving me alone.

Chapter Two

The Third Finger

The house was one of no mean order, and a glance at the rows of books showed them to be well chosen – evidently the valued treasures of a studious man. Upon the writing-table was an electric reading-lamp with green shade, and a fine, pale photograph of a handsome woman in a heavy silver frame. In the stationery rack upon the table the note-paper bore an embossed cipher surmounted by a coronet.

After a few moments the door re-opened, and there entered a very thin, pale-faced, slightly-built man of perhaps sixty, carefully dressed in clothes of rather antique cut. He threw out his chest in walking, and carried himself with stiff, unbending hauteur. His dark eyes were small and sharp, and his clean-shaven face rendered his aquiline features the more pronounced.

“Good morning,” he said, greeting me in a thin, squeaky voice. “I am very glad my servant found you at home.”

“And I, too, am glad to be of service, if possible,” I responded.

He motioned me to be seated, at the same time taking a chair behind his writing-table. Was it, I wondered, by design or by accident that in the position he had assumed his face remained in the deep shadow, while my countenance was within the broad ray of sunlight that came in between the blind and the window-sash? There was something curious in his attitude, but what it was I could not determine.

“I called you in to-day, doctor,” he explained, resting his thin, almost waxen hands upon the table, “not so much for medical advice as to have a chat with you.”

“But the patient?” I observed. “Had I not better see her first, and chat afterwards?”

“No,” he responded. “It is necessary that we should first understand one another perfectly.”

I glanced at him, but his face was only a grey blotch in the deep shadow. Of its expression I could observe nothing. Who, I wondered, was this man?

“Then the patient is better, I presume?”

“Better, but still in a precarious condition,” he replied, in a snapping voice. Then, after a moment’s pause, he added, in a more conciliatory tone, “I don’t know, doctor, whether you will agree with me, but I have a theory that, just as every medical man and lawyer has his fee, so has every man his price!”

“I scarcely follow you,” I said, somewhat puzzled. “I mean that every man, no matter what his station in life, is ready to perform services for another, providing the sum is sufficient in payment.”

I smiled at his philosophy. “There is a good deal of truth in that,” I remarked; “but of course there are exceptions.”

“Are you one?” he inquired sharply, in a strange voice.

I hesitated. His question was curious. I could not see his object in such observations.

“I ask you a plain question,” he repeated. “Are you so rich as to be beyond the necessity of money?”

“No,” I answered frankly. “I’m not rich.”

“Then you admit that, for a certain price, you would be willing to perform a service?” he said bluntly.

“I don’t admit anything of the kind,” I laughed, not, however, without a feeling of indignation.

“Well,” he said after a few moments hesitation, during which time his pair of small black eyes were, I knew, fixed upon me, “I’ll speak more plainly. Would you object, for instance, to taking a fee of five figures to-day?”

“A fee of five figures?” I repeated, puzzled. “I don’t quite follow you.”

“Five figures equal to ten thousand pounds,” he said slowly, in a strange voice.

“A fee of five figures,” I repeated, puzzled. “For what?”

In an instant it flashed across my mind that the thin, grey-faced man before me was trying to suborn me to commit murder – that crime so easily committed by a doctor. The thought staggered me.

“The service I require of you is not a very difficult one,” he answered, bending across the table in his earnestness. “You are young – a bachelor, I presume – and enthusiastic in your honourable calling. Would not ten thousand pounds be of great use to you at this moment?”

I admitted that it would. What could I not do with such a sum?

Again I asked him the nature of the service he demanded, but he cleverly evaded my inquiries.

“My suggestion will, I fear, strike you as curious,” he added. “But in this matter there must be no hesitation on our part; it must be accomplished to-day.”

“Then it is, I take it, a matter of life or death?”

There was a brief silence, broken only by the low ticking of the marble clock upon the mantelshelf.

“Of death,” he answered in a low, strained tone. “Of death, rather than of life.”

I held my breath. My countenance must have undergone a change, and this did not escape his observant eyes, for he added —

“Before we go further, I would ask you, doctor, to regard this interview as strictly confidential.”

“It shall be entirely as you wish,” I stammered.

The atmosphere of the room seemed suddenly oppressive, my head was in a whirl, and I wanted to get away from the presence of my tempter.

“Good,” he said, apparently reassured. “Then we can advance a step further. I observed just now that you were a bachelor, and you did not contradict me.”

“I am a bachelor, and have no intention of marrying.”

“Not for ten thousand pounds?” he inquired.

“I’ve never yet met a woman whom I could love sufficiently,” I told him quite plainly.

“But is your name so very valuable to you that you would hesitate to bestow it upon a woman for a single hour – even though you were a widower before sunset?”

“A widower before sunset?” I echoed. “You speak in enigmas. If you were plainer in your words I might comprehend your meaning.”

“Briefly, my meaning is this,” he said, in a firmer voice, after pausing, as though to gauge my strength of character. “Upstairs in this house my daughter is ill – she is not confined to her bed, but she is nevertheless dying. Two doctors have attended her for several weeks, and to-day in consultation have pronounced her beyond hope of recovery. Before being struck down by disease, she was hopelessly in love with a man whom I believed to be worthless – a man whose name they told me was synonymous with all that is evil in human nature. She was passionately fond of him, and her love very nearly resulted in a terrible tragedy. Through the weeks of her delirium she has constantly called his name. Her every thought has been of him; and now, in these her last moments, I am filled with remorse that I did not endeavour to reclaim him and allow them to marry. He is no longer in England, otherwise I would unite them. The suggestion I have to make to you is that you should assume that man’s place and marry my daughter.”

“Marry her!” I gasped.

“Yes. Not being in possession of all her faculties, she will, therefore, not distinguish between her true lover and yourself. She will believe herself married to him, and her last moments will be rendered happy.”

I did not reply. The suggestion held me dumbfounded.

“I know that the proposal is a very extraordinary one,” he went on, his voice trembling in deep earnestness, “but I make it to you in desperation. By my own ill-advised action and interference, Beryl, my only child, is dying, and I am determined, if possible, to bring peace to her poor unbalanced

mind in these the last hours of her existence. My remorse is bitter, God knows! It is little that I can do in the way of atonement, save to convince her of my forgiveness.”

His face, as he bent forward to me at that moment, came, for the first time, within the broad bar of sunlight that fell between us, and I saw how white and haggard it was. The countenance was no longer that of a haughty man, but of one rendered desperate.

“I fear that in this matter it is beyond my power to assist you,” I said, stirring myself at last. Truth to tell, his proposal was so staggering that I inclined to the belief that he himself was not quite right in his mind. The curious light in his eyes strengthened this suspicion.

“You will not help me?” he cried starting up.

“You will not assist in bringing happiness to my poor girl in her dying hour?”

“I will be no party to such a flagrant fraud as you propose,” I responded quietly.

“The sum insufficient – eh! Well, I’ll double it. Let us say twenty thousand.”

“And the marriage you suggest is, I presume, to be a mock one?”

“A mock one? No, a real and binding one – entirely legal,” he responded. “A marriage in church.”

“Would not a mock one be just as effective in the mind of the unfortunate young lady?” I suggested.

“No, there are reasons why a legal marriage should take place,” he answered distinctly.

“And they are?”

“Ah! upon that point I regret that I cannot satisfy you,” he answered. “Is not twenty thousand pounds sufficient to satisfy you, without asking questions?”

“But I cannot see how a legal marriage can take place,” I queried. “There are surely formalities to be observed.”

“Leave them all to me,” he answered quickly. “Rest assured that I have overlooked no detail in this affair. A mock marriage would, of course, have been easy enough; but I intend that Beryl shall be legally wedded, and for the service rendered me by becoming her husband I am prepared to pay you twenty thousand pounds the instant the ceremony is concluded.”

Then, unlocking a drawer in his writing-table, he drew forth a large bundle of notes secured by an elastic band, which he held towards me, saying —

“These are yours if you care to accept my offer.”

I glanced at the thick square packet of crisp notes, and saw that each was for one hundred pounds. My eyes wandered to the Tempter’s face. The look I saw there startled me. Was he actually the devil in human guise?

He noticed the quick start I gave, and instantly his features relaxed into a smile.

“I cannot see what possible ground you can have for scruples,” he said. “To deceive a dying girl in order to render her last moments happy is surely admissible. Come, render me this trifling service.”

And thus he persuaded and cajoled me, tempting me with the money in his hand to sell my name. Reader, place yourself in my position for a moment. I might, I reflected, slave through all my life, and never become possessed of such a sum. I was not avaricious, far from it; yet with twenty thousand pounds I could gain the zenith of my ambition, and lead the quiet, even life that had so long been my ideal. I strove to shut my ears to the persuasive words of the Tempter, but could not. The service was not a very great one, after all. The woman who was to be my wife was dying. In a few hours, at most, I should be free again, and our contract would remain for ever a secret.

The sight of that money – money with a curse upon it, money that, had I known the truth, I would have flung into the grate and burned rather than suffer its contact with my hand – decided me. Reader, can you wonder at it? I was desperately in want of money, and, throwing my natural caution and discretion to the winds, I yielded. Yes, I yielded.

The Tempter drew a distinct sigh of relief. His sinister face, so thin that I could trace the bones beneath the white, tightly-stretched skin, grinned in satisfaction, for he was now confident of his

power over me. He had me irretrievably in his toils. He tossed the notes carelessly back into the drawer and locked it with the key upon his chain, then, glancing at the clock and rising, said —

“We must lose no time. All is prepared. Come with me.”

My heart at that instant beat so loudly that its pulsations were audible. I was to sacrifice myself and wed an unknown bride in order to gain that packet of banknotes. Mine was indeed a strange position, but, held beneath the spell of this man’s presence, I obeyed him and followed him, curious to see the face of the woman to whom I was to give my name.

Together we went out into the hall where stood the man-servant who had admitted me.

“Is everything ready, Davies?” his master inquired. “Everything, sir. The carriage is at the door.”

“I would ask of you one favour,” the Tempter said, in a low voice; “do not express any surprise. All will be afterwards explained.”

From the inner pocket of his frock-coat he produced a pair of white kid gloves, which he handed me, observing, with a smile —

“They are large for you, I fear; but that will not much matter. You will meet my daughter at the church; it looks better.”

Then, as I commenced putting on the gloves, we went out together, and entered the smart brougham awaiting us. All preparations had evidently been made for my marriage.

Our drive was not a long one; but so bewildered was I by my singular situation, that I took little notice of the direction in which we were travelling. Indeed, I was utterly unfamiliar with that part of London, and I only know that we crossed Sloane Street, and, after traversing a number of back streets, suddenly stopped before a church standing in a small cul-de-sac.

The strip of faded red baize upon the steps showed that we were expected; but the church was empty save for a wheezy, unshaken old verger, who, greeting us, preceded us to a pew in front.

Scarcely had we seated ourselves, conversing in whispers, when we heard a second carriage stop; and, turning, I saw in the entrance the silhouette of my unknown bride in her white satin gown. She advanced up the aisle leaning heavily upon the arm of a smartly-dressed man, who wore a monocle with foppish air. Her progress was slow – due, no doubt, to extreme weakness. Her veil was handsome, but so thick that, in the dim gloom of the church, I was quite unable to distinguish her features.

As she passed where I sat, silent, anxious, and wondering, the Tempter prompted me, and I rose and took my place beside her, while at the same moment the officiating clergyman himself appeared from the vestry. His face was red and pimply, showing him to be of intemperate habits; but at his order I took my unknown companion’s slim, soft hand in mine, and the scent of the orange blossom in her corsage filled my nostrils. I stood like a man in a dream.

At that instant the Tempter bent tenderly to her, saying —

“Beryl, my child, this is your wedding day. You are to be married to the man you love. Listen!” Then in a nasal tone, which sounded weirdly in the silence of the place, the clergyman began to drone the first words of the Marriage Service, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered together,” until he came to the first question to which I responded in a voice which sounded strange and cavernous.

I was selling myself for twenty thousand pounds. The thought caused me a slight twinge of conscience. Turning to the woman at my side, he asked —

“Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep ye only unto him as long as ye both shall live?”

A silence fell, deep and complete.

Two ordinary-looking men, who had entered the church to serve as witnesses, exchanged glances. Then a slight sound escaped my unknown bride, like a low sigh, and we could just distinguish the reply —

“I will.”

The remainder of the service was gabbled through. A ring which the Tempter had slipped into my hand I placed upon her finger, and ten minutes later I had signed the register, and was the husband of a woman upon whose face I had never looked.

The name which she signed with mine was “Beryl Wynd”; beyond that I knew nothing. Utterly bewildered at my position, I sat beside my bride on the drive back, but she preserved silence, and I exchanged no word with her. She shuddered once, as though cold. Her father accompanied us, keeping up a lively conversation during the whole distance.

Arrived at the house, the woman who had sought me at Rowan Road came forward to meet my bride, and at once accompanied her upstairs, while we entered the dining-room. The two witnesses, who had followed in the second carriage, quickly joined us. The butler Davies opened champagne, and my health, with that of the bride, was drunk in solemn silence. The man with the monocle was absent. Truly my nuptial feast was a strange one.

A few minutes later, however, I was again alone in the library with the Tempter, whose eyes had grown brighter, and whose face had assumed an even more demoniacal expression. The door was closed, the silence unbroken.

“So far all has been perfectly satisfactory,” he said, halting upon the hearthrug suddenly and facing me. “There is, however, still one condition to be fulfilled, before I place the money in your hands.”

“And what is that?” I inquired.

“That your wife must die before sunset,” he answered, in a hoarse, earnest whisper. “She must die – you understand! It is now half-past twelve.”

“What?” I cried, starting forward. “You would bribe me to murder your own daughter?”

He shrugged his thin shoulders, made an impatient movement, his small eyes glittered, and in a cold hard voice, he exclaimed —

“I said that it is imperative she should die before the money is yours – that is all.”

Chapter Three

Concerning a Compact

"Then you make murder one of the conditions of payment?" I said, facing him.

"I have only said she must die before sunset," he answered. "She cannot live, in any case, longer than a few hours. It is easy for you, a doctor, to render her agony brief."

"To speak plainly," I said, with rising indignation, "you wish me to kill her! You offer me twenty thousand pounds, not for marriage, but for the committal of the capital sin."

His thin lips twitched nervously and his brows contracted.

"Ah!" he responded, still quite cool. "I think you view the matter in a wrong light. There are various grades of murder. Surely it is no great crime, but rather a humane action, to put a dying girl out of her agony."

"To shorten her life a single minute would be a foul assassination," I replied, regarding him with loathing. "And further, sir, you do not appear to fully realise your own position, or that it is a penal offence to attempt to bribe a person to take another's life."

He laughed a short, defiant laugh.

"No, no," he said. "Please do not waste valuable time by idle chatter of that kind. I assure you that I have no fear whatever of the result of my action. There is no witness here, and if you endeavoured to bring me before a judge, who, pray, would believe you?" There was some truth in those defiant words, and I saw by his attitude that he was not to be trifled with.

"I take it that you have objects in both your propositions – in your daughter's marriage, and in her death?" I said, in a more conciliatory tone, hoping to learn something further of the motive of his dastardly proposal.

"My object is my own affair," he snapped.

"And my conscience is my own," I said. "I certainly do not intend that it shall be burdened by the crime for which you offer me this payment."

He fixed me with flaming eyes. "Then you refuse?" he cried.

"Most certainly I refuse," I responded. "Moreover, I intend to visit your daughter upstairs, and strive, if possible, to save her."

"Save her?" he echoed. "You can't do that, unless you can perform miracles. But perhaps," he added with a sneer, "such a virtuous person as yourself may be able to work marvels."

"I may be able to save her from assassination," I answered meaningly.

"You intend to oppose me?"

"I intend to prevent you from murdering your own daughter," I said warmly. "Further, I forbid you to enter her room again. I am a medical man, and have been called in by you to attend her. Therefore, if you attempt to approach her I shall summon the police."

"Rubbish!" he laughed, his sinister face now ashen pale. "You cannot prevent me from approaching her bedside."

"I can, and I will," I said. "You have expressed a desire that she should, for some mysterious reasons, die before sunset. You would kill her with your own hand, only you fear that when the doctor came to give his certificate he might discover evidence of foul play."

"Exactly," he responded with perfect coolness, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "It is because of that I offer you twenty thousand pounds. I am prepared to pay for your scientific knowledge."

"And for a death certificate?"

"Of course."

“Well, to speak plainly, I consider you an inhuman scoundrel,” I said. “If your daughter’s dying hour is not sacred to you, then no man’s honour or reputation is safe in your hands.”

“I thank you for your compliment,” he replied with a stiff bow. “But I might reply that you yourself are not very remarkable for honour, having in view the fact that, in the hope of gaining a sufficient price, you have married a woman upon whom you have never set eyes.”

“You tempted me!” I cried furiously. “You held the money before my gaze and fascinated me with it until I was helpless in your power. Fortunately, however, the spell is broken by this inhuman suggestion of yours, and I wash my hands clean of the whole affair.”

“Ah, my dear sir, that is not possible. Remember you are my daughter’s husband.”

“And yet you ask me to kill her.”

“Who has greater right to curtail her sufferings than her husband?”

“And who has greater right to endeavour to save her life?”

“But you cannot. It is impossible.”

“Why impossible?”

“She is doomed.”

“By you. You have resolved that she shall not live till morning,” I said, adding: “If, as you tell me, her mysterious illness must prove fatal, I see no reason why you should offer me a bribe to encompass her death. Surely a few hours more or less are of no consequence.”

“But they are,” he protested quickly. “She must die before sundown, I tell you.”

“Not if I can prevent it.”

“Then you will forgo the money I have offered you,” he inquired seriously.

“I have no intention of touching a single farthing of it.”

“Until you are forced to.”

“Forced to!” I exclaimed. “I don’t understand your meaning.”

“You will understand one day,” he answered with a grin – “one day when it may, perhaps, be too late. It would be best for us to act in unison, I assure you.”

“For you, possibly; not for me.”

“No – for you,” he said, fixing his crafty, evil-looking eyes upon me. “You have taken one step towards the goal, and you cannot now draw back. You have already accepted your price – twenty thousand pounds.”

“Enough!” I cried indignantly. “If I were to give information to the police regarding this conversation, you would find yourself arrested within an hour.”

“As I have already told you, my dear sir, I am not at all afraid of such a contretemps; I am no blunderer, I assure you.”

“Neither am I,” I answered quickly, resolving to remain there no longer discussing such a subject. From the first moment of our meeting I had entertained a suspicion of him. Several facts were evident. He had some strong motive, first in marrying his daughter Beryl, secondly in encompassing her death before sundown, and thirdly in implicating me so deeply that I should be unable to extricate myself from the net which he set to entrap me.

A fourth fact, apparently small in itself, had caused me considerable reflection: the hand that I had held and on the finger of which I had placed the bond of matrimony, was in no sense chilly or clammy. It was not the wasted hand of a moribund invalid, but rather that of a healthy person. While I had held it I felt and counted the pulsations. The latter had told me that my mysterious bride was without fever, and was apparently in a normal state of health. It was curious that she should have walked and acted involuntarily, if only half-conscious of her surroundings.

The Tempter was endeavouring to deceive me in this particular. But it was in vain.

“Cannot we come to terms?” he asked in a low, earnest voice. “There is surely no object to be gained in our being enemies; rather let us act together in our mutual interests. Recollect that by your marriage you have become my son-in-law and heir.”

"Your heir!" I echoed. I had not thought of that before. His house betokened that he was wealthy. "You are very generous," I added, not without some sarcasm. "But I do not feel inclined to accept any such responsibility from one whose name even I do not know."

"Of course," he said easily. "I was stupid not to introduce myself. In the excitement it quite slipped my memory. Pray forgive me. My name is Wynd – Wyndham Wynd."

"Well, Mr Wynd," I said with some forced politeness, "I think we may as well conclude this interview. I wish to make the acquaintance of my wife."

"Quite natural," he answered, smiling good-humouredly. "Quite natural that you should wish to see her; only I beg you, doctor, to prepare for disappointment."

"Your warning is unnecessary," I responded as carelessly as I could.

My curiosity had been aroused by the healthfulness of that small, well-formed hand, and I intended to investigate for myself. That house was, I felt certain, a house of mystery.

I had turned towards the door, but in an instant he had reached it and stood facing me with his back to it resolutely, saying —

"You will go to her on one condition – the condition I have already explained."

"That I take her life seriously, and give a certificate of death from natural causes," I said. "No, Mr Wynd, I am no murderer."

"Not if we add to the sum an extra five thousand?"

"I will not harm her for an extra fifty thousand. Let me pass!" I cried with fierce resolution.

"When you have promised to accede to my request."

"I will never promise that."

"Then you will not enter her room again."

Almost as the words left his lips there was a low tap at the door, and it opened, disclosing Davies, who announced —

"The Major, sir."

"Show him in."

The visitor, who entered jauntily with his silk hat still set at a slight angle on his head, was the well-groomed man who had led my bride up the aisle of the church. I judged him to be about forty-five, dark-complexioned, good-looking, but foppish in appearance, carrying his monocle with ease acquired by long practice.

"Well, Wynd," he said, greeting his friend, cheerily, "all serene?"

"Entirely," answered the other. And then, turning to me, introduced the new-comer as "Major Tattersett."

"This, Major, is Dr Colkirk, my new son-in-law," he explained. "Permit me to present him."

"Congratulate you, my dear sir," he responded laughing good-humouredly, while the Tempter remarked —

"The Major is, of course, fully aware of the circumstances of your marriage. He is our nearest friend."

"Marriage rather unconventional, eh?" the other remarked to me. "Poor Beryl! It is a thousand pities that she has been struck down like that. Six months ago down at Wyndhurst she was the very soul of the house-parties – and here to-day she is dying."

"Extremely sad," I remarked. "As a medical man I see too vividly the uncertainty of human life."

"How is she now?" inquired the Major of her father. "The same, alas!" answered the Tempter with well-assumed sorrow. "She will, we fear, not live till midnight."

"Poor girl! Poor girl!" the new-comer ejaculated with a sigh, while the Tempter, excusing himself for an instant left the room.

I would have risen and followed, but the Major, addressing me confidentially, said —

“This is a strange whim of my old friend’s, marrying his daughter in this manner. There seems no motive for it, as far as I can gather.”

“No, none,” I responded. “Mr Wynd has struck me as being somewhat eccentric.”

“He’s a very good fellow – an excellent fellow. Entirely loyal to his friends. You are fortunate, my dear fellow, in having him as a father-in-law. He’s amazingly well off, and generosity itself.”

I recollected his dastardly suggestion that my wife should not live longer than sundown, and smiled within myself. This friend of his evidently did not know his real character.

Besides, being an observant man by nature, I noticed as I sat there one thing which filled me with curiosity. The tops of the Major’s fingers and thumb of his right hand were thick and slightly deformed, while the skin was hardened and the nails worn down to the quick.

While the left hand was of normal appearance, the other had undoubtedly performed hard manual labour. A major holding her Majesty’s commission does not usually bear such evident traces of toil. The hand was out of keeping with the fine diamond ring that flashed upon it.

“The incident of to-day,” I said, “has been to me most unusual. It hardly seems possible that I am a bridegroom, for, truth to tell, I fancied myself the most confirmed of bachelors. Early marriage always hampers the professional man.”

“But I don’t suppose you will have any cause for regret on that score,” he observed. “You will have been a bridegroom and a widower in a single day.”

I was silent. His words betrayed him. He knew of the plot conceived by his friend to bribe me to kill the woman to whom I had been so strangely wedded!

But successfully concealing my surprise at his incautious words, I answered —

“Yes, mine will certainly have been a unique experience.”

He courteously offered me a cigarette, and lighting one himself, held the match to me. Then we sat chatting, he telling me what a charming girl Beryl had been until stricken down by disease.

“What was her ailment?” I inquired.

“I am not aware of the name by which you doctors know it. It is, I believe, a complication of ailments. Half a dozen specialists have seen her, and all are agreed that her life cannot be saved. Wynd has spared no expense in the matter, for he is perfectly devoted to her.”

His words, hardly coincided with the truth, I reflected. So far from being devoted to her, he was anxious, for some mysterious reason, that she should not live after midnight.

“To lose her will, I suppose, be a great blow to him?” I observed, with feigned sympathy.

“Most certainly. She has been his constant friend and companion ever since his wife died, six years ago. I’m awfully sorry for both poor Beryl and Wynd.”

I was about to reply, but his words froze upon my lips, for at that instant there rang through the house a shrill scream – the agonised scream of a woman.

“Listen!” I cried. “What’s that?”

But my companion’s jaw had dropped, and he sat immovable, listening intently.

Again the scream rang out, but seemed stifled and weaker.

The Tempter was with his daughter whom he had determined should die. The thought decided me, and turning, without further word, I dashed from the room, and with quickly-beating heart ran up the wide thickly-carpeted staircase.

Chapter Four

The Note of Interrogation

On reaching the corridor I was confronted by the thin, spare figure of the Tempter standing resolutely before a closed door – that of Beryl's chamber.

His black eyes seemed to flash upon me defiantly, and his face had reassumed that expression which was sufficient index to the unscrupulousness of his character.

"Let me pass!" I cried roughly, in my headlong haste. "I desire to see my wife."

"You shall not enter?" he answered, in a voice tremulous with an excitement which he strove in vain to control.

"She is in distress. I heard her scream. It is my duty, both as a doctor and as her husband, to be at her side."

"Duty?" he sneered. "My dear sir, what is duty to a man who will sell himself for a handful of banknotes?"

"I yielded to your accursed temptation, it is true!" I cried fiercely. "But human feeling is not entirely dead in my heart, as it is in yours. Thank God that my hands are still unsullied!"

He laughed – the same harsh, discordant laugh that had escaped him when, below in the library, I had refused to accept the vile condition of the compact.

He stood there barring my passage to that room wherein lay the unknown woman who had been so strangely united to me. Whoever she was, I was resolved to rescue her. Mystery surrounded her – mystery that I resolved at all hazards to penetrate.

"You were in want of money, and I offered it to you," the Tempter answered coldly. "You have refused, and the matter is ended."

"I think not," I said warmly. "You will hear something more of this night's work."

He laughed again, displaying an uneven row of discoloured teeth. To argue with him further was useless.

"Come, stand aside?" I cried, making a movement forward.

He receded a couple of paces, until he stood with his back against the door, and as I faced him I looked down the shining barrel of a revolver.

I do not know what possessed me at that instant. I did not fully realise my danger, that is certain. My mind was too full of the mystery surrounding the unknown woman who was lying within, and whose hand had showed me that she was no invalid. Physically I am a muscular man, and without a second's hesitation I sprang upon my adversary and closed with him. His strength was marvellous. I had under-calculated it, for he was wiry, with muscles like iron.

For a few moments we swayed to and fro in deadly embrace, until I felt that he had turned the weapon until the barrel touched my neck. Next instant there was a loud report. The flash burned my face, but fortunately the bullet only grazed my cheek.

I was unharmed, but his deliberate attempt to take my life urged me to desperation, and with an almost superhuman effort I tripped him by a trick, and kneeling upon him, wrenched the weapon from his grasp. Then, leaving him, I dashed towards the door and turned the handle, but in vain. It was locked. Without more ado I stepped back, and taking a run, flung myself against the door, bursting the lock from its socket and falling headlong into the chamber.

The light was insufficient in that great chamber; therefore I drew up one of the blinds partially and crossed to the bed, full of curiosity.

My wife was lying there, silent and still. Her wealth of dishevelled hair strayed across the lace-edged pillow, and the hand with the wedding-ring I had placed upon it was raised above her head and tightly clenched in that attitude often assumed by children in their sleep.

She had screamed. That sound I had heard, so shrill and plain, was undoubtedly the voice of a young woman, and it had come from this room, which was directly above the library. Yet, as far as I could see, there was nothing to indicate the cause of her alarm.

Utterly bewildered, I stood there gazing at the form hidden beneath the silken coverlet of pale blue. The face was turned away towards the wall, so that I could not see it.

Why, I wondered, had the Tempter barred my entrance there with such determination, endeavouring to take my life rather than allow me to enter there?

The small ormolu clock chimed the hour upon its silver bell. It was one o'clock.

Attentively I bent and listened. Her breathing seemed very low. I touched her hand and found it chilly.

For a moment I hesitated to disturb her, for she was lying in such a position that I could not see her face without turning her over. Suddenly, however, it occurred to me that I might draw out the bed from the wall and get behind it.

This I did, but the bed, being very heavy, required all my effort to move it.

Strangely enough at that moment I felt a curious sensation in my mouth and throat, and an unaccountable dizziness seized me. It seemed as though my mouth and lips were swelling, and the thought occurred to me that I might have ruptured a blood-vessel in my exertions in moving the bed.

Eager, however, to look upon the face of the woman who was my wife, I slipped between the wall and the bed, and, bending down, drew back the embroidered sheet which half concealed the features.

I stood dumb-stricken. The face was the most beautiful, the most perfect in contour and in natural sweetness of expression, that I had ever gazed upon. It was the face of a healthful and vigorous girl of twenty, rather than of an invalid – a face about the beauty of which there could be no two opinions. The great blue eyes were wide open, looking curiously into mine, while about the mouth was a half-smile which rendered the features additionally attractive.

"You are ill," I whispered in a low, intense voice, bending to her. "Cannot you tell me what is the matter? I am a doctor, and will do all in my power to make you better."

There was no response. The great blue eyes stared at me fixedly, the smile did not relax, the features seemed strangely rigid. Next second a terrible suspicion flashed across my mind, and I bent closer down. The eyes did not waver in the light as eyes must do when a light shines straight into them. I touched her cheek with my hand, and its thrilling contact told me the truth only too plainly.

My wife was dead. She had died before sunset, as the Tempter had intended.

The discovery held me immovable. Hers was a face such as I had never seen before. She was a woman before whom, had I met her in life, I should have fallen down and worshipped. Indeed, strange as it may seem, I confess that, as I stood there, I fell in love with her – even though she was a corpse.

Yet, as my eyes fixed themselves lovingly upon her features, as sweet, tender, and innocent in expression as a child's, I could not imagine the cause of death. There was no sign of disease or unhealthiness there.

Why had she uttered those screams? Why, indeed, had the door of the death-chamber been afterwards locked? Had she, after all, fallen a victim to foul play?

I drew down the bed-clothes and exposed her neck in order to make an examination. She wore, suspended by a thin gold chain, a small amulet shaped like a note of interrogation and encrusted with diamonds. My observations told me that she had not worn it very long, for the edges of the stones were sharp, yet the delicate skin remained unscratched. A desire possessed me to have some souvenir of her, and without further ado, I unclasped the chain from her neck, and placed it and the little charm in my pocket.

Then, in continuation of my examination, I placed my hand upon her heart, but could detect no cause of death.

Upon her breast, however, I found a curious tattoo-mark – a strange device representing three hearts entwined. Now in my medical experience, I have found that very few women are tattooed. A woman usually shrinks from the operation – which is not unaccompanied by pain – and, on careful examination of this mark, I came to the conclusion that it had been pricked some years ago by a practised hand; further, that it had some distinct and mysterious signification.

It was in the exact centre of the breast, and just sufficiently low to remain concealed when she had worn a *décolleté* dress. The light was dim and unsatisfactory, but all my efforts to trace the hand of an assassin were futile.

Suddenly, however, as I examined her eyes, the left one, nearest the pillow, bore an expression which struck me as unusual. Both organs of sight seemed to have lost their clearness in the moments I had been standing there, and were glazing as *rigor mortis* set in, but the left eye was becoming more blurred than its fellow – an unusual circumstance which attracted me. The bright blue which I had seen in its unfathomable depths had contracted in a manner altogether unaccountable until it was now only the size of a pin's head. I bent again closely and peered into it. Next instant the awful truth was revealed.

She had been foully murdered.

With quick heart-beating I examined the eye carefully, finding symptoms of death from some deliriant – a neurotic acting on the brain and producing delirium, presbyopia, and coma. Certain it was that if this were actually the Tempter's work, he was a veritable artist in crime, for the manner in which death had been caused was extremely difficult to determine.

Finding myself undisturbed there, I made further and more searching examination, until I held the opinion that death must have been almost, if not quite, instantaneous.

But such theory did not coincide with the screams that had escaped her. On reviewing the whole of the circumstances, I felt confident that she must have been fully conscious at the time, and that those shrieks were shrieks of terror. She had divined the intention of her enemies.

About the vicinity of the bed I searched for any bottle of medicine that might be there, but in vain. If she had really been ill previously, as the Tempter had alleged, the medicine prescribed might give me some clue to the nature of her disease.

Upon a chair close by, her bridal veil of Brussels lace was lying crumpled in a heap, while her gown of white satin was hanging upon the door-knob of the handsome wardrobe. The orange-blossoms diffused their perfume over the room, but to me it was a sickly odour emblematic of the grave.

My wife, the most beautiful woman upon whom my eyes had ever fallen, was lifeless – struck down by the hand of a murderer.

As I bent, looking full into the contracted pupil, I suddenly detected something half concealed in the lace edging of the pillow. I drew it forth, and found it to be a crumpled letter, which I spread out and read. It had evidently been treasured there, just as invalids treasure beneath the bolster all the correspondence they receive.

In an angular hand, evidently masculine, was written the simple words, without address or signature, "I have seen La Gioia!"

Who, I wondered, was "La Gioia"? Was it a happy meeting or a disconcerting one? The announcement was bare enough, without comment and without detail. Significant, no doubt, it had been received by her and kept secret beneath her pillow.

I started across the room to investigate my dead wife's surroundings and to learn, if possible, by observation, something concerning her life. A room is often indicative of a woman's character, and always of her habits. The apartment was, I found, artistic and luxurious, while the few books lying about showed her to be a woman of education, culture, and refinement. Upon a little side-table, concealed behind a pile of books, I found a small blue bottle which, taking up, I held to the

light, and afterwards uncorked and smelt, wondering whether its odour would give me any clue to its composition. The bottle contained pure chloroform.

Once more I crossed to the bed when, of a sudden, I again felt that strange sensation in my mouth and throat, both of which seemed to contract until my breathing became difficult. I felt half strangled. I fought against the curious feeling that crept over me, but a dizziness seized me, and I was compelled to clutch the foot of the bed in order to steady myself.

My mouth was burning, my head reeling, while my lower limbs seemed to have, in that moment, become cold, benumbed, and devoid of all feeling. I held my breath, determined to battle against the faintness; but all was useless. Sharp, acute pains shot through my legs as though red-hot wires were being thrust through my muscles, and a second later I became seized by a kind of paralysis which held my jaws immovable.

I placed my hands to my parched lips, and found that they had swollen to an enormous size. My tongue seemed too large for my mouth, and my throat so small that I could not swallow.

My head was swimming, but nevertheless I strove to calmly consider my situation. The symptoms were plain enough, and could not be mistaken. The Egyptian cigarette which the Major had given me had been strongly impregnated with some deleterious and poisonous substance.

I had, after all, fallen a hapless victim to my enemies, for by moistening the cigarette I had absorbed the poison, and, by the rapidity with which my mouth was swelling.

I knew that I had been given a fatal dose. With set teeth I stood trying to bear up against the sudden paroxysm of agony, but so excruciating was it that it proved too much. A loud cry escaped me. Writhing in the awful pains that gripped me from head to foot, I grew so weak that my legs refused to support me. Then, out of sheer exhaustion, I sank upon the floor, and the rest became blotted out in unconsciousness.

Chapter Five

Outward Bound

Strange noises aroused me slowly to a sense of my helplessness. My head seemed heavy as lead, my brain incapable of receiving any impression, my throat contracted as though by a diphtheritic swelling.

A low continued roaring sounded in my ears, accompanied by a curious unusual jarring. Slow to fully realise my position, it was some moments before I became convinced that the regular throbbing beneath my head was caused by machinery, and that the steady motion to and fro was the rocking of the waves.

I opened my eyes and found that it was broad daylight. To the left was a round opening closed by glass – a porthole through which the summer sun was shining, its rays being shut out now and then by the bright green water that rose against it as the waves hissed past. I was on board a ship at sea. The cabin was a narrow, rather dirty place, and the mattress on which I was lying was hard, being filled with straw. It was not a passenger cabin, that was certain, for the beams across were black and dirty, and swinging on a nail were a set of unclean yellow oil-skins and a sou'-wester.

So sudden and unaccountable had been my transition from the bed-chamber in that mysterious house of the Wynds', wherein my wife had been murdered, to that narrow pallet out at sea, that at first I could not believe it possible. I raised myself and looked around in wonder, half inclined to believe that the past events had been but a dream.

In that instant all the curious circumstances which had followed my call to the house with the big portico came vividly before me in rapid succession, the crafty actions of the Tempter and my wife's marvellous beauty most of all. With her, I had fallen a victim to the two ingenious conspirators, her father and the Major. It had, no doubt, been intended that I should die; yet certain of the Tempter's actions seemed out of keeping with the others, thus rendering the enigma more complete.

The pains in my head and the swelling in my mouth and throat were sufficient, however, to prove that the past was no chimera of the imagination. I had met with an adventure stranger, perhaps, than that experienced by any other man, for I had been both bridegroom and widower within an hour.

With some little difficulty I rose, but my legs were weak and cramped, and this, combined with the rolling of the ship, caused me to quickly seat myself on the edge of the narrow berth. My nerves were unstrung, my brain dulled, and the giddiness that seized me was such as I had never before experienced. It was not *mal de mer*, for I had travelled much by sea and had never experienced nausea, even in roughest weather. No; I had, by moistening the cigarette with the saliva, absorbed a strong dose of some anaesthetic, and its effect had been to a great extent irritant as well. Only my robust constitution had succeeded in throwing it off; the dose must, I felt confident, have killed a weaker man.

In a few minutes I succeeded in standing erect, and struggled to the cabin door. I turned the handle, but could not open it. I was locked in.

Again I seated myself upon my mattress and tried to calmly review the situation. Of a sudden I bethought myself of the amulet I had taken from the neck of my dead wife, and thrusting my hand into my pocket, was gratified to find it still there, together with a pair of white gloves that the Tempter had given me.

I took it out and carefully examined it. The chain was a very fine but strong one, and the curious little charm of plain gold on that side that would lay against the skin, was beautifully set with diamonds which now sparkled and flashed with a thousand fires in the brilliant sunset. About an inch and a half long, it was of most delicate workmanship. I had seen in jewellers' windows in Bond Street and Regent Street many articles of jewellery – brooches, breast-pins, and the like – in the form of a

note of interrogation, but never one made in this manner. It was different to all the others, a costly ornament without doubt, for all the stones were well matched, and, as far as I could judge, not being an expert, of the first water.

What was its significance, I wondered, as it lay in the palm of my hand. It was a souvenir of her – a souvenir of the woman who was my legal wife, and who had fallen a victim beneath the cruel hand of an assassin.

The crumpled scrap of paper I had also secured I brought from my pocket and likewise examined. The words upon it were in a man's hand without a doubt – an educated hand which, by its angularity and the formation of the letters might possibly have been acquired on the Continent.

"I have seen La Gioia!"

The words conveyed some distinct message or warning which I could not determine. One fact was, however, plain; if I could discover this mysterious "La Gioia," be she a woman or an object, I might perhaps ascertain the true meaning of the words, the reason they were penned, and the motive Beryl had in thus treasuring them beneath her pillow.

A desire possessed me to escape from that narrow place wherein the air was stifling. The porthole was screwed down so tightly that I could not move it without a wrench, and the place seemed hermetically sealed.

By the terrible racket of the machinery and the strong smell of tar and oil I felt certain that it was no passenger steamer by which I was travelling. Everywhere were traces of black dust. I dipped my finger in some of it, examining it closely; it was coal dust. The ship was a collier.

I rose again, and taking up a stout piece of wood lying on the floor, battered heavily at the door, demanding release. But the clash and roar of the rickety engines drowned my voice, and I feared that no one could hear me above the din.

A strong sea was running, although the sun shone brightly. We were evidently somewhere in the Channel, but from my porthole I could see no land.

Again and again I battered furiously, until of a sudden I heard gruff voices, and the door was unlocked and opened cautiously, disclosing two rough-looking bronzed seamen, dark-bearded and dressed in patched and faded dungareen.

"Well, mister," exclaimed the elder of the two, "what's the fuss?"

"No fuss at all," I responded. "I only want to be let out."

"No doubt," he responded, with a grin at his companion. "You'd like a breath of fresh air – eh?"

"Yes, I should."

"But sea-air ain't good for your constitution mister, so you'll have to stop here. You've got a cabin all to yourself, so what more do you want? Perhaps you'd like a bloomin' saloon?"

"Look here, my man," I said, as calmly as I could, "just do me a favour and ask your captain to step down here. I'd like to speak to him before the farce proceeds further. You're only obeying orders by locking me up here, of that I'm sure. But just tell the captain that I'm better, and want to have a word with him."

Both men looked somewhat surprised.

"We were goin' to have a look at you in a few minutes, and see whether you'd come to, if you hadn't have kicked up such a confounded row."

"Well, go and tell the captain I want to see him," I said, endeavouring to smile.

"All right, sir, I will," answered the man; "but I'll have to lock the door again."

"Very well," I laughed. "Only don't starve me, remember." The situation seemed humorous.

Both men grinned broadly; the door was closed, and I heard one remark to the other in true cockney English —

"E ain't such a vi'lent fellow, after all, Bill." Five minutes later the door was again opened, and a burly, full-bearded, black-eyed man in a pea-jacket and peaked cap entered the cabin.

"You are the captain, I presume?" I said.

"That's me," he answered, leaning against the wooden partition opposite my bunk.

"Well," I said, "I'd like to know by what right you lock me up here? I've been unconscious for a long time, and on coming to myself, I find I'm here onboard your ship at sea, imprisoned, and not allowed out."

"You're in here for the benefit of your health," he answered roughly. "A sea voyage'll do you good."

"Then perhaps you'll tell me the name of the ship on board which I'm taking this pleasure trip?" I said sarcastically.

"Better find that out."

"No very difficult matter, I suppose," I answered quite coolly. "Only I should like to point out that even though you may be skipper of this coal hulk, you have no right to imprison me here."

"I shall do just as I like, cocky," he responded. "And further, you'd best be quiet and keep a still tongue, or perhaps you won't see land again."

"That's certainly a very genteel speech," I said; "and perhaps the British Consul at your port of destination will have something to say regarding your conduct."

"I don't care a brass button for all the blanked consuls in the whole Consular Service," he replied, with a coarse laugh. "You are on board my ship, and I'll give you to understand now, once and for all, that I'm master here."

"Perhaps you'll pipe to a different tune when your master's certificate is suspended for a year or two."

"It 'ud take a better man than you to suspend it. While you're on board this craft, it'll be a wise policy to keep a still tongue in your head."

"And it will be wiser if you allow me my liberty, and just tell me how and why I came aboard here."

"You were brought here, but for what reason I don't know."

"And who brought me here?"

"I don't know. I wasn't on board when you arrived."

"The ship was lying in the Thames, wasn't it?"

"Yes," he answered. "It wasn't on Clapham Common, that's a certainty."

"And where are we now?"

"At sea."

"I'm aware of that, but in what sea – the Channel, the North Sea, or the Atlantic?"

"You'll know soon enough. Just breathe the ozone, and make yourself comfortable. That's all you have to do," he responded, with his bearded chin thrust forward, in an air of unconcern.

"Well, you haven't provided many creature comforts for me," I remarked, with a glance round the stuffy little place.

"No, this isn't exactly a Cunarder," he admitted. "But I'll tell the men to bring you some grub, at any rate. Like some duff?"

"You're very kind; but I'd rather take a walk on deck in order to get an appetite."

"No; the sun's a bit too strong," he answered waggishly. "You might get sunstroke, you know."

"I shall be asphyxiated if I remain here."

"Well, that's a comfortable death, I believe. More than one chap has died for want o' breath in the hold of this ship when we've been trimmin' coal."

"Then you refuse me my liberty?" I said, feeling that to argue pleasantly was useless.

"Yes, you've got to stay 'ere."

"By whose orders?"

"That's my own business," he growled.

"And mine also," I responded firmly. "You may be skipper of this craft, but you are not a gaoler, you know."

"I'm your gaoler, at any rate."

"That remains to be seen," I answered. "I suppose you've been paid to take me out of the country, like this; but I may as well warn you that you are aiding and abetting a murder, and that when you get ashore you'll find yourself in a very nasty position."

"With the Consul, eh?" he laughed. "Well, they're a decent lot, as a rule. We don't get much trouble with 'em if we deposit our papers in order."

"But if I demanded your arrest for illegal imprisonment?"

"I don't fancy you'd do that, mister," he responded with sarcasm. "It might be a bit of a bother for me in England, but the foreign police are a bit chary of touching a British capt'n."

There was, I knew, some truth in that. Yet I did not intend to remain cooped up there, a prisoner, for the remainder of the voyage.

"Well, now, look here," I said, in a more conciliatory tone. "Why are you not frank with me?"

"Because you ain't responsible for your actions."

"And that's why you won't allow me on deck?" He nodded.

"Then I suppose when I was handed over to your tender charge they told you I was a lunatic?"

"Well, they said you'd better be kept under restraint. I was told that you'd had a bad touch of the blues, it seems."

"And yet you took me aboard while I was unconscious," I said. "That was scarcely a wise proceeding was it?"

"You were here when I returned; I've told you I found you here."

"Then you mean to tell me that you don't know who paid you to take me on this pleasure trip?"

"No, I don't. I've only received orders, and just observed them."

"Orders from whom?"

"From my owners."

"Your owners! What possible interest could your owners have in shipping me aboard while I was unconscious? Who are they?"

"Hanways, of Newcastle."

"And what ship is this?"

"The *Petrel*, of Newcastle."

"Bound for where?"

"No," he replied. "I've strict orders to keep you confined in the cabin, to treat you as well as your behaviour will allow, and to tell you nothing."

"Well, captain, you're a sensible man, and surely you'll listen to reason."

"What reason? I've got my orders. That's enough for me."

"But I tell you that by this action you are aiding in the concealment of a terrible crime – the dastardly murder of a lady in London," I burst forth.

"Of course. That's the yarn they said you'd spin. Well, you can stow that for the present. I'll come down and hear it over a pipe, when I want a bit of relaxation. For the time being, just you sniff the ozone, and fancy yourself in a drawin'-room."

Then, without more ado, the burly fellow made his exit, slammed the heavy door and bolted it, leaving me still a prisoner within that tiny cabin.

Chapter Six

Captain Banfield Explains

The hours passed but slowly. The man who had first answered my summons brought me some food but to all my arguments he remained obdurate.

“The cap’n says you’re to stay ’ere,” he responded, “and if I let you out he’d put me in irons. Old Banfield ain’t a skipper to be trifled with, I can tell yer.”

So I remained there, filled with gloomy thoughts, and wondering where I was being taken, and what possible interest Messrs Hanway, the owners of the *Petrel*, could have in my forcible abduction.

I sat there, helpless and puzzled, until it grew quite dark, then my head feeling heavy, and my limbs exhausted on account of the drug that had been so ingeniously administered to me, I threw myself down, and the motion of the vessel soon lulled me to sleep.

The long green waves were sweeping past in the sunlight when I again opened my eyes, and from the porthole I could see a large steamer with a pair of red and black funnels in the distance, leaving a long trail of smoke behind her. Soon, however, she was beyond the range of my vision, and I could do nothing except sit there and review the whole situation.

The beautiful face of my murdered wife arose ever before me. It seemed to cry to me for vengeance. I was her husband, and I alone knew the truth.

Yet it was evident that I was still in the hands of enemies, and, imprisoned there, I could do nothing.

The day passed, and fortunately I found myself feeling better. The effect of the noxious drug was slowly wearing off; yet the strain upon my nerves was terrible, and the imprisonment, coupled with uncertainty as to the future, was driving me to desperation.

A third day passed, much as the second. The only person I saw was the sailor who brought me food from the cook’s galley in the morning and at evening – badly cooked sailors’ fare that I could scarcely touch. As the sun was sinking, we suddenly approached a blue line of coast, and continued to skirt it until it became swallowed up in the night mists. Then, wearied, I again lay down to sleep.

I was awakened by the sudden stoppage of the engines, and found that it was already day again, and that we were in calm water. Outside my porthole was a flat stone wall which shut out everything.

Much shouting and tramping sounded above, and I knew that we were being made fast at a quay.

My opportunity for escape had arrived. If only I could break open the door, and slip up on deck unobserved, I might regain my freedom.

Now, I had during the past two days made a most careful examination of my cabin and of the door, during which I had noticed that, supporting the box-like berth beneath, was an iron stay, the lower end of which was flattened out so that it could be more easily screwed down to the floor. The screws were loose, like most of the fittings of the badly kept craft; therefore, after some little trouble, I managed to remove it, and found that I held in my hand a capital crowbar.

Presently I managed to work the thin end between the door and the lintel, and then, throwing my whole weight against it, endeavoured to force the outer bolt from its fastenings.

My first attempt was abortive, but I saw that the screws were giving away; therefore I continued my efforts carefully so as not to attract attention, until, of a sudden, the socket of the bolt flew off, and the door was burst open. Then, holding my iron bar in self-defence, I stepped along to the foot of a ladder, by which I climbed on deck.

The vessel, it seemed, was not a large one, and of a particularly dirty and forbidding appearance. With care I crept round the deck-house unobserved, until I reached the gangway, and just as my presence was discovered by the captain, I slipped across it nimbly, and was on the quay amid a crowd

of labourers, custom officers, and the usual motley assemblage which gathers to watch an arriving vessel.

I heard the skipper shouting violently, and a couple of the crew started in pursuit; but, taking to my heels I soon outdistanced them, and after some little time found myself walking in a large handsome street lined with fine shops and showy cafés. I was in Christiania.

I inquired in French of several persons the whereabouts of the British Consulate, and about an hour later found myself in the private office of the representative of her Majesty, a tall, good-looking man in a cool suit of white linen.

To him I related the whole circumstances. He listened, but smiled now and then with an air of incredulity. I told him of the murder, of the manner in which my life had been twice attempted, and of the remarkable circumstances of my abduction.

"And you say that you were taken on board the *Petrel*," he said reflectively. "I know Captain Banfield quite well. He is a strict disciplinarian, an excellent sailor, and is held in high esteem by his men. We must hear his explanation of the affair at once. If what you have said is true, it is certainly most remarkable."

I drew the trinket with the golden chain from my pocket, together with the crumpled note, and showed them to him.

"Strange," he remarked. "Most extraordinary! I'll send down to the docks for Banfield at once;" and, calling a clerk, he dispatched him in a cab.

In the meantime, in response to his questions, I gave him the most minute details of the startling affairs, as well as the ingenious manner in which Beryl Wynd had been murdered. I knew that the story when related sounded absolutely incredible; but it was equally certain that the Consul, at first inclined to doubt my statement, had now become highly interested in it.

I remarked upon the extraordinary mystery, and its features which seemed to stagger belief.

"But you are a medical man of considerable attainment, I notice from your card," he resumed. "I have no reason to doubt your story. It is rather a matter which should be strictly inquired into. Any person abducted from England, in the manner you have been, has a right to seek protection and advice of his consul."

And we continued chatting until, after a lapse of nearly half an hour, the captain of the *Petrel*, wearing his shore-going clothes, was ushered in.

"Good morning, sir!" he exclaimed, addressing the representative of the Foreign Office, but taking no notice of my presence. "You've sent for me?"

"Yes, Captain," the Consul responded rather severely. "Kindly sit down. There is a little matter upon which you can throw some light. You know this gentleman?" – and he indicated myself.

"Yes, sir. I know 'im."

"Well, he has lodged a very serious complaint against you, namely, that you have held him a prisoner on board your ship without any just cause; and, further, that contrary to the regulations of the Board of Trade, you carried him from port while in an unconscious condition." The skipper remained quite unabashed.

"Well, sir," he answered, "as I've already told the gentleman, I've only acted under strict orders from my owners. I suppose they'll take all the responsibility?"

"No; the responsibility rests upon yourself. You've held a master's certificate a good many years, and you are fully acquainted with the Board of Trade regulations."

"Of course, I don't deny that," the other responded.

"But my orders were quite precise."

"And now, tell me, how came this gentleman on board your ship?"

"To tell the truth, sir, I don't know exactly. We were lying in the St. Katherine Docks, and my last evening ashore I spent at home with my wife, over at Victoria Park. We were to sail at four o'clock in the morning, but I didn't get aboard before about ten past four. When I did so, orders from the

owners were put into my hand, and I was told that there was a passenger who'd been brought aboard, lying asleep below. 'Ere's the letter;" and he drew it from his pocket and handed it to the Consul.

The latter read it through, then, with an exclamation of surprise, handed it over to me.

It certainly increased the mystery, for it was from the office of the owners, Messrs Hanway Brothers, in Leadenhall Street, ordering that I should be taken on the round voyage to the Baltic, well cared for, but kept locked in a cabin, as I had developed homicidal tendencies.

"The gentleman, whose name is Doctor Colkirk," continued the letter, "is subject to fits, in which he remains unconscious for some hours; therefore there is no cause for alarm if he is not conscious when he reaches you. He is under an hallucination that he has been witness of some remarkable crime, and will, no doubt, impress upon you the urgent necessity of returning to London for the prosecution of inquiries. If he does this, humour him, but on no account allow him to go on deck, or to hold conversation with any one. The gentleman is a source of the greatest anxiety to his friends, and, we may add, that if the present orders are strictly carried out, the gentleman's friends have promised the payment of a handsome bonus to yourself. We therefore place him on board the *Petrel*, in preference to any other vessel of our fleet, because of the confidence we entertain that you will strictly carry out your orders."

The letter was signed by the firm.

"It seems very much as though the owners had some object in sending you aboard," observed the Consul.

Then, turning to the skipper, he asked, "How was the gentleman brought on board?"

"He was brought in a private carriage about six o'clock in the evening, my men say. Two gentlemen carried him on board. The dock police stopped them, but they told the constable that the gentleman was drunk."

"And when you received this letter, what did you do?"

"Well, I put him in the second mate's cabin, and left him alone till two days later, when he came to. Then I just carried out my orders."

"Where are you bound for?"

"The round trip – Stockholm, Riga, St. Petersburg, Drammen, Christiansund, and home."

"That means a month."

"More – six weeks."

"Your owners, therefore, were anxious that the doctor should be absent from England during that time. There is some mystery here, on the face of it. Doctor Colkirk has related to me a very remarkable story, and the most searching inquiry should be instituted."

"Well, sir," Banfield said apologetically, "I hope you don't consider my conduct bad. I've only carried out my orders to the letter. You see I didn't know that the gentleman was on board until we'd actually left the quay; and the letter says, quite distinctly, that he's subject to fits, therefore I let him remain quiet until he regained consciousness." Then, turning to me, he added, "I trust, sir, that you'll accept my apology."

"That's all very well," interposed the Consul; "but you know that you did entirely wrong in sailing with an unconscious stranger on board."

"I admit that. But you see I had my orders, sir."

"Who delivered them to you?" I inquired.

"The two gentlemen who brought you on board," he responded.

"Have any of your men described them to you?"

"They only said that they were both well dressed, and about middle age."

They were, without doubt, the Tempter and his accomplice. The conspiracy had been conceived and carried out with amazing ingenuity.

"And they brought the doctor on board and delivered this letter?"

"Yes, sir. They afterwards re-entered the carriage and drove away."

“Well,” said the Consul, “the only course I see is for the doctor to take this letter, return to London, and seek an explanation of your owners.”

“No, sir, I shan’t give up the letter. It’s written to me,” demurred the captain.

“But it is in my hands,” responded the Consul. “I am making inquiries into this affair, and I shall act as I think best in the interest of all parties concerned. The letter is your property, certainly; but recollect that this affair may prove very awkward for your owners. Therefore, take my advice, Captain, and assist this gentleman in his inquiries.”

“I protest against you keeping the letter.”

“Very well, I will see that your protest is forwarded to your owners,” replied the Consul; and he handed me the letter, saying —

“Your best course. Doctor, is to return by the Wilson boat to Hull. She sails this afternoon at four. Then go down to Leadenhall Street and, make inquiries – it seems a strange affair, to say the least.”

“It is entirely unaccountable,” I said. “There seems to have been a widespread plot against me, with a single motive – the concealment of the murder of Beryl Wynd.”

“But in that case why not let me telegraph to Scotland Yard?” suggested the Consul, as the sudden idea occurred to him. “They would watch the house until your return. To-day is Tuesday. You’ll be in London on Thursday night, or early on Friday morning.”

The proposal was an excellent one, and I gladly acceded. Next instant, however, the bewildering truth flashed across my mind. I had not hitherto realised my position. My heart sank within me.

“Would that your suggestion could be carried out,” I replied. “But, truth to tell, I don’t know the house, for I took no notice of its situation, and am unable to tell the name of the road.”

“Ah! how extremely unfortunate. London is a big place, and there are thousands of houses that are outwardly the same. Didn’t the servant who called at your surgery give you the address?”

“No; she gave it to the cabman, but I did not catch it. Men of my profession take little heed of the exterior of houses. We make a note of the number in our visiting-books – that’s all.”

“Then you really haven’t any idea of the situation of the house in which the tragedy occurred?”

“None whatever,” I replied. A moment later a further thought occurred to me, and I added, “But would not the registry of marriages give the address of my bride?”

“Why, of course it would!” cried the Consul excitedly. “An excellent idea. Return to London as quickly as you can, and search the marriage register. From that I’m certain you’ll obtain a clue.”

Chapter Seven

My New Patient

On Friday morning I entered the office of Messrs Hanway Brothers in Leadenhall Street, and after a short wait was accorded an interview with the manager.

I demanded, of course, an explanation why I had been shipped away from London in such a summary manner, whereupon he apparently regarded me as a lunatic.

"I really had no knowledge of the affair," he replied, smiling incredulously. "Do you actually allege you were taken on board the *Petrel* and kept imprisoned in a cabin by Captain Banfield? A most extraordinary story, to say the least."

I told him of the inquiries made by the British Consul in Christiania, and added —

"I have here the captain's written orders from your firm, signed by yourself." And I produced the letter.

He glanced it through eagerly, and then carefully scrutinised the signature.

"This renders the affair far more mysterious," he exclaimed with increased interest. "The letter-paper is certainly ours, but the whole thing is a forgery."

"It is not your signature?"

"No, certainly not — only a clumsy imitation;" and taking up a pen, he wrote his signature and handed them both to me for comparison. At once I saw that several of the peculiarities of his handwriting were absent from Banfield's orders.

"The type-writing is done by a different machine to ours. We use Bar-Locks, while this has probably been written by a Remington," he went on. "Besides, look at the edge of the paper, and you'll see that it is badly cut. It is, without doubt, a sheet out of several reams, that were delivered by the stationers some months ago, and were rejected by me because of the careless manner in which the edges had been cut."

Then he touched his bell and the chief clerk appeared. To him he showed the letter, and without a moment's hesitation he declared it to be a forgery.

Without going into details of the events of that memorable night, I described how I had recovered consciousness to find myself at sea, and the strict obedience, of the captain to the orders he had received.

"Well, all I can conjecture is," declared the manager, much puzzled, "that you have fallen the victim of some clever conspiracy. The details show that there was some strong motive for your abduction, and that the conspirators well knew that Banfield remained at home until almost the last moment before sailing. They were, therefore, enabled to put you on board during his absence. The forged orders, too, were brief and well to the point — in fact, worded just as they might be if sent from this house. No; depend upon it there has been some very ingenious plotting somewhere."

I remained with him a short time longer, then, realising the uselessness of occupying his time, I withdrew, and in further prosecution of my inquiries drove to Doctors' Commons.

Here, after certain formalities, I gained knowledge which seemed of distinct advantage. Of the official there I learned that the special licence by which I had been married had been applied for by Beryl herself, and was shown a copy of the application signed by her, "Beryl Wynd."

I read the document through, and its contents held me in amazement, for it prayed "that a licence might be issued for the solemnisation of marriage in the church of St. Ann's, Wilton Place, between herself and Richard Dawes Colkirk, bachelor, Doctor of Medicine, of 114, Rowan Road, Hammersmith." Besides, it was dated nearly a fortnight before — soon after I had accepted Raymond's invitation to be his guest.

But my main object in making inquiries at the registry was to discover my wife's address, and in this I was successful, for in the same document I found that she was described as "Beryl Grace Wynd, spinster, of 46, Earl's-court Road, Kensington."

I had, at least, gained knowledge of the house in which the tragedy had been enacted.

"When the young lady called to make this application, were you present?" I inquired eagerly.

"Yes. I saw her."

"What was she like? Could you give me a description of her?"

"She was good-looking, elegantly dressed, and about middle height, if I remember aright."

"And her hair?"

"It was of a colour rather unusual," answered the man, peering at me through his spectacles. "A kind of golden-brown."

The description was exact. Beryl had been there, and of her own accord applied for a licence to marry me. The mystery increased each moment.

"Was she alone?" I inquired.

"No. Her father was with her."

"How did you know he was her father?"

"He introduced himself to me as such – Major Wynd."

"Major Wynd!" I ejaculated. "But Mr Wynd is not an officer. What kind of man is he?"

"Of military appearance, round-faced, and good-humoured."

"Old?"

"Certainly not – scarcely fifty. He wore a single eyeglass."

The description did not answer to that of the Tempter, but rather to that of Tattersett. The truth seemed plain: the Major had posed as Beryl's father, and had given his consent to the marriage.

The registry official, a little dry-as-dust individual who wore steel-rimmed spectacles poised far down his thin nose, endeavoured to learn who and what I was; but I merely replied that I was making inquiries on behalf of certain friends of the lady, and having satisfied myself by another glance at the signatures, I bade him good afternoon.

After a hasty lunch in a bar at the foot of Ludgate Hill, I set forth by the underground railway to Earl's Court, and experienced but little difficulty in discovering Number 46. It stood on the right, between Park Terrace and Scarsdale Villas; but at a single glance I saw that it was not the house to which I had been conducted. The latter had been a big, substantial mansion with a spacious portico supported by four huge pillars, whereas this was a small, old-fashioned house of perhaps ten rooms.

Nevertheless, I walked up the garden path and rang the bell. My summons was answered by a neat maid, who called her mistress, an elderly lady, and the latter declared that she had lived there five years and had never heard the name of Wynd.

"Have you ever let your house furnished?" I inquired.

"Never," She responded. "But the name is somewhat uncommon, and you ought to have no difficulty in finding the address."

"I hope sincerely that I shall," I answered, and, apologising for disturbing her, went down the steps, feeling that my mysterious wife had purposely given a false address in order to place any inquirer on a wrong scent.

Along to the corner of Kensington Road I strolled slowly, debating in my mind the best course to pursue. I turned into a public-house at the corner, and asked to see a London Directory, which I searched eagerly. But there was no such name as Wynd among the residents, neither could I find it among those of people living in the suburbs.

I called upon the Vicar of St. Ann's, Wilton Place, and saw the register I had signed, but the officiating clergyman had been a friend of Wynd's, and he did not know his address.

It seemed suspiciously as though the name of Wynd was an assumed one. If a false address had been given by the Major at Doctors' Commons, then in all probability the surname was likewise false.

Fatigued, hungry, and dusty, I at last found myself once again in Rowan Road before the door of Bob Raymond's house, and entered with my latch-key.

Old Mrs Bishop came forward excitedly to meet me.

"Oh, Doctor," she cried, "wherever had you been all this week? I felt certain that something had happened to you, and yesterday I got my daughter to write a line to Dr Raymond. But I'm so glad you are back again sir. It's given my daughter and me such a fright. We imagined all sorts of horrible things like those we read of in *Lloyd's* and *Reynolds's*."

"Well, I'm back again, Mrs Bishop," I answered as carelessly as I could. "And I'm confoundedly hungry and tired. Get me a cup of tea and a chop, there's a good woman." And I ascended to Bob's cosy little den from which I had been so suddenly called seven days before.

So Mrs Bishop had written to Bob, and no doubt he would be very surprised that I had disappeared and left the practice to take care of itself. He would certainly consider that my gratitude took a curious form. Therefore, I decided to send him a wire, telling him of my return and promising explanations later.

I cast myself wearily into the big leather armchair, and sat plunged in thought until the old housekeeper entered fussily with my tea.

"Well," I asked, "I suppose there have been no new patients during my absence?"

"Oh, yes. One, sir."

"Who was it?"

"A lady, sir. She came about noon on the second day of your absence, and said she wished to consult you. I told her that you'd been called out two days ago, and that you had not returned. She asked when you'd be in, and I said I didn't know for certain. So she called again later, and seemed very disappointed and anxious. She came next day; but as you were still absent, she left her card. Here it is." And Mrs Bishop took a card from the tray on a side-table and handed it to me. Upon it was the name, "Lady Pierrepont-Lane."

"Was she young or old?"

"Rather young, sir – not more than thirty, I think. She was dressed in deep mourning."

"And you have seen nothing more of her?" I inquired interestedly. "There's no address on the card."

"She came again two days ago, and finding that you had not returned, left this note, telling me to give it to you on arrival." And the woman fumbled behind the mirror on the mantelshelf and handed me a dainty note, the envelope of which bore a neat coat-of-arms.

The heading was "88, Gloucester Square, Hyde Park," and the brief note ran —

"Lady Pierrepont-Lane would esteem it a favour if Dr Colkirk could make it convenient to call upon her at his earliest opportunity."

Curiosity prompted me to turn to Debrett's *Baronetage*, in Raymond's bookcase, and from it I discovered that her ladyship was the wife of Sir Henry Pierrepont-Lane, Bart., a wealthy landowner and the patron of several livings in Yorkshire and Shropshire whose principal seat was Atworth, in Wiltshire. His wife was the eldest daughter of General Sir Charles Naylor, late of the Indian army.

Having re-read the short paragraph in the *Baronetage*, which gave a facsimile of the coat-of-arms upon the envelope, I sipped my tea and then wrote a short note regretting my absence from home, and stating my intention to call upon the following morning at eleven o'clock. This I dispatched by boy-messenger.

Hence it was that next morning, when I passed down Stanhope Street and turned into Gloucester Gardens, I felt in no mood to humour and sympathise with the whims and imaginary maladies of a fashionable patient.

With a feeling of irritation and low spirits, I mounted the steps of the house in Gloucester Square and inquired for my new patient.

I was ushered into a pretty morning-room, and shortly afterwards there entered a slim, youngish-looking woman, not exactly handsome, but of refined appearance, dark, with hair well coiled by an expert maid, and wearing a simple dress of pearl-grey cashmere, which clung about her form and showed it to distinct advantage. Before she had greeted me I saw that she was a type subject to nerve-storms, perhaps with a craving for stimulants after the reaction.

“Good morning, Doctor,” she exclaimed, crossing the room and greeting me pleasantly. “I received your note last night. You were absent each time I called.”

“Yes,” I responded. “I was called out to an urgent case, and compelled to remain.”

“Does that happen often in your profession?” she asked, sinking into a chair opposite me. “If it does, I fear that doctors’ wives must have an uncomfortable time. Your housekeeper was quite concerned about you.”

“But when one is a bachelor, as I am, absence is not of any great moment,” I laughed.

At that moment her dark, brilliant eyes met mine, and I fancied I detected a strange look in them.

“Well,” she said with some hesitation, “I am very glad you have come at last, Doctor, for I want to consult you upon a secret and very serious matter concerning myself, and to obtain your opinion.”

“I shall be most happy to give you whatever advice lies in my power,” I responded, assuming an air of professional gravity, and preparing myself to listen to her symptoms. “What is the nature of your ailment?” I inquired.

“Well,” she answered, “I can scarcely describe it: I seem in perpetually low spirits, although I have no cause whatever to be sad, and, further, there is a matter which troubles me exceedingly. I hardly like to confess it, but of late I have developed a terrible craving for stimulants.”

I put to her a number of questions which it is unnecessary here to recount, and found her exactly as I had supposed – a bundle of nerves.

“But this unaccountable craving for stimulants is most remarkable,” she went on. “I am naturally a most temperate woman, but nowadays I feel that I cannot live without having recourse to brandy or some other spirit.”

“Sometimes you feel quite well and strong, then suddenly you experience a sensation of being extremely ill?” I suggested.

“Exactly. How do you account for it?”

“The feeling of strength and vigour is not necessarily the outcome of actual strength, any more than is the feeling of weakness the necessary outcome of actual weakness,” I responded. “A person may be weak to a degree, and the sands of life be almost run out, and yet feel overwhelmingly strong and exuberantly happy, and, on the other hand, when in sound and vigorous health, he may feel exhausted and depressed. Feelings, especially so with women of the better class, rise into being in connexion with the nervous system. Whether a person feels well or ill depends upon the structure of his nervous system and the way in which it is played upon, for, like a musical instrument, it may be made to give forth gay music or sad.”

“But is not my case remarkable?” she asked.

“Not at all,” I responded.

“Then you think that you can treat me, and prevent me from becoming a dipsomaniac?” she said eagerly.

“Certainly,” I replied. “I have no doubt that this craving can be removed by proper treatment. I will write you a prescription.”

“Ah?” she exclaimed, with a sigh. “You doctors, with your serums and the like, can nowadays inoculate against almost every disease. Would that you could give us women an immune from that deadly ailment so common among my sex, and so very often fatal.”

“What ailment?” I asked, rather surprised at her sudden and impetuous speech.

“That of love!” she responded in a low, strained voice – the voice of a woman desperate.

Chapter Eight

What Happened to me

“Do you consider love an ailment?” I asked, looking at her in quick surprise.

“In many cases,” she responded in a serious tone. “I fear I am no exception to the general rule,” she added meaningly.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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