Le Queux William

The Wiles of the Wicked

William Le Queux
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Содержание

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Chapter One
Why This is Written

Wilford Heaton is not my real name, for why should I publish it to the world?

The reason I do not give it is, first, because I have no desire to be made the object of idle curiosity or speculation, and secondly, although the explanation herein given will clear the honour of one of the most powerful of the Imperial Houses in Europe, I have no wish that my true name should be associated with it.

I have, however, a reason for writing this narrative – a very strong reason.

The story is an enthralling one; the adventures stranger, perhaps, than ever happened to any other living person. I have resolved to relate the plain unvarnished facts in their sequence, just as they occurred, without seeking to suppress or embellish, but to recount the strange adventures just as they are registered in the small leather portfolio, or secret dossier, which still, at this moment, reposes in the archives of a certain Ministry in one of the European capitals.

There have recently been stories afloat – strange stories. At first I laughed at all the absurd rumours, but very quickly I saw how seriously distorted the real facts had become, for ingenious paragraphs of certain so-called Society papers, grasping the story eagerly, worked it up into a narrative which reflected very seriously upon the honour of one who is dearest in all the world to me.

Well, my tale – or exposure – is written here.

In order that those who read may clearly follow the curious chain of circumstances, it is necessary for me to go back some eight years or so – not a long period as far as time goes, but to me a veritable century. I was young, just turned twenty five. I was decently well-off, having come into an income of nearly a couple of thousand a year left me by my father, a sum which put me beyond the necessity of entering business, pursuing the daily grind, or troubling about the morrow. My career at Oxford had, I fear, been marked by a good many shortcomings and many youthful escapades, but I ended it by taking my degree of Bachelor of Medicine, shortly afterwards pursuing the fashionable habit of "going abroad." Within two years, however, I returned to London world-weary – like so many other young men who, being left comfortably off, commence to taste the enjoyment of life too early – and settled down in a suite of smoke-begrimed rooms in Essex Street, Strand.

The place was horribly dingy, situated in that *cul-de-sac* which is quiet and almost deserted, even though only a stone's throw

from the busiest, noisiest, and muddiest thoroughfare in the world. The ground and first floors of the house were occupied by several firms of solicitors, whose doors were covered with ragged and sadly faded green baize, while the second floor I rented as my abode. The quaint, shabby, bizarre old place had been built at the end of the last century for family residence, in the days when Bloomsbury was an aristocratic quarter and great men lived in Leicester Square; but now, alas! smoke-stained and time-dimmed, it was given over to the dust which the law accumulates. From its exterior, like those of its neighbours, there protruded those great iron extinguishers used by the linkmen of days bygone, while the broad, thin-worn stairs, easy of ascent, the solid mahogany doors, the great carved handrail, and the fine Adams ceilings, like those in the older houses of the Adelphi, told mutely of the prosperity of its long-departed owners.

I had taken over the furniture, a frowsy lot of faded horsehair, which had perhaps done duty there for half a century, together with the rooms, and even though they were so dismal and out-of-date, I must confess that they had one attraction for me, namely, that above, in the low-pitched rooms on the top floor, there lived and worked my old college chum, Dick Doyle, who had, after a good deal of wild-oat sowing, developed into a rising journalist and *littérateur*.

Curious though it may appear, I had returned from the Sunny South and taken up my abode in that dingy, dispiriting place with one sole idea, namely, to be near the man who was practically

my only friend in the whole world. I was in sore need of him, for I was utterly heedless of everything past, present, or future.

With the exception of old Mrs Parker, who had served my family for twenty years, I was absolutely alone and helpless as a child. At the age of twenty-five I had ceased to interest myself in anything, and plunged in eternal gloom, all desire for life having left me, for knowing that its joys could no longer be mine I was, even though in the full possession of all my youthful vigour, mental faculties, and bodily strength, actually looking forward to the grave.

The terrible truth must here be told. The reader will, I feel confident, sympathise. While living abroad, travelling hither and thither through the old Italian towns, where I delighted to roam in the big white piazzas and through the crumbling palaces, every stone of which spoke of a brilliant and historic past, I had been suddenly seized by disease, and for three months lay tossing upon my bed in an English pension in Florence, tended by two calm, sweet-faced sisters of charity, with their grey-blue habits and great white linen head-dresses, which in my hours of fever and delirium seemed always so clean and cool. The two great Italian professors who were called to me shook their heads, believing that, even if they managed to save my life, it would be at a loss of one of my senses. In this, alas! they were not mistaken. My eyes became affected by sclerotitis, a severe inflammation of the sclerotic. Gradually my eyes, those most beautiful structures of the human body which manifest in such

small compass the great, the unspeakable, the incomprehensible power of our Creator, grew dim. My sight was slowly but surely failing me. I was recovering from my bodily ailment to be attacked by the ophthalmic disease which the doctors had all along feared.

I implored of them to do something to preserve my sight, but they only dropped into my eye certain liquids from their little brown glass phials, and regarded the effect gravely. A great oculist from Rome came to give his opinion. I saw him but mistily, as though I were looking through a dense fog; and he, too, told me that all that could be done had already been done.

I arose from my bed a fortnight later stone blind.

With this terrible affliction upon me I returned to London with Dick Doyle, who came out to Florence to fetch me home. For me, life had no further charm. The beauties of the world which had given me so much pleasure and happiness were blotted out for me for ever. I lived now only in an eternal darkness which by day, when the sun shone upon my eyes, seemed to assume a dull dark red. At first it struck me that because my sight had been destroyed my personal appearance must have altered, but Dick assured me that it had not. No one, he declared, could tell by looking at my eyes that they were actually sightless.

And so I, Wilford Heaton, lived in those dull old chambers in Essex Street, in rooms that I had never seen.

You, who have sight to read these lines, can you imagine what it is to be suddenly struck blind? Close your eyes for a brief five

minutes and see how utterly helpless you become, how entirely dependent you are upon others, how blank would be your life if you were always thus.

Dick gave to me all the time he could spare from his work, and would come and sit with me to chat, for conversation with him was all that was now left to me. He described my rooms and my surroundings with the same minuteness with which he wrote, and tried to interest me by relating scraps of the day's news. Yet when he was absent, away or at work in his rooms above, I sat alone thinking for hours and hours, counting time by the chiming of the clock of St. Clement Danes.

So heavily did time hang upon my hands that at last I engaged a teacher from the Blind School over in Lambeth, and with his books of raised letters he used to visit me each day and teach me to read. I was an apt pupil, I suppose, yet there was something strangely grotesque about a man who had already graduated recommencing to learn his alphabet like a child. Still, it saved me from being driven mad by melancholy, and it was not long before I found that, by the exercise of pains, I could read slowly the various embossed books, standard works manufactured for the recreation of those unfortunates like myself, who would otherwise sit eternally idle with their hands before them. And not only did I learn to read, but also to make small fancy baskets, work very intricate at first, but which, on account of the highly developed sense of touch that I had acquired in reading, soon became quite easy.

The long months of winter darkness went by; but to me, who could not see the sun, what mattered whether the days were brilliant August or black December? Sometimes I went out, but not often. I had not become proficient in finding my way by aid of a stick. I had practised a good deal in my rooms; but for a blind man to go forth into the busy Strand he must have perfect confidence, and be able to guide himself among the bustling throng. Therefore, on my airings I usually went forth upon Dick's arm, and the extent of our wanderings was the end of the Embankment at Westminster Bridge, or around those small ornamental gardens which extend from the Charing Cross station of the Underground Railway up to Waterloo Bridge. Sometimes, on rare occasions, he would take me to dine with him at the Savage Club, in Adelphi Terrace; and men, easy-going Bohemians, whom I could not see, would warmly shake my hand. I heard their voices – voices of artists and *littérateurs* whose names were as household words – sat charmed by their merry gossip of artistic "shop," laughed at their droll stories, or listened to one or other of the members who would recite or sing for the benefit of his "brother Savages." Those evenings, spent amid the tobacco-smoke and glass-jingling of the only Bohemia still existing in London, were the happiest in all that dull, colourless, dismal life of sound and touch.

They were the only recreations left to me. Truly mine was a tristful life.

In April, after I had lived in that dingy den six months or

more, Dick came into my room one morning and made an announcement. It was that he had been commissioned by his paper to go as its correspondent with a British punitive expedition on the North-West Frontier of India.

"You'll go, of course," I said, reflecting that such an offer meant both advancement and profit. He had long ago told me that a commission as war correspondent was his greatest ambition.

"No, my dear old fellow," his deep voice answered in a tone more grave than usual. "I can't leave you alone."

"Nonsense!" I ejaculated. "I'm not going to allow you to fling away such a good offer to remain with me. No, you must go, Dick. You'll be back in three months at most, won't you?"

"Perhaps before," and his voice sounded low and strange. "But really, old fellow, I can't go and leave you helpless, like this."

"You'll go," I said decisively. "Mrs Parker will look after me, and three months will soon pass."

"No," he said. "It's all very well, but you can't sit here month after month, helpless as you are. It's impossible."

"I shall amuse myself with my books and my basket-making," I answered. Truth to tell, this announcement of his had utterly crushed me. His society was the only bright spot in my life. If he left me I should be entirely alone, cheerless and melancholy. Nevertheless, when the sight is destroyed the mind is quickened, and I reflected all that this offer meant to him, and admired his self-denial and readiness to refuse it on my account.

Therefore I insisted that he should go. In the end he was

persuaded, and three days later left Charing Cross for India.

When he had gone I became hopelessly depressed. In vain did I try to interest myself in the embossed books, but they were mostly works which I had read long ago, and in vain I toiled at basket-making until my finger-tips were sore and aching. Sometimes at evening Mrs Parker, herself a sad scholar, would try and read a few of what she considered the choicest morsels of the "extra special." She read very slowly and inaccurately, poor old soul, and many were the words she was compelled to spell and leave me to solve their meaning. Indeed, in those long hours I spent by myself I sank lower and lower in dejection. No longer I heard Dick's merry voice saying —

"Come, cheer up, old chap. Let me tell you all I heard to-day over at the club."

No longer could I lean upon his arm as we descended that steep flight of steps leading from the end of Essex Street to the Embankment; no longer did I hear those playful words of his on such occasions —

"Take care, darling, or you'll fall."

Dear old Dick! Now, when I reflected upon it all, I saw how in my great affliction he treated me as tenderly as he could a woman. Forlorn, hypped, and heart-sick, I lived on from day to day, taking interest in nothing, moping doleful and unmanned.

A single letter came from him, posted at some outlandish place in the North-West. It was read to me by old Mrs Parker, but as Dick was a sad scribbler, its translation was not a very brilliant

success. Nevertheless, from it I gathered how deep were his thoughts of me, and how eager he was to complete his work and return. Truly no man had a more devoted friend, and certainly no man was more in need of one.

As the days grew warmer, and I sat ever with the *taedium vitae* upon me, joyless and dispirited in that narrow world of darkness, I felt stifled, and longed for air. Essex Street is terribly close in July, therefore, finding the heat intolerable, I went forth at evening upon the Embankment with Mrs Parker, and, with my stick, practised walking alone upon that long, rather unfrequented stretch of pavement between the railings of the Temple Gardens and the corner of Savoy Street.

Try to walk a dozen paces as one blind. Close your eyes, and tap lightly with your stick before you as you walk, and see how utterly helpless you feel, and how erratic are your footsteps. Then you will know how extremely difficult I found my first essays alone. I walked full of fear, as a child walks, stumbling, colliding, halting, and afterwards waiting for my pitying old woman-servant to take my arm and guide me in safety.

Yet evening after evening I went forth and steadily persevered. I had, in the days before the world became shut out from my gaze, seen men who were blind guiding themselves fearlessly hither and thither among the London crowds, and I was determined, in Dick's absence, to master the means of visionless locomotion, so that I might walk alone for health's sake, if for nothing else. And so I continued, striving and striving. When Mrs Parker

had served my dinner, cutting it up for me just as one places meat before a helpless infant, we went forth together, and for an hour each evening I went out upon that wide expanse of the Embankment pavement which formed my practice-ground.

Gradually, by slow degrees, I became proficient in guiding myself with that constant tapping that marks a blind man's progress through the black void which constitutes his own narrow joyless world. At last, after several weeks of constant practice, I found to my great delight that I could actually walk alone the whole length of the pavement, guiding myself by intuition when encountering passers-by, and continuing straight on without stumbling or colliding with any object, a fact which gave me the utmost satisfaction, for it seemed to place me beyond, the need of a constant guide. With this progress I intended to astound Dick upon his return, and so gradually persevered towards proficiency.

Chapter Two
The Bracelet and the Palm

August was dusty and blazing in London, and I felt it sorely in Essex Street. The frontier war dragged on its weary length, as frontier wars always drag, and Dick was still unable to return. His brilliant descriptions of the fighting had become a feature in the journal he represented. On one of my short walks from end to end of that long even strip of pavement a hand was suddenly placed upon my shoulder, and the voice told me that it was Shadrack Fennell, a charming old fellow, who had been a popular actor of a day long since past, and was now a prominent "Savage," well known in that little circle of London Bohemia. He walked with me a little way, and next evening called and spent an hour over cigars and whisky. He was the only visitor I had had in all those months of Dick's absence.

A blind man has, alas! very few friends.

Once or twice, when the heat became insufferable in my close stuffy rooms, I contemplated going to the country or to the sea. Yet, on reflection, I told myself bitterly that, being unable to see the beauties of God's earth, I was just as well there moping in that gloomy street, and taking my evening airing beside the Thames.

Therefore with all desire for life or enjoyment crushed from my soul, I remained in London, going out each fine evening,

sometimes with Mrs Parker, and at others, with a fearlessness acquired by practice, I carefully guided myself down the steep granite steps leading from Essex Street to the Embankment, and then paced my strip of pavement alone. But how tristful, dispiriting, and soul-sickening was that monotonous world of darkness in which I eternally existed, none can know, only those unfortunate ones who are blind themselves.

About half-past eight o'clock one breathless evening in mid-August, Mrs Parker being unwell, I went forth alone for my usual stroll. The atmosphere was close and oppressive, the pavement seemed to reflect the heat, and even along the Embankment there was not a breath of air. Alone, plunged in my own thoughts – for the blind think far more deeply than those whose minds are distracted by the sights around them – I went on with those short steps that I had acquired, ever tapping with my stick to discover the crossings. I was afraid of no street traffic; only of cycles, which, by reason of their silence, are veritable ogres to the blind.

Almost unconsciously I passed beyond the limit of my regular track, beneath a railway-bridge which I knew led from Charing Cross station, and then straight on, with only a single crossing, until I came to what seemed the junction of several roads, where I hesitated. It was an adventure to go so far, and I wondered where I was. The chiming of Big Ben, however, gave me a clue. I was at the corner of Bridge Street, for I felt the wall of the St. Stephen's Club. The turning to the left would, I knew, take me over Westminster Bridge; to the right I could cross Palace Yard

and Broad Sanctuary, and so gain Victoria Street. Before my affliction I knew well that portion of London around the Houses of Parliament. I decided, therefore, on keeping to the right, and some one whom I know not kindly piloted me over the dangerous crossing from the corner of Parliament Street, for such I judged it to be from the cries of men selling the evening papers. Again, three times in succession, did sympathetic persons, noticing my helplessness as I stood upon the kerb, take my arm and lead me across, but in these constant crossings I somehow entirely lost my bearings. I was, I knew, in a long straight thoroughfare and by the iron railings before the houses guessed it to be that road of flat-dom, Victoria Street.

Amused at my intrepidity, and congratulating myself upon having gone so far alone, I kept on, knowing that even if I lost myself I had only to call a passing hansom and be driven back to Essex Street. Thus for perhaps three-quarters of an hour I wandered on. From a lad who helped me over one of the crossings I learnt that I had passed Victoria Station, and now appeared to be traversing several large squares – at least, such was the impression conveyed upon my mind. It was useless to stop passers-by every moment to inquire where I was, therefore, laughing inwardly at my situation, lost in London, the great city I had known so well, I went on and on, down long straight thoroughfares that seemed endless, in enjoyment of the first real walk I had taken since my crushing affliction had fallen upon me.

Suddenly, in what seemed to be a quiet deserted street, I

left the kerb to cross the road alone, but ere I became aware of impending danger a man's voice shouted roughly, and I found myself thrown by violent concussion upon the roadway, struggling frantically beneath a horse's hoofs. I clutched wildly at air to save myself, but next second received a violent kick on the left side of the head, which caused sparks to appear before my sightless eyes, stunned me, and rendered me almost instantly insensible.

How long I remained ignorant of things about me it is impossible to tell. I fancy it must have been a good many hours. On my first return to consciousness I heard strange confused sounds about me, low whispering, the words of which were utterly unintelligible to my unbalanced brain, and the quick rustling of silk. I remember wondering vaguely where I was. The blind quickly develop a habit of extreme caution, and with my senses dulled by the excruciating pain in my skull I lay reflecting without speaking. The throbbing in my head was frightful. When the recollections of my long walk which had ended so disastrously surged through my brain, it struck me that I must have been taken to a hospital after the accident, and that I had most probably remained there some days. Yet in hospitals there is no perfume of *peau d'Espagne*, nor do the nurses wear silken flounces.

I tried to catch the words uttered by those about me, but in vain. It may have been that they were spoken in some foreign tongue, or, what is much more likely, the terrible blow I had

received from the horse's hoof had utterly disarranged my sense of hearing. This single thought appalled me. If my hearing had really been injured, then I was rendered absolutely helpless. To the blind the acoustic organs become so sharpened that they can detect sounds where those in full possession of sight and hearing can distinguish nothing. It is the ear that acts for the sightless eye. Therefore the fear that even this had failed me held me appalled.

I stretched forth my hand, and to my surprise felt that I was not in a hospital bed, as I had at first believed, but upon a silken couch, with my head resting upon a soft satin pillow. The covering of the couch was of rich brocade in wide stripes, while the woodwork had a smoothness which caused me to believe that it was gilt. I raised my hand to my head, and found it bandaged with a handkerchief and some apparently improvised compresses.

Although I opened my eyes, all was, of course, an utter blank before me. Yet I felt instinctively, as every blind person does, the presence of some one in my immediate vicinity, and presently, after long reflection, I suddenly asked —

"Where am I? What has happened?"

"You have been run over, and your head is injured," answered a strange harsh voice, hoarse and altogether curious. "But tell me. Your eyes have a curious look in them. Can't you see?"

"No," I responded. "Unfortunately I am totally blind."

"Blind!" gasped the voice, in apparent amazement. "Then that accounts for your accident!"

"But where am I?" I inquired eagerly.

"You need not trouble, I assure you," answered the voice, pleasantly. "You are with friends."

"Then I am not in a hospital?"

"Certainly not. Having witnessed your accident, I am trying to do what little I can for you."

The voice was low-pitched; and, further, it struck me as being disguised.

"May I not know the name of my good Samaritan?" I inquired.

"The name is entirely unnecessary," the voice responded. "From your card-case I see that your name is Heaton, and that you live in Essex Street, Strand."

"Yes," I answered.

"How long have you been blind?" the voice inquired, hoarse and deep. I knew that it was disguised by certain of the syllables being pronounced differently in various words.

"For a year or more," I answered.

"And does your head still pain you very much?" inquired the voice, while at the same moment I felt a cool hand placed upon my throbbing brow.

In an instant I seized it by the wrist. The hand tried to wrench itself free, but not before I had felt the slimness of the fingers, the rings upon them, and the softness of the palm.

It was a woman's. She had cleverly disguised her voice to cause me to believe that it was a man's. I placed my right hand upon her arm and felt it bare. Upon her wrist was a curious bracelet,

thin but strangely pliable, evidently made of some ingeniously worked and twisted wire.

The arm was bare; her skirts were of silk. My nurse was evidently in an evening toilette.

"Although I cannot see you, madam, I thank you for your kind attention," I said, a trifle piqued that she should have endeavoured to mislead me by her voice.

She drew her hand away quickly, with a slight cry, as though annoyed at my discovery.

"I witnessed your accident," she explained simply, in a sweet, well-modulated voice, evidently her own. By her tone, she was no doubt young, and I wondered whether she were pretty.

"How did it happen? Tell me," I urged.

"You were crossing the road, and were knocked down by a cab. My doctor has already examined you, and says that you are not seriously hurt. It is a mere scalp-wound, therefore you may rest content, and congratulate yourself upon a very narrow escape."

"I congratulate myself upon failing into the hands of a friend," I said.

"Oh, it is really nothing!" exclaimed my unknown hostess. "In a few hours you will, no doubt, be all right. Rest, and in the morning the carriage shall take you home."

"Then it is not yet morning?" I inquired, vaguely wondering what hour it might be.

"No, not yet."

The response sounded afar off, and I felt somehow that my strength was suddenly failing me. A heavy, drowsy feeling crept over me, and my mind seemed filled with conflicting thoughts, until I fell asleep, the cool, soft, sympathetic hand still upon my brow.

When I awoke it was with a refreshed feeling. No one was, however, in my immediate vicinity. My kind protectress had left me, yet I heard voices in conversation in the adjoining room. The door communicating was closed, but there was the unmistakable pop of a champagne-cork and a jingling of thin glasses that told of festivity. In whose house, I wondered, was I a guest? Already I had inquired, but had been refused information.

Suddenly the voices were hushed, and I could distinguish a woman saying —

"I tell, you he's blind – stone blind. If you doubt me, hold that before his face and see if he flinches." A man's voice sounded in a low growl in response, then all was silent again. Only the ticking of a clock somewhere near me broke the stillness.

Whispers, like low, suspicious exchanges of confidence, soon afterwards reached my ears. The door had opened silently, and a few seconds later I felt the soft hand of my protectress again upon my forehead. My sightless eyes were wide open, and by that she, of course, knew that I was awake.

"Are you better after your sleep?" the well-cultivated voice inquired concernedly.

"Very much," I answered, raising myself upon my elbows.

"But I have troubled you far too long, and will go, if you will kindly instruct your servant to call me a cab."

"Oh dear no," the voice answered pleasantly. "I couldn't think of allowing you to go home at this hour, and in your weak state, too. It would be madness. Continue your rest, and you will be quite right again in the morning."

"You are extremely kind," I protested, "but I really couldn't think of remaining longer."

"Would you like to repay me for what you so very generously term my kindness?" she asked. "If so, I would only ask one little favour."

"Certainly. I will grant it if it lies within my power," I responded.

"Well, it is that you would scribble your name here, in this birthday book of mine. It will be a little souvenir of this evening."

"But I cannot write well nowadays. I can't see, you know," I protested.

"But you can write your signature. If the handwriting is uneven I will forgive you, in the circumstances," the voice said merrily; and a moment later she placed a pen with a handle of ivory or pearl within my hand.

"What day of the month?" inquired the sweet voice.

"The second of July," I answered, laughing; and my unknown friend, having opened the book at that page, guided my hand to the paper, whereon I scrawled my name.

She took both pen and book, and by the departing swish of

her skirts I knew that she had left me and had passed into the adjoining room.

A strange picture arose in my mind. Was she beautiful? At any rate her surroundings were elegant, and her low musical voice was that of a young and refined girl of twenty or so.

I listened, lying there helpless and sorely puzzled. Again curious whisperings in subdued tones sounded from beyond, but almost at that same moment some one commenced to play upon the piano Chopin's "Andante-Spinato," which prevented me from distinguishing either the words uttered or the trend of the discussion.

For several minutes the sound of the piano filled the room, the touch, light and delicate, seeming to be that of a woman, when, of a sudden, there was a loud smashing of glass, and a woman's shrill, piercing scream rang out, accompanied by the sound of some heavy object falling to the floor.

In an instant the music ceased, and at the same moment I heard a man's voice cry wildly —

"Good God! You've – why, you've killed her!"

Next second there sounded a rapid scuffling of feet, a chair was overturned and broken, and from the quick panting and muttered ejaculations it seemed as though two persons had closed in deadly embrace. In their frantic, desperate struggle they advanced into the room where I was, and I, still utterly helpless, with only a dark void about me, raised myself in horror and alarm. The man's words held me appalled.

Some terrible tragedy had occurred. My kind protectress had been murdered.

The other two persons, whoever they were, fought fiercely quite close to me, and I could distinctly detect from the vain efforts to shout made by the weaker, that the stronger held him by the throat, and was endeavouring to strangle him.

Of a sudden there was a quick, dull thud, the unmistakable sound of a heavy blow, followed by a short agonised cry.

"Ah-h!" shrieked the voice of the person struck; and at the same instant a great weight fell back inertly upon me as I was lying, nearly crushing the breath from me.

I passed my sensitive hands over it quickly. It was the body of a man. Blood ran warm over my fingers.

He had been stabbed to the heart.

Chapter Three
The House with the Portico

The weight of the inert body oppressed me, and in striving to extricate myself it slipped from the couch and slid to the ground; but such a feeling of dread overcame me that I reached down and pushed the warm body under the couch.

The faint sound of some one moving stealthily across the thick pile carpet caused me to lie rigid, holding my breath. I heard the movement distinctly, and curiously enough it sounded as though it were a woman, for there was just a faint rustling as though her skirts trailed upon the ground. My quick ear told me that the person was approaching. By the panting breath I knew that it was the assassin. Was I, too, to fall a victim?

I tried to call out, but in that moment of agony and horror my tongue refused to articulate. It seemed to cleave to the roof of my mouth.

The sound of movement ceased, and I knew that the person was quite close to me. My eyes were wide open, held fixed in expectant horror.

I felt a warm breath upon my cheeks, and knew that the unknown assassin was peering into my eyes. In a few moments I had an instinctive feeling of something being held a few inches from my face.

Then the words that had been spoken by my protectress recurred to me. She had declared to her companions that I was blind, and urged them to test me by holding something to my head.

This was now being done. The truth of my statement was being proved, possibly by a revolver being held to my brow. If so, my only chance of safety rested in unflinching coolness. My position was certainly a most unenviable one.

For a few moments the panting heart of the assassin thumped close to me; then, apparently satisfied, the unknown person moved off in silence without uttering a single word.

My first impulse was to jump up and arrest the progress of the assassin, but on reflection I saw that to do so would only be to invite death. What could I do, blind as I was?

Only could I sit and listen, trying to distinguish every detail of the mystery.

Yes, I became convinced more than ever that the person leaving the room was not a man – but a woman.

Could it be the same individual whose cool, sympathetic hand had only a quarter of an hour before soothed my brow? The thought held me dumbfounded.

I had all along believed that the assassin had been a man, but it was certain by that swish of silken flounces that it was a woman.

As I listened I heard the click of an electric-light switch at the door of the room, and a couple of minutes later a heavy door closed. From the bang of the knocker I knew that the street door

had been shut by some person who had left the house.

I still sat listening. All was silent. Only the low ticking of the clock broke the dead stillness of the night. The mysterious woman who had thus made her exit had evidently switched off the light, leaving me in total darkness with the hideous evidences of her crime.

For some short time longer I listened, my ears open to catch every sound, but, hearing nothing, I now knew that I was alone. Therefore, rising to my feet, I groped about until my hands touched the prostrate body of the man, and as I did so he heaved a long sigh, and a quick shudder ran through his frame. The wound had evidently not caused instant death, but, placing my hand quickly over the heart, I found that it had now ceased its beating with the final spasm.

Slowly, and with utmost care, I passed both my hands over the dead man's face, in order to obtain some mental picture of his appearance. His hair seemed thick and well parted at the side, his features those of a young man shaven save for the moustache, which was long and well trained. He was in evening clothes, and wore in his shirt a single stud, which, to my touch, seemed of very peculiar shape. I tried to make out its design, but in vain, when suddenly I remembered that if I took it, it might afterwards give me some clue to its dead owner's identity. So I took it from the stiff shirt-front and placed it in the pocket of my vest.

His watch-chain was an ordinary curb, I found, with a watch which had the greasy feel of silver. In his pockets were a couple

of sovereigns and some loose silver, but no letters nor card-case, nothing indeed to lead me to a knowledge of who he really was. In one pocket I found a small pencil-case, and this I also took for my own purposes.

Half a dozen times I placed my hand upon his heart, whence the blood was slowly oozing, but there was no movement.

My investigations showed that he was about twenty-eight years of age; probably fair, by the softness of the hair and moustache, with even teeth, rather sharp jawbones and cheeks a trifle thin. Having ascertained this much, I groped forward with both hands in the direction of the room wherein the woman had been so swiftly done to death. It was in darkness, I have no doubt, but to me darkness was of no account, for I was ever in eternal gloom. The furniture over which I stumbled here and there was covered with silk brocade, the woodwork being of that smoothness which had led me to believe that it must be gilded. It was without doubt a fine spacious drawing-room where I had been lying, for the dimensions of the place were quite unusual, and the objects with which my hands came into contact were always of a character magnificent, and in keeping with the grandeur of the place. The house was evidently one of those fine mansions with which the West End of London abounds, and certainly this apartment, even though I could not see it, was the acme of comfort and luxury.

I at last found the entrance to the adjoining room, but the door was locked.

This sudden check to my investigations caused me to pause.

That a woman had been first struck down by a cowardly blow appeared evident. The loud agonised shriek which had emanated from that inner room was, I felt convinced, that of the tender, sweet-voiced woman who had administered to my wants. It seemed, now that I recollected, as though she had been seated at the piano when the fatal blow was dealt. The scream and the cessation of the music had occurred simultaneously.

The theory impressed itself upon me that a woman was responsible for both crimes. It was a woman who had stood panting near me, who had noiselessly tested me to ascertain whether I could distinguish objects about me, and who had afterwards left the house. My blindness had, no doubt, saved my life.

Before leaving she had, for some unknown reason, locked the communicating door and taken the key. But upon the air, after she had gone, there lingered the subtle fragrance of *peau d'Espagne*, the same perfume used by the woman whose cool palm had soothed my brow. Nevertheless, it seemed impossible that a woman could thus commit a double crime so swiftly and with such force as to drive a knife to the heart of a man and fling him back upon me – all in silence, without the utterance of one single word.

With my eyes only a void of blackness, this mystery was bewildering, and rendered the more tantalising by my inability to gaze about me. I had been present at the enactment of a terrible drama, but had not witnessed it, and could not, therefore,

recognise either culprit or victims.

Again I searched the great handsome room, in order to rivet all its details upon my memory. It had three long windows opening down to the floor, which showed that it was situated in the back of the house, otherwise they must have opened upon the street. In one corner was a pedestal, whereon stood a marble bust of a dancing-woman, like those I had seen in the sculptor's at Pisa before the days of my darkness. There were tables, too, with glass tops wherein, I supposed, were curios and bric-à-brac, and before the great fireplace was stretched a tiger-skin, with the paws preserved.

While groping there, however, my hand came into contact with something which I found was a narrow, three-edged knife, so sharp that I cut my finger while feeling it. It had a cross-hilt, and the blade was thin and triangular, tapering to a point. The shape I knew to be Italian, one of those Florentine stilettos used long ago in the Middle Ages, a wound from which was almost certain to be fatal. The Italians have long ago brought the use of the knife to a fine art, and even to-day, murders by stabbing are the most usual occurrences reported in their newspapers. The blade of this antique weapon was about nine inches long, and the handle velvet-covered and bound with wire, probably either gold or silver. The point was sharp as a needle.

My first impulse was to take possession of it; but, on reflection, I saw that if I did so grave suspicion might possibly fall upon me. I might even be charged with the murder, especially

as I had already in my pocket the dead's man stud and pencil-case. This thought caused me to throw down the stiletto, and, continuing my search, I at length found the door which gave egress to the place.

I opened it and stood in the hall to listen. There was no sound. The stillness of the night remained quite unbroken, and I believed myself alone with the dead. By coughing, the echo of my voice showed that the hall and staircase were wide and spacious. Then it struck me that I had no stick, without which I feared to walk; but, groping about, I found an umbrella stand, and took therefrom a stout thorn, the handle of which seemed smooth-worn by long usage.

What was my best course? Should I go forth secretly, return home and await the discovery of the terrible affair, which would no doubt be fully reported in those evening newspapers which revel in crime? Or should I go out and inform the first constable I met? The latter, I saw, was my duty, and even though I had no desire to mix myself up in such a mysterious and sensational affair, I resolved to go at once and state all that I heard.

Whether the street door was situated to right or left I knew not, but trying the right first, I found that the door was at the end of the hall. Opening it, I passed out, and having closed it again noiselessly went down the five wide steps into the deserted street.

There were iron railings in front of the house, and before the door was a big stone portico. My hands told me both these details.

I turned to the left, and after walking some little distance

crossed a road and kept on down a long road which, although it did not appear to be a main thoroughfare, seemed to run straight as an arrow. For fully a quarter of an hour I walked on without meeting a soul. The only noise that broke the quiet was the dismal howl of a dog, and now and then the distant shriek and low roar of trains. Suddenly I found myself in quite a labyrinth of crooked streets, and after several turns emerged into what I presumed to be one of the great arteries of London.

I stood listening. The air was fresh, and it seemed to me that dawn was spreading. Afar I could hear the measured, heavy tread of a police-constable, and hurried in his direction. As I did so I put out my stick and it struck some iron railings. A few minutes later, in hot haste, I overtook the man of heavy tread, and addressing him, said —

"Tell me, please, are you a constable?"

"Well, I believe I am," answered a rough voice, pleasantly withal. "But can't you see?"

"No, unfortunately I can't," I replied. "Where am I?"

"Outside the South Kensington Museum. Where do you want to go?"

"I want you to come with me," I said.

"With you. What's up?"

"I've been present at a terrible tragedy," I blurted forth. "Two people have been murdered."

"Two people?" exclaimed the voice, quickly interested. "Where?"

"In – in a house," I faltered, for not until that instant did the appalling truth occur to me. I had wandered away from the place, and had no idea of its outward appearance, or in what road it was situated!

"Well, double murders don't often take place in the street, sonny. But – " and the voice hesitated.

"Why, there's blood on your clothes, I see! Tell me all about it. Where's the house?"

"I confess that I've been foolishly stupid, for I've left it, and I could never find my way back again. I'm blind, you see, and I've no idea of its exterior appearance."

"At any rate you've been near enough to the affair to get yourself in a pretty mess," the rough voice said, somewhat suspiciously. "Surely you have some idea of where the affair took place?"

The situation was certainly the most curious in which any man could be placed, for with only one thought in my mind, namely, to raise the alarm, I had gone forth from the house of mystery and failed to mark it. This negligence of mine might, I reflected, result in the affair being hushed up for ever. London is a big place in which to search for the scene of a murder upon which my eyes had never gazed, and the details of which I only knew by my sense of touch. How many thousands of houses there were in the West End each with its smoke-blackened portico and little piece of area railing.

"No," I responded to the officer's inquiry. "I was so bent upon

giving information that I forgot to place any mark upon the house by which to know it again."

"Well, I've 'eard a good many funny stories while I've been on night-duty in these eighteen years, but your yarn is about the rummest of the lot," he said bluntly.

"I only know that the house is a large one, very well furnished, and has a portico and railings in front – a double house, with hall in the centre, and rooms on either side."

"That don't 'elp us very much, sonny," the voice observed. "What's the good o' running after me with a yarn like this if you can't take me to the spot? To judge from the state of your clothes, though, you've been in some scrap or another. If your coat was not covered with blood as it is, I'd be inclined to put you down as a chap with a screw loose."

"I'm not demented, I tell you," I cried warmly. "There's a terrible crime been committed, and I have sought your assistance."

"And I'd go and have a look at the premises with you, if you could only tell me where they are. But as you can't – well, what are we to do, sonny?"

Chapter Four
The Woman

"Take me at once to the police-station," I said firmly. "I must make a statement to your inspector on duty."

"Not much good, is it, if you can't tell us where the affair took place?" queried the man, impertinently.

"It is my duty to make the report, and the duty of the police to investigate it," I answered, annoyed, for it seemed as though he doubted me.

"That's a nasty cut on your hand," he remarked. "How did you get it?"

"I cut it myself by accident with the knife."

"What knife?"

"The knife with which the murders were committed."

"And what were you doing with it?" inquired the constable, utterly regardless of the strict police regulation which forbids an officer to put any such questions.

"I found it," I replied.

"Where?"

"On the floor of the room, while I was searching about."

The man grunted dubiously.

I was well aware of the suspicion which must fall upon me, for I knew there was blood upon my clothes, and that my story

possessed a distinct air of improbability.

"Who injured your head like that?" he asked.

In response, I told him how, in crossing a road, I had been knocked down and rendered insensible by a cab, and how, on regaining consciousness, I had found myself under the care of some woman unknown.

He gave vent to a short harsh laugh, as though discrediting my statements.

"You don't believe me," I blurted forth hastily. "Take me to your inspector. We must lose no time."

"Well, you know," observed the man, "your story, you'll admit, is a very extraordinary one. You say that a terrible affair has happened in a house somewhere about here, yet you can't direct us to it. The whole story is so curious that I'm afraid you'll have a difficulty in persuading anybody to believe you."

"If you don't, somebody else will," I snapped. "Come, take me to the police-station."

Thus ordered, the man rather reluctantly took my arm, and crossing the wide main road, we traversed a number of short crooked thoroughfares.

"You don't seem a very good walker, mister," the constable observed presently. "I see a cab in the distance. Would you like to take it?"

"Yes. Call it," I said, for I felt very weak and ill after my terrible night's adventure.

A few minutes later we were sitting together in the hansom,

driving towards the address he had given, namely, College Place Police-Station.

On the way I explained to him the whole of the facts as far as I could recollect them. He listened attentively to my curious narrative until I had concluded, then said —

"Well, sir, it's certainly a most mysterious affair, and the only fear I have is that everybody will look upon it with disbelief. I know what I should do if I were a gentleman in your place."

"What would you do?"

"Well, I should keep my knowledge to myself, say nothing about it, and leave the revelation of the crime to chance."

"I am compelled to make a report of it, because I was present at the tragedy," I said. "It is my duty, in the interests of justice."

"Of course, that's all very well, I quite agree that your duty as a citizen is to make a statement to my inspector, but if I may be permitted to say so, my private opinion is, that to preserve a discreet silence is better than making a fool of one's self."

"You're certainly plain-spoken," I said smiling.

"Oh, well, you'll excuse me, sir," the man said, half-apologetically. "I mean no offence, you know. I only tell you how I myself would act. Now, if you could give any real information of value to the detectives, there would be some reason for making the statement, but as you can't, well you'll only give yourself no end of bother for nothing."

"But surely, man, you don't think that with the knowledge of this terrible affair in my mind I'm going to preserve silence and

allow the assassin to escape, do you?"

"Well, it seems that the assassin has escaped already, in any case," the man laughed. "You take it from me that they were a cute lot in that house, whoever they were. The wonder is that they didn't kill you."

An exactly similar thought had crossed my mind. The drive seemed a long one, but at length the cab stopped, and we alighted.

I heard the conveyance turn and go off, as together we ascended the steps of the station. One thing struck me as curious, namely, that the air was filled with a strong odour like turpentine.

"The station is a long way from your beat," I remarked.

"Yes. A fairish way, but we're used to it, and don't notice the distance."

"And this is College Place – is it?"

"Yes," he responded, conducting me down a long passage. The length of the corridor surprised me, and I humorously remarked —

"You're not going to put me in the cells, I hope?"

"Scarcely," he laughed. "But if we did the darkness wouldn't trouble you very much, I fear. Blindness must be an awful affliction."

He had scarcely uttered these words ere we ascended a couple of steps and entered what seemed to be a spacious place, the charge-room of the police-station.

There was the sound of heavy tramping over bare boards, and suddenly a rather gruff voice inquired —

"Well, four-six-eight? What is it?"

"Gentleman, sir – wants to report a tragedy. He's blind, sir."

"Bring him a chair," said the inspector's voice authoritatively.

My guide drew forward a chair, and I seated myself, saying —

"I believe you are the inspector on duty here?"

"Yes, I am. Will you kindly tell me your name and address?"

I did so, and the scratching of a quill told me that he was about to take down my statement.

"Well?" he inquired at length. "Please go on, for my time is limited. What's the nature of the affair?"

"I've been present to-night in a house where a double murder has been committed," I said.

"Where?"

"Ah! That's unfortunately just the mystery which I cannot solve. Being blind, I could obtain no idea of the exterior of the place, and in my excitement I left it without properly marking the house."

"Tell me the whole of the facts," observed the officer. "Who are the victims?"

"A woman and a man."

"Young or old?"

"Both young, as far as I can judge. At any rate, I examined the body of the man and found him to be about twenty-eight."

"The gentleman has no idea of the street where the tragedy has occurred," chimed in the constable. "He met me outside the Museum, and the blood on his clothes was still wet."

"He's got an injury to the head," remarked the inspector.

"I was knocked down and rendered insensible by a cab," I explained. "When I again became conscious I found myself in a strange house."

"They didn't rob you?"

I felt in my pockets, but I could not discover that I had lost anything. I remembered that I had only a couple of half-sovereigns and some loose silver upon me, and this remained still in my pocket. My fingers touched the stud and pencil-case, and I hesitated whether to give these up to the police. But next second the thought flashed through my mind that if I did, suspicion might be aroused against me, and further that while I kept them in my possession I should possess a secret clue to the victims of the terrible tragedy.

After I had fully explained the whole circumstances, and the inspector had written down with infinite care each word of my remarkable statement, he said —

"It seems as though both the man and woman fell victims to some plot or other. You say that there were no high words, and that all you heard was a woman's shriek, and a man's voice say, 'Why, you've killed her!' Now, have you any idea of the identity of that man?"

"None whatsoever," I answered. "My mind is a perfect blank on everything, save the personal appearance of the man who was afterwards struck to the heart."

"Exactly. But don't you think that the man who expressed

horror at the first crime fell the victim of the second?"

"Ah! I never thought of that!" I said. "Of course, it seems most likely."

"Certainly. The second crime was committed undoubtedly in order to conceal the first."

"Then how extraordinary it is that I was spared."

"There was a motive, I believe, for that. We shall no doubt find that later."

"You will communicate with Scotland Yard, I suppose," I remarked.

"Perhaps we shall; perhaps not," answered the inspector, vaguely. "The affair must, of course, be fully investigated. Have you anything to add? You say that some woman treated you kindly. Have you any idea of her personal appearance?"

"None," I answered. "The only fact I know was that she was in evening dress, and that upon her wrist was a curious smooth-worn bangle of a kind of fine plaited wire, very pliable, like those worn by African native women."

"Eh! What – impossible!" gasped the inspector, in a voice which surprised me. But next moment he recovered his self-possession and made a calm remark that this fact did not lead to anything definite. Yet the sudden exclamation of startled surprise which escaped him aroused within me a belief that my words had given him some mysterious clue.

"You have no further statement to make?"

"None," I responded.

There was a few moments' silence during which time the quill continued its rapid scratching.

"You will kindly sign your information," the officer said, whereupon the constable brought me the sheet of foolscap and a pen wherewith I scrawled my name.

"Good," observed the inspector, with a grunt of satisfaction. "And now I must ask you to excuse me further, Mr – Mr Heaton, and wish you good morning."

I made my adieu, after obtaining from him a promise to communicate with me if anything transpired, and, accompanied by the constable, made my way out into the long passage again.

I had not walked a dozen paces ere I knew instinctively that some persons were near me, and next instant felt myself seized roughly by both arms and legs.

"What are you doing?" I shouted in alarm; "let me go!"

But only for an instant I struggled. The force used was utterly irresistible, and not a single word was uttered. My arms were in a moment pinioned, rendering me helpless as a child. With my terrible affliction upon me, I could neither defend myself nor could I see my assailants. Whoever the latter were, it was evident that they were determined, and, further, that I had been cleverly entrapped.

My first thought was that I had been arrested, but ere the lapse of a few moments the hideous truth became impressed forcibly upon me.

I tried to fight for life, but my wrists had been seized in grips

of steel, and after a few desperate wrenches I stood, bound, and utterly unconscious of where I was.

My real position was, to a certain degree, plain. The man whom I had believed to be a constable was no police-officer at all, but some thief or London ruffian; I, far too confiding, had neglected to take the precaution of feeling his uniform.

A shrewd suspicion overcame me that this trap had been purposely laid for me. The man who had posed as a police inspector had obtained from me a signed declaration of the remarkable occurrence, for what reason I knew not. Did they now intend to silence me for ever? The thought struck a deep and terrible dread within my heart.

To my demands to know where I was, no response was given.

Indistinct whisperings sounded about me, and by the liquid "s's" of one person I felt convinced that a woman was present.

Little time, however, was I given in which to distinguish my surroundings, for two persons gripped my bound arms and drew me roughly through a narrow door, across an uneven floor, and thence down a long, crooked flight of stone steps.

From below came up a dank, mouldy smell, as of some chamber long unopened, and suddenly there broke upon my quick ears the wash of water.

In that moment of mental agony the truth was rendered plain. I was not in a police-station, as I believed, but in some house beside the Thames, and, moreover, I was descending to the water – going to my death.

Once again, as a last effort, I struggled and fought with the fierce desperation begotten of terror, but in a moment the strong hands that held me pushed me violently forward, and I then felt myself falling helplessly from some dizzy height. My head reeled, and weakened as I already was, all knowledge of things became blotted out.

The touch of a cool, sympathetic hand upon my brow was the first thing I subsequently remembered. My arms had apparently been freed, and with a quick movement I grasped the hand. It was a woman's.

Was I dreaming?

I stretched forth my left hand to obtain some idea of my surroundings, and found myself lying upon an uneven stone flooring that seemed covered with the evil-smelling slime of the river.

With my right hand I touched a woman's firm, well-moulded arm, and to my amazement my eager fingers came into contact with a bangle. I felt it.

The hand, the arm, the bangle, the perfume of *peau d'Espagne*, all were the same as those of the woman who had pitied me in my helplessness, and had so tenderly cared for me in that mysterious, unknown house, wherein the tragedy had afterwards occurred.

At first I lay speechless in wonderment, but when I found tongue I spoke, imploring her to make explanation. I heard her sigh deeply, but to all my inquiries she remained dumb.

Chapter Five
The Unseen

"Tell me," I demanded in my helplessness, of the mysterious woman at my side, "what has happened?"

"Rise, and try whether you can walk," said the voice at last, sweet and low-pitched, the same well-remembered voice that had spoken to me in that unknown house of shadows.

I struggled and rose stiffly, assisted tenderly by her. To my joy I found that I could walk quite well.

"Thank God!" she gasped, as though a great weight had been lifted from her mind. "Thank God that I have found you. The tide is rising, and in half an hour you would have been beyond human aid."

"The tide!" I repeated. "What do you mean?"

"At high tide the river floods this place to the roof, therefore nothing could have saved you."

"What place is this?"

The voice was silent, as though hesitating to reveal to me the truth.

"A place wherein, alas! more than one person has found his grave," she explained at last.

"But I don't understand," I said eagerly. "All is so puzzling. I believed that I was inside a police-station, whereas I had actually

walked into this mysterious and cleverly-prepared trap. Who are these people who are my enemies? – tell me."

"Unfortunately, I cannot."

"But you, yourself, are not one of them," I declared.

"I may be," answered the voice in a strange, vague tone.

"Why?"

"Ah! no, that is not a fair question to ask."

"But surely, you, who were so kind to me after my accident in the street, will you desert me now?" I argued. Her failure to give me any assurance that she was my friend struck me as peculiar. There was something extremely uncanny about the whole affair. I did not like it.

"I have not said that I intend to leave you. Indeed, from motives of my own I have sought and found you; but before we go further I must obtain from you a distinct and faithful promise."

"A promise – of what?"

There was a brief silence, and I heard that she drew a deep breath as those do who are driven to desperation.

"The situation is briefly this," the voice said, in a tone a trifle harsher than before. "I searched for you, and by a stroke of good fortune discovered where your unknown enemies had placed you, intending that at high tide you should be drowned, and your body carried out to sea, as others have been. From this place there is only one means of egress, and that being concealed, only death can come to you unless I assist you. You understand?"

"Perfectly. This is a trap where a man may be drowned like

a rat in a hole. The place is foetid with the black mud of the Thames."

"Exactly," she answered. Then she added, "Now tell me, are you prepared to make a compact with me?"

"A compact? Of what nature?" I inquired, much surprised.

"It will, I fear, strike you as rather strange, nevertheless it is, I assure you, imperative. If I rescue you and give you back your life, it must be conditional that you accept my terms absolutely."

"And what are those terms?" I inquired, amazed at this extraordinary speech of hers.

"There are two conditions," she answered, after a slight pause. "The first is that you must undertake to make no statement whatever to the police regarding the events of last night."

She intended to secure my silence regarding the tragedy. Was it because that she herself was the actual assassin? I remembered that while I had reclined upon the silken couch in that house of mystery this startling suspicion had crossed my mind. Was that same cool, sympathetic palm that had twice soothed my brow the hand of a murderess?

"But there has been a terrible crime – a double crime committed," I protested. "Surely, the police should know!"

"No; all knowledge must be kept from them," she answered decisively. "I wish you to understand me perfectly from the outset. I have sought you here in order to rescue you from this place, because you have unwittingly fallen the victim of a most dastardly plot. You are blind, defenceless, helpless, therefore all

who have not hearts of stone must have compassion upon you. Yet if I rescue you, and allow you to go forth again into the world, you may, if you make a statement to the police, be the means of bringing upon me a catastrophe, dire and complete."

Every word of hers showed that guilt was upon her. Had I not heard the swish of her skirts as she crept from the room after striking down that unknown man so swiftly and silently that he died without a word?

"And if I promise to remain mute?"

"If you promise," she said, "I will accept it only on one further condition."

"And what's that?"

"One which I know you will have some hesitation in accepting; yet, like the first, it is absolutely imperative."

Her voice showed traces of extreme anxiety, and the slim hand upon my arm trembled.

She was young, I knew, but was she beautiful? I felt instinctively that she was, and conjured up within myself a vision of a refined face, perfect in its tragic beauty, like that of Van Dyck's Madonna that I had seen in the Pitti Palace at Florence in those well-remembered days when I looked upon the world, and it had given me such pleasure.

"Your words are very puzzling," I said gravely. "Tell me what it is that you would have me do."

"It is not difficult," she answered, "yet the curious character of my request will, I feel, cause you to hold back with a natural

caution. It will sound strange; nevertheless, here, before I put the suggestion before you, I give you my word of honour, as a woman who fears her God, that no undue advantage shall be taken of your promise."

"Well, explain what you mean."

"The condition I impose upon you in return for my assistance," she said, in deepest earnestness, "is that you shall promise to render assistance to a person who will ever remain unknown to you. Any requests made to you will be by letter bearing the signature A-V-E-L, and these instructions you must promise to obey without seeking to discover either motive or reason. The latter can never be made plain to you, therefore do not puzzle yourself unnecessarily over them, for it will be all to no purpose. The secret – for secret there is, of course – will be so well guarded that it can never be exposed, therefore if you consent to thus rendering me a personal assistance in return for your life, it will be necessary to act blindly and carry out to the letter whatever instructions you receive, no matter how remarkable or how illogical they may seem. Do you agree?"

"Well," I said hesitatingly, "your request is indeed a most extraordinary one. If I promise, what safeguard have I for my own interests?"

"Sometimes you may, of course, be compelled to act against your own inclinations," she admitted. "I, however, can only assure you that if you make this promise I will constitute myself your protectress, and at the same time give you solemn assurance

that no request contained in the letters of which I have spoken will be of such a character as to cause you to commit any offence against the law."

"Then it is you yourself who will be my anonymous correspondent?" I observed quickly.

"Ah, no!" she answered. "That is, of course, the natural conclusion; but I may as well at once assure you that such will not be the case." Then she added, "I merely ask you to accept or decline. If the former, I will ever be at your service, although we must never meet again after to-day; if the latter, then I will wish you adieu, and the terrible fate your unknown enemies have prepared for you must be allowed to take effect."

"But I should be drowned!" I exclaimed in alarm. "Surely you will not abandon me!"

"Not if you will consent to ally yourself with me."

"For evil?" I suggested very dubiously.

"No, for good," she answered. "I require your silence, and I desire that you should render assistance to one who is sorely in need of a friend."

"Financial aid?"

"No, finance has nothing to do with it. The unknown person has money and to spare. It is a devoted personal assistance and obedience that is required."

"But how can one be devoted to a person one has neither seen nor known?" I queried, for her words had increased the mystery.

The shrewd suspicion grew upon me that this curious effort to

secure my silence was because of her own guilt; that she intended to bind me to a compact in her own nefarious interests.

"I am quite well aware of the strangeness of the conditions I am imposing upon you, but they are necessary."

"And if I accept them will the mystery of to-night ever be explained?" I inquired, eager to learn the truth.

"Of that I know not," she answered vaguely. "Your silence is required to preserve the secret."

"But tell me," I said quickly, "how many persons were there present in that house beside yourself?"

"No, no!" she ejaculated in a tone of horror. "Make no further inquiry. Try and forget all – everything – as I shall try and forget. You cannot know – you will never know – therefore it is utterly useless to seek to learn the truth."

"And may I not even know your identity?" I inquired, putting forth my hand until it rested upon her well-formed shoulder. "May I not touch your face, so as to give me an impression of your personal appearance?"

She laughed at what, of course, must have seemed to her a rather amusing request.

"Give me permission to do this," I urged. "If there is to be mutual trust between us it is only fair that I should know whether you are young or old."

She hesitated. I felt her hand trembling.

"Remember, I cannot see you," I went on. "By touch I can convey to my mind an impression of the contour of your features,

and thus know with whom I am dealing."

"Very well," she said at last. "You have my permission."

Then eagerly, with both my hands, I touched her face, while she stood rigid and motionless as a statue. I could feel by the contraction of the muscles that this action of mine amused her, and that she was laughing.

Her skin was soft as velvet, her lashes long, her features regular and finely cut like those of some old cameo. Her hair was dressed plainly, and she had about her shoulders a large cape of rich fur – sable I believed it to be. There was no doubt she was young, perhaps not more than twenty-one or so, and certainly she was very handsome of countenance, and dressed with an elegance quite unusual.

Her mouth was small, her chin pointed, and her cheeks with a firm contour which spoke of health and happiness. As I carefully passed my hands backwards and forwards, obtaining a fresh mental impression with each movement, she laughed outright.

Of a sudden, however, she sprang aside quickly, and left me grasping at air.

"Ah!" she cried, wildly horrified at a sudden discovery. "There is blood upon your hands —*his blood*!"

"I had forgotten," I apologised quickly. "Forgive me; I cannot see, and was not aware that my hands were unclean."

"It's too terrible," she gasped hoarsely. "You have placed those stained hands upon my face, as though to taunt me."

"With what?" I inquired, breathlessly interested.

But she did not reply. She only held her breath, while her heart beat quickly, and by her silence I felt convinced that by her involuntary ejaculation she had nearly betrayed herself.

The sole question which occupied my thoughts at that moment was whether she was not the actual assassin. I forgot my own critical position. I recollected not the remarkable adventures that had befallen me that night. I thought not of the ghastly fate prepared for me by my unknown enemies. All my thoughts were concentrated upon the one problem – the innocence or guilt of that unseen, soft-spoken woman before me.

"And now," she said at last – "now that you have satisfied yourself of my personal appearance, are you prepared to accept the conditions?"

"I confess to having some hesitation in doing so," I answered, quite frankly.

"That is not at all surprising. But the very fact of your own defencelessness should cause you to ally yourself with one who has shown herself to be your protectress, and seeks to remain your friend."

"What motive can you possibly have for thus endeavouring to ally yourself with me?" I inquired, without attempting to disguise my suspicion.

"A secret one."

"For your own ends, of course?"

"Not exactly. For our mutual interests. By my own action in taking you in when you were knocked down by the cab I have

placed your life in serious jeopardy; therefore, it is only just that I should now seek to rescue you. Yet if I do so without first obtaining your promise of silence and of assistance, I may, for aught I know, bring an overwhelming catastrophe upon myself."

"You assure me, upon your honour as a woman, that no harm shall befall me if I carry out the instructions in those mysterious letters?"

"If you obey without seeking to elucidate their mystery, or the identity of their sender, no harm shall come to you," she answered solemnly.

"And regarding the silence which you seek to impose upon me? May I not explain my adventures to my friend, in order to account for the blood upon my clothes and the injury to my head?"

"Only if you find it actually necessary. Recollect, however, that no statement whatever must be made to the police. You must give an undertaking never to divulge to them one single word of what occurred last night."

There was a dead silence, broken only by the lapping of water, which had already risen and had flooded the chamber to the depth of about two inches. The place was a veritable death-trap, for, being a kind of cellar and below high-water mark, the Thames flood entered by a hole near the floor too small to permit the escape of a man, and would rise until it reached the roof.

"Come," she urged at last. "Give me your undertaking, and let us at once get away from this horrible place."

I remained silent. Anxious to escape and save my life, I nevertheless entertained deep suspicions of her, because of her anxiety that I should give no information to the police. She had drawn back in horror at the sight of the blood of the murdered man! Had she not, by her hesitation, admitted her own guilt?

"You don't trust me," she observed, with an air of bitter reproach.

"No," I answered, very bluntly; "I do not."

"You are at least plain and outspoken," she responded. "But as our interests are mutual, I surely may presume to advise you to accept the conditions. Life is better than death, even though one may be blind."

"And you hold back from me the chance to escape from this slow but inevitable fate unless I conform to your wishes?"

"I do."

"Such action as yours cannot inspire confidence."

"I am impelled by circumstances beyond my own control," she answered, with a momentary touch of sadness. "If you knew the truth you certainly would not hesitate."

"Will you not tell me your name?"

"No. It is useless."

"At least, you can so far confide in me as to tell me your Christian name," I said.

"Edna."

"And you refuse your surname?"

"I do so under compulsion."

The water had by this time risen rapidly. My legs had become benumbed, for it now reached nearly to my knees.

"Why do you longer hesitate?" she went on. "Give me your word that you will render the assistance I require, and we will at once escape. Let us lose no time. All this seems strange to you, I know; but some day, when you learn the real reason, you will thank me rather than think ill of my present actions."

Her determination was, I saw plainly, the outcome of some terror which held her fettered, and I knew that, in order to save myself, I must give her the promise she had so persistently desired to extract from me.

Therefore, with sudden determination, prompted by the natural, instinct of self-preservation than by any desire to assist her, I gave her my bond of secrecy.

Again she sighed deeply, as though released of some oppressive weight by my words. Then our hands clasped in mutual trust, and without further word she led me to the opposite side of the noisome cellar into which my enemies had cast me.

"You shall never regret this decision," she assured me in a strained voice, trembling with emotion – "never, never!"

And with a sudden movement she raised my hand and touched it lightly with her dry, fevered lips.

Chapter Six
Hand and Heart

This impulsive action of hers was as though she were deeply indebted to me. I stood motionless in wonderment.

But only for an instant. She left my side for a moment, and from the sound that escaped her lips appeared to be struggling to open some means of egress from the place.

"Remain where you are," she said, "and I will return to you in a moment. The way out is rather difficult, and I shall be compelled to assist you." Her voice sounded above me, as though she had somehow climbed to the roof of the place.

I heard the drawing of a bolt and the clang of iron; then she climbed down again to where I anxiously awaited her. The river flood had risen alarmingly, and was still entering rapidly.

"Come, let me guide you," she said, taking my arm and leading me to the wall. "Lift your foot, so!" and taking my foot, she placed it in a kind of narrow step in the rough stone wall, at the same time placing my hand upon a piece of iron that seemed to be a large nail driven into the masonry. "Now climb very carefully," she went on.

Without hesitation, I raised myself from the ground slowly, and with infinite care commenced to scale the wall, while she remained below, wading almost up to her waist in water.

"Take care that you don't strike your head," she cried warningly. "Above you is a small hole just large enough for you to get through. Be very careful, and take your time."

The one hand at liberty I stretched above my head, and found, as she described, a square hole in the roof of the place, and, grasping the stone, I eventually managed to escape through it, finding myself at last standing upon a boarded floor.

A few moments later she was again at my side, and by the clang of iron I knew that the aperture of that fatal place was closed again.

I inquired of her where we were, but she only replied —

"I've already explained to you that to seek to elucidate the mystery of these adventures of yours is entirely useless. We have promised to each other mutual faith. That is, in itself, sufficient."

Then, taking my arm, she hurriedly led me across the room, up some steps, and along two long passages that ran at right angles to each other, until at length we emerged into the street.

Where we were I had not the slightest idea. I only knew that we were beside the river bank, for upon my ears there fell the shrill whistle of a steam-tug.

With her arm linked in mine, and heedless of the water dripping from her skirts, she led me forward through a number of narrow turnings, until by the bustle about me I knew that we must have reached a main road.

I heard the approaching hoot of a taxi, and the vehicle, at her demand, pulled up at the kerb.

"We must now part," she said, in a low, earnest voice. "Remember that in this remarkable affair our interests are absolutely identical. Any order that you receive you will obey without seeking to discover the why or wherefore, and above all, silence to the police."

"I have promised," I answered.

"And whatever may occur in the future, recollect that I am still your protectress, as I have been to-day. I have forced you to your promise, but for that I ask your forgiveness, because it is essential, if the mystery is ever to be solved."

"Are you, too, seeking the truth?"

"Yes," she responded. "But we must not talk here. The condition of our clothes is attracting attention."

"I shall think always of the mysterious Edna who refuses all information," I laughed.

"And I, too, shall not easily forget you – and all I owe to you. Farewell."

Her soft hand grasped mine for an instant, that same cool hand that had soothed my brow. Afterwards she assisted me into the cab.

"Good-bye," she cried. Then she became lost to me.

I told the driver where to go, and sat back in the vehicle, plunged in my own thoughts. I was like a man in a dream. The mystery was most tantalising. Feeling weak, I stopped at a public-house and had some brandy. Indeed, I felt so unwell that I sat in the bar-parlour fully half an hour before resuming my drive.

Suddenly I recollected that I might gather something from the driver, and I inquired where he had taken me up.

"In Albert Road, Battersea, sir."

This surprised me, for I had no idea that I had been on the Surrey side of the river.

I explained to the man my blindness, and asked him to describe the lady who had put me into this cab.

"Well, sir," he said, "she was very pretty indeed, with grey eyes and darkish hair."

"She was good-looking – eh?"

"Yes, sir. I don't think I've ever seen a much prettier young lady."

I sighed. How tantalising it was that my poor sightless eyes had been unable to gaze upon her.

"Describe her more closely," I urged. "I'm anxious to know exactly what she's like."

"She had lovely eyes, sir. Her hair seemed a bit untidy, but it was a pretty shade of dark-brown. Her face seemed innocent-looking, like a child's. I was surprised to see her like that."

"Like what?"

"Half-drowned like. She had on a black skirt that seemed soaking wet through, and covered with mud. She looked in an awful plight, and yet her face was merry and smiling. She took another cab as soon as she parted from you, and drove after us across the Albert Bridge, and then down Oakley Street. There she stopped the cab to speak to some one."

"Who was it?" I asked eagerly.

"A woman. But I couldn't see distinctly. They were too far away, and turned down Cheyne Walk, so I didn't see 'em any more."

"You say that her clothes were very dirty?"

"Yes, worse than yours, and, great Scott! sir, they're bad enough. You'll want to send 'em to the cleaners when you get 'ome."

What the man said was perfectly true. The slime of the river emitted a sickening stench, but it fortunately served to conceal one thing, namely, the blood-stains upon my coat.

I laughed at this remark of his, but I had no intention to enter upon explanations.

"From her appearance did my companion lead you to believe that she was a lady?"

"Oh yes, sir. By her manner you'd tell her as a lady among ten thousand."

"There was nothing noticeable about whereby I might recognise her again? Try and recollect."

"No, sir," answered the man. "She was a very beautiful young lady, and that's all I noticed."

"You'd know her again if you saw her?"

"I should just say I would," laughed the man. "When a chap sees a woman as lovely as she is it ain't likely he'll forget her, even though he may have a wife and 'arf a dozen kids at 'ome."

"You're smitten by her beauty, it seems," I laughed. "What's

your name?"

"West, sir – Tom West. Number L.C.432. I stand on the rank at Hyde Park Corner."

"Well, West," I said, taking a card out of my case, and handing it to him, "if you ever see that lady again, and can find out who and what she is, and where she lives, I'll give you a present – say twenty pounds."

"Twenty quid!" the man echoed with a whistle. "I'd like to touch the oof, sir, and you bet I'll keep my weather eye open."

"As soon as you've found her, let me know, and the money is yours. You understand that's a bargain."

"Right you are, sir. I'll do my very best."

"If you only knew the driver of the cab she took after we parted you might, perhaps, learn something."

"That's just what I'm thinking," he said. "The man who drove her was, I believe, an old fellow that we know as 'Doughy' but I'm not at all sure. However, as soon as I set you down I'll go and find him. A driver is difficult to recognise if he wears another overcoat, you see. That's why I'm not certain that it really was 'Doughy'."

By the sharp descent of the roadway I knew that we were already in Essex Street, and a few moments later I had paid the man West and was ascending the stair to my own chambers.

The enlistment into my service of this man, the only person who had seen the mysterious Edna, was, I congratulated myself, a very shrewd and clever commencement of the investigation

which I intended, at all hazards, to carry out.

Indeed, my only means of tracing her was through the intermediary of this one man, who had seen her and remarked upon her marvellous beauty. He seemed a sharp, witty fellow, and I therefore entertained every confidence in his efforts to earn the promised reward. He was now on his way to find his colleague, the old driver "Doughy," and if Edna had actually taken his cab I should, without doubt, soon be in possession of some information.

Thus, with a light step and reassured feeling, I ascended the stairs, wondering what old Mrs Parker would say to my protracted absence, and how I should explain it to her. I took out my latch-key and opened the door.

As I entered the tiny lobby that served the dual purpose of hall and a place in which to hang coats, a startling sound broke upon my ears – the sound of a woman's cry.

In an instant I drew back. Fresh mystery greeted me. I stood there rigid, speechless, aghast.

Chapter Seven
The Mystery is Increased

The voice which greeted me was that of a woman surprised by my sudden entrance; and walking swiftly forward to investigate, I passed into my own dingy sitting-room.

"I have a visitor, it seems," I exclaimed, stopping short. "May I not know your name?"

There was no response. Instinctively I knew that the woman I had thus disturbed was still present in that room wherein I spent so many lonely hours. Her startled cry was sufficient to convince me that she was there for some secret purpose. What, I wondered, could it be?

"Speak," I urged. "Kindly explain your business with me, and the reason of your presence here."

Yet she uttered no word of response, and apparently did not move.

I advanced, crossing towards the window, where I believed she must be standing, but with a quick movement my mysterious visitor eluded me, passing me by so near that her warm breath fanned my cheek, and next instant she had escaped and slammed the outer door of my chambers.

I stood wondering. Her presence there was most extraordinary. The faithful Parker, too, was absent, a

circumstance which aroused misgivings within me. Could this strange female visitor have entered the place with a false key; or was she a mere pilferer whom I had disturbed in her search for plunder? Numbers of female thieves haunt the London streets, and it seemed more than likely that she was one who had ascended the stairs on pretence of selling something or other.

At any rate, I had returned at an unexpected moment, or she would not have given vent to that involuntary cry of dismay. I groped about the familiar room in order to ascertain whether it were disordered, but could find nothing whatsoever out of place. I called Parker loudly by name, but all was silence save the quick ticking of the timepiece upon the mantelshelf.

The clock of St. Clement Danes chimed merrily, then slowly struck the hour. I counted, and found that it was eleven o'clock in the morning. How much had happened during the past fifteen hours! I had twice nearly lost my life.

Having cast aside my hat, I sank into my armchair, muddy and dirty, just as I was. My head, where it had been struck in the accident, pained me considerably, and I felt that I had a touch of fever coming on. Yet all my thoughts were concentrated upon the future and what the curious alliance with my strange protectress might bring upon me. Surely no man had ever found himself in a more remarkable situation than I was at that moment; certainly no man could be more mystified and puzzled. Deeply I pondered again and again, but could make nothing of that tangled web of startling facts.

By no desire or inclination of my own I had fallen among what appeared to be very undesirable company, and had involuntarily promised to become the assistant of some person whom I could not see. The strange oppression that fell upon me seemed precursory of evil.

My wet clothes sticking to me chilled me to the bone, and, with a sudden resolve to shake off the gloomy apprehensions that seemed to have gripped my heart, I rose and passed into my own room to wash and get a change of clothing.

The prolonged absence of Parker caused me much wonder. She never went out unless to go into the Strand to purchase the diurnal steak or tri-weekly chop which constituted my chief sustenance; or, perhaps, on Sunday afternoon she would, on rare occasions, go "to take a cup o' tea" with her daughter, who was a music-hall artiste, and lived somewhere off the Kensington Road.

Having cleaned myself, I proceeded to dress the wound on my head, my own medical knowledge standing me in good stead, and when I had satisfactorily bandaged it and put on a dry suit of clothes, I groped about through the several small rooms which were my home. Nothing seemed disarranged, nothing missing – only the woman who had ever been so faithful to me and had treated me as tenderly in my helplessness as though I had been her own son.

In impatience I took a cigar, lit it, and sat down to wait. No doubt, when she returned I should find that she had been absent

upon some errand connected with her not-over-extensive *cuisine*. The thought grew upon me that my promise to the mysterious Edna, whoever she might be, was a rashly foolish one, and must result in some very serious *contretemps* for me. I had willingly given up my liberty of action and become the instrument of a person who had, without doubt, imposed upon me. It seemed most probable, now that I reflected, that she was acting in concert with the man who had so cleverly practised deception upon me and led me to believe that he was a police-constable. That man, it now seemed plain, had followed me from the house of mystery, allowed me to wander sufficiently far to lose my bearings, and then got on in front of me so that I might approach and accost him. The whole affair had been carried out with amazing ingenuity, and every precaution had apparently been taken to conceal the remarkable tragedy. Yet the chief feature of the affair which puzzled me was the motive in endeavouring to take my life in that cellar beside the Thames. I had surely harmed no one, and, being utterly ignorant of the house wherein the affair had taken place, and also knowing me to be blind, they certainly could not fear any revelations that I might make. It was an enigma which I strove in vain to solve.

My gloomy thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of a latch-key in the outer door, and as I rose old Mrs Parker entered with an expression of profound surprise.

"Why, sir?" she cried. "I understood that you'd gone away into the country!"

"Into the country?" I echoed. "Who told you so?"

"The lady you sent to tell me."

"Lady? What lady?" I inquired, amazed. "Surely, Parker, you've taken leave of your senses?"

"The lady came about an hour ago, sir, and said that you had sent her to tell me that you would be absent for perhaps a week or so – that you had gone down to your uncle's in Hampshire."

"I've sent no one," I responded, astounded at this fresh phase of the affair. "What kind of lady was she – old or young?"

"Middle-aged."

"Well-dressed?"

"Yes, sir. She spoke with a funny kind of lisp, which made me think she might be a foreigner. She said she knew you quite well, being a friend of your aunt's, and that you were travelling down to Hampshire this morning, your uncle having been taken ill. I remarked that it was strange that you shouldn't come home for your bag and things, but she gave me a message from you to send a bag packed with your clothes by train from Waterloo to Christchurch Station marked 'To be called for.'"

"But didn't you think her story a very lame one, Parker?" I asked, angry that my old serving-woman should have thus been misled and deceived.

"Of course I did, sir, especially as you were absent all night. I told her that, and she said that you had called upon her, and finding your aunt, Lady Durrant, there on a visit, remained to supper. While at supper a telegram had arrived summoning your

aunt home, as your uncle had been taken dangerously ill, and at once you had resolved to accompany her. But you've hurt your head, sir, haven't you?" she added, noticing my bandages.

"Yes," I answered. "I fell down. It is nothing – my own carelessness."

The story was, to say the least, a most ingenious one. Whoever the mysterious woman was she apparently knew that my uncle, Sir Charles Durrant, lived in the neighbourhood of Christchurch; that he was at that moment in a very critical state of health, suffering from paralysis, and further, that I had considerable expectations from him, and would not hesitate to travel down to see him if I knew him to be worse. One thing, therefore, was quite plain, namely, that my family affairs were perfectly well known to these persons whose movements were so mystifying.

"It was foolish of you, Parker, very foolish indeed, to have given credence to such an absurd tale as that," I said, annoyed. "You are usually a shrewd woman, but you have displayed no discretion in this affair – none whatever."

"I'm very sorry, sir," the woman answered. "But I knew that if Sir Charles were worse you'd go down to the Manor at once. Did you really send nobody, sir?"

"No; nobody at all. There's some underhand business in all this, Parker, so keep your wits about you."

"And haven't you seen her ladyship at all, sir?" she inquired, in her turn astonished.

"No, and, moreover, I know nothing of this mysterious woman

who came to you with this cock-and-bull story. Did she say where she lived, or give any card?"

"No, she didn't, sir."

"I suppose you'd know her again if you saw her?"

"Well," she answered with considerable hesitancy, "I don't know as I should, sir. You see, she wore one of them white lace veils which makes it difficult to distinguish the features."

"But what object could any one have in coming to you and telling a falsehood in that manner?" I cried, my anger increased by the knowledge of Parker's inability to again recognise the bearer of the false message.

"I don't know, I'm sure, sir," was the woman's reply, in a voice which showed how deeply she regretted the occurrence.

"How long was she here?" I inquired.

"About five minutes. She asked me to let her see your sitting-room and the reading-books with the embossed letters, as she was much interested in you, and had heard so much of you from Lady Durrant."

"And you showed them to her?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you had no right to do so without my permission, Parker," I said angrily. "You are an old and trusted servant, and should have known better."

"I'm very sorry, sir. The truth was that she seemed such a well-spoken lady, and her manner was so perfect that I thought you would not like to offend her."

"Recollect that if any other persons call they are not to enter my rooms on any pretext," I said decisively.

"Very well, sir. I acknowledge that I was entirely in the wrong in allowing her to pry about the place."

"And when she had gone?"

"Then I went over to the butcher's in the Strand to get a bit of steak."

"And saw nothing more of her?"

"Yes, sir. I did see her again. As I was coming back I met her in the Strand, at the corner of Arundel Street, walking with a gentleman who looked like a City man. She said something to him, and he turned and had a good look at me."

"Then it must have been this same woman who was in my chambers here when I returned," I said.

"A woman here?" she ejaculated.

"Yes; when I entered there was a woman here, and she escaped as though she were a thief. She must have gone out and rejoined the man, who was awaiting her somewhere in the vicinity. That would bear out the fact that you encountered her again."

"But how could she get in? I'm always careful to see that the door is properly closed."

"Probably she stole the extra latch-key while prying about the place. See whether it is still on the nail." She crossed the room, and next moment gasped – "It's gone, sir!"

"Ah!" I said. "Just as I thought! The story she told you was a mere excuse to obtain admittance to the place, and, if possible, to

get possession of the key. This she obtained, and, having watched you out, returned and continued her search for something she desired to secure. We must at once examine the whole place, and seek to discover what's been stolen."

"Do you think she was a common thief, sir?" inquired Parker, dumbfounded by the ingenuity with which the latch-key had been secured.

"I don't know what to believe at present," I answered. "We must investigate first, and form our conclusions afterwards. Now, make a thorough search and see what has been disturbed and what is missing."

I had no intention of entering into a long explanation with Parker regarding the events of that fateful night, or to disturb her peace of mind by relating any of the tragic circumstances. Therefore, I went to my room and locked away my muddy, blood-stained clothing, and afterwards returned, and with my hands felt the various objects in my sitting-room, to assure myself that none was displaced or missing.

Chapter Eight
The Stranger

The visit of this mysterious woman in the white lace veil – at that time a fashionable feminine adornment – was, I felt assured, more than a coincidence. That it had some connexion with the strange events of the past night seemed certain, yet, try how I would, I could form no definite idea of either the motive of the visit or the object of her search. As far as Parker could discover, nothing whatever had been taken. A writing-table, the drawers of which contained some family papers, had apparently been hastily examined, but no object of value, nor any paper, had been extracted. Therefore I concluded that I had returned before the intruder had had time to make the complete examination of my effects which she had intended.

A curious thought occurred to me. Was the intruder in the white veil none other than the mysterious Edna herself?

As the day wore on I became more and more impressed by the belief that my surmise was the actual truth. Yet the cabman West had declared that she was young and pretty, while Parker expressed herself positive that she was middle-aged. But of the two statements I accepted that of the cabman as the more reliable. He had seen her in the broad daylight without the veil.

The fact of her concealing her features in a species of fine

window-curtain proved an attempt at disguise, therefore what more likely than that she should contrive to render her features older, and thus impose upon Parker, whose sight was not over good? In any case, however, if it were really Edna, she had certainly lost no time in carrying out her design, and further, she must have been fully aware of my intended return.

Days passed, hot blazing days and stifling nights, when the dust of throbbing, ever-roaring London seemed over my heart. Each morning, with Parker's assistance, I searched the newspapers, but nothing appeared to show that that strange midnight crime had been discovered. Were there two victims, or only one? How strange it was that although I had been present I could not tell I only knew that the male victim was young and well-dressed, probably a gentleman, and that he had been stabbed by a cowardly blow which had proved almost instantly fatal. That woman's scream that had sounded so shrill and agonised in the dead stillness of the night I remembered plainly as though it were but an hour ago – indeed, I remember it now as distinctly as ever. Was it the cry of Edna herself?

In my helplessness I could do nothing but remain silent, and keep my terrible secret to myself. Unable either to communicate with the police or seek the assistance of my friend, I found that any endeavour to seek a solution of the problem was mere sowing of the wind. My thoughts hour by hour, as I sat alone in my dingy room, my poor blind eyes a black void, were of the ghastly affair, and in all its phases I considered it, trying to find some motive in

the subsequent actions of the unscrupulous persons into whose hands I had had the misfortune to fall.

I heard of Dick through the office of his journal. He was down with fever at some outlandish place on the Afghan frontier, and would certainly not be home for a couple of months or so.

At first I was puzzled how to get rid of my soiled and blood-stained clothes so that Parker should not discover them, and at last hit upon the expedient of making them into a bundle and going forth one night when she was over at Kennington with her daughter Lily, the dancing-girl, and casting them into the Thames from the Embankment. It was a risky operation, for that part of London is well guarded by police after dark; nevertheless I accomplished it in safety, and was much amused a few days later by reading in an evening paper that they had been found near London Bridge and handed over to the river police, who, of course, scented a mystery. The blood-stains puzzled them, and the journal hinted that Scotland Yard had instituted inquiries into the ownership of the discarded suit of clothes. The paragraph concluded with that sentence, indispensable in reporting a mystery, "The police are very reticent about the matter."

Fortunately, having cut out the maker's name, and taken everything from the pockets which might serve as a clue to ownership, I felt perfectly safe, and eagerly read the issue of the same journal on the following evening, which told how the stains had been analysed, and found to be those of human blood.

A little more than a week had passed since my remarkable midnight adventure, when one morning I received a brief note by post, which Parker read to me. It consisted of only two typewritten lines stating that at mid-day I would receive a visitor, and was signed with the strange word "AVEL."

It was, I knew, a message from Edna, and I dressed myself with greater care in expectation that she herself would visit me. In this, however, I was disappointed, for after existing some three hours on tiptoe with anxiety I found my visitor to be a well-spoken, middle-aged man, whose slight accent when introducing himself betrayed that he was an American.

When we were alone, with the door closed, he made the following explanation —

"I have called upon you, Mr Heaton, at the request of a lady who is our mutual friend. You have, I presume, received a letter signed 'Avel'?"

"Yes," I said, remembering how that I had promised to blindly and obediently render my protectress whatever assistance she desired. "I presume you desire some service of me. What is it?"

"No," he said. "You are mistaken. It is with regard to the terrible affliction from which I see you are suffering that I have been sent."

"Are you a medical man?" I inquired, with some astonishment.

"I am an oculist," was his reply.

"And your name?"

"Slade – James Slade."

"And you have been sent here by whom?"

"By a lady whose real name I do not know."

"But you will kindly explain, before we go further, the circumstance in which she sought your aid on my behalf," I said firmly.

"You are mutual friends," he answered, somewhat vaguely. "It is no unusual thing for a patient to seek my aid on behalf of a friend. She sent me here to see you, and to examine your eyes, if you will kindly permit me."

The man's bearing irritated me, and I was inclined to resent this enforced subjection to an examination by one of whose reputation I knew absolutely nothing. Some of the greatest oculists in the world had looked into my sightless eyes and pronounced my case utterly hopeless. Therefore I had no desire to be tinkered with by this man, who, for aught I knew, might be a quack whose sole desire was to run up a long bill.

"I have no necessity for your aid," I answered, somewhat bluntly. "Therefore any examination is entirely waste of time."

"But surely the sight is one of God's most precious gifts to man," he answered, in a smooth, pleasant voice; "and if a cure is possible, you yourself would, I think, welcome it."

"I don't deny that," I answered. "I would give half that I possess – nay, more – to have my sight restored, but Sir Leopold Fry, Dr Measom, and Harker Halliday have all three seen me, and agree in their opinion that my sight is totally lost for ever.

You probably know them as specialists?"

"Exactly. They are the first men in my profession," he answered. "Yet sometimes one treatment succeeds where another fails. Mine is entirely and totally different to theirs, and has, I may remark, been successful in quite a number of cases which were pronounced hopeless."

Mere quackery, I thought. I am no believer in new treatments and new medicines. The fellow's style of talk prejudiced me against him. He actually placed himself in direct opposition to the practice of the three greatest oculists in the world.

"Then you believe that you can actually cure me?" I remarked, with an incredulous smile.

"All I ask is to be permitted to try," he answered blandly, in no way annoyed by my undisguised sneer.

"Plainly speaking," I answered, "I have neither inclination nor intention to place myself at your disposal for experiments. My case has been pronounced hopeless by the three greatest of living specialists, and I am content to abide by their decision."

"Oculists are liable to draw wrong conclusions, just as other persons may do," he remarked. "In a matter of this magnitude you should – permit me to say so – endeavour to regain your sight and embrace any treatment likely to be successful. Blindness is one of man's most terrible afflictions, and assuredly no living person who is blind would wish to remain so."

"I have every desire to regain my sight, but I repeat that I have no faith whatever in new treatment."

"Your view is not at all unnatural, bearing in mind the fact that you have been pronounced incurable by the first men of the profession," he answered. "But may I not make an examination of your eyes? It is, of course, impossible to speak with any degree of authority without a diagnosis. You appear to think me a charlatan. Well, for the present I am content that you should regard me as such;" and he laughed as though amused.

He seemed so perfectly confident in his own powers that I confess my hastily formed opinion became moderated and my prejudice weakened. He spoke as though he had detected the disease which had deprived me of vision, and knew how to successfully combat it.

"Will you kindly come forward to the window?" he requested, without giving me time to reply to his previous observations. I obeyed his wish.

Then I felt his fingers open my eyelids wide, and knew that he was gazing into my eyes through one of those glasses like other oculists had used. He took a long time over the right eye, which he examined first, then having apparently satisfied himself, he opened the left, felt it carefully, and touched the surface, of the eyeball, causing me a twinge of pain.

"As I thought!" he ejaculated when he had finished. "As I thought! A slight operation only is necessary. The specialists whom you consulted were wrong in their conclusions. They have all three made an error which is very easy to make, yet it might have deprived you of sight for your whole life."

"What!" I cried, in sudden enthusiasm. "Do you mean to tell me solemnly that you can perform a miracle? – that you can restore my sight to me?"

"I tell you, sir," he answered quite calmly, "that if you will undergo a small operation, and afterwards subject yourself to a course of treatment, in a fortnight – or, say three weeks – you will again open your eyes and look upon the world."

His words were certainly startling to me, shut out so long from all the pleasures of life. This stranger promised me a new existence, a world of light and movement, of colour, and of all the interests which combine to make life worth living. At first I was inclined to scorn this statement of his, yet so solemnly had he uttered it, and with such an air of confidence, that I became half convinced that he was more than a mere quack.

"Your words arouse within me a new interest," I said. "When do you propose this operation?"

"To-morrow, if you will."

"Will it be painful?"

"Not very – a slight twinge, that's all."

I remained again in doubt. He noticed my hesitation, and urged me to submit.

But my natural caution asserted itself, and I felt disinclined to place myself in the hands of one of whose *bona fides* I knew absolutely nothing.

As politely as I could I told him this, but he merely replied —

"I have been sent by the lady whom we both know as Edna.

Have you no confidence in her desire to assist you?"

"Certainly I have."

"She has already explained to me that you have promised to carry out her wishes. It is at her urgent request that I have come to you with the object of giving you back your sight."

"She wishes me to submit to the experiment?"

"Pardon me. It is no experiment," he said. "She desires you to submit yourself to my treatment. If you do, I have entire confidence that in a week or so you will see almost as well as I do."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.