

Le Queux William

The Under-Secretary



William Le Queux
The Under-Secretary

«Public Domain»

Le Queux W.

The Under-Secretary / W. Le Queux — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	10
Chapter Three.	14
Chapter Four.	18
Chapter Five.	22
Chapter Six.	27
Chapter Seven.	31
Chapter Eight.	36
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	37

Le Queux William

The Under-Secretary

Chapter One.

Is mainly about a Man

Two o'clock – two o'clock in the morning.

The bells had just chimed the hour. Big Ben had boomed forth its deep and solemn note over sleeping London. The patient constable on point-duty at the foot of Westminster Bridge had stamped his feet for the last time, and had been relieved by his colleague, who gave him the usual pass-word, "All right." The tumultuous roar of traffic, surging, beating, pulsating, had long ago ceased, but the crowd of smart broughams and private hansoms still stood in New Palace Yard, while from the summit of St. Stephen's tower the long ray of electricity streamed westward, showing that the House of Commons was still sitting.

The giant Metropolis, the throbbing heart of the greatest empire the world has known, was silent. London, the city of varying moods, as easily pleased, as easily offended as a petted child; London, the dear, smoke-blackened old city, which every Englishman loves and every foreigner admires; London, that complex centre of the universe, humdrum and prosaic, yet ever mysterious, poetic and wonderful, the city full of the heart's secrets and of life's tragedies, slept calmly and in peace while her legislators discussed and decided the policy of the Empire.

The long rows of light on the deserted terrace and along the opposite shore in front of St. Thomas's Hospital threw their shimmering reflection upon the black waters of the Thames; the cold wind swept roughly up the river, causing the gas-jets to flicker, so that the few shivering outcasts who had taken refuge on the steps of the closed doorway of Westminster Station, murmured as they pulled their rags more tightly round them. Only the low rumbling of a country waggon bearing vegetables to Covent Garden, or the sharp clip-clap of a cab-horse's feet upon the asphalt, broke the quiet. Except for these occasional disturbances all else was as silent on that dark and cloudy night in late October as if the world were dead.

Over in the far corner of New Palace Yard horses were champing their bits, and coachmen and police were waiting patiently, knowing that with the Twelve o'clock Rule suspended the length of the sitting was quite uncertain. Wearied journalists from the Press Gallery, having finished their "turns," came out singly or in pairs from their own little side door in the opposite corner of the yard, wished a cheery "good-night" to the portly sergeant and the two idling detectives who acted as janitors, and then hurried on through the chill night over the bridge towards their homes in Brixton or Clapham. An autumn session is a weary one, and weighs quite as heavily upon the Parliamentary journalist as upon the Leader of the House himself.

On the floor of the House honourable members might stretch themselves and doze; they might wander about St. Stephen's Hall with prominent constituents who sought admission to the Strangers' Gallery, entertain them in the dining-room, or take their ease across the way at St. Stephen's Club, ready to return by the underground passage on the ringing of the division-bell; but that gallery above the Speaker, the eye and ear of the world, was never anything else but a hive of industry from the moment after prayers until the House rose. Ever watchful, ever scribbling its hieroglyphics and deciphering them; ever covering ream upon ream of paper with the verbose and vapid utterances of ambitious but unimportant members, its telegraphs clicked on incessantly hour after hour, transmitting reports of the business accomplished to the farthest recesses of the King's

Empire. Truly, a strange life is that of both legislator and journalist within those sombre walls at Westminster.

On this night a full House was occupied with serious business. Within St. Stephen's men collected in groups, talked anxiously, and awaited the doom of the Government; for the political horizon was black, and the storm, long threatened, was now to burst. Contrary to the usual course of things, the small band of Irish obstructionists, fluent orators, whose heckling of Ministers caused so many scenes, were silent, for a matter of foreign policy of the most vital importance had been debated ever since the dinner-hour. Member after member had risen from the Opposition Benches and beneath the soft glow of the electric light shining through the glass roof had, before a crowded and excited House, supported the vote of censure, denouncing the Government for its apathy, its neglect of warnings, and the failure of its diplomacy abroad. The scene would have been an ordinary one were it not for the fact that a five-line whip had been sent out. An important division was hourly expected, and as the defeat of the Government was believed to be close at hand, the excitement had risen to fever heat.

The calmest man in the whole of that versatile House was, perhaps, he who was at that moment replying from the Treasury Bench.

"Strangers" in the gallery were struck by his youthful appearance, for he did not seem to be much over thirty. Tall, dark-haired, with slightly aquiline features and a small black moustache, his face was refined, studious, and full of keen intelligence. Standing beside the clerk's table, upon the very spot where the late Mr Gladstone had so often stood when delivering his masterpieces of oratory, he leaned easily upon his right hand while he addressed the House calmly and clearly in defence of Her Majesty's Government.

All the world knew that the Right Honourable Dudley Waldegrave Chisholm, member for the Albury Division of Surrey and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, was a coming man. Five years ago, when he was still private secretary to the Marquess of Stockbridge, Her Majesty's Foreign Minister, the political paragraphists, as well as those journalists known as "lobbyists," had predicted for him a brilliant future; and he certainly had shown himself worthy the position he now held – a very high one for so young a man.

Standing there, a well-groomed figure in evening-dress, the smart fencer with supplementary questions spoke fluently, without dramatic gesture or any straining after effect, his sweeping and polished eloquence annihilating the opponents against whom it had been set in motion. Deliberately he rebuked the Opposition for their unfounded allegations, and gave the lie direct to many of the statements that had been made in the course of the debate. The speech, a most brilliant and telling defence of the policy of the Government, recalled the greatness of Castlereagh.

"And now," he said, in the same calm tone, slightly altering his position as he continued, and knitting his brows, "the Honourable Member for North Monmouthshire has hinted at the overthrow of Her Majesty's Government, and even at a Dissolution. Upon such a threat let all the voters in these islands reflect. The enfranchised public is really living in an unpractical paradise. It stands for nothing better than a puppet Czar. When the five millions of voters have with infinite pains been enabled to record their sovereign will and pleasure, and have succeeded in returning a majority on one side or another, they are apt to consider that they have returned a Liberal or a Conservative majority; but, to quote Hosea Biglow, they have done little else than change the holders of offices. The new Parliament meets, and the electors wait to see the results of their exertions. There is a new Ministry, no doubt, and, so far, that is to the good; but when the new Ministry gets to work, it finds itself in a very different position from that of a Minister charged with a Ukase from a real Czar. If the election has taken place upon one specific point, and the response of the electors has been decisive and overwhelming, then it is possible that a Bill embodying the views of the voters may pass into law; but that is only when the will of the electors has been unmistakably made known, not for the first time, but for the second, or even for the third."

An enthusiastic chorus of “He-ah! He-ah!” arose from the crowded benches behind the speaker, but without a pause he went on fearlessly:

“The Opposition may threaten Her Majesty’s Government with overthrow and ignominy if it choose, but it cannot hoodwink the constituencies. Experience has taught the electors that they are mocked with a semblance of power, the real sceptre being held in permanence by the House of Lords, whose four hundred members appeal to no constituency, but sit by virtue of hereditary privilege and right of birth, with a perpetual mandate to veto any and every scheme submitted by this House which they do not like and which is not literally forced upon them by overwhelming popular pressure. The voting public, therefore, while it can make a statesman a prime minister, and can pass one bill, if it is very angry and has expressed its opinion with emphasis when appeal was made to it upon that specific question, has no more power than this.”

At these outspoken words, expressions of amazement arose from both sides of the House; but the Under-Secretary, heedless of all in the warmth of his defence, continued, reverting to the main question at issue – namely, the alleged Russian encroachments in the Far East, a subject upon which, owing to his own extensive journeys in Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Pamirs, he was a recognised authority.

“It is excessively rare to find, even among educated Englishmen,” he declared, “a perception of the simple fact that the landward expansion of Russia has been as natural, gradual and legitimate as the spread of British sea-power, and that the former process has been infinitely the less aggressive and violent of the two. Russophobia in this country rests upon the assumption that the devouring advance of the Muscovite has been exclusively dictated by a melodramatic and iniquitous design upon our dominion in India. There never was a stranger fallacy springing from jealous hallucinations. If our Indian Empire had never existed, if the continent-peninsula had disappeared at a remote geological epoch beneath the waves, and if the Indian Ocean had washed the base of the Himalayas for ages, Russian expansion would still have followed precisely the same course it has taken under existing circumstances at exactly the same rate.”

And so he continued, arguing, criticising, ridiculing and substantiating, thrusting the truth upon the Opposition; in his eyes a swift light which swept the House like an eagle’s glance; on his lips the thin smile which his opponents dreaded, until he resumed his seat amid the wild outburst of cheers from the Government benches. He had thrilled the House. The victory of his party was virtually won.

“The best speech Chisholm has ever delivered,” declared one of Her Majesty’s Ministers, a grey-haired old gentleman in black broadcloth, to his colleague, the Home Secretary, at his side. “Marvellous! magnificent!”

“Yes,” declared the other enthusiastically. “He has turned the tide. It was really excellent.”

Everywhere this verdict was accepted, even by the Opposition. Public opinion was certainly not wrong: Chisholm was a coming man – a man of the near future.

But he sat entirely unmoved by the wild outburst of applause. He had taken some papers from the pocket of his dining-jacket and was busy examining them in a manner quite unconcerned. His dark face was serious. He never played “to the gallery,” as he termed the Irish Nationalists opposite, and although he had chosen a public career, he was at heart a rather melancholy man, who regretted that on account of his travels and his official position he had become notable. The one thing he detested was the plaudits of the public; cheap advertisement he abominated.

For that very reason he addressed his constituents down at Albury as rarely as possible. His enthusiastic electors were in the habit of cheering him to the echo, for by reason of his travels he was a popular hero. After a meeting the crowd would usually unharness the horses from his carriage and drag him triumphantly back to his hotel. From that sort of thing his retiring and studious nature shrank. Such enthusiasm might flatter the vanity of the brewer or cotton-spinner, who wished to get into the Carlton, or of the mushroom financier from the Stock Exchange, striving to thrust his way into the fringe of society and to be mentioned in the “social diaries” of the halfpenny newspapers.

There were men in the House, whom he could name, ready to descend to any ruse to obtain a little cheap notoriety; who would readily black the boots of the editor of the *Times* in exchange for a twenty-line report of their speeches. But Dudley Chisholm was not one of the hungry mob of place-hunters. Heir to the Barony of Lynchmere, he was also a wealthy man by reason of the huge fortune left him by his uncle, the eccentric old Duke of Lincoln, together with Wroxeter Castle, the historic seat of the Chisholms up in Shropshire. Since his entry into political life he had not been idle. He had been sworn a Privy Councillor a year ago, was Deputy-Lieutenant and a Justice of the Peace for Shropshire, and upon him the Royal Geographical Society had conferred its highest award, the gold medal for his famous journey through the almost unknown territory of Bhutan.

All these honours had been thrust upon him. He had sought none of them, for at no time had he been a political “log-roller.” When he came down from Oxford, to find himself possessor of an almost princely income, he resolved to take up something with which to occupy his time. He had no inclination for the life of a sybarite about town; the drawing-rooms of Mayfair and Belgravia had no attraction for him; the Sunday strutting in the park bored him. He therefore allowed himself to be nominated for the Guildford Division, and after a valiant fight was returned, subsequently being appointed by the Marquess of Stockbridge one of his private secretaries.

Eight years had gone by since then. Twelve months after delivering his maiden speech in the House he had set forth to make himself personally acquainted with England’s oversea possessions, for he declared that no legislator was competent to criticise a country he had never seen. To Australia, to China, and to India he proceeded in turn, and at last he made his remarkable journey through Central Asia, in order to ascertain the truth of the Russian advance towards India alleged by certain sensational journals. After this came the daring journey across Bhutan. Then, on his return to England on the eve of a general election, he was amazed to find himself famous – the man of the hour, as had been long ago predicted. Later changes in the Cabinet brought him his well-earned reward in the position he now held of Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

He sat there unmoved by the applause which greeted his speech, and when it had ceased he rose. The tellers were being named, and as he passed out into the lobby a few minutes later his name was on every tongue. Men saluted him, but he only bowed slightly on either side in acknowledgment with haughty courtesy; he held to the imperious, patrician code of his Norman race, and the plaudits of his fellows were almost as indifferent to him, almost as much disdained by him, as their censure.

Dudley Chisholm had much of the despot, but nothing of the demagogue, in his character. He had come to the front quickly. Certainly no man was more surprised at his own success in the world of politics than he himself; and certainly no man in London was considered by mothers more eligible as a husband.

Perhaps it is fortunate for Members of the House that their female friends are discreetly hidden away behind that heavy iron grille over the Press Gallery, so that they are invisible save for a neatly gloved hand which sometimes shows upon the ironwork, or a flash of bright colour in the deep shadow, caused by bobbing millinery. Many a husband or lover addressing the House would waver beneath the critical eyes of his womenkind. Indeed, on the night in question, Dudley Chisholm would certainly not have delivered his telling words so calmly had he been aware of the presence of certain persons hidden away behind that Byzantine grating.

The Ladies’ Gallery was crowded by Members’ wives and daughters, enthusiastic Primrose League workers, dowagers, and a few of the smarter set. Among the latter, at the extreme end of the gallery, sat a well-preserved, elderly woman of rather aristocratic bearing, accompanied by a blue-eyed girl in lavender, wearing a costly opera cloak trimmed with sable, a girl with a countenance so charming that she would cause a sensation anywhere. The black toilette of the elder woman and the lavender “creation” worn by her daughter, spoke mutely to the other women near them of an *atelier* in the Rue de la Paix, but as to their names, these were unknown to every person in the gallery.

When Chisholm had risen to address the House the elder had bent to the younger and whispered something in her ear. Then both women had pressed their faces eagerly to the grille, and, sitting bent forward, listened to every word that fell so deliberately from the speaker's lips.

Again the aristocratic-looking woman with the white hair whispered to the girl beside her, so low that no one overheard:

“There, Muriel! That is the man. I have not exaggerated his qualities, have I? You must marry him, my dear – you must marry him!”

Chapter Two. Concerns Claudia's Caprice

The division had been taken, the position of the Government saved, and the House was "up."

Dudley Chisholm, after driving back in a hansom to his chambers in St. James's Street, stretched himself before the fire with a weary sigh of relief, to rest himself after the struggle in which he had been so prominent a figure. His rooms, almost opposite the Naval and Military Club, were decorated in that modern style affected by the younger generation of bachelors, with rich brocade hangings, Turkey carpets, art pottery, and woodwork painted dead white. A single glance, however, showed it to be the abode of a man sufficiently wealthy to be able to indulge in costly works of art and fine old china; and although modern in every sense of the word, it was, nevertheless, a very snug, tasteful and well-arranged abode.

The room in which he was sitting, deep in a big armchair of the "grandfather" type, was a study; not spacious, but lined completely with well-chosen books, while the centre was occupied by a large, workmanlike table littered by the many official documents which his secretary had, on the previous morning, brought to him from the Foreign Office. The electric lamp on the table was shaded by a cover of pale green silk and lace, so that he sat in the shadow, with the firelight playing upon his dark and serious features.

Parsons, his bent, white-haired old servant in livery of an antiquated cut, had noiselessly entered with his master's whiskey and soda, and after placing it in its accustomed spot on a small table at his elbow, was about to retire, when the younger man, deep in reflection, stirred himself, asking:

"Who brought that letter – the one I found here when I came in?"

"A commissionaire, sir," was the old servitor's response. "It came about midnight. And somebody rang up on the telephone about an hour after, but I couldn't catch the name, as I'm always a bit flustered by the outlandish thing, sir."

His master smiled. That telephone was, he knew, the bane of old Parsons' existence.

"Ah!" he said. "You're not so young as you used to be, eh?"

"No, Master Dudley," sighed the old fellow with the blanched hair and thin, white, mutton-chop whiskers. "When I think that I was his lordship's valet here in London nigh on fifty years ago, and that I've been in the family every since, I begin to feel that I'm gettin' on a bit in years."

"Sitting up late every night like this isn't very good for one of your age," observed his master, mindful of the old fellow's faithful services. "I'll have Riggs up from Wroxeter, and he can attend to me at night."

"You're very thoughtful of me, Master Dudley; but I'd rather serve you myself, sir. I can't abear young men about me. They're only in the way, and get a-flirtin' with the gals whenever they have a chance."

"Very well, Parsons, just please yourself," answered Chisholm pleasantly. "But to-morrow morning first pack my bag and then wire to Wroxeter. I shall be going down there in the afternoon with two friends for a couple of days' shooting."

"Very well, sir," replied the old fellow in the antique dress suit and narrow tie. He half turned to walk out, but hesitated and fidgeted; then, a moment later, he turned back and stood before his master.

"Well, Parsons, anything more?" Chisholm asked. He was used to the old fellow's confidences and eccentricities, for more than once since he had come down from college his ancient retainer had given him words of sound advice, his half-century of service allowing him such licence as very few servants possessed.

"There's one little matter I wanted to speak to you about, Master Dudley. I'm an old man, and a pretty blunt 'un at times, that you know."

“Yes,” laughed Dudley. “You can make very caustic remarks sometimes, Parsons. Well, who’s been offending you now?”

“No one, sir,” he answered gravely. “It’s about something that concerns yourself, Master Dudley.”

His master glanced up at him quickly, not without some surprise, saying:

“Well, fire away, Parsons. Out with it. What have I done wrong this time?”

“That woman was here this afternoon!” he blurted out.

“What woman?” inquired his master, looking at him seriously.

“Her ladyship.”

“Well, and what of that? She called at my invitation. I’m sorry I was not in.”

“And I’m very glad I had the satisfaction of sending that woman away,” declared the ancient retainer bluntly.

“Why, Parsons? Surely it’s hardly the proper thing to speak of a lady as ‘that woman’?”

“Master. Dudley,” said the old man, “you’ll forgive me for speaking plain, won’t you? It would, I know, be called presumption in other houses for a servant to speak like this to his master, but you are thirty-three now, and for those thirty-three years I’ve advised you, just as I would my own son.”

“I know, Parsons, I know. My father trusted you implicitly, just as I have done. Speak quite plainly. I’m never offended by your criticisms.”

“Well, sir, that woman may have a title, but she’s not at all a desirable acquaintance for you, a rising man.”

Chisholm smiled. Claudia Nevill was a smart woman, moving in the best set in London; something of a lion-hunter, it was true, but a really good sort, nevertheless.

“She dresses too well to suit your old-fashioned tastes, eh? In your days women wore curls and crinolines.”

“No, Master Dudley. It isn’t her dress, sir. I don’t like the woman.”

“Why?”

“Because – well, you’ll permit me to speak quite frankly, sir – because to my mind it’s dangerous for a young man like you to be so much in the company of an attractive young person. And, besides, she’s playing some deep game, depend upon it.”

Dudley’s dark brows contracted for a moment at the old man’s words. It was quite true that he was very often in Claudia Nevill’s society, because he found her both charming and amusing. But the suggestion of her playing some game caused him to prick up his ears in quick interest. Parsons was a shrewd old fellow, that he knew.

“And what kind of double game is Lady Richard playing?” he asked in a rather hard voice.

“Well, sir, you’ll remember that she called here just after luncheon the day before yesterday, and had an elderly lady with her. You had gone down to the Foreign Office; but I expected you back every moment, so they waited. When they were together in the drawing-room with the door closed I heard that woman explain to her companion that you were the most eligible man in London. They had spoken of your income, of Wroxeter, of his lordship’s failing health, and all the rest of it, when that woman made a suggestion to her companion – namely, that you might be induced to marry some woman they called Muriel.”

“Muriel? And who in the name of fortune is Muriel?”

“I don’t know, sir. That, however, was the name that was mentioned.”

“Who was the lady who accompanied her ladyship? Had you ever seen her before?”

“No, sir, never. She didn’t give a card. She was elderly, dressed in deep mourning. They waited best part of an hour for you, then drove away in her ladyship’s brougham.”

“I wonder who she could have been,” remarked Dudley Chisholm reflectively. “I haven’t the honour of knowing any lady named Muriel, and, what’s more, I have no desire to make her

acquaintance. But how was it, Parsons, that if the door was closed, you overheard this very edifying conversation?”

“I listened at the keyhole, sir. Old men have long ears, you know.”

His master laughed.

“Slow at the telephone, quick at the keyhole, eh, Parsons?” he said. “Well, somehow, you don’t like her ladyship. Why is it?”

“I’ve already told you, Master Dudley. First, because you are too much with her. There’s no woman more dangerous to men like yourself than a wealthy young person of her attractions; secondly, because she has some extraordinary design upon you on behalf of this mysterious Muriel – whoever she is.”

What the old man had said was certainly puzzling. What possible object could Claudia have, he wondered, in bringing there a strange woman and suggesting to her that he should marry a third person? He would put the question point-blank to her to-morrow. Claudia Nevill and he were old friends – very old friends. Years ago, long before she had married his friend Dick Nevill, a noble lord who sat for Huntingdon, they had been close acquaintances, and now, Nevill having died two years after the marriage, leaving Claudia sole mistress of the huge estate, together with that princely house in Albert Gate, he had naturally become her confidant and adviser.

She was now only twenty-six, one of the smartest women in London, and one of the prettiest. After a brief period of mourning, she had again thrown herself into all the dissipations of the following season, and was seen everywhere. She had been so often in the company of Dudley Chisholm that their close friendship had for months past been remarked.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary had, of course, heard the gossip, and laughed at it. He naturally admired her, and once, long before her marriage, he thought he was in love with her; but after a rigid self-examination he came to the conclusion that he had not been really desperately in love with any woman in his life, and promised himself not to commit any such folly now. Therefore, he laughed heartily at his old servant’s ominous but well-meant warning.

“I’m not the sort of man to marry, Parsons,” he said. “Truth to tell, I’m too much of an old fogey for women to care for me. And as for this unknown Muriel, well, I don’t think you need have much fear that I shall commit any matrimonial indiscretion with her. I expect her ladyship was only joking, and you took her words seriously.”

“No, she wasn’t joking,” declared the old man in all seriousness. “You mark my words, Master Dudley, that woman is not your friend.”

Again Chisholm laughed airily, and sipped his whiskey, while the old man, satisfied with his parting shot, went out, giving a grunt of dissatisfaction as he closed the door noiselessly behind him.

“Poor old Parsons! He thinks I’m going to the devil! Well, I wonder what’s in the wind?” observed Dudley aloud to himself when he was again alone. “I’ve noticed a curious change in Claudia’s manner of late. What can be her object in bringing about my marriage, except that perhaps my alliance with one or other of the insipid young ladies who are so often passed before me for inspection, might stifle the ugly scandal that seems to have arisen about us. She’s a clever woman – the cleverest woman in London, but horribly indiscreet. I wonder whether that’s really the truth. But marriage! *Au grand jamais!*” and he raised his glass again and took a deep draught.

“No,” he went on, “Claudia is never so charming as when she has some little intrigue or other on hand; but I must really get at the bottom of this, and find out the *belle inconnue*. Parsons is no fool, but the old boy is a Methodist, and hates everything in petticoats,” and he laughed lightly to himself as he recollected the old fellow’s sage, and perhaps justifiable, reprimands in his wilder college days. “I know I’ve been a fool – an absolute, idiotic fool with Claudia – and she’s been equally foolish. People have talked, but without any foundation for their impertinent gossip, and now she, of course, finds herself in a hole. Dick Nevill was the best of good fellows, but she never loved him. Her marriage was merely one of her *caprices de coeur*. I don’t think she could really love anybody for longer than a

week. Yes, Parsons is right. He always is. I've been an ass – a downright ass!” he added with sudden emphasis. “I must go and see her to-morrow, and end all this confounded folly.”

From the table he took up the letter he had received on his return home, and about which he had questioned his servant. Again he read it through, stroking his dark moustache thoughtfully, and knitting his brows.

“Writing is woman's *métier*. I wonder what she wants to see me about so particularly,” he went on, still speaking to himself. “I wired to her saying, ‘The House is sitting late,’ so she surely couldn't be expecting me. But it's rather unusual for her to send out urgent notes at midnight. No, *la belle capricieuse* has no discretion – she never will have.”

And although the great marble clock on the mantelshelf chimed four, he sat with his dark and serious eyes fixed upon the embers, reviewing the chapters of his past.

He saw the folly of his dalliance at the side of Claudia Nevill *en plein jour*. He put to himself the question whether or not he really loved her, and somehow could not bring himself to return a distinct negative. She was graceful, charming and handsome, the centre of the smartest set in London, a *grande dame* whose aid had been useful to him in more ways than one. As he sat there in the silence of the night, he recollected those pleasant hours spent with her at Albert Gate, where they so often dined together, and where she would afterwards sing to him those old Italian love-songs in her sweet contralto, beaming upon him with her coquettish smile, half languid, half *moquer*; those drives together in the park, and those long walks they had taken when, accompanied by her mother, she had visited him at Wroxeter Castle. Yes, all were pleasant memories, yet he felt that between him and her love was an impossibility. As this was the case, the less they saw of one another in the future, even *en bon camarade*, the better for them both.

This was not a pleasant decision, for Dudley Chisholm made few friends, and was nothing of a ladies' man. He looked upon life around him as *contes pour rire*. His friends were mostly bachelors like himself, and in all the wide range of his acquaintances he had scarcely any women associates, and, except Claudia, not a single one in whom he could confide. Women courted him everywhere, of course. It was not to be supposed that a popular, good-looking man of his wealth and fame was not actively angled for in various directions; but to all attempted flirtations he gave a polite negative. Hence it was that these disappointed women revenged themselves by starting the ill-natured gossip about his relations with Claudia Nevill, the smart little widow, who was still young, who gave such lavish entertainments, who moved in the most select set in London, and at whose side he was so frequently to be seen.

The old baron, his father, who lived the life of a recluse up at Dunkeld, had written to him upon the subject only a few weeks before, and to-night even his own servant had frankly expressed his opinion of her. *Dieu le veut*.

Dudley Chisholm sighed. He was an honest man, and these thoughts troubled him greatly. He feared for her reputation more than for his own. As he was a man, what did it matter? It did not occur to him how much it flattered that voluptuous *rêveuse* to possess as her cavalier the man of the hour, the man about whom half England was at that moment talking. All he felt was that they had both been indiscreet – horribly indiscreet.

Yes; to-morrow he must end it all. The tongue of scandal must be silenced at once and for ever.

He had risen to stir the fire when the stillness was suddenly broken by the sharp ring of the telephone-bell outside the room. A moment later Parsons announced that some one desired to speak with him. As it was no uncommon occurrence for him to be rung up in the middle of the night by the Foreign Office officials, he walked up to the instrument and inquired who was there.

“Is that you, Dudley?” asked the soft voice he knew so well. “I called this afternoon, and I've been waiting for you ever since half-past two, when the House rose. You've had my note, of course. Why don't you come? Justine will open the door to you. I know it's very indiscreet, but I must see you to-night on an important matter – at once. Do you understand, Dudley?”

Chapter Three.

In which Dudley Chisholm is Frank

The mellow autumn sunlight streamed full into the bright morning-room at Albert Gate where Dudley Chisholm was standing before the great wood-fire with his hands behind his back. It was a handsome apartment, solidly furnished and fully in keeping with the rest of the rooms in the huge mansion, which was acknowledged to be one of the finest in the West End.

Before him, nestling in the cosy depths of her luxurious chair, sat its owner, young, dark-haired, with soft languorous eyes, her long and radiant tresses bound carelessly and hanging in as loose and rippled a luxuriance as the hair of the *Vénus à la Coquille*. No toilette was more becoming than her pale-blue *négligé* of softest Indian texture, with its profusion of chiffon about the arms and bosom, a robe the very negligence of which was the supreme perfection of art; no *chaussure* more shapely than the little Cairene slipper fantastically brodered with gold and pearls, into which the tiny foot she held out to the fire to warm was slipped. At that moment, perhaps, Claudia Nevill, who was exquisitely beautiful at all hours, looked her freshest and loveliest. She sat there thinking, while the sunbeams shone on the dazzling whiteness of her skin, on the luminous depths of her wonderful eyes, on her loosely bound tresses, and on the plain gold circlet on her fair left hand – the badge of her alliance with a dead lord and the signet of her title to reign a Queen of Society.

Sitting there among her soft cushions she was indeed a lovely woman, an almost girlish figure, with a face oval and perfect, a countenance sweet and winning, a true type of English beauty, who had been portrayed in a very notable picture by a famous Academician. Acknowledged on all hands to be one of the prettiest women in London, she was proud and splendid in the abundance of the power she exercised over her world, which was enchanted by her fascination and obedient to her magic, let her place her foot upon its neck and rule it as she would. There was swung for her the rich incense of worship wherever she moved; and she gave out life and death, as it were, with her smile and her frown, with a soft-whispered word or a *moue boudeuse*. From a station of comparative obscurity, where her existence had threatened to pass away in cotton blouses amid the monotony of a dull cathedral town, her beauty had lifted her to dazzling rank as wife of one of England's wealthiest men, and her tact had taught her to grace it so well that, forgetting to carp, high society agreed to bow before her. In the exclusive set in which she moved she created a *furor*; she became the mode; she gave the law and made the fashion. Thus by the double right of her own resistless fascination and the dignity of her late lord's name, Claudia Nevill was a power in smart London, and an acknowledged leader of her own spheres of *ton*, pleasure and coquetry.

Her ladyship was herself, and was all-sufficient for herself. On her *début* she was murmured at, and society had been a little slow to receive her; but her delicate azure veins were her *sangre azul*, her white hands were her *seize quartiers*, her marvellous black tresses were her *bezants d'or*, and her splendidly luminous eyes her blazonry. Of a verity, Venus needs no Pursuivant's marshalling.

As she sat gazing pensively into the fire a flush had spread over the fairness of her brow, her fingers played idly with her chiffons, and the corners of her lips twitched slightly. Her thoughts were not pleasing.

The man who had been held to her by her magical witchery had been speaking, and she had shrunk slightly when she heard him. He had not obeyed her wilful caprice and visited her when she summoned him, but had waited until morning.

The words he had just uttered, outspoken and manly, had been fraught with all she would willingly have buried in oblivion for ever: they awoke remembrances that caused her to wince; they were of a kind to fret and embitter her haughty life. With his calm words there came back to her all the

shame she burned to ignore and put behind her, as though it never had been; they brought with them all the echoes of that early and innocent affection to which she had so soon been faithless and disloyal.

She was cold, though she knew coldness to be base; she was restless under his eyes, though she knew that so much love looked at her from them; she was stung with impatience and with false pride, though she knew that in him she saw the very saviour of her existence.

Her eyelids fell, her white forehead flushed, her soft cheeks burned as she heard him. She breathed quickly in agitation; at the sound of his voice the warm and reverent tenderness of long ago once more sprang to light in her heart.

He watched her, accurately reading her emotions and gazing at the marvellous change wrought in her. She was superb; she was like a noble sculptor's dream of Aspasia. He looked at her for several minutes, while speechlessness held them both as captives.

At last she raised her head, and with a sudden pang of unbearable agony, cried:

"You are cruel, Dudley! – cruel! I cannot bear such words from you!"

"I have only spoken the truth, Claudia," he replied in the same low, calm tone as he had before used. Their eyes met. She knew that he read her soul; she knew that he had not lied.

She – now become keenly critical, scornfully indifferent, and very difficult to impress – was struck as she had never been before by the authority, the dignity, the pure accent of his voice, and his steady, thorough manliness.

He stood gazing down at her with a look under which her dark eyes sank. There was a sternness in his words that moved her with a sense almost of fear. The greatness, the singularity, the mystery of this life, that had so long been interwoven with her own, bewildered her; she could not fully comprehend these qualities.

Little by little she had been drawn away from him, till between them scarcely a bond remained. As he fixed his eyes upon her lovely face, it occurred to him to wonder whether, after all, he would have been so selfishly in error, so blind a traveller in the mists of passion, if he had kept her in his own hands, under his own law and love? Would he not have made her happiness far purer, her future safer, because nearer God, than they now were, brilliant, imperious, pampered, exquisite creature though she had become? She was great, she was lovely, she was popular, she entertained princes, she was unrivalled; but where was that "divine nature" with which he had once, in the bygone days, believed her to be dowered? Where was it now?

"Your words are cruel, Dudley! That you should speak like this! My God! Tell me that you don't mean it!" she cried suddenly, after a long silence, restless beneath the fixed and melancholy look which she could not meet.

"Listen, Claudia," he said, still quite calmly, standing erect with his back to the fire. "What I have just said I have long wanted to say, but have always put it off for fear of hurting your feelings – for fear of reproaching you for what is mainly my own folly."

"But you have reproached me!" she cried in a hard voice. "You tell me this with such a *nonchalant* air that it has at last awakened me to the bitter truth – you don't love me!"

"I have spoken as much for your own good as for mine," he answered. "We must end this folly, Claudia – we –"

"Folly! You call my love folly!" she exclaimed, starting forward. Life had been so fair with her. The years had gone by in one continual blaze of triumph. She was the smart Lady Richard Nevill, whose name was on everybody's tongue; she was satiated with offers of love. And yet this man had coldly exposed to her the naked truth. Intoxicated with homage, indulgence, extravagance and pleasure, her conscience had become stifled and her memory killed; her heart scarcely knew how to beat without the throbs of vanity or triumph. So she had lived her life in freedom – absolute freedom. Vague rumours had been whispered in the boudoirs of Berkeley Square and Grosvenor Gardens concerning her, but with the sceptre of her matchless loveliness and the skill of a born

tactician, she cleared all obstacles, overruled all opponents, bore down all hesitations, and silenced all sneers. “Folly? – you call my love folly, Dudley?”

“We have both been foolish, Claudia – very foolish,” he answered, facing her and looking gravely into her dark eyes, in which shone the light of unshed tears. “People are talking, and we must end our folly.”

“And you fear that the teacup tittle-tattle of my enemies may endanger your official position and retard your advancement, eh?” she asked, knitting her dark brows slightly.

“Of late our names have been coupled far too frequently – mainly owing to our own indiscretions.”

“Well, and if they have?” she asked defiantly. “What matters? The amiable gossips have coupled my name quite falsely with a dozen different men during the past twelve months, and am I a penny the worse for it? Not in the least. No, my dear Dudley, you may just as well admit the truth. Your father has written to you about your too frequent presence in my society and our too frequent teas on the terrace – he told Lady Uppingham so, and she, of course, told me. He has asked you to cut me as a – well, as an undesirable acquaintance.”

“What my father has written is my own affair, Claudia,” he answered. “You know me well, and we have hidden few secrets from one another. Surely we may part friends.”

“Then you actually mean what you’ve said?” she asked, opening her magnificent eyes to their full extent, as with a sigh she raised herself from her former attitude of luxurious laziness.

“Most certainly! It has pained me to speak as I have done, and I can only crave your forgiveness if anything I’ve said has caused you annoyance. But we have to face the hard and melancholy fact that we must end it all.”

“Simply because you fear that a spiteful paragraph regarding us may appear in *Truth*, or some similar paper, and that your official chief may demand an explanation. Well, *mon cher*, I gave you credit for possessing the proverbial pluck and defiance of the Chisholms. It seems, however, that I was mistaken.”

He looked at her without making an immediate reply. He was thinking of what old Parsons had alleged on the previous night in regard to the mysterious Muriel. Should he mention it, or should he reserve to himself the knowledge of her inexplicable resolve to effect his marriage with an unknown girl?

As became a discreet man, who dealt daily in the secrets of a nation, he reflected for a moment. He quickly came to the conclusion that silence, at least for the present, was the most judicious policy.

He had once loved this woman, long ago in the golden days of youth, and their love had been of a purely platonic character. But during the past couple of years, now that she was released from the marital bond, Claudia’s actions had exceeded all the bounds of discretion. And even now, when the silent passion which he had struggled against so long as merely a selfish and vain desire was conquered, he was, nevertheless, to a great extent still under the spell of her marvellous witchery.

“I regret, Claudia, that you should upbraid me for speaking so frankly and for thus consulting our mutual interests,” he said at last, as, crossing to the table and leaning against it easily, he regarded her with a melancholy expression upon his face. “We have been friends for a good many years; indeed, ever since you were a child and I was at college. Do you remember those days, long ago, when at Winchester we were boy and girl lovers? Do you remember?” he went on, advancing to her and placing his strong hand tenderly upon her shoulder. “Do you ever recall those sunny afternoons when we used to meet clandestinely, and go for long walks through the meadows round Abbots Barton in deadly terror of every one we met lest we should be recognised? Do you remember how, beneath the stars that sweet-scented night in July, we swore eternal friendship and eternal love?”

She nodded in the affirmative, but no word passed the lips so tightly pressed together.

“And what followed?” he continued. “We drifted apart, I to Oxford, and on into the world; and you, like myself, forgot. You married the man who was my best friend; but for what purpose?”

Claudia, let me speak plainly, as one who is still your friend, although no longer your lover. You married Dick Nevill in order to escape the deadly dullness of Abbots Barton and to enter the kingdom of omnipotence, pleasure and triumphant vanity, as a sure deliverance from all future chance of obscurity. You became at once the idol, the leader, the reigning beauty of your sphere. Poor Dick was the slave of your flimsiest caprice; he ministered to your wishes and was grateful for your slightest smile. He died – died while you were away enjoying yourself on the Riviera – and I – ”

“No!” she exclaimed wildly, rising to her feet and covering her face with her hands in deep remorse. “No, Dudley! Spare me all that! I know. My God! I know – I know, alas! too well! I never loved him!”

“Then if you regard our folly in a proper light, Claudia,” he said earnestly, with his hand placed again upon her shoulder, “you will at once see that my decision is for the best.”

“You intend to leave me?” she asked huskily.

“It is the only way,” he replied with a catch in his voice. “We have courted scandal sufficiently.”

“But you cannot cast me off, Dudley?” she cried, suddenly springing towards him and wildly flinging her beautiful arms about his neck. “You shall never leave me, because I love you. Are you blind? Don’t you understand? Don’t you see that I love you, Dudley?”

“You loved me once, in those old days at Winchester,” he said, slowly disengaging himself from her embrace. “But not now.”

“I do!” she cried. “I swear that I do! You are jealous of all those men who flatter me and hang about me wherever I go; but I care nothing for the whole crowd of them. You know me,” she went on; “you know that I live only for you – for you.” Her words did not correspond with the sentiments she expressed to the woman who had accompanied her to his chambers. He reflected for a moment; then he said:

“Admiration I have for you, Claudia, as the most beautiful woman in London, but I think in this discussion we may both omit the word ‘love’ as entirely superfluous. We are children no longer. Let us face the truth. Our acquaintanceship ripened into love while we were yet in our teens. Then in maturer years it faded out completely, the acquaintanceship being renewed only when, on the death of your husband, you wanted a friend – and found one in me.”

“And now?” she asked.

“Now you have other friends – many others.”

“Ah! you are jealous! I knew you were!” she exclaimed in a reproachful tone of voice, her glorious eyes flashing. “You believe that I don’t love you! You believe me capable of lying to you – to you, of all men!”

Chisholm remained silent.

Chapter Four. Reveals a Peccant Passion

The brilliant woman, ignorant of his meaning, but comprehending only that he deemed her inconstant and unworthy, stood with tears in her eyes – tears which sprang partly from sorrow, partly from offence. She knew within herself that she was heartless and wrong; but, none the less, she felt herself aggrieved.

“Claudia,” he said at last, looking straight at her, “our mutual protestations of love ended long ago. We have been friends – close friends; but as for love, well, when a woman really loves a man she does not bestow her smiles upon a score of other admirers.”

“Ah! you reproach me for being smart,” she cried. “I am a woman, and may surely be forgiven any little *caprices de coeur*.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Your attachment to me was one of your caprices, Claudia.”

“Then you don’t believe that I really have within my heart one atom of real affection for you?” she asked seriously.

“Your love for me is dead,” he answered gravely. “It died long ago. Since then you have made other conquests, and to-day half London is at your feet. I, Dudley Chisholm, am a man who has had an unwelcome popularity thrust upon him, and it is only in the natural order of things that I should follow in your train. But, as my place in your heart has long ago been usurped, why should we, intimate friends as we are, make a hollow pretence that it still exists?”

His voice remained calm and unbroken during his speech, yet there was an accent in it that thrilled through her heart. As she listened, stirred at heart by a strange emotion, her truer nature told her that she had by her caprice and folly fallen in his esteem. She had left the greatness that was pure and lofty for the greatness which was nothing better than tinsel.

“Once, Claudia, I loved you. In those days, before your marriage, you were my ideal – my all in all. You wedded Dick, and I – well, I can honestly say that during those two years of your married life I never entered your house. We met, here and there, at various functions, but I avoided you when I could, and never accepted your invitations. Why, you ask? Well, I’ll tell you. Because I loved you.”

Her head was bowed; a stifled sob escaped her.

“When you were free,” he went on, “it was different. In your grief you wrote to me, and I at once came to you. At first you were mournful in your retirement; then of a sudden, after a few short months, you were seized by an overweening ambition to become a queen of society. I watched you; I saw your indiscretions; I spoke to you, and your answer was an open defiance. Then it was that my sympathy with you gradually diminished. You had become a smart woman, and had developed that irremediable disorder which every smart woman nowadays is bound sooner or later to develop – a callous heart. The crowd of men about you became as so many puppets ready to execute your imperious will, and soon, as I expected, the fiery breath of scandal seared your good name. You laughed, knowing well that the very fact of your being talked about added lustre to your popularity as a smart hostess. I regretted all this, because my belief in your honesty – that belief which had first come to me long ago in the green meadows round about Winchester – was utterly shattered. The naked truth become exposed – you were deceiving me.”

“No, Dudley!” the woman wailed beseechingly. “Spare me these reproaches! I cannot bear them – and least of all from you. I have been foolish – very foolish, I admit. Had you been my husband I should have been a different woman, leading a quiet and happy life, but as I am now – I – ” She burst into a torrent of tears without finishing her confession.

“If you acknowledge what I have said to be the truth, Claudia, we are agreed, and more need not be said,” he observed, when, a few moments later, she had grown calm again.

“You are tired of me, Dudley,” she declared, suddenly raising her head and looking straight into his eyes. “We have been – close friends, shall I say? long enough. You have found some other woman who pleases you – a woman more charming, more graceful than myself. Now, confess to me the truth,” she said with deep earnestness. “I will not upbraid you,” she went on in a hard, strained voice. “No, I – I will be silent. I swear I will. Now, Dudley, tell me the truth.”

“I have met no woman more beautiful than yourself, Claudia,” Chisholm answered in a deep tone. “You have no rival within my heart.”

“I don’t believe it!” she cried fiercely. “You could never reproach me as you have done unless some woman who is my enemy had prompted you. Your father has written to you, that I know; but you are not the man to be the slave of paternal warnings. No,” she said harshly, “it is a woman who has drawn you away from me. I swear not to rest till I have found out the truth!”

When she showed her *griffes*, this bright *capricieuse*, the leader of the smartest set in town, was, he knew, merciless.

But at that moment he only smiled at her sudden outburst of jealousy.

“I have already spoken the truth,” he said. “I have never yet lied to you.”

“Never, until to-day,” was her sharp retort. “I suppose you think that, because of your responsible official position, you ought now to develop into the old fogey, marry some scraggy girl with red hair and half a million, and settle down to sober statesmanship and the Carlton. As you have found the future partner of your joys, you think it high time to drop an undesirable acquaintance.”

Her words were hard ones, spoken in a tone of biting sarcasm. In an instant his countenance grew serious.

“No, Claudia,” he protested quickly. “You entirely misjudge me. I have neither the intention nor the inclination to marry. Moreover, I confess to you that I am becoming rather tired of the everlasting monotony of the House. The scraggy female with the red hair, who, according to your gospel, is to be the *châtelaine* of Wroxeter, is still unselected. No. You have not understood me, and have formed entirely wrong conclusions as to my motive in speaking as I have. I repeat that the step I am now taking is one for our mutual advantage. People may talk about us in Belgravia, but they must not in Battersea.”

“And you wish every one to know that we have quarrelled?” she said petulantly. He saw by her countenance that she was still puzzled. Was it possible that she was thinking of the unknown Muriel, whom she had declared he must marry?

As a matchmaker, Claudia was certainly entering upon an entirely new *rôle*.

“We shall not quarrel, I hope,” he answered.

“Why should we? By mutual consent we shall merely remain apart.”

There was another long and painful silence. Her chiffons slowly rose and fell as she sighed. What he had said had produced a greater impression upon her than he anticipated. No other man could have spoken to her as he had done, for every word of his brought back to her the long-forgotten days of their youthful love, and of those passionate kisses beneath the stars. In those brief moments she tried to examine her heart, but could not decide whether she still loved him, or whether his intention of leaving her had only aroused within her a sense of offended dignity.

“And your determination is never to see me?” she asked him in a despondent tone of voice.

“I shall only meet you upon chance occasions in society,” was his answer.

“And when people have forgotten – then you will return to me? Give me your promise, Dudley.”

“I cannot promise.”

“Ah!” she cried; “why not at once confess what I believe is the truth, that you have grown tired of me?”

“No. I have not grown tired,” he declared in a fervent voice. “We have always been firm friends, and I hope that our friendship will continue. For my own part, my regard for you, Claudia, is not in the least impaired. You are a woman, and the victim of circumstances. Hence, I shall always remain faithfully your friend.”

“Dudley,” she said in a calmer tone, speaking very earnestly, “remember that women never change their natures, only their faces. So long have we been associated, and such intimate friends have we been, that I have grown to regard you as my own personal property. *C’est assez.*”

“I quite understand,” answered the man in whom Her Majesty’s Prime Minister possessed such complete confidence. “You should, for your own sake, Claudia, regard this matter in a proper light. If we do not by our actions give the lie direct to all this tittle-tattle, then an open scandal must result. Surely if we, by mutual consent, remain apart, we may still remain in *bon accord*?”

“But you are mine, Dudley!” she cried, again throwing her snowy, half-bare arms around his neck and kissing him passionately.

“Then since you hold me in such esteem, why not act in my interests?” he asked, for in argument he was as shrewd as a man could possibly be, and had passed with honours through that school of *finesse*, the Foreign Office.

“I – well, I decline to release you, if your freedom is to be used in dallying at the side of another woman,” she replied, heedless of his question.

“But I have no intention of doing so. Surely you know my nature well enough? You know how fully occupied I am as Under-Secretary, and that my presence here from time to time has scarcely been in harmony with my duties at the Foreign Office and in the House. I have little leisure; and I do not possess that inclination for *amourettes* which somehow appears to seize half the legislators sent to Westminster.”

“I know! I know!” she replied, still clinging to him, stroking the dark hair from his brow with the velvety hand which he had so often kissed. “I admit that you have always been loyal to me, Dudley. Sometimes, with a woman’s quick jealousy, I have doubted you, and have watched you carefully, always, however, to find my suspicions utterly unfounded. Do you remember what you told me when we walked together in the park at Wroxeter that morning last summer? Do you recollect your vows of eternal friendship to me – unworthy though I may be?” She paused, and there was a slight catch in her voice.

“Alas! I am fully aware of all my failings, of all my indiscretions, of all my caprices; but surely you do not heed this spiteful gossip which is going the rounds? You do not believe me so black as I am painted – do you?” and again she stroked his brow with her caressing hand.

“I believe only what I have seen with my own eyes,” he answered rather ambiguously. “You have been indiscreet – extremely indiscreet – and I have often told you so. But your ambition was to become the most *chic* woman in town, and you have accomplished it. At what cost?”

She made no response. Her head was bowed.

“Shall I tell you at what cost?” he went on very gravely. “At the cost of your reputation – and of mine.”

“Ah! forgive me, Dudley!” she cried quickly. “I was blind then, dazzled by the compliments heaped upon me, bewildered by the wealth that had so suddenly become mine after poor Dick’s death. I was rendered callous to everything by my foolish desire to shine as the smartest and most popular woman in London. I did not think of you.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Your admission only clinches my argument that, although we have been close friends, no real affection has of later years existed between us. Frankly, had you loved me, you could not have acted with such reckless indiscretion as to risk my name, my position, and my honour.”

He spoke a truth which admitted of no question.

“Now,” he went on at last, slowly unclasping her clinging arms from his neck. “It is already late and I have an important appointment at the Foreign Office, for which I am overdue. We must part.”

“Never!” she cried wildly. “You shall not leave me like this! If you do, I shall call at your chambers every day, and compel you to see me.”

“Then I must give orders to Parsons not to admit you,” he answered quite calmly.

“That man of yours is an old bear. Why don’t you get rid of him, and have some one less fossilised?” she exclaimed in a gust of fury. “When I called the other day with Lady Meldrum, he was positively rude.”

“Lady Meldrum!” exclaimed Chisholm, pricking up his ears. “Who’s she?”

“Oh, a woman who has rather come to the front of late – wife of old Sir Henry Meldrum, the great Glasgow ironmaster. We were driving past, and I wanted to see you, so she came in with me, rather than wait in the cold. Quite a smart woman – you ought to know her.”

“Thanks,” responded the Under-Secretary coldly. “I have no desire to have that pleasure. Smart women don’t interest me in the least.”

“That is meant, I suppose, as a compliment,” she observed. “You are certainly in a very delightful mood to-day, Dudley.”

“I have at least spoken the truth,” he said, piqued by the knowledge that for some mysterious reason this woman was conniving with a new star in the social firmament, Lady Meldrum, wife of his pet abomination, a Jubilee knight, to effect his marriage with the unknown Muriel – her daughter, of course.

“You have unearthed and placed before me all the most ugly phases of my career,” cried the unhappy woman with a quick, defiant glance; “and now, after your flood of reproaches, you declare that in future we are to be as strangers.”

“For the sake of our reputations.”

“Our reputations? Rubbish!” she laughed cynically. “What reputation has either of us to lose?” He bit his lip. A hasty retort arose within him, but he succeeded in stifling it.

“We need not, I think, discuss that point,” he said very coldly.

She stood in silence waiting for him to proceed.

“Well,” she asked at last, with an air of mingled defiance and sarcasm. “And what more?”

“Nothing. I have finished. I have only to wish you adieu.”

“Then you really intend to abandon me?” she asked very gravely, her small hand trembling.

“I have already explained my intentions. They were quite clear, I think.”

“And you decline to reconsider them?”

“They admit of no reconsideration,” he answered briefly.

“Very well then, adieu,” she said in a cold and bitter voice, for in those few moments her manner had changed, and she was now a frigid, imperious woman with a heart of stone.

“Adieu, Claudia,” he said, bending with a stiff courtliness over the hand she had extended to him. “You will one day see that this step of mine has saved us both from degradation and ruin. Good-bye. Recollect that even though we are apart, I remain still, as I have ever been, your devoted friend.”

Her hand dropped limply from his grasp as she stood there like a beautiful statue in the centre of the room. With a final glance at her he turned and walked straight out.

For a moment after the door had closed, she still remained in the same position in which he had left her. Then, in a sudden frenzy of uncontrollable passion, she hooked her nervous fingers in her chiffons and tore them into shreds.

“He has defied me!” she exclaimed wildly, bursting into a flood of hot tears. “He has defied me, and cast me off —*me, who love him!*”

Chapter Five. Describes an English Home

Three miles from the long white road that runs between sedate old Shrewsbury and the town of Wellington, there stood a prominent object in the landscape, high upon a wooded hill to the right. It was the ancient castle of Wroxeter, one of the best preserved and most historic of the Norman castles of England.

Seen through the trees, golden in their autumn tints, it was an imposing grey pile, rich in turrets with narrow windows, whence, long ago, archers had showered their shafts, but which were now half concealed by an evergreen mantle. Closer inspection showed that it was a fortress no longer. The old moat, once fed from the winding Severn close by, was now a well-kept garden with gravelled walks and trees cut into fantastic shapes, while around the building were level lawns sweeping away to the great park beyond.

One wing of the fine old feudal castle was in decay. The shattered state of the tower was due to a siege conducted by Cromwell, and the ivy had overgrown the ruins. All the other parts were in good order, stern and impressive in regard to the exterior, yet luxurious within. In the great courtyard, that had through the Middle Ages so often rung with the clank of sword and the tread of armed men, moss grew between the pebbles, and the echoes were only nowadays awakened by the wheels of the high dog-cart which conveyed its owner to and from the railway station at Shrewsbury. The old drawbridge had been replaced by a gravel drive a century ago; yet in the fine oak-panelled hall there still stood the rust-stained armour of the departed Chisholms, together with the faded and tattered banners carried by them in tournament and battle.

Built on the site of the Roman city called Vriconium, whilst in the park and in neighbouring meadows traces of the city wall could still be seen, the fosse and the basilica were still visible. The history of Wroxeter began with the Norman survey, the account given of it in Domesday Book being as follows:

“Chisholme holds a hide and three roodlands in Wroxeter in this manor, which was always included in the district of Haughmond, where the castle is situated. Roger had half a hide, and Ralph two roodlands. There is one plough and a half in the demesne, and seven villeins with ten bondmen have four ploughs and a half. The whole value in the time of the Confessor was six pounds, it has since been estimated at six: but it is now appreciated at nine pounds.”

The portion now ruined was standing in those early days of England's history, but it was not until the third year of Richard the Second's reign that the other portion of the old fortress was completed by Sir Robert Chisholm, who (together with Sir John Calveley of Chester and Sir John Hawkwood of Haughmond Castle), was a celebrated captain of those marauding bands that shared in the triumphs of Cressy and Poitiers. The following distich, by a mediaeval poet, records his prowess:

“O Roberte Chisholme, per te fit Francia mollis,
Ense tuo tollis praedas, dans vulnera collis.”

O Robert Chisholm, the stubborn souls
Of Frenchmen well you check;
Your mighty blade has largely preyed,
And wounded many a neck.

During those stormy days of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Wroxeter withstood many a fierce assault and sheltered not a few of England's kings and queens as guests of the Chisholms, many of whom had been favourites at Court and held official positions of high importance. Queen Elizabeth was the last monarch to visit the castle, and the memory of that event was kept green by the name given to the old-world garden over-looking the Severn, which was known as the Queen's Garden.

It was a grand old building, this feudal home to which Dudley Chisholm returned on the night following the farewell scene which had taken place between himself and the frivolous woman with whose name his own had been linked. He had invited for three days' shooting two men – Colonel Murray-Kerr, a retired military attaché, and Henry Benthall, a man who had been at college with him, and who had, after being called to the bar, successfully contested East Glamorganshire. All three had travelled down from Euston together; but Dudley, after a sleepless night, had risen long before his guests and wandered through the vast and lonely chambers, full of melancholy musings. He would have put the men off, for he was in no mood to entertain, but there had been no time.

So he spent an idle hour alone before his guests appeared for breakfast.

He wandered through the great and gloomy hall, the vaulted ceiling of which had so often echoed to the laughter of the banquets held there in bygone days. It was now tenanted only by the many suits of armour that had belonged to his illustrious forefathers. His steps sounded in a grim fashion upon the floor of polished oak, and as he passed the huge fireplace, where once the oxen had been roasted whole to satisfy the Gargantuan appetites of mediaeval warriors, a servant threw open the door leading into the long picture gallery.

What an array of fine pictures was there! For each member of this ancient family his or her arms had been painted in the right-hand corner of the canvas. The Chisholms were a handsome, stalwart race, the men strong and the women beautiful. In the features of nearly all, however, there was the same predominant characteristic, the stern gravity, which in Dudley was so often mistaken for actual asperity. Before the last portrait at the farther end of the gallery – the picture of a young and eminently beautiful woman – the young man paused. It was his mother.

Deep in contemplation, he stood before it for a long time. His lips moved, but no sound escaped them. At last, with a deep sigh, he passed on, still walking at the same slow pace, plunged in his melancholy thoughts.

He passed round the big quadrangle, through one great room after the other: the blue drawing-room, Anne Boleyn's sitting-room, the grand drawing-room, the library, each an apartment of fine dimensions, mostly panelled in oak dark with age and containing antique furniture, curios connected with the family history through eight unbroken centuries, with many other priceless works of art.

Two or three of the smaller rooms, such as the breakfast-room, the dining-room, and his dead mother's boudoir, were alone furnished in modern style. In all the others there seemed to linger an atmosphere of bygone centuries. This was the fine old home which so many mothers coveted for their daughters. Indeed, there were a hundred pretty and well-born girls in London, each of whom was at that moment ready to become châtelaine of Wroxeter.

But Dudley strolled on slowly, almost like a man in a dream. He was seldom at Wroxeter out of the shooting season. The place was to him something of a white elephant. He had spent his boyhood there, but recollections of the rather unhappy life and early death of that grave-faced woman, his mother, caused him to dislike the old place. One or two memories he would fain forget – memories of his mother's sorrow regarding her husband's mode of life and eccentricities. Truth to tell, husband and wife did not live happily together, and Dudley, knowing this, had been his mother's sympathiser and champion.

These handsome rooms, with their ancient tapestries, wonderful carpets, exquisite carvings, old Venetian mirrors and time-darkened gilt, even in the gay light of morning seemed to him sombre and full of ghosts of the past. He only used the library and half a dozen of the smaller and more modern rooms in the eastern wing. The splendid state apartments which he had just passed through

he seldom visited. No one entered them, except the servants to clean and open the windows, and the upholsterer who at fixed intervals came from Shrewsbury to examine the tapestries worked centuries ago by the fair hands of the Chisholm women.

From the great drawing-room, a huge apartment with a rather low ceiling curiously carved, he passed on, and traversing one of the ante rooms, found himself in the long corridor which ran the whole length of the quadrangle. The stone flooring was worn hollow in the centre by the tramp of generations of armed men, and the quaint arched doors were heavy and studded with monstrous nails. He stood there for a few minutes, glancing through the diamond panes out into the ancient courtyard. His abstracted mood was suddenly disturbed by the sound of the breakfast gong. As his guests would be awaiting him, he must throw care to the dogs for a few hours and try to amuse them.

Turning, he walked down the long corridor. As he did so he recollected the strange tradition which he had heard in his youth – namely, that in this passage had been seen at certain intervals a strange old lady, humpbacked and small, dressed in rusty black, who “walked” the corridor even in the middle of the day, and then suddenly disappeared through a door which for a full century past had been walled up. This legendary apparition was known to the family as Lady Margaret, and whenever she showed herself in the corridor it was a presage of evil to the Chisholms.

Dudley laughed within himself as he remembered his childish terror when his old nurse used to relate those dramatic stories about her deformed ladyship and the evil influence she exerted upon his house. It is strange how deeply rooted become many of the convictions of our childhood, especially where a family superstition is concerned; and Chisholm, even though he was a level-headed man of the world, had in his more mature years found himself wondering whether, after all, there had been any foundation for the legend.

Family ghosts do not, however, appear nowadays. They were all “laid” last century. So he laughed again to himself and continued on his way across the east wing to the bright breakfast-room, where his two guests were already awaiting him.

“What a lazy beggar you are, Dudley!” cried Benthall, as his host greeted them and took his seat at the head of the table.

“No, my dear fellow,” protested the Under-Secretary. “I – oh, well, I’ve been up quite a long time, and have already consulted Marston about our sport to-day. He says there are some strong birds over in the Dean Copse, so we’ll work that this morning.”

“Excellent! I recollect the splendid sport we got there last year!” exclaimed the colonel, a tall, white-haired, soldierly old fellow with a somewhat florid complexion and a well-trimmed moustache. He was a first-class shot, and now that he had retired from the Diplomatic Service, spent the whole of the shooting season at one house or another in different parts of the country. He was a popular, all-round sportsman, always welcome at any house-party, for he was full of droll stories, a bachelor, and a great favourite among the ladies. The announcement of a hostess to the effect that “Colonel Murray-Kerr will be here,” was always received with satisfaction by both sexes. As he had graduated as military attaché at the Embassies in Vienna, St. Petersburg, and, finally, in Rome, he was a cosmopolitan of cosmopolitans, though at the same time a thorough Englishman, and one of Dudley’s most intimate friends.

There were letters on the table for their host, two bulky ones marked “On His Majesty’s Service,” from the Foreign Office, and another, the handwriting on the envelope of which he saw at a glance to be Claudia’s. He glanced at this, then placed it in his pocket unopened.

“Oh, read it, my dear fellow,” laughed the colonel, quickly divining that it was from a woman. “Don’t mind us in the least.”

“Only tell us who’s the lady,” chimed in Benthall merrily.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Dudley assured them, rather annoyed, nevertheless.

“From Lady Richard – eh?” suggested the old officer chaffingly. “By Jove!” he went on; “she’s really charming. I was staying last week down at Fernhurst, the place old Meldrum has just bought

in Sussex, and she was there. Quite a host of smart women were staying there, but she, of course, eclipsed them all. I fear she's a sad flirt, Dudley, my boy, even though they say she's a bit fond of you."

"I know she's a flirt," Chisholm answered, rather thoughtfully. The mention of the name of Meldrum brought to his mind what Claudia had admitted, namely, that she had taken Lady Meldrum to his rooms.

The old colonel, who always maintained a diplomatic smartness in his attire, was a terrible gossip. He was a living Debrett, and a guide to knowledge affecting social affairs in half the courts of Europe. He knew everybody, as well as everything worth knowing about them. This was his hobby. Perhaps he rode it all the more perseveringly because a natural talent for inquisitiveness had been steadily cultivated during his long service as an attaché; for, as all the world knows, an official of this standing is little better than a spy. So, without any thought of hurting his young host's feelings, he continued his reminiscences of the house-party:

"We had splendid sport down at Fernhurst. The birds were very strong, and there were several excellent shots. But Lady Richard was, of course, the centre of all the attractions. Every man Jack among the males was absolutely her slave, lock, stock and barrel! By Jove! I don't think in all my diplomatic career I've ever seen a woman play them off one against the other with such *finesse*. Meldrum seems to have got into society wonderfully well of late. The young Grand-Duke Stanislas was there, and he made desperate love to the pretty widow. Indeed, so marked were their flirtations, that several of the feminine contingent declared themselves scandalised, and left. But, of course, the real truth was that they knew themselves to be entirely out of the running. One thing, however, struck me as curious – very curious: the hostess, a rather matronly *bourgeoise* person, seemed to throw the pair into one another's society as much as possible. At any rate, the extravagant flirtation nearly resulted in an open scandal. To my mind, Dudley, she's playing a decidedly dangerous game. Forgive me for saying so, if she's more to you than a jolly acquaintance; but you know the proverb about the pitcher going too often to the well."

"Angling after a Grand-Duke sounds bold," observed Benthall, attacking his cutlet. "I always thought, Dudley, old chap, that she had set her mind on becoming mistress of Wroxeter."

"Oh, I know," exclaimed their host impatiently, although trying to conceal his annoyance, "a lot of rot has been talked! I'm quite well aware of what you fellows mean. But I assure you that I'm a confirmed bachelor – just as confirmed as you, colonel – and, hang it! if report speaks correctly, you're one of the worst of the woman-haters in the whole of the Albany."

"I've never had any necessity to marry," laughed the old officer, his cheeks flushing with good humour.

"I've piloted some ripping ball-skirts and tailor-made gowns through half the courts of Europe, but I'm still heart-whole."

"A fine record," observed Harry Benthall with his mouth full. At that breakfast-table there was no ceremony, and words were certainly not minced.

"Well, every one seems to be linking my name with Claudia Nevill's," Dudley remarked, after commencing his breakfast, "I really can't see why."

"But I can," declared the colonel bluntly. "You're a fool – if you'll forgive me for saying so."

"Why?"

"A fool for giving a second thought to a woman of her stamp," he answered. "Good heavens! if you knew half the tales about her, you'd cut her dead. I wonder why the Meldrums invited her? Suppose they couldn't help it – or something."

"What tales?" asked Dudley, glancing inquiringly from one man to the other.

"No. I'm not going to besmirch any woman's character, my dear fellow," replied the elder man. "Only, take my advice and have nothing more to do with her – that's all. She's no good to you, or indeed to any honest man."

“Some foul scandal about her, I suppose,” cried Chisholm, his brow darkening for an instant. As a matter of fact, he knew the scandal quite well. It was the common talk in every club in town. But he intended to champion her, even though he had escaped from her net. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“It is unnecessary – utterly unnecessary,” the colonel answered, making as if breakfast were more important than gossip.

“A pretty woman, smart and popular as she is, always gets talked about, and her enemies are sure to invent some cruel story or other. Half the women in London are envious of Claudia Nevill, hence all these absurd and scandalous tales,” Chisholm declared.

“Ah!” laughed the colonel, “as I said, you’re gone on her, like the others, Dudley. You are old friends, every one knows. It’s a pity that she’s so reckless.”

“In what manner has she been reckless?”

“Well, if you had been down at Fernhurst and seen her with the young Grand-Duke, you wouldn’t defend her actions as you are now doing – well, by Jove! you couldn’t. I’m a man of the world, you know, but I must say that the flirtation was a regular blizzard.”

“And is every woman who glances prettily at a man from behind her fan, or chats to a fellow in a conservatory, to be condemned?” asked his host. “If so, then society has suddenly become intensely puritanical. Remember that the licence not allowed to an unmarried girl may justifiably be employed by a widow.”

“Widow!” laughed Murray-Kerr adjusting his monocle. “My dear boy, I’m perfectly with you; but then the fair Claudia is one in ten millions. She’s more like a girl of eighteen, in face, figure, and the choice of lovers, than the usual prim and stale relict with whom we are all more or less familiar.”

“Just because she’s popular, all this confounded gossip buzzes here, there, and everywhere. My name is coupled with hers, and all kinds of ridiculous stories have been started about us. I know, for too many of them have come to my ears.”

“Then if you know, Dudley, why don’t you take my advice and cut her?” asked the old officer, fixing his host with his keen eyes.

Chapter Six. In which the Colonel grows Mysterious

Chisholm was silent. The two men exchanged glances. Since they were his best and most confidential friends, he could not be offended in the least at what they had said, especially as he knew quite well that they had spoken plain, hard facts.

“Well,” he said at last, in a metallic tone of voice, “the truth is, we have parted.”

“Then I cordially congratulate you, my dear fellow,” declared the red-faced old colonel bluntly. “Forgive me, but you’ve been a fool over her, an absolute fool, and couldn’t see that she was deceiving you on every hand. Men had begun to sneer and laugh at you behind your back – and, by Jove! you’ve had a narrow escape of making a complete ass of yourself.”

“I know. I’m well aware of it,” his host replied in a low tone. “But between ourselves, it’s all over.”

“Why between ourselves?” inquired Benthall. “The world should, I think, know, for your own sake? *Pourquoi non?*”

“No. I intend to keep it a secret – for her sake.” Both men were silent. The conversation had, indeed, been a strange one to take place between a host and his guests. But both men saw that although Claudia and her lover had parted, there still lingered in Dudley Chisholm’s heart tender thoughts of that pretty, callous woman who was one of the leaders of smart society in London.

“Very well,” said Murray-Kerr at length, after a brief period of silence. “If you wish us to say nothing, we can only obey. But, nevertheless, my dear old chap, I, for one, congratulate you most heartily upon your resolution. A man in your shoes can’t afford to risk his reputation any longer. Forgive me for speaking as I have done, won’t you?”

“Certainly, my dear fellow,” he answered with a bitter smile. “You’ve both spoken as friends, and I’ve told you the plain truth, so what more need be said?”

“Nothing,” said the colonel. “Stick to your resolution, and let Claudia Nevill proceed at her own sweet will. She’ll marry some foreign notability or other, I expect, now that she’s in search of big game. Then you’ll be entirely free of her.”

Dudley laughed again, and soon afterwards, much to his relief, the conversation drifted into an easier channel. Her letter, however, remained in his pocket unopened. What words of mad despair, he wondered, did it contain?

He sat finishing his breakfast and chatting about various subjects. But his thoughts were of her – always of her.

When they rose, his two guests went out to see after their guns, while he, remaining behind upon some pretext, tore open the letter.

It was brief, and had evidently been penned in one of those moments of remorse which must come sooner or later to such a woman.

“You are cruel to leave me like this,” she wrote. “Surely, if you really loved me, you would not care what the world might say. I have been foolish, I know, but am now penitent. I see the folly of it all – the folly of not keeping my secret and playing the hypocrite like other women. Surely love is not forbidden between us because you happen to hold an official position! Return to me, Dudley – for I love you!”

He sighed, then, crushing the letter in his hand, he flung it into the fire, murmuring:

“No. She’s played me false – false!”

He recollected what the colonel had said in regard to the Grand-Duke Stanislas, and saw with chagrin that the world was pitying him.

Before the blazing logs he stood, watching the leaping flames consume the letter. When the last spark had died from the black crackling tinder, he sighed again, and reluctantly went out to join his guests.

The morning was dull and grey. As they trudged on past the site of the old Roman cemetery, down through Altringham Wood, across the wide stretch of moorland known as Uckington Heath, at last crossing the old highway of Watling Street and entering the Dean Copse, the sportsmen agreed that October might have behaved in a handsomer fashion. The fierce north-east wind that had swept over the Welsh hills had died away the evening before in a tumbled sea of fiery crimson and dense jagged drift of sulphurous blue. For days and days it had torn and shaken the great elms in Wroxeter Park, until it had stripped them of the last vestige of their autumn foliage, and now in the calm morning the leaves in park and copse were lying in a deep, moist carpet of shimmering gold. Nothing but the oaks had been able to withstand the fury of the blast; these still bore their leafy flags bravely aloft, thousands and thousands of their family flying proofs of staunchness on the flanks of many a noble hill. On the grass by the lane-side the dew was held in uncomfortable abundance, and a few belated blackberries showed sodden in the hedgerows. On entering the copse the shooters trudged down the narrow path, which was covered thickly with decaying leaves, and a few moments later both dogs and guns got to work.

During their walk the conversation had for the most part dealt with the condition of the birds. The colonel, keen sportsman that he was, telling of the execution effected by the six guns at Fernhurst; describing the big bags made up at Lord Morton's place in Cumberland, and how scarce the grouse had been in various districts in Scotland.

As Marston, the head-keeper, had predicted, birds were plentiful in the Dean Copse. Although the ground was rather difficult to work, the guests had good reason to praise the Under-Secretary's preserves. As for the colonel, who scarcely ever missed, he was now in his element; the heavier the bag became, the more brightly the old warrior's eyes sparkled. So excellent had been the sport, and, in consequence, so quickly had the time passed, that the guests could hardly believe their ears when the interval for lunch was announced. Dudley, who was an excellent shot, and who, on an ordinary occasion, would have entered into the sport with becoming zest, throughout the morning had knocked down the birds in a merely mechanical way, more to please his friends than himself. Secretly he wished himself back at the castle, in the solitude of that old library which he used for his den at such times as he was all by himself at Wroxeter.

"I think, sir, we ought to try the Holly Wood now," Marston suggested as soon as they had eaten their sandwiches and drunk their sherry. In accordance with this view, they tramped down into the valley by Upton Magna, and presently came to the spot indicated. For the past two seasons Dudley had been down at Wroxeter but seldom, one of the results being that birds were very plentiful. All three of the shooters were kept busy until nearly three o'clock, when, after enjoying a grand day's sport, the party turned towards the old inn at Uffington, where the dog-cart was to meet them.

On the way across the brown fields, Benthall, deep in conversation with Marston, was somewhat ahead, and Dudley walked at the colonel's side, a smart, well-set-up figure in his drab shooting-clothes.

He was hesitating whether to broach a subject that was puzzling him. Presently, however, unable longer to conceal his curiosity, he turned suddenly to his companion, saying:

"You were speaking of Fernhurst at breakfast. Let's see, hasn't Lady Meldrum a daughter?"

"A daughter?" observed the colonel, looking at him. "Certainly not. There's no family."

"That's curious," Dudley said with an affected air of indifference. "Somebody said she had a daughter named Muriel."

"A daughter named Muriel!" the old officer exclaimed. "No, she has a girl named Muriel who lives with her – a ward, I believe – and a confoundedly pretty girl she is, too. She wasn't much *en*

Evidence when I was down there. I have my suspicions that during the house-party she was sent away to the quieter atmosphere surrounding a maiden aunt.”

“Oh, she’s a ward, is she?” remarked Chisholm. “What’s her name?”

“Muriel Mortimer.”

“A ward in Chancery, I suppose?”

“I’m not certain,” replied Murray-Kerr hesitatingly. “I only saw her once, on the day of my arrival at Fernhurst. She left for Hertfordshire next day. Lady Meldrum, however, seemed devoted to her – went up to town to see her off, and all that sort of thing. But who’s been chattering to you about her?”

“Oh, I heard her spoken of somewhere. The fellow who told me said she was rather pretty.”

“Yes,” the other answered in rather a strange and hesitating manner, “she is – very pretty, and quite young.”

“Do you know absolutely nothing more concerning her?” Chisholm asked. “You always know everything about everybody when you’re in the smoking-room at the Junior, you know.”

“In the club a man may open his mouth, but it isn’t always wise when visiting friends,” the colonel replied with a laugh.

“I don’t quite follow you,” his companion said. “Surely Wroxeter is as free as Charles Street, isn’t it?”

“Well, no, not quite, my dear Dudley – not quite.”

“Why?”

“Because there are some things that even I – plain-spoken as I am – would rather leave unsaid.”

Chisholm looked at him and saw the change upon the old fellow’s countenance.

“You’re hiding something from me,” the younger man said quickly.

“I don’t deny that,” was the other’s response. “But I really can’t see why you should so suddenly become the victim of an intense desire to know the history of Lady Meldrum’s ward. Have you met her?”

“No, never.”

“Then don’t, that’s all,” was the mysterious answer.

“What the dickens do you mean, speaking in enigmas like this? Surely you can speak straight out?”

“No, not in this case, Dudley,” the colonel said in a rather softer tone. “I told you sufficient this morning about Claudia Nevill, and all I wish to urge is that you should avoid the pretty Muriel quite as assiduously as you will her ladyship in future.”

Chisholm was puzzled. His companion was evidently aware of some fact which, for a mysterious reason, he was reluctant to disclose.

“But I can’t see your object in mystifying me like this!” he protested. “We are friends – very old friends – surely you can at least tell me the truth?”

“I’ve told you the truth, dear boy. Muriel Mortimer is an undesirable acquaintance for you. Is not that a friendly warning?”

“A warning, certainly – but hardly a friendly one,” answered Dudley, swinging over a stile into the high-road. “I mention to you a woman I’ve heard about,” he went on as the pair were walking side by side again, “and you at once give me these extraordinary warnings, without offering any explanation whatsoever. Who is this mysterious ward? What is she?”

“I’ve already told you who she is,” his companion replied, shifting his gun as he marched onward. “What she is I don’t know. All I am sure about is that the less you see of her the better, Dudley – that’s all.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Because of something I’ve discovered,” the elder man replied.

“Something about her?”

“Well – yes. Something about her.”

“But you speak as though we were intimate, my dear fellow, and as if I were about to lose my heart to her!” exclaimed Chisholm.

“You’ll probably know her soon, but when you are introduced, remember my warning, and drop her at once like a live coal.”

“You’re in a delightfully prophetic vein this afternoon,” laughed his host. “I suppose it’s the dull weather.”

At this the elder man halted, turned upon him suddenly, placed his hand upon his shoulder, and said in a deep and earnest tone:

“Recollect, Dudley, that what I told you this morning at breakfast was for your own good. I’m not a fellow given to preaching or moralising, that you know well. But I tell you straight to your face that before long you’ll know Muriel Mortimer. All I urge upon you is not to allow yourself to be captivated.”

“Then you know something distinctly to her detriment?” Chisholm suggested, for what his friend had said had shown him plainly that this girl was mixed up in unsavoury matters.

“I only say that she’s not a desirable person for you to know.”

Dudley laughed uneasily. These words were all the more remarkable in the light of old Parsons’ statement.

“You speak just as though you feared I might marry her!” he said.

“Well, there are many things more unlikely than that,” was the elder man’s reply. “We hear of strange matches nowadays.”

“And if I married this fair unknown, what then?”

“Well, before you do that just take my advice and swallow an overdose of chloral, or something of that sort. It would be a far easier way out of this work-a-day world than marriage with her.” Chisholm looked at him quickly.

“My dear fellow,” he said, “your words imply that marriage with her would be tantamount to suicide.”

“That was exactly the impression I meant to convey, Dudley,” was the strange reply. “I can say no more – indeed, I have no intention of being more explicit, even were I free to make further explanation. Avoid her – that’s all.”

Chapter Seven. Unites Reality with Romance

The colonel's strange premonition was puzzling.

Chisholm saw quite plainly that his friendship with Claudia Nevill had caused him to throw his usual carefulness to the winds. Her letter was but another proof of her insincerity; while the statement of the old colonel in respect of the house-party at Fernhurst angered him. He was furious that she should risk her reputation openly in such a manner. At the same time he was filled with regret that from the charming woman of four years ago she should have developed into a brilliant leader of society, acknowledged by all to be the smartest woman in London.

It was dark when they drove into the quadrangle of the castle, and Dudley, excusing himself to his friends, dressed and retired to the great library for an hour before dinner in order to examine the official correspondence that had arrived in the morning.

From the big Foreign Office envelopes he drew a mass of papers which required his endorsement, and several important letters which he at once answered. The duties of Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs are multitudinous, and the office needs a man who does not hanker after a sinecure. Little leisure was Dudley Chisholm allowed, and seldom could he snatch a few days to run down into the country. His presence in or near town was required always for passing reports; he had to sign here, initial there, and control in a great measure one of the greatest and most important departments of the State.

It is generally understood by Parliament that answers to questions put to the Foreign Under-secretary are prescribed by his Chief, His Majesty's Principal Secretary. Palmerston would never allow an Under-Secretary to answer a supplementary question until his superior had dictated the reply. But under the Gladstone *régime* this rule was gradually relaxed; and such confidence did Lord Stockbridge place in Chisholm's discretion and power to fence with the Opposition, that, although he was required to meet his Chief at the Foreign Office between the hours of twelve and two each Parliamentary day, he was allowed a practically free hand. Years ago under-secretaries were but the mouthpieces of their chiefs. Old Parliamentary hands recollect seeing Sir William Harcourt at the far end of the Treasury Bench pass the word to Sir Edward Grey at the other end not to answer a supplementary question until he had consulted Lord Rosebery; and once when Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice asked for notice of a supplementary question so that he might consult Earl Granville, the Opposition jeered, and Mr Gladstone jumped up to declare that Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice had done so by his orders. That, however, was all of the past. Dudley Chisholm was entirely in the confidence of the Marquess of Stockbridge. He relied upon him.

In that sombre old room where the firelight danced upon the rows and rows of heavy volumes written in days long past, he sat within the zone of the green-shaded reading-lamp, his attention absorbed by some official reports. They were evidently of an unusual nature, for of a sudden an exclamation of profound surprise escaped him, and with growing eagerness he scanned page after page of those written lines.

"I don't believe it!" he exclaimed, speaking to himself. "It can't be true! My secret is still safe. It cannot possibly be revealed any more than the dead can speak. And yet cock-and-bull stories do not usually emanate from that quarter. It's certainly startling enough – and if true – well –"

He rose from his chair and thoughtfully paced the room, his hands locked behind his back, as was his habit when thinking deeply. The statement contained in the despatch had alarmed him. He scented danger, and his brow was clouded. The whole thing was so unexpected and so extraordinary that he could scarcely credit it, although the signature to the despatch was that of his Chief, Lord

Stockbridge. The matter was one demanding his immediate attention, and yet he had allowed the despatch to remain unopened all day.

Up and down the polished floor he paced, plunged in apprehensive reflections. It appeared that after he had left the Foreign Office on the previous day the Minister had attended there and had sent him that startling despatch under seal. He paused at the table, and taking up the envelope for the first time discovered that it had not been through the post.

Then he touched the bell, and of the man who entered he asked:

“Did a messenger from London leave anything for me this morning, Riggs?”

“Yes, sir. Two official letters, sir. He arrived at six o’clock, and I placed the letters on the breakfast-table.”

“Oh, very well,” his master answered. “You signed the receipt?”

“Yes, sir. It was Mr Forbes who brought them, sir. He said he couldn’t wait till you came down as he was driving back to Shrewsbury to catch the eight-ten up to London.”

“He didn’t say they were important, or make any remark?”

“No, sir.”

“Very well.” And then the man, a smart, middle-aged servant in the Chisholm livery, withdrew.

“Curious – very curious!” exclaimed Dudley in a low, half-frightened whisper when the man had closed the door. “It’s certainly a matter that requires the most searching investigation, otherwise we shall infallibly find ourselves checkmated, Lord Stockbridge writes. I wonder what it can all mean? Even Stockbridge himself doesn’t see any light through it, apparently.”

Again he read the puzzling document, which bore the signature known to every court of Europe as that of the greatest of living statesmen. It bore a postscript also, written by his lordship’s own quill: “When read, please destroy.”

He replaced it on the table, and, crossing to the ancient hearth where the big logs were burning, he stood motionless, gazing blankly at the fire.

The words he read had aroused within him a suspicion – a grave, terrible, awful suspicion. In those moments of deep contemplation he looked fully ten years older. His hand rested upon the high overmantel of black oak, on which was a carved representation of the simple coat of the Shropshire Chisholms, azure, a chevron, or between three water-bougets argent. His brow rested upon his arm as he gazed at the glowing logs. Truth to tell, that confidential document had caused a flood of recollections to surge through his brain – recollections whose return he did not desire. He had vainly thought the past all buried, and had forgiven and forgotten his enemy. But, reading between the lines of that despatch, he saw that this ghost of the past had again arisen. Lord Stockbridge had, of course, no suspicion of the truth. The confidential communication had been made to him in the ordinary course of events, in order that he might institute secret inquiries in certain quarters, and ascertain the feeling of certain influential members in the House.

But if the truth became known? He set his jaws hard, and a deep sigh escaped him. He dared not contemplate the result. It would mean for him ruin, ignominy, shame.

He passed his hot hand wearily across his brow, pushing the thick dark hair from his forehead.

The dead silence was broken by a low groan – a groan of despair and penitence.

“God!” he gasped. “Surely the truth cannot possibly be known? How can it? No,” he went on, murmuring to himself. “Bah! I’m timid – thoughts of it always unnerve me. And yet from this it seems very much as if some secret enemy had waited through these years until I had attained position and popularity in order to strike, to crush, to ruin me for ever!”

He was silent again, silent for many minutes. He stood quite motionless, still gazing into the fire.

“But dare I face exposure?” he asked himself, his hoarse whisper sounding strangely in that old room. “No. A thousand times no! No – impossible! A thousand times no! I’d prefer death. Yes, suicide. It would be the only way. Death is far preferable to dishonour.”

He saw it all – he who could read between those lines. He detected the hand of some secret enemy uplifted against him – an enemy who, he did not doubt, held that secret which through the past six years had been the skeleton in his cupboard. In the esteem of men he had risen rapidly, until to-day he was declared to be one of the shrewdest of England's legislators, fulfilling all the traditions of his ancient and honourable house. And through out these six years he had striven, and striven, always with an idea of atonement for his cardinal sin; always working in the interests of the nation he had resolved to serve.

How strange it was that His Majesty's Foreign Minister should have actually communicated this to him, of all men! But man works half his own doom, and circumstance the other half. *C'est toujours le destin.*

In his despair there had arisen before him that grim and hideous ghost of the past which had always overshadowed the later years of his life; that incident which he constantly feared might come to light to destroy the position he had created, to wreck his popularity, and to cause his name to be synonymous with all that was base, treacherous, and ignominious. For the fault he had committed – a grave offence which he knew could never be humanly forgiven – he had endeavoured to atone to the best of his ability. Other young men of his wealth would have probably married and taken their ease; but with that secret deep in his heart he had worked and striven for his country's good, prompted by a desire not merely to become popular, but to accomplish something by means of which to make amends.

Men had, of course, never rightly understood his motives. They had believed him to be one of a motley crowd of place-seekers, whose brilliant oratory had fortunately brought him into the front rank, though this was certainly far from being the case. Popularity had been heaped upon him as an entirely unwelcome reward. He always declared within himself that he merited nothing – absolutely nothing; and this belief accounted for his utter indifference to the plaudits of the public or the praise bestowed upon him by his Party. He was endeavouring to work out his atonement and make reparation – that was all.

Try as he would, however, he could not put aside the grave suggestion that some secret enemy was preparing a *coup* beneath which he must fall. The disquieting despatch from Constantinople seemed to portend this. It was a presage of his downfall. To endeavour to prove his innocence, to try to withstand the storm of indignation that must certainly sweep over England, or to prevent exposure of the truth, spelt futility. He was helpless – utterly helpless against the onswEEPing tide of retribution.

The marquess urged that he – the very man concerned in the disreputable affair – should make secret inquiry into the truth of the report. Was not that a freak of Fate? Surely Nemesis was already upon him. What could he reply to that despatch? How could he act?

Many men grudged him his position and the fame he had won. And yet, would they envy him if they were aware of the terrible truth – if they were aware of that awful secret ever burdening his conscience?

Suddenly, as though some fresh thought had occurred to him, he crossed to the opposite side of the room, and, pressing against one of the shelves filled with old brown-covered folios, opened a part which concealed a small safe embedded deeply in the wall, hidden from even the keenest eyes in a manner that could scarcely have been improved. From his watch-chain he selected a key, opened the safe and took from one of its drawers a large official-looking envelope. Walking back to the light of the table, he drew out a piece of thin transparent tracing-paper which he opened and spread upon the blotting-pad.

Upon this paper a letter in a strange, almost microscopic hand, had been traced. This he read carefully, apparently weighing every word. Twice he went over it, almost as though he wished to commit it to memory; then, with a hard look upon his dark features, he replaced it in the envelope, sealed it with a stick of black wax and put it once more in the safe. From the same drawer he extracted a second paper, folded in a small square. With this in his hand he walked toward the nearest window,

so as to be in the best light for his purpose. When he was satisfied in this regard, he undid the packet. It contained a curl of fair hair bound together with sewing silk of a faded pink.

As he looked upon it tears welled up into his eyes. That lock of hair brought back to him memories, bitter and tender memories which he always tried to forget, though in vain. Before him arose a woman's face, pale, fair, with eyes of that deep childlike blue which always proclaims purity of soul. He saw her before him in her simple dress of white linen – a vision of sweet and perfect beauty. The words she had spoken in her gentle voice seemed once again to fall upon his ears with the music that had so invariably charmed him. He remembered what she had said to him – he recollected the whole of that conversation, although years had passed since it had been held. He found it impossible to prevent his thoughts from wandering back to the tender grace of a day that was dead, when, beside the sea, he had for a few hours enjoyed a calm and sunny paradise, which had too quickly changed into a wilderness barren of both roses and angels.

He sighed; and down his cheek there crept a single tear. Then he raised the tiny lock of hair to his lips.

“May God cherish her always – always,” he murmured.

Twice he kissed the lock of hair before, with every sign of reluctance, returning it to the packet and replacing it in the steel drawer. Superstitious persons believe that ill-fortune follows the possession of hair; but Chisholm was never superstitious. This curl, which at rare intervals he was in the habit of taking from its secret hiding-place, always carried his memory back to those brief days when, for the second time in his life, he had experienced perfect happiness. It was an outward and visible sign of a love that had once burned fiercely within two hearts.

He had just locked the safe and hidden it in the usual manner, when Benthall burst into the library, and said in a merry tone of voice:

“I've come just to see what you're doing, old fellow. The gong went half an hour ago and the colonel says he's got a ravenous appetite. The soup will be cold.”

He had walked across to the table, and stood beside it ready dressed for dinner.

“I – oh! I was busy,” his host answered. “A lot of official correspondence from the Foreign Office, you know – things I ought to have seen to this morning instead of shooting. Correspondence always crowds upon me if I go out of town even for a couple of days.”

“But you've done now – haven't you?” asked his guest, glancing at the littered table.

“Just finished. But I'm awfully sorry to have kept you fellows waiting. The colonel's so infernally prompt at feeding-time. They say at the Junior that he doesn't vary five minutes at dinner once in six months.”

“Well, come along, old fellow. Don't wait to finish.” He seated himself on the edge of the big writing-table while Dudley busied himself in replacing some letters he had taken from the steel despatch-box which accompanied him everywhere.

Smoking a cigarette, and swinging his legs easily, Benthall waited while his host – who had pointed out that he could not leave confidential documents open for the servants to pry into – straightened his papers, and put them together with the communications littering the table, in the box, afterwards locking it.

Only one was left on the table, the despatch which Lord Stockbridge had ordered him to destroy. This he carried to the fire, lit one corner, and held it until it was all consumed, afterwards destroying the tinder with the poker.

“What's that you're so careful to burn?” asked Benthall, interested.

“Oh, nothing, my dear Harry – nothing,” answered the Under-Secretary in a nonchalant manner. “Only a despatch.”

“From Stockbridge, or one of the other Ministers, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“But why did you burn it?”

“In order that it shouldn’t fall into anybody else’s hands.”

“Something very confidential, then?”

“Yes, something extremely confidential,” answered Chisholm. “But come along, old fellow, let’s go to dinner, or the colonel will never forgive me.”

Chapter Eight.

Shows a Politician and a Policy

Dudley Chisholm, with the excuse that his presence was urgently required at the Foreign Office, returned to town by the first train on the following day, leaving the colonel and Benthall to continue their sport. He would probably return in a couple of days, he said, but Lord Stockbridge wished to explain to him the line of policy which he intended to adopt towards France, with a view to lessening the tension between the two nations, and to give him certain instructions as to the conduct of the forthcoming debate in the House.

As both his guests understood that a man holding such a position was liable at any moment to be called up to town, they made the best of their disappointment, wished him good luck when the time came for his departure, and went out with the head-keeper for a day's sport in Parnholt Wood.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.