

Le Queux William

Whatsoever a Man Soweth



William Le Queux

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Whatsoever a Man Soweth

Chapter One.

Concerns a Proposal of Marriage

“Then you really don’t intend to marry me, Wilfrid?”

“The honour of being your husband, Tibbie, I must respectfully decline,” I said.

“But I’d make you a very quiet, sociable wife, you know. I can ride to hounds, cook, sew clothes for old people, and drive a motor. What higher qualifications do you want?”

“Well – love, for instance.”

“Ah! That’s what I’m afraid I don’t possess, any more than you do,” she laughed. “It isn’t a family characteristic. With us, it’s everyone for herself,” and she beat a tattoo upon the window-pane with the tips of her slim, white fingers.

“I know,” I said, smiling. “We are old friends enough to speak quite frankly, aren’t we?”

“Of course. That’s why I asked you ‘your intentions’ – as the mater calls them. But it seems that you haven’t any.”

“Not in your direction, Tibbie.”

“And yet you told me you loved me!” said the pretty woman at my side in mock reproach, pouting her lips.

“Let’s see – how long ago was that? You were thirteen, I think, and I was still at Eton – eh?”

“I was very fond of you,” she declared. “Indeed, I like you now. Don’t you remember those big boxes of sweets you used to smuggle in to me, and how we used to meet in secret and walk down by the river in the evening? Those were really very happy days, Wilfrid,” and she sighed at the memory of our youthful love.

We were standing together in the sunset at one of the old diamond-paned windows of the Long Gallery at Ryhall Place, the ancient home of the Scarcliffs in Sussex, gazing away over the broad park which stretched as far as the eye could reach, its fine old avenue of beeches running in a straight line to East Marden village, and the Chichester high road.

My companion, the Honourable Eva Sybil Burnet, third daughter of the late Viscount Scarcliff, was known to her intimates as “Tibbie,” because as a child she so pronounced her Christian name. In the smart set in London and at country houses she was well known as the prettiest of a handsome trio, the other two sisters being Cynthia, who married Lord Wyndcombe, and Violet, who a year ago became Countess of Alderholt. Young Lady Wyndcombe, who was perhaps one of the smartest women in town, noted for her dinners and her bridge parties in Curzon Street, and her smart house parties up in Durham, had unfortunately taken Tibbie under her care after she had come out, with the result that although unmarried she had prematurely developed into one of the most *blasé* and go-ahead women in town. The gossips talked of her, but the scandal was invented by her enemies.

The country people whispered strange things of “Miss Sybil” and her whims and fancies. The family had been known as “the reckless Burnets” ever since the Georgian days, when the sixth Viscount had, in one night at Crockford’s, gambled away the whole of his vast Yorkshire estate, and his son on the following night lost forty-five thousand guineas at the same table. Dare-devilry ran in the Scarcliff blood. From the Wars of the Roses down to the present day the men had always been fearless soldiers – for some of their armour, and that of their retainers, still stood in long, grim rows in the dark-panelled gallery where we were – and the women had always been notable for their beauty,

as proved by the famous portraits by Gainsborough, Lawrence, Lely, Reynolds, Hoppner, and others, that hung in the splendid gallery beyond.

But surely none of those time-mellowed portraits that I could see from where I stood was half so beautiful as the little friend of my youth beside me. In those long-past days of our boy-and-girl affection she had been very fragile and very beautiful, with wondrous hair of that unusual gold-brown tint, and eyes of clear bright blue. But even now, at twenty-three, she had in no way lost her almost child-like grace and charm. Those deep blue eyes, turned upon me in mock reproach, were still fathomless, her cheeks were perfect in their symmetry, her mouth smiling and sweet, and her brows well arched and well defined, while her chin, slightly protruding, gave her that piquant air that was so delightful.

Though unmarried, she was entirely unconventional, just as the Scarcliffs had ever been. Smart London knew Tibbie well. Some day she would marry, people said, but the wiseacres shook their heads and secretly pitied the man who became her husband.

As a friend Tibbie was perfect. She was a man's woman. She could shoot or fish, she would play bridge and pay up honourably, she rode well, and she drove her 60 h.p. "Mercedes" better even than her own chauffeur. Old Lady Scarcliff – a delightful old person – had long ago given her up as hopeless. It was all Cynthia's doing, for, truth to tell, her extravagances and her utter disregard for the *convenances* were the outcome of her residence with the Wydcombes.

I own frankly that I was sorry to see this change in her. The slim, rather prudish little love of my youth had now developed into that loud-speaking, reckless type of smart woman who nowadays is so much in evidence in Society. I much preferred her as I had known her years ago when my father and hers were intimate friends, and when I came so often to stay at Ryhall. True, our friendship had been a firm one always, but alas! I now detected a great change in her. Though so handsome, she was, as I had so very frankly told her, not exactly the kind of woman I should choose as a wife. And yet, after all, when I reflected I often thought her very sweet and womanly at home in the family circle.

My visit to Ryhall was to end on the morrow, and she had promised to drive me up to town on her car.

The men of the party had not yet returned from shooting, and in that calm sunset hour we were alone in the fine old gallery, with its splendid tapestries, its old carved coffers and straight-backed chairs, its rows of antlers and its armour of the dead-and-gone Scarcliffs. High in the long windows were the rose en soleil of Edward IV, the crown in the hawthorn bush of Henry VII, the wolf's head crowned, the badge of the Scarcliffs, and other armorial devices, while the autumn sunlight slanting in threw coloured reflections upon the oaken floor worn smooth and polished by the feet of generations.

She was dressed in cream serge, a slight, dainty, neat-waisted figure, thrown into relief as she leaned back against the dark old panelling, laughing at my retort.

Her musical voice echoed down the long corridor, that old place that always seemed so far remote from the present day, and where the country folk declared that at night could be heard the footfall of the knight and the rustle of the lady's kirtle.

Ryhall was indeed a magnificent old place, built by Sir Henry Burnet in the Tudor days, and pre-eminent to-day among the historic mansions of England, an architectural triumph that still remained almost the same as it was on the death of its builder. Its great vaulted hall with the wonderful fireplace and carved minstrels' gallery, its fine old tapestries in King James's room, the yellow drawing-room, the red boudoir, and the Baron's hall, full of antique furniture, were all splendid apartments breathing of an age long past and forgotten.

Being something of an antiquary myself, I loved Ryhall, and took a keen delight in exploring its quaint passages and discovering its secret doors in picture-frames and panelling. Tibbie, however, who had no love for old things, hated Ryhall. She preferred everything essentially modern, the art nouveau, art colourings, and the electric light of her mother's house in Grosvenor Street. She only came down to Ryhall when absolutely necessary, and then grumbled constantly, even worrying Jack,

her brother – now Lord Scarcliff – to “put some decent new furniture into the place,” and declaring to her mother that the house was full of moths and rats.

“Look!” she suddenly exclaimed at last. “The boys are coming home! Can’t you see them there, down in the avenue?” and she pointed with her finger. “Well,” she added, “you’re not a bit entertaining, Wilfrid. You refuse to become my husband, so I suppose I shall have to marry someone else. The mater says I really must marry somebody.”

“Of course, you must,” I said. “But who is to be the happy man? Have you decided?”

“M’-well, I don’t quite know. Ellice Winsloe is a good fellow, and we’re very friendly,” she admitted. “The mater approves of him, because he’s well off.”

“Then she wouldn’t approve of me,” I laughed. “You know I haven’t got very much.”

“I’ve never asked her. Indeed, if you would marry me I shouldn’t ask her, I should marry first and ask afterwards.”

“But do you really mean to marry Ellice?” I asked seriously. “Is he – well, such a very particular friend?”

“He proposed to me a fortnight ago after the Jardines’ dance, and I refused him – I always refuse, you know,” and she smiled again.

She was as gay and merry as usual, yet there was about her face a look of strange anxiety that greatly puzzled me.

“Then you’ve had other offers?”

“Of course, but mostly from the undesirables. Oh! you would laugh if you could hear them laying open their hearts, as they call it,” she said gaily. “Why does a man call his love his secret – as though he’d committed some awful crime? It is most amusing, I can assure you. Mason and I have some good laughs over it very often.”

“But you surely don’t tell your maid such things?” I said, surprised, but knowing well her hoydenish spirit.

“Indeed I do. Mason enjoys the joke just as much as I do.”

“Ah! Tibbie,” I said reproachfully, “you are a sad breaker of men’s hearts! By Jove! you are so good-looking that if I didn’t know you I, too, should fall in love with you.”

“Why don’t you? That’s just what I want. Then we should marry and live happy ever after. It would be so delightful. I’d marry you to-morrow, dear old boy, if you wished,” she declared unblushingly.

“And regret it the day after,” I laughed. “Why, Tibbie, you know how horribly badly off the poor old governor left me – a bare thousand a year when all expenses of Netherdene are paid. The place is an absolute white elephant, shabby, worn out, dilapidated – certainly not the house to take a bride to. I haven’t been up there for nearly two years. A cotton-spinner in Oldham rents the shoot, and his cheque is always helpful.”

“Yes,” she remarked thoughtfully, gazing down upon the oak floor, “Netherdene certainly isn’t a very cheerful spot. It would make a nice home for incurables, or a lunatic asylum. Why don’t you try and form a company, or something in the City, and run it? Other fellows do.”

“What’s the use?” I asked. “I’m no hand at business; I only wish I were. Then I could make money. Now, I only wander about and spend it.”

“Well, you have a decent time, so what more can you want?” she asked, looking at me with those wonderful eyes that had caused many a man’s head to reel. “You ought, after all, to be satisfied, and thank your stars you’re not worse off.”

“You’re not satisfied yourself, even though you are one of the most popular girls in town?” I said. “You want a husband.”

“I shouldn’t want one if the mater gave me a decent allowance. I hate to be continually borrowing from Cynthia when the mater has plenty and Jack is throwing it away on the Stock Exchange. He’s always learning of good things from his friends, but they generally result in losses.”

A silence fell between us for some moments, broken only by the slow, solemn ticking of the long old clock near by.

“And so, Tibbie, you intend to marry Ellice!” I remarked at last, looking straight into her handsome face. Yes; after all, there was an indescribable sweetness in her manner, whatever the world might say regarding her.

“It’s a secret. I’ve told nobody; therefore you’ll not say a word, will you?”

“Certainly not. But I congratulate you. Winsloe is, I believe, a real good fellow, and I can only hope you will love him.”

“I shall learn to love him in time, I suppose,” she answered. “Look! there he is!”

And glancing down I saw the well-set-up figure, in drab tweeds with his gun across his shoulder, striding over the park, together with her brother Jack, my old friend Eric Domville, Lord Wydcombe, and several ladies of the house-party in shooting kit, followed by the keepers and dogs.

“Tibbie,” I said, seriously, turning to her. “You know we’ve known each other many years. I was your first sweetheart, and afterwards your friend. I am still your firm friend, and as such I may be permitted to give you a single word of advice – to urge you not to marry that man unless you really love him.”

“I know, my dear old Wilfrid,” she said, smiling prettily. “You are such a philosopher. You ought to have been a parson. Nowadays women don’t marry for love. They unfortunately put that away with their short skirts. They marry for convenience.”

And she gazed again out of the lead-lighted window.

“But is it wise of you? Remember I am still your platonic friend, and have every regard for your future happiness. To serve you I am always ready. That you know. Only command me, Tibbie.”

She hesitated for a moment, then turning to me with that strange, anxious look upon her countenance, an expression most unusual for her, she said in a low, intense voice, —

“I wonder if I might actually take you at your word, Wilfrid. I wonder if – if – ” and she hesitated, pursing her lips, and I saw that her hand trembled.

“Of course I’m always ready to assist you,” I said, somewhat surprised at her sudden change of manner.

“Ah! no!” she gasped, suddenly pale to the lips, a strange look of terror in her eyes. “My secret! I am very foolish. I cannot tell it to you – you of all men. It is too terrible. You would hate me!”

“Your secret!” I echoed. “What secret, Tibbie? Tell me?”

But she turned away from me, and covering her white face with her hands, burst into a flood of tears.

Chapter Two. Reveals a Woman's Secret

That evening, as I changed for dinner in the quaint old tapestried room, with its ancient carved four-poster and green silk hangings, I reflected deeply.

What, I wondered, was Tibbie's secret?

That it was something she feared to reveal to me was quite plain, and yet were we not firm, confidential friends? It had been on the tip of her tongue to tell me, and to ask my help, yet on reflection she realised that her confession would estrange us. What could its nature possibly be?

Her manner had so entirely and quickly changed, that more than once I had wondered whether she had witnessed something, or seen some person from the window, and that the sight had struck terror into her heart. Was she conscience-stricken? I recollected how she had suddenly turned from the window, and how ashen her face had gone in a single instant.

What was her secret?

I, Wilfrid Hughes, confess that I admired her, though I was in no way a lady's man. I was comparatively poor. I preferred to lead a wandering life as an independent bachelor, pursuing my favourite antiquarian studies, than to settling down to the humdrum existence of a country gentleman with the appended J.P. and D.L. after one's name. I had just enough to make both ends meet, and while Netherdene was let I occupied, when not travelling on the Continent, a decently comfortable set of chambers in Bolton Street. My friend Tibbie Burnet was, without a doubt, one of the smartest unmarried girls in London, a woman whose utter disregard of all the laws of conventionality would ten years ago have shocked, but which, alas! now was regarded as the height of *chic* and smartness. Half-a-dozen times report had engaged her, but all rumours had proved false, while one could scarcely take up an illustrated paper without finding a photograph or paragraph concerning her. Hundreds of girls envied her, of course, therefore it was not after all surprising that evil tongues were ready to say bitter things of her. Every woman who is popular, be it in merry Mayfair or tattling Tooting, *blasé* Belgravia or busy Brixton, is sure to make a host of enemies. There is no more bitter enmity in this world of ours than the jealousy between woman and woman.

So I had always dismissed the stories I had heard in various quarters concerning Tibbie as unjust and untrue. One rumour, however, a strange, faint echo, had reached me in a curious roundabout way while staying at a country house up in Yorkshire, and of late it had caused me to pause and wonder – as I still paused and wondered that night. Could it be true? Could it really be true?

I stood looking in the long old-fashioned mirror, gazing unconsciously at my own reflection.

No. What was said was a foul lie. I was quite sure of it. Country yokels are always inventing some story or other concerning the gentlefolk. It was a fable, and I refused to believe it. Tibbie was my friend, and if she was in distress I would help her.

And with that resolve I went down to dinner. I found her in the great oak-panelled hall, where hung the faded and tattered banners of the Scarcliffs, a brilliant figure in pale rose, laughing gaily with her brother-in-law, Lord Wycombe, her sweet face betraying no sign of either terror or of tears.

She glanced at me, waving her hand merrily as I lounged across the big vaulted apartment to join the tall, distinguished-looking man of thirty-eight, whom she had told me in secret she intended was to be her husband, Ellice Winsloe.

"Why didn't you come with us this afternoon, old chap?" he asked. "We had excellent sport across at Whitewater."

"I had letters to write," I pleaded. "I'll go with you to-morrow."

"Tibbie promised to come out to lunch, but didn't turn up," he remarked, folding his arms, a habit of his when conversing.

“No. She went out to make a call, I think. She said she had some old people to visit down in the village. She came in half-an-hour before you did,” and then at that moment Adams, the white-headed old butler, announced that dinner was served.

It was a gay party who assembled in the fine old dining-room panelled from floor to ceiling, with the great hearth, the high old Tudor mantelpiece and the white ornamented ceiling with the gilded armorial bearings of the Scarcliffs in the centre. In all we were eleven, including old Lady Scarcliff herself, who, seated at the head of her son’s table, had Eric and Ellice on either hand. My seat was between Lady Wydcombe and a fair-haired, rather pretty young girl named Hilda Tracey, and although the meal was a pleasant one, I noticed that never once did Tibbie address the man who had proposed to her. Indeed, she rather avoided us both. Once or twice I addressed a question directly to her, but she replied briefly, and I saw that she regretted that involuntary outburst of a couple of hours before.

The conversation of the men, keen sportsmen all, was mostly regarding the bag of the day, while the women discussed the forthcoming fancy ball over at Arundel, and made plans for it. Cynthia was a tall, striking brunette, a go-ahead woman who entertained lavishly, and whose husband, a thin, fair-haired, fair-moustached man, disapproved of his wife’s gaiety, but said nothing. He was a keen sportsman, who had shot big game in the Andes and in Somaliland, and who each year gave a good time to his friends up at his fine grouse-moor in the Highlands. Jack, otherwise the tenth Viscount Scarcliff, was a slim, dark-haired young fellow of twenty-five, with a small black moustache, of a rather indolent, easy-going type, who hated town, and whose chief hobbies were speculating on the Stock Exchange and driving his motor.

Three years ago he had been in London, reading for the Bar, or rather making a pretence of reading, when suddenly he found himself possessor of the title and estates with a substantial rent-roll and the wherewithal to lead an easy existence. Therefore he at once cast aside all ideas of the Law and settled down to a country life, which he now thoroughly enjoyed.

Eric Domville was, however, my intimate friend. Although young – for he was not more than thirty-five – “Who’s Who” recorded to him a long record of distinguished services as traveller, explorer, Government agent and soldier, a man who during the past ten years or so had lived a charmed life in the African forests and in the great burning Sahara. A big, broad-shouldered fellow of that manly, muscular type of Englishman with a hand-grip like iron, a dark, clean-shaven face, bronzed by the Southern suns, and a long swinging stride, he was essentially a leader of men, and yet at the same time a most charming companion. We had been Etonians together, and afterwards at Oxford, but even when he had gone to Africa we had never lost sight of each other, and often on his brief sojourn at home he had been my guest at Bolton Street. To his intrepid courage the Government were indebted for much geographical knowledge, and considerable prestige in those dark, unknown forest lands beyond the Aruwimi, and to his tact with the native tribes the Colonial Office owed certain important treaties, much to the chagrin of the Belgians. He had fought and conquered savages, he had been bitten by venomous snakes, and had been shot in the back by a treacherous slave-trader, yet he still survived, ever and anon turning up in England recounting his thrilling adventures and difficulties, and laughing over them.

And with all he was one of the most modest of men, and never talked of himself before strangers.

The evening passed as the evenings at Ryhall usually passed, with music in the red drawing-room, afterwards a hand at bridge, and billiards and cigars when the ladies had retired. Yet, watching Tibbie as I did all the evening, I did not fail to notice that her spirits were not nearly so high as usual. Though she very cleverly sought to conceal it, I saw that she was nervous and anxious, and that each time Ellice addressed her she shrank from him as though she held him in abhorrence, instead of having decided to accept him as her husband.

She possessed some secret, the knowledge of which held her in fear. Of that I became convinced.

We usually retired rather late at Ryhall. With the other men I had been smoking and gossiping in one of the smaller rooms leading from the billiard-room, a panelled apartment known as Dame Grace's Room, and at two o'clock in the morning, Jack and his guests having taken their candles, I found myself alone with Eric.

I had just stretched myself yawning in my chair, and remarked that it was quite time we turned in, when my friend rose, closed the door, and returned to me, saying in a very low, mysterious voice, – "Wilfrid, I've been waiting all the evening to speak to you, only I couldn't get you alone. They've all gone at last, so we can talk."

"Well," I said, throwing away my cigar, and bending towards him eagerly. "What is it, old fellow? Something serious, I know, from your manner." For I saw that his good-humoured face was now pale and troubled.

"Yes. It is serious – very serious," he said in a hard, low voice. "It concerns Sybil – your friend."

"What about her?" I exclaimed, in quick surprise.

"I've learnt something to-day – something that utterly amazes me. I feel that it can't be true. Therefore, I'm bound to confide in you, as you are her friend as well as mine. We must act together."

"Tell me," I said anxiously, "what have you heard? Some foolish story concerning her, of course."

"Well. I know that I may rely on your secrecy, so I'll relate the whole facts. About three o'clock this afternoon I left the others to try the turnips around Charlton Wood, and while walking on the edge of the thickets that fringe the forest I thought I heard voices. I have a quick ear for sound, you know. Well, wondering who might be there, I resorted to an old trick taught me by the African natives, and leaving my gun, crept in through the undergrowth without stirring a leaf until I was close to the strangers. Then parting the branches I saw to my utter amazement, Tibbie standing there with a man – a tallish fellow in a dark suit."

"Tibbie!" I gasped. "With a man – in the wood?"

"Yes," said my friend. "And mere. I overheard some of their conversation. The fellow looked to me like some farmer's lout, yet he spoke with an air of refinement – he spoke to her, Wilfrid – as her lover!"

"Her lover!" I echoed, bewildered. Then the strange rumour I had heard had actually some foundation! The Honourable Sybil Burnet, one of the smartest women in London, was in the habit of meeting a lover in secret. I held my breath, utterly confounded.

"Well," I asked, stunned by the revelation, "and what else – what else did you see?"

"Imagine my utter surprise, my dear old chap, to witness Tibbie – our own Tibbie – allowing the fellow to kiss her! And yet she did, without repelling him. She stood and heard him to the end. He told her that he loved her and that he intended to marry her, whatever the world might say. 'You are mine, Miss Sybil – mine – mine!' he kept on repeating, while she stood, allowing him to take her in his arms, and kiss her passionately. Who the fellow is I don't know. I'm only certain that for some reason she's in deadly fear of him."

"Why?" I asked, eagerly.

"Because a lady would surely never allow herself to be caressed by such a rank outsider. Why, my dear old chap, he seemed to be a mere shabby wayfarer with down-at-heel boots, and an old dusty suit. At last, after a quarter of an hour, during which time I learned that he had loved her in secret for two years, she suddenly pushed him from her, and spoke quite seriously, saying, 'All this is entirely useless, my dear Charles. I may as well tell you the truth at once, and end this folly for ever. I am engaged to Mr Winsloe!' In an instant the fellow's affection turned to an ungovernable fury. He raved and threatened, declaring that she was his, and no one else's, and that she should never marry Winsloe. At all this, however, Tibbie only laughed defiantly, apparently treating his words as

mere empty threats, until of a sudden he took her roughly by the shoulders, and glaring into her face said, 'Sybil! You will marry me, or I will tell the world the truth! You know what I mean. I'm not to be trifled with. Decide.' Then occurred a terrible scene between them. She openly accused him of attempting to blackmail her, while he, on his part, reiterated his love, declaring that while he lived she should never marry another. I would have gone forward to protect her, but how could I? By so doing I should only have acknowledged myself as a mean eavesdropper. Therefore, overhearing that which I had no desire to hear, I turned and crept back into the field as noiselessly as I came. Then," and he lowered his voice, and speaking slowly, "then five minutes later, as I was making my way back to the party I heard a shot from the wood – a revolver shot I knew by the sound. But I went on in wonder and fear. I looked at my watch, and saw that it was just four o'clock."

"And at a little after half-past she was with me in the Long Gallery. Perhaps the fellow fired at her?" I suggested, staring at him.

"Or she at him?" Eric said in a low, very hard tone. "Recollect this ruffian is a lover, and moreover is in possession of some secret which she fears may be revealed. I saw a revolver in her hand, Wilfrid," he added hoarsely. "She threatened him with it. And she shot him! What can we do to save her?"

Scarcely had he whispered this serious question when Rainer, the under-butler, entered to inquire if we desired anything further, and on my replying in the negative, the man said, —

"There's been a terrible affair up in Charlton Wood, sir, John Harris, the keeper, on going his round to-night found a man shot dead. They sent down to the house to telephone to the doctor half-an-hour ago."

"Who's the man?" I gasped, springing up at the servant's startling declaration, while Eric stood rigid.

"Nobody knows. They haven't brought him down to the village yet."

Eric and I exchanged glances. But we were silent – and our silence was surely more expressive than words.

Chapter Three.

Describes a Man and a Mystery

"It's probably some poor beggar who's committed suicide," I remarked, in order to allay Rainer's suspicions, if he had noticed the change in our countenances when he made his startling announcement.

"He's badly-dressed, Harris says. Perhaps he's a tramp," remarked the servant.

"Perhaps so. We want nothing more, Rainer, to-night," I added.

"Very good, sir," and the man bowed and withdrew, closing the door after him.

"What shall we do?" whispered Eric, quickly, his face pale beneath the sun-tan.

I stood staring at my friend, unable to utter a word.

Was that Sybil's secret – the secret that she had been so very near revealing to me? I recollected those strange words of hers, "You would hate me!" Yes, her secret was a guilty one.

"Do?" I echoed at last in a low whisper, fearing Rainer might be listening. "Why, we must make our own inquiries before those local busybodies of police step in and bungle the affair. She must be saved – don't you agree?"

"Yes. At all costs we must save her," he cried quickly. "Let's go out and see who the fellow is."

"Not yet. Wait for half an hour or so, until they're all gone to bed. The servants' hall is all in a flutter, it seems, and the maids will be about frightened and whispering. If we are to get away unseen we must slip out of yonder window. All the doors are closed now, and the dogs are loose in the courtyard."

"You're right, old fellow. We must wait a bit," he agreed. "But what's your private opinion of the affair?"

"I have none," was my blank reply. "Until I have some proof, I suspect nobody."

"Quite so. Let's leave Tibbie entirely out of the question. Remember, not a word to anyone of what I've told you, for I'm the principal witness against her. Think, if they called me. My evidence would condemn her!"

"I regard all that you've told me, Eric, as unsaid," I responded. "Tibbie is my friend."

"But you don't think I've lied, do you?" he asked quickly, not grasping my meaning.

"Of course not. Why should you? We know each other too well to make false charges against our friends," I answered. "It is a mystery – a complete mystery."

"Absolutely. I was struck dumb when I discovered her in the arms of the fellow. I couldn't really believe my own eyes." Then, after a pause, he asked in a lower tone, "What secret of hers did he hold, I wonder?"

"Ah! what indeed."

"To me, it is very evident that she met the fellow at that lonely spot under compulsion. She may have reciprocated his affection at one time, but her manner was inert and unresponsive. She allowed him to caress her because she was in deadly fear – I'm absolutely certain of that."

"Then she didn't betray any love for him?"

"None whatever. In his reproaches, however, he reminded her of how she had once loved him and allowed him to think that he might aspire to her hand. He reproached her with cruelty and double-dealing, saying that she had betrayed him to his enemies, and that now, in return, he would reveal to the world her dark and terrible secret. This announcement electrified her. Until that moment she apparently had no idea of her peril, but instantly she saw that he held her future entirely in his hands – and – well, that's all."

I stood upon the hearthrug, my hands deep in my trouser-pockets, my back to the high, old stone overmantel that bore emblazoned the arms of the Scarcliffs, and remained silent. What could

I say? What could I think of the woman who was in her room somewhere above in that great old mansion – the woman who was, no doubt, still awake in terror of the morrow?

The stable clock clanged out half-past two, and presently Eric stepped on tip-toe to the door, opened it and looked down the great hall, dark, gloomy and mysterious, with its stands of armour, its tattered banners and its old carved furniture of centuries ago.

Across the hall he crept until lost in the darkness, and a few minutes later returned carrying two hats, and saying that all was quiet in the servants' hall, and that everybody had gone to bed.

Then we closed the door, took a wooden chair to the window, opened it, and scrambled through, dropping noiselessly down upon the grass beyond.

We closed the old window behind us lest the night-watchman should discover it open and raise an alarm, and then started off together straight across the park, in the direction of the Long Avenue that led away for a mile and a half down to the village.

The night was bright and starlit, but over the grass hung a heavy white mist, especially in the hollows.

For a long time neither of us spoke, but presently, as we sped briskly along, Eric said, —

“We must pretend that Rainer has aroused our curiosity, otherwise the villagers will think our visit strange at this hour. Our first object must be to establish the fellow's identity. At present we know his name to be Charles – and that's all.”

With this I agreed, and presently we arrived at the fine old Tudor gate-house, and passed out from the park into the broad highway that ran over Bow Hill to Chichester. Half a mile along the road we entered the quaint, peaceful little village of East Marden, with its ancient church and long row of comfortable cottages, now, however, in darkness. Five miles from the railway, it still preserved its rural traditions. There was no inn, and consequently little distress; the village retired early and rose with the sun, a pleasant little place prosperous under the proprietorship of the Scarcliffs.

Along the deserted little street we searched until we came to the constable's cottage, in the window of which a light was burning, and knocking at the door it was opened by Mr Booth, as the villagers called him, a big, round-faced officer in constabulary uniform.

“Oh! beg pardon, gentlemen!” he exclaimed, recognising us. “I thought it were Dr Richards. They've telephoned from the house to call him. He ought to be here by now.”

“What's the matter, Booth? What has happened?” I asked, stepping into his clean little parlour where his wife greeted us with a curtsy. “Rainer came to us and said that somebody had been found dead, so we came out to hear all about it.”

“Yes, sir, that's right. John Harris found him some hours ago; but I was out on my beat across at Elsted, and they 'ad to fetch me. I've been up to Charlton Wood and seen 'im, but I've left 'im there till the gov'nor comes. We've strict orders never to move a body without the superintendent sees it first.”

“But tell us all about it,” I urged. “Who's the man, and what has happened?”

“Well, John Harris was goin' 'is round as usual, when 'is dog found a man lyin' just inside the wood – stone dead. Shot in the chest. The sight, of course, gave 'im a fright, an' he comes down here quick and informs my missis. She told him to keep it dark, as we didn't want the whole village up there, an' sent him up to the house to telephone to Midhurst to the divisional surgeon. Then they came out and found me.”

“You don't recognise the dead man?” I asked with trepidation.

“No. 'E's a stranger – maybe a tramp.”

“You haven't searched him?”

“Not yet. I'm waiting for the doctor and the gov'nor. I've telephoned to him in Chichester, only 'e may be out on inspection-duty.”

“And meanwhile the body is up in the wood? Is anybody there with it?”

“No, sir. We think it better to leave it there alone, otherwise the news’ll spread and they’ll tread out whatever marks of a struggle there maybe there.” In an instant a serious thought occurred to me. Had the dead man on him any letter of Sybil’s or anything to connect her with him?

“Well,” I said a moment later in as unconcerned a tone as I could, “we’re interested to see who the poor fellow is. Therefore we’ll walk on up in the direction of the wood, and when Richards comes you’ll overtake us.”

“Very well, gentlemen,” was the constable’s reply. “But you won’t tell anyone yet, will you? And you won’t go into the wood and tread about? If there’s been murder committed, as there seems to have been, then we must find the guilty party,” he added seriously, this no doubt being the first really grave case he had ever had in all his eighteen years’ career.

“Of course not,” answered Eric. “We shall wait for you, as we don’t know where the body is.”

“Ah! I never thought o’ that,” was Booth’s reply. “All right, gentlemen, I’ll be after you as soon as the doctor comes. He’ll drive me on in his trap.” And we said good-night to Mrs Booth, a rather frail, hard-working little woman, and went once more out into the broad high road.

“We must act quickly. Come, hurry along,” I exclaimed, as soon as we were beyond the village. “We haven’t a second to spare.”

“Why?” asked Domville in some surprise.

“Didn’t you say that we must save Tibbie?” I asked. “Can’t you see her serious peril? The fellow may have on him some letter or something that may incriminate her. We must get there and search him before Booth brings the doctor. What fortune that the body has been left unattended.”

“But is it?” Eric queried. “Don’t you think that Harris has spread the news among the other keepers and one or other of them are lurking near out of curiosity? Wouldn’t it be infernally awkward for us if we were discovered rifling the dead man’s pockets?”

“We must risk everything – for Tibbie’s sake – for the sake of the family,” I declared decisively, and impelled by my words he hurried along at my side.

“You have given it as your opinion that they were once lovers,” I continued. “Therefore, if he had come there to blackmail her, what more natural than that he should carry with him something by which to impress her with his power over her? At all costs, therefore, we must try and satisfy ourselves that there is nothing to incriminate her.”

“Ah! my dear Wilfrid,” he sighed. “It is really terrible – too terrible.”

“This is not the moment to discuss the affair. We must act,” I urged, and together we got over a gate and turned into a grass field which was a shorter cut to the wood.

“This way,” my friend directed. “The spot is up at that corner,” pointing away up the hill, where the wood loomed darkly against the sky.

Truth to tell, I shared Eric’s fear that Harris or one of his sons might be lurking in the neighbourhood, yet I said nothing. My only thought was for the woman who had been my friend, my playmate, the dainty love of my early youth. She might be all that her enemies said of her, yet for her mother’s sake, for Jack’s sake, I meant – if possible – to save her.

Keeping in the shadow of the hedgerows and walls, I allowed my companion to direct my footsteps. With his long practice in those boundless forests of eternal night in Equatorial Africa, he had learnt how to creep along with scarce a sound. He motioned to me to be silent, and presently we crossed the big turnip field and entered the thicket at the point where he had entered it that afternoon.

“This will destroy my track,” he whispered. “Tread always on your toes.”

His example I followed, malting my way through the brambles and undergrowth until, of a sudden, we came out into a small open space beneath some big trees on the edge of the wood itself, and there upon the ground I saw something lying. In the darkness I could not distinguish what it was, but Eric advanced slowly, and bending, turned to me, saying in a low whisper, —

“Here it is. But how can we search him without a light? If we strike a match it can be seen by anyone coming up the hill.”

I knelt at his side and ran my hands over the cold corpse. Ah! it was a gruesome moment. My eager fingers unbuttoned his jacket that was wet and clammy with blood, and quickly I put my fingers in his inner pocket. Yes! there were papers there. Quick as thought I thrust them into my own pocket, and then in the darkness searched his clothes thoroughly. In his hip-pocket I felt a small leather wallet or card-case, and in his left-hand trousers pocket was a pen-knife, both of which I secured; while Eric, making another search of his waistcoat, discovered an inner pocket which contained some paper or other, which he handed to me.

To search a dead man in the darkness is not the easiest thing, and even though we had gone through his pockets, yet I was not satisfied.

My friend urged me to creep away and go back to meet Booth, but I hesitated. I wanted a light in order to satisfy myself thoroughly that I had overlooked nothing, and I told him so.

In a moment he threw off his jacket, and covering the prostrate figure with it, said, "Strike a match underneath. This will hide the light."

I did so, and the fickle flame from the wax vesta fell upon the hard white face, a face that in death bore a wild, desperate look that was truly horrifying.

The pockets were, however, my chief concern, and, striking match after match, I made a methodical examination, finding a screwed-up piece of paper, the receipt for a registered letter. In feeling within his vest my hand touched something hard beneath his shirt.

I felt again. Yes, there was something next his skin. Therefore I carefully opened his saturated shirt, and placing my hand within, drew out something about the size of a penny, a kind of medallion that he wore suspended around his neck by a fine gold chain.

A quick twist broke the latter, and I secured both medallion and chain.

"Make haste!" cried my companion in quick alarm. "Lights are coming up the hill! It's Richards's dog-cart with Booth. Let's fly. We must get back to the road, or they may suspect."

"A moment!" I cried. "Let me adjust his clothes," and with eager, nervous fingers I re-buttoned the dead man's clothing, and carefully rearranged the body as we had found it.

Those moments were exciting ones, for already the trap was coming on at a brisk pace, the lights shining clear along the road, and we yet had two large fields to cross before reaching the point where it was necessary to meet the doctor and constable.

Eric slipped on his coat, and we scrambled through the undergrowth by the way we had come, and then under the shadow of the wall, tore on as quickly as our legs would carry us.

Just, however, as we got out of the turnip field, my companion turned to me, and gasped, —

"Look there — to the left! There's someone over in that clump of bushes there. By Heaven! old fellow, we've been seen!"

"Are you sure?" I cried hoarsely, glancing at the same moment in the direction he had indicated.

"Certain. I saw the figure draw back as we passed. My eyes don't deceive me in the dark — I'm used to it."

"Then we're betrayed!" I said breathlessly.

"Yes. That's quite certain," was his hard response. "We've been watched — just as I feared."

Chapter Four. Is Astounding

To halt would be to reveal our visit to the wood to the village constable, therefore we sprang across a stile, skirted the grass land, keeping beneath the high hawthorn hedge, and emerging into the roadway just as the lights of the gig came around the bend.

“Halloa! doctor!” I shouted, as he approached with the constable at his side, and the groom behind.

“Who’s that?” he inquired, peering into the darkness.

“Hughes – Wilfrid Hughes,” I answered, and a moment later he pulled up, and both Eric and I greeted him.

“We can go across the fields from here,” Booth remarked. Therefore they all three descended, and leaving the groom with the horse, we allowed ourselves to be guided by the constable to the spot where the body was lying.

“I hope, gentlemen, you haven’t been waitin’ long,” said Booth, addressing us, as he lit the hurricane lamp he had brought.

“Not at all,” declared Eric, quite unconcernedly, “but we’re naturally very anxious to ascertain who the poor fellow is.”

“From what Booth says, it seems a clear case of murder,” remarked Richards, the hard-working country practitioner.

“A mystery, evidently,” said Domville. “Has no weapon been found?”

“We haven’t searched yet, sir,” the constable replied. “We’ll have to wait till daylight.”

And so, our way lit by the officer’s lantern, we went on past the dump of bushes where my friend declared that some person was in hiding. Both of us glanced across eagerly, but all was quiet – not a leaf stirred.

Who was concealed there, I wondered? I knew Eric Domville too well to doubt that his practised eye had been deceived.

I longed to go forward and search, but that was entirely out of the question. Some unknown person had witnessed our visit to the body. Our actions had been watched.

Presently, when we reached the spot, and the light shone upon the prostrate man, I was enabled to obtain my first clear sight of him.

The face, white and waxen in death, bore a hard, terrible look in the eyes, an expression that caused me to shudder. It was the look of one who shrank in awe and horror from the great Unknown. His clothes, a suit of rough, cheap dark tweed, the vest of which bore a large dark stain, showed evidence of hard wear, frayed at the elbows and cuffs, his linen was not over clean, and his boots bore traces of long tramping.

His cloth golf-cap had fallen off, and lay near, disclosing that his close-cropped dark hair was somewhat curly, while his face was clean-shaven, and around his collar was a dark blue cravat tied in a bow.

“I wonder who he is?” remarked Booth, as he bent down, and, opening his vest, disclosed the small shot-wound.

“I wonder,” I echoed, at the same time feeling in my pocket the papers and other objects which no doubt would establish his identity. I longed to return to the house and examine them.

“Shot clean through the heart!” exclaimed Richards, kneeling upon the carpet of dead leaves and making as thorough an examination as the fickle light afforded. “He must have fallen and died almost instantly.”

“Could it have been suicide?” inquired Booth.

"I think not. Of course, he might have shot himself, but from the position of the wound I think not. Besides, where is the revolver?"

We looked about, but could not discover it, and at the same time Booth constantly urged upon us not to move about lest we might destroy any footmarks that would lead to a clue.

While Booth was searching the dead man's pockets of course finding nothing, Eric noticed a light approaching up the road, and pointed it out.

"That's the gov'nor on 'is bike," declared the constable. "I left word with my missis to send 'im up 'ere. I'm glad 'e's come."

We awaited the arrival of the superintendent, a short, elderly, thick-set man in a dark suit, who spoke sharply to his officer, listened to the doctor's opinion, and then proceeded to make a methodical examination for himself.

He held the lantern to the dead man's face, and looked for some moments into his features.

"No. He's a perfect stranger to me," the officer declared. "Was there nothing in his pockets?"

"Only some money, sir – a shillin' or two," answered the village policeman.

"On tramp, no doubt," and he examined the palms of both hands, feeling them with his fingers. "Not used to hard work – clean-shaven, too – done it to disguise himself probably. No razor?"

"No, sir."

"Found the revolver?"

"No, sir."

"Not searched yet, I suppose?"

"No, sir. I waited until you came, to hear your instructions."

"Quite right. You'd better move him down to the village, and when it's light we'll search all around." Then, turning to Richards, he added, "There'll have to be an inquest, doctor. Shall we fix it for the day after to-morrow, at the Spread Eagle at Midhurst? Will that suit you?"

"Yes. I can make the post-mortem to-morrow," Richards said, and thus it was arranged.

"It's a mystery – murder without a doubt," declared the superintendent a few minutes later, while chatting with the doctor. "How long has he been dead, do you think?"

"Eight or nine hours," I should say.

"Then it was done about dusk, you think?"

"Most probably."

"He was shot from the front, you notice, not in the back. Therefore, it seems quite evident that some secret meeting took place here before it grew dark. Bear that in mind, Booth, and make every inquiry to find out whether anybody was seen going over the fields."

"His lordship and his friends were about the farms a-shootin' all day," the constable replied.

"Yes," laughed Eric, "but we didn't shoot with revolvers," at which we all three laughed.

I admired my friend for his clever sally, for if anyone actually did see him crossing the turnips there would be no suspicion aroused that he had been witness of any meeting.

The police superintendent made a cursory examination of the surroundings by aid of the lantern, but saw nothing that led him to believe that a struggle had taken place; then eager to return and examine those papers I had in my pocket, we both bade the doctor and policeman good-night, and returned across the fields and along the drift skirting the park, scaling the wall, and so reaching the house by a much shorter route than by re-passing the village.

"I wonder who was in that thicket," I said, as we walked down the hill, after leaving the scene of the tragedy.

"I saw something white, but whether it was a man's shirt-front or a woman's blouse I don't know," Eric replied. "Whoever it was may tell the police of our visit there, and we may find ourselves in a most awkward position. It wouldn't be nice to be charged with trying to defeat the ends of justice, would it?"

“No,” I said, thinking deeply, and recognising the seriousness of the situation. “But how could we have acted otherwise? If we are to save Tibbie we must accept the risk.”

“It’s terrible – terrible,” he murmured. “I wonder who the fellow is?”

“Let’s get back. Come up to my room, and we’ll have a look through what we’ve found,” I said, and then we went on in silence until we managed to reopen the smoking-room window and creep in without attracting the attention of either the dogs or the night-watchman.

Eric mixed two stiff glasses of whisky, and we drank them. I confess that my hand trembled with excitement, while before me as I had walked through the night I saw that staring terror-stricken face – the face of the man who had looked into the Unknown and had been appalled.

Together we crept up to my room, first taking off our boots, as in order to reach the wing in which I was placed we had to pass Jack’s room, and also that of old Lady Scarcliff, who was, I knew, always nervous of burglars. Besides, we had no desire that it should be known that we had been out at that hour – otherwise Sybil might suspect.

Up the Long Gallery we went, past the grim row of armed knights so ghostly in the darkness, past the loudly-ticking old clock, past the deep window-seat wherein Sybil had so nearly betrayed her secret in the sunset hour, and on into my room.

Once within we locked the door, drew the *portière* to shut out the sound of our voices, and I took from my various pockets all that we had secured from the dead man.

It was a strange collection of papers, letters and various odds and ends, rendered gruesome by the stains of a man’s life-blood upon them.

They lay upon the table in the window and I scarce dared to touch them; stolen as they had been from that silent, staring corpse.

I switched on the table-lamp, and we drew chairs eagerly forward, so excited that neither of us spoke.

The first thing I took in my hand was the small circular medallion of gold with the thin chain which I had taken from the dead man’s neck. About the size of a penny it was, smooth and polished on either side. I turned it over in wonder, and as I did so noticed that although so thin it was really a locket, one of those which is sometimes worn by ladies upon a long chain.

With trembling fingers I inserted my thumb nail into the slit and prised it open.

Upon one side a small ivory miniature of the Honourable Sybil smiled mockingly at us, and on the other was engraved an inscription.

I put it down and took up a letter folded in half without an envelope, the paper of which was crumpled and blood-stained.

I quickly scanned over what was written there, Eric looking over my shoulder meanwhile.

What I learnt staggered me. It told us the awful truth.

We turned and faced each other, looking into each other’s eyes without uttering a word.

The problem was, we saw, far more intricate and amazing than we had ever dreamed.

Yes, there, spread before us, was the dead man’s secret!

Chapter Five.

Which Puzzles both of us

Holding our breath in our eagerness, we turned over the letters and hastily scanned them through, save where the writing was obliterated by those dark stains.

They were a revelation to us both. They told a story which utterly amazed us.

Within the flat circular locket were engraved the words: "From Sybil – August 14th," but there was no year. It was a love token which the unknown had worn around his neck, a beautiful miniature signed by one of the most fashionable modern miniaturists.

The letters were, for the most part, in a woman's large, rather sprawling hand, which I at once recognised as Sybil's, and signed either by her Christian name or by her initials, "S.B."

The first we read was written on the notepaper of Hethe Hall, in Cumberland, a country house near Keswick, where she often visited. Undated, it ran: —

"I do wish, Ralph, you would be more careful. Your actions every day betray the truth, and I fear somebody may suspect. You know how carefully I am watched and how my every action is noted. Every hour I live in dread. Think what exposure would mean to me. I shall walk down to Braithwaite Station to-morrow evening about 5:30. Do not write to me, as I fear Mason may get hold of one of your letters. She is so very curious. If you are free to-morrow evening perhaps I shall meet you 'accidentally.' But I do warn you to be careful for my sake. Till to-morrow. – S."

What was meant by the "truth?" Was that ill-dressed, low-born fellow actually her secret lover? The love token showed that such was actually the case. Yet who was he?

Another note, written hurriedly upon a plain sheet of common notepaper, was as follows: —

"I don't know if I can escape them. If so, I shall try and get hold of one of Mason's dresses and hats and meet you in Serle Street, outside Lincoln's Inn. But it is very risky. Do be careful that you are not followed."

The next was upon pale green notepaper, bearing in gold the heading, "S.Y. *Regina*," with the added words, "Off the Faroe Islands: —

"I am longing to be back again in town, but it cannot be for another four or five weeks. We have decided to do the Fiords. Do not write, as your letter must go through so many hands before it reaches me. What you tell me makes me suspicious. Why should they ask you that question if there had not been some whisper? Find out. Remember I have enemies – very bitter ones. It was hazardous of you to come to Glasgow. I saw you on the quay when we sailed. But you may have been recognised. If so, think of my position. Again I do beg of you to be as cautious as I am. From me the world shall never know the truth. I can keep a secret. See if you cannot do so, for my sake."

Apparently the fellow had preserved all her letters, either because he was so deeply in love with her, or with that ulterior motive of which she had so openly accused him.

"Why did you speak to me on the stairs last night?" she asked, reproachfully, in another hastily-written note upon plain paper. "You imperil me at every moment. You may love me as fervently as you declare you do, but surely you should do nothing that may imperil my good name!"

In another, evidently of more recent date, she wrote:

"I cannot understand you. Our love has been a very foolish romance. Let us part and agree to forget it. I have been injudicious, and so have you. Let us agree to be friends, and I will, I assure you, do all I can for your interests in the future. Sometimes I think that Mason suspects. She may have seen you speak to me, or overheard you. She looks at me so very strangely sometimes, and I'm sure she watches me."

Again in another communication, which was besmirched by the dead man's blood, writing from the Hotel Ritz, in Paris, she said: —

“We are in deadly peril, both of us – but you more especially. E – knows the truth. Avoid him. He intends to betray you. I met J – in the Bois to-day, and he asked if you were in Paris. I pretended to be ignorant of your very existence, but he told me that E – had explained certain things, and he promised to keep my secret. I send you fifty pounds enclosed. Don’t acknowledge it. Burn this letter.”

The longest, written on thin blue foreign paper, was even more enigmatical. It was dated from her sister’s place up in Durham, and read: —

“You are right when you declared last night that I am very fond of Wilfrid Hughes. It is a pity, perhaps, that I did not marry him three years ago. If I had I should have been spared this awful anxiety and double life that I am now forced to lead. You say that I am giddy and heartless, thoughtless and reckless. Yes. I am all that, I admit. And yet I am only like many women who are seeking to forget. Some take morphia, others drink brandy, and I – well, I try and amuse myself as far as my remnant of a conscience will allow me. Ah! when I look back upon my quiet girlhood down at Ryhall I recollect how happy I was, how easily satisfied, how high were my ideals when I loved Wilfrid Hughes. And now? But will you not give me back my freedom? I ask, I beg, I implore of you to give me liberty – and save my life. You have always said that you loved me, therefore you surely will not continue this cruel persecution of a woman who is defenceless and powerless. I feel that your heart is too noble, and that when we meet to-morrow you will release me from my bond. Up to the present I have been able to close the lips of your enemies, yet how have you repaid me? But I do not reproach you. No. I only crave humbly at your feet.”

The last, written from Ryhall, and dated three days before, was brief but to the point: —

“If you are absolutely determined that I should see you then, I will keep your appointment. Recollect, however, that I have no fear of you. I have kept my mouth closed until to-day, and it will remain closed unless you compel me to open it. – S.”

The other papers, of which we made methodical examination, were mysterious and puzzling. Upon a sheet of ruled sermon paper was drawn in red ink a geometrical device – the plan of a house we took it to be – while another piece of paper was covered with long lists of letters, words and phrases in a masculine but almost microscopic hand, together with their cipher equivalents.

Was this the cipher used by the dead man to communicate with Sybil?

“This will assist us, no doubt,” remarked Eric, scrutinising it beneath the light. “Probably she sent him cipher messages from time to time.”

There was also a man’s visiting card, bearing the name, —

“Mr John Parham, Keymer, Sydenham Hill, S.E.” As I turned it over I remarked, “This also may tell us something. This Mr Parham is perhaps his friend.” The card-case was empty, but a couple of pawn tickets for a watch and ring, showing them to be pawned at a shop in the Fulham Road in the name of Green, completed the miscellaneous collection that I had filched from the dead man’s pockets, and showed that, at any rate, he had been in want of money, even though he had a few shillings upon him at the time of his death.

To say the least, it was a strange, gruesome collection as it lay spread upon the table. To my chagrin one of the blood-stained letters made an ugly mark upon the long hem-stitched linen toilet-cover.

Eric took up letter after letter, and with knit brows re-read them, although he vouchsafed no remark.

Who was the man? That was the one question which now occupied our minds.

“How fortunate we’ve been able to possess ourselves of these!” I remarked. “Think, if they had fallen into the hands of the police!”

“Yes,” answered my friend, “you acted boldly – more boldly than I dare act. I only hope that the person who saw us will not gossip. If he does – well, then it will be decidedly awkward.”

“If he does, then we must put the best face upon matters. He probably didn’t see us take anything from the body.”

“He may have followed and watched. Most likely.”

“We’ve more to fear from somebody having seen Sybil go to the spot this afternoon. At that hour people would be at work in the fields, and anybody crossing those turnips must have been seen half a mile off.”

“Unless they made a *détour* and came through the wood from the opposite side, as I expect she did. She would never risk discovery by going there openly.”

“But what shall we do with all this?” I asked.

“Burn the lot; that’s my advice.”

“And if we’ve been discovered. What then? It would be awkward if the police came to us for these letters and we had burnt them. No,” I declared. “Let us keep them under lock and key – at least for the present.”

“Very well, as you like. All I hope is that nobody will identify the fellow,” my friend said. “If they do, then his connection with Sybil may be known. Recollect what the letters say about the maid Mason. She suspects.”

“That’s so,” I said, seriously. “Mason must be sent to London on some pretence the first thing in the morning. She must not be allowed to see the body.”

“It seems that Sybil held some secret of the dead man’s, and yet was loyal to him throughout. I wonder what it was?”

“The fellow was an outsider, without a doubt. Sybil foolishly fell in love with him, and he sought to profit by it. He was an adventurer, most certainly. I don’t like that cipher. It’s suspicious,” I declared.

“Then you’ll keep all these things in your possession. Better seal them up and put them in your bank or somewhere safe.”

“Yes,” I said, “I’ll take them to my bank. At any rate, they’ll be put away from prying eyes there.”

“And how shall we face her?” Eric asked.

“How will she face us, that’s the question?” I said, in a low voice.

Then almost at the same moment we were both startled by hearing a low tapping upon my door. Eric and I turned and looked inquiringly at each other.

“It’s Budd, your man, I expect,” he whispered. “He must not see me. Perhaps he’s heard of the affair and come to tell you. Look, I’ll get in there,” and springing across to a big old-fashioned oak wardrobe he slipped inside and I closed the door noiselessly.

Then, quick as thought, I swept up the letters and other articles upon the table, placed them in one of the drawers, and stood awaiting a further summons.

In a moment the low tapping was repeated.

“Who’s there?” I inquired, crossing and drawing aside the heavy *portière*.

“Wilfrid!” whispered a low voice. “Can you see me? I must speak with you at once.”

I started as though I had received a blow. It was Sybil herself!

Chapter Six.

Contains a Curious Confession

I unlocked the door, and opening it, met the love of my youth standing there in the darkness.

“Wilfrid!” she gasped, in a low whisper, “I – I want to speak to you. Forgive me, but it is very urgent. Come along here – into the blue room. Come, there is no time to lose.”

Thus impelled, I followed her along the corridor to the small sitting-room at the end, where she had apparently left her candle.

By its light I saw that she was dressed in a black tailor-made gown, and that her face was white and haggard. She closed the door, and noticing that I was still dressed, said, —

“Have you only just come up to bed?”

“Yes,” was my answer. “Eric and I have been gossiping. The others went up long ago, but he began telling me some of his African yarns.”

“But everyone is in bed now?” she inquired, quickly.

“Of course,” I answered, wondering why she had come to me thus, in the middle of the night. She had changed her dinner-gown for a walking dress, but there was still the bow of blue velvet in her gold-brown hair which she had apparently forgotten to remove.

“Wilfrid!” she said, in a low, hard voice, suddenly grasping both my hands. “Although you refused to marry me you are still my friend, are you not?”

“Your friend! Of course I am,” I answered rather hoarsely. “Did I not tell you so before dinner?”

“I know you did, but – ” and she dropped her fine eyes, still holding my hands in hers. Her own hands trembled, and apparently she dared not look me full in the face.

“But what – ?” I asked. “What troubles you? Why are you dressed like this?”

“I – I have been very foolish,” she whispered. “I am, after all, a woman, and very weak. Ah! Wilfrid – if I only dare tell you the truth – if I only dare?” she gasped, and I saw how terribly agitated she was.

“Why not? Why not confide in me?” I urged, seriously. “I can keep a secret, you know.”

“No, no,” she cried. “How can I? No, I only beg and implore of you to help me, and not to misjudge me.”

“Misjudge you, why? I don’t understand,” I said, in pretence of ignorance.

“Ah! of course not. But to-morrow you will know everything, and – ” but she did not conclude her sentence.

There was a change in her countenance, and I saw that she was fainting. I drew her to a big armchair, and a second later she sank into it unconscious.

Next instant I dashed along to my room for the water-bottle, whispered to Eric what had taken place and ran back to assist my little friend.

Ten minutes later she opened her eyes again and gazed steadily at the candle. Then, finding me at her side, she whispered, —

“Yes, ah – yes, I remember. How very foolish I have been. Forgive me, Wilfrid, won’t you? I miscalculated my strength. I thought myself stronger,” and her soft hand again sought mine, and she looked into my eyes steadily, with a long, earnest gaze.

“You are in distress, Tibbie,” I said, as kindly as I could. “What is it? How can I help you?”

“You can save me,” she said in an intense, earnest voice. “You can save my life if you will.”

“If I will? Why, of course I will,” was my quick response.

“Then you will really help me?”

“Only tell me what you wish me to do and I’ll do it at once,” I replied.

“You will have no fear?”

“Fear of what?”

“Well,” she exclaimed, hesitating, “suppose you were suspected of something – that the police believed you to be guilty of a crime?”

“Guilty of a crime?” I echoed, with a forced smile. “Well, they might suspect whatever they like, so long as I was innocent.”

“Then you are really prepared to bear any suspicion if it would be for my salvation?”

“Have I not already said that I am quite ready to help you, Tibbie?”

“Ah, yes, because you do not yet realise your grave peril,” she said. “If only I dare be frank with you – if only I dare tell you the awful, bitter truth! Yet I can’t, and you must remain in ignorance. Your very ignorance will cause you to court danger, and at the same time to misjudge me.”

“I shall not misjudge you,” I assured her. “But at the present I am, as you say, entirely in the dark. What is it you want me to do?”

For a moment she was silent, apparently fearing to make the suggestion lest I should refuse. At last she looked straight into my face and said, —

“What I ask you to do is to make a great sacrifice in order to save me. I am in peril, Wilfrid, in a grave, terrible peril. The sword of fate hangs over me, and may fall at any instant. I must fly from here – I must fly to-night and hide – I – ”

She hesitated again. Her words were an admission of her guilt. She was a murderess. That unknown man that I had left lying cold and dead beneath the trees had fallen by her hand.

“Well?” I asked, rather coldly, I fear.

“I must hide. I must efface my identity, and for certain reasons – indeed to obtain greater security I must marry.”

“Marry!” I echoed. “Well, really, Sybil, I don’t understand you in the least. Why?”

“Because I can, I hope, save myself by marrying,” she went on quickly. “To-night I am going into hiding, and not a soul must know of my whereabouts. The place best of all in which to hide oneself is London, in one of the populous working districts. They would never search for me there. As the wife of an industrious working-man I should be safe. To go abroad would be useless.”

“But why should you leave so hurriedly?” I asked her.

“Ah! you will know in due course,” was her answer. “Ask me no questions now, only help me to escape.”

“How?”

“Listen, and I will tell you of the plans I have formed. To-night I have thought it all out, and have made resolve. The car is in the shed over against the kennels. I backed it in yesterday, therefore it will run down the hill along the avenue, and right out through the lodge gates without petrol and noiselessly. Once in the Chichester road, I can drive it away without awakening either the house or the Grants who keep the gate. You’ll come with me.”

“Where?”

“To London.”

“And what would people say when it was known that you and I left together in the middle of the night?”

“Oh! they’d only say it was one of Tibbie’s mad freaks. It is useful sometimes,” she added, “to have a reputation for eccentricity. It saves so many explanations.”

“Yes, that’s all very well, but it is not a judicious course in any way.”

Suddenly I recollected the woman Mason whom I saw at all costs must be got out of the way. As a servant she might get a view of the dead man out of curiosity and identify him as her mistress’s lover.

“No,” I added, after a moment’s reflection. “If you really want to escape to London go in exactly the opposite direction. Run across the New Forest to Bournemouth, for instance. Take Mason with you. Go to the Bath Hotel, and then slip away by train say up to Birmingham, and from there to London.”

“Yes, but I can’t take Mason. She must remain in ignorance. She knows far too much of my affairs already.”

“Well, I can’t go with you. It would be madness. And you cannot go alone.”

She was silent, her lips pressed together, her brows knit. Her countenance was hard and troubled, and there was a look of unmistakable terror in those wonderful eyes of hers.

“And if I act on your advice, Wilfrid, will you meet me in secret in London to-morrow or the next day?”

“Certainly. I will do all I can to help you – only accept my advice and take Mason with you. Mislead her, just as you are misleading everyone.”

“You will not think ill of me if I ask you something?” she said, seriously, looking very earnestly up into my face.

“Certainly not. You can be perfectly open and straightforward with me, surely.”

“Then I want you to do something – although I’m almost afraid to ask you.”

“And what’s that?”

“I have no one else I can trust, Wilfrid, as I trust you. You are a man of honour and I am an honest woman, even though my enemies have whispered their calumnies regarding me. You are my friend; if you were not I surely dare not ask you to help me in this,” and her voice faltered as she averted her gaze. “I want you – I want you to pretend that you are my husband.”

“Your husband,” I exclaimed, staring at her.

“Yes,” she cried quickly. “To place myself in a position of safety I must first live in a crowded part of London where I can efface my identity; and secondly, for appearances’ sake, as well as for another and much stronger motive, I must have a husband. Will you, Wilfrid, pretend to be mine?”

Her request utterly nonplussed me, and she noticed my hesitation.

“If you will only consent to go into hiding with me I can escape,” she urged, quickly. “You can easily contrive to live in Bolton Street and pose as my husband in another part of the world; while I – well, I simply disappear. There will be a loud hue and cry after me, of course, but when I’m not found, the mater and the others will simply put my disappearance down to my eccentricity. They will never connect us, for you will take good care to be seen in London leading your usual life, and indeed seriously troubled over my disappearance. They will never suspect.”

“But why must you appear to have a husband?” I asked, extremely puzzled.

“I have a reason – a strong one,” she answered, earnestly. “I have enemies, and my hand will be strengthened against them the instant they believe that I have married.”

“That may be so,” I said, dubiously. “But where do you suggest taking up your abode?”

“Camberwell would be a good quarter,” she responded. “There is a large working-class population there. We could take furnished apartments with some quiet landlady. You are a compositor on one of the morning newspapers, and are out at work all night. Sometimes, too, you have to work overtime – I think they call it – and then you are away the greater part of the day also. I don’t want you to tie yourself to me too much, you see,” she added, smiling. “We shall give out that we’ve been married a year, and by your being a compositor, your absence won’t be remarked. So you see you can live in Bolton Street just the same, and pay me a daily visit to Camberwell, just to cheer me up.”

“But surely you could never bear life in a back street, Tibbie,” I said, looking at her utterly bewildered at her suggestion. “You would have to wear print dresses, cook, and clean up your rooms.”

“And don’t you think I know how to do that?” she asked. “Just see whether I can’t act the working-man’s wife if you will only help to save me from – from the awful fate that threatens me. Say you will, Wilfrid,” she gasped, taking my hand again. “You will not desert me now, will you? Remember you are the only friend I dare go to in my present trouble. You will not refuse to be known in Camberwell as my husband – will you?”

I was silent. Was any living man ever placed in dilemma more difficult? What could I reply? That she was in real deep earnest I saw from her white, drawn countenance. The dark rings around

her eyes told their own tale. She was desperate, and she declared that by acting as she suggested I could save her.

The dead, staring, clean-shaven countenance of that man in the wood arose before me, and I held my breath, my eyes fixed upon hers.

She saw that I hesitated to compromise her and implicate myself.

Then slowly she raised my hand to her lips and kissed it, saying in a strange voice, so low that I hardly caught the words, —

“Wilfrid, I – I can tell you no more. My life is entirely in your hands. Save me, or – or I will kill myself. I dare not face the truth. Give me my life. Do whatever you will. Suspect me; hate me; spurn me as I deserve, but I crave mercy of you – I crave of you life – life!”

And releasing me she stood motionless, her hands clasped in supplication, her head bent, not daring to look me again in the face.

What could I think? What, reader, would you have thought? How would you have acted in such circumstances?

Chapter Seven.

In which I Play a Dangerous Game

Well – I agreed.

Yes – I agreed to pose as the hard-working compositor upon a daily newspaper and husband of the Honourable Sybil Burnet, the woman by whose hand the unknown man had fallen.

At first I hesitated, refusing to compromise her, yet she had fallen upon her knees imploring me to help her, and I was bound to fulfil the promise I had so injudiciously made.

There was no love between us now, she had declared. The flame had flickered and died out long ago.

“If you will only consent to act as though I were your wife, then I may be able to save myself,” she urged. “You will do so, will you not?”

“But why?” I had asked. “I cannot see how our pretended marriage can assist you?”

“Leave it all to me,” was her confident reply. “One day you will discern the reason.”

And then, with tears in her beautiful eyes, and kneeling at my feet, she begged again of me to act as she suggested and thus save her life.

So I consented. Yes – you may say that I was foolish, that I was injudicious, that I was still beneath the spell of her exquisite grace and matchless beauty. Perhaps I was: yet I tell you that at the moment so stunned was I by the tragedy, by what Eric had revealed, and by her midnight visit, that I hardly knew what I did.

“Very well, Sybil,” I said at last. “Let it be so. I will help you to escape, and I will act as though I were your husband. For your sake I will do this, although I tell you plainly that I see in it a grave and deadly peril.”

“There is a far greater peril if I remain unmarried,” she answered. “You recollect my question this afternoon. I asked whether you would not really marry me. I asked because I feared that the blow might fall, and that I should have to seek protection.”

“And the blow has fallen?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered, in a low, desperate voice. “And were it not for you I – I should go to my room now and kill myself, Wilfrid! You, however, have promised to save me. There is no time to lose. I must get away at once. You will help me to get out the car?”

“Of course. And you will take Mason? You must take her,” I added.

“Why?”

“Because it is dangerous for her to remain here. She may raise the alarm,” I said, rather lamely. “Take my advice and carry her with you down to Bournemouth.”

“Very well,” she answered, hurriedly, and raising my hand to her soft lips, kissed it before I could prevent her, and said, “Wilfrid, let me thank you. You have given me back my life. An hour ago I was in my room and made preparations to bid adieu to everything. But I thought of you – my last and only chance of salvation. Ah! you do not know – no, no – I – I can never tell you! I can only give you the thanks of a desperate and grateful woman!” And then she slipped out, promising to meet me again there with Mason in a quarter of an hour.

I crept back to my room, and when I had closed the door Eric stepped from his hiding-place.

“She intends to fly,” I explained. “She is going away on the car, and I have persuaded her to take Mason.”

“On the car? At this hour?”

In brief I explained all that had taken place between us, and he listened to me in silence till the end.

“What?” he cried. “You are actually going to make people believe that you’re her husband?”

"I'm going to make people in Camberwell believe it," I answered.

"But isn't that a very dangerous bit of business?" he queried. "Suppose any of her people knew it. What would be said?"

I only shrugged my shoulders.

"Well," he remarked at last, "please yourself, old chap, but I can't help thinking that it's very unwise. I can't see either how being married protects her in the least."

"Nor can I. Yet I've resolved to shield her, and at the same time to try and solve the mysterious affair, therefore, I'm bound to adopt her suggestions. She must get away at once, and we must get Mason out of the neighbourhood – those two facts are plain. The motor will run down the avenue without any noise, so she'll be miles away when the household awake."

"Where's she going?"

I told him, and he agreed that my suggestion had been a good one.

Leaving him in my room, I crept again down the corridor, and presently both she and Mason came noiselessly along in the dark. My little friend had on a thick box-cloth motor coat with fur collar, a motor-cap and her goggles hanging round her neck, while Mason, who often went in the car with her, had also a thick black coat, close cap and veil.

"I hope we sha'n't get a break-down," Tibbie said, with a laugh. "I really ought to take Webber with me," she added, referring to her smart chauffeur. "But how can I?"

"No," I said. "Drive yourself and risk it. I know you can change a tyre or mend a puncture as well as any man." Whereat she laughed.

"Very well," she said, "let us go," and we crossed the Long Gallery and descended the wide oak stairs, Mason carrying the candle, which she afterwards blew out.

Upon my suggestion, we made our exit by that same window through which Eric and I had passed earlier in the night. Mistress and maid scrambled through, and I assisted them down upon the grass.

Then we slipped across to where the car was, opened the door, and after Sybil had mounted into her place Mason and I pushed the fine "Mercedes" slowly out, while she steered it down the incline to the avenue.

She let it run twenty yards or so, and afterwards put on the brake to allow her maid to mount beside her. Then after I had tucked the rug round her legs, she gripped my hand tightly and meaningly, saying in a low voice, —

"Thanks so much, Mr Hughes. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," I whispered. "*Bon voyage.*"

And slowly the long powerful car glided off almost noiselessly down the incline, and was a moment later lost in the darkness of the great avenue.

I stood peering into the blackness, but in a few moments could hear no further sound. She had escaped, leaving me utterly mystified and wondering.

When, ten minutes later, I returned to Eric and described her silent departure, he said, —

"So you're going to meet her in town – eh?"

"Yes, in secret, on Thursday night. She has made an appointment. She will leave Mason in Bournemouth, and then simply disappear. By the time Mason returns here the dead man will be in his coffin, therefore she won't have any opportunity of identifying him."

"But there'll be a hue and cry after her. The police will think that something has happened to her."

"Let them think. We shall pretend to make inquiries and assist them. In the meantime, with all these letters and things in our hands, we hold the trump cards."

"If Tibbie knew that we had her letters, I wonder what she would say – how she would act?"

"She no doubt fears that they may fall into the hands of the police. That is why she is disappearing."

“Of course. And for the present she must be allowed to remain in that belief,” Eric replied. “I wonder who the man Parham is? We must inquire. On Sydenham Hill are some rather nice houses. I once knew a rather pretty girl who lived in that neighbourhood, and used to take her for evening walks up the hill to the Crystal Palace.”

“Yes,” I said. “We must discover all we can about the dead man’s friends. We must also call and see the pawnbroker in the Fulham Road. He may be able to tell us who pledged the watch and ring. Indeed, we might get them out of pawn and see whether there are any remarks or inscription that will tell us anything.”

With my suggestion he entirely agreed, and for a second time we re-read those curious letters of the woman who was now flying into hiding, and whom I had promised to meet and assist.

I had placed myself in a very difficult and dangerous position. Of that I was well aware. I hoped, however, to save her. Too well I knew that she was in desperation, that she had seriously contemplated suicide until she had resolved to make her appeal for my sympathy and help.

Yet she was under the impression that I was as yet in ignorance of this tragedy, although in her white, terrified countenance I saw guilt distinctly written.

I took counsel with Eric. He was entirely against the very dangerous part that I had now promised to play, saying, – “I can’t for the life of me see what motive she can have. To hide is all very well – to bury herself in a working-class suburb and pretend to be poor is certainly a much safer plan than endeavouring to slip across to the Continent. But why does she want you to act as her husband? Not for appearances’ sake, surely! And yet if she hadn’t a very strong motive she would not thus run the very great risk of compromising herself. She respects you, too, therefore all the stronger reason why she would never ask you to place yourself in that awkward position. No, old fellow,” he declared, seating himself upon the edge of my bed, “I can’t make it out at all.”

“Of course, it has to do with the affair of yesterday,” I remarked.

“Undoubtedly. It has some connection with it, but what it is we can’t yet discern.”

“I can only act as she suggests,” I remarked.

“I fear you can’t do anything else,” he said, after a pause. “Only you’ll have to be most careful and circumspect, for I can foresee danger ahead. Tibbie’s clever enough, but she is erratic sometimes, and one untimely word of hers may upset everything. I hardly like the idea of you posing as her husband, Wilfrid. I tell you plainly that I have some distinct premonition of evil – forgive me for saying so.”

“I hope not. I’m only consenting to it for her sake.”

“Because you are still just a little bit fond of her, old fellow. Now, confess it.”

“I’m not, Eric. I swear to you I’m not. We could never marry. We are no longer lovers.”

“I hope not,” he said in an altered tone. “But pretended love-making is always dangerous, you know.”

“Well,” I said, pacing up the old tapestried room and down again, “let’s leave love out of the question. What I intend to do is to save Tibbie, and at the same time find out the truth. You, Eric, will help me, won’t you?”

“With all my heart, my dear chap,” he said. “But – well, somehow I have had lately a very faint suspicion of one thing; and that is, I believe Ellice Winsloe is deeply in love with her. I’ve seen it in his face. If so, you and I have to reckon with him.”

“How?”

“Because as soon as she disappears he’ll commence making eager inquiries and trying to trace her. His inquiries may lead him in our direction, don’t you see. Besides, it would be awkward if he found you down at Camberwell.”

I was silent. There was a good deal of truth in what he said. Eric Domville always had a knack of looking far ahead. He was what is vulgarly known as “a far-seeing man.”

“But don’t you think that when I’m a compositor in a well-worn tweed suit and a threadbare overcoat with wages of two pounds a week I’ll be beyond the pale and safe from recognition?”

“That’s all very well, but the working-class are intelligent. They’ll easily see through a gentleman’s disguise.”

“I quite agree,” I said. “There is no more intelligent class than the working-class in London, or indeed in any of the big cities of the North. It is the working-man who is the back-bone of England, after all. The capitalist may direct and public companies may manoeuvre, but it is the skilled labourer who has made England what she is. Yes, I’m quite with you there. I shall have to exert all my tact if I’m to pass as a printer among working-men. Yet Tibbie’s idea that I should be on a morning paper and be out at work at night is an ingenious one, isn’t it?”

“Ingenious? Why, isn’t she one of the very cleverest women in England?” he asked. “I say that she is as unequalled for her ingenuity as for her beauty. Therefore, Wilfrid, have a care. I’ll help you – unknown to Tibbie, of course – but I beg of you to be careful. And now let’s turn in for an hour or so. We must be astir and alert to-morrow, for our work of fathoming the mystery must commence at once. We must be all ears and eyes. We already hold the honours in our hand, it is true; but much very difficult and dangerous work lies before us.”

“Never mind,” I said. “We must save her, Eric. We must save her at all hazards!”

Chapter Eight.

Mainly about the Stranger

When next morning the tragedy in the wood became known the whole household was agog.

It was discussed at the breakfast-table, and Scarcliff, Wydcombe, Ellice Winsloe and myself agreed to walk down to the village and ascertain the facts. Eric remained behind to drive Lady Wydcombe into Chichester as he had arranged on the previous evening.

About half-past ten we four men walked down the avenue into the village, where we found the constable with two other officers in plain clothes. Great consternation had, of course, been created by the startling news, and the whole village seemed to be gossiping at the doors, and forming wild theories concerning the death of the unfortunate unknown.

After making inquiries of the constables, and hearing details of which I, of course, was already aware, Scarcliff asked leave to view the body.

"Certainly, m'lord," was Booth's prompt reply, and we moved off together.

My great fear was that the village constable should remark upon my previous visit to him, therefore I walked with him, keeping him a considerable distance behind the others as we went up the street.

"The superintendent is not here now?" I remarked casually, in order that he should recall our meeting up in the wood while we were alone, and not before my friends.

"No, sir. The gov'nor went back to Chichester about an hour ago," was his answer, and a few minutes later we turned into a farmyard, where in a barn, the door of which was unlocked by one of the men, we saw the body lying face upwards upon a plank on trestles.

Booth drew the handkerchief from the dead face that seemed to stare at us so grimly in the semi-darkness of the barn, and from my companions escaped exclamations of surprise and horror.

"Awful!" gasped the young viscount – who was known as "The Scrambler" to his intimates – a name given to him at Eton; "I wonder who murdered him?"

"I wonder!" echoed Ellice Winsloe in a hard, hushed voice.

His strange tone attracted me, and my eyes fell upon his countenance. It had, I was amazed to see, blanched in an instant, and was as white as that of the dead man himself.

The sudden impression produced upon the others was such that they failed to notice the change in Ellice. I, however, saw it distinctly.

I was confident of one thing – that he had identified the victim.

Yet he said nothing beyond agreeing with his companions that a dastardly crime had been committed, and expressing a hope that the assassin would be arrested.

"He's a stranger," declared Scarcliff.

"Yes – an entire stranger," said Winsloe, emphatically, and at the same time he bent forward to get a better view of the lifeless countenance. Standing behind, I watched him closely.

The sight of the body had produced a remarkable change in him. His face was wild and terrified, and I saw that his lips trembled.

Nevertheless he braced himself up with a great effort, and said, —

"Then it's a complete mystery. He was found by Harris, the keeper, last night?"

"Yes, sir," answered Booth. "He'd been dead then some hours. Dr Richards says it's murder. He's goin' to make the post-mortem this afternoon."

"Has the revolver been found?" he asked.

"No, sir. We've been searching all the morning, but can find nothing."

"And what was in his pockets?" inquired Winsloe, his anxiety well disguised.

"Nothing."

“Nothing at all?” he demanded.

“Oh! a knife, a piece of pencil, a little money and a few odds and ends. But nothing of any use to us.”

“Then you can’t identify him?”

“Unfortunately we can’t, sir,” was the man’s reply.

“We hope to find out who he is, but from all appearances he’s a total stranger in these parts.”

“It’s very evident that the murderer searched the poor fellow’s pockets,” Jack said. “He was afraid lest his victim might be identified.”

“That’s what we think, m’lord,” remarked one of Booth’s companions. “The tab off the back of his jacket, which bore the maker’s name, has been cut out.”

“By the murderer?” asked Wydcombe.

“Probably so, m’lord.”

“Then whoever killed him took good care to remove every scrap of evidence which might lead to his victim’s identification,” Ellice Winsloe remarked, standing with his eyes fixed steadily upon the dead face.

“That’s what our superintendent thinks. He believes that if we establish who the poor fellow is, that we shall have no difficulty in putting our hand upon the guilty person.”

“But did no one hear the shot?” Winsloe inquired.

“Nobody. The doctor thinks the affair took place late in the afternoon,” answered Booth.

Winsloe pursed his white lips, and turned away. For an instant a haggard, fearsome look crossed his hard countenance – the look of a man haunted by a guilty secret – but a moment later, when Wydcombe turned to join him, his face changed, and he exclaimed lightly, —

“Let’s get out of this. The thing’s a complete mystery, and we must leave it to the police to puzzle it all out. Of course, there’ll be an inquest, and then we may hear something further.”

“At present the affair is a complete enigma,” Jack remarked. Then, bending again towards the dead man’s face, he added, “Do you know, Ellice, I can’t help thinking that I’ve seen him before somewhere, but where, I can’t for the life of me recollect.”

I saw that Winsloe started, and he turned again. “I don’t recognise him in the least,” he said quickly. “A face is always altered by death. He now resembles, perhaps, somebody you’ve known.”

“Ah, perhaps so,” remarked the young viscount. “Yet I certainly have a faint impression of having seen him somewhere before – or somebody very like him.”

“I hope your lordship will try and remember,” urged the village constable. “It would be of the greatest assistance to us.”

“I’ll try and think, Booth. If I recollect I’ll send for you,” he answered.

“Thank you, m’lord,” the constable replied, and as I glanced covertly at Winsloe I saw that his face had fallen.

Would Scarcliff recall who he really was?

“To identify a dead person is always most difficult,” Winsloe remarked with assumed disinterestedness. “I’ve heard of cases where half a dozen different families have laid claim to one dead body – wives, mothers, children and intimate friends. No doubt lots of people are buried from time to time under names that are not their own. Richards, of any doctor, will tell you that a countenance when drawn by death is most difficult to recognise.”

By those remarks I saw that he was trying very ingeniously to arouse doubt within Jack’s mind, in order to prevent him making any statement. His attitude increased the mystery a hundredfold.

I recollected the secret Sybil had revealed to me on the previous afternoon when we had stood together in the Long Gallery – how she had told me that she intended to marry Winsloe. What he had said now aroused my suspicions.

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