

Le Queux William

The Sign of Silence



William Le Queux
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCES A GENTLEMAN

"Then it's an entire mystery?"

"Yes, Phrida."

"But it's astounding! It really seems so utterly impossible," declared my well-beloved, amazed at what I had just related.

"I've simply stated hard facts."

"But there's been nothing about this affair in the papers."

"For certain reasons the authorities are not exactly anxious for any publicity. It is a very puzzling problem, and they do not care to own themselves baffled," I replied.

"Really, it's the most extraordinary story of London life that I've ever heard," Phrida Shand declared, leaning forward in her chair, clasping her small white hands as, with her elbows upon the *table-à-deux*, she looked at me with her wondrous dark eyes across the bowl of red tulips between us.

We were lunching together at the Berkeley, in Piccadilly, one January day last year, and had just arrived at the dessert.

"The whole thing is quite bewildering, Teddy – an utter enigma," she exclaimed in a low, rather strained voice, her pretty, pointed chin resting upon the back of her hand as she gazed upon me from beneath those long, curved lashes.

"I quite agree," was my answer. "The police are mystified, and so am I. Sir Digby Kemsley is my friend, you know."

"I remember," she said. "You once introduced me – at the opening of the Motor Show at Olympia, I believe. A very brilliant and famous man, isn't he?"

"Rather! A famous engineer. He made the new railway across the Andes, and possesses huge rubber interests in Peru. His name, both in Seina and Valparaiso, is one to conjure with," was my reply; "but –"

"But what?" queried my well-beloved.

"Well, there's one fact which greatly increases the mystery – a fact which is yet to be told."

"What's that?" she asked eagerly.

I hesitated.

"Well, I've been making inquiries this morning," I replied with some reluctance, "and I learn to my blank amazement that there is no such person as my friend."

"No such person!" she echoed, staring at me, her lips parted. Being seated in a corner, no one could overhear our conversation. "I don't follow you!"

"Well, Sir Digby died somewhere in South America about a year ago," was my quiet response.

"What? Was your friend a fraud, eh?"

"Apparently so. And yet, if he was, he must have been a man of marvellous cunning and subterfuge," I said. "He was most popular at the club, known at the Ritz and the Savoy, and other places about town."

"He struck me as a man of great refinement – a gentleman, in fact," Phrida said. "I recollect him perfectly: tall, rather thin, with a pointed, grey beard, a long, oval face, and thinnish, grey hair. A very lithe, erect man, whose polite, elegant manner was that of a diplomat, and in whose dark eyes was an expression of constant merriment and good humour. He spoke with a slight accent – Scotch, isn't it?"

"Exactly. You remember him perfectly, dear. A most excellent description," I said; "and that same description has been circulated this morning to every police office throughout the United Kingdom, as well as to the prefectures of police in all the European capitals. All the ports are being watched, as it is expected he may make his way abroad."

"But what do the authorities suspect?" asked Phrida, with a serious look.

"Ah, that's just it! They haven't yet decided what to suspect."

I looked across at her and thought, though slightly more pale than usual, she had never appeared more charming.

Sweet-faced, slim, with a soft, sibilant voice, and dainty to her finger-tips, she did not look more than nineteen, though her age was twenty-four. How shall I describe her save to say that her oval, well-defined features were perfect, her dark, arched brows gave piquancy to a countenance that was remarked wherever she went, a merry face, with a touch of impudence in her smile – the face of an essentially London girl.

Only daughter of my father's late partner, James Shand, we had been friends from childhood, and our friendship had, three years ago, blossomed into a deep and mutual affection. Born and bred in Kensington, she cared little for country life. She loved her London, its throbbing streets, its life and movement, its concerts, its bright restaurants, and, most of all, its theatres – for she was an ardent playgoer.

My father, Edward Royle, was head of the firm of well-known chemical manufacturers, Messrs. Royle and Shand, whose works were a feature of the river landscape close to Greenwich, and whose offices were in St. Mary Axe. He had died two years before, pre-deceasing his partner by a year. The business – a big one, for we were the largest chemical manufacturers in England – had been left solely in my hands. Shand's widow still lived with Phrida in Cromwell Road, drawing from it an income of seven thousand pounds yearly.

As for myself, I was a bachelor, aged thirty-two, and if golf be a vice I was greatly addicted to it. I occupied a cosy set of chambers, half-way up Albemarle Street, and am thankful to say that in consequence of my father's business acumen, my balance at my bankers was increasing annually. At the works at Greenwich nearly two thousand hands were employed, and it had always been the firm's proud boast that they laboured under the most healthy conditions possible to secure in the manufacture of chemicals.

My father, upon his deathbed, had held my hand and expressed to me his profoundest satisfaction at my engagement with the daughter of his partner, and almost with his last breath had pronounced a blessing upon our union.

Yes, I loved Phrida – loved her with all my heart and all my soul. She was mine – mine for ever.

Yet, as I sat at that little table in the white-enamelled restaurant gazing at her across the bowl of tulips, I felt a strange, a very curious misgiving, an extraordinary misty suspicion, for which I could not in the least account.

I experienced a strange intuition of doubt and vague uncertainty.

The facts we had just been discussing were, to say the least, amazing.

Only the Metropolitan Police and myself were aware of the astounding discovery which had been made that morning – a discovery of which the ever-vigilant London evening newspapers had as yet no inkling.

The affair was being carefully hushed up. In certain quarters – high official quarters, I believe – a flutter of excitement had been caused at noon, when it had become known that a mystery had occurred, one which at the outset New Scotland Yard had acknowledged itself utterly without a clue.

About the affair there was nothing usual, nothing commonplace. The murder mysteries of London always form exciting reading, for it is surely the easiest work of the practised journalist to put forward from day to day fresh clues and exciting propositions.

The present case, however, was an entirely fresh and unheard-of mystery, one such as London had never before known.

In the whole annals of Scotland Yard no case presenting such unusual features had previously been reported.

"Have you no theory as to what really occurred?" Phrida asked slowly, after a very long and pensive silence.

"None whatever, dear," I replied.

What theory could I form? Aye, what indeed?

In order that the exact truth should be made entirely plain to the reader and the mystery viewed in all its phases, it will be best for me to briefly record the main facts prior to entering upon any detail.

The following were the circumstances exactly as I knew them.

At twenty-five minutes to ten on the previous night – the night of January the sixth – I was at home in Albemarle Street, writing letters. Haines, my man, had gone out, and I was alone, when the telephone bell rang. Taking up the receiver I heard the cheery voice of Sir Digby Kemsley asking what I was doing. My prompt reply was that I was staying at home that night, whereupon his voice changed and he asked me in great earnestness to come over to his flat in Harrington Gardens, South Kensington, at eleven o'clock.

"And look here," he added in a confidential tone, "the outside door will be closed at half-past ten and the porter off duty. I'll go down just before eleven and leave the door ajar. Don't let anyone see you come in. Be extremely careful. I have reasons I'll explain afterwards."

"Right," I replied, and shut off.

His request seemed just a little curious. It struck me that he perhaps wished to consult with me over some private matter, as he had done once before. Therefore, just before eleven I hailed a taxi in Piccadilly and drove westward past Gloucester Road Station, and into the quiet, eminently select neighbourhood where my friend lived.

At eleven o'clock Harrington Gardens – that long thoroughfare of big rather gloomy houses, most of them residences of City merchants, or town houses or flats of people who have seats in the country – was as silent as the grave, and my taxi awoke its echoes until, about half way up, I stopped the man, alighted, and paid him off.

Then, after walking a couple of hundred yards, I found the door ajar and slipped into the hall unobserved.

Ascending the wide carpeted steps to the second floor, the door of the flat was opened noiselessly by the owner himself, and a few seconds later I found myself seated before a big fire in his snug sitting-room.

My friend's face was grey and entirely changed, yet his manner was still as polished, cheery, and buoyant as ever.

The flat – quite a small one, though very expensive as he had once remarked to me – was furnished throughout with elegance and taste. Upon its walls everywhere hung curios and savage arms, which he had brought from various parts of the world. The drawing-room was furnished entirely in Arab style, with cedar-wood screens, semi-circular arches, low, soft divans and silken rugs, which he had bought in Egypt, while, in contrast, the little den in which we were sitting at that moment was panelled in white with an old-rose carpet, rendering it essentially bright and modern.

The tall, grey-bearded, elegant man handed me a box of Perfectos Finos, from which we selected, and then, throwing myself into a chair, I slowly lit up.

His back was turned from me at the moment, as he leaned over the writing-table apparently gathering up some papers which he did not desire that I should see. He was facing a circular mirror on the wall, and in it I could see his countenance reflected. The expression upon his face – cold, cynical, sinister – startled me. He placed the papers in a drawer and locked it with a key upon his chain.

"Well?" I asked. "Why all this confounded mystery, Digby?"

He turned upon me quickly, his long face usually so full of merriment, grey and drawn. I saw instantly that something very serious was amiss.

"I – I want to ask your advice, Royle," he replied in a hard voice scarce above a whisper. Walking to the pretty rug of old-rose and pale green silk spread before the fire he stood upon it, facing me. "And – well, truth to tell, I don't want it to be known that you've been here to-night, old fellow."

"Why?"

"For certain private reasons – very strong reasons."

"As you wish, my dear chap," was my response, as I drew at his perfect cigar.

Then he looked me straight in the face and said: "My motive in asking you here to-night, Royle, is to beg of you to extend your valued friendship to me at a moment which is the greatest crisis of my career. The fact is, I've played the game of life falsely, and the truth must out, unless – unless you will consent to save me."

"I don't follow you," I said, staring at him. "What in heaven's name do you mean?"

"My dear boy, I'll put my cards down on the table at once," he said in a slow, deep tone. "Let's see – we've known each other for nearly a year. You have been my best friend, entirely devoted to my interests – a staunch friend, better than whom no man could ever desire. In return I've lied to you, led you to believe that I am what I am not. Why? Because – well, I suppose I'm no different to any other man – or woman for the matter of that – I have a skeleton in my cupboard – a grim skeleton, my dear Royle. One which I've always striven to hide – until to-night," he added with emotion.

"But that hardly interferes with our friendship, does it? We all of us have our private affairs, both of business and of heart," I said.

"The heart," he echoed bitterly. "Ah! yes – the heart. You, my dear boy, are a man of the world. You understand life. You are never narrow-minded – eh?" he asked, advancing a step nearer to me.

"I hope not," I said. "At any rate, I've always been your friend, ever since our first meeting on the steamer on the Lake of Garda, last February."

The eminent engineer rolled his cigar between his fingers, and calmly contemplated it in silence. Then, quite abruptly, he exclaimed:

"Royle, my present misfortune is due to a woman."

"Ah!" I sighed. "A woman! Always a woman in such cases! Well?"

"Mind you, I don't blame her in the least," he went on quickly, "I – I was hot-tempered, and I miscalculated her power. We quarrelled, and – and she, though so young, refined and pretty, has arisen to crush me."

"Anyone I know?"

"No. I think not," was his slow reply, his dark eyes gazing full into mine as he still stood astride upon the hearthrug.

Then he fidgeted uneasily, stroked his well-clipped grey beard with his strong, bronzed hand, and strode across the room and back again.

"Look here, Royle," he exclaimed at last. "You're my friend, so I may as well speak straight out. Will you help me?"

"Certainly – if I can."

"I'm in a hole – a confounded hole. I've been worried ever since I got back from Egypt just before Christmas. Only you can save me."

"Me! Why?"

"I want you to remain my friend; to still believe in me, when – well – when I've gone under," he answered brokenly, his brows contracting as he spoke.

"I don't understand you."

"Then I'll speak more plainly. To-night is the last time we shall meet. I've played the game, I tell you – and I've lost!"

"You seem horribly hipped about something to-night, my dear fellow!" I exclaimed in wonder at his strange words. In all my circle of friends no man was more level-headed than Sir Digby Kemsley.

"Yes, I'm not quite myself. Perhaps you wouldn't be, Royle, in the same circumstances." Halting, he stood erect with his hands clasped behind his back. Even then, at that moment of despair, he presented the fine figure of a man in his well-cut dinner clothes and the single ruby in his piqué shirt-front. "I want to entrust a secret to you – a great secret," he went on a few seconds later. "I tell you that to-night is the last occasion we shall ever meet, but I beg – may I implore you to judge me with leniency, to form no unjust conclusions, and when you remember me to regard my memory as that of a man who was not a rogue, but a victim of untoward circumstances."

"Really, my dear fellow," I said, "you speak in enigmas. What do you mean – you intend what?"

"That matters nothing to you, Royle," was his hoarse reply. "I merely ask for your continued friendship. I ask that you will treat my successor here in the exact manner in which you have treated me – that you will become his firm friend – and that you will perform for me one great and most important service."

"Your successor! Who will succeed you? You have no son!"

"No, I have no male relation whatever," he replied. "But we were speaking of the favour I am begging of you to perform for me. On the fourteenth of January I shall not be here, but it is highly necessary that on that evening, at eight o'clock, a secret message should be delivered into the hands of a certain lady – a message from myself. Will you do it?"

"Certainly. Are you going abroad again?"

"I – well, I can hardly tell. I may be dead by then – who knows?" And he smiled grimly.

He returned to his writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and took therefrom a letter which was carefully sealed with black wax.

"Now, listen," he said, holding the letter in his fingers; "on the night of the fourteenth, just at eight o'clock precisely, go to the Piccadilly tube station, stand at the telephone box numbered four on the Haymarket side, when a lady in black will approach you and ask news of me. In response you will give her this note. But there is a further condition: you may be watched and recognised, therefore be extremely careful that you are not followed on that day, and, above all, adopt some effective disguise. Go there dressed as a working-man, I would suggest."

"That request, Kemsley, is certainly a very queer one," I remarked. "Is she *the* lady?"

He smiled, and I took that as an affirmative.

"You say she'll be dressed in black. Lots of ladies dress in black. I might mistake her."

"Not very likely. I forgot to tell you that she will wear a small spray of mimosa."

"Ah, that shows originality," I remarked. "Mimosa is not often worn on the person."

"It will serve as a distinguishing mark." Then, after a pause, he added, handing me the letter: "There is one further request I want to make – or, at least, I want you to give me your promise, Royle. I ask you to make a solemn vow to me that if any suspicion arises within your mind, that you will believe nothing without absolute and decisive proof. I mean that you will not misjudge her."

"I certainly will not."

"Your hand upon it?"

I put forth my hand and, gripping his warmly, gave him my word of honour.

"I hope you will never regret this, Royle," he said in an earnest tone.

"We are friends," I remarked simply.

"And I trust, Royle, you will never regret the responsibility which you have accepted on my behalf," he said in a deep, hard voice – the voice of a desperate man. "Remember to treat my successor exactly as you have treated me. Be his best friend, as he will be yours. You will be astonished, amazed, mystified, no doubt, at the events which must, alas! inevitably occur. But it is not my fault, Royle, believe me," he declared with solemn emphasis. "It is, alas! my misfortune!"

CHAPTER II. THE SCENT

After giving me the letter, and receiving my assurance that it would be safely delivered, Sir Digby's spirits seemed somewhat to revive.

He chatted in his old, good-humoured style, drank a whisky and soda, and, just before one o'clock, let me out, urging me to descend the stairs noiselessly lest the hall-porter should know that he had had a visitor.

Time after time I had questioned him regarding his strange reference to his successor, but to all my queries he was entirely dumb. He had, I recollected, never been the same since his return from a flying visit to Egypt.

"The future will, no doubt, astound you, but I know, Royle, that you are a man of honour and of your word, and that you will keep your promise at all hazards," was all he would reply.

The secrecy with which I had entered and left caused me considerable curiosity. Kemsley was one of those free, bluff, open-hearted, open-handed, men. He was never secretive, never elusive. I could only account for his curious, mystifying actions by the fact that the reputation of a woman was at stake – that he was acting for her protection.

And I was to meet that woman face to face in eight days' time!

As I walked towards Gloucester Road Station – where I hoped to find a taxi – all was silence. At that hour the streets of South Kensington are as deserted as a graveyard, and as I bent towards the cutting wind from the east, I wondered who could be the mysterious woman who had broken up my dear friend's future plans. Yet he bore her no malice. Some men's temperaments are really curious.

Beneath a street-lamp I paused and looked at the superscription upon the envelope. It ran:

"For E. P. K."

The initial K! Was the lady Digby's wife? That was the suspicion which at once fell upon me, and by which I became convinced.

At half-past one o'clock I let myself into my own flat in Albemarle Street. The faithful Haines, who had been a marine wardroom servant in the navy before entering my employ, was awaiting me.

"The telephone bell rang ten minutes ago, sir," he said. "Sir Digby Kemsley wishes to speak to you."

"Very well!" I replied. "You can go to bed."

The man placed my tray with whisky and soda upon the little table near my chair, as was his habit, and, wishing me good-night, retired.

I went to the telephone, and asked for Digby's number.

After a few seconds a voice, which at first I failed to recognise, replied to mine:

"I say, Royle; I'm so sorry to disturb you, old chap, but could you possibly come back here at once?"

"What?" I asked, very surprised. "Is it so very important? Can't it wait till to-morrow?"

"No, unfortunately it can't. It's most imperative that I should see you. Something has happened. Do come!" he begged. "But don't attract attention – you understand!"

"Something happened!" I echoed. "What?"

"That woman. Come at once – do, there's a good fellow. Will you – for my sake and hers?"

The mention of the woman decided me, so I replied "All right!" and hung up the receiver.

Within half an hour I alighted in Courtfield Gardens and walked up Harrington Gardens to the door of my friend's house, which I saw was already ajar in anticipation of my arrival.

Closing the door noiselessly, in order not to attract the attention of the alert porter who lived in the basement, I crept up the carpeted stairs to the door of the flat, which I found also ajar.

Having closed the door, I slipped into the hall and made my way to the warm, cosy room I had left earlier that night.

The door was closed, and without ceremony I turned the handle.

I threw it open laughingly in order to surprise my friend, but next instant halted in amazement upon the threshold.

I stood there breathless, staring in speechless wonder, and drawing back.

"I'm really very sorry!" I exclaimed. "I thought Sir Digby was here!"

The man who had risen from his chair and bowed when I opened the door was about the same build, but, apparently, a trifle younger. He had iron-grey hair and a pointed beard, but his face was more triangular, with higher cheek-bones, and eyes more brilliant and deeper set.

His thin countenance relaxed into a pleasant smile as he replied in a calm, suave voice:

"I am Sir Digby Kemsley, and you – I believe – are Mr. Edward Royle – my friend – my very intimate friend – are you not?"

"You!" I gasped, staring at him.

And then, for several seconds I failed to articulate any further words. The imposture was so utterly barefaced.

"You are not Sir Digby Kemsley," I went on angrily at last. "What trick is this?"

"No trick whatever, my dear Royle," was the man's quiet reply as he stood upon the hearthrug in the same position in which my friend had stood an hour before. "I tell you that my name is Kemsley – Sir Digby Kemsley."

"Then you assert that this flat is yours?"

"Most certainly I do."

"Bosh! How can you expect me to believe such a transparent tale?" I cried impatiently. "Where is my friend?"

"I am your friend, my dear Royle!" he laughed.

"You're not."

"But did you not, only an hour ago, promise him to treat his successor in the same manner in which you had treated himself?" the man asked very slowly, his high, deep-set eyes fixed upon me with a crafty, almost snake-like expression, an expression that was distinctly one of evil.

"True, I did," was my quick reply. "But I never bargained for this attempted imposture."

"I tell you it is no imposture!" declared the man before me. "You will, perhaps, understand later. Have a cigar," and he took up Digby's box and handed it to me.

I declined very abruptly, and without much politeness, I fear.

I was surveying the man who, with such astounding impudence, was attempting to impose upon me a false identity. There was something curiously striking in his appearance, but what it was I could not exactly determine. His speech was soft and educated, in a slightly higher pitch than my friend's; his hands white and carefully manicured, yet, as he stood, I noted that his left shoulder was slightly higher than the other, that his dress clothes ill-fitted him in consequence; that in his shirt-front were two rare, orange-coloured gems such as I had never seen before, and, further, that when I caught him side face, it much resembled Digby's, so aquiline as to present an almost birdlike appearance.

"Look here!" I exclaimed in anger a few moments later. "Why have you called me over here? When you spoke to me your voice struck me as peculiar, but I put it down to the distortion of sound on the telephone."

"I wanted to see if you recognised my other self," he answered with a smile.

"At this late hour? Couldn't you have postponed your ghastly joke till the morning?" I asked.

"Joke!" he echoed, his face suddenly pale and serious. "This is no joke, Royle, but a very serious matter. The most serious that can occur in any man's life."

"Well, what is it? Tell me the truth."

"You shall know that later."

"Where is Sir Digby?"

"Here! I am Sir Digby, I tell you."

"I mean my friend."

"I am your friend," was the man's response, as he turned away towards the writing-table. "The friend you first met on the Lake of Garda."

"Now, why all this secrecy?" I asked. "I was first called here and warned not to show myself, and, on arrival, find you here."

"And who else did you expect to find?" he asked with a faint smile.

"I expected to find my friend."

"But I am your friend," he asserted. "You promised me only an hour ago that you would treat my successor exactly as you treated me. And," he added, "I am my own successor!"

I stood much puzzled.

There were certain features in his countenance that were much like Digby's, and certain tones in his voice that were the same. His hands seemed the same, too, and yet he was not Digby himself.

"How can I believe you if you refuse to be frank and open with me?" I asked.

"You promised me, Royle, and a good deal depends upon your promise," he replied, looking me squarely in the face. "Perhaps even your own future."

"My future!" I echoed. "What has that to do with you, pray?" I demanded angrily.

"More than you imagine," was his low response, his eyes fixed upon mine.

"Well, all I know is that you are endeavouring to make me believe that you are what you are not. Some evil purpose is, no doubt, behind it all. But such an endeavour is an insult to my intelligence," I declared.

The man laughed a low, harsh laugh and turned away.

"I demand to know where my friend is!" I cried, stepping after him across the room, and facing him again.

"My dear Royle," he replied, in that curious, high-pitched voice, yet with a calm, irritating demeanour. "Haven't I already told you I am your friend?"

"It's a lie! You are not Sir Digby!" I cried angrily. "I shall inform the police that I've found you usurping his place and name, and leave them to solve the mystery."

"Act just as you think fit, my dear old fellow," he laughed. "Perhaps the police might discover more than you yourself would care for them to know."

His words caused me to ponder. At what could he be hinting?

He saw my hesitancy, and with a sudden movement placed his face close to me, saying:

"My dear fellow look – look into my countenance, you surely can penetrate my disguise. It cannot be so very perfect, surely."

I looked, but turned from him in disgust.

"No. Stop this infernal fooling!" I cried. "I've never seen you before in my life."

He burst out laughing – laughed heartily, and with genuine amusement.

His attitude held me in surprise.

"You refuse to be my friend, Royle – but I desire to be yours, if you will allow me," he said.

"I can have no friend whom I cannot trust," I repeated.

"Naturally. But I hope you will soon learn to trust me," was his quiet retort. "I called you back to-night in order to see if you – my most intimate friend – would recognise me. But you do not. I am, therefore, safe – safe to go forth and perform a certain mission which it is imperative that I should perform."

"You are fooling me," I declared.

For a second he looked straight and unflinchingly into my eyes, then with a sudden movement he drew the left cuff of his dress shirt up to the elbow and held out his forearm for me to gaze upon.

I looked.

Then I stood dumbfounded, for half-way up the forearm, on the inside, was the cicatrice of an old knife wound which long ago, he had told me, had been made by an Indian in South America who had attempted to kill him, and whom he had shot in self-defence.

"You believe me now?" he asked, in a voice scarce above a whisper.

"Of course," I said. "Pardon me, Digby – but this change in your personality is marvellous – almost superhuman!"

"So I've been told before," he replied lightly.

"But, really, didn't you penetrate it?" he asked, resuming his normal voice.

"No. I certainly did not," I answered, and helping myself to a drink, swallowed it.

"Well?" I went on. "What does this mean?"

"At present I can't exactly tell you what I intend doing," he replied. "To-night I wanted to test you, and have done so. It's late now," he added, glancing at the clock, which showed it to be half-past two o'clock in the morning. "Come in to-morrow at ten, will you?" he asked. "I want to discuss the future with you very seriously. I have something to say which concerns your own future, and which also closely concerns a friend of yours. So come in your own interests, Royle – now don't fail, I beg of you!"

"But can't you tell me to-night," I asked.

"Not until I know something of what my own movements are to be," he replied. "I cannot know before to-morrow," he replied with a mysterious air. "So if you wish to be forewarned of an impending peril, come and see me and I will then explain. We shall, no doubt, be on closer terms to-morrow. *Au revoir*," and he took my hand warmly and then let me out.

The rather narrow, ill-lit staircase, the outer door of which had been shut for hours, was close and stuffy, but as I descended the second flight and was about to pass along the hall to the door, I distinctly heard a movement in the shadow where, on my left, the hall continued along to the door of the ground-floor flat.

I peered over the banisters, but in the darkness could distinguish nothing.

That somebody was lurking there I instantly felt assured, and next moment the truth became revealed by two facts.

The first was a light, almost imperceptible noise, the jingle of a woman's bangles, and, secondly, the faint odour of some subtle perfume, a sweet, intoxicating scent such as my nostrils had never greeted before.

For the moment I felt surprise, but as the hidden lady was apparently standing outside the ground-floor flat – perhaps awaiting admittance – I felt it to be no concern of mine, and proceeding, opened the outer door and passed outside, closing it quietly after me.

An unusually sweet perfume one can seldom forget. Even out in the keen night air that delightful odour seemed to cling to my memory – the latest creation of the Rue de la Paix, I supposed.

Well, I duly returned home to Albemarle Street once again, utterly mystified.

What did it all mean? Why had Digby adopted such a marvellous disguise? What did he mean by saying that he wished to stand my friend and safeguard me from impending evil?

Yes, it was all a mystery – but surely not so great a mystery as that which was to follow. Ah! had I but suspected the astounding truth how very differently would I have acted!

Filled with curiosity regarding Digby's strange forebodings, I alighted from a taxi in Harrington Gardens at a quarter to eleven that same morning, but on entering found the uniformed hall-porter in a great state of excitement and alarm.

"Oh, sir!" he cried breathlessly, advancing towards me. "You're a friend of Sir Digby's sir. The police are upstairs. Something extraordinary has happened."

"The police!" I gasped. "Why, what's happened?"

"Well, sir. As his man left the day before yesterday, my wife went up to Sir Digby's flat as usual this morning about eight, and put him his early cup of tea outside his door. But when she went

in again she found he had not taken it into his room. She believed him to be asleep, so not till ten o'clock did she go into the sitting-room to draw up the blinds, when, to her horror, she found a young lady, a perfect stranger, lying stretched on the floor there! She rushed down and told me, and I went up. I found that Sir Digby's bed hadn't been slept in, and that though the poor girl was unconscious, she was still breathing. So I at once called in the constable on point duty at the corner of Collingham Road, and he 'phoned to the police station."

"But the girl – is she dead?" I inquired quickly.

"I don't know, sir. You'd better go upstairs. There's an inspector, two plain-clothes men, and a doctor up there."

He took me up in the lift, and a few moments later I stood beside Digby's bed, whereon the men had laid the inanimate form of a well-dressed girl whom I judged to be about twenty-two, whose dark hair, unbound, lay in disorder upon the pillow. The face, white as marble, was handsome and clean cut, but upon it, alas! was the ashen hue of death, the pale lips slightly parted as though in a half-sarcastic smile.

The doctor was bending over her making his examination.

I looked upon her for a moment, but it was a countenance which I had never seen before. Digby had many lady friends, but I had never seen her among them. She was a perfect stranger.

Her gown was of dark blue serge, smartly made, and beneath her coat she wore a cream silk blouse with deep sailor collar open at the neck, and a soft flowing bow of turquoise blue. This, however, had been disarranged by the doctor in opening her blouse to listen to her breathing, and I saw that upon it was a small crimson stain.

Yes, she was remarkably good-looking, without a doubt.

When I announced myself as an intimate friend of Sir Digby Kemsley, the inspector at once took me into the adjoining room and began to eagerly question me.

With him I was perfectly frank; but I said nothing regarding my second visit there in the night.

My gravest concern was the whereabouts of my friend.

"This is a very curious case, Mr. Royle," declared the inspector. "The C.I.D. men have established one fact – that another woman was with the stranger here in the early hours of this morning. This hair-comb" – and he showed me a small side-comb of dark green horn – "was found close beside her on the floor. Also a couple of hair-pins, which are different to those in the dead woman's hair. There was a struggle, no doubt, and the woman got away. In the poor girl's hair are two tortoiseshell side-combs."

"But what is her injury?" I asked breathlessly.

"She's been stabbed," he replied. "Let's go back."

Together we re-entered the room, but as we did so we saw that the doctor had now left the bedside, and was speaking earnestly with the two detectives.

"Well, doctor?" asked the inspector in a low voice.

"She's quite dead – murder, without a doubt," was his reply. "The girl was struck beneath the left breast – a small punctured wound, but fatal!"

"The woman who left this hair-comb behind knows something about the affair evidently," exclaimed the inspector. "We must first discover Sir Digby Kemsley. He seems to have been here up until eleven o'clock last night. Then he mysteriously disappeared, and the stranger entered unseen, two very curious and suspicious circumstances. I wonder who the poor girl was?"

The two detectives were discussing the affair in low voices. Here was a complete and very remarkable mystery, which, from the first, the police told me they intended to keep to themselves, and not allow a syllable of it to leak out to the public through the newspapers.

A woman had been there!

Did there not exist vividly in my recollection that strange encounter in the darkness of the stairs? The jingle of the golden bangles, and the sweet odour of that delicious perfume?

But I said nothing. I intended that the police should prosecute their inquiries, find my friend, and establish the identity of the mysterious girl who had met with such an untimely end presumably at the hands of that woman who had been lurking in the darkness awaiting my departure.

Truly it was a mystery, a most remarkable problem among the many which occur each week amid the amazing labyrinth of humanity which we term London life.

Sir Digby Kemsley had disappeared. Where?

Half an hour after noon I had left Harrington Gardens utterly bewildered, and returned to Albemarle Street, and at half-past one met Phrida at the Berkeley, where, as I have already described, we lunched together.

I had revealed to her everything under seal of the secrecy placed upon me by the police – everything save that suspicion I had had in the darkness, and the suspicion the police also held – the suspicion of a woman.

Relation of the curious affair seemed to have unnerved her. She had become paler and was fidgeting with her serviette. Loving me so devotedly, she seemed to entertain vague and ridiculous fears regarding my own personal safety.

"It was very foolish and hazardous of you to have returned there at that hour, dear," she declared with sweet solicitation, as she drew on her white gloves preparatory to leaving the restaurant, for I had already paid the bill and drained my liqueur-glass.

"I don't see why," I said. "Whatever could have happened to me, when –"

My sentence remained unfinished.

I held my breath. The colour must have left my cheeks, I know.

My well-beloved had at that moment opened her handbag and taken out her wisp of lace handkerchief.

My nostrils were instantly filled with that same sweet, subtle perfume which I so vividly recollected, the identical perfume of the woman concealed in that dark passage-way!

Her bangles, two thin gold ones, jingled as she moved – that same sound which had come up to me from the blackness. I sat like a statue, staring at her amazed, aghast, like a man in a dream.

CHAPTER III. DESCRIBES THE TRYSTING-PLACE

I drove Phrida back to Cromwell Road in a taxi.

As I sat beside her, that sweet irritating perfume filled my senses, almost intoxicating me. For some time I remained silent; then, unable to longer restrain my curiosity, I exclaimed with a calm, irresponsible air, though with great difficulty of self-restraint:

"What awfully nice perfume you have, dearest! Surely it's new, isn't it? I never remember smelling it before!"

"Quite new, and rather delicious, don't you think? My cousin Arthur brought it from Paris a few days ago. I only opened the bottle last night. Mother declared it to be the sweetest she's ever smelt. It's so very strong that one single drop is sufficient."

"What do they call it?"

"Parfait d'Amour. Lauzan, in the Placé Vendôme, makes it. It's quite new, and not yet on the market, Arthur said. He got it – a sample bottle – from a friend of his in the perfume trade."

Not on the market! Those words of hers condemned her. Little did she dream that I had smelt that same sweet, subtle odour as I descended the stairs from Sir Digby's flat. She, no doubt, had recognised my silhouette in the half darkness, yet nevertheless she felt herself quite safe, knowing that I had not seen her.

Why had she been lurking there?

A black cloud of suspicion fell upon me. She kept up a desultory conversation as we went along Piccadilly in the dreary gloom of that dull January afternoon, but I only replied in monosyllables, until at length she remarked:

"Really, Teddy, you're not thinking of a word I'm saying. I suppose your mind is centred upon your friend – the man who has turned out to be an impostor."

The conclusion of that sentence and its tone showed a distinct antagonism.

It was true that the man whom I had known as Sir Digby Kemsley – the man who for years past had been so popular among a really good set in London – was according to the police an impostor.

The detective-inspector had told me so. From the flat in Harrington Gardens the men of the Criminal Investigation Department had rung up New Scotland Yard to make their report, and about noon, while I was resting at home in Albemarle Street, I was told over the telephone that my whilom friend was not the man I had believed him to be.

As I had listened to the inspector's voice, I heard him say:

"There's another complication of this affair, Mr. Royle. Your friend could not have been Sir Digby Kemsley, for that gentleman died suddenly a year ago, at Huacho, in Peru. There was some mystery about his death, it seems, for it was reported by the British Consul at Lima. Inspector Edwards, of the C.I. Department, will call upon you this afternoon. What time could you conveniently be at home?"

I named five o'clock, and that appointment I intended, at all hazards, to keep.

The big, heavily-furnished drawing-room in Cromwell Road was dark and sombre as I stood with Phrida, who, bright and happy, pulled off her gloves and declared to her mother – that charming, sedate, grey-haired, but wonderfully preserved, woman – that she had had such "a jolly lunch."

"I saw the Redmaynes there, mother," she was saying. "Mr. Redmayne has asked us to lunch with them at the Carlton next Tuesday. Can we go?"

"I think so, dear," was her mother's reply. "I'll look at my engagements."

"Oh, do let's go! Ida is coming home from her trip to the West Indies. I do want to see her so much."

Strange it was that my well-beloved, in face of that amazing mystery, preserved such an extraordinary, nay, an astounding, calm. I was thinking of the little side-comb of green horn, for I had seen her wearing a pair exactly similar!

Standing by I watched her pale sweet countenance, full of speechless wonder.

After the first moment of suspense she had found herself treading firm ground, and now, feeling herself perfectly secure, she had assumed a perfectly frank and confident attitude.

Yet the perfume still arose to my nostrils – the sweet, subtle scent which had condemned her.

I briefly related to Mrs. Shand my amazing adventures of the previous night, my eyes furtively upon Phrida's countenance the while. Strangely enough, she betrayed no guilty knowledge, but fell to discussing the mystery with ease and common-sense calm.

"What I can't really make out is how your friend could have had the audacity to pose as Sir Digby Kemsley, well knowing that the real person was alive," she remarked.

"The police have discovered that Sir Digby died in Peru last January," I said.

"While your friend was in London?"

"Certainly. My friend – I shall still call him Sir Digby, for I have known him by no other name – has not been abroad since last July, when he went on business to Moscow."

"How very extraordinary," remarked Mrs. Shand. "Your friend must surely have had some object in posing as the dead man."

"But he posed as a man who was still alive!" I exclaimed.

"Until, perhaps, he was found out," observed Phrida shrewdly. "Then he bolted."

I glanced at her quickly. Did those words betray any knowledge of the truth, I wondered.

"Apparently there was some mystery surrounding the death of Sir Digby at Huacho," I remarked. "The British Consul in Lima made a report upon it to the Foreign Office, who, in turn, handed it to Scotland Yard. I wonder what it was."

"When you know, we shall be better able to judge the matter and to form some theory," Phrida said, crossing the room and re-arranging the big bowl of daffodils in the window.

I remained about an hour, and then, amazed at the calmness of my well-beloved, I returned to my rooms.

In impatience I waited till a quarter past five, when Haines ushered in a tall, well-dressed, clean-shaven man, wearing a dark grey overcoat and white slip beneath his waistcoat, and who introduced himself as Inspector Charles Edwards.

"I've called, Mr. Royle, in order to make some further inquiries regarding this person you have known as Sir Digby Kemsley," he said when he had seated himself. "A very curious affair happened last night. I've been down to Harrington Gardens, and have had a look around there myself. Many features of the affair are unique."

"Yes," I agreed. "It is curious – very curious."

"I have a copy of your statement regarding your visit to the house during the night," said the official, who was one of the Council of Seven at the Yard, looking up at me suddenly from the cigarette he was about to light. "Have you any suspicion who killed the young lady?"

"How can I have – except that my friend – "

"Is missing – eh?"

"Exactly."

"But now, tell me all about this friend whom you knew as Sir Digby Kemsley. How did you first become acquainted with him?"

"I met him on a steamer on the Lake of Garda this last summer," was my reply. "I was staying at Riva, the little town at the north end of the lake, over the Austrian frontier, and one day took the steamer down to Gardone, in Italy. We sat next each other at lunch on board, and, owing to a chance conversation, became friends."

"What did he tell you?"

"Well, only that he was travelling for his health. He mentioned that he had been a great deal in South America, and was then over in Europe for a holiday. Indeed, on the first day we met, he did not even mention his name, and I quite forgot to ask for it. In travelling one meets so many people who are only of brief passing interest. It was not until a week later, when I found him staying in the same hotel as myself, the Cavour, in Milan, I learnt from the hall-porter that he was Sir Digby Kemsley, the great engineer. We travelled to Florence together, and stayed at the Baglioni, but one morning when I came down I found a hurried note awaiting me. From the hall-porter I learned that a gentleman had arrived in the middle of the night, and Sir Digby, after an excited controversy, left with him for London. In the note he gave me his address in Harrington Gardens, and asked me not to fail to call on my return to town."

"Curious to have a visitor in the middle of the night," remarked the detective reflectively.

"I thought so at the time, but, knowing him to be a man of wide business interests, concluded that it was someone who had brought him an urgent message," I replied. "Well, the rest is quickly told. On my return home I sought him out, with the result that we became great friends."

"You had no suspicion that he was an impostor?"

"None whatever. He seemed well known in London," I replied. "Besides, if he was not the real Sir Digby, how is it possible that he could have so completely deceived his friends! Why, he has visited the offices of Colliers, the great railway contractors in Westminster – the firm who constructed the railway in Peru. I recollect calling there with him in a taxi one day."

Edwards smiled.

"He probably did that to impress you, sir," he replied. "They may have known him as somebody else. Or he simply went in and made an inquiry. He's evidently a very clever person."

Personally, I could not see how my friend could possibly have posed as Sir Digby Kemsley if he were not, even though Edwards pointed out that the real Sir Digby had only been in London a fortnight for the past nine years.

Still, on viewing the whole situation, I confess inclination towards the belief that my friend was, notwithstanding the allegations, the real Sir Digby.

And yet those strange words of his, spoken in such confidence on the previous night, recurred to me. There was mystery somewhere – a far more obscure mystery even than what was apparent at that moment.

"Tell me what is known concerning Sir Digby's death in Peru," I asked.

"From the report furnished to us at the Yard it seems that one day last August, while the gentleman in question was riding upon a trolley on the Cerro de Pasco railway, the conveyance was accidentally overturned into a river, and he was badly injured in the spine. A friend of his, a somewhat mysterious Englishman named Cane, brought him down to the hospital at Lima, and after two months there, he becoming convalescent, was conveyed for fresh air to Huacho, on the sea. Here he lived with Cane in a small bungalow in a somewhat retired spot, until on one night in February last year something occurred – but exactly what, nobody is able to tell. Sir Digby was found by his Peruvian servant dead from snake-bite. Cane evinced the greatest distress and horror until, of a sudden, a second man-servant declared that he had heard his master cry out in terror as he lay helpless in his bed. He heard him shriek: 'You – you blackguard, Cane – take the thing away! Ah! God! You've – you've killed me!' Cane denied it, and proved that he was at a friend's house playing cards at the hour when the servant heard his master shout for help. Next day, however, he disappeared. Our Consul in Lima took up the matter, and in due course a full report of the affair was forwarded to the Yard, together with a very detailed description of the man wanted. This we sent around the world, but up to to-day without result."

"Then the man Cane was apparently responsible for the death of the invalid," I remarked.

"I think so – without a doubt."

"But who was the invalid? Was he the real Sir Digby?"

"Aye, that's the question," said Edwards, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets. For some moments we both sat staring blankly into the fire.

"Among the papers sent to us," he said very slowly at last, "was this. Read it, and tell me your opinion."

And then he took from his pocket-book and handed me a half-sheet of thin foreign notepaper, which had been closely written upon on both sides. It was apparently a sheet from a letter, for there was no beginning and no ending.

The handwriting was educated, though small and crabbed, and the ink brown and half-faded, perhaps because of its exposure to a tropical climate. It had been written by a man, without a doubt.

"That," said Edwards, "was found in a pocket-book belonging to Cane, which, in his hasty flight, he apparently forgot. According to our report the wallet was found concealed beneath the mattress of his bed, as though he feared lest anyone should read and learn what it contained. Read it, and tell me what you think."

I took the sheet of thin paper in my fingers, and, crossing the room to a brighter light, managed to decipher the writing as follows:

"... At fourteen paces from where this wall rises from the lawn stands the ever-plashing fountain. The basin is circular, while around runs a paved path, hemmed in by smoke-blackened laurels and cut off from the public way by iron railings. The water falls with pleasant cadence into a small basin set upon a base of moss-grown rockwork. Looking south one meets a vista of green grass, of never-ceasing London traffic, and one tall distant factory chimney away in the grey haze, while around the fountain are four stunted trees. On the right stretches a strip of garden, in spring green and gay with bulbs which bloom and die unnoticed by the hundreds upon hundreds of London's workers who pass and re-pass daily in their mad, reckless hurry to earn the wherewithal to live.

"Halt upon the gravel at that spot on the twenty-third of the month punctually at noon, and she will pass wearing the yellow flower. It is the only trysting-place. She has kept it religiously for one whole year without – alas! – effecting a meeting. Go there – tell her that I still live, shake her hand in greeting and assure her that I will come there as soon as ever I am given strength so to do.

"I have been at that spot once only, yet every detail of its appearance is impressed indelibly upon my memory. Alas! that I do not know its name. Search and you will assuredly find it – and you will see her. You will speak, and give her courage."

I bit my lip.

A sudden thought illuminated my mind.

The yellow flower!

Was not the mysterious woman whom I was to meet on the night of the fourteenth also to wear a yellow flower – the mimosa!

CHAPTER IV. "DEAR OLD DIG."

I told Edwards nothing of Sir Digby's curious request, of his strange confidences, or of the mysterious letter to "E. P. K.", which now reposed in a locked drawer in my writing-table.

My friend, be he impostor or not, had always treated me strictly honourably and well. Therefore, I did not intend to betray him, although he might be a fugitive hunted by the police.

Yet was he a fugitive? Did not his words to me and his marvellous disguise prior to the tragedy imply an intention to disappear?

The enigma was indeed beyond solution.

At seven o'clock my visitor, finding necessity to revisit Harrington Gardens, I eagerly accompanied him.

There is a briskness and brightness in Piccadilly at seven o'clock on a clear, cold, winter's night unequalled in any thoroughfare in the world. On the pavements and in the motor-buses are thousands of London's workers hurrying to their homes in western suburbs, mostly the female employees of the hundreds of shops and work-rooms which supply the world's fashions – for, after all, London has now ousted Paris as the centre of the feminine mode – the shops are still gaily lit, the club windows have not yet drawn their blinds, and as motors and taxis flash past eastward, one catches glimpses of pretty women in gay evening gowns, accompanied by their male escorts on pleasure bent: the restaurant, the theatre, and the supper, until the unwelcome cry – that cry which resounds at half-past twelve from end to end of Greater London, "Time, please, ladies and gentlemen. Time!" – the pharisaical decree that further harmless merriment is forbidden. How the foreigner laughs at our childish obedience to the decree of the killjoys. And well he may, especially when we know full well that while the good people of the middle class are forced to return to the dulness of their particular suburb, the people of the class above them can sneak in by back doors of unsuspected places, and indulge in drinking, gambling, and dancing till daylight. Truly the middle-class Londoner is a meek, obedient person. One day, however, he may revolt.

Piccadilly was particularly bright and gay that night, as, passing the end of St. James's Street, we sped forward in the taxi towards Brompton Road and past the Natural History Museum to Gloucester Road.

On our arrival the door of the flat was opened by a constable without a helmet. Recognising the famous inspector, he saluted.

The body of the unknown girl had been removed to the mortuary for a post-mortem examination, but nothing else had been moved, and two officers of the C.I.D. were busy making examination for finger-prints.

I allowed them to take mine for comparison, but some they found upon the mahogany table and upon the back of a chair were undoubtedly those of the victim herself.

The small glass-topped specimen-table still lay where it had been overturned, and the fragments of the two green-glass flower-vases were strewn upon the carpet with the drooping red anemones themselves.

Regarding the overturned table the two detectives held that it had separated the assassin from his victim; that the girl had been chased around it several times before her assailant had thrown it down, suddenly sprung upon her, and delivered the fatal blow, full in her chest.

"We've thoroughly examined it for finger-prints, sir," the elder of the two officers explained to my companion. "Both on the glass top and on the mahogany edge there are a number of prints of the victim herself, as well as a number made by another hand."

"A man's?" I asked.

"No; curiously enough, it seems to be a woman's," was the reply.

"A woman's!"

I thought of that sweet perfume, and of the person who had lurked in the shadow of the stairs!

"That's interesting," remarked Edwards. "They may be those of the woman who wore green combs in her hair, or else of the porter's wife."

"The owner's man-servant is away abroad on business for his master, we've found out," answered the man addressed. "So of late the porter's wife, who lives in the basement of the next house, has been in the habit of coming in every day and tidying up the room. We took her prints this morning, and have found quite a lot about the place. No," added the man emphatically, "the finger-prints on that little table yonder are not those of the porter's wife, but of another woman who's been here recently. We only find them upon the door-handle and on the edge of the writing-table, against which the woman must have leaned. We'll have them photographed to-morrow."

The men then showed us the marks in question – distinct impressions of small finger-tips, which they had rendered vivid and undeniable by the application of a finely-powdered chalk of a pale green colour.

Apparently the two experts had devoted the whole day to the search for finger-print clues, and they had established the fact that two women had been there – the victim and another.

Who was she?

The investigation of the papers in my friend's writing-table had not yet been made. Inspector Edwards had telephoned earlier in the day, stating that he would himself go through them.

Therefore, exercising every care not to obliterate the three finger-marks upon the edge of the table, the officers proceeded to break open drawer after drawer and methodically examine the contents while I looked on.

The work was exciting. At any moment we might discover something which would throw light upon the tragedy, the grim evidence of which remained in that dark, still damp stain upon the carpet – the life-blood of the unknown victim.

Already the face of the dead girl had been photographed, and would, before morning, be circulated everywhere in an endeavour to secure identification.

I had learnt from Edwards that before noon that morning, upon the notice-board outside Bow Street Police Station, there had been posted one of those pale, buff-coloured bills headed in great, bold capitals: "Body found," in which the description had been filled in by a clerkish hand, and at the bottom a statement that the corpse was lying at the Kensington Mortuary awaiting identification.

That she was a lady seemed established by her dress, her well-kept hands, innocent of manual labour, by the costly rings and bracelet she was wearing, and the fact that, in the pocket of her coat was found her purse containing eleven pounds in gold and some silver.

Sir Digby's papers promised to be extremely interesting, as we cleared the books off a side-table and sat down to carefully investigate them.

The writing-table was a pedestal one, with a centre drawer and four drawers on either side. The first drawer burst open was the top one on the left, and from it Edwards drew two bundles of letters, each secured by faded pink tape.

These bundles he handed to me, saying —

"See what you think of these, Mr. Royle!"

One after another I opened them. They were all in the same sprawly handwriting of a woman – a woman who simply signed herself "Mittie."

They were love-letters written in the long ago, many commencing "My darling," or "Dearest," and some with "Dear old Dig."

Though it seemed mean of me to peer into the closed chapter of my friend's history, I quickly found myself absorbed in them. They were the passionate outpourings of a brave but overburdened heart. Most of them were dated from hotels in the South of England and in Ireland, and were

apparently written at the end of the eighties. But as no envelopes had been preserved they gave no clue to where the addressee had been at the time.

Nearly all were on foreign notepaper, so we agreed that he must have been abroad.

As I read, it became apparent that the writer and the addressee had been deeply in love with one another, but the lady's parents had forbidden their marriage; and as, alas! in so many like cases, she had been induced to make an odious but wealthier marriage. The man's name was Francis.

"He is, alas! just the same," she wrote in one letter dated "Mount Ephraim Hotel, at Tunbridge Wells, Thursday": "We have nothing in common. He only thinks of his dividends, his stocks and shares, and his business in the City always. I am simply an ornament of his life, a woman who acts as his hostess and relieves him of much trouble in social anxieties. If father had not owed him seventeen thousand pounds he would, I feel certain, never have allowed me to marry him. But I paid my father's debt with my happiness, with my very life. And you, dear old Dig, are the only person who knows the secret of my broken heart. You will be home in London seven weeks from to-day. I will meet you at the old place at three o'clock on the first of October, for I have much – so very much – to tell you. Father knows now how I hate this dull, impossible life of mine, and how dearly I love your own kind self. I told him so to-day, and he pities me. I hope you will get this letter before you leave, but I shall watch the movements of your ship, and I shall meet you on the first of October. Till then adieu. – Ever your own Mittie."

At the old place! Where was it, I wondered? At what spot had the secret meeting been effected between the man who had returned from abroad and the woman who loved him so well, though she had been forced to become the wife of another.

That meeting had taken place more than twenty years ago. What had been its result was shown in the next letter I opened.

Written from the Queen's Hotel at Hastings on the fourth of October, the unfortunate "Mittie," who seemed to spend her life travelling on the South Coast, penned the following in a thin, uncertain hand: —

"Our meeting was a mistake, Dig, a grave mistake. We were watched by somebody in the employ of Francis. When I returned to Tunbridge Wells he taxed me with having met you, described our trysting-place – the fountain – and how we had walked and walked until, becoming too tired, we had entered that quiet little restaurant to dine. He has misjudged me horribly. The sneak who watched us must have lied to him, or he would never have spoken to me as he did – he would not have insulted me. That night I left him, and am here alone. Do not come near me, do not reply to this. It might make matters worse. Though we are parted, Dig, you know I love you and only you —*you!* Still your own Mittie."

I sat staring at that half-faded letter, taking no heed of what Edwards was saying.

The fountain! They had met at the fountain, and had been seen!

Could that spot be the same as mentioned in the mysterious letter left behind by the fugitive Cane after the sudden death of the Englishman away in far-off Peru?

Did someone, after all the lapse of years, go there on every twenty-third of the month at noon wearing a yellow flower, to wait for a person who, alas! never came?

The thought filled me with romance, even though we were at that moment investigating a very remarkable tragedy. Yet surely in no city in this world is there so much romance, so much pathos, such whole-hearted love and affection, or such deep and deadly hatred as in our great palpitating metropolis, where secret assassinations are of daily occurrence, and where the most unpardonable sin is that of being found out.

"What's that you've got hold of?" Edwards asked me, as he crossed to the table and bent over me.

I started.

Then, recovering myself – for I had no desire that he should know – replied, quite coolly:

"Oh, only a few old letters – written long ago, in the eighties."

"Ah! Ancient history, eh?"

"Yes," I replied, packing them together and retying them with the soiled, pink tape. "But have you discovered anything?"

"Well," he replied with a self-conscious smile, "I've found a letter here which rather alters my theory," and I saw that he held a piece of grey notepaper in his hand. "Here is a note addressed to him as long ago as 1900 in the name of Sir Digby Kemsley! Perhaps, after all, the man who died so mysteriously in Peru was an impostor, and the owner of this place was the real Sir Digby!"

"Exactly my own theory," I declared.

"But that fountain!" he remarked. "The fountain mentioned in the letter left behind by the man Cane. We must take immediate steps to identify it, and it must be watched on the twenty-third for the coming of the woman who wears a yellow flower. When we find her, we shall be able to discover something very interesting, Mr. Royle. Don't you agree?"

CHAPTER V. "TIME WILL PROVE."

These are truly the fevered days of journalistic enterprise the world over.

There are no smarter journalists than those of Fleet Street, and none, not even in New York, with scent more keen for sensational news. "The day's story" is the first thought in every newspaper office, and surely no story would have been a greater "scoop" for any journal than the curious facts which I have related in the foregoing pages.

But even though the gentlemen of the Press are ubiquitous, many a curious happening, and many a remarkable coroner's inquiry, often remain unreported.

And so in this case. When, on the following morning, the coroner for the borough of Kensington held his inquiry in the little court off the High Street, no reporter was present, and only half a dozen idlers were seated in the back of the gloomy room.

When the jury had taken their seats after viewing the remains, according to custom, the police inspector reported to the coroner that the body remained unidentified, though the description had been telegraphed everywhere.

"I might add, sir," went on the inspector, "that there is strong belief that the young lady may be a foreigner. Upon the tab of her coat she was wearing was the name of a costumier: 'Sartori, Via Roma.' Only the name of the street, and not the town is given. But it must be somewhere in Italy. We are in communication with the Italian police with a view to ascertaining the name of the town, and hope thus to identify the deceased."

"Very well!" said the coroner, a shrewd, middle-aged, clean-shaven man in gold pince-nez. "Let us have the evidence," and he arranged his papers with business-like exactitude.

The procedure differed in no way from that in any other coroner's court in the kingdom, the relation of dry details by matter-of-fact persons spoken slowly in order that they might be carefully taken down.

The scene was, indeed, a gloomy one, for the morning was dark, and the place was lit by electric light. The jury – twelve honest householders of Kensington – appeared from the outset eager to get back to their daily avocations. They were unaware of the curious enigma about to be presented to them.

Not until I began to give my evidence did they appear to evince any curiosity regarding the case. But presently, when I had related my midnight interview with my friend, who was now a fugitive, the foreman put to me several questions.

"You say that after your return from your visit from this man, Sir Digby Kemsley, he rang you up on the telephone?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?" inquired the foreman, a thin, white-headed man whose social standing was no doubt slightly above that of his fellow jurymen.

"He asked me to return to him at once," was my reply.

"But this appears extraordinary –"

"We are not here to criticise the evidence, sir!" interrupted the coroner sharply. "We are only here to decide how the deceased came by her death – by accident, or by violence. Have you any doubt?"

The foreman replied in the negative, and refrained from further cross-examining me.

The coroner himself, however, put one or two pointed questions. He asked me whether I believed that it had actually been Sir Digby speaking on the second occasion, when I had been rung up, to which I replied:

"At first, the voice sounded unfamiliar."

"At first! Did you recognise it afterwards?"

I paused for a few seconds, and then was compelled to admit that I had not been entirely certain.

"Voices are, of course, often distorted by the telephone," remarked the coroner. "But in this case you may have believed the voice to have been your friend's because he spoke of things which you had been discussing in private only half-an-hour before. It may have been the voice of a stranger."

"That is my own opinion, sir," I replied.

"Ah!" he ejaculated, "and I entirely agree with you, for if your friend had contemplated the crime of murder he would scarcely have telephoned to you to come back. He would be most anxious to get the longest start he could before the raising of any hue and cry."

This remark further aroused the curiosity of the hitherto apathetic jury, who sat and listened intently to the medical evidence which followed.

The result of the doctor's examination was quickly told, and not of great interest. He had been called by the police and found the young woman dying from a deep wound under the breast, which had penetrated to the heart, the result of a savage blow with some long, thin, and very sharp instrument. The girl was not dead when he first saw her, but she expired about ten minutes afterwards.

"I should think that the weapon used was a knife with a very sharp, triangular blade judging from the wound," the spruce-looking doctor explained. "The police, however, have failed to discover it."

The words of the witness held me dumbfounded.

"Have you ever met with knives with triangular blades, doctor?" inquired the coroner.

"Oh, yes!" was the reply. "One sees them in collections of mediæval arms. In ancient days they were carried almost universally in Southern Europe – the blade about nine inches long, and sometimes perforated. Along the blade, grease impregnated with mineral poison was placed, so that, on striking, some of the grease would remain in the wound. This form of knife was most deadly, and in Italy it was known as a misericordia."

I sat there listening with open mouth. Why? Because I knew where one of those curious knives had been – one with a carved handle of cracked, yellow ivory. I had often taken it up and looked at the coat of arms carved upon the ivory – the shield with the six balls of the princely house of the Medici.

"And in your opinion, doctor, the deceased came by her death from a blow from such a weapon as you describe?" the coroner was asking.

"That is my firm opinion. The wound penetrated to the heart, and death was probably almost instantaneous."

"Would she utter a cry?"

"I think she would."

"And yet no one seems to have heard any noise!" remarked the coroner. "Is that so?" he asked, turning to the police inspector.

"We have no evidence of any cry being heard," replied the officer. "I purposely asked the other tenants of the flats above and below. But they heard no unusual sound."

One of the detective-sergeants was then called; Inspector Edwards, though present, being purposely omitted. In reply to the coroner, he described the finding of the body, its examination, and the investigation which ensued.

"I need not ask you if you have any clue to the assassin," said the coroner, when he had concluded writing down the depositions. "I presume you are actively prosecuting inquiries?"

"Yes, sir," was the brief response.

"I think, gentlemen," the coroner said, turning at last to the jury, "that we can go no further with this inquiry to-day. We must leave it for the police to investigate, and if we adjourn, let us say for a fortnight, we may then, I hope, have evidence of identification before us. The case certainly presents a number of curious features, not the least being the fact that the owner of the flat has mysteriously fled."

When he is found he will, no doubt, throw some light upon the puzzling affair. I have to thank you for your attendance to-day, gentlemen," he added, addressing the dozen respectable householders, "and ask you to be present again this day fortnight – at noon."

There was evident dissatisfaction among the jury, as there is always when a coroner's inquest is ever adjourned.

It is certainly the reverse of pleasant to be compelled to keep an appointment which may mean considerable out-of-pocket expense and much personal inconvenience.

One juror, indeed, raised an objection, as he had to go to do business in Scotland. Whereupon the coroner, as he rose, expressed his regret but declared himself unable to assist him. It was, he remarked, his duty as a citizen to assist in this inquiry, and to arrive at a verdict.

After that the court rose, and every one broke up into small groups to discuss the strange affair of which the Press were at present in ignorance.

Edwards had crossed the room and was speaking to me. But I heard him not. I was thinking of that triangular-bladed weapon – the "misericordia" of the middle ages – so frequently used for stealthy knife-thrusts.

"Coming?" he asked at last. This aroused me to a sense of my surroundings, and I followed him blindly out into the afternoon shopping bustle of High Street, Kensington.

Outside the Underground Station were the flower-sellers. Some were offering that tribute which the Riviera never fails to send to us Londoners in spring – sprigs of mimosa: the yellow flower which would be worn by the mysterious "E. P. K.," the written message to whom reposed in my writing-table at home.

Personally, I am not a man of mystery, but just an ordinary London business man, differing in no way to thousands of others who are at the head of prosperous commercial concerns. London with all its garish glitter, its moods of dulness and of gaiety, its petrol-smelling streets, its farces of passing life, and its hard and bitter dramas always appealed to me. It was my home, the atmosphere in which I had been born and bred, nay, my very existence. I loved London and was ever true to the city of my birth, even though its climate might be derided, and Paris claimed as the one city in which to find the acme of comfort and enjoyment.

I had not sought mystery – far from it. It had been thrust upon me, and now, as we went along the High Street in Kensington, towards the police-station, I found myself a sudden but important factor in a stern chase – a man-hunt – such as London had seldom known, for Edwards was saying to me:

"At all hazards we must find your friend Kemsley, and you, Mr. Royle, must help us. You know him, and can identify him. There are grave suspicions against him, and these must be cleared up in view of the mysterious tragedy in Harrington Gardens."

"You surely don't expect me to denounce my friend!" I cried.

"It is not a question of denouncing him. His own actions have rendered the truth patent to every one. The girl was brutally killed, and he disappeared. Therefore he must be found," Edwards said.

"But who was it who telephoned to me, do you think?" I asked.

"Himself, perhaps. He was full of inventiveness, and he may have adopted that course hoping, when the time came, to prove an alibi. Who knows?" asked the famous inspector.

"Look here!" I said as we crossed the threshold of the police-station, "I don't believe Sir Digby was either an impostor or an assassin."

"Time will prove, Mr. Royle," he laughed with an incredulous air. "A man don't take all these precautions before disappearing unless he has a deeper motive. Your friend evidently knew of the lady's impending visit. Indeed, how could she have entered the flat had he not admitted her?"

"She might have had a key," I hazarded.

"Might – but not very likely," he said. "No, my firm conviction is that the man you know as Sir Digby Kemsley struck the fatal blow, and took the knife away with him."

I shrugged my shoulders, but did not reply.

Inside the station, we passed into the long room devoted to the officers of the Criminal Investigation Department attached to the division, and there met two sergeants who had given evidence.

I was shown the photograph of the dead unknown, calm, and even pretty, just as I had seen her lying stretched in Digby's room.

"The medical evidence was curious, Mr. Royle, wasn't it?" Edwards remarked. "That triangular knife ought not to be very difficult to trace. There surely are not many of them about."

"No," I replied faintly, for the recollection of one which I had seen only a few days prior to the tragic occurrence – the one with the arms of the Medici carved upon its hilt, arose vividly before me.

To me, alas! the awful truth was now plain.

My suspicion regarding the culprit had, by the doctor's evidence, become entirely confirmed.

I set my jaws hard in agony of mind. What was a mystery of London was to me no longer a mystery!

CHAPTER VI.

THE PIECE OF CONVICTION

The morning of the tenth of January was one of those of gloom and darkness which are, on occasions, the blots upon London's reputation.

There seemed no fog, only a heavy, threatening cloud of night fell suddenly upon the city, and at three o'clock it might have been midnight. Streets, shops, and offices were lit everywhere, and buses and taxis compelled to light up, while in the atmosphere was a sulphurous odour with a black deposit which caused the eyes to smart and the lungs to irritate.

Londoners know those periods of unpleasant darkness only too well.

I was sitting in my room in Albemarle Street, watching Haines, who was cleaning a piece of old silver I had bought at an auction on the previous day. The collecting of old silver is, I may say, my hobby, and the piece was a very fine old Italian reliquary, about ten inches in height, with the Sicilian mark of the seventeenth century.

Haines, under my tuition, had become an expert and careful cleaner of silver, and I was watching and exhorting him to exercise the greatest care, as the ornamentation was thin, and some of the scrollwork around the top extremely fragile. It had, according to the inscription at its base, contained a bone of a certain saint – a local saint of Palermo it seemed – but the relic had disappeared long ago. Yet the silver case which, for centuries, had stood upon an altar somewhere, was a really exquisite piece of the silversmith's art.

Suddenly the telephone-bell rang, and on answering it I heard Phrida's voice asking —

"I say, Teddy, is that you? Why haven't you been over since Thursday?"

I started, recollecting that I had not been to Cromwell Road since the afternoon of the inquest – three days ago.

"Dear, do forgive me," I craved. "I – I've been so horribly busy. Had to be at the works each day."

"But you might have been over in the evening," she responded in a tone of complaint. "You remember you promised to take me to the St. James's last night, and I expected you."

"Oh, dearest, I'm so sorry," I said. "But I've been awfully worried, you know. Do forgive me!"

"Yes, I know!" she answered. "Well, I'll forgive you if you'll run over now and take me to tea at the Leslies. I've ordered the car for four o'clock. Will that suit you?"

The Leslies! They were snobbish folk with whom I had but little in common. Yet what could I do but agree?

And then my well-beloved rang off.

When I got down to Cromwell Road just before four o'clock, the darkness had not lifted.

My feelings as I passed along the big, old-fashioned hall and up the thickly-carpeted stairs to the drawing-room were mixed ones of doubt, and yet of deep affection.

Ah, I loved Phrida – loved her better than my own life – and yet – ?

Fresh in my memory was the doctor's evidence that the crime in Harrington Gardens had been committed with a thin, triangular knife – a knife such as that I had often seen lying upon the old-fashioned, walnut what-not in the corner of the room I was just about to enter. I had known it lying in the same place for years.

Was it still there?

Purposely, because I felt that it could no longer be there, I had refrained from calling upon my love, and now, when I paused and turned the handle of the drawing-room door, I hardly dared to cast my eyes upon that antiquated piece of furniture.

Phrida, who was sitting with her hat and coat already on, jumped up gaily to meet me.

"Oh, you really are prompt, Teddy!" she cried with a flush of pleasure.

Then, as I bent over her mother's hand, the latter said —

"You're quite a stranger, Mr. Royle. I expect you have been very upset over the curious disappearance of your friend. We've searched the papers every day, but could find nothing whatever about it."

Phrida had turned towards the fire, her pretty head bent as she buttoned her glove.

"No," I replied. "Up to the present the newspapers are in complete ignorance of the affair. But no doubt they'll learn all about it before long."

Then, crossing the room to pick up a magazine lying upon a chair, I halted against the old walnut what-not.

Yes, the mediæval poignard was still lying there, just as I had always seen it!

Had it been used, and afterwards replaced?

I scarcely dared to glance at it, lest I should betray any unusual interest. I felt that Phrida's eyes were watching me, that she suspected my knowledge.

I took up the magazine idly, glanced at it, and, replacing it, returned to her side.

"Well," she asked, "are you ready?"

And then together we descended to the car.

All the way up to Abbey Road she hardly spoke. She seemed unusually pale and haggard. I asked her what was the matter, but she only replied in a faint, unnatural voice —

"Matter? Why nothing — nothing, I assure you, Teddy!"

I did not reply. I gazed upon the pretty, pale-faced figure at my side in wonder and yet in fear. I loved her — ah! I loved her well and truly, with all my soul. Yet was it possible that by means of that knife lying there so openly in that West-End drawing-room a woman's life had been treacherously taken.

Had my friend Digby, the fugitive, actually committed the crime?

When I put the whole matter clearly and with common-sense before myself, I was bound to admit that I had a strong belief of his innocence.

What would those finger-prints reveal?

The thought held me breathless. Yes, to satisfy myself I would surreptitiously secure finger-prints of my well-beloved and then in secret compare them with those found in Sir Digby's rooms.

But how? I was reflecting as the car passed by Apsley House and into the Park on its way to St. John's Wood.

Was I acting honestly? I doubted her, I quite admit. Yet I felt that if I took some object — a glass, or something with a polished surface — that she had touched, and submitted it to examination, I would be acting as a sneak.

The idea was repugnant to me. Yet with that horrible suspicion obsessing me I felt that I must do something in order to satisfy myself.

What inane small talk I uttered in the Leslies' big, over-furnished drawing-room I know not. All I remember is that I sat with some insipid girl whose hair was flaxen and as colourless as her mind, sipping my tea while I listened to her silly chatter about a Cook's tour she had just taken through Holland and Belgium. The estimable Cook is, alas! responsible for much tea-table chatter among the fair sex.

Our hostess was an obese, flashily-dressed, dogmatic lady, the wife of the chairman of a big drapery concern who, having married her eldest daughter to a purchased knighthood, fondly believed herself to be in society — thanks to the "paid paragraphs" in the social columns of certain morning newspapers. It is really wonderful what half-guineas will do towards social advancement in these days! For a guinea one's presence can be recorded at a dinner, or an at home, or one's departure from town can be notified to the world in general in a paragraph all to one's self — a paragraph which rubs shoulders with those concerning the highest in the land. The snobbery of the "social column" would

really be amusing were it not so painfully apparent. A good press-agent will, for a fee, give one as much publicity and newspaper popularity as that enjoyed by a duke, and most amazing is it that such paragraphs are swallowed with keen avidity by Suburbia.

The Leslies were an average specimen of the upper middle-class, who were struggling frantically to get into a good set. The old man was bald, pompous, and always wore gold pince-nez and a fancy waistcoat. He carried his shop manners into his drawing-room, retaining his habit of rubbing his hands in true shop-walker style when he wished to be polite to his guests.

His wife was a loud-tongued and altogether impossible person, who, it was said, had once served behind the counter in a small shop in Cardiff, but who now regarded the poor workers in her husband's huge emporium as mere money-making machines.

By dint of careful cultivation at bazaars and such-like charitable functions she had scraped acquaintance with a few women of title, to whom she referred in conversation as "dear Lady So and So, who said to me the other day," or "as my friend Lady Violet always says."

She had buttonholed me at last, though I had endeavoured to escape her, and was standing before me like a pouter-pigeon pluming herself and endeavouring to be humorous at the expense of a very modest little married woman who had been her guest that afternoon and had just left after shaking my hand.

Women of Mrs. Leslie's stamp are perhaps the most evil-tongued of all. They rise from obscurity, and finding wealth at their command, imagine that they can command obeisance and popularity. Woe betide other women who arouse their jealousy, for they will scandalise and blight the reputation of the purest of their sex in the suburban belief that the invention of scandal is the hallmark of smartness.

At last I got rid of her, thanks to the arrival of an elegant young man, the younger son of a well-known peer, to whom, of course, she was at once all smiles, and, presently, I found myself out in the hall with Phrida. I breathed more freely when at last I passed into the keen air and entered the car.

"Those people are impossible, dearest," I blurted out when the car had moved away from the door. "They are the most vulgar pair I know."

"I quite agree," replied my well-beloved, pulling the fur rug over her knees. "But they are old friends of mother's, so I'm compelled to go and see them sometimes."

"Ah!" I sighed. "I suppose the old draper will buy a knighthood at this year's sale for the King's Birthday, and then his fat wife will have a tin handle to her name."

"Really, Teddy, you're simply awful," replied my companion. "If they heard you I wonder what they would say?"

"I don't care," I replied frankly. "I only speak the truth. The Government sell their titles to anybody who cares to buy. Ah! I fear that few men who really deserve honour ever get it in these days. No man can become great unless he has the influence of money to back him. The biggest swindler who ever walked up Threadneedle Street can buy a peerage, always providing he is married and has no son. As old Leslie buys his calicoes, ribbons and women's frills, so he'll buy his title. He hasn't a son, so perhaps he'll fancy a peerage and become the Lord Bargain of Sale."

Phrida laughed heartily at my biting sarcasm.

Truth to tell, though I was uttering bitter sentiments, my thoughts were running in a very different direction. I was wondering how I could best obtain the finger-prints of the woman who held my future so irrevocably in her hands.

I had become determined to satisfy myself of my love's innocence – or – can I write the words? – of her guilt!

And as I sat there beside her, my nostrils again became filled by that sweet subtle perfume – the perfume of tragedy.

CHAPTER VII. FATAL FINGERS

Two days passed.

Those finger-prints – impressions left by a woman – upon the glass-topped specimen table in Sir Digby's room and on the door handle, were puzzling the police as they puzzled me. They had already been proved not to be those of the porter's wife, the lines being lighter and more refined.

According to Edwards, after the finger-prints had been photographed, search had been made in the archives at Scotland Yard, but no record could be found that they were those of any person previously convicted.

Were they imprints of the hand of my well-beloved?

I held my breath each time that black and terrible suspicion filled my mind. I tried to put them aside, but, like a nightmare, they would recur to me hourly until I felt impelled to endeavour to satisfy myself as to her guilt or her innocence.

I loved her. Yes, passionately and truly. Yet, somehow, I could not prevent this ever-recurring suspicion to fill my mind. There were so many small points to be elucidated – the jingle of the golden bangles, and especially the perfume, which each time I entered her presence recalled to me all the strange and unaccountable happenings of that fatal night.

Again, who was the poor, unidentified victim – the pale-faced, pretty young woman who had visited Digby clandestinely, and gone to her death?

Up to the present the police notices circulated throughout the country had failed to establish who she was. Yet, if she were a foreigner, as seemed so likely, identification might be extremely difficult; indeed, she might ever remain a mystery.

It was nearly ten o'clock at night when I called at Cromwell Road, for I had excused myself for not coming earlier, having an object in view.

I found Phrida in the library, sweet and attractive in a pale blue gown cut slightly *décolletée*. She and her mother had been out to dinner somewhere in Holland Park, and had only just returned.

Mrs. Shand drew an armchair for me to the fire, and we all three sat down to chat in the cosiness of the sombre little book-lined den. Bain, the old butler, who had known me almost since childhood, placed the tantalus, a syphon and glasses near my elbow, and at Phrida's invitation I poured myself out a drink and lit a cigarette.

"Come," I said, "you will have your usual lemonade"; and at my suggestion her mother ordered Bain to bring a syphon of that harmless beverage.

My love reached forward for one of the glasses, whereupon I took one and, with a word of apology, declared that it was not quite clean.

"Not clean!" exclaimed Mrs. Shand quickly.

"There are a few smears upon it," I said, and adding "Excuse my handkerchief. It is quite clean," I took the silk handkerchief I carried with me purposely, and polished it with the air of a professional waiter.

Both Phrida and her mother laughed.

"Really, Mr. Royle, you are full of eccentricities," declared Mrs. Shand. "You always remind me of your poor father. He was most particular."

"One cannot be too careful, or guard sufficiently against germs, you know," I said, handling the clean glass carefully and pouring out the lemonade from the syphon.

Phrida took the glass from my hand, and laughing happily across its edge, drank. Her fingers were leaving tell-tale impressions upon its surface. And yet she was unconscious of my duplicity.

Ah! yes, I hated myself for my double dealing. And yet so filled was I now by dark and breathless suspicion, that I found myself quite unable to resist an opportunity of establishing proof.

I watched her as she, in all innocence, leaned back in the big saddle-bag chair holding her glass in her hand and now and then contemplating it. The impressions – impressions which could not lie – would be the means of exonerating her – or of condemning her.

Those golden bangles upon her slim white wrist and that irritating perfume held me entranced. What did she know concerning that strange tragedy in Harrington Gardens. What, indeed, was the secret?

My chief difficulty was to remain apparently indifferent. But to do so was indeed a task. I loved her, aye, with all my strength, and all my soul. Yet the black cloud which had fallen upon her was one of impenetrable mystery, and as I sat gazing upon her through the haze of my cigarette smoke, I fell to wondering, just as I had wondered during all those hours which had elapsed since I had scented that first whiff of Parfait d'Amour, with which her chiffons seemed impregnated.

At last she put down her empty glass upon the bookshelf near her. Several books had been removed, leaving a vacant space.

Mrs. Shand had already risen and bade me good-night; therefore, we were alone. So I rose from my chair and, bending over her, kissed her fondly upon the brow.

No. I would believe her innocent. That white hand – the soft little hand I held in mine could never have taken a woman's life. I refused to believe it, and yet!

Did she know more of Sir Digby Kemsley than she had admitted? Why had she gone to his flat at that hour, lurking upon the stairs until he should be alone, and, no doubt, in ignorance that I was his visitor?

As I bent over her, stroking her soft hair with my hand, I tried to conjure up the scene which had taken place in Sir Digby's room – the tragedy which had caused my friend to flee and hide himself. Surely, something of a very terrible nature must have happened, or my friend – impostor or not – would have remained, faced the music, and told the truth.

I knew Digby better than most men. The police had declared him to be an impostor; nevertheless, I still believed in him, even though he was now a fugitive. Edwards had laughed at my faith in the man who was my friend, but I felt within me a strong conviction that he was not so black as pigheaded officialdom had painted him.

The Council of Seven at Scotland Yard might be a clever combination of expert brains, but they were not infallible, as had been proved so many times in the recent annals of London crime.

Phrida had not referred to the tragedy, and I had not therefore mentioned it.

My sole object at the moment was to obtain possession of the empty glass and carry it with me from the house.

But how could I effect this without arousing her suspicion?

She had risen and stood with her back to the blazing fire, her pretty lips parted in a sweet smile. We were discussing a play at which she had been on the previous evening, a comedy that had taken the town by storm.

Her golden bangles jingled as she moved – that same light metallic sound I had heard in the darkness of the staircase at Harrington Gardens. My eager fingers itched to obtain possession of that glass which stood so tantalisingly within a couple of feet of my hand. By its means I could establish the truth.

"Well, Teddy," my beloved said at last, as she glanced at the chiming clock upon the mantelshelf. "It's past eleven, so I suppose I must go to bed. Mallock is always in a bad temper if I keep her up after eleven."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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