

Le Queux William

The Pauper of Park Lane



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Содержание

Chapter One.	4
Chapter Two.	13
Chapter Three.	22
Chapter Four.	31
Chapter Five.	40
Chapter Six.	48
Chapter Seven.	57
Chapter Eight.	66
Chapter Nine.	74
Chapter Ten.	82
Chapter Eleven.	91
Chapter Twelve.	100
Chapter Thirteen.	109
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	117

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Chapter One.

Introduces a Man and a Mystery

“There’s some mystery about that girl – I’m certain of it.”

“What makes you suspect that?”

“Well, first, she’s evidently a lady – the daughter of a man who has come down in the world most probably: and secondly – ”

“Ah! You mean the secret lover – the man who was here yesterday and bought a twenty-guinea evening gown of her to send to his sister – eh?” exclaimed Mr Warner, “buyer” of the costume department of the great drapery house of Cunnington’s, in Oxford Street, that huge store which, as everybody knows, competes with Whiteley’s and Harrod’s for the premier place of the middle-class trade in London.

“Yes,” laughed Miss Thomas, the rather stout middle-aged woman who was head saleswoman of the department, as she stood in the small, glass-partitioned office of the buyer, a pleasant-faced man of forty-five who was an expert in ladies’ costumes, and twice yearly bought his stock personally in Paris and in Berlin. “Yes. She’s a really nice girl, but I can’t quite make

her out, although she's been here for over a year now."

"And the lover?" asked the buyer, with a glance across the long square room where autumn costumes of every description were displayed upon stands, or hanging by the hundred in long rows, while ranged round the walls were many expensive evening-dresses exhibited in glass cases. It was afternoon, and the place was full of customers, the assistants in their neat black holding ready-made skirts to their sides to try the effect, or conducting the prospective purchaser to the fitting-rooms. And yet they were not what Mr Warner termed "busy."

"The man, too, is a mystery, like Miss Rolfe. Nobody knows his name. He comes in sometimes, goes up to her, and asks to be served with a skirt or something, and has it sent to Mr Evans at some chambers in Dover Street. The name is, of course, not the right one," said the head assistant. "But Miss Rolfe knows it, of course?"

"Probably she does."

"And she meets him after business hours?"

"I think so. But she keeps herself very much to herself, and is always at home early."

Mr Warner glanced across at the tall, fair-haired, handsome girl, whose figure showed to such advantage in her black satin gown. At that moment she was displaying a cheap tweed skirt to two middle-aged women. Her face, as he caught its profile, was very soft and refined, the contour of her cheeks perfect, and the stray wisp of hair across the brow gave a softness to

her countenance that was charming. Many a stage girl whose photograph was displayed in the shop-windows was not half so beautiful as the demure, hard-working shop-assistant, Marion Rolfe.

The air of mystery surrounding her, Mr Warner found interesting, and the love-romance now in progress he intended to watch. Towards his assistants, he was always lenient. Unlike some "buyers," he was never hard, and never bullied them. He believed that by treating them with kindness and with the courtesy every man should show towards a woman he obtained the best of their business abilities, as no doubt he did. "Warner of the Costumes" was known through the whole "house" as one of the most considerate of men, and one of the most trusted of old Mr Cunningham's advisers. Those in his department were envied by all the other seven hundred odd assistants in the employment of the great firm.

While Mr Warner and Miss Thomas were speaking, a smart-looking, fair-haired, fair-moustached young man of about twenty-five, in frock coat and silk hat, entered, and walking up to the little office, greeted the buyer saying —

"Mr Warner, I'm sorry to worry you, but may I speak to my sister for a moment on some important family business? I won't keep her but a few moments, for I see she's busy."

"Why, certainly, Mr Rolfe," was the good-humoured reply, as Miss Thomas went away to serve a customer. "It's against our rules, as you know, but for my own part I can never see why a

young lady need be debarred from speaking to her own brother.”

“You’re always very good, Mr Warner,” responded the young man, “and I’d like to thank you for many little kindnesses you’ve shown to Marion.”

“Oh, nothing, nothing, my dear Mr Rolfe,” Warner said. “Your sister is an excellent business woman – one of the best I have, I may tell you. But look! She’s disengaged now. Go over to her.” And he watched the young man crossing the department.

Marion, surprised when her brother stood before her, immediately asked whether he had received Mr Warner’s permission.

“Of course I have,” was his quick reply in rather an excited manner, she thought. “I just ran up to tell you that I have to go abroad suddenly to-night, and to say good-bye. Old Sam Statham is sending me out to Servia. He only told me at one o’clock that I must go, and I’ve been buying some things necessary.”

“To Servia!” exclaimed the girl, amazed that her brother, to whom she was devoted, was to go so far from her.

“Yes. We have some mining interests and some other things out there, and old Sam suddenly decided to send me out to make certain inquiries. I shall be away a month or two, I daresay, as I have to go to see a new mine in the course of preparation down on the banks of the Danube somewhere.”

“But do take care of yourself, Charlie,” urged the girl, looking up into her brother’s face. “I’ve heard that it’s an unsafe country.”

“Unsafe! Why that’s quite a fallacy. Servia is as safe as the

Strand nowadays. Bland, our chief clerk, was out there a year, and he's been telling me how delightful the people are. Servia is entirely misjudged by us."

"Then you'll go to-night?"

"Yes, by the mail from Charing Cross," he replied. "But don't come and see me off. I hate people to do that. And when you see dear old Max, tell him that I'm sorry I had no time to go round before leaving. I've just telephoned, and his man says he won't be back till seven. That will be too late for me."

"Very well," replied his sister. "But –"

"But what?"

"Well, Charlie, I'm sorry you're going. I feel – well, I feel that you are going to a place where an accident might happen to you. I know nothing about Servia, and besides –"

"Well?"

"The mystery about old Sam Statham always haunts me. I don't somehow like that man."

"You only met him once, and he was very courteous to you. Besides, he is my master. Were it not for him I should most probably be going about London penniless."

"I know, I know," she said. "Have you been to his house in Park Lane lately?"

"I was there this morning, but only for five minutes. He gave me some instructions about a call I had to make in the city."

"I wish you could leave him and get some other work as secretary. I don't like him. He isn't what he pretends to be, I'm

sure he isn't."

"He pretends to be nothing," laughed her brother. "Old Sam is a millionaire, and millionaires need no pretence. He could buy up this show twice over, and then leave a million for the death duties. You've taken a prejudice against him."

"A woman's prejudice – which often is not very far wrong."

"I know that you women see much further than we men do, but in this, Marion, you are quite wrong. Old Sam is eccentric and mean, but at heart he's not at all a bad old fellow."

"Well, I tell you frankly, I don't half like your going to Servia under his auspices."

Charlie Rolfe laughed aloud.

"My dear Marion, of what are you apprehensive?" he asked. "I go in a very responsible position, as his confidential secretary, to inquire into certain matters in his interests. If I carry out my mission successfully, I shall get a rise of salary."

"Granted. But you know what you're told me about the queer stories afloat regarding Samuel Statham and his house in Park Lane."

"I've never believed them, although they are, of course, curious. Yet you must remember that every man of great wealth has mysterious stories put about by his enemies. Every man and every woman has enemies. Who has not?"

"But you've admitted yourself that you've never been in more than one room in the mansion," she said, looking him straight in the face.

“That’s true. But it doesn’t prove anything, does it?” he asked. And Marion saw that he was nervous and agitated, quite unlike his usual self. Perhaps, however, it was on account of her apprehensions, she thought.

She had only seen Samuel Statham, the well-known millionaire, on one occasion. She had called at the offices in Old Broad Street one afternoon to see her brother, who was his confidential secretary, when the old fellow had entered, a short, round-shouldered, grey-bearded old man, rather shabbily-dressed, who, looking at her, bluntly asked who she was and what she wanted there.

One of his eccentricities was that he hated women, and Marion knew that.

In a faltering tone she replied that she was sister of his secretary, whereupon his manner instantly changed. He became the acme of politeness, asked her into his private room, offered her a glass of port – which, of course, she refused – and chatted to her most affably till her brother’s return.

Why she had taken such a violent dislike to the old man she herself could not tell. Possibly it was his sudden change of manner, and that his pleasant suavity was feigned. And this, combined with the extraordinary rumours regarding his past, and the mystery of his great mansion in Park Lane, had caused her to view him with bitter prejudice.

Several customers were waiting to be served, and Marion saw Mr Warner’s eye upon her.

"Well, Charlie," she said, "perhaps I'll get down to Charing Cross to see you off. You go to Paris first, I suppose?"

"Yes. I take the Orient Express from there, by way of Vienna and Budapest to Belgrade. But," he added, "don't come and see me off, there's a good girl."

"Why? I've been before, when you've gone to the Continent."

"Yes, I know," he answered impatiently; "but – well, it makes me feel as if I shan't come back. Don't come, will you?"

Marion smiled. His anxiety that she should not come struck her as distinctly curious.

He was not himself. Of that she was convinced. To her, ever since her father's death, he had been a good friend, and for a year prior to her engagement at Cunningham's he had divided his salary with her. No girl ever had a better brother than he had been, yet of late she had noticed a complete change in his manner. He was no longer frank with her, as he used to be, and he seemed often to hide from her facts which, with her woman's keen intelligence, she afterwards discovered.

"Miss Rolfe!" exclaimed Mr Warner, emerging from his office. "Disengaged?" And he pointed to a pair of somewhat obese ladies who were examining a costume displayed on a stand.

"Well, good-bye, Charlie," she said, shaking his hand. "I must go. We're very busy this afternoon. Perhaps I shall see you at Charing Cross. If not – then take care of yourself, dear. Good-bye."

And she turned and left him to attend to the two ladies, while

he, with a nod across to Mr Warner, strode out of the shop.

“I hope to goodness Marion doesn’t come,” he muttered to himself. “Women are so infernally inquisitive. And if she does go to Charing Cross she’s sure to suspect something!”

Chapter Two.

Concerns a Silent Secret

That same afternoon, while Charlie Rolfe was bidding farewell to his sister Marion, Max Barclay was sitting in the cosy study of one of the smaller houses in Cromwell Road, smoking cigarettes with a thin-faced, grey-haired, grey-bearded man whose cast of features at once betrayed him to be a foreigner.

The well-furnished room was the typical den of a studious man, as its owner really was, for about it was an air of solid comfort, while upon the floor near where the elder man was lying back in his leather easy-chair were scattered some newspapers with headings in unfamiliar type – the Greek alphabet.

The air was thick with cigarette smoke, giving forth an aroma unusual to English nostrils – that pleasant aroma peculiar to Servian tobacco.

The younger man, dressed in well-fitting, dark grey flannels, his long legs sprawled out as he lay back in his chair taking his ease and gossiping with his friend, was, without doubt, a handsome fellow. Tall beyond the average run of men, with lithe, clean-cut limbs, smart and well-groomed, with closely-cropped dark hair, a pair of merry dark eyes, and a small dark moustache which had an upward trend, his air was distinctly military.

Indeed, until a few months before he had held a commission, in a cavalry regiment, but had resigned on account of the death of his father and his consequent succession to the wide and unencumbered Barclay estates in Lincolnshire and up in the Highlands.

Though now possessor of a fine old English home and a seventeenth-century castle in Scotland, Max Barclay preferred to divide his time between his chambers in Dover Street and wandering about the Continent. There was time enough to “settle down,” he always declared. Besides, both the houses were too big and too gloomy to suit his rather simple bachelor tastes. His Aunt Emily, an old lady of seventy, still continued to live at Water Newton Hall, not far from that quaint, old world and many-spired town, Stamford; but Kilmaronock Castle was unoccupied save for six weeks or so when he went up with friends for the shooting season.

Agents were frequently making tempting offers to him to let the place to certain wealthy Americans, but he refused all inducements. The fine old place between Crieff and Perth had never been let during his father's lifetime, and he did not intend that any stranger, except his own friends, should enjoy the splendid shooting now.

“My dear Petrovitch,” he was saying between whiffs of his cigarette, “It is indeed reassuring what you tell me regarding the settled state of the country. You have surely had sufficient internal troubles of late.”

“Ah, yes!” sighed the elder man, a deep, thoughtful expression upon his pleasant, if somewhat sallow, countenance. “Servia has passed through her great crisis – the crisis through which every young nation must pass sooner or later; and now, heaven be thanked, a brighter day has dawned for us. Under our new *régime* prosperity is assured. But” – and pausing, he looked Max straight in the face, and in a changed voice, a voice of increased earnestness and confidence, he added with only a slight accent, for he spoke English very well – “I did not ask you here to discuss politics. We Servians are, I fear, sad gossips upon our own affairs. I wanted to speak to you upon a subject of greatest importance to myself personally, and of someone very dear to me. Now we have been friends, my dear Max, you and I, through some years, and I feel – nay, I know, that you will regard what I say in entire confidence.”

“Most certainly,” was the young Englishman’s reply, though somewhat surprised at his friend’s sudden change of manner.

It was true that he had known Dr Michael Petrovitch for quite a number of years.

Long ago, when he had first visited Belgrade, the Servian capital, the man before him, well-known throughout the Balkans as a patriot, was occupying the position of Minister of Finance under King Milan. Both his Excellency and his wife had been extremely kind to him, had introduced him to the smart social set, had obtained for him the *entrée* to the Palace festivities, and had presented him to Queen Nathalie. Thus a firm friendship

had been established between the two men.

But affairs in Servia had considerably changed since then. Madame Petrovitch, a charming English lady, had died, and his Excellency, after becoming Minister of Commerce and subsequently Foreign Minister in several succeeding Cabinets, had gone abroad to represent his country at foreign Courts, first St. Petersburg, then Berlin, and then Constantinople, finally returning and coming to live in England.

Even now he was not more than fifty, and it had long ago been whispered that his Majesty was constantly urging him to return and accept the portfolio of Finance or of Commerce. But he steadily declined. As a statesman, his abilities had long ago been recognised by Europe, and none knew his value or appreciated him more than his own sovereign; yet for private reasons he preferred to live quietly in the Cromwell Road to returning to all the worries of State and those eternal bickerings in the Servian Skuptchina.

He was a man of even temper, of charming manner, and of scrupulous honesty. Had he been dishonest in his dealings he might have amassed a great fortune while occupying those posts in the various ministries. But he had preferred to remain as he was, upright, even though comparatively poor.

“Well?” asked Max, after a long silence. “I am waiting.”

“It is a matter to which I refer not without some hesitation,” declared his friend. “I want to speak to you about Maud.”

“About Maud. Well?”

"I am worried about the child – a good deal."

"For what reason?" asked Max, considerably surprised.

Maud was Petrovitch's only daughter, a very beautiful girl, now nineteen years of age, who had been brought up in England and to whom he was entirely devoted.

"Well, she has fallen in love."

"All girls do sooner or later," replied Max, philosophically.

"But she's too young yet – far too young. Twenty-five is quite early enough for a girl to marry."

"And who's the man?"

"Your friend – Charlie Rolfe."

"Charlie!" he exclaimed, in great surprise. "And he's in love with Maud. Are you quite sure of this?"

"Quite. She meets him in secret, and though Rolfe is your friend, Max, I tell you I don't like it," he declared.

"I am not surprised. Secret affections never meet with a parent's approbation. If Charlie is in love with her, and the affection is mutual, why doesn't he come straight and tell you?"

"Exactly my argument," declared Petrovitch, lighting a fresh cigarette with the end of one half-consumed. "But tell me, Rolfe is an intimate friend of yours, is he not?"

"Very," was Max's reply, though he did not inform his friend of his love for Marion.

"What is his exact position?"

"As far as I know, he is private secretary to old Samuel Statham, the great financier. His position is quite a good one –

as far as confidential secretaryships go.”

“Statham! I’ve heard of him. There’s some extraordinary story about his house in Park Lane, isn’t there? Nobody has ever been inside, or something.”

“There is, I believe, some cock and bull story,” responded Max. “The old fellow is a bit eccentric, and doesn’t care for people prying all over his house. He lives alone, and has no friends. Do you know, one can be very lonely in London. It is a perfect Sahara to those who are friendless.”

“Yes,” said Petrovitch, huskily. “I know it by experience myself. When I was a youth I lived here. I was a foreign clerk in an insurance office in the city, and I lived perfectly alone – among all these millions. I remember it all as though it were only yesterday. I was indeed glad to get back to Servia.”

“But why are you worried about Maud, old fellow?” Max asked. “Don’t you like Rolfe – or what?”

“I like him very much, indeed I took a great fancy to the young fellow when you introduced him to me last year at Aix-les-Bains. From the very first I noticed that he was attracted towards the child, and I did not object because I thought a little flirtation would amuse her. These secret meetings, however, I don’t like. It is not right. She’s met him in St. James’s Park, and at other places of late, and they have gone for long walks together without my knowledge or sanction.”

Max thought for a moment.

“Does she know that you are aware of the meetings?”

“No.”

“Well, I must admit that I had no idea matters had gone so far as they evidently have,” he said. “I, of course, knew that he has greatly admired Maud from the very first. He was, in fact, always speaking of her in admiration, yet I believed that he did not consider his position to be sufficiently established in warranting him to declare his love to her. Shall I throw out a gentle hint to him that the secret meetings would be best discontinued?”

“If he were to discontinue his visits here altogether it would, I think, be best,” said Petrovitch in a hard voice, quite unusual to him.

Max was surprised at this. Had any unpleasantness occurred between the two men, which his friend was concealing, knowing that Rolfe was his most intimate chum?

“Does he come often?”

“He calls about once a week – upon me, ostensibly, but really in excuse to see the child.”

“And now – let us speak frankly, old fellow,” Max said, bending slightly towards the man seated opposite him. “Do you object to Rolfe paying his attentions to your daughter?”

“Yes – I do.”

“Then I very much regret that I ever introduced him. We were together at Aix-les-Bains for three weeks last summer, and, as you know, we met. You were my old friend, and I could not help introducing him. I regret it now, and can only hope you will forgive me such an indiscretion.”

“It was not indiscreet at all – only unfortunate,” he answered, almost snappishly.

“But tell me straight out – what do you wish me to do?” Max urged. “Recollect that if I can serve you in any way you have only to command me.”

“Even at the expense of your friend’s happiness?” asked Petrovitch, his sharp eyes fixed upon the young man.

“If he really loves her, the circumstances of the cue are altered,” was the diplomatic answer.

“And if he does not? If it is, as I suspect, a mere flirtation – what then?”

“Then I think you should leave the matter to me, to act with my discretion,” young Barclay replied. He recollected that Charlie was Marion’s brother, and he saw himself already in a somewhat difficult position. “My own idea is,” he went on, “that it is something more than a mere flirtation, and that the reason of the secret meetings is because he fears to ask your consent to be allowed to pay court to your daughter.”

“What makes you think so?”

“From some words that his sister Marion let drop the other day.”

“Ah! Marion is a sweet and charming girl,” the elder man declared. “What a pity she should be compelled to drudge in a shop!”

“Yes,” replied Max, quickly. “It is a thousand pities. She’s far too refined and good for that life.”

“A matter of unfortunate necessity, I suppose.”

Necessity! Max Barclay bit his lips when he recollected how very easily she might leave that shop-life if she would only accept money from him. But how could she? How could he offer it to her without insult?

No. Until she consented to be his wife she must still remain there, at the beck and call of every irritating tradesman's wife who cared to enter the department to purchase a ready-made costume or a skirt “with material for bodice.”

“I'm sorry for Marion,” Dr Petrovitch went on. “She frequently comes here of an evening, and often on Sundays to keep Maud company. They get on most excellently together.”

“Yes; she is devoted to Maud. She has told me so.”

“I believe she is,” Petrovitch said. “And yet it is unfortunate, for friendliness with Marion must also mean continued friendliness with her brother.”

“Ah! I see now that you do not like him,” Max said, openly, for he could not now fail to see from his friend's expression that something had occurred. What it was he was utterly unable to make out.

“No, I don't,” was the ex-Minister's plain, determined answer. “And to tell you the truth, I have other views regarding Maud's future. So just tell the young man whatever you think proper. Only request him neither to call here, nor to attempt to see the child again!”

Chapter Three.

Tells of a Woman's Love

In the dull hazy London sunset Fopstone Road, which leads from Earl's Court Road into Nevern Square, was quite deserted.

There is a silence and monotony in the eminently respectable thoroughfares in that particular district that, to their residents, is often very depressing. Traffic there is none save a stray hansom or a tradesman's cart at long intervals, while street organs and even the muffin men avoid them because, unlike the poorer districts, they find no stray coppers and no customers.

On the same evening as the events recorded in the previous chapters, about six o'clock, just as the red dusky after-glow was deepening into twilight, Charlie Rolfe emerged from Earl's Court Station, walked along to the corner of Fopstone Road, and, halting, looked eagerly down it.

But there was not a soul. Indeed there was no sound beyond that of a distant cab whistle somewhere in Nevern Square.

For about five minutes he waited, glancing impatiently at his watch, and then, turning upon his heel, strolled along in the direction of the Square.

A few moments later, however, there hurried up behind him a sweet-faced, smartly-dressed girl who, as he turned to meet her, laughed merrily, saying:

"I do hope, Charlie, I haven't kept you waiting, but I've had such trouble to get out. Dad asked me to write some private letters in English for him; I really believe he suspects something. We meet too often."

"No, darling," answered Rolfe, raising his hat and taking her small gloved hand. "We don't meet frequently enough for me. And I think that your father is entirely unsuspicious. I was with him last night, and he did not strike me as possessing any knowledge of these secret meetings of ours."

"Yes, but you know how dangerous it is," replied the pretty girl, glancing round. "Somebody might pass, recognise me, and tell dad."

"And what then, dearest?" he laughed. "Why your fears are utterly groundless."

"I know, but –"

"But what?"

"Well, dad would be annoyed – that's all – annoyed with both of us."

"He must already have seen, darling, that I love you. He isn't blind," said Charlie Rolfe, moving slowly along at her side.

Hers was, indeed, a face that would attract attention anywhere, oval, delicately moulded, slightly flushed by the momentary excitement of meeting her lover. Her hair was well-dressed, her narrow-waisted figure still girlish; her dress, a pale biscuit-coloured cloth, which, in its refined simplicity, suited well the graceful contour of the slender form, and contrasted admirably

with the soft white skin; the dark hair, a stray coquettish little wisp of which fell across her brow beneath her neat black hat, and the dark brown eyes, so large, luminous, and expressive.

Her gaze met his. Every sensitive feature, every quiet graceful movement told plainly of her culture and refinement, while on her face there rested an indescribable charm, a look of shy, sweet humility, of fond and all-consuming love for the man beside her.

As she lifted her eyes at the words of affection he was whispering into her ear as they went along the quiet, deserted street, she perceived how tall and athletic he was, and noticed, woman-like, the masculine perfection of his dress, alike removed from slovenliness and foppery.

"No," she said at last, her eyes gazing in abstraction in front of her. "I don't suppose dad is in any way blind. He generally is too wide-awake. I have to make all sorts of excuses to get out – dressmakers, painting-lessons, buying evening gloves, a broken watch – and all sorts of thing like that. The fact is," she declared, laughing sweetly and glancing again at him, "I have almost exhausted all the subterfuges."

"Ah, dearest, a woman can always find some excuse," he remarked, joining in her laughter.

"Yes, but that's all very well; you haven't a father," she protested, "so you don't know."

She had only left school at Brighton two years before, therefore her clandestine meetings with Charlie Rolfe were adventures which she dearly loved. And, moreover, they both of

them were devoted to each other. Charlie absolutely adored her. Hitherto women had never attracted him, but from the day of their introduction on the gravelled walk in front of the Villa des Fleurs at Aix, his whole life had changed. He was hers – hers utterly and entirely.

For three months he had existed in constant uncertainty, until one warm evening at Scarborough – where she and her father were staying at the Grand – while they were alone together in the sloping garden of the Spa he summoned courage to tell her the secret of his heart, and to his overwhelming joy found that his passion was reciprocated. Thus had they become lovers.

As Max rightly guessed, he had feared for the present to tell Dr Petrovitch the truth lest he should object and a parting be the result. His position was not what he wished it to be. As secretary to the eccentric old financier, his salary was an adequate one, but not sufficient to provide Maud with a home such as her own. He therefore intended in a little while to tell old Statham the truth, and to ask for more. And until he had done so, he hesitated to demand of the Doctor his daughter's hand.

Together they strolled slowly on, chatting as lovers will. At the bottom of Fopstone Road they continued round the crescent of Philbeach Gardens, along Warwick Road, and crossing Old Brompton Road, entered that maze of quiet, eminently respectable streets in the neighbourhood of Redcliffe Square, strolling slowly on in the falling gloom.

“Do you know, darling,” he exclaimed at last, “I wanted to see

you very particularly this evening, because I am leaving London to-night for Servia.”

“For Servia!” she cried, halting and fixing her great eyes upon his in quick surprise.

“Yes.”

Her countenance fell.

“Then you – you are leaving me?”

“It is imperative, my darling,” he said, in a low, tender voice, taking her hand in his. He wished to kiss her sweet lips, but there in the open street such action was impossible. Courtship in our grimy, matter-of-fact London has many drawbacks, even though every house contains its life-romance and every street holds its man or woman with a broken heart.

“But you never told me,” she complained. “You’ve left it until the last minute. Do you start from Charing Cross to-night?”

“Yes. I would leave to-morrow at nine, and catch the Orient express from Calais for Belgrade, but I have business to do in Paris to-morrow.”

“Ah! Belgrade!” sighed the girl. “I wonder if I shall ever see it again? Long ago I used to be so fond of it, and we had so very many good friends. Dear old dad is so popular. Why, when we drove out the people in their brown homespun clothes used to run after the carriage and cheer ‘Petrovitch the Patriot,’ as they call dad.”

“Of course you will return soon,” Charlie said. “No doubt your father will be induced to enter the new Pashitch Cabinet.”

The girl shook her head dubiously.

"I know the King has several times asked him to return to Servia, but for some mysterious reason he has always declined."

"But he is the most popular man in the country, and he cannot remain away much longer. It is his duty to return and assist in the Government."

"Yes. But my mother died in Belgrade, you know, and I think that may be the reason he does not care to return," replied the girl. "Why are you going there?" she asked.

"On a mission for Statham – regarding a mining concession," he answered. "You know we have a lot of interests out there. Perhaps I shall be away only a week or two – perhaps six months."

"Six months!" she cried in a blank voice. "It is such a long, long time to look forward to."

"I have no desire to leave you, my own darling," he declared, looking straight into her beautiful face. "But the mission is confidential, and for that reason I have received orders to go."

"Your train leaves at nine," she said, "and it is already nearly seven – only two hours! And those two remaining hours I cannot spend with you, for I must be in to dinner at seven. I must leave you in a moment," she added, and the faint flush in her face died away.

Her voice ceased. He looked down musing, without replying. He was impressed by her utter loneliness – impressed, too, without knowing it by the time and place. The twilight of the short evening was gathering fast. A cold damp feeling was

mingled with the silence of the dull, drab London street. It struck him that it felt like a grave.

A slight nervous trembling came over his well-beloved, and a weary little sigh escaped her lips.

That sigh of hers recalled him to a sense of her distress at his departure, and the face that met her troubled eyes was, in an instant, as full as ever of resolute hopefulness.

“What matters, my own, if I am away?” he asked with a smile. “We love each other, and that is all-sufficient.”

All the pity of his strong, tender nature went forth to the lovely girl whom he loved with such strong passionate devotion.

“What matter, indeed!” she cried, hoarsely, tears springing to her eyes. “Is it no matter that I see you, Charlie? Ah! you do not know how I count the hours when we shall meet again – how – how – ” And unable to further restrain her emotion, she burst into tears.

He was silent. What, indeed, could he say?

Reflections, considerations, possibilities crowded in upon his mind, already disturbed and perplexed. The sweetness of the hours passed in her society had increased insensibly ever since that well-remembered afternoon in Aix; the tones of her voice, the notes of those melodious old Servian songs she so often sang, her slightest action held a charm for him such as his earnest nature had never experienced before.

And they must part.

Within himself he doubted whether they would ever meet

again. He had secret fears – fears of something that was in progress – something that might entirely change his life – something he held secret from her.

But he put the thought away. It was a horrible reflection – a qualm of conscience. What would she think of him if she actually knew the truth?

He bit his lip, and in resolution again took her white-gloved hand.

“No, darling,” he said, softly, in an earnest effort to cheer her. “I will return very soon. Be brave, and remember that my every thought is of you always – of you, my love.”

“I know,” she sobbed. “I know, Charlie, but – but I cannot really help it. Forgive me.”

“Forgive you! Of course I do, sweetheart; only do not cry, or they will certainly suspect something when you sit down to dinner.”

His argument decided her, and she slowly dried her tears, saying:

“I only wish I could go to Charing Cross to see you off. But an hour ago I telephoned to your sister Marion to come and dine with us, and go with me to a concert at Queen’s hall.”

“And she accepted?” he asked, quickly, almost breathlessly.

Rolfe gave a sigh of relief. At any rate neither his sister nor his well-beloved would be at Charing Cross at nine that evening.

“I must try and bring her to the station, if possible. Does she know you are going?” asked the girl.

“Oh, yes. But I particularly asked her not to see me off.”

“In order that I might come alone. Oh! how very good of you, Charlie!”

“No. Forgive me for saying so, but like a good many men who travel a lot I never like being seen off – not even by you, yourself, my darling!”

“Very well,” she sighed, looking up into his serious eyes. “I must, I suppose, act as you wish. May God protect you, my dearest, and bring you back again in safety to me.” Then as he whispered into her ear words of courage and ardent affection, with linked arms they re-traced their steps back to Earl’s Court Road, where, with lingering reluctance, he took affectionate leave of her.

Having watched her turn the corner, he went slowly back towards Earl’s Court Station, and as he did so, beneath his breath he murmured “Ah! if she knew – if she knew! But she must never know – she shall never know – never as long as I have breath. I love her – love her better than my life – and she is mine. Yet – yet how can I, after – after – ”

And he sighed deeply without concluding the sentence, while his face went ashen pale at the thought which again crossed his mind – a thought, secret and terrible.

Chapter Four.

Which is Distinctly Mysterious

Max Barclay, on leaving Dr Petrovitch, had taken a cab straight to Charlie's chambers in Jermyn Street, arriving there shortly before six. Green, his man, had told him, however, that his master had returned soon after luncheon, ordered two big bags to be packed, and had left with them upon a hansom, merely saying that he should be absent a week, or perhaps two, and that no letters need be forwarded.

Max was not surprised at this sudden departure, for old Statham had a habit of sending his confidential secretary hither and thither at almost a moment's notice. The old fellow's financial interests were enormous, and widely dispersed. Some of them were in Servia and Bulgaria, where he held concessions of great value.

He had had a finger in most of the financial undertakings in the Near East during the past fifteen years or so. Out of the Oriental Railway extension from Salonica to the Servian frontier alone he had, it was said, made a huge fortune, for he was the original concessionaire. For some years he had lived in the Balkans, looking after his interests in person, but nowadays he entrusted it all to his agents with occasional visits by this confidential secretary.

Therefore Max suspected that Charlie had left for the East, more especially that at the hour he had left Jermyn Street he could have caught the afternoon Continental service from Charing Cross *viâ* Boulogne.

So he went on to his own rooms, changed, dined at the Automobile Club, his mind being full of what the Doctor had told him concerning Charlie and Maud. He had, of course, suspected it all along. Marion knew the truth, but, loyal to her brother, she had said no word. Yet when he had seen Rolfe with the ex-statesman's pretty daughter, he had long ago guessed that the pair were more than mere friends.

That the Doctor disapproved of the affair was somewhat disconcerting, more especially as he had openly declared that he had other ideas of Maud's future. What were they? Was her father hoping that she would marry some young Servian – a man of his own race?

He sat in the club over a cigar till nearly nine o'clock, wondering how he could assist the man who was not only his dearest friend but brother of the girl to whom he was so entirely devoted and whom he intended to make his wife.

He sighed with regret when he thought of her undergoing that shop drudgery to which she had never been accustomed. The early rising, the eternal drive of business, the calm, smiling exterior towards those pettish, snapping women customers, and those hasty scrambles for meals. He had seen her engaged in her business, and he had met her after shop hours, pale, worn, and

fagged out.

And yet he – the man who was to be her husband – lived in that ease and idleness which an income of twelve thousand a year secured.

Had Petrovitch not told him that Marion was dining at Cromwell Road and going to a concert with Maud afterwards, he would have wired to her to meet him. But he knew how devoted the two girls were to each other, notwithstanding the difference of their stations, and how Maud welcomed Marion's company at concerts or theatres to which her father so seldom cared to go.

Suddenly it occurred to him that if he returned to the Doctor's he would meet Marion there later on, when she came back from Queen's Hall, and be able to drive her home to that dull street at the back of Oxford Street where the assistants of Cunnington's, Limited, "lived in."

This reflection aroused him, and, glancing at the smoking-room clock, he saw it wanted a quarter to ten.

Two other men, friends of his, were sitting near, discussing motoring matters, and their eternal chatter upon cylinders, tyres, radiators, and electric horns bored him. Therefore he rose, put on his coat, and, hailing a cab, told the man to drive to Victoria, where he took the underground railway to Gloucester Road Station.

From there to the house of the ex-Minister was only a very short walk. The night was mild, bright, and starlight, for the haze of sundown which had threatened rain had been succeeded by a

brilliant evening. Cromwell Road is always deserted at that hour before the cabs and carriages begin to return from restaurants and theatres, and as he strolled along, knowing that he was always welcome at the Doctor's house to chat and smoke, his was the only footfall to be heard in the long open thoroughfare.

Ascending the steps beneath the wide portico, he pressed the visitors' bell, but though he waited several minutes, there was no response. Again and again he rang, but the bell was apparently out of order, so he gave a sounding rat-tat with the knocker.

Then he listened intently; but to his surprise no one stirred.

Over the door was a bright light, as usual, revealing the number in great white numerals, and through the chinks of the Venetian blinds of the dining-room he could see that the electric lamps were on.

Again and again he rang and knocked. It was surely curious, he thought, that all the servants should be out, even though the Doctor might be absent. The failure to arouse anybody caused him both surprise and apprehension. Though the electric bell might be out of order, yet his loud knock must be heard even up to the garrets. London servants are often neglectful in the absence of their masters, and more especially if there is no mistress, yet it seemed hardly creditable that they would go out and leave the place unattended.

Seven or eight times he repeated his summons, standing upon the door-steps with his ears strained to catch the slightest sound.

Once he thought he heard distinctly the noise of stealthy

footsteps in the hall, and he held his breath. They were repeated. He was quite certain that his ears had not deceived him, for in the street all was silent as the grave. He heard someone moving within as though creeping slowly from the door.

What could it mean? Were thieves within?

He examined the door to see if the lock had been tampered with, but, so far as he could discern, it was untouched. He was undecided how to act, though now positively certain that something unusual was in progress.

He glanced up and down the long road, with its rows of gas lamps, but no one was visible. The only sound was the far-distant rat-tat of the postman on his last round.

For the Doctor to be out of an evening was very unusual; and that stealthy footstep had alarmed him. If there were actually thieves, then they had probably entered by the area door. Max was by no means a coward. There was a mystery there – a mystery he intended to at once investigate.

Doctor Petrovitch was one of his dearest friends and he meant to act as a friend should act.

What puzzled him most of all was the absence of the servants. All of them were apparently highly trustworthy, yet the foreigner in London, he remembered, often engaged servants without sufficient inquiry into their past.

For a few moment he stood motionless, his ears strained, at the door.

The movement was repeated. Someone seemed to be leaving

the dining-room, for he distinctly heard the light footfall.

Therefore, with scarce a sound, he crept down the steps to the pavement and descended the winding flight to the area door. With great caution he turned the handle, but alas! the knob went right round in his hand, the door remaining still fastened.

A light showed in the kitchen, but whether anyone was there he of course could not tell. Again he tried the door, but without avail. It was securely fastened, while, as far as he could ascertain, there were no marks of any forcible entry.

Should he rap at the door? Or would that further alarm the intruders? He had knocked many times at the front door, it was true, but they would no doubt wait until they believed he had gone. Or else they might escape by the rear of the premises.

What should he do?

He hesitated again, with bated breath.

Next instant, however, he heard upon the stone steps above him, leading from the pavement to the front door, the light tread of feet quickly descending. Someone, having watched him descend there, was leaving the house! And yet so noiselessly that at first Max believed himself mistaken.

In a second he had dashed up the area steps and stood upon the pavement. But already he realised the truth. The front door stood ajar, and the intruder was flying as fast as his feet could carry him in the direction of the Brompton Road.

Swiftly, without looking back, the man sped lightly along the pavement to the next corner, which he turned and was a moment

later lost to view.

Max Barclay did not follow. He stood there like a man in a dream.

“What – in Heaven’s name – is the meaning of this?” as, held powerless, he stood staring in the direction the fugitive had taken.

His first impulse had been to follow, but next moment, as the escaping intruder had passed beneath a street lamp he recognised the figure unmistakably, both by the clothes and hat, as none other than his friend Charles Rolfe!

He fell back, staggered by the discovery.

For quite a brief space he stood unable to move. Then, seeing the door ajar, he ascended the steps and entered the house. The lights were switched on everywhere, but, on going in, something – what it was he could never describe – struck him as peculiar. Hardly had he crossed the threshold than he became instinctively aware that some mystery was there.

In a few seconds the amazing truth became apparent, for when he entered the dining-room, to the left of the hall, he started, and an involuntary exclamation of surprise escaped him. The place was empty, devoid of every stick of furniture!

From room to room he dashed, only to find that everything had been mysteriously removed. In the few brief hours of his absence Doctor Petrovitch had apparently fled, taking with him all his household effects.

He stood in the hall utterly dumbfounded.

Why had Rolfe been there? What had he been doing in the

empty house?

The swift manner in which the removal had been effected increased the mystery, for he had not left the Doctor till five o'clock. Besides, he had no doubt dined with his daughter Maud and with Marion, and they would not leave until about eight o'clock.

Again, a removal of that magnitude, requiring at least two vans, after dark could not possibly be effected without attracting the notice of the constable on duty!

Perhaps the police really did know who carried out the sudden change of residence. Anyhow, the whole affair was a complete enigma which amazed and stupefied him.

Presently, when he had somewhat recovered from his surprise, he ascended the stairs, his footsteps now echoing strangely through the empty place, and there found that the drawing-room, and, in fact, all the other rooms, had been completely and quickly cleared. The carpets had in some cases been left, but in the hasty removal curtains had been torn down from the rings, leaving cornices and poles, and the grand piano remained, it being apparently too large and heavy for rapid transit.

He ascended, even to the servants' rooms on the top floor, but found scarcely a vestige of furniture left.

In one back room, a small half-garret with a slightly eloping roof, he noticed a cupboard which curiosity led him to open, as he had opened other cupboards. As he did so, he saw a bundle upon the floor, as though it had been hastily thrown there.

As he pulled it forth it unrolled, and he then saw that it was a woman's light grey tweed skirt and coat.

The latter felt damp to his touch, and as he held it up to examine it he saw that the breast and sleeve were both saturated with blood!

It dropped from his nerveless fingers. Some secret crime had been committed in that house, so suddenly and mysteriously divested of its furniture.

But what?

Max Barclay, pale as death, stood gazing around him, staggered, bewildered, horrified, scarce daring to breathe.

Why had Charles Rolfe fled so hurriedly and secretly from the place?

Chapter Five.

What a Constable Saw

Slowly Max Barclay regained possession of his senses. The discovery had so staggered him that, for a few moments, he had stood there in that room, staring at the woman's tweed coat, transfixed in horror.

There was some great and terrible mystery there, and with it Charlie Rolfe, the man whom he had so implicitly trusted, his most intimate friend, and brother of the woman who was all the world to him, was closely associated.

He glanced around the bare garret in apprehension. All was so weird and unexpected that a queer, uncanny feeling had crept over him. What could have occurred to have caused this revolution in the Doctor's house?

Here in that house, only a few hours ago, he had smoked calmly with Petrovitch, the studious Servian patriot, the man whom the Servians worshipped, and who was the right hand of his sovereign the King. When they had chatted of Maud's flirtation there had been no suggestion of departure. Indeed, the Doctor had invited him to return after dinner, as he so often did. Max was an easy, gay, careless man of the world, yet he was fond of study, and fond of the society of clever men like Petrovitch. The latter was well-known in literary circles on the

Continent by reason of having written a most exhaustive history of the Ottoman Empire. That night Marion, his well-beloved, had no doubt dined at that house, prior to going to the concert with Maud. At least she would be aware of something that might give a clue to this extraordinary and hurried flight, if not to the ugly stain upon the woman's dress lying upon the floor at his feet.

He was undecided how next to act. Should he go to the police-station and inquire of the inspector whether removing vans had been noticed by the constable on the beat, or should he take a cab to Queen's Hall to try and find Marion and Maud?

He glanced at his watch, and saw that by the time he got to the concert they would in all probability have left. Marion was compelled to be in by eleven o'clock, therefore Maud would no doubt come out with her. Indeed, in a quarter of an hour his friend's daughter would be due to return there.

This decided him, and, without more ado, he left the house. Was it worth while at present, he reflected, saying anything to the police regarding the blood-stained garment? Charlie might give the explanation. He would see him before the night was out.

Therefore, finding a constable at the corner of Earl's Court Road, he inquired of him if he had noticed any removing vans before the house in question. The man replied that he had only come on duty at ten, therefore, it would be best if he went to the police-station, to which he directed him.

"If the man on duty saw any removing vans in the evening, he would certainly report it," the constable added politely, and

Barclay then went in the direction he indicated.

A quarter of an hour later he stood in the police-office, while the inspector turned over the leaves of the big book in which reports of every untoward or suspicious occurrence are entered for reference, in case of civil actions or other eventualities.

At first he could find nothing, but at last he exclaimed:

“There’s something here. I suppose this is it. Listen: P.C. Baldwin, when he came off duty, reported to the station-sergeant that two large pantehnicon vans and a small covered van of Harmer’s Stores, Knightsbridge, drove up at 8:10 to Number 127a, Cromwell Road, close to Queen’s Gate Gardens, and with seven men and a foreman removed the whole of the furniture. The constable spoke to the foreman, and learned that it was a sudden order given by the householder, a Dr Petrovitch, a foreigner, for his goods to be removed before half-past ten that night, and stored at the firm’s depository at Chiswick.”

“But they must have done it with marvellous alacrity!” Max remarked, at the same time pleased to have so quickly discovered the destination of the Doctor’s household goods.

“Bless you, sir,” answered the inspector, “Harmer’s can do anything. They’d have sent twenty vans and cleared out the place in a quarter of an hour if they’d contracted to do so. You know they can do anything, and supply anything from a tin-tack to a live monkey.”

“Then they’ve been stored at Chiswick, eh?”

“No doubt, sir. The constable would make all inquiry. You

know Harmer's place at Chiswick, not far from Turnham Green railway station? At the office in Knightsbridge they'd tell you all about it. This foreign doctor was a friend of yours, I suppose?"

"Yes, a great friend," replied Barclay. "The fact is, I'm much puzzled over the affair. Only late this afternoon I was in his study, smoking and talking, but he told me nothing about his sudden removal."

"Ah, foreigners are generally pretty shifty customers, sir," was the officer's remark. "If you'd seen as much as I have of 'em, when I was down at Leman Street, you'd think twice before you trusted one. Of course, no reflection intended on your friend, sir."

"But there are foreigners who are gentlemen," Max ventured to suggest.

"Yes, there may be. I haven't met many, and we have to deal with all classes, you know. But tell me the circumstances," added the inspector, scenting mystery in this sudden flight. "Petrovitch might be some City speculator who had suddenly been ruined, or a bankrupt who had absconded."

Max Barclay was, however, not very communicative. Perhaps it was because of Charlie's inexplicable presence in that deserted house, or perhaps on account of the inspector's British antipathy towards foreigners; nevertheless, he said nothing regarding that woman's coat with the tell-tale mark of blood.

Besides, the Doctor and Maud must be somewhere in the vicinity. No doubt he would come round to Dover Street in

the morning and explain his unusual removal. The discovery of Rolfe's presence there was nevertheless inexplicable. The more he reflected upon it, the more suspicious it seemed. The inspector's curiosity had been aroused by Max's demeanour. The latter had briefly related how he had called, to find the house empty, and both occupier, his daughter, and the servants gone.

"Did you see any servant when you were there this evening?"

"Yes; the man-servant Costa."

"Ah, a foreigner! Old or young?"

"Middle-aged."

"A devoted retainer of his master, of course."

"I believe so."

"Then he may have been in his master's secret – most probably was. When a master suddenly flies he generally confides in his man. I've known that in many instances. What nationality was this Petrovitch?"

"Servian."

"Oh, we don't get many of those people in London. They come from the East somewhere, don't they – a half-civilised lot?"

"Doctor Petrovitch is perfectly civilised, and a highly-cultured man," Max responded. "He is a statesman and diplomat."

"What! Is he the Minister of Servia?"

"He was – in Berlin, Constantinople, and other places."

"Then there may be something political behind it," the officer suggested, beaming as though some great flash of wisdom had come to him. "If so, it don't concern us. England's a free country

to all the scum of Europe. This doctor may be flying from some enemy. Russian refugees often do. I've heard some queer tales about them, more strange than what them writers put in sixpenny books."

"Yes," remarked Barclay, "I expect you've had a pretty big experience of foreigners down in Whitechapel."

"And at Vine Street, too, sir," was the man's reply, as he leaned against the edge of his high desk, over which the flaring gas jets hissed. "Nineteen years in the London police gives one an intimate acquaintance with the undesirable alien. Your story to-night is a queer one. Would you like me to send a man round to the house with you in order to give it a look over?"

Max reflected in an instant that if that were done the woman's dress would be discovered.

"Well – no," he replied. "At present I think it would be scarcely worth while. I think I know where I shall find the Doctor in the morning. Besides, a friend of mine is engaged to his daughter, so he'll be certain to know their whereabouts."

"Very well – as you wish. But," he said, "if you can't find where they're all disappeared to, give us a call again, and we'll try to assist you to the best of our ability."

Max thanked him. A ragged pickpocket, held by two constables, was at that moment brought in and placed in the railed dock, making loud protests of "I'm quite innocent, guv'nor. It warn't me at all. I was only a-lookin' on!"

So Barclay, seeing that the inspector would be occupied in

taking the charge, thanked him and left.

Outside, he reflected whether he should go direct to Charlie's chambers in Jermyn Street. His first impulse was to do so, but somehow he viewed Rolfe with suspicion. If his friend had not seen him – and he believed he had not – then for the present it was best that he should hold his secret.

Perhaps the Doctor had sent a telegram to his own chambers. He would surely never leave London without sending him word. Therefore Max hailed a passing cab and drove to Dover Street.

His chambers, on the first floor, were cosy and well-furnished, betraying a taste in antique of the Louis XIV period. Odd articles of furniture he had picked up in out-of-the-way places, while several of the pictures were family portraits brought from Kilmaronock Castle.

The red-carpeted sitting-room, with its big inlaid writing-table, bought from an old château on the Loire, its old French chairs and modern book-case, was lit only by the green-shaded reading lamp, beneath which were some letters where his man had placed them.

On a small table at the side was a decanter of whisky, a syphon, glasses, and cigars, and beside them his letters. Eagerly he turned them over for a telegram, but there was none. Neither was there a letter from the Doctor. On the writing-table stood the telephone instrument. It might have been rung while his man Gustave had been absent. That evening he had sent him on a message down to Croydon, and he had not yet returned.

He pushed his opera-hat to the back of his head, and stood puzzled as to how he should act. Green had told him that his master had left for the Continent, and yet had he not with his own eyes seen him fly from that house in Cromwell Road?

Yes; there was a mystery – a deep, inexplicable mystery. There was not a doubt of it!

Chapter Six.

Mentions a Curious Confession

When about ten o'clock next morning Mr Warner, buyer of the costumes at Cunnington's, noticed the tall, athletic figure of the young man in brown tweeds known as Mr Evans of Dover Street advance across the drab carpet with which the "department" was covered, he smiled within himself.

The "young ladies" of Cunnington's were not allowed any flirtations. It was "the sack" at a moment's notice for any girl being found flirting either with one of the male assistants or with an outsider, though he be a good customer. Cunnington's hundred and one rules, with fines ranging from threepence to half-a-crown, were stringent ones. Mr Cunnington himself, a short, black-bearded man, of keen business instinct, was a kindly master; but in such a huge establishment with its hundreds of employees, rules must of necessity, be adhered to. Nevertheless, the buyers or headmen of the various departments each controlled their own assistants, and some being more lenient than others towards the girls, rules were very often broken.

Cunnington's was, therefore, known to be one of the most comfortable "cribs" in the trade. Assistants who came up to London in search of a billet always went to see Mr Cunnington, and happy he or she who obtained a personal introduction to

him. He had earned his success by dint of hard work. Originally an assistant himself in a Birmingham shop, he had gone into business for himself in Oxford Street, in one small establishment, and had, by fair dealing and giving good value, prospered, until great rows of windows testified to the fortune he had amassed.

Unlike most employers in the drapery trade, he was generous to a degree, and he appreciated devoted service. In his great shops he had many old hands. Some, indeed, had been with him ever since his first beginning. Those were his trusted lieutenants, of whom "Warner of the Costumes" was one.

What Warner said was never queried, and, being a kindly man, the girls in his department did pretty much as they liked.

Max Barclay, or Mr Evans as he had several times given his name, had run the gauntlet of the shopwalkers of the outer shops, and penetrated anxiously to the costumes. At that hour there were no customers. Before eleven there is but little shopping in Oxford Street. Buyers then see travellers, who come in their broughams, and assistants re-arrange and display their stocks.

On entering the department, Max at once caught sight of the tall fair-haired girl who, with her back to him, was arranging a linen costume upon a stand.

Two other girls glanced across at him, but, knowing the truth, did not ask what he required. He was Miss Rolfe's admirer, they guessed, for men did not usually come in alone and buy twenty-guinea ready-made costumes for imaginary relatives as he had done.

He was standing behind her before she turned suddenly, and blushed in surprise. Warner, sitting in his little glass desk, noticed the look upon the girl's face and fully realised the situation. He liked Marion's brother, while the girl herself was extremely modest and an excellent saleswoman. He knew that Charles Rolfe and this Mr Evans were friends, and that fact had prevented him from forbidding the flirtation to continue.

Evans was evidently a gentleman. Of that he had no doubt.

"Why!" she exclaimed to her lover. "This is really a great surprise. You are early?"

"Because I wanted to see you, Marion," he answered, quickly. She noticed his anxiety, and in an instant grew alarmed.

"Why, what's the matter?" she asked, glancing round to see whether the other girls were watching her. "You ought not to come here, you know, Max. I fear Mr Warner will object to you seeing me in business hours."

"Oh! never mind him, darling," he replied, in a low voice. "I want to ask you a question or two. Where did you see Maud last night?"

"I met her at the door at Queen's Hall. I was to go to Cromwell Road to call for her, but she telegraphed to me at the last moment. She was with Charlie, she told me."

"And where is Charlie?"

"Gone to Servia. He left Charing Cross by the mail last night."

Max reflected that his friend had not left as his sister supposed.

"And where did you leave Maud?"

"I walked to the 'tube' station at Piccadilly Circus, and left her there. She went to Earl's Court Station, and I took a bus home. She told me that you'd been to see the Doctor earlier in the evening. But why do you ask all this?"

"Because – well, because, Marion, something unusual has occurred," he replied.

"Unusual!" she echoed. "What do you mean?"

"Did Maud tell you anything about her future movements last night – or mention her father's intentions?"

"Intentions of what?"

"Of leaving the house in Cromwell Road."

"No; she told me nothing. Only – "

"Only what?"

"Well, it struck me that she had something on her mind. You know how bright and merry she usually is. Well, last night she seemed very thoughtful, and I wondered whether she had had any little difference with Charlie."

"You mean that they may have quarrelled?"

"I hardly think that likely," she said, quickly. "Charlie is far too fond of her, as you know."

"And her father does not altogether approve of it," Max remarked. "He has told me so."

"Poor Charlie!" the girl said, for she was very fond of her brother. He was always a good friend to her, and gave her money to buy her dresses and purchase the few little luxuries which

her modest stipend as a shop-assistant would not allow her to otherwise possess. "I'm sure he's devoted to Maud. And she's one of the best girls I know. They'd make a perfect pair. But the Doctor's a foreigner, and doesn't really understand Englishmen."

"Perhaps that's it," Max said, trying to assume a careless air, for he felt that a hundred eyes were upon him.

Their position was not a very comfortable one, to say the least. He knew that he ought not to have come there during business hours, but the mystery had so puzzled him that he felt he must continue his inquiries. He had fully expected the morning post to bring him a line from the Doctor. But there had been nothing.

Both he and Maud had disappeared suddenly, leaving no trace behind – no trace except that woman's coat with the stain of blood upon the breast.

Was it one of Maud's dresses, he wondered. In the band he had noticed the name of its maker – Maison Durand, of Conduit Street – one of the best dressmakers in London. True he had found it in the servants' quarters, but domestics did not have their clothes made by Durand.

"But tell me, Max," said the girl, her fine eyes fixed upon her lover, "what makes you suggest that the Doctor is about to leave Cromwell Road."

"He has left already," was Max's reply. "That's the curious part of it."

"Left! Moved away!"

"Yes. I came to ask you what you know about it. They've gone

away without a word!"

"How? Why, you were there last evening!"

"I was. But soon after I left, and while Maud was with you at the concert, three vans came from Harmer's Stores and cleared out the whole of the furniture."

"There wasn't a bill of sale, or something of that sort, I suppose?" she suggested.

"Certainly not. The Doctor is a wealthy man. The copper mines of Kaopanik bring him in a splendid income in themselves," Max said. "No; there's a mystery – a very great mystery about the affair."

"A mystery! Tell me all about it!" she cried, anxiously, for Maud was her best friend, while the Doctor had also been *extremely* kind to her.

"I don't know anything," he responded. "Except that the whole place by half-past ten last night had been cleared out of furniture. Only the grand piano and a few big pieces have been left. Harmer's have taken the whole of it to their depository at Chiswick."

"Well, that's most extraordinary, certainly," she said, opening her eyes in blank surprise. "Maud must have known what was taking place. Possibly that is why she was so melancholy and pensive."

"Did she say nothing which would throw any light upon their sudden disappearance?"

Marion reflected for a few moments, her brows slightly knit

in thought.

“Well, she said something about her father being much worried, but she did not tell me why. About a fortnight ago she told me that both she and her father had many enemies, one of whom would not hesitate to kill him if a chance occurred. I tried to get from her the reason, but she would not tell me.”

“But you don’t think that the Doctor has been the victim of an assassin, do you?” Max asked in apprehension.

“No; but Maud may have been,” she answered. “Killed?”

“I hope not, yet – ”

“Why do you hesitate, Marion, to tell me all you know?” he urged. “There is a mystery here which we must fathom.”

“My brother knows nothing yet, I suppose.”

Barclay hesitated.

“I suppose not,” was his reply.

“Then, before I say anything, I must see him.”

“But he’s away in Servia, is he not? He won’t be back for six months.”

“Then I must wait till he returns,” she answered, decisively.

“Maud has told you something. Come, admit it,” he urged.

The girl was silent for a full minute.

“Yes,” she sighed. “She did tell me something.”

“When?”

“Last night, as we were walking together to the station – something that I refused to believe. But I believe it now.”

“Then you know the truth,” he cried. “If there had not been

some unfair play, the Doctor would never have disappeared without first telling me. He has many times entrusted me with his secrets."

"I quite believe that he would have telegraphed or written," she said. "He looked upon you as his best friend in London."

"And, Marion, this very fact causes me to suspect foul play," he said, the recollection of that fugitive in the night flashing across his brain. "What do you, in the light of this secret knowledge, suspect?"

Her lips were closed tightly, and there was a strange look in her eyes.

"I believe, Max," she replied, in a low, hard voice, "that something terrible must have happened to Maud!"

"Did she apprehend something?"

"I cannot tell. She confessed to me something under a bond of secrecy. Before I tell you I must consult Charlie – the man she loved so dearly."

"But are we not lovers, Marion?" he asked, in a low intense voice. "Cannot you tell me what she said, in order that I may institute inquiries at once. Delay may mean the escape of the assassin if there really has been foul play."

"I cannot betray Maud's confidence, Max," was her calm answer.

This response of hers struck him as implying that Maud had confessed something not very creditable to herself, something which she, as a woman, hesitated to tell him. If this were actually

true, however, why should she reveal the truth to Maud's lover? Would she not rather hide it from him?

"But you will not see Charlie for months," he exclaimed, in dismay. "What are we to do in the meantime?"

"We can only wait," she answered. "I cannot break my oath to my friend."

"Then you took an oath not to repeat what she told you?"

"She told me something amazing concerning – "

And she hesitated.

"Concerning herself," he added. "Well?"

"It was a confession, Max – a – a terrible confession. I had not a wink of sleep last night for her words rang in my ears, and her face, wild and haggard, haunted me in the darkness. Ah! it is beyond credence – horrible! – but – but, Max – leave me. These people are noticing us. I will see you to-night, where you like. Only go – go! I can't bear to talk of it! Poor Maud! What that confession must have cost her! And why? Ah, I see it all now! Because – because she knew that her end was near!"

Chapter Seven.

Contains Several Revelations

Max Barclay re-traced his steps along Oxford Street much puzzled. What Marion had told him was both startling and curious in face of the sudden disappearance of the Doctor and his daughter. If the latter had made a confession, as she apparently had, then Marion was, after all, perfectly within her right in not betraying her friend.

Yet what could that confession be? Marion had said it was “a terrible confession,” and as he went along he tried in vain to imagine its nature.

The morning was bright and sunlit, and Oxford Street was already busy. About the Circus the ebb and flow of traffic had already begun, and the windows of the big drapery shops were already attracting the feminine crowds with their announcements of “summer sales” and baits of “great bargains.”

For a moment he paused at the kerb, then, entering a hansom, he drove to Mariner's Stores, the great emporium in Knightsbridge, which had been entrusted with the removal of the Doctor's furniture.

Without much difficulty he found the manager, a short, dapper, little frock-coated freckled-faced business man, and explained the nature of his inquiry.

The man seemed somewhat puzzled, and, going to a desk, opened a big ledger and slowly turned the pages.

"I think there must be some mistake, sir," was his reply. "We have had no removal of that name yesterday."

"But they were at Cromwell Road late last night," Max declared. "The police saw them there."

"The police could not have seen any of our vans removing furniture from Cromwell Road last night," protested the manager. "See here for yourself. Yesterday there were four removals only – Croydon to Southsea, Fitzjohn's Avenue to Lower Norwood, South Audley Street to Ashley Gardens, and Elgin Avenue to Finchley. Here they are," and he pointed to the page whereon the particulars were inscribed.

"The goods in question were removed by you from Cromwell Road, and stored in your depository at Chiswick."

"I think, sir, you really must be mistaken," replied the manager, shaking his head. "Did you see our vans there yourself?"

"No. The police did, and made inquiry."

"With the usual result, I suppose, that they bungled, and told you the wrong name."

"They've got it written down in their books."

"Well, all I can say is, that we didn't remove any furniture from the road you mention."

"But it was at night."

"We do not undertake a job at night unless we receive a

guarantee from the landlord that the rent is duly paid, and ascertain that no money is owing.”

Max was now puzzled more than ever.

“The police say that the effects were sent to your depository,” he remarked, dissatisfied with the manager’s assurance.

“In that case inquiry is very easy,” he said, and walking to the telephone he rang up the depository at Chiswick.

“Is that you, Merrick?” he asked over the ’phone. “I say! Have you been warehousing any goods either yesterday or to-day, or do you know of a job in Cromwell Road, at the house of a Doctor Petrovitch?”

For a full minute he waited the reply. At last it came, and he heard it to the end.

“No,” he said, putting down the receiver and turning to Barclay. “As I expected. They know nothing of the matter at the depository.”

“But how do you account for your vans – two pantechicons and a covered van – being there?” he asked.

The manager shook his head.

“We have here the times when each job in London was finished, and when the vans returned to the yard. They were all in by 7:30. Therefore, they could not have been ours.”

“Well, that’s most extraordinary.”

“Is it somebody who has disappeared?”

“Yes.”

“Ah! the vans were, no doubt, painted with our names

specially, in order to mislead the police,” he said. “There’s some shady transaction somewhere, sir, depend upon it. Perhaps the gentleman wanted to get his things away, eh?”

“No. He had no necessity for so doing. He was quite well off – no debts, or anything of that kind.”

“Well, it’s evident that if our name is registered in the police occurrences the vans were painted with our name for some illegal purpose. The gentleman’s disappeared, you say.”

“Yes. And – well, to tell you the truth, I suspect foul play.”

“Have you told the police that?” asked the man, suddenly interested.

“No; not yet. I’ve come to you first.”

“Then if I were you I’d tell the police the result of your inquiries,” the manager said. “No doubt there’s a crooked incident somewhere.”

“That’s just what I fear. Quite a number of men most have been engaged in clearing the place out.”

“Have you been over it? Is it entirely cleared?”

“Nearly. The grand piano and a big book-case have been; left.”

“I wonder if it’s been done by professional removers, or by amateurs?” suggested the manager.

“Ah! I don’t know. If you saw the state of the place you’d know, wouldn’t you?”

“Most probably.”

“Then if you’ll come with me I’ll be delighted to show you, and you can give me your opinion.”

So the pair entered a cab, and a quarter of an hour later were passing along the hall of the empty house. The manager of Harmer's removals inspected room after room, noticed how the curtains had been torn down, and noted in the fire grate of the drawing-room a quantity of tinder where a number of papers seemed to have been burned.

"No," he said presently. "This removal was carried out by amateurs, who were in a very violent hurry. Those vans were faked – bought, perhaps, and repainted with our name. It's evident that they deceived the constable very cleverly."

"But the whole affair is so extraordinary?" gasped Max, staring at his companion.

"Yes. It would appear so. Your friend, the Doctor, evidently wished to get his goods away with the least possible delay and in the greatest secrecy."

"But the employment of so many men did not admit of much secrecy, surely!"

"They were only employed to load. They did not unload. Only the three drivers probably know the destination of the furniture. It was valuable old stuff, I should say, if one is to judge by what is remaining."

"Yes, the place was well and comfortably furnished."

"Then I really think, sir, that if you suspect foul play it's your duty to tell the police. In cases like this an hour's delay is often fatal to success in elucidating the mystery." Max was undecided how to act. It was his duty to tell the police his suspicions and

show them that blood-stained coat. And yet he felt so certain that the Doctor must in the course of the day take him into his confidence that he hesitated to make a suggestion of foul play and thus bring the affair into public prominence.

The fact that Harmer's name had been upon vans not belonging to that firm was in itself sufficient proof that there had been a conspiracy somewhere.

But of what nature was it? What could possibly have been its object? What was Maud's "terrible confession!"

The expert in removals was examining some litter in the dining-room.

"They evidently did not stop to pack anything," he remarked, "but simply bundled it out with all possible speed. One fact strikes me as very peculiar."

"What is that?"

"Well, if they wanted to empty the place they might have done so, leaving the curtains up, and the palms and things in the windows in order to lead people to believe that the house was still occupied. Apparently, however, they disregarded that precaution altogether."

"Yes. That's true. The object of the sudden flight is a complete mystery," Max remarked. He had not taken the man to the top room, where, in the cupboard, the woman's dress was hidden.

"You say that the Doctor was rich. Therefore, it wasn't to escape from an execution threatened by the landlord."

"Certainly not."

“Well, you may rest assured, sir, that the removal was not effected by professional men. The way in which carpets have been torn up and damaged, curtains torn from their rings, and crockery smashed in moving, shows them to have been amateurs.”

They had ascended to the front bedroom, wherein remained a large, heavy old-fashioned mahogany chest of drawers, and he had walked across to them.

“Indeed,” he added. “It almost looks as though it were the work of thieves?”

“Thieves! Why?”

“Well – look at this. They had no keys, so they broke open the drawers, and removed the contents,” he answered. “And look across there!”

He pointed to a small iron fireproof safe let into the wall – a safe evidently intended originally as a place for the lady of the house to keep her jewels.

The door stood ajar, and Max, as he opened it, saw that it was empty.

The curious part of the affair was that Max was convinced within himself that when he had searched the house on the previous night that safe was not there. If it was, then the door must have been closed and concealed.

He remembered most distinctly entering that room and looking around. The chest of drawers had been moved since he was last there. When he had seen them they had been standing

in their place concealing the iron door of the safe, which, when shut, closed flush with the wall. Someone had been there since! And whoever it was, had moved the heavy piece of furniture and found the safe.

He examined the door, and from its blackened condition, the twisted iron, and the broken lock, no second glance was needed to ascertain that it had been blown open by explosives.

Whatever valuables Dr Petrovitch had kept there had disappeared.

The theory of theft was certainly substantiated by these discoveries. Max stood by the empty safe silent and wondering.

"I noticed downstairs in the study that a board had been prised up, as though somebody has been searching for something," the man from Harmer's remarked. "Probably the Doctor had something in his possession of which the thieves desired to get possession."

"Well," said Max, "I must say that this safe being open looks as though the affair has actually been the work of thieves. If so, then where is the Doctor, where is his daughter Maud, and where are the servants?"

"Yes. I agree. The whole affair is a complete mystery, sir," the other replied. "There have been thieves here without a doubt. Perhaps the Doctor knows all about it, but for some reason dare not utter a word of complaint. Indeed, that's my theory. He may be in fear of them, you know. It's a gang that have done it, without a doubt."

"And a pretty ingenious gang, too," declared Max, with knit brows.

"They evidently made short work of all the furniture. I wonder why they took it, and where it is at present."

"If it has gone to a sale room the police could trace it," Max suggested.

"Certainly. But suppose it was transferred from the vans it was taken away in to the vans of some depository, and removed, say, to Portsmouth or Plymouth, and there stored? It could be done quite easily, and would never be traced."

"Yes. But it's a big job to have made a whole houseful of furniture disappear in a couple of hours."

"It is not so big as it first seems, sir. I'd guarantee to clear a house of this size in one hour, if necessary. And the way they turned out the things didn't take them very long. They were in a desperate hurry, evidently."

"Do you think that thieves did the work?"

"I'm very strongly of that opinion. Everything points to it. If I were you I'd go back to the police and tell them about the safe, about that chest of drawers, and the flooring in the study. Somebody's been prying about here, depend upon it."

Max stood, still undecided. Did it not seem very much as though the thieves had visited there after Charles Rolfe had fled so hurriedly?

Chapter Eight.

The Pauper of Park Lane

About half-way up Park Lane – the one-sided row of millionaires' residences that face Hyde Park – not far from the corner of that narrow little turning, Deanery Street, stood a great white house, one of a short row. The windows were protected from the sun by outside blinds of red and buff-striped holland, and the first floor sills were gay with, geraniums.

The house was one of imposing importance, and dwarfed its neighbours, being both higher, larger, and more artistic. On the right side dwelt one of Manchester's cotton kings, and on the other a duke whose rent-roll was one of the biggest in the United Kingdoms. The centre house, however, was far more prosperous-looking than the others, and was often remarked upon by country cousins as they passed up and down upon omnibuses. It was certainly one of the finest in the whole of that select thoroughfare where rents alone were ruinous, and where the possession of a house meant that one's annual income must run into six figures. The mere nobility of England cannot afford to live in Park Lane nowadays. It is reserved for the kings of Britain's commerce, the Stock Exchange speculator, or the get-rich-quick financier.

Those who read these lines know well the exterior of many of the houses of notable people who live there. Some are in excellent

taste, while others betray the blatant arrogance of the man who, risen from penury, has suddenly found himself a controller of England's destinies, a Birthday Knight, and the husband of a woman whom the papers have suddenly commenced to dub "the beautiful Lady So-and-So." Other houses are quiet and sober in their exterior, small, modest, and unobstructive, the town residences of men of great wealth, who, posing as gentlemen, are hoping for a peerage.

The hopes in Park Lane are many. Almost every household possesses a secret ambition, some to shine in Society, other in politics, and some even in literature. The really wealthy man sneers at a baronetcy, an honour which his tea-merchant received last year, and as for a knighthood, well, he can plank down his money this afternoon and buy one just as he bought a cigar half an hour ago in Bond Street. He must have a title, for his wife wants to be known by the name of his country place, and he has secret ambitions for a seat in the Lords. And so in every house in that long, one-sided row are hopes eternal which rise regularly every year towards the end of June.

Diamond, copper, soap, pork, and railway "kings" who dwell there are a curious assortment, yet the combined wealth of that street alone would be sufficient to pay off our National Debt and also run a respectable-sized kingdom for a year or two.

Almost every man could realise a million sterling, and certainly one of the very wealthiest among them was old Samuel Statham, the man who owned and lived in that house with the

red-striped sun-blinds.

While Max Barclay was engaged in his investigations at the deserted house in Cromwell Road, old Sam was standing at the window of his study, a large front room on the ground floor overlooking the Park. It was a quiet, soberly-furnished apartment, the carpet of which was so soft that one's feet fell noiselessly, while over the mantelshelf was a large life-sized Venus by a modern French artist, the most notable picture in the Salon five years ago.

The leather-covered chairs were all heavy and old-fashioned, the books in uniform bindings of calf and gold, and the big writing-table of the early Victorian period. Upon the table stood a great silver candelabra fitted with electric lamps, while littered about the floor were quantities of folded papers and business documents of various kinds.

There was but little comfort about the room. Artistic taste and luxury are commonly associated with Park Lane, therefore the stranger would have been greatly surprised if he had been allowed a peep within. But there was a curious bet about the house.

No stranger had ever been known to pass beyond the big swing-glass doors half-way down the hall. No outsider had ever set foot within.

Levi, the hook-nosed old butler, in his well-cut clothes and spotless linen, was a zealous janitor. No one, upon any pretext whatsoever, was allowed to pass beyond the glass doors.

His master was a little eccentric, it was said, and greatly disliked intruders. He hated the inquisitiveness of the modern Press, and always feared lest his house should be described and photographed as those of his neighbours constantly were. Therefore all strangers were rigorously excluded.

Some gossip had got about concerning this. A year ago the wealthy old financier had been taken suddenly ill, and his doctor was sent for from Cavendish Square. But even he was not allowed to pass the rigidly-guarded frontier. His patient saw him in the hall, and there he diagnosed the ailment and prescribed. The doctor in question, a well-known physician, remarked upon old Sam's eccentricity over a dinner-table in Mayfair, and very soon half smart London were talking and wondering why nobody was ever invited to the table of Samuel Statham.

In the City, as head of Statham Brothers, foreign bankers, whose offices in Old Broad Street are known to every City man, he was always affable, yet very shrewd. He and his brother could drive hard bargains, but they were always charitable, and the name of the firm constantly figured for a substantial amount in the lists in response to any charitable appeal.

From small beginnings – the early days of both brothers being shrouded in mystery – they had risen to become what they now were, a house second only to the Rothschilds in financial power, a house whose assistance was sought by kings and emperors, and whose interests were world-wide.

That morning old Sam Statham appeared unusually agitated.

Rising at five o'clock, as was his habit summer and winter, he had been hard at work for hours when Levi brought him his tiny cup of black Turkish coffee. Then, glancing at the clock upon his desk, he had risen, gone to the window, and gazed out eagerly, as though in search of someone.

It was eight o'clock, and there were plenty of people about. But, though he looked up and down the thoroughfare, he was disappointed. So he snapped his thin fingers impatiently and returned to his writing.

His personal appearance was truly insignificant. When, in the street, he was pointed out to people as the great Samuel Statham, they invariably expressed astonishment. There was nothing of the blatant millionaire about him. On the contrary, he was a thin, grey, sad-looking man, rather short of stature, with a face very broad in the brow and very narrow at the chin, ending with a small, scraggy white beard clipped to a point. His cheeks were hollow, his dark eyes sunken, the skin upon his brow tightly stretched, his lips pale and thin, and about his clean-shaven upper lip a hardness that was in entire opposition with his generous instincts towards his less fortunate fellow men.

One of his peculiarities of dress was that he always wore a piece of greasy black satin ribbon, tied loosely in a bow as a cravat. The same piece did duty both by day and at evening.

His clothes, for the most part, hung upon his lean, shrunken limbs as though they had been made for a much more robust man, and his hats were indescribably greasy and out of date.

When he went to the City Levi compelled him to put on his best silk hat and a decent frock coat, but often of an afternoon he might be seen sitting alone in the Park and mistaken for some poor, broken-down old man the sadness of whose face compelled sympathy.

This carelessness of dress appears to be one of the inevitable results of great fortune. A man should never be judged by his coat nowadays. The struggling clerk who lives in busy Brixton or cackling Croydon usually gives himself greater airs, and dresses far better than the head of the firm, while the dainty typewriter wears prettier blouses and neater footgear than his own out-door daughters, with their slang, their “pals,” and their distorted ideas of maiden modesty.

But old Sam Statham had neither kith nor kin. He was a lonely man – how utterly lonely only he himself knew. He had only his perpetual calculations of finance, his profit and loss accounts, and occasional chats with the ever-faithful Levi to occupy his days. He seldom if ever left London. Even the stifling August days, when his clerks went to the mountains or the sea, he still remained in London, because, as he openly declared, he hated to mix with strangers.

Curiously enough, almost the only man he trusted was his private secretary, Charlie Rolfe, the smart young man who came there from ten o'clock till two each day, wrote his private letters, and was paid a very handsome salary.

Usually old Sam was a very quiet-mannered man whom

nothing disturbed. But that morning he was distinctly upset. He had scarcely slept a single wink, and his deep-sunken eyes and almost haggard face told of a great anxiety wearing out his heart.

He tried to add up a long column of figures upon a sheet of paper before him, but gave it up with a deep sigh. Again he rose, glanced out of the window, audibly denounced in unmeasured terms a motor-'bus which, tearing past, caused his room to shake, and then returned to his table.

But he was far too impatient to sit there long, for again he rose and paced the room, his grey brows knit in evident displeasure, his thin, bony hands clenched tightly, and from his lips escaping muttered imprecations upon some person whom he did not name.

Once he laughed – a hard little laugh. His lip curled in exultant triumph as he stuck his hands into the pockets of his shabby jacket and again went to look over the *brisé-brisé* curtains of pale pink silk into the roadway.

For a moment he looked, then, with a start, he stood glaring out. Next instant he sprang back from the window with a look of terror upon his blanched cheeks. He had caught sight of somebody whose presence there was both unwelcome and unexpected, and the encounter had filled him with anxiety and dismay.

As he had gazed inquiringly forth, with his face close to the window-pane, his eyes had met those of a man of about his own age, shabby, with grey, ragged hair, threadbare clothes, broken

boots, and a soft grey felt hat, darkly stained around the band – a tramp evidently. The stranger was leaning idly against the park railings, evidently regarding the house with some wonder, when the sad face of its master had appeared.

The pair glared at each other for one single second. Then Sam Statham, recognising in the other's crafty eyes a look of cruel, relentless revenge, started back into the room, breathless and deathly pale. He staggered to his chair, supporting himself by clutching at its back.

“Then they did not lie!” he gasped aloud. “He – he's alive – therefore so it's all over! I – I saw his intentions plainly written in his face. I've played the game and lost! He has returned, therefore I must face the inevitable. Yes,” he added, with that same bitter laugh, only this time it was the hoarse, discordant laugh of a man who found himself cornered, without any possible means of escape. “Yes – this is the end – I must die! – to-day!” And he whispered, glancing round the room as though in terror of his own voice, “Yes – before the sun sets.”

Chapter Nine.

In which Levi Gives Advice

For fully five minutes Samuel Statham stood steadying himself by the back of his chair. His face was white and rigid, his jaw set, his breathing quick and excited, his hands trembling, his face full of a sudden horror.

He had entirely changed. The sight of that shabby stranger had filled him with fear.

Once or twice he glanced furtively at the window. Then, straightening himself in a vain endeavour to remain calm, he bent and crept back to the window in order to ascertain whether the man still remained. Bent and out of sight he approached the lace-edged curtain and peered through unseen.

Yes; the fellow was still there. He had lit his pipe with calm unconcern, and was leaning back against the railings in full view of the house. The man's attitude was that of complete triumph. Ah! what a fool he had been to have shown himself so openly as he had done! To think that this man of all men was still alive!

He crept back again, trembling. His face was haggard and bloodless, the countenance of a man whose future was but a blank – the dismal blank of the grave.

His whole body trembled as he sank into his writing-chair, and, leaning his elbows upon the desk, he buried his face in his

hands and sobbed. Yes; he, the hard-headed financier, whose influence was felt in every corner of the world, the man who controlled millions and who loaned great sums to certain of the rulers of Europe, sobbed aloud.

“Ah!” he cried to himself, “I was a fool when I disbelieved them. I thought that blackmail was their object in telling me the story of how that man was alive and had been seen. Therefore I only laughed at them and took no precaution. Ah! I was a fool, and my foolishness must end fatally. There is no way out of it for me – only death. I’ve been a fool – a confounded fool. I ought to have made certain; I ought not to have taken any risk. I’m wiser now than I was then. Age has brought me wisdom as well as destroying my belief in the honesty of men and the loyalty of friends”; and as he sighed heavily, his brow still bent upon his hand, he touched the bell, and old Levi appeared.

“Levi,” he said, in a low unusual voice, “go quietly to that window and, without attracting attention, look outside at a man opposite.”

The faithful old servant, somewhat surprised at these rather unusual instructions, walked stealthily to the window and peered through the lace insertion of the *brisé-brisé*.

Scarcely had he done so than, with a cry, he withdrew, and facing his master, stood staring at him.

“Did you see anyone, Levi?” asked his master, raising his head suddenly.

“Yes,” was the hoarse whisper of the man who stood there,

white-faced in fear. "It's him! I – I thought you said he was dead."

"No; he isn't! He's there in the flesh."

"And what are we to do?"

"What can we do? He recognised me a moment ago, and he's watching the house."

"Which means that you had better leave England for a considerable time."

"What!" cried Statham, in quick reproof. "What – run away? Never!"

"But – well, in the circumstances, don't you scent danger – a very grave danger?" asked the old servant whose devotion to his master had always been so marked.

"When I am threatened I always face my accuser. I shall do so now," was the great man's calm reply, even though it were in absolute contradiction to his attitude only a few moments before. Perhaps it was that he did not wish old Levi to know his fear.

"But – but that can only result in disaster," remarked the old servant, who never addressed his master as "sir" – the pair were on too intimate terms for that. "If I might presume to advise, I think –"

"No, Levi," snapped the other; "you haven't any right to give advice in this affair. I know my own business best, surely?"

"And that man knows as much as you do – and more."

"They told me he was alive, and I – fool that I was – disbelieved them!" the old millionaire cried. "And there he is now, watching outside like a terrier outside a rat-hole. And I'm the rat, Levi –"

caught in my own trap!”

“Is there no way out of this?” asked the other. “Surely you can escape if you so desire – get away to America, or to the Continent.”

“And what’s the use. He’d follow. And even if he didn’t, think of what he can tell if he goes to the police.”

“Yes; he could tell sufficient to cause Statham Brothers to close their doors – eh?” remarked the old servant very seriously.

“That’s just it. I’ve been a confounded idiot. Rolfe warned me only the other day that the fellow was in London, but I said I wouldn’t believe him until I saw the man with my own eyes. To-day I have actually seen him, and there can be no mistake. He’s the man that – that I – ”

His sentence remained unfinished, for he sank into his chair and groaned, covered his face again with his hands in an attitude of deep remorse, while Levi stood by watching in silence.

“Rolfe could help you in this matter,” the man exclaimed at last. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know. I sent him yesterday to Belgrade, but last night he telephoned that he had lost the train.”

“Then he may have left at nine o’clock this morning?”

“Most probably.”

“Then you must recall him by wire.”

“No telegram can reach him till he gets to Servia, for I don’t know whether he’s gone from Ostend or Paris.”

“They’d know in the City. Why not ask them?”

“No; they wouldn’t know.”

“Why?”

“Because Rolfe had with him a big sum in German notes and a quantity of securities belonging to the National Bank of Servia. In that case he would not let anyone know his route, for fear of thieves. It is one of my strictest orders to him. Why he lost the train last night I can’t tell.”

“Well, it’s a thousand pities we can’t get at him, for he’s the only man to help you out – of this difficulty.”

“Yes; I quite agree. That shabby, down-at-heel man waiting outside is my master, Levi – the master of Statham Ltd. My future is in his hands!”

He had raised his head, and sat staring at the beautiful picture upon the wall before him, the picture with its wonderful tints which had been copied in a hundred different places.

His countenance was haggard and drawn, and in his eyes was a look of unspeakable terror, as though he were looking into his own grave, as indeed at that moment he was.

The sombre melancholy-looking Levi stood watching for a moment, and then, creeping to the window, looked out into the sunshine of Park Lane.

The ragged tramp was still there, idling against the railings, and smoking a short, dirty pipe quite unconcernedly. He was watching for the re-appearance of that white, startled face at the window – the face of the great Samuel Statham. “He’s still outside, I suppose?” queried the man at the other end of the

room.

Levi replied in the affirmative, whereat old Samuel clenched his teeth and muttered something which sounded like an oration. He was condemning himself for his disbelief in his secretary's warnings.

"Had I listened to him I could easily have saved myself – I could have prevented him from coming here," he said in a meaning voice.

"Yes; it would not have been difficult to have prevented this. After what has occurred that blackguard has no right to live."

"Aha! then you believe me, Levi?" cried the wretched man. "You do not blame me?" he asked, anxiously.

"He was to blame – not you."

"Then I was right in acting as I did, you think – right to protect my interests."

"You were right in your self-defence," the man answered, somewhat grey, sphinx-like, for Levi was a man whose thoughts one could never read from his thin, grey, expressionless face. "But you were injudicious when you disregarded Rolfe's warning."

"I thought he had his own interests to serve," was Statham's reply.

"Frankly, you believed it to be an attempt at blackmail. I quite follow you. But do you think Rolfe would be guilty of such a thing?"

"My dear Levi, when a poor man is in love, as Rolfe is, it is a

sore temptation to obtain by any means, fair or foul, sufficient to marry and support a wife. You and I were both young once – eh? And we thought that our love would last always. Where is yours to-day, and” – he sighed – “where is mine?”

“You are right,” replied the old servant slowly, with a slight sigh. “You refer to little Marie. Ah! I can see her now, as plainly as she was then, forty years ago. How beautiful she was, how dainty, how perfect, and – ah! – how well you loved her. And what a tragedy – the tragedy of your life – the tragedy that has ever been hidden from the world – the – ”

“No! Enough, Levi!” cried his master hoarsely, staring straight before him. “Do not recall that to me, especially at this moment. It was the great tragedy of my life, until – until this present one which – which threatens to end it.”

“But you are going to face the music. You have said!”

“I may – and I may not.”

Levi was silent again. Only the low ticking of the dock broke the quiet, and was followed by the rumble of a motor-bus and the consequent tremor in the room.

“At any rate, Samuel Statham will never act the coward,” the millionaire remarked at last, in a soft but distinct voice.

“Rolfe can help you. Where is he – away just at the moment that he’s wanted,” Levi said.

“My fault! My fault, Levi!” his master declared. “I disbelieved him, and sent him out to Servia to show him that I did not credit what he told me.”

“You were a fool!” said Levi, bluntly. He never minced words when his master spoke confidentially.

“I know I was. I have already admitted it,” exclaimed the financier. “But what puzzles me is that that man outside is really alive and in the flesh. I never dreamed that he would return to face me. He was dead – I could have sworn it.”

“So you saw him dead – eh?”

Old Statham drew a quick breath, and his face went ashen, for he saw how he had betrayed himself. Next instant he had recovered from his embarrassment and, bracing himself with an effort, said:

“No – no, of course not. I – I only know what – well, what I’ve been told. I was misled wilfully by my enemies.”

Levi looked straight into his face with a queer expression of disbelief. Statham noticed it, and it unnerved him.

He had inadvertently made confession, and Levi did not credit his denial.

The peril of the situation was complete!

Chapter Ten.

Shows a Woman's Peril

Several hours had gone by, hours which Samuel Statham spent, seated in a deep easy-chair near the empty fire grate, reviewing his long and eventful life.

With his head buried in his hands, he reflected upon all the past – its tragedy and its prosperity. True, he had grown rich, wealthier than he had ever dreamed, but, ah! at what a cost! The world knew nothing. The world of finance, known in the City, looked upon him as a power to be reckoned with. By a stroke of that stubby, ink-stained pen which lay upon the writing-table he could influence the markets in Paris or Berlin. His aid and advice were sought by men who were foremost in the country's commerce and politics, and he granted loans to princes and to kingdoms. And yet the tragedy of his own heart was a bitter one, and his secret one that none dreamed.

He, like many another world-famous man, had a skeleton in his cupboard. And that day it had seen the light, and the sight of it had caused him to begin the slow and painful process of putting his house in order, prior to quitting it for ever – prior to seeking death by his own hand.

For nearly an hour he had been huddled up in the big leather armchair almost immovable. He had scrawled two or three

letters, and written the superscription upon their envelopes, and from his writing-table he had taken a bundle of letters tied with a faded blue ribbon. One by one he had read them through, and then, placing them in the grate, he had applied a match and burnt them all. Some other business documents followed, as well as an old parchment deed, which he first tried to tear, but at last burned until it was merely twisted tinder.

It was now afternoon, and the silence of that house of mystery, wherein no one save Charles Rolfe ever penetrated, was unbroken. Across the soft green carpet lay a bar of warm sunlight that seemed strangely out of place in that sombre apartment, with its despairing owner, while outside the shabby stranger was no longer to be seen.

He might be lurking in the vicinity, but Levi had an hour ago entered and informed his master that the patient vigil had been relaxed.

Old Sam had dismissed him with a grunt of dissatisfaction. Those last hours of his life he wished to spend alone.

He had been trying to see some way out of the *cul-de-sac* in which he found himself, but there was none. That shabby wayfarer – his worst enemy, had found him. Years ago he had sworn a terrible vengeance, but for secret reasons, known only to Statham himself, he had laughed his threats to scorn. Then came his death, and Statham was free, free to prosper, become rich and powerful, and use his great wealth for good or for evil as he felt so inclined.

He had, however, used it for good. His contributions to charities were many and handsome. Among other things, he had built and endowed a wing of the London Hospital, for which his Majesty signified his intention of conferring a baronetcy upon him. But that honour he declined. To his brother in the City he had said, "I don't wish for any honour, and I'll remain plain Sam to the end of my days." There was a reason – a secret reason – why he was unable to receive the distinction. None knew it – none even dreamed.

The papers expressed wonder at the refusal, and people called him a fool. In Old Broad Street men were envious, and laughed in their sleeves. Yet if they had known the real reason they would surely have stood aghast.

One day, however, his private secretary, young Rolfe, had come to him with a strange and improbable tale. His enemy was alive and well, and was, moreover, actually in England! He questioned the young man, and found certain discrepancies in the statement. Therefore, shrewd and far-seeing, he refused to believe it, and suspected blackmail to be the ultimate intention. He did not, however, suspect Rolfe of any inclination that way. He was both faithful and devoted.

Five years before, Rolfe's father, a man of considerable means who had been interested in his financial undertakings, burnt his fingers badly over a concession given by the Persian Government and became bankrupt. A year later he died, a ruined man, leaving a son Charles and a daughter Marion. The latter had been

compelled, he understood, to earn her living in a London shop, and the former, who had only recently come down from Oxford, he had engaged as his confidential secretary.

He had indeed done this because he had felt that Charlie's father had made the ruinous speculation upon his advice, and it therefore behoved him to do some little for the dead man's children. Few men in the City of London in these modern days are possessors of consciences, and those who have are usually too busy with their own affairs to think of the children of ruined friends.

Old Sam Statham was a hard man, it must be admitted. He would drive a bargain to the last fraction of percentage, and in repayment of loans he was relentless sometimes. Yet the acts of private charity that he did were many, and he never sought to advertise them.

In Charles Rolfe he had not been disappointed. Never once had he disobeyed the orders he had given, and, what was more, never once had he sought to penetrate beyond the door at the head of the staircase which shut off the ground floor from the one above.

The first day that Rolfe came to attend to his correspondence he had told him that he must never ascend those stairs, and that if he did he would be discharged at a moment's notice.

This prohibition struck the young man as curious and lent additional colour to the whispers of mystery concerning the fine fashionable house. A thousand weird suggestions arose within his

mind of what was concealed upstairs, yet he was powerless to investigate, and, after a few weeks, grew to regard his master's words as those of an eccentric man whose enormous wealth had rendered a trifle extraordinary at times.

Old Levi was janitor of that green baize door. Situated round the corner, no one standing in the hall could see it. Therefore its existence was unsuspected. But it was an iron door covered with green baize, and always kept locked. Levi kept the key, and to all Rolfe's inquisitiveness he was dumb.

"The master allows nobody upstairs," was always his reply. "I sleep downstairs because I am not permitted to ascend."

What other servants might be there he knew not. Levi was the only other person he ever saw. The curtains at the upper windows always looked fresh and smart, and often as he went up Park Lane at night and glanced up at them, he saw lights in them, showing that they must be inhabited.

At first all this puzzled him sorely. He had told Marion about it, and also Maud Petrovitch, both girls being intensely interested in the mystery of the house and the character of the unseen occupants of its upper floors.

But as Charlie declared that old Statham was eccentric in everything, the mystery had gradually worn off and been forgotten.

The old man's face had sadly changed since early morning. His countenance now was that of a man in sheer despair. He had looked up the Continental Bradshaw and had scrawled half

a dozen telegrams, addressed to his secretary, now on his way to Servia, and these had been taken to the post-office by Levi.

But it was all in vain. The message to Belgrade could not possibly reach Rolfe for another three days, and then, alas! it would be too late.

Before then he would be finished with all earthly things, and the world would denounce him as a coward. Yet even that would be preferable to standing and hearing his enemy's denunciation than facing exposure, ridicule, and ruin.

"Levi was right when he suggested flight," he was murmuring to himself. "Yet where can I go? I'm too well-known. My portrait is constantly in the papers, and, save Greece, there is no country in which I could obtain sanctuary. Again, suppose I got safely to Greece, what about the firm's credit? It would be gone. But if I die to-day, before this man returns, they cannot accuse the dead, and the firm, being in a sound financial position, cannot be attacked. No, only by my own death can I save the situation. I must sacrifice myself. There is no help for it! None! I must die!"

He gazed wildly around the big old-fashioned room as though his eyes were searching for some means of escape.

But there was none. His past had that day risen against him, and he was self-condemned.

His chin sank again upon his chest, and his deep-set eyes were fixed upon the soft, dark-green carpet. The marble clock chimed the hour of four, and recalled him to a sense of his surroundings.

He stretched himself, sighing deeply. He was wondering,

when that shabby watcher, who held his life in his dirty talons, would return.

Thoughts of the past, tragic and bitter, arose within him, and a muttered imprecation escaped his thin, white lips. He was faced with a problem that even the expenditure of his millions could not solve. He could purchase anything on earth, but he could not buy a few more years of his own life.

He envied the man who was poor and struggling, the man with a cheerful wife and loving children, the man who worked and earned and had no far-reaching interests. The wage-earner was to him the ideal life of a man, for he obtained an income without the enormous responsibility consequent upon being a "principal." His vast wealth was but a millstone about his neck.

That little leather book, with its brass lock, wherein was recorded his financial position in a nutshell, was lying upon the table. When he had consulted it he had been appalled. He was worth far more than he had ever imagined. And yet, by an irony of fate, the accumulation of that wealth was now to cost him his life!

The long bar of sunlight had been moving slowly across the carpet, all the afternoon. Old Sam Statham has risen and crossed again to his writing-table, searching among some papers in a drawer, and finding a silver cigarette case, much tarnished by long neglect. This he opened, and within was displayed one tiny object. It was not a cigarette, but a tiny glass tube with a glass stopper, containing a number of very small white pilules.

He was gazing thoughtfully upon these, without removing the tube from its hiding-place, when, of a sudden, the door opened, and Levi, his pale face flushed with excitement and half breathless, entered, exclaiming in a low whisper:

“Rolfe is here! Shall I show him in?”

“Rolfe!” gasped the millionaire in a voice of amazement. “Are you serious, Levi?”

“Serious? Of course. He has just called and asked if you can see him.”

“Show him in instantly,” was Statham’s answer, as hope became at that instant renewed. “We may find a way out of this difficulty yet – with his aid.”

“We may,” echoed Levi, closing the door for a moment behind him, so that the young man might not overhear his words. “We may; but recollect that he is a man in love.”

“Well?”

“And he loves that girl Maud Petrovitch. Don’t you understand – eh?” asked Levi, with an evil flash in his eyes.

“Ah! I see,” replied his master, biting his under lip. “I follow you, Levi. It is good that you warned me. Leave the girl to me. Show him in.”

“You know what I told you a few days ago – of his friendship with Petrovitch,” the old servant went on. “Recollect that what I said was the truth, and act upon the confidential information I gave you. In this matter you’ve a difficult task before you, but don’t be chicken-hearted and generous, as you are so very often.

You're in a tight corner, and you must get out of it somehow, by hook or by crook."

"Trust me to look after myself," responded the millionaire, with a sudden smile upon his pale, haggard face, for he saw that with his secretary in London he might after all escape, and he had already closed the tarnished cigarette case that contained those pilules by which he had been contemplating ending his stormy existence. "Tell him to come in."

"But I beg of you to be firm. You're not a fool," urged Levi, bending earnestly towards him. "What is a woman's honour as compared with your future? You must sacrifice her – or yourself. There are many women in the world, recollect – but there is only one Samuel Statham!"

Chapter Eleven.

Samuel Statham Makes Confession

When Rolfe entered old Sam's presence he saw that something was amiss.

Was it possible that his employer knew his secret – the secret of his visit to Cromwell Road on the previous night? Perhaps he did. The suggestion crossed his mind, and he stood breathless for a few seconds.

"I thought you had left for Servia, Rolfe," exclaimed the old man in his thin, weak voice. He had seated himself at the writing-table prior to his secretary's appearance, and had tried to assume a businesslike air. But his face was unusually drawn and haggard.

"I missed the train last night," was the young man's reply. "It is useless to leave till to-night, as I can then catch the Orient Express from Paris to-morrow morning. Therefore I thought I'd call to see if you have any further instructions."

The old man grunted. His keen eyes were fixed upon the other's face. The explanation was an unsatisfactory one.

Samuel Statham, as became a great financier, had a wonderful knack of knowing all that passed. He had his spies and secret agents in every capital, and was always well informed of every financial move in progress. To him, early information often meant profits of many thousands, and that information was

indeed paid for generously.

In London, too, his spies were ever at work. Queer, mysterious persons of both sexes often called there in Park Lane, and were admitted to private audience of the king of the financial world. Rolfe knew them to be his secret agents, and, further, that his employer's knowledge of his own movements was often wider than he had ever dreamed.

No man in the whole City of London was more shrewd or more cunning than old Sam Statham. It was to the interest of Statham Brothers to be so. Indeed, he had once remarked to his secretary that no secret, however carefully kept, was safe from his agents, and that he could discover without difficulty anything he wanted to know.

Had he discovered the truth regarding the strange disappearance of the Doctor and his daughter?

"Why did you lose the train last night, Rolfe?" asked the great financier. "You did not go to Charing Cross," he added.

Rolfe held his breath again. Yes, as he had feared, his departure had been watched for.

"I – well, it was too late, and so I didn't attempt to catch the train."

"Why too late?" asked Statham, reprovingly. "In a matter of business – and especially of the magnitude of yours at this moment – one should never be behindhand. Your arrival in Belgrade twenty-four hours late may mean a loss of about twenty thousand to the firm."

"I hope not, sir," Rolfe exclaimed, quickly. "I trust that the business will go through all right. I – I did my best to catch the train!"

"Your best! Why, you had half a day in which to pack and get to Charing Cross!"

"I quite admit that, but I was prevented."

"By what?" asked Statham, fixing his eyes upon the young man before him.

"By a matter of private business."

"Yes – a woman! You may as well admit it, Rolfe, for I know all about it. You can't deceive me, you know."

The other's face went ghastly white, much to Statham's surprise. The latter saw that he had unconsciously touched a point which had filled his secretary with either shame or fear, and made a mental note of it.

"I don't deny it, sir," he faltered, much confused. He had no idea that his employer had any knowledge of Maud.

"Well – you're an idiot," he said, very plainly. "You'll never get on in the world if you're tied to a woman's shoe strings, depend upon it. Girls are the ruin of young men like you. When a man is free, he's his own master, but as soon as he becomes the slave of a pretty face then he's a lost soul both to himself and to those who employ him. Take the advice of an old man, Rolfe," he added, not unkindly. "Cast off the trammels, and be free to go hither and thither. When I was your age, I believed in what men call love. Bah! Live as long as I have, and watch human nature as I

have watched it, and you'll come to the same conclusion as I have arrived at."

"And what is that?" asked Rolfe, for such conversation was altogether unusual.

"That woman is man's ruin always – that the more beautiful the woman the more complete the ruin," he answered, in the hard, unsympathetic way which he sometimes did when he wished to emphasise a point.

Charlie Rolfe was silent. He was familiar with old Sam's eccentricities, one of which was that he must never be contradicted. His amazing prosperity had induced an overbearing egotism. It was better to make no reply.

At heart the old man was beside himself with delight that his secretary had not left London, but it was his policy never to betray pleasure at anything. He seldom bestowed a single word of praise upon anyone. He was silent when satisfied, and bitterly sarcastic when not pleased.

"I do not think, sir, that whatever you may have heard concerning the lady in question is to her detriment," he could not refrain from remarking.

"All that I have heard is very favourable, I admit. Understand that I say nothing against the lady. What I object to is the principle of a young man being in love. Why court unhappiness? You'll meet with sufficient of it in the world, I can assure you. Look at me! Should I be what I am if I had saddled myself with a woman and her worries of society, frocks, children,

petty jealousies, flirtations, and the thousand and one cares and annoyances which make a man's life a burden to him.

"No. Take my advice, and let those fools who run after trouble go their own way. Sentimentalists may write screeds and poets sonnets, but you'll find, my boy, that the only true friend you'll have in life is your own pocket."

Charlie was not in the humour to be lectured, and more especially upon his passionate devotion to Maud. He was annoyed that Statham should have found it out, and yet, knowing the wide-reaching sources of information possessed by the old millionaire, it was scarcely to be wondered at.

"Of course," he admitted, somewhat impatiently, "there is a good deal of truth in your argument, even though it be a rather blunt one. Yet are not some men happy with the love of a good wife?"

"A few – alas! a very few," Statham replied. "Think of our greatest men. Nearly all of them have had skeletons in their cupboards because of their early infatuations. Of some, their domestic unhappiness is well-known. Others have, however, hidden it from the world, preferring to suffer than to humiliate themselves or admit their foolishness," he said, with a calm cynicism. "To-day you think me heartless, without sentiment, because you are inexperienced. Twenty years hence recollect my words, and you will be fully in accord with me, and probably regret deeply not having followed my advice."

With his thin hand he turned over some papers idly, and then,

after a moment's pause, his manner changed, and he said, with a good-humoured laugh:

"You won't listen to me, I know, Rolfe. So what is the use of expounding my theory?"

"It is very valuable," the young man declared, deferentially. "I know that you are antagonistic towards women. All London is aware of that."

"And they think me eccentric – eh?" he laughed. "Well, I do not want them. Society I have no use for. It is all too shallow, too ephemeral, and too much make-believe. If I wished to go into Society to-morrow, it would welcome me. The door of every house in this neighbourhood would be opened to me. Why? Because my money is the key by which I can enter.

"The most exclusive set would be delighted to come here, eat my dinners, listen to my music, and borrow my money. But who among the whole of that narrow, fast-living little world would care to know me as a poor man? I have known what it is to be poor, Rolfe," he went on; "poorer than yourself. The world knows nothing of my past – of the romance of my life. One day, when I am dead, it may perhaps know. But until then I preserve my secret."

He was leaning back in his padded chair, staring straight before him, just as he had been an hour ago.

"Yes," he continued; "I recollect one cold January night, when I passed along the pavement yonder," and jerked his finger in the direction of the street. "I was penniless, hungry, and chilled to the

bone. A man in evening-dress was coming from this very house, and I begged from him a few coppers, for I had tasted nothing that day, and further, my poor mother was dying at home – dying of starvation. The man refused, and cursed me for daring to beg charity. I turned upon him and cursed him in return; I vowed that if ever I had money I would one day live in his house. He jeered at me and called me a maniac.

“But, strangely enough, my words were prophetic. My fortune turned. I prospered. I am to-day living in the house of the man who cursed me, and that man himself is compelled to beg charity of me! Ah, yes!” he exclaimed suddenly, rising from his chair with a sigh. “The world little dreams of what my past has been. Only one man knows – the man whom you told me, Rolfe, a little time ago, is in England and alive.”

“What – the man Adams?” exclaimed Rolfe, in surprise.

“Yes,” replied his employer, in a hoarse, changed voice. “He knows everything.”

“Things that would be detrimental to you?” asked his private secretary slowly.

“He is unscrupulous, and would prove certain things that – well, I – I admit to you in strictest confidence, Rolfe, that it would be impossible for me to face.”

Charlie stared at him in utter amazement.

“Then you have satisfied yourself that what I told you is correct?”

“I disbelieved you when you told me. But I no longer doubt.”

“Why?”

“Because I have seen him to-day – seen him with my own eyes. He was standing outside, there against the railings, watching the house.”

“And did he see you?”

“He saw and recognised me.”

Charlie gave vent to a low whistle. He recognised the seriousness of the situation. As private secretary he was in old Statham’s confidence to a certain extent, but never before had he made such an admission of fear as that he had just done.

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know. Gone to prepare his coup for my ruin, most probably,” was the old man’s response, in a strained unnatural voice. “But listen, Rolfe. I have told you to-day what I would tell no other man. In you I have reposed many confidences, because I know you well enough to be confident that you will never betray them.”

“You honour me, sir, by those words,” the young man said. “I endeavour to serve you faithfully as it is my duty. I am not forgetful of all that you have done for my sister and myself.”

“I know that you are grateful, Rolfe,” he said, placing his bony hand upon the young man’s shoulder. “Therefore I seek your aid in this very delicate affair. The man Adams has returned from the grave – how, I do not know. So utterly bewildering is it all that I was at first under the belief that my eyes were deceiving me – that some man had been made up to resemble him and to

impose upon me. Yet there is no imposture. The man whom I know to be dead is here in London, and alive!"

"But did you actually see him dead?" asked Rolfe, innocently. Old Statham started quickly at the question.

"Er – well – no. I mean, I didn't exactly see him dead myself," he faltered.

"Then how are you so very positive that he died?"

"Well, there was a funeral, a certificate, and insurance money was, I believe, paid."

"That does not prove that he died," remarked Rolfe. "I thought I understood you to say distinctly when we spoke of it the other day that you had actually stood beside the dead body of John Adams, and that you had satisfied yourself that life was extinct."

"No! no!" cried the old man, uneasily, his face blanched. "If I led you to suppose that, I was wrong. I meant to imply that, from information furnished by others, I was under the belief that he had died."

Charlie Rolfe was silent. Why had his employer altered his declaration so as to suit the exigencies of the moment?

He raised his eyes to old Sam's countenance, and saw that it was the face of a man upon whom the shadow of a crime had fallen.

Chapter Twelve.

In which a Woman's Honour is at Stake

“John Adams has seen you!” exclaimed Rolfe, slowly. “Therefore the situation is, I understand, one of extreme peril. Is that so?”

“Exactly,” responded the millionaire, in a thin, weak voice. “But by your aid I may yet extricate myself.”

The younger man saw that the other was full of fear. Never had he seen his employer so nervous and utterly unstrung. The mystery of it all fascinated him. Statham had unwittingly acknowledged having been present at the presumed death of John Adams, and that in itself was a very suspicious circumstance.

“Whatever assistance I can give I am quite ready to render it,” he said, little dreaming what dire result would attend that offer.

“Ah, yes!” cried the old man, thankfully, grasping his secretary's hand. “I knew you would not refuse, Rolfe. If you succeed I shall owe my life to you; you understand – my life!” And he looked straight into the young man's face, adding, “And Samuel Statham never forgets to repay a service rendered.”

“I look for no repayment,” he said. “You have been so very good to my sister and myself that I owe you a deep debt of gratitude.”

“Ah! your sister. Where is she now?”

“At Cunnington’s, in Oxford Street.”

“Oh, yes! I forgot. I wrote to Cunnington myself regarding her, didn’t I? I hope she’s comfortable. If not, tell me. I’m the largest shareholder in that business.”

“You are very kind,” replied the young man. “But she always says she is most comfortable, and all the principals are very kind to her. Of course, it was hard for her at first when she commenced to earn her own living. The hours, the confinement, and the rigorous rules were irksome to a girl of her character, always been used as she had to freedom and a country life.”

“Yes,” replied the old man rather thoughtfully. “I suppose so. But if she’s getting on well, I am quite satisfied. Should she have any complaint to make, don’t fail to let me know.”

Rolfe thanked him. The old fellow, notwithstanding his eccentricities, was always a generous master.

There was a pause, during which the millionaire walked to the window, peered out to see if the shabby watcher had returned, and then came back again to his table.

“Rolfe,” he commenced, as he seated himself, with surprising calmness, “I have spoken more openly to you this afternoon than I have spoken to anyone for many years. First, you must remain in London. Just ring them up in the City, and tell them to send Sheldon here, and say that he must leave for Belgrade to-night. I will see him at seven o’clock.”

The secretary took up the transmitter of the private telephone

line to the offices of Statham Brothers in Old Broad Street, and in a few moments was delivering the principal's message to the manager.

"Sheldon will be here at seven for instructions," he said, as he replaced the transmitter.

"Then sit down, Rolfe – and listen," the old man commanded, indicating a chair at the side of the table.

The younger man obeyed, and the great financier commenced.

"You have promised your help, and also complete secrecy, have you not?"

"I shall say nothing," answered the other, at the same time eager to hear some closed page in the old man's history. "Rely upon my discretion."

He was wondering whether the grey-faced old fellow was aware of the startling events of the previous evening in Cromwell Road. His spies had told him of Maud. They perhaps had discovered that amazing truth of what had occurred in that house, now deserted and empty.

Was it possible that old Statham, being in possession of his secret, did not now fear to repose confidence in him, for he knew that if he were betrayed he could on his part make an exposure that must prove both ruinous and fatal. The crafty old financier was not the person to place himself unreservedly in the hands of any man who could possibly turn his enemy. He had an ulterior motive, without a doubt. But what it was Charles Rolfe was unable to discover.

“The mouth of that man Adams must be closed,” said the old man, in a slow, deliberate voice, “and you alone are able to accomplish it. Do this for me, and I can afford to pay well,” and he regarded the young man with a meaning look.

Was it possible that he suggested foul play. Rolfe wondered. Was he suggesting that he should lurk in some dark corner and take the life of the shabby wayfarer, who had recently returned to England after a long absence?

“It is not a question of payment,” Rolfe replied. “It is whether any effort of mine can be successful.”

“Yes; I know. I admit, Rolfe, that I was a fool. I ought to have listened to you when you first told me of his re-appearance, and I ought to have approached him and purchased his silence. I thought myself shrewd, and my cautiousness has been my undoing.”

“From the little I know, I fear that the purchase of the fellow’s silence is now out of the question. A week ago it could have been effected, but now he has cast all thought of himself to the winds, and his only object is revenge.”

“Revenge upon myself,” sighed the old man, his face growing a trifle paler as he foresaw what a terrible vengeance was within the power of that shabby stranger. “Ah! I know. He will be relentless. He has every reason to be if what has been told him had been true. A man lied – the man who is dead. Therefore the truth – the truth that would save my honour and my life – can never be told,” he added, with a desperate look upon his

countenance.

“Then you have been the victim of a liar?” Rolfe said. “Yes – of a man who, jealous of my prosperity, endeavoured to ruin me by making a false statement. But his reward came quickly. I retaliated with my financial strength, and in a year he was ruined. To recoup himself he committed forgery, was arrested, and six months later died in prison – but without confessing that what he had said concerning me was a foul invention. John Adams believed it – and because of that, among other things, is my bitterest enemy.”

“But is there no way of proving the truth?” asked Rolfe, surprised at this story.

“None. The fellow put forward in support of his story proofs which he had forged. Adams naturally believed they were genuine.”

“And where are those proofs now?”

“Probably in Adams’ possession. He has no doubt hoarded them for use at the moment of his triumph.”

Rolfe did not speak for several moments.

“A week ago those proofs might, I believe, have been purchased for a round sum.”

“Could they not be purchased now? From the man’s appearance he is penniless.”

“Not so poor as you think. If what I’ve heard is true, he is in possession of funds. His shabbiness is only assumed. Have you any knowledge of a certain man named Lyle – a short man

slightly deformed.”

“Lyle!” gasped his employer. “Do you mean Leonard Lyle? What do you know of him?”

“I saw him in the company of Adams. It is he who supplies the latter with money.”

“Lyle!” cried Statham, his eyes glaring in amazement. “Lyle here – in London?”

“He was here a week ago. You know him?”

“Know him – yes!” answered the old millionaire, hoarsely. “Are you certain that he has become Adams’ friend?”

“I saw them together with my own eyes. They were sitting in the Café Royal, in Regent Street. Adams was in evening-dress, and wore an opera-hat. They’d been to the Empire together.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all this before?” asked Statham, in a tone of blank despair. “I – I see now all the difficulties that have arisen. The pair have united to wreak their vengeance upon me, and I am powerless and unprotected.”

“But who is this man Leonard Lyle?” inquired the secretary.

“A man without a conscience. He was a mining engineer, and is now, I suppose – a short, white-moustached man, with a slightly humped back and a squeaky voice.”

“The same.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before? If Lyle knows Adams, the position is doubly dangerous,” he exclaimed, in abject dismay. “No,” he added, bitterly; “there can be no way out.”

“I said nothing because you had refused to believe.”

“You saw them together after you had told me of Adams’ return, or before?”

“After,” he replied. “Even though you refused to believe me, I continued to remain watchful in your interests and those of the firm. I spent several evenings in watching their movements.”

“Ah! you are loyal to me, I know, Rolfe. You shall not regret this. Hitherto I have not treated you well, but I will now try and atone for the manner in which I misjudged you. I ask your pardon.”

“For what?” inquired Rolfe, in surprise.

“For believing ill of you,” was all the old man vouchsafed.

“I tried to do my duty as your secretary,” was all he said.

“Your duty. You have done more. You have watched my enemies even though I sneered at your well-meant warning,” he said. “But if you have watched, you perhaps know where the pair are in hiding.”

“Lyle lives at the First Avenue Hotel, in Holborn. Adams lives in a small furnished flat in Addison Mansions, close to Addison Road railway station.”

“Lives there in preference to an hotel because he can go in and out shabby and down-at-heel without attracting comment – eh?”

“I suppose so. I had great difficulty in following him to his hiding-place without arousing his suspicions.”

“Does he really mean mischief?” asked the principal of Satham Brothers, bending slightly towards his secretary.

“Yes; undoubtedly he does. The pair are here with the

intention of bringing ruin upon you and upon the house of Statham,” was Rolfe’s quiet reply.

“Then only you can save me, Rolfe,” cried the old man, starting up wildly.

“How? Tell me, and I am ready to act upon your instructions,” Rolfe said.

The millionaire placed his hand upon the young man’s shoulder and said:

“Repeat those words.”

Rolfe did so.

“And you will not seek to inquire the reason of a request I may make to you, even though it may sound an extraordinary and perhaps mysterious one?”

“I will act as you wish, without desiring to know your motives.”

The great financier stood looking straight into his secretary’s eyes. He was deeply in earnest, for his very life now depended upon the other’s assent. How could he put the proposal to the man before him?

“Then I take that as a promise, Rolfe,” he said at last. “You will not withdraw. You will swear to assist me at all hazards – to save me from these men.”

“I swear.”

“Good! Then to-day – nay, at this very hour – you must make what no doubt will be to you a great sacrifice.”

“What do you mean?” asked Rolfe, quickly.

“I mean,” the old man said, in a very slow distinct voice – “I mean that you must first sacrifice the honour of the woman you love – Maud Petrovitch.”

“Maud Petrovitch!” he gasped, utterly mystified.

“Yes,” he answered. “You have promised to save me – you have sworn to assist me, and the sacrifice is imperative! It is her honour – or my death!”

Chapter Thirteen.

Describes the Man from Nowhere

Late that same night, in the small and rather well-furnished dining-room of a flat close to Addison Road station, the beetle-browed man known to some as John Adams and to others as Jean Adam was seated in a comfortable armchair smoking a cigarette.

He was no longer the shabby, half-famished looking stranger who had been watching outside Statham's house in Park Lane, but rather dandified in his neat dinner jacket, glossy shirt-front, and black tie. Adventurer was written all over his face. He was a man whose whole life history had been a romance and who had knocked about in various odd and out-of-the-way corners of the world. A cosmopolitan to the backbone, he, like his friend Leonard Lyle, whom he was at that moment expecting, hated the trammels of civilised society, and their lives had mostly been spent in places where human life was cheap and where justice was unknown.

Alone in that small room where the dinner-cloth had been removed and a decanter and glasses had been placed by his one elderly serving-woman, who had now gone for the night, he was muttering to himself as he smoked – murmuring incoherent words that sounded much like threats.

It was difficult to recognise in this well-groomed,

gentlemanly-looking man, with the diamond in his shirt-front and the sparkling ring upon his finger, the low-looking tramp whose eyes had encountered those of the man whose ruin he now sought to encompass.

In half a dozen capitals of the world he was known as Jean Adam, for he spoke French perfectly, and passed as a French subject, a native of Algiers; but in London, New York, and Montreal he was known as the wandering and adventurous Englishman John Adams.

Whether he was really English was doubtful. True, he spoke English without the slightest trace of accent, yet sometimes in his gesture, when unduly excited, there was unconsciously betrayed his foreign birth.

His French was as perfect as his English. He spoke with an accent of the South, and none ever dreamed that he could at the same time speak the pure, unadulterated Cockney slang.

He had just glanced at his watch, and knit his brows when the electric bell rang, and he rose to admit a short, triangular-faced, queer-looking little old man, whose back was bent and whose body seemed too large for his legs. He, too, was in evening-dress, and carried his overcoat across his arm.

"I began to fear, old chap, that you couldn't come," Adams exclaimed, as he hung his friend's coat in the narrow hall. "You didn't acknowledge my wire."

"I couldn't until too late. I was out," the other explained, in a tone of apology. "Well," he asked, with a sigh, as he stretched

himself before he seated himself in the proffered chair, “what has happened?”

“A lot, my dear fellow. We shall come out on top yet.”

“Be more explicit. What do you mean?”

“What I say,” was Adams’ response. “I’ve seen old Statham to-day.”

“And he’s seen you – eh?”

“Of course he has. And he’s scared out of his senses – thinks he’s seen a ghost, most likely,” he laughed, in triumph. “But he’ll find I’m much more than a ghost before he’s much older, the canting old blackguard.”

Lyle thought for a second.

“The sight of you has forearmed him! It was rather injudicious just at this moment, wasn’t it?”

“Not at all. I meant to give him a surprise. If I’d have gone up to the house, rung the bell, and asked to see him, I should have been refused. He sees absolutely nobody, for there’s a mystery connected with the house. Nobody has ever been inside.”

“What!” exclaimed the old hunchbacked mining engineer. “That’s interesting! Tell me more about it. Is it like the haunted house in Berkeley Square about which people used to talk so much years ago?”

“I don’t think it’s ever been alleged to be haunted,” responded Adams. “Yet there are several weird and amazing stories told of it, and of the grim shadows which overhang it both night and day.”

“What stories have you heard?” asked his companion, taking a cigarette from the box, for he had suddenly become much interested.

“Well, it is said that the place is the most gorgeously furnished of any house in that select quarter, and that it is full of art treasures, old silver, miniatures, and antique furniture, for old Statham is a well-known collector and is known to have purchased many very fine specimens of antiques during the past few years. They say that, having furnished the place from kitchen to garret in the most costly manner possible, he sought out the old love of his earlier days – a woman who assisted him in the foundation of his fortune, and invited her to inspect the house. They went round it together, and after luncheon he proposed marriage to her. To his chagrin, she declined the honour of becoming the wife of a millionaire.”

“She was a bit of a fool, I should suppose,” remarked the hunchback.

“They were fond enough of each other. She was nearly twenty years his junior, and though they had been separated for a good many years, he was still devoted to her. When she refused to marry him, there was a scene. And at last she was compelled to admit the truth – she was the wife of another! A quarter of an hour later she left the house in tears, and from that moment the beautiful mansion, with the exception of two or three rooms, has been closed. He will allow nobody to pass upstairs, and the place remains the same as on that day when all his hopes of happiness

were shattered.”

“But you said there were stories concerning the house,” Lyle remarked, between the whiffs of his cigarette.

“So there are. Both yesterday and to-day I’ve been making inquiries and been told many curious things. A statement, for instance, made to me is to the effect that one night about a month ago the chauffeur of the great Lancashire cotton-spinner living a few doors away was seated on the car at two o’clock in the morning, ready to take two of his master’s guests down to their home near Epsom, when he noticed Statham’s windows all brilliantly lit.

“From the drawing-room above came the sounds of waltz music – a piano excellently played. This struck the man as curious, well knowing the local belief that the upper portion of the house was kept rigorously closed. Yet, from all appearances, the old millionaire was that night entertaining guests, which was further proved when a quarter of an hour later the door opened and old Levi, the man-servant, came forth. As he did so, a four-wheeled cab, which had been waiting opposite, a little further up the road, drew across, and a few moments later both Levi and Statham appeared, struggling with a long, narrow black box, which, with the cabman’s aid, was put on top of the vehicle. The box much resembled a coffin, and seemed unusually heavy.

“So hurried and excited were the men that they took no notice of the motor car, and the cab next moment drove away, the man no doubt having previously received his orders. The music had

ceased, and as soon as the cab had departed the lights in the windows were extinguished, and the weird home remained in darkness.”

“Very curious. Looks about as though there had been some foul play, doesn’t it?” Lyle suggested.

“That’s what the chauffeur suspects. I’ve spoken with him myself, and he tells me that the box was so like a coffin that the whole incident held him fascinated,” Adams said. “And, of course, this story getting about, has set other people on the watch. Indeed, only last night a very curious affair occurred. It was witnessed by a man who earns his living washing carriages in the mews close by, and who has for years taken an interest in the mysterious home of Samuel Statham.

“He had been washing carriages till very late, and at about half-past two in the morning was going up Park Lane towards Edgware Road, where he lives, when his attention was drawn to the fact that as he passed Statham’s house the front door was slightly ajar. Somebody was waiting there for the expected arrival of a stranger, and, hearing the carriage washer’s footstep, had opened the door in readiness. There was no light in the hall, and the man’s first suspicion was that of burglars about to leave the place.

“Next instant, however, the reputation for mystery which the place had earned, occurred to him, and he resolved to pass on and watch. This he did, retiring into a doorway a little farther down, and standing in the shadow unobserved he waited.

“Half an hour passed, but nothing unusual occurred, until just after the clock had struck three, a rather tall, thin man passed quietly along. He was in evening-dress, and wore pumps, for his tread was noiseless. The man describes him as an aristocratic-looking person, and evidently a foreigner. At Statham’s door he suddenly halted, looked up and down furtively to satisfy himself that he was not being watched, and then slipped inside.”

“And what then?” inquired Lyle, much interested.

“A very queer circumstance followed,” went on the cosmopolitan. “There was, an hour and a half later, an exact repetition of the scene witnessed by the chauffeur.”

“What! the black trunk?”

“Yes. A cab drove up near to the house, and, at signal from Levi, came up to the kerb. Then the long, heavy box was brought out by the servant and his master, heaved up on to the cab, which drove away in the direction of the Marble Arch.”

“Infernally suspicious,” remarked the hunchback, tossing his cigarette end into the grate. “Didn’t the washer take note of the number of the cab?”

“No. That’s the unfortunate part of it. Apparently he didn’t notice the crawling four-wheeler until he saw Levi come forth and give the signal.”

“And the aristocratic-looking foreigner? Could he recognise him again?”

“He says he could.”

“That was last night – eh?”

“Yes.”

“There may be some police inquiries regarding a missing foreigner,” remarked Lyle, thoughtfully. “If so, his information may be valuable. How did you obtain it?”

“From his own lips.”

“Then we had better wait, and watch to see if anybody is reported missing. Certainly that house is one of mystery.”

“Sam Statham is unscrupulous. I know him to my cost,” Adams remarked.

“And so do I,” Lyle declared. “If what I suspect is true, then we shall make an exposure that will startle and horrify the world.”

“You mean regarding the foreigner of last night?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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