Le Queux William

The Bond of Black

William Le Queux
The Bond of Black

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23155587
The Bond of Black:

Содержание

Le Queux William
The Bond of Black

Preface
Author's Note

In this story I have dealt with an extraordinary phase of modern life in London, which to the majority will come as a startling revelation.

Some will, perhaps, declare that no such amazing state of things exists in this, the most enlightened age the world has known. To such, I can only assert that in this decadent civilisation of ours the things which I have described actually take place in secret, as certain facts in my possession indisputably show.

It is no unhealthy problem of sex, or of the ethics of divorce; no story of woman's faithlessness or man's misplaced confidence, but a subject upon which I believe no English author has yet touched, and one which I anticipate will prove interesting, and point a wholesome moral. It may not be out of place to add that I have been compelled to touch the subject with as light a hand as the purpose of the story will allow, in respect for the susceptibilities of the reader, and because it is furthest from my intention to sow evil broadcast.

Chapter One
London's Delight

It is a remarkable sequence of events, a story which in these days of high civilisation is so extraordinary as to almost stagger belief. Yet the higher the civilisation the more refined are its evil-doers, the more ingenious is the innate devilry of man, the more skilful are those who act with malice aforethought.

In replacing this strange drama of present-day life before the reader – a drama of love, of self-sacrifice, of evil passions, and of all uncharitableness – I, Clifton Cleeve, am compelled to speak of myself; to recount the strange adventures which befell me, and to expose to the public gaze the undercurrents of a curious phase of society, of the existence of which few dream. If, therefore, I am forced to the constant use of the first person singular, it is in no egotistical sense, but merely in order that my strange story should be properly understood, and that the blame which rightly attaches to me should not be borne by others. In this narrative of curious circumstances are facts that will astound, perhaps even terrify; nevertheless be it recollected that I myself was an unwilling actor in this drama, and that I only relate that which. I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears.

Even now, as I recall the past, there are scenes before me as vivid in every detail as though the events occurred but an hour

ago; scenes which could not fail to leave a life-long impression upon the mind of any man, so unusual, so striking, so utterly extraordinary were they.

A little more than two years have now elapsed since that well-remembered night when the prologue was enacted. Yet the months that have gone by have seemed a veritable century of time, for have I not trodden the path of life overburdened by a weight of weariness, my youth sapped by vain longings and heart-sickening disappointment, my natural desire for existence blunted by an ever-recurring sorrow, and a constant, irritating, soul-maddening mystery, which lay unsolved, a barrier between myself and happiness. I am no faint-heart, yet as I live again those breathless months of anxiety, of fascination and of terror, I am again seized by that same fear which two years ago consumed me, and held me dumbfounded.

I was not feeling well. Having risen late after a dance, I had spent the afternoon over a book, dined at home in my chambers in Charing Cross Mansions, and had afterwards gone out for an idle stroll across Leicester Square and up Piccadilly. The night was moonless, but brilliant for October, yet the atmosphere was of that artificial clearness which in London renders the street-lamps unusually bright, and is always precursory of rain. At the corner of Park Lane I turned back, hesitating whether to turn into the Naval and Military for a gossip, or spend an hour at a theatre.

London had finished its long and toilsome day. Tired Hammersmith and jaded Notting Hill crowded into the

omnibuses, eager to get to their homes without a moment's delay, while gay Belgravia and Kensington were starting forth upon their night of delight, to be spent within that little area of half a mile around Charing Cross, wherein centres all the life and diversion of the giant metropolis. Gay London is very concentrated.

A brazen-lunged man pushed the special *Standard* under my nose, saying – "'Ere y'are, sir. All the winners!"

But I uttered one word, expressive though not polite, and strode on; for, truth to tell, I had read the paper an hour before, and by it discovered to my chagrin that I had been rather hard hit over a race. Therefore, a list of the winners being pushed into my face by this man was an unintentional insult. Yes, I was decidedly out of sorts.

Self-absorbed, a trifle melancholy, and undecided where to spend the evening, I was passing the corner of Bond Street, when I felt a hand upon my arm, as a voice exclaimed —

"Hullo, Clifton, old fellow! You in town? How long have you been back from Tixover?"

I looked up quickly and saw one of my oldest and closest friends, Roddy Morgan, or, to be more exact, the Honourable Roderick Morgan, a tall, smart, good-looking man about my own age, thirty, or perhaps a couple of years my senior, with dark eyes and hair, well-cut features and a merry, amused expression which did not belie his natural temperament. Roddy was a younger son who had gone the pace as rapidly as most men, until he

had suddenly found himself with a sufficient quantity of writs and judgment summonses to paper his room with, and in a very fair way to becoming a bankrupt. But of judgment summonses the ever-merry Roddy had once laughingly declared that "no home was complete without them;" and at the critical juncture a generous maternal uncle, who was likewise a Duke, had very considerately placed the easy-going Roddy on his legs again. And not only this, but he had induced Roddy, who was an excellent speaker, to stand for a county constituency, and paid his election expenses, with the result that he now found himself representing the important division of South-West Sussex in the House.

We clasped hands heartily, and as I explained how three days ago I had come up from Tixover, my father's place in the country, he strode on at my side, gossiping about our mutual friends, and telling me the latest amusing story from the House.

"Ah! my dear fellow," he said, "a chap in Parliament has a pretty hard time of it in these days when the Opposition papers in his constituency keep their eye upon him, ready at any moment to fling mud, to charge him with negligence if he refuses to ask some ridiculous question of the Government, or to comment sarcastically if he chances to miss a division."

"But you like it," I said. "At Oxford you were always to the forefront at the Union. Everybody, from the 'Honourable George Nathaniel' downwards, prophesied that you'd some day place your silk hat on a bench in the House."

"I know, I know," he answered, rather impatiently, "but the

truth is I only allowed myself to be put up because my old uncle pressed me. He made me a present of a neat ten thou', so what could I do? I was simply led as a lamb to the slaughter, and nowadays I get deputations waiting upon me, headed by the butcher of Little Twaddlington, and consisting of the inn-keeper and the tinker of that rural centre of civilisation. I'm civil to them, of course, but hang it, old man, I can't promise to ask all their foolish questions. I'm not built that way. When I make a promise, I keep it. Members nowadays, however, will promise anything on earth, from obtaining an autograph for the butcher's wife's collection to the bringing down of manna from above."

I saw that Roddy was discontented, and was considerably surprised. His Parliamentary honours weighed heavily upon him. He had joined the St. Stephen's Club in the manner of all staunch Conservative members, and I attributed some of his dissatisfaction to the fact that he was nightly compelled to dine with the old fogies there, so as to be within reach for divisions. The Club is only across the road from the House, standing at the corner of the Embankment, and connected with Palace Yard by a subterranean passage. When the division-bell rings in the House it also rings in the club dining-room, and anxious members leave their soup, dash through the tunnel and vote, and come back to finish it. Indeed, it is no uncommon thing for this to be repeated several times in the course of dinner, causing much puffing and grumbling on the part of the stout and gouty members who, overtaken in this helter-skelter to vote, are very often shut out and

find they have had their scramble for nothing. Then on returning to table they have to withstand the chaff of the younger and more active legislators, of whom Roddy was a very fair specimen.

"Going down to the House to-night?" I inquired.

"No. It's Wednesday, thank Heaven! I've been down there this afternoon, but we rose at six. Where are you toddling?"

"Anywhere," I answered. "I want to look in at the Naval and Military for a letter first."

"From a charmer, eh?" he asked, with a merry twinkle.

"No," I answered briefly.

"You're a rum chap, Clifton," he said. "You never seem to take girls up the river, to the theatre, or to the races, as other men do. I'm beginning to think that you don't like womankind."

"Well, I don't know. I fancy I've had as many little affairs of the heart as most men," I answered.

"Somebody was saying the other day that you were likely to be engaged to May Symonds. Is it true?"

"Whoever said so is certainly premature," I laughed. "Then you don't deny it, old chap?"

I shrugged my shoulders, smiled, and together we ascended the club steps.

After a drink we lit cigars and went forth again, strolling along to the Empire, where in the lounge we idled about, chatting with many men we knew, watching the acrobats, the conjurors, the eccentric singers, the ballet, and the other variety items which went to make up the attractive programme.

Leaning upon the plush-covered backs of the circle seats, we smoked and chatted as we watched the ballet, and subsequently entered the bar, where there had congregated about a dozen men all more or less known to me. We joined them, my friend the irrepressible young Tory Member being hailed by a youthful sprig of the Stock Exchange as "The Prime Minister," whereat there was a round of hearty laughter.

We had chatted for some moments when suddenly Roddy started as if he had encountered some one whose presence was disagreeable in the extreme, and turning to me, said in a hurried half-whisper —

"I'm off, old chap. Forgot I have another engagement. Good night."

And ere I could reply he had slipped away, and was lost in the chattering crowd.

At the time it struck me that this action was strange, for I felt sure he had seen somebody he did not wish to meet, and reflected that perhaps it was some unwelcome creditor or other. I continued chatting with the other men, until some twenty minutes later I left them and crossed to the little bar where cigars are sold, in order to get something to smoke. The lounge was then so crowded that locomotion was difficult. I was forced to elbow my way to the end of the promenade.

The curtain had fallen upon the ballet, the orchestra was playing the National Anthem, and the place was congested by people coming from their seats in the grand circle, and making

their way to the exit. The air was heavy with tobacco-smoke mingled with the odour of a thousand perfumes, for the chiffons of each woman who passed seemed to exhale a different scent, from the nauseous patchouli to the latest patent of the ingenious Parisian perfumer.

Having bought my cigar and lit it, I stood chatting with another man I knew while the theatre emptied, then parting from him, I returned to the bar, only to find my group of friends had dispersed.

I wandered out to the vestibule, and as I stood glancing round, thinking it unusual that Roddy should have left in so mysterious a manner, my gaze encountered that of an extraordinarily pretty girl.

A pair of wistful blue eyes with a half-frightened expression gazed out of a face which was beautiful in its every line, a face saintly in its expression of innocence and youth. As far as I could judge she was about twenty, the paleness of her cheeks showing that no artificial colouring had been added to tinge them, like those of the women about her, while from beneath her hat a mass of fair hair strayed upon her brow, imparting an almost childlike softness to her face; her blue eyes were clear and wide-open, as if in wonder, and her mouth half-parted showed an even row of perfect teeth, while her dimpled chin was pointed and altogether charming.

About her figure was a grace of outline too seldom seen in London women, a suppleness of the hips that seemed almost

foreign; yet the face was pure, sweet and winning, an altogether typical English face, refined, with a complexion perfect. In her dress was nothing startling, nothing calculated to arrest the attention of the sterner sex, nothing vulgar nor loud, for it was of dead black grenadine, relieved by a little white lace at the throat and cuffs – an almost funereal robe in contrast with the gay-coloured silks and daring ornamentation of the loud-tongued women who swept past her with inquiring glance and chattering gaily as they made their way out.

I looked at her a second time, for I confess to being attracted by her quietness of dress, her natural dignity, and the agitation within her which she was trying in vain to conceal. Demure and unaffected, she was so utterly out of place in that centre of, London gaiety that I could not help pausing to watch her. Those of her sex who passed looked somewhat askance at her and smiled among themselves, while more than one man ogled her through his monocle. But not a single glance did she bestow upon any in return save myself.

In dismay she looked slowly around the well-lit vestibule and out into the street, where cabs and carriages were driving off. Then she gazed about her, evidently hesitating how to act. There was a hard curl at the corners of her mouth, and a contraction of the eyelids which showed me that tears were ready to start. Yes, there was no doubt whatever that she was in distress, and needed assistance.

She was speaking earnestly with one of the uniformed

doorkeepers, an elderly attendant whom I knew quite well, a highly-respectable pensioner in whom the management reposed the greatest confidence.

Noticing me standing there, he came forward with a military salute, saying —

"Excuse me, sir. But I have a lady here who's in a rather curious difficulty. You know London well, sir?"

"I think so," I answered, smiling.

"Well, will you speak with her a moment, sir?"

"What's her trouble?" I inquired, somewhat surprised, nevertheless crossing with him to where she stood, and raising my hat. I confess that she was so eminently beautiful, her face so absolutely flawless in its contour and innocent in its expression, that she had fascinated me. I was beneath the spell of her marvellous beauty.

Many women had smiled upon me, women who were more than passing fair; but never had my eyes fallen upon one whose purity of soul was so mirrored in her eyes, or whose face was so childlike and so perfect. Those tendrils, soft as floss silk, were of that delicate gold which the majority of women lose with their teens; those eyes possessed the true clearness which innocence alone can impart.

"If I can render you any assistance I will do so with pleasure," I said, addressing her, adding, "I noticed a moment ago that you appeared to be in distress."

"You are extremely kind," she answered, raising her eyes to

mine for an instant. Her glance was steady and searching, and I saw that she was undecided whether to trust me. "You were quite correct in thinking I am in distress, and if you really could help me I should be so much obliged."

"Then what troubles you?" I inquired, well satisfied with her answer, and anxious that she should make me her confidant.

"I have been separated from my friends, and am a stranger to London," she replied. "You will laugh," she added, "but I am really lost, for I don't know my way back to my friends' house."

"You know the address, I suppose?" I laughed, for to me the idea of one being thus lost in London was amusing.

"Yes: Ellerdale Street."

"Where?"

"I don't know," she answered, "except that it's a long way from here; somewhere on the other side of London. We came by train."

"Ellerdale Street," I repeated reflectively. "I've never heard of it." There are, of course, thousands of streets in the suburbs of which nobody ever hears, save when somebody commits a crime of more than ordinary violence, and papers give the unknown thoroughfare undue prominence.

"But the strange thing is that my friends, two ladies, should have disappeared so quickly," she went on, pausing on the pavement before the theatre as we went out and gazing blankly about her. "They must surely have missed me, and if so, one would think they would remain till everybody had gone, and then search for me."

"Yes," I said, "it is certainly rather remarkable," and together we walked to the corner of Leicester Street, where there is another exit of the theatre, but my pretty companion could discover neither of the ladies who had accompanied her.

Her voice was low and refined, her well-gloved hands small; yet her severe style of dress seemed to speak of poverty which she would fain conceal. She wore no jewellery, not even a brooch; and I fell to wondering whether she might be a governess, or perhaps a shop-assistant who had come from a provincial town to "better herself" in London.

For fully a quarter of an hour we strolled together, backwards and forwards before the railings of the Empire, which soon became dark and deserted, until we were practically the only loiterers. It certainly struck me as more than strange that her companions, knowing her to be a stranger to London, should thus leave her to her own devices in Leicester Square at midnight. Again, it was curious that she herself should only know the name of the road, and not the district.

"You said your friends live in Ellerdale Street," I exclaimed at last, after we had been chatting about the performance, and she had criticised the singers with an artlessness which betrayed that she was entirely unaccustomed to the music-hall. "The best course will be to ask a cabman."

A hansom was standing at the kerb.

"Do you know of any street named Ellerdale Street?" I asked the driver.

"No, sir, I don't," he answered, after a pause, during which time he thought deeply. "There's Ellerslie Road up in Shep'erd's Bush, and Ellesmere Road out at Bow, but I don't know of any others." Then, turning to another man on a cab behind him, he asked:

"I say, Sandy, do you know Ellerdale Street?"

"No, don't know it at all. Ask a policeman," was the other's gruff response.

"I'm giving you a lot of trouble," my companion said apologetically. "It is really too bad, and you must think me very foolish to get separated from my friends like this. How it occurred I really don't know. They went out in front of me, and the crowd kept me from coming out of my seat. Then, when I got into the promenade I found they had vanished, as if by magic."

"It's evident that the street is not well-known," I said, "for hansom-cab drivers are really encyclopaedias of London geography, having to pass an examination in it before being granted a driver's licence by the police. It must be somewhere far out in the suburbs."

Then a thought suddenly occurred to me.

"The only thing I can suggest," I continued, "is that you should walk round to my chambers in Charing Cross Road, for I have there a Directory which will no doubt give us some clue to the whereabouts of your friends."

She paused, and looked at me rather strangely I thought. I had expected her to be eager to act as I suggested, but found her

somewhat loth to accompany me. Yet, was this not natural? I was an utter stranger. Perhaps, too, she had seen some drama in the provinces where the villain invariably wears a starched shirt-front and smokes cigarettes, for it seemed as though she held me in fear.

"You are very kind," she answered, "but I really think – "

"No," I said, divining her thoughts. "It is impossible for you to wander the streets until morning. You must allow me to help you. Come."

"I've been thinking it would be best, perhaps, for me to go to an hotel," she said.

"As you wish," I replied. "But you must find out this unknown street either now or to-morrow morning, and if you take my advice you will lose no time in ascertaining where your friends really live, for they will be anxious about you."

For a few moments she reflected, then exclaimed —

"Yes, you're right after all. I'm sure you are extremely kind."

And together we crossed the Square and continued along Cranbourne Street to the colossal block of redbrick flats wherein my chambers were situated.

Chapter Two
This Crucifix

On ascending to the third floor, Simes, my man, opened the door and she advanced timidly down the tiny passage to my sitting-room. It was not a very large apartment, but I had furnished it comfortably a couple of years before, and it presented a rather cosy appearance with the table-cover and velvet *portières* of sage green to match, a couple of big roomy saddlebag chairs of club dimensions, a high, carved-oak buffet, with its strip of white cloth spread as daintily as in the dining-room of any well-appointed house, for Simes was an excellent man, as natty as a chamber-maid. He took a pride in keeping my rooms spick and span. An ex-trooper of Hussars, he had seen service with me in Egypt before I left the Service, and was a model servant, obeying with military precision, and was eminently trustworthy, save where whiskey was concerned. He could not be expected to resist the temptation of taking a drop from my tantalus on odd occasions.

Upon the walls of my room were a few choice pictures which I had purchased from time to time, together with a pencil caricature of myself drawn by one of the *Punch* artists who was an old friend, and a couple of plaques which had been given me by the lady who painted them. In the middle of the room stood

the square table with a bowl of flowers in the centre, on one side of the fireplace a revolving bookstand, and on the other nearest the window, which looked down upon Charing Cross Road, a small triangular table of rosewood, whereon stood some curios which I had picked up during my pleasure trip round the world.

I give this detailed description of my own quarters because it will be found necessary in order to properly understand the story.

"What a pretty room!" was my fair unknown's first exclamation.

"Do you think so? I'm glad you like it," I laughed, for most of my visitors were in the habit of making similar observations. "Do sit down," and I drew forward one of the big armchairs.

With a word of thanks she seated herself, and when I placed a hassock at her feet she stretched out one tiny foot upon it coquettishly, although with such natural grace that there was nothing fast about her.

I stood upon the hearthrug looking at her, and when our eyes met she laughed a bright, merry laugh, all the misgivings she had previously entertained having now vanished.

"First, you must be faint, for it is so late," and touching the bell Simes instantly answered, and I ordered port wine and glasses.

She protested instantly, but on being pressed sipped half a glass and left the remainder.

We chatted on as Simes, who had been waiting on us, with a glance of wonder, left and closed the door.

Then, rising, I took down the Directory from the bookcase

and opened it at the "Streets." She rose from her chair, and gazed eagerly upon the great puzzling volume until I came to Ellerdale Street.

"Ellerdale Street, Lewisham," I read aloud. "From Porson Street to Ermine Road. Do those names bring back to you any recollection of the whereabouts of your friends' house?"

"No," she reflected, with a perplexed expression. "I've never heard of them."

"The street is apparently near Loampit Vale," I said. "That would be the principal thoroughfare. You no doubt came from Lewisham Road Station by the Chatham and Dover Railway to Victoria – or perhaps to Ludgate Hill?"

She shook her head. Apparently she had not the slightest idea of the geography of London. Upon this point her mind was an utter blank.

"How long have you been in London?" I inquired.

"Nearly a week; but I've not been out before. My aunt has been ill," she explained.

"Then you live in the country, I suppose?"

"Yes, I have lived in Warwickshire, but my home lately has been in France."

"In France!" I exclaimed, surprised. "Where?"

"At Montgeron, not far from Paris."

"And you have come to London on a visit?"

"No. I have come to live here," she replied; adding, "It is absurd that the first evening I go out I am so utterly lost. I know

my way about Paris quite well."

"But Paris is not London," I said. "The suburbs of our metropolis are veritable Saharas, with their miles and miles of streets where the houses are exactly similar, as if the jerry-builders had not two ideas of architecture."

It certainly was extraordinary that none of the thoroughfares which I had named gave her any clue to this remote street in which was situated her temporary home. She read down the names of the occupiers of the houses, but could not find her aunt's name. True, there were some omissions, as there always are, and I began to fear that the Directory would not help us.

On turning over the page, however, I saw in italics: "*Ellerdale Road. See Hampstead*."

"Ah!" I cried, "there is another; but it's Ellerdale Road," and after a few moments' eager search I discovered it. "This road runs from Fitzjohn's Avenue to Arkwright Road in Frognal. Have you ever heard of them before?"

It was really remarkable that a young girl should thus be so utterly lost in London. I, a man-about-town, knew the West End as I knew the way around my own chambers; and I thought I knew London; but now, on reflection, saw how utterly ignorant I was of the great world which lies beyond those few thoroughfares wherein are situated the theatres, the clubs, and the houses of the wealthy. For the bachelor who lives the life of London the world revolves around Piccadilly Circus.

My pretty companion stood puzzled. It was apparent that she

had never heard of any of the thoroughfares I had mentioned, yet it was equally extraordinary that any persons living in London should be entirely ignorant of the district in which they resided.

"The thoroughfare in Hampstead is Ellerdale Road, while that in Lewisham is Ellerdale Street. It must be either one or the other, for they are the only two in London?" I said.

"How far are they apart?" she inquired, looking up from the book, dismayed.

"I don't know the distance," I was compelled to admit. "But the one is on one side of London, and the other is in the opposite direction – perhaps nearly eight miles away."

"I believe it's Ellerdale Street. I've always called it that, and neither of my aunts has corrected me." Then suddenly, as she glanced round the room, she started as if in terror, and pointing to the little side-table, cried —

"Oh, look!"

I turned quickly, but saw nothing.

"Why, what is it?" I inquired in quick concern. But in an instant her face, a moment before suddenly blanched by some mysterious fear, relaxed into a smile, as she answered —

"Nothing! It was really nothing. I thought – I thought I saw something in that corner."

"Saw something!" I exclaimed, advancing to the table. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," and she laughed a strange, forced laugh. "It was really nothing, I assure you."

"But surely your imagination did not cause you to start like that," I said dubiously. She was, I felt convinced, trying to conceal something from me. Could she, I wondered, be subject to hallucinations?

Then, as if to change the subject, she crossed to my side, and pointing to an antique ivory cross upon an ebony stand, much battered and yellow with age, which I had picked up in a shop on the Ponte Vecchio, in Florence, long ago, she exclaimed —

"What a quaint old crucifix!"

And she took it up and examined it closely, as a connoisseur might look at it.

"The figure, I see, is in silver," she observed. "And it is very old. Italian, I should say."

"Yes," I replied, rather surprised at her knowledge. "How did you know that?"

But she smiled, and declared that she only guessed it to be so, as I had half an hour ago spoken of a recent winter spent in Italy. Then, after admiring it, she placed it down, and again turned, sighed heavily, and bent over the Directory, which was still open upon the table.

As she did so, she suddenly burst forth —

"At last! I've found it. Look! there can be no mistake. It isn't Ellerdale Street, but Ellerdale Road!"

And bending beside her I read where she pointed with her slim finger the words, "16, Popejoy, Mrs"

"Is that your aunt's name?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"And yours?" I asked.

But she pursed up her lips and did not seem inclined to impart this knowledge to me.

"My name is really of no account," she said. "We shall not meet again."

"Not meet again?" I cried, for the thought of losing a friend so beautiful and so charming was an exceedingly unhappy one. "Why shall we not meet? You are going to live in London now, you say," and taking a card from my cigarette-case I handed it to her.

With her clear, brilliant eyes fixed upon mine, she took the card almost mechanically, then glanced at it.

"I'm greatly indebted to you, Mr Cleeve," she said. "But I don't see there is any necessity for you to know my name. It is sufficient, surely, for you to reflect that you one night befriended one who was in distress."

"But I must know your name," I protested. "Come, do tell me."

She hesitated, then lifted her eyes again to mine and answered —

"My name is Aline."

"Aline," I repeated. "A name as charming as its owner."

"You want to pay me compliments," she laughed, blushing deeply.

"And your surname?" I went on.

"Cloud," she replied. "Aline Cloud."

"Then your aunt's name is Popejoy, and you are living at 16, Ellerdale Road, Hampstead," I said, laughing. "Well, we have discovered it all at last."

"Yes, thanks to you," she replied, with a sigh of relief. Then looking anxiously at the clock, she added, "It's late, therefore I must be going. I can get there in a cab, I suppose?"

"Certainly," I answered; "and if you'll wait a moment while I get a thick coat I'll see you safely there – if I may be allowed."

"No," she said, putting up her little hand as if to arrest me, "I couldn't think of taking you out all that way at this hour."

I laughed, for I was used to late hours at the club, and had on many a morning crossed Leicester Square on my way home when the sun was shining.

So disregarding her, I went into my room, exchanged my light overcoat for a heavier one, placed a silk muffler around my neck, and having fortified myself with a whiskey and soda, we both went out, and entering a cab started forth on our long drive up to Hampstead.

The cabman was ignorant of Ellerdale Road, but when I directed him to Fitzjohn's Avenue he at once asserted that he would quickly find it.

"I hope we may meet again. We must!" I exclaimed, when at last we grew near our journey's end. "This is certainly a very strange meeting, but if at any time I can render you another service, command me."

"You are extremely good," she answered, turning to me after

looking out fixedly upon the dark, deserted street, for rain was falling, and it was muddy and cheerless. “We had, however, better not meet again.”

“Why?” I inquired. Her beauty had cast a spell about me, and I was capable of any foolishness.

“Because it is unnecessary,” she replied, with a strange vagueness, yet without hesitation.

We were passing at that moment the end of a winding thoroughfare, and at a word the cabman turned his horse and proceeded slowly in search of Number 16.

Without much difficulty we found it, a good-sized detached house, built in modern style, with gable ends and long windows; a house of a character far better than I had expected. I had believed the street to be a mean one, of those poor-looking houses which bear the stamp of weekly rents, but was surprised to find a quiet, eminently respectable suburban road at the very edge of London. At the back of the houses were open fields, and one or two of the residences had carriage-drives before them.

There was still a light over the door, which showed that the lost one was expected, and as she descended she allowed her little, well-gloved hand to linger for a moment in mine.

“Good night,” she said, merrily, “and thank you ever so much. I shall never forget your kindness – never.”

“Then you will repay me by meeting me again?” I urged.

“No,” she answered, in an instant serious. “It is best not.”

“Why? I trust I have not offended you?”

"Of course not. It is because you have been my friend to-night that I wish to keep apart from you."

"Is that the way you treat your friends?" I inquired.

"Yes," she replied, meaningly. Then, after a pause, added, "I have no desire to bring evil upon you."

"Evil!" I exclaimed, gazing in wonderment at her beauty. "What evil can you possibly bring upon me?"

"You will, perhaps, discover some day," she answered, with a hollow, artificial laugh. "But I'm so very late. Good night, and thank you again so much."

Then turning quickly, with a graceful bow she entered the gate leading to the house, and rang the bell.

I saw her admitted by a smart maid, and having lit a fresh cigarette settled myself in a corner, and told the cabman to drive back to Charing Cross Mansions.

The man opened the trap-door in the roof of the conveyance, and began to chat, as night-cabmen will do to while away the time, yet the outlook was very dismal – that broad, long, never-ending road glistening with wet, and lit by two straight rows of street-lamps as far as the eye could reach right down to Oxford Street.

I was thinking regretfully of Aline; of her grace, her beauty, and of the strange circumstances in which we had become acquainted. Her curious declaration that she might cause me some mysterious evil sorely puzzled me, and I felt impelled to seek some further explanation.

I entered my chambers with my latch-key, and the ever-watchful Simes came forward, took my hat and coat, drew forward my particular armchair, and placed the whiskey and syphon at my elbow.

I had mixed a final drink, and was raising my glass, when suddenly my eyes fell upon the little triangular side-table where the curios were displayed.

What I saw caused me to start and open my eyes in amazement. Then I walked across to inspect it more closely.

The ivory crucifix, the most treasured in my collection, had been entirely consumed by fire. Nothing remained of it but its ashes, a small white heap, the silver effigy fused to a mass.

"Simes!" I cried. "What's the meaning of this?"

"I don't know, sir," he answered, pale in alarm. "I noticed it almost the instant you had left the house. The ashes were quite warm then."

"Are you sure you haven't had an accident with it?" I queried, looking him straight in the face.

"No, sir; I swear I haven't," he replied. "Your cab had hardly driven away when I found it just as it is now. I haven't touched it."

I looked, and noted its position. It was in the exact spot where Aline had placed it after taking it in her hand.

I recollected, too, that it was there where she had seen the object which had so disturbed her.

That some deep and extraordinary mystery was connected with this sudden spontaneous destruction of the crucifix was

plain. It was certainly an uncanny circumstance.

I stood before that little table, my eyes fixed upon the ashes, amazed, open-mouthed, petrified.

A vague, indefinite shadow of evil had fallen upon me.

Chapter Three
Woman's World

The more I reflected, the greater mystery appeared to surround my pretty acquaintance of that well-remembered evening.

Three days went by, and, truth to tell, I remained in an uncertain, undecided mood. For a year past I had been the closest friend and confidant of Muriel Moore, but not her lover. The words of love I had spoken had been merely in jest, although I could not disguise from myself that she regarded me as something more than a mere acquaintance. Yet the strange, half-tragic beauty of Aline Cloud was undeniable. Sometimes I felt half-inclined to write to her and endeavour to again see her, but each time I thought of her, visions of Muriel rose before me, and I recollected that I admired her with an admiration that was really akin to love.

On the third evening I looked in at the St. Stephen's Club, finding Roddy stretched in one of the morocco-covered chairs in the smoking-room, with a long whisky and soda on the table by his side.

"Hullo!" he cried gaily, as I advanced, "where did you get to the other night?"

"No, old fellow," I answered, sinking into a chair near him;

"ask yourself that question. You slipped away so very quickly that I thought you'd met some creditor or other."

"Well," he answered, after a pause, "I did see somebody I didn't want to meet."

"A man?" I asked, for my old chum had but few secrets from me.

"No; a woman."

I nodded.

At that instant a thought occurred to me, and I wondered whether Roddy had encountered Aline, and whether she was the woman he did not wish to meet. "Was she young?" I asked, laughing.

"Not very," he replied vaguely, adding, "There are some persons who, being associated with the melancholy incidents in one's life, bring back bitter memories that one would fain forget."

"Yes, yes; I understand," I said.

Then presently, when I had got my cigar under way, I related to him what had afterwards occurred, omitting, however, to tell him of the remarkable fusion of my crucifix. The latter fact was so extraordinary that it appeared incredible.

He listened in silence until I had finished, and then I asked him —

"Now, you've had a good long experience of all kinds of adventure. What do you think of it?"

"Well, when you commenced to tell me of her loneliness I felt inclined to think that she was deceiving you. The alone-in-

London dodge has too often been worked. But you say that she was evidently a lady – modest, timid, and apparently unused to London life. What name did she give you?"

"Cloud – Aline Cloud."

"Aline Cloud!" – he gasped, starting forward with a look of inexpressible fear.

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"No!" he answered promptly, instantly recovering himself.

But his manner was unconvincing. The hand holding his cigar trembled slightly, and it was apparent that the news I had imparted had created an impression upon him the reverse of favourable.

I did not continue the subject, yet as we chatted on, discussing other things, I pondered deeply.

"Things in the House are droning away as usual," Roddy said, in answer to a question. "I get sick of this never-ending talk. The debates seem to grow longer and longer. I'm heartily weary of it all." And he sighed heavily.

"Yet the papers report your speeches, and write leaders about them," I remarked. "That speech of yours regarding Korea the other night was splendid."

"Because I know the country," he replied. "I'm the only man in the House who has set foot in the place, I suppose. Therefore, I spoke from personal observation."

"But with the reputation you've gained you ought to be well satisfied," I urged. "You are among the youngest men in the

House, yet you are hailed as a coming man."

"That's all very well," he answered. "Nevertheless I wish I'd never gone in for it," and he yawned and stretched himself.

Then, after a pause, he said reflectively —

"That was really a remarkable adventure of yours – very remarkable! Where did you say the girl lived?"

"In Ellerdale Road, Hampstead. She lives with an aunt named Popejoy."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, then lapsed into a sullen silence, his brow clouded by a heavy, thoughtful look, as though he were reflecting upon some strange circumstance of the past.

I remained about an hour, when suddenly the division-bell rang and we parted: he entering the House to record his vote, I to stroll along to my own club to write letters.

Whether Roddy was acquainted with my pretty companion I was unable to determine. It seemed very much as if he were, for I could not fail to notice his paleness and agitation when I had pronounced her name. Still I resolved to act with discretion, for I felt myself on the verge of some interesting discovery, the nature of which, however, I knew not.

Next evening, in response to a telegram, Muriel Moore met me, and we dined together on the balcony of Frascati's Restaurant, in Oxford Street.

First let me confess that our attachment was something of a secret, for there was considerable difference in our social positions; I had known her for years, indeed ever since her

hoydenish days when she had worn short frocks. Her father, a respectable tradesman in Stamford, a few miles from Tixover, had failed, and within a year had died, with the result that at nineteen she had drifted into that channel wherein so many girls drift who are compelled to seek their own living, and had become an assistant at a well-known milliner's in Oxford Street. In the shop world milliners' assistants and show-room hands rank higher than the ordinary girl who serves her wealthier sisters with tapes, ribbons, or underclothing, therefore Muriel had been decidedly fortunate in obtaining, this berth. It was, no doubt, on account of her beauty that the shrewd manageress of the establishment had engaged her, for her chief duty seemed to be to try on hats and bonnets for customers to witness the effect, and as nearly everything suited her she was enabled to effect many advantageous sales. Dozens of women, ugly and a trifle *passé*, were cajoled into believing that a certain hat suited them when they saw it upon her handsome, well-poised head.

She was dark, with refined, well-cut, intelligent features; not the doll-like, dimpled face of the average shop-girl, but a countenance open and handsome, even though her hair was arranged a trifle coquettishly, a fact which she explained was due to the wishes of the manageress. Her mouth was small, and had the true arch of Cupid, her teeth even and well-matched, her chin pointed and showing considerable determination, and her eyes black as those of any woman of the South. Many men who went with their wives and sisters to choose hats glanced at

her in admiration, for she was tall, with a figure well-rounded, a small waist and an easy, graceful carriage, enhanced perhaps by the well-fitting costume of black satin supplied her by the management.

My family had bought their smaller drapery goods of her father for years, and it was in my college days that I had first seen and admired her in the little old-fashioned shop in St. Martin's, in Stamford. Old Mr Moore, a steady-going man of antiquated ideas, had been overtaken and left behind in the race of life, for cheap "cash drapers" had of recent years sprung up all around him, his trade had dwindled down, until it left him unable to meet the invoices from Cook's, Pawson's, and other firms of whom he purchased goods, and he was compelled to file his petition.

I knew nothing of this, for I was abroad at the time. It must, however, have been a terrible blow to poor Muriel when she and her father were compelled to leave the old shop and take furnished rooms in a back street at the further end of the town, and a still more serious misfortune fell upon her when a few months later her father died, leaving her practically alone in the world. Through the influence of one of the commercial travellers from London, who had been in the habit of calling upon her father, she had obtained the berth at Madame Gabrielle's, and for the past year had proved herself invaluable at that establishment, one of the most noted in London as selling copies of "the latest models."

We did not very often meet, for she well understood that a

union was entirely out of the question. We were excellent friends, purely Platonic, and it gave her pleasure and variety to dine sometimes with me at a restaurant. There was nothing loud about her; no taint of the London shop-girl, whose tastes invariably lie in the direction of the lower music-halls, Cinderella dances, and Sunday up-river excursions. She was a thoroughly honest, upright, and modest girl, who, compelled to earn her own living, had set out bravely to do so.

From where we sat dining we could listen to the music and look down upon the restaurant below. The tables were filled with diners and the light laughter and merry chatter general.

We had not met for nearly a month, as I had been down to Tixover, where we had had a house-party with its usual round of gaiety, shooting and cycling. Indeed, since June I had been very little in London, having spent the whole summer at Zermatt.

"It seems so long since we were last here," she exclaimed suddenly, casting her eyes around the well-lit restaurant. "I suppose you had quite a merry time at home?"

"Yes," I answered, and then began to tell her of all our doings, and relating little bits of gossip from her home – that quiet, old-fashioned market town with its many churches, its broad, brimming Welland winding through the meadows, and picturesque, old-world streets where the grass springs from between the pebbles, and where each Friday the farmers congregate at market. I told her of the new shops which had sprung up in the High Street, of the death of poor old

Goltmann who kept the fancy shop where in my youth I had purchased mechanical toys, and of the latest alterations at Burleigh consequent upon the old Marquis's death. All this interested her, for like many a girl compelled to seek her living in London, the little town where she was born was always dearly cherished in her memory.

"And you?" I said at last. "How have you been going along?"

She placed both her elbows on the table and looked straight into my eyes.

"Fairly well," she answered, with a half-suppressed sigh. "When you are away I miss our meetings so much, and am often dull and miserable."

"Without me, eh?" I laughed.

"Life in London is terribly monotonous," she said as I pushed the dessert-plate aside, and lit a cigarette. "I often wish I were back in Stamford again. Here one can never make any friends."

"That's quite true," I replied, for only those who have come from the country to earn their bread know the utter loneliness of the great metropolis with its busy, hurrying millions. In London one may be a householder for ten years without knowing the name of one's next-door neighbour, and may live and work all one's life without making scarce a single friend. Thus the average shop-girl is usually friendless outside her own establishment unless she cares to mix with that crowd of clerks and others who are fond of "taking out" good-looking shop-assistants.

I often felt sorry for Muriel, knowing how dull and

monotonous was her life, but while I sat chatting to her that evening a vision of another face rose before me – the pale face with the strange blue eyes, the beautiful countenance of the mysterious Aline.

It seemed very much as if Roddy knew my mysterious friend. If so, it also seemed more than likely that I had been deceived in her; because was not Roddy a well-known man about town, and what more likely than that he had met her in London? To me, however, she had declared that she had only arrived in London a week before, and had never been out. Whatever was the explanation, Roddy's concern at hearing her name was certainly extraordinary.

I therefore resolved to seek her again, and obtain some explanation.

Why, I wondered, had she made that vague prophecy of evil which would befall me if we continued our acquaintanceship? It was all very extraordinary. The more I thought of it, the more puzzling became the facts.

Chapter Four
Not Counting the Cost

The afternoon was damp, chilly, and cheerless as I stood at my window awaiting Aline. I had written to her, and after some days received a reply addressed from somewhere in South London declining to accept my invitation, but in response to a second and more pressing letter I had received a telegram, and now stood impatient for her coming.

Outside, it was growing gloomy. The *matinée* at the Garrick Theatre was over, and the afternoon playgoers had all gone their various ways, while the long string of light carts belonging to the *Pall Mall Gazette* stood opposite, ready to distribute the special edition of that journal in every part of London. The wind blew gustily, and the people passing were compelled to clutch their hats. Inside, however, a bright fire burned, and I had set my easiest chair ready for the reception of the dainty girl who held me beneath her spell.

Even at that moment I recollected Muriel, but cast her out of my thoughts when I reflected upon Aline's bewitching beauty.

Moments passed as hours. In the darkening day I stood watching for her, but saw no sign, until I began to fear she would disappoint me. Indeed, the clock on the mantel-shelf, the little timepiece which I had carried on all my travels, had already

struck five, whereas the hour she had appointed was half-past four.

Suddenly, however, the door opening caused me to turn, and my pretty companion of that night was ushered in by Simes.

"I'm late," she said apologetically. "I trust you will forgive me."

"It is a lady's privilege to be late," I responded, taking her hand, and welcoming her gladly.

She took the chair at my invitation, and I saw that she was dressed extremely plainly, wearing no ornaments. The dress was not the same she had worn when we had met, but another of more funereal aspect. Yet she was dainty and chic from her large black hat, which well suited her pale, innocent type of beauty, down to her tiny, patent-leather shoe. As she placed her foot out upon the footstool I did not fail to notice how neat was the ankle encased in its black silk stocking, or how small was the little pointed shoe.

"Why did you ask me to come here?" she asked, with a slightly nervous laugh when, at my suggestion, she had drawn off her gloves.

"Because I did not intend that we should drift apart altogether," I answered. "If you had refused, I should have come to you."

"At Ellerdale Road?" she exclaimed in alarm.

"Yes; why not? Is your aunt such a terrible person?"

"No," she exclaimed in all seriousness. "Promise me you will not seek me – never."

"I can scarcely promise that," I laughed. "But why were you so reluctant to come here again?" I inquired.

"Because I had no desire to cause you any unnecessary worry," she replied.

"Unnecessary worry? What do you mean?" I asked, puzzled.

But she only laughed, without giving me any satisfactory answer.

"I'm extremely pleased to see you," I said, and in response to my summons Simes entered with the tea, which she poured out, gracefully handing me my cup.

"I'm of course very pleased to come and see you like this," she said when my man had gone; "but if my aunt knew, she wouldn't like it."

"I suppose she was concerned about you the other night, wasn't she?"

"Oh yes," she replied with a smile. "We've often laughed over my absurd ignorance of London."

"Do you intend to live always with your aunt?"

"Ah, I do not know. Unfortunately there are some in whose footsteps evil always follows; some upon whom the shadow of sin for ever falls," and she sighed as she added, "I am one of those."

I glanced across at her in surprise. She was holding her cup in her hand, and her face was pale and agitated, as though the confession had involuntarily escaped her.

"I don't understand?" I said, puzzled. "Are you a fatalist?"

"I'm not quite certain," she answered, in an undecided tone.

"As I have already told you, I hesitated to visit you because of the evil which I bring upon those who are my friends."

"But explain to me," I exclaimed, interested. "Of what nature is this evil? It is surely not inevitable?"

"Yes," she responded, in a calm, low voice, "it is inevitable. You have been very kind to me, therefore I have no desire to cause you any unhappiness."

"I really can't help thinking that you view things rather gloomily," I said, in as irresponsible a tone as I could.

"I only tell you that which is the truth. Some persons have a faculty for working evil, even when they intend to do good. They are the accursed among their fellows."

Her observation was an extraordinary one, inasmuch as more than one great scientist has put forward a similar theory, although the cause of the evil influence which such persons are able to exercise has never been discovered.

About her face was nothing evil, nothing crafty, nothing to lead one to suspect that she was not what she seemed – pure, innocent, and womanly. Indeed, as she sat before me, I felt inclined to laugh at her assertion as some absurd fantasy of the imagination. Surely no evil could lurk behind such a face as hers?

"You are not one of the accursed," I protested, smiling.

"But I am!" she answered, looking me straight in the face. Then, starting forward, she exclaimed, "Oh! why did you press me to come here, to you?"

"Because I count you among my friends," I responded. "To

see me and drink a cup of tea can surely do no harm, either to you or to me."

"But it will!" she cried in agitation. "Have I not told you that evil follows in my footsteps – that those who are my friends always suffer the penalty of my friendship?"

"You speak like a prophetess," I laughed.

"Ah! you don't believe me!" she exclaimed. "I see you don't. You will never believe until the hideous truth is forced upon you."

"No," I said, "I don't believe. Let us talk of something else, Aline – if I may be permitted to call you by your Christian name?"

"You have called me by that name already without permission," she laughed gaily, her manner instantly changing. "It would be ungenerous of me to object, would it not?"

"You are extremely philosophical," I observed, handing her my cup to be refilled.

"I'm afraid you must have formed a very curious opinion of me," she replied.

"You seem to have no inclination to tell me anything of yourself," I said. "I fancy I have told you all about myself worth knowing, but you will tell me nothing in exchange."

"Why should you desire to know? I cannot interest you more than a mere passing acquaintance, to be entertained to-day and forgotten to-morrow."

"No, not forgotten," I said reproachfully. "You may forget me, but I shall never forget our meeting the other night."

"It will be best if you do forget me," she declared.

"But I cannot!" I declared passionately, bending and looking straight into her beautiful countenance.

"I shall never forget."

"Because my face interests you, you are fascinated! Come, admit the truth," she said, with a plain straightforwardness that somewhat took me aback.

"Yes," I said. "That's the truth. I freely admit it."

She laughed a light, merry, tantalising laugh, as if ridiculing such an idea. Her face at that instant seemed more attractive than ever it appeared before; her smiling lips, half-parted, seemed pouted, inviting me to kiss them.

"Why should a man be attracted by a woman's face?" she argued, growing suddenly serious again. "He should judge her by her manner, her thoughts, her womanly feeling, and her absence of that masculine affectation which in these days so deforms the feminine character."

"But beauty is one of woman's most charming attributes," I ventured to remark.

"Are not things that are most beautiful the most deadly?"

"Certainly, some are," I admitted.

"Then for aught you know the influence I can exert upon you may be of the most evil kind," she suggested.

"No, no!" I hastened to protest. "I'll never believe that – never! I wish for no greater pleasure than that you should remain my friend."

She was silent for some time, gazing slowly around the room. Her breast heaved and fell, as if overcome by some flood of emotion which she strove to suppress. Then, turning again to me, she said —

"I have forewarned you."

"Of what?"

"That if we remain friends it can result in nothing but evil."

I was puzzled. She spoke so strangely, and I, sitting there fascinated by her marvellous beauty, gazed full at her in silence.

"You speak in enigmas," I exclaimed.

"You have only to choose for yourself."

"Your words are those of one who fears some terrible catastrophe," I said. "I don't really understand."

"Ah! you cannot. It's impossible!" she answered in a low, hollow voice, all life having left her face. She was sitting in the armchair, leaning forward slightly, with her face still beautiful, but white and haggard. "If I could explain, then you might find some means to escape, but I dare not tell you. Chance has thrown us together – an evil chance – and you admire me; you think perhaps that you could love me, you – "

"I do love you, Aline!" I burst forth with an impetuosity which was beyond my control, and springing to my feet I caught her hand and pressed it to my lips.

"Ah!" she sighed, allowing the hand to remain limp and inert in mine. "Yes, I dreaded this. I was convinced from your manner that my fascination had fallen upon you. No!" she cried, rising

slowly and determinedly to her feet. “No! I tell you that you must not love me. Rather hate me – curse me for the evil I have already wrought – detest my name as that of one whose sin is unpardonable, whose contact is deadly, and at whose touch all that is good and honest and just withers and passes away. You do not know me, you cannot know me, or you would not kiss my hand,” she cried, with a strange glint in her eyes as she held forth her small, white palm. “You love me!” she added, panting, with a hoarse, harsh laugh. “Say rather that you hold me in eternal loathing.”

“All this puzzles me,” I cried, standing stone still. “You revile yourself, but if you have sinned surely there is atonement? Your past cannot have been so ugly as you would make me believe.”

“My past concerns none but myself,” she said quickly, as if indignant that I should have mentioned an unwelcome subject. “It is the future that I anticipate with dread, a future in which you appear determined to sacrifice yourself as victim.”

“I cannot be a victim if you love me in return, Aline,” I said calmly.

“I – love you?” She laughed in a strange, half-amused way. “What would you have? Would you have me caress you and yet wreck your future; kiss you, and yet at the same moment exert upon you that baneful power which must inevitably sap your life and render you as capable as myself of doing evil to your fellow-men? Ah! you do not know what you say, or you would never suggest that I, of all women, should love you.”

I gazed at her open-mouthed in amazement. Such a speech from the lips of one so young, so beautiful, so altogether ingenuous, was absolutely without parallel.

"I cannot help myself. I love you all the same, Aline," I faltered.

"Yes, I know," she replied quickly, with that same strange light in her eyes which I had only noticed once before. At that instant they seemed to flash with a vengeful fire, but in a second the strange glance she gave me had been succeeded by that calm, wistful look which when we had first met had so impressed me.

The idea that she was not quite responsible for her strange speeches I scouted. She was as sane as myself, thoughtful, quick of perception, yet possessing a mysteriousness of manner which was intensely puzzling. This extraordinary declaration of hers seemed as though she anticipated that some terrible catastrophe would befall me, and that now the influence of her beauty was upon me, and I loved her, the spell would drag me to the depths of despair.

"A woman knows in an instant by her natural intuition when she is loved," she continued, speaking slowly and with emphasis. "Well, if you choose to throw all your happiness to the winds, then you are, of course, at liberty to do so. Yet, if you think that I can ever reciprocate your love you have formed an entirely wrong estimate of my character. One whose mission it is to work evil cannot love. I can hate – and hate well – but affection knows no place in my heart."

"That's a terrible self-denunciation," I said. "Have you never loved, then?"

"Love comes always once to a woman, as it does to a man," she replied. "Yes, I loved once."

"And it was an unfortunate attachment?"

She nodded.

"As unfortunate as yours is," she said, hoarsely.

"But cannot I take your lover's place?" I bent and whispered passionately. "Will you not let me love you? I will do so with all my heart, with all my soul."

She raised her fine eyes to mine, and after a moment's pause, added —

"I am entirely in your hands. You say you love me now – you love me because you consider my beauty greater than that of other women; because I have fascinated you." And sighing she slowly sank into her chair again. Then she added, "You wish me to be yours, but that I can never be. I can be your friend, but recollect I can never love you – never!" Then, putting forth her white hand she took mine, and looking into my face with a sweet, imploring expression, she went on —

"Think well of what I have said. Reflect upon my words. Surely it is best to end our friendship when you know how impossible it is for me to love you in return."

"Then you will not allow me to take the place in your heart that your lost lover once occupied?" I said, with deep disappointment.

"It is impossible!" she answered, shaking her head gravely.

"The love which comes to each of us once in a lifetime is like no other. If doomed to misfortune, it can never be replaced. None can fill the breach in a wounded heart."

"That is only too true," I was compelled to admit. "Yet I cannot relinquish you, Aline, because I love you."

"You are infatuated – like other men have been," she said, with a faint, pitying smile. "Holding you in esteem as I do, I regret it."

"Why?"

"This is but the second time we have met, and you know nothing of my character," she pointed out. "Your love is, therefore, mere admiration."

I shook my head. Her argument was unconvincing.

"Well," she went on, "*I* only desire that you should release me from this bond of friendship formed by your kindness to me the other night. It would be better for you, better for me, if we parted this evening never to again meet."

"That's impossible. I must see you from time to time, even though you may endeavour to put me from you. I do not fear this mysterious evil which you prophesy, because loving you as firmly as I do, no harm can befall me."

"Ah, no!" she cried. "Do not say that. Think that the evil in the world is far stronger than the good; that sin is in the ascendency, and that the honest and upright are in the minority. Remember that no man is infallible, and that ill-fortune always strikes those who are least prepared to withstand the shock."

I remained silent. She spoke so earnestly, and with such

heartfelt concern for my welfare, that I was half-convinced of her sincerity of purpose. The calmness of her words and her dignity of bearing was utterly mystifying. Outwardly she was a mere girl, timid, unused to the world and its ways, honest-eyed and open-faced; yet her words were those of a woman who had had a long and bitter experience of loves and hatreds, and to whom a lover was no new experience. Beneath these strange declarations there was, I felt certain, some hidden meaning, but its nature I utterly failed to grasp.

I was young, impetuous, madly in love with this mysterious, beautiful woman who had come so suddenly into my otherwise happy, irresponsible life, and I had made my declaration of affection without counting the cost.

"I care not what evil may fall upon me," I said boldly, holding her hand in tightening grip. "I have heard you, and have decided that I will love you, Aline."

Again I raised her hand, and in silence she allowed me to kiss her fingers, without seeking to withdraw them.

She only sighed. I thought there was a passing look of pity in her eyes for a single moment, but could not decide whether it had really been there or whether it was merely imaginary.

"Then, if that is your decision, so let it be!" she murmured hoarsely.

And we were silent for a long time.

I looked into her beautiful eyes in admiration, for was I not now her lover? Was not Aline Cloud my beloved?

The dying day darkened into night, and Simes entering to draw down the blinds compelled us to converse on topics far from our inmost thoughts.

She allowed me to smoke, but when I invited her to dine, she firmly declined.

"No," she answered. "For to-day this is sufficient. I regret that I called to visit you – I shall regret it all my life through."

"Why?" I demanded, dismayed. "Ah, don't say that, Aline! Remember that you've permitted me to love you."

"I have only permitted what I cannot obviate," she answered, in a hard, strained voice. I saw that tears were in her eyes, and that she was now filled with regret.

Yet I loved her, and felt that my true, honest affection must sooner or later be reciprocated.

Without further word she rose, drew on her gloves, placed her warm cape around her shoulders and pulled down her veil. Then she stretched forth her hand.

"You will not remain and dine? Do!" I urged.

"Not to-night," she answered, in a voice quite different from her usual tone. "I will accept your invitation on another occasion."

"When shall I see you?" I asked. "May I hope to-morrow?"

"I will call when it is possible," she replied. "You say you love me. Then promise me one thing."

"Anything you wish I am ready to grant," I answered.

"Then do not write to me, or seek me. I will call and see you

whenever my time admits."

"But may I not write?" I asked.

"No," she answered firmly. "No letters must pass between us."

I saw that she meant to enforce this condition, therefore did not argue, but reluctantly took leave of her after her refusal to allow me to accompany her back to Hampstead.

Again she allowed me to kiss her hand, then turning slowly she sighed and passed out, preceded by Simes, who opened the door for her.

I sank back into my chair when the door closed upon her, puzzled yet ecstatic. This woman, the most beautiful I had ever seen, had allowed me to love her.

I had at last an object in life. Aline Cloud was my well-beloved, and I would live only for her. In those moments, as I sat alone gazing into the fire, I became filled with a great content, for infatuation had overwhelmed me.

The clock striking seven at last aroused me to a sense of hunger, and I rose to dross before going along to the club to dine. As I did so, however, my eyes suddenly fell upon the mantel-shelf, and I stood amazed, dumbfounded, rooted to the spot.

Upon the shelf there had been a small wooden medallion, a specimen of the Russian peasants' carving, representing the head of a Madonna – I had bought it in Moscow a year before – but an utterly astounding thing had occurred.

I could scarce believe my own eyes.

It had been consumed by an unseen fire, just as the crucifix

had been, and nothing but a little white ash now remained!

"Good heavens!" I gasped; and with my finger touched the ashes.

They were still warm!

I stood wondering, my gaze fixed upon the consumed Madonna, reflecting that upon the occasion of Aline's last visit my crucifix was destroyed in the same manner by some unseen agency, and now, strangely enough, this second sacred emblem in my possession had with her presence disappeared, falling into ashes beneath my very eyes.

The mysterious influence of evil she confessed to possessing was here illustrated in a manner that was unmistakable.

In an instant all the strange words she had uttered swept through my bewildered brain as I stood there terrified, aghast.

The mystery surrounding her was as inexplicable as it was startling.

Chapter Five
The Bony-Faced Man

Daily the problem grew more puzzling.

The fusing of the crucifix and the carved medallion of the Madonna were clearly due to the presence of the mysterious Aline, the beautiful woman who had warned me against the strange evil she exerted over those with whom she came in contact. Such occurrences seemed supernatural; yet so curious were her words and actions, and so peculiar and impressive her beauty, that I could not help doubting whether she actually existed in flesh and blood, or only in some bright vision that had come to hold me in fascination. Yet Simes had seen her, and had spoken with her. There was therefore no doubt that she was a living person, even though she might be a sorceress.

Nevertheless, they were something more than mere conjuring feats which caused the sacred objects in my room to spontaneously consume in her presence. Had she not told me plainly that evil followed in her footsteps? Did not these two inexplicable events fully bear out her words?

I called Simes, and when I showed him the Madonna he stood glaring at it as one terrified.

"I don't like that lady, sir," he exclaimed, glancing at me.

"Why not?"

"Well, sir, pardon me for saying so, but I believe she can work the evil of the very Devil himself."

That was exactly my own opinion; therefore I preserved silence.

As lover of a woman possessed of a mysterious influence, the like of which I had never before heard, my position was certainly an unique one. In the days which followed I tried to argue with myself that I did not love her; to convince myself that what she had alleged was true, namely, that I admired but did not love her. Yet all was in vain. I was fascinated by her large blue eyes, which looked out upon me with that calm, childlike innocence, and remaining beneath their spell, believed that I loved her.

The mystery with which she had surrounded herself was remarkable. Her refusal to allow me to call upon her, or even to write, was strange, yet her excuse that her aunt would be annoyed was plausible enough.

Compelled, therefore, to await her visit, I remained from day to day anxious to meet her because I loved her.

On entering the club one afternoon I found Roddy alone in the smoking-room, writing a letter.

"Well!" he cried, merrily, gripping my hand. "How goes it – and how's your little mystery going on?"

I sank into a chair close to him and told him of Aline's visit.

"And you're clean gone on her – eh?" he queried.

I shrugged my shoulders and gave him a vague reply.

"Well, take care," he said in a serious tone. "If I were you I'd

find out who and what she is. She might be some adventuress or other."

"Do you suspect her to be an adventuress?" I inquired quickly.

"My dear fellow, how can I tell? There seems to me something rather shady about her, that's all."

I pondered. Yes, he spoke the truth. There was something shady about her. She would tell me absolutely nothing of herself.

We smoked together for half an hour, then parted, for he was compelled to go down to the House, as a dutiful legislator should.

A week passed yet I saw not Aline, nor had any word from her. From day to day I existed in all anxiety to once again look upon that face so angelic in its beauty and so pure in expression. Indeed, more than once I felt inclined to break the promise I had made her and call at Ellerdale Road, but I refrained, fearing lest such a course might annoy her.

One evening, a fortnight after she had visited me, I was walking along the Bayswater Road towards Oxford Street, skirting the railings of Hyde Park, when suddenly I noticed before me two figures, a man and a woman. They were walking slowly, deep in conversation.

In an instant I recognised the slim, perfect figure in the black jacket and black hat as that of Aline, and drew back to escape observation.

Her companion was tall, thin, and rather ill-dressed. As they passed beneath a street-lamp I discerned that he was about forty, with lank black hair, a long black moustache, and a sallow, bony

face – a countenance the reverse of prepossessing. His silk hat had seen better days, his frock-coat was tightly buttoned for warmth, as he had no overcoat, and his boots were sadly run down at heel. As this seedy individual walked beside her she was speaking rapidly, while he, bonding to her, was listening intently.

The meeting was such an unexpected one that at first I was at a loss what to do. Next moment, however, with the fire of jealousy aroused within me, I resolved to follow them and watch. They strolled slowly along until they came to Victoria Gate, and then turned into the Park, at that hour dark and deserted. I noticed that as they entered she took his arm, and it appeared as if they were going in the direction of Grosvenor Gate, which leads out into Park Lane; for they crossed the Ring, and continued straight ahead along the tree-lined avenue. But few lights were there, so following at a respectable distance, I managed to keep them in sight.

Soon, however, they rested upon a seat at foot of a great old beech, and continued their conversation. I had, of course, a keen desire to learn the nature of this exchange of confidences, but the problem was how to approach sufficiently near and yet escape observation. At first I was inclined to relinquish my endeavours, but suddenly it occurred to me that I might get over the railing on to the grass, and in the darkness approach noiselessly behind the tree where they were seated.

Therefore, turning back some distance to a bend in the path, where they could not detect me, I sprang over the iron fencing,

and treading softly, cautiously made my way up behind them, until I actually stood behind the tree within three yards of them, but with the railing between us.

Then, scarce daring to breathe, I waited to catch their words. Of this shabby-genteel fellow, evidently her lover, I was madly jealous; but my anger was instantly changed to surprise when I heard the nature of their conversation.

"But you must!" he was saying earnestly.

"I tell you, I won't!" she answered decisively. "The risk is too great – far too great."

"But as I've already told you, it's absolutely imperative."

He spoke roughly, but with a refinement which showed him to be educated. He bore outward evidence of having come down in the world.

"I wouldn't act like that if I were offered a thousand pounds," she declared.

"But it must be done," he urged.

"Not by me."

"Do you intend to back out, then?" he inquired roughly.

"I merely tell you plainly that you and your ruffianly associates have gone quite far enough. That's all," she answered calmly. Her words were not those which a woman usually uses towards her lover.

He gave vent to a short, brutal laugh, as if enjoying her indignation.

"It's all very well to talk like this, Aline," he said; "but you

know quite well that argument is useless. You must do it."

"I will not, I tell you!" she cried fiercely.

"Well, we shall see," he answered. "Recollect that you are one of us, and as such, to break away is impossible."

"I know that, only too well," she answered bitterly. "But it is terrible – horrible! As each day passes I am more and more convinced that the truth must soon be discovered."

"And if it is?"

"I will never live to bear the exposure," she said, in the hoarse, low voice of one desperate.

"My dear girl," he exclaimed, "you who have beauty and a plausible tongue have the world before you; yet you always refuse to seize your opportunity. You who possess the power of the King of Evil, whose touch is deadly and whose caress is venomous, could rule an empire if you wished; yet you are inert, lethargic, and refuse to assist us, even in this."

"I will not sin deeper than I have already sinned," she answered. "I will have no hand in it."

"Why not?"

"It is horrible!" she protested. "And I tell you, once and for all, that I will have nothing to do with the affair."

"You're a fool!" he cried roughly.

"True! I am, or I would never have fallen thus into the trap you and your friends baited so cunningly."

"You are beautiful!" he answered, with a harsh laugh. "A beautiful woman is always a safe trap for fools."

"If men admire me I cannot help it; if they love me then it is against my wish, for since that day long ago, when the Spirit of Evil entered into me, love has known no place in my heart."

"Well spoken!" he exclaimed. "If you have no love for him the rest is quite easy."

"Though all love within me is dead, I yet have a woman's heart, and womanly feeling," she said. "I know that my beauty is only a curse; I am well aware that men who have admired me have been drawn irresistibly to their doom. Ah!" and she shuddered in shame, "it is terrible – terrible!"

"Yet why should you regret?" he queried. "You are not of their world; you have nothing in common with them. You have been given beauty, the most marvellous, perhaps, in all the world; diabolic beauty, which causes you to be remarked wherever you go; which has caused the downfall of the upright, and has wrecked the lives of those who trust in the guardian Spirit of Good."

"Yes, I know," she answered quickly. "Yet I am tired of it all. I am aware that my power for the working of evil among my fellow-creatures is greater than that of any other person of flesh and blood; that at my touch objects held sacred are defiled and consumed, that sight of my face may cause a veritable saint to turn from his asceticism and become an evil-doer. All this I know, alas! All this is due to the influence of evil, which once I might have striven against, had I wished."

"You possess the *beauté du Diable*," he said. "Are you not the

daughter of Satan?"

"If I am I decline to commit any further crime at your bidding," she answered, with indignation. "You have held me enthralled until now, but I tell you that you have strained the bond until it will ere long break. Then I shall be free."

"I'm pleased that you have such pleasant anticipations," he replied. "A woman who once gives herself over to the Evil One can never regain her freedom."

"But she can refuse to increase the enormity of her sin by committing crime at the bidding of the man who holds her beneath his thrall," she answered.

"You know what such refusal means?" he said in a threatening tone.

"Yes – death. Well, I do not fear it. Within me a new love has been awakened. I now love for the first time in all my life."

"Yet you have already said that in your heart love knows no place."

"I tell you I love him!" she cried. "He shall not suffer!"

She was evidently referring to me. I held my breath, eager to catch every syllable. Perhaps this man was urging her to kill me!

"The power you possess to work evil is irresistible," he said briefly.

"Alas! I know it," she answered. "Those with whom I am in daily contact little dream of who or what I really am, or they would shun me as they would shun a leper."

"Why should they?" her bony-faced companion asked. "Evil

has been dominant in the world for all ages, and the Prince of Darkness has still the ascendency!"

"But is not mine the blackest – the foulest of all crimes?" she shuddered.

"Only one touch," he urged. "Your hand is fatal."

"Ah! why do you taunt me thus?" she cried. "Is it not enough that I should be degraded and outcast, overburdened by sin for which I cannot hope for forgiveness, and that my position should be irretrievably lost? Is it not enough that in me all the evils of the world are concentrated, and that I am shut out from happiness for ever?"

"You had your choice," the man answered. "It is true that you are one unique among the millions of your fellow-creatures. The blackness of your heart is concealed by the purity of your face, and your real being so disguised that none suspect. If your real identity were discovered some prophets would declare that the end of the world was near." And he laughed coarsely.

"Yes, yes," she cried quickly. "But do not taunt me. I know too well the far-reaching influence which emanates from me, and the fatal effect of my touch upon all that is held sacred by those who believe in the Supreme. I have striven to do good, and have only wrought evil; I have been charitable, and my efforts have only resulted in bringing disaster upon the needy. Those whom I thought to benefit have rewarded me by curses, because all that I do is the work of the wicked. I have struggled to lead a double life, and have failed. I have tried to counterbalance the evil I am

compelled to achieve by doing good works such as might endear me in the eyes of those who believe in the Supreme; but all, alas, has been in vain – all futile. I am now convinced that in my heart there can remain no good feeling, no womanly love, no charitableness towards my fellows."

"It is only what might be expected," he said in a dry tone. "Your great beauty is given you to cover your heart. You are soulless."

"Yes," she cried. "That is true – only too true. I have no soul, no conscience, no regret!"

She spoke in a hard tone, as though utterly wearied of life. Her voice had lost its music, and her speech was of one in blank despair.

"If you are without regret, then what I have suggested is the more easy of accomplishment," he said, in a low intense voice. "Remember that no power on earth can withstand your influence."

"I will not!" she cried, starting up in fierce determination. "Through your evil counsel I have already wrought that which I shall ever regret," she went on. "I have placed myself beneath the thraldom irrevocably, and have brought upon those who admired me a doom which has destroyed their happiness and wrecked their lives. I have now a lover – a man who, because of my good looks, is infatuated, as others have been."

"It has been decided!" her companion said, with a calmness that was appalling.

"But I love him!" she declared. "I myself will be his protector!"

"You intend to defy the resolution which has been arrived at?"

"I have no intention of committing further sin," she said. "I may be an evil-doer and one of the accursed, but none shall say that I deliberately acted in such manner towards one who became fascinated by my beauty. Rather would I disfigure my face by burns or acid in order to render myself ugly and unattractive."

"No woman would do that of her own free will," he laughed.

"No ordinary woman could," she said. "But recollect who I am. Reflect upon my far-reaching influence for evil – an influence which is felt throughout this kingdom. I tell you that rather than continue I would kill myself."

The man laughed aloud.

"I admit all that," he said. "If the people of London knew the truth they would, I believe, tear you limb from limb. But they are ignorant; therefore you are but an ordinary girl of more than extraordinary beauty."

"Which means that my beauty will always ruin those upon whom I may bestow a glance. As my touch is fatal to certain objects of adoration, so is my love-look fatal to those who admire me. No," she added, after a brief pause, "I have determined to act as this man's protector, instead of his destroyer."

"You are relenting," he observed with sarcasm. "Soon you will proclaim your repentance."

"No!" she cried fiercely. "I shall never repent, because of you.

To you I owe the major part of this evil of which I am possessed, and to you – ”

“It was your choice,” he interrupted, with a brutal laugh. “You accepted the challenge, and gave your soul to the Evil One. Why blame me?”

“At your instigation,” she went on in fierce anger. “To the world I am a pure, ingenuous girl; yet beneath this veil of virtue and purity I work these veritable miracles of evil, possessing a power which ofttimes appals me, an irresistible influence that nothing can withstand. I am unique in the world as possessing this superhuman faculty of being able to impart evil to those with whom I come into contact, be they pure as angels. You taunt me,” she added. “But some day you will crave mercy of me, and then I will show you none – none! I will be hard-hearted as flint – as relentless as you are to-night!”

“You wish to break away from the compact, but you shall not,” the man said firmly, between his teeth. “If you prefer defiance, well and good. But I merely point out that obedience is best.”

She paused. She was, I surmised, deep in reflection.

“Very well,” at last she answered, in a hoarse, unnatural voice. “Now that I have sunk so low I suppose it is impossible to sink further. But recollect that this same influence that I will exert over this, my latest victim, I will one day exert over you. I warn you. One day ere long you will crave pity at my feet.”

“Never from you,” the man said, with a short defiant laugh.

“I have only prophesied once before,” she answered

meaningly. “Whether or no that came true you are well aware. In this world of London I am, as yet, unknown, but when the true facts are known this great metropolis will stand aghast in terror. Our positions will then be reversed. You will be the victim, and I triumphant.”

“Proceed,” he laughed. “All this is intensely interesting.”

There was a pause, longer than before.

“Then you declare that I must do this thing?” she asked, in a strange, hollow voice, the voice of one dismayed.

“Yes,” her companion answered; “you must – swiftly and secretly. It is imperative.”

Without further word she rose slowly to her feet, and staggered away down the gravelled path, while her companion, hesitating for a few seconds, rose with a muttered imprecation and strode along after her. A moment later they were out of hearing.

The remainder of their extraordinary conversation was lost to me.

One suspicion alone possessed me. That thin, shabby man had sentenced me to death.

Chapter Six
Two Mysteries

The discovery I had accidentally made was the reverse of reassuring.

Aline had admitted herself possessed of some mysterious power which caused sacred objects to consume, the power of evil which she feared would also fall upon me. I recollected how when she had visited me she had urged me to hate her rather than love her, and I now discerned the reason. She had feared lest her subtle influence upon me should be fatal.

Through the days which passed her strange words rang ever through my ears. She was a woman unique in all the world; a woman who, living in teeming London, was endowed with faculties of abnormal proportions, and possessed an unearthly power utterly unknown to modern science. I thought of the fusing of my crucifix and my Madonna, and shuddered. Her beauty was amazing, but she was a veritable temptress, a deistical daughter of Apollyon.

My first feeling after leaving the Park was one of repugnance; yet on reflection I found myself overcome by fascination, still bewitched by her beautiful face, and eager to meet her once again. Surely nothing maleficent could remain hidden beneath such outward innocence?

Thus I waited long and wearily for her coming, remaining in from day to day, or whenever I went out leaving word with Simes as to where I could be found if she called. In my turbulent state of mind I imagined many strange things.

The more I reflected, the more complicated became the enigma.

At length one morning Simes opened my door suddenly and ushered her in. I flung down my newspaper and rose to meet her, but next instant drew back in surprise and alarm.

She was dressed in an elegant costume of pale grey trimmed with white lace and heavy embroidery of pearls, a dress which could only have been turned out by a first-class house, for it bore a Parisian chic, being modelled in latest style. Her tiny shoes and gloves were of grey suede to match the dress, and beneath her big black hat with ostrich feathers her face looked sweet and winning as a child's.

But the flush of health had faded. Her cheeks were just as beautiful as they had ever been, but the bloom of youth had died from them, and her complexion was a yellowish brown, like that of a woman of sixty. The light in her blue eyes had faded; they were now dull and leaden.

"At last!" I cried happily. "I am so glad you've come, for I've waited so long, Aline."

She allowed her hand to rest in mine, then sank wearily into my armchair without a word.

"You are not well," I cried, in concern. "What ails you?"

"Nothing!" she gasped. "It is nothing. In a few minutes it will pass." Then she added, as if on second thought, "Perhaps it was your stairs. The lift is out of order." And she rested her head upon the back of the chair and looked up at me with pitying eyes.

All life had apparently gone out of her beautiful face. That vivacity that had attracted me had given place to a deep, thoughtful look, as though she were in momentary fear. Her face seemed blanched to the lips.

"May I get you something?" I asked. "Let me give you some brandy," and taking the bottle from the tantalus I gave her a liqueur-glass full of cognac, which she swallowed at one gulp.

"Why have you not called before?" I inquired, when, at length, she grew less agitated. "I have expected you daily for so long."

"I've been away in the country," she answered. "But do not think that I have not remembered you."

"Nearly three weeks have gone by since you were last here," I said. "It is too cruel of you not to allow me to write to you."

"No," she said decisively, "you must not write. You have already promised me, and I know you will not break any compact you make."

"But I love you, Aline," I whispered, bending forward to her.

"Yes, alas! I know that," she responded, rousing herself. "Yet, why carry this folly further?"

"Folly you call it?" I exclaimed regretfully. "Because you cannot love me in return you tell me I am foolish. Since you have been absent I have examined my own heart, and I swear that my

love is more than mere admiration. I think of no one in the world besides yourself."

"No, no," she said uneasily. "There is some other woman whom you could love far better, a woman who would make you a true and faithful wife."

"But I can love no one else."

"Try," she answered, looking me straight in the face. "Before we met you loved one who reciprocated your affection."

"Who?"

"You wish me to tell you?" she replied in a hard, bitter tone. "Surely you cannot affect ignorance that you are loved by Muriel Moore?"

"Muriel!" I gasped in amazement. "How did you know?"

She smiled.

"There is but little that escapes me," she answered. "You loved each other before our romantic meeting, and I, the woman who must necessarily bring evil upon you, have come to separate you. Yet you calmly stand by and invite me to wreck your life! Ah! you cannot know who I am, or you would cast me from your thoughts for over."

"Then who are you?" I blurted forth, in blank amazement.

"I have already told you. You have, of your own free will, united yourself with me by a declaration of love, and the consequences are therefore upon your own head."

"Cannot you love like other women?" I demanded. "Have you no heart, no feeling, no soul?"

"No," she sighed. "Love is forbidden me. Hatred takes its place; a fierce, deadly hatred, in which vengeance is untempered by justice, and fatality is always inevitable. Now that I confess, will you not cast me aside? I have come here to you to urge you to do this ere it is too late."

"You speak so strangely that I'm bewildered," I declared. "I have told you of my love, and will not relinquish you."

"But for the sake of the woman who loves you. She will break her heart."

"Muriel does not love me," I answered. "I have spoken no word of affection to her. We were friends – that is all."

"Reflect! Is it possible for a girl in such a position as Muriel Moore to be your friend without loving you! You are wealthy, she is poor. You give her dinners with champagne at the gayest restaurants; you take her to stalls at theatres, or to a box at the Alhambra; you invite her to these rooms, where she drinks tea, and plays your piano; and it is all so different from her humdrum life at Madame Gabrielle's. Place yourself for one moment in her position, with a salary of ten shillings a-week and dresses provided by the establishment, leading a life of wearying monotony from nine in the morning till seven at night, trying on bonnets, and persuading ignorant, inartistic women to buy your wares. Would you not be flattered, nay, dazzled, by all these attentions which you show her? Would you not become convinced that your admirer loved you if he troubled himself so much about you?"

Her argument was plain and forcible. I had never regarded the matter in that light.

"Really, Aline," I said, "I'm beginning to think that you are possessed of some power that is supernatural."

She laughed – a laugh that sounded strangely hollow.

"I tell you this – I argue with you for your own sake, to save you from the danger which now encompasses you. I would be your protector because you trust me so implicitly, only that is impossible."

In an instant I recollected her declaration to her bony-faced companion in the Park. Had she actually resolved to kill me?

"Why should I relinquish you in favour of one for whom I have no affection?" I argued.

"Why should you kiss the hand that must smite you?" she asked.

Her lips were bloodless; her face of ashen pallor.

"You are not yourself to-day," I said. "It is not usual for a woman who is loved to speak as you speak. The love of a man is usually flattering to a woman."

"I have come to save you, and have spoken plainly."

"What, then, have I done that I deserve punishment?" I inquired in breathless eagerness.

"You love me."

"Surely the simple offence of being your lover is not punishable by death?"

"Alas! it is," she answered hoarsely. "Compelled as I am to

preserve my secret, I cannot explain to you. Yet, if I could, the facts would prove so astounding that you would refuse to believe them. Only the graves of those who have loved me – some of them nameless – are sufficient proof of the fatality I bring upon those whom my beauty entrances."

She raised her head, and her eyes encountered a photograph standing on a table in the window. It was Roddy's.

"See there!" she said, starting, raising her hand and pointing to it. "Like yourself, that man loved me, and has paid the penalty. He died abroad."

"No," I replied quickly. "You are mistaken. That picture is the portrait of a friend; and he's certainly not dead, for he was here smoking with me last night."

"Not dead!" she cried, starting up and crossing to it. "Why, he died at Monte Carlo. He committed suicide after losing all he had."

"No," I replied, rather amused. "That is the Honourable Roderick Morgan, member of Parliament."

"Yes, that was the name," she said aloud to herself. "Roddy Morgan they called him. He lost seven thousand pounds in one day at roulette."

"He has never to my knowledge been to Monte Carlo," I observed, standing beside her.

"You've not always accompanied him everywhere he has been, I presume?" she said.

"No, but had he been to Monte Carlo he would certainly have

told me."

"Men do not care to speak of losses when they are as absurdly reckless as he was."

The idea that Roddy had committed suicide at Monte Carlo seemed utterly absurd, nevertheless in order to convince her that he was still very much alive I picked up the paper and pointed to his name in the Parliamentary debate of the previous night.

"It is strange, very strange!" she said, reflecting. "I was in the Rooms when he shot himself. While sitting at one of the tables I saw them carry him away dead."

"You must have made some mistake," I suggested.

"I was playing at the same table, and he continued to love me, although I had warned him of the consequences, as I have now warned you. He lost and lost. Each time he played he lost, till every farthing he possessed had gone. Then I turned away, but ere I had left the room there was the sound of a pistol-shot, and he fell across the table dead."

She had the photograph in her hand, and bent to the light, examining it closely.

"It cannot be the same man," I said.

"Yes, it is," she responded. "There can be no mistake, for the ring which secures his cravat is mine. I gave it to him."

I looked, and there sure enough was an antique ring of curious pattern, through which his soft scarf was threaded.

"It is Etruscan," she said. "I picked it up in a shop in Bologna."

I glanced quickly at her. Her face was that of a girl of twenty;

yet her speech was that of a woman of the world who had travelled and become utterly weary. The more I saw of her the more puzzled I became.

"Then if the man you knew was the original of that photograph he certainly is not dead. If you wish, I will send my man for him."

"Ah, no!" she cried, putting up her hand in quick alarm. "He has suffered enough – I have suffered enough. No, no; we must not meet – we cannot. I tell you he is dead – and his body lies unmarked in the suicides' cemetery at Monte Carlo."

I shrugged my shoulders, declaring that my statement should be sufficient to convince her.

Quickly, however, she turned to me, and with her gloved hand upon my arm, besought me to release her.

"Hate me!" she implored. "Go to your friend, if he really is alive as you declare, and ask of him my character – who and what I am."

"I shall never hate you – I cannot!" I declared, bending again towards her and seeking her hand, but she instantly withdrew it, looking into my face with an expression of annoyance.

"You disbelieve me!" she said.

"All that you say is so bewildering that I know not what to believe," I answered.

"In this room you have, I suppose, discovered certain objects reduced to ashes?" she asked in a hoarse tone.

"Yes, I have," I answered breathlessly.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

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