

Le Queux William

Devil's Dice



William Le Queux

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Chapter One Queen of the Unknown

Let me gaze down the vista of the tristful past.

Ah! there are things that cannot be uttered; there are scenes that still entrance me, and incidents so unexpected and terrible that they cause me even now to hold my breath in horror.

The prologue of this extraordinary drama of London life was enacted three years ago; its astounding dénouement occurred quite recently. During those three weary, anxious years the days have glided on as they glide even with those who suffer most, but alas! I have the sense of having trodden a veritable Via Dolorosa during a century, the tragedy of my life, with its ever-present sorrow, pressing heavily upon me perpetually. Yet my life's journey has not always been along the barren shore of the sea of Despair. During brief moments, when, with the sweet childlike angel of my solitude, heaven and earth have seemed to glide slowly into space, I have found peace in the supreme joy of happiness. My gaze has been lost in the azure immensity of a woman's eyes.

In this strange story, this astounding record of chastity of affection and bitter hatred, of vile scheming, of secret sins and astounding facts, I, Stuart Ridgeway, younger son of Sir Francis Ridgeway, Member for Barmouth and banker of the City of London, am compelled to speak of myself. It is indeed a relief to be able to reason out one's misfortunes; confession is the lancet-stroke that empties the abscess. The Devil has thrown his dice and the game is up. I can now lay bare the secret of my sorrow.

Away south in the heart of the snow-capped Pyrenees, while idling away a few sunny weeks at Bagnères-de-Luchon, that quaint little spa so popular with the Cleopatras of the Boulevards, nestling in its secluded valley beneath the three great peaks of Sacrous, de Sauvegarde, and de la Mine, a woman first brought sweetness to the sadness of my melancholy days. Mine was an aimless, idle life. I had left behind me at college a reputation for recklessness. I was an arrant dunce at figures, and finance had no attraction for me. I had lived the semi-Bohemian life of a law student in London, and grown tired of it I had tried art and ignominiously failed, and, being in receipt of a generous allowance from an indulgent father, I found myself at the age of twenty-eight without profession, a mere world-weary cosmopolitan, wandering from place to place with the sole object of killing time.

Having taken up my quarters alone at the Hotel des Bains, that glaring building with its dead-white façade in the Allee d'Etigny – the magnificent view from which renders it one of the finest thoroughfares in the world – I soon became seized by ennui.

The place, filled with the *haut ton* of Paris, was gay enough, but somehow I met no one at the table d'hôte or elsewhere whom I cared to accept as companion. Sick of the utter loneliness amid all the mad gaiety, I was contemplating moving to Biarritz, where a maiden aunt resided, when one evening, while seated in the picturesque Casino Garden listening to the band, I saw in the crowd of chattering, laughing promenaders a woman's face that entranced me. Only for a second in the faint light shed by the Chinese lanterns, strung from tree to tree, was I able to distinguish her features. In that brief moment, however, our eyes met, yet next second she was gone, lost in one of the gayest crowds in Europe.

The next night and the next I sat at the same little tin table taking my coffee and eagerly scanning the crowd passing and re-passing along the broad gravelled walk until once again I saw her. Then, held in fascination by her marvellous beauty, attracted as a needle by a magnet, I rose and followed

her. Like myself she was alone, and a trivial accident, of which I eagerly availed myself, gave me an opportunity of introducing myself. Judge my joyful satisfaction when I found that she was English, although her dress and hat bore the unmistakable stamp of the Rue de la Paix, and her chic was that of the true Parisienne. As we walked together in the shadows beyond the public promenade, she told me that her home was in London; that on account of her father having been compelled to return suddenly, she had been left alone, and she admitted that, like myself, she had become dull and lonely.

Apparently she had no objection to my companionship, although she strove to preserve a British rigidity of manner and respect for the convenances. Yet after the reserve of the first half-hour had worn off we sat down together under a tree near the band-stand, and I gave her a card. She, however, refused to give me one.

“Call me Sybil,” she said smiling.

“Sybil!” I repeated. “A name as charming as its owner. Is your name Sybil – only Sybil?”

“My surname is of no consequence,” she answered quickly, with a slight haughtiness. “We are merely English folk thrown together in this place. To-morrow, or the next day perhaps, we shall part, never to meet again.”

“I trust not,” I said gallantly. “An acquaintanceship commenced under these strange conditions is rather romantic, to say the least.”

“Romantic,” she repeated mechanically, in a strange tone. “Yes, that is so. Every one of us, from pauper to peer, all have our little romances. But romance, after all, is synonymous with unhappiness,” and she drew a long breath as if sad thoughts oppressed her.

A moment later, however, she was as gay and bright as before, and we chatted on pleasantly until suddenly she consulted the tiny watch in her bangle and announced that it was time she returned. At her side I walked to her hotel, the Bonnemaison, and left her at the entrance.

We met frequently after that, and one morning she accompanied me on a drive through the quaint old frontier village of St. Aventin and on through the wild Oo Valley as far as the Cascade.

As in the bright sunshine she lounged back in the carriage, her fair, flawless complexion a trifle heightened by the pink of her parasol, I gazed upon her as one entranced. The half-lights of the Casino Garden had not been deceptive. She was twenty-two at the most, and absolutely lovely; the most bewitching woman I had ever seen. From beneath a marvel of the milliner’s art, tendrils of fair hair, soft as floss silk, strayed upon her white brow; her eyes were of that clear childlike blue that presupposes an absolute purity of soul, and in her pointed chin was a single dimple that deepened when she smiled. Hers was an adorable face, sweet, full of an exquisite beauty, and as she gazed upon me with her great eyes she seemed to read my heart. Her lithe, slim figure was admirably set off by her gown of soft material of palest green, which had all the shimmer of silk, yet moulded and defined its wearer like a Sultan’s scarf. It had tiny shaded stripes which imparted a delicious effect of myriad folds; the hem of the skirt, from under which a dainty bronze shoe appeared, had a garniture in the chromatics, as it were, of mingled rose and blue and green, and the slender waist, made long as waists may be, was girdled narrow but distinctive.

As I sat beside her, her violet-pervaded chiffons touching me, the perfume they exhaled intoxicated me with its fragrance. She was an enchantress, a well-beloved, whose beautiful face I longed to smother with kisses each time I pressed her tiny well-gloved hand.

Her frank conversation was marked by an ingenuousness that was charming. It was apparent that she moved in an exclusive circle at home, and from her allusions to notable people whom I knew in London, I was assured that her acquaintance with them was not feigned. Days passed – happy, idle, never-to-be-forgotten days. Nevertheless, try how I would, I could not induce her to tell me her name, nor could I discover it at her hotel, for the one she had given there was evidently assumed.

“Call me Sybil,” she always replied when I alluded to the subject.

“Why are you so determined to preserve the secret of your identity?” I asked, when, one evening after dinner, we were strolling beneath the trees in the Allee.

A faint shadow of displeasure fell upon her brow, and turning to me quickly she answered:

“Because – well, because it is necessary.” Then she added with a strange touch of sadness, “When we part here we shall not meet again.”

“No, don’t say that,” I protested; “I hope that in London we may see something of each other.”

She sighed, and as we passed out into the bright moonbeams that flooded the mountains and valleys, giving the snowy range the aspect of a far-off fairyland, I noticed that her habitual brightness had given place to an expression of mingled fear and sorrow. Some perpetual thought elevated her forehead and enlarged her eyes, and a little later, as we walked slowly forward into the now deserted promenade, I repeated a hope that our friendship would always remain sincere and unbroken.

“Why do you speak these words to me?” she asked suddenly, in faltering tones. “Why do you render my life more bitter than it is?”

“Because when your father returns and takes you away the light of my life will be extinguished. Don’t be cruel, Sybil; you must have seen – ”

“I am not cruel,” she answered calmly, halting suddenly and looking at me with her great clear eyes. “During the past fortnight we have – well, we have amused each other, and time has passed pleasantly. I know, alas! the words I have arrested on your lips. You mistake this mild summer flirtation of ours for real love. You were about to declare that you love me – were you not?”

“True, Sybil. And I mean it. From the first moment our eyes met I have adored you,” I exclaimed with passionate tenderness. “The brightness of your face has brought light into my life. You have showed me at all times the face of an adorable woman; you have peopled my desert, you have filled me with such supreme joy that I have been lost in profound love.”

“Hush! hush!” she cried, interrupting me. “Listen, let me tell you my position.”

“I care naught for your position; I want only you, Sybil,” I continued earnestly, raising her hand to my lips and smothering it with kisses. “I have adored you in all the different forms of love. You, who have sufficed for my being; you, whose wondrous beauty filled me with all the chastity of affection. Between you and the horizon there seems a secret harmony that makes me love the stones on the very footpaths. The river yonder has your voice; the stars above us your look; everything around me smiles with your smile. I never knew until now what it was to live, but now I live because I love you. Each night when we part I long for morning; I want to see you again, to kiss your hair, to tell you I love you always – always.”

Her bosom rose and fell quickly as I spoke, and when I had finished, her little hand closed convulsively upon mine.

“No, no,” she cried hoarsely. “Let us end this interview; it is painful to both of us. I have brought this unhappiness upon you by my own reckless folly. I ought never to have broken the convenances and accepted as companion a man to whom I had not been formally introduced.”

“Ah! don’t be cruel, Sybil,” I pleaded earnestly; “cannot you see how madly I love you?”

“Yes; I think that perhaps you care more for me than I imagined,” she answered, endeavouring to preserve a calmness that was impossible. “But leave me and forget me, Stuart. I am worthless because I have fascinated you when I ought to have shunned you, knowing that our love can only bring us poignant bitterness.”

“Why? Tell me,” I gasped; then, half fearing the truth, I asked. “Are you already married?”

“No.”

“Then what barrier is there to our happiness?”

“One that is insurmountable,” she answered hoarsely, hot tears welling in her eyes. “The truth I cannot explain, as for certain reasons I am compelled to keep my secret.”

“But surely you can tell me the reason why we may not love? You cannot deny that you love me just a little,” I said.

“I do not deny it,” she answered in a low, earnest voice, raising her beautiful face to mine. “It is true, Stuart, that you are the only man I have looked upon with real affection, and I make no effort

at concealment; nevertheless, our dream must end here. I have striven to stifle my passion, knowing full well the dire result that must accrue. But it is useless. Our misfortune is that we love one another; so we must part.”

“And you refuse to tell me the reason why you intend to break off our acquaintanceship,” I observed reproachfully.

“Ah, no!” she answered quickly. “You cannot understand. I dare not love you. A deadly peril threatens me. Ere six months have passed the sword which hangs, as it were, suspended over me may fall with fatal effect, but – but if it does, if I die, my last thought shall be of you, Stuart, for I feel that you are mine alone.”

I clasped her in my arms, and beneath the great tree where we were standing our lips met for the first time in a hot, passionate caress.

Then, panting, she slowly disengaged herself from my arms, saying:

“Our dream is over. After to-night we may be friends, but never lovers. To love me would bring upon you a disaster, terrible and complete; therefore strive, for my sake, Stuart, to forget.”

“I cannot,” I answered. “Tell me of your peril.”

“My peril – ah!” she exclaimed sadly. “Ever present, it haunts me like a hideous nightmare, and only your companionship has lately caused me to forget it for a few brief hours, although I have all the time been conscious of an approaching doom. It may be postponed for months, or so swiftly may it descend upon me that when to-morrow’s sun shines into my room its rays will fall upon my lifeless form; my soul and body will have parted.”

“Are you threatened by disease?”

“No. My peril is a strange one,” she answered slowly. “If I might tell you all my curious story I would, Stuart. At present, alas! I cannot. Come, let us go back to the hotel, and there bid me farewell.”

“Farewell! When do you intend to leave me?” I cried dismayed, as we turned and walked on together.

“Soon,” she said, sighing, her hand trembling in mine – “it will be imperative very soon.”

“But may I not help you? Cannot I shield you from this mysterious peril?”

“Alas! I know not. If your aid will assist me in the future I will communicate with you. I have your London address upon your card.”

There was a long and painful pause. But in those silent moments during our walk I became conscious of the grand passion that consumed me.

“And you will think of me sometimes with thoughts of love, Sybil?” I said disconsolately.

“Yes. But for the present forget me. Some day, however, I may be compelled to put your affection to the test.”

“I am prepared for any ordeal in order to prove that my passion is no idle midsummer fancy,” I answered. “Command me, and I will obey.”

“Then good-night,” she said, stretching forth her hand, for by this time we were in front of the Bonnemaison. I held her hand in silence for some moments, my thoughts too full for words.

“Shall I see you to-morrow?” I asked.

“Yes, if – if my doom does not overwhelm me,” she answered with a choking sob. “If it does, then adieu, my love, adieu forever!”

“No, not adieu, Sybil,” I said, drawing her beneath the shadow of a tree and once again imprinting a passionate kiss upon her lips. “Not adieu! Let us at least meet to-morrow, even if it must be for the last time.”

She burst into a flood of tears, and turning from me walked quickly to the steps leading to the hotel, while I, mystified and full of sad thoughts, strode onward along the silent moonlit Allee towards my hotel.

Little sleep came that night to my eyes, but when my coffee was brought in the morning a perfumed note lay upon the tray. I tore it open eagerly, and read the following words hastily scribbled in pencil and blurred by tears:

“I am in deadly peril and have been compelled to leave unexpectedly. Do not attempt to find me, but forget everything. – Sybil.”

I dashed aside the curtains and, like a man in a dream, stood gazing away at the white mountains, brilliant in the morning sunlight I had lost her; the iron of despair had entered my heart.

Chapter Two

Sin or Secret?

Six months passed. Left forlorn, with only the vivid memory of a charming face, I had travelled to rid myself of the remembrance, but in vain. Sometimes I felt inclined to regard my mysterious divinity as a mere adventuress; at others I became lost in contemplation and puzzled over her words almost to the point of madness. I knew that I had loved her; that, fascinated by her great beauty and enmeshed in the soft web of her silken tresses, she held me irrevocably for life or death.

Unhappy and disconsolate, heedless of London's pleasures or the perpetual gaiety of the "smart" circle in which my friends and relations moved, I spent the gloomy December days in my chambers in Shaftesbury Avenue, endeavouring to distract the one thought that possessed me by reading. My companions chaffed me, dubbing me a misanthrope, but to none of them, not even Jack Bethune, the friend of my college days and greatest chum, did I disclose the secret of my despair.

Thus weeks went by, until one morning my man, Saunders, brought me a telegram which I opened carelessly, but read with breathless eagerness, when I saw the signature was "Sybil."

The words upon the flimsy paper caused me such sudden and unexpected delight that old Saunders, most discreet of servants, must have had some apprehension as to my sanity. The telegram, which had been despatched from Newbury, read:

"Must see you this evening. In Richmond Terrace Gardens, opposite the tea-pavilion, is a seat beneath a tree. Be there at six. Do not fail. – Sybil."

Almost beside myself with joyful anticipation of seeing her sweet, sad face once again, I went out and whiled away the hours that seemed never-ending, until at last when twilight fell I took train to the place named.

Ten minutes before the hour she had indicated I found the seat in the Terrace Gardens, but there was no sign of the presence of any human being. It was almost closing time, and the Terrace was utterly deserted. All was silent save the rushing of a train, or the dull rumbling of vehicles passing along the top of the hill, and distant sounds became mingled with the vague murmurs of the trees. The chill wind sighed softly in the oaks, lugubriously extending their dark bare arms along the walk like a row of spectres guarding the vast masses of vapour spreading out behind them and across the valley, where the Thames ran silent and darkly in serpentine wanderings, and the lights were already twinkling. Even as I sat the last ray of twilight faded, and night, cloudy and moonless, closed in.

Suddenly a harsh strident bell gave six hurried strokes, followed by half a dozen others in different keys, the one sounding far distant across the river, coming, I knew, from Isleworth's old time-stained tower, with which boating men are so familiar.

It had seemed years full of sad and tender memories since we had parted, yet in ecstasy I told myself that in a few moments she would be again at my side, and from her eyes I might, as before, drink of the cup of love to the verge of intoxication.

A light footstep sounded on the gravel, and peering into the darkness I could just distinguish the form of a man. As he advanced I saw he was tall, well-built, and muscular, nearly forty years of age, with a slight black moustache and closely cropped hair that was turning prematurely grey. He wore the conventional silk hat, an overcoat heavily trimmed with astrakhan, and as he strode towards me he took a long draw at his cigar.

"Good-evening," he said courteously, halting before me as I rose, "I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Mr Stuart Ridgeway, have I *not*?"

"That is my name," I answered rather brusquely, not without surprise, for I had expected Sybil to keep her appointment.

“I am the bearer of a message,” he said in slow, deliberate tones. “The lady who telegraphed to you this morning desires to express her extreme regret at her inability to meet you. Since the telegram was sent, events have occurred which preclude her attendance anywhere,” and he paused. Then he added with sadness: “Anywhere – except before her Judge.”

“Her Judge!” I gasped. “What do you mean? Speak! Is she dead?”

“No,” he answered solemnly, “she still lives, and although overshadowed by a secret terror, her only thought is of you, even in these very moments when she is being carried swiftly by the overwhelming flood of circumstances towards her terrible doom.”

“You speak in enigmas,” I said quickly. “We are strangers, yet you apparently are aware of my acquaintance with Sybil. Will you not tell me the nature of her secret terror?”

“I cannot, for two reasons,” he replied. “The first is, because I am not aware of the whole of the circumstances; the second, because I have given her my promise to reveal nothing. Hence my lips are sealed. All I can tell you is that a great danger threatens her – how great you cannot imagine – and she desires you to fulfill your promise and render her your aid.”

“Whatever lies in my power I will do willingly,” I answered. “If she cannot come to me will you take me to her?”

“Upon two conditions only.”

“What are they?”

“For your own sake as well as hers, it is imperative that she should still preserve the strictest incognito. Therefore, in driving to her house, you must allow the blinds of the carriage to be drawn, and, however curious may appear anything you may witness in her presence, you must give your word of honour as a gentleman – nay, you must take oath – not to seek to elucidate it. Mystery surrounds her, I admit, but remember that any attempt to penetrate it will assuredly place her in graver peril, and thwart your own efforts on her behalf.”

“Such conditions from a stranger are, to say the least, curious,” I observed.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, smiling, “your reluctance to accept is but natural. Well, I can do no more, I have fulfilled my mission. The woman you love has staked her young life – and alas! lost. She has counted upon your aid in this hour of her extremity and despair, yet if you withhold it I must return and tell her.”

“But I love her,” I said. “Surely I may know who she is, and why she is haunted by this secret dread!”

For a few seconds he was silent. Then he tossed his cigar away with a gesture of impatience.

“Time does not admit of argument. I have merely to apologise for bringing you down here to a fruitless appointment, and to wish you good-evening,” he said in a tone of mingled annoyance and disappointment, as turning on his heel he walked away.

His words and manner aroused within me a sudden dislike, a curious hatred that I could not describe, yet ere he had gone a dozen paces I cried:

“Stop! I have reconsidered my decision. I must see her, for I promised her assistance, and am ready to give it in whatever manner she desires.”

“You know the conditions,” he said, sauntering carelessly back to me, “Do you accept them absolutely?”

“Yes.”

“Then swear.”

He had drawn from his pocket a Testament, and held it towards me. I hesitated.

“You may be tempted to break your word. You will never violate your oath,” he added, in the same slow, deliberate tone in which he had first addressed me. Still I was not prepared for this strange proceeding, and not until he urged me to hasten and declared that my oath was imperative, did I move.

Taking the book, I slowly raised it until it touched my lips.

Next second I regretted my action. I had a vague, indefinable feeling that I had subjected myself to him; that I had foolishly placed myself under his thrall.

Yet, as we walked together up the steep path and gained the Terrace, he chatted gayly upon various topics, and the strange presage of evil that I had first experienced was soon succeeded by lively anticipations of seeing once again the beautiful woman I adored.

In Hill Rise, close to that row of glaring new semi-aesthetic houses known as Cardigan Gate, a neat brougham drawn by a magnificent pair of bays was in waiting, and before we entered, the footman carefully drew down the blinds, then saluted as he closed the door.

The interior of the carriage would have been dark had not a tiny glimmering lamp been placed there, and this showed that, in addition to the blinds drawn down, heavy curtains had also been arranged, so that to see outside was impossible. My strange companion was affable, even amusing, but the drive occupied quite an hour and a half, although we travelled at a pretty smart pace.

Presently my companion turned to me, saying: "There is still one small thing more. Before we alight you must allow me to tie my handkerchief across your eyes."

"In order that I may not note the exterior of the house – eh?" I suggested, laughing.

He nodded, and a strange cynical smile played upon his lips.

"Very well," I said. "It is useless, I suppose, to protest."

He did not answer, but folding a silk handkerchief he placed it over my eyes and tied it tightly at the back. Almost at the moment he had completed this the conveyance stopped, the door was opened, and, led by my mysterious companion, I alighted.

Taking his arm, we crossed the pavement and ascended a short flight of steps. There were three. I counted them. I could also hear the wind in some trees, and found myself wondering whether we were in town or country.

A door opened, and we stepped into a hall, which, owing to the echo of my conductor's voice, I concluded was a spacious one, but ere I had time to reflect, the man whose arm I held said:

"Just a moment. You must sign the visitors' book – it is the rule here. We'll excuse bad writing as you can't see," he added with a laugh.

At the same moment I felt a pen placed in my fingers by a man-servant, who guided my hand to the book. Then I hastily scrawled my name.

It was strange, I thought; but the events of the evening were all so extraordinary that there was nothing after all very unusual in signing a visitors' book.

Again he took my arm, leading me up a long flight of stairs, the carpet of which was so thick that our feet fell noiselessly. In the ascent I felt that the balustrade was cold and highly polished, like glass. Confused and mysterious whisperings sounded about me, and I felt confident that I distinctly heard a woman's sob quite close to me, while at the same moment a whiff of violets greeted my nostrils. Its fragrance stirred my memory – it was Sybil's favourite perfume. Suddenly my guide ushered me into a room and took the handkerchief from my eyes. The apartment was a small study, cozy and well furnished, with a bright fire burning in the grate, and lit only by a green-shaded reading-lamp.

"If you'll take off your overcoat and wait here a few moments I will bring her to you," he said; adding, "you can talk here alone and undisturbed," and he went out, closing the door after him.

Five eager minutes passed while I listened for her footstep, expecting each second to hear her well-known voice; but gradually the atmosphere seemed to become stifling. In my mouth was a sulphurous taste, and the lamp, growing more dim, at last gave a weak flicker and went out. Rushing to the door, I found, to my astonishment, it was locked!

I dashed to the window and tried to open it, but could not. In despair I beat the door frantically with my fists and shouted. But my muffled voice seemed as weak as a child's. I doubted whether it could be heard beyond the walls.

Flinging myself upon my knees, I bent to examine the small fire, glowing like a blacksmith's forge, and discovered to my horror that the chimney had been closed, and that the grate was filled

with burning charcoal. Quickly I raked it out, but the red cinders only glowed the brighter, and, even though I dashed the hearthrug upon them, I could not extinguish them.

In desperation I tried to struggle to my feet, but failed. My legs refused to support me; my head throbbled as if my skull would burst. Then a strange sensation of nausea crept over me; my starting eyes smarted as if acid had been flung into them, my tongue clave to the roof of my parched mouth, my chest seemed held in contraction by a band of iron, as half rising I fell next second, inert and helpless, a sudden darkness obliterating all my senses.

What time elapsed I have no idea. Gradually I struggled back to consciousness, and as I made desperate endeavour to steady my nerves and collect my thoughts, I suddenly became painfully aware of a bright light falling full upon me. My eyes were dazzled by the extraordinary brilliancy. I closed them again, and tried to recollect what had occurred.

“Pull yourself together, my dear fellow. You are all right now, aren’t you?” asked a voice in my ear.

I recognised the tones as those of my strange guide.

“Yes,” I answered mechanically. “But Sybil – where is she?”

He made no reply.

I tried to open my eyes, but again the light dazzled me. About me sounded soft sibilations and the frou-frou of silk, while the warm air seemed filled with the sickly perfume of tuberoses. My left hand was grasping the arm of a capacious saddle-bag chair, wherein I was evidently sitting, while in my right I held something, the nature of which I could not at first determine.

My trembling fingers closed upon it more tightly a moment later, and I suddenly recognised that it was the hand of a woman! Again opening my heavy eyes, I strained them until they grew accustomed to the brightness, and was amazed to discover myself sitting in a spacious, richly-furnished drawing-room, brilliant with gilt and mirrors, while two men and two women in evening dress were standing around me, anxiety betrayed upon their pale faces. In a chair close beside mine sat a woman, whose hand I was holding.

Springing to my feet, my eyes fell full upon her. Attired in dead-white satin, a long veil hid her face, and in her hair and across her corsage were orange-blossoms. She was a bride!

Behind her – erect and motionless – was the man who had conducted me there, while at her side stood a grave, grey-haired clergyman, who at that moment was gabbling the concluding portion of the marriage service. The veil failed to conceal her wondrous beauty; in an instant I recognised her.

It was the woman I adored. A wedding-ring was upon the hand I had held!

“Speak, Sybil!” I cried. “Speak! tell me the reason of this!”

But she answered not. Only the clergyman’s droning voice broke the silence. The hand with the ring upon it lay upon her knees and I caught it up, but next second dropped it, as if I had been stung. Its contact thrilled me!

Divining my intention, the man who had brought me there dashed between us, but ere he could prevent me, I had, with a sudden movement, torn aside the veil.

Horror transfixed me. Her beauty was entrancing, but her blue eyes, wide open in a stony stare, had lost their clearness and were rapidly glazing; her lips, with their true *arc de Cupidon*, were growing cold, and from her cheeks the flush of life had departed, leaving them white as the bridal dress she wore.

I stood open-mouthed, aghast, petrified.

Sybil, the woman I loved better than life, was dead, and I had been married to her!

Chapter Three

Ghosts of the Past

Horrified and appalled, my startled eyes were riveted upon the flawless face that in life had entranced me.

“See! She’s dead – dead!” I gasped wildly, when a few seconds later I fully realised the ghastly truth.

Then throwing myself upon my knees, heedless of the presence of strangers, I seized her clammy hand that bore the wedding-ring, and covered it with mad, grief-impassioned caresses. In her breast was a spray of tuberose, flowers ineffably emblematic of the grave. Faugh! how I have ever since detested their gruesome, sickly odour. There is death in their breath.

The despairing look in her sightless eyes was so horrible that I covered my face with my hands to shut it out from my gaze. The secret terror that she had dreaded, and to which she had made such veiled, gloomy references, had actually fallen. Her incredible presage of evil, which in Luchon I had at first regarded as the fantastic imaginings of a romantic disposition, had actually become an accomplished fact – some dire, mysterious catastrophe, sudden and complete, had overwhelmed her.

The woman I adored was dead!

In those moments of desolation, stricken down by a sudden grief, I bent over the slim, delicate hands that had so often grasped mine in warm affection, and there came back to me memories of the brief joyous days in the gay little mountain town, when for hours I walked by her side in rapturous transports and sat with her each evening under the trees, charmed by her manner, fascinated by her wondrous fathomless eyes, held by her beautiful countenance as under a spell. There had seemed some mysterious rapport between her soul and mine. The sun shone more brightly for me on the day she came into my world, and my heart became filled with a supreme happiness such as I, blasé and world-weary, had never known. Heaven had endowed her with one of those women’s souls embodying pity and love, a ray of joy-giving light from a better world, that consoled my being, softened my existence, and aroused within me for the first time the conviction that in this brotherhood of tears there existed one true-hearted, soft-voiced woman, who might be the sweet companion of my future life. Through those few sunny days we had been forgetful of all earth’s grim realities, of all the evil thoughts of the world. We had led an almost idyllic existence, inspired by our love-making with great contempt for everything, vainly imagining that we should have no other care than that of loving one another.

Ah! how brief, alas! had been our paradise! How sudden and complete was my bereavement! how bitter my sorrow!

True, Sybil had spoken of the mysterious spectral terror which constantly held her in a paroxysm of fear; yet having been satisfied by her declaration that she was not already married, I had continued to love her with the whole strength of my being, never dreaming that her end was so near. Dead! She could no longer utter those soft, sympathetic words that had brought peace to me. No longer could she press my hand, nor smile upon me with those great eyes, clear and trusting as a child’s. Only her soulless body was before me; only her chilly form that ere long would be snatched from my sight forever.

No, I could not realise that she had departed beyond recall. In mad desperation I kissed her brow in an attempt to revivify her. At that moment her sweet voice seemed raised within me, but it was a voice of remembrance that brought hot tears to my eyes.

A second later I sprang up, startled by a loud knocking at the door of the room. The unknown onlookers, breathless and silent, exchanged glances of abject terror. “Hark!” I cried. “What’s that?”

“Hush!” they commanded fiercely. For a few seconds there was a dead silence, then the summons was repeated louder than before, as a deep voice outside cried:

“Open the door. We are police officers, and demand admittance in the name of the law.”

Upon the small assembly the words fell like a thunderbolt.

“They have come!” gasped one of the women, pale and trembling. She was of middle age, and wore an elaborate toilette with a magnificent necklet of pearls.

“Silence! Make no answer,” the man who had conducted me from Richmond whispered anxiously. “They may pass on, and we may yet escape.”

“Escape!” I echoed, looking from one to the other; “what crime have you committed?”

A third time the knocking was repeated, when suddenly there was a loud crash, and the door, slowly breaking from its hinges, fell, with its silken portiere, heavily into the room as three detectives, springing over it, dashed towards us.

“See! there she is!” cried one of the men authoritatively, pointing to Sybil. “Arrest her!”

The two others dashed forward to execute their inspector’s orders, but as they did so the clergyman stepped quickly before her chair, and, raising his bony hand, cried:

“Back, I command you! Back! The lady for whose arrest I presume you hold a warrant has, alas! gone to where she is not amenable to the law of man.”

The men halted, puzzled.

“What do you mean?” cried the inspector.

“Look for yourselves, gentlemen,” the man answered calmly. Then, in a voice full of emotion he added, “She is dead!”

“Dead! Impossible!” all three echoed dismayed, as next second they crowded around her, gazed into her calm, sweet face, and touching her stiffening fingers, at last satisfied themselves of the terrible truth. Then they removed their hats reverently, and, aghast at the sudden and unexpected discovery, stood eagerly listening to the grave-faced man who had made the amazing announcement.

“Yes,” he continued, preserving a quiet demeanour. “Such an occurrence is undoubtedly as unexpected by you as it is bitterly painful to us. This intrusion upon the death-chamber is, I know, warranted by certain unfortunate circumstances; nevertheless it is my duty, as the officiating priest, to inform you that shortly before this lady expired she was united in matrimony by special licence to this gentleman, Mr Stuart Ridgeway, and of course if you wish you can inspect the register, which I think you will find duly in order.”

“The marriage does not concern us,” the red-faced inspector answered, murmuring in the same breath an apology for causing us unnecessary pain by forcing the door. “The lady is dead, therefore we must, of course, return our warrant unexecuted.”

The others also expressed regret at their hasty action, and, having quite satisfied themselves that Sybil was not merely unconscious, they consulted among themselves in an undertone, and afterwards withdrew with disappointment plainly portrayed upon their features.

“What is the meaning of this?” I demanded angrily of the clergyman when they had gone.

“Unfortunately I can make no explanation,” he replied.

“But while I have been unconscious you have, without my knowledge or consent, performed the ceremony of marriage, uniting me to a dead bride. You have thus rendered yourself distinctly liable to prosecution, therefore I demand to know the reason at once,” I exclaimed fiercely.

Unconcernedly he shrugged his shoulders, answering: “I regret extremely that it is beyond my power to satisfy you. No doubt all this appears exceedingly strange; nevertheless, when the truth is revealed, I venture to think you will not be inclined to judge me quite so harshly, sir. I was asked to perform a service, and have done so. This lady is your wife, although, alas! she no longer lives.”

“But why was I entrapped here to be wedded to a dying woman?”

“I have acted no part in entrapping you – as you term it,” he protested with calm dignity. “I had but one duty; I have performed that faithfully.”

“Then I am to understand that you absolutely refuse to tell me the name of my dead wife, or any facts concerning her?”

“I do.”

“Very well, then. I shall invoke the aid of the police in order to fully investigate the mystery,” I said. “That all of you fear arrest is evident from the alarm betrayed on the arrival of the officers. What guarantee have I that Sybil has not been murdered?”

“Mine,” interposed one of the men, bald-headed and grey-bearded, who had until then been standing silent and thoughtful. “I may as well inform you that I am a qualified medical practitioner, and for two years have been this lady’s medical attendant. She suffered acutely from heart-disease, and the hurry and excitement of the marriage ceremony under such strange conditions has resulted fatally. I think my certificate, combined with my personal reputation in the medical profession, will be quite sufficient to satisfy any coroner’s officer.”

Approaching my dead bride as he spoke, he tenderly closed her staring eyes, composed her hands, and, taking up the veil I had torn aside, folded it and placed it lightly across her white face.

I was about to demur, when suddenly the man who had acted as my guide placed his hand upon my shoulder, saying in a calm, serious tone:

“Remember, you have taken your oath never to attempt to elucidate this mystery.”

“Yes, but if I have suspicion that Sybil has been murdered I am justified in breaking it,” I cried in protest.

“She has not been murdered, I swear,” he replied. “Moreover, the doctor here stakes his professional reputation by giving a certificate showing natural causes.”

This did not satisfy me, and I commented in rather uncomplimentary terms upon the unsatisfactory nature of the whole proceedings.

“But before coming here you accepted my conditions,” the man said, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets. “Sybil sought your aid to save her from a deadly peril, and you were willing to assist her. You have done so, although alas! all our efforts have been unavailing. You have had the unique experience of having been a bridegroom and a widower within ten minutes. Although I admit that there are many mysterious circumstances surrounding your tragic union, yet for the present it is impossible to give my explanation. Indeed, as I have already told you, any inquiries must inevitably increase your burden of sorrow and unhappiness. Therefore preserve silence and wait until I am able to render you full satisfaction. When the true facts are exposed, you will find that the only safeguard to ourselves lies in the present preservation of our secret.”

I observed that he was fully alive to my suspicions, that he divined them, and anxiously followed my words. I surprised a swift gleam in his eye that revealed the instinctive terror of the animal attacked at the moment of its fancied security. I felt convinced that a crime had been committed. At thought of it my heart-beats were quickened, and my nerves thrilled. Again he placed his hand upon my shoulder, but I shrank with unconquerable repugnance from that contact. “I intend to elucidate this mystery,” I said firmly. “Neither threats nor oaths shall deter me from seeking the truth.”

“Very well,” he replied hoarsely; “if you intend to violate your oath, taken before your Creator, do so. Nevertheless, I and my friends warn you of the penalty for so doing.”

“Well, and what is the penalty, pray?”

He shrugged his shoulders, but no answer passed his lips.

His face had strong individuality and vivid expression. As he stood there between the two handsomely-dressed women, in his grey furtive eyes, too wide apart, and always seeming to shun observation; in his prematurely grey hair, in his mouth set round with deep wrinkles; in his dark, blotched, bilious complexion, there seemed to be a creature of another race. What passions had worn those furrows? What vigils had hollowed those eyeballs? Was this the face of a happy man who had known neither the wearying cares of ambition, the toil of money-getting, nor the stings of wounded self-love? Why did all these marks of trouble and exhaustion suddenly strike me as effects of a secret cause, and why was I astonished that I had not sooner sought for it?

“Then you threaten me?” I said slowly, after a moment’s pause.

“I threaten nothing,” he answered, raising his dark eyebrows, and adding, “There is no reason, as far as I can see, why we should be enemies, but rather let us be friends. Sybil’s death has brought to my heart grief quite as poignant as that which you are suffering; therefore in our mourning for one who was pure and good, should we not be united? I have given you my word that I will elucidate the mystery as soon as I feel confident that no catastrophe will follow. I consider that this should satisfy you for the present, and that your own discretion should induce you to wait at least with patience.”

As he spoke there were some little details – the quick flutter of the eyelids, the rapidly dismissed expression of disagreeable surprise when I announced my intention of breaking my oath – that did not escape me. But was it not the same with myself? I could have sworn that at the same moment he experienced sensations exactly similar to those which were catching me at the breast and in the throat. Did this not prove that a current of antipathy existed between him and me?

Why had the police held a warrant for Sybil’s arrest? Why had such care been taken to conceal her identity? Why had I been married to her so mysteriously? Why had she so suddenly passed to that land that lies beyond human ken? Had a fatal draught been forced between her lips; or had she, too, been placed in that room where I had so narrowly escaped asphyxiation?

“Since I have been in this house,” I said, “an attempt has been made to kill me. I have therefore a right to demand an explanation, or place the matter in the hands of the police.”

“There was no attempt to injure you. It was imperative that you should be rendered unconscious,” the man said.

“And you expect me to accept all this, and make no effort to ascertain the true facts?” I cried. “Sybil feared an unknown terror, but it appears to me more than probable that she lived in constant dread of assassination.”

The man frowned, and upon the faces of those about him settled dark, ominous expressions.

“It is useless to continue this argument in the presence of the dead,” he said. “I have your address, and, if you desire it, I will call upon you to-morrow.”

“As you wish,” I replied stiffly. “I have no inclination to remain in this house longer than necessary.”

Crossing to where the body of Sybil reclined, I slowly raised the veil, gazing for some moments upon her calm, pale face, as restful as if composed in peaceful sleep. Bending, I pressed my lips to her clammy brow, then taking a piece of the drooping orange-blossom from her hair, I replaced the veil, and, overcome with emotion, walked unsteadily out over the fallen door, followed by the man whom I felt instinctively was my enemy.

Together we descended the fine staircase, brilliantly lit by a huge chandelier of crystal and hung with large time-mellowed paintings, into a spacious hall, in which a footman with powdered hair awaited us. Half dazed, my senses not having recovered from the shock caused to them, first by the charcoal fumes and secondly by the appalling discovery of Sybil’s death, I remember that when the flunkey threw open the door a hansom was awaiting me, and that my strange companion himself gave the cabman my address. I have also a distinct recollection of having refused to grasp my enemy’s proffered hand, but it was not until I found myself seated alone before the dying embers of the fire in my chambers in Shaftesbury Avenue, my mind troubled to the point of torment, that it suddenly occurred to me that in leaving the mysterious mansion I had been culpably negligent of the future.

I had actually failed to take notice either of the exterior of the house, or of the thoroughfare in which it was situated!

I had, I knew, driven along Oxford Street eastward to Regent Street, and thence home, but from what direction the conveyance had approached the Marble Arch I knew not. In blank despair I paced my room, for I saw I should be compelled to search London for a house, of which all I knew of the exterior was that it had a wide portico in front and was approached from the pavement by three steps.

My omission to take notice of its aspect overwhelmed me with despair, for there were thousands of similar houses in the West-End, and I knew that, while I prosecuted my inquiries, those responsible for Sybil's death would be afforded ample time to effect their escape.

That such a search was beset with difficulty I was well aware. But nervousness gave way to determination, at once feverish and fixed, and it was in a mood of perfect self-mastery that, after a long period of mental conflict, I flung myself upon my couch with my plan of operations clearly laid out, and lay thinking over them until the yellow light of the wintry dawn struggled in between the curtains.

Chapter Four

A Deepening Mystery

As the cheerless morning wore on, I sat after breakfast gloomily smoking, trying to verify my first impression that Sybil had been the victim of foul play in the hope of dispelling it. But it was, on the contrary, deepened.

Either I was wrong to think thus; and at any price I was determined to convince myself by facts that I was wrong, or I was right. The sole resource henceforth remaining to me for the preservation of my self-respect and the unburdening of my conscience was ardent and ceaseless search after certainty.

Each hour as I pondered I was plunged more profoundly into the gulf of suspicion. Yet the very position of the intricate problem which I had before me seemed to forbid all hope of discovering anything whatsoever without a formal inquiry. With foolish disregard for the future, I had taken an oath to seek no explanation of what I might witness within that mysterious house; I had placed myself irrevocably under the thrall of the strange, cynical individual who had acted as Sybil's messenger! Yet, now that Sybil was dead and everything pointed to a crime, I was fully justified in seeking the truth, and had resolved upon bringing the assassin to punishment.

During this debauch of melancholy the door opened and my old friend and college chum, Captain Jack Bethune, burst into the room exclaiming:

"Mornin', Stuart, old chap. That ancient servitor of yours, Saunders, told me that you're a bit seedy. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I said, languidly grasping his hand. "Sit down. To what good or evil fortune do I owe the honour of a visit at this unearthly hour?"

"Good fortune, old chap, good fortune!" he laughed, flinging off his overcoat and throwing himself back in the capacious armchair. "The best fortune that could befall a man. Congratulate me, Stuart."

"Upon what? Have you finished a new book, or has your publisher been unduly generous?"

"Neither. It isn't a book; it's a woman!"

"A woman?" I inquired, puzzled.

"I'm engaged to be married, old fellow."

"To Dora Stretton?"

"To Dora Stretton, the most adorable girl in the world."

I sighed; not because I regretted his choice. Far from it. Truth to tell, I envied him his happiness.

"With all my heart I congratulate you, Jack," I cried next second, springing up and grasping his hand. "I wish you every prosperity. I have known Dora ever since a child, and although she may move in a smart set, yet I have had opportunities that you have not of observing her true-heartedness and – what shall I say? – her hatred of the hollow shams and artificiality by which she is surrounded."

"Yes, you know her far better than I do," he admitted, lighting a cigarette and adding, "I'd take your opinion upon a woman's character before anybody else's. As a novelist, I have gained a reputation for portraying female character, yet I assure you my ability in that direction only exists in the imaginations of my reviewers. I can write about women, but, hang it, old chap, I'm absolutely ignorant of them in real life. You, a calm philosopher, can analyse a woman's nature and lay every fibre of it bare as if by the scalpel; while I, finding my conclusions always hopelessly at fault when attempting to study from life, have written merely what I have believed to be artistic."

"Your books are popular, so I suppose your confession proves that pure fiction pays better without an admixture of fact," I laughed.

"Yes," he said; "I'm afraid that is so," and then went on smoking with an expression of joyful contentment.

John Bethune, known as the “soldier-novelist,” was a handsome, well-built fellow about thirty-two, with dark hair, a carefully-trimmed moustache, and a pair of merry brown eyes that were an index to the genuine bonhomie which was the chief trait of his character. Though he entertained none of the idiosyncrasies or eccentricities of dress common to many writers, he was, although a smart officer, nevertheless a true Bohemian – always gay and light-hearted and the most popular man in his regiment.

A thoroughly good fellow, he deserved every bit of the success he had attained. The son of a struggling barrister, he had graduated, then joined the army, afterwards becoming an anonymous contributor to a Scotch review of hypercritical trend, edited by the distinguished critic, Mr Goring. Having turned his attention to novel-writing in combination with soldiering, he had made a brilliant success with his first book, which had been increased by each other that had been issued. On both sides of the Atlantic the newspapers were full of paragraphs regarding his sayings and doings, many of their writers being fond of alluding to him as “one of Mr Goring’s young men,” and for the past three years he had been recognised as one of the leading “younger novelists,” whose wondrous insight into the complexities and contradictions of woman’s nature had earned for him a world-wide reputation.

As he chatted about the woman to whom he had become engaged, I expressed genuine satisfaction at his announcement. The honourable Dora Stretton, although sister of the Countess of Fyneshade, one of the smartest women in England, was altogether sweet and adorable, with a winning manner and a face voted pretty wherever she appeared. She hated town life, for, being a splendid horsewoman, she loved all outdoor sport, and was never so happy as when riding with the Fitzwilliam pack, or driving her spanking bays over the broad level Lincolnshire highways. Outwardly she was a smart woman of to-day, but, as her childhood’s friend, I knew that beneath her tightly-laced Parisian corset and the veneer that she was compelled to assume, there beat a true heart that yearned for the honest love of a man.

So I congratulated Jack, explaining how Blatherwycke, old Lady Stretton’s estate in Northamptonshire, joined that of my father, and how Dora, her sister Mabel, now Countess of Fyneshade, and myself had known each other ever since the time when our nurses gossiped. Cruel-tongued scandalmongers had said that her ladyship, finding her estates impoverished on the death of her husband, the Viscount, gave Mabel in marriage to the Earl of Fyneshade, a widower nearly twice her age, in exchange for a service he rendered her by paying off a certain mortgage upon the property. But, be that how it might, Dora had five thousand a year in her own right, and this, together with Jack’s fair income from his royalties, would suffice to keep them in comfort, if not in affluence.

“I had heard that Dora was likely to become the wife of old Lord Wansford,” I observed at last.

“Yes,” he answered in a low tone. “Don’t mention it to anybody, but her ladyship is simply furious because Dora and I love each other. She had set her mind on her daughter marrying a peer.”

“Then you haven’t yet obtained her ladyship’s consent – eh?”

“No. We love each other, and Dora says she intends to marry me, therefore we have agreed to defy the maternal anger.”

“Quite right, old chap,” I said. “Under the circumstances you are justified. Besides, knowing the unhappiness in the Fyneshade menage, Dora is not likely to marry anybody she does not love.”

“True,” he said. Then tossing his cigarette into the grate he rose, and declaring he had a business appointment, he struggled into his overcoat and, grasping my hand in adieu, said:

“You seem confoundedly glum to-day. Shake yourself up, old fellow. We shall soon be hearing of your marriage!”

“My marriage!” I gasped, starting. His jovial words cut me to the quick. They had an ominous meaning. “My marriage!”

“Yes,” he said. “We shall soon be hearing all about it.”

“Never, I hope – never.”

“Bah! I was of the same mind until a month ago. Some day you, like myself, will discover one woman who is not a coquette. Ta-ta for the present,” and he strode airily out, whistling a gay air, and leaving me alone with my bitter sorrow.

Once or twice during our conversation I had been sorely tempted to disclose the whole of the dismal circumstances and seek his advice, but I had hesitated. He was perhaps too full of his newly-found joy to trouble himself over my grief, and, after all, he might consider me a fool for allowing myself to become fascinated by a mere chance-met acquaintance about whom I knew absolutely nothing, and whose principal efforts were directed towards enveloping herself in an impenetrable veil of mystery. No; I resolved to preserve my own secret and act upon the plans I had already formulated. With bitterness I sat and brooded over Burns' lines:

Pleasures are like poppies spread.
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed.
Or like the snowflake on the river,
A moment white – then gone forever.

At noon I roused myself and started forth on the first stage of a search after truth, a search which I swore within myself I would not relinquish until I had learnt Sybil's true history; nay, I had resolved to make the elucidation of the mystery of her tragic end the one object in my life.

It occurred to me that from the police I might at least ascertain her name and the nature of the information upon which the warrant had been issued; therefore I walked to New Scotland Yard and sought audience of the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department. For half an hour I aired my heels in a bare, cheerless waiting-room at the end of a long stone corridor on the first floor, until at last a secretary entered with my card, and an intimation from the Chief that he regretted he had “no information to give on the subject.”

Argument with the secretary proved unavailing, therefore I left, feeling that I could hope for no assistance from the police.

Next it occurred to me to search the record of special marriage licences at Doctors' Commons, and, taking a cab there, I was not long in obtaining what appeared to be the first clue, for at the Faculty Office I was shown the affidavit that had been made in application for a special licence, which read as follows:

“Canterbury Diocese, December 8, 1891.

“Appeared personally, Sybil Henniker, spinster, of Hereford Road, Bayswater, and prayed a special licence for the solemnisation of matrimony between her and Stuart Ridgeway, bachelor, of 49, Shaftesbury Avenue, London, and made oath that she believed that there is no impediment of kindred or alliance, or any other lawful cause, nor any suit commenced in any Ecclesiastical Court, to bar or hinder the proceedings of the said matrimony according to the tenor of such licence.

“Sworn before me, —

“John Hatchard (Registrar).”

The special licence had, it appeared, been granted on the following day, but the clerk said the applicant had been seen by his colleague, now absent.

Feeling that at least I should know the whereabouts of the strange company who held in their charge the lifeless form of the woman I loved, I drove rapidly to Bayswater, but when the cab turned from Westbourne Grove into Hereford Road, and I saw that the house for which I was searching, the number of which appeared in the licence, was a small tobacconist and newsvendor's, my heart again sank within me.

I alighted and made inquiry of the shopkeeper, but she knew of no young lady named Sybil, nor of any person named Henniker. Once again, then, I was foiled; the address given in the affidavit was false.

For hours I drove aimlessly about the streets and squares lying between Praed Street and Oxford Street, vaguely looking for a house I had never distinctly seen, until at last it grew dark; then, cold and wearied, I returned to my chambers.

As day succeeded day I continued my search, but could not grasp a single certainty. At Somerset House I could discover no facts regarding either the marriage or the death, and advertisements I inserted in various newspapers, inquiring for the cabman who drove me home on the fatal morning, elicited no reply.

Jack Bethune dropped in to see me daily and pestered me with inquiries regarding the cause of my gloominess. Little, however, did he imagine that I had been engaged through a whole fortnight in searching patiently and methodically the registers of the great metropolitan cemeteries. To Kensal Green, Highgate, Abney Park, Nunhead, Dulwich, Brompton, Norwood, Crystal Palace, Lee, and elsewhere I went, always searching for the names of Sybil Henniker or Sybil Ridgeway. This investigation proved long and, alas! futile. I could obtain no clue whatever, all trace of her had been so carefully hidden as to defy my vigilance.

At last, however, a month after that fatal night and just when the prospect of misery which my future offered seemed too terrible for endurance, I suddenly made a discovery. It was in the London office of the Woking Cemetery Company that I found in the register an entry of an interment on the second day following the midnight ceremony, of "Sybil Ridgeway, wife of Stuart Ridgeway, of Shaftesbury Avenue." The address whence the body was removed was not given, but, taking the next train from Waterloo to Woking, I was not long in finding, by aid of the cemetery-keeper's plan, away in a far corner of the ground a newly-made grave.

Overcome with emotion, I stood before it in the fast-falling wintry twilight, and saw lying upon the mound of brown earth a magnificent wreath of white immortelles. Attached to it was a limp visiting-card. Eagerly I took it up and inspected it.

Upon it, traced in ink that had become blurred and half-effaced by the rain, there appeared some words. As I read them they seemed to glow in letters of fire; they held me spell-bound.

I lost courage to pursue my cold, calm, reasonable deductions; a kind of hallucination came upon me – a mental picture of her tragic end – and I felt my reason reel.

A vertigo of terror seized me, as though the breath of destiny swept over my brow.

The card secured to the great wreath was my own – the one I had given Sybil on the first evening we had met in the Casino Garden – but the words written upon it amazed me. I stood breathless, dumbfounded, holding it between my trembling fingers, utterly unable to realise the truth.

A portion of the writing upon it was in a well-formed man's hand, the remainder in a heavy calligraphy totally different. The rains had rendered the writing faint and brown, yet in the fast-falling gloom I was enabled to decipher that one side bore the inscription —

"From your heart-broken husband – Stuart."

Then, turning it over, I read in a distinctly feminine hand the strange exhortation —

"Seek, and you may find."

What did it mean? Was it an actual message to me from the grave? Did it not appear like a declaration from my dead love herself that some mysterious crime had been committed, and that she left its elucidation in my hands? I became lost in bewilderment.

The inscription, purporting to be written by myself, was not in my handwriting, and I was puzzled to divine its meaning. That it had been penned at a date prior to the mysterious woman's words appeared certain, as the lines were almost obliterated. Yet on reflection I saw that this fact might be accounted for if that side of the card had been uppermost, and thus more exposed. But the mysterious words, "Seek, and you may find," were written in a different ink, upon which the action of the weather had had but little effect. The exhortation stood out plainly before my wondering eyes. By whose hand had it been traced? True, it was not addressed personally to me, yet so ominous were the words that I could not rid myself of the conviction that they were meant as an appeal to me.

Why the wreath had been so carefully placed upon the grave, as if it were a tribute from myself, was an inscrutable mystery; and the five firmly-written words on the reverse of the card contained a mystic meaning that I could not follow.

For a long time I remained there until night closed in and the wintry mists gathered; then, detaching the card and placing it in my pocket-book, I wended my way between the white, ghostly tombs towards the cemetery gate, plunged deep in thought.

Suddenly, as I turned a corner sharply, I came face to face with an ill-dressed man, who had apparently been lurking behind a great marble monument. In the gloom I could not distinguish his features, and as he turned and walked in the opposite direction I concluded that he was a grave-digger or gardener, so dismissed the incident from my mind. Yet half an hour later, while waiting on the platform of Woking Station, a man who passed me beneath a lamp gave me a swift inquisitive look. His strange expression attracted my attention, and as I turned and watched his retreating figure it seemed familiar. Then I remembered. It was the same individual who had apparently been watching my movements beside Sybil's grave. Was he "shadowing" me?

Again I passed him, but he was wary, and bent feigning to eagerly scan a time-table, thereby hiding his features. Nevertheless, before the train arrived I managed by means of a ruse to obtain an uninterrupted view of his pale, sad-looking countenance.

At first I was prompted to approach him boldly and demand the reason he watched my actions, but on reflection I became convinced that my suspicions were groundless, and that after all he was merely a lonely mourner like myself. Perhaps he, too, had come from London to visit the last resting-place of some dearly-loved friend; perhaps, even while I viewed him with unjust suspicion, he had actually been sympathising with me. No, I felt certain that my apprehensions were absurd, and that the man had no sinister motive.

Alone in my room some hours later I placed the card carefully in the fender to dry, and sat smoking and thinking over the strangely ominous words upon it.

I could not rid myself of the conviction that my well-beloved had been the victim of foul play. The words "Seek, and you may find" rang for ever in my ears, yet in face of the declaration of the doctor I had no proof that murder had actually been committed. I could discover no report of an inquest having been held, and as the police had declined to assist me I knew that I must work single-handed and unaided.

Noticing that the card was now dry, I knocked the ashes from my pipe, then slowly stooping, picked it up. I turned it over to re-read the mysterious words of entreaty, but a cry of dismay escaped me when next instant I found the back of the card a perfect blank. On that side not a trace of writing remained.

The puzzling mystic sentence had faded. The words had been wholly obliterated as by some unseen hand.

The card fell from my nerveless fingers.

Presently it occurred to me that by again damping it the mysterious entreaty might be rendered visible, and, taking the ewer that Saunders had placed beside the tantalus stand, I dipped the precious document in water. For half an hour I alternately wetted it and carefully dried it with my handkerchief, but all effort to restore the writing proved unavailing. The surface became rubbed by continued immersions, but the words had utterly vanished, as if by magic.

Some hours afterwards I found myself doubting if I had ever actually seen those strange words, and wondering whether after all they were not a mere chimera of my disordered imagination. So strangely ominous were they that I could not help feeling a trifle uncertain that they had actually existed, and I remember that as I sat brooding over my sorrow I feared lest I had been the victim of one of those strange hallucinations which I had heard were precursory of insanity.

Twice I visited the grave of my dead love, but inquiries of the cemetery-keeper elicited no clue. Times without number I felt prompted to explain the strange circumstances to Jack Bethune, but

always hesitated, deeming silence the best course. Whether this secrecy regarding my heart-sorrow was beneficial to my interests, I cannot say, but the occurrence of at least one incident caused me self-congratulation that my friends were unaware of the strange drama that wrecked my happiness and overshadowed my life. It is, alas! true, as François Coppee has said, “*Pour le mélancolique, le soleil se couche déjà le matin.*”

Chapter Five

Dora's Engagement

One night Jack dashed into my chambers and carried me off to a reception at the house of John Thackwell, the well-known Lancashire millionaire, at Hyde Park Gate. He would hear no excuses, for Dora was to be there, and he pointed out that I had not yet congratulated her upon her engagement. This fact alone induced me to accompany him, but, truth to tell, I had only once before accepted Thackwell's hospitality, and on that occasion had been terribly bored.

Thackwell had risen from a carding-hand to be sole proprietor of extensive mills at Oldham, and a dozen other great spinning mills in the neighbourhood of Manchester. This Lancashire cotton-king was bluff, honest, and unassuming, and still retained all the peculiarities of the dialect of his youth. He had tried to enter the gate of Society by the Parliamentary pathway, but the electors of Bamborough had returned a young sprig of the aristocracy by a narrow majority, notwithstanding the fact that the cotton-king had built a fresh wing to one of the hospitals, and presented the town with a brand new red-brick free library. In chagrin he had come to London, bought one of the finest mansions overlooking Hyde Park, and was now endeavouring to enter the charmed circle by entertaining all and sundry on a scale lavish even for millionaires.

Although the bluff old bachelor was fond of placing his "J.P." after his name, dropping his "h's," and referring on inopportune occasions to the fact that when a lad he had assisted to build his great mill at Oldham by carrying hods of mortar up a ladder, he was nevertheless popular among a certain set. Many scheming and impecunious mothers with titles and marriageable daughters coveted his wealth, and it was no secret that several of the men registered in "Debrett," who "looked in" at his monthly functions, were indebted to him for substantial financial assistance.

On arrival, we found the great magnificently-furnished rooms crowded almost to suffocation by a brilliant but decidedly mixed throng. Some of the men who nodded to us were high-priests of Mammon, officers who lounged in clubs without any visible means of subsistence, and idlers about town; but there was also a fair sprinkling of those leisurely well-dressed people who constitute what is known as London, and I noticed at once that on the whole the guests were of a much better set than when I had before partaken of the millionaire's hospitality. Society resembles a bal masqué, where the women never unmask themselves.

At the moment we were announced, Thackwell, a burly, florid-faced, grey-bearded man in ill-fitting clothes, and with an enormous diamond solitaire in the centre of his crumpled shirt-front, was talking loudly with old Lady Stretton, who was congratulating him upon the completion of the beautiful frescoes by the Italian artists he had employed. As I approached, I heard the millionaire reply:

"It's shaping gradely weel, but after all I get no more pleasure out of life than when I wor a journeyman. Yet a chap with any spirit likes to get on, and when he has put his heart into a job, feels as if he would rayther dee than be bet. It's cost me a sight o' money, but it doesn't pay to scamp."

Then, noticing me, he gripped my hand heartily, and to Bethune cried:

"Well, Jack, lad, how goes it?"

"Jack, lad," smiled as he made polite reply, but did not seem to greatly admire this style of greeting, albeit the soldier-novelist knew the cotton-king intimately. Truly, old Thackwell was an incongruity in Society.

Lady Stretton smiled pleasantly, and bowed to us as we pushed our way forward among the crowd, and we were not long in discovering the Honourable Dora, Jack's adored, comfortably ensconced in a cosy-corner, chatting with three men we knew.

“Halloa, Ridgeway!” cried one, a club acquaintance. Then dropping his voice he added: “Unusual to find you in the cotton-palace, isn’t it?”

“I’ve been here once before,” I replied briefly, as, turning to Dora, I sank into a low chair near her and began to chat. Soon the others left, and Jack and I were alone with her. When I offered her my congratulations, she clutched my arm quickly, whispering:

“Don’t let anyone overhear you. Remember, no announcement has yet been made, and Ma is quite inexorable.”

“I’m looking for it in the Morning Post each day,” I laughed, while as punishment she playfully tapped me with her ostrich-feather fan.

Though three years had elapsed since she had kissed the hand of her Sovereign, Society had not spoiled her. She was just as fresh, light-hearted, and ingenuous as I remembered her in her hoyden days at Blatherwycke, and as she sat talking with her lover and myself I saw how thoroughly charming and brilliant she was.

Her fund of vivacity was, I knew, inexhaustible. When she wished to do honour to a melancholy occasion, her vivacity turned any slight sorrow she had into hysterical weeping; when the occasion was joyful, it became a torrent of frivolity that is delightful when poured forth by a happy girl of twenty-two. This evening the occasion was distinctly joyful. Men had complimented her upon her dress, and she had a large sense of success.

When she spoke to Jack there was a love-look in her dark brilliant eyes that was unmistakable, and she was altogether handsome and fascinating. Small-featured, hers was a delicately-moulded oval face with pointed chin and pouting lips, while at the back of her well-poised head, her maid had deftly coiled her wealth of dark-brown hair, wherein a diamond aigrette glittered. Her smart gown was of pale pink chine silk, patterned in green and darker pink. The coat bodice of darker pink moiré boasted diamond buttons, kilted frills of ivory lace, the sleeves of kilted pale-green chiffon, and a large bow of green chiffon with draped ends to the waist over a jabot of ivory lace.

Many turned and looked at her as they passed. The glow of excitement and success burned brightly in her cheeks, and no one accused Dora of using rouge. Lady Stretton eyed us viciously once or twice; nevertheless, Jack held in conversation the girl he loved, and they laughed happily together. He was telling us of an amusing incident that had occurred during the exercise of the troopers on Hounslow Heath that morning, and I was feeling myself *de trop* when Dora, looking up suddenly, exclaimed:

“Why, here’s Mabel!”

Turning quickly I found her elder sister, the Countess of Fyneshade, in a marvellous creation in yellow, leaning over my chair.

“I’ve come across to talk to you, Mr Ridgeway,” she exclaimed, smiling. “I saw that Jack had quite monopolised Dora. Their public love-making is really becoming a scandal.” Then she seated herself in a dimly-lit corner close by, and motioned me to a chair near her.

Chapter Six

The Countess of Fyneshade

Three years Dora's senior, the Countess was dark, strikingly handsome, an accomplished horsewoman, and accredited one of the smartest women in Society. Wedded to an elderly peer, she flirted outrageously, and always had one or two younger cavaliers in her train. Fyneshade was scarcely ever seen with his wife, and many were the stories afloat regarding the serious differences existing between them. Outwardly, however, the Countess was always gay, witty, and brilliant. She displayed exquisite taste, and men voted her "capital company." It is true that beside her pretty women seemed plain and middle-aged, and well-dressed women looked dowdy, but since her marriage she had become just a trifle too smart for my taste.

Dora was no doubt pleased that her sister had taken me off, so that she might exchange confidences with Jack, but I confess I was not one of the drivelling crowd that admired Fyneshade's wife.

When I had known her at Blatherwycke, in the days before her presentation, she had been as frank and merry as her sister, but since her union with the Earl she had sadly changed, acquiring an artificiality and a penchant for flirtation, apparently living only to be flattered and admired. True, she moved in one of the most select circles, and no really smart house-party was complete without her; but, knowing her as intimately as I did, it was not surprising perhaps that I had long ago arrived at the conclusion that her gaiety and recklessness were feigned, and I felt some sorrow for her.

She was lounging back talking nonsense at the highest possible speed, for ever exchanging greetings and salutations in the same breath, and as I calmly contemplated her I wondered whether her domestic unhappiness was the sole cause of the secret trouble which she strove to mask.

"Jack and Dora are really too absurd," she was saying, glancing over to them. "They are childishly fond of one another, but what the result will be I dread to think."

"The result? Why, marriage," I said laughing.

She shrugged her shoulders, causing the diamonds at her white throat to sparkle, elevated her dark arched brows, and exclaimed:

"Of course Jack is popular, and has a fair income, and everybody likes him, but Ma is absolutely determined that Dora shall marry a title."

"Which means a loveless union with an elderly husband, and no happiness within her own home – eh?"

She looked at me inquiringly, and her lips quivered slightly.

"You are cruel, Stuart," she answered seriously. "You mean that I am an illustration of the victim of a loveless marriage."

I nodded. Then I said: "We are such old acquaintances, Mabel, that I feel myself permitted to speak candidly. I have watched you for a long time, and I know that you do not, you cannot love Fyneshade; you are unhappily married, and all the pleasure of life lies beyond your own home. Gossips' tongues try to wound your reputation – well, that's not my affair, but –"

"Gossips' tongues!" she echoed hoarsely. "What care I for the lies of scandalmongers? True, men admire me, flatter me, and say pretty things that please me, but surely I am mistress of my own actions? If I chose to flirt with my coachman it would be of no concern to anybody except Fyneshade."

"You misconstrue my meaning," I said quietly. "It was my intention to ask you whether you would desire Dora to lead a life similar to yours, or whether you would allow her to seek happiness with the man she loves."

In hesitation she opened and closed her fan. At last, in a harsh, strained voice, quite unusual to her, she answered:

“Now that you have spoken so plainly, Stuart, I am compelled to admit the truth,” and with a sigh she continued: “You are quite right when you say that mine was a loveless marriage, but even you cannot imagine how bitter is my misery. Once I was as happy as my sister there, and believed that I could love a man as devotedly as she does Jack, but my mother led me to believe that wealth brought love, and I sacrificed myself to rescue her from her creditors. The result has been three long years of wretchedness and duplicity, of sorrow, misery, and despair. Wealth and luxury are mine, it is true, and my diamonds are the envy of the feminine half of London, but – but I have no happiness, no object in life, no love. I hate everything, and most of all I hate myself.”

“And why do you hate yourself?” I asked sympathetically.

“For reasons known only to myself,” she answered evasively. “Ah! you little dream, Stuart, what a life mine is – at least, the life I am leading now. Another year of it will kill me, or drive me mad.”

“Am I then to understand by your words that there is truth in this gossip about Prince Starikoff and yourself at Royat?” I asked seriously.

She drew a deep breath and bit her lip. I saw I had approached a delicate subject. Her words had aroused my suspicions that there was some foundation for the scandal freely circulated regarding a fracas that had taken place at the little French watering-place of Royat, a month or so before, between Fyneshade and a Russian Prince named Starikoff.

“You have no right, Stuart, to question me upon my private affairs,” she said frigidly. “*Les calomnies n’ennuient jamais*. I know the Prince, it is true, but I had no intention that my words should convey the meaning you choose to put upon them, and I have no wish that we should pursue the subject further.”

“I bow to your desire, of course,” I said. “My sole object in speaking to you thus was to urge you to plead Jack’s cause with your mother. I know well enough that Lord Wansford admires Dora, and that Lady Stretton looks upon him with favour. But surely his is an unenviable reputation. If you were a man I could speak more plainly, but to you I can only say that I would never allow a sister of mine to become his wife. I would rather see her marry an honest working man.”

The Countess’ seriousness suddenly vanished, and she laughed lightly as she answered:

“I really believe that after all, dear old boy, you are in love with Dora yourself. I know you used to be rather fond of her in the old days, and am inclined to think that in reality you are Jack’s rival.”

“No, not at all,” I said. “Bethune is my friend; so is Dora. I merely desire to see them happy, and if I can save your sister from a life of wretchedness with Wansford, I shall feel that at least I have acted as her friend.”

“Rubbish!” the Countess exclaimed impatiently. “Marriage nowadays is a mere commercial transaction; very few people marry for love. An affectionate husband is apt to be jealous, and jealousy is decidedly bourgeois. Besides, Jack hasn’t the means to keep Dora as she should be kept. It would mean a red-brick villa in a remote suburb with a couple of servants, I suppose. Why, she would leave him in six months.”

“No,” I said. “Surely love and sufficient to provide comfort is better than loathing and thirty thousand a year! Scarcely a man in England or America is better known than Jack Beaune.”

“I was only aggravating you,” she said with a tantalising smile a moment later. “I quite admit the force of your argument, but to argue is useless. Mother has set her mind upon Lord Wansford, and, although I should like to see Dora marry Jack, I’m afraid there’s but little chance of the match – unless, of course, they throw over the maternal authority altogether and – ”

The words froze upon her lips. With her eyes fixed beyond me, she started suddenly and turned deathly pale, as if she had seen an apparition. Alarmed at her sudden change of manner, and fearing that she was about to faint, I turned in my chair, and was just in time to come face to face with a tall military-looking man who was sauntering by with a fair, insipid-looking girl in pink upon his arm.

For an instant our eyes met. It was a startling encounter. We glared at each other for one brief second, both open-mouthed in amazement. Then, smiling cynically at Mabel, he hurried away, being lost next second in the laughing, chattering crowd.

I had recognised the face instantly. It was the mysterious individual who had met me at Richmond and conducted me to Sybil! My first impulse was to spring up and dash after him, but, noticing the Countess was on the point of fainting, I rushed across to Dora and borrowed her smelling-salts. These revived my companion, who fortunately had not created a scene by losing consciousness, but the unexpected encounter had evidently completely unnerved her, for she was trembling violently, and in her eyes was a wild, haggard look, such as I had never before witnessed.

“That man recognised you,” I said a few moments later. “Who is he?”

“What man?” she gasped with well-feigned surprise. “I was not aware that any man had noticed me.”

“The fellow who passed with a fair girl in pink.”

“I saw no girl in pink,” she replied. “The heat of this crowded room upset me – it caused my faintness.” Then, noticing my expression of doubt, she added, “You don’t appear to believe me.”

“I watched him smile at you,” I answered calmly.

“He smiled! Yes, he smiled at me!” she said hoarsely, as if to herself. “He is the victor and I the vanquished. He laughs because he wins, but –” She stopped short without finishing the sentence, as if suddenly recollecting my presence, and annoyed that she should have involuntarily uttered these words.

“Tell me, Mabel, who he is,” I inquired. “I have met him before, and to me he is a mystery.”

“To me also he is a mystery,” she said, with knit brows. “If he is your friend, take my advice and end your friendship speedily.”

“But is he not your friend?” I asked.

“I knew him – once,” she answered in a low voice; adding quickly: “If I remain here I shall faint. Do take me to my carriage at once.”

She rose unsteadily, bade good-night to her sister and Jack, then taking my arm accompanied me downstairs to the great hall.

It was an entirely new phase of the mystery that the Countess of Fyneshade should be acquainted with my strange, sinister-faced conductor. That she feared him was evident, for while there had been an unmistakable look of taunting triumph in his face, she had flinched beneath his gaze and nearly fainted. Her declaration that she had recognised no man at that moment, her strenuous efforts to remain calm, and her subsequent admission that he was her enemy, all pointed to the fact that she was well acquainted with him; and although, as we stood while her carriage was being found, I asked her fully a dozen times to disclose his name or something about him, she steadily refused. It was a secret that she seemed determined to preserve at all hazards.

When she grasped my hand in farewell she whispered, “Regard what I have told you as a secret between friends. I have been foolish, but I will try to make amends. Adieu!” Then she stepped into her carriage, and I went up into the drawing-room in search of the mysterious dark-visaged guest, whose appearance had produced such a sudden, almost electric effect upon her. Through several rooms, the great conservatory, and the corridors I searched, but could neither discover my strange companion on that eventful night, nor the pale-faced girl in pink. For fully half an hour I wandered about, my eager eyes on the alert, but apparently they had both disappeared on being recognised.

Did this strange individual fear to meet me face to face?

Though my mind was filled with memories of that fateful night when I had been joined in matrimony to my divinity, I nevertheless chatted with several women I knew, and at last found myself again with Dora, “Jack, lad,” being carried off by our energetic old host to be introduced to the buxom daughter of some Lancashire worthy.

Dora pulled a wry face and smiled, but we talked gayly together until the soldier-novelist returned. Soon afterwards, however, old Lady Stretton came up to us and carried off her daughter, while Jack shared my cab as far as his chambers, where we parted.

Chapter Seven

On Life's Quicksands

At home I cast myself in my chair and threw myself into an ocean of memories. I did not switch on the light, but mused on, gazing into the darkness, now and then lit up by the ruddy flames as they shot forth from the grate and cast great quivering shadows, like dancing spectres, on the walls and ceiling. Ever and anon a momentary flash would hover about the antique silver ewer or glint along the old oak sideboard, which, like a vague dark mass, filled up an angle in the room, or play about the set of old china or the pair of antique vases on the mantelshelf. This prevailing gloom, penetrated by fitful gleams, was soothing after the glare and glitter of what had irreverently been termed the cotton-palace, and as the fickle light fell in spectral relief about the gloom-hidden furniture, I mused on in coldest pessimism.

As I sat thinking what I had lived through, scenes in many climes and pictures of various cities rose before my mind, but one face alone stood out boldly before me, the sweet countenance of the woman I had loved.

I recollected the strange events of that fateful night of grief and terror, and reflected upon the recognition between the Countess and the unknown man whom she had admitted was her enemy. How suddenly and completely he had disappeared! Yet it was apparent that he held some strange influence over Fyneshade's wife, for she feared to tell me his name or disclose her secret. Even though he had brushed past me and his cold, glittering eyes had gazed into my face, he had again eluded me. The expression of triumph upon his dark countenance was still plainly before me, a look full of of portent and evil.

I met Dora several times, once riding in the Park, once at the theatre with Lady Stretton, and once in Park Lane with her lover. From her I learnt that the Countess had been very unwell ever since that evening at Thackwell's, and had not been out. Her doctor had recommended complete rest for a week, and suggested that she should afterwards go to the Riviera for a change.

Was this extreme nervousness from which she was suffering the result of the unexpected encounter with the man she held in dread? I felt inclined to call at Eaton Square, but doubted whether, if she were ill, she would receive me.

One bright dry morning, about ten days later, I was strolling aimlessly along Regent Street with Jack Bethune, who, knowing that Dora would be out shopping, had come out to look for her. About half-way along the thoroughfare some unknown influence prompted me to halt before a photographer's window and inspect a series of new pictures of celebrities, when suddenly my eye fell upon an object which, placed in the most prominent position in the centre of the window, caused me to utter a cry of surprise.

Enclosed in a heavy frame of oxidised silver was a beautifully-finished cabinet portrait of Sybil!

The frame, a double one, also contained the portrait of a young pleasant-faced man of about twenty-five, who wore his moustache carefully curled, and about whose features was a rather foreign expression. The picture of my dead love riveted my attention, and as I stood gazing at it with my face glued to the glass, Jack chaffed me, saying:

"What's the matter, old chap? Who's the beauty?" His flippant words annoyed me.

"A friend," I snapped. "Wait for me. I'm going in to buy it."

"On the stage, I suppose?" he hazarded. "Awfully good-looking, whoever she is."

"No, she's not on the stage," I answered brusquely, leaving him and entering the shop.

At my request the frame was brought out of the window, and in response to my inquiries regarding it the manager referred to his books, an operation which occupied considerable time.

Meanwhile Jack, who had found Dora, had rushed in, announced his intention of calling on me in the evening, and left.

At last the photographer's manager came to me, ledger in hand, saying: "Both photographs were taken at the same time. I remember quite distinctly that the young lady accompanied the gentleman, and it was at her expense and special request that they were framed together and exhibited in our window. The prints were taken hurriedly because the gentleman was going abroad and wanted to take one with him."

"What name did they give?"

"Henniker."

"And the address?" I demanded breathlessly.

The photographer consulted his book closely, and replied: "The prints appear to have been sent to Miss Henniker, 79 Gloucester Square, Hyde Park."

Upon my shirt cuff I scribbled the address, and having paid for both the portraits, was about to leave, congratulating myself that at last I had probably obtained a clue to the house to which I had been conducted, when it suddenly occurred to me to ask the date when the photographs were taken.

"They were taken on January 12th last," he replied.

"Last year, you mean," I said.

"No, the present year. This ledger was only commenced in January."

"What?" I cried amazed. "Were these portraits actually taken only six weeks ago? Impossible! The lady has been dead fully three months."

"The originals of the portraits gave us sittings here on the date I have mentioned," he said, handing me the packet courteously, putting aside the frame, and leaving me in order to attend to another customer.

The announcement was incredible. It staggered belief. Emerging from the shop, I jumped into a cab and gave the man the address in Gloucester Square. Then, as we drove along, I took out the photograph of my well-beloved and examined it for a long time closely. Yes, there was no mistake about her identity. The same sweet, well-remembered face, with its clear, trusting eyes looked out upon me, the same half-sad expression that had so puzzled me. I raised the cold, polished card to my lips and reverently kissed it. Presently the cab drew up suddenly, and I found myself before a wide portico extending across the pavement to the curb, in front of a rather gloomy, solid-looking mansion. Alighting, I crossed to the door, and as I did so counted the steps. There were three, the same number that I remembered ascending on that eventful night I had raised my hand to ring the visitors' bell when suddenly a voice behind me uttered my name. It sounded familiar, and I looked round hastily. As I turned, the Countess of Fyneshade, warmly clad in smart sealskin coat and neat seal toque trimmed with sable, confronted me. Standing upon the pavement beneath the wide gloomy portico, she was smiling amusedly at the sudden start I had given on hearing my name.

"I declare you've turned quite pale, Stuart," she cried with that gay, irresponsible air and high-pitched voice habitual to her. "You gave such a jump when I spoke that one would think you had been detected in the act of committing a burglary, or some other crime equally dreadful."

"I really beg your pardon," I exclaimed quickly, descending the steps and raising my hat. "I confess I didn't notice you." Then, for the first time, I observed standing a few yards from her a slim, well-dressed young man in long dark overcoat and silk hat.

"Gilbert," she said, turning to him, "you've not met Mr Ridgeway before, I believe. Allow me to introduce you – Mr Gilbert Sternroyd, Mr Stuart Ridgeway, one of my oldest friends."

We uttered mutual conventionalities, but an instant later, when my eyes met his, the words froze upon my lips. The Countess's companion was the original of the photograph that had been exhibited at my dead love's request in the same frame as her own.

Of what words I uttered I have no remembrance. Bewildered by this strange and unexpected encounter, on the very threshold of the mysterious house that for months I had been striving in vain

to discover, I felt my senses whirl. Only by dint of summoning all my self-possession I preserved a calm demeanour. That Mabel should have admitted acquaintance with the strange and rather shady person who had met me at Richmond was curious enough, but her friendship with Sybil's whilom companion was a fact even more incomprehensible.

An hour ago I had discovered the picture of this man called Sternroyd, yet here he stood before me in the flesh, accompanied by the one person of my acquaintance who knew that nameless man who had inveigled me to this house of shadows. Heedless of Mabel's amusing gossip, I surveyed her companion's face calmly, satisfying myself that every feature agreed with the counterfeit presentment I carried in my pocket. The portrait was strikingly accurate, even his curiously-shaped scarf-pin in the form of a pair of crossed daggers with diamond hilts being shown in the picture. He was tall, fair, of fresh complexion, aged about twenty-four, with grey eyes rather deeply set, and a scanty moustache a little ragged. Lithe, active, and upright, his bearing was distinctly athletic, although his speech was a trifle languid and affected. What, I wondered, had been the nature of his relations with Sybil? The horrifying thought flashed across my mind that he might have been her lover, but next second I scorned such a suggestion, convinced that she had been devoted to me alone.

Yet how could I reconcile the statement of the photographer that the portrait had only been taken a few weeks with my own personal investigation that she at that time was dead? Had I not, alas! kissed her cold brow and chafed her thin dead hands, hoping to bring back to them the glow of life? Had I not raised her gloved arm only to find it stiffening in death? The remembrance of that fateful night chilled my blood.

"Who are you calling upon, Stuart?" the Countess asked, her light words bringing me at last back to consciousness of my surroundings.

"Upon – upon friends," I stammered.

"Friends! Well, they can't live here," she observed incredulously.

"They do," I answered. "This is number seventy-nine."

"True, but the place is empty." She laughed.

I glanced at the doorway, and my heart sank within me when I noticed that the unwhitened stones were littered with drifting straws and scraps of paper, the flotsam and jetsam of the street, that the glass of the wide fanlight was thickly encrusted with dirt, and that the board fixed over the door, announcing that the "imposing mansion" was to let, had, judging from its begrimed, blistered, and weather-stained appearance, been in that position several years.

To reassure myself, I glanced at my cuff and inquired of the cabman whether the house was not Number 79 Gloucester Square.

"Quite right, sir," answered the plethoric driver. "This 'ere's Radnor Place, but these 'ouses fronts into the square. This row 'ain't got no entrances there, but the front doors are at the back here. I've known these 'ouses ever since I was a nipper. This 'ere one's been to let this last four years. A French gentleman lived 'ere before."

"I fancy you've mistaken the number," drawled the Countess's companion, putting up his single eye-glass to survey the place more minutely. "So confoundedly easy to make mistakes, don't yer know," and he laughed, as if amused at his witticism.

I resented this apparent hilarity, and with difficulty restrained some hot words that rose quickly to my lips. It had occurred to me that if I preserved silence and gave no sign, I might perhaps discover the identity of this foppish young man. The mansion, silent, dismal, and deserted, was drab-painted and of unusually imposing proportions. The drawing-room on the first floor was evidently of vast extent, running the whole width of the house and commanding in front a wide view across the square, while at the rear it opened upon a fine domed conservatory constructed over the great portico.

"If you can't find your friends, Stuart, I'll give you a lift homeward. My carriage is at the corner," Mabel said, evidently anxious to get away. "I'm going down to the Reform, to fetch Fyneshade."

In this invitation I saw an opportunity of obtaining some further knowledge of her mysterious companion, and, after settling with my cabman, lost no time in embracing it. A few moments later the Countess's smart victoria drew up, and entering, I took the place beside her, while Sternroyd seated himself opposite.

As we drove around Southwick Crescent in the direction of Park Lane, Mabel, in the course of conversation, let drop the fact that Gilbert, a protégé of her husband's, was spending a few days at Eaton Square prior to returning to his studies at Oxford.

"Yes," he drawled. "A fellow appreciates town after poring over musty volumes, as I unfortunately am compelled to do. Beastly bore!"

Then he told me he was at Balliol – my old college – and our conversation afterwards turned mainly upon dons and duns.

"I always have such jolly times with Mab – Lady Fyneshade – each time I come to town," he said. "Whenever I go back I feel absolutely miserable."

"Yet memories of the past are sometimes painful," I observed, smiling. At the same time I glanced at Mabel, knowing that the strange circumstances in which we had parted at the cotton-king's reception must still be fresh in her mind. Darting at me a swift look of inquiry, she picked at the buttons of her pearl-grey glove, laughed lightly, and exclaimed flippantly:

"We have no memories when we arrive at years of discretion. Idle memory wastes time and other things. The moments as they drop must disappear and be simply forgotten as a child forgets. Nowadays one lives only for the future, and lets the past be buried."

"And if the past refuses to be interred?" I asked.

She started visibly, and a frown of annoyance rested for a brief moment upon her handsome countenance. I fancied, too, that her companion looked askance at me, but not waiting for either to reply, I said:

"I myself find it difficult to altogether forget. Some incidents in each of our lives are indelibly engraven upon our minds, and there are some tender memories that in our hours of melancholy we love to linger over and brood upon. At such times we find solace in solitude and sup on vain regrets."

"That's only when we have been in love," the Countess laughed, patting the large pug beside her. "Gilbert has never been in love; have you, Gilbert?"

"Never," he answered, grinning.

"With one exception," she observed with mock gravity.

"Yourself, you mean?" he drawled, twirling his flaxen moustache and smiling.

"Certainly not," she cried with feigned indignation. "How dare you attempt to be complimentary at my expense? No, if I remember aright there was one woman who in your eyes was a veritable angel, who –"

"Ah!" he said gravely, in a tone quite natural and unaffected. "Yes, you are right. There was one woman." And he sighed as if painful memories oppressed him.

One woman! Did he allude to Sybil? If so, it was apparent that Mabel must be well aware of his acquaintance with the woman I had loved. Silent I sat while the conversation quickly turned from grave to gay, as it always did when the Countess chattered.

Suddenly, as we were passing into Piccadilly, it became impressed vividly upon my mind that they were hiding some secret from me. Two prominent facts aroused within me suspicion that their conversation was being carried on in order to mislead me. The first was, that although I had asked them what had brought them to Radnor Place neither of them had given any satisfactory reply; the second was, that although Sternroyd must have been associated in some mysterious way with that silent house to which the photographs had been sent, he had made no allusion whatever to it, nor did he make any observation when he noticed my dismay at discovering it untenanted.

It was evident some secret understanding existed between them, and the more I reflected upon it the more probable did it appear that they had actually called at this house, and had only

just left it when I arrived. In order to ascertain my object in visiting it, and to learn the extent of my knowledge regarding it, the Countess had greeted me with her usual gaiety, and was now carrying me triumphantly back. I had, of course, no proof; nevertheless, I had an intuition, strange and distinct, that in close concert with my dead love's whilom friend, Sternroyd, she was playing a deep mysterious game with considerable tact and consummate ingenuity. But she was a most remarkable woman. Always brilliant and fascinating, always sparkling with wit and bubbling with humour, she was thoroughly unconventional in every respect. Society had long ago ceased to express surprise at any of her eccentric or impetuous actions. She held licence from Mother Grundy to act as, she pleased, for was she not admitted on all hands to be "the smartest woman in London?" She had a watchful confidence not only in a multitude of men, but in a multitude of things.

She dropped me outside the New Lyric Club, close to Piccadilly Circus, not, however, before she had expressed regret at Dora's unhappiness.

"What has occurred?" I asked concernedly.

"Oh! there has been a terrible upset at home about Jack Bethune," she answered. "I've done my level best with Ma, but she absolutely forbids Jack to pay his addresses to Dora."

"Because, as you have already told me, she wants her to marry a man she can never love," I said gravely.

"Yes," she said hurriedly. "But here's your club. Captain Bethune is certain to tell you all about it. Goodbye! I shall be at Lady Hillingdon's to-morrow night, then we'll resume our chat."

"Good-bye!" I said, alighting and grasping her hand; then as the commissionaire swung the club door open her companion raised his hat and the carriage was driven rapidly away.

Chapter Eight

Secret Understanding

Idle memory shortens life, or shortens the sense of life, by linking the immediate past clingingly to the present. In this may be found one of the reasons for the length of time in our juvenile days and the brevity of the time that succeeds. The child forgets, habitually, gayly, and constantly. Would that I had never acquired the habit of recall!

Jack, in a well-worn velvet lounge coat, was seated at his writing-table absorbed in his work when I entered, a couple of hours after I had left Mabel. His small den, lined with books, contained but little furniture beyond the big oak writing-table in the window, a heavy old-fashioned horse-hair couch, and several easy-chairs. Littered with newspapers, books, magazines, and those minor worries of an author's life, press-cuttings, the apartment was nevertheless snug, the bright fire and the green-shaded reading-lamp giving it a cosy appearance.

"Halloa, old chap!" he cried, throwing down his pen gayly and rising to grip my hand. "So glad you've looked in. Have a weed?" and as we seated ourselves before the fire he pushed the box towards me.

"I met Mabel to-day," I said at last, after we had been chatting and smoking for some minutes.

"Did you? Well? What's the latest fad? Teas for poor children, bicycling, golf, old silver, or what?"

"She's much concerned regarding Dora," I answered. "And she has hinted that there are strained relations between Dora's mother and yourself. I've come to hear all about it."

He hesitated, tugging thoughtfully at his moustache.

"There's not very much to tell," he replied, rather bitterly. "The old lady won't hear of our marriage. When I mentioned it yesterday she went absolutely purple with rage, and forbade me to enter her house again, or hold any further communication with the woman I love."

"Which you will disregard, eh? Have you seen Dora to-day?"

"No. I've been waiting at home all day expecting a note, but none has arrived," he said disappointedly; adding, "Yet, after all, there is no disguising the fact, old chap, that I really haven't enough money to marry a girl like Dora, and perhaps the sooner I recognise the truth and give up all hope of marriage, the better for us both."

"No, no. Don't take such a gloomy view, Jack," I said sympathetically. "Dora loves you, doesn't she?"

"Yes. You know well enough that I absolutely adore her," he answered with deep earnestness.

I had known long ago that his avowed intention had been never to marry. Until he became noted as a novelist his periods of life in town had been few and fleeting. Not that he felt awkward or ill at ease in society; his name was a passport, while his well-bred ease always insured him a flattering welcome; but for the most part Society had no charm for him. Sometimes, when among his most intimate friends, he would give the reins to his high spirits, and then, gayest of the gay, he would have smoothed the brow of Remorse itself. Private theatricals, dinner-parties, dances, or tennis-matches, he was head and front of everything. Then suddenly he would receive orders to remove with his regiment to another town, and good-bye to all frivolity – he was a cavalry officer again, and no engagement had power to keep him.

If he ever made any impression on the fair sex, he had remained unscathed himself until a few months ago, and the eagerness with which he obeyed each call to duty had been proof of the unfettered state of his heart. His ardent love for his profession was, he used to be fond of declaring, incompatible with domestic life. "The first requisite for a good officer," he had told me dozens of times, "is absolute freedom from all ties;" but now, having entered the profession of letters and having

discovered the power of the pen, he had paid Dora Stretton a chivalrous attention that had developed into ardent and passionate devotion. She was his goddess; he worshipped at her shrine.

“Well, having received the maternal congé, what do you intend doing?” I inquired after a long silence.

“What can I do?” he asked despondently, gazing sadly into the fire. “I love her with all my heart and soul, as you are aware, yet what can I do?”

“Why, marry her all the same,” cried a musical voice gayly, and as we both jumped up, startled, we were surprised to find Dora herself standing in the doorway, laughing at our discomfiture.

“You!” cried Jack, gladly rushing forward and grasping her hand. “How did you get in?”

“I forbade your woman to announce me, because I wanted to surprise you,” she laughed. “But I – I had no idea that Mr Ridgeway was with you. She ought to have told me,” she added, blushing.

“I’m surely not such a formidable person, am I?” I asked.

“Well, no,” she answered. Then looking round the little book-lined room rather timidly, she said, “I don’t know that I ought to have come here, but I wanted to see Jack. I’m supposed to be at Mabel’s, dining. I drove there in the brougham, and then came along here in a cab.”

“Won’t you sit down?” her lover asked. “Now you are here we must try and make you as cosy as possible, providing you’ll excuse the Bohemianism of my quarters.”

“Why apologise, Jack?” she asked, as he unclasped her cape, revealing her handsome dinner-dress cut a trifle décolleté. “If Ma will not let us meet openly, then we must see each other surreptitiously.”

“Well spoken,” I exclaimed, laughing, and when she had seated herself in Jack’s armchair, with her little satin shoes placed coquettishly upon the fender, she told us how she had ingeniously arranged with her sister to return to Eaton Square in a cab, and then drive home in the carriage, as if she had been spending the whole evening with Mabel.

We laughed, and as I sat gazing at her, memories of Sybil, the woman I had loved and lost, crowded upon me. Even though Lady Stretton’s consent was withheld, they were nevertheless happy in each other’s love. The love-look upon their faces told me how intense was the passion between them, and I envied my friend his happiness. Dora was indeed as charming to the sight as eyes could desire. Her bare shoulders, well set-off by her black bespangled dress trimmed with pale-green chiffon, were a trifle narrow, but that lent her a childish grace, and it was the one fault that could be found with her; all the rest was perfect, and the greatest charm of all that, unlike her sister, she was totally unconscious of her loveliness.

In the warm atmosphere of their love and confidence their characters had unfolded, and they had learned to know one another perfectly. Jack, although he held a world-wide reputation for keen analysis of character on paper, had been amazed at all the delicate susceptibilities cherished in Dora’s heart, at the freshness and innocent pleasures of which it was capable, and not a little at the vein of malicious fun he had wholly unsuspected.

I sat silent while they chatted, reflecting upon the strange discovery of the photograph of my lost love, and the more remarkable encounter that afternoon, I had called on Jack for the purpose of making a clean breast of the whole affair, but Dora’s arrival precluded me from so doing. My sorrow, however, lost none of its bitterness by keeping, and I resolved to return to him on the morrow, show him the portraits, and ask his advice.

Jack had been admiring her gown, and the conversation had turned upon the evergreen topic of dress. But she spoke with the air of a philosopher rather than of a Society girl.

“Everyday life needs all the romance that can be crowded into it,” she said. “Dress, in my opinion, is a duty to ourselves and to others – is a piece of altruism unsoured by sacrifice, a joy so long as it may last to wearer and beholder, doing good openly nor blushing to find itself famous.”

“Your view is certainly correct,” I said, smiling at her sedate little speech. “You are a pretty woman, and without committing yourself to affectation or eccentricity, you may choose the mode

that shall best become you, whether born of Worth's imagination or founded on some picturesque tradition. You may be severe or splendid, avenante or rococo, with equal impunity."

"Really you are awfully complimentary, Mr Ridgeway," she answered, with just the faintest blush of modesty. "You are such a flatterer that one never knows whether you are in earnest."

"I'm quite in earnest, I assure you," I said. "Your dresses always suit you admirably. On any other woman they would look dowdy."

"I quite endorse Stuart's opinion," said Jack with enthusiasm. "In writing it is often my misfortune to be compelled to describe feminine habiliments, therefore I've tried to study them a little. It seems to me that the ball-dress may be festal, the dinner-dress majestic, and the outdoor frock combine the virtues of both; but romance must always centre in the tea-gown. Before the advent of the tea-gown, the indoor state of woman was innocent of comfort and beggared of poetry."

"Yes," she replied, clasping her hands behind her head and looking up at him with her soft brown eyes, "the tea-gown is always ingenuous in sentiment and not wanting in charm, even though its hues may be odious or sickly. Once it was looked upon with disfavour as a garment too graceful to be respectable, and stern parents, I believe, forbade its use. But time, taste, and the sense of fitness have put Puritanism to shame, and the useful tea-gown; bears witness now to our proficiency in the long-lost art of living."

Her reference to stern parents caused me to refer to what Mabel had told me regarding the attitude of her mother.

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