

Le Queux William

The Temptress



William Le Queux

The Temptress

«Public Domain»

Le Queux W.

The Temptress / W. Le Queux — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	8
Chapter Three	12
Chapter Four	16
Chapter Five	20
Chapter Six	23
Chapter Seven	26
Chapter Eight	30
Chapter Nine	34
Chapter Ten	39
Chapter Eleven	43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	45

Le Queux William

The Temptress

Chapter One

Handfast

“May she ever imitate the holy women of former times, and may the Evil One have no share in her actions.”

The nuptial blessing was droned monotonously in French by a stout rubicund priest, who wore soiled and crumpled vestments.

The scene was strange and impressive.

Upon a tawdry altar, in a small bare chapel, two candles flickered unsteadily. The gloomy place was utterly devoid of embellishment, with damp-stained, white-washed walls, a stone floor, dirty and uneven, and broken windows patched with paper.

Over the man and woman kneeling at the steps the priest outstretched his hands, and pronounced the benediction.

When he had concluded a gabbled exhortation and premonishment, they rose. The weary-eyed man regained his feet quickly, gazing a trifle sadly at his companion, while the latter, with a scarcely perceptible sigh, got up slowly, and affectionately embraced her newly-wedded husband.

As the bride placed her arms about her husband’s neck, he bent, and, lifting her black veil slightly, gave her a fond, passionate caress.

Turning from the altar, the priest grasped their hands, wishing them health and happiness. What bitter irony! what a canting pretence of humanity! As if either could be obtained in New Caledonia, the malarial island to which the French transport their criminals. The ill-timed sarcasm caused the statuesque warders to grin, but a tear stood in the eye of more than one of the bridegroom’s comrades in adversity, even though they were desperate characters, hardened by crime.

“We thank you heartily for your kind wishes,” he replied, “and trust that your blessing will render our lot less wearisome.”

The convict’s bride remained silent, gazing about her unconcernedly.

“Come,” exclaimed the officer, rising abruptly, “we must not linger; already we have lost too much time.”

After the register had been signed, the husband again kissed his wife. As she raised her lips to his, he whispered a few words, as if to reassure her, then said aloud —

“Farewell, dearest. In seven years I shall be free. Till then, *au revoir, sans adieu!*”

“*Sans adieu!*” she echoed in a low voice, apparently unmoved.

He shrugged his shoulders, and turned towards his stern guards.

“I must apologise for detaining you, gentlemen,” he said. “Let us go; I am ready.”

The bride, who was young, was dressed very plainly in black, yet with Parisian taste. Perhaps she was handsome, but the thick veil concealed her features. The husband’s appearance, however, was decidedly unprepossessing. He was undergoing a term of ten years’ hard labour and lifelong banishment.

Tall, bronzed, and bearded, with a thin face wrinkled by toil, although still retaining traces of good looks, he remained for a moment motionless, contemplating with loving eyes the woman who was now his wife. His attire was scarcely befitting a bridegroom, for he had no coat, and wore the soiled and ragged grey shirt and trousers of a miner, while the chains that bound his wrists seemed strangely out of place.

Yet the spectators of this odd ceremony were as strikingly incongruous as the principals themselves.

There were but eight persons. Five were fellow-prisoners of the husband, comprising the labour gang in which he worked, while close behind them sat an officer and two sinister-looking warders in faded military uniforms, the butts of their loaded rifles resting on the floor. The convicts were watching the ceremony interestedly, frequently whispering among themselves, and ever and anon, as either stirred, the clanking of their chains formed an ominous accompaniment to the hastily-gabbed formula, as if reminding them of the dismal hopelessness of their situation.

Neither replied. The warder who held the chain to which the five prisoners were manacled stepped forward, and locked it to the bridegroom's fetters.

For a few minutes, while before the altar, the latter had been allowed comparative freedom, but now, the ceremony over, he was compelled to return with his gang to the atrocious tortures and dispiriting gloom of the copper mines – that monotonous, toilsome existence of French convicts; a life without rest, without hope, with naught else beyond hard labour, brutal taskmasters, and the whining homilies of drunken priests.

At a word from the officer the men filed slowly out, a dismal, dejected procession. Notwithstanding the uniform grey dress and closely-cropped heads, the difference in their physiognomy came prominently out. It was easily distinguishable that the husband belonged to a higher social circle than the others, who, from their ferocious, forbidding aspect, had evidently given the rein to their evil passions, and were undergoing their just punishment. Through the narrow door they passed in single file, the warders following immediately behind with their rifles upon their shoulders.

The officer paused at the door, and turning, lifted his cap politely to the bride, saying —

“Forgive me, madame, for thus taking your husband from you, but, alas! I have orders which must be obeyed.”

“No apology is needed, m'sieur,” she replied, with a slight sigh. “My husband's honeymoon has been brief indeed, but, as one convicted of a serious crime, what can he expect? We must both wait. Nothing further need be said.”

“And you have followed him here – from Paris?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, what devotion! Madame, truly yours is a cruel separation, and you have my heartfelt sympathy. Adieu.”

“Thanks, m'sieur; adieu,” she said brokenly; but the officer had already passed out, and was beyond hearing.

Drawing herself up suddenly, and bowing stiffly to the priest, she left the chapel without deigning to thank him.

Outside the furnace heat of sunshine was intense.

The fierce, glaring sun reflected upon the unruffled surface of the Pacific Ocean, and beat down mercilessly on the white road that stretched away for a mile or so to Noumea, the chief town of the penal settlement, which is altogether a curious place, where society is composed chiefly of *recidivistes* and warders, and where in the Rue Magenta, one rubs shoulders with murderers, thieves, and notorious conspirators, the scum of French prisons, who, having completed their term of hard labour, have developed into colonists, respectable and otherwise.

Hesitating on the threshold, undecided whether to return to the town or take the road which led up the steep hill to where the black shaft and windlass marked the mouth of the convict's mine, she quickly resolved upon the former course, and, strolling leisurely down to where the waveless sea lazily lapped the shingly beach, continued her way under the welcome shadow of some great rocks overgrown by tropical vegetation, and rendered picturesque by palms, acacias, and giant azaleas in full bloom.

The landscape, though arid, was beautiful.

Away across the bay, the cluster of white houses, embowered in branches, stood out in bold relief against the more sombre background of forest, and behind rose mountains denuded of their foliage, but clothed by the sun and air with a living garment of constantly changing colours, which sometimes hid their loss, sometimes more than atoned for it. Into the far distance the long ranges stretched away in undulating lines of ultra-marine and rose, while in the centre the snow-capped summit of Mount Humboldt glistened like frosted silver. Not a breath of wind stirred the sultry atmosphere. The very birds were silent, having sought shelter from the terrible heat; and the calm waters, shut in by coral reefs, seemed to reflect and even increase the intensity of the sun's rays.

Suddenly she halted, and looked back contemplatively along the road the convicts had taken.

Words escaped her. They were scarcely vapid sentimentalities.

“Bah! even the warder pities me, the imbecile!” she exclaimed in French, breaking into a nervous, discordant laugh. “I have obeyed you, my elegant husband, merely because I am helpless; but my fervent wishes for your welfare are that you will descend yonder mine and never return to the light of day – that your taskmasters will crush the life out of you long before the expiration of your term. You think you have ingeniously strengthened the tie by making me your wife, but you have yet to discover your mistake. You have yet to discover that you are dealing with one who can hold her own against the world!” Motionless and silent, she stood for a few moments with fixed eyes and hands tightly clutched. Then she continued —

“Seven years must elapse before you return to civilisation. Meanwhile much can be accomplished. *Sacre!* I hope you'll die the death you deserve, and rot in a criminal's grave before that, curse you! Your wife — *ma foi!* — your victim!”

Hissing the last sentence with bitter contempt, and stamping her shapely foot vehemently, she added —

“Why should I barter myself? By going through the ceremony I have effectually closed his mouth for at least seven years, yet I still have freedom and the means whereby to enjoy life. Shall I calmly submit, then, and pose before the world as a social outcast – the wife of a notorious convict?”

The words were uttered in a tone that clearly demonstrated her intense hatred of the man to whom she had bound herself.

After pausing, deeply engrossed in thought, she exclaimed resolutely —

“No, I will not.”

In a frenzy of passion she tore the ring from her finger, and with a fierce imprecation flung it into the water as far as her strength allowed.

“And so I cast aside my vows,” she muttered between her teeth, as she watched it disappear.

Then, without a second glance, she turned upon her heel, and, with a harsh, discordant laugh, resumed her walk towards Noumea.

Chapter Two

The Charing Cross Mystery

Two years later. A frosty evening, clear and starlit – one of those dry nights in early spring so delightful to the dweller in London, too familiar with choking fog, drizzling rain, and sloppy mire.

In the vicinity of Charing Cross the busy stream of traffic had almost subsided. At ten o'clock the Strand is usually half deserted – the shops are closed, foot passengers are few, and the theatres have not yet disgorged their crowds of pleasure-seekers anxious to secure conveyances to take them to the suburbs. For half an hour previous to eleven o'clock the thoroughfare, notwithstanding the glare of electricity at theatre entrances and the blaze of garish restaurants and public-houses, assumes an appearance of almost dismal solitude. Boys who have hitherto indefatigably cried “special editions,” congregate at corners to chat among themselves, the few loungers stroll along dejectedly, and cadgers slink into doorways to await the time when they can resume their importunities among returning playgoers.

A similar aspect was presented this calm, bright night, as one of the omnibuses plying between the Strand and Kilburn slowly crossed Trafalgar Square, mounted the short incline to Charing Cross at walking pace, and, turning into Duncannon Street, pulled up before the public-house which at that time was the starting-point for that route.

The driver, facetiously adjuring his colleague on the ’bus, which was just moving off, to get “higher up,” unfastened his waist-strap, and, casting aside his multifarious wraps, descended. Stamping his feet to promote circulation, he was about to enter the bar. Suddenly he remembered that the conductor, after collecting the fares, had left the vehicle at the corner of the Haymarket for the purpose of walking the remainder of the journey – a proceeding not unusual in cold weather, when one’s hands become numbed, and a walk proves a welcome exercise.

It occurred to him that some one might still be inside. His surmise proved correct for, ensconced in a corner in the front of the conveyance, sat a well-dressed, middle-aged man. His fur-trimmed overcoat was unbuttoned, his head had fallen forward upon his chest, and he was apparently slumbering soundly.

“Charin’ Cross, sir,” shouted the plethoric old driver, peering in at the door.

The man showed no sign of awakening.

Sleeping passengers, who at their journey’s end awake irate and in great consternation at finding themselves a mile or two past their destination, are the daily experience of every omnibus conductor; and it is a remarkable fact that the rattle, combined with the rocking of the vehicle, is conducive to slumber.

Chuckling at the unconscious man’s probable chagrin, the driver entered the conveyance, and, grasping his shoulder, shook him violently, exclaiming in a loud voice —

“Ere y’are! Charin’ Cross, sir. Wake up, guv’nor, please.”

The passenger did not stir. His arm dropped inertly by his side, and as the driver relaxed his hold, he swayed forward, and, before the mishap could be prevented, fell heavily upon the cushions opposite, and rolled upon the floor.

“He must be ill,” the driver exclaimed to himself in alarm.

Then stooping, he seized the prostrate man round the waist, and with some difficulty succeeded in dragging him to his feet and replacing him upon the seat.

As he did so he felt his fingers come into contact with some wet, sticky substance. Holding his hand against the dim oil lamp, he examined it closely.

“Blood, by God!” he gasped.

Glancing quickly down at the feet of the inanimate man, he noticed for the first time a small, dark pool, beside which lay a white handkerchief.

In a moment the terrible truth dawned upon him.

Vaguely apprehensive of foul play, he pulled aside the overcoat, and placed his hand upon the heart of the prostrate man.

There was no movement.

“Hullo, Teddy, what’s up? Any one would think you were robbing the chap,” shouted a voice jocosely at the door.

The driver started, and, looking up, saw his conductor who, having taken a shorter route than the omnibus by walking along Pall Mall, across the north side of Trafalgar Square, and entering Duncannon Street from the opposite end, had just arrived.

“Bill,” replied the driver in an awe-stricken tone, his face wearing a scared look, “there’s something wrong here. I believe the gent’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes. Come here.”

The conductor grew pale, and got into the conveyance beside his companion.

“Look! that’s blood,” the latter said, pointing to the floor.

“You’re joking,” the other replied incredulously, bending down to examine it.

“Pon my honour I’m not. There’s some on my hand here. Besides, his heart doesn’t beat.”

Leaning hastily forward, the conductor pressed his hand to the passenger’s breast. He quickly withdrew it, admitting that such indeed was the case.

“But what can be wrong with him, Ted? He looks like a gentleman,” he added in amazement.

“I can’t tell. In this ’ere light it’s impossible to see.”

Striking a vesta, the conductor held it close to the man’s coat. As it shed its light in fitful gleams, their eager eyes at once discerned a small hole in the breast, from which blood was slowly oozing.

Both drew back in dismay.

“He’s been stabbed?” the man who held the match exclaimed in a low, terrified voice. “See, the overcoat must have been opened first, as it isn’t pierced.”

The victim had been wounded in the heart, struck by a steady hand, and evidently with great violence.

They stood aghast at the horrifying discovery.

“What do you think of it, Bill?” asked the old driver timorously.

“Murder, without a doubt.”

“I wonder whether this will give any clue to the murderer?” the elder man said, picking up the handkerchief.

It was a lady’s – a small square of fine cambric with a delicate border of lace.

“Let’s look,” exclaimed his companion, taking it in his hands, and holding it to the lamp.

“Any mark on it?”

“No, nothing,” he replied. “There’s some funny scent on it, though,” he added, placing it nearer his nose.

“Good heavens, Bill, what shall we do?” ejaculated the driver, thoroughly alarmed at the startling discovery.

“Call the police at once. Wait here a minute, and I’ll fetch a constable,” the other replied, getting out of the omnibus, and running to the corner of the Strand, where an officer is constantly stationed on point duty.

Already a small crowd had collected, for the cabmen from the shelter opposite had quickly discerned that something unusual had occurred, and, on learning of the crime, grouped themselves around the vehicle in a state of great excitement, and eager to obtain a glimpse of the corpse.

A minute later the conductor returned with two constables. These were immediately followed by a detective-sergeant, who chanced to be passing, and another constable. The detective himself was astounded, although he had been present on more than one occasion when bodies had been found.

The circumstances having been briefly explained, he despatched one of the men to Agar Street for the hospital ambulance, and gave other orders, which were executed with obedience and promptitude.

“Do you know the gentleman by sight?” asked the detective of the conductor, as they both stood gazing upon the body, awaiting the arrival of the ambulance.

“No, I’ve never seen him before,” the man replied; “and the strangest part of the affair is, that when I got off at the Haymarket corner he wasn’t inside. There were two gentlemen in the ’bus.”

“They got out at Spring Gardens,” interrupted the driver. “I stopped for them.”

“Then he must have entered immediately afterwards,” remarked the detective thoughtfully.

“Yes, that’s the only way I can account for it.”

“It is certainly an extraordinary case,” the officer said, bending down and re-examining the dead man’s wound. “From the time he got into the ’bus until you discovered him dead could not have been more than six or seven minutes?”

“Not so much,” replied the driver. “I generally reckon it takes four minutes from Dent’s to the corner here, including the stoppage in front of the lions.”

“But you didn’t pull up there to-night?”

“No, because I was not aware I had any fare inside.”

“Ah?” exclaimed the detective confidently. “The murder was evidently cleverly planned, and the assassin has got away very neatly indeed.”

“It couldn’t be suicide, could it?” suggested one of the constables.

“Impossible, for the knife has disappeared. But here’s the ambulance; we must remove the body and disperse the crowd.”

At that moment a hansom, which had turned from the Strand towards Pall Mall, was compelled to pull up owing to the throng of eager onlookers which had now become so augmented as to reach across the road.

Pushing up the flap in the roof with his walking-stick, the fare, a well-dressed and rather handsome young man, whose face bore that frank, good-humoured expression which always impresses favourably, asked – “What’s the fuss, cabby?”

“Can’t exactly make out, sir,” replied the man. “They say a murder’s been committed.”

“Somebody murdered!” he exclaimed in surprise. “By Jove, a crime in a ’bus isn’t a sight to be witnessed every day. Wait over there, cabby, opposite the church. I’ll go and have a look.”

Alighting, he quickly made his way through the excited crowd. As he edged in towards the omnibus, two constables, who had just lifted the body out, were placing it carefully upon the stretcher, for a doctor had already made an examination and pronounced that death had been almost instantaneous.

In the brief moment while the constables arranged his head the light of the gas lamps outside the public-house shone full upon the pale, bloodless features, revealing a man of about thirty-five, whose face was well moulded and refined, with closed eyes, very wavy hair, and short, pointed beard. That he was a gentleman was evident. His hands looked soft and white, his finger-nails showed that attention had been bestowed upon them; a large diamond glittered on his finger, and in his scarf was another valuable stone. His attire, too, was the reverse of common, for his overcoat was lined with sable in a style which only a West-End tailor could produce, and his other garments were of the best quality and latest fashion.

“Poor fellow – he looks as if he’s asleep,” exclaimed a woman sympathetically, at the young man’s elbow.

“Ah,” remarked another, “he’ll never wake again. Whoever killed him accomplished the deed very effectually.”

“He’s a thorough gentleman, too,” commented a cabman, who was eagerly watching with several of his companions. “I wonder what the motive could have been?”

“They’ll call Teddy Mills’s ’bus the hearse, now,” said another cabman; but his companion replied —

“G’arn, ’Arry, it ain’t no laughing matter.”

“Well, it’s a bold stroke, at any rate,” rejoined the man addressed. “Why, he couldn’t have been seated in the ’bus a minute before he was killed.”

“Is it such a mysterious affair, then?” asked the young man who had alighted from the cab, turning to them.

“Mysterious? I should rather think it was. It all happened between the corner of Pall Mall and here. The victim must have entered the ’bus as it was going along, but whether the murderer was inside or whether he followed, nobody knows.”

“Pass along, please; pass along!” two constables commanded.

The body, which had by this time been placed on the ambulance and lightly covered, was being wheeled away, and the police were busy dispersing the ever-increasing crowd.

“By Jove, it’s terrible! Such sights are enough to give one the blues,” the young man exclaimed aloud, as he made his way towards his cab. “I wonder who the Johnnie is? The face seems familiar, yet for the life of me I can’t recollect where I’ve seen it before. But, there, it isn’t any use making oneself glum over the troubles of others, and, goodness knows, my own cursed luck is hard enough.”

He sighed, and, springing into the hansom, shouted – “Drive on, cabby, as fast as you can make that bag of bones travel.”

The man laughed at his fare’s humorous cynicism, and, whipping his horse, drove rapidly away.

Chapter Three In Bohemia

“Look here, Hugh, what is the cause of this confounded gloominess?”

“Nothing that concerns anybody, except myself,” was the morose reply.

“Well, you needn’t snarl like that at an old friend. Come, out with it, and let’s have no secrets.”

“There’s not much to tell, old fellow, beyond the fact that I’m ruined.”

“What!” exclaimed John Egerton, open-mouthed in amazement. “Ruined?”

“Yes.”

“Are you really serious; or is this another of your confoundedly grim jokes?”

“It’s too true, alas!” the other replied, with a sigh. The artist, laying his palette and mahlstick aside, turned and faced his visitor, exclaiming —

“Sit down and relate the circumstances; we must see what can be done.”

“Nothing can prevent the catastrophe. I’ve considered the problem long enough, and can find no solution.”

“Well, don’t knock under without a struggle, my dear old chap. Men work for fame and fortune, but expect happiness as a gift. Confide in me, and perhaps we may arrange things.”

The other smiled sadly, but shook his head.

It was the afternoon following the events related in the previous chapter. The two speakers who were in such serious conversation stood in a shabby studio in Fitzroy Square gravely contemplating one another.

John Egerton, the owner of the place was a successful artist, whose works sold well, whose black and white illustrations were much sought after by magazine proprietors, and whose Academy pictures had brought him some amount of notoriety. His success was well deserved, for, after a rather wild student life on the Continent, he was now exceedingly industrious. Art was his hobby, and he had but little pleasure outside the walls of his studio. Though discarding a collar, and attired negligently in a paint-besmirched coat very much the worse for wear, a pair of trousers much bespattered, and feet thrust into slippers, yet his face spoke of genius and indomitable perseverance, with its deep grey eyes, firm, yet tender mouth, and general expression of power and independence.

His visitor, Hugh Trethowen, was of a different type – handsome, and perhaps a trifle more refined. A splendid specimen of manhood, with his fine height and strongly-built frame, well-cut Saxon features, and bright colouring, with laughing blue eyes, the earnest depths of which were rendered all the more apparent by the thoughtful, preoccupied look which his countenance wore.

A young girl, undeniably beautiful, with a good complexion, stood watching them. She was dressed in a bright but becoming costume of the harem, and had, until the arrival of Trethowen, been posing to the artist. Upon the easel was a full length canvas almost complete – a marvellous likeness, representing her laughing face, with its clear brown eyes, and her bare white arms swinging the scimitars over her head in the undulating motion of the Circassian dance.

Besides acting in the capacity of model, Dolly Vivian was the artist’s companion, critic and friend. Among the brethren of the brush she was well-known as a quiet, patient, unobtrusive girl, who, with commendable self-sacrifice, had supported her mother and invalid sister by her earnings. Egerton had become acquainted with her years ago, long before he became known to fame, at a time when his studio was an attic in a street off the Edgware Road, when he used frequently to eat but one meal a day, and had often shared that with her. She was his friend and benefactor then, as now. When times were hard and money scarce, she would give him sittings and accept no payment, or, if she did, she would spend the greater portion in the necessaries of life, which she would convey to his sky parlour on the following morning.

This platonic friendship, which sprang up in days of hardship and disappointment, had been preserved in affluence. From her model the rising artist had painted most of the pictures that had brought him renown, and he acknowledged the debt of gratitude by making her his confidante. It was not surprising, therefore, that at his studio she conducted herself as if thoroughly at home, nor that she should be well acquainted with such a constant visitor as Hugh Trethowen.

When, however, the two men commenced so momentous a question, she felt that her presence was not desired, so busied herself, with a good deal of unnecessary noise, with the teacups which stood on a small table beside the easel.

Suddenly she raised her handsome head, and, looking at Egerton, said:

“If you are talking of private matters, I will go and rest until you are ready to recommence.”

The artist glanced inquiringly at his friend.

“There is no necessity for leaving us, Dolly,” said Trethowen. “We are all three old friends, and my purpose in coming here this afternoon is to spend an hour with you for the last time.”

“The last time!” she echoed in dismay. “Why – are you going away?”

He did not answer for a moment. His eyes were fixed upon the girl’s face, and his lips trembled a little under the shadow of his fair moustache. Could he really muster up courage to tell them of his intention? He hesitated, then he replied, firmly enough:

“By an unfortunate combination of circumstances I am compelled to leave all my friends. I much regret it, but it cannot be avoided.”

The men had seated themselves, and the pretty model was pouring tea into three dainty little cups.

Egerton frowned impatiently.

“This sort of talk isn’t like you, Hugh, and it sounds bad. Surely you don’t contemplate leaving us altogether?”

“I must – I cannot remain.”

“Why?”

“I’ve already told you. I’m ruined.”

“Ruined – good God – you’re joking! But even if you are – confound it – why should you go? Other men have got on their legs again.”

“I never shall,” Trethowen replied sadly. “It’s impossible.”

“If you’ll tell us about it,” said the artist persuasively, “we can judge for ourselves.”

“Well, briefly told, the facts are these, old fellow. You are aware I’m only the younger son, and that on my father’s death my elder brother, Douglas, with whom I’ve not been on friendly terms for several years, succeeded to the estate.”

The other nodded acquiescence.

“My father undoubtedly meant well,” Hugh continued, “for he left me some property yielding nearly five hundred a year. Upon this I lived for five years, but – ”

“And what more could you expect?” interrupted his friend. “Surely that’s enough for a bachelor to live upon?”

“It would have been, I admit,” he replied despondently. “Unfortunately, I have been compelled to dispose of the property.”

“Why?”

“To temporarily satisfy my hungry creditors.”

“Are they numerous?”

“Numerous! Why, they’re so plentiful that, by Jove, I’ve never troubled to count ’em.”

“But how have you become so entangled?”

“The usual method is responsible, old chap – tempting fortune,” he replied bitterly. “The fact is, things have been going wrong for a long time past, and I’ve disposed of all I’m worth in an endeavour to settle up honourably. It’s no use, however – I’ve sunk deeper and deeper into the mire, until the

only means by which to extricate myself is to go right away. Dunned on every side, with county court summonses descending in showers, the Hebrew Shylocks who hold me in their accursed clutches seem to be taking a delight in crushing me out of existence.”

The artist was mute with astonishment. He had always considered his friend very lucky in having ample means at his command, and had never imagined he was in such straits.

“Then, as I understand, you’ve had to go to the Jews, and they’ve foreclosed,” he said, after silently contemplating the canvas before him.

“Exactly,” Hugh replied. “Think. What can a fellow do when he’s about town like I’ve been? He must necessarily follow the example of others on the course and in the clubs, if he doesn’t wish to be ranked with outsiders. As an instance, I lost over the St. Leger a clear eight hundred.”

“Whew! If that’s the case, I’m at a loss to give advice,” exclaimed Egerton gravely.

“It would be of no assistance,” he said. “Like an ass, I’ve run through all I possess, with the exception of a bare couple of pounds a week. I must therefore drag out an existence in one of those dismal old continental towns that seem to be provided as harbours of refuge for unfortunate fellows like myself. I’m truly sorry to leave you both, but needs must when the devil drives.”

“Why not remain here? If you are hard hit, I can see no reason why you should bury yourself,” contended the artist thoughtfully.

“No, Mr Trethowen,” added Dolly, gazing into her teacup in a vain endeavour to hide the tears that stood in her eyes, “don’t leave us. Why, Mr Egerton would not have half the spirit for his work if you didn’t run in now and then and make him laugh.”

“I – I cannot remain,” he replied hesitatingly. “You see, I’m utterly incapable of making a fresh start in life, for I’ve no profession. Besides, there’s a much stronger reason for my departure. It’s absolutely imperative.”

His face was lined with pain and sorrow, as he drew a deep sigh, the index to a heavy heart.

“What’s the reason?” demanded his friend, glancing sharply at him.

“Because, if I don’t get away almost immediately I shall find myself arrested.”

“Arrested?”

He nodded, but for a few moments no words escaped his lips.

“Yes, Jack, old fellow, I’m in a terrible fix,” he replied in a gloomy tone unusual to him. “I’ll confide in you because I can trust you. Three months ago I was hard pressed for money, and seeing a dishonest way of obtaining it, I yielded to the temptation of the moment. I imitated a signature, and drew a thousand pounds.”

“Forgery!” the artist exclaimed, dumbfounded.

“Call it what you like. The bill is due the day after to-morrow, then the fraud will be detected.”

He uttered the words mechanically, his head bowed upon his breast.

Jack Egerton bit his lip. He could scarcely realise the grave importance of his companion’s words.

“Are there no means by which I can assist you, Hugh?” he asked presently in a sympathetic tone.

“None. There is room enough in the world for everybody to stretch himself. You understand my departure is inevitable. It is either arrest or exile, and I choose the latter.”

“I’m afraid it is; but, look here. Have a trifle on loan from me – say a hundred.”

“Not a penny, Jack. I couldn’t take it from you, indeed,” he replied, his voice trembling with an emotion he was unable to subdue. “With finances at the present low ebb I could never repay you. Perhaps, however, there may be a day when I shall require a good turn, and I feel confident of your firm friendship.”

“Rely on it,” the artist said, warmly grasping his hand. “You have my most sincere sympathy, Hugh; for bad luck like yours might fall upon any of us. In times gone by you’ve often assisted me and cheered me when I’ve been downcast and dispirited. It is, therefore, my duty to render you in return any service in my power.”

Hugh Trethowen rose, listless and sad. The lightheartedness and careless gaiety which were his chief characteristics had given place to settled gloom and despair. “Thanks for your kind words, old fellow,” he exclaimed gravely. “I really ought not to trouble you with my miseries, so I’ll wish you farewell.”

The handsome girl, who had been silent and thoughtful, listening to the conversation, was unable to control her feelings, and burst into tears.

“Don’t cry, Dolly,” said he in a sorry attempt to comfort her. “Jack and yourself are old friends whom I much regret leaving, but don’t take it to heart in this way.”

Raising her hand reverently to his lips he kissed it, with a murmured adieu.

She did not reply, but, burying her face in the rich silk robe she wore, wept bitterly.

For a moment he stood contemplating her, then, turning to the artist, he said:

“Good-bye, Jack.”

“Good-bye, Hugh,” replied Egerton, wringing his hand earnestly. “Remember, whatever happens, I am always your friend – always.”

A few brief words of thanks, and Hugh Trethowen snatched up his hat and stick, and, drawing aside the heavy plush *portière* before the door, stumbled blind out.

Chapter Four

The Nectar of Death

Slowly and solemnly the clock of St. James's, Piccadilly, chimed nine.

In his comfortable chambers in Jermyn Street, Hugh Trethowen sat alone. The graceful indifference of the Sybarite had vanished, the cloud of apprehension had deepened, and with eyes fixed abstractedly upon the flickering fire, he was oblivious of his surroundings, plunged in painful reverie.

The silk-shaded lamp shed a soft light upon the objects around, revealing that the owner of the apartment had debarred himself no luxury, and that, although a typical bachelor's abode, yet the dainty nick-nacks, the cupboard of old china, the choice paintings, and the saddle-bag furniture – all exhibited a taste and refinement that would have done credit to any drawing-room. Upon a table at his elbow was a spirit stand, beside which stood a glass of brandy and soda; but it was flat, having been poured out half an hour before.

Suddenly he tugged vigorously at his moustache, as if in deep contemplation, and, rising, crossed the room and touched a gong.

His summons was answered by an aged male servant, the venerable appearance of whose white hair was enhanced by his suit of spotless black and narrow strip of shirt front.

“Anybody called, Jacob?”

“No, sir; nobody's called, sir,” replied the old man in a squeaky voice.

“You may close the door, Jacob, and sit down. I want to have a word with you.”

The aged retainer shut the door, and stood near the table, opposite his master, fully prepared to receive a reprimand for having performed his work unsatisfactorily. “Sit down, Jacob; we must have a serious talk.” Surprised at these unusual words, the old man seated himself upon the edge of a chair, waiting for his master to commence.

“Look here, Jacob,” said Trethowen; “you and I will have to part.”

“Eh? what? Master Hugh? Have I done anything wrong, sir? If I have, look over it, for I'm an old man, and – ”

“Hush, you've done nothing wrong, Jacob; you've been a good servant to me – very good. The fact is, I'm ruined.”

“Ruined, Master Hugh? How, sir?”

“Well, do you ever take an interest in racing?”

“No, sir; I never do, sir.”

“Ah, I thought not. Fossils such as you do not know a racehorse from a park-hack. The truth is, I've chucked away nearly every farthing I possess upon the turf and the card-table; therefore I am compelled to go somewhere out of the reach of those confounded duns. You understand? When I'm gone they'll sell up this place.”

“Will the furniture be sold, sir? Oh, don't say so, Master Hugh!” exclaimed the old servant, casting a long glance around the room.

“Yes; and, by Jove, they'd sell you, too, Jacob, only I suppose such a bag of bones wouldn't fetch much.”

“You – you can't mean you are going to leave me, sir?” he implored. “For nigh on sixty years, man and boy, I've been in the service of your family, and it does seem hard that I should remain here and see the things sold – the pictures and the china that came from the Hall.”

“Yes, I know, Jacob: but it's no use worrying,” said Hugh, somewhat impatiently. “It cannot be avoided, so the things from the old place will have to travel and see the world, as I am compelled to.”

“And you really mean to go, Master Hugh?”

“Yes; I tell you I must.”

“And cannot I – cannot I come with you?” faltered the old man.

“No, Jacob – that’s impossible. I – I shall have no need of a servant. I must discharge you, but here’s fifty pounds to keep you from the workhouse for the present. I’d give you more, Jacob, but, indeed the fact is, I’m deuced hard up.”

And he took some notes from a drawer in his escritoire, and handed them to his faithful old servant.

“Thank you very kindly, sir – thank you. But – hadn’t you better keep the money, sir? You might want it.”

“No,” replied Hugh, with a sad smile. “I insist upon you taking it; and, look here, what’s more, the basket of plate is yours. It is all good stuff, and belonged to the dear old governor; so sell it to-morrow when I’m gone, and put the money into your pocket. Take anything else you like as well, because if you don’t others will. And, by the way, should you ever want to write to me, a letter to the ‘Travellers’ will be forwarded. I – I’m busy now, so good-night, Jacob.” Grasping the venerable servant’s bony hand, he shook it warmly.

“Good-night, Master Hugh,” murmured the latter in a low, broken voice. “Good-night; may God watch over you, sir.”

“Ay, Jacob, and may this smash bring me good luck in the future. Good-night.”

The old man tottered out, closing the door noiselessly after him.

“Poor old Jacob,” said Hugh aloud, as he stood before the fireplace with his hands thrust deep in his pockets in an attitude of despair. “It must be truly hard for him to leave me. He was my father’s valet when he was a young man; he has known me ever since I could toddle, and now I’m compelled to throw him out of doors, as if he were a common drudge who didn’t please me. He’s been more than a servant – he was the friend and adviser of my youth. Yet now we must part, owing to my own mad folly. Some people carry wealth in their pockets, others in their hearts.”

With a sigh and a muttered imprecation, he paced the room with deliberate, thoughtful steps.

Suddenly he noticed the evening newspaper that had been placed upon the table by his servant. Anxious to know the result of a race, he took it up mechanically, when his eyes fell upon the headline in large capitals, “Mysterious murder in the Strand.”

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed in surprise. “Why, I had really forgotten that strange incident last night. It must be the man I saw taken from the omnibus. By Jove, that was a curious affair; I wonder what the paper says about it?”

Reseating himself, he commenced to read the column of elaborately worked-up sensation with which the journal regaled its readers.

It certainly was an extraordinary case, inasmuch as the crime must have been committed with a swiftness and dexterity that was little short of marvellous. As far as the representative of the journal had been able to ascertain, the body was still unidentified, and, after advancing an extravagant theory of his own, the enterprising scribe terminated with the stereotyped phrase, invariably used on such occasions, declaring that the police, “though very reticent upon the matter, were prosecuting diligent inquiries.”

“Remarkable!” ejaculated Trethowen, when he had finished reading this account. “I wonder who the victim is, and what object anybody could have had in murdering him? So daring, too – in a public conveyance in the very heart of London. There was some motive, I suppose; but evidently the person who committed the crime was no novice, and went to work with swiftness and caution for the purpose of baffling the police. I’ve been thinking so much of my own affairs to-day that the remembrance of last night’s tragedy had entirely gone out of my head. Yet, after all, why should I puzzle my brains over a case that will require all the wit and cunning of skilled detectives before the guilty person is revealed?”

He cast the paper aside, and passed his hand wearily across his aching brow.

“No,” he continued, after a brief silence. “I’ve got too much to think of with my own affairs. Here am I, ruined irretrievably, with no hope beyond that of dragging out a miserable existence in a poverty-stricken sort of way, while my friends laugh over my misfortunes, and make themselves fat upon what they’ve won from me by foul means as well as fair. Bah! I’ve been a downright consummate fool, and deserve all this punishment; by Heaven I do!”

And he sprang to his feet, and again paced the room.

“What is my punishment?” he asked of himself, after some soliloquy. “Social ostracism, perpetual poverty, interminable despair. Yet, after all, what have I done to deserve it? I’ve not been more wild than other fellows during the sowing of my wild oats, as old fogies term it. No; the simple reason for it all is merely because I’m a younger son. My brother has enough to keep him in luxury, whereas I had but a pittance at most, and upon it was expected to keep up appearances and spend it like other fellows. I’ve done so, and now am doomed to pay the penalty of poverty. Even death would be preferable to the life before me.”

He halted, suddenly impressed by the idea. His face was pale and haggard, and in his eyes was a strangely intense look.

“Death! Why not?” he repeated in a hoarse whisper. “I have no longer any interest in life, therefore death would be the easiest means to end my difficulties. It would be all over in a moment.”

Shuddering, he sank slowly into the chair, and resting his arms upon the table, buried his face in his hands.

“Yes,” he muttered in bitter despair. “I’ve staked everything, and lost, through my cursed ill-luck. If I exiled myself it would be running away from my creditors, as if I feared them. No, by God! I – I won’t do that; I’ll choose the other alternative.”

With a firm, resolute expression upon his grave features he rose, strode quickly across the room, and, unlocking a Japanese cabinet, took therefrom a tiny phial of colourless liquid.

Holding it up to the light, he gazed upon it with a curious smile of gratification at having the poison in his possession. Strange that a man should laugh when about to take his own life; yet such is frequently the case. What is the motive that prompts him to smile when the grave is before him? What, perhaps, but the fascination of suicide. There are some men who at first feel like jumping from a high elevation into the void below. The feeling grows if at all indulged. There is a strange and, indeed, wonderful fascination in high precipices. The very fact that life can be taken is fascinating often to fatality. The majority of cases of suicide by pistol or by poison would not have occurred if the weapon or potion had been absent. Their very presence keeps the temptation to use them before the would-be suicide with more or less power.

In this case it was the same as many others. Hugh Trethowen’s lucidity of mind, granting that there was mental aberration, could not have been fully absent. The fascination of rest, of a possible life beyond, of dramatic sensationalism – all combined – may have been the chief motive-power.

Nevertheless, he stood looking at it calmly. He was bent upon his purpose.

Lifting the glass of brandy and soda, he poured the contents of the phial into it, afterwards tossing the bottle into the grate. His hand trembled a little, but by setting his feet firmly he overcame this sudden nervousness, and looked around him for the last time calmly and seriously.

“Well, here’s health to my creditors, and long life to the men who, posing as my friends, have ruined me!” he said bitterly, with a harsh laugh.

Heaving one long sigh, he raised the glass to his lips. He was preparing to drink it at one gulp.

At that moment there came Jacob’s well-known tap at the door, and he entered, bearing a letter upon a salver.

Trethowen started, and quickly replaced the glass upon the table. He was confused, and felt ashamed of being caught in the act of self-destruction, although the old man could not have been aware of what the glass contained.

Without a word he took the letter, and Jacob retired.

Tearing it open impatiently, he eagerly read its contents. It was a purely formal communication from Messrs Graham and Ratcliff, an eminently respectable legal firm, who, some years before, had transacted his late father's business, and who now expressed a desire that he should call at their offices in Devereux Court, Temple, at noon on the following day, as they wished to have an interview with him on a most important and pressing matter.

He re-read the letter several times; then, without a word escaping his lips, flung the contents of the glass upon the fire.

The letter puzzled him sorely. He resolved to call at the address given and ascertain the nature of the mysterious business.

It had saved him.

Chapter Five

Under St. Clement Danes

The office was small, dingy, and undusted, with a threadbare carpet that had once been green, long rows of pigeon-holes filled with faded legal papers, and windows so dirt-begrimed that they only admitted a yellow light, which added to the characteristic gloom.

Before a large writing-table sat Mr Bernard Graham, solicitor and commissioner for oaths, interestedly reading some documents which had apparently been taken from a black tin box that was standing open near him. He was a clean-shaven, wizened man of sixty, with scanty white hair, a forehead denoting considerable self-esteem, a pair of small, cold grey eyes, and an aquiline nose, surmounted by pince-nez with tortoiseshell frames. Attired in broadcloth of an antiquated cut, he looked exactly what his clients believed him to be – a respectable family solicitor, the surviving partner of the once popular firm of Graham and Ratcliff.

“Hum! the dates correspond,” he was murmuring aloud, as he jotted down some memoranda, after glancing through an affidavit yellow with age. “There can be no doubt that my surmise is correct; yet the whole affair is the most extraordinary within my experience. I wonder whether there are any minor points that will require clearing up?”

Selecting another document, somewhat larger than the former, he opened it, and readjusting his glasses, read it through slowly and carefully, breaking off several times to make notes of dates and names therein set forth.

“No,” he exclaimed at last, as he laid the paper aside; “we must first establish the identity, then everything will be straightforward. It all seems remarkably dear.”

Leaning back in his writing chair, his features relaxed into a self-satisfied smile.

“Some one must benefit,” he observed aloud, his face again assuming a thoughtful look. “There is such a thing as murder through revenge. Now, I wonder how I should fare if – ”

The door suddenly opened, and a clerk appeared bearing a card.

“Show him in,” commanded the solicitor, after glancing at it.

A moment later Hugh Trethowen entered.

Dressed fashionably, with a flower in his coat, he looked spruce and gay. The settled look of despair had given place to a pleasant smile, and as he advanced with elastic tread and greeted the old gentleman in his usual easy, familiar manner, it would have been hard to believe that twelve hours ago he had been on the point of taking his life.

“Well, Graham,” he began, as he put down his hat, and took the chair opposite the solicitor; “now, what is it you want with me? I’ve been breathing an atmosphere of debts and duns lately, so, if any of my creditors have been so misguided as to put their claim into your hands, I may as well give you the tip at once that I’m not worth sixpence.”

“Creditors are out of the question, Mr Hugh,” the old solicitor replied, smiling, and leaning back in his chair.

“I wish they were,” said Hugh fervently. “Give me a recipe to get rid of them, and I’ll try the experiment at all hazards.”

“You have no need, my dear sir, – no need whatever.”

“No need!” repeated the younger man in astonishment, for the words seemed like an insinuation that he knew the secret means by which he intended to evade his difficulties. “Why, what do you mean?” he asked seriously. “I tell you, it is pay or smash with me.”

“I regret to hear that, but you will adopt the former course,” Graham replied mysteriously.

Hugh laughed sarcastically.

“That’s very likely, when I have no money. But, look here, what do you want with me?”

“To impart some news.”

“News!” exclaimed Trethowen, suddenly interested. “Good or bad?”

“Both.”

“What is it? Tell me quickly,” he demanded, with an impatient gesture.

“Simply this. I wish to congratulate you upon your inheritance.”

“What inheritance?”

“Well, the information it is my pleasure to communicate will undoubtedly cause you mingled pain and satisfaction. Briefly, your brother, Douglas Trethowen, is dead, and – ”

“What!” cried Hugh, starting to his feet in amazement. “You’re humbugging me!”

“I repeat, your brother is dead,” resumed the old solicitor calmly, looking intently into the face of the man before him. “In consequence of that event you inherit the whole of the estate.”

“Good heavens, is this true, Graham?” he asked breathlessly.

“It is. Therefore I don’t think you need trouble yourself over creditors any longer. You can now pay, and wipe them out.”

The old man laughed at the effect his words had produced, for Hugh Trethowen was standing in mute astonishment.

“But how do you know Douglas is dead?” he asked.

“There is little doubt of it,” answered Mr Graham coolly. “Read this,” and he handed him a newspaper cutting.

Hugh scanned it eagerly, with an expression of abject amazement. The statement was to the effect that it had just transpired that the man found murdered in an omnibus at Charing Cross had been identified as Mr Douglas Trethowen, of Coombe Hall, Cornwall. Upon the body some cards and letters had been found, which, for some unaccountable reason, had at first been kept secret by the police.

“I can scarcely believe it,” Hugh ejaculated at length. “Besides, after all, it is not absolutely certain that it is he.”

“Not at all,” admitted Graham, with a puzzled look. “Of course, you, as his brother, must identify him.”

“Yes,” said the other, very thoughtfully; for it had suddenly occurred to him that he had not recognised the features when he saw the body taken from the omnibus.

“No time must be lost,” observed the solicitor. “The identity must be established at once. The inquest will, I believe, be held to-morrow.”

Hugh hesitated, and for some moments remained silent.

“You see, I’ve not met my brother for six years, therefore I might be unable to recognise him. He has been abroad during the greater part of that period, and his appearance may have altered considerably.”

“Nonsense, my dear sir, – nonsense. You would surely know your own brother, even if a dozen years had elapsed,” he answered decisively.

“And suppose he really is Douglas?”

“The will is explicit enough,” the elder man said, pointing to an open document before him. “This is a copy of it, and no codicil has been added. In the same manner as your late respected father, Mr Douglas left the whole of his affairs in my hands. Fortunately for you, he never married, and the property is yours.”

He felt bewildered. Such agreeable news was sufficient to animate with immoderate joy a ruined man who, a few hours previously, had contemplated suicide.

“Now, speaking candidly, Graham, have you any doubt that it is Douglas?”

“None.”

“Why?”

“Well – for the simple reason that I believe he is dead.”

“That’s an evasive answer. Tell me the reason.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot divulge secrets entrusted to me, Mr Hugh. You may, however, at once rest assured that I am absolutely ignorant both of the motive of the terrible crime and the existence of any one likely to commit it. If I possessed any such knowledge, of course, I should communicate with the police without delay,” the old gentleman said calmly.

“Then you refuse to state your reasons?” exclaimed Trethowen, a trifle annoyed.

“I do, most decidedly. All I can tell you is that I knew your brother had returned from abroad; and, as a matter of fact, he wrote making an appointment to meet me yesterday, but did not keep it.”

“From that you conclude he is dead?”

“Combined with various other circumstances.”

“Well, Graham, it’s hardly satisfactory, you’ll admit,” observed Hugh. And then he added: “Of course, if you refuse to tell me anything else, I can do nothing.”

“Excuse me, Mr Hugh,” answered the solicitor blandly. “You can go to the mortuary at once and identify the body.”

“If I fail, what then?”

“I don’t think you will fail,” replied Graham, with a meaning smile.

“You’ll come and assist me?”

“I shall be very pleased to accompany you, but must claim your indulgence for a few moments while I put away these papers;” and he commenced gathering up the scattered documents and replacing them in the box.

When he had finished he locked it carefully, and then, struggling into his overcoat, and putting on his hat, he followed Hugh Trethowen out.

An hour later they returned and reseated themselves. “The whole affair is so enshrouded in mystery that I doubt very much whether the murderer will ever be discovered,” Graham remarked, taking up some letters that had been placed upon his table during his absence.

“I agree with you. It’s a most remarkable crime.”

“But, after all, what’s the use of puzzling one’s brain?” the solicitor asked. “You inherit the estate, with an income that should keep you in luxury for the remainder of your days, therefore why trouble about it?”

“That is so; but supposing Douglas is still alive – I only say supposing – now what would be the result?” Graham shrugged his shoulders, and his visage elongated.

“It’s no use apprehending such a *dénouement*. You are absolutely certain that the body is his, are you not?” he asked.

“I’m positive of it. The curious deformity of the ear I remember quite distinctly.”

“Then you will swear before the coroner to-morrow that he is your brother?” he observed, regarding the young man keenly.

“I shall.”

“In that case no more need be said. We shall immediately proceed to prove the will, and you will be master of Coombe.”

“Indeed,” exclaimed Hugh, with a light laugh, as he rose to depart. “I’m in luck’s way to-day. A few hours ago I little thought myself so near being a wealthy man.”

“No; it must be a very pleasant surprise,” the old gentleman said, rising and grasping his new client’s hand. “I heartily congratulate you on your good fortune, Mr Hugh. I shall call upon you at noon to-morrow, and we will attend the inquest together. Your interests will be safe in my hands, so for the present good-bye.”

“Good-day, Graham. I’ll expect you to-morrow,” Hugh replied, and, lighting a cigar, he went out.

Chapter Six

Valérie Dedieu

“Look! there she goes! Isn’t she lovely? By Jove, she’s the most charming woman I’ve ever met!”

“The less of her sort there are about, the better for society at large, old fellow.”

“What? You know her?”

“Yes. Unfortunately.”

“Oh, of course. Some frivolous tale; but I’ll not hear a word of it. Some people are never satisfied unless they are polluting a fair name, or washing their neighbour’s dirty linen.”

“That’s meant to be personal, I suppose?”

“As you please.”

“And where did you make her acquaintance, pray?”

“Quite casually; a week ago.”

“And you’ve taken her for three drives, and walked on the promenade with her?”

“If I have, what crime have I committed beyond arousing your jealousy?”

“I’m not jealous in the least, I assure you, old chap,” replied Jack Egerton, smiling. “But the fact is, Hugh, I’ve always considered you a man, and never believed that you could develop into a brainless, lovesick swain. Yet it appears you have. We’ve known each other long enough to speak plainly, and if you take my advice you’ll steer clear of her.”

“Why do you give me this mysterious warning, old chap?”

“She’s bewitching, I admit: but a pretty face is not all that is desirable in a woman. If you’re on the lookout for a suitable partner – and it seems you are – I advise you not to make her your wife, or you’ll repent it. Besides, a rich man like yourself can choose from among the younger and possibly better-looking bargains offered by anxious but impecunious mothers.”

“Oh yes; I know all about that,” replied Hugh impatiently. “I shall never take any advice upon matrimony, so you are only wasting breath. The man who frowns at coquetry is often willing enough to wink at the coquette. I’m master of my own actions, and were we not old friends, Jack, I should consider this abominable impertinence on your part.”

“But, my dear fellow, it is in your own interests that – ”

“Bother my interests! Have another cigar and shut up!”

“Very well, as you please.”

The two men, who were thus discussing the merits of a female form which had just passed, were seated at an open window at the Queen’s Hotel, at Eastbourne. It was an August morning, warm, with scarcely a breath of wind. The cerulean sky reflected upon the clear sea, glassy and calm in the sunlight, while the white sails of the yachts and the distant outlines of larger vessels relieved the monotonous expanse of blue, and added effect and harmony to the scene.

A fashionable crowd of loungers were passing and reusing the window, keeping under the shadow of the eaves: for the fair ones who frequent seaside resorts, presumably for health, never desire their faces tanned. Now that the legal formalities had been accomplished, and Hugh Trethowen found himself with a comfortable competence, he, no longer world-weary, had recommenced a life of enjoyment. It was a pleasant reflection to know that his creditors had been paid in full, that he had repaid the thousand pounds he had obtained dishonourably, that he was no longer likely to be troubled by duns, and that his trusted servant Jacob had been reinstated master of his chambers. He had spent a few weeks at Coombe, and formally taken possession of the home of his youth; then he returned and went to Eastbourne, having induced Egerton to put aside work and spend a short holiday with him.

After this discussion regarding the lady, he sat back in his chair, with a cigar in his mouth, looking unutterably bored. Truth to tell, he was a little out of temper; the weather was oppressive, and

he hated discussions, as he always argued that life was too short, and breath too precious, to waste on trying to convince any one against his will.

As he sat there he gazed out upon the expanse of blue, and lapsed into silent contemplation.

The object of his admiration, who had just passed their window, was dressed with elegance and taste in a dainty pearl-grey creation of Worth's, a hat of the latest French mode, the whole being surmounted by a cool-looking lace sunshade, the tint of which served to enhance her extraordinary beauty.

She was one of those women frequently met with in Society, whose past is enveloped in a mist of uncertainty, yet they cannot be termed adventuresses, for their adventures, as far as known, are nothing extraordinary, and *les conveyances* have always been respected and rigorously preserved. Men liked her because her foreign accent and gesture added a vivacious piquancy to her manner, and women tolerated her because she was affable, fashionable, and *chic*. Scandalous tongues had certainly done their utmost to injure her reputation, but had failed. She numbered many smart people among her friends, but not even her enemies could accuse her of vulgarity or indiscretion. All that was known was that she possessed ample means, moved in a good set, and was a conspicuous figure wherever the *haut monde* poured forth her children – at Trouville, Royat, Brighton, on the *plage* at Arcachon, or the Promenade des Anglais at Nice, according to the season and fashion.

“Let's go for a stroll, old fellow,” suggested Hugh, rising, and tossing his cigar out of the window.

“I've some letters to write.”

“Oh, let them wait. Come along.”

Egerton's features were clouded by a frown of displeasure. He yawned wearily, but rose and accompanied his friend.

They strolled along the parade, and back, and then out to the end of the pier. Trethowen's eager eyes soon descried the object of his admiration, seated alone under the shadow of the pavilion, apparently engrossed in a novel. She looked up in surprise at their approach, and after mutual greetings they seated themselves beside her.

Valérie Dedieu, whose features were flushed – for she had been startled by their sudden appearance – was certainly remarkably pretty. She was gentle and winning, with a well-formed head, and a tall, graceful figure that any woman might have envied. Her large, expressive dark eyes, protected by their fringe of long lashes, had that look, at once stubborn and gentle, provocative and modest, wanton and ardent, of the Frenchwoman. The expression of her face was ever changing; now her eyes, cast down demurely, seemed to indicate a coy modesty; now her pouting lip betrayed a slight annoyance, only to be succeeded by a charming smile which disclosed an even row of pearly teeth.

As Hugh gazed upon her he remembered his friend's mysterious warning, and asked himself what evil could lurk under so innocent a countenance.

“I had no idea you were acquainted with M'sieur Egerton,” she exclaimed, suddenly turning to him.

“Oh yes; we are old friends,” Hugh replied, smiling.

“Ah! what an age it is since we met,” she said, addressing the artist, her words just tinged with an accent that added charm to her musical voice.

“It is, mademoiselle,” he answered, somewhat sullenly; “I scarcely expected to come across you here.”

She darted a sharp, inquiring glance at him, and frowned, almost imperceptibly. Next second she recovered her self-possession, and with a light laugh said: “Well, there seems some truth in the assertion that the world is very small after all.”

“There does, and encounters are sometimes unpleasant for both parties,” he remarked abruptly. “But you'll excuse me, won't you? I see a man over there that I know, and want to speak to him.”

Valérie gracefully inclined her head, and Egerton, rising, lounged over to the man he had recognised.

The moment he was out of hearing, she turned to Trethewen, and said:

“Then you and Jack Egerton are friends?”

“Yes; I find him a very agreeable and good hearted fellow.”

“That may be.” She hesitated thoughtfully; then she added: “You do not know him as well as I do.”

“And what is your objection to him?” asked he in surprise.

“Hugh, yesterday you told me you loved me,” she said, looking seriously into his face.

“Yes, dearest, I did. I meant it.”

“Then; as I explained to you, I have many enemies as well as friends. Jack Egerton is one of the former, and will do all in his power to part us when he finds out our affection is mutual. Now you understand my antipathy.”

“Clearly,” he replied, puzzled. “But I know Jack too well; he would not be guilty of an underhand action.”

“Do not trust him, but promise me *one thing*.”

“Of course, I’ll promise you anything to make you happy. What is it?”

“That you will take no heed of any allegations he may make against me.”

She was intensely in earnest, and gazed at him with eyes that were entirely human in their quick sympathy, their gentleness – in their appeal to the world for a favouring word.

“Rest assured, nothing he may say will ever turn me from you, Valérie.”

She heaved a sigh of relief when he gave his answer.

“Somehow or other I am always being scandalised,” she exclaimed bitterly. “I have done nothing of which I am ashamed, yet my select circle of enemies seem to conspire to cause the world to deride me. Because I am unmarried, and do not believe in burying myself, they endeavour to besmirch my fair name.”

She spoke with a touch of emotion, which she ineffectually tried to hide.

Then, as Hugh addressed her in a tone in which respect melted into love, she quivered at the simple words in which he poured forth his whole soul:

“I love you. Why need you fear?”

He uttered these words with a slight pressure of the hand, and a look which sank deep into her heart.

Then they exchanged a few tremulous words – those treasured speeches which, monotonous as they seem, are as music in the ears of lovers. The artist and his friend were by this time out of sight, and they were left to themselves to enjoy those brief half-hours of happiness which seldom return, which combine the sadness of parting with the radiant hopes of a brighter day, and which we all of us grasp with sweet, trembling joy, as we stand on the threshold of a new life.

And Valérie – forgetting everything, absorbed in a dream which was now a tangible reality – sat silent, with moist and downcast eyes. Hugh continued to smile, and murmured again and again in her ear:

“I love you.”

The pier was almost deserted, and, heedless of the rest of the world, they sat enraptured by love, lulled by the soft splashing of the sea, and bathed in the glorious golden sunshine.

Chapter Seven

Aut Tace, aut Pace

On the following afternoon there was held in the Floral Hall of the Devonshire Park one of those brilliant orchestral performances which always attract the fashionable portion of Eastbourne visitors. The concerts, held several times each week, are extensively patronised by the cultured, and even the crotchety, who hate music, and regard Mozart and Mendelssohn as inflictions, look upon them as a pleasant means of idling away an hour. This afternoon, however, was devoted to operatic selections, and the hall was filled with a gay throng.

Trethowen had gone over to Hastings to visit some friends, and Egerton, who found time hanging heavily upon his hands, strolled in to hear the music. As he entered, the first object which met his eye was Valérie, who, dressed with becoming taste and elegance, was sitting alone, casting furtive glances towards the door, as if expecting someone.

After a moment's hesitation he walked over to where she sat, and greeting her briefly with a pleasant smile, took a chair beside her.

"Where is your friend?" she asked abruptly.

"He went to Hastings this morning."

"When will he return?"

"I'm sure I don't know," replied the artist carelessly.

"I suppose the attraction of your fascinating self will not allow him to remain absent long. Am I to – er – congratulate you?"

Her dark eyes flashed angrily, as she exclaimed in a low, fierce tone:

"You've tricked me! You've told him!"

"And if I have, surely it is no reason why you should make an exhibition of your confounded bad temper in a public place. If you wish to talk, come into the grounds," he said in a tone of annoyance.

"Yes; let's go. I've something to say."

The conductor's baton was tapping the desk as they rose and passed out upon the pleasant lawn beyond. Walking a short distance, they seated themselves under the shadow of a tree, in a nook where there were no eavesdroppers.

"Well, Valérie, what have you to say to me? I'm all attention," said Egerton, assuming an amused air, and calmly lighting a cigarette.

"*Diable!* You try to hide the truth from me," she said, her accent being more pronounced with her anger. "You have warned Hugh; you have told him to beware of me – that my touch pollutes, and my kisses are venomous. Remember what you and I were once to each other – and you, of all men, try to ruin my reputation! Fortunately, I am well able to defend it."

"Your reputation – bah!"

"Yes, m'sieur, you may sneer; but I tell you, we are not so unequally matched as you imagine. If you have breathed one word to Hugh of my past, I can very easily prove to him that you have lied; and, further, you appear to forget that certain information that I could give would place you in a very ugly predicament."

"Oh! you threaten, do you?"

"Only in the event of your being such an imbecile as to reveal to Hugh the secret."

"Then, I may as well tell you that up to the present he knows nothing. Yet, remember, he and I are old friends, therefore it will be my endeavour to prevent him falling into your accursed toils, as others have!" he exclaimed angrily.

“Cursed toils, indeed!” she echoed, with a contemptuous toss of her pretty head. “The idea of a man like you setting himself up as Hugh Trethowen’s protector! It’s too absurd. I wonder whether you would still be friends were he to know the truth about you, eh?”

“It matters little,” he answered sternly. “You’ll keep your mouth closed for your own sake.”

“What have I to fear, pray?” she asked impatiently. “It seems you think me a weak, impressionable schoolgirl, who will tremble under your menaces. Why, the worst accusation you can make, is that I have been guilty of that crime so terrible to the eyes of the hypocritical English – unconventionality. Don’t you think I could easily disprove your statements, especially to a man who loves me?”

“Loves you!” repeated the artist, with a harsh, derisive laugh. “He wouldn’t be guilty of such romantic folly.”

“You are mistaken.”

“Then I can quickly put an end to his fool’s paradise.”

“How?” she asked breathlessly.

“I will find the means. If nothing else avails, he shall be made acquainted with the history of La – ”

“Hear me!” she interrupted fiercely. “We are both past masters in the art of lying, John Egerton; we have both led double lives, and graduated as deceivers. Breathe one word to him, and I swear that at any cost the world shall know your secret. You should know by this time how futile it is to trifle with me, especially when I hold the trump card. Hugh has been your friend, but now he is my lover; and, furthermore, I mean that he shall marry me.”

The man was silent.

He admitted to himself that her bold, passionate words were true. He was powerless to give his friend an insight into her true character, fearing the consequences, and knowing too well how relentless she was, and that she would not spare him.

“If I carry out my intentions and tell him everything – ”

“Then you will suffer, and in his eyes I shall remain immaculate,” she exclaimed quickly, watching his face intently.

Calm indifference had been succeeded by a wearied, anxious expression, and in his eyes there was a look of unutterable hatred. She waited for him to answer, but he continued smoking thoughtfully.

“*Ne m’échauffez pas les oreilles,*” she urged in a less irritated tone. “You must admit, Jack, there are certain bonds between us that for our own sakes must not be broken. The folly of disclosing my past to Hugh is palpable, for it would mean speedy ruin to yourself, and be of no possible benefit. Therefore but one solution of the difficulty remains.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I have already told you what form my revenge would take were you to expose me, and I think you acknowledge that to tell all I know would be most undesirable from your point of view.”

He bowed in assent.

“I’m glad you admit the inefficacy of your attempt to bounce me,” she continued. “I can suggest but one thing, namely, that we resolve to preserve our compact of secrecy.”

“At the cost of my friend’s happiness?”

“At any risk. But let me first assure you that Hugh’s happiness will not be jeopardised by the adoption of this course.”

“There will be no – er – danger, I suppose?”

“What do you mean?”

“Men die sometimes.”

“I don’t understand your insinuation. I confess I love him, so it is scarcely probable that any harm will befall him if it is in my power to prevent it.”

He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and frowned. Then he exclaimed decisively:

“Your words have no effect upon me. I am determined he shall judge you in your true light.”

She glanced at him in anxious surprise, for, truth to tell, she was unprepared for this bold reply. She hesitated whether she should change her tactics, as she was well acquainted with his obdurate nature, and in her heart feared to lose the man whose tender passion she half reciprocated. But her quick, impetuous character quickly asserted itself, and attained the mastery.

“You – you blighted my life!” she cried in a towering rage, her face blanched with passion. “And even now, when I have an opportunity, you debar me from atoning for the past, and becoming an honest woman! I am not such a blind fool, however, as to bow calmly to your tyranny. I have already sacrificed too much, so I give you but one chance to save yourself.”

“To save myself. Bah! you are talking nonsense.”

“No, believe me, I’m not,” she declared, her dark eyes flashing with anger. “Either you give your promise of secrecy now, at once, or before the day is out I will give you up to the police.”

Jack Egerton drew a long breath, and his countenance grew visibly paler. He was cornered, and saw no possible means of evading the dire alternative. If he divulged the secret, it would mean disgrace, ruin, even worse.

She smiled triumphantly at his bewilderment. It was true, as she assured him, she held the trump card, and was playing the dangerous game dexterously, as only a clever, scheming woman could.

“Which do you choose?” she asked in a cool, indifferent tone, as if putting forward some very commonplace plan.

“You’re an idiot,” he exclaimed in vehement disgust.

“I’m well aware of that fact, *mon ami*,” replied she, with a supercilious curl of the lip. “Such a compliment is particularly appropriate. I was an idiot to allow you to have the freedom you now enjoy. Remember, however, I have yet a talisman that will sooner or later cause you to cringe at my feet.”

“Never.”

“Then you must put up with the consequences,” she answered calmly, nervously twisting the ribbons of her sunshade. “But I warn you, that if we are to be enemies you will find me even more merciless than yourself. Your own folly alone will bring upon you the retribution you so richly deserve.”

“Bah! what’s the use of being dramatic? If it’s a fight between us, your record is quite as black as mine.”

“Ah! you would have to prove that; but in the meantime I should have the satisfaction of seeing you sent to penal servitude. You have been acquainted with me long enough to know that I do nothing by halves. I am determined that now, before we part, you shall swear to keep my secret, or I will put you in a convict’s cell.”

“But think of the injury you would – ”

“Enough! Words are useless. You must choose now.”

Her handsome face was perfectly impassive; a cruel, sarcastic smile played about her lips.

She had been watching his features narrowly, for the pallor and the nervous twitchings clearly showed the agitation her decisive alternative had produced. Passionate love for Hugh Trethowen had alone prompted her, for she saw that if this man gave him an insight into her past he would turn his back upon her in ineffable disgust. Hers was a Bohemian nature, and she had led a strangely adventurous life, though few were aware of it. Her early education in the Montmartre quarter of Paris had effectually eradicated any principles she might have originally possessed, and up to this time she had enjoyed the freedom of being absolute mistress of her actions. Yet, strangely enough, now she had met Hugh, her admiration of his character had quickly developed into that intense affection which is frequently characteristic of women of her temperament, and she discovered that his love was indispensable to her existence. There was but one barrier to her happiness. Egerton knew more

of the unpleasant incidents of her life than was desirable, and for the protection of her own interests she was compelled to silence him.

From the expression on his face she felt she had gained her point, and rose with a feeling of absolute triumph.

“Now,” she demanded impatiently, “what is your decision?”

“Your secret shall be kept on one condition only,” he said, rising slowly, and standing beside her.

“What is that, pray?”

“That no harm shall befall Hugh,” he replied earnestly. “You understand my meaning, Valérie?”

“It isn’t very likely that I should allow anything of that sort to occur. You seem to forget I love him.”

The artist was convinced that her affection for his friend was unfeigned. She was but a woman after all, he argued, and probably her life had changed since they last met. Her answer decided him.

“Well, which will you do?” she again asked, with an anxious look.

“I will tell Hugh nothing of the past,” he said briefly.

“Ah! I thought you would come to your senses at last,” she exclaimed, with a short, hysterical laugh. “Then it is a compact between us. You take an oath of silence.”

“I swear I will divulge nothing,” he stammered.

Then Valérie breathed again, and it was impossible for her to hide the satisfaction with which she regarded his words.

“Divulge nothing,” she repeated, quite cheerfully. “Undoubtedly it will be the best course, especially as we both have hideous secrets which, if exposed, would bring inevitable ruin upon us both. Was it not Marmontel who said ‘La fortune, soit bonne ou mauvaise, soit passagère ou constante, ne peut rien sur l’âme du sage?’”

They chatted for a few moments, then moved away together in the direction of the Floral Hall – not, however, before she exclaimed —

“If you break your oath you will bitterly repent.”

Chapter Eight

Under Seal

Surrounded by a thickly-wooded park, where the deer abound in ferny coombes and hollows, stood the home of the Trethowens.

The house, to which a long elm avenue formed the principal approach, was an imposing pile, and dated for the most part from the reign of Queen Anne. Standing out prominently, its grey walls were almost wholly ivy covered, and from its grey slate roofs rose stacks of tall chimneys backed by thick masses of foliage. Striking as was its exterior, within the arrangements were antiquated and behind the times; for comfort had not been sacrificed to modern improvement, and vandalism had never been a distinctive quality of any of its masters.

In the great old entrance-hall, with its wide hearth and fire-dogs, were paintings by Fuseli and carvings by Gibbon, in which the motto of the Trethowens, *Sit sine labe fines*, was conspicuous, while the rooms, furnished with that elegant taste in vogue when the house was built, contained many unique specimens of Guercino, Chari, and Kneller.

Indeed, Coombe Hall was one of the finest mansions in North Cornwall.

During Douglas Trethowen's absence the place had been left with only a gardener and his wife as caretakers. The park had been neglected, grass had grown in the gravelled carriage-drive, and the fine old gardens had been allowed to become choked with weeds. Though the whole place had a potency to set men thinking, perhaps the most quaint, old-world spot was the flower garden, with its spreading cedars and shady elms, its lichen-covered walls overrun with tea-roses, jasmine, and honeysuckle, with black yew hedges forming pleasant shades to the pretty zigzag walks. Here, long ago, dainty high-born dames in patches, powdered wigs, and satin sacques fed the peacocks and gathered the roses, or, clad as Watteau shepherdesses, danced minuets with pink-coated shepherds with crooks in their hands. Here, the scene of many a brilliant *fête champêtre*, syllabubs were sipped, and gorgeous *beaux* uttered pretty phrases, and, perchance, words that were the reverse of delicate, and were punished by being lightly tapped by fans.

Amid these unprofaned, old-world surroundings, Hugh Trethowen found himself, having been called thither by urgent business, for a portion of the house was in process of renovation, and the architect required his instructions.

Familiar as was the home of his childhood, yet he had not been there a week before his habitual *blasé* restlessness returned. Only a few days ago he had bade farewell to the woman he loved, but already he was longing to be again at her side, and had decided to return to her on the morrow.

He had been inspecting the progress of the work of putting the garden in order, and the various other improvements, but time hung heavily upon his hands, and it was merely for the purpose of whiling away an hour or two that he resolved to ascertain the nature of the private papers left by his dead brother.

Thus it was that he was sitting in the fine old library, cigar in mouth, lazily scanning some letters and documents scattered before him. He found little of interest, however; but as his chair was comfortable, and as the golden sunset streaming in through the diamond panes illumined the room with a warm light, he experienced a languid satisfaction in making himself acquainted with his brother's secrets.

One by one he took the letters and digested their contents. Many were Cupid's missives, couched in extravagant language, and still emitting an odour of stale perfume. Some were tied together in bundles from various fair correspondents, others were flung indiscriminately among a heterogeneous accumulation of bills, receipts, and other papers similarly uninteresting.

At last, when he had finished the whole of those before him, he sat back, and for a long time smoked in meditative silence.

“By Jove,” he exclaimed at last, aloud, “Douglas must have had a variety of lady friends of whose existence nobody knew. And they all loved him, poor little dears. No doubt his money attracted them more than his precious self, yet he was too wide awake to allow himself to become enmeshed in the matrimonial net.” And he laughed amusedly. “Their pretty sentiments, kisses indicated by crosses, and mouldy scents, were all to no purpose,” he continued, taking up one of the letters, and contemplating the address. “What a disappointment it must have been when he went abroad, and left the whole of the artless damsels to pine – or rather to seek some other fellow likely to prove a prize. And their presents! Good heavens! he might have set up a bazaar with the jewellery, slippers, smoking caps, cigarette cases, match-boxes, and other such trash mentioned in their dainty notes. I suppose I shall find the whole collection bundled into a cupboard somewhere, for they must have been forgotten as soon as received. What strange beings women are, to be sure!”

Having finished his cigar, he stretched himself lazily, yawned, and exclaimed:

“Now I wonder whether there’s anything else worth looking at? Such letters are quite as amusing as the comic papers.”

He glanced at them carelessly, with an uninterested listlessness, for he felt half inclined to burn them, as at best they were only rubbish. It was a pity, he thought, that such a fine old piece of furniture as the Chippendale bureau should be used for no better purpose than to store these forgotten and useless communications. Again, why should he harbour the evidences of his dead brother’s flirtations.

As these and similar thoughts were passing through his mind, he suddenly gave vent to an exclamation of intense surprise. Withdrawing his hand quickly from the bureau, he rushed across to the window in order to examine more closely the object which had evoked his astonishment.

It was a coloured cabinet photograph.

He gazed upon it in dumb amazement, for the light revealed the pictured face of Valérie Dedieu!

Evidently it had been taken several years ago, as the hair was dressed in a style that was now out of date; still there was no doubt as to the identity of the original. With the exact contour of the features he was too well acquainted to regard it as a striking resemblance heightened by imagination. He examined every detail with eager eyes, and was convinced that the photograph was hers. The colouring, so far from altering the expression of the features, added a lifelike look, enhancing the beauty of the picture. The lips were parted, disclosing even rows of small white teeth; the counterfeit presentment seemed to smile mockingly at him.

“Valérie’s photograph!” he ejaculated, running his fingers through his hair, and gazing around in blank bewilderment. “How could it have come into Douglas’s possession? Strange that I should find it here, unless – unless she, too, loved him.”

“No,” he added savagely, a moment afterwards. “Why should I think that? I’ll not believe it until I have proof. And then, after all, they may not have been acquainted; the photograph may have come into his possession in some roundabout way. By the way,” he continued, as a sudden thought occurred to him, “I might possibly discover something further.”

Again he returned to the bureau, still holding the photograph in his hand, and after a few moments’ eager search drew forth a small packet of letters tied with pink tape and sealed with red wax.

They had evidently been carefully preserved, for he discovered the packet concealed at the back of one of the small drawers in the interior.

With hands trembling with feverish excitement he took them to the window. Hastily he broke the seals, drew off the tape, and found there were three letters.

He felt a sudden throb at his heart, a touch of suspense that was painful, as he opened the first anxiously.

“Her handwriting!” he ejaculated excitedly, at the same time taking from his pocket a letter he had received that morning from Valérie, and placing them side by side.

The peculiarities of the fine angular calligraphy were exactly similar.

He read the letter. It was disappointing.

Merely a plain, curt note, commencing: "Dear Douglas," making an appointment to meet at the Midland Hotel, St. Pancras, from which place it was dated and signed with the initial "V."

The discovery had wrought a great change in him. He was not the same man. A cloud overspread his countenance, and he remained buried in thought.

When he roused himself to glance at the second letter, he seemed yet more melancholy.

It certainly was an interesting and correspondingly mysterious communication.

Dated from 14 Rue d'Amsterdam, Paris, it commenced without any prefix, endearing or formal, and bore unmistakable signs of having been hastily written. It read as follows:

If you do not call before midday to-morrow I shall know that you refuse to entertain any conciliatory measure. Time does not admit of argument; I must act. At least, I must leave Paris to-morrow night, and even then all may be known. Fail to come, and I shall know you are my enemy. If I am unfortunate, rest assured I shall not suffer alone. Take my advice and seek me the moment you receive this, as it is imperative we should arrange matters before my departure. This course will be the best for you.

V.

"There was some secret between them!" Hugh said to himself in a strange half-whisper, as he finished the curious epistle. "I wonder what it was? It is clear she had a very strong motive in her desire to see him, and the letter, from its general tone, appears to relate to some transaction in which they were both implicated."

Suddenly the words of Jack Egerton, when he had pointed Valérie out at Eastbourne, recurred to him.

"The less of her sort the better," he mused, gazing out of the window abstractedly. "I never asked Jack what he meant by that mysterious allusion. Perhaps, however, he didn't mean it seriously, and only said it in chaff."

He remained silent for some moments.

"Why," he suddenly exclaimed, "why should I believe malignant stories, when there is nothing to prove them? These letters are certainly strange, yet, after all, they may relate to some purely matter-of-fact affair."

Truth to tell, he felt half inclined to believe there had been a deeper meaning in the artist's words than he imagined, and was stupefied in the agony of mental struggle. He stood rigid and confounded, gazing in turn at the letters and photograph, utterly unable to account for the curious and secret correspondence that had evidently taken place between his late brother and the woman who had promised to become his wife.

At last he opened the remaining letter, and was astonished to find it merely a blank sheet of notepaper, inside which was carefully preserved a scrap of half-burned paper about two inches square. Apparently it was a portion of a letter which, after being torn across, had been thrown into the fire. By some means the edges had been burned, the remainder being severely scorched.

It was written on one side of the paper, and the words, which were in French, and in a disguised hand, revealed a fact which added interest to the discovery. Necessarily few, they were very pointed, and translated they read:

Our agreement... dies I will... meet in London... of that sum on June 13th... Montabello to his rooms on the Boulevard... defy detection by...

He read and re-read these words, but could glean little from them. The small piece of blackened paper had presumably formed part of a note, but it was clear that the writer was illiterate, or intentionally ignorant, for in two instances the orthography was faulty.

Try how he would, Hugh was unable to disguise the fact that it was a promise to pay a certain sum, and the mention of the word "dies" seemed as if it had connection with some dark deed. Perhaps

it alluded to the secret referred to by Valérie in the former letter! With tantalising contrariety, any names that had been mentioned had been consumed, and nothing but the few words already given remained as indication of what the communication originally contained.

Nevertheless, thought Hugh, it must have been regarded as of considerable importance by his brother, or it would not have been so carefully preserved and concealed. So crisp was it in its half-consumed condition, that he was compelled to handle it tenderly, otherwise it would have crumbled.

Having satisfied himself that nothing further could be gathered from the almost obliterated words, he replaced it carefully inside the sheet of notepaper, and proceeded to make a thorough search of the bureau.

In vain he took out the remaining letters and scanned them eagerly, hoping to find something which would throw a further light upon the extraordinary missives. None, however, contained any reference to Valérie, or to Paris. When he had finished, he summoned old Jacob, and ordered him to make a fire and burn all except about half a dozen, which appeared of a business character.

Placing the photograph and the three letters in his pocket, he stood thoughtfully watching the old man as he piled the bills and the billets-doux upon the wide-open hearth and ignited them.

The mysterious correspondence sorely puzzled him, and he was determined to find out its meaning. Undoubtedly, Douglas and Valérie were intimately acquainted, and from the tone in which she wrote, it appeared as if from some reason she was afraid of him, and, further, that she was leaving Paris by compulsion.

His thoughts were embittered by a vague feeling of jealousy and hatred towards his brother, yet he felt himself on the verge of a discovery which might possibly lead to strange disclosures.

Curiously enough, our sins find us out very rapidly. We cannot tamper with what is right and for the best in order to secure what is temporarily convenient without invoking Nemesis; and sometimes she comes with a rapid tread that is a little disconcerting.

Though he experienced a strange apprehensive feeling, Hugh Trethowen little dreamed of the significance of the communications which, by a strange vagary of Fate, had been placed under his hand.

Chapter Nine

Denizens of Soho

A dirty, frowsy room, with furniture old and rickety, a ceiling blackened, and a faded carpet full of holes.

Its two occupants, dark, sallow-looking foreigners in shabby-genteel attire, sat conversing seriously in French, between frequent whiffs of *caporal* cigarettes of the most rank description.

Bateman's Buildings, Soho – where, on the second floor of one of the houses, this apartment was situated – is a thoroughfare but little known, even to dwellers in the immediate vicinity. The wandering Londoner, whose peregrinations take him into the foreign quarter, might pass a dozen times between Frith and Greek Streets without discovering its existence. Indeed, his search will not be rewarded until he pauses halfway down Bateman Street and turns up a narrow and exceedingly uninviting passage between a marine-store dealer's and the shop of a small vendor of vegetables and coals. He will then find himself at Bateman's Buildings, a short, paved court, lined on each side by grimy, squalid-looking houses, the court itself forming the playground of a hundred or so spirited juveniles of the unwashed class.

It is altogether a very undesirable place of abode. The houses, in comparison with those of some neighbouring thoroughfares, certainly put forward a sorry pretence towards respectability; for a century ago some well-to-do people resided there; and the buildings, even in their present state of dilapidation and decay, have still a solid, substantial air about them. Now, however, they are let out in tenements, and the inhabitants are almost wholly foreigners.

Soho has always been the abode of the French immigrant. But Time, combined with a squabbling County Council, has affected even cosmopolitan London; and Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road have now opened up the more inaccessible haunts, rendering them more conventional, if less interesting. Notwithstanding this, it is still the French quarter. French laundresses abound in great variety, with cheap French cafés where one can obtain absinthe, groseille, or grenadine, and where Jacques Bonhomme can dine with *potage* and three *plats* for less than a shilling, while French bakers are a feature at every turn.

Within a small radius of Bateman's Buildings several thousand strangers struggle for the bare necessities of life – deluded Germans, Belgians, and Frenchmen, who thought the English Metropolis a second El Dorado, and have found it nothing beyond a focus for squalid poverty, hunger, and crime.

The two men who were seated together in this upper room were no exception. Although not immigrants in search of employment, yet they were disappointed that the business which brought them over had not resulted profitably, and, moreover, they were considerably dejected by reason of their funds being almost exhausted.

They sat opposite one another at the table, with an evil-smelling paraffin lamp between them. The silence was broken by the elder man.

“You must admit, Pierre,” he exclaimed in French, contracting his dark bushy eyebrows slightly, “it is no use sitting down and giving vent to empty lamentations. We must act.”

Pierre Rouillier, the young man addressed, was tall and lean, with jet black hair, a well-trimmed moustache, and a thin face, the rather melancholy expression of which did not detract from the elements of good looks which his features possessed.

“Why can't we remain here quietly in hiding for a time?” he suggested. “If we wait, something good may turn up.”

“Remain and do nothing!” echoed Victor Bérard. “Are you an imbecile? While we rest, the chance may slip from us.”

“There’s no fear of that,” Pierre replied confidently. “My opinion is that we can remain here for a month or two longer with much advantage to ourselves.”

“Bah!” ejaculated his companion, a short and rather stout man, about ten years his senior, whose brilliant dark eyes gleamed with anger and disgust.

“Well, speaking candidly,” continued Pierre, “do you really think it advisable to do anything just now?”

“I see nothing to prevent it; but, of course, it would be impossible to carry out our primary intention just at present. In fact, until the business is more developed any attempt would be mere folly.”

“Exactly. That’s just my reason for remaining idle.”

“The fact is, you’re afraid,” exclaimed Bérard, regarding him contemptuously.

“Afraid of what?”

“Of making a false move,” he replied; and then he added: “Look here, Pierre, leave everything to me. Hitherto we have transacted our various affairs satisfactorily, and there’s no reason why we should not be successful in this. It only requires tact and caution – qualities with which both of us are fortunately well endowed. When it is complete we shall leave this wretched country.”

“As for myself, I shouldn’t be sorry if we were going to-morrow,” remarked the younger man morosely. “I’m sick of the whole business.”

“Oh, are you?” exclaimed Bérard fiercely. “What in the name of the devil is the matter with you, you impudent coward? We entered upon this affair together; our course is quite plain, and now, just when we are within an ace of success, you want to back out of it. You’re mad!”

“Perhaps I am,” replied Pierre warmly. “But you are too enthusiastic, and I have a presentiment that the whole affair will end in disaster.”

“Disaster! You talk like a woman,” Bérard exclaimed. “How is it that other delicate matters you and I have negotiated have not ended in a *contretemps*, eh?”

“*Nom d’un chien!* And what have we gained by them? Why, simply nothing. You have been clever, it’s true; but in this, if we don’t wait until a more favourable opportunity occurs, we shall bungle. And if we do, you know the consequences.”

“But while we are waiting we must have money from somewhere.”

“We must wait,” declared Pierre. “We ought to get out of this wretched rabbit-warren, and dress a bit more respectably. Do you think we’re likely to (unreadable). *Je n’ai pas un rond,*” he added in the argot of the criminal circles of Montmartre.

Bérard shrugged his shoulders, and pulled a wry face.

“We can but try,” he observed, selecting a fresh cigarette and lighting it.

At that moment the stairs outside creaked, and a light footstep was heard upon them.

“Hark!” exclaimed the younger man. “She has arrived! She promised she would come to-night.”

The words were scarcely uttered before the door was flung open unceremoniously, and Valérie Dedieu entered.

Her most intimate friends would scarcely have recognised her had they met her in the street in broad daylight. A common and shabby tweed ulster enveloped her figure, and upon her head was a wide-brimmed, dark-blue hat, battered and faded.

Her disguise was complete.

“Well, you see I’m here as requested,” she exclaimed, as she burst into the room, and, taking off her hat, flung it carelessly upon the ragged old leather sofa.

“Ah, *ma petite lapin*, we’re glad you’ve come,” Bérard replied, with a smile. “If Mahomet can’t go to the mountain because he has no decent clothes, then the mountain must come to Mahomet.”

“That’s so,” she observed, with a light laugh, seating herself on a chair at the table. “I look nice in this get-up, don’t I? Pierre, give me a cigarette. You’ve apparently forgotten your manners towards a lady,” she added reproachfully.

The trio laughed. The younger man did as he was commanded, and gallantly struck the match, igniting the cigarette for her.

“Now, how have you been getting on?” she inquired.

“Deuced badly,” Bérard replied. “We’re hard up and must have money.”

“Money! *C’est du réchauffé!* Valérie cried in dismay. *Mon Dieu!* I’ve none. I’m almost penniless, and must have some from you.”

“What?” cried Rouillier. “You can’t give us any?”

“No, not a sou,” she replied. “An appearance such as I’m bound to keep up requires a small fortune, and I tell you just now my expenses are something enormous.”

“Then how do you expect we can live?” asked Bérard, with an injured expression and violent gesticulation.

“I’m sure I cannot tell you, my dear Victor. You know better how to obtain funds than I. Live as you’ve lived for the past five years. You both have enjoyed luxury during that time, and I suppose you will continue to do so somehow or other.”

“This handsome *salon* looks like luxury, doesn’t it?” remarked Pierre, smiling contemptuously, as he cast his eyes around.

“Well, certainly there’s nothing gorgeous about it,” she admitted, laughing, although she shuddered as she realised its discomforts.

Bérard shook his head impatiently. He did not care to be reminded of days of past splendour, and he hardly knew whether to be pleased or not at her visit.

“Look here,” he said, gazing up at her suddenly. “It’s no use chattering like an insane magpie. What’s to be done?”

“I don’t know, and I care very little,” she replied candidly. “I want money, and if I don’t get it the whole affair will collapse.”

And she blew a cloud of smoke from between her dainty lips with apparent unconcern.

“But how are we to get it? No one will lend it to us.”

“Don’t talk absurdly. I have no desire to be acquainted with the means by which you obtain it. I want a thousand pounds. And,” she added coolly, “I tell you I *must* have it.”

The two men were silent. They knew Valérie of old, and were fully convinced that argument was useless.

Leaning her elbows upon the table, she puffed at her rank cigarette with all the gusto of an inveterate smoker, and watched their puzzled, thoughtful faces.

“Would that sum suffice until – ?” Bérard asked mysteriously, giving her a keen glance, and not completing the sentence.

Although her face was naturally pallid, it was easy to discern that the agitation of the last few moments had rendered it even more pale than usual, and her hand was twitching impatiently.

“Yes,” she answered abruptly.

“Couldn’t you make shift with five hundred?” he suggested hesitatingly.

“No,” she said decisively; “it would be absolutely useless. I must have a thousand to settle my present debts; then I can go on for six, perhaps twelve months, longer.”

“And after that?” inquired Pierre.

She arched her eyebrows, and, giving her shoulders a tiny shrug, replied —

“Well – I suppose I shall have the misfortune to marry some day or another.”

All three smiled grimly.

“How are matters progressing in that direction?” Victor asked, with a curious expression.

“As favourably as can be expected,” replied Valérie in an indifferent tone. “If a woman is *chic* and decorous at the same time, and manages to get in with a good set, she need not go far for suitors.”

“Have you seen the Sky Pilot?” inquired Victor, with a thoughtful frown.

“Yes, I met Hubert Holt a few days ago at Eastbourne. He asked after you.”

“Shall I find him at the usual place?”

“Yes; but it would not be safe to go there.”

“Then I’ll write. I must see him to-morrow.”

“Why?”

“You want *le pognon*?” he asked snappishly.

“I do.”

“Then, if we are to get it, he must give us his aid,” he said ominously.

“Ah!” she exclaimed, evidently comprehending his meaning. “But you are not very hospitable,” she added. “Have you got anything to drink?”

“Not a drop.”

“*Malheureux!* you’ve fallen on evil times, my dears,” she said, laughing uneasily.

Taking out her small, silver-mounted purse, she emptied its contents upon the table. This consisted of two sovereigns and some silver. The former she handed to Victor, saying, —

“That’s all I can give you just now.”

He put them into his pocket without a word of thanks, while she sat back in her chair whistling a few bars of a popular *chansonette eccentricque*.

“Pierre,” Bérard said sullenly, at the same time vigorously apostrophising the “*diable*,” “we’re in a difficulty, and the only way we can obtain the money is by another – er – disappearance.”

“What, again?” cried Valérie. “Why, poor Pierre is vanishing fast enough already. He’s almost a skeleton now,” and she pointed at his lean figure derisively.

“I don’t get enough to eat nowadays,” declared he, pulling a wry face.

“Do stop your chatter, Valérie,” Victor said angrily, “I’m talking business.”

“Oh, pardon, m’sieur?” and she pouted like a spoiled child.

“It’s generally a safe trick. How much would it bring in?” asked the younger man of his companion.

“Two thousand sterling.”

“Just the sum,” interrupted mademoiselle, striking the table in her enthusiasm. “We’ll divide it. When can I have my half?”

“As soon as possible, but don’t be impatient, as hurried action means certain failure.”

“All right,” she replied boldly, removing the cigarette from her lips, and contemplating it. “You can keep your fatherly advice for somebody else,” she added, grinning across the table at Rouillier.

Tossing the cigarette into the grate, she rose.

“What, are you going so soon?” asked the younger *homme de facie*.

“Yes, it’s late; and, besides, I can’t go straight home in such a get-up as this.”

Cramming on her battered hat, she pulled it over her forehead, and then struck an attitude so comic that neither of the men could refrain from laughing. When they grew serious again, she said —

“Now, one word; shall I have the money? I think we understand one another sufficiently to agree that it is imperative, don’t we?”

Victor Bérard nodded an affirmative. He had decided. “You will promise me?”

“Yes, you shall have it, notwithstanding the risks,” he replied. “Of course, the latter are very great, but I think if we carry out our plans boldly, it will be all right.”

“*Bien*,” she said in a satisfied tone. “And now you can both come out with me, and have the pleasure of regaling me with a glass of wine; for,” she added, with a little mock curtsy, “I feel faint after all this exertion.”

“Very well,” said Pierre, as both men rose and put on their hats.

“We’ll drink to another successful disappearance,” Valérie said, patting him playfully on the cheek. “The dear boy will prove our salvation from misery, provided he doesn’t blunder.”

“Not much fear of that,” answered the young man she caressed. “It isn’t the first time, so trust me to bring it off properly. I know my work too well to take an incautious step,” he remarked in a low whisper, as the strange trio descended the creaking stairs.

“That’s all very well,” muttered Bérard, “but we can’t afford to act rashly, for it’ll be a complicated and extremely ugly bit of business at best.”

Chapter Ten

Deadly Pair

A month had elapsed.

In the exquisite little drawing-room of a first-floor flat in Victoria Street, Westminster, where tender lights filtered through the golden shadows of silken hangings, sat Valérie. Her attitude was one of repose – deep, unruffled. From the crown of her handsome head to the tip of her dainty shoe she was perfect. With her eyes fixed seriously upon the ceiling, she sat crouching in her chair with all the abandon of a dozing tigress. The room, a glowing blaze of colour, and carpeted with rich skins, was a fitting jungle. With all a woman's cunning she had chosen a tea-gown of pale heliotrope silk, which, falling in artistic folds, gave sculptural relief to her almost angular outline, and diffused a faint breath of violets about her.

She gave a stifled yawn and drew a heavy breath, as one does when encountering some obstacle that must be overcome.

"I wonder whether he will come?" she exclaimed, aloud.

As she uttered these words the door opened, and Nanette, her discreet French maid, entered.

"M'sieur Trethowen," she announced.

He followed quickly on the girl's heels, with a fond, glad smile.

"I must really apologise, my dear Valérie. Have I kept you waiting?" he cried breathlessly, at the same time bending and kissing her lightly.

She gave her shapely shoulders a slight shrug, but watched him with contemplative eyes as he rushed on.

"I thought I should be unable to take you out to-day, as I was detained in the City upon business. However, I've brought the dog-cart round. The drive will do you good, for the weather is superb."

"Indeed," she said languidly. Putting out a lazy, bejewelled hand, she drew back the curtain that hid the window, and gazed out upon the bright afternoon. "Yes, it is lovely," she assented. "But you must excuse me to-day, Hugh. I am not feeling well."

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked in alarm, noticing for the first time that there was a restless, haggard expression about her eyes.

"Oh, it's nothing," she replied with a smile; "really nothing. A mere headache. I shall be better to-morrow."

"Can I do anything for you?"

"No, thanks," she answered, motioning him to a seat beside her.

"No, no, at your feet; Valérie – always at your feet," the young man replied gayly, throwing himself down before her, and flinging his head back in order to gaze more intently into the dark, brilliant eyes above him.

Keeping time with a heavy finger, he sang, in a not unmusical baritone, two lines of an old French love song:

"Non, ma jeunesse n'est pas morte,
Il n'est pas mort ton souvenir."

But his fair companion was almost oblivious to the importance of the burden of his melody. With her little pointed chin against the rose of her palm, she sat lost in a world of reverie.

"Do you ever see Jack Egerton now?" she asked suddenly.

He smiled, accustomed to her wilful wanderings.

“Yes, frequently,” he said in turn. “We have known one another so long, that I look upon him as my best friend.”

“Your best friend!” she echoed. “Ah! that is to be regretted. Then you could not have known him when he was a student in Paris.”

“No; tell me about him,” Hugh asked anxiously.

“Although I knew him, I shall say nothing beyond the fact that his was an unenviable reputation.”

His lips were parted in surprise as he looked at her.

“My darling,” he said, a trifle coldly, “you can’t expect me to judge my friend without being aware of his offence.”

“His offence?” she exclaimed, with a start. “What – what do you mean? What do you know of his offence?”

He was astonished at her sudden and intense interest.

“Nothing beyond what you have just told me,” he replied calmly, although her strange agitation had not escaped him.

It seemed as if she had unintentionally referred to something she wished to hide. Drawing a long breath, she quickly recovered herself.

“Ah, I understand,” she said; “I thought you were referring to – other things.”

The mention of Paris had brought vividly to his memory the strange letters and the photograph he had discovered among his dead brother’s papers. A dozen times he had resolved upon approaching the subject, in an endeavour to find out how they came into his possession, but each time he had refrained from doing so because he feared causing her annoyance.

Piqued by the uncomplimentary terms in which she had spoken of Egerton, he uttered a question which the moment after the words fell from his lips he regretted.

“Valérie,” he said, grasping her hand, and gazing earnestly into her eyes, “I have a curious desire to know whether you ever were acquainted with my brother?”

The light died out of her face instantly. She turned pale as death, her delicate nostrils dilated, and her lips quivered strangely.

“What do you mean?” she gasped.

“I simply asked whether you were ever acquainted with my brother Douglas, who was murdered, poor fellow.”

“Murdered!” she cried hoarsely. “Was Douglas Trethowen murdered?”

“Yes; I thought you were aware of that painful incident.”

“*Dieu!*” she ejaculated, with a shudder. “I knew he was dead, but I was told he died of fever,” she said in a harsh, low voice.

“Then you knew him?”

“No – I – we were not acquainted,” she replied, endeavouring to remain calm, at the same time passing her slim hand across her blanched face.

Her breast heaved convulsively, and her limbs trembled. But it was only for a moment.

“Strange that you did not know him,” Hugh said in a tone of distrust.

“What caused you to think that he and I were friends?” she asked, rather haughtily, bracing herself up with an effort.

He hesitated. He was on the point of telling her of his discovery and demanding an explanation, but he decided that such a course might be indiscreet.

“Well,” he replied, “I had reason for believing so.”

“What was your reason?” she inquired, breathless with anxiety, as if half fearing his reply.

He had determined not to tell her the truth.

“Oh, a very foolish one,” replied he, with a laugh. “It was a mere fancy.”

“Only a fancy,” she said dreamily. “Are you sure it was nothing more?”

“Why are you so anxious to know?” he demanded, raising her hand to his lips.

“It’s feminine curiosity, I suppose,” she said, smiling.

“Well, then, I assure you it was only an absurd notion that somehow took possession of me.”

“An absurd notion,” she echoed absently. “Why, of course it is! How could I have known your brother when I have been so little in England?”

“You might have met him in society.”

“No; believe me, to my knowledge I have never seen him. If I had, what difference could it make?”

“If you entertained any affection for him – ”

“What nonsense you are talking to-day, Hugh,” she interrupted, with a little derisive laugh. “I really believe you are jealous.”

“Perhaps I am,” he admitted; “but, you see, I love so well that any such shortcoming you really must excuse.”

He laughed inwardly at the glibness of his invention.

But her manner had suddenly changed.

“You will love me always, will you not, Hugh?” she whispered earnestly.

“Yes, dearest; of course I shall,” he replied tenderly. “I have spoken unkindly – forgive me.”

Bravely smothering a storm of rising sobs, she held him with both her small hands until she had sufficiently controlled herself to speak.

“I thought a few moments ago that – that you no longer cared for me,” she said, with an effort, watching the effect of her words with wide-open, earnest eyes.

“No, Valérie, you were mistaken,” he replied in a low, intense tone. “I love you, and nothing shall ever part us.”

They had risen, and were standing together before the fireplace.

For a moment she stared vacantly before her. Then she threw herself into his arms, and, clinging to him convulsively, hid her face upon his shoulder.

“I love you, Hugh; I love you more than I have loved any man,” she murmured.

He strained her to his heart – a heart remorseful, even miserable and unhappy. Not even her declaration of love brought him a ray of consolation, for the gnawing consciousness of some deep mystery connected with her past, and the danger of their love for one another, had crushed all happiness from his soul.

And although he was feigning love and endeavouring to console her, yet there was no help for it – they were inseparable, their beings were knit together, their hearts were one.

She possessed the fatal power of fascination. He was under her spell.

With an effort to shake off the gloom that was possessing him, he spoke to her words of comfort.

She tried to reply, but a great sob choked her utterance.

Presently she released herself gently but firmly, saying —

“You must go, Hugh; you have been here too long, and I am not well to-day. I want to be alone.”

“Yes, you are right,” replied he woefully. “I ought not to have caused you this pain. I am to blame.”

Yet something of hope returned to him as he spoke, for she clasped her arms around his neck, and, clinging to him closely, fixed upon him a look of moving appeal.

Slowly she drew down his head towards her face, and then gave him a warm, passionate kiss.

“Good-bye, Hugh,” she said in a broken pleading voice. “Remember you have one who loves you more dearly than life.”

“I’ve been a fool. Forgive me for speaking as I did,” he entreated.

“Yes,” she replied, with a sigh; “if we love one another, why should there be any mistrust between us?”

Why? Had he not cause for apprehension? he asked himself.

But her arms were about his neck, her head pillowed upon his shoulder. The sweet perfume of violets intoxicated him. In a moment he became convinced that she was terribly in earnest, and was confident of her intense affection.

“I have no mistrust whatever, darling,” he said reassuringly, stroking her hair with infinite tenderness.

“I – I am satisfied,” she murmured. “But tell me, Hugh, once more, that I shall be your wife.”

“Yes, indeed you shall, dearest; I care for no one else but you,” said he, with a grave look.

Her labouring heart throbbed against his as their lips met in a long last caress. His anguished soul invoked the blessing on her that his quivering lips refused to utter, and he tore himself away.

He took one look back, and saw her totter a few steps after him with arms outstretched, then stop.

Gazing upon her with a loving glance, he waved his hand, and passed out.

When he had gone she stood motionless and silent for a few moments, looking wildly around, but mute under the leaden weight of her thoughts. Then she walked with slow, uneven steps to the ottoman by the fire, and sank upon it.

The fierce strain had been removed from her nerves, and her happiness found vent in hysterical sobs.

“I hate myself. It’s horrible, and yet I am powerless,” she cried passionately.

Then she lapsed into a silence broken only by long, deep sighs.

Chapter Eleven

The Fourth Passenger

“I think the trick is almost accomplished.”

“So do I.”

“Is everything ready?”

“Yes; but remember, we must keep very cool. A false step means ruin.”

The man addressed laid his finger significantly upon his lips and replied —

“Of course. I quite understand.”

This whispered conversation took place in the upper room at Bateman’s Buildings, on the same evening that Hugh had visited Valérie, and the two men who stood aside talking in almost inaudible tones were Victor Bérard and the Rev. Hubert Holt. In every particular they were dissimilar. The former was well-dressed and wore several flash-looking rings, while the latter was in clerical attire of the most unassuming and orthodox cut. Both appeared earnest and anxious, glancing uneasily toward Pierre Rouillier and a companion, who were sitting at the table facing each other.

“Come,” exclaimed Pierre, addressing the other in French, “fill your glass. Good stuff like this never hurts one.”

His compatriot, who was evidently more than half intoxicated, raised his head, and stammered

—
“You’re — you’re right, *mon ami*. Such cognac warms the blood this weather. Let’s have another glass before we go.”

He, like the others, was dressed in well-cut clothes, but it was curious that when the dim lamplight fell upon his face it disclosed features strangely resembling those of the man with whom he was drinking.

Adolphe Chavoix was about twenty-eight years of age, tall and dark, with closely-cropped jet black hair, and a sallow, rather sullen-looking face. The brandy had given an unnatural fire to his eyes, his cheeks were flushed, and as he grasped his glass his lean bony hand had the appearance of the talons of a bird of prey.

Bérard and his clerical companion continued their conversation in an undertone.

The Rev. Hubert Holt, upon whom the international gang of adventurers had long ago bestowed the sobriquet of “The Sky Pilot,” certainly did not, amid such surroundings, present the appearance of a spiritual guide. True, he was the shining light of the church of St. Barnabas, Camberwell, where he held the office of curate, but as a clerical luminary he was by no means of the chalk-and-water type. On the contrary, he could wink wickedly at a pretty girl, drink a glass of “fizz,” or handle a billiard cue in a style only acquired by long practice. Nevertheless, he was considered thoroughly devout by his aged and antiquated vicar, and not having joined the ranks of Benedicts, was consequently the principal attraction at mothers’ meetings and other similar gatherings of the more enlightened parishioners of the mean and squalid parish of St. Barnabas. They, however, were in blissful ignorance of the character of his associates, otherwise it is more than probable that the pulpit and altar of the transpontine church would have been at once occupied by mother fledgling pastor.

“Suppose the whole business came to light? How should I fare?” asked the sable-coated ecclesiastic thoughtfully, after they had been in conversation some minutes.

“Bah! *Vous-vous moquez des gens!* Besides, you are always safe, surrounded as you are by a cloak of honesty. I tell you, the game can never be detected.”

“Don’t be too confident; it’s a bad habit. Hugh Trethowen may suspect. *Il est dégourdi*, and if he should discover anything, depend upon it we should have the utmost difficulty in clearing ourselves. Somehow, I don’t like the fellow; he knows too much.”

“What nonsense you talk,” replied the Frenchman impatiently. “He can never know the truth. He loves Valérie, and you ought to know her well enough to recognise her consummate tact and ingenuity.”

“Exactly. But why are you so positive that strict secrecy will be observed?”

“Because – because the only person who knew the secret has been silenced.”

“Who?” demanded Holt in a hoarse whisper.

“Egerton.”

The curate thrust his hands into his pockets, and gazed upon the floor a few moments.

“Well, I tell you candidly I don’t half like it,” he remarked apprehensively.

“Content yourself; neither of us are such imbeciles as to run any risks. Have you not already assisted us and shared our profits?”

Holt bit his lip. It was an allusion to unpleasant reminiscences.

“That is so,” he admitted, twirling the small gold cross suspended from his watch-chain. “And what is the extent of my remuneration this time?”

“One hundred pounds.”

“The job is worth double.”

“You’ll not have a sou more, so think yourself lucky to get what I offer.”

“If I refuse?”

“You dare not,” interrupted Victor in a changed tone. “Think of what your future would be if Valérie uttered one word.”

“Yes – yes,” Holt replied, with a fierce frown. “I know I’ve linked myself with you. I’m your cat’s-paw, however detestable your shady transactions are.”

“You always receive money for your services.”

“Yes,” he muttered between his teeth. “Gold with a curse upon it.”

Bérard shrugged his shoulders unconcernedly and said —

“I suppose we shall each owe an ornamental wax taper to St. Jean le Baptiste for to-night’s manoeuvre.” Turning away he went to a drawer, from which he took a card-case and some letters, placing them in his pocket.

“Now, Sky Pilot,” he continued resolutely, as he walked up to where Holt stood, “are you ready?” The curate held his breath.

“Very well,” he replied, after a brief pause, “I suppose I must do the bidding of my masters.”

“It would be best – that is, if you respect your position as a holy man,” the Frenchman replied, with a mocking laugh.

“Come, gentlemen,” he exclaimed aloud, turning to the pair seated at the table. “It’s time we started, or we shall not keep our appointment.”

“There is no immediate hurry, is there?” asked Chavoix in a husky voice.

“Yes,” Bérard replied, “we must be at West Brompton at eight.”

“In that case I’m ready,” said he, rising, at the same time casting a longing look at the unfinished bottle of cognac before him. With unsteady gait he stumbled across the room, and, with the assistance of Pierre, arrayed himself in his overcoat and hat – not, however, without some difficulty and much good-humoured banter.

The other men sought their outdoor garments, and descended the stairs together, Bérard remaining behind a moment to blow out the lamp and lock the door.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

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