

Tracy Louis

The Late Tenant



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«Public Domain»

Tracy L.

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CHAPTER I

A WHIFF OF VIOLETS

“I suppose one becomes used to this sort of thing in time,” thought David Harcourt, as he peered through the dusty plate-glass windows of his third-floor flat. “At present I can appreciate the feelings of a Wyoming steer when he first experiences the restraint of a cattle-truck. Or am I a caged bird? or a menagerie ape? or a mere ass? There is something in the evolution theory, after all. Obviously, one of my respected ancestors is kicking.”

Then, being a cheerful soul, he laughed, and turned from the outer prospect to face the coziness of his new abode. He did not understand yet that in No. 7, Eddystone Mansions, picked almost at haphazard from a house-agent’s list, he had hit upon a residence singularly free from the sort of thing which induced this present fit of the blues. In the first place, owing to a suit in chancery, the “eligible” building-site opposite was vacant, and most of the windows of No. 7 commanded an open space. Secondly, the street itself did not connect two main thoroughfares; hence its quietude was seldom disturbed by vehicles. Thirdly, and, perhaps, most important of all, his neighbors, above, below, and on three sides, were people who had achieved by design what he had done by accident – they had taken up their abode in Eddystone Mansions on account of the peace thus secured in the heart of London.

For London has a stony heart with wooden arteries, through which the stream of life rushes noisily. To ears tuned by the far-flung silence of the prairie this din of traffic was thunderous. To eyes trained by the smooth horizon it was bewildering to see a clear sky overhead and a sun sinking slowly, like a dim Chinese fire-balloon, into a compound of smoke and chimneys. In fact, David Harcourt came to the conclusion that Londoners, as a race, must be purblind and somewhat deaf.

“I wonder if I can stand it?” he commented. “I saw a map of South Africa in a shop window today. It looked wonderfully attractive. Yes, I am beginning to believe there is neither claw nor feather in my composition. ‘Kicking’ is the right word – hoof – ass! Oh! the line of descent is clear.” Then he laughed again, taking a box of cigars off the top of a bookcase, and any one who heard him laugh would have grasped the reason why men soon called him “Davie,” and women smiled when he looked at them.

Dame Nature, aided by his less remote ancestors in the evolutionary tree, had been good to him. It would have needed the worst “environment” ever dreamed of by sociology to make him a degenerate. As it was, a healthy upbringing, a fair public-school education, and the chance that a relation of his owned a Wyoming ranch, joined in fashioning an excellent specimen of lusty and clean-souled young manhood. But that same general wet-nurse, who had intended David to lord it over herds and vast pastures, had complicated matters by throwing a literary kink into the deftly coiled strands of his composition. Thus, at the age of twenty-five, he took more interest in scribbling stories and searching for rimes than in toting up the proceeds of sales at Chicago stock-yards. Worse than that, having oft imagined and striven to depict various ethereal creatures typical of the Spirit of the Dawn, the Fairy of the Dell, or the Goddess of the Mist, he had refused, most emphatically, to wed the elderly rancher’s daughter, his relative, a lady blessed with more wealth and weight than was necessary for any one woman in the world.

So, like many another youngster in the far lands, he heard the voice of London calling through every book and newspaper he read. It was a siren voice, devoid of accent. The Wyoming wooing, too, became a serious matter; hence, like one of the dove-eyed oxen he knew so well, he stampeded

in sudden panic, realized his personal possessions, and, in the vernacular of Sioux Pass, “lit out for the nearest depot, an’ boarded an east-bound train.”

He had now been in England a month, in London a week. From the landing-stage at Liverpool he had gone to visit the country cousins who superintended his childhood and education after the death of his mother, that lady having been stricken down by the hand which killed her soldier husband at Dargai. He found the cousins snug in their Bedfordshire nest. The squire-like head of the household wondered dully why any man should quit a place where he could “get on” to seek a precarious livelihood in a land which was “rapidly going to the dogs.” David certainly received more encouragement from the younger members of the family, especially from a bright-eyed maiden of eighteen, who thought London “awfully jolly,” and vowed a literary career to be “quite too devey for anything.”

But David was level-headed enough to see that the verdict of squire and maid were equally unfavorable.

Then followed a few days in a big hotel. He paid a round of useless calls at the offices of magazines that, to his certain knowledge, printed all sorts of rubbishy articles about cow-boy life, but opposed a phalanx of commissionaires against a man who could not only round up an infuriated herd, but could also describe the feat deftly with a pen. Ultimately, he resolved to lay siege to the citadel which he was unable to storm, and pitch his camp over against the tents of the enemy. He took a furnished flat, “with plate and linen, gas-stove, electric light, bath H. and C.,” for six months.

In thus becoming a Londoner, he encountered the first quaint anomaly of London life. When he drove up to the door of the most fashionable hotel in the West End, and deposited a couple of portmanteaus in a bed-room after signing the register, he was permitted to run a bill for a week, at least, without let or hindrance; but when he offered to pay cash in advance for the flat, he met with a demand for “references.”

The agent was firm but explanatory. “It is not my client, but the over-landlord, who makes that stipulation,” he said. “In fact, the letting is wholly in my hands, as the late tenant is dead; but, for certain reasons, the residuary legatees wish to keep the place in its present condition until the lease expires a year hence.”

“Did the late tenant die there?” asked David.

“Well – yes – fully five months since; there have been other occupants subsequently, and the terms are so reasonable – ”

“What did he, or she, die of?” persisted David. He was accustomed to reading men’s faces, and he had caught a certain fluttering of the agent’s eyelids.

“Nothing to cause any alarm, nothing infectious, I assure you. People – er – die in flats just the same as – er – in private houses.” This, being a joke, had its chuckle.

But the agent also knew men in his own way, and he felt it was unwise to wriggle. David had a steadfast glance. He gave others the impression that he heard and treasured each word they uttered. He was really wondering then why the speaker’s neck was so long and thin – nothing more serious, but, with a disagreeable disclosure lurking in the other’s mind, David’s scrutiny compelled candor.

“The thing is bound to come to your ears sooner or later, Mr. Harcourt; so I may as well tell you now,” said the Londoner. “The late tenant was a lady, a singer of much promise, it was said. For an unknown reason – probably some love affair was disturbing her rest – she – er – took an overdose of a sleeping-draft. She was a very charming woman, quite young, of highest character. It is inconceivable that she should have committed suicide. The affair was an accident, of course, but – er – ”

“A sceptical coroner thought it a murder?”

“Oh, dear, no, nothing of the kind, not a hint of such a thing. Fact is – well, it sounds ridiculous to say with reference to a popular block of flats in the middle of London, but two foolish women – an excitable actress and her servant, your predecessors in the flat – have spread reports as to queer noises. Well, you know, don’t you? the sort of nonsense women will talk.”

“In plain English, they say the place is haunted.”

“Ha, ha! Something in that nature. You have hit it! Something in that nature. Absurd thing!”

“Who knows?” David had a cold disbelief in spooks, but it amused him to see the agent squirm; and he sat tight. Those eyelids fluttered again, and Mr. Dibbin banged a ledger with wrathful fist.

“Look here, Mr. Harcourt,” cried he finally. “This is a five-guineas-a-week flat. I’ll make you a fair offer; take it for six months and I give it you at half price.”

“I laying the ghost at two and a half guineas weekly?”

“Put it any way you like. If a man of sound common-sense like you lives there for a considerable period, the wretched affair will be forgotten; so it is worth the loss to me, and it is a first-class bargain for you.”

“Done!” said David.

The agent was so pleased that his annoyance vanished; he promised to secure a woman whom he knew to look after the new tenant’s housekeeping. She had probably never heard of the Eddystone Mansions tragedy. He would have her in the flat within four days. Meanwhile a charwoman might attend to things generally.

The references having proved satisfactory, David was now passing his first evening in his new abode. He had purchased some books and stationery; his charwoman had left him; and, when the door had closed behind her, he turned from the head of the dead girl in chalks over the mantelpiece to gaze out of the dining-room window, and back again to the sweet face in chalks, to return presently to the window.

It was a Thursday evening in the last week of January. The housekeeper was to arrive on Saturday. David fixed Monday as a good day to start work. In the interim he meant to loaf, dine at noteworthy restaurants, read, and go to theaters.

A man accustomed to guide his movements by the position of mountain-ranges or the stars, and count distances by his days on horseback, is likely to find himself all unhinged within a four-mile radius. David was in the novice stage of acquaintanceship with the magnetic life of the world’s capital. Not yet did the roar of London sing in familiar harmonies; the crunch of the omnibuses, the jingle of the hansoms, made no music in his ears. There was something uncanny in the silence of the millions eddying through the streets. Where all else was clamor, mankind was dumb, save for the shouts of the newsboys, the jabber of bus-conductors, the cries of itinerant venders.

So David, having dressed and gone out, wandered into another restaurant than that which he was aiming for; dawdled over the meal until the first act of the play which he meant to see must have been ended; and decided then upon a music-hall; finally, he strolled back toward Eddystone Mansions as early as eleven.

The elevator, placed in the center of the building, ran from the basement floor; those who used it had to descend a few steps from the entrance and advance along a passage. Harcourt felt unaccountably tired – there is a strain of life in London as on the tops of mountains – so he chose the lift in preference to the stairs.

The hall-porter, who sat within the lift, pondering the entries for the Spring Handicaps, recognized him, and jumped up with a salute.

“Good-evenin’, sir! Fine, frosty night, sir,” said he. They began to ascend. A thought occurred to David. “What was the name of the lady who occupied No. 7?” he asked.

“Miss Ermyn L’Estrange, sir,” was the instant answer.

Even in the wilds of Wyoming one grasps the significance of certain classes of names. For instance, not even the rawest tenderfoot would expect “One-eyed Pete” to turn out to be a parson.

“I mean the lady who died here,” said David.

The porter stopped the lift. “Your floor, sir,” he said. “I’ve only bin in these ’ere flats a matter o’ two months, sir.”

“Good egg!” cried David. “Have a cigar, porter. You are a man to be depended on. But surely there is no harm in telling me the poor girl’s name. It must have appeared in all the newspapers.”

The attendant tickled his head underneath his hat. The new tenant of No. 7 seemed a nice gentleman, anyhow. He looked up and down the stairs, of which two sections were visible from the landing where they stood.

“I ’ave ’eard,” said he, “that a young lydy used ter live ’ere of the nyme of Miss Gwendoline Barnes.”

“Ah, that sounds more like it. Good-night.”

“Good-night, sir.”

Harcourt, fumbling over the intricacies of the lock, heard the rattle of the lift as it reached the basement. On his landing were two doors, his own and that of No. 8; and light shone from his neighbor’s dwelling. That was companionable. The stairs, too, were well lighted.

At last he gave the key the right pressure, and the latch yielded. He passed within and closed the door noiselessly. The electric switch governing the hall-lamp was on the wall beyond the short entrance-passage. He removed his overcoat and hat in the semi-darkness; the sheen coming through the corrugated-glass panels of the outer door did not so much as cast a shadow.

All at once he detected a fragrance of violets, faintly, but distinctly. This was puzzling! He knew that it was almost impossible for that scent to have been there earlier in the evening when he was at home, without being marked by him. Even now not one man in a thousand in London that night would have caught the subtle perfume; but David retained the hunter’s senses. As he stood in suspense, a feeling peeped and grew up within him that the odor carried with it a suggestion of death; his muscles grew taut, ready to fight, to defend himself against this world or the next.

The next instant he smiled, thinking: “Nonsense! It must have been here before. Each time I came in I was smoking; the air is frosty, too.”

He groped inward for the switch, turned on the light, and, without deigning to give another thought to the smell of violets, turned to the left along the main corridor, which was rectangular to the entrance-hall. Passing the drawing-room door, he entered the dining-room. Opposite the latter was the kitchen and servants’ apartments. Around the other end of the main corridor were disposed three bed-rooms and a bath-room. The light he had turned on illuminated entrance and corridor alike.

In the dining-room he found the fire still burning. That was good. The coal-scuttle was not by the fireplace, but in a corner. He went to get a shovelful of coal; and as he stooped, again came to him the fragrance, thrilling, bringing with it a picture of a girl whom he had once seen lying in funereal state, surrounded by flowers, and clothed in the last white robes of earth.

David stabbed the coals with the shovel. “What’s wrong with me?” he half laughed. Yet his eyes sought the crayon drawing of Gwendoline Barnes.

Presently he lit a cigar, unfolded an evening paper which he had bought in the streets, and tried to take an interest in the news of this new-old world into which he was new-born.

But his mind wandered. Without he heard the distant rumble of traffic; hansoms were beginning to arrive in the street beneath; he heard doors slam; the jingling of bells on head-stalls; feet pattering across the pavement; a driver’s tongue-click, and away would jog a horse, to be stirred, perhaps, into sudden frenzy by two shrills of a far-off whistle.

A contrast, these sounds, to the twig-snapping and grass-rustling of a night on the plains! There, lying by the camp-fire embers, he had heard the coyote slinking past in the dark, while the tethered horses suspended their cropping to hearken. Here men and streets made a yet stranger wilderness. He sat over the hearth absorbed by it, already yielding his tribute to the greatness of the outer ocean of life.

But prairie or city, man must sleep. David rose and went to the sideboard for a decanter. A certain graceful slowness characterized his movements. Town-bred men might have been deceived thereby, might reason that he was lethargic, of strapping physique, certainly, yet a man who could be

hit three times before he countered once. It is this error of judgment which leads to accidents when town-dwellers encounter the denizens of the jungle. Harcourt's hand was outstretched for the decanter when he became aware that he was not alone in the flat. The knowledge was derived from neither sight nor sound. It was intuitive, a species of feeling through space, an imperative consciousness that he shared his suite of apartments with another distinct, if intangible, being. Many men might not have had it, but Harcourt had it clearly.

Instantly he was rigid. This time he was weaving no fantasy round a whiff of violets. The sense of nearness to other presences is really inherent in man. Residence in settled communities dulls it, but in David Harcourt it was a living faculty. He stood motionless, waiting for some simple proof of his belief.

The door, veiled by a portière, was not closed, but sufficiently closed to prevent any view of the corridor, which, otherwise, it commanded throughout. The flat was carpeted so thickly that movement was silenced. But David fancied that a woman's dress did brush somewhere against wall or floor. That was enough. He was about to spring forward and pull the door open to see, when he heard, or thought that he heard, the switch of the light outside click, as if it had been carefully raised. And on the instant, without hesitation, he pushed up the switch in the dining-room, and hid himself in darkness. There are wolves, too, in the London desert.

Now, like a bush-cat, he crept to the door, opened it, and peeped out. Certainly the light which he had left burning had been extinguished by some hand; the corridor was in darkness.

Nerves, as commonly understood, did not much enter into Harcourt's scheme of things. But his heart beat quicker. The speed of thought cannot be measured. Many questions, and one doubt, one question, flitted through his brain. He stood in deep gloom; near him, he was convinced, was something in the guise of woman. The face in chalks on the mantelpiece seemed to crowd the dark, the face of the woman who had been hovering on the verge of his consciousness ever since the agent had mentioned her to him.

CHAPTER II

A SIGNATURE WITH A FLOURISH

He was collected enough, though the blood was rather cool in his veins, and there was an odd sensitiveness at the roots of his hair. "Who is there?" he asked in a matter-of-fact voice.

There was no answer, and now he had a feeling that the presence was drawing nearer.

He was unarmed, of course. The inseparable six-shooter of the West lay at the bottom of a cabin-trunk in his bed-room. But his faculties were exerted to an extent hardly possible to men who have not lived close to wild nature. He conceived that his safety demanded the exercise not only of pluck, but of artifice. So he stepped softly to the corner by the entrance to the servants' apartments, and, standing there, sought a loose match in his waistcoat pocket, and held it against the wall, ready to light it at an instant's notice. He did not mean to sacrifice to any chivalric nonsense about sex the opening move in what might prove to be a game of life or death. The woman, or whatever it was, showed by her conduct that she was not there by some mischance capable of explanation; he would determine by her first move, by the first flash of light, how to deal with her; and, if there were others with her, her body would be his shield until he gained the outer door and staircase. And so he waited, with the alert patience of an Indian, poised on the very tip-toe of action.

But as time passed, and there was no further sign of life in the corridor, the situation became over trying. He formulated a fresh plan. Behind him lay the kitchen, with its fire-irons, and thither he ran, seized a poker, then rushing out again, had the corridor, the drawing-room, every room, alight. But he saw no one.

He searched each room with eager haste, but there was nothing out of the common to be discovered. The front door was closed as he had left it. He ran into the exterior lobby, and, keeping an eye on the exit, summoned the elevator. Up it came; but the porter, throwing open the doors, checked his ready salute in his alarm at the sight of "No. 7" facing him poker in hand.

"Have you seen a lady go out?" demanded David.

The man drew back, one hand on his lever and the other on a sliding trellis-work of iron.

"N-no, sir," he stammered.

"Don't be frightened," said David, sharply. "I want you to keep your wits. Some one has been in my flat –"

"Is that so, sir?"

"Where have you been during the last five minutes?"

"Down-stairs, sir."

"At the door?"

"No, sir, in the back, not five yards from the lift, sir." He thought it unnecessary to mention that he had been talking to the housemaid of No. 2, in the basement on her way to the post.

"So any one could have gone out without your knowledge?"

"If they went by the stairs, sir."

"Come in and help me to search my place again."

The porter hung back. The man's sheepish face was almost comical.

"Come, come," said David, "there isn't much to be afraid of now, but I tell you that some one put out the light in the corridor, and I am almost sure that I heard the stir of a woman's dress somewhere."

The lift-attendant's pallor increased.

"That's just it, sir," he murmured. "The others have heard it, too."

"Stuff!" said David, turning on his heel.

Few Britons can stand contempt. The porter followed him.

"That's a man," said David, and they entered the flat. Harcourt shut and bolted the door.

“Now,” he said, “you mount guard in the passage, while I carry on the hunt.”

He would have disturbed a mouse were it in hiding, so complete was his second scrutiny of every nook. At the end of a fruitless quest he gave the porter a whisky and soda.

“I’ll tell you wot, sir,” said the man, “there’s more in this than meets the heye. Miss L’Estrange, she never saw anythink, but she ’eard all sorts o’ rummy noises, an’ twiced she found that all ’er things ’ad bin rummidged. An’ it was no thief, neither. The maid, she acshully sawr the pore lydy. If I may s’y it in confidence, sir, and you wants ter be comfortable, there’s No. 18 in the next block – ”

“I have rented the place for six months, and I shall stay in it,” said David. “Have another? No? Well, here is half a crown. Say nothing about to-night’s adventure. I am going to bed.”

“Lordy! Goin’ ter sleep ’ere alone?” gasped his companion. “I wouldn’t do it for a pension.”

“Yet I am paying for the privilege. However, not a word, remember.”

“Right you are, sir. ’Ope you’ll ’ave a good night’s rest, sir. I’ll be in the lift for another ’arf hour, if you should ’appen to want me.”

Left to himself, David bolted the outer door again, and returned to the dining-room. Obeying an impulse, he jotted down some notes of the occurrence, paying special heed to times and impressions. Then he went to bed, having locked his bed-room door and placed his revolver under his pillow. He imagined that he would remain awake many hours, but, tired and overwrought, he was soon asleep, to be aroused only by the news-agent’s effort to stuff a morning paper into the letter-box. The charwoman was already in the flat, and the sun was shining through the drawn-thread pattern of the blinds.

“The air of London must be drugged,” thought David, looking at his watch. “Asleep at half-past eight of a fine morning!”

Such early-morning reproaches mark the first stage of town life.

After breakfast he went to his bank. He had expended a good deal of money during the past month, but was well equipped in substantials, owned a comfortable home for six months – barring such experiences as those of the preceding night – and found at the bank a good balance to his credit.

“I will hold on until I have left two hundred pounds of my capital and earnings combined,” he decided; “then I shall take the next mail steamer to some place where they raise stock.”

He called at the agent’s office.

“Nothing amiss, I hope?” said Mr. Dibbin.

“Nothing, whatever. I just happened in to get a few pointers about Miss Gwendoline Barnes.”

Harcourt found that in London it was helpful to use Americanisms in his speech. People smiled and became attentive when new idioms tickled their metropolitan ears. But the mention of the dead tenant of No. 7 Eddystone Mansions froze Dibbin’s smile.

“What about her? Poor lady! she might well be forgotten,” he said.

“So soon? I suppose you knew her?”

“Yes. Oh, yes.”

“Nice girl?”

The agent bent over some papers. He seemed to be unable to bear Harcourt’s steady glance.

“She was exceedingly good-looking,” he answered; “tall, elegant figure, head well poised, kind of a face you see in a Romney, high forehead, large eyes, small nose and mouth – sort of artist type.”

“Wore a lot of lace about the throat?”

“What? You know that?”

“Oh, don’t be startled,” said Harcourt. “There is her head in chinks you know, over the mantelpiece – ”

“Ah, true, true.”

“I wonder if it was she or some other lady who was in my flat last night at half-past eleven.”

Dibbin again started, stared at Harcourt, and groaned.

“If it distresses you, I will talk of something else,” said Harcourt.

“Mr. Harcourt, you don’t realize what this means to me. That block of buildings brings me an income. Any more talk of a ghost at No. 7 will cause dissatisfaction, and the proprietary company will employ another agency.”

“Now, let us be reasonable. Even if I hold a séance every night, I shall stick to my contract without troubling a board of directors. I am that kind of man. But, meantime, you should help me with information.”

Dibbin blinked, and dabbed his face with a handkerchief. “Ask me anything you like,” he said.

“When did Miss Barnes die?”

“On July 28 of last year. She lived alone in the flat, employing a non-resident general servant. This woman left the flat at six o’clock on the previous evening. At half-past eight A. M. next day, when she tried to let herself in, the latch appeared to be locked. After some hours’ delay, when nothing could be ascertained of Miss Barnes’s movements, though she was due at a music-master’s that morning and at a rehearsal in the afternoon, the door was forced, and it was discovered that the latch was not only locked but a lower bolt had been shot home, thus proving that the unhappy girl herself had taken this means of showing that her death was self-inflicted.”

“Why do you say that, if a coroner’s jury brought in a verdict of ‘Death from Misadventure’?”

Mr. Dibbin’s eyes shifted again slightly. “That was – er – what one calls – ”

“I see. The verdict was virtually one of suicide?”

“It could not well be otherwise. She had purchased the sleeping-draft herself, but, unfortunately, fortified it with strychnine. How else could the precautions about the door be explained? That is the only means of egress. Each window is sixty feet from the ground.”

“Did she rent the flat herself?”

“No. That is the only really mysterious circumstance about the affair. It was taken on a three years’ agreement, and furnished for her, by a gentleman.”

“Who was he?”

“No one knows. He paid cash in advance for everything.”

David was surprised. “Say, Mr. Dibbin,” he queried, “how about the ‘references’ upon which the over-landlord insisted in my case?”

“What are references worth, anyhow?” cried the agent, testily. “In this instance, when inquired into by the police, they were proved to be bogus. A bundle of bank-notes inspires confidence when you are a buyer, and propose to part with them forthwith.”

“Surely suspicions were aroused?”

The agent coughed discreetly. “This is London, you know. Given a pretty girl, a singer, a minor actress, who leaves her home and lives alone in apartments exceedingly well furnished, what do people think? The man had sufficient reasons to remain unknown, and those reasons were strengthened ten-fold by the scandal of Miss Barnes’s death. She left not even a scrap of paper to identify him, or herself, for that matter. All we had was his signature to the agreement. It is, I believe, a false name. Would you care to see it?”

“Yes,” said David.

Dibbin took some papers from a pigeonhole. Among them David recognized the deed he had signed a few days earlier. A similar document was now spread before him. It bore the scrawl, “Johann Strauss,” with the final S developed into an elaborate flourish.

“A foreigner,” observed David.

“Possibly. The man spoke excellent English.”

“Have you ever heard of Lombroso, Mr. Dibbin?”

“Lombroso? I have seen the name, somewhere in Soho, I think.”

“Not the same,” said David with due gravity. “The man I mean is an Italian criminologist of great note. He lays it down as a principle that a signature of that kind is a sign of moral degeneracy. Keep an eye on those among your clients who use such a flourish, Mr. Dibbin.”

“Good gracious!” cried the agent, casting a glance at the well-stuffed letter-cases of his office. How many moral degenerates had left their sign manual there!

“Two more questions,” went on Harcourt. “Where do Miss Barnes’s relatives reside?”

“Her name was not Barnes,” was the instant answer; “but I am pledged to secrecy in that regard. There is a mother, a most charming woman, and a sister, both certainly most charming ladies, of a family very highly respected. They did not discover the unhappy girl’s death until she was long laid to rest – ”

“Then, why is the flat still in the condition in which Miss Barnes inhabited it?”

“Ah, that is simple enough. Isn’t the agreement valid for nearly a year yet? When that term expires, I shall dispose of the furniture and hand over the proceeds to the young lady’s heirs-at-law, subject to direction, of course, in case the real lessee ever puts in a claim.”

David strolled out into the crowded solitude of the streets, with a vague mind of Gwendoline Barnes and Johann Strauss, two misty personalities veiled under false names. But they so dwelt in his mind that he asked himself if he had fled from the pursuit of a living woman in far Wyoming to be haunted by a dead one in England? Like most strangers in London, he turned to the police for counsel, and told to an inspector on duty at a police-station his tale of the whiff of violets, of the extinguished light in his corridor, and of the real or fancied brush of a woman’s skirt somewhere against wall or carpet. He was listened to with kindness, though, of course, without much faith. However, he learned from the inspector the address of the coroner’s court where the inquest had probably been held; it was near by, and David’s steps led him thither. There he asked some questions at haphazard, without picking up anything of fresh interest; unless it was that “Gwendoline Barnes” lay buried in Kensal Green cemetery.

It was now late in the afternoon. He strolled down Tottenham Court Road into Holborn, ate a deferred luncheon in Oxford-St., and started to saunter back home, shirking a theater matinée, which was irksome since it was the fixed thing on his program. But it struck him half-way home that his charwoman was gone, that the flat was lonely; he got into a cab, saying to the driver: “Kensal Green cemetery!”

Some electric lamps were a-flicker already in the streets. It was nearly the hour at which London roars loudest, when the city begins to pour out its hordes, and vans hurry to their bourne, with blocks in the traffic, and more haste, less speed. When he reached the cemetery the closing time was imminent.

A little snow lay among the graves, through which the grass-tufts showed, making a ground of black-and-white. Some few stars had ventured to peep from the wintry sky. A custodian supplied David with the formal information which he sought. The plot of ground had been bought in perpetuity; it was in a shaded place a good distance from the entrance; an Iona cross, erected by friends, marked the spot, bearing the one word, “Gwendoline.”

“It is late, sir,” said the man. But mighty is the power of the tip, even in cemeteries.

David walked down an avenue of the dead toward the little mound that covered the young actress. He was perhaps twenty yards from it when he heard and almost stopped at the sound of a sob not far away. He looked on this hand and on that, but could see no one. The place, with its silent populace, was more lonesome than the prairie; and a new sense had been steadily growing up in him since half-past eleven of the previous night – the sense of the “other world,” of its possible reality and nearness. There was an odor here, strong enough to his keen nostrils, of flowers, especially of violets, and of the last end of mortal man, a blend of sweet and abhorrent which was to infect his mind for many a day. However, he did not hesitate, but, with slower steps, that made hardly a sound, turned a corner of the path, cleared a clump of trees which had blocked his view, and now saw the grave of Gwendoline, the cross, the chaplet of fresh violets at the foot of the cross, and over the cross a woman weeping.

Weeping bitterly, her face in her hands, she was standing, but her body was bent in grief, and she was all shaken with it, though little sound escaped that lonely passion of pity and heartbreak.

Harcourt at once felt that he had invaded holy ground. He gave himself time to notice only that she was tall, cloaked wholly in black – and he turned, or half-turned, to retire.

But in his haste and embarrassment he let his stick fall from his hand; whereat the young woman started, and they looked at each other.

In an instant Harcourt understood that she was the sister of her whose portrait stood on his mantelpiece; and he felt that he had never seen woman so lovely and gentle.

CHAPTER III

VIOLET

She looked at Harcourt with wide eyes, seeming frightened, in suspense, and ready to fly, because he did not know how his eyes devoured her.

“I am sorry – ” he began, retiring a step.

“What do you want of me?” she asked, staring fixedly at him.

“Nothing,” he said. “Don’t be alarmed; I am merely here by chance.”

“But why have you followed me?”

“No, I have not followed you, I assure you of that. I did not know that you were here, even. I beg you not to be alarmed – ”

“Why, then, are you here?” she persisted.

“This is a public cemetery, you know. I came to see a grave, just as you have – ”

“This grave?”

“How can you possibly guess that,” he asked, “since you have never before seen me, and do not know who I am?”

“You stopped here, did you not?” she asked. “You stopped, and looked strangely at me.”

“Certainly I looked at you,” admitted Harcourt. “I did not realize that I looked ‘strangely.’ However, let me be frank. I did come to see your sister’s grave.”

“My sister!” said she, shrinking, as from the touch of a wound, “how do you know? what interest can you have strong enough to bring you?”

“Not such a very strong interest,” he answered. “I am here merely to fill an idle hour, and because I happen to be occupying the flat in which your sister died. There is that link between her and me; she has moved in the same little home, looked from the same windows, slept in the same room, as I, poor girl.”

She suddenly looked up from the ground, saying: “May I ask how long you have been there?”

“This is only the second day,” he answered with a reassuring smile.

“Your interest in her has been sudden.”

“But her crayon portrait is there over my dining-room mantelpiece, and it is an interesting one. The moment I saw you I understood that you are her sister.”

“You must have known that she had a sister.”

“Why, yes, I knew.”

“Who told you that, pray?”

Her manner had now changed from one of alarm to one of resentment, of mistrust. Her questions leaped from her as from a judge eager to condemn.

“Surely it was no secret that she had a sister,” he said. “The agent happened to mention it in speaking to me of the late tenant, as agents do.”

“Ah, no doubt,” she said half to herself. “You all are ready enough with explanations. Wise as serpents, if not harmless as doves.”

The last words were spoken with a break in her voice and a look that went to Harcourt’s heart. He understood that he was in the presence here of the strange, of a mind touched to wildness by a monstrous grief, and needing delicate handling.

“What I have told you is only the truth,” he said gently.

“Ah, no doubt,” she said again. “But did you know the history of the flat before you went into it?”

“Why, yes.”

“Yet you went. What, then, was your motive?”

“Ah, now, come,” said he. “I can see that you are on a wrong track, and I must try to set things right. Your sister has perhaps been badly treated by some one or more persons, and the notion has occurred to you that I may be one of them, or may have some knowledge even of one of them. But I have been in England only a month; I come from Wyoming, a place at the other end of creation. See if you can’t catch a hint of an accent in my speech. I never saw your sister alive; I am quite a stranger in London. It is not nice to be mistrusted.”

She thought this over gravely, then said with a moment’s openness of heart: “Forgive me, if I give you pain unjustly”; but at once again she changed, muttering stubbornly to herself with a certain vindictiveness: “If I mistrust you, it is not for nothing. I suppose you are all about equally pitiless and deadly. There she lies, low enough, dead, undone – so young – Gwen! was there no pity, no help, not even God to direct, not even God?”

Again she covered her face, and was shaken with grief, while Harcourt, yearning, but not daring to stir a step toward her, stood in pain; till presently she looked up at him sharply with all the former suspiciousness, saying with here a sob and there a sob: “But, after all, words are only words. You can all talk, I dare say; yet you have not been able to give me any valid explanation.”

“Of what?” he asked.

“Of your strange interest in this lady; of your presence here over her grave; of the fact that you chose to occupy the flat, knowing what you know of it. In my mind these are points against you.”

He could not help smiling. “Let me reason with you,” said he earnestly. “Remember that I am not the first person who has occupied the flat since the death of your sister. Did not a Miss L’Estrange have it before me? Well, my motive is precisely the same as hers – I wanted somewhere to live. You did not attribute to Miss L’Estrange any ulterior motive, I think? Then why attribute one to me?”

“I attribute nothing to any one,” she sighed. “I merely ask for an explanation which you seem unable to give.”

“Think, now! Have I not given it? I say that I wanted a flat and took this one. Don’t mistrust me for nothing!”

“Oh, I keep a perfectly open mind. Till things are proved to me, I mistrust no one. But you make your excuses with rather too much earnestness to be convincing; for you would not care what I thought, if you had no motive.”

“My motive is simply a desire to stand well with you,” said David. “You won’t punish me for that?”

Now for the first time she looked squarely at him, her eyes meditating gravely upon his face, as she said: “If you never knew my sister before, it was good of you to come to her grave. You do not look like one of the ruthless ones.”

“No, I hope not. Thank you for saying that,” said David, with his eyes on the ground. He was shy with women. Such a girl as this filled a shrine in his presence.

“And yet, who can ever tell?” she sighed, half to herself, with a weary drop of the hand. “The world seems so hopelessly given over to I don’t know what. One would say that men were compounded of fraud and ill-will, so that one does not know whom to trust, nor even if there is any one to be trusted. You go into the flat without any motive apparently that you can give. You would never have managed it, if I had had my way!”

“Is it against your will that the flat has been let?” asked David.

“That is not your business, you know!” she said, quickly resentful of probing questions.

“I only asked,” said he, “in order to tell you that if it was against your will, you have only to breathe a wish, and I shall find the means to leave it.”

“Well, surely that is kindly said,” she answered. “Forgive me, will you, if I seem unreasonable? Perhaps you do not know what grief is. I will tell you that it is against my will that the flat has been let. My mother’s doing; she insisted because she suspected that I had a tendency to – be drawn toward the spot; she feared that I might – go there; and so it was let. But it is useless, I suppose, for you to

give it up. They would only let it to some one else. And whoever was in it, I should have the same suspicions – ”

That word! “Suspensions of what?” asked David. “I am so much in the dark as to what you mean! If you would explain yourself, then I might be able to help you. Will you let me help you?”

“God knows what the truth is,” she said despondently, staring downward afresh, for, when David looked at her, her eyes fell. “They are all kind enough at first, no doubt, and their kindness ends here, where the grass grows, and the winds moan all night, Gwen. I do not know who or what you are, sir,” she added, with that puzzling sharpness, “or what your motive may be; but – what have you done with my sister’s papers?”

“Papers?” said David. “You surprise me. Are there any papers of your sister’s in the flat?”

She looked keenly at him, with eyelids lowered, seeking to read his mind as though it was an open book.

“Who knows?” said she.

He recalled his harmless conversational dodge with Dibbin. He could have smiled at the thought; but he only answered: “Surely all her papers have been removed?”

“Who knows?” she said again, eyeing him keenly.

“Certainly, I have seen no papers!” he exclaimed.

“Well, you seem honest.”

“I hope so.”

“If you did happen to find any papers in the flat, they would not be your property, would they?”

“Of course not!”

“What would you do with them?”

“I should give them to you.”

“God grant that you are honest!” she sighed. “But how would you find me?”

“If you give me your name and address – ”

“My name is Violet Mordaunt,” she said rapidly, as if venturing against some feeling of rashness. “My home is at Rigsworth in Warwickshire, near Kenilworth; but I am for the present in London, at – ”

Before she could mention her London address they were both aware that a third person was with them. The light carpet of snow would not have deadened the newcomer’s approach to David’s ears, were it not that he was so absorbed in the words, the looks, the merest gestures of his companion. David heard the girl say; “Oh, Mr. Van Hupfeldt!” and a man walked past him to the grave with lifted hat. The man and Violet Mordaunt shook hands. It was now getting dark; but David could still see that the newcomer was an uncommonly handsome person, turned out with faultless elegance from his glossy beaver to the tip of his *verni* boots; of dark, sallow skin; and a black mustache as daintily curled as those mustaches which one sees in the costumers’ windows. David stepped back a little, and stood awkwardly. Beside this West End dandy he felt that he was somewhat of a rough-rider, and, like most young men dowered with both brain and sinew, he fancied that women incline more readily to the trimly dressed popinjay of society. Yet Violet Mordaunt seemed anything but pleased at the interruption.

“I am come to look for you by the request of your mother,” David heard the stranger say. “It was feared that you might be here, and I am to take you home, if you will do me the honor to come in my carriage.”

“But I ought not to be tracked,” said Violet, with the quick petulance which already was music for David.

“There is the question of tea and dinner,” remarked Van Hupfeldt. “If a lady will not eat, she must expect to be plagued.”

“I prefer to walk home.”

“That couldn’t be done; it is too far,” said Van Hupfeldt. “Oh, come, come!” he went on pleadingly, with a fond gaze into her eyes.

A minute afterward they left the grave together. Van Hupfeldt, as he passed David on the path, frowned momentarily; Violet slightly inclined her head.

He looked after them, and admitted to himself that they made a handsome pair, tall, like children of the gods. But three yards away after they had passed him something fell from Violet – a card – whether by accident or design David did not know; but the thought that it might be by design sent a thrill through his frame. He picked it up. It had on it the address of a boarding-house in Porchester Gardens.

He was yet tingling with the hope of meeting her again when a custodian approached. “Must shut the gates, sir,” he said.

And the clang of iron brought David back to the roadway and reality once more.

CHAPTER IV “JOHANN STRAUSS”

On Monday morning David made the acquaintance of the *genus* “housekeeper,” when the woman recommended by Dibbin arrived to take him in hand. He had thought that she would sleep in the place, and had rather looked forward to the human companionship, for nothing is more cut off from the world of the living than a flat, if one is alone in it, especially through the watches of the night. Surely, if there are ghosts in want of undisturbed house-room, every bachelor’s flat must be haunted.

Mrs. Grover, the housekeeper, however, said that “sleeping in” was not the arrangement suggested to her by Dibbin, since there were “the children to be looked after.” David, for his part, would not let it appear that he cared at all; so Mrs. Grover, a busy little fat woman, set to work making things rattle, on an understanding of “sleeping out” and freedom for church services o’ Sunday.

This Monday was David’s appointed day for beginning work. But he did not prosper very well. Plenty of paper, lots of ink, and a new gold pen make no Shakespeare. And it is always hard to begin, even when the mind does not wander. But Violet Mordaunt had brown eyes, so soft, so grave, as those that beam with pity over the dying. She was more beautiful than her sister, whose face, too, David could see through the back of his head. Also, Van Hupfeldt was undoubtedly a more elegant object for the eye of woman to rest upon than David Harcourt.

David wondered if Van Hupfeldt was engaged to Violet. He had certainly spoken to her at the grave with much tender gallantry of manner, as if something was understood between them. And since Violet’s mother sent this man to seek her in his carriage, that must mean that they were on familiar terms; unless, indeed, the mother was pressingly anxious about Violet, could not go herself, and had no one else to win the young woman home from her sister’s grave. Such questionings were the cause of long pauses between the writing of David’s sentences. He was glad when something interrupted – when the bell rang, and Dibbin was ushered in.

“I have looked in for one minute on the subject of that – grate,” said the agent. “Do not disturb yourself, I beg. Well, I see that Mrs. Grover is duly in her place, and you as snug here as a bird in its nest.”

“So snug,” said David, “that I feel stifled. It beats me how people can get so accustomed to this sort of prison as not even to remember any longer that they are in prison. No air, no room to stretch, coal-dust in your very soul, and even at night in your bed!”

“Dash it all, don’t say it.”

“Say what?”

“Were you about to refer to any fresh experiences?”

“Of the ghost? Not a bit of it!” said David. “I have seen, heard, or smelled nothing more of anything.”

“Good, good!” went on Dibbin, softly. “Keep on like that, and we shall pull through yet. I find you are well stocked with violets, meantime.”

David laughed a little uneasily, and said “Yes” – no more. Whiffs of violets in a lonely flat, for which one can’t account, are not altogether pleasant things. David had therefore surrounded himself with violets, in order, when he was greeted with a scent of violets, to be able to say to himself that the scent came from those which he had bought. He had not admitted even to himself what his motive was in buying; nor would he admit it to Mr. Dibbin. There, however, the violets were in several pots, and their fragrance at once drew the notice of a visitor, for the London florist has an art to heighten dull nature in violets and much else.

“Have a seat, Mr. Dibbin,” said David, “and let us talk.”

“I am afraid I must be off,” began the other.

“Well, have a B. and S. any way. I only want to hear from you whatever you can tell me of Mrs. and Miss Violet Mordaunt.”

“What? You have discovered their names?” cried Dibbin with a start.

“I have.”

“Mr. Harcourt, you are a remarkable man,” said the agent with quiet certainty.

“Oh, not too remarkable. But since I do know something, you might let yourself loose as to the rest, as I am interested. You have seen the mother, I know. Have you seen the daughter, too?”

“Several times.”

“Pretty girl, eh? Or what do you think?”

“Well, I am getting an old man now,” said Dibbin; “but I have been young, and I think I can remember how I should have felt at twenty-five in the presence of such a being.”

“Pretty, you think her, eh?”

“Rather!”

“Prettier than Gwendoline? Prettier than her sister?”

“Well, I don’t know so much about that neither – different type – graver, softer in the eye and hair, taller, darker, not so young; but that poor dead girl was something to make the mouth water, too, sir – such a cut diamond! to see her in her full war-paint, turned out like a daisy! – in short, lovely beings, both of ’em, both of ’em.”

“Fairly well fixed, the mother?”

“You mean financially? Oh, I think so. Got a fine place down in Warwickshire, I know – not far from Kenilworth. Good old family, and that sort of thing.”

“But how on earth this man Strauss, more or less an adventurer, I take it, could have got hold of such a girl, to the extent of drawing her from her happy home, and sending her on the stage. He didn’t marry her, Dibbin? He didn’t marry her?”

“How can I say?” asked Dibbin, blinking. “We can all make a shrewd guess; but one can’t be absolutely certain, though the fact of her suicide would seem to be a sort of proof.”

“What do the mother and Miss Mordaunt think of it? Do they assume that she was married? Or do they know enough of the world to guess that she was not? I suppose you don’t know.”

“They know what the world thinks, I’m afraid,” answered Dibbin. “I am sure of that much. Yes, they know, they know. I have been with Mrs. Mordaunt a good many times, for one reason or another. I can tell how she feels, and I’m afraid that she not only guesses what the world thinks, but agrees with the world’s view. On the other hand, I have reason to think that Miss Mordaunt has an obstinate faith in her sister, and neither believes that she died unmarried, nor even that she committed suicide. Well, well, you can’t expect much clear reasoning from a poor sister with a head half turned with grief.”

Dibbin tossed off his brandy, while David paced the room, his hands behind him, with a clouded brow.

“Have they no protector, these women?” he asked. “Isn’t Miss Mordaunt engaged?”

“I fancy not,” said the agent. “In fact, I think I can say undoubtedly not. She was not engaged before the death of her sister, I am certain; and this disaster of her sister appears to have inspired the poor girl with such a detestation of the whole male sex – ”

“Do you happen to know who a certain Mr. Van Hupfeldt is?” asked David.

“Van Hupfeldt, Van Hupfeldt? No, never heard of him. What of him?”

“He seems to be a pretty close friend of the Mordaunts, if I am right.”

“He may be a close friend, and yet a new one,” said Dibbin, “as sometimes happens. Never heard of him, although I thought that I knew the names of most of Mrs. Mordaunt’s connections, either through herself or her solicitors.”

“But to go back to this Strauss,” said David. “Do you mean to say that neither the mother nor Miss Mordaunt ever once saw him?”

“Not once that they know of.”

“Then, how did he get hold of Gwendoline?”

“That’s the question. It is suspected that he met her in the hunting-field, persuaded her to meet him secretly, and finally won her to fly from home. To me this is quite credible; for I’ve seen Johann Strauss twice, and each time have been struck with the thought how fascinating this man must be in the eyes of a young woman!”

“What was he like, then, this Mr. Johann Strauss of the flourishy signature?”

“A most handsome young man,” said Mr. Dibbin, impressively; “hard to describe exactly. Came from the States, I think, or had lived there – had just a touch of the talk, perhaps – of Dutch extraction, I take it. Handsome fellow, handsome fellow; the kind of man girls throw themselves over precipices after: teeth flashing between the wings of his black mustache – tall, thin man, always most elegantly dressed – dark skin – sallow – ”

At that word “sallow,” David started, the description of Johann Strauss had so strangely reminded him of Van Hupfeldt! But the thought that the cause of the one sister’s undoing should be friendly with the other sister, paying his court to her over the grave of the ill-fated dead, was too wild to find for itself a place all at once in the mind.

David frowned down the notion of such a horror. He told himself that it was dark when he had seen Van Hupfeldt, that there were many tall men with white teeth and black mustaches, and sallow, dark skins. If he had felt some sort of antipathy to Van Hupfeldt at first sight, this was no proof of evil in Van Hupfeldt’s nature, but a proof only, perhaps, of David’s capabilities of being jealous of one more favored than himself by nature as he fancied – and by Violet Mordaunt, which was the notion that rankled.

And yet he tingled. Dibbin had said that this Van Hupfeldt might be “a new friend – one who had become a friend since the death of Gwendoline.”

David paced the room with slow steps, and while Dibbin talked on of one or another of the people who had known Gwendoline Mordaunt in the flesh, vowed to himself that he would take this matter on his shoulders and see it through.

“Speaking of the Miss L’Estrange who was in the flat before me,” said he; “how long did she stay in it?”

“Three months, nearly,” answered Dibbin, “and then all of a sudden she wouldn’t stay another day. And I had no means of forcing her to do so either.”

“What? Did the ghost suddenly get worse?”

“I couldn’t quite tell you what happened. Miss Ermyn L’Estrange isn’t a lady altogether easy to understand when in an excited condition. Suffice it to say, she wouldn’t stay another hour, and went off with a noise like a catherine-wheel.”

“Quite so. But I say, Dibbin, can you give me the address of the lady?”

“With pleasure,” said the agent, in whom brandy and soda acted as a solvent. “I am a man, Mr. Harcourt, with three hundred and odd addresses in my head, I do assure you. But, then, Miss L’Estrange is a bird of passage – ”

“All right, just write down the address that you know; and there is one other address that I want, Mr. Dibbin – that of the girl who acted as help to Miss Gwendoline Mordaunt.”

Dibbin had known this address also, and with the promise to see if he could find it among his papers – for it was he who had recommended the girl – went away. He was hardly gone when Harcourt, who did not let the grass grow under his feet, put on hat and coat, and started out to call upon Miss Ermyn L’Estrange.

CHAPTER V VON OR VAN?

The address of Miss L'Estrange, given to David by Dibbin, was in King's Road, Chelsea, and thither David set out, thinking in his cab of that word "papers," of the oddness of Violet's question at the grave: "What have you done with my sister's papers?"

Whatever papers might be meant, it was hardly to be supposed that Miss L'Estrange knew aught of them, yet he hoped for information from her, since a tenant next in order is always likely to have gathered many bits of knowledge about the former tenant.

As for his right to pry and interfere, that, he assured himself, was a settled thing. Going over in his mind Violet's words and manner in the cemetery, he came to the conclusion that she was half inclined to suspect that he was her sister's destroyer, who had now taken the flat for some vaguely evil reason, perhaps to seek, or to guard from her, those very papers for which she so craved. Had she never heard, he wondered, that her sister's evil mate was a man with a black mustache and pale, dark skin? Perhaps, if she ever had, she would suspect – some one else than he! That would be strange enough, her suspicion of the innocent, if at the same time the guilty was at her side, unsuspected! But David tried to banish from his mind the notion that Van Hupfeldt might possibly be Johann Strauss.

At Chelsea he was admitted to a flat as cozily dim as his own, but much more frivolously crowded with knickknacks; nor had he long to wait until Miss L'Estrange, all hair and paint, dashed in. It was near one in the afternoon, but she had an early-morning look of rawness and *déshabille*, as if she had just risen from bed. Her toilet was incomplete. Her face had the crude look of a water-color daub by a school-girl; her whirl of red hair swept like a turban about her head.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

"I am sorry – " began David.

"Cut the excuses," said Miss Ermyn L'Estrange. She had a reputation for brusqueness which passed for wit in her set.

"I am the occupant of the flat in Eddystone Mansions which you recently left."

"I hope you like it."

"I like it fairly well, as a flat."

"What? Not seen anything?"

"No. Anything of what nature?"

"Anything ghostified?" she snapped, sitting with her chin on her palm, her face poked forward close to David's, while the sleeve fell away from her thin forearm. She had decided that he was an interesting young man.

"I have seen no ghost," he said. "I don't believe I ever shall see one."

"There are ghosts," she said; "so it's no good saying there are not, for my old Granny Price has been chased by one, and there's been a ghost in that very flat. My servant Jenny saw it with her own eyes."

"It is always some one else's eyes which see the invisible," said David.

"Jenny's eyes are not some one else's, they are her own. She saw it, I tell you, but perhaps you are one of those people who cower under the sheets all night for fright, and in the daytime swear that there are no ghosts."

"What? You know so much of me already?"

"Oh, I know my man the moment I lay eyes on him, as a rule. You're from Australia – I can tell your twang – and you have come to England to look for a wife. Can't very well get along without us, after all, can you?"

"There is some truth in that. What a pity you didn't see the ghost yourself!"

“I heard it; I smelled it.”

“Really? What did it smell of? Brimstone?”

“Violets!”

David started, not wholly because he thought Miss L’Estrange would be flattered by this tribute to her forcible style.

“And I’m not one of your fanciful ones either,” she went on, smirking at the effect she had made.

“How often did this thing happen to you?”

“Twice in three months.”

“Daytime? Night-time?”

“Dead of night. The first time about two in the morning, the second time about three.”

“To me this is naturally fascinating,” said David. “Do tell me – ”

“The first time, I was asleep in that front bed-room, when I suddenly found myself awake – couldn’t tell why, for I hadn’t long been in bed, and was tired. I found myself listening, heard some creaks about, nothing more than you can generally hear in a house in the dead of night, and I was thinking of going to sleep again, when all at once I seemed to scent violets somewhere. I wasn’t certain at first, but the notion grew, and if it had been brimstone, as you said, I couldn’t have been so overcome as I was – something so solemn and deathly in that fume of violets visiting anybody in the dark in that fashion. As I knew that Gwen Barnes, who poisoned herself in that very room, was fond of violets – for I had seen her both on and off the stage several times – you can guess whether I felt rummy or not. Pop went my little head under the bed-clothes, for I’ll stand up to any living girl you care to mention, and send her home all the worse for it; but the dead have an unfair advantage, anyhow. The next minute I heard a bang – it sounded to me like the lid of one of my trunks dropping down – and this was followed by a scream. The scream did for me – I was upset for weeks. It was Jenny who had screamed; but, like a fool, I thought it was the ghost – I don’t know what I thought; in fact, I just heard the scream, and lay me down and d’eed. When I came to myself, there was Jenny shivering at my side, with the light turned on, saying that a tall woman had been in the flat – ”

“Was Gwendoline Barnes in the flesh a tall girl?” asked David.

“Pretty tall; one would have called her tall.”

“And Jenny was certain? She had really seen a woman?”

“Quite certain.”

“In the light?”

“No, in the dark.”

“Ah, that’s not so good. And as to your trunk, had you left it locked?”

“No, I don’t think. It’s certain anyway that something or somebody was at it that night; for next day I found the things rummaged.”

“Sure now? I don’t imagine that you are very tidy.”

“The cheek! I tell you the things were rummaged.”

“And nothing stolen?”

“Ghosts are not thieves. They only come back to pretend to themselves that they are still living in the old scenes, and that their bit of a fling is not all over forever. I can well imagine how the poor things feel, can’t you? Of course, nothing was stolen, though I did miss something out of the trunk a day or two afterward – ”

“What was that?”

“My agreement with the theater. Couldn’t find it high or low in the place; though I was pretty sure that I had put it into that very trunk. Three weeks after it had disappeared, lo and behold! my agreement comes to me one morning through the post! No letter with it, not a word of explanation, just the blessed agreement of itself staring me in the face, like a miracle. Now, I’m rather off miracles – aren’t you? So I said to myself – ”

“But stay, what was the postmark on the envelope which brought you back this agreement?” asked David.

“Just London, and a six-barred gate.”

“You couldn’t perhaps find that envelope now?”

“Now, do I look like anybody who ties up old envelopes in packets? Or do you take me for an old maid? Because, if you do, just let me know.”

“Certainly not an old one,” said David. “But how as to the second visit of the ghost?”

“The second time it was about three in the morning. Jenny did not see her then; but we both woke up at the same moment without any apparent cause – we were sleeping together, you may bet your last dollar on that! – and we both smelled something like violets, and we heard a sound, too, like the top of the piano being shut down. ‘Miss L’Estrange,’ Jenny whispered into my ear, ‘there’s something in the drawing-room.’ – ‘Go, Jenny,’ I whispered to her, ‘and see what it is.’ – ‘You go, Miss L’Estrange,’ Jenny whispered to me, ‘you being the mistress; and I’ll come after.’ – ‘But you are the servant,’ I whispered to her, ‘you go.’ – ‘No, Miss L’Estrange,’ she whispered back, ‘you are braver than me, you go, and I’ll come after.’ – ‘No, you know that you are much the bravest, Jenny, so don’t be such a coward,’ I whispered to her, ‘and I’ll come after.’ It was like a farcical comedy. At this we heard something like a chair falling upon the carpet in the drawing-room, and now we were in such a state of fright that we couldn’t move our hands, to say nothing of our feet. Then a long time passed, we didn’t hear anything more; so, after about half an hour of it, Jenny and I together made a rush for the switch, and got out into the drawing-room. Then again we scented a faint something like violets; but nobody was there, and we neither saw nor heard anything more.”

“So, after that second experience, I suppose, you would stay no longer in the flat?” said David.

“I did stay a few days. It wasn’t altogether the ghost that drove me away, though that may have had something to do with it, but the cheek and the meanness of the man who put me there.”

“Of the – Ah, I beg pardon,” said David, with lowered lids.

“Oh, this isn’t a Sunday school. If you hem and haw at me I shall show you the short cut to the front door. It was a fair business arrangement; so don’t you think anything else. The man was named Strauss, and whether his motive in putting me there was quite square or not, don’t let him suppose that I am going to screen him, for I’m not. I am straight with those that are straight with me; but those that are up to mean tricks, let them beware of the color of my hair – ”

“So you were put into the flat!”

“Didn’t I go into it rent-free? Stop, I will tell you, and you shall judge for yourself whether I have been shabbily used or not. One night last August I was introduced by a friend to a gentleman named Strauss – dark, pale man, pretty fetching, but not my style. However, next day he turned up at my place – I was living then in Great Titchfield-St.; and what do you think my man wanted? To put me into the Eddystone Mansions flat for six months at his expense, on the condition that I or Jenny would devote some time every day to searching for papers among the furniture. He said that a chum of his had once occupied the flat, and had left in it one or more documents, carefully hidden somewhere, which were of the utmost importance; I was to search for these, and give them to him. Well, I didn’t half like it, for I thought he was wicked. So I asked him why he didn’t take the flat, and search for the papers himself at his leisure? Well, he made some excuse or other, and at last, as he talked sanely enough, I struck hands over it – rent free, six months, an hour’s search each day; and Jenny and I moved in.”

“Did you search an hour each day?” asked David with a laugh.

“Hardly likely!” grinned Miss Ermyn L’Estrange. “I can see myself searching a small flat day after day for I didn’t know what, like a goose. There was nowhere to search. I did look about a little the first day; but, not finding any documents, I thought to myself, ‘Here endeth.’ Of course, I had to tell him that I was busy searching, for that man pestered me so, you wouldn’t believe. He never actually came to the flat, for some reason or other; but night after night, when the theaters opened

in September, there he was, wanting to know if I had found anything, if I had probed the cushions with hat-pins, if I had looked under the carpets, and the rest of it. At last I began to treat him a bit off-handedly, I admit, and before the third month was up, he says to me one night that if I didn't find something at once, he would have to cut off the allowance for the rent. I told him that he had put me there for six months, that I had made all arrangements, and that he was an idiot. If he didn't know his mind, I knew mine. Oh, we had a fine set-to, I can tell you. He said that, since I had proved useless to him, I should have to pay my own rent, so, what with ghosts and all, I wouldn't stay in the place another two days; and in going I gave it hot to that Mr. Dibbin, too – ”

“What had Dibbin done?” asked David.

“He hadn't done anything; but still I gave him a piece of my mind, for I was wild.”

“Poor Dibbin! he is still shaky from it. He has mentioned to me that you went off with a noise like a catherine-wheel. But you never found any papers at all in the flat?”

“No – except one, or rather two, and those Strauss never got.”

“How was that?”

“Because I didn't find them till the day after we had had the row, when my trunks were ready packed to go, and I wasn't going to give them to him then, for his cheek. Besides, they didn't concern him; they were only a marriage certificate, and the certificate of a birth which fell out of a picture.”

David sat up, saying: “How do you mean, ‘fell out of a picture’?”

“As we were carrying out the trunks, there was a bump, and one of the pictures in the corridor came down. The boards at the back of it must have been loose, for they fell out, and among them was an envelope with the two certificates in it.”

“Now, I bless my stars that ever I came to you,” said David. “This may be the very thing I want.”

“How many of you are after papers in that flat, I should like to know. First there was Strauss, then that young lady, and now you – ”

“Which young lady?” asked David.

“Why, I hadn't been in the flat three days when a young lady, a tall, dark girl came, and practically insulted me. She wanted to know what was my motive for coming into the flat, and if I was the agent of any one, and if I meant to purloin any papers which I might find. Well, I'm not one for taking much sauce from another woman; for I've got red hair, as you can see for yourself, but somehow I couldn't be hard on her, she had had some big trouble, I could tell – a bit touched somewhere, too, I thought, suspicious as a bird, sick at the very name of Strauss! She had dropped to it all right that I was there to serve Strauss's ends, and she went on her bended knees to me, asking me not to do it. I couldn't quite make out what it was all about, or what there was between her and Strauss, for she wouldn't tell me. It was something pretty strong, for when I told Strauss about her visit, I thought the man was going to drop dead. Her name was Violet Mordaunt. I remember it; for Mordaunt was also the family name of the woman in the marriage certificate – ”

“Why did you not send this marriage certificate to Violet Mordaunt?” asked David, “since you did not give it to Strauss?”

“I would have sent it to her, I'm sure, but I didn't have her address. She did leave me an address that day she came; but, to tell the truth, I didn't take the whole to-do about papers, papers, papers, seriously, and Lord knows what became of the address – ”

“Oh, good heavens, how selfish and careless!” groaned David.

“Look here, young man, you come from Australia?” cried Miss L'Estrange, bouncing up from her chair. “In London people look after themselves and mind their own business, you see. We are as kind-hearted here as they are anywhere else, but we haven't the same leisure to be kind. I tell you that if I had had the young lady's address I should very likely have sent her the papers; but I didn't, and that's all; so don't preach.”

“Well, better late than never,” said David. “Just give me the papers now, if you will, for I know her address – ”

“But where are the papers?” said Miss L’Estrange. “You don’t suppose that I keep papers – ”

“Don’t say that you have lost them!” pleaded David.

“I haven’t the faintest idea where the papers are! I was in a regular flurry, just moving out of the place; I had no interest in the papers. I glanced at them to see what they were, and, as far as I can remember, I threw them on the floor, or handed them to Jenny. It’s just possible that they are here now; but I shouldn’t fancy so. I’ll ask Jenny when she comes in.”

“Ah, you little know how much misery you might have saved a poor girl, if you had been a little more thoughtful,” growled David, and his wrath seemed to cow the woman somewhat. “This name of Mordaunt was the maiden name of your predecessor in the flat, who took the name of Gwendoline Barnes; Violet Mordaunt is her sister; Gwendoline is believed by all the world, including her own mother, to have been led astray, and the certificates which you handled so lightly would have cleared her name and lifted a world of grief from her poor sister’s heart.”

“Good Lord! How was I to know all that?” shrilled Miss L’Estrange, staring. “So it was Strauss that ruined Gwen Barnes? And this Violet Mordaunt was Gwen Barnes’s sister? Now you say it, they were something alike. I always put down that Strauss for a rotter – ”

“But why, since he married her?”

“Married whom? Strauss wasn’t the husband’s name on the marriage-certificate! Gwendoline Mordaunt was one, and the other, as far as I can recollect, was a foreign name, von Somebody or other – ”

“Von!” David also sprang to his feet. “Are you sure? or might it have been ‘van’? Oh, try now to remember! One is German, the other Dutch!”

“It might have been ‘van,’ or it might have been ‘von’ – you can’t expect one to remember after all these names. But I remember the woman’s name, Gwendoline Mordaunt, quite well, because the Gwendoline reminded me of Gwen Barnes, and the Mordaunt reminded me of Miss Violet Mordaunt; and the husband’s name, I know, was von or van Something, and so was the name of the child – a boy it was – I think its name was Henry – ”

“Hupfeldt?” suggested David, suddenly.

“Hupfeldt? It might have been Hupfeldt. I really can’t say now. I’ll ask Jenny.”

“At any rate,” said David, calming himself with a great effort, “we have that certain fact that Gwendoline Mordaunt was a wife. Good, to begin; most excellent, to begin. You can’t say where the marriage took place? No other information at all.”

“I’m sorry, since it is so mighty important, but I’m afraid not. However, I’ll do my best for you. I’ll see if I or Jenny can remember anything. When we left the flat, there was a great overflowing with my torn-up letters, and Jenny may have thrown the certificates on that grate, or the bits of them, or she may have dropped them on the floor, or, just possibly, she put them in her pocket and may have them still. She will be here in less than half an hour, so, if I may offer you a cigar, and a whisky and soda – ”

“You are very good. I won’t stay now, as I am in a hurry to do something. But, if I may come back – may I?”

“Modest request! As often as you please, and welcome. This is Liberty Hall, you know.”

“Thank you, I will, then. There is one thing I have to ask you. Could you point out to me Mr. Johann Strauss?”

“Of course, if I saw him. But I never knew where he lived, and have never seen him since the day I left the flat.”

“Well, that may come in time,” said David, putting out his hand; “and meantime you will do your best for me in finding out about the two certificates. Thank you for all your goodness, and I will be here again soon.”

“Good-by,” said Miss L’Estrange, “and I do hope you mean to give that Strauss a sound hiding some day. You look as if you could do it with one hand and pick your teeth with the other. It would be no more than he deserves.”

David ran down the flight after flight of stairs quicker than he had gone up.

“Now,” he thought to himself as he left the building with eager steps, “is my chance to give some joy!” Going into the first paper-shop, he wrote: “A well-wisher of Miss Mordaunt desires to assure her that it is a pretty certain thing that her sister Gwendoline was a duly wedded wife; the proofs of this statement may sooner or later be forthcoming.”

He put no signature to it, made haste to post it, and drove back to Eddystone Mansions. It had been wiser had he flattered Miss Ermyn L’Estrange by returning to her.

CHAPTER VI

THE WORD OF JOY

Not many guests were for the moment at No. 60A, Porchester Gardens, so that the Mordaunts, mother and daughter, who always stopped there during their visits to London, could almost persuade themselves that they were in their own home. In the good old days Mr. and Mrs. Harrod, the proprietors, had been accustomed to receive three Mordaunts to their hospitality, when Gwen, the bright and petted, came with Violet and Mrs. Mordaunt. Only two now visited London, a grayer mother, a dumber sister; and though the Harrods asked no questions, made no prying into the heart's secret, nor uttered any word of sympathy, they well divined that the feet of the angel of sorrow had passed that way, and expressed their pity silently by a hundred little ministries.

Violet and Mrs. Mordaunt were having tea in the drawing-room on the day of David Harcourt's visit to Miss L'Estrange, when the postman's knock sounded, and a minute later Mrs. Harrod herself came in, saying:

"A letter for Miss Violet, and it contains good news; for I dreamt of soldiers last night, and so sure as I dream of soldiers, so sure are there letters with good news."

"The good news will all be in the other people's letters, I'm afraid," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "Good news is like wealth, Mrs. Harrod, unequally divided; to some of us it never comes."

"Oh, come now!" cried the hearty Mrs. Harrod. "Never say die, say I! There's good and bad in store for everybody; and care killed a cat, after all. Don't I tell you I dreamt of soldiers? And so sure –"

"It is that good heart of yours which makes you dream of soldiers. To bring healing to some lots in this world, you would have need to dream of generals and field-m Marshals –"

"Some more tea, mother?" interposed Violet. She shrank from the threatened talk of human ills. Mrs. Mordaunt, most excellent woman, was not adverse to pouring some of her grief into a sympathetic ear.

"Well, you will tell me at dinner whether I was right," cried Mrs. Harrod, and was gone.

She had placed the letter on the tray, and there it still lay unopened. Violet handed the tea to her mother. The room was empty, save for them, the few other guests being out, and in the house reigned perfect quietude, a peacefulness accentuated by the wheels and hoofs passing in the dusk outside.

"Vi," said Mrs. Mordaunt, "those flowers at your waist are almost faded; I think you might give up violets in London. They don't seem to me the same thing as in the country; but at least let them be fresh. Mr. Van Hupfeldt will be here presently –"

"How do you know, mother?"

"He mentioned, dear, that he would be coming."

"But why, after all, every day?"

"Is that displeasing to you, dear?"

"It seems superfluous."

"That compels me to suggest to you, Vi, that his coming to-day is of some special importance."

"And why, pray?"

"Can you not guess?"

The girl stood up; she walked restlessly to the window and back before she cried: "Mother! mother! Have you not had experience enough of the curse of men?" Her great eyes rested gloomily on the older woman's face. There was a beautiful heredity marked in the pair; but seldom have more diverse souls been pent within similar tabernacles.

"Don't speak so recklessly, dear," said the old lady. "You had the best of fathers. There are good men, too, in the world, and when a man is good, he is better than any woman."

“It may be so. God knows. I hope it is so. But is Mr. Van Hupfeldt one of these fabulous beings? It has not struck me – ”

“Please, Violet, don’t imagine that I desire to influence you in the slightest degree,” said Mrs. Mordaunt. “I merely wish to hint to you what, in fact, you can’t be blind to, that Mr. Van Hupfeldt’s inclinations are fixed on you, and that he will probably give expression to them to-day. On Saturday he approached me on the subject, beseeching me with great warmth to hold out to him hopes which, of course, I could not hold out, yet which I did not feel authorized wholly to destroy. At any rate, I was persuaded upon to promise him a fair field for his enterprise to-day.”

“Oh, mother! Really, this is irritating of you!” cried Violet, letting fall with a clatter a spoon she had lifted off the table.

“But I don’t see it. Why so?”

“It sounds so light-minded, at your years!”

“As if I was one of the two parties concerned!” laughed Mrs. Mordaunt with a certain maternal complacency. She knew, or thought she knew, her wayward daughter. With a little tact this most suitable marriage could be arranged.

“No,” admitted Violet, angry at the weakness of her defense, “but you allow yourself to be drawn into having a hand in what is called a love-affair because it is an event; and it was not fair to Mr. Van Hupfeldt, since you knew quite well beforehand what would be the result.”

“Well, well,” purred Mrs. Mordaunt good-humoredly, looking down to stroke the toy Pom on her lap, a nervous little animal which one might have wrapped in a handkerchief, “I will say no more. If the thought of allowing myself to be bereft of you has occurred to me, you understand for whose good I gave it a moment’s entertainment. Marriage, of course, is a change of life, and for girls whose minds have been overshadowed by sorrow, it may not be altogether a bad thing.”

“But there is usually some selection in the matter, I think, some pretense of preference for one above others. Just marriage by itself hardly seems a goal.”

“Yes, love is good, dear – none knows better than I – but better marriage without love, than love without marriage,” muttered Mrs. Mordaunt, suddenly shaken.

“And better still life with neither, it seems to me; and best of all, the end of life, and good-by to it all, mother.”

“Vi, Vi! sh-h-h, dear!” Mrs. Mordaunt was so genuinely shocked that her daughter swung the talk back into its personal channel.

“Still, I will not see this man. Tell him when he comes that I will not see him. He has held out to me hopes which he has done nothing to fulfil.”

“What hopes, dear?”

“You may as well know: hopes as to – Gwen, then.”

“Tell me.”

“Twice he has hinted to me that he knows some one who knew the man named Strauss; that he would succeed in finding this Strauss; that all was quite, quite well; and that he did not despair of finding some trace of the whereabouts of the child. He had no right to say such things, if he had not some real grounds for believing that he would do as he hinted. It is two months ago now since he last spoke in this way down at Rigsworth, and he has not referred to it since, though he has several times been alone with me. I believe that he only said it because he fancied that whatever man held out such hopes to me would be likely to find me pliant to his wishes. I won’t see him to-day.”

“Oh, he said that, did he – that all was quite well, that he might be able to find... But he must have meant it, since he said it.”

“I doubt now that he meant it. Who knows whether he is not in league with the enemies of her who was cast helpless to the wolves – ”

“Violet, for shame to let such words escape your lips! Mr. Van Hupfeldt – a man of standing and position, presented to us by Lord Vanstone, and moving in the highest circles! Oh, beware, dear,

lest sorrow warp the gentler instincts of your nature, and by the sadness of the countenance the heart be not made better! Grief is evil, then, indeed when it does not win us into a sweeter mood of charity. I fear, Vi, that you have lost something of your old amiableness since the blow.”

“Forgive me, darling!” sobbed Violet, dropping quickly by the side of her mother’s chair, with her eyes swimming. “It has gone deep, this wild wrong. Forgive, forgive! I wish to feel and do right; but I can’t. It is the fault of the iron world.”

“No, don’t cry, sweet,” murmured Mrs. Mordaunt, kissing her warmly. “It will come right. We must repress all feelings of rebellion and rancor, and pray often, and in the end your good heart will find its way back to its natural sweetness and peace. I myself too frequently give way, I’m afraid; the ways of Providence are so inscrutably hard. We must bear up, and wait, and wait, till ‘harsh grief pass in time into far music.’ As for Mr. Van Hupfeldt, there seems no reason why you should see him, if you do not wish. But you haven’t opened your letter – see if it is from Rigsworth, dear.”

Violet now rose from her mother’s side, and tore open the letter. She did not know the handwriting, and as her eyes fell on the words she started. They were these: “A well-wisher of Miss Mordaunt desires to assure her that it is a pretty certain thing that her sister Gwendoline was a duly wedded wife. The proofs of this statement may sooner or later be forthcoming.”

Mrs. Mordaunt’s observant glance, noting the changes of color and expression going on in her daughter’s face, saw that the news was really as Mrs. Harrod had dreamed. Violet’s eyes were raised in silent thanksgiving, and, without saying anything, she dropped the note on her mother’s lap. Going to one of the windows, she stood there with tremulous lips. She looked into the dim street through a mist of tears. For the moment, speech was impossible.

There was silence in the room for some minutes. Then Mrs. Mordaunt called out: “Vi, dear, come here.”

Violet ran from the window with a buoyancy of dancing in her gait. “Heaven forgive us, mother, for having wronged Gwendoline in our thoughts!” said she, with her cheek against her mother’s.

“Heaven forgive me rather,” said Mrs. Mordaunt. “You, dear, have never for a moment lost faith and hope. But still, Vi – ”

“Well?”

“Let me warn you, dear, against too much confidence in this note. The disappointment may be all the more terrible. Why could not the sender sign his name? Of course, we can guess from whom it comes; but does not the fact that he does not sign his name show a lack of confidence in his own statements?”

“Oh, I think not,” cried Violet, flushed with enthusiasm, “if it is from whom you think; but, who, then, do you think sent it?”

“It can only be from Mr. Van Hupfeldt, child, I take it.”

The girl was seemingly taken aback for an instant; but her thoughts bubbled forth again rapidly: “Well, his motive for not signing his name may simply be a very proper reserve, not a lack of confidence in his statements. Remember, dearest, that he is coming here to-day with a certain purpose with regard to me, and if he had signed his name, it would have set up a sort of claim to my favor as a reward for services done. Oh, now I come to think of it, I call this most generous of the man!”

“That’s splendid, that’s right,” said Mrs. Mordaunt. “Your instincts always scent out nobility where any clue to it can be found. I am glad that you take it in that way. But young people are enthusiastic and prone to jump to conclusions. As we grow older we acquire a certain habit of second thoughts. In this instance, no doubt, you are right; he could have had no other motive – unless – I suppose that there is no one else from whom the note may possibly have come?”

At this question Violet stood startled a moment, panting a little, and somehow there passed like a mist through her consciousness a memory, a half-thought, of David Harcourt.

“From whom else could it have come?” she asked her mother breathlessly.

“The handwriting is not Mr. Van Hupfeldt’s,” said Mrs. Mordaunt. “This is a less ornate hand, you notice.”

Violet took the note again, and knit her pretty brows over it. “No,” she said, “this is a much stronger, cleaner hand – I don’t know who else – ”

“Yet, if Mr. Van Hupfeldt wished to be generous in the sense of which you spoke,” said her mother, “if it was his purpose to conceal his part in the matter, he would naturally ask some one else to write for him. And, since we can imagine no one but him – There! that, I think, is his rap at the door. Tell me now, Vi, if you will see him alone?”

“Yes, mother, I will see him.”

“Bless you for your good and grateful heart! Well, then, after a little I will go out. But, oh, pray, do nothing precipitate in an impulse of joy and mere gratitude, child! If I am bereft of my two children, I am bereft indeed. Do find happiness, my darling. That first and above all.”

At that moment Mrs. Harrod looked in, with her pleasant smile, saying: “Mr. Van Hupfeldt is here. Well, did the letter contain good news?”

“You dear!” murmured Violet, running to kiss her, “I must wear red before you, so that you may dream of soldiers every, every night!”

The steps of Van Hupfeldt were heard coming up the stairs.

CHAPTER VII

VIOLET'S CONDITIONS

Van Hupfeldt bowed himself into the drawing-room. His eyes wandering weighingly with a quick underlook which they had from the face of Violet to that of Mrs. Mordaunt, and back again to Violet. He saw what pleased him, smiles on both faces, and his brow lightened. He was a man of about forty, with a little gray in his straight hair, which, parted in the middle, inclosed the forehead in a perfect arch. He stood upon thin legs as straight as poles. His hands and feet were small. His features as regular and chiseled as a statue's; he looked more Spanish than Dutch.

Mrs. Mordaunt received him with a pressure of the hand in which was conveyed a message of sympathy and encouragement, and Van Hupfeldt bent toward Violet with a murmur:

“I am glad to see you looking so bright to-day.”

“You observe quickly,” said Violet.

“Some things,” answered Van Hupfeldt.

“Our good hostess has been dreaming of soldiers, Mr. Van Hupfeldt,” put in Mrs. Mordaunt, lightly, “and it seems that such a dream always brings good news to her guests; so my daughter is feeling the effects of it.”

Van Hupfeldt looked puzzled, and asked: “Has Miss Violet heard that her orchids are flourishing in her absence, or that those two swans I promised have arrived?”

Violet and Mrs. Mordaunt exchanged glances of approval of this speech, the latter saying: “There are brighter things in the world than orchids, thank Heaven! and a kind deed may be more white and graceful than all the swans of Dale Manor.”

Van Hupfeldt looked still more puzzled – a look which was noted by the women, but was attributed by them to a wish not to seem to know anything of the joyful note, and was put down to his credit. After some minutes' talk of a general nature, Mrs. Mordaunt went out. Violet sat in an easy-chair at one of the balcony windows. Van Hupfeldt leaned against the embrasure of the window. He seemed to brace himself for an effort before he said to her:

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