

Mitford Bertram

The Heath Hover Mystery



Bertram Mitford

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Содержание

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	8
Chapter Three	13
Chapter Four	16
Chapter Five	19
Chapter Six	23
Chapter Seven	27
Chapter Eight	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	34

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Chapter One

The Door in the Corner

John Seward Mervyn lay back in his accustomed armchair, and – looked.

The room was of medium size, partly panelled, and partly hung with dark red papering. It was low ceiled, and the bending beams between the strips of whitewash were almost black. This added to the gloominess of the apartment whether by day or night; and now it was night. To be precise it was the stroke of midnight.

A bright fire glowed and flared in the wide, old-world chimney grate, but even this failed altogether to dispel a certain suggestion of the hauntings of vague, shadowy evil influences that seemed to be in the atmosphere. The lamplight too, was cheerful enough, and yet not. It would have been, anywhere else, but here it seemed that any element of cheerfulness must somehow infallibly miss its way.

The moan of the winter wind surged around the gables of the old house, rising now and then to a most doleful howling, and within, beams and rafters cracked, breaking out loudly in new and unexpected places. Also in a manner somewhat nerve-trying to one who sat there in the ghostly midnight solitude – as this one sat, and he in the full consciousness that for years and years past nobody had been found to inhabit this house even rent free and for the sole consideration of residing within the same. And he was trying the experiment.

John Seward Mervyn was a man who prided himself on being an absolute and cynical sceptic with regard to the supernatural, and he was poor. Dreadful tales were afloat with regard to this particular tenement, but at such he laughed. Nobody had been able to inhabit it even for weeks. Several had made the attempt, allured by the inducement of rent free. They had remained just long enough to begin to congratulate themselves upon such a find – and then – out they had gone, bag and baggage, without so much as a day's notice. Several in succession; and what they had seen – or heard – somehow or other none had been willing – or able – to disclose. But the present occupant had been in possession for some months, to the marvel of the neighbourhood.

Now he sat there at dead midnight in absolute solitude. Not a soul was within call; the nearest habitations were two or three labourers' cottages on the further side of a wooded hill. His thoughts were of the past, and they were not pleasant, those of the past seldom are. A couple of pipes were on the table at his elbow, and a tobacco jar – likewise a square whisky bottle, a syphon and a tumbler, but of this he had partaken but little. But somehow he felt his solitude to-night as he had never felt it since he had entered on possession. To-night he felt he would have given something for human companionship in almost any shape. The winter wind howled without, not loud but inexpressibly dismal. And he sat, and – looked.

Looked! At what?

In a corner of the room was a door – a massive door. It had a curious old-world, wrought-iron handle. And at this he was looking – gazing, in fact, more than intently. Was it slowly turning?

He could have sworn that it was. Well, what, then? The door was securely locked, the key was in a very safe place. And the door led nowhere and from nowhere. It led, in fact, to a vault-like underground cellar whose solid walls were totally devoid of outlet. When he had entered on possession he had exhaustively verified this, and having thus satisfied himself had laughed all the

startling and shadowy possibilities which popular report ascribed to the place to utter scorn. And yet, now to-night, he could have sworn that the handle of this door was slowly turning.

To anybody less sceptical – less unaffectedly and wholesouledly sceptical – there was that in the conviction which would have set up a blood-chilling, hair-raising effect. The utter loneliness of the place, the midnight sounds, the moaning of the doleful winter wind, the crackings and creakings of the ghostly old house, the dreadful legends that centred round that very vault, of which the movement of this very door handle was a preliminary incident – would have been sufficient to have driven out such into the pitiless winter night rather than remain sitting there – on the watch.

On the watch – for what? Could a spectral hand undo that lock? Then the watcher rubbed his eyes and looked again. Certainly the handle had turned. Its broad iron loop had been horizontal before, now it was at an angle of forty-five. Of that he was as sure as that he was alive and sitting there. And then he remembered that – this was the night.

It doesn't matter what day of the month it was. Manifestations were liable to occur at any time, and sporadically, but there were two nights in the year when – Well he had obtained a vague inkling as to what might be expected, but the last of these two dates had befallen prior to his occupation. This was the second of them within the year. This was the night.

“Now this is all unutterable bosh,” Mervyn said to himself. “I'll have another drink anyhow. Then I'll turn in.”

He reached for the whisky bottle, and filled up. Yet he was conscious of a feeling as though a chill were running down him from head to foot, notwithstanding that the fire was glowing with a heat that was almost fierce; and with the hissing squirt of the syphon into the tumbler there mingled a sound as though something or somebody were shuffling or groping behind that heavily locked door. He took a long pull at his tumbler, almost emptying it. Then he looked again at the broad iron loop handle. Its straight lower end, which before had stood at an angle of forty five, was now vertical.

His eyes dilated upon the phenomenon. The cold chill that ran through his system seemed to intensify. Mervyn, though by no means a total abstainer was a temperate man – so it was not that. Well, the obvious thing was to go and get the key, and open the door and satisfy himself. But, for the life of him he – could not.

No. He could not. He sat staring more and more wildly with dilated eyes. He was even horribly conscious of a slow pallor creeping over his face. What did it mean? The whole atmosphere of the room seemed charged with some evil influence. An owl hooted melodiously outside. It was answered by another. This seemed in a measure to break the spell, for he loved birds and bird voices, and the hooting of owls in the dark woods overhanging the long lake-like pond behind his dwelling was a sound that often drew him forth on moonlight nights to stand on the sluice and listen for an hour at a time. There was to him nothing boding or sinister in the voices of the night birds, any more than there was in the jubilant shout of the cuckoo by day, or the twanging of the nightingale.

He looked again. Certainly that door handle was moving, and it could be moved by no mortal hand. Yet to make sure, he found his voice.

“Any one there?” he called, and as he did so he was conscious of a suspicion of a quake in his voice.

For answer only a soft drive of sleet against the curtained window, and through it he could swear that the door handle slowly creaked. The door itself stood shadowy in the gloom of the corner where the light only half reached.

Then something moved. For the life of him the watcher could not repress a start, a thrill of the nerves. But the sound, the movement, did not come from the corner whereon his tense gaze was fixed. There was a little black kitten curled up asleep in an armchair opposite the one in which he was seated – a tiny ball of woolly fluff, which during its short life had been the regular companion of his lonely evenings, and of which he was almost humanly fond. It, now, was uncurling itself with a sudden celerity totally foreign to the usual deliberation of its kind on awakening from sleep. Its round eyes

were wide open, and a crescendo fire of shrill growls were proceeding from its little throat. Its back was arched, and its fur all standing up, and – its gaze too, was fixed upon that door in the shadowy corner. Then it spat, retreating further and further till it was against the back of the chair, for all the world as though to repel the onslaught of its natural and hereditary enemy – dog.

“The fact is,” thought Mervyn, noting this, “I have been too much shut up with myself, and the utter, infernal loneliness of life here is eating into my nerves.” But the sensible side of this sceptical reflection was undermined by another – that there are occasions when animals can see what we cannot. And this tiny creature was showing unmistakable and increasing signs of perturbation and alarm.

He spoke to it – softly, caressingly – then went over and picked it up. As he returned with it to his own chair it struggled violently as though to escape – a thing it had never done – growling the while with redoubled intensity. And his own chair was nearer to that door.

“Now Poogie, don’t be a little fool,” he apostrophised, holding it tighter. But the tiny creature became almost frantic, striking its claws into his hand. He released it, and it darted like lightning into the far corner of the room, where it crouched, still growling.

For all his scepticism the man was conscious of a chill feeling in the region of the spine. He reached out a hand for the square bottle. The hand shook, and glass clinked against glass more than once as he filled out a liberal measure. This he tossed off, and as he glanced again towards the centre of attention the glass fell from his hand on to the table. *The door had opened.*

Had opened – was opening. As yet but a few inches of dense black slit, but it seemed to be gaining in width. Mervyn gazed at it with dilated eyes, and as he did so he realised that the blood had receded from his face, leaving it cold – clammy. What on earth – or beyond the earth – could have opened that door, secured as it was with a solid lock, the key of which was at that moment safe within one of the drawers of his writing table? What on earth – or from beyond the earth – was he going to behold when that door should be opened to its full width? Moved by a natural instinct of material defence, he backed towards the fireplace – still without taking his gaze from that slowly opening door – and bent down as though to seize the poker, but refrained, as the conviction flooded his mind that whatever it might be that he was about to meet certainly no material weapon would be available against it. Again he found his voice.

“Any one there?” he repeated, this time conscious of very much more than a suspicion of a quaver in his voice.

As if in answer, the door noiselessly opened further. The black gap now occupied half the doorway. And then, while he was meditating a frantic rush forward to make one desperate effort at clearing up the mystery whatever it might be, something occurred to divert the awful tensivity of apprehension which had about reached its climax.

Through the doleful, long drawn howling of the winter wind and the rattle of sleet, came a cry. A cry – ever so faint – distant – but just audible; a cry, as of distress, of utter, dire, and hopeless extremity – and it came from without. And it was clearly and unmistakably human.

Chapter Two

The Cry from the Ice

Every nerve rigid and tense Mervyn listened again. Yes – it was repeated. It echoed forth more distinctly now upon the dismal night, and it came from far up the great pond above. Quickly he rose and threw on a warm cloak, and as quickly reached the front door, turned the key, and went out. Somebody was in imminent peril – and then he remembered. The ice!

He sprang up the path stairway which led to the sluice, and even as he did so the thought flashed through his mind that he had been on the eve of falling asleep in his chair when the phenomenon of the door handle had befallen to start him wide awake. No more thought however did he give to this, as he reached the level of the sluice and looked out.

The long triangle of the pond narrowing away between its overhanging woods, shone in the moonlight a gleaming sheet of ice, whose silver surface the drive of sleet was already whitening, and the firs in the dark woods which flowed down the banks were scintillating with hoarfrost. Now again, from far up that long gleaming triangle, came the raucous, agonised appeal for aid, this time quite distinctly audible.

“Some one’s got stuck there in the ice,” said Mervyn to himself. “But what the devil is he doing there at this time of night? Some poacher I suppose. Well, poaching isn’t a capital crime.” And raising his voice he answered the shout with a vigorous and reassuring halloo.

The sleet had suddenly ceased, and the clouds parting somewhat, showed glimpses of a rushing moon. Far up the frozen surface a dark interruption was just discernible. Here it was that the ice had parted, and from here now came a responsive, but weakening shout of hopeless human extremity.

“Keep up – keep up,” bellowed Mervyn through his hands. “I’m coming.”

He did not stop to think, he did his thinking while he moved. He went quickly down the sluice path to his house, all superstitious midnight imaginings thrown to the winds. To have started straight for the spot would have been to render no earthly service to the submerged man. He would have been powerless for anything save to stand on the bank and encourage him drowning, wherefore the additional few minutes sacrificed to returning to the house and procuring a ladder might mean the difference in any case between life and death.

The ladder was not found quite so easily as he had reckoned on, and when found, it proved a trifle heavier than he had expected. In spite of the biting cold he was streaming with perspiration by the time he had dragged it up the steep path to the level of the sluice again, and by the time he had brought it to the gate which opened into the path through the wood which skirted the length of the long triangle of ice he was wondering if he could get any further with it. But he sent forth a loud, encouraging shout, and without waiting for an answer, held on his way.

Fortunately every inch of the latter was known to him, and shafts of moonlight, darting through the leafless wood aided him appreciably. Still the way seemed interminable, and his progress, weighted as it was, was perforce slow. He knew exactly where to find the spot, and, lo – there it was.

“Are you there?” he cried, parting some elder stems, to reach the edge, and thrusting out the ladder along the smooth, shining surface. No answer came, but in the glint of moonlight he could see the shattered, heaving ice slabs, and wedged in between these, supported by both arms extended, he made out the head and shoulders of a man.

The latter, obviously, was not more than half conscious, indeed it was little short of a miracle that he had not, in a state of relaxed muscular power, lost all hold and slid down to his frozen death in the black water. Obviously, too, he was in a state of collapse, and incapable of helping himself. The helping would all devolve upon his would-be rescuer. The latter, in cold blood, would not in the least have relished the job.

It is curious how the glow of a life-saving attempt will warm the coldest blood. John Seward Mervyn was a complete and genuine cynic; yet to effect the rescue of this totally unknown stranger, and that at great peril to himself, here in the biting freezing midnight, seemed to him at that moment the one thing worth living for.

At great peril to himself. Yes, for he knew the water here to be a matter of four fathoms in depth – it might as well have been four hundred for the result would be the same. It was likely enough that in attempting single-handed to get the stranger out he would share the stranger's fate.

The ice cracked and bent as he pushed out the ladder along its surface; and cautiously, and lying flat in order to distribute his weight, made his way along it. Then it broke, with a glass-like splintering, and jets of water spurted through. Then the moon was again obscured, and a wild drive of sleet whirled down.

"Here, buck up, man, and lay hold of the ladder," he panted, having attained within grasp of his objective. The latter, whose staring eyes and blue lips showed the very last stage of exhaustion, made a wild attempt to comply, but his hand just missed its grasp, and the supporting ice slabs, loosened by the effort, would have let him through and in another moment would have closed over his head, when his wrist was seized in a tolerably firm grip.

"Now – you're all right," gasped Mervyn. "Grab hold with the other hand, and work your way along the rungs of the ladder. Come on. Buck up."

The nearly drowned, and wholly frozen man seemed to understand, for although powerless for speech he did just what he was told. There was a mingling of splashing and glassy splintering as the ice gave way beneath this double weight, but Mervyn's head was clear, and he distributed his own weight while piloting the other along the half submerged ladder. At last slowly and laboriously, foot by foot, they regained the bank.

"Here. You get outside a great toothful of this," said Mervyn, producing the square whisky bottle which he had shoved hastily into his side pocket with an eye to just such a contingency, and had hurriedly deposited under a tree, when starting to venture upon the ice. "Then we'll sprint as hard as we can for my diggings. Do as I say," he added, sharply, as the other hesitated. "It may mean the difference between life and death."

The stranger, who had seemed to hesitate, now obeyed, and took a liberal pull at the potent spirit. His rescuer followed his example.

"Here, take another pull," urged the latter. "Nothing like it, on top of a freezing soak. Go ahead. It can't hurt you under the circumstances."

The stranger complied, and the effect was nearly instantaneous. His chattering teeth were stilled, and the awful numbness that held his frame, relaxed, as the generous warmth of the spirit ran through his veins. Still he did not speak. Mervyn eyed him critically.

"Come along," he said. "My crib's just handy. Sooner we get there the better, for I'm in as risky a state as you are. Man, but I'm just steaming with perspiration, and a chill upon that on an icy night like this – at my age – no thank you! Here – I'll give you an arm. You must be clean played out."

"I am," said the other, speaking for the first time. But that was all he said. No words of thanks, of explanation. Mervyn passed a tolerably strong arm through that of his guest, and piloted him along the path beneath the trees, athwart whose frosted boughs the moon was networking in fitful strands of light. The ladder he did not trouble his head further about. It would be there in the morning. Two owls, floating over the tree-tops, hooted sepulchral but melodiously to each other.

"That's how I heard them when I was in there. They sounded like the voices of devils."

Mervyn looked at the speaker curiously. They had nearly gained the gate which opened out of the sombre woods on to the sluice. The voice was rather deep, not unpleasing, but strained. Lord! what if a touch of brain fever followed on the strain of the long immersion? What on earth was he going to do with a raving delirious man, in his lonely, haunted abode? thought Mervyn.

“Oh, that’s how they struck you!” he answered, bluffly. “No ‘devil’ about them. They’re jolly beggars and I like to hear them. I dare say, though, when you’re hanging on for dear life in a freezing ice hole at midnight anything strikes you as all distorted – eh? Well, here we are – that’s my crib. Hold up, go easy down this path. It’s really a flight of steps, you know. By the way, as you see, I’m yards below the level of the pond. If that sluice were to give way it’d sweep me and my shack to Kingdom Come before you could say knife. I shouldn’t like to say how many million gallons of water there are in that pond. It’s about half a mile long, and fills what is really the bottom of a valley, so you can imagine it’s astonishingly deep.”

Thus chatting, he had piloted the man he had rescued safely down the staircase-like path and had gained the front door, which had been left half open in his hurried exit. The lamp in the inner room was still burning, and into this he led the stranger.

“Now, peel off all your wet clothes,” he went on. “This is the only decent fire in the house – the one in my bedroom has burnt low. But – lose no time about it. I’ll get you a couple of rough towels for a glowing rub down – then you’ll be none the worse.”

Mervyn stirred up the fire and piled on it several great billets. In a moment they were roaring up the chimney. But as he did so his glance quickly sought the mysterious door in the shadowy corner. It was tight shut – moreover the long loop handle was in its normal position – at the horizontal.

“I must have been dreaming,” he said to himself, as he went upstairs to rummage out the towels aforesaid, and anything else that his new-found guest would be likely to need. “And yet – if that devilish rum optical delusion hadn’t come off – why I should have dozed on comfortably, and never have heard that chump’s shout for help. Well I’ve read of that sort of thing, but here’s a first-class case in point.”

But at this decision his meditations stopped short, and that uncomfortably. For the dread legends that hung around his lonely abode invariably had it that any manifestations within the same boded ill – were productive of ill – to the witness or witnesses thereof; certainly not good, to any living soul. Yet this manifestation – if manifestation it were – had been directly instrumental in the saving of a human life. And with this came another uncomfortable reflection – to wit, the proverb that if you save anybody’s life, he – or she – is bound to do you an injury.

“All bosh,” he decided, next minute, as he proceeded to get out a suit of clothes, in fact a complete outfit, for his guest. Both were tall men, and much of the same build. The things would fit admirably. But this sudden acquisition of human companionship had made all the difference in Mervyn. An imaginative man when alone, he was as hard-headed and matter of fact as could be in the society of his fellows. He did not disguise from himself that the society of this one, whoever he might be, had come right opportunely just now.

“Here you are,” he cried, flinging the bundle of things down on the table. “Get into these while I go and rummage out some supper. You can do with some I expect after your ‘dip.’ But I warn you it’s all cold, and there’s no kitchen fire. There isn’t a soul on the premises but myself.”

The stranger protested that he really required nothing. His voice was rather a pleasing one, with ever so slight a foreign intonation and accent. He had a well-shaped head, straight features, and a short dark beard trimmed to a point. On the whole, rather a striking looking man.

While he was changing Mervyn made several expeditions to the back premises, and by the time these were completed the table looked alluring by reason of the adornment of a cold silverside, half a Stilton cheese – and the usual appurtenances thereto.

“Rough and ready,” declared Mervyn, “but all good of its kind. I thought we could dispense with laying a cloth.”

The other bowed a smiling assent. If his dark eyes flashed round the room in a quick appraising glance when his host was not, looking he evinced no appreciable curiosity otherwise, either by look or speech. The latter, for his part, was equally contained. He detested being cross-questioned himself,

consequently forebore, as second nature, to subject other people to that process. If his guest chose to volunteer information about himself he would do so, if not – well, he needn't.

A renewed whirl of dismal wind round the gables of the house, and a fine clatter of sleet against the windowpanes as they began their meal. The stranger looked up.

"I am fortunate indeed," he said, "to have fallen upon such hospitality as yours to-night, Mr – ?"

"Mervyn," supplied his host. But hardly had he uttered his own name, than a very strange and unaccountable misgiving struck root within his mind. Was it some long-forgotten brain wave that suggested to him that he had seen this man somewhere or other before – and that under circumstances which would in no way render it desirable that he should see him again? Yet, like a long-forgotten dream which locates us in similar place or circumstances, it was an impression to vanish as completely and as bafflingly as recalled.

"Hark! That is not the wind," went on the stranger, looking up.

"No, it isn't," said Mervyn, on whose ears the sound of a scratching on the windowpane and a plaintive little cry at the same time struck.

He raised the sash, admitting a whirl of icy sleet, also the little black kitten, its fur plentifully powdered with the white particles. It had slipped out of the door when he had started upon his rescue quest, and he had been too much occupied with this and the sequel to give it another thought just then.

"Why, Pookie, you little fool, what did you want to leave a snug fire for at all on a night like this?" he apostrophised as the tiny creature sprang lightly to his shoulder, and sat there purring and rubbing its head against his cheek. He sat down with it at the table, and began feeding it with scraps from his plate. The stranger looked on with a slightly amused smile.

"I see you are a lover of cats, Mr Mervyn," he remarked.

"Why, rather. They're such jolly, chummy little beasts. Look at this one," holding it up. "Isn't it a picture, with its little tufted ears and round, woolly face?"

But somehow the object of this eulogy did not seem appreciative. It struggled, and half struck its claws into its owner's hand, which held it up under the armpits. But its said owner realised that its resentment was not directed upon him. It was viewing the stranger with much the same manifestations of disapproval and distrust as when gazing at the weirdly opening door, earlier in the night. And to its owner was borne in the consciousness that it had never displayed hostility towards anybody before – stranger or not. This, however, he kept to himself. He replaced the kitten on his lap, but even then it seemed restive and uneasy.

"Are you fond of dogs too?" said the other. "I suppose you are, but I didn't see or hear one when we came in."

"Yes. But I haven't got one just now. The fact is this is a difficult place to keep a dog in. They get roaming off into the coverts and get trapped or shot. The last one I had disappeared – suddenly."

There was a curious hesitation about this explanation. Perhaps the stranger noticed it – perhaps not.

"Now we'll have a smoke," said Mervyn, when they had finished, producing a cigar box. "These are pretty well matured – Unless you'd prefer to turn in?"

But the other declared he preferred nothing of the kind. The comfort of this delightful room after the experience he had gone through was idyllic. So Mervyn, by no means averse to this opportunity of conviviality so unexpectedly thrown in his way, fell in, and for upwards of an hour they sat on, before the blazing roaring log-fire, chatting easily, but always on indifferent subjects. And all the time the stranger, while an ideal conversationalist, had vouchsafed no information about himself – not even as to his name.

But when bedtime came he flatly and absolutely refused to avail himself of his host's bedroom. He could not think of entailing that inconvenience, he declared. Here was a roomy and comfortable couch, and a blazing fire. A couple of pillows and a blanket was all he needed. And Mervyn perforce had to acquiesce. The latter smiled queerly to himself at his own thoughts while doing so. If the

mysterious one were a burglar – only he did not look like it – why the most professional of burglars would hardly burgle a man who had just pulled him out of the jaws of death, and – more potent argument still perhaps to the hardened cynic – here was nothing worth burgling.

But – when he was in his own room, and was disposing himself comfortably to sleep, with the little black kitten as usual curled up on his feet outside the counterpane, he reflected complacently that the door of his room owned a very strong lock, and that a Browning pistol reposed beside his watch under his pillow.

But these precautions – especially in this instance – had nothing to do with burglars or burgling.

Chapter Three

The House by the Pond

Heath Hover was a long, two-storeyed house built in the shape of the letter E with the centre bar left out. Nobody knew exactly how it had ever come to be built at all. The property on which it stood had changed hands several times right up to date, and tradition on the subject was obscure. It could never have been intended for a farmstead, if only that it was situated right in the middle of woods, nor were there any traces of yard or outbuildings in the very limited and sloping space immediately behind it. Some were of opinion that it had been built as a dower house to one or other of the succeeding owners of Sotherby Hall, others that it had been a separate demesne altogether.

As we have said, it stood low – the chimneys being below the level of the sluice which regulated the custody of the great mass of water pent within the long triangular pond which was the scene of the midnight incident. It was situated at the open end of the V formed by this and by a sweep of oakwoods on either side, flowing down to the water's edge. In summer it was a delightfully picturesque and inviting retreat, nestling in the heart of its sylvan surroundings, and never failed to catch the attention of the users of the not very good public road which ran along the sluice, whether motorists or cycle riders. In the darker months, when the cloud-murk hung grey and gloomy, and no sound broke the awful stillness of the moist air but that of the dripping woods, why then the impression conveyed to the onlookers was dismal and desolate to the last degree. Then it seemed to live up to its sinister reputation, for in the opinion of the countryside Heath Hover was a very badly haunted house indeed.

Its present occupant awoke the next morning later than usual, and feeling by no means best pleased with himself and the world at large. To begin with he had passed a bad night. Whether it was owing to the excitement of the strange midnight adventure which might so easily have culminated in tragedy, or that he had been wrought up by the weird phenomenon of the opening door – which, try as he would, he could not altogether persuade himself was a sheer optical delusion – certain it was that hour followed upon hour before sleep would come. When it did it brought with it strange dreams, or rather imaginings. Once he could have sworn that his own bedroom door was opening, then that the mysterious stranger whom he had so opportunely rescued, was standing by his bedside, bending over him with stealthy enquiring gaze; and his fingers had closed round the butt of the deadly weapon which reposed beneath his pillow. But no; there was nothing. The moon tempered the darkness of the room sufficiently to render visible anything moving within the same. Still, when he did doze off there was always that haunting apprehension of some impending peril and something which he had thought buried, and which had suddenly started to life to dog him down and threaten him in this out-of-the-world retreat. And it, somehow or other, was closely connected with his unexpected guest, sleeping peacefully in the room below.

Stay. As to the latter, was he sleeping so peacefully? Moved by an unaccountable impulse Mervyn decided that he would make sure of that, and was in the act of rising with that intent when a sudden wake of drowsiness swept over him, and he fell back and slept hard until morning.

The late sun was just rising, a red ball above the tree-tops. The ground lay shrouded in whiteness, and the dark firs and naked oak boughs were picked out in snow patterns, and the window panes were crusted with the delicate lacework of a hard frost. Mervyn shivered, and wondered apprehensively if he had caught cold in his undertaking of the night. He dressed quickly and went downstairs.

He opened the door noiselessly and looked in. The room was in semi-darkness, for the blinds were still down. His guest was still asleep apparently, for there on the couch he lay, the rug drawn over his head. Noiselessly still, Mervyn closed the door, and went out. Then, through the back kitchen

– for he would not open the front door lest the grating of the bolts should disturb the sleeper – he passed into the open air.

The exhilaration of it in a measure braced him. The sun, mounting higher and higher, had emerged from the red ball stage into radiating beams, which touched the frosty particles on ground and tree alike into myriads of faceted diamonds. Mechanically he mounted the staircase-like path which led up to the sluice. The ice lay, a pure white triangle, narrowing away to the distantly converging woods; the break, now frozen over and newly coated with snow, hardly showing. But to this he took his way.

Heavens! it was a mystery the man had escaped the frozen death – a marvel that he himself should have been aroused just in the very nick of time to rescue him – he now told himself standing on the bank and contemplating the spot in broad daylight. The ladder lay where it had been left, but now frozen fast into the ice. It resisted his efforts to move it. Well, it could stay where it was for the present. When old Joe turned up – by the way, the old rascal was late this morning – they would be able to move it between them, and the ice was thicker for the night's frost, and would bear easily.

He retraced his steps along the woodland path. The leaves crackled crisply under his tread, and hungry blackbirds shot out swiftly from the hollies, uttering alarmed cachinnations. A little red squirrel clawed itself up a tree bole, and squatting in a fork chirked angrily and impudently at him from its place of safety. But as he walked, he was puzzling hard over the strange and sinister impression which the advent of his unknown guest had instilled within his mind. In the cheery and bracing morning light and air, this seemed to strike him as sheer fancy, sheer unreasonable imagining. The man was probably quite all right; his appearance and manner were certainly not unprepossessing. He would persuade him to stay on a few days and relieve his loneliness. Why not? He was becoming altogether too self-centred, as he had told himself the night before.

Thus musing he gained the sluice and looked down at his dwelling. The blinds of the living-room were still down. Clearly his guest was “taking it out,” and small blame to him, after his experiences of the night before. At the bottom of the stair path, the unit previously referred to as old Joe came round the end of the house.

Old Joe, surnamed Sayers, was his outdoor male factotum – gardener – though there wasn't much of a garden – make-himself-generally-useful, and so on. Old Judy – otherwise Christian-named Judith – was his indoor and female factotum; cook, general-do-everything there was to be done. Joe Sayers was an ancient rustic, normally towards crisp surliness inclined, except when full of extra ale – and Joe could carry a great deal of extra ale – and then he would wax confidential, not to say friendly. On him his master now opened.

“Hard morning, Joe?”

“Sure-ly,” came the laconic assent.

“Is the gentleman in the sitting-room awake yet?”

“Gemmun in settin' room? I see nought o' he.”

“Well, the blinds are still down. I thought Judy might have disturbed him, not knowing he was here.”

“She's t'whoäm. Got roomatics. Tarr'ble hard marnin' t'is.”

This ancient couple only gave their services during the hours of daylight; no consideration on earth would have availed to keep them within the precincts of Heath Hover during those of darkness. They inhabited one of the labourers' cottages referred to on the other side of the wooded hill and half a mile distant by road.

“Can't she come to-day then, Joe?”

“Not to-day,” was the answer, with a very decided shake of the head. “May-be not to-marrer neither.”

Mervyn felt vexed. How could he ask the stranger to prolong his stay when there was nobody on the premises to so much as boil a potato. And he had rather reckoned that the other would prolong

his stay. In fact he wanted him to, and that, paradoxically, on all fours with that vague, undefinable instinct of apprehension which had been upon him during those sleepless night hours.

“Look up the pond, Joe,” he said. “See that break in the ice, away there, by the two hanging ash trees. Well, I got him out of there in the middle of the night. I had to lug the ladder along to do it – we’ll have to haul it back again presently, by the way. He’d have been drowned but for it.”

“That he would, sure-ly.” Then the intense rustic suspicion of everything and everybody unknown asserted itself – “What be he a doing there – on the ice – middle of the night? Poachin’ may be?” Mervyn laughed.

“No – no. He’s no poacher whatever he is?”

“And what might he be? Tell me that,” and the old countryman’s little eyes blinked with satisfaction over what he considered his own shrewdness.

“Don’t know, I didn’t ask him and he hasn’t told me – yet. It’s a bad habit to get into – asking people questions about themselves and their private affairs, Joe. It’s a thing I don’t do.”

The ancient slowly shook his head – pityingly, contemptuously. He thought his master little removed from a fool.

“Folks as gets on the ice, middle of Plane Pond – middle of the night, and don’t say nothin’ as to how they gets there and what they be after, bean’t up to no good. That’s what *I* say, muster.” And the speaker nodded profoundly.

“You’re a rare clever ’un, Joe,” and Mervyn laughed banteringly. “Now there’d be no great difficulty in any one, especially a stranger, losing his way in country like this, and that in the teeth of a howling sleet storm. Taking a short cut, you know, and thinking to cross the ice instead of taking all the way round? That needn’t prove he was up to no good. Eh?”

But to this the old fellow condescended no reply. He didn’t take kindly to banter, slow witted people don’t as a rule. He spat on his palms, picked up the handles of the barrow he had come to fetch and moved off with it. His master followed him, chatting desultorily. Three or four pigs in a sty grunted shrilly as the human clement suggested morning aliment. To this was added the cacklings and flutterings of the occupants of a fowl roost, expectant of like solid advantage.

“Mus’ Reynolds he bin around sure-ly,” chuckled old Joe, looking down on the numerous pad marks of a fox indented in the fresh snow. “Well, well, that there wire cageing’s too tough for his milk teeth. He’ll ha’ gone away wi’ an empty belly I rackon.”

“That reminds me, Joe, that I could peck a bit myself,” laughed Mervyn, turning towards the house. It was getting quite late too, he decided, looking at his watch. It would do no harm now to awaken his guest.

He passed in through the back, listened a moment, then softly turned the handle of the living-room door. The room was still in semi-darkness. On the couch lay the long, shadowy figure of the stranger.

“Feel like turning out?” said Mervyn genially, but not in so loud a tone as to startle the other. But no answer came. Then stepping to the window, he raised the blind.

The room was now flooded with light – the light of a radiant, cloudless, frosty winter day. Still the recumbent form never moved. Bending over it Mervyn dropped a hand on one shoulder. But – still no response.

With a quick, strange impulse that accelerated his own heartbeats he turned down the blanket and rug, which had been drawn over the head of the sleeper. The latter had removed his coat and waistcoat, otherwise he was fully dressed. But his face wore a half-startled, half-puzzled expression, and the lips were slightly parted – and then, bending down for a closer glance, Mervyn’s countenance became if possible more white – certainly more ghastly – than the one lying there beneath his gaze, as well it might.

For his unknown and unexpected guest, the man whom he had rescued from the frozen death in the black midnight depths of Plane Pond, was now lying there in front of him stone dead.

Chapter Four

The Pentacle

Yes – stone dead. There could be no possible mistake about it. Mervyn touched the face. It was icy cold. But how on earth could this have befallen? The man had seemed as well as any one could be when he had bidden him good-night and retired to his own room. Certainly he had appeared none the worse for his immersion. Quite himself after his hearty supper and generous liquid refreshment, he had sat and chatted and smoked in the enjoyment of perfect comfort for an hour or so. The room was still warm, the ashes of the glowing fire not yet dead in the grate. Heavens, what a thing to happen! Well, it had happened, and the next thing was to send Joe with the pony and cart into Clancehurst – incidentally five miles distant – for a doctor.

To that end he moved towards the door. But before he reached it something caused him to turn. Ever so faint a sound had fallen upon his ear. Something had fallen – had fallen from the couch where the dead man lay – had fallen with ever so faint a clink. It lay on the ground – a small object – and it shone. He picked it up – and then as he stood there in the winter sunlight holding it in his fingers, John Seward Mervyn felt the hair upon him rise, and his flesh creep, and his face grow rather more ghastly and livid than that of the dead man lying there. For one dazed moment he stood gazing at the thing, then went over to the mantelpiece and dropped it into one of the queer old vases of quaint ware that stood thereon.

“Good God!” he ejaculated. “That – and now!”

Outside he could hear the movements of his old retainer. The latter had come into the kitchen, which adjoined this room, and could be heard fussing about and grumbling in very audible tones.

“Why, what be it, Mus’ Mervyn?” he exclaimed, startled at the perturbed apparition presented by his master. “Look as if you’d seed a ghoäst, sure-ly.”

“Well, I’ve seen the next thing to it, and that’s a dead man,” was the answer; and even amid his own perturbation, the speaker’s sense of humour could not resist watching the effect the announcement was bound to have upon his ancient servitor. But upon the mind of the stolid countryman the statement had just no effect at all.

“Thass better,” came the almost unconcerned reply. “We’m all bound to die come the day; but them things what goes a-creepin’ about at night, and what you can’t always see, like in this ’ere ’ouse some nights – why they’re a deal wuss. And – who’s the dead ’un, sir?”

“Why the stranger I pulled out of the pond last night. I left him comfortably tucked up on the couch in the room there, and now this morning he’s as dead as a stone.”

“Talking o’ he,” said the countryman, whom the tragical side seemed to impress not in the least. “I bin over to th’ ice to get that ladder out, but it’s that hard froze in, and that heavy I can’t move it. You’ll have to lend a hand, Muster.”

“And a devilish good thing you can’t move it, Joe. Why don’t you see, lying just where it was it’ll furnish a very important item of evidence.”

Now old Joe’s stolidity did undergo a shock. That last word conveyed an unpleasant suggestiveness of the atmosphere of courts, and of the atmosphere of courts the rustic mind stands in holy terror.

“There’ll be an inquest then, a crowner’s inquest?” he said, with sudden awe. “Lor sakes, Mus’ Mervyn they can’t bring in as *we* had to do with it?”

“Of course not, you old juggins. But don’t you see – the first thing they’ll ask was how he got here and where he came from, and all that. Well, the position of the ladder – left exactly where it was, you understand – will confirm my explanation as to how he got here. So it’s devilish important that it should be left there. Now, do you see?”

Joe did see – and saw something else, or thought he did. For now his little rustic cunning suggested to his little rustic mind that his master seemed rather over anxious to supply material for explanation.

“Well, *I* didn’t see the gemmun,” he answered, with a note of sulkiness underlying his tone. “You’ll mind I said so, Mus’ Mervyn. I didn’t see he.”

“No, but you’ve got to now, so come along and look at him. After that you must hitch up the pony and cart, and get along to Clancehurst, and tell Dr Sandys and the Police Inspector to come along here at once. And – look. There are the strange gentleman’s clothes, hanging up on that clothes-horse to dry. I didn’t change mine – wasn’t wet enough.”

The clothes were hung in front of the kitchen fire now roaring and crackling merrily. Joe eyed them with surly disgust. He was becoming more and more imbued with a horrid suspicion that he would be involved in a charge of murdering the stranger – whom as yet he had not even seen – and in the result, duly hanged in Clancehurst gaol; incidentally that edifice was not of sufficient county importance to be used for capital executions, but of this, of course, he was ignorant.

“Well, come along,” said his master, turning. But Joe didn’t move.

“Beggin’ pardon, sur,” he said, “but I’d rather not. I said I didn’t see he, and I don’t want to now.”

“Oh, that’s it is it? Well you’d better. They’ll be asking all sorts of questions – and we are the only two people in the house. You’ll have to give evidence in any case, and you’ll do it all the better for having seen all there is to be seen. So, don’t be a fool. I only want you to see just how the man was when I found him. Of course he won’t be touched or moved or anything until the doctor comes.”

The old man gave way, although reluctantly, and followed his master into the chamber of death.

“Who be he, sur, do you know?” he asked in lowered voice, as he stood gazing, awed, upon the still features. “E be a middlin’ likely sort of gent, for sure.”

“I know just as much about him as you do, Joe. As I told you this morning – I never ask people about themselves, and he didn’t tell me anything. No doubt he would have done so this morning, poor chap, but – there he is. Well, get away now and fetch the doctor and the police, and the sooner we get all the bother over and done with the better.”

Mervyn went out, and superintended the harnessing of the pony, and saw his old retainer start. It would take the latter well over the hour to jog along the hilly road, between Heath Hover and Clancehurst.

“Straight on and straight back, Joe,” was his parting injunction. “You don’t want to wet your whistle at any pubs this journey you know. The business is too important. And keep your tongue in your head about it, too. The only people you’ve got to wag it to are the doctor and the inspector. To any one else might make things unpleasant to you. See?”

Having, as he thought, effectually frightened his ancient servitor into discretion, and duly seen him start, Mervyn went back to the house, but did not enter. Instead, he took his way up to the sluice and stood gazing out over the ice-bound pond. There was nothing to be done until the representatives of medicine and the law should arrive, and meanwhile he felt a sort of disinclination to enter the house. But for its rather thick coating of snow he would have put on his skates and amused himself upon the said ice, cutting a few figures. Then he remembered he had had no breakfast, and suddenly felt the want of it.

Accordingly he descended the path, and entering began to get out the requisite materials. He was accustomed largely to doing for himself, so in a trice he had brewed his tea in the kitchen and got out other things needed. But some of the said other things were in the living-room, left there from the night before. He did not care to breakfast there with the dead man lying on the couch in the same room.

The latter seemed unusually, supernaturally still. He glanced at the couch. It was just as he had left it. There was nothing particularly repellant in the dead man’s aspect. On the whole it was rather

peaceful – still, he preferred to have his breakfast somewhere else. And then, while collecting what he required, his thoughts went again to the thing he had deposited within the vase on the mantelpiece.

This he now extracted. Had there been any one to witness the process, they would have seen that it was effected with extraordinary care. For instance, he did not touch the object, he turned it out upon the table, and when he moved it at all it was with a bit of stick which he took from the remains of what had been used to make the fire with. Yet it was a harmless looking thing enough – a small, shining disk not more than an inch and a half in diameter, and it had five points like those of a star.

What an extraordinary thing was that which had happened, he said to himself. The omen of the door handle and the open door; and involuntarily now he glanced at the latter. But it was fast shut, and the handle at its usual angle. It had been the means of saving the stranger's life – for what a very short time, as events had proved – and he remembered how he had marvelled that contrary to all report the manifestation had been effected in bringing any *good* to anybody. Well the “good” had not been effectual enough to last, so that far the grimness of the tradition did not belie itself. It was indeed extraordinary, and here in the broad daylight he could afford to contemplate it from a purely speculative point of view. Yet as he looked more and more at the little disk a good deal of an uneasy fascination was upon him, and well it might be – none knew this better than himself.

Then he did a strange thing. He went out of the room, returning immediately wearing a thick pair of fur-lined gloves. He took up the trinket, even then holding it gingerly. He looked round for something to wrap it in, then thought better of it. He rose, and carried the thing out, holding it behind him, and ascended again to the sluice. There was a small hole in the ice, where the overflow ran out over an iron door. That would do. No, it would not. He paused – just in time, as he realised he had been on the point of making a most fatal mistake.

He looked around, not furtively, not pointedly, just casually. Not a soul was in sight, but he knew, none better, that it does not follow that because you cannot see a soul therefore not a soul can see you. A cloud of blue titmice was twittering in a leafless alder, glancing from twig to twig. Overhead a little red kestrel was hovering against the cloudless blue of the dazzling winter sky, and two squirrels gambolled and chirked among the feathering boughs of a dark yew tree which still had a few berries left. Blackbirds clucked and flickered over the ice surface. All Nature was joyous and at peace this bracing, invigorating winter morning, and within the room down yonder the dead man lay.

Mervyn turned to regain the house. The little black kitten, its bushy tail erect, came bounding up the path stairway to meet him, but he did not take it up, as it rubbed against his legs, purring a greeting.

Halfway down the earth stairway a large stone lay, partly embedded in the soil. Mervyn bent down as though to tie up his bootlace. When he rose again that stone was the custodian of something. It was the tombstone of the strange small disk he had held in his hand.

Mervyn went into the kitchen, where he had left his breakfast all ready; and then he did another strange thing. He took off the big fur gloves he had been wearing, and put both well to the back of the red, roaring, kitchen fire. In an instant they were absorbed in the furnace-like heat. Then he sat down to his breakfast, but, in view of the proceedings just detailed he thought he could in a degree estimate the sensations of a murderer, who has carefully and effectually – as he thinks – disposed of every item of evidence.

Chapter Five

The Enquiry

About lunch-time a smart dogcart came bowling along the snow covered road, and from it descended the doctor and the police inspector, likewise a constable: old Joe, with his slower conveyance, had been left to follow on. Dr Sandys was a good representative of the prosperous G.P. in practice in a prosperous market town; genial, hearty, and prepared to be surprised at nothing which came in his way professionally. The inspector likewise was a good type of his kind; tall, alert, rather soldierly in countenance and bearing.

“Well, Mr Mervyn, this is a strange sort of happening, isn’t it?” began the former. “However, the first thing to do is to get to work.”

“Will you look at the – er – the body first, or the locality?” said Mervyn.

“The locality?”

“Yes. I mean where I first picked him up. I suppose Joe told you all about it, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he told us all about it – after a fashion,” said the inspector with a slight smile. “But I needn’t remind you Mr Mervyn, what sort of a ‘telling all about it,’ one would be likely to get from a man of old Joe’s stamp. So the first thing to do is for you to give us your account of what happened,” and the speaker’s hand instinctively dived for his notebook.

“I rather think I had better inspect the ‘subject’ the first thing, Nashby,” struck in the doctor.

“Of course. This way.”

Mervyn showed them into the room and raised the blinds, which he had lowered again after the first discovery. The constable was left in charge of the dogcart. The doctor bent over the dead man and proceeded to make his first examination. The bystanders could not but notice that he looked more than a little puzzled.

“We shall have to strip him,” he said, looking up. This was done, the police inspector giving his aid. Mervyn stood and looked on.

The body was that of a well-knit, well-proportioned man, probably on the right side of forty.

“No sign of injury, none whatever,” pronounced the doctor, “and his heart is as sound as a bell. Here is something, but it seems of no importance. At one time or other, he was addicted to the drug habit,” pointing to the left arm, which he had raised. “But – not lately.”

“Not lately?” echoed the inspector, whose notebook was in full swing. “Now to be precise, doctor, up to how lately should you say?”

“It’s impossible to be precise,” was the answer, “if by that you mean exactly how many years ago he discontinued the habit – and from all appearances he needn’t have been very greatly addicted to it even then. Certainly not less than five or six years ago, possibly longer; indeed, I should say longer.”

The inspector nodded, and for a minute or two his stylo was very busy indeed. The puzzled frown on the surgeon’s face grew deeper and deeper, and well it might. Here was a strong, well-built, healthy man in the prime of life, dying in his sleep, and no sign whatever to guide Science towards the discovery of the cause.

“We shall have to make an exhaustive postmortem,” said the doctor at last, covering the dead man again, “and to this end I must take steps for having the body removed to Clancehurst, for I propose to call in first-rate expert assistance.”

“Very good, sir,” assented the inspector briskly, relieved that he was now going to get his own innings, and also all his professional keenness to the fore over the prospect of being put in charge of a very out-of-the-way case. “And now, with Mr Mervyn’s permission, I will take his statement as to the whole of last night’s occurrence.”

“You shall have it to the full,” was the answer. “But first of all had you not better go through the poor chap’s clothes – they are hanging up in the kitchen where I put them to dry, those he has on now are mine, which I rigged him out with as a change. Needless to say I haven’t touched a thing of his, pending your arrival. You may find some clue to identification there.”

“We’ll do so at once,” said the police officer, and they adjourned forthwith to the kitchen.

The clothes were hanging where they had been placed the night before, and were now quite dry. But mystery seemed likely to be piled on mystery. Except some sovereigns and silver change amounting to something over five pounds in all, the pockets were absolutely empty. Not a scrap of paper, no card-case or pocket-book, not even a purse. Besides the money, an old Waterbury watch, attached to a leather guard, made up the entire contents.

Furthermore the clothes themselves afforded no clue. The buttons were plain horn ones, and bore the name of no tailor, nor was there any shop mark upon any article of hosiery; and now the police inspector warmed to his work, for he could see that all such indications had been carefully and deliberately removed. But by whom, and with what object? That was his business to find out.

“Now Mr Mervyn, if you please. I should like your statement.”

“Certainly. Let’s go back into the other room and I’ll get you some foolscap to take it down on. It’ll ease your notebook – eh, inspector?”

Mervyn told his story, plainly and concisely, as we know it – not omitting any detail. Any detail? Yes. He omitted just one – the finding of the metal disk. But at that part of the narrative which related to the apparition – or hallucination – of the opening door, both his auditors looked up keenly. For they were acquainted with the weird legends which popular belief hung around Heath Hover.

“As sure as I sit here,” went on the narrator, “that manifestation – delusion, if you like – was the means of saving the man’s life, for if I hadn’t seen it I should have finished dropping off to sleep in my chair, and had I done so, why he might have shouted till doomsday without my hearing him. However, it didn’t seem much good, as things turned out.”

The inspector laid down his stylo.

“Now, Mr Mervyn, if you will be so good. We will examine that door, and what lies beyond it.”

“Certainly,” and Mervyn, unlocking a drawer in his writing table produced a long, brown, heavy key.

“See,” he went on, “it was under this pile of papers. I always keep it there. Yet that door opened of itself, just as I have described. I’d swear to that as positively as I could swear to anything in my life.”

“You have strong nerves, Mr Mervyn,” said the inspector, a thought drily, perhaps, as he took the key which the other tendered to him.

The lock, though a trifle stiff, turned without difficulty. A black gap yawned in front, and a close yet chilly, fungus-laden air greeted their faces.

“Hold hard now till I get some candles,” went on Mervyn. In a moment these were obtained and lighted, each carrying one. “I’d better lead,” he appended, perhaps anticipating the thought that flitted through the mind of the police officer. It would be so easy otherwise to spring back, and locking the pair securely in that vault, thus obtain for himself a start of several hours. Such things had happened.

A good bit of a shiver ran through the trio as they descended into the dank mustiness of the vault. The walls glistened with moisture, so did the stone floor. But there was no break in the solid masonry, save for one hole, barely four inches across, which admitted air from the outside but no light. The inspector made a minute and exhaustive examination of both walls and flooring, but there was no sign of either having been disturbed, perhaps for centuries.

“My belief is that this place was nothing more than a common or homely wine cellar,” said Mervyn, as having found nothing whatever to reward their investigation they took their way up the stone steps again. “The fact of the existence of a disused empty vault like this under a house is enough to give rise to all sorts of weird beliefs centring round it. But yet – that door business of last night – well, if that was an optical delusion I’ll never believe in my own eyesight again. And now,” as they

regained the outer day, “before we start to look at the hole in the ice, how about a little something stimulating after your drive. Eh?”

The doctor was agreeable, in fact quite willing, but the cautious police officer declined. Mervyn, seeing through this thought too, got out a new bottle with the seal intact, and drew the cork. Likewise he placed an unbroken syphon on the table, perhaps rather ostentatiously. While thus engaged, the pony-cart rumbled up, bringing the returning Joe.

He, too, now the inspector desired to question. Possibly because disregarding his master’s parting injunction, the old rustic had been imbibing some Dutch courage in the shape of a couple of “goes” of square Hollands on the way back at the *Dog and Partridge*, the same number of miles distant upon the road, he was able to answer these questions in a straight and fairly lucid manner, though he would more than once revert – as his mind misgave him – to his stock declaration! “I didn’t see no strange gemmun ’ere last night. You’ll mind I said so, Mus’ Mervyn. I didn’t see he.”

“Nobody said you did, Joe,” reassured the inspector. “You only saw him this morning, after he was dead.”

“That’s Gawd’s truth, I reckon, Mr Nashby, zur,” was the fervent rejoinder.

“One thing more, if you’ll excuse me, Mr Mervyn,” said Nashby. “I’ll just examine this room a little.”

He looked on the floor, under the couch, in cupboards, and drawers; not omitting the old vases of quaint ware that stood on the mantelpiece. The owner, watching with outward indifference, had his own thoughts. So had the inspector. Whoever had been the cause of this unknown stranger’s death, it had been no one entering the house from outside, determined the latter.

Then they adjourned to view the scene of the rescue. Along the path through the wood Mervyn pointed out the footprints – half obliterated by subsequent snow – left by himself and the rescued stranger, likewise those quite fresh, made by himself and old Joe that morning on their respective and independent progresses to the spot. Of these Nashby took careful measurements.

“There you are,” went on Mervyn, as they arrived at the place. “You’ll see the hole is newly frozen over, but the ladder’s just where I left it. The water’s over twenty feet deep there, but what the deuce started the poor chap on the ice at all is what bangs me. Seems to me we’re up against a very tall thing in mysteries.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if we were, Mr Mervyn,” rejoined the inspector, again rather drily.

“Couldn’t we trace his footmarks back?” suggested the doctor. “It would show the direction he had come from, and then we could make enquiries. Eh, Nashby?”

“The very thing I was going to do,” answered the latter.

But the plan, though good, was difficult of execution. The footmarks were almost obliterated by the more recent snowfall, in places quite so. And they led from nowhere direct. They zigzagged and twisted, as though their perpetrator were wandering at random and round and round, then lost themselves altogether in a sort of small ravine. But the very incoherency of their course suggested a reason for the stranger plunging into the peril he had done. Clearly he had got lost in the thick woods and had welcomed this long, broad stretch of open, and apparently strong ice, as a way out.

“Now I would suggest an adjournment for lunch,” said Mervyn. “We can take up the trail afterwards where we left it.”

“That’s not half a bad idea,” assented the doctor heartily. “Thanks very much, Mr Mervyn. I’d been about a bit before I started for here, and after a drive through this invigorating air, it seems a long while ago since breakfast time.”

Inspector Nashby raised no objection. A stalwart police officer, even though on an interesting case, and prospectively a case for advancement, is not proof against the pangs of deferred appetite on a crisp, keen, frosty day. But even while discussing good cheer in an impromptu way in Mervyn’s kitchen – for they left the living-room in silent possession of the dead – Nashby kept his eyes about

him and his perceptions at full cock. For Nashby had his theories already forming. The doctor as yet had formed none.

While thus engaged, they missed the fact that the sun-bright day had overclouded. They were awakened to it, however, by the discovery that it had begun to snow again. More than begun indeed, for the snow was coming down, not merely in flakes, but almost in slabs. A little more of it and they would hardly be able to get back to Clancehurst. The Inspector jumped to his feet.

"Heavens!" he ejaculated, going to the window. "Why, this'll cover up all and any footprints there may be to find beyond where we left off."

"Shouldn't wonder if it did. Well, it can't be helped," said Mervyn coolly. He had by now quite got behind the policeman's suspicions, and was taking rather a half-hearted delight in teasing that worthy. "Have another whisky and soda, inspector?"

"Thanks, no. I'll go and take up the track where we left it."

"If you'll take my advice you won't," said Mervyn. "In fact you'll get back to Clancehurst as soon as possible, and come back here when all's clear again. Why, you've seen how even a moderate snowdrift can pile up. If you get caught in the middle of this deluge of it, right out in the thick of the woods, why I shouldn't wonder if you're as stiff as our poor friend there, before many hours are gone. What do you say, doctor?"

"What do I say? Why that I can't afford to get snowed up right away in the country for days. What price my practice? So if it's all the same to you, Mr Mervyn, I'll ask you to have my cart hitched up and start before it gets worse."

Nashby had not waited to hear this decision. He had gone outside to see if it really was impracticable to pursue the search. But even before he had reached the top of the path which led to the sluice, the rush of the blinding cold flakes into his eyes drove him back.

"No, it'd be quite useless," he said, by no means pleased. "Couldn't do anything in the teeth of this. But it won't be dead against us going back, rather behind us, that's one thing."

So they started, the inspector very dissatisfied and very suspicious. He questioned the doctor all the way along the road, under difficulties certainly, because of the blinding sheets of snow which drove in upon them, rendering breathing – let alone conversation – difficult – as to Mervyn, his circumstances and his antecedents – above all, his antecedents. But on this point the doctor was able to give no information – only that he knew no more on the subject than did his questioner.

And Mervyn was left alone with the dead, in solitary, haunted Heath Hover – yet not quite alone, for the police constable was left too; and perhaps he was not sorry for the man's companionship. For the snow whirled down in masses for the best part of the night, blocking the road in huge drifts, and the wind howled dirgefully round the gables of the house, where lay the living and the man who had come there to meet his strange, mysterious death.

Chapter Six

“The Key of the Street.”

“For the third and last time, I say – will you hand me that letter or will you not?”

“No, I will not.” And the speaker’s lips tightened, and her blue eyes met the angry red brown ones calm and full, and the coronal of golden hair shone upon a very erect head indeed.

The parties to this dialogue were a girl and a woman, the latter middle-aged, not to say elderly. She had a hooked, commandeering nose and a hard mouth turning down at the corners. Now they were turning down very much indeed. It may be hardly necessary to explain that these two occupied the position of employer and employed.

“Now mark my words, Miss Seward,” went on the first speaker, fast getting into the tremulous stage of white anger. “I’ll give you just one more chance, and only one. Hand me over that letter, or – out of my house you go. Without references mind – and this very day at that. Now – take your choice.”

There was some excuse for the irritation displayed by the older woman, in that she had surprised the other in the act of reading a letter – a fairly closely written one too, and that in the handwriting of her only son, a young subaltern not long gazetted, and only recently gone out to India. She had suspected something between them prior to his departure; and this girl was a mere paid teacher of French and music to her own two – then in the “flapper” stage. As a matter of fact there had been, but it was all on one side – on that of the boy.

“There’s really nothing in it,” was the answer, “I didn’t want him to write to me, and told him so more than once. But as he has, well I can’t show private correspondence to a third person, even though it be the correspondent’s mother.”

In hard reality the speaker was more than half inclined to comply – more to put an end to the whole bother than anything. But there were two obstacles in the way of such a safe and easy course; first her own pride, of which she had all her share – in spite of her dependent position – not that she considered it a dependent one as long as she gave *quid pro quo*, and who shall say that she was altogether wrong? And Mrs Carstairs had put on a tone that was raspingly dictatorial and commandeering. The second lay in the fact that the writer had particularly requested that all knowledge of her having received the letter should be withheld from his mother. Equally, as a matter of fact, even as she had said – there was nothing in it. It was a very harmless effusion. It contained vehement declarations of devotion, but such were merely unsophisticated and doglike. When at home the boy had fallen violently in love with her, but though kind to him in a sisterly way, she had not reciprocated, and while sorry for him had pointed out plainly to him more than once that this was so. She was older than him too, and could not look upon him from the point of view he wanted – and this she also pointed out to him plainly.

In view of all this it seemed rather hard lines now that his mother should swoop down upon her in this fashion as though she were a mere designing intriguing adventuress, instead of being, as it happened, of considerably older descent than this family of two generations of worthy and successful manufacturers, among whom perforce for the time being, she was earning her daily bread, and perhaps it was a little of this sense of contrast that raised that gold-crowned, well-poised, thoroughbred head somewhat higher in the air during the gathering storm of the interview. But here were two angry women, rapidly becoming more angry still – the one steadfastly refusing what the other as equally steadfastly imagined she had every right in the world to demand. What sort of outcome was this likely to yield?

The elder woman’s normally rubicund cheeks had now gone nearly white.

“So that’s your last word?” she panted.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Then go. D’you hear. Go upstairs and pack, and leave this house at once. That is the return I get for my kindness – my charity – in ever taking you into it at all.”

Melian Mervyn Seward threw back her head, and straightened herself still more at the ugly word.

“Excuse me, Mrs Carstairs,” she said, a small red circle coming into each of her likewise paled cheeks, “but I think you used the wrong word. You have had your full money value from me, fair work for fair wage. So I don’t see where the word ‘charity’ comes in at all.”

The other could only sputter, she was simply speechless with wrath. The girl went on:

“Not only that, but I am entitled to some notice. I refuse to be thrown out in the street without any at all. Remember, I have to make my own arrangements as to my next plans. So I will take your notice now if you like.”

You see there was the element of a capable business woman about this thoroughbred, self possessed orphan girl, who had hardly a friend in the world and that not capable of being of any use to her in a stress like the present. She, calm, because with the power to control her white anger, held the other at a disadvantage, who had not.

“Oh, well,” the latter managed to stutter. “I will pay you your month’s wages, and – ”

“Quarter’s,” corrected the girl quietly. “I am not a servant, let me remind you, but teacher of French and music to your children. Therefore I am entitled to a quarter’s notice.”

“Why, this is blackmailing,” blared the woman furiously. “Sheer blackmailing.”

“Don’t keep on using ugly words. You know it’s nothing of the kind – only a sheer matter of business.” And then somehow the mere mention of the word seemed to be effectual in calming the speaker’s restrained math. “I have got to take care of myself, you know. There’s no one else in this wide world to do it for me. So I must have my contract carried out, or take steps to enforce it if necessary. There is no blackmailing in that.”

“Oh, that’s a threat, is it?”

“Not a bit. I am merely putting the situation before you from both sides.”

“You shall have your quarter, then,” said the other, after a moment of silence. “But – leave this house by to-night.”

“If I can, I will,” answered the girl. “But I must first make sure that I have somewhere to go to. So if you will kindly have a telegram dispatched for me, and the reply is satisfactory, I shall be prepared to do as you wish. *If* it is not, I fear I shall have to burden you until to-morrow morning.”

The other gasped in speechless amazement. But she knew what was in the speaker’s mind. If the latter were to go out herself with the object of sending the telegram, who knew but that she might not find herself refused re-admission? In justice it is only fair to say that such an extreme measure would not have been adopted. Still, as the girl had said, she had got to take care of herself.

“Very well, write your telegram then,” she snapped, and rustled out.

Melian went over to a writing table, found a telegraph form, and having filled it in, rang the bell and dispatched it. Then she went up to her room.

So she had lost her means of livelihood. It was not a very congenial means of livelihood, still it might have been worse – infinitely worse – and this she candidly acknowledged. There was little sympathy between herself and her employer. The latter had treated her with a certain courtesy, but she was a hard, dictatorial, narrow minded type of woman, and utterly intolerant of contradiction in any shape or form. As for the nominal head of the house he was a mere nonentity, a mere cipher. Outside its limits he was a fairly prosperous stockbroker, and only returned home to dine and sleep, and seldom speak. Her charges were not particularly interesting or engaging children; empty-headed, selfish, and thoroughly spoilt. Still she managed to get on with them – and what was more – to get them on. And now she had to leave; to lose her means of livelihood for the time being – and Heaven only knew where and how she was going to obtain another – and all because a silly boy now at the other end of the world had chosen to fall in love with her at this.

Yet as she caught her three parts length reflection in the glass, Melian Mervyn Seward would have been no woman had she not known that upon that account the boy was not so silly after all. For it framed a really exquisite picture – that of a beautifully proportioned figure, neither tall nor short, in fact exactly the right height for a woman. The well-poised head, gleaming gold under the electric light was set upon a full, rounded throat. The blue eyes, beneath their well marked brows were steadfast, and full of character, and even more so if possible the set of the mouth. But the contour of cheeks and chin was perfect, and now that the reaction after the strife had brought an unusual glow of colour to the former the face was absolutely lovely. Here was a girl who well and tastefully dressed would have created more than a sensation in any big ballroom, and now she stood there realising more and more how utterly helpless and alone in the world she was, with her only means of livelihood taken from her, and with very precarious chances of finding another.

“Little fool!” she muttered with a stamp of the foot against the fender bar; the exclamation not being directed against herself but against her absent adorer. “Little fool! I expect he’ll feel pretty sick when he hears what he’s been the means of doing – if he ever does hear. Still – he couldn’t help it, I suppose.”

Looking up, the blue eyes suddenly filled, then overflowed, for they had encountered a portrait of her dead father. She caught up the frame from the mantelpiece, and pressed her red warm lips passionately against the cold glass, murmuring words of love and tenderness. Then she sank into a low chair and sobbed unrestrainedly – it may be that the reaction of the nervous system after her late passage of arms had something to do with the breakdown. There came a knock at the door. Instantly she sprang to her feet, dashing the tears away. Heavens! they would be attributed to grief and fear over her dismissal. That would not do – no not for anything. It was difficult, however, to regain her self command at a brace of seconds’ notice, and the maid who now entered with a telegram, subsequently and as a matter of course did set them down to that very cause.

The wire was a reply from her friend, a girl who made a living as a typist, and hardly comes within the scope of our story except in so far that now she wired that she could take Melian into her modest quarters for a night or two while the latter “looked about her.” This was so far satisfactory. Melian wrote out another telegram in reply, saying she was coming on in a couple of hours, and gave it to the maid, which message of course supplied that young person with something to talk about, and conjecture about, below stairs. Then she set to work to pack in earnest.

Mrs Carstairs was not quite happy in her mind, while sitting in her morning-room waiting for her discharged *employée* to come and take her leave – and her salary. She was not a bad hearted woman *au fond*, only there were times when the “*fond*” took a good deal of getting at. Now she had qualms. Miss Seward had not been wrong in saying she had given her good money’s worth. She certainly had done that, and now the woman was already consumed with misgivings as to how she was going to supply her place. But as Miss Seward entered, this misgiving merged into a feeling of vague self-gratulation that it had turned out for the best. The girl was looking lovely. Quietly but tastefully dressed, her patrician blood and bearing was never so manifest. She wore a large black hat – large without exaggeration – which framed and set off the beautiful refined face, and the velvety blue eyes. No, assuredly she was too dangerously pretty to keep; otherwise there is no telling that she would not have climbed down even at the eleventh hour.

“Here is your cheque, Miss Seward,” she said, “and there is the receipt form.” Then having seen this duly signed, she added stiffly – “And now, good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Mrs Carstairs. I’ll just repeat to you. There was no harm whatever in that letter. I did not feel justified in showing you – only on principle, mind. Good-bye, children.”

For the two girls had just come in. There was, as we said, nothing engaging about them. They were gawky plain girls, sallow faced and inclined to be hook-nosed too, with a skimpy black pigtail hanging down each of their backs. They showed no more feeling on parting with Melian than if she

were just getting up from an afternoon call. They each stuck a limp bony paw into her palm, and there was an end of it.

She went downstairs. Her luggage – by no means the traditional, and feminine, “mountain of luggage” – was being stowed in and on a cab. A door on the ground floor opened into the hall. Within this stood the – nominal – master of the house.

“I hear you’re leaving us, Miss Seward. I’m sorry,” he began rather jerkily. “Will you kindly step in here for a moment?”

Melian wondered, but complied. Seen in the full light, he was a quiet looking, keen faced man, keen as to the upper part of his face – that represented his moderate success on the Stock Exchange – falling away in the lower – that represented his subsidiary position as merely nominal master in his own house.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “You’re very young, and I understand, alone in the world. This fuss, whatever it’s about, is clean outside my department, but remember, if ever you want a friend – either to speak a good word for you – or what not – remember me. Good-bye, child.”

She flashed a bright smile at him as she took the hand which jerkily shot forth at her. Then she went out.

“By gad, she’s lovely!” exclaimed Carstairs, staring after her, “and the very perfection of a lady too. What a fool Adelina is to have got rid of one like that.”

And Adelina, who from the upper landing was privily assisting auricularly at this scene, was for once, inclined to agree with the submissive one. Certainly it would not be easy to find an adequate substitute.

“Still – she’s too pretty,” she told herself with something of a sigh. “Too pretty, and – too proud. Yes – far too proud.”

And this reflection seemed to carry something of consolation as her mind went back to that scene in the forenoon, and how the girl had uncompromisingly declined to capitulate, while she herself had come out of it with far from flying colours.

Chapter Seven

Interim – “Flu.”

The Carstairs abode was a large, dull, ugly villa in a large, dull, ugly suburb – one of those depressing suburbs that is neither town nor country but has the disadvantages of both and the advantages of neither. But it was cheerfulness itself compared with the locality through which Melian’s cab was now slowly jogging. The squalor of the greasy streets; the dank, thick atmosphere; the hoarse, scarcely human yells and the incessant rumble and clatter attendant on that sort of locality are too well known to need any describing.

Leaning back in the mouldy vehicle, she set her mind to go over the events of the last few hours. Had she been ill advised, hasty – she asked herself? Their behaviour at the very last had seemed to show they were not such ill-meaning people. Yet, as she looked back she knew that relations between them had been getting more and more strained. For some reason or other Mrs Carstairs had been growing more and more short in her manner towards her, and now she knew that reason. The old woman had had her suspicions all along, but the discovery of the climax brought things to a head. But the whole thing was ludicrous, and all about a little booby like that – Melian’s lip curled as she thus rather unjustly characterised the distant cause of all the bother.

The drive was long and the cab slow. She had time to let her thoughts go further back from her present troubles – the future was not a welcome subject, looked at sitting alone there in that mouldy box on wheels, and in the dark at that. Her earlier life had been a sufficiently happy one. She had seen a great deal of the world and developed her artistic instincts. Then had come losses; and speculations, instead of mending things, made them worse. Her father was lacking in the business capacity, while her other parent was under the impression that one pound sterling was endowed with the purchasing power of three, and acted consistently upon that conviction. So means dwindled till there was very little left.

Things had reached this point when one day her father started off on a railway journey to a place some hours distant. He was mysterious as to the object of it, but declared that they would none of them be the worse if it failed, whereas if it succeeded, they would be considerably the better. He seemed in a hopeful mood, and in fairly good spirits, and when at the big, dingy terminus, where she was seeing him off, he handed her a couple of accident insurance tickets, which he had just purchased; he seemed fairly bubbling over with fun.

“See these?” he had said. “All right. They cost a shilling apiece, and represent 1,000 pounds apiece if I’m – er – totally smashed up. So, you see, I’m more valuable to you dead than alive. I used to think it was the other way about. But take care of them, I’ve signed them, and all, so it’d be quite safe. Put them away carefully. Two thousand pounds, remember.”

“I’ve a great mind to tear them across and throw them on to the line,” the girl had answered, looking at him with filling eyes and quivering lips. But he laughed gaily.

“Don’t do that, little one. They cover minor injuries too, only those mean less dibs. You know. So much a leg, so much an arm, so much a finger – and so on. It’s a rum world – and you never can tell. So stick to those tickets till I come back. Now, good-bye, my darling little one. Here, let go – the train’s moving, by George!”

She was very nearly tightening her hold, so that it would be physically impossible for him to free himself until the train had gone, but she did not. With eyes blinded with tears she waved to him from the platform as he leaned half out of the window watching to see the last of her, and he was gone. Yet he would be back the day after to-morrow at the latest. She had often seen him off on such journeys before.

“I *am* a little fool,” she said to herself as she walked away.

About two hours later, when in the middle of its longest non-stop run, Marston Seward fell from the train.

There were headlines in the evening paper posters, but somehow or other Melian did not notice these. It was not until the next day, when they opened their morning paper, that the tragedy rose up and hit them between the eyes – name, description, everything, for by this time identification had been easily obtained. Melian hardly knew how she lived through that stunning blow – perhaps because it was a stunning one. But the shock was too much for her mother – the shock only, for there was little if any affection between her and the dead man. Brain fever supervened and she died.

Her illness made an alarming inroad into the scanty resources remaining to them. Hard material necessities had to be met. Hitherto the girl had shrunk with shuddering horror from turning to account those fatal insurance tickets, the price of her father's blood. She could not claim it. Oh God! the thought of it? But she might have spared herself any qualms on this head. The railway company flatly and uncompromisingly repudiated all liability. The insurance was against *accident* not suicide. They were in a position to prove, and to prove indisputably that for any one to have fallen from the particular coach of which Seward was an occupant, and that by accident, was a sheer impossibility. The door handles were all in good order; if anything, rather stiff to turn than otherwise. They could prove too, that the said door handles were properly secured at the last station the train had passed through. And worst of all, they were in a position to produce a platform inspector who had passed the pair at the moment of the utterance of those fatal words: "You see, I'm more valuable to you dead than alive. I used to think it was the other way about." The official had heard the words distinctly, and after the tragedy had himself voluntarily come forward with the information. At the time they had struck him as uttered jokingly, but in the light of the subsequent event they took on a far different aspect. In short, Seward had bungled the whole business. He died as he had lived, and his last act was one of perfectly inexcusable bungle. "More valuable to you dead than alive," had been his words, and in the result his daughter was left alone in the world, as nearly as possible penniless.

Alone! Yes – for she had no relations, except one, away in India, and for certain reasons the last person on earth to whom she would apply under any circumstances whatever. She had no real friends, only acquaintances who could be of no great service to her, but eventually, thanks to the inherent spirit and pluck which buoyed her up, she managed to find means of supporting herself. And all this had befallen rather more than two years previously to when we first see her, being, more or less politely, shown the door at the Villa Carstairs.

Now, shut up in the mouldy darkness of the slow, Jolting vehicle, it all came back to her again, and she had to hurriedly brush away the warm tears which the recollection – always vivid – had evoked, as the cab drew up with a jolt at her friend's lodgings. But she met with what she most needed, a cordial welcome. Even the cabman, a rubicund old fellow with a bulbous nose and a rumbling voice, forebore to claim so much as a penny over his legal fare when he caught a full view of her face under the street lamp, and a gratuity of threepence, smilingly tendered, was met by a hearty "Thankee kindly, missie."

Cumnor Lodge, the Carstairs villa, though dull and heavy outside, within was characterised by a considerable degree of solid comfort. But this narrow hallway and the nondescript combination of smells of sink-cum-cabbage, with a slatternly landlady and a still more slatternly servant, waiting to give a hand upstairs with the luggage as well as to satisfy a natural curiosity as to what the visitor would be like, struck her with a very real chill. Would it be her lot to inhabit such a place, was the thought that instinctively shot through her mind? But the impression was partly neutralised when she found herself within her friend's tiny but snug sitting-room, with its bright fire, and hissing kettle, and tea and its appurtenances all so dear to the feminine eye. Violet Clinock was a bright, pleasing type of girl, with dark hair, and honest grey eyes, not exactly pretty, but rather near being so. But with all her natural cheerfulness, there was intertwined an impression of one who was perfectly well able to take care of herself. In fact she rather prided herself upon this, and upon being an independent bachelor

girl who could always make her own way. She was a country parson's daughter – one of many – under which circumstances she flattered herself she had done the right thing in striking out on her own.

"This shop's rather dingy in the daytime, dear," she explained as the two were seated comfortably in the really cosy little room, and the tea and muffins and other things dear to the feminine appetite were in full force. "But I'm not much here in the daytime, and at night, once I get inside it doesn't matter. The main thing is it's cheap – very. Not nasty either, for I do every mortal thing for myself. Heaven help me if I left it to anybody else. Well, I've been saving up, with an eye to running a typing shop on my own. It isn't my ambition to remain for ever in a position to take orders from other people, I can tell you. Well, and why did you leave your last crowd? Had a row?"

"Sort of. It takes two to make a row, and there wasn't much of that on my side," answered Melian. "I just let the old woman talk, but she didn't get what she wanted. I got the key of the street instead – so, here I am. By the way," she added, waxing grave. "I don't know where I'm going to be. That's a pair of shoes of another pattern."

"Oh, with all your high accomplishments," laughed the other. "Why any one would jump at you."

"Would they? They're welcome to skip, then. But even 'high accomplishments' are no good without references."

"Without references? But you can get – Oh, I see. The old cat won't give you any."

Melian nodded.

"The beastly old cat!" pronounced Violet. "She ought to be compelled to."

"Well, she can't be, and that's all I've got to do with it. So there you are."

"Let's see. You're no good at our job, are you, Melian?" said the other, drumming the tips of her fingers together meditatively.

"Unfortunately I've never learned it."

"That's a pity." In her romantic little soul she was beginning to weave a web of destiny for Melian, and the meshes thereof were glittering. A secretarial post in some flourishing office, and if her beautiful friend did not promptly enslave an opulent junior partner, why then it was her own fault. But then, unfortunately, her said "beautiful friend" had never learned typing.

They chatted on, about everything and nothing, and bedtime came.

"I turn in early," explained Violet, "because I have to turn out early, and get to my job. You'll have to turn in with me, dear, to-night at any rate. To-morrow, if you want a room to yourself, I dare say Mrs Seals can fix you up. But they're all rather kennels I'm afraid. I've got the pick of the basket."

"Don't you worry about me, Violet. It's something to have some one to come to when you get the key of the street door given you, I can tell you," answered Melian, seriously. And then they went to bed and talked each other to sleep.

There followed then, sad, disappointing, heart weary days for poor Melian. She answered advertisements in person, and by letter. She went to all sorts of places, in and around London, in course of such answers. Sometimes she was sympathetically received, twice she was insulted, but that was where she found the dominant male had been advertiser under cover of what looked like one of her own sex. But in the genuine cases disappointment awaited – and but that she was free from vanity or self-consciousness she might easily have read the real nature of the verdict – "Far too pretty."

Oh, the weariness of those daily tramps, and bus and tram journeys, through more or less hideous, drab, depressing streets in the dull, deadly depressing winter murk invariably characteristic of London during the young end of the year! Oh, the weight of it upon the mind, as she realised, instinctively, that it was not a case of try again, but that for some reason or other her case seemed utterly hopeless. She put it to her friend. But the latter, though she shrewdly suspected the reason, shrank from saying so.

Of her, Melian saw little or nothing during the daytime, Violet Clinock was thorough, and stuck to her job, with an eye to material improvement. But in the evening they would foregather, and

the daily tale of worn out disappointment would unfold itself, and after the wretched, soul-wearying effort of the day Melian could not but realise the warmth and comfort and companionship which it ended up with; and this in a measure heartened her for the next.

She had taken a small bedroom at the top of the squalid house – a mere attic, but the two girls “chummed” together for the rest of their arrangements. But a fortnight went by, then three weeks, and still with the same result. Melian Seward was just where she was at the time of leaving Cumnor Lodge. There seemed to be no room in the world for her. Her slender savings, in spite of every possible economy, were dwindling. When they had done dwindling – what then?

And then the result of the cold, dank, and often wet, questings around after a means of livelihood, combined with lowness of spirits, and a sorely disturbed mind, came. She was laid low with a bad bout of influenza. The hydra-headed fiend was hard on the ramp, seeking whom he might devour, and finding it too in plenty. And among his countless victims was Melian Mervyn Seward.

And she could not afford to be ill; for is not illness a luxury for the rich?

But through it all her friend tended her with wholehearted and loyal camaraderie. Of course she suggested a doctor.

“A doctor? Heavens, Violet! I can’t afford such luxuries,” Melian burst forth fiercely. “The only thing I can afford is to die – and the sooner the better.” And then she became delirious, and imagined she was standing on the platform of the gloomy, dingy terminus, amid its vibration of hissing, shrieking engines, discussing those hateful, fateful railway insurance tickets with her dead father. But whether she would have a doctor or not, Violet was determined she should, and sent for one accordingly.

He, on arrival, looked grave.

“Has she any relations, Miss Clinock?”

“Oh, good Heavens! You don’t say it means that?” And the business girl was startled for the moment out of her normal take-things-as-they-come attitude.

“No, no, no. But – they ought to know. She’s in a very low state, I’m bound to inform you. There’s something on her mind – something hard and heavy on her mind – and that’s all against her – all against everything.”

“Lord! I wish I knew what to do. But she’s very ‘close.’ Between ourselves, doctor – of course, strictly between ourselves – ” The other nodded. “I believe she has one or two. But she must have quarrelled with them, or they with her, for if ever I got on to the subject she takes me up mighty sharp, I can tell you. And I don’t believe in forcing people’s confidences or prying into their affairs.”

“No, no. Of – course not. Still, do all you can in that direction. You may find opportunities, you know – or make them. Good-evening, I am very busy just now, there’s a record lot of ‘flu’ about, as I dare say you know. I’ll look round in the morning.”

Chapter Eight

Violet's Discovery

"In the morning," the doctor had said. What a deal of difference those three words can cover. In this instance Melian had passed a quiet night, thanks to his prescription, but was very down and listless. Violet Clinock had decided to take a day off on purpose to look after her, and with that intent had "expressed" a note down to her place of business to intimate that fact. Now she sat at breakfast, alone, with the morning paper propped up against her coffee pot.

As she read, a name caught her eye. "Seward Mervyn." She stared. "Seward Mervyn" again. Yes it was. And then running her glance down the paragraph and up again, she saw that it was headed: "Clancehurst – The Heath Hover Mystery." Thus it ran:

"The remains of the unidentified stranger, who met his death so mysteriously at Heath Hover, the residence of Mr Seward Mervyn, were buried yesterday afternoon in Clancehurst churchyard. No friends or relatives were forthcoming, but Mr Mervyn, unwilling that one who had been a guest of his – though from first to last unknown to himself – should be buried by the parish, generously came forward, and together with Dr Sandys and a few other generous leading townspeople, raised sufficient to cover all expenses, and also attended the funeral. Up till now no light whatever has been thrown upon this strange occurrence which has baffled alike all the researches of medical science and the exhaustive investigations of the police. Inspector Nashby of Clancehurst, together with an official from Scotland Yard are in charge of the case from the latter point of view."

Violet stared at the paragraph and read it through again. Now it all came back. She had read about it before, but it had not fixed itself upon her memory. Even the name had failed to effect this then for she had not seen Melian for some time, and in the busy life she led, "out of sight out of mind" could not but hold good to a certain extent. But now the name seized her attention at once. "Seward Mervyn?" And she knew that Melian's second name was Mervyn, Clearly this must be a relation. And the doctor had asked her about Melian's relations.

She read no more of the paper. Her shrewd, busy little brain was at work. This must be a relation, probably an uncle or a cousin. Clearly her duty was to communicate with him. Clancehurst was only about an hour and a half from London. The day was young – should she go down herself and interview him personally? But against that she did not care to leave her friend alone at this stage. Should she write? Perhaps that would be the best course. But she had better question Melian first as to her relative, while saying nothing about any intention on her part to communicate with him. Having thus decided, she went up to her friend's room, taking the paper with her.

Melian was awake, but drowsily so. Her blue eyes were wide open, but had a pathetic and lack-lustre look, and her hair, partly loosened, made a tumbled halo of gold against the pillow. Yes, she had slept well – she said – only rather wished she could go on sleeping for ever.

"By the way," went on Violet, casually, after having talked a little about things in general. "Have you got a relation named Seward Mervyn?"

"Oh yes! He's my uncle. He's out in India."

"Is he? Well have you any other relation of the name?"

"No. Not that I know of. In fact I can't have – or I should have known it."

"Well then, this one isn't out in India at all. He's in England, and not very far from London at that. In fact, only about an hour and a half by rail, if as much."

Melian stared, then raised herself on one elbow.

"What on earth are you talking about, Violet?" she said. "I tell you he's in India."

"Well, people come back from India sometimes, don't they?"

“Yes. But I’ve no interest in this one, nor he in me. He has never shown any at any rate. I don’t want him to either. He wasn’t at all nice to my father. He disapproved of his sister marrying him, and, in fact, he disapproved of him entirely. No. I couldn’t bring myself to be civil even if I were to see him.”

“Have you ever seen him?”

“No.”

The word jerked out fiercely. Violet Clinock could see that her friend was getting excited, and that was bad.

“Then don’t be in too great a hurry to pass judgment. Life is – I’m not going to say, ‘too short,’ as the silly old chestnut runs, when if anything it’s long enough – but too busy, too hard, to keep grinding away at ancient grievances, even if they are not entirely or partly imaginary. It’s just possible that this relation of yours may have been a bit misunderstood. Anyway give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Where did you say he is?” said Melian listlessly.

“Clancehurst – or near it, rather,” glancing again at the newspaper. “Heath Hover, they call his place.”

“That sounds rather nice,” murmured the invalid.

“It’s a jolly part of the country I can tell you,” went on Violet, emphatically. Her plot seemed somehow to look hopeful. “I’ve been near that part, and I’d give something for a week or two down there now with my bike, even though it is winter. The glow of the heather, and the green and gold of the waving woods is something to see, I tell you.”

“In winter?” smiled Melian artlessly.

“No, you goose. I’m talking about summer and autumn.”

“Oh!”

“Shall I read you the paragraph?”

“Yes, do.”

The other did so, and then went on to tell her all about the original mystery, which now came back to her memory. Melian listened, and grew more and more interested.

“It’s funny how the thing should have escaped my attention,” she said. “But I didn’t see the papers regularly at the Carstairs’. Sometimes a day or two would go by – or even longer.”

Melian grew no better. Violet could not stay in to look after her every day, for she was entirely dependent upon her work, and were she to lose this, why then they would both be in the same boat. So during the day she was dependent on the slatternly landlady – who though well meaning and kind according to her lights, was yet slatternly, and very vulgar in her ideas. So the girl would lie there by the hour, feeling too weak and listless even to read, with no more cheering a prospect to look out upon than a vista of black chimney stacks and chimney cowl, taking weird shapes against the grey murk of the London sky. And what was there to cheer her? Nothing. Even when she did get well her small savings would have vanished, or dwindled to vanishing point, in the incidental expenses of her illness alone, apart from the liquidation of her medical attendant’s claim. The girl felt very wretched, very despairing, as she lay there day after day in her loneliness. And in the evening when her friend returned and tried to cheer her, the process grew more and more difficult.

“This won’t do,” said the doctor, one morning, coming into Violet’s little sitting-room with a very grave face. “Is there nowhere that Miss Seward could go to for a complete change of air and scene?”

Violet shook her head sadly. She thought of the dwindling purse, and of her friend’s sinking despondency. She thought also of her friend’s pride. And then an idea came to her.

“There is only one thing I can think of, doctor,” she said suddenly, “and even that may bring forth nothing. But if I tell you, it is entirely in confidence you understand.”

“Why that of course,” answered the doctor. He was a youngish man, very hardworking, in a hard-worked and poorly paying practice, and like most members of his profession had more than an

ordinary share of intelligent human sympathy. He guessed pretty accurately at one of the causes for worry which kept back his patient upstairs – in fact the main cause – and had been puzzling how to hint, delicately, that so far as he was concerned, that cause need not count.

Then Violet told him of the existence of Melian's unknown relative and how the girl refused to communicate with him, through some notion of – probably mistaken – pride. At the mention of the name and locality Dr Barnes brightened up at once.

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