GUILTY BONDS

BY

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Freeditorial

Guilty Bonds

Chapter One.

The Mystery of Bedford Place.

“Come, have another hand, Burgoyne.”

“I’ll have my revenge to-morrow, old fellow,” I replied.

“Why not to-night?”

“It’s past two, and I’ve a long walk home, remember.”

“Very well; as you wish.”

My friend, Robert Nugent, a journalist, was young man, tall and dark, twenty-seven at the outside, with a pleasant, smiling face. His wavy hair, worn rather long, and negligence of attire gave him a dash of the genial good-for-nothing.

It was in the card-room of that Bohemian—but, alas, now defunct—institution, the Junior Garrick Club, where we had been indulging in a friendly hand. Having finished our game, we ordered some refreshment, and seated ourselves upon the balcony on Adelphi Terrace, smoking our last cigarettes, and watching the ripple of the stream, the broken reflection of the stars, and many lights that lined the Thames. All was dark in the houses on the opposite shore; the summer wind whispered in the leafy boughs on the Embankment, and a faint cold grey in the east showed that night was on the edge of morn.

For some time we sat chatting, until Big Ben boomed forth three o’clock; then we rose, and wishing good-night to the men who were still playing, sought our hats and left the club.

We walked together as far as Danes’ Inn, where we parted, Nugent entering the Inn, while I continued my homeward walk alone. From the Strand to Torrington Square is a considerable distance; but I did not feel inclined for sleep, and sauntered along in the steely light, enjoying the silence and solitude of the deserted streets, absorbed in my own thoughts.

What need I say about myself? Some envied me, I knew, for I chanced to be the only son of a wealthy man who had died a few months before, leaving me a handsome fortune, together with a stately old mansion in Northamptonshire. In

the choice of a profession I had not altogether pleased my father, the result being that the old gentleman was somewhat niggardly regarding my allowance, and in consequence of this I had lived a devil-may-care Bohemian life, earning a moderate living by my pen. But upon my father's death a change came, and now, instead of a hand-to-mouth existence, I found myself with an income which far exceeded my wildest expectations. This sudden affluence might have turned the head of many a man, but it made very little difference to me. My friends, for the most part struggling artists and literary men, congratulated me upon my good fortune, probably believing that now I was rich I should cut them. They were mistaken; I continued to live pretty much as before, though I gave up literary work and devoted more time to pleasure.

Dreamily pondering over what I should do in the future, and heedless of where my footsteps led me, I had crossed Holborn and was passing along Bedford Place, Bloomsbury, before I was aroused from my reverie.

At that moment I was passing a rather large, handsome-looking house, of a character somewhat superior to its neighbours, inasmuch as its outward appearance had an air of wealth and prosperity. The other houses were in darkness, but the drawing-room of this particular one was brilliantly lit, the window being almost on a level with the pavement.

A faint agonised cry caused me to pause in my walk. For some moments I stood before the gilt-topped railings listening, but no other sound greeted my ears.

My idle, reflective mood suddenly fled. Recalled from it by the startling distinctness of the appeal—half-moan, half-scream, with its intonation of anguish—an overwhelming curiosity possessed me.

An ominous sound: what could it mean?

Impelled by an involuntary inquisitiveness I resolved to ascertain, if possible, the cause of this midnight cry of distress.

The gate leading to the front door was open. I crept inside and advanced cautiously.

Upon tiptoe I placed my face close to the glass of the window. At first my expectations seemed doomed, but to my intense joy I found a small aperture between the blind and window-sash through which a glimpse of the interior could be obtained.

My eager eyes fell upon a scene which caused me to start back with a scarcely repressed ejaculation of horror and surprise!

A tragedy had been enacted!

Stretched at full length upon the carpet was the form of a woman in a white flimsy evening dress, the breast of which bore a large crimson stain—the stain of blood!

Utterly unable to make up my mind how to act, I stood rooted to the spot. A violent gust of wind swept down the street, causing the lights in the lamps to flicker, and the branches of the stunted trees to groan beneath its power.

Just then the front door opened and closed noiselessly, and as I drew back into the shadow a man passed me so closely that I could touch him; and after glancing anxiously up and down the street, walked hurriedly away.

As he brushed past, the light from a neighbouring street-lamp disclosed the face of a young and rather handsome man, with dark eyes and carefully waxed moustache—a face it was impossible to mistake.

I hesitated a few seconds whether I should give the alarm and follow him. The echo of his retreating footsteps brought me to my senses, and I started off after the fugitive.

As soon as he heard my footsteps behind him, however, he quickened his pace. I had gained on him until he was within a hundred yards or so, when he suddenly turned half-fearfully around, and started running as fast as his legs could carry him.

I called upon him to stop, but he took no heed. We were soon in Russell Square, and, crossing it, turned the corner at the Alexandra Hospital and continued along Guilford Street into Gray's Inn Road. I was a fairly good runner, yet though I exerted every muscle in my endeavours to catch the man, nevertheless he gradually increased the distance between us.

It was an exciting chase. If I could only meet a policeman no doubt we might run him to earth by our combined efforts; but after the lapse of five minutes, without meeting one of the guardians of the public peace, the mysterious man dived into some intricate turnings, with which he was evidently too well acquainted, and I was compelled to relinquish the pursuit.

Chapter Two.

Sealed Lips.

With some difficulty I at last found my way back to the house, but all was quiet, and the passer-by would little dream of the terrible tragedy that had taken place within. I had no time for reflection, however, for I heard the well-known creaking footstep, and saw the flashing of a distant bull's-eye, betokening the arrival of a policeman from the opposite direction.

Hastening to meet the constable, with excited gesture and confused accents, I told him of my horrible discovery. At first the man seemed inclined to disbelieve it, but seeing I was in earnest, accompanied me to the house, and peeped in at the window as directed.

He started when his gaze fell upon the prostrate woman.

"Do you know who lives 'ere?" he asked.

"No. Haven't I told you I'm an utter stranger?" I replied.

As I spoke he ran up the short flight of stone steps and pulled the large brass knob beside the door.

Clear and distinct the deep-toned bell clanged out somewhere in the regions at the rear, but there was no response.

As suddenly as it had risen the wind sank; the streets were silent, the houses gloomy as rows of sepulchres tenanted only by the departed; and as the day broke, cold and grey, light fleecy clouds gathered over the waning moon.

Twice the constable tugged at the bell in his efforts to awaken the inmates of the house, but all was still, save for the bark of a distant dog. Although we both strained our ears, no sounds of life were apparent within.

"Shall I go round to the station for help? I can find it if you will direct me," I said to the man.

"No; you stay 'ere. There's no necessity," replied he gruffly. "I'll soon call my mates," and applying his whistle to his lips, he blew a series of shrill calls, which were immediately answered by others.

Ten minutes later three policemen had arrived, and, finding there was no entrance from the rear, had burst open the door.

The houses adjoining were both empty, so no neighbours were awakened by the noise.

We entered undisturbed.

From the spacious hall several doors opened right and left; while immediately opposite was a broad staircase.

With but a hasty glance around we passed to a door which stood open, and from which a flood of light was issuing. There our eyes encountered a terrible sight.

Lying on her back upon the carpet, with her arms outstretched above her head, was a tall and undeniably beautiful woman of about thirty years of age. Her wealth of fair hair had become unfastened, and fell in disorder about her bare shoulders. Her lips were still apart, as if in her last moments she had uttered a cry, and her clear blue eyes, wide open, had in them a stony stare—that of death.

Attired in an elegant evening dress of soft white silk, her low bodice revealed the fatal wound in her breast from which the blood slowly oozed, forming a dark crimson pool upon the carpet. Upon her wrist was a splendid diamond bracelet of an uncommon pattern, for it was shaped to represent a double-headed snake, and under the gaslight the gems danced and gleamed with a thousand fires.

The appearance of the murdered woman was hideous enough in itself, but something else we saw startled us, and sent an increased thrill of horror through our nerves.

We were awe-struck by the sight of it, yet there was nothing extraordinarily revolting—merely a half sheet of notepaper upon which was a large red seal of a peculiar character, fastened to the breast of the dress.

“Good God! The Seal!”

It was the ejaculation of one of the constables as he knelt and unpinned the paper.

Breathlessly, we bent over the piece of paper and closely examined it, for we were all aware of the unparalleled and inexplicable mysteries with which not only London but the whole world was ringing.

It had an awful significance.

That its exact dimensions and strange hieroglyphics may be the more readily conceived, I reproduce it here:—

The horrible mystery connected with the fatal device flashed vividly across my mind in an instant, as, with a sickly, giddy feeling in my head, my heart beating violently, and my hands trembling as if palsied, I examined it. What did it mean? I wondered in a dazed fashion, for my thoughts seemed in a whirl of maddening velocity. There was no power in my mind to grasp the meaning of the hideous fact at first, and only a stupefied, dull sense of evil filled my soul.

My mental vision grew gradually clearer after a few moments; as if slowly awakening from a frightful dream, I drew myself together, trying to grasp the full interpretation of the mysterious symbol.

Within the past few months there had been no fewer than six murders in different countries, and in every case a piece of paper with a seal identical with the one we had just discovered had been found pinned upon the breast of the victim; yet in no instance had there been a clue to the murderer, though all the vigilance of the police, both at Scotland Yard and elsewhere, had been directed towards the elucidation of the mystery.

We stood aghast and pale, for the discovery had completely dumbfounded us.

There had been something so uncanny, almost supernatural, about the six other crimes, which so closely followed each other, that for the moment we were quite unnerved at this latest essay of the unrevealed assassin.

A momentary glance sufficed to convince the constables that a brutal murder had been committed, and after a few moments' hesitation two of their number hurried out—one to fetch the divisional surgeon, the other to report to the inspector on duty at the station.

The two constables remaining gently lifted the corpse, and placing it upon a low lounge near, began to examine the apartment. It was a luxuriously-furnished drawing-room, and the gas, which burned in crimson glass, threw a soft harmonious light over the furniture and hangings, which were composed of

pale blue satin; and upon the costly nick-nacks which plainly showed the owner was possessed of artistic tastes and refinement. A room, in fact, which bore the unmistakable traces of the daily presence of a woman of wealth and culture.

Glancing round, I could see that some of the articles were of great value. The pictures were for the most part rare, the quaint old Dresden and Sèvres upon the brackets, and the ivory carvings, were all curiosities of no ordinary character, while upon the mantelshelf stood a French clock, the tiny peal of silver bells of which chimed merrily, even as I looked.

Presently the officers concluded their examination of the room, and taking one of the candles from the piano, proceeded upstairs to search the house.

Accompanying them, I, an unwilling witness of this midnight tragedy, found the whole of the rooms furnished in elegant taste, no expense having been spared to make them the acme of comfort and luxury. Every nook and corner was searched, without success, so we returned again to the drawing-room.

To our surprise we found the body had moved slightly from the position in which we had placed it. The woman's bloodless face seemed gradually to assume the faintest flush, her eyelids quivered, and in a strange, low whisper she uttered a word which to us was unintelligible.

Again she articulated it with evident difficulty; then a convulsive shudder shook her frame, her breast heaved, and her features again grew pale and rigid.

We stood watching her for a moment. One of the constables placed his hand upon her breast, but withdrew it, saying, "It's all over with her, poor thing; I'm afraid the doctor won't be able to do her any good."

And we sat down to await the arrival of the inspector and surgeon, conversing only in low whispers.

A few minutes had elapsed, when they entered.

The doctor, as soon as he saw her, shook his head, saying, "Dead, poor woman! Ah! stabbed to the heart, I see."

"Murder, evidently," exclaimed the inspector, glancing round; then turning to the constables, he asked, "Have you searched the house?"

“Yes, sir,” they replied.

“Found anything?”

“This, we found in the hall,” replied one of the men, taking a small Indian dagger from a side-table, “and this paper was pinned upon her dress.”

The production of the seal caused both the inspector and doctor to start in surprise, and the former, after examining it, placed it carefully in his pocket-book.

Taking the knife in his hand, the inspector examined it minutely. It was stained with blood—evidently the weapon with which the murderer had dealt the fatal blow.

The doctor also looked at it, and wiping the blood from the victim’s breast, gazed upon the wound, saying, “Yes, that’s the knife, without a doubt; but who did it is the question.”

“Who’s this gentleman?” asked the officer, jerking his thumb towards me.

“Gentleman who informed us, sir.”

“Do you know who lives here?” he asked, sharply, turning to me.

“No, I do not. I am quite a stranger; in fact, I have never been in this street before in my life.”

“Hum!” he grunted, in a rather suspicious manner. “And how came you to know anything about the affair?”

“I chanced to be passing at the time, and my attention was attracted by a scream. I found a space between the blind and the window, and my curiosity being aroused, I looked in and saw the woman had been murdered.”

“Is that all you know?” he asked.

“That’s all.”

“Well, you won’t mind just stepping round to the station for a few minutes, will you? Then you can give us your version of the matter.”

“Oh, certainly I will, with pleasure,” I replied. The inspector having given some instructions to his men, the body of the murdered woman was covered with a table-cloth, and we went out leaving two constables in charge of the premises.

Dawn was spreading now; the stars had disappeared, and there were some saffron tints in the east, heralding the sun’s coming. At the corner of Montague Street the doctor wished us “good-morning,” and strode away in an opposite direction, scarcely well pleased at being aroused from his bed and called out to witness so unpleasant a sight.

Chapter Three.

What the World Said.

A quarter of an hour later I was in the inspector's office at Tottenham Court Road Police-Station, relating to him all I knew of the horrible discovery.

"You saw a man come out, you say? Are you certain of this?" the inspector asked, after I had concluded my story.

"Quite; and, what's more, I saw his face."

"Would you know him again?" he inquired, eyeing me keenly.

"Certainly, I should."

"Well, when you saw him, what did you do?"

"I followed him. We ran for nearly five minutes without meeting a constable, and I subsequently lost sight of him in Gray's Inn Road."

"For five minutes without meeting one of our men?" repeated the inspector, dubiously.

"Yes. I shouted, but nobody came to my assistance," I replied, for I had not failed to notice the suspicion with which he regarded me.

The inspector's brows contracted slightly as he took a slate from his desk, saying, "Give me his description as accurately as possible, please."

I did so, and he wrote at my dictation. As soon as he had finished, he handed the slate to a sergeant, who at once went to the row of telegraph instruments and transmitted the description of the murderer to all the stations in the Metropolitan Police District.

"And this was upon the body when you saw it?" exclaimed the officer, smoothing out the crumpled piece of paper before placing it upon the desk in front of him.

I nodded an affirmative, and proceeded to describe the position of the paper as pinned upon the breast.

“Hum! well, I think that’s all,” said he, when I had finished. “You say you live in Torrington Square. Ah! I have the number. And you spent the evening at the Junior Garrick Club—was that so?”

“Yes.”

“At the inquest we shall want you as a witness; but you will get warning in due course. Good-morning.”

I left the station, and trudged homeward, full of thoughts of the horrible scene of which I had been an involuntary spectator.

Truly the night had been an eventful one.

The discovery had been made too late for the first editions of the morning papers, but those published on the following evening gave accounts of the tragedy, headed “Another Mysterious Murder: The Mystic Seal again,” in which the details of the crime were most graphically told, the facts exaggerated, and plenty of fiction infused; for that style known as the New Journalism seems to have been invented for the purpose of satisfying the craving for sensational reading.

During the day I was pestered with interviewers. Several enterprising reporters, who saw a chance of making an interesting column of “copy” out of me, sent up their cards, and to them I granted an audience. Following these came two detectives from the Criminal Investigation Department, who also wished for a description of my night’s adventure.

This I gave willingly, yet to my astonishment and annoyance I found, when I went down to the club in the evening, that the police had been making inquiries of the servants as to what time I left on the previous night, besides endeavouring to learn various other particulars.

I, Frank Burgoyne, was evidently suspected of the crime!

There had been six murders, all curious, unexplained mysteries, which had formed the chief topic of conversation and comment in the newspapers for the past few weeks. In each there appeared an utter absence of motive, which made the enigma doubly puzzling; and though the murderer had sought his victims from every rank of society, the same seal—evidently impressed by the same hand—had been found pinned upon the breast of the corpses.

Premeditated the crimes undoubtedly were, and accomplished by one to whom murder was an art, for in not a single instance was there the slightest clue to his identity, though some were committed in broad daylight. The modus operandi appeared to be similar in every case, and with the exception of one victim, who had been shot, the remaining five had all been stabbed to the heart by a stiletto, which the murderer usually carried away with him.

Various were the theories advanced as to the motives for these appalling deeds.

Some journals suggested that the murderer was a maniac, whose insatiable thirst for blood was controlled by the moon's changes. This appeared plausible enough to some, but others asked how, if he were a lunatic, did he continue so effectually to conceal himself. These were told there was method in madness, and that in all probability the murderer was insane whilst committing the crimes, and immediately afterwards, on gaining his right senses, he remembered nothing of the fearful deeds.

Such hypotheses, and others of a far wilder character, were daily talk, not only throughout the Kingdom, but in all the Continental capitals, and in America. Although several heavy rewards had been offered for the apprehension of the defender, and a free pardon to any accomplice, all efforts to discover him were futile. The shrewdest detectives acknowledged themselves utterly baffled.

The most inexplicable part of the mystery was the fact that the crimes were not confined to one city, or even to one country, but had been committed at places at great distances from one another. This plainly showed that the murderer travelled with almost miraculous rapidity.

Very little sensation was created by the first discovery, although it was regarded as a mysterious affair. It occurred in New York, where a celebrated financier, George M. Sheward, was discovered one day in his private office, stabbed to the heart. Here the fatal seal first made its appearance. At the time the New York police thought little of the fact, and the finding of the symbol was not made public until subsequently, when other crimes had taken place, and the same emblem was found.

From inquiries, it appeared that the deceased arrived at Wall Street, as usual, at ten o'clock in the morning, retiring into his room, which was only separated from that of his clerk's by a short passage, some ten feet in length. He remained in his room an hour, interviewing several clients and attending to his correspondence. His manager had occasion to consult him shortly after eleven,

when on entering the room he was horrified at finding him dead in his chair. Upon the blotting-pad before him lay the paper whereon was the seal.

The persons who had called to see the murdered man were so numerous that neither of the clerks could tell who had been the last to visit their master, yet it was certain that the murderer, whoever he was, had passed through the public office to get to the principal's room.

As the deceased gentleman had a world-wide reputation, the fact of his sudden death from some unknown assassin was speedily carried to the ends of the civilised globe, or, at all events, to the great centres where his financial influence was felt. He was a quiet, reserved man, but had many friends, for his well-known benevolence of disposition, combined with his immense wealth, had acquired for him a celebrity in more circles than one.

The New York police, aided by the powerful agency of the Press, which in America takes a peculiar pride in the business of the detection of crime, gave all its energies to the unravelling of the mystery; but their efforts, alas! were in vain. Before a fortnight had passed, news was received from Vienna that Herr Scherb, a wealthy professor, a man of great scientific attainments, had been stabbed in a restaurant at mid-day.

It appeared that a waiter, on approaching a table at which Herr Scherb was sitting, was terrified to observe that he was quite dead. The cause of his sudden demise was a glittering dagger, even then firmly fixed in the breast. On this being removed, it was discovered that a piece of paper bearing the seal had been fastened to the handle.

With trembling fingers and blanched faces the spectators unfolded it, and tried to decipher the hieroglyphics. It was not until the discovery of this seal had gained publicity that the New York police admitted finding one that was identical.

This was considered a very curious circumstance and was freely commented upon by various London and provincial newspapers, some giving a woodcut of what purported to be a representation of the mysterious characters upon the seal. Considerable excitement was caused thereby, and numbers of antiquarians and others at once set about trying to solve its meaning; but although editors were flooded with correspondence from those who professed to have found an elucidation, it remained as enigmatical as ever.

Just as the excitement was abating there came information of a third tragedy. This time a young French actress, Mlle. Voiturit, who waspremière danseuse at the Eden Theatre in Paris, was discovered late one evening in the Kalverstraat at Amsterdam, dying from the effects of a knife-wound in the breast.

There were dozens of persons passing and repassing in the street at the time of the occurrence, nevertheless, so swiftly and surely was the blow dealt and the seal attached, that before a crowd had assembled, the unfortunate young artiste had expired.

This created little less than a panic.

By the existence of the seals—each of which corresponded in every detail with the others—the fact was proved that the murders, if not committed by the same hand, were within the knowledge of the same person. This, of course, was a peculiar element in the case, and not a little speculation was indulged in as to what was the chief motive leading to the commission of crimes so outrageous.

The next dastardly affair caused a thrill of amazement and horror through the whole of Europe.

Mr Joseph Glossop, member of the House of Commons, and one of Society's shining lights, had been found dead in bed at his house in Mount Street, Grosvenor Square, in most curious circumstances. True, the deceased had met with his death much in the same manner as the three previous victims, and he seal was present in exactly the same form, yet the window of the room was securely fastened, and the door locked.

This catastrophe caused the hearts of the three great capitals to throb with fear and indignation and the efforts of the police were redoubled. The same result—or lack of result—followed all their endeavours, however, and again nothing was discovered of the assassin who so ruthlessly took the lives of his unoffending fellow-men.

The police were utterly powerless, for the marvellous, almost superhuman, swiftness with which the fell deeds were accomplished, and the manner in which the murderer gained access to his victims, were two points which were entirely incomprehensible.

But while this situation was bad enough, it was nothing when compared with the complete paralysis which took possession of the entire population when, a

few weeks later, the work of the same dreadful hand was observed, this time at Zurich, where Madame Daburon—a celebrated authoress, whose works, principally on political questions, and of a Socialistic tendency, had attracted a great deal of attention—was found lying in the bottom of a pleasure boat drifting upon the Lake.

The discovery was made by a party of tourists who were out sailing, and their dismay may be readily imagined when they found the unfortunate woman had been shot in the breast, and the seal placed upon her.

There were neither oars nor rudder to the boat, yet from the presence of blood it was plain that the shot was fired after the murdered woman had embarked, and it was more than probable that the assassin, before escaping, threw both oars and rudder overboard. How he landed was a mystery.

Hardly had the news of this latest crime reached London, when the sensation was increased by the report that another person had been discovered in the metropolis with the seal upon him.

In a few hours this statement was confirmed.

It transpired that on the afternoon following the discovery in Switzerland some children who were at play in Upper Street, Islington, noticed blood trickling from under the door of a pawnbroker's shop occupied by Mr Isaac Solomons. The police were called; with difficulty the door was forced. Solomons was found face downwards in the passage, with a fearful gash in his throat, and on lifting the body, the seal was seen pinned upon him.

The seventh of this remarkable series was the Mystery of Bedford Place.

The Comet—most sensational of evening newspapers—upon the staff of which was my friend Bob Nugent, appeared with what it assured its readers was a portrait of the murdered woman, and in its comments upon the continuation of the mysterious crimes severely criticised our police system, asking what was the use of a Commissioner, of detectives, of a police force at all, if crimes could be committed with impunity in our very midst.

The murderer apparently treated the vigilance of the combined detective force of Europe with the utmost indifference, and such an attitude was alarming, for, as the latter acknowledged themselves defeated, there was no telling where this wholesale butchery would end!

That there was a motive for it all no one doubted, though it was a problem none could solve.

What was to be done? demanded the public; a question on which the newspapers were skilfully silent.

Questions were asked in the House, but the reply was that all that could be done had been done.

The population were to be coolly assassinated, while the apathetic authorities made no secret of their incompetency, and treated it with unconcern.

The excitement rose to fever heat.

Chapter Four.

“Startling revelations.”

The coroner held his inquiry at a neighbouring tavern two days after the murder, but the investigations, instead of throwing any light upon the mystery, only increased it.

After the jury had formally viewed the body, the coroner, addressing the inspector in charge of the case, said,—

“We will take evidence of identification first.”

“We have none, sir, up to the present,” replied the officer gravely.

The jury looked at one another in dismay.

“What!” exclaimed the coroner. “Have you not discovered who the lady is?”

“No, sir. The only evidence we can procure is that of an estate agent by whom the house was let to deceased.”

“Call him.”

The oath having been administered to the witness, a man named Stevenson, he proceeded to give his evidence, from which it appeared that he was an agent carrying on business in Gower Street. A few months previous he was entrusted with the house in Bedford Place to let furnished, the family having gone abroad. A month ago the deceased called upon him, and after viewing the premises, consented to take them, paying six months’ rent in advance, and giving her name as Mrs Inglewood. She was undoubtedly a lady of means, for she kept two servants and rode out daily in a brougham hired from a neighbouring livery stable.

The most unaccountable feature of the case, however, was that neither of these servants were in the house at the time of the murder, nor had they since returned. The police had been unable to discover any one else who knew the murdered woman, or could give any particulars regarding her.

The next witness was myself, and my depositions were rather more satisfactory. I related my experience on the fatal night, and how I had discovered the crime. Then I was submitted to a severe cross-examination by

the jury regarding the appearance of the man who left the house immediately afterwards.

The other evidence adduced was purely formal: that of the divisional surgeon, who certified the cause of death was a knife-wound in the heart, and of the constable who came to my assistance. The latter produced the blood-smeared paper with its cabalistic seal, as to which much curiosity was evinced by the jury, it being handed round and minutely examined.

The inquest, after lasting several hours, was ultimately adjourned for a week, in order that the police might make further inquiries and bring the necessary evidence of identification.

To this end advertisements were inserted in the leading newspapers, giving a description of the latest victim, with the request that persons acquainted with her would communicate at once with any police-station in the metropolitan district.

This mystery in which the murdered woman was enveloped added to the excitement prevalent. Notwithstanding all the efforts of the Criminal Investigation Department, the coroner was informed, when he resumed his inquiry on the following week, that no further light could be thrown upon her identity. It seemed that the mysterious Mrs Inglewood was an utter stranger and entirely friendless, although the police were bound to admit there was something suspicious in the continued absence and strict silence of the servants. Had she any friends, one or other must have come forward, for the Press had carried the details of the tragedy to the most remote corners of the Kingdom.

No further statements being forthcoming, the jury, after a long deliberation, returned the same verdict as had been recorded upon the other mysterious deaths, that of “Wilful murder by some person or persons unknown.”

Thus ended the seventh murder, with all its journalistic embellishments; and the public, who looked for “startling revelations,” were disappointed.

“Who will be the next victim?” was the question all the capitals of the world were asking.

The detectives were by no means idle, and from occupants of neighbouring houses they found that Mrs Inglewood, during her residence, had received but few visitors, the most conspicuous being an elderly lady, accompanied

apparently by her daughter. They came several times a week in a victoria, and remained an hour.

This was all the information they were able to glean, for it seemed that the unfortunate woman was an enigma herself, making the mystery even more abstruse.

On the evening the jury delivered their verdict, I went down to the Club.

In the spacious smoking-room, with its fine portraits of Garrick and his contemporaries (which, alas, have now fallen under the hammer), a few Bohemians were taking their ease in the well-padded lounge chairs, discussing the details of the inquiry as reported in the evening journals.

“It’s all very well to talk,” exclaimed Hugh Latimer, a young artist of renown, as he cast aside his newspaper, “there must be something radically wrong with our detective force if the man Burgoyne has seen cannot be traced.”

“But how’s it to be done? Perhaps he could not be recognised,” suggested one.

“Or he may be in America by this time,” said another.

“No. I disagree with you. It is proved that the guilty one is a well-dressed man, and the success of his sanguinary work has been such as to encourage him to commit further crimes; therefore, the logical deduction is that he will remain in England and continue them,” Latimer replied. “What do you think?” he added, turning to me.

“I don’t think anything about it, except that I heartily wish I’d never been mixed up with it at all,” I said.

“I should have liked it myself,” exclaimed Bob Nugent, with an eye to the manufacture of sensational “copy.” The remark created a laugh.

“Well; joking aside,” he continued, “very few of you fellows who are pressmen would have objected to being on the scene of the tragedy. Sensational writing is the living of most of us, and if Burgoyne were in the position he once occupied, he would have been eager enough for the chance.”

”‘Them’s just my sentiments,’” said Moreland, who was on the staff of a comic journal, and fancied himself the wit of the Club. “But, you see, Burgoyne is no

longer one of us; he's one of the 'bloated aristocracy,' as he used to call the wealthy at one time."

"True," I said, smiling. "I know from experience that such mysteries are an unqualified blessing to the impecunious journalist. The worst of it is that I've grown so confoundedly idle now, I really have nothing with which to occupy my time."

"But you have plenty of work of a character that will benefit mankind, if you'll only do it," observed Nugent.

"What's that?"

"Find the author of the crimes. You have seen him, and it only remains for you to turn amateur detective. By the exercise of a little patience you will be able to identify the wretch and bring his guilt home to him."

"Impossible," I remarked, though the suggestion was one which had not crossed my mind before, and I felt inclined to give it some consideration, as I had grown listless and lazy, and required something to occupy my mind.

To write for one's bread and to write for mere pastime are very different matters. When I was compelled to follow journalism as a profession I put my very soul into my work; but now my keen enthusiasm had entirely disappeared, and I had neither patience nor inclination to write for pleasure.

"Man-hunting would be rattling good fun," remarked Latimer, "especially when one is free, and possesses as much of the world's good things as you, Burgoyne."

"What nonsense you fellows talk?" I said. "How could I hope to succeed where Scotland Yard fails?"

"Exactly. But they haven't seen the man they want; you have."

"Oh, let's change the subject. If ever I come across him he shall not go unpunished. Now, I've been at the inquest all day, and am bored to death with the whole thing. Come, Bob, let's go out on the balcony; I want to talk to you," I added, addressing Nugent.

Rising, we both passed out upon the veranda overlooking the Embankment.

Chapter Five.

Suspicions.

Like many others, I found my sudden acquisition of wealth had made me not a whit the more contented than when I was compelled to write for an existence. Still, I was a thorough-going Bohemian, and never happier than when amongst that free-and-easy artistic circle that made the Junior Garrick its headquarters.

For years Nugent had been my particular chum, and had frequently been the means of getting my articles accepted when I was more than usually hard-up; and now, in my affluence, I did not fail to remember the many services my old friend had rendered me.

As we sat together under the stars I was confiding to him how discontented I had felt of late.

“Well, my dear fellow, there’s only one remedy,” said Bob, blowing a cloud of smoke from his lips.

“And what’s that?”

“Get married.”

“Marriage be hanged! I couldn’t settle down; besides, it is not my intention to forge the matrimonial gyves just yet. The fact is, Bob, I’m not well. I believe this horrible murder has given me a touch of the blues, and nothing but an entire change will rid me of it. I’m bored with everything, and with myself most of all. It may seem strange, but I have no object in life, except merely to exist. Once I envied fellows with money, but, by Jove, I don’t now.”

“Then what is your intention?”

“To go abroad; and I want you to accompany me.”

“I should be only too pleased, providing I could get away, but I have a great deal of work on hand which I must finish,” replied Nugent.

“Do come, and take the rest with you. Fresh surroundings will incite new inspirations, and you can combine business with pleasure. Can you be ready by next Saturday?”

“Well, yes, I think so; but where do you intend going?”

“Don’t know, and don’t care a straw, as long as I get a change. We’ll run over to Paris first, and afterwards decide where shall be our next halting-place.”

“And how long do you propose being away?”

“Six months—a year, if you like.”

“I must return in a couple of months at latest, for I’ve business to attend to.”

“Very well, return whenever you please. What do you say to starting by the night mail on Saturday?”

Bob replied in the affirmative, and we ratified the agreement over a bottle of Pommery.

Later that night when I left the Club to walk home, my thoughts involuntarily wandered to the mysterious tragedy which I had discovered.

It was past one o’clock, and few people were about as I turned from Adam Street into the Strand. I was alone, and strolling along at an easy pace, passed down Drury Lane.

Suddenly I became conscious that some one had been following me, though the footsteps of the person seemed almost noiseless.

Thinking it might be some pickpocket, I buttoned my coat across the chest, and grasping my stick firmly, waited until I approached a gas-lamp, then turning suddenly, confronted a respectably-dressed man in the garb of a mechanic.

He was only a few yards from me, and at first I felt ashamed of exhibiting such fear, but a momentary glance sufficed to show that this person was also connected with the adventure of the never-to-be forgotten evening.

He was an elderly man, who bore a striking resemblance to the detective who had called upon me.

I stood aghast, for this man’s appearance had been so sudden and unexpected that I was too much confused for the moment to collect my thoughts.

He was apparently following me and keeping observation upon my movements. That fact instantly aroused in me a feeling of great indignation. I should have spoken, and probably an angry scene would have followed, had not he, with a celerity of movement which baffled my efforts, almost instantly gone off in an opposite direction.

I made no attempt to follow him.

It was intensely annoying to be tracked in this manner. Was I, Frank Burgoyne, to be watched like a suspected criminal or a ticket-of-leave man, because I had—unfortunately, as it seemed—been the means of bringing to light yet another foul piece of handiwork of the unknown miscreant?

Why did they suspect me? What end had they in view in such a proceeding?

Suppose my friends and the world should notice the suspicion resting upon me? I grew hot at the very thought.

Perhaps, after all, he was only acting from curiosity, and not under the orders of his superiors. The suggestion was a little consoling, and endeavouring to re-assure myself by its aid, I walked briskly home.

Chapter Six.

Vera Seroff.

Two months had elapsed.

Rob Nugent and I had had a pleasant time up the Rhine and among the Swiss lakes, and both acknowledged ourselves greatly benefited by the change. We were in Genoa, having broken our journey between Lugano and Rome, intending to remain only a couple of days, but finding so much of interest in the old city of Paganini and Columbus, we had already remained there a fortnight; and neither of us felt any inclination to travel further south.

We had taken up our quarters at the Hôtel Isotta, in that handsome thoroughfare the Via Roma, of which the Genoese are so justly proud, and though debarred from sight-seeing in the daytime by reason of the blazing autumn sun, we thoroughly enjoyed those cool balmy evenings when jalousies are thrown open, and the light-hearted Ligurians stroll up and down the Via Carlo Felice and the Via Assaroti, or sit outside the cafés taking their ease in the bel fresco.

Nugent's vacation was at an end, for he had received a letter which necessitated his almost immediate return to London. I had neither the desire nor intention of quitting Genoa just yet. The cause of this was not very far to seek, and of course Bob suspected the position of affairs from the first; yet when he signified his intention of departing, and I said I should remain another week or so, his surmise was confirmed, and he could not refrain from indulging in a little good-humoured chaff at my expense.

The fact was that at the hotel there was also staying an exceedingly pretty young lady, named Vera Seroff, under the guardianship of her uncle, and accompanied by her French maid. The first evening we met at table-d'hôte I was fascinated with her beauty, and my admiration had not diminished as we sat opposite one another on the eve of Nugent's departure.

The hotel was not full, and the number dining that evening did not exceed twenty, though the long table, glittering with its choice glass and plate, would have accommodated a hundred.

My vis-à-vis was about twenty-three, with a face as to which there could be no adverse opinion. She was dark, with fine eyes, serious and penetrating, a delicate little nose, and a well-formed mouth, which showed, when she smiled,

two rows of pearly teeth. She was brisk, vivacious, with a charming ingenuousness in her flawless face; a figure slim and graceful, and a voice silvery and sympathetic.

In contrast to her was her uncle, who sat by her side, a short, stout old gentleman, with sharp features, a prominent nose, and scanty white hair, who seldom entered into conversation with any one, and who always appeared ill-humoured, grumbling constantly at the heat.

She spoke English with a pleasant accent, and was conversing with Bob and myself, to the apparent annoyance of the old gentleman, who could not understand a word. She was relating her impressions of one of the galleries she had visited that day, and displayed such a wide knowledge of pictures as to astonish Nugent, himself the art-critic of the Evening Comet. We both had become friendly with her, for, besides meeting daily at the hotel, we had several times run across one another at those places of interest the tourist always visits. Her uncle, Monsieur Hertzen, rarely went out, and her maid usually accompanied her on such expeditions; however, when only taking a short walk, she was frequently alone.

On one of these latter occasions I met her in the Piazza Principale, and offered to escort her to the hotel, to which proposal she made no objection. The distance was not great, but it sufficed to break the conventional ice between us, and when we parted I was more than ever fascinated. Never before had I met a woman so beautiful, so charming, so near my ideal of perfection.

When the meal had ended, and we rose, I said to her, “This is my friend’s last evening in Genoa. He returns to England to-morrow.”

“And do you go also?” she asked, with an intonation—as I flattered myself—of disappointment.

“Well; no,” I replied; “I shall remain a few days longer.”

The shadow of anxiety which had rested momentarily upon her face, vanished at once, as she turned to Nugent, saying, “I am sorry you are leaving, and must wish you bon voyage. I hope, some day, we may meet again, for our dinner-table discussions have been exceedingly pleasant.”

“Thanks, Mademoiselle,” replied Bob, grasping the tiny white hand she held out to him. “My business calls me to London, otherwise I should not return just

yet. However, I hope you will prevent my friend, here, from getting into any scrapes with the bloodthirsty Italians after I'm gone."

She laughed merrily as she answered, "He's quite old enough to take care of himself. I cannot undertake the responsibility. Good-bye," and she tripped away up the stairs to her own apartments.

"Old fellow," exclaimed Bob, after she was out of hearing, "if you feel inclined to pitch yourself into the matrimonial net, there's your chance; and I wish you every success."

"Well, there are more unlikely things than my enlistment in the ranks of Benedicts," I replied, laughing, as we sought our hats and went out to spend our last evening together.

Early the following morning Nugent departed for Turin, en route for England, and I was left alone to amuse myself as best I could. Truth to tell, I was not sorry Bob had gone, for now I felt free to devote myself to the beautiful woman who held me under her spell. I lost no time in carrying out my object, for meeting her in the drawing-room before dinner, I obtained permission to escort her on her evening walk.

It was already dusk when the tediously long meal was brought to a conclusion, and we left the hotel, strolling along the Galleria Mazzini towards the public gardens of Aqua Sola, the most charming promenade in Genoa. It is situated upon a picturesque cliff overlooking the port and the Mediterranean beyond, while at the rear rise the tall vine-covered Appenines, with romantic-looking villas peeping out here and there from amongst the olives and maize. The shadow of its great old trees form a delightful retreat from the scorching noon-day sun; but at night, when the people refresh themselves after the heat and burden of the day, its gravelled walks are thronged by the élite. Fashionable Genoa enjoys herself with mad but harmless frolic, and under the deep shadows fire-flies flit and couples flirt.

Upon an old stone seat near a plashing fountain we sat listening to the sweet melancholy strains of the Sempre Vostro waltz, performed by the splendid band of the National Guard. On the right the many-coloured fairy lamps of the gardens attached to the Caffé d'Italia shone through the dark foliage; on the left the ripple of the sea surged softly far below. Away across the moonlit waters flashed the warning beacon of the port, and the air was heavy with the sensuous odour of orange blossom and roses.

For upwards of an hour we sat talking; she piquante, bright, and amusing; I lazily enjoying a cigar, and watching her beautiful face in rapt admiration. I told her of myself—how the interest in my sole object in life had been suddenly destroyed by affluence—and my present position, that of a world-weary tourist, with no definite purpose farther than killing time.

All my efforts to learn some events of her past life or her place of abode were unavailing. “I am plain Vera Seroff,” she replied, “and I, too, am a wanderer—what you call bird of passage. I have no country, alas! even if I have patriotism.”

“But you are Russian?” I said.

“Quite true—yes. I shall return to Russia—some day.” And she sighed, as if the mention of her native land stirred strangely sad memories.

“Where do you intend going when you leave here?” I asked.

“I have not the slightest idea. We have no fixed abode, and travel whither it suits my uncle—London, New York, Paris; it matters little where we go.”

“You have been in England; have you not?”

“Yes; and I hate it,” she replied, abruptly, at once turning the conversation into another channel. She appeared extremely reticent regarding her past, and by no amount of ingenuity could I obtain any further information.

When it grew chilly, we rose and walked along past the forts, and out upon the Spezzia road, where a refreshing breeze blew in from the sea.

In her soft white dress, with a bunch of crimson roses at her throat, I had never seen her looking so beautiful. I loved her madly, blindly, and longed to tell her so.

Yet how could I?

Such a proceeding would be absurd, for our acquaintance had been of so brief a duration that we scarcely knew anything of one another.

Chapter Seven.

A Secret Tie.

On our return we traversed the road skirting the fortress, and paused for a few moments, resting upon a disused gun-carriage. The moon had reappeared and cast its long line of pale light upon the rippling waters of the Mediterranean.

Suddenly, as we were seated side by side, her dark eyes met mine, and by some inexplicable intuition, some mysterious rapport between my soul and hers, I knew I was something more to her than a mere casual acquaintance. My reason answered me that I must be mad to think she loved me, but my heart told me different, and gradually all my misgivings vanished before the hope and confidence that the conviction of her love raised in my mind.

“I have just been wondering,” I said, “whether, when we part in a few days, we shall ever meet again, for, believe me, I shall cherish the fondest memory of this evening we have passed together. It is charming.”

“And I also,” she replied, “but as you say in English, the best of friends must part.”

It is useless to repeat the words I uttered. Suffice it to say that I could restrain my feelings no longer, and there, in the bright Italian moonlight, I declared my ecstatic passion, and asked her to be my wife.

Had I taken her unawares? Probably so; for, when I had finished, she rose with an effort, and withdrawing her hand gently, said, “No, Frank—for I may call you by that name—your request I am unable to grant, and the reason I cannot now explain. There is, alas! an insurmountable barrier between us, and had you known more of me you would not have asked me this.”

“But, Vera, you love me, you can’t deny it!” I passionately exclaimed.

Tears stood in her eyes, as she answered, “Yes, yes, I do—I love you dearly!”

“Then what is this obstacle to our happiness?”

“No! no!” she cried, covering her face with her hands. “Request no explanation, for, I—I cannot give it. It would be fatal.”

“But why?” I asked, for it was a cruel and bitter disappointment. All my hopes had been shattered in those brief moments.

“From the day we first met I have known we loved one another,” she said slowly, “yet it would have been better had we never become acquainted, since it causes pain to both.”

“But, surely, if you love me, Vera, this obstacle can be removed! Tell me what it is; if a secret, it will be safe with me,” I said earnestly.

She dashed the tears from her eyes, and with an effort stood erect before me, saying:

“No! it is impossible. Think no more of marriage, Frank; regard me only as a dear friend who loves you.”

“Then you will not tell me why we cannot marry?” I said, gravely, rising and taking her hand.

“It—it is a secret. I would rather die than divulge it; though, some day, perhaps, the circumstances will alter, and I shall be at liberty to tell you everything. For the present we love one another, but it must end there; marriage is entirely out of the question.”

I saw it was useless to press for any further explanation. Evidently she was prepared for any self-sacrifice, to protect her secret, because, when finding herself wavering, she had summoned all her strength, and with a mighty effort overcame her emotion, resolutely giving her answer.

As we rose and turned towards the city, a circumstance, slight in itself, occurred, which afterwards caused me not a little perturbation and surprise, and which considerably enhanced the mystery surrounding the fair Russian.

We were passing a buttress of the fort when my attention was arrested by what appeared to be a man standing bolt upright in the shadow.

I was too engrossed with thoughts of our tête-à-tête to allow the discovery of an eavesdropper—probably only a peasant—to cause me any alarm, but, seeing my eyes upon him, for I had halted to make sure, the figure suddenly drew from the shadow, and, with its face averted from the moonlight, walked rapidly away.

Vera, uttering an exclamation of surprise or alarm,—which it was I could not tell—seized my arm with a convulsive energy that caused me no small pleasure at the feeling of dependence it implied, and drew a deep breath.

“Do you know him?” I asked.

“No, no; not at all,” she quickly replied. “He might have heard us; but never mind.”

I endeavoured to learn the cause of her alarm thinking that so much agitation could not be created by such a trivial circumstance; but whether my knowledge of feminine nature was imperfect, or whether she knew who the listener was, and concealed his identity, I could not learn, her answers being of the most evasive kind.

It was plain that the fact of our being discovered together had caused her the greatest consternation, and I was considerably puzzled to assign to this a reason.

I did not broach the subject again, however, but walked straight to the hotel, where we bade each other buona notte.

We met daily, and I, most prosaic of bachelors, found myself thinking of her every moment.

Though in a dejected, perplexed mood, I felt utterly happy when at her side; for had she not given me words of hope for the future, and in these was a certain amount of consolation, however slight. Our clandestine meetings were so skilfully arranged as to keep the ever-grumbling Hertzen in entire ignorance, and Vera admitted such expeditions were her happiest hours.

One evening, a fortnight afterwards, we had driven to Pegli, a quaint old fishing village four miles from Genoa. It was a gorgeous sunset, the sea a glittering expanse of blue and gold stretching out toward the descending sky, with nothing to fleck its surface but the gleam of a white sail or two; and as we walked together, close to the lapping waves, I fancied she looked a trifle wan and anxious.

At first I took no heed of it, but presently her agitation became so apparent that I asked whether she were well.

“Yes, well enough in health,” she sighed, “but very unhappy.”

“Why, how is that?” I asked in concern.

“Ah! Frank,” she said, with her eyes fixed sorrowfully upon the ground, “I must not tell you all, so you cannot understand but I am one of those born to unhappiness.”

“Tell me something of this sorrow, that I may sympathise with you,” I said, looking into her eyes. “If it is in my power to help you I will do so willingly.”

“Ah! if you would?” she exclaimed wistfully, her face brightening at a suggestion which appeared to flash across her mind. “There is indeed one way by which you might render me a service, but it is impossible. I am afraid the commission is too great for you to undertake.”

“I am ready to serve you in any way, Vera. If a test of my devotion is required, I’m prepared for the ordeal,” I replied seriously.

She halted, and gazing into my face with eyes brimming with tears, said: “Believe me, I am in sore need of a friend. I will tell you something of my trouble, but do not ask for further explanations now, as I cannot give them. The man whom you know as my uncle holds me in his power. He is harsh, cruel, and—and—”

“He is your husband!” I interrupted in a low voice, for somehow I felt convinced that such was the case.

“No! no!” she cried hoarsely; “no, I swear that is not so. He is neither husband, nor even friend. Though my uncle, he is unworthy the name of relation. I am unfortunately in his thrall, and dare not disobey his will. To do so would mean—”

“What?—tell me.”

“Impossible. The longer I live the more I learn to hate his presence. Ah, if you could but know!”

There was an intensity of bitterness in that utterance, a flash in her clear dark eyes that spoke of a fierce passion. Could it be hatred?

“Vera; why not trust me?” I implored, taking her hand, and seeking to penetrate the indomitable reserve in which her words were shrouded.

“Once and for all, Frank, it cannot be.”

Her answer came short, sharp, decisive, firm, yet with ineffable sadness.

“Heaven knows! I would willingly share your burden, Vera.”

She paused, as if in doubt.

The silence grew painful, and I watched the mobile features which so plainly indexed the passing emotions of her mind. A blush, like that of shame, tinged her cheek and pallid brow as she lifted her face to mine, although her eyes were downcast.

“Frank,” she said, slowly, “will you help me?”

“With heart and soul, dearest.”

“Then you can do so.” And she drew a deep breath.

“How?”

She hesitated, wavering even then, as it seemed; and the colour left her cheeks as suddenly as it had appeared.

In a low voice, speaking rapidly and impetuously, she replied:—

“Briefly, you may learn this. My uncle is my guardian. He has, I believe, appropriated a large sum of money which is mine by right. Ah! I know what you would say. But I dare not prosecute or expose him, for the consequences would be almost beyond conception, and would affect myself more even than him. I am powerless!”

“But I can help you?”

“I’m afraid you will not consent to what I ask.”

“What is it? You know I cannot refuse a behest of yours.”

“A further annoyance, in fact a great danger, threatens me now. My dead mother’s jewels—on which I place great store, for they are the only souvenir remaining of she whom I dearly loved—are now coveted by him. In vain I have besought him to let me keep them, but he is inexorable. To place them with a friend in whom I have confidence is the only course remaining; that friend lives—”

“Yes, where?”

“At St. Petersburg.”

“St. Petersburg!” I exclaimed, in surprise. “Oh! but, of course, it is your home?”

“It is; or rather was. Had I the opportunity I would convey them there myself, braving the displeasure of my harsh relative and the punishment that would follow. Unhappily I am debarred. To trust the jewels to the post would be too great a risk, and it is only to—to such a—confidant as you that I can look for assistance.”

“And this is all?” I asked. “You merely want me to take them to St. Petersburg?”

“That is all.”

“The commission is a slight one, Vera; you know how willingly I would undertake, for your sake, a thousand such—”

“How can I ever thank you enough?” she interrupted, her face assuming a brighter expression. “I really thought it too much to ask of you.”

“Nothing could be too much, dearest. When shall I start?”

“As soon as possible. By delay all may be lost. It is imperative you should be in Russia three weeks from to-day.”

“Three weeks from to-day,” I echoed.

“Yes, within that time, or it will be useless—my friend will have departed.”

“Then I am ready to set out to-morrow. Have you any message? What must I do?”

“To-morrow morning I will give you the case. Go to the Hôtel Michaeli, on the Galernoi Oulitza, at St. Petersburg, and remain there until a tall, fair gentleman presents my card and asks for them. He will give his name as Paul Volkhovski.”

“Very well,” I said, “I shall leave to-morrow night.”

Then we retraced our steps, and entering the carriage, drove back to Genoa in the fading twilight.

Next morning we met alone in the drawing-room, and she placed in my hands a leather jewel-case about nine inches square and three deep, securely sealed, saying,—

“I trust to you for their safety. Do not let this out of your sight for an instant, and on no account allow the seals to be broken, for it will be easy enough to pass so small a box through the douane.”

I bade her rest assured the diamonds would be safe in my hands, and that I would carry out her instructions regarding the preservation of the seals.

“I trust you implicitly,” she repeated. “And now—as to funds?” producing her purse.

“No,” I said firmly, “I should not think of taking your money. This journey will be a pleasure, and you must allow me to defray its cost.”

“Thank you, a thousand times,” she replied, her lips quivering with emotion. “Our movements are very uncertain, but I have your London address, and will write and inform you of our wanderings from time to time.”

“After I have accomplished this mission, I shall return to you immediately, when I hope you will be convinced that my love is no mere passing fancy, but a—”

“Hark!” she interrupted, “my uncle’s cough. Go!—Farewell!”

I bent and kissed her, then snatching up the box, hurriedly left the room.

Chapter Eight.

Post-Haste across Europe.

One circumstance puzzled me greatly.

My baggage had already been placed in the carriage which was to take me to the station, and in descending the stairs to depart I passed the sitting-room occupied by Vera. The door was ajar, and I was suddenly prompted to enter to wish her a final adieu. Having opened the door half-way I heard voices, which caused me to halt. Vera was seated upon an ottoman, her elbows upon her knees in an attitude of dejection. Before her, with his hands thrust deep in his capacious pockets, stood a well-made athletic young fellow, who, though his back was burned towards me, had the air of a military officer. Apparently he had assumed a commanding demeanour, for he was bending over her, speaking rapidly in a language I did not understand, while she was appealing to him to desist.

I had already bade her adieu, and as neither noticed me I passed down the staircase and out into the street, the thick pile of the carpet preventing my footsteps being heard.

In my drive to the station I was greatly perplexed over this incident, wondering who the man could be. Evidently he was a Russian, and had just arrived or was on the point of departing on a journey, for he wore a long travelling ulster and soft felt hat. From Vera's dispirited manner it appeared as if he were giving some directions which were hateful to her, and which she was vainly resisting.

I somehow felt certain, too, that he had pronounced my name; and at mention of it she shrank as if in fear. It seemed very much as if this man, as well as her uncle, exercised some power over her, and during my long night journey I tried to account for the stranger's presence.

After all, it might be nothing, I thought at last; and perhaps the green-eyed monster had arisen within me and distorted, as it often does, what would otherwise have seemed a very commonplace occurrence.

On the third evening after leaving Genoa I arrived at Charing Cross, having travelled incessantly by the Mont Cenis route without breaking the journey at Paris. It was impossible for me to go to Russia without a passport, therefore I was compelled to return to London and obtain one. At first I was troubled by this, the time of my arrival being limited to three weeks; but afterwards, finding

the journey from Italy to the Russian capital was much more circuitous than from London, I made the best of it, feeling certain I should be able to deliver the jewels within the time stipulated by the woman who had enchanted me.

On my arrival I drove at once to my rooms and sought the rest of which I was so sorely in need, afterwards setting about packing a few additional necessaries for my journey. For three days, however, I was obliged to remain in London before I could obtain my passport, and though impatient to set out, I passed the time as best I could.

The evening of the second day I met Nugent at the Club.

He expressed the greatest surprise at meeting me, yet I did not inform him of the journey I had undertaken, but led him to believe that my life at Genoa had become unbearable after he had left, and that on the following day I contemplated returning to Paris for a few weeks.

We dined together and afterwards went to the Alhambra, but only once did he refer to Vera.

It was after the ballet, when we were taking cigarettes and coffee.

“By the way,” he said suddenly, a mischievous smile lighting up his genial face, “what progress did you make with la belle Seroff? You have not spoken of her.”

I did not care to be questioned upon this matter, so appeared to treat it as a joke.

“Ah?” I replied, “it was a mere flirtation. Why, really, Bob, old chap, I believe you regarded that little affair seriously,” I said, laughing.

He raised his eyebrows slightly, saying, “You guessed aright. I thought you were in love with her; but am glad to hear such is not the case.”

“Why?” I asked, in surprise, for had he not hinted more than once that she would make me a charming wife?

“No reason, no reason,” he replied evasively; “simply because I’ve altered the opinion I once held regarding her.”

I requested no further explanation, for the bell was ringing, denoting that the curtain had risen, and we returned to our stalls.

Could he have seen or heard anything to cause him to utter this vague warning? I asked myself. No, surely not; yet it was strange, to say the least.

Having obtained my passport properly viséd by the Russian Consul, on the evening following I entered a first-class compartment of the Queenborough express at Victoria, and, settling myself, commenced the initial stage of my long journey across Europe. As the train sped onward through the Kentish hop-gardens, I sat watching the September sun change from gold to purple, and eventually disappear behind the dark night-clouds. Safely stowed away in my valise was the jewel-case; but I had already devised a plan whereby it would escape the pryingdouaniers—the same by which I had brought it from Italy unopened, viz, to place it in the capacious pockets of my travelling coat, and hang that garment upon my arm during the examination of the baggage.

I was alone in the carriage, but by reading the newspapers with which I had provided myself, managed to wile away the two hours' journey to the sea.

With relief I alighted at Queenborough Pier, and embarked upon the Flushing steamer, for here I knew the sensation of loneliness would quickly disappear. The whirr of the steam crane, hubbub and noise, mingled with disconsolate comments in English and staccato sounds in French, soon ceased, and very quickly the vessel had set her head towards the Dutch coast.

At seven we landed, and an hour later I had commenced a several days' journey by rail across the continent, the terrible monotony of which is known only to those who have accomplished it. Cramped up in a coupé-lit for a day and night is sufficient to tire most persons, but a continuance of that sort of thing is the reverse of enjoyable.

Both at Flushing and Kaldenkirchen I contrived to smuggle the jewels through the douane, and with a honeymooning couple and a voluble old Frenchman as fellow-passengers, I travelled onward through Duisburg, Oberhausen, and Hanover, arriving at Berlin early on the third morning after leaving London.

Here I decided to break the journey for a day, having traversed half the distance, and after seeking repose at a hotel, strolled through the city to stretch my legs. That evening I passed wandering alone through the principal thoroughfares, and lounging in several beer gardens, returning to the hotel shortly before midnight, and resuming my eastward journey the following morning.

With scarcely any interesting scenery, it was a wearying monotony enough throughout the day, but when night drew on and the shrieking of the engine and whirl and rattle of wheels made sleep impossible, it was absolutely unendurable. My French novel no longer interested me. I was excessively fatigued, and as I lay my aching head upon the velvet cushion of the narrow berth, watching the flickering oil-lamp, my meditations reverted, as they constantly did, to the pleasant evenings Vera and I had spent beside the Mediterranean. Thoughts of her for whose sake I had undertaken this journey, of her strange position, and of the service it was in my power to render her, acted as an incentive, and caused the inconveniences and fatigue of travel to appear much less than they would otherwise have been.

In a fortnight I hoped to have fulfilled my promise and return to her, for this enforced separation I could tolerate no longer than was absolutely necessary. Already I was eagerly looking forward to the time when I should again be at her side, for was it not my duty to be near and to protect her whom I loved?

What might not happen during my absence? I dreaded to think.

Evidently she was in the hands of an unscrupulous villain, and my anxiety and hope was to marry her as soon as possible, and take her under my own protection.

Like other men, I had had my flirtations, but this was my Grand Passion. I loved Vera heart and soul, passionately and purely, and was determined to make her my wife without delay. As I lay there I could not help reflecting how little of real happiness I had known before we met; how selfish and unsatisfactory my life had hitherto been, when my motto was Chacun pour soi, et Dieu pour nous tous.

Now, all was changed. At last I had found the woman whom I believed was predestined to become my wife; she who had fascinated me, who held me for life or death.

Through the long night I thought only of her, puzzled over the secret of the old man's influence; happy and content, nevertheless, in the knowledge that ere long I should return to her, never to part.

Chapter Nine.

In the Izak Platz.

Why need I refer further to the terribly wearisome journey across Prussia, Poland and Western Russia? Those of my readers who have accomplished it know well how dull, tedious and tiring it is, travelling hour after hour, day after day, through a flat, uninteresting country.

Suffice it to say, that on the fifth day after leaving London, the train came to a standstill in the spacious station of the Russian capital.

After some difficulty I discovered the whereabouts of the Hôtel Michaeli, and entering a likhac was driven to a small, and rather uninviting hotel under the shadow of the gilded dome of the Izak Church.

The proprietor, a tall, black-bearded Russian, greeted me warmly in French, exclaiming:

“M’sieur Burgoyne, n’est ce pas?”

“That is my name,” I replied.

“The apartments ordered for you are in readiness.”

“Who ordered them?” I asked.

“M’sieur must be aware that a gentleman secured his rooms a week ago?”

“No, I did not know that arrangements had been made for my reception,” I said.

“Will m’sieur have the kindness to sign the register before ascending?” he said, politely handing me a book and pen.

Those who have not travelled in the dominions of the Czar know nothing of the strict police regulations, the many formalities the foreigner has to undergo, and the questions he must answer before he is allowed to take up even a temporary residence in the Venice of the North.

I wrote replies to the printed questions in the book, and, signing my name, handed it back to him, and was shown to my rooms.

Though anxious to complete my mission and return, I confess I found much of interest. St. Petersburg externally is the finest city in the world, but internally

the dirtiest and most enthralled, struggling as it does under a police régime so harsh that one can scarcely walk the streets without infringing some law, and attracting the attention of the spies, who everywhere abound.

I remained waiting several days for the appearance of the man to whom I was to deliver the diamonds, but he did not present himself, so I occupied myself inspecting the sights of the city. Through the churches of Kazan, St. Nicholas, and the Intercession I wandered, astounded at their magnificence; saw a comedy at the Bolshoi, admired the statues of Peter the Great and Souvaroff, and, perhaps the greatest novelty of all, visited that most magnificent of imperial residences, the Winter Palace.

Here occurred an incident of which at the time I thought nothing, though afterwards I had much cause to remember it.

Following one of the gorgeously attired servants through a labyrinth of picture galleries and apartments, we entered the Salle Blanche, the most luxurious chamber of this splendid palace, with its wonderful decorations of white and gold, from which it derives its name. In this chamber are held those court fêtes which eclipse all others in the world, for it is here the nobility assemble to pay homage to the Autocrat of all the Russias.

Standing in the centre of the apartment, I gazed in wonderment upon its marvellous gilding and glittering magnificence, while the servant described graphically, but parrot-like, how the receptions were conducted, the blazing of the priceless jewels worn by the Empress, and how the Emperor himself, the most quietly dressed amongst the gay assemblage, walked and talked with his guests.

The whiteness of the walls I was unable to understand, and being of a somewhat inquisitive nature, and desirous of ascertaining whether they were marble or wood-panel, I rapped upon it sharply with my knuckles.

In an instant a sentry, who had been standing motionless at the door, and several servants in the Imperial livery, were at my side.

“For what reason did you tap that wall?” demanded one of the men in French.

I was thoroughly taken by surprise, and stammered out an apology, urging that I was not aware of committing any offence.

“It is an offence, and a grave one,” exclaimed the servant, whom I afterwards found was a police spy. “Visitors must not touch the walls in that manner, and we have orders to eject those who break the law.”

“Oh, very well,” I replied, rather ruffled at the man’s impertinence, “I have no desire to do anything contrary to this strange law of yours; and, moreover, I’ll leave the Palace.”

With these words, I turned and retraced my steps to the entrance, being closely followed by the sentry and the guide.

It was a very small matter and soon passed out of my mind, though it afterwards proved more serious than one would have imagined.

Life in St. Petersburg was so different from any to be found in Western Europe, that during the few days I awaited the arrival of the man to whom I was to deliver the jewels, I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

In the daytime, perhaps the place which has most attraction for the foreigner is the Nevskoi Prospekt. It is the principal thoroughfare, a fine broad street four versts long, with imposing houses and handsome shops, the favourite promenade of the haut ton. The bustle and throng is as great as in Regent Street or the Strand on a sunny day, for the endless line of well-appointed equipages, with servants in splendid liveries, and mostly drawn by four horses, roll noiselessly over the asphalte, while upon the pavement stroll princes and generals in uniform, aides-de-camp and staff officers, merchants, mujiks, Greeks, Circassians—indeed, that heterogeneous assortment of sects and races which combine to make up the population of a great city. Russian women, as a rule, are the reverse of prepossessing; but the ladies who shop in the Nevskoi, and afterwards promenade on the English Quay, are even more remarkable for their elegance and beauty than those one sees in the Row or on Parisian boulevards.

As it is not my intention, however, to dilate upon Russian manners and customs, except for the purpose of presenting this strange drama in which I played a leading part, I must refrain from commenting on the thousand and one show places, the coffin shops, in the windows of which the grim receptacles for the dead are ticketed, and many other things which strike the stranger as ludicrous and curious.

I saw them merely pour passer le temps, and they can be of but little interest in the present narrative.

Exactly three weeks had passed since I bade farewell to Vera. I had breakfasted, and was standing before the window looking out upon the Izak Platz, that broad square in the centre of which the column of Alexander stands out in bold relief. Not having made up my mind whither I should repair in search of pleasure, I was idly watching the busy, ever-changing crowd of pedestrians and vehicles, when I heard the door behind me open, and, turning, confronted a tall, fair-bearded man, who had entered unannounced. He was well-dressed, and as I turned and looked inquiringly at him, he bowed and removed his hat.

"Is it to M'sieur Frank Burgoyne I have the pleasure of speaking?" he asked politely, in very fair English.

"Quite correct," I replied.

"Allow me to present to you the carte of Mademoiselle Vera Seroff, and to introduce myself. Paul Volkhovski is my name, and—er—need I tell you the object of my visit?" he inquired, showing an even set of white teeth as he smiled.

"It is unnecessary," I replied, glancing at the card he took from his wallet and handed to me. "The jewels are quite safe in that box upon the ottoman. The seals, you will notice, are untouched."

"Merci," he replied, a grin of satisfaction lighting up his countenance as he repeated, "The jewels—ah!"

Crossing quickly to where the box lay, he took it up and examined it minutely.

"Ha! harosho!" he exclaimed confidently, replacing it with care.

There was something peculiar in his manner which I could not fail to notice.

To tell the truth, I was rather disappointed in Vera's friend. I had imagined that any friends of hers must be men with whom I could readily associate, whereas there was nothing beyond mere bourgeois respectability in Monsieur Volkhovski.

Somehow a feeling of suspicion crept over me.

It was possible some one had personated the man whom I was awaiting! At that moment it occurred to me that the means at my disposal to recognise him were exceedingly slight.

This man might be an impostor.

“How do I know, m’sieur—if you will pardon my interrogation—that you are the person you represent yourself?” I said, regarding him keenly.

With an exclamation in Russian which I did not understand, he said, “It is not for you to doubt! Mademoiselle Seroff asked you to bring the diamonds to me. Your commission is ended.”

“I had conceived.” I replied rather warmly, “that Mademoiselle’s friends were mine. Apparently I am mistaken.”

“It matters not—a mere trifle.”

“At least you will give me a receipt to show that my promise has been carried out.”

“She said nothing of any receipt, and I will give none.”

Evidently he was alarmed.

“Then I shall not give up the jewels—”

“Not another word! You have safely delivered them, and your commission is ended. Go back to Mademoiselle as quickly as possible. She is expecting you, and will explain all. You have rendered her a great service, and she owes you a debt of gratitude.”

Walking to the door, with the sealed jewel-case carefully placed in the pocket of his fashionable dust-coat, he simply paused to add, with a severe air:

“You have been mistaken, m’sieur; you deceived yourself. I wish you adieu and a safe return.” Before I could utter another word he had left the room.

Chapter Ten.

The Spider's Web.

I gave myself up to reflection.

Vera was an enigma, it was true, yet somehow I could not bring myself to realise that she had made pretence to love me merely for the purpose of prevailing upon me to undertake the conveyance of the jewels. Loving her as sincerely as I did, I was loth to credit anything base of her, feeling confident she reciprocated my affection.

It must be confessed that I was bitterly disappointed in Volkhovski. He had not welcomed me as I had expected, and his behaviour was so brusque as to leave me no pleasant impression of his character.

The day wore on.

The afternoon I spent smoking in the Café Chinois in the Nevskoi Prospekt, and in the evening strolled through the delightfully artistic Summer Gardens, debating whether I should remain a few days longer, or leave Russia at once.

Sitting alone at dinner about seven o'clock, I chanced to gaze across the Polschad. It was apparent something unusual had taken place, for people were standing in small groups talking and gesticulating together; and as I rose to regard them more closely, Trosciansky, the proprietor of the hotel, entered, with a pale, half-scared expression upon his face.

"What's the matter outside?" I asked in French. "It seems as if something is wrong."

"I have heard of nothing, m'sieur," he replied, with an expression of astonishment which I detected was feigned, at the same time advancing to the window and looking out.

I made a mental note that mine host was not telling the truth, for his agitation was plainly observable; and, while a number of police were being marched across the square, he quickly withdrew his face from the window, as if half-fearful lest he should be observed. He left the room for a few moments, afterwards returning with a large bowl of crimson flowers, which he placed upon a small table close to the window, remarking:

“These will make your room brighter, m’sieur. I, myself, am very fond of flowers.”

“And I’m not,” I remarked, “I detest flowers in a room; take them away, please.”

He turned and looked at me with surprise, not unmixed with alarm.

“Eh? M’sieur really means I am to take away the beautiful blossoms?” he said, raising his eyebrows in astonishment.

“Yes, I won’t have them here on any account, they smell so faint.”

He hesitated for a few seconds, then replied: “Well, I regret it, for I procured these expressly for m’sieur’s benefit,” and carried the bowl out of the room, muttering as he did so, “Then it must be the artificial ones.”

He had been absent only a few minutes before he reappeared, bearing a large basket of crimson roses in wax, under a glass shade, and set them in the place whence he had removed the real ones.

“What have you brought those for?” I asked, as wax-flowers are one of my abominations.

“For you, m’sieur. Are they not superb?—so near the life. Wonderfully clever imitation, are they not?”

I nodded assent, but it struck me there must be some reason for the hotel-keeper placing these in my window. What was it?

I was about to order him to remove them also, but refrained from doing so, determined to observe this strange proceeding and endeavour to find out the cause.

After some cigarettes, I went out for an evening stroll, and as soon as I gained the street there were unmistakable signs that something extraordinary had happened, though, not speaking Russian, I was unable to ascertain. Intelligence of some description had spread like wildfire and was causing a terrible sensation, for from mouth to mouth ominous news was whispered with bated breath, conversations were being carried on in an undertone, heads were shaken mysteriously, and newspapers rapidly scanned, which all tended to confirm my suspicion that something had occurred.

Such a stir had not been created in the capital for many years, and that night the streets presented a scene of panic that impressed itself indelibly upon my memory.

When I returned to the hotel I chanced to be walking upon the opposite side of the street, and glancing up, before crossing, saw what caused me to start in surprise. Though the lamp in my sitting-room was alight, the blind was not drawn, the brilliant illumination within causing the wax roses to stand out in bold relief in the window—so bold, indeed, that they could be plainly seen from the most distant part of the great square.

That they were placed there for some purpose I was convinced—what did they mean?

I retired to rest as usual, but could not close my eyes for thinking of the strange episode. There seemed an air of mystery about the whole place that I did not like.

Several minor matters now occurred to me of which, at the time they happened, I thought nothing; yet as I lay thinking I confess I began to wish myself anywhere but in St. Petersburg. Throughout, there had been so much that was incomprehensible, and I had been so sorely puzzled, that I felt a fervent desire to give up, and seek no further elucidation of the riddle from Vera.

The bells of the Izak Church had broken the silence of the night, chiming the hour of three, as I lay dozing, when suddenly there came a sharp rapping at the door, and voices demanding admittance.

My first impression was that the hotel was on fire, but on throwing open the door, Trosciansky and two other men entered.

“What is the meaning of this?” I demanded.

“Hist! m’sieur,” he replied, laying his finger upon his lips, indicative of silence. Then he said in a low voice:

“Quick! Prepare yourself for a journey; the police are on their way here, and will arrest you! Make your escape, now you have time.”

“What?” I cried, rubbing my eyes to make certain I was not dreaming. “To arrest me! What for, pray?”

“M’sieur must be aware. Lose no time, you must get out of Russia at once, or all will be lost,” he said in a loud whisper, while the other men gave vent to some ejaculations in Russian.

“I have committed no crime,” I said, “and I certainly shall not fly from here like a thief. The police may come, and I will welcome them.”

“Fly! fly!” urged the man, with a look of alarm upon his face; “fly for Vera Seroff’s sake!”

“What has she to do with this?” I asked eagerly.

“You know, m’sieur; you know. It will place her in deadly peril if you are arrested. Fly, while there is still time.”

“But the police cannot touch me; I have no fear of them,” I remarked, just as a thought suddenly occurred to me.

Where was my passport, that paper without which no one in Russia is safe, not even Russians themselves? I took up my coat and felt in the inner pocket where I constantly kept it.

It was gone!

My valise, the pockets of other coats, every hole and corner I investigated, but found it not. It was evidently lost or stolen!

Then a thought crossed my mind.

“Take our advice, m’sieur; dress and escape,” said Trosciansky, persuasively.

“No, I will not,” I cried angrily. “I see this is a plot to extort money—or something. My passport has been stolen, and I shall myself inform the police to-morrow, and also of my suspicions regarding this house.”

“Diable!” he ejaculated, in the utmost alarm, as at that moment there was a sound of a door opening and heavy footsteps below!

“Hark! They are here! It is too late.”

I opened my lips to reply, but no sound came from them. I have a faint recollection of a sponge being dashed into my face by one of the hotel-keeper’s

companions, then came a strange, even delightful sensation of giddiness, a confused murmur of voices, of music, of pleasant sounds,—and all was blank.

I had been drugged.

Chapter Eleven.

The Cell below the River.

A terrible, excruciating headache of maddening intensity, a violent throbbing, as if molten lead were being injected into my skull; a horrible pain through my eyes and temples like the pricking of red-hot needles.

I tried to think, but could remember nothing distinctly; I was only conscious of frightful agony. To all else I was oblivious. Where I was, or what were my surroundings, I knew not.

My mind was wandering, my reason giving way, for suddenly I felt a sensation as if the burning in my head had been succeeded by an icy coldness which seemed to freeze my senses; and then, as suddenly, I felt as if I were being borne along in mid-air, floating higher and higher into space, then down, down, into depths too terrible to contemplate. In a moment I should be dashed to pieces. I felt I was falling and utterly unable to save myself.

The sensation was awful.

One moment I fancied I was in London, amid old associations and boon companions, the next I seemed in some out-of-the-way place, lonely and forgotten. Presently I saw the grave, beautiful face of Vera, and then it gave place to that of a middle-aged man, whose sinister features puckered into a hideous mocking smile.

I tried to collect my thoughts, to shape them, to think; but it was no use.

The pains returned more acutely than before. I essayed to cry out, but my dry, parched tongue clave to the roof of my mouth. I felt weak and ill, and my agony was so intense I was convinced if it continued I should go mad or die.

Perhaps it grew too much for me, for as the throbbing in my temples increased, I experienced a sickening sensation of giddiness, and again became insensible.

I must have fainted.

Slowly I struggled back to consciousness, only to find myself stretched at full length upon a heap of mouldy straw, with a black, impenetrable darkness around me. The place was cold and damp, and as soon as I was able I rose and commenced to feel the dimensions of my strange apartment.

It was not large, I found, but its four bare stone walls, through which water oozed in places, the large iron ring fixed into the masonry, and the strong iron-bound door, quickly apprised me of my position.

I was in prison.

Awe-struck at finding myself under arrest, I sank upon the narrow stone shelf which served as chair, and tried to recollect the events of the past few hours. I knew nothing, save that I had been drugged, and by some means conveyed there. What was my crime? Why had I been arrested? I wondered.

Through the roof of the cell came a tiny glimmer of light, not half sufficient to enable me to discern anything, though it was evident from this, as well as from the sodden dampness of the walls, that my place of confinement was underground.

The horrors of that Dantean dungeon were indescribable. Before I had lodged at the expense of the Russian Government a few days, the fearful suspense and agony of mind had already added years to my age.

As I sat, desponding and forlorn, I experienced for the first time, regret that I had ever known Vera Seroff. All my good resolutions not to prejudge her went to the winds, and I found myself regretting from the bottom of my heart that I, who had passed unscathed through many a mad infatuation, had permitted myself to become so enamoured and fascinated by her irresistible charms.

Fool that I was to be so blind to her false assumption of injured innocence, to believe that she ever entertained any affection for me, or to imagine that by undertaking a journey across the continent I could render her a service.

And that crotchety old bore, Hertzen. Surely I must have been wilfully undiscerning not to have detected a closer tie between them. No doubt she was his wife, or, yet more probable—no relation whatever.

I ground my teeth and paced the slimy stone floor in anger as I thought how ingeniously I had been tricked; how from the beginning I had been an unresisting dupe in the hands of a heartless, designing woman. She must indeed be sadly wanting in womanly love and tenderness to be a party to this vile plot, whatever its object might be. Doubtless she knew of my arrest, and from her place of safety laughed with satisfaction as she reflected upon her own cleverness.

These and a thousand other thoughts surged through my brain as I walked to and fro in hopeless dejection. Alone, heart-broken at realising my idol shattered, that she whom I believed immaculate and loved so dearly was base and false, I felt utterly indifferent to what my fate might be, only desiring not to be kept in that horrible suspense, but to know the worst.

If it were death, what would it matter? Though young, I had seen the world, tasted of its pleasures, and grown blasé. The sun of my existence was the hope of making Vera my wife, yet now it was blotted out I cared no longer to live, for my life in future would be one of blank despair.

After a few hours I heard a rattling in the lock, a jingle of keys, and the door opened, revealing the brawny form of a man bearing a lantern. It was my jailer.

He held in his hand a basin containing soup and some black bread, which he placed upon the floor without deigning to bestow a word upon me.

As he turned to leave I rose and, clutching his arm, addressed him in French.

Turning the light full upon my face, he took a couple of paces backward, fearing perhaps that I was about to attack him.

“Why am I here?” I asked. “Tell me, what is the crime I am accused of?”

He regarded me for a moment in surprise, answering:

“How should I know?”

“But surely you are aware who brought me here?”

“The gorodovoi, I suppose,” he grunted savagely.

“And what is this detestable place called?” I asked.

“The Fortress; the prison from which no man has ever been known to escape.”

“Are its bolts and bars so strong?”

“Yes, and there is no way out for convicts unless they swim the Neva,” the man replied, grinning with satisfaction.

“Are you not aware of my crime?” I asked, persuasively.

“No, I know nothing about it. My business is not with the crime but with the criminal,” he growled.

“I am an Englishman—a foreigner—and cannot be supposed to know your laws. Is this what you term justice in Russia—to imprison a man without trial?”

“You have had your trial and been condemned. In the sentence passed upon you by the Court you were told the crime for which you must suffer.”

“Condemned!” I cried. “Condemned for what? Why, I have had no trial. I have never been before the Court!”

He turned from me, and as he did so, muttered:

“Ah! just what I thought—mad. These cells below the river always affect their brains.”

In another moment the key turned heavily in the lock, the bolts shot into their sockets, and I was again alone.

Was I mad, as the turnkey believed? I was almost convinced I must be, the events of the past few hours seemed so unreal—like the impression of some horrible dream.

I had been sentenced, the jailer said. Sentenced for what? I had wronged no man on earth that I was aware of, neither had I done an evil action willingly. What was my offence, and what was my sentence?

For days I lived with this one thought, crushed by its terrible weight, frozen by its ghastly presence. Not days, but years ago it seemed, since I was a man like any other, with an intellect young and fresh, losing itself in a pleasant world of fantasy, with buoyant hopes for the future; an existence full of life and light, gaiety, and unalloyed happiness, with naught to trouble me save the realisation of my fond dream of marrying Vera and dwelling with her in perfect felicity. Joyous and free had been my thoughts, therefore I was free also.

Alas! those aerial castles, those blissful illusions, had been cruelly dispelled, for I was free no longer.

I was a criminal.

Chapter Twelve.

A Subterranean Drama.

With my wrists in bonds of iron, and my soul fettered by one idea—horrible, implacable—the days passed: I kept no count of them.

Whilst the glimmer of daylight shone through the chink above I spent the time sitting engrossed in my own sad thoughts, or pacing the narrow cell for exercise. When it had faded I cast myself, restless and nervous, upon the heap of evil-smelling straw that served as bed, waiting patiently for the reappearance of the streak of grey light.

Those hours of awful silence and suspense I shall never forget.

Do what I might a terrible thought, a deep-rooted conviction, was ever with me, like a spectre haunting me face to face, frustrating every endeavour to close my eyes—it was that by Vera's instrumentality I had been arrested and incarcerated in that foul dungeon.

The jailer, when he brought my daily ration of food, seldom spoke; but on one occasion I asked him:

"What is my sentence?"

"You know better than I," he growled. "Indeed, I do not. Tell me; is it death?"

"No; the death sentence has been abolished by order of the Czar. Criminals are tortured to death instead of being killed instantaneously by hanging."

"And is this the commencement of my torture?" I asked, glancing round the glistening walls, that looked black and unwholesome in the flickering lamplight.

"You may call it so, if you like," he replied.

"Many prisoners would no doubt prefer the death sentence being passed upon them—but that the law now forbids."

"Shall I never leave this horrible place?" I asked.

"Shall I never again see the blessed light of day?"

“Yes,” he muttered, ominously, “you will leave here—some day—never to return.”

I said no more. I knew he meant that when I left the prison I should be dead.

Torture till death! This, then, was my sentence! The words were continually passing through my brain, attacking me whilst waking, and intruding themselves upon my spasmodic attempts to sleep; appearing in my dreams in all their hideousness.

Even when I awakened to realise the terrible reality that surrounded me, those four bare walls, coarse clothes, straw pallet, and the monotonous tramp of the sentry in the corridor outside my door, the words rang a continuous, demoniacal chorus in my ears. Torture till death!

In my solitary confinement I naturally began to seek some means by which to occupy attention and divert my mind from the unjust and horrible sentence.

One matter interested me in a dreamy, indifferent way. It was the inscriptions that had been traced upon the damp walls of my gloomy cell, presumably by former occupants.

Having been in darkness so long, I had developed an acute sensitiveness in the tips of my fingers, almost in the same manner as the blind; and for recreation I took to groping about, feeling the indentations upon the stone, and trying to sketch their appearance mentally.

Hours—nay, days—I spent in this grim but interesting occupation, studying carefully the initials, dates, and other inscriptions, and after I had formed a correct picture in my imagination, I would sit down, wondering by whose hand those letters had been graven; what was the prisoner’s crime; and how long he had lived in that terrible tomb.

The persons who had been confined there before me must have been legion, for the walls seemed literally covered with words and symbols, some well defined, others only scratched roughly and almost obliterated by the thick slime which covered them. So interested was I in their study that, after a short time, I had gained a pretty accurate knowledge of the appearance and position of most of them. Some had written their names in full, with the date; one had drawn a gallows, and many had inscribed lines of words like poetry, but as they were in Russian I was unable to read them.

I confess, though I gave up the greater portion of every day to the investigation of the self-executed epitaphs of those who had gone before, I made but little progress in their meaning.

Still, they served to occupy my time, and for that alone I was thankful.

I had gone methodically to work in my strange researches, commencing at the door, and taking them one by one from the floor upwards, as far as I could reach. The advancement I made was not great; in fact, I was purposely slow, and took a considerable time over the examination of each one, because I wanted my task to last as long as possible.

Of those upon the sides of the cell I had formed a fairly distinct mental picture, and one day while engaged upon the wall opposite the door groping along as usual, my hand passed over a circular indentation cut deeply in the stone, which I judged to be about six inches in circumference. It was on a level with my head, and by the first touch I distinguished it was entirely different from the others, both in form, size, and general character.

Interested in this discovery, I proceeded to make a minute investigation with the tips of the fingers of both hands.

There were two circles, the one inside the other, about an inch apart, and I felt some writing in the intervening space. Round the circle I ran my fingers; the inscription was not profuse, only nine ill-formed letters.

“The name of some prisoner, perhaps,” I said to myself, as I carefully passed my finger over each letter, and tried to picture it upon my mind.

The first was of so strange a form that I could make nothing out of it, so passed on to the next. This seemed like a small thin line, crooked half-way down; the next was straight, like a figure one, and the next very similar, and so on, until I came to the one I had examined first.

Disappointed because I could not decipher a single character of what seemed hieroglyphics, I passed my hand over the whole in an endeavour to gain a general impression of it, when I found the centre of the circle was occupied by some large solid device.

I felt again. It bore some resemblance to the letter T inverted, and then momentarily, there flashed across my mind the thought that I had somewhere seen an emblem of similar appearance.

Eagerly I ran my hands over it, carefully fingering the centre, and trying to form a clearer idea of what it was like, when I suddenly recollected where I had met its exact counterpart.

“Yes, there is no mistake,” I said in an awed whisper, once more fingering it in breathless excitement.

“The characters must be the same; the centre is the same; it differs in no particular. It is the Seal!”

I stood almost terrified at the unearthly sound of my own words.

Here, in this foul prison, amid all these gruesome surroundings, I had made a strange discovery!

I had deciphered an exact reproduction of the curious seal found upon the body of the woman who had been so mysteriously murdered on that eventful night in Bedford Place—the fatal emblem over which the police of Europe and America had been so puzzled.

The disclosure brought vividly to my mind recollections of the murder which, by rare chance, I detected, and I asked myself whether Fate had decreed that a sketch of the seal should be graven upon the wall of my dungeon.

I am neither a visionary, nor am I superstitious, yet it is probable that my gloomy thoughts, combined with my solitary imprisonment, the lack of exercise, and the horrors of my cell, had produced a slight attack of fever; for while I was musing it seemed as if the mystic symbols assumed divers grotesque shapes, the outlines of which glowed like fire, and that by my side were hideous grinning demons, who assumed a threatening attitude towards me.

My breathing became difficult, my head swam, and I sank backward upon the stone seat.

I may have been insensible, or perhaps only sleeping soundly, when there came a jingling of keys, and a harsh grating of bolts. This aroused me.

“Get up,” commanded the jailer; “follow me.”

I rose, my hands trembling and my teeth chattering so that I could hardly re-arrange my clothes.

What fresh torture was in store for me? I dreaded to think.

At the first step I attempted to take I staggered and almost fell, but recovering myself, followed the turnkey.

After examining my fetters to make certain of their security, he led me through a long dark passage, up a flight of steps, down another, and through some intricate places, little more than tunnels. Unlocking a door, he bade me enter.

I did so, and found myself in a square cell, damp, and pitch dark, like my own. We had been joined by another jailer in our walk through the corridor, and both men entered with me.

As the lantern-light fell upon the straw I saw the cell was occupied; a man was lying there, fully dressed, and apparently asleep.

“Prisoner,” said the jailer, “take the clothes from off that man, dress yourself in them, and afterwards put your own on him.”

“But he will wake,” I said.

“Do as I bid,” growled the man; “and look sharp; or it will be the worse for you.”

For a moment I did not move. I felt dazed.

“Now; do you hear?” cried he angrily, shaking me roughly by the arm.

I stooped over the prostrate man in order to unbutton the collar of his coarse coat, but in doing so my hand touched his chin. I withdrew it as if I had been stung, for it sent a thrill of horror through me. It was cold as ice.

I was to undress a dead man!

“Why do you hesitate?” the jailer asked gruffly. “Know you not that you must obey?”

“This man is dead!” I said, in alarm.

“And the best thing that could happen to him,” was the stern reply. “Now, how long am I to wait for you?”

His companion grinned at my abhorrence of the task, and uttered some words in Russian, which the other answered.

It was plain I had to obey my heartless janitor, so, kneeling beside the corpse, I managed, by dint of some exertion, to divest it of its grey kaftan, strong knee boots, and sheepskin bonnet. In these I attired myself, afterwards dressing the corpse in my own clothes.

My new garments were such as I had never seen before, and upon my breast was a brass plate bearing a number.

“Now, take these,” commanded the turnkey, throwing his light upon some things in a corner.

I turned and picked them up.

There was a rug, a mess tin, and a wooden spoon.

“What am I to do with these?” I asked.

“You will want them upon your journey.”

“My journey! Where, then, am I going?”

“To the mines.”

“To Siberia?” I gasped.

“Yes,” he answered, adding, “Come, follow me.”

I left the side of the dead prisoner and accompanied him back to my own cell.

I would have preferred death ten thousand times, for I knew, too well, that for the Russian convict is reserved that punishment which is tantamount to death by slow torture—a living tomb in the quicksilver mines beyond Tomsk. When sent under the earth he never again sees the sunlight or breathes the fresh air, until a year or so afterwards when he is brought to the surface to die.

Racked by the frightful pain which quicksilver produces, gaunt as skeletons, and with hair and eyebrows dropping off, convicts are kept at labour under the lash by taskmasters who have orders not to spare them, working eighteen hours at a stretch, and sleeping the remaining six in holes in the rock—mere kennels, into which they must crawl.

A sentence of Siberian hard labour always means death, for the Government are well aware it is an absolute impossibility to live longer than five years in such horrible torture in the depths of the earth.

To this terrible existence was I consigned. Was it surprising, therefore, that I hoped—nay, longed—for death instead?

Chapter Thirteen.

Graven on the Wall.

I walked back to my cell as one in a dream.

Engrossed with my own reflections, I neither saw nor heard anything until I found myself seated alone in the dark, damp chamber, with the maddening thought of Vera's treachery and triumph torturing and goading me to despair.

I covered my face with my hands, and strove to forget the present and to review the past.

As I pondered, the recollection of my childhood's days came back to me. I saw the grey-haired stately lady, my mother, whom I loved, whose counsel I had ofttimes wisely taken, but who now, alas! was no more. I saw myself a laughing schoolboy, and later, a rollicking student, one of a crowd in the Latin Quarter; then a young man hard at work with my pen in a tall old house in one of the Inns of Court, burning the midnight oil and striving day and night towards the coveted Temple of Fame.

Later, a man of ample means, and afterwards—a convict.

Next morning, after the warder had paid his matutinal visit and I had appeased my hunger, I naturally turned to the inscriptions as my sole means of occupation; for besides being anxious for anything wherewith to occupy my mind, however trivial, I was also curious to ascertain whether the mysterious device upon the wall really bore a resemblance to the seal, or whether it was only in my distorted imagination that the similarity existed.

Without difficulty I succeeded in placing my hands upon the indentation, and after minute investigation satisfied myself I had not been mistaken. Though somewhat roughly executed, the symbols were exactly the same as those upon the fatal seal.

While carefully following the lines with my finger tips, I felt, suddenly, what appeared to be some letters, two above the circle and two below, about an inch from the outer ring. At first it did not cross my mind that they could have any connection with it, for I concluded they were but the initials of two prisoners who had occupied the cell.

However, when I had completed my investigation of the inexplicable emblem which had so long occupied my thoughts, I commenced trying to decipher the letters above.

At first I could make nothing out of them, but by passing my hand carelessly along I ascertained that they were in the Russian character.

Evidently they were initials.

Fortunately, while at college I had gained a knowledge of the Russian alphabet, and though it was rather imperfect, I was prompted to make an attempt to discover the equivalent of the two letters in English.

The task occupied me a very long time, and after considerable patience and perseverance I found I had translated the initials, although they told me nothing.

The two letters cut in the stone above were “N.S.”

I stood motionless for a few minutes, almost unable to give credence to the solution of the puzzle; then went carefully over the two signs again.

No; I was not mistaken.

“N.S.,” I repeated to myself aloud, almost breathless with amazement, my heart beating quickly, and sounding distinctly in the tomb-like silence of my dungeon. “The initials of some unfortunate man who perhaps, like myself, was confined here for some crime he did not commit.”

Whose was the hand that traced the deadly sign, and the initials? This was the question I vainly asked myself.

“Perhaps the letters below will throw some light upon this ghastly secret,” I said aloud, as I commenced to feel the two characters underneath the design. They were well-shaped and deeply cut, so I had not so much difficulty as with those above.

“I may be about to solve the enigma of the seal,” I reflected, as, in intense excitement, I took one letter after the other and thought of its corresponding letter in English.

I soon deciphered them, and found the initials were “S.O.”

The discovery caused me much disappointment, for beyond the assumption that a certain person whose initials were N.S. had been imprisoned in the cell, together, perhaps, with a comrade whose initials were S.O., who had possibly sketched the obscure hieroglyphics, I was no nearer the solution of the device than before.

It might have been inscribed a dozen, perhaps a hundred, years ago—before the seal had become synonymous of death—for aught I knew.

So intent was I in endeavouring to feel other names or devices near this particular one that I failed to notice the opening of my cell door, and when I became aware of the lantern-light behind me I turned and saw a Cossack officer standing upon the threshold.

He stepped forward and was about to enter, but suddenly, as if on second thought, he drew back and pulled up the broad collar of his riding-coat about his neck, so as to partially hide his face before entering.

Advancing, and turning the lamplight full upon my face, he gazed into it fixedly for several seconds, his own countenance being concealed by the shadow. Then, without speaking, he went across the cell and commenced examining the wall, apparently to ascertain in what pursuit I was engaged when he entered.

He cast his eyes along the wall, when he suddenly gave vent to a low exclamation of profound surprise, not unmingled with horror, and holding his lantern on a level with the inscription, scrutinised it minutely for some minutes, at the same time muttering to himself.

From his movements, and the agitation which he strove to suppress, it was evident he, too, had made a startling discovery; and I stood wondering what there was about it that interested him so much.

He looked at me several times, and though his face was always in the shade I could see that in his eyes was a peculiar expression. Twice he returned and examined the inscription, as if to rivet it upon his memory and to satisfy himself he was not mistaken; then he turned, and, addressing me in French, said:

“Prisoner, prepare yourself. We start to-morrow.”

“To Siberia?” I asked.

“Yes; make the best of your last night’s rest,” he replied in a strange hoarse voice, and went out, leaving me again to my gloomy reflections.

For hours I sat, asking myself what this could mean. The initials, in conjunction with the seal, served to increase the mystery, and the agitation of the officer when his gaze fell upon it clearly showed the grim symbol was repulsive to him, although the cruel light in his eyes caused me to conjecture that it revealed to him some awful truth that had hitherto been hidden.

But why need I exercise my mind upon trying to solve this inscrutable problem, I thought, when on the morrow I should start upon my terrible journey to the grave?

Ay, what was the use?

Chapter Fourteen.

En Route for the Mines.

At last the day—or rather night—arrived, when the gates of the Citadel opened, allowing myself with thirty other prisoners to pass out upon the first stage of the weary two months' tramp to that bourne whence few convicts ever return.

We were a sorry, smileless band of criminals of all classes, each dressed alike and bearing a number, our hands fastened behind our backs, and chained together in single file.

Slowly we passed through the great iron gates, and turning, crossed the Troitskoi Bridge, our escort of mounted Cossacks cracking their long whips, and with lanterns tied to their lance-points examining the road continually, in search of any letters which might be dropped. It was a weird, dismal procession, as we trudged on through the streets made sloppy by the melting snow, and the clanking of chains, the cracking of whips, the shouts of the soldiers, and the rumbling of the springless carts in the rear for those who might fall ill by the way, awoke the echoes of the silent thoroughfares.

A few belated pleasure-seekers, some in fancy dress, who were evidently returning from a ball, stopped to watch us pass, but no one was allowed to come near us, for the Cossacks warned them off.

In this way we passed across the slumbering city and out upon the broad, bleak highway on our journey eastward to the Ourals. It commenced to rain in torrents, and soon all of us were wet and uncomfortable, but through the long night we marched onward in dogged silence. Conversation was forbidden, and those who had spoken had felt the thong of the escort's whip about his shoulders.

The convict to whom I was chained I recognised as the guide who had conducted me over the Winter Palace. What was his crime I knew not, but he plodded on, with a settled look of terror on his face, and the sighs that frequently escaped him plainly showed what were his feelings at being exiled from his native land.

His was not the face of a criminal, but rather that of one who had been unjustly condemned, as I had been.

Our wet clothes clung to us as we walked, our feet splashed through great pools at every step, and the icy wind that blew across the wide level highway chilled our very bones, greatly adding to our discomfort.

We must have walked six hours, for as the day dawned, cloudy and grey, we saw in the distance the wooden houses of Jjora, and half an hour later were drawn up in a line in the open space before the little church.

Here our fetters were removed; but in the meantime the news had spread through the village that a convict convoy was on the march, and the inhabitants, taking compassion upon us, crowded round with steaming tureens of tschi, piles of new bread, and jugs of vodki. They were not allowed to approach us, however, and were compelled to set their offerings at the roadside and retire.

The pity felt for Siberian exiles is universal, and even the Cossacks seemed to have some sympathy for us poor wretches, as they allowed us to partake freely of what the kind-hearted peasants offered.

I was almost exhausted by the long tramp, and ate ravenously. As soon as we had appeased our hunger, we were marched inside the church to attend a parting mass and hear a brief sermon.

As we knelt, the priest went through the ritual, afterwards giving us an address, urging submission and penitence, as well as extolling the Czar's clemency most likely; but as I was unable to understand a word, I was spared this canting hypocrisy, and was glad when the grim farce was over and we had left the sacred building.

Soon we were upon our way again, and through out the day trudged wearily onward. With a thick pine forest on each side of the road, the journey resembled a sea voyage, one spot so much like another that we always seemed to remain in the same place.

We had no chains to trouble us now; but though permission had been given to talk, all desire for conversation had gone out of us, so jaded and weary were we. Without a halt, we pushed on until long after daylight had faded, and when at last a rest was made we prepared to bivouac in the forest.

A large fire was lit, some biscuits and salt beef served out, and then, with nothing further to protect us from the frost than our greatcoats and rugs, we flung ourselves upon the ground and sought repose.

I was exhausted and soon fell asleep. I must have continued so for several hours, when suddenly I felt a hand upon my cheek, and in the fitful light thrown by the dying embers of the fire, saw a Cossack bending over me.

All was quiet, save for the shadowy forms of the sentries, who paced quietly to and fro among the surrounding trees.

As I awoke, the man at my side placed his finger significantly upon my lips, whispering in broken English, “Don’t utter a word, but listen; Frank Burgoyne, remember what I am about to tell you. Be brave, and you may escape.”

“Escape!” I ejaculated, rubbing my eyes, half-believing that I must be dreaming. “How can I?”

“The matter is simple if you follow my directions; but it will require nerve and firm determination. If you falter you are lost.”

“Tell me, how can it be done?” I whispered, eagerly.

He bent so closely that, although his face was unrecognisable in the darkness, I could feel his breath. Placing his mouth to my ear he said: “To-morrow afternoon we shall pass through a small village called Podberesa. A mile after leaving it, we shall come to cross-roads, and there you will see a two-horse sleigh awaiting you, the driver of which will have a red ribbon upon his whip. Be on the watch, and when close to it make a dash between the guards, jump in, and you will be driven to the coast, where you can get away to England. In the sleigh you will find the dress of a courier, and a passport which will ensure your safety.”

“But the escort; they will fire!” I exclaimed in amazement.

“There are no ‘buts.’ Time does not permit of reflection. Do as I bid, and you will not be harmed,” he said.

“You are my friend, then?”

“No, scarcely that. My duty is to take you to the mines.”

“Then why do you tell me how to escape?”

“There is reason in most things that we do.”

“And what is your reason for this?” I asked. “Perhaps you can explain why I have been kept in that horrible prison without trial, and why I, an Englishman, should be sent to Siberia for no offence whatever?”

“Yes, yes,” he replied, “I am aware of all this. But hush! The guards are changing. Remember all I have said; make your dash for liberty with a stout heart, and when you return to London all will be explained. Adieu, and bon voyage.”

The man crawled noiselessly away, but as he lifted himself upon his hands the fire threw out a flicker of light which fell upon his features. It was only momentarily and then died away, yet in that brief second I detected a close—even striking—resemblance to some one I had seen before.

He slipped away without a sound, just as the sentry passed; nevertheless for a long time I lay awake trying to recollect where I had seen the soldier’s face before.

At last I felt positive the voice was the same as that of the officer who had visited me in the cell, yet what motive he could have in planning my escape, I could not guess. Then again I felt sure the face resembled some one I had known intimately, or had cause to remember. Suddenly it dawned upon me.

The face was similar to that of the man I had seen leaving the house in Bedford Place!

The next day passed much as the preceding one, though with considerable excitement and anxiety I prepared myself for my bold attempt to regain freedom. It was late in the afternoon that we passed through the village, and it was fast growing dusk when the object for which I was straining my eyes came into view—a sleigh, the driver of which had the reins and whip gathered up in the act of starting.

The critical moment arrived.

Just as we were passing, I slipped out of the ranks, and made a sudden dash, falling headlong into the vehicle. The fall saved me.

I heard the word of command. A dozen shots rang out. But in a few seconds we were flying at a furious rate along the smooth highway in an opposite direction. It was an exciting moment, but I did not lose my nerve.

“Don’t be alarmed,” said the driver, in English; “the guards dare not leave the prisoners, and we shall beat them easily. Dress as quickly as you can, for by this time to-morrow we must be at Viborg.”

I found the clothes, and exchanged my convict’s dress for them. In the pockets were a passport and a purse well filled with roubles. When dressed, I settled myself to think. With relays of horse at every post-station, we travelled all that night. Next evening we drove into Viborg.

I questioned the driver, but he would not tell me by whom he had been engaged.

“You have been wronged, and reparation must be made,” was all he replied.

By no ingenious questioning could I elicit any particulars as to who was instrumental in scheming my escape, for to all my inquiries he was dumb, although he appeared fully cognisant of my adventures since I had been in Russia.

On arrival at Viborg I lost no time in searching for a ship, and, to my relief, found one leaving for Hull in a few hours. I exhibited my passport as an official courier, obtained a berth, and before the next day dawned had the satisfaction of watching the lights of the Russian port disappear at the stern.

Chapter Fifteen.

An Ominous Incident.

On the evening of the day after my return to London, I was passing down the Strand, intending to seek Bob Nugent at the Junior Garrick.

The utmost excitement was prevalent.

Something startling had been published in the evening papers. Dozens of newsboys were rushing about amongst the throng of foot-passengers crying "Spe-shall! 'nother 'orrible murder!" Every one was purchasing copies, reading them in doorways and under street-lamps, and my curiosity being aroused at the unusual commotion, I did likewise.

Opening the paper, my eye caught the bold headlines, "The Mystic Seal again. Another Mysterious Murder."

The account was too long to be read in the street, so turning into the nearest restaurant, and flinging myself into a chair, I read it from beginning to end; for I, of all men, was interested in these almost superhuman crimes.

Briefly told, they were the details of a curious but atrocious crime, committed with great daring. Shortly before one o'clock that morning, a constable on his beat, while passing through Angel Court, Drury Lane, noticed the form of a woman lying in the shadow of a doorway. He at first thought it was one of the wanderers so numerous in that neighbourhood, and was about to rouse her, when he was horrified to discover that she was dead, and that blood was flowing from a deep wound in her throat.

The body was in a pool of blood, and it appeared as if the fatal gash had been inflicted with a razor. The officer at once gave the alarm, and within a few minutes several other constables were on the spot, as well as the divisional surgeon. Nothing could be ascertained in the neighbourhood regarding the murdered woman, who was aged about twenty-five. But on the body being removed to the mortuary, there was discovered pinned to the breast, and soaked through with blood, a small piece of paper which had evidently borne the repulsive seal. Although the latter had been torn off, a portion of the wax still remained.

The narrow passage in which the murdered woman had been found was little frequented, it being extremely secluded, and, except at the outer portion, the houses were not inhabited.

How the deed could have been committed without any sounds having been heard by those who lived near was regarded as a mystery by all who knew the neighbourhood, and, of course, there were the usual wild rumours afloat as to the probable identity of the murdered woman.

In a leading article, the journal said:

“It seems pretty certain that this last atrocity must be ranked with the others. Committed with the same startling rapidity, with the same disheartening absence of traceable clues, this latest crime was probably perpetrated by the same scoundrel or maniac as the one who horrified and puzzled the world last year. The murderer goes about his work with much deliberation, and effects his escape with great skill, and even takes time and trouble in pinning the cabalistic sign of the seal to the breast of his victim. The meaning of that sign it is impossible to tell. We have steadily asserted, before and after the occurrence of these murders, that the police force of London is not adequate in numbers to the duties imposed upon it. It is the business of the police, if it cannot prevent crime, at least to detect it.”

It was the eighth murder, and still the authorities were as far off bringing the guilty one to justice as they were when the first victim was discovered.

After eagerly reading the report I placed the newspaper aside and sat in silent meditation. There was something so curious, almost supernatural, in these crimes, that I could not reflect without a shudder upon the horrors of that night a few months before when I was instrumental in bringing the previous work of the mysterious, assassin to light. Every detail of that terrible crime surged through my brain as plainly as if it were but yesterday, and the face of the man who left the house, and whom I followed I could see as vividly as if he were still before me, for his features were graven too deeply upon my memory to be ever effaced.

I sat utterly dumbfounded. The problem was growing even more complicated, for it struck me as something more than a strange coincidence that the Bedford Place murder should have been committed immediately before I left London, and that the murderer should have thought fit not to add another victim to his ghastly list until immediately upon my return.

Somehow I could not help feeling convinced there must be some occult reason in this.

On the former occasion I had carefully studied the theories put forward, especially that urged by an eminent medical man, that the murderer was a homicidal maniac. This, I felt assured, was totally wrong. The man the doctor had in his mind was a type well-known to those who have made a special study of murder-madness. But such a man does not work with the skill displayed by this assassin—he does not arrange his entrance, his "picture," his exit, so carefully. Misdirected enthusiasm may prompt to murder, but it does not run side by side with cunning deliberation and desire for effect.

No! I maintained in my own mind that when, if ever, the author of the murders was arrested, he would be found to be a man who was perfectly sane, and who had gloated over the extraordinary skill with which he had thrown the London detective force off the scent.

I did not seek Nugent that night, but returned to my rooms, and sat far into the early hours, soliloquising upon the mystery.

At last, wearied out, I rose, and, taking down a pipe, filled it. There was a mirror over the mantelshelf, and as I was in the act of lighting my pipe, I caught sight of a countenance in the glass, and paused to reflect. The vesta burned down till it scorched my fingers; but, fascinated by what I saw, I stood motionless, staring into the glass.

It was not upon the reflection of myself that I gazed, but on the face of the man I had seen coming from the house in Bedford Place!

I am aware there are some events in our lives, of which each circumstance and surrounding detail is indelibly impressed upon the mind, and, on reflection, it was easy to account for this strange and startling fantasy. So petrified had my mind been during the past few hours, that, in my imagination, the image of my own facial expression closely resembled his. Still, there was yet another more urgent aspect, which caused me to consider seriously. Such a freak of the mental faculties I had never before experienced; nevertheless, I knew the symptom to be precursory of madness.

Was I doomed to insanity?

Sinking back into a chair and smoking my pipe, I calmly reviewed the situation. My inner conscience seemed to tell me—though, to this day, I have

never been able to account for it—that the key to the mystery was in my hands. By mere chance—or was it Fate?—I had discovered one of the murderer's victims, and had seen the miscreant himself leave the house—a man whom I should be able to identify anywhere. No one else had seen him, I argued with myself, so it was a duty towards my fellow-men to bring him to the punishment he so well merited. That is what conscience urged me as I sat smoking through the long night, and before the dawn I had made up my mind again to try my hand at elucidating the fearful mystery, and spare no effort towards its accomplishment.

With that object, I obtained permission of the police next morning, and viewed the body which was in the mortuary awaiting identification. It lay in the chilly chamber, stretched upon the dark slate slab, the face covered with a white cloth. This the constable removed, revealing the features of a dark, rather handsome, young woman, evidently of the poorer class, and a denizen of that quarter of the city.

As I gazed upon the body I wondered who she was. What was she? What was her history? Could even such a plebeian woman be missed by her friends, and no inquiries made after her? It seemed almost incredible, yet it was so; for when the coroner held his inquiry a few days later, she had not been identified, so the verdict of "Murder" was given, photographs were taken of the dead unknown—one of which I have before me as I write—and she was conveyed to her last resting-place in Nunhead Cemetery.

It was no isolated case. Every year numbers of bodies of men and women are found by the London police and buried unclaimed, at the expense of the parish; until one is at a loss to know where are the relatives of the unfortunate ones that they make no sign, and take no trouble to make known their loss.

It is one of Babylon's unfathomable mysteries.

For days—nay, weeks—afterwards, I continually devoured the information contained in the newspapers regarding the eighth murder, but the victim remained unidentified; and although I frequented the busiest haunts of men in the City and its immediate suburbs at all hours of the day and night, in the hope of meeting the murderer, my efforts were so dispiritingly futile that more than once I was sorely tempted to give up in despair.

Chapter Sixteen.

Facing the Inevitable.

Though I had been in London nearly two months I had heard nothing of Vera, and her explanation of my imprisonment, as promised by the Cossack, had not been made.

I had some misgivings, it is true, for I could not help feeling that, having used me to execute her strange commission, she would trouble me no further; and as the days went by, and I received neither letter nor visit, my conviction was strengthened that such was the case.

A wet, cheerless night, one of those soaking rains with which dwellers in the metropolis are too well acquainted. Business London had brought a day's work to a close, the 'buses were filled to overflowing, the shops were putting up their shutters, and the strings of dripping humanity waiting at pit doors of theatres were anathematising the management of places of amusement for not opening earlier, as a hansom deposited Nugent and myself before the Gaiety Theatre, where a new burlesque was that night to be produced.

A contrast to the rain and mud outside was the interior of the theatre. Warm, bright, and comfortable, were stalls and boxes, filled with "fair women and brave men," the bright dresses and glittering jewels of the former contrasting well with the dull red shade with which the place was decorated and adding a brilliancy and luxury to the whole. The production of the piece had long been talked of, and the event had the effect of bringing together a number of professional first-nighters and leading lights of the literary and musical world, not forgetting the fair sprinkling of Bohemians who are always the welcome guests of the management on such occasions.

Soon after we had found our stalls the conductor's bâton waved, the overture was played, and the curtain rose.

The first act had concluded when I stood up to nod to several people present whom I knew, and in casting my eyes around the boxes I was attracted to one in which sat a young and handsomely dressed lady, alone. As I looked, our eyes met.

It was Vera!

Apparently she had been watching me, for with a pleasant smile of recognition, she beckoned me with her fan.

At that moment Bob noticed her, and nodding towards her, whispered, “By Jove! old fellow, who’d have thought of meeting the fair Russian? The world isn’t so large, after all. Shall you go up and speak?”

I glanced upwards in hesitation. She was leaning from the box, the diamonds in her hair flashing under the gaslight, and she beckoned anxiously. This decided me, and I went in search of her, with a feeling—half of the old love, and half of a newly-born distrust.

I was not long in finding her box, and as I entered, her maid, who was her only companion, went out.

Retiring into the shadow, so as not to be observed by the people below, she stretched forth her hand and, with a glad smile, exclaimed, “At last, Frank—quel plaisir!”

I drew back, and was ungallant enough not to take the proffered hand, for had I not been duped by her and nearly lost my liberty and life?

“Ah!” she said in a hoarse whisper, “it is as I expected, Frank—we are no longer friends.”

“Why should we be?”

“I know I am unworthy a thought, having acted as basely as I did; but it was not my fault. It could not be avoided,” she said, casting her eyes to the floor.

“And that is the way you reciprocate my affection! You send me upon an errand so dangerous that it nearly costs me my life!” I remarked, bitterly.

“No, no! Do not judge me harshly,” she pleaded, laying her hand upon my coat-sleeve, and looking into my face imploringly. “Wait until I can explain before you condemn me. I know you think me a scheming, cold-hearted adventuress; perhaps I was when I met you; but now—it is different.”

“Vera,” I said, endeavouring to be firm, “it pains me, but I must put an end to this interview. I was foolish to seek you thus, but it was only to confront you for the last time that I obeyed. I have loved you fondly, madly, but you have—

there—I could never trust you again; so, for the future, we must be as strangers."

"You are cruel, Frank," she said, the tears welling in her eyes. "It is merciless of you not to hear my version of the matter, although I own appearances are much against me. The vilest criminal is allowed to make a defence; surely you will not debar me from it!"

She looked beseechingly at me, her face blanched and betraying the struggle going on within.

"But you cannot tell me here," I said, somewhat softened by her repentance.

"No; my uncle will be out to-morrow evening, come to me then," she replied, producing a visiting card, upon which she scribbled an address. "We are living at Richmond. If you cannot come, may I meet you?"

Taking the card, I said, "Very well, you shall explain matters if you wish. I will call to-morrow."

"Do," she implored; "I am sure I shall be able to satisfy you that I am not so very much to blame."

We then shook hands and parted, for the orchestra having finished playing, the curtain had risen, and the theatre was too quiet to allow further conversation.

I returned to my seat, but on glancing up five minutes afterwards, saw that Vera was not in her box, and concluded that the burlesque had no longer any attraction for her.

Nugent's inquiries after her health and well-being I answered satisfactorily, though I, myself, could not sit out the play, and returned home long before it was over.

I need not dwell upon the fearful suspense and mental torture in which that night was spent. Suffice it to say it was a period that seemed interminable, for my heart was racked by an intensity of emotion which can scarcely be conceived. The sight of Vera, in all her bewitching loveliness of old when we passed those happy days at Genoa, had awakened, with a thousand-fold energy, my love. Deceived as I imagined myself to have been, the one absorbing passion of my existence had still lived, in spite of all attempts to smother and subdue it by reason's aid. One word from Vera, one look from those eyes into

my own, had again laid me a captive at her feet, although I despised—hated—myself for what seemed mere weakness.

I knew it was a farce to seek an explanation, for, whatever it might be, I was ready to accept it. My heart could not be hardened against Vera. And then, should she in verity explain the mystery which hung around us both, that would mean the dawn of better days and brighter hopes.

Chapter Seventeen.

The Terrace, Richmond.

With a beating heart and a firm determination to be strong, I was ushered on the following afternoon into the drawing-room of one of that terrace of large houses that stand on the summit of Richmond Hill, overlooking what was at that time the grounds of Buccleuch House, but which have lately been thrown open as public gardens.

It was a pleasant room, the windows of which commanded a fine view of the picturesque valley, where, deep down, the river, like a silvery streak, winds in and out the mass of foliage. Undoubtedly it is the prettiest scene within many miles of London, and that day Father Thames was looking his best in the glories of a setting sun, whose rays now gilded the sail of a tiny craft dropping down with the tide, and anon lighted up some snorting tug or shrieking pleasure-launch.

Scarcely had I time to glance round when the door opened and Vera entered.

She looked even more lovely than I had ever before seen her, dressed in a tea-gown of cream lace over vieux rose satin, with a loose front and train, showing the pale rose satin lining, her waist being encircled by a curious girdle. It suited her admirably, and as she walked across the room with a smile of glad welcome upon her lips and her hand outstretched, I confess my heart was softened towards her.

There was an indefinable air—it might be of anxiety about her, however, as if she were afraid that what she had to say would not be convincing to me; and it was plainly to be seen that she, too, had spent a night of sleeplessness.

“Well, Frank, we have met again—you did not forget your promise,” she said, in those soft tones I loved to hear, speaking slowly, perhaps timidly.

We seated ourselves in silence. I dared not yet trust myself to speak.

“Last night I said I would give you the reason of my apparent fourberie.”

She paused, and toyed with her rings. She was waiting for me to answer.

“Yes,” I said; “I am listening.”

She looked up hastily; my voice was not encouraging.

“It was imperative Frank, that you should be sent to Petersburg—and—it was for your own sake—”

“For my sake!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, Frank,” she replied; “and it was only for that and for your future happiness and our—” she paused, while a vivid blush mantled her handsome features.

“Our what?” I demanded, almost rudely.

“I must not say, dearest; but this you might know—that no harm was intended for you in any proceeding in which I had a hand.”

“That is no answer, Vera,” I said, somewhat sternly. “You say this was for ‘our’ something, and for my future happiness! What does it all mean, and why this mystery? I’m tired of it. If you cannot explain, why ask me to call upon you?”

“Because, Frank—because I feel sure you would forgive me everything, could you know all.”

“Is there a reason, then, that you will make no explanation?”

“Yes, a most important one. If I could, I would tell you—but I cannot,” she said.

“Yet you were aware of my arrest, my imprisonment without trial, and transportation?”

“True. I knew of your arrest an hour after it had taken place.”

“And it was you who planned my escape?”

“It was. Had I not been successful, you would now be working in the Kara silver mines, enduring that living death which is a worse punishment than the gallows,” she replied, shuddering.

“For your timely assistance in that matter I must thank you,” I said. “Yet it is only fair that I should know the nature of my unknown offence, and the reason of my arrest I presume you are aware of it?”

“No, do not thank me, Frank. It was in my power to help you, and I did so. It was but my duty.”

“But why was I imprisoned?” I asked.

“That I cannot tell you.”

“Surely I have a right to demand an explanation, and if you do not tell me I shall place the matter before the English Consul, who will, perhaps, be able to fathom it,” I observed.

“No, no!” she replied, starting up. “No, Frank, don’t do that, for my sake. It would implicate me and I should be in deadly peril. Let the subject rest, and request no further explanation, promise me that?” she urged earnestly.

“I cannot. There is a mystery about the whole affair which I confess I don’t like. I came here to-day expecting to hear it explained, but I find you indisposed to tell me anything,” I replied angrily.

“Not indisposed, Frank—unable.”

“Unable! Why, you admit you are fully cognisant of the facts!”

“I do, but unfortunately circumstances will not permit me to disclose the secret.”

“There is a secret, then?” I ejaculated.

“Yes, one that must be kept at all hazards, alas! Therefore promise not to cause inquiries to be made, or it will be myself who will be the sufferer. Do promise me this?” she implored.

“If what you say is true,” I replied, “you may rely upon my silence, though I think, in the interests of our friendship, you should tell me what you know.”

“I wish I could. I know I am not hors de blâme, for I deceived you when I said I was under my uncle’s thrall. It is true he holds power over me, but not in the way I suggested.”

“How, then?”

“Ah, it is part of the secret. Some day, perhaps, you may know—not now. I had a set purpose in asking you to go to Russia to perform that commission you so kindly undertook, yet it was in desperation that I asked you—the man who was to have been my husband.”

“And I shall bitterly remember the experience until my dying day,” I remarked.

“Yes! it is only natural that you should feel disgusted at what you conceive is my treachery. It is but another result of the fatal step—I mean of the cursed circumstances in which I am placed. I cannot hope for your forgiveness, for I dare not explain. On every side,” she exclaimed disconsolately, with a vehement gesture of the hands, “I am watched and surrounded, hemmed in with difficulties, absolutely prevented from—”

“From telling me the object for which you sent me to Russia, when you knew it was a dangerous errand, likely to cost me my life? How can you expect that I should love you as I did with this terrible enigma unsolved?”

She remained silent.

For a moment I thought she was on the point of telling me all, when, with a look of piteous appeal, she threw herself at my knees and raised my hands to her lips.

“Frank,” she murmured, so low that it was only by bending forward that I could catch the words, “why do you ask? Is it because you love me, or—or—is it from mere curiosity you inquire?”

“Because I love you, Vera.”

“Then,” raising her beautiful face to my own, with a smile of hope, “then—trust me, Frank, and, in the future, when things have altered, you shall know all!”

“This is trifling,” I said stiffly, raising her to her feet. “You ask me to trust you because I love you; if you care for me, why not trust me, and confide this trouble to one who would do so much for you?”

“Cannot you wait, Frank, for—for even a short time? Can you never think that it was by pure force of circumstances that I was compelled to practise deceit towards you? I have known of your return since the day of the murder—that is—I mean since the first hour you set foot in England, but I had not the courage to face you because I knew I deserved forgiveness so little.”

“If this is all you have to say,” I responded, rising, and taking up my stick and hat, as if going, “we may as well part. Force of circumstances may be compelling you to deceive me now.”

My heart told me that Vera was wronged. As the cynical words fell from my lips she gave me a glance confirming that opinion. Standing erect, her features

aglow with indignation, her whole frame quivering with excitement, she confronted me like a lioness.

“Go!” she exclaimed, with an energy which made me start violently. “Go, for we have both been deceived. I have been deceived, but now my awakening has come. Alas! this is my reward for the dangers braved, the difficulties surmounted, and the crimes committed for your sake!”

“Stay, Vera, for Heaven’s sake! What crimes?”

“Oh, forgive me! What have I said? I think I’m mad. Nay, question me no further, but leave me. Could you but know my heart, Frank, you would have pity—you would know that my love is too great, too all-absorbing, to allow me for an instant to endanger your life unnecessarily. But it is absolutely certain I cannot tell you now, and therefore—”

I was conquered. As she paused again, in the midst of her anguish, and her eyes sought mine with an irresistible glance in which love and tenderness, mingled with entreaty, struggled with hope, I knew that all further resistance to the spell on my part was useless, for Vera spoke the truth—and she was all the world to me.

So I took her in my arms, and forgave her.

“And you will always trust me now, Frank?” she asked presently with happy and tender elation.

“Vera,” I said, gravely, “I am showing my faith in you, am I not, by asking you to be my wife? I can trust you?”

“Trust me!” she cried. “Mon Dieu! I have loved only one man; it is you.”

I bent down to kiss the pale upturned face and her lips met mine in a hot passionate caress, enough to make any man’s head reel.

“I will endeavour to blot out from my memory this strange deceit you have practised upon me,” I exclaimed in a low voice.

“I am thankful to you, for I’m so undeserving,” she cried, kissing me fondly again and again.

“But you must own your vindication has not been very satisfactory,” I said, smiling.

“Yes, I am aware of that,” she replied, seriously.

“Mais, restes tranquille. I cannot tell you all—at least not yet.”

“Then for the present I have heard enough to convince me once more of your affection, Vera, and to each other we will be as before. You are still, darling, my betrothed.”

She did not reply, but flinging her slim white arms around my neck, shed tears of joy. The terrible anxiety as to the result of her pleading, upon which depended her happiness and peace of mind, had proved too great for her, and her pent-up feelings found vent in hysterical emotion.

She clung tightly to me as I tried to soothe her, and presently, when she became more calm, she dashed away her tears.

Before I returned to town that night she had consented to become my wife in a few months. Some might censure me as being rash and headstrong, but the truth was I had become intoxicated with her marvellous beauty, fascinated by her charming manner, just as I had been when we met by the Mediterranean.

There was something undeniably strange and mysterious in her religiously-guarded secret, but I felt assured hers was a strong, passionate, unwavering affection, and consequently, when I bade her good-night, I was in the best of spirits, and hopeful of the future.

Chapter Eighteen.

Under the Stars.

Six months later.

Vera was now my wife. After spending a blissful honeymoon among the Cumberland Lakes we had taken up our abode at Elveham Dene, the home of my childhood, which I had inherited from my father. She was delighted with the old place, and, indeed, I myself have always been fond of it, and may be forgiven if I descant upon its old-world beauties.

It sounds egotistical, even snobbish, nowadays, to talk of ancient lineage, but ours was not a mushroom family, for the Burgoynes have been the possessors of the estate for the greater portion of three centuries.

Six miles from the nearest railway station, Stamford, and one from the village of Blatherwyke, Elveham stands high up, commanding magnificent views across that most fertile of the midland counties—Northamptonshire. Built when the First James was King, with its wings of brick and stone dressings, the centre entirely of stone shrouded by the ivy of years and decorated with Renaissance ornaments, its great charm lies in the air of unprofaned antiquity which surrounds it. There are no modern additions; and the broad balustraded terraces, the quaint old flower gardens with their sundials, and the venerable oaks and yew-trees, all call up visions of sturdy white-plumed cavaliers whose talk is of the unhappy fight at Cheriton and the downfall of “Loyalty.”

Through the long years the interior has been little changed, and contains some fine old tapestry, ancient furniture, and a gallery wherein hang the time-sombred portraits of my ancestors.

It is a quaint old place throughout, and it was my delight when I brought Vera there to point out and explain the curiosities, odd nooks and corners, and relate to her its many traditions.

The Dene itself is noteworthy, too: a long steep glade carpeted with turf, closed in by a wooded amphitheatre, which opens close to the house. The lower part forms a flower garden; the whole scene, with its occasional cypresses and sunny patches of greensward, is Poussinesque, and strictly classical, belonging not to English fairies, but to the wood spirit of the old world.

Beyond, a walk leads through a beech wood, the undergrowth of which consists of huge rhododendrons. Blatherwyke may be reached by this path, being a shorter distance than by the high-road.

Such was the home which, owing to a quarrel with my father, I had left seven years before to battle with the world and earn my living by dint of sheer hard work; the home to which I returned, my bride upon my arm, wealthy, happy, with a bright future of bliss unalloyed before me. Our welcome, too, was a very hearty one, possibly because from a child I had been popular with the servants and tenants, and since coming into possession of the place I had not stinted them.

It was scarcely surprising that my wife should have been charmed with the natural and artistic beauties of this dear home, for they were such as should content any one of good sense, even though their tastes were fastidious.

Mine were not. I was a happy, contented man, blessed with a beautiful and affectionate wife, and feeling glad, having at last secured the prize for which I risked so much.

As she had scarcely any friends in this country we had been married quietly at Richmond. Monsieur Hertzen performed the formality of giving away his niece, and at the church door we left him, as we understood he had to leave England upon pressing business. On our return from the Lakes I proposed that we should spend the autumn at Elveham and invite some people for the shooting. For the winter season it was my intention to take a house in London and introduce Vera in society. At these plans she expressed her utmost satisfaction, though she said she should be happy to live aways at Elveham.

In peaceful contentment, without thought, devoid of care, the days passed pleasantly after our arrival home.

As mistress, she soon set about arranging and reorganising the household, and I could not fail to notice that her quiet, kindly demeanour at once endeared her to the servants, all of whom spoke highly of her.

I had married her knowing absolutely nothing about her past, and this was a fact which she apparently had not forgotten, for on the night of our arrival, when we had dined, and were seated tête-à-tête in her boudoir, she rose, and coming behind my chair, said,—

“Frank, dear, I had no idea my future home was to be so beautiful a place; it is absolutely perfect. Few women begin their married life in happier circumstances than these.”

“Was it a pleasant surprise?” I asked, laughing. “Yes, very,” she answered. “But I cannot forget, dear, that you know nothing whatever about me. I might be a base adventuress for aught you know. How is it you trust me so?”

“Because—why, because I love you,” I replied. She passed her hand lightly through my hair, as she said, “In return I will always be true to you, Frank. The day will come, sooner or later, when I can tell you the story of my life, and much that will astonish you, perhaps.”

“And you promise there shall be no clouds to mar our happiness?—clouds caused by jealousy or distrust, I mean.”

“No, never. You love me truly, I know. No man who did not would have married me with appearances so much against me as they were. I am world-weary, tired of the wandering life I have led, and glad to be with you here—always. I swear I will ever be good and faithful to you,” and a light of great contentment shone in her eyes.

It was enough. I desired no more, for my cup of happiness was filled, and with all my heart I worshipped my wife as an angel of goodness and purity. Ah! if we men could but remember that there is no beauty beneath the skin, that a soft tongue is not an outward sign of genuine affection in that crisis in our lives when we take a woman for our wife, how many brief fools’ paradises should we avoid, how many hours, nay years of trouble and unhappiness, how much shame, how many broken hearts!

Alas! my bliss was but short-lived, for very soon the glamour fell from my eyes, and I made discoveries of a nature so horrible that I would gladly have given all I possessed as a ransom for my freedom.

Love is blind, ’tis true, but jealousy has a thousand eyes which hideously distort that which is seen, at the same time eating into our hearts like a corrosive acid, with results almost as dire. Yet what greater calamity could befall a man than to discover his wife’s perfidy, and to know that while she smiles and caresses him she is conspiring with others to bring about his death?

Fate decreed that such position, ere long, should be mine.

One morning, after we had been at Elveham several weeks, the post-bag contained a letter addressed to Vera, which I handed to her. There was nothing extraordinary in this, as she received many letters from friends, some of which bore the Russian stamp. But the postmark of this particular one was remarkable, inasmuch as it was from Oundle, a town but a few miles distant, where I knew none of her acquaintances resided.

Hastily glancing at its superscription, she turned pale and became visibly agitated; then glancing at me, as if to assure herself I had not noticed her anxiety, she broke the envelope and read the contents, afterwards thrusting it hurriedly into her pocket, evidently trying to hide it from my sight.

I am constrained to confess that in my then mood I attached but little importance to the matter, and not until subsequent events had occurred did I remember it, though I remarked inwardly that during the remainder of the day she seemed nervously anxious, and about her face there was a strange, careworn expression, such as I had only once before seen—on the night of our interview at Richmond.

In the evening, having some correspondence to attend to, I retired to the library, a fine old room, filled from floor to ceiling with books, and containing many choice editions, for bibliophilism had been my father's hobby, and he had rendered this portion of the house extremely pleasant and comfortable. A lover of books himself, I, as a literary man, inherited his tastes, and now on my return home frequently spent several hours here daily, reading, and transacting that business which necessarily falls upon the owner of an estate.

It was pleasant enough in the daytime, with its windows opening upon the terrace, commanding an extensive view of the Dene, but at night, when the thick crimson curtains were drawn, the lamps lit, and the fire blazed cheerfully in the wide old-fashioned grate, casting its inconstant light upon the stands of shining armour of departed Burgoynes, then it was one of the most snug and cosy rooms in the house.

We had dined, and I had been alone a couple of hours busily answering several important letters, when Vera entered.

She did not speak, fearing perhaps to interrupt me, but with a loving glance drew a lounge chair towards the fire, and sank into it. I was startled to notice how deathly pale she was, and asked whether she felt ill.

“I have a very painful headache, dear,” she replied in a tremulous voice. “I think I will go to my room and rest. If I am undisturbed I shall, perhaps, be better.”

“Very well,” I replied; “I will ring for Elise,” for my wife’s maid had been retained, and was devoted to her mistress.

“No, no, do not trouble her; I will go myself. Don’t disturb me, dear, and I shall be well to-morrow,” she replied, as I rose to touch the bell.

“As you wish, dearest,” I said, kissing her; “I hope sleep will refresh you.”

She rose and departed, but before she closed the door, added: “I shall not come down again to-night. You will not feel dull?”

“No, dear,” I replied. “Here’s a heap of writing before me, and while you are getting rid of your headache I can get through it. Good-night.”

She wished me bon soir in a low, strained voice, and closed the door.

Till nearly eleven o’clock I continued writing, but feeling cramped, lit a cigarette, and opening one of the French windows, stepped out into the night.

It was dark. There was no sound beyond my own footsteps, but as I left the house the thought of the strange murders in London by some chance recurred to me. Was it a presage of coming evil; of an approaching crisis of my fate? Somehow I felt that it was, and with my thoughts fixed upon the awful subject I wandered away over the gravelled paths, scarcely heeding the direction in which I was walking. Gradually, however, I became more composed; the surrounding peace, the soft air, and the thought of my wife’s strong affection, had their soothing effect upon me.

Recalled to myself by the weird hoot of an owl, I looked round, and saw I had penetrated into the beech wood, and that I trod noiselessly upon the mossy ground.

Pausing for a moment to take out a fresh cigarette, the sound of voices, close to where I stood, fell indistinctly upon my ears. It did not, and would not, have struck me as curious, had I not suddenly observed two figures, a man and a woman, who were standing together. I had no desire, nor inclination, to witness the love-making of a couple of rustics, yet what could I do? To move was to be discovered, so I remained motionless, hidden behind the trunk of a huge tree.

After a few moments they resumed their conversation earnestly, and my curiosity was aroused. I listened, but was unable to distinguish a single word. Suddenly, however, the truth became evident. I knew they were speaking in Russian!

I recognised the woman's voice as that of Vera!

Scarce daring to breathe, I stood rooted to the spot, but just as I had made the startling discovery the moon appeared from behind a bank of cloud, shining down through the leafy branches, and revealing my wife leaning upon the arm of her companion.

He was bending over her, with his face hidden from me. My first impulse was to rush forward and surprise them; but reflecting a moment, I stood eagerly watching. He was uttering tenderly-spoken words, and her head was resting upon his shoulder, when suddenly he turned and glanced in my direction.

The moonlight fell full upon his face, and in a moment I recognised it as one I had seen before!

It was a countenance every feature of which was impressed only too deeply upon my memory—that of the man I had seen leaving the house in Bedford Place!—the man I had vowed to deliver up to justice whenever he should cross my path!

There was a rustling among the bracken, and the branches of the trees gently swaying, cast weird shadows around which a heated imagination could easily have transformed into the shapes and forms of supernatural creatures.

Again peeping from my place of concealment, I saw my wife and her companion were moving onward; indeed I was compelled to draw back quickly, for she passed so close that I could touch her.

Conversing in the same earnest tones they strolled slowly along to the edge of the wood; but I did not follow them: I had heard and seen enough.

Stunned and bewildered, no tears welled from my eyes, but, nevertheless, I began to bitterly repent the implicit trust I had placed in Vera, and firmly resolved not to rest until I could bring to justice the inhuman monster who, not content with his horrible deeds, had ruined that happiness that I foolishly believed would last always.

The shock was so great it prostrated me. The impulse to follow them never suggested itself—fool that I was!

Chapter Nineteen.

False!

Utterly broken down at this manifestation of Vera's deception and faithlessness, I wandered away through the grounds in an opposite direction.

Those only who have experienced a suddenly overwhelming grief at discovering the perfidy of the person on whom their affection is set know the intense regret, the anger, and the jealous hatred of the one by whose instrumentality their idol has been shattered. If ever the spirit of murder enters a man's soul it is then.

I thought only of revenge.

Did I not know enough of this man who had blighted my wife's happiness to prove him a murderer and to send him to the gallows? Should I not be even fulfilling my duty in doing so, as well as avenging my own wrongs at the same time?

Yes. I resolved, after much commune with myself, to do this on the morrow. First I would compel Vera to disclose his name, then seek him out, and hand him over to the police.

With these and other maddening thoughts coursing through my brain I had cast myself upon the trunk of a fallen tree, and must have sat there for some time as, when I became conscious of things about me, the grey dawn had appeared through the fast-falling foliage.

Rising, I slowly retraced my steps to the house, pacing the terrace several times in deep soliloquy. The stars had disappeared, the chill breeze stirred the boughs softly, and the air was impregnated with the perfume of decaying leaves. How well I remember leaning upon the stone balustrade, gazing away down the misty Dene, and reflecting that ere the morrow's sun had set Vera and I would be parted forever; for after such a discovery I could trust her no longer, neither could we be anything more to each other than strangers.

Need I say how heartily I cursed myself for having been prevailed upon to visit her at Richmond, to listen to her lame excuses, to be softened by her endearing words? No. For the thousandth time I told myself I had been fascinated by her beauty in the way the bird is fascinated by the snake; her toils were about me, and until the present moment I had always been too weak to tear them

asunder, to lift the veil from my own eyes, and see her in her true character—that of an adventuress.

But that time had now arrived, and though I confess I was beside myself with grief to find the woman I had loved so fondly, guilty of such scheming and such treachery, I was, nevertheless, pleased to be in possession of the truth. Now I was aware of the worst, and should know how to act.

Presently I turned and passed through the French window into my study. It was useless retiring, for I could not sleep with such thoughts gnawing at my heart, so I flung myself into my writing-chair and thought.

I sat motionless until the warm sun shone through the open window and the birds outside had broken forth into song, when it occurred to me that as I had resolved to leave the place in a few hours it would be well to place my papers in order. This I commenced to do.

There lay scattered upon the table a deed relating to some property, and several letters of a private nature, upon which I had been engaged before taking my stroll on the previous night. With the object of placing them under lock and key I was thoughtfully collecting them when there fell from amongst the heap of papers a piece of red sealing-wax, about the size of a sixpence.

Rarely having occasion to use wax myself I took up the fragment, and found it had the appearance of being the rough corner of a seal that had chipped off the paper to which it had been affixed.

“Some one must have been here in my absence,” I exclaimed aloud, glancing at the taper which also lay upon the table, at the same time noticing a small spot of wax that had apparently been dropped upon the leather. Then I remembered that if any one had been in the study during the night they had, without doubt, made themselves acquainted with the contents of the paper, and with the rough copy of my will which I had carelessly left about.

I glanced at the scrap of wax again and found upon the margin, close to where it was broken, there was an impression of something.

This might give me a clue to the identity of the member of my household who required sealing-wax in the middle of the night.

Going to the window, the stronger light revealed a strange character, something of the shape of the letter B, but having a long excrescence in front.

In a moment I recognised it as one of the hieroglyphics of the mystic seal!

Nervousness is not one of my afflictions, yet I looked round that room involuntarily viewing the curtains with suspicion, as if half afraid I should witness something supernatural appear from behind them.

It was obvious that some one with the seal in his or her possession had come to my study in my absence during the dark hours of the night for the purpose of obtaining an impression in wax, and that the piece which had served as a clue had accidentally chipped off, alighting amongst the papers.

That some one in the house held the seal there could not be the slightest doubt, and my thoughts at once flew to the man whom Vera had clandestinely met—he whom I knew to be the murderer of Mrs Inglewood.

Who had he marked out as his next victim?

If he entertained affection for Vera, and she reciprocated it, what was more natural than that they should wish to rid themselves of me? I shuddered at the thought. My wife could surely never be an accessory to a murder—yet such things were not unknown, I told myself.

Yes; my surmise must be correct. My wife's lover was only waiting for a favourable opportunity to strike the fatal blow.

He was not aware, however, that I had espied his presence, had recognised him; nor that by mere chance I had learned that an attempt was to be made upon my life.

"I can thwart their vile plot, even now!" I said bitterly, holding the piece of wax in my hand, and gazing upon it. "I will see Vera and first give her an opportunity to justify herself. If it is unsatisfactory I shall then give information to the police, and have the murderer arrested," and I even smiled at the thought that, after all, I held the trump card.

Just at that moment the door opened, a head was poked in, and a voice exclaimed: "Halloa, old fellow, why you look as if you hadn't been to bed! I heard somebody chattering, and thought there must be visitors, yet it's rather early. Talking to yourself, it seems."

"What's the time?" I exclaimed rather brusquely, at the same moment taking out my watch.

"Half-past five," he replied. "Coming out with me for a walk? A stretch at this hour of the morning will do you good."

"No, thanks; I'm not an athlete," I replied. "Very well. But, by Jove, what's the matter with you this morning? If you'd had a bad night at baccarat and were stone broke you couldn't look worse."

"Matter with me? Nothing!" I replied, endeavouring to smile, "except that I've been very busy writing."

“Take my tip and go to bed, old fellow. A couple of hours there will freshen you up wonderfully. But, good-bye, if you won’t come for a stroll.”
“Good-bye: see you at breakfast,” I replied abruptly, as the head withdrew and the door closed.
The intruder was Demetrius Hertzen, Vera’s cousin, a tall, broad-shouldered fellow about my own age, who had an abundance of spirits, which made him a most agreeable companion.
In response to my invitation he had arrived from Brussels a fortnight previously, and had signified his ability to remain my guest for another month. I had only met him once before, at our marriage, but when he had been with us a few days, I found he had many tastes in common with myself,—that he knew London quite as well as Paris or Brussels, and that although used to rather fast society perhaps, he was nevertheless a thoroughly good fellow.
Vera and he had been children together, and laughingly admitted they were sweethearts before they had gained their teens, but that when Demetrius arrived at the mature age of fifteen he transferred his affections. Cautiously I had approached my guest with a view to learn something of his cousin’s past, but he seemed remarkably shrewd, and carefully warded off every indirect question I put to him on the subject.
Possibly it was at Vera’s request that he would not tell me what he knew, yet upon this matter only was he silent, as he conversed freely of his own doings and acquaintances, and of his life since leaving the paternal roof, for though a Russian, he spoke English almost perfectly, and only in certain words could the accent be detected.
Somehow, though our acquaintance had been but brief, I had become greatly attached to him, such a mirthful cosmopolitan was he, brimming over with humour and good-fellowship and as light-hearted as his father was dark and sullen. He seemed to be untroubled by any thought or care, the sole object of his existence being to get the greatest amount of enjoyment out of life, and cause amusement to his companions.
Perplexed and uneasy, I longed for some one in whom to confide, and after he had gone, as I stood there brooding, I almost regretted I had not told him of my suspicions, and enlisted his sympathy and aid in tracking the murderer.
I knew, were I to tell him of my discovery of Vera’s faithlessness, he would readily render any assistance, and even give me advice that I might follow with advantage. I had no one else near to whom I could speak, and after considerable deliberation I at last determined to take him into my confidence, provided I obtained an opportunity of speaking with him alone after breakfast.
To my pocket-book I transferred the mysterious piece of sealing-wax, and then sadly and thoughtfully resumed the task of putting my papers in order.

It took some time, and when finished I set about making preparations for my journey.

First I drew a cheque in favour of myself for a good round sum, then I sat down and wrote a long letter to Vera, which I intended she should read after I had gone.

Full of sorrow and regret, it was a letter in which I told her of my dejection and my inconsolable grief, yet expressing a bitter hope that her life might be happier in the future than mine would be, and explaining the arrangements I proposed whereby she would have a fair income, and Elveham to reside in as long as she wished.

More than once in the course of writing I was so overcome I could scarce proceed, and throwing down my pen was tempted to tear the letter up. But it was a duty; the last communication between myself and she who had been dearest to me. I felt constrained to write on to the end, and append my signature.

After carefully reading it through, I placed it in an envelope, and addressed it to her, “to be opened after my departure.”

The hours had crept on unnoticed; the servant had long ago come in for the purpose of dusting the place, but, seeing me, had retired. Just as I had written the superscription on the envelope the door again opened, and I found myself face to face with Vera.

Chapter Twenty.

A Mystery Still.

I rose with a resolute determination that it should be our last interview.

“Why, Frank,” she exclaimed, with well-feigned surprise, as she advanced, “you haven’t been to bed, and—why, what’s the matter, dear?” she added, noticing the expression of anger upon my countenance.

“You ought to know well enough,” I replied sternly.

“How should I know?” she asked. “Why, the gas is still burning! Surely you’ve not been writing all night!”

“It seems your headache has left you,” I exclaimed curtly, without answering her question.

“Yes, I feel better this morning.”

“In fact, the pain disappeared as soon as you left me last night, eh?”

“What!—what do you mean, Frank?” she asked anxiously, in a strange voice, a sudden pallor overspreading her statuesque face.

“You plead ignorance; it is exactly what I expected. My meaning, I should have thought was pretty clear. You are not usually so dull.”

“I do not understand you.”

Her eyes wavered, she trembled with excitement, and I could see she was bent upon concealing the truth. This increased my anger.

“It is a lie!” I said sharply. “You are trying to deceive me, but I know the truth at last.”

“Deceiving you! Why, what have I done that you should accuse me in this manner? Surely you are not yourself this morning?”

“You left me here writing last night, did you not?”

“Yes,” she answered, gloomily.

“And thought that I was safe for a few hours, and would not keep an eye upon your movements?”

“What has that to do with it?”

“Simply this. A couple of hours after you shammed illness and left me, I went out into the Dene, and there I saw—”

“There you saw me!” she cried wildly, swaying forward, and clutching at the back of a chair for support. “Dieu! it is true, Frank; yes, true, I—I confess—I deceived you.”

“Then you admit it!” I ejaculated, hardly believing my own ears.

“Yes; yes, I do,” she moaned in tones of anguish. “But forgive me, and say no more about the occurrence. It was unfortunate, and no harm has been done.”

I tried with difficulty to restrain my passionate indignation. Such a cool request maddened me.

“Unfortunate?” I cried. “No; for me it is the reverse, for it has opened my eyes to your faithlessness. Forgive you this! The thing’s absurd!”

“I unfaithful!” she repeated, looking vacantly about her, and clasping her hands. “I never thought it could be misconstrued into that! I unfaithful! Am I not your wife?” and with heaving breast and tearful eyes she bent her head as if to avert my gaze.

“Yes; you are my wife, but she who brings dishonour upon her husband is unworthy that name,” I said, in a tone of disgust.

“I have not brought you dishonour,” she declared, drawing herself up with dignity.

“You have, I tell you! Late last night you met a strange man in the Dene, and that man is your lover!” I retorted, decisively.

“That I am to blame, Frank, I admit,” she said, dashing the tears from her eyes, “but he is not my lover. I swear you are mistaken. Nothing was further from my thoughts.”

“Oh, don’t tell me that! I know enough of the world to distinguish the meaning of such clandestine meetings,” I replied, sickened at the manner she was endeavouring to clear herself.

“There is no love between us,” she exclaimed; “but,”—and she paused.

“Then why meet him in such a secret manner?” I demanded, adding with a sneer, “perhaps you will tell me next that it was not you I saw, but a twin sister.”

She still hesitated, with her eyes cast down as if in thought.

“You can give no answer,” I continued with warmth, “because you are guilty.”

“Guilty only of meeting him,” she said, drawing a deep breath: “but I assure you there is no love between us—nay, I swear it—only a secret tie.”

“I don’t wish you to perjure yourself,” I remarked coldly. “You ‘assure me’! What utter nonsense.”

“I tell you the truth.”

“You have told me so many falsehoods that a little truth is certainly refreshing!” I replied with sarcasm.

“I cannot force you to believe me,” she continued in a low voice, still steadying herself by the chair.

“Do you think me such a confounded idiot, then, as to believe you could have business with a strange man at that hour of the night?”

“Business, nevertheless, was the object of our meeting.”

“Bah! your excuses are positively intolerable. What was the nature of this business?”

“You must not know,” she replied, hesitatingly.

Her brows contracted, and her tiny hands clenched tightly upon the chair-back, as if summoning all her courage to be firm.

“Ah! the old story. More mystery. Look here! I’ve had enough of it!” I shouted in anger. “In fact, I’ve had too much of it already, and I demand an explanation, or you and I must part!”

A shudder ran through her slim frame as I spoke, and she lost her support and almost fell. With a sudden movement she pushed back the mass of dark curls from her forehead, her bright eyes gleamed with an earnest fire as they met mine, and she said, hysterically, “You are cruel—you do not know how I suffer, for your surmise is not correct in the smallest degree. You, my husband, I love, and no one else. And you accuse me. Mon Dieu!”

My self-control was very nearly exhausted. If she had been a man I might have struck her! As it was, I was powerless, and as I looked at her my eyes must have gleamed with fury.

“Last night proved the great extent of your love for me,” I exclaimed fiercely.

All that latent fire which exists in every woman’s nature, ready to burst into flame when her self-respect is wounded, was aglow in Vera as I uttered that retort.

“I cannot see that it did. I have done absolutely nothing of which I am ashamed,” was her answer.

She spoke with a cool, reckless candour that shocked me. My thoughts were soured by disappointment.

“What!” I cried, “have you no compunction?”

“I am sorry it was my ill-luck to be seen by you, and thus cause you unnecessary pain.”

“Oh, spare me your expressions of sorrow, pray,” I said, in a hard tone. “They are out of place.”

“I had thought to keep his presence a secret,” she continued in that dead-calm voice, which was like some one speaking in a dream.

“If he were not your lover, why should you do that? Your own words prove your guilt?”

“Because I had reasons,” she replied. “Reasons!” I repeated, my thoughts at once reverting to the piece of seal I had discovered. “Strange reasons they must be, surely. What is his name?”

“It is nobody you know. You have never heard of him.”

It was upon the tip of my tongue to denounce him as the perpetrator of the crime in Bedford Place, but with difficulty I restrained myself, and, impelled by the strangeness of her manner, demanded:

“Who is he? Answer me!”

“I am very sorry, Frank, but I cannot,” she replied, her face deathly pale, and her limbs trembling with agitation.

“Then you refuse to answer?” I cried, stung to the quick by her dogged persistency.

“Yes; I must.”

Her hands clasped, her teeth firmly set, her bloodless face tear-stained and haggard, and her hair disordered, she stood rigidly beside the chair that supported her, striving by an almost superhuman effort to suppress her emotion.

“Vera,” I shouted fiercely, “it seems I’ve been fooled. Curse that man who has brought misery and destruction to us both! By heaven if—”

“He is not to blame: it is I,” she interrupted. “You shield him at the expense of yourself. I see. Now, hear me. All my questions you have evaded; to none will you give direct answers. Enough of mysteries which you have refused to reveal ever since knowing me; therefore, we can do naught else but part.”

“What—you will leave me because of this?” she moaned, with a wild, hysterical cry. “Why don’t you go a step further—why don’t you say at once you are tired of me?” she cried, with an outburst of passion. “Say that you wish me dead.”

“That would be untrue,” I answered. “You know well I have lived only for you, Vera, and at nothing should I rejoice more than to be able to prove myself mistaken; yet, until that can be done, we must separate.”

She was grave and thoughtful for a moment, then, looking into my face, said haughtily:

“If you are determined upon this step, I am powerless to prevent it.”

“No, you are not,” I asserted.

“Why?”

“Because you might answer satisfactorily the questions I put to you just now.”

“No; no, anything but that,” she replied promptly, as with a frantic gesture she covered her face with her hands, continuing, “It—it would be far better for us to part, or the result—the result—might prove fatal.”

“What do you mean?” I demanded incredulously, as the mystery of the seal recurred to me.

“I mean that my secret must be kept, even if we part,” she gasped, with a futile endeavour to compose herself.

“This is your final decision, then?”

“Alas! it must be.”

“Very well, Vera, I wish you adieu,” I said sadly, for I was completely broken-hearted at the thought of my idol’s deceit, and the transparent subterfuges by which she had endeavoured to conceal her guilt. “We have been happy during the few months of our wedded life, but that is a thing of the past. Henceforth mine will be a dark, hopeless existence, while yours, I trust, may be as pleasant as it has hitherto been; for though you have dishonoured me, I love you too well, even now, to wish any calamity should ever befall you.”

“No, Frank, don’t leave me. I could not bear it!” she shrieked, bursting into a torrent of tears. “I have told you the truth—I have, by heaven! It is my terrible misfortune that I am unable to explain who that man was, and from the same cause it has not been possible for me to acquaint you with anything relating to my past. Wait patiently for a little, and I promise you faithfully—I swear you shall know everything.”

She was terribly in earnest, I could see; her whole future depending upon my decision that moment. It was the secret of her life I was anxious to learn beyond anything, and I asked:

“How long must I wait?”

She gazed at me for a few seconds blankly, apparently making some calculation.

“Three weeks. Wait till then before you condemn me—do, I implore of you!”

What ingenious motive could there be in thus gaining time, I asked myself. Could it be that in three weeks' time the murderer would be safely out of the country?

This seemed more than probable.

I felt half inclined to demand an immediate explanation or carry out the alternative, when, on a moment's reflection, I resolved not to resort to extremes without giving her an opportunity of disproving my allegations.

"Very well," I said impatiently, at last; "the matter shall rest for the present; but this day three weeks I shall be prepared—I shall expect to hear a complete explanation. Bear that in mind."

As I spoke the door had opened noiselessly, and Demetrius, with an expectant expression on his good-humoured face, and a cigarette in his mouth, stood upon the threshold.

Vera, who had been awaiting my reply with breathless agitation, murmured in a low, intense voice, "In three weeks you shall know all, I—promise—you," and before I could save her she had swayed forward helplessly and fallen full length in a dead swoon.

"Ma foi!" exclaimed Demetrius; "why, what has happened?" as he rushed forward in consternation and assisted me to lift her upon the couch.

"Nothing," I replied. "A little difference of opinion between us, that's all;" and ringing the bell violently to summon the servants, I left the room without further utterance.

Chapter Twenty One.

Storms of Fate.

It will readily be imagined that it was in no amiable state of mind I left the house. Distraction was what I wanted—distraction from thoughts of the sad events which had just transpired, and which threatened to wreck all the hopes of wedded happiness I had founded upon Vera's supposed love for me. It was a bitter experience of the vanity of human pleasures, and was one more proof of the falsity and hollowness of her whom I had loved more than life itself.

Determined to leave the Dene and rid myself of these remorseful thoughts, I jammed on my hat and rushed from the house.

While walking down the drive the postman passed me, bearing the second delivery of letters. The sight of him recalled to my mind the fact that, in the midst of the morning's excitement, the usual batch of correspondence had escaped my notice. Turning hastily, I made for the study, where a number of letters were awaiting me.

There was only one communication which possessed for me any interest. It was from my old friend Bob Nugent, and a thrill of pleasure passed through me as I recognised the familiar scrawl—Bob was never a neat writer.

The letter was as follows: "Dear Old Frank,—I am writing in great haste, and at the usual high pressure, to give you the welcome news that Teddy Rivers has turned up after his New Zealand experiences, as fresh as paint. He hasn't much time to spare; so if you want to have one of the old dinners at the Junior Garrick, my boy, and can tear yourself away from the little wife for a few hours, why—come soon.—Yours ever, Bob Nugent."

"Tear yourself away from the little wife!" I repeated to myself with a groan. Bob was quite right; Vera had truly charmed me, laying me under the spell of her beauty and the vivacity of her manner—for what! With a savage stamp of my foot I threw the letter upon the fire.

A moment's reflection convinced me that my best course would be to run up to town and meet my friends. As a matter of fact, the opportunity was just what I needed. It would afford a little excitement to drown the weary hours, and cause the time to pass more quickly.

I decided to go.

My preparations were soon complete, and the afternoon mail saw me being rapidly conveyed to town, after having left an explanatory note for Vera, to the effect that I should in all probability be absent three weeks.

That journey I shall ever remember. The mad noisy whirl of the express train was as nothing compared with the wild tormenting dance of my thoughts as they again and again reverted to the unhappy events of the morning. At one time I blamed my precipitation; at another I bemoaned my weakness in allowing myself to be wheedled into waiting another three weeks. Should I ever live those fearful twenty-one days? Some presentiment seemed to fill my brain, and as the train rushed through the stations one after another, every moment seemed bearing me nearer and nearer to some catastrophe.

With a sense of vast satisfaction, therefore, I alighted from a cab in Adam Street, Strand, the same evening, and found myself standing outside the time-stained old building, with which so much of my past had been associated. As its well-known entrance met my gaze it appeared to be but yesterday when I left that very spot on the morning the first murder was committed in Bedford Place.

Brushing aside these memories—for they threatened to become very dismal—I walked quickly upstairs to the well-remembered smoking-room, and glanced around.

As I did this it occurred to me that I had made a great omission. I had forgotten to inform Bob by telegram that I so promptly accepted his invitation, and consequently he was not awaiting me, nor did I know a single face about me.

Evidently there was no utility in staying there, for it might be hours before my friend put in an appearance. I knew his address, but did not feel in the humour for going to hunt him up; finally I resolved to go to a hotel at once.

On regaining the street I noticed, crouching beside the iron railings, which, however, afforded him very little shelter, a haggard-looking man. His threadbare coat was buttoned tightly across his chest, and a battered silk hat, which had seen better days, was pulled down over his eyes, giving him a peculiar, almost repulsive, appearance. Under the rim of his hat a pair of sharp keen eyes glittered with a baleful yet anxious glare, and these two orbs were the most striking part of the man's tout ensemble. Something about the fellow's appearance caused me to regard him with attention.

He did not withdraw his glance as mine rested on him. On the contrary, he seemed to become satisfied of my identity. With earnest gesture he rose and stopped me as I was about to enter the cab.

“Now then; move on!” shouted a harsh voice, as the unknown placed his hand, lean, thin and dirty, upon the sleeve of my ulster. The figure of a constable loomed up suddenly in the flickering gaslight.

“Stay! What is it you want?” I asked, for my heart seemed to tell me he was no ordinary alms-seeker.

He was about to reply, and I could feel his hand upon my arm trembling with eagerness, when the policeman again interposed.

“He’s only a-beggin’ again, sir,” said that worthy. “I often turn him away when he’s bothering the gents—and that’s pretty nigh always,” he added, in a grumbling undertone.

“What’s the matter with him?” I inquired, noting the paleness of the poor fellow’s face. Before I could say another word his hold on my arm had relaxed, and he fell backwards, almost into the arms of the too zealous officer.

Bending beside him, I ordered some brandy to be brought, and in spite of the assurance from my astute friend that “he was not worth the trouble,” I did all I could to restore the inanimate form to consciousness.

“I’ve never seen ’im like this ’ere before, blow me!” observed the cabby, who was lending a little assistance, because, as I supposed, he thought there might be some profit attaching to the operation. My authority was not to be slighted when I was in earnest, which was the case just then.

The unfortunate man presently showed signs of reviving, having been carried into the cloak-room of the club, while I questioned the constable as to who he was and where he lived.

“As for who he is, sir, that’s more than any one knows barrin’ hisself,” and he laughed. “He lives ’ere, or has done so for the last eight or nine months and always seems to be lookin’ out for somebody wot he thinks he’ll know when he sees.”

This appeared rather enigmatical. Why had the stranger sought to detain me? A momentary thought crossed my mind—was Vera concerned in this?

With a new interest I turned to the constable.

“Has he ever stopped any one else and spoken like this?” I asked.

“Bless you, yes,” he replied. “But I never knew him so earnest as this time—hullo, old fellow, how do you feel now?”

A faint flush of colour tinged the careworn face; the stimulant had done its work. How sickening it was, I thought, to hear the affectation of friendliness in this man’s voice, now he thought that because my sympathy had been attracted towards the sufferer there was a chance of gaining a few shillings!

“It’s him—it’s him! I knew I’d find him some day,” cried the prostrate man, raising himself on his arm and pointing eagerly at me, as if awakening from some bad dream. Then, as he saw the interested faces of those who had gathered around, and noted the keen looks with which he was regarded, he scowled darkly, and struggled into a sitting posture. As he noticed me again watching him intently, he started.

“Did you want to speak to me, my poor fellow?” I inquired kindly.

“For mercy’s sake wait a few moments, sir, please. Let me get breath. Send these people away, I—I’m better now. See,” and he rose and walked unsteadily to the door, watching me all the time with a keen scrutiny which made me feel rather uncomfortable.

A moment or two later we were on the pavement outside, where the cab I had ordered still remained.

“We must hurry, or we shall be too late,” he urged. “Follow quickly, sir.”

“Wait a moment,” I said, my prudence for the moment mastering my curiosity. “What do you want with me, and where are you going to take me?” With a searching stare he faced me, but I did not flinch. There was an ominous gleam in his dark eyes scowling fiercely into mine, as he said impetuously,—

“Don’t stand here, wasting precious time in useless questions. You cannot know now what it is I want you for—if you are the right man—and Heaven grant you may be—you shall know all.”

“You are talking nonsense,” I said quietly, and with determination. “What’s at the bottom of all this? Come, tell me quickly; my time is being wasted.”

My watch, as I glanced at it in the gaslight, showed that the hour was about half-past ten, but my earnestness to find the real meaning of this mysterious adventure, coupled with my curiosity, would probably have kept me there for hours.

Soon, however, I became impatient.

My unknown questioner looked at me with a resolute smile. His features, or as much of them as could be seen beneath the shabby hat, were not unhandsome, and the smile became him well.

“You are coming with me to-night and soon,” he said, in the same cool and determined manner I had myself displayed.

This was too much. Without word or sign I sprang into the cab, and as the Jehu touched the animal with his whip, my face was determinedly turned away from my strange acquaintance.

My action was so sudden that at first he seemed disconcerted. The cab had only moved a few yards before, with a sudden bound, he gained the horse’s head.

“Leave go that ’orse!” shouted the cabman with an oath.

For a few seconds there was a scene of confusion. The man still holding the reins, and heedless of the plunging and affrighted animal, approached me. He was evidently exhausted, and could withstand the excitement no longer. His coat had burst asunder, revealing in all its raggedness the soiled shirt underneath, through the holes in which his panting chest was plainly visible.

“One word, sir,” he implored, springing with the wildness of despair upon the front of the hansom. “Just one more word, and then if you won’t come, the consequence will lie upon your own head. Do, do stop!”

Thoroughly alarmed at his vehemence, I again ordered the cabman to pull up. There must, I reflected, be something in this matter, after all.

“Will you tell me, without delay, the reason I’m stopped here; or do you wish me to give you into custody as a beggar?” I sternly asked.

There was a crowd around us. It was a rather unusual spectacle, and the passers-by gave eager attention to it.

“Very well, then, I’ll show you something that will decide you, if you will let the man drive on a little, out of this crush,” he rejoined, diving his hand into his breast-pocket.

Impatiently I told him to jump in, giving the order to drive away, anywhere. After the lapse of a few minutes I turned to the strange being by my side.

He held a piece of torn paper, but what was on it I could not then see. Putting his shaking hand upon my shoulder, and his ashen face with its wild, glaring eyes, close to my own, he hissed, with a kind of vicious pleasure.

“You think me an impostor, eh? Well, look at this, and remember what it has revealed to you before. Then say if I have stopped you without cause. Its author may yet be found!”

His face wore a smile of triumph as he held before my eyes a torn fragment of paper. With an indefinable thrill of excitement, not unmingled with alarm—for his words were ominous—I took it. So dark was it in the vehicle that I held it close to my eyes till we approached the next street-lamp. As we did so, and the light fell across the crumpled and dirty paper, my heart almost stopped beating, and my pulses, for a moment ceased.

There, in all its frightful reality, was the seal!

Chapter Twenty Two.

The Verge of a Discovery.

My first impulse was to call the police, but he noticed my intention, and his hand was laid hurriedly upon my mouth.

“There’s nothing to fear—I’m not the man,” he said. “Make no noise, and keep your own counsel. I can tell you plenty about this, if you care to listen.”

The words fell dimly and indistinctly upon my ears. I was stunned and speechless—it was as if some vast substance had struck me an annihilating blow, which, while paralysing my senses to a certain degree, yet left me half oblivious. It was clear we were in a cab, driving aimlessly about London streets at a late hour. It was also true that I had once more seen that fatal, horrible symbol, associated with which were the most terrifying and agonising events of my life. I could not, however, speak, and it was only by great effort that I retained my courage.

My companion stooped and picked up something that had fallen at our feet. It was the paper to which the seal was affixed, that had dropped from my nerveless fingers.

Suddenly an icy-cold hand was laid upon my forehead.

“Wake up! wake up!—be a man! I’ve told you to fear nothing with me. We’re wasting precious time. Arouse yourself for once in your life!”

My senses returned as suddenly as they had fled. The horror of feeling his hand—a hand that had in its possession the seal—recalled me. I sat upright and drew to my side of the cab as much as I could.

“Ah!” he exclaimed bitterly, “you are still afraid of me. See here, now,” and he leaned across, speaking deliberately and with quiet emphasis, “I may die to-night, but—”

“What!” I exclaimed, “you die to-night?”

“Yes,” he replied, in the same cool and determined tone. “You seem incredulous, but I am sure. Look!”

He put his hand to the back of his head and withdrew it, holding it before my eyes.

“Blood! Good heavens?” I ejaculated, as again the light revealed his thin grimy fingers.

“True, and I’ve not long to live—all the more reason, is it not, that I should make haste? Will you come to my home, now?”

“At once. But let us drive to a doctor and see about your head.” All my repugnance had vanished.

“Wait,” he said, shouting to the cabman an address. I remember that we at once altered our course, but whither we were proceeding I cared not—knew not. Here was, perhaps, an elucidation of the mystery forthcoming, and I had nearly done my utmost to prevent it.

“Go on; tell me all you can,” I demanded, when, after considerable persuasion, he had consented to have his head bound up as well as my slight knowledge of surgery permitted.

“Presently. When we get home—or what was once my home,” he rejoined. He was paler than before, and leaned back in a state apparently of the utmost exhaustion. His necktie had been loosened, and I had placed my travelling rug around the thinly-covered chest, yet in spite of this the severe reaction affected him severely. Sometimes he closed his eyes, and every now and then, when we passed along streets where the lights were more brilliant than in others, he stared vacantly at the roof of the cab.

Once, when I was leaning over him, making him a little more comfortable, a tear rolled down the thin, haggard cheek.

The journey seemed interminable. Street after street we traversed, and yet our journey’s end appeared as far off as ever. We had evidently wandered a long way before our driver received a definite address, or possibly he was lengthening the course for his own benefit.

The fact was that, in my impatience, it appeared longer than it really would have done.

Eventually we regained the Strand, and shortly afterwards our conveyance came to a standstill in what appeared to be anything but an inviting neighbourhood. Not a soul was about, and the empty street rattled loudly as we clattered along it.

We were in Drury Lane, before the entrance to a narrow squalid court.

As we stopped I turned with a sigh of relief to my companion, who, however, stirred not.

A fearful misgiving entered my heart. Was it possible he was dead?

Profoundly thankful I felt when, after shaking him, he turned and opened his eyes.

“Come; is this the place?” I asked, assisting him to his feet.

He followed me mechanically, but leaned very heavily on my arm as we stood for a moment while I paid the cabman.

“Where is it?” was my next question.

With an effort he composed himself, passing his hand wearily over his eyes. He appeared much changed. Inwardly deploring my forgetfulness, I drew my flask from my pocket and tendered him a pull, which he accepted with feverish energy.

“Ah! that puts new life into one!” he exclaimed, with a gasp.

His tone struck me as peculiar, and, regarding him attentively, it was plainly to be seen that he was in a very faint condition.

“This way,” he continued, as, bracing himself up, he led the way up the court.

“Here—here was where I found her, murdered!”

“Who?” I asked, instantly.

“My wife.”

The words were simple ones, and might have been spoken and heard a thousand times on any day; but at that time, and in those circumstances, they thrilled me indescribably. If those two words had been uttered by an enthusiastic lover to his bride for the first time, they could not have been more tenderly breathed.

Brushing aside all sentiment, however, I inquired, coldly, “When was this?”

“On the night of the fourth of March.”

“What! that was the night after I returned from Russia!” I exclaimed, involuntarily. “And the seal. Was that found upon her?”

“It was. But hush! we may be overheard. Let us go in.”

Filled with horror and amazement, I followed him up the tortuous stairs of a house in close proximity to the spot. After mounting several flights in utter darkness, we entered an attic—as it proved on striking a match—containing only the scantiest possible furniture. In one corner stood a bed, and by it a broken wicker-bottomed chair. An old box was placed near the broken fireplace rusted by damp, and that, with a few other articles, formed the whole contents of the miserable apartment.

He lighted the piece of candle which was upon the box, and after carefully closing the door, we sat down.

Scarcely had we done this, however, than he fell forward with a crash upon the bare floor, the blood at the same time gushing out afresh from the wound at the back of the head, and forming a small pool. Greatly to my relief he spoke almost immediately, although in such low tones as to be scarcely audible.

“It’s useless to call for assistance, for the house is empty. Lay me on the bed, if you can, and I’ll tell you all—everything.”

“But you are hurt, and must be attended to,” I said. There was a pang at my heart all the time, for, with my selfish desire to solve the mystery at once, this new wound meant fresh delay.

“If you leave me you will, on returning, find me dead. Lay me on the bed; keep quiet, and listen.”

Those were the words he spoke, and strangely calm and composed they seemed. With a precipitation which I have never ceased to deplore, I lifted him as he desired, and gave up the idea of trying to obtain medical aid at that hour in a quarter unknown to me.

He was soon arranged as comfortably as possible. The spectacle he presented—spare, pale and gaunt, propped up on a squalid bed, the pillows all stained with blood—will never be erased from my memory.

At a sign from him I snuffed the cheap candle and drew closer to his side.

“A year ago on the fourth of next March,” he commenced, speaking deliberately, but in a very weak voice, “my wife left me for a few hours. We were in utter poverty, for our little all had been stolen from us by my wife’s brother-in-law. You may have guessed already that I was not always what I appear now. At one time—”

“But,” I interrupted, “had you not better tell me why you have brought me here, before—”

“Before it is too late, eh? You’re right. Well, my wife left me on a desperate errand. She went to ask for money from some one over whom she had a great hold—and—and she never came home.”

He paused to gain breath. My heart beat violently as I noted the great effort he had to make for respiration.

“The man she went to see was—who?”

“Wait! By mere accident she knew his secret. One night, a long time ago, she told me that a gold mine had been opened to her. In the City, at a public-house where she had called, she met her sister Jane, who gave her a five-pound note. A few days afterwards Nell went to see some gentleman, and came home with a lot of money. She said she knew a secret out of which we both might make our fortunes. In the meantime Jane had disappeared. They were sisters, and so much alike that one could scarcely tell the difference. Open the box with this key, and give me the portrait you’ll find there.”

Chafing with impatience I did as he required and quickly found the picture.

The little photograph was of the ordinary cheap pattern, and presented the features of a rather attractive young woman.

“This,” said my strange narrator, taking it in his trembling hand, “is my wife’s picture, and it will do very well for Jane’s. We saw little of her, as she moved about so much, sometimes in England and sometimes abroad.”

“Really this does not throw much light on the occurrence,” I remarked. “What connects me with all this?”

“The fact that you witnessed the murder at Bedford Place,” he replied. “You have seen the man who killed Mrs Inglewood, and he also, I am certain, murdered my wife! You may well stare; but consider well, as I have done, and

you will come to the same conclusion. When Nell left me she said, 'Good-bye Ned; I know it's a dangerous errand I'm on, but don't fret.' It was dangerous—fatal. When I found she did not return I went out. It was dark, and a very few steps from my door I stumble on a drunken woman lying in a corner. When I looked closer my head reeled, and I nearly fainted—it was Nell! On her breast was the—the—"

"The seal!" I exclaimed.

He did not answer. Gradually his voice had become fainter, till it was only by placing my ear almost to his mouth that I caught the feebly-uttered syllables.

Putting the candle to his face I saw that his eyes were fixed on vacancy, while huge drops of dank perspiration stood upon the tightly-drawn skin of the forehead.

Evidently my mysterious acquaintance was dying rapidly. What was to be done?

The fatal secret was yet locked in his bosom.

Maddened with a feverish anxiety I emptied the brandy remaining in the flask down his throat, afterwards wiping his pallid face with my handkerchief.

My efforts for a time seemed in vain, but by degrees the breathing became more perceptible. Presently he opened his eyes.

"Thanks, thanks," he murmured, his hands clutching convulsively over mine with each respiration.

"Are you better now?" I asked.

He disregarded my question, and appeared to be endeavouring to recall his thoughts.

"Ah, yes, it was the seal that was on Nell,—yes, the seal, and I took it off. It's in the box, along with the portrait."

"And you wanted me—for what?" I said, inquiringly, for he seemed to be losing himself again.

"You? Who are you?"

The question fell with a terrible weight upon my ears—it was clear that the man's senses had fled.

"Frank Burgoyne is my name," was my reply. "You were going to tell me who it was your wife went to see, and why you wanted me."

"Wanted you? Ah, yes! I've seen you before—in Drury Lane. Nell showed you to me, for you gave evidence at the inquest. Yes, I've seen you!"

In a moment the remembrance of that mysterious encounter in Drury Lane came vividly back to me.

Was this the suspicious character who had come up as if he meant to speak to me, and who afterwards vanished?

There was something very awful in the ravings of that man during the next quarter of a hour. At times he was apparently hiding like a beaten hound, cringing and whining, while from the mention of the Junior Garrick Club it struck me that he was, in imagination, pleading to be allowed to stay outside the club house.

"I will see him! I will wait, if I stay here till I die!" he yelled wildly, struggling to rise.

My endeavours to hold him down were at length successful, and, apparently exhausted, he lay back, groaning and muttering.

Slowly and wearily the time passed. When at last I looked at my watch its hands pointed to the hour of half-past four.

In a frenzy of excitement I listened breathlessly for every word, hoping to catch some clue to the problem. The sick man moaned and ground his teeth, ever and anon raising his voice, startling me with the suddenness of the outbursts. Lower and lower sank the candle in its socket, until I feared that unless the day soon dawned we should be in darkness.

A cold shiver ran through me.

Then strain was beginning to take effect; my limbs trembled with the tension to which my nerves subjected them.

Presently the day broke, and never was it more welcome.

The candle had just flickered and died out when the injured man spoke with startling distinctness.

“You shall be revenged, Nell, never fear! I’ll find him. He has seen him once—red-handed then. The blood was upon him—he shall be richly repaid!”

Was he talking of me? I had seen the murderer once, certainly.

“I tell you I will! My oath is sacred. Who will believe me, without him—without Burgoyne?” he continued in his delirium.

Hoping a sudden fright might bring him to consciousness, I laid my hand upon his arm sharply, and exclaimed,—

“What do you want me to do?”

Seemingly startled for a moment, he was silent. Then he asked,—

“What time is it?”

“Half-past six,” I answered.

“I’ve told you all. That cursed fall last night has done for me; or I would have gone with you—gone with you to—to—”

Again he faltered. The fingers which I clasped seemed to stiffen around mine and grow cold.

He was dying!

“For Heaven’s sake bear up a few moments!” I implored. “There must be a doctor about now. See, it’s getting light!”

Those dark eyes which had pierced me on the previous night once more turned to mine. In their depths a film was gathering. He motioned that he wished to speak, and I leaned down till my face almost touched his.

“Well?” I inquired, kindly and softly.

“It’s—for—Nell—I—”

All was over!

For a few seconds I was stunned. It seemed impossible that he was dead—it was not to be realised, in spite of the inanimate body before me.

Then suddenly I gazed about me.

The noise of busy London was in my ears; the day was before me. No more could be learnt from the corpse—why should I stay?

Hastily putting the photograph and the piece of sealed paper into my pocket, I turned and left the room.

The energy of the movement was so great that as I opened the door my attention was attracted by the skirt of a woman's dress disappearing round a corner of the landing.

In spite of my haste, however, the person had gone when I reached the door of the house and stepped into the street. There was no one visible.

Then I remembered an omission.

Retracing my steps, I regained the attic. The body lay rigid and cold as I had left it a few minutes before.

I closed the eyes, and then went home.

Chapter Twenty Three.

The Dead Woman's Picture.

About seven that evening I turned out of the Charing Cross Hotel, where I had taken up a temporary abode, and strolled down the Strand towards the club, having arranged to dine there with Bob and Rivers.

Deeply meditating, endeavouring to account for the strange events of the early morning, I was heedless of those around me, and unconscious of the presence of any one I knew until I felt a smart slap on the back and heard a voice shout,—

"Hulloa, old fellow! Found you at last! Why, you look as glum as if you'd been to a funeral."

It was Demetrius Hertzen.

"What! you in London?" I cried in genuine surprise, heartily glad to meet him.

"Yes, you left the Dene in such an uncommonly mysterious manner, and Vera is so cut up, that I thought I'd come to town, find you, and prevail upon you to return."

Linking his arm in mine, he walked in my direction, as he added, "What's the meaning of all this? Surely you can confide in me, my dear fellow; I am your wife's cousin."

I hesitated. Should I tell him? I longed to do so, and was on the verge of disclosing my secret feelings when suddenly I remembered the promise I had made to Vera to wait three weeks for her explanation.

"Well," I replied endeavouring to smile, but scarcely succeeding, "it is all owing to a few hasty words. Husbands and wives will have little differences sometimes, you know."

He laughed lightly, and regarding me critically for a moment, said,—

"Ah! I see. A lover's quarrel, eh? Why don't you return to Elveham and end all this unpleasantness? It would be far better."

I felt his advice was well-meant, and from the bottom of my heart I thanked him, yet how could I act upon it? Three long anxious weeks must pass before any explanation.

"No," I answered, "I'll remain in London, at least for the present. I don't know exactly when I shall return."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, don't talk so despondently. Remember it's only a petty quarrel, after all," he declared, endeavouring to cheer me up.

I tried again to laugh, saying, "Yes, that's true, but absence makes the heart grow fonder—we're told."

"Very well, old fellow, if you won't take my advice I can't help it," he observed disappointedly.

By this time we were at the corner of Adam Street, and I exclaimed, "By the way, what are you doing with yourself this evening?"

"Nothing."

"Come and have a bit of dinner with Bob Nugent and myself at the Junior Garrick; I'm on my way there."

"Thanks, you're very kind. By Jove, I've had nothing to eat since I left the Dene, and I'm getting a trifle peckish!"

"Then come along," I commanded. We turned into the Adelphi, and entered the club.

In the pleasant oak-panelled dining-room, the windows of which commanded a view of the Embankment Gardens and the river, half-a-dozen men had assembled. At one of the tables Nugent and Rivers were awaiting me.

They both rose and gave me a hearty greeting on entering, and, in turn, I introduced Demetrius, who, by his ready wit and entertaining manner, soon ingratiated himself with my two old friends.

Rivers was, like most members of that Bohemian institution, a devil-may-care, erratic fellow, whom the outside world regarded as rather a shady character. Nobody knew exactly what was his profession. Since I first became acquainted with him, in the days when I was a working journalist, he had been, first, an actor, then manager of a touring dramatic company, a playwright, and

afterwards traveller for a firm of wine merchants, besides executing commissions on the turf. Cards and billiards he played with skill acquired by long practice, and was usually victor whenever he took a hand at nap or baccarat.

I had not seen him since my Italian tour, as he had suddenly embarked for Australia, presumably upon business connected with a theatrical speculation, although compulsory exile had more than once been hinted at by those who were not his friends.

Be that how it may, he was back again. His age was about thirty, tall, dark, and not bad looking. The beard he had grown had considerably altered his appearance, and had I met him in the street I confess I should scarcely have recognised him.

Many were the whispers I had heard that Ted Rivers was not a model of uprightness; nevertheless, I had always found him a good-hearted, genial Philistine in my bachelor days, and now, over our meal, he cracked his jokes and beamed with that bonhomie as was his wont in times gone by.

Bob, Ted, Demetrius and myself, were a merry quartette, despite the anxiety and the many maddening thoughts gnawing constantly at my heart. The dinner passed off pleasantly, Ted giving a humorous description of life among Australian squatters. Although he asserted that dramatic business took him to the Antipodes, he admitted that he had been compelled to go up-country in search of work, and that his employment at one period had been that of a shepherd in Gippsland.

His description of the shifts which he had been put to in order to obtain a crust—he, a curled darling of Society, whilom actor at a West End theatre, and pet of the ladies—was very amusing, and caused us to roar with laughter.

“And how have you been all this time, Burgoyne?” he asked of me, when he had finished his narrative.

“Oh! Frank’s a Benedict now,” interposed Bob, laughing. “Married a fair Russian.”

“What!” exclaimed Ted in surprise. “Well, well, it’s what all of us must come to, sooner or later. But Burgoyne’s different from us poor beggars; he’s rich, and can afford matrimony.”

“I don’t see what money has to do with it,” I said. “Many poor men are happy with good helpmates.”

“Oh! don’t you,” exclaimed Rivers. “My idea is that marriage without money is suicide under an euphonious name.”

“Opinions differ on that point,” remarked Demetrius. “If I married a woman I loved, I think I should be happy with her, money or no money. But excuse me a moment, you fellows, I’ve left my cigar-case in my overcoat,” and rising, he left the table.

“Ah, cigars?” I said, suddenly remembering. “I’ve some somewhere,” and feeling in my pocket for my case, pulled forth a number of letters and papers with it.

I did so without a thought, but a second later I regretted, for from between the letters there fell a photograph, face upwards upon the table-cloth.

It was the picture the dead man had given me on the previous night.

I placed my hand upon it, but before I could do so, Bob had snatched it up, exclaiming,—

“Hulloa! carrying Vera’s photo about like a love-sick swain, eh? By Jove?” he ejaculated when he had glanced at it. “Ah!—I’ve caught you, have I? Why, this isn’t Vera, but some other woman! I’m surprised at you,” and he feigned the utmost indignation.

“Let’s look!” demanded Rivers, taking it from Bob’s hand, as I vainly endeavoured to regain possession of it.

“Ah—Heavens?” exclaimed Ted with a repugnant gesture, when his eyes fell upon it.

“What! you know her, then?” asked Bob.

“No—er—no, my dear fellow,” replied the other hurriedly, with a curious smile. “Never saw her in my life. The likeness is very like some one—some one I once knew,” he added hastily, as he scrutinised it carefully, looking upon the back at the name of the photographer. “But I see I—I’m mistaken, it isn’t she.”

And he returned the picture to me.

“Who’s the lady?” inquired Bob. “Pretty woman, without a doubt.”

“Ask no questions,” I replied, smiling mysteriously. “A purely private matter.”

“Hum!—those private matters are entertaining, sometimes,” remarked Ted, as he and Bob laughed at my confusion; but as Demetrius returned just at that moment, the subject dropped.

We went to the smoking-room and sat chatting over coffee and liqueurs, but I noticed a marked difference in the manner of Rivers. He was no longer gay, but gloomy and taciturn, and more than once I caught him regarding me with an evil, angry glitter in his dark eyes, and a scowl upon his features. The others noticed it also, but made no remark.

When the clock chimed ten Ted rose, and addressing Nugent, said: “You must excuse me, old fellow, but I’ve an engagement which I must keep. Sorry to have to leave you so early, but it’s a matter of rather urgent business.”

“Oh, no. Stay another hour; the evening’s young yet,” urged Demetrius.

“Very sorry; but I cannot.”

“Put off your engagement till to-morrow,” I suggested, but he made no reply, affecting not to have heard me.

“Well, if you must go, au revoir,” Bob said, offering his hand. “I’m here every evening, so I hope you’ll often drop in, now you have returned to civilisation.”

“Thanks, I shall be glad to accept your hospitality until I can be re-elected a member.”

He shook hands with Demetrius, but only placed the tips of his fingers in my hand, withdrawing them as if he were touching some unclean thing.

Without wishing me good-night, he departed.

An hour afterwards I returned to the hotel in deep soliloquy, wondering what this latest development meant. What connection could Rivers have with the murder of the woman whose photograph I had in my pocket?

Why did he start on seeing the picture, and afterwards deny all knowledge of its original? Why did he eye me so suspiciously?

Was he the murderer of the dead man’s wife, the unfortunate Nell, who was found killed by an unknown hand, on the night after my return from Russia?

Deeply exercised in mind over this increased complication, I sat in my room until the small hours, then—heartily sick of it all—I sought repose.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Doubts and Fears.

"You seemed so out of sorts last night, Frank, old chap, that I thought I'd just drop in and see whether you could be cheered up a bit."

"You're very kind, Bob," I said, cracking a matutinal egg, for I was breakfasting; "I'm afraid it's a little more serious than being out of sorts just now."

Bob laid his hand kindly upon my shoulder, exclaiming earnestly,—

"That's exactly what I expected. You and I used to be old chums—now, is it so private that you can't confide in me, and let me see what I can do, if anything?"

"The fact is I'm just desperate, and don't know which way to turn for the best," was my answer, with a savage curse to myself.

"Look here, Frank, remember that I am speaking seriously. In the old days we had many a 'spree' together—to use a colloquialism—and perhaps our actions, judged from a high standard of morality, were not all they might have been. You know very well that I've never pretended to be a saint, and that I never preach because I can't be such a confounded hypocrite as to rail at others for being as foolish as myself—and—and you'll believe, I hope, that I'm sincere in saying this—that you are doing yourself an injustice, and Vera also, if there's any truth in what we teased you about last night."

Never had I seen Bob so much in earnest before, and certainly he had never made such a speech in this life. Dear old Bob, he was a right good fellow at heart, after all!

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed, although there was an uneasy consciousness that I was to blame.

"Why, to speak plainly, if you have married Vera, and love her, you should not carry another woman's photograph. You should not leave your wife at Elveham. You know what I mean, well enough."

A light dawned upon me. Bob thought the picture was that of some courtesan!

"Confound it all, old fellow, you jump to conclusions too readily," I replied, with justifiable warmth.

“Well, what does it mean, then?” he asked, adding, “I don’t wish to pry into your secrets, but you’ll excuse me endeavouring, even just a little, to pull you up when you seem off the straight line. I should thank any one for doing so for me, if they meant it honestly.”

“I’m sure you would, Bob. This, I may tell you, is simply a little tiff which Vera and I have had, owing—oh, well, perhaps that’s sufficient.”

“I see. You don’t care to confide in me, therefore as I’ve business waiting for me, I’ll wish you good-bye,” he said, rather sadly, rising and extending his hand.

“Sit down, Bob, and don’t make a fool of yourself. How can I explain to you what I don’t myself understand? Answer me that, my Christian moraliser.”

“Then it has to do with her secret, eh? Have you never fathomed that yet?” he asked, eagerly, sinking into his chair again.

“What the devil do you know of her secret?” I demanded, in intense surprise. “How did you know there was one in connection with her?”

“Partly from my own observation, and partly from what I picked up after you left Genoa so suddenly. At that time I did not know you were going to marry her, or possibly I should not have been so inquisitive,” he replied rather disinterestedly.

“Then perhaps you can solve some of these mysteries that have puzzled me so long? Come, tell me everything about it, Bob, and you’ll do me an inestimable service. However it may be viewed, I strive to convince myself that Vera is not to blame. Don’t keep me in suspense—tell me at once, is that so?”

Here was the grand chance come at last. Now I should hear that for which my ears had been on the alert all these weary months.

Bob regarded me with a stare of curiosity, mingled with suspicion, and maintained silence for a few moments. Then he said, incredulously,—

“Is it possible there is anything unknown to you, save what we used to discuss when we first met your wife?”

“I’m absolutely ignorant of all save the fact that, with an infatuation for which I cannot account, I loved Vera and married her. I love her still, in spite of— Oh, I

cannot go further! For Heaven's sake tell me all you know now, at once, or I shall not retain my senses?"

Bob's face was a study for a time. It apparently struck him that I was playing a part and wished to learn the depth of his knowledge regarding my wife. After a short pause, however, he continued, and imparted to me the first facts I had ever learned on this mysteriously-guarded point.

"Well, you see, after you left Genoa business compelled me to return. I was thrown on my own resources for a day or two, and during that period I made it a point to keep my ears open so as to catch anything I could regarding the mysterious fair one who had so interested us. Having a friend with me who was known at the police bureau it needed not a great deal of ingenuity to ascertain a few particulars. The first thing that came to light was the fact that old Hertzen, the grumbling uncle, was living under an assumed name."

"Vera's uncle! Was he—is he—not her uncle?" I exclaimed.

"Oh, yes; he's her uncle, I believe," replied my friend, placidly. "It was not surprising that he was—and is—assuming another patronymic, because, being a Russian exile—"

"An exile!"

"My dear fellow, do not keep interrupting. Yes, I say, being a Russian exile, for some offence or other, it was quite a reasonable deceit to practise. But, while it was almost certain that Hertzen was not his real name, it was equally certain that he was some relation of Vera's, for he lavished a vast amount of care and attention on her which could not be accounted for on any other supposition. At the same time it was very curious that my informant would not say who he believed Hertzen to be, so on that point I am still quite ignorant."

"Go on, go on, please; and remember that I want to know about Vera," I said, with some impatience.

"Listen, then. Your wife's father was a Russian Count, a man of great wealth, who lived at Warsaw! Vera, his daughter, developed into the beautiful girl we met. Count Nicholas Seroff, her father, was a brave and loyal soldier, and when the Turko-Russian War broke out in 1877 was placed in a responsible position. He had previously served with great distinction in the Crimea, where he gained the sky-blue ribbon of St. Andrew 'For Faith and Loyalty.'" Bob paused.

“After the war, the count retired to his house in the Njazlov at Warsaw, where he bestowed all his paternal affection on Vera. The two became inseparable, and for a long time, I hear, lived together as one soul.”

“For a long time, you hear—what happened then?”

“We met them at Genoa.”

“But do you mean to say your information ended abruptly at this point? Have you learned nothing since?”

“Nothing whatever. I did not trouble after my return to think any more about the matter. It was only while we were both interested in her that I was interested. You don’t think,” added he, in a half-jesting manner, “that I have nothing else to do but to run after every pretty girl who appears to have a romantic mystery about her, do you?”

“Are you speaking seriously?” I asked, my hopes sinking as rapidly as they had risen.

“Quite,” was his reply.

“Why did you not tell me this on my return, when we saw her at the theatre, together? You knew all about it then, and you also knew how anxious I was.”

“True, but you did not broach the subject, and as soon as we caught sight of her you seemed fascinated, leaving me almost at once, so that I had no chance.”

“But there were plenty of occasions afterwards,” I contended impatiently.

Bob did not seem perturbed in the least. He merely lit another cigarette, as he replied,—

“Whenever I saw you afterwards you were so distant and uncommunicative that it appeared as if you knew far more than you apparently did. As you were still interested in her and her movements it was not my place to take the initiative.”

“And even if you had,” I rejoined, speaking rather warmly, for my disappointment was galling, “it would not have greatly mattered; you don’t seem to know a great deal, after all. It does not make very much difference.”

“Look here, Burgoyne, it is no use attempting to hide your thoughts from me in this matter. It appears as if you wish me to think you are sorry I know so little. Perhaps you are secretly glad that such is the case, eh? It would be awkward for some of your wife’s relations to find that photograph in your pocket, under these circumstances—what is your opinion? Those hot-blooded counts are very jealous relatives, I believe, and—”

“By Heaven! you wrong me there, Bob,” I retorted, touched to the quick by the sneer. “In spite of all Vera’s treachery—in spite of our quarrels, I have never, for an instant been untrue to her—never!”

“Very well,” was his cool reply, “let us admit that. Can you, however, honestly explain your confusion—to say nothing of Rivers’ amazement—when it was produced?”

This direct question nonplussed me entirely. To explain all the facts without exposing Vera—which I was determined not to do—at first appeared a sheer impossibility. Bob watched my vain endeavours to think it out with clearness for several minutes.

Neither of us spoke. Leaning back in his chair he watched the smoke from his cigarette curl upwards. Then he rose again, and said in a tone of voice very sad for me to hear:

“Well, don’t trouble to reply to that last query of mine, Frank, if it causes you pain. I was a fool to make it. Good-bye,” and he held forth his hand.

“Stay,” I urged, “I’ll explain it as well as I can, if you’ll have patience.”

I had made up my mind to tell Bob as much as I could of the mystery surrounding the dead man, and ask his assistance.

Silently and almost incredulously he listened to my statement, as I briefly ran over the events of the night I had spent with the stranger. When I had finished, he asked,—

“And did you leave the body there, and not utter a word to any one? That was scarcely like yourself, was it?”

“But what was I to do? I should have been mixed up in the scandal again; and the question arises, where would it have ended?”

“And did you not search that box for further proof of his assertion? There might have been valuable evidence there.”

“There might! What an idiot I must have been not to think of that at the time. Supposing there were letters from—from—”

“From the murderer? That is quite possible. Why not go and look at once?”

After discussing the matter at some length, it was decided that as soon as night fell I should go to the house alone, so as to lessen the risk of detection, and search the box. With this arrangement we separated, a load having been taken off my mind by this even partial confession to Bob.

Chapter Twenty Five.

A Midnight Search.

The hours crept on very slowly that day. To me they seemed interminable. A thousand times I glanced at the little clock that ticked so sharply on the mantelshelf, but its small hand sullenly, as it seemed, refused to move any faster.

Feeling that the suspense was becoming unbearable, I tried a short walk in the Strand. Scarcely had I gone a hundred yards along that busy thoroughfare before I espied Demetrius. He was strolling along in the same aimless fashion as myself. At first my impulse was to go and salute him, for his cheerful companionship might do much to arrest my melancholy feelings, and make the time pass rapidly. My next thought, however, was to avoid him, for he would be certain to notice my preoccupation, and might put me to trouble in framing evasive answers.

While I was thus debating with myself, he settled the point by catching sight of me and coming cheerfully up.

“Hey-day! and why so cheerless?” he cried, as he clasped me warmly by the hand. It was a favourite expression of his, and one which he very frequently used, in spite of its antiquated ring.

“Did I look cheerful?” I responded, purposely answering his inquiry oppositely. “The fact is I’ve come out to kill an hour or two, and when one is seeking amusement it’s not difficult to find it in the streets of this great city of ours, is it?”

He glanced at me with a curious expression in his eyes, and I wondered whether he saw through the forced flippancy of my reply.

“That’s it, is it?” he remarked. “Well, come along, and we’ll do our best to destroy some of your dread enemy, Time, for a while,” and forthwith he hurried me along several miles of streets, bustling among the people right and left, and keeping up a constant chatter which did much to relieve me, as all I need do was to return a fragmentary answer when occasion offered.

Presently, when we had reached a quiet corner, where conversation was much easier, I said,—

“By the way, now I think of it; where are you ‘hanging out’?”

He burst into a loud laugh as he asked,—

“Is it possible you don’t know?”

“’Pon my honour, it never occurred to me to inquire till this moment. Where are you staying?”

“Number 171,” he answered, still laughing.

“Number 171 where—why don’t you speak plainly, and not keep a fellow waiting when he wants to get to his hotel to keep an appointment?”

“What! another engagement!—with the lady whose photograph you were passing to the fellows at the Junior Garrick last night, eh? I heard about it, old fellow,” he exclaimed, evidently thinking he had a fine chance to chaff me. Seeing my frown at the reference, he continued: “Seriously, it is curious you did not know of my whereabouts. My room is 171 at the Charing Cross Hotel, and yours is 172—now do you see why I laughed?”

“Your room next to mine!” I said in concern, the thought that perhaps he might have overheard my interview with Frank that morning suddenly occurring to me.

“Well, there’s nothing to be alarmed at, is there? I’ve not escaped from quarantine. By the way, I took an opportunity of calling upon you this morning, and as you did not notice my timid rap—you know I always give a timid rap, for you’ve often laughed at it—I peeped in. You were, however, so deeply ingrossed in conversation with your friend Nugent that I did not think fit to disturb you, and came away. He’s an old friend of yours, isn’t he?” he asked, carelessly.

When Demetrius told me this my heart stood still; yet what was there to fear? I could have as well trusted him as Frank. Yet somehow the idea of Demetrius knowing about this was intensely disagreeable, especially after his ironical reference to the photograph, which had been uttered in a rather threatening tone.

Hastily muttering something about being sorry he had not come in as Bob was very good company, I looked at my watch and bade him an abrupt adieu. He

seemed inclined to walk back with me, but seeing his intention I called a cab and bade the driver hurry to the hotel.

There is an indistinct recollection in my mind of having eaten a hasty dinner, but whether I really did so that eventful evening or not is a matter of speculation. At all events, I wrapped up warmly, for it was a wet night and the prospect was anything but inviting.

Determining to have a sharp walk in order to set my blood in circulation, I had started out, when it occurred to me that, having a good round sum in notes in my pocket, it would be policy to leave them behind. Hurrying back I did this, and turned out sundry valuables from my pocket-book. Then the seal, on its blood-stained and crumpled paper, became apparent in the depths of the wallet and the question arose, should I leave that also?

Since the night when it was given me by the trembling hands of the man whose room I was now about to invade, it had rested securely there, for I had been afraid to let it out of my possession on any account. It would perhaps be best to leave it at the hotel, under lock and key, so I put it in a little cash-box in my portmanteau. But the next moment a superstitious dread seized me, and I replaced it again in the pocket-book, and then once more started on my adventurous errand.

Before long I reached the spot. It was a rather tall house, uninhabited apparently, for its lower windows were covered with hoarding, and generally the structure bore a grim, uninviting appearance. On the first occasion, when the poor fellow had dragged me there in a kind of mad frenzy, I had not taken particular notice of the manner in which we effected our entrance, but, as there was no one about, I made a careful scrutiny of a side-door.

As I gave it a violent push the noise resounded through the empty place with such a hollow clamour that a chill fell upon my heart, and, save for the intense curiosity which possessed me, I should have come away, leaving the place unexplored.

But this was rendered impossible, for, although the moment had been carefully chosen when there was not a person in sight, my indecision, lasting for several minutes, brought other consequences in its train. The corner where the door was located was a dark one, it was true, yet, as the measured tread of a constable fell upon my strained ears, I saw immediate action was imperative.

The prospect of a bull's-eye lantern being suddenly flashed upon one was not at all encouraging, and was not to be faced.

Another and stronger jerk at the door proved that it was fastened, or that something so obstructed its opening that more force, and therefore more noise, was needed. This would not do; therefore, summoning up some of my old courage and resolution which had unaccountably deserted me of late, I speedily clambered in by a small window, through the broken upper panes of which it was easy to put one's hand to turn the catch.

Having done this, and replaced, as well as possible in the circumstances, the piece of hoarding, I allowed the constable to pass on before moving further. My heart beat high for a moment as the glare from his lantern flashed through the chinks and lighted, like the gleaming of a fire, the miserable and musty-smelling apartment; but he passed on unheedingly, unsuspicious of the stealthy intruder near him.

When he had gone, all was dark. Never will the memory of that miserable contretemps be surpassed by a more disheartening experience. It required several minutes' careful search to find the stairs, and my hands encountered all sorts of horrible recesses, as, painfully and slowly, I felt my way about.

The only occasion like it was when, in that dreary Russian dungeon, my hands had discovered the fatal seal. My thoughts instantly reverted to that night, then many months ago, and it felt to my excited and over-wrought nerves, that every crack my fingers found were portions of the occult inscription.

As I at last ascended the stairs my memory endeavoured to recall the position of the room in which I had left the body. It was certainly at the top of the house, for our ascent, in his weak state, had occupied some time.

Arrived at the top landing I struck a match, for it was evident that it would not be observed at such a height. To my surprise there were only two rooms, both entirely empty, one so small that it certainly could not have been the one in which that eventful night had been spent. The other was also small, and had not the shape that I remembered.

Obviously there was some mistake in my calculations, and dropping the burnt match upon the carpetless boards, I resumed my search, this time in a downward direction.

And now an event happened which added increased risk to the adventure, and which, even after the lapse of many months since its occurrence, I cannot think of without a thrill of excitement.

In treading upon the match my face in some way became reversed, so that my next steps, carefully guided as I was by the wall, were in the wrong direction. The first indication I had of this was a collision, with some force, with the balustrades of the stairs. These appeared to be very old and rickety, for as my heavy frame dealt them a blow they shook and rattled ominously.

To seize them convulsively was the work of an instant; but, quick as thought, I had drawn back and thrown myself on my side.

After swaying for a second, the heavy railing plunged forward and fell with a sound almost like thunder down the whole height of the building, bumping from stage to stage in the most hideous manner.

I was saved; but what next!

For a time I lay and listened, as little pieces of plaster rolled down the stairs and the rats scuttled restlessly about. Then, half-dazed, I felt for the matches, which, happily, were safe in my pocket.

By the dim light given by one of these it was easy to see my horrible position, perched on the edge of the landing, some part of my long ulster actually hanging over the side.

Below, all was dark.

A dense cloud seemed rising between my eyes and the match slowly burning itself out.

The choking sensation told me that it was a cloud of dust raised by the fall of so much plaster.

After waiting for a short time, scarcely daring to breathe, I struck another match, and again looked around.

The cloud had disappeared, but my clothes were whitened, indicating where its particles had settled.

Then the match burnt my fingers, and as it dropped down into the Stygian darkness I could descry its course till it became merely a faint red speck in that great depth.

Lighting yet another match, and making a great effort to pull myself together, I slowly and carefully rose and crept away from that dangerous spot.

Why need I go into further detail? Let it suffice for me to state that, with care and eagerness, I searched every room I could find, till my patience and my matches were exhausted—yet without avail.

Evidently I had entered the wrong house!

On the bottom flight I had to encounter and pass over the débris which had fallen from above. The task was a difficult and perilous one, but eventually reaching the bottom, I stood on firm ground.

My journey had been for naught; my clothes were covered with a white powder which all my resources failed to remove; and the task of regaining the street unobserved and unsuspected remained to be accomplished.

I listened attentively. There was not a sound to be heard. All was silent and gloomy, save where the light from a street-lamp shone through a distant window in another room, making the outline of the door dimly visible.

Cautiously and carefully I essayed to reach the pavement by the window which had afforded me an entrance.

Suddenly I was startled by my wrists being seized from the outside, the hoarding removed in a trice, and ere an exclamation could escape me, I found myself in the grasp of a couple of stalwart constables.

“What are you doing here—eh?” one asked, roughly, turning the insufferable glare of his lantern into my eyes.

I tried to answer, but a dimness seemed to come over me, and the only recollection that remains of what followed was of darting across a road accompanied by my two captors, one of whom held me on each side.

”‘Being on unoccupied premises, supposed for an unlawful purpose—’ eh?” suggested the man on my right.

“That’s it,” replied the other, who had first spoken to me.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Queer Straits.

“Well, constable, what’s the charge?” asked the inspector on duty, turning on his stool and surveying me critically.

“Found him getting through the window of a house in Angel Court, Drury Lane, sir. The place is unoccupied, and we arrested him in the act of coming out,” replied the man nearest me.

“Stolen anything?”

“No, sir; we think not: we haven’t searched the premises yet.”

“Put him in the dock.”

“This way,” commanded the constable, and I followed him into a bare, unfurnished room, where I entered the prisoners’ dock, and leaned upon the steel rail, silent in perplexity.

In a few moments the inspector came in and seated himself at the desk, saying,—

“Now then, look alive; charge him, and get on your beat again.”

“Stand up straight, I want to take your measure,” the constable said, and as I obeyed, he exclaimed, “Five-foot-nine.”

“What’s your name?” asked the officer, looking towards me.

I hesitated.

“Give us your right one, now; or it may go against you.”

Why need I? Was it not a disgrace to be arrested? For Vera’s sake I felt I must keep the matter secret.

“Harold Dobson,” I replied, uttering the first name that occurred to me.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-nine.” The inspector filled in the charge-sheet.

“Where do you live?”

Again I hesitated.

“No use hatching up any lies! Where do you live?”

“I refuse to say.”

“Hum!” muttered the officer as if to himself. “It’s only guilty persons who refuse their address; but if you won’t answer, then there’s an end of it. What are you?”

“Nothing.”

“Gentleman at large, I suppose,” said he, smiling incredulously as he surveyed my clothes.

“Very well; no occupation,” and then there was a silence of some minutes, only broken by the hissing of the flaring gas-jet, and the monotonous scratching of the inspector’s quill.

“Sign your names,” he commanded, when he had finished; and the two constables who had arrested me appended their signatures.

“Now, prisoner,” said the inspector, as he blotted the charge-sheet, “you are charged with breaking and entering the dwelling-house, Number 4, Angel Court, Drury Lane, for the purpose of committing a felony. I must caution you that any statement you make will be taken down and used as evidence against you.”

“I don’t see how I can be suspected of a felony when the place is unoccupied,” I replied.

“You must leave that point to be decided to-morrow by the magistrate. A man don’t break into a house for nothing.”

“Two days ago a man died in that house, and I was searching for his body in order to give you information,” I said.

“That can’t be true, sir,” interposed one of the men. “The house hasn’t been lived in for a year or more.”

“Well, if a man died there a couple of days ago there would be surely be some furniture, or some traces of habitation. When he’s in the cell, go and examine the premises thoroughly.”

“Very well, sir,” the man answered.

“Now,” said the inspector, turning to me, “have you anything more to say?”

“Nothing; I’ve told you the truth.”

“Turn out your pockets. We’ll take care of your valuables,” he said laying stress on the last word, as if it were not likely my possessions were worth much.

The constable lifted the bar allowing me to step from the dock, and I went to a small table and commenced placing the contents of my pockets thereon. Some silver, my pocket-book, penknife, pencil-case, and other articles I produced, each of which were examined by the two men.

The pocket-book, one that Vera had given me, attracted the most curiosity, and one of them opened it and commenced reading my memoranda, also scrutinising the various papers and cards therein.

“Hulloa, what’s this?” he suddenly exclaimed, holding a piece of paper nearer his eyes and examining it carefully. The ejaculation caused the other constable to peer over his shoulder, while the inspector rose and walked towards them.

It was then only that I recognised the horrifying reality. It was the fatal seal, the one given me by the strange man, now dead, that they had discovered? “Why, great Heavens!” cried the inspector, as he took the paper from the man’s hand, “don’t you see? It’s the seal that puzzled us so last year!”

“Good God? so it is!” ejaculated both the men almost simultaneously, a look of abject astonishment upon their faces.

The inspector lifted his eyes from the seal and glanced at me keenly. He had been thoroughly taken by surprise at the discovery, but did not lose his head.

“Warner,” he said, hastily, addressing one of the men, “go round to the superintendent and ask him to come here at once.”

“Right, sir!” and, swinging his cape around his shoulders, the man departed.

“Richards, remain here with the prisoner,” he added, as he turned and left the charge-room also.

A few moments later the sharp ring of the telegraph bell in the outer office broke upon my ear, followed by the whirr and click of the instrument; and with a sinking heart I knew that information of my capture was being flashed to Scotland Yard.

For myself I cared nothing. I had never told Vera of my connection with that series of mysterious crimes that had startled the country, and was only thinking of the means by which I could still keep her in ignorance of the facts.

I had given a fictitious name and refused my address; if I were firm and careful not to commit myself I might still be able to keep my identity a secret.

What a fool I had been, thought I, not to have left the seal in the cash-box, as I first intended, and this reflection brought with it another, more maddening, when I remembered that, although I was bearing this oppression and mental torture for Vera’s sake, nevertheless I had found a portion of a seal at Elveham, identical with that which had produced such a consternation among the police.

Again I was seized with that horrible apprehension that Vera wished to rid herself of me, and the seal I found in my library was to have been placed on the next victim—myself!

Why should I not make a clean breast of the matter to the inspector? Vera had already proved herself base and treacherous. For her I had suffered enough in that Russian dungeon, at the horrors of which I involuntarily shuddered, even then. Were I to give my right name the suspicion could easily be removed, and I should be a free man. I was wavering. I own I felt almost inclined to do it. Then I reflected that my wife must know the secret of the seal, and that in the event of my release detectives would be busy. What if it were traced to her and she stood in the position I then was? No, I decided to conceal my identity, come what might, for I had not forgotten the promise I made her before we parted.

In a couple of weeks her explanation would be forthcoming, and in the meantime the police might do their worst.

Presently the inspector returned, and I was taken to a small room leading from the charge-room.

“How did this seal come into your possession?” the officer asked sharply.

“It was given to me.”

“By whom?”

“By a man who is dead.”

“What was his name?”

“I do not know.”

“You don’t know; or you won’t tell me, which?”

“I have already answered.”

“We shall want to know more than that,” he said, ominously.

“Unsatisfactory as my answer may be it is nevertheless a fact,” I replied.

“You expect us to believe it?” he asked with a suspicious smile.

“Discredit it if you like, it’s all the same to me,” I replied rather disinterestedly, after which the officer turned on his heel and left.

I sank upon a chair in a semi-exhausted state, and tried to think of some way out of this maze, for I could plainly see none of my statements appeared to have even the elements of truth.

The constable stood silently at the door, his arms folded, his gaze fixed upon me. He was watching me, fearing, perhaps, lest I should attempt suicide to escape justice.

Shortly afterwards three men entered, accompanied by the inspector. Two were detectives—I knew them at a glance—the other a tall, dark man, with curled moustaches, pointed beard, and a pair of keen grey eyes. He spoke with authority, in a sharp, abrupt tone, and, as I afterwards, discovered, I was correct in thinking him the superintendent of that division of Metropolitan police.

“I understand you give a false name, refuse your address, and decline to say how you came possessed of this seal?” he said to me.

“The seal was given me by a man who is dead,” I repeated, calmly.

“Has that man any relations living?”

“I don’t know.”
“What evidence can you bring to corroborate your statement that it was given to you?”
“None. But stay—I have one friend whom I told of the occurrence, although I do not wish him to be brought into this matter.”
“You refuse to name him, or call him on your behalf?” said the chief officer, raising his eyebrows. “I do.”
“Are you aware of the significance of this symbol?”
“Perfectly—in a general sense.”
“Then perhaps it will be no surprise to you to know that a lady named Inglewood was discovered murdered at her house in Bedford Place some time ago, with an identical seal pinned upon her breast, and further, that a woman was found in Angel Court a short time back. Her throat was cut, and she lay within a few yards of where you were arrested. Upon her body was found a portion of paper to which part of a seal adhered, and this paper, which is in our possession, exactly fits the piece that has been torn from the one found in your pocket-book.”
“It does!” I cried, amazed, for in a moment I recognised the serious suspicion now resting upon me.
“Now; what have you to say?”
“I have nothing to add,” I said dreamily.
“And you still refuse your address?”

“Yes.”

“Very well, then; we must find out for ourselves.” After a few words to the detectives in an undertone, he turned and said,—

“Inspector, you will charge him on suspicion of the wilful murder of the woman—and, by the way, let one of the men sit with him to-night. I’m going down to the Yard.”

“Very well, sir,” replied the officer, and they all left the room, with the exception of the statuesque constable.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

A Guiltless Crime.

Down one dimly-lit, dreary corridor, along an other, and up a flight of spiral stairs, I walked listlessly, with two warders at my side.

A low door opened, a breath of warm air, a hum of voices, and I was standing in the prisoners' dock at the Central Criminal Court, Old Bailey.

As I entered and faced the grave-looking judge, and the aldermen in their fur-trimmed scarlet robes seated beside him, I heard the stentorian voice of the usher cry "Silence," and immediately the clerk rose, and with a paper in his hand, said in clear monotonous tones:

"Prisoner at the bar, you are indicted for that you did on the night of August the fifteenth, eighteen hundred and eighty-seven, wilfully murder Ethel Inglewood, one of Her Majesty's subjects, at Number 67, Bedford Place, Bloomsbury, by stabbing her with a knife. Are you guilty, or not guilty?"

Mr Roland, Q.C., who, with Mr Crane, had been retained for my defence, rose promptly and replied, "Prisoner pleads not guilty, m'lord."

There was a dead silence.

All that could be heard was the rustling of the briefs of the great array of counsel before me, and the busy hum and din of the city that came through the open window, while a stray streak of dusky sunlight, glinting across the sombre Court, fell like a bar of golden dust between myself and the judge. The twelve benevolent-looking yet impassive jurymen sat motionless on my left, and on my right the crowd of eager spectators craned their necks in their curiosity to obtain a glimpse of one who was alleged to be the author of the mysterious crime.

Mine was a celebrated case.

Three weeks had nearly elapsed since my arrest, and Scotland Yard, so far from being idle, had succeeded in working up evidence and charging me with a horrible murder, for which I had been committed to take my trial by the magistrate at Bow Street.

Of Vera I had seen nothing. Both Bob and Demetrius had visited me whilst under remand and endeavoured to cheer me, although both admitted they had been served with subpoenas by the prosecution, but of the nature of the evidence they wished them to give they were ignorant.

Rumours had reached me, even in my prison cell, of the intense excitement that had been caused by the news of my capture, and the plain facts had, I heard, become so distorted in their progress from mouth to mouth that not only was it anticipated that my identity as the murderer was completely established, but speculation had already planned for me another atrocity in connection with the spot where I had been found.

The one topic of conversation was my arrest, and in private circles, as well as in places of general meeting, little else was discussed. The public pulse, in fact, was fevered.

With the opening of the trial the crisis had arrived.

I had been told that the counsel appearing to conduct my prosecution were Mr Norman Ayrton, Q.C., and Mr Paget, and as I glanced at these gentlemen seated in close consultation I instinctively dreaded the cold, merciless face of the former, and the supercilious nonchalance of the latter.

As perfect quietude was restored in the stifling Court with its long tiers of white expectant faces, Mr Ayrton gave his gown a twitch, and with a preliminary cough, rose.

The warder handed me a chair, and, seating myself, I concentrated my attention upon the clear, concise utterances of the man who was doing his utmost to fix the awful stigma upon me.

Turning to the judge, he said: “May it please your lordship, I appear on behalf of the Crown to prosecute the prisoner at the bar. The case which your lordship and gentlemen of the jury have before you to-day is one of an abnormal and extraordinary nature. It will be within the recollection of the Court that during the last three years a series of mysterious and diabolical murders have been committed, absolutely, as far as at present known, without motive. What may have been the motive of these, however, is not the point to which I desire to call your attention, but to one utterly unaccountable crime, as it then appeared, which took place on the night of August the fifteenth, two years ago. On that occasion a lady named Mrs Ethel Inglewood, residing at 67, Bedford Place,

Bloomsbury, was discovered murdered, and the connecting link between that tragic occurrence and six of a similar character which had preceded it was the circumstance that a seal of peculiar design, fixed to a blank paper, was found pinned upon the breast of that lady. Of the seal, and the mysteries surrounding it, I shall be in a position to give your lordship and the gentlemen of the jury some further information at a later stage in these proceedings.

"It is sufficient for my purpose at the present moment simply to indicate the fact that the seal, connected in such a peculiar manner with the previous outrages, was also a conspicuous object in this, and undoubtedly proved that the crime, if not the work of the same hand, emanated at any rate from the same source. The prisoner at the bar was the principal witness in the discovery of the murder of Mrs Inglewood, and gave evidence before the Coroner, when a verdict of wilful murder against some person unknown was returned. He professed, in the assistance which he then gave, to have been animated simply and solely by the desire to bring the offender to justice. Considerable doubt was entertained by the police with regard to the veracity of that statement, and I believe, my lord, it will be in my power to prove, by most conclusive evidence, that the prisoner then committed the crime of perjury in addition to the greater and more hideous one for which he stands here indicted."

Counsel then paused and examined the first folio of his brief.

To my disordered imagination it seemed as if I already stood convicted.

Again the eminent Queen's Counsel gave a preliminary cough, and resumed:—

"If I shall be in a position to establish beyond any shadow of doubt that the prisoner really committed the murder in Bloomsbury, the evidence which can be adduced against him in regard to a second count, which, however, is not on the present indictment, is even still more indubitable. On the night of March the fourth last, the body of a woman, which has never yet been identified, was discovered lying in a blind alley, called Angel Court, leading from Drury Lane. She was quite dead when discovered, having been stabbed in the throat, and on her breast, as in the previous tragedy, was a piece of paper from which the larger portion had evidently been roughly torn. The small piece adhering was pinned in exactly the same fashion as upon the deceased Mrs Inglewood, and no one could doubt that the murder which had been committed formed one of that series of horrifying outrages of which it formed the eighth.

“From that day till the present no clue whatever has been obtained as to the identity of the poor woman who was then discovered, but events have so conspired, and the police have been so vigilant, that a strange finale has been brought about. There is an old truism, gentlemen, that ‘Murder will out,’ and though that expression is worn almost threadbare by constant repetition, its force is recognised, and its truth is applicable as much now as ever. ‘Murder,’ in this case ‘did out,’ by a most fortuitous circumstance which I will briefly narrate, although the story has been freely circulated in the public Press.”

In a few terse sentences counsel explained my arrest, and the discovery of the seal in my wallet.

“Such, my lord,” he continued, “were the means by which the prisoner at the bar came into the hands of the police, and I would impress very strongly upon the jury, at this stage, the consideration that when charged at the police-station prisoner not only gave a fictitious name, but refused his address, besides giving as his excuse for his presence in the house on the night in question, a silly story which I venture to believe, you, gentlemen of the jury, will at once see to be outside the bounds of credibility. In the extraordinary explanations which the prisoner has given of his actions during the past year—strange and improbable—none so utterly feeble as these have been advanced. He asserts that his motive in going to the house in Angel Court, at that hour of the evening, was the altogether monstrous one of filching from a corpse evidence in connection—in close connection, I may say, gentlemen—with this very crime which we are now investigating.”

A murmur of surprise ran through the densely-packed Court. This was the first time my explanation had been made public.

“Incredible as it may seem,” said counsel, immediately resuming, “for the last twelve months he says he has been actively pursuing inquiries in regard to these crimes, and that his own life having, in some way which he will not at present disclose, been endangered, it has given him peculiar reason so to do. This story, of course, the jury will regard in any light they choose, but I rather think that when the evidence which I shall presently call is given, absolutely no credence will be placed upon it. My remarks will be brief at the present moment, but my learned friends who have been instructed for the defence, will, no doubt, seek to attach great importance to the personal character of the prisoner. Nevertheless I would ask what that character is? Two years ago this man, who used formerly, it is true, to occupy a position of some importance in journalism, became possessed of a fortune, and whether it be that the

possession of so much wealth suddenly turned him into a monomaniac, or whether, previously to that time, his actions, of which we have, at present, no record, were characterised by this mad thirst for blood, I cannot inform you. Whatever things may have appeared to the outside world, there is no doubt in my mind that the prisoner has been cherishing a most intense and unnatural hatred against mankind, and that with the accession of wealth his means for executing his fell projects were correspondingly enhanced.

"It is true he bears the character of an English gentleman, but men of the world, such as I see before me in the jury box, are not to be deceived by mere detail of dress or conversation. The actions of men are the means by which they must be judged, and, looking upon the past life of this man by the lurid glare which the statements of the witnesses—and which his own actions themselves afford—it will be matter for surprise that his career has been allowed to go on so long unchecked. When he talks of his character, gentlemen, let me ask one question. In what was he engaged for nearly six months out of the last twelve? Perhaps my learned friend will answer this in his defence. The prisoner refuses, gentlemen, to give one word of explanation."

Again there was a rustle in court, and the usher interposed with his stern command of "Silence?"

"Now, gentlemen, with these few brief observations, which I shall supplement later on, I will proceed to call my witnesses—persons whose veracity is unimpeachable—who will give you such an insight into his past life that will leave not the faintest suspicion of doubt in your minds that the prisoner at the bar has been the perpetrator of one, at least, of that string of almost unparalleled crimes which have shocked the whole of the civilised world."

As the leading counsel, with a significant smile at the jury, resumed his seat, and his junior rose to call the witnesses, I folded my arms and waited.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

The Clique.

The two men first called did not interest me. They were the constables to whose evidence I had listened at the police court.

“Detective-Inspector Cronin,” exclaimed Mr Paget, when they had finished, and a tall, well-preserved, black-bearded man entered the witness-box and was sworn.

“I am John Cronin, detective inspector, Criminal Investigation Department,” said he, in answer to counsel. “The pocket-book which I produce was handed me on prisoner’s arrest, and upon examining it, I found it contained, amongst other things, a bill of the Charing Cross Hotel. I proceeded there, made inquiries, and ascertained that prisoner had been staying there one day, giving his name as Frank Burgoyne. I examined the room he occupied, and found a despatch box in which was the photograph I now produce. Comparing it with that of the woman murdered in Angel Court, taken after death, I find the features exactly coincide.”

“Was there any distinguishing mark?” asked his lordship.

“Yes, m’lord,” replied the detective handing up both photographs. “Your lordship will notice a small scar over the left eye.”

“You made other inquiries, I believe?” asked Mr Paget.

“Yes; on the following day I went to prisoner’s house, Elveham Dene, Northamptonshire, and searched the premises. On examining the drawers of a writing-table in the library, which were unlocked, I found two blank pieces of paper on which were seals corresponding in every particular to that found on the lady murdered in Bedford Place.”

What did all this mean? I knew nothing of these seals. Surely it must be some plot to take away my life!

The frightful suspicion—could Vera be concerned in it—entered my soul.

The doubt was too awful to be entertained; yet she had not communicated with me since my arrest.

“In the same drawer,” continued the detective fumbling among some papers he held in his hand, “I found this telegram. It is dated on the day of the murder in Bloomsbury, and addressed to the deceased. It reads:—‘Handed in at Hull and received at the West Central district office. Shall be with you about midnight. Be at home.’ It is signed with a single letter ‘B.’ On examining the notepaper on the writing-table, I found it was the same as that upon which the seals were impressed.”

“You produce some of that notepaper, I think?” said Mr Paget.

“I do, sir.”

The paper was handed to the judge, who held it to the light and compared the watermarks.

When he had satisfied himself the detective resumed:

“Throughout my examination I was in every way retarded by the action of the prisoner’s wife. On proceeding to search one of the bedrooms she positively refused to give me the keys of a chest of drawers, and I was therefore compelled to force them. Concealed under some papers, which lined one of the drawers, I discovered a small gold padlock, upon which are engraved the initials ‘R.S.’, and to which was attached the small portion of gold chain I now produce. I had charge of the inquiries in the case of Mrs Inglewood, and remember at the time of her decease she was wearing a diamond bracelet which is also produced. When I examined the house at Bedford Place I discovered the case of the bracelet, which bore the name of the jeweller. The manager of the firm in question will be called to prove that the padlock found in the bedroom of the prisoner is the one belonging to Mrs Inglewood’s bracelet, and that it had been sold to her a week before her death.”

Some of the dead woman’s jewellery in my room! Incredible!

Was it possible that Vera—but, no—again banish the thought!

“In the same drawer,” added the detective, with a self-satisfied smile at the intense surprise which his statements excited, “was this letter, in a lady’s handwriting, signed ‘Ethel Inglewood’: ‘Come and dine to-morrow evening. I have the money ready, and rely on you to keep my secret.’ The address embossed on the paper is ‘67, Bedford Place,’ and the date is that of the day previous to the murder.”

“Do you prove anything else?” inquired Mr Paget, expectantly.

“No,” replied the inspector, “except that from inquiries I made I find that very shortly after the inquest on Mrs Inglewood the prisoner left the country suddenly, and the next murder—the one in Angel Court—was perpetrated on the day of his return.”

As Mr Paget resumed his seat, my counsel, Mr Roland, rose. Turning to the witness with a suave countenance, he mildly asked:

“How do you fix the day of the prisoner’s return?”

“By the books of the club to which the accused belonged—the Junior Garrick.”

“You say you found the seals in the library. Could access be easily gained to that room?”

“No; prisoner’s wife had the key.”

“And she refused you the keys of the chest of drawers?”

“Yes, giving as her reason that it contained papers of a strictly private nature.”

“Did she express surprise when you found the seals?”

“When I showed them to her she fainted.”

“You said, just now, that the little padlock was ‘concealed.’ Are you sure it had not accidentally fallen behind the paper?”

“No; I should think not.”

“Did you suspect the prisoner previous to his arrest?”

“I did. After the inquest on Mrs Inglewood, observation was kept upon him for some time, but he eluded us by going abroad.”

“And now you endeavour to fix the crime upon him without any direct evidence. I have nothing more to ask you.”

My hopes sank as Mr Roland resumed his seat, with a poor affectation of indifference.

The next witness was a neatly-attired, gentlemanly-looking man, the jeweller's manager, who proved the purchase of the bracelet by Mrs Inglewood, and identified the tiny padlock as a portion of it.

When he had retired, Mr Roland having asked him no questions, he was succeeded by Bob Nugent, who stepped into the witness-box averting my gaze. Was even Bob in the conspiracy!

"You were, I think, Mr Nugent," said the prosecuting counsel, "a friend—a particular friend I may say—of the prisoner's?"

"I was—formerly."

"Now, tell me, do you remember the night of the 15th August?"

"I do. The prisoner and I left the Junior Garrick Club soon after midnight, to proceed home."

"Was there anything in his manner which attracted your attention?"

"He seemed rather excited, having lost heavily at cards. I left him at Danes' Inn."

"Do you know on what day he returned from abroad?"

"It was in the beginning of March. He was then strangely reticent as to his actions in the meantime."

"You will remember, as a journalist, possibly, on what night the murder in Angel Court occurred?"

"On the same night as the prisoner's return."

"Do you know anything of the photograph found upon the accused?"

"Yes; he produced it accidentally, while dining at the Junior Garrick Club, and appeared much confused and annoyed, endeavouring at once to conceal it."

"Did you see it again?"

"The prisoner, in consequence of some remarks I made to him, showed it to me next day at his hotel. On that occasion he explained that it had been given to him by some man who is now dead."

“Did that not strike you as improbable?”

“Well—yes, it did.”

“Did he enter into any further explanation?”

“Very little was said about the seal.”

The court was extremely hot. Surely I was becoming fainter and more faint! There was a singing and surging in my ears. Was I falling or standing upright? What were they speaking of? I had lost sight of the face of my friend. I could only see the lines of expectant upturned countenances.

I was really fainting; nevertheless I struggled against it. Something, too, within me told me that I ought to struggle against it, yet everything was swimming and whirling around me, and vague forms seemed rapidly passing and repassing before my vision.

Then I staggered backward into the chair placed for me, and gradually the sense of sickening misery departed.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Monsieur's Opinion.

The spirit was strong within me not to yield to any growing unconsciousness; not to be subdued by any physical or moral influences.

I again became perfectly calm. I was seated in the chair. A seafaring man was in the witness-box. Nugent was not there. Demetrius, sitting below, was looking at me with an anxious and uneasy expression.

"I recognise the accused," I heard the witness say in reply to a question from the prosecuting counsel. "A recent event has brought me here to give evidence."

"Have you any doubt prisoner is the man you saw emerge from the doorway of Mrs Inglewood's house on the night in question?"

"None."

"Did he appear agitated?"

"Yes; he passed me and rushed down the street as fast as he could run."

"Did you not make any attempt to stop him?"

"No; at that time I was unaware of the murder."

"When did you again see him?"

"Not until a few days ago, when I recognised his portrait in a newspaper."

A long cross-examination resulted in the witness firmly adhering to his story, and explaining that as he had been on a long voyage he knew nothing of the occurrence until many months afterwards.

Demetrius, with evident unwillingness, entered the box. His story was brief, yet damaging.

When he had concluded, Mr Roland, adjusting his eye-glasses, rose and asked:

"You are acquainted with prisoner's wife, I believe?"

"Yes; she is my cousin."

“Where did you go when you left England?”

“I decline to answer.”

“You have been the prisoner’s guest at Elveham, have you not?”

“Yes.”

“And what were these suspicious circumstances of which you spoke just now?”

“There were several. Late one night, about three weeks ago, I had occasion to enter the library. The door was ajar, and as I pushed it open I saw the accused in the act of impressing a seal, similar to the ones produced. I drew back unnoticed.”

It was untrue! He had seen me sealing the envelope containing a lease, and believed I was using the fatal emblem!

I waited breathlessly for the next question.

“Is it a fact that on the night previous to his departure from Elveham, some unpleasant incident occurred?”

“I know nothing of it. I have heard that the prisoner had some little difference with his wife.”

“Come, sir,” demanded my counsel sharply, “did you not overhear a conversation in the early morning?”

The witness appeared confused.

“Yes, I did,” he admitted. “I heard my cousin ask him to wait a stipulated period for an explanation.”

“Have you any idea what this explanation is?”

“None.”

“Then, after all, you are unable to throw any light whatever upon these mysterious crimes?” he asked, in a strange harsh voice.

“I’ve told you all I know,” replied Demetrius, a trifle paler than before.

Mr Roland flung down his brief upon the table, slowly resumed his seat, and pushed his wig from off his forehead with a perplexed gesture.

I could hardly realise my situation. What could it all possibly mean? What was the object of this seaman giving evidence when he could throw no light upon the matter, except that he actually saw me following the murderer from Bedford Place?

He had taken a seat in the well of the Court with his face turned towards me.

“Sergius Hertzen.”

As the words rang through the place I started. I had not seen Vera’s uncle since our marriage, as he went to Zurich immediately afterwards.

There was a shuffling near the door, and the old man entered. As he mounted the steps to the witness-box I noticed he had aged considerably.

“What are you, Mr Hartzen?” Mr Paget asked, referring to his brief at the same moment.

“Police agent.”

“And your nationality?”

“Russian.”

The old man a police agent! Dumbfounded, I looked blankly around me.

“You are father of the previous witness?”

“I am.”

“Now, what evidence can you give regarding the charge against the prisoner?”

There was a dead and painful silence.

“We first met at the Hotel Isotta, Genoa, about a month after the murder in Bedford Place. We frequently played écarté together, and on one occasion he paid me a debt with the three five-pound notes I now produce.”

“And what is there peculiar about them?”

“I have since ascertained that their numbers correspond with those now known to have been stolen from the house in Bedford Place.”

The thought flashed across my mind that once, when I had lost to him, I had discharged the debt with three notes. From whom I received them I could not tell.

“What else do you know about the affair?” was the insinuating question of the prosecuting counsel.

“Well; some three months after this I was present at the Central Tribunal at St. Petersburg, when prisoner was sentenced to the mines for complicity in the murder of a hotel-keeper. The sentence, however, was never carried out, for on the way to Siberia he escaped, returning to England.”

“It’s a lie! I was exiled without trial,” I shouted. Amid the loud cries of “Silence,” counsel turned to the judge, and with a cruel smile about his lips remarked, “You see, my lord, prisoner admits he was exiled.”

Mr Roland made an impatient motion to me to preserve silence; so seeing my protests were useless, I sank again into my chair, and tried to conquer my fate by bearing it.

Mr Crane the junior counsel defending me, cross-examined him at some length, but resumed his seat without being able to shake his testimony.

The waiter who had attended to me at the Charing Cross Hotel, and two of my own servants were called, but their evidence was immaterial and uninteresting.

I felt a strange morbid yielding to a superstitious feeling that I could not shake off, and sat as one in a dream, until the Court rose and I was sent back to my cell.

Chapter Thirty.

The Eleventh Hour.

Next morning my trial was resumed.

There was the same array of counsel; the same crowd of curious onlookers lounging on the benches like carrion crows around a carcase; the same strange, half-visionary procession of judges, lawyers and witnesses, who passed and repassed before me, sometimes ludicrous, but generally gloomy and depressing.

The jury looked pale and weary. They had been locked up during the night, and now several of them were yawning. None gave indication that they felt the responsibility of the sentence they had to pronounce.

I sat in the dock heedless of everything; I had grown callous. I had one thought only: Why had not Vera made her promised explanation?

A few minor witnesses were called, and the case for the prosecution closed.

At last Mr Roland rose to make his speech in my defence. The circumstantial evidence already produced was, I knew, sufficient to cause the jury to find me guilty, and I listened in rapt attention to the clear, concise arguments of the famous advocate.

But how unsatisfactory was his speech—how weak was his defence! With a sinking heart I saw more than one of the jury smile incredulously when my innocence was asserted.

“I admit, gentlemen,” said Mr Roland, in the course of his address, “that this case is enshrouded in mystery; but while asserting that the prisoner is innocent, I tell you plainly there is a secret. The key to this enigma is known to one person alone, and that person, for reasons with which I am myself unacquainted, is not in a position to divulge it. That this secret bears directly upon the crime is obvious, nevertheless it is a most unfortunate circumstance that the mystery cannot be wholly elucidated by a satisfactory explanation. However, I have several witnesses whom I purpose calling before you; and having heard them, I shall ask you to discharge the prisoner, feeling assured you will be convinced that he is entirely innocent.”

“But, Mr Roland, this is a most extraordinary case,” interposed the judge. “You speak of a person who knows the secret and refuses to give evidence. If this is so, this person is party to the crime. To whom do you refer?”

Counsel held a brief consultation with his junior, then rose again.

The Court was all expectancy.

“I refer, m’lord, to no less a person than the prisoner’s wife!”

The reply caused a sensation. Vera knew the secret! I was not wrong.

“Ah, that is unfortunate,” exclaimed the judge, disappointedly. “It is impossible to call her in a case of this description.”

At that moment the usher handed Mr Roland a note. He read it hastily, and, raising his hand, said:

“The lady has just arrived in court, and is about to produce important evidence, m’lord.”

The silence was unbroken, save for the frou-frou of Vera’s dress as she advanced towards my counsel, and bent over him, whispering.

Mr Roland was seated close to the dock, and I strained my ears to catch their hurried conversation.

In face of the horrible charge brought against me, the persistency with which it was pursued, and the evidence produced in support of it, I had been so overwhelmed by a sense of fatality that I had almost decided to let things take their course. I knew I was innocent, nevertheless I felt the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of proving it. Now, however, encouraged by this proof of sympathy on the part of Vera, I took heart.

“What will these witnesses prove?” asked Mr Roland, hurriedly.

Vera, whose face was rendered more delicate and touching by the tortures she seemed undergoing, glanced quickly towards me, and replied:

“They will prove my husband’s innocence!”

Counsel uttered an ejaculation of surprise. “Are you certain of this?” he asked.

“Yes. If it were possible that I might be called as a witness I could tell the Court things that would probably astonish it; but I leave everything to the two persons I have brought,” she replied in a tremulous voice.

The jury grew impatient. The excitement was intense.

In a few moments a young and rather showily-attired woman stepped into the box. As she turned towards me I was puzzled to know where I had seen the face before. The features seemed quite familiar, yet I could not recollect.

“You are Jane Maygrove?” asked my counsel.

“Yes.”

“Tell us what you know of the murder of Mrs Inglewood. Relate it in your own way.”

She hesitated for a moment and commenced:

“Before I married I was maid to Mrs Inglewood. Mistress was a very quiet lady, and lived with a cook and myself in Bedford Place. I was in her service about three months, and although she told me she was married—and she wore a wedding-ring—her husband never visited her. Several foreign ladies came to see her on different occasions, but only one gentleman. He also had the appearance of a foreigner but spoke English without an accent. One evening, in the latter part of July, mistress dined alone with this gentleman, and I overheard a conversation which took place in the drawing-room afterwards. I—”

“Was this gentleman to whom you refer the prisoner?” asked Mr Roland.

“No he was not. On that night I heard the visitor advising mistress to withdraw her money from a company which he said was on the brink of collapsing, and place it in his hands to invest. At first she demurred, and appeared to discredit the rumour that the company was not safe; but, after a long argument, he exacted a promise that she would withdraw the money and hand it over to him in cash on the fifteenth of August, when it was arranged that he should re-invest it for her.”

“And what happened on the latter date?”

“Mistress was at home during the day. A clerk called in the afternoon and handed a small leather bag to her, for which she signed a receipt, after counting the money. When she had finished, I saw her place the bag under the sofa, at the same time leaving a small roll of bank-notes upon the mantelshelf. Previously I had mentioned the matter to my young man, and it was he who prompted me to act in the manner I did. Well, about seven o’clock the gentleman arrived, and shortly afterwards mistress and he went out—to the Café Royal, I believe—to dine, as Mary, our cook, had been dismissed that morning for dishonesty.

“My young man urged me to get possession of the money while they were out, saying that we could then marry, go abroad, and set up in business with it. But my heart failed me, and I could not bring myself to commit the robbery. About ten o’clock a telegram came, and half an hour later mistress and the gentleman returned. When mistress read the telegram she appeared nervous and agitated. They both entered the dining-room, and at first conversed in low tones, but soon appeared to be in altercation. I heard the gentleman say, ‘I shall not leave this house until you let me have the money. I tell you I will not allow you to ruin yourself.’ To which mistress replied that she had changed her mind, and should place the money in the bank instead. At this the foreigner grew furious. Mistress urged him to go, but he would not. Then all was quiet again. She gave me orders to lay supper in the sitting-room upstairs, which I obeyed, she telling me that her husband was coming home after a long journey. I wondered what the master would say to the other gentleman, but discreetly held my tongue. It wasn’t my place to say a word. About eleven o’clock the gentleman departed very reluctantly, and soon after midnight mistress’s husband arrived.

“I opened the door to him. He was a tall, handsome man, who wore a felt hat and long travelling ulster. He greeted mistress very cordially, kissing her with much affection, and then they went upstairs together to supper.

“All the evening I had been hesitating whether or not I should decamp with the money, and while they were sitting at table I was still thinking over the matter. The clock struck two, and roused me. Suddenly I made up my mind to take it, so creeping back to the drawing-room I opened the bag, abstracted the contents, and replaced it again. Just as I was about to leave the room with the money in my hands I heard a footstep on the stairs. I knew it was mistress! I slipped behind the screen, hoping to escape observation. Scarcely had she crossed the threshold when I heard another person following stealthily. It was

the foreign gentleman. 'Have you decided?' he asked, in a low whisper. 'Yes,' she replied, starting at his sudden reappearance; 'once for all, I tell you I will rid myself of you.' He appeared mad with anger. He pushed the door to, and placed his back against it. Then he laughed a low, harsh laugh, replying, 'That's not so easy, my pretty one: remember our secret bond.' She turned upon him furiously, crying, 'Leave this house at once! Do you wish to compromise me besides endeavouring to rob me of my money? Ah! you think I do not know you. We have been friends because it suited my purpose; but if you dare touch that money I will tell what I know! I will give the police the information they seek regarding the Villeneuve affair!' This speech had a strange effect upon him. 'Dieu!—she knows,' he ejaculated, involuntarily. Glaring at her with an expression of murderous hatred, he watched her every movement. 'Will you hand me over the money?' he demanded, sternly. 'No; you shall never have it. Leave this house; and if you remain in England another week I'll carry my threat into effect. If you fancy you can practise the confidence trick on me you are mistaken—so, go!'

"'I shall not!' he replied, fiercely. 'I will have that money,' and he bent down in the act of drawing the bag from beneath the sofa. 'Touch it at your peril!' she cried, hoarsely. 'I see you now in your true light; you would rob a woman of her means of existence. God knows you have brought me enough misery already!' Again he tried to obtain possession of the bag, but once more she frustrated his design. Then they struggled for the mastery. His face was ashen pale, and his fingers gripped her bare arms, leaving great red marks; but she was not to be easily vanquished, and fought like a tigress. 'To-morrow,' she said, in a terrible half-whisper, 'the world shall know who stole the Villeneuve diamonds, and I will rid myself of you forever. I will expose your accursed villainy!' He grasped her by the wrist and dragged her towards him. 'You—you say this—to me,' he hissed, in a frenzy of passion. 'You have spoken your last words—you—you shall die.' I saw a knife uplifted in his hand, and he plunged it in my mistress's breast with a dull, sickening sound. She sank upon the floor, uttering a shrill cry. For a few seconds he bent over her and seemed to be rearranging her dress, then he snatched up the bag, took the roll of notes from the mantelshelf, and thrusting them into his pocket, stole noiselessly out by the back-door. I stood for a few seconds, not knowing what to do. At last I summoned courage to approach my poor mistress, who lay motionless; but just as I was stepping from my hiding-place I heard some one descending the stairs. It was master! He rushed into the room, but stopped suddenly, in horror, as he caught sight of his wife. Bending over her, he was about to lift her, when his eyes caught sight of something, which I suppose was the seal afterwards found. With a loud

cry of despair, and uttering words in a foreign language, he kissed her calm white face. 'I must fly,' he said, aloud, 'or I shall be suspected,' and without another word he also hurried out of the house.

"When he had gone, I placed the money I had stolen in a small hand-bag, and crept out by the front door. A few days later my young man and myself sailed for Australia, and that is all I know of the murder."

There was a long pause when the voluble witness had concluded her breathless recital.

Chapter Thirty One.

By whose Hand?

“This is a most remarkable statement,” observed the judge, regarding the woman keenly. “You swear positively that the prisoner was not the murderer?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then surely you would be able to recognise the man whom you assert stabbed your mistress? Have you seen him since?”

“Never.”

“Don’t tell me his name, but answer me; do you know it?”

“No; my mistress always called him Victor, and told me, whenever he came, to announce him as Monsieur. He, too, always addressed her by her Christian name.”

“Why did you not give information to the police at the time?” asked his lordship.

“Because I should have been prosecuted for robbery,” she replied, confusedly.

“I have only one question, m’lord,” exclaimed counsel for the prosecution, rising. Turning to the witness, he asked: “When was the first occasion upon which you saw the prisoner?”

“Half-an-hour ago.”

“And you positively swear you never saw him before to-day?”

“I do.”

“Witness,” said the judge, “you will give the police a detailed description of the man you saw commit the murder. That will do.”

Mr Roland and Vera were in earnest conversation. He appeared to be dubious about some point upon which she was trying to convince him.

The spectators were eager for the next development of the curious case. They had followed the verbal duel with the same interest as that inspired by a thrilling drama performed by first-class artistes. Several times already

applause had almost broken out, and was only suppressed by the dread of the Court being cleared.

“The next witness, m’lord, will be Boris Seroff,” Mr Roland said, glancing hesitatingly at his brief, while Vera retired to a seat where I could not observe her.

“Seroff!” I repeated to myself, “who can he be? Surely he must be a relation of Vera’s; and yet I’ve never heard of him!”

The name was shouted down the corridor outside the Court; then there was a movement among the eager crowd which stood about the door, and a man advanced towards the witness-box.

Instantly I recognised him. It was the murderer!

What fresh intrigue was this?

I leapt from my chair, and leaning over the dock, cried:

“My lord, that man who is going to give evidence, is—”

“Enough?” interposed the judge. “If you cannot be silent, you will be removed to the cells during the remainder of your trial.”

The warder at my side grasped me roughly by the arm, and forcing me into my chair, whispered, “Don’t be a fool! Such excitement can do you no good.”

I saw how utterly helpless I was, yet I was determined to denounce this man by some means. The midnight scene in the Dene came back to me in all its hideous reality. Vera’s lips defiled by those of a murderer!

The thought goaded me to desperation. Springing to my feet again I was on the point of proclaiming his guilt, when the first question was put by my counsel.

“Now, Mr Seroff, what are you?”

With bated breath I awaited his answer.

“I am brother-in-law of accused. His wife is my sister.”

His sister! Then at least I had no cause for jealousy, and had judged Vera wrongly.

“Tell us, please, what you know of the circumstances attending the murder of Mrs Inglewood.”

The witness twirled his moustache nervously, and glanced at me; then, as he saw my eyes fixed upon him, he scowled and turned away.

Yes. I felt convinced it was he. I could see guilt written upon his face.

“The story is a rather long one, and there are some matters which I cannot explain; however, I will tell you what occurred on the night in question. The murdered woman, who, for certain reasons, assumed the name of Mrs Inglewood, was my wife. She was called Rina Beranger before I married her, a schoolfellow of my sister’s, at Warsaw. After our marriage it was imperative she should live in England, and for that reason she left me. I resumed my position, that of an officer of Cossacks, and for a year we were parted. At last I obtained leave and travelled from St. Petersburg to London. I landed at Hull on the afternoon of the fifteenth of August, and at once telegraphed to my wife announcing that I should arrive about midnight.”

“Did you sign that telegram?” asked Mr Roland.

“With my initial only.”

“Is that the message?” counsel asked, handing up the telegram which had been put in as evidence against me.

“Yes; it is.”

“I would point out, your lordship,” observed Mr Roland, “that the letter B. stands for Boris, as well as Burgoyne, the prisoner.”

Continuing, the witness said: “I arrived home soon after twelve at night, and was admitted by the woman I see sitting in the well of the Court. Supper was laid in an upstairs room, and my wife, who I thought appeared unusually nervous, called for it to be served at once. I do not remember how long we sat together talking; it might have been a couple of hours for aught I know. My wife was telling me certain things, which it is unnecessary to repeat here, they being purely business matters, when suddenly she recollected that she had a letter to give me. It was downstairs in the drawing-room, she said, and begging me to remain where I was she left the room, closing the door.”

“Was this only a ruse on her part?” asked the judge.

“I’m afraid so. She—she did not return,” he continued, with a sign of emotion. “After she had been absent five or six minutes I heard a shrill scream, and then a sound like the smashing of glass. At first I believed that the servant had fallen with a tray, and fully expected my wife to return and relate the occurrence; but as she did not come I opened the door and listened. All was silent. The terrible quiet unmanned me. I called to her, but there was no response, then, suspecting that some accident had happened, I dashed downstairs and entered the room—”

“And what did you find?” counsel inquired.

The witness appeared overcome with agitation, which he strove to repress. But was it only feigned?

“There—I saw my wife—lying on the floor—murdered!”

“How did you act immediately after discovering the crime?”

“I—I fled from the house,” he stammered.

“Did you not first ascertain whether the unfortunate woman was really dead? Did you not call the servant?”

“No. Overcome by sudden fear I left the place, lest I should be suspected of committing the murder.” This statement had a great effect upon the spectators, and it was some moments before quiet was sufficiently restored for the interrogatory to proceed. “Did you give information to the police?”

“No. I left for Paris at ten the same morning.”

“Can you say positively that it was not the prisoner who committed the murder?”

“Yes; I am certain it was not,” he replied, drawing a long breath.

I was still convinced he was the murderer. He might, I thought, be endeavouring to shield himself by giving evidence against some imaginary person. “Have you any idea who committed the deed?”

“I have—I believe—”

“Stop! Whatever information you can give in a serious charge like this must be given to the police,” exclaimed the judge, interrupting.

“Shall I give the police the name of the person I suspect?” asked the Russian.

“Yes; at the conclusion of your examination.” Counsel for the prosecution rose and took a deliberate view of the witness, saying: “Tell me, Mr Seroff, what prompted you to act in the extraordinary manner you did on discovering the crime?”

“I had no desire to be suspected.”

“Would it not have been more natural to have given information at once, instead of hiding yourself?”

“Possibly it would.”

“Then what caused you to keep the matter a secret, and not come forward until now?” demanded the lawyer, with a shrewd look.

“I had my reasons.”

“It is those reasons I desire to know.”

“I refuse to state them.”

“Then your evidence is very incomplete, and I do not think the jury will accept it.”

“Not if I place the police on the track of the assassin?”

“You forget that by your refusal to state the whole of the facts, and keeping the matter secret as you have, that you are an accessory, in a certain degree, to your wife’s murder.”

“I’m fully aware of it; nevertheless I refuse to give you the reason why I believed I should be suspected of the crime.”

“Very well,” said counsel, in a tone of annoyance, resuming his seat. “I hope the jury will accept your evidence with the utmost caution.”

“Have you any more witnesses, Mr Roland?” the judge asked.

“No, m’lord. This concludes the case for the defence.”

Boris Seroff descended from the witness-box, and left the Court in company with an inspector of police and a detective.

A few seconds later they returned, held a hurried conversation with the clerk of the Court, who in turn whispered something to the judge, which appeared greatly to surprise him. Then the two officers went out again.

Had my newly-discovered brother-in-law divulged the name of the murderer?

Those were moments of terrible excitement.

Chapter Thirty Two.

Rays of Hope.

My trial was concluding.

With logical clearness Mr Roland addressed the jury for my defence, saying that in the face of the evidence which had been produced, and which all tended to show that the murder was committed by another person, he felt assured they would not find me guilty. He commented at some length upon the lack of corroborative evidence on the part of the prosecution, criticising the weak points in that masterly manner which had brought him so much renown.

“I again admit, gentlemen,” he continued, “mine is not a wholly satisfactory defence, for the prisoner appears to have acted somewhat suspiciously, and he refuses to explain certain matters connected with the occurrence; yet this trial is satisfactory, inasmuch as it has caused the real culprit to be denounced, and although I am as ignorant as yourselves as to the identity of the murderer, I understand the police are already engaged in tracking him.

“As I told you in my opening speech, there are certain facts connected with this case which are bound to be kept secret, even though a man’s life or liberty are at stake, and when I tell you that I—like yourselves—am unaware of the bearing which these family affairs have upon the crime we are investigating, you will fully appreciate the difficulty in which I am placed. Had it not been for the production of the two witnesses by the prisoner’s wife at the eleventh hour, I should have been compelled to give way against the weight of circumstantial evidence brought by the prosecution. However, I feel assured that no right-minded man can assume that the prisoner at the bar had any hand in the assassination of the defenceless woman in Bedford Place, after the statement of the maid who actually saw the crime committed, and who positively swears that the accused was not present. I would therefore ask you to at once return a verdict of ‘Not Guilty,’ and thus bring about the prisoner’s discharge.”

Then the judge summed up.

He reviewed the case with much deliberation and care, saying that, in dealing with a crime committed without any witnesses being present, inference must take the place of direct evidence; but in the case before them they had discovered that a witness was present, and that witness positively swore that I

was not the murderer. Therefore, despite the obvious gaps in the argument for the defence, it was an open question whether or not I should be discharged.

The spectators looked on with breathless anxiety, understanding that the woman's evidence had served as a lever to demolish the whole theory of the prosecution.

But no. The jury were not unanimous. They asked leave to retire. Once only I saw Vera during the quarter of an hour they were absent. I could see she was terribly agitated as she leant over to consult Mr Roland. "You need have no fear," I heard him say. "He will be acquitted."

All eyes were turned upon me during those awful moments.

Suddenly there was a movement, and the jury Slowly filed into Court.

A deathlike stillness ensued as the clerk rose and asked the foreman,—

"Have you agreed upon your verdict?"

"We have."

"Do you find the prisoner, Frank Burgoyne, guilty of having murdered Ethel Inglewood, or not guilty?"

"Not guilty!"

An outburst of applause greeted this announcement; then the judge ordered my discharge, and I walked from the dock a free man.

Vera met me, and flinging her arms about my neck, kissed me. My face was wet with her tears of joy. Not a single word was exchanged between us.

We left the Court together, and entering a cab, drove to the Grand Hotel, where she was staying.

Chapter Thirty Three.

Vera's Secret.

A few hours had elapsed since my acquittal, and after a brush up and a hasty meal I had entered Vera's sitting-room.

It was already dark. The tiny electric lamps flooded with amber light the small apartment rendered cosy by the drawn curtains. On a lounge chair she sat, wrapped in a pale grey cashmere gown, with a bunch of crimson roses in her breast. At sight of me she rose. Not a muscle of her countenance stirred, I and could divine her embarrassment by the sharp glance she momentarily darted at me.

I scented in this proceeding some annoying mystery.

A constrained silence reigned for some moments.

"Frank," exclaimed she, in a very calm tone, advancing slowly and taking my hand, "at last we are alone."

"Yes, Vera," I replied, calling to my aid all my coolness to feign a serenity which I was far from possessing. "Now, perhaps, you will let me know this secret of yours which has so long estranged us, and brought us all this sorrow."

She stood motionless, with compressed lips, and shivering slightly, said,—

"Forgive me! Frank, forgive me! I will tell you everything. You shall know the truth; believe me."

"Why did you not tell me the truth long ago; then this degrading trial would have been avoided," I said, bitterly.

"Because I could not, until this afternoon."

"Not when my life was at stake?"

She shook her head seriously, replying, "No, it was impossible."

Was I still being duped? Those were the only words that beat a constant and painful tattoo in my brain.

"Tell me," I said, laying my hand upon her shoulder, "tell me the reason why you have kept this secret of yours till now?"

“Hark!” she said, listening intently.

I could hear nothing beyond the roar of the traffic in Trafalgar Square.

She crossed quickly to the window, and flinging aside the curtains, opened it.

“Come here,” she commanded.

I obeyed her.

“See! below. There is a man selling newspapers. Listen to what he says?”

I leant out of the window, and as I did so a hoarse cry broke upon my ear. It caused me to start, for the words the man shouted were, “Extra special! Attempt to murder the Czar! Exciting Scenes! Extra special!”

“What has that to do with it?” I asked, puzzled, as she closed the window and drew the curtains again.

“Everything,” she replied, sighing. “Sit down, and I will tell you the story.”

I flung myself into an easy-chair, and she came and stood beside me. Her hand smoothed my forehead with a tender caress, yet somehow I could not trust her; the ironic and brutal strokes of Fate had paralysed me, and I felt myself wholly stupefied.

“Sometimes, Frank, an unforeseen incident, a chance, an exterior influence, may bring on a disastrous crisis. It has unfortunately been so in my case,” she said, in a deep, earnest voice.

“Begin at the beginning. Let me know what is this strange mystery which has shadowed your life,” I urged, taking her hand in mine.

“Hush! we must not be overheard,” she replied, glancing apprehensively at the door. “I—I fully recognise how painful all these complications must have been to you, dear, but I assure you it is not my fault that I have not divulged. I had taken an oath—”

“An oath!”

“Yes. I know it was purely from love that you married me, enveloped in mystery as I was; and, then, when you saw me in the Dene, and—and—thought me

untrue—ah—you surely should have known me better than that. You know how I love you; and yet you suspected me!" she cried passionately.

"Don't let's talk of that," I said, impatiently.

"When I have told you," she continued, her eyes filling with tears, "you will no longer believe me Valse, even though I—your wife—have stained my Hands with crime!"

"What!" I cried, in amazement, "you?"

"Ah, no," she answered, "and yet mine is a horrible crime. Listen! Years ago, when I was a little child, my father, Count Nicholas, held a responsible position at the Court of the Czar at Petersburg. His closest friend was Sergius Orselska—the man you know as Hertzen—his half-brother. His son, Demetrius, and I were playmates."

"But what of Boris. The man who gave evidence to-day?"

"He is my brother. When the Russo-Turkish war broke out, my father, who was an officer, was placed in command of a troop, Boris having in the meantime joined the Cossacks. The Count served with distinction throughout the campaign; but, alas! after the fall of Plevna, he received news that my brother had been killed in an engagement with some insurgents in Georgia.

"Overcome with sorrow, my father retired from the army, and took me to live in a gloomy old house in the Njazlov at Warsaw. While we were leading a somewhat secluded existence the revolutionary movement sprang up in Poland; the people commenced their struggle for freedom, and the propaganda took root with alarming rapidity. My father, a loyal subject of the Czar, believed that his warmest friend, Serge Orselska, held views similar to his own, but, as I afterwards discovered, he was mistaken. This half-brother was a scheming scoundrel, who having allied himself with the Terrorists, determined upon making it a lucrative business by becoming a police spy, so that he could give secret information regarding the conspirators. In this he had more than one object in view. My father had occasion to travel to Petersburg on business connected with his estate, and remained there several weeks. On the day following his return to Warsaw the grand coup was made, and the Czar was assassinated by a bomb thrown at his sleigh. The world was convulsed. My father, honest loyalist that he was, regarded this action of the Nihilists most unfavourably.

“Yet as soon as Alexander the Third had succeeded the dead Emperor my poor father was arrested, conveyed to Petersburg, and charged with being implicated in the assassination! Though the accusation was utterly unfounded, the perjured evidence was much against him. He was found guilty, and condemned to Siberian hard labour for life. I was in Court and heard sentence pronounced. Ah! Grand Dieu! Shall I ever forget that day?

“He was despatched with a convoy of prisoners to Asia, but on the way endeavoured to escape, and was shot dead. It was the new Czar who was responsible for my beloved father’s death; he was his murderer! and I swore it should be avenged, even if my own life were sacrificed in the attempt. Then I went to live under the guardianship of Serge Orselska, who, hearing my vow, admitted that he was a Nihilist, and persuaded me to take the oath to the Executive. I did so, and, confident of success, swore that I would make three attempts to remove the Autocrat of the Russias, adding, as a stipulation, that if none were successful the oath should be removed. Thus I developed into an enthusiastic and patriotic Terrorist. Bent upon avenging my father’s wrongs, I was prepared to go to any length, and to follow the examples of Jessy Helfman and Sophia Perovskaia in order to accomplish my object.”

“Fancy, you—a Nihilist!” I said, incredulously in abject astonishment.

“Yes, and I was not idle either. The schemes of our Circle having matured sufficiently to allow me to make the first attempt, I did so. We were living in Petersburg at the time, and although everything appeared to favour me, the plot failed at the last moment. The police, however grew suspicious, and we were compelled to fly from Russia. My uncle—who had assumed the name of Hertzen—and I, travelled first to Paris, and for a couple of years led a wandering life, visiting nearly all the European capitals. I devoted to the Cause a large portion of the fortune left me by my father, and was looked upon by the members of the Circle as one who would probably be successful in effecting our purpose. If I did, I told myself it would be but a life for a life. I believed that a terrible victory would be obtained by the Party, and saw everything in a rose-coloured light.”

Notwithstanding the overwhelming passion which filled her heart, and revealed itself painfully in spite of her, in her face, and her voice, she tried to speak slowly and calmly. There was an expression of indescribable suffering, too, around her mouth and in her eyes, which told me that this chapter of her life she would have hidden forever, if she could.

“Then it was during these wanderings that we met?” I said.

“Exactly. Fate brought us together in Genoa just as we were arranging the second attempt. I was in sore need of a friend, and—why should I hesitate to admit it—when first we met, I loved you. But, cruel Fate! mine has been a love which has almost brought death to you,” she faltered.

“How?”

“My uncle—always a scheming villain—laid his plans deeply in this, as in other things. I was the instigator of the attempt to be made, and was at my wits’ ends to know how to get the instrument conveyed to Petersburg. The police were keeping a sharp look-out, and for any of our Circle to have entered Russia would have been highly dangerous. Notwithstanding this, I was determined to succeed. Meanwhile our affection was not unnoticed by Orselska, who spoke to me upon the subject. Remember, he was my guardian, and, not being of age, I was bound to obey him in a certain measure. When I admitted that I loved you and that you had asked me to be your wife, he flew into a passion, and said he would never give his consent. For several days he was harsh and unkind, when suddenly his manner changed and he again referred to the matter. He said he would give his consent with one stipulation: that I should, as a test of your love, get you to take the instrument to Petersburg, the—”

“The instrument! What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean, that the box you took to the Russian capital did not contain jewels at all; it was dynamite clock!”

“An infernal machine!”

“Yes. It was that which wrecked the Winter Palace on the day you were arrested. But listen, and you will learn the depth of Orselska’s villainy. Already by his treachery my poor father had been degraded and killed, and the fortune left to me was in his hands. He was determined to keep it, and there were but two ways of doing this: either I, too, must be killed, or marry his son Demetrius. Now you see why he schemed that you should be sent upon that dangerous errand. You were sent, Frank dear, so that on your arrival he, as a police spy, could give information which would secure your arrest and exile?”

“Impossible!” I cried. “Yet the explosion accounts for the excitement on the night of my arrest.”

“It is true, every word,” my wife asserted.

“I was arrested, nevertheless.”

“Yes, and it was with difficulty that we planned your escape. Partisans of Czaricide, those assisting in the struggle of freedom, however, are to be found in every class of society in my downtrodden country. The military and prison officials are no exception. My brother Boris, who was not—after all—dead, had allied himself with the Nihilists from the same motives as myself, and chanced to be the officer in command of the escort ordered to take your convoy to Siberia. Two of the prison warders were members of my Circle. Your trial was avoided by the judicious exercise of stratagem. When you changed clothes with the dead convict you ceased to exist in the eyes of the law, and your subsequent escape, due mainly to the exertions of Boris, was rendered easy.”

“Why did you remain silent so long after my return to England?”

She gazed upon me with loving eyes, and ran her fingers tenderly through my hair as she replied,—“Because I strove to forget you. I was ashamed at the deceit I had been compelled to practise, and felt that you could never forgive me sufficiently to again have confidence in me.”

“But I have done so, Vera.”

“Yes, that is why I am so happy—or—or rather, I shall be happy,” she replied, endeavouring to smile.

“Finish your story, and we shall no longer be alienated.”

“My confession is unpleasant, nay, horrible, but I must continue it,” she sighed. “After your escape from Russia my uncle, from some inexplicable cause, turned against me, and I had but one friend, Demetrius. As the playmate of my youth who had been absent many years, he renewed his acquaintanceship with a kindness and tenderness that caused me to suspect his intentions. My surmise proved correct. He asked me to marry him; and I, having in a manner pledged myself to you, refused.”

“And what did he do?”

“It made but little difference. We were none the less friends; for even though the father is a vile schemer, the son is not.”

“You refused him because you loved me so well?”

“Yes, dear, I did,” she replied.

Then she bent, and our lips met.

Chapter Thirty Four.

A Strange Disclosure.

The door opened, and Boris Seroff stood before us.

Little introduction was necessary. We grasped each other's hands.

"My brother! The man of whom you were jealous," laughed Vera, as she nervously twisted the ribbons of her wrap around her hand.

"Well," said Boris, heartily, "I'm pleased we are relatives, and that we have at last met. The mystery you have so long tried to solve can now be cleared up."

"I have just been relating my history," said Vera, naïvely.

"Then I will explain something of mine, although it is a story not enticing to tell," Boris exclaimed, a shadow of pain crossing his face.

"Let me know all!" I urged, impatiently. "What I have already heard has almost bewildered me; I can scarcely realise its truth."

He twirled his moustache and appeared to be lost in thought for a few moments. Then he said: "First, let me make a confession. Like my sister, I am—or rather was—a member of a Nihilist Circle. I joined from the same motive of revenge that prompted Vera, and perhaps she has explained how you unwittingly assisted us in our attempt; how, by the treachery of Hertzen, you were arrested; and how by our exertions you escaped."

"Yes," I replied.

"But you do not know all. You remember finding the seal in your cell?"

"Ah—the seal?" I cried, excitedly, for the mention of it brought back terrible memories. "What was its meaning?" I demanded.

"By the merest accident you directed my attention to the hieroglyphics on the wall, and the discovery threw a light upon a phase of the mystery that had hitherto been unintelligible. That cell, I found, was the same in which my father was confined before his exile, and it was he who cut that emblem in the stone, with his initials linked with those of the villain who plotted his destruction."

“And that villain was—”

“The man you know as Hertzen. Having obtained control of my sister’s fortune, he schemed to entangle her so that he might be instrumental in securing her exile to the mines, and eventually appropriate the money for his own use. He was unaware, however, that my wound in Georgia had not proved fatal. By concealing my identity I contrived to assist Vera and yourself.”

“But the seal! Tell me; what is its meaning?” I asked, in breathless suspense.

“It is the death symbol. The Nihilist law demands that those who accidentally discover our secret, and refuse to take the oath, must die by the hand of the person from whose lips they learn it. To ensure absolute secrecy, so essential in a country like Russia teeming with police spies, the Executive devised a seal to be affixed to the body of the murdered person, thus showing members of our Cause the reason of the crime and deterring them from betraying us.”

“So the seal, about which there has been so much controversy, is a Nihilist emblem,” I said, bewildered.

“Purely. For the most part the persons upon whose bodies the seal has been discovered are those whom it was found necessary to remove for the preservation of our secret. In some cases where we have been betrayed by members of our Circle, lots have been cast among us, the deed has been committed, and the lips of the traitor silenced forever. The crimes have been regarded as the work of a maniac. You will understand that it was to our interest to make them appear so,” he replied, calmly.

“What is the meaning of those strange symbols around the seal which have been the cause of so much comment?” I asked, eagerly, for this extraordinary revelation was even more mystifying than the secrets.

Taking from his breast-pocket a paper upon which was an impression of the seal, similar to that found on the victims, he said,—

“See, the centre, which has proved so puzzling to many, is a representation of the hammer of Thor, the god of thunder. It is symbolical of strength, work, and duty. By the Scandinavians Thor was supposed to be the guardian genius, and representations of his hammer were believed to be charms against every terror. In that sense the organisation has used it. The legend, of which antiquarians have failed to discover the key, is an obsolete Norse rune, the words being,

‘Bith Sithi Gast,’ the equivalent in English to ‘Halt! accursed enemy!’ It is indeed the Seal of Death.”

“Does no one outside the Nihilist Circle know its significance?” I asked, in wonder.

“Not a soul. Remember Vera and I are now no longer members of the organisation. Our oaths are removed, therefore I am able to tell you this.”

“Happily our conspiracy against the Autocrat has been unsuccessful,” broke in Vera, smiling.

“We are not Russians now, but content to be loyal subjects of your Queen.”

“I’m pleased that is so,” I replied, with a sigh of relief; “but there is still one circumstance unexplained.”

“To which do you allude?” Boris asked, plunging his hands into his pockets and leaning against the table opposite me.

I was loth to approach a subject which must be exceedingly painful to him.

“I mean the murder—the tragedy in Bedford Place—”

“Ah!” he cried, sorrowfully, passing his hand quickly across his forehead, “the remembrance of that terrible night—the white face of my poor dead wife constantly haunts me. But the scoundrel who killed her shall suffer his well-merited punishment,” he added, as he paced the room angrily, muttering some imprecations in Russian.

“Boris dear, calm yourself,” said Vera, persuasively, clutching him by the arm. “Tell Frank everything; he has a right to know.”

“Yes, he has,” replied her brother, turning suddenly towards me. “From the first I knew by whose hand she died, but was unable to act. You will understand, when I say that the villain was a member of our Circle, and that it was believed my wife was removed because she had accidentally discovered that an attempt was to be made at the Winter Palace. Such, however, was the report to the Executive, and the murder was looked upon as a commendable precaution.”

“Did not the Circle know it was your wife?”

“No, I had kept my marriage a secret. The murderer was ignorant of our relationship, otherwise he would not have dared to commit the crime and report it to the Executive.”

“Then you are absolutely certain as to his identity?” I said, breathlessly.

“Yes. At first I could not discover the motive, but since the confession of the servant it is plain he wished to obtain possession of the money, and placed the fatal emblem upon her in order to deceive us and secure our aid in concealing his guilt.”

“You have given the police his name!” exclaimed Vera, anxiously, “quick! tell us who he is.”

“What!” I ejaculated, in surprise, “are you, too, in ignorance of the real culprit?”

“Quite; Boris has refused to disclose his identity,” she said, quietly, in a tone of annoyance.

“No,” replied the Russian, bitterly. “There will be time enough when the police have hunted him down. Hitherto I have been powerless. I dare not denounce him lest he should divulge my connection with the plots, the inevitable result of which would have been my exile to the mines. Now, however, I fear nothing. He has destroyed the only one I loved, and shall suffer the penalty!” he added, fiercely.

“But why not tell us?” I argued. “Surely we may know upon whom rests the guilt?”

“Let the matter remain at present,” he said, petulantly. “When the time arrives I shall be prepared to prove that which will send him to the gallows. Not only did he take my wife’s life, but he also committed a second murder in order to hide the first—”

“Another?” I cried.

“Yes. Since my poor wife’s maid, Jane Maygrove, returned from Australia and made her confession, I have discovered something even more strange. It seems that Jane had a sister Nell, very similar in feature, and previous to her departure abroad she told this sister all that had happened at Bedford Place on the fatal night. Needless to say, Nell traced the murderer and made excellent use of her information, inasmuch as she levied blackmail upon him to a

considerable extent, he, of course, believing her to be the witness of his crime. She had married a man named Grey, and the pair lived upon the money she succeeded in extorting from the murderer. For some time this went on, until one night she was discovered in a court off Drury Lane, stabbed in the neck, and with the seal upon her—"

"Why, that was the woman who was murdered on the night following my return from Russia!" I remarked, in amazement.

"That is so. Here is her photograph," and he handed me a faded carte-de-visite, which he took from his pocket.

It was similar to that which had been given me by the man who had died in the garret.

"Jane Maygrove," he continued, "is none other than the wife of your club-friend, Rivers."

"Ted Rivers's wife?" I repeated, incredulously. He replied in the affirmative, adding, "Does not that account for his consternation when you produced a photograph of her twin sister? He believed it to be that of his own wife."

"How do you know all this?" I asked, my interest in the solution of this extraordinary problem increasing more than ever.

"On the day you left Elveham, after discovering Vera and myself in the Dene, you came to London, and outside the Junior Garrick you were met by an old man named Grey, the husband of Nell Maygrove, were you not?"

"That's true," I admitted. "But how came you aware of this?"

"Simply because I followed you," he replied, laughing. "I had an object in doing so; it was in your own interest, as you will know later."

"How could your espionage affect me?" I asked, with a sudden feeling of resentment at having been "shadowed."

"You shall know very soon. On the day to which I refer, you went to Grey's room. He told you, before he died, how he discovered his murdered wife, and how he had taken the seal from her breast. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

“Your conversation was overheard by the sister of the dead woman, who, until then, was unaware that the significant sign had been found upon her, she being abroad at the time the accounts were published in the newspapers. When she heard Grey’s declaration she at once knew that the man who had killed her sister was the murderer of my wife. Prompted by revenge, she determined to track the villain, and bring him to justice, even at the risk of being prosecuted for theft herself. It was in consequence of this that she materially assisted us by giving evidence in your favour to-day.”

“To her, to Vera, and to yourself, I owe my present liberty,” I exclaimed deeply moved. “I am indeed grateful to you all for your efforts.”

“You have little to thank me for, dear,” said Vera tenderly. “Fate seemed against me in everything I did.”

“I understand how you must have suffered, dearest, and how circumstances precluded you from telling me the truth. You did your best, and in future I shall trust you implicitly,” I said, while her arm stole gently around my neck, and she looked lovingly into my eyes.

Wringing Boris’s hand heartily, I expressed my gratitude to him, adding, “There is one thing needful to completely solve the enigma—the name of the man who committed the crimes.”

“When I gave the police the information I promised I would not divulge until they made the arrest; otherwise I would tell you,” he replied, with a tantalising smile.

“Do tell us! We must know the whole truth now,” urged Vera earnestly.

“His name—but—hark!—what’s that?” he ejaculated, with bated breath.

We listened. It was the sound of hurrying footsteps in the corridor.

“I must see Mrs Burgoyne at once. Do you hear? Quick! Tell me; which is her room?” a voice shouted excitedly.

“It’s here! first on the left, sir,” was the reply.

A second later the door was flung open without warning.

Chapter Thirty Five.

The Vantage-Ground of Truth.

Demetrius burst abruptly into the room.

His wild appearance startled us. His face was pale and haggard; his eyes bloodshot, his collar torn, and his coat rent at the shoulder.

He stopped suddenly, stepping back a few paces when he saw Vera was not alone.

“Why, good Heavens! What’s the matter?” I exclaimed, in utter astonishment; for he and I had been the closest friends.

“Matter! Diable! You should know!” he cried, his foreign accent being more pronounced in his excitement.

“No. What is it?” asked Vera, who had risen and was standing close to him. “Are you mad?”

“Yes, imbecile—if you like,” he shouted hoarsely. Pointing to Boris, he added, his face distorted by a look of intense hatred, “That traitor is the cause! He has set the police upon me. They have followed me and are hunting me down. But they shall not arrest me—Sacré—at least not yet!”

“Come; enough of this!” commanded Boris, sternly, advancing and clutching him by the shoulder.

“Hands off, you devil!” he cried fiercely, shaking himself free. “Listen, first, to what I have to say!”

“Now, it’s useless to struggle,” Boris declared firmly. “I shall detain you here and send for the police.”

“No you won’t. Curse you! They are following me now. They saw me enter the hotel. Hark! they’re on the stairs. But I have something—something to say.”

There was a sly, crafty look in his distended eyes.

“Well; what is it?” I asked, at the same time glancing at Vera, and noting that her delicate face was firm-set and pale.

“You—you robbed me of her, and, by Heaven, some satisfaction is due to me. I demand it—do you understand?” he screamed with an imprecation, addressing me.

“It is I who protected my sister, and assisted her to evade the clutches of a heartless villain—the man who murdered my wife!” interposed Boris, infuriated, emphasising his words with a foreign oath.

“Is it this man?” I demanded, bewildered.

“Yes,” he answered, angrily. “This is the scoundrel who murdered two defenceless women.” Turning towards him, he added quickly, “Ah! Demetrius Orselska, the revenge I have so long sought is now near at hand.”

“It is—it is,” hissed the other. “But, ma foi! if you think I will be trapped, you are mistaken!” he laughed harshly. “No—you, Frank Burgoyne—you English cur!—you took Vera from me. Though she is your wife, you shall no longer enjoy her beauty. Dieu! you shan’t?”

I saw him plunge his hand nervously into his pocket, but had not the slightest idea of his intention.

As I turned to look at Vera she covered her blanched face with her hands, screaming,—“Look, Frank—he has a pistol!”

His movements were of lightning-like rapidity. Before I could wrest the weapon from his murderous grasp he had levelled it at her.

There was a flash—a loud report—and a puff of smoke curled between us.

For a second I feared to glance at her, but when I lifted my eyes, it was with joy I saw that the bullet had sped harmlessly past, shattering a great mirror at the opposite end of the room.

Shrieking wildly and hysterically, she staggered fainting to a chair, while Boris and I struggled with the murderer to obtain possession of the weapon.

“Stand back!” he shouted, his dark flashing eyes starting from their sockets, and his even row of white teeth prominently displayed. “Touch me, and I’ll blow your brains out! Sacré! I warn you!”

The mad excitement seemed to have filled him with fiendish strength, and by an agile movement he again freed himself.

With a muttered oath he advanced several steps towards the spot where Vera was sitting, now rendered utterly unconscious by the sudden shock.

I saw his intention. I detected the terrible expression of revenge that passed over his features; and sprang towards him.

Another second, and I should have been too late.

The muzzle of the revolver was again pointed at her; his finger was upon the trigger, nevertheless as he pulled it I knocked his arm upwards.

The weapon discharged, but the bullet imbedded itself in the ceiling.

I had saved Vera's life!

At this moment there were loud shouts in the corridor, and a few seconds later a police inspector, accompanied by two detectives and several waiters, dashed into the room.

"Demetrius Orselska, we have a warrant for your arrest for murder!" announced the officer, sharply, and turning to his men, added, "arrest him?"

Like some hunted animal who is brought to bay, the scoundrel glanced quickly around for means of escape, but finding none, turned and faced them.

A moment's reflection had decided him.

"You—you shall not take me," he hissed. "I—I confess I am guilty of the crimes—but—Diable! I will take my own life, and—and you can take my body if it's any use—you can can do what you like with that, you bloodhounds!"

Before the detectives could obey the orders of the inspector, he had placed the revolver to his forehead.

The plated barrel flashed in the light only for an instant—then there was a loud explosion.

The officers recoiled, startled by its suddenness; for it all took place so rapidly that for the moment they apparently did not comprehend his intention.

As the pistol fell from the unhappy man's grasp he uttered a loud moan, staggered, and then wheeled slowly round, as if on a pivot. His bloodshot eyes caught sight of Boris, and frightful convulsions of every feature proclaimed his

terror. He did not utter another cry but fell forward to the floor where he quivered for a few moments in death agony.

It was an awful tableau; the last act of a terrible game that had for its stakes riches, or the grave.

Boris, with livid face, was resting his right hand against the wall, while he pressed his left to his breast as if to stay the beating of his heart. He watched the dying struggles of his wife's murderer, seeming fascinated by the frightful spectacle.

There was an awful silence.

Amid this terrible scene Vera regained consciousness. Struggling to her feet she walked with uneven steps towards us. All at once her face assumed a look of inexpressible horror, as she gazed down upon the body of the murderer, and gradually realised the truth.

"It is he! And he tried to kill me! It all seems like some horrible dream," she gasped, clutching my arm and uttering a low cry of horror.

"Come; Vera," I whispered, softly, "the mystery is solved. The guilty one has received the wages of his sin."

She did not reply, but, with a deep-drawn sigh, as if a great weight had been lifted from her mind, she leaned heavily upon my arm and left the chamber of death.

Boris followed.

His thirst for vengeance had been satisfied.

Chapter Thirty Six.

Conclusion.

A sultry autumn day had passed; the freshening twilight had faded, and the moon and evening star were in the sky as Vera and I sat together on the terrace at Elveham. Already the lights of the village began to twinkle in the distance; the tops of the trees in the Dene were gleaming in the moonlight like a silver sea, a night bird warbled sweetly, and the little brook babbled on with lulling music.

My heart drank in the tranquillity of the scene, as in the listlessness of after dinner I smoked the sleep-inviting cigar.

A month had elapsed since the tragic dénouement of the strange drama, but Vera's nerves had been so unstrung that I had scarcely referred to the terrible occurrence since.

We had just dined with Boris and Bob Nugent, who had arrived as our guests that day. During the meal Vera had spoken of the scene at the hotel—not without some hesitation, however—and now we were alone she again alluded to it.

"Do you remember, Frank, it was on a similar night to this, that you saw, over there in the Dene, what your jealous eyes distorted into a meeting of lovers?"

"Yes, dearest; I do remember it. Boris being the man I saw leave the house in Bedford Place, I believed him to be the murderer," I replied.

"Boris; the murderer!" cried my wife in surprise. "Ah! I understand, dear, what agony of mind such a discovery must have caused you. It was all my fault—everything," she added, with regret.

"The mystification was not intentional, Vera," I said, tenderly, encircling her slim waist with my arm. "But do not let us speak of it again."

"Frank," she exclaimed suddenly, as she placed her hand upon my shoulder tenderly, looking into my eyes, "Boris has yet something to tell you. Ah! here they come; you must hear it now."

My two guests had emerged from the dining-room and were strolling leisurely towards us in full enjoyment of their goddess Nicotine.

My wife called them, and they came and seated themselves beside us.

“Now, Boris,” she said, “we have all met, and you can explain to Frank that complication you did not acquaint him with on the night of his acquittal.”

“What more can there be?” I asked, in unfeigned astonishment.

“Simply this: The villain meant to kill you?” Boris replied calmly.

“To kill me?”

“Yes. You remember discovering portions of a seal upon your writing-table?”

“Perfectly. It was on the morning I left for London.”

“Exactly. Had you remained here, you would have been murdered, and the seal, which was in readiness, affixed upon you. When you left, he followed, his purpose being to kill you when a fitting opportunity presented itself. Luckily events so conspired as to frustrate his evil design.”

“Is this really true?” I exclaimed, in amazement.

“Yes. You will now understand why I shadowed you so closely. It was in order that no harm should befall you.”

“But my arrest—” I said, utterly bewildered at this fresh feature the mystery presented—a plot against my own life.

“The villain suddenly altered his tactics, presumably because he would be running too great a risk by killing you. He therefore returned here, placed the seals and other articles among your possessions, and afterwards gave information to the police which led to your committal.”

“What could have been the motive of all this?”

I asked, my astonishment increasing at such revelations. “We were friends; I had done him no wrong.”

“The motive was a sufficiently strong one; that of obtaining your fortune.”

“How?”

“Cannot you see the depths of the plot? He was aware you had made a will leaving everything to Vera, therefore, if you died, she would possess the estate.

In that case he hoped to marry her, and failing this, his father could give information which would secure her conviction and exile as one implicated in the attempts against the Czar. In either case he would obtain the money. You were the only obstacle, and when once removed, all would have been easy."

"By fortuitous circumstances he did not succeed," Vera said, kissing me fondly.

"No. He was a clever rogue, I can assure you. But he was unaware that I was in England watching his movements," remarked Boris.

"What of his father?" I asked.

"He also has obtained what he richly deserves. Having been detected in assisting in the manufacture of bombs in Zurich, immediately on his return after giving evidence against you, he was convicted and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment."

"Serve the old scoundrel right!" declared Bob, in a tone of satisfaction. "It seems to me, Frank, old fellow, you owe your life to our newly-discovered friend."

"Yes, that is true," I admitted. "It is a debt I can never repay."

"Don't talk of it," said Boris, tossing away his cigar-end. "My only desire has been to secure the happiness of my sister and yourself."

"There is nothing to fear in that respect," I said, laughing. "The dark clouds and terrible ordeals that overshadowed the first few months after our marriage have now passed, and brighter days, full of hope and enjoyment, have dawned. Our future lives will be devoid of sorrow, and there shall be no element of mistrust again to part us."

"Frank, old chap," cried Bob, enthusiastically, "I congratulate you on the recommencement of your honeymoon with all my heart. You and Mrs Burgoyne certainly deserve every happiness after the severe trials you have both undergone."

Thanking him warmly, our hands gripped with the same hearty clasp as in days gone by.

While I had been speaking my wife had taken a little spray of stephanotis from her breast and with loving hands pinned it in the lapel of my coat.

As I kissed her passionately, she assured me, with a rippling laugh: “There shall be nothing wanting on my part to ensure perfect felicity, for I think, dearest, you can now place implicit trust in the woman who once was Vera Seroff, Nihilist.”

The End.