THE UNDER SECRETARY

BY

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The Under Secretary

Chapter One.

Is mainly about a Man.

Two o'clock—two o'clock in the morning.

The bells had just chimed the hour. Big Ben had boomed forth its deep and solemn note over sleeping London. The patient constable on point-duty at the foot of Westminster Bridge had stamped his feet for the last time, and had been relieved by his colleague, who gave him the usual pass-word, "All right." The tumultuous roar of traffic, surging, beating, pulsating, had long ago ceased, but the crowd of smart broughams and private hansoms still stood in New Palace Yard, while from the summit of St. Stephen's tower the long ray of electricity streamed westward, showing that the House of Commons was still sitting.

The giant Metropolis, the throbbing heart of the greatest empire the world has known, was silent. London, the city of varying moods, as easily pleased, as easily offended as a petted child; London, the dear, smoke-blackened old city, which every Englishman loves and every foreigner admires; London, that complex centre of the universe, humdrum and prosaic, yet ever mysterious, poetic and wonderful, the city full of the heart's secrets and of life's tragedies, slept calmly and in peace while her legislators discussed and decided the policy of the Empire.

The long rows of light on the deserted terrace and along the opposite shore in front of St. Thomas's Hospital threw their shimmering reflection upon the black waters of the Thames; the cold wind swept roughly up the river, causing the gas-jets to flicker, so that the few shivering outcasts who had taken refuge on the steps of the closed doorway of Westminster Station, murmured as they pulled their rags more tightly round them. Only the low rumbling of a country waggon bearing vegetables to Covent Garden, or the sharp clip-clap of a cab-horse's feet upon the asphalt, broke the quiet. Except for these occasional disturbances all else was as silent on that dark and cloudy night in late October as if the world were dead.

Over in the far corner of New Palace Yard horses were champing their bits, and coachmen and police were waiting patiently, knowing that with the Twelve o'clock Rule suspended the length of the sitting was quite uncertain. Wearied journalists from the Press Gallery, having finished their "turns," came out singly or in pairs from their own little side door in the opposite corner of the yard, wished a cheery "good-night" to the portly sergeant and

the two idling detectives who acted as janitors, and then hurried on through the chill night over the bridge towards their homes in Brixton or Clapham. An autumn session is a weary one, and weighs quite as heavily upon the Parliamentary journalist as upon the Leader of the House himself.

On the floor of the House honourable members might stretch themselves and doze; they might wander about St. Stephen's Hall with prominent constituents who sought admission to the Strangers' Gallery, entertain them in the dining-room, or take their ease across the way at St. Stephen's Club, ready to return by the underground passage on the ringing of the division-bell; but that gallery above the Speaker, the eye and ear of the world, was never anything else but a hive of industry from the moment after prayers until the House rose. Ever watchful, ever scribbling its hieroglyphics and deciphering them; ever covering ream upon ream of paper with the verbose and vapid utterances of ambitious but unimportant members, its telegraphs clicked on incessantly hour after hour, transmitting reports of the business accomplished to the farthermost recesses of the King's Empire. Truly, a strange life is that of both legislator and journalist within those sombre walls at Westminster.

On this night a full House was occupied with serious business. Within St. Stephen's men collected in groups, talked anxiously, and awaited the doom of the Government; for the political horizon was black, and the storm, long threatened, was now to burst. Contrary to the usual course of things, the small band of Irish obstructionists, fluent orators, whose heckling of Ministers caused so many scenes, were silent, for a matter of foreign policy of the most vital importance had been debated ever since the dinner-hour. Member after member had risen from the Opposition Benches and beneath the soft glow of the electric light shining through the glass roof had, before a crowded and excited House, supported the vote of censure, denouncing the Government for its apathy, its neglect of warnings, and the failure of its diplomacy abroad. The scene would have been an ordinary one were it not for the fact that a five-line whip had been sent out. An important division was hourly expected, and as the defeat of the Government was believed to be close at hand, the excitement had risen to fever heat.

The calmest man in the whole of that versatile House was, perhaps, he who was at that moment replying from the Treasury Bench.

"Strangers" in the gallery were struck by his youthful appearance, for he did not seem to be much over thirty. Tall, dark-haired, with slightly aquiline features and a small black moustache, his face was refined, studious, and full of keen intelligence. Standing beside the clerk's table, upon the very spot where the late Mr Gladstone had so often stood when delivering his

masterpieces of oratory, he leaned easily upon his right hand while he addressed the House calmly and clearly in defence of Her Majesty's Government.

All the world knew that the Right Honourable Dudley Waldegrave Chisholm, member for the Albury Division of Surrey and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, was a coming man. Five years ago, when he was still private secretary to the Marquess of Stockbridge, Her Majesty's Foreign Minister, the political paragraphists, as well as those journalists known as "lobbyists," had predicted for him a brilliant future; and he certainly had shown himself worthy the position he now held—a very high one for so young a man.

Standing there, a well-groomed figure in evening-dress, the smart fencer with supplementary questions spoke fluently, without dramatic gesture or any straining after effect, his sweeping and polished eloquence annihilating the opponents against whom it had been set in motion. Deliberately he rebuked the Opposition for their unfounded allegations, and gave the lie direct to many of the statements that had been made in the course of the debate. The speech, a most brilliant and telling defence of the policy of the Government, recalled the greatness of Castlereagh.

"And now," he said, in the same calm tone, slightly altering his position as he continued, and knitting his brows, "the Honourable Member for North Monmouthshire has hinted at the overthrow of Her Majesty's Government, and even at a Dissolution. Upon such a threat let all the voters in these islands reflect. The enfranchised public is really living in an unpractical paradise. It stands for nothing better than a puppet Czar. When the five millions of voters have with infinite pains been enabled to record their sovereign will and pleasure, and have succeeded in returning a majority on one side or another, they are apt to consider that they have returned a Liberal or a Conservative majority; but, to quote Hosea Biglow, they have done little else than change the holders of offices. The new Parliament meets, and the electors wait to see the results of their exertions. There is a new Ministry, no doubt, and, so far, that is to the good; but when the new Ministry gets to work, it finds itself in a very different position from that of a Minister charged with a Ukase from a real Czar. If the election has taken place upon one specific point, and the response of the electors has been decisive and overwhelming, then it is possible that a Bill embodying the views of the voters may pass into law; but that is only when the will of the electors has been unmistakably made known, not for the first time, but for the second, or even for the third."

An enthusiastic chorus of “He-ah! He-ah!” arose from the crowded benches behind the speaker, but without a pause he went on fearlessly:

“The Opposition may threaten Her Majesty’s Government with overthrow and ignominy if it choose, but it cannot hoodwink the constituencies. Experience has taught the electors that they are mocked with a semblance of power, the real sceptre being held in permanence by the House of Lords, whose four hundred members appeal to no constituency, but sit by virtue of hereditary privilege and right of birth, with a perpetual mandate to veto any and every scheme submitted by this House which they do not like and which is not literally forced upon them by overwhelming popular pressure. The voting public, therefore, while it can make a statesman a prime minister, and can pass one bill, if it is very angry and has expressed its opinion with emphasis when appeal was made to it upon that specific question, has no more power than this.”

At these outspoken words, expressions of amazement arose from both sides of the House; but the Under-Secretary, heedless of all in the warmth of his defence, continued, reverting to the main question at issue—namely, the alleged Russian encroachments in the Far East, a subject upon which, owing to his own extensive journeys in Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Pamirs, he was a recognised authority.

“It is excessively rare to find, even among educated Englishmen,” he declared, “a perception of the simple fact that the landward expansion of Russia has been as natural, gradual and legitimate as the spread of British sea-power, and that the former process has been infinitely the less aggressive and violent of the two. Russophobia in this country rests upon the assumption that the devouring advance of the Muscovite has been exclusively dictated by a melodramatic and iniquitous design upon our dominion in India. There never was a stranger fallacy springing from jealous hallucinations. If our Indian Empire had never existed, if the continent-peninsula had disappeared at a remote geological epoch beneath the waves, and if the Indian Ocean had washed the base of the Himalayas for ages, Russian expansion would still have followed precisely the same course it has taken under existing circumstances at exactly the same rate.”

And so he continued, arguing, criticising, ridiculing and substantiating, thrusting the truth upon the Opposition; in his eyes a swift light which swept the House like an eagle’s glance; on his lips the thin smile which his opponents dreaded, until he resumed his seat amid the wild outburst of cheers from the Government benches. He had thrilled the House. The victory of his party was virtually won.

“The best speech Chisholm has ever delivered,” declared one of Her Majesty’s Ministers, a grey-haired old gentleman in black broadcloth, to his colleague, the Home Secretary, at his side. “Marvellous! magnificent!”

“Yes,” declared the other enthusiastically. “He has turned the tide. It was really excellent.”

Everywhere this verdict was accepted, even by the Opposition. Public opinion was certainly not wrong: Chisholm was a coming man—a man of the near future.

But he sat entirely unmoved by the wild outburst of applause. He had taken some papers from the pocket of his dining-jacket and was busy examining them in a manner quite unconcerned. His dark face was serious. He never played “to the gallery,” as he termed the Irish Nationalists opposite, and although he had chosen a public career, he was at heart a rather melancholy man, who regretted that on account of his travels and his official position he had become notable. The one thing he detested was the plaudits of the public; cheap advertisement he abominated.

For that very reason he addressed his constituents down at Albury as rarely as possible. His enthusiastic electors were in the habit of cheering him to the echo, for by reason of his travels he was a popular hero. After a meeting the crowd would usually unharness the horses from his carriage and drag him triumphantly back to his hotel. From that sort of thing his retiring and studious nature shrank. Such enthusiasm might flatter the vanity of the brewer or cotton-spinner, who wished to get into the Carlton, or of the mushroom financier from the Stock Exchange, striving to thrust his way into the fringe of society and to be mentioned in the “social diaries” of the halfpenny newspapers. There were men in the House, whom he could name, ready to descend to any ruse to obtain a little cheap notoriety; who would readily black the boots of the editor of the Times in exchange for a twenty-line report of their speeches. But Dudley Chisholm was not one of the hungry mob of place-hunters. Heir to the Barony of Lynchmere, he was also a wealthy man by reason of the huge fortune left him by his uncle, the eccentric old Duke of Lincoln, together with Wroxeter Castle, the historic seat of the Chisholms up in Shropshire. Since his entry into political life he had not been idle. He had been sworn a Privy Councillor a year ago, was Deputy-Lieutenant and a Justice of the Peace for Shropshire, and upon him the Royal Geographical Society had conferred its highest award, the gold medal for his famous journey through the almost unknown territory of Bhutan.

All these honours had been thrust upon him. He had sought none of them, for at no time had he been a political “log-roller.” When he came down from Oxford, to find himself possessor of an almost princely income, he resolved to take up something with which to occupy his time. He had no inclination for the life of a sybarite about town; the drawing-rooms of Mayfair and Belgravia had no attraction for him; the Sunday strutting in the park bored him. He therefore allowed himself to be nominated for the Guildford Division, and after a valiant fight was returned, subsequently being appointed by the Marquess of Stockbridge one of his private secretaries.

Eight years had gone by since then. Twelve months after delivering his maiden speech in the House he had set forth to make himself personally acquainted with England’s oversea possessions, for he declared that no legislator was competent to criticise a country he had never seen. To Australia, to China, and to India he proceeded in turn, and at last he made his remarkable journey through Central Asia, in order to ascertain the truth of the Russian advance towards India alleged by certain sensational journals. After this came the daring journey across Bhutan. Then, on his return to England on the eve of a general election, he was amazed to find himself famous—the man of the hour, as had been long ago predicted. Later changes in the Cabinet brought him his well-earned reward in the position he now held of Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

He sat there unmoved by the applause which greeted his speech, and when it had ceased he rose. The tellers were being named, and as he passed out into the lobby a few minutes later his name was on every tongue. Men saluted him, but he only bowed slightly on either side in acknowledgment with haughty courtesy; he held to the imperious, patrician code of his Norman race, and the plaudits of his fellows were almost as indifferent to him, almost as much disdained by him, as their censure.

Dudley Chisholm had much of the despot, but nothing of the demagogue, in his character. He had come to the front quickly. Certainly no man was more surprised at his own success in the world of politics than he himself; and certainly no man in London was considered by mothers more eligible as a husband.

Perhaps it is fortunate for Members of the House that their female friends are discreetly hidden away behind that heavy iron grille over the Press Gallery, so that they are invisible save for a neatly gloved hand which sometimes shows upon the ironwork, or a flash of bright colour in the deep shadow, caused by bobbing millinery. Many a husband or lover addressing the House would waver beneath the critical eyes of his womenkind. Indeed, on the night in question, Dudley Chisholm would certainly not have

delivered his telling words so calmly had he been aware of the presence of certain persons hidden away behind that Byzantine grating.

The Ladies' Gallery was crowded by Members' wives and daughters, enthusiastic Primrose League workers, dowagers, and a few of the smarter set. Among the latter, at the extreme end of the gallery, sat a well-preserved, elderly woman of rather aristocratic bearing, accompanied by a blue-eyed girl in lavender, wearing a costly opera cloak trimmed with sable, a girl with a countenance so charming that she would cause a sensation anywhere. The black toilette of the elder woman and the lavender "creation" worn by her daughter, spoke mutely to the other women near them of an atelier in the Rue de la Paix, but as to their names, these were unknown to every person in the gallery.

When Chisholm had risen to address the House the elder had bent to the younger and whispered something in her ear. Then both women had pressed their faces eagerly to the grille, and, sitting bent forward, listened to every word that fell so deliberately from the speaker's lips.

Again the aristocratic-looking woman with the white hair whispered to the girl beside her, so low that no one overheard:

"There, Muriel! That is the man. I have not exaggerated his qualities, have I? You must marry him, my dear—you must marry him!"

Chapter Two.

Concerns Claudia's Caprice.

The division had been taken, the position of the Government saved, and the House was "up."

Dudley Chisholm, after driving back in a hansom to his chambers in St. James's Street, stretched himself before the fire with a weary sigh of relief, to rest himself after the struggle in which he had been so prominent a figure. His rooms, almost opposite the Naval and Military Club, were decorated in that modern style affected by the younger generation of bachelors, with rich brocade hangings, Turkey carpets, art pottery, and woodwork painted dead white. A single glance, however, showed it to be the abode of a man sufficiently wealthy to be able to indulge in costly works of art and fine old china; and although modern in every sense of the word, it was, nevertheless, a very snug, tasteful and well-arranged abode.

The room in which he was sitting, deep in a big armchair of the "grandfather" type, was a study; not spacious, but lined completely with well-chosen books, while the centre was occupied by a large, workmanlike table littered by the many official documents which his secretary had, on the previous morning, brought to him from the Foreign Office. The electric lamp on the table was shaded by a cover of pale green silk and lace, so that he sat in the shadow, with the firelight playing upon his dark and serious features.

Parsons, his bent, white-haired old servant in livery of an antiquated cut, had noiselessly entered with his master's whiskey and soda, and after placing it in its accustomed spot on a small table at his elbow, was about to retire, when the younger man, deep in reflection, stirred himself, asking:

"Who brought that letter—the one I found here when I came in?"

"A commissionaire, sir," was the old servitor's response. "It came about midnight. And somebody rang up on the telephone about an hour after, but I couldn't catch the name, as I'm always a bit flustered by the outlandish thing, sir."

His master smiled. That telephone was, he knew, the bane of old Parsons' existence.

"Ah!" he said. "You're not so young as you used to be, eh?"

"No, Master Dudley," sighed the old fellow with the blanched hair and thin, white, mutton-chop whiskers. "When I think that I was his lordship's valet

here in London nigh on fifty years ago, and that I've been in the family every since, I begin to feel that I'm gettin' on a bit in years."

"Sitting up late every night like this isn't very good for one of your age," observed his master, mindful of the old fellow's faithful services. "I'll have Riggs up from Wroxeter, and he can attend to me at night."

"You're very thoughtful of me, Master Dudley; but I'd rather serve you myself, sir. I can't abear young men about me. They're only in the way, and get a-flirtin' with the gals whenever they have a chance."

"Very well, Parsons, just please yourself," answered Chisholm pleasantly. "But to-morrow morning first pack my bag and then wire to Wroxeter. I shall be going down there in the afternoon with two friends for a couple of days' shooting."

"Very well, sir," replied the old fellow in the antique dress suit and narrow tie. He half turned to walk out, but hesitated and fidgeted; then, a moment later, he turned back and stood before his master.

"Well, Parsons, anything more?" Chisholm asked. He was used to the old fellow's confidences and eccentricities, for more than once since he had come down from college his ancient retainer had given him words of sound advice, his half-century of service allowing him such licence as very few servants possessed.

"There's one little matter I wanted to speak to you about, Master Dudley. I'm an old man, and a pretty blunt 'un at times, that you know."

"Yes," laughed Dudley. "You can make very caustic remarks sometimes, Parsons. Well, who's been offending you now?"

"No one, sir," he answered gravely. "It's about something that concerns yourself, Master Dudley."

His master glanced up at him quickly, not without some surprise, saying:

"Well, fire away, Parsons. Out with it. What have I done wrong this time?"

"That woman was here this afternoon!" he blurted out.

"What woman?" inquired his master, looking at him seriously.

"Her ladyship."

"Well, and what of that? She called at my invitation. I'm sorry I was not in."

“And I’m very glad I had the satisfaction of sending that woman away,” declared the ancient retainer bluntly.

“Why, Parsons? Surely it’s hardly the proper thing to speak of a lady as ‘that woman’?”

“Master. Dudley,” said the old man, “you’ll forgive me for speaking plain, won’t you? It would, I know, be called presumption in other houses for a servant to speak like this to his master, but you are thirty-three now, and for those thirty-three years I’ve advised you, just as I would my own son.”

“I know, Parsons, I know. My father trusted you implicitly, just as I have done. Speak quite plainly. I’m never offended by your criticisms.”

“Well, sir, that woman may have a title, but she’s not at all a desirable acquaintance for you, a rising man.”

Chisholm smiled. Claudia Nevill was a smart woman, moving in the best set in London; something of a lion-hunter, it was true, but a really good sort, nevertheless.

“She dresses too well to suit your old-fashioned tastes, eh? In your days women wore curls and crinolines.”

“No, Master Dudley. It isn’t her dress, sir. I don’t like the woman.”

“Why?”

“Because—well, you’ll permit me to speak quite frankly, sir—because to my mind it’s dangerous for a young man like you to be so much in the company of an attractive young person. And, besides, she’s playing some deep game, depend upon it.”

Dudley’s dark brows contracted for a moment at the old man’s words. It was quite true that he was very often in Claudia Nevill’s society, because he found her both charming and amusing. But the suggestion of her playing some game caused him to prick up his ears in quick interest. Parsons was a shrewd old fellow, that he knew.

“And what kind of double game is Lady Richard playing?” he asked in a rather hard voice.

“Well, sir, you’ll remember that she called here just after luncheon the day before yesterday, and had an elderly lady with her. You had gone down to the Foreign Office; but I expected you back every moment, so they waited. When they were together in the drawing-room with the door closed I heard

that woman explain to her companion that you were the most eligible man in London. They had spoken of your income, of Wroxeter, of his lordship's failing health, and all the rest of it, when that woman made a suggestion to her companion—namely, that you might be induced to marry some woman they called Muriel."

"Muriel? And who in the name of fortune is Muriel?"

"I don't know, sir. That, however, was the name that was mentioned."

"Who was the lady who accompanied her ladyship? Had you ever seen her before?"

"No, sir, never. She didn't give a card. She was elderly, dressed in deep mourning. They waited best part of an hour for you, then drove away in her ladyship's brougham."

"I wonder who she could have been," remarked Dudley Chisholm reflectively. "I haven't the honour of knowing any lady named Muriel, and, what's more, I have no desire to make her acquaintance. But how was it, Parsons, that if the door was closed, you overheard this very edifying conversation?"

"I listened at the keyhole, sir. Old men have long ears, you know."

His master laughed.

"Slow at the telephone, quick at the keyhole, eh, Parsons?" he said. "Well, somehow, you don't like her ladyship. Why is it?"

"I've already told you, Master Dudley. First, because you are too much with her. There's no woman more dangerous to men like yourself than a wealthy young person of her attractions; secondly, because she has some extraordinary design upon you on behalf of this mysterious Muriel—whoever she is."

What the old man had said was certainly puzzling. What possible object could Claudia have, he wondered, in bringing there a strange woman and suggesting to her that he should marry a third person? He would put the question point-blank to her to-morrow. Claudia Nevill and he were old friends—very old friends. Years ago, long before she had married his friend Dick Nevill, a noble lord who sat for Huntingdon, they had been close acquaintances, and now, Nevill having died two years after the marriage, leaving Claudia sole mistress of the huge estate, together with that princely house in Albert Gate, he had naturally become her confidant and adviser.

She was now only twenty-six, one of the smartest women in London, and one of the prettiest. After a brief period of mourning, she had again thrown herself into all the dissipations of the following season, and was seen everywhere. She had been so often in the company of Dudley Chisholm that their close friendship had for months past been remarked.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary had, of course, heard the gossip, and laughed at it. He naturally admired her, and once, long before her marriage, he thought he was in love with her; but after a rigid self-examination he came to the conclusion that he had not been really desperately in love with any woman in his life, and promised himself not to commit any such folly now. Therefore, he laughed heartily at his old servant's ominous but well-meant warning.

"I'm not the sort of man to marry, Parsons," he said. "Truth to tell, I'm too much of an old fogey for women to care for me. And as for this unknown Muriel, well, I don't think you need have much fear that I shall commit any matrimonial indiscretion with her. I expect her ladyship was only joking, and you took her words seriously."

"No, she wasn't joking," declared the old man in all seriousness. "You mark my words, Master Dudley, that woman is not your friend."

Again Chisholm laughed airily, and sipped his whiskey, while the old man, satisfied with his parting shot, went out, giving a grunt of dissatisfaction as he closed the door noiselessly behind him.

"Poor old Parsons! He thinks I'm going to the devil! Well, I wonder what's in the wind?" observed Dudley aloud to himself when he was again alone. "I've noticed a curious change in Claudia's manner of late. What can be her object in bringing about my marriage, except that perhaps my alliance with one or other of the insipid young ladies who are so often passed before me for inspection, might stifle the ugly scandal that seems to have arisen about us. She's a clever woman—the cleverest woman in London, but horribly indiscreet. I wonder whether that's really the truth. But marriage! Au grand jamais!" and he raised his glass again and took a deep draught.

"No," he went on, "Claudia is never so charming as when she has some little intrigue or other on hand; but I must really get at the bottom of this, and find out the belle inconnue. Parsons is no fool, but the old boy is a Methodist, and hates everything in petticoats," and he laughed lightly to himself as he recollected the old fellow's sage, and perhaps justifiable, reprimands in his wilder college days. "I know I've been a fool—an absolute, idiotic fool with Claudia—and she's been equally foolish. People have talked,

but without any foundation for their impertinent gossip, and now she, of course, finds herself in a hole. Dick Nevill was the best of good fellows, but she never loved him. Her marriage was merely one of her caprices de coeur. I don't think she could really love anybody for longer than a week. Yes, Parsons is right. He always is. I've been an ass—a downright ass!" he added with sudden emphasis. "I must go and see her to-morrow, and end all this confounded folly."

From the table he took up the letter he had received on his return home, and about which he had questioned his servant. Again he read it through, stroking his dark moustache thoughtfully, and knitting his brows.

"Writing is woman's métier. I wonder what she wants to see me about so particularly," he went on, still speaking to himself. "I wired to her saying, 'The House is sitting late,' so she surely couldn't be expecting me. But it's rather unusual for her to send out urgent notes at midnight. No, la belle capricieuse has no discretion—she never will have."

And although the great marble clock on the mantelshelf chimed four, he sat with his dark and serious eyes fixed upon the embers, reviewing the chapters of his past.

He saw the folly of his dalliance at the side of Claudia Nevill en plein jour. He put to himself the question whether or not he really loved her, and somehow could not bring himself to return a distinct negative. She was graceful, charming and handsome, the centre of the smartest set in London, a grande dame whose aid had been useful to him in more ways than one. As he sat there in the silence of the night, he recollected those pleasant hours spent with her at Albert Gate, where they so often dined together, and where she would afterwards sing to him those old Italian love-songs in her sweet contralto, beaming upon him with her coquettish smile, half languid, half moquer; those drives together in the park, and those long walks they had taken when, accompanied by her mother, she had visited him at Wroxeter Castle. Yes, all were pleasant memories, yet he felt that between him and her love was an impossibility. As this was the case, the less they saw of one another in the future, even en bon camarade, the better for them both.

This was not a pleasant decision, for Dudley Chisholm made few friends, and was nothing of a ladies' man. He looked upon life around him as contes pour rire. His friends were mostly bachelors like himself, and in all the wide range of his acquaintances he had scarcely any women associates, and, except Claudia, not a single one in whom he could confide. Women courted him everywhere, of course. It was not to be supposed that a popular, good-looking man of his wealth and fame was not actively angled for in various

directions; but to all attempted flirtations he gave a polite negative. Hence it was that these disappointed women revenged themselves by starting the ill-natured gossip about his relations with Claudia Nevill, the smart little widow, who was still young, who gave such lavish entertainments, who moved in the most select set in London, and at whose side he was so frequently to be seen.

The old baron, his father, who lived the life of a recluse up at Dunkeld, had written to him upon the subject only a few weeks before, and to-night even his own servant had frankly expressed his opinion of her. Dieu le veut.

Dudley Chisholm sighed. He was an honest man, and these thoughts troubled him greatly. He feared for her reputation more than for his own. As he was a man, what did it matter? It did not occur to him how much it flattered that voluptuous rêveuse to possess as her cavalier the man of the hour, the man about whom half England was at that moment talking. All he felt was that they had both been indiscreet—horribly indiscreet.

Yes; to-morrow he must end it all. The tongue of scandal must be silenced at once and for ever.

He had risen to stir the fire when the stillness was suddenly broken by the sharp ring of the telephone-bell outside the room. A moment later Parsons announced that some one desired to speak with him. As it was no uncommon occurrence for him to be rung up in the middle of the night by the Foreign Office officials, he walked up to the instrument and inquired who was there.

“Is that you, Dudley?” asked the soft voice he knew so well. “I called this afternoon, and I’ve been waiting for you ever since half-past two, when the House rose. You’ve had my note, of course. Why don’t you come? Justine will open the door to you. I know it’s very indiscreet, but I must see you to-night on an important matter—at once. Do you understand, Dudley?”

Chapter Three.

In which Dudley Chisholm is Frank.

The mellow autumn sunlight streamed full into the bright morning-room at Albert Gate where Dudley Chisholm was standing before the great wood-fire with his hands behind his back. It was a handsome apartment, solidly furnished and fully in keeping with the rest of the rooms in the huge mansion, which was acknowledged to be one of the finest in the West End.

Before him, nestling in the cosy depths of her luxurious chair, sat its owner, young, dark-haired, with soft languorous eyes, her long and radiant tresses bound carelessly and hanging in as loose and rippled a luxuriance as the hair of the Vénus à la Coquille. No toilette was more becoming than her pale-blue négligé of softest Indian texture, with its profusion of chiffon about the arms and bosom, a robe the very negligence of which was the supreme perfection of art; no chaussure more shapely than the little Cairene slipper fantastically broidered with gold and pearls, into which the tiny foot she held out to the fire to warm was slipped. At that moment, perhaps, Claudia Nevill, who was exquisitely beautiful at all hours, looked her freshest and loveliest. She sat there thinking, while the sunbeams shone on the dazzling whiteness of her skin, on the luminous depths of her wonderful eyes, on her loosely bound tresses, and on the plain gold circlet on her fair left hand—the badge of her alliance with a dead lord and the signet of her title to reign a Queen of Society.

Sitting there among her soft cushions she was indeed a lovely woman, an almost girlish figure, with a face oval and perfect, a countenance sweet and winning, a true type of English beauty, who had been portrayed in a very notable picture by a famous Academician. Acknowledged on all hands to be one of the prettiest women in London, she was proud and splendid in the abundance of the power she exercised over her world, which was enchanted by her fascination and obedient to her magic, let her place her foot upon its neck and rule it as she would. There was swung for her the rich incense of worship wherever she moved; and she gave out life and death, as it were, with her smile and her frown, with a soft-whispered word or a moue boudeuse. From a station of comparative obscurity, where her existence had threatened to pass away in cotton blouses amid the monotony of a dull cathedral town, her beauty had lifted her to dazzling rank as wife of one of England's wealthiest men, and her tact had taught her to grace it so well that, forgetting to carp, high society agreed to bow before her. In the exclusive set in which she moved she created a furore; she became the mode; she gave the law and made the fashion. Thus by the double right of her own resistless fascination and the dignity of her late lord's name,

Claudia Nevill was a power in smart London, and an acknowledged leader of her own spheres of ton, pleasure and coquetry.

Her ladyship was herself, and was all-sufficient for herself. On her début she was murmured at, and society had been a little slow to receive her; but her delicate azure veins were her sangre azul, her white hands were her seize quartiers, her marvellous black tresses were her bezants d'or, and her splendidly luminous eyes her blazonry. Of a verity, Venus needs no Pursuivant's marshalling.

As she sat gazing pensively into the fire a flush had spread over the fairness of her brow, her fingers played idly with her chiffons, and the corners of her lips twitched slightly. Her thoughts were not pleasing.

The man who had been held to her by her magical witchery had been speaking, and she had shrunk slightly when she heard him. He had not obeyed her wilful caprice and visited her when she summoned him, but had waited until morning.

The words he had just uttered, outspoken and manly, had been fraught with all she would willingly have buried in oblivion for ever: they awoke remembrances that caused her to wince; they were of a kind to fret and embitter her haughty life. With his calm words there came back to her all the shame she burned to ignore and put behind her, as though it never had been; they brought with them all the echoes of that early and innocent affection to which she had so soon been faithless and disloyal.

She was cold, though she knew coldness to be base; she was restless under his eyes, though she knew that so much love looked at her from them; she was stung with impatience and with false pride, though she knew that in him she saw the very saviour of her existence.

Her eyelids fell, her white forehead flushed, her soft cheeks burned as she heard him. She breathed quickly in agitation; at the sound of his voice the warm and reverent tenderness of long ago once more sprang to light in her heart.

He watched her, accurately reading her emotions and gazing at the marvellous change wrought in her. She was superb; she was like a noble sculptor's dream of Aspasia. He looked at her for several minutes, while speechlessness held them both as captives.

At last she raised her head, and with a sudden pang of unbearable agony, cried:

“You are cruel, Dudley!—cruel! I cannot bear such words from you!”

“I have only spoken the truth, Claudia,” he replied in the same low, calm tone as he had before used. Their eyes met. She knew that he read her soul; she knew that he had not lied.

She—now become keenly critical, scornfully indifferent, and very difficult to impress—was struck as she had never been before by the authority, the dignity, the pure accent of his voice, and his steady, thorough manliness.

He stood gazing down at her with a look under which her dark eyes sank. There was a sternness in his words that moved her with a sense almost of fear. The greatness, the singularity, the mystery of this life, that had so long been interwoven with her own, bewildered her; she could not fully comprehend these qualities.

Little by little she had been drawn away from him, till between them scarcely a bond remained. As he fixed his eyes upon her lovely face, it occurred to him to wonder whether, after all, he would have been so selfishly in error, so blind a traveller in the mists of passion, if he had kept her in his own hands, under his own law and love? Would he not have made her happiness far purer, her future safer, because nearer God, than they now were, brilliant, imperious, pampered, exquisite creature though she had become? She was great, she was lovely, she was popular, she entertained princes, she was unrivalled; but where was that “divine nature” with which he had once, in the bygone days, believed her to be dowered? Where was it now?

“Your words are cruel, Dudley! That you should speak like this! My God! Tell me that you don’t mean it!” she cried suddenly, after a long silence, restless beneath the fixed and melancholy look which she could not meet.

“Listen, Claudia,” he said, still quite calmly, standing erect with his back to the fire. “What I have just said I have long wanted to say, but have always put it off for fear of hurting your feelings—for fear of reproaching you for what is mainly my own folly.”

“But you have reproached me!” she cried in a hard voice. “You tell me this with such a nonchalant air that it has at last awakened me to the bitter truth—you don’t love me!”

“I have spoken as much for your own good as for mine,” he answered. “We must end this folly, Claudia—we—”

“Folly! You call my love folly!” she exclaimed, starting forward. Life had been so fair with her. The years had gone by in one continual blaze of triumph. She was the smart Lady Richard Nevill, whose name was on everybody’s tongue; she was satiated with offers of love. And yet this man had coldly exposed to her the naked truth. Intoxicated with homage, indulgence, extravagance and pleasure, her conscience had become stifled and her memory killed; her heart scarcely knew how to beat without the throbs of vanity or triumph. So she had lived her life in freedom—absolute freedom. Vague rumours had been whispered in the boudoirs of Berkeley Square and Grosvenor Gardens concerning her, but with the sceptre of her matchless loveliness and the skill of a born tactician, she cleared all obstacles, overruled all opponents, bore down all hesitations, and silenced all sneers. “Folly?—you call my love folly, Dudley?”

“We have both been foolish, Claudia—very foolish,” he answered, facing her and looking gravely into her dark eyes, in which shone the light of unshed tears. “People are talking, and we must end our folly.”

“And you fear that the teacup tittle-tattle of my enemies may endanger your official position and retard your advancement, eh?” she asked, knitting her dark brows slightly.

“Of late our names have been coupled far too frequently—mainly owing to our own indiscretions.”

“Well, and if they have?” she asked defiantly. “What matters? The amiable gossips have coupled my name quite falsely with a dozen different men during the past twelve months, and am I a penny the worse for it? Not in the least. No, my dear Dudley, you may just as well admit the truth. Your father has written to you about your too frequent presence in my society and our too frequent teas on the terrace—he told Lady Uppingham so, and she, of course, told me. He has asked you to cut me as a—well, as an undesirable acquaintance.”

“What my father has written is my own affair, Claudia,” he answered. “You know me well, and we have hidden few secrets from one another. Surely we may part friends.”

“Then you actually mean what you’ve said?” she asked, opening her magnificent eyes to their full extent, as with a sigh she raised herself from her former attitude of luxurious laziness.

“Most certainly! It has pained me to speak as I have done, and I can only crave your forgiveness if anything I’ve said has caused you annoyance. But we have to face the hard and melancholy fact that we must end it all.”

“Simply because you fear that a spiteful paragraph regarding us may appear in Truth, or some similar paper, and that your official chief may demand an explanation. Well, mon cher, I gave you credit for possessing the proverbial pluck and defiance of the Chisholms. It seems, however, that I was mistaken.”

He looked at her without making an immediate reply. He was thinking of what old Parsons had alleged on the previous night in regard to the mysterious Muriel. Should he mention it, or should he reserve to himself the knowledge of her inexplicable resolve to effect his marriage with an unknown girl?

As became a discreet man, who dealt daily in the secrets of a nation, he reflected for a moment. He quickly came to the conclusion that silence, at least for the present, was the most judicious policy.

He had once loved this woman, long ago in the golden days of youth, and their love had been of a purely platonic character. But during the past couple of years, now that she was released from the marital bond, Claudia’s actions had exceeded all the bounds of discretion. And even now, when the silent passion which he had struggled against so long as merely a selfish and vain desire was conquered, he was, nevertheless, to a great extent still under the spell of her marvellous witchery.

“I regret, Claudia, that you should upbraid me for speaking so frankly and for thus consulting our mutual interests,” he said at last, as, crossing to the table and leaning against it easily, he regarded her with a melancholy expression upon his face. “We have been friends for a good many years; indeed, ever since you were a child and I was at college. Do you remember those days, long ago, when at Winchester we were boy and girl lovers? Do you remember?” he went on, advancing to her and placing his strong hand tenderly upon her shoulder. “Do you ever recall those sunny afternoons when we used to meet clandestinely, and go for long walks through the meadows round Abbots Barton in deadly terror of every one we met lest we should be recognised? Do you remember how, beneath the stars that sweet-scented night in July, we swore eternal friendship and eternal love?”

She nodded in the affirmative, but no word passed the lips so tightly pressed together.

“And what followed?” he continued. “We drifted apart, I to Oxford, and on into the world; and you, like myself, forgot. You married the man who was my best friend; but for what purpose? Claudia, let me speak plainly, as one who is still your friend, although no longer your lover. You married Dick

Nevill in order to escape the deadly dulness of Abbots Barton and to enter the kingdom of omnipotence, pleasure and triumphant vanity, as a sure deliverance from all future chance of obscurity. You became at once the idol, the leader, the reigning beauty of your sphere. Poor Dick was the slave of your flimsiest caprice; he ministered to your wishes and was grateful for your slightest smile. He died—died while you were away enjoying yourself on the Riviera—and I—"

"No!" she exclaimed wildly, rising to her feet and covering her face with her hands in deep remorse. "No, Dudley! Spare me all that! I know. My God! I know—I know, alas! too well! I never loved him!"

"Then if you regard our folly in a proper light, Claudia," he said earnestly, with his hand placed again upon her shoulder, "you will at once see that my decision is for the best."

"You intend to leave me?" she asked huskily.

"It is the only way," he replied with a catch in his voice. "We have courted scandal sufficiently."

"But you cannot cast me off, Dudley?" she cried, suddenly springing towards him and wildly flinging her beautiful arms about his neck. "You shall never leave me, because I love you. Are you blind? Don't you understand? Don't you see that I love you, Dudley?"

"You loved me once, in those old days at Winchester," he said, slowly disengaging himself from her embrace. "But not now."

"I do!" she cried. "I swear that I do! You are jealous of all those men who flatter me and hang about me wherever I go; but I care nothing for the whole crowd of them. You know me," she went on; "you know that I live only for you—for you." Her words did not correspond with the sentiments she expressed to the woman who had accompanied her to his chambers. He reflected for a moment; then he said:

"Admiration I have for you, Claudia, as the most beautiful woman in London, but I think in this discussion we may both omit the word 'love' as entirely superfluous. We are children no longer. Let us face the truth. Our acquaintanceship ripened into love while we were yet in our teens. Then in maturer years it faded out completely, the acquaintanceship being renewed only when, on the death of your husband, you wanted a friend—and found one in me."

"And now?" she asked.

“Now you have other friends—many others.”

“Ah! you are jealous! I knew you were!” she exclaimed in a reproachful tone of voice, her glorious eyes flashing. “You believe that I don’t love you! You believe me capable of lying to you—to you, of all men!”

Chisholm remained silent.

Chapter Four.

Reveals a Peccant Passion.

The brilliant woman, ignorant of his meaning, but comprehending only that he deemed her inconstant and unworthy, stood with tears in her eyes—tears which sprang partly from sorrow, partly from offence. She knew within herself that she was heartless and wrong; but, none the less, she felt herself aggrieved.

“Claudia,” he said at last, looking straight at her, “our mutual protestations of love ended long ago. We have been friends—close friends; but as for love, well, when a woman really loves a man she does not bestow her smiles upon a score of other admirers.”

“Ah! you reproach me for being smart,” she cried. “I am a woman, and may surely be forgiven any little caprices de coeur.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Your attachment to me was one of your caprices, Claudia.”

“Then you don’t believe that I really have within my heart one atom of real affection for you?” she asked seriously.

“Your love for me is dead,” he answered gravely. “It died long ago. Since then you have made other conquests, and to-day half London is at your feet. I, Dudley Chisholm, am a man who has had an unwelcome popularity thrust upon him, and it is only in the natural order of things that I should follow in your train. But, as my place in your heart has long ago been usurped, why should we, intimate friends as we are, make a hollow pretence that it still exists?”

His voice remained calm and unbroken during his speech, yet there was an accent in it that thrilled through her heart. As she listened, stirred at heart by a strange emotion, her truer nature told her that she had by her caprice and folly fallen in his esteem. She had left the greatness that was pure and lofty for the greatness which was nothing better than tinsel.

“Once, Claudia, I loved you. In those days, before your marriage, you were my ideal—my all in all. You wedded Dick, and I—well, I can honestly say that during those two years of your married life I never entered your house. We met, here and there, at various functions, but I avoided you when I could, and never accepted your invitations. Why, you ask? Well, I’ll tell you. Because I loved you.”

Her head was bowed; a stifled sob escaped her.

“When you were free,” he went on, “it was different. In your grief you wrote to me, and I at once came to you. At first you were mournful in your retirement; then of a sudden, after a few short months, you were seized by an overweening ambition to become a queen of society. I watched you; I saw your indiscretions; I spoke to you, and your answer was an open defiance. Then it was that my sympathy with you gradually diminished. You had become a smart woman, and had developed that irremediable disorder which every smart woman nowadays is bound sooner or later to develop—a callous heart. The crowd of men about you became as so many puppets ready to execute your imperious will, and soon, as I expected, the fiery breath of scandal seared your good name. You laughed, knowing well that the very fact of your being talked about added lustre to your popularity as a smart hostess. I regretted all this, because my belief in your honesty—that belief which had first come to me long ago in the green meadows round about Winchester—was utterly shattered. The naked truth become exposed—you were deceiving me.”

“No, Dudley!” the woman wailed beseechingly. “Spare me these reproaches! I cannot bear them—and least of all from you. I have been foolish—very foolish, I admit. Had you been my husband I should have been a different woman, leading a quiet and happy life, but as I am now—I—” She burst into a torrent of tears without finishing her confession.

“If you acknowledge what I have said to be the truth, Claudia, we are agreed, and more need not be said,” he observed, when, a few moments later, she had grown calm again.

“You are tired of me, Dudley,” she declared, suddenly raising her head and looking straight into his eyes. “We have been—close friends, shall I say? long enough. You have found some other woman who pleases you—a woman more charming, more graceful than myself. Now, confess to me the truth,” she said with deep earnestness. “I will not upbraid you,” she went on in a hard, strained voice. “No, I—I will be silent. I swear I will. Now, Dudley, tell me the truth.”

“I have met no woman more beautiful than yourself, Claudia,” Chisholm answered in a deep tone. “You have no rival within my heart.”

“I don’t believe it!” she cried fiercely. “You could never reproach me as you have done unless some woman who is my enemy had prompted you. Your father has written to you, that I know; but you are not the man to be the

slave of paternal warnings. No," she said harshly, "it is a woman who has drawn you away from me. I swear not to rest till I have found out the truth!"

When she showed her griffes, this bright capricieuse, the leader of the smartest set in town, was, he knew, merciless.

But at that moment he only smiled at her sudden outburst of jealousy.

"I have already spoken the truth," he said. "I have never yet lied to you."

"Never, until to-day," was her sharp retort. "I suppose you think that, because of your responsible official position, you ought now to develop into the old fogey, marry some scraggy girl with red hair and half a million, and settle down to sober statesmanship and the Carlton. As you have found the future partner of your joys, you think it high time to drop an undesirable acquaintance."

Her words were hard ones, spoken in a tone of biting sarcasm. In an instant his countenance grew serious.

"No, Claudia," he protested quickly. "You entirely misjudge me. I have neither the intention nor the inclination to marry. Moreover, I confess to you that I am becoming rather tired of the everlasting monotony of the House. The scraggy female with the red hair, who, according to your gospel, is to be the châtelaine of Wroxeter, is still unselected. No. You have not understood me, and have formed entirely wrong conclusions as to my motive in speaking as I have. I repeat that the step I am now taking is one for our mutual advantage. People may talk about us in Belgravia, but they must not in Battersea."

"And you wish every one to know that we have quarrelled?" she said petulantly. He saw by her countenance that she was still puzzled. Was it possible that she was thinking of the unknown Muriel, whom she had declared he must marry?

As a matchmaker, Claudia was certainly entering upon an entirely new rôle.

"We shall not quarrel, I hope," he answered.

"Why should we? By mutual consent we shall merely remain apart."

There was another long and painful silence. Her chiffons slowly rose and fell as she sighed. What he had said had produced a greater impression upon her than he anticipated. No other man could have spoken to her as he had done, for every word of his brought back to her the long-forgotten days of their youthful love, and of those passionate kisses beneath the stars. In

those brief moments she tried to examine her heart, but could not decide whether she still loved him, or whether his intention of leaving her had only aroused within her a sense of offended dignity.

“And your determination is never to see me?” she asked him in a despondent tone of voice.

“I shall only meet you upon chance occasions in society,” was his answer.

“And when people have forgotten—then you will return to me? Give me your promise, Dudley.”

“I cannot promise.”

“Ah!” she cried; “why not at once confess what I believe is the truth, that you have grown tired of me?”

“No. I have not grown tired,” he declared in a fervent voice. “We have always been firm friends, and I hope that our friendship will continue. For my own part, my regard for you, Claudia, is not in the least impaired. You are a woman, and the victim of circumstances. Hence, I shall always remain faithfully your friend.”

“Dudley,” she said in a calmer tone, speaking very earnestly, “remember that women never change their natures, only their faces. So long have we been associated, and such intimate friends have we been, that I have grown to regard you as my own personal property. C’est assez.”

“I quite understand,” answered the man in whom Her Majesty’s Prime Minister possessed such complete confidence. “You should, for your own sake, Claudia, regard this matter in a proper light. If we do not by our actions give the lie direct to all this tittle-tattle, then an open scandal must result. Surely if we, by mutual consent, remain apart, we may still remain in bon accord?”

“But you are mine, Dudley!” she cried, again throwing her snowy, half-bare arms around his neck and kissing him passionately.

“Then since you hold me in such esteem, why not act in my interests?” he asked, for in argument he was as shrewd as a man could possibly be, and had passed with honours through that school of finesse, the Foreign Office.

“I—well, I decline to release you, if your freedom is to be used in dallying at the side of another woman,” she replied, heedless of his question.

“But I have no intention of doing so. Surely you know my nature well enough? You know how fully occupied I am as Under-Secretary, and that my presence here from time to time has scarcely been in harmony with my duties at the Foreign Office and in the House. I have little leisure; and I do not possess that inclination for amourettes which somehow appears to seize half the legislators sent to Westminster.”

“I know! I know!” she replied, still clinging to him, stroking the dark hair from his brow with the velvety hand which he had so often kissed. “I admit that you have always been loyal to me, Dudley. Sometimes, with a woman’s quick jealousy, I have doubted you, and have watched you carefully, always, however, to find my suspicions utterly unfounded. Do you remember what you told me when we walked together in the park at Wroxeter that morning last summer? Do you recollect your vows of eternal friendship to me—unworthy though I may be?” She paused, and there was a slight catch in her voice.

“Alas! I am fully aware of all my failings, of all my indiscretions, of all my caprices; but surely you do not heed this spiteful gossip which is going the rounds? You do not believe me so black as I am painted—do you?” and again she stroked his brow with her caressing hand.

“I believe only what I have seen with my own eyes,” he answered rather ambiguously. “You have been indiscreet—extremely indiscreet—and I have often told you so. But your ambition was to become the most chic woman in town, and you have accomplished it. At what cost?”

She made no response. Her head was bowed.

“Shall I tell you at what cost?” he went on very gravely. “At the cost of your reputation—and of mine.”

“Ah! forgive me, Dudley!” she cried quickly. “I was blind then, dazzled by the compliments heaped upon me, bewildered by the wealth that had so suddenly become mine after poor Dick’s death. I was rendered callous to everything by my foolish desire to shine as the smartest and most popular woman in London. I did not think of you.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Your admission only clinches my argument that, although we have been close friends, no real affection has of later years existed between us. Frankly, had you loved me, you could not have acted with such reckless indiscretion as to risk my name, my position, and my honour.”

He spoke a truth which admitted of no question.

“Now,” he went on at last, slowly unclasping her clinging arms from his neck. “It is already late and I have an important appointment at the Foreign Office, for which I am overdue. We must part.”

“Never!” she cried wildly. “You shall not leave me like this! If you do, I shall call at your chambers every day, and compel you to see me.”

“Then I must give orders to Parsons not to admit you,” he answered quite calmly.

“That man of yours is an old bear. Why don’t you get rid of him, and have some one less fossilised?” she exclaimed in a gust of fury. “When I called the other day with Lady Meldrum, he was positively rude.”

“Lady Meldrum!” exclaimed Chisholm, pricking up his ears. “Who’s she?”

“Oh, a woman who has rather come to the front of late—wife of old Sir Henry Meldrum, the great Glasgow ironrnaster. We were driving past, and I wanted to see you, so she came in with me, rather than wait in the cold. Quite a smart woman—you ought to know her.”

“Thanks,” responded the Under-Secretary coldly. “I have no desire to have that pleasure. Smart women don’t interest me in the least.”

“That is meant, I suppose, as a compliment,” she observed. “You are certainly in a very delightful mood to-day, Dudley.”

“I have at least spoken the truth,” he said, piqued by the knowledge that for some mysterious reason this woman was conniving with a new star in the social firmament, Lady Meldrum, wife of his pet abomination, a Jubilee knight, to effect his marriage with the unknown Muriel—her daughter, of course.

“You have unearthed and placed before me all the most ugly phases of my career,” cried the unhappy woman with a quick, defiant glance; “and now, after your flood of reproaches, you declare that in future we are to be as strangers.”

“For the sake of our reputations.”

“Our reputations? Rubbish!” she laughed cynically. “What reputation has either of us to lose?” He bit his lip. A hasty retort arose within him, but he succeeded in stifling it.

“We need not, I think, discuss that point,” he said very coldly.

She stood in silence waiting for him to proceed.

“Well,” she asked at last, with an air of mingled defiance and sarcasm. “And what more?”

“Nothing. I have finished. I have only to wish you adieu.”

“Then you really intend to abandon me?” she asked very gravely, her small hand trembling.

“I have already explained my intentions. They were quite clear, I think.”

“And you decline to reconsider them?”

“They admit of no reconsideration,” he answered briefly.

“Very well then, adieu,” she said in a cold and bitter voice, for in those few moments her manner had changed, and she was now a frigid, imperious woman with a heart of stone.

“Adieu, Claudia,” he said, bending with a stiff courtliness over the hand she had extended to him. “You will one day see that this step of mine has saved us both from degradation and ruin. Good-bye. Recollect that even though we are apart, I remain still, as I have ever been, your devoted friend.”

Her hand dropped limply from his grasp as she stood there like a beautiful statue in the centre of the room. With a final glance at her he turned and walked straight out.

For a moment after the door had closed, she still remained in the same position in which he had left her. Then, in a sudden frenzy of uncontrollable passion, she hooked her nervous fingers in her chiffons and tore them into shreds.

“He has defied me!” she exclaimed wildly, bursting into a flood of hot tears. “He has defied me, and cast me off—me, who love him!”

Chapter Five.

Describes an English Home.

Three miles from the long white road that runs between sedate old Shrewsbury and the town of Wellington, there stood a prominent object in the landscape, high upon a wooded hill to the right. It was the ancient castle of Wroxeter, one of the best preserved and most historic of the Norman castles of England.

Seen through the trees, golden in their autumn tints, it was an imposing grey pile, rich in turrets with narrow windows, whence, long ago, archers had showered their shafts, but which were now half concealed by an evergreen mantle. Closer inspection showed that it was a fortress no longer. The old moat, once fed from the winding Severn close by, was now a well-kept garden with gravelled walks and trees cut into fantastic shapes, while around the building were level lawns sweeping away to the great park beyond.

One wing of the fine old feudal castle was in decay. The shattered state of the tower was due to a siege conducted by Cromwell, and the ivy had overgrown the ruins. All the other parts were in good order, stern and impressive in regard to the exterior, yet luxurious within. In the great courtyard, that had through the Middle Ages so often rung with the clank of sword and the tread of armed men, moss grew between the pebbles, and the echoes were only nowadays awakened by the wheels of the high dog-cart which conveyed its owner to and from the railway station at Shrewsbury. The old drawbridge had been replaced by a gravel drive a century ago; yet in the fine oak-panelled hall there still stood the rust-stained armour of the departed Chisholms, together with the faded and tattered banners carried by them in tournament and battle.

Built on the site of the Roman city called Vriconium, whilst in the park and in neighbouring meadows traces of the city wall could still be seen, the fosse and the basilica were still visible. The history of Wroxeter began with the Norman survey, the account given of it in Domesday Book being as follows:

“Chisholme holds a hide and three roodlands in Wroxeter in this manor, which was always included in the district of Haughmond, where the castle is situated. Roger had half a hide, and Ralph two roodlands. There is one plough and a half in the demesne, and seven villeins with ten bondmen have four ploughs and a half. The whole value in the time of the Confessor was six pounds, it has since been estimated at six: but it is now appreciated at nine pounds.”

The portion now ruined was standing in those early days of England's history, but it was not until the third year of Richard the Second's reign that the other portion of the old fortress was completed by Sir Robert Chisholm, who (together with Sir John Calveley of Chester and Sir John Hawkwood of Haughmond Castle), was a celebrated captain of those marauding bands that shared in the triumphs of Cressy and Poitiers. The following distich, by a mediaeval poet, records his prowess:

"O Roberte Chisholme, per te fit Francia mollis,

Ense tuo tollis praedas, dans vulnera collis."

O Robert Chisholm, the stubborn souls

Of Frenchmen well you check;

Your mighty blade has largely preyed,

And wounded many a neck.

During those stormy days of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Wroxeter withstood many a fierce assault and sheltered not a few of England's kings and queens as guests of the Chisholms, many of whom had been favourites at Court and held official positions of high importance. Queen Elizabeth was the last monarch to visit the castle, and the memory of that event was kept green by the name given to the old-world garden over-looking the Severn, which was known as the Queen's Garden.

It was a grand old building, this feudal home to which Dudley Chisholm returned on the night following the farewell scene which had taken place between himself and the frivolous woman with whose name his own had been linked. He had invited for three days' shooting two men—Colonel Murray-Kerr, a retired military attaché, and Henry Benthall, a man who had been at college with him, and who had, after being called to the bar, successfully contested East Glamorganshire. All three had travelled down from Euston together; but Dudley, after a sleepless night, had risen long before his guests and wandered through the vast and lonely chambers, full of melancholy musings. He would have put the men off, for he was in no mood to entertain, but there had been no time.

So he spent an idle hour alone before his guests appeared for breakfast.

He wandered through the great and gloomy hall, the vaulted ceiling of which had so often echoed to the laughter of the banquets held there in bygone days. It was now tenanted only by the many suits of armour that had

belonged to his illustrious forefathers. His steps sounded in a grim fashion upon the floor of polished oak, and as he passed the huge fireplace, where once the oxen had been roasted whole to satisfy the Gargantuan appetites of mediaeval warriors, a servant threw open the door leading into the long picture gallery.

What an array of fine pictures was there! For each member of this ancient family his or her arms had been painted in the right-hand corner of the canvas. The Chisholms were a handsome, stalwart race, the men strong and the women beautiful. In the features of nearly all, however, there was the same predominant characteristic, the stern gravity, which in Dudley was so often mistaken for actual asperity. Before the last portrait at the farther end of the gallery—the picture of a young and eminently beautiful woman—the young man paused. It was his mother.

Deep in contemplation, he stood before it for a long time. His lips moved, but no sound escaped them. At last, with a deep sigh, he passed on, still walking at the same slow pace, plunged in his melancholy thoughts.

He passed round the big quadrangle, through one great room after the other: the blue drawing-room, Anne Boleyn's sitting-room, the grand drawing-room, the library, each an apartment of fine dimensions, mostly panelled in oak dark with age and containing antique furniture, curios connected with the family history through eight unbroken centuries, with many other priceless works of art.

Two or three of the smaller rooms, such as the breakfast-room, the dining-room, and his dead mother's boudoir, were alone furnished in modern style. In all the others there seemed to linger an atmosphere of bygone centuries. This was the fine old home which so many mothers coveted for their daughters. Indeed, there were a hundred pretty and well-born girls in London, each of whom was at that moment ready to become châtelaine of Wroxeter.

But Dudley strolled on slowly, almost like a man in a dream. He was seldom at Wroxeter out of the shooting season. The place was to him something of a white elephant. He had spent his boyhood there, but recollections of the rather unhappy life and early death of that grave-faced woman, his mother, caused him to dislike the old place. One or two memories he would fain forget—memories of his mother's sorrow regarding her husband's mode of life and eccentricities. Truth to tell, husband and wife did not live happily together, and Dudley, knowing this, had been his mother's sympathiser and champion.

These handsome rooms, with their ancient tapestries, wonderful carpets, exquisite carvings, old Venetian mirrors and time-darkened gilt, even in the gay light of morning seemed to him sombre and full of ghosts of the past. He only used the library and half a dozen of the smaller and more modern rooms in the eastern wing. The splendid state apartments which he had just passed through he seldom visited. No one entered them, except the servants to clean and open the windows, and the upholsterer who at fixed intervals came from Shrewsbury to examine the tapestries worked centuries ago by the fair hands of the Chisholm women.

From the great drawing-room, a huge apartment with a rather low ceiling curiously carved, he passed on, and traversing one of the ante rooms, found himself in the long corridor which ran the whole length of the quadrangle. The stone flooring was worn hollow in the centre by the tramp of generations of armed men, and the quaint arched doors were heavy and studded with monstrous nails. He stood there for a few minutes, glancing through the diamond panes out into the ancient courtyard. His abstracted mood was suddenly disturbed by the sound of the breakfast gong. As his guests would be awaiting him, he must throw care to the dogs for a few hours and try to amuse them.

Turning, he walked down the long corridor. As he did so he recollected the strange tradition which he had heard in his youth—namely, that in this passage had been seen at certain intervals a strange old lady, humpbacked and small, dressed in rusty black, who “walked” the corridor even in the middle of the day, and then suddenly disappeared through a door which for a full century past had been walled up. This legendary apparition was known to the family as Lady Margaret, and whenever she showed herself in the corridor it was a presage of evil to the Chisholms.

Dudley laughed within himself as he remembered his childish terror when his old nurse used to relate those dramatic stories about her deformed ladyship and the evil influence she exerted upon his house. It is strange how deeply rooted become many of the convictions of our childhood, especially where a family superstition is concerned; and Chisholm, even though he was a level-headed man of the world, had in his more mature years found himself wondering whether, after all, there had been any foundation for the legend.

Family ghosts do not, however, appear nowadays. They were all “laid” last century. So he laughed again to himself and continued on his way across the east wing to the bright breakfast-room, where his two guests were already awaiting him.

“What a lazy beggar you are, Dudley!” cried Benthall, as his host greeted them and took his seat at the head of the table.

“No, my dear fellow,” protested the Under-Secretary. “I—oh, well, I’ve been up quite a long time, and have already consulted Marston about our sport to-day. He says there are some strong birds over in the Dean Copse, so we’ll work that this morning.”

“Excellent! I recollect the splendid sport we got there last year!” exclaimed the colonel, a tall, white-haired, soldierly old fellow with a somewhat florid complexion and a well-trimmed moustache. He was a first-class shot, and now that he had retired from the Diplomatic Service, spent the whole of the shooting season at one house or another in different parts of the country. He was a popular, all-round sportsman, always welcome at any house-party, for he was full of droll stories, a bachelor, and a great favourite among the ladies. The announcement of a hostess to the effect that “Colonel Murray-Kerr will be here,” was always received with satisfaction by both sexes. As he had graduated as military attaché at the Embassies in Vienna, St. Petersburg, and, finally, in Rome, he was a cosmopolitan of cosmopolitans, though at the same time a thorough Englishman, and one of Dudley’s most intimate friends.

There were letters on the table for their host, two bulky ones marked “On His Majesty’s Service,” from the Foreign Office, and another, the handwriting on the envelope of which he saw at a glance to be Claudia’s. He glanced at this, then placed it in his pocket unopened.

“Oh, read it, my dear fellow,” laughed the colonel, quickly divining that it was from a woman. “Don’t mind us in the least.”

“Only tell us who’s the lady,” chimed in Benthall merrily.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Dudley assured them, rather annoyed, nevertheless.

“From Lady Richard—eh?” suggested the old officer chaffingly. “By Jove!” he went on; “she’s really charming. I was staying last week down at Fernhurst, the place old Meldrum has just bought in Sussex, and she was there. Quite a host of smart women were staying there, but she, of course, eclipsed them all. I fear she’s a sad flirt, Dudley, my boy, even though they say she’s a bit fond of you.”

“I know she’s a flirt,” Chisholm answered, rather thoughtfully. The mention of the name of Meldrum brought to his mind what Claudia had admitted, namely, that she had taken Lady Meldrum to his rooms.

The old colonel, who always maintained a diplomatic smartness in his attire, was a terrible gossip. He was a living Debrett, and a guide to knowledge affecting social affairs in half the courts of Europe. He knew everybody, as well as everything worth knowing about them. This was his hobby. Perhaps he rode it all the more perseveringly because a natural talent for inquisitiveness had been steadily cultivated during his long service as an attaché; for, as all the world knows, an official of this standing is little better than a spy. So, without any thought of hurting his young host's feelings, he continued his reminiscences of the house-party:

"We had splendid sport down at Fernhurst. The birds were very strong, and there were several excellent shots. But Lady Richard was, of course, the centre of all the attractions. Every man Jack among the males was absolutely her slave, lock, stock and barrel! By Jove! I don't think in all my diplomatic career I've ever seen a woman play them off one against the other with such finesse. Meldrum seems to have got into society wonderfully well of late. The young Grand-Duke Stanislas was there, and he made desperate love to the pretty widow. Indeed, so marked were their flirtations, that several of the feminine contingent declared themselves scandalised, and left. But, of course, the real truth was that they knew themselves to be entirely out of the running. One thing, however, struck me as curious—very curious: the hostess, a rather matronly bourgeoise person, seemed to throw the pair into one another's society as much as possible. At any rate, the extravagant flirtation nearly resulted in an open scandal. To my mind, Dudley, she's playing a decidedly dangerous game. Forgive me for saying so, if she's more to you than a jolly acquaintance; but you know the proverb about the pitcher going too often to the well."

"Angling after a Grand-Duke sounds bold," observed Benthall, attacking his cutlet. "I always thought, Dudley, old chap, that she had set her mind on becoming mistress of Wroxeter."

"Oh, I know," exclaimed their host impatiently, although trying to conceal his annoyance, "a lot of rot has been talked! I'm quite well aware of what you fellows mean. But I assure you that I'm a confirmed bachelor—just as confirmed as you, colonel—and, hang it! if report speaks correctly, you're one of the worst of the woman-haters in the whole of the Albany."

"I've never had any necessity to marry," laughed the old officer, his cheeks flushing with good humour.

"I've piloted some ripping ball-skirts and tailor-made gowns through half the courts of Europe, but I'm still heart-whole."

“A fine record,” observed Harry Benthall with his mouth full. At that breakfast-table there was no ceremony, and words were certainly not minced.

“Well, every one seems to be linking my name with Claudia Nevill’s,” Dudley remarked, after commencing his breakfast, “I really can’t see why.”

“But I can,” declared the colonel bluntly. “You’re a fool—if you’ll forgive me for saying so.”

“Why?”

“A fool for giving a second thought to a woman of her stamp,” he answered. “Good heavens! if you knew half the tales about her, you’d cut her dead. I wonder why the Meldrums invited her? Suppose they couldn’t help it—or something.”

“What tales?” asked Dudley, glancing inquiringly from one man to the other.

“No. I’m not going to besmirch any woman’s character, my dear fellow,” replied the elder man. “Only, take my advice and have nothing more to do with her—that’s all. She’s no good to you, or indeed to any honest man.”

“Some foul scandal about her, I suppose,” cried Chisholm, his brow darkening for an instant. As a matter of fact, he knew the scandal quite well. It was the common talk in every club in town. But he intended to champion her, even though he had escaped from her net. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“It is unnecessary—utterly unnecessary,” the colonel answered, making as if breakfast were more important than gossip.

“A pretty woman, smart and popular as she is, always gets talked about, and her enemies are sure to invent some cruel story or other. Half the women in London are envious of Claudia Nevill, hence all these absurd and scandalous tales,” Chisholm declared.

“Ah!” laughed the colonel, “as I said, you’re gone on her, like the others, Dudley. You are old friends, every one knows. It’s a pity that she’s so reckless.”

“In what manner has she been reckless?”

“Well, if you had been down at Fernhurst and seen her with the young Grand-Duke, you wouldn’t defend her actions as you are now doing—well, by Jove! you couldn’t. I’m a man of the world, you know, but I must say that the flirtation was a regular blizzard.”

“And is every woman who glances prettily at a man from behind her fan, or chats to a fellow in a conservatory, to be condemned?” asked his host. “If so, then society has suddenly become intensely puritanical. Remember that the licence not allowed to an unmarried girl may justifiably be employed by a widow.”

“Widow!” laughed Murray-Kerr adjusting his monocle. “My dear boy, I’m perfectly with you; but then the fair Claudia is one in ten millions. She’s more like a girl of eighteen, in face, figure, and the choice of lovers, than the usual prim and stale relict with whom we are all more or less familiar.”

“Just because she’s popular, all this confounded gossip buzzes here, there, and everywhere. My name is coupled with hers, and all kinds of ridiculous stories have been started about us. I know, for too many of them have come to my ears.”

“Then if you know, Dudley, why don’t you take my advice and cut her?” asked the old officer, fixing his host with his keen eyes.

Chapter Six.

In which the Colonel grows Mysterious.

Chisholm was silent. The two men exchanged glances. Since they were his best and most confidential friends, he could not be offended in the least at what they had said, especially as he knew quite well that they had spoken plain, hard facts.

“Well,” he said at last, in a metallic tone of voice, “the truth is, we have parted.”

“Then I cordially congratulate you, my dear fellow,” declared the red-faced old colonel bluntly. “Forgive me, but you’ve been a fool over her, an absolute fool, and couldn’t see that she was deceiving you on every hand. Men had begun to sneer and laugh at you behind your back—and, by Jove! you’ve had a narrow escape of making a complete ass of yourself.”

“I know. I’m well aware of it,” his host replied in a low tone. “But between ourselves, it’s all over.”

“Why between ourselves?” inquired Benthall. “The world should, I think, know, for your own sake? Pourquoi non?”

“No. I intend to keep it a secret—for her sake.” Both men were silent. The conversation had, indeed, been a strange one to take place between a host and his guests. But both men saw that although Claudia and her lover had parted, there still lingered in Dudley Chisholm’s heart tender thoughts of that pretty, callous woman who was one of the leaders of smart society in London.

“Very well,” said Murray-Kerr at length, after a brief period of silence. “If you wish us to say nothing, we can only obey. But, nevertheless, my dear old chap, I, for one, congratulate you most heartily upon your resolution. A man in your shoes can’t afford to risk his reputation any longer. Forgive me for speaking as I have done, won’t you?”

“Certainly, my dear fellow,” he answered with a bitter smile. “You’ve both spoken as friends, and I’ve told you the plain truth, so what more need be said?”

“Nothing,” said the colonel. “Stick to your resolution, and let Claudia Nevill proceed at her own sweet will. She’ll marry some foreign notability or other, I expect, now that she’s in search of big game. Then you’ll be entirely free of her.”

Dudley laughed again, and soon afterwards, much to his relief, the conversation drifted into an easier channel. Her letter, however, remained in his pocket unopened. What words of mad despair, he wondered, did it contain?

He sat finishing his breakfast and chatting about various subjects. But his thoughts were of her—always of her.

When they rose, his two guests went out to see after their guns, while he, remaining behind upon some pretext, tore open the letter.

It was brief, and had evidently been penned in one of those moments of remorse which must come sooner or later to such a woman.

"You are cruel to leave me like this," she wrote. "Surely, if you really loved me, you would not care what the world might say. I have been foolish, I know, but am now penitent. I see the folly of it all—the folly of not keeping my secret and playing the hypocrite like other women. Surely love is not forbidden between us because you happen to hold an official position! Return to me, Dudley—for I love you!"

He sighed, then, crushing the letter in his hand, he flung it into the fire, murmuring:

"No. She's played me false—false!"

He recollected what the colonel had said in regard to the Grand-Duke Stanislas, and saw with chagrin that the world was pitying him.

Before the blazing logs he stood, watching the leaping flames consume the letter. When the last spark had died from the black crackling tinder, he sighed again, and reluctantly went out to join his guests.

The morning was dull and grey. As they trudged on past the site of the old Roman cemetery, down through Altringham Wood, across the wide stretch of moorland known as Uckington Heath, at last crossing the old highway of Watling Street and entering the Dean Copse, the sportsmen agreed that October might have behaved in a handsomer fashion. The fierce north-east wind that had swept over the Welsh hills had died away the evening before in a tumbled sea of fiery crimson and dense jagged drift of sulphurous blue. For days and days it had torn and shaken the great elms in Wroxeter Park, until it had stripped them of the last vestige of their autumn foliage, and now in the calm morning the leaves in park and copse were lying in a deep, moist carpet of shimmering gold. Nothing but the oaks had been able to withstand the fury of the blast; these still bore their leafy flags bravely aloft,

thousands and thousands of their family flying proofs of staunchness on the flanks of many a noble hill. On the grass by the lane-side the dew was held in uncomfortable abundance, and a few belated blackberries showed sodden in the hedgerows. On entering the copse the shooters trudged down the narrow path, which was covered thickly with decaying leaves, and a few moments later both dogs and guns got to work.

During their walk the conversation had for the most part dealt with the condition of the birds. The colonel, keen sportsman that he was, telling of the execution effected by the six guns at Fernhurst; describing the big bags made up at Lord Morton's place in Cumberland, and how scarce the grouse had been in various districts in Scotland.

As Marston, the head-keeper, had predicted, birds were plentiful in the Dean Copse. Although the ground was rather difficult to work, the guests had good reason to praise the Under-Secretary's preserves. As for the colonel, who scarcely ever missed, he was now in his element; the heavier the bag became, the more brightly the old warrior's eyes sparkled. So excellent had been the sport, and, in consequence, so quickly had the time passed, that the guests could hardly believe their ears when the interval for lunch was announced. Dudley, who was an excellent shot, and who, on an ordinary occasion, would have entered into the sport with becoming zest, throughout the morning had knocked down the birds in a merely mechanical way, more to please his friends than himself. Secretly he wished himself back at the castle, in the solitude of that old library which he used for his den at such times as he was all by himself at Wroxeter.

"I think, sir, we ought to try the Holly Wood now," Marston suggested as soon as they had eaten their sandwiches and drunk their sherry. In accordance with this view, they tramped down into the valley by Upton Magna, and presently came to the spot indicated. For the past two seasons Dudley had been down at Wroxeter but seldom, one of the results being that birds were very plentiful. All three of the shooters were kept busy until nearly three o'clock, when, after enjoying a grand day's sport, the party turned towards the old inn at Uffington, where the dog-cart was to meet them.

On the way across the brown fields, Benthall, deep in conversation with Marston, was somewhat ahead, and Dudley walked at the colonel's side, a smart, well-set-up figure in his drab shooting-clothes.

He was hesitating whether to broach a subject that was puzzling him. Presently, however, unable longer to conceal his curiosity, he turned suddenly to his companion, saying:

“You were speaking of Fernhurst at breakfast. Let’s see, hasn’t Lady Meldrum a daughter?”
“A daughter?” observed the colonel, looking at him. “Certainly not. There’s no family.”
“That’s curious,” Dudley said with an affected air of indifference. “Somebody said she had a daughter named Muriel.”
“A daughter named Muriel!” the old officer exclaimed. “No, she has a girl named Muriel who lives with her—a ward, I believe—and a confoundedly pretty girl she is, too. She wasn’t much en Evidence when I was down there. I have my suspicions that during the house-party she was sent away to the quieter atmosphere surrounding a maiden aunt.”
“Oh, she’s a ward, is she?” remarked Chisholm. “What’s her name?”
“Muriel Mortimer.”
“A ward in Chancery, I suppose?”
“I’m not certain,” replied Murray-Kerr hesitatingly. “I only saw her once, on the day of my arrival at Fernhurst. She left for Hertfordshire next day. Lady Meldrum, however, seemed devoted to her—went up to town to see her off, and all that sort of thing. But who’s been chattering to you about her?”
“Oh, I heard her spoken of somewhere. The fellow who told me said she was rather pretty.”
“Yes,” the other answered in rather a strange and hesitating manner, “she is—very pretty, and quite young.”
“Do you know absolutely nothing more concerning her?” Chisholm asked. “You always know everything about everybody when you’re in the smoking-room at the Junior, you know.”
“In the club a man may open his mouth, but it isn’t always wise when visiting friends,” the colonel replied with a laugh.
“I don’t quite follow you,” his companion said. “Surely Wroxeter is as free as Charles Street, isn’t it?”
“Well, no, not quite, my dear Dudley—not quite.”
“Why?”
“Because there are some things that even I—plain-spoken as I am—would rather leave unsaid.”
Chisholm looked at him and saw the change upon the old fellow’s countenance.
“You’re hiding something from me,” the younger man said quickly.
“I don’t deny that,” was the other’s response. “But I really can’t see why you should so suddenly become the victim of an intense desire to know the history of Lady Meldrum’s ward. Have you met her?”
“No, never.”
“Then don’t, that’s all,” was the mysterious answer.
“What the dickens do you mean, speaking in enigmas like this? Surely you can speak straight out?”

“No, not in this case, Dudley,” the colonel said in a rather softer tone. “I told you sufficient this morning about Claudia Nevill, and all I wish to urge is that you should avoid the pretty Muriel quite as assiduously as you will her ladyship in future.”
Chisholm was puzzled. His companion was evidently aware of some fact which, for a mysterious reason, he was reluctant to disclose.
“But I can’t see your object in mystifying me like this!” he protested. “We are friends—very old friends—surely you can at least tell me the truth?”
“I’ve told you the truth, dear boy. Muriel Mortimer is an undesirable acquaintance for you. Is not that a friendly warning.”
“A warning, certainly—but hardly a friendly one,” answered Dudley, swinging over a stile into the high-road. “I mention to you a woman I’ve heard about,” he went on as the pair were walking side by side again, “and you at once give me these extraordinary warnings, without offering any explanation whatsoever. Who is this mysterious ward? What is she?”
“I’ve already told you who she is,” his companion replied, shifting his gun as he marched onward. “What she is I don’t know. All I am sure about is that the less you see of her the better, Dudley—that’s all.”
“And how do you know that?”
“Because of something I’ve discovered,” the elder man replied.
“Something about her?”
“Well—yes. Something about her.”
“But you speak as though we were intimate, my dear fellow, and as if I were about to lose my heart to her!” exclaimed Chisholm.
“You’ll probably know her soon, but when you are introduced, remember my warning, and drop her at once like a live coal.”
“You’re in a delightfully prophetic vein this afternoon,” laughed his host. “I suppose it’s the dull weather.”
At this the elder man halted, turned upon him suddenly, placed his hand upon his shoulder, and said in a deep and earnest tone:
“Recollect, Dudley, that what I told you this morning at breakfast was for your own good. I’m not a fellow given to preaching or moralising, that you know well. But I tell you straight to your face that before long you’ll know Muriel Mortimer. All I urge upon you is not to allow yourself to be captivated.”
“Then you know something distinctly to her detriment?” Chisholm suggested, for what his friend had said had shown him plainly that this girl was mixed up in unsavoury matters.
“I only say that she’s not a desirable person for you to know.”
Dudley laughed uneasily. These words were all the more remarkable in the light of old Parsons’ statement.

“You speak just as though you feared I might marry her!” he said.

“Well, there are many things more unlikely than that,” was the elder man’s reply. “We hear of strange matches nowadays.”

“And if I married this fair unknown, what then?”

“Well, before you do that just take my advice and swallow an overdose of chloral, or something of that sort. It would be a far easier way out of this work-a-day world than marriage with her.” Chisholm looked at him quickly.

“My dear fellow,” he said, “your words imply that marriage with her would be tantamount to suicide.”

“That was exactly the impression I meant to convey, Dudley,” was the strange reply. “I can say no more—indeed, I have no intention of being more explicit, even were I free to make further explanation. Avoid her—that’s all.”

Chapter Seven.

Unites Reality with Romance.

The colonel's strange premonition was puzzling.

Chisholm saw quite plainly that his friendship with Claudia Nevill had caused him to throw his usual carefulness to the winds. Her letter was but another proof of her insincerity; while the statement of the old colonel in respect of the house-party at Fernhurst angered him. He was furious that she should risk her reputation openly in such a manner. At the same time he was filled with regret that from the charming woman of four years ago she should have developed into a brilliant leader of society, acknowledged by all to be the smartest woman in London.

It was dark when they drove into the quadrangle of the castle, and Dudley, excusing himself to his friends, dressed and retired to the great library for an hour before dinner in order to examine the official correspondence that had arrived in the morning.

From the big Foreign Office envelopes he drew a mass of papers which required his endorsement, and several important letters which he at once answered. The duties of Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs are multitudinous, and the office needs a man who does not hanker after a sinecure. Little leisure was Dudley Chisholm allowed, and seldom could he snatch a few days to run down into the country. His presence in or near town was required always for passing reports; he had to sign here, initial there, and control in a great measure one of the greatest and most important departments of the State.

It is generally understood by Parliament that answers to questions put to the Foreign Under-secretary are prescribed by his Chief, His Majesty's Principal Secretary. Palmerston would never allow an Under-Secretary to answer a supplementary question until his superior had dictated the reply. But under the Gladstone régime this rule was gradually relaxed; and such confidence did Lord Stockbridge place in Chisholm's discretion and power to fence with the Opposition, that, although he was required to meet his Chief at the Foreign Office between the hours of twelve and two each Parliamentary day, he was allowed a practically free hand. Years ago under-secretaries were but the mouthpieces of their chiefs. Old Parliamentary hands recollect seeing Sir William Harcourt at the far end of the Treasury Bench pass the word to Sir Edward Grey at the other end not to answer a supplementary question until he had consulted Lord Rosebery; and once when Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice asked for notice of a supplementary

question so that he might consult Earl Granville, the Opposition jeered, and Mr Gladstone jumped up to declare that Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice had done so by his orders. That, however, was all of the past. Dudley Chisholm was entirely in the confidence of the Marquess of Stockbridge. He relied upon him.

In that sombre old room where the firelight danced upon the rows and rows of heavy volumes written in days long past, he sat within the zone of the green-shaded reading-lamp, his attention absorbed by some official reports. They were evidently of an unusual nature, for of a sudden an exclamation of profound surprise escaped him, and with growing eagerness he scanned page after page of those written lines.

“I don’t believe it!” he exclaimed, speaking to himself. “It can’t be true! My secret is still safe. It cannot possibly be revealed any more than the dead can speak. And yet cock-and-bull stories do not usually emanate from that quarter. It’s certainly startling enough—and if true—well—”

He rose from his chair and thoughtfully paced the room, his hands locked behind his back, as was his habit when thinking deeply. The statement contained in the despatch had alarmed him. He scented danger, and his brow was clouded. The whole thing was so unexpected and so extraordinary that he could scarcely credit it, although the signature to the despatch was that of his Chief, Lord Stockbridge. The matter was one demanding his immediate attention, and yet he had allowed the despatch to remain unopened all day.

Up and down the polished floor he paced, plunged in apprehensive reflections. It appeared that after he had left the Foreign Office on the previous day the Minister had attended there and had sent him that startling despatch under seal. He paused at the table, and taking up the envelope for the first time discovered that it had not been through the post.

Then he touched the bell, and of the man who entered he asked:

“Did a messenger from London leave anything for me this morning, Riggs?”

“Yes, sir. Two official letters, sir. He arrived at six o’clock, and I placed the letters on the breakfast-table.”

“Oh, very well,” his master answered. “You signed the receipt?”

“Yes, sir. It was Mr Forbes who brought them, sir. He said he couldn’t wait till you came down as he was driving back to Shrewsbury to catch the eight-ten up to London.”

“He didn’t say they were important, or make any remark?”

“No, sir.”

“Very well.” And then the man, a smart, middle-aged servant in the Chisholm livery, withdrew.

“Curious—very curious!” exclaimed Dudley in a low, half-frightened whisper when the man had closed the door. “It’s certainly a matter that requires the most searching investigation, otherwise we shall infallibly find ourselves checkmated, Lord Stockbridge writes. I wonder what it can all mean? Even Stockbridge himself doesn’t see any light through it, apparently.”

Again he read the puzzling document, which bore the signature known to every court of Europe as that of the greatest of living statesmen. It bore a postscript also, written by his lordship’s own quill: “When read, please destroy.”

He replaced it on the table, and, crossing to the ancient hearth where the big logs were burning, he stood motionless, gazing blankly at the fire.

The words he read had aroused within him a suspicion—a grave, terrible, awful suspicion. In those moments of deep contemplation he looked fully ten years older. His hand rested upon the high overmantel of black oak, on which was a carved representation of the simple coat of the Shropshire Chisholms, azure, a chevron, or between three water-bougets argent. His brow rested upon his arm as he gazed at the glowing logs. Truth to tell, that confidential document had caused a flood of recollections to surge through his brain—recollections whose return he did not desire. He had vainly thought the past all buried, and had forgiven and forgotten his enemy. But, reading between the lines of that despatch, he saw that this ghost of the past had again arisen. Lord Stockbridge had, of course, no suspicion of the truth. The confidential communication had been made to him in the ordinary course of events, in order that he might institute secret inquiries in certain quarters, and ascertain the feeling of certain influential members in the House.

But if the truth became known? He set his jaws hard, and a deep sigh escaped him. He dared not contemplate the result. It would mean for him ruin, ignominy, shame.

He passed his hot hand wearily across his brow, pushing the thick dark hair from his forehead.

The dead silence was broken by a low groan—a groan of despair and penitence.

"God!" he gasped. "Surely the truth cannot possibly be known? How can it? No," he went on, murmuring to himself. "Bah! I'm timid—thoughts of it always unnerve me. And yet from this it seems very much as if some secret enemy had waited through these years until I had attained position and popularity in order to strike, to crush, to ruin me for ever!"

He was silent again, silent for many minutes. He stood quite motionless, still gazing into the fire.

"But dare I face exposure?" he asked himself, his hoarse whisper sounding strangely in that old room. "No. A thousand times no! No—impossible! A thousand times no! I'd prefer death. Yes, suicide. It would be the only way. Death is far preferable to dishonour."

He saw it all—he who could read between those lines. He detected the hand of some secret enemy uplifted against him—an enemy who, he did not doubt, held that secret which through the past six years had been the skeleton in his cupboard. In the esteem of men he had risen rapidly, until to-day he was declared to be one of the shrewdest of England's legislators, fulfilling all the traditions of his ancient and honourable house. And through out these six years he had striven, and striven, always with an idea of atonement for his cardinal sin; always working in the interests of the nation he had resolved to serve.

How strange it was that His Majesty's Foreign Minister should have actually communicated this to him, of all men! But man works half his own doom, and circumstance the other half. C'est toujours le destin.

In his despair there had arisen before him that grim and hideous ghost of the past which had always overshadowed the later years of his life; that incident which he constantly feared might come to light to destroy the position he had created, to wreck his popularity, and to cause his name to be synonymous with all that was base, treacherous, and ignominious. For the fault he had committed—a grave offence which he knew could never be humanly forgiven—he had endeavoured to atone to the best of his ability. Other young men of his wealth would have probably married and taken their ease; but with that secret deep in his heart he had worked and striven for his country's good, prompted by a desire not merely to become popular, but to accomplish something by means of which to make amends.

Men had, of course, never rightly understood his motives. They had believed him to be one of a motley crowd of place-seekers, whose brilliant oratory had

fortunately brought him into the front rank, though this was certainly far from being the case Popularity had been heaped upon him as an entirely unwelcome reward. He always declared within himself that he merited nothing—absolutely nothing; and this belief accounted for his utter indifference to the plaudits of the public or the praise bestowed upon him by his Party. He was endeavouring to work out his atonement and make reparation—that was all.

Try as he would, however, he could not put aside the grave suggestion that some secret enemy was preparing a coup beneath which he must fall. The disquieting despatch from Constantinople seemed to portend this. It was a presage of his downfall. To endeavour to prove his innocence, to try to withstand the storm of indignation that must certainly sweep over England, or to prevent exposure of the truth, spelt futility. He was helpless—utterly helpless against the onsweeping tide of retribution.

The marquess urged that he—the very man concerned in the disreputable affair—should make secret inquiry into the truth of the report. Was not that a freak of Fate? Surely Nemesis was already upon him. What could he reply to that despatch? How could he act?

Many men grudged him his position and the fame he had won. And yet, would they envy him if they were aware of the terrible truth—if they were aware of that awful secret ever burdening his conscience?

Suddenly, as though some fresh thought had occurred to him, he crossed to the opposite side of the room, and, pressing against one of the shelves filled with old brown-covered folios, opened a part which concealed a small safe embedded deeply in the wall, hidden from even the keenest eyes in a manner that could scarcely have been improved. From his watch-chain he selected a key, opened the safe and took from one of its drawers a large official-looking envelope. Walking back to the light of the table, he drew out a piece of thin transparent tracing-paper which he opened and spread upon the blotting-pad.

Upon this paper a letter in a strange, almost microscopic hand, had been traced. This he read carefully, apparently weighing every word. Twice he went over it, almost as though he wished to commit it to memory; then, with a hard look upon his dark features, he replaced it in the envelope, sealed it with a stick of black wax and put it once more in the safe. From the same drawer he extracted a second paper, folded in a small square. With this in his hand he walked toward the nearest window, so as to be in the best light for his purpose. When he was satisfied in this regard, he undid the packet.

It contained a curl of fair hair bound together with sewing silk of a faded pink.

As he looked upon it tears welled up into his eyes. That lock of hair brought back to him memories, bitter and tender memories which he always tried to forget, though in vain. Before him arose a woman's face, pale, fair, with eyes of that deep childlike blue which always proclaims purity of soul. He saw her before him in her simple dress of white linen—a vision of sweet and perfect beauty. The words she had spoken in her gentle voice seemed once again to fall upon his ears with the music that had so invariably charmed him. He remembered what she had said to him—he recollected the whole of that conversation, although years had passed since it had been held. He found it impossible to prevent his thoughts from wandering back to the tender grace of a day that was dead, when, beside the sea, he had for a few hours enjoyed a calm and sunny paradise, which had too quickly changed into a wilderness barren of both roses and angels.

He sighed; and down his cheek there crept a single tear. Then he raised the tiny lock of hair to his lips.

"May God cherish her always—always," he murmured.

Twice he kissed the lock of hair before, with every sign of reluctance, returning it to the packet and replacing it in the steel drawer. Superstitious persons believe that ill-fortune follows the possession of hair; but Chisholm was never superstitious. This curl, which at rare intervals he was in the habit of taking from its secret hiding-place, always carried his memory back to those brief days when, for the second time in his life, he had experienced perfect happiness. It was an outward and visible sign of a love that had once burned fiercely within two hearts.

He had just locked the safe and hidden it in the usual manner, when Benthall burst into the library, and said in a merry tone of voice:

"I've come just to see what you're doing, old fellow. The gong went half an hour ago and the colonel says he's got a ravenous appetite. The soup will be cold."

He had walked across to the table, and stood beside it ready dressed for dinner.

"I—oh! I was busy," his host answered. "A lot of official correspondence from the Foreign Office, you know—things I ought to have seen to this morning instead of shooting. Correspondence always crowds upon me if I go out of town even for a couple of days."

“But you’ve done now—haven’t you?” asked his guest, glancing at the littered table.

“Just finished. But I’m awfully sorry to have kept you fellows waiting. The colonel’s so infernally prompt at feeding-time. They say at the Junior that he doesn’t vary five minutes at dinner once in six months.”

“Well, come along, old fellow. Don’t wait to finish.” He seated himself on the edge of the big writing-table while Dudley busied himself in replacing some letters he had taken from the steel despatch-box which accompanied him everywhere.

Smoking a cigarette, and swinging his legs easily, Benthall waited while his host—who had pointed out that he could not leave confidential documents open for the servants to pry into—straightened his papers, and put them together with the communications littering the table, in the box, afterwards locking it.

Only one was left on the table, the despatch which Lord Stockbridge had ordered him to destroy. This he carried to the fire, lit one corner, and held it until it was all consumed, afterwards destroying the tinder with the poker.

“What’s that you’re so careful to burn?” asked Benthall, interested.

“Oh, nothing, my dear Harry—nothing,” answered the Under-Secretary in a nonchalant manner. “Only a despatch.”

“From Stockbridge, or one of the other Ministers, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“But why did you burn it?”

“In order that it shouldn’t fall into anybody else’s hands.”

“Something very confidential, then?”

“Yes, something extremely confidential,” answered Chisholm. “But come along, old fellow, let’s go to dinner, or the colonel will never forgive me.”

Chapter Eight.

Shows a Politician and a Policy.

Dudley Chisholm, with the excuse that his presence was urgently required at the Foreign Office, returned to town by the first train on the following day, leaving the colonel and Benthall to continue their sport. He would probably return in a couple of days, he said, but Lord Stockbridge wished to explain to him the line of policy which he intended to adopt towards France, with a view to lessening the tension between the two nations, and to give him certain instructions as to the conduct of the forthcoming debate in the House.

As both his guests understood that a man holding such a position was liable at any moment to be called up to town, they made the best of their disappointment, wished him good luck when the time came for his departure, and went out with the head-keeper for a day's sport in Parnholt Wood.

That same afternoon, in the fading light, the Under-Secretary was closeted with his Chief, the Most Noble the Marquess of Stockbridge, K.G., Prime Minister of England, and Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State, in his private room at Downing Street.

Next to the Sovereign, this tall, thin-faced, grey-bearded man, with the rather ascetic, aquiline features and keen dark eyes that age had not dimmed, was the most potent personage in the British Empire. The room in which he was sitting at the big pedestal writing-table was on the first floor of the Foreign Office, a spacious apartment, solidly furnished and of a very business-like appearance. In that room Ambassadors and Envoys Plenipotentiary had discussed matters of such importance, in such a way, that if those walls had ears to listen and tongues to repeat, the whole of Europe would have been in arms on many an occasion. Placed as far from the door as possible, the most conspicuous object in the room was the Prime Minister's table, standing on the right, close to the fireplace of black and white marble, with a plain, gilt-framed mirror above, and one of those ordinary square marble clocks which may be found in almost every middle-class dining-room. In a small bookcase close to his lordship's left hand was a library of reference works; while to his right, in the centre of the apartment, was a round table covered with books, where the current issue of the Times was lying.

In front of the great statesman was a long lounge, upholstered in dark green leather, as was the rest of the furniture, and upon the wall behind the

lounge a rack containing a large number of maps. Two or three deep armchairs, a couple of other tables and several revolving bookcases completed the furniture of the private room of the head of the Cabinet. At the table sat the marquess toying idly with his quill, while upon the leather-covered lounge before him sat Chisholm, the Under-secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

They were alone, with the door closed against intruders. The greyness of the short afternoon had become more and more pronounced during their conversation, and as neither had risen to switch on the electric light the room was in semi-darkness. Chisholm was thankful, for he was uneasy, and feared that his face might betray him to that keen and practised statesman beneath whose calm gaze many a diplomatist, whether British or foreign, had so often trembled. A rather cold, but exceedingly courteous man, Lord Stockbridge always spoke with slow deliberation, and with a gentleness that one would scarcely have expected from a man of such an austere manner. He was an autocrat both at the Foreign Office and in the Cabinet, always ruling with a firm hand, exhibiting a strange individualism in responsibility, bestowing but little praise upon any of Britain's hard-working representatives abroad; but he was a patriot, and every inch a gentleman. Representatives of certain of the Powers at the Court of St. James held him in dread—they even hated him, because of his integrity, his calm dignity, and his shrewd foresight. They knew that he was not a man to be tricked, and that in his anger the British lion showed its teeth.

To this rather melancholy man with the grave face and the quick dark eyes the British nation chiefly owed the retention of its position as the first Power in the world. During his fifteen years of office the European outlook had, times without number, been of a grim blackness, and the war-cloud had hovered on the political horizon almost incessantly; yet, by means of his careful statesmanship and the marvellous tact and finesse constantly exhibited by him, this splendid politician had succeeded in piloting the ship of state into quieter waters.

Like his trusted Under-Secretary, he was a man who hated popularity, although he was equally popular in England and throughout the great Empire oversea. He detested cheap notoriety; he always declared that he left that sort of thing to the Opposition benches. In a word, he was an honest, straightforward, patriotic Englishman, the most trusted of Her Majesty's Ministers, and the greatest living statesman in Europe.

Had he not acted with firmness and discretion, as well as with quick foresight, Great Britain would a dozen times have been at war with her jealous neighbours. More than once conspiracies, deeply laid and skilfully

engineered, had been in progress in some diplomatic circles for the purpose of inveigling England into hostilities; but his power of keen penetration and swift deduction had caused the efforts of our enemies to be thwarted and they themselves to be discomfited by some remarkable coup in quite another direction. It was the cackling cry of certain leader-writers that English diplomacy was abortive, that other nations left us behind in the race, and that our Ambassadors and Ministers were merely bunglers. These prophets (hired at the rate of two guineas a column) always conveniently overlooked the fact that the world virtually owed its peace and consequent prosperity to the thin-faced, rather haggard-looking, man who was the personal friend, confidant and adviser of his venerated and peace-loving Sovereign.

He sat there in the half light twisting his quill in his thin hands, a sign that he was puzzled.

“The situation is undoubtedly critical, Chisholm,” he said in a low voice. “I confess I cannot make it out in the least. The whole thing appears to me an enigma at present.”

“Have you received no further despatch from Vienna?” inquired the Under-Secretary.

“Yes. One came through in cipher a couple of hours ago. But it tells us nothing. Farncombe is apparently without information.”

The younger man breathed more freely. He had feared that the truth was already known. Up to the present, then, he was safe; but the tension was terrible. He did not know from one moment to another by what avenue his exposure, which would mean his inevitable degradation and ruin, would come. A despatch from Lord Farncombe, the British Ambassador at Vienna, revealing the truth, would be his death-warrant, for he had determined to commit suicide rather than face the terrible exposure that would necessarily ensue were his secret to become known.

By making a supreme effort he had succeeded in carrying on this private consultation with his chief without betraying undue apprehension. He had shown some alarm, it is true, but the marquess put this down to his natural anxiety in regard to the serious complications in Europe which, as it seemed, had been created by what had so mysteriously leaked out from Vienna and Constantinople.

“I can’t understand why Farncombe has not some information on the matter,” his lordship went on deliberately, almost as though he were speaking to himself. “It’s scandalous that we should be working entirely in the dark. But for the present we must wait. Our only chance of success is to

keep our own counsel and not show our hand. We are weak in this affair, Chisholm, horribly weak. If the Opposition got wind of it we should have a poor chance, I'm afraid. It's just what they've been longing for these three years."

"But they must know nothing!" exclaimed. Chisholm quickly. "If the secret of our weakness comes out, all Europe will be ablaze."

"Exactly, that's just what I fear!" the Minister answered. "It must be kept from them at all hazards. You are the only man in London besides myself who has the slightest inkling of the situation. You will, of course, regard it as strictly confidential."

"Absolutely."

"And you destroyed the despatch I sent you to Wroxeter?"

"I burnt it."

"Good!" exclaimed the marquess, leaning both elbows upon the table and looking across again at the man sitting there in the falling darkness. "And now we must form some plan of action. We must save the situation. Have you anything to suggest?"

"I really don't know what to suggest," Dudley faltered. "The whole affair is so mysterious, and we seem to have nothing to go upon. To me, it doesn't seem possible that our friends in Constantinople have suddenly turned antagonistic."

"Certainly not. Our relations with the Porte are excellent—and you can tell the House so. It is that very fact which puzzles me. The only solution of the enigma, as far as I can see, is that it is the outcome of that dastardly betrayal to Russia of our policy towards the Porte a year or two ago. You will recollect it, and how nearly it resulted in war?"

"Yes," answered Dudley in a faltering voice, "I remember it." Then he added quickly, as though to change the subject: "As far as I can see, the conspiracy is being worked from one of the other capitals."

Her Majesty's Under-Secretary knew the truth, but made a clever pretence of being no less mystified than his chief.

"Perhaps so, perhaps so," the great statesman remarked. "But this affair shows that there is once again a desperate attempt being made against us—from what quarter we are unable at present to detect."

“Rome is not the centre of activity, I feel sure,” Chisholm observed. “We only see its effect there.”

“An effect which may alienate us from Italy at any moment. With the Saracco Government in power there, matters are by no means upon a firm basis.”

“But Rathmore is one of our best men. He’ll surely see that such a contretemps does not occur.”

“Difficult—my dear Chisholm,” replied the grey-haired Minister. “Diplomacy is often as difficult in Rome as it is in Petersburg. The undercurrents against us are quite as many. The Powers are jealous of Italy’s friendship towards us and of her resolve to assist us in the Mediterranean if necessary. That is the whole crux of the matter. Happily, they are not aware of the terms I made with Rudini two years ago, or the war-cloud would probably have burst some time back. We can’t afford to risk hostilities while Italy is so weak. In two years her new armaments will be complete, and then—”

“And then we shall be able to defy them,” added the Under-Secretary with a smile.

The great Minister rubbed his gold-framed glasses and nodded in the affirmative.

“But the most curious aspect of this sudden development—if the information is correct, as we suppose it to be—is the apparent boldness of the diplomatic move on the part of the Porte,” the elder man went on. “It is an absolute enigma how they dare to attempt such a coup without being absolutely certain of success.”

“But how could they be?” queried the Under-secretary in a strained voice.

“Only by the possession of secret information,” the other replied. “It is the outcome of our base betrayal five years ago.”

“Surely nothing further has leaked out!” exclaimed the man seated upon the leather-covered lounge.

“No. There are spies in London—a crowd of them. Melville from Scotland Yard handed me a list of twenty or so of the interesting gentlemen last week. But we have nothing to fear from them—absolutely nothing. What I dread is that there is a traitor here, in my own Department.”

“Then what is your private opinion?”

“Well,” said the great man, still slowly twisting his quill between his fingers, “it seems to me, Chisholm, very much as though the person who is responsible for this clever move to checkmate our influence in the Mediterranean, like the man who betrayed us before, knows our secret, and is possessed of absolute self-confidence. He evidently knows of the agreement made five years ago, or else he possesses influence in some quarter or other which may prove detrimental to us.”

Dudley Chisholm held his breath. Truth lived in the last words that had fallen from the lips of his chief. The man responsible for the remarkable coup that had been forecasted from Vienna did indeed possess influence—over himself—an influence for life or death. After a great effort he contrived to remain calm, and, in a voice which to him sounded cavernous in that great room, he merely said:

“Yes. I thoroughly agree with your theory—thoroughly.”

“Then in that case, Chisholm, you must make a distinct statement in the House to-morrow regarding our policy abroad and the defence of the Empire. If the coup is really attempted, we must have public opinion entirely with us. This is not a party matter. You follow me?”

“Entirely. I will have a supplementary question put to-morrow, and reply to it.”

“Speak fearlessly and straight to the point. Assure the House that at this moment we are in a stronger position than we ever were, and that our allies are eager to assist us whenever war may break out. Hint at certain secret understandings with regard to the Mediterranean, and also at an Anglo-American alliance. I detest to play this game, but it is necessary—highly necessary, having regard to the extreme gravity of the outlook.”

“Very well,” replied Chisholm, rising, anxious to escape from that astute man’s presence before his pallid face should confess a part of the truth. “I will carry out your instructions. I quite understand the line to be adopted—one of nonchalance and self-satisfaction.”

And then, after a brief conversation upon other topics, the Under-Secretary, when he had switched on the light for his chief, walked out, and went down the great staircase into Downing Street.

Chapter Nine.

Defines the Dazzling Degradation.

At “question-time” on the following afternoon Dudley Chisholm, as mouthpiece of the Foreign Office, rose to reply to a very pointed and seemingly awkward supplementary question put to him by an obscure Member. There was a big House, and owing to the continual allegations of England’s unpreparedness made by the alarmist section of the Press, the answer was listened to with almost breathless interest.

The man who stood there addressing the House affected a calmness which he certainly did not feel. He knew not but that at any moment some Member of the Opposition might rise and there publicly show him up as a political impostor, a man who was sailing under false colours, and who knew of England’s danger yet dare not speak because to do so would be to expose his own crime. Nevertheless, even though the terrible tension had worked havoc with him throughout the long night, preventing him from sleeping and causing him to tramp for hours the deserted streets of London, he stood there speaking in his well-known deliberate manner, from time to time making home-thrusts at his political opponents, and eloquently assuring the House and the public that the Empire was safe from attack.

In the course of his brilliant reply he deprecated the popular assumption that in diplomacy we were always left behind, and hinted, as Lord Stockbridge had instructed him to do, at certain secret agreements which, having been of late effected, placed England in an almost invulnerable position. Never during the century, he declared, had Great Britain been on more amicable terms with her neighbours, and never had her position as the first among nations been more secure. Then he went on to speak of the two great tasks Her Majesty’s Ministers had themselves undertaken—the task of drawing all members of this vast Empire, all the dependencies of the crown in every quarter of the world, into a close and more organic unity, and the task of providing adequate defences for this great Empire. He admitted that it was sometimes held abroad that this awakening on our part to the obligations of Empire denoted a new spirit of antagonism in this country towards the legitimate aims and aspirations of European Powers. That was not so. The spirit in which we took up our portion of the task was not one of antagonism, but of generous emulation, with a view to seeing which of the favoured nations of the world could do most in the shortest time to perform the duty owed by them to the countries still oppressed by savagery, barbarism, or imperfect civilisation. That spirit was embodied in a certain secret agreement which he could not, of course, mention. The tasks he had spoken of could not be undertaken by their opponents, who in essential

questions were distracted and apathetic. While the Government would foster true Imperialism, they would not neglect social and domestic legislation. The Opposition were living on the ghosts of the past and amid the tombs of dead policies.

As he resumed his seat there was an outburst of applause. The country had long been waiting for some reassuring declaration from the Government, and this, flashed by the wires from the Press Gallery above, would in a few hours have the effect of allaying any public misgivings.

But Chisholm, having performed his duty, gathered up his papers and at once left the House. In the Lobby one or two men congratulated him, but he only smiled that rather melancholy smile they knew so well.

The House of Commons nowadays is not such an austere assembly as it was even a decade ago. True, Members are sometimes called to St. Stephen's in October and November, and thus have their vacation plans for Cairo or the Riviera considerably disarranged; yet the patriotic M.P. now finds the House the best and cheapest club in London, where he can, if he chooses, live upon ninepenny steaks and drink gin at twopence a glassful! Indeed, nowadays there seems more dining than politics, and more brilliant entertaining than brilliant oratory. There are many distinct coteries in the House, as there must always be among men divided in political opinion, but the coterie of entertainers is quite definite and distinct. Its members are those who have entered upon a Parliamentary career as a gentleman's due. They are the political drones. They rarely, if ever, speak, but with their many smart lady-guests support the social side of Parliament right royally. Harry Benthall was one of these butterflies among legislators. When he spoke, the subject was usually connected with the personal comfort of Members. Among the boiled-shirt brigade was a man who had sat in the House for thirty years, and had only spoken once—a speech that lasted one minute; while Mr Kinnear, the Parliamentary diarist, has placed it on record that a certain gentleman representing a county division sat in three successive Governments without finding his way to the vote office! The whole life of such men is taken up in hunting for a "pair." It is one of the first duties he feels he owes to himself and to his friends of the dining-room, or of that latter-day annexe to Mayfair, the Terrace. Indeed, so popular became the Terrace a couple of seasons ago that each afternoon it was crowded by grandes dames and young legislators, and flirting, tea-drinking, and strawberry-eating went on to such an extent that the merrymaking seriously threatened to stop legislation altogether. So that awe-inspiring functionary, the Serjeant-at-Arms, acting quietly but firmly, issued such orders that "at

homes" in Parliament were suddenly discontinued, and the daily crush at Westminster became less of a public scandal.

To put it plainly, a new House has grown up. The old austerity of legislation in the days of Palmerston and Beaconsfield has nearly disappeared, and to-day the gentlemen upon whom the right to add M.P. to their name is bestowed, find to their delight that legislation is really very largely an arrangement come to between the two front Benches.

As Chisholm passed through the Lobby, pausing at Mr Pike's office to obtain some letters, some one cried "Saunderson's up," and all the idlers knew that the debate upon another matter had commenced, and that "fun" might be expected.

The Under-Secretary thrust the letters into his pocket, put on his overcoat, and walked back to the Foreign Office, where some documents were awaiting his signature, and where he had some instructions to give his secretary. On his way across Palace Yard and along Parliament Street his eyes were fixed upon the pavement, for he was deep in thought and heedless of all about him. He walked like a man in a dream.

Before long the blow must fall, he told himself. How long would it be deferred? How many days of grace would his secret enemy give him?

Hour after hour had he endeavoured to find some solution of the problem how to repel the threatened vengeance. But there seemed to be no satisfactory way—absolutely none.

A word from him to his chief might save the situation. That would mean open and complete confession. No, he could not confess to the great statesman who had reposed such entire confidence in him, and who had given him the high and responsible office he now held. He could not; he dare not face the wrath of Lord Stockbridge, of all men.

He had sinned, and must suffer. A dozen times during the past night as he had paced the silent streets of London the suggestion had occurred to him to resign everything and go abroad at once. Yet what would that avail him? To escape would be only to exhibit cowardice. The sleep from which there was no awakening was by far the best mode of release at which to aim.

Upon a seat at the kerb in Piccadilly, with a ragged outcast as companion, he had sat a full hour in the most silent watch of the night thinking the matter over. After all, he told himself, he was little better than the shivering wretch beside him.

And now, as he turned the corner of Downing Street, he sighed heavily, wondering on how many more occasions he would return to his official headquarters. Not many, alas! Nemesis was at his heels.

That night he dined at his club, the Carlton, but returned to his chambers immediately afterwards.

As he entered his sitting-room, a woman in a striking evening toilet of pale-blue, turning from the fire, rose to greet him. It was Claudia Nevill.

“My dear Dudley!” she cried, stretching forth both her hands to him. “I’ve been awaiting you for half an hour or more. Wherever have you been?”

He had drawn back in annoyance at the moment when she faced him so unexpectedly. She was the last person he wished to meet at that moment.

“Oh,” he answered rather coldly, taking her hands in greeting, “I dined at the Club. I’m not very well,” he added wearily.

“But not too queer to go to the Duchess’s ball?”

“The Duchess’s ball? I don’t understand,” he said, looking at her puzzled.

“Why, surely you keep a note of your engagements, or Wrey does for you? It’s quite three weeks ago since we arranged to go there together.”

“To go where?”

“Why, to the Duchess of Penarth’s ball. You of course remembered that she asked us both, and we promised. You had a card, no doubt.”

“Perhaps I had,” he said blankly, for he received so many invitations that he always left it to Wrey, his private secretary, to attend to the resulting correspondence. He had gone little into society, except when Claudia Nevill took him as her escort.

“Perhaps?” she exclaimed. “Why, whatever is the matter with you, Dudley? You’ve not been at all yourself for some days past. Now, tell me—do.”

He was silent for a few moments.

“I told you when I was last at Albert Gate,” he said at length very seriously. “I thought my words were quite plain, Claudia.”

“You spoke all sorts of absurd things about scandals and gossip,” she laughed, reseating herself and motioning him to a chair on the opposite side of the fireplace. “But you were not yourself, so I didn’t take any heed of it.”

“I told you exactly what I intended doing,” he answered, standing before her, with his back to the fire. “I am surprised to find you here.”

“And who has been putting all these absurd ideas into your head, my dear Dudley?” asked the brilliant woman in the magnificent Dôeuillet ball toilette. “You know that we love each other, so what’s the use of kicking against the pricks? Now go and put on a dress-coat and a pair of gloves and take me to Penarth House, there’s a good fellow—the Duchess expects us.”

“Her Grace doesn’t expect me, for I declined.”

“You declined!” cried his fair companion. “Why?”

“Wrey declined. He has recently had orders from me to decline all such invitations. Dances only bore me. I’m too much occupied with official business.”

“Official business! Bosh! Leave it alone for a time and enjoy yourself. You are really becoming quite the old crony.”

“Better that than—well, than to be one of the set who were down at Fernhurst Abbey.”

She glanced at him swiftly, with a curious, half-apprehensive look.

“At Fernhurst? What do you mean?”

“I mean, Claudia, that there were certain incidents at Fernhurst which do not reflect much credit upon either the man or the woman.”

“And I am the woman, of course?”

He nodded.

“And the man? Name him.”

“A certain foreigner.”

“Ah!” she laughed lightly. “So you’ve heard all about it already. You mean the Grand-Duke. He was such fun, such a soft-headed fool. He actually thought himself in love with me.”

“And you allowed him to entertain that impression. I know the whole of the facts,” he said harshly.

“What you know is, I presume, some absurd tittle-tattle about us,” she replied, a shadow of annoyance upon her face.

“I know sufficient, Claudia, to cause me to alter my opinion regarding you,” he answered very gravely.

“Oh! so you would condemn me unheard? That is unlike you, Dudley. I cannot think chivalry and justice are dead in you.”

“I condemn you,” he said quickly, looking straight at her. “I condemn you for casting aside all your womanly instincts in this mad craze of yours to lead society and retain your position as a so-called smart woman. You cannot see that smartness is merely a synonym for fastness, and that you are rapidly flinging your reputation to the winds.”

“That, my dear Dudley, is a stale story. You have already told me so before. Without offence to you, I would point out that my reputation is entirely my own affair.”

“It concerns me, as well as yourself,” he blurted out. “You cannot afford to run the risks you are running. You love distinction, Claudia, and that is a passion of a deep and dangerous nature. In a man that passion is ambition. In a woman it is a selfish desire to stand apart from the many; to be, as far as is possible, unique; to enjoy what she does enjoy and to appropriate the tribute which society offers her, without caring a rap for the sisterhood to which she belongs. To be the idol of society is synonymous with being the butt of ridicule and of scandal, especially to all who have failed in the same career.”

“Oh,” she laughed, “you are such a funny old philosopher, Dudley. You grow worse and worse.”

“I know this,” he went on, “that no sooner does a woman begin to feel herself a leader of society, as you are at this moment, than she finds in her daily path innumerable temptations, of which she had never before dreamed. Her exalted position is maintained, not by the universal suffrage of her friends, for at least one-half of them would tear her down from her pedestal, if they were able, but by the indefatigable exercise of ingenuity in the way of evading, stooping, conciliating, deceiving; as well as by a continued series of efforts to be cheerful when depressed, witty when absolutely dull, and animated, brilliant, and amusing when disappointed, weary, or distressed.”

“Oh,” she cried impatiently, “I thought we had enough of moralising the last time we met! And now you want to re-open the old question.”

“No, Claudia,” he answered, placing his hand tenderly upon her shoulder, which was covered only by the strap of pale-blue embroidered satin which held her handsome corsage. “I only want to show you plainly how in a

woman simplicity of heart cannot be allied to ambition. The woman who aspires to be the idol of her fellows, as you do, must be satisfied to lose this lily from her wreath. And when a woman's simplicity of heart is gone, then she is no longer faithful as a wife or safe as a friend. Her fame is, after all, nothing more than dazzling degradation."

Chapter Ten.

Makes Plain a Woman's Duty.

"And all that philosophy is directed against me?" she asked, looking up at him seriously.

"It is only just that you should see yourself, Claudia, as others see you," he said in a more sympathetic tone of voice. "It pains me to have to speak like this; to criticise your actions as though I were a man old enough to be your grandfather. But I merely want to point out what is the unvarnished truth."

"All of us have our failings," she declared with a pout. "You tell me this because you want to sever your connection with me. Why not admit the truth?"

"No. I tell you this because a woman who seeks to occupy the place you now occupy is exposed to the pitiless gaze of admiration; but little respect, and no love is blended with it. I speak frankly, and say that, however much you have gained in name, in rank, in fortune, you have suffered as a woman."

"How?"

"Shall I tell you the actual truth?"

"Certainly. You will not offend me, I assure you," she replied in a cynical tone, coquettishly placing her small foot in its neat silk stocking upon the fender.

"Well, Claudia," he said, "to tell you the truth, you are no longer the simple-hearted, intelligent, generous, frank and true woman I once knew."

"Really? You are extremely flattering!" she exclaimed. She began to see that her ruse of boldly returning to him as she had done and waiting him there, even in defiance of old Parsons, was of no avail.

"I do not speak with any desire to hurt your feelings, Claudia," he went on. "I know my words are harsh ones, but I cannot remain a spectator of your follies without reproving you."

"You would compel me to return to the deadly dulness of tennis, tea-table gossip, church-decorating and country life in cotton blouses and home-made skirts—eh? Thank you; I object. I had quite sufficient of that at Winchester."

“I have no right to compel you to do anything,” he answered. “I only suggest moderation, in your own interests. On every side I hear scandalous stories into which your name is introduced.”

“And you believe them?” she asked quickly. “You, my friend, believe all these lying inventions of my enemies?”

“I believe nothing of which I have no proof.”

“Then you believe in what is really proved?”

“Yes.”

“In that case you must believe that, even though I possess all the defects which you have enumerated, I nevertheless love you?”

“In woman’s true love,” he said slowly, emphasising every word, “there is mingled the trusting dependence of a child, for she always looks up to man as her protector and her guide. Man, let him love as he may, has an existence which lies outside the orbit of his affections. He has his worldly interests, his public character, his ambition, his competition with other men—but the woman of noble mind centres all in that one feeling of affection.”

“Really?” She laughed flippantly, toying with her bracelets. “This is a most erudite discourse. It would no doubt edify the House if one night you introduced the subject of love. You’ve grown of late to be quite a philosopher, my dear Dudley. Politics and that horrid old Foreign Office have entirely spoilt you.”

“No, you misunderstand me,” he went on, deeply in earnest. “I merely want to place before you the utter folly of your present actions—all these flirtations about which people in our rank are always talking.”

“Ah!” she laughed; “because you’re jealous. Somebody has been telling you, no doubt, that the Grand-Duke was always at my side at Fernhurst, and probably embellished the story until it forms a very nice little tit-bit of scandal.”

“Well, is it not true that this foreigner was with you so constantly that it became a matter of serious comment?”

“I don’t deny it. Why should I? He was very amusing, and if I found him so I cannot see why people should presume to criticise me. If I had a husband I might be called upon to answer to him, but as poor Dick is dead I consider myself perfectly free.”

“Yes, but not to make a fool of yourself by openly inviting people to cast mud at you,” he burst forth impatiently.

“Upon that point, Dudley, we shall never agree, so let us drop the subject,” she replied, treating his criticisms airily and with utter indifference. “I shall please myself, just as I have always done.”

“I have no doubt you will. That is what I regret, for when a woman loses her integrity and self-respect, she is indeed pitiable and degraded.”

“Really!” she cried; “you are in a most delightful mood, I’m sure. What has upset you? Tell me, and then I’ll forgive you.”

“Nothing has upset me—except your visit,” he answered quite frankly.

“Then I am unwelcome here?”

“While you continue to follow the absurd course you have of late chosen, you are.”

“Thank you,” she replied. “You are at least candid.”

“We have been friends, and you have, I think, always found me honest and outspoken, Claudia.”

“Yes, but I have never before known you to treat me in this manner,” she answered with sudden hauteur. “The other day you declared your intention of severing our friendship, but I did not believe you.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew that we loved each other.”

“No,” he said in a hard tone, “do not let us speak of love. Speak of it to those men who dance attendance upon you everywhere, but with me, Claudia, be as frank as I am with you.”

“Dudley! It is cruel of you to speak like this!” she cried with a sudden outburst of emotion, for she now saw quite plainly that the power she once exerted over him had disappeared.

Chisholm had been sadly disillusioned. During the past few weeks the bitter truth had gradually been forced upon him. Instead of remaining a real, dignified, high-minded woman of unblemished integrity, Claudia Nevill had grown callous and artificial, and in other ways hostile to true womanhood. But Dudley had always admired her, and once she had been his ideal.

He had admired her simplicity of heart. Unquestionably that is a great charm in a woman, though not a charm so illuminating as integrity, because it consists more in the ignorance of evil, and, consequently, of temptation, than in the possession of principle strong enough to withstand both. In the days before her marriage her simplicity of heart was the child of that unruffled serenity of soul which suspects no mischief to be lurking beneath the fair surface of things—which trusts, confides and is happy in this confidence, because it has never been deceived, and because it has never learned that most fatal of all arts, the mystery of deceiving others.

But all was now changed. She was no longer the Claudia of old. She had degenerated into a smart, brilliant woman, full of arts and subterfuges, with no thoughts beyond her engagements, her toilettes, and her vainglorious triumphs.

“I have only spoken what I feel, Claudia!” exclaimed the man still standing before her. “I have no power to compel you to heed my warning.”

“Oh, do let us drop the subject, my dear Dudley!” she cried impatiently. “This lecture of yours upon my duty towards society may surely be continued on another occasion. Let us go along to the Duchess’s. As I’ve already said, the House has entirely spoilt you.”

“I don’t wish to continue the discussion. Indeed, I’ve said all that I intend saying. My only regret is that you are heedless of my words—that you are blind to the truth, and have closed your ears to all this gossip.”

“Let them gossip. What does it matter to me? Now to you, of course, it matters considerably. You can’t afford to imperil your official position by allowing all this chatter to go on. I quite understand that.”

“And yet you come here to-night and ask me to take you to the Duchess’s?” he said.

“For the last time, Dudley,” she answered, looking up at him with that sweet, sympathetic look of old. “This is the last of our engagements, and it is an odd fancy of mine that you should take me to the ball—for the last time.”

“Yes,” he repeated hoarsely, in a deep voice full of meaning; “for the last time, Claudia.”

“You speak as though you were doomed to some awful fate,” she remarked, looking up at him with a puzzled expression on her face. Little did the giddy woman think that her words, like the sword of the angel at the entrance to Paradise, were double-edged.

“Oh,” he said, rousing himself and endeavouring to smile, “I didn’t know. Forgive me.”

“You’ve changed somehow, Dudley,” she said, rising. She went near to him and took his hand tenderly. “Why don’t you tell me what is the matter? Something is troubling you. What is it?”

“You are, for one thing,” he answered promptly, looking straight into her splendid eyes. As she stood there in that beautiful gown, with the historic pearls of the Nevills upon her white neck, Dudley thought he had never seen her look so magnificent. Well might she be called the Empress of Mayfair.

“But why trouble your head about me?” she asked in a low, musical voice, pressing his hand tenderly. “You have worries enough, no doubt.”

“The stories I hear on every hand vex me horribly.”

“You are jealous of that man who was at the Meldrums’ house-party. It’s useless to deny it. Well, perhaps I was foolish, but if I promise never to see him again, will you forgive me?”

“It is not for me to forgive,” he said in an earnest voice. “I have, I suppose, no right to criticise your actions, or to exact any promises.”

“Yes, Dudley, you, of all men, have that right,” she answered, her beautiful breast, stirred by emotion, rising and falling quickly. “All that you have just said is, I know, just and honest; and it comes straight from your heart. You have spoken to me as you would to your own sister—and, well, I thank you for your good advice.”

“And will you not promise to follow it?” he asked, taking her other hand. “Will you not promise me, your oldest man friend, to cut all these people and return to the simple, dignified life you led when Dick was still alive? Promise me.”

“And if I promise, what do you promise me in exchange?” she asked. “Will you make me your wife?”

The look of eagerness died out of his face; he stood as rigid as one turned to stone. What was she suggesting? Only a course that they had discussed, times without number, in happier days. And yet, what could he answer, knowing well that before a few hours passed he might be compelled to take his own life, so as to escape from the public scorn which would of necessity follow upon his exposure.

“I—I can’t promise that,” he faltered, uttering his refusal with difficulty.

She shrank from him, as if he had struck her a blow.

“Then the truth is as I suspected. Some other woman has attracted you!”

“No,” he answered in a hard voice, his dark brow clouded, “no other woman has attracted me.”

“Then—well, to put it plainly—you believe all these scandalous tales that have been circulated about me of late? Because of these you’ve turned from me, and now abandon me like this!”

“It is not that,” he protested.

“Then why do you refuse to repeat your promise, when you know, Dudley, that I love you?”

“For a reason which I cannot tell you.”

She looked at him puzzled by his reticence. He was certainly not himself. His face was bloodless, and for the first time she noticed round his eyes the dark rings caused by the insomnia of the past two nights.

“Tell me, Dudley,” she implored, clinging to him in dismay. “Can’t you see this coldness of yours is driving me to despair—killing me? Tell me the truth. What is it that troubles you?”

“I regret, Claudia, that I cannot tell you.”

“But you always used to trust me. You have never had secrets from me.”

“No, only this one,” he answered in a dull, monotonous manner.

“And is it this secret which prevents you from making the compact I have just suggested?”

“Yes.”

“It has nothing to do with any woman who has come into your life?” she demanded eagerly.

“No.”

“Will you swear that?”

“I swear it.”

“You only tell me that we cannot marry, that is all? Can I have no further explanation?”

“No, none.”

“Your decision is not owing to the scandal which you say is talked everywhere? You give your word of honour that it is not?”

“Yes, I give my word of honour,” he answered. “My inability to renew my offer of marriage is owing to a circumstance which I am powerless to control.”

“And you refuse to tell me its nature?”

“I regret, Claudia, that I must refuse,” he said, pressing her hand. His lips twitched, and she saw that tears stood in his eyes. She knew that the man who had been her lover in the days of her girlhood spoke the truth when he added, “This circumstance must remain my own secret.”

Chapter Eleven.

Discloses an Ugly Truth.

With hands interlocked they stood together in silence for some minutes. Neither spoke. Their hearts were full to overflowing.

This woman, whose remarkable beauty had made it possible for her to ride rough-shod over discretion, was in those moments of silence seized by remorse. She saw that he was suffering, and with a woman's quick sympathy strove to alleviate his distress. In a manner that was neither hysterical nor theatrical, she carried his hand to her soft lips. Then, with a sudden burst of affection, she raised her beautiful face to his, saying:

"All the hard words you have spoken, Dudley, belong entirely to the past. I only know that I love you."

He looked at her steadfastly for a few moments, then said:

"No, Claudia. Our love must end. It is not fair to you that it should continue."

"You desire that it should end?" she asked in a strained voice.

"No. I am bound to leave you by force of circumstances," he replied. "We can never marry—never."

"But why? I really can't understand you. Of late you have been so strange, so preoccupied, and so unusually solicitous for my good name."

"Yes," he admitted, "it must have struck you as strange. But I have been thinking of your future."

"Did you never think of it in the past?"

"Of the future—when you are alone, I mean," he said gravely.

"What? Are you going abroad?"

He was silent again, his eyes fixed blankly upon the carpet.

"Perhaps," he said at last.

"And may I not go with you?" she asked in a tender tone of voice.

"No; that would be impossible—quite impossible." His strangely despondent state of mind puzzled her. She tried to penetrate the mystery which had so

suddenly surrounded him, but was unable to see any light. She saw, however, that he was nervous and troubled, as though in fear of some dreadful catastrophe, and endeavoured by low words and soft caresses to induce him to lay bare his heart. She, who knew his every mood and every expression, had never seen him so utterly despondent or pathetic. At first she was inclined to attribute it to the failure of some move on the political chessboard; but he had assured her that such was not the case. She could only soothe him by making him feel the depth of her love.

The words she uttered recalled to him memories of days long past, recollections of the hours when innocence and youth combined to make them happy. Her voice was the same, as sweet and tender as of old; her face not less beautiful, her lips not less soft, her form just as slim and supple. Ah! how madly he had loved her in the days beyond recall!

He stood listening to her, but making no response. She was speaking of her devotion to him; of her regret that she had allowed herself to flirt with others. She did not know that her lover was hopeless and despairing—a man condemned to death by his own edict.

As she stood there, the diamonds on her wrist flashing in the lamplight, he looked at her long and earnestly, and once again marvelled at the radiant completeness of her beauty. Was there any wonder that such a woman was the leader of the smart world, or that every fad or fancy of hers should become the mode? No. She was even more lovely than in the old days at Winchester. Her splendid toilettes, often the envy of other women, suited her handsome features better even than the prim dresses she used to wear during her girlhood, and she wore jewels with the easy air of one born to the purple.

Their eyes met, and she with her woman's intuition saw that he was admiring her, not less ardently than had been his custom until a week ago. In his eyes she detected a wistful look, as though he wished to lay his secret before her, yet dare not. There was a sadness, a look of blank desolation, in his face that she had never before seen there. It set her wondering.

She knew well the many grave official matters with which he was constantly called upon to deal at the Foreign Office; of the strain of speech-making in the House, and of the many weary hours spent in his private room with his secretary. Many a time he had confided to her the causes of his nervousness and gravity; and not infrequently she had been in possession of official secrets, which, unlike the majority of her sex, she always preserved, knowing well that to divulge them would seriously compromise him.

Often and often, after an exhausting evening in the House, he had come to her at Albert Gate and cast himself wearily upon the blue sofa in her own cosy boudoir, while she, sitting at his side, had tenderly smoothed his brow. It was in those quiet hours that he had made her his confidante.

She referred to those occasions, and asked him whether he believed her any less trustworthy now.

“No, not at all, Claudia,” he answered, speaking mechanically. “You cannot understand. The secret is mine—the secret of an incident of my past.”

She was silent. His words were surprising. She thought that she was aware of all his past—even of follies perpetrated when he was sowing his wild oats; but it appeared that there was one incident, the incident now troubling him, which he had always carefully concealed from her.

“If the secret so closely concerns yourself,” she said at last, “surely I am the person who may know.”

“No,” he replied briefly.

“But you have told me many other things of a delicate nature concerning yourself—why may I not know this, and help you to bear your trouble?” she asked coaxingly. “However much you may despise me for my frivolity and vanity, you surely do not think me capable of betraying your confidence, do you?”

“No,” he replied. “You have never betrayed any secret I have told you, Claudia, and I have no reason to suppose you would do so now. But this matter concerns myself—only myself.”

“And you will tell me absolutely nothing?”

“I—I cannot,” he declared brokenly.

A long silence again fell between the pair whose names had so long been coupled by the gossips. They certainly looked well suited to each other—he, tall, dark-faced, and undoubtedly handsome; she, brilliant and beautiful.

“Dudley, dear,” she murmured after a pause, placing her hand tenderly upon his arm, “you are certainly not yourself to-night. You are in trouble over some small matter which your own apprehensions have unduly exaggerated. Probably you’ve been working too hard, or perhaps you’ve made a long speech to-day—have you?”

“I spoke this afternoon,” he replied. The tone of his voice was unusually harsh.

“You want a little brightness and relaxation. Let us go on to the Duchess’s together, and we will waltz—perhaps for the last time.”

Those words fell upon his ears with a terrible significance. Yes, it would be for the last time. In his gloomy state of mind her suggestion commended itself to him. What matter if people gossiped about them? They might surely enjoy one last evening in each other’s society. And how many waltzes they had had together during the past two seasons! Yet this was to be the last—actually the last.

She saw his indecision, and hastened to strengthen her argument.

“Your words to-night, Dudley, have shown me plainly your intention is that we should drift apart. This being the case, you will not, I’m sure, refuse me the favour I ask. You will take me to the Duchess’s. My brougham is below. I told Faulkes to return at eleven,” she added, as she glanced at the clock. “Will you not have one last dance with me, if only as a tribute to the old happiness?” She spoke in the soft and persuasive voice that always charmed him. There were tears in her wonderful eyes.

“I am really in no mood for a ballroom crush,” he answered. “You know that I don’t care for the Penarth set at any time.”

“I know that. But surely you will let me have my own way just once more?”

“Very well,” he answered reluctantly, with a deep sigh. “We will go, if you really wish it.”

“Of course!” she cried gladly. She flung her arms about his neck and kissed him fervently on the lips.

Did she really love him? he wondered. And if she did, why did she act as it was reported that she had acted, flirting outrageously at all times and in all places with men whose companionship was detrimental to any woman’s good name? Why had she been planning for him to marry a girl who was unknown to him? No. He could not understand her in the least.

He touched the bell, and when Parsons came he ordered him to put out his dress-coat and gloves.

The old man glared at the visitor, for whom he used a title no more distinguished than “that woman,” and went off with a bad grace to do his master’s bidding.

“Parsons doesn’t like me in the least,” she said with a laugh. “I wonder why?”

Though Chisholm knew the reason, he only smiled, and turned aside the rather awkward question.

Then, when the old man had put his head into the room, announcing that his master’s coat was ready, Claudia Nevill was left alone.

“I wonder what’s on his mind?” she mused, sinking into a low chair before the fire and resting her elbows upon her knees. “Something unusual has certainly occurred. I wonder what story has come to his ears?—something about me, of course.” The white forehead so beautifully shaded by her dark hair, which had been well-dressed by her French maid, Justine, clouded slightly, and she stared straight before her, plunged in a deep reverie; she was indeed a voluptuous rêveuse. Life that was comme il faut had no attraction for her. She was reflecting upon all that he had said; upon the harsh criticisms and the ominous warnings of this man whom she had once believed she would marry. Yes, what he had said was only too true. Her conscience told her that she had been at fault; that she had set his affection at nought, and had, in her mad struggle for supremacy in society, flung prudence to the winds. And those ugly scandals whispered here and there? What of them? The mere thought of them caused her teeth to set firmly, and her shapely hands to clasp her cheeks with sudden vehemence.

“No,” she said aloud in a mournful voice; “his affection for me has been killed by my own mad folly. It cannot have survived all this deception. To-night is our last night together—the death of our love.”

At that moment Dudley re-entered, having exchanged his dinner-jacket for a white vest and dress-coat, in the lappel of which was a gardenia. Claudia roused herself quickly, and when she turned towards him her face betrayed no sign of the tristesse of a moment before.

“I’m quite ready,” he said, as, after buttoning his gloves and his coat, he turned towards the door to open it.

“This is my last visit to you, Dudley,” she said, sighing deeply and gazing round the room with a lingering glance. “My presence here is no longer welcome.”

What could he reply? He only looked at her in silence.

She was standing close to him, her pale face anxiously raised to his. He divined her unuttered request, and slowly bent until his lips met hers.

Then she burst suddenly into tears.

He put his arm tenderly round her waist saying what he could to console her, for her emotion distressed him. Complex as was her character, he saw that his plain, outspoken words had had their effect. When he had told her of his decision that morning at Albert Gate she had been defiant, treating the matter with utter unconcern; but now, as the result apparently of full reflection, she had become filled by a bitter remorse, and was penitent enough to beseech forgiveness.

How little we men know of the true hearts of women! Could we but follow the whole course of feeling in the feminine mind; could we trace accurately the links that connect certain consequences with remote causes, which often render what we most condemn a necessity from which there was never a single chance of escape; could we, in short, see as a whole, and see it clearly, what at present our lack of the right vision causes us to see in part, and obscurely—all that tempted to wrong, all that blinded to right—we should not then presume to theorise so glibly; to set ourselves up as accusers, judges, executioners, in such unbecoming haste. We should have mercy upon women, as befits honest men.

At heart Dudley Chisholm loved the woman he was striving to comfort, even though his association with her had so nearly wrecked his chance of succeeding in an official career. But he hated the artificiality of the smarter set; he detested the fickleness of the flirt; and he had been sadly disillusioned by the gossip that had of late sprung up in connection with the woman who for so long had represented his ideal.

He would have forgiven her without further parley had it not been for the knowledge that vengeance was already close behind him, and that before long she must be left without his love and protection. His secret caused him to preserve silence; but she, ignorant of the truth, believed that the spell she had exercised so long was at last broken.

In the hour of her despair she uttered many passionate words of love, and many, many times their lips met in fervent kisses. Nevertheless, both felt that a gulf yawned between them—a wide gulf caused by her own folly and recklessness.

At length she succeeded in stifling her emotion, drying her eyes, and concealing the traces of her tears by means of the eau de Cologne he handed her and a few dexterous dabs with her tiny powder-puff.

Now that she was calmer, he kissed her upon the forehead, drew her cloak over the still tumultuous breast, and then led her below, where her brougham was awaiting them.

During the drive to Penarth House, that old-fashioned but well-known mansion at the western end of Piccadilly, they sat together in silence.

Their hands were clasped. Both hearts were too full for words. They, who had loved one another for so many years, were now together for the last time.

A deep and bitter sigh escaped Chisholm. He was going to this ball, always one of the most brilliant entertainments in London—for the duchess was a political hostess and frequently entertained “for the Party”—to drink the cup of pleasure to the dregs, because on the morrow his place in English officialdom would be empty.

Chapter Twelve.

Is Distinctly Enigmatical.

Distinction among women is rapidly becoming a lost art. Woman nowadays is nothing if not modern in her views. After her presentation, her natural enthusiasm and charming high spirits usually cause her to take a too tolerant and rosy view of life, with the result that she degenerates into being merely smart. She becomes absorbed in Man and Millinery. Dress is her keynote. A lady's luggage has during the past ten years assumed alarming proportions, and a fashionable woman rushes eagerly to a house-party for the express purpose of airing the latest triumphs of Paquin or Lentheric. She is expected to make as many alterations in her costume as a quick-change artiste at the music-halls. In old times a tailor-made gown was worn for breakfast; but now a smart gown is put on for the morning meal, afterwards to be changed for a walking-costume or a suit for motor-driving. Luncheon demands another dainty gown, and tea brings out that luxurious and poetical garment, the tea-gown. At quite a small party this is sometimes retained for dinner, but for a big affair a magnificent dress is donned; and the same gown, whether designed for the morning or the evening, must never be worn twice.

Except when she was entertaining for a political purpose, the Duchess of Penarth's functions were characterised by an exclusiveness which belonged more to the mid-Victorian period than to latter-day London. Her Grace was a well-known hostess, and as her house-parties in Derbyshire usually included a member of the royal family, her circle of guests was a small and exceedingly smart one. If any outsider was admitted to her balls, he or she was always a brilliant person. Every season, of course, sees a new recruit to the ranks of these distinguished strangers—the latest empire-builder, the newest millionaire, or the most recently discovered society beauty. Dudley Chisholm had several times accompanied Claudia to balls at Penarth House, and knew well that everything was most magnificently done.

The carriage drew up in the long line that slowly filed into the old-fashioned courtyard, there to set down the guests. As Dudley looked out upon the lights of Piccadilly the rhymer's jingle recurred to him:

Oh! the tales that you could tell,

Piccadilly.

(Fit for Heaven, fit for hell),

Piccadilly.

Of the folk who buy and sell,

Of the merry marriage bell,

Of the birthday, of the knell,

Of the palace, of the cell,

Of the beldame, and the belle,

Of the rest of them who fell,

Piccadilly.

Yes, he hated it all. But it was the end—his last night with the woman who had for so long held him enthralled.

He believed he had broken the spell when he left her at Albert Gate a few mornings before; but he now discovered that he had been mistaken. Her tears had moved him. Although she was much to blame, he could not bear to see her suffer.

Up that wide staircase, well-known for its ancient handrail of crystal, they passed to the ballroom, which, as was usual at Penarth House, presented a most brilliant coup d'oeil. The women, all of them splendidly attired, ranged from the freshest débutante to the painted brigade of frivolous fifty, the members of which exhibit all the pitiful paraphernalia of the womanhood which counterfeits the youth it has lost and wreathes the death's head in artificial smiles. The crush was great, but even before Dudley and Lady Richard Nevill had entered the ballroom his beautiful companion was receiving homage from every side. Her arrival was the clou of the entertainment, and Her Grace, an elderly, rather stout person, wearing a magnificent tiara, came fussily forward to greet her.

Chisholm was quick to notice that Claudia had no desire to dance with any of the host of partners who at once began to petition her. Many of the men he knew—and heartily hated. Young scions of noble houses, a bachelor millionaire with black, mutton-chop whiskers, a reckless young peer, in whose company Claudia had often of late been seen, all crowded about her, smiling, paying compliments, and bowing over her hand.

But to all of these she excused herself. She was not feeling well, she declared, and as yet could not possibly dance. So by degrees her court slowly dissolved, and for a time she and Dudley were left alone. As may be imagined, there was much whispering in all quarters about her re-appearance in public with Chisholm.

They sat out several dances in a cool anteroom, dimly lit and filled with palms. In the half darkness they clasped hands, but they spoke very little, fearing lest others might overhear. Chisholm sat as one dead to all around him. As he passed through the great ballroom with its myriad lights and restless crowd he had mechanically returned the salutes of those who knew him, without recognising a single man or woman. In his present mood friends and enemies were alike to him—all of them so many shapes from the past.

To the woman at his side he clung, and to her alone. The memory of their bygone happiness he could not put aside. He would be compelled to make his adieux to life very soon—perhaps, indeed, in a few hours—and his only regret was for her. He could tell her nothing, and when he was dead she, like the others, would spurn his memory.

That thought caused him to grip the small, white-gloved hand he held. His lips moved convulsively, but in that subdued light Claudia could not detect his agitation. He was unusually sad and apprehensive, fearful of some impending catastrophe—that was all she knew.

She had tried to arouse him by making caustic and amusing criticisms regarding those about them, but all to no purpose. Her witticisms provoked no smile. He seemed utterly lost in his melancholy reflections.

“Listen!” she said at last. “There’s a waltz. Let us go.”

She rose and led him into the ballroom, where a moment later they were whirling along together in the smart crowd, compelling even jealous onlookers to describe them as splendidly matched. As Dudley steered his beautiful partner among the other dancers the music caused a flow of sad memories to surge through his brain—memories of the hundreds of balls at which they had been happy in each other’s love.

He laughed bitterly within himself as he saw her smile at a man she knew. Yes, when he was dead she would, he supposed, mourn for him for the first day and forget him on the second, just as completely as she had forgotten her indulgent husband. He saw that look of recognition exchanged between them; but the man’s face was unfamiliar. He was young, rather sallow-faced, with a dark-brown beard.

But he made no comment. As this waltz was their last, why should he spoil it? Upon her all argument was expended in vain, he declared to himself bitterly.

The floor was perfect, the music excellent, and quickly the old flush of pleasure came back to her face.

“You are enjoying it?” he whispered to her.

“And why don’t you, Dudley?” she asked. “You really ought to put on a more pleasant expression. People will remark upon it.”

“Let them say what they will,” he replied in a hard tone. “They cannot hurt me now.”

“Well, dear, you look as grave as if you were at a funeral. Forgive me for speaking plainly, won’t you?”

“I am grave because I cannot take leave of all that I have learnt to love without a feeling of poignant regret,” he answered. “In future I shall be debarred from all this.”

“Why? Are you going to enter a monastery, or something?” she asked, her old easy-going insouciance now returning to her.

“No, not exactly that!” he answered ambiguously.

“Really, I can’t make you out to-night, Dudley,” she answered as, now that the waltz had ended, he was conducting her across the room. “I do wish you’d tell me this extraordinary secret which is oppressing you. Once you used to tell me everything. But now—”

“Ah! it is different now,” he said.

“Because you mistrust me?”

“No, because our love must end,” he replied in a voice so low that none overheard.

She looked at him swiftly with a pained expression, still unable to discover the reason of his extraordinary attitude of melancholy and despair.

“Even if it must be as you have said, surely it is unnecessary to exhibit your heart upon your sleeve in public?” she argued. “Your words have placed upon me a heavy burden of sorrow, God knows! But I have learned to wear a mask, and only give myself up to wretchedness in the silence of my own room.” She spoke the truth. Well-versed, indeed, was she in all the feminine artifices. He knew quite well that her gaiety was assumed, for he had noticed how her hand trembled, and he had seen how quickly her breast rose and fell beneath its lace. Though her heart was stirred to its very depths, to the

smart world in which she delighted to move she betrayed not a single sign of grief. She was just the gay, reckless woman who was so popular as a host and so eagerly sought as guest, the pretty woman of the hour, the brilliant object of so much scandal.

“Ah!” he said briefly, “you are a woman.”

“Yes,” she answered in a deep, intense whisper. “A woman who has always loved you, Dudley, and who loves you still!”

At that instant the Duchess of Penarth approached them and carried Claudia away to be introduced to some notable person—who was “dying to know” her. No sooner had she left him than Dudley found himself face to face with a tall, elderly man who sat for South Staffordshire and was one of the staunchest supporters of the Government.

Naturally they exchanged greetings, and fell to chatting. While they were thus engaged the young brown-bearded man to whom Claudia had given a covert sign of recognition passed them.

“Do you happen to know that fellow’s name?” Chisholm asked, well aware that his friend was a popular figure in society and knew every one.

“What, the young fellow now speaking to Lady Meldrum? Oh, don’t you know? That’s the Grand-Duke Stanislas.”

“The Grand-Duke?” echoed the Under-Secretary, as the truth at once became apparent. No doubt he had watched them separate and was now on his way in search of her.

“And is that elderly woman with white hair Lady Meldrum? I’ve heard of her. Wife of a big iron-founder in Glasgow, isn’t she?”

“That’s so,” his friend answered. “But haven’t you met their ward, Muriel Mortimer? She was presented last year. Awfully pretty girl. There she is, in cream, sitting close by Lady Meldrum. You should know her. Let me introduce you. I’m an old friend of the family, you know, and she’s been wanting to know you for ever so long.”

At first he held back, declaring that he had to return to the House before it rose; but the Member for South Staffordshire would take no refusal, and a moment later the Under-Secretary found himself bowing before a fair-haired girl with a sweet, innocent-looking face, dimpled cheeks that blushed slightly as he was introduced, and a pair of large wide-open blue eyes that looked out upon him in wonder.

About twenty-two he judged her to be, fragile, pretty, almost childlike in her artless grace. Her complexion was perfect, and her rather plainly made toilette of cream chiffon suited her beauty admirably. Indeed, demure and rather shy, she seemed out of place in that crowd of the more brilliant butterflies of fashion.

A moment before, Dudley Chisholm had turned away from the dancers and had intended to drive down to the House in order to while away the rest of the night, but now this resolution was forgotten, because he had at once become interested in the girl with whom he had just made acquaintance, and all the more so when he recollected the colonel's strange warning down at Wroxeter. He was bending towards her, speaking in commonplaces, reflecting the while that there certainly was nothing in her outward appearance to cause him terror.

And yet the colonel had prophesied correctly in regard to their meeting and had warned him to avoid her. Why? The mystery underlying the words of his friend was certainly remarkable.

He was really attracted towards her by her childlike absence of artificiality. Though the shyness of the débutante had scarcely worn off, she committed no errors of etiquette. As she slowly fanned herself, she talked to him with all the gravity and composure of a woman of the world.

Lady Meldrum had also been introduced to him by the honourable Member for South Staffordshire, and she was, he discovered, a rather gushing, good-looking woman of the type prone to paying compliments quite indiscriminately.

Women nowadays keep their good looks much longer than they used to do. The woman of forty, and even the woman of fifty, to-day is not so old as the woman of thirty was—well, thirty years ago. For this reason, no doubt, and because we are becoming so very Continental, the married women reign supreme, and appear to reign for ever. It seems absurd to read in the list of beauties at a ball, the names of mothers and daughters bracketed together; but, in several instances, if the truth were told, it should be the daughter's name, and and not the mother's, which ought to be left out.

"Do you know, Mr Chisholm, I have already paid a visit to your chambers," her ladyship laughed. "Lady Richard Nevill took me up with her, fearing that I should catch cold while waiting in the carriage. She has been staying with us down at Fernhurst. Perhaps you have heard?"

“She told me so,” the Under-Secretary answered, at once summing her up as a rather vulgar person who had opened the door of society by means of a key fashioned out of gold.

“And now I must let you into another secret,” she went on fussily. “I took Muriel to the House the other night, and we heard you speak.”

He smiled.

“I don’t know what subject you heard me speak upon, Miss Mortimer,” he said, turning to the blue-eyed girl in cream, “but I hope you were edified.”

“I was intensely interested,” the young girl said. “Mr Blackwood,” she added, indicating the Honourable Member who had introduced them,—“took us all through the House and showed us the library, the dining-rooms, the Lobby, and all the places that I’d read about. I had no idea the House of Commons was such a wonderful place and so full of creature comforts.”

“Its wonders are very often tiresome,” he remarked with a little smile. “As a show-place, Miss Mortimer, it is one of the sights of England. As a place in which to spend half one’s days it is not the most comfortable, I assure you.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Lady Meldrum; “of course; I quite understand. A man holding such an important position in the Government as you do can have but little time for leisure. I saw you with Lady Richard Nevill just now. She brought you here, of course.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I go out very little.”

“And she induced you to come here with her. Charming woman! She was the light and soul of our party at Fernhurst.”

And as the wife of the Jubilee knight continued to make claims upon Dudley’s attention, he was prevented from exchanging more than a few words with the sweet-faced girl against whom he had been so strangely warned by the man who for so many years had been one of his closest friends.

This plump wife of the estimable Scotch iron-founder was a recent importation into society. She had, he heard, been “taken up” by Claudia, and owed all her success to her ladyship’s introductions. It is not given to every one to entertain a Grand-Duke for the shooting, and her fame as a hostess had been considerably increased by her good fortune in this respect.

She chattered steadily until the tall, thin-faced Duke of Penarth himself strolled past, bowed on catching sight of her, and stayed to talk for a few

moments. Lady Meldrum did not hesitate when it was necessary to choose between a sprat and a whale. She at once turned aside from Dudley, thus giving him a chance to improve the occasion with her ward.

Yes, he decided, she was possessed of a charming ingenuousness; and yet at the same time there was nothing of the school-miss about her.

She had given a very candid and amusing opinion regarding the controversy which had taken place in the House at the time of her visit, and had openly expressed her admiration of the determined and outspoken manner in which he had supported the Government and crushed the arguments of the Opposition.

“I really suspect you to be a politician, Miss Mortimer,” he laughed presently. “You seem well-versed in so many points of our foreign policy.”

“Oh,” she answered with a smile. “I read the papers in preference to novels, that’s the reason.”

Another waltz was commencing. As he turned to glance to the centre of the room, his eyes fell upon a couple gliding together among the dancers. He bit his lip, for he recognised them as the Grand-Duke and the woman who only an hour ago had vowed that she still loved him.

He turned back again to that pale, childish face with the blue eyes, and saw truth, honesty, and purity mirrored there.

Yet he had been distinctly and seriously warned against her—even her.

Why, he wondered, had the colonel spoken in so forcible a fashion, and yet refused a single word of explanation?

It was an enigma, to say the least of it.

Chapter Thirteen.

Takes Dudley by a By-Path.

To love faithfully is to love with singleness of heart and sameness of purpose, through all the temptations which society presents, and under all the assaults of vanity both from within and without. It is so pleasant for a woman to be admired and so soothing to her to be loved, that the grand trial of female constancy is to refrain from adding one more conquest to her triumphs when it is evidently in her power to do so. Obviously her chief protection is to restrain the first indefinite thoughts which, if allowed to gain clearness and swiftness, may lead her fancy astray. Even the ideas which commonly float through the mind of woman are so rapid and so indistinctly shaped, that when the door is opened to such thoughts as these they pour in like a torrent. Then first will arise a sudden perception of deficiency in the object of her love, or some additional impression of his unkindness or neglect, with comparisons between him and other men, and regret that he has not some quality which they possess; sadness under a conviction of her future destiny, pining for sympathy under that sadness, and, lastly, the commencement of some other intimacy, which at first she has no idea of converting into love.

Such is the manner in which, in thousands of cases, the faithfulness of woman's love has been destroyed, and destroyed far more effectually than if assailed by an open, and, apparently, more formidable foe. And what a wreck has followed! For when woman loses her integrity and her self-respect, she is indeed pitiable and degraded. While her faithfulness remains unshaken, it is true she may, and probably will, have much to suffer; but let her destiny in this life be what it may, she will walk through the world with a firm and upright step. To live solitary may be the cost of her noble behaviour; but often this solitude will represent a decoration more splendid than any to be received from the hands of queens and emperors.

I may be accused of a cold philosophy in speaking of such consolation being efficacious under the suffering which arises from unkindness and desertion; but who would not rather be the one to bear injury than the one to inflict it? The very act of bearing it meekly and reverently, as from the hand of God, has a purifying and solemnising effect upon the soul, which the faithless and the fickle never can experience.

Dudley Chisholm sat before the fire in his room until the dawn, trying to unravel a thousand knots, his mind filled with sad memories and with bitter regrets in plenty.

Muriel Mortimer had interested him, just as a child sometimes interests the pedantic philosopher. He had found hers a frank, open, girlish nature, as yet unspoiled by its contact with the smart, well-dressed, vicious set into which the ambitious Lady Meldrum had seen fit to plunge her. He admired her as one standing apart from most of the women he knew, for she had displayed an intelligence and a knowledge of political affairs that surprised him. She, on her side, seemed to regard him rather fearfully, as one of the powers of the State. This amused him, and he assured her that he could not honestly claim to be more than the mouthpiece of the Foreign Office. Yes, she was as charming as she was ingenuous.

And Claudia? He reflected upon all that he had said, and upon all her answers; yet somehow he could not make up his mind whether she were really false.

When he recollected the quick passion of her caresses, the tenderness of her words, the gentle sympathy with which she had asked him to confide in her, he found it difficult to believe that she could actually forget him five minutes after leaving him in that ballroom, and waltz airily with the man with whose name her own was being everywhere coupled.

To him, honest, upright man that he was, this seemed an absolute impossibility. He refused to believe it. Surely she loved him, in spite of her perplexing caprices; surely she had been seized by remorse for her own fickleness.

He endeavoured to compare the two women, but the comparison caused him to start up in quick impatience.

“No!” he cried aloud in a fierce voice. “A thousand times no! I love Claudia—no one else!—no one else in all the world!”

Next day when he entered his room at Downing Street, Wrey, his secretary, put before him a quantity of documents requiring attention. He held the responsible office of superintending under-secretary of the Commercial Department of Her Majesty’s Foreign Office, the business of which consisted of correspondence with our Ministers and Consuls abroad; with the representatives of the Foreign Powers in England, and with the Board of Trade and other departments of the Government. He had been absorbed in these papers for some hours, snatching only a few minutes for a glass of sherry and a biscuit at luncheon-time, when Wrey returned to remind him of a long-standing engagement that evening at the little town of Godalming, which was in his constituency, four miles from Albury.

He glanced up from his writing and gave vent to a sharp ejaculation of annoyance.

“Are you quite certain it is to-night?” he asked, for the reminder was to him a most unpleasant one. He avoided speaking in his constituency whenever he could.

“Yes. I put it down in the diary a month ago—a dinner given by the Lodge of Odd Fellows in aid of a local charity.”

Dudley groaned. He knew too well those charity dinners given in a small room among his honest but rather uncouth supporters. He dreaded the tinned soups, the roast beef, the tough fowls, and the surreptitious tankards of ale in lieu of wine, to be followed by those post-prandial pipes and strong cigars. He shuddered. The dense atmosphere always turned him sick, so that he usually made his speech while it was still possible to see across the room. He was very fond of the working-man, and subscribed liberally to all charitable objects and associations, from those with a political aim down to the smallest coal club in the outlying villages; but why could not those honest sons of toil leave him in peace?

His presence, of course, gave importance to the occasion, but if they had found it possible to spare him the ordeal of sitting through their dinner he would have been thankful. Out of fifty invitations to banquets of various kinds, openings of bazaars, flower-shows, lectures, concerts, entertainments and penny-readings, he usually declined forty-nine. As he could not absolutely cut himself aloof from his Division, on rare occasions he accepted, and spent an evening at Albury, or Godalming, or some of the less important local centres of political thought.

The pot-house politician, who forms his ideas of current events from the ultra-patriotic screeches of certain popular newspapers, was a common object in his constituency; but in Godalming, at any rate, the great majority of his supporters were honest working-men. The little town is a quaint, old-world place with a long High Street of ancient houses, many of them displaying the oak-beams of the sixteenth century, and its politics were just as staunch and old-fashioned as the borough itself. True, a new town of comfortable villas has sprung up of late around it, and high upon the hill are to be seen the pinnacles of Charterhouse School; but, notwithstanding these innovations, Godalming has not marched with the times. Because of this the blatant reformer has but little chance there, and the Parliamentary Seat is always a safe one for the Conservatives.

Much as he disliked the duty, he saw that it was absolutely necessary to go down and make pretence of having a meal with that estimable Society of Odd Fellows. He rose from his seat at the littered table, at once feeling a sudden desire for fresh air after the closeness of his room, and a few minutes later was driving in a cab to Waterloo. To dress for such a function was quite unnecessary. Working-men do not approve of their Member wearing a dinner-jacket when among them, for they look upon a starched shirt as a sign of superiority. He was always fond of the country round Godalming, where he had once spent a summer, and as it was a sunshiny afternoon saw in the occasion an opportunity of taking a walk through some of the most picturesque lanes in Surrey.

He was tired, world-weary, utterly sick of life. The duties of his office pressed heavily upon him; but most burdensome of all was the ever-present dread that the threatened blow should fall and crush him. He wanted air: he wanted to be alone to think.

And so, when that afternoon he alighted at Godalming and returned the salutes of the station-master and book-stall keeper, he started off up the steep road as far as the Charterhouse, and from that point struck off by a narrow footpath which led away across the brown ploughed fields to where the Hog's Back stretched before him in the blue distance. The autumn sun shone brightly in the clear, grey sky, and the trees in all their glory of brown and gold shed their leaves upon him as he passed.

Save the station-master and the book-stall clerk, none had recognised him. This was fortunate, for now he was free, out in the open country with its rich meadows and picturesque hills and valleys, until the hour when he must dine with his supporters and utter some trite sayings regarding the work of the Government and its policy abroad.

He was fond of walking, and was glad to escape from Downing Street and from the House for a single evening; so he strode along down the path with a swinging gait, though with a heart not light enough for the full enjoyment of his lovely surroundings.

The by-path he had taken was that which leads over the hills from Godalming past Field Place to the little old-world village of Compton. Having crossed the ploughed lands, he entered a thick coppice, where the path began to run down with remarkable steepness into wide meadows, on the other side of which lay a dark wood. The narrow path running through the coppice terminated at a stile which gave entrance to the park-like meadow-land.

Descending this path he halted at the stile, leaning against it. Alone in that rural solitude, far removed from the mad hurry of London life, he stood to think. Each gust of wind brought down a shower of brown leaves from the oaks above, and the only other sound was the cry of a pheasant in the wood.

For at least five minutes he stood motionless. Then he suddenly roused himself, and some words escaped his lips:

“How strange,” he murmured, “that my footsteps should lead me to this very spot, of all others! Why, I wonder, has Fate directed me here?”

He turned and gazed slowly round upon the scene spread before him, the green meadows, the dark wood, the sloping hill with its bare, brown fields, and the Hog’s Back rising in the far distance, with the black line of the telegraph standing out against the sky. With slow deliberation he took in every feature of the landscape. Then, facing about, with his back to the stile, his eyes wandered up the steep path by which he had just descended from the crest of the hill.

“No,” he went on in a strange, low voice, speaking to himself, “it has not changed—not in the least. It is all just the same to-day, as then—just the same.” He sighed heavily as he leaned back upon the wooden rail and gazed up the ascent, brown with its carpet of acorns and fallen leaves. “Yes,” he continued at last, “it is destiny that has led me here, to this well-remembered spot for the last time before I die—the justice which demands a life for a life.”

Throughout the district it would not have been easy to find a more secluded spot than the small belt of dense wood, half of which lay on either side of the footpath. So steep was this path that considerable care had to be exercised during its descent, especially in autumn, when the damp leaves and acorns were slippery, or in winter, when the rain-channels were frozen into precipitous slides.

“A life for a life!” he repeated slowly with a strange curl of the lip. He permitted himself to speak aloud because in that rural, solitude he had no fear of eavesdroppers. “I have lived my life,” he said, “and now it is ended. My attempted atonement is all to no purpose, for to-day, or to-morrow, a voice as from the grave will arise to condemn me—to drive me to take my life!”

He glanced at his watch.

“Yes,” he sighed. “Four o’clock!—at this very spot—at this hour on a wet day in mid-winter—”

And his eyes fixed themselves blankly upon the ground a couple of yards distant from where he was standing. “Six years have gone, and it has remained ever a mystery!”

His face was pale, his brow contracted, his teeth firmly set. His eyes still rested upon that spot covered with dead brown leaves. Certainly it was strange that the steep and narrow pathway should possess such fascination for him, for he had wandered there quite involuntarily. It is not too much to say that he would have flown to any other part of England rather than stand upon the spot so closely associated with the chapter in his life’s history that he hoped was closed for ever.

Suddenly he roused himself, and, walking forward a couple of paces, marked with his stick a square in the dead leaves. Apparently he was deep in calculation, for after he had made the mark he carefully measured, by means of his cane, the distance between the square and the top of the short ascent. On either side of the path was a steep moss-grown bank surmounted by thick hazel-bushes, but on the left a little distance up was an old wooden fence, grey with lichen. He appeared to be deeply interested in this fence, for after going close up to it he measured by careful pacing the distance between it and the spot he had marked out.

When this was done, he stood again motionless, his fevered brow bared to the breezes as though to him that spot were hallowed. Then, crossing the stile, he entered the meadow, passing and repassing the narrow lane as though for the purpose of discovering the exact position an observer would be compelled to take up in order to watch a person standing at the point he had marked.

At last he returned, standing again with his back to the stile, his hat raised in reverence, gazing fixedly upon those dead and decaying leaves.

“Yes,” he murmured, “I was mad—mad! The devil tempted me, and I fell. Would to God that I could make amends! But I cannot—I dare not. No, I must suffer!”

Chapter Fourteen.

Which Demands Explanation.

Chisholm dined that night in the upstairs room of that old-fashioned hostelry, the Angel, at Godalming, in company with the brethren of the banner.

He sat at the right of the estimable, fat-handed butcher who presided, and was informed by him that as the gigantic roast sirloin that was served was his "own killing," he could recommend it. They ate, drank, and made merry, these men banded together by their sacred rites, until the heat grew so intense that the windows were opened, with the result that decorous High Street echoed to the volleys of their hearty laughter.

As drink was included in the cost of the repast, those diners with the more rapacious appetites—who, indeed, made no secret that they had been existing in a state of semi-starvation all day in order to eat at night—drank indiscriminately of the lemonade, beer, wine and whiskey placed upon the table. Indeed, as is usual at such feasts, they ate and drank all within reach of their hands. But these bearded working-men and small tradesmen were merry and well-meaning with it all. After "The King" had been honoured, they toasted with boisterous enthusiasm "Our Honourable Member," and joined in the usual chorus of poetical praise, "For he's a jolly good fellow."

Dudley sat bowing and smiling, yet at heart sick of the whole performance. He dreaded the pipes and cigars that would in a few moments appear. Shag and clays always turned him ill. He was no great smoker himself, and had never been able to withstand the smell of a strong cigar.

His quick eyes observed a man who was beginning in an affectionate manner to fondle a well-coloured short clay. He bent at once to the chairman, saying that he would now deliver his speech.

"Silence, please, gentlemen!" shouted the rotund butcher, rapping the table with his wooden mallet after their guest's health had been drunk. "Silence for our Honourable Member! Silence—please!"

Then Dudley rose eagerly, happy in the knowledge that he was almost through the ordeal, and, with a preliminary "Mr Chairman and Gentlemen," addressed the hundred or so of his faithful supporters, telling them this and that about the Government, and assuring them of the soundness of the policy adopted by Her Majesty's Ministers. It was not a very long speech, but it was upon a subject of the moment; and as there were two "gentlemen of the Press" representing the local advertisement sheets, the one a mere boy,

and the other a melancholy, disappointed-looking man, with a sage and rather ascetic expression, the speech would appear in the papers, and the Godalming Lodge of Odd Fellows would receive the credit of having entertained one of England's most rising statesmen. The two representatives of the Press, each of whom took himself very seriously, had been regaled with a bottle of port and some cigars by the committee, who entertained a hope that they would thus be induced to give a lengthy and laudatory account of the function.

While Dudley was on his legs the cloud of tobacco-smoke became thicker and thicker. Those triumphs of the tobacconist called "tuppenny smokes" are nauseous when in combination with the odour of food. Dudley sniffed them, coughed slightly, sipped some water, and then drew his speech to a close amid a terrific outburst of applause and a beating upon the tables which caused the glasses and crockery to jingle.

While this oration was in full blast he noticed a committee-man uncovering the piano, by which he knew that "harmony" was to embellish the hot whiskey period. At last, however, he managed to excuse himself, upon the plea that he must return to the House for a Division that was expected; and as soon as he was out in the High Street he breathed more freely. Then he hurried to the train, and, entering the express from Portsmouth, tried to forget the spot he had visited in that small belt of forest—the scene that too often commanded the most vivid powers of his memory.

"I was a fool ever to have gone there!—an absolute fool!" he murmured to himself, as he flung himself back in the first-class compartment when alone. "I ran an unnecessary risk. And that man who came so suddenly upon me just as I was leaving! What if he had watched and recognised me? If so, he would certainly gossip about my presence there, describe my actions—and then—"

He was silent; his face became blanched and drawn.

"Even though six years have passed, the affair is not forgotten," he went on in a hard voice. "It is still the local mystery which Scotland Yard failed to elucidate. Yes," he added, "I was a fool—a confounded fool! What absurd whim took me to that place of all others, I can't imagine. I'm mad—mad!" he cried in wild despair. "This madness is the shadow of suicide!"

Instead of going down to the House he drove back at once to his chambers.

Upon his table was a note from Claudia, affectionate as usual, and full of regret that they had not met again on the previous night—when they had been so suddenly separated at Penarth House.

“What do you think of little Muriel Mortimer? I saw you speaking with her,” she wrote. “She was full of you when I met her shopping in Bond Street this morning. You have made quite an impression, my dear Dudley. But don’t altogether forget me, will you?”

Forget? Could he ever forget the woman whom he loved, and yet despised? Strange that Claudia should have plotted with Lady Meldrum against his bachelor estate, and should have determined to bring about this marriage with Muriel Mortimer!

In a frenzy of despair he cast her letter into the flames. He recollected the words she had uttered to him in that room on the previous night, the sweet words of love and tenderness that had held him spellbound. No, there was no other woman in all the world save her—and yet, she was false and fickle, as all the world knew.

Life’s comforts are its cares. He smiled bitterly as he reflected upon that phrase, which was an extract from one of his many brilliant speeches. If a person has no cares, that person must make them, or be wretched; care is actually an employment, an action; sometimes even a joy. And so it is with love. Life and love must have employment and action. There must be responsibility and a striving to reach a goal; for if not, both the power to endure and the power to give comfort are shrunken and crippled.

When Dudley Chisholm was young he had long worshipped an ideal. But when he found his idol to be undeserving of the idolatry, madness fell upon him, and he accepted the creed of the prodigal. Raking over the ashes of the numerous bonfires he had made, for which his senses had been the fuel, he now found a revelation of his inner self. He recognised for the first time his weakness and his unworthiness. He wanted something better than he had known—not in others, but in himself. He had discovered a spot of tenderness in his heart that had, so to speak, remained virgin soil.

“Could a really smart woman possess any nice sense of honour?” he asked himself for the hundredth time. If she is endowed with any particular intelligence, and the world discovers it, then society is prone to think that she is necessarily a “schemer,” and, unless her friends know her very well, she is soon given a place upon society’s black list as an “adventuress,” a term which applies to the whole gamut of West End wickedness. No, after all, few women can be both honourable and smart.

His thoughts wandered back into the past, as they so frequently did, and a moan came from his heart. He remembered Claudia as an ideal woman of whom a cruel Fate had robbed him in those days before he learned the

world to be what it is. And he still loved her—even though this great gulf yawned between them.

Dudley Chisholm was blind to Claudia's true character. He was attracted to her by her intellect and her physical magnetism. In these days of her freedom she had dared to be herself, and having knowledge of herself and of men, she had developed his admiration up to her own standpoint. She had taught him women as she knew them herself. She was playing with all the edged tools of daring because she felt that she was the stronger of the two, and that he would dare no further than she willed. She was charmed with the freedom she allowed herself; while he was, in a manner, flattered by her apparent constancy to him and by her finding in him anything that interested a woman of her attainments and popularity. Thus he had become thoroughly interested, madly infatuated, as well as honestly in love.

Men so seldom understand the inner nature, the designing nature, if I may be forgiven the expression, of some women. Such women are unscrupulous in their dealings both with men and women. The West End is full of them. They live for what they can get out of their acquaintances, instead of for what they can do for them. They give as much love to all as to one, unless that one should happen to be more wealthy or distinguished than the others. Then the wealthy one will get the largest quantity of attention, while the others will be kept dangling on the string for use at odd times. Such women are shrewd. Mayfair has taught them the art of conversation. They have reduced it to a science. With the innocent face of a child, they learn never to let the left hand know what the right hand is doing. And, if the bare truth be stated, Claudia Nevill was one of these. She, in her shrewdness, had handled Dudley with light ribbons. She had intuitively understood what kind of woman he preferred, and she had been that woman—until now, when the bitter truth had been made plain to him.

In this life of ours the tossing between the extremes of happiness and misery are terribly wearying. When once life's lessons begin they continue in a mad headlong rush of events. During the last few days Dudley Chisholm seemed to have lived a lifetime. Fate twisted and turned him through and round human follies and treachery. It laughed at him, beating up all that was false against all that was true in his own nature, until he found himself in such a pot-pourri of sunshine and storm that life seemed suddenly too incomprehensible to be endured.

The daintiness of women rivets and enchains men of Dudley's stamp—the perfume of the hair, the baby-smell of the skin, the frills, the laces, the violets exuding from the chiffons, the arched foot, the neat ankle, the clinging drapery—everything, in fact, that means delicate luxury not to be

enjoyed save in the company of a woman. Awkwardness disenchants, but well-poised, graceful lines, added to a chic in dress, hold for ever. To be essentially feminine places a woman in the holy of holies in a man's heart. As Claudia was essentially feminine, she still held Dudley safe, in spite of that sudden gust of scandal.

Alone, seated in his familiar armchair, he cast aside the heavy thoughts that had so oppressed him ever since he had stood at that spot deep in rural Surrey, and looked upon the place every object of which was photographed upon his memory. He thought of Claudia, and, remembering the declaration of her love whispered in that room, felt regret at the hard words he had uttered. She had made mistakes and become entangled in the meshes of the net spread out for her. Was it not his duty to extricate her? He too had made a mistake in not paying respect, at least outwardly, to the social code, and now the time had come when he was forced to recognise that necessity. Yes, in his inner consciousness he fully realised the mistake he had made. He had all unconsciously aided and abetted her in becoming what was known as "a smart woman."

Perhaps, however, his opinion of her would have been a different one had he been present at that moment in one of the smaller sitting-rooms of the great mansion at Albert Gate. It was a cosy apartment, with the lamplight mellowed to a half tone by the yellow shade; dull greyish blue was the colour of the silken walls, a cool, restful tint that seemed a fitting background for the cosy lounge draped with dark Egyptian red and suppressed greens and yellows.

Upon the couch, in a handsome dinner-gown of pale pink trimmed with black velvet, lazily lounged its mistress among her silken pillows, slowly waving her fan, while near her in one of the big saddle-bag chairs sat the Grand-Duke Stanislas smoking a cigarette, his eyes fixed upon her.

At his throat he wore the ribbon of St. Andrew, one of the highest of the Russian orders, the splendid diamond cross glittering upon his shirt-front. He was on his way to a reception at the Austrian Embassy given in his honour by the ambassador, but at Claudia's invitation he had dined with her.

"No, really," she was laughing, "it is not so in England. I quite admit that men make it a general accusation against us, as a sex, that we are ill-natured, unfair, pitiless, in judging one another. They say that when women get together, at every word a reputation dies; they say that as a savage proves his heroism by displaying in grim array the torn scalps of his enemies, so a woman thinks she proves her virtue by exhibiting the mangled

reputations of her friends; they say—But there is no end to the witty impertinences and fag-ends of rhymes from Simonides to Pope, which they fling at us on this subject I have never heard men so eloquently satirical as when treating with utter scorn the idea that a woman can possibly elevate herself in the eyes of one of their sex by degrading, or suffering to be degraded, one of her own; and in their censure they are right—quite right; but wrong—quite wrong in attributing this, our worst propensity, to ill-nature and jealousy. Ignorance is the main cause: ignorance of ourselves and others."

He laughed at her philosophy, and blew a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling.

"I think, my dear madame, that you must be full of whims, comme disent les Anglais. A pretty woman like yourself always is," he said in his marked foreign accent.

"And why not?" she inquired, for he had suddenly changed the channel of their conversation, and she much feared that he now intended to give her a réchauffé of his sentimental nonsense.

"Because you brought your friend to the duchess's last night. I saw him. C'etait assez."

"You are jealous—eh?"

"Not in the least, I assure you," he answered quite coolly. "Only it is pretty folly on madame's part—that is all."

"Why folly? O la belle idée!"

"Madame's amitiés are of course friendships," he said, raising his dark eyebrows. "Nevertheless, she should be warned."

"Of what?"

"Of Monsieur the Under-Secretary," he replied, still regarding her quite calmly with his dark eyes. "For her own reputation madame should no longer be seen with him."

She glanced at her guest quickly, for she was used to men's jealousies. Yet surely this scion of an Imperial House could not be jealous!

"And for what reason, pray?" she asked, puzzled.

“Because of a regrettable circumstance,” he answered mysteriously. “Because of a forthcoming exposure which will be startling. In a certain Chancellerie in a certain capital of Europe there reposes a document which must shortly be made public property.”

“Well, and what then?” she asked, not yet grasping his meaning.

“Its publication will bring disgrace and ruin upon madame’s friend,” he answered simply. “That is why I warn you not to be seen again in his company.”

“What do you mean?” she cried, starting up with sudden hauteur. “You tell me this, in order to turn me from him.”

“No, ma chère, I tell you a secret which is known in the Chancellerie of a certain Power antagonistic to your country,” he responded. “I have told madame the truth for her own benefit.”

“You would try to poison my mind against Dudley Chisholm by hints such as these!” she cried, magnificent in her sudden fury. “You!—You! But let me tell you that I love him—that—that—”

“That you refuse to believe my word!” he said, concluding her unfinished sentence.

“Yes, that I absolutely refuse to believe you!” she declared emphatically, facing him boldly in a manner which showed that her nature had revolted against this attempt to denounce the man she loved.

“C’est assez!” he laughed with an air of nonchalance the moment he had blown a cloud of smoke from his lips. “Madame has spoken!”

Chapter Fifteen.

Is told in the Grass Country.

Throughout November Dudley remained in town tied to the House by his official duties, and saw little of Claudia, who had gone into Leicestershire for the hunting. Riding to hounds was her favourite sport, and she was one of the best horse-women within fifty miles of Market Harborough. Each season she went on a visit to Lady Atteridge, whose husband had a box right in the centre of the hunting-country, and at every meet she was a conspicuous figure.

An acquaintance she made in the field with the late Empress of Austria, during a run with the Pytchley across the Grafton country, ripened into a warm friendship, and on many occasions she had entertained her now lamented Majesty at Albert Gate. Nearly every year some foreign royalty or other is the centre of hunting interest. Unable to enjoy the race over the grass in their own land, they come to England for healthful sport, and generally make Harborough their headquarters. That season it was the Grand-Duke Stanislas who rode to nearly every meet, always accompanied by his equerry. Hence Claudia and he frequently met, but since that evening when he had endeavoured to turn her from the man she loved she had avoided him. She purposely refrained from attending any function at which he might possibly be present, and when they were compelled to meet with the hounds she only bowed, and seldom, if ever, offered him her hand.

On his part, he was always fussing about her, scolding her for her too reckless riding across boggy meadows, or at hedges made dangerous by barbed wires, and always holding himself prepared to render her any of those many little services which the hunting-man renders the fair sex in the field. But on her part she was absolutely indifferent to his attentions, and at the same time annoyed that he should thus publicly exhibit his admiration.

Certainly no figure was more neat and chic than hers in its well-cut habit, her dark hair tightly coiled beneath her becoming hunting-hat. In the saddle she looked as if she were part of the animal she rode, and her mare, “Tattie,” was a splendid creature, which always came in for a full share of praise among those who could tell a good hunter when they saw one. The men who ride to hounds in the Harborough country are, as a rule, hard as nails, and as keen and outspoken critics of a woman as of a horse. But Claudia Nevill and “Tattie” were both pronounced first-class, the former because she was so extremely affable with one and all, even to the farmer’s sons who followed the hounds, and blushed with a countryman’s awkwardness when she, the woman of whom the papers spoke, addressed them. There was no pride

about her ladyship, and the whole countryside, from Harborough right across to Peterborough, declared her to be “one of the right sort.”

Of course even in the villages there were whispers that she was very friendly with the Grand-Duke, and the usual deductions were made from the fact that the latest foreign star in the hunting-firmament was always riding near her. But in the country the people are very slow to give credence to scandal, and the gossip, though active, was not ill-natured; besides, it had long ago been known that the Foreign Under-Secretary was passionately attached to her. Last season Chisholm had hunted with the Pytchley and had been always at her side, so that the rustics, and even the members of the hunt had come to regard him as her future husband, and had pronounced them to be a well-matched pair.

Late one afternoon towards the close of November the end of a busy day was drawing near. The meet was at Althorpe Park, Earl Spencer’s seat, and the spinneys all around the park were drawn one after the other; but although plenty of pretty hunting took place, the hounds did not do any good. On drawing No-bottle Wood the greater portion of the large field managed to get away with the pack as the hounds raced away up wind in the direction of Harlestone. The first fox led his pursuers over fine grass country to a copse near Floore, where the sight of hounds in full cry, a rare occurrence, caused considerable excitement among the villagers. Continuing past Weedon Beck, the fugitive circled round in the direction of Pattishall, but he was so hotly pressed that he was obliged to take shelter in a drain near Bugbrook, where it was decided to leave him. The second fox, which was started from Dowsby Gorse, gave a fine run of an hour. He travelled first to Byfield, thence across the hilly country back to Weedon Beck, over almost the same district as his predecessor. Near Weedon reynard had an encounter with some terriers belonging to a rabbiting party, but got safely away and finally beat the pack close to the Nene.

The run had been a very fast one, but both Claudia and Stanislas were among the few in at the finish. As many of the hunters jogged homeward along the Daventry road, the Grand-Duke managed to take up his position by the side of the beautiful woman whom he so greatly admired. Stanislas, who was an excellent rider, had left his equerry far behind in the mad race across hedges, ditches, stubble and ploughed land. Somewhat bespattered by mud, he sat his horse with perfect ease and with almost imperial dignity. To the casual observer there was nothing to distinguish him from any of the other hunters, for in his well-worn riding-breeches, gaiters and black coat his appearance was devoid of that elegance which had distinguished him in

London society, and he looked more like a country squire than the son of an emperor.

They were descending the slope towards a small hamlet of thatched cottages, when of a sudden he drew his horse closer to hers and, turning to her, exclaimed in English of rather a pleasant accent:

“Madame is, I fear, fatigued—of my company?”

“Oh dear no,” she laughed, turning her fine dark eyes mischievously towards him. “Why should I be? When you are so self-sacrificing as to leave Muriel Mortimer to Captain Graydon’s charge and ride with me, I surely ought not to complain.”

“Why do you speak of Mam’zelle Mortimer?” he asked, at once grown serious.

“Because you have been flirting with her outrageously all day. You can’t deny it,” she declared, turning to him in her saddle.

“I was merely pleasant to her,” he admitted. “But you English declare that a man is a flirt if he merely extends the most commonplace courtesies to a woman. It is so different in other countries.”

“Yes,” she laughed. “Here, in England, woman is fortunately respected, but it is not so on the Continent.”

“I trust that madame has not found me indiscreet,” he said earnestly. “If I have been, I must crave forgiveness, because I am so unused to English manners.”

“I don’t think any one need blame you for indiscretion, providing that Muriel does not object.”

“Object? I do not follow you,” he said.

“Well, she may object to her name being bandied about as a woman with whom you are carrying on an open flirtation.”

“You appear to blame me for common civility to her,” he observed. “I cannot, somehow, understand madame of late. She has so changed.”

“Yes,” she answered with a bitter smile; “I have grown older—and wiser.”

“Wisdom always adds charm to a woman,” he replied, endeavouring to turn her sarcasm into a compliment.

“And age commands respect,” she answered.

He laughed uneasily, for he knew well her quick and clever repartee.

“I have been wishing to have a word with madame for a long time,” he said, at last breaking a silence that had fallen between them. “You have pointedly avoided me for several weeks. Have I given you offence? If so, I beg a thousand pardons.”

She did not answer for some time. At heart she despised this Imperial Prince, before whom half the women in London bowed and curtsied. She had once allowed him to pay court to her in his fussy, foreign manner, amused and flattered that one of his degree should find her interesting; but all that was now of the past. In those brief moments as they rode together along the country road in the wintry twilight, recollections of summer days at Fernhurst came back to her, and she hated herself. In those days she had actually forgotten Dudley. And then she also remembered how this man had condemned her lover: how he had urged her to break off the acquaintance, and how he had hinted at some secret which, when exposed, must result in Dudley’s ruin.

Those enigmatical words of his had caused her much thought. At what had he hinted? A thousand times had she endeavoured to discover his meaning, but had utterly failed. If such a secret actually existed, and if its revelation could cause the downfall of Dudley Chisholm, then it was surely her duty to discover it and to seek its suppression. This latter thought caused her to hesitate, and to leave unsaid the hasty answer that had flashed into her mind.

“Well,” she said at length, “now that you have spoken plainly, I may as well confess that I have been annoyed—very much annoyed.”

“I regret that!” he exclaimed with quick concern. “If I have caused madame any annoyance, I assure her it was not in the least intentional. But tell me how I have annoyed you.”

“Oh, it was a small matter, quite a trivial one,” she said with affected carelessness, settling her habit and glancing furtively at the man who had declared that he held her lover’s secret.

“But you will tell me,” he urged. “Please do. I have already apologised.”

“Then that is sufficient,” she replied.

“No, it is not sufficient I must know my offence, to be fully cognisant of its gravity.”

Her brows contracted slightly, but in the fading light he did not notice the shadow of annoyance that passed across her countenance.

“As I have told you, the offence was not a grave one,” she declared. “I was merely annoyed, that is all.”

“Annoyed by my actions, or by my words?”

“By your words.”

“On what occasion?”

“On the last occasion you dined at my house.”

For a moment his face assumed a puzzled expression, then in an instant the truth flashed upon him.

“Ah!” he cried; “I recollect, of course. Madame has been offended at what I said regarding her friend, the Under-Secretary. I can only repeat my apologies.”

“You repeat them because what you told me was untrue!” she exclaimed, turning and looking him full in the face. They had allowed their horses to walk, in order to be able to converse.

“I much regret, madame, that it was true,” he replied.

“All of it?”

“All of it.”

“And there exists somewhere or other a document which inculpates Dudley Chisholm?”

“Yes, it inculpates him very gravely, I am sorry to say.”

“Sorry! Why?”

“Well, because he is madame’s friend—her very best friend, if report speaks the truth.” There was a sarcastic ring in his words which she did not fail to detect, and it stung her to fury.

“I cannot see why you should entertain the least sympathy for my friend,” she remarked in a hard voice. “More especially for one unknown to you.”

“Oh, we have met!” her companion said. “We met in Paris long since on an occasion when I was travelling incognito, and I liked him. Indeed, he was dining at the Carlton a week ago at the next table to me.”

“And you are aware of the nature of this secret, which, according to what you tell me, must some day or other bring about his utter downfall?”

“Ah, no. Madame misunderstands me entirely,” he hastened to protest. “I am not a diplomatist, nor have I any connection, official or otherwise, with diplomacy. I merely told you of a matter which had come to my knowledge. Recollect, that a young man in Chisholm’s position of responsibility must have a large number of jealous enemies. Perhaps it will be owing to one of these that the secret will leak out.”

“It will be used for a political purpose, you mean?”

“Exactly,” replied the Grand-Duke. “Your Government, what with the two or three contending parties, is always at war, as it were, and the Opposition, as you term it, may, as a coup de grace to the Government, reveal the secret.”

“But you told me that it was a document, and that it reposed safely in one of the Chancelleries in a foreign capital, if I remember aright,” she said. “Now, tell me honestly, is St. Petersburg the capital you refer to?”

“No, it is not,” he replied promptly.

“And the Embassy in London that is aware of the truth is not in Chesham Place?”

“Most assuredly not, madame,” he replied.

“Cannot you be more explicit,” she urged. “Cannot you, if you are my friend, as you have more than once declared yourself to be, tell me more regarding this extraordinary matter which is to create such a terrible scandal?”

“No, it is impossible—utterly impossible. If I could, I would tell madame everything. But my information really carries me no further than the bare fact that a certain Power antagonistic to England has been able to secure a document which must prove the ruin of the most brilliant and promising of the younger English statesmen.”

“And have you really no idea whatever as to the nature of the secret?”

“None.”

“From what you tell me one would almost infer that Dudley Chisholm had been guilty of some crime. Have you no suspicion of its nature?”

“Absolutely none,” her companion declared. “The only other fact I know is the whereabouts of the document in question, and that I must keep a secret, according to my solemn promise.”

“You promised not to divulge the direction in which danger lies?” she said suspiciously. “Why did you do so? You surely must have had some motive!”

“I had none. The affair was mentioned to me confidentially, and I was compelled to promise that I would give no indication as to what person held the incriminating paper. I told madame of its existence merely to warn her, and perhaps to prepare her for an unwelcome revelation.”

“You refuse to tell me more?” she asked quickly, “even though you must be aware how deeply this extraordinary matter affects me?”

“I am compelled to refuse, madame,” he answered in the same calm, unruffled tone. “I cannot break my word of honour.”

Chapter Sixteen.

Suggests a Double Problem.

Fashion, as we call it, is in these decadent days at the mercy of any millionaire pork-butcher, or any enterprising adventurer from across the seas. Victorian literature has declined into the "short story" and the "problem play," taking its heroines from among women with a past and its heroes from the slums. In prose, in verse, and in conversation, the favourite style is the Cockney slang of the costermonger, the betting-ring, and the barrack canteen. Is it not appalling that the reek of the pot-house, the music-hall, the turf, the share-market, the thieves' doss-house infects our literature, our manners, our amusements, and our ideals of life? Yet is it not the truth?

Dudley, yielding to Claudia's persuasion, gave a large house-party at Wroxeter during the Christmas recess. As he was too much occupied with his public duties to be able to arrange the affair himself, she returned from Market Harborough and went down to Shropshire to make his arrangements. Truth to tell, he was wearied of the nightly discussions in the House and his daily work at the Foreign Office, and looked forward to a brief period of relaxation and gaiety, when he could entertain his friends. He left everything to her, just as he had done on several previous occasions. Very soon after his decision to ask his friends down to the old feudal castle, Wroxeter was the scene of much cleaning and garnishing.

Claudia, whose charm of manner was unequalled, was an admirable hostess of striking individuality, and her own entertainments were always brilliant successes. Royalties came to her small parties, and every one who was any one was seen at her receptions. She it was who decided what guests should be asked to Wroxeter, and who sent out the invitations; then, after seeing that all was in complete readiness, she returned again to town. She was a born entertainer, and never so happy as when arranging a social function, whether it was a dinner, private theatricals, a bazaar, or a theatre supper at the Carlton. It follows that as regards the arrangement of Dudley's house-party at Wroxeter she was entirely in her element.

A paragraph crept into the papers announcing how the popular Under-Secretary intended to spend the recess. This was copied into hundreds of papers all over the country with that rapidity with which the personal paragraph always travels.

Of course the invitations were sent out in Dudley's name, and the fact that Claudia had arranged the whole matter was carefully concealed. As the relict

of Dick Nevill she had a perfect right to act as hostess on Chisholm's behalf if she so desired, but Dudley had strenuously refused to allow this, for people might renew their ill-natured gossip. He had no desire to submit either Claudia or himself to a fresh burst of scandal.

The House rose. Three days later the guests began to assemble at Wroxeter, making the old halls echo with their laughter in a manner in which they had not echoed for many years. Claudia herself did not arrive until a couple of days later, but the arrangements she had made with the housekeeper were perfect.

The guests numbered thirty-three, nearly all of them Dudley's most intimate friends, including a Cabinet Minister and a sprinkling of political notabilities. Among them were, of course, some smart women and pretty girls; and with a perfect round of entertainment the Christmas festival was kept in a right royal manner, worthy the best traditions of the Chisholms. Holly boughs and mistletoe were suspended in the great oak-panelled hall, while a boar's head and other old-world dishes formed part of the fare on Christmas Day. Outside, the weather was intensely cold, for snow had fallen heavily and had now frozen, giving the park and the surrounding hills quite a fairy-like appearance. It was in every respect such a festival as we most of us desire, "an old-fashioned Christmas."

The Grand-Duke was in Paris, and Dudley was secretly glad that on this account he could not be invited. But among the guests were the portly Lady Meldrum, whose black satin seemed a fixed part of her, her inoffensive husband, Sir Henry, and pretty, fair-haired Muriel Mortimer. Benthall, the Member for East Glamorganshire, was, of course, there, but the colonel, who had been his fellow-guest for the shooting, had gone to Cannes for the winter, in accordance with his usual habit.

With such a party, a woman's directing influence was, of course, indispensable, but Claudia acted the part of hostess in a manner so unobtrusive that no one could demur. So skilfully planned was the whole affair that a perfect round of gaiety was enjoyed each day, with some amusement to attract everybody.

Compelled to be civil and affable to everybody, Dudley somehow found himself more often in the company of Muriel Mortimer than in that of Claudia. Whether it was that Lady Meldrum's ward deliberately sought his society, or whether chance threw them together so often, he could not decide. At any rate, he played billiards with her, danced with her, and always found her seat close to his at the head of the table.

On the morning following the revels of Christmas night most of the guests were late down to breakfast save Muriel, who was one of the first to appear. Dudley met her in the great old room and bent over her hand in salutation. She had been the prettiest woman at the dance on the previous night, and her unaffected manner had again attracted him. But as he stood before the big wood-fire, chatting with her and awaiting the others, a curious thought crossed his mind. There, in that very room, a couple of months earlier, he had been warned against her by the blunt old colonel; and yet he was now entertaining her beneath his roof.

Their eyes met as they were speaking, and he saw that hers were clear, blue, wide open, with an expression of perfect frankness. Yes, she was altogether charming in her simple morning gown. Why in the world had the colonel so distinctly warned him? What harm could there possibly be in their meeting?

Claudia, who, strangely enough, evinced no jealousy because of his constant companionship with her, was standing near the window, handsomely and becomingly clad, chatting with old Sir Henry Meldrum, now and then glancing in the direction of the man for whom she had confessed her love. Dudley noticed these glances, but went on talking, though rather mechanically, with the sweet, ingenuous girl whom the colonel had declared he ought to avoid. Claudia herself had arranged her seat at table close to him; she had even suggested on the previous afternoon that as Muriel liked billiards, her host should play with her, and had herself whispered in his ear at the dance to invite Lady Meldrum's ward to be his partner in the "Washington Post."

All this puzzled him, as the truth was slowly revealed to him. And, after all, who was this pretty Muriel?

From a dozen different sources he had endeavoured to obtain some information regarding her birth and parentage, but all he could gather was of a contradictory nature. One old dowager had told him that she was the only daughter and heiress of the late Charles Mortimer, a great Liverpool ship-owner and intimate friend of Sir Henry's. From another source he learnt that she was the daughter of a man who had been for some years partner with the ironmaster; while a third person hinted mysteriously that her parentage was unknown, and that she had merely been adopted by Sir Henry and his wife, chiefly because they were childless. All this was perplexing, to say the least of it.

He had laughed heartily when the old colonel had warned him against her, declaring that he had no desire to make the acquaintance of the pretty

Unknown. But somehow the mystery surrounding her began to attract him, and he became eager to fathom it.

Later that morning he met Claudia alone in one of the corridors, and took her aside to arrange the entertainment for the morrow. Then, when they had finished, he put a question to her, point-blank: “Who is Muriel Mortimer?” he asked.

She glanced at him quickly, evidently taken somewhat aback by the suddenness of his question.

“My dear Dudley,” she laughed, “I should have thought you knew all about your guests by this time. She is Sir Henry Meldrum’s ward.”

“I know that,” he said, a trifle impatiently. “But who were her parents?”

“I’ve never heard,” she replied. “I don’t think any one knows. Possibly it is some family secret. At least, I’ve always thought so.”

“Then you have already endeavoured to find out?”

“Of course. Curiosity is woman’s nature.”

“And have you discovered nothing of her birth, or who she is?”

“Nothing whatever. A month ago I even went so far as to ask Lady Meldrum.”

“And what was her answer?” he inquired eagerly. “She said that her parentage was a matter that concerned only Muriel herself. Indeed, she seemed quite huffy that I should have dared to broach the subject. But you know how sore that kind of person is in regard to certain points.”

“Then Lady Meldrum gave no reason why Muriel was her husband’s ward?”

“No. Her reply was a polite negative to all inquiries.”

He was silent for a few minutes, leaning against the table and facing her.

“How did you first become acquainted with this estimable pair, Claudia? Tell me, for they interest me.”

“You mean that Muriel interests you,” she laughed mischievously.

“No, I mean that the whole affair appears to me full of mystery.”

“I first met Lady Meldrum at a bazaar with which I was connected in aid of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. We held a stall together.”

“You had never met her, or known her before?”
“Never. She was the wife of a Glasgow knight, and quite unknown in London.”
“Was Muriel with her at the bazaar?”
“I did, not see her. I believe she was away visiting somewhere. Lady Meldrum spoke of her, I recollect quite distinctly.”
“And it was you who afterwards introduced her in town. I presume she owes all her social success to you?”
“Yes, I believe she does,” she replied.
“Then I consider it curious that she has never confided in you the secret of Muriel’s birth. She surely could not expect you to stand sponsor for a girl of whom you knew nothing?”
“Oh, how absurdly you talk, Dudley!” she laughed airily. “Whatever is in your mind? If Muriel Mortimer amuses you, as apparently she does, what does her parentage matter? Sir Henry and her ladyship are perfectly respectable persons, and even though they may be of somewhat plebeian origin they don’t offend by bad manners. Can it be that your thirst for knowledge is due to a vague idea that Muriel might one day be the châtelaine of this place, eh?”
She looked him full in the face with the dark and brilliant eyes that had always held him spellbound. She was a clever woman, and with feminine intuition knew exactly the power she possessed over the man whom she loved with a passion so fierce and uncurbed that she had been led to overstep the conventionalities.
“Muriel Mortimer will never be mistress here,” he said in a hard voice, a trifle annoyed at her final remark. “You yourself have invited her here as my guest, and I am bound to be civil, but beyond that—well, I hope that we shall not meet again after this party breaks up.”
“And yet you want to know all about her, with the eagerness of an ardent lover!” she laughed sarcastically.
“I have reasons—strong ones,” he answered firmly.
Again she raised her eyes to his, but rather furtively, as though she were seeking to discover the reason of this sudden anxiety and was not quite sure of how much he knew.
“Then if you consider the matter of sufficient importance, why not ask Lady Meldrum herself?” she suggested. “To you she may perhaps give a more satisfactory answer.”
“How can I? Don’t be ridiculous, my dear Claudia,” said the Under-Secretary.

“Then if the girl is really nothing to you, let the matter drop,” she urged. “In what way does her parentage concern either you or me?”
“It does concern me,” he answered in a hard tone, his brow clouded by thought.
“How?”
“For reasons known only to myself,” he responded enigmatically. He was thinking of the colonel’s warning, which had been troubling him ever since breakfast. It was the irony of fate that he was now compelled to entertain the very woman against whom his best friend had uttered the strange words he recollected so well. He had broached the matter to Benthall, but it was evident that the latter was not aware of the colonel’s reasons for denouncing her as an undesirable acquaintance.
A silence had fallen between the pair, but it was at length broken by Claudia, who said:

“Tell me, Dudley, what is it that is troubling you?”

“Yes,” he responded promptly, “I will tell you. I wish to know the reason why you invited this family beneath my roof. You had a motive, Claudia. Come now, confess it.”

She opened her eyes, startled by his words.

“My dear Dudley,” she cried. “Why, I only invited them because Lady Meldrum was my friend. They were extremely kind to me down at Fernhurst, and I thought that you would be pleased to offer them the hospitality of the Castle for Christmas. You had met them at the Duchess of Penarth’s, and both Lady Meldrum and Muriel were never tired of singing your praises. They went one night to hear you address the House, I believe.”

“Yes, I know about it. She told me!” exclaimed the Under-Secretary petulantly. “But there’s some hidden motive in their actions—of that I’m absolutely convinced.”

Chapter Seventeen.

Recounts Curious Circumstances.

Even though the House stood prorogued for yet another ten days, formidable packets of documents continually reached Dudley Chisholm from the Foreign Office, sometimes through the post, and at others by special messenger. England's relations with the Powers were, as usual, not very reassuring, hence the Parliamentary Under-Secretary was kept busy, and every moment he could snatch from his guests was spent in the library among the heaps of papers with which his table was always littered. Wrey, his private secretary, was absent on leave, for the holidays, and, therefore, the whole of the work fell upon him.

Each night, after the men had finished their whiskey and their gossip in the smoking-room, he would retire to the big, book-lined chamber, and plunge into the work, often difficult and tedious, which the nation expected of him.

Usually during the half hour before dinner some of the guests would assemble in the great, brown, old room to gossip, and the cosy-corner beside the big wood-fire was a favourite resting-place of Muriel's. She generally dressed early, and with one or other of the younger men would sit there and chat until the dinner-bell sounded. The fine old chamber, with its overmantel bearing the three water-bougets argent, its lining of books, and its oaken ceiling was quiet and secluded from the rest of the house, the ideal refuge of a studious man.

Dudley, having occasion to enter there on the second evening following his conversation with Claudia, related in the foregoing chapter, found Sir Henry's ward sitting alone in the cosy-corner, half hidden by the draperies. The light from the green-shaded lamp, insufficient to illuminate the whole place, only revealed the table with its piles of papers, but upon her face the firelight danced, throwing her countenance into bold relief. As she sat there in her pale-blue dress she made a picture of a most contenting sort.

"What! alone!" he exclaimed pleasantly as he advanced to meet her, settling his dress-tie with his hand, for he had just come in from a drive and had slipped into his clothes hurriedly.

"Yes," she laughed, stretching forth her small foot coquettishly upon the red Turkey rug before the fire. "You men are so long making your toilette; and yet you blame us for all our fal-lals."

"Haven't you been out?"

“Yes,” she answered; “I went this afternoon into Shrewsbury with Lady Richard to do some shopping. What a curious old town it is! I’ve never been there before, and was most interested.”

“True it’s old-fashioned, and far behind the times, Miss Mortimer,” he said, smiling, as he stood before her, his back to the fire. “But I always thought that you did not care for the antique.”

“The antique! Why, I adore it! This splendid castle of yours is unique. I confess to you that I’ve slipped away and wandered about it for hours, exploring all sorts of winding stairways and turret-chambers unknown to any one except the servants. I had no idea Wroxeter was so charming. One can imagine oneself back in the Middle Ages with men in armour, sentries, knights, lady-loves and all the rest of it.”

He laughed lightly, placed his hands behind his back, and looked straight at her.

“I’m very glad the old place interests you,” he replied. “Fernhurst is comparatively modern, is it not?”

“Horribly modern as compared with Wroxeter,” she said, leaning back and gazing up at him with her clear blue eyes. “Sir Henry was sadly imposed upon when he bought it three years ago—at least, so I believe.”

Dudley was at heart rather annoyed at finding her there alone, for a glance at his littered table caused him to recollect that among those papers there were several confidential documents which had reached him that morning, and which he had been in the act of examining when called to go out driving with two of his guests. Usually he locked the library door on such occasions, but with his friends in the house the act of securing the door of one of the most popular of the apartments was, he thought, a measure not less grave than a spoken insult.

He was suspicious of the fair-eyed girl. Although he could not account for it in the least, the strange suspicion had grown upon him that she was not what she represented herself to be. And yet, on the other hand, neither in actions nor words was she at all obtrusive, but, on the contrary, extremely popular with every one, including Claudia, who had herself declared her to be charming. He wondered whether she had been amusing herself by prying into the heap of papers spread upon his blotting-pad, and glanced across at them. No. They lay there just in the same position, secured by the heavy paper-weight under which he had put them earlier in the afternoon.

And yet, after all, he was a fool to run such risks, he told himself. To fear to offend the susceptibilities of his guests was all very well, but with the many confidential documents in his possession he ought in all conscience to be more careful.

As the evening was biting cold and the keen north-east wind had caught his face while driving, in the warmth his cheeks were burning hot. Muriel, practised flirt that she was, believed their redness to be due to an inward turmoil caused by her presence. Hence she presumed to coquet with him, laughing, joking, chaffing in a manner which displayed her conversational, mobility to perfection. He, on his part, allowed her to proceed, eager to divine her motive.

“We go south at the end of January,” she said at last, in answer to his question. “Sir Henry thinks of taking a villa at Beaulieu this season. Last year we were in Nice, but found it too crowded and noisy at Carnival.”

“Beaulieu is charming,” he said. “More especially that part known as La Petite Afrique.”

“That’s where the villa is situated—facing the sea. One of those four white villas in the little bay.”

“The most charming spot on the whole Riviera. By the way,” he added, “one of my old friends is already in Cannes, Colonel Murray-Kerr. Do you happen to know him? He was military attach at Vienna, Rome and Paris until he retired.”

A curious expression passed over her countenance as he mentioned the name. But it vanished instantly, as, glancing up, she looked at him with the frank look that was so characteristic.

“No. I don’t think we have ever met. Murray-Kerr? No. The name is not familiar. He was in the diplomatic service, you say?”

“Yes, for about fifteen years. I had hoped he would have been one of the party here, but he slipped away a week ago, attracted, as usual in winter, by the charms of Cannes.”

“He gambles at Monte Carlo, I suppose?”

“I think not. He’s, nowadays, one of the old fogies of the Junior United Service, and thinks of nothing but the lustre of his patent-leather boots and the chance of shooting with friends. But he’s so well-known in town, I felt sure that you must have met him,” added Dudley meaningly.

“One meets so many people,” she replied carelessly, “and so many are not introduced by name, that it is difficult to recollect. We haven’t the least knowledge of the names of people we’ve known by sight for months. And I’m awfully bad at recollecting names. I always remember faces, but can’t furnish them with names. The position is often extremely awkward and ludicrous.”

The false note in her explanation did not escape his sensitive hearing. Her sudden glances of surprise and annoyance when he had mentioned the colonel’s name had roused suspicion in his mind, and he felt convinced that she was well acquainted with the man who had warned him against her in such mysterious terms.

“If I remember aright,” he said, “the colonel once mentioned you.”

“Mentioned me?” she exclaimed with undisguised surprise, and not without an expression of alarm. In an instant, however, she recovered her self-possession. “Did he say any nice things of me?”

“Of course,” he laughed. “Could he say otherwise?”

“Ah! I don’t know. He might if he was not acquainted with me.”

“Then he is acquainted with you?” exclaimed Dudley quickly.

“No, why—how silly! I really do not know your friend. Indeed, I have never heard of him. It seems that if what you tell me is correct I have an unknown admirer.”

Dudley smiled. He was reflecting upon the colonel’s warning, and her replies to his questions made it all the more plain that she was denying knowledge of a man with whom she was well acquainted.

“Did he say when he had met me?” she asked.

“I don’t really recollect. The conversation took place while several other persons were talking loudly, and many of his words were lost to me.”

“He discussed my merits before we met at the duchess’s, I presume?”

“Yes. As I had not at that time the honour of your acquaintance, I took but little heed of the conversation.”

She looked at him with a covert glance, and with her fingers turned one of her rings round and round in a quick, nervous way. What, she was

wondering, had Colonel Murray-Kerr said about her? The fact that she had been discussed by him was to her extremely disconcerting.

“Well,” she exclaimed a moment later, with a forced laugh, “as long as your friend did not speak ill of me, I suppose I ought not to complain of having my personal points openly discussed! Most smart women court the publicity of a smoking-room discussion.”

“Yes,” he replied in a hard voice, wondering whether her words were directed against Claudia, “unfortunately they do. But there are smart women and smart women. I trust, Miss Mortimer, that you have no desire to develop into one of the latter.”

“Certainly not,” she answered in all earnestness.

Half rising, she put her hand into her dress pocket, ostensibly to obtain her handkerchief, but in reality to place there a small piece of paper which she had crushed into her palm and held concealed when Dudley entered.

Her deft movement as she hid the paper was so swift that it entirely escaped his notice, while at the same moment Claudia, accompanied by two of the male guests, came into the library, thus putting an end to their tête-à-tête.

Dudley, still standing before the burning logs, continued chatting to Sir Henry’s ward, but, owing to the arrival of his other guests, it was no longer possible to keep the conversation in the same channel.

As he sat at dinner he could not prevent his eyes from wandering across to Muriel and from allowing strange thoughts to flit through his mind. At what had the colonel hinted in that very room months ago, when he had warned him to beware of her? He knew Murray-Kerr to be an easy-going cosmopolitan, whose acquaintance with diplomatic Europe was perhaps more extensive than that of any other living man, yet what possible object could he have had in urging him to be careful when he met that innocent-looking woman scarcely out of her teens?

Why Claudia had invited a woman who might become her rival in his affections was another enigma which was puzzling. There was some distinct object in this policy, but its real nature he was quite unable to fathom.

That night there was, as usual, a dance in the old banqueting hall, the high-roofed chamber that had long ago echoed to the boisterous merrymaking of those armoured knights whose coats of mail now stood round, and whose tattered banners hung above. Until half a century back, the old stone flooring, worn hollow by the tramp of generations of retainers, still existed,

but Dudley's grandfather had had an oak flooring placed over it, and it now served as the ballroom, even though at one end was the enormous hearth, where an ox could be roasted whole, while the wooden benches, at which the banqueters used to hold revel, served as seats for those who did not dance.

Few of the guests, however, refrained from the waltzing, so delightful were the attendant circumstances. Once during the evening Dudley found himself taking a turn with Claudia.

"I've wanted to speak to you for nearly an hour past," she whispered to him, so low that none could overhear. "Some man, apparently an undesirable person, has called to see you."

"To see me—at this hour? Why, it's past midnight!" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"He will not give any details regarding his business," she went on. "He only expressed a desire that none of the guests should be aware of his presence, and that he might have an interview alone with you."

"A rather curious request at this time of night," her companion observed. She noticed that he had turned pale, and that the hand holding hers perceptibly trembled. Their glances met, and he saw in her dark and brilliant eyes the love-look of old that was so unmistakable. Upon her countenance there was a look of concern, and this he strove at once to dispel by saying airily:

"I suppose it is some one who wants assistance or something. Where is he?"

"In your secretary's room. I had him shown there, in order that his wish regarding the secrecy of his visit should be respected."

"Then you have seen him?"

"Yes. You were not to be found at the moment, so, hearing the message he had given the servant, I saw him myself. He's middle-aged, and rather shabbily dressed. From the state of his clothes I should think that he's walked over from Shrewsbury. He told me that the matter on which he desired to see you was of the greatest urgency, and apologised for calling at such an hour."

"Well," he answered, "I suppose I'd better go and see the fellow, whoever he is. He may be some political crank or other. There are so many about."

“Yes,” Claudia urged; “if I were you I’d go at once, and get rid of him. It appears that Riggs told him you could not be seen until the morning, but he absolutely refused to be sent away.”

“Very well, I’ll go and see who he is,” replied the Under-Secretary, only remaining calm by dint of the most strenuous effort. Then, leading his partner to a seat, he bowed, took leave of her, and slipped away from the ball through several arched doors and down the two long corridors until he came to a door at the end.

He was in the east wing of the castle, a part to which the visitors did not penetrate, for to do so it was necessary to cross the kitchen.

Before the closed door he paused, held his breath, and placed his hand instinctively upon his heart, as though to still its beating. He dared not advance farther.

Who, he wondered, was his visitor? Could it be that the blow which he had expected for so long had at length fallen?

Chapter Eighteen.

Introduces an Interesting Person.

He hesitated for a moment; then, setting his jaws hard in sudden resolution, he turned the door-handle and entered.

Within, the long, low-ceilinged room was furnished as a kind of office. From an armchair near the fireless grate rose the spare figure of a grey-haired, grey-eyed, haggard-faced man of a type which might be described as shabby-genteel, a man who had without doubt seen better days. His features were refined, but his cheeks were sunken until the bones of the face showed plainly beneath the skin, and his hair and moustache, though grey, had prematurely lost their original colour. His tall, slim figure was straight, and he bowed to Chisholm with the easy manner of a gentleman. His overcoat of shabby grey Irish frieze was open, displaying a coat and vest much the worse for wear, while his upturned trousers were sodden by the melting snow.

“I understand that you wish, to see me,” Chisholm began, glancing at the fellow keenly, and not half liking his appearance. “This is a rather unusual hour for a visit, is it not?”

“Yes,” the man replied. “For the lateness of the hour I must apologise, but my trains did not fit, and I was compelled to walk from Shrewsbury.” He spoke in a refined voice, and his bearing was not that of a person who intended to ask assistance. Dudley possessed a quick insight into character, and could sum up a man as sharply and correctly as a lawyer with a wide experience of criminals.

“And what may your business be with me?” asked the master of Wroxeter.

The man glanced suspiciously at the door by which Dudley had entered, and asked:

“Are we alone? Do you think there can possibly be any eavesdroppers?”

“Certainly not. But I cannot understand why your business should be of such a purely private character. You are entirely unknown to me, and I understand that you refused to give a card.” He uttered the last words with a slight touch of sarcasm, for the man’s appearance was not such as would warrant the casual observer in believing him to be possessed of that mark of gentility.

“Of course I am unknown to you, Mr Chisholm. But although unknown to you in person, I am probably known to you by name.” As he spoke, he selected from his rather shabby pocket-book a folded paper, which he handed to Dudley. “This credential will, I think, satisfy you.”

Dudley took it, glanced at it, and started quickly. Then he fixed his eyes upon his visitor in boundless surprise. The man before him smiled faintly at the impression which the sight of that document had caused. The paper was headed with the British arms in scarlet, and contained only three lines written over a signature he knew well—the signature of the Prime Minister of England.

“And you are really Captain Cator?” exclaimed the Under-Secretary, looking at him in amazement, and handing him back his credential.

“Yes, Archibald Cator, chief of Her Majesty’s Secret Service,” said the shrunken-faced man. “We have had correspondence on more than one occasion, but have never met, for the simple reason that I am seldom in England. Now you will at once recognise why I refused a card, and also why I wished my visit to you to remain a secret.”

“Of course, of course,” answered Dudley. “I had no suspicion of your identity, and—well, if you will permit me to say so, your personal appearance at this moment is scarcely that which might be expected of Captain Archibald Cator, military attach in Rome.”

“Exactly! But I have been paying a call earlier in the day, and shabbiness was a necessity,” he explained with a laugh. “Besides, I tramped all the way from Shrewsbury and—”

“And you are wet and cold. You’ll have a stiff whiskey and soda.” Dudley pressed the bell and, when Riggs appeared, gave the necessary order.

“You won’t return to-night, of course,” suggested Chisholm. “I’ll tell them to get a room ready for you.”

“Thanks for your hospitality, but my return is absolutely imperative. There is a train from Shrewsbury to town at 4:25 in the morning. I must leave by that.”

Both men sank into chairs opposite each other in the chill, rather gloomy, room. The mysterious visitor who had called at that extraordinary hour was one of the most trusted and faithful servants at the disposal of the Foreign Office. Although nominally holding the appointment of military attach at the Embassy in Rome, he was in reality the chief of the British Secret Service on

the Continent, a man whose career had been replete with extraordinary adventures, to whose marvellous tact, ready ingenuity, and careful methods of investigation, England was indebted for many of the diplomatic coups she had made during the past dozen years or so.

In the diplomatic circle, and in the British colony in Rome, every one knew Archie Cator, for he was popular everywhere, and a welcome visitor at the houses of the English and the wealthier Italians alike. It was often hinted that in the Foreign Office at home he possessed influential friends, for whenever he wished for leave he had only to wire to London to obtain a grant of absence. The supposition was that in summer he went to his pretty villa at Ardenza, on the Tuscan shore near Leghorn, there to enjoy the sea-breezes, or in winter over to Cairo or Algiers. None knew, save, of course, Her Majesty's Ambassador, that these frequent periods of leave were spent in flying visits to one or other of the capitals of Europe to direct the operations of the band of confidential agents under him, or that the attach so popular with the ladies was in reality the Prince of Spies.

Spying is against an Englishman's notion of fair-play, but to such an extent have the other great Powers carried the operation of their various Intelligence Departments that to the Foreign Office the secret service has become a most necessary adjunct. Were it not for its operations, and the early intelligence it obtains, England would often be left out of the diplomatic game, and British interests would suffer to an extent that would soon become alarming, even to that puerile person, the Little Englander. Officially no person connected with the Secret Service is recognised, except its chief, and he, in order to cloak his real position, was at that moment holding the post of attaché in Rome, where he had but little to do, since Italy was the Power most friendly towards England.

Stories without number of the captain's prowess, of his absolute fearlessness, and of his marvellous ingenuity as a spy in the interests of his country, had already reached Chisholm. They were whispered within a certain circle at the Foreign Office when from time to time a copy of a secret document, or a piece of remarkable intelligence reached headquarters from Paris, Berlin, or Petersburg. They knew that it came from Archie Cator, the wiry, middle-aged attach who idled in the salons of the Eternal City, drove in the Corso, and, especially as he was an easy-going bachelor, found remarkable favour in the eyes of the ladies.

He lived two lives. In the one he was a diplomatist, smart, polished, courtly—the perfect model of all a British attach should be. In the other he was a shrewd, crafty spy, possessed of a tact unequalled by any detective officer at Scotland Yard, a brain fertile in invention and subterfuge, and

nerves of iron. In Rome, in Paris and in Petersburg, only the ambassadors knew the secret of his real office. He transacted his business direct with them and with the chief in London, Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Indeed, British diplomatic policy was often based upon his reports and suggestions. The utmost care was always exercised to conceal his real office from the staffs of the various Embassies. They only knew him as Archie Cator from Rome, the man with a friend high up in the Foreign Office who got him short leave whenever he chose to take it.

The money annually voted by Parliament for secret service was entirely at his disposal, and the only account he rendered was to the chief himself. The department was a costly one, for often he was compelled to bribe heavily through his agents, men specially selected for the work of spying; and as these numbered nearly forty, distributed in the various capitals, the expenditure was by no means light. With such a director, for whose methods, indeed, the staff at Scotland Yard had the highest admiration, the successes were many. To Cator's untiring energy, skilful perception, and exhaustless ingenuity in worming out secrets, our diplomatic success in various matters, despite the conspiracies formed against us by certain of the Powers, was entirely due. The Foreign Secretary himself had, it was whispered, once remarked at a Cabinet meeting that if England possessed half a dozen Cators she would need no ambassadors. The marquess trusted him implicitly, relying as much upon his judgment as upon that of the oldest and most practised representative of Her Majesty at any of the European courts.

If the truth were told, the secret of England's dominant influence in Central Africa was entirely due to the discovery of a diplomatic intrigue in Berlin by the omnipotent Cator, who, at risk of his life, secured a certain document which placed our Foreign Office in a position to dictate to the Powers. It was a master-stroke, and as a partial return for it the popular, cigarette-smoking attach in Rome, found one morning upon his table an autograph letter of thanks from Her Majesty's Prime Minister. When occupying his position as attach he was an idler about the Eternal City, an inveterate theatre-goer, and a well-known, and even ostentatious, figure in Roman society. But when at work he was patient, unobtrusive, and usually ill-dressed, moving quickly hither and thither, taking long night journeys by the various rapides, caring nothing for fatigue, and directing his corps of secret agents as a general does an army.

Knowledge is power. Hence England is compelled to hold her place in the diplomatic intrigues of the world by the employment of secret agents. There

are many doors to be unlocked, and to men like Cator, England does not grudge golden keys.

Riggs had brought the whiskey and soda, and the man whose career would have perhaps made the finest romance ever written, had drained a tumblerful thirstily, with a laugh and a word of excuse that "the way had been long, and the wind cold."

When they were alone again, he twisted the rather stubby ends of his grey moustache, and with his eyes fixed upon the Under-Secretary said:

"I should not have disturbed you at this hour, Mr Chisholm, were not the matter one of extreme urgency."

Dudley sat eager and anxious, wondering what could have brought this man to England. A grave and horrible suspicion had seized him that the truth he dreaded was actually out—that the blow had fallen. No secret was safe from Cator. As he had obtained knowledge of the profoundest secrets of the various European Powers in a manner absolutely incredible, what chance was there to hide from him any information which he had set his mind to obtain. "Is the matter serious?" he asked vaguely.

"For the present I cannot tell whether it is actually as serious as it appears to be," the other answered with a grave look. "As you are well aware, the outlook abroad at this moment is far from promising. There is more than one deep and dastardly intrigue against us. The diplomatic air on the Continent is full of rumours of antagonistic alliances against England, and even Mercier, in Paris, has actually gone the length of planning an invasion. But a fig for all the bumptious chatter of French invasions!" he said, snapping his finger and thumb. "What we have to regard at this moment is not menaces abroad, but perils at home."

"I hardly follow you," observed the Under-secretary.

"Well, I arrived in London from the Continent the night before last upon a confidential mission, and it is in order to obtain information from yourself that I am here to-night," he explained. "Perhaps the fact that I have not had my clothes off for the past five days, and that I have been in four of the capitals of Europe during the same period, will be sufficient to convince you of the urgency of the matter in hand. Besides, it may account for my somewhat unrepresentable appearance," he added with a good-humoured laugh. "But now let us get at once to the point, for I have but little time to spare if I'm to catch the early express back to London. The matter is strictly private, and all I ask, Mr Chisholm, is that what passes between us goes no further than these four walls. Recollect that my position is one of constant

and extreme peril. I am the confidential agent of the Foreign Office, and you are its Parliamentary Under-secretary. Therefore, in our mutual interests, no word must escape you either in regard to my visit here, or even to the fact that I have been in England. London to-day swarms with foreign spies, and if I am recognised all my chances of being successful in the present matter must at once vanish."

"I am all attention," said Dudley, interested to hear something from this gatherer of the secrets of the nation. "If I can give you any assistance I shall be most ready to do so."

"Then let me put a question to you, which please answer truthfully, for much depends upon it," he said slowly, his eyes fixed upon the man before him as he pensively twisted his moustache. "Were you ever acquainted with a man named Lennox?"

The words fell upon Dudley Chisholm like a thunderclap. Yes, the blow had fallen! He started, then, gripping the arms of the chair, sat upright and motionless as a statue, his face blanched to the lips. He knew that the ghastly truth, so long concealed that he had believed the matter forgotten, was out. Ruin stood before him. His secret was known.

Chapter Nineteen.

A Man of Secrets Speaks.

Archibald Cator's bony face was grave, serious, sphinx-like. His personality was strange and striking.

He had detected in an instant the sudden alarm which his question had aroused within the mind of the man before him, but, pretending not to observe it, he added with a pleasant air:

"You will, of course, forgive anything which may appear to be an impertinent cross-examination, Mr Chisholm. Both of us are alike working in the interests of our country, and certain facts which I have recently unearthed are, to say the least, extremely curious. They even constitute a great danger. Do you happen to remember any one among your acquaintances named Lennox—Major Mayne Lennox?"

Mayne Lennox! Mention of that name brought before Chisholm's eyes a grim and ghastly vision of the past—a past which he had fondly believed was long ago dead and buried. There arose the face that had haunted him so continuously, that white countenance which appeared to him in his dreams and haunted him even in the moments of his greatest triumphs, social and political.

The shabbily attired man patiently awaited an answer, his eyes fixed upon the man before him.

"Yes," answered Dudley at last, with a strenuous effort to calm the tumultuous beating of his heart.

"I was once acquainted with a man of that name."

His visitor slowly changed his position, and a strange half-smile played about the corners of his mouth, as though that admission was the sum of his desire.

"May I ask under what circumstances you met this person?" he inquired, adding: "I am not asking through any idle motive of curiosity, but in order to complete a series of inquiries I have in hand, it is necessary for certain points to be absolutely clear."

"We met at a card-party in a friend's rooms," Dudley said. "I saw something of him at Hastings, where he was spending the summer. Afterwards, I believe, he went abroad. But we have not met for years."

“For how many years?”

“Oh, seven, or perhaps eight! I really could not say exactly.”

“Are you certain that Mayne Lennox went abroad?” inquired Cator as though suddenly interested.

“Yes. He told me that he had lived on the Continent for a great many years, mostly in Italy, I think. He often spoke of a villa he had outside Perugia, and I presume that he returned there.”

“Ah, exactly!” said his visitor, again twisting his moustache, as was his habit when deep in thought. “And you have not seen him for some years?”

“No. But is it regarding Major Lennox that you are making inquiries? He surely had no political connections?”

“My inquiries concern him indirectly,” admitted the man with the hollow cheeks. “I am seeking to discover him.”

“Surely that will not be difficult. A retired officer is usually found with the utmost ease.”

“Yes. But from inquiries I have already made I have come to the conclusion that he returned to England again. If so, my difficulty increases.” Dudley was silent for some moments. Was this man telling the truth? he wondered.

“May I ask what is your object in discovering him?” he inquired, feeling that as he had now answered Cator’s questions he might be permitted to ask some himself.

“I desire to ascertain from him certain facts which will elucidate what remains at present a profound mystery,” the other replied. “Indeed, a statement by him will place in our hands a weapon by which we can thwart certain of the Powers who are launching a powerful combination against us.”

Cator, who occupied the post that Colonel Murray-Kerr had once held, was himself a skilled diplomatist. As the confusion caused in the Under-Secretary’s mind at his first question had shown how unlikely it was that he would get a clear statement of the truth, he proceeded to work for the information he wanted, and to work in a cautious and indirect manner. Chisholm, recollecting the confidential document which had passed through his hands some time before, and which had aroused his suspicions, said:

“I think I know the combination to which you refer. Something regarding it leaked out to one of the newspapers a few weeks ago, and a question was asked in the House.”

Cator laughed.

“Yes,” he said, “a question to which you gave a very neat, but altogether unintelligible reply—eh? They were waiting that reply of yours in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a good deal of anxiety, I can tell you. It was telephoned to Paris before you had delivered it.”

“Ah! copied from one of the sheets of replies given out to the Press Gallery, I expect,” observed the Under-Secretary. “But I had no idea that our friends across the Channel were so watchful of my utterances.”

“Oh, aren’t they? They are watchful of your movements, too,” replied the Secret Agent of Her Majesty’s Foreign Office. “Recollect, Mr Chisholm, you as Parliamentary Under-Secretary are in the confidence of the Government, and frequently possess documents and information which to our enemies would be priceless. If I may be permitted to say so, you should be constantly on the alert against any of your papers falling into undesirable hands.”

“But surely none have?” Dudley gasped in alarm.

“None have, to my knowledge,” his visitor replied.

“But information is gained by spies in a variety of ways. Perhaps few know better than myself the perfection of the secret service system of certain Powers who are our antagonists. Few diplomatic secrets are safe from them.”

“And few of the secrets of our rivals are safe from you, Captain Cator—if all I’ve heard be true,” observed Chisholm, smiling.

“Ah!” the other laughed; “I believe I’m credited with performing all sorts of miracles in the way of espionage. I fear I possess a reputation which I in no way desire. But,” he added, “can you tell me nothing more of this man Lennox—of his antecedents, I mean?”

“Nothing. I know absolutely nothing of his people.”

“Can you direct me to the mutual friend at whose rooms you met him, for he might possibly be able to tell us his whereabouts?”

“It was a man in the Worcestershire Regiment; he’s out in Uganda now. Perhaps the War Office knows, for doubtless he draws his pension,” Chisholm suggested.

“No. That source of information has already been tried, but in vain.” The visitor thrust his ungloved hands into the pockets of his shabby overcoat, stretched out his legs, and fixed his keen eyes upon the rising statesman, to interview whom he had travelled post-haste half across Europe.

“If I knew more of the character of your inquiries and the point towards which they are directed I might possibly be able to render you further assistance,” Dudley said after a short pause, hoping to obtain some information from the man who, as he was well aware, so completely possessed the confidence of the controller of England’s destinies.

“Well,” said Cator, after some hesitation, “the matter forms a very tangled and complicated problem. By sheer chance I discovered, by means of a document which was copied in a certain Chancellerie and found its way to me in secret a short time ago, that a movement was afoot in a most unexpected direction to counter-balance Britain’s power on the sea, and oust us from China as a preliminary to a great and terrific war. The document contained extracts of confidential correspondence which had passed between the Foreign Ministers of the two nations implicated, and showed that the details of the conspiracy were arranged with such an exactitude and forethought that by certain means—which were actually given in one of the extracts in question, a grave Parliamentary crisis would be created in England, of which the Powers intended to take immediate advantage in order the better to aim their blow at British supremacy.”

Archibald Cator paused and glanced behind him half suspiciously, as if to make certain that the door was closed, while Chisholm sat erect, immovable, as though turned to stone. What his visitor had told him, confirmed the horrible suspicion which had crept upon him some weeks ago.

“Yes. It was a very neat and very pretty scheme, all of it,” went on the man with the hollow cheeks, giving vent to a short, dry laugh. “During my career I have known many schemes and intrigues with the same object, but never has one been formed with such open audacity, such cool forethought, and such clever ingenuity as the present.”

“Then it still exists?” exclaimed Chisholm quickly.

“Most certainly. My present object is to expose and destroy it,” answered the confidential agent. “That it has the support of two monarchs of known antipathy towards England is plain enough, but our would-be enemies have

no idea that the details of their plot are already in my possession, nor that yesterday I placed the whole of them before the chief. By to-morrow every British Embassy in Europe will be in possession of a cypher despatch from his lordship warning Ministers of the intrigue in progress. The messengers left Charing Cross last night carrying confidential instructions to all the capitals."

"And especially to Vienna, I presume?"

"Yes, especially to Vienna," Cator said, adding, "That, I suppose, you guessed from the tenor of the confidential report from the Austrian capital which passed through your hands a short time back. Do you recollect that your answer to that embarrassing question in the House was supplied to you after a special meeting of the Cabinet?"

"I recollect that was so."

"Then perhaps it may interest you to know that I myself drafted the answer and suggested to the F.O. that it should be given exactly as I had written, it, in order to mislead those who were so ingeniously trying to undermine our prestige. It was our counter-stroke of diplomacy."

This statement of Cator's was a revelation. He had been under the impression that the public reply to the Opposition was the composition of the Foreign Secretary himself.

"Really," he said, "that is most interesting. I had not the least idea that you were responsible for that enigmatical answer. I must congratulate you. It was certainly extremely clever."

The captain smiled, as though gratified by the other's compliment. As he sat there, a wan and very unimpressive figure, none would have believed him to be the great confidential agent who, if the truth were told, was the Foreign Secretary's trusted adviser upon the more delicate matters of European policy. This man with the muddy trousers and frayed suit was actually the intimate friend of princes; he knew reigning Sovereigns personally, had diplomatic Europe at his fingers' ends, and had often been the means of shaping the policy to be employed by England in Europe.

"I must not conceal from you the fact that the present situation is extremely critical," the secret agent went on. "When Parliament reassembles you will find that a strenuous attempt will be made by the Opposition to force your hand. It is part of the game. All replies must be carefully guarded—most carefully."

“That I quite understand.”

“It was certainly most fortunate for us that I, quite by accident, dropped upon the conspiracy,” the other went on. “The man through whom I obtained the copy of the document was a person well-known to us. He was in a high position in his own government, but as his expenditure greatly exceeded his income, the bank drafts that mysteriously found their way into his pocket were most acceptable.”

“You speak in the past tense. Why?”

“Because unfortunately the person in question fell into disgrace a few weeks ago, and was called upon to resign. Hence, our channel of information is, just at the moment when it would be so highly useful, suddenly closed.”

“Fortunate that it was not closed before you could obtain the document which gave you the clue to what was really taking place,” remarked the Under-Secretary. “Cannot you tell me more regarding the plot? From which Chancellerie did the document emanate?”

“Ah, I regret that at this juncture I am not at liberty to say! The matter is still in the most confidential stage. The slightest betrayal of our knowledge may result in disaster. It is the chief’s policy to retain the facts we have gathered and act upon them as soon as the inquiry is complete. For the past three weeks all my endeavours and those of my staff have been directed towards unravelling the mystery presented by the document I have mentioned. In every capital active searches have been made, copies of correspondence secured, prominent statesmen sounded as to their views, and photographs taken of certain letters and plans, all of which go to show the deep conspiracy that is in progress, with the object of striking a staggering blow at us. Yet, strangest of all, there is mention of a matter which is hinted at so vaguely that up to the present I have been unable to form any theory as to what it really is. To put it plainly,” he added, with his eyes fixed upon Chisholm’s face, “in certain parts of the correspondence the name of Mayne Lennox is mentioned in connection with your own.”

“In connection with my own!” gasped Dudley, his face blanching again in an instant. “What statements are made?”

“Nothing is stated definitely,” replied his shabby visitor. “There are only vague hints.”

“Of what?”

“Of the existence of something that I have up to the present failed to discover.”

Dudley Chisholm breathed more freely, but beneath that cold, keen gaze of the man of secrets his eyes wavered. Nevertheless, the fact that Cator was still in ignorance of the truth reassured him, and in an instant he regained his self-possession.

“Curious that I should be mentioned in the same breath, as it were, with a man whom I know so very slightly—very curious,” he observed, as though reflecting.

“It was because of this that I have sought you here to-night,” the confidential agent explained. “I must find this man Lennox, for he alone can throw some light upon the strange hints contained in two of the letters. Then, as soon as we know the truth, the chief will act swiftly and fearlessly to expose and overthrow the dastardly plot. Until all the facts are quite plain it is impossible to move, for in this affair the game of bluff will avail nothing. We must be absolutely certain of our ground before making any attack. Then the whole of Europe will stand aghast, and England will awake one morning to discover how she has been within an ace of disaster.”

“But tell me more of this mention of myself in the confidential correspondence of our enemies,” Dudley urged. “What you have told me has aroused my curiosity.”

“I have told you all that there is to tell at this stage,” Cator replied. “It is most unfortunate that you can give me absolutely no information regarding this man; but I suppose I must seek for it elsewhere. He must be found and questioned, for the allegations are extremely grave, and the situation the most critical I have known in all my diplomatic career.”

“What are the allegations? I thought I understood you that there were only vague hints?” exclaimed Chisholm in suspicion.

“In some letters the hints are vague, but in one there is a distinct and serious charge.”

“Of what?”

“Of a certain matter which, together with the name of the Ministry from which the document was secured, must remain for the present a secret.”

“If the crisis is so very serious I think I, as Parliamentary Under-Secretary, have a right to know,” protested Dudley.

“No. I much regret my inability to reply to your questions, Mr Chisholm,” his visitor answered. “It is, moreover, not my habit to make any statement until an inquiry is concluded, and not even then if the chief imposes silence upon me, as he has done in the present case. Remember that I am in the public service, just as you are. All that has passed between us to-night has passed in the strictest confidence. Any communication made by the chief through you in the House will, in the nation’s interest, be of a kind to mislead and mystify our enemies.”

“But the mention of my own name in these copied letters!” observed the Under-Secretary. “What you have told has only whetted my appetite for further information. I really can’t understand it.”

“No, nor can I,” replied Archibald Cator frankly.

And he certainly spoke the honest truth, even though he knew a good deal more than he had thought it wise to admit.

Chapter Twenty.

Throws Light on the Past.

Finding that his visitor was determined to travel back to London at once, Dudley gave orders for the dog-cart to be brought round to the servants' entrance, for Cator had expressed the strongest desire that his visit should remain unknown.

"Among your guests are several persons who have wintered in Rome, with whom I am on friendly terms. Just now I'm too much occupied to meet them. You'll quite understand," he said.

"Perfectly, my dear sir," replied the Under-secretary, mixing another glass of whiskey for each of them. "In this matter I shall be perfectly silent. From me not a soul will know that you have been in England."

Dudley's spirits had risen, for he imagined that he had successfully evaded the man's inquiries and by that means had staved off the threatened exposure and ruin.

"From what I've explained you will readily recognise how extremely critical is the present situation, and the urgent necessity that exists for a firm and defiant policy on our part. But until I discover the truth the chief is utterly unable to move, lest he should precipitate events and cause the bursting of the war-cloud."

"Exactly. I see it all quite plainly," Dudley answered. "I trust you will experience little difficulty in discovering the man for whom you are searching. I need not say how extremely anxious I shall be to see the strange matter elucidated, so that the mystery may once and for all be cleared up."

"I am working unceasingly towards that end, Mr Chisholm," answered Cator with a meaning look in his quick grey eyes, as he drained his glass and rose. "And now I have only to apologise for intruding upon you at such an unearthly hour."

"Apology is quite unnecessary," Dudley assured him. "It appears that the matter personally concerns me in some extraordinary manner."

"Yes," replied the chief of the secret service. "So it seems. But we shall know more later, I hope. My staff are on the alert everywhere. As every confidential agent that England possesses on the Continent is at work endeavouring to unravel the mystery of Mayne Lennox, I am very hopeful of success. And success will allow England to make a counter-stroke that will paralyse our

enemies and 'frustrate their knavish tricks,' to quote a suppressed line from the National Anthem."

"I wish you every luck," said the Under-Secretary, shaking the other's thin and chilly hand. "As I can't persuade you to remain the night, I hope you'll have a comfortable journey up to town."

"Not very comfortable, I anticipate," the captain laughed, surveying himself. "I'm in an awful state—aren't I? It was so late when I got to Shrewsbury that I couldn't get a conveyance anywhere, so in desperation I tramped over here."

"Well, Barton shall drive you back; you'll have plenty of time for your train. When do you return to the Continent?"

"Perhaps at once—by the eleven from Charing Cross. It all depends upon a telegram which I shall receive on arrival in town. My future movements are extremely uncertain. They always are. From one hour to another I never know in which direction I shall be hurrying."

Chisholm had heard of this man's rapidity of movement. Indeed, it was whispered in his own circle in the Foreign Office that Archie Cator would often retire to his bachelor rooms in Rome, and cause his man, Jewell, to give out that his master was indisposed, and confined to his bed; though, as a matter of fact, the chief of the Confidential Intelligence Department would be flying across to Berlin, Vienna, or Petersburg on a swift and secret mission. He lived two lives so completely that his ingenuity surpassed comprehension. In Rome, only his servant and the Ambassador knew the truth. Even at that moment the diplomatic circle in the Eternal City believed their popular member, Captain Archie Cator of the British Embassy, to be suffering from one of his acute and periodical attacks of the rheumatic gout which so often prostrated him.

Dudley himself conducted his distinguished visitor down several stone corridors into the servants' quarters. In the courtyard outside stood Barton with the dog-cart, the light of the lamps showing that the snow was still thawing into thick slush.

"Good-bye," cried the captain airily, when he had swung himself into the trap and turned up the collar of his shabby overcoat.

"Good-bye, and good luck!" exclaimed the owner of Wroxeter, with a warmth that was far from being heart-felt. Then the trap turned, and disappeared swiftly through the old arched gateway into the black winter's night.

Dudley, full of conflicting thoughts, paced slowly back through the echoing corridors until he reached the ancient banqueting hall, where the dancing had not long since been in progress. But all was silence, and on opening the door he found the place in darkness. The gaiety had ended, and his guests had retired. He crossed the great, gloomy hall, distinguished by its ghostly-looking stands of armour, on which the light from the corridor shone in gleaming patches, and, passing down another corridor of the rambling old place, entered the smoking-room, where half a dozen men were taking their whiskey and gossiping as was their habit before going to bed.

“Hulloa, Dudley!” cried one man as he entered. “We’ve been looking for you for an hour past. We wanted you to take a hand at whist.”

“I had some little matters to attend to, so I slipped away,” his host explained. “I know you will forgive me.”

“Of course,” the man laughed, pulling forward a chair, into which Chisholm sank wearily. When he had allowed a servant to hand him some refreshment he joined? in the discussion which his entrance had interrupted. As it was incumbent upon him to spend an hour with his guests, he did so, but of the conversation he scarcely had any idea, for his mind was full of grave thoughts, and he spoke mechanically, heartily wishing that the men would retire, and leave him at liberty to return to his study.

At last they all bade him good-night. As soon as they were gone he walked slowly to that old room in which he knew he would remain undisturbed. He threw himself down in the cosy-corner beside the blazing logs, where he sat staring fixedly at the dancing flames.

For a long time he remained immovable, his face hard and drawn, his eyes wide open and fixed, until of a sudden he passed his hand slowly across his brow, sighed heavily, and at last allowed bitter words to escape from his white lips.

“My God!” he exclaimed in wild despair; “it’s all over. That man Cator has discovered the clue which must sooner or later reveal the hideous truth. If it were any other person except him there might be just a chance of misleading the chase. But no secret is safe from him and his army of confidential agents. Ruin—nothing but ruin is before me! What can I do?”

He rose and paced the room quickly with unequal steps. His face was blanched, his eyes were fixed, his clenched hands trembled.

“Ah!” he cried bitterly to himself, “it would have been best to have resigned and gone abroad months ago, while there was yet time. Under another name

I might have contrived to conceal my identity in one or other of the colonies, where they do not inquire too closely into a man's antecedents. But, alas! it is now too late. My movements are evidently watched, and I am under suspicion, owing to the discovery of my connection with that scoundrel Lennox. To resign my appointment is impossible. I can only remain and face the ruin, shame, and ignominy that are inevitable. I have sinned before God, and before man!" he cried wildly, his face upturned, his clenched hands held trembling above his head in blank despair. "For me there is no forgiveness—none!—none! My only means of escape is suicide," he gasped with bated breath. "A few drops of liquid in a wine-glass full of innocent water, and all will be over—all the anguish, all the fever. No, it is not difficult—not at all," and he laughed a hard, dry, sarcastic laugh. "And a final drastic step of that sort is far preferable to shame and ruin."

He was silent for some time. His lips were still moving as he stood there in the centre of the room, but no sound came from them. In the awful agony he suffered he spoke to himself and heard words that were unuttered. The possibility which he had suspected and dreaded during so many dark weeks was now becoming horribly realised. His secret sin would before long be revealed in all its true hideousness, and he, England's rising statesman, the man of whom so much was prophesied, the man who was trusted by the Prime Minister, who held such a brilliant and responsible position, and who was envied by all the lesser fry in the House, would be rudely cast forth as unfit and unworthy, his name, honoured for generations, rendered odious.

Truly his position was graver and more precarious than that of ninety-nine out of a hundred men. Condemnation was at hand. Cator, now that he knew the name of Mayne Lennox, would not be long in laying bare the whole of the facts.

And then?

He thought it all over, sighing heavily and clenching his hands in wild despair. To no single person could he look for assistance, for he dared not confide in any one. He could only suffer alone, and pay the penalty for his sin.

How little the world knows of the inner life of its greatest men! The popular favourite, the chosen of fortune in the various walks of life, is too often an undeserving man, the skeleton in whose cupboard could not bear the light of day. Fortune never chooses the best men for the best places. Dishonesty grows fat, while virtue dies of starvation. The public are prone to envy the men who are popular, who are "boomed" by the newspapers, and whose doings are chronicled daily with the same assiduity as the movements of the

Sovereign himself, yet in many cases these very men, as did Dudley Chisholm, shrink from the fierce light always beating upon them. They loathe the plaudits of the multitude, because of the inner voice of conscience that tells them they are charlatans and shams; and they are always promising themselves that one day, when they see a fitting opportunity, they will retire into private life.

In every public assembly, from the smallest parish council up to Westminster itself, there are prominent members who live in daily fear of exposure. Although looked upon by the world as self-denying, upright citizens, they are, nevertheless, leading a life of awful tension and constant anxiety, knowing that their enemies may at any moment reveal the truth.

Thus it was with Dudley Chisholm. That he was a man well fitted for the responsible post he occupied in the Government could not be denied, and that he had carefully and assiduously carried out the duties of his office was patent to all. Yet the past—that dark, grim past which had caused him to travel in the unfrequented tracks of the Far East—had never ceased to haunt him, until now he could plainly see that the end was very near. Exposure could not be long delayed.

The turret-clock chimed the hour slowly, and its bells aroused him.

“No,” he cried hoarsely to himself, “no, it would not be just! Before taking the final step I must place things in order—I must go out of office with all the honour and dignity of the Chisholms,” he added with a short and bitter laugh. “Out of office!” he repeated hoarsely to himself, “out of office—and out of the world!”

Chapter Twenty One.

Sows Seeds of Suspicion.

Chisholm with uneven steps walked back to the big writing-table, turned up the reading-lamp and, seating himself, began to put the many official papers quickly in order, signing some, destroying others, and now and then making marginal notes on those to be returned to the Foreign Office. Many of the more unimportant documents he consigned to the waste-paper basket, but the others he arranged carefully, sorted them, and placed them in several of the large official envelopes upon which the address was printed, together with the bold words "On Her Majesty's Service."

The light of hope had died from his well-cut features. His countenance was changed, grey, anxious, with dark haggard eyes and trembling lips. When, at last, he had finished, he rose again with a strange smile of bitterness. He crossed to the portion of the book-lined wall that was merely imitation, opened it, and with the key upon his chain took from the small safe concealed there the envelope secured by the black seal, and the small piece of folded paper which contained the lock of fair hair—his most cherished possession.

He opened the paper and stood with the golden curl in the palm of his hand, gazing upon it long and earnestly.

"Hers!" he moaned in a voice that sounded suspiciously like a sob. "If she were here I wonder what would be her advice? I might long ago have confided in her, told her all, and asked her help. She would have given it. Yes, she was my friend, and would have sacrificed her very life to save me. But it is all over. I am alone—utterly alone."

Tears stood in his eyes as he raised the love-token slowly and reverently to his lips. Then he spoke again:

"For me there only remains the punishment of Heaven. And yet in those days how childishly happy we were—how perfect was our love! Is it an actual reality that I'm standing here to-night for the last time, or is it a dream? No," he added, his teeth clenched in firmness, "it's no dream. The end has come!"

The stillness of the night remained unbroken for a long time, for he continued to stand beside the table with the fair curl in his nervous hand. Many times he had been sorely tempted to destroy it, and put an end to all the thoughts of the past that it conjured up. And yet he had grown to regard it as a talisman, and actually dare not cast it from him.

“Little lock of hair,” he said at last in a choking voice, his eyes fixed upon it, “throughout these years you have formed the single link that has connected me with those blissful days of fervent love. You are the only souvenir I possess of her, and you, emblem of her, fragile, exquisite, tender, were my faithful companion through those long journeys in far-off lands. In days of peril you have rested near my heart; you have been my talisman; you have, sweet and silent friend, cheered me often, telling me that even though long absent I was not forgotten. Yes—yes!” he exclaimed wildly; “you are part of her—actually part of her!” and again he kissed the lock of hair in a burst of uncontrollable feeling.

Suddenly he drew himself up. His manner instantly changed, as the stern reality again forced itself upon him.

“Ah!” he sighed, “those days are long spent, and to me happiness can never return—never. My sin has risen against me; my one false step debars me from the pleasures of the world.” His chin was sunk upon his breast, and he stood staring at the little curl, deep in reverie. At last, without another word, he raised it again to his hot, parched lips, and then folded it carefully in its wrapping.

The envelope he broke open, took out the small piece of transparent paper, and spread it upon a piece of white foolscap in order to read it with greater ease. Slowly he pondered over every one of the almost microscopic words written there. As he read, his heavy brows were knit, as though some of the words puzzled him.

He took a pencil from the inkstand and with it traced a kind of geometrical diagram of several straight lines upon the blotting-pad.

These lines were similar to those he had traced with his stick in the dust when standing at the stile on that steep path in the lonely coppice near Godalming.

Now and then he referred to the small document in the crabbed handwriting, and afterwards examined his diagram, as though to make certain of its correct proportions. Then, resting his chin upon his hands, he sat staring at the paper as it lay upon the blotting-pad within the zone of mellow lamplight.

“It seems quite feasible,” he said at last, speaking aloud. “Would that the suggestion were only true! But unfortunately it is merely a vague and ridiculous idea—a fantastic chimera of the imagination, after all. No,” he added resolutely, “the hope is utterly false and misleading. It will not bear a second thought.”

With sad reluctance he refolded the piece of transparent paper, replaced it in the envelope, and put it back in the safe without resealing it. But from the same unlocked drawer he took a formidable-looking blue envelope, together with a tiny paper folded oblong, and sealed securely with white wax. The paper contained a powdered substance.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary carried them both back to his writing-table, and laid them before him. Upon the envelope was written in a bold legal hand, doubly underlined: “The Last Will and Testament of Dudley Waldegrave Chisholm, Esquire (Copy).”

He smiled bitterly as he glanced at the superscription, then drew out the document and spread it before him, reading through clause after clause quite calmly.

There were four pages of foolscap, engrossed with the usual legal margin and bound together with green silk. By it the Castle of Wroxeter and his extensive property in Shropshire were disposed of in a dozen words. The document was only lengthy by reason of the various bequests to old servants of the family and annuities to certain needy cousins. With the exception of the Castle and certain lands, the bulk of the great estate was, by that will, bequeathed to a well-known London hospital.

Some words escaped him when, after completing its examination, during which he found nothing he wished to be altered, he refolded it. He then sealed it in another envelope and wrote in a big, bold hand: “My Will—Dudley Chisholm.”

As the names of his solicitors, Messrs Tarrant and Drew, of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, were appended to the document, there was no necessity for him to superscribe them.

“All is entirely in order,” he murmured hoarsely. “And now I have to decide whether to await my doom, or take time by the forelock.” As he spoke thus, his nervous hand toyed with the little paper packet before him.

The room was in semi-darkness, for the logs had burned down and their red glow threw no light. At that moment the turret-clock struck a deep note, which echoed far away across the silent Severn.

A strange look was in his eyes. The fire of insanity was burning there. As he glanced around in a strained and peculiar manner, he noticed upon a side table the whiskey, some soda-water, and a glass, all of which Riggs, according to custom, had placed there ready to his hand.

Without hesitation he crossed to it, resolved on the last desperate step. He drew from the syphon until the glass was half-full. Then he added some whiskey, returned with it to his seat, and placed it upon the table.

With care he opened the little packet that had been hoarded since the days of his journey in Central Asia, disclosing a small quantity of some yellowish powder, which he emptied into the glass, stirring it with the ivory paper-knife until all became dissolved. Then he sank into his chair with the tumbler set before him.

He held it up to the light, examining it critically, with a sad smile playing about his thin white lips. Presently he put it down, and with both hands pushed the hair wearily from his fevered forehead.

"Shall I write to Claudia?" he asked himself in a hoarse voice, scarcely louder than a whisper. "Shall I leave her a letter confessing all and asking forgiveness?"

For a long time he pondered over the suggestion that had thus come to him.

"No," he said at last, "it would be useless, and my sin would only cause my memory to be more hateful. Ah, no!" he murmured; "to leave the world in silence is far the best. The coroner's jury will return a verdict to the effect that I was of unsound mind. Juries don't return verdicts of felo-de-se nowadays. The time of stakes and cross-roads has passed."

And he laughed harshly again, for now that he had placed all his affairs in order a strange carelessness in regard to existence had come upon him.

"To-morrow, when I am found, the papers—those same papers that have boomed me, as they term it—will discover in my end a startling sensation. All sorts of ridiculous rumours will be afloat. Parliament will gossip when it meets; but in a week my very name will be forgotten. One memorial alone will remain of me, my name engraved upon the tablet in the house of the Royal Geographical Society as its gold-medallist. And nothing else—absolutely nothing."

Again he paused. After a few minutes had passed he stretched out his trembling hand and took the glass.

"What will the world say of me, I wonder?" he exclaimed in a hoarse tone. "Will they declare that I was a coward?"

“Yes,” came an answering voice, low, but quite distinct within the old brown room, “the world will surely say that Dudley Chisholm was a coward—a coward!”

He sprang to his feet in alarm, dashing the glass down on the table, and, turning quickly to the spot whence the answer had come, found himself face to face with an intruder who had evidently been concealed behind the heavy curtains of dark red velvet before the window, and who had heard everything and witnessed all his agony.

The figure was lithe and of middle stature—the figure of a woman in a plain dark dress standing back in the deep shadow.

At the first moment he could not distinguish the features; but when he had rushed forward a few paces, fierce resentment in his heart because his actions had been overlooked, he suddenly became aware of the women’s identity.

It was Muriel Mortimer.

Since he had locked the door behind him as soon as he had entered the room, she must have been concealed behind the heavy curtains which were drawn across the deep recess of the old diamond-paned window.

“You!” he gasped, white-faced and haggard. “You! Miss Mortimer! To what cause, pray, do I owe this nocturnal visit to my study?” he demanded in a stern and angry voice.

“The reason of my presence here was the wish to find a novel to read in bed, Mr Chisholm,” she answered with extraordinary firmness. “Its result has been to save you from an ignominious death.”

Erect, almost defiant, she stood before him. Her face in the heavy shadow was as pale as his own, for she perceived his desperate mood and recognised the improbability of being able to grapple with the situation. He intended to end his life, while she, on her part, was just as determined that he should live.

“You have been in this room the whole time?” he demanded, speaking quite unceremoniously.

“Yes.”

“You have heard my words, and witnessed all my actions?”

“I have.”

“You know, then, that I intend to drink the contents of that glass and end my life?” he said, looking straight at her.

“That was your intention, but it is my duty towards you, and towards humanity, to prevent such a catastrophe.”

“Then you really intend to prevent me?”

“That certainly is my intention,” she answered. Her clear eyes were upon him, and beneath her steady gaze he shrank and trembled.

“And if I live you will remain as witness of my agony, and of my degradation?” he said. “If I live you will gossip, and tell them of all that has escaped my lips, of my despair—of my contemplated suicide!”

“I have seen all, and I have heard all,” the girl answered. “But no word of it will pass my lips. With me your secret is sacred.”

“But how came you here at this hour?” he demanded in a fiercer tone.

“As I’ve already told you, I came to get a book before retiring, and the moment I had entered you came in. Because I feared to be discovered I hid behind the curtains.”

“You came here to spy upon me?” he cried angrily. “Come, confess the truth!”

The curious thought had crossed his mind that she had been sent there by Claudia.

“I chanced to be present here entirely by accident,” she answered. “But by good fortune I have been able to rescue you from death.”

He bowed to her with stiff politeness, for he suspected her of eavesdropping. He felt that he disliked her, and in no half-hearted fashion. Besides, he recollected the prophetic warning of the colonel. It was more than strange that he should discover her there, in that room where his valuable papers were lodged. He scented mystery in her action, and fiercely resented this unwarrantable intrusion upon his privacy.

“My own behaviour is my own affair, Miss Mortimer,” he said in a determined voice.

“Yes, all but suicide,” she assented. “That is an affair which concerns your friends.”

“Of whom you are scarcely one,” he observed meaningly.

“No,” she replied, stretching forth her hand until it rested upon his arm. “You entirely misunderstand me, Mr Chisholm. As in this affair you have already involuntarily confided in me, I beg of you to rely upon my discretion and secrecy, and to allow me to become your friend.”

Chapter Twenty Two.

Requires Solution.

With his face to the intruder, Chisholm stood leaning with his hand upon the back of a chair.

“Friends are to me useless, Miss Mortimer,” he answered her.

“Others perhaps are useless, but I may prove to be the exception,” she said very gravely. “You want a friend, and I am ready to become yours.”

“Your offer is a kind one,” he replied, still regarding her with suspicion, for he could not divine the real reason of her visit there, or why she had concealed herself, unless she had done so to learn, if possible, his secret. “I thank you for it, but cannot accept it.”

“But, surely, you do not intend to perform such a cowardly act as to take your own life,” she said in a measured tone of voice, looking at him with her wide-open eyes. “It is my duty to prevent you from committing such a mad action as that.”

“I quite admit that it would be mad,” he said. “But the victim of circumstances can only accept the inevitable.”

“Why, how strangely and despondently you talk, Mr Chisholm! From my hiding-place at the back of those curtains, I’ve been watching you this hour or more. Your nervousness has developed into madness, if you will permit me to criticise. Had it not been for my presence here you would by this time have taken your life. For what reason? Shall I tell you? Because, Mr Chisholm, you are a coward. You are in terror of an exposure that you dare not face.”

“How do you know?” he cried fiercely, springing towards her in alarm. “Who told you?”

“You told me yourself,” she answered. “Your own lips denounced you.”

“What did I say? What foolish nonsense did I utter in my madness?” he demanded, the fact now being plain that she had heard all the wild words that had escaped him. The old colonel had warned him that this woman was not his friend. He reflected that, at all costs he must silence her. She paused for a few moments in hesitation.

“Believing yourself to be here alone, you discussed aloud your secret in all its hideousness—the secret of your sin.”

“And if I did—what then?” he demanded defiantly. His courtliness towards her had been succeeded by an undisguised resentment. To think that she should have been brought into his house to act as eavesdropper, and to learn his secret!

“Nothing, except that I am now in your confidence, and, having rescued you from an ignominious end, am anxious to become your friend,” she answered in a quiet tone of voice. Her face was pale, but she was, nevertheless, firm and resolute.

He was puzzled more than ever in regard to her. With his wild eyes full upon her, he tried to make out whether it was by design or by accident that she was there, locked in that room with him. That she was an inveterate novel-reader he knew, but her excuse that she had come there to obtain a book at so late an hour scarcely bore an air of probability. Besides, she had exchanged her smart dinner-gown for a dark stuff dress. No, she had spied upon him. The thought lashed him to fury.

“To calculate the amount of profit likely to accrue to oneself as the result of a friend’s misfortune is no sign of friendship,” he said in a sarcastic voice. “No, Miss Mortimer, you have, by thus revealing your presence, prolonged my life by a few feverish minutes, but your words certainly do not establish the sincerity of your friendship. Besides,” he added, “we scarcely know each other.”

“I admit that; but let us reconsider all the facts,” she said, leaning a little toward him, across the back of a chair. “Your actions have shown that the matter is to you one of life or death. If so, it manifestly deserves careful and mature consideration.”

He nodded, but no word passed his lips. She seemed a strangely sage person, this girl with the fair hair, whose parentage was so obscure, and whose invitation to his house was due to some ridiculous penchant felt for her by Claudia. Why she had ever been invited puzzled him. He would gladly have asked her to return to town on the day of her arrival if it had been possible to forget the laws of hospitality and chivalry. The whole matter had annoyed him greatly, and this was its climax.

“Well, now,” she went on, in a voice which proved her to be in no way excited, “I gather from your words and actions that you fear to face the truth—that your guilt is such that exposure will mean ruin. Is this so?”

“Well, to speak plainly, it is so,” he said mechanically, looking back at the glassful of death on the table.

“You must avoid exposure.”

“How?”

“By acting like a man, not like a coward.”

He looked at her sharply, without replying. She spoke with all the gravity of a woman twice her years, and he could not decide whether she were really in earnest in the expression of her readiness to become his friend. One thing was absolutely certain, namely, that she was acquainted with the innermost secrets of his heart. In the wild madness of despair he had blurted out his fear and agony of mind, and she had actually been the witness of those moments of sweet melancholy when, at the sight of that lock of hair, he had allowed his thoughts to wander back to the days long dead, when the world was to him so rosy and full of life. Should he conciliate her, or should he, on the other hand, defy her and refuse her assistance? That she, of all women, should in this fashion thrust herself into his life was strange indeed. But had she actually thrust herself upon him, or was her presence there, as she had alleged, a mere freak of fortune?

“You say that I ought to act like a man, Miss Mortimer. Well, I am ready to hear your suggestion.”

“My suggestion is quite simple: it is that you should live, be bold, and face those who seek your downfall.”

He sighed despairingly.

“In theory that’s all very well, but in practice, impossible,” he answered after a short pause.

“Think! You are wealthy, you are famous, with hosts of friends who will come to your aid if you confide in them—”

“Ah! but I cannot confide in them,” he cried despondently, interrupting her. “You are the only person who knows the secret of my intention.”

“But surely you will not deliberately seek such an inglorious end—you, the pride and hope of a political party, and one of a race that has century after century been famous for producing noble Englishmen. It is madness—sheer madness!”

“I know it,” he admitted; “but to me birth, position, wealth, popularity are all nothing.”

“I can quite understand that all these qualities may count as nothing to you, Mr Chisholm,” she said in a tone of voice indicative of impatience, “but there is still one reason more why you should hesitate to take the step you have just been contemplating.”

“And what is that?”

For a moment she remained silent, looking straight at him with her splendid eyes, as if to read the book of his heart. At length she made answer:

“Because a woman worships you.”

He started, wondering quickly if his midnight visitor intended those words to convey a declaration of love. With an effort he smiled in a good-humoured way, but almost instantly his dark features regained their tragic expression.

“And if a woman pays me that compliment, is it not a misfortune for her?” he asked. There was a motive in her concealment there. What could it be?

“It surely should not be so, if the love is perfect, as it is in the present case.”

“Well,” he said, smiling, “apparently you are better acquainted with my private affairs than I am myself, Miss Mortimer. But in any case the love of this woman whom you mention can be only a passing fancy. True, I was loved once, long ago. But that all belongs to the past.”

“And the only relic of the bygone romance is that lock of hair? Yes, I know all. I have seen all. And your secret is, I assure you, safe with me.”

“But this woman who—well, who is attracted towards me? What is her name?” he demanded, not without some interest.

“You surely know her,” she answered. “The woman who is your best and most devoted friend—the woman in whom you should surely confide before attempting to take such a step as you are contemplating to-night—Lady Richard Nevill.”

His lips again set themselves hard at the mention of that name. Was it uttered in sarcasm, or was she in real earnest? He regarded her keenly for a moment, and then inclined to the latter opinion.

“The relations existing between Lady Richard and myself are our own affair,” he said, vexed by her reference to a subject which of all others, next to the knowledge of his sin, perturbed him most.

“But your secret concerns her,” Muriel declared. “Many times you have confided in her and asked her help at the various crises in your career. Why not now? Her very life is yours.”

“Am I to understand that you wish to pay me compliments, Miss Mortimer?”

“No. This is hardly the time for paying compliments. I speak the truth, Mr Chisholm. She loves you.”

“Then if that is really so, it seems an additional misfortune has overtaken me,” he replied hoarsely, unable as yet to grasp her motive.

“All the world knows that she is madly in love with you, and would be ready to become your wife to-morrow. Under all the circumstances I must say that your indifference strikes me as almost unbelievable.”

She was pleading for Claudia, a fact which made the mystery surrounding her all the more perplexing. He did not notice that she was calmly watching the effect of her words upon him.

“You hold a brief for Lady Richard, but I fail to see the reason why. We are friends, very old friends, but nothing else. Our future concerns no one but ourselves,” he said.

“Exactly. The future of each of you concerns the other,” she answered triumphantly. “She loves you, and because of this all her thoughts are centred in you.”

“I must really confess, Miss Mortimer, that I do not see the drift of your argument,” he said. “Lady Richard has no connection whatever with the present matter, which is my private affair alone.”

“But since she loves you as devotedly as she does, it concerns her deeply.”

“I repeat that we are friends, not lovers,” he replied with some asperity.

“And I repeat, just as emphatically, that she loves you, and that it is your duty to confide in her,” answered Muriel, determined not to haul down her flag.

“Love!” he cried bitterly, beginning to pace the room, for as soon as he thought of Claudia his attempt to remain calm was less and less effective; “what is love to me? There is no love for such as I.”

“No, Mr Chisholm,” she said earnestly, stretching forth her hand. “Pardon me, I pray, for speaking thus, but to every man and woman both love and happiness are given, if only they will accept it.”

He was thinking of Claudia, and of the fact that she had first seen Cator and had contrived to keep him aloof from the guests. She could surely suspect nothing, otherwise she would have waited to see him after the visitor’s departure. Yes, he knew that everything said by this fair-haired girl was quite true. That was the unfortunate factor in the affair. She loved him.

“Tell me, then,” he demanded at last, “what do you advise? You know that I have a secret; that I intend deliberately to take my life and to trouble no one any further. As you have prevented me from doing so, it is to you I look for help and good counsel.”

“I am ready and eager to give both,” she exclaimed, “only I very much fear that you do not trust me, Mr Chisholm! Well, after all, that is not very remarkable when the short period of our acquaintanceship is borne in mind. Nevertheless, I am Claudia’s friend, and consequently yours. You must really not do anything foolish. Think of your own position, and of the harsh judgment you will naturally provoke by your insane action!”

“I know! I know!” he replied. “But to me the opinion of the world counts for absolutely nothing. I have sinned, and, like other men, must bear the penalty. For me there is no pardon on this side of the grave.”

“There is always pardon for the man who is loved.”

“A love that must turn to hate when the truth is discovered,” he added bitterly, with a short, dry laugh. “No, I much prefer the alternative of death. I do not fear the end, I assure you. Indeed, I really welcome it,” and he laughed again nervously, as though suicide were one of the humours of life.

“No,” she cried in earnestness, laying her hand gently on his arm. “Listen to reason, Mr Chisholm. I know I have no right to speak to you like this—only the right of a fellow-creature who would prevent you from taking the rash step you contemplate. But I want you fully to realise your responsibility towards the woman who so dearly loves you.”

“Our love is ended,” he blurted out, with a quick, furtive look at the glass upon the writing-table. “I have no further responsibility.”

“Has it really ended?” she asked anxiously. “Can you honestly and truthfully say before your Maker that you entertain no love for Lady Richard—that she is never in your thoughts?”

Her question nonplussed him. A lie arose to his lips, but remained there unuttered.

“You are thinking of that former love,” she went on; “of that wild, impetuous affection of long ago, that madness which has resulted so disastrously, eh? Yes, I know. You still love Lady Richard, while she, for her part, entertains a loving thought for no other man but you. And yet there is a sad, sweet memory within you which you can neither stifle nor forget.” There was a tone of distinct melancholy in her voice.

“You have guessed aright,” he answered in a strained tone. “The tragedy of it all is before me day and night, and it is that alone which holds me at a distance from Claudia.”

“Why not make full confession to her?” she suggested, after a short pause.

Surely it was very strange, he thought, that she, who was little more than a mere girl, should venture to debate with him his private affairs. To him it appeared suspiciously as though she had already discussed the situation with the woman who had introduced her beneath his roof. Had they arranged all this between them? But if his madness had not blinded him, he would have detected the contemptuous curl of the lip when she uttered Claudia’s name.

“I have neither the wish nor the intention to confess anything,” he answered. “You alone know my secret, Miss Mortimer, and I rely upon your honesty as a woman to divulge nothing.”

For answer she walked quickly to the table, took up the glass, and flung its contents upon the broad, old-fashioned hearthstone.

“I solemnly promise you,” she said, as she replaced the empty tumbler and confronted him again. “I promise you that as long as you hold back from this suicidal madness the world shall know nothing. Live, be brave, grapple with those who seek your downfall, and reciprocate the love of the woman who is both eager and ready to assist and defend you.”

It struck him that in the last words of this sentence she referred to herself. If so, hers was, indeed, a strange lovemaking.

“No,” replied the despondent man. “My position is hopeless—utterly hopeless.”

As his head was turned away, he did not notice the strange glint in her eyes. For a single instant the fierce fire of hatred burned there, but in a moment it

had vanished, and she was once more the same calm, persuasive woman as throughout the conversation she had been.

“But your position is really not so serious as you imagine,” she declared. “If you will only place confidence in me I can help you ever so much. Indeed, I anticipate that, if I so wish, I can rescue you from the exposure and ruin that threatens you.”

“You?” he cried incredulously. “How can you hope to rescue me?” he demanded sharply, taking a step toward her in his eagerness to know what the answer to his question would be.

“By means known only to myself,” she said, watching him with panther-like intensity. She had changed her tactics.

“From your words it would appear that my future is to be controlled in most respects by you, Miss Mortimer,” he observed with a slight touch of sarcasm in his hard voice.

“You have spoken correctly. It is.”

“And for what reason, pray?” he inquired, frowning in his perplexity.

“Because I alone know the truth, Mr Chisholm,” she said distinctly. “I am aware of the secret of your sin. All of these hideous facts are in my possession.”

He started violently, glaring at her open-mouthed, as though she were some superhuman monstrosity.

“You believe that I am lying to you, but I declare that I am not. I am in full possession of the secret of your sin, even to its smallest detail. If you wish, I will defend you, and show you a means by which you can defy those who are seeking to expose you. Shall I give you proof that I am cognisant of the truth?”

He nodded in the affirmative, still too dumbfounded to articulate.

Moving suddenly she stepped forward to the table, took up a pen, and wrote two words upon a piece of paper, which she handed to him in silence.

He grasped it with trembling fingers. No sooner had his eyes fallen upon it than a horrible change swept over his countenance.

“My God! Yes!” he gasped, his face blanched to the lips. “It was that name. Then you really know my terrible guilt. You—a comparative stranger!”

“Yes,” she answered. “I know everything, and can yet save you, if you will place your trust in me—even though I am little more than a stranger.”

“And if I did—if I allowed you to strive on my behalf? What then?”

She looked straight at him. The deep silence of the night was again broken by the musical chimes high up in the ancient turret.

“Shall I continue to speak frankly?” she asked at last.

“Most certainly. In this affair there can be no concealment between us, Miss Mortimer, for it seems that my future is entirely in your hands.”

“It is,” she answered, in a deep, intense voice. “And in return for my silence and defence of yourself I make one condition.”

“And that is?”

She again placed her soft hand tenderly upon the arm of the nervous, haggard-faced man whom she had just rescued from self-destruction, and looked earnestly into his pallid face.

“My sole condition is that you shall give me yourself,” she answered in a wild, hoarse voice; “that you shall cast aside this other woman and give me your love.”

“Then you actually love me!” he exclaimed in his astonishment.

“Yes,” she cried fiercely, her clear eyes looking anxiously up into his face. “Yes, I frankly confess that I love you.”

Chapter Twenty Three.

Records some Matters of Fact.

The house-party at Wroxeter Castle had broken up, and Dudley Chisholm, having returned to town, had once more taken up his official duties.

Every hour of his day, however, was haunted by the memory of that strange encounter in the library, and its astonishing sequel. That fair-haired girl, whose parentage was so mysterious, and against whom he had been so distinctly warned, was aware of his secret, and, moreover, had openly declared her love for him. Assuredly his was a most complicated and perilous position.

Muriel Mortimer had at every point displayed marvellous tact and ingenuity. She was undoubtedly clever, for at breakfast on the morning following their interview, Lady Meldrum had announced the receipt of a letter which compelled them to leave by the midday train for Carlisle. All sorts of regrets were expressed in the usual conventional manner, but Muriel exchanged a glance with her host, and he understood. No word regarding the midnight interview passed between them; but when she entered the carriage to be driven into Shrewsbury with Sir Henry and his wife, and grasped his hands in farewell, he felt a slight pressure upon his fingers as their eyes met, and knew that it was intended as a mute repetition of her promise to rescue him.

She alone knew the truth. If she so desired she herself could expose him and lay bare his secret. He was utterly helpless in her hands, and in order to save himself had been compelled to accept the strange condition she had so clearly and inexorably laid down. This fair-faced woman, about whom he knew next to nothing, had declared that she could save him by means known only to herself; and this she was now setting forth to do.

Archibald Cator, the resourceful man whose success in learning the diplomatic secrets of foreign states was unequalled, was working towards his exposure, while she, an apparently simple woman, with a countenance full of childlike innocence, had pitted herself against his long experience and cunning mind. The match was unequal, he thought. Surely she must be vanquished. Yet she had saved him from suicide, and somehow, he knew not exactly how, her declarations and her sudden outburst of devotion had renewed the hope of happiness within him.

Public life had never offered more brilliant prizes to a Canning, a Disraeli, or a Randolph Churchill than it did to Dudley Chisholm. To him, it seemed, the future belonged. England was in the mood to surrender herself, not necessarily to a prodigy of genius, a Napoleon of politics, but to a man of

marked independence, faith, and capacity. And all these qualities were possessed by the present Parliamentary Under-Secretary—the unhappy man who so short a time before had sat with the fatal glass in front of him.

He was in the hall when Muriel took leave of Claudia. The latter was inclined to be affectionate and bent to kiss her on the cheek, but Muriel pretended not to notice her intention, merely shaking her hand and expressing regret at being compelled to leave so suddenly. Their parting was most decidedly a strained one, and he fell to wondering whether, on his account, any high words had passed between them.

But a fortnight had gone by, the House had reassembled, and he had resumed his duties.

Has it ever occurred to you, my reader, what a terrible sameness marks the careers of front-bench men?

Ancestors who toiled and spun, as some writer in a daily journal has it; Eton and Oxford; the charmed Commons at twenty-eight or thirty, an Under-Secretaryship of State two years later; high Government office three years after that, then a seat in the Cabinet, then the invariable Chief Secretaryship of Ireland, birthplace of reputations, where they take the place of colleagues physically prostrated by Irish persiflage.

As Chief Secretary the typical front-bench man, of course, surprises friends and foes by his unshakable coolness. If he still has any hair, he never turns a particle of it while the Irish members are shrieking their loudest, and branding him with nicknames; which we are instructed to accept as examples of epoch-making humour. Well, we are bound to believe what we are told, but we cannot be described as cordial believers.

Last scene of all, the ignoble, protesting tumble upstairs into the House of Lords; a coronet on the door panels of his brougham; his identity hidden under the name of a London suburb or an obscure village; while his eldest son who is now an “Honourable,” and has always been a zany, remains down below to fritter away illustrious traditions.

Once Dudley Waldegrave Chisholm had marked out for himself a similar career, but the events of the past few months had changed it all. Public life no longer attracted him. He hated the wearying monotony of the House, and each time he rose from the Treasury bench to speak, he trembled lest there should arise a figure from the Opposition to denounce him in scathing terms. The nervous tension of those days was awful. His friends of his own party, noticing his nervousness, put it down to the strain of office, and more

than one idling politician of the dining-room had suggested that he should pair and leave town for a bit of a change.

Would, he thought within himself, that he could leave the town for ever!

He had arranged with the woman into whose hands he had given himself unreservedly, providing that she placed him in a position to overthrow his enemies, that she should write to him at his club, the Carlton; but as the weeks crept on and he received no letter he began to be uneasy at her silence.

In the Morning Post he had noticed two lines in the fashionable intelligence, which ran as follows:

“Sir Henry and Lady Meldrum with Miss Muriel Mortimer have left Green Street for the Continent.” The announcement was vague, but purposely so, he thought. He tried to calm himself by plunging with redoubled energy into the daily political struggle.

Claudia after leaving the castle had gone to Paris with her almost inseparable friend, the Duchess of Penarth, gowns being the object of the visit. Hors de Paris, hors du monde was Claudia’s motto always. They usually went over together, without male encumbrances, twice or three times yearly, stayed at the Athenée, and spent the greater part of their time in the ateliers of Doeuillet and Paquin, or shopping in the Vendôme quarter, that little area of the gay city so dear to the feminine heart.

The visit had lasted a fortnight, and Claudia was back again at Albert Gate. She had sent him a brief note announcing her arrival, but he had not called, for, truth to tell, because of the fresh development springing from Muriel Mortimer’s policy he felt unable to continue his fervent protestations of love. The web of complications was drawing round him more tightly every moment. He tried to struggle against it, but the feeble effort was utterly hopeless.

One evening, however, he accepted, under absolute compulsion, her invitation to dine. In that handsome, well-remembered room, with its snowy cloth, its shining glass, its heavy plate and big silver épergne of hot-house flowers, he sat with her tête-à-tête, listening to the story of her visit to the French capital, her account of the pretty evening gowns which were on their way to her—new and exclusive “models” for which she had been compelled to pay terribly dear—all about her meeting with the old Comtesse de Montigny while driving in the Avenue des Acacias, and the warm invitation, which she had accepted, to the latter’s salon, one of the most exclusive in all Paris. Moreover, she and the Duchess had dined one evening with Madame

Durand, one of her old companions at the pension at Enghien, and now wife of the newly appointed Minister of the Interior. Yes, in Paris she had, as usual, a most enjoyable time. And how had he fared?

As Jackson, the solemn-faced and rather pompous butler, who had been in poor Dick Nevill's service for a good many years, was pouring out his wine, he hesitated to speak confidentially until he had left.

Claudia certainly looked charming. She was dressed in black, and had a large bunch of Neapolitan violets in her low corsage. They were his favourite flowers, and he knew that she wore them in honour of his visit.

"I wrote to you twice from Paris, and received no reply, Dudley," she said, leaning toward him when the man had gone. "Why didn't you answer?"

"Forgive me, Claudia," he answered, placing his hand upon hers and looking into her handsome face. "I have been so very busy of late—and I expected you back in London every day."

"You have only written to me once since I left Wroxeter," she said, pouting. "It is really too bad of you."

"I can only plead heavy work and the grave responsibilities of office," he answered. "I've been literally driven to death. You've no doubt seen the papers."

"Yes, I have seen them," she answered. "And my candid opinion is, Dudley, that the Government has not come out particularly well in regard to the question of Crete. I'm quite with you as to your declaration in the House last night, that we are not nearly strong enough in the Mediterranean."

Jackson entered again, and, as their conversation was of necessity prevented from taking on an intimate tone, they kept to a discussion of matters upon which Dudley had been speaking in the House during the past week. She had always been his candid critic, and often pointed out to him his slips and shortcomings, just as she had criticised him in their youthful days and stirred within him the ambition to enter public life.

If she knew of the secret compact that he had made with Muriel Mortimer what would she say? He dreaded to contemplate the exposure of the truth.

"Have you heard anything of the Meldrums?" he inquired, as the thought flashed into his mind that from her very probably he might be able to learn their whereabouts.

“Oh! they’re abroad,” she replied. “They left us very suddenly at the castle, for what reason I’ve not yet been able to make out. Do you know, I’ve a horrible suspicion that Lady Meldrum was offended, or something, but what it was I really have no idea. She was scarcely civil when we parted.”

“That’s very strange,” he said, pricking up his ears and looking at her in astonishment. “Who was the culprit? One of the guests, I suppose.”

“I suppose so,” his hostess answered. “But at any rate, whatever the cause, she was gravely offended. The excuse to leave was a palpably false one, for there chanced to be no letters for her that morning.”

“Where are they now?”

“They first went up to Dumfries, and then came to town and left for Brussels. I heard from Muriel a week ago from Florence.”

“From Muriel!” he exclaimed. “Then she is with them?”

“Yes. Her letter says that they were contemplating taking a villa there for the winter, but were hesitating on account of Lady Meldrum’s health. It appears that her London doctor did not recommend Florence on account of the cold winds along the Arno.”

In Florence! It was strange, he thought, that if she could write civilly to the woman who was her rival, whom she had scarcely saluted at parting, she did not send a single line to him. Then the strange thought flitted through his mind that Archibald Cator was attach in Rome. Could her visit to Italy have any connection with the task which she had taken upon herself to fulfil?

In the blue drawing-room later, after they had taken their coffee and were alone, she rose slowly and stood with him before the tiled hearth. She saw by his heavy brow that he was preoccupied, and without a word she took his hand and raised it with infinite tenderness to her lips.

He turned his eyes upon her, uttering no word, for he hated himself for his duplicity. Why had he been persuaded to visit her? How could he endure to feign an affection and fill her heart with unrealisable hopes? It was disloyal of him, and cruel to her.

She, a woman of infinite tact and finesse, had suffered bitterly from the harsh words he had spoken weeks ago, yet she had never upbraided him. She had suffered in patience and in silence, as the true woman does when the man she loves causes her unhappiness. Jealousy may engender fury;

but the woman whose soul is pure and whose heart is honest in her love is always patient and long-suffering, always willing to believe that her ideal is represented by the man she loves. And it was so with Claudia. Gossips had tried to injure her good name by alleging things that were untrue, yet she had never once complained. “Tiens!” she would exclaim. That was all. It was true that she had allowed herself to flirt with the young Russian because, being a woman, she could not resist that little piece of harmless coquetry. Nevertheless she had never for a single instant forgotten the sacred love of her youth.

She was essentially a smart woman, whose doings were chronicled almost daily in the fashionable intelligence of the newspapers; and every woman of her stamp may always be sure of being persecuted by malignant gossips. Were she a saint she could not escape them. The eternal feminine is prolific of aspersions where a pretty member of its own sex is under examination, and especially if she be left lonely and unprotected while she is still quite young. It was so with Claudia Nevill. She allowed people to talk, and was even amused at the wild and often scandalous tales whispered about her, for she knew that the man she loved would give no credence to them.

Dudley had loved her long ago in her schoolgirl days, and she knew that he loved her now. For her, that was all-sufficient.

But his preoccupied manner that night caused her considerable apprehension. He was not his old self. Once, while at dinner, she had caught a strange, haunted look in his eyes.

“Tell me, Dudley,” she urged, holding his hand and looking earnestly up to him. “Be frank with me, and tell me what ails you.”

“Nothing,” he laughed uneasily, carrying her soft hand to his lips. “But whatever made you ask such a question?”

“Because you seem upset,” she answered, smoothing his hair tenderly from his brow. “If there is any matter that is worrying you, why not confide in me, as you have done so often before, and let me help you.”

“No, really,” he protested with a forced laugh.

“Nothing worries me—only matters down at the House.”

She looked at him in silence. In those dark, brilliant eyes of hers was a love-look that was unmistakable. She was a woman believed by men to be utterly frivolous and heartless, yet she loved Dudley Chisholm with all the fierce

passion possible to her ardent soul. His face told her that he had been suffering in her absence, and she strove to discover the reason.

“Why, Dudley,” she exclaimed at last, “now that I reflect, you have not been quite the same since the midnight visit paid you at the castle by the mysterious man who was so very careful that his presence should not be made known! You have never told me who he was, or what was his business.”

He started so quickly that she could not fail to notice it. This set her wondering.

“Oh!” he replied with affected carelessness next moment, “the tall shabby man who called on the night of the dance you mean? He was a confidential messenger, that was all.”

“I suppose I was mistaken, but his face and voice both seemed quite familiar to me,” she remarked. “I meant to tell you before, but it entirely slipped my memory. The likeness to some one I have met was very striking, but I cannot recollect where I’ve met him before. Is he an official messenger?”

“Yes,” answered her lover vaguely, although alarmed that she should so nearly have recognised Cator; “he’s attached to the Foreign Office. I urged him to stay the night, but he was compelled to return at once to town.”

“And he brought you some bad news? Admit the truth, dear.”

“He certainly brought some official intelligence that was not altogether reassuring,” her lover said.

“Are you quite certain that it was official, and did not concern yourself?” she asked in a low voice which sounded to him full of suspicion.

“Certain? Why, of course,” he laughed. “Whatever strange ideas are you entertaining, Claudia?”

“Well,” she answered, “to tell the truth, Dudley, I have a notion that he came to see you on some private business, because ever since that night you have been a changed man.”

“I really had no idea that. I had changed,” he said. “You surely don’t mean that I have changed towards you?”

“Yes,” she answered gravely, her small hand trembling slightly in his nervous grasp,—“yes, I think you have changed—even towards me.”

Chapter Twenty Four.

Contrasts Two Loves.

When a woman of Claudia Nevill's passionate temperament loves, it is with her whole soul. The women with dark flashing eyes, red lips, arched brows, and oval countenances can never do things by halves. They either love fiercely, or else are as cold as ice; they hate with all the vindictiveness of hell, or are patient, forbearing and forgiving to the end. Dudley Chisholm knew this well enough, and was aware how deep and devoted was the love of the true-hearted woman from whom he had tried to part, but without whom there seemed a void in his life.

Because gossips had maligned them he had striven, for her sake as well as his own, to put an end to their affection. His words had pained him and had stabbed her cruelly, but they had turned out; to be inconclusive. Their lives were bound together, as she had so frequently declared.

Now that she had approached the subject, he longed to tell her of the secret in his heart. But how could he when he had made that strange, unholy compact with that woman, her rival, who now held his future in her hands?

With an effort he put such thoughts aside, and with feigned carelessness strove to assure her that he was in no wise changed. When, however, a woman really loves, it is difficult to deceive her. She reads man's innermost thoughts as clearly as though they were written upon an open page. The wavering of the eyes, the twitching of the lips, the slight movement of the muscles of the face, and the well nigh imperceptible swelling at the temples, although entirely unobserved by the woman who is not in love, are plain and open declarations of the truth to her who loves the face exhibiting these subtle signals. Truly the feminine intuition is marvellous and inexplicable.

Dudley knew that to lie to her was impossible. Little by little he managed to convince her that his mysterious visitor had come from the Foreign Office. At length he succeeded in turning their conversation into a different channel.

At his request she crossed to the grand piano at the end of the magnificent room in which there were so many signs of her exquisite taste, seated herself at the instrument, and played Mendelssohn's "Rondo capriccioso" and Chopin's "Valse Op. 70."

Though he made an attempt to turn over the leaves of the music, he found it difficult to keep himself from becoming absorbed in reverie. What, he wondered, could she suspect? Surely the woman into whose hands he had

given himself had told her nothing. No. Had she not promised in the most emphatic manner that no word of his terrible secret should pass her lips? As she had already exhibited marvellous cleverness and diplomatic finesse, he felt confident of her discretion and silence.

He looked down at the dark-haired woman seated at the piano and thought how her loveliness would have delighted Greuze. As her slim fingers, laden with sparkling gems, ran swiftly and dexterously over the keys, her lawny bosom rose and fell, the diamonds at her throat glittered with iridescent fire, and the sweet odour of the violets added one more to the many charms thus spread for him. She had taken three or four of the flowers from her breast, and with a single leaf had made up a tiny bouquet, afterwards placing it in the lappel of his coat, as was her tender habit when they were alone. And he was actually deceiving this affectionate woman, who had been his friend, confidante, and adviser ever since their days of childhood!

He stood behind her, clenching his teeth, hating himself for his duplicity.

Did he really love her, he asked himself for the thousandth time? Yes, he did. She was all in all to him. Their love had always been idyllic. In his eyes no woman was half as fair to look upon; none so full of innate grace and chic; none so sweet in temperament or so full of charms. Fate had parted them, it was true, and she had married Dick Nevill, his best friend. Yet he had never ceased to love her—though to her dead lord she had been a model wife during their too brief period of wedded happiness.

When Dick died he had, at Claudia's own request, gone back to her to become her platonic friend, to cheer her in her loneliness, and to advise her in the hundred and one matters which concerned her future. And again she had grown to love him; again she had worshipped him as her ideal.

She had finished the valse, and, turning slowly, raised her perfect face, slightly tragic in its dark beauty, with a mute invitation for his caress. He placed his hand tenderly upon her shoulder and bent until his lips touched hers. And as he did so, he saw in her bright eyes that calm expression of tranquil content which comes to such a woman in the thrill engendered by her lover's kiss.

She rose from the music-stool. Once more he held her in his arms, as he had so often done of old, while she, in that soft voice he knew so well, tried to teach him the height and breadth and depth of her love.

"I know what people say, Dudley!" she exclaimed, hoarsely. "Tant mieux! I know that odious reports have reached you regarding me, but surely you

will trust me? Cannot you see for yourself, dear, that I am yours—entirely yours?"

"Words are unnecessary, Claudia," he answered, kissing her. "That you love me I have never doubted; I give no credence to anything I hear. I trust in you implicitly."

"Then if that is so, dear, why not be perfectly frank and tell me the reason of your sadness?" she urged.

"I am not sad, Claudia," he protested with a feigned air of gaiety. "How can I be sorrowful when I know that I possess your love?"

"It is not sufficient that you have my affection," she answered. "I wish to continue to be your confidante and friend. Recollect that a woman's wit is often of value to a man engaged in public life as you are."

"I know my debt to you is more than I can ever repay," he declared frankly. "To your good counsels and personal interest all my success is due. I owe all to you—everything."

"And in return you have given me your love, the sum of my desire," she said contentedly, slowly raising her lips and kissing him. "You are mine, Dudley, and you will ever remain so—won't you?" He held his breath for an instant. Then, as he twined his arm round her slender waist, he said:

"Of course, darling, I shall ever remain yours, always—always."

He lied to her. Faugh! he hated himself. For the first time he had uttered a deliberate falsehood concerning their love; and he felt positive she knew that he had not spoken the truth. So close had been their association for many years, unbroken save for the few months of her married life, that they read each other's unuttered thought and knew each other's innermost secrets.

Long ago she had laid bare her whole heart to him, concealing nothing, and not seeking to excuse herself for any of those flirtations which from time to time had been the talk of the town. He knew everything, and had in return repeated his declaration of love for her. Indeed, after that long friendship the life of each was void without the other. When parted from her by reason of her country visits, there somehow seemed a blank in his existence, and he found himself thinking of her night and day. Until her last absence in Paris it had been their custom to write to each other every second day.

How; would she act if she knew the truth? What would she think of him if she were aware that he had promised himself to another woman, and one

who had come into his life so suddenly, if she continued to shield him from the exposure of his guilty secret? Her dark eyes, those splendid eyes everywhere so greatly admired, were turned upon him. There was an air of sweet sadness in their expression. His eyes fell: he could not meet her gaze.

“Do you know, Dudley,” she exclaimed at last in the soft, sweet voice he was never tired of hearing, the voice that had so often consoled him and encouraged him to strive after high ideals,—“do you know, dear, I have lately thought that your people are endeavouring to part us. You recollect your sudden refusal to see me last autumn? Your cruel action put fear into my heart. I am dreading always that I may lose you—that you will listen to the well-meant counsels of your relations and cast my love aside.”

He saw by her countenance how terribly in earnest she was, and hastened to reassure her.

“No, darling. All that is a foolish fancy. You may rest quite assured that as I have not already listened to the advice of people who are in ignorance of the platonic nature of our friendship, I shall never do so. We have been lovers ever since our teens, and we shall, I hope, always so remain.”

She sprang upon him, clasping her soft arms around his neck, and, kissing him with a fierce and fervent passion, exclaimed:

“Thank you, Dudley! Thank you for those words! You know how fondly I love you—you know that I could not live without frequent sight of you, without your good counsels and guidance—for I am but a woman, after all.”

“The best and bravest little woman in all the world,” he declared in words that came direct from his heart. Then, pressing her closer to him, he went on: “You surely know how deep and complete is my affection, Claudia. The test of it is shown by the fact that were it not for my love for you I should have forsaken you months ago in order to save my reputation—and yours.”

“It was a foul calumny!” she cried quickly. “The lie was probably started by some woman who envied me. But a scandal is like a snowball—it increases as it is rolled along. We invited gossip, and lent colour to the report by being seen so much together. I know it too well, and I have regretted it bitterly for your sake. With a public man like yourself a scandal is very apt to put an end for ever to all chances of high position. Knowing that, I, too, tried hard to cut myself adrift from you. Ah! you cannot know, Dudley, what I suffered when I attempted self-sacrifice for your own dear sake. You can never know!” she went on, panting and trembling. “But you misjudged me—you believed me fickle. It was what I intended, for I wanted you to cast me aside and save yourself.”

“Well?”

“They spoke of my flirtations en plein jour at Fernhurst,” she continued, looking up into his face with an expression full of passionate love. “The report, with exaggerations, reached you as I had hoped it would, but although it caused you pain it made no difference to your affection. Therefore, I failed, and we were compelled to accept the inevitable.”

“Yes, Claudia. What I heard from Fernhurst did pain me terribly,” he answered very gravely. “Yet I could not believe without absolute proof that you, whom I knew to be an honest, upright woman, would deliberately create a scandal, knowing well that it would be reflected upon me. I knew that you loved me; I knew that our lives were firmly linked the one to the other, and that our mutual confidence and affection were based upon a sure foundation. That is why I refused to give credence to the scandalous gossip.”

Her small hands trembled with emotion, and as she pressed her lips to his, mutely thanking him for his forbearance and refusal to believe ill of her, she burst into tears.

“I know, dearest, how terribly you have suffered,” he said in a low voice as he tried to console her. “I know well that your position as a smart woman supplies your enemies with opportunities for wounding your reputation. In the clubs men will, with an idle word, take away a woman’s good name, and often think it a huge joke when they hear the despicable calumny repeated. Indeed, it seems an unwritten law nowadays, that the woman who is not talked about and who does not hover between sacraments and scandals, is not to be considered smart. If she gives dinners and supper-parties at the Carlton or Prince’s, her name is usually coupled with one of her favourite guests. No woman is really in the running without gossip having ungenerously given her a lover.”

“Yes,” she answered, “that is only too true? Dudley. I know quite well that the happiness of many a smart woman, as well as her domestic comfort has been utterly wrecked by the eternal chatter which follows public entertaining. A short time ago we gave dinners in our own houses, as our mothers used to do; but that is all of the past. The glitter of the big restaurants has attracted us. To be chic one must engage a table at Prince’s or the Carlton, smother it with flowers, and dine with one’s guests in the full glare of publicity in a hot and crowded room, where the chatter is so incessant that one can scarcely hear one’s own voice. The Italian waiters rush through the courses as if they wish to get rid of you at the earliest possible moment; there is clatter, noise, an inordinate perfume of cooked food, and a hasty gobbling up of gastronomic masterpieces. I am compelled

to give my dinners amid such surroundings, but how I hate it all! For me it is only an ordeal—just as are your political dinners with your friendly working-men."

He smiled as he recollected what he had so often suffered from the "tuppenny smokes" of his constituents.

"The restaurant dinner of Aristocrats and Anonymas is a terrible feast," he said. "I suppose the new fashion of entertaining was started by the nouveaux riches because after the public feast there appeared in what are called the fashionable columns of the papers paragraphs, supplied by the restaurants, informing London's millions that Mrs So-and-So had been entertaining a big party, among the guests at which were Lady Nobody, who was exquisitely dressed in black velvet and old lace, and Lord Somebody, who was looking younger than ever. You know the style."

She laughed outright at his candid criticism, which was so thoroughly well deserved. Half the dinners, she declared, were given by adventurers from the City to needy men with titles, which were wanted to lend lustre to prospectuses. And the whole affair had been so cleverly engineered by the manager of the restaurants, who nightly gave paragraphs to the journalists, thus glorifying the givers of feasts and flattering the guests, that a mode had actually been created, and even the most exclusive set had been compelled to follow it, royalty itself being often among the diners.

At his request she re-seated herself at the piano, and to disperse the melancholy that had settled upon him she sang with infinite zest the latest song of the Paris café-concerts which had been made famous by the popular chanteur, Paulus, at the Ambassadeurs'. The chorus ran as follows:

"Ah! Monsieur Chamberlain, ça n'etait pas malin,

Les femmes de l'Angleterre ell's manqu'nt de militaires

D'leur absenc' tout l'mond' se plaint.

Car ils sont rigolos, avec leurs p'tits polos.

A London je le confess' on admir' leur gentiless

Quand ils march'nt entortillant, en entortillant leur... yes."

The grave-faced Jackson entered and with pompous ceremony served him with a whiskey and soda, as was usual; then, after she had sung to him another chanson, he rose to go. As it was already late, and as he was obliged to return to the House, he was compelled to take leave of her.

“You really love me, Dudley?” she asked in a low, intense voice, as they stood locked in each other’s arms just before he left. “Tell me that you do. Somehow I am so apprehensive, foolishly so, perhaps; but your words always reassure me. I feel happier and a better woman after hearing them.”

“Love you, Claudia?” he cried, his hand stroking her beautiful hair; “how can you ever doubt me? I swear by all I hold most sacred that no tender thought of any woman save yourself ever enters my heart. I am wholly and entirely yours.” And he kissed her with all the fervent passion of an ardent lover.

“And you will never desert me—never? Promise!” she said, in tones breathing anxiety and earnestness.

“I promise,” he answered. His voice had lost a little of its resonance, but she did not notice the slight change. He made a promise which he himself knew to be incapable of fulfilment. Hers no longer, he was now helpless in the inexorable toils of that mysterious woman who alone held his secret.

She kissed him again in fond farewell. Outside in the great hall, which was famous for its fine marble columns and statuary, the man helped him on with his coat, while Claudia stood above upon the terrace of the upper hall, laughing gaily and wishing him “good-bye” as was her wont. Then he went forth in a dazed condition, walking along Knightsbridge in search of a passing hansom to take him down to the House.

As the door closed behind him when he emerged from the great portico into the foggy night, the short, dark figure of a rather thin man in a soft deer-stalker hat and dark overcoat slunk quickly out of the shadow of a doorway almost opposite, crossed the road, and hurried after him with laboured breath.

Of a sudden as Dudley, having gone a hundred yards or so, turned to glance behind him for an approaching cab, he came face to face with the fellow who, if the truth were told, had for nearly two hours been patiently awaiting his appearance.

“Pardon, signore!” exclaimed the black-haired, sharp-featured man, speaking with a decided Italian accent. He was somewhat taken aback by the abrupt termination of his rather clumsy efforts at espionage. “I beg the signore a thousand pardons, but may I be permitted to have a parolina (little word) with him?”

Chapter Twenty Five.

In which the Stranger states his Mission.

“Well, what do you want?” Chisholm inquired sharply, glancing keenly at the foreigner, and not approving of his appearance.

“I want a word with the signore,” the man who had accosted him answered, with an air almost of authority.

“I don’t know you,” replied the Under-Secretary, “and have no desire to hold intercourse with perfect strangers.”

“It is true that I am unknown to the signore,” said the man in very fair English, “but I am here, in London, on purpose to speak with you. I ascertained that you were visiting at yonder palazzo; therefore, I waited.”

“And why do you wish to speak with me? Surely you might have found a more fitting opportunity than this—you could have waited until to-morrow.”

“No. The signore is watched,” said the man as he began to walk at Dudley’s side among the throngs of people, for in Knightsbridge there is always considerable movement after the theatres have closed and the tide of pleasure-seekers is flowing westward. “I have waited for this opportunity to ask the signore to make an appointment with me.”

“Can’t you tell me your business now?” inquired Chisholm suspiciously, not half liking the fellow’s look. He spoke English fairly well, but his rather narrow face was not a reassuring one. An Englishman is always apt, however, to judge the Italian physiognomy unjustly, for those who look the fiercest and the most like brigands are, in the experience of those who live in Italy, generally the most harmless persons.

“To speak here is impossible,” he declared, glancing about him. “I must not be seen with you. Even at this moment it is dangerous. Give me a rendezvous quickly, signore, and let me leave you. We may be seen. If so, my mission is futile.”

“You have a mission, then. Of what character?”

“I will tell you everything, signore, when we meet. Where can I see you?”

“At my house in St. James’s Street—in an hour’s time.”

“Not so. That is far too dangerous. Let us meet in some unfrequented café where we can talk without being overheard. I dare not, for certain reasons, be seen near the signore’s abode.”

The man’s mysterious manner was anything but convincing, but Dudley, perceiving that he was determined to have speech with him, told him at last to follow him. The stranger instantly dropped behind among the crowd without another word, while the master of Wroxeter continued on his way past Hyde Park Corner and along Piccadilly, where gaiety and recklessness were as plentiful as ever, until making a quick turn, he entered a narrow court to the left, which led to Vine Street, the home of the notorious police-station of the West End. Half-way up the court was a wine-bar, a kind of Bodega, patronised mostly by shopmen from the various establishments in Regent Street. This he entered, looked round to see which of the upturned barrels that served as tables was vacant, and then seated himself in a corner some distance away from the men and women who were drinking port, munching biscuits, and laughing more and more merrily as closing time drew near. Then, about ten minutes later, the stranger slunk in, cast a quick suspicious glance in the direction of the merrymakers, walked across the sanded floor and joined him.

“I hope we have not been seen,” were his opening words as he seated himself upon the stool opposite Chisholm.

“I hope not, if the danger you describe really exists,” Dudley replied. After he had ordered a glass of wine for his companion he scrutinised for a few seconds the narrow and rather sinister face in front of him. With the full light upon him, the stranger looked weary and worn. Chisholm judged him to be about fifty, a rather refined man with a grey, wiry moustache, well-bred manners, and a strange expression of superiority that struck Dudley as peculiar.

“You are Tuscan,” he said, looking at the man with a smile.

The other returned his glance in undisguised wonderment.

“How did the signore know when I have only spoken in my faulty English?” he asked in amazement.

Chisholm laughed, affecting an air of mysterious penetration, with a view to impressing his visitor. The man’s rather faded clothes were of foreign cut, and his wide felt hat was un-English, but he did not explain to him that the unmistakable stamp of the Tuscan was upon him in the tiny object suspended from his watch-chain, a small piece of twisted and pointed coral set in gold, which every Tuscan in every walk of life carries with him, either

openly, or concealed upon his person, to counteract the influence of the Evil Eye.

“It is true that I am Tuscan,” the man said. “But I must confess that the signore surprises me by his quickness of perception.”

“I have travelled, and know Italy well,” was all the explanation Dudley vouchsafed.

“And I arrived from Italy this evening,” said the stranger. “I have been sent to London expressly to see the signore.”

“Sent by whom?”

“By the signore’s friend—a signorina inglese.”

“Her name?”

“The Signorina Mortimer.”

Mention of that name caused Dudley to start and fix his eyes upon the stranger with the sallow face.

“She has sent you. Why?”

“To deliver to you an urgent message,” was the man’s response. “I have here a credential.” And fumbling in the breast pocket of his coat he produced an envelope, open and without superscription, which he handed to Chisholm.

From it the latter drew forth a piece of folded white paper, which he opened carefully.

What he saw struck him aghast. Within the folds was concealed an object, simple, it is true, but of a nature to cause him to hold his breath in sheer astonishment.

The paper contained what Dudley had believed to be still reposing in the safe at Wroxeter. It was the revered relic of a day long past, the token of a love long dead—the little curl he had so faithfully treasured.

The woman into whose hands he had so irretrievably given himself had stolen it. She had secured it by stealth on that night when, conversing with him in the library, she had confessed her knowledge of his secret, so that he had been forced by overwhelming circumstances to make the unholy compact which was driving him to despair. Time after time he had risked his life against fearful odds, snatched it from savage treachery, fought for it in

open fight in wild regions where the foot of a white man had never before trod, plucked it from the heart of battle; but never had he cast it so recklessly upon the dice-board of Fate as on that night when she, the Devil's angel, had appeared to him in the guise of a saviour.

His mouth grew hard as he thought of it. What did it matter? Life was sweet after all, and she had rescued him from suicide. Impulse rode rough-shod over reason, as it so often does with impetuous men of Dudley Chisholm's stamp; his inborn love of adventure, which had carried him far afield into remote corners of the earth, was up in arms against sober thought.

Upon the paper in which the lock of hair was wrapped were a few words, written in ink in a firm feminine hand.

He spread the paper out and read them. The message was very brief, but very pointed:

"The bearer, Francesco Marucci, is to be trusted implicitly.—Muriel Mortimer."

That was all. Surely no better credential could there be than the return of the treasured love-token which she had so ingeniously secured.

"Well?" he inquired, refolding the paper and replacing it in its envelope. "And your message? What is it?"

"A confidential one," replied the Tuscan. "The Signorina ordered me to find you at once, the instant that I reached London. I left Florence the day before yesterday and travelled straight through, by way of Milan and Bâle. She gave me the address of that palazzo where you have been visiting, and I waited in the street until you came out."

"But you have told me that I am watched," said Dudley. "Who is taking an interest in my movements?"

"That is the reason why I am in London. As the signore is watched by the most practised and experienced secret agents, it was with difficulty that I succeeded in approaching him. If those men track me down and discover who I am, then all will be lost—everything."

The paper he held in his hand told him that this stranger could be trusted. He was essentially a man of the world, and was not in the habit of trusting those whom he did not know. And yet, what credential could be more convincing than that innocent-looking love-token of the past?

“But why are these men, whoever they are, watching me? What interest can they possibly have in my movements? The day of the Irish agitation is over,” he said in a somewhat incredulous tone.

“The signorina in her message wishes to give you warning that you are in the deadliest peril,” the man said in a low voice, bending towards him so that none should overhear.

“Speak in Italian, if you wish,” Dudley suggested. “I can understand, and it will be safer.”

The eyes of Francesco Marucci sparkled for a moment at this announcement, and he exclaimed in that soft Tuscan tongue which is so musical to English ears:

“Benissimo! I had no idea the signore knew Italian. The signorina did not tell me so.”

It chanced that Chisholm knew Italian far better than French. As he had learnt it when, in his youth, he had spent two years in Siena, he spoke good Italian without that curious aspiration of the “c’s” which is so characteristically Tuscan.

“Perhaps the signorina did not know,” he said in response.

“The signore is to be congratulated on speaking so well our language!” the stranger exclaimed. “It makes things so much easier. Your English is so very difficult with its ‘w’s’ and its Greek ‘i’s’, and all the rest of the puzzles. We Italians can never speak it properly.”

“But the message,” demanded Dudley rather impatiently. “Tell me quickly, for in five minutes or so this place will be closed, and we shall be turned out into the street.”

“The message of the signorina is a simple one,” answered Marucci in Italian. “It is to warn you to leave England secretly and at once. To fly instantly—to-morrow—because the truth is known.”

“The truth known!” he gasped, half rising from his seat, then dropping back and glaring fixedly at the stranger.

“Yes,” the man replied. “It is unfortunately so.”

“How do you know that?”

“How?” repeated the thin-faced Tuscan, bending towards Chisholm in a confidential manner. “Because I chance to be in the service of your enemies.”

“What? You are in the British Secret Service?” cried the Under-Secretary, amazed by this revelation.

“Si, signore. I am under the Signor Capitano Cator.”

“And you are also in the service of the Signorina Mortimer?”

“That is so,” answered the man, smiling.

“You are actually one of Cator’s agents?”

“The signore is correct,” he answered. “I am an agent in the service of the British Government, mainly employed in France and Belgium. Indeed, if the Signor Sotto-Secretario reflects, he will remember a report upon the Toulon defences which reached the Intelligence Department a few months ago, and about which a rather awkward question was asked in the House of Commons.”

“Yes, I recollect. The elaborate report, which was produced confidentially, I myself saw at the time. It was by one Cuillini, if I remember right.”

“Exactly! Benvenuto Cuillini and Francesco Marucci are one and the same person.”

The young statesman sat speechless. This man Marucci was the most ingenious and faithful of all Cator’s secret agents, and the manner in which he had obtained the plans of the defences of Toulon was, he knew, considered by the Intelligence Department to be little short of miraculous. The report was a most detailed and elaborate one, actually accompanied by snapshot photographs and a mass of information which would be of the greatest service if ever England fought France in the Mediterranean.

“Then you, Signor Marucci, are really my friend?” he exclaimed at last.

“I am the friend of the Signorina Mortimer,” he replied, correcting him.

“And who is the Signorina Mortimer,” Chisholm demanded. “Who and what is she that you should be her intimate friend? Tell me.”

Chapter Twenty Six.

Shows Signori of the Suburbs.

The wiry Italian with the bristly moustache glanced at him half suspiciously; then a smile lit up his face for an instant.

“The Signorina Mortimer is an English signorina whom I have known a long time. Francesco Marucci is a friend of all the English.”

“I know. But in this matter you are actually working against the efforts of your own department.”

“As I have already explained to the signore, I am but the signorina’s messenger,” he declared, in a tone which showed him to be a past-master in the art of evasion. “She urges you to pay an immediate visit to a certain person here in London, and to leave for the Continent to-morrow morning—for Italy.”

“To go to her? Why cannot she come to England?”

“Because just at present that is impossible,” the man replied.

“And this visit you speak of. To whom is it?” The Italian drew from his pocket a small and shabby wallet, about six inches square, of the kind used in Italy to carry the paper money. From this he took a card, on which was written an address at Penge.

“She asks you to call at the house indicated immediately this card comes into your possession,” he said. “As your visit is expected, you had better go to-night.”

“For what reason?”

“For reasons known to her alone,” replied the messenger. “I am not in the possession of the motives of the signorina in this affair.”

“Speak candidly, Marucci,” said Chisholm. “You, as confidential agent of the British Government, know all about this matter. You cannot deny that?”

“I know the facts only so far as it is necessary for me to know them,” answered the Italian warily. He was still much impressed by the manner in which the Signor Sotto-Secretario had pronounced his nationality.

“You know the object of my visit to Penge, eh?”

“No, signore, I assure you that I do not. I am merely obeying orders given me by the signorina, and I hope to leave Charing Cross at nine o’clock to-morrow morning on my return to Italy.”

“Did she explain to you the manner in which the truth had been revealed?” he inquired eagerly.

“No, but I can guess,” was his companion’s answer, given in a low voice. “Some one has denounced you, and consequently your English police have received information which necessitates your flying the country and remaining hidden until you can prove an unshakeable alibi.”

Dudley was silent, thoughtfully polishing the silver handle of his cane with his glove.

“Were no instructions given you as to the mode in which I should escape? If I am watched, as you allege, then the ordinary routes to the Continent are under observation and the Channel ports closed to me.”

“No instructions were given me,” he replied. “You are to pay a visit to that address, and afterwards to leave for Florence, where I am to meet you at the Hotel Savoy. To-day is Thursday; I shall call for you at the hotel at midday on Monday.”

The hunted man reflected, for the position was both embarrassing and serious. Here were peremptory orders from the woman to whom he had sold himself as the price of his secret, to the effect that he should renounce everything, leave England, and become known at Scotland Yard as a criminal fugitive. He was to part from Claudia, whom he loved, and who loved him with all her soul; to leave her without farewell and without any words breathing patience and courage. And this, after his solemn declarations of an hour before!

What would she think of him—she who had been just as much a part of his life as he of hers?

In those brief moments he remembered the wild, uncurbed passion of her love; how that she had exalted him as her idol, as the one person who held her future in his hands, the one person whose kiss gave life to her. She was wealthy, almost beyond the wildest dreams of her youth; but riches availed her not. Her heart was bursting with the great and boundless love she bore him. He knew this; knew it all, and sighed as he faced the inevitable.

What an ignominious ending to a brief and brilliant career! It had been a thousand times better if he had cast the offer of the temptress aside, and

swallowed the fatal draught he had prepared! The jury would have pronounced him to be the victim of temporary insanity, and all the ugly story that was now in possession of Scotland Yard would have been hushed for ever, and the high honour of the Chisholms saved from public blemish.

Bah! He had been weak, he told himself, and for his lack of courage he must now suffer. His thoughts turned again to suicide, but on reflection he saw that to take his own life was now unavailing. The truth was known at the Home Office, and the police would reveal it at the inquiry into the cause of his decease.

He was helpless, utterly helpless, in the hands of a clever adventuress.

Long and steadily he looked at the Italian. This man with the thin, haggard face, grey moustache and deeply furrowed brow, was actually the most daring and ingenious of all the confidential agents employed by the British Intelligence Department on the Continent. Known to the Department as Benvenuto Cuillini, it was owing to his astuteness, indomitable energy, and patient inquiry that the British Government were often put in possession of information of the highest possible value in the conduct of diplomacy or of war. There is, of course, in the Englishman's mind an emphatic dislike of the employment of spies, but we have nowadays to face hard facts, and must pander to no sentimentalities in dealing with avowed enemies. The recent Transvaal war has shown the hopeless inefficiency of our secret service in South Africa, and has taught every Englishman the lesson that, even though he may be disinclined to employ spies, he must keep pace with other nations. Furthermore, it has proved to him that knowledge is power and that it may often be the means of saving many valuable lives.

The barman, feeling thankful that the end of his day's work was at last reached, shouted in a stentorian voice:

"Time, gentlemen! Time!"

This announcement caused every one to drain his glass and rise.

"You will lose no time in visiting the house indicated upon the card, will you?" urged the secret agent. "And I shall meet you at the Savoy in Florence on Monday next at noon. That is a definite appointment."

"If you wish," Chisholm replied mechanically. And both went out, walking slowly down the court.

Before turning into Piccadilly, the Italian halted, declaring it was best that they should not be seen in company. He therefore wished Dudley good-night, and "buon viaggio."

Should he return to Albert Gate and speak with Claudia for the last time? Ah! if only he dared to tell her the ghastly truth; to lay bare his innermost consciousness and expose to her the secret of his sin! Ah! if he only could! If he only dared to ask for her guidance, as he had so often done at the other crises of his life! She loved him; but would she love him any longer when she knew the appalling truth?

No. It was quite impossible. Even to the passionate love of a woman there is a limit.

He stood in hesitation on the crowded pavement, under the portico of the St. James's Restaurant. To go down to the House was out of the question. Should he return to Claudia? He glanced at his watch. No. It was too late. What excuse could he make for seeking an interview with her after she had retired for the night and the great house was closed. If he went there he must perforce tell her of his intended flight—that they must, in future, be apart. This would result in a scene; and he hated scenes.

He would write to her. It was the only way. After to-morrow he, whose career had been so brilliant and full of promise, whose life was supposed by all to be so free from any cares, save those belonging to his political office, would be a fugitive upon whose track the police would raise a hue and cry throughout all the various countries which had treaties of extradition with England.

"It is God's justice," he murmured. "I have sinned, and this is my punishment."

Two rough-voiced women jostled him, making some silly remarks about his star-gazing.

This roused him, and he permitted himself to drift with the crowd along to the Circus, where, having glanced at the address upon the card the spy had given him, he hailed one of the hansoms which were slowly filing past.

When the man received orders to drive to Worthington Road, Penge, he was sarcastic, and seemed disinclined to take the fare.

"It's a long way, gov'nor," said the driver, when Dudley had announced his intention of paying well.

“I can’t go there and back under a couple o’ quid.”

“Very well, that’s agreed,” Chisholm said. He stepped into the cab, threw himself into a corner, and gave himself up to a long and serious train of thought.

He loved Claudia, and hated the mysterious woman, who had in a manner so remarkable learned the truth regarding the one tragic event in his past. Muriel’s innocent-looking face utterly belied her crafty and avaricious nature. Gifted with the countenance of a child, her active brain was that of an adventuress. A dangerous woman for any man to associate with. And he, Dudley Chisholm, who had so long prided himself upon his shrewd observance of men and women and his quick perception, had been utterly and completely deceived.

The long drive across Westminster Bridge and along the wide and apparently endless thoroughfares with their rows of gas-lamps, through the suburbs of Walworth, Camberwell, Denmark Hill, and Sydenham, passed unnoticed. He was so much preoccupied that he did not realise his whereabouts until they were descending the hill past Sydenham Station, where they turned to the right by Venney Road, thus heading for Penge. The suburban roads were quiet and deserted; the horse’s hoofs and the tinkling of the bell were the sole disturbers of the night.

Presently the cabman pulled up to ask the solitary policeman the direction of the road which Dudley had mentioned; then he drove on again. At last, after making several turns, they passed down Green Lane and entered a road of small detached villas, rather artistically built, with red and white exteriors. Apparently they were only just finished, for in front of some there still were piles of bricks and building rubbish, while before others boards stood announcing that this or that “desirable residence” was “to be let or sold.”

The road was a cul-de-sac which terminated in a newly worked brickfield. When nearly at the end of it, the cab suddenly pulled up before a house of exactly the same appearance as its unlet neighbour, save for the fact that the Venetian blinds were down, and that a gas-jet was burning behind the fan-light of the door.

“This is it, sir,” announced the cabman through the trap-door in the roof. Dudley left the cab and passed through the newly painted iron gate and up the short path to the door, at which he knocked with a firm and sounding rat-tat.

There were signs of scuttling within. His quick eye noticed that one of the slats of the Venetian blind in the bay window of the parlour had been lifted for an instant by some person who had evidently been watching for him, and then dropped again quickly.

The low-pitched voices of men sounded ominously within, but the door was not opened.

He waited fully five minutes, listening attentively the while; he clearly heard a sound which was suspiciously like the despairing cry of a woman.

Then he knocked loudly again.

Dudley Chisholm was by no means a timid man. A dozen times he had faced death during his erratic wanderings in the almost unknown regions of the far east. He was of the type of athletic Englishman that prefers the fist as a weapon at close quarters to any knife or revolver. That whispering within, however, unnerved him; while the woman's ejaculation was also distinctly uncanny. The cabman was awaiting him, it was true, and could be relied upon to raise an alarm if there should be any attempt at foul play. The remembrance of this, to a certain degree, reassured him.

He had come there in obedience to the orders of the woman who held his future in her hands, but he did not like the situation in the least.

His second summons was answered tardily by an old woman, withered and bent, who came shuffling down the little hall grumbling to herself, and who, on throwing open the door, inquired what he wanted.

"I think I am expected here," was all he could reply, handing her the card which the Italian had given him.

The old hag took it in her claw-like fingers and examined it suspiciously.

"Are you Mr Chisholm?" she inquired.

Dudley nodded in the affirmative.

"Then come in—come in. They've been expecting you these two days." She closed the door behind and led the way through the barely furnished hall into a back sitting-room on the left, which contained a little furniture of a kind to suggest that it had been purchased on the instalment system.

He seated himself, wondering who were the persons by whom he was expected. When his guide had gone he strained his ears to catch any sound of the woman's voice which he had heard raised in distress after his first

knock at the door. But all was silent. Only the paraffin lamp on the table with its shade of crimson paper spluttered as it burned low, for it was now about half-past two in the morning.

The association of ideas caused him to recollect all he had ever heard about strange nocturnal adventures met with by men in unknown houses in the suburbs; and as he sat awaiting the arrival of the persons who apparently took such a deep interest in his welfare he could not help becoming a prey to misgivings.

Suddenly he heard low whisperings out in the hall, and some words, distinct and ominous reached him.

“Well, if it must be, I suppose it must,” he heard a voice say. “But recollect I am no party to such a thing.”

A low, sarcastic laugh was the sole answer to this protest. The next instant the door opened, and there entered two men, one young, tall, and muscular, with an ugly scar across his lower jaw, and the other very old, feeble, and white-haired. Both were foreigners. Chisholm knew they were Italians before either of them spoke.

“Buona sera!” exclaimed the elder man, greeting the visitor in a squeaky voice. “You are the Signor Chisholm, and the English signorina in Florence has sent you to us. Benissimo! We have been awaiting you these two days. I presume our friend Marucci has only just arrived in London.”

“He arrived this evening,” said Chisholm. “But before we go further may I not know who it is I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“My name is Sisto Bernini. Our friend here,” he added, indicating his companion, “is Tonio Rocchi.” The younger man, a dark-eyed, black-haired, rather handsome fellow grinned with satisfaction. Chisholm glanced at him, but was not reassured. There was a strange mystery about the whole affair.

“You have been sent to us because you desire to avoid the police, and escape from England,” the old man continued. “To get you away is difficult, very difficult, because you are a man so extremely well-known. We often assist our own countrymen to get, safely back to Italy after any little fracas, but with you it is very different.”

“And by what means are you able to get them secretly out of the country?” inquired Chisholm, much interested in this newly discovered traffic.

“By various means. Sometimes as stowaways; at others, in our own fishing-smack from one or other of the villages along the south coast. There are a dozen different ways.”

“And are none safe for me?”

The old man shook his head dubiously.

“For you, all are dangerous.”

“All, save one,” chimed in the younger man, exchanging glances with his companion.

“And what is that?” Chisholm asked.

“It is our secret,” the old man replied, shutting his thin lips tightly with a grin of self-satisfaction.

“I was informed by Marucci that you were prepared to assist me!” exclaimed Chisholm in a tone of annoyance; “but if you are not, then I may as well wish you good-night.”

“If the signore will exercise a little patience, he shall hear our plan,” the old man Bernini assured him. “I am all attention.”

“Then let us speak quite frankly,” squeaked the old fellow. “You desire to escape from the police who, for all we know, are now watching you. That you have been watched during the past few days is evident. Tonio, here, has himself seen detectives following you. Well, we are prepared to undertake the risk—in exchange, of course, for a certain consideration.”

“To speak quite candidly you intend to blackmail me—eh? It isn’t at all difficult to see your drift.”

“If the signore desires a service rendered, he must be prepared to pay,” declared the younger man. “Sisto has a plan, but it is expensive.”

“And how much would it cost me?” inquired Chisholm, still preserving his outward calm, although he saw that he had fallen among a very undesirable and unscrupulous set.

“Ten thousand pounds sterling,” was the old man’s prompt reply.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Which asks a Question.

“Ah!” exclaimed the Under-Secretary with affected nonchalance, “I merely asked out of curiosity. I have no intention whatever of paying such a sum.”

“For the amount I have named we will guarantee to place you ashore in Greece, or in any other of the few countries that remain open to fugitives from justice.”

“I have no doubt,” Dudley answered with distinct sarcasm. “But as I have no intention of being blackmailed, or even of employing any of your efforts on my behalf, we may as well end this interview.” He rose from his chair and drew himself up to his full height.

The two men exchanged glances full of sinister meaning.

“Our aid has been invoked by your friend, the English signorina,” the young man exclaimed in a bullying tone, for the first time revealing his true character. “We have told you our terms—high, we admit, but not too exorbitant when you recollect the many bribes that have to be paid.”

“Ten thousand pounds, eh?”

“That is the sum.”

“Well, I’ll make a confession to you both,” declared Chisholm defiantly. “It is this. My life isn’t worth to me ten thousand pence. Now you can at once relinquish all hope of bleeding me in the manner you have arranged.”

“The signore is frank,” remarked the old man. “Frankness saves so much argument in such matters. I will be frank also, and say that there is still another, and perhaps more pleasant mode of escape.”

“I shall be interested to hear it,” said Dudley, folding his arms, and leaning carelessly back against the table.

The man was silent for a moment, as though hesitating whether to tell his visitor the truth. At last he spoke, compressing his scheme into a couple of words.

“By marriage.”

“With whom?”

At that instant the door was flung open suddenly, and there advanced into the room the woman he believed to be far away in Italy—the woman who held his future in her hands, Muriel Mortimer.

“Marriage with me,” she said, answering his question.

“You!” he cried, thoroughly taken aback at her sudden appearance. “What do you mean? Kindly explain all this.”

“It requires no explanation, Mr Chisholm,” she replied, her pale face hard-set and determined. “You are in the gravest peril, and I have come to you prepared to rescue you from the punishment which must otherwise fall upon you. To-night you have been with the woman who loves you—the witch-like woman who has half London at her feet. I know it all. You love her, and intend to marry her. But you will marry me—me!” and she struck her breast with her hand to emphasise her words. “Or,” she added,—“or to-night you will be arrested as a common criminal.”

He looked her straight in the face without flinching. She was dressed plainly, even shabbily, in rusty black, as though, when out of doors, to avoid attention. Her countenance, pallid and drawn, showed how desperate she was. He, for his part, perceived that he had been tricked by her, and the thought lashed him to fury.

“Listen!” he cried indignantly; “I have been enticed here to this place as part of a plot formed to obtain ten thousand pounds by blackmail, or else to drive me into becoming your husband, you well knowing that I should be prepared to pay any sum to be rid of the danger that threatens me. You promise me freedom if I consent to one or the other. The affection you pretended to feel for me was a sham of the worst kind. You and your precious myrmidons want money—only money. But from me you won’t obtain a single halfpenny. Understand that, all three of you!”

“You intend to marry her!” she said between her teeth. “But you shall never do that. She shall know the truth.”

“Tell her. To me, it is quite immaterial, I assure you,” he declared in defiance.

He saw that this woman, whom he had once believed so innocent, even childish in her simplicity, was an associate of an unscrupulous gang that, no doubt, existed by blackmailing those who desired to escape from England. He had heard vague rumours of the existence of this strange association, for it had long ago been a puzzle to the London police why so many foreigners were able to evade them and fly successfully from the

country, while Englishmen, who knew well the various outlets, usually failed.

“You made a solemn compact with me that night at Wroxeter,” she said. “And you have broken it. On my part I have done all that was possible. Cator would have known the truth long ago had it not been for my presence in Italy, and for the counteracting efforts of his own lieutenant, Francesco Marucci. To my foresight all this is due, yet now you decline to save yourself!”

“I refuse to be blackmailed.”

“You hope to escape and marry her,” laughed the fair-haired woman defiantly.

“I hope for nothing. My life is, to me, just as precious as it was that bitter night at Wroxeter.”

“And you absolutely refuse to accept the alternative?”

“I will accept nothing either from you, or from your associates,” he replied.

“Then we are to be enemies?”

“If you so desire.”

“You prefer the revelations that I intend to make?”

“I do, most certainly,” he answered with a forced laugh.

“Shall I tell you one thing?”

“Do, by all means.”

“Well, you shall never marry her. To-morrow she will hate the very mention of your name,” she cried wildly.

“My memory, you mean.”

“Why?”

“Because to-morrow I shall be dead, and your chance of plucking the pigeon will have disappeared,” he answered bitterly.

She looked at him with a maddened and fiery glance, as though his defiance had aroused the spirit of murder within her. She saw that his determination

to carry out his previous intention of suicide checkmated her. All her ingenious wiles had been conceived and operated in vain.

While he still lived, there was a hope of securing the prize which an hour ago had seemed to be so well within her grasp.

“So you refuse!” she cried in a frenzy of anger. “You intend to escape by self-destruction, miserable coward that you are!”

“I am no coward!” he replied with fierce indignation. “If I were a coward I would accept the offer of your associates and pay willingly to be placed beyond the possibility of arrest. But I prefer to face the inevitable, and shall do so without flinching.” Then, turning to the others, he added: “I wish all three of you more success in your next attempt to squeeze money from an unfortunate criminal—that is all.”

He turned to leave, but Tonio, the hot-headed young bully, instantly sprang forward and drew from his belt a glittering knife, one of those long, narrow-bladed weapons which the Italian of the South usually carries out of sight on his person, although his paternal government forbids him so to do. Quick as thought Dudley divined the Italian wished to prevent him from leaving the house, and, seeing the knife held down threateningly before him, he raised his fist and with a rapid, well-directed drive from the shoulder struck the fellow beneath the jaw with such force that he was lifted up and fell backwards upon the table, overturning the cheap paraffin lamp standing there.

In an instant the place burst into flames. During the confusion that followed, while the woman rushed from the room screaming “Fire!” Dudley dashed out of the house, expecting, of course, to find his cab waiting for him.

But it was not there. While he had been arguing, the old hag had evidently paid the fare and dismissed the conveyance, a fact which was in itself sufficient evidence that they had not intended him to leave the house.

For a moment he hesitated. Then, recognising how narrowly he had escaped being struck down by an assassin, he turned and hurried away across the rough brickfield to which the unfinished road gave entrance.

Shouts of alarm, and loud cries of “Fire!” sounded behind him, but without turning to look he continued on his way, stumbling along in the darkness, utterly dumbfounded at his strange adventure and the remarkable revelation of the true character of the pretty young woman known in West End drawing-rooms as Muriel Mortimer.

For most of the remainder of the night Dudley Chisholm, unnerved by the strange affair and haunted by the constant dread that he was already under police surveillance, wandered through the deserted streets of Penge and Lower Sydenham. He feared to inquire the way from any of the constables he met, lest he should be recognised. As he was entirely unacquainted with the district, he knew his position was hopeless till there should be light enough to show him the Crystal Palace. Once arrived there, he could easily make his way back to London, for in days gone by he had often driven down in his tandem from Westminster, once or twice with Claudia at his side.

The night was dark, starless, and intensely cold. But he heeded not fatigue, for his mind was full of the gravest reflections. That the woman Mortimer, the mysterious ward of the Meldrums, had laid a very clever plot, into which he had fallen, was plainly apparent. But he had refused her demands, and she was now, of course, his most bitter enemy. That she would seek vengeance he had no doubt, for she had already shown herself to be a woman not to be thwarted.

And what was worse than all—she knew his secret.

Through the ill-lit suburban roads he wandered on and on, reflecting bitterly that with this woman as his enemy there only remained for him suicide, if he wished to avoid arrest and a criminal's trial. He came at last to a railway line running on a low embankment, through market gardens, and it occurred to him to climb up there and wait in patience for the approach of a train. All this time Dudley Chisholm was not in the least distraught; and yet of all his wishes none was so powerful as the wish to end his life.

But Claudia's beautiful face arose before him. Her dear eyes, with that familiar expression of tenderness, a little sad, but sweet with a love-look not to be mistaken, seemed to gaze upon him just as they had done during that blissful hour before midnight, when he had held her in his arms and breathed into her ear the declaration of his love.

Ah, how passionately he loved her!

No, he could not take farewell of life without once again beholding her! He descended the embankment and walked along what seemed interminable miles of streets, until he met at last a bricklayer on his way to work, carrying his tin tea-bottle in his hand. This man proved communicative, and informed him that he was at Rushey Green, on the main road which led through Lewisham and Deptford, where it entered one of the arteries of London, the Old Kent Road.

He glanced at his watch and found that it was close upon five o'clock. Roused by this discovery, he pushed forward at a quicker pace, at length finding a belated cab in front of a coffee-stall, at which its driver was refreshing himself. Then, thoroughly worn out, he got into the conveyance and was driven back to his chambers.

Old Parsons had a message for him when he reached home.

"A man called to see you during the night, master Dudley. He wished to see you very particularly, but would leave no card."

"What kind of man?" inquired his master suspiciously.

"I think he was a gentleman. At least he spoke like one. I had never seen him before. He wanted to know whether he would find you down at the House, and I said that it was most probable you were there."

"He wasn't a foreigner?"

"Oh no," the old man answered. "Some papers have also been brought by a messenger. They are on your table."

Dudley passed through into his study, put down his hat, and broke open the usual sealed packet of Parliamentary papers which reached him each night, and which contained among others, the draft of the questions to be addressed to him on the following day in his capacity of Foreign Under-Secretary in the House.

Without seating himself he took out the question paper and looked at it.

He glanced rapidly from paragraph to paragraph. Suddenly his gaze became fixed, and he held his breath. He read in the precise handwriting of Wrey, the following words:

"Mr Gerald Oldfield (Antrim West) to ask the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs whether it is true that a certain member of this House, now a Member of Her Majesty's Government, has sold to the representative of a Foreign Power a copy of certain confidential diplomatic correspondence, and further whether it is not a fact that the Member of Her Majesty's Government referred to is guilty of the crime of wilful murder."

The blue official paper fluttered from his nerveless fingers and fell to the ground.

"My God!" he gasped, his jaws rigid, his eyes staring and fixed. "My secret is already known to my enemies!"

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Confesses the Truth.

The wintry dawn had scarcely broken; he would have to wait several hours before paying his last visit to Albert Gate. He threw off his great-coat and cast himself wearily into the big armchair, his mind full of conflicting thoughts. Despair had gripped his heart. It was hard that his career should thus be suddenly cut off, harder still that he must leave the sweet and tender woman whom he had loved so fondly for so many years. But he was guilty—yes, guilty; he must suffer the penalty exacted from all those who sin against their Maker.

Parsons entered to inquire if he wanted anything; but he dismissed him, telling him to go and snatch some rest for an hour or two. The faithful old retainer never went to bed before the return of his master, no matter to what hour he might be detained in the House.

When he had gone, Chisholm opened the heavy curtains, drew up the blind and watched the yellow London dawn slowly dispersing the mists over St. James's Park. Standing at the window he gazed out upon St. James's Street, dismal and deserted, with its strip of dull sky above. It was the last dawn that he would see, he told himself bitterly, From him all the attractions of the world would very soon be taken away. Well, he left them with only a single regret—Claudia.

He fondly whispered her name. It sounded to him strange, almost unearthly, in that silent room.

Yes, he must see her again for the last time, and confess to her the whole terrible truth. She would hate and despise him, for from the man whose hands are stained with the blood of a fellow-creature it would only be natural for her to shrink. The awful truth he had to confront was—that he was a murderer.

The remembrance of the narrow path in the patch of forest near Godalming came back to him. In a single instant he lived again those terrible moments of his madness—the death-cry rang in his ears. He remembered how quickly he had slipped away through the wood; how at last he found himself standing on the high-road; how he reached a railway station and returned to London.

Then, two days later, the papers were full of it. He recollected all the theories that had been put forward; the many mysterious facts that were produced at the inquest, and the grave suspicion that fell upon another. It was all like

some horrible nightmare, so horrible, indeed, that he found himself wondering if he had really lived through it—if he were really an assassin.

Alas! it was only too true. Cator had discovered the real facts, and the crime was now fixed upon him.

He tried to rid himself of these hideous recollections of the past, to brace himself up boldly, and to face his condemnation and self-destruction. But it was too difficult; his strength failed him.

Not only was his secret known to the Intelligence Department, but one, at least, of his fiercest political opponents, a wild-haired demagogue, knew the truth and intended to explode that question in the House, as if it were an infernal machine, in the hope of upsetting the Government by his action.

From his breast pocket he took the tiny talisman, the lock of hair which Muriel Mortimer had so ingeniously stolen, and at last returned to him. When he had opened the paper, he looked at the curl, long and wistfully.

He was thinking—thinking deeply, while the yellow dawn struggled through the canopy of London fog and the hands of the clock before him were slowly creeping forward to mark the hour of his doom.

There were several letters, which had been delivered by the last post on the previous night, awaiting his attention. Out of curiosity he took them up and one by one opened them, throwing them into the waste-paper basket when read, for, as he bitterly reflected, they would need no reply.

One of the letters gave him pause. He re-read it several times, with brows knit and a puzzled expression upon his countenance. Dated from Boodle's it ran as follows:

"Dear Sir,—I have twice during the past two days endeavoured to see you, once at the House of Commons, and again at the Foreign Office, but have on both occasions been unsuccessful. I shall to-morrow do myself the honour of calling upon you at your chambers, and if you are not in, I shall esteem it a favour if you will kindly leave word with your servant at what hour you will return.

"Yours truly.

"Ralph Brodie."

His features relaxed into a hard smile. What a curious freak of Fate it was that caused this man, of all others, to write and ask for an appointment! He was a person with whom he had never before held any communication—the

husband of the woman who, years before her marriage, had given him that lock of hair as a love-token. She had been one of the loves of his youth, and since her marriage he had never seen her. He knew that she had married a wealthy Anglo-Indian named Brodie, and that he had taken her back with him to India. When he was in that country, after his journey across Bhutan, he had been told they were living on their great estate at Kapurthala, near Jalandhar, in the Punjab; and there were whispers to the effect that the marriage had been anything but a happy one. Brodie neglected her, it was said, and at Simla she was flattered, so went the report, by a host of admirers, mostly military, in the usual manner. It was for that reason that he did not visit Simla. She had never once written to him after her marriage. Although he held her memory sacred, he had no wish to meet her and risk the chance of becoming disillusioned in regard to her character.

He had always suspected that Brodie was aware of the affection which had nearly resulted in their engagement. Hence, he had entertained no desire to meet him. Strange, indeed, that he should so persistently seek him, just at the most critical moment in his life.

“Well,” he laughed at last, tearing up the letter and tossing it into the fire, “I’ve never met the fellow in all my life, and I don’t see why I should put myself out to do so now. The brute treated May badly, infernally badly. If we met I couldn’t be civil to the cad.”

He had loved May—the daughter of a retired colonel—in the days after he and Claudia had drifted apart, he to indulge his cynicism, she to marry Dick Nevill. But his love for her was not that passionate worship of the ideal which had marked his affection for the charming little friend of his youth. It was a mere midsummer madness, the pleasant memory of which lingered always in his mind.

He thought over it all, and smiled bitterly when he recollected the past.

Presently Parsons brought him a cup of black coffee. It was a habit of his, acquired abroad, to take it each morning in bed. When the old servitor, true to his clock-work precision, entered with the tiny Nankin cup upon the tray, Dudley was astonished.

“What? Eight o’clock already?” he exclaimed, starting up.

“Yes, Master Dudley,” the old man replied. “Aren’t you going to bed, sir?”

“No. Well—at least, I don’t know, Parsons,” said the Under-Secretary. “I have several early appointments.”

At that moment the electric bell in the hall rang sharply, and the old man went out to answer the summons.

“There’s a gentleman, Master Dudley,” was Parson’s announcement. “He wishes to see you at once very particularly. He will give no card.”

“Well, show him in,” his master answered with every sign of reluctance, swallowing his coffee at a gulp. As his doom was fixed, what did it matter who called upon him now? He smiled bitterly.

Parsons disappeared for a moment. A few seconds later the heavy portico was drawn aside, and there stood before Dudley the tall, rather well-dressed, figure of a man, who halted upon the threshold without uttering a word.

“You!” gasped Chisholm, springing from his chair. “You! Archibald Cator!”

“Yes,” answered the other gravely, closing the door behind him. “We have met before, and, doubtless, you know my errand.”

“I do,” groaned the despairing man. “Alas! I do.”

“The truth is out, Mr Chisholm!” exclaimed his visitor, in slow, deep tones. “Our inquiries are complete, and there has been discovered against you evidence so plain as to be altogether indisputable. There need be no ceremony between us. You, esteemed by the world, and held in high honour by the Government, are both a traitor and a murderer. Do you deny it?”

There was a silence, deep and painful.

“No, I do not,” was the low, harsh rejoinder of the wretched man, who had sunk back into his chair with his chin upon his breast.

His visitor deliberately drew from the inner pocket of his overcoat a big, official-looking envelope, out of which he took several unmounted photographs.

These he spread before the man whose brilliant career had thus been so suddenly ended.

“Do you recognise these as reproductions of documents handed by you to a certain friend of yours—copies of confidential despatches from Sir Henry Lygon, Her Majesty’s Ambassador at Constantinople?”

Chisholm, his face livid, nodded in the affirmative. Denials were, he knew, utterly useless. The whole ingenious network of the British Intelligence

Department on the Continent had been diligently at work piecing together the evidence against him, and had, under the active direction of that prince of spies, Archibald Cator, at last succeeded in unravelling what had for years remained a profound mystery.

His grave-faced, unwelcome visitor, well-satisfied by this admission, next drew a mounted cabinet photograph from his pocket, and, holding it out before his eyes, asked, in a low, distinct voice whether he knew the original.

Chisholm's countenance turned ashen grey the instant his haggard eyes fell upon the pictured face.

"God!" he cried, wildly starting up, "my God! Cator, spare me that! Hide it from my sight! hide it! I cannot bear it! It's his portrait—his!"

The clock of St. Anne's, in Wilton Place, had just chimed eleven, and the yellow sun had now succeeded in struggling through the wintry mist.

Claudia's carriage with its handsome pair of bays and her powdered footman, with the bearskin rug over his arm, stood awaiting her beneath the dark portico.

As, warmly wrapped in her sables, she descended the wide marble staircase slowly, buttoning her glove, Jackson met her.

"Mr Chisholm has just called, m'lady. He has been shown into the morning-room."

Her heart gave a quick bound. She dismissed the servant with a nod and walked to the apartment indicated.

Dudley turned quickly from the window as she entered, and greeted her, raising her ungloved hand to his lips with infinite courtliness. In an instant, however, she detected the change in him, for his face was blanched to the lips, his voice hoarse and tremulous.

"My dear Dudley!" she cried in alarm. "Why, whatever is the matter? You are ill."

He closed the door behind her; then, still holding her hand, looked straight into her dark eyes, and said:

"I have come to you, Claudia, to bid you farewell—to see you for the last time."

“What do you mean?” she gasped, her cheeks turning pale in an instant at his announcement.

“I mean that our love must end to-day. That in future, instead of entertaining affection for me, you must hate me, as one guilty and unworthy.”

“I really don’t understand, dear,” she answered, bewildered. “You are not yourself to-day.”

“Alas! I am too much myself,” he answered in a low hoarse voice. “I am here, Claudia, to make confession to you. I would, indeed, crave your forgiveness, but I know that that is impossible.” He was holding her hand in his convulsive grasp, and his eyes were riveted on hers in a fierce look full of a passionate devotion.

“Confession?” she asked quickly. “What secrets have you from me? Has some other woman usurped my place in your heart? If so, tell me, Dudley. Do not hesitate.”

“No,” he answered, trying to preserve an outward calm, “it is not that. I love no woman but your own dear self. Surely you do not doubt me?”

“I have never doubted you. Sometimes I have been jealous—madly jealous, I confess—but always without reason, for you have always been loyal to me.”

“I was loyal because I loved no other woman save yourself,” he cried, kissing her passionately upon the lips. “But all the joy must wither. I am here to make confession, to reveal a ghastly chapter in my life, and to take leave of you—and of life.”

She saw how terribly agitated he was, and her woman’s solicitude for his welfare calmed her. “Come,” she said tenderly, leading him towards a chair. “Sit down and remain quiet for a little. You are nervous and overworked.” She placed her small, soft hand upon his hot brow, and brushed back the dark hair from his forehead.

Refusing to sit, he stood before her, grasping the chair to steady himself.

“No, Claudia; do not trouble about me. It is all useless now. The end has come. Let me confess all to you. I know that what I am about to disclose will turn your love to hatred; that my very memory will become repugnant to you, and that mere mention of my name will fill you with indignation and disgust. But hear the secret chapter of my life’s history before you judge. Let me tell you all,” he added hoarsely. “Let me lay bare the terrible secret that I

have carried these six years buried within my heart. Let me confess to you, the woman I love."

His words filled her with amazement. Her brows contracted, and her breath came and went in short, quick gasps. Was she actually to lose him? It seemed impossible.

"I am all attention, Dudley," she replied in a low, mechanical voice. "Your confession, whatever its nature, shall find in me a safe guardian."

"I cannot ask you to forgive, Claudia," he said, "I can only beg of you to think that I have hidden the truth from you because I dearly loved you and knew that exposure must result in the abrupt termination of our love-dream."

"Tell me all," she urged. "Have no secrets from me."

"Then hear me," he said, his hard face white and drawn, while with his strong hands he gripped the chair, striving valiantly to remain calm. "I will relate to you all the hideous facts in their proper sequence; you will see what a canker-worm of guilt has existed within me all these years. For me, there is now no life, no hope, no love—"

"Except mine," she interrupted quickly.

"Ah! yours must turn to hatred, Claudia! I cannot hope for the pardon of man or woman. I have suffered; I have repented deeply on my knees before my Maker. But God's judgment is upon me, and the end is near. My story is a tragic one indeed. I think you will recollect that, long ago, after I had come down from Oxford, it was our custom to take happy walks round Winchester, over to King's Worthy, across the Down to Hursley, or through the Crab Wood to Sparsholt—do you remember those still summer evenings in the golden sun-down, dearest, when youth was buoyant and careless, and our love was perfect?"

"Remember them?" she cried. "Ah! yes. I live those happy hours over again very often in my day-dreams, when I am alone. They are the tenderest memories of all my past," she answered in a deep voice, tremulous with an emotion which stirred her to the very depths of her being.

"Your marriage came as a natural sequence, Claudia, for as the old adage has it, the course of true love never did run smooth. We separated, and you carried my farewell kiss of benediction upon your brow. I became lonely and melancholy when you, the sun of my life, had gone out. In order to occupy myself, as you had urged me to do, I obtained by family influence the

appointment of private secretary to Lord Stockbridge, Her Majesty's Foreign Minister. You were abroad with Dick, spending the winter at Cannes, when I became acquainted with a girl named May Lennox, the daughter of a retired officer who had spent much of the latter part of his life on the Continent. I missed you as my constant companion, and it was merely for the sake of her bright companionship that I allowed myself to become attracted by her. Father and daughter were devoted to each other, and as the colonel was a widower, the pair lived in furnished lodgings, a drawing-room floor in Hereford Road, which turns out of Westbourne Grove, close to Whiteley's. I rather liked the colonel. By reason of my frequent visits, we became very friendly. During the hot days of August they moved down to Hastings, taking up their quarters at the Queen's, to which place I often ran down to see them, for I must here confess that a midsummer madness grew upon me, and I at last found myself in love with her. From the first, however, I had been quick to perceive that although the colonel was a thoroughgoing cosmopolitan and a lighthearted fellow whose only occupation seemed to be the study of foreign politics from the newspapers—for knowing my official position he often discussed and criticised with me points in Lord Stockbridge's policy—yet he was nevertheless entirely opposed to my suit. I did my utmost to ingratiate myself with him, for at the time I believed myself to be hopelessly in love with May."

He paused in hesitation, for he knew that his confession must be a cruel and terrible disillusionment for Claudia.

But he had taken the initial step, and was now compelled to describe to the bitter end his downfall, and thus to lose the treasure of her esteem.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Confides a Motive and a Mystery.

"One Sunday evening early in September," Chisholm continued at last, in a hoarse, strained voice, low and yet distinct, "May had retired immediately after dinner, owing to a headache, and I agreed to accompany the colonel for a turn along the Esplanade, to smoke a cigar. The night was hot and close, prophetic of a thunderstorm. As we sat together on a seat close to the St. Leonard's Pier, chatting in the semi-darkness, he suddenly broached a subject and made a suggestion, the astounding audacity of which struck me absolutely dumb with horror. He explained to me in confidence that he knew there had arrived at the Foreign Office from Constantinople certain cipher despatches from Sir Henry Lygon, Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Porte, and that he was prepared to pay almost any price for copies of these documents. He pointed how easy it would be for me, as private secretary to Lord Stockbridge, to photograph them. He tempted me, saying that for such photographs I might name my own price. Wild indignation seized me; but he only laughed and calmly lit a fresh cigar, at the same time dropping a hint that my reward for this suggested service would be his daughter's hand. May was in ignorance of all this. She never knew that her father was a mean and despicable spy who had constant relations with a foreign Power. I refused, and we argued, he and I, until, what with his persuasions and his promise that May should be my wife, he induced me to comply with his audacious demand. He tempted me, and I fell. Next day, after the exercise of not a little ingenuity, I succeeded in obtaining possession of the despatches in question, took them to my rooms, and secured photographs of each, returning the originals to their place within half an hour. I developed the negatives in secret, made some hasty prints, and delivered them to Lennox at Hastings three days later. By aid of the powerful reading-glass which he had bought at an optician's in Robertson Street, the cipher of the confidential despatches could be distinctly read, a result which gave him the utmost satisfaction. I was young, inexperienced, and did not then fully appreciate the gravity of my offence. It was, However, certain that those into whose hands the photographs eventually passed possessed a copy of the decipher used by the British Foreign Office, for subsequent events proved that Tewfik Pasha, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, successfully used the information in his diplomatic juggling with Russia. I never dreamed that this untimely exposure of Britain's policy in the near East would result in such a serious crisis as eventually came to pass; for my theft was the cause of a grave misunderstanding between England, the Porte, and the Triple Alliance; so serious, indeed, that a European war was only narrowly averted

by the tact of Lord Stockbridge, combined with that of Count Murieff, the Russian Foreign Minister." Chisholm paused again, with eyes downcast.

"Go on," she said brokenly. "Tell me all, Dudley—everything."

"I had believed that by doing this scoundrel Lennox a service I had ingratiated myself with him," the despairing man continued after a pause; "but, so far from this being the case, he told me on the following day that it would be better if I remained apart from them, as my too frequent visits might be suspected by the Foreign Office, especially after what had transpired. May was still my unsophisticated friend, and was quite unaware of the theft I had committed at her father's bidding; but even in her I fancied I detected a change. It required only this to tear down the last barrier between myself and my conscience; the knowledge that I was a traitor to my Queen and country began to pierce me like sword. Of a sudden, a fortnight after the photographs had passed into the possession of Lennox, the spy settled his daughter as a paying guest with a family living in Christchurch Road, Tulse Hill, and then disappeared as completely as though the earth had swallowed him; but not before he had written me a stiff letter formally refusing his consent to my marriage with May. Then I saw how cleverly I had been entrapped by the adventurer, who knew well that I dared not expose him, for the sake of my own reputation. Soon afterwards the general election was held, and, as a reward for my services, which were believed, of course, to have been faithfully rendered, I was given a safe seat at Albury. Then May and I drifted apart, for she went to live with an aunt up at Berwick-on-Tweed, while I entered enthusiastically upon a political career. The manner in which Sir Henry Lygon's despatches had leaked out to England's enemies was a puzzle to the Foreign Office and to the world; but as I possessed the entire confidence of my chief I remained unsuspected, although my treachery had cost the country dearly, for by it I had betrayed my benefactor, Lord Stockbridge, and given to the wily Turk the whip hand over Europe, enabling the Sultan to defy both England and Russia. England had held the trump card in the diplomatic game, but by the premature exposure of her hand all had been lost. Searching inquiries were, of course, made by the cleverest detectives and agents of the Intelligence Department, but the result was absolutely nil."

"There was considerable comment in the papers at the time," remarked Claudia slowly. "I recollect Dick speaking of it as a mystery, and condemning the apparent laxity of Foreign Office rules."

"Some months had gone by, and May's letters, which had been growing perceptibly colder, at last ceased altogether," he continued, heedless of her remark. "In order to become acquainted with my constituents I had taken

up my residence in my Parliamentary Division, at Godalming to be exact, and it was my habit each afternoon to take long walks alone through the woods and over the hills of that delightful neighbourhood. The sequel to what I have already confessed to you," he said, after a moment's pause, "occurred one autumn day when the trees were almost bare and the woodland paths were covered with acorns and withered leaves. I had been for a long stretch over the Hog's Back, having paid a visit to my friend Machray, at Wanborough, and was returning by way of Compton, and then across the meadows and up the hill towards the Charterhouse at Godalming. The gusty wind was chilly and the wintry twilight was fading as I passed Field Place and struck across the wide grass-lands to a corner where the path was divided by a stile from a dense belt of wood, the most lonely and secluded spot in the neighbourhood, and a popular resort of rustic couples. As I leaped over the stile into the dark pathway which led up a very steep incline through the wood, I was startled by being suddenly confronted by a man whom, in an instant, I recognised as Lennox. He had evidently been awaiting me there, for he put his hand upon my shoulder, saying that he desired a few words with me. With disgust and hatred I shook him off; but he resolutely placed himself before me, saying that he desired of me one other service, namely, that I should secure for him a copy of a certain document which had that morning reached the Foreign Office by Queen's messenger from the British Embassy in Paris. This I flatly refused; whereupon this enemy of England, who had once held Her Majesty's commission, threatened me with exposure and ruin if I did not at once comply with his demand. My blood rose, and, by way of retort, I gave him to understand that I would inform the police of his presence in England. High words and bitter recriminations ensued. Suddenly, without the least warning, his hand went swiftly to his hip, and I saw him draw a gleaming knife with which next moment he rushed at me. The wild look in his face was sufficient to show his evil intent, and in a second I drew from my pocket the small revolver that I always carried. In the fierce and desperate struggle we were well matched, and for some minutes we fought for life. With wild and fearful oaths he tried time after time to plunge his weapon into my heart, but only succeeded in twice gashing my wrist. I carry the scars to this very day."

He drew up his shirt-cuff and showed her where his assailant's knife had wounded him.

"Suddenly I felt my strength failing," he went on in a low, hard tone, a wild look in his eyes. "Then, in a fury of hatred, I twisted my arm from his sinewy grasp, and fired my revolver full at him. I must, I think have emptied two, or

even three, chambers. He fell forward dead—with a curse upon his lips. I—I murdered him—in order to seal his lips!"

"You, Dudley!" cried the pale, bewildered woman, swaying forward as though she had received a blow. "You?—you killed him!"

"Yes, Claudia," said the guilty man, not daring to look her in the face, "I have confessed to you my double crime. The truth now stands revealed to you in all its naked hideousness. I, the man whom you have trusted and loved for all these years, am a traitor, and worse—a murderer!"

She could not speak, her heart was too full of grief and suffering. She covered her white face with her hands; low sobs escaped her, the bitterest lamentations of a broken heart.

"And now let me conclude my story," he went on, his own heart almost breaking because of her agony. "How I got away I cannot tell. I remember but little, save that I rushed from the spot, tore across the fields to Farncombe station, whence I took train to Waterloo. From the accounts in the papers it appears that an hour later the body, stiff and cold, was discovered by a pair of lovers walking together, and information was given to the county constabulary. Nothing was found upon the man to lead to his identification, and although the greatest sensation was caused by the tragedy, Scotland Yard was utterly puzzled. One miserable wretch, a tramp who had been seen loitering in the neighbourhood, was arrested on suspicion, but was afterwards released. Detectives searched diligently for some clue, but found nothing to help them in regard to the identity of the murderer or to that of his victim, who was buried in a nameless grave in Godalming Cemetery at the expense of the parish. Imagine the awful remorse I suffered! For a few weeks I remained in London with this terrible guilt weighing upon me, feverishly scanning the papers, and preparing for a journey to the Far East. You will recollect that you were in Pau, when I wrote announcing my sudden departure."

"Yes," she murmured, "I remember. Dick's illness had then begun, and the doctors had ordered him abroad."

"I feared to remain longer in England, and desired to place as great a distance as possible between myself and the scene of my crime. I, belauded by the newspapers as a coming man, was a traitor to my country and a murderer. My conscience drove me to madness. I could not get rid of the ever-recurring recollections of my crime. And so it has been during these later years, whether I have travelled through the eternal snows of the Himalayas, explored the forbidden lands of Bhutan or Nepal, or sat on the

Treasury Bench of the House. I have lived in constant dread of denunciation and exposure. While in Calcutta, as the guest of the Viceroy on my return from Chinese Turkestan, I learnt that May Lennox had married a wealthy man named Brodie, and had gone to live up at Kapurthala, in the Punjab. Since that day I have heard nothing of her. Four years have passed since my return, years of awful anxiety and mental strain that have made me old before my time; yet at last Archibald Cator, the man from whom no state secret is safe—that midnight visitor at Wroxeter—has discovered the truth. His secret agents have penetrated to the archives of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Constantinople, and from them have secured those photographs, to which is attached a docket written in Turkish stating by what channel they were secured. Thus from the carefully-guarded storehouse of the Sultan's secrets has the evidence of my crime been exposed, and my accusation is now at hand. Guilty of treason and of murder I have lost your love, Claudia—I can hope for nothing, nothing. My very name will become a reproach, and the very people who have so often applauded me will now hate my memory as that of a betrayer. My punishment is complete!" he cried wildly, in hoarse despair. "I have sinned, and this is God's judgment!"

Chapter Thirty.

Tells a Strange Tale.

"And your secret is known," said the pale, agitated woman despairingly, her dark eyes still fixed upon the guilty man before her. Her voice was scarcely raised above a whisper, for the wounded heart made it difficult for her to speak.

He nodded in the affirmative.

"To whom?" she asked.

"To Cator, of the Secret Service; to many of his agents, no doubt; to one, at least, of my political opponents, and to a woman who is your friend—Muriel Mortimer!"

"To Muriel?" she gasped in abject amazement.

"Yes," he answered; "the woman who, if report speaks correctly, was suggested by you to Lady Meldrum as a fitting person to become my wife."

"Ah, forgive me!" Claudia cried quickly. "I threw you into one another's society in order to test your love for me. I was, not certain whether you really loved me, or whether this younger and prettier woman might not attract you. Believe me, I invited her to the house-party at Wroxeter for the same purpose that I allowed my name to be associated with that of the Grand-Duke and others—to test the extent of your affection. I was foolish—very foolish, I know. But forgive me, Dudley, I was jealous."

In answer to her request he related the ingenious manner in which he had been entrapped, precisely as in the foregoing pages it has already been described.

"She wished to marry you in order to obtain money," declared the angry woman, upon whom these revelations had fallen as a crushing blow. "I never suspected her; yet now I see it all. Her ingenuity has been simply marvellous. She intended that you should buy from her a freedom which it was not within her power to sell. If you had become her husband she would, no doubt, either have tempted you to commit suicide rather than face arrest—first, of course, having induced you to make a will in her favour—or else have expected you to pay heavily for release from a woman of her stamp."

"But who is she?" he demanded. "What do you know of her?"

“Nothing, except what you already know, Dudley, that, although the ward of a respectable family, she is now proved to be an unscrupulous adventuress. But I myself will attempt to solve the mystery. She was abroad for about a year, she once told me, and she often goes to the Continent to visit friends there. There are many facts about her that are mysterious, and yet Lady Meldrum absolutely adores her. She cannot, however, know the truth of her association with these foreign ruffians who have attempted your life. Now that I recollect,” she added, “I found one morning, concealed behind one of the cushions in the cosy-corner of the library, a piece of crumpled paper, which, when opened, I discovered to be the commencement of a letter in a woman’s hand. It was in Italian, and began, ‘Mio adorato Tonio.’ She must have gone there to write to the man, and, being interrupted, had evidently crushed the paper in her hand and hid it, and then forgotten it.”

“Yes,” he said, “I recollect finding her alone there one evening, and that my entrance seemed to confuse her somewhat. But,” he went on despondently, “had the scoundrels been successful it would perhaps have been better for me.” He was no coward, but he saw that for him all life, all happiness, all love had ended.

“No, Dudley,” she answered in a sweet and tender voice, looking straight at him. “You are guilty, but both you and I have been the victims of this ingenious trickster. She first tried to rob me of your love, and then, finding herself unsuccessful, resorted to a foul and cunning strategy.”

“Yes,” he said in a low voice, his chin still upon his breast. “I am guilty, and must suffer. But,” he added, raising his head slowly until his eyes met hers, “promise me one thing, Claudia—promise that after to-day you will give no further thought to me. I have deceived you, and am unworthy; put me out of your mind for ever.”

“But you loved me, Dudley,” she cried with a mournful tenderness. “How can I allow your memory to pass from me when for so many years you have been my all in all?”

“In the future we must be parted,” he answered huskily. “From the consequences of my crime there is no escape—none. But if I thought that you had forgotten the grave wrong I have done you, my mind would at least be easier.”

She did not answer for a few moments. Then, with the passion begotten of a changeless and profound affection she rushed towards him, threw her arms about his neck, and cried out:

“No, Dudley, you are mine—mine! we must not part. I love you—you know that I do! You shall not leave me—you hear! you shall not!”

“But I must,” he replied gravely, a hardness appearing at the corners of his mouth as he slowly disengaged himself from her embrace. “I have given my word of honour to return to my chambers before midday.”

“To whom?”

“To Archibald Cator. The man who, in the exercise of his profession as chief of our Secret Service, has discovered my secret.” Chisholm, whatever might have been his follies in the past, was now a man of unflinching principle. He had given his word not to attempt to escape.

“Then I will go with you,” she said with resolution. “It is half-past eleven, and my carriage is outside. We will drive down to St. James’s Street together.”

But in all earnestness he begged her not to accompany him. He did not desire that she should be a witness of his degradation and arrest. He could not bear the thought. He knew that the matter would be placed before Lord Stockbridge himself, and that, in company with Cator, he would be called into the presence of the grave-eyed Chief in whose confidence and regard he had for long held so high a place.

“I shall go with you,” she said decisively, now calm and composed after her agitation and flood of tears. She had braced herself up with what was, under the circumstances, a remarkable effort. By way of explanation she added, half breathlessly: “I love you, Dudley, and my place in the hour of trial is at your side.”

He raised her bejewelled hand tremblingly to his lips, and thanked her in a husky voice. He, the Discrowned, dared not kiss her lips.

“Patience and courage,” she said, laying her hand upon his shoulder tenderly, just as she had been wont to do in those early days of his career when she had so often given him advice.

He shook his head sadly before answering.

“Both are unavailing against the vengeance of Heaven!”

She was silent. This man, whom she had loved as her own life, was a murderer. A gulf had opened between them, his arrest and denunciation were imminent. They could no longer be lovers. All was of the past.

Her tender woman's sympathy for him in his hopeless despair was too deep for tears. Her countenance, usually so sweet and smiling, had grown hard, and her eyes large and serious. The caprice of her broken heart was that this last drive to his chambers should be taken in his company. Many and many a time he had driven with her hither and thither in London, but this was the last occasion. After that, then she would be alone, friendless, unloved—the queen of the silent kingdom, as she had so often termed the stately mansion, one of the finest in London, where the servants moved in silence and the huge marble hall and corridors echoed to the slightest whisper.

They drove together past Apsley House and along Piccadilly without exchanging a single word. Once or twice Dudley raised his hat mechanically to passers-by who, now that the yellow sunlight had struggled through the clouds, were enjoying a stroll in London's gayest thoroughfare. Whenever there is any sunshine in the metropolis, it is always in Piccadilly. But the unwonted brightness of that morning jarred upon Dudley and Claudia. Few who passed the pair driving in that handsome carriage would ever have dreamed that the light of that beautiful woman's heart was extinguished, and that the well-groomed man at her side was going deliberately to his doom.

Beneath the bearskin rug their hands met—and clasped. Their hearts beat quickly, their eyes met, but no word passed between them. Both understood that all words were empty in face of the horrible truth.

Archibald Cator, who had been sitting beside the fire in Chisholm's sitting-room, rose and bowed when they entered. He recognised Claudia at once, and darted a look of inquiry at the accused man.

"Captain Cator, I believe?" she exclaimed, addressing him. "To apologise is quite unnecessary. I know everything. Mr Chisholm has told me the whole terrible story. You have but done your duty in the service of your country, and as far as I am concerned your just behaviour will receive a just verdict."

The tall, thin-faced man was expressing his regrets, when Claudia, turning to him again, asked:

"In this affair there is still an element of mystery which should be at once cleared up. Through my own unpardonable folly in accepting as friend a woman whom I did not know, Mr Chisholm has fallen the victim of a curious conspiracy. Do you chance to know in Italy a man named Marucci?"

“Marucci?” repeated the captain; “Francesco Marruci, I presume you mean? Yes, I know him and have employed him in Rome, and elsewhere, to make confidential inquiries.”

“And do you chance to be acquainted with a woman named Mortimer—a young woman, Muriel Mortimer?”

“Certainly,” he replied quite frankly. “She is a fair-headed young person who poses as the ward of an English family named Meldrum. A couple of years ago, however, she married secretly an Italian named Biancheri, then a lieutenant of Artillery stationed at Florence, and she and her husband are now generally supposed to be agents employed in the secret service of Italy. This good-looking woman has been a successful spy. Her husband is a black-haired, evil-looking fellow with an ugly scar across his lower jaw.”

“His description is exact. He was the man who attempted to take my life last night!” exclaimed Chisholm, astonished at this revelation. “He called himself Tonio Rocchi.”

When Dudley had briefly described his adventure, Cator said:

“I knew the woman Mortimer was a guest at Wroxeter, and that was the reason why I wished nobody to know of my visit there. We are acquainted, but at that moment I had no wish to meet her.”

“Then this woman, her husband, and the Italian Marucci have by some means learnt my secret, and are actually in agreement as regards this scheme of attempted blackmail?”

“Most certainly,” was Cator’s response. “Biancheri, or Rocchi, as he calls himself, and his wife are as smart a pair of adventurers as any on the Continent, and it is well-known to us that they have on several occasions levied huge sums in blackmail when diplomatic and family secrets have leaked out.”

“But the Meldrums!” exclaimed Claudia in astonishment. “Is it possible that they, a most respectable family, can actually be aware of this woman’s fraud?”

“I think not,” was the captain’s reply. “Muriel Mortimer, the daughter of a deceased station-master employed on the Great Northern Railway, is of age, and therefore, of course, her own mistress. In England she is still the ward of Sir Henry Meldrum—who had taken her out of charity—and passes as a single woman, but she secretly married Biancheri while they were wintering in Florence, and her frequent journeys abroad have not been undertaken for

the purpose of visiting friends, as she pretends but, in reality, to assist her husband in his ingenious and daring schemes of espionage and blackmail. She is an adventuress of the very worst type."

"But how can she have learnt my secret?" demanded the melancholy man upon whom the all-reaching hand of justice had so heavily fallen.

"Ah, that is utterly impossible to tell," answered Cator. "All that is certain is that she, together with her husband and confederates, will quickly clear out of England now that you have so determinedly withstood their efforts and defied their threats."

Archibald Cator had turned away, and was making a pretence of examining the titles of the books in the bookcase on the opposite side of the room while Claudia and Dudley stood silently hand in hand. The captain had an appointment to see the Marquess of Stockbridge in company with the Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office at one o'clock, when the serious charges were to be privately investigated. The hour was drawing near, and the white-faced, tearful woman was taking leave of the guilty man, whom she had so fondly and so truly loved.

There was in her eyes an inexpressible sadness, and the quivering lips he had so often kissed with tender passion showed plainly the agony she was suffering.

"Forgive me, Claudia, forgive me for the sake of the love of old!" he implored, whispering in her ear. "With your forgiveness I can face my fate unflinchingly, knowing that my punishment is just."

"Dudley," she answered in a voice broken by emotion, as she uttered what was to her the dearest of all names, "I forgive you everything. A cruel, an inexorable fate tears us apart, but I shall never forget you—never. May God forgive you as I forgive you."

"Thank you, my heart, for those encouraging words," he cried, snatching up her hand and imprinting upon it a lingering kiss of farewell.

As their eyes met for a single instant, in hers he saw a look of blank despair and mingled sympathy more expressive than any words could possibly be.

"Farewell, Dudley!" was all she said. "I shall pray to Him for you."

She turned slowly from him and walked across to the door, while Cator drew back the velvet portière and bowed in silence.

At this moment the door was thrown open by Parsons, who carried a rather bulky letter and a card upon his salver.

“The gentleman who called in the night has called again, sir,” announced the old man. “I told him you were engaged, but he said he could not possibly wait, as he was sailing from London almost immediately. He regretted missing you, and left this letter.”

His master glanced at the card, and saw that it bore the name “Ralph Brodie,” with the word “Boodle’s” in the corner.

With nervous fingers he quickly tore open the envelope and drew from it a note, together with a smaller envelope, rather soiled, sealed with black wax, and addressed to him in a woman’s pointed hand.

Claudia, who had halted, stood watching him.

The note was a brief one, written by Brodie from his club, stating with regret that his wife had died of consumption a month ago. Among the papers which he found after her death was the enclosed, together with instructions that he should deliver it personally and unopened. This he did. As he had only been in London a few hours on urgent business, and was compelled to return to India by the Caledonia that afternoon, he had written this note of explanation in case they could not meet.

He broke the brittle wax of the dead woman’s letter, and drew forth a sheet of thin foreign note-paper, the ink on which was somewhat faded.

Swiftly he scanned the lines of brown ink; then, while looking for May Brodie’s signature, he saw in addition to this another name at the bottom of of the document—“Muriel Mortimer.”

“Impossible!” he gasped. “Surely this is not a dream! Look! Read this!” He handed the missive to Cator, who, together with the woman who had just bidden him a last farewell, read it through eagerly.

“It is the truth!” cried Claudia wildly, a moment later, rushing towards him, throwing her clinging arms about his neck, kissing him passionately, and shedding tears of joy. “You are innocent, Dudley! innocent! Think, think! The truth is written there in the presence of a witness. You are innocent!”

Some time elapsed before Dudley could grasp the whole of the facts. What he held in his trembling fingers was a statement written by May Lennox three years before. It began in a somewhat rambling manner, was dated from Kapurthala, and had been written after the doctors had pronounced

her to be suffering from incurable consumption. The important paragraph, however, penned in an unsteady hand and rather smeared, read as follows:

“And now, as I know that before very long I must die, I have resolved to confess to you the whole truth. I knew too well of my father’s relations with the Turkish and Italian Governments, and I knew how he induced you to procure for him photographs of the Anglo-Russian agreement in the East, offering myself to you as a bribe. I was helpless in his hands; he used me as his decoy in the various capitals, and often accomplished important coups of espionage with my assistance. But the photographs you furnished to him proved to be those of quite unimportant despatches, and utterly valueless. The photographs of the actual despatches wanted by Tewfik were procured by a person named Peynton in the employ of the Foreign Office, who has since died. My father, however, believed that you wilfully endeavoured to mislead him and intended to expose him; hence his fierce antagonism, which caused him to lay in wait for you in that lonely path near Godalming. As I had gained knowledge of his intention to harm you, I went down there and watched his movements. I was present, hidden in the shadow behind a rail only a few paces from the spot—at the point where, you will remember, the police found the weeds down-trodden and other signs of the presence of a third person. I overheard his suggestion to you, and your refusal; I saw him draw his knife with intent to strike you. I watched your struggle, and in the course of the fracas his revolver fell unnoticed from his pocket. As you were both close to me at that moment I was enabled to reach the weapon. Then I saw that your strength was failing, and you fired at him. You missed. I believe I know the very tree in which your bullet lodged. Seeing your imminent peril, I also fired—and he fell. I saved you, but I killed the man whom I was compelled to call father, though I had good reasons to hate his memory. He killed my poor mother by sheer brutality and neglect, and made me his puppet and decoy in his nefarious schemes. When he fell, you rushed from the spot, believing that you had killed him, but if you will refer to the medical evidence you will find that he was struck by a single bullet beneath the left shoulder-blade. That shot was the one I fired, and could not possibly have been fired by you. In order to tell you the truth, and yet not commit myself, I sent you anonymously, a few weeks after the occurrence, a piece of tracing-paper with a diagram upon it, and a few words, which were purposely rather vague, hoping that the plan of the spot would show you that you were innocent, and that in case you were afterwards charged with the crime you would be able to use the plan in your defence. Confession I make calmly and of my own free will, in order that it may be signed by the woman who is my companion and my most intimate friend, and that it may be opened by your own hand when I am dead and beyond the reach of man’s justice.”

There was nothing else. Only the signature, “May Beatrice Brodie,” together with that of Muriel Mortimer.

“This clearly explains how the woman Mortimer, or Biancheri, obtained possession of your secret,” observed Cator in surprise, after he had read it through aloud. “My inquiries, I recollect, showed that she entered Mrs Brodie’s employ as companion and was in India for six months, but that she returned, owing to the climate, and again took up her abode with the Meldrums. The explanation given by the Meldrums to friends was that she had been out to India on a visit. Having obtained knowledge of your secret, she imparted it to Biancheri after her marriage, with the result that he and his associates made the clever attempt to blackmail you. She, no doubt, felt herself safe as long as her late employer was living, and is, of course, in ignorance of her death and the passing of this confession into your hands.”

An hour later Dudley Chisholm was closeted alone with the Marquess of Stockbridge in the latter’s private room at the Foreign Office, where he related the whole story. That any man enjoying the confidence of Her Majesty’s Government in any capacity should have endeavoured to betray its secrets was a most heinous and unpardonable offence in the eyes of the stern old politician who was Her Majesty’s chief adviser. Nevertheless, on carefully weighing all the facts, his lordship came to the conclusion that the man who had been his private secretary, and who now held responsible office, had proved himself deeply penitent, and had, during the intervening years, endeavoured to make every reparation in his power. The actual documents Chisholm had photographed were quite unimportant. It was manifest that from first to last he had been the victim of a cleverly arranged conspiracy. The interview was a long one, and all that passed between them will never be recorded. But at last the Marquess rose and generously extended to Dudley his thin, bony hand in forgiveness. He summed up the case as follows:

“It is true that you photographed the despatches with intent to hand them to the man Lennox, and it is true that the present complications in Europe are the outcome of the betrayal of our policy, but it is not true, Chisholm, that you are a traitor. Your career has encouraged me to prophesy (and the indiscretion of which I am to-day aware for the first time has not caused me to alter my opinion) that you are one of the men who will rise after me to safeguard your country’s interests. The question placed on the paper by the member for West Antrim must be expunged at once. I will see to that matter personally, for it is apparent that the member in question has either received information, or is himself associated with the unscrupulous persons who endeavoured to profit by their knowledge of your secret. Leave

it to me. That question will never be printed in the paper nor asked in the House. Only a traitor in association with the representative of some foreign Power dare endeavour to create a political crisis at this moment by asking such a question."

"Then I am actually forgiven?" Dudley asked in a low voice, scarcely realising the truth.

"Yes, Chisholm," replied the Marquess gravely, pressing the hand of the younger man, "you are forgiven, and what is more, my confidence in you is not shaken, for you have been proved a man of sterling worth, and the unfortunate victim of as vile and ingenious a conspiracy as ever was formed against us by dastardly spies from across the Channel. You come of an ancient and honourable race, Chisholm. Recollect, therefore, that throughout the remainder of your life your first duty is always to your God, and the second to your country and your Queen."

Chapter Thirty One.

Contains the Conclusion.

The greyness of the short winter's afternoon was steadily growing darker and darker, and the lights were already beginning to appear in the shops and the vehicles in busy Knightsbridge; but within the pretty boudoir, where an old punch-bowl full of flowers poured sweetness into the air, two hearts beat in unison, full of new-found joy, full of hope, full of perfect confidence and love.

Holding his queen in his strong arms, Dudley had asked her a question, to which she had made answer with all the fervour of her being:

"Yes, I will gladly be your wife, Dudley," she said, in a tender voice. "As you well know, my heart has ever been yours, and ever will be—until the end."

In the dim light, which had now become so dark that he could scarcely distinguish her face, he pressed her closely to him in a wild ecstasy of love, and as he kissed her on the lips, his heart full of gladness inexpressible, she fancied that she felt a tear-drop upon his hollow cheek.

To recount facts already known to every reader of these pages would serve no purpose, but it will interest some to learn that Marucci subsequently confessed to Captain Cator that the plot against the Under-Secretary, devised by Biancheri and his wife, had long been in progress. It was certainly at the instigation of this woman that Marucci had succeeded in obtaining the incriminating documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Constantinople, which he had passed on to his employer, Archibald Cator; while she at the same time sent an anonymous letter to Mr Gerald Oldfield, the Member for Antrim West, one of Dudley's bitterest political opponents, preferring against him a charge of murder. The Grand-Duke Stanislas knew the truth, of course, from what was told him at his own Embassy. The Meldrums, a worthy pair, had always remained in ignorance of the true character of the station-master's daughter, whom they had adopted out of charity. They were first told the truth by Claudia herself, and the blow was a terrible disillusion, for they had always treated her as their own child. To Colonel Murray-Kerr, while he was still attach in Rome, the secret of the marriage of Muriel Mortimer with Biancheri was imparted by Marucci, who explained that there was some deep and mysterious conspiracy on foot against Dudley Chisholm, that Biancheri had left the Italian army, and that he was undoubtedly a spy. For that reason the colonel had uttered his strange warning when shooting with Dudley, but he had unfortunately not taken Marucci's statement very seriously.

Quite recently Archibald Cator ascertained that the woman Biancheri, who had so cleverly plotted the grand coup, had been deserted by her scoundrelly husband, and had died alone and in penury in a bare room on the fifth storey of a rickety house in the Montmartre quarter of Paris. Biancheri himself is at this moment languishing in prison at Grenoble, having been arrested by French gendarmes in the very act of making a plan of one of the Alpine frontier fortresses.

All London is well aware how Dudley Chisholm's marriage, so long expected, took place, not with the éclat common to a fashionable wedding in town, but quietly in the quaint old village church at Wroxeter, where the mellow-toned bells pealed merrily, and the school children strewed the roses of July in their path.

And every one, both in society and out of it, knows that Lady Dudley Chisholm still retains her place as one of the smartest women in London; that all the scandals once whispered about her have been proved to be false inventions of her detractors; that as châtelaine of Wroxeter she is one of the most popular among hostesses; and that her husband, whom she adores, and whose fame is of worldwide renown, will certainly have a seat in the next Cabinet.

You, my reader, whom curiosity or necessity takes into Mayfair or Belgravia, must often have seen a slim, sweet-faced woman, remarkable for the most wonderful eyes, driving in her neat Victoria, her servants in dark green liveries, and with the three water-bougets of the Chisholms upon the silver harness. Beside her there not infrequently nestles a child with an exquisite face, dark hair, and great, wide-open eyes that look in wonder on the vast world of London.

You are acquainted with their life-story. They are mother and daughter, the wife and child of one of the happiest of men, the Right Honourable Dudley Waldegrave Chisholm, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

The End.