

Le Queux William

An Eye for an Eye



William Le Queux
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Содержание

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	9
Chapter Three	16
Chapter Four	20
Chapter Five	26
Chapter Six	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

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Chapter One

The Mystery Man

“Hush! Think, if you were overheard!”

“Well, my dear fellow, I only assert what’s true,” I said.

“I really can’t believe it,” observed my companion, shaking his head doubtfully.

“But I’m absolutely satisfied,” I answered. “The two affairs, mysterious as they are, are more closely connected than we imagine. I thought I had convinced you by my arguments. A revelation will be made some day, and it will be a startling one – depend upon it.”

“You’ll never convince me without absolute proof – never. The idea is far too hazy to be possible. Only a madman could dream such a thing.”

“Then I suppose I’m a madman?” I laughed.

“No, old chap. I don’t mean any insult, of course,” my friend the journalist, a youngish, dark-haired man, hastened to assure me. “But the whole thing is really too extraordinary to believe.”

We were seated together one June morning some years ago, in a train on the Underground Railway, and had been discussing a very remarkable occurrence which had been discovered a few days before – a discovery that was a secret between us. Scarcely, however, had he uttered his final denunciation of my theory when the train ran into the sulphurous ever-murky station of Blackfriars, for the electrification of the line was not then completed: and promising to continue our argument later, he bade me good-bye, sprang out, and hastened away in the crowd of silk-hatted City men on their way to their offices.

He was rather tall, aged about thirty, with a well-cut, clever face, a complexion unusually dark, a well-trimmed black moustache, and a smart gait which gave him something of a military bearing. Yet his cravat was habitually tied with carelessness, and he usually wore a light overcoat except through the month of August. His name was Richard Cleugh, one of the sharpest men in Fleet Street, being special reporter of London’s most up-to-date evening paper, the *Comet*.

When alone, I sat back in the ill-lit railway carriage and, during my short journey to Cannon Street, reflected deeply.

The affair was, as he had said, absolutely bewildering.

Indeed, this chain of curious facts, this romance of love and devotion, of guile, intrigue, and of the cardinal sins which it is my intention to here record, proved one of the strangest that has ever occurred in our giant London. It was an absolute mystery. Readers of newspapers know well the many strange stories told in courts of justice, or unearthed by the untiring “liner” and the reporter who is a specialist in the discovery of crime. Yet when we walk the streets of our Metropolis, where the fevered crowd jostles in the mad race of life, there is more romance around us, and of a character far more extraordinary than any that has ever appeared in the public prints.

The secrets of London’s ever-throbbing heart, and her hidden and inexplicable mysteries which never get into the papers, are legion.

This is one of them.

In order to understand the facts aright, it is necessary to here explain that I, Frank Urwin, am myself a member of that ubiquitous and much maligned profession, journalism, being engaged at the time of the opening of this narrative as special reporter of a highly respectable London daily newspaper – a journal which was so superior that it never allowed itself to make any sensational

statement. Its conductors as studiously avoided sensationalism as they did libel, and although we were very often in possession of “startling facts,” and “sensational statements” which would have sold the paper, and caused it to be quoted next morning up and down the country, yet we of the staff, forbidden to write anything so undignified, kept our information to ourselves, or, as was once rumoured, the office boy, a thrifty youth, went forth and calmly sold it to one of our more enterprising rivals. Hence, owing to the heaviness of its articles, which usually contained “chunks” of foreign quotations, and the paucity of its news, the paper was dubbed by its staff “the Magazine.”

Before being appointed to this pseudo-newspaper, where, by the way, work was light and remuneration good, I had been for several years engaged upon one of those enterprising evening journals who print their “specials” on tinted paper, and by reason of my constant investigations I had become well-known to the police, and perhaps something of a specialist in the revealing of hidden facts and the unravelling of mysteries.

Dick Cleugh was my most intimate friend, for we shared chambers in Gray’s Inn, a rather dingy and typical bachelor’s abode, be it said; but it had the advantage of being in close proximity to Fleet Street, and situated as we were, flying all over London clay after day, we could not afford to live out in the peculiarly journalistic suburb of Brixton. Our little flat contained a very sad and shabby sitting-room – in which stood a couple of writing-tables whereat we often worked, joining in, and re-echoing, each other’s imprecations – a couple of bedrooms and a small box-room which, containing a gas-stove over which the diurnal chops were fried, was termed by the Inn authorities a kitchen. We, however, irreverently termed it “the sink.” Old Mrs Joad, a worthy old soul who lived across in Fetter Lane, “did for” us, and was known as “the Hag,” on account of her *passé* and extremely *bizarre* appearance. Her duties were not very onerous, consisting of preparing our morning tea, “doing up” the rooms, cooking the eternal chops or the everlasting steaks at six, when, our respective “special editions” having gone to press, we both returned hungry to our dens, and lastly in drinking our whisky. She preferred gin, but took whisky in order to put us to no inconvenience.

Cleugh was one of the queer figures in journalistic London. Essentially of the Bohemian type, easy-going and possessed of a quaint, dry humour, many were the stories told in Fleet Street of his utter disregard for the *convenances*. Shrewd, witty, clever, well-educated, he was no respecter of persons. If he went forth to make an inquiry for his journal, he hesitated at nothing. With the constant companionship of an extremely foul briar pipe, it was his habit to “interview” people and obtain “latest details” of the day’s sensation without removing it from his lips, and it was well-known down at the Press Club, that dingy but interesting institution in Wine Office Court, that on one field-day at Aldershot he had actually chatted with the Commander-in-Chief, pipe in mouth, and afterwards put the conversation “on the wire” in the form of an interview. When having nothing to do he would clean that pipe for recreation, and such operation usually caused a rapid exit from the vicinity. Known to all in Fleet Street as “the Mystery Man,” he was clever-looking and dignified, and could snuff out an uncommunicative secretary, or a pompous policeman, with his marvellous control of expressions, sarcastic without being abusive. He was undoubtedly “a smart man” – and to be smart in journalism nowadays requires a good deal more than ordinary intelligence. An ex-Jesus man, he had been a True Blue, been ploughed for the Army, studied medicine, and travelled pretty widely, until having been a brilliant failure he had drifted into journalism, like so many other men have drifted, commencing as an outside contributor, or “liner,” and eventually, by dint of the swiftness and marvellous tact and ability with which he got at the bottom of the inquiries he made, he joined the regular staff of a popular evening sheet – which, by reason of having once tried the experiment of printing on scented paper, was known in press circles as “The Stinker” – and subsequently became chief of the reporting staff of the *Comet* – as smart a staff as could be found in London.

In common with many other men in Fleet Street, that never-sleeping world of tape and flimsy, Dick had one failing – he had a penchant for a particular brand of whisky sold at the *Cheese*, the ancient house of steak-pudding fame, but he was always moderate, for his great pride was that his sub-editors could place the greatest reliance in him, as indeed they could. Dick Cleugh was certainly smart, even though his hair was often unkempt and a bundle of copy-paper usually poked out of the side-pocket of his well-worn overcoat. Over and over again had he proved himself a very brilliant pressman and had startled London by the “latest details” he had elicited where the police had failed.

I had arrived at our chambers about six, after a heavy day. I had visited Barking and Wandsworth, and had made an inquiry at Hammersmith, three districts far afield from one another, therefore I felt fagged and hungry. The Hag was engaged in fizzling the usual daily steak in the gas fumes, filling the place with a decidedly appetising odour; nevertheless, between Dick and I there was an arrangement that neither should eat without the other, unless a telegram arrived announcing a protracted absence. Therefore I lit a cigarette, cast myself into the trifle rickety but very comfortable armchair, and waited by the open window. I was just a trifle melancholy that evening, for there had come back to me recollections of a love-bond long since severed, of a face which was once very dear to me. But I was a lonely bachelor now. All was of the past. Soon, however, as I sat thinking, I saw Cleugh hurrying across the square, his silk hat, a trifle rusty, tilted at the back of his head, and a few moments later he burst merrily into the room, saying —

“Sorry to keep you so long, old chap, but we brought out an extra to-night. There’s a bit of a row down in Parliament.” Then, calling to Mrs Joad, who was pottering in the “sink” beyond, he said, “Come along, mother. Look sharp with the horseflesh!”

We sat down and commenced our meal, while he, overflowing with spirits, told me how he had been out on an inquiry near to the *Welsh Harp*, spending a very pleasant afternoon there, and how he meant to “write it up” for the “mornings.” The old instinct of the “liner” was still upon him, and on his littered table he always kept his agate stylus and oiled tissue, known as “flimsy,” his “blacks” and his square of tin whereon to write. The sub-editors of the morning papers, the judges of next day’s intelligence, could always rely on Dick Cleugh’s “stuff,” therefore they used it, and he profited at the rate of a penny farthing per line. He was, in brief, purveyor of sensations to the newspaper-reading public.

“I’m going to take Lil out to-night,” my companion said between mouthfuls of steak, for he was ravenously hungry. “Smart girl, Lil.”

“Yes,” I answered. “She’s really awfully nice. By Jove! old chap, I envy you.”

The Mystery Man smiled contentedly with a piece of meat poised gracefully on his fork, then he began humming the latest love-song which the barrel-organs had made popular, beating time with his fork, at the same time placing his hand upon his heart in true operatic style.

This proceeding was, however, interrupted by the entrance of the Hag bearing a telegram for me. On opening it I found it contained only the one word “Come,” signed by the initial “P.”

I tossed it across to my companion without comment, and as I did so was surprised to notice a strange, puzzled look upon his dark face.

He glanced at it, then handing it back to me, exclaimed – “Wonder what’s up at Kensington?”

“Something unusual, or Patterson wouldn’t have wired,” I said.

“You’ll go, of course?”

“Yes. I’ll just see what it looks like, and if there’s anything in it I’ll let you know.”

“Well, old dawdler,” he laughed, “if it’s a good thing, leave a bit of the latest intelligence for me to pick up for my early edition to-morrow. To-night I can’t disappoint Lily, you know. She’s a good girl, and never worries.”

“I’ll tell you all about it when I come back; then you can write up something in readiness for to-morrow. If it’s a mystery my people won’t touch it, you know.”

“Of course,” he said. “Your staff is only paid to look pleasant.”

The mysterious telegram had come from the police headquarters at Kensington, an early intimation that something unusual had occurred. In years of reporting in London I had become friendly with many police inspectors and detectives, and had long ago made arrangements with some of them whereby they would send me a wire by day, or a line by boy-messenger at night with information of the latest “sensation.” The reason why all were signed with initials was because such intimation was contrary to the order of the Chief Commissioner.

I therefore left Dick sucking his foul briar, and, taking a motor-bus to Kensington, entered the police-station, which stands back hidden in a courtyard opposite St. Mary Abbot’s Church. In the charge-room, with its bare, grey-painted walls, its steel-railed dock for prisoners, its loud-ticking clock, and its desk, whereon the oblong charge-book lay open, I found my old friend Inspector Patterson in earnest conversation with two men of the working class, who spoke with a strong Cockney accent and addressed him familiarly as “guv’nor.” They were evidently policemen’s noses, or, in criminal parlance, “narks.”

“Good evening, Mr Urwin,” the inspector exclaimed, putting forth his big hand. He was a tall, fair-moustached, easy-going fellow, an excellent officer, tender-hearted where the deserving poor was concerned, but harsh and unbending towards the habitual offender. From constable, as I had first known him in the T or Hammersmith Division, he had been moved to St. Luke’s, to Paddington, to Lemn Street and to Bow Street, until, owing to the marks which various magistrates had made upon his charge sheets, he had now at last risen to the rank of first-class inspector.

He was discreet in his every action, therefore he did not refer to the telegram he had sent me lest any of the men should overhear, but when we had chatted for a few moments he whispered —

“Go over to the bar at High Street Railway Station and wait there for me. I want to see you very particularly.”

I nodded. Then, after some further conversation, I left him and wandered across to the refreshment room he had indicated.

Chapter Two

The Penny in Paper

About twenty minutes elapsed before Patterson rejoined me, but expressing a fear that we might be overheard there, we went forth together and strolled along High Street, until, coming to a quiet turning which, I think, led past the workhouse, we strolled along it, and there he commenced his explanation.

“The fact is,” he said in a nervous, hushed voice, “there’s been a most extraordinary occurrence here to-night. The mystery is the strangest in all my experience, and I’ve made inquiries into one or two in my time, as you know.”

“Tell me all about it,” I said, my curiosity whetted.

“I wish I could, my dear fellow,” he answered.

“I mean, tell me all the known facts.”

“Nothing is known – save the discovery,” he replied. “As soon as it became known I wired to you. When the papers get hold of it, it will make the greatest sensation ever known in London.”

“Well, that’s saying a good deal,” I remarked. “Who made the discovery?”

“I did,” he answered, adding quickly, “but don’t mention me, or the superintendent may suspect me of giving you information. He already has a suspicion that I’m a bit too friendly with you gentlemen of the press. A contravention of the Commissioner’s orders against giving information to the papers might get me carpeted up at the Yard, you know.”

“And the discovery?” I asked impatiently. “What’s its nature?”

“Most astounding,” he replied, with a bewildered look. “I’m a police officer, Urwin,” he added hoarsely, “and I’m not often unnerved. But to-night, by Jove! I’m upset – altogether upset. The whole affair is so devilish uncanny and unnatural.”

“Tell me the story,” I urged. “If it is so strange the evening papers will have a good time to-morrow.”

“No, no,” he cried in quick alarm. “You must publish nothing yet – nothing. You understand that I give you these facts only on condition that you promise not to publish any thing until I give you permission. You alone will know of it. We must preserve the utmost secrecy. Not a word must leak out yet. You understand in what an awkward position you would place me were you to publish anything of this affair.”

“Of course. I promise you to keep the matter a strict secret,” I answered. “There are many cases in which the publication of the details of a crime might defeat the efforts of the police, and this I supposed to be one of them.”

“Well,” he said, “I made the discovery in a most curious manner. Just before seven o’clock this evening, just as it was growing dark, I was returning to the station after visiting the ‘fixed-point’ at the corner of Earl’s Court Road. You know the spot – just opposite Holland Park.”

I nodded. I knew that particular street-corner where Earl’s Court Road joined Kensington Road quite well.

“I had previously been my usual round through Campden Hill Road and Holland Walk, and was strolling back along the main Kensington Road, past that terrace of houses Upper Phillimore Place, when my attention was suddenly arrested by seeing on the steps leading from the pavement up to the front garden of one of the houses a small object moving. It was inside the gate, and in the dim half-light I bent to examine it. What do you think it was?”

“Don’t know,” I replied. “Don’t ask riddles – describe facts.”

“Well, it was the very last thing one would dream of finding on a London doorstep – a small, strangely-marked snake.”

“A snake!” I echoed. “You didn’t arrest it for being found without visible means of subsistence, I suppose?”

“No,” he answered, controlling the smile which played about his lips. “But the thing’s too serious for joking, as you’ll recognise when I’ve told you all. Well, the squirming reptile, as soon as it saw me, coiled itself round, and with head erect and swelled, commenced hissing viciously. I saw that there was considerable danger in a thing like that being at large, and surmising that it had escaped from the house, having been kept in captivity by somebody fond of such pets, I opened the gate, passed it, not, however, without it making a dart at me, and walking up to the door, rang the bell. The house was in total darkness, but daylight had only just faded, and in many of the houses in the same terrace the gas in the hall had not yet been lit. I rang and rang, but there was no response. In a large house of that character it seemed strange that no servant was about. Indeed, most of the houses there, large, roomy and old-fashioned, let furnished apartments, but this one seemed to be superior to its neighbours, inasmuch as it has a balcony on the first floor, and the small front garden is well-kept in comparison to the patches of bald, weedy grass with which the others are content. As I stood on the doorstep, trying to arouse the inmates, I watched the reptile squirming about the paved path, apparently enjoying its liberty immensely. I placed my ear attentively at the door, trying to detect some sound of movement, but failed, until suddenly I heard within the ringing of an electric bell, subdued by reason of the closed door. It was certain that, after all, some one was within.”

“Was your summons answered?” I asked eagerly.

“No. I rang fully a dozen times, but nobody came. It occurred to me that within might be an invalid, and that, hearing my ring, he or she had rung the bell to the kitchen, but the servants were absent. There was an area door, so I descended, and tried that. The handle yielded. It was unlocked. Therefore I pushed it open and went in, though I was certainly not prepared for the discovery I afterwards made. As I entered, the electric bell commenced ringing again, but it was apparently above me, on the ground floor, and not in the kitchen where I stood. In the cooking-stove the fire was dying out, and there were other signs that servants had been about recently. Finding no one in the basement I ascended to the first floor, when there greeted my nostrils a most delicious fragrance, very similar to the incense which the Roman Catholics burn. The place smelt like the Brompton Oratory.”

“Well, what did you do next?” I asked, excited at his extraordinary narrative.

“I searched the two big rooms – a dining-room and a back sitting-room – on the ground floor, but finding no one, I stood at the bottom of the stairs and shouted, thinking to discover the whereabouts of the invalid who had rung the bell. There was no answer. The place was dark, so I struck a match, ascended to the first floor and entered the front room, which proved to be a good-sized, well-furnished drawing-room, dimly lit by the street-lamp opposite shining through the windows. At the further end, suspended from the ceiling, a curious lamp was burning in red glass, just like those one sees in Roman Catholic churches, and on examining it I found it to be a little float in oil, so arranged that it would burn continuously for many days and nights without attention. It looked strange and weird, a red spot in the darkness at the end of the room; but what was stranger and more amazing was a discovery I made a moment later when, my eyes having grown used to the semi-obscurity of the room, I discerned two human forms, one that of a woman lying back in an armchair as if asleep, and the other a man, who had fallen close by and was lying outstretched upon the carpet. Even the faint light of the match I struck told me that both were dead, and so startled was I by this unexpected revelation that with scarcely a second glance round the weird place I hastened downstairs and left by the front door.”

“You went on to the station at once, I suppose?”

“Yes,” he answered; then after a pause he looked straight into my face, adding, “but to tell the truth, Urwin, you and I are the only persons who know of this affair. I haven’t reported it.”

“Haven’t reported it?” I echoed. “Why not? Delay may prevent the mystery being unravelled.”

“I know it’s absurd and foolish,” he faltered in an unsteady voice, “but the fact is, I entertain a deep-rooted superstition about snakes. My poor wife was always dreaming of snakes before she died, and strangely enough, whenever I have seen those reptiles in my dreams some bad luck, catastrophe or bereavement has always fallen upon me immediately afterwards.”

“It isn’t like you to speak thus, Patterson,” I said, knowing him to be a fearless man who more than once had boldly faced a burglar’s revolver.

“I really don’t know what to do,” he said. “It’s nearly two hours ago since I entered the place. I was so upset when I came out that I went to the telegraph office and wired to you, in the hope that you might be able to suggest some plan of action.”

“Report at once and let’s thoroughly investigate it,” I said promptly.

“No. I can’t report it on account of that snake. If I did, I feel assured that some fatality would fall upon me.”

“You’re unnerved by what you’ve seen,” I said. “It certainly was not a nice position to unexpectedly find oneself alone with the dead in a dark deserted house like that. In any case, however, the matter is a queer one and must be sifted.”

“Yes,” he said, “it appears to be a most remarkable affair.”

“Well,” I exclaimed, “if you are determined not to report it just at present I’m ready to go with you and search the place. The area door is still unlocked, you say?”

He hesitated, pale and agitated. The effect of this discovery upon him had been really remarkable.

“Yes, the door is still unlocked, of course,” he said reflectively, “but personally I don’t care about returning.”

“Rubbish, my dear chap,” I exclaimed. “I don’t believe in superstitions. The finding of the snake was curious, no doubt, but this isn’t the first time snakes have been found in the streets of London. Lots have been discovered about Covent Garden Market, having come over in baskets of fruit.”

He was silent. Evidently his discovery had been a very unusual one. I know well the row of houses he had indicated, the most old-fashioned, perhaps, in the district, for they had formed a part of old Kensington over a century ago, and even now the great iron extinguishers ornamented some of the doorways, mute remembrancers of the days of sedan chairs and linkmen.

“Let’s go and explore the place, and report afterwards,” I urged, my appetite for adventure whetted by his strong disinclination to return. “I’ll report it as a discovery of my own if you are disinclined to do so.”

“Very well,” he answered at last, “let’s go. But before we enter I tell you that it is a very mysterious house. Recollect that strange ringing I heard.”

“We’ll look into all that later on,” I said, surprised at his unusual agitation. There, facing one of the busiest thoroughfares of the West End, little harm surely could come to us. “Come along,” I said, and thus persuaded, he quickened his footsteps. We passed along Abingdon Villas into Earl’s Court Road, where, meeting a constable on duty, he borrowed his lamp; then turning into the Kensington Road we at length reached the house of mystery, which, as he had said, was a gloomy-looking place in total darkness.

We peered eagerly inside the gate, but could distinguish no sign of the reptile which had so strangely attracted my friend’s attention in the first instance. It had no doubt withdrawn among the plants and shrubs in the little smoke-dried garden, and was watching us unseen. Without hesitation, in order not to attract the curiosity of any passer-by whose attention might be arrested by Patterson’s uniform, we walked straight to the area door, and gaining the kitchen, at once lit the gas. As he had said, there was every sign that the place had been recently occupied, but with only a cursory

examination of the basement we passed upstairs to the dining-room. Here we also lit the gas and saw that the table had been laid for three persons in a manner quite luxurious, with real silver, cut glass and tiny vases of fresh flowers arranged artistically. Beside each plate were blue glass finger-bowls filled with water which gave out a strong perfume of roses. The chairs had been placed, and the *hors d'oeuvres*, olives, anchovies and caviare were already on the table, showing that all preparations for dinner had been made. Yet strangely enough, in the kitchen the greater part of the meat and vegetables remained uncooked.

From this room we passed into the smaller one adjoining, lighting the gas as we went, but this seemed to have been used as a smoking-room, and contained nothing of note.

It was, however, in the drawing-room above where we made the most astounding discoveries. The apartment was spacious for the size of the house, upholstered in pale-blue with furniture of expensive character, and large growing palms placed on stands. In the centre was a great circular settee, and in the corners wide soft divans of pale-blue velvet with golden fringe. Comfort and luxury had been studied by whoever had furnished the place, for as we lit one of the side gas-brackets we saw that it was really a very artistic room, the floor covered with a real Turkey carpet of softest hues, while the few paintings on the walls were choice examples of well-known artists. At the end opposite the grate was suspended from the ceiling by three gilt chains the mysterious little red lamp, burning steadily without a flicker, and beneath it, fallen back in a large armchair, was a woman, whose face, although waxen white, was eminently beautiful. The paleness of death was upon her, yet her handsome head with its wealth of gold brown hair was pillowed upon the cushion of yellow silk, and upon the cold, slightly-parted lips there played a strange, bitter smile. She was young, twenty or so, dressed in an artistically-made gown of pale mauve, trimmed with lace. Her teeth were even and perfect; her cheeks round and well-moulded; her chin slightly protruding, and a piquant little nose; but that smile in death seemed revolting in its hideousness. Her eyes large, of a deep blue, once luminous as stars no doubt, but now dull and filmy, were wide open, as though gazing out upon us in an endeavour to speak and tell us the truth of the strange and tragic occurrence. I looked upon her bewildered, dumbfounded.

Not three yards away, stretched at her feet, was a man of about thirty-five, well-dressed in frock coat and light-coloured trousers, with collar and cravat of the latest mode, and wearing on his cold, stiff hand a ring set with a single diamond of unusual lustre. His face was towards the carpet, and while I held the lamp, Patterson bent and turned him over. We then saw that he was dark and good-looking, a gentleman evidently, although from the upward curl of his moustache and his smartness of attire he appeared to be something of a fop.

“It looks a good deal like murder and suicide,” Patterson exclaimed, still bending over him. “I wonder who he is?”

“There’s initials on his sleeve-links,” I said, for I had detected an engraved cipher upon the plain gold buttons at his wrists.

“They’re two ‘K’s’ intertwined, surmounted by a crest,” my companion said in a strange voice. “I wonder what’s on him?” and he proceeded to search the breast-pocket of the dead man’s coat. The contents, which we afterwards examined together, consisted only of two prospectuses of new companies, an amber cigar-tube mounted in gold, and the envelope of a letter addressed in a woman’s hand to “George Grove, Poste Restante, Charing Cross,” and bearing the Manchester post-mark of three days before. The letter had unfortunately been destroyed; only the envelope remained. But we both recollected that persons who have letters addressed to the Poste Restante do not usually give their correct names.

In one of the vest pockets were three ten-pound notes folded carelessly together, while in the trousers pockets was a quantity of loose silver. Beyond that there was nothing else upon him. Contrary to the effect of death upon his unfortunate companion, his face was slightly distorted, the tip of the tongue protruding, and both hands clenched, showing that he had endured a momentary

spasm of agony as the last spark of life died out, while from the fact that a small tripod table with painted plate-glass top had been overturned and broken it seemed apparent that he had staggered and clutched wildly at the first object within his reach.

But on neither could we detect any wound, nor was there anything to show the cause of death. I examined the hand of the woman, a tiny, slim, cold hand, the contact of which thrilled me by its chilliness, and saw that her rings, set with emeralds, rubies and diamonds, were of the finest quality.

“She’s beautiful,” Patterson observed, gazing down upon her. “Perhaps she was his wife.”

“Perhaps,” I said. “Curious that they should have both died together in this manner.”

“They were evidently sitting here chatting before dinner, when both were either murdered, or died suddenly before assistance could reach them. She died before he did.”

“What makes you think that?” I asked quickly, my eyes wandering around the large, comfortable room, the atmosphere of which was heavy with fragrant odours.

“Because he placed that cushion beneath her head,” answered the shrewd, observant police-officer. “He had kissed her, and she was in the act of smiling at his last act of love when her heart suddenly failed, and soul and body parted.”

“And he died immediately afterwards, you think?”

“Yes, that’s what I surmise. What’s your opinion?”

“I can form no theory at present,” I answered, bewildered. In the course of years spent in the investigation of crime for journalistic purposes I had had my wits sharpened, and rather prided myself upon the soundness of the theories I propounded in the articles I wrote. Patterson knew this, and probably for that reason had invoked my companionship in this curious affair.

Together we made a searching examination of the whole room, but there was absolutely nothing to show the motive, or even the mode, of the tragedy. The absence of servants was of course extremely suspicious, but neither of us attached much importance to that. A close examination of the scene was our present object, experience having taught that upon the scene of most crimes there remains some trace of the assassin. The old saying that “Murder will out” is truer than the majority of people believe, for even that night we had had a striking illustration in Patterson’s attention being attracted by the snake in the gateway.

Beside the dead woman’s chair was lying a handkerchief, a tiny square of lawn and lace, which I picked up. It emitted an odour very sweet and subtle, such as I had never before smelt.

Patterson sniffed it, but placed it down.

“Some new scent,” he said. “Women are always going in for the latest inventions in perfumes.”

“But this is an extraordinary one,” I said, again smelling it. “Terribly strong, too,” I added, for the odour had a strange, half-intoxicating effect upon me. The small red light steadily burning, the fragrance of the incense, the two dead forms lying there, still and cold, and the single gas-burner, hissing as it flared, combined to present a weird, lurid picture, each detail of which has ever since been indelibly photographed upon my memory.

The smile of death upon that woman’s lips was horrible. That look of hers has ever since haunted me, for now that I know the truth and have realised all that had taken place in that room prior to the tragedy, that laugh of derision has a significance which renders its recollection bitter, gruesome, hideous.

I know not what prompted me at that moment, but bending again beside the prostrate man I placed my hand inside his vest, recollecting that sometimes tailors, adopting the French mode, made pockets there, and that therein many men carried articles of value in secrecy and safety.

As I did so, I felt that there was a pocket in the lining, that it was buttoned, and that there was something within. Quickly I unbuttoned it and drew forth a small packet wrapped in glazed writing-paper, dirty and worn through being carried for a long time. With care I opened it, and inside found an object which caused us both to give vent to an ejaculation of wonder.

It was simply a penny.

“His mascot, I suppose,” remarked the inspector. “A lucky coin.”

“But it has no hole through it,” I observed.

“The hole is of no importance. The coin may have been given him for luck,” replied my companion. “Lots of people believe in such things, especially betting men.”

“He was evidently very careful of it,” I said, at the same time searching and finding another pocket on the other side of the vest, and from this I took a neat little cloth-covered case, not much larger than those containing cigarette tubes, and found on opening it that it contained a small hypodermic syringe, complete with its needles and accessories.

“This shows that he was addicted to the morphia habit,” I remarked. “An overdose, perhaps.”

My friend, who had now recovered something of his coolness and self-possession, took the tiny instrument and examined it carefully beneath the gas-light.

“There’s been no morphia in this lately,” he said. “It’s quite dry, and certainly hasn’t been used to-day.”

“Let’s search the whole house,” I suggested. “We may find something which will give us a clue as to who and what these people were. Funny that the servants don’t come back, isn’t it?”

“I don’t expect they will,” answered Patterson.

“Depend upon it that there’s more mystery in this affair than we at present suspect.”

“Why?”

“Look at these,” he said, passing over to me the three banknotes found upon the dead man. “They are spurious!”

No second glance was needed to convince me that he spoke the truth. They were clever imitations of ten-pound notes, but the paper, the despair of the forger, was thick and entirely different to that of the genuine bank-note.

Again I glanced at that beautiful woman’s face with its smile of mingled ecstatic pleasure and bitterness. Her sightless eyes seemed fixed upon me, following me as I moved.

I drew back horrified, shuddering. Her gaze was ghastly.

“It certainly is a most mysterious affair,” I ejaculated again, glancing around the place. “You ought at once to report it.”

“No,” cried my companion quickly. “The discovery must be yours. You must report it, Mr Urwin.”

“Why?”

“Because, as I’ve already told you, I fear to do so on account of the snake.”

I smiled at his curious objection, but an instant later grew serious because of the sharp and sudden ringing of an electric bell somewhere on the ground floor. It was the bell my companion had heard when first knocking at the door.

We both listened for a few moments while the ringing continued, until with sudden resolve I dashed downstairs to ascertain where the bell was. Without difficulty I found it, for there in the hall, revealed by the gas-lamp we had lit, was a telephone instrument with its bell agitated violently.

Without a second’s delay I placed the receiver to my ear and gave the usual signal —

“Hulloa! Hulloa?”

The whirr and clicking stopped, and a voice, squeaky as that of an elderly person, said petulantly —

“I’ve been ringing up for an hour or more. What’s wrong that you haven’t replied? You’re at fifty-eight, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I answered, recollecting that fifty-eight was the number of that house. “Nothing is wrong. Why? Can’t you be patient?”

“I felt uneasy,” answered the mysterious voice apologetically. “I thought there might possibly have been some hitch as you haven’t rung up.”

“No,” I responded. “None.”

“Then of course it’s all over?” inquired the voice. I started at this strange query. This unknown inquirer was evidently in possession of the truth, and believed himself to be talking to an accomplice. He knew of the commission of the crime, therefore it occurred to me that by the exercise of due caution I might be able to discover his identity.

“Yes,” I answered, breathless in excitement.

“Both?” asked the voice.

“Both,” I responded.

“Good. Then I shall see you at the place we arranged – eh?”

“Of course,” I answered. “But when? I’ve forgotten.”

“Forgotten!” echoed the squeaky voice in a tone of undisguised disgust. “Take care, or you’ll blunder yet. You’re a confounded idiot. Why, to-morrow at midday.”

“I know I’m a fool,” I replied. “But in the excitement it’s quite slipped my memory where you said I was to meet you.”

Then, holding the receiver tremblingly to my ear, I listened with quick heart-beating for the response of that mysterious, far distant voice which squeaked so strangely, sounding thin and high-pitched, more like that of a woman than of a man.

“You’re a confounded fool to waste time like this if you’re still at fifty-eight,” said the voice.

“You’ve said so before,” I responded. “But where shall I meet you?”

Chapter Three

An Appointment

The voice answered at last —

“I’ll meet you beside the lake in St. James’s Park, Buckingham Palace end, at twelve tomorrow. Remember that.”

“Very well,” I responded eagerly. “Anything more?”

“No,” was the reply. “Be careful how you get out, and where you go. So long!”

Then, next instant, I knew by the sound that the connexion had been switched off.

“What’s the matter?” asked Patterson, now beside me.

“Wait, and I’ll tell you afterwards,” I said, at the same time ringing up again.

In response I was answered by a feminine voice at the Exchange, who inquired what number I desired.

“Tell me, miss, who has just been speaking to me. Kindly oblige me, as it’s most important.”

There was silence for a few moments, then the female voice inquired – “Are you there?” to which I responded.

“You were on a moment ago with 14,982, the public call-office at Putney.”

“How long was I on?”

“About ten minutes.”

“Have I been on to the same place before this evening?” I asked.

“No. Several numbers have been ringing you up, but you haven’t replied.”

“Who were they?”

“Oh, I really can’t tell you now. It’s quite impossible. I remember that the call-office at Piccadilly Circus was one, and I think the one in the Minories.”

“They were all call-offices – no private persons?”

“I’m unable to say. I’ve been on duty for the past four hours, and have connected up thousands of numbers.”

“Then you can’t tell me anything else?” I asked disappointedly.

“No. I’m sorry I can’t,” replied the girl.

I was about to place the receiver on its hook when a sudden thought occurred to me, and again I addressed her.

“This matter is a most urgent one,” I said. “Can’t you ask at the call-office for a description of the man who has just been speaking?”

“There’s no one there. It is merely an instrument placed in a passage leading to some offices,” was the reply.

I hung up the receiver, and turning to Patterson repeated the conversation.

“Extraordinary,” he ejaculated, when I had concluded. “We must keep that appointment. The inquiry is plain proof that murder has been committed, and further, that more than one person is in the secret.”

“But is it not strange that this person, whoever he is, should dare to telephone in that manner?”

“It certainly is a bold move,” my companion answered, “but from his conversation it is evident that the assassin promised to telephone to him, and was either disturbed in his work and compelled to escape hurriedly, or else forgot it altogether. Again, it’s plain that to avoid detection the unknown man went from one call-office to another, always ringing up to this house, and never obtaining a response until you answered.”

“His inquiry was certainly a guarded one.”

“And your answers were smart, too,” he laughed. “You were careful not to commit yourself.”

“Do you think he’ll keep the appointment?” I asked eagerly.

“That remains to be seen,” answered my friend, glancing at the bull’s-eye to see if it were burning well. “If he’s not a blunderer he won’t.”

“Well, let’s hope he does,” I said. “You would arrest him, of course?”

“I don’t know,” he answered doubtfully. “We might learn more by keeping observation upon him for a day or two.”

“Well,” I said, “we haven’t yet searched the place thoroughly. Let’s see what is above.”

My companion followed me upstairs rather reluctantly, I thought, passing the room where the mysterious tragedy had occurred and ascending to the floor above. There were four bedrooms, each well-furnished, but finding that they contained nothing of a suspicious character we continued to the top floor, where there were several smaller low-ceilinged rooms opening from a narrow passage. Two of them were evidently the sleeping apartments of the servants, the third was filled with lumber, but the fourth, which overlooked the back premises, long and narrow, was fitted as a kind of workshop or laboratory. A curious smell greeted our nostrils as we opened the door – a smell very much like the perfume on the dead woman’s handkerchief.

We found a gas-jet and lit it, afterwards gazing round the place with some surprise. Upon shelves around the walls were various bottles containing liquids; on the table stood two curious-looking globes of bright steel, riveted like those of a steam-boiler, and connected by a long tubular coil rolled into three consecutive spirals which ended with a kind of nozzle. From the fact that an electric battery and a lathe also stood in the room we at once came to the conclusion that the master of that house had been engaged in some scientific investigations.

From place to place we went, searching every corner for any written document or letter, until at last I found, crumpled and cast into the empty grate, an old envelope on which I read the address: “Professor Douglas Dawson.”

“At any rate we’ve got the name of the occupant of this place,” I said, handing my find to the police-officer.

“Dawson?” he repeated, “Dawson? I fancy I’ve heard that name in connexion with scientific discovery.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “If he’s a well-known man we shall soon find out all about him at the Royal Institution.”

I was standing near the fireplace with the envelope still in my hand when, of a sudden, I was startled by a strange scuttling noise near my feet.

“Good heavens!” gasped Patterson, his eyes riveted on the spot. “Look there! Look at that glass case! There are snakes in it!”

I sprang away, and looking in the direction he indicated saw that a glass case, standing on the ground, contained two great snakes with beautiful markings of yellow and black. Even as I looked they were coiled, with their flat heads erect and their bead-like eyes shining like tiny stars in the shadow, their bodies half-hidden in a blanket.

“Nice kind of pets, to keep in a house,” observed Patterson. “That’s one of them that’s escaped into the garden, I expect.”

“I quite agree,” I said, “this place is decidedly the reverse of cheerful. Hadn’t we better report at once? There’s been a mysterious tragedy here, and immediate efforts should be made to trace the assassin.”

“But, my dear fellow, how do you know they’ve been murdered?” he argued. “There’s no marks of violence whatever.”

“Not as far as we’ve been able to discover. A doctor can tell us more after the post-mortem,” I responded.

There were many very strange features connected with this remarkable discovery. My friend’s reluctance to commence an investigation, his firm resolve not to report the discovery, the

mysterious voice at the telephone, the fact that some experimental scientist had his laboratory in that house, and the revelation of the unaccountable tragedy itself, were all so extraordinary that I stood utterly bewildered.

Absolutely nothing remained to show who were the pair lying dead, and no explanation seemed possible of that strange red light burning there so steadily, and unflickering. By the appearance of the glass, and the dust in the oil, the tiny lamp must have burned on incessantly for a very long time.

Strange it was that there, within a few yards of one of London's great arteries of traffic, that charming woman and her companion should have been cut off swiftly and suddenly, without a hand being stretched forth to save them.

In company we went downstairs, leaving the light in the laboratory still burning, and re-entered the drawing-room to take a final glance around. As I approached the prostrate body of the man I felt something beneath my foot, and glancing down saw that some coppers had evidently fallen from his pocket and were lying strewn about the carpet. Then, having remained a few minutes longer, we both went out by the door we had entered, locking it and taking the key.

"We must report it, Patterson," I said. "It certainly has some queer and very extraordinary features."

"Yes," he responded; adding slowly, "did you notice anything strange up in that top room where the chemicals and things were?"

"Yes, a good deal," I answered. "It isn't every one who keeps snakes as pets."

"I don't mean that," he answered. "But did you notice on the table a glassful of liquid, like water?"

"Yes."

"Well, that stuff was bubbling and boiling without any heat beneath."

"Perhaps the man who experiments there is a conjurer," I suggested, smiling at his surprise at seeing liquid boil when exposed to air. Police-officers know little of any other science save that of self-defence.

"Now," he said seriously, as we strode forward together in the direction of Kensington Church, "you must go to the station and report the discovery as if made by you – you understand. Remember, the snake attracted your attention, you entered, found the man and woman lying dead, lit the gas, searched the house, then left to get assistance, and met me."

"That's all very well," I answered. "But you forget that you borrowed that lamp from one of your own men, and that I called on you first."

"Ah!" he gasped; turning slightly pale. "I never thought of that!"

"Why don't you report it yourself?" I urged.

"For superstitious reasons," he laughed nervously.

"Hang superstition!" I cried. Adding: "Of course, I'll report it if you like, but it would be far better for you to do so and risk this mysterious bad luck that you fear."

He was silent for a moment, thinking deeply, then answered in a strange, hard voice, —

"Perhaps you're right, Urwin. I – I'm a confounded fool to be afraid," and with an effort quite apparent he braced himself up and we entered the police-station. Ascending the stairs we were soon closeted with Octavius Boyd, inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department attached to that Division, a middle-aged, dark-bearded, pleasant-faced man in plain-clothes, who, as soon as he heard our story, was immediately ready to accompany us, while five minutes later the clicking of the telegraph told that news of our discovery was being transmitted to headquarters at New Scotland Yard.

Patterson took down the *London Directory*, and turning it up at Upper Phillimore Place, found that the occupier of the house in question was Andrew Callender. He made inquiries in the section-house of the men off duty as to what was known of that house, but only one constable made a

statement, and it was to the effect that he had, when on duty in Kensington Road, seen a youngish lady with fair hair, whose description tallied with that of the dead woman, come out and go across to the shops on the opposite side of the road.

“Do you know anything of the servants?” inquired Patterson.

“Well, sir,” the man answered, “one was a man, and the other a woman.”

“How do you know?”

“Because the servant of the house next door told me so. The woman was the cook, and the man did the housework. She said that the house was a most mysterious one.”

“Is she there now?” my friend asked.

“No, sir. She was discharged a fortnight ago. Dishonest, I think.”

“And you don’t know where she is?”

Boyd had by this time called one of his plain-clothes men, who had obtained lamps, turning the dark slides over the flame, the station-sergeant had carefully ruled a line and written something in that remarkable register kept in every London police-station, wherein is recorded every event which transpires in the district, from a tragedy to the return of the sub-divisional inspector from his rounds, or the grooming of the horses. Then, after a short conversation with one of the second-class inspectors, we all four, accompanied by a sergeant, started for Upper Phillimore Place.

In order not to attract attention we separated. Patterson walking with me to the opposite side of the road, while the detectives walked together, and the sergeant alone. Little did the passers-by suspect when they saw Patterson and me strolling leisurely along that we were on our way to investigate what afterwards proved to be one of the strangest and most remarkable mysteries that had ever puzzled the Metropolitan Police.

Chapter Four

The Three Cards

On reaching the house, Boyd, an expert officer who had spent years in the investigation of crime, ascended with his subordinate to the drawing-room, while we remained on the ground floor to complete our search, the sergeant being stationed inside the hall.

Our further investigations were not very fruitful. The fact that dinner was laid for three indicated that a third person had been present, or was expected. The room did not differ from any other, except that it was perhaps better furnished than one would have expected in such a house, for although in a first-class and rather expensive neighbourhood the row of houses had declined in popularity of late years, and was now inhabited mostly by the lodging-house fraternity.

In moving about the room, however, my coat caught the plate laid for the person who was to occupy the head of the table, and it was nearly swept off. I saved it, however, but beneath was revealed a plain white card which, until that moment, had been concealed. Patterson caught sight of it at the same moment, and taking it in my hand I examined it, finding that it was a plain visiting card of lady's size, one side being blank, and other bearing a roughly-drawn circle in ink.

There was nothing else.

"That's certainly curious," my companion remarked, looking over my shoulder.

"Yes," I said, lifting a second plate to see what was there concealed, and finding another card, in all appearances similar, plain, but bearing across its reverse a single straight line drawn with a pen.

"By Jove!" observed Patterson, lifting the other plate, and finding a third card, "this is certainly very strange."

He turned the card over, but it was blank on both sides.

"I wonder what game is this, or whether these have any connexion with the crime?" I exclaimed, holding all three of the cards in my hand, turning them over and examining them carefully beneath the light. "By the ink they have the appearance of having been prepared long ago. See!" I added, holding one of them towards him, "the corners of this one are slightly turned up and soiled. It has been carried in some one's pocket, and is not a fresh card."

Again Patterson took it and examined it. It was the one with the line drawn across it. The others were quite clean, as if just taken fresh from a packet.

"There's some mystery about these," he said reflectively, as though speaking to himself. "If we could but solve it we should likewise solve the problem of the crime, depend upon it."

"No doubt," I assented. "Each of them have some meaning, occult but extraordinary. They were turned face downwards so that the accidental removal of the plate would not reveal the device upon them."

"The devices are simple enough, but undoubtedly they have some hidden meaning," my friend said.

"They were evidently concealed there, and the three persons, unsuspecting, were to discover them when the first plates were removed," I suggested.

He placed them together on the table, saying —

"Better let Boyd see them when he comes down. The affair grows more queer and complicated as we proceed."

"Don't you recollect," I said suddenly, "in the dead man's pocket was a card exactly similar, but quite blank. You threw it into the fireplace."

"Ah! of course," he answered quickly. "That fact shows that he had something to do with these mysterious symbols. I wonder what is their real meaning."

“I wonder,” I said. “As you say, the mystery grows each moment more and more inexplicable. Curious, too, that the snake in the garden path should have directed your attention to it.”

“No,” he said quickly, his face in an instant pale and serious, “don’t mention that, there’s a good fellow. I’m trying not to think of it; for when I recollect all that it means to me I’m unnerved.”

“Bah!” I laughed. “Surely there’s nothing to fear. It only shows that however careful the assassin is to cover his crime it must be unearthed sooner or later. The finger of Fate always points to the crime of murder, however well it may be concealed.”

“True,” he sighed, his brows knit in serious thought. “But the finger of Fate has in this case shown me an omen of evil.”

“You’re a fool, Patterson,” I said bluntly. “You have here every chance to distinguish yourself as a shrewd officer, yet you calmly stand by talking of omens and all that rot.”

“Yes,” he answered. “I know I’m an idiot, Mr Urwin, but I can’t help it. That’s the worst of it.”

“Well,” I suggested, “while Boyd is upstairs, why not make inquiries of the next-door neighbours regarding those who occupied this place?”

He at once acted on my suggestion, and together we went out and rang the bell of the house adjoining on the right. My friend’s curious apathy in this matter surprised me, for usually he was a quick, active fellow, who prosecuted his inquiries methodically, and worked up evidence in a manner that had more than once called forth the commendation of the judge at the Old Bailey. That night, however, he was plainly upset – nervous, trembling and agitated, in a manner quite unusual to him.

Boyd, the keen-eyed, quick-witted detective inspector, had noticed this when at the police-station, but Patterson had only replied —

“I’m a bit unwell, that’s all.”

Our summons at the house next door was answered by the occupier’s wife, a rather stout, white-haired, gaily-capped old lady named Luff.

The appearance of Patterson in uniform surprised her, but when she had asked us in, and we were seated, he said —

“There is no occasion to be alarmed, madam. I have merely called to make an inquiry of you. It is in your power to render us assistance in a rather confidential matter regarding the occupiers of the house next door – your neighbours on the left. What do you know of them?”

“Nothing,” she answered. “They came about six months ago, a young lady and a very old gentleman, with a single maid-servant. They speak to no one, and, as far as I have observed, have very few friends. I have often remarked to my son, who is a civil engineer, and now away making the railway in China, that they are a mysterious couple. What is wrong with them?”

“Oh, it’s simply a private matter,” my companion answered carelessly, not wishing to alarm the neighbourhood by news of our discovery.

“What is the old gentleman like? Can you describe him?” I inquired. No doubt she took me for a detective, but at that moment this thought did not occur to me.

“He is sixty, I should think, old and decrepit, with white hair, and always walks with a stick.”

“And the lady was his daughter?” suggested the inspector.

“I suppose her to be his daughter,” she answered. “The old man’s name is Dawson, I believe – at least one day a messenger-boy brought a note here by mistake, addressed to Professor Dawson. The daughter is a very good pianist, and plays every morning regularly.”

“They are well off, as far as you can judge?” Patterson inquired with his assumed careless air.

“No, I don’t think they are, because my maid heard at Boucher’s – the grocer’s across the way – that they owed a large bill which they couldn’t settle. Again, people who have a house of that sort do not have coal by the hundredweight taken down into the kitchen as they do.”

Patterson nodded. No more sure sign of a light purse is there than the purchase of coal by the half-sack. Yet the interior of that house, with its well-laid dinner-table, certainly did not betray

any sign of poverty. Indeed, I had noticed in the cellar a dusty stock of choice wines, hocks, ports, and champagnes of expensive brands.

“You don’t know the young lady’s name, then?” asked my friend, after a slight pause.

“If she’s really his daughter it would, I suppose, be Dawson,” she replied with a smile. “But I’m not certain, remember, as to either of their names.”

“Perhaps your servants may know something about them. Servants generally gossip and pick up information about one’s neighbours, you know.”

“You are right,” answered the affable old lady, “they gossip far too much. Unfortunately, however, both my servants are out at this moment.”

We chatted on, but it was evident from her conversation that her servants knew little beyond what she did. One statement she made was somewhat curious. She alleged that a few nights before she was awakened about two o’clock in the morning by hearing the loud shrill screams of a woman who seemed to be in the room next hers in the adjoining house. She could hear a man’s voice talking low and gruffly, and three or four times were the screams repeated, as if the woman were in excruciating pain.

“What visitors came to the house?” Patterson asked at length.

“Very few. A youngish gentleman came sometimes. He called the other morning just as I was going out.”

“Who admitted him?”

“The young lady herself.”

Many more questions Patterson put to the old lady, but elicited no noteworthy fact, except that two large, heavy trunks had been sent away by Parcels Delivery a couple of days before. Therefore, thanking Mrs Luff, who, of course, was extremely curious to know why the police were taking such an active interest in her neighbour, we left and made inquiries of the people in the adjoining house on the opposite hand.

It was a lodging-house and the owner, a rather surly old widow, was not at all communicative. What she told us amounted practically to what we had already learnt. She, too, had long ago set the old man and his daughter down as mysterious persons, and her two servants had never been able to find out anything regarding them.

So after nearly half an hour’s absence we returned to the house of mystery, watched, of course, by the persons in the houses on either side. None suspected a tragedy, but all remained at their windows expecting to see somebody arrested.

In the dining-room we found Doctor Knowles, the police divisional surgeon, who had been sent for by the police. He had already examined the bodies and was on the point of returning home.

“Well, doctor, what’s your opinion?” asked Patterson.

“I can form none until after the post-mortem,” answered the prim, youngish, dark-moustached man in silk hat and frock coat, a typical Kensington practitioner, who was known to be a great favourite with his lady patients.

“Are there no marks of violence?”

“None,” he responded. “Although there seems no doubt that there has been foul play, yet the means used to encompass their death remains an entire mystery. That laboratory, too, is a very remarkable feature.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because the occupant of that place has made a discovery for which scientists have for years striven in vain,” the doctor replied.

“What is it?”

“You noticed those strange globes with the coil of tubing,” he said. “Well, from what I’ve found, it seems that the experimenter has invented a means for the liquefaction of hydrogen in large quantities.”

“Is that anything very remarkable?” I asked, in my ignorance of recent science.

“Remarkable!” he echoed. “I should rather say it was. The discovery will create the greatest interest in the scientific world. Other gases have all been handled as true liquids in measurable quantities, while until now hydrogen has only been seen in clouds or droplets, and never collected into a liquid mass. Upstairs, however, there is actually a glass bowl of liquid hydrogen. The experimenter, whoever he is, has determined at last the exact temperature at which it will liquefy, and thus a field for quite new researches, as also for new generalisations, has been thrown wide open.”

“But why is the discovery so very important?” I asked, still puzzled at the doctor’s unusual enthusiasm.

“Briefly, because by it physicists and chemists can henceforward obtain temperatures lying within thirty-five degrees from the so-called absolute zero of temperature – minus 459 degrees Fahrenheit. A possibility is thus given to study physical bodies in the vicinity of that point, which represents, so to say, the death of matter – that is, absence of the molecular vibrations which we describe as heat.”

This explanation, technical though it was, interested me. I knew Doctor Lees Knowles to be a rising man, and when reporting lectures at the Royal Institution had often noticed him among the audiences. There was no doubt that he was highly excited over the discovery, for, like myself, he had seen the liquid hydrogen boiling without any visible heat. In the papers there had been lots about Professor Dewar’s experiments in the liquefaction of oxygen, fluorine and the newly-discovered helium, and I remembered how all his efforts to bring hydrogen to a liquid state had failed. Now, however, the mysterious occupier of that house had succeeded, and every known gas could now be liquefied.

“But the murder,” observed Patterson, his thoughts reverting to the crime, for to him the most wonderful scientific discovery was as naught. “Can you form absolutely no opinion as to how it was accomplished?”

The doctor shook his head.

“There is nothing whatever to account for their sudden death, as far as I can observe,” he answered. “To the woman, however, death must have come instantly, while the man must have fallen and expired a few seconds later. There seem many mysterious features in the affair.”

“The discoverer of this latest scientific fact is undoubtedly the old man who is absent, the father of the dead girl. From him we may learn something to lead us to form conclusions,” I suggested.

“An old man!” echoed Dr Knowles. “Tell me about him.”

Briefly Patterson related all that had been told us by the neighbours, and when he had finished the doctor exclaimed —

“Then I can tell you one thing which is proved undoubtedly. The old man seen to go in and out was in reality a young one, for while looking over the laboratory I came across a white wig and a make-up box, such as is used by actors. Go upstairs and you’ll find a complete disguise there – broadcloth coat, pepper-and-salt trousers baggy at the knees, old-fashioned white vest, and collars of antique pattern.”

“Surely that can’t be true!” Patterson exclaimed in amazement.

“It certainly is,” the doctor asserted. “Depend upon it that the man lying upstairs dead was the man who has been making these successful experiments, and who for some unknown reason desired to conceal his identity. Recollect that they had few friends, if any, and that their man-servant was a most discreet foreigner, who never gossiped.”

“Then you think that to the world they assumed the position of father and daughter, while in reality they were husband and wife?” I said.

“Most likely,” responded the doctor. “A man to make experiments on an elaborate scale as he has must necessarily have been absorbed in them. Indeed, that apparatus must have taken a year to prepare, and no doubt he has been making constant trials for months. He probably intended to give forth his discovery to the world as a great surprise, but has been prevented from doing so by some extraordinary combination of circumstances which has resulted in his death.”

At that instant we heard a voice in the hall – a quick, sharp voice extremely familiar to me, but nevertheless it caused me to start. Next instant, however, there entered the room the well-known figure of Dick Cleugh.

“Hulloa, old fellow!” he exclaimed, greeting me and taking me aside. “I thought I’d run down and see what’s in this. Funny affair it seems, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” I answered. “A most remarkable mystery. But why have you come out here?”

“Soon after you left I went to find Lily, but she’s gone into the country. So having nothing else to do I came down to see what had occurred. I knew, of course, from Patterson’s telegram, that it was something unusual.”

“Have you been upstairs?”

“Yes, I’ve been worrying around this last half-hour, while you and Patterson have been making inquiries next door. I’ve been having a look about with the Doctor. It seems that there’s some wonderful apparatus in the laboratory – a discovery for liquefying hydrogen. Has he told you about it?”

“Yes,” I responded. “What’s your theory?”

“By Jove! old fellow,” he said smiling, “the whole affair is so devilish uncanny, with those snakes upstairs, water boiling without any heat beneath it, and one thing and another, that I’m utterly at a loss how to account for it all.”

“You think they’ve been murdered?”

“Of course,” answered the astute Cleugh. “But the doctor can’t discover how. There is not a scratch upon them. The discovery of those flash notes on the man looks as though he were a bit of a swell swindler, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said. Then taking him across to the dining-table I explained how we had discovered the three cards concealed beneath the plates.

He took the cards in his hand, turning them over, and examining them carefully.

“Strange,” he ejaculated. “This adds still another phase to the affair. It is really a most sensational discovery, and will work up well for to-morrow.”

“No, Mr Cleugh,” put in Patterson quickly, overhearing his remark, “I beg of you to publish nothing whatever about it until I give you permission. In this we are bound to preserve secrecy for the present in order that our inquiries may not be thwarted. Even the neighbours will remain in ignorance of the real nature of things, so carefully do I intend to guard against any public sensation. Whatever information I can give you I will do so willingly, in order that you can prepare your account of it, but remember that not a word must be published until I give you permission.”

“Quite right,” observed the doctor. “In such a matter as this any sensation in the Press might frustrate all your efforts to arrive at the truth.”

“Very well,” answered Dick, a trifle disappointedly. “Of course you’ll give nothing to anybody else. I want to be first in the field with it.”

“Of that I give you my word. Not a soul will know of this discovery outside the persons in this house at the present moment. Come, let’s go upstairs and speak to Boyd,” and while the doctor wished us good evening and left, my two friends accompanied me upstairs, where in the drawing-room the detectives were continuing their searching investigation.

“The woman is decidedly good-looking, isn’t she?” observed Cleugh as we entered.

Instinctively I turned towards the chair in which the body was still reclining, but next instant, with a loud cry of dismay, which at the same moment was echoed by Patterson, I stood aghast, rigid, immovable.

The sight which met our eyes was utterly bewildering.

The woman we had discovered there, so lovely in form and feature, had a wealth of auburn hair, and eyes of a deep intense blue, while, amazing though it was, this woman before us was quite ten years older, dark-complexioned, with hair which in that light seemed blue-black, and half-closed eyes as dark as jet.

“Good Heavens!” I gasped. “Look! Why, that is not the woman we found when we first entered this place – but another. Where is the fair girl?”

“There’s no fair girl,” answered the detective Boyd, as all started back in surprise at my astounding assertion. “This is the woman we found, you must be mistaken.”

“No,” Patterson declared in the low, hoarse voice of one filled with fear. “There is no mistake. When we first entered there was another woman here, younger, prettier, with light hair and blue eyes. This is the most unaccountable, most amazing and most inexplicable of all our discoveries.”

Chapter Five

The Second Woman

The statement that the woman found by Patterson on his first entry there, and seen by me afterwards, had disappeared, was at first discredited by our companions. It seemed too astounding to be the truth, nevertheless there was now reclining in the same armchair a woman who certainly bore no resemblance whatever to the beautiful, fair-haired girl with eyes of such deep, pure blue – those eyes that had stared at me so horribly in the ghastly rigidity of death. I recollected that smile upon her lips, half of sarcasm, half of pleasure; that strange expression which had held me entranced yet horrified.

She had disappeared, and here in her place was a dark-complexioned woman, older, nevertheless handsome – a woman in whose refined face was an air of romance and tragedy, and upon whose hand was the marriage bond. She, too, was dead. The doctor had examined her and pronounced life extinct.

“How could this have occurred?” I exclaimed, turning to Patterson as soon as I had recovered from the shock of the astounding discovery.

“It’s simply amazing!” he declared. “I’m utterly at a loss to account for it. The woman we found here was most distinctly another person.”

“Then there has been a triple tragedy,” observed Boyd. “The body of the first woman must have been conveyed away during the time you were absent at the police-station.”

“But why?” I asked. “What on earth could be the motive?”

“Impossible to tell,” Patterson answered. “Perhaps the body is hidden somewhere in the house.”

“No,” Boyd replied. “We’ve made a complete search everywhere. It has undoubtedly been taken away. This fact, in itself, shows first, that there is more than one person implicated in the crime, and secondly, that they were absolutely fearless; while further, the incident of the telephone is in itself sufficient proof that they had taken the utmost precautions against detection.”

“Are you quite certain that every cupboard and wardrobe has been looked into?” I asked doubtfully.

“Quite. From garret to cellar we’ve thoroughly overhauled the place. There are a couple of large trunks in one of the bedrooms, but we examined the contents of both. They contain books.”

“But loose boards, or places of that sort?” I suggested.

“When we search a place,” responded the Scotland Yard inspector with a smile, “we’re always on the look-out for places of concealment. I’ve superintended the investigation myself, and I vouch that nothing is concealed within this house.”

“Do you think that the assassin was actually in the house when we first entered?”

“That’s more than likely,” he answered with a pensive air. “Evidently the instant you’d gone the body of the fair-haired girl was somehow spirited away.”

“Where?”

“Ah, that’s what we must find out. Perhaps a taxi-driver will be able to throw a light upon the matter.”

“This is certainly a first-class mystery,” observed Dick, with journalistic instinct and a keen eye to those “special interviews” and “latest revelations” in which readers of his journal always revelled. “It will make no end of a stir. What a godsend, now that the gooseberry season is coming on.”

A good murder mystery is always welcome to a certain class of London daily journals, but more especially in the season when Parliament is “up,” the Courts are closed for the Vacation, and

the well of sensations runs low. This season is termed, in journalistic parlance, “the gooseberry season,” on account of the annual appearance of the big gooseberry, that mythical monster of our youth, the sea-serpent, and the starting of the usual silly correspondence upon “Why should we live?” or some equally interesting controversial subject.

We were all held in blank astonishment at this latest development of the extraordinary affair. It had so many remarkable phases that, even to Boyd, one of the shrewdest officers of the Criminal Investigation Department, it was bewildering.

To me, however, the disappearance of that dead woman with the fair, pure face was the strangest of all that tangle of astounding facts. That face had impressed me. Its every feature had been riveted indelibly upon my memory, for it was a face which, in life, I should have fallen down and worshipped as an idol, for there was about it a purity and charm which must have been highly attractive, a vivacity in those eyes which, even in death, had held me spell-bound.

“I don’t see that we can do any more just now,” Boyd remarked in a business-like tone to his subordinate.

“You’ve seen the three cards which were beneath the plates on the dining-table?” I asked.

“Yes,” he responded. “There’s some hidden meaning connected with them, but what it’s impossible at present to guess. In order to prosecute our inquiries we must preserve secrecy. Nothing must be published yet. Indeed, Patterson, you’ll apply to the Coroner at once to take steps to withhold the real state of affairs from the public. If the assassins find that no hue and cry is aroused we may have a far better chance of tracing them, for they may betray themselves.”

“It’s a pity,” observed Dick, deeply disappointed. “A first-class sensation of this sort don’t occur every day. Why, it’s worth four columns if a line.”

“Be patient,” Patterson urged. “You shall have an opportunity of publishing it before long, and I’ll see that you are a long way ahead of your contemporaries.”

“Don’t let the news agencies have a word. They always try and get in front of us,” said Cleugh, whose particular antagonists were the Central News and the Press Association, which possess facilities for the collection of news and its transmission by wire to the various newspapers that form one of the most marvellous organisations in unknown London.

“Leave it to me,” said the inspector. “As soon as it’s wise to let the public know anything I’ll give you permission to publish. The *Comet* shall be first in the field with it.”

“Very well,” answered Dick, satisfied with Patterson’s answer. That officer had been prominent a few years before in the investigations relative to those mysterious assassinations of women in Whitechapel, and was very friendly with “the *Comet* man,” as Cleugh was termed in the journal which he represented.

Many were the suggestions we put forth as to how the bodies of the victims could have thus been changed, but no theory we could advance seemed likely to have any foundation in fact.

The mystery was certainly one of the strangest that had ever puzzled the crime investigators of London. The cause of its discovery was a most remarkable incident, and at every turn as the investigation proceeded mystery seemed to follow upon mystery, until the whole affair presented so many curious features that a solution of the problem seemed utterly impossible.

I bent beside the body of the woman who, reclining in the armchair with one arm fallen by her side, presented the appearance of one asleep. Her presence there was a profound enigma. A thought, however, occurred to me at that moment. The dining-table below had been laid for three. Perhaps she was the third person.

For the greater part of an hour we remained in that house of grim shadows discussing the various phases of the astounding affair, until at last, about eleven, we all left, two constables in uniform being stationed within. So secretly had this search been carried out that the neighbours, though, perhaps, puzzled by Patterson’s inquiries, entertained no suspicion of any tragic occurrence. In Kensington Road all the shops facing Upper Phillimore Place were closed

save the tobacconist's and the frequent public-houses, the foot passengers were few, and at that hour the stream of taxis with homeward-bound theatre-goers had not yet commenced. Market garden carts from Hounslow or Feltham, piled high with vegetables, rumbled slowly past on their journey to Covent Garden, and a few empty motor-buses rattled along towards Hyde Park, but beyond all was quiet, for that great artery of Western London goes early to rest.

At the police-station we took leave of Patterson and Boyd, and entering a motor-bus at Kensington Church, arrived at our chambers shortly before midnight.

"There's something infernally uncanny in the whole business," said the Mystery-monger as we sat smoking, prior to turning in. It was our habit to smoke and gossip for half an hour before going to bed, no matter what the time. Our talk was generally of "shop" events in our world of journalism, the chatter of Fleet Street intermingled with reminiscences of the day's doings. Dick was sitting in the armchair reflectively sucking his eternal briar, while I sat at my table pondering over a letter I had found there on my return. It was from Mary Blain, for whom I had once long ago entertained a very strong affection, but who had since gone out of my life, leaving only a shadowy recollection of a midsummer madness, of clandestine meetings, of idle, careless days spent in company with a smart, eminently pretty, girl in blue serge skirt, cotton blouse and sailor hat. All was of the past. She had played me false. I was poor, and she had thrown me over for a man richer than myself. For nearly three years I had heard little of her; indeed, I confess that she had almost passed from my memory until that evening when I had sat awaiting Dick, and now on my return I opened that letter to discover it in her well-known, bold hand – the hand of an educated woman.

The letter, which had had some wanderings, as its envelope showed, and was dated from her father's house up the river, merely expressed a hope that I was in good health, and satisfaction at hearing news of me through a mutual friend. Such a letter struck me as rather strange. I could only account for it by the fact that she desired to resume our acquaintanceship, and that this was a woman's diplomatic way of opening negotiations. All women are born diplomatists, and woman's wit and powers of perception are far more acute than man's.

The letter brought back to me vividly the memory of that sweet, merry face beneath the sailor hat, the wealth of dark hair, the laughing eyes so dark and brilliant, the small white hands, and their wrists confined by their golden bangles. Yes, Mary Blain was uncommonly good-looking. Her face was one in ten thousand. But she was utterly heartless. I recollected how, when with her mother she had spent a summer at Eastbourne, what a sensation her remarkable beauty caused at Sunday parade on the Esplanade. She was lovely without consciousness of it, utterly ingenuous, and as ignorant of the world's wickedness as a child. The daughter of a wealthy City man who combined company-promoting with wine-importing, she had from childhood been nursed in the lap of luxury, and being the only child, was the idol of her parents. Their country house at Harwell, near Didcot, was in my father's parish, and from the time when her nurse used to bring her to the Rectory until that well-remembered evening when in the leafy by-lane I had for the last time turned my back upon her with a hasty word of denunciation, we had been closest friends. She had played me false. My hopes had been wrecked on Life's strange and trackless sea, and now whenever I thought of her it was only in bitterness. I have more than a suspicion that old Mr Blain did not approve of our close acquaintanceship, knowing that I was a mere journalist with an almost untaxable income; nevertheless, she had continued to meet me, and many were the happy hours we spent together wandering through that charming country that skirts the upper reaches of the Thames.

In order to see her I used frequently to run down from London to my home on Saturdays and remain till Mondays. With her mother she sat in her seat in front of the Rectory pew, and as she walked down the aisle her face would be illumined by a glad light of welcome. How restful were those Sundays after the wear and tear of London life! How peaceful the days in that sleepy little village hidden away in a leafy hollow three miles from the Great Western line! After we had

parted, however, I did not go home for six months. Then, on inquiry, I found that the Blains had sold their place, presumably because they were in want of money, for it was said that they had taken a smaller house facing the Thames, near Laleham, that village a little beyond Shepperton, where in the churchyard lies Matthew Arnold. From all accounts old Blain had lost heavily in speculation and had been compelled to sell his carriages and horses, dispose of many of his pictures, and even part with some of the Louis Seize furniture at Shenley Court, where they had lived. This was, of course, indicative of a very severe reverse of fortune.

Since those hours of Mary's love and her subsequent falseness, my life had been a queer series of ups and downs, as it must ever be in journalistic London. Many dreary days of changeable care had come and gone since then.

I sat silent, thinking, with her letter still open in my hand.

"Why are you so confoundedly glum, old man?" Dick asked. "What's your screed about? Duns in the offing?"

"No. It's nothing," I answered evasively, smiling.

"Then don't look so down in the mouth," he urged. "Have a peg, and pull yourself together." He had been in India, and consequently termed a whisky-and-soda a "peg." The origin of that expression is a little abstruse, but is supposed to refer pointedly to the pegs in one's coffin.

I thrust the letter into my pocket, helped myself to a drink, and lit a cigarette.

"It's a really first-class sensation," Dick said, again referring to the curious affair. "Pity I can't publish something of it to-morrow. It's a good thing chucked away."

"Yes," I replied. "But Patterson has some object in imposing secrecy on us."

"Of course," he answered thoughtfully.

There was a pause. We both smoked on. Not a sound penetrated there save the solemn ticking of the clock and the distant strains of a piano in some man's rooms across the square.

"Do you know, Frank," my companion said after some reflection, and looking at me with a rather curious expression – "do you know that I have some strange misgivings?"

"Misgivings!" I echoed. "Of what?"

"Well," he said, "did anything strike you as strange in Patterson's manner?"

"To tell the truth," I answered, "something did. His attitude was unusual – quite unusual, to-night."

"He's a funny Johnnie. That story of the snake on the pavement – isn't it rather too strange to be believed?"

"At first sight it appears extraordinary, but remember that in the laboratory upstairs we found other snakes. The occupier of the house evidently went in for the reptiles as pets."

"I quite agree with you there," he said. "But there are certain circumstances in the case which have aroused my suspicion, old chap. Of all the curious cases I've ever investigated while I've been on the *Comet*, this is the most astounding from every point of view, and I, for one, shan't rest until we've fully solved the problem."

"In that you'll have my heartiest assistance," I said. "All the time I can spare away from the office I'll devote to helping you."

"Good," Dick exclaimed heartily, refilling his pipe. "Between us we ought to find out something, for you and I can get at the bottom of things as soon as most people."

"The two strangest features of this case," I pointed out, "are first the telephonic message, and secondly, the disappearance of the first woman we found."

"And those cards!"

"And that penny wrapped so carefully in paper!" I added. "Yes, there are fully a dozen extraordinary features connected with the affair. The whole business is an absolute puzzle."

"Tell me, old chap," Dick said, after a pause, "what causes you to suspect Patterson?"

“I don’t suspect him,” I answered quickly. “No. I merely think that he has not told the exact truth of the first discovery of the crime, that’s all.”

“Exactly my own opinion,” responded Dick. “He’s concealing some very important fact from us – for what purpose we can’t yet tell. There’s more in this than we surmise. Of that I feel absolutely confident.”

“The snake story is a little too good,” I said, rather surprised that his suspicions should have been aroused, for I had not related to him my conversation with Patterson and his very lame excuse for not making a report of the discovery at the police-station. What had aroused Dick’s suspicions I was extremely puzzled to know. But he was a shrewd, clever fellow, whose greatest delight was the investigation of crime and the obtaining of those “revelations” which middle-class London so eagerly devours.

“A very happy invention of an ingenious mind, my dear fellow,” exclaimed the Mystery-monger. “Depend upon it, Patterson, being already aware that there were snakes in that house, invented the story, knowing that when the place was searched it would appear quite circumstantial.”

“Then you think that he’s not in absolute ignorance of who lived there?” I exclaimed, surprised at my friend’s startling theory.

Dick nodded.

“I shouldn’t be surprised if it be proved that he knew all along who the dead man is.”

“Why?”

“Well, I noticed that he never once looked at that man’s face. It was he who covered it with a handkerchief, as though the sight of the white countenance appalled him.”

“Come come,” I said, “proceed. You’ll say that he’s the guilty one next.”

“Ah! no, my dear fellow,” he hastened to reassure me. “You quite misunderstand my meaning. I hold the theory that in life these people were friends of Patterson’s, that’s all.”

“What makes you suspect such a thing?”

“Well, I watched our friend very closely this evening, and that’s the conclusion I’ve arrived at.”

“You really think that he is concealing facts which might throw light on the affair?” I exclaimed, much surprised.

“Yes,” he answered, “I feel certain of it – absolutely certain.”

Chapter Six

What I Saw in the Park

For a long time, sitting by the open window and looking out upon the starry night, we discussed the grim affair in all its details. The piano had stopped its tinkling, a dead silence had fallen upon the old-world square, one of the relics of bygone London, and the clock upon the hall had struck one o'clock with that solemnity which does not fail to impress even the most dissipated resident of Gray's. As a bachelor abode Gray's Inn is as comfortable and convenient a spot as there is in London, for there is always a quiet, restful air within; the grey, smoke-stained houses open on airy squares, and until a couple of years ago, quite a large colony of rooks made their home in the great old trees. It is an oasis of peace and repose in the very centre of that gigantic fevered city, where the whirl of daily life is unceasing, where in the east and south toiling millions struggle fiercely for their bread, while in the west is greater wealth and extravagance than in all the world besides.

"I think," said Dick at last, after he had put forth one or two theories, "that if we manage to get to the bottom of this affair we shall discover some very startling facts."

"That's absolutely certain," I answered. "The disappearance of the fair girl, and the substitution of the other, is in itself a fact absolutely unique in the annals of crime. Whoever effected that change must have been indeed a bold person."

"Didn't the people next door see any taxi drive up, or notice anything being brought up to the house?"

"No. That's the strangest part of it," I responded. "Nothing was seen of any cab or conveyance, although, of course, there must have been one."

"And that inquiry by telephone was a remarkable incident," Dick went on. "You say that the inquirer was popping about to various call-rooms ringing up his confederates. That shows that there were two or three in the secret. It hardly seems feasible that the man who rang up from the Minories was the same as the one with whom you spoke at Putney."

"No; but the arrangement to meet in St. James's Park to-morrow is extraordinary, to say the least."

"Ah, my dear fellow," observed my friend, with a smile, "I very much fear that that appointment won't be kept. Men such as they evidently are will hardly risk a meeting. On reflection, the individual, whoever he is, will see that he has given himself away, and his natural caution will prevent him from going near St. James's Park."

"Well, I only hope he does meet me," I observed.

"So do I. But to my mind such a circumstance is entirely out of the question. You see he went to call-boxes in order to avoid detection."

"The curious thing is, that if it were the same man who rang up each time he must have travelled from one place to another in an amazingly rapid manner."

"There might be two persons," he suggested.

"Of course there might," I answered. "But I think not. The girl at the exchange evidently recognised the voice of the persistent inquirer."

"I'm glad I came down – very glad," he said. "I went over to see Lily, but she's gone to Ipswich with her aunt, an old lady who feared to travel alone. It appears she wrote to me this morning, but the letter has missed the post, I suppose. It will come to-morrow morning."

"You had your journey to Peckham for nothing, then?"

"Yes," he answered. "She ought to have sent me a wire. Just like a woman."

I knew Lily Lowry, the pretty friend of Dick Cleugh, very well indeed. I did not know that he actually loved her. There was undoubtedly a mutual friendship between them, but nevertheless he often would go for a month and see nothing of her. The daughter of a struggling shopkeeper near the *Elephant and Castle*, she had been compelled to seek her own living, and was at present assistant at a large cheap draper's in Rye Lane, Peckham. Setting the *convenances* at naught, as became a London girl of the present decade, she had many times visited our dingy abode. I had always suspected that the love was on her side, for she was always giving him various little things – embroidered pouches, handkerchiefs and those semi-useful articles with which girls delight the men they love.

But Dick did not seem in the least concerned at not having seen her. He was annoyed that he had had a journey on the Chatham and Dover for nothing, and thought a great deed more of the mystery of Phillimore Place than of Lily's well-being. He was a pessimist in every sense of the word. Once he had told me the story of his first love, a strange tragedy of his life that had occurred in his days at Jesus. It was this, I always suspected, that had evoked from him the real ardent affection which a man should have for a woman who is to be his companion through life. Man loves but once, it is true, but the love of youth is in the generality of cases a mere heart-beating caused by a fantasy begotten of inexperience. The woman we love at sixteen – too often some kind-hearted housewife, whose soft speech we mistake for affection – we flout when we are twenty. The woman who was angelic in our eyes when in our teens, is old, fat and ugly when, four years later, the glamour has fallen from our eyes and we begin to find a foothold in the world. Wisdom comes with the moustache.

So it was with Dick. He had lost the woman he had loved in his college days, yet, as far as I could judge, none other had ever taken her place in his heart.

Two o'clock had struck ere we turned in, and both of us were up at seven, our usual hour, for evening papers, issued as they are at noon, are prepared early in the morning. We were always at our respective offices at half-past seven.

My first thought was of the meeting I had arranged in St. James's Park, and of my friend's misgivings regarding it. Full of anxiety, I worked on till eleven o'clock, when Boyd was shown into my room, greeting me merrily. His appearance was in no way that of a police-officer, for he wore a shabby suit of tweed, a soiled collar, and an old silk hat much frayed at the brim, presenting the appearance of the typical beery Fleet Street loungee.

"I've come to see you, Mr Urwin, regarding this meeting in the park," he said. "Do you intend going?"

"Of course," I answered, surprised that he should ask such a question. "Why?"

"Well, because I think it would be best to leave it entirely to us. You might be indiscreet and queer the whole thing."

"I don't think you'll find me guilty of any indiscretion," I said, somewhat piqued.

"I don't apprehend that," he said. "But on seeing you at the spot appointed, the mysterious person who made the inquiry last night will at once get away, for he will know that the secret is out. We must, as you know, act with greatest caution in this affair, so as not to arouse the slightest suspicion that the keeping of this appointment is in the hands of the police."

"Then what, in your opinion, is the best course to pursue?" I inquired.

"First, your friend Mr Cleugh must not go near the park. I've already written him a note to that effect. Secondly, you must act exactly as I direct. A single slip will mean that the individual will escape, and in this we must not court failure by any indiscreet move."

"And how do you intend that I should act?" I asked, sitting back in my writing-chair and looking at the shrewd detective who was known throughout London as one of the cleverest unravellers of crime, and who had been successful in so many cases wherein human life had been involved.

“Well,” he said, hesitating, “truth to tell, I would rather that you didn’t go to the park at all.”

“Why?”

“Because you could not wait about in the vicinity of the spot indicated without betraying a sign that you were in expectation of some one,” he answered. “Remember, you are not a detective.”

“No,” I answered, “I’m not a detective, but I’ve had a few years’ training in investigations. I think I could disguise my anxiety sufficiently.”

I was extremely anxious to keep the appointment, and his suggestion that I should not go caused me disappointment and annoyance.

“But if you were seen waiting about, the man we want would certainly not make his appearance. He’d scent danger at once. We’ve evidently got to deal with a very cunning scoundrel.”

“I could conceal myself,” I declared. “I promise you I will act with greatest discretion.”

“Well,” he said at length, after some further demur, “I suppose, then, you must have your own way. Personally, I don’t think the man will be such a fool as to run his neck into a noose. There’s been some clever work in connexion with this matter, and men capable of such ingenuity must be veritable artists in crime and not given to the committal of any indiscretion. The voice in the telephone was a squeaky one, I think you said?”

“Yes, weak and thin, like an old man’s.”

Boyd glanced at his watch – a gold hunter with an inscription. It had been given him by public subscription in Hampstead in recognition of his bravery in capturing two armed burglars in Fitzjohn’s Avenue.

“It’s time we went,” he exclaimed; but as we rose Dick entered in hot haste. He had just received Boyd’s note and had run round to my office.

“I’ve been out making an inquiry,” he said, having greeted us and expressed disappointment at Boyd’s decision. “I thought, in order to satisfy myself, and so that I could use the information later on, I would go round to Professor Braithwaite at the Royal Institution and ask his opinion of the scientific apparatus found in the laboratory. I went down to Patterson, got permission to remove it from the house, and took the whole affair in a cab to the Royal Institution.”

“Well, what’s the result?” I inquired breathlessly.

“The result?” he answered. “Why, the old Johnnie, when he saw the paraphernalia, stood dumbfounded, and when he put it together and commenced experimenting seemed speechless in amazement. The discovery, he declared, was among the greatest and most important of those made within the last twenty years. He sent messengers for a dozen other scientific men, who, when they saw the arrangement, examined it with great care and were equally amazed with old Braithwaite. All were extremely anxious as to the identity of the discoverer of this mode of liquefying almost the last of the refractory gases, but I, of course, held my tongue for a most excellent reason – I did not myself know. I merely explained that the apparatus had fallen into my hands accidentally and I wished to ascertain its use.”

“Then quite a flutter has been caused among these dry-as-dust old fossils,” I observed, laughing.

“A flutter!” Dick echoed. “Why, the whole of the scientific world will be in a state of highest excitement to-morrow when the truth becomes known. Old Braithwaite declared that the discoverer deserves an immediate knighthood.”

“Let’s be off,” Boyd said. He took no interest in the discovery. Like myself, his only object was to solve the mystery.

“Then I’m not to go?” Dick said inquiringly.

“No,” the detective replied. “I’m sorry, but a crowd of us will queer the thing. You shall have all the details later. Patterson has promised that you shall publish first news of the affair.”

Dick was sorely disappointed, I saw it in his face; nevertheless, with a light laugh he wished us goodbye when we emerged into Fleet Street, and hurried away back to the offices of the *Comet*,

while Boyd and myself jumped into a hansom outside St. Dunstan's Church, and drove along Pall Mall as far as St. James's Palace, where we alighted and entered the park. The detective explained his tactics during the drive. They were that we should separate immediately on entering the park, and that he should go alone to the spot indicated by the mysterious voice, while I idled in the vicinity. I was to act just as I pleased, but we were not to recognise one another either by look or sign.

I own, therefore, that it was with considerable trepidation that I left the detective on entering the Mall and wandered slowly along beneath the trees, while he crossed and entered the park himself. In that thoroughfare, which forms a short and pleasant cut for taxis going eastward from Victoria station, there was considerable traffic at that hour. The sky was blue, and the June sun shone warmly through the trees, giving the Londoner a foretaste of summer, and causing him to think of straw hats, flannels and holiday diversions. A bright day in a London park at once arouses thoughts of the country or the sea. With my face set towards the long, regular façade of Buckingham Palace – a grey picture with little artistic touches of red, the scarlet coats of the Guards – I wondered what would be the outcome of this attempt to obtain a clue. That thin squeaky voice sounded in my ear as distinctly at that moment as it had done on the previous night, a weird summons from one unknown.

At last, just as Big Ben, showing high across the trees, chimed and boomed forth the hour of noon, I entered one of the small gates of the park and strolled along the grave: led walk down to the edge of the ornamental water, where, for some minutes, I stood watching a group of children feeding the water-fowl.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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