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Title: The Voice from the Void: The Great Wireless Mystery

Author: William Le Queux

Release date: October 25, 2012 [EBook #41185]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

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William Le Queux

"The Voice from the Void"

"The Great Wireless Mystery"

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## Chapter One.

### Concerns a Stranger.

"Yes! I'm certain it was Gordon Gray—the man whose face I can never forget, and whom I could identify among a million! Gordon Gray! *Returned from, the dead!*"

The white-haired rector, the Reverend Norton Homfray, a tall, sparely-built man of sixty-five, pursed his lips and drew a long breath. He was evidently greatly upset.

He had taken off his surplice in the vestry after evening service, and now stood motionless against the old rood-screen gazing into the cavernous darkness of the empty Norman church.

The congregation had dispersed into the winter darkness, wandering slowly and piously through the churchyard and out by the old lych-gate and down the hill, and old Morley, the verger, had already turned out the lights.

"Yes," murmured the old clergyman, "he sat in the last pew yonder listening to me as I preached! Surely he cannot have risen from the grave, for I heard that he died at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York eighteen months ago! Forget him? Ah!" he sighed. "How can I ever forget? Why is he here in Little Farncombe, I wonder?"

For a few moments he remained motionless in the silent gloom of the historic old church, with its beautiful Norman arches so admired by archaeologists from all parts of the country. The stillness was broken only by the creaking of old Morley's Sunday boots and the slow deep tick of the clock in the belfry.

Then, at last, he buttoned his overcoat and made his way out into the windy December night, passing round the churchyard and entering the grounds of his quiet old-world, ivy-clad rectory, a sixteenth-century house too large for his needs and too expensive for his slender pocket.

Norton Homfray was a fine type of country rector, a theological scholar and highly popular with all in his rural parish.

As a young man at Balliol he had taken high honours, and when a curate at Durham he had married. After twenty-seven years of married happiness Mrs Homfray had died four years ago leaving one son, Roderick, a heavy-jawed young fellow, now twenty-six. Mr Homfray had been utterly crushed by his wife's death, and his house was now conducted by Mrs Bentley, a deaf old woman with a high-pitched voice.

When the latter, in order to make up the fire, came into the long old dining-room, a heavily-furnished apartment with several old portraits on the walls and French windows across which heavy dark-green curtains were drawn, she found Mr Homfray sitting beside the glowing logs staring straight at the embers.

Of late he had been unusually silent and morose. Therefore she put on a couple of logs and left the room without speaking.

When she had closed the door the old man, whose strong face was thrown into bold relief by the fitful light of the fire, stirred uneasily in a manner that showed him to be highly nervous and anxious.

"Roddy must never know! *Roddy must never know—never!*" he kept whispering to himself.

And the light of the blazing logs rose and fell, illuminating his fine old face, the countenance of an honest, upright man.

"No!" he murmured to himself, too agitated even to enjoy his pipe which he always smoked as relaxation after preaching his sermon. "No, I am not mistaken! Gordon Gray is still in the flesh! But why should he come here, as though risen from the grave? I saw him come in after the service had commenced. He sat there staring straight at me—staring as though in evil triumph. Why? What can it mean?"

And the thin, white-haired man lapsed into silence again, still staring into the blazing logs, the light from which danced about the long dining-room. On a little mahogany side-table near where the rector was seated stood a small tin tobacco-box attached by a cord to a pair of wireless telephones, and also to a thick, rubber-covered wire which ran to the window and passed out to the garden. Roddy Homfray, the rector's son, was a young mining engineer, and also an enthusiastic wireless amateur. In an adjoining room he had a very fine wireless set, most of which he had constructed himself, but the little tobacco-box was a "freak" crystal-receiver set which he could carry in his pocket, together with the telephones, and by using a little coil of wire, also easily carried—which he could stretch anywhere as an aerial—he could listen to any of the high-power stations such as Paris, Leafield, Carnarvon, Nantes or Bordeaux. It was a remarkably sensitive little piece of apparatus, ships and "spark" stations being also received with peculiar clearness. That wonderful little contrivance had been described in several of the journals devoted to the science of radio, together with photographs, and had caused a sensation.

As the old clergyman's eyes fell upon it he drew a long breath, and then whispered to himself:

"Poor Roddy! If he knew! Ah! If he knew! But he must never know the truth. It would break his heart, poor boy!"

Sight of the stranger who had sat alone in the pew at the back of the church had brought to him a flood of bitter memories, haunting recollections of a closed page in his history—one that he never dared reopen.

Meanwhile Roddy Homfray, a tall, dark-haired, clean-limbed fellow who, though young, had made several mining expeditions in Brazil and Peru as assistant to a well-known engineer, had left the church after service and walked down the hill towards the village. Recently he had been in Peru for five months, and had only returned a week ago and again taken up his hobby of wireless.

Three days before, while walking down the road from Little Farncombe into Haslemere to take train to London, he had overtaken an extremely dainty chestnut-haired girl, *petite* and full of charm, warmly clad in rich furs. She was evidently a lady. With her was a black toy pom which ran yapping at Roddy, as was its nature.

"Tweedles! Come here," she cried, and having called off her pet she in a sweet refined voice apologised. Roddy laughed, assuring her that he was not in the least alarmed, and then they walked the remainder of the way side by side, chatting about the picturesqueness of the Surrey hills, until at last he lifted his hat and left her. She did not look more than seventeen, though he afterwards found that she was twenty. He had become fascinated by her extreme beauty, by her manner, and her inexpressible grace and charm, and as he sat in the express rushing towards London her sweet oval face and deep violet eyes arose time after time before him.

On that Sunday morning he had called upon his old friend Hubert Denton, the village doctor, and while smoking before the fire in the low-pitched sitting-room, he had described his meeting with the fair stranger.

"Oh! That's Elma Sandys," replied the doctor, a thick-set man of about forty-five.

"What? The daughter of Mr Purcell Sandys who has just bought Farncombe Towers?" asked Roddy in surprise.

"Yes. As I dare say you know, Purcell Sandys is a well-known financier in the City and has a house in Park Lane," said the doctor. "A few months ago he bought the Towers and the great estates, including three villages with their advowsons, from the Earl of Farncombe."

"He must be immensely rich," remarked Roddy reflectively.

"Yes, no doubt. He is a widower and Elma is his only daughter. She looks only a child. I was asked to dinner at the Towers a fortnight ago, and I found both father and daughter charming—the girl especially so. Since leaving school her father has taken her travelling quite a lot. Last winter they spent in Egypt."

Roddy listened to his description of the dinner-party. Then he said:

"Poor Lord Farncombe! I'm sorry he had to sell the place. He is a real good type of the British nobility. It seems nothing short of vandalism that the historic houses of our peers should pass into the hands of the magnates of commerce."

"I quite agree. Lord Farncombe has gone to America, I believe. They say he was broken-hearted at being compelled to sell the house which his ancestors had held for five centuries."

"Mr Sandys' daughter is a very charming girl," Roddy said.

"Very. She acts as hostess for her father. Mrs Sandys died some years ago, I understand," replied the doctor. "Sandys is spending an enormous sum in improving the Towers, putting in a new electrical plant and building a new range of glass-houses. Halton, the builder, was telling me of it."

But Roddy's thoughts were afar. He was thinking of the *chic*, dainty little girl at whose side he had walked down to Haslemere, little dreaming that she was the daughter of the man who had purchased the whole Farncombe estates, including the living which his father held.

That night, after church, he decided to stroll down through the village and out to the house of an old retired colonel, who was a friend of his father.

The new moon was shining, but the sky was growing dull and overcast. He had lingered until all the congregation had passed out of the old churchyard, and following them down the hill, he turned to the left at the Market Cross, where he overtook a small, fur-clad female figure, whom he at once recognised by the light of the moon, which had reappeared from a bank of cloud, as that of Elma Sandys.

She, too, recognised him as he raised his hat and joined her.

"We are hardly strangers, Mr Homfray," she exclaimed in her sweet musical voice. "Since we met the other day I learned who you are."

"May I walk with you?" he asked, laughing. "You are going home, I suppose, and it's lonely beyond the bridge."

"You're really awfully kind," she said. "I've just been taking some chicken broth the cook made for a poor old lady named Bamford. Do you know her?"

"Oh, yes, poor old Betty Bamford! She's been bedridden for years, poor old woman," replied Roddy. "My mother used to go and see her. It certainly is good of you to look after her. Lady Farncombe also used to be very kind to her, I've heard my father say."

And as they sauntered slowly along over the ancient moss-grown bridge and down the road where the bare trees met overhead, they chatted on merrily as young people will chat.

Roddy Homfray found her a delightful companion. He had on their first meeting believed her to be a visitor in the locality, for many people came from London to Little Farncombe on account of its picturesque surroundings, and its fine views across to the Hog's Back and over in the direction of Petersfield. But he had been disappointed to find that she was the only daughter of Purcell Sandys, the millionaire purchaser of the Farncombe estates.

From the moment her father had entered possession of the Towers, the magnificent Tudor mansion which had been the home of the Farncombes, Elma had interested herself in the welfare of the village and had, with the assistance of two lady residents, sought out the poor. Her father, unlike most financiers, was a straightforward, upright, honest man who believed in giving charity in secret where it was needed. In this Elma assisted him, hence the new owner had already become popular in the neighbourhood, though, naturally, great sympathy was felt on all sides for the old earl who had been compelled to part with his estates.

As Roddy walked at Elma's side down the dark, lonely road, the girl suddenly said:

"It's really awfully good of you to come with me all this way, Mr Homfray. I expected to be home earlier, but the poor old lady was alone and begged me to stay a little longer. I was surprised when I saw how dark it had grown."

"I assure you that it is a pleasure," he declared briefly. There was regret in his heart that she was what she was. From the very first moment they had met, when little Tweedles had bristled his black hair and barked at him, he had fallen in love with her. Thoughts of her obsessed him, and her face rose ever before him. But as they walked together he knew that the difference in their stations would ever be a barrier between them. He was poor and could never aspire to her hand.

"I hear you have just returned from abroad," she remarked.

"Yes. I sailed from Buenos Ayres six weeks ago," he replied. "I'm a mining engineer, and we've been prospecting in the Andes."

"And were you successful?"

"Fortunately, yes. But I expect to go away again very soon—that is, if I can obtain what I want, namely, a concession from the Moorish Government to prospect for emeralds beyond the Atlas Mountains. According to records left by the ancients there is a rich deposit of emeralds in the Wad Sus district, and I am hoping to be able to discover it."

"How exciting! Fancy discovering emeralds?" Roddy laughed, and replied:

"The probability is that I shall fail. But if I get the concession I shall do my best."

"I certainly wish you every good luck," the girl said. "It must be awfully exciting to go prospecting. I suppose you meet with all sorts of adventures?"

"Oh! We have curious experiences sometimes," he said lightly, and then he went on to describe a very narrow escape from drowning he had had once while at work on the bank of the Amazon.

On her part, she told him she was delighted with Farncombe.

"I'm tired of the rush of life in London," she said. "My father is compelled to entertain a great deal at Park Lane, and I have to be hostess. But it is so very pleasant to live here in the country and have one's friends down from town. We had a big house-party last week and had a ripping time. We shall have a shooting-party next week, and another the week after."

Roddy was silent for a few moments, for they were already in the avenue and in sight of the lights of the great mansion.

"I had better leave you here, Miss Sandys," he said, with undisguised regret. "And if you are to be so busy I fear I shall not have the pleasure of meeting you again before I go." Then as he raised his hat, she replied cheerily: "Perhaps we may meet again very soon. Who knows? Thanks ever so much, Mr Homfray. It was very good of you to come all this way. Good-night?"

And she turned and left him.

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## Chapter Two.

### The Rector's Secret Visitor.

While Roddy Homfray had been strolling at Elma's side, his father had still sat, gloomy and thoughtful, in the firelight at the Rectory.

The light evening meal which the rector always took on Sunday evening had been placed upon the table by old Mrs Bentley, who, after lighting the gas, had retired to her part of the rambling house. But the food had remained untouched.

The rector had sat nearly half an hour in the silence of the long, old room with its low-pitched ceiling and black oak beams. Deep in his arm-chair he did not stir, his bearded chin resting upon his thin hands, his brows knit in reflection. He was thinking—thinking, as ghosts of the past arose before him, visions of scenes which in vain he had always tried to put from him, and to blot out from his memory.

The silence of the room was broken only by the crackling of the big logs and the slow tick of the grandfather clock in the corner by the door, till suddenly the church clock chimed the hour of nine across the hills.

Then, scarcely had it ceased when there was the noise of a door handle being slowly turned, and next moment the heavy green curtains before the French window were drawn aside and a dark-haired, rather handsome woman of forty, wearing a close-fitting hat and a coney seal coat with skunk collar, stepped into the room.

Old Mr Homfray, startled at the sound, turned in his chair, and then springing to his feet faced her.

"*You!*" he gasped. "Why do you dare to come here? What do you want?" he asked angrily.

"To speak privately with you," was her hard reply. "I didn't want others to know of my visit, and thinking the window might possibly be unlatched, I tried it, and came in this way."

"Then go out the same way!" commanded the old clergyman angrily. "How dare you come here?"

"Because I want to say something to you."

"I don't wish to—and won't hear it!"

"You shall, Mr Homfray!" replied the woman, whose face was full of evil, her eyes glittering like those of a serpent. "I come to-night as messenger from a man you know—from Gordon Gray."

"From Gordon Gray—*you?*" gasped the rector in surprise. "Why should he send you to me?"

"Because he thought it best not to come himself."

"If he wishes to speak to me let him face me here," Mr Homfray said boldly.

"Ah?" laughed the woman as though in triumph. "I seem to be an unwelcome visitor."

"How could you be otherwise, after what has passed?" queried the old fellow.

"Well, don't let us have any more bickering. Let's come to business. Mr Gray wants to know whether you intend paying?"

"Not a penny—until the money is due next August."

"But it was due last August," the woman declared.

"That is quite untrue," replied the rector very quietly.

"Well, the date is on the deed."

"If it is, then the date has been altered."

"But you have a copy."

"No. I can't find it. I must have mislaid it. Is there no stamp, with date?"

"It was never stamped. Mr Gray's solicitors have already written to you three times about it, and you have not replied."

"I have been away, taking duty in Switzerland. Besides, I understood that Gordon Gray died in New York last year,

and—”

“And you thought that by that fact you would escape your indebtedness—eh?” laughed the woman as she stood beside the table, an erect smart figure which was well known in certain disreputable night-clubs in the West End. “But Gordon Gray attended service in your church to-night, and you must have seen him in the flesh.”

“I did,” replied the old man hoarsely. “Sight of him recalled many events of the past.”

“Things that you wish to forget—eh, Mr Homfray?” she said in a hard voice. “But Gordon wants his money. If you allege fraud on the part of his solicitors you had better write to them.”

“Why does Gray send you here? You, of all women! What does he intend to do?” asked the grave old man.

“To sell the property if you can’t pay him. He has already given you several months’ grace. And besides, you’ve never answered any letters, nor have you paid any interest on the loan.”

“Because the money is not yet due,” declared the Rector of Little Farncombe. “If you knew the facts you would never make this illegal demand.”

“I know all the facts. Gordon means to sell the property if you cannot pay at once.”

Norton Homfray bit his lip. Only during the past two years had he suspected his whilom friend Gordon Gray, and that suspicion had that night been confirmed by the presence there of that vampire woman, Freda Crisp, whose dark, handsome face he had hoped never to look upon again. Gray, the son of a rich City merchant, had long been the black sheep of his family, and had, when at Oxford, been sent down from Balliol for forging a cheque to a tailor in the Broad. A few years later Homfray, who had recently taken Holy Orders, met him and, ignorant of his past, had become his bosom friend. After six years Gordon went to America, and not until fifteen years afterwards did the pair see each other, when one day they found themselves staying at the Bath Hotel in Bournemouth and resumed their close friendship.

Now old Mr Homfray was at that moment in serious difficulties, partly owing to his business instinct and his innocent generosity and trustfulness. He was a real upright and pious man who, unlike many parsons, practised what he preached. He had, in fact, stood security for an old college chum who had died suddenly from pneumonia and “let him in.”

He had been compelled to confess to Gray that he was ruined, whereupon his old friend had at once told him not to worry, and offered to lend him the sum upon his little piece of house property in the steep main street of Totnes, in Devon, from which he derived his slender income, the stipend at Little Farncombe being hardly sufficient to pay the housekeeper and the gardener at the Rectory.

But by the sudden appearance of the woman and her demands he realised that there was some sinister design afoot. That woman who stood before him he had strong cause to hate, yet hatred never entered his soul—even at that moment.

He now realised with blank amazement that her friend Gordon Gray, the man returned from the grave, was trying to swindle him, and that the date of the deed—the copy of which he had mislaid—had been altered and pre-dated a year.

“If your friend Gray dares to sell my little property—all I have—then I shall institute criminal proceedings against him,” he told the woman frankly, whereupon his unwelcome visitor opened her little brown leather handbag and from it produced a crumpled envelope, out of which she took three tattered newspaper cuttings, saying coldly:

“Perhaps you had better read these before you utter threats,” and she handed them to him.

He held his breath, and the light died from his thin countenance. He pushed them aside with trembling hands.

“You know to what they refer, Mr Homfray—to your appearance under another name!” sneered Freda Crisp. “You are the highly respected rector of this picturesque, though obscure, little parish, but if your parishioners knew the truth I fancy that they and your bishop would have something to say about it. Is it just to the public that a man such as yourself should dare to wear a surplice and have the audacity to preach sermons?”

The Rector of Little Farncombe remained silent. His face was deathly white, his hands trembled, and his eyes were staring. He had suspected that the one great secret of his life was known. But it appeared that not only was it known to the unscrupulous man who had once been his friend, but also to the woman before him, who was his bitterest enemy!

“So the pair of you have learnt my secret!” he said in a low, hard voice. “And I suppose you intend to blackmail me—eh?”

The dark-haired woman laughed.

“Gordon only wants his money back, that’s all.”

“And you have forced him to take up this hostile attitude,” he said. “You are my enemy. I know it. Well, what do you intend to do?”

“It isn’t my affair,” she declared. “Gray now knows that the money you borrowed from him was in order to help your fellow-criminal—a man who once did him an evil turn—after he had served his sentence. He wants his money back,

and he is going to take it. The property will be up for auction in a week or so."

"But I won't be swindled in this way!" cried old Mr Homfray.

"Act just as you wish—but remember, if you make any move it will be the worse for you. Gordon is not a man to stick at trifles," the woman said.

"I know that," said the rector.

"And it is a very ugly skeleton you have in your cupboard," remarked the woman with a sinister smile.

"The property at Totnes is worth over four thousand pounds," he said.

"You have only to repay the money with interest and the matter is ended."

Mr Homfray paused.

Then, looking straight into the woman's evil face, he said:

"It is you, woman, who once swore to ruin me because I would not assist you in that vile plot of yours! You thought to trap me, a minister of the Church, into assisting you to entice that fly into the web you had so cunningly spun for him. But you were mistaken! I saw through your evil game, and because I did so you vowed vengeance upon me. And this is the hour of your triumph!" he added bitterly in a deep, hoarse voice, and one quite unusual to him.

The woman's thin lips were pressed together, but she made no immediate reply.

At last she said:

"I am only here on Mr Gray's behalf."

"But it is you who have goaded him to do this—to take this action, well knowing that at the moment I cannot pay."

"That surely is not my affair," snapped the woman, while old Mr Homfray stood aghast at the sudden blow which had fallen to crush him.

What would his son Roddy think if he learnt the truth concerning that closed chapter of his father's past? What would the parish of Little Farncombe say if they knew that their respected rector had fallen among thieves?

"Won't Gray come here himself and talk over the matter?" he asked presently.

"No. He motored back to London as soon as the service was over. He had a fancy to see you and hear you preach to your dear parishioners, who, in all their innocence, believe in you, Mr Homfray," and again the woman laughed sardonically. "So he sent me to see you in private, and to tell you his intentions."

"Are you quite certain he will not come and see me?"

"I urged him to do so, but he refused," said the woman.

"Because he fears to face me!" exclaimed the rector. "He fears lest I, on my part, should speak the truth. I trusted Gordon Gray—trusted him as my friend—but I have been sadly disillusioned to-night, for I have found that he is my enemy, and I am now forearmed."

"That is no concern of mine whatever. I have given you his message."

The Rector of Little Farncombe looked straight into her face with his calm grey eyes behind his shaggy brows.

"Then I will send a message back to him," he slowly replied. "As he refuses to come here and deliver his ultimatum in person, I will, in return, deliver my ultimatum to him. Go back and tell him that I defy him. Tell him that if either he or you lift a finger against me, then the truth concerning the death of young Hugh Willard will be known to Scotland Yard, and the affair of Hyde Park Square will be cleared up by the arrest of the assassin. Tell him that though he thinks there was no witness, yet one still exists—one who will come forward with indisputable proof. You know his name. Gordon Gray and I were friends until to-night. But we are no longer so. We are enemies. And you know to much of the affair as I do?"

The woman staggered as though he had dealt her a blow. Her evil face went ashen in an instant, and her dark eyes started from her head.

"What—what do you mean?" she gasped.

"What I have said! You heard my message to Gordon Gray; go and deliver it. Remember that if either of you molest me, or attempt to swindle me as you are now doing, then I shall reveal all that I know. My silence depends upon you both. So begone!" he added calmly, with firm resolve.

For a few moments the woman in furs stood motionless and silent.

"You will regret those words, Mr Homfray!" she said at last, threateningly. "I will deliver your message, but you will regret it. Remember that!"

"I assure you I have no fear," laughed the old rector. "While Gordon Gray acted honestly as the friend I believed him

to be, I remained his friend. Now that we are enemies it is I who can—and will—speak in self-defence. He threatens me with ruin, but little does he dream what I know concerning the young fellow's death and who was implicated in it—how the snare was set to ruin him, and afterwards to close his lips!"

The handsome woman shrugged her shoulders, but her face had entirely changed. She had been taken entirely aback by the open defiance of the man who, in her fierce vindictiveness, she had intended should be her victim. She had believed the hour of her triumph to be at hand, instead of which she saw that an abyss had opened before her—one into which she and her accomplice Gray must assuredly fall unless they trod a very narrow and intricate path.

"Very well," she laughed with well-feigned defiance. "I will give Gordon your message. And we shall see!"

With those words she passed to the heavy plush curtains and disappeared behind them out upon the lawn, beyond which, separated only by a wire fence, lay a small and picturesque wood which ran down the hill for a quarter of a mile or so.

Old Mr Homfray followed her, and with a sigh, closed the long glass door and bolted it.

Then, returning to the fireplace, he stood upon the hearthrug with folded arms, thinking deeply, faintly murmured words escaping his pale lips.

"Roddy must never know!" he repeated.

"If he knew the truth concerning that slip in my past what would he think of me? He would regard his father as a liar and a hypocrite!"

Again he remained silent for a considerable time.

"Gordon Gray!" he muttered. "It seems impossible that he should rise from the grave and become my enemy, after all I have done in his interests. I believed him to be my friend! But he is under the influence of that woman—that woman who means to ruin me because I refused to render her assistance in that vile scheme of hers!"

Suddenly, as he stood there before the blazing logs, he recollected the sixth chapter of St. Luke.

"Love your enemies," he repeated aloud. "Do good to those who hate you. And unto him that smiteth you on the one cheek, offer also the other."

And there before the big arm-chair the fine old fellow sank upon his knees and prayed silently for his enemy and his female accomplice.

Afterwards he rose, and re-seating himself in his chair sat with his eyes closed, recalling all the tragedy and villainy concerned with young Hugh Willard's mysterious death in London five years before—an enigma that the police had failed to solve.

Meanwhile Roddy Homfray, having left Elma, was strolling slowly home full of thoughts of the slim and charming girl who had bewitched him, and yet whose station was so far above his own.

Through the sharp frosty night he walked for some distance along the broad highway, until he came to the cross roads, where he stopped to gossip with the village chemist. Then, after ten minutes or so, he walked on, crossed a stile and took a short cut across a field and up the hill to the woods at the back of the Rectory.

The night had now grown very dark, and as he entered the wood, he saw a figure skirting it. Whether man or woman he could not distinguish. He found the path more difficult than he expected, but he knew that way well, and by the aid of his pocket torch he was able to keep to the path, a rather crooked one, which led to the boundary of the Rectory lawn.

Suddenly, as he passed, his footsteps rustling among the dead leaves, he thought he heard a curious sound, like a groan. He halted, quickly alert.

Again the sound was repeated somewhere to his left—a low groan as though of someone in great pain.

He stepped from the path, examining the ground with its many tree trunks by the aid of his torch.

A third time the groan was repeated, but fainter than before, therefore he began to search in the direction whence the cry came, until, to his surprise, he discovered lying upon the ground at a short distance from the wire fence which divided the wood from the Rectory property, a female form in a neat navy-blue costume, with a small red hat lying a short distance away.

She was in a crouching position, and as the young man shone his light upon her, she again drew a deep sigh and groaned faintly.

"What is the matter?" he cried in alarm, dropping upon his knees and raising the fair head of a young and pretty girl.

She tried to speak, but her white lips refused to utter a sound. At last, by dint of desperate effort, she whispered in piteous appeal:

"Save me! Oh!—*save me—do!*"

Then next second she drew a deep breath, a shiver ran through her body, and she fell inert into the young fellow's arms!

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## Chapter Three.

### Which Contains Another Mystery.

Roddy Homfray, with the aid of his flash-lamp, gazed in breathless eagerness, his strong jaw set, at the girl's blanched countenance.

As he brushed back the soft hair from the brow, he noted how very beautiful she was.

"Speak!" he urged eagerly. "Tell me what has happened?"

But her heart seemed to have ceased beating; he could detect no sign of life. Was he speaking to the dead?

So sudden had it all been that for some moments he did not realise the tragic truth. Then, in a flash, he became horrified. The girl's piteous appeal made it only too plain that in that dark wood she had been the victim of foul play.

She had begged him to save her. From what? From whom?

There had been a struggle, for he saw that the sleeve of her coat had been torn from the shoulder, and her hat lying near was also evidence that she had been attacked, probably suddenly, and before she had been aware of danger. The trees were numerous at that spot, and behind any of their great, lichen-covered trunks a man could easily hide.

But who was she? What was she doing in Welling Wood, just off the beaten path, at that hour?

Again he stroked the hair from her brow and gazed upon her half-open but sightless eyes, as she lay heavy and inert in his arms. He listened intently in order to satisfy himself that she no longer breathed. There seemed no sign of respiration and the muscles of her face and hands seemed to have become rigid.

In astonishment and horror the young man rose to his feet, and placing his flash-lamp, still switched on, upon the ground, started off by a short cut to the Rectory by a path which he knew even in the darkness. He was eager to raise the alarm regarding the unexpected discovery, and every moment of delay might mean the escape of whoever was responsible for the crime.

The village police inspector lived not far from the Rectory, and it was his intention first to inform his father, and then run on to the police.

But this intention was never carried out, because of a strange and bewildering circumstance.

Indeed, till long past midnight the Reverend Norton Homfray sat in his rather shabby little study reflecting upon the unwelcome visit of that woman Freda Crisp, and wondering what it portended. Her threatening attitude was the reverse of reassuring. Nevertheless, the rector felt that if Gray and his unscrupulous accomplice really meant mischief, then he, after all, held the trump card which he had so long hesitated to play.

The clock ticked on. The time passed unnoticed, and at last he dozed. It was not until nearly three o'clock in the morning that he suddenly awakened to the lateness of the hour, and the curious fact that Roddy had not been in since he had left church.

The old man rose, and ascending to his son's room, believing that Roddy might have come in and retired while he slept, found to his surprise that the bed had not been occupied. He walked round the house with the aid of his electric torch. The front door was still unlocked, and it was quite evident that his son had not yet returned.

"This is a night of strange incidents!" he said aloud to himself as he stood upon the staircase. "First that man Gordon Gray rises as though from the tomb, then Freda Crisp visits me, and now Roddy is missing! Strange indeed—very strange!"

He returned to his study, and lighting his green-shaded reading-lamp upon the writing-table, sat down to attend to some letters. He was too wakeful now to retire to rest. Besides, Roddy was out, and he had decided to remain up until his son returned.

Why Roddy should be out all night puzzled the old man greatly. His only intimate friend was the village doctor, Hubert Denton, and perhaps the doctor being called to a patient early in the evening Roddy had gone out in the car with him. Such seemed the only explanation of his absence.

"That woman!" remarked the old rector angrily, as he took some writing paper from a drawer. "That woman intends mischief! If she or Gray attempts to harm me—then I will retaliate!"

And he drew a long breath, his dark, deep-set eyes being fixed straight before him.

"Yet, after all, ought I to do so?" he went on at length. "I have sinned, and I have repented. I am no better than any other man, though I strive to do right and to live up to the teaching of the Prince of Peace. 'Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.' Ah! it is so hard to carry out that principle of forgiveness—so very hard!"

And again he lapsed into silence.

"What if Roddy knew—what if those fiends told him? Ah! what would he think of the other side of his father's life? No!" he cried again in anguish some minutes later, his voice sounding weirdly in the old-world little room. "No! I could



not bear it! I—I would rather die than my son should know!”

Presently, however, he became calmer. As rector of Little Farncombe he was beloved by all, for few men, even ministers of religion, were so upright and pious or set such an example to their fellow-men.

Old Mr Purcell Sandys had been to church on two successive Sunday mornings, and had acknowledged himself greatly impressed by Mr Homfray’s sermons.

“They’re not chanted cant, such as we have in so many churches and which does so much harm to our modern religion,” he had told his daughter as they had walked back to the Towers. “But they are straight, manly talks which do one real good, and point out one’s faults.”

“Yes, father,” Elma agreed. “The whole village speaks exceedingly well of Mr Homfray.” And so it was that the man seated writing his letters in the middle of the night and awaiting the home-coming of his son, had gained the high esteem of the new owner of Farncombe even before he had made his first ceremonial call upon the great City magnate.

That night, however, a cloud had suddenly arisen and enveloped him. As he wrote on, the old rector could not put from him a distinct presage of evil. Where was Roddy? What could have happened that he had not returned as usual to supper after church? The boy was a roamer and an adventurer. His profession made him that, but when at home he always kept regular hours as became a dutiful son.

The bitter east wind had grown stronger, causing the bare branches of the trees in the pleasant old garden to shake and creak, while in the chimney it moaned mournfully.

At last the bell in the ivy-clad church tower chimed the hour of five. The wild winter night was past, and it was morning, though still dark. The old rector drew aside the blind, but the dawn was not yet showing. The fire was out, the lamp burned dim and was smoking, and the room was now cold and cheerless.

“I wonder where Roddy can possibly be?” again murmured the old man.

Then, still leaving the front door unlocked, he blew out the lamp and retired for a few hours’ rest.

At noon Roderick Homfray had not returned, and after sending a message to Doctor Denton and receiving word that he had not seen the young man since the previous morning, Mr Homfray began to be seriously alarmed. He went about the village that afternoon making inquiries, but nobody seemed to have seen him after he had passed through the churchyard after the evening service.

Only Mr Hughes, who kept a small tobacconist’s at the further end of the village, apparently had any information to give.

“I passed along the Guildford road about ten o’clock or so, and I believe I saw Mr Roddy talking to a man—who was a stranger. I noticed the man in church. He sat in one of the back pews,” said old Mr Hughes.

In an instant Norton Homfray became alert.

Could Roddy have been speaking with Gordon Gray?

“Are you quite sure it was my son?” he asked eagerly.

“Well, it was rather dark, so I could not see the young man’s face. But I’m sure that the other was the stranger.”

“Then you are not absolutely certain it was Roddy?”

“No, Mr Homfray, I couldn’t swear to it, though he looked very much like Mr Roddy,” was the old tobacconist’s reply. “My sight isn’t what it used to be,” he added.

Still, the incident aroused suspicions in the rector’s mind. Was it possible that Gray had told Roddy the truth, and the latter had gone off with his father’s enemy? In any case, his son’s absence was a complete mystery.

That evening Mr Homfray called at the village police station and there saw the inspector of the Surrey County Constabulary, a big, burly man named Freeman, whom he knew well, and who frequently was an attendant at church.

He, of course, told him nothing of the reappearance of Gordon Gray, but simply related the fact that Roddy had left the church on Sunday night, and with the exception of being seen in the Guildford road two hours later, had completely disappeared.

“That’s peculiar!” remarked the dark-bearded man in uniform. “But I dare say there’s some explanation, sir. You’ll no doubt get a wire or a letter in the morning.” Then he added: “Mr Roddy is young, you know, sir. Perhaps there’s a lady in the case! When a young man disappears we generally look for the lady—and usually we find her!”

“Roddy has but few female friends,” replied the old rector. “He is not the sort of lad to disappear and leave me in anxiety.”

“Well, sir, if you like, I’ll phone into Guildford and circulate his description,” Freeman said. “But personally I think that he’ll come back before to-morrow.”

“Why?”

"Well—I know Mr Roddy. And I agree that he would never cause you, his father, an instant's pain if he could help it. He's away by force of circumstances, depend upon it!"

Force of circumstances! The inspector's words caused him to ponder. Were those circumstances his meeting with Gordon Gray for the first time that night?

Roddy, he knew, had never met Gray. The man's very existence he had hidden from his son. And Roddy was abroad when, in those later years, the two men had met. The old rector of Little Farncombe felt bewildered. A crowd of difficulties had, of late, fallen upon him, as they more or less fall upon everybody in every walk of life at one time or another. We all of us have our "bad times," and Norton Homfray's was a case in point. Financial troubles had been succeeded by the rising of the ghosts of the past, and followed by the vanishing of his only son.

Three eager, breathless, watchful days went by, but no word came from the fine well-set-up young man who had led such a daring and adventurous life in South America. More than ever was his father convinced that old Hughes was correct in his surmise. He had stood upon the pathway of the Guildford road—the old tar-macked highway which leads from London to Portsmouth—and had been approached by Gordon Gray, the man who meant to expose his father to the parishioners. The world of the Reverend Norton Homfray was, after all, a very little one. The world of each of us, whether we be politician or patriot, peer or plasterer, personage or pauper, has its own narrow confines. Our enemies are indeed well defined by the Yogi teaching as "little children at play." Think of them as such and you have the foundation of that great philosophy of the East which raises man from his ordinary level to that of superman—the man who wills and is obeyed.

The fact that the son of the rector of Little Farncombe was missing had come to the knowledge of an alert newspaper correspondent in Guildford, and on the fourth day of Roddy's disappearance a paragraph appeared in several of the London papers announcing the fact.

Though the story was happily unembroidered, it caused the rector great indignation. Why should the Press obtrude upon his anxiety? He became furious. As an old-fashioned minister of religion he had nothing in common with modern journalism. Indeed, he read little except his weekly *Guardian*, and politics did not interest him. His sphere was beyond the sordid scramble for political notoriety and the petticoat influence in high quarters.

His son was missing, and up and down the country the fact was being blazoned forth by one of the news agencies!

Next day brought him three letters from private inquiry agents offering their services in the tracing of "your son, Mr Roderick Homfray,"—with a scale of fees. He held his breath and tore up the letters viciously. Half an hour afterwards Inspector Freeman called. Mrs Bentley showed him into the study, whereupon the inspector, still standing, said:

"Well, sir, I've got into trouble about your son. The Chief Constable has just rung me up asking why I had not reported that he was missing, as it's in the papers."

The rector was silent for a moment.

"I'm sorry, Freeman, but my anxiety is my own affair. If you will tell Captain Harwood that from me, I shall feel greatly obliged."

"But how did it get into the papers, sir?"

"That I don't know. Local gossip, I suppose. But why," asked the rector angrily, "why should these people trouble themselves over my private affairs? If my son is lost to me, then it is my own concern—and mine alone!" he added with dignity.

"I quite agree, sir," replied the inspector. "Of course, I have my duty to do and I am bound to obey orders. But I think with you that it is most disgraceful for any newspaper man to put facts forward all over the country which are yours alone—as father and son."

"Then I hope you will explain to your Chief Constable, who, no doubt, as is his duty, has reproached you for lack of acumen. Tell him that I distinctly asked you to refrain from raising a hue and cry and circulating Roddy's description. When I wish it I will let the Chief Constable of Surrey know," he added.

That message Inspector Freeman spoke into the ear of the Chief Constable in Guildford and thus cleared himself of responsibility. But by that time the whole of Little Farncombe had become agog at the knowledge that the rector's tall, good-looking son was being searched for by the police.

Everyone knew him to be a wanderer and an adventurer who lived mostly abroad, and many asked each other why he was missing and what allegation there could possibly be against him—now that the police were in active search of any trace of him.

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## Chapter Four.

### Lost Days.

It was a bright, crisp afternoon on the seventh day of Roddy's disappearance.

The light was fading, and already old Mrs Bentley had carried the lamp into Mr Homfray's study and lit it, prior to bringing him his simple cup of tea, for at tea-time he only drank a single cup, without either toast or bread-and-butter.

He was about to raise his cup to his lips, having removed his old briar pipe and laid it in the ash-tray, when Mrs Bentley tapped and, re-entering, said:

"There's Miss Sandys to see you, sir."

The rector rose and, rather surprised, ordered his visitor to be shown in.

Next moment from the square stone hall the pretty young girl, warmly clad in furs, entered the room.

She met the eyes of the grey old man, and after a second's pause said:

"I have to apologise for this intrusion, Mr Homfray, but—well, I have seen in the paper that your son is missing. He went out on Sunday night, it is said, and has not been seen since."

"That is so, Miss Sandys," replied the old man, offering her a chair beside the fire. "As you may imagine, I am greatly concerned at his disappearance."

"Naturally. But I have come here, Mr Homfray, to speak to you in confidence," said the girl hesitatingly. "Your son and I were acquainted, and—"

"I was not aware of that, Miss Sandys," exclaimed the rector, interrupting her.

"No. I do not expect that he told you. My father does not know either. But we met quite casually the other day, and last Sunday we again met accidentally after church and he walked home with me. I suppose it was half-past nine when we parted."

"There was no reason why he should not return home, I suppose?" asked Mr Homfray eagerly.

"None whatever. In wishing me good-bye he told me that he might be leaving here very soon, and perhaps we might not have another opportunity of meeting before he went. I thanked him for walking so far with me, and we parted the best of friends."

"He said he would be leaving Little Farncombe very soon, did he?" remarked the rector thoughtfully.

"Yes. I understood from him that he was obtaining, or had obtained, a concession to prospect for a deposit of emeralds somewhere in the Atlas Mountains, in Morocco."

"That is true. Some ancient workings are known to exist somewhere in the wild Wad Sus region, and through a friend he has been in treaty with the Moorish Government, with the hope of obtaining the concession. If he found the mine which is mentioned by several old Arabic writers it would no doubt bring him great fortune."

"Yes. But where can he be?"

"Who knows, Miss Sandys!" exclaimed the distracted father blankly.

"He must be found," declared the girl. "He left me to return home. What could possibly have occurred to prevent him from carrying out his intention?"

What indeed, reflected the old man, except perhaps that he met Gordon Gray and perhaps left for London with him? He was now more than ever inclined to believe the rather vague story told by the village tobacconist.

"Yes, Miss Sandys, he must be found. I have now asked the police to circulate his description, and if he is alive no doubt he will be discovered."

"You surely don't suspect that something tragic has happened to him—for instance, that he has met with foul play?" cried the girl.

"It certainly looks like it, or he would no doubt have set my mind at rest by this time," replied his father.

By the girl's anxiety and agitation he saw that she was more than usually concerned regarding his son's whereabouts. He had had no idea that Roddy was acquainted with the daughter of the great financier who had purchased Lord Farncombe's estates. Yet, after all, he reflected, Roddy was a fine, handsome boy, therefore what more natural than the pair should become attracted by each other.

He saw that the girl was uneasy, and was not surprised when she said:

"I trust, Mr Homfray, that you will treat what I have told you in entire confidence. My father does not approve of my making chance acquaintances. I got into an awful row a little time ago about it. I know he would not object to my knowing your son if we had been properly introduced. But, you see, we were not!" she laughed.

"I quite understand," said the old rector, smiling. "One day I hope you will be properly introduced to my son when we find him."

"We must, Mr Homfray. And we will!" cried the pretty young girl determinedly.

"Ah!" exclaimed the old man, his thin fingers clasped before him. "If we only could. Where can my boy be?"

Elma Sandys rose a few moments later, and taking the old man's hand urged patience and courage, and then walked down the hill and back to the Towers full of grave reflections.

She was the last person to see and speak with the alert, athletic young man who had so suddenly and strangely come into her life. At Park Lane she met many young men-about-town, most of them wealthy and all of them idlers, but no second thought had she given to a single one of them. As she walked she examined her own mind, and was compelled to admit that thoughts of Roddy Homfray now absorbed her.

The mystery of his disappearance after bidding her farewell had gripped her, heart and soul.

During the two days that followed the description of Roderick Homfray, the young mining engineer, was circulated to every police station in the country, and all constables in London and the great cities had had that description read out to them before going on duty. There was scarcely a police constable in the United Kingdom who did not know it by heart, with the final words of the official notice: "The missing man is greatly interested in wireless telephony, of which he has a deep and scientific knowledge."

That sentence had been added by the Surrey County Constabulary in case the young man might be hiding from his friends, and might betray himself by his expert knowledge of radio science.

Of the woman Freda Crisp, or of Gordon Gray, old Mr Homfray had heard nothing. The whole village sympathised with him in his distress, and, of course, all sorts of rumours—some of them cruel indeed—were afloat. Fortunately Elma's name was not coupled with Roddy's, for with the exception of the rector nobody knew of their acquaintance. Yet some ill-natured gossip, a low-bred woman at the end of the village, started a story connecting Roddy with a young married woman who had left her husband a fortnight before, gone to London, and disappeared.

This cruel story was not long in reaching Elma's ears, and though she disbelieved it, nevertheless it naturally caused her both wonder and anger.

On the afternoon of the third day after the circulation of the description of the missing young man, a stout, pleasant-faced lady named Boydon chanced to read it in the paper, and then sat staring before her in wonderment.

Then, after a few moments, she rose, crossed the room, and rang the telephone.

A few seconds later she was speaking with a Mr Edwards, and asked him to come along to see her upon an important matter, to which he at once consented.

Now Miss Boydon was the matron of the Cottage Hospital at Pangbourne, a pretty Thames-side village well known to river folk as being one of the prettiest reaches in Berkshire, and Mr Edwards was the local police sergeant of the Berks. Constabulary, and lived at the other end of the long wide village street which led out upon the Reading road.

Ten minutes later Edwards, a portly, rather red-faced man, arrived on his bicycle, and on entering the matron's room, his helmet in his hand, was shown the description.

"By jove, miss?" he exclaimed. "I believe it's him! We've had the notice at the station, but I never connected him with it!"

"Neither did I—until now," declared the stout Miss Boydon. "He only became conscious this morning—and now he tells us a rambling and altogether incoherent story. Personally I think he's slightly demented. That's what the doctor thought when he saw him at noon. He's waiting to see his condition to-night."

"Well, the description is exactly like him," declared the sergeant, re-reading it. "When he was brought into the station the other night I took him to be intoxicated. Then when Doctor Maynard saw him, he ordered him here."

"The doctor thinks he is suffering from drugs," said the matron. "He has been unconscious ever since he was brought here, nearly a week ago, and now he certainly has not regained his senses. He talks wildly about a girl who was murdered in a wood and died in his arms. Apparently he is suffering from delusions."

"In any case, miss, I think I ought to telegraph to Guildford that a young man answering the description is here, don't you think so?"

"I should not be in too great a hurry if I were you, Edwards," was the reply. "Wait until Doctor Maynard has seen him again. We shall probably know more to-night. I've ordered nurse to keep him quite quiet and listen to his stories as though she believes every word."

"The young man is missing from a place called Little Farncombe, in Surrey," said the sergeant. "I wonder how he came to be lying on the tow-path at the foot of Whitchurch Bridge? He must have been there all night, for one of the men working on the Thames Conservancy dredger found him when on his way to work at six o'clock on Tuesday morning."

"All clues to his identity have been removed," remarked the matron. "His name has been cut out of his shirt collar and underclothing, and the laundry marks removed—all deliberately done as if to efface his identity. Possibly he intended to commit suicide, and that's why he was on the river bank."

"But the doctor, when he saw him at the police station, gave his opinion that the man was drugged," the police sergeant said. "I don't think he had any intention of suicide."

"Well, in any case, let us wait till this evening. I will telephone to you after the doctor has seen him," the matron promised. And with that the sergeant left.

At six o'clock Doctor Maynard, a quiet elderly man who had practised in Pangbourne and district for fifteen years, called again and saw Roddy lying in the narrow little bed.

His face was pale and drawn, and his eyes sunken and weary:

"Well, doctor," he exclaimed cheerily, "I feel a lot better than I did this morning. I'm able to think now—and to remember. But oh!—my head!"

"That's good," declared the white-haired medical man. "Now what is your name, and how did you come here?" he asked, the stout matron standing, watchful, beside him.

"My name is Roderick Homfray, and I'm the son of the Reverend Norton Homfray, rector of Little Farncombe, in Surrey," the patient replied frankly. "What brought me here I don't know. What day is it to-day?"

"The fourteenth of December."

"The fourteenth of December! Well, the last I remember is on the night of the third—a Sunday night. And I shan't forget it either, I assure you! I was on my way home soon after half-past nine at night, and in Welling Wood, close by the Rectory paddock, I found a girl lying on the ground. She could just speak. She appealed to me to save her. Then she died. I rose and dashed across the wood to my father's house to raise the alarm, but I had hardly gone a hundred yards when straight in front of me something exploded. I saw what seemed to be a ball of red fire, but after that I know nothing—nothing until I came to my senses this morning and found myself here! Where I've been in the meantime, doctor, I have no idea."

Doctor Maynard, still under the impression that the story of the murdered girl was a delusion, sympathised with the patient and suggested sleep.

"I'll come to see you to-morrow," he added. "You're quite all right, so don't worry. I will see that a telegram is sent to-night to your father. He'll be here to-morrow, no doubt."

At ten o'clock the following morning the rector stood at the bedside of his son and listened to the amazing story of the discovery in Welling Wood and the red ball of fire which Roddy subsequently saw before him.

"Perhaps I was struck by lightning!" Roddy added. "But if that were so I should surely have remained in the wood. No doubt I was struck down maliciously. But why? And why should I have been taken away unconscious and kept so for several days, and then conveyed to the river bank here at Whitchurch?"

"I don't know, my son," replied his father quietly, though he stood staggered at the amazing story.

Then he added:

"The police searched Welling Wood and all the neighbouring copses three days after you had disappeared, but found no trace of you."

"But surely they found the poor girl, father?" cried Roddy, raising himself upon his arm.

"No, my boy, nobody was found," he replied. "That's strange!" exclaimed the young man. "Then she must have been taken away with me! But by whom? What devil's work was there in progress that night, father?"

"Ah! my boy. That I cannot tell!"

"But I mean to ascertain!" cried the young man fiercely. "That girl appealed to me to save her, and she died in my arms. Where is she? And why should I be attacked and drugged so that I nearly became insane? Why? Perhaps it was because I had accidentally discovered the crime!"

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## Chapter Five.

### Through the Ether.

"Hush! You infernal idiot! What did I tell you? What the deuce are you doing?" cried the man, tearing the telephone from the woman's hand and throwing over a switch upon the roll-top desk at which she was seated.

The low hum of an electric generator ceased and the current was cut off.

"You fool!" cried the short, middle-aged, clean-shaven man in a dinner-jacket, and with a cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth.

"Will you never learn common sense, Freda, after all I've told you! It's fortunate I came in at this moment! Do you want to be jugged? It seems so!"

Freda Crisp, in a gorgeous Paquin evening gown, turned deliberately in her chair and, coldly surveying the man who had just entered, said:

"Well, my dear Gordon, and what's upset your digestion to-night? Things said over this wireless telephone—broadcasted over five hundred miles of space from your cosy rooms here—can be said without anybody being the wiser as to who uttered them. I look upon this wireless box of tricks as a priceless joke. You turn over a switch, and into thousands of ears you speak all over the kingdom, and across into Holland and France and even Scandinavia. The great Marconi is, you'll admit, dear old thing, a wonderful nut!"

"Bah! You're not serious, Freda! You laugh at perils. And a peril now faces us."

"Ah! My dear Gordon, this is the first time I've ever heard such an admission from you—you, of all men! Peril? It's in the dictionary, but not in your vocabulary—or mine, my dear boy. I've faced danger, and so have you—nasty troublous moments with detectives hanging around—but we've generally been able to wriggle out by the back door, or the window, or—"

"Or else bluff it out, Freda!" interrupted Gray. "Yes, you're right! But to deliberately ask after the health of Roderick Homfray over the wireless telephone—well, it's simply courting trouble."

"Why?"

"Well, don't you know that there's an apparatus invented by two clever Italians, Bellini and Tosi, which is called a direction-finder?" asked her rather good-looking companion, as he removed his cigar from his lips. "That apparatus is in use all over the country. That's how they find aircraft lost in fogs—and that's how they could find to a yard exactly the position of this secret set of ours from which you spoke those silly jeering words. Gad! you're a fool, Freda! Shut up—and don't meddle with this wireless transmitter in future! Remember, I've got no official licence. This room,"—and he swept his hand around the small apartment filled with a marvellous collection of wireless apparatus—"is our secret. If the authorities discovered it—well, it would, no doubt, be the end for both of us—the Old Bailey and—well, just jug for both of us. I know something about wireless, and as you know it bears us in good stead. We've profited thousands on the stunt—you and I, Freda—and—"

"And Roderick Homfray also knows something about wireless, my dear old thing," laughed the handsome woman, lazily taking a cigarette from her gold case, tapping it and lighting it.

"That's just it! You're a priceless fool to have taken such a risk as to speak broadcast as you did. What did you say?"

"I only asked how 3.X.Q. Roddy Homfray of Little Farncombe was getting on, and gave my name as Freda!"

"Fool!" yelled Gordon Gray in fury. "It may be reported to the old sky-pilot! Young Homfray is in oblivion. We know that he's been picked up off the Thames towing-path, damp and unconscious, but in all probability he'll never recover from the dope we gave him. We sincerely hope not, eh? I expected he'd die in the night." The handsome woman hesitated.

"No, Gordon, we hope he will recover. If he doesn't, then it's murder once again; and, after all, that's an infernally ugly word. It would mean more than jug!"

The short, rather stout, beady-eyed man, the huge cigar still in his mouth, made a gesture of impatience, and crossing to the big roll-top writing-table, upon which was a high-power transmission set of wireless telephone capable of projecting the human voice clearly to any point in the British Isles, he turned over another switch and placed the telephones over his ears.

As he did so he turned an ebonite knob with a brass pointer upon a semicircular scale of ivory—one of many before him—just a sixteenth of an inch. He touched it with infinite care.

"Just listen, Freda," he said, in a hard voice. "Now just listen here, how by your accursed foolishness you've brought danger upon us. Listen, you madwoman?"

The woman took up the second pair of head-'phones, twisted the steel band and, instead of placing the 'phones over her head, put the ear pieces to her ears with the arched band towards her face—a favourite attitude with women who listen to wireless telephony.

As the delicate receivers came to her ears she drew a long breath, the colour dying from her face.

The little room wherein the fine expensive experimental set was installed was on the ground floor of a good-sized, old-fashioned house called "Willowden," which stood behind a broad lawn just off the Great North Road between Hatfield and Welwyn, twenty-five miles from London, a distance which was as nothing to Gordon Gray with his up-to-date Rolls.

From the Automobile Club in Pall Mall he could easily reach home in half an hour, even though the traffic through North London was usually bad. That night he had taken Freda to the theatre, and they had had supper at Ciro's afterwards, and it was now only one o'clock in the morning.

"Listen, old thing?" she urged, as she again adjusted the telephones on her ears. "What's that?"

Gordon Gray listened attentively.

A deep harsh voice was heard—a Voice from Nowhere—which asked slowly and very distinctly:

"Who was that who is interested in 3.X.Q.? This is 3.A.X. at Carlisle calling. Who are you, Freda? Please tell me who you are! Roddy Homfray, 3.X.Q., is well, but I fear he may not be listening. Can I relay any message, Freda?" asked the voice.

"Curse you!" cried the man. "You've actually given your name broadcast over the whole country! What the devil do you mean?" he cried, glaring at her. "All wireless amateurs know 3.X.Q. as old Homfray's son. They will inquire after Freda, and then old Homfray will know! Gad! You've made an unholy mess of things now! Put those 'phones down and be quiet!" he added.

Then, as she disentangled the head-'phones from her hair, he pulled over the transmitting switch, and as the generator began to gather speed until it hummed pleasantly and the two big globular valves being aglow, he said, in

a forced, unnatural voice:

"Hulloa, 3.A.X.? Hulloa, Carlisle. Hulloa, 3.A.X. 3.A.X.? This is 3.B.T. at Birmingham calling. I heard your message about 3.X.Q. at Little Farncombe and about Freda. It wasn't Freda—a woman—but Freeman—Freeman. Do you hear? I heard it as Freeman. I heard 3.X.Q. speaking an hour ago. He said he could not transmit to-night, but will do so to-morrow night at 20:00 o'clock G.M.T. Have you got that, 3.A.X.? 3.B.T. changing over!"

And he flung back the switch so that in a few seconds the generator was silent, and all became quiet save for the ticking of the round-faced yacht's clock which bore in large capitals G.M.T.—meaning Greenwich Mean Time.

Both took up the receiving 'phones and listened. A few moments later there sounded the peculiar whistle of a wireless carrier wave, and next second the same deep voice called in the jargon of wireless:

"Hulloa, 3.B.T.? Hulloa, Birmingham? Hulloa, 3.B.T. This is 3.A.X. at Carlisle calling. I heard your message O.K. I understand that it was Freeman—not Freda. I thought it was a lady inquiring after our friend 3.X.Q. Many thanks. I will listen for 3.X.Q.'s transmission to-morrow night. Sorry I worried you about Freda. Thanks, 3.B.T. Thanks, O.M. 3.A.X. switching off!"

The O.M. stood for "old man," a familiar greeting between wireless experimenters unknown to each other, and who only meet through the ether.

"I hope nobody has put a direction-finder upon me!" said Gray a moment later.

"Really you are very slick, Gordon," laughed the handsome woman. "That change-over to Freeman is excellent! But as you said you were an amateur in Birmingham, and here we are at Crane Hill, you are quite right in fearing that somebody might spot us."

"Ah! I replied quickly, and gave them no time, you see," laughed the elusive crook, for such he was.

His accomplice laughed merrily. They were a refined, good-looking pair. Freda passed herself off to most people as Gray's sister. The good people of Hatfield knew the tenants of the old-fashioned house as Mr Gray and his widowed sister, Mrs Crisp. The latter—a smart, go-ahead woman—often drove her own little aluminium-bodied A.C. car up to London and back. Indeed, brother and sister lived mostly in London where they had a flat in Kensington, but the week-ends they usually spent at Willowden, where Gray's old servant, Claribut, and his wife ran the house together.

Indeed Gray, a moment later, touched the bell, and old Claribut—a very respectable-looking, white-haired man—appeared. Surely none who called there would suspect such an outwardly perfect servant to be a crook like his master.

"Jim, we're going back to town to-night," Gray said. "If anybody calls I'm in Paris. But I don't expect that anyone will. Tell that to your wife, and to-morrow go over to Pangbourne, stay at the Elephant Hotel there, and find out what is doing concerning young Homfray. He's at the Cottage Hospital there. You know all the facts."

"All right!" replied the clean-shaven old butler, whose aristocratic appearance always bore him in such good stead. He often posed as a benevolent philanthropist, and could impose upon most people. His was a long criminal record at Parkhurst and Sing-Sing, and he was a man who, having spent nearly half his life in jail, had brought crookdom to a fine art, truly a worthy associate of Gordon Gray, alias Gordon Tresham, Ralph Fane, Major Hawes Jackson, Commander Tothill, R.N., and a dozen other names which had risen and faded upon the phosphorescence of his elusive life.

Gordon Gray lived—and he lived well—at other people's expense. He had caught the habit of hanging on to the edge of the wealthy man's garment, and wealthy war-profiteers were, he found, so very easily gulled when they wanted to get on, and by political manoeuvring to make their wives titled "ladies."

The fact was that Gordon Gray was a dealer in big things. Trumpery theft, burglary or suchlike offences, were beneath him. He could manipulate big deals in the City, could "arrange" a knighthood at a price, and sometimes, when he and Freda had suddenly arrived in London from New York, he would actually entertain English politicians with names of world-wide repute at elaborate dinners at the Ritz.

Though a crook he was a philosopher, and his favourite remark when things went badly was: "Bah! it is no use blowing against the wind!"

That night he felt himself blowing against the wind. Though he said nothing to the handsome woman at his side, he regretted that Roddy Homfray had not been placed in the river Thames as he had first suggested, instead of upon the bank opposite that beautiful riverside house with its glorious lawns and gardens at the other side of Whitechurch Bridge. If Roddy's unconscious form had been pitched over the bank it would have been found down at Mapledurham, and believed to be a case of suicide. He had been a fool, he declared within himself. He had hoped that the young man would be found dead in the morning. But he had not!

"I'll go over to Pangbourne," said the elderly man he had addressed so familiarly as Jim. "And I'll report all I can gather. Anything else?" he asked, crossing to a box of cigars and helping himself without being invited.

"No. Get back here. And tell your wife to keep the wireless securely locked up. There's a Yale lock on this door. Nobody comes in. You hear!"

"Of course. It wouldn't do, Gordon, would it? That wireless is going to be a big use to us in the near future, eh?" laughed the white-haired old man.

"It will be, if we're cute. But we shall have to have our eyes skinned. Have you paid all the tradesmen's books?"

"Yes."

"Then send to the chemist in Hatfield for a big bottle of eau-de-cologne—the biggest he's got. Pay a pound for it, or more, and say that I want it to put into my bath. It gives the guys here a shock and impresses them."

"Good idea!" laughed Jim. "You're always brimming over with them. But look here, Gordon," he said, as he bit off the end of the cigar and started to light it. "First, I don't like this furnished house of ours, with the inquisitive landlady; and I don't like the wireless."

"Why?"

"Well, what I'm afraid of is, that though we've got the aerial wires well concealed from the roadway, some boy scout of an errand boy may come in and twig it, and tell some other boy scout that we've got an aerial up. See?"

"Yes, I see," replied Gordon. "But the risk is small. If a boy discovers it, let the boy listen in, and tell him to keep dark about it. We're inventors, and we have discovered something regarding wireless telephony which will soon startle the whole world. The boy, whoever he is, will be startled and hold his tongue—till we decide how to deal with him. Oh! how simple you are, Jim! You're getting chicken-hearted in your old age!"

And Freda, who was standing by, laughed outright.

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## Chapter Six.

### Mists of Memory.

Three days after Roddy Homfray had regained consciousness Doctor Maynard, on visiting him, declared that though his mental condition was not yet quite satisfactory, he was well enough to travel home. Therefore he took him in his own two-seater car from the Cottage Hospital at Pangbourne, by way of Wokingham and Godalming to Little Farncombe, where the old rector welcomed back his son and secretly returned thanks to his Maker for his safety.

The quiet old doctor only remained long enough to have a drink—unprofessional, perhaps, but refreshing—for he had to get back to his patients.

After he had gone, Roddy sat before the fire in the little study, his left hand upon his brow, for his head ached badly. It seemed that around his skull was a band of iron. Never for an instant since he had become conscious of things about him had that excruciating pain ceased. It was only when worn out by it that he slept, and thus became free.

"Well, now, my boy, tell me exactly what occurred on that Sunday night," urged the old clergyman, standing before him and looking down at the crouched figure with eager curiosity.

"I—well, I really don't know," was the young man's reply. "As I told you, in the darkness I found a girl just off the path in Welling Wood. She appealed to me to save her, and a few moments later she died in my arms. Then I rushed across here to raise the alarm, when, all of a sudden, I saw a bright red flash, and I knew no more till I awoke in the little hospital at Pangbourne."

"But, my dear Roddy, the police searched the wood to find you—searched every inch of it—but there was no girl there. If she were dead she would surely have been found."

"I was taken away unconscious. If so, what could have prevented the assassin and his friends—for there must have been more than one person—removing the evidence of their crime?"

"Assassin!" gasped the old man, drawing a deep breath. Thoughts of Gordon Gray and the handsome Freda crossed his mind. But what hand could they have had in the death of an unknown girl in the woods at the rear of the Rectory?

No. He decided that Roddy, in his unbalanced state of mind, was filled with wild imaginings. The description of the red ball of fire was sufficient in itself to show how disordered was his brain. The poor boy was suffering from hallucinations, he decided, so he humoured him and listened as he repeated his incredible story.

"You would recognise the girl again, Roddy?" asked his father, puffing at his pipe.

"Recognise her! Of course I should. I'd know her anywhere!" And once again he went into a long and detailed description of her face, her eyes, her hair, and her dress.

The short December afternoon was drawing in and the light was fading.

"I think, Roddy, that if I were you I'd go and lie down," said his father softly. "Your poor head worries you—I know, my dear boy."

"It does. But I can think now—think quite clearly," was the young man's reply. "At the hospital the matron regarded me as a half-dazed idiot, I believe, and the nurse listened to me as she might listen to a baby's babbling. But I tell you, father, I'm now perfectly in my right mind. You may believe, or you may disbelieve my story, but Roddy, your son, has told you the truth, and he repeats every word he has said."

For a few moments the rector was silent, his pipe still in his mouth and his hands in the pockets of the easy old black jacket he wore in the house. He was not a man who made any outward show, and, like most scholars, cared little for



dress now that, alas! his wife, who had looked after him so tenderly, was dead. Old Norton Homfray was of simple tastes and few wants. His whole soul was in the welfare of his parish, and in consequence the parish held him up as a real fine old fellow.

"Well, Roddy, what you've told me is, of course, most astounding—almost incredible. On that night you walked home with Miss Sandys—eh? She came here and told me so herself."

"She came here! Elma here!" cried Roddy, quickly stirring himself from his chair and becoming alert. "What did she say?"

"She heard that you were missing, and she came to tell me of her walk home to the Towers with you."

"Yes. And—and what did she say about me?" the young man asked with quick eagerness.

"Nothing. Only she seemed greatly surprised and upset," his father replied. "But—well—"

And he hesitated.

"Well—go on," the young man said.

"Well, look here, Roddy, after leaving Miss Sandys, did you meet anyone else—a man in the Guildford road?"

"A man? No. Why? Haven't I told you I walked straight home? What are you trying to make out?"

"You are quite certain that you did not stop and speak with any stranger in the Guildford road?"

"I am quite certain that I did not. I spoke to nobody till I found the girl dying in Welling Wood."

"And—well, now let me at once be frank with you, Roddy: have you ever in your life heard the name of Gordon Gray?"

"Never. Who is he?"

"No matter. Recollect the name, and if you ever hear it, avoid him—avoid him, my boy, as you would Satan himself. And his woman friend Freda Crisp."

"Freda Crisp? Oh! I fancy I've met her—been introduced to her somewhere or other about a year ago. In South America, I believe, but I really can't remember. A fine handsome woman, who always dresses beautifully, and who is a topping dancer. Always has lots of men about her. Yes. I have a recollection of her, but I don't just now recall where we met. In travelling I meet so many people, dad, as you know."

"Yes, of course, my boy; but if you ever meet her again, remember my words."

"That Miss Sandys should come and see you, dad, is peculiar. Why did she come? What interest can she possibly have in me, except—well, perhaps it is the wireless. She told me she was very interested in it, and possibly she has heard that I'm an experimenter—eh?"

"Probably so," laughed the old clergyman. "But hearing you were coming home to-day, she sent me a message to say that she is calling here at five."

"Jolly good of her!" replied the young man, suddenly raising his head, which seemed to be bursting, "It's now nearly four. I think I'll go up and have a lie down till she comes," and so saying he ascended the stairs to his own room.

Just before five o'clock Elma Sandys, a dainty figure in furs, was ushered into the study by Mrs Bentley, and was greeted by the rector, who, shaking her hand, said:

"It's really awfully kind of you to come and see my poor son, Miss Sandys. Frankly, I hardly know what to make of him. His mind seems entirely upset in some way. He talks wildly, and tells me of some terrible tragedy which occurred in Welling Wood on the night of his disappearance."

"Tragedy! What?" asked the girl quickly.

"He will tell you all about it. The story is a very strange one. I would rather he told you himself."

The girl sank into the wide wicker arm-chair which the old man pulled up to the fire, and then he left to summon his son.

When Roddy entered the room Elma, jumping up, saw instantly that he seemed still half-dazed. She took his hand and instinctively realised that his gaze was fixed and strange. His friend Denton had seen him soon after his return, and declared him to be suffering from some potent drug which had apparently affected him mentally.

"Hulloa, Miss Sandys?" exclaimed the young man cheerily. "Well! I'm in a pretty pickle—as you see—eh? What's happened I can't make out. People seem to think I'm not quite in my right senses," and then, grinning, he added: "Perhaps I'm not—and perhaps I am."

"But, Mr Homfray, I've been awfully worried about you," the girl said, facing him and gazing again into his pale drawn face. "You disappeared, and we had an awful shock, all of us. You left me at the end of the avenue and nobody saw you again!"

"Well," said the young fellow, with a sorry attempt at laughing, "somebody must have seen me, no doubt, or I shouldn't have been found in this precious state. What happened to me I haven't the slightest notion. You see, I came up the village and went on through Welling Wood, and—well, as I went along I heard a strange cry, and in the darkness found a girl lying, under a tree. I went to her, and as I did so, she cried out to me to save her. The whole affair was unusual, wasn't it? I bent and took her up, and—the poor girl sank in my arms."

"Sank? Did she die?" asked the great financier's daughter.

"Yes, she did."

The rector, who stood near his writing-table, exchanged glances with their pretty visitor. They were meaning glances. Old Mr Homfray was somewhat puzzled why the daughter of Purcell Sandys should be so deeply interested in his son. Yet, of course, young people will be ever young people, and deep pockets are of no account where Love is concerned. Love and Lucre have now happily been divorced in our post-war get ahead world.

"But tell me, Mr Homfray, what was she like? Who could she be to be in Welling Wood at that hour?"

"Ah! I don't know," was the young fellow's half-dazed reply. "I only know what happened to me, how I dashed away to reach home and raise the alarm, and suddenly saw what appeared to be a ball of fire before me. Then I knew no more till I found myself in hospital at Pangbourne. A man, they say, found me lying near the towing-path by the Thames. I was in the long grass—left there to die, Doctor Maynard believes."

"But you must have been in somebody's hands for days," his father remarked.

"Yes," said the young man, "I know. Though I can recollect nothing at all—distinctly. Some incidents seem to be coming back to me. I have just a faint idea of two persons—a man and a woman. They were well-dressed and lived in a big old house. And—and they made me do something. Ah! I—I can't recall it, only—only I know that the suggestion horrified me!" And he gave vent to a strange cry and his eyes glared with terror at the recollection. "Ah! the—the brutes—they forced me to—to do something—to—"

"To do what?" asked the girl, taking his hand softly and looking into his pale, drawn face.

"It is all a strange misty kind of recollection," he declared, staring stonily in front of him. "I can see them—yes! I can see both of them—the woman—she—yes!—she held my hand while—she guided my hand when I did it!"

"Did what?" asked Elma in a slow, calm voice, as though trying to soothe him.

"I—I—I can't recollect! Only—only he died!"

"Died! Who died?" gasped the old rector, who at the mention of the man and the woman at once wondered again whether Gordon Gray and Freda Crisp were in any way implicated. "You surely did not commit—murder!"

The young man seated in his chair sat for a few seconds, silent and staring.

"Murder! I—yes, I saw him! I would recognise him. Murder, perhaps—oh, perhaps I—I killed him! That woman made me do it!"

The rector and the pretty daughter of Purcell Sandys exchanged glances. Roddy was no doubt still under the influence of some terrible, baneful drug. Was his mind wandering, or was there some grain of truth in those misty, horrifying recollections?

"I'm thirsty," he said a moment later; "very thirsty."

His father went out at once to obtain a glass of water, whereupon Elma, advancing closely to the young man, drew from her little bag a photograph.

"Hush! Mr Homfray! Don't say a word. But look at this! Do you recognise it?" she whispered in breathless anxiety.

He glanced at it as she held it before his bewildered eyes.

"Why—yes!" he gasped, staring at her in blank amazement. "That's—that's the girl I found in Welling Wood!"

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## Chapter Seven.

### The Girl Named Edna.

"Hush!" cried Elma. "Say nothing at present." And next instant the old rector re-entered with a glass of water which his son drank with avidity.

Then he sat staring straight into the fire without uttering a word.

"Is your head better?" asked the girl a moment later; and she slipped the photograph back into her bag.

"Yes, just a little better. But it still aches horribly," Roddy replied. "I'm anxious to get to that spot in the wood."

"To-morrow," his father promised. "It's already dark now. And to-morrow you will be much better."

"And I'll come with you," Miss Sandys volunteered. "The whole affair is certainly most mysterious."

"Yes. Neither Denton nor the doctor at Pangbourne can make out the nature of the drug that was given to me. It seems to have upset the balance of my brain altogether. But I recollect that house—the man and the woman and— and how she compelled me to do her bidding to—"

"To what?" asked the girl.

The young mining engineer drew a long breath and shook his head despairingly.

"I hardly know. Things seem to be going round. When I try to recall it I become bewildered."

"Then don't try to remember," urged his father in a sympathetic voice. "Remain quiet, my boy, and you will be better to-morrow."

The young fellow looked straight at the sweet-faced girl standing beside his chair. He longed to ask her how she became possessed of that photograph—to ask the dead girl's name. But she had imposed silence upon him.

"We will go together to the spot to-morrow, Miss Sandys," he said. "People think I'm telling a fairy story about the girl. But I assure you I'm not. I held her in my arms and stroked her hair from her face. I remember every incident of that tragic discovery."

"Very well," said the girl. "I'll be here at ten o'clock, and we will go together. Now remain quiet and rest," she urged with an air of solicitude. "Don't worry about anything—about anything whatever," she added with emphasis. "We shall clear up this mystery and bring your enemies to book without a doubt."

And with that Roddy Homfray had to be satisfied, for a few moments later she buttoned up her warm fur coat and left, while old Mrs Bentley went upstairs and prepared his bed.

His friend Denton called again after he had retired, and found him much better.

"You're pulling round all right, Roddy," he laughed. "You'll be your old self again in a day or two. But what really happened to you seems a complete enigma. You evidently fell into very bad hands for they gave you a number of injections—as your arm shows. But what they administered I can't make out. They evidently gave you something which acted on your brain and muddled it, while at the same time you were capable of physical action, walking, and perhaps talking quite rationally."

Then Roddy told his chum the doctor of the weird but misty recollections which from time to time arose within him of having been compelled to act as the handsome woman had directed. Exactly what he did he could not recall—except that he felt certain that while beneath the woman's influence he had committed some great and terrible crime.

"Bah! my dear Roddy?" laughed Denton as he sat beside the other's bed. "Your nerves are all wrong and awry. After those mysterious doses you've had no wonder you're upset, and your imagination has grown so vivid."

"I tell you it isn't imagination!" cried Roddy in quick protest. "I know that the whole thing sounds utterly improbable, but—well, perhaps to-morrow—perhaps to-morrow I can give you some proof."

"Of what!"

"Of the identity of the girl I found dying in Welling Wood."

Hubert Denton smiled incredulously, and patting his friend upon the shoulder, said:

"All right, my dear fellow. Go to sleep. A good rest will do you a lot of good. I'll see you in the morning."

The doctor left and Roddy Homfray, tired and exhausted after an exciting day, dropped off to sleep—a sleep full of strange, fantastic dreams in which the sweet calm face of Elma Sandys appeared ever and anon.

Next morning at about nine o'clock, when Roddy awakened to find the weather bright and crisp, he called his father, and said:

"I don't want Inspector Freeman to know about what I've told you—about the girl in Welling Wood."

"Certainly not," replied the quiet old rector reassuringly. "That is your own affair. They found nothing when they searched the wood for you."

"Perhaps they didn't look in the right spot," remarked his son. "Elma will be here at ten, and we'll go together—alone—you don't mind, father?"

"Not in the least, my boy," laughed the old man. "Miss Sandys seems deeply distressed concerning you."

"Does she?" asked Roddy, with wide-open eyes. "Do you really think she is? Or is it the mystery of the affair which appeals to her. Mystery always appeals to women in a greater sense than to men. Every mystery case in the newspapers is read by ten women to one man, they say."

"Perhaps. But I think Miss Sandys evinces a real interest in you, Roddy, because you are ill and the victim of mysterious circumstances," he said.

Over the old man's mind rested the shadow of that unscrupulous pair, Gray and the woman Crisp. Had they done

some of their devil's work upon his beloved son? He had forgiven them their threats and their intentions, but he remained calm to wait, to investigate, and to point the finger of denunciation against them if their villainy were proved.

At ten o'clock Elma Sandys arrived upon her motorcycle, which she constantly used for short distances when alone. Though in the garage her father had two big cars, and she had her own smart little two-seater in which she frequently ran up to London and back, yet she enjoyed her cycle, which she used with a fearlessness begotten of her practice during the war when she had acted as a driver in the Air Force at Oxford—one of the youngest who had taken service, be it said.

As soon as she arrived she helped Roddy into his coat, and both went down the Rectory garden, climbed the fence, walked across the paddock, and at last entered the wood with its brown frosted bracken and thick evergreen undergrowth. Through the half-bare branches, for the weather had been mild, the blue sky shone, though the wintry sun was not yet up, and as Roddy led the way carefully towards the footpath, he warned his pretty companion to have a care as there were a number of highly dangerous but concealed holes from which gravel had been dug fifty years or so ago, the gulfs being now covered with the undergrowth.

Scarcely had he spoken ere she stumbled and narrowly escaped being precipitated into a hole in which water showed deep below through the tangled briars.

Soon they reached the footpath along which he had gone in the darkness on that fatal Sunday night. He paused to take his bearings. He recognised the thick, stout trunk of a high Scotch fir, the only one in the wood. His flash-lamp had shone upon it, he remembered, just at the moment when he had heard the woman's cries.

He halted, reflected for a few moments, and then struck out into the undergrowth, confident that he was upon the spot where the unknown girl had sunk dying into his arms. Elma, who watched, followed him. He scarcely spoke, so fully absorbed was he in his quest.

At last he crossed some dead and broken bracken, and said:

"Here! This is where I found her!"

His pretty companion halted at his side and gazed about her. There was nothing save a tangle of undergrowth and dead ferns. Above were high bare oaks swaying slowly in the wintry wind.

"Well," said Elma at last. "There's nothing here, is there?"

He turned and looked her straight in the face, his expression very serious.

"No. There is nothing, I admit. Nothing! And yet a great secret lies here. Here, this spot, remote from anywhere, was the scene of a mysterious tragedy. You hold one clue, Elma—and I the other." And again he looked straight into her eyes, while standing on that very spot where the fair-haired girl had breathed her last in his arms, and then, after a few seconds' silence, he went on: "Elma! I—I call you by your Christian name because I feel that you have my future at heart, and—and I, on my part—I love you! May I call you by your Christian name?"

She returned his look very gravely. Her fine eyes met his, but he never wavered. Since that first day when Tweedles, her little black Pomeranian, had snapped at him she had been ever in his thoughts. He could not disguise the fact. Yet, after all, it was a very foolish dream, he had told himself dozens of times. He was poor—very poor—a mere adventurer on life's troublous waters—while she was the daughter of a millionaire with, perhaps, a peeress' career before her.

"Roddy," at last she spoke, "I call you that! I think of you as Roddy," she said slowly, looking straight into his eyes. "But in this matter we are very serious—both of us—eh?"

"Certainly we are, Elma," he replied, taking her hand passionately.

She withdrew it at once, saying:

"You have brought me here for a purpose—to find traces of—of the girl who died at this spot. Where are the traces?"

"Well, the bracken is trodden down, as you see," he replied.

"But surely that is no evidence of what you allege?"

"No, Elma. But that photograph which you showed me last night is a picture of her."

The girl smiled mysteriously.

"You say so. How am I to know? They say that you are unfortunately suffering from delusions. In that case sight of any photograph would possibly strike a false chord in your memory."

"False chord!" he cried. "Do you doubt this morning that I am in my sane senses? Do you doubt that which I have just said, Elma—do you doubt that I love you?"

The girl's cheeks flushed instantly at his words. Next second they were pale again.

"No," she said. "Please don't let us talk of love, Mr Homfray."

"Roddy—call me that."

"Well—yes, Roddy, if you like."

"I do like. You told me that you thought of me as Roddy. Can you never love me?" he implored.

The girl held her breath. Her heart was beating quickly and her eyes were turned away. She let him take her gloved hand and raise it fervently to his lips. Then, without answering his question, she turned her splendid eyes to his and he saw in them a strange, mysterious expression such as he had never noticed in the eyes of any woman before.

He thought it was a look of sympathy and trust, but a moment later it seemed as though she doubted him—she was half afraid of him.

"Elma!" he cried, still holding her hand. "Tell me—tell me that you care for me a little—just a little!" And he gazed imploringly into her pale face.

"A little!" she echoed softly. "Perhaps—well, perhaps I do, Roddy. But—but do not let us speak of it now—not until you are better."

"Ah! You do love me a little," he cried with delight, again raising her hand to his lips. "Perhaps you think I've not recovered from that infernal drug which my unknown enemies gave me. But I declare that to-day I am in my full senses—all except my memory—which is still curiously at fault."

"Let us agree to be very good friends, Roddy," the girl said, pressing his hand. "I confess that I like you very much," she admitted, "but love is quite another matter. We have not known each other very long, remember."

"Sufficiently long for me to know that I love you truly, and most dearly, Elma," the young man declared with keen enthusiasm.

Then the girl sighed, withdrew her hand, and begged of him to drop the subject.

"I have told you that I care for you just a little, Roddy," she said. "For the present let that suffice."

She was obdurate, refusing to discuss the matter further. Instead, she began to question him closely concerning the events of that fatal night.

Again he repeated them, just as they have been recorded in the foregoing pages.

"Then it is evident that you were watched," she remarked. "Whoever was responsible for the crime attacked you by some secret means. Then both of you were taken away."

"By whom? To where? That's the mystery!" Roddy echoed blankly.

"A mystery which must be fathomed. And I will help you," she said quietly.

"You know the identity of the poor girl," he said. "How did you come by her photograph?" he asked, a question he had been dying to put to her ever since the previous evening.

She was silent.

"You know more of the affair than you have admitted, Elma," he suggested in a low voice, his eyes still fixed upon her pale countenance. "Is my surmise correct?"

"It is," she replied in a strange half-whisper. "I have no actual knowledge," she hastened to add. "But I have certain grim and terrible surmises."

"You were anxious that my father should not see that photograph last night. Why?"

"Well—well, because I did not wish to—I didn't wish him to think that I was unduly exciting you by showing you the portrait," she faltered.

He looked at her, struck by her curious evasiveness.

"And was there no other reason, Elma?" asked the young man in deep earnestness.

Again she hesitated.

"Yes. There was another reason," she replied. "One that I regret I cannot at present tell you."

"You refuse to satisfy my curiosity—eh?"

"I am compelled to refuse," she replied in a low voice.

"Why?"

"Because, as yet, I have only suspicions and surmises. When I have proved even one of them then I shall not hesitate to tell you the truth, Roddy—a bitter and terrible truth though it may be."

"Really you are most mysterious!" her companion said, his face darkening.

"I know I am," she answered with a queer hollow laugh.

"But at least you can tell me the dead girl's name?"

"I only know her Christian name. It is Edna."

"You knew her personally?"

"Well—yes. I have met her."

"In what circumstances?"

"Curious ones. Very curious ones," the girl replied. "If my surmises are correct, Roddy, we are face to face with one of the strangest problems of crime that has ever arisen in our modern world," she added. "But until I am able to substantiate certain facts I can tell you nothing—nothing, much as I desire to in order to place you upon your guard."

"What, am I still in peril?"

"Yes, I believe you are—in very great peril. So beware of yet another trap which may be cunningly laid for you by those who may pose as your friends."

And the girl, taking her companion's hand, gripped it between hers, and looking into his face, added:

"Roddy, trust me. Don't ask me for facts which I cannot give. There are reasons—very strong reasons—that compel me for the moment to remain silent. So trust me?"

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## Chapter Eight.

### Fears and Surprises.

Three nights later.

Over the steps which led from the pavement in Park Lane to the front door of Mr Sandys' huge white mansion an awning had been erected. The people who went by upon the motor-buses to Oxford Street or to Hyde Park Corner noted it, and remarked that Purcell Sandys was giving one of his usual parties—functions at which the smartest set in high Society attended; gatherings which were always announced by the *Times* on the day previous and chronicled—with the dresses worn by the female guests—on the morning following.

The huge white-painted mansion which was so well known to Londoners was to them, after all, a house of mystery. The gossip papers had told them how the famous financier—one of England's pillars of finance—spent three hundred pounds weekly on the floral decorations of the place; how the rooms, the mahogany doors of which had silver hinges, were full of priceless curios, and how each Wednesday night the greatest musical artistes in the world were engaged to play for the benefit of his guests at fees varying from five hundred to a thousand guineas.

All this was the truth. The Wednesday night entertainments of Purcell Sandys were unique. Nobody in all the world was so lavish upon music or upon floral decorations. The grey-bearded old man, who usually wore a rather shabby suit, and habitually smoked a pipe, gave his guests the very best he could, for he loved flowers—as his great range of hot-houses at Farncombe Towers and at Biarritz testified—while good music always absorbed his senses.

Cars were constantly arriving, depositing the guests, and driving on again, while the servants in the wide, flower-decorated hall were passing to and fro, busy with the hats and coats of the men, and conducting the ladies upstairs.

Through the hall came strains of dance music from the fine ballroom at the back of the house, one of the finest in the West End of London.

At the head of the great staircase Elma, in a simple but pretty frock of pale lemon, was doing the duty of hostess, as she always did, while her father, a burly, grey-bearded, rather bluff man in a well-fitting but well-worn evening suit, was grasping the hands of his friends warmly, and welcoming them.

On the opposite side of the road, against the railings of Hyde Park, a young man was standing, watching the procession of cars, watching with wistful eyes as he stood with half a dozen others attracted by the commotion, as is always the case outside the mansions of the West End where a party is in progress.

The young man was Roddy Homfray. As a matter of fact, he had passed in a 'bus towards Hyde Park Corner, and seeing the awning outside Mr Sandys' house, had alighted and out of sheer curiosity made his way back. At his side were two young girls of the true Cockney type, who were criticising each female guest as she arrived, and declaring what a joy it must be to be able to wear fine clothes and go to parties in a car.

Roddy was just about to turn away and cross to Waterloo to take the last train home, when among the cars he saw a fine grey Rolls in which a man and a woman were seated. Next second he craned his neck, and then crossed the road to obtain a nearer view of the pair.

"Yes," he gasped aloud to himself, "that's the woman. I'm certain! And the man? No, I'm not quite so sure. He was older, I think."

Unseen, he narrowly watched the tallish, dark-haired, clean-shaven man alight, and saw him help out his companion, who was about forty, and wore a fur-trimmed evening wrap of gorgeous brocade and a beautiful diamond ornament in her dark hair.

"No! I'm not mistaken!" the young man muttered again to himself. "That's the woman, without a doubt. But surely she can't be a friend of Mr Sandys!"

That she was, was instantly proved by the fact that she ascended the red-carpeted steps followed by her companion, and they were received within by the bowing man-servant.

He watched them disappear, and a few moments afterwards he boldly mounted the steps to the door, where his passage was at once barred by a flunkey.

"I don't want to come in," said Roddy, in a low, confidential tone. "Do me a favour, will you? I'll make it right with you. I want to know the names of that lady and gentleman who've this moment gone in."

The servant viewed him rather suspiciously, and replied:

"Well, I don't know them myself, for I haven't been here long—only a week. But I'll try to find out if you'll come back, say, in a quarter of an hour."

"Yes, do," urged Roddy. "It's most important to me."

And then he slipped back down the steps and strolled along Park Lane, full of strange reflections.

That woman! It was the same woman of his hideous nightmare—the dark-faced woman who had held him beneath her evil influence, and forced him to commit some act against his will. But exactly what act it was he could not for the life of him recall. Sometimes he had an idea that he had been forced into the committal of a terrible crime, while at others the recollections all seemed so vague and fantastic that he dismissed them as the mere vagaries of an upset mind.

But he had found the woman. She was a friend of the Sandys! And did not Elma hold the photograph of the girl Edna, whom he had discovered in Welling Wood? The circumstances were more than strange!

A quarter of an hour later he returned to the house, and on slipping a ten-shilling note surreptitiously into the hand of the servant the latter said:

"The gentleman's name is Mr Bertram Harrison, and the lady—a widow—is Mrs Freda Crisp."

"Freda Crisp?" he echoed aghast.

"Yes. That's the name Mr Hughes, the butler, told me," the flunkey declared.

Roddy Homfray turned away. Freda Crisp! How amazing! That was the name of the woman against whom his father had warned him. That woman was undoubtedly his enemy. Why? Could it be possible that she was Elma's enemy also? Was it possible that Elma, with the knowledge of the girl Edna, who had died in the wood and so mysteriously disappeared, suspected that handsome dark-haired woman of being implicated in the crime?

He recollected Elma's curious reticence concerning the girl, and her refusal to make any allegations before she had ascertained and proved certain facts.

He crossed the road and, halting, gazed through the railings out across the dark London park where in the distance the lights were twinkling among the bare branches. The night was cold, for a keen east wind had sprung up. He hesitated.

To remain the night in London would bring the truth no nearer, for with the gay party in progress he could not enter there in the clothes he wore. And besides, he had not yet met Elma's father. He longed to go there and watch the movements of that dark, gorgeously-dressed woman who had exercised such a strangely evil influence over him while he was in the grip of that mysterious drug. Who was she? Why had she and her companion held him in their toils for days, and then cast him aside at that remote spot by the Thames, hoping that he would die during the night?

What did it all mean?

He glanced at his watch, and saw that if he took a taxi he might just catch the last train. And this he did.

It was long after midnight when he entered the silent old Rectory and found his father bent beneath the green-shaded reading-lamp which stood on the study table.

The rector had been busy writing for hours—ever since old Mrs Bentley had cleared away his supper and wished him good-night.

Roddy, throwing off his coat, sank wearily into the wicker arm-chair before the welcome fire and took out his pipe, his father continuing writing his next Sunday's sermon after briefly greeting him.

As the young man smoked, he reflected, until at last he suddenly said:

"Haven't you finished your work, father? It's getting very late."

"Just finished—just finished, my boy!" said the old man cheerily, screwing up his fountain-pen. "I've had a heavy day to-day—out visiting nearly all day. There's a lot of sickness in the village, you know."

"Yes. And the Sandys are away in town, aren't they?"

"They went up yesterday. Mr Sandys and his daughter are always at Park Lane on Wednesdays, I understand. I saw in the paper this morning that the party to-night has a rather political flavour, for two Cabinet Ministers and their wives are to be there."

"I suppose Mr Sandys must be very rich?"

"Immensely, they say. I heard the other day that he is one of the confidential advisers of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and he'll probably get a peerage before long," said his father. "But, after all, he is not one of your modern, get-rich-quick men. He's a real, solid, God-fearing man, who though so very wealthy does a large amount of good in a quiet, unostentatious way. Only three days ago he gave me a cheque for two hundred pounds and asked me to distribute it to the poor people at Christmas, but on no condition is his name to be mentioned to a soul. So keep the information to yourself, Roddy."

"Of course I will," his son replied, puffing at his pipe.

"Mr Sandys asked about you," said the rector. "I am to take you to the Towers to dine one night very soon."

"I shall be delighted. Old Lord Farncombe asked me when I was last at home. Don't you remember?"

"Of course," said his father. "But how have you been feeling to-day? All right, I hope?"

"I feel quite right again now," replied the young man. Then, after a brief pause, he removed his pipe and looked straight across at his father as in a rather changed voice, he said: "Do you recollect, dad, the other day you spoke of a certain woman, and warned me against her?"

"Yes," said the old rector very seriously. "You recollect her name, I hope—Freda Crisp. Never forget that name, Roddy, *never!*"

"Why?"

"Because she is my enemy, my boy—and yours," replied the old man, in a hard, strained voice.

"Why should she be? I don't know the lady."

"You said that you had some recollection of her in South America," the old clergyman remarked.

"It isn't the same woman."

"Oh! How do you know?" asked his father, glancing at him quickly.

"Because I've seen the real Freda Crisp—the woman who you say is my enemy. I saw her to-night."

"You've seen her! Where?" asked Mr Homfray eagerly.

"She is the woman I see in my bad dreams—those hazy recollections of the hours when I was drugged—handsome, dark-haired, middle-aged, and wears wonderful gowns."

"Exactly! The description is quite correct, Roddy. But where did you see her to-night?"

"She is at Mr Sandys'."

"At Mr Sandys'?" gasped his father. "You are surely mistaken! Freda Crisp would never have the *entrée* there?"

"But she has, father! I saw her go in—with an elderly man whose name is Bertram Harrison."

"I've never heard of him. But are you quite certain of this, Roddy? Are you positive that the woman is actually on friendly terms with Mr Sandys?"

Then Roddy explained to his father exactly what had occurred, and how he had obtained the name of the handsome guest.

"Well—what you tell me, my boy, utterly staggers me?" the old man admitted. "I never dreamed that the woman knew Purcell Sandys. I told you to beware of her, and I repeat my warning. She is a woman whose eyes are as fascinating as those of a snake, and whose hand-shake is as fatal as a poisoned dart."

"Really, dad, you don't seem to like her, eh?"

"No, my boy, I don't. I have cause—good cause, alas! to hold her in abhorrence—as your enemy and mine!"

"But why? I can't understand you. You've never spoken of her till the other day."

"Because I—well, the secret is mine, Roddy."

"Yours," said his son. "Is it one that I may not know?"

"Yes. I would prefer to say nothing more," he answered briefly.

"Nothing more concerning a woman who held me for days beneath her evil influence, helpless as a babe in her unscrupulous hands—a woman who compelled me to—"



"To what, Roddy?" asked his father very quickly, and with difficulty controlling his own emotion.

"To commit some crime, I fear. But I cannot tell—I cannot decide exactly what I did—or how I acted. All seems so vague, indistinct and mysterious! All I remember is that woman's handsome face—that pair of dark, evil eyes!"

"Yes," remarked the old man in a deep voice. "They are evil. The man is bad enough—but the woman is even worse."

"The man Harrison?"

"No. Gordon Gray. You have not met him."

"Perhaps I have. Perhaps he was the man with Mrs Crisp at the house where I was held in bondage—a big house standing in its own grounds—but where it is situated, I have no idea."

"Perhaps," said his father reflectively. "Describe him."

Roddy Homfray strove to recall the salient points of the woman's male companion, and as far as his recollection went he described them.

"Yes," said the rector, his grey brows knit.

"It may have been Gordon Gray! But why did they make that secret attack upon you, if not in order to injure me?"

"Because I discovered the girl in the wood. They evidently intended to cover all traces of the crime. But how did they come to Welling Wood at all?"

His father remained silent. He had said nothing of the woman's secret visit to him, nor of Gray's presence in the church on that Sunday night. He kept his own counsel, yet now he fully realised the dastardly trap set for his son, and how, all unconsciously, the lad had fallen into it.

Only that afternoon Doctor Denton had called, and they had taken tea together. In the course of their conversation the doctor had told him how, when in London on the previous day, he had gone to an old fellow-student who was now a great mental specialist in Harley Street, and had had a conversation with him concerning Roddy's case.

After hearing all the circumstances and a close description of the symptoms, the specialist had given it as his opinion that the ball of fire which Roddy had seen was undoubtedly the explosion of a small bomb of asphyxiating gas which had rendered him unconscious. Afterwards a certain drug recently invented by a chemist in Darmstadt had, no doubt, been injected into his arms. This drug was a most dangerous and terrible one, for while it had no influence upon a person's actions, yet it paralysed the brain and almost inevitably caused insanity.

Roddy was practically cured, but the specialist had expressed a very serious fear that ere long signs of insanity would reappear, and it would then be incurable!

It was that secret but terrible knowledge of his son's imminent peril that old Mr Homfray now held. His enemies had triumphed, after all!

And this was made the more plain when three hours later he woke up to find his son in his room, chattering and behaving as no man in his senses would.

The old man rose, and with clenched fists declared aloud that he would now himself fight for his son's life and bring the guilty pair to justice.

But, alas! the old rector never dreamed how difficult would be his task, nor what impregnable defences had arisen to protect and aid those who were his enemies.

In addition Roddy, in his half-dazed condition, never dreamed of the perils and pitfalls which now surrounded the girl he so dearly loved.

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## **Chapter Nine.**

### **The Spider's Nest.**

Ten days had gone by.

Gordon Gray, wearing a grey Austrian velour hat and heavy brown motor-coat, turned the car from the Great North Road into the drive which led to the front of Willowden, and alighted.

The afternoon was wet, and the drive from London had been a cold, uncomfortable one. In the hall he threw off his coat, and entering the well-furnished morning-room, rang the bell. In a few moments Claribut, respectable, white-haired and rosy-faced, entered.

"Well, Jim?" he asked. "What's the news at Little Farncombe—eh? You've been there several days; what have you discovered?"

"Several things," replied the old crook who posed as servant. "Things we didn't expect."

"How?" asked Gray, offering the old man a cigarette from his gold case.

"Well, I went first to Pangbourne, and then to Little Farncombe. Young Homfray was taken queer again. I stayed at the Red Lion, and managed to find out all about what was going on at the Rectory. Homfray's old gardener is in the habit of taking his glass of beer there at night, and I, posing as a stranger, soon got him to talk. He told me that his young master was taken ill in the night. His brain had given way, and the village doctor called in a specialist from Harley Street. The latter can't make out the symptoms."

"Probably not!" growled Gray. "The dose cost us a lot, so it ought not to be detected by the first man consulted."

"The specialist has, however, fixed that he's suffering from a drug—administered with malicious intent, he puts it."

"What's the fool's name?" snapped Gray.

"I don't know. My friend, the gardener, could not ascertain."

Gray gave vent to a short grunt of dissatisfaction.

"Well—and what then?"

"The young fellow was very ill—quite off his head for three days—and then they gave him some injections which quietened him, and now he's a lot better. Nearer his normal self, I hear." And he sank into a chair by the fire.

"H'm! He'll probably have a second relapse. I wonder what they gave him? I wonder if this Harley Street chap has twigged our game, Jim?"

"Perhaps he has."

"If so, then it's a jolly good job for us that I kept out of the way. Young Homfray has never seen me to his knowledge, remember. He saw you several times."

"Yes, Gordon. You took precautions—as you always do. You somehow seem to see into the future."

"I do, my dear Jimmie. I hope this lad doesn't recognise Freda again. He may, of course. But he doesn't know me—which is as well."

"He recollects finding Edna, though."

"Ah! That's a little awkward, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. He told the old sky-pilot all about it, but naturally they think his mind is unhinged and take the story with a grain of salt."

"Naturally. But what else?" asked the well-dressed international crook with a business-like air.

"It seems that the young fellow is on the point of obtaining a concession from the Moorish Government to prospect for emeralds somewhere in the Atlas Mountains; I believe it is a place called the Wad Sus. Ever heard of it?"

"Yes," replied Gray, making a mental note of the region. "I've heard of some ancient mines there. But how is he obtaining the concession?"

"Ah! I've had a lot of trouble to get that information, and it has cost me a pound or two. But I've got it," laughed the old scoundrel.

"There's a friend of his who lives at Richmond, a certain Andrew Barclay, who has spent many years in Fez. It seems that young Homfray met him in Santiago last year, and by some means was able to do him a great service. In return, this man Barclay is endeavouring to obtain the concession for prospecting from the Moorish Government."

"H'm! The Wad Sus region—a very wild mountainous one, inhabited by a wild desert tribe called the Touaregs, men who wear black veils over their faces to protect them from the sandstorms so prevalent in the Sahara. But I'll look it all up. Where does this man Barclay live?" asked Gray.

"In Underhill Road. Where that is I don't know—but, of course, it is easily found."

The master-crook drew several long whiffs at his choice Eastern cigarette.

"Then, after all, it may be to our distinct advantage that Roderick Homfray recovers, Jimmie."

"What! Then you think that the concession for the emerald prospecting may be worth money?"

"It may be worth quite a lot in the City. A rather attractive proposition—emeralds in the Sahara. I know two or three men who would take it up—providing I could bring them a properly signed and sealed concession. Emeralds are increasing in value nowadays, you know—and an emerald concession is a sound proposition. After all, the lad may yet be of considerable use to us, Jimmie."

"Pity he saw Freda!" remarked the wily old fellow. "Jimmie, the butler" was well known in Sing-Sing Prison as one of the shrewdest and cleverest of crooks and card-sharpers who had ever "worked" the transatlantic liners.

In the underworld of New York, Paris and London marvellous stories had been and were still told of his alertness, of the several bold *coups* he had made, and the great sums he had filched from the pockets of the unwary in conjunction, be it said, with Gordon Gray, alias Commander George Tothill, late of the British Navy, who was also

known to certain of his pals as "Toby" Jackson. At Parkhurst Prison "Joyous Jimmie" was also well known, for he had enjoyed the English air for seven years less certain good conduct remission. But both master and man were crooks, clever cultured men who could delude anybody, who could adapt themselves to any surroundings, who knew life in all its phases, and could, with equanimity, eat a portion of oily fried fish-and-chips for their dinner or enjoy a Sole Colbert washed down with a glass of Imperial Tokay.

The pair, with a man named Arthur Porter, known to his criminal friends as "Guinness"—whom, by the way, Roddy had seen entering Mr Sandys' house in Park Lane—and the handsome woman Freda Crisp were indeed parasites upon London society.

Their daring was colossal, their ingenuity astounding, and the ramifications of their friends bewildering.

"Get me a drink, Jimmie," said the man who posed as his master. "I'm cold. Why the devil don't you keep a better fire than this?"

"The missus is out. Went to the parson's wife's tea-party half an hour ago. Mary goes to church here. It's better."

"Of course it is—gives us a hall-mark of respectability," laughed Gray. "Freda goes now and then. But she gives money to the old parson and excuses herself for non-attendance on Sunday mornings. Oh! my dear Jimmie!" he laughed. "These people want a lot of moss scraping off them, don't they—eh?"

"Moss! Why, it's that hard, grey lichen with hairy flowers that grows on trees! They want it all scraped off, then rubbed with sandpaper and a rag and acid applied to put a bit of vim in them. It's the same over all this faded old country—that's my belief."

"And yet some of them are infernally cute. That old man Homfray, for instance, he's got his eyes skinned. He doesn't forget that silly young ass Hugh Willard, you know!"

"No, Gordon! Don't mention him. That's one of our failures—one of our false steps," declared Jimmie. "I don't like to hear any mention of his name—nor of Hyde Park Square either."

"Rot! my dear fellow! What can the old clergyman know? Nothing. It's all surmise—and what does that matter? There's no trace, and—"

"And we made a profit—and a fine lot of good it did us."

"It was Freda's doing. She worked it out."

"I know. And, thanks to her, we are in the infernal peril we are to-day, my dear Gordon."

"Peril? Bosh! What are you thinking of, Jimmie?" laughed Gray. "There's not a written word."

"But you know what old Homfray said to Freda—what he threatened—a witness!"

"Witness!" laughed the good-looking man, tossing his cigarette end viciously into the fire. "Don't believe it, my dear old chap. He was only trying to bluff her—and Freda knows a game worth two of that—the game we are playing with the old fool's son."

"A highly dangerous game—I call it!" was the butler's dubious reply.

"Leave that to me."

"But he might recognise me, Gordon!"

"Rot! You won't meet him."

"What about Freda?"

"Don't worry. The boy was so dazed by the drug that he'll never recognise her again. She tried to make him believe that he himself had committed a crime. And she succeeded."

"Old Homfray may have told him about us and about the Willard affair. What then?"

"No fear of that. Old Homfray will say nothing to his son. He wouldn't expose himself."

But Claribut shook his head in doubt.

"My opinion is that we're treading on very thin ice. I don't like this house—and I don't like the look of things at all."

"The house is all right. Young Homfray can recollect nothing clearly after he found the girl."

"Of course, his friends are laughing at this weird story of how he discovered her," said Claribut. "But we don't know whether, in some way or other, his story may be corroborated. And then—"

"Well, even then there's no evidence to connect us with the affair. None whatever. We got them both clear away in the car, thanks to your marvellous ingenuity, Jimmie. And naturally he wonders where Edna is."

"And so do two or three other people," Claribut remarked. "Recollect there are some unwelcome inquiries on foot in another quarter."

"I don't fear them in the least. All we have to do now is to sit tight and watch the young fellow's movements. We want to ascertain what he is doing concerning that concession. We must discover that man Barclay at Richmond and find out what sort of fellow he is. I may have to approach him. We both of us know Morocco—eh, Jimmie? That little bit of gun-running helping the Moors against the Spanish was exciting enough—wasn't it?"

"Yes. And it brought us in big profits, too. I wish we had another slice of luck like it," Claribut agreed.

"Well, we may. Who knows? I'll see what I can find out about emeralds in Morocco."

At that moment the woman Crisp came in. She was wearing a long mink coat, with a splendid blue fox around her neck and a small grey velour hat which suited her to perfection.

"Hallo, Gordon! Back again. How's Paris looking?"

"Looking? I was only there nine hours, just to see Françillon. Good job I went. He didn't see the risk. He's slipped off to Switzerland. He left the Gare de Lyon at eleven this morning, and the Sûreté are now looking, for him. He got off just in the nick of time."

"You came over by air, I suppose?"

"Yes, left Le Bourget at ten and was at Croydon just after twelve. I left the car at Croydon yesterday afternoon when I went over. Rather a bad fog over the Channel and it took us over three hours."

"Did you see Milly?"

"Yes, called at the Continental last night and had half an hour's chat with her. She seems well enough, and had booked her passage to New York from Cherbourg on the eighteenth."

"And what's the latest about young Homfray?" asked the handsome woman, divesting herself of her furs.

"I was just discussing him with Jimmie. He seems to have unearthed one or two things while poking about at Little Farncombe."

"Yes. But there's one fact that I've discovered to-day—a very important fact," she said.

"Well, what's the trouble now?" asked Gray. "Young Homfray is watching us!"

"Watching us? What do you mean?" asked the man, turning pale. "Has the old man told him about us?"

"He may have done. That we can't tell. Only I found out that the other night Homfray was watching outside Purcell Sandys' house in Park Lane, and saw me go in with Arthur. He inquired our names of one of the servants."

"Gad! Then he's already recognised you—eh?" cried Gray. "That's horribly awkward."

"It is—in many ways! We must devise some plan to close the young man's mouth."

"But how, Freda?"

"The drug will work again in a day or two. When it does he'll be a hopeless idiot and nobody will credit a word he's said."

"It may work—and it may not. Jimmie says that some Harley Street fellow has been giving him injections. That looks as though the drug has been spotted—eh?"

"Yes, it does. But old Grunberg assured me that a reaction must set in and hopeless idiocy will be the result. At least, let's hope so."

"I'm not so hopeful. The lad may yet be of some use to us. It's fortunate that he's never seen me."

"It is. And you'd better keep away from me in London, for it's evident that he is pretty shrewd, and is now constantly watchful."

"I agree," growled Claribut. "And he must not see me either."

"No. He certainly must not," said Freda Crisp. "Of course, the mystery of Edna has aroused his curiosity—which is a pity. Our only hope is that the drug will act as old Grunberg guaranteed it would. By Jove! those German chemists are devilish clever—aren't they? Old Homfray has defied us, and he will very soon have cause to regret his words, as I told him he would. Yet he may, of course, risk everything and tell the police about Hugh Willard!"

"Oh! Don't worry at all about that, you fool!" urged Gray. "As long as his son lives, whether idiot or not, he'll keep his mouth closed for his own sake, depend upon it?"

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## Chapter Ten.

### What Mr Sandys Knew.

"I am very pleased indeed to meet your son, Mr Homfray," said the grey-bearded man in his well-worn dinner-jacket

as he grasped Roddy's hand in the handsome hall of Farncombe Towers.

"It's awfully kind of you to say that, Mr Sandys," replied the young man, as they crossed to the great open fireplace with the blazing logs, a fireplace with carved stone over which was the time-worn escutcheon with the sea-horse rampant of the ancient Farncombe family. "It's so very kind of you to invite me," the young man went on. "Lord Farncombe asked me here the last time I was back in England."

"You are a great traveller, I believe—are you not? Your father told me the other day about your adventures on the Amazon."

"Well," laughed the young man, easy in his well-cut dinner-jacket. "I'm a mining engineer, you know, and we have to rough it very often."

"No doubt. Some of you are the pioneers of Great Britain. Once, years ago, I accompanied an expedition up the Yukon River, and I had a very rough time of it, but it was intensely interesting."

"Just now my son is interested in a concession for emerald prospecting in the Atlas Mountains," the old rector remarked. "I have been going into the matter. There are some ancient workings somewhere in the Wad Sus district, from which it is said that the Pharaoh Rameses V of the Twenty-First Dynasty, and who was called Amennesu-F, obtained the magnificent gems which were among the greatest treasures of his huge palace in ancient Thebes. They were the gems which five hundred years later Ptolemy IV gave to Arsinde, the wife of Philopator—a fact which is recorded in a papyrus in the British Museum. And that was about eleven hundred years before the Christian era. The exact locality has been lost, but my son believes that from the mention of two ancient documents—one of which is in the Egyptian department at the British Museum and the other in the National Library in Paris—it can be located."

"Most interesting, intensely interesting," exclaimed the honest-faced old gentleman whose name in connexion with his partner, Sir Charles Hornton, the international banker, who lived mostly in Paris, was one to conjure with in high finance. All over Europe the banking house of Sandys and Hornton was known. Next to that of the Rothschilds it was the most world famous. Old Purcell's partner lived in the Avenue des Champs Elysées and had the ancient château of Livarat on the Loire, a beautiful winter villa at Cap Martin, and a house in Suffolk. Sir Charles seldom, if ever, came to London. Lady Hornton, however, frequently came, and spent a few weeks each season at Claridge's or at Fawndene Court.

"I hope you will be successful, not only in obtaining the concession from the Moors, Homfray, but also in locating the exact position of the ancient workings," Sandys said, turning to the young man. "It should bring you a fortune, for such a business proposition is worth money even to-day when there is a slump in precious gems."

"I hope to be successful," Roddy replied, when at the same moment Elma, in a pretty gown of soft pink crêpe marocain, entered the room.

Unaware of their previous friendship, Mr Sandys introduced his daughter. Roddy instantly realised the fact that her father was in ignorance of their acquaintance, therefore he greeted her with formality, a fact which secretly amused the old rector.

At dinner Roddy found himself seated on Elma's left in the fine old seventeenth-century room, with its old panelling and its four oval portraits by Lely, pictures of the dead-and-gone Farncombe beauties in wigs and patches.

Roddy and his father were the only guests, and Elma, smiling and happy, acted as hostess.

The grey-bearded old financier evinced a great interest in the rector's son, and listened to his descriptions of his wanderings up the mighty Amazon.

Presently Mr Sandys remarked:

"I hear you are interested in wireless. It must be a most fascinating science. Of course, I have seen the installations on board ship, but the modern wireless telephony seems to me little short of marvellous."

"Yes, to the uninitiated," remarked the young fellow with a smile. "I've been experimenting for some years, and the set I have at the Rectory is quite efficient. From it I can speak over five to six hundred miles of space."

"Really?" exclaimed the old gentleman, greatly interested. "How very wonderful. I should like to see it."

"So should I, dad," said Elma, not allowing her father to know that she was already very well acquainted with the set, for Roddy had shown her how it worked, and had given her some slight instruction in its various complications. "We ought to have a set fixed here. Then we could listen to the wireless concerts, the broadcasting of news, and all that goes on in the ether—eh?"

"Would it be a very difficult affair to fit up a set here?" inquired her father of the young man.

"Not at all. You could easily stretch an aerial from a mast on one of the towers across to one of the big trees in the park, and so have a magnificent aerial. As regards cost, it all depends upon what you desire to receive. There are small sets for about five pounds, while on the large sets, which would receive everything up to nine thousand miles distant, one can spend a hundred pounds or more. Of course, you would not want to transmit—for transmission permits are only granted to those engaged in genuine research work."

"No. I should only want to listen. Could you manage to instal one for me, do you think?"

"With the greatest of pleasure," said Roddy, delighted, while in secret Elma was equally enthusiastic. She well knew

how absorbed he was in his experiments, and what pleasure he would derive from fitting up the new station.

So it was decided that Roddy should purchase a really fine seven-valve receiving-set and fix it up as soon as possible.

"You are not going away just yet, I hope," said the financier laughing, "at least, not until you've fixed up our wireless."

"I don't expect so," was the young man's reply. "As soon as my friend gets the concession through at Fez I shall go to Morocco and start to work. I've been reading up the Wad Sus region, and it seems that the only way to reach it in safety is to join one of the camel caravans which go regularly to and fro from Mogador across the Sahara."

"How interesting!" declared Elma, looking very sweet and dainty. "What an adventure to travel with the Arabs! I'd love it. We were in Algiers for a few weeks the winter before last, and I longed to make an excursion into the desert, but father objected!"

"Ah! The Sahara is no place for a woman, Elma," replied the old man. "And especially that district south of the Atlas where Mr Homfray is going. By the way," added Mr Sandys, turning to the young man, "I hear that you haven't been very well lately. Somebody said you were missing for several days. Is that so?"

A slight colour rose to the young man's face, for he was at a loss for an evasive explanation.

"Oh! I went away—up to London—and father grew alarmed because I hadn't told him where I'd gone—that's all!" he laughed, and his eyes met Elma's with a meaning look.

There the matter dropped, and all four leaving the table passed into the big drawing-room, warmed by huge wood fires blazing at each end, where coffee was served by Hughes, the stately old butler who had been in Lord Farncombe's service. Indeed, when Mr Sandys purchased the Towers he took over nearly the entire staff, by which he had greatly ingratiated himself with the whole countryside.

It was a magnificent old room, oblong, with four long windows which in daytime gave beautiful vistas over the lake, the park, and dark woods beyond—a room which contained a number of valuable pieces of antique furniture, some genuine Elizabethan chairs and a Carolean day-bed, while on the walls were three pieces of almost priceless tapestry which had originally been in the historic Château of Amboise. Across the long windows heavy plush curtains were now drawn, and instead of a hundred candles in the great crystal candelabra, the beautiful old apartment with its sweet odour of pot pourri was filled with the soft glow of electricity, the lamps being hidden behind the high-up cornice.

After coffee, Elma, at her father's request, went to the piano and King delightfully some charming French chansonettes. She had received part of her education at Versailles and spoke French fluently.

"When shall you start putting up the wireless, Mr Homfray?" she asked presently, turning to Roddy, while her father and the rector were discussing something concerning the parish.

"As soon as I can get the apparatus," was his reply. "You will, I hope, help me—eh?"

And he looked straight into her fine eyes.

"If you wish," she replied. "But—but," she added in a low voice, "you are going away to Morocco?" and her lips pouted prettily.

"Not yet," he assured her beneath his breath. "I have no wish to go while you are here, Elma." They had contrived to be at the other end of the big room, so that they could not be overheard. But next second he spoke aloud, suggesting that she should sing another song.

"No, Mr Homfray. Come, let us sit by the fire," she urged. "Tell me more about your adventures in South America. It's so exciting." And they seated themselves at the further end of the room.

Elma was nothing else than a modern girl—a "latchkey girl," if one liked to apply to her such an epithet. The removal of the conventions which tradition had built up around women—removed by the ardours and endurances of the war—has reorganised society. The correct behaviour of the days of Elma's mother had vanished, and instead of the chaperon—to-day as extinct as the dodo—Elma frequently took around with her her dancing partner, a good-looking young barrister named Mostyn Wynn, with whom she often danced the entire evening, he taking her home to Park Lane in the small hours of the morning. Mostyn was only a "pal." He was a divine dancer, but she regarded him in much the same light as she regarded her little sharp-nosed, alert Pomeranian, Tweedles, the fiery yapper who had been the means of introducing her to Roddy Homfray.

There are a good many pessimists to-day, both men and women, in London Society who declare that its "decline and fall" has come because a girl has a latchkey, because she sometimes pays for a man's dinner at a restaurant, and because she takes her dancing partner about with her like a dog. They say that the delicate lights and shades of the romance of Society of the Edwardian days are no longer to be found in Mayfair or Belgravia, but those who see through modern spectacles know that the removal of those tiresome and outworn conventions was inevitable, and that dancing partners and latchkeys for women mark the renaissance of London life, rather than the decline which our pessimists who have lived in the last generation declare it to be.

"Last Wednesday you were not in London, were you?" remarked Roddy, as he smoked the cigarette which Elma had offered him.

"No," she replied. "I motored father up to Liverpool. He had some business friends coming from New York, so we

didn't give our usual party."

"But on the previous Wednesday you did, and you had among your guests a Mrs Crisp."

"Yes, Freda Crisp. Do you know her? Isn't she awfully jolly?"

"I only know her by sight, Elma. What do you know of her? Tell me," he asked, lowering his voice again.

"Oh! not really very much. Her friend, Mr Bertram Harrison, is a business friend of father's. They are, I believe, carrying on some negotiations concerning a company in Marseilles."

"But Mrs Crisp. How did you come to know her?"

"Why?"

"Because I am very interested," Roddy said, deeply in earnest.

"Lady Hornton, the wife of father's partner, introduced us when I was staying at Fawndene Court, their place in Suffolk, about six months ago. Mr Harrison came there to dine and sleep. But Freda never fails nowadays to come to our party, and she has hosts of friends in town."

"Where does she live?" he asked eagerly.

"At a big old house called Willowden, beyond Welwyn, on the Great North Road."

The young man made a mental note of the address. Could it have been to that house he had been taken? If he saw it again possibly he would remember it.

"Why are you so inquisitive about her?" asked the girl.

"For several reasons," he replied. "I was once warned against her, Elma. And I would repeat the warning to you," he said, looking straight into the beautiful eyes of the girl he loved so deeply.

"But why?" she asked, staring at him. "Freda is an awfully good friend of mine?"

"Has she ever been down here?"

"No. We've always met in town."

"Has she ever asked about this place—about Little Farncombe—or about myself?"

"No, never. Why?"

Roddy hesitated. Then he answered:

"Oh! well, I thought she might be a little inquisitive—that's all?" He did not tell her that it was his father, the rector, who had declared her to be a woman of a very undesirable type. It was that woman's handsome, evil face that ever and anon arose in his dreams. She was the woman under whose influence he had acted against his will, utterly helpless while beneath her dominating influence and only half-conscious in his drugged state.

And such a woman was Elma's friend!

"Do you know anything of Mr Harrison?" Roddy asked, whereupon she replied that she did not know much about him, but that her father would know. Then she called across to him:

"I say, dad, what do you know about Bertram Harrison—Freda Crisp's friend?"

At mention of the latter name the rector's face changed.

"Bertram Harrison?" echoed the great financier. "Oh! He is partner in a French financial house. Hornton is having some business with him. Mrs Crisp is a relative of his—his sister, I believe. Why do you ask?"

The rector sat silent and wondering.

"Mr Homfray knows Mrs Crisp, and has just asked me about Mr Harrison."

"Oh! you know Freda, do you?" exclaimed Mr Sandys, addressing the young man. "A very intelligent and delightful woman, isn't she? She has been a wonderful traveller."

"Yes," replied Roddy faintly. "I—well, I was surprised when I knew that she was a frequent visitor at Park Lane."

"Why?"

"For certain reasons, Mr Sandys," was the young man's hard reply, "certain private reasons."

"You don't like her, that's evident," laughed the grey-bearded man.

"No, I don't," was Roddy's blunt answer, as his eyes met those of his father.

"Well, she's always most charming to me?" declared Elma.

“And she has never mentioned me?” he asked. “Are you quite sure?”

“Never?”

“Of course, I only know her through Harrison,” Mr Sandys said. “He introduced her to my partner, Sir Charles Hornton, whose wife, in turn, introduced her to Elma. She comes to our parties and seems to be very well known, for I’ve seen her in the Park once or twice with people who move in the best circles.”

“I know you’ll pardon me, Mr Sandys,” Roddy said, “but I merely asked your daughter what she knew of her. Please do not think that I wish to criticise your friends.”

“Of course not,” laughed the financier. “All of us at times make social mistakes, especially men in my own walk of life. I am frequently compelled to entertain people whose friendship I do not desire, but whom I have to tolerate for purely business purposes. But, by the way,” he added, “I should much like to hear more concerning this concession in Morocco in which you are interested. Shall you be in London to-morrow? If so, will you look in and see me about noon in Lombard Street?”

“Certainly,” replied Roddy with delight, and half an hour later father and son walked back through the frosty night to the Rectory.

On the way Roddy referred to the conversation concerning the woman Crisp, but his father remained pensive and silent.

He merely remarked:

“I had no idea that that woman was friendly with Miss Sandys.”

Next day at the hour appointed Roddy passed through the huge swing doors in Lombard Street which bore a great brass plate with the inscription: “Sandys and Hornton,” and a commissionaire at once conducted him up in the lift to Mr Purcell Sandys’ private room.

The elderly man was seated smoking a cigar by the fire of the big apartment which, with its red Turkey carpet and large mahogany table, was more like a comfortable dining-room than a business office. He welcomed his visitor to an arm-chair and at once pushed over a box of cigars.

Then, when Roddy had lit one, he rose, and standing astride upon the hearthrug, he looked at him very seriously and said:

“I really asked you here, Homfray, to put a question to you—one which I trust you will answer with truth.”

“Certainly I will,” the young man replied frankly.

The old man fixed him with his deep-set eyes, and in a strange voice put to him a question which caused him to gasp.

“A young girl named Edna Manners has mysteriously disappeared. You know something concerning the affair! Tell me, what do you know?”

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## Chapter Eleven.

### The House of Mystery.

In an instant Roddy recovered himself. He saw that if he repeated the story of finding the girl in Welling Wood he would not be believed. And if Mr Sandys did not believe the strange truth, he would likewise not believe in his *bona fides* concerning the hoped-for concession in Morocco. He therefore pursued a rather injudicious policy of evasion.

“I know no girl named Edna Manners,” he replied.

The old gentleman moved uneasily and grunted in dissatisfaction.

“You did not tell me the truth last night concerning your disappearance,” he said severely. “Why?”

“The less known about my strange adventure the better, Mr Sandys,” was the young man’s reply.

“Then you did have a curious adventure, eh? I’ve heard some rather strange rumours.”

“Rumours which I suppose are more or less true,” Roddy admitted. “But, pardon me, Mr Sandys, the affair is now all over. I was ill at the time, but now I am quite well again, and I have no desire to recall the past. It upsets me. Therefore I know that you will forgive me.”

“Certainly, certainly, my dear young friend. I quite understand. I’ve heard that you’ve been suffering—well—from a nervous breakdown, they say. Denton had a specialist down to see you. Of course I’m wrong in trying to question you when you are not in a fit state. I admit it. It is I who should ask your forgiveness, Homfray.” The young man smiled, glad to have extricated himself from a rather delicate situation.

“There is nothing to forgive,” he answered. “But one day, and very soon perhaps, I shall require your assistance, Homfray,” the grey-bearded financier said, looking at him very earnestly. “I shall want you to help me to discover what has become of that young girl. You tell me you don’t know. But perhaps you may be aware of facts which may



give us a clue to what actually happened to her.”

Those words of his made it clear that it was not Elma who had told him about the tragic discovery in Welling Wood. He had learnt it from some other source—possibly from the current village gossip. In any case, Elma had not told her father the strange truth, and for that Roddy was indeed thankful.

Those words of Purcell Sandys’, however, struck him as very strange; certainly they showed that his questioner believed that he knew more about the mysterious Edna Manners—whoever she had been—than he had admitted.

“I take it that you are deeply interested in the young lady who is missing?” Roddy remarked, hoping to elicit something concerning the girl, especially as Elma had the girl’s photograph in her possession.

“Yes, I am,” was the other’s abrupt reply. “She must be found—and at all hazards, for much depends upon it.”

“Where was she last seen?”

“On the platform at Waterloo Station on a Sunday morning—the day when you also disappeared. She was with a gentleman whose description I have, and whom we must find. I have already a very reliable firm of private inquiry agents at work, and that much they have already discovered. Whether the pair took train from Waterloo is not known.” And taking a paper from a drawer which he unlocked he read a minute description of a middle-aged, clean-shaven, well-dressed man, to which Roddy listened.

“Ah!” he said at last. “I know of nobody who answers to that description.” And he spoke the truth.

The fact, however, that Elma’s father had engaged detectives was rather perturbing. They might discover the secret of his love for Elma! That secret both were determined, for the present, to conceal.

Half an hour later Roddy walked back along Lombard Street, that bustling thoroughfare of bankers and financiers, full of grave reflections. If he could only recollect what had happened during that period of half-oblivion, then he would be able to act with fearlessness and come to grips with his enemies.

He remembered that on the previous night he had learnt where Freda Crisp lived—a house called Willowden, on the high road beyond Welwyn. Therefore after a sandwich at the refreshment bar at King’s Cross station he took train, and half an hour later alighted at Welwyn station.

Directed by a butcher’s boy, he walked for about a mile along the broad high road until he came to the house—a large old-fashioned one standing back amid a clump of high fir trees, with a tennis lawn and large walled garden on the left. The green holland blinds were down, and apparently the place was temporarily closed, a fact which gave him courage to approach nearer.

As he did so the chords of his memory began to vibrate. He could remember at last! He recollected quite distinctly walking on the lawn. In a flash it all came back to him! There was a gate which led into a small rose garden. He looked for it. Yes! There it was! And the grey old sundial! He recollected the quaint inscription upon it: “I mark ye Time; saye Gossip dost thou so.” Yes, the weather-beaten old dial was there beside a lily pond with a pretty rock garden beyond.

He stood peering eagerly through a crack in the old moss-grown oak fence, his vista being limited. But it sufficed to recall to his be-dimmed memory some details, sharp and outstanding, of the interior of that old Georgian house, its plan and its early Victorian furnishings. In the days he had spent there he had wandered aimlessly in and out. He knew that the two French windows, which he could see, opening on to a veranda and giving out upon the leaf-strewn lawn, were those of the drawing-room. The old-fashioned furniture he remembered was covered with glazed chintz with a design of great red roses and green peacocks. In the centre was a large settee upon which the Woman of Evil had often sat beside him, holding his hand and talking to him in domineering tones, while her elderly male companion sat in a high-backed “grandfather” chair beside the fire, smoking and smiling.

Mostly, however, he had spent his time in an upstairs room which had once been a nursery, for it had iron bars at the window. His eyes sought that window—and he found it!

Ah! in that room he had spent many dreary hours; his mind filled with weird and horrible visions—shadowy pictures which seemed bent on driving him to insanity.

For fully a quarter of an hour he remained in the vicinity, his eyes strained on every side, and gradually recovering his normal memory.

When, however, he tried to recall that night when he had acted under the overbearing influence of the woman Crisp he, alas! failed—failed utterly. Perhaps if he could get sight of the interior of the room in which he was victimised he might remember, but strive how he would all he could recall was but misty and unreal.

At last he turned from the house, half-fearful lest his presence there might be known, yet gratified that the place was shut up.

Had the woman and her companion left? Had they taken fright and flown?

He walked back to the station, but ere he had arrived at King’s Cross he found that his recollection was becoming fainter, until it was just as hazy as before. Only when his eyes were fixed upon the scene of his mysterious bondage did his memory return to him.

Yet he had satisfactorily cleared up one important point. He had fixed the house to which he had been secretly

conveyed. Had the girl Edna Manners been taken there also? Perhaps her body had afterwards been concealed. Recollection of his mysterious discovery caused him to shudder. The girl's appeal to him to save her still sounded in his ears, while the vision of that pale, still countenance often rose before him.

Next day, and the next, he was busy purchasing the wireless set which he had promised to obtain for Mr Sandys—a seven-valve Marconi set with a “double note-magnifier,” a microphone relay and a loud-speaking telephone. This, with coils taking every wavelength from one hundred to twenty-five thousand metres, completed one of the best and most sensitive sets that had been invented.

Adjoining the morning-room in the east wing of Farncombe Towers was a small ante-room, and into this he proceeded to instal the apparatus, aided of course by Elma. Mr Sandys had gone to Paris to consult with his partner, therefore the young pair had the place to themselves.

The local builder at Roddy's orders put up a mast upon the tower immediately above the room they had chosen, and the young man having constructed the double-line aerial a hundred feet long and put many insulators of both ebonite and porcelain at each end, the long twin wires were one morning hoisted to the pole, while the other end was secured in the top of a great Wellingtonia not far from the mansion. The lead-in cable, known to naval wireless men as the “cow-tail,” was brought on to a well-insulated brass rod which passed through the window-frame and so on to the instruments, which Roddy set up neatly in an American roll-top desk as being convenient to exclude the dust.

Making a wireless “earth” proved an amusing diversion to both. Elma, who had read a book about wireless, suggested soldering a wire to the water tap; but Roddy, who had bought his experience in wireless after many months and even years of experiment, replied:

“Yes. That's all very well for an amateur ‘earth,’ but we've put up a professional set, and we must make a real ‘earth.’”

The real “earth” consisted, first, of digging three deep holes about four feet deep and three feet long under the aerial. This necessitated the use of a pickaxe borrowed from the head gardener, for they had to dig into chalk.

Elma proved herself an enthusiastic excavator and very handy with the shovel, and after a heavy afternoon's work she wheeled a barrowful of coke from the palm-house furnace, and Roddy carefully placed a zinc plate in a perpendicular position into each hole and surrounded it with coke which, absorbing the moisture, would always keep the zinc damp, and hence make a good earth connexion. These three plates having been put in directly beneath the aerial wires, they were connected by soldered wires, and before darkness set in the earth-wire was brought in and connected up to the set.

Afterwards, in order to make certain of his “earth”—usually one of the most neglected portions of a wireless installation, by the way—he took a large mat of fine copper gauze which he had bought in London, and soldering a lead to it spread it across the grass, also beneath the aerial.

Elma watched it all in wonderment and in admiration of Roddy's scientific knowledge. She had read the elementary book upon wireless, but her lover, discarding the directions there set down, had put in things which she did not understand.

“And now will it really work?” asked the girl, as together they stood in the little room where upon the oak writing-desk the various complicated-looking pieces of apparatus had been screwed down.

“Let's try,” said Roddy, screwing two pairs of head-phones upon two brass terminals on one of the units of the apparatus.

Elma took one pair of telephones, while Roddy placed the others over his ears. His deft fingers pulled over the aerial switch, whereupon the nine little tubular electric lights instantly glowed, each of them three inches long and about the size of a chemical test-tube. They gave quite a pretty effect.

“Thanks, Cox!” came a voice, loud and distinct. “I could not get you clearly until now. I understand that your position is about half-way across the Channel and that visibility is rather bad. Le Bourget reported when you left. Righto! Croydon, switching off!”

“Splendid!” Elma cried. “Just fancy, within a day you have fitted up wireless for us, so that we can actually hear telephony on the Paris airway!”

“That was my friend Luger talking to the Paris-London mail-plane. Probably we'll have Tubby next.”

“Who's Tubby?”

“Oh! The one-time boy scout who is an operator in the hut at Croydon aerodrome and who climbs the masts, fits the switch-board, and does all the odd jobs. Sometimes the jobs are very odd, for he makes the wheels go round when other people give it up. Listen again. The hour has just struck. Tubby may now come on duty.”

Again they placed the telephones over their ears, but beyond a few faint dots and dashes—“spark” signals from ships at sea and “harmonies” at that—there was nothing. The mysterious voice of Croydon was silent.

Suddenly they heard a kind of wind whistle in the telephones, and another voice, rather high-pitched, said:

“Hulloa! G.E.A.Y.! Hulloa, Cox! Croydon calling. Please give me your position. Croydon over.”

“That's Tubby,” laughed Roddy. “I thought he'd come on duty for the last watch.”

"Marvellous!" declared the pretty girl, still listening intently.

Then she heard a faint voice reply:

"Hulloa, Croydon! G.E.A.Y. answering. I am just over Boulogne; visibility much better. Thanks, Tubby! Switching off."

Roddy removed the telephones from his ears, and remarked:

"I hope your father will be interested."

"He will, I'm certain. It's topping," the girl declared, "but it's rather weird though."

"Yes—to the uninitiated," he replied. Then, glancing at his wrist-watch, he said: "It's time that New Brunswick began to work with Carnarvon. Let us see if we can get the American station."

He changed the small coils of wires for ones treble their size, and having adjusted them, they both listened again.

"There he is!" Roddy exclaimed. "Sending his testing 'V's' in Morse. Do you hear them—three shorts and one long?"

In the 'phones the girl could hear them quite plainly, though the sending station was across the Atlantic.

Then the signals stopped. Instantly the great Marconi station gave the signal "go." And Roddy, taking up a pencil, scribbled down the first message of the series, a commercial message addressed to a shipping firm in Liverpool from their New York agent concerning freights, followed, with scarce a pause, by a congratulatory message upon somebody's marriage—two persons named Gladwyn—and then a short Press message recording what the President had said in Congress an hour before.

"They'll keep on all night," remarked Roddy, with a smile. "But so long as the set works, that's all I care about. I only hope your father will be satisfied that I've tried to do my best."

"Really the marvels of wireless are unending!" Elma declared, looking into her lover's strong, manly face. "You said that the broadcast would come on at eight. Stay and have something to eat, and let us listen to it."

"Ah! I'm afraid I'd—"

"Afraid! Of course not!" she laughed merrily, and ringing the bell she told Hughes, who answered, that "Mr Homfray would stay to dinner."

The latter proved a cosy tête-à-tête meal at which the old butler very discreetly left the young couple to themselves, and at eight they were back in the newly fitted wireless-room where, on taking up the telephones, they found that the concert broadcasted from London had already begun. A certain prima donna of world-wide fame was singing a selection from *Il Trovatore*, and into the room the singer's voice came perfectly.

Roddy turned a switch, and instead of the music being received into the 'phones it came out through the horn of the "loud speaker," and could be heard as though the singer was actually in the house and not forty-five miles away.

And they sat together for yet another hour enjoying the latest wonders of wireless.

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## Chapter Twelve.

### Rex Rutherford's Prophecy.

At the Rectory Roddy sat in his own wireless-room until far into the night, fitting a complete wireless receiving-set into a small cigar-box. The one he had fitted into a tin tobacco-box was efficient in a sense, but the detector being a crystal it was not sufficiently sensitive to suit him.

The one he was constructing was of his own design, with three valves—as the little wireless glow-lamps are called—the batteries and telephones being all contained in the box, which could easily be carried in the pocket together with a small coil of wire which could be strung up anywhere as an aerial, and as "earth" a lamp post, a pillar-box, or running water could be used.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning before he had finished assembling it, and prior to fixing it in the box he submitted it to a test. Opening the window of his wireless-room he threw the end of the coil of wire outside. Then going out into the moonlight, he took the ball insulator at the end of the wire and fixed it upon a nail he had driven in the wall of the gardener's potting-shed some time before.

Then, having stretched the wire taut to the house, he went back and attached it to one of the terminal screws of the little set upon which he had been working for many days. The earth-wire of his experimental set he joined up, and then putting on the 'phones listened intently.

Not a tick!

He slowly turned the ebonite knob of the condenser, but to no avail. Raising the wavelength brought no better result. Was it yet another failure? As an experimenter in radio he was used to failures, so it never disheartened him. Failure in prospecting was the same as failure in wireless. He received each rebuff complacently, but with that air of dogged perseverance of which success is ever born.

“Strange!” he remarked aloud. “It certainly should give signals.”

Then he examined the underside of the sheet of ebonite on which the various units were mounted, valves, condensers, etc, when at last he discovered a faulty connexion on the grid-leak. The latter will puzzle the uninitiated, but suffice it to say that so delicate is wireless receiving that over a line drawn by a lead pencil across paper or ebonite with a two-inch scratch in it filled with pencil dust the electric waves will travel. The connexion was not complete at one end. He tightened the little terminal, and suddenly came the expected high-pitched dots and dashes in the Morse code.

“Ah! Stonehaven!” he remarked. Then, by turning the knob of the condenser, a sharp rippling sound was brought in—the automatic transmission from Cologne to Aldershot at seventy words a minute.

Backwards and forwards he turned the condenser, and with a second knob altered the wavelength of his reception, first tuning in ships in the Channel signalling to their controlling station at Niton, in the Isle of Wight, or the North Foreland; then Leafield, in Oxfordshire, could be heard transmitting to Cairo, while Madrid was calling Ongar, and upon the highest wavelength the powerful Marconi station at Carnarvon was sending out a continuous stream of messages across the Atlantic.

Suddenly, as he reduced his wavelength below six hundred metres, he heard a man’s deep voice call:

“Hulloa, 3.V.N. Hulloa! This is 3.A.Z. answering. What I said was the truth. You will understand. Tell me that you do. It is important and very urgent. 3.A.Z. changing over.”

Who 3.A.Z. was, or who 3.V.N., Roddy did not at the moment know without looking up the call-letters in his list of experimental stations. The voice was, however, very strong, and evidently high power was being used.

He listened, and presently he heard a voice much fainter and evidently at a considerable distance, reply:

“Hulloa, 3.A.Z. This is 3.V.N. answering. No, I could not get you quite clearly then. Remember, I am at Nice. Kindly now repeat your message on a thousand metres. 3.V.N. over.”

Quickly Roddy increased his wavelength to a thousand metres, which he swiftly tested with his wave-metre, a box-like apparatus with buzzer and little electric bulb. Suddenly through the ether came the words even more clearly than before:

“Hulloa, 3.V.N. at Nice! Hulloa! This is 3.A.Z. repeating. I will repeat slowly. Please listen! 3.A.Z. repeating a message. Andrew Barclay leaves London to-morrow for Marseilles, where he will meet Mohamed Ben Azuz at the Hôtel Louvre et Paix. Will you go to Marseilles? Please reply. 3.A.Z. over.”

Roddy held his breath. Who could possibly be warning somebody in the south of France of his friend Barclay’s departure from Victoria to interview the Moorish Minister of the Interior regarding the concession?

Again he listened, and yet again came the far-off voice, faint, though yet distinct:

“3.V.N. calling 3.A.Z.! Thanks, I understand. Yes. I will go by next train to Marseilles. Is Freda coming? 3.V.N. over.”

“Yes. Freda will come if you wish it,” replied the loud, hard voice. “3.A.Z. calling 3.V.N. Over.”

“Hulloa, 3.A.Z. From 3.V.N. Thanks. Shall expect Freda, but not by same train. Tell Jimmie to be on the alert. I’ll explain to Freda when I see her. Good-night, old man. Good-bye. 3.V.N. closing down.”

Quickly Roddy searched his list of amateur call-signs, but he could not find either 3.A.Z. or 3.V.N. They were evidently false signs used by pre-arrangement, but by persons who, strangely enough, knew of his friend Barclay’s journey on the morrow!

And Freda? Could it be Freda Crisp who had been indicated? Why was she going south also—but not by the same train?

After an hour’s sleep young Homfray, much mystified, rose, dressed, and taking out his motorcycle, started up the long high road to London.

On the platform at Victoria as early as half-past eight o’clock he awaited his friend Barclay. Presently he came, a ruddy, round-faced, rather short little man of fifty, who was a thoroughgoing cosmopolitan and who had dabbled in concessions in all parts of the world.

“Hulloa, Homfray!” he exclaimed, looking at the muddy condition of his friend’s motor clothes. “I didn’t expect you to come to see me off.”

“No,” replied the young man rather hesitatingly, “but the fact is I have come here to warn you.”

“Warn me! Of what?” asked his friend in surprise.

Then Roddy explained, and repeated what the mysterious voice from the void had said.

“Both speaker and listener were disguised under false call-signs,” he went on. “Hence it is highly suspicious, and I felt it my duty to tell you.”

Andrew Barclay was puzzled. The porter was placing his bags in a first-class compartment of the boat train, which was crowded with people going holiday-making abroad. Loud-voiced society women commanded porters, and elderly

men stalked along to the carriages following their piles of baggage. The eight-forty Paris service is usually crowded in summer and winter, for one gets to Paris by five, in time for a leisurely dinner and the series of trains which leave the Gare de Lyon in the region of nine o'clock.

"Just repeat all you said, Roddy, will you?" asked the man in the heavy travelling coat.

The young fellow did so.

"Freda? That's a rather unusual name. Has it anything to do with that woman Freda Crisp you told me about? What do you think?"

"I believe it has."

Barclay was aware of all the strange experiences of the shrewd young mining engineer. Only three days after his return to Little Farncombe he had gone down to the quiet old country rectory and listened to his friend's story.

In this concession to work the ancient mines in the Wad Sus he was equally interested with his young friend in whom he believed so implicitly, knowing how enthusiastic and therefore successful he had been in his prospecting expeditions up the Amazon.

The big portable luggage-vans—those secured by wire hawsers which are slung on to the mail-boat and re-slung on to the Paris express—had been locked and sealed with lead, as they always are. The head guard's whistle blew, and Barclay was about to enter the train, when Roddy said:

"Do take care! There's more in this than either of us suspect. That woman Crisp! Beware of her. You will see her in due course at your hotel. Be careful. Good-bye—and good luck!"

The train moved out around the bend. The young fellow in his wet, muddy overalls stood for a moment gazing at the rear van. Should he watch for the departure of the woman? No. She might see him. Better that he should remain in apparent ignorance. So he went out, remounted his cycle, and headed away back over Putney Bridge and through crooked Kingston, Cobham, and down the steep hill in Guildford towards home.

Freda! That name was burned into his brain like the brand of a red-hot iron. Freda—the woman who had held him beneath her strange, inexplicable spell during his bondage at the remote old country house near Welwyn.

But why? Why should his father have warned him against her? His father, a most honest, upright, pious man to whom he had always looked for leadership—the road-builder to the perfect life, as he had always regarded him. No man in the world is perfect, but Norton Homfray had, to say the least, tried to live up to the standard laid down by the Holy Writ.

Had he had faults in his past life, his son wondered? Every man has faults. Were those faults being concealed by his father—the "pater" upon whom he doted and to whom when away he wrote so regularly, with all his most intimate news, though mails might leave very intermittently, as they do from the back of beyond, where prospectors carry on their work with hammer and microscope.

Then, as he rode along in the grey, damp winter morning, he reflected.

The whole situation was most puzzling. He loved Elma with a fierce all-consuming affection. She was his only beacon in his eager, strenuous life.

A week went by. He anxiously awaited news from Andrew Barclay, but the latter sent no word. He was, without doubt, negotiating with the Moorish Minister of the Interior, who was at that moment visiting France, and who was his personal friend.

But Roddy could not rid himself of the recollection of that strange conversation by radio-telephone—the request that Freda should go south. He had taken another journey out to Welwyn in order to ascertain if the woman was still at Willowden, but had found the house still closed and apparently without a caretaker. Had he been able to get a view of the back of the premises he would, no doubt, have noticed the well-constructed wireless aerial, but it was completely hidden from the road, and as during his enforced sojourn in the place he had never seen it, he remained in ignorance of its existence.

At Farncombe Towers Mr Sandys, when he returned home, had expressed himself highly delighted with the wireless set which the rector's son had installed, and on two successive evenings sat with Elma intensely interested in listening to broadcasted concerts and news.

Three nights later Elma and her father, having been to the first night of a new revue, had had supper at the Savoy, and passing into the lounge, sat down to their coffee, when an elderly, clean-shaven, rather tall man, accompanied by a well-dressed, shorter, but good-looking companion, both in well-cut evening clothes, suddenly halted.

"Hulloa, Harrison!" exclaimed the grey-bearded financier to the man who bowed before Elma and greeted her.

"Not often we see you here, Mr Sandys!" replied the man, evidently surprised. Then he begged leave to introduce his companion, Mr Rex Rutherford.

Elma smiled as the stranger expressed delight at meeting her father and herself.

"Your name is very well known to me, as to everybody, Mr Sandys," said the dark-eyed man pleasantly, as they both took chairs which the financier offered them, at the same time ordering extra coffee. "Though I'm an American, I live

mostly in Paris, and I met your partner, Sir Charles, there quite recently.”

“I shouldn’t have thought you were an American,” remarked Elma. “We in England expect every United States citizen to speak with an accent, you know.”

“Well, Miss Sandys, I suppose I’m one of the exceptions. My father and mother were British. Perhaps that accounts for it,” he laughed, lighting a cigar.

“Mr Rutherford is more of a Parisian than American, Miss Sandys,” declared the man, Bertram Harrison. And then they began to chat about the new revue, which Elma described enthusiastically as a great success, while Rex Rutherford sat listening to her, evidently filled with admiration of her sweetness and remarkable beauty.

Elma presently inquired of Mr Harrison if he had seen Mrs Crisp lately.

“No. She’s gone to Switzerland,” was his reply.

“I’m thinking of going across to Florida very soon to spend the winter at Palm Beach. I was there last year,” remarked Rutherford. “Ever been there, Mr Sandys?”

“Never,” replied Elma’s father. “I must try it one winter. I’ve heard so much about it. Are you in London for long?”

“Only for a week or so on a matter of business. I’m at the Carlton, but I expect very soon to get back to Paris again.”

And so the conversation drifted on, both men well-bred and of charming manner, until the lights were lowered as sign that the restaurant was closing.

The pair saw Mr Sandys and his daughter into their limousine, and then walked together along the Strand.

“Well, how did it work?” asked the man Harrison eagerly.

“Excellent,” declared Gordon Gray, for it was he who had been introduced as Rex Rutherford. “We’ve taken a step in the right direction to-night. It only shows you what can be done by watchfulness. But, oh! the girl! Lovely, isn’t she?”

“Yes, but I hope, my dear Gordon, you’re not going to lose your head to a woman! We’ve other fish to fry with the old man—remember!”

“Lose my head to a woman!” cried Gray, halting beneath the street lamp and looking at him with his dark eyes. “No, my dear fellow, I never do that. It’s the woman who loses her head to me! You told me once that she dances well, didn’t you? Well, the day will come when she will dance to any tune that I choose to play!”

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## Chapter Thirteen.

### The Hidden Ear.

“No, Dick! A trifle farther this way,” whispered Freda Crisp, who with a piece of string had been measuring the blank wall of the sparely-furnished hotel sitting-room.

“Do you think so? I don’t,” replied a lean, well-dressed, rather striking-looking man of middle-age, who held in his hand a steel gimlet, nearly two feet in length, such as is used by electricians to bore holes through walls and floors to admit the passage of electric-lighting wires.

“Slip out and measure again,” urged the woman, who was wearing a simple blouse and a navy-blue skirt which looked rather shabby in the grey afternoon light. “It won’t do to be much out.”

The man, whom she had addressed as Dick, carefully opened the door of the room a little way, peered out into the corridor, and waited. There being no sign of anyone stirring—for hotels are usually most quiet at about half-past three in the afternoon—he slipped out. He took the string and, stooping to the floor, measured from the lintel of the door to the dividing wall of the next room.

Twice he did so, and then made a knot in the string, so that there should be no further mistake.

On creeping back to where the woman awaited him, he said:

“You were quite right, Freda. Now let’s get to work.”

So saying, he again measured the distance from the door, being on his knees the while. Then, still on his knees and taking the long gimlet, he screwed it into the plaster and worked hard until the steel slowly entered the wall, driving a small hole through it and at the same time throwing out a quantity of white dust upon the floor.

“It’s through?” he exclaimed presently, and withdrawing the tool, placed his eye to the small round hole.

“Excellent. Now we’ll take the wires through.”

Again the man, Dick Allen, opened the door noiselessly, and creeping out with a coil of twin wires, unrolled it from his hand and, as he went down the corridor, placed it beneath the edge of the strip of thick green carpet, and into a sitting-room four doors along.

He laid the two twisted wires still beneath the carpet, and carrying them behind a heavy settee, he took from his pocket what looked like a good-sized nickel-plated button. The front of it was, however, of mica, a tiny brass screw set in the centre. To it he carefully attached the fine silk-covered wires, tightening the screw securely. Then, taking a big safety-pin from his pocket, he attached the button to the back of the settee, where it was completely hidden.

The microphone-button hung there as a hidden ear in that luxuriously-furnished room.

When he returned to his companion he found that she had already driven in a tin-tack, around which she had twisted the two wires. To pass the wires beneath the door was impossible, as they would have to run over a long stretch of stone and somebody might trip over them.

Afterwards she put on her hat and fur coat, and the pair left the big Hôtel du Parc and strolled down the wide, bustling boulevard, the Rue Noailles, in that great city of commerce, Marseilles. The hotel they had left was not so large nor so popular as the great Louvre et Paix, which is perhaps one of the most cosmopolitan in all the world, but it was nevertheless well patronised. At the Louvre most travellers passing to and from India and the Far East stay the night, after landing or before embarking, so that it is an establishment with a purely cosmopolitan clientèle. But the Parc was a quieter, though very aristocratic hotel, patronised by British peers and wealthy Americans on their way to the Riviera or the East, and also by foreign potentates when landing in Europe.

The truth was that when the Moorish Minister of the Interior—the white-bearded old Moslem who had come over on an informal visit to the French President—arrived in Marseilles accommodation could not be found for him at the Louvre et Paix. So he had naturally gone to the Parc, where the best suite had been placed at his disposal by the officials at the Quai d'Orsay.

News of this had reached Dick Allen on his arrival from Nice, and Freda, posing as an English society woman, had taken another suite for the purpose of keeping observation upon the old Moorish Minister, whom his English friend Barclay had arrived in Marseilles to visit.

Already it was nearly five o'clock, so the woman Crisp and her companion strolled along to the big Café de l'Univers in the Cannebière, where they sat outside over their *apéritifs*, well satisfied with their preparations.

"When I dined at the Louvre et Paix last night I sat close to Barclay. The old Moor was with him, and I distinctly heard Barclay say that he would call at the Parc at nine to-night. The old Moor looks very picturesque in his native costume with his turban and his white burnous."

"Marseilles is so cosmopolitan that one meets almost as many costumes here in the Cannebière as on the Galata Bridge at Constantinople," laughed Freda. "Nobody here takes any notice of costume. Besides, all the Arab business men from Algeria and Tunis who come over wear the same Arab dress. In any other city they would be conspicuous, but not here."

Dick Allen, a clever crook, by the way, who had been in many intricate little "affairs" as the accomplice of Gordon Gray, Porter, Claribut and Freda, remained silent for a moment or two.

"A Moorish costume would be a jolly good disguise one day, wouldn't it? I've never thought of that before, Freda," he said.

"Providing you knew a few words of Arabic and could speak French fairly well," the woman answered.

"The first I could easily pick up. The second I can already do fairly well. Just a little staining of the face, hands and hair, and the transformation would be complete. I'll remember that for the future."

"Yes, my dear Dick. One day it might be very handy—if the police were very hot on the track. You could pose as an Algerian fruit merchant, or something of the sort, while they'd be looking for the Englishman, Dick Allen?"

Both laughed. Each had their reminiscences of being hard pressed and having to exercise their keenest wits to elude their pursuers.

"What you've told me about that old parson in England rather worries me," said the man. "What can he know about Hugh?"

"Nothing, my dear Dick. Don't worry. It's all bluff! Leave it to Gordon. He directs everything. He wriggled out in the past, and he'll do it again."

"That's all very well. But I tell you I'm not so sure. Jimmie wrote to me the other day. The butler stunt at your house at Welwyn is all very well, but the game must be blown sooner or later. Believe me, Freda, it must?"

"I know. But we're not staying at Willowden always."

"But Gordon has his radio-telephone there. He talked to me on it to Nice the other night."

"Yes. But we shall clear out at a moment's notice—when it becomes desirable, and the little local police sergeant—no, I beg his pardon, he's fat and red-faced and goes about on a push-bike—will be left guessing why the rich tenants of the big house have gone away on holidays. We've departed upon lots of holidays—haven't we, Dick? And we'll go once more! Each holiday brings us money—one holiday more or one less—what matters? And, after all, we who live with eyes skinned on people with money deserve all we get. England has now changed. Those stay-at-home cowards of the war have all the money, and poor people like ourselves deserve to touch it, if we can manage to lead them up the garden, eh?"

And the handsome adventuress laughed merrily.

"But surely our present game is not one against war profits?" the man remarked, during a lull in the blatant café orchestra.

"No. We're up against saving ourselves—you and I and Gordon and Jimmie. Don't you realise that not a word must ever leak out about young Willard? Otherwise we shall all be right in the cart—jugged at once!"

"I hope old Homfray knows nothing. What can he know?"

"He may, of course, know something, Dick," the woman said in an altered voice. "If I had known what I do now I would never have been a party to taking his son Roddy away." She paused for a moment and looked straight at him. "We made a silly mistake—I'm certain of it. Gordon laughs at me. But Jimmie is of my opinion."

"But can't we close the old man's mouth and trust to luck with his son? He'll become an idiot."

"Gordon is bent upon getting this concession. So are you. So let us do what we can. The installation of that delicate microphone into the old Moor's room is a mark up to you."

"It usually works. I've used it once or twice before. But let's hope for the best—eh, Freda?"

"Yes," laughed the handsome woman carelessly—the adventuress who was so well known each winter at Cannes or at Monte Carlo, or in summer at Aix or Deauville. In the gayer cosmopolitan world Freda Crisp was known wherever smart society congregated to enjoy itself.

The pair of crooks afterwards dined at that well-known restaurant the Basso-Brégaillon, on the Quai de la Fraternité, a place noted for its "bouillabaisse"—that thick fish soup with the laurel leaves and onions and coloured with saffron, which is the great delicacy of the city. Both Freda and her companion had been in Marseilles before upon other adventurous missions. Dick lived in Nice, and was really a secret agent for the blackmailing exploits of others concerning those who played at Monte Carlo when they were supposed to be at home attending to business or politics; or the wives of men who were detained by their affairs in Paris, New York, or London.

Mr Richard Allen lived very quietly and respectably in his little white villa on the Corniche road. He was known everywhere along the Riviera from Hyères to Mentone. That he was a wireless amateur many people also knew. But of his real and very lucrative profession of blackmail nobody ever dreamed. Yet of the women who flock to the Riviera each year who dreams that the nice amiable, middle-aged man whom one meets at hotels or at the Casino, and who may offer to dance, is a blackmailer? Ah! How many hundreds of the fair sex have in these post-war days been misled and, bemuddled by liqueurs, fallen into the clever trap laid for them by such blackguards?

Blackmailers stand around the *tapis-vert* on the Riviera in dozens. Nobody suspects them. But their victims are many, and their failures few. And of the vampires of the Côte d'Azur, Allen was one of the most successful—allied as he was with Gordon Gray, who, when necessity arose, supplied the sinews of war.

Soon after half-past eight they were back in the private sitting-room at the hotel, and having locked the door, Allen set to work. Upon the table was a small dispatch-case, and from it he took a flat dry battery, such as is used in flash-lamps, and a pair of wireless telephone receivers. The battery and telephones being carefully attached to the wires, the man took one of the receivers and listened. The ticking of the clock in the adjoining room, hardly discernible to anyone even a few yards away, was now distinctly audible.

No word was exchanged between the pair, for they were unaware whether anyone was already in the room.

Suddenly Allen raised his finger and motioned to his companion to take the other receiver. This she did eagerly, when she heard the rustling of a newspaper, followed by a man's deep cough. The old Moor was already there, awaiting the Englishman.

By means of the delicate microphone-button every sound was now magnified and conveyed from His Excellency's sitting-room to the ears of the listeners. The clock had already struck nine when presently the door opened and two men entered, greeting the Moorish Minister in French. One, who spoke French very badly, was Barclay.

The conversation which ensued, believed by the three men to be in strictest secrecy, was highly interesting to the pair of listeners four rooms away. Little did they dream that behind that soft silk-covered settee hung the tiny transmitting-button, that little contrivance by which Allen had listened to private conversations many times before, conversations which had resulted in large sums being paid to him to ensure silence.

The man who had accompanied the Englishman, Barclay, appeared from their deliberations to be the Kaid Ahmed-el-Hafid, one of the most powerful officials at Fez, and their discussion concerned the granting of the concession to prospect for precious stones in the Wad Sus valley.

"And the name in which the concession is to be granted?" inquired His Excellency huskily in French.

"The name is Roderick Charles Homfray," said Barclay. "I have it here written down. If your Excellency will have the document drawn up and sealed, my friend the Kaid will come over and meet me here or in Paris, or even in London."

"In London," the Kaid suggested. "I have business there next month."

"And it is distinctly understood that if gems be found and a company formed that I get one-eighth share?" asked the wily old Minister.



"I have already assigned that to your Excellency," replied Barclay. "I think you and the Kaid know me well enough to trust me."

"Of course we do, Monsieur Barclay," declared the Minister with a laugh. "Very well. It is fixed. I will, immediately on my return, grant the concession to this Monsieur—Monsieur Homfray, and hand it to the Kaid to bring to you." Then, after a pause, the patriarchal old Moor added in his hoarse voice: "Now that we have arrived at terms I have something here which will greatly facilitate Monsieur Homfray's search."

"Have you?" cried Barclay eagerly. "What's that?"

"When you sent me word in confidence some months ago about the ancient mines in the Wad Sus, I sent a trusty agent, one Ben Chaib Benuis, there to make secret inquiry. He is one of the Touareg—the brigands of the desert—and from his fellow-marauders he discovered the exact spot where the ancient workings are situated—a spot only known to those veiled nomads. They preserve the secret from the Arabs. Indeed, here I have not only a map giving the exact spot—roughly drawn though it is, yet giving the exact measurements and direction from the oasis of Raffi—but also one of the emeralds which my agent himself discovered. You see, it is still rough and uncut, yet is it not magnificent in size?"

Both men drew deep breaths. The listeners could hear their surprise as the old Minister exhibited to them proof of the continued existence of the gems at the spot marked upon the map.

"Now," went on the old man, "I will give you this map, Monsieur Barclay, but I will keep the emerald to repay myself for the expenses of my agent—eh? Be extremely careful of the map, and take all precautions for its safety, I beg of you. I have brought it over with me rather than trust it to others, Monsieur Barclay."

"I thank your Excellency. It shall not leave my possession until I hand it, together with the concession, to young Homfray—who, I may say, is enthusiastic, resourceful and daring—just the go-ahead young man we require for such a hazardous venture."

"And you will form a company in London to work the mines—eh?" the Kaid remarked.

"That is our intention. We can find the money easier in London than in Paris, I think."

"Yes, London," urged His Excellency. "I would prefer London. But," he added, "be careful of that map, Monsieur Barclay! It will be of greatest use to our young friend, whom I hope one day to see in Fez. I will then introduce him to Ben Chaib, who will obtain for him a safe conduct among the Touareg because they are always dangerous for strangers."

"Even to ourselves," laughed the Kaid, and then added: "I will be in London on the tenth of next month. But I will write to you, Monsieur Barclay, giving you notice of my arrival."

A quarter of an hour later the three men went forth together, while Freda, opening the door stealthily, saw their figures disappearing down the corridor. The Kaid was a tall, spare man in European clothes, but the Moorish Minister of the Interior was wearing his turban and flowing white burnous which spread about him as he walked.

"Quick!" she whispered to her companion. "Slip in and get out the wires, while I detach them on this side."

This he did, and, save the small hole through the wall, all traces of their ingenuity were swiftly removed.

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## Chapter Fourteen.

### The Key to a Fortune.

"Here's five pounds now—and fifteen more when you give it back to me, my dear little girl. Only be sure it's the right one you take!"

"But I—I really can't—I—"

"Don't be a silly fool, Lily. I only want to play a practical joke on your master. I knew him a long time ago, and it will greatly surprise him. No harm will be done, I assure you. Surely you can trust me?"

The girl Lily, well and neatly dressed, was a parlour-maid, while the man, also quite decently dressed, was somewhat older. The pair were at the moment standing at the corner of the street near Richmond Station, and it was already nearly ten o'clock at night, at which hour the girl had to be indoors.

Three weeks before she had first met Mr Henry Elton. He had sat next to her in the cinema and had spoken to her. The result had been that he had taken her to tea on several evenings, and on her "day out," which had been the previous Friday, he had taken her on a char-à-banc to Bognor. He was not at all bad-looking, a solicitor's managing clerk, he told her, and she rather liked him for his quiet, subtle manner.

But what he had asked her to do had greatly surprised her. He had promised her twenty pounds if she would press her master's little safe key into the tin matchbox filled with soft wax, and thus take an impression of it. Naturally she asked why. In reply he had explained that he and her master had, for years, been intimate friends, and that once in the club they had had a sharp discussion about safes and keys. Her master had declared that safe-makers made no two keys alike. And now he wanted to play a joke upon him and prove to him that they did.

They had been chatting it over all that evening. The plea was certainly a thin one, but to Lily Lawson in her frame of mind, and with a gentleman as her sweetheart, it sounded quite plausible.

"Of course, I rely upon you, Lily, never to give me away," he laughed. "I want to win the bet, and I'll give you half?"

"Of course I won't," she answered, as they still stood there, the clock striking ten. "But I really ought not to do it?"

"It isn't difficult. You say that he often leaves his keys on his dressing-table, and you know the little one which unlocks the safe in the basement."

"Yes. It's quite a tiny key with the maker's name along the barrel of it."

"Then all you have to do is to press it well into the wax, and there's fifteen pounds for you if you give the little box back to me to-morrow night. It's so easy—and twenty pounds will certainly be of use to you, now that your poor mother is so ill."

The girl wavered. The man saw it and cleverly put further pressure upon her, by suggesting that with the money she could send her mother away for a change.

"But is it really right?" she queried, raising her dark eyes to his.

"Of course it is. It's only a joke, dear," he laughed.

Again she was silent.

"Well," she said at last. "I really must fly now."

"And you'll do it, won't you?" he urged.

"Well, if it's only a joke, yes. I'll—I'll try to do it."

"At the usual place at nine to-morrow night—eh?"

"All right," she replied, and hurried away, while the man lit a cigarette, well satisfied, and then turned into a bar to get a drink.

The man was the blackmailer Richard Allen.

During Andrew Barclay's journey home Allen and his woman accomplice had made a daring attempt to possess themselves of the valuable plan which had been given him by His Excellency. Barclay had broken his journey for a day in Paris, and had gone to the Grand Hôtel. During his absence Allen had applied at the bureau for the key of the room—explaining that he was Mr Barclay's secretary—and had been given it.

Instantly he went up and ransacked the Englishman's bags. But to his chagrin and annoyance the plan was not there.

As a matter of fact Barclay had placed it in his pocket-book and carried it with him. Again, next day, as he disembarked from the Channel steamer at Folkestone, Freda stumbled against him and apologised, and while his attention was thus attracted Allen made an attempt to possess himself of his wallet. But in that he was unsuccessful.

Therefore the pair, annoyed at their failure, had watched him enter the train for Victoria and for the moment gave up any further attempt. Thus it was that the man had contrived to get on friendly terms with Barclay's parlour-maid, who had told him that in the house her master had a safe built in the wall in the basement near the kitchen. In it the silver and other valuables were kept, together with a quantity of papers.

No doubt the precious map was held there in safety, and for that reason they were endeavouring to obtain a cast of the key.

It was after all a dangerous job, for the girl might very easily tell her master of the kind gentleman who had offered twenty pounds for the wherewithal to play a practical joke. And if so, then the police would no doubt be informed and watch would be kept.

With that in view, Freda was next night idling near the spot arranged, close to where one buys "Maids of Honour," and though Allen was in the vicinity, he did not appear.

At last the girl came and waited leisurely at the corner, whereupon after a few moments Freda approached her and said pleasantly:

"You are waiting for Mr Elton, I believe?"

"Yes, I am," replied the girl, much surprised. "He is sorry he can't be here. He had to go to the north this afternoon. He'll be back in a day or two. He gave me fifteen pounds to give to you for something. Have you got it?"

"Yes," replied the girl. "Come along, madam, where it's dark and I'll give it to you."

So they moved along together around a corner where they would not be observed, and in exchange for the three five-pound notes the girl handed the woman the little tin matchbox with the impression of a key in the wax.

"You'll say nothing, of course," said Freda. "You've promised Mr Elton to say nothing."

"Of course I won't say anything," laughed the girl. "The fact is, I've had a row with the housekeeper and have given in my notice. I leave this day week."

This news was to the woman very reassuring. "You're quite certain you took the right key?" she asked.

"Quite. I looked at the maker's name before I pressed it into the wax," she answered. "But I'd like to see Mr Elton again before I leave Richmond."

"He'll be back in a couple of days, and then he will write to you. I'll tell him. Good-night, and thanks."

And the woman with the little box in her muff moved away well satisfied.

A quarter of an hour later she met Allen outside Richmond Station, and placing the little box in his hands, explained that the girl was leaving her place the following week.

"Excellent! We'll delay our action until she's gone. I suppose I'd better see her before she goes, so as to allay any suspicion." Then, opening the box, his keen eye saw that the impression was undoubtedly one of a safe key.

Indeed, next morning, he took it to a man in Clerkenwell who for years had made a speciality of cutting keys and asking no questions, and by the following night the means of opening the safe at Underhill Road was in Allen's hands.

The man who lived by the blackmailing of those whom he entrapped—mostly women, by the way—was nothing if not wary, as was shown by the fact that he had sent Freda to act as his messenger. If the girl had told the police the woman could have at once declared that she had never seen the girl before, though if the little box had been found upon her, explanation would have been somewhat difficult. But the gang of which the exquisite adventurer Gordon Gray was the alert head always acted with forethought and circumspection; the real criminal keeping out of the way and lying "doggo" proof was always rendered as difficult as possible.

Gray had gone over to Brussels, which accounted for Willowden being closed. He had a little piece of rather irritating business on hand there. Awkward inquiries by the police had led to the arrest of a man who had sent word in secret that if his wife were not paid two thousand pounds as hush-money, he would tell what he knew. And the wife being a low-class Belgian woman from Namur, Gray had gone over to see her and to appease her husband by paying the sum demanded.

Crooks are not always straight towards each other. Sometimes thieves fall out, and when in difficulties or peril they blackmail each other—often to the advantage of the police.

Roddy and Barclay had met, the latter having told his young friend of the arrangements he had made with His Excellency and the Kaid, and also shown him the map which had been given to him.

At sight of this the young fellow grew very excited.

"Why, it gives us the exact location of the workings," he cried. "With this, a compass and measuring instruments I can discover the point straight away. The old man is no fool, evidently!"

"No, the Moors are a clever and cultivated race, my dear Roddy," the elder man replied. "As soon as the Kaid brings over the necessary permits and the concession you can go ahead. I will keep the map in my safe till then, when I will hand all the documents over to you."

This good news Roddy had told Elma one evening when they had met clandestinely—as they now so often met—at a spot not far from the lodge gates at Farncombe Towers.

"How jolly lucky!" the girl cried. "Now you're only waiting for the proper permits to come. It's really most good of Mr Barclay to help you. He must be an awfully nice man."

"Yes, he's a topper—one of the best," Roddy declared. "Out in South America he did me a good turn, and I tried to repay it. So we became friends. He's one of the few Englishmen who know the Moors and has their confidence. He's a bachelor, and a great traveller, but just now he's rented a furnished house in Richmond. He's one of those rolling stones one meets all over the world."

The young man waxed enthusiastic. He loved Elma with all his heart, yet he wondered if his affection were reciprocated. She had mentioned to him the close friendship which had sprung up between her father and Mr Rex Rutherford, and how he had dined at Park Lane. But at the moment he never dreamed that her grace and beauty had attracted her father's newly-made friend.

As for Roddy's father, he remained calm and reflective, as was his wont, visiting his parishioners, delivering his sermons on Sundays, and going the weary round of the village each day with a cheery face and kindly word for everybody. Nothing had been done concerning his property in Totnes as the woman Crisp had threatened. It was curious, he thought, and it was evident that the ultimatum he had given Gray had caused him to stay his hand.

Yet as he sat alone he often wondered why Gray and that serpent woman should have so suddenly descended upon him, and upon Roddy, to wreak a vengeance that, after all, seemed mysterious and quite without motive.

The hot blazing summer days were passing, when late one balmy breathless night—indeed it was two o'clock in the morning—a man dressed as a railway signalman, who had been on night duty, passed along Underhill Road, in Richmond, and halted near the pillar-box. Underhill Road was one of the quieter and more select thoroughfares of that picturesque suburb, for from the windows of the houses glorious views could be obtained across the sloping Terrace Gardens and the wide valley of the Thames towards Teddington and Kingston.

A constable had, with slow tread, passed along a few moments before, but the signalman, who wore rubber-soled black tennis shoes, had followed without noise.

The watcher, who was Dick Allen, saw the man in uniform turn the corner under the lamplight and disappear. Then slipping swiftly along to a good-sized detached house which stood back from the road in its small garden, he entered the gate and dived quickly down to the basement—which, by the way, he had already well surveyed in the daytime.

Before a window he halted, and turning upon it a small flash-lamp, inserted a knife into the sash and pressed back the latch in a manner that was certainly professional. Having lifted the sash he sprang inside and, guided by the particulars he had learnt from the maid Lily, he soon discovered the door of the safe, which was let into the wall in a stone passage leading from the kitchen to the coal-cellar.

He halted to listen. There was no sound. The little round zone of bright light fell upon the brass flap over the keyhole of the dark-green painted door of the safe, wherein reposed the secret of the rich emerald mine in the great Sahara Desert.

He took the bright little false key, which was already well oiled, and lifting the flap inserted it. It turned easily.

Then he turned the brass handle, which also yielded. He drew the heavy door towards him and the safe stood open! The little light revealed three steel drawers. The first which he opened in eager haste contained a number of little canvas bags, each sealed up. They contained specimens of ore from various mines in Peru and Ecuador. Each bore a tab with its contents described.

In the next were several pieces of valuable old silver, while the third contained papers—a quantity of documents secured by elastic bands.

These he turned over hurriedly, and yet with care so as not to allow the owner to suspect that they had been disturbed. For some time he searched, until suddenly he came upon an envelope bearing upon its flap the address of the Hôtel du Parc at Marseilles. It was not stuck down. He opened it—and there he found the precious map which showed the exact position of the ancient Wad Sus mine!

For a few seconds he held it in his hands in supreme delight. Then, taking from his pocket a blank piece of folded paper he put it into the envelope, and replacing it among the other documents which he arranged just as he had found them, he closed the safe and relocked it.

A second later he stole noiselessly out by the way he had come, the only evidence of his presence being the fact that the window was left unfastened, a fact which his friend Lily's successor would, he felt sure, never notice.

But as, having slowly drawn down the window, he turned to ascend the steps a very strange and disconcerting incident occurred.

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## **Chapter Fifteen.**

### **The Master-Stroke.**

Mr Richard Allen found himself, ere he was aware of it, in the strong grip of a burly police constable.

"And what 'ave you been up to 'ere—eh?" demanded the officer, who had gripped him tightly by the coat collar and arm.

"Nothing," replied Allen. "I fancy you've made a mistake!"

"I fancy I 'aven't," was the constable's reply. "You'll 'ave to come to the station with me."

"Well, do as you please," said Allen with an air of nonchalance. "I've done nothing."

"I'm not so sure about it. We'll see what you've done when you're safely in the cells."

Cells! Mr Richard Allen had already had a taste of those—on more than one occasion—both in England and abroad. It was, after all, very humiliating to one of his high caste in crookdom to be arrested like a mere area sneak.

"I don't see why I should be put to the inconvenience of going to the station," the cosmopolitan remarked.

"Well, I do, mister, so there's all the difference!" replied the other grimly, his eyes and ears on the alert to hail one of his comrades, a fact which the astute Mr Allen did not fail to realise. The situation was distinctly awkward, not to say alarming, for in his pocket he had the precious map.

Suddenly they were about to turn the corner into the main road when the prisoner, who had gone along quite quietly, even inertly, quickly swung round and snatched at the policeman's whistle, breaking it from its chain and throwing it away.

It was done in a moment, and next second with a deft movement he tripped up his captor, and both fell heavily to the pavement. He had taken the constable unawares, before he could realise that he had a slippery customer to deal with. The constable, however, would not release his hold, with the result that they rolled struggling into the gutter, the policeman shouting for assistance.

A man's voice answered in the distance, whereupon Allen's right hand went to his jacket pocket, and then swiftly to

the face of his captor, who almost instantly relaxed his hold as he fell into unconsciousness. The prisoner had held a small capsule in his captor's face and smashed it in his fingers, thus releasing an asphyxiating gas of sufficient potency to render the constable insensible.

Quick as lightning Allen disengaged himself, and dragging the senseless man across the pavement into the front garden of a small house exactly opposite, closed the gate, picked up his hat, and then walked quietly on as though nothing had occurred.

As he turned the corner he came face to face with another constable who was hurrying up.

"Did you hear my mate shouting a moment ago, sir?" asked the man breathlessly.

"No," replied Allen halting. "I heard no shouting. When?"

"A few moments ago. The shouts came from this direction. He was crying for help."

"Well, I heard nothing," declared Allen, still standing as the constable, proceeding, passed the gate behind which his colleague lay hidden.

Then Allen laughed softly to himself and set out on the high road which led to Kingston.

"A narrow shave!" he remarked to himself aloud. "I wonder what Barclay will say when they go to Underhill Road!"

Not until eight o'clock in the morning did a milkman going his round find the constable lying as though asleep in the little front garden. He tried to rouse him, but not being able to do so, called the nearest policeman who summoned the ambulance. At first the inspector thought the man intoxicated, but the divisional surgeon pronounced that he had been gassed, and it was several hours later, when in the hospital, that he managed to give an intelligible account of what had occurred.

About noon an inspector called upon Mr Barclay at Underhill Road, but he had gone out.

"Did you find any of your basement windows open when you got up this morning?" he asked the housekeeper, who replied in the negative. Then the new parlour-maid being called declared that she had fastened all the windows securely before retiring, and that they were all shut when she came down at seven o'clock.

The inspector went away, but in the evening he called, saw Mr Barclay, and told him how a man lurking against the kitchen window had been captured, and explained that he must be a well-known and desperate thief because of the subtle means he had in his possession to overcome his captors.

"My servants have told me about it. But as they say the windows were fastened the man could not have committed a burglary," replied Mr Barclay. "The house was quite in order this morning."

"But it is evident that the fellow, whoever he was, meant mischief, sir."

"Probably. But he didn't succeed, which is fortunate for me!" the other laughed.

"Well, sir, have you anything particularly valuable on the premises here? If so, we'll have special watch kept," the inspector said.

"Nothing beyond the ordinary. I've got a safe down below—a very good one because the man who had this house before me was a diamond dealer, with offices in the City, and he often kept some of his stock here. Come and look at it."

Both men went below, and Mr Barclay showed the inspector the heavy steel door.

The inspector examined the keyhole, but there were no traces of the lock having been tampered with. On the contrary, all was in such complete order that Mr Barclay did not even open the safe.

"It's rather a pity the fellow got away," Mr Barclay remarked.

"It is, sir—a thousand pities. But according to the description given of him by Barnes—who is one of the sharpest men in our division—we believe it to be a man named Hamilton Layton, a well-known burglar who works alone, and who has been many times convicted. A constable in Sunderland was attacked by him last winter in an almost identical manner."

The inspector made a thorough search of the basement premises, and again questioned the fair-haired parlour-maid who was Lily's successor. She vowed that she had latched all the windows, though within herself she feared that she had overlooked the fact that one of the windows was unlatched in the morning. Yet what was the use of confessing it, she thought.

So there being no trace of any intruder, the inspector walked back to the station, while Mr Barclay smiled at the great hubbub, little dreaming that in place of that precious map there reposed in the envelope only a plain piece of paper.

That afternoon Dick Allen arrived at Willowden. Gray was away motoring in Scotland, where he had some little "business" of the usual shady character to attend to. Freda had gone to Hatfield, and it was an hour before she returned. During that hour Allen smoked and read in the pretty summerhouse at the end of the old-world garden, so full of climbing roses and gay borders.

Suddenly he heard her voice, and looking up from his paper saw her in a big hat and filmy lemon-coloured gown.

He waved to her, rose, and met her at the French window of the old-fashioned dining-room.

"Well?" she asked. "What luck, Dick? I worried a lot about you last night. I felt somehow that you'd had an accident and to-day—I don't know how it was—I became filled with apprehension and had to go out. I'm much relieved to see you. What's happened?"

"Nothing, my dear Freda," laughed the good-looking scoundrel. "There was just a little *contretemps*—that's all."

"Have you got the map?"

"Sure," he laughed.

"Ah! When you go out to get a thing you never fail to bring it home," she said, with a smile. "You're just like Gordon. You've both got the impudence of the very devil himself."

"And so have you, Freda," laughed her companion, as he stretched himself upon the sofa. "But the little reverse I had in the early hours of this morning was—well, I admit it—rather disturbing. The fact is that on leaving the house in Richmond a constable collared me. He became nasty, so I was nastier still, and gave him a Number Two right up his nose. And you know what that means!"

"Yes," said the woman. "He won't speak much for eight hours or so. I expect he saw the red light, eh?"

"No doubt. But I've got the little map here, and Barclay retains a sheet of blank paper."

"Splendid!"

Then he drew it from his pocket and showed it to her.

"Oh! won't Gordon be delighted to get this!" she cried. "It will gladden his heart. The dear boy is a bit down, and wants bucking up."

"Where's Jimmie?" asked Allen. "Tell him to get me a drink. I suppose he's back by this time?"

The handsome woman in the lemon-coloured gown rose and rang the bell, and old Claribut, servile and dignified, entered.

"Hulloa! Dick!" he exclaimed. "Why, where have you sprung from? I thought you were in Nice!"

"So I was. But I'm in Welwyn now, and I want one of your very best cocktails—and one for Freda also."

The old man retired and presently brought two drinks upon a silver salver.

"I shan't be in to dinner to-night, Jimmie. I'm motoring Dick to London presently. I'll be home about midnight. But I'll take the key. Any news?"

"Nothing, madam," replied the perfectly-mannered butler. "Only the gas-man came this morning, and the parson called and left some handbills about the Sunday school treat you are going to give next Thursday."

"Oh! yes, I forgot about that infernal treat! See about it, Jimmie, and order the stuff and the marquee to be put up out in the field. See Jackson, the schoolmaster; he'll help you. Say I'm busy."

"Very well, madam."

"Well!" laughed Allen, "so you are acting the great lady of the village now, Freda!"

"Of course. It impresses these people, and it only costs a few cups of tea and a few subscriptions. Gordon thinks it policy, but, by Jove! how I hate it all. Oh! you should see Gordon on a Sunday morning in his new hat and gloves. He's really a spectacle!"

"Ah! I suppose a reputation is judicious out here," her companion laughed.

"Yes. But I'll drive you back to town," she said. "We'll dine at the Ritz. I want to meet a woman there. Wait a minute or two while I change my frock. I think you've done wonders to get hold of that map. Gordon will be most excited. He'll be in Inverness to-morrow, and I'll wire to him."

"Guardedly," he urged.

"Why, of course," she laughed. "But that poor old bobby with a dose of Number Two! I bet he's feeling pretty rotten!"

"It was the only way," declared the cosmopolitan adventurer. "I wasn't going to be hauled to the station and lose the map."

"Of course not. Well, have another drink and wait a few minutes," the woman said, whereupon he began to chat with old Claribut.

"I suppose the Riviera looks a bit hot and dusty just now," remarked Jimmie, the butler.

"Yes. But Freda's a wonder, isn't she?" remarked Allen. "I've been asking her about that girl Edna. What has become

of her?"

"I don't know, Dick. So don't ask me," Claribut answered, as he smoked one of Gordon's cigars. Truly that was a strange menage.

"But surely you know something," Allen said. "No, I don't," snapped old Jimmie.

"Ah! you know something—something very private, eh?" remarked the wily Dick. "I suppose you are aware that old Sandys has a firm of inquiry agents out looking for her?"

"Has he really?" laughed Claribut. "Well, then let them find her. Who has he called in?"

"Fuller—who used to be at the Yard. You recollect him. He had you once, so you'd better be careful."

"Yes, he had me for passing bad notes in Brussels," remarked the old man grimly. "So old Sandys is employing him?"

"Yes, and the old man is determined to know the whereabouts of Edna Manners."

"I don't think he'll ever know. But how came you to know about it?"

"I have a pal who is a friend of Fuller's—Jack Shawford. He told me. Sandys suspects that something serious has happened to the girl."

At this Claribut became very grave.

"What makes him suspect it? He surely doesn't know that the girl was acquainted with that old parson Homfray!"

"No. I don't think so," was the reply.

"Ah! That's good. If he had any suspicion of that, then Fuller might get on the right track, you know, because of this mining concession in Morocco."

"What connexion has that with the disappearance of the pretty Edna?" asked his fellow crook, in ignorance.

"Oh! it's a complicated affair, and it would take a long time to explain—but it *has!*"

"Then you know all about Edna and what has happened! I see it in your face, Jimmie! Just tell me in confidence."

But the wary old man who had spent many years in prison cells only smiled and shook his head.

"I don't interfere with other people's affairs, Dick. You know that. I've enough to do to look after my own."

"*But where is Edna? Is she—dead?*"

The old man merely shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of uncertainty and ignorance.

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## Chapter Sixteen.

### The Light of Love.

It had been all summer—endless, cloudless summer in England, from the time of the violets to the now ripening corn. And there was no foreboding of storm or winter in the air that glorious day.

It was yet quite early in the morning, and high on the Hog's Back, that ridge of the Surrey Hills that runs from Farnham towards Guildford, the gentle coolness of daybreak had not left the air.

Roddy and Elma had met for an early morning walk, she being again alone at the Towers. They had been walking across the fields and woods for an hour, and were now high up upon the hill which on one side gave views far away to the misty valley of the Thames, and on the other to Hindhead and the South Downs. The hill rose steep and sombre, its sides dark with chestnut woods, and all about them the fields were golden with the harvest.

They were tired with their walk, so they threw themselves down upon the grassy hillside and gazed away across the wide vista of hills and woodlands.

"How glorious it is!" declared the girl, looking fresh and sweet in a white frock and wide-brimmed summer hat trimmed with a saxe-blue scarf.

"Delightful! This walk is worth getting up early to take!" he remarked with soft love laughter, looking into her wonderful eyes that at the moment were fixed in fascination upon the scene.

Since that day months ago when he had declared his affection, he had never spoken directly of love, but only uttered it in those divers ways and words, those charms of touch and elegance of grace which are love's subtlest, truest, and most perilous language.

Slowly, as she turned her beautiful eyes to his, he took her soft little hand, raising it gallantly to his lips.

"Elma," he said after a long silence, "I have brought you here to tell you something—something that perhaps I ought to leave unsaid."

"What?" she asked with sudden interest, her eyes opening widely.

"I want to say that I dislike your friend Mr Rutherford," he blurted forth.

"Mr Rutherford!" she echoed. "He is father's friend—not mine!"

"When I was at Park Lane the other night I noticed the marked attention he paid you—how he—"

"Oh! you are awfully foolish, Mr Homfray—Roddy! He surely pays me no attention."

"You did not notice it, but I did!" cried the young man, whose heart was torn by fierce jealousy.

"Well, if he did, then I am certainly quite unaware of it."

His hand closed fast and warm upon hers. "Ah!" he cried, his eyes seeking hers with eager wistfulness, "I do not wonder. Once I should have wondered, but now—I understand. He is rich," he said softly and very sadly. "And, after all, I am only an adventurer."

"What are you saying?" cried the girl.

"I know the truth," he replied bitterly. "If you ever loved me you would one day repent, for I have nothing to offer you, Elma. I ought to be content with my life—it is good enough in its way, though nameless and fruitless also, perhaps. Yes, it is foolish of me to object to the attentions which Mr Rutherford pays you. He returned from Paris specially last Wednesday to be at your party."

"I cannot understand!" she declared. "I do not want to understand! You are foolish, Roddy. I have no liking for Mr Rutherford. None whatever!"

"Are you quite certain of that?" he cried, again looking eagerly into her face with a fierce expression such as she had never seen before upon his handsome countenance.

"I am, Roddy," she whispered.

"And you really love me?"

"I do," she whispered again. "I shall be content anyhow, anywhere, any time—*always*—with you!"

He let go her hands—for him, almost roughly—and rose quickly to his feet, and silently paced to and fro under the high hedgerow. His straw hat was down over his eyes. He brushed and trampled the wild flowers ruthlessly as he went. She could not tell what moved him—anger or pain.

She loved him well—loved him with all the simple ardour and fierce affection of one of her young years. After all, she was not much more than a child, and had never before conceived a real affection for any living thing. She had not yet experienced that affinity which comes of maturer years, that subtle sympathy, that perfect passion and patience which alone enable one heart to feel each pang or each joy that makes another beat.

Roddy's moods were often as changeful as the wind, while at times he was restless, impatient and depressed—perhaps when his wireless experiments gave no result. But it was often beyond her understanding.

Seeing him so perturbed, Elma wondered whether, in her confession of affection, she had said anything wrong. Was he, after all, growing tired of her? Had that sudden fit of jealousy been assumed on purpose to effect a breach?

She did not go to him. She still sat idly among the grasses.

A military aeroplane from Farnborough was circling overhead, and she watched it blankly.

After a little while her lover mastered whatever emotion had been aroused within him, and came back to her.

He spoke in his old caressing manner, even if a little colder than before.

"Forgive me, dearest," he said softly. "I—I was jealous of that man Rutherford. That you really love me has brought to me a great and unbounded joy. No shadow has power to rest upon me to-day. But I—I somehow fear the future—I fear that yours would be but a sorry mode of existence with me. As I have said, my profession is merely that of a traveller and adventurer. Fortune may come in my way—but probably not. We cannot all be like the Italian beggar who bought the great Zuroff diamond—one of the finest stones in existence—for two soldi from a rag-dealer in the Mercato Vecchio in Ravenna."

"You have your fortune to make, Roddy," she said trustfully, taking his hand. "And you will make it. Keep a stout heart, and act with that great courage which you always possess."

"I am disheartened," he said.

"Disheartened! Why?"

"Because of the mystery—because of these strange mental attacks, this loss of memory to which I am so often subject. I feel that before I can go farther I must clear up the mystery of those lost days—clear myself."

"Of what?" she asked, his hand still in hers.



"Of what that woman made me—compelled me to do," he said in a harsh, broken voice. He had not told her he had discovered where he had been taken. He felt that he was always disbelieved.

"Now, Roddy, listen!" she cried, jumping up. "I believe that it is all hallucination on your part. You were kept prisoner at that house—as you have explained—but beyond that I believe that, your brain being affected by the injection the devils gave to you, you have imagined certain things."

"But I did not imagine the finding of Edna Manners!" he cried. "Surely you believe me!"

"Of course I do, dear," she said softly.

"Then why do you not tell who she was? At least let me clear up one point of the mystery."

"Unfortunately I am not allowed to say anything. My father has forbidden it."

"But what has your father to do with it? I know he has put the matter into the hands of ex-inspector Fuller. But why?"

"Father knows. I do not."

"But he told me that much depended upon discovering her," said her lover. "Why does he search when I know that she died in my arms?"

"You have never told him so. He wishes to obtain proof of whether she is dead, I think," said the girl.

"Why?"

"That I cannot tell. He has his own motives, I suppose. I never dare ask him. It is a subject I cannot mention."

"Why?"

"He forbade me ever to utter Edna's name," she replied slowly.

"That is very curious, when he told me that he must find her. And he employed the famous Fuller to search for trace of her. But," he added, "trace they will never find, for she is dead. If I told him so he would certainly not believe me. They all think that I am half demented, and imagine weird things!" And he drew a long breath full of bitterness.

"Never mind," she said. "It would be infamous to be melancholy, or athirst for great diamonds on such a glorious day."

"True, my darling, true!" he said. "Let us sit down again. There! Lean back so as to be in the shade, and give me your hand. Now I want to kiss you."

And taking her in his warm embrace, he rained kisses upon her full red lips in wild ecstasy, with low murmurs of love that were sweet in the young girl's ears, while she, on her part, reclined in his arms without raising protest or trying to disengage herself from his strong clasp.

"I love you, Elma!" he cried. "That you have no thought for that man Rutherford who danced with you so many times on Wednesday night, who took you into supper and laughed so gaily with you, has greatly relieved me. I know I am poor, but I will do my very utmost to make good and to be worthy of your love."

Again his lips met hers in a long, passionate caress. For both of them the world was nonexistent at that moment, and then, for the first time, her pretty lips pressed hard against his and he felt one long, fierce and affectionate kiss.

He knew that she was his at last!

Half an hour later, as they went down the steep hill and across the beautiful wooded country towards Haslemere, Roddy Homfray trod on air. For him the face of the world had suddenly changed. There was a perfect peace and gladness in that morning of late summer. Elma, on her part, needed nothing more than the joy of the moment, and whatever darkness her lover may have seen in the future was all sunlight to her. Roddy's glad smile was for her all-sufficient.

That day surely no shadow could fall between them and the sun!

As they walked along, Roddy suddenly exclaimed:

"What fools are clever folk!"

Surely his hours of melancholy had not returned, she thought.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because my enemies—my unknown mysterious enemies—your enemies—are fools, Elma, my darling." And then perhaps for a moment they caught sight of each other's souls.

"Perhaps they are. But we must both be guarded against them," the girl said as he walked beside her.

"Guarded! Yes, Poor Edna has fallen their victim. Next, my darling, it might be you yourself! But of the motive I can discern nothing."

"I! What have I done?" cried the girl, looking straight at him. "No, surely I can have no enemies."

"We all have enemies, darling. Ah! you do not yet realise that in our life to-day falsehoods are daily food and that a lie is small coinage in which the interchange of the world, francs, marks, dollars, or diplomacy, is carried on to the equal convenience of us all. Lying lips are no longer an abomination. They are part of our daily existence."

"You are horribly philosophic, Roddy!" she said with a laugh. "But I quite understand that it is so. The scandals in politics and in society prove it every day."

"Yes. And let us—both of us—now that we love each other, be forewarned of the mysterious evil that threatens."

"How?"

"I can't tell. Yet I have a vague premonition that though the sun shines to-day, that all is bright and glorious, and that the clear horizon of our lives is speckless, yet very soon a darkness will arise to obscure further the mystery of that night in Welling Wood."

"I sincerely hope not. Let us leave the affair to Inspector Fuller," said Elma. "He was down to see my father the night before last. I do not know what was said. I left them together in the library when I went to bed."

"You heard nothing?"

"Only as I came in I heard Fuller mention the name of your friend Andrew Barclay, who has gone to Marseilles to see the Moorish Minister."

"Yes, Barclay is certainly my friend. But how could the detective have possibly known that?"

"Detectives are strangely inquisitive people," remarked the girl, as hand in hand they went down the hill.

"That is so. And I only hope Mr Fuller will discover the truth concerning poor Edna Manners. Ah! I recollect it all so well. And yet the recollection goes giddily round and round and round in a sickening whirl of colour before my blinded eyes. It is all horrible! And it is all hideous and incredible. She died! I dashed to raise the alarm—and then I know no more! All I recollect is that I grovelled, frightened, sobbing! I saw the shimmering of sun-rays through the darkness of leaves. I was in a strange garden and it was day! And always since, whenever I have closed my eyes, I can see it still!"

"No, Roddy," she urged. "Try to put it all aside. Try not to think of it!"

"But I can't forget it!" he cried, covering his face with his hands. "I can't—I can't—it is all so terrible—horrible."

In sympathy the girl took his arm. Her touch aroused him. Of a sudden all the strength of his being came to his aid.

"Forgive me, darling! Forgive me!" he craved.

And together they crossed the low old stile into the road which led down through a quaint little village, and out on the way to Haslemere.

On that same morning at noon Richard Allen again stood in the dining-room at Willowden, when Gordon Gray, alias Rex Rutherford, entered. He was in a light motor-coat, having just returned from his tour to Scotland.

"Well, Dick!" he cried cheerily in that easy, good-humoured way of his, that cheerful mannerism by which he made so many friends. "So you've had luck—eh?"

"Yes, after a narrow escape. Got caught, and had to fight a way out," laughed the other.

"Not the first time. Do you recollect that night in Cannes two years ago? By Jove! I thought we were done."

"Don't let's talk of nasty things," his friend said. "Here's the precious little map—the secret of the Wad Sus mines."

"Splendid!" cried Gray, taking the small piece of folded paper to the window. "By Jove! it gives exact measurements in metres, and minute directions."

"Yes. And the old Minister has in his possession a great emerald taken from the ancient workings."

"We ought to get that. It will show *bona fides* when we deal with the concession. It would be better to buy it than to get it by other means. If it were stolen there would be a hue-and-cry raised. But if we could get it honestly—honestly, mark you, Dick!—we could get the official certificate saying where and when it was found."

"True!" remarked Allen, who chanced to be standing near the window and whose attention had suddenly been attracted by a movement in the bushes on the opposite side of the lawn. "But don't move, Gordon!" he cried quickly. "Keep quiet! Don't show yourself! Get back behind the curtains. There's somebody over in the bushes yonder, watching the window! Just by the yew-tree there. Watch!"

In an instant Gordon Gray was on the alert. For some moments both men stood with bated breath, watching eagerly.

Suddenly the figure moved and a ray of sunlight revealed a woman's face.

"By Gad! Dick! Yes, I've seen that woman somewhere before! What can be her game? She's evidently taking observations! Call Freda and Jimmie, quick! We must all get out of this at once! There's not a second to lose! *Quick!*"

## Chapter Seventeen.

### The Ears of the Blind.

The discovery of the watcher at Willowden was most disconcerting to Gray and his accomplices.

They recognised the stranger as a person who had once kept observation upon them in London two years before, and now saw to their dismay that their headquarters had been discovered.

So that night Gray and Claribut worked hard in frantic haste and dismantled the wireless installation, which they packed in boxes, while Freda eagerly collected her own belongings. Then making sure that they were not still being watched they stowed the boxes in the car, and creeping forth sped rapidly away along the Great North Road.

"I don't like the look of things?" Gray muttered to Freda, who sat beside him. "We've only got away in the nick of time. The police might have been upon us before morning. We'll have to be extremely careful."

And then a silence fell between them as they drove through the pelting rain. Once again they had wriggled out of an awkward situation.

At a first-floor window of an ancient half-timbered house in a narrow, dingy street behind the cathedral in quaint old Bayeux, in Normandy, a pretty, fair-haired young girl was silting in the sunshine, her hands lying idly in her lap.

It was noon. The ill-paved street below—a street of sixteenth-century houses with heavy carved woodwork and quaint gables—was deserted, as the great bell of the magnificent old cathedral, built by Odo, the bishop, after the Norman Conquest of Britain, boomed forth the hour of twelve.

The girl did not move or speak. She seldom did, because first, her blue eyes were fixed and sightless, and, secondly, she was always strange of manner.

Jean Nicole, the boot-repairer, and his wife, with whom the girl lived, were honest country folk of Normandy. Both came from Vaubadon, a remote little village on the road to St. Lô. After the war they had moved to Bayeux, when one day they chanced to see an advertisement in the *Ouest Éclair*, an advertisement inviting a trustworthy married couple to take charge of a young lady who was slightly mentally deficient, and offering a good recompense.

They answered the advertisement, with the result that they were invited to the Hôtel de l'Univers at St. Malo, where the worthy pair were shown up to a private sitting-room wherein sat a well-dressed Englishman and a smartly-attired woman, his wife.

They explained that they had been left in charge of the young lady in question, who was unfortunately blind. Her father's sudden death, by accident, had so preyed upon her mind that it had become deranged.

The man, who gave the name of Mr Hugh Ford, explained that he and his wife were sailing from Havre to New York on business on the following Saturday, and they required someone to look after the unfortunate young lady during their absence. Would Monsieur and Madame Nicole do so?

The boot-repairer and his stout spouse, eager to increase their income, expressed their readiness, and within an hour arrangements were made, an agreement drawn up by which the pair were to receive from a bank in Paris a certain monthly sum for mademoiselle's maintenance, and the young lady was introduced to them.

Her affliction of blindness was pitiable. Her eyes seemed fixed as she groped her way across the room, and it was with difficulty that her guardian made her understand that she was going to live with new friends.

At last she uttered two words only in English.

"I understand."

The middle-aged Frenchman and his wife knew no English, while it seemed that the young lady knew no French.

"Her name is Betty Grayson," explained Mr Ford, speaking in French. "She seldom speaks. Yet at times she will, perhaps, become talkative, and will probably tell you in English some absurd story or other, always highly dramatic, about some terrible crime. But, as I tell you, Monsieur Nicole, her mind is unhinged, poor girl! So take no notice of her fantastic imagination."

"*Très bien, monsieur,*" replied the dark-faced boot-repairer. "I quite follow. Poor mademoiselle!"

"Yes. Her affliction is terribly unfortunate. You see her condition—quite hopeless, alas! She must have complete mental rest. To be in the presence of people unduly excites her, therefore it is best to keep her indoors as much as possible. And when she goes out, let it be at night when nobody is about."

"I understand, monsieur."

"The best London specialists on mental diseases have already examined her. Poor Betty! They have told me her condition, therefore, if she gets worse it will be useless to call in a doctor. And she may get worse," he added meaningly, after a pause.

"And when will monsieur and madame be back?" inquired Madame Nicole.

"It is quite impossible to tell how long my business will take," was Mr Ford's reply. "We shall leave Havre by the *Homeric* on Saturday, and I hope we shall be back by November. But your monthly payments will be remitted to you by the *Crédit Lyonnais* until our return."

So the pair had gone back by train from St. Malo to quiet old Bayeux, to that dingy, ramshackle old house a few doors from that ancient mansion, now the museum in which is preserved in long glass cases the wonderful strip of linen cloth worked in outline by Queen Matilda and her ladies, representing the Conquest of England by her husband, William of Normandy, and the overthrow of Harold—one of the treasures of our modern world. On the way there they found that Miss Grayson could speak French.

The rooms to which they brought the poor sightless English mademoiselle were small and frowsy. The atmosphere was close, and pervaded by the odour of a stack of old boots which Monsieur Nicole kept in the small back room, in which he cut leather and hammered tacks from early morn till nightfall.

From the front window at which the girl sat daily, inert and uninterested, a statuesque figure, silent and sightless, a good view could be obtained of the wonderful west façade of the magnificent Gothic Cathedral, the bells of which rang forth their sweet musical carillon four times each hour.

Summer sightseers who, with guide-book in hand, passed up the old Rue des Chanoines to the door of the Cathedral, she heard, but she could not see. Americans, of whom there were many, and a sprinkling of English, chattered and laughed upon their pilgrimage to the magnificent masterpiece of the Conqueror's half-brother, and some of them glanced up and wondered at the motionless figure seated staring out straight before her.

It is curious how very few English travellers ever go to Bayeux, the cradle of their race, and yet how many Americans are interested in the famous tapestries and the marvellous monument in stone.

On that warm noon as Betty Grayson sat back in the window, silent and motionless, her brain suddenly became stirred, as it was on occasions, by recollections, weird, horrible and fantastic.

Madame Nicole, in her full black dress and the curious muslin cap of the shape that has been worn for centuries by the villagers of Vaubadon—for each village in Normandy has its own fashion in women's caps so that the denizens of one village can, in the markets, be distinguished from those of another—crossed the room from the heavy, old oak sideboard, laying the midday meal. In the room beyond Jean, her husband, was earning his daily bread tapping, and ever tapping upon the boots.

"Madame," exclaimed the girl, rising with a suddenness which caused the boot-repairer's wife to start. "There is a strange man below. He keeps passing and re-passing and looking up at me."

The stout, stolid Frenchwoman in her neat and spotless cap started, and smiled good-humouredly.

"Then you can see at last—eh?" she cried. "Perhaps he is only some sightseer from the Agence Cook." The woman was astounded at the sudden recovery of the girl's sight.

"No. I do not think so. He looks like an English business man. Come and see," said the girl.

Madame crossed to the window, but only two women were in sight, neighbours who lived across the way, and with them was old Abbé Laugée who had just left his confessional and was on his way home to *déjeuner*.

"Ah! He's gone!" the girl said in French. "I saw him passing along last evening, and he seemed to be greatly interested in this house."

"He may perhaps have a friend living above us," suggested Madame Nicole.

Scarcely had she replied, however, when a knock was heard at the outside door, which, on being opened, revealed the figure of a rather tall, spruce-looking Englishman, well-dressed in a dark grey suit.

"I beg pardon, madame," he said in good French, "but I believe you have a Mademoiselle Grayson living with you?"

Ere the woman could speak the girl rushed forward, and staring straight into the face of the man, cried:

"Why! It's—it's actually Mr Porter!"

The man laughed rather uneasily, though he well concealed his chagrin. He had believed that she was blind.

"I fear you have mistaken me for somebody else," he said. Then, turning to the woman, he remarked: "This is Miss Grayson, I suppose?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Ah! Then she imagines me to be somebody named Porter—eh?" he remarked in a tone of pity.

"I imagine nothing," declared the girl vehemently. "I used to, but I am now growing much better, and I begin to recollect. I recognise you as Mr Arthur Porter, whom I last saw at Willowden, near Welwyn. And you know it is the truth."

The man shrugged his shoulders, and turning to Madame Nicole said in French:

"I have heard that mademoiselle is suffering from—well, from hallucinations."

"Yes, monsieur, she does. For days she will scarcely speak. Her memory comes and goes quite suddenly. And she has to-day recovered her sight."

"That is true," replied the pretty blue-eyed girl. "I recognise this gentleman as Mr Arthur Porter," she cried again. "I recollect many things—that night at Farncombe when—when I learnt the truth, and then lost my reason."

"Take no notice, monsieur," the woman urged. "Poor mademoiselle! She tells us some very odd stories sometimes—about a young man whom she calls Monsieur Willard. She says he was murdered."

"And so he was!" declared the girl in English. "Mr Homfray can bear me out! He can prove it!" she said determinedly.

Their visitor was silent for a moment. Then he asked:

"What is this strange story?"

"You know it as well as I do, Mr Porter," she replied bitterly. But the stranger only smiled again as though in pity.

"My name is not Porter," he assured her. "I am a doctor, and my name is George Crowe, a friend of your guardian, Mr Ford. He called upon me in Philadelphia a few weeks ago, and as I was travelling to Paris he asked me to come here and see you."

"What?" shrieked the girl. "Dare you stand there and deny that you are Arthur Porter, the friend of that woman, Freda Crisp!"

"I certainly do deny it! And further, I have not the pleasure of knowing your friend."

Betty Grayson drew a long breath as her blue eyes narrowed and her brow knit in anger.

"I know that because of my lapses of memory and my muddled brain I am not believed," she said. "But I tell you that poor Mr Willard was killed—murdered, and that the identity of the culprits is known to me as well as to old Mr Homfray, the rector of Little Farncombe."

"Ah! That is most interesting," remarked the doctor, humouring her as he would a child. "And who, pray, was this Mr Willard?"

"Mr Willard was engaged to be married to me!" she said in a hard voice. "He lived in a house in Hyde Park Square, in London, a house which his father had left him, and he also had a pretty seaside house near Cromer. But he was blackmailed by that adventuress, your friend, Mrs Crisp, and when at last he decided to unmask and prosecute the woman and her friends he was one morning found dead in very mysterious circumstances. At first it was believed that he had committed suicide, but on investigation it was found that such was not the case. He had been killed by some secret and subtle means which puzzled and baffled the police. The murder is still an unsolved mystery."

"And you know the identity of the person whom you allege killed your lover—eh?" asked the doctor with interest.

"Yes, I do. And so does Mr Homfray."

"Then why have neither of you given information to the police?" asked the visitor seriously.

"Because of certain reasons—reasons known to old Mr Homfray."

"This Mr Homfray is your friend, I take it?"

"He is a clergyman, and he is my friend," was her reply. Then suddenly she added: "But why should I tell you this when you yourself are a friend of the woman Crisp, and of Gordon Gray?"

"My dear young lady," he exclaimed, laughing, "you are really making a very great error. To my knowledge I have never seen you before I passed this house last evening, and as for this Mrs Crisp, I have never even heard of her! Yet what you tell me concerning Hugh Willard is certainly of great interest."

"Hugh Willard!" she cried. "You betray yourself, Mr Porter! How do you know his Christian name? Tell me that!"

"Because you have just mentioned it," replied the man, not in the least perturbed.

"I certainly have not!" she declared, while Madame Nicole, not understanding English, stood aside trying to gather the drift of the conversation.

The man's assertion that his name was Crowe, and that he was a doctor when she had recognised him as an intimate friend of the woman who had blackmailed her lover, aroused the girl's anger and indignation. Why was he there in Bayeux?

"I tell you that you are Arthur Porter, the friend of Gordon Gray and his unscrupulous circle of friends!" cried the girl, who, turning to the stout Frenchwoman, went on in French: "This man is an impostor! He calls himself a doctor, yet I recognise him as a man named Porter, the friend of the woman who victimised the man I loved! Do not believe him?"

"Madame!" exclaimed the visitor with a benign smile, as he bowed slightly. "I think we can dismiss all these dramatic allegations made by poor mademoiselle—can we not? Your own observations have," he said, speaking in French, "shown you the abnormal state of the young lady's mind. She is, I understand, prone to imagining tragic events, and making statements that are quite unfounded. For that reason Mr Ford asked me to call and see her, because—to be frank—I am a specialist on mental diseases."

"Ah! Doctor! I fear that mademoiselle's mind is much unbalanced by her poor father's death," said the woman. "Monsieur Ford explained it all to me, and urged me to take no notice of her wild statements. When is Mr Ford returning to France?"

"In about three months, I believe. Then he will no doubt relieve you of your charge—which, I fear, must be a heavy one."

"Sometimes, yes. But mademoiselle has never been so talkative and vehement as she is to-day."

"Because I, perhaps, bear some slight resemblance to some man she once knew—the man named Porter, I suppose."

"You are Arthur Porter!" declared the girl in French. "When I first saw you hazily last night I thought that you resembled him, but now I see you closer and plainly I *know* that you are! I would recognise you by your eyes among a thousand men!"

But the visitor only shrugged his shoulders again and declared to madame that mademoiselle's hallucinations were, alas! pitiable.

Then he questioned the woman about her charge, and when he left he handed her a five-hundred-franc note which he said Mr Ford had sent to her.

But a few moments later when on his way down the narrow, old-world street with its overhanging houses, he muttered ominously to himself in English:

"I must get back to Gordon as soon as possible. That girl is more dangerous than we ever contemplated. As we believed, she knows too much—far too much! And if Sandys finds her then all will be lost. It was a false step of Gordon's to leave her over here. She is recovering. The situation is distinctly dangerous. Therefore we must act—without delay!"

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## Chapter Eighteen.

### Wiles of the Wicked.

On the day that Arthur Porter, under the guise of a doctor from Philadelphia, had visited Edna Manners at quaint old Bayeux, Roddy Homfray had, since early morning, been in his wireless-room at Little Farncombe Rectory, making some experiments with the new receiving-set which he had constructed in a cigar-box.

The results had been highly satisfactory and very gratifying. He had been experimenting with a new organic and easily manufactured super-sensitive crystal which he had discovered to be a very delicate detector of wireless waves when an electrical circuit was passed through it, and by dint of long and patient tests of pressure electricity, had come to the conclusion that it was quite as effective as the usual three valves. This meant a very great improvement in the reception of wireless telephony.

As that afternoon he sat at tea with his father he explained the trend of his piezo-electric experiments. The discovery was entirely his own, for though others had experimented with inorganic crystals, quartz and gems, trying to solve the riddle why sugar and certain salts should cool from liquid into different patterns of crystals, nobody had ever dreamed of constructing such a detector or of using such a manufactured "crystal."

The secret of the new crystals was his own, and, judging from the efficiency of the new portable receiving-set, would be of very considerable value. When, later on, deaf old Mrs Bentley had cleared the table, father and son sat smoking, and Roddy said:

"I'm going along to the Towers to dinner. Mr Sandys has asked me to have a hand at bridge afterwards."

"Elma is away, isn't she?"

"Yes. At Harrogate with her aunt. She returns on Tuesday," the young man replied. "And to-morrow Barclay meets the Kaid Ahmed-el-Hafid at the Ritz to receive the concession. He had a telegram from the Kaid last Friday to say that the concession had been granted in my name, and that he was leaving Tangiers with it on the following day."

"Well, my boy, it really looks as though Fortune is about to smile on you at last! But we must always remember that she is but a fickle jade at best."

"Yes, father. I shall not feel safe until the concession is actually in my hands. Barclay has promised to introduce me to the Kaid, who will give me every assistance in my prospecting expedition. It is fortunate that we already hold the secret of the exact position of the ancient workings."

"It is, my boy," remarked the old rector thoughtfully. "Possibly you can induce Mr Sandys to finance the undertaking and float a company—eh?"

"That is my idea," his son replied. "But I shall not approach him until I have been out to the Wad Sus and seen for myself. Then I can speak with authority, and conduct to the spot any expert engineer he may like to send out there."

Afterwards Roddy glanced at the old grandfather clock with its brass face which stood in the corner, rose, and after dressing, shouted a merry "good-bye" to the rector, and left the house to dine with the great financier, with whose daughter he was so deeply in love.

Their secret they withheld from Mr Sandys. Theirs was a fierce, all-absorbing passion, a mutual affection that was intense. They loved each other fondly and, Mr Sandys being so often in London, they saw each other nearly every day. Indeed, for hours on end Elma would sit in the wireless-room and assist her lover in those delicate and patient experiments which he had been daily making. Roddy, in the weeks that had passed, had regained his normal condition, though sometimes, at odd moments, he still experienced curious lapses of memory.

Old Mr Homfray had not been very well of late. His heart was naturally weak, and the doctor had for several years warned him against any undue excitement or hurrying when walking uphill. Once while conducting morning service, he was seized by faintness and was prevented from preaching his sermon. The narrow, gossiping world of Little Farncombe declared that their rector needed a change, and Mr Homfray had promised his churchwardens that he would take one as soon as he could get someone to look after the parish in his absence.

On the previous day he had received a letter from Gray's solicitors informing him that the mortgaged property at Totnes had been sold, and enclosing the paltry sum of fourteen pounds twelve shillings as the balance due to him. This fad had irritated him and caused him the greatest indignation. Gordon Gray had defied him and had foreclosed the mortgage after all! He had, however, made no mention of it to Roddy. The matter was his secret—and his alone, for it so closely concerned that closed chapter of his earlier days.

To Roddy his own strange experience following the tragic discovery in Welling Wood was still a mystery. Only a few days before he had, out of sheer curiosity, taken train to Welwyn and walked out to Willowden. But the house was closed and the garden neglected, and on inquiry in the neighbourhood he had learnt that the people from London had taken the place furnished, and that their lease being up they had left. Where they had gone nobody knew.

To Park Lane Mr Rex Rutherford—as Gordon Gray called himself—had accompanied his friend Porter, alias Harrison, on two occasions, and had endeavoured to make himself extremely affable to Elma, by whose extraordinary beauty he had become greatly attracted. The girl, however, instinctively disliked him. Why, she could not herself tell. He was elegantly-dressed, and his manners were those of a gentleman, yet he had an oleaginous air about him which annoyed her on both occasions. Once she had been compelled to dance with him, and he had been full of empty compliments. But on subsequent occasions when he requested "the pleasure" she managed to excuse herself.

Indeed, she went so far as to suggest to her father that he should not invite Mr Rutherford again. Mr Sandys was rather surprised, but said nothing, and obeyed his daughter's wish.

Roddy had left the Rectory about an hour and the dusk was gathering into night, when a closed car with strong headlights, coming from the direction of London and driven by a middle-aged man, drew up outside the village, and from it there alighted a short, stout man wearing a green velour Homburg hat.

"I won't be long," he remarked to the driver, and at once set out on foot in the direction of the Rectory.

Old Norton Homfray was in his study looking up a text in his big well-worn "Cruden," when he heard a ring, and knowing Mrs Bentley to be upstairs—and that if downstairs she would never hear it—he went to the door and threw it open, expecting his visitor to be one of his parishioners.

Instead, he came face to face with his enemy, Gordon Gray.

For a second he was too surprised for words.

"Well," he asked with dignity, "why are you here?"

"Oh!—well, I happened to be near here, and I thought I'd just pay you a call. I want to see you. May I come in?"

"If you wish," growled the old clergyman, admitting him and conducting him to the study where the lamp was lit.

Then when his visitor was in the room, he turned to him and said:

"So you have carried out your threat, Gray, and sold my houses in Totnes—eh? You've taken my little income from me, as that woman told me you intended."

"I had to; I'm so hard-up. Since the war I've been very hard hit," replied the man. "I'm sorry, of course."

"Yes. I suppose you are very sorry!" sarcastically remarked the old man, pale with anger. "Once, Gray, I trusted you, and—"

"And I befriended you in consequence," interrupted the other. "I lent you money."

"You did—to your own advantage," said the old rector bitterly. "But let all that pass. I want you to tell me—nay, I demand to know!—what occurred in the wood outside this house on the night when Freda came here in secret."

"How do I know? I was not here."

"You were here. I saw you in church."

"I came to listen to the excellent maxims you put before these yokels—you, who have been in a criminal dock. A fine moral leader you are, Norton?" he laughed scornfully. "You ought to be hounded out of the parish as a hypocrite and a black-coated humbug. And if you don't take care you will be!"

"And you! I—"

"Take care. I know too much for you, remember," said Gray seriously.

"You ruin me, and now you would blackmail me—as you and that woman Crisp have blackmailed others. I know your game. It has been played too long."

"You are making allegations that may prove as dangerous to yourself as to me, Homfray," said the adventurer coldly, gazing straight into the other's eyes.

"What do you mean?" cried the rector fiercely. "I know something—and I suspect a good deal more. Edna Manners died in Welling Wood on that fatal night, and my boy Roddy, because he discovered her, fell into your unscrupulous hands. Now, confess it—or, by Heaven! I'll tell the truth concerning young Willard!"

"Really, Homfray," the visitor remarked, quite unperturbed. "You're a very nice, delightful parson—eh? Fancy you preaching in that pulpit, as I sat and listened to you on that Sunday night! You—of all men!"

"I demand to know the truth. Poor Edna was engaged to marry that boy whom you, with that accursed woman, fleeced with such audacity. And you had the further audacity to ask me to assist you in your vile plans."

"Why not? You live askew, just as we do—only you are slick enough to put on a clerical collar, as to six-tenths of the world the 'cloth' can do no evil," he laughed.

"Edna Manners knew too much for you. I recognised her from Roddy's description. And then Roddy himself was drugged—or something."

"It is a matter which neither of us need discuss, Homfray," said the other. "There is six of me and half a dozen of you. Your son is all right again, deep in his wireless experiments and, I hear, in love with a very charming girl. What more do you want?"

"I want justice and fair play!" said the old rector in desperation. "You, whom I believed to be my real friend, have played a deep and crooked game. Place your cards on the table for once, Gray, and tell me why. I have never been your enemy—only your friend!"

The stocky, beady-eyed adventurer paused for a few seconds. The question nonplussed him. Suddenly he blurted forth:

"You didn't play a straight game over young Willard. We might have shared equally thirty thousand pounds, but you wouldn't. I confess, Homfray, your refusal annoyed me."

"Oh! Then *that* is the secret!" he said. "I recollect it all. I told you that if you attempted to make that *coup* and divest the poor boy of everything so that he could not marry Edna, I would go to the police. You pretended to withhold your hand in fear of my threat. But Freda and your unscrupulous friend 'Guinness' managed to get the money from him and afterwards close his mouth so that the poor lad could tell no tales."

"It's a lie! A damnable lie!" cried Gray, fiercely indignant.

"I have only spoken the truth, and you know it," declared the old rector calmly. "As a minister of the Gospel, I am not in the habit of lying or being, uncharitable towards my fellow-men."

"Oh! stop that silly rot! You are on a par with us. Don't pose as a saint?"

"I am not a saint by any means, Gray. But I try to live honestly and in the fear of God."

"And the fear of man also, I hope!" the other laughed. "Look here, is it to be war to the end between us? Or will you consider a little proposition I have in mind? Remember that I can very easily go to your bishop and have you kicked out of this little snuggery of yours. And what would your dear son think of all your past adventures—eh?"

"Do it. Go to the bishop!" cried the poor old rector in desperation. "I tell you that I will never lift a finger to aid an assassin."

"Whom do you call an assassin?" asked Gray, putting forward his dark face threateningly to the rector.

"You—Gordon Gray!" replied the elder man fearlessly. "I know the truth concerning that poor boy Willard's death, and now that you have ruined me I have determined to risk my position here and reveal the truth!"

Gray, never at a loss for words, stood silent. Homfray's pale determined countenance told him that he meant what he had said. He realised, for the first time, that in attacking Roddy he had taken a false step. The boy's father suspected the truth. Nay, he knew it.

But there was the concession—and Elma! He was determined, at all hazards, to possess himself of both as the crowning point of his marvellously adventurous career.

"I defy you to utter a single word!" cried Gray, with clenched fists. "If you do, it will be the worse for you! Remember that!"

"I repeat what I told your accomplice, Freda Crisp. I will rid society of you both as social pests—vampires who prey upon the unwary and inexperienced," shouted the old clergyman in a frenzy of anger. "You have attacked me and mine, and now I will, in turn, retaliate. Get out of my house this instant!"

Gordon Gray glanced keenly at the old rector with his shrewd dark eyes and shrugged his shoulders.



"Homfray, you are a fool?" he declared. "Why can't we arrange matters? I came here to put a little proposition to you—that I should join your son in that mining concession he is obtaining from the Moorish Government."

"Join my son!" shrieked the old man. "I would rather that Roddy grasped hands with Satan himself than with you! I—I—"

And his face became crimson as he gasped for breath, and suddenly clutched wildly at his throat.

"I—I—"

But he uttered no further intelligible word. Next second a seizure, due to the violent excitement, held him rigid, and a few seconds later he sank into the arm-chair and expired in the presence of his enemy, thus carrying with him to the grave the secret of Hugh Willard's tragic end.

Gordon Gray stood there in silence and watching with interest, amused rather than otherwise, realising that Nature herself had, by a strange freak, effected still another *coup* in his own interests.

The one enemy he feared had been swept from his path! Of Roddy he took no heed.

The road to fortune and to Elma was now rendered clear for him.

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## Chapter Nineteen.

### A Matter of Urgency.

When Roddy Homfray returned from Farncombe Towers shortly before midnight he was staggered to find his father lying back in his arm-chair.

Horrified, he tried to rouse him. But at once he saw that he was dead.

He raised the alarm, and Doctor Denton was at once fetched out in his pyjamas from the other end of the village.

"As I feared," said his friend when he saw the dead rector. "He has had another heart attack which has unfortunately proved fatal."

"But he was quite all right and bright when I left him at seven," Roddy cried in despair.

"No doubt. But your father has had a weak heart for years. I've attended him for it, so there will be no need for an inquest. Indeed, only a week ago I warned him that any undue excitement might end fatally."

"But he has had no excitement!" cried the dead man's son, looking in despair around the cosy little study, where upon the writing-table "Cruden's Concordance" still lay open, as it had done when Gordon Gray had entered.

"Apparently not," Denton admitted. "But perhaps he may have been secretly worrying over something. We shall, I fear, never know. Your father was a rather secretive man, I believe, wasn't he, Roddy?"

"Yes. He was. He held some secret or other from me, the nature of which I could never make out," said his son, overcome with grief. At first he could not believe that his father, whom he idolised, was actually dead. But now he realised his loss, and tears were rolling down his cheeks.

"A secret!" exclaimed his friend the doctor. "Of what nature?"

"I have no idea. He once warned me against a certain man and a certain woman, who were apparently his enemies. But he would tell me nothing definite—nothing!"

"When you came home, was the front-door locked?" asked the doctor.

"No, my father always leaves it unlocked for me."

"He expected you to come in later, and was no doubt at work here preparing his sermon," said Denton, glancing at the open reference book lying upon the blotting-pad. Indeed, beside the copy of "Cruden" was a sheet of sermon paper with a number of headings written in the neat uniform hand of a classical scholar, as old Mr Homfray was.

"Yes. It seems so," said his son. "Apparently he felt the seizure approaching, and, leaving the table, crossed to the chair, and sinking into it, he breathed his last. Poor dear father! Why was I not here to assist him, instead of playing bridge? I—I'll never forgive myself, Denton!"

"But you could not have foretold this. Who could?" asked his friend. "Endocarditis, from which your father was suffering, is quite a common complaint and very often causes sudden death, especially when it is ulcerative, as in your lamented father's case. No medical aid would have saved him."

"And he knew this, and never told me!" cried Roddy.

"He was secretive, as I have already said," answered the doctor. "Your poor father's death was caused by embolism; I have suspected it for some time."

While Roddy and Denton were speaking at the dead man's side, Gordon Gray entered the tawdrily-decorated dancing-room of a certain disreputable night-club off Regent Street known as "The Gay Hundred"—a haunt of cocaine sellers and takers—and glanced eagerly around. He had driven up in his car a few doors away, and the doorkeeper had bowed to him and taken his coat and hat as he rushed in.

His quick eyes espied a table in the corner at which sat Freda Crisp, in a daring black-and-orange gown without sleeves, smoking a cigarette in an amber holder, laughing, and drinking champagne with two young men in evening clothes, while about them whirled many couples dancing, the women mostly with artificially fair hair and wearing deeply-cut gowns, while some of them smoked cigarettes as they danced to the wild strains of the blatant orchestra.

Freda's eyes met those of her friend Gray, and she read in them a message. She was a woman of quick perception and astounding intuition. Her adventures had been many and constant, and if she could have recorded them in print the book would certainly have been amongst the "best sellers" of which the public hear so much.

The men with her were strangers to Gordon, therefore, assuming an instant carelessness, he lounged over, bowed, and greeted her. He did not know on what terms she was with the pair with whom she was drinking "bubbly," whether, indeed, they were pigeons worth plucking. Therefore his attitude was one of extreme caution. Gordon Gray was far too clever ever to spoil "a good thing" in the course of being engineered by any of his accomplices of either sex.

"Oh! Good-evening, Mr Gray!" Freda exclaimed. "Fancy your being here to-night! I never suspected you of being a member of this place!"

"I'm not. A friend of mine has introduced me," he said, and then, when the elegantly-dressed woman in the daring black-and-orange gown had introduced her companions, Gray sat down at the table and took a cigarette.

Presently she excused herself from her two friends, saying:

"You'll forgive me if I have just this one dance with Mr Gray—won't you?"

And both joined the fox-trot which was at that moment commencing.

"Well, I see by your face, Gordon, that something has happened. What?" she whispered as they took the floor.

"Something good. Old Homfray is dead!"

"Dead!" gasped the woman. "But you didn't do it—eh?"

"No. I might have done. You know what I intended to do if he cut up rough—but luck came to my aid. The old hypocrite died suddenly from heart disease, I think. At any rate, he got into a passion and sank into his chair and expired. And then I quietly retired and drove back here to town. Nobody saw me. Luck—eh?"

"By Jove! yes. That relieves us of a great deal of worry, doesn't it?" said the woman. "It's the best bit of news I've heard for years. While the old man lived there was always a risk—always a constant danger that he might throw discretion to the winds and give us away."

"You're quite right, Freda. He was the only person in the world I feared."

"And yet you defied him!" she remarked. "That is the only way. Never let your enemy suspect that you are frightened of him," said the stout, beady-eyed man in the navy-blue suit.

"What about the young pup?" asked the woman in a low voice as they danced together over the excellent floor, while yellow-haired, under-dressed women who bore on their countenances the mark of cocaine-taking, and prosperous, vicious-looking men, both young and old, sat at the little tables, laughing, drinking and looking on.

"He knows nothing, and he's going to be useful to us."

"But he's very deeply in love with Elma."

"Of course. But to part them will be quite easy. Leave all that to me."

There was a pause.

"And you will desert me for that slip of a girl—eh, Gordon?" asked the handsome woman suddenly in a strange, unusual voice.

He started. He had never realised that the woman's jealousy had been aroused, but, nevertheless, he knew that a jealous woman always constitutes a danger when one sails near the wind.

"Oh! my dear Freda, please don't talk like that," he laughed. "Surely ours is a business connexion. Your interests are mine, and *vice versa*. Have they not been so for five years? You have kept your eyes open for the pigeons, while I have plucked them for you and given you half share of the spoil."

"And now you contemplate deserting me—and perhaps marrying the daughter of a wealthy man. Where do I come in?"

"As you always have done, my dear Freda. Both of us are out for money—and big money we must get from somewhere. That concession in Morocco is my main object at the present moment. We already have the plan, and Barclay has not yet discovered his loss."

"He may do so at any moment. What then?"

"Why, nothing. He will have no suspicion as to who has secured it or how it was taken from his safe. Besides, the old Moor is arriving at the Ritz and is bringing the actual signed concession over from Fez. And now that the parson is dead all will be plain sailing. Have you heard from Arthur to-day?"

"Not a word. He should be back from Bayeux in a couple of days."

"I shall want him to help me when young Homfray gets the concession in his possession."

The woman looked him straight in the face, and then, after another pause, asked in a whisper: "What! Do you intend that an—an accident shall happen to him—eh?"

"Perhaps," replied the man with a grim smile. "Who knows?"

"Ah! I see!" she exclaimed quickly. "There cannot be two candidates for the hand of Elma Sandys!"

And he nodded in the affirmative, a few moments later leading her back to the two young men who had been entertaining her, and then he left the place.

The ill-suppressed jealousy which his accomplice had expressed considerably perturbed him. He saw that if he intended to attain success with Elma he must first propitiate Freda. A single word from her as an enemy would ruin all his chances.

He was not blind to the fact either that Elma had no great liking for him, and that, on the other hand, the girl was deeply in love with the late rector's son. Though he had declared to Freda that all was plain sailing, he viewed the situation with considerable misgiving. As Rex Rutherford he had made a very favourable impression upon Mr Sandys, but women being gifted with an often uncanny intuition, Elma had from the first viewed him with suspicion. His studied attentions had annoyed her. And now that Freda had shown jealousy, a further difficulty, and even danger, had arisen.

Since their hurried departure from Willowden Freda had taken another furnished house called The Elms, not far from Laleham, on the Thames, and there old Claribut had again been installed as butler and general factotum, while Gray, under the name of Rutherford, occupied a handsome suite of chambers in Dover Street, to which his new chauffeur eventually drove him that night.

Next day the village of Little Farncombe was plunged into grief at the astounding news that their popular rector was dead. Old Mr Sandys' valet told his master the sad truth when he took up his early cup of tea, and within an hour the old financier called at the Rectory and offered his sincere condolences to Roddy, while later he sent a telegram to Elma at Harrogate announcing the tragic fact.

Not a soul had apparently seen the dead man's visitor either arrive or depart. Mrs Bentley had, as was her habit, gone to bed without wishing her master "Good-night." Nobody, therefore, discovered that the poor old gentleman had been taken ill in consequence of violent anger expressed to a visitor, for the latter had been clever enough to slip away without being seen.

Before noon Roddy received a long telegram from Elma, among many others, and three days later the body of the Reverend Norton Homfray was laid to rest in the quiet old churchyard which almost joined the Rectory garden. From far and near came crowds of mourners, and many were the beautiful wreaths placed upon the coffin by loving hands, though none was more beautiful than that which Elma herself brought from the Towers.

That evening, when the funeral was over, and all the mourners had gone, Roddy stood in the wireless-room with his loved one clasped in his strong arms.

He was pale, serious, and grief-stricken. She saw it, and kissed him upon the lips in mute sympathy.

He held his breath as his eyes wandered over the long row of experimental instruments which had been his chief hobby and delight. But with his father's death all the interest in them had been swept away.

This he declared to Elma in a tone of deep and poignant sorrow.

"No, Roddy dear," she exclaimed, her hand tenderly placed on his shoulder. "You must strive to bear your loss, great as it is. I know how you loved your dear father, but the parting must always come for all of us. The blow is great—to us all, to the village—and to you more especially, but you must not allow it to interfere with your future interests."

She saw in his eyes the light of unshed tears, and taking his strong hand, softly added:

"Face the world anew, dear—face it with greater spirit and energy than you have done before, so that you may become a son worthy of a splendid and revered father."

"I know!" he said. "It is very good of you to speak like that, Elma, but my grief seems to have altered the face of the world for me. The Moroccan Government has suddenly changed, it appears, and the Kaid Ahmed-el-Hafid is now no longer in power. The Minister of the Interior has been replaced by Mohammed ben Mussa, who was grand chamberlain to the Sultan, and who is now at the Ritz Hotel. My friend Barclay has arranged with him that I shall receive the concession for the ancient emerald mines, and I have to be introduced to him to-morrow. He promises me every facility and protection."

"Then you will go, dearest," she said, standing with her little black "pom" in her arms. "It will mean a great fortune for you. Father was only remarking about it the other day."

Roddy paused and looked fondly at her sweet face.

"Yes. If you really wish it, darling, I'll go."

"That's right," she exclaimed brightly. "Come up to the Towers with me in the car. Father asked me to bring you. You can't stay here alone this evening."

He demurred, and tried to excuse himself, but the girl was insistent.

"There's the news broadcast!" she exclaimed next second, glancing at the big, round-faced ship's clock. "Let's listen for a moment before we go—eh? The broadcast always fascinates me."

In obedience to her desire Roddy switched on the aerial, lit the valves, and giving her one pair of head-phones, took another. Then adjusting a tuning-coil and turning the knobs of the two condensers one after the other, a deep, sonorous voice was heard announcing the results of certain races held that afternoon, followed by a number of items of general news, which included a railway accident in France and the facts, that the King had left Buckingham Palace for Windsor, and that yet another conference of the Allies was contemplated.

The news was followed by the announcement:

"Mr George Pelham will now tell you all one of the famous bedtime stories for the children. Hulloo! C.Q. Hulloo! C.Q.? Listen! A bedtime story."

Elma removed the telephones from her ears, and said:

"I think we may go now." And then together they went forth to the car awaiting them.

Mr Sandys had asked Roddy to fit for him a wireless transmitting set so that he could speak to his office by wireless telephone. This he had done, though not without considerable difficulties with the authorities.

It was eleven o'clock before the young man returned to the silent, empty house, and on entering his dead father's study he saw that upon the blotting-pad old Mrs Bentley had placed several letters.

He took them up thoughtfully.

"Poor old dad!" he exclaimed aloud. "These have been written by people who still believe him to be alive!"

He turned them over in his hand, and then began to open them. The first was a polite intimation from a moneylender, who expressed himself anxious to lend the reverend gentleman a loan of anything from two pounds to two thousand pounds at practically a nominal interest. The next was from a second-hand bookseller of whom his father frequently dealt, the third a bill, and the fourth was thin and bore a foreign stamp, the address being written in a small, angular hand.

He opened it with some curiosity, and read as follows:

"Dear Mr Homfray,—Though we have not met for nearly two years, you will probably recollect me. I have of late been very ill, and in a most mysterious manner. I am, however, fast recovering, and am at last able to write to you—having recollected only yesterday your name and address.

"I have been suffering from blindness and a peculiar loss of memory; indeed, so much that I could not, until yesterday, tell people my own name. Here I am known as Betty Grayson, and I am living with some good, honest Normandy folk called Nicole.

"I need not recall the tragedy which befell my *fiancé*, Mr Willard, but it is in that connexion that I wish to see you—and with all urgency, for your interests in the affair coincide with my own. I feel that I dare not tell you more in this letter than to say that I feel grave danger threatening, and I make an appeal to you to come here and see me, so that we may act together in clearing up the mystery and bringing those guilty to the justice they deserve.

"The situation has assumed the greatest urgency for action, so will you, on receipt of this letter, telegraph to me: chez Madame Nicole, 104, Rue des Chanoines, Bayeux, France, and tell me that you will come at once to see me. I would come to you, but as an invalid I am in the charge of those who are doing their best to ensure my rapid recovery. You are a clergyman, and I rely upon your kind and generous aid.—Yours very sincerely,

"Edna Manners."

"Edna Manners?" gasped Roddy when he saw the signature. "Can she possibly be the girl whom I saw dead in Welling Wood?"

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## Chapter Twenty.

### Concerns the Concession.

Next morning Roddy was compelled to leave Haslemere by the early train, and having met Barclay at Waterloo station, they drove in a taxi to the Ritz, where in a luxurious suite of apartments they found the white-bearded intellectual old Moor, Mohammed ben Mussa. His dark, deep-set eyes sparkled when in French Mr Barclay introduced the young man as "one of the most active and enthusiastic mining engineers in London," and from beneath his white robe he put forth his hand and grasped Roddy's.

"I am very pleased, Monsieur Homfray, to think that you contemplate prospecting in the Wad Sus. Our mutual friend Mr Barclay is well known to us in Fez, and at his instigation I am granting you the necessary concession on the same conditions as my predecessor proposed to you, namely, that one-eighth of the profits be paid to me privately."

"To those terms, Your Excellency, we entirely agree," Roddy said.

"Good. Then I have the agreement ready for your signature."

Upon the writing-table stood a small steel dispatch-case, from which His Excellency brought out a document which had been drawn up by a French notary in Tangiers, and, having read it, both Barclay and Homfray appended their signatures. Replacing it in the box, he then drew out a formidable-looking document written in Arabic with a translation in French.

Both Roddy and his friend sat down and together digested the contents of the document by which "Son Majesté Chérifiane," through "his trusted Minister Mohammed ben Mussa," granted to Roderick Charles Homfray, of Little Farncombe, in Surrey, the sole right to prospect for and to work the emerald mines in the Wad Sus region of the Sahara on payment of one-eighth of the money obtained from the sale of the gems to the Sultan's private account at the Crédit Lyonnais in Paris.

It was a long and wordy screed, couched in the quaint and flowery language of the Moors, but the above was the gist of it. The Sultan and his Minister were sharing between themselves a quarter of the spoils, while Morocco itself obtained no benefit whatever.

The two Englishmen having expressed their acceptance, His Excellency, the slow-moving Moorish Minister, bestirred himself again, and taking a large piece of scarlet sealing-wax, produced a huge silver seal—his seal of office as Minister—and with considerable care and with a great show of formality, he heated the wax until he had a round mass about three inches in diameter, into which he pressed the all-important seal. Then, ascertaining that the impression was a good one, he took out a red pen and signed it with long, sprawly Arabic characters, afterwards signing his name in French as Minister of His Majesty the Sultan.

"And now, my young friend," said the patriarchal-looking man in French, as he handed the document to Roddy hardly dry, "I want to give you some little advice. You will go to Mogador, and there you will meet Ben Chaib Benuis, who will bear a letter from me. He will conduct you safely through very unsafe country which is held by our veiled Touaregs, the brigands of the Great Desert. While you are with him you will have safe conduct into the Wad Sus, one of the most inaccessible regions south of the Atlas Mountains."

"I am much indebted to Your Excellency," said the young man. "I have had some little experience of mining operations in South America, and up to the present I am glad to say that I have been successful. I hope I may be equally successful in Morocco."

"You will surely be," the old man assured him. "Already Ben Chaib Benuis knows where to find the entrance to the workings, and the rest will be quite easy for you. You have only to raise the necessary capital here, in your city of London, and then we go ahead. And may Allah's blessing ever rest upon you!" concluded the mock-pious old man, who saw in the concession a big profit to himself and to his royal master.

Roddy folded the precious document into four and placed it in the breast pocket of his dark-blue jacket with an expression of thanks and a promise to do his utmost to carry out his part of the contract.

"We have every hope of floating a very important company to carry out the scheme," said Andrew Barclay enthusiastically, even then in ignorance that the plan given him by the Minister's predecessor in Marseilles was no longer in his possession. "I saw the beautiful dark emerald which has been only recently taken from one of the mines. It is a glorious stone, finer, they say, than any that have ever come from the Urals into the treasury of the Romanoffs."

"Emeralds and rubies are the most precious stones of to-day," Roddy declared. "Diamonds do not count. They are unfashionable in these post-war days of the ruined aristocracy and the blatant profiteer. A big emerald worn as a pendant upon a platinum chain is of far greater notoriety than a diamond tiara. Nobody wears the latter."

It was eleven o'clock, and His Excellency rang for a cup of black coffee, while Barclay and Roddy each took a glass of French vermouth. Then, when they sat down to chat over their cigarettes, Roddy glanced casually at the morning newspaper, and saw the announcement that the Moorish Minister was in London "upon a matter of international importance concerning the port of Mogador."

The young fellow smiled. The matter upon which old Mohammed was "doing himself well" at the Ritz concerned his own pocket—the same matter which affects nine-tenths of the foreign political adventurers who visit Paris and London. They make excuses of international "conversations," but the greed of gain to themselves at the expense of their own country is ever present.

Later, when he walked with Barclay along Piccadilly towards the Circus, the concession safely in his pocket, Roddy turned to his friends and said:

"Do you know, Andrew, I'm not quite easy in my own mind! I fear that somebody might try to do me out of this great stroke of good fortune for which I am indebted to you."

"Why? Who could contest your right to the concession? The future is all plain sailing for you—and for Miss Sandys, I hope. I congratulate you, my boy. You'll end by being a pillar of finance!"

"Never, old chap," laughed Roddy. Then, after a few moments' pause, he added: "I'm going over to France tomorrow. I must go."

"Why?"

"I have a little matter to see after that brooks no delay. When I'm back I'll tell you all about it. I'll be away only two or three days at most. But in the meantime I shall place the concession with old Braydon, my father's solicitor, in Bedford Row. I have to see him this afternoon regarding some matters concerning the poor old governor's will."

"Yes. Perhaps it may be just as well, Roddy," said his friend. "But as soon as you have recovered from the blow of your poor father's death we ought to take up the concession and see what business we can do to our mutual advantage. There's a big fortune in it. Of that I'm quite convinced."

"So am I—unless there are sinister influences at work, as somehow I fear there may be."

But Barclay laughed at his qualms. The pair took lunch in a small Italian restaurant in Wardour Street, and while Andrew returned to Richmond, Roddy went along to see his father's old friend, Mr Braydon, and asked him to put the sealed concession into safe keeping.

"I'm just sending along to the Safe Deposit Company's vaults in Chancery Lane," said the grey-haired, clean-shaven old man who was so well known in the legal world. "I'll send the document for you. Perhaps you will like a copy? I'll have a rough copy made at once." And, touching a bell, he gave the order to the lady clerk who entered in response.

When Roddy left Bedford Row he felt that a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Perhaps he would not have been so completely reassured if he had known that Gordon Gray himself had been very cleverly keeping watch upon his movements all the morning. He had been idling in the corridor of the Ritz while Roddy had been engaged in the negotiations, and he had been standing on the opposite pavement in Bedford Row while he had sought Mr Arnold Braydon.

When Roddy had walked down towards Holborn the silent watcher had turned upon his heel and left, with a muttered expression of dissatisfaction, for he knew that young Homfray had placed the official document in keeping so safe that theft would now be impossible.

"We must change our tactics," growled the king of international crooks to himself. "That concession would be worthless to us even if we had it at this moment. No; we must devise other means."

And, hailing a passing taxi, he entered and drove away.

Gordon Gray had been foiled by Roddy's forethought. Yet, after all, the concession had been actually granted and stamped by the official seal of the Moorish Minister of the Interior. Therefore, the dead rector's son was in possession of the sole right to prospect in the Wad Sus, and it only now remained for him to start out on his journey into the Sahara and locate the mines, aided by the plan which his friend Barclay had been given.

As far as Roddy was concerned the concession was an accomplished fact. But uppermost in his mind was that curious letter addressed to his father from the girl, Edna Manners. Something impelled him to investigate it—and at once.

Therefore, he dashed back to Little Farncombe, and before going home called at the Towers, intending to show the strange letter to Mr Sandys before leaving for Bayeux. James, the footman, who opened the door to him, replied that both his master and Miss Elma had left at twelve o'clock, Mr Sandys having some urgent business in Liverpool. They had gone north in the car.

Disappointed, Roddy went home and packed a suit-case, and that evening left for Southampton, whence he crossed to Havre, as being the most direct route into Normandy.

At midday he alighted from the train at Bayeux, and drove in a ramshackle *fiacre* over the uneven cobbles of the quaint old town, until at the back of the magnificent cathedral he found the address given in the letter.

Ascending to the first floor, he knocked at the door, and Madame Nicole appeared.

"I am in search of Mademoiselle Grayson," he said inquiringly in French.

"Mademoiselle lives here," answered the woman, "but, unfortunately, she is not at home. She went out last evening to post a letter, and, strangely enough, she has not returned! We are much distressed. Only an hour ago my husband informed the commissary of police, and he is making inquiries. Mademoiselle has recovered her sight and, to a great extent, her proper senses. It is a mystery! She promised to return in a quarter of an hour, but she has not been seen since!"

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## Chapter Twenty One.

### The Blow.

Purcell Sandys was seated at his writing-table in his fine spacious library in Park Lane engrossed in the intricacies of some formidable-looking accounts.

Hughes, the grave-faced old butler, opened the door softly, and asked:

“Shall you be wanting anything more to-night, sir?”

His master raised his head wearily, and Hughes at once noticed how very pale and changed he seemed.

“No, nothing, Hughes,” he replied in an unusual voice. “But leave word that when Miss Elma comes in I wish to see her here at once. She’s at Lady Whitchurch’s dance, but she ought to be back very soon.”

“Yes, sir,” answered the old servant. “But—excuse me, sir, you don’t look very well. Can’t I get you something? A little brandy—perhaps?”

“Well, yes, Hughes. Just a liqueur-glass full,” was his master’s reply; and then he turned again to his accounts.

Hughes, a moment later, placed the thin little Venetian liqueur-glass upon a silver salver at his elbow, and retired noiselessly.

Mr Sandys had not heard him. He was far too engrossed in his work of examination of the accounts and three bankers’ pass-books.

Now and then he drew long breaths and snapped his fingers in fierce impatience.

“To think of this! Only to think of it!” escaped his pale, thin lips.

Then he rose, and with his hand on the edge of the table he slowly surveyed his room.

“And I trusted Hornton! He was so sound that I would have entrusted to him Elma’s life and future. And she is all I have in the world. And he’s let me down!”

He reseated himself at the table, and, taking up a telegram, re-read it, as he had done a dozen times before.

It was dated from Stowmarket, and said:

“Much regret to tell you that poor Charles has been found dead. Very distressed.—Lady Hornton.”

His partner was dead! Upon his table lay a letter he had received by the last post that evening. A letter of apology it was. On the previous night at eight o’clock the two partners had met alone in Lombard Street, and Sir Charles had confessed that he had been gambling heavily in Paris, at Deauville, at Aix, at Madeira, at the Jockey Club, at Buenos Ayres, as well as at a private gambling-hell called Evans’ in West Kensington, and that the result had been that he had lost everything. He could not face the music.

So he had made his bow to the world and ended his life. Purcell Sandys was left to bear the brunt of the whole of the gigantic liabilities of them both!

The great financier left the little glass of brandy untouched. He was never addicted to spirits. A man of strong and outstanding personality, he had studied, as so many of our greatest Englishmen have done, the practically unknown philosophy of Yogi—that science of “I am”—of the “Great Ego,” which by our modern world is so little understood.

Purcell Sandys, at that moment when he knew that ruin had befallen him, stood erect, and presently a curious smile crossed his lips. He had studied the old Indian science of “Raja Yogi” thoroughly and well. He knew the nature of Real Self, as every strong man does. He knew the power of the Will, which power underlies the entire teachings of Raja Yogi, and he was master of his Real Self. The great strong men through all the ages have studied the Yogi science perhaps unconsciously. Even as Purcell Sandys stood there, a ruined man in that millionaire’s palace in Park Lane, he spoke aloud and repeated the mantrams or affirmations of the candidates presenting themselves to the Yogi masters for their first lesson.

“I am a Centre,” he said in a low, distinct voice. “Around me revolves the world. ‘I’ am a Centre of Influence and Power. ‘I’ am a Centre of Thought and Consciousness. ‘I’ am independent of the Body. ‘I’ am Immortal and cannot be destroyed. ‘I’ am Invincible and cannot be injured. Mastery is with me.”

Then he returned to his chair and fell to studying and adding up his liabilities. They were colossal. He had known that Hornton was very fond of games of chance and often played for high stakes at a certain gaming-club in Paris, but he had never dreamed he was gambling away the firm’s securities. The blow had staggered him, for it had brought him in a day from luxury to ruin. The financial operations they had in progress throughout the world were now simply bubbles. There was nothing behind them. The Paris house had been depleted, and yet so high was the standing of the firm that nobody had expected such a crisis.

The failure would inevitably bring down with it other smaller houses, and hundreds of small investors, war widows, clergymen, artisans, and people who earned weekly wages, both in England and in France, would lose their all.

He bit his lip to the blood. An hour before he had spoken on the telephone to Lady Hornton, but the line was very bad to Stowmarket, and he could scarcely hear her. But he understood her to say that her husband, who had been out motoring in the morning, had lunched and then, as usual, gone to his room to have a nap. But when his man went to call him at half-past five he found him dead.

Such news was, indeed, calculated to upset any man. But Purcell Sandys, on account of his Yogi knowledge, knew of his own subconscious mentality. He relaxed every muscle, he took the tension from every nerve, threw aside all mental strain, and waited for a few moments. Then he placed his position firmly and fixedly before his mental vision by means of concentration. Afterwards he murmured to his subconscious mentality—which all of us possess if we know how to use it aright:

“I wish my position to be thoroughly analysed, arranged, classified, and directed, and the result handed back to me. Attend to this?”

Thus the ruined financier spoke to his subconscious mentality just as though it were a separate entity which had been employed to do the work.

Confident expectation was, he knew, an important part of the process, and that the degree of success depended upon the degree of his confident expectation. He was not a slave to the subconscious, but its master.

Returning again to his table, he sat for a long time pondering until suddenly the door opened and Elma burst in, bright and radiant in a filmy dance frock of emerald with shoes and stockings to match. In her hair she wore a large golden butterfly, and in her hand she carried her long gloves.

“Do you want to see me, dad?” she asked. “I know I’m rather late, but I’ve had such a topping time. Only one thing spoiled it. That Mr Rutherford was there and pestered me to dance with him.”

Her father was silent for a few seconds. Mention of the name of Rutherford caused him to reflect.

“Yes, dear, I want to see you. Sit down for a moment. I have something to tell you.”

“You look very anxious, dad,” exclaimed the girl. “Why, what’s the matter?”

“A very serious one, my dear—most serious. A heavy blow has fallen upon me. Sir Charles has killed himself!”

“What?” gasped the girl, rising from her chair.

“Yes, and, moreover, before doing so he ruined us both by gambling. Elma, I cannot conceal the bitter truth from you, dear. I am ruined!”

The girl was too astounded to utter a word. Her countenance had blanched.

“But, dad!” she cried at last. “You can’t mean that you are actually ruined—you, the rich man that you are.”

“I thought I was until last night,” he replied huskily. “I have enemies, as well as friends. What man has not? The truth cannot be concealed from them very long, and then they will exult over my ruin,” he remarked very gravely.

“But, dad, what are we to do? Surely Sir Charles hasn’t actually ruined you?”

“Unfortunately he has, my child. I trusted him, but the curse of gambling was in his blood and he flung away my money as well as his own. But he is dead—he has paid the penalty of his folly, and left me to face our creditors.”

“And the future, dad?” asked the young girl, gazing aimlessly about her and not yet realising what ruin meant.

Purcell Sandys, the man whose credit was at that moment so high in Lombard Street—for the truth was not yet out—sighed and shook his head.

“I must face the music, my dear,” he said. “Face defeat, as others have done. Napoleon was compelled to bow to the inevitable; I must do so. Farncombe must be sold, and this house also. I must realise as much as possible to pay my creditors. But I cannot pay them all even though I sell everything.”

“And then?” asked his pretty daughter, so slim and girlish. “And then, dad?”

“Then we must both go into obscurity. Perhaps we can live over in Brittany, in some out-of-the-way place, and learn to forget. But I said ‘we.’ No, dear, you could never forget. You are young and have your life before you—you must marry, child, and be a happy wife. I could never take you over to France to one of those deadly-dull little towns where life is only existence, and thoughts of the past become an obsession. No.”

“But I want to help you, dad,” she said, crossing to him and stroking his grey brow with her hand.

“I know, darling. I know,” he muttered. “You may be able to—one day. But—but to-night don’t let us discuss this painful subject further. I feel—well, I can’t bear it. Good-night!” And raising his bearded face, he kissed her, patting her upon the shoulder as he did so.

Reluctantly she withdrew, for he was insistent that she should retire.

Then, when she had gone, he drew several long, deep breaths—part of his Yogi training—and locking up the sheaf of accounts and the pass-books, he switched off the light and ascended the wide, handsome stairs to his room.

By the irony of fate the man who had built that magnificent town mansion in Park Lane, and had sold it to Purcell Sandys, had afterwards stood in the dock at the Old Bailey and had been sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment for a gigantic fraud.

The position of Purcell Sandys was certainly a very serious one. Honest, upright, and straight-spoken, he had, from



small beginnings, attained greatness in the financial world, until the name of the firm was one to conjure with in the money markets of Europe. But he was ever a man of honour. During the war he saw the way open to make a profit of five millions sterling by dealing with Germany through a certain source in South America.

The proposition was put to him on the day of the air-raid on Brixton. He heard the sleek agent of the enemy, and smoked a good cigar as he listened. Then he rose from his chair, and said:

“Look here! I’m an Englishman! Get out! There’s the door. And if you don’t get out of England in twelve hours you’ll find yourself arrested. Get out!”

And even while the caller was in the room he crossed to the telephone and rang up “M.O.5” at the War Office.

Purcell Sandys was a real, honest, firm-handed Englishman. He had, by his own pluck, self-confidence and shrewd intuition, raised himself from his small office as a provincial bank manager to the position he had attained in the financial world. Mrs Sandys, who had been a great invalid for years, had died at St. Moritz two years before, and he had only Elma left to him. And naturally he doted upon her—his only child.

That night he felt himself up against a brick wall—he, whose very name was a power upon every bourse in Europe.

Alone in her room Elma, dismissing her maid Evans, sank at her bedside and prayed. She loved her father, and had never before seen him with hopelessness written plainly upon his features.

She thought of Roddy. Would that he were at her side to advise and help her!

But she was alone—alone except for her little pet, the black pom, Tweedles.

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## Chapter Twenty Two.

### By Stroke of the Pen.

Next day the news of the sudden death of Sir Charles Hornton at his country house in Suffolk caused a great sensation in the City. But as the truth was never guessed, the greatest sympathy was felt on every hand for his close friend and partner Purcell Sandys. The fact that Sir Charles had committed suicide had not leaked out. He had been found dead under very mysterious circumstances. That was all.

Almost the first person to call at Park Lane and express his sorrow was the well-dressed, soft-speaking and refined Mr Rex Rutherford. It was about eleven o’clock. Elma heard a ring at the door, and afterwards asked Hughes who was the caller.

“Mr Rutherford, miss,” was the old man’s reply.

The girl said nothing, but she wondered why he should call upon her father so early in the morning.

Two days later the white-bearded old Moorish Minister Mohammed ben Mussa was seated with his secretary, a young Frenchman, in his hotel in the Rue de Rivoli, in Paris, when a waiter entered, saying:

“Madame Crisp has called, Your Excellency.”

In an instant the old man’s face became illuminated, and he gave orders to show the lady in.

“It is the lady I met on the boat between Dover and Calais. Her necklet had been stolen, and she was naturally in tears. We travelled together from Calais to Paris,” he explained. “She is a very intelligent English society woman, and I asked her to call.”

The French secretary, who had been engaged at the Ministry in Fez for some years, bowed as his new master spoke.

In a few moments Freda Crisp, elegantly-dressed, swept into the luxurious room.

“Ah! So here you are!” she cried in French, which she spoke extremely well. “I promised I would call. Do you know, the French police are so much cleverer than the English! They have already arrested the thief and returned my necklet to me!”

His Excellency, after inviting his guest to be seated, expressed pleasure at the news, and then the secretary rose discreetly and left.

“I hope you are enjoying Paris,” Freda said in her low musical voice, which always charmed her dupes. “Now that the autumn is coming on everyone is returning from Deauville. I am giving a little party to-night at the Ritz. I wonder if you would honour me with your presence? I have a friend, an Englishman, who wishes very particularly to make Your Excellency’s acquaintance.”

The old Minister expressed himself as being delighted, whereupon she suggested that he should dine with her and her English friend at the hotel. The old Moor with his Eastern admiration of feminine beauty found her charming, and at eight o’clock that night when he entered the hotel, his striking figure in the ample white burnous (upon which was the glittering star of the Order of the Tower and the Sword), and turban, caused all heads to be turned in his direction.

“This is my friend, Mr Arthur Porter,” Freda said. “Will Your Excellency allow me to present him?”

The old Moor took Porter's hand and, with an expression of pleasure, the trio sat down to dinner at a corner table in the great restaurant.

The Moorish Minister spent a most enjoyable evening, for though he touched no wine, he was after dinner introduced to several very elegant and charming women, both English and French, for in a certain circle in Paris Freda was well known. Porter took good care to ingratiate himself with the patriarchal-looking old fellow, declaring that he knew Morocco, was delighted with the life there, and intended in a few weeks' time to visit Fez again. The truth, however, was that he had never been there in his life and had no intention of ever going. Freda had followed the old Minister from London and had managed to become acquainted with him with the sole object of introducing Arthur Porter, alias Bertram Harrison. To them both the death of Sir Charles was known, and Porter guessed that Mr Sandys' financial position would be greatly affected. He had seen Sir Charles at several gaming-tables, and knew that he had been a reckless gambler. So cleverly did the pair play their cards that Mohammed ben Mussa invited Porter to call and see him next day—which he did.

As the two men sat together smoking cigarettes, Porter suddenly said in French:

"I heard the other day that the ancient emerald mines in the Wad Sus are about to be worked again."

"That is so. I granted the concession in London only a few days ago."

"Ah! How very unfortunate!" remarked his visitor. "I have a big financial backing, and could have exploited those mines with huge profits to all of us. Of course, I do not know how much gratification Your Excellency has received for the concession, but my friends would, I believe, have paid Your Excellency fifty thousand francs down and one-quarter of the profits of the undertaking." The old Moor pursed his lips and pricked up his ears. From Barclay he had received nothing on account, and only one-eighth share. Porter could see that the old fellow was filled with regret and chagrin that he had granted the concession with such little gain to himself.

"His Majesty the Sultan demands a share in the profits," old Mohammed remarked. "He has been allotted an eighth share—similar to myself."

"I could have arranged a quarter share for you and an eighth for His Majesty," said the crafty Englishman quickly. "But I suppose it is unfortunately too late, now that you have given the concession into another quarter."

Mohammed ben Mussa remained silent, slowly stroking his long beard with his brown claw-like hand.

The Englishman's offer was extremely tempting. He was reflecting.

At last he said very slowly:

"Perhaps if seventy-five thousand francs were offered me and the shares you suggest, I might find some way out," and he smiled craftily.

"Well," said Porter with affected hesitation, "I'm inclined to think that my friends would pay that sum—and at once if they received an unassailable concession. I mean a concession given to Mr Rex Rutherford under your hand and seal as Minister which would cancel the previous one." Porter knew well the one power in Oriental countries was that of backsheesh, and wrote down the name Rex Rutherford.

"I will consider it," said the old man. "There is no hurry till to-morrow. I may find it necessary to telegraph to Fez. I—I have to think it over, M'sieur Porter."

"Of course. Then I will come here to-morrow—shall we say at eleven? And you will afterwards lunch with me at Voisin's—eh?"

"It is agreed," said the representative of the Moorish Sultan, and then, after another cigarette, Porter rose and left, walking back to the Place Vendôme to tell Freda the result of his morning's negotiations.

Next day, at noon when the tall Englishman entered Mohammed's room he saw by the expression on the old man's face that he had triumphed.

"I have been reflecting," His Excellency said when his visitor was seated, "and I have prepared a copy of the concession which I gave in London, with the name and terms altered as we discussed yesterday, and with the payment of seventy-five thousand francs to me direct at latest to-morrow as being the consideration. You see, it is all in order—a concession in perpetuity granted to your nominee, Mr Rutherford, and sealed by my Ministerial seal, which I hold from His Majesty, and signed by myself. Please examine it."

Arthur Porter took the document, which was almost a replica of that handed to Barclay in London. The date was, however, different, as well as the terms.

"Yes," he said, after carefully reading the French translation. "It all seems in order. It rescinds the previous concession granted in London."

"Most certainly. No one will have any authority to enter the Wad Sus except yourself and those you appoint."

With satisfaction Porter drew from his inner pocket an envelope containing seventy-five one-thousand-franc notes, which he counted out upon the table one by one.

The old Moor's thin yellow fingers handled them gleefully, and placing them together he drew them beneath his ample burnous, saying quite coolly:

"I trust, Monsieur Porter, that you are satisfied."

"Perfectly," was the Englishman's reply. "My friend will at once form a syndicate and work the mines. Of course, we may have trouble with that Mr Barclay in London."

"He paid no consideration. Therefore you need not trouble about him. The concession you have is the only valid one, for it is dated after the one I gave in London. If they attempt to enforce it we shall instantly prevent their entering the district, or arrest them if they attempt to do so."

And the old man chuckled to himself at the easy manner in which he had obtained seventy-five thousand francs.

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## Chapter Twenty Three.

### A Caller at the Rectory.

That morning Gordon Gray, dapper and well-dressed as ever, had scanned the papers and read the report of the inquiry into the death of Sir Charles Hornton. The coroner's jury had returned a verdict of "death through misadventure," it having been proved that Sir Charles had mistaken a bottle of poison for a prescription for indigestion which the local doctor had sent him on the previous day. In fact, it was a not too rare way of hushing-up the suicide of a well-known man. In many cases where persons of means commit wilful suicide the twelve local tradesmen are lenient, and declare it to be pure accident, or "misadventure"—unless, of course, the suicide leaves a letter, in which case the truth cannot be circumvented. For a suicide to leave a letter is a criminal act towards his family.

Early in the afternoon the telephone-bell rang in the pleasant sitting-room of the cosy West End chambers Gray was occupying, and on taking off the receiver he heard Freda speaking from Paris.

"All O.K.," she said. "Guinness has got the concession and is bringing it over this afternoon. He'll be with you to-night."

"When does the old Moor leave?" asked Gray.

"The day after to-morrow. He goes straight back to Tangier."

"Right. Keep in touch with him till he's safely away, then get back here," were the great crook's orders.

Meanwhile events were following close upon each other in those crowded autumn days.

Roddy, checkmated by his failure to find the girl Manners who had written to his dead father from Bayeux, made, in company with the shoe-repairer Nicole, a number of inquiries of the commissary of police and in other quarters, but in vain.

From the worthy pair he learnt how they had received the young lady at St. Malo from an Englishman and a woman, apparently his wife. From the description of the woman he felt convinced that it was Freda Crisp. The girl, under the influence of the same drug that had been administered to him, had been smitten by temporary blindness, in addition to her mind being deranged. Here was still more evidence of the dastardly machinations of Gray and his unscrupulous associates. It was now plain that the girl Manners had not died, after all, but had lapsed into a kind of cataleptic state, just as he had done.

The problem of her whereabouts, however, was an all-important one. With her as witness against Gray and the woman Crisp the unmasking of the malefactors would be an easy matter. Besides, had not Mr Sandys told him that it was most important to him that the young lady's fate should be ascertained?

What had been her fate? The description of the mysterious man who called himself a doctor and who had recently visited the poor girl conveyed nothing to Roddy. It seemed, however, as though after she had written the letter to his father she had suddenly disappeared. Had she left Bayeux of her own accord, or had she been enticed away?

The police suspected foul play, and frankly told him so.

It was during those eager, anxious days in Bayeux that Roddy, on glancing at *Le Nouvelliste*, the daily paper published in Rennes, saw to his astonishment news of the tragic death of Mr Sandys' partner, and hastened to telegraph his condolences. Hence it was with great surprise that Elma and her father were aware that the young man was in France, for the telegram simply bore the place of origin as Bayeux.

Little did he dream of the clever devil's work which Freda and her associate Porter had accomplished with old Mohammed ben Mussa, but remained in Normandy following a slender clue, namely, a statement made by a white-capped peasant woman hailing from the neighbouring village of Le Molay-Littry, who declared that she had, on the day of the young English mademoiselle's disappearance, seen her on the railway platform at Lison entering a train for Cherbourg. She was alone. To Cherbourg Roddy travelled, accompanied by a police-officer from Bayeux and Monsieur Nicole, but though they made every inquiry, no trace of her could be found. At the office of the Southampton boats nobody recollected her taking a passage on the day in question. Therefore, saddened and disappointed, he was compelled to relinquish his search and cross back to England.

While on board the boat he paced the deck much puzzled how to act. He wondered how Elma was faring. Mr Sandys was, no doubt, too full of his partner's tragic end to attend to any fresh business proposal. Therefore he decided not to approach him at present with the concession, which was in the vaults of the Safe Deposit Company.

On arrival at Victoria he, however, drove to Park Lane to call, see Elma, and express to her father his regret at the tragedy. The footman who opened the door answered that neither his master nor Miss Elma was at home.

“Are they at Farncombe?” asked Roddy, much disappointed.

“No, sir. They are in town. But I do not think they will be back till very late.”

Roddy, who was a shrewd observer, could tell that the man had received orders to say “not at home.”

“Not at home” to him? Why? He stood upon the wide doorstep filled with wonder and chagrin. He wanted to tell Mr Sandys of the second disappearance of Edna Manners, and most of all to see the girl he so fondly loved.

But she was “not at home.” What could be the reason of such an attitude?

He took the last train home from Waterloo, and on arrival at the Rectory—which he still occupied until the new incumbent should require it—old Mrs Bentley came down to let him in.

“Oh, sir,” she exclaimed, “I’m glad you’ve come back. There’s been a young lady here this evening inquiring for your poor father. I told her I expected you home every day, and she’s coming again to-morrow evening at five o’clock. After she went I saw her wandering about Welling Wood, as though searching for something. She told me to say that her name is Miss Manners.”

Roddy stood staggered—too amazed to utter a word for the moment. Edna Manners had returned, and to-morrow he would know the truth.

Too puzzled and excited to sleep, he threw off his coat, and entering his wireless-room took up his cigar-box receiver with the newly invented and super-sensitive crystal detector. Placing the ‘phones over his ears he switched on the little portable aerial wire which he used with it and attached another wire to earth, whereupon he heard loud and strong telephony—somebody in Rotterdam testing with a station in London and speaking in Dutch. It proved beyond all doubt that the new crystal was the most sensitive type known, and that, for a portable set, was of far greater utility than vacuum valves. The quality of the telephony, indeed, astounded him.

He had been listening in for nearly an hour when suddenly he heard the voice of a fellow-experimenter, a man named Overton, in Liverpool, with whom he often exchanged tests.

At once he threw over his transmission switch, the generator hummed with gathering speed, and taking up the telephone, he said:

“Hulloa, 3.B.L.! Hulloa, 3.B.L.! Hulloa, Liverpool! This is Homfray 3.X.Q. calling. Your signals are very good. Modulation excellent 3.B.L. I am just back from France, and will test with you to-morrow night at 22:00 G.M.T. Did you get that 3.B.L., Liverpool? 3.X.Q. over.” And he threw over the switch, the humming of the generator dying down.

In a few seconds came Overton’s familiar voice, saying:

“Hulloa 3.X.Q.! This is 3.B.L. answering! Thanks very much for your report. I will call you to-morrow night at 22:00 G.M.T. Thanks again. Somebody was calling you half an hour ago on one thousand metres. You did not get him. Better try now. G.N.O.M. (Good-night, old man.) 3.B.L. switching off.”

Roddy, interested as to who, in the wonderful modern world of wireless where men and women only meet through the ether, could have called him, raised his receiving wavelength to a thousand metres and listened.

Beyond some “harmonics” there was nothing. Suddenly, however, an unknown voice, so clear and high-pitched that it startled him, said:

“Hulloa, 3.X.Q.! Hulloa, Farncombe! I have called you several times to-night; the last time an hour ago. I’m speaking for Mr Barclay. He did not know that you were back. He is coming on urgent business to Guildford to-morrow. Can you meet him at the station at eleven o’clock in the morning. He has asked me to give you that message. This is 3.T.M. at Kingston-on-Thames speaking. 3.T.M. over.”

Roddy was not surprised. He frequently—in contravention of the Post-Office regulations, be it said—received such relayed messages. He could be with Barclay at eleven and meet Edna Manners at five.

So putting in his transmission switch, which caused the big vacuum globes to light up and the generator to hum again, he took up the microphone transmitter, and replied in a sharp clear voice:

“Hulloa, 3.T.M.! This is 3.X.Q. answering. Thank you very much for the message from Barclay—I will keep the appointment to-morrow. 3.X.Q. switching off.”

Why did Barclay wish to see him so urgently? Perhaps the urgency had not occurred until the post-office had closed, hence he had been unable to send a telegram. And at the Rectory there was no telephone, save that splendidly equipped radio-phone.

Little did Roddy Homfray suspect that Mr Purcell Sandys was faced with ruin, that Elma knew of the impending disaster, and that there was a reason—a very clear and distinct reason—why she and her father were neither of them “at home” when he had called.

Black ruin had fallen upon the great financial house of Sandys and Hornton, a fact of which, though Roddy was in ignorance, Gordon Gray, alias Rex Rutherford, and his accomplices were well aware, and were about to turn to their

own advantage.

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## Chapter Twenty Four.

### Rutherford Makes a Proposition.

On that evening when Roddy was told that neither Mr Sandys nor Elma was at home both father and daughter were, as a matter of fact, seated together in the library. Mr Sandys had by that time been able to ascertain pretty nearly the extent of his firm's liabilities, and was in complete despair.

Elma was kneeling beside her father with her arm lovingly around his neck, nobly trying to comfort him.

She had confessed her affection for Roddy, and had spoken of the young man's high hopes and aspirations, and shown her father a hasty letter she had received from him announcing the fact that the concession for emerald mining had actually been granted to him by the Moorish Minister, Mohammed ben Mussa.

A new thought arose in Mr Sandys' mind. If Roddy had really been granted the concession for the mines known to exist there—and he had made some searching inquiries during the past week or so—then by dealing with it he might, after all, be able to raise sufficient money to discharge part of the immense liabilities of the firm, and thus stem the tide which must otherwise rise in the course of the next few days and overwhelm him.

Elma's father spoke quite openly concerning the situation.

"In that case Roddy could marry me, dad," she said. "And further, even if he had no concession, I am poor enough now to marry a poor man," she added.

"Yes, my child," was his reply. "If what young Homfray says is true then he can be the saviour of our firm and of our family. I confess I have taken a great liking to the young fellow. I have liked him all along."

Then Elma flung herself into her father's arms and kissed him again and again, with tears of joy. Strangely enough her father's ruin had brought about her own happiness.

It was at that moment when the footman entered, and said:

"Mr Homfray has called, sir, and I told him that you were not at home, as you ordered."

Elma looked at her father dismayed.

"Has he gone?" she gasped, her face falling.

"Yes, miss. He called about five minutes ago."

And then the man bowed and retired, while the girl, turning to her father, remarked:

"How very unfortunate, dad! I wanted to tell him the good news. But now it must wait until to-morrow. Good-night, dad. Cheer up now, won't you, dearest? This is a black cloud, but it will pass, as all clouds pass sooner or later, and the sun shines out again." And kissing him the girl ran off joyously to her own room.

Roddy rose early, as was his wont, and went into his wireless-room, as was his habit each morning to listen to the transatlantic messages, and those from Moscow, Nantes and the rest. His eye rested upon the sensitive little set in the cigar-box, and it occurred to him to test it that day as a portable set in the train and elsewhere.

His train arrived at Guildford from Haslemere soon after ten o'clock, therefore he left the station, and climbing the old disused coach-road known as the Mount, reached the long range of hills called the Hog's Back. There, upon the wide grass-grown road which has not been used for nearly a century, he threw up his aerial wire into a high elm and placing in position his ground wire soldered to a long steel skewer he put on the telephones, holding the box in his left hand while he turned the condensers with his right.

At once he heard the voice of the radio-telephone operator at Croydon, the shrewd, alert expert with the rolling r's, calling Le Bourget. Signals were excellent. He listened for ten minutes or so and then, drawing down his temporary aerial and withdrawing the skewer from the wet earth, put the cigar-box into the pocket of his raincoat and descended the hill to the station.

Upon the platform he awaited the incoming train from Waterloo, and was determined to be at home at five o'clock to meet Edna Manners. The train arrived but without Barclay, so he strolled out into the yard to await the next.

In the meantime, however, another striking incident was happening at Park Lane.

Old Hughes, summoned to the door, opened it to the smiling, well-dressed Mr Rex Rutherford.

"Will you tell Mr Sandys I'm here. And apologise for my early call. I have come on rather pressing business," he said briskly.

"Very well, sir," replied Lord Farncombe's old butler rather stiffly, taking his hat and umbrella, and asking him into the library.

A couple of minutes later the bearded old financier entered with outstretched hand, and smiling.

"I really must apologise, Mr Sandys," Rutherford said. "It's awfully early, I know, but between business men the hour, early or late, doesn't really count—does it? At least, we say so in New York."

"I agree," said Mr Sandys with a smile, and then when both were seated, Rutherford said:

"I've come to you, Mr Sandys, with a very important proposition—one in which you will at once see big money—the concession for some ancient emerald mines in Morocco."

"Do you mean the Wad Sus mines?" asked Sandys, much surprised.

"Yes. I have arranged with my friend, His Excellency Mohammed ben Mussa, the Moorish Minister of the Interior, for a concession in perpetuity over the whole region, subject to a payment on results to His Majesty the Sultan."

"I really don't understand you," exclaimed Elma's father, looking straight in his face. "A concession has already been granted to a young man of my acquaintance, Mr Homfray."

"Not of the same mines—ancient ones, from which one big dark-coloured emerald has quite recently been taken? That can't be?"

"But it is."

"Have you seen this concession given to your friend, Mr Homfray? I don't know who he is, but I fear it is not worth the paper it is written upon, because here I have a concession which revokes all previous ones, and which will make it penal for anyone who attempts to trespass as a prospector in any part of the Wad Sus region! Here it is! Look for yourself," he said, taking the sealed document from his pocket and handing it to the astonished financier. "Of course," he added, "if the affair is too small for your attention, Mr Sandys, I can easily negotiate it elsewhere. But as we are friends, I thought I would let you have its refusal."

Purcell Sandys was utterly staggered. He knew French well, and at a glance he convinced himself that the document was genuine.

"And not only have we the concession, but here also is a plan of the exact situation of the mines, together with a statement from one of the Touareg tribesmen, Ben Chaib Benuis, with its French translation. The man, a trusted messenger of the Moorish Government, has quite recently been upon the spot, and has brought back a very large and valuable emerald which is in the possession of an ex-Moorish official at Tangier, and can be seen any day."

Mr Sandys scanned the French translation and sat back in wonder.

It was quite evident that the concession granted to young Homfray—if there had ever been one—was worthless, for there was the sealed document dated only a few days before which rescinded every other grant made by the Moorish Government.

"I, of course, know nothing of your friend Mr Homfray," remarked Rutherford. "But I fear that if he attempts to prospect in the Wad Sus he will be at once arrested. I alone hold the only concession in that district," and slowly picking up both the formidable-looking documents, he carefully refolded them and replaced them in his pocket.

"Well, Mr Rutherford," said the pale, thoughtful old financier at last. "I confess I am very much puzzled, and before entering upon this affair as a matter of business I would first like to look into young Homfray's claims."

"Very naturally," laughed the easy-going Rutherford. "I should do so myself in the circumstances. I fear, however, that the young man, whoever he is, has somewhat misled you. I'll look in and see you to-morrow morning—about this time—eh?" he added as he rose and left, while Mr Sandys sat speechless and puzzled.

When Rutherford had gone he called Elma and told her of his visit.

"What? That man here again?" cried the girl. "He can't have any valid concession. Roddy has it. He would never write a lie to *me!*"

"My child, we can do nothing until we see and question young Homfray."

"You are right, dad. I'll try at once to get hold of him. He is probably at Farncombe. I'll telephone to the Towers and tell Bowyer to go to the Rectory at once."

This she did, but half an hour later the reply came back. The maid Bowyer had been to the Rectory, but Mr Homfray was out and would not return till five o'clock. She had left a message from Elma asking him to go to London at once.

At five o'clock Mrs Bentley at the Rectory opened the door to Edna Manners, but Roddy had not returned. For an hour she waited, idling most of the time in the garden. Then at last she asked leave to write him a note, which she did in the dead rector's study, and then reluctantly left.

The evening passed until at half-past nine a man from the Towers called to ask again for Roddy, but Mrs Bentley repeated that her young master had gone out that morning and had not yet returned. This report was later repeated to Elma over the telephone from the Towers to Park Lane.

Meanwhile Mr Sandys telegraphed to the Minister Mohammed ben Mussa in Tangier, asking for confirmation of Mr Rutherford's concession, and just before midnight came a reply that the concession had been granted to Mr Rex Rutherford.

Elma's father showed her the reply. All Roddy's assertions were false! All her hopes were crushed. She burst into tears and fled to her room.

Mr Sandys, left alone, faced the situation calmly. The only way to stave off ruin would be to deal with Rutherford.

Meanwhile the master criminal was playing a clever double game.

When he called next morning he asked to see Elma, pleading that he had something very important to say to her. When Hughes brought the message she was at first reluctant to accede to his wish, but in a few moments she steeled herself and walked to the morning-room into which he had been shown.

As usual, he was smartly-groomed and the essence of politeness. As he took her hand, he said:

"Miss Elma, I want to tell you that I sympathise very much with your father in his great misfortune, the secret of which I happen to know—though as yet the world suspects nothing. But I fear it soon will, unless your father can come forward with some big and lucrative scheme. I have it in my power to help him with the mining concession in Morocco. I will do so on one condition."

"And what is that, Mr Rutherford?" she asked quite calmly.

He looked straight into her big, wide-open eyes and, after a second's pause, replied:

"That I may be permitted to pay my attentions to you—for I confess that I love you."

The girl's cheeks coloured slightly and the expression in her eyes altered.

"That cannot be," she said. "I am already engaged."

"To that young fellow Homfray, I believe?" he laughed. "Has he not already misled you and your father into believing that he is a rich man, inasmuch that he pretends to have been granted some worthless concession also in Morocco? Surely such a man is not suited to you as a husband, Miss Elma? Could you ever trust him?"

"I will not have Mr Homfray's character besmirched in my presence, Mr Rutherford," she said haughtily. "And if this is the matter upon which you wished to speak with me I should prefer that you said nothing further."

"Elma! I love you!" he cried, with openly sensual admiration.

The girl was horrified and revolted. She told him so, but he treated with a conqueror's contempt her frightened attempts to evade him. She was to be his toy, his plaything—or he would not lift a finger to save her father.

On her part she pleaded her love for Roddy, but he told her brutally that the young fellow was a liar. Why had he not produced the concession he alleged he had?

At last Elma, compelled to listen to his specious arguments, almost gave up hope, but before leaving the room she declared that she would starve rather than marry him. And then she closed the door after her.

Ten minutes later Rutherford was shown into the library, and in his most oleaginous manner greeted the ruined financier.

"I have called to keep my appointment, Mr Sandys," he said. "But since I saw your circumstances have altered somewhat, which makes it incumbent upon me to place the concession elsewhere."

"Why?" asked Sandys, his face falling. "Well, it is a private matter. I—I really don't care to discuss it, Mr Sandys. Indeed, I think it is best for me to say that our negotiations must conclude here, even though I regret it very deeply. It is not my fault, but the—well, the barrier—lies in another direction."

"In what direction?" asked the grey-bearded man who had been clutching at the straw offered him on the previous day.

"Well—if you ask Miss Elma, your daughter, she will explain."

"My daughter? What has she to do with our propositions?"

"I simply repeat my reply, Mr Sandys. I can't say more. To tell the truth, I don't feel capable. I must go now. If you want to see me later you know my telephone number."

And taking his hat, he stalked out of the fine library, well knowing himself to be the conqueror. To those who are patient and painstaking the fruits of the world will arrive. But there are exceptions, even though the devil controls his own.

When Elma's father sought her he found her in a paroxysm of tears and tried to comfort her. She had thrown herself on a couch at the foot of her bed and was sobbing out her heart.

The ruined man told his daughter of Rutherford's visit, and asked her for the explanation which he had said that she alone could give.

In a few halting sentences she related what had happened.

For some time the old man remained silent, standing at the great window past which the motor-buses were passing

up and down London's street of the wealthy.

"Ah! my dear!" he sighed. "I am sorry that you have so unfortunately fallen in love with young Homfray. At first I liked him, I confess. But he seems to have sadly misled you, and is now afraid to face the truth."

"I agree, father. But I love him. There is some explanation, I feel sure."

"There can be none regarding the emerald concession. Rutherford has it, as well as the plan showing the whereabouts of the mine. I could float a big company to-morrow, even upon the concession and the official plan furnished by the Moorish Minister of the Interior. But he has, alas! now withdrawn his offer."

"Because I have refused him," said Elma bitterly. "I love Roddy. How could I possibly become that man's wife?"

Her father drew a long breath and shrugged his shoulders. He stood with his back towards her, looking idly out upon the traffic in Park Lane and the Park beyond.

"Yes, darling," he said at last. "But you must not sacrifice yourself for me. It would be grossly unfair. I am ruined through no fault of my own, I trust—ruined by a gambling partner who cared for nothing save his obsession with regard to games of chance. Let us say no more about it. Rutherford may take his concession elsewhere, and I will face the music. I have my comfort in my Yogi teaching—in those two words 'I am.' I have done my best in life, and to my knowledge have never injured anyone. I have tried to act up to my Yogi teachers, with their magnificent philosophy of the East. Therefore I will face disaster unflinchingly."

And seeing his daughter in tears, his further words were choked by emotion. He merely patted her upon the shoulder and, unable to bear the interview longer, withdrew.

For a fortnight past Rex Rutherford, like many crooks of his calibre, had actually engaged a "Press agent"—one of those parasites who fasten themselves upon the ambitious and put forward lies and photographs to the Press at so many guineas a time. The crook, in the financial Press, read of his own wonderful financial operations in Paris and in New York, reports which were calculated to raise him in the estimation of the great house of Sandys and Hornton. The City had read of Rex Rutherford day after day, and there were rumours of a great scheme he had for a new electric tube rail system for the outer suburbs of Paris, for which he was negotiating with the French Government.

Purcell Sandys had read all this—a Press campaign which had cost the master criminal a mere three hundred pounds. With that sum he had established a reputation in the financial papers. Editors of newspapers cannot always exclude the "puff paragraphs" when they are cleverly concealed by a master of that craft. And it often takes even a shrewd sub-editor to detect the gentle art of self-advertisement.

That afternoon the old financier walked alone through the Park as far as Kensington Gardens and back. He knew that the crash must come at latest in a day or two, and Sandys and Hornton must suspend payment.

There was no way out.

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## Chapter Twenty Five.

### The Sacrifice.

For Elma the world held no future. Though surrounded by every luxury in that magnificent Park Lane mansion, the millionaire home that was the most notable in all London's modern houses, her only thoughts were of her father and of her lover Roddy.

She hated that fat, beady-eyed but elegantly-dressed man whom Mr Harrison had introduced to her father, and who was now so openly making love to her. His words and his manner were alike artificial. The feminine mind is always astute, and she knew that whatever he said was mere empty compliment. She saw upon his lips the sign of sensuousness, a sign that no woman fails to note. Sensuousness and real love are things apart, and every woman can discriminate them. Men are deceivers. Women may, on the other hand, allure, and be it said that the vampire woman like Freda Crisp is ever with us.

In the life of London, of Paris, or of New York, the vampire woman in society plays a part which is seldom suspected.

They are in a class by themselves, as was Freda Crisp. The vampire woman is the popular term for a woman who lives by preying upon others; men usually, but upon her own sex if occasion demands.

Freda Crisp, though few of the characters in this human drama of love and cupidity had suspected her, was a case in point. She was a type that was interesting. As a girl of eighteen everyone admired her for her charm of manner, her conversational gifts and her bright intellect, which was marred only by a rather too lively imagination, and a tendency to romance so ingeniously that no one ever knew if she told the truth or not.

Her career was abnormal, and yet not stranger than that of some others in these post-war days.

At nineteen she had been to prison for swindling. Physically she was wonderfully fascinating, but her chief characteristic was an absence of all real affection and moral feeling. Even as a girl she could profess passionate love for those from whom she expected profit and gain; but misfortune and death, even of those nearest her, would leave her quite unmoved.

She was a perfect type of the modern adventuress. She could act well, and at times would shed tears profusely if she



thought it the right thing at the moment.

As she grew older her unrestrained coquetry threw her into the vicious adventurous circle of which Gordon Gray was the master and moving spirit. She threw in her lot with him. On board a transatlantic liner on which she went for a trip to New York an officer fell a victim to her charms, and supplied her with money that was not his. His defalcations were discovered, and he committed suicide to escape disgrace.

That was the first unpleasant incident in her career after meeting Gray. There were many afterwards. She was a woman whose sole aim was to see and enjoy life. Without heart and without feeling, active, not passive in her love-making, she, like many another woman before her, aspired to power and influence over men, and many an honourable career was wrecked by her, and much gain had gone into the joint pockets of Gordon Gray and herself.

Purcell Sandys had been ruined. She knew it, and laughed.

She sat in Gray's rooms in St. James's smoking a cigarette before going to dine at a restaurant, and was discussing the situation.

"Really, my dear Gordon," she said, puffing the smoke from her lips, "you are wonderful! You have the whole affair in your hands. We shall both make a fortune over this concession. The whole thing is as easy as falling off a log, thanks to you."

"It hasn't been so easy as you think, my dear Freda, that I can assure you," he replied. "But I think we are now on a fair way towards bringing off our coup. The one great thing in our favour is old Homfray's death. He knew far too much. At any moment he might have given us away. He was the one person in the whole world whom I feared."

"And you were a fool to defy him by selling that petty bit of property at Totnes," said the handsome woman.

"No, Freda, I wasn't. I did it to prove that I defied him. When one man defies another it causes the defied to think. That is why I did it. I knew his secret—a secret that no parson could face in his own parish. And if he dared to say a word against me I should have told what I knew to the bishop."

"Would the bishop have believed you?"

"Of course. He had only to look up the date of the criminal trial, then old Homfray, who knew so much of our little business, would have had to face the music. No, Freda, the old sky-pilot was too cute for us. He dared not face the music."

"But the girl, Elma Sandys? She's a good sort and—well, Gordon, I tell you, I'm a bit sorry for her."

"I'm not. You and I will part for a bit, and I'll marry her. By so doing I'll gain a fortune, and then after a time I'll come back to you, old girl. I won't desert you—I promise that!"

"But would you really come back?" asked the woman, after a pause.

The stout man put his big hand upon hers and, looking into her eyes, said, "I swear it. We've been in tight corners before, Freda. Surely you can trust me in this—eh? It means big money for both of us, and no further worry for you."

"I don't know that I can trust you, Gordon," the woman said, looking him straight in the face.

"Bah! you're jealous of the girl!" And he laughed. "She's only a slip of a thing who doesn't count."

"But you've taken a fancy to her."

"I have, and I mean to marry her. Nothing can prevent that."

"I could," snapped the woman.

"Yes. But you won't, my dear Freda. If you did—well, you'd forgo all the money that will very soon be yours."

"Arthur stands in with us."

"Well, I suppose we shall have to give him a little bit. But he'll have to be satisfied with a few hundreds."

"He expects a quarter share."

"He'll have to go on expecting," laughed her companion. "'Guinness' always expects more than he's entitled to. It is a complaint of his."

"And if you married this girl, do you think you would be happy, Gordon?"

"Happy? I'm not seeking happiness, my dear girl. I'm after money."

"But can't it be managed without your marriage to Elma?"

"No, it can't," he declared. "That's one of my conditions to old Sandys. Naturally the girl is thinking of her lover. But she'll soon see that he's deceived her, and then she'll learn to forget him."

"I doubt it. I know the temperament of young girls of Elma's stamp."

"You're jealous. I repeat!" he said with sarcasm. "Fancy! Your being jealous of Elma! Am I so good-looking and such an Adonis—eh?"

"You're anything but that," she replied sharply. "But you see, Gordon, you've taught me never to trust a soul, not even yourself. And I don't. Once you marry that girl you will become a rich man and try to shake me off. But,"—and a fierce expression showed in the woman's eyes—"but I'll watch that you don't. I can say a lot, remember."

"And I can also," the man laughed, with a careless air, "but I won't, and neither will you, my dear girl. Silence is best for both of us."

"You can carry out the business without marrying Elma," Freda urged. "You have taken every precaution against accident, and the ruin of Sandys has made everything possible. What would Mr Sandys say if he knew that the amiable Mr Rex Rutherford was one of the men to whom Sir Charles Hornton lost that big sum at cards three nights before he killed himself?"

Gray drew a long breath.

"Well," he said with a bitter smile, "I don't suppose he'd feel very friendly towards me. But the driving of Sir Charles into a corner was, I foresaw, one of the chief points in our game. Sandys is ruined, and I'm the good Samaritan who comes forward at the opportune moment and brings salvation."

"Clever," declared the woman, "devilish clever! But you always are, Gordon. You are wonderful."

"In combination with yourself, my dear Freda. I'm no good without you," he declared. "So don't exhibit these foolish fits of jealousy. I've made up my mind to marry Sandys' daughter, for it will improve my prestige. When I've had enough of her, I shall simply leave her and we will rejoin forces again," he added callously. And then together they went out to dine at the Ritz.

That same evening Elma sat in her room, with the hazy London sunset fading over the Park, confused and wondering.

Surely Roddy would not tell her a lie! She took out his scribbled note and re-read it, as she had done a dozen times before. It was a plain and straightforward assertion, and yet the man Rutherford had produced the concession granted to him, properly authenticated and officially sealed.

Where was Roddy? Was it really possible, as Rutherford had suggested, that he was in hiding, not daring to come forward now that his lie was proved? She could not bring herself to believe it. And yet why had he so suddenly gone to Farncombe for one night and then taken train to Guildford and disappeared?

On the previous day she had been down to Guildford by train from Waterloo, and had made inquiries of the porters and in the booking-office and elsewhere regarding Roddy, whom one or two of the railway servants—knew, but without avail. Roddy had been seen waiting out in the station yard by a clerk in the parcel office. That was all the information she could gather. Therefore, after a cup of coffee at the tea-shop in the old-fashioned High Street, she had returned to London.

That evening as she sat pondering, pale and nervous, her maid came into her room and she roused herself wearily. Then she put on a plain little black dinner-frock and went downstairs to the dining-room, where her father, pale-faced and rather morose, awaited her.

Hughes, surprised at his master's sudden gravity, served the meal with his usual stateliness, begotten of long service with the Earl.

With the footman and Hughes present father and daughter could exchange no confidences. So they hurried over their meal, and found relief when they were back in the library and alone.

"I'm utterly puzzled, dad," declared the girl; "I can get no news of Roddy. I'm certain that he would never write that letter and deceive me about the concession. It is his—I'm positive."

"But, my dear child, how can it be? I have read the translation of Rutherford's concession. All is in order. It revokes any other permit that has ever been given. It is a firm and unassailable contract."

"I don't care what it is," declared the girl. "Roddy would never deceive me. I know his father's death has greatly upset him, but he is still in possession of all his faculties."

"But his mental condition was bad, you will remember," remarked her father.

"It was. But he is quite well again. I know he would never mislead me, dad!" And she fondled Tweedles, who, barking for recognition, had placed his front paws upon her knees.

"Of course," said Mr Sandys, humouring her, "you love Roddy and, of course, believe in him. It is after all but natural, my child."

"Yes, dad. You know that I love him. He is so honest, so upright, so true, that I feel confident, though the evidence seems against him, that he has not told a lie. He is the victim of circumstances," the slim girl said, as she stood before the fire with the little dog in her arms.

"But unfortunately, dear, he does not come forward," her father said. "Is it not his place to be here after writing you that letter concerning the concession? If he had been granted it, surely he would have come direct to me with it! Homfray is no fool. He knows that I could develop the scheme in the City within a few hours. Therefore why is he not

here?"

"He is prevented."

"How do we know that? He may be prevented—or he may fear to come."

"You are not generous towards him, dad," the girl protested.

"I'm generous, my dear—most generous," replied the ruined man. "I like Roddy Homfray. His poor father's sudden death was, I fear, a great blow to him, and especially so as he has scarcely entirely recovered from that very strange adventure of his which narrowly cost him his life. But in the present circumstances we must face hard facts. He has written to you making an assertion which he has not substantiated, and which is disproved by the official document which Rex Rutherford has placed in my hands."

The girl, still confident in her lover's *bona fides*, shook her head.

"There will be ample explanation one day, dad. I'm certain of it," she declared. "I am indeed confident that Roddy has not written to me a deliberate lie."

Next day passed, but young Homfray made no sign. Again Elma telephoned to Farncombe, and yet again came the reply that her lover had not returned. His silence puzzled her greatly. Could it be really true that his concession only existed in his own imagination? She loved him too well to think ill of him. Now that she was as poor as he was there could be no barrier to their marriage. Her magnificent home would be swept away, the Towers would be sold again, and her father made bankrupt.

She was again standing alone at the window of her room looking across the Park, where the trees were clearly showing the autumn tints.

Her face was pale and haggard, her clenched hands trembling.

"No, no!" she whispered hoarsely. "I alone can save dad from ruin and bankruptcy. I alone! And I must do it!"

That evening, just after Hughes had brought in the tea, her father being in the City, the old man reappeared saying that Mr Rutherford had called.

She held her breath, then, with an effort, she gave permission for him to be shown in.

The stout, beady-eyed man, in perfect-fitting clothes and a dangling monocle, crossed the carpet, smiling, with hand outstretched. The girl asked him to be seated, and poured him out a cup of tea. Her thoughts were of Roddy, but she strove to crush them down. Her brain was awl, for she knew that only by her own sacrifice could her beloved father be saved.

Presently, when they had chatted about other things, Rutherford returned to the point and bluntly asked whether she had reconsidered her decision.

"Yes, Mr Rutherford, I have," she replied very slowly in a deep, tense voice. "You are prepared to assist my father under a certain condition. That I accept."

"Then you will marry me!" he cried, with triumph in his eyes, as he jumped up and seized her hand. Then she felt his hot breath upon her cheek and shrank from his embrace.

When he left she went to her room and, locking the door, gave way to another paroxysm of grief.

At nine o'clock that night Rutherford called again and told Mr Sandys of Elma's acceptance.

The old man stood staggered.

"Elma has done this for your sake, Mr Sandys," Rutherford said. "And, after all, it is a marriage of convenience, as so many are. Both our positions will be improved by it, yours and mine, for this concession will mean big money to both of us."

Mr Sandys could not reply. His thoughts held him speechless. Elma had sacrificed herself to save him from ruin!

But where was Roddy Homfray? That was a problem which neither father nor daughter could solve.

Two days later Elma and her father went down to Farncombe Towers, Mr Sandys having already taken preliminary steps for the purpose of floating the Emerald Mines of Morocco. There were rumours in the City concerning it, and a great deal of interest was being taken in the scheme in very influential quarters.

Rex Rutherford had not before been to Farncombe, therefore he was now invited. Now that old Norton Homfray was dead he accepted, and spent most of the time rambling with Elma either in the gardens, the park, or the surrounding woods, though she did all in her power to avoid his loathsome caresses.

Elma, unknown to Rutherford, managed to call at the Rectory. On inquiring of Mrs Bentley regarding Roddy, the old woman explained that he had returned from abroad, slept one night there, and had gone out next day and had not come back. She knew that he had gone to Guildford, but that was all.

"And there's been a young lady here wanting to see him, miss."

"A young lady! Who?"

"She's a Miss Manners."

"Miss Manners!" Elma echoed. "Describe her."

The woman did so, and Elma stood open-mouthed.

"She was here again three days ago," Mrs Bentley added. "And she seems so eager to see Mr Roddy."

"I must see Miss Manners," Elma shouted to the deaf old woman. "You have no idea where she lives, I suppose?"

"No. I think she comes from London."

"Well, next time she comes let me know at once. Or better, bring her up to the Towers to see me. It is most important that I should see her."

Mrs Bentley promised, and Elma, returning to the Towers, told her father of Edna's reappearance. Old Mr Sandys was equally surprised and equally eager to meet her. Where, they wondered, had she been all those months. He telephoned at once to the boarding-house in Powis Square, Bayswater, at which she had lived before her sudden disappearance, but could obtain no news of her whereabouts.

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## Chapter Twenty Six.

### The Unknown Hand.

What occurred at Guildford station on the morning when Roddy went to meet his friend Barclay by appointment was distinctly curious.

Having spent nearly an hour on the Hog's Back, experimenting with his new wireless receiving-set, he packed it up, descended the hill to the station, and was on the platform when the train from Waterloo came in.

Barclay, however, was not among the alighting passengers.

There being another train a quarter of an hour later, he decided to await it, and strolled out into the station yard. He had just lit a cigarette and was gazing around when he noticed a big limousine car approach and draw up opposite the booking-office. The chauffeur, descending, approached him, touched his cap, and said:

"Excuse me, sir. Are you Mr Homfray?"

"That's my name," Roddy replied.

"Oh, Mr Barclay has sent me for you, sir. He's at the Lion Hotel here. He's got a business engagement, and is sorry he couldn't come along."

"Right," answered the young man, crossing to the car, the windows of which were closed. The man opened the door politely and he entered, but as soon as he sat down he heard a strange hissing noise and felt a want of air. He gasped, his eyes burned, and the next second the darkness of unconsciousness fell upon him and he knew no more. The car had, in the seat, a bellows which, as he sat upon it, blew out a poisonous gas. Of what happened afterwards he had no knowledge.

When slowly and painfully he regained his senses and became aware of his surroundings, he found himself in a small bare room with a stone floor. He was lying upon some old sacking, while near by, close to the door, stood a plate that had evidently contained food and a broken brown jug with some water, while in close vicinity was his raincoat, which had apparently been flung into a corner.

High up in the thick wall was a small window, not more than six inches square. There was no glass in it, so it gave both light and ventilation.

He was too weak to move, and his hand, coming into contact with his chin, he was surprised to find that, though usually shaven, he had a growth of beard. Could he have lain there for some days in a state of semi-consciousness?

He shouted, but his voice was very weak. There was no response, though he strained his ears to listen.

At once he realised that he had again fallen into a trap cunningly prepared for him. That message on the radio-telephone he should not have heeded. He had been a fool! Yet he had believed it to be genuine, because it had been relayed to him by a radio experimenter whom he had known for many months. Probably Barclay was in ignorance of the whole affair, and was wondering what had become of him.

And Elma! What would she think? How was she faring?

His hollow, deep-set eyes wandered slowly around the bare stone chamber with its dusty beams hung with cobwebs, and its lime-washed walls. An odour of damp and mildew greeted his nostrils, while from outside came the rustle of autumn leaves.

He was somewhere out in the country. But where?

The empty plate and jug of water told their own tale. He was held there in bondage by his enemies! He could only surmise that during his period of unconsciousness his janitors—whoever they might be—had fed him, giving him just sufficient to keep body and soul together. Had his captors condemned him to death by starvation? It seemed that they had. He stared at the empty plate in horror.

From the light in the narrow high-up window he judged the hour to be about noon. The autumn sky was blue and cloudless, and he could hear a sparrow twittering. What, he wondered, had happened? All he could recall was his entering into the motor-car, the strange hissing noise and his sudden asphyxiation. He had evidently walked straight into a trap!

Again and again he shouted, but only feebly, for he was very weak, and his brain seemed on fire. His thoughts were all confused. Yet ever and anon, through the mists, came flashes of remembrance of the past, with visions of Elma's beautiful face looking inquiringly into his. His strange adventure in Welling Wood; his love for Elma, his meeting with Mr Sandys, his father's death, and his search in Normandy for the mysterious Miss Manners came before him. But his mental capacity was far from normal. When he reflected he became more than ever puzzled.

One thing was plain. He was held by the enemy.

In his nervous half-conscious state he fell asleep. How long he slept he had no idea. When he awoke, however, he felt refreshed. Dawn was spreading. He had been asleep for many hours.

On the plate lay some tinned meat and some bread! The water jug had been refilled! Whoever was his janitor was determined to keep him alive.

With an effort he raised himself, but so weak was he that only by clutching at the wall did he succeed in reaching the jug, from which he drank deeply.

Then he crawled around his stone prison with difficulty. He was hungry and ate some of the meat and bread.

Afterwards he sat upon the sacks, weak, weary and with wandering brain, trying to locate his exact position.

Suddenly, from outside, he heard voices—rough voices in the silence.

"Yes. Rotten! I call it! But I'm in for higher wages, and that's a fact! Tom's wages were rose this week," were the words that broke in upon his ear.

He raised himself and crawled to the little window, but, despite his struggles, could not reach it. It was far too high. He longed to look out upon the world and ascertain where he was. But that was impossible, and in his weak state he sank back again into unconsciousness.

How long he remained he knew not.

When he awoke, however, he found himself still beneath the little window. The plate and jug were there, just as he had left them.

The rough voices of workers outside had passed in mystery. He ate the remaining portions of the food which was grudgingly given him by an unknown hand, drank some water, and then crossed to his raincoat. In its pocket his cigar-box wireless receiving-set still remained.

Then he searched his other pockets, and to his surprise found that his captors had not taken anything. His wallet, with his visiting cards, and some money and other things were still there.

"Well," he exclaimed aloud, "this is all astounding. What fresh mystery is there here? Who is it who feeds me when I am unconscious? And how silent it all is! Only the whispers of the leaves, and the twittering of birds. I am alone!"

Then after reflection he again spoke aloud to himself.

"What can Elma think of my silence? I wrote to her telling her of my good fortune, and I have not seen her since. And again—the girl Manners! She reappeared at the Rectory after I had searched in France for her, and yet we have not met! Mr Sandys told me that it was most important to him that her fate should be ascertained. I have discovered that she is actually alive, and yet I cannot confirm it. I cannot confirm anything—even my letter to Elma about the concession. God!" he shouted in agony of mind. "What can I do? How shall I act?"

Again he yelled for help, as he had done times without number.

But all was silent. He was in a tomb.

In a hazy way he recollected stories of the oubliettes of the Bastille and of the dreaded dungeons of the Château of Loches. Here he was confined in a modern dungeon where, if the hand of his unseen janitor were withdrawn, he would die of hunger and thirst!

Yes. His father's enemies had indeed triumphed!

All his fears were concentrated upon Elma. What was happening to the girl he loved so dearly? If he had fallen into the hands of his enemies, it was only to be supposed that she too—even though she were the daughter of the great financier—had shared the same fate.

He recollected how his dead father had warned him against Freda Crisp and Gordon Gray. And yet he felt assured,

when he examined his own conscience, that he had never to his knowledge harmed a living soul. He had been enthusiastic in his profession, travelling hither and thither in little known regions of the world prospecting for ore. It was his calling to do so. And now, on his return to England, he had suddenly fallen into one trap after another.

Why?

That was a problem which he tried to solve until, worried and angry, he once more sank upon the heap of old sacking and again fell asleep, quite exhausted in body and in mind.

Two days followed—days of long vigil, eager listening and a strangely dead silence. All he heard was the rustling of leaves and the glad song of the birds. By day he could hear the sparrow, the thrush and the robin, and at night the weird hooting of an owl and the scuttling of rats.

His mind was slowly regaining its normal balance. He could think without that bursting sensation in his skull, yet the great mystery which overwhelmed him was the motive why he had been entrapped into captivity as some strange and dangerous animal.

“No doubt I am dangerous,” he said aloud to himself on the second morning. “Dangerous to those into whose hands I have now fallen—that vampire woman who is actually the friend of Elma! Gad! I can’t fathom it. The whole affair is quite beyond my comprehension. Why did my own father warn me of the pair? If he knew them as crooks, why did he not himself openly expose them—except—except—that—”

And he paused, gazing fixedly up at the little window.

“Except—that—that perhaps the dear old dad dare not tell the truth! He may have had some secret!”

He walked slowly and with difficulty around that small stone chamber. His father had died without revealing to him the truth about Gray and the woman Crisp. Why?

“I wonder if Elma will believe me?” he said aloud, in a strange whisper which echoed weirdly around those lime-washed walls. “Will she believe that letter I wrote her regarding the Wad Sus concession? I should have told her so with my own lips, only—only at Park Lane that night I was not wanted. Elma was not at home. Oh! when shall I learn the truth of all this—when shall I be able to explain it all to Elma? When shall I see Barclay?”

He was silent for some minutes. Then another mystery was the identity of the person who, being his janitor, supplied him with food. Two further days went by. When he slept, exhausted, his food was renewed—by whose hands?

As he grew stronger in those days since the recovery of his senses he had striven to reach the window and look out. But he had never been able to do so. The little window was fully eight feet above the floor and he had nothing to mount upon to grip its ledge. Time after time he ran at it and sprang in the air, but in his weakened condition he always fell too short.

So he gave it up as hopeless. Escape, he realised, was quite impossible. Yet where he was held captive he knew not. His enemies had taken all precautions. They were determined to hold him prisoner, apparently to gain time.

Why?

One day he had slept heavily all the morning, probably snoring, as he knew he did, when he was awakened by a movement near him. He opened his eyes stealthily but made no sign.

Before him, moving across the room, he saw the dim figure of a man in respectable black who carried in his hand a plate containing food.

Suddenly the beam of light from the high window lit up his janitor’s face, and in an instant he recognised it as the countenance of a man he had seen in his dreams while he had been held prisoner at Willowden—it was, in fact, the old criminal who posed as Gray’s butler—the man Claribut.

For a few seconds Roddy watched, and then with a sudden effort he sprang up and threw himself upon the fellow at a second when his back was turned.

“What the devil do you mean by keeping me here!” he demanded, as he threw his arms around the man’s neck and attempted to throw him to the ground.

Claribut, taken entirely off his guard, tried to throw off his assailant, uttering a fierce imprecation the while, but the pair were locked in a deadly embrace. Roddy, though young and athletic, was still too weak to overcome the old man’s defence.

Around the narrow stone walls they reeled. The door stood open, and Roddy, with a frantic effort, tried to force Claribut towards it, but the old criminal, who had been very athletic in his time, always prevented him.

Roddy, weakened and ill, fought for his life, and gradually succeeded in getting his opponent towards the door. He fell and rolled in the dust, but the young fellow would not release his hold. The open door was before him and he was determined to escape.

Twice he was near it and endeavoured to throw off his captor, but old Claribut always kept with him and held him by the throat until he was nearly choked.

Roddy again struggled to his feet, and with both hands at Claribut’s throat at last had the advantage. He saw the

man's face purple and his eyes starting. He was close to the door, and if he could only cast the choking man from him he could escape.

He drew a long breath for a last frantic effort, but as he did so, Claribut, who had succeeded in drawing a lead-weighted life-preserver from his pocket, raised it and brought it down with crashing force upon the young man's skull.

And Roddy Homfray fell like a log upon the stones.

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## Chapter Twenty Seven.

### The Death-Trap.

When Roddy again became conscious of his surroundings he found himself lying in a corner of the place, so weak that he was scarcely able to move his arms. His head was throbbing, and placing his hand upon it, he found himself suffering from a long scalp wound.

He lay for quite an hour staring up at the plaster ceiling which was peeling after many years of neglect. He tried to recall what had occurred.

Mistily he remembered his desperate fight for liberty, and how old Claribut had eventually clubbed him with a short, pliable life-preserver.

It seemed to be again morning. His lips were parched, his throat contracted, and he felt feverish and ill. Water was there, and he managed to reach it.

"What can I do?" he cried faintly to himself. "I must get out of this. I must! How many days have I been here, I wonder?" and again his hand felt his chin. The growth of beard had increased, and by it he knew that already he must have been there a week—or even more.

For the hundredth time he glanced at the heavy old door, and saw how a small panel had been sawn out near the bottom to admit the introduction of the plate and jug. The mysterious hand that fed him was that of the old man whom he recollected as having been at Willowden. Outwardly the old fellow seemed feeble, but he certainly was the reverse when put to the test.

Roddy ambled across to where his raincoat lay upon the stones. In its pocket was the cigar-box, two coils of wire—airial and "earth"—and the head-'phones. He opened the box and, as far as he could discover, it was intact. But of what use was it?

He sighed and slowly packed it back into the pocket of the coat, which afterwards he dropped back upon the spot whence he had picked it up.

Suddenly he heard a footstep outside and the panel in the door was slid back, the grey evil face of old Claribut being revealed in the aperture.

"Hulloa!" he exclaimed with a harsh laugh. "So you've come to your senses again—eh? I hope you liked what I gave you for attacking me, young man?"

"I only tried to escape," was Roddy's reply.

"Well, that you won't do," the other laughed. "You'll never leave here alive. I'll take good care of that."

"Oh! We shall see," replied Roddy, whose stout heart had not yet forsaken him. It was not the first time in his life that he had been in a tight corner, and after all he was ever optimistic. The only thing that troubled him was the wound in his head.

"You were useful once," said the evil-faced old criminal. "But now you are of no further use. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, I do; and no, I don't," was Roddy's defiant reply.

"Well, you're only an encumbrance," he said. "And you're young to die like a rat in a hole?"

"That's very interesting," Roddy remarked grimly. "And who's going to be my executioner, pray?"

"You'll learn that in due course," said his evil-faced janitor, who then opened the door after removing two strong bars.

Roddy instantly sprang at him, but he found himself so weak that he was as a child in Claribut's hands.

The old man seized him, and dragging him out roughly thrust him down some spiral atone stairs and into a stone chamber below the one in which he had been confined. It was about the same size and smelt damp and mouldy. The window, strongly barred, was as high up as the one in the chamber above. When he had bundled the helpless man down the stairs, with one hand, he took the raincoat and flung it into the chamber after him.

All Roddy's protests and struggles were useless. In his weak physical state, still more exhausted by loss of blood from his wound, he was helpless as a child, as Claribut flung him upon the damp shiny stones, saying with a laugh of

triumph:

“You’ll stay there and die—now that you’re no longer wanted!”

Next second Roddy, lying where he had been flung, heard the door being bolted and barred.

He was again alone!

He raised himself slowly and painfully from the slimy stones and gazed around. The walls were green and damp and the place smelt muddy.

Suddenly his eager ears caught the faint ripple of water. There was a river flowing outside!

Again he listened. No longer could he hear Claribut’s footsteps, but only the low ripple as the water ran past beneath the window. He judged that the pavement upon which he stood was on a level with the river.

But where was he? What was the nature of the place he was in—those strong stone walls that had probably stood there for centuries. In any case the intention of his enemies was that it should be his tomb!

It was still morning—early morning he judged it to be. But suddenly as he stood there he saw that the clouds had darkened, and he heard the rain falling slowly upon the surface of the river outside.

Gradually the stones upon which he stood became wetter. Water was oozing up from between the crevices everywhere.

The river was rising. The ghastly truth all at once fell upon him, numbing his senses. If the rain continued to fall then the river would rise, and he would be drowned, as Claribut had prophesied—drowned like a rat in a hole!

Realisation of the situation held him rigid as a statue.

For a few moments he was plunged into despair.

Then suddenly a thought came to him. There was still a hundredth chance left.

So taking out his pocket-book he scribbled an urgent message to Elma, stating that he was confined in some house beside the river, that the flood was rising, and telling her that he had with him his new wireless receiver, asked her to speak to him, if she chanced to be at Farncombe. He urged her to hasten to his side.

His handwriting was irregular, for his hand trembled as he wrote. But having finished it he took out a frayed but plain envelope, and addressed it: “Urgent: Miss Elma Sandys, Farncombe Towers, near Haslemere.”

Having placed the message inside, he sealed it, and managed, after many futile attempts, to toss it through the barred window.

If it fell upon the face of the waters it might be picked up by some inquisitive person out boating or fishing. Yet he knew not what river was flowing by. He had an idea that it was the Thames, because on the previous day he had seen the brilliant flash of light blue as a kingfisher had sped past the window.

The envelope fluttered from the window—a forlorn hope.

From the crevices in the paving the water was still rising, even though the heavy shower had passed, and the sun was again shining.

Feeling a trifle better and more hopeful, he again took out his wireless receiving-set from the pocket of his discarded raincoat. Old Claribut evidently intended that when the river overwhelmed him, and later he might be found dead, his coat should be with him. Had it been left above there might have been more serious suspicions of foul play.

Claribut, as an old criminal, left nothing to chance. When Roddy Homfray died there should also be found his belongings. That was what he intended.

The first fear which entered Roddy’s mind was that the dampness of the stones might have affected the sensitiveness of the set. Eagerly he commenced to string up his aerial to several old nails which he found in the wall above the height of his head. Then he put down an “earth” wire under one of the small stones in the wet floor, which he lifted for that purpose.

After preparations which lasted ten minutes or so he held the cigar-box in his hand, and putting on the head-phones listened and turned the condenser to receive waves of nine hundred metres.

In a few moments his heart gave a bound. His set worked and the water had not injured it, for he heard the operator at the London aerodrome telephoning to an aeroplane in flight towards Paris.

Those words through the ether gave him renewed courage. His set was working!

Would that he could hear Elma’s answering voice.

The envelope had fluttered from the window, yet the only sound that reached him was the low lapping of the water and the songs of the birds.

He listened to the daily traffic in the air, the Morse and telephony, all of which he knew so well. Yet he was unable to



call for help. He could only listen—listen for Elma's words of encouragement.

But would she ever receive that message tossed at haphazard from that barred high-up window—tossed into the air or upon the water? Which he knew not.

An hour later another sharp shower fell, and as it did so the water percolated through the floor until it was quite two inches deep. It was an ugly sign.

Would Elma receive his message and come to his rescue?

At some moments he gave up the situation as hopeless. His father's reluctance to tell him the truth concerning Gray and his accomplice, the woman Crisp who was actually on visiting terms with Mr Sandys and his daughter, utterly puzzled him. He had trusted his father before all men, yet the poor old rector had died with his secret locked in his heart.

A thousand conflicting thoughts arose within him, all weird, mysterious, inscrutable. Why should his own father have held back from him the truth? Why should Mr Sandys demand from him the secret of his discovery of the girl in Welling Wood?

What connexion could there be with the City magnate and the girl whom he had believed was dead, but who was certainly still alive?

As the day faded the rain, which had ceased for an hour, again fell heavily, and in the dim grey light he could see the water rising almost imperceptibly, until it had already reached his knees.

He still listened intently, but though he heard a concert sent out from Marconi House, on four hundred metres, gay music which jarred upon the nerves of a doomed man, and also the voices of amateurs in the vicinity, yet no sound was there of Elma.

Would she be able to get the transmission set to work? The thought caused him to hold his breath. Even if she received his message it might be too late if the rain continued and the river rose further!

He recollected how, when at Mr Sandys' request he obtained official permission and had erected the telephone transmission set, he had given Elma several lessons in its working until once or twice she had spoken to him at the Rectory from the Towers and had once given him a gramophone selection. He knew that the exact filament current on the valves was necessary for clear speech. Would she remember the exact instructions he had given her?

But after all he had merely cast his urgent appeal to the wind. He did not even know whether it had floated upon the water. Perhaps it might have been caught in a tree and would remain unseen until the paper rotted and dropped!

Darkness fell, and the only sound that reached his living tomb was the low lapping of the waters, as slowly but surely they rose.

There was no acknowledgment of his message. He held the receiver above the level of the waters in breathless expectancy, knowing that if water entered the box its sensibility would at once be destroyed.

A weather forecast was given out from the Air Ministry, followed by an amateur in London with bad modulation trying to call a fellow amateur in Liverpool, but no acknowledgment from the girl he loved and from whom he had been so rudely parted.

Would she ever get his message of distress? His heart sank when he knew that the chance was so small.

Truly his enemies held him powerless, and their intention was that he should either starve or drown!

He had hoped against hope, until he, alas! gave up.

The river was still rising and very soon the flood must engulf him!

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## **Chapter Twenty Eight.**

### **A Race for Life.**

The day was a Saturday, and Elma's wedding to Mr Rex Rutherford was fixed for the following Friday. It was to take place at Little Farncombe Church. Rutherford had insisted upon it.

Mr Sandys was unaware that he was triumphant over poor old Homfray and his son, and it pleased him to think that they should be married in the village church where old Mr Homfray had been rector.

Elma and her father were at the Towers, and Rutherford had motored down to spend the day. He posed as the devoted lover, and really played the part quite well now that he and Freda understood each other. The woman was no longer jealous. He had given her an assurance to return to her.

The pair, by Gray's marriage to Elma, would reap a rich harvest at the expense of the poor girl's happiness and future. With Roddy safely out of the way the road was laid open for complete conquest. The coup would be complete.

The cold, cheerless day had been very showery, but Rutherford and Mr Sandys had been out all the afternoon with their guns over some rough shooting towards Hindhead.

At about five o'clock the neat maid Evans ascended to Elma's room, saying:

"James says, miss, that there is a man in the kitchen who wants to see you personally."

"What kind of man?" asked the girl, surprised, she being at the moment before the mirror in the feminine act of powdering her face.

"James says he's a respectable-looking working man, miss. He won't see anybody but you."

"Then I suppose I must see him. Tell James to send him round to the hall. I wonder who he can be? Begging—a starving wife and family, I expect. Ah! our poor ex-service men," she added with a sigh, "they gallantly won the war for us, and now nobody wants them—alas! How very cruel the world is!"

A few minutes later she descended the wide oaken staircase and passing into the big, long-panelled hall, with its stained glass windows and its rows of old portraits, where a great wood fire burned, throwing out a sweet fragrance, she met a brown-bearded, burly-looking man in a faded blue suit, standing with his cap in his hand.

"I'm sorry, miss, to worry you," he said. "I hope you'll forgive me. Are you Miss Elma Sandys?"

"I am."

"Well, miss," said the rough fellow, "I've found this 'ere in the water. I work on a timber barge on the Thames and up the Wey. To-day I saw it a-floatin' on the water not far from the old ruined mill near Old Woking, so I picks it up out o' curiosity. It was unstuck, so I read the contents, and I come over 'ere by train as soon as I could."

And he handed her a damp letter written in pencil and sadly blurred by the water.

Elma held her breath as she recognised the handwriting, much of which was obliterated.

She eagerly scanned the lines of writing, and her face went pale as death.

After some words with the man, and he had given her certain directions, she managed to thank him, and gave him a pound note, for which he was very grateful. Then she rushed away to the room wherein was the wireless telephone-transmitter installed by Roddy. She turned the key in the door to be private, and at once sat down to the complicated-looking instruments into the intricacies of which her lover had already initiated her. She pulled over the switches so that the generator began to hum, and lit up the filaments of the two big electric globes. These she carefully adjusted till she had the exact current, and taking up the transmitting instrument she was about to speak.

The handle of the door turned, and she heard Rutherford's voice calling her. He had come in unexpectedly from shooting, and was motoring back to town before dinner. Forced to switch off the current, she sprang up and opened the door.

"Hallo, Rex! I was just about to amuse myself with the wireless!" she said in an affected tone of unconcern, as she joined him in the corridor and they walked together to the hall, where Hughes was ready to serve them in stately manner with tea.

Her agony of mind may easily be imagined as she sat there in a low chair beside the log fire, and in pretence of being calm gave her father and her hated lover their tea-cups, while Rutherford was full of praise as to the amount of game that remained upon the pretty old-world English estate so near London.

Elma was longing for the fellow to go. She was eager to dash back to the wireless-room and thence speak to her imprisoned lover. The whole situation held her breathless. Roddy was in deadly peril, and she alone could encourage and save him.

Those moments were, to her, like hours. She thought to excuse herself and leave the two men together, but she feared lest Rutherford might follow her and overhear her voice on the radio-telephone.

So she waited patiently till at last the man rose, and, placing one of his hot, hateful kisses upon her lips, strode out, promising to come down again on the following day if his urgent business concerning the concession would allow.

The instant he had stepped into his car, Elma, in a few hurried words, told her father of the strange message from Roddy, and showed to him the half obliterated scribble.

"Speak to him at once, dear?" cried Mr Sandys excitedly. "What can it all mean?"

Together they hastened to the wireless-room, and very soon Elma had the set going, the generator softly purring, and the valves lighted to their exact brilliancy for clear modulation of the human voice.

"Hulloa! Hulloa! Hulloa?" she cried, repeating her call six times. "Hulloa! 3.X.Q.! Hulloa, 3.X.Q.! Can you hear me, 3.X.Q.? This is Elma speaking—Elma speaking to 3.X.Q. All right. I-have-had-your-message-and-I-think-I-know-where-you-are! Hulloa, 3.X.Q. I will investigate at once! Hold on. Elma speaking. I will be with you very soon. 3.X.Q. 3.X.Q.! Elma-has-had-your-message. Listen! I will repeat."

And in a clear voice she repeated what she had already said.

Afterwards, knowing that her lover could not reply, she went out to meet her father who had already telephoned across to the chauffeur to get the car ready. Both father and daughter put on their hats and mackintoshes and hurried across the back premises to the big well-lit garage. On their way they met Telford, the second gardener. His

master told him to get a couple of crowbars and axes and to come along.

"I want that axe you use for felling big trees," he added.

The man went to the tool-shed in wonder, and placed them in the car.

Then all four set out in the rain upon a strange and exciting expedition.

The note had been picked up not far from the ruined mill on the bank of the river Wey. From Roddy's message it seemed to the girl that he must certainly be held prisoner within that old mill, so they drove away along the London road through Godalming and Guildford until they found themselves at Woking Station. Then on inquiry, and after losing themselves three times on narrow, intricate roads, they at last came to the bank of the river, a tributary of the Thames, and presently found the dark walls of the half-ruined mill.

On pulling up Elma shouted with all her might.

"Roddy! Roddy!"

There was no response. They saw in the darkness that the river was swollen and was running swiftly towards the Thames.

"Roddy! Roddy!" the girl shouted again, whereupon at last there was a very faint response, deep down somewhere. All were silent for a few seconds.

"By Gad!" cried Mr Sandys, "he's here! Yes. He's here!"

The two servants got out the axes and crowbars and, aided by their master, attacked the heavy iron-bound door of the disused water-mill. At first it resisted them. It was of oak and centuries old, as was the stone structure itself.

At last it yielded to the combined efforts of all four.

Inside they found a big, bare room of stone, where in the old days the sacks of corn were stored. Soon, having explored the place by the aid of two flash-lamps, and Elma calling constantly, Roddy's voice directed them to the chamber below in which his captors had placed him with such evil intent.

At last they descended a flight of winding stone steps, slippery with slime, but on reaching the last step they found the water to be high above their waists.

"Roddy!" cried Elma breathlessly, "are you there?"

"Yes, dear. I'm here! Try and open the door. But do be careful. The water is rising. It's very deep now!" was the faint reply.

They could not see the fastenings of the door on account of the black flood, but after great difficulty, all four succeeded in forcing it open, whereupon Roddy, entirely exhausted in body and in mind and at the limit of his endurance, fell back into the girl's ready arms.

Elma's voice from the void had given him courage, and his life had, after all, been saved by wireless!

There is an old Spanish proverb which says, "From poverty to wealth is the breadth of two hands: from wealth to poverty, the breadth of two fingers."

*De pobre à rico, dos palmos!*  
*De rico à pobre, dos dedos.*

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## Chapter Twenty Nine.

### The Coup.

The world of Little Farncombe was agog, for though great secrecy had been preserved it became rumoured that Miss Elma Sandys was to be married to a rich American financier, Mr Rex Rutherford.

At the hour appointed for the ceremony the bridegroom, accompanied by his friend, Mr Bertram Harrison—or Arthur Porter, to be exact—arrived at the crowded little church, but as the time went on and the bride did not arrive everyone began to whisper.

What hitch could have occurred?

Nearly an hour went by when Rutherford went out and telephoned to the Towers, only to receive an astounding reply from Purcell Sandys himself, who said:

"My daughter Elma was married to Roderick Homfray by special licence in London this morning, and they are already on their way to the Continent on their honeymoon."

The crook stood dumbfounded for a second. Then, uttering a shriek of rage, he banged down the receiver, called Harrison, and they both drove rapidly away in the car together.

A trap for them had already been set, for as the car entered Haslemere four constables attempted to hold it up. Gray, seeing this, drew a revolver, fired three shots indiscriminately and dashed past.

Meanwhile Edna Manners was sitting with Mr Sandys, whose ward she was, relating to him a very remarkable story.

It concerned the death of her *fiancé*, Hugh Willard.

“But,” she said, “old Mr Homfray was, as you know, a friend of poor Hugh, and he was the only man who knew that Gordon Gray—the scoundrel whom you knew as Rutherford—and his accomplice, the woman Crisp, were the actual assassins. Mr Homfray had called upon him in Hyde Park Square on the night of the crime, and was actually in the house and saw the deed committed! The woman held poor Hugh down while the man injected something into his scalp by means of a hypodermic syringe. But Mr Homfray was too late to save him. I suspected that he was cognisant of these facts, but not until I had watched Freda Crisp enter the Rectory by stealth and listened in secret at the window and heard him threaten the woman with exposure did I know that he could clear up the mystery when he wished. But Gray held a secret of Mr Homfray’s past. When I had learnt the truth I slipped away in the wood, but was overtaken by Gray himself, and the next I saw was a bright red flash and then I lapsed into semi-consciousness. I shouted to somebody to save me. I have just a faint recollection of some man bending over me, and then I knew no more until my reason returned to me and I found myself living with the shoe-repairer and his wife in Bayeux.”

“Then it is quite clear that Mr Homfray’s son discovered you, but Gray, believing that he had seen you attacked, also attacked him.”

“Yes,” said the girl. “But there was evidently a yet deeper motive. Gray knew that the rector held the secret of poor Mr Willard’s death and, I think, feared lest he had disclosed it to his son. Poor Mr Homfray died mysteriously. Perhaps they actually killed him.”

“To me it seems clear that the reason why young Homfray was not killed outright was because, knowing of the impending concession, they watched their opportunity to obtain it,” said Mr Sandys. “Barclay received the very valuable plan of the mine, but it somehow fell into their hands,—a fact which was not discovered till a few days ago—and now I happily have it together with both concessions. At the hour of their triumph they confined Roddy in a place where they knew that a terrible death must sooner or later await him. Having swindled him out of his concession Gray hoped to marry Elma, first having cleverly entrapped Roddy and determined that the rising river should cause his death.”

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Of this curious sequence of strange and exciting adventures there remains little more to relate, save to say that during the time that Roddy and Elma were on their quiet, delightful honeymoon in Switzerland, Mr Sandys was busy at work on Roddy’s original concession, while Andrew Barclay left for Morocco in order to get the original concession confirmed by the Sultan himself—which was done.

When the happy pair returned, they found that Mr Sandys was well forward in the retrieving of his lost fortune, for two other commercial ventures which he had regarded as failures had suddenly turned to be great successes—in one case a “boom.” Therefore there was now little cause for anxiety.

A few months later Roddy and another expert engineer went out to the Wad Sus, and armed with the plan had but little difficulty in re-discovering the ancient workings, which were soon found to be extremely rich in emeralds of the best dark-green colour. Within a year Roddy Homfray, not only reaching the zenith of his happiness with Elma, had also become a comparatively rich man.

Of the criminals nothing was heard until about eight months after Elma’s marriage, when the Paris Sûreté discovered that Gray, Porter and the woman Crisp were living in a fine villa near Dinard, and arrested them for the assassination in Paris, three years previously, of old Monsieur Jules Gournay, a banker living in the Avenue de Neuilly, whom the woman Crisp had previously robbed of a large sum of money.

Of this crime in March last, after a delay of over a year, Gordon Gray, alias Rex Rutherford and other names, was found guilty by the Assize Court of the Seine, held at Versailles, and duly sent to the guillotine, while both Porter and Freda Crisp were sent to penal servitude for life on the dreaded “Devil’s Island,” while nothing has since been heard of old Claribut, though a warrant is still out for his arrest.

All their cunningly devised schemes had been checkmated by “The Voice from the Void.”

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\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VOICE FROM THE VOID: THE GREAT WIRELESS MYSTERY \*\*\*

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