Le Queux William

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Содержание

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PROLOGUE
IS ABOUT MYSELF

The whole circumstances of the Stretton Street Affair were so complicated and so amazing from start to finish that, had the facts been related to me, I confess I should never have for a moment given them credence.

That they were hard, undeniable facts, presenting a problem both startling and sensational, the reader will quickly learn from this straightforward narrative – an open confession of what actually occurred.

In all innocence, and certainly without any desire to achieve that ephemeral notoriety which accrues from having one's portrait in the pictorial press and being besieged by interviewers in search of a "story," I found myself, without seeking adventure, one of the chief actors in a drama which was perhaps one of the strangest and most astounding of this our twentieth century.

I almost hesitate to set down the true facts, so utterly amazing are they. Indeed, as I sit in the silence of this old brown room in a low-built and timbered Surrey farmhouse, with pen and paper before me, I feel that it is only by a miracle that I have been spared to narrate one of the most complex and ingenious plots which the human mind, with malice aforethought, ever conceived.

I ought, I suppose, in opening to tell you something concerning myself. Hugh Garfield is my name; my age twenty-nine, and I am the son of the late Reverend Francis Garfield, rector of Aldingbourne and minor canon of Chichester. In the war I served with the Royal Air Force and obtained my pilot's certificate. I went to France and afterwards to Italy, and on being demobilized returned to my work as an electrical engineer in the employ of Messrs. Francis and Goldsmith, the well-known firm whose palatial offices are in Great George Street, Westminster, quite close to the Institute of Electrical Engineers.

Though I had obtained my Degree in Science I was at the time employed a good deal upon clerical work. Five years of war had, of course, been something of a set-back to my career, but in our reputable firm our places had been kept open for us – for those who returned, and we were, alas! only three out of twenty-eight.

Perhaps it was that having done my duty and obtained my captaincy and a Military Cross, the loyal, old-fashioned firm regarded me with considerable favour. At any rate, it set its face against anything German, even in the post-war days when the enemy sent its Ambassador to the Court of St. James, and we weakheartedly reopened trade with the diabolical Huns and allowed them to dump in their cheap and nasty goods just as though no war had happened.

Messrs. Francis and Goldsmith was a private firm, and the principals were both fine, patriotic Britons. Though electrical appliances were coming from Germany wholesale, and being put in to the market at prices with which British firms could never hope to compete, yet they stuck to their old resolution when in 1918 they had joined the Anti-German Union of "No German Goods."

Would that all other firms, electrical and otherwise, had done likewise!

Before I describe the amazing adventures which befell me I suppose I ought to tell you the exact circumstances. I had an excellent business appointment, with a salary which was quite adequate for my modest needs as a bachelor. Further, my Aunt Emily had died and left me quite a comfortable little fortune in addition. I shared a small flat in Rivermead Mansions, just over Hammersmith Bridge, with another bachelor, a young solicitor – a dark-haired, clean-shaven, alert fellow named

Henry Hambledon, who had created quite a good practice, with only small fees of course, at the Hammersmith Police Court and its vicinity.

I first met Hambledon at the front – years ago it seems in these days when events march on so rapidly. For nearly a year we were brother-officers, until I was sent to Italy. We met again after the Armistice and set up housekeeping together, our female "Kaiserin" being a sharp-featured, grey-haired young lady of about fifty-five, who "looked after us" very well, and though she possessed many idiosyncrasies, did not rob us quite so openly as do most housekeepers of the London bachelor's home.

Harry was one of the best of good fellows. He had seen a lot of service ever since he had responded to his country's call and joined up as a private. We always got on excellently together, so we had furnished our pleasant little six-roomed, second-floor flat quite comfortably, and as Harry had looked after the artistic side of its furnishings – aided by a pal of his, an impecunious artist who lived in Chelsea – it certainly was a very passable bachelor's snuggery.

The small front room commanded a view over the river with works, wharves, and high factory chimneys on the Middlesex shore. To the left, across the long suspension bridge, was Chiswick and Kew, while to the right lay Putney and Chelsea. Before the house flowed the great broad muddy river where once each year the University eights flashed past, while ever and anon, year in, year out, noisy tugs towed strings of black barges up and down the stream.

Away across the high-road to the left were the great reservoirs of London's water works, a huge open space always fresh and breezy even within a stone's throw of stifled Hammersmith, with its "tubes" and its dancing-halls. Used as we both had been to years of roughing it, the spot had taken our fancy, and we got on famously together. On most evenings we were out, but sometimes, before we turned in, we would sit and smoke and laugh over our stirring adventures and humorous incidents in the war, and the "scraps" we had been safely through.

Since his demobilization Harry had fallen deeply in love with an extremely pretty girl named Norah Peyton, who lived in a house overlooking the Terrace Gardens at Richmond, and whose father was partner in a firm of well-known importers in Mincing Lane. As for myself, I was "unattached." Like every other young man of my age I had, of course, had several little affairs of the heart, all of which had, however, died within a few short weeks.

Now it happened that on the evening of the day prior to the opening of this strange series of adventures which befell me, I was in the city of York, whither I had gone on business for the firm, and as my old-fashioned employers allowed first-class travelling expenses, I entered an empty first-class compartment of the London express which left York at six-twenty-three, and was due at King's Cross at ten-thirty.

A few moments later a fellow-passenger appeared, a well-dressed, middle-aged man, who asked me in French if the train went to London, and on my replying in the affirmative, he thanked me profusely and joined me.

"I regret, m'sieur, that I, alas! know so very leetle of your Engleesh," he remarked pleasantly, and continued in French: "Sometimes my ignorance places me in great difficulty when *en voyage* here."

Knowing French fairly well we soon commenced to chat in that language. He struck me as a man of considerable refinement and education. Therefore it was no surprise to me when he told me that, as an official at the head office of the Crédit Lyonnais in Paris, it was his duty sometimes to visit their correspondents in the chief commercial centres of Great Britain.

"I am on my way from Glasgow back to Paris," he said. "But I had to break my journey in York this morning. I shall leave London for Paris to-morrow. I shall travel by the air-route," he added; "it is so much quicker, and far less fatiguing. I have been backwards and forwards to the Croydon Aerodrome quite half a dozen times of late."

"Yes," I remarked. "Travel by aeroplane must be of very considerable advantage to really busy men."

And thus we chatted until dinner was announced, and we went together along the corridor to the restaurant-car, where we sat opposite each other.

As the train sped along over the flat fertile country through Doncaster and Grantham on that moonlit winter's night we sat gossiping pleasantly, for I had looked forward to a lonely journey back to London.

I have "knocked about" ever since the commencement of the war, but I abhor a lonely four-hour railway journey. I had had enough of slow railway journeys in France and elsewhere. But on that evening I confess I was greatly taken with my fellow-traveller.

He had all the alertness and exquisite politeness of the Parisian, and he compelled me to have a Benedictine at his expense. Then, as a *quid pro quo*, he took one of my cigarettes.

Later, when we had concluded the usual and never-altering meal provided by the Great Northern Railway Company – I often wonder who are the culinary artists who devise those menus which face us on all English trains – we returned to our compartment to stretch ourselves in our corners and to smoke. Grantham we had passed and we were approaching Peterborough, the old fen town with the ancient cathedral.

In French my friend the banker kept up a continuous chatter, even though I was tired and drowsy. He had told me much concerning himself, and I, in turn, told him of my profession and where I lived. I did not tell him very much, for I am one of those persons who prefer to keep themselves to themselves. I seldom give strangers any information. After a time, indeed, I tired of him.

At last we entered King's Cross – a little late, as is usual on a long run.

"I have to get to the Carlton," my companion said. "Of course there will be no taxis. But are not you in London very badly served in that respect? We, in Paris, have taxis at any hour. When your stations close I find always a great difficulty in getting a conveyance. By the way! Could you not dine with me to-morrow night?"

"I am sorry," I replied. "But I have arranged to visit my uncle in Orchard Street."

Two minutes later the train drew up slowly, and wishing my fellow-traveller *bon soir*, I expressed a hope that one day, ere long, we might meet again. I had not given him my card, as our acquaintance was only upon chance, and – well, after all, he was only a passing foreigner.

Half an hour after I had stepped from the train, I was back again in my cosy little flat in Rivermead Mansions, after a very strenuous day. On the hall table lay a letter from my solicitors. I tore it open eagerly and read that they regretted to inform me that certain investments I had made a year before, with the money which my aunt had left me, had not realized my expectations. In other words, I had lost the whole of my money!

All I possessed was the salary paid me by Messrs. Francis and Goldsmith.

My heart stood still. The blow staggered me. Yet, after all, I had been a fool – a fact which my solicitors had hinted at the time.

I crushed the letter in my hand and passed on into the little sitting-room.

Harry had gone out to a dance, and had left a scribbled note on the table saying that he had his latchkey and would not be back until two or so. He wished me "cheerio." So having smoked a final cigarette I retired.

Next day I went to the office in Great George Street and reported upon the business I had done in York – and good business it was, too, with the Municipal Electric Supply – and in the evening I returned across Hammersmith Bridge at about six o'clock.

At seven our buxom "Kaiserin" put our meal upon the table – a roast, a sweet, and a wedge of Cheshire cheese. The mind of the dear old soul, who had so many relations, never rose above the butcher's joint and apple tart. Alas! that cooking is an art still unknown in our dear old England. We sit at table only by Nature's necessity – not to enjoy the kindly fruits of the earth as do other nations.

Yet what could we expect of the 'Ammersmith charlady who looked after us? – and who, by the way, probably looked after her own pocket as well.

The bachelor's housekeeper is always a fifteen puzzle – twelve for herself and the remaining three for her employer. As sure as rain comes in winter, so does the smug and sedate female who keeps house for the unfortunate unattached male place the onus of housekeeping bills upon him and reap the desserts of life for herself.

On that particular evening I felt very tired, for in the five days of my absence many business matters had accumulated, and I had had much to attend to.

Harry, who ate hurriedly – even gobbling his food – told me that he was taking Norah to the theatre, hence, after dinner, I was left alone. I read the evening paper when he had left, and then, at eight o'clock, stretched myself, for it was time that I went out to my uncle's.

The evening was cold and bright, with twinkling stars which on air-raid nights in London would have caused much perturbation among average householders and their families.

Our "Kaiserin" had gone home, so I rose, put on my overcoat, switched off the lights and descended the stairs to Hammersmith Bridge.

Thus, as you, my reader, will realize, I went out in the manner of a million other men in London on that particular night of Wednesday, the seventh of November.

And yet all unconsciously I plunged into a vortex of mystery and uncertainty such as, perhaps, no other living man has ever experienced.

Again I hesitate to pen these lines.

Yet, be patient, and I will endeavour, as far as I am able in these cold printed pages, to reveal exactly what occurred, without any exaggeration or hysterical meanderings. My only object being to present to you a plain, straightforward, and unvarnished narrative of those amazing occurrences, and in what astounding circumstances I found myself.

Surely it was not any of my own seeking – as you will readily understand. Because I performed what I believed to be a good action – as most readers of these pages would have done in similar circumstances – I was rewarded by unspeakable trouble, tribulation and tragedy.

CHAPTER THE FIRST
INTRODUCES OSWALD DE GEX

I had promised to call upon Charles Latimer, my bachelor uncle, a retired naval captain, a somewhat crusty old fellow who lived in Orchard Street, which runs between Oxford Street and Portman Square. I usually went there twice a week. With that intent I took a motor 'bus from Hammersmith Broadway as far as Hyde Park Corner.

As I stepped off the 'bus rain began to fall, so turning up the collar of my coat I hurried up Park Lane, at that hour half deserted.

When half-way up to Oxford Street I turned into one of the small, highly aristocratic streets leading into Park Street as a short cut to Orchard Street. The houses were all of them fine town mansions of the aristocracy, most of them with deep porticos and deeper areas.

Stretton Street was essentially one inhabited by the highest in London society. I had passed through it many times – as a Londoner does in making short cuts – without even noticing the name. The Londoner's geography is usually only by the landmarks of street corners and "tube" stations.

As I hurried along through the rain, I suddenly heard a man's voice behind me say:

"Excuse me, sir! But may I speak to you for just one second?"

I turned, and as I halted, a bare-headed young man-servant in livery, with waistcoat of striped black-and-yellow, faced me.

"I'm sorry, sir," he exclaimed breathlessly, "but will you wait just a moment?"

"What do you want?" I asked, surprised at being thus accosted.

"Would you oblige my master, sir?" inquired the young man eagerly. "He is in some very great trouble. Only a moment, sir. Just come in and see him. Do. Poor fellow! he's in great trouble. Do come in and see him, sir," he begged.

Amazed at this appeal, and my curiosity aroused, I consented, and followed the man back to a great stone-built mansion about fifty yards away. The front door in its deep portico stood open, just as the servant had left it when, apparently, he had dashed out into the street to accost the first passer-by.

"I'm sure my master will be most grateful to you, sir," the young footman said as I crossed the threshold.

We passed through a large square hall and up a great flight of softly-carpeted stairs to the library on the first floor – a big, sombre room, lined with books from floor to ceiling – evidently the den of a studious man.

In the grate there burned a bright log fire, and on either side stood two deep leather arm-chairs. It was a room possessing the acme of cosiness and comfort. Over the fireplace was set a large circular painting of the Madonna and Child – evidently the work of some Italian master of the seventeenth century – while here and there stood several exquisite bronzes.

In the window on the left was set a great carved Renaissance writing-table, and upon it burned an electric lamp with an artistic shade of emerald glass.

A few moments later a man in evening-dress entered hurriedly – almost breathlessly. I judged him to be about forty-five, dark-haired and decidedly handsome, but his complexion was a trifle sallow, and his features had a decidedly Oriental cast.

He greeted me profusely in a quiet, highly refined voice. Though his appearance was foreign, yet he was certainly English.

"I'm really awfully sorry to trouble you, sir," he said in a tone of profuse apology, "but the fact is that I find myself in a state of considerable perplexity. It is extremely good of you to consent to accompany Horton back here. I only hope that I have not interfered with any appointment you have to keep."

"Not at all," I replied, wondering who my host might be, for the whole affair was so sudden and unexpected that I was bewildered.

"Do sit down, and have a cigar," said my unknown host cheerily, and he took up a large silver box from a side table whereon was set a decanter of whisky, a syphon of soda water and four glasses upon a beautiful old tray of Georgian silver.

I selected a Corona, and sinking into the inviting chair, lit it, while he also took a cigar, and having clipped off the end, lit up as well.

We chatted affably, for my host was certainly geniality itself.

"This is quite an unexpected visit!" I remarked laughing, wondering still why I had been called in.

"Yes," he said. "I should not have had the pleasure of your acquaintance had it not been for the great trouble I have to-night," and he drew a deep sigh, while across his dark face passed an expression of pain and regret. "Some men are happy, others are – are, well, unfortunately unhappy in their domestic life. I, alas! am one of the latter," he added.

"That is very regrettable," I said sympathetically.

"My wife," he said hoarsely after a pause, "my wife took out my little boy this evening and deliberately left him in Westbourne Grove – just in order to spite me! Then she rang me up from some call-office and told me what she had done. Put yourself in my place," he said. "Would you not be indignant? Would you not be filled with hatred – and – "

"I certainly should," was my reply. "I'm a bachelor, and sometimes when I see so many unhappy marriages I fear to take the matrimonial plunge myself."

"Ah! Take my advice and remain single as long as ever you can, my dear sir. I – I haven't the pleasure of your name."

"Garfield – Hugh Garfield," I said.

"Mine is De Gex – Oswald De Gex," he said. "You may perhaps have heard of me."

Heard of Oswald De Gex! Of course I had! He was reputed to be one of the wealthiest of men, but he lived mostly in Paris or at his magnificent villa outside Florence. It was common knowledge that he had, during the war, invested a level million sterling in the War Loan, while he was constantly giving great donations to various charities. Somewhat eccentric, he preferred living abroad to spending his time in England, because, it was said, of some personal quarrel with another Member of the House of Commons which had arisen over a debate soon after he had been elected.

I recollected, too, that his wife – whose handsome pictured face so often appeared in the newspapers – was the daughter of a sporting baronet, yet I had never heard any whisper of such matrimonial troubles as he had just revealed to me.

He seemed a most easy-going man, whose clean-shaven face under the softly shaded electric light did not now appear so sallow and foreign as at first. His eyes were dark and rather deeply set, while his mouth was narrow and refined, with a dimple in the centre of his chin. His cast of features was certainly foreign, and handsome withal – a face full of strength and character. When he spoke he slightly aspirated his c's, and now and then he gesticulated when enthusiastic, due, of course, to his long residence abroad.

Often I had read in the newspapers of the splendid mediæval castle which he had bought from the Earl of Weymount, a castle perched high upon the granite rocks facing the Channel, between the Lizard and St. Ruan. He had spent a fortune in restoring it, yet he very seldom visited it. The historic place, with its wind-swept surroundings, was given over to his agent at Truro and to a caretaker.

As a matter of fact, I had once seen it while on a summer tour in Cornwall five years before, a great square keep with four towers, storm-worn and forbidding – one of the most perfect specimens of the mediæval castles in England. I had been told by the man who drove the hired car about its history, how in the early fourteenth century it had been the home of William Auberville, a favourite

of Edward II. From the Aubervilles the old fortress had passed a century later into the Weymount family, and had been their ancestral home for centuries.

I chanced to mention that I had seen the castle, whereupon the millionaire smiled, and remarked:

"I fear that I've not been there lately. I am so very seldom in England nowadays. Besides, the old place is so cold and gloomy. It is draughty even on a summer's day. My wife liked it when we were married – liked it until somebody told her of a family legend, how Hugh de Weymount, in the fifteenth century, walled up his wife in the north tower and left her to starve to death. Ever since she heard that story she has hated the old place. But," he added with a hard laugh, "it is most probably not true, and if the gallant knight actually did such a thing, perhaps, after all, the lady deserved it!"

My friend certainly seemed soured against the opposite sex. And surely he had just cause to be if his wife, in order to spite him, had deliberately lost the heir, little Oswald De Gex, in Westbourne Grove.

It was a strange thing that the heir of one of the wealthiest men in Britain should have been abandoned in Bayswater. As a bachelor, I wondered as to the state of mind of the mother – a mother who could take out her child on a winter's night, without hat or coat, and deliberately cast him adrift just to annoy her husband.

But the gentler sex in these days of drugs and dancing are, it must be admitted, strangely abnormal. Women with crazes abound everywhere. That women are emancipated from the almost Oriental thraldom in which they lived in the days of Victoria the Good is a bright sign of our times – the times of discovery, refinement, and mutual happiness of all classes. But certain circles – those circles wherein women take drugs to enable them to dance the better, circles where opium is smoked, and where morals do not count, where religion is scoffed at and relegated to the limbo of an out-of-date fiction, and where only the possessor of money counts, there is a strange and mysterious phase of Society indescribable by the pen. Only those who know of them by personal experience – the experience of "fast living" – can understand it. And even the man-about-town stands aghast at the ultra-modern crazes.

As we sat chatting in that quiet comfortable room, I confess that I became rather fascinated by my host. Perhaps he was a trifle too cynical at times, but his matrimonial trouble no doubt accounted for it.

Suddenly he rose and stretched himself rather wearily, I thought. The thin, delicate hand which held his cigar was long and tapering, and upon his finger was an antique Florentine ring in the form of a small emerald moth. I particularly noticed it as of very unusual pattern. I recollected seeing one of the same design in the Louvre Museum in Paris several years before.

"Ah!" he sighed. "I shall very soon leave London again – thank goodness! Next week I return to Fiesole for the winter. I am no great lover of London – are you, Mr. – Mr. Garfield?"

"My business as an electrical engineer keeps me in London," was my reply. "Besides, I have recently sustained a very heavy financial loss. If, however, I were independent I should certainly live in the country. London has, to me, become unbearable since the war."

"Ah! I quite agree," replied my host. "All our fine British traditions seem to have gone by the board. That, at least, is my own view. But there – perhaps I am getting an old fogey."

"I don't think so," I replied. "Everyone who knows you, Mr. De Gex, is well aware of your up-to-dateness, and your great generosity."

"Are they?" he asked, smiling wearily. "Personally I care very little. Popularity and prosperity can be manufactured by any shrewd press-agent employed at so much a year. Without publicity, the professional man or woman would never obtain a hearing. These are the days when incompetency properly boomed raises the incompetent to greatness – and even to Cabinet rank. Neither would the society woman ever obtain a friend without her boom," he went on. "Bah! I'm sick of it all!" he added with a sweep of his thin white hand. "But it is refreshing to talk with you, a stranger."

He was certainly frank in his criticisms, and I was not at all surprised when he commenced to question me as to my profession, where I lived, and what were my future plans.

I told him quite openly of my position, and that I lived in Rivermead Mansions with my friend Hambledon; and I also mentioned again the financial blow I had just received.

"Well," he said lazily, "I'm greatly indebted to you, Mr. Garfield, for deigning to come in and see a much-worried man. Ah! you do not know how I suffer from my wife's hatred of me. My poor little Oswald. Fancy abandoning him in order that the police might find him. But happily he is back. Think of the publicity – for the papers would have been full of my son being lost." Then, after a pause, he added: "I hope we shall see each other again before I go back to Italy."

At that moment, the butler, Horton, entered with a card upon a silver salver, whereupon I rose to leave.

"Oh! don't go yet!" my host urged quickly, as he glanced at the card.

"Is he waiting?" asked Mr. De Gex, turning to his servant.

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, well. Yes, I'll see him," he said. And then, excusing himself, he rose and left, followed by the man.

Why, I wondered, had I been invited there? It seemed curious that this exceedingly rich man was bursting to confide his domestic troubles to a perfect stranger.

I glanced around the handsome, well-furnished room.

Upon the writing-table lay a number of letters, and upon the red blotting-pad was a big wad of Treasury notes, under an elastic band, cast aside heedlessly, as rich men often do.

As I sat there awaiting my host's return, I recollected how, in the previous year, I had seen in the pictorial press photographs of the handsome Mrs. De Gex attired in jersey and breeches, with knitted cap and big woollen scarf, lying upon her stomach on a sleigh on the Cresta run. In another photograph which I recollected she was watching some ski-ing, and still another, when she was walking in the park with a well-known Cabinet Minister and his wife. But her husband never appeared in print. One of his well-known idiosyncrasies was that he would never allow himself to be photographed.

At the end of the room I noticed, for the first time, a pair of heavy oaken folding-doors communicating with the adjoining apartment, and as I sat there I fancied I heard a woman's shrill but refined voice – the voice of a well-bred young woman, followed by a peal of light, almost hysterical, laughter, in which a man joined.

My adventure was certainly a strange one. I had started out to visit my prosaic old uncle – as I so often did – and I had anticipated a very boring time. But here I was, by a most curious circumstance, upon friendly terms with one of the richest men in England.

Further, he seemed to have taken an unusual fancy to me. Probably because I had been sympathetic regarding the rescue of little Oswald De Gex. But why he should have confided all this to me I failed to realize.

As I sat there by the cheerful fire I heard the voices again raised in the adjoining room – the voices of a man and a woman.

Suddenly a sweet perfume greeted my nostrils. At first it seemed like that of an old-fashioned *pot-pourri* of lavender, verbena and basalt, such as our grandmothers decocted in their punch-bowls from dried rose-leaves to give their rooms a sweet odour. The scent reminded me of my mother's drawing-room of long ago.

Gradually it became more and more pungent. It seemed as though some pastille were burning somewhere, for soon it became almost sickening, an odour utterly overbearing.

At the same time I felt a curious sensation creeping over me. Why I could not tell.

I was both agitated and annoyed. I had only half finished my drink, and it was certainly not alcohol that was affecting me. Rather it seemed to be that curious old-world perfume which each moment grew more pungent.

I struggled against it. What would my newly-found friend think if he returned to find me overcome?

I gained my feet with difficulty and managed to walk across the carpet, holding my breath.

Certainly my night's adventure was, to say the least, a curious one.

Yet in our post-war days in London the man who ventures about town after dark can easily meet with as strange occurrences and narrow escapes as ever were described by the pioneers of Central Africa. The explorer Stanley himself declared that the African jungle was safer than the crossing of the Strand.

I suppose I must have remained in the chair into which I again sank for a further ten minutes. My head swam. My mental balance seemed to have become strangely upset by that highly pungent odour of lavender and verbena. I could even taste it upon my tongue, and somehow it seemed to paralyse all my senses save two, those of sight and reason.

I had difficulty in moving my mouth, my fingers, and my shoulders, but my sense of smell seemed to have become extremely acute. Yet my muscles seemed rigid, although my brain remained perfectly clear and unimpaired.

It was that scent of verbena – now terrible and detestable – a million times more potent than any bath soap – which filled my nostrils so that it seemed to choke me. I longed for fresh air.

By dint of persistent effort I rose, dragged myself across the room, drew aside the heavy silken curtain, and opening the window leaned out into the cold air, gasping for breath.

Where was Mr. De Gex?

For about five minutes I remained there, yet even the night air gave me little relief. My throat had become contracted until I seemed to be choking.

By the exercise of greater effort I staggered back, aghast at the sudden and unaccountable attack, and pressed the electric bell beside the fireplace to summon my host or the estimable Horton. Then I sank back into the arm-chair, my limbs paralysed.

How long I remained there I cannot tell for that pungent odour had, at last, dulled my brain. I had heard of cocaine, of opium, and of other drugs, and it occurred to me that I might be under the influence of one or the other of them. Yet the idea was absurd. I was Mr. De Gex's guest, and I could only suppose that my sudden seizure was due to natural causes – to some complication of a mental nature which I had never suspected. The human brain is a very complex composition, and its strange vagaries are only known to alienists.

I seemed stifled, and I sat clutching the arms of the big leather chair when my host at last entered, smiling serenely and full of apologies.

"I'm awfully sorry to have left you, Mr. Garfield, but my agent called to do some very urgent business. Pray excuse me, won't you?"

"I – I'm awfully sorry!" I exclaimed. "But I – I don't feel very well. I must apologize, Mr. De Gex, but would you ask your man to order me a taxi? I – well, I've come over strangely queer since you've been out."

"Bah! my dear fellow," he laughed cheerily. "You'll surely be all right in a few minutes. Stay here and rest. I'm sorry you don't feel well. You'll be better soon. I'll order my car to take you home in half an hour."

Then he crossed to the telephone, rang up a number, and ordered his car to be at the house in half an hour.

Then he rang for Horton, who brought me a liqueur glass of old brandy, which at my host's suggestion I swallowed.

Mr. De Gex, standing upon the thick Turkey hearthrug with his cigar between his lips, watched me closely. Apparently he was considerably perturbed at my sudden illness, for he expressed regret, hoping that the brandy would revive me.

It, however, had the opposite effect. The strong perfume like *pot-pourri* had confused my senses, but the brandy dulled them still further. I felt inert and unable to move a muscle, or even to exercise my will power. Yet my sense of sight was quite unimpaired.

I recollect distinctly how the dark keen-faced aristocrat-looking man stood before me alert and eager, as he gazed intently into my face as though watching the progress of my seizure which had so completely paralysed me.

Of a sudden a loud shriek sounded from the adjoining room – a woman's wild shriek of terror.

My host's thin lips tightened.

The scream was repeated, and continued.

"Excuse me," he exclaimed as he left the room hastily.

I sat with ears alert. It was surely most strange that the well-known millionaire, whose name was on everyone's lips, had confided in me as he had done. Why had he done so?

The screams of terror continued for about half a minute. Then they seemed stifled down to heavy sobbing. They seemed to be hysterical sobs, as of someone who had suffered from some great shock.

I was full of wonderment. It was unusual, I thought, that such noises should be heard in a sedate West End mansion.

There was a long-drawn-out sob, and then silence. A dead silence!

A few moments later Mr. De Gex came in looking very flushed and excited.

"My troubles are ever on the increase," he exclaimed breathlessly. "Come, Mr. Garfield. Come with me."

He assisted me to my feet and led me out into the corridor and into the adjoining room.

To my surprise it was a great handsomely furnished bedroom with heavy hangings of yellow silk before the windows, and a great dressing-table with a huge mirror with side wings. Along one side were wardrobes built into the wall, the doors being of satinwood beautifully inlaid.

In the centre stood a handsome bed, and upon it lay a young and beautiful girl wearing a dark blue serge walking dress of the latest mode. Her hat was off, and across her dark hair was a band of black velvet. The light, shining upon her white face – a countenance which has ever since been photographed upon my memory – left the remainder of the room in semi-darkness.

"My poor niece!" Mr. De Gex said breathlessly. "She – she has been subject to fits of hysteria. The doctor has warned her of her heart. You heard her cries. I – I believe she's dead!"

We both moved to the bed, my host still supporting me. I bent cautiously and listened, but I could hear no sound of breathing. Her heart has ceased to beat!

He took a hand mirror from the dressing-table and held it over her mouth. When he withdrew it it remained unclouded.

"She's dead —*dead*!" he exclaimed. "And – well, I am in despair. First, my wife defies me – and now poor Gabrielle is dead! How would you feel?"

"I really don't know," I whispered.

"Come back with me into the library," he urged. "We can't speak here. I – well – I want to be perfectly frank with you."

And he conducted me back to the room where we had been seated together.

I had resumed my seat much puzzled and excited by the tragedy that had occurred – the sudden death of my host's niece.

"Now, look here," exclaimed Mr. De Gex, standing upon the hearthrug, his sallow face pale and drawn. "Your presence here is most opportune. You must render me assistance in this unfortunate affair, Mr. Garfield. I feel that I can trust you, and I – well, I hope you can trust me in return. Will you consent to help me?"

"In what way?" I asked.

"I'm in a hole – a desperate hole," he said very anxiously. "Poor Gabrielle has died, but if it gets out that her death is sudden, then there must be a coroner's inquiry with all its publicity – photographs in the picture-papers, and, perhaps, all sorts of mud cast at me. I want to avoid all this – and you alone can help me!"

"How?" I inquired, much perturbed by the tragic occurrence.

"By giving a death certificate."

"But I'm not a doctor!"

"You can pass as one," he said, looking very straight at me. "Besides, it is so easy for you to write out a certificate and sign it, with a change of your Christian name. There is a Gordon Garfield in the 'Medical List.' Won't you do it for me, and help me out of a very great difficulty? Do! I implore you," he urged.

"But – I – I – "

"Please do not hesitate. You have only to give the certificate. Here is pen and paper. And here is a blank form. My niece died of heart disease, for which you have attended her several times during the past six months."

"I certainly have not!"

"No," he replied, grinning. "I am aware of that. But surely five thousand pounds is easily earned by writing out a certificate. I'll write it – you only just copy it," and he bent and scribbled some words upon a slip of paper.

Five thousand pounds! It was a tempting offer in face of the fact that I had just lost practically a similar sum.

"But how do I know that Miss – "

"Miss Engledue," he said.

"Well, how do I know that Miss Engledue has not – well, has not met with foul play?" I asked.

"You don't, my dear sir. That I admit. Yet you surely do not suspect me of murdering my niece – the girl I have brought up as my own daughter," and he laughed grimly. "Five thousand pounds is a decent sum," he added. "And in this case you can very easily earn it."

"By posing as a medical man," I remarked. "A very serious offence!"

Again my host smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said, after a pause. "Here is the certificate for you to copy. Reject my offer if you like; but I think you must agree that it is a most generous one. To me, money is but little object. My only concern is the annoying publicity which a coroner's inquiry must bring."

I confess that I was wavering. The shrewd, clever man at once realized the position, and again he conducted me to the chamber where the young girl was lying cold and still.

I shall ever recollect that beautiful face, white and cold like chiselled marble it seemed, for *rigor mortis* was apparently already setting in.

Back again in the library Oswald De Gex took from his safe a bundle of hundred-pound Bank of England notes, and counted them out – fifty of them.

He held them in his hand with a sheet of blank notepaper bearing an address in Queen Anne Street, Cavendish Square, and a blank form. Thus he tempted me – and – and at last I fell!

When I had written and signed the certificate, he handed me the bundle of notes.

I now remember that, at that moment, he took some pastilles from his pocket and placed one in his mouth. I thought perhaps they were throat lozenges. Of a sudden, however, the atmosphere seemed to be overpoweringly oppressive with the odour of heliotrope. It seemed a house of subtle perfumes!

The effect upon me was that of delirious intoxication. I could hear nothing and I could think of nothing.

My senses were entirely confused, and I became utterly dazed.

What did it all mean?

I only know that I placed the wad of bank notes in the inner pocket of my waistcoat, and that I was talking to the millionaire when, of a sudden, my brain felt as though it had suddenly become frozen.

The scent of verbena became nauseating – even intoxicating. But upon Oswald De Gex, who was still munching his pastille, the odour apparently had no effect.

All I recollect further is that I sank suddenly into a big arm-chair, while my host's face grinned demoniacally in complete satisfaction. I slowly lapsed into blank unconsciousness.

Little did I at the time dream with what amazing cleverness the trap into which I had fallen had been baited.

But what happened to me further I will endeavour to describe to you.

CHAPTER THE SECOND
THE SISTER'S STORY

A strange sensation crept over me, for I suddenly felt that my brain, dazed by that subtle odour of *pot-pourri*, was slowly unclouding – ever so slowly – until, to my amazement, I found myself seated upon a garden chair on a long veranda which overlooked a sloping garden, with the blue-green sunlit sea beyond.

Of the lapse of time I have no idea to this day; nor have I any knowledge of what happened to me.

All I am able to relate is the fact that I found myself in overcoat and hat seated upon a long terrace in the noon sunlight of winter.

I gazed around, utterly astonished. The clothes I wore seemed coarse and unfamiliar. My hand went to my chin, when I found that I had grown a beard! My surroundings were strange and mysterious. The houses on either side were white and inartistic, with sloping roofs and square windows. They were foreign – evidently French!

The shrill siren of a factory sounded somewhere, releasing the workers. Far away before me a steamer away on the horizon left a long trail of smoke behind, while here and there showed the brown sails of fishing boats.

I rose from my seat, filled with curiosity, and glanced at the house before which I stood. It was a big square building of red brick with many square windows. It seemed like a hospital or institution.

That it was the former was quickly revealed, for a few moments after I had risen, a nursing-sister in a tri-winged linen head-dress appeared and spoke kindly to me, asking in French how I felt on that glorious morning.

"I am quite all right," was my reply in French. "But where am I?" I inquired, utterly dazed.

"Never mind, m'sieur, where you are," replied the stout, middle-aged woman in blue uniform and broad collar. "You have only to get better."

"But I am better," I protested. "I lost consciousness in London – and now I awake here to find myself – where?"

"You are in good hands, so why trouble?" asked the Sister very kindly. "You are upset, I know. Do not worry. Take things quite easily. Do not try to recall the past."

"The past!" I cried. "What has passed – eh? What has happened since I went through Stretton Street the other night?"

The Sister smiled at me. She seemed inclined to humour me – as she would a child.

"Do not perturb yourself, I beg of you," she said in a sympathetic voice. "There is really no need for it. Only just remain calm – and all will be right."

"But you do not explain, Sister," I said. "Why am I here? And where am I?" I asked, gazing vacantly around me.

"You are with friends – friends who have looked after you," was her reply. "We are all very sorry for your motor accident."

"Motor accident!" I echoed. "I have had no motor accident."

Again the dark-eyed woman smiled in disbelief, and it annoyed me. Indeed, it goaded me to anger.

"But you told us all about it. How you started out from the Quay at Boulogne late at night to drive to Abbeville, and how your hired chauffeur held you up, and left you at the roadside," she said. "Yet the curious fact about your strange story is the money."

"Money! What money?" I gasped, utterly astounded by the Sister's remark.

"The money they found upon you, a packet of bank notes. The police have the five thousand pounds in English money, I believe."

"The police! Why?" I asked.

"No," she said, smiling, and still humouring me as though I were a child. "Don't bother about it now. You are a little better to-day. To-morrow we will talk of it all."

"But where am I?" I demanded, still bewildered.

"You are in St. Malo," was her slow reply.

"St. Malo!" I echoed. "How did I get here? I have no remembrance of it."

"Of course you have not," replied the kindly woman in the cool-looking head-dress. "You are only just recovering."

"From what?"

"From loss of memory, and – well, the doctors say you have suffered from a complete nervous breakdown."

I was aghast, scarce believing myself to be in my senses, and at the same time wondering if it were not all a dream. But no! Gradually all the events of that night in Stretton Street arose before me. I saw them again in every detail – Oswald De Gex, his servant, Horton, and the dead girl, pale but very beautiful, as she lay with closed eyes upon her death-bed.

I recollected, too, the certificate I had given for payment – those notes which the police held in safe custody.

The whole adventure seemed a hideous nightmare. And yet it was all so real.

But how did I come to be in St. Malo? How did I travel from London?

"Sister," I said presently. "What is the date of to-day?"

"The eleventh of December," she replied.

The affair at Stretton Street had occurred on the night of November 7th, over a month before!

"And how long have I been here?"

"Nearly three weeks," was her answer.

Was it really possible that I had been lost for the previous ten days or so?

I tried to obtain some further facts from my nurse, but she refused to satisfy my curiosity.

"I have been ordered by the doctors to keep you very quiet," she said. "Please do not ask me to break my promise. You will be much better to-morrow – and they will tell you everything."

"But mine is a strange case, is it not?" I asked.

"Very strange," she admitted. "We have all been much puzzled concerning you."

"Then why not tell me all the circumstances now? Why keep me in suspense?" I urged.

"Because you have not yet quite recovered. You are not entirely yourself. Come," she added kindly, "let us take a little walk. It will do you good for the weather is so lovely to-day."

At her suggestion I strolled by her side through the pleasant grounds of the hospital, down into St. Malo, the busy streets of which were, however, entirely unfamiliar to me. Yet, according to the Sister, I had walked in them a number of times before. Still, I had no recollection of doing so.

"I am taking you for your favourite stroll," she said, as we went down one of the steep, tortuous streets to the little Place Châteaubriand in front of the ancient castle, which, she told me, was now a barracks.

Presently she mounted to the ramparts, and as we strolled round them, I admired the beautiful view of the sea, the many islets, and the curious appearance of the town. The tide was up, and the view on that sunny December morning was glorious.

At one point where we halted my nurse pointed out the little summer town of Dinard and St. Enogat, and told me the names of the various islets rising from the sea, Les Herbiers, the Grand Jardin, La Conchée, and all the rest.

But I walked those ramparts like a man in a dream. A new life had, in that past hour, opened up to me. What had occurred since I had accepted that bundle of bank notes from the millionaire's

hand I did not know. I had emerged from the darkness of unconsciousness into the knowledge of things about me, and found myself amid surroundings which I had never before known – in a French hospital where they evidently viewed me as an interesting "case."

I stood against the wall and gazed about. My habit was to carry my cigarette-case in my upper waistcoat pocket. Instinctively I felt for it, and it was there. It was not my own silver case, but a big nickel one, yet in it there were some of my own brand.

I looked inquiringly at my nurse.

She smiled, saying:

"You haven't many left. Why can't you smoke some other brand? You always insist upon that one. I had so much difficulty in getting them for you yesterday!"

"They are my own particular fancy," I said, tapping one of them upon the case before lighting it.

"I know. But here, in France, they are most difficult to get. The other day you said you had smoked them all through the war, and even when you were in Italy you had had them sent out to you from London."

That was quite correct.

"Well, Sister," I laughed. "I have no recollection of saying that, but it is perfectly true. It seems that only this morning I regained consciousness."

"Professor Thillot said you would. Others gave you up, but he declared that after careful nursing your memory would regain its normal balance."

"Who is Professor Thillot?"

"The great nerve specialist of Paris. The police engaged him to come to see you. He was here ten days ago, and he put you under my charge."

I laughed.

"Then I am still an interesting case, Sister – eh?"

"Yes. You certainly are."

"But do tell me more of what I am in ignorance," I implored. "I want to know how I came here – in France – when I lost all consciousness in a house just off Park Lane, in London."

"To-morrow," she said, firmly, but kindly. She was a charming woman, whose name she gave me as Sœur Marie.

We strolled back to the hospital, but on the way along the Quai Duguay-Trouin – I noticed it written up – I became again confused. My vision was not as it should have been, and my memory seemed blurred, even of the happenings of the past hour.

My nurse chatted as we walked together through the streets, but I know that my answers were unintelligible. I felt I was not myself. All my senses were keen as far as I could gauge – all save that of my memory of the past.

As I ascended through the pretty grounds of the hospital, the Sister beside me, I felt a curious failing of my heart. I experienced a sensation which I cannot here describe, as of one who had lost all interest in life, and who longed for death.

There may be some among my readers who have experienced it, perhaps. I cannot describe it; I merely explain that I felt inert, inefficient, and bored with life.

No such feeling had ever fallen upon me before. Hitherto I had been quick, alert, and full of the enjoyment of living. At Rivermead Mansions Harry Hambledon and I had prided ourselves on our post-war alertness.

Where was Harry? What was he doing? Would he be wondering why I was absent from our riparian bachelor home?

I was reflecting upon all this when suddenly, without any apparent cause, I once more lost consciousness. We were at that moment entering the door of the hospital and the Sister had just exclaimed:

"Now, do remain quite quiet and not worry over the past. It will all be right to-morrow," she urged.

I know not what words I uttered in reply. A curious sense of oppression had fallen upon me, a hot, burning feeling as though my skull was filled with molten metal, while at the back of my neck was a sharp excruciating pain which caused me to hold my breath.

The Sister apparently noticed my sudden relapse, for she expressed a hope that I was not feeling worse. I tried to reassure her that I was all right, but I know I failed to do so, for once again I lost all knowledge of things about me.

After that I recollect nothing more. Probably I walked on mechanically back to my bed.

When my lapse had passed, and I again regained consciousness, I found myself in bed gazing up at the ceiling. On either side of me were men, also in bed. They were talking in French.

I listened, and in a few seconds I recollected the events of the previous day. Then a sharp-featured nurse, whom I had not seen before, told us it was time to dress. I obeyed, but my clothes were entirely unfamiliar. They were coarse and did not fit me.

While I washed I burst out laughing. The humour of the situation struck me as distinctly amusing. At one hour I was myself; at the next I was another being!

Was my case that of Jekyll and Hyde?

I knew, and I felt keenly about it, that I had accepted a bribe to perform an illicit service. I had posed as a medical man and given a certificate of death. But my one and only object in life was to see Mr. De Gex and demand of him a full explanation of the amazing and suspicious circumstances.

My lapses were intermittent. At times I was fully conscious of the past. At others my brain was awhirl and aflame. I could think of nothing, see nothing – only distorted visions of things about me.

Apparently twenty-four hours had passed since I walked in the sunshine.

The men in the hospital ward were all Frenchmen, apparently of the lower class. At one end of the room a heated argument was in progress in which four or five men were gesticulating and wrangling, while one man was seated on his bed laughing idiotically, it seemed, at his own thoughts.

Presently a tall thin man in spectacles entered, and addressing me, asked me to follow him.

I obeyed, and he conducted me to a small kind of office in which two men were standing. Both were middle-aged, and of official aspect.

Having given me a chair they all seated themselves when the thin man – who I rightly judged to be the director of the hospital – commenced to interrogate me.

"How do you feel to-day?" was his first question, which he put in French in a quiet, kindly manner.

"I feel much better," was my reply. "But yesterday my nurse revealed to me some very extraordinary facts concerning myself."

"Yes. You have been seriously ill," he said. "But now you are better these gentlemen wish to put a few questions to you."

"They are police officers, I presume."

The director nodded in the affirmative.

"We wish to ascertain exactly what happened to you, monsieur," exclaimed the elder of the pair.

"I really don't know," I replied. "I must have lost all consciousness in London, and – "

"In London!" exclaimed Monsieur Leullier, the Prefect of Police, in great surprise. "Then how came you here in St. Malo?"

"I have not the slightest idea," was my reply. "I only presume that I was found here."

"You were. A fish-porter passing along the Quay St. Vincent at about two o'clock in the morning found you seated on the ground with your back to the wall, moaning as though in pain. He called the police and you were removed on the ambulance to the hospital here. The doctors found that you were in no pain, but that you could give no intelligible account of yourself."

"What did I tell them?"

"Oh! a number of silly stories. At one moment you said you had come from Italy. Then you said that you had hired a motor-car and the driver had attacked you in the night. Afterwards you believed yourself to be in some office, and talked about electrical engineering."

"That is my profession," I said. And I told them my name and my address in London, facts which the police carefully set down.

"You told us that your name was Henry Aitken, and that you lived mostly in Italy – at some place near Rome. We have made inquiries by telegraph of a number of people whom you have mentioned, but all their replies have been in the negative," said the police official.

"Well, I am now entirely in possession of my full senses," I declared. "But how I got to France I have not the slightest knowledge. I lost consciousness in a house in Stretton Street, in London. Since then I have known nothing – until yesterday."

"In what circumstances did you lapse into unconsciousness?" asked the doctor, looking intently at me through his glasses, for mine was no doubt an extremely interesting case. "What do you remember? Did you receive any sudden shock?"

I explained that being on a visit to a friend – as I designated Oswald De Gex – his niece died very suddenly. And after that I became unconscious.

The Prefect of Police naturally became very inquisitive, but I preferred not to satisfy his curiosity. My intention was to return to London and demand from De Gex a full explanation of what had actually occurred on that fatal night. I was full of suspicion regarding the sudden death of his niece, Gabrielle Engledue.

The police official told me that from my clothes all the tabs bearing the tailor's name had been removed, and also the laundry marks from my underclothes. There was nothing upon me that could possibly establish my identity, though in my pocket was found five thousand pounds in bank notes – which he handed to me. They were intact – the same notes which De Gex has given me in return for the false death certificate I had signed.

I sat utterly aghast at the story of my discovery, of the many attempts made to establish my identity, of the visit of the British Vice-Consul to the hospital, and of his kindness towards me. It seemed that he had questioned me closely, but I had told an utterly fantastic story.

Indeed, as I sat there, I felt that neither of my three interrogators believed a single word of the truth I related. Yet, after all, I was not revealing the whole truth.

Certain recollections which I would have forgotten came to me. I had, I knew, committed a very serious criminal offence in posing as a medical man and giving that death certificate. Possibly I had been an accessory to some great crime – the crime of murder!

That thought held me anxious and filled me with fear.

The Prefect of Police seemed entirely dissatisfied with my explanation, nevertheless he was compelled to accept it, and an hour later I was released from the hospital. Before leaving, however, I was shown the register in which I had signed my name as "Henry Aitken." This I erased and substituted my own name.

Then I thanked the tall, thin director and walked out into the streets of St. Malo a changed man.

CHAPTER THE THIRD
WHO WAS GABRIELLE ENGLEDUE?

What, I wondered, had happened during my month of unconsciousness? I wandered into a café and sat pondering. Afterwards I walked about the town aimlessly and rather hungry. My own clothes had been returned to me, but before I assumed them I saw that every mark of identity had been purposely removed. Even the trousers buttons – which had borne the name of my tailor, a reputable firm in New Bond Street – had been substituted.

But by whom?

On the following afternoon I arrived in London and drove straight to Rivermead Mansions. I entered with my latchkey, and on glancing around saw signs that my friend Hambledon was still living there. The fire in the sitting-room had been lit by the "Kaiserin" ready for his home-coming, and everything seemed bright and cosy.

It was then about four o'clock, and Hambledon would certainly not return till six. Therefore after a good wash, a shave, and a clean collar, I set forth for Stretton Street to interview Oswald De Gex.

The house in the dusk was just as I recollected it on that eventful night when I was so unexpectedly called inside.

I rang the bell three times, until at last the door opened and a tall, stalwart man appeared.

I inquired for Mr. De Gex, whereupon he replied:

"Mr. De Gex is in Italy, sir."

"Oh! When did he leave town?"

"About a month ago, sir," the man answered.

"You are, I suppose, the caretaker?" I asked. "Now, I wonder if you will do me a very great favour. You may think me a thief or a burglar," I laughed, "but the fact is I have a great desire to see Mr. De Gex's house. I've heard so much about its beauties. I wonder if you would show me the drawing-room and the library?"

The man hesitated, saying:

"Well, sir, I've no orders to show anyone over. Have you a card?"

I at once produced one from my cigarette-case, and added that I was a personal friend of the millionaire's. He read my name and looked again at me. I assured him that I was not prospecting with a view to burglary.

"I'm only asking you to do me a favour," I went on, and I put a couple of Treasury notes into his hand. "You can inquire about me at my office to-morrow, if you like. They will tell you, I expect, that I have been away on a month's leave."

The little palm-oil no doubt propitiated him, for he invited me in. Then he switched on the light in the hall, and as he did so, said:

"I don't know what trouble I'd get into with the master. He's a very eccentric man – as you, of course, know."

I laughed as we ascended the soft carpeted stairs. I recollected the pattern.

A few moments later we were in the library. Yes. It was just as I remembered it. Nothing had been altered. There was the writing-table whereon I had copied out the death certificate; the big fireplace, now empty, and the deep chair in which I had sat.

There was the window, too – the window which I had opened in order to gasp for air after that suffocating odour of *pot-pourri*.

As I stood there – the watchful caretaker with his eye upon me, wondering no doubt – I again took in every detail. My return held me more than ever puzzled.

"What is the room beyond?" I asked.

"Oh! That's the mistress's bedroom," he replied. "A curious fancy to have her room next to the library. But it's one of the best rooms in the house. The master hates London. He lives all the time in Italy, and is only over here just for a week or two in spring, and a week or so before Christmas."

"I'd like to see that room," I said, affecting ignorance.

He took me in.

In a second I saw that nothing had been changed since I had stood there at the death-bed of Gabrielle Engledue a little over a month ago.

There was the handsome bed-chamber with its inlaid cupboards, its great dressing-table, and its fine bed – the bed upon which the beautiful young woman had been lying dead. But now the bed had been re-made and its quilted coverlet of pale pink silk was undisturbed.

The corpse had been removed and buried upon my certificate!

I sniffed to see whether I could detect that curious odour of *pot-pourri*, but in vain. The air seemed fresh and not stifling as it had been on that well-remembered night.

Upon a side table stood a large photograph in a silver frame. I bent to look at it, whereupon the caretaker said:

"That's a good photograph of Mr. De Gex, isn't it, sir?"

"Excellent," I said, for it was a really fine portrait. "Does your mistress come over from Italy often?"

"Oh, yes, and she brings the little boy over with her. She is frequently here, while her husband stays at Fiesole. I send on his correspondence every day to Mr. Henderson, his secretary."

I stood gazing around the room. Upon that bed the beautiful girl lay dead, and I had certified the cause of her death! Yet I had, later on, been the victim of some devil's trick of which I knew nothing.

I was there to investigate. Yet though I questioned the caretaker very closely, I confess that I met with little success. He was an old and trusted servant of the family. Hence to many of my inquiries he remained dumb.

"When do you expect your master back?" I asked at last.

"Oh, not for another six months or so."

"Where is Mrs. De Gex?"

"Ah! That I can't quite make out," he replied. "It's a bit of a mystery. One night she went away quite unexpectedly and, as a matter of fact, nobody knows where she is. Her husband doesn't know – or pretends he doesn't," he said with a knowing grin.

"Then she has disappeared!" I exclaimed.

"That's just it. And they were always such a devoted pair. Little Oswald was the only thing she lived for."

"Lived!" I echoed. "Then do you think she's dead?" I asked quickly.

"Dead! Why should we think so? If she were, we should surely have seen it in the papers?"

"But your master has very funny fits sometimes," I said. "I've heard about his eccentric ways."

"Of course he has. He's overburdened with money – that's what it is. Mr. Henderson looks after all his affairs. Mr. De Gex has no regard for money. Mr. Henderson attends to everything. Phew! I wish I were a millionaire! I find it hard enough nowadays to pay the butcher and baker and make both ends meet."

"And so do I," I said, laughing. "But, tell me, where is the young lady who used to live here – Mr. De Gex's niece?"

"His niece! I don't think he has a niece."

"Miss Gabrielle Engledue."

"Who's she? I've never heard of her," was the man's reply.

I described her, but he shook his head.

"To my knowledge Mr. De Gex hasn't got a niece," he said.

"Were you here five weeks ago?" I inquired.

"Five weeks ago? No. I and my wife went away down to Swanage to see her sister. The master gave us a fortnight's holiday. Why?"

"Oh – nothing," I replied. "I merely inquired as I want to clear up a mystery – that's all."

"What mystery?"

"The mystery of Miss Engledue – your master's niece," I answered.

"But I've never heard of any niece," he said.

"A young lady of about twenty-one with dark hair and eyes, and a beautiful complexion," I said.

But the old servant's mind was a blank.

"Of course, sir, many people come to visit Mr. De Gex. Horton would know them, but I don't. When the master is in town the servants are here, and I'm down in Cornwall at the castle."

"Then you are only here as caretaker when the family is away?"

"That's it, sir," he said. "But what is the mystery about this young lady? You said you knew Mr. De Gex, and yet you wanted to look over the house."

"Yes," I responded with a laugh. "I have my own object – to clear up the mystery of Mr. De Gex's niece."

"Well, as far as I know, he has no niece! But you could easily find out, I suppose!"

The man was evidently no fool.

"Of course I don't know who comes here, or who stays here when the family is in town," he went on. "I simply come up and look after the place with my wife."

"Then you were away in Swanage during the first week of November?" I asked very seriously.

"Yes, we went down on the last day of October, and we were back here in the middle of November. My wife's sister was very ill, and her husband didn't expect her to live. So I remember the dates only too well."

"Then the family were in town on the date I mention."

He considered a moment.

"Oh! Of course they were. They must have been."

I glanced again around the room, full of amazement and wonder.

The man's failure to give me any details regarding the extremely attractive girl who had died upon his mistress's bed held me gripped in uncertainty. The mystery was even more puzzling now that I had started to investigate.

As I stood in that room a thousand strange reflections flashed across my mind.

Why had I, a mere passer-by, been called in so suddenly to be taken into the intimacy of the millionaire's household? Was it by mere accident that I had been invited in, or was it by careful design? I had lost five thousand pounds by foolish speculation, and yet I had regained it by being party to a criminal offence.

Again, who was the pretty, dark-haired girl who had first uttered those hysterical screams, and then, while fully dressed, had died upon Mrs. De Gex's bed? Further, if the mysterious dead girl had been niece of the millionaire surely my friend the caretaker would have known her?

I confess that I now became more bewildered than ever.

That a girl named Gabrielle Engledue – whoever she might have been – had died, and that I had forged a certificate showing the cause of death were hard, solid facts. But the mystery of it all was complete.

That I had been the victim of some very carefully prepared and subtle plot was apparent, and it had become my own affair to investigate it and bring to justice those who were responsible for the poor girl's death.

Time after time I questioned the caretaker regarding the existence of the millionaire's niece, Miss Engledue, but it was plain to me that he had no knowledge of any such person.

"Was there not a death in this house – about five weeks ago?" I asked.

"Death?" he echoed. "Why, no, sir. You must be dreaming. If there had been a death while I was away, either my wife or I would certainly have heard about it." And he looked suspiciously at me as though he believed I had taken leave of my senses.

An hour later I was back at Rivermead Mansions, where Harry, for whom I had left a note, was awaiting me.

As we sat together before a cheerful fire I told him of my lapse into unconsciousness, of my loss of memory, but I did not explain all that had happened, for, as a matter of fact, I had no desire that anyone should know of my guilt in posing as a medical man and thus becoming implicated in the mysterious death of Gabrielle Engledue.

My friend sat and heard me, smoking his pipe in silence.

"Extraordinary!" he said. "You ought to go to the police, Garfield. You were doped – without a doubt. But what was the motive? I've been very worried about you. When you had been missing a week they sent over from your office, and I then went to the police at Hammersmith. They made every inquiry and circulated your description. But they could discover no trace of you. I'll have to report that you've been found."

"Yes, do so to-morrow morning," I urged. "I don't want the police following me about – thank you," and I laughed, rather grimly perhaps.

During the hours that I lay awake that night a thought suddenly crossed my mind – an idea which next day I promptly put into execution.

I went to Somerset House, and there searched the register of deaths. At first my efforts were in vain, but at last I discovered what I sought, namely an entry that a young woman named Gabrielle Engledue, single, aged twenty-one, of unknown parentage, had died of heart trouble at No. 9 Stretton Street, Park Lane, on the night of November the Seventh, the body having been cremated five days later!

I pursued my inquiries in various quarters that day, and further discovered that the funeral expenses had been defrayed by some person named Moroni. There had been only two mourners, of whom Moroni had been one.

Still feeling very ill, I was compelled – after reporting to the office – to remain at home for the three days which followed.

To the two heads of the firm I fear the story that I told must have appeared somewhat lame, yet they exhibited no disbelief, but on the contrary sympathized with me in my strange and unaccountable affliction.

In a drawer in my bedroom lay the five thousand pounds in bank notes just as Oswald De Gex had given to me. I, of course, said nothing of them to Harry. But once or twice I drew them from the old envelope in which I had placed them, and turned them over in wonder.

I decided that they would be safer in the bank, but I hesitated to place them to my credit, so I at last put them away in the bottom of an old writing-case which had belonged to my father, resolving to try to forget their existence.

Though perhaps I did at last manage to forget the bribe, yet I could not put from myself the memory of that beautiful girl, the cause of whose death I had certified. The perfect countenance haunted me constantly. In my dreams I often saw her alive and well. The marvellous face was turned towards me, with merry, dancing dark eyes and a tantalizing smile – an enticing smile of mystery.

At last I resolved to go and face Oswald De Gex, so with that object I one morning left Charing Cross for Florence. Travelling by the Rome express from the Gare de Lyon, in Paris, I changed at Pisa, and at last, as the "snail train," as it is known in Italy on account of its slowness, wound slowly up the beautiful valley of the Arno, the old red roofs and domes of Firenze La Bella came into view.

The winter morning was sunny and brilliant with a clear blue sky, and as I drove through the streets, past the marble-built Duomo with its wonderful campanile, the city was agog, for it happened to be the *Festa* of the Befana.

I had left my bag at the station, and the taxi took me to Fiesole, the high-up little town outside which lived the “rich Inglese” – Oswald De Gex.

Long before we arrived the driver pointed out the huge, mediæval country house situated among the olives and vines, and commanding extensive views over Florence and the Arno, with the blue mountains beyond. It was a great white house with red tiles and overhanging eaves, palatial indeed in its dimensions, and for centuries the summer residence of the head of the great family of Clementini, from whom the English millionaire had bought it fifteen years before, together with all its pictures, tapestries, and antiques, with the farms adjoining.

On entering the great gates of seventeenth century wrought iron, we found ourselves in a glorious old-world Italian garden, with a wonderful marble fountain, and a good deal of antique statuary, and then driving through the extensive grounds – past a lake – I at last rang the bell.

Quickly the great iron-studded door was opened by an elderly Englishman in livery, to whom I gave my card, and asked to see his master.

The man, without hesitation, ushered me through a huge marble-built hall, with a wonderfully frescoed ceiling, into a large room hung with priceless tapestry, and furnished with old gilt chairs covered with faded green silk damask.

I, however, took very little note of my surroundings, so anxious was I to again meet my host of Stretton Street face to face.

Not long did I have to wait before the door opened, and he stood before me.

“Well, Mr. Garfield?” he asked quietly, as he advanced. “To what do I owe the honour of this visit?”

“Ah!” I cried. “Then you recollect me, I see! You know my name?”

“Yes. It was upon your card,” was his quiet reply. “But, forgive me, I do not recollect ever having met you before!”

I held my breath. I tried to speak, but for the moment words failed me, so angry was I at his cleverly pretended ignorance and flat denial.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH
FACING THE MUSIC

"Do you seriously mean to say that you have no knowledge of me?" I demanded angrily, looking the millionaire straight in the face.

"Yes, sir," he replied. "I seriously mean what I say. But, tell me," he demanded resentfully, "why are you here to claim acquaintance with me?"

"Do you really deny you have ever seen me before?" I asked, astounded at his barefaced pretence of ignorance.

"Never to my knowledge," replied the sallow-faced man whose countenance I so well recollected.

"Then you forget a certain night not so long ago when I was called into your house in Stretton Street, and you chatted confidentially with me – about your wife and your little son?"

"My dear sir!" he cried. "Whatever do you mean? I have never seen you at Stretton Street; and I have certainly never discussed my wife with you!"

I stood aghast at his continued denial.

"But you *did*," I asserted. "And there was another matter – a matter about which I must question you – the – "

"Ah! I see!" he interrupted. "You're here to blackmail me – eh? Well – let me hear the worst," and across his rather Oriental face there spread a mocking, half amused smile.

"I am not a blackmailer!" I protested angrily. "I want no money – only to know the truth."

"Of what?"

"Well, the truth concerning the death of Miss Gabrielle Engledue."

"The death of Miss Gabrielle Engledue!" he cried. "I really don't understand you, Mr. – Mr. Garfield!"

At mention of the name I saw that he started, but almost imperceptibly. The man was certainly a most perfect actor, and his protestations of ignorance were, indeed, well-feigned.

"Then you actually deny all knowledge of the young lady!" I said.

"I know no lady of that name."

"But she is your niece."

"I have only one niece – Lady Shalford."

"And how old is she?"

He hesitated for a few moments. Then he answered.

"Oh! She must be about thirty-five. She married Shalford about ten years ago, and she lives at Wickenham Grange, near Malton, in Yorkshire."

"And you have no other niece?"

"None – I assure you. But why do you ask such a question? You puzzle me."

"Not more than you puzzle me, Mr. De Gex," I replied with pique. "It would be so much easier if you would be frank and open with me."

"My dear sir, you seem to me to have a bee in your bonnet about something or other. Tell me, now, what is it?"

"Simply that you know me very well, but you deny it. You never thought that I should make this unwelcome reappearance."

"Your appearance here as a mad-brained person is certainly unwelcome," he retorted. "You first tell me that you visited me at Stretton Street. Well, you may have been in the servants' quarters for all I know, and – "

"Please do not be insulting!" I cried angrily.

"I have no intention of offering you an insult, sir, but your attitude is so very extraordinary! You speak of a girl named Engledue – that was the name, I think – and allege that she is my niece. Why?"

"Because the young lady is dead – she died under most suspicious circumstances. And you know all about it!" I said bluntly.

"Oh! perhaps you will allege that I am a murderer next!" he laughed, as though enjoying the joke.

"It is no laughing matter!" I cried in fury.

"Why not? I find all your allegations most amusing," and across his dark handsome face there spread a good-humoured smile.

His was a face that I could never forget. At one moment its expression was kindly and full of *bonhomie*, the next it was hard and unrelenting – the face of an eccentric criminal.

"To me they are the reverse of amusing," I said. "I allege that on the night of Wednesday, November the seventh last, I was passing your house in Stretton Street, Park Lane, when your man, Horton, invited me inside, and – well, well – I need not describe what occurred there, for you recollect only too vividly – without a doubt. But what I demand to know is why you asked me in, and what happened to me after you gave me that money?"

"Money! I gave you money?" he cried. "Why, man alive, you're dreaming! *You must be!*"

"I'm not dreaming at all! It is a hard fact. Indeed, I still have the money – five thousand pounds in bank notes."

Oswald De Gex looked at me strangely. His sallow face coloured slightly, and his lips compressed. I had cornered him. A little further firmness, and he would no doubt admit that we had met at Stretton Street.

"Look here, Mr. Garfield," he said in a changed voice. "This is beyond a joke. You now tell me that I presented you with five thousand pounds."

"I do – and I repeat it."

"But why should I give you this sum?"

"Because I assisted you in the commission of a crime."

"That's a lie!" he declared vehemently. "Forgive me for saying so, but I can only think that you are not quite in your right mind."

"I have not been in my right mind for a month or more – thanks to your deep plotting," I retorted sharply. "Further, I am telling the truth – as I shall later on tell it before a court of law. I intend to solve the mystery of the death of Gabrielle Engledue."

"Well – I will not hinder you," he laughed grimly.

"You mean that you will not assist me?"

"I mean that I have no knowledge of any such person; nor have I any knowledge of you," he said. "A perfect stranger, you come here, present your card, and at once start a series of most serious allegations against me, the chief of them being that I gave you five thousand pounds for some assistance which you refuse to describe."

"If I tell you, you will only deny it, Mr. De Gex," I exclaimed bitterly. "So what is the use?"

"None. In fact I don't see that any object is to be gained in prolonging this interview," was his quick retort. "If, as you say, I gave you five thousand – which I certainly never did – then what more can you want? I however, suspect that the five thousand exists only in your own imagination."

"But I have the sum intact – in a drawer at my home in London."

"It would be of interest to see it. Are they the same notes which you say I gave you?"

"The same," I answered, and then I went on to tell him how I had awakened to find myself in St. Malo, and how the French police had taken possession of the money found upon me.

"Ah!" he exclaimed at last. "It all seems quite clear now. You've had a bad illness, my dear fellow! Your brain has become unbalanced, and you are now subject to hallucinations. I regret my hard words, Mr. Garfield," he added in a kindly tone. "I also regret that your mental state is what it is."

"I desire no sympathy!" I protested, raising my voice angrily. "All I want to know is the truth."

"I have already told you that, as far as I am personally concerned."

"No. You have denied everything, and now you try to treat me as one demented!" I declared in a fury. "The existence of the bank notes you gave me are sufficient evidence against you."

"I think not. First, I doubt if they exist anywhere save in your imagination; secondly, if they do, then someone else may have given them to you."

"You did. I would recognize you among ten thousand men. On the night in question you wore a dinner jacket, and now you are in grey. That is all the difference."

"Well, have it your own way," he replied smiling, though I could see that he had become palpably perturbed by my allegations. Whatever had been administered to me – some dope or other, no doubt – it had been intended that I should be cast adrift on the Continent as a semi-imbecile.

It was that fact which maddened me. The poor girl might not have been his niece, of course, but whoever she had been, this man had had some very strange and distinct motive in getting rid of her.

What it was I had vowed to discover.

It was apparent that De Gex was anxious to get rid of me. Indeed, as we stood together in that fine old room, across the marble floor of which strayed long beams of sunlight, the door opened and a pretty woman came in. She was dressed to go out, and asked:

"Will you be long, dear?"

It was the beautiful Mrs. De Gex! In an instant I recognized her by the many photographs I had seen in the picture papers.

"No. I'll be with you in a minute, dear. Is the car there?" he asked.

"It's been there a quarter of an hour, and if we don't go now we shall be late in meeting Hylda at the station," she said, glancing at me with undisguised annoyance.

Then she left, closing the door after her.

Across my brain ran strange thoughts. I recollected his words in Stretton Street regarding his spiteful wife when I had been called in to listen to his matrimonial troubles. But husband and wife now appeared to be on quite amicable and even affectionate terms.

I confess that I was still bewildered, as you, my reader, in whom I am here reposing confidence, would, I believe, have been, had you found yourself in similar circumstances.

"I see that your wife is eager to go out," I said. "But I fear I must, before I go, press for a direct answer to my questions, Mr. De Gex."

"My dear sir, I have answered them. What more can I say?" he exclaimed with affected dismay.

"A very great deal. You can tell me the truth."

"I have," he snapped. "Who this girl Engledue is I have not a ghost of an idea. Are you certain she is dead?"

"Positive. I saw her lying dead in the room which adjoins your library."

"What! My wife's room!" he cried. "Oh, come – let us finish all this silly talk."

"When you are, at least, frank with me!"

"I am."

"But do you deny that the young lady, Gabrielle Engledue, died there? Do you not recollect that we both stood at her death-bed?"

"Don't talk such piffle!" De Gex snapped, no doubt believing in the end that he would convince me of his ignorance of the whole tragedy.

Whatever had happened on that November night was, no doubt, to the distinct advantage of the wealthy man who stood before me. Yet I was faced with a difficulty. He had uttered that most ugly word "blackmail." Suppose he called the police and accused me of it! His word – the word of a wealthy financier – would, no doubt, be taken by a jury before my own!

On the other hand, I had up my sleeve a trump-card – the death and cremation of the mysterious Gabrielle Engledue. Probably the poor victim was poisoned – hence the object of her cremation to

remove all traces of it! Yet, opposed to that, there still remained my own most serious offence of posing as a medical man and giving a forged certificate concerning the cause of death.

Yes. I was only too keenly alive to my own very precarious position. Yet I was emboldened by De Gex's agitation, and the pallor in his sallow cheeks.

He was, no doubt, feeling very uneasy. And even a millionaire can feel uneasy when faced with a witness of his own offence.

"Mr. De Gex, I am not talking rubbish," I said in all seriousness. "You appear to forget that night when your wife deserted your son in Westbourne Grove, and then laughed at you over the telephone from a public call-office."

He looked at me very straight with those deep-set eyes of his.

"Really," he exclaimed. "That is quite a new feature in the affair. Let me see, what did I tell you?"

"Your man, Horton, invited me, a mere passer-by, into your house in Stretton Street. He said you were very much worried and asked if I would meet you. Why? I cannot imagine. When we met you were very vague in your statements, and at first I could not for the life of me discover why I had been asked to meet you. But soon you confided to me the fact that your wife, being spiteful towards you, had abandoned your heir, little Oswald, in Westbourne Grove, and had then rung up from a call-office telling you to find him."

"Bosh! My dear fellow! Bosh!" was his reply. "First, you were never there; and secondly, I've never complained of my wife's behaviour to anyone; certainly not to a stranger."

"You did to me. I certainly am not dreaming."

"But you have already admitted that you've been in hospital in St. Malo suffering from loss of memory."

"My memory has now fortunately been restored," I replied.

"Distorted – without a doubt. You would never travel all the way from London to relate these absolutely silly stories to me if you were in your right senses, my dear Mr. Garfield," he said.

"They're not silly stories, but hard, indisputable facts!" I declared resentfully.

The millionaire had assumed an air of nonchalance, for leaning against a big old buhl table he took out a cigarette from his gold case and slowly lit it, after which he said:

"You must, I think, really excuse me. We have to go down into Florence to meet my sister-in-law, who is coming from London. I'm afraid, Mr. Garfield, that I cannot help you any further."

"You mean you won't!"

"Not at all. If I knew anything of this young lady who, you said, died in my wife's bedroom in Stretton Street, and at whose bedside you and I stood together, I would tell you. But I really don't."

He tossed his cigarette hastily out of the open window.

"No," he added. "I won't hear any more. I haven't the time or the inclination to listen to the wanderings of any insane person. I've had enough!"

"And so have I!" I retorted. "You are trying to mislead me by affecting ignorance of my very existence, but I don't intend that you shall escape!" I added, again raising my voice.

"Hush, please," he said in a calmer tone. "My wife may overhear."

"I don't care!" I cried in desperation. "You never dreamed that I should arise against you, as I have. You are not fair towards me! If you revealed to me in confidence the reason you gave me that bribe of five thousand pounds, then I, on my part, would have played the straight game."

"My dear sir, play whatever game you like. It is immaterial to me whether straight or crooked. I don't know anything about what you have been talking, and you have only wasted your breath and got out of temper for nothing."

Again I looked him straight in the face. There was no doubt that the strain of his clever denials was telling upon him. His dark complexion had paled; in his eyes there was a fierce, haunted look as that of a man who was straining every effort to remain calm under the gravest circumstances.

"I have no game to play," I declared. "I only demand the truth. Why was I invited into your house in Stretton Street to be present as witness at the poor girl's death?"

"I don't know. Find out for yourself, my dear Mr. Garfield," laughed the rich man. "I have no time to discuss this silly affair further. I'm sorry you have troubled to come out from London to see me. But really yours has been a fool's errand," and he turned towards the door.

"A fool's errand!" I echoed. "I am no fool and my errand is in deep earnestness. You may try to befool me, but I tell you that I will leave no stone unturned to solve the problem which you alone can explain."

"Well, get along with your work," he laughed in open defiance. "I have no further time to waste," and glancing at his watch he opened the door and abruptly left me.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH
THE CITY OF THE LILY

Full of indignation I remained for a few further moments in that wonderful old room, the room of faded tapestries with the marvellous painted ceiling.

From the window was afforded a glorious view over the gardens where, even in winter, tangled masses of flowers ran riot, while beyond lay the picturesque old red-roofed Tuscan city. Fiesole is distinctly a village of the wealthy, for the several colossal villas, built in the days of the Medici and even before, are now owned by rich foreigners, many of them English.

Oswald De Gex was one of them.

He had certainly foiled me. I gritted my teeth and vowed that, come what might, I would compel him to accept the inevitable and reveal to me the truth. I left the room and found my way alone across the great marble entrance hall, and out to where my taxi awaited me.

I drove back to Florence, where, at the station, I obtained my bag, and then went to the Savoy Hotel in the Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, where I engaged a room.

For a long time I sat at my window gazing down upon the busy square below, one of the centres of Florentine life. The bell of the Duomo was ringing, the shops were mostly closed, and all Florence was out in the streets, it being the Festa of the Befana, one of the greatest of all the ever-recurring festas of Florence. Street urchins were parading the thoroughfares with horns and wildly shouting, and there was an exchange of presents on every hand. At the Befana everyone in Firenze goes mad with good intentions.

The artistic side of the ancient Lily City did not interest me. I knew it of old. I had strolled on the Lung Arno, I had long ago with my father on a winter tour looked into the little shops of the coral and pearl merchants on the Ponte Vecchio, and I had taken my *apératif* at Doney's or at Giacosa's. I was no stranger in Florence. My mind was fully occupied by the deep mystery of Gabrielle Engledue's death, and of the millionaire's flat denial that we had ever met before.

As I sat gazing across the square my anger and indignation increased. That De Gex should have dared to affect such entire ignorance surpassed belief.

I tried to form a scheme for further action, but could think of no way by which to force him to acknowledge our previous meeting. That the beautiful girl had died, and that her body had been cremated upon the false certificate I had given, was beyond all doubt. But what had been the rich man's motive?

How very perturbed and anxious he was I had noticed, though he put such a very brave face upon it and appeared so imperturbable. That he could treat such a serious matter as a joke utterly amazed me. Nevertheless, I recollected that he had long earned the reputation of being highly eccentric.

That afternoon I spent in wandering about the sunny streets of Florence. In the evening I dined at Bonciani's, in the Via Panzani, an unpretentious place at which I well remembered having eaten famously when on my last visit to Florence. Afterwards, having nothing to do, I went to a variety show at the Alhambra.

Florence was full of French and English visitors, as it always is in winter, so next day I formed a plan, and in pretence of desiring to rent a furnished flat, I called at the office of a well-known English house-agent in the Via Tornabuoni. My real object was to ascertain some facts concerning Oswald De Gex.

The English clerk became quite enthusiastic when I mentioned him.

"Mr. De Gex is greatly respected here," he hastened to tell me. "Since he bought the Villa Clementini outside Fiesole he has lived here for about eight months out of the twelve. Italians love

rich people, and because of his wealth he is most popular. I see a good deal of him, for we act as agents for his property in Italy. He has quite a large estate – mostly wine-growing."

I mentioned that I had met him in London, and then asked in curiosity:

"Do you happen to know anything of his niece, a tall, very handsome, dark-haired girl, Miss Engledue?"

For a moment he reflected. Then he said:

"I recollect when up at the villa just before he went to London – that was about three months ago – seeing a tall, dark-haired young lady. She came into the library while I was chatting with him. But I don't know her name."

"Was she about twenty-one?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes – about that age," was his reply. "But, of course, I have no idea whether it is the young lady you mean."

"Had you seen her before?"

"I think so – once before. She was in the car in the Cascine with Mrs. De Gex."

"I wonder how I could discover more about her?" I asked. "Who would know?"

"Robertson, the butler, or Mr. Henderson, the secretary."

"The butler would be best," I said. "How could I approach him, do you think? I don't want to go up to the villa."

"It would be easy. He's often down at the Gambrinus in the afternoon. I frequently meet him there, and we have a drink and a chat."

"Would he be there this afternoon? I do wish you would introduce me," I urged. "The matter is an important personal one concerning myself."

"He might be down this afternoon – about four o'clock," replied the alert young Englishman who spoke Italian so well. "I'll look in there at four, if you will be about."

"I certainly will be there," I said, and then we went along to Giacosa's, where we each had that cocktail-like speciality known as a "piccolo."

At five minutes to four that afternoon I entered the big Gambrinus Café, which was nearly opposite my hotel on the other side of the piazza, and I took a seat just inside the door. The orchestra was playing, and the place was well filled with a gay cosmopolitan crowd, many of them winter idlers.

I looked around, wondering if the butler, Robertson, had arrived, and waited in patience for the coming of my friend.

Punctually at four he appeared, and greeting me, cast his eyes over the many small tables, until suddenly he exclaimed:

"Ah! There he is!"

We walked to a table some distance away, where a stoutish, grey-haired, clean-shaven Englishman was smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper, with a glass of vermouth and seltzer before him.

"Hallo, Arthur!" he exclaimed as he raised his eyes to my friend.

"This is a friend of mine, Mr. Garfield," my companion said, introducing me, and then we sat down and began to chat. At last I could possess myself in patience no longer, and addressing the millionaire's butler, told him frankly that I was in search of information concerning the dark-haired young lady who had been guest up at the villa about three months ago.

"Oh! I suppose you mean Miss Thurston – the young American lady, don't you? But she's fair-haired!"

"The lady I mean is named Engledue," I replied.

"Oh! I don't know anyone of that name," was his reply. "Miss Thurston has stayed with us in London and down in Cornwall, and has been here several times. I fancy she's some relation of the mistress's. She first came to stay about three years ago, when she left school in Paris. Then she went home to America, and after six months came back again to us."

"You haven't any idea who her parents are – or where she lived in America?"

"She lived somewhere near Detroit, I believe. That's all I know about her. I believe her people are motor-car makers and extremely wealthy. At least, somebody said so – and she's very free with tips to the under-servants."

"When did she leave here?"

"When the master went to London. I was to go too, but I had influenza and had to remain here."

"And where was Mrs. De Gex?" I inquired.

"She was already at Stretton Street. She and the little boy went to London early in October, but came back at the end of the month."

Then I questioned the estimable Robertson concerning the domestic happiness of his master. I said I had heard rumours in London of matrimonial differences.

"Well, that's a lie," he replied quickly. "There isn't a pair in the whole of London Society who are more devoted to each other."

This greatly surprised me after the words that had fallen from the millionaire's lips.

Again I referred to the mysterious Gabrielle whom I described as minutely as I was able, and apparently my description fitted that of Rose Thurston, save for the colour of her hair.

"You have no idea where she is, I suppose?"

"Not the slightest. Back in America, perhaps. She seems to come over every year."

"I wonder if you could find out her address?" I asked. "If you could, it would be of very great service to me," and I handed him my card, expressing a hope that he would refrain from mentioning the matter to his master.

"I'll try," he said. "But I fear I shan't succeed. Mr. Henderson, the master's secretary, would know, of course."

The point at issue now was whether the young American girl, who had been the millionaire's guest at the villa, and Gabrielle Engledue were actually one and the same person. If they were, then I had made one step towards the solution of the enigma.

I confess to utter bewilderment. My brain was still confused. Sometimes my skull seemed wrapped in cotton wool. From a mere unimportant person in the world of electrical engineering I had suddenly become a man upon whom rested a great and criminal responsibility!

In that huge, garish café, with its great arc lamps glowing though night had not yet fallen, and with a noisy orchestra playing selections from the latest crazes of music from the revues in London, I sat with a perfectly open mind. I had been the victim of some extremely clever plot. But of its motive, of its ramifications, or of its conception, I had no knowledge. Even my wildest imagination was at fault.

All I knew was that the sallow-faced De Gex – the millionaire who lived up at the huge Villa Clementini – had plotted against the handsome girl, and she had died in his wife's bedroom in Stretton Street.

"Well, Mr. Robertson, how can I find out anything more about Miss Thurston? Give me your advice."

"I'll try and see what I can do," he said. "Perhaps I may be able to get a glance at the mistress's address book. I have seen it. I'll try."

"Yes – do!" I said very anxiously. "It means so very much to me."

"Why?"

I hesitated. My intention was to mislead both of my companions.

"Well," I said with a laugh, "the fact is, I – I'm very fond of her!"

Both men exchanged glances. Then they smiled, almost imperceptibly, I know, but it struck them as humorous that I had fallen in love with the daughter of a wealthy American.

"Of course I'm not yet certain whether she is the same lady," I went on. "She may not be. But on calm consideration I believe she is. The description you give of her is exact."

"Well," exclaimed the butler, "I'll see if I can get at the address book. She keeps it in a drawer in her boudoir, which is usually locked. But sometimes she leaves it open. At any rate, I'll see what I can do and let you know."

I thanked him and told him that I was staying at the Savoy. Then I was compelled to discuss with the estate-agent's clerk the pretended renting of an apartment out by the Porta Romana, which, he said, was vacant.

On the following day, in order to still sustain the deception, I went and viewed the place, and found it really quite comfortable and very reasonable. But, of course, I was compelled to express dislike of it. Whereupon my friend promised to find me another.

Day after day I waited in Florence, hoping against hope that Robertson would be able to furnish me with Miss Thurston's address. But though I saw him several times he reported that the drawer containing the address book was still locked.

Mr. De Gex had gone to Rome, and was away for three days. The British Ambassador was giving some official function and the millionaire had been invited. Indeed, I read all about it in the *Nazione*.

On the fourth day he returned, for I saw him in his big yellow car driving along the Via Calzajoli. An elegant Italian, the young Marchese Cerretani, was seated at his side, and both were laughing together.

Twice I had been up to the Villa Clementini, and wandered around its high white walls which hid the beautiful gardens from the public gaze. Surely there was no fairer spot in all sunny Italy than that chosen by the rich man as his abode. To the hundreds of visitors of all nations, who came up by train to Fiesole from Florence to lunch or dine at the various pleasant little restaurants, the great imposing place was pointed out as the residence of the rich "Inglese" – the man who possessed more money than any of the most wealthy in the kingdom of Italy.

When I thought of that fateful night in Stretton Street, I waxed furious. Was it possible, that, by the possession of great riches, a man could commit crime with impunity? Perhaps what goaded me to desperation more than anything was the foul trick that had been played upon me – the administration of that drug which had caused me to lose all sense of my own being.

That subtle odour of *pot-pourri* had gripped me until I felt faint and inert beneath its perfume, and it often returned to me – but in fancy, of course.

In the winter sunshine I wandered about the busy, old-world streets of Florence, idling in the cafés, gazing into the many shop-windows of the dealers in faked pictures and faked antiques, while often my wandering footsteps led me into one or other of the "sights" of the city, all of which I had visited before – the National Museum at the Bargello, the Laurenziana Library, with its rows of priceless chained manuscripts, the Chiostro dello Scalzo, where Andrea del Sarto's wonderful frescoes adorn the walls, or into the Palazzo Vecchio, or the galleries of the Pitti, or the Uffizi. I was merely killing time in the faint hope that the good-natured Robertson might get for me the information which, in the circumstances, I was naturally most eager to obtain.

In the course of my erratic wanderings through the grand old city, with its host of monuments of a glorious past, I was one morning passing the great marble-built cathedral and noticed a number of people entering. There seemed to be an unusual number of visitors, so having nothing to do I passed through the narrow door into the sombre gloom of the magnificent old place – one of the most noteworthy and most beautiful sacred buildings in the world.

At first, entering from the bright sunshine of the piazza, I could scarcely see, so dim was the huge interior, but slowly my vision, rather bad since my strange adventure, grew accustomed to the half-darkness, and I saw that upon the high altar there were many long candles burning in their brass sconces and before the high altar three priests in gorgeous vestments were kneeling.

In the great cavernous place, with its choir beneath the dome, I heard low prayers in Latin. Men and women who passed me bowed and crossed themselves while many knelt.

The glorious cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, so called from the Lily which figures in the Arms of Florence – hence “the Lily City” – had always an attraction for me, as it has for every visitor to the ancient Tuscan capital. The stained glass of Ghiberti, the wonderful mosaics of Gaddo Gaddi, the frescoes of angels by Santi di Tito, and the beautiful pictures by the great mediæval masters, all are marvellous, and worth crossing the world to see.

From before the altar a long spiral mist of incense was rising, and about me as I stood in the centre of the enormous interior, many visitors were passing out from the dim religious gloom into the light of the open doorway.

Suddenly my eyes caught sight of a countenance.

I held my breath, standing rooted to the spot. What I saw staggered belief. Was it only a chimera of my unbalanced imagination – or was it actual fact?

For a few seconds I remained undecided. Then, aghast and amazed, I became convinced that it was a stern reality.

The mystery of the affair at Stretton Street became in that single moment a problem even more than ever bewildering.

CHAPTER THE SIXTH
ANOTHER PUZZLE

Kneeling before Donatello's magnificent picture of the Virgin over one of the side altars, her outline dimly illuminated by the light of many candles, was a slim, dark-haired young woman in deep mourning. Her head was bowed in an attitude of great devotion, but a few moments later, when she raised her face, I stood rooted to the spot.

The countenance was that of the dead girl Gabrielle Engledue!

An involuntary exclamation left my lips, and a woman standing near me heard me, and wondered.

Kneeling beside the girl in black was a thin-faced, black-haired Italian of about forty-five. He was somewhat handsome, though a sinister expression played about his lips.

I watched the pair for several minutes, wondering whether in my brain, unbalanced as it had been, the scene was a mere chimera on my part and that, after all, the girl only slightly resembled the victim at Stretton Street.

The latter I had not seen in life, and death always alters the features. Nevertheless, the sudden encounter was most startling, and from where I stood behind a great marble column I watched them.

At last both rose and crossing themselves piously, walked slowly to the door. I followed them. It surely could not be that the girl whose death certificate I had forged, and whose body had been reduced to ashes, was actually alive and well! I recollected that sum of five thousand pounds, and the strange adventures which had befallen me after I had accepted the bribe to pose as a doctor, and certify that death had been due to natural causes.

Outside in the bright sunlight of the Piazza, I obtained a full view of her. Her rather shabby black was evidently of good material, but her face struck me as distinctly strange. The expression in her dark luminous eyes was fixed, as though she were fascinated and utterly unconscious of all about her. She walked mechanically, without interest, and utterly heedless of where she went. Her companion's hand was upon her arm as she crossed to the Via Calzajoli, and I wondered if she were blind.

I had never before seen such a blank, hopeless expression in a woman's eyes.

The man, on the contrary, was shrewd and alert. His close-set eyes shot shrewd glances from beneath black bushy eyebrows with a keen, penetrating gaze, as though nothing escaped him. He seemed to be trying to hurry her, in fear of being recognized. He had not noticed me, hence in the bustle of the busy street I managed to get up close behind them, when of a sudden, I heard her exclaim:

"Not so fast! Really I can't walk so fast!"

She spoke in English!

Her companion, uncouth and heedless, still had his hand upon her arm, hurrying her along without slackening his pace. She seemed like a girl in a dream. Truly, she was very handsome, a strange tragic figure amid all the hubbub of Florence, the old-world city of noise and of narrow streets, where Counts and *contadini* rub shoulders, and the tradesmen are ever on the look out to profit – if only a few soldi – upon the innocent foreigner.

Firenze la Bella – or Florence as the average Englishman knows it – is surely a city of strange people and of strange moods. By the discordant clanging of its church bells the laughter-loving Florentines are moved to gaiety, or to piety, and by the daily articles in the local journals, the *Nazione* or the *Fieramosca*, they can be incited to riot or violence. The Tuscans, fine aristocratic nobles with ten centuries of lineage behind them, and splendid peasants with all their glorious traditions of feudal servitude under the "nobile," are, after all, like children, with a simplicity that is astounding, combined with a cunning that is amazing.

Along the Via Calzajoli I followed the pair in breathless eagerness. At that hour of the morning the central thoroughfare is always crowded by business men, cooks out shopping, and open-mouthed *forestieri*– the foreigners who come, guide-book in hand, to gaze at and admire the thousand wonderful monuments of the ancient city of Medici. The girl's face certainly resembled very closely that of the dead girl Gabrielle Engledue. The countenance I had seen at Stretton Street was white and lifeless, while that of the girl was fresh and rosy. Nevertheless, that blank expression upon her face, and the fact that her companion had linked his arm in hers, both pointed to the fact that either her vision was dim, or her great dark eyes were actually sightless. The man was fairly well dressed, but the girl was very shabby. Her rusty black, her cheap stockings, her down-at-heel shoes, and her faded hat combined to present a picture of poverty. Indeed, the very fact of the neglect of her dress was increasing evidence that her vision was dim, for surely she would not go forth with the rent in the elbow of her blouse. Did she know that it was torn?

Just as we were passing the ancient church of Or San Michele, with its wonderful armorial bearings by Luca della Robbia, an old man with long white hair and beard, whom I took to be one of the mangy painters who copy the masterpieces in the Uffizi or the Pitti, passed by, and raising his hat, wished the pair: *"Buon giorno!"*

The girl's companion returned the salute with a slight expression of annoyance, perhaps at being recognized, but the girl took no notice, and did not acknowledge him.

The man uttered some words in the girl's ear, and then hurried her on more quickly, at the same time glancing furtively around. It was quite plain that he had no wish to be seen there, hence my curiosity became increased.

Every moment I, however, feared that he might realize I was following them; but I did not mean that they should escape me.

In the Piazza della Signorina they halted opposite that great old prison-like building, the Palazzo Vecchio, where several people were awaiting an omnibus, and as they stood there the girl, who bore such a striking resemblance to the dead niece of the millionaire, stared straight before her, taking no notice of anything about her, a strange, statuesque, pathetic figure, inert and entirely guided by the ferret-eyed man at her side.

I was compelled to draw back and watch them from a distance, hoping that I might be successful in following them to their destination. It certainly was strange that the girl who was so much like Gabrielle Engledue should be there in Florence, within a mile or two of De Gex's villa!

As I watched, yet another person – a well-dressed woman of about forty – recognizing the girl's companion, smiled as she passed, while he, on his part, raised his hat. The woman who had passed struck me as being either English or American, for there are many English-speaking residents in Florence. For a second I debated within myself, and then a moment later I followed her until she turned a corner in the Via di Porta Rossa. Then I hurried, and overtaking her politely raised my hat.

"I trust you will pardon me, Madame," I exclaimed in English, as she started and looked at me askance. "I presume you are either English or American?"

"I am American," she replied with a pronounced drawl.

"Please forgive my inquisitiveness, but I seek your aid in a little matter which is of greatest consequence to me," I went on. "A moment ago, as you crossed the Piazza, you encountered an Italian gentleman and a girl. Could you tell me the gentleman's name?"

"What, the person I bowed to a moment ago?" she exclaimed. "Oh! that's Doctor Moroni."

Moroni! I recollected the name. He was one of the mourners!

"And the girl?" I asked.

"Ah! I do not know. I saw her out with an old woman the other day. But I have no idea who she is."

"Is Doctor Moroni a doctor of medicine?" I inquired.

"Yes. The people at the *pension* of the Lung Arno where I live, always call him in. I was ill six months ago, and he attended me. He lives in the Via Cavezzo, near the Porta Romona – number six, I believe."

"I am sure I am extremely obliged to you," I replied very gratefully. "I have a very strong reason for asking these questions – reasons which concern the young lady," I added.

The American woman smiled, and then, reiterating my thanks, I raised my hat and left her.

At least I had discovered the identity of the girl's companion. He was a doctor, hence it was most probable that she was under his charge. Nevertheless, it was strange that he should take her to the Duomo and pray at her side. Doctors do not usually act in that manner with their patients.

When I returned to the Piazza the pair were nowhere to be seen, therefore I strolled to the nearest café, and sat down with a cigarette to think out the remarkable affair.

One or two features of the problem now became more than ever puzzling. First, in view of the fact that I had seen Gabrielle Engledue lying dead and had, for a bribe of five thousand pounds, signed a death certificate purporting to be from Doctor Gordon Garfield, of Queen Anne Street, Cavendish Square, it seemed beyond credence that the girl who had died and been cremated should be led about the streets of Florence by this Italian, Doctor Moroni. Oswald De Gex's denials were, in themselves, only thin, and yet they were all very clever and carefully prepared. The story of how his wife had left his little son in Westbourne Grove to be discovered by the police was no doubt well thought out. De Gex and his wife were actually on most affectionate terms, hence the tale he had told had been purposely concocted, in order to mislead me. Besides, his pretence that the dead girl had been his niece was, of course, a similarly concocted story to mislead me, and also to discredit me if perchance I made any unwelcome inquiries.

That I had been half asphyxiated and then drugged until my mental balance had been upset, was quite plain. And it was equally plain that De Gex did not intend that I should be capable of making inquiries concerning the events of that memorable November night. When I had been thrown out of the motor-car on that French highway, near St. Malo, the bank-notes had been purposely left in my pocket. I had already copied the numbers, and had called upon the millionaire's bankers in Pall Mall, but there was no record that any of them had been issued to him. That payment had evidently been very well concealed.

On every hand it appeared quite plain that I had been the victim of some strange and remarkable conspiracy, the motive of which was entirely obscure. Surely I must have been watched, and my habits noted. De Gex had known that I frequently passed his door on my way to visit my uncle, and further, he must have known that I should pass on that fateful night in November when Horton was sent out to entice me within.

But the chief point of that complex puzzle was the fact that there, in Florence, within a mile or two of the millionaire's almost regal residence, I had encountered a living girl who, in every feature, was the exact counterpart of the poor girl whose death and cremation stood recorded in the official registry at Somerset House!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.