

Le Queux William

Guilty Bonds



William Le Queux

Guilty Bonds

«Public Domain»

Le Queux W.

Guilty Bonds / W. Le Queux — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	7
Chapter Three	10
Chapter Four	14
Chapter Five	17
Chapter Six	19
Chapter Seven	22
Chapter Eight	26
Chapter Nine	29
Chapter Ten	32
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	33

Le Queux William

Guilty Bonds

Chapter One

The Mystery of Bedford Place

“Come, have another hand, Burgoyne.”

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

“Why not to-night?”

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

“Very well; as you wish.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An ominous sound: what could it mean?

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

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

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

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

A tragedy had been enacted!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had escaped!

Chapter Two

Sealed Lips

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

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

He started when his gaze fell upon the prostrate woman.

“Do you know who lives 'ere?” he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We entered undisturbed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Good God! The Seal!”

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

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

It had an awful significance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The two constables remaining gently lifted the corpse, and placing it upon a low lounge near, began to examine the apartment. It was a luxuriously-furnished drawing-room, and the gas, which burned in crimson glass, threw a soft harmonious light over the furniture and hangings, which were composed of pale blue satin; and upon the costly nick-nacks which plainly showed the owner was possessed of artistic tastes and refinement. A room, in fact, which bore the unmistakable traces of the daily presence of a woman of wealth and culture.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A few minutes had elapsed, when they entered.

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

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

"Yes, sir," they replied.

"Found anything?"

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

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

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

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

"Who's this gentleman?" asked the officer, jerking his thumb towards me.

"Gentleman who informed us, sir."

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

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

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

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

"Is that all you know?" he asked.

"That's all."

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

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

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

Chapter Three

What the World Said

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

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

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

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

"Certainly, I should."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

Truly the night had been an eventful one.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From inquiries, it appeared that the deceased arrived at Wall Street, as usual, at ten o'clock in the morning, retiring into his room, which was only separated from that of his clerk's by a short passage, some ten feet in length. He remained in his room an hour, interviewing several clients and attending to his correspondence. His manager had occasion to consult him shortly after eleven, when on entering the room he was horrified at finding him dead in his chair. Upon the blotting-pad before him lay the paper whereon was the seal.

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

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

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

It appeared that a waiter, on approaching a table at which Herr Scherb was sitting, was terrified to observe that he was quite dead. The cause of his sudden demise was a glittering dagger, even then

firmly fixed in the breast. On this being removed, it was discovered that a piece of paper bearing the seal had been fastened to the handle.

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

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

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

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

This created little less than a panic.

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

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

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

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

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

But while this situation was bad enough, it was nothing when compared with the complete paralysis which took possession of the entire population when, a few weeks later, the work of the same dreadful hand was observed, this time at Zurich, where Madame Daburon – a celebrated authoress, whose works, principally on political questions, and of a Socialistic tendency, had attracted a great deal of attention – was found lying in the bottom of a pleasure boat drifting upon the Lake.

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

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

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

In a few hours this statement was confirmed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The excitement rose to fever heat.

Chapter Four

“Startling revelations.”

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

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

“We will take evidence of identification first.”

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

The jury looked at one another in dismay.

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

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

“Call him.”

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

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

The next witness was myself, and my depositions were rather more satisfactory. I related my experience on the fatal night, and how I had discovered the crime. Then I was submitted to a severe cross-examination by the jury regarding the appearance of the man who left the house immediately afterwards.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The detectives were by no means idle, and from occupants of neighbouring houses they found that Mrs Inglewood, during her residence, had received but few visitors, the most conspicuous being an elderly lady, accompanied apparently by her daughter. They came several times a week in a victoria, and remained an hour.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Them’s just my sentiments,” said Moreland, who was on the staff of a comic journal, and fancied himself the wit of the Club. “But, you see, Burgoyne is no longer one of us; he’s one of the ‘bloated aristocracy,’ as he used to call the wealthy at one time.”

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

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

“What’s that?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Exactly. But they haven’t seen the man they want; you have.”

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

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

Chapter Five

Suspicious

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

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

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

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

“And what’s that?”

“Get married.”

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

“Then what is your intention?”

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

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

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

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

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

“And how long do you propose being away?”

“Six months – a year, if you like.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I made no attempt to follow him.

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

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

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

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

Chapter Six

Vera Seroff

Two months had elapsed.

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

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

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

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

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

My *vis-à-vis* was about twenty-three, with a face as to which there could be no adverse opinion. She was dark, with fine eyes, serious and penetrating, a delicate little nose, and a well-formed mouth, which showed, when she smiled, two rows of pearly teeth. She was brisk, vivacious, with a charming ingenuousness in her flawless face; a figure slim and graceful, and a voice silvery and sympathetic.

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

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

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

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

“And do you go also?” she asked, with an intonation – as I flattered myself – of disappointment. “Well; no,” I replied; “I shall remain a few days longer.”

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

“Thanks, Mademoiselle,” replied Bob, grasping the tiny white hand she held out to him. “My business calls me to London, otherwise I should not return just yet. However, I hope you will prevent my friend, here, from getting into any scrapes with the bloodthirsty Italians after I’m gone.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But you are Russian?” I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yet how could I?

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

Chapter Seven

A Secret Tie

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Then what is this obstacle to our happiness?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you know him?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What? – tell me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

She paused, as if in doubt.

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

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

“With heart and soul, dearest.”

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

“How?”

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

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

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

“But I can help you?”

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

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

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

“Yes, where?”

“At St. Petersburg.”

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

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

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

“That is all.”

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

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

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

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

“Three weeks from to-day,” I echoed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Eight

Post-Haste across Europe

One circumstance puzzled me greatly.

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

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

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

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

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

On the third evening after leaving Genoa I arrived at Charing Cross, having travelled incessantly by the Mont Cenis route without breaking the journey at Paris. It was impossible for me to go to Russia without a passport, therefore I was compelled to return to London and obtain one. At first I was troubled by this, the time of my arrival being limited to three weeks; but afterwards, finding the journey from Italy to the Russian capital was much more circuitous than from London, I made the best of it, feeling certain I should be able to deliver the jewels within the time stipulated by the woman who had enchanted me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Nine

In the Izak Platz

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

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

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

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

“M’sieur Burgoyne, *n’est ce pas?*”

“That is my name,” I replied.

“The apartments ordered for you are in readiness.”

“Who ordered them?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

Though anxious to complete my mission and return, I confess I found much of interest. St. Petersburg externally is the finest city in the world, but internally the dirtiest and most enthralled, struggling as it does under a police *régime* so harsh that one can scarcely walk the streets without infringing some law, and attracting the attention of the spies, who everywhere abound.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Quite correct,” I replied.

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

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

“*Merci*,” he replied, a grin of satisfaction lighting up his countenance as he repeated, “The jewels – ah!”

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

“*Ha! harosho!*” he exclaimed confidently, replacing it with care.

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

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

Somehow a feeling of suspicion crept over me.

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

This man might be an impostor.

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

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

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

“It matters not – a mere trifle.”

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

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

Evidently he was alarmed.

“Then I shall not give up the jewels – ”

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

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

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

Chapter Ten

The Spider's Web

I gave myself up to reflection.

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

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

The day wore on.

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

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

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

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

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.