Le Queux William

The Lost Million

William Le Queux

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Le Queux W.

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Содержание

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Chapter One
Describes a Man and his Secret

"See! It's – it's in my kit-bag, over there! The thing – the Thing at which the whole world will stand aghast!"

The thin, white-faced, grey-bearded man lying on his back in bed roused himself with difficulty, and with skinny finger pointed at his strong but battered old leather bag lying in the corner of the small hotel bedroom.

"The keys – on my chain – Mr Kemball – " he gasped faintly, his face slowly flushing. "Open it, quick! – ah no! you can't deceive me, my dear fellow. I'm dying! I heard what the doctor told you – though he only whispered. But, Mr Kemball, although you are a young man, I – I'm going to trust you with a – with a strange responsibility. I – I trust you because you were so very kind to me on board. They all shunned me – all save you! They didn't know my real name," – and the old man chuckled bitterly to himself – "and they were not likely to!"

"You were unwell on the voyage, Mr Arnold, and it was surely my duty to – "

"Duty! What duty do you owe to me? – a perfect stranger – an adventurer for aught you know!" cried the old fellow with whom I had formed such a curious friendship. "No, Mr Kemball, you have acted as a real man, as a friend – one of the few friends one meets in this hard, workaday world," and he clutched wildly at his throat, while his sunken cheeks slowly assumed a hectic flush. "Unlock the bag – get it out – before – before I lose my senses," he added.

I took from the dressing-table the bunch of keys attached to his steel watch-chain, and was crossing the room towards the bag when he exclaimed —

"Listen, Mr Kemball! I'm a dying man. Will you make a solemn promise to me? Will you grant me one last earnest request? In half an hour – perhaps before – I shall be lying here dead. But I'm still alive – a man who has seen much, who knows strange things – a man who has lived through much, and who has stood by and seen men die around him like flies. God! If I dare only tell you half – but – "

"Well, Mr Arnold," I asked quietly, returning to the bedside and looking into the pinched grey face, "how do you wish me to act?"

"I have already written it here – I wrote it on board ship, after my first seizure," he said, slowly drawing a crumpled and bulky envelope from beneath his pillow and handing it to me with trembling fingers. "Will you promise not to open it until after I have been placed in the grave, and to act as I have requested?"

"Most certainly, Mr Arnold," was my reply. "A promise given to one who is about to pass to the Beyond is sacred."

His thin fingers gripped my hand in silent acknowledgment. He did not speak, but the expression in his eyes told of his profound thankfulness. I placed the letter in my breast-pocket. Something seemed to be enclosed within.

"Go and open the bag," he whispered, after a brief silence.

I did so, and within, to my great surprise, found two huge bundles of fifty and hundred pound Bank of England notes, each packet several inches thick and tied with faded pink tape.

He beckoned me to bring them to him, and when I again stood near the bed, he selected one note, and then said —

"I wish you to destroy all of them – burn them there in the grate – so that I can watch you," and he gave vent to a harsh, unnatural laugh, a hideous laugh of despair.

I looked at him in hesitation. The poor old fellow was surely mad. In my hands I held notes to the value of an enormous sum. And yet he wished to ruthlessly destroy them!

He noticed my hesitation, and in a quick, impatient tone, asked whether I would not carry out his wishes, at the same time handing me the note he had taken, telling me that it was to pay for his interment.

"As you desire," I said, with some reluctance.

"But is it just – with so much distress here, in London – to deliberately destroy money like this?"

"I have a reason, Mr Kemball, a very strong reason," he answered in a low tone.

So I was compelled to untie the bundles, and, separating the notes, placed them in the grate and commenced a fire, which I fed on and on, until the last note had been consumed, and there remained only a grate full of blackened tinder. I confess that I found myself wishing that I had the numbers of some of the notes, in order to reclaim their equivalent from the Bank.

The old man's wild eyes, full of unnatural fire, watched the flames die down, and as they did so he gave a sigh of distinct relief.

Then, with difficulty, he turned to me and, putting out his hand, said —

"In the bag – at the bottom – you will find a sealed cylinder of metal."

I searched as he directed, and drew forth a heavy ancient cylinder of bronze, about a foot and a half long and three inches in diameter. The top had, I saw, been welded down, but a long time ago, because of the green corrosion about it.

When I had carried it across to him, he looked me straight in the face with those deep-set glassy eyes, which haunted me for long afterwards, and said —

"I trust you with that, Mr Kemball, because – because – I feel assured that you will act as I direct. Do not attempt to seek – to discover what is within. That secret must be withheld – from you. In this I hope – that you will respect my desire – I hope so, for – for your own sake."

I held the mysterious cylinder in my hand in wonder. Evidently he treasured it even far greater than his riches, and had brought it to London with some distinct purpose which he was now – owing to his heart-trouble – unable to accomplish.

"There are other things – other things in the bag. Bring them to me," he said, in a low, weak voice, speaking with the greatest difficulty.

I brought the bag over to him and turned its contents pell-mell upon the floor. Among the several articles of clothing were a few old letters which, at his direction, I burned amid the tinder of the banknotes. Then, on searching further, I found a small, and evidently very antique, statuette of a figure standing, holding a kind of spear. It was about seven inches high, much worn, with a square base, and of solid gold. Around it I noticed an inscription in hieroglyphics.

"That," my dying friend managed to gasp, "is an ancient image – of the Egyptian God Osiris, son of Seb, and Nut, or Heaven and Earth, and married to Isis. He was held to have gone through sufferings – to have died – to have risen again, and finally to have become the Judge of the Dead, His mysteries and rites were – were the most important part of Egyptian wisdom. The inscription upon it shows that it was made by one Mersekha, in the reign of King Radadef, in the Fourth Dynasty – or about three thousand five hundred years before the Christian era. Take it for yourself, Mr Kemball," added the old man, his voice distinctly weaker. "It will serve as your mascot and will perhaps remind you of the friendless man whom you have to-day befriended."

I stood by in silence, for I saw a distinct change had crept over him.

I took a glass in which the doctor had placed some drug, giving me instructions to administer it to him, and I forced a few drops of it between his teeth.

The evening was warm and oppressive. Twilight was just falling, and through the open window came the low hum of the motor traffic a few hundred yards away in the Strand. The hotel in which

we were was a quiet, unostentatious little place in Surrey Street, to which, on leaving the ship two days before, he had persuaded me to accompany him. Some one had recommended him to go there, he said, in preference to the Savoy or Carlton.

On board the *Miltiades*, which he had joined at Naples, he had displayed no outward sign of wealth – or that he possessed money to burn. Indeed, his dress was mean and shabby, and by the wardrobe contained in his two ragged bags, one would certainly never put him down as a man of means. It is generally dangerous, however, to judge a man by his clothes.

The old clock of St. Clement Danes struck eight, and a few moments later there came a low tap at the door, and the doctor again reappeared, and bent over his patient anxiously.

He gave him a few more drops of the medicine, but the old man made an impatient gesture, and refused to swallow more.

What request, I wondered, was contained in that crumpled and rather bulky letter which I held in my breast-pocket?

Outside, in the corridor, the doctor told me that the end was quite near, and suggested that I should obtain something from him concerning his friends.

"Mr Arnold has already told me," I replied. "He possesses no friends."

And at that the doctor shrugged his shoulders and descended the stairs.

Back at the bedside in the fast-fading light of the hot day of early June, I took the old man's bony hand in silent farewell.

He turned his eyes upon me, gazing at me with a strange intense look, as though trying to read my very soul.

He endeavoured to speak, but though I bent my ear to his mouth, I could catch no words. His thin nervous hands clenched themselves, his grey beard moved, and he struggled violently to communicate with me, but without avail. Then with his right hand, he made a sign that he wished to write.

Instantly I obtained a pen and scrap of paper which I placed before him.

For a long time his hand trembled, so that he could make no intelligible writing. At last, however, he managed slowly, and with infinite difficulty, to trace very unevenly the words —

"*Remember the name Harford – be friendly, but beware of him and the Hand*."

He watched my face eagerly as I read.

Of a sudden, the light went out of his grey countenance, the pen dropped from his thin, nerveless fingers, a scarlet spot fell upon the paper, and a deep, long-drawn sigh escaped his ashen lips.

Then a great stillness fell – a great silence broken only by the low roar of the London traffic.

And I knew that Melvill Arnold, the man of mystery, was dead.

Chapter Two
Contains Several Surprises

For some moments I stood gazing upon the dead man's changed face, not knowing how to act.

I, Lionel Kemball, had, perhaps very unwisely, accepted a strange responsibility. I had acted with complete indiscretion.

On my way home from Australia, where I had been for a voyage for my health, the liner had called at Naples, and Mr Melvill Arnold had joined us. On the day after we had sailed I heard that he had had a sudden heart seizure, and was confined to his cabin, therefore – why, I can't exactly tell – I sought him out, and spent a good many hours chatting with him, and keeping him company.

Perhaps it was that, having been something of an invalid myself, I knew the weary monotony of being confined to bed; I could sympathise with anybody who was ill.

From the first I realised that Arnold was a man of no ordinary stamp. Possessed of a clear and quick intelligence, he was a cultured man notwithstanding his rather rough exterior, and full of a quiet sound philosophy. To me, it appeared as though he had lived abroad a good many years, and was consequently out of touch with England. Whence he had come he never told me, save to casually mention that he had been a great traveller and had "lived out in the wilds for years." The possession of the golden god seemed to point to the fact that he had come from Egypt.

"London has nowadays no attraction for me," he told me one day. "I only go there merely because I am forced to do so. I finished with London long, long ago."

Surely, as I, a prosaic man-of-the-world, sat in that narrow cabin as we steamed up the Mediterranean towards Gibraltar, I had never dreamed that in his old kit-bag, smothered as it was with faded hotel labels, there reposed a fortune in banknotes.

He had been perfectly frank on one point. He was a man without a single friend. And now I knew that he had an enemy – and that his name was Harford.

Presently I bent to the dead man's bag – and examining it thoroughly, discovered that one letter had remained unburned – a letter which, by the London postmark upon it, had been written two years ago. It was addressed in a fine, angular, woman's hand to "Arnold Edgcumbe, Esquire, Post Office, Kingswear, South Devon."

The name caused me to ponder. Had not he admitted that Melvill Arnold was not his real name? Was it not to be supposed that his actual name was Edgcumbe?

The letter was, to say the least, a curious communication. It bore no address, but on the half-sheet of paper was written, in the same feminine hand, the words: "You, no doubt, saw the newspapers of 6th September, and the sentence of the Court upon the person they know as Lancaster. Rest assured that her betrayal will not go unrevenged by – Her Friend."

I stood gazing at the missive which the dead man had evidently believed that I had burned. It would not be difficult to search the files of the newspapers for 6th September 1908, and ascertain for what crime a prisoner named Lancaster had been sentenced. The information might, perhaps, lead me to some further discovery.

I placed the letter carefully aside and made a most minute search of the dead man's clothes, and of his other belongings, but found absolutely nothing. Then, crossing the wasted hands, and placing the sheet tenderly over the white face, I left the room, and, descending, informed the hotel manager of what had occurred, while he, in turn, telephoned to an undertaker.

The effects of the deceased were taken possession of by the hotel manager pending the opening of the letter of instructions, while I conveyed to my own room the ancient bronze cylinder and the golden image that was to be my mascot.

Death in an hotel is always the cause of unpleasantness with the management, who declare it to be injurious to the reputation of the establishment, hence the body was conveyed away by night to await interment, while I moved to the Cecil.

But that same night a man from the undertaker's came to me and asked me somewhat mysteriously what I knew concerning the dead man.

"He was my friend," I replied. "Why do you make this inquiry?"

"Well, sir," he answered, "the guv'nor sent me round to say that he's found he wore a false beard. It fell off!"

The man's statement mystified me, more especially when he added —

"The body is that of a much younger man than the gentleman appeared to be. The guv'nor fancies there's a bit of a mystery about him."

"Probably he's right," I said, but the judicious administration of a golden coin quickly put matters straight, and my visitor bowed himself out.

Sorely was I tempted to tear open that letter which the mysterious man, now dead, had with calm forethought prepared, yet on the envelope was boldly written the words: "Not to be opened until after my burial." That plain injunction deterred me.

Yet on the following morning I went down Fleet Street to the office of the *Daily Telegraph*, and there asked to see the file of the paper for September 1908.

It was not long before I was turning over the pages of the news of the day in question. For some time I searched, until my eye at last caught the name of Lancaster in the report of a trial at Old Bailey.

The report was headed —

"LADY LETTICE LANCASTER

"Amazing Life-Story of an Adventuress

"The story of a woman adventuress is always interesting, and that of Lettice Earnshaw, *alias* Lady Lettice Lancaster, is no exception. She is a woman of mystery. Born thirty-four years ago in the West of England, she has lived the greater part of her life more or less by her wits. Always a woman of mystery, she has used many names and lived in many districts, generally changing her name and abode when the attentions of her creditors became too pressing. Many attempts have been made to trap her, but she has always escaped, until yesterday, when she was convicted at the Old Bailey of removing furniture in order to cheat her creditors, and was sent to gaol for nine months.

"The discoveries made by the police reveal a remarkable romance. Her birth has always been shrouded in mystery, but it is probable that she was to a certain extent entitled to rise the name Lancaster. Her father, believed to have been a distant relative of a well-known man of title, married an actress. Needless to say, trouble was occasioned by the advent of a child. The family naturally attempted to hush up the marriage, and the little infant was sent to Camborne in Cornwall, where her mother had a brother who was a policeman. Lettice grew up into a knowing and pretty child, looking much older than her real age, and in 1890 she met a medical student, who was staying in the neighbourhood. Although at this time she was only fifteen, she looked some years older, and on 9th April she was married at Exeter, to the student, whose name was given as Henry Earnshaw.

"At this youthful age the young bride started her long list of aliases. According to the marriage register she was nineteen years of age – a jump of four years – and her name was given as Edith Jane Lucy Haddon, the surname being that of her nurse's daughter. Her actual life immediately after marriage is not known, but about a year later she was living at Manchester, where, according to the prosecuting counsel in the case heard yesterday, she was obtaining her living by acting in a pantomime. Her stay in that city was perhaps her longest in any one district, and she did not obtain

notoriety until some years later. In Manchester she was known as the Hon. Lucy Huntingdon, and also as Lady Ella Earnshaw. The Hon. Lucy was unmarried, but Lady Ella had entered the bonds of wedlock.

"With her many aliases and a husband and foster-brother, who conveniently changed places as the occasion demanded, Lady Lettice Lancaster, to give her the name by which she is best known, has nearly always contrived to enjoy life at the expense of others. When the bills began to arrive, she denied responsibility, the husband or brother to whom the creditors were referred was not to be found, and yet, when a suitable opportunity occurred, she herself disappeared, only to bob up elsewhere, and continue the same game. The story of this amazing woman's extraordinary life has never been published, but we are now in a position to give many interesting facts as to her career.

"The name Lady Lettice Lancaster was not used until about six years ago, when she blossomed out in London, took a flat in Hyde Park Court, and was frequently seen driving in the West End. She then started a more clever system of defrauding her creditors.

"Here is a list of some of her abodes, each of which she left somewhat hurriedly —

"1903. – Tufnell House, Teddington.
1903. – Skelton, York.
1903. – St. Catherine's, Guildford.
1904. – Hackthorn, Lincoln.
1904. – Kiltoon, Athlone.
1905. – Saham Toney, Thetford.
1906. – Gloucester Terrace, London.
1907. – St. John's, Woking.
1907. – Stuston Hall, Chelmsford.
1908. – Portleven Mansions, Maida Vale.
1908. – Brancaster, Norfolk.

"It was while golfing at Brancaster that Lady Lettice was arrested and brought to London under the Debtors Act in connection with her stay at Maida Vale.

"While she had many residences, they were few in comparison to her different aliases. Here are some of the names by which the extraordinary woman has been known —

"Lady Lettice Lancaster, Lady Ella Earnshaw, Hon. Lucy Huntingdon, Hon. Mary Trelawnay, Mrs Emily Dewar, Mrs Gertrude Curtis, Mrs Evans, Mrs Shaw, Lettice Leyton, Alice Lethbridge, Grace Fane, Grace Fitzjames.

"Each of these names was used by her, while she had a habit of giving one of the other names as reference. In the case for which she has now been convicted, she was using the name of Mrs Gertrude Curtis, and had given Lady Ella Earnshaw as a reference."

The report then went on to give an example of the clever way in which this extraordinary woman escaped paying her creditors, which showed what a remarkable adventuress she was.

"Early last year," the journal continued, "she took a fine furnished mansion, Stuston Hall, near Chelmsford, in the name of Mrs Gertrude Curtis, and almost immediately afterwards a man who was known in the village as Hoare, and was thought to be her groom, arrived on the scene. About two months later Mrs Curtis came down from town, but by this time there was a considerable sum of money owing. Certain sums were paid on account, but before very long the tradespeople were getting anxious about their money, and a number of county court summonses were issued. These were allowed to go by default, and after judgment had been given, the woman and a man, who was known as Ralph Lancaster, and was said to be her foster-brother, were found to have removed the furniture and antiques to London, where it was sold. The defence to the charge was that Hoare was really Earnshaw, the woman's husband, and that he was responsible for the debts, which were on his account, he having given the orders.

"In the witness-box, Mrs Curtis admitted that Hoare was her husband, and that his real name was Earnshaw. She took the house in the name of Curtis because she was anxious to get away from her husband, who when drunk was very cruel, and on one occasion broke her arm. He, however, found her out, and, as a matter of fact, went down to Stuston Hall, a long time before her advent there. She claimed to have 'a moral right' to use the name Lady Lettice Lancaster, but 'for family reasons' refused to divulge why. If she did, her income would be discontinued. She added that she was receiving five pounds per week from a firm of solicitors in London. The defence did not prevail, and both the woman and Ralph Lancaster were sent to gaol for nine months.

"The way the three persons mixed up their relationship is decidedly interesting. Earnshaw or Hoare is the son of an officer who held high rank in the Navy, and was known as groom, butler, chauffeur, husband, or foster-brother, while Ralph Lancaster was referred to as foster-brother, husband, or stepbrother. The real husband was nearly always treated as if he were the groom, and when the three were living in Yorkshire, Lady Lettice was summoned for keeping a man-servant without a licence – the man-servant was her husband! This was not the only occasion on which the Inland Revenue took action against Lady Lettice. Once when the woman was prosecuted for keeping a dog without a licence, Lancaster represented her at the police-court. He then said he did not know whether she was the daughter of a Duke or of an Earl, but she was his wife.

"While living near Lincoln, the woman came into prominence for an unusual assault on a butcher's salesman, who had been sent to obtain payment of an account. He found the gate of the house locked, and rattled it to attract attention. Lady Lettice then came out of the house with a hunting-crop in her hand, and shouted to her daughter: 'Let loose the dogs, and they will kill and devour him.' The dogs, however, neither killed nor devoured him, but the woman hit him on the head with a hunting-crop, and knocked him over his bicycle. This little amusement cost her two pounds and costs at the subsequent police proceedings.

"Lady Lettice was always interested in horses, and she generally had some good animals in her stables. For some years she, in conjunction with Ralph Lancaster, had been running a riding-school in the West End, and it is stated that her income from this source was nearly 500 a year. When at Woking, in 1907, she was known as the 'lady horse-dealer,' and was very popular locally, until pressing creditors caused her to seek fresh fields and pastures new. When she was at Stuston Hall, she stated that she had taken the place for the purpose of teaching riding, and receiving hunting guests. But although she had several horses there, the only persons to use them were Lady Lettice, the two men, and the children. The eldest of the children, a girl of sixteen, frequently attracted attention by her plucky riding, and she is now earning money as a rider.

"While Lady Lettice was living at Stuston Hall, the house was regarded more or less as a house of mystery, and strange tales are told of how the woman disregarded the canons of convention during the hot weather. Moreover, the hours kept were hardly regarded as usual by her neighbours. Stuston, being a small village, is generally asleep fairly early, but if the statements made to callers are to be accepted as correct Lady Lettice frequently retired for the night as early as six o'clock. Nevertheless, it is stated that she was sometimes seen walking in the grounds during the night in a garb that can only be described as scanty. Naturally the house was watched by the local tradespeople with some care, and it was due to this watching that the removal of the furniture was discovered. The local postman and grocer, to whom she owed nearly ten pounds, saw the furniture being removed, and followed it to London, where it was sold. The police, in the course of the evidence, also hinted at the probability of other and more serious charges of crime being preferred against them on the expiration of their sentences."

In the centre of the report was given the photograph of "Lady Lettice," taken by one of the news agencies, the picture being the head and shoulders of a good-looking woman, smartly dressed in tweed country-hat and tailor-made coat – a woman whose type of features was certainly aristocratic, and would never be adjudged an adventuress.

When I had finished reading the report – which I here reproduce in order that you shall be more thoroughly acquainted with every detail of the strange adventures which befell me – I purchased a copy of the paper, and carried it back with me to my room at the Hotel Cecil.

Who was that mysterious correspondent of the dead man who had sworn vengeance. Who was the friend of Lettice Lancaster? For what reason had that letter been written? What connection could the quiet-mannered, unassuming old gentleman have with such a trio of clever swindlers?

It was fortunate, perhaps, that the letter had not been burned, for it had, at least, placed me in possession of some curious facts which must otherwise have been hidden.

During the next three days I was greatly occupied by my own affairs, which had been neglected by my year's absence at the Antipodes. Yet time after time I felt the keenest anxiety as to what could be contained in the dead man's letter of instruction, and in that corroded cylinder of bronze.

At last, however, I followed the mortal remains of my mysterious friend to Highgate Cemetery, the sole mourner, and after I had seen the coffin committed to the grave I returned to the hotel, where the statue of Osiris stood upon my table, and there, with impatient fingers, tore open the letter.

I read it through.

Then I stood staring at the unevenly scribbled words – staring at them like a man in a dream.

What I read there held me aghast, amazed, stupefied.

Chapter Three
What Mr Arnold Left Behind

The letter, written upon the notepaper of R.M.S. *Miltiades*, was dated four days prior to our arrival in London.

Perhaps I cannot do better than reproduce it in its entirety.

"To Lionel Kemball, Esquire.

"Dear Mr Kemball, – Now, after my death, I desire here to place on record my great indebtedness to you for your kindness and sympathy. You knew nothing of me, yet you took pity upon my lonely and unfortunate self. You have, in addition, made solemn promise to me to act as I direct. At the outset I desire to be perfectly frank with you and to confess that I was not what I represented myself to be. Certain chapters of my eventful life must be for ever hidden, even from you, who are acting as my friend. This I greatly regret, but to reveal all must only bring unhappiness upon one who is innocent. For that reason I die carrying my secret with me.

"How long I shall continue to live after penning this request I cannot know. Therefore, I will make matters as plain as possible, and earnestly request you to act as follows: —

"To be present at the railway station of Totnes in Devon at five o'clock on the evening of the 20th of June next, and there meet a certain man who will come in secret in search of you. He will wear a red tie, a carnation in his coat, and will carry an ebony walking-stick. He may be watched, therefore do not approach him unless he unbuttons his gloves and removes them. To him hand the enclosed letter, and if you wish further to serve the interests of one who herein expresses his deepest and most heartfelt gratitude, watch him, become his helper, and act as he directs – but do not trust him implicitly.

"Some of the circumstances may strike you as extraordinary and unwarrantable, but I beg of you not to attempt to solve mysteries which must, for ever, be hidden. The person in question may be in sore need of a friend to give assistance and advice, therefore rest assured that such favour shown to him will not go unrewarded.

"As regards the bronze cylinder, be extremely careful of it, and in all security hold it unopened in trust for me until six months from the date of this letter – namely, on 3rd November – when you will hand it without question to the person who comes to you and lays claim to it.

"What is enclosed addressed to yourself please accept as a trifling token of the great esteem in which you have been held by the lonely and forgotten man who, in later life, was known as —

"Melvill Arnold."

I tore open the envelope addressed to myself, and therein found four Bank of England notes for five hundred pounds each. My mysterious fellow-traveller who had money to burn had presented me with the sum of two thousand pounds.

The other enclosure, a letter secured by three seals of black wax, was addressed to "Arthur Dawnay, Esquire."

My trust was indeed a strange one, increased by the dead man's request that I should befriend a man who was friendless, and at the same time warning me against placing too great a trust in him.

I tried to conjure up in my mind what kind of person I was to meet so mysteriously away in Devonshire. Why, I wondered, could not Mr Arnold's affairs be settled in a proper manner by his lawyers? But perhaps, so mysterious was he, that to trust solicitors would be to reveal his identity. One thing, however, was evident. He had already made a secret appointment with Mr Dawnay. In all probability he had travelled to England expressly to see him.

From him I should probably learn something concerning the Man from Nowhere who had made me that very welcome present of two thousand pounds.

That the grey beard was not his own, and that he was somewhat younger than the age he had assumed, were, in themselves, facts which caused me a good deal of deep reflection. He was a complete mystery, and more could not be said.

Many times had I taken the ancient cylinder in my hand wondering what it really contained. As far as I could judge it was of metal, half an inch thick, for the cylinder was well made, and had apparently been drilled out of a solid block. The welded end had been very carefully and neatly closed, and it had evidently lain in the damp, or more probably under water, for many years, judging from the rough corrosion upon it.

My instructions were to guard it with all zeal, yet I was to hand it without question to whoever, on the 3rd of November, should ask for it.

I turned it over in my hands time after time, wondering what could be the nature of this, the greatest treasure of a man, who had undoubtedly been wealthy.

I confess to you that I entertained certain misgivings. Out of mere pity I had made the acquaintance of Melvill Arnold, never dreaming that I should be led into so strange an executorship. Again, there being no will, I began to wonder what was my actual position in law.

The mystery surrounding the dead man had been increased both by the discovery of his disguise and by the frankness of his letter, in which he plainly admitted that he was not what he had represented himself to be. Why had that letter been sent to him threatening revenge for the sentence upon the adventuress who called herself Lady Lettice Lancaster? What connection could he have had with such swindlers?

The whole affair formed a complete enigma. Perhaps I had acted very foolishly in mixing myself up with a perfect stranger, and as day succeeded day this thought became the more and more impressed upon me.

I suppose in order that you should understand matters aright I ought here to say something concerning myself.

I, Lionel Kemball, was aged twenty-seven. My father, a well-known London surgeon, who had been knighted for his services in the interests of surgical science, had died two years ago, leaving me with a comfortable old house, called Upton End, near Newport Pagnell, in Buckinghamshire, and an income of about a couple of thousand a year. Three years prior to his death he had retired and given up the house in Cavendish Square, preferring life in healthier and quieter surroundings. I had studied medicine, and had passed my preliminary examinations at Edinburgh, when I found myself troubled slightly with my lungs, and had been advised to take a trip to Australia. To my satisfaction I had returned in the very pink of health and perfectly cured.

I had visited Ceylon, the cities of Sydney, Brisbane, and Perth, had witnessed some of the wonders of New Zealand, and now, on my return, had become involved in this most curious and perplexing romance.

The day on which I opened Mr Arnold's strange letter was the 8th of June, therefore twelve days had to elapse before I could go down to Devonshire to meet the mysterious Mr Dawnay.

Those were hot, exciting days. Such blazing weather in June had not been experienced in London for years. It was hot by day, succeeded by oppressive, breathless evenings, with that red dust-haze seen only in our great metropolis. The Derby had been run and London hotels were crammed. The colossal Cecil, at which it was my habit to stay, was filled to overflowing by crowds of Americans, and the West End ran riot with gaiety and extravagance, as it always does each season.

Perhaps fortunately for me, for it prevented my mind being too much concentrated upon my remarkable trust, I found myself involved in some trouble concerning some land down at Upton End, and I had a number of interviews with my late father's solicitors. A lawsuit was threatened, and it looked much as though I should be the loser by several hundreds a year.

My mother died when I was but ten, and though I was fond of a country life, yet, somehow, since my father's decease, I had not cared for the loneliness and solitude of the quaint old house. It

was certainly a delightful old place, with several oak-panelled chambers, and clinging to it were all sorts of quaint legends of Roundheads and Cavaliers. Its old bowling-green and its gardens ablaze in summer with crimson ramblers were charming; yet it was, after all, only a white elephant to me, a bachelor. So I had kept on a couple of the old servants, who together with Tucker, the head-gardener, and his assistant, kept the place going – for I had secret thoughts of letting it furnished.

My trouble over the ownership of the piece of land forming a portion of the farm attached to the house, and several other matters which had been neglected owing to my absence in Australia, kept my hands pretty full; nevertheless, I found time one evening to take a taxi up to Highgate Cemetery in order to see that the grave of my dead friend had been properly closed and put in order.

It was about six o'clock in the evening when I arrived, and there were many friends and relatives tenderly watering the flowers on the graves of their loved ones. Without much difficulty I found the newly made mound of brown earth, but to my surprise I also saw that a magnificent cross of white flowers had been laid upon it.

This I eagerly examined, but no card was attached.

Surely whoever had placed it there had mistaken the grave, for Mr Arnold possessed no friends, and I had been the only follower. His decease had not been advertised; therefore surely none could know of his death.

For a few minutes I stood there, gazing upon the emblem, and pondering.

Suddenly I saw the cemetery-keeper, and walking up to him pointed out the grave and asked him if he knew anything of the cross that had been placed upon it.

"Oh, you mean Mr Arnold's grave, I suppose, sir," exclaimed the man.

"How do you know it is Mr Arnold's!" I asked.

"Well, sir, the day after the funeral a young lady came to me and inquired where a Mr Melvill Arnold had been buried. So I looked it up in the books and told her. She's been here every day since, and put fresh flowers there."

"A young lady! What was she like?" I inquired. "Oh, well, she's about twenty, I should say – pretty, with dark hair, and dressed in mourning," he replied. "She comes each day about five, generally in a private motor-car – a big grey car. The flowers cost her a tidy lot, I should think, for they're not common ones."

"About five o'clock!" I exclaimed. "Has she been here to-day?"

"No. And she didn't come yesterday either," was the man's reply. "Perhaps she'll come later on. We don't close till half-past seven just now."

So I waited in patience in the vicinity, eagerly watching for the advent of the one person beside myself and the undertaker who knew of the last resting-place of the mysterious man who had deliberately destroyed his fortune.

I wandered among the graves for a full hour, until of a sudden the cemetery-keeper approached me, and in a low voice said —

"Look, over yonder, sir! That tall young lady in black with the chauffeur carrying the wreath: that's the lady who comes daily to Mr Arnold's grave."

I looked, but, curiously enough, she had turned and was leaving the spot without depositing the wreath she had brought.

"Somebody's watching her, sir," remarked the man, "Perhaps she recognises you. She's taking the wreath away again!"

The chauffeur was walking close behind her along the central avenue as though about to leave the burial-ground, when of a sudden she crossed the grass to a newly made grave, and there her man deposited the wreath.

She had detected somebody watching – perhaps she had suspicion of the keeper in conversation with myself; at any rate, she resorted to the ruse of placing the wreath upon the grave of a stranger.

Fortunately, I had been able to obtain a good look at her handsome, refined features, and I decided that hers was a countenance which I should recognise again anywhere.

I looked around, but could see no one in the vicinity to arouse her suspicion – nobody, save myself.

Why did she hold me in fear? By what manner had she been aware of the mysterious man's death, or that I had been his friend?

I watched her turn and leave the cemetery, followed by her motor-driver.

Why did she hold the dead man in such esteem that she came there each day and with tender hands placed fresh flowers upon his grave? What relation could she be? And why did she thus visit his last resting-place in secret?

Chapter Four
The Man with the Red Cravat

Of necessity I went down to Upton End in order to see old Tucker and his wife, who had acted as caretakers in my absence.

Thomas Tucker – a tall, thin, active, grey-moustached man of sixty-five – was a servant of the old-fashioned faithful school. For thirty-two years – ever since the day of his marriage – he had lived in the pretty rose-embowered lodge, and had been taken over by my father as part of the estate. Indeed, in such high esteem did the governor hold him that he was given an entirely free hand in all outside matters; while his wife – a well-preserved, round-faced woman, equally devoted to her master – was entrusted with the care of the servants and other domestic affairs.

Hence, when I found myself possessor of the place, I too reposed the same confidence in the faithful pair as my father had done. But now that he was dead and I was alone, Upton End seemed, alas! very grim and silent. True, the old place, with its quaint corners and historic associations, its dark panelling, polished floors, and antique furniture, its high box hedges, level lawns, and wealth of roses, would have delighted the artist or the antiquarian; but modern man that I was, I failed to find very much there to attract me.

It was a house built for entertainment, and was only tolerable when filled by a gay house-party. The lawns, gardens, and park were looking their best in those balmy days of June; yet as I walked about, listening to Tucker as he showed me some improvements in tree-planting and in the green-houses, I found myself already reflecting whether, after all, it was worth while keeping the place up further, now that I scarcely ever visited it.

The rural quiet of the place palled upon me – so much so, indeed, that while sitting on the wide veranda smoking in the sunset on the third evening after my arrival I made up my mind to leave again next day. This I did, much to Tucker's regret.

The old fellow watched me climb into the dog-cart, and touched his straw hat in respectful silence. I knew how the poor old fellow hated his master to be absent.

Again in London, I waited in eager impatience until the nineteenth of the month, when I left Paddington for Totnes, in Devon. It was, I found, a quaint old town among green hills through which wound the picturesque Dart – a town with a long, steep high street, a city gateway, with shops built over the footpath, like those in the Borgo Largo in Pisa.

The Seymour Hotel, where I took up my quarters, was situated by the bridge, and faced the river – a well-known resort of anglers and summer tourists. But of such things as fishing or scenery I cared nothing on that well-remembered day – the day appointed for me to keep the strange tryst made by the man now dead.

The wording of Mr Arnold's injunction was "to be present at the railway station of Totnes at five o'clock." It did not mention the platform or the booking-office. Examination of the time-table showed that no train arrived at or left Totnes between the hours of four p.m., when the Plymouth train arrived, and the five-fifteen up-train to Exeter and Taunton. There were several expresses, of course, Totnes being on the Great Western main line between Plymouth and London.

By this fact it seemed that the mysterious man whom I was to meet would already be in Totnes, and would come to the station in order to meet me. All day, therefore, my eyes were open for sight of a man wearing a red tie or a carnation in his coat.

Mr Arnold had held suspicion that he might be watched. Why? What did he fear?

I was not to approach him unless he unbuttoned his gloves and removed them.

All that well-remembered day I idled by the cool rippling river, lingered by the rushing weir, watching the fishermen haul in their salmon-nets, and strolled about the quiet old-world streets of the rather sleepy place, eager for the arrival of five o'clock.

The station being some distance from the town, I walked down to it about half-past four. The afternoon was blazing-hot, and scarcely anyone was astir, even the dogs were asleep in the shadows, and the heat-slumber was over everything.

A hundred times had I tried to picture to myself what Mr Arthur Dawnay could be like. In the High Street, earlier in the day, I had seen a young man in tweed Norfolk jacket, obviously a tourist, wearing a red tie, but no carnation, and had followed him unnoticed to a house out on the outskirts of the town, where he was evidently lodging. Was his name Dawnay, I wondered! If he were actually the man whom I was to meet, then he certainly was a very prosaic looking person.

Still I possessed my soul in patience, and with the dead man's letter in my breast-pocket I walked through the booking-office and on to the platform.

Several persons were about – ordinary looking individuals, such as one sees every day at the station of a small provincial town – but there was no man wearing either a red cravat or a carnation.

I lit a cigarette and strolled up and down the platform where the booking-office was situated. The gate of the up-platform being kept locked, he would be compelled to pass through the booking-office.

Twice expresses with ocean mails from Plymouth to London roared through, and slowly the hands of the big clock approached the hour of five.

The appointment must have been made long ago by the man now dead – weeks ago, when he was still abroad; for the letter, I recollected, had been written on board the liner between Naples and London. But the principal point which puzzled me was the reason why the dead man's letter should be delivered in such secrecy.

A man with a red tie is very easily distinguishable, and I flatter myself that I possess a very keen eyesight; yet though minute after minute went by till it was already a quarter-past the hour, still no man answering the description given by the late Mr Arnold put in an appearance.

Presently, on the opposite platform, the express from Plymouth to Bristol came in; and suspecting that he might arrive by it, I dashed up the stairs, two steps at a time, and across the footbridge. When halfway down the stairs I halted, for I could see all over the up-platform.

Few passengers had alighted, but among them I instantly discerned a man wearing a cravat of scarlet satin. He was smartly dressed in a grey lounge-suit, and in his coat he wore a pink carnation. In his hand was an old-fashioned black ebony cane with silver knob.

He was standing looking up and down the platform, as though in search of somebody. Therefore I sped down the remaining stairs and quickly approached him, though I had not seen his face distinctly.

Suddenly, as I was within six yards of him, I recollected the dead man's written words, and halted short.

He was still wearing grey suède gloves. He had not removed them; therefore he was suspicious of being watched!

I lit another cigarette, and with careless air sauntered past him in order to gain a good view of his features.

He was, I saw, of middle height, and aged about fifty. His clean-shaven face, with heavy, square jaws, was pimply and rather bloated – a face which somehow filled me with repugnance, for it was the countenance of one who was a fast liver and who indulged a little too freely in alcohol. His grey suit, grey soft felt hat, and grey gloves gave to him a certain air of smartness and distinction; yet those small brown eyes, with a peculiar, indescribable expression searching up and down the platform, were the eyes of a man full of craft and double cunning.

From the first moment I turned my gaze upon him I held him in distinct suspicion; while he, it appeared, in turn held somebody else in suspicion. I looked around, but could not discern anybody who might arouse his misgivings. About us were all honest Devon folk.

The fact that he had not taken off his gloves still remained. My injunctions were not to approach him if he failed to remove them. He had the air of a *bon vivant*, even to the manner in which he tucked his ebony cane beneath his arm in order to light a choice cigar.

Most of the passengers crossed the bridge on their way out, while others made their exit by the little wicket, some of them entering the dusty motor-'bus which plies to Paignton.

Once, only once, his small narrow brown eyes met mine, and I saw in them a look of quick inquiry and shrewd cunning.

Then, still wearing his gloves as sign to me to hold aloof, he leisurely crossed the bridge to the down-platform, and strolled along the hot, dusty road into the town.

As far as I could discern, nobody was watching his movements at all; nevertheless, I could only suppose that he had great cause for precaution, otherwise he would have allowed me to approach and speak to him.

True, there was a queer, insignificant-looking old lady in rusty black, who had been on the platform when I had arrived, who had crossed the bridge and waited for the train from Plymouth, and who was now making her way back into Totnes in the direction we were walking.

Could it be possible that he feared her?

It struck me that he might have recognised that I had travelled there to meet him in place of the man now deceased; therefore I hurried on and got in front so that he might, if he so wished, follow me to the Seymour Hotel.

But judge my chagrin when at last we entered the main street, and while I turned down towards the bridge, he turned in the opposite direction, thus showing that he had not detected my anxiety to speak with him. And the old lady had followed in his footsteps.

Suddenly a thought occurred to me. It was surely more than probable that Mr Dawnay was there to meet the man Arnold, in ignorance of his death. Therefore, having allowed him to get on some distance, I turned upon my heel and followed him.

His movements were certainly curious. He was undoubtedly avoiding the unwelcome attentions of the old lady, who now seemed to be acting in conjunction with a dark-haired, middle-aged man with beetling brows, who wore a shabby brown suit and a last year's straw hat.

The man with the red cravat entered an inn in Fore Street, and remained there a full hour, the other man watching in the vicinity. Then, on emerging, he went to a chemist's, and afterwards turned his footsteps back towards the station.

I saw that his intention was to leave Totnes. Therefore, in preference to following on foot, I drove to the station in a fly.

He had never once removed those grey suède gloves, though the day was so hot, for on the up-platform the man in the straw hat was still idling behind him. A number of people were waiting for the train, and I, discerning Mr Dawnay's intention of travelling, entered the booking-office and bought a ticket for Exeter.

At last the London express came roaring into the station, when the man whom I was there to meet quickly entered a first-class corridor compartment, and while I remained vigilant, I saw the mysterious watcher enter a carriage a little way behind. Then, just as the train was leaving, I sprang into the compartment next that of Mr Dawnay.

I allowed the train to travel for about ten minutes, and as we slowly ascended the steep incline to Stony Coombe, between Totnes and Newton Abbot, I passed along the corridor and entered the compartment of the fugitive.

His quick, wary eyes were upon me in an instant, and I saw him start visibly in alarm, as I shut the door behind me leading to the corridor.

"I believe," I exclaimed next moment, "that you are Mr Arthur Dawnay?"

In an instant – before, indeed, I was aware of it – I found myself looking down the big barrel of a heavy Browning pistol.

"Well?" asked the man with the red tie, without moving from his seat, yet covering me with his weapon. "And what if I am, eh?"

Upon his face was a hard, evil grin, and I saw that he certainly was not a man to be trifled with.

"You think you've cornered me this time, eh?" he said in a hard, dry voice. "But raise a finger, and, by Gad! I'll put a bullet through you. So you'd best own yourself beaten, and let me slip out at Newton Abbot. Understand?"

Then, next moment, the train unfortunately entered the tunnel, and we were plunged in complete darkness.

Chapter Five
The Sign of the Gloves

Those moments of security seemed hours as I sat there with the pistol turned upon me.

Truly his was a strange greeting.

At length, however, daylight showed again as we commenced to descend the incline towards Newton Abbot, yet I saw that his hand – practised, no doubt, with a weapon by the manner he had whipped it forth – was still uplifted against me.

"Really, sir, you have no cause for alarm," I assured him, with a laugh. "I could not approach; you openly, so I adopted the ruse of travelling with you in order to speak. You came to Totnes to-day in order to meet me, did you not?"

"No, I certainly did not," he said, the expression upon his countenance showing him to be much puzzled by my words.

"Then perhaps you came to meet Mr Melvill Arnold?" I suggested.

"And why do you wish to know that, pray?" he asked, in the refined voice of a gentleman, still regarding me with antagonism. His small, closely set eyes peered forth at me with a ferret-like expression, while about his clean-shaven mouth was a curious hardness as his hand still held the weapon pointed in my direction.

"Because you are wearing the signs – the scarlet tie, the carnation, and I see that you carry the ebony walking-stick," was my cool reply. I was trying to prevent myself from flinching before that grim, business-like weapon of his.

"And what if I am? What business is it of yours?" he asked resentfully, and in evident alarm.

"My business is with you if your name is Alfred Dawnay," I said. "Mr Melvill Arnold is, I regret to say, dead, and – "

"Dead!" he gasped, lowering his weapon and staring at me, the colour dying from his face. "Arnold dead! Is this the truth – are you quite certain?"

"The unfortunate gentleman died in my presence."

"Where? Abroad, I suppose?"

"No; in a small hotel off the Strand," was my reply.

The news I had imparted to him seemed to hold him amazed and stupefied.

"Poor Arnold! Dead!" he repeated blankly to himself, sitting with both hands upon his knees – for he had flung the pistol upon the cushion. "Ah!" he exclaimed suddenly, raising his eyes to mine.

"Forgive me for receiving you in this antagonistic manner, sir, but – but you don't know what Mr Arnold's death means to me. It means everything to me – all that – " But his lips closed with a snap without concluding his sentence.

"A few moments before he died he gave me this letter, with instructions to meet you at Totnes to-day," and I handed him the dead man's missive.

Eagerly, with trembling fingers, he broke open the black seals; but the letter was in a second envelope, also carefully sealed with black wax. This he also tore open, and breathlessly read the closely scribbled lines which it contained – the message from the dead.

He bit his full red lips, his cheeks went ashen pale, and his nostrils dilated.

"I – I wish to thank you for carrying out Arnold's injunctions," he managed to gasp. "I went to Totnes for the purpose of meeting him, for he had made the appointment with me three months ago. Yet it seemed that he must have had some presentiment that he could not keep it himself, or he would not have suggested me wearing a red tie, a carnation, and carrying this old-fashioned ebony stick which he gave me long ago."

Briefly I recounted my meeting with him when he came on board at Naples, his sudden illness, and its fatal termination in the Strand hotel.

"Ah, yes," sighed the man Dawnay – the man whom I was to help, but not to trust. "Poor Arnold was a great traveller – ever on the move; but for years he knew that he had a weak heart."

I was about to make further inquiry regarding the man who had so strangely left me a legacy, but Dawnay suddenly exclaimed —

"You and I must not be seen together, Mr Kemball – for I notice by this letter that that is your name."

"Where can I meet you again?" I inquired; for I recollected the dead man's words that my strange companion might be in sore need of a friend.

"I hardly know," was his hasty answer, as he replaced his pistol in his pocket. "I am closely watched. Probably you saw the man – a fellow in a straw hat."

"Yes – and the old woman."

"Ah! then you are observant, Mr Kemball," he exclaimed, with a slight grin. "Yes, I am in danger – grave danger at this moment; and how to escape I know not."

"Escape from what?"

"From arrest."

"Is that young-looking man a police-officer?" I asked, much surprised.

"Yes; he's older than he looks. I ought never to have dared to go to Totnes."

"Why not Totnes?" I asked.

"I was lying low – for a certain reason, Mr Kemball. All of us have to wash in dirty water sometimes, you know," he smiled grimly. "You are an honest man, no doubt – I too was, once."

"And now the police are in search of you – eh?"

I asked. So my estimate of the man was not very far wrong.

He nodded slowly in the affirmative.

A silence fell between us. This discovery, coupled with Arnold's mysterious connection with the trial of the adventuress who called herself Lady Lettice Lancaster, caused me to ponder. Arnold had warned me not to trust him entirely.

The train was now rushing down the incline, and in a few moments would be at Newton Abbot, the junction for Torquay.

Without a word, my companion suddenly sprang to his feet, and taking a railway key from his pocket, went out into the corridor and locked both doors at either end of the carriage so that no one could pass along.

Then, returning to me, he said —

"Perhaps it would be better, Mr Kemball, if you went into the next compartment while we are stopping. We must not appear to have knowledge of each other."

Scarcely had I time to enter the adjoining compartment when the train pulled up. I lit a cigarette, and sat gazing lazily out of the window, when, sure enough, the man in the straw hat who had travelled in the rear of the train strolled aimlessly along, and as he passed the compartment occupied by Dawnay glanced in to satisfy himself that he was still there.

The wait was long, for the corridor coaches from Torquay for London were being joined on. But at last we moved off again, and as soon as we did so I returned to the mysterious fugitive.

"Tell me, Mr Dawnay, something concerning Mr Arnold," I urged earnestly, without preamble. "He did me the honour of entrusting me with certain purely personal matters, but gave me no information as to who or what he was."

"Melvill Arnold was a most remarkable person," declared the man in the red tie. "He divided his time between life in London and exploring the remains of the extinct civilisation in Egypt."

"Then he lived in Egypt?"

"Mostly in the deserts. His knowledge of Egyptology was, perhaps, unequalled. The last letter I received from him was from El Fasher, in Darfur."

"Arnold was not his real name?"

"Not exactly his baptismal one," laughed Dawnay, lightly. "It would hardly have suited him to use that!"

"What was it? Is there any reason why I should not know?"

"Yes. I am scarcely likely to betray my dead friend, Mr Kemball."

I was silent beneath his stern rebuke. At one moment I felt repulsion when I gazed upon his pimply face, yet at the next I experienced a curious sense of fascination. The mystery of it all had become most tantalising. Thought of the bronze cylinder and what it might contain flashed across my mind, whereupon I asked whether Arnold had had any permanent address in London.

"No. I usually wrote to him to the Poste Restante at Charing Cross. He was an elusive man always, and when in London – which was on very rare occasions – seemed to change his abode each day. He boasted that he never slept two nights running in the same bed. He had reasons for that – the same reasons, truth to tell, that I had."

"He feared the police – eh?"

Dawnay's fat face relaxed again into a grim smile. "But now that Arnold is dead I have to secure my own safety," he exclaimed quickly. "I'm in an infernal trap here in this train. I may be arrested when I step out of it – who knows?"

"And would arrest entail serious consequences?" I asked slowly, my eyes fixed upon his.

"Yes, very serious consequences. For myself I don't care very much, but for another – a woman – it would, alas! be fatal," he added hoarsely.

A woman! Did he refer to that remarkable adventuress, details of whose strange career I had read in that old copy of the newspaper?

I remembered that Arnold, in his letter to me, had appealed to me to assist this man – who was evidently his very intimate friend.

"You must evade this person who is watching," I said. "How can it be done?"

He shrugged his shoulders with an expression indicative of bewilderment.

A sudden thought occurred to me.

"You and I are about the same build. Could we not exchange clothes?" I suggested. "At Exeter, you could walk up to the front of the train and escape away, and out of the station, while I will still sit here, my back turned towards the window. The detective will believe you to be still in the train."

"Capital?" he cried, starting up. "A splendid plan, Mr Kemball! By Jove! you are resourceful!" And he began quickly divesting himself of coat and trousers. "This train is express to Exeter, therefore we shall not stop at either Teignmouth or Dawlish." I threw off my coat, vest, cravat, and trousers, and in five minutes had exchanged my garments for his, and had assumed the scarlet tie in place of my own, while he, on his part, got into my suit, which, however, seemed slightly tight for him. He laughed heartily as we stood regarding each other so quickly transformed.

I assumed the grey suède gloves, slightly large for me, tilted the smart grey hat a little over my eyes, and then ensconced myself against the corridor, so that my back only could be visible when the train drew up at St. David's Station in Exeter.

Dawnay went out into the corridor to observe the effect critically.

"Capital!" he cried. "Capital! Won't the fellow be done in the eye!"

"Yes," I laughed; "it will be really amusing to watch his face when he comes to arrest me."

"But he may not come until you get to Paddington – after midnight. And what excuse shall you make for changing clothes with me?"

"Oh, don't bother about that," I said, rather enjoying the prospect of a joke, but little dreaming of the serious predicament in which I was placing myself. "Where shall I meet you again?"

"Ah! Be careful – be very careful, Mr Kemball. You will no doubt be watched. They will suspect you of an intention to meet me again in secret, and for that reason will keep strict surveillance upon you. Use the name Hamilton Davis, and write to me at the Poste Restante at Charing Cross. That is as safe as anywhere. I shall be in London; but I must be off now, and the moment the train stops I shall be out and away. There's sure to be a crowd upon Exeter platform. Ah! You can't tell what a great service you have rendered me in assuming my identity this evening – you have saved me. Good-bye – and a thousand thanks."

Then, with a wave of his hand and a merry smile, the elusive person – for such he no doubt was – went forth into the corridor and disappeared.

I took up my previous position, so that when the train ran into Exeter I was seated with my back to the window, one leg upon the cushion, lazily reading a newspaper which I had found in Dawnay's pocket.

Much bustle was going on outside on the platform, and I knew that the police-officer had passed in order to reassure himself that I had not escaped. For perhaps ten minutes I sat there in lazy indolence, until at last the train moved off again, and once more I was free from observation.

I could not for the life of me discern why the man had feared to be seen in my company. Arnold must have somehow foreseen that his friend would be watched, and had therefore prearranged the sign of the gloves. Perhaps he had expected that another enemy, not the police, would be watching. Yet even there, in the train, Dawnay had expressed fear lest we be observed together. It was a point the full meaning of which I failed to grasp.

At Taunton we stopped again, and I assumed my attitude just as before, with my back to the window, when of a sudden the carriage door was flung open unceremoniously, and a man's voice exclaimed —

"Alfred Dawnay, I am a police-officer and I hold a warrant for your arrest!"

I roused myself slowly and, facing the man who had addressed me, remarked in a cool voice —

"I think you've made a slight mistake – eh? My name is not Dawnay."

The man in the straw hat uttered an ejaculation of surprise and stood staring at me dumbfounded, while a man at his side, evidently one of the Taunton police in plain clothes, looked at us both in wonder.

"If you are not Dawnay, then where is Dawnay?" demanded the detective quickly.

"How do I know?"

"But you are wearing his clothes! You assisted him to escape, therefore you will have to make some explanation."

"I have no explanation to offer," I said. "If you want Dawnay you'd better go and look for him. You have no warrant to arrest me merely because I happen to be wearing clothes resembling Dawnay's."

"Perhaps not, my dear sir," replied the detective, greatly annoyed at being thus outwitted. "But I tell you it will be better for you to be quite frank and outspoken with us. When did Dawnay leave this train – tell me?"

"I don't know," I replied, which was really the truth. And the chagrin of the two police-officers was now fully apparent.

"But you've rendered yourself liable to prosecution, don't forget that," said the man with the straw hat. "That man, Alfred Dawnay, *alias* Day, is wanted on a very serious charge."

"Of what?" I asked quickly.

"Never mind what. You've assisted him to escape, and you'll have to answer for it."

And he closed the door angrily, for the train was again about to move off towards London.

What, I wondered, was the serious charge against Alfred Dawnay?

Chapter Six
The Quick and the Dead

On my return to London I had the very unpleasant experience of being closely watched by detectives, just as the fugitive had foreseen. It was quite evident that the police intended to rediscover Dawnay through my instrumentality.

I wrote to "Mr Hamilton Davis," at the Poste Restante, Charing Cross, giving him my London address at the Hotel Cecil, and also my address at Upton End, hoping that he would send me an appointment. Yet he had shown himself so wary that I hardly believed he would at once reveal his hiding-place. I was extremely anxious to meet him again, for I hoped to learn more from him and solve the mystery of the man whom I had known as Melvill Arnold.

In order to evade the unwelcome attentions of detectives, I went down to Upton End for a few days, for I knew that if any stranger were lurking in the vicinity old Tucker would certainly know of it. Not three days had I been there, indeed, before one morning he lingered over watering the plants in the conservatory when I came down to breakfast, to declare that he was much puzzled over the fact that a man – "a decent-looking man" he described him – seemed to be for ever passing and repassing the lodge.

"I can't think, sir, what can be his business," he said. "I don't like the looks of him at all. Maybe he's one of a gang who intends to rob the house, sir. Therefore I've told Thomas and Mason to keep their eyes open." He referred to the groom and the under-gardener. "I've half a mind to set the dogs on 'im," he added. "Only let 'im come into the drive and I'd let Prince after 'im. His whole suit of clothes wouldn't be worth sixpence afterwards."

"Some inquisitive fellow, I suppose, Tucker," I said, in an endeavour to treat the incident with utter unconcern. "I don't fancy burglars would come here."

"Don't you believe it, sir. There's lots of things – pictures and curios which your father, the late Sir Lionel, collected – which would fetch a big price in London, you know, sir."

"Well," I laughed, "if burglars really do pay us a visit, Prince will see to them. I'd be sorry to face the dog if I were a thief."

"So would I, sir. Only there's such a thing as a dose o' strychnine on a bit o' meat, you know."

"Abroad, yes. In Italy it is the favourite ruse of burglars, Tucker. But here in England we are much more secure."

And then, watering-can in hand, the faithful old fellow passed out, while I sat down to my lonely breakfast.

A week after I had written to the Charing Cross Post Office I received a note, dated from the Hôtel de la Boule d'Or at Provins, a small town some sixty miles east of Paris.

"I am delighted to have your address," it read. "At the present moment my movements are very uncertain, but as soon as I can see you again I will write to Upton End. Be careful, however, that when you meet me you are not watched. I fear you may be troubled by unwelcome watchers. If you are, pray forgive me, and recollect how grateful I am to you for the service which you have rendered me, and which one day I hope to repay."

That was all. There was no signature.

And so I was compelled to wait for a further communication from the man who was undoubtedly in hiding in that obscure old town in the valley of the Voulzie.

Time after time I took out that corroded cylinder – wherein was something which the dead man had declared would cause the whole world to stand aghast – and held it in my hand full of wonder. Upon the table, in the big old-fashioned library, stood the weird little figure of the ancient god of the

Egyptians – the great Osiris. Sight of it, each time that I entered there, recalled to me that sunset hour in the little hotel off the Strand, the hour when Melvill Arnold had passed silently to the Beyond.

Three weeks went by in eager expectancy. By careful inquiry and judicious watchfulness, I came to the conclusion that the surveillance set upon me by Scotland Yard had been withdrawn. Hence it seemed to me that they had found traces of the fugitive they sought. Probably, if he were a known criminal, his presence in France had been reported through the Prefecture of Police in Paris. It was part of the international police system to do so.

Was Alfred Dawnay again in peril of arrest, I wondered?

One morning, however, I received the long-expected message, for among my letters I found a note asking me to be alone outside Lathbury – a small hamlet a little way out of Newport Pagnell, on the Northampton Road – at three o'clock that afternoon. The heavy handwriting was the same as the letter from Provins, and I knew it to be from Dawnay.

Therefore, with considerable eagerness, I set out about two o'clock to walk to the place appointed for meeting. I passed up the long street of Newport Pagnell, but nobody followed me. It was early-closing day, and the place was sleepy and deserted. Out again upon the dusty high road I met nobody save a middle-aged man on a motor-cycle, who dashed past me at a tearing pace, and who, as later on I approached the inn at Lathbury, had pulled up to make some repair.

Suddenly I regarded him with suspicion. Was it possible that he was following me to watch my movements?

As I went by he looked up, full into my face, and then I felt certain that I had seen him somewhere before. But where I could not recollect.

I had half a mind to turn back and thus throw him off the scent if he were a detective; nevertheless, compelled as I was to act warily, I strolled on through the village, and out upon the open road, up the hill in the direction of Gaythurst.

I glanced at my watch and found it already a quarter-past three. But nobody was yet in sight. Probably Dawnay was standing concealed somewhere behind the hedge in order to satisfy himself that the coast was quite clear before approaching me.

Behind, at some distance away, I heard the hum of an approaching motor-car, and, stepping to the side of the road, prepared to be suffocated by the thick white dust.

The car swung through the village and rushed up the hill, but as it came behind me slowed down, until it passed me at quite a slow pace. Then I saw it was a powerful limousine, painted and upholstered in stone-grey, and within sat a woman alone.

A few yards in front of me it stopped dead, and the woman leaned out of the door, when, to my utter amazement, I recognised her to be the same pretty young girl whom I had seen in Highgate Cemetery – the mysterious person who had so tenderly placed fresh flowers upon the grave of Melvill Arnold.

"Excuse me!" she exclaimed, addressing me in a musical voice, as she opened the door. "I believe you are Mr Kemball, are you not?"

"That certainly is my name," I said, raising my straw hat instinctively.

"Well, I – I've come here to meet you," she laughed merrily. "Would you come inside, and then I can tell you all."

So at her invitation I got in beside her, when the ear moved off swiftly again, and next moment we were swinging along towards Northampton, the driver evidently having already received his instructions.

"I suppose I ought to explain, Mr Kemball, that Mr Harvey Shaw, the gentleman known to you as Dawnay, deemed it wiser not to come and meet you in person, because – well – " and she laughed sweetly, displaying even rows of pearly teeth. "I think you probably realise the reason."

"Fully," I answered, quite taken aback by the ruddiness of her appearance. "But I had suspicion as I came along of a motor-cyclist who stopped before the inn. He is a man I have seen somewhere before."

"Oh, he is a friend. He is there as scout for us," she said. "He has been watching you, and has signalled that all is clear, and so we may proceed without fear. Mr Shaw has asked me to take you to him."

"Where is he?"

"At Rockingham, beyond Kettering," was her reply, and as she turned her splendid brown eyes upon me, I judged her to be about nineteen or twenty, and saw that hers was a face more perfect in its beauty than ever I had before gazed upon. Her sombre black heightened the pallor of her complexion, yet her lips were full and red, her soft cheeks dimpled and perfect in their contour, while her large splendid eyes revealed an inexpressible sweetness and charm. From the first moment I realised that she was full of good-humour, with a bright, cheerful disposition, and yet quiet of manner and full of exquisite refinement. The expression in her great wide-open eyes was perhaps just a trifle too shrewd, and she seemed, as I began to chat with her, possessed of a ready wit and a quaint philosophy.

Of her wondrous and striking beauty there could be no two opinions. She was perfect, from the crown of her neat little straw motor-bonnet to the top of her brown glacé shoe. Her hands were small and well-gloved, and her pointed chin gave to her sweet delicate face an air of piquant irresponsibility that added greatly to her attractiveness.

Between the smart chauffeur and ourselves the window was closed; therefore we could converse without being overheard.

"Mr Shaw told me how generously you assisted him when you met at Totnes," she exclaimed at last. "Ah, Mr Kemball!" she added, suddenly growing very serious, "you cannot tell how great a service you rendered us then."

"Us?" I echoed. "Then I presume you are a relation?"

"His daughter," she replied, "or, to be quite correct, his adopted daughter. My name is Asta – Asta Seymour. So perhaps I may be permitted to thank you, Mr Kemball, for the generous assistance you gave in securing my foster-father's escape."

"No thanks are needed, Miss Seymour, I assure you," I declared. "But tell me, why is he in dread of the police?"

"Of that you will learn soon enough, I fear," she replied in a hard, changed voice, which had a distant touch of sadness in it.

"Yes. But is there not a grave danger in returning to England?"

"He was compelled to do so – first in order to meet you at Totnes, and now for a second reason, in connection with the unfortunate death of poor Mr Melvill Arnold."

"You, of course, knew Mr Arnold," I said. "It is your hand that has placed those fresh flowers upon his grave."

She was silent. Then in a low voice she said —

"I admit that I have done so, for he was always my friend – always. But please say nothing to my father regarding what I have done."

"To me a great mystery enshrouds Mr Arnold," I said. "Cannot you tell me something concerning him – who and what he was? By my very slight knowledge of him, I feel instinctively that he was no ordinary person."

"And your estimate was surely a perfectly correct one, Mr Kemball. He was one of the most remarkable of men."

"You knew of his death. How?"

"I knew he was in London, for he scribbled me a note telling me his address, but requesting me to reveal it to nobody, not even my father," she said, in a low, hoarse voice. "I called to see him upon some urgent business – because he wished to see me, but, alas! they told me at the hotel that

he had died only a few hours before. So I went away, fearing to reveal myself to you, who they told me was his friend. Two days later I made inquiries, and learned where they had buried him. Then, in tribute to the memory of the man of whose greatness of heart and remarkable attainments the world has remained in ignorance, I laid flowers upon his grave."

"Why did you fear to reveal yourself to me, Miss Seymour?" I asked earnestly, looking straight into her soft brown eyes as the car rushed along.

But she avoided my gaze, while a flush overspreading her cheeks betrayed her embarrassment.

"Because – well, because I did not know how far you might be trusted," was her frank, open response, after a moment's hesitation. "Indeed, I do not even now know whether you would still remain our friend and preserve the secret if the ugly truth became revealed to you!"

Chapter Seven
Dawnay Makes Confession

Her curious reply greatly puzzled me. What could be "the ugly truth" to which she had referred?

At her side I sat in silence for some time. The car was tearing along a wide straight main road between dusty hedges and many telegraph wires, and as I glanced at her I saw that she was staring straight before her fixedly, with a strange hard look upon her beautiful countenance.

Perhaps I might have been mistaken, but at my mention of the dead man I felt certain that I saw in her eyes the light of unshed tears.

Through the busy town of Northampton we went, and out again on the road to lettering – a road I knew well, having motored over it many times. In the centre of the latter town we turned sharply to the left, and, taking the Oakham Road, soon passed through the village of Great Oakley, and suddenly descending a very steep hill, on the summit, of which a castle was perched, we found ourselves in the wide straggling main street of Rockingham village.

My fair companion spoke but little. She seemed suddenly to have become strangely preoccupied. Indeed, it struck me as though she had been seized by some sudden apprehension, by a thought which had crossed her mind for the first time. Her manner had completely changed.

"Your father has been away in France since I met him?" I remarked, for want of something else to say.

"Yes," she responded; "he has been moving rapidly from place to place for reasons to which I need not refer."

"But why has he returned if there is still danger?" I queried.

"I scarcely think there is further danger – at least at present," she answered. I was puzzled at her reply, but not for long, as I will relate.

The car slipped through Rockingham, and when about two miles farther on swung abruptly through a handsome pair of lodge-gates and into a broad, well-timbered park, at last pulled up before a long, old-fashioned Jacobean mansion which commanded from its grey stone terrace fine views of the green undulating hills and rich pastures around. The old ivy-clad place, with its pointed gables and mullioned windows, was a good type of the stately English home, and as the car drew up at the porch the great door was flung open by a neat man-servant, who bowed low as we entered the fine hall, where the stone slabs were, I noticed, worn hollow by the tread of generations.

The place was built in a quadrangle, two-storeyed, with handsome heraldic devices in the stained windows. There seemed to be roomy corridors, leading by stout oak doors to roomier apartments within, some oak-panelled, others with moulded ceilings and carved stone fireplaces. The whole place had a cloak and rapier look about it, built probably when the old Cavalier was poor and soured and had sheathed his sword, but nevertheless was counting the months when the King should come to his own again.

I followed Asta Seymour along the hall, and turning into a corridor on the left, suddenly found myself in a pleasant sitting-room wherein the man I knew as Dawnay stood, his hands behind his back, awaiting me.

As we entered she closed the door behind us. The room bore an old-world air, with chintz-covered furniture and filled with the perfume of pot-pourri.

"At last, Mr Kemball! At last?" cried the fugitive, crossing quickly to me and taking my hand in warm welcome. "So Asta found you all right, eh?"

"Her appearance was certainly a surprise," I said. "I expected you to meet me yourself."

"Well," he laughed, his small narrow-set eyes filled with a merry twinkle. "It would hardly have been a judicious proceeding. So I sent Asta, to whom, I may as well tell you, I entrust all matters of strictest confidence. But sit down, Mr Kemball. Give me your hat and stick."

And he drew forward for me a comfortable chair, while the girl, excusing herself, left us alone.

When she had gone, my friend looked me in the face, and burst out laughing, exclaiming —

"I suppose, Mr Kemball, this is rather a surprise to you to find that Harvey Shaw, the occupier of Lydford Hall, and Alfred Dawnay are one and the same person, eh?"

"It is," I admitted. "I have passed the edge of your park many times in my car, but I never dreamed that you lived here."

"Well," he said, "I rely upon your secrecy. You were extremely good to me the other day, so I see no reason why I should not be just a little frank with you."

"Your affairs are, of course, no business of mine," I declared. "But whatever you may reveal to me I shall certainly treat with the strictest confidence."

"Ah! I feel sure that you will. Melvill Arnold would never have taken you into his confidence if he had not been certain that he could trust you. He was one of the very shrewdest men in all England, or he would not have been so enormously successful."

From the long windows, with their small leaded panes, I could see from where I sat far away across the park with its fine beech avenue. Over the wide fireplace were carved many heraldic devices in stone, while against the dark oak-panelling the bright chintzes showed clean and fresh. Taste was displayed everywhere – the taste of a refined man.

Mr Shaw, as he was apparently known there, was dressed very different from the occasion when we had met at Totnes. Then he had assumed the appearance of a racing man, but in his guise of country gentleman he was dressed in morning-coat of a rather old-fashioned cut, and pepper-and-salt trousers, an attire which gave him a quiet and somewhat distinguished appearance.

I sat before him, wondering at his remarkable dual personality – the man hunted by the police, and the wealthy occupier of that fine country mansion.

His small, shrewd eyes seemed to realise the trend of my thoughts as he lounged back in his chair near the window, regarding me lazily.

"I promised, Mr Kemball, that I would see you again as soon as opportunity offered," he said; "and feeling assured of the spirit of good fellowship existing between us, I have this afternoon let you into the secret of my double life. That evening at Exeter I had a very narrow squeak of it – by Gad! one of the narrowest in all my life. An enemy – one whom I had believed to be my friend – gave me completely away. The police evidently expected to find me through you, for you were watched constantly. Everywhere you went you were followed."

"You know that?"

"I do," he said. "The fact is I have a personal guardian who constantly watches over me, and warns me of danger. You saw him on his cycle at Lathbury. He watched you while I was absent in France shaking off those bloodhounds of the law."

"And you have now shaken them off, I presume?"

"I think so. Scotland Yard has, happily, never yet associated Harvey Shaw, Justice of the Peace for the County of Rutland, and one of the visiting justices of Oakham Gaol, with Alfred Dawnay, alias Day, whom they are so very eager to arrest," and he laughed grimly. "Mine is an amusing situation, I assure you, to sit on the Bench and try prisoners, well knowing that each police-officer who appears as witness would, if he knew, be only too eager to execute the warrant outstanding."

And his broad, good-humoured face again expanded into a smile.

"Certainly. I quite see the grim humour of the situation," I said.

"And if you had not assisted me, Mr Kemball, I should, at this moment, have been under detention in His Majesty's prison at Brixton," he said. "By the way, I have to return the suit of clothes you so very kindly lent to me. My man has them upstairs ready packed. I shall send them to you

by parcel-post. Gates was, I think, rather surprised to find another man's clothes among my kit. But fortunately he's used to my idiosyncrasies, and regards them as mere eccentricities on the part of his master. But he is always discreet. He's been with me these ten years."

"How long have you lived here, Mr – er – "

"Shaw here," he interrupted quickly.

"Mr Shaw. How long have you lived here? I thought the place belonged to Lord Wyville?"

"So it does – at least to the late lord's executors. I've rented it for the past three years. So in the county I'm highly respectable, and I believe highly respected."

"The situation is unusual – to say the least," I declared.

"Perhaps I'm a rather unusual man, Mr Kemball," he said, rising and crossing the room. I saw that in his dark green cravat he wore a fine diamond, and that his manner and bearing were those of a well-born country gentleman. Truly, he was an unusual person.

"I hope," he went on, halting suddenly before me, "that as you have associated yourself with my very dear and intimate friend, Melvill Arnold, you will now become my friend also. It is for that reason I venture to approach you as I have done to-day."

"Well," I said, my natural sense of caution exerting itself as I recollected the dead man's written injunction, "I must admit, Mr Shaw, that I am sorely puzzled to fathom the mystery of the situation. Ever since my meeting with poor Mr Arnold I seem to have been living in a perfect maze of inexplicable circumstances."

"I have no doubt. But all will be explained in due course. Did Arnold make no explanation?"

"None. Indeed, in his letter to me, which I opened after his burial, he admitted to me that he was not what he had pretended to be."

"Few of us are, I fear," he laughed. "We are all more or less hypocrites and humbugs. To-day, in this age of criminality and self-advertisement, the art of evading exposure is the art of industry. Alas! the copy-book proverb that honesty is the best policy seems no longer true. To be dishonest is to get rich quick; to remain honest is to face the Official Receiver in the Bankruptcy Court. A dishonest man amasses money and becomes great and honoured owing to the effort of his press agent. The honest man struggles against the trickery of the unscrupulous, and sooner or later goes to the wall."

"What you say is, I fear, too true," I sighed. "Would that it were untrue. Virtue has very little reward in these days of unscrupulous dealing in every walk of life, from the palace to the slum."

"Then I take it that you do not hold in contempt a man who, in dealing with the world, has used his opponents' own weapons?" he asked.

"How can I? In a duel the same weapons must be used."

"Exactly, Mr Kemball, we are now beginning to understand each other, and – "

At that moment the door opened without warning, and Asta re-entered. She had changed her frock, and was wearing a pretty muslin blouse and skirt of dove-grey.

"Shall you have tea in here, Dad – or out on the lawn?" she inquired.

"Oh, on the lawn, I think, dear. I just want to finish my chat with Mr Kemball – if you don't mind."

"I'm awfully sorry I intruded," she laughed. "I thought you'd finished." And with a sweet smile to me she closed the door and again left us.

How very dainty she looked; how exquisite was her figure! Surely her grace was perfect.

"Really," my companion said, "I don't know what I'd do without Asta. She's all I have in the world, and she's a perfect marvel of discretion and diplomacy."

"She's indeed very charming," I said, perfectly frankly.

"I'm glad you find her so. She has plenty of admirers, I can assure you. And I fear they are spoiling her. But as I was saying, Mr Kemball," he went on, "I hope we now understand each other perfectly. Poor Arnold was such a dear and intimate friend of mine, and we were equally interested in so many financial schemes that it has puzzled me greatly that he should have sought an obscure

burial as he has done, and that his affairs are not in the hands of some responsible lawyer. Did he mention anything to you concerning the terms of his will?"

"He never breathed a word regarding it. Indeed, I have no idea whether he had made one."

"Ah!" sighed my companion; "so like poor Arnold. He always was fond of postponing till to-morrow what could be done to-day. His will – if he made one – would be interesting, no doubt, for his estate must be pretty considerable. He was a wealthy man."

I recollected the incident of the burning of the banknotes, and that set me pondering.

"Do you anticipate that he made a will?" I asked. "I think not," was Shaw's answer. "He had a strong aversion to making a will, I know, because he feared that after his death the truth might be revealed."

"The truth concerning what?"

"Concerning a certain chapter of his life which for years had been very carefully hidden. The fact is, Mr Kemball, that he feared exposure!"

"Of what?"

"Of some rather ugly facts. And for that reason he carefully avoided making much explanation to you as to who he really was. He had reasons – very strong reasons – for concealing his actual identity."

"May I not know them?" I asked very slowly, fixing my eyes upon his.

"Some day," was the rather strained reply. "Not now – some day – some day. I hope to be in a position to explain all to you – to reveal to you certain matters which will hold you utterly dumbfounded and amazed."

Chapter Eight
The Story of the Cylinder

I was taking tea beneath the trees with my host and Asta, when there approached a tall, dark-haired athletic young fellow in grey flannels and straw hat. He was smiling merrily, and the sudden light in the girl's eyes when she saw him was sufficient to reveal to me that they were intimate friends.

They grasped hands, while Shaw exclaimed in his slow deliberate drawl —

"Hulloa, Guy! I thought you had gone up to town?"

"No. I had a wire which put off my appointment until Thursday, so I've come over for a cup of tea." Then she introduced the young fellow to me as Guy Nicholson.

He seated himself in one of the long cane deckchairs, and as Asta handed him some tea the pair began to chat about a tennis tournament which was to be held at a neighbouring house. Presently he turned to me, and we had a long conversation. He had the distinct bearing of a gentleman, smart, spruce, and upright, his handsome smiling face bronzed by the sun, while he seemed brimming over with good-humour.

From the first I instinctively liked him. Shaw explained that the young fellow was a near neighbour, whose father, an ironmaster in the North, had died a couple of years ago, leaving him a handsome fortune.

"He's always about with Asta," he added confidently in a low voice. "And I have suspicion that she has grown very fond of him."

As I glanced across at the pair I saw how well suited they were to each other. She looked the personification of all that is lovely. Her cool muslin blouse and grey skirt fell to her young form prettily; her dark wavy hair shadowed the great brown eyes now that she had removed her motor-bonnet, making them seem to hold in their depths a vague knowledge that should never come to the ken of man, save perhaps at that moment when love would drag from them their slumbering secrets.

But that was only one of Asta's moods, and almost before I had taken notice of it she was laughing merrily with her companion as she handed him the cake.

I saw that her eyes did not flinch from the steady gaze of those others, but I knew that there was a certain quick thumping beneath the pretty blouse that made her realise she was not quite so adamant as she had believed.

She believed that her secret was her own. It did not matter about her heart. No one could see, and so no one knew.

When we had finished tea the pair rose and strolled away together through the rosery, towards the flower-garden ablaze with bright blossoms. And as they passed beneath the arches of crimson ramblers and were lost to sight, my host exclaimed, with a sigh and a sad smile —

"Ah! How delightful it would be to find oneself young again – young again like you, Mr Kemball!"

I laughed, and we lit cigarettes and began to chat. I confess that the mystery surrounding this man who had so openly admitted to me that he was an adventurer as well as a county magistrate greatly attracted me. I found myself fascinated by the whole unusual circumstances. One curious fact I had noted was that while Asta was aware of Arnold's death she had never told the man whom she knew as father. What motive had she in concealing the truth? Again, it seemed very evident that the young man Nicholson little dreamed that Mr Harvey Shaw was anything else than the wealthy idler which he pretended to be. And surely Asta had not undeceived him.

As together we strolled about the beautiful well-kept grounds, and as he showed me his motor garage, wherein stood four cars of various types, his electric lighting plant and electric pumps for the water supply, I tried to obtain from him some further information regarding the man Arnold.

But to all my ingenious inquiries he remained dumb.

Therefore I turned my attention to Asta, and discovered that he had adopted her when she was left alone a little child of eight.

"My life, Mr Kemball, has been very full of change and variety. Sometimes for months I have been compelled to live in strict seclusion – sometimes in places hardly civilised. I spent a year in the mountains of Northern Albania, for instance, living with one of the mountain tribes; and on another occasion necessity compelled me to live for eight months in an obscure village in Corfu. But through it all little Asta has been my companion – ah, yes! – and how often she has cheered my lonely, solitary life!"

I saw that, whatever might be this man's character, he was devoted to her. While she, on her part, had shown herself to be ever watchful of his interests.

"Then she really is quite a cosmopolitan!" I exclaimed.

"Certainly. She speaks three languages perfectly. Few girls of her age have, like her, seen life in all its various phases, from that of the peasant hut to life here in an English home. But," he added, "when Arnold spoke to you in confidence did he tell you nothing?"

"Of what?" I asked.

"Nothing concerning his past?"

"Nothing."

"He did not mention me – eh?" asked my companion.

"Only to urge me to carry that letter to you at Totnes."

"And he gave you nothing else? I understood you to say that he treated you with a certain amount of confidence," and he looked me narrowly in the face.

"He gave me two objects," I replied. "A small golden figure of the Egyptian god Osiris – a very ancient relic – and a curious and much corroded cylinder of bronze."

"Great Heavens! The bronze cylinder!" he gasped, starting and standing before me open-mouthed. His face was blanched at mention of it.

"Yes."

"He gave you that, eh?" he cried in distinct alarm. "And you accepted the trust – you were fool enough to do that?"

"Of course I did. Why?"

"Ah! You would not have done so had you but known the terrible evil which must now threaten you," he said in a low, hoarse voice, his manner changing to one of great alarm. He seemed agitated and nervous.

"I don't quite follow you," I said, much puzzled at his manner.

"You are, of course, in ignorance, Mr Kemball. But by the acceptance of that executorship – by the holding in your possession of that cylinder you are a doomed man."

"Doomed? How?" I asked, with an incredulous smile.

"I tell you this quite openly and frankly, because you have already proved yourself my friend," he said, his face now entirely transformed. We were standing together at the edge of the square croquet lawn, once the bowling-green, where the great old box-trees were clipped into fantastic shapes, while at the end was the long stone terrace with the open park beyond.

"I think you told me that he made you a present in banknotes?" Shaw went on. "Ah! Melvill Arnold knew only too well what dire unhappiness and misfortune, what deadly peril, possession of that cylinder must entail. He therefore made you that payment by way of a little recompense. Did he instruct you what to do with the thing," he inquired.

"On a certain day I am to hand it over to a person who will come to me and ask for it."

"To hand it over without question?"

"Yes, without question."

Shaw was silent for some moments. His brows were knit, and he was thinking deeply, his arms folded as he stood.

"Well," he exclaimed suddenly, at last, "I never dreamed that he had entrusted the cylinder to you. You, of course, still hold it in your possession?"

"Yes."

"Then, if I were you, I should be very anxious for the arrival of the appointed day when you are to be relieved of its heavy responsibility. The history of that metal tube is a record of ruin, disaster, and death, for misfortune in one form or another always overtakes its possessor. Its story is surely the weirdest and most terrible that could be related. I knew that Arnold was in Egypt, but I never dreamed that he would dare at last to take the cylinder from its hiding-place and convey it here – to England!"

I recollected how my friend had just before his death declared that its contents would amaze the world, and I made quick inquiry concerning it.

"What it contains I do not know," he replied. "Only Arnold himself knows, and he has unfortunately carried his secret to the grave. It was found, I believe, in the tomb of King Merenptah, the Pharaoh under whom the exodus of the Israelites took place some twelve hundred years before the Christian era. Arnold himself discovered it at Abydos, but on opening it, dreaded to allow the thing to see the light of day, and in order to preserve its influence from mankind, he again buried it in a certain spot known only to himself; but, no doubt, somewhere near the great Temple of Amon-Ra, at Karnak."

"Why did he wish to preserve his discovery from mankind?" I asked, much interested.

"How can I tell? After his discovery he returned post-haste to England, an entirely changed man. He would never reveal to me, his most intimate friend, what the cylinder actually contained, save that he admitted to me that he held it in awe – and that if he allowed it to go forth to the world it would have caused the greatest sensation in our modern civilisation, that the world would stand still in amazement."

"What could he have meant by that?"

"Ah!" replied my companion, "I cannot tell. All I know is, that together with the cylinder he discovered some ancient papyri recounting the terrible fate which would befall its possessors, and warning any one against handling, possessing, or opening it."

"A favourite method of the ancients to prevent the rifling of their tombs," I remarked with a laugh.

"But in this case Arnold, who was a great archaeologist, and could decipher the hieroglyphics no doubt, investigated the weird contents of the cylinder and satisfied himself that they were such that no mortal eye should gaze upon without bewilderment. Those were the very words he used in describing them to me."

"And did anything terrible happen to him as a result?" I asked.

"From the moment of that investigation misfortune dogged his footsteps always. His friends died one by one, and he himself was smitten by that infection of the heart, which, as you know, has terminated fatally."

"How long ago is it since he made this discovery in King Merenptah's tomb?" I asked.

"About four years," was Shaw's reply, and I saw that he was trembling with excitement. "And from that day until the day of his death poor Melvill Arnold was, alas! never the same man. What he found within the Thing, as he used to call it, made such a terrible impression upon him that he, bold and fearless and defiant as he used to be, became suddenly weak, timid, and nervous, lest the secret contained in the cylinder should be revealed. That message of the hieroglyphics, whatever it was, haunted him night and day, and he often declared to me that, in consequence of his foolish disobedience of the injunction contained in the papyri, he had become a doomed man, – doomed, Mr Kemball!" he added, in a low, strange voice, looking straight and earnestly into my lace – "doomed, as I fear, alas! that you too are now doomed!"

Chapter Nine
Reveals Guy's Suspicions

All endeavour to discover from Shaw something further concerning the mysterious cylinder proved unavailing. Apparently he was entirely in ignorance of its actual contents – of the Thing referred to by the man now dead.

Later I had an opportunity of chatting with Guy Nicholson as we strolled about the beautiful gardens in the sunset. He was a bright, merry, easy-going fellow, who had been a year or two in a cavalry regiment, had retired on the death of his father, and who now expressed an ambition for foreign travel. He lived at Titmarsh Court, between Rockingham and Corby, he explained, and he invited me over to see him.

Long ago, I had heard of old Nathaniel Nicholson, the great Sheffield ironmaster, who had purchased the place from a bankrupt peer, and who had spent many thousands on improvements. My father had known him but slightly, for they met in the hunting-field, and now I was much gratified to know his son.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.