Le Queux William

The Mysterious Mr. Miller

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Le Queux W.

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Содержание

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Chapter One
A Stranger in Shepherd's Bush

"Why! Look! he's dead, doctor!" I gasped, standing aghast.

The sudden change in the thin sallow face, the lack of expression in the brilliant eyes, and the dropping of the jaw were sufficient to convince me that the stranger's life had ebbed away.

The doctor bent, placed his hand upon the prostrate man's breast for a moment, and then, straightening himself, he turned to me and answered gravely: —

"Yes, Godfrey; it is as I feared from the first. Nothing could save him. Remember what I told you this morning – it was simply a matter of hours."

"He appears to have been a rather strong, athletic man," I remarked, looking down upon the wan, furrowed face.

"Unusually so. The disease, however, has thoroughly wrecked his constitution. He was addicted to the morphia habit of late." And pulling down the sheet he pointed to the marks of recent punctures upon the dead man's forearm.

We were standing together in the small shabby bedroom of the boarding-house wherein I lived in Granville Gardens, facing the recreation ground close to Shepherd's Bush Railway Station. The stifling July day was at an end, and the narrow room was lit by the soft hazy glow of the fast-fading London sunset.

Through the open window came the shouts of children at play upon the "green" opposite, mingled with the chatter of the passers-by and the ever-increasing whirr of the electric trams. Within that faded, smoke-grimed chamber of the dead was silence. Upon the bed between us lay the dead stranger – the man who was a mystery.

"Well, has he told you anything after all?" inquired my friend, Dr Tulloch.

"Very little," was my reply. "He was uncommunicative. He had a reason, I believe, for concealing his identity."

"Perhaps we shall discover something when we search his things," my friend remarked.

"We'll do that to-morrow," I said. "It isn't decent to do so at once."

Then, as Tulloch bent again, to reassure himself that his patient was actually lifeless, a silence once more fell between us. The glow of the summer sunset deepened, shining through the smoke-haze, and lighting up those dead features for a moment, but next instant the doctor, having been satisfied that no spark of life remained, tenderly drew the sheet over the white sphinx-like countenance.

The unfortunate man was a perfect stranger to us all.

On the previous day, at a little before six o'clock in the evening, he had called upon old Mrs Gilbert, who with her daughter kept the boarding-house where I chanced to be staying, and had, it appeared, taken a top room, where his two leather portmanteaux were placed. I knew nothing of the man's advent until Miss Gilbert had tapped at the door of the sitting-room and informed me that she had a new guest, a foreign gentleman who could speak only a few words of broken English.

"This is his name," she said, handing me a scrap of paper whereon he had written "Michele Massari."

"An Italian," I remarked. "There is a noble family of the Massari, in Ferrara. He may belong to it."

"It's fortunate, Mr Leaf, that you speak Italian," Miss Gilbert said, laughing. "You'll help us if we are in any difficulty, won't you?"

"Most certainly," I assured her, for I knew that a foreigner is often a great trouble in a purely English *pension*. Many people speak French or German, but few know Italian.

Then the landlady's daughter, a pleasant-faced, florid young woman of about thirty, thanked me and withdrew.

The reason I found myself at Mrs Gilbert's *pension* was in order to be near my old schoolfellow, Sammy Sampson, who had made the place his *pied-à-terre* in town for several years past. I had to spend six months in London upon business affairs, therefore we had agreed to share his sitting-room, a cosy little bachelor's den leading from his bedroom at the back of the house.

An hour later at dinner the stranger made his appearance and, with my consent, was placed next to me. There were eleven guests in all – two married couples of the usual *genre* to be found in London boarding-houses of that order, and the rest men with various occupations "in the City." We were usually a merry party, with Miss Gilbert at the head of the long table, and the chatter was generally amusing.

The advent of the stranger, however, awakened every one's curiosity, and as he took his seat, glancing sharply around, there fell a dead silence.

He was a tall, thin, wiry man with sharp aquiline features, hair with silver threads in it, and fierce black moustaches carefully waxed. His eyes were black and penetrating, his complexion sallow, his cheeks sunken, and the glance he gave at his fellow-guests was quick and apprehensive, as though he feared recognition.

He wore evening dress, which was out of place at Mrs Gilbert's, and also showed that he was not used to boarding-houses of that class. And as he bowed towards me and seated himself, I saw that upon his lean, claw-like hand was a fine diamond ring.

All eyes were directed upon him, and at once I detected that, being a foreigner, he was viewed with considerable disfavour and distrust. The guests at Mrs Gilbert's were not cosmopolitan. The only foreigners accepted at their own estimation in London boarding-houses are the Indian law students. Every girl believes her "tar-brush" table-companion to be a prince.

Signor Massari ate his tinned soup in silence. He had tucked the end of his napkin into his collar in true Italian fashion, and from the fact that attached to his watch-chain was a small golden hand with the index-finger pointing, I put him down as a superstitious Tuscan. That hand was the survival of a mediaeval Tuscan charm to avert the evil eye.

Having spent some years of an adventurous youth in old-world Tuscany, and being well acquainted with the soft musical tongue of the flower-scented land, I ventured presently to make a casual remark with my c's well aspirated, as became the true-born Florentine.

My companion started, looking at me in quick suspicion. In his keen piercing eyes was a glance of sharp apprehension and inquiry – but only for a moment. Sight of me seemed instantly to dispel his fears, and his countenance resumed its normal appearance. But his response was a rather cold and formal one – in the *patois* of the Genoese. He evidently desired that I should not put him down as Tuscan.

Though somewhat puzzled I allowed the incident to pass. Yet I made a mental note of it. Signor Massari, I decided, was a somewhat queer customer. He was a man with enemies – and he feared them. That fact was quite evident.

We chatted in Italian, much to Miss Gilbert's fussy satisfaction, but our conversation was rather formal and strained. He had no intention, it seemed, to have anything to do with his fellow-guests, and he only tolerated me because it would have been uncivil not to do so.

A friend in Italy had recommended him to Mrs Gilbert's, he explained. He had only arrived from the Continent at 4:50 that evening, and had come straight there in a cab.

"Then this is your first visit to London?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "I was here once before – long ago." And I thought he sighed slightly, as though the recollection of the previous visit was painful.

His was a sad face; hard, furrowed – a countenance that bore trouble written indelibly upon it. He ate but little, and drank only a glass of mineral water.

I tried to get him to tell me from what province of Italy he came, but he studiously avoided all my ingenious questions. He spoke of Italy vaguely, and yet with the tenderness of one who loved his fatherland. Among all the nations of Europe, the Italian is surely the most patriotic and the most eager to serve his country.

On several occasions remarks, meant to be courteous, were addressed to him in English by my companions, but it was plain that he did not understand our tongue. Or if he did, he gave no sign.

Therefore, from the very first moment of his entry into our boarding-house circle we put him down as a complete mystery.

Sammy Sampson, my irresponsible friend, sat opposite me and, as usual, kept the table laughing at his clever witticisms. Once I saw the Italian scowl in displeasure, and wondered whether he had conceived the idea that my friend was joking at his expense.

The stranger was not aware that I had detected the fierce look of hatred that, for a single instant, showed in his dark shining eyes. It was an expression that I did not like – an expression of fierce, relentless, even murderous resentment.

I was about to assure him of Sammy's utter disinclination to poke fun at any foreigner, when I saw that if I did so I should only aggravate the situation. Therefore I let it pass.

The Italian was a man of refinement, exquisite of manner towards the ladies as was all his race, and though I cannot explain it he struck me as being well-born, and superior to those sitting at table with him. Yet he vouchsafed but little as regards himself. Italy was his home – that was all. And Italy is a great place; a country of a hundred nations. The Venetian is of a different race from the Sicilian, the Tuscan from the Calabrian. I still suspected he was a Tuscan, yet he spoke the Italian tongue so well that at one moment I put him down as a born Florentine, while at the next as a Livornese or a Roman.

He saw that I knew Italy and the Italians, and was purposely endeavouring to mislead me.

That same night, just after midnight, Jane, one of the maids-of-all-work, rapped at my door, saying: —

"Please, sir, the Italian gentleman's been taken awful ill. We can't make out what 'e wants. Would you kindly go to 'im?"

I dressed hurriedly, and, ascending to the stranger's room, asked, in Italian, permission to enter.

A faint voice responded, and a moment later I was at the stranger's bedside. The feeble light of the single candle showed a great change in his countenance, and I saw that he was suffering severely and seemed to be choking.

"I – I thank you very much, signore, for coming to me," he said, with considerable difficulty. "I am having one of my bad attacks – I – I – "

"Had you not better see a doctor? I'll call a friend of mine, if you'll allow me."

"Yes. Perhaps it would really be best," was his reply, and I saw that his hands were clenched in sudden pain.

Therefore, after telling Sammy of the foreigner's illness, I put on my hat and went round into the Holland Road for my friend Tulloch.

The latter came with me at once, and as soon as I had interpreted the stranger's symptoms, and he had made a careful examination, he turned to me and said in English: —

"The man's very bad – cancer in the stomach. He's evidently been near death half a dozen times, and this will probably prove fatal. Don't frighten him, Godfrey, but just put it to him as quietly as you can. Tell him that he's really very much worse than he thinks."

"Is it worth while to tell the poor fellow the truth?" I argued. "It may only have a bad effect upon him."

"His other doctors have, no doubt, already warned him. Besides it's only fair that he should know his danger. I never keep the truth from a patient when things are desperate, like this."

"Then you hold out but little hope of him?"

Bob Tulloch, who had been with me at Charterhouse, stroked his dark beard and replied in the negative, while the stranger, who had been watching us very closely, said in Italian in a low faint voice: —

"I know! I know! I'm dying – dying!" and he laughed curiously, almost triumphantly. "I'm dying – and I shall escape them. Ah! signore," he added, with his bright black eyes fixed upon mine, "if you only knew the truth – the terrible, awful truth – you would pity me – you would, I am convinced, stand my friend. You would not believe the evil that men say of me."

"Then tell me the truth," I urged quickly, bending down to him in eagerness.

But he only shook his head and clenched his even white teeth.

"No," he said, with a fierce imprecation in Italian. "Mine is a secret – her secret – a secret that I have kept until now – a secret that none shall know!"

Chapter Two
Touches a Woman's Honour

Tulloch left half an hour later, and Sammy, whose curiosity had been aroused concerning the foreigner, entered the room and inquired after the patient.

But hoping to learn more from the stricken man, I sent my friend back to bed and remained there through the night, administering to the patient what my friend Tulloch had ordered.

The long hours dragged on in silence. Only the ticking of the cheap American clock broke the quiet. Lying upon his back the stranger fixed his dark eyes upon me, until his hard gaze caused me quite an uncomfortable feeling. It is unpleasant to have a dying man's eyes fixed so attentively upon one. Therefore I shifted my chair, but even then I could not escape that intent penetrating gaze. He seemed as if he were reading my very soul.

If I spoke he answered only in low monosyllables. Whenever I attempted to put a question he made a quick gesticulation, indicating his impossibility to reply. And so passed the whole long vigil until day broke in brightening grey, and the sun shone forth again.

Yet the man's hard stony stare was horrifying. Somehow it utterly unnerved me.

Had Tulloch not declared that the fellow was dying, I should certainly have left him; yet I felt it was my duty as a man to remain there, for was I not the only person in that household acquainted with the Italian tongue?

Ever and anon he clenched his teeth tightly and drew a long hard breath, as though bitterly vengeful at thought of some incident of the past.

"*Accidenti*!" was an ejaculation that escaped his lips now and then, and by it I knew that he was praying that an accident might befall his enemies – whoever they were. He uttered the most bitter curse that an Italian could utter.

Presently, about five o'clock, just as the sun's rays entering through the opening between the dingy old rep curtains fell across the threadbare carpet in a golden bar, he became quiet again.

"Ah, signore," he said gratefully, "it is really extremely good of you to put yourself out on my account – a perfect stranger."

"Nothing, nothing," I assured him. "It is only what you would do for me if I were ill in a foreign country where I could not speak the language."

"Ay, that I would," he declared. And after a pause he added: "Nearness to death causes us to make strange friendships – doesn't it?"

"Why?" I asked, somewhat puzzled.

"Well – in me, for instance, you are making a strange friend," he said, with a queer, harsh laugh.

"Why strange?"

"Because you are utterly unaware of who or what I am."

"I know your name – that is all," I responded quietly. "You know the name by which I choose to be known here. It is not likely that I should disclose my real identity."

"Why not?"

"Because – well, there are strong reasons," was his vague answer, and his mouth shut with a snap, as though he discerned that he had already said too much. Then a moment later he added: "As I've already told you, you have made a strange acquaintance in me. You will probably be surprised if ever you really do ascertain the truth, which is, however, not very likely, I think. At least I hope not."

I recollected that he had spoken of a secret – some woman's secret – which he intended, at all hazards, to preserve. What was it, I wondered?

The thin drawn face upon the white pillow wore a wild, desperate expression. The stranger had actually laughed in triumph at the suggestion of death. A man must be desperate ere he can face the open grave with a smile upon his lips.

After a few minutes he raised his thin yellow finger beckoning me closer, and in a fainter voice said: —

"You are the only friend I have in this great capital, Signor Leaf," – for at table I had told him my name and something about my wandering life on the Continent – "you will not allow them to bury me as a pauper? There is money – see, in that left-hand top drawer – over there. Will you get my purse?"

I rose, opened the drawer he indicated, and handed him a bulky red morocco wallet, one of those in which Italians carry their paper currency.

He opened it and I saw that it was crammed with hundred-franc and even thousand-franc notes. In the wallet there was probably over a thousand pounds.

"Will you take charge of it?" he asked, handing it back. "I shall never want it again. Pay all the expenses, and I would ask of you one favour. Upon the stone over my grave put no name – only the words: 'In Memory of one who was Unfortunate' – that is all."

"And the balance of the money – to whom shall I hand that?"

He thought a few moments, his eyes fixed upon the low, smoke-blackened ceiling.

"If there is no just claimant within one year take five thousand francs as a souvenir of me, and present the remainder to a hospital – whatever hospital in London you think the most deserving. You will also find the directions for obtaining certain securities deposited in Italy. Obtain them and deal with them as you deem advisable."

"But have you no relations?" I inquired, foreseeing a great difficulty in carrying out these verbal instructions.

"Relations! Bah! what are relations?" he cried excitedly. "Only an infernal encumbrance. I suppose I have some somewhere – everybody has more or less."

"And don't you know where yours are?"

"No, nor do I wish to know," he snapped. "I am alone – you understand – entirely alone. And, moreover, I trust that if you are my friend, as you seem to wish to be, you will so far respect my memory as not to believe all that will probably be said against me. To you only I admit that I am not what I have represented myself to be – that is all. I accept your kindness, but, alas! with considerable shame."

I drew the Italian notes from the wallet, and counted them.

"There are twenty-eight thousand lire here," I remarked, "one thousand one hundred and twenty pounds."

"What does it concern me how much there is?" he asked, smiling. "Use it as I've directed. Indeed," he added, after a pause, "you need not tell any one that you have it."

"I shall tell my friend Sampson, or people may think that I've stolen it," I said.

"Yes," he remarked hoarsely, with a sigh, "people are always ready to think ill of one, are they not?"

And then, as the bar of sunlight crept slowly across the worn-out carpet, a deep silence again fell, broken only by the stranger's fierce, vengeful mutterings which to me conveyed no distinct meaning.

"*Madonna mia*!" he cried aloud once, cringing in excruciating pain. "How I suffer! I wonder how long it must be before I give out. *Dio*! Is this the punishment of hell?"

Then he turned his eyes upon me – those wide-open, horrified eyes – in a look the remembrance of which is even to-day still before me, the recollection of which I shall carry with me to the grave.

There was something indescribable about that expression, uncanny, fascinating, inhuman. They were the eyes of a man who, though still alive, was obtaining his first glance into the awful mysteries of the eternity.

At half-past seven Tulloch returned and brought him a soothing draught, so that he slept, and I then left the sick-room to dress and breakfast.

With Mrs Gilbert, Sammy and I agreed that no word of the painful affair should be told to our fellow-guests, because illness in a boarding-house always causes the visitors to make excuses for departure. So we said nothing.

Sampson had some urgent business with his solicitor in the City that day, therefore I remained at home, acting as nurse to the unfortunate man whose end was now so near.

Three times during the day Tulloch returned, but all he did proved unavailing. The stranger could not possibly live, he said. It was a wonder that he had had strength to withstand the journey to England. It was the reaction that was proving fatal – internal haemorrhage.

Just before six o'clock, when I crept on tiptoe back to the mysterious man's darkened room to see if he still slept, he called me eagerly in a low whisper, saying that he wished to speak to me in strict confidence.

I therefore seated myself at his bedside and bent down, so that the effort of speaking should be as little as possible.

"There is still one further favour I would beg of you, Signor Leaf. I wonder whether – whether you would grant it?" he asked very feebly, stretching out his thin hand until it rested upon my wrist.

"If it is within my power, I will," I assured him.

"Then you see this!" he exclaimed, drawing from beneath his pillow a small flat packet in white paper about four inches square and secured by three large black oval seals evidently impressed by some old monastic seal of the middle ages.

"I want you," he said, "to accept the responsibility of this. They are papers of considerable value to certain relatives in Italy. Will you take charge of it, and three years after my death hand it intact to the Italian Ambassador? I appeal to you to do so, for you are my only friend, and I am dying," he added, in a tone of intense earnestness.

"If you wish," I said, somewhat reluctant, however, to undertake such responsibility. And I took the packet, and, after examining the seals, transferred it to my pocket.

The mysterious Massari firmly declined my offer to go to the Italian Church in Hatton Garden and fetch a priest.

"I don't wish to see anybody," he snapped. "I have a reason. At least let me die in peace."

And an hour later, just as Tulloch returned, he again fixed those bright staring eyes upon me and silently passed away, carrying with him his secret to the grave.

It concerned a woman. That much he had admitted. Who was the woman, I wondered? What was her secret?

"This man had a strange history, I feel convinced," I remarked in a low voice to Tulloch as we left the chamber of death together and quietly closed the door.

"Yes," he said. "He seemed a queer fellow. But in my profession, old chap, we often meet strange people, you know. Men, when they are dying, frequently have curious fancies and extraordinary hallucinations."

And then we went down into Mrs Gilbert's sitting-room to inform her of the unfortunate occurrence in her house.

I locked the sealed packet and the bulky wallet safely away in my despatch-box, and when Sammy returned a little later I told him all that had occurred.

My friend, a short, fair-haired, round-faced fellow of thirty-eight, a splendid type of the muscular athletic Englishman, flung himself into the big leather armchair with a cigarette and listened. Like mine, his life had been full of adventure. Some years before he had thrown up his commission in the Scots Greys in order to go on active service, anywhere so long as there was fighting. He had been through three South American revolutions; had served with the Americans in Cuba; had been mentioned in despatches for his services before Ladysmith, and was now contemplating volunteering

for service against the Mad Mullah. Possessed of comfortable private means he was soldier, traveller, big-game hunter and champion tennis-player, a good all-round man bubbling over with good-humour, and a great favourite with the ladies.

"Well, Godfrey, old chap," he remarked, stretching himself out when I had concluded my story. "Certainly the fellow's a bit of a mystery. Do you know, I watched him very closely at table last night, and it somehow struck me that he feared to be recognised. Each time the door opened he started and looked apprehensively in its direction. Besides, a man of his stamp doesn't usually come to a boarding-house of this sort. He'd go to the Savoy, or the Cecil. Depend upon it he had a motive in coming here, and that motive was in order to hide himself. He may have done something wrong in Italy and fled to London, as so many do. Who knows?"

Truth to tell, my friend's suggestion exactly coincided with my own suspicion. Jane, the maid-of-all-work, had told me, to my surprise, that when she had entered his room that morning during my absence he had spoken to her in most excellent English! The fact, too, that he had refused to see a priest seemed to point to a fear lest his hiding-place might be discovered.

But he was dead, and I had, rather unwisely perhaps, accepted a curious responsibility. Even the money he had placed in my charge might be the proceeds of some theft!

That night I arranged with a neighbouring undertaker that the remains of the stranger should be taken away on the following night when the whole house was asleep, a service for which I received the heartfelt gratitude of Mrs Gilbert.

About seven o'clock the next evening when I returned from the club, Miss Gilbert met me excitedly in the hall, and asked whether I would mind stepping into her mother's sitting-room for a moment.

Seated within, I found a tall, dark-haired, sweet-faced girl in neat black who looked at me with shy inquiry as I entered. I saw she was very beautiful. Her delicately moulded features were perfect, and upon her cheeks was the fresh bloom of youth. I judged her to be about twenty-five, with slim, narrow-waisted, graceful figure, eyes of soft dark brown, well-defined brows and tiny shell-like ears. Her air and manner was of the *chic* Parisienne, rather than the Londoner. The instant our gaze met I saw that she was a woman of exquisite sweetness – perhaps one of the most attractive I had ever seen in all my wide wanderings over the face of the globe.

"This lady desires to see you, Mr Leaf," explained the landlady's daughter. "She has called with regard to our friend, Signor Massari."

I bowed to her, and as I did so she said quickly in English: —

"I am in active search of Signor Massari, and have come post-haste across Europe in order to find him. This lady says he has been here, but has left. You, I understand, speak Italian and have had several conversations with him?"

I glanced quickly at Miss Gilbert. She had not told the visitor the sad truth, therefore I was compelled to sustain the fiction that the dead man had left.

The landlady's daughter, apparently unable to further evade her visitor's eager questions, excused herself and left us alone together.

The instant she had gone the visitor rose with a quick *frou-frou* of silken underskirts, and closing the door turned to me with a deep earnest look, saying in a low voice scarcely above a whisper: —

"Let me confess the truth, sir! I am in a most deadly peril, and yet utterly defenceless. I have come direct from Rome in order to overtake the man who has called himself Massari. I must find him, at all hazards. If he chooses to speak – to tell the truth – then he can save my life. If not, I'm lost. Will you help me to discover him? Perhaps you know where he has gone? I throw myself upon your sympathy – upon your mercy. See!" she cried hoarsely, with a wild look in her beautiful eyes, for she was indeed desperate, "I am begging of you, a perfect stranger, begging for my freedom, for my woman's honour – nay for my life!"

I stood before her stunned.

What could I reply? What would you have replied in such circumstances?

Chapter Three
Gives some Explanations

Her voice was soft and refined. She was evidently a lady.

The mysterious stranger had held the secret which might liberate her, yet he had carried it with him to the grave!

Who was he? Who was she?

The situation was certainly one of the most difficult in which a man could find himself. Miss Gilbert, in order to conceal the fact that a death had occurred in her boarding-house, had pretended that Massari had left. I saw, however, that the pale-faced girl before me was desperate, and felt convinced that the melancholy truth should be revealed to her.

The man's death sealed her doom. She had made that entirely plain to me.

I now distinguished that her dress was dusty, her dark hair slightly dishevelled, and she bore traces of long travel. She had evidently, on arrival from the Continent, come straight from Charing Cross out to Shepherd's Bush. Therefore, by some secret means, she knew of Massari's intention of hiding himself at Mrs Gilbert's.

"You do not reply," she said, in a voice full of reproach. "Do you really refuse to render me assistance, sir? Remember, I am a helpless woman who begs her life of you. You have seen and spoken with that man. Where is he now?"

For a moment I hesitated. Then seeing that she must sooner or later know the truth I drew my breath and said: —

"Come, follow me." And opening the door we ascended the stairs.

"Ah!" she cried excitedly. "He is still here! That woman lied when she told me he had gone, eh? He is still in the house!"

I made no reply, but went on, she following closely behind.

Then a few moments later, having gained the top landing, I threw open the door of the darkened chamber of death and drew aside the curtains.

She dashed to the bed and tore the sheet from the dead, white face.

Then she staggered back as though she had received a blow.

"My God!" she cried. "Too late! —*too late*!"

Dull, dazed, she stood there, with the stare of blank despair in her eyes and pale as ashes. The dead white face seemed to wear a smile – the smile of cheerful resignation, as though his body had parted with its spirit in gladness and in triumph.

For a little while she stood stock-still and speechless – the living dead! Suddenly – ah! it is nothing in the telling; one should have heard and seen to realise – suddenly there welled up from the depths of her heart the sigh of its aching, the sob of its breaking. Then she shrieked with the ghastly laughter of despair. Then she lashed out to a cursing of the dead man and all his deeds; and her execrations were the most shocking because they proceeded from the tongue of a sweet-mouthed woman.

Of a sudden her eyes fell upon the stranger's two portmanteaux, and dashing across she knelt to open them.

"No," I said quietly, "I cannot permit you to touch anything there."

"You cannot permit —*you*!" she cried, facing me.

"And who, pray, are you? Have I not more right to know what he has here than you?"

And with a sudden wrench she broke the hasp of the weak, foreign-made lock, and next instant turned the whole of the contents, clothes and papers, out upon the floor.

Quickly she searched among the quantity of papers, as though looking for something. Yet she was disappointed.

I took up several of the folded documents and found that they were bonds and other securities. It almost seemed as though the mysterious Massari had fled at an instant's warning and taken all the valuables he had at hand.

The second portmanteau resisted her efforts to break it open, therefore I handed her the key. If, as she said, that man had held her future in his hands, she certainly had a right to look through what he had left behind.

In her eagerness she tossed the papers hither and thither, now pausing to scan a letter and now breaking open a sealed envelope and hastily ascertaining the contents.

"No," she cried hoarsely at last, turning fiercely to where the dead body lay. "You have left no written record. Brute! coward! assassin!" she hissed between her teeth, shaking her fist in the dead man's face. "You refused to give me my freedom – to clear my honour – you laughed in my face – you who knew the truth but refused to speak!"

The scene was terrible, the living execrating the dead. I took her by the arm and tried to lead her away. But she shook me off, crying: —

"He has died of the terrible disease with which God had afflicted him. He knew, too well, that after his death I should be helpless and defenceless. He was wealthy, but what did all his wealth serve him – compelled to fly at night and hide himself here, hoping that I should not discover him. He little dreamed that I knew of his hiding-place."

"Then he could have cleared you of some false charge, had he been so inclined?" I inquired, hoping that she would reveal the truth to me.

"Yes. A foul dastardly charge has been made against me – one of the cruellest and blackest that can be laid against a woman," she answered. "By a word he could have established my innocence. He knew I was innocent, yet he refused – he laughed in my face, and told me that he would not lift a little finger to help either me or my father."

"Why not?"

"Because the establishment of my innocence would have given me my happiness."

"And he denied it to you. He had a motive, I suppose?"

"Yes – oh yes!" she said. "Even my tears did not move him. I went upon my knees and begged him to speak, but he was obdurate. That was eight days ago. And how soon has Fate overtaken him! Two days later he was compelled to fly in secret in order to avoid arrest, and to-day he is lying there dead – his lips, alas! sealed."

"Ah! unfortunately," I sighed, "he can no longer bear witness on your behalf, miss – I have not the pleasure of your name?" I said, hesitating purposely.

"Miller – Lucie Miller," she replied. "And yours?"

"Godfrey Leaf."

"Yes, Mr Leaf, it is unfortunate for me," she said, with a dark look of desperation. "I am a doomed woman!"

"Oh, no, you must not speak like that," I urged. "Surely the charge against you is not so very serious!" To me it seemed impossible that such a sweet-faced girl should have any grave imputation against her.

"I have enemies, bitter, relentless enemies," was her brief response. She had grown a little calmer, and I had replaced the sheet over the cold, lifeless countenance of the man who had refused to tell the world the truth and thus save her.

"Have you travelled from Rome alone?" I inquired.

"No. I had a companion," she answered, but did not satisfy me whether it was a male or female.

"You live in Rome, perhaps?" I asked, for I saw that she had a cosmopolitan air which was not that of an English-bred woman.

"No. I generally live in Leghorn."

"Ah! in Tuscany. I know Leghorn quite well – the Brighton of Italy, a very gay place in summer. Pancaldi's at four o'clock in the season is always bright and amusing."

"You really know Pancaldi's?" she exclaimed, brightening. "Only fancy! We have so very few English in Leghorn. They prefer Vallombrosa or the Bagni di Lucca. Indeed an Englishman in Leghorn, beyond the shipping people, is quite a rarity."

"And this man Massari – it was not his real name?" I said.

"No. But I regret that I am not permitted to tell you who he really was. He was a person very well-known in Italy – a person of whom you read frequently in the newspapers. That is all I may tell you."

"Well, really, Miss Miller, all this is very mystifying," I said. "Why did he come here?"

"Because he thought that he would be able to live in hiding. He feared lest I might follow him."

"But you said that he also feared arrest."

"That is so. He was compelled to escape. His enemies laid a trap for him, just as he did for my father and myself."

"But why did he refuse to give you back your happiness by clearing you of the charge? To me it seems almost incredible that a man should thus treat an innocent woman."

"Ah! Mr Leaf, you didn't know him. He was one of the most unscrupulous and hard-hearted men in the whole of Italy. Every *soldo* he possessed bore upon it the blood and tears of the poor. He lent money at exorbitant interest to the *contadini*, and delighted to ruin them from the sheer love of cruelty and oppression. Those papers there," and she pointed to the securities she had scattered upon the dingy carpet, "and every franc he possessed are accursed."

And he had given me the sum of two hundred pounds for accepting the responsibility of his funeral and of the sealed packet.

"You mean that he was, by profession, a moneylender?"

"Oh, dear no. He lent money merely for the purpose of ruining people. He was heartless and cruel by nature, and if a man committed suicide – as many did because he had ruined them – he would laugh at the poor fellow as a fool, and take the very bread from the mouths of the widow and family."

"The brute! A Jew, I suppose?"

"No. The people believed him to be one, but he was not. In his methods he was more fiendish than any Hebrew. He did not lend money for profit, but in order to bring misery to others. The one kind, generous action he might have performed towards me, the giving back to me my honour, he refused. To him, it was nothing; to me, everything. It meant my life."

And I saw in her eyes a desperate look that deeply impressed me.

"I wish you would be more explicit, Miss Miller. If I can be of any service to you or assist you in any way, I shall be delighted. Really I don't like to hear you talk as you do. If you are in a quandary there must be some way out of it, and two heads, you know, are always better than one."

She sighed, and raising her fine eyes to mine, replied: —

"Ah! I fear, Mr Leaf, that your kind assistance would be unavailing, although I thank you all the same. That man yonder held my life in his hand. One word from him would have saved me. But he refused, and before I could overtake him Death had claimed him."

"He told me that he felt no regret in having to die," I said.

"Of course not. Had he lived the truth would have been revealed, and he would have dragged out his remaining days in a convict prison. I know that truth – a strange and startling one – a truth which would assuredly amaze and astound you. But he is dead," she added, "and though he refused to give me back my honour and my life I will never seek a vendetta upon one whom the Avenger has already claimed – one whom God Himself has justly judged."

And together we turned, and left the silent chamber wherein lay the remains of the man who was a mystery.

Chapter Four
Arouses Certain Suspicions

Sammy chanced to be out, therefore I conducted her to our cosy little sitting-room at the back of the house on the first floor, and after a few minutes she had so far recovered from the shock of seeing her dead enemy that she seated herself and allowed me to talk further to her.

I told her of the request which Massari had made respecting his epitaph, and of his fearless encounter with death.

"Naturally. He was unfortunate, and he wished to die," she said, quite coolly. "Had he lived he would only have fallen into disgrace and been placed in the criminal dock."

"Towards me he was very pleasant, though not very talkative."

"Ah! you have had a narrow escape," she said, with her dark eyes fixed upon me mysteriously.

"A narrow escape? What of, pray? I don't understand you."

"Of course not," she answered, smiling strangely.

"Tell me more," I said eagerly. "This statement of yours is very puzzling, and has aroused my curiosity. Do you mean that Massari had some sinister design upon me?"

She fixed her dark eyes upon me for a few moments, then said: —

"You were once, about three years ago, in Pisa – at the Minerva, I think?"

I stood before her open-mouthed. What did this sweet-faced woman know regarding that closed page of my life's history?

Mention of that hotel in the quiet old marble-built city where stands the wonderful Leaning Tower recalled to me a certain unsavoury incident that I would fain have forgotten, yet could never put from me its remembrance.

"Well?" I asked at last, summoning all my strength to remain calm. "What of it?"

She was silent for a moment, gazing straight into my eyes.

"Something occurred there, did it not?" she said slowly.

"And he knew of that?"

Then I recollected how the dying man had fixed his eyes upon me with that hard, intense look; how his gaze had followed me about the room, and I saw his fierce hatred and deep regret that while he himself was dying I still lived.

Perhaps he had intended that our positions should be reversed, but God had willed it otherwise.

Did Lucie Miller herself know what had taken place in Pisa?

I asked her point-blank, but from her replies I became reassured that she was entirely ignorant of the real facts. She knew that some extraordinary incident that concerned me had taken place there – that was all.

By what means had the stranger obtained knowledge of my secret? To me, her allegation that I had had some narrow escape seemed incredible. I could not discern sufficient motive. Yet she repeated her allegation, adding: —

"His motives were always hidden ones."

"Well," I declared, "to me the thing is really beyond credence. I can't see what I can have done to injure him. Was it in connection with the affair in Pisa, do you think?"

"I believe it was, but of course I'm not quite certain," was her somewhat vague reply. Perhaps she desired to mislead me.

The position was certainly a strange one. Had the dead man been a secret enemy of both of us?

The sweet face had changed as she sat with her neat patent-leather shoe stretched forth upon the shabby hearth-rug. It was even paler and more serious, while her eyes were fixed upon mine with a curious, intense gaze that caused me surprise.

"You have fortunately escaped," she said mechanically, after a brief pause. "I am, however, a victim, and doomed."

And sighing her eyes fell upon the carpet.

"But you will be able to clear yourself of this charge against you, Miss Miller – you must – you will. If the brute refused to clear you, then you must find other means. Why did he refuse? What had he to gain by refusing?"

"Everything," was her low, hoarse answer. "If he had spoken the truth and cleared me then a terrible vengeance would have fallen upon him. But death overtook him instead."

I wondered whether I should tell her of the commission he had entrusted to me, but decided that, for the present, I would say nothing.

"Are you returning at once to Italy?" I inquired presently, for our mutual connection with the dead man had aroused my curiosity concerning her. I longed to know who she was, and who was the man who lay in that darkened upstairs room.

"I hardly know what my future movements are to be," she replied. "I came post-haste to London to face him and to compel him to speak and clear me of the foul imputation against me. Now that all is in vain – now that the future holds no hope for me – I don't know what I shall do."

"You have friends in England, of course?"

"I have an aunt living in the country. Perhaps I shall go to her. I must first hear what my father counsels, now that our enemy is dead." Then after a pause she raised her eyes to mine and added: "I think you are acquainted with a certain lady named Hardwick, are you not?"

I started. She seemed to be aware of all my private affairs. It was extraordinary. Surely these people had not spied upon me?

"I knew a lady of that name some time ago."

She smiled mysteriously, for she had watched my face and seen my expression of surprise.

"And the recollection of her is not a very pleasant one, eh?"

"How did you know that?" I asked quickly.

She shrugged her shoulders with that foreign air which showed her to be a born cosmopolitan and laughed, but made no reply. That she knew more concerning me than she admitted was quite plain.

"And what has the woman Hardwick to do with the affair?" I asked in surprise.

"She is not your friend," she answered, in a low, serious voice. "You have seen her lately, I presume."

"I met her last while at supper at the Savoy about a fortnight ago," I said. "She then pressed me to go and dine with her."

"Of course. Hitherto you had not seen her for several months."

"No. She has been abroad, I understand."

"Yes. In Italy."

"And she invited me with some sinister motive?" I exclaimed in surprise.

"She wishes to resume your acquaintance, and to regain your confidence. It was, I think, part of an intrigue."

"I refused her invitation," I said. "I had long ago discovered that she was not my friend."

"That is fortunate. Otherwise you might have cause to deeply regret it. The woman is an adventuress of the worst type – a fact which I daresay you are already aware of."

"I discovered it by mere accident, and for that reason I dropped her acquaintance. But what you have told me is utterly astounding."

"That man's end relieves you of all further anxiety, yet at the same time it dooms me to shame – and to death!" she remarked hoarsely, rising suddenly to her feet with quick resolution.

I made no remark. What she had revealed to me was so bewildering. That the woman, before me had interests in common with myself was now plain. She was in deep distress – in fear of what the

dark future held in store for her, abandoned by the one man who could clear her of this mysterious allegation, so infamous that she dare not repeat it to me, a stranger.

Her grace and beauty, too, were assuredly incomparable. Truly she was one of the prettiest women I had ever met – yet at the same time the most despairing. I saw tragedy in her countenance – the shadow of death was in her eyes, and I stood before her silent and fascinated by the mystery which enveloped her.

"I must go, Mr Leaf," she said. "I must telegraph to my father and inform him of the *contretemps* which has occurred. He will direct me how to act. But before I go I would like to thank you very very much for your great kindness and sympathy towards me. I am sure that, if possible, you would seek to assist me. But it is out of the question – entirely out of the question. What must be, must be."

And she put out her small hand to me in farewell.

"There must, I am sure, be some way in which to evade this misfortune which you apprehend," I said. "At any rate we may meet again, may we not? Where shall you stay in London?"

"I really don't know," she said, in a vague, blank manner which showed that she wished to evade me, fearing perhaps lest I might make unwelcome inquiries concerning her. "As to our meeting again, I hardly think such a course would be wise. My friendship might imperil you still further, therefore let us end it now, as pleasantly as it has commenced."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You will know what I mean, Mr Leaf, some day," she answered, with a strange look in her dark eyes. Then sighing she added: "Farewell."

And I was compelled to take the hand she offered. Refusing to tell me where she lived, and holding out no fixed promise of returning, she at once went down with me to the front door.

After I had bowed farewell and she had descended the steps, I closed the door, and was returning along the hall when suddenly Sammy emerged from the dining-room, where he had evidently been standing, and facing me with a strange, serious expression upon his features, such as I had never seen there before, asked: —

"Godfrey! what's that woman doing here – in this house? Do you know who she is? By Jove, you don't, that's certain, otherwise you would never have let her cross this threshold. Why has she dared to come here?"

Chapter Five
The Villa Du Lac

"Look here, Sammy!" I exclaimed, when we were together in our little den a few minutes later, "what's the good of beating about the bush? Why don't you tell me straight out what you have against her?"

"My dear fellow! surely it isn't for me to cast a slur upon any lady's character. I merely warn you that she has a very queer reputation – that's all." And he stretched out his legs and blew a cloud of smoke from his lips.

"Every woman seems to enjoy a reputation more or less queer nowadays," I declared. "Have you ever come across a woman about whom something detrimental was not whispered by her enemies? I haven't."

"Perhaps you're right there, Godfrey," was my friend's reply. "You discovered the truth concerning Ina Hardwick, and that was a hard blow for you, eh? But didn't I give you a hint long before which you refused to take?"

"And now you give me a hint regarding Lucie Miller. Well, tell me straight out – who and what she is."

"First tell me why she came to see you."

"She certainly didn't come to see me," I protested. "She came to see the stranger – she's a friend of the dead man's."

He turned, knit his brows, and stared straight into my face.

"A friend of Massari's! Who told you so?"

"She did."

Sammy smiled incredulously. He was a man who had passed through life having singularly escaped all the shadows that lie on it for most men; and he had far more than most what may be termed the faculty for happiness.

"H'm. Depend upon it she came here more on your account than to visit the mysterious Italian."

"But she saw Miss Gilbert and asked for Massari!" I exclaimed. "It was Miss Gilbert who called me and introduced me. I took her up to the dead man's room, and the sight of him was a terrible shock to her. She's not exactly his friend; more his enemy, I think."

"How could she know Massari was here, pray?"

"Ah! I don't know that. The Italian was probably followed here after his arrival at Charing Cross."

"Did she explain why the fellow came here?"

"Yes, she told me various things that have utterly stupefied me," I answered. "She hints that the Italian and the woman Ina Hardwick were in league to take my life."

"Your life?" he cried. "What absurd romance has she been telling you? Why you didn't know Massari until yesterday!"

"That's just it. But nevertheless there's some truth in what she alleges. Of that I'm quite convinced."

"Why?"

"For several reasons. One is because she is aware of one curious incident in my life, one of which even you, Sammy, are in ignorance. It is my secret, and I thought none knew it. Yet Massari was aware of it, and she also knows something about it, although, fortunately, not the whole of the details."

Sammy twisted his small, fair moustache, and was puzzled.

"She actually knows a secret of yours, eh? Then depend upon it she intends to profit by it. Be careful of her, that's all, Godfrey. She may have known Massari, for she's mixed up with a very queer

lot. But it's quite evident that she came really to see you. Did she enlist your sympathies in any way; did she ask you to do anything for her – any service, I mean?"

For a few moments I hesitated; then, in order to further convince him, I told him all that had occurred, and repeated her strange story of how the man we knew as Massari had refused to tell the truth and liberate her.

"He probably had sufficient reason," declared Sammy, in a hard voice, quite unusual to him. "The truth, however, is quite plain. She has spread out her net for you, and you bid fair to fall an easy prey, old fellow."

"But, my dear chap, I'm pretty wary. Remember I'm thirty-two and am past the adolescence of youth."

"She's uncommonly good-looking. You've told me so yourself. Admiration is the first stage always," he sneered.

"But tell me what you know of her," I urged. "Where did you first come across her?"

"At Enghien, just outside Paris, nearly three years ago. They lived in a rather fine villa, the grounds of which went down to the lake. You know Enghien – a gay little place, with pretty villas and a casino on the lake. Brunet, the dramatic critic of the *Temps*, introduced her father to me in the American bar at the Grand, and he invited me to go down to his place and dine. I did so, and found several other male guests, men of the smartest sporting set in Paris – mostly Frenchmen. At first I believed Mr Miller was a person of means, but one day a man who said he had known him, told me that he was a 'crook'. I admit I could not discover what was the source of his income. I only knew that his friends were mostly rich racing men and *chevaliers d'industrie*, and that he frequently gave very delightful dinners. Though she never dined with her father's friends, Lucie was often to be seen. She seemed then to be a mere slip of a girl of nineteen or so, extremely pretty, with her dark hair dressed low and tied with a broad bow of black ribbon. The men who frequented the place always addressed her as '*Bébé*,' and would sometimes take her boxes of chocolate. One evening after dinner somebody suggested a hand at cards, when suddenly I caught Miller doing a trick, and I stood up and openly denounced him. It may have been foolish of me, but I spoke without reflecting. He denied my accusation fiercely, and was supported by his friends. Therefore I took my hat and left the house, now convinced that the fellow was a 'crook'. After that I made inquiries about him of a man who had been in the Paris *sûreté* whom I know very well, with the result that I found the Englishman enjoyed half a dozen aliases and was undoubtedly a queer character. His associates were mostly persons known to the police. Even his butler at the villa was a man who had 'done' five years for burglary. The theory of my friend, the ex-detective, was that he was allied with a gang of international thieves, those clever gentry of means who operate in the principal cities throughout Europe, and who are so ingenious that they in most cases outwit the police. Though there was not sufficient evidence to justify any direct allegation it was strongly suspected that the source of Mr Miller's wealth at that moment was the proceeds of a very cleverly planned robbery at the Commercial Bank in Bordeaux. When I told my friend how I had denounced Miller's trick, he looked grave and said: 'That was very injudicious. Those people might seek revenge.' I laughed in derision, but he was so serious, and so strongly urged me to be careful, that I began to repent my boldness in making the charge. Miller and his friends were, so my friend told me, a dangerous lot."

"But if Lucie has the misfortune to have a father who is a scoundrel, it surely is no reason why she herself should be bad?" I remarked.

"You can't touch pitch without being soiled, my dear fellow. Think of the life of a young girl among such a crowd as that! Ah! you've never seen them – you can have no idea what they're like."

"But what direct charge do you allege against her?" I asked. "Speak quite plainly, for I'm neither her friend nor her enemy. She has to-day told me certain things that have held me bewildered, and naturally I'm all curiosity to ascertain something concerning her."

"Well," he said, casting himself again into the big chair and smoking vigorously, "it was like this. One day about a month afterwards there came to stay with me at the Continental a wealthy young Chilian, Manuel Carrera by name, whom I had first met when, two years before, we had fought side by side in the streets of Valparaiso during the revolution. He and I were partisans of the Government, of which his father was Minister of the Interior. Now that the Government had been restored he occupied a very important post in the Treasury, and had come to Paris to transact some business with the Banque de France. At first we were together every evening, and very often the greater part of the day, but of a sudden he seemed to prefer to go about Paris alone, for he had, he told me, met some other friends. For a fortnight or so I had very little of his company; but one afternoon he surprised me by saying that he was going down to Enghien to make a call. I offered to accompany him, saying that I could amuse myself at a café while he was calling, and that we might afterwards dine together at the Casino. Truth to tell, I had not been to Enghien since that well-remembered night, and I wanted to see whether the Villa du Lac was still occupied. To my surprise, his destination proved to be that very villa. He left me and entered the big gates before I had time to warn him of Miller, therefore I turned on my heel and took a cab to the café of the Casino situated on the opposite shore of the lake. Where I sat, at one of the little 'tin' tables beneath the trees, the water stretched before me, and beyond a green, well-kept lawn and the big white villa were shining through the trees. I lit a cigar and sat wondering. Suddenly across the lawn I saw two figures strolling slowly. One was a slim young girl in a white muslin dress girdled with pale blue, her companion a man in grey flannels and a panama. Then the truth was plain. My friend had fallen in love with Lucie Miller. His frequent absences were thus accounted for. I watched them as they sat together upon the garden seat facing the lake, and saw that he was telling her something to which she was listening very attentively, her head bowed as though in deep emotion. Was he declaring his love, I wondered? For fully half an hour they sat there, when at last he rose, threw off his coat, and then both stepping into the boat at the bottom of the lawn he slowly rowed her away up the lake until behind the island they passed from my sight."

Sammy was silent, thinking deeply. A sigh escaped him.

"And then?"

"What happened immediately afterwards will probably never be known," he said, in a hard, hoarse voice. "I only know that somewhere about nine o'clock that same evening Carrera's despatch-box in his room at the Continental was opened with its proper key, and Chilian Government securities which he had only that day redeemed from the bank and intended to carry back to Valparaiso as well as a lot of negotiable bonds were all abstracted, together with a large sum in French bank-notes – the value altogether being about eighty thousand pounds. At midnight the poor fellow lay in the same room with a bullet in his brain. He realised how he had been tricked; how the key had been taken from his jacket pocket while he had taken the fair Lucie out upon the lake, and in a fit of chagrin and despair he took his revolver and ended his life."

"He committed suicide!" I gasped. "Didn't you see him after he went out upon the lake; didn't you warn him?"

"No. I meant to. But, alas! I was too late. I waited an hour at the Casino; then returned to Paris; and imagine my horror when I discovered next morning what had happened."

"What did you do?"

"I went at once to the Prefecture of Police and gave information. With three detectives I went down to Enghien, but we found the Villa du Lac uninhabited. The mysterious Mr Miller and his pretty daughter had already flown. That was three years ago, and from that afternoon until half an hour ago I have never set eyes upon the dark-eyed girl who so cleverly assisted her father in his ingenious schemes."

"But are you sure she is the same?" I asked. "You admit that she has changed."

"She has. She's grown more beautiful, but she is the same, my dear fellow – the same. Is it any wonder that I hate her?"

Chapter Six
The Truth about the Stranger

I sat staring at my friend, unable to utter a word.

In the past twenty-four hours, through no fault or seeking of my own, I had suddenly been plunged into a maze of mystery, and there had been revealed to me a grave personal peril of which I had been in utter ignorance.

What the sweet, open-faced girl had divulged to me had caused me much amazement, yet this extraordinary story of Sammy's was utterly dumbfounding. I could not bring myself to believe that the girl who had so simply confessed to me her distress had wilfully assisted her father in robbing young Carrera, thereby causing him to take his life. To me it was utterly incredible.

Yet the fact that she had any connection with the mysterious Italian now lying dead above caused me to ponder. She knew the secret of that incident in quiet old Pisa. Yes. She was a mystery.

Had she told me the actual truth? That was the question which greatly puzzled me.

Through the following day and the next when, with Sammy, I followed the Italian to his lonely grave at Highgate, I recalled every incident of that strange sequence of circumstances, and longed again to see and question her.

Sammy, with that easy irresponsibility which was one of his chief characteristics, declared that Lucie, for obvious reasons, would not show herself again. But, on the other hand, I argued that if his allegation that she had come to Granville Gardens in order to meet me were correct, then she would return. She had, I pointed out, no suspicion that he was there and had recognised her. Therefore there was nothing to prevent her seeking me.

The whole circumstances were both romantic and puzzling.

The very man who she had alleged had plotted with the woman Hardwick against me had entrusted his most valuable possessions to me. Why? Had the small kindness I had shown him turned his heart towards me? Certainly he had paid me for my services – the sum of two hundred pounds.

Once or twice I wondered how I stood legally. The man was dead, yet I had a faint suspicion that I had no legal right whatsoever to administer his estate. There might be a will somewhere, and if legatees came forward I might one day find myself in a very queer and awkward position.

But I told Sammy nothing of this. I deemed it best to preserve silence both as regards the money and the curious packet that I was to keep three years.

A week went by. The man who had given his name as Massari had been interred, the expenses paid, and life at Mrs Gilbert's had resumed its normal quiet. Indeed, not until three days after the funeral were the other guests let into the tragic secret of the stranger's sudden death. Then for a day or two the whole place was agog and various theories formed. In London a foreigner is always viewed with a certain amount of suspicion, perhaps on account of our insular proclivities, perhaps because the majority of Londoners know no other language beyond a smattering of elementary French.

Often and often, when alone in our little den at the back of the house, Sammy and I discussed the curious affair, but neither of us was able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion.

To be in order, I called in a solicitor named Price whom I knew, and a week after Massari's death we opened his portmanteaux together and examined the contents.

They presented several surprises. Sammy was, of course, with us, taking an eager interest in the affair and helping to examine the documents which we found. He was of little use, however, for they were mostly in Italian, a language of which both my companions were almost entirely ignorant.

The first fact I established was that the name of the deceased was not Massari but Giovanni Nardini. This surprised us all, for Nardini was very well-known in Italy, having held the portfolio of Justice in the Ministry overthrown only a week before, and having made himself conspicuous in

his perpetual war with the Socialist party in the Chamber. Only two days ago I had read telegrams from Rome in the morning papers saying that there were serious charges against the Minister of appropriating the public funds while in office, and that the Government were considering what steps they should take for his prosecution.

I had never connected the notorious Minister of Justice Nardini with the stranger who had died so suddenly. Yet had not Lucie Miller told me that he was a person well-known in Italy?

"He was a thief who absconded, that's very evident," Sammy remarked dryly. "We shall perhaps find something interesting presently."

The lawyer Price and myself were seated at the table in the room where the ex-Minister had died, and we both carefully examined paper after paper, I reading aloud a rough translation.

Many of the documents were, I recognised, of extreme importance to the Government. Some were the official records of sentences pronounced by the Tribunal upon various persons and had evidently been extracted from the archives of the Ministry.

"I wonder what he intended to do with these?" Price remarked presently. "Perhaps his idea was to sell them to the persons who had been condemned to enable them to destroy the record."

"Or perhaps he held them for the purposes of levying blackmail?" Sammy suggested. "No man, if he were leading an honest life, would like to have his police record hawked about."

"But here," I said, holding up a paper, "here are the confidential notes of the President of the Court of Assizes at Milan concerning two very important cases, showing the lines on which the prosecution was to be conducted. These would surely be of the utmost value to the prisoners, for upon them they could form a complete defence. The prosecution is a political one, and the weak points in the evidence are indicated and commented upon. Yes," I added, "all these official documents have been carried off because they could easily be turned into money. We shall be compelled to restore them to the Italian Government."

"His Excellency, when he fled from Rome, took care to carry away all he could that was of value," remarked the solicitor. "Fate, however, very quickly overtook him before he had time to negotiate any of the documents."

The letters occupied us some considerable time. They were in two packets secured by broad elastic bands, and all were, without exception, letters from poor unfortunate victims who were in his clutches financially and who begged for further time in which to pay. Some of them, written in illiterate calligraphy, were heartrending appeals for wife, family, honour – even life. They were the collection of a hard-hearted man whose delight it was to crush and oppress rich and poor alike. The letters showed that. More than one was full of bitter reproach and withering sarcasm, revealing plainly that what the English girl had said concerning him was the actual truth.

And yet in my short acquaintance with him prior to his decease I had never dreamed that his character was as such.

Nevertheless at that moment, as I afterwards discovered, the Italian press was full of bitter abuse of the man who for the past four years or so had been one of the most popular in Italy. But he had been found out, and in ignorance of his death they were now hounding him down and appealing to the Government to arrest and prosecute him.

We had nearly completed our investigation, Price taking a careful inventory of the contents of the portmanteaux, when I discovered an envelope in which was a large yellow printed form filled in with a quantity of microscopic writing.

Within was a folded sheet of grey notepaper – a letter in Italian which I read eagerly, holding my breath, for what was contained there staggered me.

My companions watched my change of countenance in wonder. And well, indeed, they might, for it was the appeal of a desperate woman, a letter that revealed to me an amazing truth – a letter signed "Lucie."

And when I had finished reading it, I sat there, staring as the written lines danced before my eyes, amazed, unable to utter a single word in response to their questions.

Chapter Seven
Describes some Confidential Documents

I had no right to divulge the girl's secret to my two companions. I recognised this in an instant. She had told me in confidence, and here was plain proof of what she had explained.

"What is it?" asked Price. "Something that surprises you?"

"Well, yes," I answered as carelessly as I could. "It's a letter from a woman."

"From Lucie Miller!" cried Sammy, whose sharp eyes had caught the signature. "What does she say? Tell us," he asked eagerly.

"No," I said firmly. "Recollect that whatever or whoever this man is, he is dead. Therefore let his private affairs rest. It is surely no concern of ours."

"No – of yours, perhaps," my friend laughed. "Remember what I told you about her."

"I recollect every word."

"And yet you are all the time anxious to meet her again, Godfrey! Do you know, I really believe the girl has captivated you – like she has so many others."

"You don't take me for a fool – do you?" I snapped, rather annoyed. "She was in distress and I am wondering if she has yet extricated herself."

Price made inquiry as to whom we were discussing, but in a few quick sentences I satisfied his curiosity.

"I should be very sorry if she ever comes here again," declared Sammy. "I have no wish to meet her. The memory of my poor friend Carrera is far too painful."

"You believe, then, that his death was due to her – that she induced him to leave his jacket upon the lawn?"

"I make no direct charge, my dear fellow. I only say that she's daughter of one of the most ingenious 'crooks' in Europe – a member, if not the actual leader, of one of the cleverest of the international gangs. They are possessed of ample means, and the police are no match for their ingenuity."

"You have your opinion, my dear old chap; I have mine," I said, glancing round the room and recollecting vividly how she had stood there and looked upon the white drawn face of the man who had refused to extricate her from her deadly peril.

He took up the yellow paper, glanced it over, and put it down again without being able to make anything out of it.

I said I would translate it later, and placed it aside, together with the strange letter of appeal.

Neither of my companions was very well satisfied, I could see. They wished to know what the mysterious Lucie had written, while I, on my part, was equally determined not to tell them. It was surely not fair to her to divulge what had been meant for Nardini's eye alone; therefore, I intended to keep possession of the letter, and to hand it to her to destroy, should we ever meet again.

Now that I recall those hours following the stranger's decease and the English girl's mysterious visit I cannot even now explain why I so suddenly commenced to take an interest in her. She was beautiful, it was true, but man-of-the-world that I was, and a constant wanderer across the face of Europe, I knew dozens of women quite as graceful, if not even more beautiful. Besides, there was the dark stigma upon her which Sammy had alleged, and which, by what I had now discovered, seemed fully borne out.

No. I think the mystery of the affair was responsible for my undue interest in her. Sammy, of course, put it down to her personal attractions, but he was decidedly and distinctly in error. She had told me of her perilous position, and of the dead man's refusal to assist her. Therefore it was but natural that I was curious to know how she fared.

Again, was she not in some mysterious way acquainted with a secret of my own life? Perhaps it was also that fact which caused me a longing to know the real truth concerning her.

There was certainly nothing of the adventuress about her. She was quiet, refined, graceful, neatly dressed, and spoke with easy, well-bred accents that were essentially those of a lady.

I do not think my worst enemy has ever declared me to be impressionable where women were concerned, for truth to tell, an incident that had occurred four years before had soured my life, and caused my resolution to ever remain a bachelor.

Ah! It was all over – the old story of the mad passion of a man for one who proved – well, unworthy. Ah! how I had adored my Ella; how I worshipped the very ground upon which she trod; how I would have conquered the very world for her sake. Yes. I saw her now, so young in her white muslin dress with her gold-brown hair falling upon her shoulders, her laughing blue eyes, and the red rose in her breast as we walked that June afternoon along those white English cliffs with the blue Channel at our feet. That never-to-be-forgotten afternoon we pledged our love, our hot lips met in their first fierce caress, our hearts beat in unison. She was my all in all. For months we lived in a world that was entirely our own – a bright rosy world of high ideals and ineffable sweetness, for we loved, ay we loved in a manner, I believe, that man and maiden never loved before. Even the remembrance of it now was sweet and yet – ah! so intensely bitter.

But why need I trouble you with that incident of long ago? Suffice it to say that my little Ella preferred money to a man's love, and she became engaged to a stout, grey-haired fellow old enough to be her father. Six months later she sickened, and then I heard that she was dead. Ah! the blow was to me terrible! I became from that day a changed man.

Since my little Ella preferred money to my love, I had again been wandering hither and thither, a careless, aimless man, just as I had wandered before meeting her. If I had had a profession it would have been different, but my father committed the unpardonable folly of leaving me comfortably off, therefore I simply developed into an idler, preferring life at the gay continental resorts – now in Monte Carlo, now in Paris, now in Rome, or elsewhere, just as my inclinations led me – to the dull humdrum existence of chambers in London. Ella – Ella! I thought of none save of my sweet dead love, now lost to me for ever.

Therefore, when Sammy hinted that I had become bewitched by Lucie Miller I firmly and frankly denied such assertion. Four years is a breach in a man's life, but even four years had not caused me to forget my first and only true passion – the passion that had ended so tragically. Sometimes life does not count by years. Some suffer a lifetime in a day, and so grow old between the rising and the setting of the sun.

When Price had concluded the inventory of the dead man's papers, I sorted out all those which had any official bearing. Perhaps I ought to have communicated at once with the Italian Consulate, seeing that the dead man was an Italian subject, but at the time it never occurred to me. The papers which had so evidently been abstracted from the archives of the Ministry of Justice in Rome I tied up in a bundle and placed them apart. The others, with the exception of the yellow folio and the letter of appeal, we replaced in the portmanteaux.

Later that afternoon, when alone, I drew out the letter again and re-read it. Translated into English it was as follows: —

> "Your Excellency Signor Nardini – For the last time I throw myself upon your charity and ask you to speak and clear me of this disgraceful allegation they have made against me. You alone know that I am entirely innocent. You alone know that on the evening of the affair I was at the Villa Verde. Therefore, how could I have been in Rome? How can I be culpable? A single word from you will vanquish these lying, unscrupulous enemies of mine who have thus attacked my honour and seek to connect me with an affair of which I swear I am in utter ignorance.

"Surely you will not refuse to make this one single declaration to save me! Reflect well all that it means to me – this disgraceful accusation against my honour. I know your reluctance. You fear that your own admission that I was at your villa out at Tivoli on that night may give rise to some scandalous gossip. But will you not risk it in order to save a woman's life? Shall I not suffer more than you – a man? Yet I am quite ready to face the scandal of our names being connected in order to free myself from this most disgraceful charge. Say what you wish concerning me – tell all you know, if it suits your purpose – only I pray of you to shield me from these fierce, relentless enemies of mine.

"I, a defenceless and desperate woman, beg of you to speak the truth and clear me. Will you not hear my appeal?

"To-morrow, at noon, I shall call upon you personally for a reply.

"Speak – speak, I beg of you most humbly and with all my heart. You are the only person who can save me, and I pray that God in His justice may direct your action of mercy. Lucie."

Was not the truth plainly written there? Surely she had not misled me in her motive in coming to England, to make one final appeal to the man whose lips had, alas! been closed by death!

I re-read the piteous letter, sighing the while. Every word of it showed her mad desperation at being unable to prove her innocence of this mysterious allegation. The reason of the man's silence was now obvious. If he had spoken he would have had to tell the truth – which from her letter appeared to be an unpleasant one and likely to cause scandal. Yet she asserted that she was fearless of anything the world might say; therefore did not that very fact suggest that there was no ground for any scandal?

Then I opened the yellow official paper which had been preserved with the letter of appeal.

Headed "*Amministrazione di Pubblica Sicurezza*" and bearing the number 28,280, it was, I saw, the Italian police record regarding an Englishman named James Harding Miller, son of William Miller, born at Studland, in Dorsetshire, widower, and resident in Rome. After the name and the statement that he was sometimes known as Milner, a minute description was given of the person whom the record concerned, and in that column headed "Connotati," or personal appearance, was the following: —

Statura: alto.
Corporature: secco.
Colorito: bruno.
Capelli: castagna.
Barba: c.
Occhi: c.
Naso: greco.
Bocca: reg.
Fronte: guista.
Segni: porta lenti.

The meaning of this was that Mr Milner, or Miller, was tall of stature, dark complexion, chestnut beard, hair and eyes, Greek nose, and that he habitually wore pince-nez. In fact upon the back of the document were pasted four photographs, taken in different positions, and probably by different photographers.

The information contained in the record was, however, of more interest to me, and I read it through very carefully from end to end.

Briefly, what was chronicled there was to the effect that the Englishman Miller had on several occasions been suspected of being implicated in various schemes of fraud in association with certain

persons against whom were previous convictions. It appeared that so strong were the suspicions concerning him in the case of an extensive fraud upon French's bank in Florence by means of forged securities two years before that Miller was arrested, but after exhaustive inquiries was allowed his freedom as there was insufficient evidence.

The lines of even writing went on to state: "The man's daughter, Lucie Lilian Miller, is constantly with him, and may participate in his schemes. There is, however, no direct allegation against her." Miller, it continued, evidently possessed a secret source of income which was believed to be derived from dishonest sources, though the actual truth had not yet been discovered. The record ended with the words added as a postscript in another handwriting: "After exhaustive inquiries made by the Questura in Rome, in Florence and in Leghorn, it is now established beyond doubt that the Englishman is in active communication with a clever international association of 'sharpers'."

After reading that I was compelled to accept the truth of Sammy's statement. The man Miller had evidently plotted and obtained the securities in the young Chilian's despatch-box.

Yet had Lucie, I wondered, any knowledge of that dastardly conspiracy which had ended in a tragedy?

Chapter Eight
"The Mysterious Mr Miller."

On the following day, about noon, I took a cab to the Italian Embassy, that fine stone-built mansion in Grosvenor Square.

A tall footman with powdered hair asked me into the great reception-room where, at one end, hung a great portrait of the late King Humbert, the other end of the room opening upon a large conservatory where stood a grand piano. It was a sombre apartment, furnished with solid, old-fashioned taste and embellished with a number of photographs of noteworthy persons presented to the popular Ambassador and his wife in the various cities wherein His Excellency had represented his sovereign.

Like most London reception-rooms, it looked its best at night under the myriad electric lamps. At noon, as I sat there, it looked a trifle too dull and gloomy. Presently one of the staff of the Embassy, a short, pleasant-faced, elderly Italian of charming manner, and speaking perfect English, greeted me courteously and inquired the object of my request to see His Excellency.

"I have called," I said, "in order to give some confidential information which may be of interest to His Excellency. The fact is I have been present at the death of the ex-Minister for Justice Nardini."

"His death!" exclaimed the pleasant official. "What do you mean? Is he dead?"

"He died here, in London, and unrecognised. It was only on searching his papers that I discovered his identity. He came to an obscure boarding-house in Shepherd's Bush, giving the name of Massari, but on the following day he died. He had for a long time been suffering from an internal complaint and suddenly collapsed. The effort of the rapid journey from Rome and the anxiety were evidently too great for him."

"This is astounding! We had no idea he was here! There were orders given for his arrest, you know," remarked the Embassy archivist, for such I afterwards found him to be – a trusted official who for many years has held that position, and is well-known and popular in the diplomatic circle in London. "But," he added suddenly, "how were you enabled to establish his identity?"

"By these," I answered, drawing out a packet of official papers from my pocket, opening them and handing him one of them to read.

The instant his eyes fell upon it he started, turned it over, and looked up at me amazed.

"I presume you know Italian?" he asked quickly.

I nodded in the affirmative.

"Then you are aware what these papers are – most important Government documents, abstracted from the archives of the Ministry of Justice in Rome?"

"I know," I replied briefly. "That is why I secured them, and why I have brought them to His Excellency. They certainly should not be allowed to go into the hands of any one, for they contain much confidential information regarding certain well-known persons."

"Of course," he said. "His Excellency will, I'm sure, be extremely indebted to you for acting with such discretion. Had they fallen into the hands of the London police they might have been copied, and the secret of our methods known. Besides, in any case, it surely would be most detrimental to our prestige, if the public knew that confidential reports of this character were being allowed to pass from hand to hand for any one to read."

"I viewed the matter from exactly the same standpoint," I said. "My own opinion is that Nardini intended either to sell them, or to levy blackmail by their means."

But the official only shrugged his shoulders in ignorance. It was not likely that he would condemn his own compatriot, even though at heart he despised both the man and his dishonest methods.

Each paper he examined carefully, and once or twice gave vent to ejaculations of surprise when he read facts concerning certain persons in high positions in Rome which amazed him.

"At this moment His Excellency is unfortunately out, but I trust, Mr Leaf, you will leave these with me," he suggested. "We shall send them back under seal to Rome."

"Of course, that was my intention," I said. And then, in reply to some further questions, I described to him the circumstances in which Nardini had died. Of course I made no mention of Lucie Miller nor of her strange story of the dead man's mysterious hatred of myself. I only apologised that I had not thought of communicating with the Italian Consulate, and expressed a hope that the restoration of these documents might partly atone for my remissness.

"There is, I suppose, nothing else among the dead man's belongings to interest us?" he asked seriously. "You have, of course, made careful search?"

"Yes. I have had an inventory made by a solicitor. There is nothing else," I answered; and after giving my courteous friend my club address, and chatting for some ten minutes longer, I received his renewed thanks, and departed.

My one thought now was of Lucie Miller, the woman whose piteous appeal to the fugitive had been in vain. Several matters puzzled me and held me mystified.

Sammy now seemed reluctant to discuss the matter any farther. Light-hearted, easy-going and irresponsible, he declared that he wasn't going to trouble his head about mysteries. The Italian was dead and buried, and there let him rest. And as for Lucie, he had told me the truth concerning her, and it ought to suffice me.

But it did not suffice me.

That desperate appeal she had written to the man who had held her future in his hands showed me that she was in dire straits. What could be the allegation against her?

As day succeeded day and she did not return I became convinced that it was not her intention to do so. From the Embassy I received an official letter of thanks signed by His Excellency himself, but it was evident that they had not revealed the truth to the press, for the newspapers were still full of hue-and-cry after the absconding ex-Minister.

I recollected that the desperate girl had told me that she had an aunt "living in the country," but she had not told me in what locality, and "the country" was a big place in which to search, more especially as I did not know the lady's name. She had told me also that she lived in Leghorn where, being English, it would be easy to find her. Yet somehow I held a strong belief that she had not returned to Italy.

The police record gave Miller's place of birth as Studland, in Dorsetshire, therefore I began to wonder whether, if I went there, I should be able to discover any of the family. Surely somebody would know some facts concerning the family. From the *Gazetteer* I discovered that the place was a small village on the sea, not far from Swanage, and on the following morning, without saying anything to Sammy, I took train from Waterloo. At Swanage I hired a fly from that hotel which faces the bay so pleasantly with grounds sloping to the water, and an hour later I descended at the inn in Studland village.

It was a quiet, quaint old-world place, I found, with a queer ancient little church hidden away among the trees at the back. In the bar-parlour of the "Lion" I ordered some tea, and then, in the course of a chat with the stout, cheery old publican I casually inquired after some friends of mine named Miller.

"Oh! yes," he said. "Old Miss Miller lives 'ere still – at the Manor 'Ouse just beyond the village. You passed it just before you came down the hill from Swanage way. They're one of the oldest families 'ere in Studland. One of the Millers – Sir Roger 'e was called – was governor of Corfe Castle under Queen Elizabeth, so I've 'eard say."

"Then the Millers have always lived at the Manor?" I remarked.

"Of course. The property really belongs to Mr James, but 'e's always abroad, so 'is sister, old Miss Catherine, lives in the 'ouse and looks after it."

"Is this Mr Miller named James Harding Miller?" I asked.

"Yes. That's 'im. They calls 'im the mysterious Mr Miller. 'E always was a wild rascal when 'e wor a boy, they say. The old gentleman could do nothing with him, so 'e was sent abroad, and has lived there mostly ever since."

"Has he any children?"

"A girl. The servants at the Manor talk a lot about 'er, and say she's very nice. She's often 'ere."

"He's well off, I suppose?"

"Oh, dear no, sir," declared the innkeeper. "The Millers are as poor as church mice. The value of land's gone down so of late years. The old place is mortgaged up to the hilt to some Jews in London, an' it's a pity – a thousand pities."

All this, together with other facts and gossip which the garrulous old fellow revealed to me, was of extreme interest, and I congratulated myself upon the success of my first investigation.

"When did you last see that mysterious Mr Miller, as you call him?"

"Oh! It's a long time now 'e 'aven't been in Studland. Once, about three years ago, 'e came without any luggage they say – and stayed over a twelvemonth. 'E's a queer man. 'E never speaks to the likes of us."

I resolved to act boldly and call upon old Miss Miller and inquire after her niece. Therefore I went out and up the hill in the bright sunshine until I came to the old and rather tumble-down lodge gate, and then, after walking a short distance up the drive, I came within sight of a large old Elizabethan mansion, long and rambling and time-mellowed – a typical English home surrounded by great trees in the centre of a small park.

A neat maid answered my summons, and I was at once ushered into a quaint old oak-panelled room off the hall, the furniture of which was undoubtedly Elizabethan, with rich old brocades dropping to pieces with age. I examined everything with interest, and then walked to the deep diamond-paned window and was looking across the park admiring the delightful vista when, of a sudden, I heard a movement behind me, and turning, confronted a tall, thin, dark-haired man, slightly grey, with bony features, a pair of sharp, closely-set eyes and scraggy brown beard. He was dressed in dark grey tweeds, and wore white spats over his boots.

"Mr Leaf?" he inquired, glancing at the card I had sent in. "I am Miss Miller's brother," he explained. "My name is James Harding Miller. Do you wish to see my sister very urgently? She has a headache, and has sent me to make her apologies."

I started when he introduced himself.

I was actually face to face with the ingenious scoundrel whom Sammy had denounced, and whom the Italian police so strongly suspected to be the leader of one of the cleverest gangs of malefactors in Europe.

Chapter Nine
Contains a Surprise

James Harding Miller was a thoroughgoing cosmopolitan of most gentlemanly exterior. His grey face was deeply lined and bore that curious washed-out look of a man who had lived many years in a hot climate. After ten years or so the fiery Italian sun no longer tans the face of the northerner, but on the contrary his hair goes prematurely grey, and each year as the burning summer comes he is less able to withstand the heat of the "lion" days. His leanness, his foreign-cut clothes, and the slight gesticulation as he spoke all showed him to be a man more at home in the bright Italian land of song and sunlight than there, in an English village, the proprietor of that charming old home of his honourable ancestors.

In reply to his question I was rather evasive, saying that I happened to be in Swanage, and had driven out to pay a complimentary call upon his sister. She was not to put herself out of the way in the least, I urged. I should remain in Swanage for some days and hoped to have the pleasure of calling again.

Then turning and glancing around, I exclaimed: – "What a delightful old room! To me it is a real pleasure to enter a thoroughly English home, as this is."

"Why?" he inquired, eyeing me with some surprise. "Because I live almost always on the Continent, and after a time foreign life and foreign ways jar upon the Englishman. At least I've found it so."

"Ah!" He sighed, rather heavily I thought. "And I, too, have found it so. I quite agree with you. One may travel the world over, as I have done these past twenty years, yet there's no place like our much-abused old England, after all."

"Oh, then you've been a rolling stone, like myself," I remarked, delighted at the success of my ruse.

"Yes. And I still am," was his answer, given rather sadly. "Ever since my poor wife's death, now nearly twenty years ago, I've been a wanderer. This place is mine, but I'm scarcely ever here. Why? I can't for the life of me tell you. I've tried to settle down, but cannot. After a week here in this quiet rural dulness, the old fever sets up in my blood, a longing for action, a longing to go south to Italy – the country which seems to hold me in a kind of magnetism which I have never been able to resist."

"And I, too, love Italy," I said. "Is it not strange that most of us who have lived any length of time in that country of blossoming magnolias and gentle vines always desire to return to it. We may abuse its defects, we may revile its people as dishonest idlers, we may execrate its snail-like railways and run down its primitive hotels, yet all the same we have a secret longing to return to that glowing land where life is love, where art is in the very atmosphere, where the sun brings gladness to the heaviest heart, and the night silence is broken by love *stornelli* and the mandoline."

"You are right," he said, gazing straight out of the old leaded window and speaking almost as though to himself. "Byron found it so, Shelley, Smollet, Trollope, the Brownings and hosts of others. They were fascinated by the fatal beauty of Italy – just as a man is so often drawn to his doom by the face of a beautiful woman. And after all we are but straws on the winds of the hour."

Then, turning to a cabinet, I bent and admired a fine old Lowestoft tea-set and a collection of old blue posset-pots, whereupon he said: —

"Ah! I see you are interested in antiques. Do you care for pictures? I have one or two."

"I do. I should delight to see them," I answered with enthusiasm; therefore he led me across the low old-fashioned hall with its great oak beams and open fireplace into a long gallery where the floor was polished, and along one side was hung a choice collection of masters of the Bolognese, Tuscan and Venetian schools.

At a glance I saw that they were of considerable value, and as I walked along slowly examining them I half feared lest I might come face to face with the daughter of the house.

Mine was a bold adventure, and surely it was fortunate for me that old Miss Catherine had a headache.

Through room after room he conducted me with all the pride of a collector showing his treasures. Indeed, I was amazed to find such a perfect museum of Italian art hidden away in that picturesque old Manor House. "Yes," he said presently, as we entered the long old-fashioned drawing-room upholstered in antique rose-pattern chintz, "I've collected in Italy for a good many years. One can pick up bargains, even now, in the less frequented towns, say Ravenna, Verona, Bologna or Rimini; while in Leghorn there are still lots of genuine Sheraton and Chippendale which was imported from England by the English merchants of that time. I once made a splendid find of seventeenth-century English silver – two porringers and some spoons – in the Ghetto in Leghorn."

I was at the moment looking at a circular Madonna on panel, evidently of the Bolognese school of the cinquecento, hanging at the end of the long pleasant old room when, in glancing round, my eye fell upon two small tables where stood photographs in frames.

In an instant I bent over one and recognised it as that of the girl who had come to me so mysteriously at Shepherd's Bush.

"That is my daughter," he remarked.

"Curious," I said, feigning to reflect. "I think I've met her somewhere abroad. Perhaps it was in Italy. Could it have been in Leghorn?"

"You know Leghorn?"

"I've been there many times. I know the Camerons, the Davises, the Matthews, and most of the English colony there."

"Then you may possibly have met her there," he said. "We have a small flat on the sea-front, and my daughter often plays tennis."

"Of course!" I exclaimed, as though the mention of tennis brought back to me full recollection of the incident. "It was at tennis that I saw her – last season when I was at the Palace Hotel. I remember now, quite well. Our Mediterranean fleet were lying there at the time, and there were lots of festivities, as there are every summer. Is your daughter now in England?"

"Oh, yes. She's up in London, but returns to-morrow."

"And are you going back to Italy soon?" I inquired.

"I hardly know. My movements are never very certain. I'm quite a creature of circumstances, and nowadays drift about with the wind of chance," he laughed.

"But this is a lovely old place," I remarked. "If I had it I should certainly not prefer a flat in a sun-baked Italian town, like Leghorn."

"Circumstances," he remarked simply, with a mysterious smile upon his grey face.

What, I wondered, was his meaning?

Did he really intend to convey that the circumstances of his dishonourable profession compelled him to hide himself in a small flat in that somewhat obscure town – obscure as far as English life went?

When he learnt that I knew some of his friends in Leghorn he became enthusiastic, and began to discuss the town and its notabilities. What did I think of the English parson? And whether I did not think that seeing the small English congregation the church ought not to be removed to some town with a larger English colony. It was absurd to keep a parson there for half a dozen people.

And while my sharp eyes were busy examining the photographs set among vases of fresh-cut flowers, I made replies and sometimes laughed at his witty criticisms of persons known to both of us in "the Brighton of Italy."

"What a contrast is the quiet rural life here, with all its old-world English tranquillity, to that of the gay, garish, sun-blanched *passeggiata* of Leghorn, with its bright-eyed women, its oleanders, its

noise, movement, the glare and strident music of the *café-chantants*, and the brightness of the newly discovered spa," I said.

He sighed, pursing his lips.

"Yes, Mr Leaf, you are quite right," he answered. "I love Italy, but I confess I very often long to be back here at Studland, in my own quiet old home. Lucie is always begging me to forsake the Continent and return. But it is impossible – utterly impossible."

"Why impossible?" I asked, looking into his deeply furrowed face.

"Well – there is a reason," was his response. "A strong reason, one of health, which induces – nay, compels me to live abroad. And I greatly prefer Italy to any other country."

Little did he dream that I had that secret document of the Italian Detective Department in my possession, or that I had learnt the truth from my friend Sampson, the friend of the young Chilian Carrera.

We were chatting on, having halted at the open window which looked across the old-fashioned garden with its rose arbours, moss-grown terrace and grey weather-beaten sundial, away to the park beyond, when I suddenly crossed to another table, whereon were other photographs.

One of them I thought I recognised even in the distance.

Yes! I was not mistaken! I took it in my trembling hand with a word of apology, and looked into the picture intently. Sight of it staggered me.

"Who is this?" I asked hoarsely, and my host must, I think, have noticed the great change in my countenance.

"A friend of my daughter's, I think. Do you know her?"

"I knew her," I replied in a hard, low tone, for sight of that smiling face brought back to me all the bitter remembrance of a part that I would have fain forgotten. "It is Ella Murray!"

"Ah! – yes, that's her name. I recollect now," he said; and I saw by his face that he was interested. "I think they were at school together."

Again I looked upon the portrait of my dear dead love, my eyes fascinated, for I beheld there, at her throat, the small brooch I had given her on her birthday, a green enamelled heart with two hearts in diamonds entwined upon it.

Those sweet, wide-open eyes, clear blue and wondering like a child's, gazed out upon me; her well-formed lips were slightly parted, as though she were speaking again, uttering those soft words that had so charmed me when she was mine, and mine only. I recollected the dress, too, one she had worn one night at dinner at the big country-house where we had been fellow-guests. Every feature of that lovely face was indelibly photographed upon my memory. Through those dark years, after that paroxysm of grief that had overtaken me when I discovered her false, I had, sleeping and waking, seen that smiling countenance as before my vision. Even in death Ella was still mine.

That smile! Ah! did it not mock me? Had not Avarice and Death cheated me out of Happiness? A great darkness was over my mind, like the plague of an unending night.

I set my teeth, swallowed the lump that arose in my throat, and with a sigh replaced the photograph upon the table.

"A pretty face," remarked the man whose police record was in my possession.

"Yes, very," I remarked casually.

Ah! what a storm of bitter recollections surged through my burning brain.

Had she but lived and loved how different would my own wasted, aimless life have been!

Yes. She was, after all, my dear dead love – my Ella!

Chapter Ten
My Own Confession

The "Lion" Inn was a pleasant, old-fashioned little hostelry overlooking the bay, with Bournemouth beyond the distant haze. My room was small and clean, with white dimity curtains and hangings, and framed religious texts upon the walls. As I sat at the window in the hour before my dinner was ready, I reflected upon the strange incidents of those past few days – a chain of curious circumstances that seemed to enmesh and to entangle me.

Lucie Miller – the girl whose peril was such a mysterious and yet deadly one – had actually known my Ella. That very fact seemed somehow as a further link between us. What, I wondered, did she know of those later days of my dead love's life? To me they were shrouded in mystery.

That cold winter's night in damp, dismal London, when I had met her in secret at the corner of Queen's Gardens, would ever remain in my memory. She was staying with an aunt in Porchester Terrace, and we had always preserved the secret of our affection. She came dressed in black, wearing a thick veil and carrying a muff in which was a bunch of violets. Her voice, when I greeted her, was, alas! not the same. Quick to recognise that something had occurred, I inquired the reason. Had she had any difference with her father or her aunt – as she sometimes had? No, she said, shaking her head, it was not that.

And then, almost in silence, we strolled on side by side over those wet shining London pavements through the quieter streets and squares of Bayswater, while I glanced wonderingly at her face showing pale behind her spotted veil. At last her trembling hand suddenly rested upon my wrist, and halting she turned to me. In hoarse tones quite unusual to her she blurted forth the truth – the bitter truth that froze my heart. I remember even the spot where we stood, beside a red letter-box at the corner of Chepstow Place. There the greatest blow of all my life fell upon me; and we parted.

I went straight along the Westbourne Grove, blinded by tears. She was to wed the very last man she ought to have chosen. The coarse, fat-necked parvenu had bought her from her father with his gold won in gambles on the Stock Exchange. Yes, my Ella, my sweet-faced love, was not satisfied with the prospect of being the wife of a man comfortably off. Like so many other girls who are dazzled by the lights of life, she longed to shine as a hostess, to wear Paquin frocks and have her portraits in the papers. I was deeply disappointed with her, for, fool that I was, I really believed that she honestly loved me. How often, alas! is a man deceived! I was but one of thousands, after all. And yet I had adored her with all my heart and all my soul.

Away in the country the very song of the birds seemed to be in praise of her – she whose beauty was sweet and delicate as the petals of the flowers; chaste and sweet as the rose itself. Love to the looker-on may be blind, unwise, unworthily bestowed, a waste, a sacrifice, a crime; yet none the less is love the only thing that, come weal or woe, is worth the loss of every other thing; the one supreme and perfect gift of earth in which all common things of daily life become transfigured and divine.

I was crushed, benumbed, broken. At first my brain refused to accept her declaration that that meeting was to be our last, until she told me the truth in all its hideous detail, and that on the morrow her engagement was to be announced in the *Morning Post.* I opened my lips to upbraid her, but my tongue refused to utter a syllable of reproach. I only bit my lips in silence. Ah! yes, I loved her! – I loved her!

From that moment we never again met. Next day I saw the announcement in the papers, and, disappointed and heart-broken, I went abroad, and it was a year after when one of my intimate friends, Jack Davies, a lieutenant on board the *Cornwall*, in a letter which I received at a lonely post-house on the snow-bound road in the extreme north of Russia, wrote those words which caused my heart to burst within me: —

"You recollect little Ella Murray, who was, with her stepmother, up at the Grainger's shoot two years ago? The poor little girl was engaged to some City fellow, an entire outsider, I heard, but I hear she caught typhoid at a hotel in Sheringham and died six months ago. A pity, isn't it? I rather liked her – so did you, I remember."

I stood at the door of that filthy, log-built place with the letter in my hand, gazing across the great snow-covered plain with its long row of telegraph-wires and verst-posts stretching away from Pokrovskoi to the grey horizon. My big bearded driver whispered to the post-house keeper, for both saw that I had received bad news. The man in sheepskins who kept the place went in without a word and returned with a glass of vodka. I recognised his kindly thought, gulped down the spirit, and mounting into the sledge drove on – on, whither I did not care. Ella – my own dear Ella was dead!

All this came back vividly to me on that evening as I ate my dinner alone in the little inn at Studland, and then in the golden sunset strolled by the sea – that same wide, mysterious sea beside which I had so long ago declared my love. She lived then, smiling, sighing, loving. But now, alas! she was no more. Of her memory there only remained that shadowy picture that I had seen in Miller's drawing-room, the portrait of the dead that smiled upon me in such mocking happiness.

I threw myself upon a bank and watched the glorious crimson and purple of the summer afterglow. Yes, the face of the world was for me now changed. The past had been full enough of bitterness, what, I wondered, did the future contain? Ah! if I could have but known at that moment! Yet perhaps after all the Divine power is merciful in keeping from us the happiness and tragedy that lie before.

Till the summer twilight darkened into night I sat therefore before the sea, smoking and thinking. The dark vista of silent waters before me harmonised with my thoughts. Mine was, alas! a wasted, useless life, I had never known one moment's financial worry, and yet I had somehow never found happiness. In my life where I might be, at home or abroad, there was always something wanting – the love of a good woman.

Through the following day I idled, mostly in the Lion, for it was too hot for walking. But at half-past two I sauntered to the station and, unseen by Lucie, I saw her alight from the train from London, climb into the smart dogcart that was awaiting her, and drive away in the direction of the Manor.

Then when I returned and had my tea I remarked casually to the stout, round-faced innkeeper: —

"I hear that Mr Miller is at the Manor House just now. I learnt so yesterday."

"An' so did I," was his reply. "Dear me! wonders 'ull never cease. Fancy Mr Miller coming back again! An' they say that Miss Lucie's a-comin', too."

"Is she his daughter?" I inquired, as though in ignorance.

"Of course she is; an' a very good girl, too. When she's 'ere – which ain't very often, more's the pity – she does a great deal of good in the village – visits the old people, looks after the coal club, and gives away quite a lot of money to the deserving people who are destitute. I only wish there were more like 'er in these 'ere parts."

"Does she often come here?"

"Oh! two or three times a year," answered the landlord. "Some say she lives up in London with 'er aunt, and others declare that she's mostly abroad with 'er father. I believe the latter story. She 'as a foreign way about 'er, and I've 'eard the servants say as 'ow all 'er things are made abroad."

"Then nobody knows her address?" I said.

"Seems not. But she's very fond of 'er father, and no doubt is always with him."

"Do they have many friends at the Manor when Mr Miller and his daughter are at home?"

"Not many. Dr Haviland often dines with 'em."

"I don't mean local friends – visitors from London."

"Very few. I've known one or two, but they've all been forriners. Mr Miller seems to like them forriners some'ow. But I don't," declared the old fellow. "They're too infernal polite and sleeky for me. I wouldn't trust any of 'em for a pint o' beer."

"They were gentlemen, I suppose?"

"Oh, dear, yes – full of fine graces and fine manners. They wore shoes like women, and shirts pleated like women's blouses – great swells, I can assure you."

"You never heard of any of their names?"

"No, how was I to 'ear? Once two of 'em came in one hot day and jabbered, sayin' '*boch! boch*!' an' grinnin' all over their faces. It was quite a long time before I discovered that they wanted two half-pints o' bitter. I suppose *boch* is what they calls it in French."

"Yes," I laughed. "You're quite right."

The strangers had evidently been French, I reflected. Had they been Italian they would have asked for *birra*.

Regarding Lucie, I learnt that on several occasions, while she had been at home, a young, black-moustached foreigner had been guest at the Manor, and that she frequently drove him out in the dogcart. My host did not know the visitor's name. He described him, however, as tall and thin with a narrow hatchet face, black eyes and moustaches that turned up at the ends.

"They passed up and down the village once or twice on their way to the post-office, and I 'eard 'em talking in some gibberish," added the old fellow, as he raised his tankard to his lips. Like all his race in the rural districts, he had no love for the foreigner, be he whatever he might. In his estimation every person from beyond the Channel was "a froggie."

That evening I went for my usual lonely stroll by the sea, while all next day I spent in watchful vigil in the vicinity of the Manor. Though for hours I idled concealed in the park, within view of the stately old home of the Millers, my patience was unrewarded. No sign of Lucie did I see, either at any of the windows or in the old rose-garden.

Next evening, however, having learnt from the landlord that she was much interested in a decrepit old woman who had been her nurse, and who lived in a cottage at the farther end of Studland, I idled in wait for her in a narrow green lane which ran at the back of the church, and was at length rewarded by seeing her approaching. She was dressed in white muslin with a large lace garden hat, and beside her walked her pet dog, a beautiful fawn collie.

Boldly I went towards her, my hat in my hand in respectful greeting.

In an instant she recognised me, and drew back, half in surprise, half in alarm.

Her countenance went white as death.

"You – Why – Mr Leaf!" she gasped, attempting to smile. "Only fancy – to meet you here!"

"Miss Miller," I said calmly, taking the hand she offered me, and glancing around in order to see that we were not observed, "I came here on purpose to meet you – to speak with you!"

"With me?" she cried in cold surprise, her brows contracting in marked displeasure. "What have you to say? Explain quickly, for we must not be seen together here." And I recognised from her trembling lips how anxious and agitated she had become. She was in some great fear. I was convinced of that.

She tried to smile me welcome, but it died from her white lips. The expression upon her face told me that she was in deadly fear lest I should discover her secret.

I was, I felt certain, the very last person whom she desired to meet.

The very fact of my presence there told her that I knew something concerning her – something concerning the past that she intended at all costs to hide from me.

Chapter Eleven
Lucie is Confidential

"This is not altogether an accidental meeting, Miss Miller," I confessed at once to her. "The fact is I have waited in vain for your return to Granville Gardens, and at length have thought it wise to come here in search of you."

"Who told you that we lived here?" she inquired breathlessly.

"No one told me, I discovered the fact quite accidentally," was my answer. "Remember that your family is an old one, and in Debrett, therefore it was easy to find out the home of the Dorsetshire Millers." My rather plausible explanation apparently satisfied her, for looking sharply around, she said: —

"If we are to talk, Mr Leaf, let us cross yonder stile and slip across the fields. We shall not be seen there." So I helped her over the stile she indicated and we passed together along a steep path beside a high hawthorn hedge, and a few minutes later descended into the hollow where the village and sea were lost to view.

"I certainly expected you to return," I said, half reproachfully. "I believed that you would wish to hear something further regarding the dead man. You refused to tell me his name, but I have discovered it. He was Nardini, the absconding ex-Minister of Justice in Rome."

"Who told you so?" she inquired, looking at me with considerable suspicion.

"I took possession of his papers. They explained everything," I replied simply. "And now," I added, "the reason I am here is to inquire if I can assist you in any way, and to repeat my readiness to do so."

"No," she answered, shaking her head sadly. "No assistance that you could render me, Mr Leaf, would, I regret to say, be of any avail," and I saw tears welling in her eyes.

"But you must not give up like this," I urged. "You must endeavour to shield yourself, even if you fail, after all. The man is dead; his mouth is closed."

"Ah, yes. That is just it. If he lived he might, perhaps, have had compassion upon me."

"He refused to tell the truth – that you were at his villa at Tivoli on that evening, and therefore could not have been in Rome, eh?"

She halted, glaring at me open-mouthed. She saw that I knew the truth, and after a few moments' silence with her eyes fixed upon mine, she exclaimed in a low, hoarse voice: —

"He preserved silence because he dared not tell the truth. He was a cur and a coward."

"And also a thief, it would seem," I added.

"Yes – you have seen what the papers are saying about him, I suppose? The police are searching for him all over Europe. They have no idea that he is already dead and buried."

"Perhaps it is as well; otherwise the papers would have fallen into their hands. As it is I took possession of them all and restored them to the Italian Embassy – all but this," and I drew out her letter of appeal, and, opening it, handed it to her.

She glanced at it, crushed it in her hand with a sigh, her dark eyes still fixed upon mine, as though she were trying to read my innermost thoughts.

"Who are your enemies?" I asked in a kindly tone of sympathy. "Tell me, Miss Miller, what have they alleged against you?"

Her brows again contracted. She set her lips hard but remained silent, determined not to satisfy me regarding the charge against her.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.