Le Queux William

The Sign of the Stranger

William Le Queux

The Sign of the Stranger

Le Queux W.

The Sign of the Stranger / W. Le Queux — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Le Queux William
The Sign of the Stranger

Chapter One
The Advent of the Stranger

The shabby stranger seated himself familiarly in a nook beside the wide-open chimney of the tap-room, and stretched out his long thin legs with a sigh.

"I want something to eat; a bit of cold meat, or bread and cheese – anything you have handy – and a glass of beer. I'm very tired."

The village publican, scanning the stranger's features keenly, moved slowly to execute the command and lingered over the cutting of the meat. The other seemed to read the signs like a flash, for he roughly drew out a handful of money, saying in his bluff outspoken way —

"Be quick, mister! Here's money to pay for it." The meal was very nimbly and swiftly placed before him; and then the landlord, with a glance back at me seated in his own little den beyond, turned off the suspicion with a remark about the warmth of the weather.

"Yes, it is a bit hot," said the stranger, a tall, thin, weary-looking man of about forty, from whose frayed clothes and peaked hat I put down to be a seafarer. "Phew! I've felt it to-day – and I'm not so strong, either."

"Have you come far, sir?" deferentially inquired the innkeeper who, having taken down his long clay, had also taken measure of his customer and decided that he was no ordinary tramp.

The other stopped his eating, looked Warr, the publican, full in the face in a curious, dreamy fashion, and then sighed —

"Yes, a fair distance – a matter of ten or eleven thousand miles."

The landlord caught his breath, and I noticed that he looked still more earnestly into the stranger's weather-beaten face.

"Ah! maybe you've been abroad – to America?" he remarked, striking a match and holding it in his fingers before lighting his pipe.

"I have, and a good many other places as well," answered the tramp thoughtfully, resting and trying the point of the knife on the hard deal table before him. "I'm a wanderer – I am, but, by Jove!" he added, "it is real good to see these green English fields once again. When I was out yonder I never thought I'd see them any more – these old thatched houses, the old church, and the windmill that generally wants a sail."

"You speak as though you know Sibberton – " the landlord said, and then he stopped uneasily.

The customer, who saw in an instant that his slip of the tongue had nearly betrayed him, answered —

"No, unfortunately I don't. I – well, I've never been in these parts before." And from where I stood I detected by the man's keen, dark eyes that he was not speaking the truth. The innkeeper, too, was puzzled.

"This place seems a pretty spot," the shabby wayfarer went on. "How far is it to Northampton?"

"Twelve miles."

The stranger sighed, glanced across at the old grandfather clock, and went on eating. There was silence after this, broken only by the buzzing of the flies against the window close to him, and the placing or adjusting of the tumblers which Warr had gravely begun to polish.

"Let's see," remarked the stranger reflectively at last, "if this is Sibberton, the old Earl of Stanchester lives here, I suppose?"

"He did live here, but he died a year ago."

"And young Lord Sibberton has come into the property – eh? Why, he must be one of the richest men in England," the fellow remarked with something of a sneer.

"They say he is," was Warr's reply.

Mention of the name of Stanchester caused me to prick my ears, for I had been private secretary to the old Earl and was now acting in that same capacity to the young man who had recently succeeded to the estates.

"And his sister, the fair one – Lady Lolita they call her – is she married yet?" inquired the half-famished man.

"No. She still lives with her brother and his wife up at the Hall."

The stranger grunted, and I noticed that he smiled faintly for the first time, but just at that moment he turned and catching sight of my back through the half-opened door, started slightly and appeared to be somewhat embarrassed.

Why did he make that inquiry regarding Lolita, I wondered? My father, Sir George Woodhouse, having been an intimate friend of the old Earl's, and his aide-de-camp when he was Viceroy of India, I had been taken into the latter's confidential service as soon as I came down from Cambridge, and for the past ten years had lived as a careless bachelor in a pleasant old ivy-covered house at the end of the village, being treated more as one of the Stanchester family than as the millionaire landowner's confidential secretary. The present Earl had been at Cambridge with me, and there was a strong bond of friendship between us.

"Yours has been a strange life," said the publican at last, in order to obtain more details of the stranger and his motive for inquiring after the people at the Hall.

"It has; I've drifted half over the world, but the passion for wandering is now pretty well worn out of me," wearily responded the other, taking a sip at his beer. "They say there's no place like home. I used to think so when the ship was steaming over the blue sea at nights with all asleep below and the clear stars shining over me. I don't think I shall live long; that's why I'm back again once more in England. But," he added, "we were talking of Lol – er, I mean Lady Lolita. Isn't she even engaged?"

"Not that I know of," answered the innkeeper. "If she were, some of the servants would be sure to chatter. There ain't much as goes on up at the Hall without me knowing it."

The estimable Warr was right. The tap-room of the *Stanchester Arms* was the village forum where the footmen, stablemen, kennel-hands and others employed in the Earl's great establishment assembled nightly to drink beer and discuss the gossip of the day.

"Ah! I suppose she's just as beautiful as ever?" remarked the stranger reflectively. His voice quivered oddly, and he rose wearily, brushing the knees of his frayed and shiny trousers. "She's one of the prettiest women in all England," added the ragged wayfarer, whose inquiries seemed to me to be made with some distinct purpose.

"She's lovely," declared Warr. "The papers often have portraits of her. Perhaps you've seen them?"

"Yes, I have," he answered, and the words came out with something like a groan.

At that instant there reached our ears the familiar jingle of harness bells, and Warr, turning quickly, cried —

"Why, she's just coming along! You'll see her in a moment!" And they both dashed to the small diamond-paned window which looked out upon the village street.

The stranger stood with his dark eyes peering out, his body drawn back as though fearing recognition, until a few moments later, when a smart victoria and pair of chestnuts dashed passed, and lolling within, beneath a pale blue sunshade, was the sweet-faced woman in white returning to the Hall after making afternoon calls.

"Ah!" he gasped as the marvellous beauty of that countenance burst upon him, and was next instant lost to view as the jingling bells receded. "You're right!" he said, turning from the window sadly, his face blanched. "She's more beautiful than ever – she's absolutely lovely!"

The man was a mystery. He attracted me.

The publican remained gravely silent, utterly at a loss to understand the stranger's meaning, while at that moment the latter apparently recollected my proximity, for he looked across towards where I, having had business with the innkeeper, still stood awaiting his return.

Suddenly turning to Warr, he said —

"I notice you have a gentleman in the parlour, there. I wonder whether you would give me just a couple of minutes alone? I want to ask you a question."

The landlord again glanced suspiciously at the mysterious stranger, but seeing the earnest, determined look upon his grizzled face, rather reluctantly consented, and conducted his customer across the low entrance-hall to a room on the opposite side, the door of which he closed behind them.

What transpired therein was in secret, but about five minutes later I heard the door open again, and the stranger, with heavy tread, walk firmly to the door.

"You won't forget the name," he called back to Warr in a strange hard voice just before he went forth. "Richard Keene – K-e-e-n-e."

"I've promised. Trust me," was the innkeeper's response, while a moment later the shabby stranger's form cast a long shadow across the sanded tap-room and vanished.

"That's a queer customer?" I remarked to Warr when he returned to me, for I had come down to pay him an account. "I don't like the look of him somehow."

"Neither do I," the landlord answered. "At first I took him for a burglar spying around to ascertain who was at home up at the Hall, but I've formed a very different conclusion during the past five minutes. He isn't a burglar, but he's somebody who evidently knows Lady Lolita."

"Knows her?" I exclaimed, surprised. "What do you mean? What did he tell you in private?"

"Nothing. He asked me to render him a service by giving a letter in secret to her ladyship, and as recompense gave me this." And opening his hand, Warr showed me a sovereign. "Something fresh, this!" he added. "A tramp who gives sovereign tips;" and he laughed very heartily to himself.

I did not join in his laughter, for on being handed the letter I saw it was inscribed to her ladyship and marked "Private" in a neat educated hand, and sealed with black wax with an unfamiliar coat-of-arms bearing a coronet and many quarterings.

"He told me also to tell her that Richard Keene has returned, and said that she would understand. Strange, ain't it?" observed the landlord, with a long pull at his clay.

"Very. If you wish, I'll undertake the responsibility of giving Lady Lolita this letter and delivering the message," I said.

"No. I'll have to come up to the Hall myself," was the innkeeper's reply. "The chap actually compelled me to take a solemn oath to deliver it into no other hands but her own!"

"Then it must contain something of supreme importance, otherwise it might surely have been sent by post," I remarked suspiciously.

"Yes, I feel sure it does. Did you notice how the fellow's face changed when he saw her drive past? He went as white as a ghost. He's a mystery – that he is."

"He is, without a doubt," I said. His announcement that Richard Keene had returned seemed to convey some covert threat. I recollected the tone in which he had uttered the name as he had crossed the threshold, and it caused me to ponder deeply – very deeply.

Little, however, did I dream of the terrible significance of that name; little did I at that moment anticipate the strange events that were to follow – that remarkable mystery of real life which proved so tantalising, so bewildering and so inscrutable.

Chapter Two
Concerns Lady Lolita

I strolled back up the long beech avenue to the Hall, apprehensive and puzzled. The stranger's manner, his curious expression when he had spoken of Lolita, and the bold way in which he had sent her the announcement of the return of Richard Keene were ominous. What, I wondered, did the letter contain, sealed as it was with the arms of some noble house?

I scented mystery in it all; mystery that somehow concerned myself. Why? Well, I will confess to you now – at the very outset. I, although but a paid servant of the Stanchesters, like any of that army of footmen and grooms, loved Lady Lolita in secret, and although no word of affection had ever passed between us, I nevertheless felt that her interests were my own.

My position was, I admit, a unique one. Lolita and I had been friends ever since our childhood days in India, when her father held the highest official position in the East and mine was his confidential assistant, and now, her brother having succeeded, she seemed to regard me as a harmless and necessary director of things in general. Very frequently I was invited to luncheon or to dinner, and treated always as one of the family, even though I was but a paid dependant. Yes, both the young Earl and his sister were extremely kind and considerate, and surely I had no cause for complaint, either in matter of salary, which was a handsome one, or in that of social standing.

So thoroughly had I mastered all the details of the great estate during the haughty old Earl's lifetime that I suppose my existence was necessary for the well-being of my college friend who had so suddenly found himself a millionaire. Indeed, he had admitted to me that he had never met several of his estate agents in various parts of the country, therefore I had the absolute control of them and generally superintended the revenue and expenditure, an office which entailed considerable work, inasmuch as besides Sibberton, the family possessed Stanchester House, that big white mansion in Park Lane, Stanchester Castle in Warwickshire, Dildawn and its great deer-forest in Argyllshire, Chelmorton Towers in Sussex, and the Villa Aurora on the olive-clad hill above San Remo.

Sibberton Hall was, however, the seat which the young Earl preferred, and where he usually spent the few weeks of summer between the season at Cowes and that of the moors. As I came up the straight shady avenue of ancient beeches which met overhead for more than a mile, the magnificent façade of the splendid old place with its countless windows, its towers and high twisted chimneys stood in the soft crimson haze of the brilliant afterglow, its delicate traceries and marvellous architecture giving it almost the appearance of an illustration from some fairy tale. Built in the early days of Elizabeth by the first Earl of Stanchester, her celebrated minister, it was in the form of a quadrangle with wings abutting from the sides and ending at the extremities in towers, while its princely proportions were such as to place it among the largest and most notable family mansions in the country.

The last rays of sunset flashed upon its many windows as I emerged from the avenue, and then passing across the level lawns and ancient bowling-green, I entered the great hall with its wonderful ornamental fireplace and stands of armour, and proceeded along one corridor after another to the cosy room in the west wing which served me as study.

From the window where I stood for a moment in deep reflection I commanded a view for several miles across the great level park which was some ten miles in extent, and where, in the distance, rose another low, old-fashioned Jacobean building with clock-tower, the kennels of the Earl's famous foxhounds. My room was an old-fashioned one, like everything else in that fine mansion. Lined from floor to ceiling with books and in the centre a big writing-table, it had been given over to me by the old Earl when I had first entered upon my duties ten years before. The floor was of oak, polished like

a mirror, and over the arched chimney was carved in stone the greyhound courant of the Stanchesters, with the date 1571.

I glanced at severed notes that had been dropped into the rack in my absence, and then casting myself into an easy chair lit a cigarette and continued my apprehensive reflections.

The summer dusk darkened into night, and having a quantity of correspondence to attend to, I went to the room I sometimes occupied, changed, dined alone, and then about nine o'clock returned to my study to finish my work.

Not a sound penetrated there. That wing was but little used, for above was the long picture-gallery with the dark old family portraits by Vandyke, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Kneller, and others, as well as priceless examples of Gainsborough, Turner, Hobbema, and the world-famous Madonna of Raphael. The room had been given to me so that I should not be disturbed by visitors who, owing to the enormous proportions of the place, usually wandered about hopelessly lost in their attempt to reach their rooms without a servant as guide.

The name of Keene was puzzling me. Somehow I had a distinct and vivid recollection of having heard it before, but in what connexion I could not recollect, although I had been racking my brains ever since I had left the village inn. I took down the old address-book used by my predecessor, but there was no entry there. No, I felt somehow that I had heard the name outside my connexion with the family, but where, or in what circumstances, I could not for the life of me remember.

My hands were clasped behind my head, and with my work cast aside, I was smoking vigorously, when there came a low tap at the door, and in response to my permission to enter, Lady Lolita came forward gaily, a sweet almost girlish figure in her cream dinner-gown girdled with turquoise blue, exclaiming —

"Mr Woodhouse, I do wish you would do me a favour, would you?"

"Most certainly," I exclaimed, springing quickly to my feet. "What is it?"

"I want you to copy out something for me, will you?" And seating herself at my writing-table, she took up a pen and scribbled some lines.

Her gown suited her to perfection, the low-cut bodice revealing her white throat, around which sparkled a splendid necklet of diamonds that flashed beneath my lamp with a thousand fires. Upon her white wrist was a quaint Chinese bracelet cut from a solid piece of bright green stone.

Her face was perfect in its symmetry, and her finely-chiselled features were almost an exact reproduction of those of Lady Mary Sibberton in Sir Joshua's picture in the gallery above. The loveliness of the Sibberton women had been proverbial back in the Jacobean and Georgian days, and assuredly Lady Lolita inherited the distinctive beauty of the female members of the family. The delicately-moulded cheeks, the pointed chin, the sweet, well-formed mouth, the even set of pearly teeth, the wealth of auburn hair and the laughing blue eyes so full of mischief and merriment rendered her peerless among women, while her wit and easy-going good-humour endeared her to all, rich and poor alike.

As I stood by, watching her bent head beneath the lamplight, I saw that although she tried to write, her small white hand trembled so that the attempt was by no means successful. She seemed nervous and upset, for I now noticed for the first time that her breast rose and fell quickly beneath her laces, and that she was trying in vain to repress a wild tumult of agitation that raged within her.

"No," she cried, throwing down the pen and looking up at me, "I can't write. I – " And she stopped without concluding her sentence, fixing her beautiful eyes upon me. She was magnificent. That look of hers was surely sufficient to make any man's head reel.

"Do you know," she exclaimed suddenly, bursting into a nervous laugh, "I didn't really want you to write a letter at all! I only wanted an excuse to come into this den of yours – to speak to you."

Her laugh somehow sounded unnatural. With her woman's subtle tact she was, I knew, trying to conceal her agitation.

"To speak to me? What about?"

She grew grave again in an instant, and rising, crossed towards me. I saw that all the colour had died from her face and that she grasped the edge of the table to steady herself.

"I wanted to ask you – I wanted to see if you would do something for me," she said in a low tremulous voice, very harsh and intense.

Was it possible that Warr had already seen her and delivered the note and message from that mysterious stranger?

"What do you wish me to do?" I inquired eagerly.

"I want you to help me, Willoughby," she said. "I am in peril – deadly peril. You can save me if you will."

"Peril? Peril of what?"

"Ah! That I cannot tell you," she answered; then suddenly losing all control of herself she exclaimed wildly, "The past has risen against me, to torment me, to hound me down to the very depths of hell. Ah! Willoughby, save me – you will, won't you? You are my friend. Say you are – say you will help me," she implored with clasped hands.

"But what do you fear, Lady Lolita?" I asked in the hope of learning her secret.

"I fear death," she cried hoarsely. "The blow has fallen, and I am lost – lost."

"No, no," I said, taking her soft hand gently in mine and finding it cold, trembling in fear. "Do not anticipate the worst, whatever may be your danger."

"Ah! if I could tell you all – if I only dared to tell you," she sighed. "But even then you wouldn't believe it – you couldn't."

"But may I not know something of this peril of yours?" I urged. "If you tell me, I shall then know how to deal with it."

"You can only serve me at great risk to yourself," was her quick reply.

"In any way I can serve you, Lolita, do not hesitate to command me," I said, deeply in earnest and still holding her trembling hand in mine. By that wild look in her beautiful eyes I saw that her heart was gripped by some nameless terror, and that she was in desperation. Then, in a moment of deep sympathy, recollecting the stranger's ominous words, I added: "I love you now, Lolita, with the deepest devotion with which any man has loved."

And before she was aware of it, I had raised those thin white fingers reverently to my lips and imprinted upon them a tender lingering kiss.

Chapter Three
Which is a Mystery

In my hot passionate declaration I repeated my readiness to serve her, at the same time acknowledging the difference in our stations and the fear that my dream of happiness must be a vain one.

She smiled very sweetly upon me, and I saw her eyes were dimmed with tears. Her lips moved, but in the first moments no sound escaped them. I had taken her by surprise, I think, for she had always regarded me as friend, and not as lover.

"I thank you for your kind promise to assist me in this hour of my need," she answered at last in a voice that seemed to have strangely altered. "I know now that I enjoy your regard, although I – well, I must confess that I had no idea that, good friends that we have been all these years, you would end by really falling in love with me. You have, however, told me the truth, and a woman always respects a man for that. I know now that I have at least one firm and devoted friend." And as she spoke her fingers closed upon my hand.

As I feared, I had presumed too far. I had no right to love her, I, a mere paid servant of the family, yet she had treated my confession with sweet dignity and womanly tact that so well became her, and cleverly turned my declaration of love into one of friendship.

"To serve me in this matter would be to imperil yourself," she went on in deep seriousness after a moment's pause. "My enemies hold my future in their hands. To me it is a matter of life or death."

"I am prepared to undertake any risk for your sake," I declared. "Only suggest a course, and I will adopt it instantly."

"Ah, you are very good!" she cried. "How can I sufficiently thank you? In all the world you are the only friend I can really trust. Well, what I want you to do is this. Take the first train to London to-morrow and go to 98, Britten Street, Chelsea, where you will find a certain Frenchwoman named Lejeune. Tell her that I have sent you to implore her to tell me the truth; that if she fears to approach me direct you will act as intermediary; that if she withholds the secret it must result in my death – my death – you understand."

"In your death!" I gasped, puzzled.

"Yes. I cannot face exposure. I would prefer death!" was her hoarse reply. "Tell that woman that Richard Keene has returned! She will know." I watched her face and recognised how desperate she was. I had never before seen such a look in any woman's eyes.

"And what else?" I asked mechanically.

"Nothing. All you have to do in order to save me is to get a written confession from that woman. If she refuses, as I fear she will, then my fate is sealed. The blow I have been dreading these past years will fall. I shall be crushed, and Lolita Sibberton will be but the memory of an unhappy woman who fell the victim of as foul and ingenious a plot as was ever conceived by the mind of man." Her hands were clasped before her, and she shivered from head to foot. I saw that she was cold, and without a word wound about her bare neck my scarf that lay upon a chair.

"I will do my utmost in your interests," I assured her. "This woman – is she one of the conspirators?"

"Beware of her. She is treacherous, unscrupulous, and possessed of a cunning that is almost beyond comprehension. Act with discretion, and exercise every care of your own personal safety."

"Why? I have no fear in London in broad daylight," I smiled.

"Ah! You don't know," she cried. "In dealing with her, you are dealing with a person who would hesitate at nothing in order to attain her own ends. Until now, although a word from her could give

me my freedom from this imminent danger that threatens to overtake me, she has kept silence and watched for my downfall."

"I will compel her to confess," I cried fiercely. "If it is within human power to save you, Lolita, I will do so. Trust me, because I love you."

She sighed, and again her eyes were dimmed by tears.

"And if you hear strange tales about me, certain allegations of – shameful stories, I mean – you will believe none of them till you have proof – will you?" she urged breathlessly, with a deep anxiety in her voice.

"No," I promised. "I will not. To me, Lolita, you are innocent, pure and good, just as when we were boy and girl together." And again I placed her finger-tips to my lips as seal of my allegiance to the one woman who was all the world to me.

At that instant there came a tap at the door, and I was compelled to drop her hand instantly.

Slater, the aged, white-whiskered butler, opened the door, saying in his squeaky voice —

"His lordship would like to see you, m'lady, in the library before sending a telegram – at once, if convenient."

"I'll be there in a moment," she answered, without turning towards the man to reveal her face. Then, when Slater had gone, she rushed to the small mirror and with her handkerchief quickly removed all traces of her tears.

"George is worrying about Marigold being alone at Aix-les-Bains," she remarked. "I'm rather surprised he let her go. If I were a man with a young and pretty wife, I shouldn't let her far out of my sight. But Marigold, I suppose, isn't an ordinary woman."

Her last sentence was indeed correct. All the world knew that the young Countess of Stanchester was the gayest and giddiest of the ultra-smart set in which she moved, and that after two years of marriage she had developed into one of the most popular and unconventional Society hostesses. The young Earl was not exactly happy – that I knew – and Lolita was usually his adviser regarding his purely domestic affairs.

Therefore, as she hurriedly put the finishing-touches to her countenance with that dexterity which a woman only possesses, she turned to me and again grasped my hand, saying —

"What I have said to-night, Willoughby, you will regard as strictly confidential. Act as I have suggested, and," she added with a catch in her voice, "remember that you alone stand between myself – and death?"

"I promise," I said. And opening the door, I bowed before her as she swept out, her silks swishing down the long corridor.

I closed the door again and flung myself back into my chair, utterly mystified by those fateful words. She had a secret, one that she was prepared to keep even at cost of her own life. To me, although she had not admitted that she reciprocated my love, she had entrusted her life.

Yes. I would force the mysterious Frenchwoman into confession, whoever she was. The thought of my love's peril roused me to action, and I seated myself at my table and set to work clearing off those letters that lay heaped up unanswered.

The clock on the stables had chimed midnight before I threw down my pen, locked my drawers, and slipping on my overcoat strolled through the silent house along to the great hall, where a footman in the bright blue and gold Stanchester livery let me out into the still, balmy night.

After the warmth of my room, the air was refreshing, and as I walked on down the dark avenue towards the village, the silence was complete save for the cry of an owl and the distant barking of the hounds in the Earl's celebrated kennels situated about a mile away. Where the trees met overhead the darkness was intense, but so often did I return home after nightfall that I knew every inch of the way.

Still pondering deeply upon my strange conversation with Lolita, I strode forward without any thought of time or place, and utterly oblivious to everything, until of a sudden I was aroused by hearing a woman's loud, piercing shriek.

I halted on the instant and listened. I judged the sound to be about a hundred yards to the left, in the darkness. After a few seconds it was repeated.

The cry was Lolita's! Of that I felt absolutely convinced.

Without a moment's hesitation I rushed forward, but in the cavernous blackness could discern nothing. I halted and listened, but beyond the hooting of the owl could discern no sound of any movement among that treble row of giant beeches.

At first I tried to convince myself that those cries of distress were merely heard in my imagination, yet they were, alas! too tangible and distinct. For a full quarter of an hour I lingered there, straining eyes and ears, but all in vain.

Then, with a resolve to take the man Warr into my confidence and invoke his aid to make a search, I rushed forward to the village, awakened him, and we both returned with lanterns as quickly as we could, and began to make a methodical examination of the spot whence I had believed the sounds emanated.

I learned from Warr one very curious fact, namely, that he had been unable to go up to the Hall to deliver the letter, and it was still in his possession. It therefore seemed as though Lolita had caught sight of the stranger's face as he peered forth from the tap-room window, and by that means knew of his unwelcome return.

For an hour we searched diligently both within the avenue and outside it, until of a sudden a cry from Warr caused my heart to leap.

"Good Heavens! Mr Woodhouse!" he gasped, bending to a clump of long grass in a deep hollow behind the huge gnarled trunk of one of the great oaks. "Come and look here!"

I dashed forward to the spot over which he held his hurricane lantern, saw what he had discovered, and stood appalled, dumbfounded, absolutely rooted to the spot.

The sight presented there rendered the mystery of that evening even more bewildering and inscrutable.

Chapter Four
Wherein a Strange Story is Told

For the moment we were both too aghast to speak.

The clump of rank high grass in the hollow had been beaten down, and in the centre, revealed by the uncertain light of our lanterns, lay a young man, whose white face and wide-open, sightless eyes told us both the terrible truth.

He had been murdered!

As I bent to examine him as he lay slightly on his side, I saw that from an ugly knife-wound in his back blood was still oozing, and had soaked into the ground around him. Both hands were tightly clenched, as though the unfortunate fellow had died in a spasm of agony, while upon one finger something shone, which I discovered to be a gold ring of curious, foreign workmanship, shaped like a large scarab, or sacred beetle, about half an inch long, and nearly as broad – an unusual ring which attracted my curiosity.

The grass around bore distinct marks of a desperate struggle, and from the position in which the young man was lying, it seemed as though, being struck suddenly, he had stumbled, fallen forward, and expired.

"He's been murdered, sir, without a doubt," exclaimed Warr, at last breaking the silence. "I thought you said you heard a woman's voice?"

"So I did," I replied, much puzzled at the discovery, for, to tell the truth, I had half-expected to find Lolita herself. Even at that moment I could have sworn that the cry was hers. "It seems, however, that I must have been mistaken."

"But who can he be?" exclaimed the innkeeper. "He's an utter stranger to me. I've certainly never seen him in Sibberton."

"Neither have I," was my response. "There's some deep mystery here, depend upon it," I added, recollecting all that Lolita had so strangely told me earlier in the evening.

"And my own opinion is that the fellow who called at my house this evening – Mr Richard Keene, as he said his name was – has had a hand in it," Warr declared as he looked across at me, still kneeling by the young man's body.

"Well, it certainly seems suspiciously like it. Both men are entire strangers, that's evident."

In order to ascertain whether there was not a spark of life still left, I undid the poor fellow's vest and placed my hand upon his heart. There was, however, no movement. The blow had been struck with an unerring hand, while the weapon had been withdrawn and carried away by the assassin.

He was well-dressed, dark-haired, with an aquiline and somewhat refined countenance. He wore a slight, dark moustache, and I judged his age to be about twenty-three. His blue serge suit was of fine quality, but was evidently of foreign cut, and his boots were also of foreign shape and make. His hands, I felt, were soft, as though unused to work, yet where he lay, in that damp hollow, I was unable to search his clothes properly to discover a clue to his identity.

The spot where he had been attacked had certainly been chosen by some one well acquainted with the park. The hollow, once an old gravel-pit, but now overgrown with grass, was screened by the trees of the avenue, so that any one in it would be entirely hidden from view, even in broad daylight. Therefore it struck me that the unfortunate victim had been enticed there by the assassin, and foully done to death.

Yet after hearing those cries I had certainly detected no movement. The murderer must have crept silently out of the grassy hollow, and struck straight across the park to the woods half a mile away. Had any other direction been taken, I must certainly have heard his footsteps.

But the woman who had screamed. What of her?

I had, at the moment, little time for reflection. Acting upon the innkeeper's suggestion I went off to fetch Knight, the constable, and my friend Pink, the doctor, while he remained with his lantern beside the victim of the tragedy.

As soon as the doctor saw him he shook his head, declaring that the wound had proved fatal a few minutes after he had been struck, while the constable, alive to the importance of the occasion, commenced suggesting all sorts of wild theories regarding the dead stranger. Disregarding them all, however, we obtained a hurdle, and Warr and Knight carried the body down the dark avenue, a strange and weird procession, our way lit uncertainly by the swing lanterns, our voices awed and hushed in the presence of the unknown dead.

The men deposited their inanimate burden in an outhouse at the back of the village inn to await the inquest which Pink declared would be necessary, and then, with a better light and the door closed against any prying intruder, we examined the dead man's pockets to see whether they contained anything that might throw light on the tragic affair or lead to his identification.

The constable, with the officiousness of his class, took out a ponderous note-book and with a stubby piece of pencil commenced to make an inventory of what we found – a pocket-knife, about three pounds ten in money, a gold French piece of twenty francs, a gun-metal watch and plated chain, a few loose cigarettes a box of matches, a pawn-ticket shewing that a lady's necklet had been pledged in the name of Bond, with a pawnbroker in the Westminster Bridge Road, about a year ago. Beyond that there was no clue to the dead man's name. We were all disappointed, for the mystery surrounding him was heightened by the absence of any letter in his pocket or name upon his underclothing. Men who go to a pawnshop do not usually give their real names, hence we knew that Bond was assumed. Indeed, in pawnbroking the name of the person offering the pledge is never even asked, the assistant filling up the voucher in any name that comes to him.

While the others were making careful examination of the maker's name and number of the dead man's watch, I chanced to hold his waistcoat in my hand, when between my fingers I felt something like a letter. In an instant I was prompted to take possession of it secretly, and this I managed to do, first crushing it into the palm of my hand, then transferring it to my pocket.

Was it possible that the crisp paper so cunningly concealed in the lining of the waistcoat contained a clue? My heart beat quickly, and I longed to escape from the place and examine it in secret. If Lolita had actually been present at the tragedy and had any connection with it, my duty was surely to conceal the fact. She had admitted that she was in deadly peril, and I had promised to assist her; therefore, by securing any clue and hiding it from the police, I was assuredly acting in her interest.

I had already managed to secure the ring surreptitiously from the dead man's finger before the body had been removed from the spot where we had discovered it, and as neither Warr nor the others had noticed it, I held it as a probable clue which I intended should be my secret alone.

"He was evidently struck with a long thin knife," remarked Pink, a muscular, clean-shaven man who was extremely popular in the district, a keen sportsman and something of an epicure. He had probed the wound and ascertained that its direction had been only too accurate. "Whoever did it," he declared, "knew exactly where to strike. I daresay he fell without a cry. The knife was very sharp, too," he went on, examining one of the black horn buttons of the young man's jacket-cuff. "You see it grazed this as he raised his arm to ward off the blow and shaved off a tiny piece, just as a razor might. The coroner will want to see this. I'll get Newman over, and we'll make a proper post-mortem in the morning."

Pink was a clever surgeon who masked his capabilities behind an easy-going good-humour. His poor patients were often convulsed by his amusing remarks, while at the houses of the county people he was always a welcome guest on account of his inexhaustible fund of droll stories, his shrewd wit, and his outspoken appreciation of a good dinner. His odd ways were the idiosyncrasies of genius, for without doubt he was as expert a surgeon as there was outside Harley Street, and I myself had heard praise of him from the mouths of certain London men with big "names."

The manner in which he examined the unfortunate young man who had so suddenly fallen a victim of an assassin showed that he was intensely interested. He grunted once or twice and sniffed suspiciously, and with some gusto took a pinch of snuff from his heavy silver box. Then, having carefully examined the man's right hand, he turned to me again, saying, as he pointed to it —

"That's strange, Woodhouse, isn't it?"

"What?" I inquired, detecting nothing.

"Can't you see. His hand is clenched. He grasped something just at the moment when he was struck."

"Well?"

He held the lantern closer to the cold stiff hand, and pointing to the thumb that was closely clenched upon the fingers, said —

"Can't you see anything there?"

I looked, and then for the first time detected that beneath the thumb was something white – a tiny piece of white fur!

"That's out of a woman's jacket, or boa, or something," he declared, gradually disengaging it, and placing it in the hollow of his hand for closer inspection. "There are one or two black hairs with it, showing it, I believe, to be ermine fur – a woman who wore some garment of ermine."

"Are you certain?" I gasped.

"Almost – but not quite until I put it beneath the microscope. Then I'll be able to tell for certain. But surely it couldn't have been a woman who killed him?"

"It looks very much like it, sir," remarked Knight, who had been gazing eagerly over the doctor's shoulder.

"Then what woman?" asked Warr, glancing across at me.

I held my breath. A silence fell between us. The mystery was of such a character that neither of us dare advance any further theory.

For my own part, however, the discovery of this tiny piece of fur was directly suspicious, and went much to confirm my belief that Lolita had been at the spot where the tragedy had been enacted, for I now recollected that sometimes when she went out after dinner she put on a wide ermine boa with long ends to cover her shoulders, a very handsome piece of fur that had been brought for her from Petersburg when the young Countess of Stanchester went to visit the Grand-Duchess Paul in the previous winter.

Was it possible that the poor young fellow had clutched at it in his dying grasp? Or had he seized the fur garment of some other woman?

Yet, I recollected, furs are not usually worn in mid-August save just to throw over a dinner-gown as protection from chills when the damp is rising after the heat of the day.

On the other hand, I tried to convince myself that the cry was not that of the sweet-eyed woman I loved; nevertheless, such thought was in vain. I knew that voice far too well to have been mistaken.

For quite an hour Pink continued his investigations as keenly and methodically as any practised detective, for he rather prided himself upon the manner in which he made discoveries about persons, and frequently astounded his patients by his knowledge of their actions and movements, which they believed only known to themselves. At last, however, he exhausted all the points possible to investigate without a post-mortem, and just as the church clock struck three we came forth, Warr locking the door of the outhouse, while Knight left us to ride on his bicycle into Northampton to report to the headquarters of the constabulary.

Pink's way lay past my house, for he lived in a big, square, comfortable house about a quarter of a mile out of the village, on the London road, and as we walked together up the silent street, he suddenly said —

"Do you know, Woodhouse, I have a firm belief that the young fellow has been murdered by some woman! We must search the spot early in the morning and see if we can't find some footprints,

or other traces. Fortunately, it's damp in that hollow, and a woman's heel would leave a well-defined mark. Will you be ready at seven to go back there with me?"

The suggestion had never occurred to me, and my heart stood still when I reflected what tell-tale traces might there be left. But I strove to show no dismay, merely answering —

"Certainly. I'll be ready. We may discover something to give the police a clue."

"Police!" he cried. "They're useless. We shall have a swarm of thick-headed bunglers over here to-morrow. If they sent one smart man down from Scotland Yard they might do some good. But the plain-clothes men of the local constabulary haven't sufficient practice in serious crime to pursue any clever methods of investigation."

"Well, then, at seven," I exclaimed, for we had just reached my gate, and I was anxious to get to my own room and ascertain the nature of the paper I had managed to secure from the lining of the dead man's waistcoat.

"That's an appointment," he said, and as I turned and entered my old-fashioned, ivy-covered house with my latch-key, he pursued his way up the short steep hill towards his home.

Within my own cosy sitting-room the green-shaded reading-lamp was still burning, and Mrs Dawson, my attentive housekeeper, had placed my slippers ready in their accustomed corner. But throwing off my light overcoat I cast myself instantly into my favourite grandfather chair, and drew from my pocket the clue I had surreptitiously stolen.

The piece of paper was pale blue, and as I opened it a cry of dismay involuntarily escaped me.

What was inscribed upon it was so strange!

Chapter Five
Reveals Three Curious Facts

There was no writing on the carefully-concealed scrap of paper. Only five rows of numerals, written in a fine feminine hand and arranged in the following manner: —

63 26 59 69 65 56 65 33 59 35 65 44
49 55 22 59 57 46 78 63 23 98 59 39
46 67 82 45 58 35 54 45 46 26 78 75
68 75 49 64 22 86 48 73 78 45 62 45
76 47 64 66 85 44 78 48 73 78 58 62

I turned the paper over, utterly puzzled. It was certainly some cipher, but of a kind of which I knew nothing. Ciphers may of course be very easily constructed and yet defy solution. This appeared to be one of those. What hidden message it contained, I had no idea, save that it was certain to be something of importance and that some other person was in possession of the secret of the decipher, or its recipient would not have concealed it where he did.

If I could only read it, a clue to the dead man's identity would no doubt be revealed. But as I glanced at those puzzling rows of numerals I felt that to endeavour to learn their secret was but a vain hope. I had expected to find upon that scrap of paper some intelligible letter, and was sorely disappointed at what I had discovered.

The further I pushed my inquiries, the more mysterious the affair seemed to become. A dozen times I tried by ordinary methods to turn the numbers into writing, but my calculations only resulted in an unmeaning array of letters of the alphabet, a chaos quite unintelligible, therefore I was at length compelled to abandon my efforts, and after examining the ring and deciding that it was a copy of one of those old Etruscan rings that I had seen in the British Museum, I reluctantly went upstairs to snatch an hour's sleep before the dawn.

My brain was awhirl. Following so quickly the strange declarations of Lolita had come this startling tragedy with all its mysterious and suspicious features. As I lay awake, listening to the solemn striking of the hour from the old church tower which told me that daylight was not far off, I recollected that Lolita had probably recognised the shabby stranger in the tap-room of the *Stanchester Arms* as she drove past. I remembered how he had held back, as though fearing recognition, and also that, as the carriage went by, her head had been half-turned in our direction. If she had detected his presence she had certainly made no sign, yet it must have been that discovery that had caused her to speak so strangely and to seek my aid in the manner she had done.

Warr still had the sealed letter in his possession, therefore the only way she could have known of the return of the bluff fellow who called himself Richard Keene was by the discovery made by herself.

I remembered her fierce desperation and her trembling fear; how cold her hands had been, and how wild that look in her beautiful eyes – a hunted look such as I had never before seen in the eyes of either man or woman. Then suddenly I recollected what damning evidence might remain on that soft clay in the hollow where the body had been found. The detectives would certainly be able to establish her presence there! I felt that at all risks I must prevent that. I had promised to help her, and although there were dark suspicions within my heart I intended to act loyally as a man should towards the woman he honestly loves. I therefore set my alarm to awaken me in an hour, and just as the grey light was breaking through the clouds eastward over Monk's Wood, I rose, dressed myself, and concealing a small garden trowel in my pocket set forth for the spot before any of the villagers were astir.

The morning air was keen and fresh as I hurried up the avenue and with some trepidation descended into the hollow, fearing lest the report had already been spread in the village and that any of the curious yokels might notice my presence there.

But I was alone, and therefore breathed more freely.

Over an area of fifteen yards or so the grass was beaten down here and there, and in the cold grey light became revealed the dark stain where the victim had fallen – the stain of his life blood.

I searched around among the grass and over the soft boggy places bare of herbage, but found no footmarks nor any trace except that of the downtrodden grass where the struggle had evidently taken place and where the unknown man had apparently fought desperately for his life. After twenty minutes or so, fearing lest some labourers early astir might come to the spot before going to work, I was about to leave when, of a sudden, in a place where no grass grew upon the clay, I saw something that held me rigid.

In the soft earth was the plain imprint of the small sole of a woman's shoe, with a Louis XV heel!

Lolita wore high heels of exactly that character, and took three's in shoes. Was it possible that the footprint was hers?

As I looked I saw others, both of a person advancing and receding. One was ill-defined, where she had apparently slipped upon the clay. But all of them I stamped out – all, indeed, that I could find. Yet was it possible, I wondered, to efface every one?

If one single one remained, it might be sufficient to throw suspicion upon her.

While engaged in this, something white caught my eye lying upon the grass about ten yards distant. I picked it up and found it to be a piece of white fur about an inch square that had evidently been torn bodily out of a boa or cape – the same fur that had been found between the dead man's fingers.

This I placed carefully in my cigarette-case and continued my work of effacing the damning footprints. There were other marks, of men's boots, but whether those of the dead man or of our own I could not decide, so I left them as evidence for the police to investigate.

My eyes were everywhere to try and discover the weapon with which the foul deed had been committed, for the assassin, I thought, might have cast it away, but my search was in vain. It had disappeared.

Fully twenty distinct marks of those small well-shod feet I effaced by stamping upon them or scraping the surface with the trowel, and was preparing to return and keep the appointment with the doctor when of a sudden I saw, lying close behind the trunk of the giant oak, a half-smoked cigarette, which on taking up I found to be of the same brand as those found in the dead man's pocket. He had therefore kept a tryst at that spot, and had smoked calmly and unsuspiciously in order to while away the time.

Of men's footprints in the soft ground there were a quantity, but then I remembered how all four of us had tramped about there, in addition to the victim himself, and I was not sufficiently expert in tracking to be able to distinguish one man's tread from another's.

It was already daylight and in the distance I could hear the sound of a reaping machine in one of the fields beyond the park, therefore I was compelled to escape in order that my premature examination should remain secret. So I struck straight across the level sward to the London road, which ran beyond the park boundary, in preference to passing straight down the avenue at risk of meeting any of the labourers.

News of the tragedy I knew had not yet reached the Hall, otherwise the servants would have been out to see the spot, therefore I believed myself quite safe from detection until, just as I scaled the old stone wall and dropped into the broad white high road with its long line of telegraph lines, I encountered the innkeeper Warr who, mounted on his bicycle, was riding towards me.

He had approached noiselessly and we were mutually surprised to meet each other in such circumstances.

"Halloa!" he cried, dismounting. "You've been out again very early – eh?"

"I've been back to the spot to see if I could find any traces of the dead man's assailant," was my reply. "I thought I'd go back early, before the crowd trod over the place. Don't say anything, or Knight may consider that I've taken his duty out of his hands."

"Ah, a very good idea, sir," was the man's approving response. "I thought of doing so myself, only they're beginning to cut my bit o' wheat in the mill-field this morning and I have to go into Thrapston about the machine. I'll be back in an hour."

He was preparing to re-mount, when I stopped him, saying —

"Look here, Warr. You recollect that stranger who called and left the note for Lady Lolita last evening? Well, there seems considerable mystery about the affair, and somehow I feel there's connexion with the fellow's visit with this poor young man's death. If so, her ladyship's name must be rigorously kept out of it, you understand. There's to be an inquest to-morrow, and we shall both be called to give evidence. Recollect that not a word is said about the man Keene, the note, or the message."

"If you wish it, sir, I'll keep a still tongue," was his reply. "I've told nobody up to now – not even the missus."

"Very well. Remember only you and I know of this man's return, and the knowledge must go no further. There's a mystery, but it must have no connexion with her ladyship."

"You may trust me, sir. The family have been too good to me all these years for me not to try and render them a service. I quite agree with you that the stranger was suspicious, and from what he said to me in private it is certain that he must know her ladyship very well indeed."

"You're sure you've never seen that young man before?" I asked, watching his face narrowly.

"Him? No, I don't know him from Adam!" was the landlord's reply, yet uttered in a manner and tone that aroused my distinct suspicions. His assurance was just a trifle too emphatic, I thought.

I paused a moment, half inclined to express my doubt openly, then said at last —

"That letter – what shall you do with it?"

"Give it to her, of course. I'll come up to the Hall when I come back. I ought to have given it to her last night."

"Had you done so that man's life might perhaps have been saved – who knows?"

"Ah!" he sighed in regret. "I never thought of that. I didn't know it was of such importance. You see the missus is in bed with a cold, and I couldn't leave the house in charge o' the girl. They were a bit merry last night after Jim Cook's weddin'."

I was anxious to obtain possession of the mysterious letter, but I already knew that he would only deliver it to Lolita personally. Yet I had no wish that the man Warr should come to the Hall just at the moment when the startling news of the tragedy would create a sensation throughout the whole household. If he were to deliver the letter, it should not be before the first horror of the affair had died down. Therefore I made excuse to him that her ladyship was going over very early to Lady Sudborough's to join a picnic and would not be back before evening.

"Very well," he answered. "I'll come up then." And mounting his machine he spun away down the hill.

Next moment, from where I stood, I distinguished a trap approaching along a bend in the road. Three men were in it, two of them being in uniform – the police from Northampton.

Having no desire that they should know that I had returned to the spot to efface those tell-tale marks, the only way to avoid them was to spring over the wall again into the park, which I did without a moment's hesitation, crouching down until they had passed, and then crossed the corner of the park and entered the Monk's Wood, a thick belt of forest through which ran a footpath which joined the road about a mile further down. The way I had taken to Sibberton was a circuitous one, it was true, but at any rate I should avoid being seen in the vicinity of the spot where the tragedy was enacted.

Walking forward along the dim forest path covered with moss and wild flowers, where the rising sun glinted upon the grey trunks of the trees and the foliage above rustled softly in the wind, I was sorely puzzled over the innkeeper's manner when I had put that direct question to him.

Notwithstanding his denial, I felt convinced that he had recognised the dead man.

I had almost gained the outer edge of the wood, walking noiselessly over the carpet of moss, when of a sudden the sound of voices caused me to start and halt.

At first I saw nothing, but next moment through the tree trunks twenty yards away I caught sight of two persons strolling slowly in company – a man and a woman.

The man's face I could not see, but the woman, whose hair, beneath her navy blue Tam o' Shanter cap showed dishevelled as a ray of sunlight struck it, and whose white silk dress showed muddy and bedraggled beneath her dark cloak, I recognised in an instant – although her back was turned towards me.

It was Lady Lolita, the goddess of my admiration. Lolita – my queen – my love.

Chapter Six
For Love of Lolita

I held my breath, open-mouthed, utterly dumbfounded.

Lolita's appearance showed too plainly that she had been out all the night. Her cloak was torn at the shoulder, evidently by a bramble, and the weary manner in which she walked was as though she were exhausted.

The man, bearded, broad-shouldered and athletic, seemed, as far as I could judge from his back, to be of middle age. He wore a rough tweed suit and a golf cap, and as he strode by her side he spoke with her earnestly, emphasising his words with gesture, as though giving her certain directions, which she heard resignedly and in silence.

I noticed that when he stretched out his hand to add force to his utterance that she shrank from him and shuddered. She was probably very cold, for the early morning air was chilly, and the dew was heavy on the ground.

Without betraying my presence, I crept on noiselessly after them, hoping that I might overhear the words the fellow uttered, but in this I was doomed to disappointment, for at the edge of the wood, before I realised the man's intention, he suddenly raised his hat, and turning, left her, disappearing by the narrow path that led through a small spinney to Lowick village. Thus I was prevented from obtaining a glance at his features and blamed myself for not acting with more foresight and ingenuity.

After he had left her, she stood alone, gazing after him. No word, however, escaped her. By his attitude I knew that he had threatened her, and that she had no defence. She was inert and helpless.

In a few moments, with a wild gesture, she sank upon her knees in the grass, and throwing up her two half-bare arms to heaven cried aloud for help, her wild beseeching words reaching me where I stood.

My adored was in desperation. I heard the words of her fervent prayer and stood with head uncovered. Long and earnestly she besought help, forgiveness and protection; then with a strange, determined calm she rose again, and stood in hesitation which way to proceed.

For the first time she seemed to realise that the sun was already shining, and that it was open day, for she glanced at her clothes, and with feminine dexterity shook out her bedraggled skirts and glanced at them dismayed.

I recognised her utter loneliness: therefore I walked forward to her.

Slowly she recognised me, as through a veil, and starting, she fell back, glaring at me as though she were witness of some appalling apparition.

"You!" she gasped. "How did you find me here?"

"No matter how I found you, Lady Lolita," I responded. "You are in want of a friend, and I am here to give you help, as I promised you last night. This is no time for words; we must act, and act quickly. You must let me take you back to the Hall."

"But look at me!" she cried in dismay. "I can't go back like this! They would – they would suspect!"

"There must be no suspicion," I said, thoroughly aroused to the importance of secrecy now that the police were already in the park making their investigations. "You cannot return to the Hall like this, for the servants would see you and know that you've been absent all night."

"I'm afraid of Weston," she said. "She is so very inquisitive." Weston was her maid.

"Then you must come with me to my house," I suggested. "We could reach it across the fields and enter by the back way unobserved. I can send Mrs Dawson out on some pretext, and you can remain locked in my sitting-room while I go up to the Hall and fetch one of your walking-dresses. I

can slip up to your wardrobe and manage to steal something without Weston suspecting. Then, when you return, you can explain that you've merely been out for an early walk."

The suggestion, although a desperate one, commended itself to her, and with a few words of heartfelt thanks she announced her readiness to accompany me.

I longed to inquire the name of the male companion, but feared to do so, seeing how pale and agitated she was. Her face had changed sadly since the previous night, for she was now white, wan and haggard, presenting a strange, terrified appearance, dishevelled and bedraggled as she was. She must certainly have been out in the park for fully seven hours. Was she aware of the tragedy, I wondered?

I told her nothing of the discovery. How could I in those circumstances? True, she was not wearing the ermine collar, as I had suspected, yet the prints made by her shoes as she now walked with me were assuredly the same as those I had effaced.

We spoke but little as we hurried along, creeping always beneath walls and behind trees, and often compelled to make long détours in order to obtain cover and avoid recognition by any of those working in the fields.

Compelled to scale the high wall of the park at last, I assisted her over without much difficulty, for although she preserved all her natural beauty, she was athletic, fond of all games and a splendid rider to hounds.

"If I can only conceal the fact that I've been absent all night, it will be of such very material assistance," she said after we had crossed the high road and gained the shelter of a long narrow spinney. "I shall never be able to sufficiently repay you for this," she added.

"Remember the confession of my heart to you last night, Lolita," was my answer. "We will discuss it all later on – when you are safe." And we pushed forward, our eyes and ears on the alert as we approached the village.

At last, by good fortune, I managed to get her unobserved inside my house. Creeping noiselessly up the stairs I took her to one of my dusty, disused attics in preference to my sitting-room, and there she locked herself in. Not, however, before I had pressed her hand in silence as assurance that she might place her trust in me.

A few moments later I found my old housekeeper in the kitchen, and having given her directions to go on an errand for me to a farm about a mile and a half distant, I started off up to the Hall upon as strange an errand as man has ever gone, namely to steal a dress belonging to his love.

I had, of course, disregarded my appointment with Pink, and not wishing to meet the searchers or the doctor himself, I reached the Hall by the bypath that led from Lowick, passing along the edge of the Monk's Wood wherein I had met Lolita.

On entering the mansion I found that the startling news of the tragedy had just reached there, for the servants were all greatly alarmed. They crowded about me to learn the latest details, but I passed quickly on to my room and for a few minutes pretended to be engrossed in correspondence, although my real reason was to await an opportunity to reach her ladyship's room after the servants' bell had sounded and the faithful maid Weston had gone down to breakfast.

At last the bell clanged, and I stole along the corridor in order to watch the neat maid's disappearance with the others. She seemed longer than usual, but presently she came, and after she had passed along to the servants' hall I quickly ascended the main staircase, and sped along the two long corridors to my love's room – a large, well-furnished apartment with long mirrors and a dressing-table heaped with silver-mounted toilet requisites.

Without a moment's hesitation I opened the huge wardrobe, and after a brief search discovered a dark tweed tailor-made coat and skirt which I recognised as one she often wore for walking, and these I hurriedly rolled up and together with a pair of buttoned boots carried them off. I noticed that the bed, with its pale blue silken hangings, was fortunately tumbled as though it had been slept in, therefore Weston evidently did not suspect that her young mistress had been absent all night.

Not without risk of detection, I managed to convey the dress and boots down to my own room, where I packed them in a neat parcel and carried them with all speed back to Sibberton.

Mrs Dawson, who was a somewhat decrepit person, had not returned, therefore I carried the parcel up to the attic, and ten minutes later her ladyship came down looking as fresh and neat in her tweed gown as though she had only that moment emerged from her room.

Leaving her cloak and muddy dinner-dress in my charge, she escaped by the back and away down the garden, expressing her intention of returning to the Hall as though she had only been out an hour for a morning walk, as was so frequently her habit. She had thanked me fervently for my assistance, and in doing so uttered a sentence that struck me as remarkably strange, knowing what I did.

"You have saved me, Willoughby. You can save my life, if you will."

"I will," was my earnest reply. "You know my secret," I added, raising her fingers to my hot passionate lips before we parted.

She made no mention of the tragedy, and what, indeed, could I remark?

My journey to London I was compelled to postpone in view of what had occurred. She had not referred to it, and to tell the truth I felt that my presence beside her just then was of greater need. Thus, after awaiting my housekeeper's return in order to preserve appearances, I ate my breakfast with the air of a man entirely undisturbed.

Just before nine the doctor came in, ruddy and well-shaven, and throwing himself into an armchair exclaimed —

"You didn't keep your promise! I called and found nobody at home. You were out."

"I'd gone down the village," I explained.

"Well, I've been up into the park with the police. They've sent that blundering fool Redway – worse than useless! We've been over the ground, but there's so many footprints that it's impossible to distinguish any – save one."

"And what's that?"

"Well, strangely enough, my dear fellow, it's a woman's."

"A woman's!" I gasped, for I saw that all my work had been in vain and in my hurry I must have unfortunately overlooked one.

"Yes, it's the print of a woman's slipper with a French heel – not the kind of shoe usually worn in Sibberton," remarked the doctor. "Funny, isn't it?"

"Very," I agreed with a sickly feeling. "What do the police think?"

"Redway means to take a plaster cast of it – says it's an important clue. Got a cigarette?"

I pushed the box before him, with sinking heart, and at the same time invited him to the table to have breakfast, for I had not yet finished.

"Breakfast!" he cried. "Why, I had mine at six, and am almost ready for lunch. I'm an early bird, you know."

It was true. He had cultivated the habit of early rising by going cub-hunting with the Stanchester hounds, and it was his boast that he never breakfasted later than six either summer or winter.

"Did they find anything else?" I inquired, fearing at the same time to betray any undue curiosity.

"Found a lot of marks of men's boots, but they might have been ours," he answered in his bluff way as he lit his cigarette. "My theory is that the mark of the woman's shoe is a very strong clue. Some woman knows all about it – that's very certain, and she's a person who wears thin French shoes, size three."

"Does Redway say that?"

"No, I say it. Redway's a fool, you know. Look how he blundered in that robbery in Northampton a year ago. I only wish we could get a man from Scotland Yard. He'd nab the murderer before the day is out."

At heart I did not endorse this wish. On the contrary the discovery of this footmark that had escaped me was certainly a very serious *contretemps*. My endeavours must, I saw, now all be directed towards arranging matters so that, if necessary, Lolita could prove a complete *alibi*.

"Do you know," went on the doctor, "there's one feature in the affair that's strangest of all, and that is that there seems to have been an attempt to efface certain marks, as though the assassin boldly returned to the spot after the removal of the body and scraped the ground in order to wipe out his footprints. Redway won't admit that, but I'm certain of it – absolutely certain. I suppose the ass won't accept the theory because it isn't his own."

I tried to speak, but what could I say? The words I uttered resolved themselves into a mere expression of blank surprise, and perhaps it was as well, for the man before me was as keen and shrewd as any member of the Criminal Investigation Department. He was essentially a man of action, who whether busy or idle could not remain in one place five minutes together. He rushed all over the country-side from early morning, or dashed up to London by the express, spent the afternoon in Bond Street or the Burlington, and was back at home, a hundred miles distant, in time for dinner. He was perfectly tireless, possessing a demeanour which no amount of offence could ruffle, and an even temper and chaffing good-humour that was a most remarkable characteristic. The very name of Pink in Northamptonshire was synonymous of patient surgical skill combined with a spontaneous gaiety and bluff good-humour.

"I've given over that bit of white fur to Red way," he went on. "And I expect we shall find that the owner of it is also owner of the small shoes. I know most of the girls of Sibberton – in fact, I've attended all of them, I expect – but I can't suggest one who would, or even could, wear such a shoe as that upon the woman who was present at the tragedy, if not the actual assassin."

"Redway will make inquiries, I suppose?" I remarked in a faint hollow voice.

"At my suggestion he has wired for assistance, and I only hope they'll get a man down from London. If they don't – by Gad! I'll pay for one myself. We must find this woman, Woodhouse," he added, rising and tossing his cigarette-end into the grate. "We'll find her – at all costs!"

Chapter Seven
Is Full of Mystery

The doctor's keen desire to solve the mystery caused me most serious apprehension. His bluff good-humour, at other times amusing, now irritated me, and I was glad when he rose restlessly and went out, saying that he had wired to Doctor Newman at Northampton, and that they intended to make the post-mortem at two o'clock.

Presently, after a rest, which I so sorely needed, I walked along to the *Stanchester Arms* and had a private consultation with Warr in the little back parlour of the old-fashioned inn. Standing back from the road with its high swinging sign, it was a quaint, picturesque place, long and rambling, with the attic windows peeping forth from beneath the thatch. Half-hidden by climbing roses, clematis and jessamine it was often the admiration of artists, and many times had it been painted or sketched, for it was certainly one of the most picturesque of any of the inns in rural Northamptonshire, and well in keeping with the old-world peace of the Sibberton village itself.

Having again impressed upon the landlord the necessity of delivering the letter to Lolita in secret, as well as remaining utterly dumb regarding the stranger's visit, I was allowed to view the body of the unknown victim. It lay stretched upon some boards in the outhouse at rear of the inn, covered by a sheet, which on being lifted revealed the cold white face.

We stood there together in silence. In the dim light of the previous night and the uncertain glimmer of the lantern, I had not obtained an adequate idea of the young man's features, and it was in order to do this that I revisited the chamber of the dead.

For a long time I gazed upon that blanched countenance and sightless eyes, a face that seemed in those few hours to have altered greatly, having become shrunken, more refined, more transparent. The closely-cropped hair, the very even dark eyebrows, and the rather high cheek-bones were the most prominent features, and all of them, combined with the cut of his clothes and the shape of his boots, went to suggest that he was not an Englishman.

In those moments every feature of that calm dead face became photographed upon the tablets of my memory, and as it did so I somehow became convinced that he was not altogether a stranger. I had, I believed, met him previously somewhere – but where I could not determine. I recollected Warr's evasion of my question. Was he also puzzled, like myself?

Outside the inn half Sibberton had assembled to discuss the terrible affair, many of the village women wearing their lilac sun-bonnets, those old-world head-dresses that are, alas! so fast disappearing from rural England. The other half of the village had entered the park to see the spot where the terrible tragedy had been enacted.

For a moment I halted talking with a couple of men who made inquiry of me, knowing that I had first raised the alarm. And then I heard a dozen different theories in as many minutes. The rural mind is always quick to suggest motive where tragedy is concerned.

At noon I walked up to the Hall again, wondering if my love would show herself. I longed to get up to London and make inquiries at that pawnbroker's in the Westminster Bridge Road, as well as to call at the address she had given me in Chelsea. As she had said, only myself stood between her and death. The situation all-round was one of great peril, and I had, at all costs, to save her.

As I entered and crossed the hall, Slater, the old butler, approached, saying —

"His lordship would like to see you, sir. He's in the library."

So I turned and walked up the corridor of the east wing to that fine long old room with its thousands of rare volumes that had been the chief delight of the white-headed old peer who had spent the evening of his days in study.

"I say, Woodhouse!" cried the young Earl, springing from his chair as I entered, "what does this murder in the park last night mean?"

"It's a profound mystery," I replied. "The murdered man has not yet been identified."

"I know, I know," he said. "I went down to the inn with Pink this morning and saw him. And, do you know, he looks suspiciously like a fellow who followed me about in town several times last season."

"That's strange!" I exclaimed, much interested. "Yes, it is. I can't make it out at all. There's a mystery somewhere – a confounded mystery." And the young Earl thrust his hands deeply into his trousers pockets as he seated himself on the arm of a chair.

Tall, dark, good-looking, and a good all-round athlete, he was about thirty, the very picture of the well-bred Englishman. A few years in the Army had set him up and given him a soldierly bearing, while his face and hands, tanned as they were, showed his fondness for out-door sports. He kept up the Stanchester hounds, of which he was master, to that high degree of efficiency which rendered them one of the most popular packs in the country; he was an excellent polo player, a splendid shot, and a thorough all-round sportsman. In his well-worn grey flannels, and with a straw hat stuck jauntily on his head, he presented the picture of healthy manhood, wealthy almost beyond the dreams of avarice, a careless, easy-going, good-humoured man-of-the-world, whose leniency to his tenants was proverbial, and whose good-nature gave him wide popularity in Society, both in London and out of it.

By the man-in-the-street he was believed to be supremely content in his great possessions, his magnificent mansions, his princely bank balance, his steam yacht and his pack of hounds, yet I, his confidential friend and secretary, knew well the weariness and chagrin that was now eating out his heart. Her ladyship, two years his junior, was one of the three celebrated beauties known in London drawing-rooms as "the giddy Gordons," and who, notwithstanding her marriage, still remained the leader of that ultra-smart set, and always had one or two admirers in her train. She was still marvellously beautiful; her portraits, representing her yachting, motoring, shooting or riding to hounds, were familiar to every one, and after her marriage it had become the fashion to regard the Countess of Stanchester as one of the leaders of the London *mode*.

All this caused her husband deep regret and worry. He was unhappy, for with her flitting to and from the Continental spas, to Rome, to Florence, to Scotland, to Paris and elsewhere, he enjoyed little of her society, although he loved her dearly and had married her purely on that account.

Often in the silence of his room he sighed heavily when he spoke of her to me, and more than once, old friends that we were, he had unbosomed himself to me, so that, knowing what I did, I honestly pitied him. There was, in fact, affection just as strong in the heart of the millionaire landowner as in that of his very humble secretary.

"I had the misfortune to be born a rich man, Willoughby," he had once declared to me. "If I had been poor and had had to work for my living, I should probably have been far happier."

At the present moment, however, he seemed to have forgotten his own sorrows in the startling occurrence that had taken place within his own demesne, and his declaration that the man now dead had followed him in London was to me intensely interesting. It added more mystery to the affair.

"Are you quite certain that you recognise him?" I inquired a few moments later, wondering whether, if this were an actual fact, I had not also seen him when walking with the Earl in London.

"Well, not quite," was my companion's reply. "A dead man's face looks rather different to that of a living person. Nevertheless, I feel almost positive that he's the same. I recollect that the first occasion I saw him was at Ranelagh, when he came and sat close by me, and was apparently watching my every movement. I took no notice, because lots of people, when they ascertain who I am, stare at me as though I were some extraordinary species. A few nights later on, walking home from the Bachelors', I passed him in Piccadilly, and again on the next day he followed me persistently through the Burlington. Don't you remember, too, when Marigold held that bazaar in the drawing-room in aid of the Deep Sea Mission? Well, he came, and bought several rather expensive things. I confess

that his constant presence grew very irritating, and although I said nothing to you at the time, for fear you would laugh at my apprehension, I grew quite timid, and didn't care to walk home from the club at night alone."

"Rather a pity you didn't point him out to me," I remarked, very much puzzled. "I, too, have a faint idea that I've seen him somewhere. It may have been that when I've walked with you he has followed us."

"Most likely," was the young Earl's reply. "He evidently had some fixed purpose in watching my movements, but what it could be is an entire mystery. During the last fortnight I was in town I always carried my little revolver, fearing – well, to tell you the truth, fearing lest he should make an attack upon me," he admitted with a smile. "The fact was, I had become thoroughly unnerved."

This confession sounded strange from a resolute athletic man of his stamp whom I had hitherto regarded as utterly fearless and possessing nerves of iron.

"And now," he went on, "the fellow is found murdered within half a mile of the house! Most extraordinary, isn't it?"

"Very remarkable – to say the least," I said reflectively. "The police will probably discover who and what he is."

"Police!" he laughed. "What do you think such a fellow as Redway could discover, except perhaps it were a mug of beer hidden by a publican after closing-time? No, I agree with Pink, we must have a couple of men down from London. It seems that Pink has found the print of a woman's shoe at the spot, while in the dead man's hand was grasped a piece of white fur. The suspicion is, therefore, that some woman has had a hand in it. I think, Willoughby, you'd best run up to London and get them to send down some smart man from the Criminal Investigation Department. Go and see my friend Layard, the Home Secretary, and tell him I sent you to obtain his assistance. He'll no doubt see that some capable person is sent."

I suggested that he should write a note to Sir Stephen Layard which I would deliver personally, and at once he sat down and scribbled a few lines in that heavy uneven calligraphy of his, for he had ever been a sad penman.

The net seemed to be slowly spreading for Lolita, yet what could I do to prevent this tracking down of the woman I loved?

The mystery of the man's movements in London had apparently thoroughly aroused the young Earl's desire to probe the affair to the bottom. And not unnaturally. None of us care to be followed and watched by an unknown man whose motive is utterly obscure.

So I was compelled to take the note and promise that I would deliver it to Layard that same evening.

"I mean to do all I can to find out who the fellow was and why he was killed," the Earl declared, striding up and down the room impatiently. "I've just seen Lolita, who seems very upset about it. She, too, admits that she saw the man watching me at Ranelagh, at the bazaar, and also at other places."

"I wonder what his motive could have been," I remarked, surprised that her ladyship should have made such a statement.

"Ah! That we must find out. His intentions were evil ones, without a doubt."

"But he didn't strike you as a thief?" I asked.

"Not at all. He was always very well-dressed and had something of a foreign appearance, although I don't believe he was a foreigner."

"How do you know?"

"Because I heard him speak. His voice had rather a Cockney ring in it, although he appeared to ape the Frenchman in dress and mannerisms, in order, I suppose, to be able to pass as one."

"An adventurer – without a doubt," I remarked. "But we shall know more before long. There are several facts which may afford us good clues."

"Yes, in the hands of an expert detective they may. That's why we must have a man down from London. You go to town and do your best, Willoughby, while I remain here and watch what transpires. The inquest is fixed for to-morrow at three, I hear, so you had better be back for it. The Coroner will no doubt want your evidence." And with that we both walked out together into the park, where the constabulary were still making a methodical examination of the whole of the area to the left of the great avenue.

I had intended to obtain another interview with Lolita, but now resolved that to keep apart from her for the present was by far the wisest course, therefore I accompanied the Earl as far as the fateful spot, and then continued my way home in order to lunch before driving to Kettering to catch the afternoon express to St. Pancras.

In the idle half-hour after my chop and claret, eaten by the way with but little relish, I lounged in my old armchair smoking my pipe, when of a sudden there flashed upon me the recollection of the ring I had secured from the dead man's hand. I ran up to my room, and taking it from the pocket of my dress-waistcoat carried it downstairs, where I submitted it to thorough and searching examination.

It was a ring of no ordinary pattern, the flat golden scarabaeus being set upon a swivel, while the remaining part of the ring was oval, so as to fit the finger. I put it on, and found that the scarabaeus being movable, it adapted itself to all movements of the finger, and that it was a marvellously fine specimen of the goldsmiths' art, and no doubt, as I had already decided, a copy of an antique Etruscan ornament.

The thickness of the golden sacred beetle attracted me, and I wondered whether it could contain anything within. Around the bottom edge were fashioned in gold the folded hairy legs of the insect just showing beneath its wings, and on examining them I discovered, to my surprise, that there was concealed a tiny hinge.

Instantly I took a pen-knife and gently prised it open, when I discovered that within it was almost like a locket, and that behind a small transparent disc of talc was concealed a tiny photograph – a pictured face the sight of which held me breathless. I could not believe my eyes.

Revealed there was a portrait of Lady Lolita Lloyd, the woman I loved, which the dead man had worn in secret upon his finger!

Chapter Eight
Wherein I Make Certain Discoveries

Alas! how I had, in loving Lolita, quaffed the sweet illusions of hope only to feel the venom of despair more poignant to my soul.

During the journey up to London my thoughts were fully occupied by the discovery of what that oddly-shaped ring contained. That portrait undoubtedly linked my love with the victim of the tragedy. But how? I believed myself acquainted with most, if not with all, of her many admirers, and if this unknown man were an actual rival then I had remained in entire and complete ignorance.

As the express rushed southward I sat alone in the compartment calmly examining my own heart and analysing my own feelings. Hope gilded my fancy, and I breathed again. I found that I loved, I reverenced woman, and had sought for a real woman to whom to offer my heart. Inherent in man is the love of something to protect; his very manhood requires that his strongest love should be showered on one who needs his strong arm to shelter her from the world, with all its troubles, all its sorrows, and all its sins. I wanted a companion, pure, loving, womanly; one who would complete what was wanting in myself; one whom I could reverence – and in Lady Lolita I had found my ideal.

Yet the difference of our stations was an insurmountable barrier in the first place, and in the second, if the young Earl knew that I, his secretary, had had the audacity to propose to his favourite sister, my connexion with the Stanchesters would, I knew, be abruptly severed. Nevertheless, I had with throbbing heart confessed my secret to my love, and being aware of my deep and honest affection she allowed me to bask in the sunshine of her beauty, and she was trusting in me to extricate her from a peril which she had declared might, alas! prove fatal.

Poor Stanchester! I pondered over his position, too – and I pitied him. Awakened from the temporary aberration which made him take as wife Lady Marigold Gordon, the racing girl and smart up-to-date maiden; conscious that the *camaraderie* of the billiard-room, the stable, and the shooting-party and the card-room was after all but a poor substitute for the true companionship of a wife. The young Countess, well-versed in French novels of doubtful taste, accomplished in manly sports, a good judge of a dog, capable of talking slang in and out of season, inured to cigarettes and strong drinks, had been an excellent “chum” for a short time, but she now preferred the freedom of her pre-matrimonial days, and drifted about wherever she could find pleasure and excitement. Indeed, she seemed to have more admirers now that she was the wife of the Earl of Stanchester than when she had been merely one of “the giddy Gordon girls.”

The smoky sunset haze had settled over the Thames as I crossed Westminster Bridge in search of the pawnbroker’s whose voucher had been found in the dead man’s pocket, and a copy of which I had obtained before leaving Sibberton. It had been a blazing August day and every Londoner who could afford to escape from the city’s turmoil was absent. Yet weather or season makes no appreciable difference to those hurrying millions who cross the bridges each evening to rush to their ’buses, trams or trains.

At six o’clock that summer’s evening the crowd was just as thick on Westminster Bridge as on any night in winter. The million or so of absent holidaymakers are unnoticed in that wild desperate fight for the daily necessaries of life.

Without difficulty I found the shop where a combined business of jeweller’s and pawnbroker’s was carried on, and having sought the proprietor, a fat man in shirt-sleeves, of pronounced Hebrew type, I requested to be allowed to see the pledge in question.

He called his assistant, and after the lapse of a few minutes the latter descended the stairs carrying a small well-worn leather jewel-case which he placed upon the counter. The instant I saw it I held my breath, for upon it, stamped in gold, was the coronet and cipher of Lady Lolita Lloyd!

The pawnbroker opened it, and within I saw a necklet of seed pearls and amethysts which I had seen many times around my love's throat, an old Delhi necklace which her father had bought for her when in India years ago. In her youth it had been her favourite ornament, but recently she had not worn it.

Was it possible that it had been stolen – or had she made gift of it to him?

I took up the familiar necklet and held it in the hollow of my hand. I recollected how Lolita, with girlish pride, had shown it to me when she had received it as a present on her eighteenth birthday, and how, on occasions at parties and balls at Government House afterwards, it had adorned her white neck and its rather barbaric splendour had so often been admired.

"It's unredeemed, you know," remarked the black-haired Jew. "You shall have it for twenty pound – dirth cheap."

Ought I to secure it? The police would, no doubt, soon institute inquiries, and finding the coronet and cipher upon the case would at once connect my love with the mysterious affair. But I had by good fortune forestalled them, therefore I saw that at all hazards I must secure it.

I pretended to examine it in the fading light at the window, lingering so as to gain time to form some plans. I had not twenty pounds in my pocket; to give a cheque would be to betray my name, and the banks had closed long ago.

At last, after some haggling, more in order to conceal my anxiety to obtain it than anything else, I said, with affected reluctance —

"I haven't the money with me. It's a pretty thing, but a trifle too dear." And I turned as though to leave.

"Well, now, ninetheen pound won't hurt yer. You shall 'ave it for ninetheen pound."

"Eighteen ten, if you like," I said. "What time do you close?"

"Nine."

"Then I'll be back before that with the money," I answered, and I saw the gleam of satisfaction in the Hebrew's eyes, for it had been pawned for five pounds. He, however, was not aware that it was I who was getting the best of the bargain.

I drove in a cab back to the Constitutional Club, where I had left my bag for the night, and the secretary, a friend of mine, at once cashed a cheque, with the result that within an hour I had the necklet and deposited it safely in my suit-case, gratified beyond measure to know that at least I had baffled the police in the possession of this very suspicious piece of evidence.

From the Jew I had endeavoured to ascertain casually who had pledged the ornament, but neither he nor his assistant recollected. In that particularly improvident part of London with its floating population of struggling actors and music-hall artistes, each pawnbroker has thousands of chance clients, therefore recollection is well-nigh impossible.

Having successfully negotiated this matter, however, a second and more difficult problem presented itself, namely, how was I to avoid delivering the letter to Sir Stephen Layard, the Home Secretary – the Earl's request that the Criminal Investigation Department should hound down the woman I adored?

My duty was to go at once to Pont Street and deliver the Earl's note, but my loyalty to my love demanded that I should find some excuse for withholding it.

I stood on the club steps in Northumberland Avenue watching the arrivals and departures from the *Hotel Victoria* opposite, hesitating in indecision. If I did not call upon Sir Stephen, then some suspicion might be aroused, therefore I resolved to see him and during the interview nullify by some means the urgency of the Earl's request.

The Cabinet Minister, a middle-aged, clean-shaven man with keen eyes and very pronounced aquiline features, entered the library a few minutes after I had sent in my card. He was in evening clothes, having, it appeared, just dined with several guests, but was nevertheless eager to serve such a powerful supporter of his party as the Earl of Stanchester.

We had met before, therefore I needed no introduction, but instead of delivering the letter I deemed it best to explain matters in my own way.

"I must apologise for intruding at this hour, Sir Stephen," I commenced, "but the fact is that a very curious and tragic affair has happened in the Earl of Stanchester's park down at Sibberton, and he has sent me to ask your opinion as to the best course to pursue in order to get the police at Scotland Yard to take up the matter."

"What, is it a mystery or something?" inquired the well-known statesman, quickly alert.

I described how the body of the unknown man had been discovered, but added purposely that the inquest had not yet been held, and there that were several clues furnished by articles discovered in the dead man's pockets.

"Well, the Northampton police are surely able to take up such a plain, straightforward case as that!" he remarked. "If not, they are not worth very much, I should say."

"But his lordship has not much faith in the intelligence of the local constabulary," I ventured to remark with a smile.

"Local constables are not usually remarkable for shrewdness or inventiveness," he laughed. "But surely at the headquarters of the county constabulary they have several very experienced and clever officers. With such clues there can surely be little difficulty in establishing the man's identity."

"Then you think it unnecessary to place the matter in the hands of the Criminal Investigation Department?" I remarked.

"Quite – at least for the present," was his reply, which instantly lifted a great weight from my mind. "We must allow the coroner's jury to give their verdict, and, at any rate, give the local police an opportunity of making proper inquiries before we take the matter out of their hands. I much regret being unable to assist the Earl of Stanchester in the matter, but at present I am really unable to order Scotland Yard to take the matter up. If, however, the local police fail, then perhaps you will kindly tell him that I shall be very pleased to reconsider the request, and, if possible, grant it." This was exactly the reply I desired. Indeed, I had put my case lamely on purpose, and had gradually led him to this decision.

"Of course," I said, "I will explain to his lordship the exact position and your readiness to order expert assistance as soon as such becomes absolutely imperative. By the way," I added, "he gave me a note to you." And I then produced it, as though an after-thought.

He glanced over it and laid it upon his table, repeating his readiness to render the Earl all the assistance he could when the proper time came – the usual evasive reply of the Cabinet Minister.

Then he shook hands with me, and I left him, reassured that I had at least prevented the introduction of any of those clever experts in criminal investigation. The suspicions against Lolita grew darker every hour, yet even though they were well-grounded I was determined to save her.

That broad-shouldered man with whom I had seen her strolling in the early morning after the tragedy puzzled me greatly. Had I only obtained sight of him, I should, perhaps, have learnt the truth. Yet when I reviewed the whole of the mysterious circumstances my brain became awhirl. They were bewildering, for the mystery had become even more inscrutable than it at first appeared.

That my love had some connexion with the affair, I could not for a moment disguise. Her manner, her very admissions in themselves convicted her. Therefore I felt that with the facts of which I was already in possession I had greater chance than the most expert detective of pursuing my own inquiries to a successful issue.

On leaving Sir Stephen Layard's about nine o'clock, I resolved to ascertain what kind of house was number ninety-eight in Britten Street, Chelsea, the place where lived the Frenchwoman, Lejeune. I recollected the desperate words of my love on the previous night and wondered whether the death of the unknown man might not have altered the circumstances. Somehow I had a distinct suspicion that it might, hence I resolved not to reveal my presence at the place until I had again consulted Lolita.

The darkness was complete when I alighted from the cab in the King's Road, Chelsea, and turned down the rather dark but respectable street of even two-storied, deep-basemented houses that ran down towards the Embankment. It was one of those thoroughfares like Walpole Street and Wellington Square, where that rapacious genus, the London landlady, flourishes and grows sleek upon the tea, sugar and bottled beer of lodgers. In the night the houses seemed most grimy and depressing, some of them half-covered by sickly creepers, and others putting forward an attempt at colour with their stunted geraniums in window-boxes.

The double rap of the postman on his last round sounded time after time, by which I knew he was approaching me, therefore I retraced my steps into the King's Road and awaited him.

He had, I noticed, finished his round, therefore a cheery word and an invitation to have a drink at the flaring public-house opposite soon rendered us friendly, and without many preliminaries I explained my reason for stopping him.

"Oh!" laughed the man, "we're often stopped by people who make inquiries about those who live on our walks. Number ninety-eight Britten Street – a Frenchwoman? Oh, yes. Name of Lejeune. She doesn't have many letters, but they're mostly foreign ones."

"What kind of people live there?" I inquired, whereupon he eyed me rather strangely, I thought, and asked —

"You're not a friend of theirs, I suppose?"

"Not at all. I don't know them."

"Well, I'll tell you in confidence. Mind, however, you don't let it out to a single soul – but the fact is that the house is under the observation of the police, and has been for some time. Sergeant Bullen, the detective, is on duty up there at the end of the road," and he jerked his thumb in that direction. "He said good-night to me only a minute ago."

"The place is being watched, then?" I gasped in surprise.

"Yes. They've been keeping it under observation night and day for a week or more. Bullen told me one day that they expect to make an arrest which will cause a great sensation."

"For whom are they lying in wait?"

"Oh, that I'm sure I can't tell you! The 'tecs, although I know 'em well, don't talk very much, you know." And then, after some further questions to which I received entirely unsatisfactory answers, we parted.

Chapter Nine
Tells Some Strange Truths

Along the dark street, quiet after the glare and bustle of the King's Road, I retraced my steps, when, about half-way up, I met a man dressed as a mechanic, idly smoking a pipe. He glanced quickly at me as I passed beneath the light of a street-lamp, and I guessed from his searching look that he was the detective Bullen.

Without apparently taking notice of him I went along almost to the end of the street, until I discovered that the house which Lolita had indicated differed little from its neighbours save that it was rendered a trifle more dingy perhaps by the London smoke. And yet the large printed numerals on the fanlight over the door gave it a bold appearance that the others did not seem to possess. The area was a deep one, but the shutters of the kitchen window were tightly closed. With the exception of the light in the hall the place seemed in darkness, presenting to me a strange, mysterious appearance, knowing all that I did. Why, I wondered, was that police officer lounging up and down keeping such a vigilant surveillance upon the place? Surely it was with some distinct motive that a plain-clothes man watched the house day and night, and to me that motive seemed that they expected that some person, now absent, might return.

There is often much mystery in those rows of smoke-blackened uniform houses that form the side-streets of London's great thoroughfares, and the presence of the police here caused me to ponder deeply.

My first impulse had been to try and get sight of the mysterious Frenchwoman and her associates, but to escape the observation of that vigilant watcher was, I knew, impossible. So I passed along down to the Embankment, where the river flowed darkly on and the lights cast long reflections.

I was puzzled. I could not well approach the detective without making some explanation of who I was, and by doing so I recognised that I might inadvertently connect my employer's sister with whatever offence the inmates of the mysterious house had committed.

Yet when I recollected that wild terrified declaration of Lolita's on the previous night, how she had told me that if the Frenchwoman withheld her secret "it must result in my death," I felt spurred to approach her at all hazards. There are moments in our lives when, disregarding our natural caution, we act with precipitation and injudiciously. I fear I was given to hot-headed actions, otherwise I should never have dared to run the risk of arousing suspicion in Bullen's mind as I did during the hours that followed.

From the fact that the house was in darkness there seemed to me a chance that the woman Lejeune was absent and that she might return home during the evening. The detective was apparently keeping watch at the King's Road end of the street, therefore I resolved to keep a vigilant eye on the Embankment end. She might perchance approach from that direction, and if she did I hoped that I should be able to stop her and obtain a few minutes' conversation. It was true that I did not know her, yet I felt sufficient confidence in my knowledge of persons to be able to pick out a Frenchwoman in a half-deserted London thoroughfare. The gait and manner of holding the skirts betray the daughter of Gaul anywhere.

Patiently I lounged at the corner, compelled to keep an eye upon the detective's movements lest he should notice my continued presence. Apparently, however, he had no suspicion of a second watcher, for he stood at the opposite end of the street gossiping with all and sundry, and passing the hours as best he could. Presently a ragged newsvendor came up, and after exchanging words the man shuffled along the street in my direction, while the detective went off to get his supper. Then I knew that the ragged man was one of those spies and informers often employed by the London police and who are known in the argot of the gutter as "policemen's noses."

I avoided him quickly, well knowing that such men are as keen-eyed and quick-witted as the detectives themselves, being often called upon to perform observation work where the police would be handicapped and at once recognised. Many a crime in London is detected, and many a criminal brought to justice by the aid of the very useful "policeman's nose," whose own record, be it said, is often the reverse of clean.

It was then nearly eleven o'clock. The newsvendor had seated himself upon a doorstep half-way up the road and almost opposite the house with the number upon the fanlight, munching his supper, which he had produced from his pocket. I had watched him from around the corner and was turning back towards the Embankment, when of a sudden I heard footsteps.

On the opposite side, by the parapet which divided the roadway from the river, two persons were walking slowly, a man and a woman. In an instant I strained my eyes in their direction, and as they passed beneath one of the lamps I saw that the woman was young, dark-haired, thin-faced and rather well-dressed, while her companion was older, bearded, with a reddish bloated face which betokened an undue consumption of alcoholic liquors. As they passed on towards Britten Street I stepped across the road and walked behind them when, next instant, I recognised by the man's dress and his broad back view that he was none other than he whom I had observed walking with Lolita in the wood that morning – the stranger whose face I had not then plainly seen!

My curiosity was aroused immediately, for on hearing the woman make an observation in French I knew that she must be the person of whom I was in search.

Was she, I wondered, aware that the police were watching her house? Should I not, by placing her on her guard, ingratiate myself with her? My object was to get her to speak the truth and thus save Lolita, therefore I should have greater chance of success were I her benefactor.

She and her companion, whoever he was, were stepping straight into the trap laid for them, therefore on the spur of the moment, regardless of the fact that I might be the means of enabling certain criminals to escape from justice, I stepped boldly up to her just before they turned the corner into Britten Street and, raising my hat, said —

"Excuse me, mademoiselle, but your name, I believe, is Lejeune?"

The pair started quickly, and I saw that they were utterly confused. They were evidently endeavouring to reach the house by the less-frequented route.

"Well, and what if it is?" inquired the broad-shouldered man in a harsh bullying tone, speaking with a pronounced Cockney accent and putting forward his flabby bull-dog face in a threatening attitude.

"There's no occasion for hot blood, my dear sir," I replied quietly. "Just turn and walk back a few yards. I'm here to speak with mademoiselle – not with you."

"And what do you wish with me?" the young woman inquired in very fair English.

"Come back a few yards and I'll explain," I responded quickly. "First, let me tell you that my name is Willoughby Woodhouse, and that I am private secretary to the Earl of Stanchester."

"Woodhouse!" gasped her companion involuntarily, and I saw that his face went pale. "You are Mr Woodhouse!"

"Yes," I continued, "and I have been sent here to you by Lady Lolita Lloyd to warn you that your house is being watched by the police."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.