Le Queux William

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Содержание

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Chapter One
Concerns a Girl in Black

"No. I mean the girl in black. The one leading the pom."

"By jove! Yes. She's uncommonly smart, isn't she?"

"Her friend isn't half bad-looking, either?"

"I don't think so very much of her, Raife. But Southport at this time of year is always full of pretty girls."

"Not one of them can compare with the girl in black – she's ripping!" declared Raife Remington, a tall, well-set up, dark-haired, hatless undergraduate, who, in grey flannels, was walking beside his college chum, Edward Mutimer, at whose father's house he was staying during the vac. Both were at Trinity, Cambridge, and both, being in their last year, were reading hard for their degrees.

Each morning in those warm August days by the summer sea they came out for a stroll on the seafront; bright with movement and gaiety, taking an airing before settling down to their studies for the day.

On this particular morning, about ten o'clock, the seafront

was already full of men in flannels and lounge-suits, and women in garments of muslin and other such flimsy materials usually affected at the seaside, for stifled and jaded Londoners had flocked down there, as usual, to enjoy the sea air and all the varied attractions which Southport never fails to offer.

Raife Remington and his friend were strolling along, chatting about their old college days, idly smoking cigarettes, when they came up behind two well yet neatly-dressed girls, one about twenty, in a white pique coat and skirt with large pearl buttons, cut smartly; the other, about a couple of years her junior, who was fair-haired, very beautiful, and led a little black pom by a silver chain, was in dead black with a neat, close-fitting hat, with a turquoise blue band. Her skirt was short and well adapted for walking, displaying neat ankles encased in black silk stockings, and she wore white kid gloves; yet the only touch of colour was the hat band and the bow of bright cherry ribbon upon the collar of the little black pom.

In every movement, in her gait, in the swing of her carriage and the way she carried her well-poised head, there was ineffable, unaffected grace. Narrow-waisted, slim, delicate, she was the very incarnation of exquisite daintiness and high refinement. Little wonder, therefore, that Raife Remington should have singled her out as the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

He and his friend took several hasty strides forward, in order to glance at her countenance, and in it he was not disappointed. Her soft fair hair was dressed with that smart neatness which

characterised her whole attire, and her big, innocent eyes were of that deep child-like blue so seldom seen in a girl after she has reached her teens.

"By jove! What a ripping girl!" Raife again exclaimed in a low whisper of admiration. "I wonder who she can be, Teddy?"

"Ah, I wonder!" echoed his companion, and the two smart, athletic young undergraduates followed the girls unnoticed, for they were chatting together, and laughing merrily, entirely absorbed in their conversation.

Many persons were passing to and fro, as there always are on Southport seafront upon a summer's morning, and so many smart motor-cars whirling up and down, even though the month of August is not the smartest season.

Raife Remington, eldest son of Sir Henry Remington, Baronet, was not usually impressionable where the fair sex were concerned. Yet from the moment his eyes had first fallen upon this pretty, fair-haired girl in black, he appeared to fall beneath the spell of her remarkable beauty.

Within himself he was longing for an introduction to her, while Mutimer, because they were smart and stylish, had inwardly set them both down as members of some theatrical company. Yet their clothes and shoes were of palpably better quality than those worn by members of musical companies which visited Cambridge. Therefore he, like Raife, was much puzzled. Most girls are aware, by natural feminine intuition, when they are admired, but the pair walking before them were

utterly unconscious of having attracted the attention of any one. Mutimer noticed this, and argued that they certainly could not be actresses.

"I wonder where they're going?" remarked Raife in a whisper, but scarcely had the words left his mouth when a black and tan fox-terrier suddenly darted out from behind a man and, without provocation, attacked the dainty little pom and rolled it over ere any one was aware of it.

The tiny dog's mistress screamed, and, bending, cried in alarm and appeal:

"Snookie! Oh, my poor little Snooks!"

In an instant Raife was on the spot, and with his cane beat off the savage terrier; then, picking up the little pom, which lay on the ground more frightened than hurt, he restored it to the arms of its frantic mistress.

"He's not injured I think," Raife exclaimed.

For the first time the fair-haired girl raised her blue eyes to his, startled and confused.

"I – I'm so very much obliged to you," she stammered. "That man really ought to keep his horrid dog under control."

"He ought – the brute!" chimed in Teddy Mutimer. "What a darling little dog," he added admiringly, stroking the fluffy little animal admiringly.

"Poor little Snookie!" exclaimed his mistress, stroking her pet's head, while the little animal wagged his bushy tail and turned up the whites of his big round eyes with an expression so

pitiful as to cause all four to laugh.

The owner of the terrier, an over-dressed, caddish-looking man, had strolled on in utter unconcern, though well aware of what had happened.

"That fellow must be a fearful outsider," declared Raife, "or he would apologise. He looks like a ratcatcher – or perhaps a dog-stealer. All dog-stealers wear straw hats and yellow boots, like his!"

Whereat the three others laughed.

Snookie, duly examined by his dainty little mistress, was declared to have suffered no damage, therefore after Raife had asked permission to walk with them – as they were going in the same direction – they all four found themselves chatting merrily as they strolled along, Raife at the side of the pom's mistress, and his chum with her foreign-looking companion.

Already Raife and his fair unknown, to whom his introduction had come about so suddenly and unusually, were chatting without reserve, for, as an undergraduate, he had the habit of contracting quick friendships, and his careless, easy-going manner she found attractive.

In the pleasant morning sunshine they sat for about half an hour, when at last Mutimer and the other girl rose from their chairs to walk together, leaving Raife, to his evident satisfaction, alone with his divinity in black.

"Do you live here?" Raife inquired, after they had been gossiping for some time.

"Oh dear, no," was his companion's reply, in that voice he found so refined and musical. "We're staying at the Queen's. Do you live here?" she inquired in turn.

"No; I'm staying with my friend. He's up at Cambridge with me, so I'm spending part of the vac. with his people."

"Oh, you're at Cambridge!" she exclaimed, "I was at the 'University Arms' with my uncle, about two months ago. We went round and saw the colleges. I was delighted with them."

"Where do you generally live?" he asked, after she had told him that her name was Gilda Tempest.

"My uncle and I live a great deal abroad," was her reply; "indeed, more than I care to – to be frank. I love England. But my uncle travels so much that we have no home nowadays, and live nearly all the year round in hotels. I get horribly tired of the eternal table d'hôte, the music and the chatter."

"Rather pleasant, I should fancy. I love travelling," remarked the young man.

"I grow sick to death of it," she declared, with a sigh. "We wander all over Europe. My uncle is a wanderer, ever on the move and most erratic."

"Are you staying in Southport long?" he enquired eagerly.

"I really don't know. We may stay for a day – or for a month. I never know where we're going. I have not been home for nearly two years now."

"Home? Where do you live?"

"Father has a house in France – in a quaint little village called

By – on the edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau. Do you know Fontainebleau?"

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I went there from Paris once, with the guv'nor. We stayed at the Hotel de France – I think it was – at Fontainebleau. We went over the old palace and drove out to Barbison, and to Marlotte. Awfully charming places."

"Ah! Barbison. That is the colony of artists. I know, I love it, and have often cycled over there, where I have friends. Father is a bit of a recluse, so I travel and look after my uncle."

"And Marlotte – by the river. Do you know the picturesque little hotel there, and its al-fresco café – the garden with all the little summer-houses?"

"Oh, yes," she laughed. "Do you know it, too? How gay it is on Sundays in summer. All the artists come out from Paris for the day."

"It reminds me of Monkey Island, on the Thames. We used to go up there when I was at Eton."

She looked at him suddenly with a fixed expression, and then said:

"You haven't told me your name. I only know you as Snookie's rescuer – you know," and she laughed.

"My name's Remington – Raife Remington," he replied. "The guv'nor lives at Aldborough Park, not far from Tunbridge Wells."

Her face changed in an instant. She seemed to suddenly hold her breath, though quite imperceptibly. For a moment all the colour left her soft cheeks, but as quickly she recovered all her

self-possession, and exclaimed, in a changed tone:

"Is your father Sir Henry Remington?"

"Yes. Why? Do you happen to know him?"

"I – er – oh, no, I don't!" she replied, endeavouring to conceal her consternation at the discovery. "Only – well – I – of course, had no idea that you were the son of a gentleman so well-known as Sir Henry."

"My misfortune, perhaps," he laughed, airily. "The guv'nor has brains – has been a member of Parliament for twenty years, and all that – I haven't any."

"You have."

"They say I haven't, at Cambridge."

She was silent for some moments. What strange freak of Fate had thrown them together – he, the very last man on earth she desired to meet. And yet, she had found him such a bright, cheerful companion!

Her eyes were turned to where Mutimer and her friend, Maud Wilson, were strolling along the seafront.

The young fellow at her side was actually the son of Sir Henry Remington! The baronet's name burned into her brain – it was branded there, as though seared by a red-hot iron.

The amazing revelation staggered her. That man seated so idly in the chair, his legs stretched out, displaying the latest make in 'Varsity socks, was actually the son of Sir Henry!

She could not believe it.

Raife, on his part, was not exactly blind to the fact that

mention of his father's name had unduly surprised her.

"I fancy you know the guv'nor – eh?" he exclaimed, chaffing her. "Do you? Tell me. Perhaps you've met him somewhere? He's at Upper Brook Street in the season, and at Mentone in winter. We have a villa there."

"No, Mr Remington, I have never had the pleasure of meeting your father," was her rather strained response. "But all the world has heard of him. One sees his picture in the papers very often. I only read yesterday his scathing criticism in the House of Commons on the Navy estimates, and his serious warning regarding the new super-dreadnought – which is building on the Clyde – the vessel which is to be the most powerful battleship afloat."

"You know more than I do, Miss Tempest," he laughed. "I never read the guv'nor's speeches. I heard too much about ships at home, before I went up to Cambridge."

"I suppose so," she laughed, and then, as though uneasy and anxious to get away, she added: "Look! Your friend is coming back with Maud. We must go," and she rose, a tall, graceful figure in neat black.

"No. Don't go yet," he urged, still remaining seated. "You surely aren't in such a great hurry! It's only just past ten."

"I have to go back to the hotel," she declared.

"Have you so very much to do – and is my society so terribly boring?" the young fellow asked, with a mischievous laugh.

"Certainly not," was her reproachful reply, and, as though

against her will, she re-seated herself. “You really ought not to say that,” she added.

“But you seem very anxious to get away. Why?” The girl held her breath, and her great blue eyes were downcast. No. She dare not raise her gaze to his lest he should suspect the terrible truth – he, the son of Sir Henry Remington!

“Well,” she replied at last. “Because I have some letters to write, and – and to tell the truth, I have a dressmaker coming at half-past ten.”

“I suppose in a woman’s life one’s dressmaker is set upon a very high pedestal. All women must bow to the Goddess of Fashion.”

“You are horribly philosophic.”

“My philosophy is induced by your attitude towards me, Miss Tempest,” he declared. “You are a mystery. You were bright and merry until you knew my name, and then – well, then you suddenly curled into your shell. Really, I confess I can’t make you out!”

One more experienced than he would probably have discerned that a great and staggering blow had fallen upon his newly-found little friend. She was at a loss how to act – or what to say.

Her heart was thumping hard within her. What if he should discover the terrible secret which she alone knew! Fearing lest he should grow suspicious, she was all anxiety to get away – to place him and his memory behind her for ever.

Yet, somehow, he had fascinated her, and she sat there quite

unable to leave him. Though the sunshine, the life and gaiety about her were brilliant, the whole earth had, for her, grown dark in one single instant. She hardly knew what she did – or what she said.

"I really must go," she declared, at last, hitching up her pom from beneath her arm.

"Well, if you must, you must, I suppose, Miss Tempest," he responded at last, with great reluctance. "I fear you don't care for my society," he added, with a sigh.

"How very foolish!" she cried. "Of course, I do – only, as I have explained, I have an engagement which I can't possibly break. My dinner-dress is a positive rag."

"Then let us meet later to-day," he suggested. "This evening – at any time you like," he urged. "Will you see me again? Do," he implored.

For some time she made no reply. She was reflecting deeply. At last, with pale face, and striving to preserve a bold front, she replied rather frigidly: "No, really, Mr Remington, I am sorry, very sorry, but I cannot meet you again. I thank you ever so much for saving my little Snookie, but, in our mutual interests, it is far the best that we should not meet again."

"Why? I really don't understand you!" he exclaimed, much mystified.

"I am sorry, I repeat, Mr Remington – very sorry indeed – but I can't meet you again," she said, in a hard, determined tone. "I do not dare to."

"Engaged, I suppose – and fear tittle-tattle – eh?" he sniffed.

"No, I'm not engaged," was her rather haughty response, her cheeks colouring slightly.

"Then why cannot we meet? What prevents it?"

She looked at him with a strange, almost weird expression in her big luminous eyes.

"A barrier lies between us, Mr Remington," she said, in a low, very earnest voice. "We must never meet again after to-day – never?"

"But, Miss Tempest – you – "

"I have told you the truth," she said, firmly, rising with little Snookie tucked beneath her arm. "Please do not ask me the reason. Come, let us rejoin Maud and your friend."

She started off, and he, being helpless in the face of her determination, was compelled to follow her.

What, he wondered, was the mysterious motive of her refusal to see him again?

Chapter Two
Presents a Curious Problem

On entering old Mr Mutimer's house a telegram addressed to Raife lay upon the hall-table. Tearing it open, he read the brief summons. "Come at once, urgent. – Mother."

The words were startling in their brevity. Turning to his friend, he exclaimed in alarmed accents: "Something serious has happened at home, old man. See what the mater has wired." He handed the telegram to Teddy.

Teddy read it and gave it back. "I'm awfully sorry, Raife. There's a good train in about an hour from now. While you are waiting, you might ring up home and find out what's the matter."

"A good idea," said Raife. And at once he entered the study, and, taking up the telephone receiver, got a trunk call.

In less than five minutes he was speaking with Edgson, the old butler at Aldborough Park, his father's fine place near Tunbridge Wells.

"Is Lady Remington there?" asked Raife, eagerly. "Tell her I want to speak to her."

"She's – oh, it's you, Master Raife, sir! She's – I'm sorry, sir, her ladyship's not well, sir."

"Not well? What's the matter?" asked the young fellow, speaking eagerly into the mouthpiece.

"Oh, sir, I – I – I can't tell you over the 'phone," replied the old servant. "Her ladyship has forbidden us to say anything at all."

"But, Edgson, surely I may know!" cried the young man, frantically.

"We thought you were on your way home, sir," the butler replied. "Can't you come, Master Raife?"

"Yes, of course, I'm leaving now – at once. But I'm anxious to know what has happened."

"Come home, sir, and her ladyship will tell you."

"Go at once and say that I am at the 'phone," Raife ordered, angrily.

"I'm very sorry, sir, but I can't," was the response. "I have very strict orders from her ladyship, but I'm sorry to have to disobey you, sir."

"Can't you tell me anything? Can't you give me an inkling of what's the matter?" urged Raife.

"I'm very sorry, sir, I can't," replied the old man, quietly, but very firmly.

Raife knew Edgson of old. With him the word of either master or mistress was law. Edgson had been in his father's service ever since his earliest recollection, and though fond of a glass of good port, as his ruddy nose betrayed, he was the most trusted servant of all the staff.

He would give no explanation of what had occurred, therefore, Raife, furiously angry with the old man, "rang off."

The train journey from Southport seemed interminable. His

mind was in a whirl. The brief words of the telegram, "Come home at once, urgent," kept ringing in his ears, above the roar of the carriage wheels. He had the sensations of a man in a nightmare. What could have happened, and to whom? His mother had sent the "wire," and therefore it most probably concerned his father.

And ever and again, at the back of his mind, racked with this horrible suspense and uncertainty, was the image of the mysterious girl whose acquaintance he had made on the Southport front. He could hear the low, sweet tones of her musical voice, he could see the grace of her dainty figure. Should he ever meet her again? Would she ever be to him more than a fascinating acquaintance?

When at length he got into London, he felt he could not bear the slow torture of another railway journey. He went to a garage close to the station and hired a motor-car. From there to Tunbridge Wells seemed but a short distance: at any rate, there was action in the movement of the throbbing car, as opposed to the monotony of the train.

But even though the speed limit was exceeded many times in the course of that journey, it seemed hours to his impatient mood before they reached the lodge gates and raced up the stately avenue.

The avenue was three-quarters of a mile long, but at last, Raife Remington, at a bend in the drive, came in view of his home – a great, old, ivy-covered Tudor mansion, with quaint gables,

high, twisted chimneys, and two pointed towers. At one end was the tall, stained-glass window of the private chapel, while at the other were domestic offices of later date, and in other forms of architecture.

Passing the inner gate, and between the lawns, where the flower beds were gay with geraniums, the car entered the great open gateway, and drew up in the ancient courtyard, around which the grand old place was built – that same quiet courtyard where the horse's hoofs of King Henry the Seventh had so often echoed upon the uneven cobbles, where Sir Henry Reymingtoune, Chancellor to Elizabeth, had bowed low and made his obeisance to his capricious royal mistress, and where Charles the Second, in later days, had idled, surrounded by his elegant, silk-coated sycophants.

The Remingtons had, ever since the fourteenth century, played their part in England's government: once a great and powerful family, and even to-day a notable and honourable house.

As the car drew up at the door, Raife sprang out, and rushing through the great stone hall, the flags of which were worn hollow by the tread of generations, and where stood the stands of armour of dead Reymingtounes, he came face to face with old Edgson, grave and white-haired.

"Ah, Master Raife!" cried the old man, "I'm so glad you've come, sir. Her ladyship is in the boudoir awaiting you."

"What's happened, Edgson?" demanded the young man.

"Please don't ask me, sir. Her ladyship will tell you," was the old servant's response, in a half-choked voice, and he turned away.

A few moments later, Raife entered the small, cosy little room, with the high, diamond-pane windows, whereon were stained-glass escutcheons. Two women were there, his mother seated with her face buried in her hands, sobbing bitterly, and, beside her, her faithful companion, an elderly spinster named Miss Holt, who had been in the family for many years and had, indeed, been at school with Lady Remington.

Miss Holt, who was on her knees trying to comfort Raife's mother, rose as the son entered.

"Mother!" he cried, rushing towards her. "What's the matter? Tell me – for heaven's sake! Edgson will tell me nothing."

But all the response from the agonised woman was a long, low groan.

"Miss Holt," he said, turning to her companion. "Tell me, what has happened?"

The angular woman, whose face was pale and thin, raised a warning finger, and pointed in silence to the sobbing lady. Then she whispered:

"Come into the next room, and I will tell you."

Both passed into the inner room, and when Miss Holt had closed the door, she said:

"I am sorry to have to break the awful news to you, Mr Raife, but a most remarkable and terrible affair occurred here, early

this morning. From what I am able to gather, your father, who – as you know – sleeps over the library, was awakened about three o'clock by an unusual noise, and, listening, came to the conclusion that a slow, sawing process was in progress in the library – that some one was below."

"Burglars!" ejaculated Raife.

"Your father took his revolver and the little electric flash-lamp which he always has in his room, and, preferring to investigate before ringing and alarming the household, crept downstairs and noiselessly opened the library door. Inside, he saw a small light moving. In an instant, a man who had already opened the safe, drew a revolver and fired point blank at your father."

"Shot my father!" gasped Raife, staring at her. "Yes. Unfortunately the bullet struck Sir Henry. He fell, but while on the ground, and before the burglar could escape, he fired and shot him dead. We were all alarmed by the shots – and for the rest, well, you had better ask Edgson. He will tell you. I must go back to your poor mother."

"But my father?"

"Alas! he is dead," was the thin-faced woman's hushed response.

"Dead!" gasped Raife, staggered. "Then the fellow murdered him!"

Miss Holt nodded in the affirmative.

At that moment old Edgson entered with a message. The doctor had returned to see her ladyship.

Raife barred the old servant's passage, saying:

"Miss Holt has told me, Edgson. Explain at once what had happened when you were all alarmed."

"Well, Master Raife, I rushed down, sir," replied the old fellow, white-faced and agitated. "Burton, the footman, got down first, and when I rushed into the library I found the poor master lying on the carpet doubled up, with blood all over his pyjama-jacket. He recognised me, sir, and declared, in a low, weak voice, that the thief had shot him. At first I was so scared that I couldn't act or think. But, on switching on the lights, I saw the body of a stranger – an elderly man, wearing thin indiarubber gloves – lying near the French window."

"Then my father was still conscious?"

"Quite. I sent Burton to the telephone to ring up Doctor Grant, in Tunbridge Wells, while I did all I could to restore the poor master. He was then quite sensible. With Burton's aid I managed to get him on to the couch in the bedroom, and then he spoke several disjointed sentences while we waited for the doctor's arrival. He asked for you, sir, and told me to give you a message."

"A message, Edgson! What message did he leave for me?" asked the son, eagerly.

"His words were these, sir: 'Tell Master Raife that the blackguard deliberately shot me! Tell him – to be careful – to be wary of the trap. I – I hesitated to tell the boy the truth, but now, Edgson, alas! it is too late!'"

"The truth!" ejaculated young Remington. "What did he

mean, Edgson? What did he mean about being careful of the trap?"

"Ah! I don't know, Master Raife," replied the old servant, shaking his head gravely. "Some secret of his, no doubt. I pressed the master to reveal it to me; but all he would reply was: 'I was a fool, Edgson. I ought to have told my boy from the first. Every man has a skeleton in his cupboard, Edgson. This is mine!' Then he murmured something about 'her' and 'that woman' – a woman in the case, it struck me, Master Raife."

"A woman!" echoed young Remington.

"So it seemed. But, Master Raife, in my position I couldn't well inquire further into the poor master's secret. Besides, her ladyship and others came in at the moment. So he uttered no other word – and died before Doctor Grant could arrive."

"But what does this all mean, Edgson?" asked the dead man's son, astounded.

"I don't know, Master Raife," replied the grave-faced old man. "I really don't know, sir."

"To my mind, it seems as though his secret was, in some mysterious way, connected with the fellow who shot him," declared the young fellow, pale and anxious. "My poor mother does not know – eh?"

"She knows nothing, Master Raife. In the years I have been in the service of your family, I have learnt discretion. I have told you this, sir, because you are my master's son," was the faithful man's response.

"You had no inkling of any secret, Edgson?"

"None in the least, sir, though I have been in Sir Henry's service thirty-two years come next Michaelmas."

"It's a complete mystery then?"

"Yes, sir, a complete mystery. But perhaps you'd like to see the master's murderer? We've taken his body over to the empty cottage at the stables. I'm expecting the detectives from London every minute. Inspector Caldwell, from Tunbridge Wells, has wired to Scotland Yard for assistance."

"Yes. Take me over there, Edgson," said Raife, boldly. "I wonder if I know him! This secret of my father's which he intended to reveal to me, though prevented by death, I mean to investigate – to unravel the mystery. Come, Edgson."

And the young master – now Sir Raife Remington, Baronet – followed the grave old man out of the house and down the broad, gravelled drive, where, in the sunshine, stood the big square stables, the clock of which, in its high, round turret, was at that moment clanging out the hour.

Chapter Three
The Fatal Fingers

Upon a bench in the front room of the artistic little cottage, the exterior of which was half hidden by Virginia creeper, lay the body of the stranger.

He was of middle age, with a dark, well-trimmed moustache, high cheek-bones, and hair slightly tinged with grey. He was wearing a smart, dark tweed suit, but his collar had been disarranged, and his tie removed, in the cursory examination made by the police when called.

Upon his cold, stiff hands were thin rubber gloves, such as surgeons wear during operations. They told their own tale. He wore them so as to obviate leaving any finger-prints. Upon his waistcoat there was a large damp patch which showed where Sir Henry's bullet had struck him.

Old Edgson stood beside his young master, hushed and awed.

"He's evidently an expert thief," remarked Raife, as he gazed upon the dead assassin's calm countenance. The eyes were, closed and he had all the composed appearance of a sleeper. "Have they searched him?"

"I don't know, sir," replied the old man.

"Then I will," Raife said, and, thereupon, commenced to investigate the dead man's pockets.

The work did not take long. From the breastpocket of his jacket he drew out a plain envelope containing three five-pound notes, as well as a scrap of torn newspaper. The young fellow, on unfolding it, found it to be the "Agony" column of the *Morning Post*, in which there was, no doubt, concealed some secret message. There were, however, a dozen or so advertisements, therefore which of them conveyed the message he was unable to decide. So he slipped it into his pocket until such time as he was able to give attention to it.

In the dead man's vest-pocket he found the return half of a first-class ticket from Charing Cross to Tunbridge Wells, issued four days previously, while in one of the trousers-pockets were four sovereigns, some silver, and in the other a bunch of skeleton keys, together with a small, leather pocket-case containing some strange-looking little steel tools, beautifully finished – the last word in up-to-date instruments for safe-breaking.

Raife, holding them in his hand, carried them to the window and examined them with keen curiosity. It was, indeed, a neat outfit and could be carried in the pocket without exciting the least suspicion. That the unknown assassin was an expert thief was quite clear.

Old Edgson was impatient to return to the house.

"Perhaps her ladyship may be wanting me, sir," he suggested. "May I go, sir?"

"Yes, Edgson," replied the young man. "Tell my mother, if you see her, that I'll be back presently."

And the old servant, with his mechanical bow, retired, leaving his young master with his father's murderer.

Raife gazed in silence upon the face of the dead stranger. Then, presently, speaking to himself, he said:

"I wonder who he is? The police will find out, no doubt. He's probably known, or he would not have been so careful about his finger-prints. By jove!" he added, "if I'd met him in a train or in the street I would never have suspected him of being a criminal. One is too apt to judge a man by his clothes."

The local police had evidently gone through the man's pockets for evidence of identification, but finding none, had replaced the articles in the pockets just as they had found them. Therefore, Raife did the same, in order that the London detectives might be able to make full investigation. The only thing he kept was the scrap torn from the *Morning Post.*

He turned the body over to get at the hip-pocket of the trousers, when from it he at length drew a bundle of soft black material, which, when opened, he found to be a capacious sack of thin black silk, evidently for the purpose of conveying away stolen property.

This he also replaced, and when, on turning the body into its original position, the shirt became further dragged open at the throat he noticed around it something that had probably been overlooked by the local constable who had opened the dead man's clothes in an endeavour to discover traces of life – a very fine silver chain.

Suspended from the chain was a tiny little ancient Egyptian charm, in the form of a statuette of the goddess Isis, wearing on her head the royal sign, the orb of the sun, supported by cobras on either side.

He removed it from the neck of the unknown, and, holding it in his palm, examined it. The modelling was perfect as a work of ancient art. It was cut in camelian about an inch and a quarter long, and, no doubt, five or six thousand years old. Up the back, from head to foot, were inscribed tiny Egyptian hieroglyphics, the circle of the sun, the feather, the sign of truth, a man kneeling in the act of adoration, a beetle and an ibis, the meaning of which were only intelligible to an Egyptologist.

"He wore this as a talisman, no doubt," remarked Raife, speaking to himself. "Perhaps it may serve as a clue to his identity. Who knows?"

And, gathering the little goddess and its chain into his palm, he transferred it to his pocket.

Just as he did so, voices sounded outside the cottage. Edgson, with three men in overcoats and bowler hats were coming up the garden path.

They entered the room without ceremony, and old Edgson, who accompanied them, said:

"These are the gentlemen from London, Master Raife."

Two of the men respectfully saluted the young baronet – for he had now succeeded to the title – while the third, Raife recognised as Inspector Caldwell from Tunbridge Wells.

"Well, Caldwell," he said. "This is a very sad business for us."

"Very sad, indeed, sir," was the dark-bearded man's reply. "We all sympathise with you and her ladyship very deeply, sir. Sir Henry was highly respected everywhere, sir, and there wasn't a more just, and yet considerate, magistrate on any county bench in England."

"Is that the popular opinion?" asked Raife, thoughtfully.

"Yes, sir. That's what everybody says. The awful news has created the greatest sensation in Tunbridge Wells. I wonder who this blackguardly individual is?" he added.

The two detectives from Scotland Yard had crossed to where the dead man was lying, his white face upturned, and were scrutinising him narrowly.

"I don't recognise him," declared the elder of the pair. "He's done time, no doubt. Look at his gloves."

"An old hand, that's quite certain. We've got his finger-prints in the Department, you bet," remarked the other. "We'd better take off his gloves and take some prints as soon as we can; they will, no doubt, establish his identity. Mr Caldwell, will you please telephone to a printer's somewhere near for a little printing-ink?"

"Certainly," replied the inspector. "I'll 'phone back to Tunbridge Wells and have it sent out by a constable on a bicycle."

The three officers then proceeded to make a minute examination of the body, but Raife did not remain. He returned to the house, accompanied by Edgson.

A few minutes later he stood in the library before the open

safe, plunged in thought. The sunshine streamed across the fine old room filled with books from floor to ceiling, for Sir Henry was a student, and his library, being his hobby, was cosily furnished – a pleasant, restful place, the long, stained-glass windows of which looked out upon the quaint old Jacobean garden, with its grey, weather-beaten sundial, its level lawns, and high, well-clipped beech hedges.

Raife stood gazing at the safe, which, standing open, just as it was when his father had surprised the intruder, revealed a quantity of papers, bundles of which were tied with faded pink tape: a number of valuable securities, correspondence, insurance policies, and the usual private documentary treasures of an important landowner. Papers concerning the estate were mostly preserved at the agent's office in Tunbridge Wells: only those concerning his own private affairs did Sir Henry keep in the library.

What had his dead father meant by those dying words uttered to old Edgson? That warning to be careful of the trap! What trap? What could his father fear? What truth was it which his father had hesitated to tell him – the important truth the telling of which had been too late.

He recollected his father's words as uttered to the faithful old servant: "I was a fool, Edgson. I ought to have told my boy from the first. Every man has a skeleton in his cupboard. This is mine!"

"And, further, who was the woman whom he had referred to as 'her'?"

The young man gazed upon the dark patch on the carpet near the door, soaked by the life-blood of his unfortunate father. The latter, so suddenly cut off, had carried his secret to the grave.

That big, sombre room, wherein the tragedy had taken place, looked pleasant and cheerful with the bright, summer sunlight now slanting upon it. The big, silver bowl of roses upon the side-table shed a sweet fragrance there, while the spacious, old-fashioned mahogany writing-table was still littered with the dead man's correspondence.

The writing-chair he had vacated on the previous night, before going to bed, stood there, the silk cushion still crushed just as he had risen from it. His big briar-pipe lay just as he had knocked it out and placed it in the little bowl of beaten brass which he used as an ash-tray.

The newspapers which he had read were, as usual, flung upon the floor, while the waste-paper basket had not been emptied that morning. The servants had not dared to enter that room of disaster.

Young Raife re-crossed the room, and again examined the open door of the safe.

He saw that it had not been forced, but opened by a duplicate key – one that had, no doubt, been cut from a cast secretly taken of the one which his father always carried attached to his watch-chain. So well had the false key fitted that the door had yielded instantly.

In the darkness in that well-remembered room, the room

which he recollected as his father's den ever since he was a child, the two men – the baronet and the burglar – had come face to face.

"I wonder," Raife exclaimed, speaking to himself softly, scarce above a whisper. "I wonder if there was a recognition? The words of the poor guv'nor almost tell me that, in that critical moment, the pair, bound together in one common secret, met. They hated each other – and they killed each other! Why did the guv'nor admit that he had been a fool? Why did he wish to warn me of a trap? What trap? Surely at my age I'm not likely to fall into any trap. No," he added, with a bitter smile, "I fancy I'm a bit too wary to do that."

He paced up and down the long, silent, book-lined chamber, much puzzled.

As he did so, the sweet, pale, refined face of Gilda Tempest again arose before him. He had only met her casually, a few hours ago, yet, somehow why he could not explain, they had seemed to have already become old friends and, amid all his trouble, anxiety and bewilderment, he found himself wondering how she fared, and whether the dear little black pom, Snookie, was guarding his dainty little mistress.

True, a black shadow had fallen upon his home, a tragic event which had rendered him a baronet, and in a few months he would be possessor of great estates, nevertheless that thought had not yet occurred to him. His only concern had been for his bereaved mother, to whom he was so devoted, and from whom

his father had hidden his strange secret. Through that dark cloud of mourning, which had so suddenly enveloped him, arose the beautiful countenance of the girl into whose society chance had so suddenly thrown him, and he felt he must see her again, that he must stroll at her side once again, at all hazards.

As his father's only son, he had a right to investigate the contents of the open safe, for he knew that one executor was away at Dinard, while the other, an uncle, lived in Perthshire. At present, his father's lawyer had not been communicated with, therefore he crossed again to the safe and methodically removed paper after paper to examine it.

Most of them were securities, mortgages, bonds, and other such documents, which, at that moment, did not possess much interest for him.

One bundle of old and faded letters which he untied were in a handwriting he at once recognised – the letters of his mother before she had become Lady Remington. Another – a batch written forty years ago – were the letters from his grandfather, while his father was at Oxford. With these were other letters from dead friends and relatives; but, though he spent an hour in searching through them, Raife discovered no clue to the strange secret which Sir Henry had died without divulging.

Then he afterwards replaced the papers, closed the safe and re-locked it with the false key which still remained in it.

His mother was still too prostrated to speak with him, therefore he again went across to the cottage where the police

were with the dead assassin.

As he entered, one of the detectives was carefully applying printer's ink to the tips of the cold, stiff fingers, and afterwards taking impressions of them upon pieces of paper.

The secret of the dead thief's identity would, they declared among themselves, very soon be known.

Chapter Four
Reveals Certain Confidences

"Tell him to be careful – to be wary of – the trap?"

Those dying words of Sir Henry's rang ever in his son's ears.

That afternoon, as Raife stood bowed in silence before the body of his beloved father, his mind was full of strange wonderings.

What was the nature of the dead man's secret? Who was the woman to whom he had referred a few moments before he expired?

The young fellow gazed upon the grey shrunken face he had loved so well, and his eyes became dimmed by tears. Only a week before they had been in London together, and he had dined with his father at the Carlton Club, and they had afterwards gone to a theatre.

The baronet was then in the best of health and spirits. A keen sportsman, and an ardent golfer, he had been essentially an out-door man. Yet he now lay there still and dead, killed by an assassin's bullet. Raife's mother was inconsolable and he had decided that it was best for him to keep apart from her for the present.

To his friend, Mutimer, he had sent a wire announcing the tragic news, and had, by telephone, also informed Mr Kellaway,

the family lawyer, whose offices were in Bedford Row, London. On hearing the astounding truth, Mr Kellaway – to whom Raife had spoken personally – had announced his intention of coming at once to Tunbridge Wells.

At six o'clock he arrived in the car which Raife had sent for him – a tall, elderly, clean-shaven man in respectful black.

"Now, Mr Kellaway," said Raife, when they were alone together in the library, and the young baronet had explained what had occurred. "You have been my father's very intimate friend, as well as his solicitor for many years. I want to ask you a simple question. Are you aware that my father held a secret – some secret of the past?"

"Not to my knowledge, Mr Raife – or Sir Raife, as I suppose I ought to call you now," was the sombre, and rather sad, man's reply.

"Well, he had a secret," exclaimed Raife, looking at him, searchingly.

"How do you know?"

"He told Edgson, the butler, before he died."

"Told his servant his secret!" echoed the lawyer, knitting his brows.

"No. He told him something – not all."

"What did he tell him?" asked Mr Kellaway, in quick eagerness.

"My father said he wished that he had been frank with me, and revealed the truth."

"Of what?"

"Of his secret. He left me a message, urging me to beware of the trap. Of what nature is the pitfall?" asked the young man. "You, his friend, must know."

"I regret, but I know absolutely nothing," declared the solicitor, frankly. "This is all news to me. What do you think was the nature of the secret? Is it concerning money matters?"

"No. I believe it mainly concerns a woman," the young man replied. "My father had no financial worries. He was, as you know, a rich man. Evidently he was anxious on my behalf, or he would not have given Edgson that message. Ah! If his lips could only speak again – poor, dear guv'nor."

And the young man sighed.

"Perhaps Edgson knows something?" the solicitor suggested.

"He knows nothing. He only suspects that there is a lady concerned in it, for my father, before his death, referred to 'her'."

"Your respected father was my client and friend through many years," said Mr Kellaway. "As far as I know, he had no secrets from me."

Raife looked him straight in the face for a few moments without speaking. Like all undergraduates he had no great liking for lawyers.

"Look here, Kellaway," he said slowly. "Are you speaking the truth?"

"The absolute truth," was the other's grave reply.

"Then you know of no secret of my father's. None – eh?"

"Ah, that is quite a different question," the solicitor said. "During the many years I have acted for your late father I have been entrusted with many of his secrets – secrets of his private affairs and suchlike matters with which a man naturally trusts his lawyer. But there was nothing out of the common concerning any of them."

"Nothing concerning any lady?"

"Nothing – I assure you."

"Then what do you surmise regarding 'the trap,' about which my father left me this inexplicable message?"

"Edgson may be romancing," the lawyer suggested. "In every case of a sudden and tragic death, the servant, male or female, always has some curious theory concerning the affair, some gossip or some scandal concerning their employer."

"Edgson has been in our family ever since he was a lad. He's not romancing," replied Raife dryly.

Mr Kellaway was a hard, level-headed, pessimistic person, who judged all men as law-breakers and criminals. He was one of those smug, old-fashioned Bedford Row solicitors, who had a dozen peers as clients, who transacted only family business, and whose firm was an eminently respectable one.

"I have always thought Edgson a most reliable servant," he admitted, crossing to the safe, the key of which Raife had handed to him.

"So he is. And when he tells me that my father possessed a secret, which he has carried to his grave – then I believe him. I

have never yet known Edgson to tell a lie. Neither has my father. He was only saying so at dinner one night three months ago."

"I have no personal knowledge of any secret of the late Sir Henry's," responded the elder man, speaking quite openly. "If I knew of any I would tell you frankly."

"No, you wouldn't, Kellaway. You know you wouldn't betray a client's confidence," said Raife, with a grim, bitter smile, as he stood by the ancient window gazing across the old Jacobean garden.

"Ah, perhaps you're right. Perhaps you're right," replied the man addressed. "But at any rate I repeat that I am ignorant of any facts concerning your father's past that he had sought to hide."

"You mean that you will not betray my dead father's confidence?"

"I mean what I say, Sir Raife – that I am in entire ignorance of anything which might be construed into a scandal."

"I did not suggest scandal, Mr Kellaway," was his rather hard reply. "My father was, I suspect, acquainted with the man who shot him. The two men met in this room, and, I believe, the recognition was mutual!"

"Your father knew the assassin?" echoed the lawyer, staring at the young man.

"I believe so."

"It seems incredible that Sir Henry should have been acquainted with an expert burglar – for such he apparently was."

"Why should he have left me that warning message? Why

should he seek to forewarn me of some mysterious trap?"

The old solicitor shrugged his shoulders, but made no reply. The whole, tragic affair was a complete and absolute mystery.

The London papers that afternoon were full of it, and already a host of eager reporters and press-photographers were waiting about on the off-chance of obtaining a glimpse of Raife, or any other member of the bereaved family. More than one had had the audacity to send in his card to Raife with a request for an interview, which had promptly been refused, and Edgson now had orders that the young master was not at home to any one.

Raife, still unconvinced that Mr Kellaway was in ignorance of his father's secret, took him across to the cottage where lay the body of the stranger. The police were no longer there, but two doctors were making an examination. The inquest had been fixed for the morrow, and the medical men were consulting prior to the post-mortem.

The cause of death was only too apparent, but the principles of the law are hidebound, and it was necessary that a post-mortem should be made, in order that the coroner's jury should arrive at their verdict.

Later Raife, assisted the family solicitor to gather out the contents of the safe and make them into bundles, which they sealed up carefully and counted.

"Of course," Kellaway said, "I am not aware of the contents of your lamented father's will, and I frankly confess I was rather disappointed at not being asked to make it."

"I think it was made by some solicitors in Edinburgh," was Raife's reply. "Gordon and Gordon, I believe, is the name of the firm. It is deposited at Barclay's Bank in London."

"The executors will, no doubt, know. You have wired to them, you say?" Then, after a pause, Kellaway added: "The fact that Sir Henry engaged a strange solicitor to draw up his will would rather lead to the assumption that he had something to hide from me, wouldn't it?"

"By jove, yes," was the young man's response. "I had never thought of that! He wished to preserve his secret until his death. I wonder if the will reveals anything?"

"Perhaps – who knows?"

Raife remained silent. He was still carefully removing the papers from the steel inner drawer of the safe – a drawer which had been overlooked when he had made his investigation. The papers were mostly memoranda regarding financial transactions, sales and purchases of land, and other matters. Among them were a number of old letters, mostly signed by George Mountjoy, who had been member for South Gloucestershire, and his father's particular crony. He had died a year ago, and Sir Henry had keenly felt the loss of his life-long friend.

They had been as brothers, and old Mr Mountjoy was frequently a guest at Aldborough for months at a stretch, and treated quite as one of the family.

Letter after letter he turned over aimlessly, reading scraps here and there. They were strange letters, which showed a great bond

of friendship existing between the two men. In some, Mountjoy asked Sir Henry's advice regarding his most intimate and private affairs, and in others he gave the baronet his aid, and made suggestions regarding his line of action in many matters.

One struck him as very strange. Dated from the Hotel Angst, in Bordighera, over three years ago, it contained the following passage:

> "As you have asked my advice upon the most secret page of our history, my dear Henry, I am most decidedly and emphatically of opinion that it will be best to allow them to remain in entire ignorance. He should, however, be diplomatically warned lest the pitfall you fear be placed in his path – as no doubt it will be sooner or later.
>
> "Under no circumstances whatever would I alarm your wife by revealing to her the truth. Remember the state of her health is delicate, and undue anxiety would most probably shatter her nerves. No, remain silent. Only you and I know the truth, and that it is our duty to keep it strictly to ourselves.
>
> "I know how it must gall you, and how helpless you must feel in the strange, unheard-of circumstances. But I beg of you to regard the threats as idle ones. For your safety I fear nothing, but for Raife it is different. He should be warned, but not in a way to cause him undue anxiety; only to impress upon him the need of shrewd precaution against his enemies.
>
> "I shall never divulge the truth, and you, my dear Henry, should still preserve a calm and smiling face. Too well I

know the extreme difficulty of doing this; but remember there is not the least suspicion of the truth abroad, and that most men in every walk of life have ugly secrets which they would not care to expose to the light of day.

"Your son, Raife, is in ignorance. Let him remain so, I beg of you. The truth, if told, will only bring unhappiness upon you both. He is young and fearless. Warn him against the trap that we, alas! know will be set sooner or later. But further than that do not go. I shall be back in London at the end of this month, and we can discuss the situation further."

The remainder of the letter consisted mainly of Riviera gossip.

Raife stood staring at the sheet of grey note-paper, his brows knit in wonder.

"What is it?" asked Kellaway, noticing the effect the letter had had upon the young man.

"Read that," was his reply. "It shows that my suspicions were well-grounded. My father had a secret – a secret which was known to no one else besides his friend, George Mountjoy. Read it, Kellaway. It is evident from that letter, and from the poor guv'nor's dying message urging me to be careful, that I am in some strange, mysterious peril! What can it be?"

Chapter Five
The Mystery of the White Room

The routine of a coroner's inquest does not vary much. In this instance the victim of a very obvious murder being a man of great distinction, a man who had rendered his country high political service, aroused widespread interest. Tunbridge Wells, where it was decided to hold the inquiry, was crowded with visitors as it has never been since the days of Beau Brummell and Beau Nash, those gay leaders of old-time society which foregathered at Bath, Tunbridge Wells, and the other inland spas of our country, to drink the waters, intrigue, elope, fight duels, and make for *la joie de vivre* as it was then constituted.

Every hotel was crowded, and even some of the old-world coaching inns revived the ancient glories that belonged to them in the days when society travelled by post-chaise and coach, and footpads and highwaymen were a terror on the King's highway.

A mixed throng promenaded the old Pantiles, discussing with breathless interest each item of fact or speculation that leaked out from the overcrowded and evil-smelling court-room. There were gaily dressed "society" women, newspaper men – descriptive writers – representing papers all over the country, the United States, Paris, and Rome. The tenants of the murdered baronet and farmers drove in from the countryside. A crowd of well-

dressed idlers, those ghouls who appear to gloat over crime and its details wherever it may occur.

The rumour that Sir Henry Remington was the victim of political assassination gained credence. The newsboys shouted the startling headlines and sold more evening newspapers than if it had been the result of a football cup-tie.

Lady Remington, as became her position, the wife of an aristocrat, nerved herself for the occasion and gave her evidence calmly, and in a low, musical voice. The old butler, Edgson, an aristocrat of his craft, repeated the story we already know. The police had failed to identify the body of the dead assassin. Raife's evidence threw no light on the subject. The verdict of murder by a person unknown was returned. The foreman asked permission, as representing the tenants, tradesmen and residents of the country around, to express their sympathy with the family of the late Sir Henry. With the indulgence of the coroner, he supplemented the testimony that Inspector Caldwell had given in the death chamber, when Raife met him there with the detectives from London.

The court-house was soon cleared. The unwonted crowd of visitors scattered, returning to their destinations, and Tunbridge Wells resumed its normal state, leaving the tragic mystery still unsolved.

Lady Remington, with Miss Hope and a maid, had returned in the car to Aldborough Park. When her ladyship reached her boudoir she collapsed, after the strain of the proceedings of the

coroner's court. The vulgar stare of the mixed crowd in the close room, the foetid atmosphere, the printed impertinences of some of the newspaper reporters, all had served to shatter her nerves, already tried by the tragic loss of the loved husband who had been her idol – her only love. The sweet-faced, grey-haired old lady reclined in a semi-conscious state, yet sobbing bitterly in the privacy of her boudoir. The rigid Miss Hope displayed a part of the anomalous dispositions of womenkind. Her austere features relaxed, and with tears, at first trickling, then flowing, she ministered to the stricken widow and gave what comfort she could.

The superficial austerity of a mature spinster should be treated with indulgence. Blighted love leaves a blight on the temperament of some women, whom a malignant fate has doomed to a solitude for which, by nature, at the outset, they were not intended. The history or life-story of Miss Hope does not concern this narrative further than this – that all the pent-up and hidden charm of a once passionate nature extended itself to this lady in great distress. Although the privacy of the boudoir should screen from public ear and gaze much of the tragedy of bereavement, who shall say that the sympathetic record of such a beautiful scene of human emotion is not justified?

Through her sobs Lady Remington spoke in a low, sweet voice. "Leave me, now, Miss Hope. You have been very kind. Thank you so much. You cannot do any more for me! I must fight this grief alone."

There was no angularity of movement, no austerity of countenance now in Miss Hope. Her very voice assumed a softness that would have seemed strange to those who were only familiar with the mental mask she had so long worn in public. She started towards the door, and held it half open. Then, closing it again with swift, graceful movements, she crossed the room and knelt at the lounge on which Lady Remington reclined amidst soft rich cushions of eiderdown. She wept no more; nor had tears left her face stained. Instead, a radiance suffused her cheeks, and her eyes glistened, betraying a beauty that had long been hidden by the set expression of that mask, assumed at first, habitual by long use.

"Lady Remington! Oh, Lady Remington! let me speak – let me tell you! I, too, have suffered. Don't stop me. Let me tell you a story to the end. It may help you."

Then commenced a life-story, told musically, almost rhythmically, of love, deceit, treachery, ending in a debacle that soured a beautiful disposition of a lovely girl. Miss Hope did not imply that she had been a lovely girl, but her radiant face, with the deep grey eyes, that for the first time during many years disclosed their full size and the limpid look of sincerity, made it evident to the stricken widow. Abruptly she finished the story, and, rising from her knees, she started across the room again. She had proceeded a bare pace or two when Lady Remington, with a vigour, surprising for her years, almost leapt from the lounge, and, throwing her arms around Miss Hope's neck, exclaimed

"Gladys! Gladys Hope! you have taught me a lesson in bravery that I will never forget. You are no longer Miss Hope. You are, if you will let me, Gladys, a dear, dear friend to me. As long as I am spared I will endeavour to be more than a friend to you!"

They embraced again and again, until the arrival of the maid with tea afforded the opportunity of a closing scene that had been tense and affecting to both women.

The new baronet left the coroner's court, and, walking down a long stable-yard of one of the hotels, escaped from the inquisitive crowd that pursued him, by entering a coach-house with a side door that led to the scullery and kitchen of the hotel. Quickly he made for a door in the narrow passage that led to the coffee-room and main entrance. Unbolting the door, which was seldom used in these latex days, he slipped into a narrow alley way. With rapid strides he found himself, unobserved, in one of the old post-houses in a side street. Raife walked right through the low-ceilinged bar to the private parlour, with its oak beams, swinging lamp, and wide, open fireplace and chimney, from which were hanging a few hams and a side of bacon. In a wooden arm-chair with high back, without cushions, sat an elderly man, pink-cheeked and clean-shaven except for two tufts of close-cropped side whiskers. He was smoking a long churchwarden pipe, and the air was redolent with the perfume of a Virginian tobacco, which, if too pungent in excess, possessed an aroma which, by indulgence, is, by some at least, considered not nauseating. He was smoking shag tobacco. At his side, on a deal table which had

been scrubbed once a day at least, for some seventy years, was an old brown toby of Kentish ale.

Kent is the garden of England, and Kentish hops are responsible for much that has been good in English manhood. Mr Twisegood was born in Kent of a long line of Kentish ancestry, and Kentish hops had formed a substantial portion of his and their daily fare. Rising from his chair as Raife entered, he displayed a portly and robust frame.

"Good afternoon, Master Raife," he said. "I'm very sorry to hear all this 'ere bad news about your father, Master Raife. I beg your pardon, Master Raife, I suppose as 'ow as I ought to carl yer Sir Raife now, sir. Beg your pardon, Master Raife – I mean Sir Raife, sir!"

In spite of the heavy load on his mind, Raife smiled, and, laying his hand on the old man's shoulders, said cheerily, "No, Twisegood, I hope I shall always be Master Raife to you – and to some others. Yes! Twisegood, it's a sad case and I'm much troubled. I've come to you to help me."

"Lud a mussy, sir, help 'ee! What can I do to help the likes o' you? I'll help, sure enough, if I can help. Now tell me, Master Raife, what can. I do for 'ee?"

When Raife was a lad, and a mischievous lad, there were many scrapes out of which he had been lifted by old Twisegood. Before the old man inherited the public-house that had been a post-house, he had worked, as many of his ancestors had, on the Remington estates.

There still remains, in spite of the spirit of unrest and agitation, which, rightly or wrongly, pervades the land, a strong sympathy between the old families and their tenants and retainers. Twisegood was of the type that made true knighthood, when knight-errantry was in a cause that they felt to be good. The Twisegoods had been retainers of the Reymingtounes since the Tudors, and the spirit of loyalty was strong within him when the young master had said, "I've come to you to help me." Raife smiled again and said: "I don't want much, Twisegood, I want you to let me have the long white room overlooking the stable-yard. I want you to see that the shutters will bolt firmly from within, and see to it that when the lamp is lit no light can be seen from without."

"Is that all you want. Master Raife? I'll see to that sure enough. When do you want the room, sir?"

Raife replied: "I want to go up there now, but you can see to the other things later."

"Yes, sir. I don't know whether the room be tidy or no, but come along o' me."

They went up a wide staircase with twisted solid oak balustrades, to a wide landing on the first floor. The old man produced a bunch of large keys which jingled until he found one to fit the rusty lock, which turned with difficulty. The door creaked when it reluctantly opened, and they entered together. A faded scent of lavender met them. A yellow film of warm sunlight filtered through the white blinds that hung from the bay window.

A white drugget covered the faded carpet, which showed slightly at the edges a dull crushed pink. A huge four-post wooden bedstead hung with white dimity. A white ceiling surmounted, and a white wall paper, with pale pink roses confined within vertical stripes of dull yellow, surrounded the room. Two ancient high-backed chairs covered in holland, and a more modern deep-set, low-lying arm-chair, covered in the same material, faced a huge fireplace of shining black metal. Fire-dogs, fender and fire-irons hammered from steel. A vast copper coal-scuttle of simple, almost crude shape, well charged with coal, stood at the side of the white supports of a deep white mantel-shelf.

There were no pictures on the walls. White candelabra and china vases of quaint shape stood before a small, and very imperfect, mirror on the mantel-shelf. Long white curtains hung in front of the bay window. The whole effect of this big white room, bathed in a warm glow of filtered sunlight, was startling. To Raife it was soothing. Twisegood crossed to pull up the blinds.

"Don't do that," Raife said, as he walked to yet another white curtain which screened a small door. The key was in the door. He opened it. It led to a narrow winding stairway with a strong oak door at the bottom. He called to Twisegood for the key. The stairs creaked as the burly old man descended and placed the key in the lock and turned it. "That will do. Give me the key. Have the lock oiled, and buy some soft carpet and put it on this stairway. This leads into the loose box, doesn't it? or have you altered the stalls lately?"

"No, sir! They be just the same as when you stayed here last, sir."

They ascended the crooked stairway, returning to the white room. Raife stood in front of the fireplace gazing at a small miniature on the mantel-shelf. At a glance it appeared to be the only pictorial ornament in the room. Neatly framed in a thin ebony oval was the most beautiful enamel of a woman's face in high, powdered head-dress, and an exquisitely-modelled bust. Raife picked it up and, looking at the back of the frame, read this inscription pasted on:

To William Twisegood for a brave service rendered.

"How did you get this, Twisegood?" asked Raife.

"Why, sir! That be a long time ago, sir, when I wur not more'n a lad. I be older'n wot your father was, and there come along a day when he wor down along the copse by Tyser Wood, and the young master, he was then, and he was a good plucked 'un. He had his gun along o' him and was out after rabbits just afore the first, when the partridges open the season. I be going along atop among the turmits, when I hears him a ordering some fellers off his ground. I listens, and presently there's a scuffling. I slips down through all the bracken and bramble, and there I sees him a scrappin' hard, with all the blood a streaming down his face. There was Nick Blacker and Bill Boneham, each a holdin' a lurcher dog, whilst Nick's three sons was a pasting the young master as hard as they could. But they wasn't a getting all their own way, for he was mighty quick with his fists, was Master

Harry. They didn't see me a coming. I ups with a couple of bits o' rock-stone and I aims at Dick. I hits him clean and down he goes. I 'as a stout ash stick in my 'and and I rushes up to Bill. Before he has time to know wot's up, I lands him a good 'un. Then I shouts to make believe that there's others a coming. Nick gets up and off they all start on a full run.

"Well, Master Harry! he was young those days, and thought I was brave. So he gave me that miniature and told me as 'ow it was his grandmother. But bless yer, Master Raife, that wasn't all he gave me."

The old man stopped for want of breath. He had lived his fight over again.

"Is there anything I can get for you, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, Twisegood, have you got any of Mrs Twisegood's home-made wines left?"

"Why, yes, sir. 'Twouldn't be the old 'Blue Boar,' if we hadn't got some of that. Or would you rather have some of her sloe gin? That was a drink of the old coaching and posting days. Try some, sir."

"All right, thanks, bring me some of that."

Raife sat in the deep arm-chair and his mind was a whirlwind of mixed thought and emotion. On the one hand, the mystery of his father's murder had not been revealed at the inquest. Nor had any light been thrown upon his father's dying words – that cryptic utterance which rang in his ears with a dull insistence that maddened him.

"Tell him to be careful – to be wary of the trap – every man has a skeleton in his cupboard – this is mine." Then those last three fateful words: "her – that woman." Who is that woman? If he only knew. His father fought three lads in the copse at Tyser Wood, as he had just learnt from Twisegood: that was easy. To fight an unknown woman, to be wary of a trap – that is hard.

The full force of an August sun still bathed the world in its glorious light, and the warm glow came through those drawn white blinds of this mysterious white room. In spite of that, Raife shivered.

Old Mr Twisegood returned with the sloe gin. Raife said: "Although it's August and the sun is shining, I feel cold. Let us light that fire." Soon the hearth roared with crackling flames, and Raife was left to himself and his troubled thoughts.

The white room of the "Blue Boar" had been famous for many generations. The secret stairway leading into the loose box in the stable had formed the means of many an escapade, and young Sir Raife was very familiar with its possibilities.

To-day he merely wanted to reflect, and the peaceful atmosphere and general air of quietude suited his mood.

Chapter Six
In the Southern Land of Adventure

Raife's passion for Gilda had been as sudden as it was fierce, and here, in the solitude of this strange white room, he allowed his pent-up feelings to obtain the mastery of him. Twisegood having closed the door, Raife paced up and down the long room with rapid strides, reiterating his admiration for her beauty. At length, he decided to return to Aldborough Park. On his way he sent a telegram and eagerly awaited a reply on the following morning, but no reply arrived.

The thousand and one details that surround the funeral of the head of an old family are very trying to those who are responsible for the dignity of the function and its safe conduct. Raife had been sorely tried in his position as the new head of the family.

At last the ceremony was completed and most of the mourners had returned to their homes. With a haste that attracted attention, at least, in some quarters, he went to Southport, and then called at the "Queen's," and, having asked for Miss Tempest, was rather surprised when the hall-porter handed him a note. He hastily tore it open and read:

> "Dear Mr Remington – Our friendship is forbidden. For your sake – and for mine – forget me.
> *"Gilda Tempest."*

The keenness of a young man's passion is only enhanced by obstacles. Mystified and baffled, Raife yet repeated his resolve to find the girl who had enthralled him.

Many weeks passed by at Aldborough Park, where the bailiffs and stewards of the estates foregathered with the solicitors of the family for the purpose of installing the new regime. Raife was somewhat impatient of the tedious nature of much of the work. To get away from the monotony, he hid himself several times in the long white room of the "Blue Boar."

He was sitting there, one afternoon, deeply abstracted and cursing the luck that had robbed him of that mysterious girl whom he loved, when he heard footsteps on the secret stairway that led to loose box in the stable. Hastily drawing the white curtain aside by opening the little door, he was confronted by his old college chum, Edward Mutimer, in whose company he had been when he met Gilda Tempest.

"Why," he exclaimed, "what are you doing here, Mutimer?"

Mutimer laughed, and said: "Well, I went up to the Park, and no one knew where to find you. I guessed you were a bit tired of parchments and documents, so I took my chance of finding you here. I asked old Twisegood, but he wouldn't give you away. But, somehow, I thought his manner was a bit strange, so I thought of the loose box and the old stairway – and here I am!"

"Good! I'm glad to see you, Mutimer. You were quite right, I'm tired to death of parchments, leases and settlements, and I've been coming here lately to get away from them. We've had some

fun in this old room when we were kids, haven't we? Twisegood's a rare good sort, too. He never gave us away."

"Well, I say, Raife, I didn't altogether come here to disturb you for nothing," said Mutimer. "I think I've got some news for you. I couldn't help noticing how keen you were on that girl we met one day at Southport."

"Yes! yes! Go on! Gilda Tempest is her name. Where is she?" almost shouted Raife, as he leapt from his chair, grasping Mutimer's arms with a grip that made his friend wince.

"Easy all, old chap, a little bit softer. I think I know where she is. You know she was staying with her uncle at the 'Queen's.' Well, they left there quite suddenly, just after your governor died. I was at the railway station and saw her and her uncle. They had not much luggage. As I was at the booking-office window, I heard the old man whisper to her: 'When we get to town we must wire for rooms. Nice is a busy place, and the Hôtel Royal is liable to be crowded.'"

"Thanks for what you've told me. Mutimer, I'm just crazy over that girl. I'll follow her to the ends of the earth, but she shall be mine. Yes, by jove! Gilda Tempest shall be mine. Mutimer! I'm not a murderer by nature, but I could slay the man who gets between me and that woman."

"By the by, Raife," said his friend, apparently disregarding the confession of love, "did anything come to light over your governor's dying words. It was something about a 'trap,' and there was a woman in it, wasn't there?"

"No! nothing came to light. It looks as though I've got a very first-class family skeleton in my cupboard." Raife said this reflectively, rather sadly. Then, bracing himself up, he exclaimed: "It'll take several skeletons to scare me, however. I don't think I'm either timid or nervous."

"Ha! ha! Well, now for a trip to Nice," he added, with a don't-care-a-hang air, "and be bothered to the lawyers for a time. I'll find Gilda Tempest. I swear I will, and her old uncle can be hanged for a meddlesome old ass."

It was in March when the young baronet, who in such tragic circumstances had just inherited large estates and twenty thousand pounds a year, arrived at the Hôtel Royal, on the Promenade des Anglais, at Nice.

His mother, the widowed Lady Remington, accompanied him. Having disposed of her ladyship in a cosy corner among the palms, Raife started on his hot-headed search for Gilda. He was not long disappointed, for in the big lounge of the hotel, not crowded at this moment, he saw Gilda, exquisitely dressed, and accompanied by a distinguished-looking old man.

The old gentleman was Doctor Danilo Malsano – the uncle of Gilda Tempest. Doctor Malsano was tall, and there was a certain air of distinction about him. A superficial graciousness of manner disguised from the casual observer the sinister cast of his countenance.

He had long black hair, receding from a high forehead, leaving two circular, bald patches on either side. A powerful jaw, and

somewhat hollow cheeks, with glittering white teeth and small ears, completed the clean-shaven appearance, with the exception of his eyes and bushy eyebrows.

More has been written on the subject of eyes than of any other portion of human anatomy, but Doctor Malsano's eyes were unique. At a glance they suggested a squint. Here was neither a squint nor an aggravated form of astigmatism. The right eye was of a steely blue, that pierced the observer with the sharpness of a gimlet. The left eye was a swivel eye, and served the purpose of preventing one from determining which eye was gazing at you. There is a certain type of Scotch sheep-dog which possesses eyes of the colour of the doctor's left eye. It is almost colourless, and with a dark spot in the centre of the right iris.

The doctor's striking appearance contrasted strongly with the fragile beauty of the fair-haired young girl, with the eyes of deep-blue, who walked by his side: narrow-waisted, delicate and slim, with a well-poised head on a rounded neck of alabaster whiteness. Raife devoured this vision with his eyes before crossing the foyer to her. The whole charm of the striking personality of the young girl was enhanced by that distinguished grace of style that characterises the refined in temperament. Raife crossed over to her and, with a bow, claimed her acquaintance. Gilda politely but frigidly declined the acquaintance, informing Raife that he was mistaken.

Raife was astounded – staggered. Accepting the situation that had just been dealt to him, and with flaming cheeks smarting

from the blow, so sudden and unexpected, he left the hotel by the main entrance and joined the throng of promenaders.

His thoughts lingered on the insult he had encountered. He fancied he had detected a sneer on Doctor Malsano's countenance. Rage and wounded vanity possessed him. At the table d'hôte he was distrait, and sorely puzzled Lady Remington with his absent-minded attentions and disjointed conversation. Seeking the first opportunity of escaping his mother's over-anxious regard for his health and spirits, he again found his way into the open air and avoided the crowd. Finding a secluded bench under a group of palms and surrounded by brilliant blossom, he sat down and sought repose in the solace of a choice Habana cigar. It was a secluded spot, and the depths of shadow from foliage were rendered more mysterious by the vivid yet luscious moonlight that flooded the countryside. Long he gazed in front of him, still smarting under that stinging snub that had, at the same time, wounded him sorely and enraged him. The latest heir of the Reymingtounes of Aldborough was not of the stuff to court a snub or endure it. Rage alternated with crumpled dignity, and he fumed, puffing his Habana viciously the while. He had sat there a long time, until the few strollers, who had found themselves near this secluded corner, seemed to have returned to the warmth of house or hotel.

Raife threw the end of his cigar far in front of him, and, rising from the bench, crossed the promenade and leant against a railing. He shivered slightly, for a March night in Nice may

be chilly, even treacherously so. Thus musing, he glanced at one of those daintily-illustrated little pamphlets that advertise the resorts of the Riviera. A thought flashed through his mind. His father's last words, as he lay dying from the assassin's revolver, came to him. "I was a fool, Edgson. I ought to have told my boy from the first. Every man has a skeleton in his cupboard. This is mine." And the last haunting words of all came to him:

"Beware of the trap – she – that woman."

Why had this beautiful young girl come into his life at such a tragic time? Could it be possible? No! Perish the thought. Nothing but good could come from that sweet countenance that had enthralled him from the first glance. But, then, who was this uncle, Doctor Malsano? The very name was evil-sounding, and, in spite of his distinguished air, that swivel eye, with much else of his striking countenance, was sinister.

Raife now felt certain that he had recognised a sneer on the man's face – a malicious sneer, when Gilda had snubbed him.

These long minutes in that full flood of southern moonlight were fraught with much that might be good – or bad – for Sir Raife Remington, Bart. In spite of his passionate outburst in the long white room of the "Blue Boar," at Tunbridge Wells; in spite of his vehemently-declared intention to win that beautiful girl for his wife – or die – he was possessed of a premonition of danger ahead. Again his father's dying words rang in his ears, and the blood-stained chamber, the scene in his ancestral hall of his father's cruel murder, came vividly before him, and he was

tempted to “beware of the trap.”

In such mood he turned on his heel and sauntered yet a little farther from the Hôtel Royal, where he was staying with his bereaved mother.

The southern lands are the lands of intrigue and mystery. They are the lands of deepest nights and brightest days, and that alternating intensity enters into the characters of the peoples who inhabit them.

As Raife was lighting a second cigar, he was vaguely conscious of a young boy or girl who dodged in the shadows behind him. The strongest man likes to meet his friends face to face, but a potential foe lurking in shadows on a moonlight night in a southern land, is disconcerting.

Watching an opportunity, therefore, Raife wheeled suddenly around, and making a dash for the youngster, secured him. The young girl, who appeared to be about thirteen years of age, did not seem alarmed, but smiled seductively, saying: “Signor Raife! meet a preety signora. Meea take you there.”

At the same time, the girl handed Raife a piece of paper on which was written:

“Quite safe. Follow the girl.”

Again those words of warning from his dying father.

Was this the trap.

In his present mood he did not care, and welcomed an adventure even if it should be dangerous.

He followed the little girl.

Chapter Seven
Who was the Apache?

Raife Remington followed the mysterious little girl, she dodging her way through the patches of silver light and gloomy shade. He strode in a gloomy, almost defiant manner, which implied that there was trouble ahead, and he was determined to meet it. As they approached the Hôtel Royal they passed a group of men who appeared to regard Raife with more than the ordinary interest that an obviously English, or perhaps American, visitor should attract. Now in the full light of the moon, enhanced by the brilliant street-lamps and the lights of the town glistening here and there, they dived into a side street. The little girl beckoned to Raife and he approached her. Then pointing to a café she said: “Signora meeta you there.”

The child disappeared and Raife sauntered in the direction indicated. With an air of nonchalance he relit the cigar which had gone out. There seemed to be an air of mystery about the transaction. He waited for a minute or two but no one appeared, until he felt a sense of impatience mixed with irritation. The event of the afternoon still rankled within him, and he was simmering with a stifled rage and indignation. The suggestion of a “trap” appeared evident, and he determined to enter the rather dimly-lit café and call for a cognac. He approached the

entrance, and his hand was upon the handle of the door, when, from apparently nowhere, the figure of a man appeared. He was dressed in a long coat, loose at the neck, displaying a flowing necktie or cravat of black. His wide-brimmed black hat covered his countenance, and his general appearance suggested a denizen of the Latin quarter of Paris. In a soft undertone he lisped: "Pardon, monsieur! mademoiselle," or as he pronounced it, "mams'elle arrivera tout à l'heure. Vous voulez attendre, monsieur?"

Raife's knowledge of French was superior to his knowledge of Italian, and he turned to talk to this person who seemed to have sprung from nowhere. His movement must have been leisurely, for when he looked around the stranger had disappeared. The message was simple enough. "Mademoiselle will arrive presently. Will you wait, sir?" What did all this mystery mean? Why was a little Italian girl sent to lead him to a place of appointment with a lady who sent a cryptic message written without a signature. Who was the person, apparently an Apache, or from the Latin quarter of Paris, who sprang from nowhere and disappeared into space? As Raife contemplated these matters, the cloaked figure of a woman came round the corner of the street.

"Ah! Sir Raife! I hope I have not kept you waiting long. I could not get here quicker." She was out of breath, and her words came quickly.

Raife at once recognised the voice and form of Gilda. Her

form was disguised in the long rich cloak that she wore, and her face was hidden by a large hat, from which a deep veil was draped around her face, but her rich, low, contralto voice was evident – especially to Raife.

All there was of mistrust, of suspicion, indignation or resentment disappeared, as she placed her hand upon his arm, looking up at him through the folds of her deep veil. Her eyes appealed to him.

"I tried to get here before, but they wouldn't let me get away. Of course, you got my message."

In spite of her extraordinary behaviour that afternoon, a few hours ago only, everything seemed quite right and natural to Raife now he heard her voice, and saw those eyes, and felt the soft touch upon his arm. In an absent-minded way he said: "Oh, yes! I got your message and I came at once. Where shall we go? I do want to talk to you." Then collecting his scattered senses, he asked a dozen questions rapidly. "Who was the Apache fellow? Why did you snub me this afternoon? What was the meaning of the note you left for me at the 'Queen's,' Southport? Oh, Gilda, tell me what is the meaning of all this mystery! If there is any trouble let me help you."

The girl, with a sob, replied: "Sir Raife, don't ask me any questions. Trust me. It is very hard for me – but don't ask questions. Let us walk back along the Promenade des Anglais." Then, dreamily, as if to herself, she added: "Yes – the promenade of the English. We are English. At least, there is no doubt that

you are. I sometimes wonder what I am."

They walked together until they reached the promenade again. There, under the light of a street-lamp, they renewed their talk. He, still interrogative, asked questions to which she would or could not reply. All she would say was, "Please! Please, don't ask me questions. Just trust me," and, with a soft tremor in her tones, she added: "Will you be my friend?"

Raife's conquest was complete. All sense of mistrust had disappeared with the first seductive notes of the voice he had longed to hear again, and, to-night, that voice was his.

"I trust you. I trust you implicitly, and I will be your friend."

For good or evil his word was given, and the word of a Remington was never lightly given. Passion or love, call it what you will, has led men and women into strangely incongruous and many dangerous situations. This promise, given with the impetuosity of youth aglow and veins afire, might lead to tragic disaster or the consummation of a pure and natural union.

The flow of lover's conversation is frequently intermittent, and sometimes erratic, and now there was a lull in the talk. At length Gilda said: "I read in the newspapers that your father was killed – or murdered by an armed burglar." Raife shuddered at the allusion. Continuing, she added: "Did you see the body of the murderer?"

Raife said: "Oh, yes! I saw the body of the brute."

"What was he like?"

"He didn't look much like a burglar. At least, not like the

burglars we've read about in books and that sort of thing."

"How sad it must have been for you all – for you – and your mother."

There was a ring of sympathy in her voice, and Raife felt grateful for the words of comfort.

Then Gilda asked, "Was he well-dressed, then?"

"Oh, yes! Quite well-dressed, and he had money in his pockets and wore jewellery."

"How strange," she added, with a slight quiver. "What sort of jewellery?"

"Oh, the usual sort of things, you know – a watch and chain and a plain signet ring! He also had a curious kind of charm hanging by a chain around his neck. I took possession of that, hoping some day it might serve as a clue. He was a strange-looking chap, and I would like to find out who he was. In fact the guv'nor, before he died, said something about a 'trap,' and other things of that sort, and I'd like to discover what it's all about. There's some deep mystery surrounding the whole affair." Gilda shivered, and said: "Isn't it terrible!" and, after a pause, added: "It's getting cool to-night. Shall we walk towards the hotel?"

As they walked towards the Hôtel Royal, Raife produced from his pocket the charm he had removed from the assassin's neck, and, handing it to Gilda for her inspection, said: "Here's the charm. It seems to be Egyptian, a figure of the goddess Isis, and there are all sorts of queer hieroglyphics on the back of it. Queer-looking thing for a burglar to wear, isn't it?"

Gilda took the charm and her eyes sparkled as she held it tenderly, and seemed almost to fondle it. Then, nervously, and sharply, she said: "Oh, how interesting! I love any thing Egyptian, and I have quite a lot of scarabs. Do give this to me as a token of your friendship. It will bring me luck. Fancy it having been worn by a murderer. I shall go to the tables at Monte Carlo, and if you give it to me, it will be my mascot."

Raife was very much in love with Gilda, and he would give his life, willingly, to serve her. The spirit of mystery seemed to enshroud this delicate, fragile girl. Why should she be fascinated by this gruesome relic of his father's murder? He did not reply for a minute or so. Gilda handed back the charm, saying: "No, you don't want to give it to me. And yet, how I feel I would like to own it. I don't know why, but it fascinates me."

"Take it, Gilda," he eventually said, fondly calling her by her Christian name, "and I hope it will bring you a lot of luck."

Gilda placed the quaint little charm with the thin gold chain in her reticule.

They had now reached the entrance of the Hôtel Royal, and together they entered. Raife cast an eager glance around. To his great relief, Lady Remington, for it was late, had retired to rest.

Gilda whispered: "Let's go up the staircase. There's a quiet alcove there, and my uncle has gone to his room."

In the brilliantly-lit foyer of the hotel an orchestra was discoursing music to a crowd of visitors, who lounged or promenaded at their sweet will. Many eyes were turned to the

handsome couple as they ascended the richly-carpeted staircase in search of that quiet alcove which promised much to Raife, and perhaps some pleasure to the mysterious young girl who accompanied him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.