

Le Queux William

As We Forgive Them



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Preface From the Author to the Reader

In these modern times of breathless hurry and great combines, when birth counts for nothing; when fortunes are made in a day and credit is lost in an hour, men's secrets are sometimes very strange ones. It is one of these which I have here revealed; one that will, I anticipate, both startle and puzzle the reader. The mystery is, in fact, one taken from the daily life about us, the truth concerning it having hitherto been regarded as strictly confidential by the persons herein mentioned, although I am now permitted by them to make the remarkable circumstances public.

*William Le Queux.
Lastra a Signa, Florence.*

Chapter One

The Stranger in Manchester

“Dead! And he’s carried his secret with him to his grave!”

“Never!”

“But he has. Look! His jaw has dropped. Can’t you see the change, man!”

“Then he’s carried out his threat after all!”

“By Heaven, he has! We’ve been fools, Reggie – utter idiots!” I whispered.

“So it seems. I confess that I fully expected he’d tell us the truth when he knew that the end had really come.”

“Ah! you didn’t know him as I did,” I remarked bitterly. “He had a will of iron and a nerve of steel.”

“Combined with the constitution of a horse, or he’d been dead long ago. But we’ve been outwitted – cleanly outwitted by a dying man. He defied us, laughed at our ignorance to the very last.”

“Blair was no fool. He knew what knowledge of the truth meant to us – a huge fortune. So he simply kept his secret.”

“And left us in penniless chagrin. Well, although we’ve lost thousands, Gilbert, I can’t help admiring his dogged determination. He went through a lot, recollect, and he’s been a good friend to us – very good – so I suppose we really oughtn’t to abuse him, however much we regret that he didn’t let us into his secret.”

“Ah, if only those white lips could speak! One word, and we’d both be rich men,” I said in regret, gazing upon the dead, white face, with its closed eyes and closely clipped beard, lying there upon the pillow.

“He intended to hold his secret from the very first,” remarked my tall friend, Reginald Seton, folding his arms as he stood on the opposite side of the bed. “It isn’t given to every man to make such a discovery as he made. It took him years to solve the problem, whatever it was; but that he really succeeded in doing so we can’t for a moment doubt.”

“And his profit was over a million sterling,” I remarked.

“More like two, at the very lowest estimate. Recollect how, when we first knew him, he was in dire want of a sovereign – and now? Why, only last week he gave twenty thousand to the Hospital Fund. And all as the result of solving the enigma which for so long we have tried to discover in vain. No, Gilbert, he hasn’t played the square game by us. We assisted him, put him on his legs, and all that, and instead of revealing to us the key to the secret which he discovered, and which placed him among the wealthiest men of London, he point-blank refused, even though he knew that he must die. We lent him money in the old days, financed him, kept Mab at school when he had no funds, and – ”

“And he repaid us every penny – with interest,” I interposed. “Come; don’t let’s discuss him here. The secret is lost for ever, that’s enough.” And I drew the sheet over the poor dead face – the countenance of Burton Blair, the man who, during the past five years, had been one of London’s mysteries.

A strange, adventurous life, a career more remarkable, perhaps, than half those imagined by writers of romance, had been brought abruptly to an end, while the secret of the source of his enormous wealth – the secret which we both had for the past five years longed to share, because we were in a sense justly entitled to participate in its advantages – had gone with him to that bourne whence none return.

The apartment in which we stood was a small, rather well-furnished bedroom in the *Queen’s Hotel*, Manchester. The window looked out upon the dark façade of the Infirmary, while to that chamber of the dead there came the roar and bustle of the traffic and trams in Piccadilly. His story was

assuredly one of the strangest that any man has ever told. Its mystery, as will be seen, was absolutely bewildering.

The light of the cheerless February afternoon was quickly fading, and as we turned softly to descend and inform the hotel manager of the fatal termination of the seizure, I noticed that the dead man's suit-case stood in the corner, and that his keys were still in it.

"We had better take possession of these," I remarked, locking the bag and transferring the small bunch to my pocket. "His executors will want them."

Then we closed the door behind us, and going to the office imparted the unwelcome intelligence that a death had occurred in the hotel. The manager was, however, quite prepared to learn such news, for, half an hour before, the doctor had declared that the stranger could not live. His case had been hopeless from the very first.

Briefly, the facts were as follows. Burton Blair had bidden his daughter Mabel farewell, left his house in Grosvenor Square on the previous morning, and had taken the ten-thirty express from Euston to Manchester, where he had said he had some private business to transact. Just before the train arrived at Crewe, he suddenly became unwell, and was discovered by one of the luncheon-car attendants in a state of collapse in one of the first-class compartments. Brandy and restoratives being administered, he revived sufficiently to travel on to Manchester, being assisted out of the train at London Road, and two porters had helped him into a cab and accompanied him to the hotel, where, on being put to bed, he again lapsed into unconsciousness. A doctor was called, but he could not diagnose the ailment, except that the patient's heart was seriously affected and, that being so, a fatal termination of the seizure might ensue. Towards two o'clock next morning, Blair, who had neither given his name nor told the hotel people who he was, asked that both Seton and I should be telegraphed for, and the result was that in anxious surprise we had both travelled up to Manchester, where on arrival, an hour before, we had discovered our friend to be in an utterly hopeless condition.

On entering the room we found the doctor, a young and rather pleasant man named Glenn, in attendance. Blair was conscious, and listened to the medical opinion without flinching. Indeed, he seemed rather to welcome death than to dread it, for, when he heard that he was in such a very critical condition, a faint smile crossed his pale, drawn features, and he remarked —

"Every man must die, so it may as well be to-day as to-morrow." Then, turning to me, he added, "Gilbert, you are very good to come just to say good-bye," and he put out his thin cold hand and grasped mine, while his eyes fixed upon me with that strange, intent look that only comes into a man's gaze when he is on the brink of the grave.

"It is a friend's duty, Burton," I answered, deeply in earnest. "But you must still hope. Doctors are often mistaken. Why, you've a splendid constitution, haven't you?"

"Hardly ever had a day's illness since I was a kid," was the millionaire's reply in a low, weak voice; "but this fit has bowled me completely over."

We endeavoured to ascertain exactly how he was seized, but neither Reggie nor the doctor could gather anything tangible.

"I became faint all of a sudden, and I know nothing more," was all the dying man would reply. "But," he added, turning again to me, "don't tell Mab till it's all over. Poor girl! My only regret is to leave her. You two fellows were so very good to her back in the old days, you won't abandon her now, will you?" he implored, speaking slowly and with very great difficulty, tears standing in his eyes.

"Certainly not, old chap," was my answer. "If left alone she'll want some one to advise her and to look after her interests."

"The scoundrelly lawyer chaps will do that," he snapped, with a strange hardness in his voice, as though he entertained no love for his solicitors. "No, I want you to see that no man marries her for her money — you understand? Dozens of fellows are after her at this moment, I know, but I'd rather see her dead than she should marry one of them. She must marry for love — love, you hear? Promise me, Gilbert, that that you'll look after her, won't you?"

Still holding his hand, I promised.

That was the last word he uttered. His pale lips twitched again, but no sound came from them. His glassy eyes were fixed upon me with a stony, terrible stare, as though he were endeavouring to tell me something.

Perhaps he was revealing to me the great secret – the secret of how he had solved the mystery of fortune and become worth over a million sterling – perhaps he was speaking of Mab. Which we knew not. His tongue refused to articulate, the silence of death was upon him.

Thus he passed away; and thus did I find myself bound to a promise which I intended to fulfil, even though he had not revealed to us his secret, as we confidently expected. We believed that, knowing himself to be dying, he had summoned us there to impart that knowledge which would render us both rich beyond the dreams of avarice. But in this we had been most bitterly disappointed. For five years, I confess, we had waited, expecting that he would some day share some of his wealth with us in return for those services we had rendered him in the past. Yet now it seemed he had coolly disregarded his indebtedness to us, and at the same time imposed upon me a duty by no means easy – the guardianship of his only daughter Mabel.

Chapter Two

Contains Certain Mysterious Facts

I ought here to declare that, having regard to all the curious and mysterious circumstances of the past, the situation was, to me, far from satisfactory. As we strolled together along Market Street that cold night discussing the affair, rather than remain in the public room of the hotel, Reggie suggested that the secret might be written somewhere and sealed up among the dead man's effects. But in that case, unless it were addressed to us, it would be opened by the persons the dying man had designated as "those scoundrelly lawyer chaps," and in all probability be turned by them to profitable account.

His solicitors were, we knew, Messrs Leighton, Brown and Leighton, an eminently respectable firm in Bedford Row; therefore we sent a telegram from the Central Office informing them of their client's sudden death, and requesting that one of the firm should at once come to Manchester to attend the inquest which Doctor Glenn had declared would be necessary. As the deceased man had expressed a wish that Mabel should, for the present, remain in ignorance, we did not inform her of the tragic occurrence.

Curiosity prompted us to ascend again to the dead man's chamber and examine the contents of his kit-bag and suit-case, but, beyond his clothes, a cheque-book and about ten pounds in gold, we found nothing. I think that we both half-expected to discover the key to that remarkable secret which he had somehow obtained, yet it was hardly to be imagined that he would carry such a valuable asset about with him in his luggage.

In the pocket of a small writing-book which formed part of the fittings of the suit-case I discovered several letters, all of which I examined and found them to be of no importance – save one, a dirty, ill-written note in uneducated Italian, which contained some passages which struck me as curious.

Indeed, so strange was the tenor of the whole communication that, with Reggie's connivance, I resolved to take possession of it and make further inquiry.

There were many things about Burton Blair that had puzzled us for years, therefore we were both determined, if possible, to elucidate the curious mystery that had surrounded him, even if he had carried to his grave the secret of his enormous fortune.

We alone in all the world knew the existence of the secret, only we were in ignorance of the necessary key by which the source of riches could be opened. The manner in which he had gained his great wealth was a mystery to every one, even to his daughter Mabel. In the City and in Society he was vaguely believed by some to possess large interests in mines, and to be a successful speculator in stocks, while others declared that he was the ground-landlord of at least two large cities in America, and yet others were positive that certain concessions from the Ottoman Government had brought him his gold.

All were, however, mistaken in their surmises. Burton Blair possessed not an acre of land; he had not a shilling in any public company; he was not interested in either Government concessions or industrial enterprises. No. The source of the great wealth by which he had, in five years, been able to purchase, decorate and furnish in princely manner one of the finest houses in Grosvenor Square, keep three of the most expensive Panhards, motoring being his hobby, and rent that fine old Jacobean mansion Mayvill Court, in Herefordshire, came from a source which nobody knew or even suspected. His were mysterious millions.

"I wonder if anything will come out at the inquest?" queried Reggie, later that evening. "His lawyers undoubtedly know nothing."

"He may have left some paper which reveals the truth," I answered. "Men who are silent in life often commit their secrets to paper."

“I don’t think Burton ever did.”

“He may have done so for Mabel’s benefit, remember.”

“Ah! by Jove!” gasped my friend, “I never thought of that. If he wished to provide for her, he would leave his secret with some one whom he could implicitly trust. Yet he trusted us – up to a certain point. We are the only ones who have any real knowledge of the state of affairs,” and my tall, long-legged, fair-haired friend, who stood six feet in his stockings, the picture of the easy-going muscular Englishman, although engaged in the commerce of feminine frippery, stopped with a low grunt of dissatisfaction, and carefully lit a fresh cigar.

We passed a dismal evening strolling about the main streets of Manchester, feeling that in Burton Blair we had lost a friend, but when on the following morning we met Herbert Leighton, the solicitor, in the hall of the *Queen’s*, and had a long consultation with him, the mystery surrounding the dead man became considerably heightened.

“You both knew my late client very well, indeed,” the solicitor remarked, after some preliminaries. “Now, are you aware of the existence of any one who would profit by his sudden decease?”

“That’s a curious question,” I remarked. “Why?”

“Well, the fact is this,” explained the dark, sharp-featured man, with some hesitation. “I have every reason to believe that he has been the victim of foul play.”

“Foul play!” I gasped. “You surely don’t think that he was murdered? Why, my dear fellow, that couldn’t be. He was taken ill in the train, and died in bed in our presence.”

The solicitor, whose face had now become graver, merely shrugged his narrow shoulders, and said – “We must, of course, await the result of the inquest, but from information in my possession I feel confident that Burton Blair did not die a natural death.”

That same evening the Coroner held his inquiry in a private room in the hotel, and, according to the two doctors who had made the post-mortem earlier in the day, death was due entirely to natural causes. It was discovered that Blair had naturally a weak heart, and that the fatal termination had been accelerated by the oscillation of the train.

There was absolutely nothing whatever to induce any suspicion of foul play, therefore the jury returned a verdict in accordance with the medical evidence that death was due to natural causes, and an order was given for the removal of the body to London for burial.

An hour after the inquest I took Mr Leighton aside and said —

“As you know, I have for some years been one of the late Mr Blair’s most intimate friends, and, therefore, I am naturally very much interested to know what induced you to suspect foul play.”

“My suspicions were well based,” was his rather enigmatical answer.

“Upon what?”

“Upon the fact that my client himself had been threatened, and that, although he told no one and laughed at my suggested precautions, he has lived in daily dread of assassination.”

“Curious!” I ejaculated. “Very curious!”

I told him nothing of that remarkable letter I had secured from the dead man’s luggage. If what he said were really true, then there was a very extraordinary secret in the death of Burton Blair, equally with that of his strange, romantic and mysterious life – a secret that was inscrutable, yet absolutely unique.

It will be necessary, I think, to fully explain the curious circumstances which first brought us into contact with Burton Blair, and to describe the mysterious events which followed our acquaintanceship. From beginning to end the whole affair is so remarkable that many who read this record of facts may be inclined to doubt my veracity. To such, I would at the very outset suggest that they make inquiries in London, in that little world of adventurers, speculators, money-lenders and money-losers known as “the City,” where I feel sure they will have no difficulty in learning even

further interesting details regarding the man of mysterious millions whom this narrative partially concerns.

And certainly the true facts concerning him will, I do not hesitate to say, be found to form one of the most remarkable romances in modern life.

Chapter Three

In Which a Strange Story is Told

In order to put the plain, unvarnished truth before you, I must, in the first place, explain that I, Gilbert Greenwood, was a man of small means, having been left an annuity by an ascetic Baptist, but somewhat prosperous aunt, while Reginald Seton I had known ever since we had been lads together at Charterhouse. The son of George Seton, a lace warehouseman of Cannon Street and Alderman of the City of London, Reggie had been left at twenty-five with a heavy burden of debt and an old-fashioned, high-class but rapidly declining business. Still, brought up to the lace trade in a factory at Nottingham, Reggie boldly followed in his father's footsteps, and by dint of close attention to business succeeding in rubbing along sufficiently well to avoid the bankruptcy court, and to secure an income of a few hundreds a year.

Both of us were still bachelors, and we chummed in comfortable chambers in a newly-constructed block of flats in Great Russell Street, while, being also fond of fox-hunting, the only sport we could afford, we also rented a cheap, old-fashioned house in a rural village called Helpstone, eighty miles from London, in the Fitzwilliam country. Here we spent each winter, usually being "out" two days a week.

Neither of us being well off, we had, as may be imagined, to practise a good deal of economy, for fox-hunting is an expensive sport to the poor man. Nevertheless, we were both fortunate in possessing a couple of good horses apiece, and by dint of a little squeezing here and there, were able to indulge in those exhilarating runs across country which cause the blood to tingle with excitement, and rejuvenate all who take part in them.

Reggie was sometimes kept in town by the exigencies of his deal in torchon, Maltese and Honiton, therefore I frequently lived alone in the old-fashioned, ivy-covered house, with Glave, my man, to look after me.

One bitterly cold evening in January Reggie was absent in London, and I, having been hunting all day, was riding home utterly fagged out. The meet that morning had been at Kate's Cabin, over in Huntingdonshire, and after two good runs I had found myself beyond Stilton, eighteen miles from home. Still, the scent had been excellent, and we had had good sport, therefore I took a pull at my flask and rode forward across country in the gathering gloom.

Fortunately I found the river fordable at Water Newton mill, a fact which saved me the long détour by Wansford, and then when within a mile of home I allowed my horse to walk, as I always did, in order that he might cool down before going to his stable. The dusk of the short afternoon was just deepening into night, and the biting wind cut me like a knife as I passed the crossroads about half a mile from Helpstone village, jogging along steadily, when of a sudden a man's burly figure loomed out of the shadow of the high, holly hedge, and a deep voice exclaimed —

"Pardon me, sir, but I'm a stranger in these parts, and my daughter here has fainted. Is there a house near?"

Then, as I drew near, I saw huddled upon a heap of stones at the roadside the slim, fragile form of a young girl of about sixteen, wrapped in a thick, dark-coloured cloak, while in the glimmer of light that remained I distinguished that the man who was addressing me was a bluff, rather well-spoken, dark-bearded fellow of about forty-five or so, in a frayed suit of blue serge and peaked cap that gave him something of the appearance of a seafarer. His face was seamed and weatherbeaten, and his broad, powerful jaws betokened a strength of character and dogged determination.

"Has your daughter been taken ill?" I inquired, when I had thoroughly examined him.

"Well, the fact is we've walked a long way to-day, and I think she's done up. She became dazed like about half an hour ago, and when she sat down she fell insensible."

“She mustn’t stay here,” I remarked, as the fact became plain that both father and daughter were tramps. “She’ll get frozen to death. My house is over yonder. I’ll ride on and bring back some one to help carry her.”

The man commenced to thank me, but I touched my horse with the spur, and was soon in the stableyard calling for Glave to accompany me back to the spot where I had left the wayfarers.

A quarter of an hour later we had arranged the insensible girl on a couch in my warm, snug sitting-room, had forced some brandy down her throat, and she had opened her eyes wonderingly, and looked round with childlike temerity upon her unfamiliar surroundings.

Her gaze met mine, and I saw that her countenance was undeniably beautiful, of that dark, half-tragic type, her eyes rendered the more luminous by the deathlike pallor of her countenance. The features were well-moulded, refined and handsome in every line, and as she addressed her father, inquiring what had occurred, I detected that she was no mere waif of the highway, but, on the contrary, highly intelligent, well mannered and well educated.

Her father, in a few deep words, explained our abrupt meeting and my hospitality, whereupon she smiled upon me sweetly and uttered words of thanks.

“It must have been the intense cold, I think,” she added. “Somehow I felt benumbed all at once, and my head swam so that I couldn’t stand. But it is really very kind indeed of you. I’m so sorry that we’ve disturbed you like this.”

I assured her that my only wish was for her complete recovery, and as I spoke I could not conceal from myself that her beauty was very remarkable. Although young, and her figure as yet not fully developed, her face was nevertheless one of the most perfect I had ever seen. From the first moment my eyes fell upon her, I found her indescribably charming. That she was utterly exhausted was rendered plain by the painful, uneasy manner in which she moved upon her couch. Her rusty black skirt and thick boots were muddy and travel-stained, and by the manner she pushed the tangled mass of dark hair from her brow I knew that her head ached.

Glave, in no good mood at the introduction of tramps, entered, announcing that my dinner was ready; but she firmly, yet with sweet grace, declined my invitation to eat, saying that if I would permit her she would rather remain alone on the couch before the fire for half an hour longer. Therefore I sent her some hot soup by old Mrs Axford, our cook, while her father, having washed his hands, accompanied me to the dining-room.

He seemed half-famished, taciturn and reserved at first, but presently, when he had judged my character sufficiently, he explained that his name was Burton Blair, that in his absence abroad he had lost his wife ten years before, and that little Mab was his only child. As his appearance denoted, he had been at sea the greater part of his life and held a master’s certificate, but of late he had been living ashore.

“I’ve been home these three years now,” he went on, “and I’ve had a pretty rough time of it, I can tell you. Poor Mab! I wouldn’t have minded had it not been for her. She’s a brick, she is, just as her poor dear mother was. She’s done three years of semi-starvation, and yet she’s never once complained. She knows my character by now, she knows that when once Burton Blair makes up his mind to do a thing, by Gad! he does it,” and he set those square jaws of his hard, while a look of determination and dogged persistency came into his eyes, the fiercest I had ever seen in any man.

“But, Mr Blair, why did you leave the sea to starve ashore?” I inquired, my curiosity aroused.

“Because – well, because I had a reason – a strong reason,” was his hesitating reply. “You see me homeless and hungry to-night,” laughed Burton Blair, bitterly, “but to-morrow I may be a millionaire!”

And his face assumed a mysterious, sphinx-like expression which sorely puzzled me.

Many and many a time since then have I recollected those strange, prophetic words of his as he sat at my table, shabby, unkempt and ravenously hungry, a worn-out, half-frozen tramp from the

highroad, who, absurd as it then seemed, held the strong belief that ere long he would be the possessor of millions.

I remember well how I smiled at his vague assertion. Every man who falls low in the social scale clings to the will-o'-the-wisp belief that his luck will change, and that by some vagary of fortune he will come up again smiling. Hope is never dead within the ruined man.

By dint of some careful questions I tried to obtain further information regarding this confident hope of wealth which he entertained, but he would tell me nothing – absolutely nothing.

He accepted a cigar after he had dined well, took brandy with his coffee, and smoked with the air of a contented man who had no single thought or care in the world – a man who knew exactly what the future held for him.

Thus, from the very first, Burton Blair was a mystery. On rejoining Mabel we found her sleeping peacefully, utterly fagged out. Therefore I induced him to remain beneath my roof that night, in order that she might rest, and, returning to the dining-room, her father and I sat together smoking and talking for several hours.

He told me of his hard, rough years at sea, of strange adventures in savage lands, of a narrow escape from death at the hands of a band of natives in the Cameroons, and of how, for three years, he acted as captain of a river-steamer up the Congo, one of the pioneers of civilisation. He related his thrilling adventures calmly and naturally, without any bragging, but just in that plain, matter-of-fact manner which revealed to me that he was one of those men who love an adventurous life because of its perils and its vicissitudes.

“And now I’m tramping the turnpikes of England,” he added, laughing. “You must, no doubt, think it very strange, Mr Greenwood, but to tell you the truth I am actively prosecuting a rather curious quest, the successful issue of which will one day bring me wealth beyond my wildest dreams. See!” he added, with a strange wild look in his great dark eyes, as swiftly undoing his blue guernsey and delving beneath it he drew forth a square, flat piece of soiled and well-worn chamois leather in which there seemed to be sewed some precious document or other. “Look! My secret lies here. Some day I shall discover the key to it – maybe to-morrow or next day, or next year. When, it is quite immaterial. The result will be the same. My years of continuous search and travel will be rewarded – and I shall be rich, and the world will wonder!” And, laughing contentedly, almost triumphantly within himself, he carefully replaced his precious document in his chest, and, rising, stood with his back to the fire in the attitude of a man entirely confident of what was written in the Book of Fate.

That midnight scene in all its strange, romantic detail, that occasion when the tired wayfarer and his daughter spent their first night as my guests, rose before me when, on that bright, cold afternoon following the inquest up at Manchester, I alighted from a cab in front of the big white house in Grosvenor Square, and received word of Carter, the solemn manservant, that Miss Mabel was at home.

The magnificent mansion, with its exquisite decorations, its genuine Louis Quatorze furniture, its valuable pictures and splendid examples of seventeenth century statuary, home of one to whom expense was surely of no account, was assuredly sufficient testimony that the shabby wayfarer who had uttered those words in my narrow little dining-room five years before had made no idle boast.

The secret sewed within that dirty bag of wash-leather, whatever it may have been, had already realised over a million, and was still realising enormous sums, until death had now so suddenly put an end to its exploitation. The mystery of it all was beyond solution; and the enigma was complete.

These and other reflections swept through my mind as I followed the footman up the wide marble staircase and was shown ceremoniously into the great gold and white drawing-room, the walls of which were panelled with pale rose silk, the four large windows affording a wide view across the Square. Those priceless paintings, those beautiful cabinets and unique *bric-à-brac*—all were purchased with the proceeds from that mysterious secret, the secret which had in that short space of five years been the means of transforming a homeless, down-at-heel wanderer into a millionaire.

Gazing aimlessly across the grey Square with its leafless trees, I stood undecided how best to break the sad news, when a slight *frou-frou* of silk swept behind me, and, turning quickly, I confronted the dead man's daughter, looking now, at twenty-three, far more sweet, graceful and womanly than in that first hour of our strange meeting by the wayside long ago.

But her black gown, her trembling form, and her pale, tear-stained cheeks told me in an instant that this woman in my charge had already learnt the painful truth. She halted before me, a beautiful, tragic figure, her tiny white hand nervously clutching the back of one of the gilt chairs for support.

"I know!" she exclaimed in a broken voice, quite unnatural to her, her eyes fixed upon me, "I know, Mr Greenwood, why you have called. The truth has been told to me by Mr Leighton an hour ago. Ah! my poor dear father!" she sighed, the words catching in her throat as she burst into tears. "Why did he go to Manchester? His enemies have triumphed, just as I have all along feared they would. Yet, great-hearted as he was, he believed ill of no man. He refused always to heed my warnings, and laughed at all my apprehensions. Yet, alas! the ghastly truth is now only too plain. My poor father!" she gasped, her handsome face blanched to the lips. "He is dead – and his secret is out!"

Chapter Four

Which Traverses Dangerous Ground

“Are you really suspicious, Mabel, that your father has been the victim of foul play?” I inquired quickly of the dead man’s daughter, standing pale and unnerved before me.

“I am,” was her direct, unhesitating answer. “You know his story, Mr Greenwood; you know how he carried with him everywhere something he had sewed in a piece of chamois leather; something which was his most precious possession. Mr Leighton tells me that it is missing.”

“That is unfortunately so,” I said. “We all three searched for it among his clothes and in his luggage; we made inquiry of the luncheon-car attendant who found him insensible in the railway carriage, of the porters who conveyed him to the hotel, of every one, in fact, but can find no trace of it whatsoever.”

“Because it has been deliberately stolen,” she remarked.

“Then your theory is that he has been assassinated in order to conceal the theft?”

She nodded in the affirmative, her face still hard and pale.

“But there is no evidence whatever of foul play, recollect,” I exclaimed. “Both medical men, two of the best in Manchester, declared that death was entirely due to natural causes.”

“I care nothing for what they say. The little sachet which my poor father sewed with his own hands, and guarded so carefully all these years, and which for some curious reason he would neither trust in any bank nor in a safe deposit vault, is missing. His enemies have gained possession of it, just as I felt confident they would.”

“I recollect him showing me that little bag of wash-leather on the first night of our acquaintance,” I said. “He then declared that what was contained therein would bring him wealth – and it certainly has done,” I added, glancing round that magnificent apartment.

“It brought him wealth, but not happiness, Mr Greenwood,” she responded quickly. “That packet, the contents of which I have never seen, he has carried with him in his pocket or suspended round his neck ever since it first came into his possession years ago. In all his clothes he had a special pocket in which to carry it, while at night he wore it in a specially made belt which was locked around his waist. I think he regarded it as a sort of charm, or talisman, which, besides bringing him his great fortune, also preserved him from all ills. The reason of this I cannot tell.”

“Did you never ascertain the nature of the document which he considered so precious?”

“I tried to do so many times, but he would never reveal it to me. ‘It was his secret,’ he would say, and no more.”

Both Reggie and I had, times without number, endeavoured to learn what the mysterious packet really contained, but had been no more successful than the charming girl now standing before me. Burton Blair was a strange man, both in actions and in words, very reserved regarding his own affairs, and yet, curiously enough, with the advent of prosperity he had become a prince of good fellows.

“But who were his enemies?” I inquired.

“Ah! of that I am likewise in utter ignorance,” was her reply. “As you know, during the past year or two, like all rich men he has been surrounded by adventurers and parasites of all sorts, whom Ford, his secretary, has kept at arm’s length. It may be that the existence of the precious packet was known, and that my poor father has fallen a victim to some foul plot. At east, that is my firm idea.”

“If so, the police should certainly be informed,” I said. “It is true that the wash-leather sachet which he showed me on the night of our first meeting is now missing, for we have all made the most careful search for it, but in vain. Yet what could its possession possibly profit any one if the key to what was contained there is wanting?”

“But was not this key, whatever it was, also in my father’s hands?” queried Mabel Blair. “Was it not the discovery of that very key which gave us all these possessions?” she asked, with the sweet womanliness that was her most engaging characteristic.

“Exactly. But surely your father, shrewd and cautious as he always was, would never carry upon his person both problem and key together! I can’t really believe that he’d do such a foolish thing as that.”

“Nor do I. Although I was his only child, and his confidante in everything relating to his life, there was one thing he persistently kept from me, and that was the nature of his secret. Sometimes I have found myself suspecting that it was not an altogether creditable one – indeed, one that a father dare not reveal to his daughter. And yet no one has ever accused him of dishonesty or of double-dealing. At other times I have noticed in his face and manner an air of distinct mystery which has caused me to believe that the source of our unlimited wealth was some curious and romantic one, which to the world would be regarded as entirely incredible. One night, indeed, as we sat here at table after dinner, and while smoking, he had been telling me about my poor mother who died in lodgings in a back street in Manchester while he was absent on a voyage to the West Coast of Africa, he declared that if London knew the source of his income it would be astounded. ‘But,’ he added, ‘it is a secret – a secret I intend to carry with me to the grave.’”

Strangely enough he had uttered those very same words to me a couple of years before, when one night he had sat before the fire in my rooms in Great Russell Street, and I had referred to his marvellous stroke of good fortune. He had died, and he had either carried out his threat of destroying that evidence of his secret in the shape of the well-worn chamois leather bag, or else it had been ingeniously stolen from him.

The curious, ill-written letter I had secured from my friend’s luggage, while puzzling me had aroused certain suspicions that hitherto I had not entertained. Of these I, of course, told Mabel nothing, for I did not wish to cause her any greater pain. In the years we had been acquainted we had always been good friends. Although Reggie was fifteen years her senior, and I thirteen years older than she, I believe she regarded both of us as big brothers.

Our friendship had commenced when, finding Burton Blair, the seafaring tramp, practically-starving as he was, we clubbed together from our small means and put her to a finishing school at Bournemouth. To allow so young and delicate a girl to tramp England aimlessly in search of some vague and secret information which seemed to be her erratic father’s object, was, we decided, an utter impossibility; therefore, following that night of our first meeting at Helpstone, Burton and his daughter remained our guests for a week, and, after many consultations and some little economies, we were at last successful in placing Mabel at school, a service for which we later received her heartfelt thanks.

She was utterly worn-out, poor child. Poverty had already set its indelible stamp upon her sweet face, and her beauty was beginning to fade beneath that burden of disappointment and erratic wandering when we had so fortunately discovered her, and been able to rescue her from the necessity of tramping footsore over those endless, pitiless highways.

Contrary to our expectation it was quite a long time before we could induce Blair to allow his daughter to return to school, for, as a matter of fact, both father and daughter were entirely devoted to one another. Nevertheless, in the end we triumphed, and later, when the bluff, bearded wayfarer came to his own, he did not forget to return thanks to us in a very substantial manner. Indeed, our present improved circumstances were due to him, for not only had he handed a cheque to Reggie sufficient to pay the whole of the liabilities of the Cannon Street lace business, but to me, on my birthday three years ago, he had sent, enclosed in a cheap, silver cigarette case, a draft upon his bankers for a sum sufficient to provide me with a very comfortable little annuity.

Burton Blair never forgot his friends – neither did he ever forgive an unkind action. Mabel was his idol, his only real confidante, and yet it seemed more than strange that she knew absolutely nothing of the mysterious source of his colossal income.

Together we sat for over an hour in that great drawing-room, the very splendour of which spoke mystery. Mrs Percival, the pleasant, middle-aged widow of a naval surgeon, who was Mabel's chaperon and companion, entered, but left us quickly, much upset by the tragic news. Presently, when I told Mabel of my promise to her father, a slight blush suffused her pale cheeks.

"It is really awfully good of you to trouble over my affairs, Mr Greenwood," she said, glancing at me, and then dropping her eyes modestly. "I suppose in future I shall have to consider you as my guardian," and she laughed lightly, twisting her ring around her finger.

"Not as your legal guardian," I answered. "Your father's lawyers will, no doubt, act in that capacity, but rather as your protector and your friend."

"Ah!" she replied sadly, "I suppose I shall require both, now that poor dad is dead."

"I have been your friend for over five years, Mabel, and I hope you will still allow me to carry out my promise to your father," I said, standing before her and speaking in deep earnestness.

"There must, however, at the outset be a clear and distinct understanding between us. Therefore permit me for one moment to speak to you candidly, as a man should to a woman who is his friend. You, Mabel, are young, and – well, you are, as you know, very good-looking –"

"No, really, Mr Greenwood," she cried, interrupting me and blushing at my compliment, "it is too bad of you. I'm sure –"

"Hear me out, please," I continued with mock severity. "You are young, you are very good-looking, and you are rich; you therefore possess the three necessary attributes which render a woman eligible in these modern days when sentiment is held of such little account. Well, people who will watch our intimate friendship will, with ill-nature, declare, no doubt, that I am seeking to marry you for your money. I am quite sure the world will say this, but what I want you to promise is to at once refute such a statement. I desire that you and I shall be firm friends, just as we have ever been, without any thought of affection. I may admire you – I confess, now, that I have always admired you – but with a man of my limited means love for you is entirely out of the question. Understand that I do not wish to presume upon the past, now that your father is dead and you are alone. Understand, too, from the very outset that I now give you the hand of firm friendship as I would give it to Reggie, my old schoolfellow and best friend, and that in future I shall safeguard your interests as though they were my own." And I held out my hands to her.

For a moment she hesitated, for my words had apparently caused her the most profound surprise.

"Very well," she faltered, glancing for an instant up to my face. "It is a bargain – if you wish it to be so."

"I wish, Mabel, to carry out the promise I made to your father," I said. "As you know, I am greatly indebted to him for much generosity, and I wish, therefore, as a mark of gratitude, to stand in his place and protect his daughter – yourself."

"But were we not, in the first place, both indebted to you?" she said. "If it had not been for Mr Seton and yourself I might have wandered on until I died by the wayside."

"For what was your father searching?" I asked. "He surely told you?"

"No, he never did. I am in entire ignorance of the reason of his three years of tramping up and down England. He had a distinct object, which he accomplished, but what it actually was he would never reveal to me."

"It was, I suppose, in connexion with that document he always carried?"

"I believe it was," was her response. Then she added, returning to her previous observations, "Why speak of your indebtedness to him, Mr Greenwood, when I know full well how you sold your best horse in order to pay my school fees at Bournemouth, and that you could not hunt that season

in consequence? You denied yourself the only little pleasure you had, in order that I might be well cared for.”

“I forbid you to mention that again,” I said quickly. “Recollect we are now friends, and between friends there can be no question of indebtedness.”

“Then you must not talk of any little service my father rendered to you,” she laughed. “Come, now, I shall be unruly if you don’t keep to your part of the bargain!”

And so we were compelled at that juncture to cry quits, and we recommenced our friendship on a firm and perfectly well-defined basis.

Yet how strange it was! The beauty of Mabel Blair, as she lounged there before me in that magnificent home that was now hers, was surely sufficient to turn the head of any man who was not a Chancery Judge or a Catholic Cardinal – different indeed from the poor, half-starved girl whom I had first seen exhausted and fallen by the roadside in the winter gloom.

Chapter Five

In which the Mystery Becomes Considerably Increased

That the precious document, or whatever it was, sewn up in the wash-leather which the dead man had so carefully guarded through all those years was now missing was, in itself, a very suspicious circumstance, while Mabel's vague but distinct apprehensions, which she either would not or could not define, now aroused my suspicions that Burton Blair had been the victim of foul play.

Immediately after leaving her I therefore drove to Bedford Row and held another consultation with Leighton, to whom I explained my grave fears.

"As I have already explained, Mr Greenwood," responded the solicitor, leaning back in his padded chair and regarding me gravely through his glasses, "I believe that my client did not die a natural death. There was some mystery in his life, some strange romantic circumstance which, unfortunately, he never thought fit to confide to me. He held a secret, he told me, and by knowledge of that secret, he obtained his vast wealth. Only half an hour ago I made a rough calculation of the present value of his estate, and at the lowest, I believe it will be found to amount to over two and a half millions. The whole of this, I may tell you in confidence, goes unreservedly to his daughter, with the exception of several legacies, which include ten thousand each to Mr Seton and to yourself, two thousand to Mrs Percival, and some small sums to the servants. But," he added, "there is a clause in the will which is very puzzling, and which closely affects yourself. As we both suspect foul play, I think I may as well at once show it to you without waiting for my unfortunate client's burial and the formal reading of his will."

Then he rose, and from a big black deed box lettered "Burton Blair, Esquire," he took out the dead man's will, and, opening it, showed me a passage which read: —

Ten: "I give and bequeath to Gilbert Greenwood of The Cedars, Helpstone, the small bag of chamois leather that will be found upon me at the time of my death, in order that he may profit by what is contained therein, and as recompense for certain valuable services rendered to me. Let him recollect always this rhyme —

"Henry the Eighth was a knave to his queens, He'd, one short of seven – and nine or ten scenes!"

"And let him well and truly preserve the secret from every man, just as I have done."

That was all. A strange clause surely! Burton Blair had, after all, actually bequeathed his secret to me, the secret that had brought him his colossal wealth! Yet it was already lost – probably stolen by his enemies.

"That's a curious doggerel," the solicitor smiled. "But poor Blair possessed but little literary culture, I fear. He knew more about the sea than poetry. Yet, after all, it seems a tantalising situation that you should be left the secret of the source of my client's enormous fortune, and that it should be stolen from you in this manner."

"We had, I think, better consult the police, and explain our suspicions," I said, in bitter chagrin that the chamois satchet should have fallen into other hands.

"I entirely agree with you, Mr Greenwood. We will go together to Scotland Yard and get them to institute inquiries. If Mr Blair was actually murdered, then his assassination was accomplished in a most secret and remarkable manner, to say the least. But there is one further clause in the will which is somewhat disturbing, and that is with regard to his daughter Mabel. The testator has appointed some person of whom I have never heard – a man called Paolo Melandrini, an Italian, apparently living in Florence, to be her secretary and the manager of her affairs."

"What!" I cried, amazed. "An Italian to be her secretary! Who is he?"

"A person with whom I am not acquainted; whose name, indeed, has never been mentioned to me by my client. He merely dictated it to me when I drafted the will."

“But the thing’s absurd!” I exclaimed. “Surely you can’t let an unknown foreigner, who may be an adventurer for all we know, have control of all her money?”

“I fear there’s no help for it,” replied Leighton, gravely. “It is written here, and we shall be compelled to give notice to this man, whoever he is, of his appointment at a salary of five thousand pounds a year.”

“And will he really have control of her affairs?”

“Absolutely. Indeed, the whole estate is left to her on condition that she accepts this fellow as her secretary and confidential adviser.”

“Why, Blair must have been mad!” I exclaimed. “Has Mabel any knowledge of this mysterious Italian?”

“She has never heard of him.”

“Well, in that case, I think that, before he is informed of poor Blair’s death and the good fortune in store for him, we ought at least to find out who and what he is. We can in any case, keep a watchful eye on him, and see that he doesn’t trick Mabel out of her money.”

The lawyer sighed, wiped his glasses slowly, and said —

“He will have the entire management of everything, therefore it will be difficult to know what goes on, or how much he puts into his own pocket.”

“But whatever could possess Blair to insert such a mad clause as that? Didn’t you point out the folly of it?”

“I did.”

“And what did he say?”

“He reflected a few moments over my words, sighed, and then answered, ‘It is imperative, Leighton. I have no other alternative.’ Therefore from that I took it that he was acting under compulsion.”

“You believe that this foreigner was in a position to demand it – eh?”

The solicitor nodded. He evidently was of opinion that the reason of the introduction of this unknown person into Mabel’s household was a secret one, known only to Burton Blair and to the individual himself. It was curious, I reflected, that Mabel herself had not mentioned it to me. Yet perhaps she had hesitated, because I had told her of my promise to her father, and she did not wish to hurt my feelings. The whole situation became hourly more complicated and more mysterious.

I was, however, bent upon accomplishing two things; first, to recover the millionaire’s most precious possession which he had bequeathed to me, together with such an extraordinary injunction to recollect that doggerel couplet which still ran in my head; and secondly, to make private inquiries regarding this unknown foreigner who had so suddenly become introduced into the affair.

That same evening at six o’clock, having met Reggie by appointment at Mr Leighton’s office, we all three drove to Scotland Yard, where we had a long consultation with one of the head officials, to whom we explained the circumstances and our suspicions of foul play.

“Well,” he replied at length, “of course I will institute inquiries in Manchester and elsewhere, but as the medical evidence has proved so conclusively that the gentleman in question died from natural causes, I cannot hold out very much hope that our Department or the Manchester Detective Department can assist you. The grounds you have for supposing that he met with foul play are very vague, you must admit, and as far as I can see, the only motive at all was the theft of this paper, or whatever it was, which he carried upon him. Yet men are not usually killed in broad daylight in order to commit a theft which any expert pickpocket might effect. Besides, if his enemies or rivals knew what it was and how he was in the habit of carrying it, they could easily have secured it without assassination.”

“But he was in possession of some secret,” remarked the solicitor.

“Of what character?”

“I have unfortunately no idea. Nobody knows. All that we are aware is that its possession raised him from poverty to affluence, and that one person, if not more, was eager to obtain possession of it.”

“Naturally,” remarked the grey-haired Assistant-Director of Criminal Investigations. “But who was this person?”

“Unfortunately I do not know. My client told me this a year ago, but mentioned no name.”

“Then you have no suspicion whatever of any one?”

“None. The little bag of wash-leather, inside which the document was sewn, has been stolen, and this fact arouses our suspicion of foul play.” The hide-bound official shook his head very dubiously.

“That is not enough upon which to base a suspicion of murder, especially as we have had all the evidence at the inquest, a post-mortem and a unanimous verdict of the coroner’s jury. No, gentlemen,” he added, “I don’t see any ground for really grave suspicion. The document may not have been stolen after all. Mr Blair seems to have been of a somewhat eccentric disposition, like many men who suddenly rise in the world, and he may have hidden it away for safe-keeping somewhere. To me, this seems by far the most likely theory, especially as he had expressed a fear that his enemies sought to gain possession of it.”

“But surely, if there is suspicion of murder, it is the duty of the police to investigate it!” I exclaimed resentfully.

“Granted. But where is the suspicion? Neither doctors, coroner, local police nor jury entertain the slightest doubt that he died from natural causes,” he argued. “In that case the Manchester police have neither right nor necessity to interfere.”

“But there has been a theft.”

“What proof have you of it?” he asked, raising his grey eyebrows and tapping the table with his pen. “If you can show me that a theft has been committed, then I will put in motion the various influences at my command. On the contrary, you merely suspect that this something sewn in a bag has been stolen. Yet it may be hidden in some place difficult to find, but nevertheless in safety. As, however, you all three allege that the unfortunate gentleman was assassinated in order to gain possession of this mysterious little packet of which he was so careful, I will communicate with the Manchester City police and ask them to make what inquiries they can. Further than that, gentlemen,” he added suavely, “I fear that my Department cannot assist you.”

“Then all I have to reply,” remarked Mr Leighton, bluntly, “is that the public opinion of the futility of this branch of the police in the detection of crime is fully justified, and I shall not fail to see that public attention is called to the matter through the Press. It’s simply a disgrace.”

“I’m only acting, sir, upon my instructions, conjointly with what you have yourself told me,” was his answer. “I assure you that if I ordered inquiries to be made in every case in which persons are alleged to have been murdered, I should require a detective force as large as the British Army. Why, not a day passes without I receive dozens of secret callers and anonymous letters all alleging assassination – generally against some person towards whom they entertain a dislike. Eighteen years as head of this Department, however, has, I think, taught me how to distinguish a case for inquiry – which yours is not.”

Argument proved futile. The official mind was made up that Burton Blair had not fallen a victim to foul play, therefore we could hope for no assistance. So with our dissatisfaction rather plainly marked, we rose and went out again into Whitehall.

“It’s a scandal!” Reggie declared angrily. “Poor Blair has been murdered – everything points to it – and yet the police won’t lift a finger to assist us to reveal the truth, just because a doctor discovered that he had a weak heart. It’s placing a premium on crime,” he added, his fist clenched savagely. “I’ll relate the whole thing to my friend Mills, the Member for West Derbyshire, and get him to ask a question in the House. We’ll see what this new Home Secretary says to it! It’ll be a nasty pill for him, I’ll wager.”

“Oh, he’ll have some typewritten official excuse ready, never fear,” laughed Leighton. “If they won’t help us, we must make inquiries for ourselves.”

The solicitor parted from us in Trafalgar Square, arranging to meet us at Grosvenor Square after the funeral, when the will would be formally read before the dead man’s daughter and her companion, Mrs Percival.

“And then,” he added, “we shall have to take some active steps to discover this mysterious person who is in future to control her fortune.”

“I’ll undertake the inquiries,” I said. “Fortunately I speak Italian, therefore, before we give him notice of Blair’s death. I’ll go out to Florence and ascertain who and what he is.” Truth to tell, I had a suspicion that the letter which I had secured from the dead man’s blotting book, and which I had kept secretly to myself, had been written by this unknown individual – Paolo Melandrini. Although it bore neither address nor signature, and was in a heavy and rather uneducated hand, it was evidently the letter of a Tuscan, for I detected in it certain phonetic spelling which was purely Florentine. Translated, the strange communication read as follows: —

“Your letter reached me only this morning. The Ceco (blind man) is in Paris, on his way to London. The girl is with him, and they evidently know something. So be very careful. He and his ingenious friends will probably try and trick you.

“I am still at my post, but the water has risen three metres on account of the heavy rains. Nevertheless, farming has been good, so I shall expect to meet you at vespers in San Frediano on the evening of the 6th of next month. I have something most important to tell you. Recollect that the Ceco means mischief, and act accordingly. *Addio.*”

Times without number I carefully translated the curious missive word for word. It seemed full of hidden meaning.

What seemed most probable was that the person known as the “blind man,” who was Blair’s enemy, had actually been successful in gaining possession of that precious little sachet of chamois leather that was now mine by right, together with the mysterious secret it contained.

Chapter Six

Concerns Three Capital A's

The function in the library at Grosvenor Square on the following afternoon was, as may be supposed, a very sad and painful one.

Mabel Blair, dressed in deep mourning, her eyes betraying traces of tears, sat still and silent while the solicitor drily read over the will, clause by clause.

She made no comment, even when he repeated the dead man's appointment of the unknown Italian to be manager of his daughter's fortune.

"But who is he, pray?" demanded Mrs Percival, in her quiet, refined voice. "I have never heard Mr Blair speak of any such person."

"Nor have I," admitted Leighton, pausing a moment to readjust his glasses, and then continuing to read the document through to the end.

We were all thoroughly glad when the formality was over. Afterwards, Mabel whispered to me that she wished to see me alone in the morning-room, and when we had entered together and I had closed the door, she said —

"Last night I searched the small safe in my father's bedroom where he sometimes kept his private papers and things. There were a quantity of my poor mother's letters, written to him years ago when he was at sea, but nothing else, only this." And she drew from her pocket a small, soiled and frayed playing-card, an ace of hearts, upon which certain cabalistic capitals had been written in three columns. In order that you shall properly understand the arrangement and position of the letters, it will perhaps be as well if I here reproduce it: —

"That's curious!" I remarked, turning it over anxiously in my hand. "Have you tried to discover what meaning the words convey?"

"Yes; but it's some cipher or other, I think. You will notice that the two upper columns commence with 'A,' and the lower column ends with the same letter. The card is the ace of hearts, and in all those points I detect some hidden meaning."

"No doubt," I said. "But was there an appearance of it being carefully preserved?"

"Yes, it was sealed in a linen-lined envelope to itself, and marked in my father's handwriting, 'Burton Blair – private.' I wonder what it means?"

"Ah! I wonder," I exclaimed, pondering deeply, and still gazing upon the three columns of fourteen letters. I tried to decipher it by the usual known methods of the easy cipher, but could make nothing intelligible of it. There were some hidden words there, and being utterly unintelligible, they caused me considerable thought. Why Blair had preserved that card in such secrecy was, to say the least, a mystery. In it I suspected there was some hidden clue to his secret, but of its nature I could not even guess.

When we had discussed it for a long time, arriving at no satisfactory conclusion, I suggested that she should go abroad with Mrs Percival for a few weeks so as to change her surroundings and endeavour to forget her sudden bereavement, but she only shook her head, murmuring —

"No, I prefer to remain here. The loss of my poor father would be the same to me abroad as it is here."

"But you must endeavour to forget," I urged with deep sympathy. "We are doing our utmost to solve the mystery surrounding your father's actions, and the means by which he came by his death. To-night, indeed, I am leaving for Italy in order to make secret inquiries regarding this person who is appointed your secretary."

"Ah, yes," she sighed. "I wonder who he is? I wonder what motive my father could possibly have in placing my affairs in the hands of a stranger?"

“He is probably an old friend of your father’s,” I suggested.

“No,” she responded, “I knew all his friends. He had only one secret from me – the secret of the source of his wealth. That he always refused point-blank to tell me.”

“I shall travel direct to Florence, and discover what I can before the lawyers give this mysterious person notice of your father’s death,” I said. “I may obtain some knowledge which will be of the greatest benefit to us hereafter.”

“Ah! it is really very good of you, Mr Greenwood,” she answered, lifting her beautiful eyes to mine with an expression of profound gratitude. “I must admit that the idea of being closely associated with a stranger, and that stranger a foreigner, causes me considerable apprehension.”

“But he may be young and good-looking, the veritable Paolo of romance – and you his Francesca,” I suggested, smiling.

Her sweet lips relaxed slightly, but she shook her head, sighing as she answered —

“Please don’t anticipate anything of the kind. I only hope he may be old and very ugly.”

“So that he will not arouse my jealousy – eh?” I laughed. “Really, Mabel, if our friendship were not upon such a well-defined basis, I should allow myself to act the part of lover. You know I – ”

“Now don’t be foolish,” she interrupted, raising her small finger in mock reproval. “Remember what you said yesterday.”

“I said what I meant.”

“And so did I. To tell you the truth, I like to think of you as my big brother,” she declared. “I suppose I shall never love,” she added, reflectively, gazing into the blazing fire.

“No, no; don’t say that, Mabel. You’ll one day meet some man in your own station, love him, marry and be happy,” I said, my hand upon her shoulder. “Recollect that with your wealth you can secure the pick of the matrimonial market.”

“Some impoverished young aristocrat, you mean? No, thanks. I’ve already met a good many, but their disguise of affection has always been much too thin. Most of them wanted my money to pay off mortgages on their estates. No, I’d much prefer a poor man – although I shall *never* marry – never.”

I was silent for a moment, then I remarked quite bluntly —

“I always thought you would marry young Lord Newborough. You both seemed very good friends.”

“So we were – until he proposed to me.”

And she looked me straight in the face with that clear gaze and those splendid eyes wide open in wonderment, almost like a child’s.

Her character was a strangely complex one. As a tall, willowy girl, in those early days of our acquaintance, I knew her to be high-minded and wilful, yet of that sweet affectionate disposition that endeared her to every one with whom she came into contact. Her nature was so calm and so sweet that in her love seemed an unconscious impulse. I had often thought she was surely too soft, too good, too fair to be cast among the briars of the world, and fall and bleed upon the thorns of life. The world is just as cold and pitiless and just as full of pitfalls for the young and unwary in Mayfair as in Mile End. Hence, to fulfil my promise to that man now silent in his grave, it was my duty to protect her from the thousand and one wiles of those who would endeavour to profit by sex and inexperience.

Her early privations, her hard life in youth while her father was absent at sea, and those weary months of tramping the turnpikes of England, all had had their effect upon her. With her, love seemed to be scarcely a passion or a sentiment, but a dreamy enchantment, a reverie which a fairy spell dissolved or riveted at pleasure. So exquisitely delicate was her character, just as was her countenance, that it seemed as if a touch would profane it. Like a strain of sad, sweet music which comes floating by on the wings of night and silence, and which we rather feel than hear, like the exhalation of the violet dying even upon the sense it charms, like the snow-flake dissolved in air before it has caught a stain of earth, like the light surf severed from the billow which a breath disperses – such was her nature, so full of that modesty, grace and tenderness without which a woman is no woman.

As she stood there before me, a frail, delicate figure in her plain black gown, and her hand in mine, thanking me for the investigation which I was undertaking in her behalf, and wishing me *bon voyage*, I shuddered to think of her thrown alone amid harsh and adverse destinies, and amid all the corruptions and sharks of society, perhaps without energy to resist, or will to act, or strength to endure. Alone in such a case, the end must inevitably be desolation.

I wished her farewell, turning from her with a feeling that, loving her as I admit I did, I was nevertheless unworthy of her. Yet surely I was playing a dangerous game!

I had entertained a strong and increasing affection for her ever since that winter's night down at Helpstone. Still, now that she was possessor of vast wealth, I felt that the difference in our ages and the fact that I was a poor man were both barriers to our marriage. Indeed, she had never exerted any of the feminine wiles of flirtation towards me; she had never once allowed me to think that I had captivated her. She had spoken the truth. She regarded me as an elder brother – that was all.

That same night, as I paced the deck of the Channel steamer in the teeth of a wintry gale, watching the revolving light of Calais harbour growing more and more distinct, my thoughts were full of her. Love is the teacher, grief the tamer, and time the healer of the human heart. While the engines throbbed, the wind howled and the dark seas swirled past, I paced up and down puzzling over the playing-card in my pocket and reflecting upon all that had occurred. The rich fancies of unbowed youth, the visions of long-perished hopes, the shadows of unborn joys, the gay colourings of the dawn of existence – what ever my memory had treasured up, came before me in review, but lived no longer within my heart.

I recollected that truism of Rochefoucauld's: "Il est difficile de définir l'amour: ce qu'on en peut dire est que, dans l'âme, c'est un passion de regner; dans les esprits, c'est une sympathie; et dans le corps, ce n'est qu'une envie cachée et délicate de posséder ce que l'on aime, après beaucoup de mystères." Yes, I loved her with all my heart, with all my soul, but to me I recognised that it was not permitted. My duty, the duty I had promised to fulfil to that dying man whose life-story had been a secret romance, was to act as Mabel's protector, and not to become her lover and thus profit by her wealth. Blair had left his secret to me, in order, no doubt, to place me beyond the necessity of fortune-hunting, and as it had been lost it was my duty to him and to myself to spare no effort to recover it.

With these sentiments firmly established within my heart I entered the *wagon-lit* at Calais, and started on the first stage of my journey across Europe from the Channel to the Mediterranean.

Three days later I was strolling up the Via Tornabuoni, in Florence, that thoroughfare of mediaeval palaces, banks, consulates and chemists' shops that had been so familiar to me each winter, until I had taken to hunting in England in preference to the sunshine of the Lung' Arno and the Cascine. Indeed, some of my early years had been spent in Italy, and I had grown to love it, as every Englishman does. In that bright February morning as I passed up the long, crooked street, filled by the nonchalant Florentines and the wealthy foreigners out for an airing, I passed many men and women of my acquaintance. Doney's and Giacosa's, the favourite lounges of the men, were agog with rich idlers sipping cocktails or that seductive *petit verre* known in the Via Tornabuoni as a *piccolo*, the baskets of the flower-sellers gave a welcome touch of colour to the grim grey of the colossal Palace of the Strozzi, while from the consulates the flags of various nations, most conspicuous of all being that of the ever-popular "Major," reminded me that it was the *festà* of Santa Margherita.

In the old days, when I used to live *en pension* with a couple of Italian artillery officers and a Dutch art-student in the top floor of one of those great old palaces in the Via dei Banchi, the Via Tornabuoni used to be my morning walk, for there one meets everybody, the ladies shopping or going to the libraries, and the men gossiping on the kerb – a habit quickly acquired by every Englishman who takes up his abode in Italy.

It was astonishing, too, what a crowd of well-known faces I passed that morning – English peers and peeresses, Members of Parliament, financial magnates, City sharks, manufacturers, and tourists of every grade and of every nation.

His Highness the Count of Turin, returning from drill, rode by laughing with his aide-de-camp and saluting those he knew. The women mostly wore their smartest toilettes with fur, because a cold wind came up from the Arno, the scent of flowers was in the air, bright laughter and incessant chatter sounded everywhere, and the red-roofed old Lily City was alive with gaiety. Perhaps no city in all the world is so full of charm nor so full of contrasts as quaint old Florence, with her wonderful cathedral, her antique bridge with rows of jewellers' shops upon it, her magnificent churches, her ponderous palaces, and her dark, silent, mediaeval streets, little changed, some of them, since the days when they were trodden by Giotto and by Dante. Time has laid his hand lightly indeed upon the City of Flowers, but whenever he has done so he has altered it out of all recognition, and the garish modernity of certain streets and piazzas surely grates to-day upon those who, like myself, knew the old city before the Piazza Vittorio – always the Piazza Vittorio, synonym of vandalism – had been constructed, and the old Ghetto, picturesque if unclean, was still in existence.

Two men, both of them Italian, stopped to salute me as I walked, and to wish me *ben tornato*. One was an advocate whose wife was accredited one of the prettiest women in that city where, strangely enough, the most striking type of beauty is fair-haired. The other was the Cavaliere Alinari, secretary to the British Consul-General, or the "Major," as everybody speaks of him.

I had only arrived in Florence two hours before, and, after a wash at the *Savoy*, had gone forth with the object of cashing a cheque at French's, prior to commencing my inquiries.

Meeting Alinari, however, caused me to halt for a moment, and after he had expressed pleasure at my return, I asked —

"Do you, by any chance, happen to know any one by the name of Melandrini – Paolo Melandrini? His address is given me as Via San Cristofano, number eight."

He looked at me rather strangely with his sharp eyes, stroked his dark beard a moment, and replied in English, with a slight accent —

"The address does not sound very inviting, Mr Greenwood. I have not the pleasure of knowing the gentleman, but the Via San Cristofano is one of the poorest and worst streets in Florence, just behind Santa Croce from the Via Ghibellina. I should not advise you to enter that quarter at night. There are some very bad characters there."

"Well," I explained, "the fact is I have come down here expressly to ascertain some facts concerning this person."

"Then don't do it yourself," was my friend's strong advice. "Employ some one who is a Florentine. If it is a case of confidential inquiries, he will certainly be much more successful than you can ever be. The moment you set foot in that street it would be known in every tenement that an Inglese was asking questions. And," he added with a meaning smile, "they resent questions being asked in the Via San Cristofano."

Chapter Seven

The Mysterious Foreigner

I felt that his advice was good, and in further conversation over a *piccolo* at Giacosa's he suggested that I should employ a very shrewd but ugly little old man named Carlini, who sometimes made confidential inquiries on behalf of the Consulate.

An hour later the old man called at the *Savoy*, a bent, shuffling, white-headed old fellow, shabbily dressed, with a grey soft felt rather greasy hat stuck jauntily on the side of his head – a typical Florentine of the people. They called him “Babbo Carlini” in the markets, I afterwards learned, and cooks and servant-girls were fond of playing pranks upon him. Believed by every one to be a little childish, he fostered the idea because it gave him greater facilities in his secret inquiries, for he was regularly employed by the police in serious cases, and through his shrewdness many a criminal had been brought to justice.

In the privacy of my bedroom I explained in Italian the mission I wished him to execute for me.

“Si, signore,” was all he responded, and this at every pause I made.

His boots were sadly cracked and down at heel, and he was badly in want of clean linen, but from his handkerchief pocket there arose a small row of “toscani,” those long, thin, penny cigars so dear to the Italian palate.

“Recollect,” I impressed upon the old fellow, “you must, if possible, find a way of striking up an acquaintance with this individual, Paolo Melandrini, obtain from him all you can about himself, and arrange so that I have, as soon as possible, an opportunity of seeing him without being myself observed. This matter,” I added, “is strictly confidential, and I engage you for one week in my service at a wage of two hundred and fifty lire. Here are one hundred to pay your current expenses.”

He took the green banknotes in his claw-like hand, and with a muttered “Tanti grazie, signore,” transferred it to the inner pocket of his shabby jacket.

“You must on no account allow the man to suspect that any inquiry is being made concerning him. Mind that he knows nothing of any Englishman in Florence asking about him, or it will arouse his suspicions at once. Be very careful in all that you say and do, and report to me to-night. At what time shall I meet you?”

“Late,” the old fellow grunted. “He may be a working-man, and if so I shall not be able to see anything of him till evening. I'll call here at eleven o'clock to-night,” and then he shuffled out, leaving an odour of stale garlic and strong tobacco.

I began to wonder what the hotel people would think of me entertaining such a visitor, for the *Savoy* is one of the smartest in Florence, but my apprehensions were quickly dispelled, for as we passed out I heard the uniformed hall-porter exclaim in Italian —

“Hulloa, Babbo! Got a fresh job?”

To which the old fellow only grinned in satisfaction, and with another grunt passed out into the sunshine.

That day passed long and anxiously. I idled on the Ponte Vecchio and in the dim religious gloom of the Santissima Anunziata, in the afternoon making several calls upon friends I had known, and in the evening dining at Doney's in preference to the crowded *table-d'hôte* of English and Americans at the *Savoy*.

At eleven I awaited old Carlini in the hall of the hotel, and on his arrival took him anxiously in the lift up to my room.

“Well,” he commenced, speaking in his slightly-lisping Florentine tongue, “I have been pursuing inquiries all day, but have discovered very little. The individual you require appears to be a mystery.”

“I expected so,” was my reply. “What have you discovered regarding him?”

“They know him in Via San Cristofano. He has a small apartment on the third floor of number eight, which he only visits occasionally. The place is looked after by an old woman of eighty, whom I managed to question. Discovering that this Melandrini was absent and that a cloth was hanging from the window to dry, I presented myself as an agent of police to explain that the hanging out of a cloth was a contravention of the law and liable to a fine of two francs. I then obtained from her a few facts concerning her *padrone*. She told me all she knew, which did not amount to much. He had a habit of arriving suddenly, generally at evening, and staying there for one or two days, never emerging in the daytime. Where he lived at other times she did not know. Letters often came for him bearing an English stamp, and she kept them. Indeed, she showed me one that arrived ten days ago and is now awaiting him.”

Could it be from Blair, I wondered?

“What was the character of the handwriting on the envelope?” I inquired.

“An English hand – thick and heavy. Signore was spelt wrongly, I noticed.”

Blair’s hand was thick, for he generally wrote with a quill. I longed to examine it for myself.

“Then this old serving-woman has no idea of the individual’s address?”

“None whatever. He told her that if any one ever called for him to say that his movements are uncertain, and that any message must be left in writing.”

“What is the place like?”

“Poorly furnished, and very dirty and neglected. The old woman is nearly blind and very feeble.”

“Does she describe him as a gentleman?”

“I could not ask her for his description, but from inquiries in other quarters I learned that he was in all probability a person who was in trouble with the police, or something of that sort. A man who kept a wine-shop at the end of the street told me in confidence that about six months before, two men, evidently agents of police, had been very active in their inquiries concerning him. They had set a watch upon the house for a month, but he had not returned. He described him as, a middle-aged man with a beard, who was very reticent, who wore glasses, spoke with just a slight foreign accent, and who seldom entered any wine-shop and who scarcely ever passed the time of day with his neighbours. Yet he was evidently well off, for on several occasions, on hearing of distress among the families living in that street, he had surreptitiously visited them and dispensed charity to a no mean degree. Apparently it is this which has inspired respect, while, in addition, he seems to have purposely surrounded his identity by mystery.”

“With some object, no doubt,” I remarked.

“Certainly,” was the queer old man’s response. “All my inquiries tend to show he is a man of secrecy and that he is concealing his real identity.”

“It may be that he keeps those rooms merely as an address for letters,” I suggested.

“Do you know, signore, that is my own opinion?” he said. “He may live in another part of Florence for aught we know.”

“We must find out. Before I leave here it is imperative that I should know all about him, therefore I will assist you to watch for his return.”

Babbo shook his head and fingered his long cigar, which he was longing to smoke.

“No, signore. You must not appear in the Via San Cristofana. They would note your presence instantly. Leave all to me. I will employ an assistant, and we shall, I hope, before long be shadowing this mysterious individual.”

Recollecting that strange letter in Italian which I had secured from the dead man’s effects, I asked the old fellow if he knew any place called San Frediano – the place appointed for the meeting between the man now dead and the writer of the letter.

“Certainly,” was his reply. “There is the market of San Frediano behind the Carmine. And, of course, there is the Church of San Frediano in Lucca.”

“In Lucca!” I echoed. “Ah, but it is not Florence.”

Nevertheless, now I recollected, the letter distinctly appointed the hour of meeting “at vespers.” The place arranged was therefore most certainly a church.

“Do you know of any other Church of San Frediano?” I inquired.

“Only the one in Lucca.”

It was evident, then, that the meeting was to take place there on the 6th of March. If I did not ascertain any further facts concerning Paolo Melandrini in the meantime, I resolved to keep the appointment and watch who should be present.

I gave Carlini permission to smoke, and, seated in a low easy-chair, the old fellow soon filled my room with the strong fumes of his cheap cigar, at the same time relating to me in narrow details all that he had gathered in that Florentine slum.

The secret connexion between Burton Blair and this mysterious Italian was a problem I could not solve. There was evidently some strong motive why he should appoint him controller of Mabel’s fortune, yet it was all an utter enigma, just as much as the mysterious source from which the millionaire had obtained his vast wealth.

Whatever we discovered I knew that it must be some strange revelation. From the first moment I had met the wayfarer and his daughter, they had been surrounded by striking romance, which had now deepened, and become more inexplicable by the death of that bluff, hearty man with a secret.

I could not help strongly suspecting that the man Melandrini, whose movements were so mysterious and suspicious, had had some hand in filching from Blair that curious little possession of his which he had, in his will, bequeathed to my keeping. This was a strange fancy of mine, and one which, try how I would, I could not put aside. So erratic seemed the man’s movements that, for aught I knew, he might have been in England at the time of Blair’s death – if so, then the suspicion against him was gravely increased.

I was feverishly anxious to return to London, but unable yet to do so ere my inquiries were completed. A whole week went by, and Carlini, employing his son-in-law, a dark-haired young man of low class, as his assistant, kept vigilant watch upon the house both night and day, but to no avail. Paolo Melandrini did not appear to claim the letter from England that was awaiting him.

One evening by judiciously bribing the old servant with twenty francs, Carlini obtained the letter in question, and brought it for me to see. In the privacy of my room we boiled a kettle, steamed the flap of the envelope, and took out the sheet of notepaper it contained.

It was from Blair. Dated from Grosvenor Square eighteen days before, it was in English, and read as follows: —

“I will meet you if you really wish it. I will bring out the papers with me and trust in you to employ persons who know how to keep their mouths shut. My address in reply will be Mr John Marshall, Grand Hotel, Birmingham.

“*B.B.*”

The mystery increased. Why did Blair wish for the employment of persons who would remain silent? What was the nature of the work that was so very confidential?

Evidently Blair took every precaution in receiving communications from the Italian, causing him to address his letters in various names to various hotels whither he went to stay a night, and thus claim them.

Mabel had often told me of her father’s frequent absences from home, he sometimes being away a week or fortnight, or even three weeks, without leaving his address behind. His erratic movements were now accounted for.

Consumed by anxiety I waited day after day, spending hours on that maddening cipher on the playing-card, until, on the morning of the 6th of March, Carlini having been unsuccessful in Florence, I took him with me up to the old city of Lucca, which, travelling by way of Pistoja, we reached about two o’clock in the afternoon.

At the *Universo* I was given that enormous bedroom with the wonderful frescoes which was for so long occupied by Ruskin, and just before the Ave Maria clanged away over the hills and plains, I parted from Babbo and strolled tourist-wise into the magnificent old mediaeval church, the darkness of which was illuminated only by the candles burning at the side altars and the cluster before the statue of Our Lady.

Vespers were in progress, and the deathlike stillness of the great interior was only broken by the low murmuring of the bowed priest.

Only about a dozen persons were present, all of them being women – all save one, a man who, standing back in the shadow behind one of the huge circular columns, was waiting there in patience, while of the others all were kneeling.

Turning suddenly on hearing my light footstep upon the marble flags, I met him next second face to face.

I drew a quick breath, then stood rooted to the spot in blank and utter amazement.

The mystery was far greater than even I had imagined it to be. The truth that dawned upon me was staggering and utterly bewildering.

Chapter Eight

In which the Truth is Spoken

The fine old church, with its heavy gildings, its tawdry altars and its magnificent frescoes, was in such gloom that at first, on entering from the street, I could distinguish nothing plainly, but as soon as my eyes became accustomed to the light I saw within a few yards of me a countenance that was distinctly familiar, a face that caused me to pause in anxious breathlessness.

Standing there, behind those scattered kneeling women, with the faint, flickering light of the altar candles illuminating his face just sufficiently, the man's head was bowed in reverence and yet his dark, beady eyes seemed darting everywhere. By his features – those hard, rather sinister features and greyish scraggy beard that I had once before seen – I knew that he was the man who had made the secret appointment with Burton Blair, yet, contrary to my expectations, he was attired in the rough brown habit and rope girdle of a Capuchin lay brother, a silent, mournful figure as he stood with folded arms while the priest in his gorgeous vestments mumbled the prayers.

In that twilight a sepulchral chill fell upon my shoulders; the sweet smell of the incense in the darkness seemed to increase with that world of incredible magnificence, of solitude gloomily enchanted, of wealth strangely incongruous with the squalor and poverty in the piazza outside. Beyond that silent monk whose piercing mysterious eyes were fixed upon me so inquiringly were dark receding distances, traversed here and there by rainbow beams that fell from some great window, while far off a dim red light was suspended from the high, vaulted roof.

Those columns beside which I was standing rose straight to the roof, close and thick like high forest trees, testifying to the patient work of a whole generation of men all carved in living stone, all infinitely durable in spite of such rare delicacy and already transmitted to us from afar through the long-past centuries.

The monk, that man whose bearded face I had seen once before in England, had thrown himself upon his knees, and was mumbling to himself and fingering the huge rosary suspended from his girdle.

A woman dressed in black with the black *santuzza* of the Lucchesi over her head had entered noiselessly, and was prostrated a few feet from me. She held a miserable baby at her breast, a child but a few months old, in whose shrivelled little face there was already the stamp of death. She was praying ardently for him, as the tapers gradually diminished, the penny tapers she had placed before the humble picture of Sant' Antonio, this sorrowing creature. The contrast between the prodigious wealth around and the rags of the humble supplicant was overwhelming and cruel; between the persistent durability of those many thousand Saints draped in gold, and the frailty of that little being with no to-morrow.

The woman was still kneeling, her lips moving in obstinate and vain repetitions. She looked at me, her eyes full of desolation, divining a pity no doubt in mine; then she turned her gaze upon the hooded Capuchin, the hard-faced, bearded man who held the key to the secret of Burton Blair.

I stood behind the ponderous column, bowed but watchful. The poor woman, after a quick glance at the splendour around, turned her eyes more anxiously upon me – a stranger. Did I really think they would listen to her, those magnificent divinities?

Ah! I did not know if they would listen. In her place I would rather have carried the child to one of those wayside shrines where the Virgin of the *contadini* reigns. The Madonnas and Saints of Ghirlandajo and Civitali and Della Querica who inhabited that magnificent old church seemed somehow to be creatures of ceremony, hardened by secular pomp. Strange as it may seem, I could not imagine that they would occupy themselves with a poor old woman from the olive mill or with her deformed and dying child.

Vespers ended. The dark, murmuring figures rose, shuffling away over the marble floor towards the door, and as the lights were quickly extinguished, the woman and her child became swallowed up in the gloom.

I loitered, desiring that the Capuchin should pass me, in order that I could obtain a further view of him. Should I address him, or should I remain silent and set Babbo to watch him?

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