

FICTION

Louis Tracy

The Late Tenant

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

THE LATE TENANT

BY

GORDON HOLMES

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"THE ARNCLIFFE PUZZLE."



New York

Edward J. Clode

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The Late Tenant

CHAPTER I

A WHIFF OF VIOLETS

"I suppose one becomes used to this sort of thing in time," thought David Harcourt, as he peered through the dusty plate-glass windows of his third-floor flat. "At present I can appreciate the feelings of a Wyoming steer when he first experiences the restraint of a cattle-truck. Or am I a caged bird? or a menagerie ape? or a mere ass? There is something in the evolution theory, after all. Obviously, one of my respected ancestors is kicking."

Then, being a cheerful soul, he laughed, and turned from the outer prospect to face the coziness of his new abode. He did not understand yet that in No. 7, Eddystone Mansions, picked almost at haphazard from a house-agent's list, he had hit upon a residence singularly free from the sort of thing which induced this present fit of the blues. In the first place, owing to a suit in chancery, the "eligible" building-site opposite was vacant, and most of the windows of No. 7 commanded an open space. Secondly, the street itself did not connect two main thoroughfares; hence its quietude was seldom disturbed by vehicles. Thirdly, and, perhaps, most important of all, his neighbors, above, below, and on three sides, were people who had achieved by design what he had done by accident--they had taken up their abode in Eddystone Mansions on account of the peace thus secured in the heart of London.

For London has a stony heart with wooden arteries, through which the stream of life rushes noisily. To ears tuned by the far-flung silence of the prairie this din of traffic was thunderous. To eyes trained by the smooth horizon it was bewildering to see a clear sky overhead and a sun sinking slowly, like a dim Chinese fire-balloon, into a compound of smoke and chimneys. In fact, David Harcourt came to the conclusion that Londoners, as a race, must be purblind and somewhat deaf.

"I wonder if I can stand it?" he commented. "I saw a map of South Africa in a shop window to-day. It looked wonderfully attractive. Yes, I am beginning to believe there is neither claw nor feather in my composition. 'Kicking' is the right word--hoof--ass! Oh! the line of descent is clear." Then he laughed again, taking a box of cigars off the top of a bookcase, and any one who heard him laugh would have grasped the reason why men soon called him "Davie," and women smiled when he looked at them.

Dame Nature, aided by his less remote ancestors in the evolutionary tree, had been good to him. It would have needed the worst "environment" ever dreamed of by sociology to make him a degenerate. As it was, a healthy upbringing, a fair public-school education, and the chance that a relation of his owned a Wyoming ranch, joined in fashioning an excellent specimen of lusty and clean-souled young manhood. But that same general wet-nurse, who had intended David to lord it over herds and vast pastures, had complicated matters by throwing a literary kink into the deftly coiled strands of his composition. Thus, at the age of twenty-five, he took more interest in scribbling stories and searching for rimes than in toting up the proceeds of sales at Chicago stock-yards. Worse than that, having oft imagined and striven to depict various ethereal creatures typical of the Spirit of the Dawn, the Fairy of the Dell, or the Goddess of the Mist, he had refused, most emphatically, to wed the elderly rancher's daughter, his relative, a lady blessed with more wealth and weight than was necessary for any one woman in the world.

So, like many another youngster in the far lands, he heard the voice of London calling through every book and newspaper he read. It was a siren voice, devoid of accent. The Wyoming wooing, too, became a serious matter; hence, like one of the dove-eyed oxen he knew so well, he stampeded in sudden panic, realized his personal possessions, and, in the vernacular of Sioux Pass, "lit out for the nearest depot, an' boarded an east-bound train."

He had now been in England a month, in London a week. From the landing-stage at Liverpool he had gone to visit the country cousins who superintended his childhood and education after the death of his mother, that lady having been stricken down by the hand which killed her soldier husband at Dargai. He found the cousins snug in their Bedfordshire nest. The squire-like head of the household wondered dully why any man should quit a place where he could "get on" to seek a precarious livelihood in a land which was "rapidly going to the dogs." David certainly received more encouragement from the younger members of the family, especially from a bright-eyed maiden of eighteen, who thought London "awfully jolly," and vowed a literary career to be "quite too devey for anything."

But David was level-headed enough to see that the verdict of squire and maid were equally unfavorable.

Then followed a few days in a big hotel. He paid a round of useless calls at the offices of magazines that, to his certain knowledge, printed all sorts of rubbishy articles about cow-boy life, but opposed a phalanx of commissionaires against a man who could not only round up an infuriated herd, but could also describe the feat deftly with a pen. Ultimately, he resolved to lay siege to the citadel which he was unable to storm, and pitch his camp over against the tents of the enemy. He took a furnished flat, "with plate and linen, gas-stove, electric light, bath H. and C.," for six months.

In thus becoming a Londoner, he encountered the first quaint anomaly of London life. When he drove up to the door of the most fashionable hotel in the West End, and deposited a couple of portmanteaus in a bed-room after signing the register, he was permitted to run a bill for a week, at least, without let or hindrance; but when he offered to pay cash in advance for the flat, he met with a demand for "references."

The agent was firm but explanatory. "It is not my client, but the over-landlord, who makes that stipulation," he said. "In fact, the letting is wholly in my hands, as the late tenant is dead; but, for certain reasons, the residuary legatees wish to keep the place in its present condition until the lease expires a year hence."

"Did the late tenant die there?" asked David.

"Well--yes--fully five months since; there have been other occupants subsequently, and the terms are so reasonable--"

"What did he, or she, die of?" persisted David. He was accustomed to reading men's faces, and he had caught a certain fluttering of the agent's eyelids.

"Nothing to cause any alarm, nothing infectious, I assure you. People--er--die in flats just the same as--er--in private houses." This, being a joke, had its chuckle.

But the agent also knew men in his own way, and he felt it was unwise to wriggle. David had a steadfast glance. He gave others the impression that he heard and treasured each word they uttered. He was really wondering then why the speaker's neck was so long and thin--nothing more serious, but, with a disagreeable disclosure lurking in the other's mind, David's scrutiny compelled candor.

"The thing is bound to come to your ears sooner or later, Mr. Harcourt; so I may as well tell you now," said the Londoner. "The late tenant was a lady, a singer of much promise, it was said. For an unknown reason--probably some love affair was disturbing her rest--she--er--took an overdose of a sleeping-draft. She was a very charming woman, quite young, of highest character. It is inconceivable that she should have committed suicide. The affair was an accident, of course, but--er--"

"A sceptical coroner thought it a murder?"

"Oh, dear, no, nothing of the kind, not a hint of such a thing. Fact is--well, it sounds ridiculous to say with reference to a popular block of flats in the middle of London, but two foolish women--an excitable actress and her servant, your predecessors in the flat--have spread reports as to queer noises. Well, you know, don't you? the sort of nonsense women will talk."

"In plain English, they say the place is haunted."

"Ha, ha! Something in that nature. You have hit it! Something in that nature. Absurd thing!"

"Who knows?" David had a cold disbelief in spooks, but it amused him to see the agent squirm; and he sat tight. Those eyelids fluttered again, and Mr. Dibbin banged a ledger with wrathful fist.

"Look here, Mr. Harcourt," cried he finally. "This is a five-guineas-a-week flat. I'll make you a fair offer; take it for six months and I give it you at half price."

"I laying the ghost at two and a half guineas weekly?"

"Put it any way you like. If a man of sound common-sense like you lives there for a considerable period, the wretched affair will be forgotten; so it is worth the loss to me, and it is a first-class bargain for you."

"Done!" said David.

The agent was so pleased that his annoyance vanished; he promised to secure a woman whom he knew to look after the new tenant's housekeeping. She had probably never heard of the Eddystone Mansions tragedy. He would have her in the flat within four days. Meanwhile a charwoman might attend to things generally.

The references having proved satisfactory, David was now passing his first evening in his new abode. He had purchased some books and stationery; his charwoman had left him; and, when the door had closed behind her, he turned from the head of the dead girl in chalks over the mantelpiece to gaze out of the dining-room window, and back again to the sweet face in chalks, to return presently to the window.

It was a Thursday evening in the last week of January. The housekeeper was to arrive on Saturday. David fixed Monday as a good day to start work. In the interim he meant to loaf, dine at noteworthy restaurants, read, and go to theaters.

A man accustomed to guide his movements by the position of mountain-ranges or the stars, and count distances by his days on horseback, is likely to find himself all unhinged within a four-mile radius. David was in the novice stage of acquaintanceship with the magnetic life of the world's capital. Not yet did the roar of London sing in familiar harmonies; the crunch of the omnibuses, the jingle of the hansoms, made no music in his ears. There was something uncanny in the silence of the millions eddying through the streets. Where all else was clamor, mankind was dumb, save for the shouts of the newsboys, the jabber of bus-conductors, the cries of itinerant venders.

So David, having dressed and gone out, wandered into another restaurant than that which he was aiming for; dawdled over the meal until the first act of the play which he meant to see must have been ended; and decided then upon a music-hall; finally, he strolled back toward Eddystone Mansions as early as eleven.

The elevator, placed in the center of the building, ran from the basement floor; those who used it had to descend a few steps from the entrance and advance along a passage. Harcourt felt unaccountably tired--there is a strain of life in London as on the tops of mountains--so he chose the lift in preference to the stairs.

The hall-porter, who sat within the lift, pondering the entries for the Spring Handicaps, recognized him, and jumped up with a salute.

"Good-evenin', sir! Fine, frosty night, sir," said he. They began to ascend. A thought occurred to David. "What was the name of the lady who occupied No. 7?" he asked.

"Miss Ermyn L'Estrange, sir," was the instant answer.

Even in the wilds of Wyoming one grasps the significance of certain classes of names. For instance, not even the rawest tenderfoot would expect "One-eyed Pete" to turn out to be a parson.

"I mean the lady who died here," said David.

The porter stopped the lift. "Your floor, sir," he said. "I've only bin in these 'ere flats a matter o' two months, sir."

"Good egg!" cried David. "Have a cigar, porter. You are a man to be depended on. But surely there is no harm in telling me the poor girl's name. It must have appeared in all the newspapers."

The attendant tickled his head underneath his hat. The new tenant of No. 7 seemed a nice gentleman, anyhow. He looked up and down the stairs, of which two sections were visible from the landing where they stood.

"I 'ave 'eard," said he, "that a young lydy used ter live 'ere of the nyme of Miss Gwendoline Barnes."

"Ah, that sounds more like it. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

Harcourt, fumbling over the intricacies of the lock, heard the rattle of the lift as it reached the basement. On his landing were two doors, his own and that of No. 8; and light shone from his neighbor's dwelling. That was companionable. The stairs, too, were well lighted.

At last he gave the key the right pressure, and the latch yielded. He passed within and closed the door noiselessly. The electric switch governing the hall-lamp was on the wall beyond the short entrance-passage. He removed his overcoat and hat in the semi-darkness; the sheen coming through the corrugated-glass panels of the outer door did not so much as cast a shadow.

All at once he detected a fragrance of violets, faintly, but distinctly. This was puzzling! He knew that it was almost impossible for that scent to have been there earlier in the evening when he was at home, without being marked by him. Even now not one man in a thousand in London that night would have caught the subtle perfume; but David retained the hunter's senses. As he stood in suspense, a feeling peeped and grew up within him that the odor carried with it a suggestion of death; his muscles grew taut, ready to fight, to defend himself against this world or the next.

The next instant he smiled, thinking: "Nonsense! It must have been here before. Each time I came in I was smoking; the air is frosty, too."

He groped inward for the switch, turned on the light, and, without deigning to give another thought to the smell of violets, turned to the left along the main corridor, which was rectangular to the entrance-hall. Passing the drawing-room door, he entered the dining-room. Opposite the latter was the kitchen and servants' apartments. Around the other end of the main corridor were disposed three bed-rooms and a bath-room. The light he had turned on illuminated entrance and corridor alike.

In the dining-room he found the fire still burning. That was good. The coal-scuttle was not by the fireplace, but in a corner. He went to get a shovelful of coal; and as he stooped, again came to him the fragrance, thrilling, bringing with it a picture of a girl whom he had once seen lying in funereal state, surrounded by flowers, and clothed in the last white robes of earth.

David stabbed the coals with the shovel. "What's wrong with me?" he half laughed. Yet his eyes sought the crayon drawing of Gwendoline Barnes.

Presently he lit a cigar, unfolded an evening paper which he had bought in the streets, and tried to take an interest in the news of this new-old world into which he was new-born.

But his mind wandered. Without he heard the distant rumble of traffic; hansoms were beginning to arrive in the street beneath; he heard doors slam; the jingling of bells on head-stalls; feet pattering across the pavement; a driver's tongue-click, and away would jog a horse, to be stirred, perhaps, into sudden frenzy by two shrills of a far-off whistle.

A contrast, these sounds, to the twig-snapping and grass-rustling of a night on the plains! There, lying by the camp-fire embers, he had heard the coyote slinking past in the dark, while the tethered horses suspended their cropping to hearken. Here men and streets made a yet stranger wilderness. He sat over the hearth absorbed by it, already yielding his tribute to the greatness of the outer ocean of life.

But prairie or city, man must sleep. David rose and went to the sideboard for a decanter. A certain graceful slowness characterized his movements. Town-bred men might have been deceived thereby, might reason that he was lethargic, of strapping physique, certainly, yet a man who could be hit three times before he countered once. It is this error of judgment which leads to accidents when town-dwellers encounter the denizens of the jungle. Harcourt's hand was outstretched for the decanter when he became aware that he was not alone in the flat. The knowledge was derived from neither sight nor sound. It was intuitive, a species of feeling through space, an imperative consciousness that he shared his suite of apartments with another distinct, if intangible, being. Many men might not have had it, but Harcourt had it clearly.

Instantly he was rigid. This time he was weaving no fantasy round a whiff of violets. The sense of nearness to other presences is really inherent in man. Residence in settled communities dulls it, but in David Harcourt it was a living faculty. He stood motionless, waiting for some simple proof of his belief.

The door, veiled by a portiere, was not closed, but sufficiently closed to prevent any view of the corridor, which, otherwise, it commanded throughout. The flat was carpeted so thickly that movement was silenced. But David fancied that a woman's dress did brush somewhere against wall or floor. That was enough. He was about to spring forward and pull the door open to see, when he heard, or thought that he heard, the switch of the light outside click, as if it had been carefully raised. And on the instant, without hesitation, he pushed up the switch in the dining-room, and hid himself in darkness. There are wolves, too, in the London desert.

Now, like a bush-cat, he crept to the door, opened it, and peeped out. Certainly the light which he had left burning had been extinguished by some hand; the corridor was in darkness.

Nerves, as commonly understood, did not much enter into Harcourt's scheme of things. But his heart beat quicker. The speed of thought cannot be measured. Many questions, and one doubt, one question, flitted through his brain. He stood in deep gloom; near him, he was convinced, was something in the guise of woman. The face in chalks on the mantelpiece seemed to crowd the dark, the face of the woman who had been hovering on the verge of his consciousness ever since the agent had mentioned her to him.

CHAPTER II

A SIGNATURE WITH A FLOURISH

He was collected enough, though the blood was rather cool in his veins, and there was an odd sensitiveness at the roots of his hair. "Who is there?" he asked in a matter-of-fact voice.

There was no answer, and now he had a feeling that the presence was drawing nearer.

He was unarmed, of course. The inseparable six-shooter of the West lay at the bottom of a cabin-trunk in his bed-room. But his faculties were exerted to an extent hardly possible to men who have not lived close to wild nature. He conceived that his safety demanded the exercise not only of pluck, but of artifice. So he stepped softly to the corner by the entrance to the servants' apartments, and, standing there, sought a loose match in his waistcoat pocket, and held it against the wall, ready to light it at an instant's notice. He did not mean to sacrifice to any chivalric nonsense about sex the opening move in what might prove to be a game of life or death. The woman, or whatever it was, showed by her conduct that she was not there by some mischance capable of explanation; he would determine by her first move, by the first flash of light, how to deal with her; and, if there were others with her, her body would be his shield until he gained the outer door and staircase. And so he waited, with the alert patience of an Indian, poised on the very tip-toe of action.

But as time passed, and there was no further sign of life in the corridor, the situation became over trying. He formulated a fresh plan. Behind him lay the kitchen, with its fire-irons, and thither he ran, seized a poker, then rushing out again, had the corridor, the drawing-room, every room, alight. But he saw no one.

He searched each room with eager haste, but there was nothing out of the common to be discovered. The front door was closed as he had left it. He ran into the exterior lobby, and, keeping an eye on the exit, summoned the elevator. Up it came; but the porter, throwing open the doors, checked his ready salute in his alarm at the sight of "No. 7" facing him poker in hand.

"Have you seen a lady go out?" demanded David.

The man drew back, one hand on his lever and the other on a sliding trellis-work of iron.

"N-no, sir," he stammered.

"Don't be frightened," said David, sharply. "I want you to keep your wits. Some one has been in my flat--"

"Is that so, sir?"

"Where have you been during the last five minutes?"

"Down-stairs, sir."

"At the door?"

"No, sir, in the back, not five yards from the lift, sir." He thought it unnecessary to mention that he had been talking to the housemaid of No. 2, in the basement on her way to the post.

"So any one could have gone out without your knowledge?"

"If they went by the stairs, sir."

"Come in and help me to search my place again."

The porter hung back. The man's sheepish face was almost comical.

"Come, come," said David, "there isn't much to be afraid of now, but I tell you that some one put out the light in the corridor, and I am almost sure that I heard the stir of a woman's dress somewhere."

The lift-attendant's pallor increased.

"That's just it, sir," he murmured. "The others have heard it, too."

"Stuff!" said David, turning on his heel.

Few Britons can stand contempt. The porter followed him.

"That's a man," said David, and they entered the flat. Harcourt shut and bolted the door.

"Now," he said, "you mount guard in the passage, while I carry on the hunt."

He would have disturbed a mouse were it in hiding, so complete was his second scrutiny of every nook. At the end of a fruitless quest he gave the porter a whisky and soda.

"I'll tell you wot, sir," said the man, "there's more in this than meets the eye. Miss L'Estrange, she never saw anything, but she 'eard all sorts o' rummy noises, an' twiced she found that all 'er things 'ad bin rummided. An' it was no thief, neither. The maid, she acshully sawr the pore lydy. If I may s'y it in confidence, sir, and you wants ter be comfortable, there's No. 18 in the next block--"

"I have rented the place for six months, and I shall stay in it," said David. "Have another? No? Well, here is half a crown. Say nothing about to-night's adventure. I am going to bed."

"Lordy! Goin' ter sleep 'ere alone?" gasped his companion. "I wouldn't do it for a pension."

"Yet I am paying for the privilege. However, not a word, remember."

"Right you are, sir. 'Ope you'll 'ave a good night's rest, sir. I'll be in the lift for another 'arf hour, if you should 'appen to want me."

Left to himself, David bolted the outer door again, and returned to the dining-room. Obeying an impulse, he jotted down some notes of the occurrence, paying special heed to times and impressions. Then he went to bed, having locked his bed-room door and placed his revolver under his pillow. He imagined that he would remain awake many hours, but, tired and overwrought, he was soon asleep, to be aroused only by the news-agent's effort to stuff a morning paper into the letter-box. The charwoman was already in the flat, and the sun was shining through the drawn-thread pattern of the blinds.

"The air of London must be drugged," thought David, looking at his watch. "Asleep at half-past eight of a fine morning!"

Such early-morning reproaches mark the first stage of town life.

After breakfast he went to his bank. He had expended a good deal of money during the past month, but was well equipped in substantial, owned a comfortable home for six months--barring such experiences as those of the preceding night--and found at the bank a good balance to his credit.

"I will hold on until I have left two hundred pounds of my capital and earnings combined," he decided; "then I shall take the next mail steamer to some place where they raise stock."

He called at the agent's office.

"Nothing amiss, I hope?" said Mr. Dibbin.

"Nothing, whatever. I just happened in to get a few pointers about Miss Gwendoline Barnes."

Harcourt found that in London it was helpful to use Americanisms in his speech. People smiled and became attentive when new idioms tickled their metropolitan ears. But the mention of the dead tenant of No. 7 Eddystone Mansions froze Dibbin's smile.

"What about her? Poor lady! she might well be forgotten," he said.

"So soon? I suppose you knew her?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"Nice girl?"

The agent bent over some papers. He seemed to be unable to bear Harcourt's steady glance.

"She was exceedingly good-looking," he answered; "tall, elegant figure, head well poised, kind of a face you see in a Romney, high forehead, large eyes, small nose and mouth--sort of artist type."

"Wore a lot of lace about the throat?"

"What? You know that?"

"Oh, don't be startled," said Harcourt. "There is her head in chalks you know, over the mantelpiece--"

"Ah, true, true."

"I wonder if it was she or some other lady who was in my flat last night at half-past eleven."

Dibbin again started, stared at Harcourt, and groaned.

"If it distresses you, I will talk of something else," said Harcourt.

"Mr. Harcourt, you don't realize what this means to me. That block of buildings brings me an income. Any more talk of a ghost at No. 7 will cause dissatisfaction, and the proprietary company will employ another agency."

"Now, let us be reasonable. Even if I hold a seance every night, I shall stick to my contract without troubling a board of directors. I am that kind of man. But, meantime, you should help me with information."

Dibbin blinked, and dabbed his face with a handkerchief. "Ask me anything you like," he said.

"When did Miss Barnes die?"

"On July 28 of last year. She lived alone in the flat, employing a non-resident general servant. This woman left the flat at six o'clock on the previous evening. At half-past eight A. M. next day, when she tried to let herself in, the latch appeared to be locked. After some hours' delay, when nothing could be ascertained of Miss Barnes's movements, though she was due at a music-master's that morning and at a rehearsal in the afternoon, the door was forced, and it was discovered that the latch was not only locked but a lower bolt had been shot home, thus proving that the unhappy girl herself had taken this means of showing that her death was self-inflicted."

"Why do you say that, if a coroner's jury brought in a verdict of 'Death from Misadventure'?"

Mr. Dibbin's eyes shifted again slightly. "That was--er--what one calls--"

"I see. The verdict was virtually one of suicide?"

"It could not well be otherwise. She had purchased the sleeping-draft herself, but, unfortunately, fortified it with strychnine. How else could the precautions about the door be explained? That is the only means of egress. Each window is sixty feet from the ground."

"Did she rent the flat herself?"

"No. That is the only really mysterious circumstance about the affair. It was taken on a three years' agreement, and furnished for her, by a gentleman."

"Who was he?"

"No one knows. He paid cash in advance for everything."

David was surprised. "Say, Mr. Dibbin," he queried, "how about the 'references' upon which the over-landlord insisted in my case?"

"What are references worth, anyhow?" cried the agent, testily. "In this instance, when inquired into by the police, they were proved to be bogus. A bundle of bank-notes inspires confidence when you are a buyer, and propose to part with them forthwith."

"Surely suspicions were aroused?"

The agent coughed discreetly. "This is London, you know. Given a pretty girl, a singer, a minor actress, who leaves her home and lives alone in apartments exceedingly well furnished, what do people think? The man had sufficient reasons to remain unknown, and those reasons were strengthened ten-fold by the scandal of Miss Barnes's death. She left not even a scrap of paper to identify him, or herself, for that matter. All we had was his signature to the agreement. It is, I believe, a false name. Would you care to see it?"

"Yes," said David.

Dibbin took some papers from a pigeonhole. Among them David recognized the deed he had signed a few days earlier. A similar document was now spread before him. It bore the scrawl, "Johann Strauss," with the final S developed into an elaborate flourish.

"A foreigner," observed David.

"Possibly. The man spoke excellent English."

"Have you ever heard of Lombroso, Mr. Dibbin?"

"Lombroso? I have seen the name, somewhere in Soho, I think."

"Not the same," said David with due gravity. "The man I mean is an Italian criminologist of great note. He lays it down as a principle that a signature of that kind is a sign of moral degeneracy. Keep an eye on those among your clients who use such a flourish, Mr. Dibbin."

"Good gracious!" cried the agent, casting a glance at the well-stuffed letter-cases of his office. How many moral degenerates had left their sign manual there!

"Two more questions," went on Harcourt. "Where do Miss Barnes's relatives reside?"

"Her name was not Barnes," was the instant answer; "but I am pledged to secrecy in that regard. There is a mother, a most charming woman, and a sister, both certainly most charming ladies, of a family very highly respected. They did not discover the unhappy girl's death until she was long laid to rest--"

"Then, why is the flat still in the condition in which Miss Barnes inhabited it?"

"Ah, that is simple enough. Isn't the agreement valid for nearly a year yet? When that term expires, I shall dispose of the furniture and hand over the proceeds to the young lady's heirs-at-law, subject to direction, of course, in case the real lessee ever puts in a claim."

David strolled out into the crowded solitude of the streets, with a vague mind of Gwendoline Barnes and Johann Strauss, two misty personalities veiled under false names. But they so dwelt in his mind that he asked himself if he had fled from the pursuit of a living woman in far Wyoming to be haunted by a dead one in England? Like most strangers in London, he turned to the police for counsel, and told to an inspector on duty at a police-station his tale of the whiff of violets, of the extinguished light in his corridor, and of the real or fancied brush of a woman's skirt somewhere against wall or carpet. He was listened to with kindness, though, of course, without much faith. However, he learned from the inspector the address of the coroner's court where the inquest had probably been held; it was near by, and David's steps led him thither. There he asked some questions at haphazard, without picking up anything of fresh interest; unless it was that "Gwendoline Barnes" lay buried in Kensal Green cemetery.

It was now late in the afternoon. He strolled down Tottenham Court Road into Holborn, ate a deferred luncheon in Oxford-St., and started to saunter back home, shirking a theater matinee, which was irksome since it was the fixed thing on his program. But it struck him half-way home that his charwoman was gone, that the flat was lonely; he got into a cab, saying to the driver: "Kensal Green cemetery!"

Some electric lamps were a-flicker already in the streets. It was nearly the hour at which London roars loudest, when the city begins to pour out its hordes, and vans hurry to their bourne, with blocks in the traffic, and more haste, less speed. When he reached the cemetery the closing time was imminent.

A little snow lay among the graves, through which the grass-tufts showed, making a ground of black-and-white. Some few stars had ventured to peep from the wintry sky. A custodian supplied David with the formal information which he sought. The plot of ground had been bought in perpetuity; it was in a shaded place a good distance from the entrance; an Iona cross, erected by friends, marked the spot, bearing the one word, "Gwendoline."

"It is late, sir," said the man. But mighty is the power of the tip, even in cemeteries.

David walked down an avenue of the dead toward the little mound that covered the young actress. He was perhaps twenty yards from it when he heard and almost stopped at the sound of a sob not far away. He looked on this hand and on that, but could see no one. The place, with its silent populace, was more lonesome than the prairie; and a new sense had been steadily growing up in him since half-past eleven of the previous night--the sense of the "other world," of its possible reality and nearness. There was an odor here, strong enough to his keen nostrils, of flowers, especially of violets, and of the last end of mortal man, a blend of sweet and abhorrent which was to infect his mind for many a day. However, he did not hesitate, but, with slower steps, that made hardly a sound, turned a corner of the path, cleared a clump of trees which had blocked his view, and now saw the grave of Gwendoline, the cross, the chaplet of fresh violets at the foot of the cross, and over the cross a woman weeping.

Weeping bitterly, her face in her hands, she was standing, but her body was bent in grief, and she was all shaken with it, though little sound escaped that lonely passion of pity and heartbreak. Harcourt at once felt that he had invaded holy ground. He gave himself time to notice only that she was tall, cloaked wholly in black--and he turned, or half-turned, to retire.

But in his haste and embarrassment he let his stick fall from his hand; whereat the young woman started, and they

looked at each other.

In an instant Harcourt understood that she was the sister of her whose portrait stood on his mantelpiece; and he felt that he had never seen woman so lovely and gentle.

CHAPTER III

VIOLET

She looked at Harcourt with wide eyes, seeming frightened, in suspense, and ready to fly, because he did not know how his eyes devoured her.

"I am sorry--" he began, retiring a step.

"What do you want of me?" she asked, staring fixedly at him.

"Nothing," he said. "Don't be alarmed; I am merely here by chance."

"But why have you followed me?"

"No, I have not followed you, I assure you of that. I did not know that you were here, even. I beg you not to be alarmed--"

"Why, then, are you here?" she persisted.

"This is a public cemetery, you know. I came to see a grave, just as you have--"

"This grave?"

"How can you possibly guess that," he asked, "since you have never before seen me, and do not know who I am?"

"You stopped here, did you not?" she asked. "You stopped, and looked strangely at me."

"Certainly I looked at you," admitted Harcourt. "I did not realize that I looked 'strangely.' However, let me be frank. I did come to see your sister's grave."

"My sister!" said she, shrinking, as from the touch of a wound, "how do you know? what interest can you have strong enough to bring you?"

"Not such a very strong interest," he answered. "I am here merely to fill an idle hour, and because I happen to be occupying the flat in which your sister died. There is that link between her and me; she has moved in the same little home, looked from the same windows, slept in the same room, as I, poor girl."

She suddenly looked up from the ground, saying: "May I ask how long you have been there?"

"This is only the second day," he answered with a reassuring smile.

"Your interest in her has been sudden."

"But her crayon portrait is there over my dining-room mantelpiece, and it is an interesting one. The moment I saw you I understood that you are her sister."

"You must have known that she had a sister."

"Why, yes, I knew."

"Who told you that, pray?"

Her manner had now changed from one of alarm to one of resentment, of mistrust. Her questions leaped from her as from a judge eager to condemn.

"Surely it was no secret that she had a sister," he said. "The agent happened to mention it in speaking to me of the late tenant, as agents do."

"Ah, no doubt," she said half to herself. "You all are ready enough with explanations. Wise as serpents, if not harmless as doves."

The last words were spoken with a break in her voice and a look that went to Harcourt's heart. He understood that he was in the presence here of the strange, of a mind touched to wildness by a monstrous grief, and needing delicate handling.

"What I have told you is only the truth," he said gently.

"Ah, no doubt," she said again. "But did you know the history of the flat before you went into it?"

"Why, yes."

"Yet you went. What, then, was your motive?"

"Ah, now, come," said he. "I can see that you are on a wrong track, and I must try to set things right. Your sister has perhaps been badly treated by some one or more persons, and the notion has occurred to you that I may be one of them, or may have some knowledge even of one of them. But I have been in England only a month; I come from Wyoming, a place at the other end of creation. See if you can't catch a hint of an accent in my speech. I never saw your sister alive; I am quite a stranger in London. It is not nice to be mistrusted."

She thought this over gravely, then said with a moment's openness of heart: "Forgive me, if I give you pain unjustly"; but at once again she changed, muttering stubbornly to herself with a certain vindictiveness: "If I mistrust you, it is not for nothing. I suppose you are all about equally pitiless and deadly. There she lies, low enough, dead, undone--so young--Gwen! was there no pity, no help, not even God to direct, not even God?"

Again she covered her face, and was shaken with grief, while Harcourt, yearning, but not daring to stir a step toward her, stood in pain; till presently she looked up at him sharply with all the former suspiciousness, saying with here a sob and there a sob: "But, after all, words are only words. You can all talk, I dare say; yet you have not been able to give me any valid explanation."

"Of what?" he asked.

"Of your strange interest in this lady; of your presence here over her grave; of the fact that you chose to occupy the flat, knowing what you know of it. In my mind these are points against you."

He could not help smiling. "Let me reason with you," said he earnestly. "Remember that I am not the first person who has occupied the flat since the death of your sister. Did not a Miss L'Estrange have it before me? Well, my motive is precisely the same as hers--I wanted somewhere to live. You did not attribute to Miss L'Estrange any ulterior motive, I think? Then why attribute one to me?"

"I attribute nothing to any one," she sighed. "I merely ask for an explanation which you seem unable to give."

"Think, now! Have I not given it? I say that I wanted a flat and took this one. Don't mistrust me for nothing!"

"Oh, I keep a perfectly open mind. Till things are proved to me, I mistrust no one. But you make your excuses with rather too much earnestness to be convincing; for you would not care what I thought, if you had no motive."

"My motive is simply a desire to stand well with you," said David. "You won't punish me for that?"

Now for the first time she looked squarely at him, her eyes meditating gravely upon his face, as she said: "If you never knew my sister before, it was good of you to come to her grave. You do not look like one of the ruthless ones."

"No, I hope not. Thank you for saying that," said David, with his eyes on the ground. He was shy with women. Such a girl as this filled a shrine in his presence.

"And yet, who can ever tell?" she sighed, half to herself, with a weary drop of the hand. "The world seems so hopelessly given over to I don't know what. One would say that men were compounded of fraud and ill-will, so that one does not know whom to trust, nor even if there is any one to be trusted. You go into the flat without any motive apparently that you can give. You would never have managed it, if I had had my way!"

"Is it against your will that the flat has been let?" asked David.

"That is not your business, you know!" she said, quickly resentful of probing questions.

"I only asked," said he, "in order to tell you that if it was against your will, you have only to breathe a wish, and I shall find the means to leave it."

"Well, surely that is kindly said," she answered. "Forgive me, will you, if I seem unreasonable? Perhaps you do not know what grief is. I will tell you that it is against my will that the flat has been let. My mother's doing; she insisted because she suspected that I had a tendency to--be drawn toward the spot; she feared that I might--go there; and so it was let. But it is useless, I suppose, for you to give it up. They would only let it to some one else. And whoever was in it, I should have the same suspicions--"

That word! "Suspicions of what?" asked David. "I am so much in the dark as to what you mean! If you would explain yourself, then I might be able to help you. Will you let me help you?"

"God knows what the truth is," she said despondently, staring downward afresh, for, when David looked at her, her eyes fell. "They are all kind enough at first, no doubt, and their kindness ends here, where the grass grows, and the winds moan all night, Gwen. I do not know who or what you are, sir," she added, with that puzzling sharpness, "or what your motive may be; but--what have you done with my sister's papers?"

"Papers?" said David. "You surprise me. Are there any papers of your sister's in the flat?"

She looked keenly at him, with eyelids lowered, seeking to read his mind as though it was an open book.

"Who knows?" said she.

He recalled his harmless conversational dodge with Dibbin. He could have smiled at the thought; but he only answered: "Surely all her papers have been removed?"

"Who knows?" she said again, eying him keenly.

"Certainly, I have seen no papers!" he exclaimed.

"Well, you seem honest."

"I hope so."

"If you did happen to find any papers in the flat, they would not be your property, would they?"

"Of course not!"

"What would you do with them?"

"I should give them to you."

"God grant that you are honest!" she sighed. "But how would you find me?"

"If you give me your name and address--"

"My name is Violet Mordaunt," she said rapidly, as if venturing against some feeling of rashness. "My home is at Rigsworth in Warwickshire, near Kenilworth; but I am for the present in London, at--"

Before she could mention her London address they were both aware that a third person was with them. The light carpet of snow would not have deadened the newcomer's approach to David's ears, were it not that he was so absorbed in the words, the looks, the merest gestures of his companion. David heard the girl say; "Oh, Mr. Van Hupfeldt!" and a man walked past him to the grave with lifted hat. The man and Violet Mordaunt shook hands. It was now getting dark; but David could still see that the newcomer was an uncommonly handsome person, turned out with faultless elegance from his glossy beaver to the tip of his *verni* boots; of dark, sallow skin; and a black mustache as daintily curled as those mustaches which one sees in the costumers' windows. David stepped back a little, and stood awkwardly. Beside this West End dandy he felt that he was somewhat of a rough-rider, and, like most young men dowered with both brain and sinew, he fancied that women incline more readily to the trimly dressed popinjay of society. Yet Violet Mordaunt seemed anything but pleased at the interruption.

"I am come to look for you by the request of your mother," David heard the stranger say. "It was feared that you might be here, and I am to take you home, if you will do me the honor to come in my carriage."

"But I ought not to be tracked," said Violet, with the quick petulance which already was music for David.

"There is the question of tea and dinner," remarked Van Hupfeldt. "If a lady will not eat, she must expect to be plagued."

"I prefer to walk home."

"That couldn't be done; it is too far," said Van Hupfeldt. "Oh, come, come!" he went on pleadingly, with a fond gaze into her eyes.

A minute afterward they left the grave together. Van Hupfeldt, as he passed David on the path, frowned momentarily; Violet slightly inclined her head.

He looked after them, and admitted to himself that they made a handsome pair, tall, like children of the gods. But three yards away after they had passed him something fell from Violet--a card--whether by accident or design David did not know; but the thought that it might be by design sent a thrill through his frame. He picked it up. It had on it the address of a boarding-house in Porchester Gardens.

He was yet tingling with the hope of meeting her again when a custodian approached. "Must shut the gates, sir," he said.

And the clang of iron brought David back to the roadway and reality once more.



CHAPTER IV

"JOHANN STRAUSS"

On Monday morning David made the acquaintance of the *genus* "housekeeper," when the woman recommended by Dibbin arrived to take him in hand. He had thought that she would sleep in the place, and had rather looked forward to the human companionship, for nothing is more cut off from the world of the living than a flat, if one is alone in it, especially through the watches of the night. Surely, if there are ghosts in want of undisturbed house-room, every bachelor's flat must be haunted.

Mrs. Grover, the housekeeper, however, said that "sleeping in" was not the arrangement suggested to her by Dibbin, since there were "the children to be looked after." David, for his part, would not let it appear that he cared at all; so Mrs. Grover, a busy little fat woman, set to work making things rattle, on an understanding of "sleeping out" and freedom for church services o' Sunday.

This Monday was David's appointed day for beginning work. But he did not prosper very well. Plenty of paper, lots of ink, and a new gold pen make no Shakespeare. And it is always hard to begin, even when the mind does not wander. But Violet Mordaunt had brown eyes, so soft, so grave, as those that beam with pity over the dying. She was more beautiful than her sister, whose face, too, David could see through the back of his head. Also, Van Hupfeldt was undoubtedly a more elegant object for the eye of woman to rest upon than David Harcourt.

David wondered if Van Hupfeldt was engaged to Violet. He had certainly spoken to her at the grave with much tender gallantry of manner, as if something was understood between them. And since Violet's mother sent this man to seek her in his carriage, that must mean that they were on familiar terms; unless, indeed, the mother was pressingly anxious about Violet, could not go herself, and had no one else to win the young woman home from her sister's grave. Such questionings were the cause of long pauses between the writing of David's sentences. He was glad when something interrupted--when the bell rang, and Dibbin was ushered in.

"I have looked in for one minute on the subject of that--grate," said the agent. "Do not disturb yourself, I beg. Well, I see that Mrs. Grover is duly in her place, and you as snug here as a bird in its nest."

"So snug," said David, "that I feel stifled. It beats me how people can get so accustomed to this sort of prison as not even to remember any longer that they are in prison. No air, no room to stretch, coal-dust in your very soul, and even at night in your bed!"

"Dash it all, don't say it."

"Say what?"

"Were you about to refer to any fresh experiences?"

"Of the ghost? Not a bit of it!" said David. "I have seen, heard, or smelled nothing more of anything."

"Good, good!" went on Dibbin, softly. "Keep on like that, and we shall pull through yet. I find you are well stocked with violets, meantime."

David laughed a little uneasily, and said "Yes"--no more. Whiffs of violets in a lonely flat, for which one can't account, are not altogether pleasant things. David had therefore surrounded himself with violets, in order, when he was greeted with a scent of violets, to be able to say to himself that the scent came from those which he had bought. He had not admitted even to himself what his motive was in buying; nor would he admit it to Mr. Dibbin. There, however, the violets were in several pots, and their fragrance at once drew the notice of a visitor, for the London florist has an art to heighten dull nature in violets and much else.

"Have a seat, Mr. Dibbin," said David, "and let us talk."

"I am afraid I must be off," began the other.

"Well, have a B. and S. any way. I only want to hear from you whatever you can tell me of Mrs. and Miss Violet Mordaunt."

"What? You have discovered their names?" cried Dibbin with a start.

"I have."

"Mr. Harcourt, you are a remarkable man," said the agent with quiet certainty.

"Oh, not too remarkable. But since I do know something, you might let yourself loose as to the rest, as I am interested. You have seen the mother, I know. Have you seen the daughter, too?"

"Several times."

"Pretty girl, eh? Or what do you think?"

"Well, I am getting an old man now," said Dibbin; "but I have been young, and I think I can remember how I should have felt at twenty-five in the presence of such a being."

"Pretty, you think her, eh?"

"Rather!"

"Prettier than Gwendoline? Prettier than her sister?"

"Well, I don't know so much about that neither--different type--graver, softer in the eye and hair, taller, darker, not so young; but that poor dead girl was something to make the mouth water, too, sir--such a cut diamond! to see her in her full war-paint, turned out like a daisy!--in short, lovely beings, both of 'em, both of 'em."

"Fairly well fixed, the mother?"

"You mean financially? Oh, I think so. Got a fine place down in Warwickshire, I know--not far from Kenilworth. Good old family, and that sort of thing."

"But how on earth this man Strauss, more or less an adventurer, I take it, could have got hold of such a girl, to the extent of drawing her from her happy home, and sending her on the stage. He didn't marry her, Dibbin? He didn't marry her?"

"How can I say?" asked Dibbin, blinking. "We can all make a shrewd guess; but one can't be absolutely certain, though the fact of her suicide would seem to be a sort of proof."

"What do the mother and Miss Mordaunt think of it? Do they assume that she was married? Or do they know enough of the world to guess that she was not? I suppose you don't know."

"They know what the world thinks, I'm afraid," answered Dibbin. "I am sure of that much. Yes, they know, they know. I have been with Mrs. Mordaunt a good many times, for one reason or another. I can tell how she feels, and I'm afraid that she not only guesses what the world thinks, but agrees with the world's view. On the other hand, I have reason to think that Miss Mordaunt has an obstinate faith in her sister, and neither believes that she died unmarried, nor even that she committed suicide. Well, well, you can't expect much clear reasoning from a poor sister with a head half turned with grief."

Dibbin tossed off his brandy, while David paced the room, his hands behind him, with a clouded brow.

"Have they no protector, these women?" he asked. "Isn't Miss Mordaunt engaged?"

"I fancy not," said the agent. "In fact, I think I can say undoubtedly not. She was not engaged before the death of her sister, I am certain; and this disaster of her sister appears to have inspired the poor girl with such a detestation of the whole male sex--"

"Do you happen to know who a certain Mr. Van Hupfeldt is?" asked David.

"Van Hupfeldt, Van Hupfeldt? No, never heard of him. What of him?"

"He seems to be a pretty close friend of the Mordaunts, if I am right."

"He may be a close friend, and yet a new one," said Dibbin, "as sometimes happens. Never heard of him, although I thought that I knew the names of most of Mrs. Mordaunt's connections, either through herself or her solicitors."

"But to go back to this Strauss," said David. "Do you mean to say that neither the mother nor Miss Mordaunt ever once saw him?"

"Not once that they know of."

"Then, how did he get hold of Gwendoline?"

"That's the question. It is suspected that he met her in the hunting-field, persuaded her to meet him secretly, and finally

won her to fly from home. To me this is quite credible; for I've seen Johann Strauss twice, and each time have been struck with the thought how fascinating this man must be in the eyes of a young woman!"

"What was he like, then, this Mr. Johann Strauss of the flourishy signature?"

"A most handsome young man," said Mr. Dibbin, impressively; "hard to describe exactly. Came from the States, I think, or had lived there--had just a touch of the talk, perhaps--of Dutch extraction, I take it. Handsome fellow, handsome fellow; the kind of man girls throw themselves over precipices after: teeth flashing between the wings of his black mustache--tall, thin man, always most elegantly dressed--dark skin--sallow--"

At that word "sallow," David started, the description of Johann Strauss had so strangely reminded him of Van Hupfeldt! But the thought that the cause of the one sister's undoing should be friendly with the other sister, paying his court to her over the grave of the ill-fated dead, was too wild to find for itself a place all at once in the mind.

David frowned down the notion of such a horror. He told himself that it was dark when he had seen Van Hupfeldt, that there were many tall men with white teeth and black mustaches, and sallow, dark skins. If he had felt some sort of antipathy to Van Hupfeldt at first sight, this was no proof of evil in Van Hupfeldt's nature, but a proof only, perhaps, of David's capabilities of being jealous of one more favored than himself by nature as he fancied--and by Violet Mordaunt, which was the notion that rankled.

And yet he tingled. Dibbin had said that this Van Hupfeldt might be "a new friend--one who had become a friend since the death of Gwendoline."

David paced the room with slow steps, and while Dibbin talked on of one or another of the people who had known Gwendoline Mordaunt in the flesh, vowed to himself that he would take this matter on his shoulders and see it through.

"Speaking of the Miss L'Estrange who was in the flat before me," said he; "how long did she stay in it?"

"Three months, nearly," answered Dibbin, "and then all of a sudden she wouldn't stay another day. And I had no means of forcing her to do so either."

"What? Did the ghost suddenly get worse?"

"I couldn't quite tell you what happened. Miss Emyrn L'Estrange isn't a lady altogether easy to understand when in an excited condition. Suffice it to say, she wouldn't stay another hour, and went off with a noise like a catherine-wheel."

"Quite so. But I say, Dibbin, can you give me the address of the lady?"

"With pleasure," said the agent, in whom brandy and soda acted as a solvent. "I am a man, Mr. Harcourt, with three hundred and odd addresses in my head, I do assure you. But, then, Miss L'Estrange is a bird of passage--"

"All right, just write down the address that you know; and there is one other address that I want, Mr. Dibbin--that of the girl who acted as help to Miss Gwendoline Mordaunt."

Dibbin had known this address also, and with the promise to see if he could find it among his papers--for it was he who had recommended the girl--went away. He was hardly gone when Harcourt, who did not let the grass grow under his feet, put on hat and coat, and started out to call upon Miss Emyrn L'Estrange.

CHAPTER V

VON OR VAN?

The address of Miss L'Estrange, given to David by Dibbin, was in King's Road, Chelsea, and thither David set out, thinking in his cab of that word "papers," of the oddness of Violet's question at the grave: "What have you done with my sister's papers?"

Whatever papers might be meant, it was hardly to be supposed that Miss L'Estrange knew aught of them, yet he hoped for information from her, since a tenant next in order is always likely to have gathered many bits of knowledge about the former tenant.

As for his right to pry and interfere, that, he assured himself, was a settled thing. Going over in his mind Violet's words and manner in the cemetery, he came to the conclusion that she was half inclined to suspect that he was her sister's destroyer, who had now taken the flat for some vaguely evil reason, perhaps to seek, or to guard from her, those very papers for which she so craved. Had she never heard, he wondered, that her sister's evil mate was a man with a black mustache and pale, dark skin? Perhaps, if she ever had, she would suspect--some one else than he! That would be strange enough, her suspicion of the innocent, if at the same time the guilty was at her side, unsuspected! But David tried to banish from his mind the notion that Van Hupfeldt might possibly be Johann Strauss.

At Chelsea he was admitted to a flat as cozily dim as his own, but much more frivolously crowded with knickknacks; nor had he long to wait until Miss L'Estrange, all hair and paint, dashed in. It was near one in the afternoon, but she had an early-morning look of rawness and *deshabillement*, as if she had just risen from bed. Her toilet was incomplete. Her face had the crude look of a water-color daub by a school-girl; her whirl of red hair swept like a turban about her head.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

"I am sorry--" began David.

"Cut the excuses," said Miss Emyrn L'Estrange. She had a reputation for brusqueness which passed for wit in her set.

"I am the occupant of the flat in Eddystone Mansions which you recently left."

"I hope you like it."

"I like it fairly well, as a flat."

"What? Not seen anything?"

"No. Anything of what nature?"

"Anything ghostified?" she snapped, sitting with her chin on her palm, her face poked forward close to David's, while the sleeve fell away from her thin forearm. She had decided that he was an interesting young man.

"I have seen no ghost," he said. "I don't believe I ever shall see one."

"There are ghosts," she said; "so it's no good saying there are not, for my old Granny Price has been chased by one, and there's been a ghost in that very flat. My servant Jenny saw it with her own eyes."

"It is always some one else's eyes which see the invisible," said David.

"Jenny's eyes are not some one else's, they are her own. She saw it, I tell you, but perhaps you are one of those people who cower under the sheets all night for fright, and in the daytime swear that there are no ghosts."

"What? You know so much of me already?"

"Oh, I know my man the moment I lay eyes on him, as a rule. You're from Australia--I can tell your twang--and you have come to England to look for a wife. Can't very well get along without us, after all, can you?"

"There is some truth in that. What a pity you didn't see the ghost yourself!"

"I heard it; I smelled it."

"Really? What did it smell of? Brimstone?"

"Violets!"

David started, not wholly because he thought Miss L'Estrange would be flattered by this tribute to her forcible style.

"And I'm not one of your fanciful ones either," she went on, smirking at the effect she had made.

"How often did this thing happen to you?"

"Twice in three months."

"Daytime? Night-time?"

"Dead of night. The first time about two in the morning, the second time about three."

"To me this is naturally fascinating," said David. "Do tell me--"

"The first time, I was asleep in that front bed-room, when I suddenly found myself awake--couldn't tell why, for I hadn't long been in bed, and was tired. I found myself listening, heard some creaks about, nothing more than you can generally hear in a house in the dead of night, and I was thinking of going to sleep again, when all at once I seemed to scent violets somewhere. I wasn't certain at first, but the notion grew, and if it had been brimstone, as you said, I couldn't have been so overcome as I was--something so solemn and deathly in that fume of violets visiting anybody in the dark in that fashion. As I knew that Gwen Barnes, who poisoned herself in that very room, was fond of violets--for I had seen her both on and off the stage several times--you can guess whether I felt rummy or not. Pop went my little head under the bed-clothes, for I'll stand up to any living girl you care to mention, and send her home all the worse for it; but the dead have an unfair advantage, anyhow. The next minute I heard a bang--it sounded to me like the lid of one of my trunks dropping down--and this was followed by a scream. The scream did for me--I was upset for weeks. It was Jenny who had screamed; but, like a fool, I thought it was the ghost--I don't know what I thought; in fact, I just heard the scream, and lay me down and d'eed. When I came to myself, there was Jenny shivering at my side, with the light turned on, saying that a tall woman had been in the flat--"

"Was Gwendoline Barnes in the flesh a tall girl?" asked David.

"Pretty tall; one would have called her tall."

"And Jenny was certain? She had really seen a woman?"

"Quite certain."

"In the light?"

"No, in the dark."

"Ah, that's not so good. And as to your trunk, had you left it locked?"

"No, I don't think. It's certain anyway that something or somebody was at it that night; for next day I found the things rummaged."

"Sure now? I don't imagine that you are very tidy."

"The cheek! I tell you the things were rummaged."

"And nothing stolen?"

"Ghosts are not thieves. They only come back to pretend to themselves that they are still living in the old scenes, and that their bit of a fling is not all over forever. I can well imagine how the poor things feel, can't you? Of course, nothing was stolen, though I did miss something out of the trunk a day or two afterward--"

"What was that?"

"My agreement with the theater. Couldn't find it high or low in the place; though I was pretty sure that I had put it into that very trunk. Three weeks after it had disappeared, lo and behold! my agreement comes to me one morning through the post! No letter with it, not a word of explanation, just the blessed agreement of itself staring me in the face, like a miracle. Now, I'm rather off miracles--aren't you? So I said to myself--"

"But stay, what was the postmark on the envelope which brought you back this agreement?" asked David.

"Just London, and a six-barred gate."

"You couldn't perhaps find that envelope now?"

"Now, do I look like anybody who ties up old envelopes in packets? Or do you take me for an old maid? Because, if you do, just let me know."

"Certainly not an old one," said David. "But how as to the second visit of the ghost?"

"The second time it was about three in the morning. Jenny did not see her then; but we both woke up at the same moment without any apparent cause--we were sleeping together, you may bet your last dollar on that!--and we both smelled something like violets, and we heard a sound, too, like the top of the piano being shut down. 'Miss L'Estrange,' Jenny whispered into my ear, 'there's something in the drawing-room.'--'Go, Jenny,' I whispered to her, 'and see what it is.'--'You go, Miss L'Estrange,' Jenny whispered to me, 'you being the mistress; and I'll come after.'--'But you are the servant,' I whispered to her, 'you go.'--'No, Miss L'Estrange,' she whispered back, 'you are braver than me, you go, and I'll come after.'--'No, you know that you are much the bravest, Jenny, so don't be such a coward,' I whispered to her, 'and I'll come after.' It was like a farcical comedy. At this we heard something like a chair falling upon the carpet in the drawing-room, and now we were in such a state of fright that we couldn't move our hands, to say nothing of our feet. Then a long time passed, we didn't hear anything more; so, after about half an hour of it, Jenny and I together made a rush for the switch, and got out into the drawing-room. Then again we scented a faint something like violets; but nobody was there, and we neither saw nor heard anything more."

"So, after that second experience, I suppose, you would stay no longer in the flat?" said David.

"I did stay a few days. It wasn't altogether the ghost that drove me away, though that may have had something to do with it, but the cheek and the meanness of the man who put me there."

"Of the--Ah, I beg pardon," said David, with lowered lids.

"Oh, this isn't a Sunday school. If you hem and haw at me I shall show you the short cut to the front door. It was a fair business arrangement; so don't you think anything else. The man was named Strauss, and whether his motive in putting me there was quite square or not, don't let him suppose that I am going to screen him, for I'm not. I am straight with those that are straight with me; but those that are up to mean tricks, let them beware of the color of my hair--"

"So you were put into the flat!"

"Didn't I go into it rent-free? Stop, I will tell you, and you shall judge for yourself whether I have been shabbily used or not. One night last August I was introduced by a friend to a gentleman named Strauss--dark, pale man, pretty fetching, but not my style. However, next day he turned up at my place--I was living then in Great Titchfield-St.; and what do you think my man wanted? To put me into the Eddystone Mansions flat for six months at his expense, on the condition that I or Jenny would devote some time every day to searching for papers among the furniture. He said that a chum of his had once occupied the flat, and had left in it one or more documents, carefully hidden somewhere, which were of the utmost importance; I was to search for these, and give them to him. Well, I didn't half like it, for I thought he was wicked. So I asked him why he didn't take the flat, and search for the papers himself at his leisure? Well, he made some excuse or other, and at last, as he talked sanely enough, I struck hands over it--rent free, six months, an hour's search each day; and Jenny and I moved in."

"Did you search an hour each day?" asked David with a laugh.

"Hardly likely!" grinned Miss Ermyn L'Estrange. "I can see myself searching a small flat day after day for I didn't know what, like a goose. There was nowhere to search. I did look about a little the first day; but, not finding any documents, I thought to myself, 'Here endeth.' Of course, I had to tell him that I was busy searching, for that man pestered me so, you wouldn't believe. He never actually came to the flat, for some reason or other; but night after night, when the theaters opened in September, there he was, wanting to know if I had found anything, if I had probed the cushions with hat-pins, if I had looked under the carpets, and the rest of it. At last I began to treat him a bit off-handedly, I admit, and before the third month was up, he says to me one night that if I didn't find something at once, he would have to cut off the allowance for the rent. I told him that he had put me there for six months, that I had made all arrangements, and that he was an idiot. If he didn't know his mind, I knew mine. Oh, we had a fine set-to, I can tell you. He said that, since I had proved useless to him, I should have to pay my own rent, so, what with ghosts and all, I wouldn't stay in the place another two days; and in going I gave it hot to that Mr. Dibbin, too--"

"What had Dibbin done?" asked David.

"He hadn't done anything; but still I gave him a piece of my mind, for I was wild."

"Poor Dibbin! he is still shaky from it. He has mentioned to me that you went off with a noise like a catherine-wheel. But you never found any papers at all in the flat?"

"No--except one, or rather two, and those Strauss never got."

"How was that?"

"Because I didn't find them till the day after we had had the row, when my trunks were ready packed to go, and I wasn't going to give them to him then, for his cheek. Besides, they didn't concern him; they were only a marriage certificate, and the certificate of a birth which fell out of a picture."

David sat up, saying: "How do you mean, 'fell out of a picture'?"

"As we were carrying out the trunks, there was a bump, and one of the pictures in the corridor came down. The boards at the back of it must have been loose, for they fell out, and among them was an envelope with the two certificates in it."

"Now, I bless my stars that ever I came to you," said David. "This may be the very thing I want."

"How many of you are after papers in that flat, I should like to know. First there was Strauss, then that young lady, and now you--"

"Which young lady?" asked David.

"Why, I hadn't been in the flat three days when a young lady, a tall, dark girl came, and practically insulted me. She wanted to know what was my motive for coming into the flat, and if I was the agent of any one, and if I meant to purloin any papers which I might find. Well, I'm not one for taking much sauce from another woman; for I've got red hair, as you can see for yourself, but somehow I couldn't be hard on her, she had had some big trouble, I could tell--a bit touched somewhere, too, I thought, suspicious as a bird, sick at the very name of Strauss! She had dropped to it all right that I was there to serve Strauss's ends, and she went on her bended knees to me, asking me not to do it. I couldn't quite make out what it was all about, or what there was between her and Strauss, for she wouldn't tell me. It was something pretty strong, for when I told Strauss about her visit, I thought the man was going to drop dead. Her name was Violet Mordaunt. I remember it; for Mordaunt was also the family name of the woman in the marriage certificate--"

"Why did you not send this marriage certificate to Violet Mordaunt?" asked David, "since you did not give it to Strauss?"

"I would have sent it to her, I'm sure, but I didn't have her address. She did leave me an address that day she came; but, to tell the truth, I didn't take the whole to-do about papers, papers, papers, seriously, and Lord knows what became of the address--"

"Oh, good heavens, how selfish and careless!" groaned David.

"Look here, young man, you come from Australia?" cried Miss L'Estrange, bouncing up from her chair. "In London people look after themselves and mind their own business, you see. We are as kind-hearted here as they are anywhere else, but we haven't the same leisure to be kind. I tell you that if I had had the young lady's address I should very likely have sent her the papers; but I didn't, and that's all; so don't preach."

"Well, better late than never," said David. "Just give me the papers now, if you will, for I know her address--"

"But where are the papers?" said Miss L'Estrange. "You don't suppose that I keep papers--"

"Don't say that you have lost them!" pleaded David.

"I haven't the faintest idea where the papers are! I was in a regular flurry, just moving out of the place; I had no interest in the papers. I glanced at them to see what they were, and, as far as I can remember, I threw them on the floor, or handed them to Jenny. It's just possible that they are here now; but I shouldn't fancy so. I'll ask Jenny when she comes in."

"Ah, you little know how much misery you might have saved a poor girl, if you had been a little more thoughtful," growled David, and his wrath seemed to cow the woman somewhat. "This name of Mordaunt was the maiden name of your predecessor in the flat, who took the name of Gwendoline Barnes; Violet Mordaunt is her sister; Gwendoline is believed by all the world, including her own mother, to have been led astray, and the certificates which you handled so lightly would have cleared her name and lifted a world of grief from her poor sister's heart."

"Good Lord! How was I to know all that?" shrilled Miss L'Estrange, staring. "So it was Strauss that ruined Gwen Barnes? And this Violet Mordaunt was Gwen Barnes's sister? Now you say it, they were something alike. I always put down that Strauss for a rotter--"

"But why, since he married her?"

"Married whom? Strauss wasn't the husband's name on the marriage-certificate! Gwendoline Mordaunt was one, and the other, as far as I can recollect, was a foreign name, von Somebody or other--"

"Von!" David also sprang to his feet. "Are you sure? or might it have been 'van'? Oh, try now to remember! One is German, the other Dutch!"

"It might have been 'van,' or it might have been 'von'--you can't expect one to remember after all these names. But I remember the woman's name, Gwendoline Mordaunt, quite well, because the Gwendoline reminded me of Gwen Barnes, and the Mordaunt reminded me of Miss Violet Mordaunt; and the husband's name, I know, was von or van Something, and so was the name of the child--a boy it was--I think its name was Henry--"

"Hupfeldt?" suggested David, suddenly.

"Hupfeldt? It might have been Hupfeldt. I really can't say now. I'll ask Jenny."

"At any rate," said David, calming himself with a great effort, "we have that certain fact that Gwendoline Mordaunt was a wife. Good, to begin; most excellent, to begin. You can't say where the marriage took place? No other information at all."

"I'm sorry, since it is so mighty important, but I'm afraid not. However, I'll do my best for you. I'll see if I or Jenny can remember anything. When we left the flat, there was a great overflowing with my torn-up letters, and Jenny may have thrown the certificates on that grate, or the bits of them, or she may have dropped them on the floor, or, just possibly, she put them in her pocket and may have them still. She will be here in less than half an hour, so, if I may offer you a cigar, and a whisky and soda--"

"You are very good. I won't stay now, as I am in a hurry to do something. But, if I may come back--may I?"

"Modest request! As often as you please, and welcome. This is Liberty Hall, you know."

"Thank you, I will, then. There is one thing I have to ask you. Could you point out to me Mr. Johann Strauss?"

"Of course, if I saw him. But I never knew where he lived, and have never seen him since the day I left the flat."

"Well, that may come in time," said David, putting out his hand; "and meantime you will do your best for me in finding out about the two certificates. Thank you for all your goodness, and I will be here again soon."

"Good-by," said Miss L'Estrange, "and I do hope you mean to give that Strauss a sound hiding some day. You look as if you could do it with one hand and pick your teeth with the other. It would be no more than he deserves."

David ran down the flight after flight of stairs quicker than he had gone up.

"Now," he thought to himself as he left the building with eager steps, "is my chance to give some joy!" Going into the first paper-shop, he wrote: "A well-wisher of Miss Mordaunt desires to assure her that it is a pretty certain thing that her sister Gwendoline was a duly wedded wife; the proofs of this statement may sooner or later be forthcoming."

He put no signature to it, made haste to post it, and drove back to Eddystone Mansions. It had been wiser had he flattered Miss Ermyn L'Estrange by returning to her.

CHAPTER VI

THE WORD OF JOY

Not many guests were for the moment at No. 60A, Porchester Gardens, so that the Mordaunts, mother and daughter, who always stopped there during their visits to London, could almost persuade themselves that they were in their own home. In the good old days Mr. and Mrs. Harrod, the proprietors, had been accustomed to receive three Mordaunts to their hospitality, when Gwen, the bright and petted, came with Violet and Mrs. Mordaunt. Only two now visited London, a grayer mother, a dumber sister; and though the Harrods asked no questions, made no prying into the heart's secret, nor uttered any word of sympathy, they well divined that the feet of the angel of sorrow had passed that way, and expressed their pity silently by a hundred little ministries.

Violet and Mrs. Mordaunt were having tea in the drawing-room on the day of David Harcourt's visit to Miss L'Estrange, when the postman's knock sounded, and a minute later Mrs. Harrod herself came in, saying:

"A letter for Miss Violet, and it contains good news; for I dreamt of soldiers last night, and so sure as I dream of soldiers, so sure are there letters with good news."

"The good news will all be in the other people's letters, I'm afraid," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "Good news is like wealth, Mrs. Harrod, unequally divided; to some of us it never comes."

"Oh, come now!" cried the hearty Mrs. Harrod. "Never say die, say I! There's good and bad in store for everybody; and care killed a cat, after all. Don't I tell you I dreamt of soldiers? And so sure--"

"It is that good heart of yours which makes you dream of soldiers. To bring healing to some lots in this world, you would have need to dream of generals and field-marsals--"

"Some more tea, mother?" interposed Violet. She shrank from the threatened talk of human ills. Mrs. Mordaunt, most excellent woman, was not adverse to pouring some of her grief into a sympathetic ear.

"Well, you will tell me at dinner whether I was right," cried Mrs. Harrod, and was gone.

She had placed the letter on the tray, and there it still lay unopened. Violet handed the tea to her mother. The room was empty, save for them, the few other guests being out, and in the house reigned perfect quietude, a peacefulness accentuated by the wheels and hoofs passing in the dusk outside.

"Vi," said Mrs. Mordaunt, "those flowers at your waist are almost faded; I think you might give up violets in London. They don't seem to me the same thing as in the country; but at least let them be fresh. Mr. Van Hupfeldt will be here presently--"

"How do you know, mother?"

"He mentioned, dear, that he would be coming."

"But why, after all, every day?"

"Is that displeasing to you, dear?"

"It seems superfluous."

"That compels me to suggest to you, Vi, that his coming to-day is of some special importance."

"And why, pray?"

"Can you not guess?"

The girl stood up; she walked restlessly to the window and back before she cried: "Mother! mother! Have you not had experience enough of the curse of men?" Her great eyes rested gloomily on the older woman's face. There was a beautiful heredity marked in the pair; but seldom have more diverse souls been pent within similar tabernacles.

"Don't speak so recklessly, dear," said the old lady. "You had the best of fathers. There are good men, too, in the world, and when a man is good, he is better than any woman."

"It may be so. God knows. I hope it is so. But is Mr. Van Hupfeldt one of these fabulous beings? It has not struck me--"

"Please, Violet, don't imagine that I desire to influence you in the slightest degree," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "I merely wish

to hint to you what, in fact, you can't be blind to, that Mr. Van Hupfeldt's inclinations are fixed on you, and that he will probably give expression to them to-day. On Saturday he approached me on the subject, beseeching me with great warmth to hold out to him hopes which, of course, I could not hold out, yet which I did not feel authorized wholly to destroy. At any rate, I was persuaded upon to promise him a fair field for his enterprise to-day."

"Oh, mother! Really, this is irritating of you!" cried Violet, letting fall with a clatter a spoon she had lifted off the table.

"But I don't see it. Why so?"

"It sounds so light-minded, at your years!"

"As if I was one of the two parties concerned!" laughed Mrs. Mordaunt with a certain maternal complacency. She knew, or thought she knew, her wayward daughter. With a little tact this most suitable marriage could be arranged.

"No," admitted Violet, angry at the weakness of her defense, "but you allow yourself to be drawn into having a hand in what is called a love-affair because it is an event; and it was not fair to Mr. Van Hupfeldt, since you knew quite well beforehand what would be the result."

"Well, well," purred Mrs. Mordaunt good-humoredly, looking down to stroke the toy Pom on her lap, a nervous little animal which one might have wrapped in a handkerchief, "I will say no more. If the thought of allowing myself to be bereft of you has occurred to me, you understand for whose good I gave it a moment's entertainment. Marriage, of course, is a change of life, and for girls whose minds have been overshadowed by sorrow, it may not be altogether a bad thing."

"But there is usually some selection in the matter, I think, some pretense of preference for one above others. Just marriage by itself hardly seems a goal."

"Yes, love is good, dear--none knows better than I--but better marriage without love, than love without marriage," muttered Mrs. Mordaunt, suddenly shaken.

"And better still life with neither, it seems to me; and best of all, the end of life, and good-by to it all, mother."

"Vi, Vi! sh-h-h, dear!" Mrs. Mordaunt was so genuinely shocked that her daughter swung the talk back into its personal channel.

"Still, I will not see this man. Tell him when he comes that I will not see him. He has held out to me hopes which he has done nothing to fulfil."

"What hopes, dear?"

"You may as well know: hopes as to--Gwen, then."

"Tell me."

"Twice he has hinted to me that he knows some one who knew the man named Strauss; that he would succeed in finding this Strauss; that all was quite, quite well; and that he did not despair of finding some trace of the whereabouts of the child. He had no right to say such things, if he had not some real grounds for believing that he would do as he hinted. It is two months ago now since he last spoke in this way down at Rigsworth, and he has not referred to it since, though he has several times been alone with me. I believe that he only said it because he fancied that whatever man held out such hopes to me would be likely to find me pliant to his wishes. I won't see him to-day."

"Oh, he said that, did he--that all was quite well, that he might be able to find.... But he must have meant it, since he said it."

"I doubt now that he meant it. Who knows whether he is not in league with the enemies of her who was cast helpless to the wolves--"

"Violet, for shame to let such words escape your lips! Mr. Van Hupfeldt--a man of standing and position, presented to us by Lord Vanstone, and moving in the highest circles! Oh, beware, dear, lest sorrow warp the gentler instincts of your nature, and by the sadness of the countenance the heart be not made better! Grief is evil, then, indeed when it does not win us into a sweeter mood of charity. I fear, Vi, that you have lost something of your old amiableness since the blow."

"Forgive me, darling!" sobbed Violet, dropping quickly by the side of her mother's chair, with her eyes swimming. "It has gone deep, this wild wrong. Forgive, forgive! I wish to feel and do right; but I can't. It is the fault of the iron world."

"No, don't cry, sweet," murmured Mrs. Mordaunt, kissing her warmly. "It will come right. We must repress all feelings of rebellion and rancor, and pray often, and in the end your good heart will find its way back to its natural sweetness and

peace. I myself too frequently give way, I'm afraid; the ways of Providence are so inscrutably hard. We must bear up, and wait, and wait, till 'harsh grief pass in time into far music.' As for Mr. Van Hupfeldt, there seems no reason why you should see him, if you do not wish. But you haven't opened your letter--see if it is from Rigsworth, dear."

Violet now rose from her mother's side, and tore open the letter. She did not know the handwriting, and as her eyes fell on the words she started. They were these: "A well-wisher of Miss Mordaunt desires to assure her that it is a pretty certain thing that her sister Gwendoline was a duly wedded wife. The proofs of this statement may sooner or later be forthcoming."

Mrs. Mordaunt's observant glance, noting the changes of color and expression going on in her daughter's face, saw that the news was really as Mrs. Harrod had dreamed. Violet's eyes were raised in silent thanksgiving, and, without saying anything, she dropped the note on her mother's lap. Going to one of the windows, she stood there with tremulous lips. She looked into the dim street through a mist of tears. For the moment, speech was impossible.

There was silence in the room for some minutes. Then Mrs. Mordaunt called out: "Vi, dear, come here."

Violet ran from the window with a buoyancy of dancing in her gait. "Heaven forgive us, mother, for having wronged Gwendoline in our thoughts!" said she, with her cheek against her mother's.

"Heaven forgive me rather," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "You, dear, have never for a moment lost faith and hope. But still, Vi--"

"Well?"

"Let me warn you, dear, against too much confidence in this note. The disappointment may be all the more terrible. Why could not the sender sign his name? Of course, we can guess from whom it comes; but does not the fact that he does not sign his name show a lack of confidence in his own statements?"

"Oh, I think not," cried Violet, flushed with enthusiasm, "if it is from whom you think; but, who, then, do you think sent it?"

"It can only be from Mr. Van Hupfeldt, child, I take it."

The girl was seemingly taken aback for an instant; but her thoughts bubbled forth again rapidly: "Well, his motive for not signing his name may simply be a very proper reserve, not a lack of confidence in his statements. Remember, dearest, that he is coming here to-day with a certain purpose with regard to me, and if he had signed his name, it would have set up a sort of claim to my favor as a reward for services done. Oh, now I come to think of it, I call this most generous of the man!"

"That's splendid, that's right," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "Your instincts always scent out nobility where any clue to it can be found. I am glad that you take it in that way. But young people are enthusiastic and prone to jump to conclusions. As we grow older we acquire a certain habit of second thoughts. In this instance, no doubt, you are right; he could have had no other motive--unless--I suppose that there is no one else from whom the note may possibly have come?"

At this question Violet stood startled a moment, panting a little, and somehow there passed like a mist through her consciousness a memory, a half-thought, of David Harcourt.

"From whom else could it have come?" she asked her mother breathlessly.

"The handwriting is not Mr. Van Hupfeldt's," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "This is a less ornate hand, you notice."

Violet took the note again, and knit her pretty brows over it. "No," she said, "this is a much stronger, cleaner hand--I don't know who else--"

"Yet, if Mr. Van Hupfeldt wished to be generous in the sense of which you spoke," said her mother, "if it was his purpose to conceal his part in the matter, he would naturally ask some one else to write for him. And, since we can imagine no one but him--There! that, I think, is his rap at the door. Tell me now, Vi, if you will see him alone?"

"Yes, mother, I will see him."

"Bless you for your good and grateful heart! Well, then, after a little I will go out. But, oh, pray, do nothing precipitate in an impulse of joy and mere gratitude, child! If I am bereft of my two children, I am bereft indeed. Do find happiness, my darling. That first and above all."

At that moment Mrs. Harrod looked in, with her pleasant smile, saying: "Mr. Van Hupfeldt is here. Well, did the letter contain good news?"

"You dear!" murmured Violet, running to kiss her, "I must wear red before you, so that you may dream of soldiers every, every night!"

The steps of Van Hupfeldt were heard coming up the stairs.

CHAPTER VII

VIOLET'S CONDITIONS

Van Hupfeldt bowed himself into the drawing-room. His eyes wandering weighingly with a quick underlook which they had from the face of Violet to that of Mrs. Mordaunt, and back again to Violet. He saw what pleased him, smiles on both faces, and his brow lightened. He was a man of about forty, with a little gray in his straight hair, which, parted in the middle, inclosed the forehead in a perfect arch. He stood upon thin legs as straight as poles. His hands and feet were small. His features as regular and chiseled as a statue's; he looked more Spanish than Dutch.

Mrs. Mordaunt received him with a pressure of the hand in which was conveyed a message of sympathy and encouragement, and Van Hupfeldt bent toward Violet with a murmur:

"I am glad to see you looking so bright to-day."

"You observe quickly," said Violet.

"Some things," answered Van Hupfeldt.

"Our good hostess has been dreaming of soldiers, Mr. Van Hupfeldt," put in Mrs. Mordaunt, lightly, "and it seems that such a dream always brings good news to her guests; so my daughter is feeling the effects of it."

Van Hupfeldt looked puzzled, and asked: "Has Miss Violet heard that her orchids are flourishing in her absence, or that those two swans I promised have arrived?"

Violet and Mrs. Mordaunt exchanged glances of approval of this speech, the latter saying: "There are brighter things in the world than orchids, thank Heaven! and a kind deed may be more white and graceful than all the swans of Dale Manor."

Van Hupfeldt looked still more puzzled--a look which was noted by the women, but was attributed by them to a wish not to seem to know anything of the joyful note, and was put down to his credit. After some minutes' talk of a general nature, Mrs. Mordaunt went out. Violet sat in an easy-chair at one of the balcony windows. Van Hupfeldt leaned against the embrasure of the window. He seemed to brace himself for an effort before he said to her:

"This is Monday evening, and since Saturday, when I brought you from the cemetery, I have not once closed my eyes. If you continue to manifest this inconsolable grief for your sister's fate, I must break down in some way. Something will happen. I shall go crazy, I think."

"You mean very kindly, I suppose," answered Violet, with lowered lids; "though I do not see--"

"No, you cannot see, you do not know," said he, with a certain redness and strain in the eyes which made it a credible thing that he had not slept in some time. "But it is so. It has been the craving of my life to save you from this grief. Let me do it; you have to let me do it!"

"How save me?" she asked, with an upward glance under her long lashes, while she wondered at the blaze in the man's eyes. "I am not to be saved from it by any means, though it will be lessened by the proofs of my sister's honor and of her child's fair name, and by the discovery of the whereabouts of the child. There are no other means."

"Yes, there are! There is the leaving of your present life, the companionship of one who will have no care but to make you happy, to redress a little in you the wrong done to your sister. That is my motive--God knows!--that is my main motive--"

"Surely I do not understand you aright!" cried Violet, somewhat dismayed by his outburst. "Your motive is to redress a wrong done by some one to my sister by devoting yourself to make me happy? Certainly, that seems a most nobly disinterested motive; but is philanthropy of this sort the best basis for the kind of proposition which you are making me? Philanthropy most certainly would wear thin in time, if it did not rest on affection--"

"Do you doubt that I have affection?" he demanded, his voice vibrating with ill-repressed passion.

"As an afterthought?"

"How as an afterthought, when my life itself depends upon continually seeing you, and seeing you happy? I tell you that if you were to refuse my prayer this evening, if anything was to happen now or in the future to thwart my cravings with respect to you, my mind is made up, I would not continue to face the harrowing cark of life. Say 'No' to me, and

from to-morrow evening you will be tortured by the same worm of remorse by which the man who caused the death of your sister must be gnawed and gnawed. You talk of affection? I have that. I do, yes, I do love you; but that would be the flimsiest motive compared with this passion which casts me at your feet."

"I don't understand him," sighed Violet to herself--and no wonder, for Van Hupfeldt's words came from him in a sort of hiss; his eyes were bloodshot; he stooped close over her, with veins standing out on his forehead. It was clear enough that the man's soul was in this wooing, yet he made so little pretense of the ordinary lover's love. He left her cold, this woman made for love, and she wondered.

"Tell me quickly," he said, "I think that your mother is not unwilling. Only let me hear the word 'Yes,' and the 'when' shall be left to you."

"Pray listen, Mr. Van Hupfeldt," said Violet, bending over her knee, which she slung between her clasped fingers. "Let us reason together; let us understand each other better. I am not disposed to be unfriendly toward you--do not think that--nor even to reject your suit unconditionally. I owe you much, and I see that you are greatly in earnest; but I am not clear. Your motive seems to be philanthropic. You have said as much yourself, you know. Still, philanthropy is only warm; it is never hot to desperation; it never commits suicide in despair of doing good. That, then, is the first thing which I fail to understand in you. And, secondly, I do not grasp why you desire any closer relation to be set up between us for my happiness, when I assure you that nothing but the rehabilitation of my sister's name could lighten my unhappiness, and that, this once done, nothing further could possibly be done by any one to attach me more to life."

"But I am older than you, and know better," answered Van Hupfeldt, seating himself beside her, speaking now more calmly. "You know nothing of the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. Travel alone would give you a new outlook. I should ever be inventing new pleasures and excitements for you. Sometimes, already, I lie awake at night, thinking them out. I am very rich, and all my wealth should be turned into one channel, to delight you. You know nothing of society in the States, of the brilliance and abandon of life across the Atlantic. And the Paris *beau monde*, with its charm and wit and easy joyousness, you know nothing yet of that. I should find the means to keep you constantly gay, to watch you in ever new phases, costumes, jewels--"

The thought passed through Violet's mind: "He has distinguished manners, but a vulgar mind," and she said aloud: "So that is how you would wean me from sorrow, Mr. Van Hupfeldt? I should prefer a week of Dale Manor with my birds and flowers to a cycle of all that."

"Then it shall be Dale Manor rather than 'all that,'" he agreed. "It shall be just as you would have it, if only you will be happy, and will give me a glance one day which means 'My happiness is due to you.' May I have another peep at the locket?"

Violet took a locket from her neck, pressed a spring, and showed within a miniature in water-colors of the dead Gwen. She shivered a little. Though she was speaking of her sister, the man's sudden request jarred on her.

"I like to look at it," said Van Hupfeldt, bending closer. "It reminds me of you--chiefly about the mouth and chin, about the dear little chin. She suffered, yes, she tasted sorrow, and since she suffered, you must not suffer, too. I kiss her instead of you, because she was like you."

This, certainly, was an odd reason for Van Hupfeldt's tenderness to the miniature, but Violet's heart instantly warmed toward him for his pity of her beloved; and when he replaced the locket round her neck, saying: "So, then, do we understand each other now?" she found it hard to answer: "I'm afraid that I am as far from understanding as ever."

"That will come in time, trust me," said he; "but as to that little word 'Yes,' is it to be taken as uttered now?"

"No, not now," she said gently, "though do not go away thinking it may never be. Let me be frank, Mr. Van Hupfeldt. You know quite well that I am not at present disposed to worship your sex, and that is really so. Honestly, I don't think that the human species adorns the earth on which it lives, least of all the male part of it. If I wished to marry, I believe I should choose some poor tiller of the fields, who had never seen a city, or heard of the arts of vice. You see, then, that the whole notion of marriage must be sufficiently distasteful to me. I wouldn't and couldn't give myself; but I am quite willing to--to make a bargain."

"A bargain?" He started, and his dark eyes stared at her blankly.

"Yes, it is better to be candid. When you have cleared my sister's name, or found the child, as you hope to be able to do, then, if you desire me still the same, you will again speak to me. I cannot definitely part from my freedom without a certainty that you will be able to do what you hope; and it is only fair to you to let you know that I should probably consent to give the same promise to any other man who would and could do this much for me."

Upon this Van Hupfeldt's brow flushed angrily, and he leaped to his feet, crying: "But that will never be! Clear your sister's name? You still talk like a child--"

Now it was Violet's turn to stand up in astonishment, as she saw her castle in the clouds diminishing. She stared in her turn, with open lips, crying: "Do you say this? that it will never be?"

"How can you set a man's life on the chance of the realization of such a mere dream?" asked Van Hupfeldt, irritated, saying more than was wise.

"A dream?" murmured Violet, as if in a dream herself. "Then, who is it that has sent me this?"

Thereupon she drew from her pocket David Harcourt's unsigned note. She held it out to Van Hupfeldt, and he, without touching, leaned over and read it; apparently slowly; more than once, so Violet thought. He stood there looking at the letter an unconscionable time, she holding it out for him to read, while the man's face bled away inwardly, as it were to death, and some power seemed to rivet his eyes, some power stronger than his effort to withdraw them.

The thought passing through Van Hupfeldt's soul was this: "Some one knows that she was a 'duly wedded wife.' But who? And how? To him it is somehow 'a pretty certain thing'; and the proofs of it 'may sooner or later be forthcoming'; and then he will give these proofs to Violet."

"I see, then, that it was not you who sent it to me," said Violet at last, and, as she said it, a certain gladness, a little thrill of relief, occurred somewhere within her.

Van Hupfeldt straightened himself. His lips were white, but they smiled dreadfully, though for some part of a second he hesitated before he said: "Now, who told you that?"

"I do not, of course, know the facts," said Violet; "but I should like to."

"You may as well know," said Van Hupfeldt, turning away from her. "Yes, I sent it."

Violet flushed. His manner did not carry conviction even to a mind not used to doubt the spoken word. It was horrid to think he was lying. Yet an odd sheepishness was visible in his face; his voice was not strong and brave.

"Well, I am still in a maze," she murmured. "Since it was you who sent it, and since you say in it that my sister's honor is now 'a pretty certain thing,' and that 'the proofs will be forthcoming,' why did you say a moment ago that it is 'a mere dream' to look forward to their forthcoming?"

Van Hupfeldt was looking out of the window. He did not answer at once; only after a minute he replied without looking round: "It was I who sent you the note. Yes, it was I; and what I say in it is true--somehow--true in some way; but I did not wish you to make the realization of those hopes a condition of your giving yourself to me. Hence I said that your stipulation was 'a mere dream.' Now, you understand; now, I think, all is clear to your mind."

Violet sighed, and made no answer. All was not so very clear to her mind. One thing only was clear, that the nobility with which she and her mother had credited Van Hupfeldt in sending the note anonymously, so that he might not claim a reward from her, was not a deep nobility; for he had promptly volunteered the information that it was he who had sent it. She felt some disgust. A woman disillusioned about a man rushes to the opposite pole. Let him but be detected to be not the hero which she had thought him, and steep is his fall. Henceforth he is not only not a hero but less than nothing in her eyes. Violet paced aimlessly through the room, then went to the window farthest from that at which Van Hupfeldt stood, and the unspoken words on her lips were: "The miserable man."

At last Van Hupfeldt almost rushed at her, with the cry: "The promise on that sheet of paper in your hand shall be fulfilled, and fulfilled by me, I vow, I swear it to you! But the fulfilment of it must not be made a condition of our union. The union must come first, and then the fulfilment; and the quicker the union the sooner the fulfilment."

"No, I will not have it so."

"You must!"

"You are to release my wrist, Mr. Van Hupfeldt!"

"You must!"

"But why hold me?"

"Listen--your sister was a wedded wife. I know it, I have reason to know it, and I am certain that, if you marry me, within six months after the marriage I shall be in a position to hand you the proofs of everything--to tell you truly the whole history from beginning to end--"

"But why six months after? Why not six months before?"

"I have reasons--there are reasons. What I shall have to tell will be a pain to you, I foresee, a pain; but perhaps not a pain which you will be unable to outlive. Nevertheless, from what I already know of your sister's history, I see that it must be told you after, not before, our union. It is a terrible history, I--gather, a harrowing tale. You don't even guess, you are far from being able to hear it now, even if I could tell you now. Violet! say 'Yes' to me!"

"What? Without understanding anything?"

"Yes, Violet, turn to me! Violet, say 'Yes' to me!"

"But what guaranty--"

"My pledged word, nothing else; that is enough. I say that within six months, not more, from the day of our marriage you shall have all that you desire to know, even the child shall have been found, for already I am on its track. But unless you consent, you will never know, the child will never be found; for I shall be dead, and the knowledge which I am in course of gathering shall die with me. If you will not give yourself, then, agree to that bargain you spoke of."

"One gives, in a bargain, for something one receives."

"It is the only condition on which we can come together. I could not bring you to-day the proofs that you long for, even if I had them. It must be six months after--not less than six months after--and for then I promise, calling Heaven to witness. Believe in me! Not all things that a man says are true; but this is true. Violet, for Gwen's sake, within a week--the sooner it's done, the sooner you hear--within not more than two weeks--"

Violet, sore beset, shielded her eyes with a listless hand. Van Hupfeldt was pleading like a man battling for his last earthly good. And yet, and yet, he left her cold.

"I don't doubt your promise," she said with a charming shyness; "but it is a great matter, you give me no guaranties, you may fail, and then all will have been in vain."

"I won't fail. I shall so manage that there will be no chance of failure. And to prove my faith, if you say 'Yes,' I think I can undertake that within only two months after the marriage the child shall be unearthed, and within six the proofs of his legitimacy shall be handed you. That's fair--that seems fairer--come, now. Only the marriage must be prompt in that case, without a fortnight's delay. I can't offer better terms. What do you say to it?"

Violet, without answering, suddenly cast herself upon the sofa-head, burying her face in it. A bitter lamentation came from her, so thin and low that Van Hupfeldt could scarce hear it. He stood over her, looking at her, his heart in his mouth; and presently, bending to her, he whispered: "Tell me!"

"God knows!" came from her brokenly.

He put his lips on her hair, and she shivered. "It is 'Yes,' then," said he; "but pity me still more, and say that it shall be at once."

"No," she sobbed, "I must have time to think. It is too much, after all--"

At that moment Mrs. Mordaunt entered. Violet, aroused by the opening door, stood up with a bent head, an averted face, and Van Hupfeldt said, with a sort of frenzied laugh, to Mrs. Mordaunt: "See how the days are lengthening out already."

Mrs. Mordaunt looked at Violet with a query in her glance; and Violet's great eyes dwelt on her mother without answering by any sign that question of lifted eyebrows. The girl was puzzled and overwrought. Was it so that men won women, that some man had won her sister? Surely this was a strange wooing!



CHAPTER VIII

AT DEAD OF NIGHT

David Harcourt, meantime, had long since reached home after his interview with Miss L'Estrange, whereupon Mrs. Grover had presented him with her first specimen of housewifery in the shape of a lunch. But, as if to prove that the fates were against literature that day, she also presented him with a letter from the agent Dibbin, saying: "Herein please find address of Sarah Gissing, servant of the late Miss Gwendoline Barnes, as promised."

David's first impulse was to go straightway after the meal to interview this Sarah Gissing. Then he set his lips, saying to himself: "The day's work," and, after lighting his pipe, he walked up to his literary tools with the grimness of a man about to throttle an enemy. Whereupon he sat down and wrote something. When he came back to earth with a weary but taut brain, Mrs. Grover was gone for the day. It was near seven in the evening, and the prairie-wolf within was growling "Dinner-time."

His mental faculties being now on a tension, he thought to himself that there was no reason why he should not be prompt, and call upon Miss Gissing that evening. Though, after dinner, a mortal lethargy and reaction seized upon him with the whisper, "To-morrow is better than to-day," he proved true to his high-strung self, and went by bus to Baker-St., where he took train for the station nearest the village of Chalfont.

It was a sharp walk from station to village. There was no cab; and when he arrived at the Peacock Inn, where Sarah Gissing was now a barmaid, he learned that she was away on leave at a neighboring village. He strolled about the silent street until Sarah came home at ten o'clock, a thin girl, with projecting top teeth, and a chronic stare of wonderment in her eyes.

"You are not to be alarmed," David said to her. "I only came to ask you a few questions about your late mistress, Miss Gwendoline Barnes, in whom I have an interest. No one will be harmed, as far as I am aware, by your telling me all that you know, while you and I may profit by it."

They spoke in the tiny inn drawing-room, and Sarah in her coat, with her hat on, sitting on the piano-stool, stared and answered shortly at first. Little by little she was induced to utter herself.

"He was a tall man," she said, "rather thin, dark and pale--"

"Straight nose?" asked David.

"Yes, sir, straight nose; a handsome man."

"Black mustache, nicely turned out?"

"Yes, sir; he had a mustache."

"Well, but all that says nothing. Many people answer such a description. Was there no photograph of him in the flat? Did you never see a photograph?"

"Yes, there was a photograph on the mantelpiece of Miss Barnes's bed-room. In a silver frame it was; but the day after her death the silver frame was still there, and the photograph was gone, for I noticed it myself."

"Do you realize that you are telling me a mighty odd thing," said David with sudden interest. "How soon after the door was forced did you go into the flat?"

"Wasn't I there when the door was forced? Didn't I go in at once?"

"And how soon afterward did you notice that the photograph was gone from the silver frame?"

"How soon? Soon afterward."

"It was not one of the men who forced the door who removed the photograph from the frame?"

"I don't think that, sir. I would have noticed it if that had been the case."

"When you went in you found the body of your mistress lying dead; the front door had been bolted inside; so there was no way for any one to have come out of the flat. And when you left your mistress the previous night the photograph was in its frame, but gone when the door was forced the next day. Those are the facts, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that seems to say that it was Miss Barnes herself who removed the photograph, doesn't it? And it follows that the photograph is still in the flat?"

"Praps she did it to screen him," suggested Sarah, indulging in the vanity of thought. "I shouldn't wonder if that was it. No doubt she tore up the photograph, or burnt it."

"But you didn't see any shreds or ashes of it anywhere?"

"Not of a photograph, although I did sweep out the place the same day, too. Still, that's not to say she didn't tear it up because there was no shreds of it, for there are ways and means."

"Were there shreds of any kind about?"

"Yes; she must have torn up a good few letters overnight before doing what she did. There was no end of litter, for that matter."

"But suppose she did not burn or tear up the photograph," said David, "where would she have hidden it? Can you suggest a place? Did you ever know her to hide anything? For, if she hid one thing, she may have hidden others, mayn't she?"

"I believe there's one letter she must have hidden," answered Sarah, "unless she destroyed it--a letter that came from Paris four days before she made away with herself. I saw the postmark and the handwriting, so I know. It was from *him*, for he was in Paris at the time, and it was that letter that was the death of her, I feel certain. It came about eleven o'clock, soon after breakfast. She was at the piano in her dressing-gown, singing, not ordinary singing, but a kind of moaning of different notes, practising her voice like--it used to give me the blues to hear her every morning, it was so doleful like, moan, moan, moan! So I says, 'A letter for you, mum,' and she first stared at it in my hand, then she jumped up sudden like, and kind of snatched it out of my hand. But she didn't read it. She went with it to the front window, looking out, holding the letter behind her back with her two hands, trembling from head to foot. So, not having any excuse to stay, I went out, but didn't quite close the door. I loitered for a little while; but, not hearing anything, I went about my work, till half an hour later something seemed to say to me: 'Better have a look,' and when I peeped into the drawing-room, there she was sitting on the floor with her face on the sofa, and the letter in her hand. I thought she had the neuralgia; she looked that much in pain, you never saw. I spoke to her, but she looked at me, sick like, and didn't say nothing. I don't believe she could have stood up, if she had tried, and it did go to my heart to see her struck down and helpless like that."

David's close interest in her story pleased the girl. Such a nice young man he was! Perhaps he might call again some evening.

"My missus wasn't quite right the rest of her time, I don't think," she went on. "She wandered about the flat, restless as a strange kitten, singing bits of songs, and she had a sweet soprano voice, I'm sure, that pierced you through when she screamed out the high notes. She didn't go to the theater any more, after the letter. The next day she comes to me in the kitchen, singing and chuckling to herself, and she says to me: 'What are you doing here?' says she. 'How do you mean, mum?' says I. 'Listen, Sarah,' says she, putting her face quite close to mine, 'you shouldn't be here, this is not a place for a decent girl like you. You are to understand that I am not married. I told you that I was; but it was a lie. I have a child; but I am not married,' and she ran off, laughing again to herself, as wild as a bird."

"No, not that!" interrupted David, for the outspoken revelation hurt him. "It was not so much that which I wished to hear. Let us talk of the letter and the man. You never saw the letter again? You can't think what your mistress may have done with it?"

"No, I never saw it again," said Sarah, "nor I can't think where she may have put it, unless she tore it up. There's only one queer thing which I can call to mind, and that is, that during the afternoon of the day before she died, I went out to buy some soda, and when I came back I found her standing on a chair, hanging up one of the pictures in the long corridor. I wondered at the time whether it had fallen down or what, though I didn't say anything. But now I come to think of it--"

David thought to himself: "She was then hiding the marriage and birth certificates which Miss L'Estrange afterward saw when the picture fell. She was reluctant to destroy them, and yet wished to screen the man, having in her mind the purpose to take her own life. The man's photograph and the fatal letter from him were not hidden in the picture, but somewhere else, perhaps. I must search every cranny."

"Of course," he said aloud, "you could easily identify her husband if he was shown to you again?"

"Oh, rather, sir," Sarah answered, "I've seen him dozens of times. He used to come to the flat anyway twice a week,

though sometimes he would be away for a goodish stretch, mostly in Paris."

"They were an affectionate pair--fond of each other?"

"They were that, indeed," said Sarah with a smile, as one who understood that sort of thing. "He, I'm sure, worshiped the ground she walked on, and she was just as bad. It came as a surprise to me that anything was wrong, though latterly she did use to have red eyes sometimes after he had been with her."

"What name did she call him by?" asked David. "His name was Johann Strauss, wasn't it?"

"He was a Mr. Strauss, sir, yes, but not the other name you say. At least, she always called him Harry."

"Henry is sometimes the English for Johann, you see," muttered David, with a random guess that Sarah was none the wiser. "Henry, too, was the name of the child, wasn't it? How about the child? Don't you know where it is?"

"I only know that she used to go every Tuesday and Thursday by the seventeen minutes past two train from Baker-St., and be back by six o'clock, so it couldn't have been very far. 'Pon my word, sometimes she'd go half crazy over that child. There was a little box of clothes that she's many a time made me waste half a day over, showing me the things, as if I'd never seen them afore, everything that was possible embroidered with violets, and she'd always be making--"

"Fond of violets, was she?" broke in David, ready enough to catch at the phrase.

"Oh, it was all violets with her,--violets in her hair, at her neck, at her waist, and all about the place. She had a sister called Violet, and I came to know the sister as well as I knew herself in a manner of speaking, she was always telling me about her. For often she had nobody to talk to, and then she'd make me sit down to hear about her mother and this Miss Vi and the child, and what she meant to do when her marriage could be made public, and that. She was a good, affectionate lady, was Miss Gwen, sir. You couldn't help loving her, and it was a mortal hard thing what happened."

It was just then that the mistress of the tavern looked in with an unsympathetic face; so David rose and slipped a gold coin into the hand of the staring Sarah. The talk had already lasted a long while, and the inn-door had to be opened to let him out.

He walked the two miles back to the station, and there learned that the last up-train for the night had just left. Even on the suburban lines there is a limit to late hours.

This carelessness on his own part caused him to growl. It was now a question either of knocking up some tavern, or of tramping to London--about twenty-one miles. However, twenty-one miles made no continent to him, and, after posting himself by questions as to the route, he set out.

Throwing his overcoat over his left arm, he put his elbows to his ribs, lifted his face skyward, and went away at a long, slow, swinging trot. One mile winded him. He stopped and walked for five minutes, then away he went again at a steady jog-trot; and now, with this second wind, he could have run in one heat to Bow Bells without any feeling but one of joy and power. He had seen Indians run all day long with pauses. He had learned the art from them, and London had scarce had time as yet to enervate him. Up hill and down dale he went steadily away, like a machine. It was dark at first, dismal in some places, the sky black, crowded with stars, like diamond-seed far sown; but suddenly, while he was trotting through the main street of Uxbridge, all this was changed, the whole look and mood of things underwent transformation, as the full moon floated like a balloon of light into the sky. It was then about one-thirty in the morning. Thenceforth his way was almost as clearly lit as by day.

Through dead villages he passed, through dead Ealing to Shepherd's Bush; there were cats, and there were policemen, and one running man, little else. Here or there a constable was half-drawn into giving chase, but wisely forbore--he never would have caught David Harcourt. But at Shepherd's Bush David came to the foot of a long hill, which he shirked, and drew up. From that point he walked to Notting Hill, past Kensington Gardens, toward Oxford Circus. It was near three A.M.

Walking on the south side of Oxford-St. eastward, he stopped to look at some books behind a grille. The moonshine was so luminous, the sky so clear, that he could see well enough to read their titles. This was the only quiet hour of London. There was not a sound, save the echo of a policeman's tread some way off down Regent-St. Not even a night cab rattled in the distance. And then, on the other side of the street, his quick ears caught the passing of swift-gliding feet--a woman's.

When David glanced round, already she was gone well past him, making westward, most silently, with a steady haste. She gave him the impression of having been overtaken by, of being shy at, the moonlight. His heart leaped in a spasm of recognition, almost of fear. And he followed, he could not help it; as water flows downward, as the needle follows the magnet, he followed, with the stealthy pace of the stalker, as silently as if he was tracking a deer, and as keenly.

His breathing, meantime, was as if suspended, his heart seemed to stand still. That form and motion, his instincts would have recognized them in midnight glimmer of dull lamps, and now they were before him in light. Still he could not believe his wits. He doubted whether he was not moonstruck, chasing a phantom made of the clair-obscure stuff of those dead hours of the night when dreams are rife in the world, and ghosts leer through the haunted chambers of the brain. That *she* should be walking the streets of London at three in the morning, alone, hastening secretly homeward like some poor outcast foreconscious of the light of dawn!--this savored somewhat of limbo and lunacy. For what good reason could she be thus abroad? A swarm of doubts, half-doubts, queer bodings, jostled in David's heart. She might, indeed, have come out to summon a doctor, to obtain a drug in an emergency. But something in her air and pace, something clandestine, desperate, illicit, seemed to belie this hope. She turned north when she had gone so far west as Orchard-St., little thinking, apparently, that she was being shadowed, and thence sped on west and north alternately through smaller streets, a region in which the desolation of the sleeping city seemed even more confirmed. And David followed, with this thought in his mind, that, though he had not seen her face, he had a certain means of determining her identity--for, if the flying figure before him went to 60A, Porchester Gardens, the address which he had of Violet Mordaunt, then this must be Violet.

Not that in the later part of his chase he had the slightest doubt. The long black cloak, like those that nurses wear, inflated behind her, the kind of toque above it, the carriage of her head, the slope of her shoulders, all these were hers: and she sped direct, notwithstanding turns and twists, to Porchester Gardens. David, from behind the corner of a street, could see her go up the house-steps, bend over something in her hand, open the door, and slip on what must have been rubber overshoes. This secrecy revolted him, and again he almost doubted that it was she. But when she had gone in, he hastened from his street-corner to the door to read the house-number, and it was 60A.

She was gone now. It was too late to challenge and upbraid her. He already regretted that he had not dared. He was bitter at it. Something said within him: "Both sisters!" Some envenomed fang of anger, spite, and jealousy plagued him, a feeling that he was wholly out of it, and had no part nor lot in her life and acts; and then, also, like oil on the waters, came pity. He must home to his haunted flat, where the scent of the violets which he had bought greeted him on his entrance. It was near four o'clock. After looking gloomily for some time at the head in chalks, he read three letters which he had found in the letter-box. One of them was from Miss L'Estrange, and in it she said:

"I have asked my girl, Jenny, about the marriage and birth certificates which fell out of the picture, and there's something funny about her." (A woman never means humor when she uses that word funny.) "She wants to make out that she knows nothing about what became of them, but I believe she does. Perhaps she has found out Strauss and sold them to him, or perhaps she only means to do so, and you may get them from her if you be quick and bid high. Anyway, I have done my best for you, and now it is in your own hands. You can come here whenever you like."

But David was now suddenly not so devoted to the affairs of Violet and Gwendoline Mordaunt as he had been. What he had seen within the past hour made him bitter. He went foraging in the kitchen for something to eat, then threw himself into bed in a vexed mood, as some gray of morning mingled with the night.

CHAPTER IX

COMING NEAR

As for Henry Van Hupfeldt, he, too, at that morning hour lay awake in his bed. If ever man knew panic, it was he all that night. He had gone home from his interview with Violet, cringing in his carriage even from the glance of the passers in the streets, stricken to the heart by that unsigned note of David's to Violet: "A pretty certain thing that your sister was a duly wedded wife" ... "the proofs of it will be forthcoming." Some one knew!

But who? And how? Van Hupfeldt locked himself away from his valet--he lived in chambers near Hanover Square--and for hours sat without a movement, staring the stare of the hopeless and the lost. The fact that he had as good as won from Violet the pledging of herself to him--that fact which at another time would have filled him with elation, was now almost forgotten in the darkness of his calamity, as a star is swallowed up by clouds. The thing was known! That known which had been between the chamber of his heart and God alone! A bird of the air had whispered it, another soul shared in its horror. The faintest hiss of a wish to commit murder came from between his teeth. He had meant well, and ill had come; but because he had meant not badly and had struggled hard with fate, let no man dare to meddle! He could be flint against the steel of a man.

His eyes, long bereft of sleep, closed of themselves at last, and he threw himself upon his bed. But the pang which pierces the sleep of the condemned criminal soon woke him. He opened his eyes with a clearer mind, and set to thinking. The unsigned note to Violet was in a man's hand. Some nights before in the cemetery he had found a man near the grave with her, and the man had seemed to be talking with her, a young, sunburned man. Who he was he had no idea; he had no reason to think this was the man who had sent the note. There was left only Miss L'Estrange. She might have sent it, getting a man to write for her--suspicion of itself fixed upon her. Always he had harbored this fear, that some paper, something to serve as a clue, had been left in the flat, which would lie hidden for a time, and then come forth into the noonday to undo him utterly. Gwendoline, he knew, had wished to screen him; but the chances were against him. He had never dared to go into the flat alone, to take the flat in his own name, and search it inside out. The place was haunted by a light step, and a sigh was in the air which no other ear could hear, but which his ear would hear without fail. Within those walls his eyes one night had seen a sight!

He had not dared to take the place; but he had put Miss L'Estrange into it, and she had failed him; so, suspecting at last that she did not search according to the bargain, he had threatened to stop supplies, in order merely to spur her to search, for his heart had always foreboded that there was something to find.

Gwen, he knew, had kept a diary. Where was that? His photographs, where were they? His last letter to her? The certificates? Had they all been duly destroyed by her? Had she forgotten nothing? But when he had attempted to spur L'Estrange, the woman had flown into a fury, and he had allowed himself to lose his temper. How bitter now was his remorse at this folly! He ought to have kept some one in perpetuity in the flat, till all fear of anything lying hidden in it was past. He suspected now that L'Estrange might have found some document, and had kept it from him through his not being well in her favor during the last weeks of her residence. He groaned aloud at this childishness of his. It was his business to have kept in touch with her, to have made her rich. But it was not too late.

So, on the following evening, he presented himself at the stage-door of the theater where Miss Ermyrn L'Estrange was then displaying her charms, in his hand an *ecrin* containing a *riviere* of diamonds. He said not one word about his motive for coming to her after so long, but put out an every-day hand, as if no dispute had been between them.

"Well, this is a surprise!" said she. "What's the game now?"

"No game," said he, assuming the necessary jauntiness. "Should old acquaintance be forgot?" They drove together to the Caf  Royal.

"It was just as I tell you," she explained in the cab, driving later to Chelsea. "I never saw one morsel of any paper until that last day, when the two certificates dropped out of the picture, and then I wouldn't give you because of the tiff. I'm awfully sorry now that I didn't," she glanced down at the *riviere* on her palm; "but there, it's done, and can't be undone--nature of the beast, I s'pose."

"And you really think Jenny has them? Are you sure, now? Are you sure?" asked Van Hupfeldt, earnestly.

"That's my honest belief," she answered. "I think I remember tossing them to Jenny, and as Jenny knew that I had gone into the flat specially to search for papers for you, she must have said to herself: 'These papers may be just what have been wanted, and they'll be worth their weight in gold to me, if I can find Mr. Strauss.' No doubt she's been looking for you ever since, or waiting for you to turn up. When I said to her yesterday: 'What about those two papers that

dropped out of the picture at Eddystone Mansions?' she turned funny, and couldn't catch her breath. 'Which two papers, miss?' she says. 'Oh, you go on,' I said to her; 'you know very well. Those that dropped out of the picture that fell down.'--'Yes,' said she, 'now I remember. I wonder what could have become of them? Didn't you throw them into the fireplace, Miss L'Estrange?'--'No, I didn't, Jenny,' I said to her, 'and a woman should lie to a man, not to another woman; for it takes a liar to catch a liar.'--'But what lie am I telling, Miss L'Estrange?' says she. 'I am not sure,' I said, 'but I know that you ought to tie your nose with string whenever you're telling a lie, for your nostrils keep opening and shutting, same as they're doing now.'--'I didn't know that, I'm sure,' says she. 'That's queer, too, if my nostrils are opening and shutting.'--'It's only the truth,' I said to her; 'your mouth is accustomed to uttering falsehood, and it doesn't mind, but when your nostrils smell the lie coming out, they get excited, my girl.'--'Fancy!' says she. 'That's funny!'--'So where's the use keeping it up, Jenny?' I said to her. 'You do make me wild, for I know that you're lying, and you know that I know, and yet you keep it up, as if I was a man, and didn't know you. If you've got the papers, say so; you are perfectly welcome to them, for I don't want to take them from you,' I said. 'Well, you seem to know more than I do myself, miss,' she says. 'Oh, you get out!' I said to her, and I pushed her by the shoulders out of the room. That's all that passed between us."

"For what reason did you ask her about these papers yesterday in particular?" demanded Van Hupfeldt, thickly, a pain gripping at his heart.

"I'll tell you. The new tenant of the flat came to me--"

"Ah! the flat is let again?"

"What, didn't you know? He's only just moved in--a young man named David Harcourt."

"And he came to you? What about?"

"Asking about papers--"

"Papers? What interest can he have in them? And you told him about the certificates?"

"Yes."

"*Gott in Himmel!*"

"Why, what's the matter?"

"You told him about the certificates? Then it was he who wrote the note!"

"Which note? Don't take on like that--in a cab!"

"You told him! Then it was he--it was he! How does he look, this young man? What kind of young man?" Van Hupfeldt wanted to choke the woman as she sat there beside him.

"Come, cheer up, pull yourself together; it will be all the same a hundred years hence. I'm sure I didn't know that I was injuring you by telling him, and even if I had known, I should still have told him--there's nothing like being frank, is there? You and I weren't pals--"

"But what is he like, this young man?"

"Not a bad sort, something like a Jameson raider, a merry, upstanding fellow--"

"It was he who was at the grave with her!" whispered Van Hupfeldt to himself, while his eyes seemed to see a ghost. "And you told him all, all! It was he, no other. What name did you give him as that of the husband on the marriage-lines? Did he ask that, too? Did you tell him?" With a kind of crazy secrecy he asked it at her ear, panting for the answer.

"I didn't remember the husband's name," she answered. "I told him it wasn't Strauss, but van or von Something. And don't lean against me in that way. People will think you are full."

"Van? You told him that? And what did he say then?"

"He asked if it wasn't van Something, I forget what, Van Hup--something. I have an awful bad memory for names, and, look here, don't come worrying me with your troubles, for I've got my own to look after."

Van Hupfeldt's finger-nails were pressed into the flesh of his palms. This new occupier of the flat, then, even knew his name, even suspected the identity of Strauss with Van Hupfeldt. How could he know it, except from Violet? To the pains of panic in Van Hupfeldt was added a stab of jealousy. That Violet knew this young man he no longer doubted, nor

doubted that the meeting at the grave was by appointment. Perhaps Violet, eager to find suspected papers of her sister's, had even put this man into the flat, just as he, Van Hupfeldt, had once put Miss L'Estrange there. At all events, here was a man in the flat having some interest or other in Violet and in Gwendoline's papers, with the name Van Hupfeldt on his lips, and a suspicion that Van Hupfeldt was Strauss, the evil genius of Gwendoline!

"But there must be no meddling in my life!" Van Hupfeldt whispered to himself, with an evil eye that meant no good to David.

When the cab drew up before Miss L'Estrange's dwelling, she said: "You can't come up, you know; it is much too late. And there isn't any need. I will let Jenny go to you as early as you like in the morning if you give me your address, or you can come yourself to-morrow--"

"Ah, don't be hard on me," he pleaded. "I mustn't lose a night. Send her down to me, if I can't go up."

"Go on, the poor girl's asleep," she answered. "Where's the use in carrying on like a loony? Can't you take it coolly?"

In the end he had to go without seeing Jenny, having left his card on the understanding that she should be with him not later than ten in the morning, and that Miss L'Estrange should keep his address an inviolable secret.

The moment he was gone from her, Erynyn L'Estrange darted up the stairs, as if to catch something, and, on entering her flat, tripped into her bed-room, turned on the light, threw off her cloak, and put on the necklace before her mirror. It was a fine affair, and no mistake, all lights and colors playing bo-peep in the stones. She made a curtsy to her image, inspected herself on every side, stepping this way and that, daintily, like a peacock, keenly enjoying the gift, till the novelty of possessing it was gone stale. But at no time did she feel any gratitude to the giver, or think of him at all in connection with it--just the fact of having it occupied her mind, it didn't matter whence.

And the mere knowledge that it was so valuable proved it to be a bribe, pointed to a weakness in the giver. Some gifts to women, especially splendid ones, produce not only no gratitude, but a certain hardness of heart, contempt, and touch of enmity. Perhaps there is a feeling of "I ought to be grateful," but being too happy to be grateful, they are bored with a sense of fault, and for this they punish the giver with the opposite of gratitude.

At all events, by the time Miss L'Estrange had taken off the string of gems, a memory had grown up within her of David Harcourt, and with it came a mild feeling of partizanship and liking for David as against Strauss. It was a wayward machine, that she-heart under the bodice of Miss Erynyn L'Estrange--wayward without motive, subtle without thought, treacherous for treachery's sake. As a matter of fact, before waking Jenny, it came into her head to "give a friendly tip" to David on the ground that he was "not a bad sort," and she actually went out of her way to send him a post-card, telling him that she had expected him to call on Jenny that day, and that, if he meant business, he must see her not later than half-past nine the next morning, or he would be too late.

What a web, this, which was being spun round the young adventurer from Wyoming!

CHAPTER X

THE MARRIAGE-LINES

David had not gone to interview Jenny the day before in obedience to Miss L'Estrange's first note, because of the sullen humor to which he relapsed after his experiences at three in the morning in the streets of London. He resented the visiting of the glimpses of the moon by a young lady who donned rubber overshoes before re-entering her house, and he said to himself: "The day's work, and skip the Violets."

Then, the next morning, came Miss L'Estrange's second letter--"he must see Jenny not later than half-past nine" or he would be "too late." Again this failed to rouse him. With those lazy, lithe movements of the body which characterized him, he strolled for some time about the flat after his early breakfast, uncertain what to do. He saw, indeed, that some one else must be after the certificates--Strauss--Van Hupfeldt--if Strauss and Van Hupfeldt were one; but still he halted between two opinions, thinking: "Where do I come in, anyway?"

Then again the face which he had seen at the grave rose before him with silent pleadings, a face touching to a man's heart, with dry rose-leaf lips which she had a way of wetting quickly, and in her cheeks a die-away touch of the peach, purplish like white violets. And how did he know, the jealous youth, by what hundred reasons her nightly wandering might be accounted for? Why did he nourish that sort of resentment against a girl who was a perfect stranger? Perhaps there was really some jealousy in it! At which thought he laughed aloud, and suddenly darted into action, snatched a hat, and went flying. But then it was already past nine.

When he reached Miss L'Estrange's flat, for some time no one answered his ring, and then the door opened but a little way to let out a voice which said: "What is it? I am not dressed. She's gone. I told you you'd be too late."

"Is she gone?" said David, blankly, eager enough now to see her.

"Look here, why should I be bothered with the lot of you at this ungodly hour of the morning?" cried the fickle L'Estrange. "*I* can't help your troubles! Can't you see when anybody is in bed?"

"But why did you let her go before I came?" asked David.

"You are cool! Am I your mother?"

"I wish you were for this once."

"Nice mother and son we little two would make, wouldn't we?"

"That's not the point. I'm afraid you are getting cold. You ought to have contrived to keep the girl till I came, though it is my own fault. But can't anything be done now? Where is she gone to?"

"To Strauss, of course."

"With the certificates?"

"I suppose so. I know nothing about it, and care less. I did try to keep her back a bit for your sake, but she was pretty keen to be gone to him when once she had his address, the underhanded little wretch!"

"But stop--how long is it since she has gone?"

"Not three minutes. It's just possible that you might catch her up, if you look alive."

"How can that be? I shouldn't know her. I have never seen her. We may have passed each other in the street."

"Listen. She is a small, slim girl with nearly white hair and little Chinese eyes. She has on a blue serge skirt with my old astrakhan bolero and a sailor hat. Now you can't miss her."

"But which way? Where does Strauss live?"

"I promised not to tell, and I'm always as good as my word," cried the reliable Miss Ermyne L'Estrange, "but between you and me, it's not a thousand miles from Piccadilly Circus; and that is where Jenny will get down off her bus; so if you take a cab--"

"Excellent. Good-by! See you again!" said David.

David was gone, in a heat of action. He took no cab, however, but took to his heels, so that he might be able to spy at

the occupants within and on the top of each bus on the line of route, by running a little faster than the vehicles. At this hour London was already out of doors, going shopping, going to office and works. It was a bright morning, like the beginning of spring. People turned their heads to look at the man who ran faster than the horses, and pried into the buses. Victoria, Whitehall, Charing Cross, he passed--still he could see no one quite like Jenny. He began to lose hope, finding, moreover, that running in London was not like running in Wyoming, or even like his run from Bucks. Here the air seemed to lack body and wine. It did not repay the lungs' effort, nor give back all that was expended, so that in going up the steep of Lower Regent-St. he began to breathe short. Nevertheless, to reward him, there, not far from the Circus, he saw sitting patient in a bus-corner the sailor hat, the bolero, the Chinese eyes, and reddish white hair of Jenny.

The moment she stepped out, two men sprang forward to address her--David and Van Hupfeldt's valet. Van Hupfeldt lived near the lower portion of Hanover Square, the way to which being rather shut in and odd to one who does not know it, his restlessness had become unbearable when Jenny was a little late, so he had described her to his valet, a whipper-snapper named Neil--for Van Hupfeldt had several times seen Jenny with Miss L'Estrange--and had sent Neil to Piccadilly Circus, where he knew that Jenny would alight, in order to conduct her to his rooms. However, as Neil moved quickly forward, David was before him, and the valet thought to himself: "Hello, this seems to be a case of two's company and three's none."

David was saying to Jenny: "You are Miss L'Estrange's servant?"

"I am," answered Jenny.

"She sent me after you. I must speak with you urgently. Come with me."

Now, in Jenny's head were visions of nothing less than wealth--wealth which she was eager to handle that hour. She said, therefore, to David: "I don't know who you are. I can't go anywhere--"

They stood together on the pavement, with Neil, all unknown to David, behind them listening.

"There's no saying 'No,'" insisted David. "You're going to see Mr. Strauss, aren't you? Well, I am here instead of Mr. Strauss in this matter."

But this ambiguous remark failed of its effect, for Neil, whose master had told him that in this affair he was not Van Hupfeldt but Strauss, intervened with the pert words: "Begging your pardon, but I am Strauss."

However, this short way of explaining that he was there on behalf of Strauss was promptly misunderstood by Jenny, who looked with disdain at the valet, saying: "You are not Mr. Strauss!"

"Of course he isn't," said David, quickly. "How dare you, sir, address this lady? Come right away, will you? Come, now. Let's jump into this cab."

"Who are you? I don't even know you!" cried the perplexed Jenny.

"I didn't say I was Mr. Strauss himself," began Neil.

"Yes, you did say so," said Jenny, "and it isn't the truth, for I know Mr. Strauss very well, and neither of you isn't going to get over me, so you know!"

"Don't you see," suggested David, his wits all at work, "that one of us must be true, and as you are aware that he is false--"

"What is all this about?" demanded Jenny. "I have no business with either of you. Just tell me the way to Hanover Square, please, and let me go about my business."

"That's just why I'm here, to show you the way," said Neil. "I dunno why this gentleman takes it upon himself--"

"Best hold your tongue, young man," growled David. "You must be stupid to think this young girl would go off with you, a man she never saw before, especially after detecting you in a direct untruth--"

"As for that, she don't know you any more than me, seemingly," retorted Neil. "Mr. Strauss sent me--"

"How is she to know that? Miss L'Estrange sent me. Didn't I know your name, Jenny, and your mistress's name?"

"Well, that's right enough," agreed Jenny on reflection.

"Then trust to me."

"But what is it you want, sir?"

"It is about the papers," whispered David, confidentially. "It is all to your good to come with me first and hear what I have to say. Miss L'Estrange--"

"Well, all right; but you must be quick," said Jenny, rushing to a decision.

David hailed a cab, and he and Jenny turned their backs upon the defeated valet, got in, and drove off. However, Neil, who had witnessed Van Hupfeldt's fever of eagerness to see this girl, followed in another cab. David drove to the Tube Station near Oxford Circus--she would accompany him no farther--and, while he talked with Jenny in a corner there, Neil, lurking among the crowd of shop-gazers across the street, kept watch.

"I propose to you," David said to Jenny, "to give the certificates to me, and in doing so, I understand that you are a poor girl--"

"That's just it," answered Jenny, "and I must know first how much I am to get for them--if it's true that I have any certificates."

"Right enough," said David, "but the main motive which I hold out to you is not what you will receive in hard cash, but that you will do an immense amount of good, if you give the papers to me. They don't belong to this Mr. Strauss, but they do belong to the mother and sister of a poor wronged lady, a lady whose character they will clear."

"Ah, no doubt," agreed Jenny, with the knowing leer of a born Cockney; "still, a girl has got to look after herself, you see, and not mind other people's troubles."

"What!" cried David, "would you rather do the wrong thing and earn twenty pounds, or do the right thing and earn five pounds? You can't be in earnest saying that."

"It isn't a question of five pounds, nor yet of twenty," snapped Jenny, offended at the mere mention of such paltry sums, "it's a question of hundreds and of thousands." Her mouth went big for the "thousands." "Don't think that I'm going to part with the papers under high figures, if so be I have any papers."

"Under what?" asked David--"under hundreds, or under thousands?"

"Under thousands."

"Now hold on a bit. Are you aware that I could have the papers taken from you this minute, papers that don't belong to you, which you propose to sell to some one other than the rightful owners?"

At this Jenny changed color. There was a policeman within a few yards, and she saw her great and golden dream dissolving.

"It remains to be seen if I have got any papers. That's the very question, you see!" she said.

"You might be searched, you know, just to clear the point. Yet you needn't be afraid of that, for I'm disposed to meet you, and you aren't going to refuse any reasonable offer, with no trouble from the police to follow. So I offer you now--fifty golden sovereigns for the papers, cash down."

"You leave me alone," muttered Jenny, sheepishly, turning her shoulder to him.

"Well, I thought we were going to be friends; but I see that I must act harshly," David said, making a threatening movement to leave her.

"You can have them for one hundred pounds," the girl murmured in a frail voice with downcast eyes; to which David, not to drive a hard bargain with her, at once answered: "Well, you shall have your one hundred pounds."

The next moment, however, he was asking himself: "Who's to pay? Can I afford these royal extravagances in other people's affairs? Steady! Not too much Violet!"

He walked a little way from the girl, considering it. He could not afford it. There was no earthly reason why he should. But he might go to Violet, to Mrs. Mordaunt, and obtain the one hundred pounds, or their authorization to spend that sum on their behalf. In that case, however, how make sure of Jenny in the meantime? It would hardly do to leave her there in the station, so near to Strauss. She would be drawn to him as by a magnet, and he thought that if he took her with him to the Mordaunts, she would recover her self-assurance and demand from the women more, perhaps, than they could afford. In the end, he decided to take her to his flat, and leave her there in Mrs. Grover's charge till he returned from the Mordaunts.

"That's a bargain, then," he said to her; "one hundred it is. I take it that you actually have the certificates on you?"

"I may have," smirked the elusive Jenny.

"That's all right. 'Have' and 'may have' are the same things in your case. So now I shall go right away to procure the one hundred pounds, and meantime you'll come with me to your old flat in Eddystone Mansions--that's where I live now--No, don't be scared, there's some one there besides myself, and the ghost doesn't walk in the daytime."

They hailed another cab, and again Neil, leaving his lurking-place, drove after them. He saw David and Jenny go into the mansions, then stood uncertain whether to hurry home and tell the position of affairs to Van Hupfeldt, who, he knew, must by this time be raving, or whether to wait and see if Jenny and David came out again.

He was loitering a little way up the house-stairs, thinking it out, when he heard the lift coming down, and presently he saw David rush out--alone. Jenny, then, was still in the building. Neil ran to the lift-man.

"Gentleman who just come down," he said, "does he live here?"

"He do, in No. 7," was the answer.

"Girl's left in his flat, then," thought Neil, scratching his head, "and the bloke wot owns the flat don't know I've been spying. I'd better hurry back and let the master know how things are looking."

Whereat the valet, who was clearer in action than in speech, ran out and took cab to Hanover Square, to tell Van Hupfeldt where Jenny was.



CHAPTER XI

SWORDS DRAWN

David, meantime, also by cab, was off to Porchester Gardens, a certain hurry and fluster now in his usually self-possessed bosom. He looked at his face in the cab-mirror, and adjusted his tie. A young man who acts in that way betrays a symptom of heart-disease. At 60A he sent up his card.

Violet knew from Dibbin the name of David Harcourt, but when she read it she seemed startled, and turned a little pale. "Show him up," she said, in a flurry.

"You will excuse my calling," explained David, without shaking hands, "though we have met before--you remember?"

She inclined her head a little, standing, as it were, shrunk from him, some way off.

"But my visit has to do with a small matter which admits of no delay."

"My mother--" she began.

"Is out, I know," said he, "but as the affair is urgent, I am here. You know that I am the tenant of No. 7, Eddystone Mansions, and you know also, that, without seeking it, I have some knowledge of your history. I wish to ask whether, without troubling your mind with a lot of details, you care to authorize me to spend at once, in your interests, a sum of one hundred pounds."

She scrutinized him with a certain furtiveness, weighing him.

"In my interests?" said she.

"Yours and your mother's."

"One hundred pounds?"

"Yes."

"It seems a strange request."

"It isn't a request. If you haven't confidence in me to the extent of one hundred pounds, I am not deeply concerned."

"But you come like a storm, and speak like one."

"On a purely business matter of your own--remember."

"You were at the pains to come," she said with a smile. "You cannot both care and not care."

"I used the word 'concern,' you know."

"Is it a gracious way to approach me?"

"Is it charming to be mistrusted?"

"Did I say that I mistrusted you?"

"With your eyes."

"Well, I say now with my lips that I do not. Which will you believe?"

"No doubt they can both deceive."

"Oh, now you are verging on rudeness."

"There are worse things than rudeness, when one thinks of it."

"I have no idea to what you refer."

"That may be because I know more about you than you think."

At this she started guiltily, visibly, and at that start again she appeared before the eye of David's memory gliding through the moonlight at three in the morning, a ghost hastening back to the tomb. Yet, in her presence, the resentment which rankled in him softened to pity. A look of appeal came into her dark eyes, and a certain essence of honesty and

purity in her being communicated itself to his instincts, putting it out of his power to think any ill of her for the moment.

He said hurriedly: "I fear I have begun badly. All this is neither here nor there."

She sat down, slung a knee between her clasped fingers in her habitual manner, and said: "Please tell me, what do you mean?" Then she looked up at him again with a troubled light in her eyes.

He walked quickly nearer to her, saying: "Now, don't let that get into your head as a serious statement. It was a mere manner of speaking, what I said, and of no importance. Moreover, there's this question of one hundred pounds, and time is a vital consideration."

"Nevertheless, you were definite enough, and must have had some meaning," she went on. "Did I not hear you say that you know more about me than I think? Well, then, have the goodness to tell me what."

"Now I have put my foot in it, I suppose," said David, "and you will never rest till I find something to tell you. But not now, if you will bear with me. In a few days I shall, perhaps, call on your mother, or see you again at a place which you no doubt visit pretty often at about the same hour, and to which I, too, somehow am strangely drawn. The question now before us is whether I am to spend the one hundred pounds for you."

"As to that, what can one say? You tell me nothing of your reason, my mother is out, and I am afraid that I have not at the moment one hundred pounds of my own. I am about to be married, and--"

"Married?"

"I am myself rather surprised at it. Yet I fail to see why you should be immoderately surprised."

"I? Surprised?" said he in a dazed way, still standing with one foot drawn back a step. "I was merely taken aback, because--"

"Well?"

"Because--nothing. I was simply taken aback, that's all. Or rather because I had not heard of it before."

"It was only fully decided upon yesterday," said she, bending down over her knee.

"Oh, only yesterday. And the happy event takes place when? for I am at least interested."

"Soon. Within two or three weeks. I don't quite know when."

"And the happy man?"

"The same whom you saw come to take me from Kensal Green."

"Mr. Van Hupfeldt?"

"Oh, you know his name. Yes; Mr. Van Hupfeldt."

David chuckled grimly.

"Why do you laugh?" she asked.

"But whatever is your motive?" he cried sharply.

"You are strange to venture to inquire into my motive," she said, with downcast eyes. Then her lip trembled, and she added in a low voice: "My motive is known only to the dead."

"Ah, don't cry!" he almost shouted at her, with a sudden brand of red anger across his brow. "There's no need for tears! It shan't ever happen, this thing!"

"What do you mean?" she asked, glancing tremulously at him.

"What I say. This marriage can't happen. I'll see to that. But stop--perhaps I am talking too soon. 'Let not him boast that putteth his armor on as he that taketh it off.' Good-day, Miss Mordaunt. I shall not trouble you any more about the one hundred pounds. I will spend it out of my own pocket pocket--"

"Please stay!" she cried after him. "Everything that you say bewilders me! How am I to believe you honest when you say such things?"

"What things? Honest? You may believe me honest or not, just as you will. I told you before that I am not greatly

concerned. If I bewilder *you*, you anger *me*."

"I am sorry for that. But how so?"

"What, is it nothing for a man to hear it doubted whether he is honest or not? And, apart from that, admit that your sister is not very long dead, and that you have been easily drawn into this engagement--"

"But what can all this matter to you?" she asked, with a wrinkled brow. "Why should my private conduct anger you at all? I have not, in fact, as you think, been so easily won into this engagement; yet, if I had, it is amazing that you should lecture me. If it was any one but you, I should be cross."

"What, am I in special favor, then?"

"You have an honest face."

"Then why is my poor honesty constantly doubted?"

"Because you say extraordinary things. It is not, for instance, usual for people to pay one hundred pounds for the benefit of a casual acquaintance as you just volunteered to do. Either you have some trick or motive in view, or you are very wonderfully disinterested."

"Which do you think?"

"I may think one thing now, and the other after you are gone."

"Well, it is useless arguing. I should be here all day, if I let myself. We were not made to agree, you see. Some people are like that. I shall just pay the one hundred pounds out of my own pocket--"

"You are not to do that, please."

"Then, will you?"

"I think not."

"You have no idea what is in question!"

"Then, give me some idea."

"And lose more time. However, you may as well hear. It is this: that the tenant in the flat before me, one Miss L'Estrange, found concealed in a picture a certificate of a marriage and one of a birth, and I wish to buy them for you from Miss L'Estrange's servant, who has them."

Violet sprang upright with an adoring face, murmuring: "Heaven be thanked!"

"I didn't tell you before," said David, "because I haven't secured the papers yet. I have left the girl in my flat--"

"But where--where do you say she found them?" she asked, with a keener interest than the question quite seemed to call for.

"It was in a picture-frame, between the picture and the boards at the back," he answered. "The picture dropped, and the certificates fell out."

"Heaven be praised!" she breathed again. "Was there nothing else that fell out?"

"Nothing else, apparently."

"That was enough. Why should I want more? Oh, get them for me quickly, will you?" she cried, all animated and pink. "With these in my hand everything will be different. Even your prophecy against my marriage, which you seemed not to desire, will very likely come true."

"So now I have your authority to spend the one hundred pounds?" he asked, with a smile.

"Of course! Ten times as much!"

"But blessed is she who has not seen, and yet has believed!"

"Forgive me! I do thank and trust you!" She put out her hand. He took it, and bent some time over it.

"Good-by, Miss Mordaunt."

"Not for long--an hour--two?"

"I am glad to have pleased you. I shall always remember how the brunette type of angels look when they thank Providence."

"It is not fair to flatter when one is highly happy and deeply thankful, for then one hears everything as music. Tell me of it some other time, when I shall have a sharper answer ready. But stay--one word. It is of these certificates that Mr. Van Hupfeldt, too, must somehow have got wind. Does the girl say that any one else knows of them?"

"A man named Strauss knows of them."

At that name her eyelids fell as if her modesty had been hurt. "Does not Mr. Van Hupfeldt know of them?" she asked, with face averted.

"I cannot tell you--yet," he answered, turning a little from her lest she caught the grim smile on his lips. "Why do you think that he may know?"

"Because some days ago he wrote me a note--it is this. It can refer only to these certificates, I suppose."

She handed to David his own note--"It is now a pretty certain thing that your sister was a duly wedded wife"--and David, looking at it, asked with something of a flush: "Did Mr. Van Hupfeldt say that it was he who sent you this? I see that it has no signature."

"Yes, it was he," said Violet.

"Ah!" murmured David, and said no more.

"If it was these certificates which he had in his mind when he wrote that note," said she, "then he, too, as well as you, must have a chance of securing them from the girl. So you had better be careful that he is not beforehand with you."

David looked squarely at her. "So long as you obtain them, what does it matter from whom they come?"

"Of course," she replied, with her eyes on the ground, "I shall owe much gratitude to the person who hands them to me."

He took a step forward, whispering: "Must I be the winner?"

He received no answer from her; only, a wave of blood, a blush that flooded her being from her toes to the roots of her hair all of a sudden, suffused Violet, while he stood awaiting her reply. He put out his hand with a fine self-control. "Well, I must try," he cried lightly. She just touched his fingers with hers, and the next moment he was striding from her.

His cab was waiting outside. Calling, "Quick as you can!" to the driver, he sprang in, and they started briskly away. He was well content inwardly. Something bird-like seemed new-fledged and fluttering a little somewhere inside. He had tasted the sweet poison of honey-dew.

As for doubt, he had none at the moment. Jenny he had left safe with Mrs. Grover; he was sure that she had the certificates with her. But when he reached the middle of Oxford-St., he saw that which made him start--Van Hupfeldt in a landau driving eastward, and, sitting beside the coachman, the valet Neil. What spurred David's interest was the pace at which the landau's horses were racing through the traffic, and also the face of the man in the carriage, so gaunt and wild, leaning forward with his two hands clenched on his knees, as if to press the carriage faster forward by the strain of his soul.

At once a host of speculations crowded upon David's mind. Now, for the first time, it occurred to him that Neil may have shadowed him and the girl to the flat, that Van Hupfeldt might have the daring to be on the way to the flat to win Jenny from him. He felt that he could hardly prevail against Van Hupfeldt with Jenny--Van Hupfeldt being rich--and the two high-steppers in the landau were fast leaving the cab-horse behind. An eagerness to be quickly at his flat rose in David, so without stopping his cab he stood out near the splash-board and cried to his amazed driver: "I say! You come inside, and let me drive."

"Mustn't do that, sir. It is more than my place is worth," began the cabman.

"Two pounds for you, and I pay all fines--quick now!" said David.

The driver hesitated, but pulled up. He climbed down, went into the cab, and David was on the perch, reins in hand. Though some persons were astonished, luckily no policeman saw them. The horse, as if conscious of something from Wyoming behind him, began to run. David bolted northward out of the traffic, and careered through the emptier streets, while the old cab-horse wondered what London was coming to when such things could be, and praised the days of his

youth. When David drew up at Eddystone Mansions, there was no sign of the landau. He ran up the stairs three at a time. He would not await the tardy elevator. In moments of stress we return to nature and cast off the artificial. Opening his door with his key, he made straight into the drawing-room where he had left Jenny. Then his heart sank miserably, for she was not there.

"Mrs. Grover!" he called, and when Mrs. Grover hurried from the kitchen, her hands leprous with pastry-dough, David looked at her so thunderously that she drew back.

"Where's the girl, Mrs. Grover?" he growled.

"She's gone, sir."

"I see that. You let her go, Mrs. Grover?"

"Why, sir, a man came here, saying he had a message from you for the girl, and I let him in. They had a talk together, then she said she must be going. I couldn't stop her."

David groaned.

The man who had called was Neil, who, on hurrying to tell his master where Jenny was, had been sent back with instructions to try and induce her to leave the flat and come to Hanover Square. Neil had accomplished this to the extent of getting Jenny to leave Eddystone Mansions; but she would not go to Strauss, for David's threat of the police if she disposed of the papers to any one else than their lawful owner was in her mind, and she now feared to sell the papers to Strauss, as she knew that she would certainly do if she once went to his rooms. Yet she was sorely tempted to sell to the lavish rich man rather than to the bargainer, and so, making a compromise between her fears and her temptation, she had told Neil that she would wait in a certain cafe, and there discuss the matter with Strauss, if Strauss would come to her. She was waiting there, and Strauss was going to her, led by Neil, when David had seen him in the landau.

At any rate, the girl was gone. David felt as if he had lost all things. He had promised the certificates; and Violet had said: "I shall owe much gratitude to the person who hands them to me."

Now Van Hupfeldt had, or would have, them. While he had been dallying and bandying words in Porchester Gardens, Van Hupfeldt had been acting, and he groaned to himself in a pain of self-reproach: "Too much Violet, David!"

He strode to and fro in the dining-room with a quick step, pacing with the lightness of a caged bear, his fists clenched, keen to act, yet not knowing what to do. The girl was gone, the certificates gone with her.

One thing, however, he had gained by the adventure, namely, the almost certainty that Van Hupfeldt was Strauss--for he had seen the valet, Neil, who at Piccadilly Circus had declared that he was Strauss's servant, sitting on the box-seat of the landau in which was the man whom David had heard Violet at the grave call "Mr. Van Hupfeldt." This seemed a sort of proof that Van Hupfeldt and Strauss were one. The same man who had been so bound up with the one sister, and had somehow brought her to her death, was now about to marry the other! The thought of such a thing struck lightning from David's eyes.

"Never that!" he vowed in his frenzy. "However it goes, not that!"

And then he was angry afresh with her, thinking: "He can't be much good, this man--she must be easily won."

He could not guess that Van Hupfeldt had promised to clear her sister's name six months after the marriage, and that this was her motive, and not love, for being won. He did not realize that the certificates now lost by him would have freed Violet from Van Hupfeldt. He believed that she was entering lightly into marriage with a man of great wealth. Again, in this unreasoning mood, he saw her in her nocturnal wanderings.

But bitterness and regrets could not bring back the certificates, in the gaining of which her honor was almost at stake. If he had known where Van Hupfeldt lived, he would have gone straight there. Nevertheless, Van Hupfeldt was not at home, was hurrying away from home, in fact. Here, then, was another point. Jenny had clearly not gone to Van Hupfeldt's on leaving the flat, or why should Van Hupfeldt be racing eastward? It seemed that Jenny and Van Hupfeldt were to meet somewhere else, perhaps somewhere not far from the mansions. If David had only kept the landau in sight, he might have tracked Van Hupfeldt to that meeting! He felt now that, if he could come upon them, then, by the mere force and whirlwind of his will, he should have his way. On a sudden he went out again into the streets.

He ran southward at a venture. If there was a conference going on in any house near by, and if the landau was waiting outside, he should recognize it by the horses and by Neil on the box. But, as it turned out, even this recognition was not necessary, for, running down Bloomsbury-St., toward a carriage of which he caught sight standing before a French

chocolate-shop at the Oxford-St. corner, he saw a man and a girl come out of the shop. The man lifted his hat and nodded toward the girl with his foot on the carriage-step, and then was driven off westward. Half a minute afterward David had overtaken the girl.

"You wretched creature!" he said, in the fierce heat of his anger and haste: "Hand me those certificates, and be quick about it!"

"I haven't the faintest idea which certificates you mean," said Jenny, as bold now as brass, for she had no doubt been strengthened by the interview in the shop, and assured of Van Hupfeldt's protection.

This was enough for David. He understood from her words that the papers were now in Van Hupfeldt's hands; whereat a flood of rage surged within him, and, without any definite purpose, he rushed after the carriage. It had not gone far, because of a block of traffic near Tottenham Court Road, and his hot face was soon thrust over the carriage-door. Van Hupfeldt shrank back into the farthest corner with a look of blank dismay.

"Yes, you can have them, Mr. Strauss--" began David, hotly.

"What is it?" muttered Van Hupfeldt, crouching, with his hand on the opposite door-handle. "That is not my name."

"Whatever your name, or however many names you may own, you can have those papers now; but there may be other things where they came from, and if they're there, I'm the man in possession, mark you, and I'll be finding them--"

"Papers! What papers? Find what?" asked Van Hupfeldt, with a scared face that belied his words.

"You cur!" cried David, his heart burning hot within him; "make amends for your crimes while you may. If you don't, I tell you, I shall have no mercy. Soon I shall have my hands on you--"

"Drive on!" screamed Van Hupfeldt to his coachman, and, the block of traffic having now cleared, the horses trotted on, and left David red-faced with fury, in imminent danger of being run over by the press of vehicles behind.



CHAPTER XII

THE NIGHT-WATCHES

David returned home angry with himself in all ways, not least for his loss of self-control in pursuing Van Hupfeldt with no object but to vent himself in mere threats. His suggestion to Van Hupfeldt that other documents besides the certificates might be hidden among the picture-frames in the flat was in the tone of a child's boasting. One should find first, he told himself, and boast afterward. However, one of Mrs. Grover's excellent little lunches put him straight, and, though work was a thousand miles from his mood that day, he compelled himself to do it, and the pen began to run.

But first he had said to Mrs. Grover: "I want you to get the steps, and take down every picture in the flat, except the three big ones, which I will see to myself."

Then, with his flower-pot of violets on each hand, he was soon in the thick of the cow-boy and prairie-flower history which he had on hand. His stories were already known on this side by the whiff of reality they brought from the States, and were in some demand. Already the postman handed him printers' proofs, and he had proved to himself that he possessed some of the wisdom of the serpent in choosing a reputable abode, because the men whom he entertained went away saying: "Harcourt has private means. He has taken to literature as a hobby," an idea which made him popular. If certain editors, on the strength of it, wished to pay him half-rates, they were soon undeceived. David was much too hard a nut to crack in that easy way.

Meantime, neither by sight nor sound had he been reminded of the eery experience of his first night in No. 7. True, there were noises during the still hours, such as had twice thrilled Miss L'Estrange and Jenny. But they seemed quite natural to him. The dryness of the interior of the block of flats had loosened flooring-boards and dislocated cross-beams, until the mere movement of an article of furniture overhead, or the passing of a next-floor tenant from one room to another, would set going creaks enough to give rise to half a dozen ghost-panics.

That night he had to be at the Holborn Restaurant for an annual dinner of internationals, so he struck work soon after four, seeing that by then Mrs. Grover's task of taking down and dusting was ended, and the pictures now lay in a pile by the dining-room sideboard. David procured himself a quantity of brown paper, with gum and pincers, sat on the floor by the pile, and, with an effort to breathe no faster than usual, set himself to work. It was not so slight a task as it looked, some of the pictures being elaborately fastened with brown paper, tacks, and bars; and, since they were not his own, he had to leave them not less trim than he found them. He was resolved to trust not even a workman in this search. However, being handy, a Jack of all trades, he had got some half dozen unfastened and again fastened before six o'clock.

His gum failing, he called upon Mrs. Grover, received no answer, called again, went searching, but could not find her in the flat. Wondering at this, he stepped outside the front door to invoke the services of the lift-man, when a little way down the stairs he caught a sound of voices in low talk. His ready ear seemed to detect the particular accent of his housekeeper, and he went downward, spying out who it might be. He wore slippers, and for this reason, perhaps, approached near the speakers before he was seen. They were Mrs. Grover and a young man. The latter, the moment he was aware of David's presence, was gone like a thief, so David did not see his face--it was dark there at that hour--but he had an impression that it was Neil, Van Hupfeldt's valet, and his legs of themselves started into chase; but he checked himself.

"Who was the man?" he asked Mrs. Grover, when they had gone back into the flat.

"I'm sure I don't know his name, sir," was her answer.

"You know him, perhaps. Is it the same who came here to speak with the girl I left in your charge?"

"I believe it is the same," said Mrs. Grover, "though I didn't see him well."

"Oh, you believe. What on earth does he want of you?"

"He kept asking me questions. I told him to go about his business--"

"What did he want to know?"

"Whether I was satisfied with my place, and whether I didn't think that a woman like me could better herself, considering the wages I'm getting--"

"That all he wanted to know?"

"That's about all--things like that."

David, looking at her, said: "I am sure he was quite right. You deserve five times the wages I am giving you; so if I pay you a month's wages in advance now--"

"But, sir!"

"No, it's no use, Mrs. Grover. You were born for greater things than this. Yet, wherever you go next, do be loyal to the man from whom you earn your bread against all the world. Here's your money."

In vain Mrs. Grover protested. The place was good enough for her, the flat not fit to be left as it was, things not washed, something on the fire. It was of no avail. As David's servant she was suddenly dead. He saw her out with a hearty hand-shake at the door, and his best wishes.

Only after she was well gone did he remember that she had forgotten to deliver up the front door-key.

As it was now nearly time to dress for the dinner, he left his work on the pictures for the day. In the half dozen or so which he had taken to pieces he had found nothing, and was disillusioned, cross-tempered, disturbed by many things.

He sat down and wrote to Miss Violet Mordaunt: "I am sorry to say that I have failed to receive the documents of which I had the honor to speak to you. I have reason, however, to believe that your fiance, Mr. Van Hupfeldt, has bought them, and from his hand you will perhaps receive them."

But his conscience felt this letter to be hard, ironical, and not sincere; for if, as he suspected, Van Hupfeldt's name was on the certificates as the husband of dead Gwendoline, Violet was little likely to receive them from Van Hupfeldt's hand. So he tore up the note, and wrote another which equally reflected his ill-humor. Nor did this go through the post. In the end, though he knew that she must be anxiously awaiting a word of news from him, he shirked for the present the task of announcing his failure to her, and rushed out to the dinner.

He came home late, and as he stepped from the lift to the landing, something--a light or a fancy--caused him to start. It seemed to him that through the opaque glass of his door he had seen a light. Certainly, the impression was gone in one instant, but he had it. He went in with some disquiet of the nerves. All was dark, all still, within. He turned on three or four of the lights in rapid succession, and his eyes pierced here and there without discerning anything save familiar articles of furniture.

The flat was lonely to him that night. Though Mrs. Grover would not in any case have been there at that hour, yet the fact that she would not come in the morning as usual, the fact that he was now the only life in the little home, made him as solitary in London as a castaway in mid-sea. The fires were dead. He sat a little while in his overcoat by the dining-room fireplace, glanced at the heap of pictures, at the face of Gwendoline. And now again he started. Something in the aspect of the heap struck him as new, as not perhaps the same as when he had gone out.

But here again he seemed to himself the prey of his own fancies. He asked himself angrily if he was losing his memory and his grip of facts. He thought that he had left only two of the pictures in pieces; now three of them were without their backs. As he sat looking at them, the clock on the mantelpiece all at once ceased ticking, and this small thing again, due solely to his omission to wind the clock, had an effect upon his mood. He seemed to hear the sudden silence, as it were the ceasing of a heart-beat, and the "all is over" of the bereaved when the last breath passes. He rose and stretched himself and yawned, and took in with him to his bed-room one of the pots of violets, so that, if he scented violets, he should know whence the scent came. And he took care to turn on the light in his bed-room before turning off all the other lights. Could this be David, the man who used to sleep beneath the stars?

Now he lay down in the dark, and all was quiet. Only, from far away, from some other polygon in the hive of flats, came a tinkling, the genteel sound of the piano, very faint, as remote from him as was the life of her who played it. He was listening to it, thinking of the isolation in which all souls are more or less doomed to live, when the question occurred to him incidentally: "Am I really alone in this flat? As a matter of fact, is not some one with me?" He had seemed to hear a definite click, and if it was not in the flat, then, he thought, his ears must be losing their old trick of exactness.

He stole out of bed, and, without making the faintest sound, peeped out along the corridors. Nothing seemed to stir. Minute after minute he stood patiently, hearing only that shell-music which the tympanum of the ear gives out in deep silence. Once he caught a Lilliputian rush, and a screech, an escapade in mouseland. Behind him a small clock ticked in his bed-room, and presently there was yet another sound, low, but prolonged, as if paper was being very cautiously torn somewhere.

Instantly the instinct to grip his six-shooter in his hand rose in David. His former experience in the flat had caused him to have the weapon ready. Great is that moment when awe rises into indignation and action, as now with him. Silently,

with every nerve strung, and each muscle nimble for the encounter, he stepped backward into his bed-room, and drew the weapon from beneath his pillow. No longer careful about hiding the fact that he was awake, he made a rush along the longer corridor into the hall, caught up the hall chair and table and threw them against the door, heaved up the hat-stand and placed it also against the door, thus blocking the enemy's retreat. And he said to himself: "Be it ghost, or be it mortal man, let there be a fight to a finish this time!"

But he kept himself in the dark for safety's sake, and, bold as his heart was, it beat fast, as he now stood in the farthest corner of the hall near the door, listening for his life. And anon he sniffed with his nostrils for a scent of violets, for a wafture from the grave, which came not.

But this waiting for he knew not what was not long to be borne. Wounds are not so grisly to the mind as the touch of a hand which cannot be grasped. He crept back in the dark along the wall, again noiselessly, into the corridor, into his bed-room, locked the door, and, with finger on trigger, switched on the light. Keeping his ear alert for whatever might happen outside, he searched the room. No one was under the bed, or anywhere there. He turned off the light, went out, and, in a similar manner, searched behind a locked door, wherever he found a key in the lock, each of the other two bed-rooms, and the bath-room. In that end of the flat there was no one, nor a scent of anything, save the perfume of the violets in his bed-room. And again he began to think that he must surely be the plaything of his fancies.

Along the corridor he crept again, and entered the drawing-room, locked the door, turned on the light, looked round to search. At that instant he heard, he felt, the flight of steps in the flat. It was the merest sign of something detected by some sixth sense acquired by him in harkening to the whispers of the jungle. These were steps as light and swift as a specter's might be. But he had the notion that they fled out of the dining-room down the short passage between the kitchen and the servant's room, and, quick as thought, he had out the drawing-room light, and was after them.

The door of the servant's bed-room was on the left of the cross passage, that of the kitchen on the right, just opposite the other. He went like a cat which sees in the night, swift and soft, along the left wall, his breast pressed to it, until, coming to the servant's bed-room door, he gave a twist to the handle to go in.

The handle turned a little, but not much. The door would not open. It seemed to be held by some one within, for it was not locked, since there happened to be no key in it.

Here, at any rate, was something tangible at last. And, when it came to be a question of main force, natural or supernatural, David was in his element. He set himself to get that door-handle round, and it turned. He put himself into the effort to press that door open, and it opened a little. But, all at once, it opened too much! and he plunged staggering within. At the same time he was aware of something rushing out; he had just time to snatch his revolver from the waist of his pajamas and fire, when his silent adversary was gone, and had vehemently slammed the door upon him. Almost at the same moment another door slammed--the kitchen-door. Then all was still again.

It was as when a mighty momentary wind seizes upon a house in the dead of night, slams two doors, causes something to bark, and passes on its way. The two slammings and the bark of the revolver were almost simultaneous--and silence swallowed them together.

David flew after the thing which had evaded him to the kitchen-door. His blood was up. During his first experience of something queer in the flat he had had an impression of a woman, perhaps on account of the scent of violets. But this time there seemed to be no such scent, and this latest impression was of a man--an impression hardly perhaps due to sight, for the servant's room was about the darkest spot in the flat, its one small window being shrouded with tapestry curtains, and the outer night itself dark. But he somehow believed now that it was a man, and he flung himself again and again against the kitchen-door with no good meaning toward that man. For there could be no doubt that whoever or whatever it was, his visitant was now in the kitchen, since the door would not open.

After some vain effort to force it, he stopped, panting, thinking what he should do. There was a little pointed poker in the dining-room by which he might pick the lock; but before deciding upon this he again tried his power of shoulder and will against the door, and this time felt something give within. The door, too, was not really locked, having no key in it, as, in general, the keys of old flats become displaced. It was apparently only fastened, if it were fastened at all, by some catch or hook, for, after two or three more thumps, it flew wide.

David, catching the handle, held it a little ajar, and now again the stillness of the night was outraged by his shout through the slit: "Hands up! or I fire!" At the same instant he rushed in, and flooded the kitchen with light.

But no one was there! A pallor struck from the corners of his mouth to his cheek, even while his brow was flushed, and he stood aghast, with an astounding question in his eyes and in his heart.

CHAPTER XIII

NO MORE VIOLET

There was little sleep for David Harcourt that night. After his inrush into the kitchen, and his long amazement to find it empty, he again searched the flat throughout; no one but he was in it, and no one had gone out through the front door, for there stood his barricade of table, chair, and hat-stand, just as he had left it.

This seemed surely to show that he had to do with that which is beyond and above natural. Yet there were points against that view, too. There was, first of all, the spot of blood, for in the passage between the servant's room and the kitchen he saw what seemed to be a spot of blood. The carpet was a brown pattern on a pink ground, and in one place the brown looked redder than elsewhere,—that was all. If it was blood, then the bullet shot by him, which he now found imbedded in the frame of the kitchen-door, may have passed through some part of a man; but he could not assert to himself that it was blood.

There were, however, the pictures. Unless he was dancing mad, the fact was certain that he had left only three of them with their backs undone, and now there were five—and he refused to believe that he was indeed moonstruck.

So, then, a man had been in the flat, since no ghost could materialize to the extent of picking tacks out of picture-frames. And, if there had been a man, that man was Van Hupfeldt, and no other. Van Hupfeldt's motive would be clear enough. Miss L'Estrange had told Van Hupfeldt that the certificates had fallen out of the back of a picture. David himself had had the rashness, in his rage at the loss of the certificates, to say over the door of Van Hupfeldt's landau that there "might be other things where the certificates came from." Mrs. Grover had been seen that afternoon talking to Van Hupfeldt's servant. She was evidently in process of being bribed and won over to the enemy. She may have told how David had had all the pictures taken down and was at work on them, and how he was to be out at an annual dinner that night. She may possibly have handed over to Van Hupfeldt the key of the flat, and Van Hupfeldt, in a crazy terror lest anything should be found by David in the pictures, may have come into the flat to search for himself.

All this seemed plausible enough. But, then, how had Van Hupfeldt got away? Had he a flying-machine? Was he a griffin? Were there holes in the wall?

But if, as a matter of fact, he or some other had been in the flat, and had some way got out other than by the front door, here was a new thought—that Gwendoline Mordaunt may not, after all, have committed suicide. Suicide had been assumed simply because of the locked and bolted front door. But how if there existed some other mysterious exit from the flat? In that case she might have been done to death—by Strauss, by Van Hupfeldt, if Van Hupfeldt was Strauss.

David, no doubt, was all too ready to think evil of this man. Nevertheless the question confronted him. Why, he asked himself, should Gwendoline have committed suicide? She was a married woman—the certificate, seen by Miss L'Estrange, proved that. True, Gwendoline had received some terrible letter four days before her death, as her servant had told David, and she had said to the girl: "I am not married. You think that I am; but I am not." Still, a doubt arose now as to her suicide. Her sister Violet did not believe in the suicide. Nothing was certain.

However, this new theory of the tragedy put David upon writing to Violet the first thing in the morning. Vague as his doubt, it was a set-off against his shame of defeat in the matter of the certificates. It was something with which to face her. He resolved to tell her at once all that was in his mind, even his shocking suspicion that Van Hupfeldt was Strauss, and he wrote:

"Mr. David Harcourt has unfortunately not been able to secure the certificates of which he had the honor of speaking to Miss Mordaunt, but believes that her fiance, Mr. Van Hupfeldt, may be in a position to give her some information on the subject. However, Mr. Harcourt has other matters of pressing importance to communicate to Miss Mordaunt for her advantage, and, in case she lacks the leisure to be alone in the course of the day, he will be pleased to be at her sister's grave this evening about five, if she will write him a line to that effect."

He posted this before eight in the morning, went off to seek his old charwoman in Clerkenwell, breakfasted outside, came home, and set to work afresh upon the pictures.

And that proved a day of days for him. For, before noon, on opening the back of a mezzotint of the "Fighting Temeraire," he found a book, large, flat, and ivory-white. Its silver clasp was locked. He could not see within, yet he understood that it was no printed book, but in manuscript, and that here was the diary of Gwendoline Mordaunt. He was still exulting over it, searching now with fresh zeal for more treasure, when he received a note: "Miss Mordaunt hopes to lay some flowers on her sister's grave this evening about five."

Her paper had a scent of violets, and David, in putting it to his nostrils, allowed his lips, too, to steal a kiss;--for happy men do sometimes kiss scented paper. And he was happy, thinking how, when he presented the diary to her, he would see her glad and thankful.

At the very hour, however, when he was thus rejoicing, Van Hupfeldt was going up the stairs at 60A, Porchester Gardens. He was limping and leaning on his valet, and his dark skin was now so much paler than usual that on his entrance into the drawing-room Mrs. Mordaunt cried out:

"Why, what is the matter?"

"Do not distress yourself at all," said Van Hupfeldt, limping on his stick toward her. "Only a slight accident--a fall off a stumbling horse in the park this morning--my knee--it is better now--"

"Oh, I am so sorry! But you should not have come; you are evidently still in pain. So distressing! Sit here; let me--"

"No, really," said he, "it is nearly all right now, dear Mrs. Mordaunt. I have so much to say, and so little time to say it in. Where is Violet?"

"She is in her bed-room; will soon be down. Let me place this cushion--"

"She is well, I hope?"

"Yes; a little strange and restless to-day, perhaps."

"What is it now?"

"Oh, some little fall of the spiritual barometer, I suppose. She has not mentioned anything specific to me."

"You received my telegram of this morning?"

"Saying that you would come at half-past one? Yes."

"Well, I am lucky to have found you alone, for in what I have now to suggest to you, I do not wish my influence to appear--let it seem to be done entirely on your own impulse--but I have to beseech you, Mrs. Mordaunt, to return to Rigsworth this very day."

"To-day? Rigsworth? But there are still a host of things to be seen to before the wedding--"

"I know, I know. Even at the cost of putting off the wedding for a week, if you will do all that is to be done from Rigsworth instead of in London, you will profoundly oblige me. I had hoped that you would do this for me without requiring my reason, but I see that I must give it, and without any beating about the bush. Only give me first your assurance that you will breathe not one word to Violet of what I am forced to tell you."

"Good gracious! What has happened?"

"Promise me this."

"Well, I shall be discreet."

"Then, I have to tell you that Violet has made an undesirable acquaintance in London, one whom it is of supreme importance, if our married life is to be a success, that she should see not once again. It is a man--No, don't be unduly alarmed--I don't for a moment suspect that their intimacy has proceeded far, but it has proceeded too far, and must go no farther. I may tell you that it is my belief that letters, or notes, have passed between them, and, to my knowledge, they have met at least once by appointment in Kensal Green cemetery, for I have actually surprised them there. Now, pray, don't be distressed. Don't, now, or I shall regret having told you. Certainly, it is a serious matter, but don't think it more serious than it is--"

"Violet?" breathed Mrs. Mordaunt, with a long face.

"The facts are as I have stated them," proceeded Van Hupfeldt, "and when the knowledge of them came to me, I was at some pains to make inquiries into the personality of the man in question. He turns out to be a man named Harcourt."

"Oh, you mean Mr. Harcourt, the occupier of the flat in Eddystone Mansions? Why, he was here yesterday. Violet herself told me--"

"Here? Yesterday?" Van Hupfeldt turned suddenly greenish. "But why so? What did the man say?"

"Violet did not seem to wish to be explicit," answered Mrs. Mordaunt; "but I understood from her that he is interested

in Gwendoline's fate."

"He? By what right does he dare? He is interested in Violet! That is whom the man is interested in, Mrs. Mordaunt, I tell you! And do you know what this man is? I have been at the pains to discover--a scribbler of books, a man of notoriously bad character who has had to fly from America--"

"How awful! But Mr. Dibbin, the agent, had references--"

"References are quite useless. It is as I say, and I am not guessing when I assert to you that Violet has a penchant for this man--a most dangerous penchant, which can lead to nothing but disaster, if it be not now scotched in the bud. I demand it as my right, and I beseech it as a friend, that she never see him again."

"Yet it is all most strange. I think you exaggerate. Violet's fancies are not errant."

"Well, say that I exaggerate. But you will at least sympathize, Mrs. Mordaunt, with my sense of the acute danger of your further stay in London at present--"

"I think you make a mountain of a molehill, Mr. Van Hupfeldt," said Mrs. Mordaunt with some dryness, "and I am sorry now that I have promised not to speak with Violet on the subject. Of course, I recognize your right to have your say and your way, but as for leaving London to-day at a moment's notice, really that can't be done."

"Not to oblige me? not to please me?" said he, grasping the old lady's hand with a nervous intensity of gesture that almost startled her.

"We might go to-morrow," she admitted.

"But if they correspond or meet to-night?"

"Well, you are a lover, of course; but you shouldn't start at shadows. Here is Violet herself."

"Leave us a little, will you?" whispered Van Hupfeldt, rising to meet the girl in his impulsive foreigner's way, but, forgetting his wounded leg, he had to stop short with a face of pain.

"Are you ill?" asked Violet, and a certain aloofness of manner did not escape him.

"A small accident--" he told over again the history of his fall from a horse which had never borne him. Mrs. Mordaunt went out. Violet stood at a table, turning over the leaves of a book, while Van Hupfeldt searched her face under his anxious eyes, and there was a silence between them, until Violet, taking from her pocket David's first unsigned note to her, held it out, saying: "It was you who sent me this?"

"I have told you so," answered Van Hupfeldt, gray to the lips. "Why do you ask again?"

"Because I am puzzled," she answered. "I have this morning received a note in this same handwriting, unless I am very much mistaken, a note from a certain Mr.--"

"Yes. Harcourt--Christian name David."

"Quite so. David Harcourt--I can say it," she answered quietly. "But how, then, comes it that your note and his are in the same handwriting?"

Van Hupfeldt's lips opened and shut, his eyes shifted, and yet he chuckled with the uneasy mirth of a ghoul: "The solution of that puzzle doesn't seem difficult to me."

"You mean that you got Mr. Harcourt to write your note for you?" asked Violet.

"You are shrewdness itself," answered Van Hupfeldt.

"I did not know that you even knew him."

"Ah, I know him well."

"Well, then, have you brought the certificates?" she asked keenly.

"Which certificates?"

"Which? You ask that? Surely, surely, you know that a certificate of marriage and one of birth were found in the flat by a Miss L'Estrange?"

"No, I didn't know. How could I know?"

"But am I in a dream? I have made sure that it was upon some knowledge of them that you relied when you wrote in the unsigned note, 'It is now a pretty certain thing that your sister was a duly wedded wife.'" And she looked at David's letter again.

"No, I had other grounds. I needn't tell you what, since they are not yet certain--other grounds. I have not heard yet of any certificates--"

"Well, God help me, then!" she murmured, half-crying. "What, then, does Mr. Harcourt mean? He says in the note of this morning: 'Mr. Harcourt has not been able to secure the certificates, but believes that Miss Mordaunt's fiance, Mr. Van Hupfeldt, may be in a position to give her some information on the subject.' What does that mean when you never even heard of the certificates?"

Van Hupfeldt, looking squarely now at her, said: "It means nothing at all. You may take it from me that no certificates have been found."

Violet flushed angrily. "Some one is untrue!" she cried out.

"I fear that that is so," murmured Van Hupfeldt, dropping his eyes from her crimsoned face.

There was silence then for a while.

"With what object did this Harcourt come to you yesterday, Violet?" asked Van Hupfeldt.

"He wished to obtain my mother's authorization for him to spend one hundred pounds in buying the certificates from Miss L'Estrange's servant."

"Ah, that was what he said was his object. But his real object was slightly different, I'm afraid. I know this man, you see. He is poor, and not honest."

"Not honest?"

"No, not honest."

"You say such a thing?"

"But what is it to you? Why do you care? Why are you pale? Yes, I say it again, not honest! the miserable ruffian."

"If he heard you, I think he might resent it with some vigor," she said quietly.

"Why do you speak so strangely? What is it? Do you doubt what I tell you?" asked Van Hupfeldt.

"I neither doubt nor believe. What is it to me? I only feel ashamed to live in the same world with such people. If it was not to obtain my authorization to spend the one hundred pounds for the certificates, why did he come?"

"There were no certificates!" cried Van Hupfeldt, vehemently. "The certificates were an invention. What he really wanted was, not your authorization, but the one hundred itself. He hoped that when he asked for your authorization, you, in your eagerness to have the certificates, would produce the one hundred pounds, which to a man in his position is quite a large sum, whereupon he would have decamped, and you would have heard no more either of him or of your one hundred pounds. But, as you did not hand him the money, he now very naturally writes to say that he can't get the certificates. I know the fellow very well. I have long known him. He comes from America, where he has played such ingenious pranks once too often."

Violet sighed with misery, like one who hears the unfavorable verdict of a doctor. "Oh, don't!" she murmured.

"I am sorry to offend your ears," said Van Hupfeldt, looking with interest at his nails, for they had nearly dug into the palms of his hands a few minutes earlier, "but it was necessary to tell you this. This is not the sort of man who ought ever to have entered your presence. How, by the way, did you come to know him?"

"I met him by chance at my sister's grave. He told me that he is the tenant of the flat. He seemed good. I don't know what to do!" She let herself fall into a chair, leaned her head on her hand, and stared miserably into vacancy, while Van Hupfeldt, limping nearer, said over her:

"You ought to promise me, Violet, never again to allow yourself to hold any sort of communication with this person. You will hardly, indeed, be able to see him again, for Mrs. Mordaunt has just been telling me of her sudden resolve to go down to Rigsworth to-morrow morning."

"To-morrow?"

"So she says; and perhaps on the whole it is best, don't you think?"

Violet shrugged hopeless shoulders. "I don't care one bit either way," she said.

"So, then, that is agreed between us. You won't ever write to him again."

"I don't undertake anything of that kind," she retorted. "I must have time to think. Are you quite sure that all this infamy is the God's truth? It is as if you said that mountain streams ran ink. The man told me that there were certificates. They fell out of a picture-frame, he said. He looked true, he seemed good and honest; he is a young man with dark-blue eyes--"

"He is a beast!"

"I don't know that yet, I have no certain proof. I was to see him this evening."

"To see him? Ah, but never again, never again! And would you now, after hearing--"

"I am not sure. I must have time to think, I must have proof. I have no proof. It is hard on me, after all."

"What is hard on you?" demanded Van Hupfeldt; and, had not the girl been so distraught, she would have seen that he had the semblance more of a murderer than of a lover. "What proofs do you want beyond my word? The man said that there were certificates, did he not? Well, let him produce them. The fact that he can't is a proof that there were none."

"Not quite. No--there is a doubt. He should have the benefit of the doubt. A man should not be condemned before he is tried, after all. If Miss L'Estrange was to say that there were no certificates, that would be proof. You must know her address--give it to me, and let me go straight to her--"

"Certainly, I have her address," said Van Hupfeldt, his eyes winking a little with crafty thought, "but not, of course, in my head. You shall have it in a day or two. You can then write and question her from Rigsworth, and she will tell you that no certificate ever fell out of any picture." He thought to himself: "for I shall see that she tells you what I wish, if she has any love of money."

"But couldn't you give me the address to-day?" asked Violet. "That would settle everything at once."

"To-day I'm afraid it is out of the question," answered Van Hupfeldt. "I have it put away in some drawer of some bureau. It may take a day or two; but find it I will, and, meantime, is it much to expect that my angel will believe in her one best and eternal friend? Assure me now that you will not see this undesirable person this evening."

"I do not mean to at this moment, but I do not decide. I said that I would. He pretends he has something to say to me--"

"He has nothing! He is merely impudent. Where were you to see him? At the grave, I think? At the grave?"

Violet blushed and made no answer. Mrs. Mordaunt came in. "So, mother," said Violet to her, "we go home to-morrow?"

"I have thought that it might be well, dear," answered her mother, "in which case we shall have enough to do between now and then."

"But why the sudden decision?"

"We are not at all moments our own masters and mistresses, dear. This at present seems the indicated course, and we must follow it."

"May I have the pleasure to come with you, if only for a day or two?" asked Van Hupfeldt.

"Of course, we are always glad of your company, Mr. Van Hupfeldt," answered Mrs. Mordaunt; "but it is such a trying journey, and it may affect your injury."

"Not trying to me where Violet is," said Van Hupfeldt.

"Violet should be a happy girl to have so much devotion lavished upon her, I am sure," said Mrs. Mordaunt, with a fond smile at her daughter. "I do hope that she is duly grateful to you, and to the Giver of all our good."

Violet said nothing. In her gloomy eyes, if one had looked, dwelt a rather hunted look. She presently left Van Hupfeldt and her mother, and in her own room lay on a couch thinking out her problem. "To go to the grave, or not to go?"

She had promised: but how if David Harcourt was truly the thing which he was said to be? Her maiden mind shrank and shuddered. It was possibly false, but, then, it was possibly true--all men seemed to be liars. She had better wait and first hear the truth from Miss L'Estrange. If Miss L'Estrange proved him false, she, Violet, would give herself one luxury, the

writing to him of one note--such a note! stinging, crushing, killing! After which she would forget once and forever that such a being had ever lived, and seemed nice, and been detestable. Meantime, it would be too unmaidenly rash to see him. It could not be done; however much he drew her with his strong magnetism, she should not, and would not. Why could he not have been good, and grand, and high, and everything that is noble and wonderful, as a man should be? In that case, ah, then! As it was, how could she? It was his own fault, and she hated him. Still, she had promised, and one should keep one's word unless the keeping becomes impossible. Moreover, since she was to leave London on the morrow, she should dearly like to see the grave once more. The new wreath must be already on its way from the florist's. She would like to go, dearly, dearly, if only it were not for the lack of dignity and reserve.

Thinking such thoughts, she lay so long that Van Hupfeldt went away without seeing her again; but he had no intention of leaving it to chance whether she saw David that evening or not. Certain that the rendezvous was at the grave, his cautious mind proceeded to take due precautions, and by three o'clock the eyes of his spy, a young woman rather overdressed, were upon the grave in the Kensal Green cemetery, while Van Hupfeldt himself was sitting patient in the smoking-room of a near hotel, ready to be called the moment a sign of Violet should be seen.

Violet, however, did not go to the grave. About four o'clock one of the servants of 60A, Porchester Gardens, arrived at the cemetery in a cab, went to the grave, put the new wreath on it, and on the wreath put an envelope directed to "David Harcourt, Esq," and went away. The moment she was gone, Van Hupfeldt's spy had the envelope, and with it hurried to him in the hotel. Breaking it open without hesitation, he read the words: "Miss Mordaunt regrets that she is unable to visit her sister's grave to-day, as she hoped, and from to-morrow morning she will be in the country; but if Mr. Harcourt really has anything of importance to communicate to her, he may write, and she will reply. Her address is Dale Manor, Rigsworth, near Kenilworth, Warwickshire."

"What do you think of this handwriting?" Van Hupfeldt asked of his she-attendant, showing her the note. "Do you think you could imitate it?"

"It is big and bold enough; it doesn't look difficult to imitate," was the critical estimate.

"Just have a try, and let me see your skill. Write--"

He dictated to her the words: "Miss Mordaunt has duly received from her fiance, Mr. Van Hupfeldt, the certificates of which Mr. Harcourt spoke to her, so that all necessity for any communication between Mr. Harcourt and Miss Mordaunt is now at an end. Miss Mordaunt leaves London to-day."

The scribe, after several rewritings, at last shaped the note into something really like Violet's writing. It was then directed to "David Harcourt." The young woman took it to the grave, and it was placed on the wreath of violets where the purloined note had lain.

Twenty minutes later, David, full of anticipation and hope, the diary in his hand, drew near to Kensal Green. For some time he did not go quite to the grave, but stood at the bend of the path, whence he should be able to see her feet coming, and the blooming beneath them of the March daisies in the turf. But she did not come. The minutes went draggingly by. Strolling presently nearer the grave, he noticed the fresh wreath, and the letter laid on it.

He stood a long while by the Iona cross over the violets, while the dusk deepened to a gloom like that of his mind. How empty seemed London now! And all life, how scantless and stale now, without the purple and perfume of her! For she was gone, and "all necessity for any communication between her and him was now at an end." He went away from the cemetery whistling a tune, with a jaunty step, in order to persuade himself that his heart was not hollow, nor his mind black with care.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DIARY

For some time after this disappearance of Violet, David needed the focusing of all his manhood to set himself to work. His feeling was that nothing is worth while. He wished to sit in his easy-chair, stare, and be vaguely conscious of the coming and going of his charwoman. An old Londoner now, he no longer heard the roar, nor stifled at the smoke of that torrent that goes up forever. He could have sat over his fire in a sort of abstract state, without thought, hope, or care, for days. If he took up the pen he groaned; but he did take it up, and it proved medicinal. Little by little he acquired tone.

Meantime, he would often re-read the note which had had so powerful an effect on him, until one day, in the ripening of his mind, the thought rose in him: "There's something queer here. She must have been very agitated when she wrote this!"

Then he began to think that it was not quite like Violet's writing. Presently hope, energy, action burst into blossom afresh within him. Suppose, he thought, that the whole business was somehow a trick of that man? Suppose that she was in London all the time? He wrote to her at Porchester Gardens that day, but received no answer. Van Hupfeldt had given orders that all letters for the Mordaunts should be sent to him, nor did he send on David's letter to Violet, for he knew David's writing. Moreover, he had warned the proprietors at Porchester Gardens that a certain man, who was likely to make himself troublesome to the Mordaunts, might present himself there in the hope of learning their address in the country, in view of which they had better give the address to no one.

Now, at David's only meeting with Violet at the grave, she had mentioned to him her country address, but, having heard it only once and that heedlessly, when his brain was full of new notions, it had so far passed out of his mind in the course of time that all that he could remember of it was that it was in Warwickshire. Nor could any racking of his brains bring back more of it than the name of the county. After some days he betook himself to Porchester Gardens.

"Is Mrs. Mordaunt at home?" he asked.

"No," was the answer, "she isn't staying here now. She is in the country."

That much, then, of the note found on the grave was true.

"When did she go?" he asked.

"Last Tuesday week," was the answer.

The note was true!

"I have written Miss Mordaunt a letter," said David, "telling her that I have in my possession something which I know that she would like to have, and have received no answer. I suppose you forward her letters on to her?"

"Yes; we send them to a gentleman who forwards them on."

"Ah? What gentleman is that?"

"A Mr. Van Hupfeldt."

"I see. But can you give me Mrs. Mordaunt's address?"

"We are not to give it; but any letters will be sent on."

"Through Mr. Van Hupfeldt?"

"Yes."

"But suppose I send you one with a cross on the envelope, would you do me the special favor to send that one on direct, not through Mr. Van Hupfeldt?"

"We have instructions as to the Mordaunts' letters," said the landlady, "and, of course, we follow them."

"Well, but you seem very inflexible, especially as I tell you--"

"Can't help that, sir. We were told that you would be turning up, and I give you the answer which I was directed to give. It is quite useless to come here making any request as to the Mordaunts."

David went away discomfited. There remained to him one hope--Dibbin. He ran round to Dibbin's and asked for the address.

"I'm afraid I'm hardly authorized to do that," answered the agent, to whom such appeals were matters of every-day business.

"Do be reasonable," urged David. "Miss Mordaunt herself gave me her address, only I have let it slip out of my mind."

Dibbin shook his head like an emblem of doubt. "Of course," he said, "I shall be happy to send on anything which you commit to me."

"Direct?" asked David, "or through Van Hupfeldt?"

"Direct, of course," answered Dibbin. "I have no sort of instructions with respect to Mr. Van Hupfeldt."

"Have you ever seen him, Dibbin?"

"Never."

"Don't happen to know his address?"

"No; I merely knew his name quite lately by repute as that of a man of wealth about town, and as an acquaintance of the Mordaunts."

"'Acquaintance' is good, as a phrase," David could not help blurting out. "Well, I have something belonging to Miss Mordaunt, and will send you a letter to forward."

That day the letter was written and sent, a stiff-stark little missive, informing Miss Mordaunt that Mr. Harcourt had duly received the note left on the grave, and had once before written her to say so, as well as to tell her that he had in his possession a book which he believed to be the diary of her sister. He did not care to send it her through another, but would at once forward it on receiving a line from her.

After two days came an answer: Miss Mordaunt thanked Mr. Harcourt extremely for his pains, and would be glad to receive the book to which he referred at "the above address," that address being: "The Cedars, Birdlip, Gloucestershire."

David actually had the diary wrapped up to send to this address. Then he paused. The handwriting of the note was not quite like that of the note in which she had made the appointment with him at the grave. It was rather like the writing of the note which he had found with the wreath--not quite, perhaps, the same. And then again the address which she had given him by word of mouth that first evening at Kensal Green was in Warwickshire. He remembered that much, beyond doubt. Was she, then, spending some time with friends at "The Cedars" in--Gloucestershire? He thought that it might be a good thing, before sending the diary, if he took a run down into Gloucestershire to make sure that she was really there.

This he did the next day, and found that "The Cedars" was a mansion two miles from the village of Birdlip, old, somewhat dismantled, shut up, occupied only by a few retainers. No Violet was there.

He learned at one of the village taverns that the place was the property of Van Hupfeldt. He took the diary back to London with him that same night.

What seemed certain to him now was that Van Hupfeldt himself or some agent of Van Hupfeldt's must be in the Mordaunts' house, and that this letter sent through Dibbin had never reached Violet. So again he was cut off from her. Not one word could he speak to her. He craved only for one small word. When that marriage of hers with Van Hupfeldt was to take place he did not know; but he felt that it might be soon. He had taken upon himself to say to her that it should never be, and not one word could he utter to prevent it. He had forgotten, and his brain would not give up its dead. He beat his brow upon his dining-room table where his head had dropped wearily on his coming home that early morning from the country.

To go to her, to tell her all, to stop the indecent marriage, to cast himself at her feet, and call upon her pity for his passionate youth--this impulse drove him; but he could not stir a step. A great "No" bewitched him. His straining was against ropes of steel. Half-thoughts, half-inventions of every impossible kind passed like smoke through his mind, and went away, and came wearily again. The only one of any likelihood was the thought of kneeling to Dibbin, of telling him that Van Hupfeldt was probably Strauss, and beseeching him for the Mordaunts' sake to give the address. But he had not the least faith in the success of such a thing. To that dried man, fossilized all through, incrustated in agency, anything that implied a new departure, a new point of view, was a thing impossible. His shake of the head was as

stubborn a fact in nature as any Andes. There was only the diary left--the diary might contain the address!

David did not wish to open those locked thoughts. He had hardly the right, but, after a whole day spent in eying the book, he laughed wildly and decided. It was a question of life, of several lives. He put the book to his lips, with a kiss of desperation, inhaling its faded scent of violets.

At once he rushed out with it to a tradesman skilled in locks, and was surprised at the ease with which the man shot back the tiny lever with a bit of twisted wire.

"I can make you a key by the morning," said the man, squinting into the lock, and listening to its action as he turned the wire in his fingers. "It is a simple mechanism with two wards. Meantime, here it is, opened."

He refused even to be paid for "so slight a thing." David handed him a cigar--and ran; and was soon deep in it. The first passage thrilled him as with solemn music:

O silent one, I must tell my sweets and bitters to you, since I mayn't to others. You will treasure each syllable, and speak of me as I am, "nothing extenuate nor set down aught in malice."

But please, as you are good, bring not upon me any further declamation of the unhappy Moor! Pray Heaven you may not have to record the "unlucky deeds" of "one that lov'd, not wisely, but too well," nor your pallid cheeks reveal your grief because my "subdued eyes,

Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian
trees
Their med'cinable gum!"

I was married last Tuesday. As the carriage rolled back along the sea front, and my darling husband's arm clasped my waist as tightly as a silver arm clasps you, little book, the old jingle came into my head: "Monday for health, Tuesday for wealth, Wednesday the best day of all." The nasty things predicted for the other days of the week do not matter a jot, do they? Well, thank God, I am healthy enough, and Harry says that we shall have plenty of money by and by. Given health and wealth, there remains but happiness, and that is of our own contriving. And I am happy. Of that there can be no manner of doubt. Of course, I should have enjoyed the pomp and circumstance of marriage in the parish church with its joy-bells, its laughing tears, its nice speeches, while the dear old rector beamed on me, and the good folk of R---- set their eyes a-goggle to see how I looked and how Harry carried himself.

I flatter myself I should have made a pretty bride, and, as for Harry, even under the chilling influences of a registrar's office he had the air of a man who knows his own mind. How often, tittering at my thoughts, have I pictured my wedding-day long before Prince Charming hove in sight! And how different it all has been to the conceits of girlhood! When he did come, he hoisted an unknown flag and bore me off like any pirate.

Then references to life in a hotel, not named, and the good-natured scrutiny of strangers "who knew us at once as a newly-married couple, though we tried to be offhand to each other."

Later she described the beginning of housekeeping in London, "where all is so strange"; then a few phrases which sighed.

I have come to hate the word "Miss." It is a constant reminder of the compact. Harry says it will not be long now before our marriage can be proclaimed; but meantime I always catch myself smiling graciously when a shop-walker hails me as "madam." There is a recognition in the word! "Miss" is only a trifle less endurable than the "my dear" of the theater, which I heard to-day for the first time.

After some days there was a darker mood:

It has given me a shock to find myself described as "domesticated." I came home to an empty house, after to-day's rehearsal, tired and a bit peevish, perhaps. It is so slow, this novitiate. Harry says that his influence will quickly bring me to the front, that I must have patience, that the theatrical world is so compact, yet so split up into cliques, that, were our relationship suspected, I should encounter hostility instead of the indifference which I now resent. So, in unamiable mood, I began to rate my charlady about the dust which gives its brown tone to London interiors. Thinking that a display of energy might prove a tonic, I cleared out the dining-room and made things shine. My help raised her eyebrows and a duster in astonishment. "Lor', miss," she said, "you are domesticated! You must have had a good

mother?" A good mother! She didn't know how that word felt.

How odiously some of the men speak, gaze. If a woman is attractive, they ogle her; if she is *passee*, she is less than nothing. Men did not talk and leer in that way at R. Did they think so? I cannot say. Even Harry laughed when I lost my temper in describing the impudence of a young fop who had bought his way into the chorus. "You must get used to that sort of thing in town!" he said. Then: "Bear with it a little while, sweetheart. Soon the pretense will be ended, and I shall be only too happy if you have lost the glamour of the footlights by that time. It was no wish of mine that you should become an actress." That is quite, quite true. But I wish now--no, I don't. I am silly and miserable. Please, diary, don't be angry if I weep over you, and if I write foolish things.

Then, some four months after marriage:

Harry away a whole week now. Telegram from Paris: "Cannot leave Mrs. S. for some time yet." He is glad that I have decided to give up the stage without delay. So soon, so soon! I am glad, too, for some reasons, and sorry for others. Is not that life in a few words?...

Creature d'un jour qui t'agites une heure,
De quoi viens-tu te plaindre et que te fait
gemir?
Ton ame t'inquiete et tu crois qu'elle pleure:
Ton ame est immortelle, et tes pleurs vont
tarur.

It is strange that I should regret the passing of the stage, now that it becomes a necessity. There I found companionship, of a sort. I shall be so lonely. But not for long. Harry returns next week, "on the 10th" his second message says, and then I think really that I must begin to insist upon seeing my mother. He can hardly refuse now. To meet her again! though our eyes will be flooded with tears. And Vi! dear, dear Vi! Will she be eager to hear all about it? But the reproach in her eyes! What did she think when she opened that letter of mine? How she would weep over her old flighty Gwen! Oh, darling mother, and sweet, ever-forgiving sister, how I long to hold you in my arms! If Harry only knew you he would surely trust you, and then I would not care if the publication of the marriage was delayed another year.



CHAPTER XV

IN PAIN

Hour after hour David read on, dead to all things in the world but to the soul in pain in that book and to his hope that, if only once, she had written the name of her home. Every time he came upon that letter R (by which she meant Rigsworth) he groaned; and anon he looked with eyes of despair and something of fond reproach at her face over the mantelpiece.

He read of her leaving the stage, because of the necessity that was now upon her, and then of the months of heaviness and tears. The worst trial of all in her lot seemed to be the constant separations, due to the tyranny of one "Mrs. S.," who ever drew her husband from her. She wrote:

I actually should be jealous, if she wasn't old! From Paris to Homburg, from Homburg to Siena: and everywhere poor Harry dragged at her chariot-wheels! I should like to have one peep at her in the flesh, just to see what she is really like. Her photographs show a fat, cross-looking old thing, but she can't be quite like that, with her really good affectionate heart. Has she not been the best of mothers to Harry? From the time she adopted him, he says, when he was a quite poor boy of fifteen, she has never been able to live a month without seeing him, even when he was at Heidelberg University. I must be content only to share him with her, but just now I think I have the stronger claim, unless she is really so very ill. I have heard that tale before of her "dying state," but that sort of old things don't die so easily. I believe that I write as if I wished her to! God forbid! I don't allow all Harry's dreams of the grandeurs to be enjoyed after her death to excite me much. I hope that I shall take it as coldly as doing up my hair when the letter comes, "Mrs. S. is dead! you are a millionaire."

Mercenariness is not one of my faults, anyway. It is true that since I have ceased to earn anything, I do sometimes feel a wee pinch of scarcity, and wish that he could send me even a few shillings a week more. But if that was only all of my trouble! No, Mrs. S., may you live as long as Heaven wills. If I thought that in any part of me there lurked one little longing to hear of that good woman's death, I should never forgive myself. Still, I don't think it right of her to play the despot over Harry to the extent to which she carries it. A man thirty-eight years old has surely the right to marry, if he wishes to. If it hadn't been for her, my marriage could have been made public from the first, and all that woe at R. would have been spared. Harry says that she hates the very word "marriage," and that if she was to get the least scent of his marriage, she would cut him off with a shilling.

He has run a risk, poor old Hal, for my sake, and if now and again he can't help longing to be rich and free, it is hard to blame him. The day he is rich and free there will be a spree, Gwen! It is wrong to anticipate it, but see if I don't make the street of R. glow, if not with the wine of France, at least with beer, and if I don't teach a certain staid Miss Violet Mordaunt how to do the high-kick, girls! I wonder if all will be over by then, and if I shall go back to dear old R. not only a wife but a mother?

Then again, a month later:

What a thing! to be a mother! Sometimes the thought hits me suddenly between the eyes, and I can't believe it is I myself—that same powerlessness to recognize myself which I had for fully a week after the marriage. But this is greater still, to have something which will be to me what I have been to my own mother. Gwen, Gwen, how exquisitely droll! How one grows into something else quite different, without at all noticing how and when! But will it never be over? It is like heaving a sigh a century long. Won't it be nice to dance again, and fling one's limbs? But meantime, such a weight of care, strange fears, gazings into I don't know what abyss, and never a day without its flood of tears. I want my mother. It is no good; I want to go back to where I was born. I am not strong enough to bear this. But after Tuesday's promise to him, what can I do? I have said now that I won't write until after, and I won't if God gives me strength.

For two months there was no entry, and then came joy that a son was born; but from the time of that birth, the diary which had before been profuse and daily became short and broken.

A deadlock seemed to have arisen. "Harry" allowed one letter to be written home to tell of the birth; but would not permit any direct statement as to the marriage, nor any meeting, nor any further letter, until "Mrs. S.," who was now "near her end," should be dead. She wrote:

To-day is six weeks since I have seen him, and altogether he has seen baby only twice. Yesterday's letter was divided into "heads," like a sermon, giving the reason why I may not go to him in Paris, why I may not write home, even without giving my address, and why he cannot come back yet. But it is a year now, and I have a mother and a sister. There is no certainty that Mrs. S. may not live ten years longer; and in last night's letter I said that on the 4th of July,

one month from now, if nothing has then happened to change the situation, I shall be compelled to risk displeasing him, and I shall go to R. That's crossing the Rubicon, Gwen, and I'm awfully frightened now. He will call it defiance, and rave, I know. "Be bold, be bold, be not too bold." But, then, I can always tame the monster with one Delilah kiss. I think I know my man, and can conquer my conqueror, and it is time now to begin to assert myself a little. . . .

Isn't there something queerish in his relation with "Mrs. S."? He stands in such mortal fear of her! I don't think it is quite pretty for a man to have such tremors for any earthly reason. One day I asked him why he could not introduce me to her as--a friend? She might take a fancy to me, I said, since I am generally popular. He looked quite frightened at the mere suggestion of such a thing. . . .

That last night, coming home from the theater, he said something about "Anna." I asked him who Anna was. He said: "I mean Mrs. S.," looking, it seemed to me, rather put out. I had never heard him call her Anna before. . . .

My voice is certainly not what it was, and not through any want of practise, I'm sure. People so hopelessly worried as I am at present can't sing really well. For the second time yesterday I wrote that I shall really go to mother after the fourth of next month, and I mean it, I do mean it! I owe something to her, too, and to myself, and I still don't see what harm it can do to Harry. Poor dear, he is awfully frightened! "If you persist in this wild notion, you will compel me to take a step which will be bitter to you and to myself." I don't know what step he can mean. That's only talk. I'll do it just to see what happens, for one oughtn't to threaten a woman with penalties which she can't conceive, or her curiosity will lead her to do the very thing. It was an ill-understood threat that made Eve eat the apple, my Hal. "Thou shalt surely die"; but, not knowing what "to die" was like, she thought to herself: "Well, just to see." There's no particularly "bitter step" that he can take, and the time is really come for me to assert myself a little now. Men love a woman better when she is not all milk and honey. . . .

It is near now, Vi! He has her chin, her hands, her dark grave eyes, her very smile. I am on the point at last of seeing him in her arms. How will she look? What will she think of me, the little girl whom she used to guide with her eye, beating her a hundred miles, an old experienced mummie while she is still a maid! I can no more resist it than I could fly! I shall do it! I am going to do it! I told Harry that I should. There's no danger, and I can't resist it any longer. I am just back from P. He is looking too sweet now for anything, and can blow the whistle of the rattle. I told Mrs. C. that in three days' time I shall be taking him from her for at least ten days, perhaps for good. Only three days! Sarah is beginning to get things ready....

Yes, it was "a bitter step" enough, poor Hal! God help you and me, and all the helpless!...

I told poor Sarah just now: "I am not married. You only think that I am; but I am not. I have a child; but I am not married. Sarah, this is no fit place for a girl like you." She thinks that I am mad, I know, but I keep quite sane and myself. I am only sorry for poor old Hal. He loves me and I loved him when I had a heart....

I thought of seeing the boy once more, but I haven't the energy. I don't seem to care. If I should care, or love, or hate, or eat, it wouldn't be so horrible. But I am only a ghost, a sham. I am really dead. My nature is akin with the grave, and has no appetite but for that with which it is akin. Well, I will soon come. It shall be to-morrow night, just after Sarah is gone. But I must rouse myself first to do that which is my duty. I ought, as a friend, to cover up poor Hal's traces, and yet I must be just to the boy, too. He ought to know when he grows up that, if his mother was unfortunate, she was not abandoned, and it is my duty to leave for him the proofs of it. But how to do that, and at the same time protect Harry, is the question, for I suppose that the police will search the flat. It is very wearisome. I doubt if my poor head is too clear to-day....

It shall be like this: I'll hide the things somewhere where the police won't readily find them. I'll invent a place. Then I shall write to Vi, not telling her what is going to happen to me, but telling her that if in a few months' time she will thoroughly search a certain flat in London, she will find what will be good for her and mother and the boy. And I shall give the address; but I won't tell her exactly where I hide the things; for fear of the police getting hold of the letter and arresting Harry. And I will post it after Sarah is gone to-morrow night, just before I do it. That's what I shall do. I'm pretty artful, my brain is quite clear and calm. I don't know yet where I shall hide the things; but I shall find a place, I shall hoodwink them all, and manage everything just nicely. Sarah thinks that I'm mad, but I'm not. It is she who is raving mad, and people who are mad think that every one is, except themselves.

I'll hide the diary in one place, the certificates in another, and the photograph of the boy's father in another. That's what I'll do. Then I'll tear up all other papers small. No, I'll hide as well the letter in which he says that he is Mrs. S.'s husband, and that I'm not his legal wife; for some day I should like Vi to know that I did not take my life for nothing, but was murdered before I killed myself. Then I'll do it. It isn't bitter; it's sweet. Death's a hole to creep in for shelter for one's poor head. Harry will be in England in five days' time, so I'll write him a letter to the Constitutional to say good-by. He loves me. He didn't mean to kill me. He only told me in order to stop me from going home. It is such a burden to write to

him, but it is my duty to give him one last word of comfort, and I will.

Then, when all this world of business is over and done, I'll do it. It isn't bitter; it's sweet. God, I couldn't face them! Forgive me! I know that it is wicked; but it is nice, is death. Things are as they are. One can't fight against the ocean. It is sweet to close one's eyes, and drown.

That word "drown" was the last. David closed the book with a blackness in his heart and brain.

The reading of it had brought him only grief and little light for practical purposes. That "Mrs. S." meant "Mrs. Strauss" he had no doubt, nor any doubt that "Harry" meant Henry Van Hupfeldt. Still, there was no formal proof of it. The name of her home, to learn which he had dared to open the diary, appeared only as "R." The only pieces of knowledge which the reading brought him were, firstly, that there were a photograph and a letter still hidden in the flat--certainly, not in any of the pictures, for he had searched them all; and secondly that "Harry" was a member of the Constitutional Club. As for the child, it was, or had been, at "P," in the care of one "Mrs. C."

CHAPTER XVI

HAND TO HAND

The necessity that was now strong upon David was to act, to fight for it. To hunt for the still hidden photograph and letter was far too slow a task in his present mood of turbulence and desperation. The photograph, indeed, would furnish certain proof as to whether Strauss and Van Hupfeldt were one. So might the letter. But of what use would proof of anything whatever be, when he was all shut out from access to the Mordaunts? He thought, however, that if he could come within earshot and striking distance of Van Hupfeldt, then something might result, he was not clear what. He put on his hat and went out, as grim a man as any on the streets of London that afternoon. He did not know where Van Hupfeldt lived, but he turned his steps toward the Constitutional Club.

He meant at least to discover if Van Hupfeldt was a member there, and he might discover more. But he was spared the pains of inquiry, for he was still at a distance of thirty yards from the club when he saw Van Hupfeldt come out and step into a carriage.

David cringed half under a dray, till the carriage began to move, then followed some way behind at his long trot. He thought now that perhaps he was about to track Van Hupfeldt to his house.

The carriage drove straight to Baker-St. Station, into which Van Hupfeldt went, and took a ticket. David, listening outside the outer entrance to the small booking-office, could not catch the name of his destination, but when Van Hupfeldt had gone down into the gloom and fume, David, half-way down the flight of stairs, stood watching. He had no little finesse in tracking, and ferreting, and remaining invisible, and when Van Hupfeldt had taken his seat, David was in another compartment of the same train.

The dusk of evening was thickening when their train stopped at the townlet of Pangley, twenty-five miles from London, where Van Hupfeldt alighted.

David saw him well out of the little station before he himself leaped, as the train began to move. He then took the precaution to ascertain the times of the next up-trains. There would be one at quarter past eight and another at ten P.M. While he asked as to the trains, and paid the fare of some excess charge, he kept his eye on the back of Van Hupfeldt, walking down the rather steep street. And, when it was safe, he followed.

At the bottom of the street they crossed a bridge, and thenceforward walked up a road with heath on both sides. David was angry with his luck, for the road was straight and long, and there was little cover in the heath, where he walked some distance from the road. Once Van Hupfeldt turned, and seemed to admire the last traces of color in the western sky, whereat David, as if shot, dropped into gorse and bracken. He hoped that Van Hupfeldt, being a man of cities and civilization, was unconscious of him; but he felt that he in Van Hupfeldt's place would have known all, and he had a fear. The light was fast failing, but he could clearly see Van Hupfeldt, who swung a parcel in his hand; and he thought that if he could see Van Hupfeldt well, then Van Hupfeldt might have seen him dimly. Van Hupfeldt, however, gave no sign of it.

David saw him go into the gateway of a pretty dwelling, and a big hearty countrywoman ran out to meet him, her face beaming with good cheer. Carrying a child in her arms, she escorted Van Hupfeldt into the house with, it was clear, no lack of welcome, and, when they had disappeared, David, vaulting over a hedge into the orchard, crept nearer the house and hid behind a shed in which he saw a white calf. He waited there for a long time, how long he did not know, for once, when he peered at his watch, he could see nothing. The night had come moonless and black. The place where he lurked was in the shadow of trees.

Meantime, within the house, Van Hupfeldt sat with the child on his knee. He was so pale that Mrs. Carter, the child's foster-mother, asked if he was well. Some purpose, some fear or hope, agitated him. Once, when the countrywoman left the room to fetch a glass of milk, the moment he was alone he put down the child, sped like a thief to the grandfather's clock ticking in its old nook by the settee, opened it, put the minute-hand back twenty minutes, and was seated again when the milk came in.

These visits of his to the child, of which he paid one every week, always lasted half an hour. This time he stayed so much longer that Mrs. Carter glanced at the clock, only to be taken aback by the earliness of the hour.

"Bless us!" she cried. "I thought it was later 'n that. You still have plenty of time to catch the quarter past eight, sir."

But Van Hupfeldt stood up, saying that he would go. Putting on his coat, he added: "Mrs. Carter, I have been followed from London by a man who, I fancy, will present himself here presently when I am gone. He wishes to know more about

my affairs than he has a right to know. If he comes, I have a reason for wishing you to receive him politely, and to keep him in talk as long as he will stay. But, of course, you won't satisfy his curiosity in anything that concerns me. In particular, be very careful not to give him any hint that my name was Strauss during my wife's lifetime."

"You may rely on me," said Mrs. Carter, in the secret voice of an accomplice.

"Now, little one, to bed," said Van Hupfeldt, a thin and lanky figure in his long overcoat, as he bent with kisses over the boy in Mrs. Carter's arms.

Five minutes after he was gone David was at the farmhouse door. He, too, would like a glass of milk.

"You're welcome, I'm sure," said Mrs. Carter. "Step inside."

His first glance was at the clock, for he did not wish to lose the quarter past eight train, since that would mean the losing of his present chance of tracking Van Hupfeldt to his address. But the clock reassured him. He indolently took it for granted that it was more or less near the mark, and it pointed to twenty minutes to eight. He would thus have time to strike up an acquaintance with Mrs. Carter, as a preliminary to closer relations in the future.

"And where is baby?" he asked.

"Oh, you know about him?" said Mrs. Carter. "He's in bed, to be sure."

"I saw him in your arms as I was passing up the road half an hour ago."

"What, you passed along here? I didn't notice you."

"I came up from the station. Now, this is something like good milk. You have a nice little farm here, too. Do you manage it yourself?"

"Yes; my husband died a twelvemonth come May."

"It must be hard work with baby, too, as well, especially if you've got any youngsters of your own."

"How can you know that this baby isn't my own?"

"Oh, as to that, I'm not quite so much in the dark about things. Why, I'm living in the very flat which its poor mother occupied. I know its aunt, I know its father--"

"Oh, well, you seem to know a lot. What more do you want?"

"I only know the father by sight--that is, if he was the father who was in here just now. I take it he was."

"Ah, there, now, you're asking."

"Oh, there's no secret, Mrs. Carter. Mr. Johann Strauss is a well-known man."

"Is that his name--Strauss? Well, well, live and learn."

"That's his name, and that's his writing, Mrs. Carter!"--words which David uttered almost with a shout, as he caught an envelope out of the coal scuttle, and laid it on the table, pointing fixedly at it.

Mrs. Carter was startled by his sudden vehemence. The envelope was one directed to her in the same flourishing writing which Dibbin had long since shown David as that of Strauss.

"You are bound to admit," said David, imperatively, "that this envelope was directed to you by the gentleman who was just here."

"Well, so it was; what of that?" asked Mrs. Carter, in a maze as to what the row was about.

"That's all right, then," said David, quieting down. "I only wanted to be sure."

This, then, settled it. Van Hupfeldt was Strauss. David kept the envelope, sipped his milk, and for some time talked with Mrs. Carter about her cows, her fruit, and whether the white calf was to be sold or kept. When it was ten minutes to eight by the big parlor clock he rose to go, said that he hoped to see baby next time, if he might call again, and shook hands. But in going out, from force of habit, he glanced at his watch, and now saw that it was really ten minutes past eight.

"Great goodness!" he exclaimed, "your clock is all wrong!"

"No, sir--" began Mrs. Carter.

David was gone. He had five minutes in which to run a good deal over a mile, and he ran with all his speed; but some distance from the station he saw the train steaming out, and pulled up short.

At that moment Van Hupfeldt in the train was thinking: "It has worked well. He is late, and there is no other train till ten--an hour and three quarters. He has only a charwoman. She will not be in the flat at this hour. No one will be there. Will it be my luck that the diary is not under lock and key?"

As a matter of fact, the diary was lying openly on the dining-room table in the flat, caution of that sort being hardly the uppermost quality in David's character.

David strolled about Pangle, looked into the tiny shop-windows, dined on fruit, wished that he had not been born some new variety of a fool, and found that hour and three quarters as long as a week. Not much given to suspicions of meanness and cunning, it did not even now come into his head that he was where he was by a trick. He blamed only destiny for imposing upon him such penal inactivity in the little town that night when a thousand spurs were urging him to action. But at last ten o'clock came, and when he stepped into the train he asked himself why he had been so impatient, since probably nothing could be done that evening. He reached London before eleven, and drove home weary of himself and of his cares.

It was too late then, he thought, to go hunting after Van Hupfeldt. On the morrow morning he would again try at the Constitutional. Meantime, he lit himself a fire, and sat over it brooding, cudgeling his brains for some plan of action. Then the diary drew him. He would re-read that tragedy throughout. He put out his arm, half-turning from over the fire to get the book.

It was no longer on the table.

He stood up and stared at the table. No diary was there. Yet he seemed to remember--He set to work to search the flat.

Suddenly, in the midst of his work, a flood of light broke in upon him. He thought that, if the letter which he had written to Violet, telling her that he had the diary, had already fallen into Van Hupfeldt's hands, then Van Hupfeldt knew that he had the diary; in which case, it was Van Hupfeldt who had put back the clock's hand in the farmhouse at Pangle! Van Hupfeldt knew all the time that David was shadowing him, had put back the clock, and now held the diary, for which both he and David would have given all that they were worth, and all is everything, whether ten pounds or a million.

"Is that it?" thought David to himself. "Oh, is that it? All right, let it be like that."

He lost not two minutes in thought, but with a lowering brow went out into the streets, high-strung, his fingers cramped together.

An hour before this he had said to himself that the hour was too late for action. Now, an hour later, such a thought did not occur to him in the high pitch of his soul. That night, and not any other night or day, he would have it out with Van Hupfeldt.

He jumped into a cab, and drove to the flat in King-St., Chelsea.

"But what on earth can the man mean," said Miss L'Estrange, peeping through the slit of her slightly-opened door, "coming to a lady's flat at this hour of the morning?"

In reality it was about half-past twelve.

"No, it's no use talking," said David, "you must let me in. I know you have a right good heart, and I rely upon its action when I tell you that it is a matter of life and death this time."

"But I'm alone."

"So much the better."

"Well, I like your cheek!"

"You like the whole of me; so you may as well own up to it, and be done."

"Rats! You only come here when you want something done. It isn't me you come to see."

"I'll come to see you some other time. Just throw something on, and let me in."

"Throw something on, indeed! I'll throw something on you, and that'll be hot water, the next time you come bothering

about at this hour. Oh, well, never mind; you're not a bad sort. Come in."

The door opened, Miss L'Estrange fled, and David went into the drawing-room, where he waited some minutes till she reappeared, looking fresh and washed from the night's stage-paint, with something voluminous wrapped about her.

"Now, what is it?" said she. "Straight to the point--that's me."

"You must give me Strauss's address," said David.

"That I sha'n't," said she. "What do you take me for? I promised the man that I wouldn't. I have told you once that he isn't a thousand miles from Piccadilly, and that's about all you'll get from me."

"Good! I understand your position," said David. "But before you refuse out and out, hear what I have to say. This man Strauss is a man who induced Gwendoline Barnes, whom you know, to leave her home, married her while his first wife was alive, and so caused her to make away with herself. And now this same man, under the name of Van Hupfeldt, is about to marry her sister, without telling her that he even knew the girl whom he has murdered. I don't know what the sister's motive for marrying him is--quite possibly there's some trick about it--but I know that the motive is not love. Now, just think a moment, and tell me if this is fair to your woman's mind."

"Oh, that's how it is!" exclaimed Emryn L'Estrange.

"All the facts which I have mentioned I know for certain," said David.

"Then, that explains--"

"Explains what?"

"I'll tell you; but this is between us, mind. Some time ago Strauss comes to me, and he says: 'I have given your address to a young lady--a Miss Violet Mordaunt--who is about to write you a letter asking whether you did or did not find any certificates in a picture in the Eddystone Mansions flat; and I want you in answer to deny to her for my sake that any certificates were ever found.'"

"And you did?" cried David with deep reproach.

"Now, no preaching, or I never tell you anything again," shrilled Miss L'Estrange. "Here's gratitude in man! Of course I did! He said it was only an innocent fib which could do no harm to anybody, and if you saw the bracelet I got for it, my boy--"

"You wrote to say that no certificates were ever found!"

"I did."

"Then what can she think of me?" he cried with a face of pain. "I told her--"

"Ah, you are after her, too? I see now how it is," said Miss L'Estrange.

"But she might at least have given me a chance of clearing myself!" groaned David. "She might have written to me to say that she had found me out in a lie."

Violet had, indeed, promised herself the luxury of writing one "stinging, crushing, killing" note to David in the event of Miss L'Estrange proving him false. And, in fact, not one but many such notes had been written down at Dale Manor. But none of them had ever been sent--her deep disdain had kept her silent.

"But," cried David, at the spur of a sudden glad thought, "since Miss Mordaunt wrote to you, and you to her, you know her address, and can give it me!"

"No, I don't know her address," answered Miss L'Estrange. "I believe now that Strauss may have been afraid that if I knew it I might give it to you, so he must have prevented her from putting it on her letter. There was no address on it, I don't think, for when I wrote back to her I gave my letter to Strauss to send."

"Ah, he's a cautious beast!" said David, bitterly. "Still--I'll have him--not to-morrow, but to-night. Quick, now--his address."

"Well, I promised not to tell it to any one," vowed Miss L'Estrange in her best soubrette manner, "and I'll be as good as my word, since I never break a promise when my word is once passed. I'll just write it down on a piece of paper, and drop it on the floor by accident, and then if anybody should happen to notice it and pick it up without my seeing, that will be no business of mine."

She rose, walked to a desk, and went through this pantomime in all seriousness. The address was dropped on the carpet, and David "happening" to notice it, picked it up behind Miss Ermyn L'Estrange's unconscious back. It had on it the number of a house near Hanover Square; and in another moment David had pressed the lady's hand, and was gone, crying: "I'll come again!"

"Not even a word of thanks," said Miss L'Estrange to herself, as she looked after his flying back: "Blow, blow, thou winter's wind."

David leaped into his waiting cab, and was off across London.

Light was still in Van Hupfeldt's quarters, and Van Hupfeldt himself, at the moment when David rang, was poring over the last words of the diary of her who had been part of his life. He was livid with fear at the knowledge just learned for certain from the written words, that there were still hidden in the flat a photograph of him, and his last letter to Gwendoline, when he heard an altercation between his man Neil and another voice outside. A moment later he heard Neil cry out sharply, and then he was aware of a hurried step coming in upon him. The first thought of his secretive nature was the diary, and, with the trepidations of a miser surprised in counting his gold, he hustled it into a secret recess of the bureau near which he had been reading. He had hardly done this when he stood face to face with David.

At that moment Van Hupfeldt's face seemed lit with a lunacy of affright, surprise, and rage. David, with his hat rather drawn over his eyes, and with a frowning severity, said: "I want four things of you--the diary, the key of my flat which you have in your possession, those certificates, and Mrs. Mordaunt's address."

A scream went out from Van Hupfeldt: "Neil! the police!"

"Quite so," said David; "but before the police come, do as I say, or I shall kill you."

Van Hupfeldt could hardly catch his breath sufficiently to speak. A man so wholly in the grip of terror it was painful to see. David understood him to say: "Man, I warn you, my heart is weak."

"Heart weak?" growled David. "That's what you say? Well, then, keep cool, and let me have my way. We must wrangle it out now somehow. You have the police on your side for the moment, and I stand alone--"

Now the outer door was heard to slam; for Neil had run out to summon help.

"I'm not acting on my own behalf," said David, "but for the sake of a girl whose life, I feel sure, you are going to make bitter. She cares nothing for you--"

"How dare you!" came in a hoarseness of concentrated passion from Van Hupfeldt's bosom.

"No, she cares nothing for you--"

"You interloper!"

"And even if she did, she is sure to find out sooner or later that you are Strauss--"

"Oh! had I but guessed!"

"Which would be the death of her--"

"I never dreamed of this."

"So, on her behalf, I'll just make a hurried search before the police comes. The things are not yours. If your heart wasn't weak, I'd maul you till you were willing to hand them over of your own accord."

With that David made a move toward the bureau, whereupon Van Hupfeldt uttered a scream and flew upon him like a cat-o'-mountain, but David flung him away to the other end of the room.

Scattered over the bureau were a number of letters in their envelopes ready for the post, and the first of these upon which David's eye fell was directed to "Miss Violet Mordaunt."

Here was luck! Even as his heart bounded, before even he had seen a word of the address, he was in darkness--Van Hupfeldt had switched off the light.

And now once again David felt himself outdone by the cunning of this man. The room was large, crowded with objects of luxury, and the switch a needle in a bundle of hay. In which direction to grope for it David did not know. He ran to where he had flung Van Hupfeldt, to compel him by main force to turn on the light. But Van Hupfeldt was no longer there. The suddenness of the darkness made it black to the eyes. David could not find the switch, and fearing lest Van

Hupfeldt might snatch away the letter to Violet in the dark, he flew back to the bureau, over-setting first a chair, and then colliding upon Van Hupfeldt a little distance from the bureau. Again he flung Van Hupfeldt far, and, keeping near the bureau, groped along the beading of the wall, to see if he could encounter another switch.

In the midst of this search, his ears detected the sound of a key in the outer door, and understanding that help had arrived for the enemy, instantly he took his decision, felt for the eight or ten envelopes on the bureau, slipped them all into his pocket, and was gone. In the hall, coming inward he met Neil and an officer, but, as if making a deep bow to the majesty of the law, he slipped as easily as a wave under the officer's hand, and disappeared through the wide-open door. The officer ran after him. This was simple. From the moment when David pitched through the house-door below the stairs, he was never more seen by that particular officer to the day of his death.

Under a lamp in Oxford-St., when he stopped running, he took out Strauss's letters from his pocket with a hand that shook, for in his heart was the thought: "Suppose I have left hers behind!"

But no; that fifth one was hers: "Miss Violet Mordaunt, Dale Manor, Rigsworth, near Kenilworth." Remembrance came to him with an ache of rapture. Within twenty-four hours he would see her. He was so pleased that he was at the pains to throw Strauss's other letters into the first pillar-box. What did it matter now that the diary, certificates, anything or everything, had been filched from him? To-morrow, no, that day, he would see Violet.



CHAPTER XVII

DAVID MORE THAN REGAINS LOST GROUND

Harcourt was now in the position of a man who thinks he has invented a flying-machine--enthusiasm became stronger than knowledge, belief was made to do service as evidence. To meet Violet, to look again into those sweet eyes of hers, that was the great thing he promised himself next morning. Indeed, it is to be feared he deliberately surrendered himself to dreams of such a meeting, while he smoked pipe after pipe in his lonesome flat, rather than set himself to an orderly review of his forces for the approaching trial of strength with Van Hupfeldt.

No sooner was he well clear of Van Hupfeldt's house than he knew that he was safe from active interference by the law. The man whom he now looked on as his rival, the subtle adversary whom he had scorned to crush when appealed to for mercy on the score of physical inferiority, would never dare to seek the aid of authority. Nursing that fact, ready enough to welcome the prospect of an unaided combat, David did not stop to consider that an older head in counsel would not be a bad thing. There was Dibbin, for instance. Dibbin, whose ideas were cramped within ledgers and schedules, had, nevertheless, as he said himself, "been young once." Surely David could have sufficiently oxygenized the agent's thin blood with the story told by the hapless Gwendoline that the man should hie with him to Rigsworth and there be confronted with the veritable Strauss. Dibbin was a precise man. It would have been hard for Van Hupfeldt to flout Dibbin.

But no; David smoked and dreamed, and saw a living Violet in the chalk portrait of the dead Gwendoline, and said so many nice words to the presentment thus created that he came to believe them; and so he consigned Dibbin to his own musty office, nor even gave heed to the existence of such a credible witness as Sarah Gissing, poor Gwendoline's maid.

He left a penciled note on his table that the charwoman was to call him when she came at eight--for in such wise does London conquer Wyoming--and with the rattle of her knuckles on the door he was out of bed, blithe as a lark, with his heart singing greetings to a sunny morning.

The manner of dress, the shade of a tie, the exact degree of whiteness of linen, were affairs of moment just then. Alack! here was our erstwhile rounder-up of steers stopping his hansom on the way to the station in order to buy a smart pair of doeskin gloves, while he gazed lovingly at a boutonniere of violets, but forbore.

It was noon ere he reached Rigsworth, and inquiry showed that the Mordaunts' house was situated at the farther end of the small village. He walked through the street of scattered houses, and attracted some attention by the sure fact that he was a stranger. At any rate, that was how he regarded the discreet scrutiny to which he was subjected.

"A big house with a lodge-gate, just past the church on the left," were the station-master's directions, and David had no difficulty in finding his way. His heart fell a little when he saw the style of the place. The lodge was a pretty villa in itself. Its garden would be of great worth within the London suburban area. Behind it stretched the park of Dale Manor, and the turrets of a mansion among many lordly elms seemed to put Violet on a somewhat inaccessible pinnacle. David did not know that people of moderate means can maintain a good sporting estate by letting the shooting, but he had learned in the free air of the States to rate a man on a different level to parks; if a half-bred rascal like Van Hupfeldt was able to enter this citadel like a thief for one daughter of the house, why should not an honest man storm it for the sake of another?

At the lodge, however, he met with a decided rebuff. "No visitors admitted," was the curt response of a gamekeeper sort of person who was lurking in a doorway when David tried to open the locked gate.

"My business is important," urged David, quietly, though his face flushed a little at the man's impudent manner.

"So's my orders," said velveteens.

"But I must see either Mrs. Mordaunt or Miss Violet."

"You can't see either. Absolute orders. Your name's Harcourt isn't it?"

Then David knew that Van Hupfeldt had over-reached him by the telegraph, and the shattering of his dream-castle caused such lightnings to gleam from within that the surly gamekeeper whistled to a retriever dog, and ostensibly revealed a double-barreled gun which lay in the corner of the porch.

David was likely to have his own way with clodhoppers, even in the hour of tribulation.

"Yes," he said, "my name is Harcourt. And yours?"

"Mine is no matter."

"Very well, 'No Matter.' You are obeying orders, I have no doubt; but you must be taught civility. I give you notice, 'No Matter,' that a little later I shall lick you good and plenty, and if you don't take it like a man you will probably be fired into the bargain."

The keeper was for abusing him, but David turned away. And now he was not the well-dressed, gloved, spick-and-span Londoner, but the Indian of the prairie, with a heart from which the glow had gone, with eyes that saw and ears that heard and a brain that recorded everything.

He was instantly aware that the country policeman who had lolled through the village behind him was a forewarned spy. He knew that this functionary watched his return to the railway station, from which, as David happened to remember, the time-table had shown a train London-wards at one o'clock.

The station-master was affable enough, gave him some bread and meat and a glass of milk, and refused any payment. When the train came in, David, sourly smiling, saw the constable loll onto the platform. He could not resist the temptation to lean out of the carriage window.

"Good-by, P. C. 198," he said.

Now, he was traveling first-class, and, in England, even a villain demands respect under that circumstance.

"Good-by, sir," said the man, surprised.

"You will know me again, eh?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"I am glad of that. Tell that chap at the gate of Dale Manor that I shall keep my fixture with him soon."

P. C. 198 scratched his head. "Funny affair," he muttered as the train moved off. "Looks an' talks more of a gentleman than van Wot's-his-name, any day."

At the next station, four miles away, David slipped out of his carriage quickly and waited in a shed until the train had gone again. Then he interviewed the station-master, and somewhat astonished the official by tendering a return ticket from Rigsworth to London.

"Can't break your journey," said the regulations.

"But I've done it," said David.

"It's irregular," complained the other.

"And the train is half a mile distant."

"Well, if you pay the fare--"

David meant to forfeit his ticket. This was a new light. He paid a few pence, took a receipt, and promised himself some fun at Rigsworth.

He asked for no information. From the train he had noted a line of telegraph posts in the distance, and he stepped out smartly along a by-road until he gained the main thoroughfare. Then, being alone, he ran, and the newly bought gloves burst their seams, so he flung them off.

When less than a mile from Rigsworth he heard the whistle of a train. Springing to a high bank, he made out the sinuous, snake-like curling of an engine and coaches beyond the hedge-rows--a train coming from London. "Van Hupfeldt is in it, of course," he decided. "I must make sure."

It needed a fine sprint, aided by the exercise of quick judgment when he neared Dale Manor; but he was hidden in a brake of brambles in the park as Van Hupfeldt, exceedingly pallid this glorious day of spring, walked up the drive, accompanied by the gamekeeper, dog and gun. The dog came near to undoing David; but a rabbit, already disturbed, ran out of the thicket, and a sharp command from the keeper brought the retriever to heel.

Van Hupfeldt entered the gardens; the keeper made off across the park. Green and brown buds, almost bursting into leaf, were already enriching the shrubs and trees of Dale Manor, especially in a sheltered hollow on the left front of the house where nestled a pretty lake. There the cover was good. The hunter instinct sent him that way.

"That Dutchman will make Violet bolt just as the dog started the rabbit," thought David, and he took a circuitous route

to reach a summer-house on the most distant side of the ornamental water, whence, he fancied, he could command a fair view of the house and grounds. He waited with stubborn patience two long hours. At last he saw a man arrive in a dog-cart, and it was the coming of this person which apparently drove Violet forth, as, five minutes after the newcomer was admitted, a tall graceful figure in black, a girl wearing a large black hat and draping a white shawl elegantly round her shoulders, stepped out of a French window to the smooth lawn, and looked straight at the sheet of water beyond which David lay ensconced.

No need to tell him who this was. His heart did not beat now. He was glad, and something warmed his whole body, for it was chill waiting there in the shade after his run, but neither man nor water could interpose further barrier between him and his Violet, so he was calm and confident.

The girl glanced back once toward the room she had quitted, and then strolled on, ever coming nearer the glistening lake and the summer-house. She crossed the fine stretch of turf and stood for an instant near a marble statue which guarded a fountain. The distance was not great, and David thought his eyes were deceiving him when he saw that the white marble and the black-garbed girl were singularly alike in feature. It was not surprising, since the sculptor had taken Violet's great-grandmother, a noted beauty of early Georgian days, as his model for the face of the dryad, and it was one of the honored traditions of Dale Manor that this figure should be promptly shielded from inclement weather, even from the dew. Just then David was not inclined to cavil at any discovery of fresh charms in Violet, but he set aside this fanciful idea, as he deemed it, and bent his mind on attracting her attention without causing a flutter either to her or to the other occupants of the house.

But she came on again, reached the lake-side path, and made him hope for a moment that she would pass by the door of his retreat. If that was so, he would reveal himself to her soon enough to save her from being unduly alarmed by the unexpected apparition of a man in that secluded place.

Now she actually passed abreast of him, with the lake between, and soon she would round the curve of the water and face him again. Her figure was mirrored in the silver and blue of the reflected sky. So light was her step that the living, moving body seemed to be as impalpable as its spirit image.

Then David's heart did jump of a sudden, for a faint hail of "Vi!" twice repeated, caught his ears, and he saw Mrs. Mordaunt, outside the French window, calling to her daughter.

The girl turned, facing David, almost. He made up his mind without a moment's hesitation.

"Violet," he said, softly but clearly, "Violet, don't go! Come here. It is I, David." The cheek of him! as Miss Ermyne L'Estrange would have put it. Violet! David! What next?

Violet was bewitched for a second or two. She looked wildly toward the house, and at him; for he stood so that she might see him plainly, though to her mother he was invisible.

"Please come!" he pleaded. "I am here for your sake, for Gwen's sake, too, and they have kept us apart so long by lies!"

That the girl was greatly excited was obvious. She pressed her hands together on her bosom, though the action might pass as a simple adjustment of her shawl.

"I must go," she murmured brokenly. "They want me there to--to sign some documents. And I cannot meet you."

"Violet, sign nothing until you have heard my story. I appeal to you for a hearing. If you refuse I shall come with you to the house. But hear me first. Make some excuse."

There was ever that in David's voice which won belief. Some men ring true, some false. David had in him the clear sound of metal without flaw.

And no woman is worth her salt who cannot act more than a little. "Give me ten minutes, mother," shrilled Violet, excitedly. "Only ten minutes; then I shall be with you."

David, peeping through the rustic timber-work, noted with satisfaction that Mrs. Mordaunt waved a hand of agreement and reentered the house. What then, of devil's work was Van Hupfeldt plotting in that drawing-room that Violet should be wanted to sign documents, and that the girl's mother should recognize the need of her daughter being allowed some few minutes of grace if she so desired?

But here came Violet, all rosy now with wonder, for her blood was racing, though in her eyes, which reflected her thoughts, was an anger which David missed in his joy. She stood framed in the narrow doorway of the summer-house, and half turned as though to leave it quickly. "Now, what have you to say to me?" she breathed hurriedly.

David, who thought he was shy with women, soon found winged words to pierce the armor of a disdain he did not yet understand. "If I obeyed my heart, Violet," he said, and she thrilled a little under the shock of hearing her Christian name so glib on his lips, "I would begin by telling you that I love you, and so throw to the winds all other considerations."

She turned and faced him, palpitating, with a certain deer-like readiness to fly. "How dare you?"

"I am not daring. Daring springs from the heart, you know. Moreover, though the knowledge of my love is old to me, old as weary days and sleepless nights can make it, it may be new to you, unless, somehow, my love has bridged the void, and made you responsive to my passion. Ah, don't be afraid, now," for David thought she shrank from him--though in very truth this maiden's soul was all a-quiver with the conviction that not so had Van Hupfeldt spoken, not so had his ardor shaken her. "I am not here to-day as your lover, as your avowed lover I would rather say, but only as your self-appointed guardian, as one who would save you from a fate worse than death. Listen now, and believe me, for I can prove the truth. Van Hupfeldt, who would marry you, is none other than Strauss, the man who married your sister."

Violet's eyes dilated. Her lips parted as if to utter a shriek. David caught her by the wrist and drew her gently toward him. Before either of them knew what was happening, his arms were about her.

"Be brave, there's a dear girl!" he whispered. "Be brave and silent! Can you listen? Tell me you are not afraid to listen."

Again Violet was conscious that the touch of David Harcourt's arms was a different thing to the impetuous embrace of Van Hupfeldt. A sob came from her. She seemed to lose a little of her fine stature. She was becoming smaller, more timidly womanlike, so near this masterful man.

"He married your sister," went on David. "He married Gwen in his own name of Van Hupfeldt, and the birth of their child is registered in that name. I wrote and told you of the certificates being in existence. He obtained them by bribery and a trick. That is nothing. Even if they are destroyed, they can be replaced by the proper authorities. I know where the child is living. I can take you to it. I can bring Dibbin, the agent, here, to face Van Hupfeldt and prove that he is none other than Strauss, your sister's husband and slayer. I can bring Sarah Gissing, your sister's servant, to identify him as the man whom poor Gwen loved as her husband and the father of her child. Were it not for my own folly, I could have brought you her diary--"

"Her diary! Has it been found?" gasped Violet, lifting up her eyes to his in sheer amazement.

"Yes. I found it."

"But where, and how?"

"It was fastened into the back of a picture, a mezzotint of Turner's."

"In the back of a picture!" she murmured, with a certain strange dejection which David found adorable; nor should it be forgotten that the only time David possessed absolute and undeniable evidence of the presence of some unseen person in his flat, he had shot at and wounded a man.

"Yes, dear--may I call you dear?"

"And you have it?"

"No."

"No!" He felt a spasm of doubt in her very shoulders, a slight withdrawing from him, for Violet was ever being denied proof, the actual, tangible proof which alone can banish suspicion from a sorely-tried nature.

"Van Hupfeldt stole it from the flat during my absence."

"How could that be?"

"He has duplicate keys, I suppose. Once before I have reason to believe he was there. We struggled together, one on each side of a door. It was in the dark, and he managed to dodge past me, but I fired at him and drew blood, I think."

"When was that?" she demanded with a quickness which did not escape him.

"On the morning of the day you were to have met me at the cemetery, but sent such a bitter little note instead."

"A bitter little note!"

And thus were the words said which, pursued for another sentence, must have unmasked Van Hupfeldt wholly; but they were both so excited, so carried out of all bounds of reasoned thought, that Violet flew off at a tangent, and David doubled after her, so delightful was it to hear the words coming from her lips, to watch her eyes telegraph their secret meanings.

"He was lame that day," she whispered. "He is not quite free from stiffness in his walk yet."

"Ah! I hit him then?" And David smiled a different kind of smile to that which Violet was learning to like.

"But if all that you say is true, the man is a monster," she cried in a sudden rage.

"I am coming to think that he is not in his right mind," said David, a surprising charity springing up in him.

"And do you know what they are waiting for now?" she asked vehemently.

"I cannot tell, save that it is for you."

"They want me to sign a marriage settlement. Oh, what a vile world!"

"Not a vile world, dear; nor are its humans altogether bad. Even this Van Hupfeldt, or Strauss, seems to have loved your sister. And she did love him. Poor girl! She meant to kill herself on his account, owing to some secret he revealed to her, something about another woman who had adopted him as her son. That was not clear in her story. She purposely kept the definite things out of her diary."

The girl's mind was driven back, with quick rebound, to the memory of her sister's fate. The mere mention of the name of Strauss touched a poignant chord. Strauss was a blacker, more Satanic creature in her imagination than Van Hupfeldt. She wrenched herself free and sprang toward the door.

"Do you swear that you are telling me the truth?" she cried.

"I swear it."

"Then I go now to meet him, and his lawyer, and my mother. Poor mother! How she will suffer!"

"Shall I come with you?"

She blushed. She began to remember, more vividly each instant, how long she had been there in his arms, almost clinging to him.

"Better not," she said. "I shall drive him away, and when mother and I have cried together we shall see you. Are you staying in the village?"

"Yes. At the inn, the Feathers I think it is called."

"Then I shall send for you to-night, or perhaps to-morrow morning."

"Make it to-night, if possible. Tell your mother I will not add to her sorrows, and it is best she should know all."

"Good-by, then, Violet."

"Good-by, David."

He held out his hand, so frankly that she placed her white fingers within the grasp of his strong ones. He was tempted to draw her nearer, but her color rose again, her eyes dropped, and she tore herself away, breaking almost into a run.

David, careless whether he was seen or not, walked off towards the lodge, glancing every now and then over his shoulder to watch Violet hastening to the house. Once, when crossing the lawn, she looked around and waved a hand to him. He replied. Then she vanished, and David walked on, the happiest man in England.

What a pity it is that ignorance should so often be an essential part of bliss. David should either have gone with Violet, or, failing that, he should have let Van Hupfeldt believe that he was well on his way to London. As it was, Van Hupfeldt saw him crossing the park, and such a man forewarned is forearmed.

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM THE DEPTHS

Violet entered the drawing-room with the air of one who rejoices in good news. Consider that she had just learned the certainty of her sister's fair fame, and that, in the same breath, she was freed from Van Hupfeldt's pestering: was it to be wondered at if, since the dread day she received a letter from a loved one already dead, she had never once looked so light-hearted, so full of the wine of life, as when she danced into the house after her interview with David. And this quickening of her pulses boded no good to Van Hupfeldt.

A lawyer-like man was arranging parchments on a table--a large, square table which had evidently been brought from a library for the purpose, as the day was chill indoors and the drawing-room was cozy with a log fire. Van Hupfeldt, who had turned from the window before Violet appeared, affected to be examining the great red seals on the green ribbons laced into the vellum. That weak heart of his was knocking hard at his ribs; but his lips were tight set: he was fighting with his back to the wall, for that interloper, David Harcourt, must have told Violet everything. So, really, Van Hupfeldt deserved some consideration for his splendid nonchalance.

Mrs. Mordaunt sat in an easy-chair, stroking her toy Pom. She was anxious for these preliminaries to be done with. Dale Manor was an expensive place to keep up; Van Hupfeldt's millions would restore the Falerian order. So she hailed her daughter pleasantly, after one critical glance.

"Your little walk did, indeed, bring out the roses, Vi. But you were rather beyond the ten minutes, and Mr. Sharpe is a business man, dear; we must not detain him unduly."

Mr. Sharpe coughed with deference. He was open to be detained or retained for the rest of his life, at the price *per diem*.

"Ah, yes," said Violet, softly, giving Van Hupfeldt a queer look which he alone understood. "There are things to be signed, something about some one of the first part and some other person of the second part. Why do you use such odd terms, Mr. Sharpe?"

"It is the jargon of the law, Miss Mordaunt. Every line adds a mite to the small incomes of us poor lawyers."

"But who are these people?"

Sharpe looked puzzled. "The first deed recites the marriage contract between you and Mr. Van Hupfeldt," he began to explain.

But Violet said, and her words had the cold clink of ice in a glass: "Who is Mr. Van Hupfeldt?"

"Vi!" This from Mrs. Mordaunt.

"Mother, better not interfere. You don't seem to understand, Mr. Sharpe. You spoke of a Mr. Henry Van Hupfeldt. Who is he?"

The lawyer, smirking at the hidden joke, pointed to the man standing by the table. "Of course, that is he," he said.

"Oh, no. That is Johann Strauss, the man who married and, it may be found, killed my sister. You must look further into your papers, Mr. Sharpe. There is some terrible mistake. Perhaps, if you went on your knees and prayed to God for guidance in your work, it might be better!"

"Vi!" shrieked her mother again, and the dog in her lap sprang off in alarm.

The solicitor stood dumfounded, still thinking that some bizarre piece of humor was toward.

It was Van Hupfeldt who saved Mrs. Mordaunt from imminent hysteria. "Violet has been talking to that fellow Harcourt, of whom I told you," he said coolly. "She is, unfortunately, only too ready to believe him, and a further wall of distrust is built between us at a most inopportune moment. I am sorry, Mrs. Mordaunt; it is not my fault. And I would have saved you from this, Violet. I knew he had left London, so I wired precautions. But he is a scamp of unparalleled audacity and resource. Surely you have given him no money?"

Violet, scarce trusting her ears, listened to the calm, smooth sentences with rising indignation. But she mastered herself sufficiently to say: "He has told me everything--about the certificates, the diary, all. The time of lies has passed. Did you, then, kill my sister?"

"Why condense the tale? Of course he assured you that Dibbin, the agent who let the flat to your sister's husband, will

readily identify me as Strauss; that Sarah Gissing, her servant, will hail me as her former master?"

"Yes. He did say that."

"Why did he not bring them here?"

"He will bring them to-morrow."

Van Hupfeldt smiled wearily. It seemed as though he could not help himself. "Forgive me, Violet," he said. "It is I who will bring them--not Harcourt. He dare not. His bubble bursts the moment you ask for proof. Indeed, I am beginning to think the man is mad. He must have conceived an insane affection for you, and you are committing a great wrong in giving him these clandestine meetings."

This was too much. Violet advanced toward him with eyes aflame. "There were days in the history of the world when men were struck dead from Heaven!" she cried.

"That is yet possible," he answered with a strange humility.

"Do you deny all, all?" she almost screamed.

"Not only do I deny, but I affirm, and I have my proofs. I have known for some time, not very long, it is true, that a man named Johann Strauss did assume my name when he married your sister. There is nothing remarkable in that. I am a rich man, known to many. The adoption of a pseudonym is a common device of actors. There was no real resemblance between this person Strauss and myself. Of that fact those who were well acquainted with him--Dibbin and Sarah Gissing--will assure you to-morrow in this house. I have your sister's marriage certificate, and the birth registration of her child. I know where the child is. I will bring the foster-mother to tell you that I was not the man who intrusted the infant to her care. I have your sister's diary, which this Harcourt did really secure. I got it from him by a trick, I admit, but only to save you from becoming his dupe. Now I have placed all my cards on the table, by the side of your marriage settlement. Can David Harcourt do as much?"

The girl's lips quivered a little. What was she to believe? In whom was she to trust? She wanted to cry, but she dug her nails into her white hands; for the encircling clasp of David's arms still tingled on her shoulders. "Why do you tell me all this only when I force it from you?" she asked.

"You answer your own question. You force it from me. Exactly I would prefer that my promised wife should have trust in me. I wished to spare you certain sordid revelations; but because some American adventurer happens upon a family tragedy and uses it for his own purposes--whether base or not I do not stop to inquire--you treat me as the one quite unworthy of belief. Violet, you hurt me more than you know." The man's voice broke. Tears stood in his eyes.

The girl was nearly distraught under the stress of the struggle going on with her. "Henry Van Hupfeldt," she said solemnly, looking him straight in the face, "may the Lord judge between me and you if I have wronged you!"

"No, sweet girl, you cannot wrong me; for my conscience is clear, but it is a hard thing that you should incline rather to this blackmailer than to me."

"Blackmailer!" The ugly word came from her lips in sheer protest; the lash of a whip could not have stung as cruelly.

"Yes, most certainly. Did he not demand a hundred pounds from you? Let me go to him and offer five hundred, and you will never see or hear of him again."

"Oh, if that is so, there is no faith or honesty in the world."

"Is *he* your world, then?" demanded Van Hupfeldt, bitterly, and even Mrs. Mordaunt broke in with her moan:

"Oh, Vi!"

"Let us end this distressing scene," went on Van Hupfeldt with a repressed indignation that was exceedingly convincing. "Mr. Sharpe, you see, of course, that Miss Mordaunt cannot be expected to complete these agreements to-day. Please be here to-morrow at the same time. Before that hour I shall be back from London with all the witnesses and documents which shall prove to Miss Mordaunt's complete satisfaction that she has been grossly misled by a cleverly concocted story. Indeed, I would be glad if, subsequently, you interviewed this David Harcourt. It seems to me almost credible now that he himself believed the extraordinary tale he has made up."

"Whatever you please shall be done, sir," said the lawyer. "And may I add, for the benefit of these two ladies, that--er--my own knowledge of your position and--er--career completely excludes such a preposterous--er--"

"Thank you, Mr. Sharpe," broke in Van Hupfeldt. "You mean that kindly, I know; but this is a matter between Miss

Mordaunt and myself at the moment."

The solicitor gathered up his papers and withdrew. For a little while there was no sound in the room except the mother's sobbing and the daughter's labored breathing; for unhappy Violet was so torn with doubt that her breast appeared to be unable to harbor its agitation. A few minutes ago she deemed herself free from a compact hateful to her soul; yet, here was Van Hupfeldt more convincing, more compelling, than ever. To her terrified eyes the man assumed the shape and properties of a python, a monstrous snake from which there was no escape.

And then the sibilant hiss of his voice reached her dulled ears. "Mrs. Mordaunt, may I appeal to your authority? Surely this Harcourt will not be admitted here in my absence? I do not ask much, only a respite of twenty-four hours. Then I return, with all the proofs."

"Why have they been withheld so long?" came Violet's agonized protest.

"I do declare, Vi," broke in her mother, "that you would try the patience of Job! Have you lost all your fine sense of honor and fairness? What more can Mr. Van Hupfeldt do to please you? And where do you meet this young man who so unwarrantably thrusts himself into our affairs, I should like to know?"

Poor Violet knew that the British matron instinct was fighting against her now. And there never was a girl more bound up in her family ties than this one. "Forgive me, mother," she said wearily. "The long struggle is at an end, now. Let Mr. Van Hupfeldt keep his promise, and I shall not cause further difficulty."

"Well said!" cried Van Hupfeldt, eagerly. "That is a brave resolve. I accept it implicitly. Mrs. Mordaunt, I trust you will not be angry with my Violet while I am away. I know how she has suffered. It is for me to make amends for all that. And I promise her happiness, a full cup. And, meanwhile, Violet--"

"I agree. I neither see nor speak to nor send any message to David Harcourt, as far as lies in my power, until your return to-morrow."

"I kiss my hand to you both!" cried Van Hupfeldt with the gallant air which came natural to him, and he went out. His preparations were soon made. A carriage took him to the station; but before he quitted the manor, he sent for the gamekeeper.

"You were remiss in your duty," he said sternly to the man. "The person of whom I warned you has been in the park and has spoken to Miss Violet. Now, listen carefully to what I say. Obtain any help you require and guard this house and its grounds so that not a bird can fly over it nor a rabbit scamper among the bushes without your knowledge. Do this until I return to-morrow and I give you fifty pounds, but fail in the least particular and you will be dismissed instantly." He was gone, with a rush of whipped horses.

Velveteens took thought. "Twiced in one day!" he growled. "A licking or the sack, an' fifty quid or the sack--which is it to be?"

It might be one, or all, or none. Of such firsts, seconds, and thirds is the acrostic of life made up. But the promise of money stirred the man's dull wits. No watch-dog could have been more faithful to his trust, and, by lavish offers of silver and beer--deferred luxuries, of course--he secured the aid of certain local poachers, his lasting enemies, but his friends for the night. In a word, if David had crept again into the park, he would probably have been beaten to a jelly.

But David attempted nothing of the sort. He was loyal to his pact with Violet, never dreaming of the ordeal to which the girl had submitted. Nevertheless, having no sort of occupation, he kept his eyes and ears open. He saw Sharpe drive through the village, and was told that the lawyer was head of a trusted firm in the county town. He saw Van Hupfeldt pass toward the station, and the ostler learned from a railway porter that the "gentleman from the manor" had gone to "Lunnon."

This gave David cause to think, seeing that there was no news from Violet. But he waited, with much hope and some spasms of miserableness, through the long dull evening; heard nothing from her; went to bed; tossed restlessly until the sun rose; met the village postman at the door of the inn; and still received no tidings. He breakfasted, hung about, watched the road, sauntered as far as the lodge, nodded affably to velveteens behind the bars, and caught no glimpse of Violet. Then he determined to break the spell of silence. He returned to the inn and wrote a letter, which he intrusted to His Majesty's Postmaster-General for express delivery.

Sure enough, the postmistress's young sister refused to be turned back by the Cerberus at the gate, nor would she tell her business. The man knew her, suspected her errand, but dared not interfere, having a wholesome regard for the law; so all he could do was to note her coming and going, and report to his briber, for he was Mrs. Mordaunt's servant.

And this is what David wrote:

MY DEAR ONE--Can it be that some newly conceived lie has kept you from sending for me? I only ask your full inquiry: I stand or fall by that. But spare me this silence; for I am eating my heart out.

Yours,
DAVID.

The messenger tripped back. "No answer, sir," she said, and the words smote David such a blow that his cheek blanched, while the girl wondered.

"To whom did you hand my note?" he managed to ask.

"To Miss Violet, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Gave it to her myself."

"And she read it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did she say anything?"

"Just that, sir; no answer."

Then David, in a mighty wrath and fume, dashed off another note.

Very well, be it so. I return to London. God help you if you marry that man! You will sink to the pit, and the angels alone will be able to lift you therefrom. Let there be no error this time. I leave for London at one fifteen, P.M. If you want me you must either detain me now or come to me in London.

Back went the postmistress's sister, marveling at the strangeness of these one-sided missives between the young woman of the manor and a handsome young man at the Feathers. Being seventeen, she took David's side as against Violet. So she added, on her own account, when she saw the white-faced aristocrat in the house, the explanatory statement that "the young gentleman seemed to be very much upset at receiving no reply."

Poor Violet, in whom loyalty was hereditary, could not break her word. But she did say: "I have no message to-day; but I know Mr. Harcourt's address."

That was the only crumb of comfort vouchsafed to David. Away he went at quarter-past one, nor did the volcano in him show any sign of subsidence when he reached the gloom and shadows of No. 7 Eddystone Mansions.

For a little drop of acutest poison had been poured into his ear by the gossip of the village. In the bar overnight he heard yokels talking of the need of money at the big house, how Van Hupfeldt's wealth would make the flowers grow again in Rigsworth. He smiled at the conceit then; now he knew that deadly nightshade was sown in the garden of his hopes, for he imagined that money had proved more potent than love.

It was a remarkable thing that of all the pictures in the flat he had left untouched the portrait in chalk which hung over the dining-room fireplace. It savored too much of sacrilege to disturb that ethereal face; but David was in far too savage a mood to check at sentiment during those dark hours. He surveyed the portrait almost vindictively, though had he been less bitter he might have seen a reassuring smile in the parted lips. So it came to pass that, after eating some dry bread, which was the only food he found in the larder, he lit a pipe, looked at the picture again, and yielded to the impulse to examine it.

Strong as were his nerves, he had to force himself to apply a knife to its brown-papered back. And then, with a queer vindictive howl of triumph, he drew forth a curiously insipid portrait of Van Hupfeldt, inscribed "To Gwen," with a date, and, folded behind it, a terrible little note, merely dated "Paris; Tuesday," which read:

MY POOR GIRL--At last, then, you force the miserable truth from me. Mrs. Strauss is my wife. She is twice my age. She forced me to marry her ten years ago for her money. She is, indeed, dying, and then I can fly to you. For the sake of our boy, forgive me.

HARRY.

"Ah!" There was something sadly animal in David's triumph. He felt like a dog which has seized the rat after which it has been straining, and, in a minute or two, he had the grace to be ashamed of himself. Then he thought of Violet, and he broke down, crying like a child. Those tears were good for him; they brought him back to sanity and garnished the

dark places of his heart.

But what to do? That was more than ever the problem. He bolted and barred his door that night, and the photograph and letter lay beside his revolver under his pillow. Not forty Van Hupfeldts nor a legion of ghosts should reave him of those telling pieces of evidence!

CHAPTER XIX

VIOLET DECIDES

Violet, waked from broken rest by the cooing of doves, had rue in her soul. She met her mother at breakfast, and the good woman, thinking her daughter not altogether in her right senses, was disposed to be somewhat snappish. So the girl was driven back on her sad imaginings, nor were they dissipated by David's two little notes. When she sent the messenger away the second time she was in a strange state of calm. Despair had numbed her: she thought persistently of her sister, and wondered if the only true rest was to be found in that dark nook of the grave.

She saw a carriage depart for the railway station to bring Van Hupfeldt. In half an hour its wheels grated on the gravel of the drive, and a servant came to her room to summon her to the fateful conclave. She was on her knees, in dry-eyed prayer, and the frightened maid, who loved Miss Violet, had a little catch in her voice as she said:

"You are wanted in the drawing-room, miss, and please, miss, I do hope you won't take on so. Everybody says you ought to be happy; but I"--sniff--"I know yer ain't, miss."

Violet rose and kissed the girl. It was good to have such honest sympathy.

In the big, cheerful salon beneath she found her mother, stiff and self-conscious, wondering what people would think if Violet persisted in her folly; Van Hupfeldt, collected and deferential, wearing a buttonhole of violets (of all flowers in creation!), and, seated gingerly on the edge of a chair, a quietly dressed young woman with "domestic servant" writ large upon her. But Dibbin, for whom Violet's eyes searched dreamily, was not there.

Van Hupfeldt, who seemed to have an uncanny trick of reading her thoughts when they were hostile, explained instantly: "Not all my persuasions could bring Mr. Dibbin from his office to-day. He had some business engagement which was imperative, he said. But I have done the next best thing. Here is a letter from him. He will substantiate its statements in person some later day."

He held out a letter. The girl took it mechanically. The envelope bore her name, typed. She broke the seal and began to read; but her mother, resolved to have "no nonsense this time," interrupted, with an unusual sharpness:

"Aloud, please!"

So Violet read:

DEAR MISS MORDAUNT:--For some reason, not explained to me, a gentleman named Van Hupfeldt has asked me to assure you that he is not Johann Strauss, who rented the flat No. 7, Eddystone Mansions, some two years since. Of course, I do that readily. I much regret that I cannot travel to Rigsworth with Mr. Van Hupfeldt to-day; but I do not suppose that the odd request he makes is really so urgent as he would have me believe. Please convey my respectful regards to Mrs. Mordaunt.

Yours faithfully,
JOHN DIBBIN.

Excepting the signature, the letter was typewritten. Violet knew the old agent's scrawling handwriting very well. He had never sent her a typewritten letter before. She laid the document on the table which had borne the parchments of yesterday.

"Well? Is that satisfactory?" said Van Hupfeldt.

"Quite conclusive," murmured Mrs. Mordaunt.

"Who is this?" asked Violet, turning toward the nervous young person on the edge of a chair.

"That is Sarah Gissing, poor Gwen's maid."

It was not Sarah Gissing; but Jenny, loaned by Miss Emyrn L'Estrange for the day at a stiff figure paid to both--Jenny, schooled for her part and glib enough at it, though her Cockney pertness was momentarily awed by the old-world grandeur of Dale Manor and its two "real" ladies.

So Van Hupfeldt was playing with loaded dice; he had discarded the dangerous notion of trying to buy Dibbin for the simpler expedient of a forged letter. The marriage ceremony was now the great coup; let that be an irrevocable fact and he believed he would be able to manage everything.

"Ah!" said Violet, with a pathos that might have touched even a calloused heart, "you are Sarah Gissing. You knew my dear sister? You saw her in her last hours? You heard her last words?"

"Yes, miss," sniveled Jenny, "an' this gentleman ain't Mr. Strauss, though he do resemble him a bit."

Now, this assurance came too quick on the heels of a natural question. It had not been asked for as yet. Violet was ready to bare her heart to this common-looking girl for sake of the knowledge that she was Gwendoline's only confidante. But the exceeding promptitude of Jenny's testimony forced back the rush of sentiment. Violet even recoiled a little. Could it be possible that her sweet and gracious sister, the laughing sprite of bygone days, had been driven to make something of a friend of this coarse, small-faced, mean-eyed wench? How pitiful, how sordid, was each fresh chapter of Gwen's hidden life!

Van Hupfeldt saw that a check had occurred, though his seething brain, intent only on securing an unalterable verdict, was unable to appreciate the delicate poise of Violet's emotions. "Question her," he said gently. "She will tell you all about her mistress, to whom she was very greatly attached. Were you not, Sarah?"

"Oh, yes, sir. She were such a lovely lady, and so nice an' kind in her ways, that nobody could help lovin' her."

That was better. Violet thawed again. "I hardly know what to ask you," she said wistfully. "Did she ever speak of us, of my mother and me?"

"She would talk about you for hours, miss. Many a time I could hardly get on with my work, she was so anxious to have some one to gossip with. Bless your 'eart, miss, I know your name as well as my own."

Strange, most unutterably strange, thought Violet; but she said, with a sad smile: "You were much favored, Sarah. I would have given all I have in the world to have changed places with you. Tell me, was this man--this Mr. Strauss--kind to her?"

"He must have been, miss. He--"

"Must have been? But you saw and heard!"

Jenny kept her head, though she flushed a little. "People often do put on a different way before servants, miss, to what they have in private. Not that I have reason to think anyways bad of Mr. Strauss. He was a very generous sort of gentleman, always free with his money. What I meant was that Miss--er--Miss Gwendoline used to speak of him as a lovin' husband."

Jenny caught her breath a trifle. She did not dare to look at Van Hupfeldt, as he had specially warned her against doing so. Like most of her class, she was prepared now to cover any mistake by excessive volubility.

"Did you address her as 'Miss Gwendoline,' then?"

"Yes, miss. That is the way on the stage, you know."

"But this was not on the stage."

"Quite right, miss, only ladies in the profession mostly uses their stage names in private."

"My sister never appeared on any stage, to my knowledge."

Jenny became a little defiant. "Of course, miss," she answered tartly, "I didn't know much about my missus's comin's and goin's, but she used to go regular to rehearsal. The call was for eleven and two most days."

Violet found herself in a new world. What could have come to Gwendoline that she should have quitted her home and gone away among these strange people? And what had she said that this servant-girl should suddenly show the shrew in her?

She glanced toward her mother, who, indeed, was as greatly perturbed as herself. The old lady could scarce comprehend that the talk was of her darling Gwendoline. Then Van Hupfeldt, thinking to lead Violet's ideas into a fresh channel, broke in:

"I was sure that these things would distress you," he said in the low voice of sympathy. "Perhaps you would prefer to send Sarah to the housekeeper's room while you look at the documents I have brought."

Violet, in whose brain a hundred wild questions as to her sister's life were jostling, suddenly faced Jenny again. "What was my sister's baby called?" she asked.

"Henry, miss, after its father."

"But why 'Henry,' since the father's name was Johann?"

"That is a puzzle, miss. I'm only tellin' you what I know."

"And what became of the child? Why was it spirited away from its mother? or was it not taken away until after her death?"

Jenny had been told to be close as an oyster on this matter. "I don't know why the baby was sent out to nurse, miss," she said. "I can only tell you it was never in the flat."

Violet passed a hand across her eyes as though to clear a bewildered brain. This domestic lived in a small flat with her sister, who "gossiped" for "hours" with her, yet the girl knew little about a child which Gwen must have idolized.

"Then you never saw the baby?" she asked.

"No, miss; that is, once, I think," for Jenny did now venture to look at Van Hupfeldt, and his slight nod came at the instant of her denial. He thought the infant a safe topic, in regard to its appearance, and the mother's love of it.

Mrs. Mordaunt, who had been listening intently enough, caught Jenny's hesitation. "It is odd," she said, "that you should have forgotten, or be uncertain of, such a definite fact as seeing my daughter's child."

A maid entered with a telegram which she handed to Violet. In a quiet country mansion the advent of a telegram is a rare event. People in rural England regard this curt manner of communication as reserved only for important items. Mrs. Mordaunt was a little alarmed. Her mind quickly reviewed all her relatives' ailments.

"What is it, Vi?" she asked anxiously, while Van Hupfeldt wondered if any unoccupied fiend had tempted David Harcourt to interfere at this critical moment.

Violet opened the buff envelope and read the message slowly. It was a perfectly marvelous thing that she retained her self-control, for the telegram was from Dibbin at Dundee.

Have just concluded sale, after three days' private negotiation here. Your moiety five hundred pounds. Letter follows.

It referred to a long-deferred bequest from a cousin, and was a simple matter enough. But Dibbin realizing an estate in the north of Scotland and Dibbin writing typewritten testimonials of Van Hupfeldt in London on one and the same day was a Mahatma performance, a case of psychic projection which did not enter into the ordinary scheme of things.

Nevertheless, Violet, save for one flash of intensest surprise in those deep eyes of hers, maintained her self-control. She had been so tried already that her mind could withstand any shock. "It is nothing, mother--merely a reference to the Auchlachan affair," she said, crushing the telegram into a little ball in her hand.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Mordaunt, greatly relieved. "I dreamed of Aunt Jane last night."

"Well, now," said Van Hupfeldt, after a bound or two of his heart, "what do you say? Mr. Sharpe will be here soon."

"You have the certificates and the diary?" said Violet.

"The certificates, yes; not the diary. On calm thought, I have decided irrevocably that the diary shall not be placed in your hands until the lapse of our six months' agreement. I have yielded every other point; there I am rigid."

"Do you assign any reason?"

"Yes, my right as your affianced husband to preserve you from the grief and morbidness of reading a record of suffering. I would not have you a weeping bride. When we return from our wedding-tour I shall hand you the diary, no sooner."

"The certificates, then," said Violet, composedly.

Van Hupfeldt took two papers from a pocket-book. One recorded the marriage of Henry Van Hupfeldt to Gwendoline Mordaunt at the office of the Brighton registrar. The other was the certificate of the birth of the child in the same town a year later.

It was a fine piece of daring for the man to produce these documents. His own name; his age, thirty eight; his occupation, gentleman, were set forth on the long narrow strip, and the address was given as No. 7, Eddystone Mansions, London, W. Even Mrs. Mordaunt was startled when she glanced over her daughter's shoulder at the papers.

Suddenly Violet thought she saw a ray of light. "Was this man a brother, some near relative, of yours?" she asked.

"No, no relation." Van Hupfeldt was taken aback, and the negative flew out before he realized that this might have been a good card to play. But no; Violet would never have married him then.

"What a mystery! To think that he should adopt your name, be of your apparent age, and yet that you should come here to Rigsworth and make our acquaintance!"

"No mystery at all. You drag everything from me like a skilled lawyer. Strauss did more than borrow my name; he forged it. There was a police inquiry. I was called into it. My curiosity was aroused. I learned something of your sister's story, and I took steps to meet you."

"Introduced by Lord Vanstone!" murmured Mrs. Mordaunt.

"Yes, some one. I quickly forgot all else when I was granted the privilege of your friendship."

And he took Violet's hand and kissed it, with a delicate grace that was courtly in him.

Sharpe was announced. Mrs. Mordaunt sent Jenny away in a maid's escort, and Violet knew that her hour of final yielding was near.

She still held the certificates. "Am I to keep these?" she asked, while her mouth quivered slightly. She was thinking, thinking, all the time, of David and Dibbin and of the queer collapse of Gwendoline which made that little Cockney woman her companion. But what plea could she urge now? She could only ask for a few days' respite, just to clear away some lingering doubts, and then--But, for mother's sake, no protests now, nor tears, nor questions.

Sharpe's ferret eyes took in the altered situation. Yesterday's clouds had passed. A glance from Van Hupfeldt brought him to business. There was a marriage settlement of five thousand pounds *per annum*, to be increased to twice the amount in the event of widowhood--and Sharpe explained the legal proviso that Violet was to be free to marry again, if so minded, without forfeiting any portion of this magnificent yearly revenue.

"Most generous!" Mrs. Mordaunt could not help saying, and even the girl herself, miserable and drooping as a caged thrush, knew that Van Hupfeldt was showing himself a princely suitor.

"And now follows a somewhat unusual document," said Sharpe in his brisk legal way. "Mr. Van Hupfeldt has instructed me to prepare a will, leaving all his real and personal estate to Miss Violet Mordaunt, he being confident that she will faithfully carry out certain instructions of his own. Of course, this instrument will have a very brief life. Marriage, I may explain, Miss Mordaunt, invalidates all wills previously executed by either of the parties. Hence, it is intended only to cover the interregnum, so to speak, between to-day's bachelordom and the marriage ceremony of--er--"

"Of this day week?" asked Van Hupfeldt, eagerly.

"Be it so," said Violet, for she had a plan in her mind now, and whatever happened, a week's grace was sufficient.

"Mrs. Mordaunt and I are appointed trustees *pro tem* for the purposes of the marriage settlement," went on Sharpe. "Mr. Van Hupfeldt will, of course, execute a fresh will after marriage. All we need now are two witnesses for various signatures. My clerk, who is waiting in the hall, will serve as one."

"The girl, Sarah Gissing, who was here just now, might be called in," said Mrs. Mordaunt.

"No, no!" cried Van Hupfeldt. "She is a stranger. After to-day she vanishes from our lives. Please summon one of your own servants--the housekeeper, or a footman."

So Violet and Van Hupfeldt and Mrs. Mordaunt and the witnesses signed their names on various parchments at places where the lawyer had marked little crosses in pencil.

Violet, as in a dream, saw the name "Henry Van Hupfeldt" above that of "Violet Mordaunt," just as it appeared over "Gwendoline Mordaunt" in the marriage certificate. In her eyes, the tiny crosses made the great squares of vellum look like the chart of a cemetery. Yet there was something singing sweetly in her ears: "You still have a week of liberty. Use your time well. Not all the law in the land can force you to the altar unless you wish it." And this lullaby was soothing.

Soon the solicitor took off himself and his duplicates, for he handed certain originals to Violet, advising her to intrust them to the care of a bank or her mother's legal advisers. Van Hupfeldt, with a creditable tact, set himself to entertain the two ladies, and when Violet wished to interview "Sarah Gissing" again, he explained that the girl had been sent back to London by his orders.

"No more tears," he said earnestly; "no more doubtings and wonderings. When we return from a tour in the States you

shall meet her again and satisfy all your cravings."

Evidently his design was to remain at Dale Manor until they were quietly married, and, meanwhile, surround the place with every possible protection. It came, therefore, as a dreadful shock to him when Violet disappeared for a whole hour after breakfast next morning, and then Mrs. Mordaunt, red-eyed and incoherent, rushed to find him with a note which had just reached her from the station.

It read:

DEAR MOTHER—I suppose I have freedom of action for two days out of my seven. I wish to make certain inquiries; so I am going away until to-morrow night, or, possibly, the next morning. I think Mr. Van Hupfeldt will say this is fair, and, in justice to him, I wish to state that I shall not see Mr. David Harcourt by design. Should I see him by chance I shall refuse to speak to him.

Your loving daughter,

VIOLET.

"It is ended! I have done with her! She has played me false!" screamed the man when he understood that Violet had really quitted Rigsworth. His paroxysm of rage was so fierce that Mrs. Mordaunt was terrified that he would die on the spot; but his passion ended in an equally vehement declaration of sorrow and affection. He would follow her and bring her back. Mrs. Mordaunt must come with him instantly. The girl must be saved from herself. Surely they would find her, even in London, whither he was certain she had gone, for she would only go to her accustomed haunts.

He infected the grief-stricken mother with some of his own frenzy. She promised to be at the station in time for the next train; he tore off to the telegraph office, where he wrote messages in a white fever of action. First, he bade his factotum Neil meet the train from Rigsworth in which Violet traveled, and ascertain her movements, if possible.

The second was to Dibbin:

A client has recommended you to me. Leave by earliest train for Portsmouth and call at offices of (a named firm of solicitors) for instructions. I forward herewith fifty pounds for preliminary expenses.

HENRY VAN HUPFELDT.

The fifty pounds which he thus telegraphed to Dibbin were notes which he had brought for the gamekeeper; so this payment was deferred, at the least.

Then he sent word to the Portsmouth firm that Dibbin was to be dispatched on a secret estate-hunting quest in Devonshire, at any terms he chose to demand. His next telegram was to Mrs. Carter at Pangley:

Take baby at once by train to Station Hotel, New-street, Birmingham. Leave word with neighbors and at station to say where you have gone. I will write you at Birmingham and send money to-night.

Finally to David he wired:

I now know everything. Mrs. Carter is about to take my sister's child away from Pangley. Please go there at once, find out where she has gone, and follow her. Wire me to-morrow, or next day, what you have discovered. Forgive yesterday's silence; it was unavoidable.

VIOLET.

That was all he could devise in the present chaos of his mind. But it would serve, he thought, to give a few hours' breathing-space. He was hard pressed, but far from beaten yet. And now that Violet and her mother were away from Dale Manor, he would take care that they did not return to the house until Violet was his wife. Perhaps even in this desperate hour things had happened for the best.

CHAPTER XX

DAVID HAS ONE VISITOR, AND EXPECTS OTHERS

David had to rise pretty early to admit his charwoman. Behind her, in the outer lobby, he saw the scared face of the hall-porter, who remembered that a certain loud knocking and difficulty of gaining access to that flat on one other occasion had been the prelude to a tragic discovery, though he, not being in the building at the time, had heard of the affair only from his mates.

David smiled reassurance at him, and went back to his bed-room to dress. He placed the portrait and the letter in an inner pocket of his waistcoat provided for paper money, and, the hour being in advance of breakfast-time, went out for a stroll.

Regent's Park was delightful that morning. Not spring, but summer, was in the air. Nature, to compel man to admire her dainty contrivances, was shutting in the vistas. Already trees and hedge-rows flung their leafy screens across the landscape. So David wandered on, promising himself many such mornings with Violet; for it passed his wit to see how Van Hupfeldt could wriggle out of the testimony of his own picture and his own handwriting.

Hence, instead of being earlier he was somewhat later than usual in sitting down to breakfast, and he was a surprised young man when, his charwoman having gone to answer a ring at the door, the announcement came of:

"A lady to see you, sir."

"A lady!" he gasped. "Who is she?" and he hoped wildly that it might be Violet.

"You know her well enough, old boy," came the high-pitched voice of Miss Ermyn L'Estrange, who now appeared in the dining-room, a pink-faced vision in a flower-garden hat and muslins. "Poof!" she cried. "I have not been out for many a day before the streets were aired. Say, young party, that bacon and egg has a more gratifying scent than violets. I have come all the way from Chelsea on one cup of tea."

The charwoman, eying the visitor askance, admitted that more supplies could be arranged.

"Hurry up, then, fairy," said Miss L'Estrange. "And don't look so shocked. Your master here is the very goodest young man in London."

David said that even the just man fell seven times a day; but, anyhow, he was delighted to see her.

"You look it," was the dry response. "I never knew anybody who threw their heart into their eyes as you do. You will never get on in London if you don't learn to lie better. When you say that sort of thing you should gush a little and leer--at any rate, when you are talking to a woman."

"But I mean it," he vowed. "You can't tell how nice it is to have some frills on the other side of the table. That hat, now, is a picture."

"The hair is a bad color to suit, you know."

"Ah, no, it has the gold of the sun in it. Perhaps I may be phrasing the words awkwardly, but you look ten years younger this morning, Miss L'Estrange."

She turned her eyes to the ceiling. "Ye gods!" she cried, "if only I had those ten back again!" Then she gave David a coy glance. "I don't mind betting you half a quid," she said, "that you are only pleased to see me here because I bring to your mind the possibility of another girl being your vis-a-vis at breakfast."

"Now you would make me dumb when I am most anxious to talk."

"Oh, you candid wretch! Why did I come here? Don't you believe that there are twenty men in London who would give quite a lot if I honored them by this morning call?"

"I do believe it," said David, gravely, "and that is just why you are here, and not with one of the twenty. You are a far more upright little lady than you profess to be, Miss L'Estrange."

She actually blushed, for, like most women who are compelled to make up professionally, never an atom of grease or rouge was on her face at other times. "David," she said, "you are a nice boy. I wish you were my brother."

"You would be fine and dandy as a sister."

"Well, let's be friends. And the first sign of friendship is a common alliance. I've taken your side against Strauss."

"What of him?" demanded David, warily; for Miss Ermyn was a slippery customer, he fancied.

"Now, no fencing, or the alliance is off. You were down at Rigsworth yesterday, remember, and you came back in a mighty temper. Not even your pretty Violet was all perfection last evening, was she?"

"Things did go wrong, I admit," said he, marveling at this attack.

"Well, I am not here to pump you, or else I would surprise you a bit more. No, David, I'm here just because I'm a woman, and as full of mischief as an egg is full of meat; so that I can't help interfering in a love affair, though it isn't my own. Did you know that Strauss brought Jenny to Rigsworth yesterday?"

"Jenny? Why Jenny?"

"That is what I wanted to know. And she wouldn't tell me, the cat, until I got my Irish up and offered to drag her over the furniture by the hair of her head. And it was no use her lying to me, either. Every time she tried to think of a plausible tale I told her it would hurt to cross the chiffoinier head first. At last she owned up, and then I opened a small bottle--she wanted it, I assure you--and I got the whole story while we finished it."

"But, for goodness' sake--"

"Whoa, my boy! Don't rush your fences. I'll tell you everything, so keep calm. First, the night before last, Strauss comes to me--"

"One moment," broke in David. "Is this Strauss?" and he handed her the portrait.

She looked at it and laughed. "Why, of course it is!" she said. "Fancy you keeping his picture over your heart! Now, if it had been Violet, or me--"

"Sorry to have interrupted you," he said.

"Funny idea! Anyhow, Strauss turned up the night before last and wanted to borrow Jenny for the whole of next day. It was beastly awkward, as she was helping me to re-hem this dress and put new sleeves in the bodice; but he badgered me so that I could hardly refuse," and she thought for an instant of certain notes crumpled up in the gold purse which was slung from her neck; "so I packed Jenny off about eight o'clock next morning--yesterday, that is. I was in a temper all day, and tore two flounces out of my frock, and scraped my shin on the step of a hansom; so when the minx came smirking home about midnight, to find me making my own fire, I let her have it, I can tell you. But it fairly gave me the needle when she wouldn't say what Strauss wanted her for, and then the row sprang up. Guess you want to smoke, eh? I would like a cigarette myself."

David was most docile outwardly when all of a boil within. He awaited her pleasure, saw her seated in a comfortable chair, joined in her own admiration of a pair of really pretty feet, and lit a pipe. Then she continued:

"There was poisonous trouble for about five minutes. I might have let her off if she hadn't said things. Then I frightened her. I believe I did yank her hat off. At last, she confessed that Strauss told her that his name now was Van Hupfeldt, and he wanted her to go down to Rigsworth to be introduced to two ladies as Sarah Gissing, Gwen Barnes's maid."

"What?" yelled David, springing to his feet.

"Oh, chuck it!" said Miss L'Estrange in a voice of deep disgust. "You nearly made me swallow my cigarette."

"But the man is a devil."

"Sit down, boy, sit down. You men are all six of one and half a dozen of the other where a woman is concerned. Poor things! I wonder how any of us escape you at all. Still, Strauss is pretty artful, I admit. You see, Jenny, having been in service here, could lie so smoothly about Gwen Barnes that it would be hard to find her out."

"Did she do this?" asked David in a fierce excitement.

Miss L'Estrange laughed again as she selected a fresh cigarette to replace the spoiled one.

"Did the cat steal cream? Fancy Jenny being offered twenty pounds for a day's prevarication and refusing it! Why, that girl lies for practise."

"Oh, please go on!" he groaned.

"Queer game, isn't it? I often think the ha'penny papers don't get hold of half the good things that are going. Well, Jenny, according to her own version, spoofed Mrs. Mordaunt and your Violet in great shape. What is more, Strauss and a lawyer man wheedled them into signing all sorts of papers, including a marriage settlement. Will you believe it? The Dutchman had the cheek to give your Violet the certificates which Jenny sold to him."

David said something under his breath.

"Yes," said Miss L'Estrange, "he deserves it. I can't abide a man who goes in for deceiving a poor girl. So, at my own loss, mind you, I determined to come here this morning and give you a friendly tip."

"Heaven knows I shall endeavor to repay you!" sighed David, in a perfect heat now to be out and doing, doing he knew not what.

"Is she very beautiful, your Violet?" asked his visitor, turning on him with one of her bird-like movements of the head.

"That is her sister," said David, flinging a hand toward the portrait.

"Ah, I knew Gwen Barnes. Saw her in the theater, you know. A nice girl, but nothing to rave about. Rather of the clinging sort. You men prefer that type I do believe. And now that you have heard my yarn, you want me to go, eh?"

"No, no. No hurry at all."

"You dear David! Mouth all 'No,' eyes all 'Yes.' That's it. Treat me like an old shoe. Bless you! we women worship that sort of thing, until, all at once, we blaze up. Well, you will give Strauss a drubbing one of these days, and I shan't be sorry. I hate pretty men. They are all affectation, and waxy like a barber's doll. Well, ta-ta! You're going to have a nice, pleasant day, I can see. But, fair play, mind. No telling tales about your little Ermyrn. I have done more for you to-day than I would do for any other man in creation. And some day you must bring your Violet to tea; I promise to be good and talk nice. There, now; ain't I a wonder?"

And she was gone, in a whirl of flounces and high heels, the last he heard of her when she declined to let him come to the door "with that glare" in his eye being her friendly hail to the lift-man: "Hello, Jimmie! Like old times to see you again. How's the wife and the kiddies?"

Left to his own devices, David was at his wits' end to know how to act for the best. At last he wrote a telegram to Violet:

The girl you met yesterday as Sarah Gissing was not your sister's maid, but another woman masquerading in her stead. I implore you and your mother to come to London and meet me in Mr. Dibbin's office. He knows the real Sarah Gissing, and will produce her.

This was definite enough, and he thought the introduction of Dibbin's name would be helpful with Mrs. Mordaunt. Then he rushed off to see Dibbin himself, but learned from a clerk that the agent would not arrive from Scotland until six-thirty P.M., "which is a pity," said the clerk, ruefully, "because a first-rate commission has just come in for him by wire."

"Some one in a hurry?" said Harcourt, speaking rather to cloak his own disappointment than out of any commiseration for Dibbin's loss.

"I should think so, indeed. Fifty golden sovereigns sent by telegraph, just to get him quick to Portsmouth."

David heard, and wondered. He made a chance shot. "I expect that is my friend, Van Hupfeldt," he said.

"The very man!" gasped the clerk.

"Oh, there is no harm done. Mr. Dibbin comes to King's Cross, I suppose?"

"Yes. I shall be there to meet him."

Certainly things were lively at Rigsworth. David had a serious notion of going there by the next train. But he returned to Eddystone Mansions, in case there might be an answer from Violet. Sure enough, there he found the telegram sent in her name by Van Hupfeldt. The time showed that it was despatched about the same hour as his own. At first, his heart danced with the joy of knowing that she still trusted him. And how truly wonderful that she mentioned Pangle, a town he had not named to her; there must, indeed, have been a tremendous eruption at Dale Manor. Yet it was too bad that he should be forced to leave London and go in chase of Mrs. Carter and the baby. Why, he would be utterly cut off from active communication with her for hours, and it was so vitally important that they should meet. Of course, he would obey, but first he would await the chance of a reply to his message. So he telegraphed again:

Will go to Pangley. Tell me when I can see you.

He was his own telegraph messenger. While he was out another buff envelope found its way to his table. Here was the confusion of a fog, for this screed ran:

Miss Violet Mordaunt traveled to London this morning by the nine-eleven train. This is right.

FRIEND.

There was no name; but the post-office said the information came from Rigsworth, and the post-office indulges in cold official accuracy. Somehow, this word from a friend did strike him as friendly. It made him read again, and ponder weightily, the longer statement signed "Violet."

He could not tell, oh, sympathetic little sister of the Rigsworth postmistress, that you wheedled the grocer's assistant into writing that most important telegram. It was a piece of utmost daring on the part of a village maid, and perhaps it might be twisted into an infringement of the "Official Secrets Act," or some such terrifying ordinance; but your tender little heart had gone out to the young man who got "no answer" from the lady of the manor, and you knew quite well that Violet had never sent him to Pangley to hunt for a missing baby.

Anyhow, David was glowering at both flimsy slips of paper, when a letter reached him. It was marked "Express Delivery," and had been handed in at Euston Station soon after twelve o'clock.

This time there could be no doubt whatever that Violet was the writer. Here was the identical handwriting of the first genuine note he had received from her. And there was Violet herself in the phrasing of it, though she was brief and reserved. She wrote:

DEAR DAVID--I am in London for the purpose of making certain inquiries. I must not see you if I can help it. I must be quite, quite alone and unaided. Please pardon my seeming want of confidence. In this matter I am trusting to God's help and my own endeavors. But I want you to oblige me by being away from your flat to-night between midnight and two A.M. That is all. Perhaps I may be able to explain everything later.

Your sincere well-wisher,
VIOLET MORDAUNT.

Then David ran like a beagle to Euston Station; but Violet had been gone from there nearly an hour, because he found on inquiry that the nine-eleven train from Rigsworth had arrived at noon. Yet he could not be content unless he careered about London looking for her, first at Porchester Gardens, then at Dibbin's office, at which he arrived exactly five minutes before she did, and he must have driven along Piccadilly while she was turning the corner from Regent's. London is the biggest bundle of hay when you want to find anybody.

Amidst the maelstrom of his doubts and fears one fact stood out so clearly that he could not fail to recognize it. Not Violet alone, but some other hidden personality, most earnestly desired his absence from the flat that night. In a word, Van Hupfeldt, who knew of the photograph and the letter being hidden there, had the strongest possible reason for seeking an opportunity to make an absolutely unhindered search of every remaining nook and crevice. But how was Violet's anxiety on this head to be explained? Was she, too, wishful to carry out a scrutiny of pictures, cupboards, and ornaments on her own account?

Then, with a sort of intuition, David felt that it was she who had already visited her sister's latest abode at such uncanny hours of gloom and mystery that her presence had given rise to the ghost legend. And with the consciousness that this was so came a hot flush of shame and remorse that he had so vilified Violet in his thoughts on the night of his long run from Chalfont. It was she whom he had seen standing at the end of the corridor on the first night of his ever-memorable tenancy of this sorrow-laden abode, and, no doubt, her earlier efforts at elucidating the dim tragedy which cloaked her sister's death had led to the eery experiences of Miss L'Estrange and Jenny.

Well, thank goodness! he held nearly all the threads of this dark business in his hands now, and it would go hard with Van Hupfeldt if he crossed his path that night. For David resolved, with a smile which had in it a mixture of grimness and tenderness, that he would obey the letter of Violet's request while decidedly disobeying its spirit. She wished him to be "away from the flat between midnight and two A.M." Certainly he would be away; but not far away--near enough, indeed, to know who went into it and who came out, and some part of their business there if he saw fit. Violet, of course, might come and go as she pleased; not so Van Hupfeldt or any of his myrmidons.

Thereupon, determined to oppose guile to guile, he dismissed his charwoman long before the usual time, and called the friendly hall-porter into consultation.

"Jim," he said, when the lift shot up to his floor in response to a summons, "I guess you want a drink."

Jim knew Harcourt's little ways by this time. "Well sir," he said, stepping forth, and unshipping the motor key, "I'm bound to admit that a slight lubrikytion wouldn't be amiss."

"In fact, it might be a hit, a palpable hit. Well, step lively. Here's the whisky. Now, Jim, listen while I talk. I understand there is to be a meeting of ghosts here to-night--no, not a word yet; drink steadily, Jim--and it is up to you and me to attend the convocation. There is nothing to worry about. These spirits are likely to be less harmful than those you are imbibing; indeed, we may be called on to grab one or two of them, but they will turn out to be ordinary men. You're not afraid of a man, Jim?"

"Not if 'e is a man, sir. But will there be any shootin'?"

"Ah, you heard of that?"

"People will talk of bullet-marks, sir, to say nothing of drops o' blood."

"Drops of blood? Where?"

"All round our front door. They wasn't there overnight, an' next day there was a revolver bullet stuck in your kitchen skirting-board."

"Excellent! Clear proof that our sort of ghosts will bleed if you punch them hard enough on the nose. Now, I want your help in three ways. In the first place, I am going out about seven and will return about nine. I want you to make sure that no one enters my flat within those hours. Secondly, when I come back, I wish to reach this floor without coming in by the front door. You understand? If any one should be watching my movements, I would like to be seen leaving the mansions but not returning. Thirdly, I want you to join me on guard when you close the front door at midnight, hiding the pair of us somewhere above, so that we can see, without fear of mistake, any persons who may possess keys which fit my front door."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said the porter, setting down his glass. "Well, I'm your man, sir. Leave everything to me. When you comes home at nine just pop along the other street until you sees a door leadin' to a harea. Drop down there, an' you'll find yourself in our basement. At twelve sharp I'll come up in the lift and fix you up proper."

"Jim, you're a treasure!" said David.



CHAPTER XXI

THE MIDNIGHT GATHERING

When the train from Rigsworth brought Violet into Euston Station, she hurried through the barrier and asked an official to direct her to the nearest post-office. At this instant a slight accident happened which had a singular bearing on the events of the day. Neil, the valet, who had driven to Euston just in time to meet the incoming train, had seen her, and was pressing in close pursuit when he tripped over a luggage barrow and fell headlong.

He was not much injured, but shaken more than a little, and when he was able to take up the chase again, Violet had vanished. Hence she was freed from espionage, and Van Hupfeldt could only curse his useless emissary. The man Neil certainly did rush about like a whirlwind as soon as he recovered his breath; but Violet was in the post-office writing to David, and securely hidden from his ferret eyes.

Oddly enough, the first person she wished to see was Miss Ermyn L'Estrange. She remembered the actress well, as she had visited her once (Jenny, the maid, was out on an errand at the time), and it was one of the many curious discrepancies in the tissue of mingled fact and fiction which obscured her sister's fate that such a volatile and talkative woman should have written the curt little note sent at Hupfeldt's bidding. Violet could not understand the reason, but she saw a loophole here. The long journey in the train had enabled her to review the information she possessed with a certain clarity and precision hitherto absent from her bewildered thoughts. In a word, there were several marked lines of inquiry, and she was resolved to follow each separately.

She felt that she had gone the wrong way to work in the first frenzy of her grief. She was calm now, more skilled in hiding her suspicion, less prone to jump at conclusions. All unknown to her, the little germ of passion planted in her heart by David's few words in the summer-house was governing her whole being. From the timid, irresolute girl, who clung to unattainable ideals, she was transformed into a woman, ready to dare anything for the sake of the man she loved, while the mere notion of marriage with Van Hupfeldt was so loathsome that she was spurred into the physical need of strenuous action to counteract it.

So it was in a restrained yet business-like mood that she climbed the stairs leading to Miss L'Estrange's flat and rang the electric bell. The door was opened by Jenny.

Not all the resources of pert Cockneyism availed that hapless domestic when she set eyes on Miss Mordaunt. She uttered a helpless little wail of dismay, and retreated a few steps, as though she half expected the wonder-stricken young woman to use strong measures with her.

"Well, what is it now?" came her mistress's sharp demand, for in that small abode there reigned what the Italians call "a delightful confidence," Jenny's scream and rush being audible in the drawing-room.

"Ow!" stammered Jenny, "it's a young lady, miss."

"A young lady? Is she nameless?"

"No," said Violet, advancing toward the voice; "but your maid seems to be alarmed by the sight of me. You know me, Miss L'Estrange. I only wish I had discovered sooner that you employed my sister's servant, Sarah Gissing."

Ermyn was accustomed to stage situations. She instantly grasped her part; for she was fresh from the interview with David, and there could be no doubt that the unmasking of Van Hupfeldt was as settled now as the third act of the farcical comedy in which she would play the soubrette that night.

"Sarah Gissing!" she said with a fine scorn. "That is not her name. She is Jenny--Jenny--blest if I have ever called her anything else. Here, you! what is your other name?"

"Blaekey, miss," sobbed Jenny, in tears.

"But you said only yesterday that you were Sarah Gissing?" cried Violet.

"Yyus, miss, an' it wasn't true."

"So you have never seen my sister?"

"No, miss."

"Why did you lie to me so shamelessly?"

"Please, miss, I was pided for it."

"Paid! By Mr. Van Hupfeldt?"

"There is some mistake," broke in Miss L'Estrange, who was a trifle awed by Violet's quiet dignity. "It was a Mr. Strauss who came here and asked permission for Jenny to have the day free yesterday in order to give some evidence he required."

"Are you quite sure it was Mr. Strauss?" asked Violet, turning away from Jenny as though the sight of her was offensive.

"Positive! I rented, or rather I took your sister's flat from him, and he has been plaguing my life out ever since about some papers he imagined I found there."

"But you wrote to me a little while ago," pleaded Violet.

"Strauss is a plausible person," countered the other woman readily. "He came here and spun such a yarn that I practically wrote at his dictation."

"There is no mistake this time, I hope."

Miss L'Estrange's color rose, and her red hair troubled her somewhat; but she answered with an effort: "There has never been any mistake on my part. Had you come to me in the first instance, and taken me into your confidence, I would have helped you. But you stormed at me quite unjustly, Miss Mordaunt, and it is not in human nature to take that sort of thing lying down, you know."

Then, seeing the sorrow in Violet's eyes, she went on with a real sympathy: "I wish we had been more candid with each other at first. And I had nothing whatever to do with Jenny's make-believe of yesterday. The girl is a first-rate cook, but she can tell lies faster than a dog can trot."

This poetic simile popped out unawares; but Violet heard the kindly tone rather than the words.

"I may want you again," she said simply. "May I rely on you if the need arises?"

"Indeed you may!" was the impulsive reply. "I have wept over your sister's unhappy fate, Miss Mordaunt, and I always thought Strauss was a villain. I hope that nice young fellow, David Harcourt, who has been on his track for months, will catch him one of these days, and give him a hiding, at the very least."

"Oh, you know Mr. Harcourt?"

And then Emlyn L'Estrange did a thing which ennobled her in her own eyes for many a day. "Yes," she said. "He found out that I occupied your sister's flat after her death; so he came to see me, and, if I may venture to say so, he betrayed an interest in you, Miss Mordaunt, which, had such a man shown it towards me, would have been deemed a very pleasing and charming testimony of his regard."

It was only a line out of an old play; but it served, and they kissed each other when they said "Good-by."

Although Violet was startled at alighting on such ready confirmation of Van Hupfeldt's duplicity, there was a remarkable brightness in her eye, a spring-time elasticity in her step, when she emerged into the High-St. of Chelsea, which had not been visible a little while earlier. In truth, she felt as a thrush may be supposed to feel after having successfully dodged the attack of a hawk. Were it not that she was treading the crowded streets of London she would have sung for sheer joy.

And now, feeling hungry after her long journey, she entered a restaurant and ate a good meal, which was a sensible thing to do in itself, but which, in its way, was another tiny factor in the undoing of Van Hupfeldt, as, thereby, she missed meeting David at Dibbin's office.

When she did ultimately reach that unconscious rendezvous, she found there the clerk who had given David such interesting information. This man knew Miss Mordaunt, and had some recollection of the dead Gwendoline; so he was civil, and assured Violet that his master would return from Scotland that evening.

"Mr. Dibbin has been at Dundee for some days?" asked Violet.

"Let me see, miss; he went away on the fourth, and this is the ninth; practically six days, counting the journeys."

"Then he certainly could not have written to me on the seventh from London?"

The clerk was puzzled. "If you mean that he wasn't in London, then--" he began.

Violet did not show the man the letter which she had in her pocket. Perhaps it was best that Dibbin himself should read it first. But she did say: "He could not have had an interview with a Mr. Van Hupfeldt, for instance?"

"Now, that is very odd, miss," said the clerk. "That is the very name of the gentleman who wired instructions to-day for Mr. Dibbin to go at once to Portsmouth. And, by Jove! begging your pardon, but the telegram came from your place, Rigsworth, in Warwickshire. I never thought of that before."

"It doesn't matter," said Violet, sweetly; "I shall endeavor to meet Mr. Dibbin at King's Cross. And will you please not mention to any one that I have called here?"

The knowledge that Van Hupfeldt was striving to decoy Dibbin away from London revealed that the pursuit had begun. For an instant she was tempted to appeal to David for help. But she had given her word not to see him, and that was sacred, even in relation to one whom she considered to be the worst man breathing.

The clerk promised readily enough to observe due discretion anent her visit. He would have promised nearly anything that such a nice-looking girl sought of him. Suddenly Violet recollected that the house-agent might know the whereabouts of the real Sarah Gissing. She asked the question, and, Dibbin being a man of docketts and pigeon holes, the clerk found the address for her in half a minute, told her where Chalfont was, looked up the next train from Baker-St., and sent her on her way rejoicing.

Violet, like the majority of her charming sex, paid small heed to time, and, indeed, time frequently returns the compliment to pretty women. It was five hours ere Dibbin was due at King's Cross, and five hours were sufficient for almost any undertaking. So she journeyed to Chalfont, found the genuine Sarah, and was alarmed and reassured at the same time by the girl nearly fainting away when she set eyes on her.

Here, then, at last, was real news of her Gwen. She could have listened for hours. The landlady of the little hotel charitably let the two talk their fill, and sent tea to them in the small parlor where David had met Sarah. Like David, too, whom Sarah did not forget to describe as "that nice young gentleman, Mr. Harcourt," Violet outstayed the train time, and, when she did make an inquiry on this head, it was impossible to reach King's Cross at six-thirty P.M.

Amid all the tears and poignancy of grief aroused by the recital of her sister's lonely life and tragic end, there was one strange, unaccountable feature which stood out boldly. Neither by direct word nor veiled inference did Sarah Gissing attribute deliberate neglect or unkindness to Strauss. If anything, her simple story told of a great love between those two, and there was the evidence of it in Gwendoline's latest distracted words about him. Of course, had Violet read the diary, this would have been clear enough; but, in view of the man's present attitude, this testimony of the servant's was hard to understand.

At any rate, Violet, sure now beyond the reach of doubt that Van Hupfeldt was Strauss, and that he was engaged in an incomprehensible conspiracy, nevertheless felt a sensible softening toward him. Perhaps her escape from the threatened marriage had something to do with this; and then, the man seemed to have almost worshiped Gwen.

Assuredly the gods, meaning to destroy Van Hupfeldt, first decided to make him mad. When he reached Dibbin's office, the clerk recognized him as Strauss, and was rendered suspicious by his reappearance, after this long time, within an hour of Violet's call, seeing that the first person he inquired about was Violet herself. Hence, being of the same mind as Miss Ermyrn L'Estrange as to the secret of success in London life, he failed to recognize any young lady named Mordaunt as among the list of Dibbin's visitors that day. Further, when Van Hupfeldt, goaded to extremities, was fain to confess that it was he who had telegraphed from Rigsworth, the clerk became obtuse on the matter of his employer's whereabouts. All he could say definitely was that Dibbin would be in his office next morning at ten o'clock.

The outcome of these cross purposes, seeing that David was in no hurry to meet the agent, was that Dibbin met only the clerk at King's Cross, and had a mysterious story poured into his ear, together with a bag of gold placed in his hands, as he tackled a chop prior to catching a train for the home of the Dibbins at Surbiton.

Van Hupfeldt took Mrs. Mordaunt to her old residence at Porchester Gardens, enjoining her not to say a word to Mrs. Harrod about Violet's escapade.

That was asking too much of a mother who had endured such heart-searchings during a day of misery. Not even the glamour of a wealthy marriage could blind Mrs. Mordaunt to certain traits in his character which the stress of fear had brought to the surface. She began to ask herself if, after all, Violet were not right in her dread of the man. She was afraid of she knew not what; so kind-hearted Mrs. Harrod's first natural question as to Violet's well-being drew a flood of tears and a resultant outpouring of the whole tragedy. But, lo and behold! Mrs. Harrod had dreamed of clear water and a trotting horse the previous night, and this combination was irresistible in its excellence on behalf of her friends. Mrs.

Harrod's prophetic dreams were always vicarious; her own fortunes were fixed--so much *per annum* earned by keeping a first-rate private hotel.

The manifold attractions of town life did not suffice to while away the weary hours of that evening for at least three people in London. Violet, returning from Chalfont, took a room in the Great Western Hotel at Paddington, and, when asked to sign the register, obeyed some unaccountable impulse by writing "Miss Barnes." It gave her a thrill to see poor Gwendoline's *nom de theatre* thus resurrected, and there was something uncanny in the incident too; but she was aroused by the hotel clerk's respectful inquiry if she had any luggage.

"No," she said, somewhat embarrassed; "but I will pay for my room in advance, if you wish."

"That is not necessary, madam, thank you," was the answer; so Violet, unconscious of the trust reposed in her appearance, took her key and went to rest a little before undertaking the last task she had set herself. She carried in her hand some violets which she had bought from a poor woman outside the hotel.

Van Hupfeldt, tortured by want of knowledge of the actions of those in whom he was most interested, was compelled to enlist Neil's services again after reviling him. The valet went openly to Eddystone Mansions and inquired for Harcourt.

"He's bin aht all d'y," said Jim the porter, speculating on Neil's fighting weight, if he was one of the ghosts to be laid after midnight.

Neil brought back this welcome information, and Van Hupfeldt hoped uneasily that his ruse had been successful. If it had, David would be somewhere near Birmingham, and would there await a message from Violet, which Van Hupfeldt would take care he received next day.

As for David, he smoked and mused in Hyde Park until after night had fallen. Then he returned to his abode by the way indicated by the porter, and smoked again in the dark, and without a fire, until a few minutes after midnight, when he heard the clank of the ascending lift, followed by a ring at the door. In case of accident, he had his revolver in his pocket this time; moreover, his right hand was ready when he opened the door with his left.

But it was his ally; Jim pointed to the lift with a grin. "Everybody else is in, sir," he said. "Just step in there an' I'll take you to the next floor. We'll switch off the light inside, but leave it on here as usual. Then we can see a mouse comin' up the stairs if need be, an' there's no other way in, unless a real ghost turns up."

They took up their position, leaving the door of the lift open. Thus they could step out without noise if necessary. They had not long to wait. Scarcely five minutes had elapsed before the porter, with an ear trained to the noises of the building, whispered eagerly:

"Some one has just closed the front door, sir."

They heard ascending footsteps. It was Van Hupfeldt, panting, darting quick glances at shadows, hastening up the stairs with a sort of felon fright. In front of No. 7 he paused and listened. Apparently not daring to risk everything, he rang the bell; he had not forgotten that a bullet had seared his leg at one of his unauthorized visits. Again he listened, being evidently ready for flight if he heard any answering sound. Then, finding all safe, he produced a key, entered, and closed the door behind him.

"Well, I'm--" began the porter, in a tense whisper, this unlawful entry being a sacrilege to him.

But David said in his ear: "Let him alone; we have him bottled."

Nevertheless, seeing that Violet had undoubtedly stated her intent (or it seemed like that) to visit the flat that night, he began to consider what he should do if she put in an appearance. What would happen if she unexpectedly encountered Van Hupfeldt within? That must be provided for. The unforeseen difficulty was an instance of the poverty of man's judgment where the future is concerned. In keeping his implied promise to Violet, he would expose her to grave peril; for, in David's view, Van Hupfeldt had done her sister to death in that same place, and there was no knowing what the crime a man in desperate straits would commit. David was sure now that, actuated by widely different motives, both Van Hupfeldt and Violet were bent on searching for the photograph and letter reposing securely in his own pocket. He smiled grimly as he thought of that which Van Hupfeldt would find, but, obviously, he ought to warn Violet beforehand. Or would it suffice if he followed quickly after her, thus giving her the opportunity of scaring Van Hupfeldt into the right mood to confess everything?

There was a slight risk in that; but it seemed to offer the best solution of a difficulty, and it would avoid the semblance of collusion between them, which Van Hupfeldt was adroit enough to take advantage of. So, when Violet did run lightly up the stairs, though his heart beat with joy at the sight of her, he restrained himself until she had opened the door. She applied her key without hesitation.

"She trusts in me fully, then!" thought David, with a pang of regret that he should be compelled now to disobey her.

He gripped the porter's arm as he stepped noiselessly out on to the landing above, and thus lost sight of Violet. The man followed, and David, leaning over the stair-rail, saw the door of his flat close. He had never before realized how quietly that door might be closed if due care was taken. Even his keen ears heard no sound whatever.

And then he heard that which sent the blood in a furious race from his brain to his heart and back to his brain again. For there came from within a cry as from some beast in pain, and, quickly following, the shriek of a woman in mortal fear.

David waited for no key-turning. He dashed in the lock with his foot and entered. The first thing that greeted his disordered senses was the odor of violets which came to him, fresh and pungent, with an eery reminiscence of the night he thought he saw the spectral embodiment of dead Gwendoline.



CHAPTER XXII

VAN HUPFELDT MAKES AMENDS

Violet's first act, on entering the hall, had been to turn on the light. She did this without giving a thought to the possibility of disturbing some prior occupant. The day's events demonstrated how completely David was worthy of faith; she was assured that he would obey the behest in her letter. How much better would it have been had she trusted intuition in the first instance!

But it chanced that David had written a little note to her, on an open sheet of paper, which he pinned to the table-cloth in the dining-room in such a position that she could not fail to see it when there was a light. And this note, headed "To Violet," contained the fateful message:

I have found the photograph of Strauss, or Van Hupfeldt, and with it the letter in which he announced to your sister that he was already married to another woman.

DAVID.

Van Hupfeldt, of course, had seen this thrice-convincing and accusing document, which proved not only that he and his secret were in David's power, but that David had expected Violet to visit his dwelling. He was sitting at the table in a stupor of rage and terror, when he fancied he heard a rustling in the outer passage. Beside himself with anger at the threatened downfall of his cardboard castle, strung to a state of high nervous tension by the horror he had of that abode of dreadful memories, he half turned toward the door, which had swung back almost into its place.

Through the chink he noticed an exterior radiance; nevertheless, he paid no heed to it, although his wearied brain seemed to remind him that he had not left a light in the corridor. Yet again he heard another rustle, as of a woman's garments. This time he sprang up, with the madness of hysteria in his eyes; he tore open the door, and saw Violet near to him. She, noting the movement of the door, stood stock-still with surprise and some fear, ungovernable emotions which undoubtedly gave a touch of wan tragedy to her expression. Moreover, the glow of the hall lamp was now behind her, and her features were somewhat in gloom; so it was not to be wondered at that Van Hupfeldt, with his conscience on the rack, thought he was actually looking at the embodied spirit of Gwendoline. He expected to see the dead woman, and he was far too unhinged to perceive that he was face to face with a living one.

He threw up his arms, uttered that horrible screech which had reached the ears of David and the porter, and collapsed limply to the floor, whence, from his knees, while he sank slowly, he gazed at the frightened girl with such an awful look of a doomed man that she, in turn, screamed aloud. Then she saw a thin stream of blood issuing from between his pallid lips, and, the strain being too great, she fainted; so that David, after bursting in the door and finding the two bodies prostrate, one on each side of the entrance to the dining-room, imagined for one agonizing second that another and more ghastly crime had been enacted in those haunted chambers.

He lifted Violet tenderly in his arms, and guessed at once that she had been overcome by the sight of Van Hupfeldt, who, at the first glance, seemed to have inflicted some mortal injury on himself.

The hall-porter, aghast at the discovery of two people apparently dead whom he had seen alive a few minutes earlier, kept his wits sufficiently together to stoop over Van Hupfeldt; then he, too, noticed the blood welling forth. "It's all right, sir," cried he, in a queer, cracked voice to David; "this here gent has on'y broke a blood-vessel!"

David said something which had better be forgotten; just then Violet, who was not at all of the lymphatic order, opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Thank God!" he whispered, close to her lips, and she, scarce comprehending her whereabouts yet, made a brave effort to smile at him.

He had carried her into the little drawing-room, and he now placed her in a chair. "Have no fear," he said. "I am here. I shall not leave you."

He ran to the door. "If that man's condition is serious, you had better summon a doctor," he cried to the porter, whom he saw engaged in the effort to prop Van Hupfeldt's body against a chair. David was pitiless, perhaps; he had not recovered from the shock of finding Violet lying prostrate.

"He mustn't be allowed to fall down, sir," said Jim, anxiously, "or he will choke. I've seen a kise like this before."

David, though quickly subsiding from his ferment, was divided between the claims of Violet and the demands of

humanity. Personally, he thought that the Dutchman would be no loss to the world; but the man was helpless. And now Violet, recovering strength and recollection with each more regular breath, knew what had happened. She stood up tremblingly.

"Let us go to him," she said, with the fine chivalry of woman, and soon, kneeling on each side of Van Hupfeldt, they supported him, and endeavored to stanch the outpouring from his lips.

The porter hurried away. David, wondering what to do for the best, held his enemy's powerless body a little inclined forward, and asked Violet if she would bring a wet towel from the bath-room. She did this at once, and wrapped it round Van Hupfeldt's forehead. The relief thus afforded was effective, and the flow of blood had ceased when the porter returned with a doctor who lived in the next block of dwellings.

The doctor made light of the hemorrhage; but he detected a pulse which made him look up at the others gravely.

"This is a bad case of heart failure," he said. "The rupture of a blood-vessel is a mere symptom. Has he had a sudden shock?"

"I fear so," said David. "What can we do for him?"

"Nothing, at present," was the ominous answer. "I dread even the necessity of moving him to a bed-room. Certainly he cannot be taken elsewhere. Is he a friend of yours? I understand he does not live here."

David was saved from the difficulty of answering by a feeble indication of Van Hupfeldt's wish to speak. The doctor gave him some water, then a little weak brandy and water. Violet again helped David to hold him, and the unfortunate man, seemingly recognizing her, now turned his head toward her.

"Forgive me!" he whispered, with the labored distinctness of one who speaks with the utmost effort. "I have deceived you vilely. I wished to make reparation."

"I think I know all you wish to tell me," said Violet, bravely, "and, even so, I am sorry for you."

"You heard what the doctor said?" he muttered.

"Yes, but you will recover. Don't try to talk. You must calm yourself. Then the doctor will help."

"I know more than he knows of my own condition. I am dying. I shall be dead in a few minutes. It is only just. I shall die here, where Gwen died--my Gwen, whom I loved more than my own soul. May God forgive--"

"Oh, don't!" cried Violet, brokenly; the presence of gray death, that last and greatest adjuster of wrong, obliterated many a bitter vow and stifled the cry for vengeance in her.

"It is just," he whispered again. "I killed her by that letter. And now she has summoned me to the grave, she who gave her life to shield me. Ah! what a punishment was mine! when I flew here from Paris to tell her that all was well, and arrived only in time to see her die! She died in my arms, just as I am dying in yours, Vi! But she suffered, and I, who deserve all the suffering, am falling away without pain."

Truly, he seemed to gain strength as he spoke; he still fancied he had seen Gwendoline; the gathering mists clouded his brain to that extent.

Violet's eyes were dim with tears; her lips trembled so that she scarce could utter a word. The doctor, who was watching Van Hupfeldt narrowly, said to her in a low tone: "Take my advice, and leave us now."

But Van Hupfeldt heard him, and roused himself determinedly for a final effort. Yet he spoke with difficulty and brokenly. "I escaped down the service-lift that night--once again when Harcourt shot at me. I only wished to atone, Vi! I made my will--you know--the lawyers will explain. The boy--Mrs. Carter--New Street, Birmingham. See to the boy, Vi, for Gwen's sake. Ah, God! for her sake!"

And that was all.

Violet, weeping bitterly, was led away. From over the mantelpiece the wild eyes of a portrait in chalk of a beautiful woman looked down in pity, it may be, on the dead face of the man lying on the floor. And so ended the sad love story of Henry Van Hupfeldt and Gwendoline Mordaunt. In the street beneath, hansoms were jingling along, bringing people home from the restaurants. London recked little of the last scene of one of its many dramas.

Yet it had its sequel in life and love, for Violet and her mother, as the result of a telegram to Birmingham, took into their arms a happy and crowing infant, a fine baby boy who won his way to their hearts by his instant readiness to be fondled by them, and who retained his place in their affections by the likeness he bore to his dead mother; though his

hair was dark, and he promised to have the Spanish profile of his father, his eyes were Gwen's blue ones, and his lips parted in the merry smile they knew so well.

But that was next day, when the fount of tears was nearly dry, and the shudderings of the night had passed. Lucky it was for Violet that David was near. What would have become of her had she regained her senses and found herself alone in the flat, alone with a dead man?

David, somewhat hardened by his career in the turbulent West, quickly hit upon a line of action. The doctor, a good soul, volunteered to drive to Van Hupfeldt's residence and summon Neil, who would probably bear the porter company during a night vigil in the flat. David, therefore, made Violet drink a little brandy, and, talking steadily the while, compelling occasional answers to his questions, he led her to a cab, which he directed to Porchester Gardens. He knew that in Mrs. Harrod she would find a friend, and it was an added relief to him to discover, after repeated ringing had brought a servant to the door, that Mrs. Mordaunt was there, too.

To save Violet the undue strain of an explanation, he asked that her mother might be aroused. There was no need for that. She was down-stairs promptly, having heard the imperative bell, certain that news of Violet was to hand.

So he told of the night's doings to a tearful and perplexed woman who had never previously set eyes on him, and it was three o'clock ere he turned his face toward Eddystone Mansions again. Arrived there, he found that the porter and Neil had carried the unfortunate Van Hupfeldt to the room in which Gwendoline died. That was chance; it must have been something more than chance which caused David to pick up the bunch of violets, torn from the breast of their wearer when she fell in a faint, and place them on the pillow near the pallid head. David was sorry for the man, after all.

In one matter, the sorely tried mother and daughter were fortunate; there was no inquest. The doctor who was present at Van Hupfeldt's death, after consulting the coroner and a West End specialist who had warned the sufferer of his dangerous state, was able to give a burial certificate in due form. Thus all scandal and sensation-mongering were avoided. The interment took place in Kensal Green cemetery. Van Hupfeldt's mortal remains were laid to rest near to those of the woman he loved.

Violet was his sole heiress under the will he had executed. A sealed letter, attached by him to that document, explained his motive. In case of accident prior to the contemplated marriage, he thereby surmounted the legal difficulty and inevitable exposure of providing for the child. He asked Violet to take the requisite steps to administer the estate, bidding her reserve a capital sum sufficient to provide the ten thousand pounds *per annum* given her by the marriage settlement, and set apart the residue, under trustees, for the benefit of the boy.

At first she refused to touch a penny of the money; but wiser counsels prevailed. There would not only be a serious tangle in the business if she declined the bequest, but Van Hupfeldt was so rich that nearly five times the amount was left for the child, the value of the estate being considerably over a million sterling.

The requisite investigation of the sources of his wealth cleared up a good deal that was previously obscure. Undoubtedly he had been helped in his early career, that of a musician, by a Mrs. Strauss, widow of a California merchant. She educated him, and, yielding to a foolish passion, offered to make him her heir if he married her and assumed the name of Strauss, she having already attained some notoriety in Continental circles under that designation. She was a *malade imaginaire*, in the sense that she would seldom reside more than a few weeks in any one place, while she positively detested both England and America.

He was kind to her, and she was devoted to him; but unlimited wealth cloyed when it involved constant obedience to her whims. Yet, rather than lose him altogether, she agreed to his occasional visits to England during the season, and when hunting was toward. Eager to shake off the thralldom of the Strauss regime, he then invariably passed under his real name of Van Hupfeldt.

Hence, when he fell in love with Gwendoline, and resolved to make her his in defiance of all social law, he was obliged to tell her that he was also Johann Strauss, and under an obligation to the Mrs. Strauss who had adopted him. Gwendoline's diary, which, with the certificates, was found in a bureau, became clear enough when annotated with these facts. Van Hupfeldt himself left the fewest possible papers, the letter accompanying the will merely setting forth his wishes, and announcing that he desired to marry Violet as an act of reparation to the memory of her sister. This had become a mania with him. The unhappy man thought that, this way, he could win forgiveness.

And then the bright world became a Valley of Despair for David Harcourt. During many a bitter hour he lamented Van Hupfeldt's death. Alive, he was a rival to be fought and conquered; dead, he had interposed that insurmountable barrier of great wealth between Violet and one who was sick for love of her. Poor David! He sought refuge in work, and found his way up some rungs of the literary ladder; but he could neither forget his Violet nor follow her to Dale Manor, the inaccessible, fenced in now by a wall of gold.

Once, he was in a hansom on the way to Euston, telling himself he was going to Rigsworth to give the gamekeeper that promised licking; but he stopped the cab and returned, saying bitterly: "Why am I trying to fool myself? That is not the David of my acquaintance."

So he went back, calling in at a florist's and buying a huge bowlful of violets, thinking to reach Nirvana by their scent, and thereby humbugging himself so egregiously that he was in despondent mood when he sat down to a lonely tea in his flat. He had not seen or heard of Violet in three long months, not since he took Mrs. Mordaunt and her to the train for Warwickshire, and, walking afterward with Dibbin from the station, learned the fateful news of her intolerable inheritance.

He had promised to write, but he had not written. What was he to say? That he still loved her, although she was rich? Perhaps he dreamed that she would write to him. But no; silence was the steady scheme of things--and work, fourteen hours a day work as the solatium, until his bronzed face began to take on the student's cast, and he wondered, at times, if he had ever caught and saddled a bronco, or slept under the stars. Or was it all a dream?

Wanting some bread, and being alone, the charwoman having believed his statement that he would be away until next midday, he went into the kitchen. It was now high summer; hot, with the stable-like heat of London, and the kitchen window was wide open. Some impulse prompted him to look out and examine the service-lift by way of which Van Hupfeldt had twice quitted the flat, once when driven by mad fear of being held guilty of Gwendoline's death, and again to save his life from David's revolver.

Given a steady brain and some little athletic skill, the feat was easy enough. All that was needed was to cling to two greasy iron uprights and slide from one floor to the next, where cross-bars marked the different stories and provided halting-places for the lift. It was typical of Van Hupfeldt that he had the nerve to essay this means of escape and the cunning to think of it.

David was looking into the well of the building a hundred feet below, when an electric bell jarred over his head. Some one was at the front door. It was a porter.

"You are wanted down-stairs, sir," said he, his honest face all of a grin.

"Down-stairs?" repeated David, puzzled.

"Yes, sir. There's a hansom waitin', sir."

"Oh," said David, wondering what he had left in his cab.

He went down, hatless, and not a word said Jim, though he watched David out of the corner of his eye, and smiled broadly when he saw David's sudden recognition of Violet through the side-window of the hansom.

She, too, smiled delightedly when David appeared. "I want you to come with me for a little drive," she said; "but not without a hat. That would be odd."

David, casting off three months' cobwebs in a second, was equal to the emergency. Somehow, the damask of Violet's flushed cheeks banished the dull tints in his.

"Jim," he said, "here's my key. Bring me a hat--any old hat--first you can grab."

Then he climbed into the vacant seat by her side. "Do you know," he said, "I was nearly going to Rigsworth to-day?"

"I only know," she replied, "that you were to write to me, and I have had no letter."

"Don't put me on my self-defense, or I shan't care tuppence if you are worth ten thousand or ten millions a year," he said.

Violet leaned over the door. "That man is a long time going for your hat," she said. "By the way, can you spare the time to drive with me to Kensal Green? And then I am to take you to Porchester Gardens, where mother expects you to dine with us, *en famille*, so you need not return here." She was a little breathless, and spoke in a flutter.

Jim arrived, with the missing head-gear. The driver whipped up his horse, and David's left arm went round Violet's waist. She bent forward, astonished, with a sidelong glance of questioning.

"It is a reasonable precaution," said David. "If the horse goes down, you don't fall out."

Violet laughed and blushed prettily.

A bus-driver, eying them, jerked his head at the cabman. "All right, the lady," he said, and the cabman winked. But the

two inside knew nothing of this ribaldry.

So, you see, David simply couldn't help himself, or rather, from another point of view, he did help himself to a remarkably charming wife and a considerable fortune.

Miss Ermyn L'Estrange insisted on an invitation to the wedding, which took place at Rigsworth as quietly as the inhabitants of the village would allow. The volatile actress won such favor from a local land agent in a fair way of business that he goes to town far too frequently, people say, and it is highly probable that her name will be changed soon to a less euphonious one, which will be good for her and excellent for the land agent's business.

Sarah Gissing found a new post as Master Henry's nurse, and Mrs. Carter was well rewarded for the care she had taken of the boy. The postmistress's sister received a fine diamond ring when David, by dint of judicious questioning, found out the identity of the "friend" who sent that most timely telegram, and, strangely enough, the surly gamekeeper never received either the fifty pounds, or the thrashing, or the sack; but was minus the silver paid to his poacher assistants for their night watch.

So, even this little side issue, out of the many grave ones raised by David's tenancy of an ordinary flat in an ordinary London mansion, shows how often the unexpected happens, even in ordinary life.

THE END