

of the stairs when that same now familiar sensation came upon me, like the touch of an icy hand. I gripped the old oaken banisters and stood cold and dumb. The same phenomena had occurred in my room as in that room of mystery at Gloucester Square. The thing utterly staggered belief. Nevertheless, almost as swiftly as the hand of Death touched me was it withdrawn, and walking somewhat unsteadily I went down and along the corridor to the breakfast-room.

The chatter was general before I entered, but there was a sudden silence as I opened the door. "Why, Dr. Colkirk!" cried a voice, "this isn't like you to be late! You're an awful sluggard this morning!"

I glanced quickly across at the speaker and held my breath in amazement.

It was Beryl. She was sitting there in her usual place, looking fresh in her pale blue cotton blouse, the merriest and happiest of the party.

What response I made I have no idea. I only know that I saluted my hostess mechanically, and then walked to my chair like a man in a dream.

CHAPTER XXVI.  
HUSBAND AND WIFE.

Personally, I am one of those who pay no tribute of grateful admiration to those who have oppressed mankind with the dubious blessings of the penny post. Just as no household which is adorned with the presence of pen-compelling young ladies is ever without its due quantity of morning letters, so no breakfast table is quite complete if the post bag has been drawn blank. The urn may hiss, eggs may be boiled to the precise degree of solidity, fizzling strips of "home cured" may smile upon you from dish of silver, or golden marmalade may strive to allure you with the richness of its hue; but if the morning letters are not present the picture is incomplete. They are the crowning glory of the British breakfast table. Saunter down to it, and find two or three stiff square envelopes on your plate, and you feel yourself a somebody, in constant touch with the world at large, justified in talking of "my letters." Saunter down to find yourself one of the letterless members of the gathering, and you cannot help noticing the fact with a measure of wistfulness.

For a good many days my correspondence had happily left me in the lurch, but as I sank into my seat I saw upon my plate a single letter, and took it up mechanically. As a rule the handwriting of the envelope betrayeth the writer, but this possessed the additional attraction of unfamiliar penmanship. It had been addressed to Rowan Road, and Bob had forwarded it.

The communication was upon paper of pale straw-colour, headed "Metropolitan Police, T Division, Brentford," and signed "J. Rowling, sub-divisional inspector." There were only two or three lines, asking whether I could make it convenient to appoint an hour when he could call upon me, as he wished to consult me upon "a matter of extreme importance." The matter referred to was, of course, the tragedy at Whitton. Truth to tell, I was sick at heart of all this ever-increasing maze of circumstances, and placed the letter in my pocket with a resolve to allow the affair to rest until I returned to London on the conclusion of my visit.

The receipt of it, however, had served one purpose admirably. It had given me an opportunity to recover my surprise at discovering Beryl sitting there opposite me, bright and vivacious, as though nothing unusual had occurred. That letter which I had seen her writing in the study on the previous evening had, I now felt convinced, made an appointment which she had kept.

But with whom?  
I glanced at my hostess, who was busily arranging with those near her at table for a driving party to visit the Haywards at Dollington Park, and wondered whether she could be aware of the strange midnight visitant. I contrived to have a brief chat with her after breakfast was finished, but she appeared in entire ignorance of what had transpired during the night. I lit a cigarette, and as usual strolled around for a morning visit to the kennels with Sir Henry. On returning I saw my well-beloved seated beneath one of the great trees near the

house reading a novel. The morning was hot, but in the shade it was delightful. As I crossed the grass to her she raised her head, and then smiling kindly, exclaimed:

"Why, I thought you'd gone to Dollington with the others, Dr. Colkirk!"  
"No," I answered, taking a chair near her. "I'm really very lazy this hot weather."

How charming she looked in her fresh cotton gown and large floppy hat of Leghorn straw trimmed with poppies.

"And I prefer quiet and an interesting book to driving in this sun. I wonder they didn't start about three and come home in the sunset. But Nora's always so wilful."

Though as merry as was her wont, I detected a tired look in her eyes. Where had she been during the long night, and with whom? The silence was only disturbed by the hum of the insects about us and the songs of the birds above. The morning was a perfect one.

"I found it very oppressive last night," I said, carefully approaching the subject upon which I wanted to talk to her. "I couldn't sleep, so I came out here, into the park."

"Into the park?" she echoed quickly, and I saw by her look that she was apprehensive.

"Yes. It was a beautiful night, cool, refreshing and starlight."

"You were alone?"  
I hesitated. Then, looking her straight in the face, answered:

"No, I was not, I had you yourself as company."

The colour in an instant left her cheeks, "Me?" she gasped.  
"Yes," I replied in a low earnest tone. "You were also in the park last night."

She was silent.  
"I did not see you," she faltered. Then, as though recovering her self-possession, she added with some hauteur: "And even if I chose to walk here after everyone had gone to rest, I really don't think that you have any right to question my actions."

"Forgive me," I said quickly. "I do not question you in the least. I have no right to do so, save where you neglect your own interests or place yourself in peril—as you did last night."  
"In peril of what?" she demanded defiantly.

"In peril of falling a victim to the vengeance of an enemy."  
"I don't understand you."

"Then I will speak more frankly. Miss Wynd, in the hope that you will be equally frank with me," I said, my eyes fixed upon her. "You were last night, or rather at an early hour this morning, with a person whom you have met on a previous occasion."

"I admit that. It is indeed useless to deny it," she answered.  
"And yet on the last occasion that you met, you nearly lost your life! Was it wise?"

"Nearly lost my life?" she echoed. "I do not follow you."

"The woman in black who cilled at Gloucester Square on that evening not many days ago. You surely remember her? Was it not after her departure that her unaccountable evil influence remained?"

"Certainly. But what of her?"  
"You were with her last night?"

"With her?" she gasped, surprised. "I certainly was not."

"Do you deny having seen her?" I demanded.  
"Most assuredly," she responded, promptly. "You certainly did not see us together."

"And your companion was not a woman?"

"No. It was a man."  
"Who?"

"I have already told you that I object to anyone interfering in my private affairs."

"A lover!" I said with some asperity, perhaps.

"You are entirely at liberty to think what you please. I only deny that I have set eyes upon my mysterious visitor since that evening in Gloucester Square."

"Well, she was in the house last night," I answered decisively. "She was in your room."

"In my room!" gasped my well-beloved in alarm. "Impossible!"

"I watched her enter there," I replied; and then continuing gave her an exact account of all that transpired—how she had first entered my room, and how the evil influence of her pres-

ence had so strangely affected me afterwards.

"It's absolutely astounding!" she declared. "I was utterly ignorant of it all. Are you absolutely certain that it was the same woman?"

"The description given of her by yourself and your cousin's servant in London is exact. She came here with some distinctly sinister purpose, that is quite evident."

"But she must have entered by the servants' quarters if she passed through the hall as you have described. She seems to have been in search of us both."

"No doubt," I answered. "And if, as you say, you were absent from the room at the time, it is evident that she went straightway out into the park in search of you. In that case she would have left the room before I tried the door, and would be ignorant of the fact that I had detected her."

"But what could she want with us?" she asked, in a voice which told me that this unexpected revelation had unnerved her.

"Ah! that I cannot tell," I responded. "She came here with an evil purpose, and fortunately we were both absent from our rooms."

She knit her brows in thought. Possibly she was recalling some event during her midnight walk.

"And you say that you actually experienced in your own room on returning there, an exactly similar sensation to that which we all felt at Gloucester Square?"

"Exactly. It seems as though when this woman enters any chamber she leaves behind her the chill of the grave. The thing is uncanny indeed, and an utter enigma which even Hofer himself, with all his research, cannot solve."

"Do you know," she faltered. "I felt the same sensation in my own room this morning; very faintly, but still the same feeling of being chilled. What is your own private opinion about it, Doctor?"

"My opinion is that there is a conspiracy afoot against both of us," I responded very earnestly. "For some unaccountable reason we are marked down as victims; why, I cannot tell. You will forgive me for speaking plainly, but I believe that you alone hold the key to the mystery—that you alone know the motive of this vengeance, if vengeance it be, and if you were to tell me frankly of the past we might unite to vanquish our enemies."

"What do you mean by the past?" she inquired with just a touch of indignation.

"There are several questions I have put to you which you have refused to answer," I replied. "The light which you could throw upon two or three points now in obscurity might lead me to a knowledge of the whole truth."

She sighed, as though the burden of her thoughts oppressed her.

"I have told you all I can," she answered.

"No. You have told me all you dare—is not that a more truthful way of putting it?"

She nodded, but made no response.

"You have feared to tell me of the one fact concerning yourself which has, in my belief, the greatest bearing upon your perilous situation."

"And what is that?"  
"The fact that you are married."

Her face blanched to the lips. Her hands trembled, and for a moment my words held her dumb.

"Who told you that?" she gasped in a low voice.

"I knew it long ago," I replied.

"Nora has betrayed my secret," she observed in a hard voice.

"No," I declared. "Your cousin has told me nothing. I have known the fact for months past."

"For months past? How?"  
"You are not frank with me," I replied. "Therefore I may be at liberty to preserve what secrets I think best."

"I—I do not deny it," she faltered. Then in a voice trembling with emotion, she added: "Ah, Dr. Colkirk, if you knew all that I have suffered, you would quite understand my fear lest anyone should discover my secret. I often wonder how it is that I have not taken my own life long ago."

"No," I said, with deep sympathy, taking her hand. "Bear up against all these troubles that have crowded themselves upon you, whatever they may be. Let me assist you as your friend."

"But you cannot," she declared, despairingly, tears welling in her eyes. "You can only assist me by keeping my secret. Will you promise me to do that?"

"Most certainly," I replied. "But I want to do more. I want to penetrate the veil of mystery which seems to surround your marriage. I want —"

"You can never do that," she interrupted quickly. "I have tried and tried, but have failed."

"Why?"  
"Because, strange though it may seem, I am entirely unaware of the identity of my husband. I have never seen him."

I was silent. Should I reveal to her the truth? She would not believe me if I did. What proof could I show her?

"And do you not know his name?"  
"No, I do not even know his name," she answered. "All I know is that by this marriage I am delirious for ever from love and happiness. I have sought to live for—nothing. Each day increases the mystery, and each day brings to me only bitterness and despair. Ah! how a woman may suffer and still live!"

"Have you no means by which to discover the identity of your unknown husband?" I inquired.

"None whatever," she answered. "I know that I am married; beyond that nothing."

"And who else is in possession of this secret?" I inquired.

"Nora."

"No one else?"  
"No one, to my knowledge."

"But you are, I understand, engaged to marry Cyril Chetwode," I said, anxious to get at the truth. "How can you marry him if you are really a wife?"

"Ah, that's just it!" she cried. "I am the most miserable girl in all the world. Everything is so hazy, so enshrouded in mystery. I am married, and yet I have no husband."

"But is it not perhaps best that under the circumstances you should be apart?" I said. "He may be old, or ugly, or a man whom you could never love."

"I dread to think of it," she said, hoarsely. "Sometimes I wonder what he is really like, and who he really is."

"And at the same time you love Cyril Chetwode," I said, the words almost choking me. "I saw that she loved that young ape, and my heart sunk within me."

"We are very good friends," she answered.

"But you love him. Why not admit it?" I said.

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