

Le Queux William

The Voice from the Void: The Great Wireless Mystery



William Le Queux

**The Voice from the Void:
The Great Wireless Mystery**

«Public Domain»

Le Queux W.

The Voice from the Void: The Great Wireless Mystery / W. Le
Queux — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	9
Chapter Three	14
Chapter Four	18
Chapter Five	22
Chapter Six	26
Chapter Seven	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	34

Le Queux William

The Voice from the Void: The Great Wireless Mystery

Chapter One Concerns a Stranger

“Yes! I’m certain it was Gordon Gray – the man whose face I can never forget, and whom I could identify among a million! Gordon Gray! *Returned from, the dead!*”

The white-haired rector, the Reverend Norton Homfray, a tall, sparely-built man of sixty-five, pursed his lips and drew a long breath. He was evidently greatly upset.

He had taken off his surplice in the vestry after evening service, and now stood motionless against the old rood-screen gazing into the cavernous darkness of the empty Norman church.

The congregation had dispersed into the winter darkness, wandering slowly and piously through the churchyard and out by the old lych-gate and down the hill, and old Morley, the verger, had already turned out the lights.

“Yes,” murmured the old clergyman, “he sat in the last pew yonder listening to me as I preached! Surely he cannot have risen from the grave, for I heard that he died at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York eighteen months ago! Forget him? Ah!” he sighed. “How can I ever forget? Why is he here in Little Farncombe, I wonder?”

For a few moments he remained motionless in the silent gloom of the historic old church, with its beautiful Norman arches so admired by archaeologists from all parts of the country. The stillness was broken only by the creaking of old Morley’s Sunday boots and the slow deep tick of the clock in the belfry.

Then, at last, he buttoned his overcoat and made his way out into the windy December night, passing round the churchyard and entering the grounds of his quiet old-world, ivy-clad rectory, a sixteenth-century house too large for his needs and too expensive for his slender pocket.

Norton Homfray was a fine type of country rector, a theological scholar and highly popular with all in his rural parish.

As a young man at Balliol he had taken high honours, and when a curate at Durham he had married. After twenty-seven years of married happiness Mrs Homfray had died four years ago leaving one son, Roderick, a heavy-jawed young fellow, now twenty-six. Mr Homfray had been utterly crushed by his wife’s death, and his house was now conducted by Mrs Bentley, a deaf old woman with a high-pitched voice.

When the latter, in order to make up the fire, came into the long old dining-room, a heavily-furnished apartment with several old portraits on the walls and French windows across which heavy dark-green curtains were drawn, she found Mr Homfray sitting beside the glowing logs staring straight at the embers.

Of late he had been unusually silent and morose. Therefore she put on a couple of logs and left the room without speaking.

When she had closed the door the old man, whose strong face was thrown into bold relief by the fitful light of the fire, stirred uneasily in a manner that showed him to be highly nervous and anxious.

“Roddy must never know! *Roddy must never know – never!*” he kept whispering to himself.

And the light of the blazing logs rose and fell, illuminating his fine old face, the countenance of an honest, upright man.

“No!” he murmured to himself, too agitated even to enjoy his pipe which he always smoked as relaxation after preaching his sermon. “No, I am not mistaken! Gordon Gray is still in the flesh! But why should he come here, as though risen from the grave? I saw him come in after the service had commenced. He sat there staring straight at me – staring as though in evil triumph. Why? What can it mean?”

And the thin, white-haired man lapsed into silence again, still staring into the blazing logs, the light from which danced about the long dining-room. On a little mahogany side-table near where the rector was seated stood a small tin tobacco-box attached by a cord to a pair of wireless telephones, and also to a thick, rubber-covered wire which ran to the window and passed out to the garden. Roddy Homfray, the rector’s son, was a young mining engineer, and also an enthusiastic wireless amateur. In an adjoining room he had a very fine wireless set, most of which he had constructed himself, but the little tobacco-box was a “freak” crystal-receiver set which he could carry in his pocket, together with the telephones, and by using a little coil of wire, also easily carried – which he could stretch anywhere as an aerial – he could listen to any of the high-power stations such as Paris, Leafield, Carnarvon, Nantes or Bordeaux. It was a remarkably sensitive little piece of apparatus, ships and “spark” stations being also received with peculiar clearness. That wonderful little contrivance had been described in several of the journals devoted to the science of radio, together with photographs, and had caused a sensation.

As the old clergyman’s eyes fell upon it he drew a long breath, and then whispered to himself:

“Poor Roddy! If he knew! Ah! If he knew! But he must never know the truth. It would break his heart, poor boy!”

Sight of the stranger who had sat alone in the pew at the back of the church had brought to him a flood of bitter memories, haunting recollections of a closed page in his history – one that he never dared reopen.

Meanwhile Roddy Homfray, a tall, dark-haired, clean-limbed fellow who, though young, had made several mining expeditions in Brazil and Peru as assistant to a well-known engineer, had left the church after service and walked down the hill towards the village. Recently he had been in Peru for five months, and had only returned a week ago and again taken up his hobby of wireless.

Three days before, while walking down the road from Little Farncombe into Haslemere to take train to London, he had overtaken an extremely dainty chestnut-haired girl, *petite* and full of charm, warmly clad in rich furs. She was evidently a lady. With her was a black toy pom which ran yapping at Roddy, as was its nature.

“Tweedles! Come here,” she cried, and having called off her pet she in a sweet refined voice apologised. Roddy laughed, assuring her that he was not in the least alarmed, and then they walked the remainder of the way side by side, chatting about the picturesqueness of the Surrey hills, until at last he lifted his hat and left her. She did not look more than seventeen, though he afterwards found that she was twenty. He had become fascinated by her extreme beauty, by her manner, and her inexpressible grace and charm, and as he sat in the express rushing towards London her sweet oval face and deep violet eyes arose time after time before him.

On that Sunday morning he had called upon his old friend Hubert Denton, the village doctor, and while smoking before the fire in the low-pitched sitting-room, he had described his meeting with the fair stranger.

“Oh! That’s Elma Sandys,” replied the doctor, a thick-set man of about forty-five.

“What? The daughter of Mr Purcell Sandys who has just bought Farncombe Towers?” asked Roddy in surprise.

“Yes. As I dare say you know, Purcell Sandys is a well-known financier in the City and has a house in Park Lane,” said the doctor. “A few months ago he bought the Towers and the great estates, including three villages with their advowsons, from the Earl of Farncombe.”

“He must be immensely rich,” remarked Roddy reflectively.

“Yes, no doubt. He is a widower and Elma is his only daughter. She looks only a child. I was asked to dinner at the Towers a fortnight ago, and I found both father and daughter charming – the girl especially so. Since leaving school her father has taken her travelling quite a lot. Last winter they spent in Egypt.”

Roddy listened to his description of the dinner-party. Then he said:

“Poor Lord Farncombe! I’m sorry he had to sell the place. He is a real good type of the British nobility. It seems nothing short of vandalism that the historic houses of our peers should pass into the hands of the magnates of commerce.”

“I quite agree. Lord Farncombe has gone to America, I believe. They say he was broken-hearted at being compelled to sell the house which his ancestors had held for five centuries.”

“Mr Sandys’ daughter is a very charming girl,” Roddy said.

“Very. She acts as hostess for her father. Mrs Sandys died some years ago, I understand,” replied the doctor. “Sandys is spending an enormous sum in improving the Towers, putting in a new electrical plant and building a new range of glass-houses. Halton, the builder, was telling me of it.”

But Roddy’s thoughts were afar. He was thinking of the *chic*, dainty little girl at whose side he had walked down to Haslemere, little dreaming that she was the daughter of the man who had purchased the whole Farncombe estates, including the living which his father held.

That night, after church, he decided to stroll down through the village and out to the house of an old retired colonel, who was a friend of his father.

The new moon was shining, but the sky was growing dull and overcast. He had lingered until all the congregation had passed out of the old churchyard, and following them down the hill, he turned to the left at the Market Cross, where he overtook a small, fur-clad female figure, whom he at once recognised by the light of the moon, which had reappeared from a bank of cloud, as that of Elma Sandys.

She, too, recognised him as he raised his hat and joined her.

“We are hardly strangers, Mr Homfray,” she exclaimed in her sweet musical voice. “Since we met the other day I learned who you are.”

“May I walk with you?” he asked, laughing. “You are going home, I suppose, and it’s lonely beyond the bridge.”

“You’re really awfully kind,” she said. “I’ve just been taking some chicken broth the cook made for a poor old lady named Bamford. Do you know her?”

“Oh, yes, poor old Betty Bamford! She’s been bedridden for years, poor old woman,” replied Roddy. “My mother used to go and see her. It certainly is good of you to look after her. Lady Farncombe also used to be very kind to her, I’ve heard my father say.”

And as they sauntered slowly along over the ancient moss-grown bridge and down the road where the bare trees met overhead, they chatted on merrily as young people will chat.

Roddy Homfray found her a delightful companion. He had on their first meeting believed her to be a visitor in the locality, for many people came from London to Little Farncombe on account of its picturesque surroundings, and its fine views across to the Hog’s Back and over in the direction of Petersfield. But he had been disappointed to find that she was the only daughter of Purcell Sandys, the millionaire purchaser of the Farncombe estates.

From the moment her father had entered possession of the Towers, the magnificent Tudor mansion which had been the home of the Farncombes, Elma had interested herself in the welfare of the village and had, with the assistance of two lady residents, sought out the poor. Her father, unlike most financiers, was a straightforward, upright, honest man who believed in giving charity in secret where it was needed. In this Elma assisted him, hence the new owner had already become popular in the neighbourhood, though, naturally, great sympathy was felt on all sides for the old earl who had been compelled to part with his estates.

As Roddy walked at Elma’s side down the dark, lonely road, the girl suddenly said:

“It’s really awfully good of you to come with me all this way, Mr Homfray. I expected to be home earlier, but the poor old lady was alone and begged me to stay a little longer. I was surprised when I saw how dark it had grown.”

“I assure you that it is a pleasure,” he declared briefly. There was regret in his heart that she was what she was. From the very first moment they had met, when little Tweedles had bristled his black hair and barked at him, he had fallen in love with her. Thoughts of her obsessed him, and her face rose ever before him. But as they walked together he knew that the difference in their stations would ever be a barrier between them. He was poor and could never aspire to her hand.

“I hear you have just returned from abroad,” she remarked.

“Yes. I sailed from Buenos Ayres six weeks ago,” he replied. “I’m a mining engineer, and we’ve been prospecting in the Andes.”

“And were you successful?”

“Fortunately, yes. But I expect to go away again very soon – that is, if I can obtain what I want, namely, a concession from the Moorish Government to prospect for emeralds beyond the Atlas Mountains. According to records left by the ancients there is a rich deposit of emeralds in the Wad Sus district, and I am hoping to be able to discover it.”

“How exciting! Fancy discovering emeralds?” Roddy laughed, and replied:

“The probability is that I shall fail. But if I get the concession I shall do my best.”

“I certainly wish you every good luck,” the girl said. “It must be awfully exciting to go prospecting. I suppose you meet with all sorts of adventures?”

“Oh! We have curious experiences sometimes,” he said lightly, and then he went on to describe a very narrow escape from drowning he had had once while at work on the bank of the Amazon.

On her part, she told him she was delighted with Farncombe.

“I’m tired of the rush of life in London,” she said. “My father is compelled to entertain a great deal at Park Lane, and I have to be hostess. But it is so very pleasant to live here in the country and have one’s friends down from town. We had a big house-party last week and had a ripping time. We shall have a shooting-party next week, and another the week after.”

Roddy was silent for a few moments, for they were already in the avenue and in sight of the lights of the great mansion.

“I had better leave you here, Miss Sandys,” he said, with undisguised regret. “And if you are to be so busy I fear I shall not have the pleasure of meeting you again before I go.” Then as he raised his hat, she replied cheerily: “Perhaps we may meet again very soon. Who knows? Thanks ever so much, Mr Homfray. It was very good of you to come all this way. Good-night?”

And she turned and left him.

Chapter Two

The Rector's Secret Visitor

While Roddy Homfray had been strolling at Elma's side, his father had still sat, gloomy and thoughtful, in the firelight at the Rectory.

The light evening meal which the rector always took on Sunday evening had been placed upon the table by old Mrs Bentley, who, after lighting the gas, had retired to her part of the rambling house. But the food had remained untouched.

The rector had sat nearly half an hour in the silence of the long, old room with its low-pitched ceiling and black oak beams. Deep in his arm-chair he did not stir, his bearded chin resting upon his thin hands, his brows knit in reflection. He was thinking – thinking, as ghosts of the past arose before him, visions of scenes which in vain he had always tried to put from him, and to blot out from his memory.

The silence of the room was broken only by the crackling of the big logs and the slow tick of the grandfather clock in the corner by the door, till suddenly the church clock chimed the hour of nine across the hills.

Then, scarcely had it ceased when there was the noise of a door handle being slowly turned, and next moment the heavy green curtains before the French window were drawn aside and a dark-haired, rather handsome woman of forty, wearing a close-fitting hat and a coney seal coat with skunk collar, stepped into the room.

Old Mr Homfray, startled at the sound, turned in his chair, and then springing to his feet faced her.

"*You!*" he gasped. "Why do you dare to come here? What do you want?" he asked angrily.

"To speak privately with you," was her hard reply. "I didn't want others to know of my visit, and thinking the window might possibly be unlatched, I tried it, and came in this way."

"Then go out the same way!" commanded the old clergyman angrily. "How dare you come here?"

"Because I want to say something to you."

"I don't wish to – and won't hear it!"

"You shall, Mr Homfray!" replied the woman, whose face was full of evil, her eyes glittering like those of a serpent. "I come to-night as messenger from a man you know – from Gordon Gray."

"From Gordon Gray – *you?*" gasped the rector in surprise. "Why should he send you to me?"

"Because he thought it best not to come himself."

"If he wishes to speak to me let him face me here," Mr Homfray said boldly.

"Ah?" laughed the woman as though in triumph. "I seem to be an unwelcome visitor."

"How could you be otherwise, after what has passed?" queried the old fellow.

"Well, don't let us have any more bickering. Let's come to business. Mr Gray wants to know whether you intend paying?"

"Not a penny – until the money is due next August."

"But it was due last August," the woman declared.

"That is quite untrue," replied the rector very quietly.

"Well, the date is on the deed."

"If it is, then the date has been altered."

"But you have a copy."

"No. I can't find it. I must have mislaid it. Is there no stamp, with date?"

"It was never stamped. Mr Gray's solicitors have already written to you three times about it, and you have not replied."

"I have been away, taking duty in Switzerland. Besides, I understood that Gordon Gray died in New York last year, and –"

"And you thought that by that fact you would escape your indebtedness – eh?" laughed the woman as she stood beside the table, an erect smart figure which was well known in certain disreputable night-clubs in the West End. "But Gordon Gray attended service in your church to-night, and you must have seen him in the flesh."

"I did," replied the old man hoarsely. "Sight of him recalled many events of the past."

"Things that you wish to forget – eh, Mr Homfray?" she said in a hard voice. "But Gordon wants his money. If you allege fraud on the part of his solicitors you had better write to them."

"Why does Gray send you here? You, of all women! What does he intend to do?" asked the grave old man.

"To sell the property if you can't pay him. He has already given you several months' grace. And besides, you've never answered any letters, nor have you paid any interest on the loan."

"Because the money is not yet due," declared the Rector of Little Farncombe. "If you knew the facts you would never make this illegal demand."

"I know all the facts. Gordon means to sell the property if you cannot pay at once."

Norton Homfray bit his lip. Only during the past two years had he suspected his whilom friend Gordon Gray, and that suspicion had that night been confirmed by the presence there of that vampire woman, Freda Crisp, whose dark, handsome face he had hoped never to look upon again. Gray, the son of a rich City merchant, had long been the black sheep of his family, and had, when at Oxford, been sent down from Balliol for forging a cheque to a tailor in the Broad. A few years later Homfray, who had recently taken Holy Orders, met him and, ignorant of his past, had become his bosom friend. After six years Gordon went to America, and not until fifteen years afterwards did the pair see each other, when one day they found themselves staying at the Bath Hotel in Bournemouth and resumed their close friendship.

Now old Mr Homfray was at that moment in serious difficulties, partly owing to his business instinct and his innocent generosity and trustfulness. He was a real upright and pious man who, unlike many parsons, practised what he preached. He had, in fact, stood security for an old college chum who had died suddenly from pneumonia and "let him in."

He had been compelled to confess to Gray that he was ruined, whereupon his old friend had at once told him not to worry, and offered to lend him the sum upon his little piece of house property in the steep main street of Totnes, in Devon, from which he derived his slender income, the stipend at Little Farncombe being hardly sufficient to pay the housekeeper and the gardener at the Rectory.

But by the sudden appearance of the woman and her demands he realised that there was some sinister design afoot. That woman who stood before him he had strong cause to hate, yet hatred never entered his soul – even at that moment.

He now realised with blank amazement that her friend Gordon Gray, the man returned from the grave, was trying to swindle him, and that the date of the deed – the copy of which he had mislaid – had been altered and pre-dated a year.

"If your friend Gray dares to sell my little property – all I have – then I shall institute criminal proceedings against him," he told the woman frankly, whereupon his unwelcome visitor opened her little brown leather handbag and from it produced a crumpled envelope, out of which she took three tattered newspaper cuttings, saying coldly:

"Perhaps you had better read these before you utter threats," and she handed them to him.

He held his breath, and the light died from his thin countenance. He pushed them aside with trembling hands.

"You know to what they refer, Mr Homfray – to your appearance under another name!" sneered Freda Crisp. "You are the highly respected rector of this picturesque, though obscure, little parish, but if your parishioners knew the truth I fancy that they and your bishop would have

something to say about it. Is it just to the public that a man such as yourself should dare to wear a surplice and have the audacity to preach sermons?”

The Rector of Little Farncombe remained silent. His face was deathly white, his hands trembled, and his eyes were staring. He had suspected that the one great secret of his life was known. But it appeared that not only was it known to the unscrupulous man who had once been his friend, but also to the woman before him, who was his bitterest enemy!

“So the pair of you have learnt my secret!” he said in a low, hard voice. “And I suppose you intend to blackmail me – eh?”

The dark-haired woman laughed.

“Gordon only wants his money back, that’s all.”

“And you have forced him to take up this hostile attitude,” he said. “You are my enemy. I know it. Well, what do you intend to do?”

“It isn’t my affair,” she declared. “Gray now knows that the money you borrowed from him was in order to help your fellow-criminal – a man who once did him an evil turn – after he had served his sentence. He wants his money back, and he is going to take it. The property will be up for auction in a week or so.”

“But I won’t be swindled in this way!” cried old Mr Homfray.

“Act just as you wish – but remember, if you make any move it will be the worse for you. Gordon is not a man to stick at trifles,” the woman said.

“I know that,” said the rector.

“And it is a very ugly skeleton you have in your cupboard,” remarked the woman with a sinister smile.

“The property at Totnes is worth over four thousand pounds,” he said.

“You have only to repay the money with interest and the matter is ended.”

Mr Homfray paused.

Then, looking straight into the woman’s evil face, he said:

“It is you, woman, who once swore to ruin me because I would not assist you in that vile plot of yours! You thought to trap me, a minister of the Church, into assisting you to entice that fly into the web you had so cunningly spun for him. But you were mistaken! I saw through your evil game, and because I did so you vowed vengeance upon me. And this is the hour of your triumph!” he added bitterly in a deep, hoarse voice, and one quite unusual to him.

The woman’s thin lips were pressed together, but she made no immediate reply.

At last she said:

“I am only here on Mr Gray’s behalf.”

“But it is you who have goaded him to do this – to take this action, well knowing that at the moment I cannot pay.”

“That surely is not my affair,” snapped the woman, while old Mr Homfray stood aghast at the sudden blow which had fallen to crush him.

What would his son Roddy think if he learnt the truth concerning that closed chapter of his father’s past? What would the parish of Little Farncombe say if they knew that their respected rector had fallen among thieves?

“Won’t Gray come here himself and talk over the matter?” he asked presently.

“No. He motored back to London as soon as the service was over. He had a fancy to see you and hear you preach to your dear parishioners, who, in all their innocence, believe in you, Mr Homfray,” and again the woman laughed sardonically. “So he sent me to see you in private, and to tell you his intentions.”

“Are you quite certain he will not come and see me?”

“I urged him to do so, but he refused,” said the woman.

“Because he fears to face me!” exclaimed the rector. “He fears lest I, on my part, should speak the truth. I trusted Gordon Gray – trusted him as my friend – but I have been sadly disillusioned to-night, for I have found that he is my enemy, and I am now forearmed.”

“That is no concern of mine whatever. I have given you his message.”

The Rector of Little Farncombe looked straight into her face with his calm grey eyes behind his shaggy brows.

“Then I will send a message back to him,” he slowly replied. “As he refuses to come here and deliver his ultimatum in person, I will, in return, deliver my ultimatum to him. Go back and tell him that I defy him. Tell him that if either he or you lift a finger against me, then the truth concerning the death of young Hugh Willard will be known to Scotland Yard, and the affair of Hyde Park Square will be cleared up by the arrest of the assassin. Tell him that though he thinks there was no witness, yet one still exists – one who will come forward with indisputable proof. You know his name. Gordon Gray and I were friends until to-night. But we are no longer so. We are enemies. And you know to much of the affair as I do?”

The woman staggered as though he had dealt her a blow. Her evil face went ashen in an instant, and her dark eyes started from her head.

“What – what do you mean?” she gasped.

“What I have said! You heard my message to Gordon Gray; go and deliver it. Remember that if either of you molest me, or attempt to swindle me as you are now doing, then I shall reveal all that I know. My silence depends upon you both. So begone!” he added calmly, with firm resolve.

For a few moments the woman in furs stood motionless and silent.

“You will regret those words, Mr Homfray!” she said at last, threateningly. “I will deliver your message, but you will regret it. Remember that!”

“I assure you I have no fear,” laughed the old rector. “While Gordon Gray acted honestly as the friend I believed him to be, I remained his friend. Now that we are enemies it is I who can – and will – speak in self-defence. He threatens me with ruin, but little does he dream what I know concerning the young fellow’s death and who was implicated in it – how the snare was set to ruin him, and afterwards to close his lips!”

The handsome woman shrugged her shoulders, but her face had entirely changed. She had been taken entirely aback by the open defiance of the man who, in her fierce vindictiveness, she had intended should be her victim. She had believed the hour of her triumph to be at hand, instead of which she saw that an abyss had opened before her – one into which she and her accomplice Gray must assuredly fall unless they trod a very narrow and intricate path.

“Very well,” she laughed with well-feigned defiance. “I will give Gordon your message. And we shall see!”

With those words she passed to the heavy plush curtains and disappeared behind them out upon the lawn, beyond which, separated only by a wire fence, lay a small and picturesque wood which ran down the hill for a quarter of a mile or so.

Old Mr Homfray followed her, and with a sigh, closed the long glass door and bolted it.

Then, returning to the fireplace, he stood upon the hearthrug with folded arms, thinking deeply, faintly murmured words escaping his pale lips.

“Roddy must never know!” he repeated.

“If he knew the truth concerning that slip in my past what would he think of me? He would regard his father as a liar and a hypocrite!”

Again he remained silent for a considerable time.

“Gordon Gray!” he muttered. “It seems impossible that he should rise from the grave and become my enemy, after all I have done in his interests. I believed him to be my friend! But he is under the influence of that woman – that woman who means to ruin me because I refused to render her assistance in that vile scheme of hers!”

Suddenly, as he stood there before the blazing logs, he recollected the sixth chapter of St. Luke.

“Love your enemies,” he repeated aloud. “Do good to those who hate you. And unto him that smiteth you on the one cheek, offer also the other.”

And there before the big arm-chair the fine old fellow sank upon his knees and prayed silently for his enemy and his female accomplice.

Afterwards he rose, and re-seating himself in his chair sat with his eyes closed, recalling all the tragedy and villainy concerned with young Hugh Willard’s mysterious death in London five years before – an enigma that the police had failed to solve.

Meanwhile Roddy Homfray, having left Elma, was strolling slowly home full of thoughts of the slim and charming girl who had bewitched him, and yet whose station was so far above his own.

Through the sharp frosty night he walked for some distance along the broad highway, until he came to the cross roads, where he stopped to gossip with the village chemist. Then, after ten minutes or so, he walked on, crossed a stile and took a short cut across a field and up the hill to the woods at the back of the Rectory.

The night had now grown very dark, and as he entered the wood, he saw a figure skirting it. Whether man or woman he could not distinguish. He found the path more difficult than he expected, but he knew that way well, and by the aid of his pocket torch he was able to keep to the path, a rather crooked one, which led to the boundary of the Rectory lawn.

Suddenly, as he passed, his footsteps rustling among the dead leaves, he thought he heard a curious sound, like a groan. He halted, quickly alert.

Again the sound was repeated somewhere to his left – a low groan as though of someone in great pain.

He stepped from the path, examining the ground with its many tree trunks by the aid of his torch.

A third time the groan was repeated, but fainter than before, therefore he began to search in the direction whence the cry came, until, to his surprise, he discovered lying upon the ground at a short distance from the wire fence which divided the wood from the Rectory property, a female form in a neat navy-blue costume, with a small red hat lying a short distance away.

She was in a crouching position, and as the young man shone his light upon her, she again drew a deep sigh and groaned faintly.

“What is the matter?” he cried in alarm, dropping upon his knees and raising the fair head of a young and pretty girl.

She tried to speak, but her white lips refused to utter a sound. At last, by dint of desperate effort, she whispered in piteous appeal:

“Save me! Oh! —*save me – do!*”

Then next second she drew a deep breath, a shiver ran through her body, and she fell inert into the young fellow’s arms!

Chapter Three

Which Contains Another Mystery

Roddy Homfray, with the aid of his flash-lamp, gazed in breathless eagerness, his strong jaw set, at the girl's blanched countenance.

As he brushed back the soft hair from the brow, he noted how very beautiful she was.

"Speak!" he urged eagerly. "Tell me what has happened?"

But her heart seemed to have ceased beating; he could detect no sign of life. Was he speaking to the dead?

So sudden had it all been that for some moments he did not realise the tragic truth. Then, in a flash, he became horrified. The girl's piteous appeal made it only too plain that in that dark wood she had been the victim of foul play.

She had begged him to save her. From what? From whom?

There had been a struggle, for he saw that the sleeve of her coat had been torn from the shoulder, and her hat lying near was also evidence that she had been attacked, probably suddenly, and before she had been aware of danger. The trees were numerous at that spot, and behind any of their great, lichen-covered trunks a man could easily hide.

But who was she? What was she doing in Welling Wood, just off the beaten path, at that hour?

Again he stroked the hair from her brow and gazed upon her half-open but sightless eyes, as she lay heavy and inert in his arms. He listened intently in order to satisfy himself that she no longer breathed. There seemed no sign of respiration and the muscles of her face and hands seemed to have become rigid.

In astonishment and horror the young man rose to his feet, and placing his flash-lamp, still switched on, upon the ground, started off by a short cut to the Rectory by a path which he knew even in the darkness. He was eager to raise the alarm regarding the unexpected discovery, and every moment of delay might mean the escape of whoever was responsible for the crime.

The village police inspector lived not far from the Rectory, and it was his intention first to inform his father, and then run on to the police.

But this intention was never carried out, because of a strange and bewildering circumstance.

Indeed, till long past midnight the Reverend Norton Homfray sat in his rather shabby little study reflecting upon the unwelcome visit of that woman Freda Crisp, and wondering what it portended. Her threatening attitude was the reverse of reassuring. Nevertheless, the rector felt that if Gray and his unscrupulous accomplice really meant mischief, then he, after all, held the trump card which he had so long hesitated to play.

The clock ticked on. The time passed unnoticed, and at last he dozed. It was not until nearly three o'clock in the morning that he suddenly awakened to the lateness of the hour, and the curious fact that Roddy had not been in since he had left church.

The old man rose, and ascending to his son's room, believing that Roddy might have come in and retired while he slept, found to his surprise that the bed had not been occupied. He walked round the house with the aid of his electric torch. The front door was still unlocked, and it was quite evident that his son had not yet returned.

"This is a night of strange incidents!" he said aloud to himself as he stood upon the staircase. "First that man Gordon Gray rises as though from the tomb, then Freda Crisp visits me, and now Roddy is missing! Strange indeed – very strange!"

He returned to his study, and lighting his green-shaded reading-lamp upon the writing-table, sat down to attend to some letters. He was too wakeful now to retire to rest. Besides, Roddy was out, and he had decided to remain up until his son returned.

Why Roddy should be out all night puzzled the old man greatly. His only intimate friend was the village doctor, Hubert Denton, and perhaps the doctor being called to a patient early in the evening Roddy had gone out in the car with him. Such seemed the only explanation of his absence.

“That woman!” remarked the old rector angrily, as he took some writing paper from a drawer. “That woman intends mischief! If she or Gray attempts to harm me – then I will retaliate!”

And he drew a long breath, his dark, deep-set eyes being fixed straight before him.

“Yet, after all, ought I to do so?” he went on at length. “I have sinned, and I have repented. I am no better than any other man, though I strive to do right and to live up to the teaching of the Prince of Peace. ‘Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.’ Ah! it is so hard to carry out that principle of forgiveness – so very hard!”

And again he lapsed into silence.

“What if Roddy knew – what if those fiends told him? Ah! what would he think of the other side of his father’s life? No!” he cried again in anguish some minutes later, his voice sounding weirdly in the old-world little room. “No! I could not bear it! I – I would rather die than my son should know!”

Presently, however, he became calmer. As rector of Little Farncombe he was beloved by all, for few men, even ministers of religion, were so upright and pious or set such an example to their fellow-men.

Old Mr Purcell Sandys had been to church on two successive Sunday mornings, and had acknowledged himself greatly impressed by Mr Homfray’s sermons.

“They’re not chanted cant, such as we have in so many churches and which does so much harm to our modern religion,” he had told his daughter as they had walked back to the Towers. “But they are straight, manly talks which do one real good, and point out one’s faults.”

“Yes, father,” Elma agreed. “The whole village speaks exceedingly well of Mr Homfray.” And so it was that the man seated writing his letters in the middle of the night and awaiting the home-coming of his son, had gained the high esteem of the new owner of Farncombe even before he had made his first ceremonial call upon the great City magnate.

That night, however, a cloud had suddenly arisen and enveloped him. As he wrote on, the old rector could not put from him a distinct presage of evil. Where was Roddy? What could have happened that he had not returned as usual to supper after church? The boy was a roamer and an adventurer. His profession made him that, but when at home he always kept regular hours as became a dutiful son.

The bitter east wind had grown stronger, causing the bare branches of the trees in the pleasant old garden to shake and creak, while in the chimney it moaned mournfully.

At last the bell in the ivy-clad church tower chimed the hour of five. The wild winter night was past, and it was morning, though still dark. The old rector drew aside the blind, but the dawn was not yet showing. The fire was out, the lamp burned dim and was smoking, and the room was now cold and cheerless.

“I wonder where Roddy can possibly be?” again murmured the old man.

Then, still leaving the front door unlocked, he blew out the lamp and retired for a few hours’ rest.

At noon Roderick Homfray had not returned, and after sending a message to Doctor Denton and receiving word that he had not seen the young man since the previous morning, Mr Homfray began to be seriously alarmed. He went about the village that afternoon making inquiries, but nobody seemed to have seen him after he had passed through the churchyard after the evening service.

Only Mr Hughes, who kept a small tobacconist’s at the further end of the village, apparently had any information to give.

"I passed along the Guildford road about ten o'clock or so, and I believe I saw Mr Roddy talking to a man – who was a stranger. I noticed the man in church. He sat in one of the back pews," said old Mr Hughes.

In an instant Norton Homfray became alert.

Could Roddy have been speaking with Gordon Gray?

"Are you quite sure it was my son?" he asked eagerly.

"Well, it was rather dark, so I could not see the young man's face. But I'm sure that the other was the stranger."

"Then you are not absolutely certain it was Roddy?"

"No, Mr Homfray, I couldn't swear to it, though he looked very much like Mr Roddy," was the old tobacconist's reply. "My sight isn't what it used to be," he added.

Still, the incident aroused suspicions in the rector's mind. Was it possible that Gray had told Roddy the truth, and the latter had gone off with his father's enemy? In any case, his son's absence was a complete mystery.

That evening Mr Homfray called at the village police station and there saw the inspector of the Surrey County Constabulary, a big, burly man named Freeman, whom he knew well, and who frequently was an attendant at church.

He, of course, told him nothing of the reappearance of Gordon Gray, but simply related the fact that Roddy had left the church on Sunday night, and with the exception of being seen in the Guildford road two hours later, had completely disappeared.

"That's peculiar!" remarked the dark-bearded man in uniform. "But I dare say there's some explanation, sir. You'll no doubt get a wire or a letter in the morning." Then he added: "Mr Roddy is young, you know, sir. Perhaps there's a lady in the case! When a young man disappears we generally look for the lady – and usually we find her!"

"Roddy has but few female friends," replied the old rector. "He is not the sort of lad to disappear and leave me in anxiety."

"Well, sir, if you like, I'll phone into Guildford and circulate his description," Freeman said. "But personally I think that he'll come back before to-morrow."

"Why?"

"Well – I know Mr Roddy. And I agree that he would never cause you, his father, an instant's pain if he could help it. He's away by force of circumstances, depend upon it!"

Force of circumstances! The inspector's words caused him to ponder. Were those circumstances his meeting with Gordon Gray for the first time that night?

Roddy, he knew, had never met Gray. The man's very existence he had hidden from his son. And Roddy was abroad when, in those later years, the two men had met. The old rector of Little Farncombe felt bewildered. A crowd of difficulties had, of late, fallen upon him, as they more or less fall upon everybody in every walk of life at one time or another. We all of us have our "bad times," and Norton Homfray's was a case in point. Financial troubles had been succeeded by the rising of the ghosts of the past, and followed by the vanishing of his only son.

Three eager, breathless, watchful days went by, but no word came from the fine well-set-up young man who had led such a daring and adventurous life in South America. More than ever was his father convinced that old Hughes was correct in his surmise. He had stood upon the pathway of the Guildford road – the old tar-macked highway which leads from London to Portsmouth – and had been approached by Gordon Gray, the man who meant to expose his father to the parishioners. The world of the Reverend Norton Homfray was, after all, a very little one. The world of each of us, whether we be politician or patriot, peer or plasterer, personage or pauper, has its own narrow confines. Our enemies are indeed well defined by the Yogi teaching as "little children at play." Think of them as such and you have the foundation of that great philosophy of the East which raises man from his ordinary level to that of superman – the man who wills and is obeyed.

The fact that the son of the rector of Little Farncombe was missing had come to the knowledge of an alert newspaper correspondent in Guildford, and on the fourth day of Roddy's disappearance a paragraph appeared in several of the London papers announcing the fact.

Though the story was happily unembroidered, it caused the rector great indignation. Why should the Press obtrude upon his anxiety? He became furious. As an old-fashioned minister of religion he had nothing in common with modern journalism. Indeed, he read little except his weekly *Guardian*, and politics did not interest him. His sphere was beyond the sordid scramble for political notoriety and the petticoat influence in high quarters.

His son was missing, and up and down the country the fact was being blazoned forth by one of the news agencies!

Next day brought him three letters from private inquiry agents offering their services in the tracing of "your son, Mr Roderick Homfray," – with a scale of fees. He held his breath and tore up the letters viciously. Half an hour afterwards Inspector Freeman called. Mrs Bentley showed him into the study, whereupon the inspector, still standing, said:

"Well, sir, I've got into trouble about your son. The Chief Constable has just rung me up asking why I had not reported that he was missing, as it's in the papers."

The rector was silent for a moment.

"I'm sorry, Freeman, but my anxiety is my own affair. If you will tell Captain Harwood that from me, I shall feel greatly obliged."

"But how did it get into the papers, sir?"

"That I don't know. Local gossip, I suppose. But why," asked the rector angrily, "why should these people trouble themselves over my private affairs? If my son is lost to me, then it is my own concern – and mine alone!" he added with dignity.

"I quite agree, sir," replied the inspector. "Of course, I have my duty to do and I am bound to obey orders. But I think with you that it is most disgraceful for any newspaper man to put facts forward all over the country which are yours alone – as father and son."

"Then I hope you will explain to your Chief Constable, who, no doubt, as is his duty, has reproached you for lack of acumen. Tell him that I distinctly asked you to refrain from raising a hue and cry and circulating Roddy's description. When I wish it I will let the Chief Constable of Surrey know," he added.

That message Inspector Freeman spoke into the ear of the Chief Constable in Guildford and thus cleared himself of responsibility. But by that time the whole of Little Farncombe had become agog at the knowledge that the rector's tall, good-looking son was being searched for by the police.

Everyone knew him to be a wanderer and an adventurer who lived mostly abroad, and many asked each other why he was missing and what allegation there could possibly be against him – now that the police were in active search of any trace of him.

Chapter Four

Lost Days

It was a bright, crisp afternoon on the seventh day of Roddy's disappearance.

The light was fading, and already old Mrs Bentley had carried the lamp into Mr Homfray's study and lit it, prior to bringing him his simple cup of tea, for at tea-time he only drank a single cup, without either toast or bread-and-butter.

He was about to raise his cup to his lips, having removed his old briar pipe and laid it in the ash-tray, when Mrs Bentley tapped and, re-entering, said:

"There's Miss Sandys to see you, sir."

The rector rose and, rather surprised, ordered his visitor to be shown in.

Next moment from the square stone hall the pretty young girl, warmly clad in furs, entered the room.

She met the eyes of the grey old man, and after a second's pause said:

"I have to apologise for this intrusion, Mr Homfray, but – well, I have seen in the paper that your son is missing. He went out on Sunday night, it is said, and has not been seen since."

"That is so, Miss Sandys," replied the old man, offering her a chair beside the fire. "As you may imagine, I am greatly concerned at his disappearance."

"Naturally. But I have come here, Mr Homfray, to speak to you in confidence," said the girl hesitatingly. "Your son and I were acquainted, and –"

"I was not aware of that, Miss Sandys," exclaimed the rector, interrupting her.

"No. I do not expect that he told you. My father does not know either. But we met quite casually the other day, and last Sunday we again met accidentally after church and he walked home with me. I suppose it was half-past nine when we parted."

"There was no reason why he should not return home, I suppose?" asked Mr Homfray eagerly.

"None whatever. In wishing me good-bye he told me that he might be leaving here very soon, and perhaps we might not have another opportunity of meeting before he went. I thanked him for walking so far with me, and we parted the best of friends."

"He said he would be leaving Little Farncombe very soon, did he?" remarked the rector thoughtfully.

"Yes. I understood from him that he was obtaining, or had obtained, a concession to prospect for a deposit of emeralds somewhere in the Atlas Mountains, in Morocco."

"That is true. Some ancient workings are known to exist somewhere in the wild Wad Sus region, and through a friend he has been in treaty with the Moorish Government, with the hope of obtaining the concession. If he found the mine which is mentioned by several old Arabic writers it would no doubt bring him great fortune."

"Yes. But where can he be?"

"Who knows, Miss Sandys!" exclaimed the distracted father blankly.

"He must be found," declared the girl. "He left me to return home. What could possibly have occurred to prevent him from carrying out his intention?"

What indeed, reflected the old man, except perhaps that he met Gordon Gray and perhaps left for London with him? He was now more than ever inclined to believe the rather vague story told by the village tobacconist.

"Yes, Miss Sandys, he must be found. I have now asked the police to circulate his description, and if he is alive no doubt he will be discovered."

"You surely don't suspect that something tragic has happened to him – for instance, that he has met with foul play?" cried the girl.

“It certainly looks like it, or he would no doubt have set my mind at rest by this time,” replied his father.

By the girl’s anxiety and agitation he saw that she was more than usually concerned regarding his son’s whereabouts. He had had no idea that Roddy was acquainted with the daughter of the great financier who had purchased Lord Farncombe’s estates. Yet, after all, he reflected, Roddy was a fine, handsome boy, therefore what more natural than the pair should become attracted by each other.

He saw that the girl was uneasy, and was not surprised when she said:

“I trust, Mr Homfray, that you will treat what I have told you in entire confidence. My father does not approve of my making chance acquaintances. I got into an awful row a little time ago about it. I know he would not object to my knowing your son if we had been properly introduced. But, you see, we were not!” she laughed.

“I quite understand,” said the old rector, smiling. “One day I hope you will be properly introduced to my son when we find him.”

“We must, Mr Homfray. And we will!” cried the pretty young girl determinedly.

“Ah!” exclaimed the old man, his thin fingers clasped before him. “If we only could. Where can my boy be?”

Elma Sandys rose a few moments later, and taking the old man’s hand urged patience and courage, and then walked down the hill and back to the Towers full of grave reflections.

She was the last person to see and speak with the alert, athletic young man who had so suddenly and strangely come into her life. At Park Lane she met many young men-about-town, most of them wealthy and all of them idlers, but no second thought had she given to a single one of them. As she walked she examined her own mind, and was compelled to admit that thoughts of Roddy Homfray now absorbed her.

The mystery of his disappearance after bidding her farewell had gripped her, heart and soul.

During the two days that followed the description of Roderick Homfray, the young mining engineer, was circulated to every police station in the country, and all constables in London and the great cities had had that description read out to them before going on duty. There was scarcely a police constable in the United Kingdom who did not know it by heart, with the final words of the official notice: “The missing man is greatly interested in wireless telephony, of which he has a deep and scientific knowledge.”

That sentence had been added by the Surrey County Constabulary in case the young man might be hiding from his friends, and might betray himself by his expert knowledge of radio science.

Of the woman Freda Crisp, or of Gordon Gray, old Mr Homfray had heard nothing. The whole village sympathised with him in his distress, and, of course, all sorts of rumours – some of them cruel indeed – were afloat. Fortunately Elma’s name was not coupled with Roddy’s, for with the exception of the rector nobody knew of their acquaintance. Yet some ill-natured gossip, a low-bred woman at the end of the village, started a story connecting Roddy with a young married woman who had left her husband a fortnight before, gone to London, and disappeared.

This cruel story was not long in reaching Elma’s ears, and though she disbelieved it, nevertheless it naturally caused her both wonder and anger.

On the afternoon of the third day after the circulation of the description of the missing young man, a stout, pleasant-faced lady named Boydon chanced to read it in the paper, and then sat staring before her in wonderment.

Then, after a few moments, she rose, crossed the room, and rang the telephone.

A few seconds later she was speaking with a Mr Edwards, and asked him to come along to see her upon an important matter, to which he at once consented.

Now Miss Boydon was the matron of the Cottage Hospital at Pangbourne, a pretty Thames-side village well known to river folk as being one of the prettiest reaches in Berkshire, and Mr Edwards was the local police sergeant of the Berks. Constabulary, and lived at the other end of the long wide village street which led out upon the Reading road.

Ten minutes later Edwards, a portly, rather red-faced man, arrived on his bicycle, and on entering the matron's room, his helmet in his hand, was shown the description.

"By jove, miss?" he exclaimed. "I believe it's him! We've had the notice at the station, but I never connected him with it!"

"Neither did I – until now," declared the stout Miss Boydon. "He only became conscious this morning – and now he tells us a rambling and altogether incoherent story. Personally I think he's slightly demented. That's what the doctor thought when he saw him at noon. He's waiting to see his condition to-night."

"Well, the description is exactly like him," declared the sergeant, re-reading it. "When he was brought into the station the other night I took him to be intoxicated. Then when Doctor Maynard saw him, he ordered him here."

"The doctor thinks he is suffering from drugs," said the matron. "He has been unconscious ever since he was brought here, nearly a week ago, and now he certainly has not regained his senses. He talks wildly about a girl who was murdered in a wood and died in his arms. Apparently he is suffering from delusions."

"In any case, miss, I think I ought to telegraph to Guildford that a young man answering the description is here, don't you think so?"

"I should not be in too great a hurry if I were you, Edwards," was the reply. "Wait until Doctor Maynard has seen him again. We shall probably know more to-night. I've ordered nurse to keep him quite quiet and listen to his stories as though she believes every word."

"The young man is missing from a place called Little Farncombe, in Surrey," said the sergeant. "I wonder how he came to be lying on the tow-path at the foot of Whitchurch Bridge? He must have been there all night, for one of the men working on the Thames Conservancy dredger found him when on his way to work at six o'clock on Tuesday morning."

"All clues to his identity have been removed," remarked the matron. "His name has been cut out of his shirt collar and underclothing, and the laundry marks removed – all deliberately done as if to efface his identity. Possibly he intended to commit suicide, and that's why he was on the river bank."

"But the doctor, when he saw him at the police station, gave his opinion that the man was drugged," the police sergeant said. "I don't think he had any intention of suicide."

"Well, in any case, let us wait till this evening. I will telephone to you after the doctor has seen him," the matron promised. And with that the sergeant left.

At six o'clock Doctor Maynard, a quiet elderly man who had practised in Pangbourne and district for fifteen years, called again and saw Roddy lying in the narrow little bed.

His face was pale and drawn, and his eyes sunken and weary:

"Well, doctor," he exclaimed cheerily, "I feel a lot better than I did this morning. I'm able to think now – and to remember. But oh! – my head!"

"That's good," declared the white-haired medical man. "Now what is your name, and how did you come here?" he asked, the stout matron standing, watchful, beside him.

"My name is Roderick Homfray, and I'm the son of the Reverend Norton Homfray, rector of Little Farncombe, in Surrey," the patient replied frankly. "What brought me here I don't know. What day is it to-day?"

"The fourteenth of December."

"The fourteenth of December! Well, the last I remember is on the night of the third – a Sunday night. And I shan't forget it either, I assure you! I was on my way home soon after half-past nine

at night, and in Welling Wood, close by the Rectory paddock, I found a girl lying on the ground. She could just speak. She appealed to me to save her. Then she died. I rose and dashed across the wood to my father's house to raise the alarm, but I had hardly gone a hundred yards when straight in front of me something exploded. I saw what seemed to be a ball of red fire, but after that I know nothing – nothing until I came to my senses this morning and found myself here! Where I've been in the meantime, doctor, I have no idea."

Doctor Maynard, still under the impression that the story of the murdered girl was a delusion, sympathised with the patient and suggested sleep.

"I'll come to see you to-morrow," he added. "You're quite all right, so don't worry. I will see that a telegram is sent to-night to your father. He'll be here to-morrow, no doubt."

At ten o'clock the following morning the rector stood at the bedside of his son and listened to the amazing story of the discovery in Welling Wood and the red ball of fire which Roddy subsequently saw before him.

"Perhaps I was struck by lightning!" Roddy added. "But if that were so I should surely have remained in the wood. No doubt I was struck down maliciously. But why? And why should I have been taken away unconscious and kept so for several days, and then conveyed to the river bank here at Whitchurch?"

"I don't know, my son," replied his father quietly, though he stood staggered at the amazing story.

Then he added:

"The police searched Welling Wood and all the neighbouring copses three days after you had disappeared, but found no trace of you."

"But surely they found the poor girl, father?" cried Roddy, raising himself upon his arm.

"No, my boy, nobody was found," he replied. "That's strange!" exclaimed the young man. "Then she must have been taken away with me! But by whom? What devil's work was there in progress that night, father?"

"Ah! my boy. That I cannot tell!"

"But I mean to ascertain!" cried the young man fiercely. "That girl appealed to me to save her, and she died in my arms. Where is she? And why should I be attacked and drugged so that I nearly became insane? Why? Perhaps it was because I had accidentally discovered the crime!"

Chapter Five Through the Ether

“Hush! You infernal idiot! What did I tell you? What the deuce are you doing?” cried the man, tearing the telephone from the woman’s hand and throwing over a switch upon the roll-top desk at which she was seated.

The low hum of an electric generator ceased and the current was cut off.

“You fool!” cried the short, middle-aged, clean-shaven man in a dinner-jacket, and with a cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth.

“Will you never learn common sense, Freda, after all I’ve told you! It’s fortunate I came in at this moment! Do you want to be juggled? It seems so!”

Freda Crisp, in a gorgeous Paquin evening gown, turned deliberately in her chair and, coldly surveying the man who had just entered, said:

“Well, my dear Gordon, and what’s upset your digestion to-night? Things said over this wireless telephone – broadcasted over five hundred miles of space from your cosy rooms here – can be said without anybody being the wiser as to who uttered them. I look upon this wireless box of tricks as a priceless joke. You turn over a switch, and into thousands of ears you speak all over the kingdom, and across into Holland and France and even Scandinavia. The great Marconi is, you’ll admit, dear old thing, a wonderful nut!”

“Bah! You’re not serious, Freda! You laugh at perils. And a peril now faces us.”

“Ah! My dear Gordon, this is the first time I’ve ever heard such an admission from you – you, of all men! Peril? It’s in the dictionary, but not in your vocabulary – or mine, my dear boy. I’ve faced danger, and so have you – nasty troublous moments with detectives hanging around – but we’ve generally been able to wriggle out by the back door, or the window, or – ”

“Or else bluff it out, Freda!” interrupted Gray. “Yes, you’re right! But to deliberately ask after the health of Roderick Homfray over the wireless telephone – well, it’s simply courting trouble.”

“Why?”

“Well, don’t you know that there’s an apparatus invented by two clever Italians, Bellini and Tosi, which is called a direction-finder?” asked her rather good-looking companion, as he removed his cigar from his lips. “That apparatus is in use all over the country. That’s how they find aircraft lost in fogs – and that’s how they could find to a yard exactly the position of this secret set of ours from which you spoke those silly jeering words. Gad! you’re a fool, Freda! Shut up – and don’t meddle with this wireless transmitter in future! Remember, I’ve got no official licence. This room,” – and he swept his hand around the small apartment filled with a marvellous collection of wireless apparatus – “is our secret. If the authorities discovered it – well, it would, no doubt, be the end for both of us – the Old Bailey and – well, just jug for both of us. I know something about wireless, and as you know it bears us in good stead. We’ve profited thousands on the stunt – you and I, Freda – and – ”

“And Roderick Homfray also knows something about wireless, my dear old thing,” laughed the handsome woman, lazily taking a cigarette from her gold case, tapping it and lighting it.

“That’s just it! You’re a priceless fool to have taken such a risk as to speak broadcast as you did. What did you say?”

“I only asked how 3.X.Q. Roddy Homfray of Little Farncombe was getting on, and gave my name as Freda!”

“Fool!” yelled Gordon Gray in fury. “It may be reported to the old sky-pilot! Young Homfray is in oblivion. We know that he’s been picked up off the Thames towing-path, damp and

unconscious, but in all probability he'll never recover from the dope we gave him. We sincerely hope not, eh? I expected he'd die in the night." The handsome woman hesitated.

"No, Gordon, we hope he will recover. If he doesn't, then it's murder once again; and, after all, that's an infernally ugly word. It would mean more than jug!"

The short, rather stout, beady-eyed man, the huge cigar still in his mouth, made a gesture of impatience, and crossing to the big roll-top writing-table, upon which was a high-power transmission set of wireless telephone capable of projecting the human voice clearly to any point in the British Isles, he turned over another switch and placed the telephones over his ears.

As he did so he turned an ebonite knob with a brass pointer upon a semicircular scale of ivory – one of many before him – just a sixteenth of an inch. He touched it with infinite care.

"Just listen, Freda," he said, in a hard voice. "Now just listen here, how by your accursed foolishness you've brought danger upon us. Listen, you madwoman?"

The woman took up the second pair of head-'phones, twisted the steel band and, instead of placing the 'phones over her head, put the ear pieces to her ears with the arched band towards her face – a favourite attitude with women who listen to wireless telephony.

As the delicate receivers came to her ears she drew a long breath, the colour dying from her face.

The little room wherein the fine expensive experimental set was installed was on the ground floor of a good-sized, old-fashioned house called "Willowden," which stood behind a broad lawn just off the Great North Road between Hatfield and Welwyn, twenty-five miles from London, a distance which was as nothing to Gordon Gray with his up-to-date Rolls.

From the Automobile Club in Pall Mall he could easily reach home in half an hour, even though the traffic through North London was usually bad. That night he had taken Freda to the theatre, and they had had supper at Ciro's afterwards, and it was now only one o'clock in the morning.

"Listen, old thing?" she urged, as she again adjusted the telephones on her ears. "What's that?"

Gordon Gray listened attentively.

A deep harsh voice was heard – a Voice from Nowhere – which asked slowly and very distinctly:

"Who was that who is interested in 3.X.Q.? This is 3.A.X. at Carlisle calling. Who are you, Freda? Please tell me who you are! Roddy Homfray, 3.X.Q., is well, but I fear he may not be listening. Can I relay any message, Freda?" asked the voice.

"Curse you!" cried the man. "You've actually given your name broadcast over the whole country! What the devil do you mean?" he cried, glaring at her. "All wireless amateurs know 3.X.Q. as old Homfray's son. They will inquire after Freda, and then old Homfray will know! Gad! You've made an unholy mess of things now! Put those 'phones down and be quiet!" he added.

Then, as she disentangled the head-'phones from her hair, he pulled over the transmitting switch, and as the generator began to gather speed until it hummed pleasantly and the two big globular valves being aglow, he said, in a forced, unnatural voice:

"Hulloa, 3.A.X.? Hulloa, Carlisle. Hulloa, 3.A.X. 3.A.X.? This is 3.B.T. at Birmingham calling. I heard your message about 3.X.Q. at Little Farncombe and about Freda. It wasn't Freda – a woman – but Freeman – Freeman. Do you hear? I heard it as Freeman. I heard 3.X.Q. speaking an hour ago. He said he could not transmit to-night, but will do so to-morrow night at 20:00 o'clock G.M.T. Have you got that, 3.A.X.? 3.B.T. changing over!"

And he flung back the switch so that in a few seconds the generator was silent, and all became quiet save for the ticking of the round-faced yacht's clock which bore in large capitals G.M.T. – meaning Greenwich Mean Time.

Both took up the receiving 'phones and listened. A few moments later there sounded the peculiar whistle of a wireless carrier wave, and next second the same deep voice called in the jargon of wireless:

"Hulloa, 3.B.T.? Hulloa, Birmingham? Hulloa, 3.B.T. This is 3.A.X. at Carlisle calling. I heard your message O.K. I understand that it was Freeman – not Freda. I thought it was a lady inquiring after our friend 3.X.Q. Many thanks. I will listen for 3.X.Q.'s transmission to-morrow night. Sorry I worried you about Freda. Thanks, 3.B.T. Thanks, O.M. 3.A.X. switching off!"

The O.M. stood for "old man," a familiar greeting between wireless experimenters unknown to each other, and who only meet through the ether.

"I hope nobody has put a direction-finder upon me!" said Gray a moment later.

"Really you are very slick, Gordon," laughed the handsome woman. "That change-over to Freeman is excellent! But as you said you were an amateur in Birmingham, and here we are at Crane Hill, you are quite right in fearing that somebody might spot us."

"Ah! I replied quickly, and gave them no time, you see," laughed the elusive crook, for such he was.

His accomplice laughed merrily. They were a refined, good-looking pair. Freda passed herself off to most people as Gray's sister. The good people of Hatfield knew the tenants of the old-fashioned house as Mr Gray and his widowed sister, Mrs Crisp. The latter – a smart, go-ahead woman – often drove her own little aluminium-bodied A.C. car up to London and back. Indeed, brother and sister lived mostly in London where they had a flat in Kensington, but the week-ends they usually spent at Willowden, where Gray's old servant, Claribut, and his wife ran the house together.

Indeed Gray, a moment later, touched the bell, and old Claribut – a very respectable-looking, white-haired man – appeared. Surely none who called there would suspect such an outwardly perfect servant to be a crook like his master.

"Jim, we're going back to town to-night," Gray said. "If anybody calls I'm in Paris. But I don't expect that anyone will. Tell that to your wife, and to-morrow go over to Pangbourne, stay at the Elephant Hotel there, and find out what is doing concerning young Homfray. He's at the Cottage Hospital there. You know all the facts."

"All right!" replied the clean-shaven old butler, whose aristocratic appearance always bore him in such good stead. He often posed as a benevolent philanthropist, and could impose upon most people. His was a long criminal record at Parkhurst and Sing-Sing, and he was a man who, having spent nearly half his life in jail, had brought crookdom to a fine art, truly a worthy associate of Gordon Gray, alias Gordon Tresham, Ralph Fane, Major Hawes Jackson, Commander Tothill, R.N., and a dozen other names which had risen and faded upon the phosphorescence of his elusive life.

Gordon Gray lived – and he lived well – at other people's expense. He had caught the habit of hanging on to the edge of the wealthy man's garment, and wealthy war-profiteers were, he found, so very easily gulled when they wanted to get on, and by political manoeuvring to make their wives titled "ladies."

The fact was that Gordon Gray was a dealer in big things. Trumpery theft, burglary or suchlike offences, were beneath him. He could manipulate big deals in the City, could "arrange" a knighthood at a price, and sometimes, when he and Freda had suddenly arrived in London from New York, he would actually entertain English politicians with names of world-wide repute at elaborate dinners at the Ritz.

Though a crook he was a philosopher, and his favourite remark when things went badly was: "Bah! it is no use blowing against the wind!"

That night he felt himself blowing against the wind. Though he said nothing to the handsome woman at his side, he regretted that Roddy Homfray had not been placed in the river Thames as

he had first suggested, instead of upon the bank opposite that beautiful riverside house with its glorious lawns and gardens at the other side of Whitchurch Bridge. If Roddy's unconscious form had been pitched over the bank it would have been found down at Mapledurham, and believed to be a case of suicide. He had been a fool, he declared within himself. He had hoped that the young man would be found dead in the morning. But he had not!

"I'll go over to Pangbourne," said the elderly man he had addressed so familiarly as Jim. "And I'll report all I can gather. Anything else?" he asked, crossing to a box of cigars and helping himself without being invited.

"No. Get back here. And tell your wife to keep the wireless securely locked up. There's a Yale lock on this door. Nobody comes in. You hear!"

"Of course. It wouldn't do, Gordon, would it? That wireless is going to be a big use to us in the near future, eh?" laughed the white-haired old man.

"It will be, if we're cute. But we shall have to have our eyes skinned. Have you paid all the tradesmen's books?"

"Yes."

"Then send to the chemist in Hatfield for a big bottle of eau-de-cologne – the biggest he's got. Pay a pound for it, or more, and say that I want it to put into my bath. It gives the guys here a shock and impresses them."

"Good idea!" laughed Jim. "You're always brimming over with them. But look here, Gordon," he said, as he bit off the end of the cigar and started to light it. "First, I don't like this furnished house of ours, with the inquisitive landlady; and I don't like the wireless."

"Why?"

"Well, what I'm afraid of is, that though we've got the aerial wires well concealed from the roadway, some boy scout of an errand boy may come in and twig it, and tell some other boy scout that we've got an aerial up. See?"

"Yes, I see," replied Gordon. "But the risk is small. If a boy discovers it, let the boy listen in, and tell him to keep dark about it. We're inventors, and we have discovered something regarding wireless telephony which will soon startle the whole world. The boy, whoever he is, will be startled and hold his tongue – till we decide how to deal with him. Oh! how simple you are, Jim! You're getting chicken-hearted in your old age!"

And Freda, who was standing by, laughed outright.

Chapter Six

Mists of Memory

Three days after Roddy Homfray had regained consciousness Doctor Maynard, on visiting him, declared that though his mental condition was not yet quite satisfactory, he was well enough to travel home. Therefore he took him in his own two-seater car from the Cottage Hospital at Pangbourne, by way of Wokingham and Godalming to Little Farncombe, where the old rector welcomed back his son and secretly returned thanks to his Maker for his safety.

The quiet old doctor only remained long enough to have a drink – unprofessional, perhaps, but refreshing – for he had to get back to his patients.

After he had gone, Roddy sat before the fire in the little study, his left hand upon his brow, for his head ached badly. It seemed that around his skull was a band of iron. Never for an instant since he had become conscious of things about him had that excruciating pain ceased. It was only when worn out by it that he slept, and thus became free.

“Well, now, my boy, tell me exactly what occurred on that Sunday night,” urged the old clergyman, standing before him and looking down at the crouched figure with eager curiosity.

“I – well, I really don’t know,” was the young man’s reply. “As I told you, in the darkness I found a girl just off the path in Welling Wood. She appealed to me to save her, and a few moments later she died in my arms. Then I rushed across here to raise the alarm, when, all of a sudden, I saw a bright red flash, and I knew no more till I awoke in the little hospital at Pangbourne.”

“But, my dear Roddy, the police searched the wood to find you – searched every inch of it – but there was no girl there. If she were dead she would surely have been found.”

“I was taken away unconscious. If so, what could have prevented the assassin and his friends – for there must have been more than one person – removing the evidence of their crime?”

“Assassin!” gasped the old man, drawing a deep breath. Thoughts of Gordon Gray and the handsome Freda crossed his mind. But what hand could they have had in the death of an unknown girl in the woods at the rear of the Rectory?

No. He decided that Roddy, in his unbalanced state of mind, was filled with wild imaginings. The description of the red ball of fire was sufficient in itself to show how disordered was his brain. The poor boy was suffering from hallucinations, he decided, so he humoured him and listened as he repeated his incredible story.

“You would recognise the girl again, Roddy?” asked his father, puffing at his pipe.

“Recognise her! Of course I should. I’d know her anywhere!” And once again he went into a long and detailed description of her face, her eyes, her hair, and her dress.

The short December afternoon was drawing in and the light was fading.

“I think, Roddy, that if I were you I’d go and lie down,” said his father softly. “Your poor head worries you – I know, my dear boy.”

“It does. But I can think now – think quite clearly,” was the young man’s reply. “At the hospital the matron regarded me as a half-dazed idiot, I believe, and the nurse listened to me as she might listen to a baby’s babbling. But I tell you, father, I’m now perfectly in my right mind. You may believe, or you may disbelieve my story, but Roddy, your son, has told you the truth, and he repeats every word he has said.”

For a few moments the rector was silent, his pipe still in his mouth and his hands in the pockets of the easy old black jacket he wore in the house. He was not a man who made any outward show, and, like most scholars, cared little for dress now that, alas! his wife, who had looked after him so tenderly, was dead. Old Norton Homfray was of simple tastes and few wants. His whole soul was in the welfare of his parish, and in consequence the parish held him up as a real fine old fellow.

“Well, Roddy, what you’ve told me is, of course, most astounding – almost incredible. On that night you walked home with Miss Sandys – eh? She came here and told me so herself.”

“She came here! Elma here!” cried Roddy, quickly stirring himself from his chair and becoming alert. “What did she say?”

“She heard that you were missing, and she came to tell me of her walk home to the Towers with you.”

“Yes. And – and what did she say about me?” the young man asked with quick eagerness.

“Nothing. Only she seemed greatly surprised and upset,” his father replied. “But – well – ” And he hesitated.

“Well – go on,” the young man said.

“Well, look here, Roddy, after leaving Miss Sandys, did you meet anyone else – a man in the Guildford road?”

“A man? No. Why? Haven’t I told you I walked straight home? What are you trying to make out?”

“You are quite certain that you did not stop and speak with any stranger in the Guildford road?”

“I am quite certain that I did not. I spoke to nobody till I found the girl dying in Welling Wood.”

“And – well, now let me at once be frank with you, Roddy: have you ever in your life heard the name of Gordon Gray?”

“Never. Who is he?”

“No matter. Recollect the name, and if you ever hear it, avoid him – avoid him, my boy, as you would Satan himself. And his woman friend Freda Crisp.”

“Freda Crisp? Oh! I fancy I’ve met her – been introduced to her somewhere or other about a year ago. In South America, I believe, but I really can’t remember. A fine handsome woman, who always dresses beautifully, and who is a topping dancer. Always has lots of men about her. Yes. I have a recollection of her, but I don’t just now recall where we met. In travelling I meet so many people, dad, as you know.”

“Yes, of course, my boy; but if you ever meet her again, remember my words.”

“That Miss Sandys should come and see you, dad, is peculiar. Why did she come? What interest can she possibly have in me, except – well, perhaps it is the wireless. She told me she was very interested in it, and possibly she has heard that I’m an experimenter – eh?”

“Probably so,” laughed the old clergyman. “But hearing you were coming home to-day, she sent me a message to say that she is calling here at five.”

“Jolly good of her!” replied the young man, suddenly raising his head, which seemed to be bursting, “It’s now nearly four. I think I’ll go up and have a lie down till she comes,” and so saying he ascended the stairs to his own room.

Just before five o’clock Elma Sandys, a dainty figure in furs, was ushered into the study by Mrs Bentley, and was greeted by the rector, who, shaking her hand, said:

“It’s really awfully kind of you to come and see my poor son, Miss Sandys. Frankly, I hardly know what to make of him. His mind seems entirely upset in some way. He talks wildly, and tells me of some terrible tragedy which occurred in Welling Wood on the night of his disappearance.”

“Tragedy! What?” asked the girl quickly.

“He will tell you all about it. The story is a very strange one. I would rather he told you himself.”

The girl sank into the wide wicker arm-chair which the old man pulled up to the fire, and then he left to summon his son.

When Roddy entered the room Elma, jumping up, saw instantly that he seemed still half-dazed. She took his hand and instinctively realised that his gaze was fixed and strange. His friend

Denton had seen him soon after his return, and declared him to be suffering from some potent drug which had apparently affected him mentally.

“Hulloa, Miss Sandys?” exclaimed the young man cheerily. “Well! I’m in a pretty pickle – as you see – eh? What’s happened I can’t make out. People seem to think I’m not quite in my right senses,” and then, grinning, he added: “Perhaps I’m not – and perhaps I am.”

“But, Mr Homfray, I’ve been awfully worried about you,” the girl said, facing him and gazing again into his pale drawn face. “You disappeared, and we had an awful shock, all of us. You left me at the end of the avenue and nobody saw you again!”

“Well,” said the young fellow, with a sorry attempt at laughing, “somebody must have seen me, no doubt, or I shouldn’t have been found in this precious state. What happened to me I haven’t the slightest notion. You see, I came up the village and went on through Welling Wood, and – well, as I went along I heard a strange cry, and in the darkness found a girl lying, under a tree. I went to her, and as I did so, she cried out to me to save her. The whole affair was unusual, wasn’t it? I bent and took her up, and – the poor girl sank in my arms.”

“Sank? Did she die?” asked the great financier’s daughter.

“Yes, she did.”

The rector, who stood near his writing-table, exchanged glances with their pretty visitor. They were meaning glances. Old Mr Homfray was somewhat puzzled why the daughter of Purcell Sandys should be so deeply interested in his son. Yet, of course, young people will be ever young people, and deep pockets are of no account where Love is concerned. Love and Lucre have now happily been divorced in our post-war get ahead world.

“But tell me, Mr Homfray, what was she like? Who could she be to be in Welling Wood at that hour?”

“Ah! I don’t know,” was the young fellow’s half-dazed reply. “I only know what happened to me, how I dashed away to reach home and raise the alarm, and suddenly saw what appeared to be a ball of fire before me. Then I knew no more till I found myself in hospital at Pangbourne. A man, they say, found me lying near the towing-path by the Thames. I was in the long grass – left there to die, Doctor Maynard believes.”

“But you must have been in somebody’s hands for days,” his father remarked.

“Yes,” said the young man, “I know. Though I can recollect nothing at all – distinctly. Some incidents seem to be coming back to me. I have just a faint idea of two persons – a man and a woman. They were well-dressed and lived in a big old house. And – and they made me do something. Ah! I – I can’t recall it, only – only I know that the suggestion horrified me!” And he gave vent to a strange cry and his eyes glared with terror at the recollection. “Ah! the – the brutes – they forced me to – to do something – to – ”

“To do what?” asked the girl, taking his hand softly and looking into his pale, drawn face.

“It is all a strange misty kind of recollection,” he declared, staring stonily in front of him. “I can see them – yes! I can see both of them – the woman – she – yes! – she held my hand while – she guided my hand when I did it!”

“Did what?” asked Elma in a slow, calm voice, as though trying to soothe him.

“I – I – I can’t recollect! Only – only he died!”

“Died! Who died?” gasped the old rector, who at the mention of the man and the woman at once wondered again whether Gordon Gray and Freda Crisp were in any way implicated. “You surely did not commit – murder!”

The young man seated in his chair sat for a few seconds, silent and staring.

“Murder! I – yes, I saw him! I would recognise him. Murder, perhaps – oh, perhaps I – I killed him! That woman made me do it!”

The rector and the pretty daughter of Purcell Sandys exchanged glances. Roddy was no doubt still under the influence of some terrible, baneful drug. Was his mind wandering, or was there some grain of truth in those misty, horrifying recollections?

“I’m thirsty,” he said a moment later; “very thirsty.”

His father went out at once to obtain a glass of water, whereupon Elma, advancing closely to the young man, drew from her little bag a photograph.

“Hush! Mr Homfray! Don’t say a word. But look at this! Do you recognise it?” she whispered in breathless anxiety.

He glanced at it as she held it before his bewildered eyes.

“Why – yes!” he gasped, staring at her in blank amazement. “That’s – that’s the girl I found in Welling Wood!”

Chapter Seven

The Girl Named Edna

“Hush!” cried Elma. “Say nothing at present.” And next instant the old rector re-entered with a glass of water which his son drank with avidity.

Then he sat staring straight into the fire without uttering a word.

“Is your head better?” asked the girl a moment later; and she slipped the photograph back into her bag.

“Yes, just a little better. But it still aches horribly,” Roddy replied. “I’m anxious to get to that spot in the wood.”

“To-morrow,” his father promised. “It’s already dark now. And to-morrow you will be much better.”

“And I’ll come with you,” Miss Sandys volunteered. “The whole affair is certainly most mysterious.”

“Yes. Neither Denton nor the doctor at Pangbourne can make out the nature of the drug that was given to me. It seems to have upset the balance of my brain altogether. But I recollect that house – the man and the woman and – and how she compelled me to do her bidding to – ”

“To what?” asked the girl.

The young mining engineer drew a long breath and shook his head despairingly.

“I hardly know. Things seem to be going round. When I try to recall it I become bewildered.”

“Then don’t try to remember,” urged his father in a sympathetic voice. “Remain quiet, my boy, and you will be better to-morrow.”

The young fellow looked straight at the sweet-faced girl standing beside his chair. He longed to ask her how she became possessed of that photograph – to ask the dead girl’s name. But she had imposed silence upon him.

“We will go together to the spot to-morrow, Miss Sandys,” he said. “People think I’m telling a fairy story about the girl. But I assure you I’m not. I held her in my arms and stroked her hair from her face. I remember every incident of that tragic discovery.”

“Very well,” said the girl. “I’ll be here at ten o’clock, and we will go together. Now remain quiet and rest,” she urged with an air of solicitude. “Don’t worry about anything – about anything whatever,” she added with emphasis. “We shall clear up this mystery and bring your enemies to book without a doubt.”

And with that Roddy Homfray had to be satisfied, for a few moments later she buttoned up her warm fur coat and left, while old Mrs Bentley went upstairs and prepared his bed.

His friend Denton called again after he had retired, and found him much better.

“You’re pulling round all right, Roddy,” he laughed. “You’ll be your old self again in a day or two. But what really happened to you seems a complete enigma. You evidently fell into very bad hands for they gave you a number of injections – as your arm shows. But what they administered I can’t make out. They evidently gave you something which acted on your brain and muddled it, while at the same time you were capable of physical action, walking, and perhaps talking quite rationally.”

Then Roddy told his chum the doctor of the weird but misty recollections which from time to time arose within him of having been compelled to act as the handsome woman had directed. Exactly what he did he could not recall – except that he felt certain that while beneath the woman’s influence he had committed some great and terrible crime.

“Bah! my dear Roddy?” laughed Denton as he sat beside the other’s bed. “Your nerves are all wrong and awry. After those mysterious doses you’ve had no wonder you’re upset, and your imagination has grown so vivid.”

“I tell you it isn’t imagination!” cried Roddy in quick protest. “I know that the whole thing sounds utterly improbable, but – well, perhaps to-morrow – perhaps to-morrow I can give you some proof.”

“Of what!”

“Of the identity of the girl I found dying in Welling Wood.”

Hubert Denton smiled incredulously, and patting his friend upon the shoulder, said:

“All right, my dear fellow. Go to sleep. A good rest will do you a lot of good. I’ll see you in the morning.”

The doctor left and Roddy Homfray, tired and exhausted after an exciting day, dropped off to sleep – a sleep full of strange, fantastic dreams in which the sweet calm face of Elma Sandys appeared ever and anon.

Next morning at about nine o’clock, when Roddy awakened to find the weather bright and crisp, he called his father, and said:

“I don’t want Inspector Freeman to know about what I’ve told you – about the girl in Welling Wood.”

“Certainly not,” replied the quiet old rector reassuringly. “That is your own affair. They found nothing when they searched the wood for you.”

“Perhaps they didn’t look in the right spot,” remarked his son. “Elma will be here at ten, and we’ll go together – alone – you don’t mind, father?”

“Not in the least, my boy,” laughed the old man. “Miss Sandys seems deeply distressed concerning you.”

“Does she?” asked Roddy, with wide-open eyes. “Do you really think she is? Or is it the mystery of the affair which appeals to her. Mystery always appeals to women in a greater sense than to men. Every mystery case in the newspapers is read by ten women to one man, they say.”

“Perhaps. But I think Miss Sandys evinces a real interest in you, Roddy, because you are ill and the victim of mysterious circumstances,” he said.

Over the old man’s mind rested the shadow of that unscrupulous pair, Gray and the woman Crisp. Had they done some of their devil’s work upon his beloved son? He had forgiven them their threats and their intentions, but he remained calm to wait, to investigate, and to point the finger of denunciation against them if their villainy were proved.

At ten o’clock Elma Sandys arrived upon her motorcycle, which she constantly used for short distances when alone. Though in the garage her father had two big cars, and she had her own smart little two-seater in which she frequently ran up to London and back, yet she enjoyed her cycle, which she used with a fearlessness begotten of her practice during the war when she had acted as a driver in the Air Force at Oxford – one of the youngest who had taken service, be it said.

As soon as she arrived she helped Roddy into his coat, and both went down the Rectory garden, climbed the fence, walked across the paddock, and at last entered the wood with its brown frosted bracken and thick evergreen undergrowth. Through the half-bare branches, for the weather had been mild, the blue sky shone, though the wintry sun was not yet up, and as Roddy led the way carefully towards the footpath, he warned his pretty companion to have a care as there were a number of highly dangerous but concealed holes from which gravel had been dug fifty years or so ago, the gulfs being now covered with the undergrowth.

Scarcely had he spoken ere she stumbled and narrowly escaped being precipitated into a hole in which water showed deep below through the tangled briars.

Soon they reached the footpath along which he had gone in the darkness on that fatal Sunday night. He paused to take his bearings. He recognised the thick, stout trunk of a high Scotch fir, the

only one in the wood. His flash-lamp had shone upon it, he remembered, just at the moment when he had heard the woman's cries.

He halted, reflected for a few moments, and then struck out into the undergrowth, confident that he was upon the spot where the unknown girl had sunk dying into his arms. Elma, who watched, followed him. He scarcely spoke, so fully absorbed was he in his quest.

At last he crossed some dead and broken bracken, and said:

"Here! This is where I found her!"

His pretty companion halted at his side and gazed about her. There was nothing save a tangle of undergrowth and dead ferns. Above were high bare oaks swaying slowly in the wintry wind.

"Well," said Elma at last. "There's nothing here, is there?"

He turned and looked her straight in the face, his expression very serious.

"No. There is nothing, I admit. Nothing! And yet a great secret lies here. Here, this spot, remote from anywhere, was the scene of a mysterious tragedy. You hold one clue, Elma – and I the other." And again he looked straight into her eyes, while standing on that very spot where the fair-haired girl had breathed her last in his arms, and then, after a few seconds' silence, he went on: "Elma! I – I call you by your Christian name because I feel that you have my future at heart, and – and I, on my part – I love you! May I call you by your Christian name?"

She returned his look very gravely. Her fine eyes met his, but he never wavered. Since that first day when Tweedles, her little black Pomeranian, had snapped at him she had been ever in his thoughts. He could not disguise the fact. Yet, after all, it was a very foolish dream, he had told himself dozens of times. He was poor – very poor – a mere adventurer on life's troublous waters – while she was the daughter of a millionaire with, perhaps, a peeress' career before her.

"Roddy," at last she spoke, "I call you that! I think of you as Roddy," she said slowly, looking straight into his eyes. "But in this matter we are very serious – both of us – eh?"

"Certainly we are, Elma," he replied, taking her hand passionately.

She withdrew it at once, saying:

"You have brought me here for a purpose – to find traces of – of the girl who died at this spot. Where are the traces?"

"Well, the bracken is trodden down, as you see," he replied.

"But surely that is no evidence of what you allege?"

"No, Elma. But that photograph which you showed me last night is a picture of her."

The girl smiled mysteriously.

"You say so. How am I to know? They say that you are unfortunately suffering from delusions. In that case sight of any photograph would possibly strike a false chord in your memory."

"False chord!" he cried. "Do you doubt this morning that I am in my sane senses? Do you doubt that which I have just said, Elma – do you doubt that I love you?"

The girl's cheeks flushed instantly at his words. Next second they were pale again.

"No," she said. "Please don't let us talk of love, Mr Homfray."

"Roddy – call me that."

"Well – yes, Roddy, if you like."

"I do like. You told me that you thought of me as Roddy. Can you never love me?" he implored.

The girl held her breath. Her heart was beating quickly and her eyes were turned away. She let him take her gloved hand and raise it fervently to his lips. Then, without answering his question, she turned her splendid eyes to his and he saw in them a strange, mysterious expression such as he had never noticed in the eyes of any woman before.

He thought it was a look of sympathy and trust, but a moment later it seemed as though she doubted him – she was half afraid of him.

“Elma!” he cried, still holding her hand. “Tell me – tell me that you care for me a little – just a little!” And he gazed imploringly into her pale face.

“A little!” she echoed softly. “Perhaps – well, perhaps I do, Roddy. But – but do not let us speak of it now – not until you are better.”

“Ah! You do love me a little,” he cried with delight, again raising her hand to his lips. “Perhaps you think I’ve not recovered from that infernal drug which my unknown enemies gave me. But I declare that to-day I am in my full senses – all except my memory – which is still curiously at fault.”

“Let us agree to be very good friends, Roddy,” the girl said, pressing his hand. “I confess that I like you very much,” she admitted, “but love is quite another matter. We have not known each other very long, remember.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.