CLASSICS TO GO

THE WEIRD PICTURE

JOHN R. CARLING

The Weird Picture

John R. Carling

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CHAPTER I
THE RED STAIN

"Belgrave Square, *November 28th*.

"Dear Frank,—Surely you are not going to spend a third Christmas at Heidelberg! We want you with us in good old England. My marriage with Daphne is fixed for Christmas Day, and I shall not regard the ceremony as valid unless you are my best man. So come—*come*—come! No time to say more. You can guess how busy I am. Write or wire by return.— Yours,

"George."

Such was the letter received by me, Frank Willard, student in Odenwald College, Heidelberg, on the first day of the last month of the year. The writer of the letter was my brother, a captain in the—something. I take a pride in not remembering the number of the regiment, for I am a man of peace and hate war and all connected therewith, excepting, of course, my soldier-brother, though my affection for him had somewhat waned of late years, for a reason that will soon appear.

The letter was accompanied by a portrait of George, an exquisite little painting in oils, representing him in full-dress uniform. A glance at the mirror showed how much I suffered by comparison. He looked every inch a hero. I looked—well, no matter. In the lottery of love the prizes are not always drawn by the handsome. The Daphne referred to was our cousin, a maiden with raven hair, dark blue eyes, and a face as lovely as a Naiad's.

Her father, Gerald Leslie, was a wealthy city merchant, who, after the death of our parents, became the guardian of George and myself, bestowing on us a warmth of affection and a wealth of pocket-money that made the transference to his roof seem rather desirable than otherwise, my own father having been of a somewhat cold and undemonstrative temperament. However, *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*.

My first impulse on reading the above letter was to pen a refusal to the invitation.

"What!" it may be said. "Refuse to be present at your brother's wedding? Refuse to return home to old England at Christmas-tide?—a season dear to every Englishman from its sacred and festive associations. 'Breathes there the man with soul so dead,' etc."

Exactly. My soul *was* dead, both to the joys of Christmas and of Daphne's wedding. Four words will explain the reason: I myself loved Daphne. And I had told her so, only to find that she had given her heart to my brother George.

I am not going to fill this chapter with the ravings of disappointed love. Suffice it to say that in my despair I left England, determined to see Daphne no more, and betook myself to the university of Heidelberg with the hope of finding oblivion in study.

Greek choruses, strophes, antistrophes, and epodes, are, however, all very well in their way, but they are a sorry substitute for love. At any rate, they did not make me forget Daphne. Her sweet face continued to haunt me, and, in the despairing and romantic mood of a Manfred, I spent many a night on the mountains around Heidelberg, watching the stars rise, and brooding over my unrequited love.

Thus my brother's letter was far from being a source of pleasure to me, though it was kindly meant on his part (for he was ignorant, so I subsequently learned, of my own love for Daphne). His invitation, translated into the language of my thoughts simply meant, "Come and be more unhappy than you are!"

Deep down in my heart I had cherished the belief that something unforeseen would happen to break off George's engagement. The sands of that hope were now fast running out. The 25th of the month would remove Daphne from me forever.

For several days I fought with my despair, but at last I resolved to be present at the wedding.

"I may as well play the stoic," I muttered, "and accept the inevitable. Perhaps the fact of seeing Daphne actually married to another will cure me of this folly."

Curiosity, also, to see how Daphne would behave on the occasion was an additional motive for going; and, poor fool that I was, I thought of the trembling handclasp, the blush, and the sweet glance that a woman seldom fails to bestow on the man who has once expressed his love for her.

Christmas Eve, midnight, found me on board the packet-boat steaming out of Calais Harbour. The sea was singularly smooth, and there was in the air that which gave promise of a heavy fall of snow ere long. Wrapped in my cloak, I leaned over the side of the vessel, listening to the silver carillon of the church-bells pealing forth from every steeple and belfry in the town the glad tidings that the sweet and solemn morn of the Nativity had dawned. Faintly and more faintly the chimes sounded over the wide expanse of glimmering sea, till they were finally lost in the distance.

At first my thoughts were gloomy. To play the stoic is never a very pleasant task. Yet I was not totally abandoned to despair. A ray of hope played over my mind, and, as the distance that separated me from Daphne diminished, this hope gradually became stronger and stronger. *Nil desperandum* should be my motto. The wedding had not taken place yet; weddings have been broken off at the very altar: why should not hers be? Foolish though it may seem, I began to nurse the pleasing idea that Fate might yet transfer Daphne to my arms. As if my wish had become a certainty, I trod the deck of the Channel steamer with exultant step, refusing to go below, although the wintry flakes were falling now in steady earnest. Such is the power of hope over the human mind; or is it something more than a poetic fiction that coming events cast their shadows before?

I was roused at length from dreamland by the sight of Dover Harbour looming through the snow-dotted gloom of night.

At the pier-head a lantern shone, and among the persons assembled beneath its light a soldierly-looking figure in a long grey coat was visible. It was my brother George. His presence on the pier seemed, in my excited state of mind, a confirmation of the daring hope I had begun to entertain.

"The dear fellow!" I murmured. "He has come down expressly to meet me, and to resign Daphne to me."

As our vessel drew alongside the pier I waved my hand to him, but at this greeting he instantly vanished. This was certainly a surprise. Why did he not await my landing?

I was the first to quit the steamer, and, emerging from the inspection of the Revenue officials, I looked eagerly around for my brother. He was not to be seen on any part of the pier.

Was I mistaken as to the identity? The figure, the face, the very carriage—all seemed to be his. Stay! Was this an ocular illusion! Had my mind been dwelling so earnestly on my brother as to stamp on the retina of my eye an image that had no corresponding objective reality outside myself? Would this account for the peculiar manner in which the figure had vanished?

I would soon put this theory to the test. If George had come by train from London, the servants at the station would surely retain some remembrance of him. If others had seen the figure in the grey cloak, it would be a proof that my sense of sight had not deceived me. I entered the station and sought knowledge from the first porter I met, a tired-looking youth, with a sprig of holly stuck in his buttonhole, who gaped vacantly at my questions till the glitter of a silver coin imparted a certain degree of briskness to his faculties.

"A military-looking gent, sir? Yes, there was one on the platform a few minutes ago."

"Describe him," said I bluntly, as my fellow passengers from the boat began to crowd into the station. "What was he like?"

I was desirous of drawing a description of the "military-looking gent" from the porter's unassisted memory rather than of suggesting personal details, to which, in his half-sleepy state and in his desire to get rid of me, he would doubtless subscribe assent.

"Well, sir, he wasn't very tall—at least, not for a soldier; but then Bonaparte wasn't——"

"Oh, hang Bonaparte! Go on," I said snappishly, for I was cold, hungry, and tired—conditions that do not tend to improve one's temper.

"He was wearing a long grey cloak and had a travelling-bag with him, marked with the letters "G.W." I noticed the bag particularly, because it came open as he was stepping from the carriage. My! didn't he shut it sharp! quick as lightning, as if he didn't want any one to see what was inside. I offered to carry it for him, and he told me——"

"What?"

"To go to the devil!"

"You didn't go, I see," said I, attempting to be facetious. "Well, go on. What about the man's face?"

"Face? He looked rather white and excited; perhaps because he was in a passion with the carriage-door; it didn't open easily. He had a dark scar on his temple, and——"

"Left or right temple?"

"Left."

George had a dark scar on his left temple, the relic of a fall from a cliff at Upsala. His initials too were "G.W." Good! The figure on the pier was not an illusion, then. The porter's words convinced me that the man he had seen was my brother.

"How long is it since he was here?" I inquired.

"How long?" repeated the official, jerking his head backwards to get a glimpse of the Station clock. "Only ten minutes since. He came down by the express from Charing Cross. It was a few minutes late owing to the snow."

"Do you know if he had a return ticket?"

"That I can't say."

"What's the next train to London?"

"One just on the move now, sir. The next in two hours' time. Better travel by this one. The next is sure to be a slow one, this snowstorm is so heavy. Going by this one, sir?" he continued, swinging open a carriage-door as he saw my hesitation. "Only a minute to spare."

"I—I don't know yet. Hold my portmanteau for a moment."

I quickly ran the whole length of the departing train, but the grey coat was not in any of the carriages. This train was the one I should have travelled by, its departure being timed for the arrival of the Continental boat; but I now resolved to delay my journey till the next, in order to travel in company with my brother, for George must return by the latter train, otherwise he would be barely in time to meet the wedding-party in the Church at half-past nine. I returned to the porter, who was surveying me with a curiosity, the reason of which soon became evident, and said:

"I shall travel by the next train. Take charge of my portmanteau until then."

"Right you are, guv'nor! What's he done? Forgery? Murder? He looks quite capable of it."

"Done? Who?" I said, astounded at this sudden familiarity.

"Why, the military cove!" returned the youth. "It's no go; I can see you're a 'tec with half an eye."

I suppose the half-eye that had discovered so much was his right one, for he proceeded to diminish it by screwing it up into a wink expressive of the penetration of its owner.

"The gentleman whom you think capable of forgery and murder is my brother, Captain Willard, of the—the never you mind; and if you give me any of your insolence, I'll report you to the authorities," I said, wrathfully.

The porter, who had evidently been drinking, was a little taken aback, to judge by his ejaculation of "Oh lor!" and as I walked off with my grandest air, I heard him mutter:

"His brother! yes, and like him, too! The one sends me to the devil, and the other threatens to report me to the station-master. Oh, they're brothers, sure enough! By your leave, there!"

A multitude of questions came surging over my mind. What was George doing at Dover only a few hours before his wedding? Obviously his purpose was not to meet me, since he had avoided me. Why? Could it be that for some strange reason he was deserting Daphne on her bridal morning?—a thought that caused my pulses to throb quickly. Was it shame, or guilt, that had kept him from facing me? Oh, if I could but find him, and learn the truth from his lips!

"On the platform ten minutes ago."

Absurd as the idea may seem, I resolved to walk the streets of Dover during the next two hours, on the chance of meeting him.

The weather was of the character that popular fancy rather than historic fact has ascribed to the Yuletides of bygone days under the name of "an old-fashioned Christmas." The snow was lying several inches deep in the streets, deadening the sound of my footfalls. The big flakes, still falling, blinded my vision with their whirling eddies. Not a soul was to be seen out of doors. Not a sound was to be heard save the sea splashing faintly against the harbour walls. The town lay draped in white, a city of the dead. Not knowing in what direction to proceed, I walked on as chance directed, without seeing the person I was in quest of. Presently, as I was turning a corner, a figure, white as a

ghost from head to foot, came into sight, startling me for the moment. It was a constable, and I questioned him.

"I saw a man in a grey cloak go by just three minutes ago."

"Carrying bag marked 'G.W.'?"

"Carrying *a* bag, sir," he replied, with marked emphasis on what the grammarians were wont to call the indefinite article. "I didn't notice any letters on it. If you hurry you'll catch him up. He went that way," pointing with his hand. "Is anything the matter? Can I be of assistance?"

"I don't understand you," I returned sharply, wondering whether he, too, like the railway-porter, thought that my brother was a fugitive from justice.

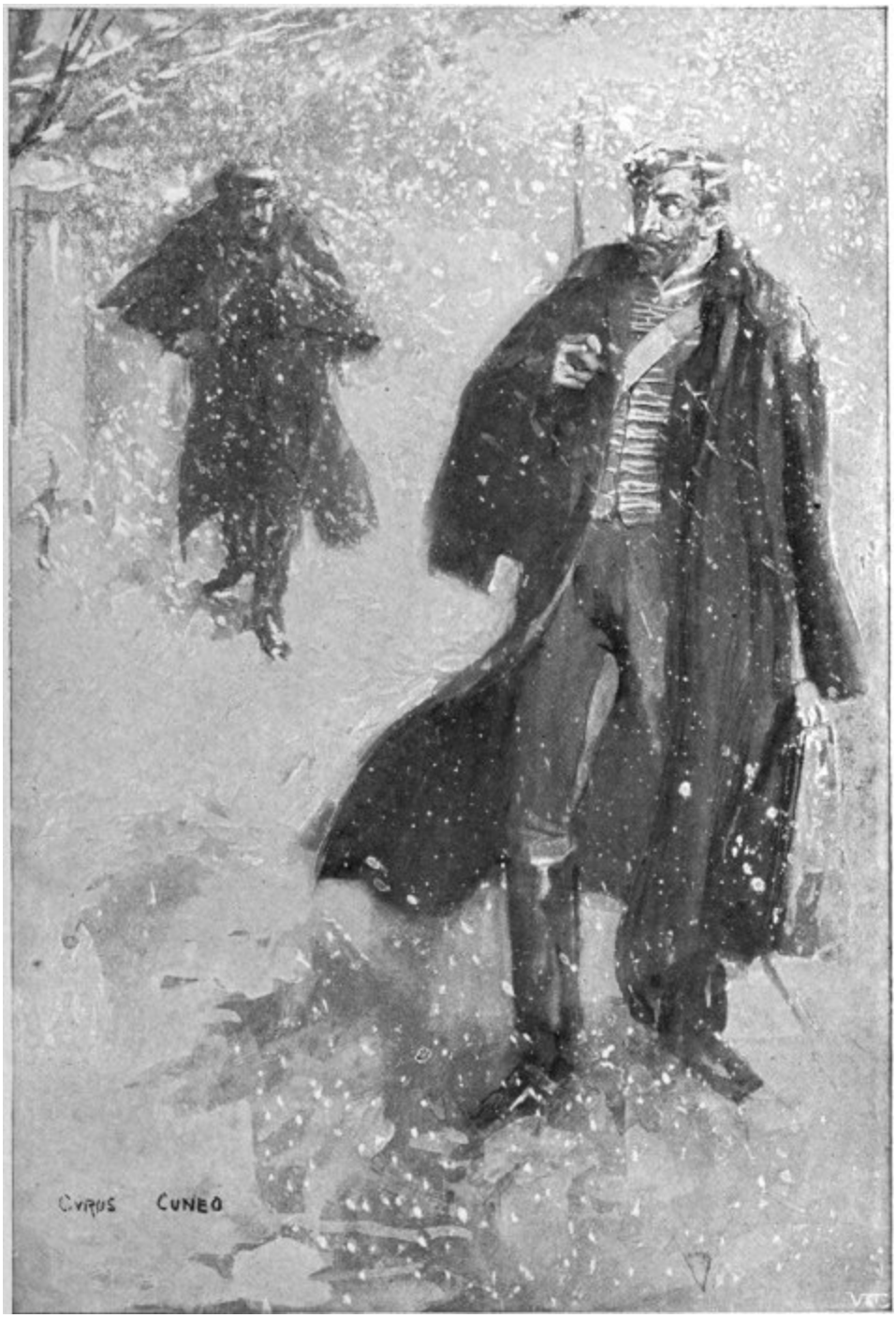
"No offence, sir, but your friend seems to need looking after. He is either mad or dying. His eyes burned like live coals, and his face was as white as this snow here. I called out 'A rough night, sir!' but he glided on, looking neither to right nor left, and taking no notice of me."

These words increased my misgivings. I thanked the constable and, declining his proffered services, rushed on in the direction indicated by him. A line of footprints in the snow served to guide me, and following their course, I presently found myself in a street whose semi-detached villas were fronted with quiet unpretentious gardens separated from the pavement by stone balustrades.

There he was! Half-way down the street, standing beneath the light of a gas-lamp, was a cloaked man apparently taking a survey of a house facing the lamp, while shaking the snow from himself. I hurried forward to greet him, my feet making no sound on the soft snow.

"George!" I cried eagerly and breathlessly when within a few paces of him. "George!"

The figure turned to meet, but not to greet me. It was my brother's face I saw, but so haggard and disfigured by lines of pain as to be scarcely recognisable. His eyes frightened me as they gleamed in the lamplight; so glassy, so unnatural was their stare.



With dread at my heart I tried to clasp his hand, but he waved me back with a gesture suggestive of surprise, despair, terror, shame, grief—any or all of these might have prompted the singular motion of his arm. If I had come upon him in the very act of murder, he could not have shown greater agitation. The fingers of his left hand relaxed their grip, and the valise they were holding dropped silently upon the snow. His action said more plainly than words: "Go back! go back! There is that happening of which you must know nothing."

To my mind there could be but one cause of his emotion, a cause as awful to me as to him, and it burst from my lips in a hoarse cry.

"Good heavens, George! Surely—surely Daphne isn't dead?"

There was no reply. The laxity of his limbs and his reclining attitude against the iron column showed that he had scarcely strength to stand. Then a sudden gust of wind blew aside both his cloak and his coat, exposing his white vest to view. And there upon that vest, plain to be seen, was a red stain large and round! For one moment only was it visible in the fitful light of the gas-lamp; the next, the folds of his cloak enveloping him again, concealed it from view.

"What is the matter? Why don't you speak?" I cried, and overcoming the vague terror that had possessed me, I stepped forward.

But before I could touch him, he gave a swift glance around, apparently seeking some way of escape, and suddenly snatching up the valise, he darted through the gate-way opposite him. Hurrying up the garden-path, he ascended a flight of steps, and while I was still gazing after him in amazement, he disappeared within the portico that gave entrance to the house.

Here was a strange affair. George, on his wedding-morn in a town far distant from his bride, trying to avoid me, his brother, after having invited me to be his best man! A second explanation of his conduct occurred to me and found its way to my tongue.

"He is mad!" and I hesitated to follow. It is not an infrequent thing for the insane to think their dearest friends their foes. And this thought begot another, more fearful still to me;

> To be wroth with one we love
> Doth work like madness in the brain.

His wild air and the red stain on his breast might well be testimony to some tragedy; in a fit of insane jealousy he had killed Daphne! Paralyzed by the idea I leaned, as he had leaned before me, against the lamp-post, with the words, "Daphne dead!" ringing in my ears.

I broke from the spell of terror imposed on me by my own fancy, and prepared to follow my brother. Putting aside the fears for my own safety with the thought that in case of an attack my cries would summon the inmates of the neighbouring houses to my aid, I cautiously groped my way to the dark portico, not without a dread that his wild figure might spring out upon me; but, on mounting the snowy steps I discovered that the portico was empty, and the front door of the house securely shut.

I had heard no noise of knocking—no sound of the opening or closing of a door; and yet, if George had not passed the threshold, where was he? This was the second time the figure had eluded me. Was it after all an apparition?

The improbability of seeing my brother in such a place and at such an hour, his obstinate silence to my appeals, his

weird aspect, the mysterious manner in which he had vanished, seemed to favour this hypothesis. Was this his wraith sent to apprise me of his death? The next moment I was smiling at the idea. A being that is merely a figment of the brain cannot be credited with the power of making footprints in snow, yet deep footprints there were leading up the steps, and terminating at the threshold of the door; footprints newly-formed, whose shape and size assured me were not my own.

I drew back to take a survey of the house in which George had evidently taken refuge. A brief inspection of the dwelling failed to afford any clue as to the character of the occupants. The blinds were drawn at every window, and, as might be expected at so early an hour, no light was anywhere visible. I knocked at the door once, twice, thrice. There was no reply. Then, seizing the knocker with a vigorous grasp, I executed a cannonade with it, loud enough to rouse not the inmates of that house only, but those of the whole street. At length my summons met with recognition from within. The door slowly opened. Fully expecting to meet my brother, his eyes aglow with passion, I drew back with arms upraised to protect myself from his rush, but nothing more terrible met my gaze than a venerable old man with silver hair, who shivered visibly as the cold wind drifted the snow into the passage. The lamp that he carried in his left hand, while he shielded it from the draught with his right, shone full on his face, which had such an air of quiet dignity that I felt quite ashamed of myself for having knocked so loudly. The disorder of his dress told me that he had but just risen from his bed.

The contrast between his grave demeanour and my excited bearing would have amused the spectator, had any been present. It struck me as a reversal of positions. I had expected to see a madman; he certainly took me for one,

standing there as I did, breathless and silent in the wild snowy night, with my arms extended in front of me.

Too surprised to speak, I looked along the length of the passage as far as the kitchen, and then glanced up the staircase, but could not see George, nor any trace of him.

"Well, sir, may I ask why you rouse me thus in the dead of night?"

My eager impatience gave me no time for apology.

"I want my brother," I cried brusquely. "He came in here, I think."

"Your brother!" exclaimed the old man in a tone of surprise, that, if not genuine, was certainly well feigned. "Young man, you have been too long at the taverns this morning. There is no one in this house but myself."

It was difficult to refuse belief to this statement, for the old man had so grave and reverend an air that he might have stood for an image of Truth—of Truth in these later days, I mean, when, as is well known, he has become a little old and antiquated.

"You are mistaken," I replied, after listening vainly for some sound to proceed from within that might disprove his words. "Some one entered here only a minute or two ago, unknown, it may be, to you. These footprints are not mine."

But on looking downwards I found that a snow-wreath had drifted over the pavement, effectually covering the footsteps of myself as well as those of the refugee.

The old man smiled at my perplexity—a smile that was annoying, for it implied that he regarded me as a sad wine-bibber.

"Who is your brother?"

"Captain George Willard, of the—the——"

And then I stopped. I could perhaps have given him the titles of Cæsar's ancient legions, but of the name of my brother's modern regiment I was totally ignorant.

"I really don't know the name of the regiment." The old man smiled again, as well he might. "He's in India now—that is to say, he is when he's there, you know," I stammered, conscious that I was blundering terribly.

"Captain Willard? I have never heard the name before. He is not here. You have mistaken the house."

"Would you allow me to search the place?" I asked. "It is a bold request for a stranger to make, especially at this unearthly hour, and nothing but the certainty that my brother has concealed himself within induces me to make it. You see, he's a madman, and might do you harm." I thought this last would move him, but it only made matters worse. "I am certain I saw him enter this house. I am willing to pay you for your trouble if—if——"

I paused diffidently, for his reverend air did not harmonise well with the taking of a bribe. The old man's voice now assumed a tone of asperity. He was evidently getting tired of shivering half-dressed in the cold night air, and no wonder.

"I shall certainly *not* allow you to search the house. Your brother is not here. This door was double-locked when I went to bed. You heard me unlock it. How could he enter without the key. I must bid you good-night, for I see it's no use arguing with you in your present state of mind."

And, without more ado, the door was closed and locked, and I could hear the footsteps of the old man receding along the

passage and ascending the stairs.

CHAPTER II
THE VEILED LADY

Completely mystified, I stood motionless for a few moments. I was certain that my brother *had* entered the house. Perhaps, despite the old man's assertion as to the door having been closed and locked, he had really left it ajar, and George, perceiving this, had, in a fit of desperation, seized the occasion to enter and hide, resolving to remain there till I had taken my departure. He might even now be stealing a look from one of the windows to see whether the coast were clear.

I looked at the time and found that I had an hour before the departure of the London train. I determined to watch the house for a short time, and then, if my brother did not appear, to betake myself to the station. The portico of the adjoining house was the spot I selected for my vigil, a place which, while concealing my own presence, gave me a full view of the strange dwelling.

"I like that old man's face," I muttered, as I shook off the snow from my cloak, preparatory to folding it closer around me. "It's a noble one and a truthful one, or I am no judge of faces. I believe he knows nothing of George's entering; but, for all that, I am certain George *is* within. Much good I do by stopping here! George can easily leave by the rear—perhaps has left already. No matter. If he is going to London he must travel by the same train as I shall, and therefore I am sure to see him on the platform. If he is not going to London—well, so much the better for my hopes. I wonder who the old man is, and why he is all alone? Perhaps he's butler to a family who are spending their Christmas from home."

The cold was intense. The wind blew keenly. The drops of perspiration caused by my violent run seemed slowly turning to icicles on my chilled skin. I took a deep draught of the brandy and water in my flask.

Taking a cigar from my case, I contrived to light it after some difficulty, and puffed away vigorously. Then I referred to my watch. "Only ten minutes elapsed? I thought it was half an hour. Time lags. Who was it that said 'Time flies?' If the ass were here to-night in my place I rather fancy he would revoke his saying. Am I really awake, I wonder? Can this be Daphne's wedding-morn, and am I here, at 3:30 A. M., in the snow at Dover, keeping watch on an absconding bridegroom? It must be a dream. I shall wake up presently at old Heidelberg, and hear the chapel-bell tinkling for matins."

Twenty minutes elapsed. "Nothing happening so far." I muttered "I'm a fool to stop here. This is growing ridiculous. I shall freeze if I remain much longer. I believe I *am* freezing —falling off into one of those sweet Russian slumbers that one reads of in books—or is it the brandy? Aha! what's that? Something is happening in the strange house, that's certain."

A light had appeared at an upper window, and was shining faintly out into the night. My curiosity was raised to a high pitch, and I stole from my hiding-place to get a nearer view. The old man had not been burning a light previously to my arrival, and if he had gone to bed, what did he want with one now? Excitement drove all the cold from my body, and a tingling warmth succeeded, as with a quickly-beating heart I waited for some development of this apparent mystery; and no words of mine can describe my feeling of surprise as I saw the shadow of a woman glide across the blind of the lighted window. The dark silhouette stood forth for a moment distinct on the illumined white, and then vanished.

Now there is nothing surprising in the shadow of a woman crossing a blind in the early hours of the morning; but when you have been assured a few minutes previously by the tenant of the house that there is no one within the building but himself, it *does* become a matter of surprise, and in the present case everything tended to invest the event with a mysterious air. The woman, to judge by the outline of her shadow, was habited as if for a journey, and this, added to the fact that the light was now extinguished, induced me to extend the duration of my watch. No one came out, however, and as the London train would be departing in fifteen minutes, I deliberated as to the wisdom of staying longer. If I missed the train I should not be in time for the wedding, using the word wedding in a provisional sense; for, from the strange proceedings of the last hour, doubts began to seize me as to whether it would ever come off.

I was loth to depart, but the desire of witnessing the scene that would take place at my uncle's house in the event of George's non-appearance decided my course of action. I determined to wait no longer, and, having applied both eye and ear to the keyhole of the strange house without learning anything thereby, I set off for the station at a running pace.

Having completely lost my bearings, and being a stranger to Dover, I knew not which way to turn, and would have fared ill but for the guidance of a friendly constable. I arrived two minutes before the departure of the train. On receiving my luggage from the porter, I said:

"You have not seen the gentleman?"

"No, sir. He's not in this train. Not been here since you left."

Having satisfied my curiosity by walking along the platform and scrutinising the occupants of every carriage, I returned, and said:

"Find me a first-class compartment, all to myself."

"One here, sir, with the brightest lamp in the whole train."

If mine were the brightest, I pity those who were cursed with the dullest.

"Put it in specially for you, sir."

The lies some people will tell for a few paltry pence! Taking a corner seat, and calling for a foot-warmer, I leaned out of the window, keeping a sharp look-out in case George should turn up on the platform at the last moment.

"I suppose my bro—the gentleman cannot now get to London before me?"

"Not unless he has gone by the other line."

"What other line?"

"The L. C. and D."

"What's that?"

"The L. C. and D.?" repeated the porter, apparently astounded that any one should be ignorant of the meaning of those initials. "Why, the London, Chatham and Dover Railway? Their last train left twenty minutes ago."

Here was a pretty piece of news! I could have written a long article on the numerous paved *viæ* that radiated from ancient Rome, but I knew next to nothing of the lines of railway that emanate from modern London, and the idea that there might be an iron road to the great city other than the one I was travelling by had never occurred to me.

"I have had my long watch for nothing," I muttered savagely. "While I was shivering in the cold, George, for all that I know to the contrary, may have left the house by a

back door, and may now be bowling on his way to London. Well, anyhow, I am close on his heels. I shall arrive before the wedding, and you don't marry Daphne, George, till you have given an explanation of your strange conduct. Something wrong has been going on, else why should you avoid me?" And, with the usual sophistry employed by mortals when their self-interest is concerned, I tried to convince myself that in requiring an explanation from George I was actuated by a consideration for Daphne's welfare, and by no other motive.

The guard's whistle had sounded, and the locomotive in front had given a warning shriek, when the figure of a lady appearing within an archway just opposite the compartment I was in darted hurriedly across the platform.

"Ticket, if you please, miss. Thank you. Charing Cross—first-class. Jump in, please. Not a moment to lose."

The carriage-door was flung hastily open, and the lady, partly by her own exertions and partly aided by a gallant porter, entered, and seated herself at the other end of the compartment on the side opposite to me.

Now, although by no means so handsome a person as I could wish myself to be, I am nevertheless not quite so ugly as to inspire aversion in the mind of any dame, be she old or young; and yet the lady had no sooner set eyes upon me than she stared at me with terror, as if mine were the most repulsive countenance that had ever disgraced the Chamber of Horrors—conduct which somewhat nettled me, for, being a not ungallant youth, I was hoping for a charming *tête-á-tête* all the way to London.

She glanced at the door, as if desirous of quitting the compartment for another, but if such were her purpose it was baffled. The train was now fairly on the move, and we

were steaming out of the station into the cold snow-dotted air of night. Willing or unwilling, the lady must submit to be my companion for the next two hours. Her obvious glances of distrust and alarm put me in a false position, and I at once determined to open a conversation for the purpose of showing what a good youth I was, and how little to be dreaded; but ere proceeding to this course I took, while pretending to read the newspaper, a steady view of my fair companion.

She was slender, graceful, lady-like, and tall, as a woman should be. With Byron, "I hate a dumpy woman." Her features seemed regular and handsome, but I could discern little of them through the thick veil she was wearing, save a pair of splendid dark eyes—the colour being a trifling deviation from my ideal of beauty, since Daphne's eyes were of a dark blue. A close-fitting bonnet covered her dark hair, and a fur boa was wrapped round her throat. A pair of little red leather shoes peeped out from beneath the skirts of a long fur-lined cloak. A muff contained her gloved hands.

"A handsome brunette," was my critique. "I shall be most happy to introduce myself. How shall I begin, and what shall I talk about? Ha! tell her I'm going to a wedding. Nothing unlocks a woman's tongue so easily as a wedding—barring, perhaps a sensational divorce."

Now, while I was casting about in my mind how to begin the conversation, my attention was suddenly attracted to something that she had thrust beneath the seat immediately on entering the compartment. Down from my hands dropped the newspaper at the sight I saw. That sight was nothing more than a valise partly hidden from view by her dress. But the portion that did display itself was marked by the letters "G.W.," thus corresponding exactly with the initials on the bag that my brother had carried! Was the bag, now peeping out at me from beneath the carriage-seat, the

identical one that had disappeared with George into the mysterious house? My staring eyes were transferred from the lady's face to the valise, and from the valise to the lady's face, in swift alternation.

Then I suddenly recalled the silhouette on the blind, and, as I studied the lady's head-dress and figure, I thought if she were to pass between a light and the blind the contour of her shadow would not be very dissimilar from the one I had seen. Could she have issued from the strange house as soon as I had left it, and would that account for her haste and breathless state on entering the train? Her obvious mistrust of me, then, arose from a cause totally different from that of womanly timidity at being exposed alone to the company of a stranger. Yet, since we had never met each other before, how did she know I was a person to be avoided?

"Who are you," I muttered to myself, "and what relations do you hold with my brother? for some dealing you have with him, else—why that bag? Are you his first Daphne, I wonder, travelling to London to tell the second Daphne that you are an insurmountable obstacle to a certain wedding that's to come off this morning? A sort of sister-in-law to me, whose relationship has not been sanctioned by the Church? Has George been compromising himself? Let me try to find out."

I had a high idea of my own ability to "draw" people out. The sequel will show what a dexterous cross-examiner the law has lost in me.

"Do you object to smoking, madam?" I asked, by way of beginning a conversation.

In lieu of a verbal reply, the lady responded by a quick horizontal motion of her head, which sign presumably implied that she did not object.

Ours was not a smoking carriage. Perhaps it was this fact that suggested the idea of a cigar. Youth is defiant, and "Thou shalt not" is often the parent of "I will." So, with a sovereign contempt for the company's by-laws, I proceeded to light a cigar, remarking as I did so:

"It is a rough night for travelling."

Assent was given to this proposition by a vertical inclination of her head. No words as yet had passed her lips. This was certainly not very encouraging, but then perhaps I ought not to have spoken until after I had been addressed by her. It occurred to me that while courting the Muses at Heidelberg I had perhaps neglected the Graces, and had lost all notions of etiquette; and unlike the damsel in the opera of *Ruddigore*, I did not carry an etiquette-book about with me to consult in cases of doubt, or I might have referred to it, in the present instance, under the head of "Whether it be allowable for a gentleman travelling in company with an unknown lady to try to draw her into conversation?" Whether it be allowable or not, it is certainly the duty of every one to be considerate, so I pushed the foot-warmer to the feet of my fair companion, remarking:

"Your need is greater than mine."

I thought that this famous quotation from Elizabethan history would be sure to elicit some words. But no. Her thanks took the shape of a graceful inclination of her head, and at the same time the dark eyes sparkled through the veil, seeming to say: "You want to make me speak, but you shall not succeed." She had evidently recovered from her terror. Perseverance is an essential feature in my character. I determined to continue my crusade against her silence. I took from my portmanteau some English illustrated magazines that I had brought with me from Heidelberg to

beguile the tedious hours of travelling, and, extending them to the stranger, said:

"May I offer you these?"

Now this proved a bad stroke of policy on my part, for the papers were accepted with a grave bow, and the lady at once immersed herself in their contents, and took no further notice of me.

"Well, if this doesn't beat all!" I muttered. "You're a cool one! Rude, too, for surely an act of courtesy is deserving of a few words of thanks?" It then occurred to me that perhaps she was aware I was suspicious of her, and had determined to baffle me by presenting a firm shield of silence to my conversational shafts, even when those shafts consisted of casual and trifling remarks.

In ordinary circumstances I should not, after so many rebuffs, have continued to press my attentions, but I regarded the singular events of the night as a justification for my persistency. I therefore seized the occasion when she chanced to look up from her reading to make another trial to elicit a word:

"Are you travelling far, madam?"

The magazine was laid aside, and, producing a card-case, she seemed to be making a selection from its contents. Presently she handed a card to me. It was inscribed with the following words, written evidently with a view to emergencies such as she was now in:

> "Pardon me if I have seemed rude. I thank you for your kind attentions, but being dumb from birth, I am unable to carry on a conversation.—DORA VANE."