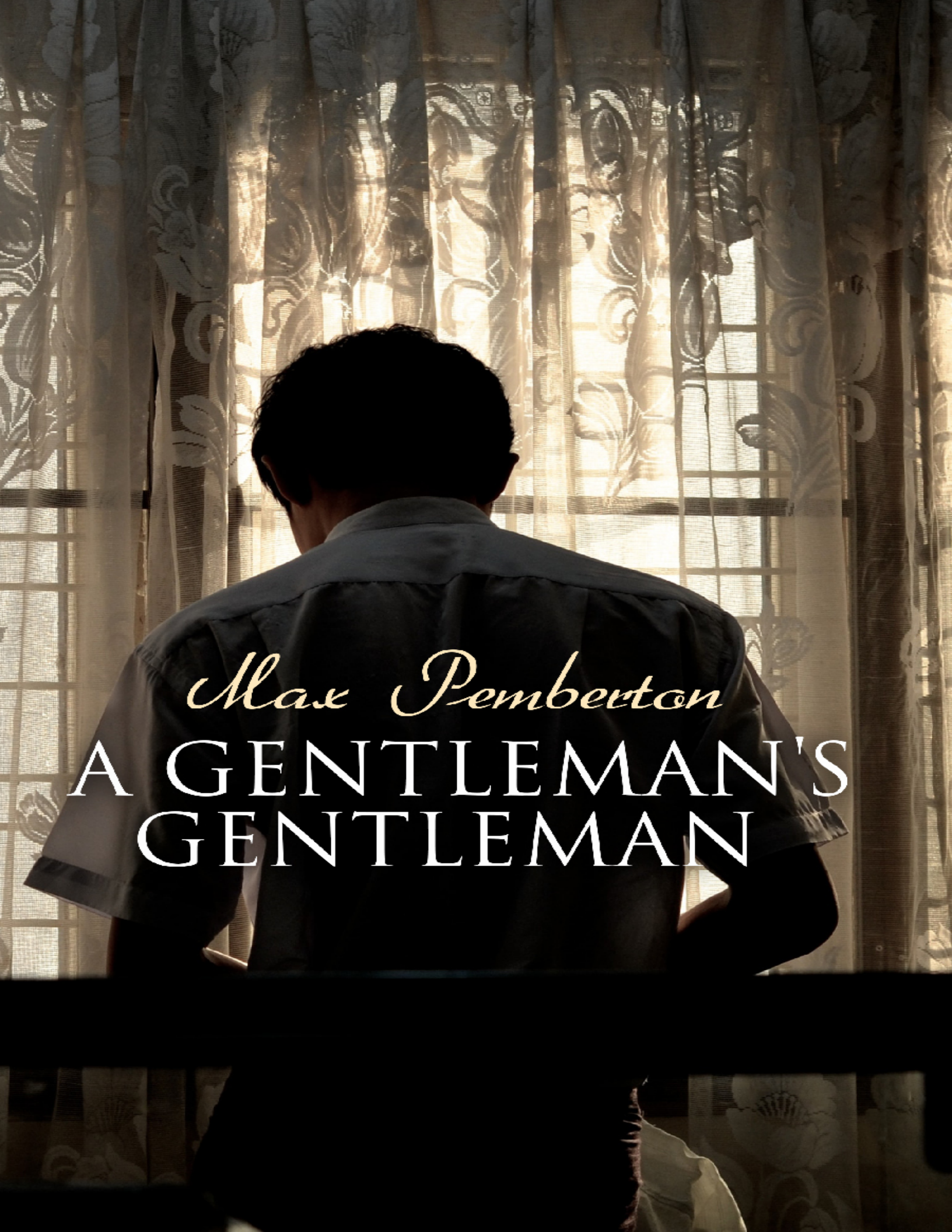
Max Pemberton
A GENTLEMAN'S GENTLEMAN

Max Pemberton

A Gentleman's Gentleman

Mystery Novel

e-artnow, 2021
Contact: info@e-artnow.org

EAN: 4064066309091

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I
THE FRIENDSHIP OF LILIAN MORE

Table of Contents

I have met a good many in my time who professed to know a lot about Sir Nicolas Steele. I am not going to contradict them here, nor do I wish to write the life of a man whom I have served, on and off, for more years than I care to remember. If ever that's to be done, it must be the business of one who got his learning at school. All that I can speak about is that which I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears during the days when I was servant to him. And if my word can do any thing to set him right before the world, in so far as he can be set right, I give that word willingly, as is his due.

No man, they say, is a hero to his own valet. Maybe they speak truth, though, for my part, I wouldn't pass that for a good saying. Scandal goes as the crow flies, while a reputation for what they call virtue is often long on the road. Sometimes she never gets there at all—a trick, I fancy, she played upon Sir Nicolas Steele. The world has called him most things, from blackmailer down to thief. There aren't many mortal sins which have not been written against his name at one time or other. I alone, perhaps, know the man as he was; know his weaknesses and his strength, his good deeds and his bad. What I shall write in these papers can add nothing to the calumnies which have been put upon him by lying tongues. It is even possible that they will serve him—which is the hope of a man who has to thank him for much!

I have said that, in attempting this task, I don't mean to write a book full of all the odds and ends which those who

write novels busy themselves with. My purpose is to speak of some of those curious adventures into which fortune led us together, and in which I played as much the part of a friend as of a servant. For the matter of that, I had not been a year in Sir Nicolas's service before it was plain to me that he stood in need of just that sort of help which I could give him. Daring, and nerve, and generosity, and recklessness—all these he had; but the mind to foresee, and to scheme, and to invent—that he lacked. How far I was able to make up for this, it is not for me to say; my writing must speak for itself upon that point.

When I look back upon my life during the past five years, it seems to me but a few months ago since my master was at the very ebb of his fortunes. I can recall the day as if it had been yesterday when we found ourselves in a two-pair back off Gower Street, and God alone knew where the next sovereign was to come from. We had just returned from Ireland then—it was four years ago—staggering under lies heavy enough to sink a ship. There weren't four doors in all London open to Sir Nicolas; hardly a friend who did not cross the road when we met him. Even some of those he had most right to count upon were the first to show their backs to him. As for enemies, a sum wouldn't have numbered them. You couldn't open a society paper without finding some chatter, which was like fuel to the fire of their talk. Old Lord Heresford swore he'd horsewhip him in the club; the Dublin people posted him for a swindler; there was a dozen versions of the card trouble which had driven us out of Ireland; a hundred tongues could tell you all about Margaret King, the woman who was the first to set the scandal going. Most men would have sunk under circumstances such as these; Nicky Steele did nothing of the sort. He took a two-pair back by Gower Street, and waited for a fairer wind.

"A snap of the finger for the lot of them!" said he; it was the second night we were back. "Let them bark, and be d——d to them. Would I run away because some poor devil of

a journalist is making a half a crown by me affairs? They'll shout themselves hoarse in a week, and I'll be on the road again."

"If you took my advice, sir," said I, "you'd be on the road now. You don't forget that Easter is three weeks off. There's plenty who'd be glad to see you in Paris just now."

"'Tis truth ye speak," he replied, "and if I had the money, this very night should see me moving. But what would I do in Paris with a five-pound note for my luggage? 'Tis greedy as a woman is that same city. And ten days yet to the, quarter! The devil take the luck we're having!"

"You don't hope to hear from Mr. Ames, sir?"

"'Twould be a miracle if I did, for 'tis two hundred that he owes me. Bedad, an artist who pays his debts should be put in a museum. And Jack Ames is likely to get no such distinction. But I'll be off after quarter-day, and thankful enough to shake my heels at this dirty country."

He said it all in his careless way, and he never was a man to show the white feather; but I knew that he was hit hard enough, and dreaded the days that must pass until he got his money and we were moving again. All said and done, there's no cure for a trouble of this kind like a bit of travel; and if Paris won't lift the gloom off a man's mind, he may say good-by to the doctors. I feared every hour to hear of him doing something foolish in London; and I know that he slept bad, for more than one night passed and he never got out of his arm-chair. As for the days, those he spent moping over the fire, a picture of dejection that cut your heart to see. Save one little woman—and God knows what he owed to her—there wasn't a human being in all the city who cared a button whether he was alive or dead. But Lilian More was a friend in a thousand. I believe that she saved the life of Sir Nicolas Steele.

He had met her some years before, I don't exactly know where; and it happened that they ran against each other at the corner of Oxford Street on the night after he had spoken

to me about going away. She was a slim little thing, not one you would have picked out on a stage as a beauty, but a wonderful woman for kindness, and just as sweet-tempered as any creature I ever clapped eyes on. When she came into a house it was like opening the front door to a breeze of laughter. She had a bright word and a smile for every one, just the prettiest possible smile you could see; and this was the more surprising since her face was the face of a woman who had suffered much and was suffering still. I remember once going into our little parlor, where she had been taking tea with Sir Nicolas, and finding her sitting over the fire with her head resting in her hands; and when I lighted the gas quickly, and she looked up, there were tears in her eyes. My master had gone into the other room to write a letter at the moment; and, of course, I pretended to see nothing. When he came back in a few minutes' time, the whole place was rippling with her laughter. For that was the way of her,—then and always, I don't doubt,—high spirits for others, and misery for herself. How many women must play a part like that!

Nicky met her just when he was most in want of a cheering word. He had not been out of the house for three days, and when he did go out it was only as far as Oxford Street to buy one of the papers which was telling some new story about him. Directly he got back I knew that something had happened. He was a different man from what he had been twenty minutes before, and the lines in his face seemed almost to have been wiped out by his walk.

"Hildebrand," he cried, pretty well before he was in the house, "ye'll lay out my clothes, please; I'm going to the theatre."

"To the theatre, sir?" exclaimed I, just as astonished as a man could be.

"'Tis so," he went on; "and I'll be supping away after. Ye may set out the glasses, and go to bed when you please. Do you remember me speaking of little Lilian More, that I used

to know in Birmingham? Well, she's playing at the Royalty, and she's asked me down. I'm to sup with her and her one-armed brother-in-law at Chelsea. Sure, 'tis as good as quinine to hear her laugh, any day."

I said nothing in answer to this, though I was very glad to think that he had met some one who would take his mind off the trouble. Though I did not know Lilian More then, I began to hope he was not going to make a fool of himself, for he put on his dress-clothes anyhow, and such was not his way when he had the mind to please a woman, he being extraordinary vain, as some of my stories will tell. I knew well enough that an hour wouldn't have served him at the glass if the lady had been any thing but a friend to him—and friend he regarded her right through to the end. What it was on her side is not for me to speak about. I believe that she loved him,—I shall believe that to my dying day,—and for love of him she paid with her life, as my story will show.

Well, he went to the theatre, and next day he got up at twelve, and was as busy as a man could be. Almost his first words were talk about Miss More, and that he kept up all the time I was shaving him.

"She has the spirits of twenty," he said; "there was never a brighter little woman born. 'Twas good luck that sent me to Oxford Street for sure! Ye'll see Mrs. Leverty about the lunch I spoke of, though I doubt she'll do much."

"You didn't mention no lunch to me, sir," said I while I helped him into his best frock-coat. "Are you looking for any company?"

"Indeed, and I am; there's Miss More coming, and her brother-in-law, Mr. Connoley—him that has one arm. A strange man he is, too, as full of tales as a bowl of good punch of whiskey. Ye must just talk sweetly to the old lady down stairs, and see what ye can do. 'Tis not much I have at the moment, but I'll not forget her when quarter-day is here."

"We've told her that pretty often already, sir," said I. "If she gets what I've promised her, Mrs. Leverty will be a rich woman on quarter-day."

"Be hanged to that!" cried he. "Ye've a sweet way with you, and will persuade her. 'Twould never do to sit down to bread and cheese and kisses. Have I any cigarettes in the house?"

"You smoked the last in bed this morning," said I; "but we've credit at the tobacconist's, and that will be all right. Perhaps I can manage a couple of bottles of champagne from Williams. I'll tell him you've good company, and that we will recommend him. It's astonishing how many wine merchants live on recommendations, sir. One chap who can't pay recommends another who don't mean to pay, and so they keep the ball rolling. It's a beautiful trade, but I've no fancy for it myself."

He laughed at this, and I went off to get his lunch ready. It was hard work to talk over the old woman who let us the lodgings, but I made a bit of love to her, and when she was smoothed down, I got the champagne from Williams. By the time I was back again Miss More and her brother-in-law were in the sitting-room, and she was already busy putting his ornaments straight and arranging a few flowers she had brought him. It was astonishing to see how her laughing little face brightened up that dingy old apartment. She was here, there, and everywhere, like a butterfly in a garden, and I don't believe she stopped talking from the minute she entered the door until the hansom took her away again.

"Pat," I heard her say—all the women called him Pat —"what a place to get into, Pat! Do you know I've a good mind to ask you where you keep the pig?"

"And wouldn't I be glad to tell you that he was under the table," said he; "'tis not me that has the money to think of pigs just now. Bedad, it's myself I'll be taking to market if times don't change. Will ye be smoking, Mr. Connoley? We've tobacco still in the ship, and that's something."

Connoley, you must know, was the queerest fish I've ever seen out of Billingsgate. He was a long, lean man, with his left hand cut off at the wrist, and his face tattooed by the roots of his beard until it looked like the chest of a sailor. Many's the queer tale he has told me in his time. To listen to him, you would think that no such fire-eating devil ever came out of Texas. Yet I discovered afterward that he was only a barrister on half-pay, so to speak, and that he had a wife and ten children in a little slum off Sloane Street. What work he did, or in whose service he did it, the Lord only knows. I never saw him, so far as my recollection goes, busy with any thing but a pipe—a great German pipe with a cherry stem, which he carried everywhere, like other men carry a stick. An odder figure than his you would never see. The first thing he did when he came to our rooms was to change his boots for a pair of carpet-slippers. Then he stuck himself in an arm-chair by the fire, and I don't think he opened his lips for an hour and a half. Food made no difference to him. He would take a fork in his left hand, and a pipe in his right. When he did speak, it was to tell you how he killed three Bulgarians in Sofia, and had a mysterious fortune awaiting him in the East. He promised to take me there when the time was right, and I couldn't answer him for laughing.

But all this is outside my story. What I wanted to write down is that Connoley smoked, and Nicky Steele laughed, and Miss More told stories all the time our little luncheon party was on. When it was done, they went off together to the West End, and I saw nothing of my master until. one o'clock in the morning. He was lively enough then, and all his depression and melancholy seemed troubles of a year rather than that of twenty-four hours ago.

"Bedad," said he, as I mixed him a whiskey and soda and gave him his smoking-coat, "'tis the best little woman in London, she is, and the merriest. I haven't stopped laughing since I left the house; yet what I laughed at, God only

knows. That's the way of a witty woman. Her laugh is like the song of a bird in spring. You don't ask why the bird sings, but you tune yourself up to the chorus. I'll forget that I was ever in Ireland if I am with her long."

"Is she living in London now, sir?" I asked.

"Indeed and she is, though 'tis a poor place of a cabin that she has. I'm to lunch there to-morrow at two. Ye'll not let me forget that—two o'clock sharp, and to the play afterward, if I can manage it——"

"You're not likely to have any engagement," said I.

"Ye speak truth," he replied; "but the money it is that makes a free man. Maybe Jack Ames will pay me this week. I wish I could think so."

"Maybe we shall see a comet in the sky, sir," was my answer; and with that I took myself off to bed.

CHAPTER II
A HOUSE OF GLOOM IN CHELSEA

Table of Contents

During the next ten days it seemed to me that I did little but run backward and forward between Gower Street and Trafalgar Square, at Chelsea, where Miss More had her flat, A queer place it was too—just a bit of a studio, one of six, all built up a yard, which might have belonged to a stable; and as bare as a barn save for the merry little woman who lived in it. A right pleasant welcome she always gave me, I must say, and many's the glass of good Scotch whiskey I have drank in her parlor.

"We must do our best for your master," she would say while she took out her purse—and that she did every time I went to her rooms; "we must do our best for him, and see that he is not left too much alone. I know what it is to want friends myself. Things will come all right presently, and he will forget that this has happened. You must make it your business to see that he does not mope in the house. Encourage him to go out, and get him away to Paris as soon as possible—you understand what I mean?"

"I understand, miss," said I; "and thank you kindly for thinking of it. I wish it was all as nice and straight as your words. But how a man who hasn't five pounds to his back is to cross the Channel, I really don't know. He isn't no Captain Webb, miss; and I don't forget that we're in the middle of March."

She laughed at this, but she was never one to laugh long when I was alone with her; and presently she became very serious.

"He did not tell me it was as bad as that," she said—and I could see that she was thinking hard—"but now I

understand many things. We must find a way out of this, Hildebrand. I am sure we can do it between us. You won't forget the letter, and be sure that he comes to the theatre to-night. When one wants to cry, there is no place like a gloomy house to cry in."

"That's true, miss," I replied; "though, if you ask me, all the crying in Europe won't make a five-pound note of a tailor's bill when your credit has gone walking. I was never one to believe in the waterworks myself, nor is Sir Nicolas, I make sure. A wonderful light heart he has most times, though I must say that I never remember such a three months as this year has brought him. If it hadn't been for you, God knows what would have happened to him."

"Oh, I have done nothing," she answered—"nothing at all; any friend would have done as much. I cannot forget what I owed to him in Birmingham five years ago. He was very good to me then, and I should be ashamed not to try and help him here."

Now, this was news to me, for I knew nothing at that time of any past relations between Sir Nicolas and herself, though I could quite imagine that any man would have gone out of his way to do a turn to so kind-hearted a creature. Yet what kindness he had shown to her, or in what position they had stood to each other, I knew no more than the dead. Her whole life seemed to me to be as great a mystery as any thing I had ever heard of. She had plenty of money, and yet she lived in a hovel where I wouldn't have stabled a donkey. She had the grace and fascination of twenty women, and yet there was not a whisper of a love affair in her life. They told you at the theatre of a hundred offers of marriage which she had declined; they spoke of the "opportunities" she had given the cold shoulder to; of the extraordinary silence which she maintained whenever her own life was mentioned. No nun in a convent could have blotted out her past more successfully. People declared that they worshipped her. They could say no more; and even the

boldest of them never dared to put a second embarrassing question to the woman who knew so well how to keep her own secrets and to defend them.

I thought of all these things on my way from Chelsea to Gower Street, and while I could make nothing of them, I was far from easy about our own future. A big-hearted man like Nicky Steele, who never said no to a woman in his life, was always dangerous when there was a woman hanging about him; and I knew well enough that little Lilian More worshipped the ground he trod on. It did not suit my plan at all that he should wind up by marrying a bit of a play-actress; for I felt his title would be worth money abroad, and abroad I meant that he should go. None the less was I sure that there was danger in the situation, and with that danger I determined to cope.

I saw this just when I arrived at our own place, expecting to find my master impatient for his lunch. I found him engaged with something much more important. He had a scrap of a letter in his hand when I came in; and he was walking up and down the parlor, still wearing his dressing-gown, but looking for all the world like a man who has been scared half out of his wits. Nor did he let any time pass before he told me what the matter was.

"Read this," said he, holding out the dirty, crumpled sheet of note; "read it, and tell me if you ever saw the like to it?"

I took the letter and found that it contained two lines of crabbed and winding writing, done in pencil. It was some minutes before I could make head or tail of the thing; but when at last I read it, I was just as much astonished as he was.

"If you are seen at Lilian More's again, I will blow your brains out."

This was all of it—no address, no date, no signature; note-paper which you might have bought at a farthing the sheet, and a handwriting which might have been a parson's,

and might have been a schoolboy's. And as if to blind us further, the postmark was Chancery Lane, which, as all the world knows, has nothing particular to do with Chelsea.

"Well," said Sir Nicolas, while I stood gaping at the letter like a board-school boy might gape at a slice of Greek, "can ye read it?"

"Oh, I can read it all right, sir," I replied; "it ain't a difficult handwriting to read."

"Indeed, and it is not. I call it altogether a very pretty production; 'tis worthy of the murdering scoundrel who had the impudence to send it."

"Then you know who sent it, sir?"

"Should I know who sent it? The devil take me if I have the ghost of an idea, unless it's the barrister with the one arm. 'Tis a queer letter entirely."

"That's true, sir; but I don't think Mr. Connoley wrote it. If he was having a bit of fun with you, he'd set about it different to that. You don't forget his three Bulgarians and his fortune in the East? What's more, he likes to see you at Chelsea. I'm as sure of that as of my own name."

"Then who the blazes would send such a thing?"

"That I can't say off-hand. Maybe one of the young men who hang about Miss More at the theatre. It isn't to be expected that all of them would see her come here and say nothing about it. You don't know of any friends that would have the right to speak for her, sir?"

"Not the shadow of one. When I met her in Birmingham eight years ago, her father was living—a bookseller down at Oxford he was; but he died three years ago, and I never heard that she had a brother."

"Then it's one of her theatre friends," said I, "and, if he comes my way, I'll wipe him down with a hickory towel. Don't you trouble about that, sir. A young man in' love is fond of flying to pistols—when he don't fly to whiskey and soda. You toss the thing into the fire, and I'll do the rest."

He heard me out, and then he seemed persuaded.

"Bedad," said he, "I believe ye're right, and it's some jealous little boy out of the wings that is anxious to crow upon my own dung-heap. The impudence of the devil! 'Tis as good as a play that any one should think I would be marrying Miss More. They'll laugh finely at the theatre when I pass it round."

"I wouldn't do that for a bit, sir," said I; "we may as well try and find out how the land lies. There are plenty of lunatics walking about the world, and it's just as well to know what road they take——"

"Would ye have me seek police protection, then? 'Tis funny I would look with a policeman at my heels for the matter of a penny letter from a maniac. Faith, I'll just put it in my pocket-book, and show it to Miss More when she comes. 'Twill be a good laugh for the pair of us."

He seemed pleased with this idea, and, sure enough, when she came up with Connoley in the afternoon, the three of them had a rare laugh over it.

"'Tis to many we are, Lilian," said my master, reading the letter out aloud, while the one-armed barrister smoked harder than ever—"to marry we are, and here is the man who will forbid the banns, d'ye see? The murdering scoundrel, to want to blow me brains out!"

"He'll never do that, Nicky," said Connoley; "that's beyond him. He may excavate the cavity, but as for blowing your brains out, why, ye can't blow out what isn't there to blow. Now, when I was in Bulgaria—you remember the three men I shot there——"

"Be hanged to your three men!" cried Sir Nicolas. "Is it not yerself that has shot them twenty times in this very room?"

"And why not?" says Connoley. "If there's a more curious story than mine since I met 'The Raven' in the Strand, I'd be glad to hear of it. But ye've no literary faculty, Nicky—not a trace of it."

"There was nothing so vulgar ever run in me family," exclaimed my master. "We never came lower than pathriots since I can remember. Ye'll not claim to be a cousin of mine, Roderick. Bedad, I'll change my name if you do. 'Tis a sweet name is More, and I would carry it finely."

He looked at Miss More when he said this, and all three of them laughed together.

"You seem to think it a very good joke, Pat," said she.

"I have heard no better since I came out of Ireland!" cried he. "That they should want to blow out my brains! I knew it would amuse you finely."

With this laugh they changed the subject; but during the afternoon I saw Miss More with tears in her eyes, as I have told you, and I am sure it was a very poor joke to her, though Nicky was blind to the end of it, and never so much as suspected what I knew all along. As for the silly letter, he forgot that as soon as he had torn it up. I heard him making an appointment to go down to Chelsea that very night, and get a picture of Lilian More in her theatre clothes. He was always messing about with photographs and stinking chemicals, and if he took one picture of that bright little woman, he took fifty. I have one now stuck on the mantle-shelf of my room here—I burned a dozen before he went down to Derbyshire and nearly married Miss Oakley there; but the photograph of Miss More in her theatre clothes is in the hands of the man who, in some sort of way, has the best right to it, though God help him when he looks at it, say I.

CHAPTER III
THE MESSAGE

Table of Contents

The arrangement was that Sir Nicolas should go down and take the picture at half -past eleven that night.

"I'll take ye by the magnesium light, Lilian," said he; "and after that we'll go and get supper somewhere. 'Tis a beautiful light, if ye know how to handle it. Ye won't forget to put on the bull's eyes and the crown."

"Why not take Roderick, too, and call it 'Beauty and the Beast'?" said she.

"'T would be a libel on my race," said he; and with that they parted, she going to the theatre, while he went to get a bit of dinner in Old Compton Street.

Half-past ten had struck when he came back again. It never occurred to me that he would want my company, but such proved the case.

"Ye may help me to carry the camera," said he, while he began to get the dry plates ready; "and, if ye're not very tired, I'd be glad to take you as far as Miss More's place. 'Tis not afraid I am of a paltry threatening letter, but we couldn't do with a scene just now, and there's plenty of fools ready to make one when they're a bit spoony over a woman. I won't keep you the half of an hour."

I was a little surprised at this, for he seemed to have forgotten all about the letter; but I went ready enough, and, what's more, I took a good thick stick in my hand when I started.

"If there is any puppy who desires particular to bark, I'm his man," said I to myself as I got in the cab. I knew well enough that *he* was right when he said that we could not afford to have a scene. There was too much talked of