

The image shows the front cover of a book. The background is a photograph of a window with a view of a dense green hedge. In the bottom left corner, an open book is visible on a surface. The author's name and the title are printed in large, bold, white, italicized serif fonts on black rectangular backgrounds.

*WILLIAM
LE QUEUX*

*GUILTY
BONDS*

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William Le Queux

Guilty Bonds

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"Guilty Bonds"

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Chapter One.

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The Mystery of Bedford Place.

“Come, have another hand, Burgoyne.”

“I’ll have my revenge to-morrow, old fellow,” I replied.

“Why not to-night?”

“It’s past two, and I’ve a long walk home, remember.”

“Very well; as you wish.”

My friend, Robert Nugent, a journalist, was young man, tall and dark, twenty-seven at the outside, with a pleasant, smiling face. His wavy hair, worn rather long, and negligence of attire gave him a dash of the genial good-for-nothing.

It was in the card-room of that Bohemian—but, alas, now defunct—institution, the Junior Garrick Club, where we had been indulging in a friendly hand. Having finished our game, we ordered some refreshment, and seated ourselves upon the balcony on Adelphi Terrace, smoking our last cigarettes, and watching the ripple of the stream, the broken reflection of the stars, and many lights that lined the Thames. All was dark in the houses on the opposite shore; the summer wind whispered in the leafy boughs on the Embankment, and a faint cold grey in the east showed that night was on the edge of morn.

For some time we sat chatting, until Big Ben boomed forth three o’clock; then we rose, and wishing good-night to the men who were still playing, sought our hats and left the club.

We walked together as far as Danes' Inn, where we parted, Nugent entering the Inn, while I continued my homeward walk alone. From the Strand to Torrington Square is a considerable distance; but I did not feel inclined for sleep, and sauntered along in the steely light, enjoying the silence and solitude of the deserted streets, absorbed in my own thoughts.

What need I say about myself? Some envied me, I knew, for I chanced to be the only son of a wealthy man who had died a few months before, leaving me a handsome fortune, together with a stately old mansion in Northamptonshire. In the choice of a profession I had not altogether pleased my father, the result being that the old gentleman was somewhat niggardly regarding my allowance, and in consequence of this I had lived a devil-may-care Bohemian life, earning a moderate living by my pen. But upon my father's death a change came, and now, instead of a hand-to-mouth existence, I found myself with an income which far exceeded my wildest expectations. This sudden affluence might have turned the head of many a man, but it made very little difference to me. My friends, for the most part struggling artists and literary men, congratulated me upon my good fortune, probably believing that now I was rich I should cut them. They were mistaken; I continued to live pretty much as before, though I gave up literary work and devoted more time to pleasure.

Dreamily pondering over what I should do in the future, and heedless of where my footsteps led me, I had crossed Holborn and was passing along Bedford Place, Bloomsbury, before I was aroused from my reverie.

At that moment I was passing a rather large, handsome-looking house, of a character somewhat superior to its neighbours, inasmuch as its outward appearance had an air of wealth and prosperity. The other houses were in darkness, but the drawing-room of this particular one was brilliantly lit, the window being almost on a level with the pavement.

A faint agonised cry caused me to pause in my walk. For some moments I stood before the gilt-topped railings listening, but no other sound greeted my ears.

My idle, reflective mood suddenly fled. Recalled from it by the startling distinctness of the appeal—half-moan, half-scream, with its intonation of anguish—an overwhelming curiosity possessed me.

An ominous sound: what could it mean?

Impelled by an involuntary inquisitiveness I resolved to ascertain, if possible, the cause of this midnight cry of distress.

The gate leading to the front door was open. I crept inside and advanced cautiously.

Upon tiptoe I placed my face close to the glass of the window. At first my expectations seemed doomed, but to my intense joy I found a small aperture between the blind and window-sash through which a glimpse of the interior could be obtained.

My eager eyes fell upon a scene which caused me to start back with a scarcely repressed ejaculation of horror and surprise!

A tragedy had been enacted!

Stretched at full length upon the carpet was the form of a woman in a white flimsy evening dress, the breast of which bore a large crimson stain—the stain of blood!

Utterly unable to make up my mind how to act, I stood rooted to the spot. A violent gust of wind swept down the street, causing the lights in the lamps to flicker, and the branches of the stunted trees to groan beneath its power.

Just then the front door opened and closed noiselessly, and as I drew back into the shadow a man passed me so closely that I could touch him; and after glancing anxiously up and down the street, walked hurriedly away.

As he brushed past, the light from a neighbouring street-lamp disclosed the face of a young and rather handsome man, with dark eyes and carefully waxed moustache—a face it was impossible to mistake.

I hesitated a few seconds whether I should give the alarm and follow him. The echo of his retreating footsteps brought me to my senses, and I started off after the fugitive.

As soon as he heard my footsteps behind him, however, he quickened his pace. I had gained on him until he was within a hundred yards or so, when he suddenly turned half-fearfully around, and started running as fast as his legs could carry him.

I called upon him to stop, but he took no heed. We were soon in Russell Square, and, crossing it, turned the corner at the Alexandra Hospital and continued along Guilford Street into Gray's Inn Road. I was a fairly good runner, yet though I exerted every muscle in my endeavours to catch the man, nevertheless he gradually increased the distance between us.

It was an exciting chase. If I could only meet a policeman no doubt we might run him to earth by our combined efforts; but after the lapse of five minutes, without meeting one of the guardians of the public peace, the mysterious man dived into some intricate turnings, with which he was evidently too well acquainted, and I was compelled to relinquish the pursuit.

He had escaped!



Chapter Two.

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Sealed Lips.

With some difficulty I at last found my way back to the house, but all was quiet, and the passer-by would little dream of the terrible tragedy that had taken place within. I had no time for reflection, however, for I heard the well-known creaking footstep, and saw the flashing of a distant bull's-eye, betokening the arrival of a policeman from the opposite direction.

Hastening to meet the constable, with excited gesture and confused accents, I told him of my horrible discovery. At first the man seemed inclined to disbelieve it, but seeing I was in earnest, accompanied me to the house, and peeped in at the window as directed.

He started when his gaze fell upon the prostrate woman.

"Do you know who lives 'ere?" he asked.

"No. Haven't I told you I'm an utter stranger?" I replied.

As I spoke he ran up the short flight of stone steps and pulled the large brass knob beside the door.

Clear and distinct the deep-toned bell clanged out somewhere in the regions at the rear, but there was no response.

As suddenly as it had risen the wind sank; the streets were silent, the houses gloomy as rows of sepulchres tenanted only by the departed; and as the day broke, cold and grey, light fleecy clouds gathered over the waning moon.

Twice the constable tugged at the bell in his efforts to awaken the inmates of the house, but all was still, save for the bark of a distant dog. Although we both strained our ears, no sounds of life were apparent within.

“Shall I go round to the station for help? I can find it if you will direct me,” I said to the man.

“No; you stay 'ere. There's no necessity,” replied he gruffly. “I'll soon call my mates,” and applying his whistle to his lips, he blew a series of shrill calls, which were immediately answered by others.

Ten minutes later three policemen had arrived, and, finding there was no entrance from the rear, had burst open the door.

The houses adjoining were both empty, so no neighbours were awakened by the noise.

We entered undisturbed.

From the spacious hall several doors opened right and left; while immediately opposite was a broad staircase.

With but a hasty glance around we passed to a door which stood open, and from which a flood of light was issuing. There our eyes encountered a terrible sight.

Lying on her back upon the carpet, with her arms outstretched above her head, was a tall and undeniably beautiful woman of about thirty years of age. Her wealth of fair hair had become unfastened, and fell in disorder about her bare shoulders. Her lips were still apart, as if in her last moments she had uttered a cry, and her clear blue eyes, wide open, had in them a stony stare—that of death.

Attired in an elegant evening dress of soft white silk, her low bodice revealed the fatal wound in her breast from

which the blood slowly oozed, forming a dark crimson pool upon the carpet. Upon her wrist was a splendid diamond bracelet of an uncommon pattern, for it was shaped to represent a double-headed snake, and under the gaslight the gems danced and gleamed with a thousand fires.

The appearance of the murdered woman was hideous enough in itself, but something else we saw startled us, and sent an increased thrill of horror through our nerves.

We were awe-struck by the sight of it, yet there was nothing extraordinarily revolting—merely a half sheet of notepaper upon which was a large red seal of a peculiar character, fastened to the breast of the dress.

“Good God! The Seal!”

It was the ejaculation of one of the constables as he knelt and unpinned the paper.

Breathlessly, we bent over the piece of paper and closely examined it, for we were all aware of the unparalleled and inexplicable mysteries with which not only London but the whole world was ringing.

It had an awful significance.

That its exact dimensions and strange hieroglyphics may be the more readily conceived, I reproduce it here:—



The horrible mystery connected with the fatal device flashed vividly across my mind in an instant, as, with a sickly, giddy feeling in my head, my heart beating violently, and my hands trembling as if palsied, I examined it. What did it mean? I wondered in a dazed fashion, for my thoughts seemed in a whirl of maddening velocity. There was no power in my mind to grasp the meaning of the hideous fact at first, and only a stupefied, dull sense of evil filled my soul.

My mental vision grew gradually clearer after a few moments; as if slowly awakening from a frightful dream, I

drew myself together, trying to grasp the full interpretation of the mysterious symbol.

Within the past few months there had been no fewer than six murders in different countries, and in every case a piece of paper with a seal identical with the one we had just discovered had been found pinned upon the breast of the victim; yet in no instance had there been a clue to the murderer, though all the vigilance of the police, both at Scotland Yard and elsewhere, had been directed towards the elucidation of the mystery.

We stood aghast and pale, for the discovery had completely dumbfounded us.

There had been something so uncanny, almost supernatural, about the six other crimes, which so closely followed each other, that for the moment we were quite unnerved at this latest essay of the unrevealed assassin.

A momentary glance sufficed to convince the constables that a brutal murder had been committed, and after a few moments' hesitation two of their number hurried out—one to fetch the divisional surgeon, the other to report to the inspector on duty at the station.

The two constables remaining gently lifted the corpse, and placing it upon a low lounge near, began to examine the apartment. It was a luxuriously-furnished drawing-room, and the gas, which burned in crimson glass, threw a soft harmonious light over the furniture and hangings, which were composed of pale blue satin; and upon the costly nick-nacks which plainly showed the owner was possessed of artistic tastes and refinement. A room, in fact, which bore

the unmistakable traces of the daily presence of a woman of wealth and culture.

Glancing round, I could see that some of the articles were of great value. The pictures were for the most part rare, the quaint old Dresden and Sèvres upon the brackets, and the ivory carvings, were all curiosities of no ordinary character, while upon the mantelshelf stood a French clock, the tiny peal of silver bells of which chimed merrily, even as I looked.

Presently the officers concluded their examination of the room, and taking one of the candles from the piano, proceeded upstairs to search the house.

Accompanying them, I, an unwilling witness of this midnight tragedy, found the whole of the rooms furnished in elegant taste, no expense having been spared to make them the acme of comfort and luxury. Every nook and corner was searched, without success, so we returned again to the drawing-room.

To our surprise we found the body had moved slightly from the position in which we had placed it. The woman's bloodless face seemed gradually to assume the faintest flush, her eyelids quivered, and in a strange, low whisper she uttered a word which to us was unintelligible.

Again she articulated it with evident difficulty; then a convulsive shudder shook her frame, her breast heaved, and her features again grew pale and rigid.

We stood watching her for a moment. One of the constables placed his hand upon her breast, but withdrew it, saying, "It's all over with her, poor thing; I'm afraid the doctor won't be able to do her any good."

And we sat down to await the arrival of the inspector and surgeon, conversing only in low whispers.

A few minutes had elapsed, when they entered.

The doctor, as soon as he saw her, shook his head, saying, "Dead, poor woman! Ah! stabbed to the heart, I see."

"Murder, evidently," exclaimed the inspector, glancing round; then turning to the constables, he asked, "Have you searched the house?"

"Yes, sir," they replied.

"Found anything?"

"This, we found in the hall," replied one of the men, taking a small Indian dagger from a side-table, "and this paper was pinned upon her dress."

The production of the seal caused both the inspector and doctor to start in surprise, and the former, after examining it, placed it carefully in his pocket-book.

Taking the knife in his hand, the inspector examined it minutely. It was stained with blood—evidently the weapon with which the murderer had dealt the fatal blow.

The doctor also looked at it, and wiping the blood from the victim's breast, gazed upon the wound, saying, "Yes, that's the knife, without a doubt; but who did it is the question."

"Who's this gentleman?" asked the officer, jerking his thumb towards me.

"Gentleman who informed us, sir."

"Do you know who lives here?" he asked, sharply, turning to me.

“No, I do not. I am quite a stranger; in fact, I have never been in this street before in my life.”

“Hum!” he grunted, in a rather suspicious manner. “And how came you to know anything about the affair?”

“I chanced to be passing at the time, and my attention was attracted by a scream. I found a space between the blind and the window, and my curiosity being aroused, I looked in and saw the woman had been murdered.”

“Is that all you know?” he asked.

“That’s all.”

“Well, you won’t mind just stepping round to the station for a few minutes, will you? Then you can give us your version of the matter.”

“Oh, certainly I will, with pleasure,” I replied. The inspector having given some instructions to his men, the body of the murdered woman was covered with a table-cloth, and we went out leaving two constables in charge of the premises.

Dawn was spreading now; the stars had disappeared, and there were some saffron tints in the east, heralding the sun’s coming. At the corner of Montague Street the doctor wished us “good-morning,” and strode away in an opposite direction, scarcely well pleased at being aroused from his bed and called out to witness so unpleasant a sight.

Chapter Three.

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What the World Said.

A quarter of an hour later I was in the inspector's office at Tottenham Court Road Police-Station, relating to him all I knew of the horrible discovery.

"You saw a man come out, you say? Are you certain of this?" the inspector asked, after I had concluded my story.

"Quite; and, what's more, I saw his face."

"Would you know him again?" he inquired, eyeing me keenly.

"Certainly, I should."

"Well, when you saw him, what did you do?"

"I followed him. We ran for nearly five minutes without meeting a constable, and I subsequently lost sight of him in Gray's Inn Road."

"For five minutes without meeting one of our men?" repeated the inspector, dubiously.

"Yes. I shouted, but nobody came to my assistance," I replied, for I had not failed to notice the suspicion with which he regarded me.

The inspector's brows contracted slightly as he took a slate from his desk, saying, "Give me his description as accurately as possible, please."

I did so, and he wrote at my dictation. As soon as he had finished, he handed the slate to a sergeant, who at once went to the row of telegraph instruments and transmitted the description of the murderer to all the stations in the Metropolitan Police District.

“And this was upon the body when you saw it?” exclaimed the officer, smoothing out the crumpled piece of paper before placing it upon the desk in front of him.

I nodded an affirmative, and proceeded to describe the position of the paper as pinned upon the breast.

“Hum! well, I think that’s all,” said he, when I had finished. “You say you live in Torrington Square. Ah! I have the number. And you spent the evening at the Junior Garrick Club—was that so?”

“Yes.”

“At the inquest we shall want you as a witness; but you will get warning in due course. Good-morning.”

I left the station, and trudged homeward, full of thoughts of the horrible scene of which I had been an involuntary spectator.

Truly the night had been an eventful one.

The discovery had been made too late for the first editions of the morning papers, but those published on the following evening gave accounts of the tragedy, headed “Another Mysterious Murder: The Mystic Seal again,” in which the details of the crime were most graphically told, the facts exaggerated, and plenty of fiction infused; for that style known as the New Journalism seems to have been invented for the purpose of satisfying the craving for sensational reading.

During the day I was pestered with interviewers. Several enterprising reporters, who saw a chance of making an interesting column of “copy” out of me, sent up their cards, and to them I granted an audience. Following these came

two detectives from the Criminal Investigation Department, who also wished for a description of my night's adventure.

This I gave willingly, yet to my astonishment and annoyance I found, when I went down to the club in the evening, that the police had been making inquiries of the servants as to what time I left on the previous night, besides endeavouring to learn various other particulars.

I, Frank Burgoyne, was evidently suspected of the crime!

There had been six murders, all curious, unexplained mysteries, which had formed the chief topic of conversation and comment in the newspapers for the past few weeks. In each there appeared an utter absence of motive, which made the enigma doubly puzzling; and though the murderer had sought his victims from every rank of society, the same seal—evidently impressed by the same hand—had been found pinned upon the breast of the corpses.

Premeditated the crimes undoubtedly were, and accomplished by one to whom murder was an art, for in not a single instance was there the slightest clue to his identity, though some were committed in broad daylight. The *modus operandi* appeared to be similar in every case, and with the exception of one victim, who had been shot, the remaining five had all been stabbed to the heart by a stiletto, which the murderer usually carried away with him.

Various were the theories advanced as to the motives for these appalling deeds.

Some journals suggested that the murderer was a maniac, whose insatiable thirst for blood was controlled by the moon's changes. This appeared plausible enough to some, but others asked how, if he were a lunatic, did he

continue so effectually to conceal himself. These were told there was method in madness, and that in all probability the murderer was insane whilst committing the crimes, and immediately afterwards, on gaining his right senses, he remembered nothing of the fearful deeds.

Such hypotheses, and others of a far wilder character, were daily talk, not only throughout the Kingdom, but in all the Continental capitals, and in America. Although several heavy rewards had been offered for the apprehension of the defender, and a free pardon to any accomplice, all efforts to discover him were futile. The shrewdest detectives acknowledged themselves utterly baffled.

The most inexplicable part of the mystery was the fact that the crimes were not confined to one city, or even to one country, but had been committed at places at great distances from one another. This plainly showed that the murderer travelled with almost miraculous rapidity.

Very little sensation was created by the first discovery, although it was regarded as a mysterious affair. It occurred in New York, where a celebrated financier, George M. Sheward, was discovered one day in his private office, stabbed to the heart. Here the fatal seal first made its appearance. At the time the New York police thought little of the fact, and the finding of the symbol was not made public until subsequently, when other crimes had taken place, and the same emblem was found.

From inquiries, it appeared that the deceased arrived at Wall Street, as usual, at ten o'clock in the morning, retiring into his room, which was only separated from that of his clerk's by a short passage, some ten feet in length. He

remained in his room an hour, interviewing several clients and attending to his correspondence. His manager had occasion to consult him shortly after eleven, when on entering the room he was horrified at finding him dead in his chair. Upon the blotting-pad before him lay the paper whereon was the seal.

The persons who had called to see the murdered man were so numerous that neither of the clerks could tell who had been the last to visit their master, yet it was certain that the murderer, whoever he was, had passed through the public office to get to the principal's room.

As the deceased gentleman had a world-wide reputation, the fact of his sudden death from some unknown assassin was speedily carried to the ends of the civilised globe, or, at all events, to the great centres where his financial influence was felt. He was a quiet, reserved man, but had many friends, for his well-known benevolence of disposition, combined with his immense wealth, had acquired for him a celebrity in more circles than one.

The New York police, aided by the powerful agency of the Press, which in America takes a peculiar pride in the business of the detection of crime, gave all its energies to the unravelling of the mystery; but their efforts, alas! were in vain. Before a fortnight had passed, news was received from Vienna that Herr Scherb, a wealthy professor, a man of great scientific attainments, had been stabbed in a restaurant at mid-day.

It appeared that a waiter, on approaching a table at which Herr Scherb was sitting, was terrified to observe that he was quite dead. The cause of his sudden demise was a

glittering dagger, even then firmly fixed in the breast. On this being removed, it was discovered that a piece of paper bearing the seal had been fastened to the handle.

With trembling fingers and blanched faces the spectators unfolded it, and tried to decipher the hieroglyphics. It was not until the discovery of this seal had gained publicity that the New York police admitted finding one that was identical.

This was considered a very curious circumstance and was freely commented upon by various London and provincial newspapers, some giving a woodcut of what purported to be a representation of the mysterious characters upon the seal. Considerable excitement was caused thereby, and numbers of antiquarians and others at once set about trying to solve its meaning; but although editors were flooded with correspondence from those who professed to have found an elucidation, it remained as enigmatical as ever.

Just as the excitement was abating there came information of a third tragedy. This time a young French actress, Mlle. Voituret, who was *première danseuse* at the Eden Theatre in Paris, was discovered late one evening in the Kalverstraat at Amsterdam, dying from the effects of a knife-wound in the breast.

There were dozens of persons passing and repassing in the street at the time of the occurrence, nevertheless, so swiftly and surely was the blow dealt and the seal attached, that before a crowd had assembled, the unfortunate young artiste had expired.

This created little less than a panic.

By the existence of the seals—each of which corresponded in every detail with the others—the fact was