WILLIAM LE QUEUX

DEVIL'S DICE

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EAN 8596547219392

DigiCat, 2022
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"Devil's Dice"

Chapter One.

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Queen of the Unknown.

Let me gaze down the vista of the tristful past.

Ah! there are things that cannot be uttered; there are scenes that still entrance me, and incidents so unexpected and terrible that they cause me even now to hold my breath in horror.

The prologue of this extraordinary drama of London life was enacted three years ago; its astounding dénouement occurred quite recently. During those three weary, anxious years the days have glided on as they glide even with those who suffer most, but alas! I have the sense of having trodden a veritable Via Dolorosa during a century, the tragedy of my life, with its ever-present sorrow, pressing heavily upon me perpetually. Yet my life's journey has not always been along the barren shore of the sea of Despair. During brief moments, when, with the sweet childlike angel of my solitude, heaven and earth have seemed to glide slowly into space, I have found peace in the supreme joy of happiness. My gaze has been lost in the azure immensity of a woman's eyes.

In this strange story, this astounding record of chastity of affection and bitter hatred, of vile scheming, of secret sins and astounding facts, I, Stuart Ridgeway, younger son of Sir Francis Ridgeway, Member for Barmouth and banker of the City of London, am compelled to speak of myself. It is indeed a relief to be able to reason out one's misfortunes; confession is the lancet-stroke that empties the abscess.

The Devil has thrown his dice and the game is up. I can now lay bare the secret of my sorrow.

Away south in the heart of the snow-capped Pyrenees, while idling away a few sunny weeks at Bagnères-de-Luchon, that quaint little spa so popular with the Cleopatras of the Boulevards, nestling in its secluded valley beneath the three great peaks of Sacrous, de Sauvegarde, and de la Mine, a woman first brought sweetness to the sadness of my melancholy days. Mine was an aimless, idle life. I had left behind me at college a reputation for recklessness. I was an arrant dunce at figures, and finance had no attraction for me. I had lived the semi-Bohemian life of a law student in London, and grown tired of it I had tried art and ignominiously failed, and, being in receipt of a generous allowance from an indulgent father, I found myself at the age of twenty-eight without profession, a mere world-weary cosmopolitan, wandering from place to place with the sole object of killing time.

Having taken up my quarters alone at the Hotel des Bains, that glaring building with its dead-white façade in the Allee d'Etigny—the magnificent view from which renders it one of the finest thoroughfares in the world—I soon became seized by ennui.

The place, filled with the *haut ton* of Paris, was gay enough, but somehow I met no one at the table d'hôte or elsewhere whom I cared to accept as companion. Sick of the utter loneliness amid all the mad gaiety, I was contemplating moving to Biarritz, where a maiden aunt resided, when one evening, while seated in the picturesque Casino Garden listening to the band, I saw in the crowd of

chattering, laughing promenaders a woman's face that entranced me. Only for a second in the faint light shed by the Chinese lanterns, strung from tree to tree, was I able to distinguish her features. In that brief moment, however, our eyes met, yet next second she was gone, lost in one of the gayest crowds in Europe.

The next night and the next I sat at the same little tin table taking my coffee and eagerly scanning the crowd passing and re-passing along the broad gravelled walk until once again I saw her. Then, held in fascination by her marvellous beauty, attracted as a needle by a magnet, I rose and followed her. Like myself she was alone, and a trivial accident, of which I eagerly availed myself, gave me an opportunity of introducing myself. Judge my joyful satisfaction when I found that she was English, although her dress and hat bore the unmistakable stamp of the Rue de la Paix, and her chic was that of the true Parisienne. As we walked together in the shadows beyond the public promenade, she told me that her home was in London; that on account of her father having been compelled to return suddenly, she had been left alone, and she admitted that, like myself, she had become dull and lonely.

Apparently she had no objection to my companionship, although she strove to preserve a British rigidity of manner and respect for the convenances. Yet after the reserve of the first half-hour had worn off we sat down together under a tree near the band-stand, and I gave her a card. She, however, refused to give me one.

"Call me Sybil," she said smiling.

“Sybil!” I repeated. “A name as charming as its owner. Is your name Sybil—only Sybil?”

“My surname is of no consequence,” she answered quickly, with a slight haughtiness. “We are merely English folk thrown together in this place. To-morrow, or the next day perhaps, we shall part, never to meet again.”

“I trust not,” I said gallantly. “An acquaintanceship commenced under these strange conditions is rather romantic, to say the least.”

“Romantic,” she repeated mechanically, in a strange tone. “Yes, that is so. Every one of us, from pauper to peer, all have our little romances. But romance, after all, is synonymous with unhappiness,” and she drew a long breath as if sad thoughts oppressed her.

A moment later, however, she was as gay and bright as before, and we chatted on pleasantly until suddenly she consulted the tiny watch in her bangle and announced that it was time she returned. At her side I walked to her hotel, the Bonnemaison, and left her at the entrance.

We met frequently after that, and one morning she accompanied me on a drive through the quaint old frontier village of St. Aventin and on through the wild Oo Valley as far as the Cascade.

As in the bright sunshine she lounged back in the carriage, her fair, flawless complexion a trifle heightened by the pink of her parasol, I gazed upon her as one entranced. The half-lights of the Casino Garden had not been deceptive. She was twenty-two at the most, and absolutely lovely; the most bewitching woman I had ever seen. From beneath a marvel of the milliner’s art, tendrils of fair hair, soft as floss

silk, strayed upon her white brow; her eyes were of that clear childlike blue that presupposes an absolute purity of soul, and in her pointed chin was a single dimple that deepened when she smiled. Hers was an adorable face, sweet, full of an exquisite beauty, and as she gazed upon me with her great eyes she seemed to read my heart. Her lithe, slim figure was admirably set off by her gown of soft material of palest green, which had all the shimmer of silk, yet moulded and defined its wearer like a Sultan’s scarf. It had tiny shaded stripes which imparted a delicious effect of myriad folds; the hem of the skirt, from under which a dainty bronze shoe appeared, had a garniture in the chromatics, as it were, of mingled rose and blue and green, and the slender waist, made long as waists may be, was girdled narrow but distinctive.

As I sat beside her, her violet-pervaded chiffons touching me, the perfume they exhaled intoxicated me with its fragrance. She was an enchantress, a well-beloved, whose beautiful face I longed to smother with kisses each time I pressed her tiny well-gloved hand.

Her frank conversation was marked by an ingenuousness that was charming. It was apparent that she moved in an exclusive circle at home, and from her allusions to notable people whom I knew in London, I was assured that her acquaintance with them was not feigned. Days passed—happy, idle, never-to-be-forgotten days. Nevertheless, try how I would, I could not induce her to tell me her name, nor could I discover it at her hotel, for the one she had given there was evidently assumed.

“Call me Sybil,” she always replied when I alluded to the subject.

“Why are you so determined to preserve the secret of your identity?” I asked, when, one evening after dinner, we were strolling beneath the trees in the Allee.

A faint shadow of displeasure fell upon her brow, and turning to me quickly she answered:

“Because—well, because it is necessary.” Then she added with a strange touch of sadness, “When we part here we shall not meet again.”

“No, don’t say that,” I protested; “I hope that in London we may see something of each other.”

She sighed, and as we passed out into the bright moonbeams that flooded the mountains and valleys, giving the snowy range the aspect of a far-off fairyland, I noticed that her habitual brightness had given place to an expression of mingled fear and sorrow. Some perpetual thought elevated her forehead and enlarged her eyes, and a little later, as we walked slowly forward into the now deserted promenade, I repeated a hope that our friendship would always remain sincere and unbroken.

“Why do you speak these words to me?” she asked suddenly, in faltering tones. “Why do you render my life more bitter than it is?”

“Because when your father returns and takes you away the light of my life will be extinguished. Don’t be cruel, Sybil; you must have seen—”

“I am not cruel,” she answered calmly, halting suddenly and looking at me with her great clear eyes. “During the past fortnight we have—well, we have amused each other,

and time has passed pleasantly. I know, alas! the words I have arrested on your lips. You mistake this mild summer flirtation of ours for real love. You were about to declare that you love me—were you not?”

“True, Sybil. And I mean it. From the first moment our eyes met I have adored you,” I exclaimed with passionate tenderness. “The brightness of your face has brought light into my life. You have showed me at all times the face of an adorable woman; you have peopled my desert, you have filled me with such supreme joy that I have been lost in profound love.”

“Hush! hush!” she cried, interrupting me. “Listen, let me tell you my position.”

“I care naught for your position; I want only you, Sybil,” I continued earnestly, raising her hand to my lips and smothering it with kisses. “I have adored you in all the different forms of love. You, who have sufficed for my being; you, whose wondrous beauty filled me with all the chastity of affection. Between you and the horizon there seems a secret harmony that makes me love the stones on the very footpaths. The river yonder has your voice; the stars above us your look; everything around me smiles with your smile. I never knew until now what it was to live, but now I live because I love you. Each night when we part I long for morning; I want to see you again, to kiss your hair, to tell you I love you always—always.”

Her bosom rose and fell quickly as I spoke, and when I had finished, her little hand closed convulsively upon mine.

“No, no,” she cried hoarsely. “Let us end this interview; it is painful to both of us. I have brought this unhappiness

upon you by my own reckless folly. I ought never to have broken the convenances and accepted as companion a man to whom I had not been formally introduced."

"Ah! don't be cruel, Sybil," I pleaded earnestly; "cannot you see how madly I love you?"

"Yes; I think that perhaps you care more for me than I imagined," she answered, endeavouring to preserve a calmness that was impossible. "But leave me and forget me, Stuart. I am worthless because I have fascinated you when I ought to have shunned you, knowing that our love can only bring us poignant bitterness."

"Why? Tell me," I gasped; then, half fearing the truth, I asked. "Are you already married?"

"No."

"Then what barrier is there to our happiness?"

"One that is insurmountable," she answered hoarsely, hot tears welling in her eyes. "The truth I cannot explain, as for certain reasons I am compelled to keep my secret."

"But surely you can tell me the reason why we may not love? You cannot deny that you love me just a little," I said.

"I do not deny it," she answered in a low, earnest voice, raising her beautiful face to mine. "It is true, Stuart, that you are the only man I have looked upon with real affection, and I make no effort at concealment; nevertheless, our dream must end here. I have striven to stifle my passion, knowing full well the dire result that must accrue. But it is useless. Our misfortune is that we love one another; so we must part."

"And you refuse to tell me the reason why you intend to break off our acquaintanceship," I observed reproachfully.

“Ah, no!” she answered quickly. “You cannot understand. I dare not love you. A deadly peril threatens me. Ere six months have passed the sword which hangs, as it were, suspended over me may fall with fatal effect, but—but if it does, if I die, my last thought shall be of you, Stuart, for I feel that you are mine alone.”

I clasped her in my arms, and beneath the great tree where we were standing our lips met for the first time in a hot, passionate caress.

Then, panting, she slowly disengaged herself from my arms, saying:

“Our dream is over. After to-night we may be friends, but never lovers. To love me would bring upon you a disaster, terrible and complete; therefore strive, for my sake, Stuart, to forget.”

“I cannot,” I answered. “Tell me of your peril.”

“My peril—ah!” she exclaimed sadly. “Ever present, it haunts me like a hideous nightmare, and only your companionship has lately caused me to forget it for a few brief hours, although I have all the time been conscious of an approaching doom. It may be postponed for months, or so swiftly may it descend upon me that when to-morrow’s sun shines into my room its rays will fall upon my lifeless form; my soul and body will have parted.”

“Are you threatened by disease?”

“No. My peril is a strange one,” she answered slowly. “If I might tell you all my curious story I would, Stuart. At present, alas! I cannot Come, let us go back to the hotel, and there bid me farewell.”

“Farewell! When do you intend to leave me?” I cried dismayed, as we turned and walked on together.

“Soon,” she said, sighing, her hand trembling in mine —“it will be imperative very soon.”

“But may I not help you? Cannot I shield you from this mysterious peril?”

“Alas! I know not. If your aid will assist me in the future I will communicate with you. I have your London address upon your card.”

There was a long and painful pause. But in those silent moments during our walk I became conscious of the grand passion that consumed me.

“And you will think of me sometimes with thoughts of love, Sybil?” I said disconsolately.

“Yes. But for the present forget me. Some day, however, I may be compelled to put your affection to the test.”

“I am prepared for any ordeal in order to prove that my passion is no idle midsummer fancy,” I answered. “Command me, and I will obey.”

“Then good-night,” she said, stretching forth her hand, for by this time we were in front of the Bonnemaison. I held her hand in silence for some moments, my thoughts too full for words.

“Shall I see you to-morrow?” I asked.

“Yes, if—if my doom does not overwhelm me,” she answered with a choking sob. “If it does, then adieu, my love, adieu forever!”

“No, not adieu, Sybil,” I said, drawing her beneath the shadow of a tree and once again imprinting a passionate

kiss upon her lips. “Not adieu! Let as at least meet to-morrow, even if it must be for the last time.”

She burst into a flood of tears, and turning from me walked quickly to the steps leading to the hotel, while I, mystified and full of sad thoughts, strode onward along the silent moonlit Allee towards my hotel.

Little sleep came that night to my eyes, but when my coffee was brought in the morning a perfumed note lay upon the tray. I tore it open eagerly, and read the following words hastily scribbled in pencil and blurred by tears:

“I am in deadly peril and have been compelled to leave unexpectedly. Do not attempt to find me, but forget everything.—Sybil.”

I dashed aside the curtains and, like a man in a dream, stood gazing away at the white mountains, brilliant in the morning sunlight I had lost her; the iron of despair had entered my heart.

Chapter Two.

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Sin or Secret?

Six months passed. Left forlorn, with only the vivid memory of a charming face, I had travelled to rid myself of the remembrance, but in vain. Sometimes I felt inclined to regard my mysterious divinity as a mere adventuress; at others I became lost in contemplation and puzzled over her words almost to the point of madness. I knew that I had loved her; that, fascinated by her great beauty and enmeshed in the soft web of her silken tresses, she held me irrevocably for life or death.

Unhappy and disconsolate, heedless of London's pleasures or the perpetual gaiety of the "smart" circle in which my friends and relations moved, I spent the gloomy December days in my chambers in Shaftesbury Avenue, endeavouring to distract the one thought that possessed me by reading. My companions chaffed me, dubbing me a misanthrope, but to none of them, not even Jack Bethune, the friend of my college days and greatest chum, did I disclose the secret of my despair.

Thus weeks went by, until one morning my man, Saunders, brought me a telegram which I opened carelessly, but read with breathless eagerness, when I saw the signature was "Sybil."

The words upon the flimsy paper caused me such sudden and unexpected delight that old Saunders, most discreet of servants, must have had some apprehension as to my

sanity. The telegram, which had been despatched from Newbury, read:

“Must see you this evening. In Richmond Terrace Gardens, opposite the tea-pavilion, is a seat beneath a tree. Be there at six. Do not fail.—Sybil.”

Almost beside myself with joyful anticipation of seeing her sweet, sad face once again, I went out and whiled away the hours that seemed never-ending, until at last when twilight fell I took train to the place named.

Ten minutes before the hour she had indicated I found the seat in the Terrace Gardens, but there was no sign of the presence of any human being. It was almost closing time, and the Terrace was utterly deserted. All was silent save the rushing of a train, or the dull rumbling of vehicles passing along the top of the hill, and distant sounds became mingled with the vague murmurs of the trees. The chill wind sighed softly in the oaks, lugubriously extending their dark bare arms along the walk like a row of spectres guarding the vast masses of vapour spreading out behind them and across the valley, where the Thames ran silent and darkly in serpentine wanderings, and the lights were already twinkling. Even as I sat the last ray of twilight faded, and night, cloudy and moonless, closed in.

Suddenly a harsh strident bell gave six hurried strokes, followed by half a dozen others in different keys, the one sounding far distant across the river, coming, I knew, from Isleworth’s old time-stained tower, with which boating men are so familiar.

It had seemed years full of sad and tender memories since we had parted, yet in ecstasy I told myself that in a

few moments she would be again at my side, and from her eyes I might, as before, drink of the cup of love to the verge of intoxication.

A light footstep sounded on the gravel, and peering into the darkness I could just distinguish the form of a man. As he advanced I saw he was tall, well-built, and muscular, nearly forty years of age, with a slight black moustache and closely cropped hair that was turning prematurely grey. He wore the conventional silk hat, an overcoat heavily trimmed with astrakhan, and as he strode towards me he took a long draw at his cigar.

“Good-evening,” he said courteously, halting before me as I rose, “I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Mr Stuart Ridgeway, have I *not*?”

“That is my name,” I answered rather brusquely, not without surprise, for I had expected Sybil to keep her appointment.

“I am the bearer of a message,” he said in slow, deliberate tones. “The lady who telegraphed to you this morning desires to express her extreme regret at her inability to meet you. Since the telegram was sent, events have occurred which preclude her attendance anywhere,” and he paused. Then he added with sadness: “Anywhere—except before her Judge.”

“Her Judge!” I gasped. “What do you mean? Speak! Is she dead?”

“No,” he answered solemnly, “she still lives, and although overshadowed by a secret terror, her only thought is of you, even in these very moments when she is being

carried swiftly by the overwhelming flood of circumstances towards her terrible doom."

"You speak in enigmas," I said quickly. "We are strangers, yet you apparently are aware of my acquaintance with Sybil. Will you not tell me the nature of her secret terror?"

"I cannot, for two reasons," he replied. "The first is, because I am not aware of the whole of the circumstances; the second, because I have given her my promise to reveal nothing. Hence my lips are sealed. All I can tell you is that a great danger threatens her—how great you cannot imagine—and she desires you to fulfill your promise and render her your aid."

"Whatever lies in my power I will do willingly," I answered. "If she cannot come to me will you take me to her?"

"Upon two conditions only."

"What are they?"

"For your own sake as well as hers, it is imperative that she should still preserve the strictest incognito. Therefore, in driving to her house, you must allow the blinds of the carriage to be drawn, and, however curious may appear anything you may witness in her presence, you must give your word of honour as a gentleman—nay, you must take oath—not to seek to elucidate it. Mystery surrounds her, I admit, but remember that any attempt to penetrate it will assuredly place her in graver peril, and thwart your own efforts on her behalf."

"Such conditions from a stranger are, to say the least, curious," I observed.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, smiling, “your reluctance to accept is but natural. Well, I can do no more, I have fulfilled my mission. The woman you love has staked her young life—and alas! lost. She has counted upon your aid in this hour of her extremity and despair, yet if you withhold it I must return and tell her.”

“But I love her,” I said. “Surely I may know who she is, and why she is haunted by this secret dread!”

For a few seconds he was silent. Then he tossed his cigar away with a gesture of impatience.

“Time does not admit of argument. I have merely to apologise for bringing you down here to a fruitless appointment, and to wish you good-evening,” he said in a tone of mingled annoyance and disappointment, as turning on his heel he walked away.

His words and manner aroused within me a sudden dislike, a curious hatred that I could not describe, yet ere he had gone a dozen paces I cried:

“Stop! I have reconsidered my decision. I must see her, for I promised her assistance, and am ready to give it in whatever manner she desires.”

“You know the conditions,” he said, sauntering carelessly back to me, “Do you accept them absolutely?”

“Yes.”

“Then swear.”

He had drawn from his pocket a Testament, and held it towards me. I hesitated.

“You may be tempted to break your word. You will never violate your oath,” he added, in the same slow, deliberate tone in which he had first addressed me. Still I was not

prepared for this strange proceeding, and not until he urged me to hasten and declared that my oath was imperative, did I move.

Taking the book, I slowly raised it until it touched my lips.

Next second I regretted my action. I had a vague, indefinable feeling that I had subjected myself to him; that I had foolishly placed myself under his thrall.

Yet, as we walked together up the steep path and gained the Terrace, he chatted gayly upon various topics, and the strange presage of evil that I had first experienced was soon succeeded by lively anticipations of seeing once again the beautiful woman I adored.

In Hill Rise, close to that row of glaring new semi-aesthetic houses known as Cardigan Gate, a neat brougham drawn by a magnificent pair of bays was in waiting, and before we entered, the footman carefully drew down the blinds, then saluted as he closed the door.

The interior of the carriage would have been dark had not a tiny glimmering lamp been placed there, and this showed that, in addition to the blinds drawn down, heavy curtains had also been arranged, so that to see outside was impossible. My strange companion was affable, even amusing, but the drive occupied quite an hour and a half, although we travelled at a pretty smart pace.

Presently my companion turned to me, saying: “There is still one small thing more. Before we alight you must allow me to tie my handkerchief across your eyes.”

“In order that I may not note the exterior of the house—eh?” I suggested, laughing.

He nodded, and a strange cynical smile played upon his lips.

“Very well,” I said. “It is useless, I suppose, to protest.”

He did not answer, but folding a silk handkerchief he placed it over my eyes and tied it tightly at the back. Almost at the moment he had completed this the conveyance stopped, the door was opened, and, led by my mysterious companion, I alighted.

Taking his arm, we crossed the pavement and ascended a short flight of steps. There were three. I counted them. I could also hear the wind in some trees, and found myself wondering whether we were in town or country.

A door opened, and we stepped into a hall, which, owing to the echo of my conductor’s voice, I concluded was a spacious one, but ere I had time to reflect, the man whose arm I held said:

“Just a moment. You must sign the visitors’ book—it is the rule here. We’ll excuse bad writing as you can’t see,” he added with a laugh.

At the same moment I felt a pen placed in my fingers by a man-servant, who guided my hand to the book. Then I hastily scrawled my name.

It was strange, I thought; but the events of the evening were all so extraordinary that there was nothing after all very unusual in signing a visitors’ book.

Again he took my arm, leading me up a long flight of stairs, the carpet of which was so thick that our feet fell noiselessly. In the ascent I felt that the balustrade was cold and highly polished, like glass. Confused and mysterious whisperings sounded about me, and I felt confident that I

distinctly heard a woman’s sob quite close to me, while at the same moment a whiff of violets greeted my nostrils. Its fragrance stirred my memory—it was Sybil’s favourite perfume. Suddenly my guide ushered me into a room and took the handkerchief from my eyes. The apartment was a small study, cozy and well furnished, with a bright fire burning in the grate, and lit only by a green-shaded reading-lamp.

“If you’ll take off your overcoat and wait here a few moments I will bring her to you,” he said; adding, “you can talk here alone and undisturbed,” and he went out, closing the door after him.

Five eager minutes passed while I listened for her footstep, expecting each second to hear her well-known voice; but gradually the atmosphere seemed to become stifling. In my mouth was a sulphurous taste, and the lamp, growing more dim, at last gave a weak flicker and went out. Rushing to the door, I found, to my astonishment, it was locked!

I dashed to the window and tried to open it, but could not. In despair I beat the door frantically with my fists and shouted. But my muffled voice seemed as weak as a child’s. I doubted whether it could be heard beyond the walls.

Flinging myself upon my knees, I bent to examine the small fire, glowing like a blacksmith’s forge, and discovered to my horror that the chimney had been closed, and that the grate was filled with burning charcoal. Quickly I raked it out, but the red cinders only glowed the brighter, and, even though I dashed the hearthrug upon them, I could not extinguish them.

In desperation I tried to struggle to my feet, but failed. My legs refused to support me; my head throbbed as if my skull would burst. Then a strange sensation of nausea crept over me; my starting eyes smarted as if acid had been flung into them, my tongue clave to the roof of my parched mouth, my chest seemed held in contraction by a band of iron, as half rising I fell next second, inert and helpless, a sudden darkness obliterating all my senses.

What time elapsed I have no idea. Gradually I struggled back to consciousness, and as I made desperate endeavour to steady my nerves and collect my thoughts, I suddenly became painfully aware of a bright light falling full upon me. My eyes were dazzled by the extraordinary brilliancy. I closed them again, and tried to recollect what had occurred.

“Pull yourself together, my dear fellow. You are all right now, aren’t you?” asked a voice in my ear.

I recognised the tones as those of my strange guide.

“Yes,” I answered mechanically. “But Sybil—where is she?”

He made no reply.

I tried to open my eyes, but again the light dazzled me. About me sounded soft sibilations and the frou-frou of silk, while the warm air seemed filled with the sickly perfume of tuberoses. My left hand was grasping the arm of a capacious saddle-bag chair, wherein I was evidently sitting, while in my right I held something, the nature of which I could not at first determine.

My trembling fingers closed upon it more tightly a moment later, and I suddenly recognised that it was the hand of a woman! Again opening my heavy eyes, I strained

them until they grew accustomed to the brightness, and was amazed to discover myself sitting in a spacious, richly-furnished drawing-room, brilliant with gilt and mirrors, while two men and two women in evening dress were standing around me, anxiety betrayed upon their pale faces. In a chair close beside mine sat a woman, whose hand I was holding.

Springing to my feet, my eyes fell full upon her. Attired in dead-white satin, a long veil hid her face, and in her hair and across her corsage were orange-blossoms. She was a bride!

Behind her—erect and motionless—was the man who had conducted me there, while at her side stood a grave, grey-haired clergyman, who at that moment was gabbling the concluding portion of the marriage service. The veil failed to conceal her wondrous beauty; in an instant I recognised her.

It was the woman I adored. A wedding-ring was upon the hand I had held!

“Speak, Sybil!” I cried. “Speak! tell me the reason of this!”

But she answered not. Only the clergyman’s droning voice broke the silence. The hand with the ring upon it lay upon her knees and I caught it up, but next second dropped it, as if I had been stung. Its contact thrilled me!

Divining my intention, the man who had brought me there dashed between us, but ere he could prevent me, I had, with a sudden movement, torn aside the veil.

Horror transfixed me. Her beauty was entrancing, but her blue eyes, wide open in a stony stare, had lost their clearness and were rapidly glazing; her lips, with their true

arc de Cupidon, were growing cold, and from her cheeks the flush of life had departed, leaving them white as the bridal dress she wore.

I stood open-mouthed, aghast, petrified.

Sybil, the woman I loved better than life, was dead, and I had been married to her!

Chapter Three.

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Ghosts of the Past.

Horrified and appalled, my startled eyes were riveted upon the flawless face that in life had entranced me.

“See! She’s dead—dead!” I gasped wildly, when a few seconds later I fully realised the ghastly truth.

Then throwing myself upon my knees, heedless of the presence of strangers, I seized her clammy hand that bore the wedding-ring, and covered it with mad, grief-impassioned caresses. In her breast was a spray of tuberoses, flowers ineffably emblematic of the grave. Faugh! how I have ever since detested their gruesome, sickly odour. There is death in their breath.

The despairing look in her sightless eyes was so horrible that I covered my face with my hands to shut it out from my gaze. The secret terror that she had dreaded, and to which she had made such veiled, gloomy references, had actually fallen. Her incredible presage of evil, which in Luchon I had at first regarded as the fantastic imaginings of a romantic disposition, had actually become an accomplished fact—some dire, mysterious catastrophe, sudden and complete, had overwhelmed her.

The woman I adored was dead!

In those moments of desolation, stricken down by a sudden grief, I bent over the slim, delicate hands that had so often grasped mine in warm affection, and there came back to me memories of the brief joyous days in the gay little mountain town, when for hours I walked by her side in

rapturous transports and sat with her each evening under the trees, charmed by her manner, fascinated by her wondrous fathomless eyes, held by her beautiful countenance as under a spell. There had seemed some mysterious rapport between her soul and mine. The sun shone more brightly for me on the day she came into my world, and my heart became filled with a supreme happiness such as I, blasé and world-weary, had never known. Heaven had endowed her with one of those women's souls embodying pity and love, a ray of joy-giving light from a better world, that consoled my being, softened my existence, and aroused within me for the first time the conviction that in this brotherhood of tears there existed one true-hearted, soft-voiced woman, who might be the sweet companion of my future life. Through those few sunny days we had been forgetful of all earth's grim realities, of all the evil thoughts of the world. We had led an almost idyllic existence, inspired by our love-making with great contempt for everything, vainly imagining that we should have no other care than that of loving one another.

Ah! how brief, alas! had been our paradise! How sudden and complete was my bereavement! how bitter my sorrow!

True, Sybil had spoken of the mysterious spectral terror which constantly held her in a paroxysm of fear; yet having been satisfied by her declaration that she was not already married, I had continued to love her with the whole strength of my being, never dreaming that her end was so near. Dead! She could no longer utter those soft, sympathetic words that had brought peace to me. No longer could she press my hand, nor smile upon me with those great eyes,

clear and trusting as a child’s. Only her soulless body was before me; only her chilly form that ere long would be snatched from my sight forever.

No, I could not realise that she had departed beyond recall. In mad desperation I kissed her brow in an attempt to revivify her. At that moment her sweet voice seemed raised within me, but it was a voice of remembrance that brought hot tears to my eyes.

A second later I sprang up, startled by a loud knocking at the door of the room. The unknown onlookers, breathless and silent, exchanged glances of abject terror. “Hark!” I cried. “What’s that?”

“Hush!” they commanded fiercely. For a few seconds there was a dead silence, then the summons was repeated louder than before, as a deep voice outside cried:

“Open the door. We are police officers, and demand admittance in the name of the law.”

Upon the small assembly the words fell like a thunderbolt.

“They have come!” gasped one of the women, pale and trembling. She was of middle age, and wore an elaborate toilette with a magnificent necklet of pearls.

“Silence! Make no answer,” the man who had conducted me from Richmond whispered anxiously. “They may pass on, and we may yet escape.”

“Escape!” I echoed, looking from one to the other; “what crime have you committed?”

A third time the knocking was repeated, when suddenly there was a loud crash, and the door, slowly breaking from