WILLIAM LE QUEUX

THE BOND OF BLACK

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Preface.

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Author’s Note.

In this story I have dealt with an extraordinary phase of modern life in London, which to the majority will come as a startling revelation.

Some will, perhaps, declare that no such amazing state of things exists in this, the most enlightened age the world has known. To such, I can only assert that in this decadent civilisation of ours the things which I have described actually take place in secret, as certain facts in my possession indisputably show.

It is no unhealthy problem of sex, or of the ethics of divorce; no story of woman’s faithlessness or man’s misplaced confidence, but a subject upon which I believe no English author has yet touched, and one which I anticipate will prove interesting, and point a wholesome moral. It may not be out of place to add that I have been compelled to touch the subject with as light a hand as the purpose of the story will allow, in respect for the susceptibilities of the reader, and because it is furthest from my intention to sow evil broadcast.

Chapter One.

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London’s Delight.

It is a remarkable sequence of events, a story which in these days of high civilisation is so extraordinary as to almost stagger belief. Yet the higher the civilisation the more refined are its evil-doers, the more ingenious is the innate devilry of man, the more skilful are those who act with malice aforethought.

In replacing this strange drama of present-day life before the reader—a drama of love, of self-sacrifice, of evil passions, and of all uncharitableness—I, Clifton Cleeve, am compelled to speak of myself; to recount the strange adventures which befell me, and to expose to the public gaze the undercurrents of a curious phase of society, of the existence of which few dream. If, therefore, I am forced to the constant use of the first person singular, it is in no egotistical sense, but merely in order that my strange story should be properly understood, and that the blame which rightly attaches to me should not be borne by others. In this narrative of curious circumstances are facts that will astound, perhaps even terrify; nevertheless be it recollected that I myself was an unwilling actor in this drama, and that I only relate that which. I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears.

Even now, as I recall the past, there are scenes before me as vivid in every detail as though the events occurred but an hour ago; scenes which could not fail to leave a life-

long impression upon the mind of any man, so unusual, so striking, so utterly extraordinary were they.

A little more than two years have now elapsed since that well-remembered night when the prologue was enacted. Yet the months that have gone by have seemed a veritable century of time, for have I not trodden the path of life overburdened by a weight of weariness, my youth sapped by vain longings and heart-sickening disappointment, my natural desire for existence blunted by an ever-recurring sorrow, and a constant, irritating, soul-maddening mystery, which lay unsolved, a barrier between myself and happiness. I am no faint-heart, yet as I live again those breathless months of anxiety, of fascination and of terror, I am again seized by that same fear which two years ago consumed me, and held me dumbfounded.

I was not feeling well. Having risen late after a dance, I had spent the afternoon over a book, dined at home in my chambers in Charing Cross Mansions, and had afterwards gone out for an idle stroll across Leicester Square and up Piccadilly. The night was moonless, but brilliant for October, yet the atmosphere was of that artificial clearness which in London renders the street-lamps unusually bright, and is always precursory of rain. At the corner of Park Lane I turned back, hesitating whether to turn into the Naval and Military for a gossip, or spend an hour at a theatre.

London had finished its long and toilsome day. Tired Hammersmith and jaded Notting Hill crowded into the omnibuses, eager to get to their homes without a moment’s delay, while gay Belgravia and Kensington were starting forth upon their night of delight, to be spent within that little

area of half a mile around Charing Cross, wherein centres all the life and diversion of the giant metropolis. Gay London is very concentrated.

A brazen-lunged man pushed the special *Standard* under my nose, saying—

"'Ere y'are, sir. All the winners!"

But I uttered one word, expressive though not polite, and strode on; for, truth to tell, I had read the paper an hour before, and by it discovered to my chagrin that I had been rather hard hit over a race. Therefore, a list of the winners being pushed into my face by this man was an unintentional insult. Yes, I was decidedly out of sorts.

Self-absorbed, a trifle melancholy, and undecided where to spend the evening, I was passing the corner of Bond Street, when I felt a hand upon my arm, as a voice exclaimed—

"Hullo, Clifton, old fellow! You in town? How long have you been back from Tixover?"

I looked up quickly and saw one of my oldest and closest friends, Roddy Morgan, or, to be more exact, the Honourable Roderick Morgan, a tall, smart, good-looking man about my own age, thirty, or perhaps a couple of years my senior, with dark eyes and hair, well-cut features and a merry, amused expression which did not belie his natural temperament. Roddy was a younger son who had gone the pace as rapidly as most men, until he had suddenly found himself with a sufficient quantity of writs and judgment summonses to paper his room with, and in a very fair way to becoming a bankrupt. But of judgment summonses the ever-merry Roddy had once laughingly declared that "no

home was complete without them;" and at the critical juncture a generous maternal uncle, who was likewise a Duke, had very considerately placed the easy-going Roddy on his legs again. And not only this, but he had induced Roddy, who was an excellent speaker, to stand for a county constituency, and paid his election expenses, with the result that he now found himself representing the important division of South-West Sussex in the House.

We clasped hands heartily, and as I explained how three days ago I had come up from Tixover, my father's place in the country, he strode on at my side, gossiping about our mutual friends, and telling me the latest amusing story from the House.

"Ah! my dear fellow," he said, "a chap in Parliament has a pretty hard time of it in these days when the Opposition papers in his constituency keep their eye upon him, ready at any moment to fling mud, to charge him with negligence if he refuses to ask some ridiculous question of the Government, or to comment sarcastically if he chances to miss a division."

"But you like it," I said. "At Oxford you were always to the forefront at the Union. Everybody, from the 'Honourable George Nathaniel' downwards, prophesied that you'd some day place your silk hat on a bench in the House."

"I know, I know," he answered, rather impatiently, "but the truth is I only allowed myself to be put up because my old uncle pressed me. He made me a present of a neat ten thou', so what could I do? I was simply led as a lamb to the slaughter, and nowadays I get deputations waiting upon me, headed by the butcher of Little Twaddlington, and consisting

of the inn-keeper and the tinker of that rural centre of civilisation. I'm civil to them, of course, but hang it, old man, I can't promise to ask all their foolish questions. I'm not built that way. When I make a promise, I keep it. Members nowadays, however, will promise anything on earth, from obtaining an autograph for the butcher's wife's collection to the bringing down of manna from above."

I saw that Roddy was discontented, and was considerably surprised. His Parliamentary honours weighed heavily upon him. He had joined the St. Stephen's Club in the manner of all staunch Conservative members, and I attributed some of his dissatisfaction to the fact that he was nightly compelled to dine with the old fogies there, so as to be within reach for divisions. The Club is only across the road from the House, standing at the corner of the Embankment, and connected with Palace Yard by a subterranean passage. When the division-bell rings in the House it also rings in the club dining-room, and anxious members leave their soup, dash through the tunnel and vote, and come back to finish it. Indeed, it is no uncommon thing for this to be repeated several times in the course of dinner, causing much puffing and grumbling on the part of the stout and gouty members who, overtaken in this helter-skelter to vote, are very often shut out and find they have had their scramble for nothing. Then on returning to table they have to withstand the chaff of the younger and more active legislators, of whom Roddy was a very fair specimen.

"Going down to the House to-night?" I inquired.

"No. It's Wednesday, thank Heaven! I've been down there this afternoon, but we rose at six. Where are you

toddling?”

“Anywhere,” I answered. “I want to look in at the Naval and Military for a letter first.”

“From a charmer, eh?” he asked, with a merry twinkle.

“No,” I answered briefly.

“You’re a rum chap, Clifton,” he said. “You never seem to take girls up the river, to the theatre, or to the races, as other men do. I’m beginning to think that you don’t like womankind.”

“Well, I don’t know. I fancy I’ve had as many little affairs of the heart as most men,” I answered.

“Somebody was saying the other day that you were likely to be engaged to May Symonds. Is it true?”

“Whoever said so is certainly premature,” I laughed. “Then you don’t deny it, old chap?”

I shrugged my shoulders, smiled, and together we ascended the club steps.

After a drink we lit cigars and went forth again, strolling along to the Empire, where in the lounge we idled about, chatting with many men we knew, watching the acrobats, the conjurors, the eccentric singers, the ballet, and the other variety items which went to make up the attractive programme.

Leaning upon the plush-covered backs of the circle seats, we smoked and chatted as we watched the ballet, and subsequently entered the bar, where there had congregated about a dozen men all more or less known to me. We joined them, my friend the irrepressible young Tory Member being hailed by a youthful sprig of the Stock Exchange as “The

Prime Minister," whereat there was a round of hearty laughter.

We had chatted for some moments when suddenly Roddy started as if he had encountered some one whose presence was disagreeable in the extreme, and turning to me, said in a hurried half-whisper—

"I'm off, old chap. Forgot I have another engagement. Good night."

And ere I could reply he had slipped away, and was lost in the chattering crowd.

At the time it struck me that this action was strange, for I felt sure he had seen somebody he did not wish to meet, and reflected that perhaps it was some unwelcome creditor or other. I continued chatting with the other men, until some twenty minutes later I left them and crossed to the little bar where cigars are sold, in order to get something to smoke. The lounge was then so crowded that locomotion was difficult. I was forced to elbow my way to the end of the promenade.

The curtain had fallen upon the ballet, the orchestra was playing the National Anthem, and the place was congested by people coming from their seats in the grand circle, and making their way to the exit. The air was heavy with tobacco-smoke mingled with the odour of a thousand perfumes, for the chiffons of each woman who passed seemed to exhale a different scent, from the nauseous patchouli to the latest patent of the ingenious Parisian perfumer.

Having bought my cigar and lit it, I stood chatting with another man I knew while the theatre emptied, then parting

from him, I returned to the bar, only to find my group of friends had dispersed.

I wandered out to the vestibule, and as I stood glancing round, thinking it unusual that Roddy should have left in so mysterious a manner, my gaze encountered that of an extraordinarily pretty girl.

A pair of wistful blue eyes with a half-frightened expression gazed out of a face which was beautiful in its every line, a face saintly in its expression of innocence and youth. As far as I could judge she was about twenty, the paleness of her cheeks showing that no artificial colouring had been added to tinge them, like those of the women about her, while from beneath her hat a mass of fair hair strayed upon her brow, imparting an almost childlike softness to her face; her blue eyes were clear and wide-open, as if in wonder, and her mouth half-parted showed an even row of perfect teeth, while her dimpled chin was pointed and altogether charming.

About her figure was a grace of outline too seldom seen in London women, a suppleness of the hips that seemed almost foreign; yet the face was pure, sweet and winning, an altogether typical English face, refined, with a complexion perfect. In her dress was nothing startling, nothing calculated to arrest the attention of the sterner sex, nothing vulgar nor loud, for it was of dead black grenadine, relieved by a little white lace at the throat and cuffs—an almost funereal robe in contrast with the gay-coloured silks and daring ornamentation of the loud-tongued women who swept past her with inquiring glance and chattering gaily as they made their way out.

I looked at her a second time, for I confess to being attracted by her quietness of dress, her natural dignity, and the agitation within her which she was trying in vain to conceal. Demure and unaffected, she was so utterly out of place in that centre of, London gaiety that I could not help pausing to watch her. Those of her sex who passed looked somewhat askance at her and smiled among themselves, while more than one man ogled her through his monocle. But not a single glance did she bestow upon any in return save myself.

In dismay she looked slowly around the well-lit vestibule and out into the street, where cabs and carriages were driving off. Then she gazed about her, evidently hesitating how to act. There was a hard curl at the corners of her mouth, and a contraction of the eyelids which showed me that tears were ready to start. Yes, there was no doubt whatever that she was in distress, and needed assistance.

She was speaking earnestly with one of the uniformed doorkeepers, an elderly attendant whom I knew quite well, a highly-respectable pensioner in whom the management reposed the greatest confidence.

Noticing me standing there, he came forward with a military salute, saying—

“Excuse me, sir. But I have a lady here who’s in a rather curious difficulty. You know London well, sir?”

“I think so,” I answered, smiling.

“Well, will you speak with her a moment, sir?”

“What’s her trouble?” I inquired, somewhat surprised, nevertheless crossing with him to where she stood, and raising my hat. I confess that she was so eminently

beautiful, her face so absolutely flawless in its contour and innocent in its expression, that she had fascinated me. I was beneath the spell of her marvellous beauty.

Many women had smiled upon me, women who were more than passing fair; but never had my eyes fallen upon one whose purity of soul was so mirrored in her eyes, or whose face was so childlike and so perfect. Those tendrils, soft as floss silk, were of that delicate gold which the majority of women lose with their teens; those eyes possessed the true clearness which innocence alone can impart.

“If I can render you any assistance I will do so with pleasure,” I said, addressing her, adding, “I noticed a moment ago that you appeared to be in distress.”

“You are extremely kind,” she answered, raising her eyes to mine for an instant. Her glance was steady and searching, and I saw that she was undecided whether to trust me. “You were quite correct in thinking I am in distress, and if you really could help me I should be so much obliged.”

“Then what troubles you?” I inquired, well satisfied with her answer, and anxious that she should make me her confidant.

“I have been separated from my friends, and am a stranger to London,” she replied. “You will laugh,” she added, “but I am really lost, for I don’t know my way back to my friends’ house.”

“You know the address, I suppose?” I laughed, for to me the idea of one being thus lost in London was amusing.

“Yes: Ellerdale Street.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, “except that it’s a long way from here; somewhere on the other side of London. We came by train.”

“Ellerdale Street,” I repeated reflectively. “I’ve never heard of it.” There are, of course, thousands of streets in the suburbs of which nobody ever hears, save when somebody commits a crime of more than ordinary violence, and papers give the unknown thoroughfare undue prominence.

“But the strange thing is that my friends, two ladies, should have disappeared so quickly,” she went on, pausing on the pavement before the theatre as we went out and gazing blankly about her. “They must surely have missed me, and if so, one would think they would remain till everybody had gone, and then search for me.”

“Yes,” I said, “it is certainly rather remarkable,” and together we walked to the corner of Leicester Street, where there is another exit of the theatre, but my pretty companion could discover neither of the ladies who had accompanied her.

Her voice was low and refined, her well-gloved hands small; yet her severe style of dress seemed to speak of poverty which she would fain conceal. She wore no jewellery, not even a brooch; and I fell to wondering whether she might be a governess, or perhaps a shop-assistant who had come from a provincial town to “better herself” in London.

For fully a quarter of an hour we strolled together, backwards and forwards before the railings of the Empire, which soon became dark and deserted, until we were

practically the only loiterers. It certainly struck me as more than strange that her companions, knowing her to be a stranger to London, should thus leave her to her own devices in Leicester Square at midnight. Again, it was curious that she herself should only know the name of the road, and not the district.

“You said your friends live in Ellerdale Street,” I exclaimed at last, after we had been chatting about the performance, and she had criticised the singers with an artlessness which betrayed that she was entirely unaccustomed to the music-hall. “The best course will be to ask a cabman.”

A hansom was standing at the kerb.

“Do you know of any street named Ellerdale Street?” I asked the driver.

“No, sir, I don’t,” he answered, after a pause, during which time he thought deeply. “There’s Ellerslie Road up in Shep’erd’s Bush, and Ellesmere Road out at Bow, but I don’t know of any others.” Then, turning to another man on a cab behind him, he asked:

“I say, Sandy, do you know Ellerdale Street?”

“No, don’t know it at all. Ask a policeman,” was the other’s gruff response.

“I’m giving you a lot of trouble,” my companion said apologetically. “It is really too bad, and you must think me very foolish to get separated from my friends like this. How it occurred I really don’t know. They went out in front of me, and the crowd kept me from coming out of my seat. Then, when I got into the promenade I found they had vanished, as if by magic.”

“It’s evident that the street is not well-known,” I said, “for hansom-cab drivers are really encyclopaedias of London geography, having to pass an examination in it before being granted a driver’s licence by the police. It must be somewhere far out in the suburbs.”

Then a thought suddenly occurred to me.

“The only thing I can suggest,” I continued, “is that you should walk round to my chambers in Charing Cross Road, for I have there a Directory which will no doubt give us some clue to the whereabouts of your friends.”

She paused, and looked at me rather strangely I thought. I had expected her to be eager to act as I suggested, but found her somewhat loth to accompany me. Yet, was this not natural? I was an utter stranger. Perhaps, too, she had seen some drama in the provinces where the villain invariably wears a starched shirt-front and smokes cigarettes, for it seemed as though she held me in fear.

“You are very kind,” she answered, “but I really think—”

“No,” I said, divining her thoughts. “It is impossible for you to wander the streets until morning. You must allow me to help you. Come.”

“I’ve been thinking it would be best, perhaps, for me to go to an hotel,” she said.

“As you wish,” I replied. “But you must find out this unknown street either now or to-morrow morning, and if you take my advice you will lose no time in ascertaining where your friends really live, for they will be anxious about you.”

For a few moments she reflected, then exclaimed—

“Yes, you’re right after all. I’m sure you are extremely kind.”

And together we crossed the Square and continued along Cranbourne Street to the colossal block of redbrick flats wherein my chambers were situated.

Chapter Two.

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This Crucifix.

On ascending to the third floor, Simes, my man, opened the door and she advanced timidly down the tiny passage to my sitting-room. It was not a very large apartment, but I had furnished it comfortably a couple of years before, and it presented a rather cosy appearance with the table-cover and velvet *portières* of sage green to match, a couple of big roomy saddlebag chairs of club dimensions, a high, carved-oak buffet, with its strip of white cloth spread as daintily as in the dining-room of any well-appointed house, for Simes was an excellent man, as natty as a chamber-maid. He took a pride in keeping my rooms spick and span. An ex-trooper of Hussars, he had seen service with me in Egypt before I left the Service, and was a model servant, obeying with military precision, and was eminently trustworthy, save where whiskey was concerned. He could not be expected to resist the temptation of taking a drop from my tantalus on odd occasions.

Upon the walls of my room were a few choice pictures which I had purchased from time to time, together with a pencil caricature of myself drawn by one of the *Punch* artists who was an old friend, and a couple of plaques which had been given me by the lady who painted them. In the middle of the room stood the square table with a bowl of flowers in the centre, on one side of the fireplace a revolving bookstand, and on the other nearest the window, which looked down upon Charing Cross Road, a small triangular

table of rosewood, whereon stood some curios which I had picked up during my pleasure trip round the world.

I give this detailed description of my own quarters because it will be found necessary in order to properly understand the story.

“What a pretty room!” was my fair unknown’s first exclamation.

“Do you think so? I’m glad you like it,” I laughed, for most of my visitors were in the habit of making similar observations. “Do sit down,” and I drew forward one of the big armchairs.

With a word of thanks she seated herself, and when I placed a hassock at her feet she stretched out one tiny foot upon it coquettishly, although with such natural grace that there was nothing fast about her.

I stood upon the hearthrug looking at her, and when our eyes met she laughed a bright, merry laugh, all the misgivings she had previously entertained having now vanished.

“First, you must be faint, for it is so late,” and touching the bell Simes instantly answered, and I ordered port wine and glasses.

She protested instantly, but on being pressed sipped half a glass and left the remainder.

We chatted on as Simes, who had been waiting on us, with a glance of wonder, left and closed the door.

Then, rising, I took down the Directory from the bookcase and opened it at the “Streets.” She rose from her chair, and gazed eagerly upon the great puzzling volume until I came to Ellerdale Street.

“Ellerdale Street, Lewisham,” I read aloud. “From Porson Street to Ermine Road. Do those names bring back to you any recollection of the whereabouts of your friends’ house?”

“No,” she reflected, with a perplexed expression. “I’ve never heard of them.”

“The street is apparently near Loampit Vale,” I said. “That would be the principal thoroughfare. You no doubt came from Lewisham Road Station by the Chatham and Dover Railway to Victoria—or perhaps to Ludgate Hill?”

She shook her head. Apparently she had not the slightest idea of the geography of London. Upon this point her mind was an utter blank.

“How long have you been in London?” I inquired.

“Nearly a week; but I’ve not been out before. My aunt has been ill,” she explained.

“Then you live in the country, I suppose?”

“Yes, I have lived in Warwickshire, but my home lately has been in France.”

“In France!” I exclaimed, surprised. “Where?”

“At Montgeron, not far from Paris.”

“And you have come to London on a visit?”

“No. I have come to live here,” she replied; adding, “It is absurd that the first evening I go out I am so utterly lost. I know my way about Paris quite well.”

“But Paris is not London,” I said. “The suburbs of our metropolis are veritable Saharas, with their miles and miles of streets where the houses are exactly similar, as if the jerry-builders had not two ideas of architecture.”

It certainly was extraordinary that none of the thoroughfares which I had named gave her any clue to this

remote street in which was situated her temporary home. She read down the names of the occupiers of the houses, but could not find her aunt's name. True, there were some omissions, as there always are, and I began to fear that the Directory would not help us.

On turning over the page, however, I saw in italics: "*Ellerdale Road. See Hampstead*."

"Ah!" I cried, "there is another; but it's Ellerdale Road," and after a few moments' eager search I discovered it. "This road runs from Fitzjohn's Avenue to Arkwright Road in Frognal. Have you ever heard of them before?"

It was really remarkable that a young girl should thus be so utterly lost in London. I, a man-about-town, knew the West End as I knew the way around my own chambers; and I thought I knew London; but now, on reflection, saw how utterly ignorant I was of the great world which lies beyond those few thoroughfares wherein are situated the theatres, the clubs, and the houses of the wealthy. For the bachelor who lives the life of London the world revolves around Piccadilly Circus.

My pretty companion stood puzzled. It was apparent that she had never heard of any of the thoroughfares I had mentioned, yet it was equally extraordinary that any persons living in London should be entirely ignorant of the district in which they resided.

"The thoroughfare in Hampstead is Ellerdale Road, while that in Lewisham is Ellerdale Street. It must be either one or the other, for they are the only two in London?" I said.

"How far are they apart?" she inquired, looking up from the book, dismayed.

“I don’t know the distance,” I was compelled to admit. “But the one is on one side of London, and the other is in the opposite direction—perhaps nearly eight miles away.”

“I believe it’s Ellerdale Street. I’ve always called it that, and neither of my aunts has corrected me.” Then suddenly, as she glanced round the room, she started as if in terror, and pointing to the little side-table, cried—

“Oh, look!”

I turned quickly, but saw nothing.

“Why, what is it?” I inquired in quick concern. But in an instant her face, a moment before suddenly blanched by some mysterious fear, relaxed into a smile, as she answered —

“Nothing! It was really nothing. I thought—I thought I saw something in that corner.”

“Saw something!” I exclaimed, advancing to the table. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” and she laughed a strange, forced laugh. “It was really nothing, I assure you.”

“But surely your imagination did not cause you to start like that,” I said dubiously. She was, I felt convinced, trying to conceal something from me. Could she, I wondered, be subject to hallucinations?

Then, as if to change the subject, she crossed to my side, and pointing to an antique ivory cross upon an ebony stand, much battered and yellow with age, which I had picked up in a shop on the Ponte Vecchio, in Florence, long ago, she exclaimed—

“What a quaint old crucifix!”

And she took it up and examined it closely, as a connoisseur might look at it.

“The figure, I see, is in silver,” she observed. “And it is very old. Italian, I should say.”

“Yes,” I replied, rather surprised at her knowledge. “How did you know that?”

But she smiled, and declared that she only guessed it to be so, as I had half an hour ago spoken of a recent winter spent in Italy. Then, after admiring it, she placed it down, and again turned, sighed heavily, and bent over the Directory, which was still open upon the table.

As she did so, she suddenly burst forth—

“At last! I’ve found it. Look! there can be no mistake. It isn’t Ellerdale Street, but Ellerdale Road!”

And bending beside her I read where she pointed with her slim finger the words, “16, Popejoy, Mrs”

“Is that your aunt’s name?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

“And yours?” I asked.

But she pursed up her lips and did not seem inclined to impart this knowledge to me.

“My name is really of no account,” she said. “We shall not meet again.”

“Not meet again?” I cried, for the thought of losing a friend so beautiful and so charming was an exceedingly unhappy one. “Why shall we not meet? You are going to live in London now, you say,” and taking a card from my cigarette-case I handed it to her.

With her clear, brilliant eyes fixed upon mine, she took the card almost mechanically, then glanced at it.

“I’m greatly indebted to you, Mr Cleeve,” she said. “But I don’t see there is any necessity for you to know my name. It is sufficient, surely, for you to reflect that you one night befriended one who was in distress.”

“But I must know your name,” I protested. “Come, do tell me.”

She hesitated, then lifted her eyes again to mine and answered—

“My name is Aline.”

“Aline,” I repeated. “A name as charming as its owner.”

“You want to pay me compliments,” she laughed, blushing deeply.

“And your surname?” I went on.

“Cloud,” she replied. “Aline Cloud.”

“Then your aunt’s name is Popejoy, and you are living at 16, Ellerdale Road, Hampstead,” I said, laughing. “Well, we have discovered it all at last.”

“Yes, thanks to you,” she replied, with a sigh of relief. Then looking anxiously at the clock, she added, “It’s late, therefore I must be going. I can get there in a cab, I suppose?”

“Certainly,” I answered; “and if you’ll wait a moment while I get a thick coat I’ll see you safely there—if I may be allowed.”

“No,” she said, putting up her little hand as if to arrest me, “I couldn’t think of taking you out all that way at this hour.”

I laughed, for I was used to late hours at the club, and had on many a morning crossed Leicester Square on my way home when the sun was shining.

So disregarding her, I went into my room, exchanged my light overcoat for a heavier one, placed a silk muffler around my neck, and having fortified myself with a whiskey and soda, we both went out, and entering a cab started forth on our long drive up to Hampstead.

The cabman was ignorant of Ellerdale Road, but when I directed him to Fitzjohn's Avenue he at once asserted that he would quickly find it.

"I hope we may meet again. We must!" I exclaimed, when at last we grew near our journey's end. "This is certainly a very strange meeting, but if at any time I can render you another service, command me."

"You are extremely good," she answered, turning to me after looking out fixedly upon the dark, deserted street, for rain was falling, and it was muddy and cheerless. "We had, however, better not meet again."

"Why?" I inquired. Her beauty had cast a spell about me, and I was capable of any foolishness.

"Because it is unnecessary," she replied, with a strange vagueness, yet without hesitation.

We were passing at that moment the end of a winding thoroughfare, and at a word the cabman turned his horse and proceeded slowly in search of Number 16.

Without much difficulty we found it, a good-sized detached house, built in modern style, with gable ends and long windows; a house of a character far better than I had expected. I had believed the street to be a mean one, of those poor-looking houses which bear the stamp of weekly rents, but was surprised to find a quiet, eminently respectable suburban road at the very edge of London. At

the back of the houses were open fields, and one or two of the residences had carriage-drives before them.

There was still a light over the door, which showed that the lost one was expected, and as she descended she allowed her little, well-gloved hand to linger for a moment in mine.

“Good night,” she said, merrily, “and thank you ever so much. I shall never forget your kindness—never.”

“Then you will repay me by meeting me again?” I urged.

“No,” she answered, in an instant serious. “It is best not.”

“Why? I trust I have not offended you?”

“Of course not. It is because you have been my friend to-night that I wish to keep apart from you.”

“Is that the way you treat your friends?” I inquired.

“Yes,” she replied, meaningly. Then, after a pause, added, “I have no desire to bring evil upon you.”

“Evil!” I exclaimed, gazing in wonderment at her beauty. “What evil can you possibly bring upon me?”

“You will, perhaps, discover some day,” she answered, with a hollow, artificial laugh. “But I’m so very late. Good night, and thank you again so much.”

Then turning quickly, with a graceful bow she entered the gate leading to the house, and rang the bell.

I saw her admitted by a smart maid, and having lit a fresh cigarette settled myself in a corner, and told the cabman to drive back to Charing Cross Mansions.

The man opened the trap-door in the roof of the conveyance, and began to chat, as night-cabmen will do to while away the time, yet the outlook was very dismal—that broad, long, never-ending road glistening with wet, and lit

by two straight rows of street-lamps as far as the eye could reach right down to Oxford Street.

I was thinking regretfully of Aline; of her grace, her beauty, and of the strange circumstances in which we had become acquainted. Her curious declaration that she might cause me some mysterious evil sorely puzzled me, and I felt impelled to seek some further explanation.

I entered my chambers with my latch-key, and the ever-watchful Simes came forward, took my hat and coat, drew forward my particular armchair, and placed the whiskey and syphon at my elbow.

I had mixed a final drink, and was raising my glass, when suddenly my eyes fell upon the little triangular side-table where the curios were displayed.

What I saw caused me to start and open my eyes in amazement. Then I walked across to inspect it more closely.

The ivory crucifix, the most treasured in my collection, had been entirely consumed by fire. Nothing remained of it but its ashes, a small white heap, the silver effigy fused to a mass.

“Simes!” I cried. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“I don’t know, sir,” he answered, pale in alarm. “I noticed it almost the instant you had left the house. The ashes were quite warm then.”

“Are you sure you haven’t had an accident with it?” I queried, looking him straight in the face.

“No, sir; I swear I haven’t,” he replied. “Your cab had hardly driven away when I found it just as it is now. I haven’t touched it.”