POOR DOCUMENT

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THE LAW OF THE LAND

By FRED M. WHITE

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CHAPTER VI.

A Claimant to the Throne.

With a great effort Ralph collected himself. His shivering fit had passed, but he had no need of anybody to tell him that he had suffered from a severe mental delusion. He went as far as the library and wrote his letter to Enid. It surprised him to see how firm and steady his handwriting was. He was by no means well, he explained, and could not come over today. Would Enid come to see him instead, and bring Dick along? As Ralph was sealing the letter, Barca came in. He carried no more than a handbag; he was taking nothing away with him.

"I hope to be back tonight," he said. "A few more hours and my experiment will be finished. Then I shall take myself off altogether and leave you to your teacups and your Phyllis, who, I understand, is in future to be your only joy. You are luckier than you deserve, Kingsmill. If I had half your money I would be famous before long. You are very, very fortunate."

Ralph laughed grimly. He wondered what Barca would have said had he known everything. The latter passed out of the house, striking into the park on his way to the station. His eyes gleamed and his smile was not quite pleasant to see. Barca slackened his pace; he seemed to be engrossed in some profound mental problem as he walked along. He came presently to a stile, leading to a stretch of woodland which formed a short cut to the station. A dainty white figure in a picture hat tripped toward him. The vision looked delightfully cool and refreshing for so hot a day, and Barca raised an admiring glance in her direction as she passed. Then a dazzling smile broke over the stranger's face.

"Good heavens!" Barca cried. "Well, I have had some surprise in my life, but never anything to equal this. Would you mind telling me what it all means and what you expect to gain by turning up in this Arcadian spot? I daresay I can give a pretty shrewd guess, but I would rather have it from your own lips."

The stranger gave a dazzling smile, though, at the same time, she looked very shrewdly into Barca's eyes. A close observer might have been justified in saying that she was weighing her chances, but if she was, she was gaining nothing from her scrutiny of Barca's puzzling face.

"You have heard the story of 'Mary and the little lamb,'" she said.

"Precisely," Barca said grimly. "But it is so long ago, in the tender days of my youth, that I have almost forgotten how the poem goes. But all this is beside the point. To begin with, even if I had more imagination than I possess, I could hardly picture you as the simple-hearted maiden who takes a pasionate delight in lambs, unless it may be lamb daintily cooked and served up with mint sauce. I asked you just now what you were doing down here, and,as they say in the House of Commons, I pause for a reply. I should tell the truth if I were you, not necessarily because it is the proper thing to do, but because it will not pay you to try to deceive me. Once more, what are you doing here?"

The woman looked up into the man's face almost timidly, her smile was soft and tender as if she wished to beseech his favor. Her eyes grew misty and luminous.

"You did not expect to see me here?" she said. "You are surprised, Richard?"

Barca made no reply for a moment. A look of amazing tenderness came over his hard, shrewd face, and the deepest affection filled his eyes. And there was reason for his admiration, for the stranger was a seductive vision of blue and gold beauty. Her figure was slight but of exquisite proportions, her expression almost saintlike in its purity. Nobody could have looked into the tender depths of those blue eyes and remained unmoved by their charm and rare pathos. There was something very inviting about the childishness of the perfect face.

"I am glad to meet you anywhere," Barca said at length. "I am just as ready to commit a crime or cut a throat for you as ever, Kate. Oh, you may smile, I know what a fool I am where you are concerned. To think that any woman should have so fair a face and cold a heart as you have! I don't think you have a heart at all. I wonder why God made you! And here am I with all the world at my feet wasting my time on you, loving you with a passion that you little dream of—but it is idle to talk like that. Kate, what are you doing here?"

Barca spoke with a passion that rendered his tones harsh and almost inaudible. The soft heavenly smile did not change on the pretty flower-like face; the sweet expression never altered.

"Surely you have no need to ask," the woman said. "I have been in Paris, as you know. Only yesterday I heard of Ralph Kingsmill's good fortune. I came down here to surprise him; I got sick of London streets and London conventions."

'And thought you would try the Arcadian role," Barca said with the suggestion of a sneer. "Upon my word, you look the part to perfection. Dressed as you are, you might pass for my Lady Bountiful. I can see the cottagers come to the doors for the sake of your smile and bless you as they pass. It seems to you a good thing to be mistress of Abbey Close and play Virginia to Kingsmill's Paul. And how dreadfully tired of it you would be in a week!"

Kate Lingen laughed pleasantly. Nobody had ever seen her put out or disturbed, no line of anger had ever crossed that child-like face. The woman's utter want of heart kept her young beyond her years, which were surprisingly more than appeared on the pink and white surface.

"You give me credit for no feeling," she said. "Why are you so candid with me, Richard?"

"Because I know you so well," Barca said bluntly. "Oh, I know my weakness for you. I know that you fascinate me, that in your presence all my strength dissolves, and you know I would sacrifice the whole future for one kiss of your lips. It is a kind of madness, a mixture of the animal and sentimental that lies beneath the surface of the coldest man. At the same time I know you have no heart and no feeling, that you are a pure and simple adventuress, that the very clothes you wear are not paid for, that some day you will step over the line and stand in the dock charged with the frauds that you have hidden so carefully. I am not blind to your failings, my dear. But you are going to do no good here. It was your fancy once to play at Platonics with Ralph Kingsmill, 'the pretty boy,' who wrote you those exquisite love letters. But the 'pretty boy' found you out and he would have no more of you. In his romantic way he is the best of the lot of us. And so you have come down here to try to whistle the dog back again, eh?"

Kate Lingen laughed again; she was not in the least annoyed.

"You have guesed it," she said, with the most melting smile. It seemed strange that one so fair and innocent looking could be so deep and full of guile. "Ralph was foolish. He did not understand the largeness of my sympathies for other men."

"To put it bluntly and plainly, he found you out, Kate."

"Well, you may express it in that coarse way, if you please. I always liked Ralph better than any of you. He chose to part, and I let him go. But I did not give him back his freedom, because if I ever do marry again, I should rather choose Ralph than anybody. And I keep those dear letters of his, not from any sordid reason, but because——"

"Oh, indeed! You have kept the letters for their literary flavor and charm. Not to hurt your feelings unduly, I presume they would make the basis of a very pretty breach of promise case. The sort of letters that would be remembered with roars of laughter in court—the kind of comedy that would drive a sensitive man like Kingsmill almost to madness. And now he has a fine estate and £10,000 a year. He should be good for a round sum of money, eh, Kate! And one or two of your tradesmen have been worrying you lately. When you buy a diamond trinket on credit and pawn it the same day, you are putting that lovely neck of yours inside the noose of the law. Don't deny what I say, because I know what I am talking about. I have a much better plan than yours, but I see that you mean to go your own way in the matter. You will get a rather cold surprise presently, and then you will come to me for assistance. When the body of Ralph Kingsmill comes to be cut up you will not be the only bird of prey there, I promise you."

"What do you mean?" the woman asked quickly. "There never was a man yet——"

"Whom you could not twist round your little finger—quite so. But we will not go into that at present. You are going to call on Ralph today?"

"Indeed, yes, I came down for that very purpose. I inquired my way and walked over from the station. And such a lovely walk, Richard. Is that Ralph's house facing through the trees yonder? It has always been my dream to have a little paradise on the Thames up Cookham way, but I did not go so far as this. Let me go along without further parley. And when everything is settled, there will always be a welcome waiting for you at Abbey Close, Richard."

Barca laughed silently as if something amused him. His cynical bitterness was none the less because he realized to the full his weakness where this woman was concerned.

"That is very kind of you. Your success with men has blinded your reason, Kate. The only thing to your credit is that no breath of scandal has touched you. But there are other girls in the world as beautiful as yourself and far more worthy of an honest man's affection. Did it ever strike you, so to speak, there is another Richmond in the field, that Kingsmill might have given his heart eleewhere?"

"Is that really a fact?" Kate Lingen asked sweetly. "Ralph is engaged."

"He is. I take positively great satisfaction in telling you the fact. Kingsmill is going to marry Miss Enid Charteris, who lives close by. I had it from the lips of our young friend last night."

"This is very unkind," the girl said in the same sweet level tones. "Very disturbing for the lady. I presume she cares for him very much; in fact, any girl must, seeing that Ralph is so handsome and makes love so charmingly. Still, she will get over it in time."

The speaker waved her hand and passed on, leaving Barca to pursue his way filled with a sense of defeat and grudging admiration. As if nothing had happened to disturb her plans, Kate Lingen tripped along the wooded path and then into the park that led to Abbey Close. Her red lips were parted in a smile, her blue eyes were filled with a tender admiration. At that moment she was touched with something akin to womanly feeling. How lovely it all looked, how peaceful was the old house in the sunshine! As Kate approached the house a tall figure rose from a large seat under a cedar tree and came towards her. Ralph had been seeing visions all day; this lovely one did not surprise him in the least.

But all the same he was disturbed and uneasy. Joicey had come back with a reply to his note. Enid was very sorry to hear that her lover was not well, she would follow her letter and come over with Dick without delay. She might arrive at any time now. And here was the woman who had caused all the trouble, the person that Ralph had the most reason to dread in the whole world. Truly his sin was finding him out now. A bolt had fallen from the blue that threatened to crush all the sweetness and marrow out of life.

"Mrs. Lingen," he gasped, as he hardly touched the eager outstretched hand, "this—this is quite an unexpected pleasure! But when we parted some year or so ago it was understood——"

"It was foolish of us," the woman said, with a soft sweep of her long lashes. "You were hasty, my dear boy, and perhaps I was careless. But I have never forgotten. Those dear letters of yours have proved to be one of the great consolations of my life."

"Oh, this is going too far," Ralph protested. "Our parting was complete and definite. And you gave me your promise to destroy those letters."

"I couldn't, dear," the woman pleaded. "I honestly tried to. But I had not the heart to do it. When I came back to London, everything reminded me of you; it was too painful. And I could not stand it any longer, I wanted to be by your side and ask your forgiveness. Oh, Ralph, if you had not loved me you would not have written to me as you did. And love like that does not come and go at a moment's notice. When I look into your face——"

The speaker paused for they were no longer alone. A tall slender figure in a wide straw hat stood under the cool shadow of the cedar; her blue eyes were looking anxiously into Ralph's pale, haggard face. But Kate Lingen was not in the least put out. She rose and regarded Enid Charteris in her sweetest manner, the childlike smile on her lips.

"Some visitors of yours, Ralph," she said. "Pray introduce me."

Enid bowed a little coldly. She did not extend her hand. Ralph wondered miserably if she had overheard any of that impassioned speech of Kate's.

"I have heard your name before," Kate said. "Perhaps we shall know one another better when we are neighbors. Has not Ralph told you, Miss Charteris? Naughty Ralph not told you that for the last two years we have been engaged to be married. And such an ideal lover, too, so sweet and tender and poetic a letter writer."

Enid's slender figure seemed to freeze, her lips turned pale as ashes. Then her eyes, like frosty fires, turned mutely to Ralph for an explanation.

CHAPTER VII.

An Injured Innocent.

Ralph appearred but dimly to apprehend what was taking place. After all, what did it matter, what did anything matter now? A quick sharp question broke from Enid's lips, but Ralph did not hear it. The question was repeated before he replied.

"I do not know," he said. "This lady is mistaken. She is not engaged to me."

Probably Kate Lingen had expected some such reply. A little cry of pain escaped her; she laid her hand to her heart. The only one of the party who remained calm was Enid's brother Richard. His rather grave face was rendered all the more solemn by reason of the glass screwed in his right eye. It always puzzled people at the first glance to say whether Dick Charteris was very clever or very stupid. It was impossible to guess from his face now. Just for an instant his clean shaven lips seemed to flicker as he glanced from one to the other.

"You are teasing me," Kate Lingen said. Her childishness and innocence were very marked as he spoke. "But your jest is not in the best taste, Ralph, seeing that Miss Charteris is a stranger to me."

Enid's eyes flashed approval. She felt hurt and humiliated, yet she was sorry for the pretty childlike figure by her side. Kate Lingen's innocence had taken her in entirely. It was impossible to look at the sweet face and believe that any guile could lie behind it.

But Ralph knew. He had known for the past two years. He realized with shamed helplessness how utterly the woman had deceived him. He was perfectly aware that she had neither heart nor feeling. She looked on the admiration of men as a flower looks on the sunshine; it was her pastime to bring men to her feet and smile at their folly. She had caused other women to suffer in this way. It was two years since Ralph had found this out, two years since he had spoken his mind freely. Whether or not his bitter words had left a sting, he could not say. Kate Lingen had parted from him with an innocent smile; if she felt anything, she did not show it.

She was now playing the injured one perfectly. Her face was pensive and mournful; she almost compelled Ralph to believe that he was acting brutally towards her. And as to Enid, she had inclined to Kate's side from the first.

"I repeat what I say," Ralph said dully. "It is two years since I last saw Mrs. Lingen. We did not part on the best of terms."

"There was no quarrel on my side," the woman said with childish eagerness. "It was Ralph's pride that came between us. He was poor; he declined to hold me to my promise. But I refused to be released. And I felt that when prosperity came to him he would be too proud, too reticent to come to me. And I cried for joy when I heard of his good fortune; I was reading your letters only last night."

"You gave me your solemn promise to destroy them," Ralph burst out. "Oh, this is maddening. You stand there with a smiling lie on your lips——"

"There is no occasion for any vulgar scene," Enid said coldly.

"I beg your pardon," Ralph replied. "So far as I am concerned there is not the least disposition on my part to make any scene, vulgar or otherwise. You seem to forget that it is only one word against another, and loth as I am to contradict a lady, I am bound to protest that Mrs. Lingen is mistaken in her statement."

"Hardly that," Enid replied. "You seem to forget your admission just now that certain letters had passed between you, and surely you are not going to deny them."

"Letters are capable of more than one interpretation," Ralph responded. "From time to time, letters are published in the shape of books, they have appeared in the form of a novel, and yet none of them could be held to have a compromising nature. Oh! I find it almost impossible to explain myself. I make every allowance for your feelings, Enid, but you are placing me in a most unpleasant position and one which no one with a spark of manhood could endure for a moment."

"That is so like a man," Enid protested, "always thinking about himself and never about the woman he has injured. In this case, it appears to me that there are two women. I am listening to you with all the patience I can command in the very faint hope——"

"Give me time, do," Ralph cried. "Was ever man placed in such a cruel dilemma? Here am I utterly incapable of dealing with the question as I could if Mrs. Lingen were of my own sex. In the circumstances I can do nothing else but——"

Enid faced round hot and indignant.

"It sems almost impossible to believe you," she said coolly. "Even a child could see that Mrs. Lingen is speaking the truth. No woman could lie with eyes like hers. After all, it is only another instance of changeable man, the man who slights the love of a woman and practices the arts that won her on another. And to deny it——"

"I do deny it," Ralph cried. He felt like a stag at bay. "Two years ago Mrs. Lingen and myself were more than friends. I did ask her to marry me; I did write her letters. It makes me feel hot when I think of those letters. But you must make allowance for one who is at heart a poet. And then I found the woman out. In my own defence, I am forced to speak plainly. I found her out. I am one of a score. Admiration is the very air that she breathes. She would pine and die without it. Oh! there is no passion or feeling there, nothing that scandal could feed upon. She is too self-calculating for that. For two years we have never met Then this good fortune comes to me and the ridiculous claim is set up. Should I have ever heard of it had I not become master of Abbey Close? Never! You will see what your lily is capable of, Enid. This is a plot against my freedom. She will demand money for her lacerated feelings. I shall be dragged into a court of justice——"

"This interview is getting impossible," Enid interrupted in her cold voice. "It pains and doubly humiliates me, but perhaps it is a blessing in disguise. It is not too late so save my self respect. And you wrong this lady here. She could never do that."

"Don't you think I may be allowed to make a suggestion?" Dick Charteris said. "Making due alowance for the heated feelings of you both, it is just possible that this misunderstanding might be cleared up without the assumption that Ralph is the sort of man who goes about making love to every woman he meets. Don't you know how often one reads in a law case the side for the prosecution, and how often one comes to the conclusion that the prisoner is utterly and hopelessly bad? You can't possibly see a way out of it, and yet when the other side of the story comes to be told, you wonder how you could be so stupid as not to have seen the whole thing from the first. Now if you two ladies will stay here whilst I go into the house and talk the matter over with Ralph——"

"All I want is truth and justice," Kate Lingen said, with her handkerchief to her eyes. "I never expected to go through such a scene as this, I always knew that Ralph was brilliantly clever, but hitherto I have found him the soul of honor and integrity. In fact, he has been rather too simple."

"There is no doubt about that," Ralph said bitterly. "Of my simplicity there is no question whatever."

"That seems rather a cowardly way out," Enid exclaimed. "And after all what Ralph said just now about Mrs. Lingen's mercenary views was a downright insult."

"It seems almost incredible," Mrs. Lingen sobbed.

"Indeed, it does," Enid protested warmly. "Much as I have learnt during the last half hour I could not look you in the face and deem you guilty of such unworthy motives. You will forgive me if I ever went so far as to doubt you at all."

Something like a chuckle broke from Dick Charteris, only to be instantly suppressed. He could see how Enid's implied trust in Kate Lingen had disconcerted the latter. She was literally forced to play up to Enid's high ideals.

"Of—of course not," she stammered. "I could not drag my feelings into the light of day. Oh, Ralph, Ralph, why do you do these cruel things? Your treatment and your duplicity have broken my heart. But I can see clearly what has happened. Miss Charteris is another victim. But, like me, she will get over it in time."

Kate Lingen spoke in tones of the deepest pity, her blue eyes full of tears. It was only Ralph who knew how keenly she was enjoying the situation, with what malignant pleasure she plunged the dagger into Enid's palpitating heart. And he was powerless to prove it; he could see how Enid was drawn to her tormentor.

"I am helpless," he said. "I can do no more. How vile a thing can lie under a perfect exterior, how false and hollow——"

With a gesture of despair Ralph threw up his hands. Kate Lingen dropped into a seat and began to cry in a perfectly charming way.

"He is mad," she sobbed. "These clever people often are. He will come to his senses presently and be sorry for all this. Meanwhile it is very painful for me, Miss Charteris. And I came all the way from London quite alone to—to—"

Enid laid a tender hand on the speaker's shouider. Her own wound was smarting terribly, but she thanked God that she had not shown it.

"I am going home," she said. "The cart is here. Will you come along with me and have some tea? Afterwards I can drive you to the station."

"No," Dick said suddenly, "I am quite sure that Mrs. Lingen would not care to go as far as Charteris Park. If she goes by way of the fields she will catch the 4.49 up train and get tea in the station."

The speaker's voice was dry and hard. Mrs. Lingen's tear-streamed eyes were raised to his with a glance half-demure, half-defiant. Dick's eyeglass was glittering and strong. Then the blue eyes were dropped again and Mrs. Lingen shook her head with a sigh.

"You are very good, dear Miss Charteris," she murmured. "In the circumstances perhaps your brother is right. It would be truer delicacy to refrain from intruding on you."

"Very well," Enid replied. Perhaps she had been a little precipitate. "In that case I will drive you as far as the station. It is all on my way home. My brother will remain; I am sure that he has something to say to Mr. Kingsmill."

Dick nodded without committing himself to any reply. In a speculative way he watched his sister and her outraged companion as they crossed the fields. Then he took a cigarette from his case and lighted it with great deliberation.

"It is a very foolish thing, my dear Ralph," he drawled, "to conceal one's past from the woman one loves. Enid told me all about it last night, and I was glad, in fact, I was most devilish glad. And she boasted to me that you had never cared for a woman before. Needless to say, I did not allude to Kate Lingen. Now if you had told her all about the Lingen business, she would not only have forgiven you, but she would have regarded the matter as a high compliment to herself. If she had ever seen the fascinating Kate in the flesh, she would have been still more pleased at her own powers. Instead of which you talk the usual gush about the only woman in the wide world for me and so on. with this result. Of course, this contretemps is very unfortunate; it is the unexpected and desirable that does happen sometimes. And Kate lost no time in looking you up as soon as she heard of your prosperity. She knows what a wonderful way she has with men and she came down here post haste to turn you round her little finger. By Jove, she is a clever little jade. How cunningly she played the pathetic business, and how she took Enid in! As a matter of fact, I can tell you just why she came down here."

"Why?" Ralph asked miserably. "Not that it matters in the least."

"Oh! but it does. There are four of us who know the history of Kate pretty well. I am one, you are another, and the other two are Stephen Holt and Richard Barca. Against his better judgment, Barca is over head and ears in love with the woman; there is no mad thing he would not do for her. But I am wandering from the point for a moment. As you know, Kate has been going it lately. She poses as a woman of means, her idea is to make a good second marriage. But she has got nearly to the end of her tether and must have money soon. She would have liked to fly higher than you, my friend, but for the present you will do. If she would announce her engagement to you, she could borrow the £3,000 which she needs to keep her from a criminal prosecution."

"Who told you all this?" Ralph asked.

"I got it from her brother, Stephen Holt, a day or two ago. As you know, this kind of social problem fascinates me, I study them. A little later I shall enlighten Enid as to Kate Lingen and open her eyes to her true nature. Don't you worry about that. Enid is not the girl to change; she has given her heart to you and will not recall it. You are going to live to be happy yet."

Ralph shook his head mournfully. Happiness and himself would walk far apart in future. After all that had happened it did not much matter whether Enid forgave him or not.

"You leave it to me," Dick went on cheerfully. "I shall be able to settle Kate for you. But you were a fool to trust her over those letters; you might have known she would not destroy them. And as for her suffering in silence, that is all nonsense. She will try to get money out of you, and she will probably succeed. A sensitive chap like you would do anything rather than have those letters read in open court and printed in the paper. Still, I begin to see my way to settle the whole business. The next time I get hold of Stephen Holt I shall let him know that I—"

"You will never get hold of him," Ralph said. "You will never see him again. Oh, I must tell you. I must tell somebody or I shall go mad. Stephen Holt is dead, he died last night in this very house. He came to see me, he menaced me with those very letters and threatened to come between Enid and myself. And I lost my temper and I killed him. I am the murderer of Stephen Holt!"

CHAPTER VIII.

Dick to the Rescue.

"Steady on," Charteris said soberly. "Pull yourself together, old man. Your good fortune or something has turned your brain. You could not have killed Holt last night for the simple reason that he wasn't here. He dined with us and I drove him to the station and saw him get into the train. I also saw him send a telegram making an appointment in London for eleven o'clock last night."

"Quite so," Ralph replied. "He got out at the Junction and came here. He had been drinking. I may as well make a clean breast of the whole thing while I am about it. The whole of the trouble arose over Enid. Holt discovered last night at dinner that there was something between Enid and myself. He had an idea in his head that if I had not come along, Enid would have cared for him; in fact, he told me that she had been very near to caring for him at one time. We had rather a violent scene, I was to stand out of the way of the man and Enid was to be his consolation. And when I refused, Holt spoke of those letters which I had believed to be destroyed. He said he could get the letters any time and that he would show them to Enid. I can't tell you what happened after that, except that there was a lot of red mist before my eyes, and when the mist cleared away Holt was lying on the floor of the dining-room dead. I killed him with an Indian paper-cutter. I can see the body now as it lay before me."

Ralph covered his eyes and shuddered. It was some time before Dick spoke.

"This is amazing," he said. "But I confess that I don't understand as yet. You say the thing took place last night, but where is the body? Where are your witnesses? Who discovered the remains of the unfortunate man? What about the police?"

"Nobody knows anything as yet," Ralph proceeded to explain. "I am going to surprise you still more. I played the coward, Dick, I kept the truth to myself. Of course, I should have called the servants in at once and explained what had happened. But nobody guessed, not even Barca, who was working at some experiment in his bedroom. I pretended to Barca that I had gone to bed as soon as he did; I looked into his room in my pyjamas. I hoped that the body might pass unindentified. I even placed things in the pockets to make it look as if burglary had taken place, as if two burglars had quarrelled, you understand. And when I could not stand it any longer I made an excuse to send old Joicey down to the dining room. He came back as if nothing had happened. And when I got down to breakfast nothing had happened. I left Holt lying in a pool of blood, the very flowers on the table were splashed with it. You know that wonderful carpet. It would show stains plainly. And yet when I got down this morning to breakfast there was no sign of a stain. Nobody had seen any sign of a body. It was as if the whole thing had been a hideous dream."

"A hallucination, perhaps, Ralph. But your eyes do not suggest that. Are you quite sure that Holt is dead?"

"Oh! quite," Ralph said impatiently. "No question about it. But it is the mystery of the thing which is maddening me. What became of the body? Who took it away? Who took the trouble to make everything as usual? By what wonderful process was that carpet cleaned? Why did the person who removed the body keep the thing a secret? I tell you those things go whirling in my brain till my head feels like bursting. You are fond of intricate problems, Dick. Please solve this one for me."

"I'll try," Dick said cheerfully. "Let us go back into the dining room. I should very much like to examine that priceless carpet of yours. Your predecessor was rather proud of it. So Barca was staying here last night?"

Dick examined the carpet carefully, but he could see nothing to help him so far. Ralph pointed out the bloodstains in the tea roses. For a long time Dick regarded the scene of the tragedy through his eyeglass. He smiled presently.

"I begin to have an idea," he said. "I am putting one or two things together. My dear Ralph, it is quite plain that at present you need have no fear of the police. Your enemy is a cunning and a powerful man, who will not show his hand unless we can force it. Now what would be the object of saving your face for you in this way. Certainly not friendship, for it was too risky a job. There are scores of such men, and to get money and the desire to obtain money is the mainspring of this puzzle. But I must not divulge my theory prematurely, for it may break down. And you don't want to wait till your nerves are all shattered for your man to show his hand. We must force him to do so. Would you mind lending me the sum of £5,000?"

"You may take every penny I have in the world if you will only get me out of this dreadful trouble," Ralph groaned. "But nobody could get me out of this mess. Mystery or no mystery, there is no getting away from th efact that I am a murderer and that sooner or later I must pay the penalty of my crime. Holt's body will be discovered."

"I don't think so, for the simple reason —but I need not go into that. You have given me a very fine clue if you only knew it, Ralph, in the matter of those letters, I mean the letters that you wrote in your period of calf love to Kate Lingen. Those letters proved to be your undoing; they may ultimately prove to be your salvation. That is why I want you to lend me £5,000. It may be necessary to use it; it may not be necessary to part with a penny. But I want to be armed. If you can put your hand on the money, I should like to have it without delay."

"No trouble about that," Ralph said. "There was plenty of cash in the bank when I came into the property, and I have hardly touched it. If you like I will give you a cheque now so that you can take it away——"

"No, no. Post a cheque tonight for £5,000 to the bank people at Stonehouse and ask them to pass it into my account. Don't fail to do this, as I may need to draw a cheque against yours this very evening. I'm going to London by the afternoon train, by the very train that Kate Lingen goes by if I can catch it."

"All right," Ralph said moodily. "It is all the same to me. But nothing you can do will save me from the punishment that I deserve."

"Nonsense," Dick cried cheerfully. "I'm going to save you. I'm going to expose one of the vilest conspiracies that ever was played on an innocent man. Every moment the thing grows clearer and clearer before my eyes. And you are not going to lose Enid simply because you told her the traditional lie that she was the first woman you ever loved. Now sit down and write that cheque and letter, so that I may post it at the station. You are not in a fit state to be trusted to remember a thing like this. I don't suppose I shall be back till the day after tomorrow. And in the meantime, as far as you are able, let me implore you to go on just as you are. And don't tell anybody else what you have told me, though your miserable face is eloquent enough of misery, suffering, and remorse. What did Barca say to you when you came down to breakfast today?"

"Oh, he did not seem to notice much. Said I looked as if I had found a ghost or something of that kind. Otherwise he was not suspicious."

Dick chuckled; he seemed to be pleased about something. He looked at his watch and declared that he must be going if he hoped to catch his train.

"I'll wire to my people from the station," he explained. "Good-bye, old chap, and keep up your spirits. Everything is certain to come out right in the long run. Give me the letter with the cheque, please."

Dick was gone, and Ralph was left to his melancholy reflections. But he felt better and easier in his mind now that he had told the dread secret to someone. The terrible tension on his brain seemed to have relaxed wonderfully.

By dint of a little diplomacy, Dick managed to take his seat in the train without attracting the attention of Enid or her newly found friend. He smiled to himself as he saw Enid walking out of the station with her head in the air. Doubtless she was miserable enough, in spite of her proud defiant air, but Dick told himself that he was going to alter all that soon. Over half a dozen meditative cigarettes he matured his plan of action. An hour later and he was in the drawing-room of Mrs. Lingen's London house, closeted with that lady, who seemed surprised and a little uneasy at seeing him.

"I don't quite understand," she stammered. "You must have come up in the same train with me. Have—have you any message from Ralph?"

"Now what makes you think I have a message from Ralph?" Dick asked sweetly. "My dear lady, we are very old friends, and though I might have appeared to have neglected you of late, I have never entirely forgotten you. Let us suggest for the moment that I am writing a play and I want a fascinating character study to give backbone to my comedy. If I could put you on the stage just as you are, it would make my fortune."

Mrs. Lingen laughed unrestrainedly. Most women of her class would have hated a man who talked to them like that, but then Kate Lingen knew Dick thoroughly, and, what was more to the point, he knew her almost better than she knew herself. From the first, he had never come under her sway, nor had he taken any pains to conceal his true opinion of her. She interested and amused him, and, sooth to say, she was more than a little afraid of Dick Charteris.

"Oh, you can drop that," she said. "I know perfectly well that you did not come here for the pleasure of my society; and as to writing a play, why you are far too lazy to do anything of the kind. Now tell me candidly why you are here tonight? I am so curious to know."

"Of course, you are," Dick laughed. "You would not be a woman if you were not. And I'll pay you the compliment of feeling that you have a pretty shrewd idea of my errand."

Mrs. Lingen laughed again, she showed her dazzling teeth in a fascinating smile.

"I suppose it is a question of price," she said. "You have come at Ralph's suggestion to make me an offer."

"Well, we won't put it quite in that way," Dick smiled. "I am more or less on my own. You acted superbly this afternoon; in fact, I have never seen you in such form. There need not be any delusions between us, Kate. I was one of the few men you never could fascinate, and I have a fair estimate of your character. How wonderfully you took my sister in, and how you must have enjoyed the situation! But all the same, you are not coming between my sister and Kingsmill, and you are not going to bring that breach of promise action."

"What is to prevent me?" the woman asked.

"Well, in the first place it will take too long. The case could not come on for hearing for at least six months. And in the meantime what are you going to do? Before the end of the week you must have £3,000 or go to prison; even your fascinations would not have much effect on a judge and jury. You need not deny this, because I am sure of my facts. Ralph has made a fool of himself, and is prepared to pay for his folly. He ought to have seen that those letters were destroyed. But he didn't, hence these tears. Give me those letters back and I'll give you a cheque now for £3,000."

"Make it another thousand," Mrs. Lingen cried, with a quick, business air. "I am not going to try to bully you, Dick; you know too much for that. Give me £4,000, and the letters are yours to do as you like with."

"It is a bargain," Dick cried. "Only I'm not going to trust you. There are thirteen letters altogether, and I'm going to read them all before I part with a penny. Turn them out on the table and let us get to business at once. What are you staring at—do you suppose that I am going to try to force the letters out of you or anything dramatic like that? This is going to be a cold-blooded transaction on strictly conventional lines."

With a laugh Kate Lingen turned to a little Dutch bureau in the window. With the aid of a pocket key she opened the top of the desk and plunged her hands into a pigeon hole. Dick watched her keenly. He saw her face gradually grow white; he saw the veins in the ivory forehead change to hard, knitted cords.

"Robbed!" she gasped. "Robbed and tricked and cheated. Some thief has been here. Oh, if I——"

She stopped, breathless, quivering with fury.

"I wish," Dick drawled, "that my sister could see you now. It would be a liberal education."

CHAPTER IX.

The Law of the Land.

Dick Charteris smiled as if something had pleased him. But he kept his feelings to himself. He had never seen Kate Lingen like this before; he was astonished at the transformation of her face. The soft smile had vanished, the innocent look in her eyes had given way to a snarling, selfish anger. Almost unconscious of the presence of her guest, Kate Lingen raged up and down the room like a lovely fury. Dick wished again that Enid could see her fellow-victim of man's perfidy now. The sight might have saved her a world of trouble.

Then the woman turned on him viciously. Even her voice had changed as she spoke. It had grown harsh and metallic.

"I believe you know something about it," she cried. "You are not in the least astonished. You knew that the letters you spoke of were stolen when you came here."

"Now be reasonable," Dick suggested. "You will gain nothing by this kind of thing. Would I come here and offer you £3,000 for those letters if I knew they had already been stolen? But I am not surprised, mind you. Ralph Kingsmill is worth blackmailing just now, and you have made no secret as to your possession of those precious documents. It is more than likely that Kingsmill would be disposed to pay handsomely for them, and this must be obvious to the thief. You will have to look amongst your own friends for the new owner of those letters."

"What do you mean by that?" Kate Lingen said.

"Well, my dear lady, I think it is pretty evident. As I said just now, you have made no secret of the fact that those precious letters of Ralph Kingsmill's have a commercial value, in which you are absolutely right. I can hear you boasting of them at little supper parties, and telling your friends how you were going to be rich before long. Of course, you have to be discreet in remarks of this kind, because it might come to Richard Barca's ears, and that would never do."

Kate Lingen smiled a little nervously.

"Why shouldn't it come to his ears?" she said. "Do you suppose for a moment that I am afraid of him?"

"Why, of course, you are. You know what a man is capable of, and you know how desperately fond he is of you. Among all your many admirers you have never had one yet who loves you with the passionate devotion of Richard Barca. Why, for your sake, I believe he is even capable of forgetting his self interest. For a man like that to care for a woman more than he cares for himself is little short of a miracle. But all this is beside the point. Surely, you can give a pretty good guess what use those letters are going to be put to. They are just as useful in the hands of your brother as they are in your own. As I said before, you will have to look nearer home for the person who was so lucky as to find himself the proud possessor of those interesting epistles. What you said to me just now is positively childish, and I wonder that, with all your acumen, you did not see it at once.

Kate Lingen composed herself a little. But the smile did not come back to her face, nor the innocent look to her eyes. She appeared strangely older, Dick thought, older and more haggard. Really, deprived of her expression and baby attractiveness, she was not in the least beautiful. Dick pictured to himself what she would be like in ten years. But he had not come to discuss problems of this kind. After what Ralph had told him as to Stephen Holt's threat about the letters, he had come here more or less expecting to find that Holt had robbed his sister of the documents. Dick was anxious to know if his suspicions were correct, for the knowledge would clear the ground wonderfully. And now he knew as well as if he had been told what had become of Ralph's passionate love letters. Beyond a doubt, Stephen Holt had stolen them. Things were going very well up to now.

(To be continued.)

GOVERNMENT TICKET IN NORTHUMBERLAND

Messrs. Murray, Winslow, Miller and Anderson Nominated—Premier Robinson's Speech.

Chatham, N. B., Feb. 7—A convention of the supporters of the government was held this afternoon in Masonic Hall to select candidates for the coming election. Robert Murray called the meeting to order. William Kerr was elected chairman, and P. J. McIntyre secretary.

The chairman moved that one man be selected from each parish. The delegates were then selected and forthwith withdrew to select their candidates. The nominating committee was as follows: George Hilderbrand, S. D. Heckbert, Wm. Kerr, Chatham; Wm. Damery, John Pallen, R. H. Gremley, Samuel Russell, L. B. McMurdo, Newcastle; A. J. Williston, Hardwicke; Wm. Ullock, Glenelg; James Anderson, Alnwicke; A. Alcorn, Blackville; James Wetmore, W. A. Campbell, Ludlow H. Holmes, D. Baldwin, Nelson; Wm. Maloney, John Buckley, Rogersville; Sam Russell, T. B. McMurdo, R. Alcorn acted as chairman.

While the foregoing meeting was in progress Dr. Byrne, a staunch and ardent supporter of the government was called upon to speak. He dwelt at length upon the Central Railway and said that instead of it being a useless undertaking, as declared Mr. Hazen, the would-be premier, and his colleague, Mr. Flemming, it would be the means of bringing into touch some of the richest coal fields in the world and thereby enable consumers to purchase coal at a much lower rate and still have the best article.

The Ticket.

The report of the meeting was then received and adopted. The candidates nominated were: Robert Murray, Chatham; W. C. Winslow, Chatham; S. W. Miller, Newcastle; Wm. Anderson, Burnt Church.

The announcement was received with much applause and the candidates were then called upon for speeches.

Robert Murray thanked the audience for his nomination and spoke of the stability of the government and how he meant to work for the interests of his party.

Next came Mr. Anderson, who said it was not in his line to make a political speech, that he did not believe in too much talking but in working and working hard, and that he for one intended to live up to his motto. He finished by offering thanks for his nomination.

S. W. Miller then came forward and thanked the audience for his nomination which was quite unexpected by him, but seeing that he was nominated it was his intention to do all in his power to further the interests of the government of New Brunswick.

Winslow "Prepared for the Worst."

At this juncture W. C. Winslow, who had not been able to get to the meeting earlier, put in an appearance and was received with much applause. He said he must apologize for being late, but that he had been making his will and that had detained him. But now he felt easier in his mind and was prepared for the worst. He did not wish to detain the meeting longer and would speak in the evening at the mass meeting and concluded by thanking them for his nomination.

Premier Robinson then brought the meeting to a close with a short speech.

The mass meeting in the evening was attended by a large crowd. W. A. Campbell occupied the chair. The speakers were Premier Robinson and the four candidates, and W. B. Snowball. Premier Robinson was received with great applause. He said that one of the most important questions which had been discussed time and again by his opposition friends was the financial condition of the province of New Brunswick and he dwelt at length on this. He said in regard to school books it is very desirable that the price of these be reduced. "We have decided to appoint an independent commission of men who understand the publishing of school books and the requirements of schools who will be able to go into the question regardless of politics and see if there is any possible way by which the price of these can be reduced. When Mr. Hazen says he can reduce the price from two-thirds to one-half he is saying what is impossible."

Mr. Robinson said his policy was one which would appeal to all sections of the country. He referred to the International Railway project. He also spoke of the pet scheme of Hon. H. R. Emmerson—the absorption by the I. C. R. of the branch lines—and said it was the duty of the provincial government to back it up.

In concluding the premier said that government was meeting with success all parts of the province. The meeting concluded with