

A VOICE FROM THE HIDDEN WORLD

A Story of Interest to Those Who Believe the Unbelievable

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

RESUME OF FIRST PART.

Dr. Faggett, a young practitioner with a patient, Miss Desmond, whose apparent ailment is self-starvation. One day, Faggett visits her and discovers her radiant in a new gown. She confesses that she has redeemed this gown from pawn at the price of going hungry. She had done so in the hope of pleasing a lover whom she is immediately expecting. This man calls at Faggett's office that night and with the doctor returns to Miss Desmond's residence. They find that she has been foully murdered.

CHAPTER II.



It is really quite impossible for any one to be bored at Mauleven Abbey. Lady Mary always has something fresh going."

"Wasn't it a delightful thought? One feels so much more interest in the performance, too, seeing it down here in one's own drawing-room. I'm sure I

wanted to go to the Adelaide Hall awfully, but Henry wouldn't let me. He wasn't quite sure that it was proper—such nonsense! Now I feel quite repaid for my disappointment. It really is charming of you, Lady Mary, and I am looking forward to this evening tremendously."

"So am I."

"And I."

"And I," I added grimly, from my position somewhat in the background.

Lady Mauleven turned towards me with a little laugh.

"Dr. Faggett, I recognise the voice of an unbeliever, do I not? You have no faith in Mademoiselle Astrea's powers? Am I not right?"

"Perfectly, Lady Mary," I answered, bowing. "I have no sympathy for, or belief in, psychology as interpreted by Mademoiselle Astrea and her disciples."

"How do you explain the phenomena which she produces, then?" asked another of the group of ladies.

I shrugged my shoulders indifferently.

"I have been to Maskelyne and Cooke's," I answered; "I saw some wonderful things there, but I could not explain them unless I was let into the secret."

"You think, then, that we have reached the limit of knowledge and control over the natural forces of the world?"

"I do not say that," I answered gravely; "indeed, I should be very sorry to say it. But I do not believe in the Mahatmas and Initiates of Miss Astrea."

"There have been some strange things seen. All London is talking of it."

"London is generally talking about something," I replied.

"By the bye, Lady Mary," some one interrupted, "if it is not a rude question, however did you persuade Astrea to come here? I heard that she would never even lecture in private except to Theosophists, and abhorred anything in the shape of a performance."

Lady Mary looked a little perplexed.

"That is so, I believe," she answered. "To tell you the truth, I was as much surprised as any one. Mr. Fitzgerald took me to her home twice, and as I was coming away the last time, I asked her, never imagining that she would accept, to spend Christmas here with us."

"And she accepted?"

"At once. 'I should be very pleased to come,' she said, 'if you would allow me one evening to speak to your guests—Christmas Eve.' Of course, I said that I should be charmed."

"And she has actually come?"

"She arrived an hour ago. She is having tea in her room, and will not appear until evening. Then she is going to lecture, or give a performance of some sort, in the library."

"She won't come down to dinner, then?"

"No; she begged to be excused. She likes to be quiet always for an hour or two before appearing in public. I wonder when the men will be back? It's a horrid day for shooting."

The conversation drifted away; and, as was natural amongst a little group of women drinking afternoon tea at an English country-house, became incomprehensible to me. It was odd that I, an old bachelor, forty years old, with little taste for gaiety, should find myself spending Christmas at Mauleven

Abbey; but Lady Mary had attacked me at a weak moment, and the inducements she offered—four meetings with the Quorn in one week and the pick of the stable—were irresistible. A bad day's hunting and a thick, drizzling rain had brought me home before the rest of the men, who had thrown in their lot with the shooting-party, and accounted for my presence at so feminine a gathering.

Presently there was a tramping in the hall and the sound of men's voices. The door was thrown open, and the Earl of Mauleven and the remainder of his guests entered. It chanced that, though I had known Lady Mary for several years, I had never met her husband, and I was looking forward to doing so with some curiosity, for Lord Mauleven was a famous man both in the House of Lords and in the literary world. So I rose and scanned his face with some interest as he advanced towards me with outstretched hand and courteous smile.

Twenty years had not dulled my memory a jot, and in Lord Mauleven I saw at once the man whom the shrewdest detectives in England had sought for in vain. Iron grey had mingled with the coal black hair, and a deep furrow was engraven across his forehead. Yet there was the same fine dignity of carriage and perfection of features. It was the face of a scholar and an artist. As a physiognomist, I should certainly have ranked it the face of a man of high principles and noble birth. Yet I knew better. I alone knew that Geoffrey, Earl of Mauleven, was the man whom a coroner's jury had found guilty of the murder of Marian Desmond well-nigh twenty years ago.

If he recognised me, and I believe that he did, his nerve was magnificent. He affected not to notice the withdrawal of my hand, and welcomed me to Mauleven Abbey in a few well-chosen and graceful sentences. Then he passed on to speak to some one else, and the meeting was over.

I stood back in the shadows of the room like a man stunned, striving to realise this thing. It had come so suddenly and so unexpectedly. Lord Mauleven, scholar, author and diplomatist, was the murderer of Marian Desmond. It was inconceivable, and yet it was true, I told myself fiercely. He should have no mercy from me. As he had sinned, so should he pay the penalty. Neither rank nor fame should save him from my vengeance, which was, indeed, only a simple act of justice.

I looked at him—tall, debonair, and courtly, moving about with all the distinction of his fine presence amongst the little scattered group of his guests; but my heart knew no pity. At that moment memories of the only woman whom I had ever cared for were rising up within me, strong and undimmed by time. Across that weary gulf of years I seemed to see once more her sweet, worn face, with all its patient hope and longing, so ill rewarded. The luxurious chamber, with all its wealth and colouring, its dainty lounges and cosy recesses, seemed to contract into a barely-furnished attic, and the roaring fire which burned brightly upon the fine open hearth, piled up with pine-logs, into a handful of white ashes. And when the dream-pictures floated before my vacant eyes had passed away, they left me full of a living anger. I would leave the Abbey this very hour and lay my information before the authorities of Scotland Yard. And with this intention I rose and, ostensibly to dress for dinner, left the room and mounted the broad oak staircase.

My apartment was the last in a long row in the main gallery. I had reached it, and was on the point of entering, when I heard the trailing of a woman's draperies close behind me, and almost immediately felt a touch upon my arm and heard my name distinctly pronounced.

I turned round, and for the moment fancied myself the victim of some transient hallucination. It seemed, indeed, as though the two figures who had dwelt so long in that dim shadow-land of memory, had glided afresh into my life on this dark winter's afternoon, for the woman who had spoken my name and who stood by my side was surely looking up at me with Marian's eyes and had spoken with Marian's voice. Yet when I looked again I found it was not so. She was slighter and much smaller than Marian had been, and her complexion was altogether different. She had the appearance of a woman who had lived in some far southern land. Her skin was almost olive-hued, and her dark, glowing eyes, shining up at me from amidst the hair which waved all around her small oval face, had an odd, penetrating force. She was a curious figure

to encounter at any time, with her wonderful eyes and quaint bizarre beauty; and the suddenness of her approach and that strange resemblance to the dead, coming at a time when my whole being was shaken with memories of the past, seemed to endow her personality with a suggestion of the supernatural. If I showed anything of this in my face, she took no notice of it.

"Dr. Faggett, it is I—Marian Desmond's sister. You were her friend, and you were good to her. How is it that I find you here, a guest beneath her murderer's roof?"

"I saw his face for the first time ten minutes ago," I answered slowly. "I am leaving the Abbey at once. I go to bring him to book."

She held up her hand. A gleam of the early moonlight stole through the mullioned window and fell upon her face. It no longer resembled her sister's. The features were set, and cold, and hard, the eyes were blazing with passion.

"Stay! His hour has already come, and your hand need not strike. Think not that you alone have thirsted for justice against this man. In the mountains of India I saw the deed done, and I heard my sister's death-cry ring over land and ocean in my ears. The God of my belief raised the veil and I saw. I bowed my head and I was silent. I sought counsel of those who knew, and I held my peace. The reward came slowly, but it has come. Nirvana, the sweetest goal of life, is before my eyes. The blessed Initiates of the East have called me sister. Powers and forces hidden and unknown to you bend themselves to my will. Stay this night and see the end. It is my bidding."

"I am Astrea, and I command. Farewell!"

She seemed to vanish from my eyes without bodily movement. Or might it not have been that the thick clouds which had floated across the moon had filled the gallery with sudden darkness? I closed the door of my room and told myself that I had spoken with a mad woman. But I did her bidding—I waited.

At nine o'clock in the evening the curtain rose on this last scene in the drama of life. The great library of Mauleven Abbey was thronged with such a company as its walls had never before enclosed, and the air was full of the rustling of gowns and suppressed whispering. Every one was full of curiosity to hear what this woman, whose name had suddenly become famous, would have to say about the unknown science. Would she have new wonders to reveal—perhaps even miracles to perform? There was an uncertainty about it all which was perfectly delightful. It seemed as though anything might happen in that great chamber, with its quaint, dark recesses, where no light fell and where the very air had a bookish, musty flavour suggestive of mystery and necromancy. It was quite a charming idea of Lady Mauleven's, every one declared; and her ladyship, leaning back in an olive-green *fauteuil*, close to the front, felt sincerely grateful to Astrea for her unaccountable whim.

I had chosen a seat, or rather a standing-place, with my back to the wall, directly opposite Lord Mauleven. Our eyes had met only once, but it was sufficient. I knew that he had recognised me, and I knew, too, that he had some idea of the danger before him.

There was a little murmur and then an intense quiet amongst the audience. Some heavy curtains at the other end of the apartment had been thrown back, and Astrea stepped slowly forward. I can see her now as she stood there, pale and still, with her great luminous eyes wandering far over the heads of the expectant audience, and her lips moving slowly, as though repeating some prayer or lesson to herself. A deep, awesome hush fell upon the crowd of fashionably dressed men and women. Lord Mauleven alone appeared unmoved and careless. He had given up his place to a late arrival, and was leaning against a pillar with his face half in the shadow. I only could read beneath that faint, supercilious smile which was hovering round his fine mouth.

Astrea slowly dropped her eyes and spoke. The first words which fell from her riveted the attention of her listeners. Some hidden electricity seemed to lurk in the timbre of her tone. Every one, even those who had come prepared to treat the affair as a joke, or some light form of entertainment, were galvanised into rapt and breathless attention.

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