

# The Houseboat

Richard Marsh

## CHAPTER I

"I am sure of it!"

Inglis laid down his knife and fork. He stared round and round the small apartment in a manner which was distinctly strange. My wife caught him up. She laid down her knife and fork.

"You're sure of what?"

Inglis seemed disturbed. He appeared unwilling to give a direct answer. "Perhaps, after all, it's only a coincidence."

But Violet insisted "What is a coincidence?"

Inglis addressed himself to me.

"The fact is, Millen, directly I came on board I thought I had seen this boat before."

"But I thought you said that you had never heard of the *Water Lily*."

"Nor have I. The truth is that when I knew it, it wasn't the *Water Lily*."

"I don't understand."

"They must have changed the name. Unless I am very much mistaken this — this used to be the *Sylph*."

"*The Sylph*?"

"You don't mean to say that you have never heard of the *Sylph*?"

Inglis asked this question in a tone of voice which was peculiar.

"My dear fellow, I'm not a riverain authority. I am not acquainted with every houseboat between Richmond and Oxford. It was only at your special recommendation that I took the *Water Lily*!"

"Excuse me, Millen, I advised a houseboat. I didn't specify the *Water Lily*!"

"But," asked my wife, "what was the matter with the *Sylph* that she should so mysteriously have become the *Water Lily*?"

Inglis fenced with this question in a manner which seemed to suggest a state of mental confusion.

"Of course, Millen, I know that that sort of thing would not have the slightest influence on you. It is only people of a very different sort who would allow it to have any effect on them. Then, after all, I may be wrong. And, in any case, I don't see that it matters."

"Mr. Inglis, are you suggesting that the *Sylph* was haunted?"

"Haunted!" Inglis started "I never dropped a hint about its being haunted. So far as I remember I never heard a word of anything of the kind."

Violet placed her knife and fork together on her plate. She folded her hands upon her lap.

"Mr. Inglis, there is a mystery. Will you this mystery unfold?"

"Didn't you really ever hear about the *Sylph* — two years ago?"

"Two years ago we were out of England."

"So you were. Perhaps that explains it. You understand, this mayn't be the *Sylph*. I may be wrong — though I don't think I am." Inglis glanced uncomfortably at the chair on which he was sitting. "Why, I believe this is the very chair on which I sat! I remember noticing what a queer shape it was."

It was rather an odd-shaped chair. For that matter, all the things on board were odd.

"Then have you been on board this boat before?"

"Yes." Inglis positively shuddered. "I was, once; if it is the *Sylph*, that is." He thrust his hands into his trouser pockets. He leaned back in his chair. A curious look came into his face. "It is the *Sylph*, I'll swear to it. It all comes back to me. What an extraordinary coincidence! One might almost think there was something supernatural in the thing."

His manner fairly roused me.

"I wish you would stop speaking in riddles, and tell us what you are driving at."

He became pretematurally solemn.

"Millen, I'm afraid I have made rather an ass of myself; I ought to have held my tongue. But the coincidence is such a strange one that it took me unawares, and since I have said so much I suppose I may as well say more. After dinner I will tell you all there is to tell. I don't think it's a story which Mrs. Millen would like to listen to."

Violet's face was a study.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Inglis, because you are quite well aware it is a principle of mine that what is good for a husband to hear is good for a wife. Come, don't be silly. Let us hear what the fuss is about. I daresay it's about nothing after all."

"You think so? Well, Mrs. Millen, you shall hear." He carefully wiped his moustache. He began: "Two years ago there was a houseboat on the river called the *Sylph*. It belonged to a man named Hambro. He lent it to a lady and a gentleman. She was rather a pretty woman, with a lot of fluffy, golden hair. He was a quiet unassuming-looking man, who looked as though he had something to do with horses. I made their acquaintance on the river. One evening he asked me on board to dine. I sat, as I believe, on this very chair, at this very table. Three days afterwards they disappeared."

"Well?" I asked. Inglis had paused.

"So far as I know, he has never been seen or heard of since."

"And the lady?"

"Some of us were getting up a picnic. We wanted them to come with us. We couldn't quite make out their sudden disappearance. So, two days after we had missed them, I and another man tried to rout them out. I looked through the window. I saw something lying on the floor. 'Jarvis,' I whispered, 'I believe that Mrs. Bush is lying on the floor dead drunk.' 'She can't have been drunk two days,' he said. He came to my side. 'Why, she's in her nightdress. This is very queer. Inglis, I wonder if the door is locked.' It wasn't. We opened it and went inside."

Inglis emptied his glass of wine.

"The woman we had known as Mrs. Bush lay in her nightdress, dead upon the floor. She had been stabbed to the heart She was lying just about where Mrs. Millen is sitting now."

"Mr. Inglis!" Violet rose suddenly.

"There is reason to believe that, from one point of view, the woman was no better than she ought to have been. That is the story."

"But" — I confess it was not at all the story I had expected it was going to be; I did not altogether like it— "who killed her?"

"That is the question. There was no direct evidence to show. No weapon was discovered The man we had known as Bush had vanished, as it seemed, off the face of the earth. He had not left so much as a pocket-handkerchief behindhim. Everything both of his and hers had gone. It turned out that nobody knew anything at all about him. They had no servant. What meals they had on board were sent in from the hotel. Hambro had advertised the *Sylph*. Bush had replied to the advertisement He had paid the rent in advance, and Hambro had asked no questions."

"And what became of the *Sylph*?"

"She also vanished. She had become a little too notorious. One doesn't fancy living on board a houseboat on which a murder has been committed; one is at too close quarters. I suppose Hambro sold her for what he could get, and the purchaser painted her, and rechristened her the *Water Lily*!"

"But are you sure this is the *Sylph*?"

"As sure as that I am sitting here. It is impossible that I could be mistaken. I still seem to see that woman lying dead just about where Mrs. Millen is standing now."

"Mr. Inglis!"

Violet was standing up. She moved away — towards me. Inglis left soon afterwards. He did not seem to care to stop. He had scarcely eaten any dinner. In fact, that was the case with all of us. Mason had exerted herself to prepare a decent

meal in her cramped little kitchen, and we had been so ungrateful as not even to reach the end of her bill of fare. When Inglis had gone she appeared in her bonnet and cloak. We supposed that, very naturally, she had taken umbrage.

"If you please, ma'am, I'm going."

"Mason ! What do you mean?"

"I couldn't think of stopping in no place in which murder was committed, least of all a houseboat. Not to mention that last night I heard ghosts, if ever anyone heard them yet."

"Mason! Don't be absurd. I thought you had more sense."

"All I can say is, ma'am, that last night as I lay awake, listening to the splashing of the water, all at once I heard in here the sound of quarrelling. I couldn't make it out. I thought that you and the master was having words. Yet it didn't sound like your voices. Besides, you went on awful. Still, I didn't like to say nothing, because it might have been, and it wasn't my place to say that I had heard. But now I know that it was ghosts."

She went. She was not to be persuaded to stay any more than Inglis. She did not even stay to clear the table. I have seldom seen a woman in a greater hurry. As for wages, there was not a hint of them. Staid, elderly, self-possessed female though she was, she seemed to be in a perfect panic of fear. Nothing would satisfy her but that she should, with the greatest possible expedition, shake from her feet the dust of the *Water Lily*. When we were quit of her I looked at Violet and Violet looked at me. I laughed. I will not go so far as to say that I laughed genially; still, I laughed.

"We seem to be in for a pleasant river holiday."

"Eric, let us get outside."

We went on deck. The sun had already set. There was no moon, but there was a cloudless sky. The air was languorous and heavy. Boats were stealing over the waters. Someone in the distance was playing a banjo accompaniment while a clear girlish voice was singing "The Garden of Sleep." The other houseboats were radiant with Chinese lanterns. The *Water Lily* alone was still in shadow. We drew our deck-chairs close together. Violet's hand stole into mine.

"Eric, do you know that last night I, too, heard voices?"

"You!" I laughed again. "Violet!"

"I couldn't make it out at all. I was just going to wake you when they were still."

"You were dreaming, child. Inglis's story — confound him and his story! — has recalled your dream to mind. I hope you don't wish to follow Mason's example, and make a bolt of it. I have paid pretty stiffly for the honour of being the *Water Lily* tenant for a month, not to mention the fact of disarranging all our plans."

Violet paused before she answered.

"No; I don't think I want, as you say, to make a bolt of it. Indeed," she nestled closer to my side, "it is rather the other way. I should like to see it through. I have sometimes thought that I should like to be with someone I can trust in a situation such as this. Perhaps we may be able to fathom the mystery — who knows?"

This tickled me. "I thought you had done with romance."

"With one sort of romance I hope I shall never have done." She pressed my hand. She looked up archly into my face. I knew it, although we were in shadow. "With another sort of romance I may be only just beginning. I have never yet had dealings with a ghost."

## CHAPTER II

At first I could not make out what it was that had roused me. Then I felt Violet's hand steal into mine. Her voice whispered in my ear, "Eric!" I turned over towards her on the pillow. "Be still! They're here." I did as she bade me. I was still. I heard no sound but the lazy rippling of the river.

"Who's here?" I asked, when, as I deemed, I had been silent long enough.

"S-sh!" I felt her finger pressed against my lips. I was still again. The silence was broken in rather a peculiar manner.

"I don't think you quite understand me."

The words were spoken in a man's voice, as it seemed to me, close behind my

back. I was so startled by the unexpected presence of a third person that I made as if to spring up in bed. My wife caught me by the arm. Before I could remonstrate or shake off her grasp a woman's laughter rang through the little cabin. It was too metallic to be agreeable. And a woman's voice replied —

"I understand you well enough, don't you make any error!"

There was a momentary pause.

"You don't understand me, fool!"

The first four words were spoken with a deliberation which meant volumes, while the final epithet came with a sudden malignant ferocity which took me aback. The speaker, whoever he might be, meant mischief. I sprang up and out of bed.

"What are you doing here?" I cried.

I addressed the inquiry apparently to the vacant air. The moonlight flooded the little cabin. It showed clearly enough that it was empty. My wife sat up in bed.

"Now," she observed, "you've done it."

"Done what? Who was that speaking?"

"The voices."

"The voices! What voices? I'll voice them! Where the dickens have they gone?"

I moved towards the cabin door, with the intention of pursuing my inquiries further. Violet's voice arrested me.

"It is no use your going to look for them. They will not be found by searching. The speakers were Mr. and Mrs. Bush."

"Mr. and Mrs. Bush?"

Violet's voice dropped to an awful whisper. "The murderer and his victim."

I stared at her in the moonlight. Inglis's pleasant little story had momentarily escaped my memory. Suddenly roused from a dreamless slumber, I had not yet had time to recall such trivialities. Now it all came back in a flash.

"Violet," I exclaimed, "have you gone mad?"

"They are the voices which I heard last night. They are the voices which Mason heard. Now you have heard them. If you had kept still the mystery might have been unravelled. The crime might have been re-acted before our eyes, or at least within sound of our ears."

I sat down upon the ingenious piece of furniture which did duty as a bed. I seemed to have struck upon a novel phase in my wife's character. It was not altogether a pleasing novelty. She spoke with a degree of judicial calmness which, under all the circumstances, I did not altogether relish.

"Violet, I wish you wouldn't talk like that. It makes my blood run cold."

"Why should it? My dear Eric, I have heard you yourself say that in the presence of the seemingly mysterious our attitude should be one of passionless criticism. A mysterious crime has been committed in this very chamber." I shivered. "Surely it is our duty to avail ourselves of any opportunities which may offer, and which may enable us to probe it to the bottom."

I made no answer. I examined the doors. They were locked and bolted. There was no sign that anyone had tampered with the fastenings. I returned to bed. As I was arranging myself between the sheets Violet whispered in my ear. "Perhaps if we are perfectly quiet they may come back again."

I am not a man given to adjectives; but I felt adjectival then. I was about to explain, in language which would not have been wanting in force, that I had no desire that they should come back again, when —

"You had better give it to me."

The words were spoken in a woman's voice, as it seemed, within twelve inches of my back. The voice was not that of a lady. I should have said without hesitation, had I heard the voice under any other circumstances, that the speaker had been bom within the sound of Bow Bells.

"Had I?"

It was a man's voice which put the question. There was something about the tone in which the speaker put it which reminded one of the line in the people's ballad, " It ain't exactly what 'e sez, it's the nasty way 'e sez it" The question was put in a very "nasty way" indeed.

"Yes, my boy, you had."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, you may say 'indeed,' but if you don't I tell you what I'll do—I'll spoil you."

"And what, my dear Gertie, am I to understand by the mystic threat of spoiling me?"

"I'll go straight to your wife, and I'll tell her everything."

"Oh, you will, will you?"

There was a movement of a chair. The male speaker was getting up.

"Yes, I will"

There was a slight pause. One could fancy that the speakers were facing each other. One could picture the look of impudent defiance upon the woman's countenance, the suggestion of coming storm upon that of the man. It was the man's voice which broke the silence.

"It is odd, Gertrude, that you should have chosen this evening to threaten me, because I myself had chosen this evening, I won't say to threaten, but to make a communication to you."

"Give me a match." The request came from the woman.

"With pleasure. I will give you anything, my dear Gertrude, within reason." There was another pause.. In the silence I seemed to hear my wife holding her breath — as I certainly was holding mine. All at once there came a sound of scratching, a flash of light. It came so unexpectedly, and such was the extreme tension of my nerves, that, with a stifled exclamation, I half rose in bed. My wife pressed her hand against my lips. She held me down. She spoke in so attenuated a whisper that it was only because all my senses were so keenly on the alert that I heard her.

" You goose ! He's only striking a match."

He might have been, but who? She took things for granted. I wanted to know. The light continued flickering to and fro, as a match does flicker. I would have

given much to know who held it, or even what was its position in the room. As luck had it, my face was turned the other way. My wife seemed to understand what was passing in my mind.

"There's no one there," she whispered.

No one, I presumed, but the match. I took it for granted that was there. Though I did not venture to inquire, I felt that I might not have such perfect control over my voice as my wife appeared to have.

While the light continued to flicker there came stealing into my nostrils — I sniffed, the thing was unmistakable! — the odour of tobacco. The woman was lighting a cigarette. I knew it was the woman because presently there came this request from the man, "After you with the light, my dear."

I presume that the match was passed. Immediately the smell of tobacco redoubled. The man had lit a cigarette as well. I confess that I resented — silently, but still strongly — the idea of two strangers, whether ghosts or anybody else, smoking, uninvited, in my cabin.

The match went out The cigarettes were lit. The man continued speaking.

"The communication, my dear Gertrude, which I intended to make to you was this. The time has come for us to part."

He paused, possibly for an answer. None came.

"I need not enlarge on the reasons which necessitate our parting. They exist."

Pause again. Then the woman.

"What are you going to give me?"

"One of the reasons which necessitate our parting — a very strong reason, as you, I am sure, will be the first to admit — is that I have nothing left to give you."

" So you say."

" Precisely. So I say and so I mean."

"Do you mean that you are going to give me nothing ? "

"I mean, my dear Gertrude, that I have nothing to give you. You have left me

nothing."

"Bah!"

The sound which issued from the lady's lips was expressive of the most complete contempt

"Look here, my boy, you give me a hundred sovereigns or I'll spoil you."

Pause again. Probably the gentleman was thinking over the lady's observation.

"What benefit do you think you will do yourself by what you call 'spoiling' me?"

"Never mind about that: I'll do it You think I don't know all about you, but I do. Perhaps I'm not so soft as you think. Your wife's got some money if you haven't. Suppose you go back and ask her for some. You've treated me badly enough. I don't see why you shouldn't go and treat her the same. She wouldn't make things warm for you if she knew a few things I could tell her — not at all! You give me a hundred sovereigns or, I tell you straight, I'll go right to your house and I'll tell her all."

"Oh, no, you won't."

"Won't I? I say I will!"

"Oh, no, you won't."

"I say I will! I've warned you, that's all I'm not going to stop here, talking stuff to you. I'm going to bed. You can go and hang yourself for all I care."

There was a sound, an indubitable sound — the sound of a pair of shoes being thrown upon the floor. There were other sounds, equally capable of explanation: sounds which suggested — I wish the printer would put it in small type — that the lady was undressing. Undressing, too, with scant regard to ceremony. Garments were thrown off and tossed higgledy-piggledy here and there. They appeared to be thrown, with sublime indifference, upon table, chairs, and floor. I even felt something alight upon the bed. Some feminine garment, perhaps, which, although it fell by no means heavily, made me conscious, as it fell, of the most curious sensation I had in all my life — till then — experienced. It seemed that the lady, while she unrobed, continued smoking.

From her next words it appeared that the gentleman, also smoking, stood and stared at her.

"Don't stand staring at me like a gawk. I'm going to turn in."

"And I'm going to turn out. Not, as you suggested, to hang myself, but to finish this cigarette upon the roof. Perhaps, when I return, you will be in a more equable frame of mind."

"Don't you flatter yourself. What I say I mean. A hundred sovereigns, or I tell your wife."

He laughed very softly, as though he was determined not to be annoyed. Then we heard his footsteps as he crossed the floor. The door opened, then closed. We heard him ascend the steps. Then, with curious distinctness, his measured tramp, tramp, as he moved to and fro upon the roof. In the cabin for a moment there was silence. Then the woman said, with a curious faltering in her voice —

"I'll do it. I don't care what he says." There was a choking in her throat. "He don't care for me a bit."

Suddenly she flung herself upon her knees beside the bed. She pillowed her head and arms upon the coverlet. I lay near the outer edge of the bed, which was a small one, by the way. As I lay I felt the pressure of her limbs. My sensations, as I did, I am unable to describe. After a momentary interval there came the sound of sobbing. I could feel the woman quivering with the strength of her emotion. Violet and I were speechless. I do not think that, for the instant, we could have spoken even had we tried. The woman's presence was so evident, her grief so real. As she wept disjointed words came from her.

"I've given everything for him! If he only cared for me! If he only did."

All at once, with a rapid movement, she sprang up. The removal of the pressure was altogether unmistakable. I was conscious of her resting her hands upon the coverlet to assist her to her feet. I felt the little jerk; then the withdrawal of the hands. She choked back her sobs when she had gained her feet. Her tone was changed.

"What a fool I am to make a fuss. He don't care for me — not that." We heard her snap her fingers in the air. "He never did. Us women are always fools — we're

all the same. I'll go to bed."

Violet clutched my arm. She whispered, in that attenuated fashion she seemed to have caught the trick of—

"She's getting into bed. We must get out."

It certainly was a fact, someone was getting into bed. The bed-clothes were moved; not our bedclothes, but some phantom coverings. We heard them rustle, we were conscious of a current of air across our faces as someone caught them open. And then! — then someone stepped upon the bed.

"Let's get out!" gasped Violet.

### **CHAPTER III**

She moved away from me. She squeezed herself against the side of the cabin. She withdrew her limbs from between the sheets. As for me, the person who had stepped upon the bed had actually stepped upon me, and that without seeming at all conscious of my presence. Someone sat down plump upon the sheet beside me. That was enough. I took advantage of my lying on the edge of the bed to slip out upon the floor. I might possess an unsuspected capacity for undergoing strange experiences, but I drew the line at sleeping with a ghost.

The moonlight streamed across the room. As I stood, in something very like a state of nature on the floor, I could clearly see Violet cowering on the further side of the bed. I could distinguish all her features. But when I looked upon the bed itself — there was nothing there. The moon's rays fell upon the pillow. They revealed its snowy whiteness. There seemed nothing else it could reveal. It was untenanted. And yet, if one looked closely at it, it seemed to be indented, just as it might have been indented had a human head been lying there. But about one thing there could be no mistake whatever — my ears did not play me false, I heard it too distinctly — the sound made by a person who settles himself between the sheets, and then the measured respiration of one who composes himself to slumber.

I remained there silent. On her hands and knees Violet crept towards the foot of the bed. When she had gained the floor she stole on tiptoe to my side.

"I did not dare to step across her." I felt her, as she nestled to me, give me a

little shiver. "I could not do it. Can you see her?"

"What a fool I am!" As Violet asked her question there came this observation from the person in the bed — whom, by the way, I could not see. There was a long-drawn sigh. "What fools all we women are! What fools!"

There was a sincerity of bitterness about the tone, which, coming as it did from an unseen speaker — one so near and yet so far — had on one a most uncomfortable effect. Violet pressed closer to my side. The woman in the bed turned over. Overhead there still continued the measured tramp, tramping of the man. We were conscious, in some subtle way, that the woman lay listening to the footsteps. They spoke more audibly to her ears even than to ours.

"Ollie! Ollie!" she repeated the name softly to herself, with a degree of tenderness which was in startling contrast to her previous bitterness.

"I wish you would come to bed."

She was silent. There was only the sound of her gentle breathing. Her bitter mood had been but transient. She was falling asleep with words of tenderness upon her lips. Above, the footsteps ceased. All was still. There was not even the murmur of the waters. The wife and I, side by side, stood looking down upon what seemed an empty bed.

"She is asleep," said Violet.

It seemed to me she was: although I could not see her, it seemed to me she was. I could hear her breathing as softly as a child. Violet continued whispering —

"How strange! Eric, what can it mean?"

I muttered a reply —

"A problem for the Psychological Research Society."

"It seems just like a dream."

"I wish it were a dream."

"S-sh! There is someone coming down the stairs."

There was — at least, if we could trust our ears, there was. Apparently the man above had had enough of solitude. We heard him move across the roof, then pause

just by the steps, then descend them one by one. It seemed to us that in this step there was something stealthy, that he was endeavouring not to arouse attention, to make as little noise as possible. Half-way down he paused; at the foot he paused again.

"He's listening outside the door." It almost seemed that he was. We stood and listened too.

"Let's get away from the bed."

My wife drew me with her. At the opposite end of the cabin was a sort of little alcove, which was screened by a curtain, and behind which were hung one or two of our garments which we were not actually using. Violet drew me within the shadow of this alcove. I say drew me because, offering no resistance, I allowed myself to be completely passive in her hands. The alcove was not large enough to hold us. Still the curtain acted as a partial screen.

The silence endured for some moments. Then we heard without a hand softly turning the handle of the door. While I was wondering whether, after all, I was not the victim of an attack of indigestion, or whether I was about to witness an attempt at effecting a burglarious entry into a houseboat, a strange thing happened, the strangest thing that had happened yet.

As I have already mentioned, the moon's rays flooded the cabin. This was owing to the fact that a long narrow casement, which ran round the walls near the roof of the cabin, had been left open for the sake of admitting air and ventilation; but save for the moonbeams, the cabin was unlighted. When, however, we heard the handle being softly turned, a singular change occurred. It was like the transformation scene in a theatre. The whole place, all at once, was brilliantly illuminated. The moon-beams disappeared. Instead, a large swinging lamp was hanging from the centre of the cabin. So strong was the light which it shed around that our eyes were dazzled. It was not our lamp; we used small hand-lamps, which stood upon the table. By its glare we saw that the whole cabin was changed. For an instant we failed to clearly realise in what the change consisted. Then we understood it was a question of decoration. The contents of the cabin, for the most part, were the same, though they looked newer, and the positions of the various articles were altered ; but the panels of the cabin of the *Water Lily* were painted blue and white. The panels of this cabin were coloured chocolate and gold.

"Eric, it's the *Sylph*!"

The suggestion conveyed by my wife's whispered words, even as she spoke, occurred to me. I understood where, for Inglis, had lain the difficulty of recognition. The two cabins were the same, and yet were not. It was just as though someone had endeavoured, without spending much cash, to render one as much as possible unlike the other.

In this cabin there were many things which were not ours. In fact, so far as I can see, there was nothing which was ours. Strange articles of costume were scattered about ; the table was covered with a curious litter ; and on the ingenious article of furniture which did duty as a bed, and which stood where our bed stood, and which, indeed, seemed to be our bed, there was someone sleeping.

As my startled eyes travelled round this amazing transformation scene, at last they reached the door. There they stayed. Mechanically I shrank back nearer to the wall. I felt my wife tighten her grasp upon my hand.

The door was open some few inches. Through the aperture thus formed there peered a man. He seemed to be listening. It was so still that one could hear the gentle breathing of the woman sleeping in the bed. Apparently satisfied, he opened the door sufficiently wide to admit of his entering the cabin. My impression was that he could not fail to perceive us, yet to all appearances he remained entirely unconscious of our neighbourhood. He was a man certainly under five feet six in height. He was slight in build, very dark, with face clean shaven; his face was long and narrow. In dress and bearing he seemed a gentleman, yet there was that about him which immediately reminded me of what Inglis had said of the man Bush — "he looked as though he had something to do with horses."

He stood for some seconds in an attitude of listening, so close to me that I had only to stretch out my hand to take him by the throat. I did not do it. I don't know what restrained me; I think, more than anything, it was the feeling that these things which were passing before me must be passing in a dream. His face was turned away. He looked intently towards the sleeping woman.

After he had had enough of listening he moved towards the bed His step was soft and cat-like; it was absolutely noiseless. Glancing down, I perceived that he was without boots or shoes. He was in his stockinged feet. I had distinctly heard the

tramp, tramping of a pair of shoes upon the cabin roof. I had heard them descend the steps. Possibly he had paused outside the door to take them off.

When he reached the bed he stood looking down upon the sleeper. He stooped over her, as if the better to catch her breathing. He whispered softly—

"Gerty!"

He paused for a moment, as if for an answer. None came. Standing up, he put his hand, as it seemed to me, into the bosom of his flannel shirt. He took out a leather sheath. From the sheath he drew a knife. It was a long, slender, glittering blade. Quite twelve inches in length, at no part was it broader than my little finger. With the empty sheath in his left hand, the knife behind his back in his right, he again leaned over the sleeper. Again he softly whispered, "Gerty!"

Again there was no answer. Again he stood upright, turning his back towards the bed, so that he looked towards us. His face was not an ugly one, though the expression was somewhat saturnine. On it, at the instant, there was a peculiar look, such a look as I could fancy upon the face of a jockey who, toward the close of a great race, settles himself in the saddle with the determination to "finish" well. The naked blade he placed upon the table, the empty sheath beside it. Then he moved towards us. My first thought was that now, at last, we were discovered ; but something in the expression of his features told me that this was not so. He approached us with an indifference which was amazing. He passed so close to us that we were conscious of the slight disturbance of the air caused by his passage. There was a Gladstone bag on a chair within two feet of us. Picking it up, he bore it to the table. Opening it out, he commenced to pack it. All manner of things he placed within it, both masculine and feminine belongings, even the garments which the sleeper had taken off, and which lay scattered on the chair and on the floor, even her shoes and stockings! When the bag was filled he took a long brown ulster, which was thrown over the back of a chair. He stuffed the pockets with odds and ends. When he had completed his operations the cabin was stripped of everything except the actual furniture. He satisfied himself that this was so by overhauling every nook and corner, in the process passing and repassing Violet and me with a perfect unconcern which was more and more amazing. Being apparently at last clear in his mind upon that point, he put on the ulster and a dark cloth cap, and began to fasten the Gladstone bag.

While he was doing so, his back being turned to the bed, without the slightest warning, the woman in the bed sat up. The man's movements had been noiseless. He had made no sound which could have roused her. Possibly some sudden intuition had come to her in her sleep. However that might be, she all at once was wide awake. She stared round the apartment with wondering eyes. Her glance fell on the man, dressed as for a journey.

"Where are you going?"

The words fell from her lips as unawares. Then some sudden conception of his purpose seemed to have flown to her brain. She sprang out of bed with a bound.

"You shan't go," she screamed.

She rushed to him. He put his hand on the table. He turned to her. Something flashed in the lamplight. It was the knife. As she came he plunged it into her side right to the hilt. For an instant he held her spitted on the blade. He put his hand to her throat. He thrust her from him. With the other hand he extricated the blade. He let her fall upon the floor. She had uttered a sort of sigh as the weapon was being driven home. Beyond that she had not made a sound.

All was still. He remained for some seconds looking down at her as she lay. Then he turned away. We saw his face. It was, if possible, paler than before. A smile distorted his lips. He stood for a moment as if listening. Then he glanced round the cabin, as if to make sure that he was unobserved.

His black eyes travelled over our startled features, in evident unconsciousness that we were there. Then he glanced at the blade in his hand. As he did so he perceptibly shuddered. The glittering steel was obscured with blood. As he perceived that this was so he gasped. He seemed to realise for the first time what it was that he had done. Taking an envelope from an inner pocket of his ulster he began to wipe the blood from off the blade. While doing so his wandering glance fell upon the woman lying on the floor. Some new aspect of the recumbent figure seemed to strike him with a sudden horror. He staggered backwards. I thought he would have fallen. He caught at the wall to help him stand — caught at the wall with the hand which held the blade. At that part of the cabin the wall was doubly panelled half-way to the roof. Between the outer and the inner panel there was evidently a cavity, because, when in his sudden alarm he clutched at the wall, the

blade slipped from his relaxing grasp and fell between the panels. Such was his state of panic that he did not appear to perceive what had happened. And at that moment a cry rang out upon the river — possibly it was someone hailing the keeper of the lock— "Ahoy!"

The sound seemed to fill him with unreasoning terror. He rushed to the table. He closed the Gladstone with a hurried snap ; he caught it up ; he turned to flee. As he did so I stepped out of the alcove. I advanced right in front of him. I cannot say whether he saw me, or whether he didn't. But he seemed to see me. He started back. A look of the most awful terror came on his countenance. And at that same instant the whole scene vanished. I was standing in the cabin of the *Water Lily*. The moon was stealing through the little narrow casement Violet was creeping to my side. She stole into my arms. I held her to me.

"Eric," she moaned.

For myself, I am not ashamed to own that, temporarily, I had lost the use of my tongue. When, in a measure, the faculty of speech returned to me —

"Was it a dream?" I whispered.

"It was a vision."

"A vision?" I shuddered. "Look!"

As I spoke she turned to look. There, in the moonbeams, we saw a woman in her nightdress, lying on the cabin floor. We saw that she had golden hair. It seemed to us that she was dead. We saw her but a moment — she was gone! It must have been imagination; we know that these things are not, but it belonged to that order of imagination which is stranger than reality.

My wife looked up at me.

"Eric, it is a vision which has been sent to us in order that we may expose in the light of day a crime which was hidden in the night."

I said nothing. I felt for a box of matches on the table. I lit a lamp. I looked round and round the cabin, holding the lamp above my head the better to assist my search. It was with a feeling of the most absurd relief that I perceived that everything was unchanged, that, so far as I could see, there was no one there but

my wife and I.

"I think, Violet, if you don't mind, I'll have some whisky."

She offered no objection. She stood and watched me as I poured the stuff into a glass. I am bound to admit that the spirit did me good.

"And what," I asked, "do you make of the performance we have just now witnessed?" She was still. I took another drink. There can be no doubt that, under certain circumstances, whisky is a fluid which is not to be despised. "Have we both suddenly become insane, or do you attribute it to the cucumber we ate at lunch?"

"How strange that Mr. Inglis should have told us the story only this afternoon."

"I wish Mr. Inglis had kept the story to himself entirely."

"They were the voices which I heard last night They were the voices Mason heard. It was all predestined. I understand it now."

"I wish that I could say the same."

"I see it all!"

She pressed her hands against her brow. Her eyes flashed fire.

"I see why it was sent to us, what it is we have to do. Eric, we have to find the knife."

I began to fear, from her frenzied manner, that her brain must in reality be softening.

"What knife?"

"The knife which he dropped between the panels. The boat has only been repainted. We know that in all essentials the *Sylph* and the *Water Lily* are one and the same. Mr. Inglis said that the weapon which did the deed was never found. No adequate search was ever made. It is waiting for us where he dropped it."

"My dear Violet, don't you think you had better have a little whisky? It will calm you."

"Have you a hammer and a chisel?"

"What do you want them for?"

"It was here that he was standing; it was here that he dropped the knife." She had taken up her position against the wall at the foot of the bed. Frankly, I did not like her manner at all. It was certainly where, in the latter portion of that nightmare, the fellow had been standing. "I will wrench this panel away." She rapped against a particular panel with her knuckles. "Behind it we shall find the knife."

"My dear Violet, this houseboat isn't mine. We cannot destroy another man's property in that wanton fashion. He will hardly accept as an adequate excuse the fact that at the time we were suffering from a severe attack of indigestion."

"This will do."

She took a large carving-knife out of the knife-basket which was on the shelf close by her. She thrust the blade between the panel and the woodwork. It could scarcely have been securely fastened. In a surprisingly short space of time she had forced it loose. Then, grasping it with both her hands, she hauled the panel bodily away.

"Eric, it is there!"

Something was there, resting on a little ledge which had checked its fall on to the floor beneath — something which was covered with paint, and dust, and cobwebs, and Violet all at once grew timid.

"You take it; I dare not touch the thing."

"It is very curious; something is there, and, by George, it is a knife!"

It was a knife — the knife which we had seen in the vision, the dream, the nightmare, call it what you will — the something which had seemed so real. There was no mistaking it, tarnished though it was — the long, slender blade which we had seen the man draw from the leather sheath. Stuck to it by what was afterwards shown to be coagulated blood was an envelope — the envelope which we had seen the fellow take from his pocket to wipe off the crimson stain. It had adhered to the blade. When the knife fell the envelope fell too.

"At least," I murmured as I stared at this grim relic, "this is a singular coincidence."

The blood upon the blade had dried. It required but little to cause the

envelope to fall away. As a matter of fact, while I was still holding the weapon in my hand it fell to the floor. I picked it up. It was addressed in a woman's hand, "Francis Joynes, Esq., Fairleigh, Streatham."

I at once recognised the name as that of a well-known owner of racehorses and so-called "gentleman rider."

Not the least singular part of all that singular story was that the letter inside that envelope, which was afterwards opened and read by the proper authorities, was from Mr. Joynes's wife. It was a loving, tender letter, from a wife who was an invalid abroad to a husband whom she supposed was thinking of her at home.

Mr. Joynes was never arrested, and that for this sufficient reason: that when the agents of the law arrived at his residence Mr. Joynes was dead. He had committed suicide on the very night on which we saw that— call it vision— on board the *Water Lily*. I viewed the corpse against my will. I was not called in evidence. Had I been, I was prepared to swear, as was my wife, that Mr. Joynes was the man whom I had seen in a dream that night. It was shown at the inquest that he had suffered of late from horrid dreams — that he had scarcely dared to sleep. I wonder if, in that last and most awful of his dreams, he had seen my face — seen it as I saw his?

It was afterwards shown, from inquiries which were made, that Mr. Joynes and "Mr. Bush," tenant of the *Sylph*, were, beyond all doubt, one and the same person. On the singular circumstances which caused that discovery to be made I offer no comment