

**'owing to frequent acquaintance with peril, I had become unusually hardened for a woman'**

Mrs Paschal is only the second ever professional female detective to feature in a work of fiction, piped to the post by just six months by Andrew Forrester's *The Female Detective* (republished by The British Library, 2012). Both were first published in 1864 and are of historical significance because for over twenty years they remained the only books to feature a female detective as the protagonist.

Mrs Paschal, the heroine of *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, is regularly consulted by the police and serves as an undercover agent as well as investigating her own cases. But even though she is 'verging on forty', she throws herself into cases with verve and gusto and has no hesitation in infiltrating a deadly secret society or casting off her crinolines in order to plummet into a sewer on the trail of a criminal.

The re-publication of *Revelations of a Lady Detective* will be welcomed by all fans of crime fiction.

#### THE AUTHOR

William Stephens Hayward (1835–1870) was a prolific author whose books were very popular in their day. He wrote sensational stories, and reprints of his books continued to appear for decades after his death.

# REVELATIONS OF A LADY DETECTIVE



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STEPHENS HAYWARD

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# THE MYSTERIOUS COUNTESS

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## CHAPTER I

### THE CHIEF OF THE DETECTIVE POLICE

I TURNED a familiar corner, and was soon threading the well-known avenues of Whitehall. It was in a small street, the houses in which cover the site of the once splendid palace of the Stuarts, where one king was born and another lost his head, that the head-quarters of the London Detective Police were situated. I stopped at a door of modest pretensions, and knocked three times. I was instantly admitted. The porter bowed when he saw who I was, and at once conducted me into a room of limited dimensions. I had not to wait long. Coming from an inner room, a man of spare build, but with keen searching eyes, like those of a ferret, shook me, in a cold, business-like way, by the hand, and desired me to be seated. His forehead bulged out a little, indicating the talent of which he was the undoubted possessor. All who knew him personally, or by reputation, admired him; he performed the difficult duties of an arduous position with untiring industry and the most praiseworthy skill and perseverance. He left nothing to others, except, of course, the bare execution. This man with the stern demeanour and the penetrating glance was Colonel Warner - at the time of which I am writing, head of the Detective Department of the Metropolitan Police.

It was through his instigation that women were first of all employed as detectives. It must be confessed that the idea was not original, but it showed him to be a clever adapter, and not above imitating those whose talent led them to take the initiative in works of progress. Fouché, the great Frenchman, was constantly in the habit of employing women to assist him in discovering the various political intrigues which disturbed the peace of the first empire. His petticoated police were as successful as the most sanguine innovator could wish; and Colonel Warner, having this fact before his eyes, determined to imitate the example of a man who united the courage of a lion with the cunning of a fox, culminating his acquisitions with the sagacity of a dog.

"Sit down, Mrs. Paschal," exclaimed the colonel, handing me a chair.

I did so immediately, with that prompt and passive obedience which always pleased him. I was particularly desirous at all times of conciliating Colonel Warner, because I had not long been employed as a female detective, and now having given up my time and attention to what I may call a new profession, I was anxious to acquit myself as well and favourably as I could, and gain the goodwill and approbation of my superior. It is hardly necessary to refer to the circumstances which led me to embark on a career at once strange, exciting, and mysterious, but I may say that my husband died suddenly, leaving me badly off. An offer was made me through a peculiar channel. I accepted it without hesitation, and became one of the much-dreaded, but little-known people called Female Detectives. At the time I was verging upon forty. My brain was vigorous and subtle, and I concentrated all my energies upon the proper fulfilment

and execution of those duties which devolved upon me. I met the glance of Colonel Warner and returned it unflinchingly; he liked people to stare back again at him, because it betokened confidence in themselves, and evidenced that they would not shrink in the hour of peril, when danger encompassed them and lurked in front and rear. I was well born and well educated, so that, like an accomplished actress, I could play my part in any drama in which I was instructed to take a part. My dramas, however, were dramas of real life, not the mimetic representations which obtain on the stage. For the parts I had to play, it was necessary to have nerve and strength, cunning and confidence, resources unlimited, confidence and numerous other qualities of which actors are totally ignorant. They strut, and talk, and give expression to the thoughts of others, but it is such as I who really create the incidents upon which their dialogue is based and grounded.

"I have sent for you," exclaimed the colonel, "to entrust a serious case to your care and judgment. I do not know a woman more fitted for the task than yourself. Your services, if successful, will be handsomely rewarded, and you shall have no reason to complain of my parsimony in the matter of your daily expenses. Let me caution you about hastening - take time - elaborate and mature your plans; for although the hare is swift, the slow and sure tortoise more often wins the race than its fleet opponent. I need hardly talk to you in this way, but advice is never prejudicial to anyone's interests."

"I am very glad, I am sure," I replied, "to hear any suggestions you are good enough to throw out for my guidance."

"Quite so," he said; "I am aware that you possess an unusual amount of common sense, and consequently are not at all likely to take umbrage at what is kindly meant."

"Of what nature is the business?" I asked.

"Of a very delicate one," answered Colonel Warner; "you have heard of the Countess of Vervaine?"

"Frequently; you mean the lady who is dazzling all London at the present moment by the splendour of her equipage and her diamonds, and the magnificent way in which she spends what must be a colossal fortune."

"That's her," said the colonel. "But I have taken great pains to ascertain what her fortune actually consists of. Now, I have been unable to identify any property as belonging to her, nor can I discern that she has a large balance in the hands of any banker. From what source, then, is her income derived?"

I acknowledged that I was at a loss to conjecture.

"Very well," cried Colonel Warner, "the task I propose for you is to discover where, and in what way, Lady Vervaine obtains the funds which enable her to carry on a career, the splendour and the profuseness of which exceed that of a prince of the blood royal during the Augustan age of France, when Louis XIV set an example of extravagance which was pursued to ruination by the dissolute nobility, who surrounded the avenues of his palaces, and thronged the drawing-rooms of his country seats. Will it be an occupation to your mind, do you think? If not, pray decline it at once. It is always bad to undertake a commission when it involves a duty which is repugnant to you."

"Not at all," I replied; "I should like above all things to unravel the secrets of the mysterious countess, and I not only undertake to do so, but promise to bring you the tidings and information you wish for within six weeks."

"Take your own time," said the colonel; "anyone one will tell you her ladyship's residence; let me see or hear from you

occasionally, for I shall be anxious to know how you are getting on. Once more, do not be precipitate. Take this cheque for your expenses. If you should require more, send to me. And now, good morning, Mrs. Paschal. I hope sincerely that your endeavours may be crowned with the success they are sure to merit."

I took the draft, wished Colonel Warner goodbye, and returned to my own lodgings to ruminate over the task which had just been confided to me.

## CHAPTER II

### THE BLACK MASK

I IMAGINED that the best and surest way of penetrating the veil of secrecy which surrounded the Countess of Vervaine would be to obtain a footing in her household, either as a domestic servant, or in some capacity such as would enable me to play the spy upon her actions, and watch all her movements with the greatest care and closeness. I felt confident that Colonel Warner had some excellent motive for having the countess unmasked; but he was a man who always made you find your own tools, and do your work with as little assistance as possible from him. He told you what he wanted done, and nothing remained but for you to go and do it. The Countess of Vervaine was the young and lovely widow of the old earl of that name. She was on the stage when the notorious and imbecile nobleman made her his wife. His extravagance and unsuccessful speculations in railway shares, in the days when Hudson was king, ruined him, and it was well known that, when he died broken-hearted, his income was very much reduced - so much so, that when his relict began

to lead the gay and luxurious life she did, more than one head was gravely shaken, and people wondered how she did it. She thought nothing of giving a thousand pounds for a pair of carriage horses, and all enterprising tradesmen were only too rejoiced when anything rare came in their way, for the Countess of Vervaine was sure to buy it. A rare picture, or a precious stone of great and peculiar value, were things that she would buy without a murmur, and pay the price demanded for them without endeavouring to abate the proprietor's price the value of a penny piece. Personally, she was a rare combination of loveliness and accomplishments. Even the women admitted that she was beautiful, and the men raved about her. She went into the best society, and those of the highest rank and the most exalted social position in London were very glad to be asked to her magnificent and exclusive parties. Fanny, Countess of Vervaine, knew very well that if you wish to become celebrated in the gay and giddy world of fashion, you must be very careful who you admit into your house. It may be convenient, and even necessary, to ask your attorney to dine with you occasionally; but forbear to ask a ducal friend on the same day, because his grace would never forgive you for making so great a blunder. The attorney would go about amongst his friends and tell them all in what company he had been. Your house would acquire the reputation of being an "easy" one, and your acquaintances who were really worth knowing would not any more visit at a house where "anybody" was received with the same cordiality that they had themselves met with. The Countess of Vervaine lived in a large mansion in one of the new, but aristocratic squares in Belgravia. A huge tower-errection it was to look at - a corner house with many

windows and balconies and verandahs and conservatories. It had belonged to the earl, and he bequeathed it to her with all its wealth of furniture, rare pictures, and valuable books. It was pretty well all he had to leave her, for his lands were all sold, and the amount of ready money standing to his credit at his banker's was lamentably small - so small, indeed, as to be almost insignificant. The earl had been dead a year and a half now. She had mourned six months for him, and at the expiration of that time she cast off her widow's weeds - disdaining the example of royalty to wear them for an indefinite period - and launched into all the gaiety and dissipation that the Babylon of the moderns could supply her with. Very clever and versatile was her ladyship, as well able to talk upon abstruse subjects with a member of a scientific society as to converse with one of her patrician friends upon the merits of the latest fashions which the Parisians had with their usual taste designed.

I dressed myself one morning, after having gained the information I have just detailed, and put on the simplest things I could find in my wardrobe, which was as extensive and as full of disguises as that of a costumier's shop. I wished to appear like a servant out of place. My idea was to represent myself as a lady's-maid or under housekeeper. I did not care what situation I took as long as I obtained a footing in the household. When I approached Lady Vervaine's house, I was very much struck by its majestic and imposing appearance. I liked to see the porcelain boxes in the windows filled with the choicest flowers, which a market gardener and floriculturist undertook by contract to change twice a week, so that they should never appear shabby or out of season. I took a delight in gazing at the trailing creepers running

in a wild, luxuriant, tropical manner, all over the spacious balconies, and I derived especial pleasure from the contemplation of the orange trees growing in large wooden tubs, loaded with their yellow fruit, the sheen and glimmer of which I could faintly see through the well-cleaned windows of the conservatory, which stood over the porch protecting the entrance to the front door.

I envied this successful actress all the beautiful things she appeared to have in her possession, and wondered why she should be so much more fortunate than myself; but a moment afterwards, I congratulated myself that I was not, like her, an object of suspicion and mistrust to the police, and that a female detective, like Nemesis, was not already upon my track. I vowed that all her splendour should be short-lived, and that in those gilded saloons and lofty halls, where now all was mirth and song and gladness, there should soon be nothing but weeping and gnashing of teeth. I descended the area steps, and even here there was a trace of refinement and good taste, for a small box of mignonette was placed on the sill of each window, and a large Virginia creeper reared its slender limbs against the stuccoed wall.

A request to see the housekeeper brought me into the presence of that worthy. I stated my business to her, and asked her favourable consideration of my case. She shook her head, and said she was afraid that there was no vacancy just at present, but if I would call again, she might perhaps be able to give me a more encouraging reply. I knew perfectly well how to treat a lady of her calibre. Servants in gentlemen's families are generally engaged in making a purse, upon the proceeds of which they are enabled to retire when the domestic harness begins to gall their necks, and they sigh for

rest after years of hard work and toil. They either patronize savings banks, where they get their two and a half per cent, on the principle that every little helps, although they could at the same time obtain six per cent in foreign guaranteed government stock; but those who work hard, know how to take care of their money, because they understand its value, and they distrust speculative undertakings, as it is the duty of all prudent people to do; or if they distrust the parochial banks, they have a stocking which they keep carefully concealed, the contents of which are to help their possessors to furnish a lodging-house, or take a tavern, when the time arrives at which they think fit to assert their independence and retire from the servitude which they have all along tolerated for a purpose. Armed with a thorough knowledge of the class, I produced a five-pound note, and said that it was part of my savings from my last place, and that I should be happy to make her a present of it, if she would use the influence I was sure she possessed to procure me the situation I was so desirous of obtaining.

This offer produced a relaxation of the housekeeper's sternness. She asked for a reference, which I gave her; we always knew how to arrange those little matters, which were managed without any difficulty; and the result of our interview was, that I was engaged as third lady's-maid at a salary of fifteen pounds a year, and to find myself in tea and sugar. I entered my new place in less than a week, and soon had an opportunity of observing the demeanour of the Countess of Vervaine; at times it was restless and excited. Her manner was frequently pre-occupied, and she was then what is called absent. You might speak to her three or four times before you obtained an answer. She did not appear to hear

you. Some weighty matter was occupying her attention, and she was so engrossed by its contemplation that she could not bestow a single thought on external objects. She was very young - scarcely five-and-twenty, and not giving evidence of being so old as that. She was not one of those proud, stern, and haughty aristocrats whom you see in the Park, leaning back in their open carriages as if they were casting their mantle of despal and scorn to those who are walking. She was not pale, and fagged, and bilious-looking; on the contrary, she was fat and chubby, with just the smallest tinge of rose-colour on her cheek - natural colour, I mean, not the artificial hue which pernicious compounds impart to a pallid cheek.

Now and then there was an air of positive joyousness about her, as if she was enamoured of life and derived the most intense pleasure from existence in this world below, where most of us experience more blows and buffets than we do occurrences of a more gratifying nature. Although pretending not to do so, I studied her with great care, and the result of my observations was, that I could have sworn before any court of justice in the world that, to the best of my belief, she had a secret - a secret which weighed her down and crushed her young, elastic spirit, sitting on her chest like a nightmare, and spoiling her rest by hideous visions. In society she showed nothing of this. It was in the company of others that she shone; at home, in her bed-room, with her attendant satellites about her, whom she regarded as nobodies, she gave way to her fits of melancholy, and showed that every shining mirror has its dull side and its leaden reverse. There are some people who are constituted in such a manner by nature, that though they may be standing upon the crater of a volcano given to chronic eruptions, and though

they are perfectly cognizant of the perilous position in which they are, will not trouble themselves much about it. It was my private opinion that the ground under the feet of the Countess of Vervaine was mined, and that she knew it, but that she had adopted that fallacious motto which has for its burden "a short life and a merry one." There was something very mysterious about her, and I made the strongest resolution that I ever made in my life that I would discover the nature of the mystery before many days had passed over my head. The countess had not the remotest idea that I was in any way inimical to her. She regarded me as something for which she paid, and which was useful to her on certain occasions. I believe she looked upon me very much as a lady in the Southern States of America looks upon a slave - a thing to minister to her vanity and obey her commands. Lady Vervaine was one of those fascinating little women who charm you by their simple, winning ways, and you do not dream for a moment that they are not terrestrial angels; did you know them intimately, however, you would discover that they have a will and a temper of their own, such as would render the life of a husband miserable and unhappy if he did not succumb to her slightest wish, and put up with her most frivolous caprice. She was frequently tyrannical with her servants, and would have her most trivial command obeyed to the letter, under pain of her sovereign displeasure. One day she struck me on the knuckles with a hair-brush, because I ran a hair-pin into her head by the merest accident in the world. I said nothing, but I cherished an idea of retaliation nevertheless. We had dressed her on a particular evening for the Opera. She looked very charming; but so graceful was her manner, so pleasant was her bearing, and so unexceptionable her taste, that she could never look anything else.



"Paschal," she said to me.

"Yes, my lady," I replied.

"I shall come home a little before twelve; wait up for me."  
 "Yes, my lady," I replied again, in the monotonous, parrot-like tone that servants are supposed to make use of when talking to those who have authority over them.

It was a long, dreary evening; there was not much to do, so I took up a book and tried to read; but although I tried to bring my attention upon the printed page, I was unable to succeed in doing so. I was animated with a conviction that I should make some important discovery that night. It is a singular thing, but in my mind coming events always cast their shadows before they actually occurred. I invariably had an intuition that such and such a thing would happen before it actually took place. It was considerably past twelve when the mysterious countess came home; the charms of the opera and the Floral Hall must have detained her until the last moment, unless she had met with some entertaining companion who beguiled the hours by soft speeches and tender phrases, such as lovers alone know how to invent and utter. I began to unrobe her, but after I had divested her of her cloak, she called for her dressing-gown, and told me to go and bring her some coffee. The cook was gone to bed, and I found some difficulty in making the water boil, but at last I succeeded in brewing the desired beverage, and took it upstairs. The countess was, on my return, industriously making calculations, at least so it seemed to me, in a little book bound in morocco leather, and smelling very much like a stationer's shop. She might have been making poetry, or concerning the plot of a drama, but she stopped every now and then, as if to "carry" something, after the manner

of mathematicians who do not keep a calculating machine on the premises.

After I had put down the coffee, she exclaimed -

"You can go. Good night."

I replied in suitable terms, and left her, but not to go to my room or to sleep. I hung about the corridor in a stealthy way, for I knew very well that no one else was likely to be about, and I wanted to watch my lady that night, which I felt convinced was going to be prolific of events of a startling nature. The night was a little chilly, but I did not care for that. Sheltering myself as well as I could in the shadow of a doorway, I waited with the amount of resignation and patience that the occasion required. In about half an hour's time the door of the Countess of Vervain's apartment opened. I listened breathlessly, never daring to move a muscle, lest my proximity to her should be discovered. What was my surprise and astonishment to see a man issue from the room! He held a light in his hand, and began to descend a flight of stairs by its aid.

I rubbed my eyes to see whether I had not fallen asleep and dreamed a dream; but no, I was wide awake. The man must, I imagined, have been concealed somewhere about the apartment, for I saw no trace of him during the time that I was in the room. He was a person of small size, and dressed in an odd way, as if he was not a gentleman, but a servant out of livery. This puzzled me more than ever, but I had seen a few things in my life which appeared scarcely susceptible of explanation at first, but which, when eliminated by the calm light of reason and dissected by the keen knife of judgment, were in a short time as plain as the sun at noonday. I thought for a brief space, and then I flattered myself that I had penetrated the mystery. I said to myself, *It is a disguise*. The Countess of

Vervaine was a little woman. She would consequently make a very small man. The one before me, slowly and with careful tread going down the staircase, was a man of unusually small stature. You would call him decidedly undersized. There was a flabbiness about the clothes he wore which seemed to indicate that they had not been made for him. The coat-sleeves were especially long. This gave strength to the supposition that the countess had assumed male attire for purposes of her own. She could not possibly have had herself measured for a suit of clothes. No tailor in London would have done such a thing. She had probably bought the things somewhere - picking them up at random without being very particular as to their size or fit. I allowed the man to reach the bottom of the staircase before I followed in pursuit. Gliding stealthily along with a care and precision I had often practised in the dead of night at home in order that I might become well versed and experienced in an art so useful to a detective, I went down step by step and caught sight of the man turning an angle which hid him from my view, but as he did so I contrived to glance at his features. I started and felt inclined to shrink. Every lineament of his face was concealed by a hideous black mask. My sensations were not enviable for many a long night afterwards; that dark funereal face-covering was imprinted in an almost indelible manner upon my mind, and once or twice I awoke in bed shivering all over in a cold perspiration, fancying that the black mask was standing over me holding a loaded pistol at my head, and threatening my life if I did not comply with some importunate demand which I felt I could not pay the slightest attention to. Recovering myself, as best I could, I raised my dress, and stepping on my toes, followed the black mask. He descended to the lower regions. He held

the light before him, occasionally looking around to see if any one were behind him. I contrived whenever he did this to vanish into some corner or fall in a heap so that the rays of the lamp should not fall upon my erect form. We passed the kitchen, from which the stale cabbage-watery smell arose which always infests those interesting domestic offices after their occupants have retired to rest. I could hear the head cook snoring. He slept in a small room in the basement, and was, I have no doubt, glad to go to bed after the various onerous duties that he had to perform during the day, for the office of cook in a good family is, you know, no sinecure. Aristocratic birth does not prevent the possessor from nourishing a somewhat plebeian appetite which must be satisfied at least four or five times a day. A plain joint is not sufficient, a dozen messes called *entrées* must accompany it, composed of truffles and other evil smelling abominations, such as are to be met with at the shop of a Parisian epicure. I had not searched the rooms on the basement very closely, but during the cursory investigation I had made, I noticed that there was one which was always kept locked. No one ever entered it. Some said the key was lost, but none of the servants seemed to trouble themselves much about it. It was an empty room, or it was a lumber room. They did not know, neither did they care. This being the state of things existent respecting that room I was astonished to see the man in the black mask produce a key well oiled so as to make it facile of turning, put it in the lock, turn it, open the door, enter and disappear, shutting the door after him. It did not take me long to reach the keyhole, to which I applied my eye. The key was not in it, but whether the Black Mask had secured the door inside or not, I could not tell. The time had not then arrived at which

it was either necessary or prudent to solve the riddle. I could see inside the room with the greatest ease. The lamp was on the floor, and the Black Mask was on his knees engaged in scrutinizing the flooring. The apartment was utterly destitute of furniture, not even a chair or a common deal table adorned the vacant space, but a few bricks piled on the top of one another lay in one corner. Near them was a little mound of dry mortar, which, from its appearance, had been made and brought there months ago. A trowel such as bricklayers use was not far off. While I was noticing these things the man in the black mask had succeeded in raising a couple of planks from the floor. These he laid in a gentle way on one side. I could perceive that he had revealed a black yawning gulf such as the entrance to a sewer might be. After hesitating a moment to see if his lamp was burning brightly and well, he essayed the chasm and disappeared in its murky depths, as if he had done the same thing before and knew very well where he was going. Perfectly amazed at the discoveries I was making, I looked on in passive wonderment. I was, as may be supposed, much pleased at what I saw, because I felt that I had discovered the way to unravel a tangled skein. Queen Eleanor, when she found out the clue which led her through the maze to the bower of fair Rosamond, was not more delighted than myself, when I saw the strange and mystic proceeding on the part of the Black Mask. When I had allowed what I considered a sufficient time to elapse, I tried the handle of the door - it turned. A slight push and the door began to revolve on its hinges; another one, and that more vigorous, admitted me to the room. All was in darkness. Sinking on my hands and knees, I crawled with the utmost caution in the direction of the hole in the floor. Half a minute's search brought me to it.

My hand sank down as I endeavoured to find a resting-place for it. I then made it my business to feel the sides of the pit to discover if there was any ladder, through the instrumentality of whose friendly steps I could follow the Black Mask. There was. Having satisfied myself of this fact, I with as much rapidity as possible took off the small crinoline I wore, for I considered that it would very much impede my movements. When I had divested myself of the obnoxious garment, and thrown it on the floor, I lowered myself into the hole and went down the ladder. Four or five feet, I should think, brought me to the end of the flight of steps. As well as I could judge I was in a stone passage. The air was damp and cold. The sudden chill made me shudder. It was evidently a long way under ground, and the terrestrial warmth was wanting. It had succumbed to the subterraneous vapours which were more searching than pleasant; a faint glimmer of light some distance up the passage, showed me that the Black Mask had not so much the best of the chase. My heart palpitated, and I hastened on at the quickest pace I considered consistent with prudence.

### CHAPTER III

#### BARS OF GOLD AND INGOTS

I COULD see that the passage I was traversing had been built for some purpose to connect two houses together. What the object of such a connexion was it was difficult to conceive. But rich people are frequently eccentric, and do things that those poorer and simpler than themselves would never dream of. The Black Mask had discovered the underground communication, and was making use of it for the furtherance of some clandestine operation. The passage was not of great

length. The Black Mask stopped and set the light upon the ground. I also halted, lest the noise of my footsteps might alarm the mysterious individual I was pursuing. I had been in many perplexities and exciting situations before, and I had taken a prominent part in more than one extremely perilous adventure, but I do not think that I was ever, during the whole course of my life, actuated by so strong a curiosity, or animated with so firm a desire to know what the end would be, as I was on the present occasion. In moments such as those which were flitting with the proverbial velocity of time, but which seemed to me very slow and sluggish, the blood flows more quickly through your veins, your heart beats with a more rapid motion, and the tension of the nerves becomes positively painful. I watched the movements of the Black Mask with the greatest care and minuteness. He removed, by some means with which he was acquainted, half a dozen good-sized bricks from the wall, revealing an aperture of sufficient dimensions to permit the passage of a human body. He was not slow in passing through the hole. The light he took with him. I was in darkness. Crawling along like a cat about to commit an act of feline ferocity upon some musipular abortion, I reached the cavity and raised my eyes to the edge, so as to be able to scrutinize the interior of the apartment into which the Black Mask had gone. It was a small place, and more like a vault than anything else. The light had been placed upon a chest, and its flickering rays fell around, affording a sickly glare very much like that produced on a dark afternoon in a shrine situated in a Roman Catholic Continental church. The sacred edifice is full of darkening shadows, but through the bronzed railings which shut off egress to the shrine, you can see the long wax tapers burning,

emitting their fiery tribute to the manes of the dead. The Black Mask had fallen on his knees before a chest of a peculiar shape and make; it was long and narrow. Shooting back some bolts, the lid flew open and disclosed a large glittering pile of gold to my wondering gaze. There was the precious metal, not coined and mixed with alloy, but shining in all the splendour of its native purity. There were bars of gold and ingots, such as Cortez and Pizarro, together with their bold followers, found in Peru, when the last of the Incas was driven from his home, his kingdom, and his friends, after many a sanguinary battle, after many a hard-fought fray. The bars were heavy and valuable, for they were pure and unadulterated. There were many chests, safes, and cases, in the vault. Were they all full of gold? If so, what a prize had this audacious robber acquired! He carefully selected five of the largest and heaviest ingots. Each must have been worth at least a thousand pounds. It was virgin gold, such as nuggets are formed of, and, of course, worth a great deal of money. After having made his choice, it was necessary to place the bars in some receptacle. He was evidently a man of resources, for he drew a stout canvas bag from his pocket, and, opening it, placed them inside; but, as he was doing so, the mask fell from his face. Before he could replace the hideous facial covering, I made a discovery, one I was not altogether unprepared for. The black mask - ungainly and repulsive as it was - had hitherto concealed the lovely features of the Countess of Vervaine. With a tiny exclamation of annoyance she replaced the mask and continued her task. I smiled grimly as I saw who the midnight robber was, whose footsteps I had tracked so well, whose movements I had watched so unerringly. It would take but few visits to this treasure vault, I thought to myself, to bring in a magnificent

income; and then I marvelled much what the vault might be, and how the vast and almost countless treasure got there. Questions easy to propound, but by no means so facile of reply. At present my attention was concentrated wholly and solely upon the countess. It would be quite time enough next morning to speculate upon the causes which brought about effects of which I was the exultant witness. Having stowed away the ingots in the canvas bag, the mysterious countess rose to her feet, and made a motion indicative of retiring. At this juncture I was somewhat troubled in my mind. Would it be better for me to raise an alarm or to remain quiet? Supposing I were to cry out, who was there to hear my exclamation or respond to my earnest entreaty for help and assistance. Perhaps the countess was armed. So desperate an adventuress as she seemed to be would very probably carry some offensive weapon about her, which it was a fair presumption she would not hesitate to use if hard pressed, and that lonely passage, the intricacies of which were in all probability known but to herself and me, would for ever hide from prying eyes my blanching bones and whitening skeleton. This was not a particularly pleasant reflection, and I saw that it behoved me to be cautious. I fancied that I could regain the lumber room before the countess could overtake me, because it would be necessary for her to shut down and fasten the chest, and when she had done that she would be obliged to replace the bricks she had removed from the wall, which proceeding would take her some little time and occupy her attention while I made my escape. I had gained as much information as I wished, and I was perfectly satisfied with the discovery I had made. The countess was undoubtedly a robber, but it required some skill to succeed in bringing her to justice. In

just that species of skill and cunning I flattered myself I was a proficient. Hastily retreating, I walked some distance, but to my surprise did not meet with the ladder. Could I have gone wrong? Was it possible that I had taken the wrong turning? I was totally unacquainted with the ramifications of these subterranean corridors. I trembled violently, for a suspicion arose in my breast that I might be shut in the vault. I stopped a moment to think, and leaned against the damp and slimy wall in a pensive attitude.

#### CHAPTER IV

### IN THE VAULT

WITHOUT a light I could not tell where I was, or in which direction it would be best for me to go. I was in doubt whether it would be better to go steadily on or stay where I was, or retrace my steps. I had a strong inclination to do the latter: whilst I was ruminating a light appeared to the left of me. It was that borne by the Countess of Vervaine. I had then gone wrong. The passage prolonged itself, and I had not taken the right turning. The countess was replacing the bricks, so that it was incumbent upon me to remain perfectly still, which I did. Having accomplished her task, she once more took up her bag, the valuable contents of which were almost as much as she could carry. I was in the most critical position. She would unquestionably replace the planks, and perhaps fasten them in some way so as to prevent my escaping as she had done. My only chance lay in reaching the ladder before her, but how was it possible to do so when she was between myself and the ladder? I should have to make a sudden attack upon her, throw her down, and pass over her prostrate body, all very desirable, but

totally impossible. I was defenceless. I believed her to be armed. I should run the risk of having a couple of inches of cold steel plunged into my body or else an ounce of lead would make a passage for itself through the ventricles of my heart, which were not at all desirous of the honour of being pierced by a lady of rank. I sighed for a Colt's revolver, and blamed myself for not having taken the precaution of being armed. Although I wished to capture Lady Vervaine above all things, I was not tired of my life. Once above ground again and in the house I should feel myself more of a free agent than I did in those dreary vaults, where I felt sure I should fall an easy prey to the attacks of an unscrupulous woman. Lady Vervaine pursued her way with a quick step, which showed that she had accomplished her object, and was anxious to get to her own room again, and reach a haven of safety. As for me, I resigned myself to my fate. What could I do? To attack her ladyship would, I thought, be the forerunner of instant death. It would be like running upon a sword, or firing a pistol in one's own mouth. She would turn upon me like a tiger, and in order to save herself from the dreadful consequences of her crime, she would not hesitate a moment to kill me. Serpents without fangs are harmless, but when they have those obnoxious weapons it is just as well to put your iron heel upon their heads and crush them, so as to render them harmless and subservient to your sovereign and conquering will. I followed the Countess of Vervaine slowly, and at a distance, but I dared not approach her. I was usually fertile in expedients, and I thought I should be able to find my way out of the dilemma in some way. I was not a woman of one idea, and if one dart did not hit the mark I always had another feathered shaft ready for action in my well-stocked quiver. Yet it was not without a sickening feeling

of uncertainty and doubt that I saw her ladyship ascend the ladder and vanish through the opening in the flooring. I was alone in the vault, and abandoned to my own resources. I waited in the black darkness in no enviable frame of mind, until I thought the countess had had sufficient time to evacuate the premises, then I groped my way to the ladder and mounted it. I reached the planks and pushed against them with all my might; but the strength I possessed was not sufficient to move them. My efforts were futile. Tired and exhausted, I once more tried the flags which paved the passage, and cast about in my mind for some means of escape from my unpleasant position. If I could find no way of extrication it was clear that I should languish horribly for a time, and ultimately perish of starvation. This was not an alluring prospect, nor did I consider it so. I had satisfied myself that it was impossible to escape through the flooring, as the Countess of Vervaine had in some manner securely fastened the boards. Suddenly an idea shot through my mind with the vivid quickness of a flash of lightning. I could work my way back through the passage, and by feeling every brick as I went, discover those which gave her ladyship admittance into the vault where the massive ingots of solid bullion were kept. I had no doubt whatever that so precious a hoard was visited occasionally by those it belonged to, and I should not only be liberated from my captivity, but I should discover the mystery which was at present perplexing me. Both of these were things I was desirous of accomplishing, so I put my shoulder to the wheel, and once more threaded the circumscribed dimensions of the corridor which led to the place in which such a vast quantity of gold was concealed. I took an immense deal of trouble, for I felt every brick singly, and after passing my fingers over its rough surface gave it a push

to see if it yielded. At last, to my inexpressible joy, I reached one which "gave;" another vigorous thrust and it fell through with a harsh crash upon the floor inside. The others I took out more carefully. When I had succeeded in removing them all I entered the bullion vault in the same way in which her ladyship had, and stopped to congratulate myself upon having achieved so much. The falling brick had made a loud noise, which had reverberated through the vault, producing cavernous echoes; but I had not surmised that this would be productive of the consequences that followed it. Whilst I was considering what I should do or how I should dispose myself to sleep for an hour or so - for, in nursery parlance, the miller had been throwing dust in my eyes, and I was weary - I heard a noise in one corner of the vault, where I afterwards found the door was situated. A moment of breathless expectation followed, and then dazzling blinding lights flashed before me and made me close my shrinking eyes involuntarily. Harsh voices rang in my ears, rude hands grasped me tightly, and I was a prisoner. When I recovered my power of vision, I was surrounded by three watchmen, and as many policemen. They manacled me. I protested against such an indignity, but appearances were against me.

"I am willing to come with you," I exclaimed, in a calm voice, because I knew I had nothing to fear in the long run. "But why treat me so badly?"

"Only doing my duty," replied one of the police, who seemed to have the command of the others.

"Why do you take me in custody?" I demanded.

"Why? Come, that's a good joke," he replied.

"Answer my question."

"Well, if you don't know, I'll tell you," he answered, with a grin.

"I have an idea, but I want to be satisfied about the matter."

"We arrest you for *robbing the bank*," he replied, solemnly. My face brightened. So it was a bank, and the place we were in was the bullion vault of the house. The mystery was now explained. The Countess of Vervaine had by some means discovered her proximity to so rich a place, and had either had the passage built, or had been fortunate enough to find it ready-made to her hand. This was a matter for subsequent explanation.

"I am ready to go with you," I said; "when we arrive at the station-house I shall speak to the inspector on duty."

The man replied in a gruff voice, and I was led from the vault, happy in the reflection that I had escaped from the gloom and darkness of the treasure house.

## CHAPTER V

### HUNTED DOWN

"GLAD to see you, Mrs. Paschal," exclaimed Colonel Warner when I was ushered into his presence. "I must congratulate you upon your tact, discrimination, and perseverance, in running the Countess of Vervaine to earth as cleverly as you did. Rather an unpleasant affair, though, that of the subterranean passage."

"I am accustomed to those little dramatic episodes," I replied: "when I was taken to the station-house by the exultant policeman, the inspector quickly released me on finding who I was. I always carry my credentials in my pocket, and your name is a tower of strength with the executive."

"We must consider now what is to be done," said the colonel; "there is no doubt whatever that the South Belgravia Bank

has been plundered to a great extent, and that it is from that source that our mysterious countess has managed to supply her extravagant habits and keep up her transitory magnificence, which she ought to have seen would, from its nature, be evanescent. I am only surprised to think that her depredations were not discovered before; she must have managed everything in a skilful manner, so skilful indeed as to be worthy of the expertest burglar of modern times. I have had the manager of the bank with me this morning, and he is desirous of having the matter hushed up if possible; but I told him frankly that I could consent to nothing of the kind. One of the watchmen or policemen who took you into custody must have gone directly to a newspaper office, and have apprised the editor of the fact, because here is a statement of the circumstance in a daily paper, which seems to have escaped the manager's notice. Newspapers pay a small sum for information, and that must have induced the man to do as he apparently has done. The astute Countess of Vervaine has, I may tell you, taken advantage of this hint, and gone away from London, for I sent to her house this morning, which was shut up. The only reply my messengers could get was that her ladyship had gone out of town, owing to the illness of a near relation, which is, of course, a ruse."

"Clearly," I replied, "she has taken the alarm, and wishes to throw dust in our eyes."

"What do you advise?" asked Colonel Warner, walking up and down the room.

"I should say, leave her alone until her fears die away and she returns to town. It is now the height of the season, and she will not like to be away for any great length of time."

"I don't agree with you, Mrs. Paschal," returned the colonel, testily.

"Indeed, and why not?"

"For many reasons. In the first place, she may escape from the country with the plunder. What is to prevent her from letting her house and furniture in London, and going abroad with the proceeds?"

"There is some truth in that," I said, more than half convinced that the colonel took the correct view of the case.

"Very well, my second reason is, that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

Proverbial, but true, I thought to myself.

"Thirdly, I wish to recover as much of the stolen property as I can. A criminal, with full hands, is worth more than one whose digits are empty."

"Do you propose that I shall follow her up?" I demanded.

"Most certainly I do."

"In that case, the sooner I start the better it will be."

"Start at once, if your arrangements will permit you to do so. Servants are not immaculate, and by dint of inquiry at her ladyship's mansion, I have little doubt you will learn something which you will find of use to you."

"In less than a week, colonel," I replied, confidently, "the Countess of Vervaine shall be in the hands of the police."

"In the hands of the police?" What a terrible phrase, full of significance and awful import. Redolent of prison and solitary confinement. Replete with visions of hard-labour, and a long and weary imprisonment, expressive of a life of labour, disgrace and pain. Perhaps indicative of summary annihilation by the hands of the hangman.

"I rely upon you," said Colonel Warner, shaking my hand. "In seven days from this time I shall expect the fulfilment of your promise."



I assented, and left the office in which affairs of so much importance to the community at large were daily conducted, and in nine cases out of ten brought to a successful issue.

Yet the salary this man received from a grateful nation, or more strictly speaking from its Government, was a bare one thousand a year, while many sinecurists get treble that sum for doing nothing at all. My first care was to return to the Countess of Vervaine's house. It was shut up, but that merely meant that the blinds were down and the shutters closed in the front part. The larger portion of the servants were still there and glad to see me. They imagined that I had been allowed a holiday, or that I had been somewhere on business for her ladyship. I at once sought the housekeeper. "Well, Paschal," she said, "what do you want?"

"I have been to get some money for the countess, who sent me into the City for that purpose, ma'am," I boldly replied, "and she told me I was to come to you, give you ten pounds, and you would give me her address, for she wished you to follow her into the country."

"Oh! indeed. Where is the money?"

I gave the housekeeper ten sovereigns, saying - "You can have five more if you like, I dare say she wont miss it."

"Not she. She has plenty."

The five additional portraits of Her Majesty were eagerly taken possession of by the housekeeper, who blandly told me that the countess would be found at Blinton Abbey, in Yorkshire, whither she had gone to spend a fortnight with some aristocratic acquaintance. I always made a point of being very quiet, civil, and obliging when in the presence of the housekeeper, who looked upon me as remarkably innocent, simple, and hardworking. After obtaining the

information I was in search of I remained chatting in an amicable and agreeable manner for a short time, after which I took my leave. When, ho! for the night mail, north. I was accompanied by a superintendent, to whom I invariably intrusted the consummation of arduous enterprises which required masculine strength. He was a sociable man, and we might between us have proved a match for the cleverest thieves in Christendom. In fact we frequently were so, as they discovered to their cost. There is to me always something very exhilarating in the quickly rushing motion of a railway carriage. It is typical of progress, and raises my spirits in proportion to the speed at which we career along, now through meadow and now through woodland, at one time cutting through a defile and afterwards steaming through a dark and sombre tunnel. What can equal such magical travelling? It was night when we reached Blinton. The Abbey was about a mile and a half from the railway station. Neither the superintendent or myself felt inclined to go to rest, for we had indulged in a nap during the journey from which we awoke very much invigorated. We left our carpet bags in the care of a sleepy railway porter who had only awaited the arrival of the night mail north, and at half-past one o'clock set out to reconnoitre the position of Blinton Abbey. The moon was shining brightly. We pursued a bridle path and found little difficulty in finding the Abbey as we followed the porter's instructions to the letter. All was still as we gazed undisturbed upon the venerable pile which had withstood the blasts of many a winter and reflected the burning rays of innumerable summer suns. I was particularly struck with the chapel, which was grey and sombre before us; the darkened roof, the lofty buttresses, the clustered shafts, all

spoke of former grandeur. The scene forcibly recalled Sir Walter Scott's lines,

"If thou would'st view fair Melrose aright,  
Go visit it by the pale moonlight;  
For the gay beams of lightsome day  
Gild but to flout the ruins grey,  
When the broken arches are black in night  
And each shafted oriel glimmers white;  
When the cold light's uncertain shower  
Streams on the ruined central tower;  
When buttress and buttress alternately  
Seem framed of ebon and ivory -  
Then go, but go alone the while,  
Then view St. David's ruined pile."

We halted, inspired with a sort of sacred awe. The chapel, the turreted castle, the pale and silvery moonlight, the still and witching time of night, the deep castellated windows, the embrasures on the roof from which, in days gone by, many a sharp speaking culverin was pointed against the firm and lawless invader, all conspired to inspire me with sadness and melancholy. I was aroused from my reverie by the hand of the Superintendent which sought my arm. Without speaking a word he drew me within the shadow of a recess, and having safely ensconced me together with himself, he whispered the single word, "Look!" in my ear. I did as he directed me, and following the direction indicated by his outstretched finger saw a dark figure stealing out of a side door of Blinton Abbey. Stealthily and with cat-like tread did that sombre figure advance until it reached the base of a spreading cedar tree whose

funebral branches afforded a deathlike shade like that of yew trees in a churchyard, when the figure produced a sharp pointed instrument and made a hole as if about to bury something. I could scarcely refrain a hoarse cry of delight for it seemed palpable to me that the Countess of Vervaine was about to dispose of her ill-gotten booty. I blessed the instinct which prompted me to propose a visit to the Abbey in the night-time, although I invariably selected the small hours for making voyages of discovery. I have generally found that criminals shun the light of day and seek the friendly shelter of a too often treacherous night. In a low voice I communicated my suspicions to the superintendent, and he concurred with me. I suggested the instant arrest of the dark figure. The lady was so intently engaged that she did not notice our approach; had she done so she might have escaped into the Abbey. The strong hand of the superintendent was upon her white throat before she could utter a sound. He dragged her remorselessly into the moonlight, and the well-known features of the Countess of Vervaine were revealed indisputably.

"What do you want of me, and why am I attacked in this way?" she demanded in a tremulous voice as soon as the grasp upon her throat was relaxed.

I had meanwhile seized a bag, the same canvas bag which had contained the ingots on the night of the robbery. They were still there. When I heard her ladyship's inquiry, I replied to it. "The directors of the South Belgravia Bank are very anxious to have an interview with your ladyship," I said.

She raised her eyes to mine, and an expression of anguish ran down her beautiful countenance. She knew me, and the act of recognition informed her that she was

hunted down. With a rapid motion, so swift, so quick, that it resembled a sleight-of-hand, the Countess of Vervaine raised something to her mouth; in another moment her hand was by her side again, as if nothing had happened. Something glittering in the moonlight attracted my attention. I stooped down and picked it up. It was a gold ring of exquisite workmanship. A spring lid revealing a cavity was open. I raised it to my face. A strong smell of bitter almonds arose. I turned round with a flushed countenance to her ladyship. She was very pale. The superintendent was preparing to place handcuffs around her slender wrists; he held the manacles in his hand and was adjusting them. But she was by her own daring act spared this indignity. A subtle poison was contained in the secret top of her ring, and she had with a boldness peculiar to herself swallowed it before we could anticipate or prevent her rash act. The action of the virulent drug was as quick as it was deadly. She tottered. A smile which seemed to say, the battle is over, and I soon shall be at rest, sat upon her lips. Then she fell heavily to the ground with her features convulsed with a hard spasm, a final pain; her eyes were fixed, her lips parted, and Fanny, the accomplished, lovely, and versatile Countess of Vervaine was no more. I did not regret that so young and fair a creature had escaped the felons' dock, the burglars' doom. The affair created much excitement at the time, and the illustrated papers were full of pictures of Blinton Abbey, but it has long since passed from the public mind, and hundreds of more sensation have cropped up since then. The South Belgravia Bank recovered its ingots, but it was nevertheless a heavy loser through the former depredations of the famous Countess of Vervaine.

## THE SECRET BAND

### CHAPTER I

#### A COMPLICATED CASE

THE postman's knock sounded at the door with its usual sharp rifle-like crack, crack; and shortly afterwards my servant entered the room, saying, "A letter for you, ma'am." The official seal quickly informed me that it was on business. Nor was I sorry to receive the information that it contained. I had been idle lately; that is to say, I had given myself a holiday for a fortnight, and I was anxious to be on active service again. I felt that I was becoming rusty and inert; not to say obese and stupid. The letter was from Colonel Warner. He wrote: -

"My dear Madam, - I have a little affair to propose to you which I think will be congenial to your feelings. There is nothing so efficient and time-saving as plunging into the middle of a thing when you happen to have business of a serious nature under your consideration, so I will, without further preface, let you know what I wish to have done. There is in existence in London a society called the 'Secret Band.' It consists of men who have banded themselves together after the manner of the famous 'Carbonari.' The members are to a man Italians and political refugees. What their oaths and ultimate objects may be I am unable to say, but this I know, they are dangerous men, unscrupulous men, who have neither the fear of Heaven or of their fellow-men before their

