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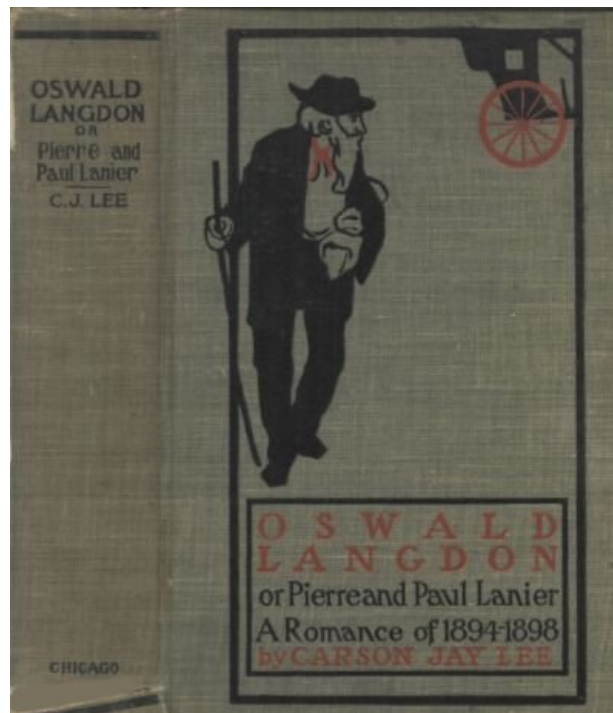
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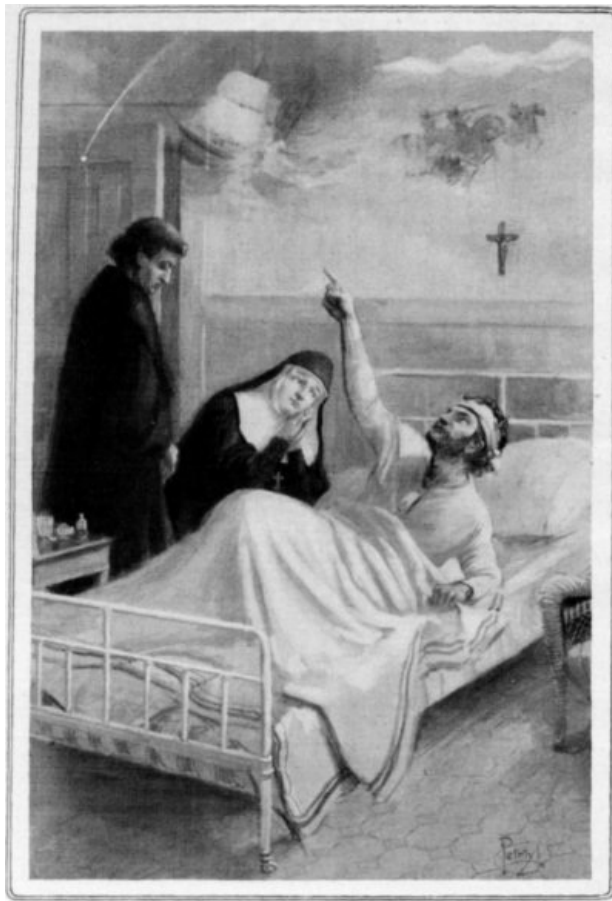
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"THE STAR! THE STAR! MOTHER!"

OSWALD LANGDON

Or, Pierre and Paul

Lanier. A Romance of

1894-1898

BY

CARSON JAY LEE

CHICAGO

THE LAKESIDE PRESS

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FIFTH EDITION

TO ONE,

"STANDING WITH RELUCTANT FEET,
WHERE THE BROOK AND RIVER MEET."

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PREFACE

[xi]

Though to explain incurs a risk, the author accepts the hazard of a word in advance.

While the novelist's license has been so used that there is need neither to resent an innuendo nor to prove an "alibi," yet, substantially, the incidents narrated occurred within the time stated, and nearly all the actors are still upon life's "boards."

The conscientious tourist in search of that "beautiful country-seat" and "wood-fringed lake" is advised to defer his visit. Perhaps the exact locations are intended to be in doubt. Even that "station" might be hard to find in an English train schedule.

Geographical accuracy may not be always essential. One noted writer has told of infatuation for

"An ounce of common, ugly, human dust,"

and declared that—

.... "Places are too much,
Or else too little, for immortal man."

The reader of few or of many books may find "reminders" in these pages. The author hastens to confess echoes from bygone days, hintings of vagrant fancies, and whimsical reveries wherein appeared the vague evasive outlines of half-remembered things.

[xii]

If keeping that harmless old connoisseur of the "image and superscription," who insisted on positive "rigor mortis," jailed so long seem heartless, it should be remembered that some wrongs are more apparent than real.

The antecedents of that mysterious fair-haired "Find" are still in doubt, but this signifies little. Child-life is always a miracle more inscrutable than the resurrection of Lazarus.

The hinted fate of Pierre and Paul Lanier may merit some criticism. Perhaps summary justice should have been meted out; but in view of all "extenuating circumstances," may not judgment be suspended? Since "Eternity is so long," and in deference to that "bias for saving," can we not allow an "appeal unto Cæsar"?

CARSON JAY LEE.

CHAPTER I

[1]

THE SCARE AND ARREST

Passing along the street, apparently self-absorbed, there seems little in this man to attract notice.

Why does the scared newsboy hurry by, thinking of that strange face?

Quickly the agitated countenance assumes a look of dignified indifference.

A block away the boy resumes his calls:

"All about the murder of a young girl! Body found in the river! Police on track of the murderer!"

"Poor little fellow!" murmured Oswald. "He gave me such a shock! But how frightened he seemed when passing, with his innocent yell! How foolish my scare! What do New York police know or care about a crime committed in London years ago?"

Curious to read what the city papers say of this homicide, Oswald retraces his steps, turns a corner, and sees the boy waiting pay from a pleasant-faced, careful old man, who holds to his purchase while critically scrutinizing the coin, as if sorry to part with such "image and superscription" without approved value. [2]

"Be the girl dead and be she drowned sure?"

"She's a goner!" replied the boy.

This emphatic assurance of "rigor mortis" having convinced the old gentleman that his money will be well invested, the deal is about to be closed, when, seeing Oswald, little Jack sprints across the street, down an alley, into the arms of a policeman.

"Pfwat yez roonin' loike yez a stalin' wagabond pfwor?" sternly asks the officer.

"That willanous-lookin' rascal round there is campin' on me trail."

With visions of a kidnaper of small boys fleeing from his wrath, Michael P. O'Brien drags the terrified Jack out of the alley to the street. Seeing the old man holding to the paper and looking dazed, upon this gray-haired malefactor is placed the strong hand of the "statute in such case made and provided," and he is started toward the police-station, with the soothing assurance:

"Yez nadn't confiss yez guilt by discriminatin' ividence."

Seeing that matters are badly mixed, Jack sidles away toward the opposite street-corner. His movement is noted by the policeman at the exact moment that Jack again sees Oswald. Heedless of loud command to "Sthop, in the noime of the law," the youthful auctioneer of the metropolitan press heads at right angles and is soon out of sight. [3]

CHAPTER II

 [4]

AFTER THE STORM

The day has been fearfully hot. Unconscious of surroundings, every nerve seemingly relaxed, a young man is riding along the road toward the station. Passing a wooded strip, there is a blinding flash. With much effort, Oswald frees himself from the limb of a tree, which in falling broke the neck of his horse. Bewildered with pain and drenched to the skin, he is staggering around in the mud, when a light wagon, drawn by a fine team, comes to a sudden halt at the fallen tree. The driver turns his conveyance around and assists the soaked victim of the storm to a seat. Retracing the way to another road, after a roundabout journey they stop in front of a large mansion surrounded by a grove.

The injured man is assisted to a room. A servant soon brings dry clothing and kindles a fire.

Oswald begins to meditate upon his mishap. "Close call," murmurs he, "and just as I had completed that grand air-castle! At the very moment when the acclaim was the loudest and the star of Langdon seemed brightest, that blinding flash! That terrible shock, too, and such an oppressive feeling, until the limb was removed from my breast! What does it mean? How like and yet unlike my last night's dream! I feel so cold, too." He stirs the fire, which is burning cheerily, and sits down in the cushioned chair, the blood flowing from his mouth. [5]

Oswald soon recovers from the hemorrhage, and is aroused from his languor by the entrance of a fine-looking man whose general appearance indicates a life of about fifty years.

Seeing the pale face, and noting its strong outlines, yet refined expression, he stands for a moment in silent admiration.

"How do you feel now?"

"Much better, thank you," is the feeble reply.

Perceiving his guest's weakness, he rings a bell, and upon the prompt appearance of a servant, gives orders which are soon complied with by the bringing of refreshments.

Oswald learns that his kind host bears the name of Donald Randolph, and is the owner of the beautiful country-seat known as "Northfield"; that he has a family consisting of a son and daughter; that the son is away on a trip to India, the daughter visiting in London, but expected home on the following day.

Wishing to know more of the girl, her age, whether single or married, educated or otherwise, with the numerous further items of information naturally desired by a young man of twenty-five, about the daughter of an aristocratic, highly connected, wealthy English gentleman, Oswald, [6]

however, has the tact and good breeding not to demand a "bill of particulars."

There being a brief pause here, as if both feel that an important though delicate subject is under consideration, Sir Donald becomes the inquisitor, learning much about Oswald's past life without asking many questions. Sir Donald manifests such kindly, unfeigned interest, so much sympathy with Oswald's plans for the future, heartily approving of his highest aspirations, that the young man confides unreservedly, and tells it well.

Oswald's father was the younger son of Herbert Langdon, and for many years had been rector of an important parish. His parents had placed Oswald under a tutor, who had prepared him for Oxford. He had finished a course at this institution, and was taking a pleasure trip on horseback when the accident befell him. He now aspires to be a barrister, though until within a few years his secret ambition had been to be a great military leader. He had read of "St. Crispin," "Balaklava," the "Battle of the Nile," "Trafalgar," and "Waterloo," but the military spirit is subservient to that of commerce and diplomacy. With much sage assurance he said:

[7]

"Massed armies, long-range ordnance, impregnable forts, steel-armored battle-ships, and deadly, explosive coast marine mines are simply bellicose forms of pacific, neutral notes commanding the 'peace of Europe.' The jealousy of nations will not permit wars of conquest for colonial extension, and the mouths of frowning cannon are imperious pledges of international comity. Weak dynasties will find tranquillity in the fears of more august powers. Even the unspeakable Moslem will be unmolested in his massacres, to insure regular clipping of Turkish bonds in money markets of European capitals."

Here Sir Donald suggested that possibly this pacific, commercial tendency had its perils, and through unforeseen complications might cause war.

"The enervating influences of wealth, the extreme conservatism thereby fostered, and the resulting disposition to accept any compromise rather than interfere with the free course of trade, may create conditions breeding hostilities. May not such extreme aversion to commercial disturbance, and disposition to think lightly of national honor, compared with financial security, be bids for attack from more hardy, martial peoples, having little respect for the prerogatives of traffic or the hypocritical refinements of diplomatic craft? Are not such conditions, with the luxurious licentiousness so natural thereto, combined with the stolid indifference and poverty of the masses, most potent factors in the decline and fall of nations?"

[8]

Struck by the force of these suggestions, Oswald is silent.

Seeing that this interesting young man is pondering upon these possibilities and resulting changes in the maps of the world, Sir Donald watches him with much admiration. He thinks, I may not live to behold much of this, but would like to see a cast of his horoscope.

After a brief pause, Oswald replies:

"Serious contingencies may grow out of these tendencies of the times. These may require diplomacy and forbearance among the powers. Barbarous peoples would be at a great disadvantage in a conflict with any of the greater nations of the earth. Personal prowess, resistless in the whirlwind of the charge, is of little avail against modern artillery or long-range ordnance. The destructive power of modern military equipment will make adjustment of international differences by arbitration imperative."

He hedges at this point with the suggestion:

"Still, some crazy autocrat or frenzied people at any time may bring on far-reaching conflicts, and barbarous hordes will become menaces to civilization if taught the art of modern warfare."

[9]

After a few minutes' further conversation of a general character, Sir Donald bids Oswald good-night.

Being weary, Oswald soon after retired.

On the waters of a beautiful lake, under a cloudless sky, Oswald is swiftly sailing. The breeze seconding his own skill, the boat seems instinct with life. From the wooded bank, around a distant curve, emerges a small sail with two persons aboard. Nearing the middle of the lake, he sees a struggle, a splash, then a female form sinking in the water. With its remaining occupant the boat speeds swiftly away, disappearing beyond a jutting wooded point. Oswald's sail reaches the spot, and he rescues the insensible form of a young woman. She revives and becomes his loving friend. Soon a hateful, sinister face haunts them. Many snares they unconsciously escape. There is a tangle in the web of events. They stand upon the banks of a river, near a large city. The girl clings to him despairingly. Their foe appears, and both are struck from the bank into the river. Regaining the shore, Oswald flees. Through terrible mazes he is driven over the earth, with the face of the drowned girl before his eyes, the shadow of the gallows looming grim and black at every turn.

[10]

With a groan Oswald awakes. The pain in his side and breast is severe, but the dream seems much more real. He can not easily believe it to be simply a chimera of an overwrought brain.

CHAPTER III

OSWALD MEETS ESTHER

Late on the following morning a servant called with breakfast. In about an hour Sir Donald paid Oswald a visit.

Replying to a question as to his night's rest, he complained of severe pains across his lungs. Sir Donald suggested that a physician be called, but Oswald declined medical assistance.

After some pleasant talk, Sir Donald informed him that the servant would be at his command until evening; that in the afternoon Esther would return from London, and expected her father at the station, adding: "These little girls must be carefully attended."

Oswald felt a shade of disappointment at this fatherly allusion to little Esther. Having pictured a graceful young woman of faultless face, form, and manner, how strong his protest against the displacement of this ideal, by a rollicking little "tot," full of spoiled temper and domineering caprice.

Oswald now sees in Sir Donald Randolph less to admire. Mentally arraigning this aristocrat for his poor taste, he blames the silly father for having such a daughter. Finally, deciding not to be unduly harsh in his judgment, as there might have been mitigating circumstances, he is feeling a sense of self-approval, when voices are heard. [12]

Looking from the window, he sees that pictured ideal coming up the graveled walk, clasping the hand of Sir Donald, talking as though time were covenant essence, with forfeiture imminent.

At once all resentment vanishes. This noble father is promptly reinstated.

Oswald now feels an impulse to apologize for his former verdict and judgment, but decides, as neither had been announced, to suppress both.

His pleased fancy pictures pleasant moonlight strolls, long rides on horseback, frequent sails upon a wooded lake, numerous tête-à-têtes in secluded bowers, a sweet girl's tender, wistful smiles, a whispered proposal, with happy, conditional acceptance, soon followed by a grand marriage ceremony.

For nearly an hour little matters kept Sir Donald from visiting his guest.

Oswald chafed under this prolonged neglect. Why should he, Oswald Langdon, with assured honors waiting acceptance, receive such shabby treatment? To leave promptly would be showing proper spirit. [13]

However, there is little hazard of such commendable spiritual manifestation.

Strange, Miss Randolph has no more curiosity and shows so little interest.

Soon Sir Donald called, and asked if Oswald felt able to go downstairs.

"Fully, thank you!" is the animated response.

Leaning on Sir Donald's arm, the young man descends, and enters the family sitting-room, where he is presented to Esther Randolph.

Habitually at ease in exchange of formal social greetings, Oswald feels a slight tremor of embarrassment upon his presentation to this beautiful blushing girl. Such mixture of childish curiosity, impulsive girlish candor, and unconscious grace, with hesitating modesty, womanly dignity, and restraints of good breeding, all modulated by eye and accent, blending with expressive facial lights and shades, is to Oswald a new creation.

The look of questioning admiration is mutual, each evidently seeing in the other an interesting enigma.

Wonderfully fascinated by this girl of twenty, Oswald spends a delightful evening. So absorbed is he, that bodily pain and Sir Donald are in abeyance. This fine specimen of mature, aristocratic manhood now is interesting only as father of a unique daughter. [14]

While pleased at Oswald's manly refinement and evident interest, the girl feels no warmer thrill.

Esther's education had progressed under her father's care. Competent teachers of high character were employed for so important work. The mental culture, social training, and refined accomplishments of Esther Randolph to such a father were matters of import. Nor were the subtle interwoven relations of the intellectual and ethical with bodily conditions, disregarded. She learned much by study wisely directed; became proficient in the languages, vocal and instrumental music; absorbed valuable general information from frequent talks with her father; read with discrimination some of the best works of poetry, romance, and literature; was familiar with the amenities of polite society; yet this girl of twenty seemed totally unconscious of her rare accomplishments, or bewitching perfections of face and form.

When she first met Oswald Langdon, Esther had not felt any symptoms of the tender sentiment. Was not this handsome, refined, enthusiastic, cultured young fellow, so strangely placed in her path, almost an ideal of manly perfection?

In Oswald's life there had been little social sentiment. The formal courtesies of polite society were hollow and tiresome. Though thought by friends and acquaintances to be a young man of strong mind, fascinating, magnetic manners, and high aspirations, with a brilliant prospective career, he seemed careless of that dubious prestige whose uncertain tenure is subject to the whims of the alleged "select." [15]

Oswald had met many well-connected, eligible young ladies. Their manners had been kindly gracious. Most courteously and with instinctive chivalry he had responded, but never felt any lasting interest. Now, providentially, he has met Esther Randolph. Oswald Langdon and providence cannot fail.

Sir Donald listened with pleasure to the animated talk of Esther and Oswald.

Though fascinated with the girl, Oswald's manner toward the father was respectfully considerate. Sir Donald was his kind benefactor, and had a most charming daughter. Oswald Langdon had too much self-respect—and tact—to ignore Sir Donald Randolph.

At ten o'clock the family and guest retired, the father to indulge his soul's long habit of speculative conjecture, the daughter to sleep, Oswald to think of Esther.

The stay of Oswald at Northfield was prolonged for a period of six weeks. For nearly half of this time he was detained by his injuries and the advice of the physician. Fearing hemorrhages as a result of the injuries to his breast, Oswald finally had consented to receive medical attendance. [16]

Enjoying the society of this interesting invalid, Sir Donald and Esther had assured him that he was welcome to the extended hospitality of Northfield.

There were many delightful talks upon all sorts of subjects, profound and otherwise. Esther often played, with exquisite skill, selections from musical masters. At his request she sang songs of grand, refined sentiment and of most entrancing melody.

Oswald was not at ease. Though Esther promptly responded to his invitations to sing and play, even anticipating his wishes in selections, seeming perfectly happy in his presence, Oswald saw that this grand girl had thoughts and purposes in which he had no part.

The form of this barrier was shadowy, but real.

To some natures, vague, dim outlines of shapes are more potent than those of an heroic mold.

There was in Oswald's high-strung, impulsive being, not tense, imperious energy alone, but that craft which in emergency could plan and wait. [17]

But how mass the forces of a masterful spirit against an evasive square?

Though perplexed by this intangible obstacle to his purposes, Oswald continued, by varying tactics, his subtle bombardment, still floundering in the mazes of the siege.

While impressed with her father's liberal views regarding the infinite wideness of divine compassion toward human frailty, Esther had a most exacting sense of personal obligation to a higher power.

It never occurred to this generous, conscientious girl that her moral delinquencies should tax the healing properties or sensitive texture of the "seamless robe." Her conscience was peculiarly responsive to all religious appeals wherein duty was imperative, and her sentiments were so generous toward human want, that the natural effect of such ethical experiences would be a life of self-sacrifice in some line of charitable service.

This conscientious leaning was toward practical charity. At London, during her recent visit, Esther had listened to eloquent, stirring appeals from a brilliant pulpit orator, upon the subjects of charity and sacrifice. Prominence was given to local endeavor in behalf of the helpless poor.

"Such are," said he, "exalted objects of divine solicitude. Hopeless looks and dwarfish lives are fearful protests against the pitiless avarice of the faithless rich. This or that conception of the redemptive economy, or concerning the personnel of its central figure, may be tolerated, but there can be no hopeful sign for him who actively or passively oppresses God's 'little ones.' [18]

"A story has been told of One whose weary, homeless head, often envied hole of fox and nest of bird; 'despised and rejected,' yet making autocratic claims to kingly prerogatives over an empire more limitless than that of Cæsar Augustus; having in marked degree, a high-born soul's characteristic indifference to personal affronts, yet terribly indignant at slights to the poor; Who, standing with His imperial brow bared in oriental sun, His right hand resting in benediction upon curly-headed babe, the other thrilling with prophetic instinct of the leftward gesture of 'Depart,' uttered this sentiment, Better a millstone necklace and deep-sea grave than offense against the helpless.

"How heartless, for one reared in luxury, placed beyond the reach of want, having refinements and accomplishments of intellectual drill, leading a life of selfish ease, pampering every personal taste, while millions of these needy wards lack common bread."

Names and sacrifices of noted philanthropists were eloquently commented upon, and pathetic instances were narrated of noble women who had spent their lives in this human ministry. [19]

These appeals had awakened in Esther's mind a fixed resolve to devote herself to some form of home missionary work. She fully had determined to forego all associations and environments not conducive to greatest usefulness in her chosen mission.

Trustingly waiting providential direction, Esther had returned from London, doubting not that a life of contented service would unfold with the years.

Thus panoplied with mail of self-consecration to an ideal, Esther Randolph met and withstood the suit of Oswald Langdon.

Oswald never overtly exceeded the bounds of social propriety, nor boorishly inflicted his presence upon Esther's attention. The high constraints of native manliness and gentlemanly instinct precluded such coarse tactics.

Esther's failure to appreciate this rare chance, and to acquiesce in her lover's evident interest, resulted not from any strange apathy or dislike, such as sometimes influences girlish choice. To her father she said: "I see in Oswald's remarkable individuality much to admire. His refined, magnetic enthusiasm is contagious, and at times most fascinating. His delicately guarded, subtle compliments, yet earnest, sincere speech, interest me greatly." It was but natural that the tender, wistful courtesies and considerate deference of this masterful suitor should be pleasing to Esther's womanly spirit. This high-principled girl, strong for self-sacrifice upon the altar of duty, was intensely human. Oswald felt this charm, and readily yielded to its power. [20]

As Esther became sensitive of her interest in Oswald's future, she became more conscientiously determined upon absolute dedication of self to higher purposes than earthly pleasures.

Being perplexed at the strange girl's conduct, Oswald concluded to learn its cause. His waking hours, while alone, were spent in framing all sorts of delicately worded questions and comments about subjects which he thought of interest to Esther, calculated to draw out this hidden secret.

Unconscious of his craft, Esther's responses were void of light as Egyptian sphinx.

Oswald became wildly curious as to this mystery. It occurred to him that there might have been a case of early infatuation.

To his skillfully framed, delicately propounded questions about her past life, Esther answered frankly, with happy enthusiasm, giving each glad reminiscence.

Perhaps her aristocratic father had confided to Esther cherished plans concerning proper social alliances, and this loyal daughter yielded to the parental will. [21]

Oswald's tactful delving unearthed no coercive "find" of restraining or constraining parental influence designedly swaying Esther's choice toward any fixed social status.

It was apparent that this girl felt toward her father a loving sense of filial reverence. That Esther would defer to Sir Donald's unexpressed or spoken will, Oswald doubted not.

There seemed to be such habitual interchange of parental and filial regard, so much of loving care and trusting dependence between this father and child, that Oswald knew in any emergency these would be far more autocratic in power of high constraint than any dogmatic assertions of authority or sentimental excesses.

Does she divine his purposes and evade the issue? Are any peculiar English property entailments obstacles to his suit? Is this hateful barrier some high family scheme of marital intrigue or establishment? These and other less probable possible causes are canvassed by Oswald with much tact and persistence.

Much of information derived by this resourceful inquisitor was not through question or reply, but was elicited by adroitly worded opinions upon remotely similar subjects adapted to time and occasion of their utterance. Still the mystery deepened. [22]

Oswald had been at Northfield for about three weeks, and was entirely recovered from his injuries.

Though loth to leave this interesting home, he concluded to go. With evident reluctance he stated his purpose to Sir Donald and Esther. These so cordially urged longer stay that Oswald readily consented.

"Why not stay here longer, and see more of Northfield?"

He had no wish to find any sufficient answer to this question. To his visual survey Northfield was then in smiling review.

Sir Donald suggested a ride on horseback. The air was pleasant and the sky cloudless. Oswald admired the picturesque variety of wood, stream, hill, and level field, with their blending, many-colored shades. Esther commented with enthusiasm upon the incidents of each loved spot, seeming a little girl again among the sweet scenes of her childhood home. Sir Donald listened with pleased smile to Esther's minute description of each coincidence of the past. At times there crossed his refined, mobile face tremulous shades, suggestive of pathetic memories. The panorama of twenty-five years was passing before his reminiscent gaze, softened and blended by subdued tints of receding lights. [23]

Turning a wooded curve, they came upon a grassy nook by a pebbly stream shaded with trees. The granite inscriptions with choicely selected bushes and flowers needed no interpreter.

Esther saw that Sir Donald wished to be alone. Without spoken sign, she rode on, accompanied by Oswald.

Sir Donald dismounted. This strong, mature, chastened man never thought of wife and child as sleeping there. They dwelt too far and safe for such pulseless rest. With clarified visions and adjusted lenses these gazed from their high mounts of observation upon "those graves called human existence, not yet resurrected unto life."

Esther led the way along a narrow path to an open space, where she and Oswald dismounted. Neither referred to Sir Donald's whim in remaining behind.

Oswald had spent a half-hour alone with this interesting girl without reference to the mystery which had eluded his subtle, absorbing inquiry for the past three weeks.

Upon being joined by Sir Donald, the party rode on for some distance along the bank of a lake, until coming to a graveled road and following its meandering course, they returned to the Northfield mansion. [24]

Next day was the Sabbath. Oswald attended the parish church with Sir Donald and Esther.

Having from early childhood felt the restraints of religious training, Oswald yielded to the sweet solemnity of the hour. Though his controlling aspirations, in their uncurbed impetuosity and youthful conceit, were little consciously tinged with the higher sentiments of ethical teaching, yet Christian principles were entitled to unquestioned homage. Feeling slight commendation for that meek attitude of majestic patience, "led like a lamb to the slaughter," he thrilled at sight of an heroic warrior figure, clad in royal Bozrah-vintage-tinted purple, with powerful victor tread, returning from "Edom" conquest. There was not much of "comeliness" in the "marred face" of an unresenting Christ, but how fascinating the autocratic, prophet-painted, empire-inscribed pose of Redemption's Champion, clad in ermine of final decree, alternately welcoming his ancient "Elect," and with awful leftward gesture upon countless millions pronouncing the changeless judgment of "Depart."

Esther's lips quivered with sympathetic emotion at the divine tenderness for human despair. In the miracles she saw heavenly interposition to relieve earthly want. Barley loaves, fish, and wine were for the hungry, thirsty, ravenous crowd. Clay anointings were for the blind, quickened ears for deaf mutes, leprous healings for diseased outcasts, and recalled vital breath to pulseless mortality, responsive to human prayer. Esther faintly comprehended the inexorable justice of final judgment, but pitied poor, erring, bewildered, helpless human wanderers, gravitating so swiftly and surely to drear, friendless caverns of eternal night. [25]

Afterward, in comment to Oswald and Esther, Sir Donald said:

"Is not patience royalty's most crucial test? How easy, kingly assertion! How hard, autocratic forbearance! How little evidence of omnipotence in vindictive wrath! Are not human weaknesses rightful claimants to a divine protectorate? Are not the crowning glories of these grand figures of Hebrew imagery in their pathetic antitypes? Is not the progressive evolution of the ages more sublime than spontaneous precocity? Restoring to normal functions ear, eye, and tongue is not so miraculous as are continuous creations of auricular and visual senses, with all the wondrous resulting harmonies of speech, sound, and song. Healing an 'unclean' wretch of his foul disorder ranks not the healthy rhythm of an infant's pulse. The inexplicable life of an interesting young girl is more mysterious than was the resurrection of Lazarus." [26]

The ritual had an unspeakable charm for Esther and Oswald.

Monday, Oswald saw Esther only briefly, as some matters of household supervision absorbed her care. He felt lonely, but improved the time in writing several letters which had been delayed. Such employment would do when Esther was out of sight. It seemed a day lost.

Many years had receded into vague retrospect before the absorbing interests of three brief weeks.

Upon Tuesday Sir Donald and Esther drove to the station. A girl friend was expected on a visit from London.

Oswald spent the day in walking about the grounds and viewing the rare beauties of Northfield. Aware that much of interest was being seen by him for the first time, yet he experienced a strange sense of familiarity with many objects in this changing panorama. He took an extended stroll along the banks of the lake. He stops and soliloquizes: "Still the same unaccountable sensation! When and where have I witnessed the counterpart of that timbered bank beyond the curve, with the jutting wooded point in the distance? Why should the waters of a running stream, with the glare of myriad lights, appear in the background of this real landscape view? What have I done that a fleeing, skulking form like my own flits back and forth in the distant outlines? Where have I seen that despairing female face?" [27]

With insistent sense of some fateful impending ill, Oswald returned to Northfield.

Having been gone several hours, the sun was setting when he reached the mansion grounds. Coming up a flower-fringed path, wondering at the chimeras of the afternoon, he saw Esther

seated on a bench near a rosebush, and stepped toward her with a pleasant greeting, but cut it short with a startled, "Well!"

The surprised cause of Oswald's exclamation blushed as she looked into his strangely excited countenance.

Thinking there was some mistake of identity at the base of this incident, Esther presented Oswald to her friend from London, Miss Alice Webster.

With much pleasant tact, Esther managed to divert the minds of her young friends from this little mistaken affair to subjects more agreeable.

"Miss Webster has lived in London several years, and is an intimate friend of my cousins dwelling there. She called upon them during my recent visit. I pressed Alice to spend a few weeks at Northfield. We look for a most delightful time.

[28]

"How nice it will be that Mr. Langdon can be here and help us to enjoy this treat! What lovely trips on horseback! Such sails on the lake! Miss Webster sings divinely."

Esther's exquisite face shone with genuine anticipation, and Alice seemed hopeful of perfect happiness.

Oswald did not just like the prospect. Though this London acquisition to Northfield's select circle was an uncommonly pretty young woman of twenty-two, tall, and a most strikingly interesting brunette, Oswald had little disposition to be promiscuous in his tastes for female charms. To his discriminating vision Esther Randolph was the ideal of all he deemed desirable in womanly loveliness. If Oswald Langdon had been consulted as to the advisability of this expected visit, Alice Webster at that time would have been in London.

However, there were matters in the Randolph social set which had taken shape without his molding hand.

Oswald considerably decided not to veto any absolute decrees of fate, but felt that innocent, generous-hearted Alice Webster was an interloper and a positive barrier to his purposes.

Let none fancy that this chafing, impetuous suitor, so impatient toward any and all obstacles, permitted ocular evidence of these sentiments to casual view. All was masked by the most refined, manly courtesy and held in check by habitual self-control.

[29]

From the first Alice admired Oswald Langdon. His conduct toward her was the perfection of manly consideration. Conscious of his unreasonable resentment against her presence at Northfield at this particular time, he made amends by strenuous efforts to entertain this handsome girl.

For nearly two weeks the time of these interesting young people was occupied in varying rounds of social pleasure. The three seldom were separated, except when Esther was called away to superintend some household matter or joined Sir Donald.

Oswald planned many ways to be alone with Esther, but found such seclusion impossible. Not that there was apparent disposition on her part to thwart any of his plans, but on the contrary, Esther seemed acquiescent in every whim of her guests.

Alice was happy in Oswald's company, and did not disguise her sentiments.

Having been so considerate, Oswald could not now be indifferent without causing sensitive pain.

Though Esther had concluded that her life's purpose never would permit anything more than Platonic regard for Oswald Langdon, yet she often wished that duty's path might be less narrow and exacting. The cost of living with sole reference to a high spiritual ideal never seemed so great as when she saw this fascinating, manly suitor, evidently seeking her hand, but failing of proper encouragement, turning his attention to another. Beyond this suppressed pain, evidenced by slightly quivering lips, there was little to disturb Esther's fixed resolve.

[30]

When Oswald had despaired of again seeing Esther except in company of Alice, and was thinking of going home to await further plans, all were surprised by the appearance of a young man from London.

That evening Sir Donald told Oswald the following story:

"For many years Paul Lanier has known Alice, and they are quite friendly. He was a frequent caller at her London home. Though Alice never felt toward him much of interest and doubted his sincerity of purpose, yet this tireless suitor persistently continued his attentions.

"Paul is the son of a rich broker, who until recently has been the guardian of Alice Webster.

"Alice's father, William Webster, acquired wealth in India. Pierre Lanier was his partner.

"Reverses came. In a fit of insane madness over his losses, resort was had to the suicide's refuge. Pierre Lanier settled the complicated affairs of his dead partner. All was absorbed but a small estate in England, yielding an annual rental of one hundred pounds. This income has been devoted to the care and education of the orphan daughter, Alice Webster, who at the time of her father's death was four years old. Her mother died when Alice was a babe, and was buried at Calcutta.

[31]

"Paul is the only son of Pierre Lanier, and until he reached the age of sixteen lived with his father in India. Nine years ago his father brought Paul to London, where he has since resided. Through his father's finesse, Paul moved in select London circles. He attended the same church as Alice Webster. The father being wealthy and of pleasant address, Paul was regarded as a promising young man with good prospects, but both, for some reason, seem interested in the future of this young orphan girl with the moderate allowance.

"Alice and Paul were much together, and became quite good friends. Paul's father still resided abroad, but made frequent visits to London. The growing friendship between these two young people seemed to meet his hearty approval. About nine months ago Paul joined his father at Calcutta, and Alice thought he was still there until she was surprised by his unheralded appearance.

"Less than a year previous to this meeting, Pierre Lanier was in London. At this time Paul proposed to Alice that they be married during his father's stay. Alice gently but positively declined this proposal. Paul insisted, and was fiercely indignant at her continued refusal. Finally, seeing there was then no hope of a favorable answer, his tactics took more subtle form, and Paul said: [32]

"It is unreasonable that I should expect an immediate answer. You have known me as a boy, and have seen little of society. You will like me better after seeing the hollow mockery of social compliments. My love for you will be constant. Will you not kindly leave me some hope, and wait a year before final decision? I will go abroad, hoping that at the end of twelve anxious months Alice Webster will consent to become my bride.'

"Thus appealed to, this generous-hearted girl consented to grant the desired time, and to defer until then the final reply. Soon after this Pierre Lanier left London, and in a few weeks Paul went to India."

Oswald was much interested in this romance and awaited developments.

Alice experienced much uneasiness because of her promise to wait. She felt determined upon refusing to become the wife of Paul Lanier, but dreaded the ordeal. She doubted his sincerity, and felt dread of both father and son. For several weeks before her visit at Northfield Alice had experienced an unaccountable sense of being watched, and often in her walks met a strange man with familiar, furtive, shifting glances. Fully determined forever to end this unwelcome affair, Alice gladly accepted Esther's invitation to visit Northfield. In the sweet infatuation of the past few weeks Alice almost had forgotten her former distresses, and was experiencing a sense of unmitigated pleasure at this beautiful home. Her growing interest in Oswald Langdon would make easier dismissal forever of Paul's attentions. [33]

Though when in company of Esther and Oswald, Alice often had experienced a temporary sense of being watched, yet her pleasure was too genuine long to feel the presence of unreal objects. More than once had the reflected shadow of Paul Lanier appeared in startling clearness. Far from being homely or of unpleasant features, judged by approved standards of manly beauty, yet compared with Oswald Langdon, Paul Lanier was to Alice Webster an uninteresting deformity.

The two girls were sitting upon the lawn, in shade of a tree, listening to Oswald's full, well-modulated voice reading from the opening chapter of "Aurora Leigh," when a neatly dressed, stylish-appearing young man stood before them. Lifting his hat with a low bow, he responded to Alice's startled "Mr. Lanier!" with "Good-evening, Alice." [34]

With apparent fear, Alice presented Paul to Esther and Oswald as her friend from London, "Mr. Paul Lanier."

Noting the dismay of Alice at his sudden appearance, and quickly divining that her sentiments toward him had not improved, Paul bit his lips with suppressed ire, but otherwise was outwardly impassive. Paul made a hurried explanation to Alice's unspoken inquiries: "I returned from India sooner than expected. I learned of you being at Northfield, and came from London to see you."

Alice endeavored to appear cheerful, but her efforts were apparent to all.

Paul attributed her conduct to the presence of Oswald, and from that moment became an implacable foe.

Oswald saw in the presence of Paul Lanier at Northfield, for the avowed purpose of meeting Alice Webster, a chance to renew his quest. So, far from attempting to supplant Paul, he wished him success, and hoped Alice would think kindly of her old-time friend, who had traveled from far India to see this capricious girl. Was not the infatuated Paul handsome, stylish, and evidently sincere? Oswald felt a sense of pity for the foolish prejudices of the silly Alice. His sympathies were aroused in behalf of the slighted Paul, who would be justified in cutting the acquaintance of such a perverse sweetheart. Oswald trusted that Paul would consider before taking such a course. It would be well for strong-minded, decisive men to practice forbearance with girlish whims and fancies. [35]

Ignoring the coolness of Alice, Paul was very courteous, seeming not to notice her evident dislike.

The efforts of both young men to be alone with their objects of interest were thwarted by the tact of Alice, who was attracted to the side of Oswald or Esther, as varying circumstances required.

The evening was passed in conversation and instrumental music, yet there were feelings of bitterness in that apparently happy group. Sir Donald and Esther felt the pleasure growing out of generous, hospitable entertainment, but there was much of unspoken recrimination between their guests.

What pent malice often is masked by smiling social courtesies!

Upon the next day Sir Donald proposed that all take a sail on the lake and enjoy some excellent fishing.

To reach the water at a convenient spot near the boat, the gay party, with lunch and fishing outfit, took a double carriage, Sir Donald occupying a seat with the driver. All entered the boat, Sir Donald with much skill handling the canvas. After an extended ride the party landed on a shaded bank, where a fire was kindled. The fish and coffee soon were steaming on a table before used by the family on similar lake excursions. [36]

After the meal Sir Donald lay down at a little distance and took a nap. The rest of the party strolled together through the timber skirting the shore.

Esther and Alice became separated by a narrow ravine, which gradually widened until its sides became steep. Oswald had followed Esther, who seemed perfectly happy, and unconscious of the widening breach between them and her friend.

Paul had seen his chance to be alone with Alice. The girl had not noticed how their path was being separated from that of her friends until they had gone some distance. Then she thought of retracing her steps, but Paul suggested that they might get farther away in this manner, and that by continuing up the ravine a crossing soon would be found. They kept on their way, Paul evincing his desire to find Esther and Oswald by frequent calls. There were no responses. After an hour of wandering, Alice became tired, and sat down to rest. [37]

Paul now seemed worried over not finding Esther and Oswald. He suggested that they wait to see if their friends would not come that way. They more easily could get back to the point of separation by not traveling farther. Alice approved of this plan, and both waited in the shade of an overhanging tree on the bank of the ravine.

Paul was very kind, treating her anxiety with marked solicitude. He succeeded in allaying her doubts as to the outcome of this incident, and they talked freely upon little events of their past.

Gradually Paul approached the subject uppermost in his mind. Alice tried to divert him until some better time. Her ingenuity was not equal to the occasion in dealing with Paul Lanier. She became aware of this, and tremblingly awaited the attack.

With softened accents and apparent deference, Paul asked:

"Do you remember, Alice, the promise made me about a year ago?"

"That I would wait a year before deciding?"

"Yes, I believe you did say a year."

"But, Mr. Lanier, that was only nine months ago."

"While I have no right to hurry you, Alice, yet when a man's dearest hopes are at stake, waiting three long months is a great trial." [38]

"Still, Mr. Lanier, to decide such an important question is a year too long?"

Mistaking her trembling earnestness for genuine interest in the proper solution of this heart problem, Paul gravely urged:

"In the time already passed since my proposal, you surely have reached a decision, and it is cruel longer to keep me in suspense."

Alice began to cry.

Paul attributed her tearful, hesitating manner to yielding consent, and said:

"It will be better for me to now know my fate than to suffer the uncertainties of three long months."

As Alice still hesitated, Paul boorishly insisted:

"Do here and now decide my fate."

Thus pressed, Alice replied:

"Mr. Lanier, I am so sorry to say that I never can become your wife."

Alice continued in a stammering way to tell Paul why she could not accept his proposal.

Seeing that the frightened girl had power to refuse, Paul Lanier listened with stoic, dogged silence. His craft did not forsake him, but encouraging Alice freely and fully to state her whole mind, he helplessly acquiesced.

Apparently dazed, Paul was some time silent; then with resigned air said:

"I wonder why Mr. Langdon and Miss Randolph have not found us? Perhaps it would be wise to return before it is late." [39]

They started back, Paul showing no lack of courtesy toward this girl who had crushed his hopes.

Alice felt rebuked by his conduct, and tried to be very kind in her manner.

They met their friends near the point of separation. There were mutual exchanges of surprises, but no one was pressed for explanations. A strange self-abstraction seemed to control all. Without many words, the four went together to the place where they had left Sir Donald. The party was soon on the lake, sailing homeward. Finding the carriage in waiting, they reached the Northfield residence at sunset.

Evidently all had enjoyed the outing, but they were weary, and soon retired.

Both Paul and Oswald had reason to ponder the eventful experiences of that day. Each felt keen disappointment, chafing at the perversity of fate.

Esther and Oswald had strolled along pleasantly for some time before missing their friends. Not doubting but that the absent ones soon would appear, Esther enjoyed being alone with Oswald for the first time since the arrival of Alice. There was something in the refined manner of this earnest man that strongly appealed to Esther's womanly sentiments. But for duty's requirements, she would have yielded to the evident wish of Oswald Langdon. Her conduct seemed less restrained, and there was an absence of that preoccupied air so puzzling to Oswald. Realizing that their lives would drift apart, Esther felt a sense of loneliness. Her smiles were wistful in anticipation of solemn adieus. [40]

Oswald observed this change in Esther's manner, vigilantly noting each significant sign. Would he ever have another such favorable opportunity to learn Esther's mind concerning the subject which so engrossed all his interest? The time would be too brief for him to know by the slow processes of the last four weeks. Might not this mystery be solved and his own fate be determined by frank avowal of his love?

There was to Oswald's thoughts a decisive directness which could not brook the slow action of less positive minds. He resolved to know his future in the hopeful present.

They sat down in an embowered spot, under a small tree, upon a grassy knoll. Oswald's manner was nervously excited, despite strenuous effort to appear circumspect. He began in low voice to express his sense of pleasure since coming to Northfield.

"The happiest days of my life have been passed in your society. I have often congratulated myself on the fortunate accident which detained me at such a hospitable home, where the associations have been so pleasant. Of my stay here I shall ever have most tender memories. It seems to me that I have always known you, Miss Randolph. I never can tell you and your father my appreciation of your kindnesses." [41]

Here Esther interrupted his earnest talk by saying:

"Father and I are the debtors. We have been overpaid by the pleasure of your stay at Northfield. Mr. Langdon, there will be a void in our home when you have gone away."

Oswald eagerly replied:

"Why should I go away? Why not always be with you, Miss Randolph?"

Startled by these sudden questions, Esther was speechless. She saw the drift, but the form was too dubious to admit of responsive reply.

Then, with impetuous frankness, Oswald avowed his love for Esther and interest in her future plans.

"My love has grown stronger every day since we met. I have not known you long, but what has time to do with such sentiments? I have so hoped that you would reciprocate my love and think kindly of my suit. I have often wondered at your preoccupation, but hope there is nothing in your plans or purposes which will prevent our being forever united." [42]

Pausing, Oswald noted Esther's tremor, but awaited her response.

In hesitating, plaintive voice, Esther said:

"Mr. Langdon, I greatly appreciate your sentiments toward me, and feel much interest in your future. No light consideration would influence me in such an important decision. I have no words to tell you how it pains me to decline such an honorable proposal. I too will always have tender recollections of your stay at Northfield. My life will be devoted to alleviating the sorrows of the poor and wretched. This vow was taken before you came to Northfield, and I must not break it, though the trial be indeed very hard. My life as your wife would be against the plain dictates of duty and a breach of covenant with Heaven."

Completely stunned, Oswald felt the decisive solemnity of Esther's words, but could find no fitting reply. He had too much respect for her good opinion, even though she crush his fondest hopes, to argue against the grounds of her decision. There was something so intangible, yet solemnly real, in this decisive consecration to holy ends that Oswald experienced a sense of

bewilderment and awe, rendering nerveless his imperious will.

Following some further explanations by Esther for her fixed resolve, they had returned and joined their friends without more than a few words. [43]

Having retired to his room, Oswald pondered long and bitterly over the unwelcome revelations of the day. Esther had told him that for a long time she had been thinking of her chosen life-work, but was fully decided in this resolve by the solemn words of a minister spoken while she was at London. Oswald had no censure for this high-principled, conscientious girl's infatuation, but indignantly railed against her spiritual advisers. These promoters of high ethical philosophy were safe from undue force of their own appeals, though more susceptible hearts might be crushed through conscientious compliance. It maddened Oswald that this lovely girl, with all her perfections of mind, face, and form, should be cast, like a common worm, into the great, vulgar, carnivorous mouth of human want. If Christ's ultimate aim were alleviation of physical suffering, why not feed and heal all earth's hungry, diseased millions, through diviner, broad-gauged philanthropy than lagging processes of personal devotion?

Oswald recalled the hateful, cruel, bigoted zeal of a Calchas, pressing upon Agamemnon at Aulis the unappeased wrath of the gods, until to fill the canvas of Grecian fleet for Troy sail this so-called "King of Men" could yield his household's idol to butcher-blade of human sacrifice. [44]

Could it be that the courteous, indulgent Sir Donald Randolph, with his wealth of cultured, intellectual power, was such a cruel, heartless, moral idealist as to approve of his daughter's immolation on this slow-torturing funeral pyre?

Then, too, Esther's infatuation for such dreary life! Esther seemed to think the infinite plans would fail without her coöperation. Diana's intervention saved the weeping, trembling Iphigenia, but how find available substitute or Tauris asylum for deluded Esther Randolph?

Thus chafing against the day's revelations, Oswald continued, until wearied he relaxed from such tense state into uneasy sleep.

Paul Lanier's quickened sense of personal humiliation struggled with the promptings of overpowering craft. At times his vindictive malice planned revengeful surprises for the man who was in some way responsible for Paul's treatment. True, Paul saw little in Oswald's conduct toward Alice evincing any absorbing interest, and could detect that Esther was the attraction; but had not this fascinating Englishman come between him and the girl of his choice? With set lips he recalled each slight received at Northfield, and meditated sure revenge. "The time is short," he mutters, "and I must not long temporize upon methods, but there must be cautious anticipation of all the consequences." [45]

In his malicious ire Paul could have found it easy forever to silence the voices of that sleeping household.

"My manners shall mask devilish craft until success is assured. There will be smiling, hypocritical acquiescence in Northfield plans, then prompt, decisive action upon the part of Paul Lanier."

For hours Paul continued revolving in his mind various plans, but reached no definite conclusion as to his course of action.

With all his survey of the situation in its remotest bearings, and determination to practice dissembling, cautious craft, Paul's decisive acts in this brooding tragedy were to be the result of passionate impulse.

CHAPTER IV

LAKE AND RIVER TRAGEDIES

The Northfield household was early astir upon the morning after the lake ride. Neither Oswald nor Paul had any hint of the other's fate.

Oswald possessed too much gentlemanly instinct to abate his respectful treatment of both father and daughter. Through craft, Paul was very courteous. He announced his intention to return that afternoon. With many expressions of regret, Paul left Northfield.

Pierre Lanier is in London. Paul and his father hold a conference, at which present and future plans are discussed. The refusal of Alice Webster to become Paul's wife and her apparent infatuation for Oswald Langdon are talked over. Pierre says:

"We must bring about this marriage in some way, Paul. To fail would be very serious. That other fellow shall not marry Alice. The man who came with me from Calcutta will do as I say. He shall begin the suit now. The income from this remnant of her father's fortune is Alice's sole support. She does not know of the defect in her title to the property. Alice will be frantic when the papers are served. Both of us will favor her side of the case and pose as sympathetic friends. Gradually we can show Alice our good intentions. When her helplessness and poverty become clear, how easy to renew your proposal. She will have faith in your sincerity then, Paul. To escape a life of [47]

want the girl will become the wife of wealthy Paul Lanier. You would make Alice a fine husband, Paul."

Next day an action involving the title to the London property belonging to Alice Webster, and for an accounting of accrued rents, was begun by William Dodge. Soon afterward proper papers were duly served.

Upon learning of this Alice was distracted. Trembling with excitement, she appealed to Sir Donald. This generous-hearted barrister felt much sympathy for Alice. It was decided that Sir Donald would go to London.

To divert Alice's mind from these worries, Oswald and both girls take frequent sails upon the lake. The interest of Alice in Oswald seems growing, and she is cheerful only in his company.

One day he does not join them in their lake excursion, but Sir Donald takes his place. A few hours later Oswald goes down to the shore. Not finding his friends, he sets out in a small sail-boat, [48] expecting to see them somewhere on the lake.

Soon he sees another sail move out from the shore in the distance. Lifting his field-glasses, he learns that there are but two persons aboard, a man and woman. The boat is similar to the one which Sir Donald must have taken, but where is Esther or Alice? The boat moves away rapidly. Both figures are now standing. Applying the glasses to determine which of the girls is on board, he beholds a struggle. The girl falls overboard and sinks out of sight. The boat pulls rapidly away, passing out of view beyond a timbered point not far distant.

Oswald's sail is soon at the place where he had seen the girl disappear. Looking around, he is surprised to behold the apparently lifeless form on the surface of the water.

The mystery is cleared when he sees that a projecting bush holds up the body by contact with a knotted scarf around the neck of the drowned girl.

Oswald places the limp form in the bottom of the boat, and soon reaches the shore. Removing the body to a grassy bank, he sees Esther and Sir Donald approaching.

They are terribly shocked. He begins to explain, when there is a movement, with positive signs of returning consciousness. Soon the eyes open with a wild stare. Slowly the wet figure revives. All are surprised to recognize Alice Webster returned to life. [49]

The girl seems dazed, but at length knows her friends. For a while explanations are deferred. Without search for the missing boat, all are taken by Oswald in his sail, and are soon at the point of embarking, where a carriage awaits them. Reaching Northfield, they enter its doors, without reference to the day's events.

In about an hour Alice is able to relate her experiences. In the mean time, Oswald had acquainted Esther and Sir Donald with his part in this mysterious drama. The explanation is startling.

"I was sitting on the shore near the boat. Both of you had taken a stroll, and were out of sight. I heard stealthy steps, and looking up was frightened to see Paul Lanier. He spoke very gently, begging my pardon for the intrusion. Then Paul said: 'I have heard of your trouble, Miss Webster, and came to offer my sympathy and help. Father and I will be able to render you some assistance, as we know all the facts. Will you do us the honor to accept our aid in thwarting this unjust attempt to rob you of all means of support?'"

"I was surprised at the kind offer, and consented. After a while Paul spoke of seeing two people [50] among the trees farther up the lake, and said he thought they must have been Miss Randolph and her father. He then said, 'Why not take a sail in that direction, and meet them returning?' I consented, and we started up the lake. The boat headed for the point extending out from the other shore. I asked Paul where we were going. He answered, 'We can reach that point over there, and get back in time to meet your friends.' His reply was testy and manner unexpected. I grew suspicious, and insisted on our return. Paul became angry, and did not heed my demands. In my fear, I arose and grasped his arm. He fiercely told me to sit down, using a fearful oath. I refused, and said some wild, bitter things. He then roughly pushed me back, and I fell overboard."

The mystery of Paul Lanier's conduct greatly puzzled all. However, it was evident that he had not intended the consequence of his rash act. This was the result of brutal passion at her resistance to some other design. What could he have intended in his deceitful ruse? He must have been convinced of her death, and fled, using the boat to gain time. All were sure that Alice nevermore would be troubled by Paul Lanier. He would flee, pursued by the supposed Nemesis of his victim.

In this their conclusion was natural, but not based on subtle knowledge of Paul's character. He [51] possessed marvelous cunning and much personal courage. No one but Alice saw him in the boat, and he thinks she is at the bottom of the lake. His coming to Northfield was in disguise, known only to Pierre Lanier. In the same manner Paul returned to London.

The affair had taken a most unpremeditated turn, but father and son will accept the tragic result with resignation. Had their plans finally miscarried, there would have been a removal of Alice Webster. Better for their consciences that her death was due to sudden passion and accident than to "malice aforethought."

Both scanned all the daily papers for news of Alice's disappearance, but were perplexed by

failure to see such reference. Not being able longer to bear the suspense, Paul, in new disguise, again appeared in the vicinity of Northfield. Inquiring as to any incidents of note occurring in that neighborhood, he learns only of other petty gossip. He dares not visit the residence, but watches for its familiar faces.

At length his tireless zeal is rewarded.

Paul is hidden in a thick undergrowth of bushes, nearly opposite the point in the lake where Alice Webster had sunk from sight. Looking from his retreat, he sees the ghost of the drowned girl approaching. In terror, Paul cowers before this supernatural figure which passes his hiding-place. Esther and Oswald come in view. [52]

It now dawns on Paul that in some mysterious way Alice had been rescued from the lake. He fears that news of the incident has been suppressed until complete evidence can be secured against him. Doubtless Alice had informed her friends, who are now on his trail. But Paul's conduct will be other than they expect. By remaining disguised in the immediate vicinity of his crime he will keep advised of their every move.

Waiting until all have passed, Paul leaves his hiding-place and follows at safe distance. It is not his intention to be seen by any of the party, as he wishes to spy upon their movements, but in event of discovery no one will recognize Paul Lanier in such disguise.

Moving around in a circle, Paul reaches a point within hearing distance of where the three are likely to stop for rest and conversation. A narrow, steep-banked ravine will separate him from them, but near enough for distinct hearing.

Screened from view by some low, thick bushes, where he can note their actions, Paul awaits the coming of Esther, Alice, and Oswald, who are now together.

The three sit down on the grassy bank opposite Paul's retreat. Soon Alice begins to discuss the subject of her London financial trouble, and tells Oswald she intends to accompany Sir Donald there on the next day. "Will you not go with us and make my home yours while in the city?" [53]

To this invitation, given in most bewitching manner, the young man courteously demurs. Just now he has little curiosity for London scenery. In fact, Oswald feels a lingering fondness for Northfield.

But the prospect takes an unexpected turn. Esther's sense of the proprieties asserts itself. She likes London very much, and wishes to accompany her father. "It will be so nice to see the sights with papa!"

Oswald now sees wherein he may be of service in assisting Sir Donald to understand this case. As he thinks of some time practicing the legal profession, until a wider field opens, this will be a good chance to acquire a little preliminary knowledge. He now has little doubt but that Alice will win her case. With the coöperation of Oswald Langdon, Sir Donald Randolph cannot fail.

This confidence is contagious. Alice and Esther now feel that the case is won.

Next day Sir Donald, Oswald, Esther, and Alice go to London. On the same train there is an odd-looking, strangely dressed, heavily whiskered man, who says nothing, but keeps track of the Northfield party until all enter the home of Alice Webster. [54]

Sir Donald learns that the plaintiff, William Dodge, is from Calcutta. Recently arrived from India, he had instituted the action. There was no record of any deed connecting the Webster estate with the original title. How the decree of court adjudging title to Alice as sole heir of William Webster had been obtained was a mystery. Perhaps some unrecorded conveyance from rightful owners to William Webster had been presented, and upon these the decree was based.

Solicitors were employed by Alice. In support of her rights they could find no record or other evidence. However, they began most exhaustive search to locate the different grantors whose names appeared in the Dodge chain of title.

Sir Donald suspected that the Dodge papers were forgeries, or were obtained from record owners who had conveyed to the father of Alice and afterward deeded the same property to the Dodge grantors. Possibly there might be a number of unrecorded deeds. Perhaps the records had been falsified.

Numberless possible contingencies were suggested to his legal acumen. Contrary to his usual secretive habit, Sir Donald suggests these to Oswald, who in turn comments upon them to Alice and Esther, with all the gravity of original discovery. [55]

Sir Donald's reports to Alice were brief, giving little information, except ultimate facts as to results of the investigations. Upon most matters relating to proposed tactics, Sir Donald was silent.

Oswald marveled at the obtuseness of this eminent barrister. Why not unravel this web of connivance with dispatch? Time, distance, and every contingency, immediate or remote, were merely incidental. Oswald Langdon will see that the solicitors and Sir Donald Randolph do not fail.

One day Alice pressed Sir Donald for an opinion of the probable time required to have the cloud upon her title removed, and said: "I hope you will frankly tell me all the difficulties likely to

confront you in the case. The matter surely can be decided in a short time. From what Oswald has told me, I certainly will win."

Sir Donald explained many uncertainties of the case. His talk was so sincere, evincing such understanding of the puzzling mazes of the matter, that Alice could not fail to see her chances of success were at best very doubtful. In spite of Sir Donald's promise to devote time and money to vindicate her title, Alice felt despondent over the outlook. She appealed to Oswald for hopeful assurance, explaining fully what had been said by Sir Donald. [56]

Oswald saw the gravity of her trouble, and could say little to mitigate it. Naturally he was frank, and would not indulge in flattery or deceit. He longed to encourage Alice, but could find no truthful words of hope.

Alice saw his evident sympathy, and felt pleased despite her utter helplessness.

Esther proposed that they take a stroll in some of the public grounds. The three afterward were seated in Hyde Park. Esther moved away, as Alice seemed anxious to talk with Oswald upon some confidential matter.

Alice related Paul Lanier's proposal, and dwelt at length upon the many persecutions she had endured, culminating in the lake tragedy.

"I always felt an unaccountable dread of both Paul and his father. Can it be that there is some conspiracy concerning my father's estate in India? Is my existence in the way of their schemes? Would my death or marriage with Paul help them? I feel that all my acts are known. How suddenly Paul appeared at the lake! They now may be watching us!" [57]

Looking around, Oswald was struck by the attitude of a plain-appearing man, with heavy whiskers, seated about twenty feet distant, evidently listening. Oswald said nothing about this, as he did not wish to increase her fears, and the stranger's conduct seemed due to vulgar curiosity.

Alice was so despondent over her financial stress, that she knew not what to do.

"What will become of me, Mr. Langdon, if I fail in the case?"

Oswald spoke hopefully, and thought there would be some way out of her trouble. Esther came up, and he then proposed a moonlight boat-ride on the Thames. He would rent a rowboat, and was quite good with the oars. They decided to take the ride. Soon after the three returned to the home of Alice.

Sir Donald invited both the girls and Oswald to attend an opera that evening. Esther explained that they had agreed upon a boat-ride. "But perhaps Alice and Mr. Langdon would find the opera just as pleasant."

To please Alice, the matter was finally settled by Esther accompanying her father to the opera and the others taking the ride. Oswald did not approve of this arrangement, but offered no objection.

During the evening Alice seemed nervous. She would exert her most bewitching arts to interest Oswald, and then remain silent. Many pleasant complimentary remarks would be cut off abruptly, as if the speaker refrained from further comment through maidenly hesitation or restraint. He noticed her odd manner, but being much absorbed in thoughts of the opera, was not inclined to be sensitive or critical. After some time had been passed in this manner, she suggested that they tie up the boat to a projecting bush on the bank of the stream and take a stroll along the shore. [58]

Alice and Oswald walked along the bank for a few minutes, coming to some overhanging shrubbery, where there was a seat, used by strollers along that side of the Thames. They sat down within a few feet of the shore. The girl still acted strangely, appearing to have some matter in thought importunate for expression, but nervously suppressed. Oswald inquired if Alice were still worrying over her financial troubles, adding some hopeful remarks as to the future, even if the property should pass into the possession of another. His manner was sympathetic. Overcome by her emotions and his words, she began to cry.

Oswald was now in a dilemma. He could face danger with unflinching nerves, but was a novice in such an emergency. Doing what any young man with generous impulses naturally would do under such circumstances, he attempted to allay the fears of his hysterical companion. There was little of premeditated propriety in his words or conduct. [59]

Alice now confessed to Oswald her love. "Much as I dread being left penniless, such poverty would be nothing compared to loss of you. With all the worry and uncertainty caused by this villainous conspiracy against my father's estate, shadowed by fear of the hateful Paul Lanier, life since meeting you at Northfield has been a joyous dream. Without you I cannot live, pursued by the cunning malice and crafty scheming of these persecutors. Will you forgive me, Mr. Langdon, for not waiting a proposal? You have been so kind, I cannot believe you insincere."

To say that Oswald was embarrassed by this unexpected burst of feminine emotion would be mild expression of his feelings. He was stunned and speechless. What could he say in reply? The utter helplessness of Alice, with her despondent future outlook, pursued by enemies whose aims were cruelly vague, against all restraints of maidenly sentiment declaring love for one having no responsive feeling other than pity, was pathetic. Had he not unwittingly contributed to her misery by his unguarded conduct? Would not his denial of her strange suit be a base betrayal? Alice had [60]

thought his conduct sincere. How could he now crush this poor girl's hopes by frank statement of his real sentiments.

With staring, inquisitive eyes Alice watched Oswald's troubled face while these thoughts were passing through his mind. She could not mistake his embarrassment. With dawning presentiment of his unspoken decision, this despairing girl, standing erect, gave one glance at the river. Her action was quickly noted by Oswald, who sprang between Alice and the shore. She begged him to have pity. "You have made me love you! Do not cast me off! Whatever happens, save me from that hateful villain, Paul Lanier!"

There is a flash of steel, a blow and thrust, followed by the splash of two bodies. A form stoops over the projecting shore until the waters have hidden both from view. By aid of the moonlight, scanning the stream far as can be seen in its onward course, this peering watcher seems fearful that his victims may escape from the river. At the sound of voices, he mutters an oath and skulks away.

Oswald rises and swims against the current. Grasping an overhanging shrub in contact with the water's surface, by great effort he manages to reach land.



"THERE WAS A FLASH OF STEEL, A BLOW AND THRUST, FOLLOWED BY THE SPLASH OF TWO BODIES."

Before starting upstream, Oswald looked for any appearance of Alice. There was no sign. When on the shore, he tried to go down the river in hope of rescuing her, but loss of blood and his fatigue prevented.

[61]

Hearing distant voices, it dawns on Oswald that he will be suspected of having caused the death of Alice Webster. They had gone for this night row, and were last seen together. Whether the body shall be found or not, he will be suspected of having murdered the girl. Who will believe his statement of the facts?

These thoughts and his weakened state still kept Oswald rooted to the spot, undecided what to do. The voices grow more distinct. He detects the excitement of those approaching. Shall he await their appearance, or meet them coming and explain all?

In this dilemma Oswald follows the impulse seeming to him most rational. Avoid these strangers about whom he knows nothing; confide first in his friends; with them and the police search for the body of Alice Webster.

With these conclusions rapidly formed, Oswald rises to his feet. Weak from loss of blood, but with forced energy, he starts in an opposite direction from that of the voices, intending to make a circle, and coming in their rear, follow cautiously until these strangers have passed up the stream beyond the point where the boat is tied to the shore. He then will return the boat. After reporting to Sir Donald and Esther, the police shall be notified, and together they will search for the

[62]

missing body.

Oswald continued for some distance, but saw no chance, without detection, of getting back of those in the rear. In this way he traveled until entirely exhausted. Crawling a few rods out of their path, but in full view, he watched them, expecting to be seen.

Four men passed between him and the shore. One remarked: "Say, pards, that empty boat down there looks suspicious. Why hasn't anybody showed up? Wonder what's their bloody lay."

"Oh, you're a little off, old chappie, to-night! Guess that red bottle you emptied got you a bloody eye!"

The quartette gave a boisterous laugh, and passed by.

When these were out of sight, Oswald arose and started back toward the boat, but soon was compelled again to sit down. Despairing of his ability to return that night, he crawled into some bushes away from the path, and slept.

The sun is brightly shining when he awakes. His left arm is sore, but he finds that it is only a deep flesh wound, which had caused excessive flow of blood. The complications of his position daze Oswald. How can he return and give information of Alice Webster's death? What reasonable excuse can be assigned for his delay? How seemingly transparent this yarn! Will it not be evident that he manufactured a tissue of falsehoods, and to clinch these preposterous lies inflicted on himself this slight wound? [63]

Return is not to be considered. There is no avoiding the gallows but in flight. But how escape?

Oswald feels feverish thirst, and hoping to find clear water follows toward its source a muddy little rivulet emptying into the river. In this way he travels about a mile from shore, where, in the corner of a fenced strip of ground, are a boy and a girl drinking from a clear stream.

Frightened by this pale-looking, bareheaded tramp, the children fled. Oswald drank deeply of the refreshing water, and was moving away, when a loud voice commanded him to stop. Looking up, Oswald saw a burly citizen, just over the fence, puffing with swelling sense of proprietorship.

Oswald's combative faculties are aroused, and in defiant attitude he awaits the attack.

"Who be ye, man, and what ye doing here?"

Oswald explained that he was a stranger there, and had slept on the bank of the river. His hat was lost. He hoped that no harm had been done. He had money, and would pay for all damages. [64]

The refined manner of speech and good looks made a favorable impression upon the staring proprietor.

Oswald saw his advantage, and appealed to this red-faced inquisitor for breakfast, adding that he would pay well.

Greatly mollified, the other invited him into the house, and set before his guest a substantial meal.

It occurred to Oswald that by show of liberality he might gain very valuable assistance in extricating himself from his terrible fix. He tossed a half-crown toward his host, who stared in blank amazement.

"That is right; keep it all, my kind friend."

With much show of appreciation the coin was pocketed.

"By the way, have you a good horse and cart?"

"You bet I has!"

"Say, friend, don't you wish to make some money?"

"That's what I does!"

"Well, I must be forty miles away to-night sometime, and here are three half-crowns for the drive. How soon can you start?" [65]

"Inside of an hour."

Tossing the coins to his excited host, Oswald said: "Get ready right off! Tell no one, and there is a sovereign at the end of our ride! Have you an old duster and hat?"

Rushing to a closet, Dick Bray produced the desired outfit, which had a most superannuated look.

"Keep the stuff, and welcome!" said Dick, with an air of much conscious generosity.

With closed lips, Dick set about preparations for the eventful journey.

In less than an hour they were jogging along the road at pretty lively gait for their slow-gearred outfit.

Oswald assumed a most taciturn manner, which convinced Dick that he was some high-born chap who had been on a "lark" and wished to keep "shady." The thought of that sovereign restrained

Dick's curiosity so thoroughly that but little was said by either.

Unused to such long, vigorous journeys, the horse required much urging, and then made distance slowly. At four o'clock the next morning they came within two miles of Oswald's home. Dick received the promised coin, and was advised to go back a few miles and rest up. Oswald lived near, and would walk the rest of the way.

[66]

"Say nothing, and perhaps I can do more some time!"

Thus adjured, Dick Bray parted with Oswald Langdon, fully determined to be very secretive about that mysterious drive.

[67]

CHAPTER V

OSWALD'S FLIGHT

Reverend Percy Langdon has been conversing with his wife about the future career of their only boy. Conscious of Oswald's brilliant powers and high ambitions, both feel a natural sense of parental pride in this son who is their one earthly hope. The fond mother talks of this manly, stalwart youth, using childhood's endearing terms, and expresses solicitude for his present welfare, while the father, with habitual sense of superior perception, positively but tenderly allays her fears.

"Oswald is safe anywhere. Our boy can be trusted in any emergency. He will make his mark. I wonder what position Oswald will occupy in a few years! How proud he is of his mother!"

"But, Percy, dear, Ossie has his father's temper and is so self-willed at times!"

"Now go to sleep, little mother!"

A hurried knock is heard at the front door. Startled by such early, unexpected call, there is no response. The knock is repeated loudly, and the bell rings. Springing up, the rector cautiously opens the door, when a dusty figure hastily pushes into the dark hall.

[68]

Reverend Percy Langdon grapples with the intruder, who holds on, but attempts no violence. "Father!" is the low-spoken greeting. "Don't frighten mother, and I will explain."

After some hurried talk, sobs, and heart-breaking good-bys, a figure steals out in the dawning light, and starts for Southampton.

Oswald walked rapidly. After about two hours he was overtaken by a man driving a horse attached to a buckboard. He received a hearty invitation to take a ride. He learned that the man was going ten miles, to meet a friend on business. To all questions Oswald gave evasive replies. At nine o'clock they arrived at the place named. Oswald walked on until noon, when he sat down in a secluded spot and ate a meal. Resuming his journey, he soon reached a small station. Here he boarded a train for Southampton, arriving at his destination without noteworthy incident.

He lodged at a cheap sort of an inn. Finding that a steamer left the next morning for Calcutta, he gave orders to call him in proper time.

Having purchased passage, Oswald is at the wharf, disguised in ill-fitting duster and broad-brimmed hat, ready to embark. Some rough-looking men are at the dock, to whom this seedy stranger is a butt of much coarse comment. Incensed at their ridicule, Oswald longs to chastise them, but moves away.

[69]

Noting the evident wish of their victim to escape further abuse, these follow. Oswald stops short, but says nothing. A powerful bully, posing as leader, steps on Oswald's foot, aiming a blow at his drooping headgear. A terrific left-hander shoots out, encountering the jaw of our swaggering tough, who strikes the resounding planks with little ceremony. Two more rush at Oswald, when, dropping his satchel, both stretch their lengths on the wharf from right and left hand blows dealt almost together. Just then the bell sounds for departure, when a big officer comes up, puffing with surplus fat and official importance. Seeing three men stretched out, and learning that the odd-looking fellow then hurrying on board is the cause, he brandishes his club, striking Oswald on the shoulder, in pompous tones announcing his arrest. Oswald remonstrates, and attempts to explain that he is not the aggressor, but to all such, this swelling representative of the Crown's outraged dignity turns a deaf ear.

Giving a rough push, the officer starts away with his prisoner.

Oswald has great respect for constituted authority, but conscious of the complications which may result through delay, and smarting under the uncalled-for arrogance of this guardian of the public peace, drops his valise, and with two quick blows so completely paralyzes this uniformed official, that he fails to respond until after the vessel is under way.

[70]

When on board Oswald discards his long duster and broad brim.

No one recognizes in his dignified air of indifference the personnel of that drooping pedestrian who had electrified onlookers with such skillful sledge-hammer blows, so disastrous to bully

insolence and official conceit.

Gradually Oswald's tense faculties relax, and an overwhelming reactive despondency takes possession of his being.

The experiences of the last few days pass before his vision. Retrospect is terrible. In this maze it avails not that he is guiltless of crime. The circumstances affirm his criminality. Is he not a refugee from justice?

Sitting alone upon the upper deck, he thus interrogates himself:

"Why not return, face my accusers, and know the worst? Why flee from the specter of a crime committed by another? Are my hands stained with human blood? Is not my soul blameless?"

Then in bitterness he says:

[71]

"Yes, return and be hung! Listen to adroitly narrated lies of detectives, caring only for vindication of their theories of guilt! Witness the heartless curiosity of vulgar crowds feasting on rumor and depraved gossip! Meet the cold, relentless gaze of those demanding satisfaction of outraged law! Hear the distorted evidence of witnesses, the impassioned appeal of the public prosecutor, as with hypocritical craft he urges the jury to hang no innocent man, and then pleads with them not to make the law a byword by turning loose a red-handed murderer! Watch the judge with solemn gravity adjust his glasses, preparatory to a dignified summing-up, conclusive of the prisoner's guilt! See the set lips of the 'unbiased twelve' as they retire for consideration of their verdict! Sit crushed under the terrible 'Guilty' and bootless, formal blasphemy, 'May God have mercy on your soul!' With pinioned arms and bandaged eyes hear the suppressed hum of mob—and then—the awful black!"

As these thoughts surged through his mind, Oswald registered a vow never to expiate the crime of another. "I will wander over the earth until old age; will face every danger of desert wilds; will resist to death any efforts for my arrest; but no gallows ever shall be erected for Oswald Langdon."

The injustice of his position confronted him with such force that Oswald felt defiant of all law. He would be an "Ishmaelite," finding "casus belli" in all the purposes of fate.

[72]

The instinct of self-defense and gravity of his position precluded sympathetic feeling for friends innocently involved in results of the tragedy. Such sentiments will come when present stress is less imminent.

Emerging from the English Channel, they are in the Bay of Biscay. A storm is raging. Sailors fear wreck, but Oswald feels not a tremor. What are ocean's pending perils to this human castaway, about whose hunted soul seem closing the tentacles of fate?

Roar of tempest, blinding electric flash, rushing wave, descending spray, creaking timbers, with instinctive ravaging of ocean's hungry hordes, are luring, friendly greetings compared to merciless clamor of that receding shore.

Spending its spasmodic heat, the storm subsides, and the ship plows on toward destined port.

CHAPTER VI

[73]

THE TRIPLE WEB

Sir Donald and Esther returned from the opera expecting to meet their friends. Admitted by the servant, they were informed that Alice and Oswald were still out. A little surprised, they expect them momentarily. After waiting some time, Esther expresses the opinion that possibly an accident occurred, causing the delay. Sir Donald has no fear but what Alice and Oswald soon will arrive. "They have enjoyed the ride and gone farther than intended."

Esther sees the probability of this, but feels piqued at their careless conduct.

"Alice should know better than to stay out so late! Perhaps they have not started back yet!"

Sir Donald looks up and notes his daughters evident excitement. Her flashing eyes and quivering lips tell their story.

Esther feels that she has shown too much interest, and resorts to pretty arts of dissembling.

Sir Donald is indulgent. He acquiesces in Esther's artful show, and with much animation they chat away for another hour on subjects which seem to have new interest for this charming girl. Finally both retire.

[74]

They listen, expecting the bell soon to announce the return of Alice and Oswald.

Both Esther and Sir Donald arose early. They were puzzled at the strange absence of their friends. Some accident must have befallen them. Perhaps assistance is needed. However, it would be wise to avoid undue haste and notoriety. The innocent conduct and mishaps of their

friends must not be made the theme of vulgar gossip.

Restrained by these refined sentiments, Esther and Sir Donald waited until afternoon before taking any action. Then they started out together, and procuring a boat, rowed up the Thames in the direction which Oswald and Alice had taken, the keeper going with them.

After about an hour the boat was found, and all landed at this point. No signs of the missing couple were seen. It was decided that Sir Donald and Esther should row farther up the stream, while the keeper searched the shore for any signs of the young people. Soon all stopped.

Oswald's hat was found upon the bank at the rustic seat. Their search up and down the river revealed no other clew. They returned greatly shocked.

It seemed certain that both had disappeared at the place where the hat was found. In some way they had gone over the bank. There may have been a bloody tragedy, but most likely Alice had fallen over into the stream, and Oswald, attempting her rescue, both were drowned. [75]

The police were notified. Careful search up and down both sides of the stream gave no further clew. All the means available for rescue of the bodies were employed. Finally a lace handkerchief was found. Esther identified it as the property of Alice. The delicately embroidered initials "A.W." made its identity complete. Both had been murdered or were accidentally drowned.

The papers commented upon this mysterious affair. Reporters vied in their narratives of exciting coincidences.

Sir Donald and Esther were harassed by all sorts of questions as to the antecedents of their friends. Between desire to be courteous and dictates of discretion, they often were much puzzled.

Detectives, each with his own theory, made frequent calls. While polite, these inquisitors were most persistent in their persecutions. What cared they for refined scruples? The presence of both missing parties at Northfield, their conduct while there, and Oswald's stay at the home of Alice in London were dwelt upon at length. Failing to get full replies responsive to direct questions, shrewdly phrased opinions delicately hinting at possible infatuation of one or the other were expressed. [76]

Sir Donald, though much annoyed, could answer with apparent frankness, yet conceal what he wished not told, but Esther had greater difficulty. Their inquisitors soon became aware of this. Not desiring notoriety, but shrinking from apparent concealment, Esther's distress was evident.

At first Sir Donald refrained from further instruction to Esther than simple suggestion of care in her answers. But this inexperienced girl was no match for detectives or reporters, who quizzed her mercilessly.

Sir Donald came to the rescue with a vigor most decisive.

One reporter had been offensively persistent. An amateur detective was pressing Sir Donald with his theory of the case.

"Oswald suggested the night ride, and lured Alice to the rustic seat for the purpose of murdering the girl. To avoid blame for her betrayal, she was thrown into the river. His hat was left at the spot as evidence that he too met death. Oswald fled, and is now somewhere in disguise."

Sir Donald managed to suppress his indignation at the substance and manner of this statement. Just then the reporter in the next room asked Esther by direct question what he had been urging by innuendo: [77]

"Was there anything in the conduct of your friends while at Northfield or in London which indicated that they were unduly familiar?"

Before time for reply, the reporter was lifted through the front door, landing beyond the porch. No one seeming to appreciate our sleuth's brilliant theory, he promptly left.

Both Sir Donald and Esther regretted the notoriety likely to result from this affair, but none of its details were published.

Soon after, there appeared in a London paper this comment:

"It is pretty generally agreed that a certain gentleman and his daughter know more than they feel safe to relate about the mysterious disappearance of Oswald Langdon and Alice Webster. Their evident embarrassment when questioned regarding the conduct of the missing parties is significant. There is such a thing as being an accessory to crime by concealment. There is no wrath like that of—, etc. A little detective work along a certain line might unearth some startling finds. A hint to the wise is sufficient."

Sir Donald received a marked copy of the paper containing this screed, but concealed it from his daughter. This precaution was unavailing, as another copy, conspicuously marked, was delivered by special carrier to Esther. [78]

Both were greatly distressed by these insinuations. Every one would know to whom reference was made. However, there was nothing which could be done. To resent this attack would be most indiscreet.

Relying upon the probability that Sir Donald and Esther were sufficiently disciplined by this

publication, other inquisitors appeared.

Sir Donald's manner was so frigid that none cared to persist. No one had the audacity further to interview Esther.

Instead of returning at once to Northfield, they remained several days in London. Realizing that there might be some suspicion cast upon them, Sir Donald was on his mettle. So far from shrinking from public gaze, he openly moved about his affairs with dignified composure. He consulted one of the most noted London detectives, retaining his agency to unravel the Dodge conspiracy, lake tragedy, and these mysterious disappearances.

This agency undertook to solve the three complex issues involved, convinced that these were so interwoven as to form one web. Skillful assistants were intrusted with particular lines of investigation. Double shifts were employed in watching each of the Laniers. A trusted lieutenant, skilled in intricate work, was sent to India. [79]

Sir Donald keenly felt the unpleasant notoriety. He had been attacked at the most sensitive, vital point of his nature. Never before had he experienced any sense of social ostracism. No thought of family shame ever had suffused his cheek. And his beloved Esther! This motherless girl, whose clinging, obedient love and trusting dependence had wound their silken tendrils around every pulsing fiber of his soul!

That penny-liners could make coarse reference or express vague innuendo about this pure-minded, sensitive girl seemed horrible. He could have trampled to death such offenders with deliberate fury, yet this vengeance but more surely would crush Esther's hopes. For her sake he must be patient. Time, property, and every available means will find employment in her vindication. There shall be permitted no maudlin sentiment of pity in this undertaking. Certain retribution shall be whetted by each delay.

This former impersonation of complacent optimism, acquiescing in all human experiences as special essentials of the infinite plan, shrinks from such crucial test. This is surely a noted exception. A daughter's tender heartstrings are too sensitive for such stoic touch. [80]

Sir Donald chafes at slow processes of retributive justice. How tardy the infinitesimal grind! Would that the wheels speed their lagging momentum!

The former Sir Donald Randolph is changed. His old philosophical, speculative, idealistic bent is as completely in abeyance as though stricken with rudimentary palsy. In their stead is an alert, untiring, relentless Nemesis, more pitiless because of intense, novel zeal.

But Sir Donald is handicapped. Not that time or money is lacking. These are available. What about Esther? Her comment upon the absence of Oswald and Alice that night had been painfully distinct. The unmistakable, mute language of her eyes and quivering lips was clearer. Her pretty, persistent dissembling was confirmation. Subsequent suspicious innuendoes had aggravated her feelings. He asks himself: "Shall I neglect this troubled child to engage in ferreting out crime? Why should Esther's sorrows merit her father's neglect?"

Seeing a picture of justice blinded, he exclaims: "What mocking irony in judicial pose of blind goddess poisoning nicely adjusted balance, whose crude, arbitrary registers reckon not of vicarious pain!" [81]

Sir Donald's first duty is at home. Justice can find agents more expert than he, but its ministry is too coarse for the subtle sentiments of the fireside.

Sir Donald and Esther returned to Northfield.

Though taking her father into many little girlish confidences, Esther had not told him of her life's mission or of Oswald's proposal. She still remained silent. Both subjects were painful. Her father's worries should not be increased.

Esther sees no way to begin her chosen work. Recent troubles cloud her vision. She shrinks from the notoriety. That which was once grand charity and self-sacrifice is now crafty, hypocritical show.

She knows her father's proud sense of propriety and abhorrence of every sham profession cannot be reconciled to such step at this time. Has not this field been interdicted by Providence? Are her faculties to find employment in the more congenial ministries of home?

Esther feels a sort of vague responsibility for the tragic occurrences of the past few weeks. True, she had acted from high moral sense of duty, but conscience is often dogmatic.

Esther knows Oswald was sincere. That she loved this manly, refined, courteous suitor she is most painfully certain. But for her acquiescence in the infatuation of Alice Webster, Oswald never would have encouraged the growing sentiment of this girl. Had Esther remained at Northfield, Oswald would have stayed away from London. But for Esther's apparent desire that Oswald and Alice take the boat-ride while she accompanied Sir Donald to the opera, both now would be alive. [82]

Esther charged herself with being the cause of all Sir Donald's sorrows, and wished to bear his burdens.

For several months Sir Donald and Esther remained at Northfield. Occasionally they went to London, Esther accompanying her father upon these brief trips. Each felt sympathy for the other.

Such generous sentiments, while bringing additional solicitude, have their compensations. Personal griefs gradually recede. Vain regrets are merging in tender companionship and mutual sympathy. Each tries to bear the other's load. Thereby selfish grief grows less acute.

Gradually Sir Donald's champing impatience for speedy retribution sufficiently subsides for intelligent survey of the situation. From the nature of the case, time, patience, and much discretion are required. Isolated circumstances shall find coherent connections, chasms of time and latitude are to be bridged.

[83]

Sir Donald keeps advised of what is being done by the agency. Circumstances have been reported, but there are many missing links. One report concluded thus: "Both Pierre and Paul Lanier are still in London. It is sure that these are confederates of William Dodge. The tireless, systematic camping of the detectives upon the Lanier trails found them both in frequent conference with Dodge. All were disguised. When casual reference to the Dodge suit was made in hearing of either father or son, Lanier conduct had careful watchers. Their speech and silence were alike significant. The fact that neither Dodge nor Lanier ever had met the other was noted."

Sir Donald surprised the opposition by having the Dodge case set for trial.

There was a conference held at the office of the Dodge solicitors. William Dodge and both Laniers were present, two of the party being in disguise. Soon after, the case of William Dodge against Alice Webster was dismissed by the complainant.

At a London meeting, the Bureau chief said to Sir Donald: "Your bluff worked well. It is now sure that Dodge is the tool of the Laniers. Alice Webster's death rendered this conspiracy unavailing. The interests to be subserved by the bringing of this action are in another venue. India is the proper jurisdiction. William Webster's estate and Pierre Lanier are the real parties in interest."

[84]

William Dodge quit London, and both Laniers sailed for Calcutta.

Sir Donald and Esther left Northfield for Paris.

CHAPTER VII

[85]

SOUTHAMPTON TO CALCUTTA

The conclusion of Oswald Langdon to sail for India was hurriedly formed while at Southampton. There were many other places more likely to have been the choice of mature deliberation.

Oswald had a glimpse of his assailant at the river. The blow upon the head of Alice and thrust following were in quick succession, but he received an impression as to their enemy's identity. He had seen the same heavily whiskered face on the trip from Northfield to London, and in Hyde Park. Had not he observed that listening attitude, while Alice was relating her troubles with Paul Lanier? This eavesdropper knew their arrangements for the night ride. Doubtless this man followed along the shore and saw them at the rustic seat. Screened behind the bushes, he heard all their conversation. Either through premeditated malice or sudden passion, the blows had been struck. Paul Lanier was the only man who could have any object in this assault. Paul had learned of Alice's escape from the lake. He surely thought she had told all about this affair, and Paul had followed them in disguise. By silencing forever this the only witness to his crime, he could defy hearsay testimony. It became necessary to kill both. Perhaps Paul fled soon as Alice and Oswald fell over the bank. Possibly he may have seen Oswald reach the shore. It might be that Paul knew of the flight, and deliberately permitted it, to insure his final ruin.

[86]

These thoughts harassed Oswald after his arrival in India. Was not this supposed asylum the home of Pierre Lanier? If identified, and the body of Alice were found, how could Oswald escape conviction as her murderer? His flight would be conclusive.

Oswald felt strong determination. He would neither skulk nor court observation. If seen here by either Pierre or Paul Lanier, he would face the issue. Fully convinced that in degree both were guilty of this murder and of an attempt upon his own life, he reasoned that neither would risk further notoriety than such as might be essential to their own protection.

Oswald wishes that he had sailed to some other country, but his money now is nearly spent, and employment must be obtained. What can he do? Where and of whom shall he seek work? His life had been spent mostly at school. True, he is a physical athlete, but how farm this barren resource? If chance come to explore remote wilds, this will accord with his restless spirit, while insuring immunity from arrest.

[87]

At Calcutta, Oswald made ostensible search for employment. Many gazed at this fine-looking Englishman and shook their heads.

The fact is that Oswald was looking for something he felt little curiosity to find. His manner was so courteous, there being such an air of refinement, that he gained much information about business enterprises. This was his real purpose.

Calcutta was too cosmopolitan. There could be little hope of isolation in this Indian metropolis.

Its ever-changing population came from all quarters of the globe. To remain hidden in shunned districts, among moral and social lepers, would be living death. How else stay in Calcutta and not be recognized? The thought of constant disguise was repugnant. He shrank from the appearance of falsehood. Realizing the urgent necessity of concealment, he must be reserved and silent, having no confidants. In what remote part of this great empire can he be lost to curious observation while employed in congenial work?

To one who recommended certain hard work, but spoke of its perils, he replied:

"Perilous undertakings shall have no terrors. Dangers will be welcomed as the spice of life. My restless energies crave occupation, but there must be no menial taint. Mental and physical toil are not to be shunned, but my hands shall remain clean." [88]

Oswald feels some relaxation of tense dread. He begins to take a less somber view of the situation. Possibly his missing hat had been found and identified. Perhaps the London public thought both had been drowned. Might it not be that no search was made for him, his death being conceded? Strange if detectives were now on the trail of Paul Lanier. Was Paul likely to sail for Calcutta when this would be the place searched for the fugitives? Would Pierre Lanier return to India, or remain in London until the mysterious disappearances ceased to interest the public mind? The Laniers would not care to meet the man they had attempted to murder and thought dead. Possibly to remove a witness they again might conspire directly against his life.

Oswald's chance for employment comes in most desirable form. An engineering party contemplates a trip to the Himalaya Mountains.

Oswald finds the chief, offers his services, and is employed at good pay. The work requires an indefinite absence from Calcutta. No information is given as to details. The purposes of this expedition are sealed. Its destination is near the point where three empires meet.

CHAPTER VIII

[89]

STRANGE ROMANCE OF PAUL AND AGNES

William Dodge took an extended trip over the continent, finally settling down for a prolonged stay at Paris. The Laniers sailed for Calcutta, but landed at Bombay.

Paul assumed an air of elegant refinement. It was rumored that father and son were fabulously wealthy. To all such gossip both seemed indifferent. Their hauteur and reserve insured desired social entrée, while hedging against impertinent curiosity.

Paul was lionized. After attending gatherings of Bombay élite, Paul condescended to manifest interest. The niece of an English aristocrat had arrested his attention.

Sir Charles Chesterton was rich and unmarried. Agnes Randall was his favorite. It was reported that this uncle had willed the bulk of his immense wealth to Agnes. Paul Lanier had heard casual reference to these bits of gossip, but seemed bored. What were vulgar expectations to refined possessor of unlimited capital?

But the good qualities of this lovely girl found appreciation. Spite of reputed wealth and high expectations, her manners had interested Paul Lanier. He accepted invitations to dine with both uncle and niece. No curiosity as to financial matters was manifested. Such common sentiment was too low for Paul. [90]

This rich Englishman and his interesting niece recently had arrived at Bombay.

Both were interested in Paul's antecedents and future prospects. The growth of this sentiment was natural and reserved, neither premature nor effusive.

After suitable time Pierre Lanier received an invitation to dine with Sir Charles. Agnes was present. Their guest was treated with due respect, as the father of such elegant son. Pierre was elated. Under the influence of rare wines, Sir Charles and Pierre became confidential. Sir Charles seemed fully absorbed in his own financial conquests. At first he listened with impatience to any of Pierre's guarded talk. Sir Charles' recitals were so insinuating that Pierre felt much constraint toward polite bragging. However, the secretive habit of a lifetime sealed his lips against boastful avowals. Vintage warmth elicited nothing more than a few guarded hints at possible craft in acquisition of untold wealth.

This interesting quartette became so exclusive that little attention was paid to other Bombay society. It soon was rumored that Paul Lanier and Agnes Randall were mutually smitten. The report was confirmed by the manner of all. In their confidences, Sir Charles and Pierre casually referred to this gossip. It was talked over between Agnes and Paul. Neither evinced any disposition to discipline the "tattling dame." [91]

Paul proposed marriage. Agnes felt disposed to grant his suit, but would abide her uncle's decision. To Paul this appeared proper. He entertained the highest respect for Sir Charles Chesterton. Much as Paul desired this marriage, he would defer to the judgment of her fond

uncle.

It was arranged that Paul should submit the matter the next day. At the time appointed the subject came up in the private room of Sir Charles. Paul was graciously received. From Sir Charles' manner Paul was sure that Agnes had spoken to her uncle of the proposal, and had received a favorable response. He avowed his love for Agnes, and their intention to abide Sir Charles' decision.

This gracious uncle for a while remains silent. His prolonged pause embarrasses Paul. Sir Charles asks where Paul was born, where his relatives reside, their names, his father's antecedents, their future intentions as to home and business, what portions of the world they had seen, adding, "These questions may seem impertinent, but I wish to know all about the one seeking the hand of my favorite niece and heir." [92]

Encouraged, Paul answers quite fully. Sir Charles seems satisfied.

After an extended pause, during which Paul shifts about in nervous anticipation, Sir Charles tells him there is yet another important matter, often neglected, but of which, before deciding, he must have full information.

"To my mind the present and future property interests of the proposed husband of Agnes Randall are vital considerations. This young girl would not think of such matters, but I have lived longer, and never will consent to her marrying a pauper. I anticipate living a few years, and whoever becomes the husband of Agnes Randall must have sufficient property to support her elegantly during this time. After I am through with earth there will be no danger about the future of my niece, as my will provides for that."

Paul assures Sir Charles that both he and his father are very wealthy.

Sir Charles seems much pleased. He hopes Paul will not consider him impertinent, but there must be a more definite statement of financial resources. [93]

"I must have an inventory. The list must be full, including every description of property, real and personal, with exact location of each separate parcel. If you desire, I will furnish such a statement of my property, which is all willed to Agnes, but there must be one furnished to me."

Paul is willing to tell Sir Charles all about the matter, but cannot now properly describe their properties as required.

Sir Charles says:

"Mr. Lanier, tell all you know, to be made more definite later."

With paper and pencil Sir Charles makes notes. The recital is quite minute and without reserve. Sir Charles is much gratified. His memory refreshed by interjected inquiries, Paul tells so much that there is little need of promised statement. However, Sir Charles does not waive further information.

In good spirits, Paul leaves to confer with Pierre Lanier.

The wily father is much pleased at his son's matrimonial prospects, but says: "Paul, I do not like his insistence on details, but perhaps you ought to humor him. So far as information cannot be evaded, the truth should be told, for possibly this stubborn fellow may take time and trouble to verify your statements." [94]

The list is prepared with care. Within three days the completed statement is presented to Sir Charles, who promises to look it over.

Agnes and Paul are often together. They exchange mutual confidences, each expressing the fond hope that her uncle will be satisfied. Incidentally Paul speaks of his past experiences, giving wrong names, places, dates, and associations. He is encouraged to do this by the artless curiosity and interest of this fond girl, whose past at times seems entirely merged in that of her lover.

Frequently Agnes speaks of Paul's reminiscent confidences when her uncle is present. Some trifling changes are made by Paul, but she is too fond to be sensitive. Her memory is defective. Even Paul's guarded mention of boyish excesses is interesting. Both uncle and niece approve of the youthful sower's occupation. There are seasons for distributing untamed oats.

Pierre Lanier accepts frequent invitations to call upon these aristocratic friends. He and Sir Charles are growing still more confidential.

The matrimonial decision is further postponed, but in such frank, honest manner, that waiting is not difficult.

In strict confidence, Sir Charles tells of many dubious successes. He knows the elder Lanier will not betray a friend's trust. Without prying into secrets of his guest, Sir Charles touches on outskirts of many crafty exploits, suggestive of more complex villainies. Pierre Lanier is greatly interested, but the narrative always lacks coherence at the most thrilling point. [95]

By his questionable tactics Sir Charles had amassed great wealth, which covered all moral turpitude with silken mantle.

Gradually the habitual secrecy of Pierre Lanier loses its restraining discretion. These cronies

become inseparable. Under influence of insidious drinks, they vie in recitals of villainous craft. Sir Charles enjoins strict secrecy.

"Never let Paul and Agnes know what their father and uncle have done for them!"

Sir Charles seems to revel in such reminiscences. He has his friend repeat parts of narratives at different times, and never tires of these villainous recitals.

Sir Charles promises to decide concerning Paul's proposal within three months. This is most exasperating, but there is no help. He will take a trip to Calcutta, and postpone decision until his return.

It is evident to both Laniers that Sir Charles intends to test their statements of property interests at that point. The elder Lanier has business there, and will be pleased to accompany Sir Charles. Paul prefers to remain in Bombay, and is delighted that Agnes has no thought of going on this trip. Sir Charles is glad to visit Calcutta with his dear friend Pierre Lanier. They sail together. [96]

Paul's calls upon Agnes are frequent. These seem indifferent to Bombay society, finding ample diversion in each other's presence. There is about Agnes such bewitching air of refinement, coupled with suggestive, romantic interest, that Paul yields completely to the charm. Her conduct varies, and there are capricious feminine moods. Paul sees in these, hints of possible estrangement, and suits his manners to every change.

Agnes discreetly limits Paul's calls to proper times. The intervals between these visits he endures under protest. Paul becomes still more hopelessly infatuated, and is ready to applaud any suggestion of this charming girl. Loyal to her unspoken whims, he would not hesitate at any act she might seem to approve. Agnes' caprices multiply with Paul's increasing acquiescence. There are many blanks in her narratives, and Paul feels these must be properly filled.

Agnes seems bored at commonplace talk, never appearing really happy except when listening to Paul's telling of questionable exploits wherein he was the central figure. Hints at successful craft, vindictive temper, swift retribution, and bootless pursuit are sure of thrilling appreciation. But those bewitching smiles subsiding, Paul is obliged to regain favor by more explicit recitals, seconded by her pertinent questioning. [97]

By slow processes the story is told. Names, dates, and places have been misstated, but such inadvertences are not misleading.

Circumstances correct particular errata.

Some time after the departure of Sir Charles and Pierre Lanier for Calcutta, Agnes informs Paul that her uncle has sailed for Bombay. She had received word to that effect, and his letter was of most cheerful tone.

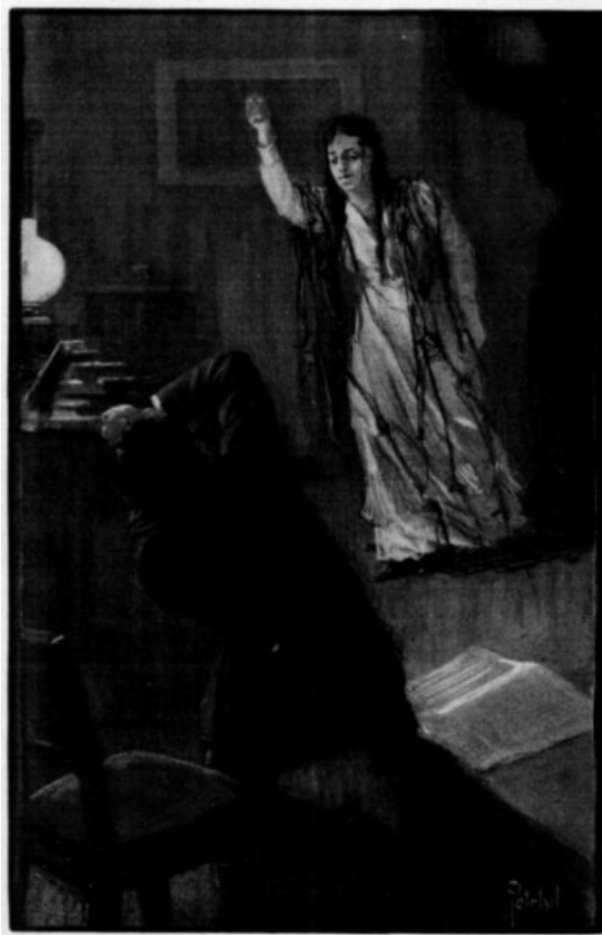
Paul expects a favorable decision, and with pleasant emotions awaits the arrival of Sir Charles. Agnes requests that Paul defer again calling before Thursday. This will be two days, but she wishes to avoid scandal. Comments have been made by cheap tattlers about his frequent visits.

"Perhaps in a little while there will be no need for such care."

Paul is pleased at the modest suggestion. He looks forward to marriage with this aristocratic heiress, and the future is most luminous. Even haunting memories of Alice Webster and Oswald Langdon fail to dampen Paul's expectant joy. These recede, their menacing voices stilled by hope's siren lullaby. [98]

Upon Thursday evening Paul calls upon Agnes, according to appointment. The servant ushers him into the private room of Sir Charles. This seems strange, but Paul thinks it some caprice of Agnes. There is but one chair in the room, and this faces the door through which Paul expects Agnes to enter. The lights are dim and throw fitful shadows. Though feeling a superstitious sense, Paul's strong nerves brace against all "uncanny" sentiments. He attempts to turn on more light, but finds this is impossible. He shifts uneasily, finally picking up a paper lying on a small table within reach. Date and title startle him. How came this copy of *London Press* of such date in possession of Sir Charles or Agnes? Paul's hand shakes as he glances over the paper's contents. He beholds, under heavily marked red lines, the account of the Thames tragedy.

Just then the door opens from an adjoining room. Draped in seaweed, the form of Alice Webster appears, blood oozing from her bruised temple, long damp tresses clinging to her neck and face. With uplifted hand, the apparition slowly advances toward the cowering Paul, as if to strike. Paralyzed with terror, the guilty wretch falls upon the floor, begging for mercy. Slowly the ghost, without change of mien, passes backward through the open door, disappearing in rayless darkness.



**"WITH UPLIFTED HAND THE APPARITION
SLOWLY ADVANCED TOWARD THE
COWERING PAUL, AS IF TO STRIKE."**

Paul recovers, and rising resumes his seat. Straining his bewildered gaze, he sees that the door is shut. He is alone. Everything is as before. It must have been an hallucination, but how dreadfully real the appearance of drowned Alice Webster! Where is Agnes? Soon he hears a voice in the next room. [99]

With solemn inflection it repeats from Hood's "Eugene Aram" these fearful lines:

"Nothing but lifeless flesh and bone,
That could not do me ill;
And yet I feared him all the more
For lying there so still:
There was a manhood in his look
That murder could not kill.

"So wills the fierce avenging sprite
Till blood for blood atones.
Ay, tho' he's buried in a cave,
And trodden down with stones,
And years have rotted off his flesh,
The world shall see his bones."

There is a minute's pause.

"Wonder what detains Mr. Lanier!"

Tremblingly Paul opens the door between the rooms, and there are many surprised remarks, followed by explanations.

Agnes says: "I heard the bell, and supposed you entered the sitting-room. I continued my toilet, and was delayed by missing articles of apparel. The new servant, in her zeal, disarranged everything. Without directions from me about your expected appearance, the servant ushered you by mistake into my uncle's private room." [100]

The bewitching manner and artless talk of Agnes soon quiet Paul's excited nerves. No hint is given of his strange apparition. The evening passes pleasantly, though at times Paul feels a creepy sense of dread. He is loth to leave. From mute signs he concludes it is better to go. Paul hurries away about midnight.

Within half an hour the rooms occupied by Sir Charles and Agnes are vacated. Two figures in male attire enter a closed conveyance, and are driven rapidly in an opposite direction from that

CHAPTER IX

[101]

THE HOSPITAL CONFESSION

Sir Donald Randolph and Esther remained several months at Paris.

While keeping fully advised of all developments reported to the London detective bureau, Sir Donald seemed absorbed in sight-seeing. His zeal in unmasking the conspiracy resulting in the double murder was unabated. That Paul Lanier, at the instigation of his father, committed the homicides, partial developments tended to prove. From Calcutta and Bombay advices received at London there was no doubt that some fraud had been perpetrated against the estate of William Webster by his partner in India.

Sir Donald felt much concern for the welfare of Esther. Not having his retributive zeal to support her in this trial, she brooded more over the recent past. He tried to divert her mind to pleasant subjects, thereby weaning from sorrowful memories.

There was much in Paris life to engross youthful attention. This, with her generous sympathy for her father's troubles and effort to mitigate his painful remembrances, prevented gloomy melancholy. Yet Esther could not be joyous. Both Oswald and Alice were transfigured. Her love for the one and pity for the other grew in tender pathos. Oswald Langdon ever would be an ideal of courteous, refined, considerate, earnest, high-souled manhood, whose last of life had touched her being's most sensitive vibratory chords. [102]

Father and daughter were much admired by Parisian social élite. Their rare intelligence, culture, and refined manners had an irresistible charm. However, there was that about both which repelled familiar personal association. They moved amid gay festivities as if their thoughts were elsewhere.

This abstraction and mutual care for each other's wants tinged their conduct with romantic interest. In all the whirl and surge of Parisian life, these unique faces never failed to attract notice. Neither seeking nor avoiding social recognition, they became quite extensively known among prominent French families and cosmopolitan notables domiciled at this Mecca of migratory moneyed aristocracy.

Sir Donald's intellectual acumen and rare versatility could not fail to impress all with whom he came in contact. His elegance of manner and diction, easy grace, with air of accustomed self-poise suggested habitual luxurious environment. [103]

Esther's finely molded, expressive features, faultless form, pensive grace, and rare feminine accomplishments seemed natural paternal dower. Doors flew open as if by magic; desired entrée smiled eager beckoning; refined circles gave freedom of their domain. Many arts of indirection were employed by eligible madames, monsieurs, and visiting notables of both sexes to remove that invisible yet formidable barrier of reserve. Courteous evasion or mild indifference or other countercraft parried every assault. In some few instances, vague or more positive-mannered "cuts" silenced curious inquiry, but these were rare. After one successful evasion, he remarked to Esther: "Refined, resolute reserve has many arts for warding off both vulgar and cultured impertinence."

Esther found time to learn much about the condition of Paris poor. Sir Donald encouraged this whim as tending to divert her mind from the past and to exert a wholesome influence. Many little helpful ministries among this class could be credited to her brief sojourn in this European capital. Esther frequently visited at the hospitals. Her calls were so ordered that notoriety was avoided. Naturally timid, she now shrank from publicity as contagion, but would take necessary hazards. [104]

Esther's zeal grows with knowledge of human want. Service becomes high privilege. Ward of want is now sanctuary. She sometimes has glimpses of angelic competition.

Smiling at his daughter's helpful infatuation, Sir Donald often accompanied her in these calls. He soon feels symptoms of mild interest. The contagion is pleasing. These visits grow in length and frequency. Sir Donald is losing zeal for man-capture. He is in danger of yielding to the delusive heresy which sees more of interest in human suffering than in crime.

One stormy day father and daughter are at a hospital. They had thought of staying away until after the rain was over, but Esther seemed lonely, and Sir Donald proposed an immediate call. They rode in a closed carriage, taking some delicacies to those who had learned to watch for their coming.

A piteous moan attracts Esther's quick ear and sympathy. Going softly down the aisle, she places her hand upon the fevered brow of a new inmate. The sufferer opens his eyes with a startled look. She asks his name and ailment. There is an expression of supplication on the pale face.

"Am I dreaming? No, it cannot be Miss Randolph."

[105]

"Yes, I am Esther Randolph. Won't you kindly tell me your name?"

Seeing his hesitation, Esther added: "Whisper it! I will not tell!" Sir Donald came near, but was motioned to stop. He understood her reason, and moved away. There was no response.

"Perhaps I can do something for you!"

"Not now. I shall soon be where help never comes."

Esther begged him to permit her to send for a minister.

"There is no use! My crimes are too great!"

Esther could not leave this strange sufferer with his goading conscience. She suggested that perhaps by telling her of his past life some good might result to the living. He remained silent for a while.

"Yes; but how atone for the death of the innocent? No, I did not kill them! I never knew about the murders until both were drowned!"

He seemed in fevered reverie. Esther, now excited, but controlling her voice, soothingly said:

"Tell me all your troubles. You are safe."

"But they will kill me if I tell! They never fail to have revenge."

"But if you are dying, why go before God without telling all? How can they hurt you for telling?" whispered Esther.

[106]

"True; but if I should not die?"

"Tell all, and you shall not be harmed."

He looked long in her face and eyes.

"Yes, I will tell none but you. I have seen you and your father in London. Where is your father now?"

"Here in this ward."

There is a startled look.

"But Sir Donald Randolph is my enemy!"

Esther assured him that her father never would betray the trust of a dying man.

He seemed convinced, but indulged in further soliloquy.

"Why should they care to follow me? The case is dismissed. I had nothing to do with the murders."

Esther sees the tragic coherence of these rambling remarks. She urges him to confess all.

"Better to tell father also. Perhaps he can protect you from your enemies. I am sure father never will betray your trust."

Sir Donald was called, and with Esther heard the confession.

"My name is William Dodge. Yes, I am the man who commenced that villainous suit against poor Alice Webster. Don't look so hard at me! I did not kill her! I never murdered Oswald Langdon.

"It is so hard to be poor and out of work. To think of Mary and the four children without food or clothing! Why, I was so desperate at times that I would have murdered for money! What was the life of one rich, useless old man to that of my Mary and our starving children? But I was not to be a murderer. No, old Pierre Lanier saved me from that crime. Bad as he is, that must be said in his favor. How scared the old rascal was when I fired! He spoke so strangely. Said: 'My good man, you are surely mistaken, but what can I do for you? Here are some coins, all I have with me, but come along and you shall have more.' I had fired at him, but missed my aim. There was no one in sight in that deserted part of Calcutta. I mistrusted his motives, but needing money, went with him. He stopped, and we sat down on a deserted bench by the side of an old vacant house. What a sly, insinuating old villain he was! Telling me that there must be some reason for my strange action in shooting, but that he would help me if I trusted him.

[107]

"I told him of my poverty and helpless family. He seemed to pity us, and said: 'I do not blame you in the least. I admire your spirit. What can you do?'"

"I told him that my former work had been bookkeeping, but that I had been discharged for dishonesty, through the connivance of another employe, who stole the money and turned suspicion on me.

[108]

"Old Pierre Lanier then became very sympathetic. I could make a neat little fortune and provide for my family's immediate wants without committing murder. He would commit any crime before those depending on him for support should suffer. If I would come with him, we would talk it over.

"I expressed fear that he would surrender me to the police.

"Is not your revolver full of cartridges? Here, take my pistol. Soon as you see me attempting any treachery, shoot to kill. My good friend, I have use for you. If you can serve me, your family shall be well cared for, and I will find more money for you to-night."

"With this strange assurance, so positively stated, I went with him. We entered his room, and the lights were turned on. Bringing pen, paper, and ink, he sat down by a table and wrote several names.

"Please copy these just like originals."

"I did as requested.

"Good! Now these," handing me paper with other signatures.

"Very good! Please copy the body of the papers."

"Then he told me of his wish to procure conveyances, purporting to come from the persons whose signatures I had copied, of property situated in London. This property was in the possession of a girl there. I was to draft these, and sign the proper names to them as grantors and witnesses. We would go to London, and at the right time begin the action for the possession of the property. He did not imagine the case ever would come to trial, but I must wait until advised to quit. My pay would be one thousand pounds and all expenses. He said the girl's title was defective, but that easily could be remedied. In the mean time my family must be provided for. 'Take these to bind the bargain.'" [109]

"What could I do but accept the offer and the money? It is easy for those having life's comforts and luxuries to be honest. What idea have such of temptation's power? Look in haggard, despairing face of wife and hear the cries of hungry children! Then be honest! Refuse to stain your soul for bread! I tell you, hunger has no soul!"

Overpowered by passionate memories, he fell back exhausted. Tears were streaming down the cheeks of Esther. Sir Donald's vision was obscured by mists. He turned away his face.

Punish such criminal? It is more likely that both these would incur liability as "accessories after the fact." [110]

In a few minutes strength for further confessions returned.

"I often met Pierre and Paul Lanier in Calcutta. Neither of them told me directly that Paul desired to marry Alice Webster, but I was sure that this was the wish of both. I thought that if the marriage occurred, there would be a dismissal of the action, otherwise it would be pressed. In this I was but partly right. They never intended the case should be tried. It was begun to bring about the marriage. When Alice was drowned and the case was set for trial, it had to be dismissed. Paul and his father were with me when I told the solicitors to quit.

"I heard Paul tell his father before Alice Webster's death that they would never hear from that girl again. She was at the bottom of the lake. Pierre Lanier replied:

"It is bad business, Paul, but can't be helped. Better an accident than intentionally, my boy."

"They never knew I heard their talk. I suspected some foul play, but was surprised to have Alice and the rest of you pointed out after your arrival in London.

"Paul, his father, and I often met in London, but without being seen together. After it was rumored that Alice and Oswald Langdon had been drowned in the Thames, I felt much worried. That same evening of the night when they disappeared I heard Paul tell his father of the proposed boat-ride, but that Oswald and the two girls were going. They agreed that Paul should trail them and learn what he could. Paul told his father what he had heard in the park. Both seemed much enraged, but Pierre Lanier cautioned Paul to be patient and not lose his temper." [111]

"Whatever happens, he must not marry her!" said Paul.

"That's right, my boy; but remember the lake, and keep cool. Make no rash breaks next time."

"I was present at this conversation, but appeared not to notice their subdued talk. My curiosity was aroused by their suggestive remarks. I left about dusk. Soon after, Paul came out. I kept out of his sight, but watched him closely. He stopped beyond where the boats were. I watched at a suitable distance. Soon Oswald and Alice came down to the stream, and procuring a boat, rowed up the river. Paul followed them. Very curious to know the result, I yet feared for my own safety. If he intended any violence, I would be safer elsewhere. It would be dangerous for him to learn that I knew of his crime. He would find an effective way of silencing a witness. Besides, I might be suspected.

"These thoughts determined me to return. My curiosity was sufficiently aroused for me to shadow the neighborhood of Paul's room. My own room was in another block, but where I could see Paul if he came back the most direct route from the river. Part of the time I sat by the darkened window, looking out in the direction of the stream; at other times I strolled up and down the street. Then I would stand in the dark hallway." [112]

"About three hours after his disappearance up the shore of the river I heard hurried steps, and slipped out into the hallway at entrance of the stairs and watched. Paul walked rapidly by, and I followed at safe distance. He soon entered his room. I returned and retired, but felt that some

fearful crime had been committed.

"Next morning I bought daily papers, to learn if anything had happened to Oswald or Alice. Feeling uneasy, I haunted the neighborhood of Alice's home, but saw no signs. In the afternoon I visited the point where the boat had been taken. The keeper remarked:

"'What could have happened to that good-lookin' jay and bloomin' sweetheart of his'n? I doesn't care how much they spoons, but I wants my boat.'

"Much excited, I was walking around, wondering what had happened, when you two were seen coming. Feeling ashamed to meet the friends of the girl against whom had been brought the villainous suit, I moved up the stream to where there would be a good view of your actions. Pretty soon both of you and the keeper started up the river in a boat. I then knew neither Oswald nor Alice had returned. That they had been killed by Paul Lanier I was now sure. [113]

"A sense of indirect complicity in this crime oppressed my heart. I skulked away and hid in my room. Uneasy there, I went over to Paul's quarters, but he was not in. His father was there, and seemed nervous. The old man asked if I had heard any news, adding that he had not been in the street yet. I noticed some of that morning's papers upon the table. He watched me suspiciously, but I acted unconcerned. I affected not to notice his nervous manner, but noted all. Listening intently to every sound, he would answer me mechanically, then would get up, slowly yawn, and shuffle toward the window fronting the street. Glancing each way, he then would be seated. His questions, answers, remarks, pauses, and whole manner confirmed me in the conviction that he had been informed of some act of Paul's resulting in the death of the missing parties. He finally became quiet, and made no responses to my talk. I knew he wished to be alone, and rose to go. Following to the door, he was extremely polite, begging me to call again next day, sure. As I left, the door closed quickly, the bolt was thrust, and the lock clicked. I waited near, but where he could not see me. [114]

"In about fifteen minutes a stooped form, with snow-white, flowing beard, feebly emerged from the hallway. Bending over a heavy cane, this old man looked through large colored glasses up, down, and across the street. He slowly started in an opposite direction from where I was standing. After he had turned the corner, I walked rapidly around the block, and saw the old man still pegging away, watching everything along his path. Soon his steps quickened, and I was compelled to walk rapidly. Finally he turned a corner, entering a narrow alley extending between rows of low buildings. I crossed to the other side of the street, and passed down to the alley, but the old man had disappeared.

"I was sure that either Pierre or Paul Lanier, in this disguise, was now hiding in one of these low buildings along the alley. Though much excited, I knew better than longer to continue my stay in that quarter. I returned to watch the entrance to the room occupied by Paul and his father.

"In about two hours this same stooping figure slowly came up the street and entered the hallway. I was sure that Pierre Lanier had visited Paul, and was keeping him posted. [115]

"That evening I went down to the boathouse and learned about the finding of Oswald's hat. The boat had been found. I felt creepy, and that night retired early.

"Next morning's papers told of the disappearances. In the afternoon I went over to Paul's room. Both were in, and greeted me with great apparent pleasure. They wondered why I did not come sooner. After a while Paul carelessly asked me if I had read any of the morning papers. Neither he nor his father had been on the street, except for meals. I told him that there had been considerable in the papers about our mutual friends. Here were the accounts. I expressed doubt of their correctness, and carelessly remarked:

"'Guess it's some reporter's fake.

"Paul read, and seemed greatly surprised. His father looked it all over, and wondered if there were any truth in the reports. They suggested that if it should turn out true, we must consider well our course of action. Suspicion might point to me as the one interested in the death of Alice Webster. My suit recently commenced against her might be construed as interesting me in having the girl put out of the way.

"I was terribly shocked. They continued to arouse my fears until I was frantic. Both spoke of this mysterious disappearance as most unfortunate for me under the circumstances. It seemed to me there was little chance to escape. Old Pierre Lanier thought I must remain in seclusion until matters cleared up. It would not do for me to be seen. Perhaps if I kept out of sight, no one would think of me in connection with this affair. They advised me to change my room to a certain quarter of the city, and remain there until Paul procured suitable disguise. [116]

"I was paralyzed with fear, and did as they told me. Going back to my room, I waited until Paul entered. He came in without knocking. I was startled by the appearance of a strange man with slouch hat and heavy brown whiskers. He removed the disguise. I was told to pack my valise and trunk and get ready to move. A false beard was handed me with some old clothes. Paul told me to put them on. Giving the name of my new quarters, and cautioning me to remain there until he called, Paul ran downstairs and brought up the man who was to remove my baggage. Telling me the man had his directions and would know just where to go, Paul left. After a roundabout trip we reached my destination. I was surprised to see the driver enter the same alley down which had passed on the previous day that strange old man. With feelings of dread I followed up a back [117]

stairway into a low room, where my stuff was deposited.

"This is the place," said the driver, and left.

"Soon after, Paul entered in the same disguise. This, he said, was to be my home until further arrangements could be made.

"Father and I will be over every day and report. I will show you where to board near here. Your name is to be Joshua Wilkins."

"I remained in this place several weeks, going out frequently. Both Pierre and Paul called often, always in disguise. Occasionally we went about London together. It seemed to me at times that we were being shadowed. Sometimes when I was alone, strangers in my hearing would speak about either Paul or Pierre Lanier, and watch me, as if they knew our acquaintance. Frequently the Dodge case against Alice Webster was mentioned. There would be talk about the disappearances of Alice and Oswald. It always seemed to me that I was being watched. Paul and Pierre Lanier were affected in the same way. Strangers would refer to these subjects in their presence. Both had denied ever seeing William Dodge.

"Oh, how miserable I was during all this time! I was suspicious of everybody and trembled at common noises. Any unexpected look of stranger caused a start. It was in vain that I reasoned against this foolish fear. My misery was so great that I contemplated suicide. It seemed to me that both of the Laniers gloated over my wretchedness. They enlarged on the perils of my situation. I really believe they wished me to take my own life. From things which I then did under their advice I often think they intended deserting me. If the bodies of Alice and Oswald had been found, I believe these villains would have procured my arrest for the murders. I was completely in their power, and it now seems that they were weaving a web for my destruction. They owed me nine hundred pounds, and I knew things against them. I bore up under it all, for the sake of Mary and the children. Old Pierre had given me in all one hundred pounds before we started for London. I gave most of this to Mary.

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"Poor Mary! I have not heard from her for many weeks. Now I am here in this hospital, dying!

"Serves me right for killing that poor girl! Yes, I'm to blame that Oswald Langdon and Alice Webster were drowned! But tell the jury, Mary and the children were hungry! Tell them that. Tell the judge about Mary and the children. Don't forget to tell the judge that! Tell everybody about that!"

There was a long silence. With scared faces Sir Donald and Esther bent over the motionless form. The attending physician felt the wrist, listened for heart-throbs. A cordial was administered. That deathlike swoon lasted for several minutes, followed by slow return to consciousness. It was evident that further attempt of the sick man to relate his experiences with these archconspirators then would be inadvisable. The physician said there was some hope of the man's recovery, but that quiet and rest were imperative. Sir Donald and Esther were loth to go, but the hospital rules were strict. They left, much interested in the fate of William Dodge.

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The confession, though confirming Sir Donald's theory of this conspiracy, was startling. That Paul Lanier had murdered both Oswald and Alice was evident. But what had become of the bodies? Could it be that the hat and handkerchief were placed where found to mislead as to manner of deaths? Were the bodies still in the river, or buried elsewhere? Perhaps the remains of Oswald and Alice had been reduced to ashes and scattered to the winds. How could the necessary evidence be obtained? How bring their murderers to justice without proof of the "corpus delicti"? Could this dying man know other facts furnishing a clue to establish their deaths? Would it be right to harass him with further inquiry upon the verge of the tomb? Why employ his slender thread of life in unraveling this intricate web. Better point him to that hope which is the refuge of a sinful soul.

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But is there any way of saving this guilty wretch, with his crimes unconfessed? First confession, then shriving of the penitent.

Limit the mercy of Heaven? Is the Infinite compassion contingent upon finite fellow tactics?

Sir Donald and Esther felt more solicitude for the sick man's recovery than in further revelations.

Next day they are early callers at the hospital. William Dodge is still alive, but delirious. He slept much of the night, but is flighty, making many wild, incoherent speeches. Receiving permission to see him, Sir Donald and Esther approach the cot.

"No, Mary, I will never let you or the children starve! I got the money from Pierre Lanier! Dear old Pierre Lanier saved my Mary and the children! Put that down! Yes, the old rascal saved Mary and the children from starving! Put that down! Old Pierre saved me from being a murderer! Write that in the book, too! No, I never struck either of them! It was Paul Lanier! He murdered them! Your boy is not a murderer! Mother, I am innocent! Mary's folks said William Dodge could not provide for Mary! I did though! But Mary cried about the children! How Mary and the children ate that night! I got it all from dear old Pierre Lanier!"

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There was another pause, and the delirious man seemed to sleep. Suddenly he struck his clenched hand upon the spread and stared wildly.

"You miserable murderer! Keep that money, and I will hang you! Send it to me, or I will tell how

Paul killed Alice Webster and Oswald Langdon! That's right! Pay me, and it's all right! I'll never squeal! I need it for Mary and the children! They'll be happy now!"

Sir Donald and Esther make daily calls until it is safe to see their interesting invalid. Recovery is slow. Sir Donald broaches the subject of the Thames tragedy. Dodge does not remember much of his former talk, but seems willing to divulge all he knows. He trusts that these kind friends will not betray his confidence. The Laniers would murder him if they heard.

Receiving positive assurance that there will be nothing said until Dodge is consulted, the narrative is again begun. Sir Donald tells him the substance of former statements.

"Well, I will complete the horrible story, relying on your promise never to tell without my consent. Those Laniers would surely find a swift way of silencing me if they knew I had told. Often I am afraid that they will have me assassinated, anyhow. [122]

"Both of them came together to my hiding-place, much excited. My case against Alice was set for trial. Her barrister had procured the setting. They were much perplexed at this, and wondered if Alice and Oswald had turned up. Both were pale, and Paul trembled violently. He was not shamming this time. His father was nervous, but advised Paul to keep cool or all would be lost. We went together that night to see my solicitors. Pierre said he had seen them before, and that they would be in their office waiting for me. Pierre and Paul were disguised. I was to tell the solicitors that the case should be dismissed, as my witnesses could not be found.

"We entered the office, and found both solicitors there. When I told them to have the case dismissed they were much surprised.

"A continuance can be procured on proper showing.'

"Pierre Lanier scowled, and looking at me, shook his head.

"I insisted upon its dismissal, as the witnesses could not be relied upon. One solicitor said:

"You have a complete chain of title deeds, and need no other witnesses, except to prove their genuineness.'

"Old Pierre frowned, and I replied: [123]

"It is better to quit. I do not care to press the case.'

"They looked at each other and at us suspiciously.

"Old Pierre then spoke up, saying:

"My friend wishes to drop the case. I understand that he owes you part of your fee. What were you to pay them, Mr. Dodge?"

"I replied, 'Two hundred pounds.'

"How much have you paid?"

"Fifty pounds.'

"Well, I know you have little money to waste on this case. These gentlemen have been paid well for what has been done thus far. If you need fifty pounds more to pay them off, I will loan the amount.'

"His proposition was promptly accepted. It was arranged that the case should be dismissed and the money paid. This was done.

"The Laniers now seemed anxious to get rid of me. I insisted on payment of the remaining nine hundred pounds. They expostulated with me; said it was outrageous; what good had I done them?"

"To my remark that I was to quit upon their advice, and had done so, Pierre replied:

"Yes, but who imagined Alice would be drowned?"

"Paul said: [124]

"You are suspected of putting her out of the way!"

"I was so angry that I looked straight at him, and said:

"You know more about that than I do!"

"I have often been sorry for this thrust, but it went home. Paul grew pale, and stared at me frightfully.

"Here, boys, none of your foolish quarreling!" said Pierre. "Mr. Dodge is entitled under the contract to the money. It shall never be said that Pierre Lanier failed to keep his word. We must stand by each other whatever happens. Mr. Dodge has a family, and long as I live they shall be provided for. I could beat him out of the money, as the contract was illegal and void. He could be prosecuted for conspiracy and fraud. Mr. Dodge will be suspected of murdering that man and girl. I have already heard rumors to that effect. But we must stand together. It would never do for Mr. Dodge to return home now. He must stay away from Calcutta a year, at least. Paul and I will go to Calcutta. We will let you know all that happens. You must not write to London, or to any one

but me. I will deliver your letters to Mary, and mail hers to you. Your name must be James Wilton. When it is safe, I will write you to come home.'

"I saw the force of these directions, but asked how I was to live during my stay from home, and what provisions would be made for my family. [125]

"Pierre replied: 'To-morrow you shall have one hundred pounds. I will give Mary one hundred pounds on my arrival in Calcutta. In one year I will pay each of you an additional hundred pounds. By that time, in all probability, you can return, and I will pay the balance in five equal annual installments.'

"This arrangement was made between us. I was in their power, and did just as he said. In a short time I sailed for Paris with the promised payment. The Laniers were to sail for Calcutta soon after. I have never received any letter from either of them since. A letter came to me from Mary, speaking of having received one hundred pounds, but not knowing from whom. It was placed to her credit in a Calcutta bank, and notice to that effect was left at the house. The letter was addressed to James Wilton in a disguised hand, but the inside sheet was in Mary's handwriting. She had been told at the bank that I was in Bombay. Doubtless her letter went there, and was forwarded by some one instructed by Pierre Lanier to me at Paris.

"Letters from my wife came regularly. I continued to write, as directed by Pierre Lanier, and Mary received my letters. It was evident that Pierre had furnished the information of my being in Bombay, and I kept up the delusion. [126]

"Life here in Paris, without employment, harassed by uncertainty, compelled to pass under an assumed name, away from my family, and obliged to keep up a deceitful correspondence with Mary, who supposed I was in Bombay, became very miserable. Still there was no alternative. I dreaded any failure to comply with the wishes of the Laniers. They would hesitate at no crime to protect themselves. I believed they suspected me of thinking Paul had murdered Oswald Langdon and Alice Webster. It would be safer for me to be away from them. Would they not plot my death if I were at Calcutta? If suspected or pursued, they might accuse me of the crime, and both conspire to secure my conviction.

"After some time spent in Paris, Mary's letters ceased. I waited anxiously, but none came. Writing for explanations, I received no answer. My fears were aroused. Was she sick? Did my letters reach her? Were her letters and mine intercepted? Were detectives on my trail? Could it be that the Laniers were being pursued for those murders? Had they decided to throw me off?

"A thousand fears haunted me. I was in constant dread of being identified, yet looked daily for a letter from Mary. Sometimes I would fully decide to start for Calcutta, regardless of consequences, but abandoned the plan. I took sick. Becoming very weak, a physician was consulted. After a few visits, he directed that I be removed to the hospital. Here I have been for weeks, without hearing from my wife or family. What can I do to hear of them? Oh, can't you do something in my behalf? Help me to hear from Mary and the children!" [127]

Sir Donald asked many questions about the deaths of Oswald and Alice, but elicited little further information. He was convinced that nothing had been concealed. There was no positive proof of their deaths. How could this missing link be procured?

Both Sir Donald and Esther were much interested in the family of William Dodge. That this husband and father had been led into crime through poverty was apparent. His love for hungry wife and children placed him at the mercy of this archvillain, who, with his murderous son, had caused so much suffering.

Sir Donald well knew that to keep inviolate his agreement with William Dodge would be a technical concealment of crime. Yet he would have accepted any fate rather than betray such trust. [128]

Strict compliance with penal statutes may require much individual meanness.

William Dodge was most unhappy. Each movement made seemed to further involve him in hopeless entanglement. The mistake which resulted in his wildly aimed cartridge missing its intended victim saved him from guilt of homicide.

But how judge of any event by its immediate circle? Only that far cycle whose ever-widening circuit merges eternal radii can fully compass the puissance of human action.

Under stress of immediate death he had fully confessed all. Now even the one dubious remnant of personal honor, according to crime's unwritten code, is swept away.

How could the wretch, about to escape all human reckoning, making cowardly confession of crime involving fellow-guilt, hope that his confidences would remain inviolate? One of the penalties of faithless duplicity is that all trust in fellow-fealty dies.

William Dodge now feared that those who so kindly watched over his hospital cot would betray his trust. They doubtless were solicitous for his recovery, that he and the Laniers might be brought to ultimate justice. What respect could be expected of these for pledges given to one who had conspired against a helpless orphan? Why should they not speed the conviction of him whose intrigues were accessory to this double homicide? [129]

How hard to conceive of better than self!

Neither Sir Donald nor Esther ever thought of punishment for the man just saved from the grave. Both felt that this poor fellow and his family were their special wards. All moral taint was covered by the mantle of sympathetic interest. Sir Donald had concluded that something must be done in behalf of those at Calcutta. It would not do to write, as this might in some way lead to inquiry for the absent father. He would avoid any course of action tending to affect the safety of this poor fellow with his burden of troubles.

There are persons who cannot do a mean act.

Though at times loth to leave Paris, Sir Donald and Esther will visit Calcutta. Thereby they may learn all about the Dodge family, and perhaps render needed assistance.

It has been three days since the hospital visit. Esther has been sick. When able to sit up, she insists upon his making a call upon their interesting convalescent and telling him of the proposed trip to India. Judge of Sir Donald's surprise upon being informed that William Dodge had been removed from the hospital. At his request a conveyance bore him away the previous evening, but no one knew where. Not a word had been said by him giving any clew to his intentions. Nothing was uttered about Sir Donald or Esther.

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This strange conduct greatly mystified Sir Donald. He framed all sorts of queries as to possible causes. Had their failure to make daily calls aroused Dodge's suspicion? Was this poor fellow afraid of their betraying him? Did he think that having procured a full confession, they had no further interest except his conviction of crime? Had the identity and whereabouts of William Dodge been discovered? Were his silence and removal only parts of an adroitly planned detective ruse? Could it be that the Laniers were at the bottom of this strange move? What if William Dodge were to be tried for murdering Oswald Langdon and Alice Webster? Had the Laniers accused him of these crimes? Strange if Paul were to be tried as principal and the other two as accessories. Possibly the detectives had a complete chain of evidence connecting these with the murders and the bodies were discovered.

Sir Donald is much perplexed. This must not be communicated to the London office. In all this tangle there is one clear point. Whatever the result, Sir Donald will shield William Dodge. That family must be found and kept from want. Delay and premature action are alike precarious.

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He compromises by a brief stay in Paris, better to know how to proceed. Failing to learn anything more, Sir Donald and Esther leave for Calcutta.

CHAPTER X

[132]

AT THE HIMALAYAS

Traversing many weary miles of that vast Indian Empire, the survey party reaches the Himalaya range.

Twenty-five persons are in the camp. The guide is an intelligent Hindu. There are one German, a Russian, and an American. Ample provisions had been made for the journey. The chief is absolute head of the undertaking, but void of light as to its ultimate purposes.

From the outset Oswald is well treated. In his looks is that which claims respect. While feeling gratitude for employment and evident good-will, Oswald's experiences of the recent past make him pensive. This abstraction had been noted. His prompt obedience to all orders wins approval. He never makes inquiries as to the purposes of this expedition. His chief reciprocates by not referring to Oswald's antecedents and by relieving him from the natural curiosity of fellow-workers.

For a long time they are employed in surveying the mountain passes and approaches. Maps are made and grades established. For many miles on both sides of the range the country is explored, and numberless cipher annotations are placed on the charts. Much care is taken in survey of streams and the location of springs.

[133]

Oswald becomes greatly interested in this work, but asks only questions about technical parts. He learns much of triangulation and of aneroid computations. Vernier and arc readings become familiar.

At times tripod and transit seem revolving belcher of deadly hail. Glaring eastward from rocky summit is a "lion rampant." This figure slowly retreats backward with sullen roar. Now upon the mountain apex appears a huge grizzly form, looking from shaggy, impassive brows toward sea and plain and jungle. A mighty horde sweeps down, emerging from pass and rocky fastnesses. This army, scattering over the plain, is swelled by Moslem, Sikh, Hindu, Parsee, and Buddhist allies, until its millions hold India's domain. The perspective becomes confused, outlines jumble, figures are inverted, lights and shadows intermingle their chameleon hues, until under widened folds of British and Russian canvas "Lion" and "Bear" divide the "foray," still regarding each other with "rolling eyes of prey."

From such chimeras Oswald turns to more prosaic matters.

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Many books had been brought on this far journey. Long, tedious hours are beguiled in the perusal of their contents. History, politics, war, poetry, religion, and romance are freely discussed by different members of the party during hours spent in camp. Both German and Russian speak English fairly well; the Hindu guide is easily understood. There is a plentiful supply of rifles, swords, knives, and ammunition. When possible, all camp near together, taking proper precautions against attacks from roving bands of marauders.

Oswald's most intimate associates are the chief, German, American, and Russian. These are not afflicted with curiosity as to each other's past. The chief is under sealed orders; both German and Russian had left their respective countries for good of Kaiser and Tsar; the American is an adventurous son of millionaire residing in New York. Weary of ennui in the metropolis, this Yankee aristocrat seeks diversion in trips to all parts of the globe. All of these are recipients of classic culture.

Oswald's experiences had been most limited, but of greatest intensity. Since his Northfield romance, pain of years had crowded into a few brief months. The face of Esther Randolph is indelibly painted on his memory. Now free from haunting fear of detection, Oswald can more rationally review the events driving him into indefinite exile from home and friends. Doubtless Sir Donald and Esther believed him dead. They never could accuse him of murdering Alice Webster, but surely would charge this crime and his own death upon Paul Lanier. The lake tragedy was conclusive. Would not Esther have sad recollections of the man who sought her hand and met such death? That she would never marry another he is sure. Has this lovely girl entered upon her chosen mission? To himself he says:

[135]

"One so pure should find refuge from earth's coarse pleasures in holy consecration to spiritual ideals. How grand the influences of those moral advisers whose teachings had directed her feet aright.

"Could I only see father and mother! What sleepless nights they must have passed since my disguised exit from that home, months ago! If I could only write to or hear from them! It may be that this horrible condition of things is proper punishment for my presumptuous pride, but why should the innocent suffer? When will this mystery be cleared? What is being done to convict the guilty?"

Oswald now hopes that English justice will not be delinquent. Surely detectives can unravel this complicated web. Why are these sleuths so tardy? He now chafes at the slow zeal of those whose pursuit of Oswald Langdon would have been resisted to the death. These ministers of justice, in honest, tireless search for the murderer of Oswald Langdon and Alice Webster, even now would reckon lightly of their own lives if they attempted his arrest. But this high-spirited youth feels no tremor of physical fear. The gallows have no terrors other than those of unmerited ignominy. Oswald would rush on swift death if thereby the name of Langdon could be cleared.

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He thus upbraids himself: "My flight from London was cowardly. Better with moral determination to have faced all and accepted my fate. The death of Alice Webster is unavenged; her slayer is at large, a human beast of prey; father and mother are in frightful suspense; the spectral hand of the drowned girl beckons me to revenge upon her murderer; but ignoring all these, I am a selfish, cowardly 'derelict,' fearful of possible harm."

Then he exclaims: "Not too fast! Has not English justice gloated over conviction of the innocent? What fearful irony in some of its swift so-called vindications! How can public clamor be satisfied but by sacrifice when there is a victim at hand? What hope that detectives would pursue Paul Lanier for the murder of Alice Webster with Oswald Langdon conveniently near? Are not my absence and supposed death necessary to the unraveling of this intricate plot? In what other way can the name of Langdon be cleared from pending disgrace?"

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Oswald now desires to live until justice triumphs. He sometimes feels assurance that all will be righted. It is difficult to restrain his curiosity within discreet bounds.

The camp discussions help to divert his thought from somber reflections. These informal debates take wide range.

Karl Ludwig is a versatile German. Though thinking it discreet to absent himself from fatherland, Karl is at heart loyal to his sturdy young Kaiser. To Karl the memories of imperial Teutonic succession and achievements are proud heritage. He would champion the real cause of his emperor against the world. In event of foreign attack Karl would subscribe without reserve to the "divine rights" of William. There is in his heart no place for treason.

Like many other exiles from native land, Karl was a real menace to constituted authority. Speech led him into proscribed provinces. Harmless in overt act or intent, his words were deadly explosives, charged with dynamo energy sufficient to wreck every throne of Europe.

To poetic or reflective mind Karl's startling metaphors were harmless hyperbole or garrulous trope of brilliant, idealistic sentiment, but such fired credulous natures to white heat of anarchy. It became essential to German tranquillity that Karl Ludwig be suppressed.

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Not aware of proper rating by officials of fatherland, Karl took passage for Calcutta, landing with culture, pride, and imagination at this Indian metropolis.

Ivan Shelgunoff graduated from Moscow University. He had imbibed sentiments harmless in theory, but inimical to practical policies of Russian civics. Having no intention of posing as

factional disturber of the public peace, his indiscreet utterances reach ear of vigilant official. Not fascinated with prospect of indefinite Siberian exile, Ivan procured leave to quit the domain of the Tsar, finding habitation under the British flag in this seaport near the mouth of the Ganges.

Yet Ivan Shelgunoff is proud of Russian traditions and statecraft, feeling no bitterness toward Nicholas II., but filial reverence for this recently crowned youthful patriarch-autocrat.

Intrusted with enforcement of police regulations, Ivan soon would abandon plausible theories of individual freedom as Utopian chimeras, not adapted to exigencies of practical civic needs. Siberian penal exile would become essential part of police supervision, with possible excesses, as in all provisions for the suppression of crime.

Oswald comes to regard Karl Ludwig and Ivan Shelgunoff with much interest. Their critical, liberal sentiments, so well expressed, are appreciated by his subtle perception. Through these garrulous, versatile commentators his horizon is vastly extended. Readily appropriating the good, he notes defects and makes judicious comparisons. Seldom drawn into discussion or comment, his evident interest insures hearty good-will. However, these vocal encyclopedias of wisdom generally and of statecraft in particular at times are surprised by Oswald's responses to their direct appeals. By a subtle system of intellectual buccaneering this reserved Englishman winnows from much chaffy verbiage the real seeds of thought. In fresh-turned fallow of his fertile fancy the grain germinates into better growths. They wonder at his quick perception, profound discrimination, and marvelous craft of readjustment. That this British subject can see in the different policies of more absolute powers and in less flexible modes of civic alignment so much to commend or excuse to them is queer indeed. They surmise that by habitual globe-trotting Oswald has become a "citizen of the world." [139]

Strange that he who would resent the least show of arbitrary interference with his own interests finds so much to justify in rigorous German and Russian policies. [140]

When Oswald did express an opinion on any of the subjects under discussion, Karl and Ivan seemed to accept his comments as oracle, making no adverse suggestions. Such deference is no infrequent tribute to well-bred reserve.

To some criticisms of Karl Ludwig, Oswald showed much sympathy with aspirations of Emperor William for military resources promptly available in all emergencies. He said:

"Increased land and naval equipment should be voted by the Reichstag in the interest of German tranquillity. Such expenditures are economic precautions against expensive wars. Thereby the solvency of the German exchequer would be moderately insured. So far from unduly fostering a bellicose spirit tending to war, these would be tactful preventives of wasteful foreign and civil broils. Fifty years' current expense to insure the empire's peace would not equal waste of one such serious conflict. There is no doubt that this sturdy sovereign possesses much military spirit. This is natural heritage, coming down in direct royal line from hero ancestry. Fostered by severe German tactics, it tends toward ambition for martial prestige, but has been consecrated to the arts of peace. It is but natural that such trend and discipline tinge this consecration with heroic shades. These are not the results of diseased caprice, but suggest potent considerations which it would be well to respect. Let none think that William would falter in any crisis. The same imperial foresight prompting some strange assertions of royal prerogatives would head German armies, for success of colonial extension, in chastisement for wanton treaty violations, or to preserve the integrity of his empire. Much lightly has been written about the caprices of this ruler, but genius always was peculiar." [141]

After an impressive silence, Oswald resumes:

"Cares of empire have strange tendencies and special warrant."

Dreamily looking at Karl, Oswald then, as if in reverie, quotes:

"And some among you held, that if the King
Had seen the sight, he would have sworn the vow;
Not easily, seeing that the King must guard
That which he rules, and is but as the hind
To whom a space of land is given to plow,
Who may not wander from the allotted field,
Until his work be done."

At another time there had been an animated discussion between Ivan Shelgunoff and Karl Ludwig as to the comparative merits of Russian and German dynasties, with the peculiar institutions of both countries. Direct appeal being made to Oswald for an opinion, he avoids invidious comparisons, and says:

"Nicholas II. is crowned head of an absolute dynasty. The royal line of Romanoff succession found in him rightful representative of its august power. Whatever may be said about the rigor of Russian rule and its conflict with Nihilistic tendencies, the quarrel so far as pertains to this young sovereign is that of a true inheritor." [142]

"Nicholas succeeded to Russian policies as essential allies of his crown. These are united in newly welded bonds of imperial wedlock. Their divorce would be destruction of his throne.

"Representative liberty is a comparative ideal. The Russian peasant enjoys frugal life with his

family and few humble friends. Is it likely that such feel the autocratic pressure of their Tsar? Perhaps there may be many cases wherein private rights have been ruthlessly invaded, but are not such results usually due to insolent perversions by minor officials? Doubtless many innocent suspects are sent into hopeless exile through official zeal, still like effects often result from similar causes in liberal commonwealths."

Looking in questioning banter at Claude Leslie, Oswald says:

"It has been rumored that in the great republic beyond the Atlantic they sometimes do a little 'railroading.'"

Tippoo Kalidasa is an interesting Hindu. With self-inflicted cognomen and many eccentric notions about all sorts of subjects, Tippoo can talk well and to the point. Though a professed disciple of modern Brahmanism, he had deeply imbibed Buddhistical precepts and philosophy. The lessons learned in childhood at his island home never were forgotten. [143]

Leaving Ceylon about his eighteenth year, Tippoo had traveled much in China, Japan, and over parts of Siberia before going to India. Everywhere had been accented in human lives the influence of that noble prince, the founder of Buddhism. True, Tippoo saw in these writings frequent contradictions, yet the character of this Indian teacher was pure.

Faith rarely insists on absolutely consistent verities.

Much travel among peoples of other beliefs, and study of new religious tenets had modified these earlier views. In reflective moods, Tippoo saw much to criticise in this ancient philosophy, which, though indelibly stamped upon its modern successor, as a professed system of religious teaching, had become almost a stranger in the land of its original growth. Still these early influences are most potent. In all emergencies of thought or feeling, Tippoo Kalidasa soulfully repeats the formula:

"I take refuge in Buddha!"

Though Oswald's mind is not excessively tinged with the speculative or ethical, he finds much of interest in the talk of this unique guide. [144]

So rudely having been torn from all early environments, with such shock of utter change in thought and impulse, is it strange that former trend is broken? While tempering the white heat of aspiration, Oswald's recent troubles widened his horizon. But novel tempers are not wholly the results of changed circumstances. Latent powers and senses are awakened.

At times the memories of recent experiences weigh upon Oswald's mind, but are not always present. There is little menace of arrest and much youthful elastic spirit. Imperious will is in abeyance. There are moods of chastened relaxation from self-consciousness, with peculiar sense of relief and compensation.

Many an hour is beguiled by these two widely different men in comment upon this philosophy of the East. A moral system claiming the fealty of so great a part of earth's population surely is an important subject for human study.

Much pleased at the interest of this dignified Englishman trying to understand the tenets of an ancient faith, Tippoo talks freely and profoundly, giving numerous explanatory versions from his own fertile fancy.

Oswald notes the strong points, beautiful sentiments, practical beneficence, and occult theories of this oriental belief. He becomes enamored of the life and teachings of Prince Guatama. [145]

To some criticisms of Ivan Shelgunoff, Oswald replies:

"Original doctrines often are distorted by ignorant interpreters. Great ideas are degraded by dogmatic priestcraft."

There is no danger of Oswald becoming a partisan of this creed. He is impressed with its defects, though appreciating the sublimity of general tenets. Oswald does not like the doctrine of "Merger." This assertive Briton has no desire to lose identity in "Brahm." Oswald Langdon as dissolved dewdrop in shoreless sea were too vague.

From listening to these German, Russian, and Hindu philosophers, Oswald enjoys talking with Claude Leslie. This rich American has none of that reputed affectation of some western aristocrats. His manners are frank, without any suggestion of pretense. Having the entrée of Gotham select circles, Claude sailed on an extended tour of the world. He had visited at leisure nearly every port and important city of earth. With a quick sense of the remarkable in ordinary commonplace, he had seen much of interest. His descriptions greatly entertained Oswald, who never tired of listening to Claude's narratives. Indeed it may be well surmised that from some of the broad-gauge ideas and epigrammatic sayings of Claude Leslie came much of Oswald's changed views and disposition to justify or excuse in others that which he formerly considered as utterly without warrant. [146]

How little does the awakened alert sense reckon of the initial processes of its quickening!

The most fascinating parts of Claude's talks are about persons, places, events, anecdotes, and incidents familiar to this Yankee aristocrat before starting on his prolonged tour of the world.

Oswald becomes greatly interested in the affairs of this land beyond the seas. Much had been written about "impressions" of America and Americans. He had read some of these erudite, mildly drawn caricatures, and is not predisposed toward the homes or characters of those "cousins" across the Atlantic. A few that he had met in England strengthened this prejudice. Shallow attempts to ape everything English had disgusted this frank, open-hearted, perceptive Briton, with his innate abhorrence of sham pretensions.

Americanism as typified by Claude Leslie is a new revelation. Such incarnation of a great national character evokes his English pride of kinship. He feels a most complacent sense of British responsibility for American progress. In response to some of Claude's comments, Oswald inquires:

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"With such pedigree, why should not this bounding thoroughbred win the Derby?"

Oswald begins to feel potent suggestions that much of human prejudice results from long-range ignorance. That this narrow-gauge, contracting visual handicap is a real social, religious, and political astigmatism he now and then quite clearly sees.

Claude Leslie's comments upon Gotham social and business life are those of a close observer. His criticisms are judicious. Though frequently barbed, these shafts never are tipped with malice.

Replying to opinions expressed by Karl Ludwig about reported whims of New York's "Four Hundred," Claude says:

"These practices result from local conditions. Those living there must conform to the unwritten social law, or risk the ostracising penalties. To some, caste observances are irksome and utterly sham, while to others the very breath of life. It ought not to be expected that all curb their tastes to conform to the fastidious notions of a few, nor should this fashionable minority be unduly blamed for exclusive whims. There always have been and will be select circles. Those sensitively chafing against this would be better employed in rising superior to such things. Even those who set the social pace often feel rebellious toward this dictator. Beneath the disguise of caste New York's select circle love, hate, despair, trust, doubt, rejoice, and suffer in degree like others. I have found such life dull, but concede the right to 'pay the price.' Temperaments differ. Constant touch with their kind is a necessity to many."

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From Karl, Claude looks questioningly to that other attentive listener. Oswald gazes at a mountain-ledge and slowly answers:

"It may be that the generous Allgiver, indulging even queer tastes of bird scavengers, not always is vexed at human caprice, but with tender, amused smile watches many of our peculiar antics."

Oswald is much interested in Claude Leslie's comments upon American political and business methods. These, while somewhat similar to those in England, yet radically differ. Disposed to doubt the wisdom of such departures from accustomed ideals, Oswald is often inquisitively critical. Claude explains nearly all to the satisfaction of his friend. Though sensible of defects, Claude is thoroughly American in his tastes and feelings.

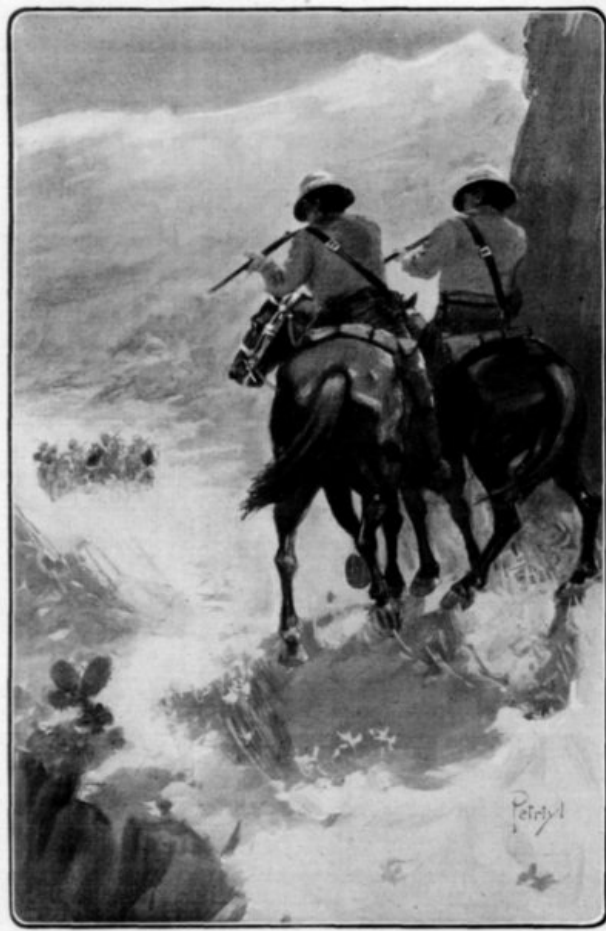
Oswald resolves to visit that western land, and to see for himself, but this trip shall abide the course of events. The whole subtly interwoven web of the Lanier conspiracy first shall be unraveled. The dead avenged, his name stainless, Oswald Langdon will sail for that western republic, no longer a hunted refugee.

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How elusive Fate's alliance!

For many months the survey party has tramped up and down the slopes of the Himalayas. Nothing has happened to interfere with the purposes of this undertaking. The chief is preparing for return to Calcutta.

Oswald and Karl Ludwig have taken a ride of several miles from camp. In the distance Karl sees a solitary horseman. Through his field-glasses he notes that the distant rider is beckoning toward some farther point. Four horsemen, with rifles across their saddles, are now in sight. Oswald has been hidden from view of these by a slope upon which Karl reined his horse. The four when within about a mile veer to the right. It soon becomes evident to Karl that these are trying to get between him and the camp. He tells Oswald his fears, who promptly joins Karl, facing these unknown horsemen. Making a turn near the trail, the four rapidly approach. Both drop their bridle-reins, grasping the repeating, long-range weapons.



**"WHEN WITHIN ABOUT A HALF-MILE, THE
FOUR RAISED THEIR WEAPONS."**

When within about a half-mile the four raise their guns at once. Karl and Oswald elevate their weapons, and the six discharges seem together. Karl's rifle drops, and he hurriedly loosens his feet from the stirrups, as the horse sinks, shot through the brain. Oswald again shoots, when his horse falls to the ground. The remaining two of the enemy press forward, firing repeatedly. Karl has been disabled by a wound in the right arm, and can render no further help. His gun has rolled down the slope, out of reach.

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His horse dead and Karl wounded, Oswald again fires, while shots whiz by his head. Only one of the attacking party is now advancing. Oswald fires his remaining charge, but fails to stop his foe, who takes deliberate aim.

Seeing that his only chance to escape being killed is by feigning death, Oswald drops heavily to the ground. With yell the other spurs forward, followed in the distance by another, who, having lost his horse, now rushes to be in at the death.

Having signaled Karl to make no resistance, Oswald is lying in apparent stupor when the horseman rides up and dismounts. Bending over the prostrate form, his long black hair is grasped by Oswald's left hand, who, springing to his feet and giving that strong right arm a swing, strikes the surprised bandit such hard blow under the left ear that there is no need for another. Picking up the rifle dropped by his quivering foe, Oswald fires the remaining charge after the fleeing form of the other robber.

Grasping the bridle of the steed standing by the side of its dead master, Oswald leads the animal to where Karl is lying with cocked revolver in his left hand.

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Karl had obeyed Oswald's signal, but watched the effect of this ruse, intending to assist if necessary.

Oswald tears off the sleeve of his shirt and bandages Karl's arm. Placing the German on the robber's steed, he leads the animal to where the nearest horse is lying wounded. Dispatching the beast, he continues on until they reach another of the attacking party, who appears to be mortally wounded by a shot in the side, but is still living.

Oswald again presses forward to the point where the first man and horse had fallen in the fight. Both are dead. The other horse is not in sight.

That upon Oswald's second shot taking effect the riderless steed escaped is evident, but where is the fourth horseman? Two are dead, one is mortally wounded, and another escaped.

They go on toward the camp. After traveling in this way over five miles, they are met by three of the camping party on horseback. It is now arranged that Oswald ride one of these horses, leading the one ridden by Karl to camp, while the others go up the trail and guard the dying bandit until a cart can be sent to bring in the wounded man, the two dead bodies, the guns, bridles, and

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saddles. After a few hours more, Oswald and Karl reach camp.

The thrilling adventures related, the cart, accompanied by several of the party on horseback, is sent out, and in due time all are under canvas.

This incident warns them that strict watch must be kept to avoid surprises from roving bands infesting some of these mountain fastnesses.

The four bandits evidently were a scouting party. Seeing Oswald and Karl, they had ventured an attack. Their tactics in trying to cut off return of the two showed knowledge of the camp's location.

Though painful, Karl's wound healed rapidly.

Oswald was lionized. Many times Karl told how that quiet Englishman rode up to his side and faced the horsemen when they were trying to cut the two off from camp. Karl would insist that all of Oswald's shots took effect except the last, and he thought that perhaps this slightly wounded the fleeing bandit. That feint of death, vigorous resurrection, and terrific right-hander electrified the garrulous Karl, who is tireless in praise of Oswald's prowess.

Though thankful for their narrow escape, Oswald feels no elation. At least one human being suddenly had been sent by him before his Maker, and another through his act is about to cross the dark river. His conscience is clear, but why was he not spared this sad notoriety? [153]

From the wounded man's features, it was believed that he came from Spain or Mexico. His rambling, delirious utterances were a jargon of mixed tongues. He lived for a week at the camp, but never gave any clue to his identity.

Oswald was the most frequent watcher at the cot of the dying man, anticipating every want, appearing to thereby seek atonement for the fatal shot.

In the last hour Oswald borrowed from one of the party a crucifix. Holding this before the glazing eye of the conscious bandit, he gently lifts the right arm, placing the emblem within the hand which is then laid across the breast.

With a smile, clasping this sacred symbol, the outlaw passes into the Beyond.

There were no papers on the three dead men giving any clue. They were buried about one mile from camp.

In another week the survey party is ready to break camp for return journey.

Accompanied by Karl Ludwig, Oswald visits the graves of the highwaymen and places thereon bunches of wild flowers gathered from slope of the Himalayas. Karl laughs at this whim of the Englishman. [154]

"Vot sendimendals! Bud id vill nod hurdt you, und der flowers vitter any vay."

Karl's arm was "in evidence."

Both returned to camp, and soon all were on the road for Calcutta.

CHAPTER XI

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PAUL'S BEWILDERMENT

Pondering over the strange events of the evening, Paul Lanier lay awake all night after return from his visit with Agnes Randall. Longer he thought, deeper became the mystery. He mutters: "Not one weird circumstance alone, but such grouping of ghostly coincidents! Being ushered into the private room of Sir Charles was explained by Agnes, but why that fitful glare of lights? How came that copy of *London Press*, with underscored reference to the Thames murders, in possession of Sir Charles Chesterton? All this might concur in time and place through odd happenings, but that horrible tableau! The murdered Alice Webster, with gory temple, long, damp tresses clinging to her form, in striking pose, advancing and receding, mutely gesticulating such fearful prophetic menace, was too real for chimerical conjecture or mere coincidence. How came that door closed just after the tableau? That declamation! Such pertinent lines and ghostly utterances, so exactly imitating the voice of Alice!" [156]

Paul began to think there must be something wrong with his head. Never before had he felt any such queer sensations, except when Alice approached his hiding-place along shore of the lake. Strange about that grewsome drapery of seaweed!

Paul is now startled with the conviction that Alice Webster, borne by the Thames current, had drifted out to sea. He exclaims: "Can it be that her body has been found and identified? What could the spectral voice have meant by the prophecy about burial 'in a cave' and 'trodden down with stones'? What if the body of Oswald Langdon, too, has passed out to the boundless deep, and his fleshless skeleton now is awaiting identification in some rock-sealed ocean cave!"

"That fearful threat about will of 'fierce avenging sprite!' How escape that sure blood-atonement?"

It now seems to Paul that all the sleuths of fate are hunting him for these murders.

Rising haggard and feverish, he takes a glass of strong brandy and braces himself for the day. After light breakfast, he starts out for a walk, but avoids familiar faces.

Agnes had told Paul not to call again before Sunday evening. Still revolving in his mind weird incidents of the previous night, this restless youth passes the time, and again sleeps but little. [157]

All the next day, until time for his call upon Agnes, Paul spends in nervous, troubled conjecture, but can find no solution of this elusive problem. The strain is terrible and his look is alert. He avoids all acquaintances and gives startled looks into vacancy, as if fearing invisible attack. With quick, furtive glances, his right hand grasping concealed dagger, Paul scans strange faces, but there is suggestion of helplessness in facial shades, as if consciously battling against unseen, pitiless foes.

Promptly at the appointed hour Paul rings the bell at apartments of Sir Charles. There is no response. Impatiently waiting for some time, the bell is again rung. Still no one responds. Going around to apartments occupied by the family, Paul again rings, when the proprietor appears. Upon asking if Miss Randall were at home, Paul is startled by the information that the Chesterton rooms have been vacated.

Excitedly curious, Paul inquires when and where Miss Randall moved. He learns that the rooms were vacated shortly after midnight two days before, without notice. The rent had been paid until the first of the next month, and the keys were found in the doors. The proprietor had watched from his window, but did not see Miss Randall leave the house. Two men left in the vehicle. [158]

Paul returned to his room more startled and mystified than before. The occupants of that midnight conveyance disturbed his waking hours and haunted his dreams. What had become of Agnes Randall? Perhaps the girl had been abducted, but why did she not enter the conveyance? Possibly Agnes had been murdered. Could it be that her body was removed in one of the large trunks? He becomes terribly interested in solving this puzzle, but hesitates to investigate.

The circumstances immediately preceding this strange affair render his will nerveless. The menacing voices of his murdered victims warn him to be cautious. With all his excitement, Paul will shun notoriety by discreet silence.

Pierre Lanier and Sir Charles are daily expected. It now occurs to Paul that his position will be most embarrassing. What theory can he advance to Sir Charles for the absence of Agnes? Will not Sir Charles suspect him of foul play? Had not Paul called that evening and left late? When Sir Charles inquires at the house and hears the whole story, Paul's connivance in this abducting scheme will seem clear.

Between two tragic plots, one real, the other mysterious, Paul is much bewildered. How escape deserved reckoning in the one and unmerited accounting in the other? [159]

The young man's ingenuity again comes to his aid. All intangible, ghostly menace downs before this real danger. Paul quits his room, and in disguise watches for incoming steamer from Calcutta. He will seek first chance to explain all to Pierre Lanier. Father and son then will determine what to do.

Disguised, Paul haunts the wharf. Neither Sir Charles nor Pierre Lanier arrives. Much perplexed, Paul nervously awaits the distribution of the mail, and receives a letter from his father. Eagerly tearing it open, he is startled by its contents.

Pierre had written:

"Take first steamer. Important business here. Come in old suit."

It is sure that something serious is contemplated. Such guarded allusion to Paul's former disguise tells of some proposed desperate job.

Paul makes hurried preparations for departure.

Soon after on a mail steamer sails a stooped old man with long beard, and known on ship as "Josiah Peters."

CHAPTER XII

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"SHADOWED" IN CALCUTTA

After usual incidents of ship life, Sir Donald and Esther are at Calcutta.

A few days were spent in rest and sight-seeing before active search for the Dodge family was begun. Sir Donald had been in the neighborhood of the former Dodge home, and by inquiry learned that the family had moved. Questions as to present whereabouts of former occupants

failed to elicit any satisfactory information. All that he heard from the neighbors was that Mrs. Dodge and children left suddenly in a closed conveyance, never returning nor disposing of the house furniture. The owner had taken possession of the premises and leased to another tenant.

Having inquired every day for about two weeks and learned nothing more of this family, Sir Donald concluded to make thorough search.

The postoffice, rent-collecting agencies, hospitals, and poor lists, hotel-registers, mortuary records, with many other means of discovery, were unavailingly employed. Investigation at the bank where Mary Dodge drew the hundred pounds failed to disclose any clue to the identity of the depositor or of her movements. [161]

Difficulties served to whet Sir Donald's desire for success. He employed discreet persons to search different districts of the city and enlisted the police in locating the Dodge family. In this way much time passed, but no clue was found.

Sir Donald pressed this search, not only because of interest in the welfare of the family, but as likely to furnish additional links in the chain of circumstantial proofs against the Laniers. He doubted not that Pierre Lanier had effected their removal.

From London advices he learned that this villain was then in Calcutta, disguised, but shadowed by detectives who were not to be hampered in their methods. To Esther he said:

"If these sleuths knew of the Paris confession and would coöperate with me, how easily the family might be located. But this would necessitate taking them into the Dodge confidence with all its perils for that unhappy man. This I must not do. For me to do such a thing is impossible. I am handicapped by scruples having no warrant in legal code, but more autocratic than mandate of Kaiser or Czar."

Esther resumes her Paris habit of visiting at the hospitals. Sir Donald occasionally accompanies his daughter. Returning from one of these calls, Esther speaks of the curious actions of a shabbily dressed old man then in sight, whom she often had met. Sir Donald recalls frequently having seen this same seedy, aged individual. They slowly walk along with well-dissembled unconcern, turning several unusual corners, with the old pedestrian always in view. They will keep watch of this stranger without arousing his suspicion. [162]

That afternoon Sir Donald employed a small boy to accompany him at a short distance, ready at a given signal to follow an old, poorly dressed man, learn his home, and give immediate notice.

In the evening the boy reported having trailed this old party for several hours, until he was lost in a distant part of the city.

The boy was engaged for further service and cautioned not to tell, but to watch every day for Sir Donald's appearance on the street.

This spying is kept up for over a week, the stranger mysteriously disappearing each day at the same place. Turning an angle in a narrow lane, this seedy-looking old chap vanishes as by magic, there being no opening anywhere for his sudden exit. The boy gets scared, and refuses longer to keep up his part of the program.

Sir Donald promises to hire another boy to help in this work. It is arranged that they meet next morning at eight o'clock in front of the hotel, when the two boys will go to the place where the old man so strangely disappeared. Leaving the new assistant in full view of this turn, facing toward the street from which the stranger made the abrupt exit, the other boy is to quickly come back and await Sir Donald. [163]

This ruse is carried out to the letter, with interesting results.

Sir Donald has been kept in sight by this feeble tramp while moving about the city, and the boy warms the accustomed trail until the usual place of disappearance is reached. The new picket runs up, and both boys stroll along down this last turn of narrow lane, following a black-whiskered, neatly dressed, quick-stepping fellow, until entering a stairway he is lost to sight.

The boys return and report.

The game has been located, and Sir Donald can investigate at leisure.

Having driven past this stairway before sunrise of the next day, and noted the surroundings, Sir Donald returns to his hotel, charges the little fellows to say nothing, pays them well, and dispenses with their services.

After making the final turn, this stooping, slow-paced, shabbily dressed form is changed into an erect, agile, dapper, dudish-looking specimen, barring the coal-black beard and heavy moustache. Though this transformation takes place in full view of the juvenile picket, the boy cannot explain any of the details, but is sure of the miracle. A small package is all that is taken up the stairway. [164]

That this disguise was assumed to spy upon Sir Donald's actions is evident. It is quite probable that no stranger would act thus, except he had reasons for wishing not to be identified. Whoever has resorted to such shifts must be interested either in thwarting search for the Dodge family or in unmasking of the Lanier plot. Solution of this affair doubtless will aid in solving one or the other of these vexing problems.

Here again there is difficulty. Sir Donald must neither visit this hiding-place nor openly take part in learning about the man who has been shadowing them. This might defeat or embarrass both investigations. He dislikes confiding in too many people and must tell no one about the Dodge confession, nor will he furnish any clue by which this wretched man may be compromised. After revolving in his mind many plans, Sir Donald concludes to employ two persons who shall constantly shadow this stranger and report.

Though questioned by the men employed in this work, he declines to furnish any explanation of his purposes. [165]

"The pay will be good and the object is honorable. No crisis shall be forced, but I will exercise discretion upon the facts. Full, correct reports are required. Dispatch is not essential."

With double shifts employed in this affair, Sir Donald and Esther pursue their accustomed habits of life in Calcutta.

Though possessing much power of concentration toward the accomplishment of a fixed purpose, Sir Donald could think of other things while exclusive agencies were working out his will. Too many voices were awaiting hearing for him to stop his ears through infatuation of one narrow aim. Specialist fame had little charm for this comprehensive, broad-gauged, yet delicately adjusted soul. One of his odd sayings seemed characteristic of the man:

"If all culture were so much acquired stock for use in a future life, how limited the patrimony of those famous specialists, under new conditions, whose 'occupation is gone.'"

This mutual spying is kept up with no decisive results. Nothing happens to justify Sir Donald in bringing matters to a crisis, and there never seems any certainty that an emergency is in sight. Taking into account all the circumstances, Sir Donald thinks that perhaps this queer masquerader is engaged in special work in hope of thereby locating some criminal. That this human enigma knows something of Sir Donald's purposes in sailing for Calcutta is apparent, but that there is any desire to thwart them is doubtful. Can it be that one of London sleuths in his employ is playing such waiting game, hoping to find William Dodge? [166]

No one knows of the Dodge confession but Esther and Sir Donald. Probably this fellow on detective work to "bag" all or one of the conspirators against Alice Webster had heard of Sir Donald's efforts to locate the Dodge family, and is keeping posted as to results. It is sure that this spy is neither Dodge nor one of the Laniers. Sir Donald will relax the hunt and await results.

With Esther he now rides about the city, paying no apparent heed to other than incidental interests.

Esther enlists her father in little charitable enterprises. She enters into the spirit of these with happy zeal. With quickened pulses and quiet joy, this refined, cultured, sweetly sympathetic girl is tireless in her gentle ministries. Unostentatious in her work, yet such service cannot escape comment.

Charitably inclined people call upon father and daughter. These calls are both welcome and distasteful. Thereby opportunities are brought to their notice, but tinkling notoriety jars upon refined benevolent sense. Overzealous would-be almoners of desired bounties press special claims with deferential yet impertinent persistence. [167]

Jostled and bored by these shallow enthusiasts, Sir Donald and Esther find it expedient to give and minister by stealth. Such course evokes adverse comment, but for this they care little. Hearing of some criticisms upon his failure to contribute through a certain channel, Sir Donald remarks to Esther:

"The rending instinct is not monopolized by that breed anciently stampeded 'down a steep place into the sea.'"

Esther looks puzzled, then shocked, but accepts her father's smile and caress as a full apology.

For several weeks this kind of life is passed, each day having some charity to its account. Though still earnestly hoping that the Dodge family may be found, Sir Donald begins to realize that there are many needy wards not so hard to locate. He becomes impressed with the democracy of human want and with the subtle vibrations of common chords.

Father and daughter have called upon a poor family, about whose destitution they learned on the previous day. Substantials for immediate want are brought. In response to sympathetic questions, the poor, grateful mother tells her pitiful story. [168]

A young mechanic and a trusting, happy girl marry in Edinburgh. He is skillful, with good pay. They live frugally, but in comfort. The firm has a branch house in Calcutta. There is a vacancy, and this young man is offered the position. All expenses of the family for the trip will be paid, and the salary is better. Strongly attached to kindred in Edinburgh, they yet decide to seek better conditions in this far land. They sail, and find their new home pleasant. Promotion follows and life's outlook is cheerful. Four children surround the family board, their future prospects bright, no fear of want harassing the fond parents, who doubt not the permanence of lucrative employment.

A slight dispute arises between manager and foreman. Neither yields the immaterial point, and the small breach widens, resulting in the latter's discharge. He seeks other work, but finds none.

Two children sicken and die. The husband soon is stricken with fever, and after a severe sickness of many weeks recovers, but with disordered mind. He becomes violent, and is removed to an asylum. All their savings soon are gone, and the mother, with two hungry children, knows not which way to turn for help. In this dilemma they are visited by a kind-hearted woman whose husband had been bookkeeper for the same firm, but was discharged for dishonesty. Her husband had gone to England on some business, and was now in Bombay, but sent money. Funds and supplies came regularly from this generous friend, but months ago these ceased.

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She called at this kind woman's home, but was surprised to learn of her removal, no one knew where. Supplies and money soon were gone, and for several months she and her children lived on scant fare from wages for odd jobs of sewing and housework.

She had been obliged to move into this poor part of the city because of cheaper rents. That week she had met Mary Dodge in one of the narrow lanes and called her by name, but received no response. The woman must have heard her, as she looked scared and hurried on, entering an old cabin just around the corner. Out of work, her children famishing, she met a kind gentleman, who, learning her distress, said he knew of a wealthy Englishman and his daughter, and would acquaint them with her needs.

Without any question, Sir Donald and Esther drove back. In a few hours both returned, a cartload of supplies and some clothing accompanying their conveyance.

Sir Donald inquired where Mary Dodge lived. The thankful woman volunteered to show him, and they drove for some distance, when Esther was left in charge while Mrs. McLaren piloted Sir Donald through winding lanes to within a few rods of the cabin which Mrs. Dodge had been seen entering. Without being observed, they were soon back to the McLaren shanty. Promising to return, father and daughter, much elated, drove to their hotel.

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Now that Mary Dodge has been found, discretion must be used. It will not do frankly and fully to discuss with her the situation. Such additional confidence would be fraught with indefinite, harmful results.

Sir Donald plans many ways of getting at the desired information. He will not even tell this wife about having met her husband in Paris until more is known of present feeling between them.

Why did she move so suddenly? What the cause for living secluded in such part of Calcutta? How occurred her poverty? Who advised the change? From whence came means of subsistence? Are marital sentiments still cherished?—were some of the questions first to be solved.

No well defined details of methods to be employed could be arranged, but rising very early, Sir Donald rode over to near the Dodge cabin, accompanied by the driver, who was left in charge of the conveyance. By the early move it was likely no one would follow to spy upon his actions.

Knocking at the low door, he hears hurried movements. Soon a blind is pushed slightly aside, and a scared face peers from the narrow opening. Again knocking, there is no response. To allay any possible fears, he gently says:

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"Open to a friend of the family!"

There was something in the tone inspiring confidence, and he was timidly admitted. That inquisitive, frightened look confirmed Sir Donald's fears. Taking the proffered stool, he sat down, much embarrassed.

How shall he broach this sensitive subject and wound anew tender sensibilities of the innocent sufferer from the crimes of others?

Sir Donald follows the sense of compassion, which often is the acme of intrinsic craft. Glancing at the poor cot on which a sick girl is lying, he kindly inquires as to her ailment. Learning that it is some sort of low fever, about which the doctor has not expressed any positive opinion, Sir Donald suggests changes involving outlay of money, and says that these will be attended to at once. In apparently offhand manner, an order is written out on an uptown firm for several articles of food, clothing, bedding, and small household furniture. Handing this to the surprised woman, he remarked:

"It's all right—a part of my business."

Noting that the pleased look had been followed by one of uneasy perplexity, he says:

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"Perhaps you are a little modest about presenting such an order, or the firm do not know you, Mrs. Dodge?"

The poor woman knows not what reply to make.

Having won the confidence of Mrs. Dodge, Sir Donald bluntly says:

"Do not be alarmed. I know your name and something of your past, but I am a real friend of the family, and can be trusted. Tell me just as much or little as you please, but let me know all about present troubles. You are not to blame, and your children must be cared for."

Seeing that she still wavered, Sir Donald gently says:

"You need not tell me about anything, but what can I do for you?"

Before time for reply, the sick child feebly said:

"Mamma, isn't papa gone a long time?"

The mother looked frightened, and quickly stepped to the cot, as if to caution the invalid.

"Yes; but, mamma, he has been gone so long, and does not write! Is Bombay a great way off, mamma?"

Moved by impulse to caution the child, motherly instinct toward uttering comforting assurance and wifely loyalty to her husband's safety, the poor woman, stammering incoherently, looked helplessly at Sir Donald.

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"But, mamma, the old gentleman said last night that papa might come any time, with lots of money."

Fully convinced that this loyal wife still trusted in her absent husband and was fearful of possible identification, Sir Donald now concludes to learn the whole truth.

Telling Mrs. Dodge that he has news for her, they sit down on a bench at the farther end of the cabin.

Kindly but positively asserting that he knew much more than she about her husband's past life, and could do him much harm, he stated his desire was to help. Some professed friends were Mr. Dodge's enemies, interested in ruining him to shield themselves. These were adroit, and posed as her friends while plotting the ruin of both. It was to save the whole family from deceitful schemes that he now begged her to trust him implicitly, keeping back nothing.

"You owe it to yourself and children to let me know all, that I may help in these troubles."

"Mamma, I dreamed about Brother Benny last night."

Still Mrs. Dodge hesitated.

"Benny reached out his arms and said, 'Come, Sister Nellie!'"

The reserve which Sir Donald's adroit appeals fail to remove yields to that childish clamor, coercive as brooding of halcyon when the wind is still.

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How the husband unjustly had been suspected, discharged, and failed to get employment; to what depths of poverty the family had sunk; the fortunate meeting of William Dodge with Pierre Lanier, who had important business and would pay so well; such opportune relief when the family were hungry and destitute; the husband's trip to London and stay in that far-off city; his removal to Bombay, with other incidents previously related at the Paris confession, were told.

Still Mrs. Dodge said nothing about the particular points so vital to Sir Donald.

Money was sent and letters written. Her husband unavoidably was detained for a long time in Bombay, but expected to get the London business finished through negotiations with parties there. It took a long time to hear from Bombay. He gave her money before leaving for London, and she received an additional one hundred pounds. The family lived well, but not extravagantly, on this. She helped a needy woman who had several small children. Her husband wrote that he soon would be home and have more money. About the time he was expected back a friend came and shocked her with the news that influential persons opposed to Pierre Lanier had conspired to procure his arrest along with that of William Dodge. To outwit these enemies both of the Laniers and her husband must disappear. Their tricky foes would watch the mails and harass the Dodge family. For the present all writing must cease, and the Dodge family move. This removal must be prompt, and nothing was to be said about it. She did as advised. Her surprise was great at being conveyed in a roundabout way for several hours, and unloaded with the children, after midnight, in a narrow street. This friend said not to be frightened, as all would soon be fixed, and conducted them through the winding lanes to the cabin. The family had lived there ever since and never heard from William Dodge.

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Another pause. Mrs. Dodge hesitates to proceed further. Sir Donald inquires:

"What time did Pierre Lanier call last night?"

Looking straight at Mary Dodge, answer could not be evaded.

"At about ten o'clock."

"Was Paul with him?"

"Yes," is the startled reply.

"Why did they come disguised?"

"Please do not ask me any more!" pleads the poor woman.

"Mrs. Dodge, you and your husband are in danger from these two villains. Tell me everything!"

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"They were being shadowed, and I must go with them."

"Why?"

"On account of the London business."

"Were you to go with them to see your husband?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Near the wharf."

"Did you go?"

"No, I could not leave my sick child."

"The steamer arrived last night?"

"Yes."

"You did not see your husband?"

"No."

"He is in danger; tell me all about it!"

Greatly frightened, Mary Dodge continues:

"They urged me to go anyhow, as it would not take long. I positively refused to leave my sick girl at that time of night. Pierre Lanier frowned and Paul looked awfully fierce. They scared me so! It then seemed to me that they would kill us both."

"Why?"

"Pierre owes my husband several hundred pounds, and I know about it."

"Were the Laniers and Mr. Dodge to come back with you to this place?"

"Pierre said for me to go with them to a house; they would leave and soon return with my husband, and we could talk it all over." [177]

"It is well for you that you did not go."

"Why do you think that?"

"You never would have returned."

"But have they murdered my husband?"

"It is probable that your refusal to go saved his life. When did the Laniers say they would again call?"

"When they left, Pierre said:

"'We may call again to-night and bring some one to stay with the children.'

"I replied, 'Do bring William with you!'

"Pierre said:

"'Not yet; it would be unsafe.'"

Realizing that an emergency in the life of the Dodge family is at hand, and that there must be prompt action to prevent tragic results, Sir Donald gives directions.

Mrs. Dodge must stay in the balance of the day, with bolted doors. If at night the Laniers call, she is to admit them. Sir Donald and another man will come in the early evening, and occupy the next room, which shall be without light. She must have only a dim candle in the other room. Watch will be kept of the Lanier movements. If any violence be thought of, she need have no fear of results. Sir Donald and his assistant will protect her. [178]

Much agitated, Mary Dodge consents, fully convinced of Sir Donald's friendly purposes.

That evening at twilight supplies are brought, and the two spies take their places in the dark room.

After about three hours, a knock is heard, and Mary Dodge unbolts the door. Two disguised figures are admitted. From Mrs. Dodge's questions, it is sure they are Pierre and Paul Lanier. An arrangement has been effected by which she can see her husband the next day at two o'clock. The location is given, and she must go heavily veiled. They will not call for her. Neither of them will be present at the meeting. She and her husband can talk matters over and then act for the best.

Not knowing whether to accept or reject this proposition, Mrs. Dodge passes by the slightly open door, and from a signal decides to do as advised. She promises to be on hand at appointed time and place.

Father and son hurry away, elated at their prospects of success in this dark plot.

Leaving his fellow-watcher on guard, Sir Donald returns to the hotel.

Next day, Mary Dodge calls at an old house in the suburbs of Calcutta, and promptly is admitted. Husband and wife are clasped in loving embrace.

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At this juncture, Pierre and Paul Lanier emerge from a trapdoor, cutting off escape. With cocked pistols and drawn daggers, they advance upon the terror-stricken pair.

A loud command to stop is heard, while a half-dozen armed men file through the outside door. The Laniers and William Dodge are placed under arrest, handcuffed together, and marched off to prison.

It is hard to say who was more surprised by this unexpected turn, Sir Donald or Mary Dodge.

The head of Calcutta police had been consulted by Sir Donald, was told of the proposed visit at the old house, and he promised to be present in time to prevent any violence from the Laniers. Why had he come with such force and arrested the three? When pressed for an explanation of his conduct in arresting William Dodge, the officer laughed, and said:

"You just wait a while!"

Mary Dodge now suspects the good faith of Sir Donald, but he so earnestly assures her of his own surprise at results that she is convinced.

From cable advices it is sure that the London agency knows nothing about such a move. Sir Donald cabled facts of the arrests to chief of the London detective bureau, and requested instructions. From the reply it is evident that something is wrong.

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Recent reports from Bombay make it clear that William Dodge is there, but eludes more definite location. However, tireless vigilance is being used with hopes of success. Letters addressed to William Dodge at Bombay were delivered, but not recently. Pierre and Paul Lanier lived at Bombay and cut a social figure. They posed as wealthy aristocrats, and Paul was lionized. He seemed haughty, but paid for information about eligible heiresses. Both were very much interested in a rich Englishman and his handsome niece. It was rumored that a marriage had been arranged between these young people. The Englishman and old Pierre took a trip to Calcutta together. About the time of their expected return, both Paul and the girl disappeared. It was sure they did not sail from Bombay. The whole affair is shrouded in mystery, but it is reasonably certain that William Dodge and Paul Lanier are somewhere in or near Bombay. Pierre is being shadowed in Calcutta.

This was the substance of London advices previous to the arrests.

That these are honest reports Sir Donald has no doubt. There has been time for both Paul and William Dodge to have sailed from Bombay, but Sir Donald is sure that a mistake has been made. The only evidence of Dodge ever having been in Bombay is that his wife wrote him there, while her husband was actually at Paris. Too, he had learned from Mrs. Dodge that for many weeks Paul has been disguised in Calcutta.

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The whole matter is much tangled, and Sir Donald doubts the efficiency of those employed to unravel this web.

The Laniers are puzzled and greatly alarmed. Their captors do not deign to explain. To all indignant protests these reserved officials are evasive. Threats are jokingly parried.

The prisoners are separately jailed. No communication is permitted between them. Days pass without any visits, except for bringing of meals. There is manifested no disposition to engage any of the three in talk upon the subject of their arrests.

William Dodge doubts not that Sir Donald Randolph has betrayed his trust. Though neither of the Laniers nor Dodge had seen him on the day of the arrests, yet all knew he was in Calcutta. The Laniers in disguise frequently had passed him and Esther on the streets.

This indefinite waiting is most trying to the nerves of all. Neither Pierre nor Paul knew what action was taken with Dodge. Both imagined that he was being pumped. Neither knew but that the other was undergoing some sort of prying ordeal.

William Dodge wondered that no one talked to him. Perhaps the Laniers had accused him of the Thames murders. The bringing of that suit in his name, death of Alice Webster, dismissal of the case, with subsequent skulking, aliases and disguises, would make a strong circumstantial chain. Against the charge of murder he could oppose only his own word. His admitted actions, confession, and motive would be conclusive.

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William Dodge sees himself on trial for the murder of Alice Webster, with Pierre and Paul Lanier posing as friends of justice, aiding its commissioned officers in vindication of an outraged law.

His weak impulses of fear and self-preservation settled down into a sort of despairing stupor. He had sent for Sir Donald, but either the message was not delivered, or that aristocrat declined to come. Possibly Sir Donald had been refused admittance to the prison. Mary Dodge had not visited her husband in custody, but perhaps such absence was discreet. Still, an almost frantic desire to see his family, at times affected him. Then followed brief stoical relapses, again replaced by fitful determination to tell the whole tale, regardless of results.

As weeks passed without any formal arraignment or attempt to engage them in talk on the subject of their arrests, neither being permitted to see the other or William Dodge, all inquiries for cause of imprisonment smilingly evaded, the strain on both Pierre and Paul became almost unbearable. Either could face definite crises with resourceful, audacious craft, but how meet indefinitely such waiting, obscure, elusive tactics? [183]

All knew they were entitled to speedy arraignment, and that such extended custody without criminal charge, aid of counsel, or confronting of witnesses was a serious abridgment of their rights, but why protest? They were guilty of felonious crimes. Could it advantage these villains to have speedy trials? William Dodge dreaded arraignment. Both Laniers feared the worst. Over against consuming, chafing, harassing uncertainty, is hesitating, cowering dread.

What could be the object of Calcutta police officials in this queer procedure? Why should these sworn conservators of public rights, ruthlessly trample upon statutory prerogatives? Were their oaths mere formal blasphemies?

There is said to be both letter and spirit in statutes. This is an elastic shift. Affirmative rights may be negatived by inadequate remedies. Police supervision is paradoxical. While not versed in subtle interpretations, it is alive to the right of a little wrong.

At length the reserve of jail officials slightly relaxes. There are vague hints that confessions have been made. The prisoners become wildly curious, but replies to their questions are evasive. [184]

Dodge is frantic. Suggestions that could come only from Lanier treachery startle him. His worst fears are to be realized. Doubtless Pierre and Paul have charged him with the Thames murders. Thoroughly convinced of their perfidy, he sends for head of the police department, and confesses all.

Like tactics have been employed with Pierre and Paul. Much disposed as each feels to seek personal safety in charging guilt upon Dodge, neither knows what the other has divulged. Natural secretiveness and craft make each alertly suspicious. Neither Lanier suspects the other of double dealing as to interests of either. Both take refuge in stoical silence.

Finally father and son are brought together in presence of police officials, and jointly informed as to certain parts of the Dodge confession. They look questioningly at each other, neither making any reply. Both seem to see that this meeting was had to remove any hesitation either may have felt, through ignorance of possible admissions or denials of the other.

For days, varying tactics are employed with these astute criminals, but all such fail to elicit from either even a response. At last this inquisition ceases. One day Pierre and Paul Lanier were discharged. [185]

Greatly mystified at this unexpected move, neither cares to press for explanations.

Without arraignment upon any formal charge, William Dodge still chafes in Calcutta prison.

CHAPTER XIII

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THE GREAT SURPRISE

For many weeks, journeying from camp on slope of the Himalayas, without much to vary monotonous daily routine, the survey party arrives at Calcutta. All are paid, and the expedition is disbanded.

To Oswald Langdon, choosing some congenial life pursuit now is a serious problem. Liberal pay for service just ended places him beyond the necessity of immediate employment. His faculties might find agreeable exercise in the legal forum, but this seems interdicted by menacing voices and spectral beckonings. Whichever way he turns there loom past wraiths, restless as ghosts of unburied Grecian slain. These must find soothing specific, ere he tastes elixir of life's destiny.

But how proceed to lay these menacing forms? What has been done to ferret out this crime? Who is suspected? Has the body of Alice Webster been discovered? Possibly the strange disappearances have ceased to excite comment. Even Sir Donald Randolph and Esther may remember these only as unpleasant reminiscences. [187]

Father and mother! What of them?

An unutterable homesickness overwhelms him. Looking with mute appeal toward the sky, a star twinkles with softened light. Blending with ominous shadows of a receding cloud, this tender radiance seems prophetic. Oswald feels a chastened sense, but strange assurance.

Two persons pass the hotel. The walk and general appearance of both seem familiar. They are engaged in hurried conversation. No other two men ever duplicated such combinations of voice, walk, gesture, and general appearance. His Northfield and London foes are near.

Pierre and Paul did not see Oswald, but hurried by. On the previous day they had quit the prison. The Calcutta press contained no reference to their release. Having arrived in Calcutta only three

days ago, Oswald knows nothing of the arrests. He has no desire to meet either of these rascals, but will go about his own affairs. He feels tempted to assume a disguise and learn something of their purposes, but recoils at such practices.

With all this uncertainty checking and thwarting his aspirations, Oswald cannot easily assume a false guise. True, at Dick Bray's, he donned an old hat and duster, but these were expedients of hunted self-defense, discarded soon as aboard ship. [188]

Upon the following day, still undecided what course to pursue, wondering at the Lanier coincidence of the previous evening, Oswald turns a street-corner, where a great surprise meets his gaze.

Standing on the threshold of a business house, facing the street, is Esther Randolph.

The looks of recognition are mutual. Esther steps slightly forward, but suddenly recoils with a look of scared embarrassment.

Controlling all emotion, Oswald passes on as if nothing had happened. Crossing at the next corner to opposite sidewalk, he sees Esther still staring.

Sir Donald joins his daughter, and noting her agitated look, inquires if she is not well.

Esther then relates her strange impression, clinging hard to her father's arm.

Sir Donald assures his daughter that such queer freaks of imaginary recognition often occur.

She still is nervously uncertain.

Even Sir Donald is not fully satisfied with his own theory.

Without suggestion to Esther, he consults registers of several hotels, but sees nothing to satisfy his curiosity. Concluding that this queer impression of Esther is through some striking similarity between the looks of a passer-by and those of that unfortunate youth now no more, Sir Donald dismisses the subject. [189]

Oswald controlled outward show of emotion at sight of the girl whose image had been in view every waking hour since their first meeting at Northfield. That this was Esther Randolph, her look of recognition fully confirmed. Why is she in Calcutta, and where is Sir Donald?

The young man hardly can prevent retracing his steps and again meeting the girl. But his conduct will not permit of such course. Possibly something happened in London to clear the Thames tragedy of all its mystery and to relieve him of any suspicion as being the murderer. But this cannot be. The presence of both Laniers undisguised upon the public streets of Calcutta is proof that justice has been laggard.

Gladly would he face all and end this horrible perplexity but for Langdon honor.

On the following day, Sir Donald and Esther take a drive. Esther excitedly points toward two men passing up the side of the street, slightly in advance of the horses. Sir Donald is struck with the appearance of the taller youth.

Just opposite the men, Sir Donald and Esther amazedly look at Oswald. Their astonished gaze meets his, and he colors perceptibly. Karl Ludwig notices the looks of recognition, and turns around. Oswald impulsively raises his hat, and the conveyance stops. [190]

Telling Karl Ludwig that he has some business with these people and will join him soon, Oswald steps out into the street. To the apparently self-composed greetings of Sir Donald and Esther, Oswald quietly responds. Asking them their number, it is arranged that he shall call that evening. With habitual courtesy they separate, Sir Donald and Esther riding up the street, and Oswald joining Karl Ludwig at the next street-crossing.

Each actor perceived the embarrassment of the situation, and prevented any public display.

Sir Donald and Esther have no further interest in Calcutta drives. They soon return to their hotel, there to await the appearance of Oswald Langdon.

Esther is all suppressed excitement, and Sir Donald tries to divert her by little fatherly expedients.

Now that there is no longer possibility of concealment, Oswald feels a sense of relief, and is eager for the meeting. To these friends he will tell all, and of them learn the whole news about the mysteries of the past.

Karl Ludwig jollies Oswald about those friends who seemed so surprised to see him. [191]

"Der voman vas luffly, und dot chentlemans vas bedder looging den mosd mens."

At appointed time Oswald enters the hotel and sends up his card. An invitation to call at the Randolph rooms promptly follows. Conducted there, he is admitted.

The gracious, kindly greetings do much to relieve his embarrassment, but Oswald knows that a frank statement should be made, as preliminary to any further courtesies. On his part have been many strange acts. This is a fateful emergency, but he will meet it manfully and without dissimulation or deceit.

His opening is characteristic.

"My conduct has been inconsistent and contradictory, unsatisfactory to myself, and, I have often suspected, cowardly, yet there was no consciousness at any time of intentionally having wronged any human being."

Esther's quick sympathies prompt the reply:

"Father and I both believe you innocent, Mr. Langdon!"

This burst of compassionate confidence pleases yet slightly disconcerts Oswald.

Giving his daughter a look of mildest remonstrance, Sir Donald mutely invites Oswald to continue.

Looking into the loyally expressive eyes of Esther, Oswald says:

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"Often I have longed for a chance to explain to you both my strange conduct, but many things prevented. Every succeeding act in the whole miserable series made telling harder. I saw Miss Randolph yesterday, but pretended not to recognize her, fearing the result of being identified."

"But you ought not to have doubted us, Mr. Langdon!"

Not knowing just how to explain this unwarranted, agnostic caprice, Oswald discreetly proceeds with his general line of defense.

"After meeting Miss Randolph yesterday, and through fear of being known, so rudely passing her by, I felt an impulse to go back, apologize, and tell the whole story, but was restrained by motives which were honest, but difficult to understand. Hard as it was to know that friends were within easy reach who could explain much I longed to hear, and possibly aid me to clear a horrible mystery, yet I determined to continue as before, until the Langdon name bears no stain."

"But, Mr. Langdon, your family name is stainless!"

Sympathizing with this earnest youth trying so hard to explain apparent misconduct, yet hedging against unfavorable impressions until all be told, nervously amplifying preliminaries through evident dread of more startling revelations, Sir Donald refrained from comment.

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After other preambles, seconded by Esther's eager sympathy and by Sir Donald's grave, kindly reserve, Oswald tells all.

There was no attempt to palliate a single inconsistency or to deny one dubious act. Anticipating surprise at numerous apparently weak performances, he neither minimized nor evaded, urging, however:

"My flight was responsible for all subsequent acts. My own judgment and conscience did not always approve these actions, neither did they condemn them. These eccentric courses were unhappy, immature shifts, concerning which I was never at ease. You have heard all, and I hope will not unduly censure."

With flushed cheeks, Esther inquiringly looked at her father, who during the whole recital had not spoken.

Deliberately rising, Sir Donald took Oswald's hand, and looking into those unflinching eyes, said:

"Mr. Langdon, I believe you fully and censure nothing. Possibly at times you may have acted indiscreetly, but of this I have doubts."

Here Esther, with happy, beaming face, extended her hand, and Oswald listened to congratulations, mutely acknowledging his great sense of happiness.

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Placed in proper light before these friends, he soon asks about father and mother.

Neither Sir Donald nor Esther had heard anything of Oswald's parents.

Oswald again experiences some unaccountable feeling. It is now growing late, and he rises to go. Promising to call upon the following evening, the young man passes out into the moonlight and soon reaches his hotel.

Oswald is desirous to hear more of the Thames tragedy. At his next call this matter is discussed quite fully.

The failure of Oswald and Alice to return from night row on the Thames; search for them next day; finding of his hat and her handkerchief; comments of London press; persecutions of detectives; persistent impertinence of reporters; trip of Sir Donald and Esther to Paris; sailing of father and daughter for Calcutta; attempts to locate Mrs. Dodge; being shadowed by strangely disguised man, with all pertaining incidents; visits to poor family, and clew thereby obtained; call upon Mrs. Dodge, her statement, and matters culminating in arrest of the three conspirators; queer, unwarranted proceedings of Calcutta officials in detention without warrant, charge, or arraignment of three men, resulting in discharge of the Laniers and continued imprisonment of William Dodge—all were graphically narrated by Sir Donald.

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Oswald asks many questions as to matters that have puzzled his mind while pondering over this tangled web. Some of these are cleared, but many remain unanswered.

What can be the meaning of these arrests? Why were the Laniers discharged and William Dodge detained? Could it be possible that the Laniers procured the arrests, their own being only a blind? Was there collusion between officials and the Laniers? How account for their strange acquiescence in this lawless imprisonment? Had all or any of the three villains confessed? Were the submission of the Laniers to such long, unwarranted custody and their final discharge in accord with an arrangement whereby they had charged William Dodge with murder? Upon what theory did William Dodge submit to continued detention without arraignment?

These and similar questions were discussed by Sir Donald and Oswald, but no satisfactory answers could be given.

Oswald said to Sir Donald: "Perhaps your detective employes effected the arrests upon insufficient evidence, and seeing that there was no possibility of convicting the Laniers, had them released. This possibly might account for their part in the farce, but does not throw any light on the Dodge episode." [196]

Sir Donald scouted such theory, replying: "I have unbounded faith in the London bureau, and am fully assured that these arrests were neither planned nor acquiesced in by that office."

After explanations of the reasons for this belief, Oswald felt sure Sir Donald was right.

Esther is now happy. This fascinating suitor of former years, whom she had mourned as dead, is alive and more interesting than ever. His sorrowful experiences and open avowal of all strange conduct encircle that brow with a romantic halo. How Oswald Langdon has suffered! She is sure there is not one blamable act in his whole course of conduct. If Oswald should renew that proposal—well, her ideas have undergone a change. She will reconsider the whole matter, and—do what her—well—perhaps—yes, that is so!

All Oswald's former love for Esther Randolph, intensified by pensive memories and lonely wandering, now pulses anew. He sees in Esther's changed manners most encouraging incentives to his reviving hopes. He believes she now would accept a proposal and become his bride.

There has been a noticeable tendency in her talks toward former associations, with delicately worded hints at changed views, resulting from more mature knowledge. [197]

But there has been a change in Oswald Langdon. The alchemy worked capriciously, but the product has been transmuted. That impetuous, masterful will is less persistent. There is a more refined, discriminating sense of subtle distinctions.

Oswald Langdon will not renew former suit. Not yet may he face the world an unsuspected man. The death of Alice Webster still remains a mystery. Her murderer, escaping farcical arrest, is now at large. The agencies employed to unravel this triple conspiracy seem ineffective. He will not pose as suspected murderer of an innocent girl. Until this mystery is cleared, he will not think of marriage with Esther Randolph. This grand, pure-minded, cultured girl shall not blush as wife of a supposed villain whose hands seem crimson with human blood. He can live and wait and plan and suffer, if need be, to the end of life, a lone wanderer, but no woman shall blush for his reputation.

Oswald feels no sense of present concern for maternal solicitude, but wonders at such marked indifference.

While much pleased at knowledge that Oswald Langdon escaped the murderous assault by Paul Lanier, and fully believing in Oswald's absolute innocence of crime, Sir Donald is alive to the situation. There can be no possible doubt as to the mutual sentiments of Esther and Oswald. That now these would grow stronger is the inevitable logic of events. [198]

Oswald's supposed death under such mysterious circumstances tends to intensify Esther's memories of the past. That all such tender recollections, augmented by romance of last few days and renewed associations, would be an irresistible magnet between these two dissimilar, yet mutually attracting souls, Sir Donald cannot doubt.

Nor does his mature judgment recoil at the issue. All fatherly intuitions approve of such choice. Every physical, ethical, and domestic consideration favors this union. Under other circumstances, this discreetly indulgent father could tenderly yield his beloved child to such a suitor.

Yet not only shall this union of young hearts be prevented, but association must cease. What explanation can Oswald Langdon offer the world for the disappearance of Alice Webster, or for his own strange conduct? It matters not that Sir Donald and Esther have no doubts of Oswald's honor. Nor will it suffice that this far-seeing, discriminating father approves of Oswald's actions in the whole affair as almost absolute necessities to the ends of justice. The conduct of this unfortunate youth must be tested in a less friendly forum, before a tribunal with penchant toward an exhaustive array of incriminating points. [199]

Sir Donald Randolph cannot permit further association of his daughter with one who may be suspected of criminal act or intrigue. Neither depth of affection nor vital impulse of the heart may control in this network. Esther Randolph may not become the wife of him who is in imminent danger of arraignment as a murderer.

To Esther he said:

"It is now clear to me that Oswald's continued absence from England and India is requisite to the

unraveling of that subtly interwoven web. The public still must believe him dead. If they knew of Oswald's flight and after hiding, the Laniers could move about with brazen effrontery. The farcical arrests of these villains, followed by such queer release from imprisonment, may have some reference to such information. Can it be that this strange procedure had its inception in knowledge of his whereabouts, and in a suspicion that the Laniers and William Dodge knew incriminating facts which they theretofore suppressed through motives of discretion or self-interest? Probably the Laniers yielded to pressure, and falsely accused Oswald of murdering Alice Webster. Even now, fate's coils may be closing about his doomed life."

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Esther was very pale, but made no reply.

There was to Sir Donald a most decisive leaning toward prompt action in an emergency. About many subjects he ruminated with speculative ease, but dallied little in matters affecting Esther's interests.

At the very time that Oswald fully vowed not to think of marriage with Esther Randolph until after the Laniers had been whipped of justice, Sir Donald was moving toward the hotel where this young man stopped, revolving in his mind how to broach his wishes without offense.

Their conference was short. When Sir Donald was explaining the requisite precautions, Oswald noted his embarrassment, and anticipated all without reference to the central figure. The girl whose image posed before the heart-visions of both was not named during this interview.

CHAPTER XIV

[201]

THE FLIGHT OF PIERRE AND PAUL

The Laniers are elated but puzzled at their release from Calcutta imprisonment. They are haunted with doubt as to the extent of the Dodge confession. That some sort has been made they are sure. Suggestions and statements of actual facts connected with the London suit and Thames homicides had been startling, but there are many missing links in the chain. The elder Lanier readily can see that these omissions may have been through either ignorance or craft. If the former, then Dodge only partly has confessed; if the latter, there is great and imminent peril.

That Sir Donald Randolph had some part in this affair is evident. His and Esther's presence in Calcutta and the search for Mary Dodge are conclusive.

Why is William Dodge still held in custody? Did those who advised the arrests counsel his further detention in hope of more complete confession? Is he held awaiting stronger proofs as to the plot against the property of Alice Webster? Perhaps he is to be tried as principal in that crime, and they are to be arrested later as accessories. If the bodies of Alice and Oswald have not been found, perhaps there are no satisfactory proofs of these murders. William Dodge has no evidence of Paul's guilt, but doubtless suspects the truth. The arraignment of Dodge on the charge of attempted fraud against the London property of Alice would lead to most serious exposures, furnishing dangerous clues to past villainies in this immediate venue.

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Hedging against such contingents, Pierre had decided not to return to Bombay. The danger was so great that he gave up thought of sailing with Sir Charles Chesterton. The risk of Dodge revelations through pressing search and inquiries of Sir Donald, then in Calcutta, was so serious as to check all interest Pierre had felt in the prospective match between Paul and the heiress, Agnes Randall.

Determined thoroughly to keep posted as to the progress of Sir Donald's investigations in Calcutta, Pierre had made most plausible excuses to Sir Charles, for not accompanying him back to Bombay to witness the nuptials between Paul and Agnes. The prospect of Paul's marriage with this rich heiress would not compensate for losses which might result from this Randolph inquisition.

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There must be decisive action. All scruples shall down before this great danger to Lanier interests. Two more voices must be silenced. Then discovery will be impossible.

Having written to William Dodge at Paris, Pierre had shadowed Sir Donald and Esther and kept track of Mary Dodge until the arrival of his son. Thereafter the two divided this work, awaiting the coming of William Dodge.

Pierre had received word that Dodge would sail and stating as to probable time of his arrival in Calcutta. There had been delays because of storms, but the vessel is sighted, and both Laniers hurry to the Dodge cabin. There is time to escort this credulous wife to the place where they will soon bring her long-absent husband. All details have been arranged with care. Action will be promptly decisive. As the Thames hushed voices, so shall here be forever stilled tell-tale murmurs of these menace tones.

What trifles thwart mature plans!

There could be no doubt of Mary Dodge's consent. This fond wife, who hitherto unmurmuringly had complied with all hard details of concealment, submitting without complaint to scant

supplies, given and accepted as gratuitous alms, waiting and longing for her husband's safe return, surely would obey all instructions, moving with alacrity to lure and death.

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But strong motives may run counter. That holy instinct which has all authority of original implanting asserts its high-born function. Little Nellie is too sick to be left alone; William Dodge can wait; Pierre Lanier may frown; Paul may look darkly fierce; Mary Dodge may tremble; but she will not leave that helpless invalid whatever betides.

It reckes little how anciently or from what rudimentary beginnings this peerless impulse dates its growth; whether spontaneous breath of divine instillment, or evolved through cycles of the eternal past, such has sanction and warrant of the Infinite.

Thwarted here, Lanier craft resorts to most plausible shift. Suspecting that possibly this timid woman hesitates to go with them, at such late hour, to a strange place, there to await the uncertain coming of her husband, they devise other plans to obviate this objection, finally deciding upon the one resulting in the arrests.

William Dodge had received Pierre Lanier's letter sent to Paris. While convalescent at the hospital this reached him, addressed to his alias, and caused such sudden removal, without leaving of any explanation for Sir Donald or Esther Randolph. Having sent a nurse for his mail, he received the invitation to return. Pierre Lanier had written him that things looked better, but still were a little shaky. By using proper precaution, all would turn out favorably. He need not write Mary, as she and the children were well. By promptly returning, he could see his wife and children. There were good reasons for Mary's failure to answer his letters. All would be explained on his arrival in Calcutta. Affairs soon would shape so that he could pay the whole balance yet due. As some precautions were wise, it would be advisable for Dodge to dress as at London, sail under his past alias, and wait at Calcutta landing until Pierre met him and gave instructions. An answer was requested, stating when and how Dodge would make the return trip.

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This was the gist of the Lanier letter as deciphered by William Dodge, though Pierre so thoroughly had hedged against possible miscarriage as to render intelligent interpretation impossible, except to one in possession of Dodge's sources of information.

Being able to move about the ward, though still weak, William Dodge is electrified. Without delay he sends the same nurse to order a cab, soon after quits the hospital, going to a new lodging-house in a suburb of Paris. Here he has a relapse, lasting many weeks, but slowly recovers. He then starts for Calcutta, previously having written to Pierre Lanier, addressed to the designated alias, giving guarded details of proposed trip. There have been unavoidable delays, rough seas, numerous squalls, and much impatient chafing, but passengers reach Calcutta.

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At the landing, Pierre Lanier, in old familiar disguise, pulls Dodge's arm, and upon recognition, giving former signal to follow at discreet distance, moves quickly. For some distance trailing, Dodge sees Pierre enter a closed vehicle, beckoning him to follow. After an extended drive, they stop in a sparsely settled suburb of the city. Pierre alights, followed by Dodge, with Paul in the rear. No other driver being in sight, Dodge thinks that Paul has performed this service. To all attempts at discussion of the situation, during the ride, Pierre insists on absolute silence.

When inside of the old house, the three seated on a bench at a small table, before a tallow candle, the one window blinded, and the door securely fastened, Pierre Lanier explains why such secrecy has been employed.

"Sir Donald Randolph had arrived in Calcutta and made inquiries for the Dodge family. Months before it had become necessary for Mary Dodge not to write, as I could neither remain in Bombay nor trust the forwarding of letters to any other person. Detectives employed by Sir Donald kept strict watch of the mails. It was in compliance with my instructions that Mary moved, ceased writing, and since remained in seclusion. I and Paul saw her to-day, and she knows of your expected arrival. We arranged this place of meeting. You must stay here until further plans for the safety of all can be devised. To-night we will again see Mary, and have her call to-morrow at two o'clock in the afternoon, when you both can talk it all over. It is hoped that matters will so clear up as to necessitate but very brief longer disguise or concealment."

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Nothing was said about the recent death of little Benny Dodge, nor was Nellie's sickness mentioned. To all Dodge's questions concerning his family, ingenious replies were made.

Food and cots had been provided. Pierre and Paul soon left to acquaint Mary Dodge with her husband's arrival and to arrange for the morrow's meeting, promising a speedy return. About midnight they came back and reported. Pierre remained only a short time, but Paul stayed until morning, when he left, with caution that William Dodge be sure to keep concealed until the afternoon's meeting.

By a rear entrance both Laniers passed to their hiding-place in the basement, under the trapdoor. Soon followed the strange procedure resulting in the release of these two murderous villains, while their intended victim, who had confessed, still remains unarraigned behind prison bars.

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Such cumulative perversities of fate bewilder the Laniers. They daily become more perplexed.

Paul's recital of events at Bombay, preceding his departure for Calcutta, alarmed and mystified

his father, who could suggest no plausible theory for such ghostly groupings.

It is now sure that the Laniers dare not risk further attempt at removal of either William or Mary Dodge. They would be suspected. It will be dangerous longer to remain in Calcutta, with the Dodges liable at any time to make more startling confessions. There is fear that both Laniers still are shadowed and may be arrested for one or more offenses. Strange that no charge was preferred against them for their murderous assaults on William and Mary Dodge. There could be no doubt in this case, and the proofs would be overwhelming.

To Pierre Lanier's crafty, well-informed intelligence this phase is most alarming. While much relieved by failure of the authorities to press this charge, he feels convinced that such official laches were prompted by overpowering motives, boding more serious dangers. Large moneyed interests or the running down of capital offenders, must be the ends justifying such laxity of official zeal. [209]

There is a strong impulse toward immediate flight, restrained through fear that their every act is being watched.

Each day the mazes of this labyrinth grow more puzzling.

While Pierre and Paul feel the tentacles of this octopus contracting around their guilty souls, the persons and agencies which they doubt not are tightening these irresistible coils, foiled, perplexed, and chagrined, have no well-defined ideas upon the subject.

Neither Sir Donald Randolph nor the London detective agency ever aided, abetted, or advised this strange proceeding, nor did those employed by Sir Donald to ferret out Lanier crimes know aught concerning any part of such proposed move, except that he had interfered to save the lives of William and Mary Dodge.

To all Sir Donald's inquiries the head of Calcutta police gave no other answer than, "You just wait awhile."

In fear of they knew not just what, the Laniers fled from Calcutta, toward no fixed destination, desperately resolved never again to be taken alive.

CHAPTER XV

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THE RETROSPECT

Sir Donald Randolph so forcibly had stated the reasons why Oswald Langdon should leave Calcutta, that this positive young man could not procrastinate. He felt that dispatch was duty, and delay criminal. His movements since return from Himalaya camp had been indiscreet, tending toward the defeat of justice. He soliloquizes:

"It seems a miraculous intervention which has prevented my recognition by Pierre and Paul Lanier. How fortunate the meeting with Sir Donald and Esther! That I ever responded to their questioning looks resulted from Karl Ludwig's pause, and was contrary to most emphatic resolve, never to make myself known to either of these friends, until those causing my troubles are brought to strict account. What other course than that thus impulsively pursued, could have prevented my being finally discovered by these crafty wretches, who would not scruple at any villainous scheme to further self-interest. Esther and Sir Donald fully believe in my innocence, approving of all conduct since that fateful flight from bank of the Thames. Thus strangely I have been advised of every fact known by these friends about this tragedy. My trip to the Himalayas and all incidents of the past two years were providential. How else possibly could I have met Karl Ludwig, whose pause and look caused those mutual recognitions?" [211]

Every detail in Oswald's experiences, from the moment his body pitched over the bank into Thames current, to present consciousness, passes in vivid review. Each seems ordered by an overruling, kindly care. This luminous retrospect widens, until it rests like benediction upon all life's past, casting forward halo encircling the Beyond.

Wistfully gazing toward that tender radiance-location, Oswald is swiftly borne by a small sail, to where an ocean steamer is anchored. Boarding the ship, he is assigned to a room. At an early morning hour, the vessel weighs anchor.

Oswald sees no rational prospect of cleared future destiny, but feels strangely acquiescent in Fate's opening seals.

CHAPTER XVI

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THE FUGITIVES DISGUISED IN LONDON

Hurrying along a narrow street, are three men, two abreast, and one following apparently unconcerned, but closely watching each movement. Turning into a dark alley, the pair disappear down a rickety stairway. Their "shadow" passes across to a small one-story cabin, with single-light window, commanding a view of that cellar entrance.

Pierre and Paul Lanier, newly disguised, again are in London. Since their departure from Calcutta, these villains had wandered, making brief stays at various points, always disguised, never without haunting fears. Different aliases had been assumed, each new departure having been most adroitly maneuvered. It seems impossible that such crafty covering of their doubling trails can baffle pursuit, yet each shrewd move sharpens apprehension by suggestions of new dangers. This growing bewilderment and stress of fear had kept them moving in uncertain rounds, varied by occasional abrupt tangents, until within zone of most heinous crimes, when drawn by that gravity existent between the criminal and the venue of his offense, both had landed in London, fearful for the future, without any decisive purposes or settled convictions as to their lines of action.

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Sir Donald and Esther were absent from England, but Pierre learned that they had sailed from Calcutta months before. William Dodge had been released from prison, going somewhere unknown to either Lanier. That this formerly subservient assistant in crime is now a foe, they cannot doubt. The desperate, treacherous assault upon husband and wife in Calcutta ended all hope of further coöperation between them and their would-be murderers. Just what line of investigation is being pressed they only can conjecture. Further scheming to silence any of their pursuers would not do.

It is sure that there has been no discovery of either Thames victim. This tragedy is only a reminiscence in London, but that horrible Bombay tableau and the mysterious disappearance of Agnes Randall can neither be forgotten nor explained.

Both Laniers are most intensely superstitious and fearful of intangible attack. However, there is a more or less fixed resolve to abate no strictness of disguises, while keeping advised of London happenings, prepared for any desperate emergency.

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Pierre never leaves the city, but Paul, thoroughly disguised, makes occasional visits in the vicinity of Northfield.

Neither Sir Donald nor Esther has returned. By guarded questions Paul learns nothing as to their present whereabouts.

That lake exerts a strange fascination upon Paul's fancy. Extended strolls along the Thames are frequent. Hours are spent near that rustic seat. Often bending over the bank, Paul peers up and down and across the river. Sometimes he rows for miles, carefully examining each projecting branch or shrub, furtively watching all intruders upon his strange search. This occupation grows more absorbing. Moonlight strolls and boat-rides are frequent. Paul insists on night shifts, and that his father then shall remain at their room.

Pierre knows nothing of this growing infatuation. While noticing Paul's reticence and abstraction, Pierre attributes these to the perplexities of their situation. To his father's questions about night happenings Paul becomes irresponsive, and when pressed, fiercely petulant. Pierre is much suprised at this, but is gravely patient, hoping for tractable, less capricious moods. There are occasional bursts of penitence, followed by more irresponsive, resentful silences and replies.

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Pierre becomes alarmed, fearing that Paul will bring on some crisis, through these strained tempers. Refraining from further questioning, the father humors his son's strange moods, determined to keep him under careful watch. Pierre will follow Paul and note any indiscreet habits, that there may be no serious mistakes at this stage. It will not do to chide this now perverse boy, who has been so habitually and fearfully filial in the past.

Pierre begins to feel a presentiment of some ominous crisis, wherein Paul may fail him.

In degree and perverted sense Pierre Lanier loved his only son. Many dark schemes had been suggested and pressed to success, prompted by mixed motives of personal acquisition and fatherly providence. This man is not a villain from mere criminal impulse. His tastes have an elegant bent. Relentless tenacity, overpowering avarice, and dissembling craft are his cardinal traits. To these all æsthetic impulses and higher sentiments must minister.

While cruelly conscienceless in pursuit of desired ends, Pierre Lanier, unlike Paul, never permitted passion to interfere with matured or maturing plans.

Having much of his father's fastidious taste, persistent tenacity, and crafty avarice, Paul is deficient in this cold-tempered power of self-control.

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Pierre is aware of this weakness. Many fatherly precepts to correct such passionate tendency had been uttered. However, this deliberate, cold-blooded man had found his son's hasty temper of service, and in emergency did not hesitate to fan its slumbering fires.

During recent years many crafty lessons had been taught and learned. From the time when Paul began to press his attentions upon Alice Webster, to present disguised straits in London suburb, this teacher and pupil had been seldom long apart. Practical demonstrations had convinced Pierre that his son was very apt.

Paul has been more reticent and absorbed; he eats little; trifles annoy him; his father's presence is offense; at Pierre's curious look or speech Paul frowns or is pertly insolent. Suddenly starting, aimlessly pausing, fiercely scowling, vacantly staring, he is again seated. Passing hatless and partially disguised up the rickety cellar stairs, he turns upon his father, resentment gleaming from those glowing black eyes, then weak and nerveless submits to restraint, abjectly penitent, mutely concurring in paternal rebuke.

Pierre finds it necessary to remain indoors when Paul is at their room. That his son is averse to this the father plainly sees. Yet such displeasure is strangely vague. There is no spoken protest. [217]

Paul twitches uneasily, glancing suddenly and often at his watch. Asked as to the time, he looks into vacancy, again consults his watch, starts up, moves about, sits down, makes no reply, the neck relaxes, and the whole body droops in apparent collapse.

Pierre resolves that during this strange indisposition Paul must not go out alone. Such conduct would attract notice. Paul might bring on notoriety by some fierce, resentful act. It is certain that such suggestion will anger him, but there is no remedy.

After humoring Paul's every whim and doing many little positive kindnesses, Pierre, in most persuasive tones, begs as a special favor that they change shifts for once.

"I will watch to-night, while you get some sleep."

The young man springs up, glowers at his father, scowls, and then smiles consent.

From now until the hour for Pierre's new shift Paul is most dutifully considerate, frequently gratefully commenting upon his father's kindnesses. He insists upon preparing their evening meal, and cooks some savory dishes, which he smilingly serves. With filial solicitude, Paul counsels his father to avoid river fogs and malarial vapors.

"At this damp season it is better to stay away from the Thames." [218]

Pierre is much pleased at this changed temper, and smiles his great appreciation. Promising to return before it is late, Pierre leaves, both uttering soft-toned good-bys.

CHAPTER XVII

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BACK AT NORTHFIELD

After a long absence, Sir Donald and Esther are back at Northfield. Many parts of Europe and the Orient were visited. Father and daughter saw much of interest. Their stops had been sufficiently prolonged for comfort and intelligent impression.

Though in regular communication with the London office, Sir Donald knows nothing about the present location of either Lanier.

That William Dodge disappeared from Calcutta seems certain. After the death of Nellie this unfortunate man was released. News of her illness and of his boy's death at length reached Dodge through the doctor. All attempts of Mary Dodge to hear from her husband while he was in prison were unavailing. Little Nellie's appeals to see "papa" had failed.

Under patrol of verbal promise the prisoner was permitted to attend the burial. He returned according to pledge. In about ten days thereafter he was released. The family soon moved, and there is no clew to present whereabouts. [220]

Neither Sir Donald nor Esther heard anything from Oswald Langdon. Since Oswald's departure from Calcutta, Sir Donald anxiously had waited for notice of clew to Lanier guilt. He believed London agents honestly were seeking more decisive results, but there was little immediate or remote prospect of success. At the last Calcutta conference, Sir Donald promised Oswald to spare no zeal in bringing these villains to swift accounting.

Convinced that absence from England and India was essential to success of plans then in operation, Oswald hesitated not, but promptly sailed.

It was agreed between them that any decisive act or clew should be communicated by letter to Paris, thence forwarded to whatever point they should direct. Sir Donald's letters would be directed to an agreed alias. Both would use guarded terms, but to them intelligible. There would be no letter from Sir Donald except "upon some important development." Should Oswald stop long at any point, he was to write, that unnecessary delay might be avoided.

They had decided that any attempt of Oswald at ferreting out these crimes would be dangerous. Such action might hamper the London bureau and hasten a crisis exculpating the Laniers.

Sir Donald had told Esther the cause of Oswald's sudden departure. She was saddened, but made no protest. That the innocent should suffer such unjust banishment shocked Esther's ideas of right providence. Why were such straits permitted? [221]

Esther begins to see that the world groans beneath weight of unmerited burdens. Under fairest

skies gleam sacrificial blades. Balmiest airs minister to altar-fires. Bird-carols and zephyr-murmurs are but medley variations to minor chords of vicarious pain.

Esther now has occasional convictions that some wrongs may continue indefinitely. Can it be that transient evil is lasting good? Are there more clamorous voices than those of physical need? Shall the less ravenous, yet infinitely more real, soul-hunger wait on alms and ambulance?

That such moods of questioning thought bear intimate reference to Oswald's hard fate no way lessens their deep sincerity. Heart queries are wonderfully profound.

No word of complaint escapes Esther's lips, nor does she doubt the wisdom of their proposed course. Deeply solicitous for Oswald's vindication, this loyally sympathetic girl would hesitate at no personal sacrifice in his behalf. It is hard that she can do nothing to help him.

Aware of her father's interest in her every wish and aspiration, Esther refrains from any suggestion which may cause additional care. [222]

Sir Donald's observing vision notes each emotional clew. Many unspoken queries find vocal reply. Delicate points are cleared by suggestive indirection. Neither completely yields to profitless conjecture. They magnetize Northfield.

One bright day Sir Donald and Esther take a stroll about the familiar grounds. The air is laden with perfume of flowers. Both are charmed with exquisite plant and foliage shades. Many exclamatory comments are uttered by the enthusiastic daughter, more gravely confirmed by her gently reserved father. They quit the mansion grounds for a stroll along the wood-fringed lake. Past the family graves, where a pensive hour is spent, they walk to where a small sail is locked fast by the pebbly shore. Sir Donald fails to loosen the fastening. Farther down is a rowboat, in which they start out on the lake.

Moving along with the breeze, both yield to meditation. Former tragic happenings upon this peaceful lake come to mind. Each ripple is tremulous with saddened retrospect. Every voice of wind and branch is keyed to minor utterance. These, with monotonous swish of slow waves, blending with notes of leaf-hid birds, seem miserere and requiem.

At this projecting shrub, bright-eyed, sweet-voiced, vivacious, loving, impulsive Alice Webster had been rescued by Oswald Langdon; yonder is the wooded point toward which Paul Lanier was sailing when, maddened by her frightened resistance and stinging protests, he roughly pushed Alice overboard. Here is the bank upon which the body again became instinct with life's returning pulses. [223]

Such panorama, with varying lines of sorrowful perspective, passed before Sir Donald's and Esther's view. Each colored the pathetic pictures with like yet different hues, from peculiar tints of inner consciousness.

Sir Donald is struck by singular grouping of assault, projecting shrub, knotted tie, Oswald's sail and opportune rescue; Esther's memory reverts to that eloquent avowal beyond the distant ravine. Some misgivings as to her own conduct on that occasion are now felt. There is an accusing sense of vague responsibility for after tragic happenings. That true penitence often means restitution is a cardinal tenet in Esther's creed. This is now most soothing conscience specific.

If Esther wrongfully withheld from that earnest, masterful, persuasive suitor his just dues, she now feels such ethical qualms as to prompt payment with usury.

Moving with the breeze, the boat is nearing the point where Esther, Alice Webster, and Oswald Langdon were seated when Paul Lanier listened to that proposed London trip made necessary by the suit of William Dodge. [224]

Soon are heard tones of impassioned declamation. With unearthly unction the voice repeats those dream-lines so dramatically uttered in hearing of Paul Lanier at Bombay.

Again and again come the words, "Fierce avenging sprite," "till blood for blood atones," "buried from my sight," "and trodden down with stones." Then follow loud, hollow, unnatural guffaws, succeeded by, "And years have rotted off his flesh." There are muttered curses, a blood-curdling, demoniacal yell, then in solemn, guttural tones, "The world shall see his bones."

These disconnected yet coherent utterances cease. Soon are heard retreating footsteps.

Profoundly moved, Sir Donald turns the boat and vigorously rows back to the shore. Both are glad to reach land, and rapidly walk homeward. Neither is superstitious, but such ghostly utterances, with all drappings of time and place, weirdly tinted by so pensive, reminiscent sentiments, rouse dormant fancies. Each feels a mystic sense of some impending crisis.

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE "TRAMP" STEAMER

From Calcutta Oswald sails without definite destination. The ship's prospective course is unknown. This "tramp" steamer has an oddly assorted cargo. Her officers and crew are a motley mixture of different nationalities. Cabin and steerage passengers hail from many parts of earth.

Oswald learns that there is little prospect of touching at any Indian or English port. The trip will be of uncertain duration, lasting many months, possibly more than a year.

The first day's sail is characteristic. There are fair skies, balmy breezes, smooth seas, followed by clouds, squalls, churning waves, and tempest.

In noisiest turbulence of typhoon wrath this reserved Englishman sways and tosses with the ship's motion, raptly listening to low-pitched, soft-keyed voice rising above the storm.

What is ocean's tumult to this long-range undertone?

Outriding storm fury, the steamer for needed repairs anchors off Indian shore, whence she continues her eccentric course. [226]

Long days, late into the night, are passed by Oswald sitting on and walking the decks. This homeless wanderer on havenless seas reckes little of log-book or transit. Unlike sure-winged passage-bird, he knows not his journey's issue. So perverse have been fate's courses that this high-strung, assertive mariner hesitates to direct life's drifting argosy. There are looks of indecision, tense resolve, and helpless perplexity. Eagerly scanning the arched blue, he notes stellar assurance. Hushed as by cradle-song, every harassing emotion subsides.

Some odd, inquisitive conceits grow out of these moods. Gazing from steamer deck into lighted canopy he soliloquizes: "What vigils are those old guards commissioned to keep over this sail? Even if cares of universe now absorb divine solicitude, has there not been, in long ages of the eternal past, ample time to assign watchers over a few afloat on ocean's fickle domain? May not that kindly indulgent Sense, missing no carrion note of clamorous raven-cry, quicken at stress of higher life-forms pulsing with infinite longings of a human soul?"

This peculiar personality seems to reach convictions by more direct processes than others. Meandering courses of intricate reasonings are not to his liking—that divinely intuitive, far-seeing, inner-focalized ray shoots straight as plummet and far as God. [227]

Oswald observes many interesting occurrences aboard the steamer. With perceptive craft he scans faces and notes special traits of fellow-passengers. Neither back nor profile view long can dissemble. By some sorting sense he segregates those few whom his judgment commends to more than casual notice. These are so watched as not to be aware.

These entries occur in his diary:

"We have been out many weeks. One clear-cut, expressive face rivets my view. This stranger appears to be about my age. He is tall, straight, and well-proportioned. I find nothing to correct. Called upon for a manly model to be produced instanter, I unhesitatingly would point at this interesting unknown. There is something in facial lights and shades like and unlike indistinct pictures whose outlines are familiar.

"This enigma is utterly unconscious of such close observation. Though within ten feet, he has not noticed me reclining in a steamer-chair on deck. The stranger sits down on a bench along the outer railing. Soon a middle-aged man joins him, and the two engage in conversation. Their talk is plainly audible. They make pleasant comments, evincing much general information and discriminating intelligence. [228]

"The older man is in poor health, but is hectically cheerful. There is that pathetically wearied look of one engaged in unequal contest with the insinuating, elusive, relentless microbe.

"Hopefully seeking to loosen the slowly contracting hold of this persistent 'strangler,' the sick man has traveled in strange lands and over many waters.

"The other has seen much of interest, and feels hopeful aspirations of young manhood. Many clear-cut, positive views are expressed in courteous, deferential manner, but in no uncertain or ambiguous phrase.

"Over the invalid's face pass pleased, softened shades at some uniquely stated, positive opinions. Such are characteristic. Maturing thought produces milder tints, but truer perspective.

"My sympathies go out to this sick passenger. I long to speak and act kindly. Forgetting personal stress, I am touched at thought of fellow-helplessness. Yet there must be no sentimental indiscretions. To converse with either would invite questioning. Direct answers might be unsafe. Evasive replies would excite suspicion.

"I now little fear any personal results of fate's perversities. From hunted sense of unmerited outlawry I have passed to that of 'ermine' function. Aware that my discreet silences and acts may conserve the ends of justice, I will do nothing in contempt of such high ministry. [229]

"In times of more than wonted assurance I would not accept complete vindication. There must be exact justice meted for an outraged law. Father can await his boy's final clearance from guilty suspicions in patient abeyance to public weal. Mother will approve—her high sense of duty must—so unselfish were her plans—yes, it will be all right with Mother!"

Strangely affected, Oswald looks upward, intensely curious at lowering clouds obscuring the sky. Then follows a sense of unutterable loneliness and bewilderment. Soon a softened radiance steals through the storm blackness. There is suggestion of mild reproof in that image reflection. With reverent, submissive mien Oswald quits the deck.

The diary thus continues:

"Weeks are spent at sea without stop. Only at long intervals does the sick man leave his room. Each appearance shows greater weakness, but no lack of cheerful emotion. The intellectual sense seems to quicken, as if through transparent fleshly gauze that expectant soul lay open to 'prick of light.' There cannot be much longer prolonging of the unequal contest. To sympathetic interest he is so considerably thankful that it is doubtful who is the comforter. Still 'raptured with the world,' he surveys life's receding shores, as if booked for its more luminous, harmonious antitype.

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"The younger traveler is all attention, anticipating every want. His kindnesses, delicately unobtrusive, yet frank and hearty, leave no reactive friction.

"I am charmed with such refined tact. Discreet scruples would be set aside but for sure conviction that no want of the invalid is unobserved or slighted.

"One day neither passenger appears on deck. This excites no comment. For over a week I catch only brief views of the younger man. It is then casually remarked:

"'The consumptive is dead.'

"I learn where the body lies, and that on the following day there is to be a burial at sea. I am admitted to the room where stretches mortal remnant of once complex, interwoven humanity.

"Odd fancies flit across my visual camera. Does that enfranchised soul look down from far observatory height at wave-rocked ship like mature manhood on baby rock-a-by? Fanned by soothing breezes of emerald-hued sea, does this glad convalescent meander at will along either tree-fringed shore, with happy child-impulsiveness gathering bouquets of that foliage which is for the 'healing of the nations'?

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"Little need for further globe-trotting in case of this once observing traveler, who now—

'... has seen the secret hid
Under Egypt's pyramid.'

"To-day occurs the brief ocean obsequies. These are unimportant. It signifies little when or where or how this ceremony is observed. By that mysterious, anciently affirmed gravity the real wanderer has found genial habitation. It matters not through what varying molds passes the disintegrating and reincarnating dust. Essential identity lasts always. Ego consciousness is sure.

"This eccentric 'tramp' steamer passes through many experiences. Being propelled by both wind and steam, she often veers with capricious 'trades,' making peculiar tacks, through some odd adjustment of time, air, and coal. Points not marked upon more pretentious charts receive and bill barter products. The vessel often drops anchor far from land, in channels having neither wharf nor breakwater.

"Queer methods of transfer from ship and shore amuse me. Seeing horses and cattle swimming to and from the vessel, their noses projecting over the sides of rowboats, is interesting. Even trained circus animals are subject to this moist ordeal. By crude tackle and steam-turned windlass, suspended in midair, the poor beasts find ship asylum a most welcome port of entry. One passenger is both amusing and annoying. This odd-gear'd Teuton hails from Hamburg. Like most stuttering unfortunates, he is a chronic talker. He stutters garrulously in several tongues. There are serious impediments in his pumping gestures. His tongue, hands, and feet, like stringed orchestra, seem trying to arrive at an amicable understanding, but never find the right chord.

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"My reserve piques him. Professional solicitude is aroused. This German Æsculapian expert is anxious for a diagnosis. Perhaps this still Englishman requires a prescription.

"For days I am amused and bored by the German's antics. Late at night, after an unusually hot day, the vessel drops anchor. A circus aggregation is taken aboard. After a two-hours' stop the ship moves on.

"All berths and available sleeping-places are occupied. The clown, trapeze performers, bareback riders, and various acrobatic artists are compelled to sleep on deck. This is but little inconvenience in such warm weather. They are stretched and curled in different shapes on benches along the outer railings.

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"It is about two o'clock in the morning, and a storm is coming. Soon the waves dash and the rain pours down.

"I see a small bundle on the deck. It obstructs the approaches to the 'scupper' in front of my cabin door. About to step out and clear this watercourse, I see that 'sorrel-top,' corpulent, garrulous German doctor gently unwind the soaked package and tenderly gaze at an upturned childish face. Apparently not approving of this unorthodox baptismal procedure, the boy is borne away. Curled up in the German's warm berth, this little eight-year-old bareback rider, wearied with the night's performance, sleeps until the next evening, unconscious of what has happened.

Our fussy old 'granny' sits out on deck, rolling and pitching with the boat's motion, wondering what ails that chap who never talks to anybody.

"From now on I believe in human transfiguration. Coarse red hair is silky auburn; fat face is luminous with refined, expressive lights; stuttering voice is musical as mother's lullaby; and two gray eyes shine like optics of those high sentinels who, keeping ceaseless childhood watch, 'do ever behold the face of our Father.'

"Such long voyage gives time for much reflection. Many old, indistinct recollections are photographed anew. Seen through readjusted visual lens, these create strange emotions. Things witnessed and heard in childhood now are understood more clearly. Vague impressions from books are brought out in more definite relief. My dreams take on changed trend from waking thoughts and emotional moods. Though fanciful tinting is somber-hued, I have growing assurance that all tends to ultimate good. [234]

"I dream of Promethean myth. Chained god writhes on Tarpeian rock, Jove's black eagle tearing at the quick flesh, senseless of the cruel feast. Poet's conceit is not too extravagant or remote. He who in any age filches from time-lock combination light for his kind, must have his Caucasus, whereon, blind scavengers of fate, batten harpy gorge, while not a kindly drop softens Olmpus' cold, drear scowl. No prayer moves those tense lips, but Caucasus groans with the voiceless petition, and Olympus' huge molars chatter with the prophetic beseeching. No uttered petition from bound victim, but unutterable longings of passionate, helpless hearts and blood lift 'void hands' of imperious need. Earth and sea abjure allegiance to blind force, affirming endless fealty to human weal."

Numberless odd ethical impressions grow out of Oswald's peculiar experiences and inner consciousness. Former intense aspiring confidence in personal destiny no longer veils visions nor drowns voices then waiting their appropriate sense. [235]

Uniquely worded sentiments, embodied in his father's sermons and parish talks, come to mind. Most of these are approved, but some seem strangely grotesque. To Oswald's tense perception the general tenor is along severely orthodox lines, but as to occult verities the style appears flippantly superficial. Many comments upon "rewards of virtue" and "refined craft in uprightness" seem gayly ironical. Such jar upon Oswald's strained sense.

Still that larger, if not better, view makes him less exacting. He is more tolerant of honest, dogmatic assertion, believing it to result from environment. Early precept and conviction are elements transmuted by white heat of life's crucible.

Reverend Percy Langdon occupies a conspicuous place in all his son's plans, contingent on clearance from that horrible menacing shadow brooding over the stricken home. As to the idolized mother, it is different. She is left out.

One day the vessel anchors in a European port. Oswald hears the distinguished-appearing stranger talking about quitting the steamer for a brief stay. Soon will follow a trip to an English home. There is boyish enthusiasm at the prospect of a visit with loved ones after absence of years. [236]

Oswald's straining sense hears no definite clew to the disembarking traveler's home port. Indistinct mention of some familiar English towns and scenery makes Oswald very curious, but he must not be inquisitive. There is renewal of that fathomless homesickness, deep resolve, and high assurance.

After partial unloading of cargo, taking on of other commodities, and the booking of a few new passengers, the ship weighs anchor. Long cruising in continental waters, stopping at numerous unimportant points, making little steerage exchanges, she anticipates extended voyage, and heading for the Atlantic, steams for New York.

Now the vessel veers little from direct courses. Late one cloudy afternoon she rounds Sandy Hook, and after a day's quarantine, finds a dock.

With strong sense of relief, Oswald quits the ship. He is taken by hack to a well-appointed hotel near junction of Thirty-third Street and Fifth Avenue.

CHAPTER XIX

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THAMES PANTOMIMES

Covertly watching for new or suspicious faces, Pierre Lanier finds himself at the river-bank. His eyes bulge with frightened surprise.

Moving upstream, oars dipping in clear moonlight, is a familiar figure. Stoop and motion cannot be mistaken.

The father stares after that disappearing form. His indecision is short. Following along the bank, every sense alert, he resolves to watch his son and solve this enigma. Cautiously keeping out of

view, Pierre is slightly in the rear of the boat. They are nearing the rustic seat where sat Oswald Langdon and Alice Webster on that fatal night years before. The boat stops at a projecting tree-branch. Pierre is petrified with a new fear! Dagger in hand, Paul examines this obstruction, looking thence toward either bank. He resumes the oars, again pausing at thick overhanging bushes. Peering under, around, and through the foliage, Paul rubs the glistening blade on upturned shoe-sole. Sheathing his weapon, he slowly moves toward the point whence the two bodies had disappeared into swollen stream. Directly opposite the rustic seat, he stops. Looking up, down, and across the river, Paul stands, steadying the boat with both oars, his thin-bladed dagger flashing from close-set jaws. Back and forth across the river, through moonlight shades, slowly moves this horrible tableau. Staring at reflected shadows, Paul shrinks backward. Dropping an oar, he grasps the pearl handle of his oft-whetted blade. With forward poise, in striking attitude, every nerve at tense strain, stands this crazed tragedian. Pierre is near enough to hear mutterings. Soon the relaxing form is again seated, while boat and dozing occupant drift downstream.

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Pierre Lanier feels bewildered. These fearfully real hallucinations have neither antidote nor specific. Of what avail is craft against such emotional outlawry? This irresponsible infatuation of his son will rise like Banquo wraith, a menacing interloper at all councils, doggedly irresponsible, yet insistent.

Truly the Furies are massing their evasive yet resistless squares against this guilty soul.

How dread is the coherence of crimes and their effects!

That father and son might have luxurious refinements, trusting business associate deliberately is harassed under friendly guise of sympathetic interest to bankruptcy and death. As sworn legal representative, trust funds are misappropriated and retained through perjured accounting. To insure immunity from prosecution and continued possession of stolen estate, is planned the marriage between his son and defrauded ward. That girlish opposition to such hateful union may be crushed occurs the villainous conspiracy, involving remaining pittance of once princely estate, William Dodge's unfortunate connivance, and Paul's murderous assaults. This fearful category is followed by enforced concealments in disreputable dens of poverty, disguised skulkings along unlighted streets, furtive watches, deceitful ruses, scared embarkings for distant ports, new schemes for wealthy alliance, horrible tableaux, attempts at other murders, suspense of imprisonment, strange releases, and harassing uncertainty, compelling renewed flight, resulting in purposeless return of arch-criminals to scene of their most heinous crimes.

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In this hunted maze, taxing every power of crafty, defensive vigilance, yawns a new pursuing vortex. From such menacing depths may not the eye withdraw nor step recede. This fearful presence is neither chimera of transient nightmare nor creation of evanescent day-dream. Like ever-present sprite, its boding menace pose shifts in accord with each changing view and altered visual range.

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Stunned by this shock, Pierre Lanier gropingly stumbles along the Thames bank, following the drifting boat. Through all this bewilderment, self-preserving interest guides his course. Keeping close watch of that relaxed, dozing form, he recklessly tramples all impediments. Habitual, calculating craft of years is merged in this all-absorbing zeal to prevent indefinite exposure and contingent reckoning. It matters not that Nemesis, keeping pace with his own course, rustles through obstructing foliage. Crackling branches and pursuing footstep echoes are unheeded by this new, engrossing fear.

By great effort Pierre has followed the boat for miles, only briefly losing sight of his son. They are nearing the starting-point. Round a small curve the boat drifts with the shifting current. Pierre spurts forward to regain the lost view. Striking a grass-concealed boulder, he pitches forward, falling heavily upon the bank. By hard effort he prevents rolling over into the stream. Regaining his feet, Pierre finds that one leg is badly sprained. He continues down the shore, but moves slowly. The boat and Paul are out of sight.

There is return of cautious fear. When scrambling back from the yawning depths, Pierre caught sight of a face partly screened by foliage of near bushes. He is startled. With certainty that his son has passed out of sight, the father now seeks to elude this mute intruder. Moving downstream, each step causing a groan, he is aware that this spy is following him, but at a cautious pace. After painful, harassed hours, this limping form, slowly descending those rickety cellar stairs, enters at a low opening, and totally collapsing, falls upon the stone floor.

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The dim twilight is streaming through barred cellar transom when Pierre Lanier opens his eyes from that long swoon. It is several minutes before he vaguely comprehends what has happened. Gradually the situation dawns upon his mind. Recalling his weaned entrance at the cellar door and habitual testing of its catch, his memory is thereafter a blank. He mutters:

"How came I on Paul's cot? Why such comfortable arrangement of pillows and quilts? What means that array of bottles, cups, saucers, and glasses on the chair at my head? Can it be that I am in hospital ward?"

Pierre starts up with fright, stares wildly, and settles back with a groan. His leg pains terribly. Removing the light coverlid, he sees that the foot and ankle are tightly bandaged. Again he mutters: "There is odor of liniment! Who but an expert could have so neatly sewed those bands? Surely this is our own room. Has a doctor called and performed professional service? Where is Paul?"

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By much effort Pierre gets up and staggers to the transom. The outside scenery is familiar. The door is locked. Turning the catch, he looks out and up the stairs, but sees no one. With puzzled expression he says: "Everything belonging to our room and wardrobe is here except Paul's usual London disguise. Paul must be out on some venturesome craze!"

Gradually Pierre's habitual craft returns. Whatever happens he must keep cool. Taking a discreet bracer of brandy and examining his pistols, Pierre lies down on the cot. There are toothsome eatables on the table. These he now devours with ravenous relish, but partakes sparingly of the tempting liquors. Between set teeth Pierre says: "There must be self-control and iron nerves. I will not trust any fictitious strength. Only a steady brain and hand tensely nerved by my cold-tempered yet dynamic will must keep this watch. If by any possible chance only Paul knows of my plight, then there is hope. Should it transpire that the spying figure seen on Thames bank has followed me home and is responsible for after happenings, longer dallying must cease. Perhaps Paul is now in custody. Those who shall come for Pierre Lanier will witness a change and have short shrift."

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Lying with cocked pistols held in each hand under the light spread, this determined sentinel watches that cellar entrance.

After a half-hour, steps are heard on the stairs. Pierre's vigilant ear detects his son's gait. Quickly resetting pistol-hammers and placing both weapons under his pillow, the much relieved father feigns sleep under screen of upturned arm, watching lower half of cellar door.

It seems a long while before the door opens. Convinced that his son is alone, Pierre has no use for the pistols. Even should Paul meditate any violence, his father cannot resort to armed resistance. Ready to slay any other who hinders mature plans or attempts his arrest, Pierre Lanier may not hurt this crazed boy.

There is in that depraved soul at least one sacred precinct where this hunted, distracted, youthful head may find sanctuary. At this indulgent bar there is such accusing sense of self-accounting for all unfilial excesses as to preclude harsh judgment.

The door slowly opens. The lock clicks softly. Noislessly tiptoeing across the room, Paul looks long and anxiously at his sleeping father. At length he notes that most of the refreshments have disappeared. He does not perceive the significance of this fact, but thinks his father has continued in such queer stupor. Gently stroking the paternal brow, Paul sits down. With silk handkerchief immersed in brandy, the son rubs his father's temples and removes dirt-stains caused by fall of previous evening. Slowly lifting the quilt, Paul critically examines foot-bandages. Gently covering the swollen member, he resumes his watch, in subdued undertones uttering most tender, filial sympathies, hopes, and regrets.

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It is doubtful if that listening sleeper ever before heard such soothing, softly modulated tones. Hoping that Paul would give some clue to recent events, Pierre lay long in this dissembling stupor. Fearing from his son's nervous preparations that he soon may start out on some night trip up the Thames, Pierre concludes to learn what has happened. Slowly opening his eyes and staring at Paul, he asks: "What time is it, Paul?"

With much sympathy, Paul replies: "I found you unconscious this morning lying on the cellar floor. I carried you to the cot, and from involuntary movements discovered the sprained ankle. After stitching on the saturated bandages, I brought out refreshments and liquors. You did not use these, but continued unconscious, responding only in mutterings. I watched all day until evening, and then went out a few minutes for some needed provisions." No reference was made to the previous night's experiences.

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Much relieved, Pierre shows great appreciation of his boy's kindly interest.

Paul is pleased at these grateful comments. He now and then glances at his watch. Nervously walking to the door, he returns and sits down by his father's side. With much filial solicitude he says:

"Father, you should never venture out on late night watches. This attack was the result of last night's vigil.

"You are getting older, father, and can't stand night work. It will never do to risk such an attack at night. I cannot bear the thought of sleeping while you are wandering about London, liable to be paralyzed at any moment in some dark alley. I need my father's counsels too badly to risk losing him through such rash exposure."

Growing excited, Paul grasps his dagger, and glowering at the shrinking, reclining form, dramatically waves the glistening blade as he utters the injunction:

"Never go out again at night in London!"

Cowed by this unexpected pose and threat, Pierre Lanier promises to stay in nights.

"I know my dear son is right! My own Paul always will care for his poor old father!"

Paul grows quiet. With shamefaced, submissive mien he sheathes the thin, gleaming blade. Then follow suppressed sobs and hysterical assurances of future obedience.

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With childish penitence this hardened youth, steeped in murderous guilt and crazed by tragic

memories almost to the point of irresponsible parricide, hiding his face upon his father's breast, cries himself to sleep.

CHAPTER XX

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THE CONFERENCE

Their extended visits abroad endear Sir Donald's and Esther's home memories. Northfield seems both haven and rose-scented bower of rest.

Yet there are many pensive reflections. Over brightest views often settle shadows of tragic retrospect.

Neither Sir Donald nor Esther sees cleared future earthly prospects. Both are uncertain as to issues in which each feels vital interest.

Since they listened to that suggestive declamation, neither cared for another sail on the lake. Those oddly tinted pictures, combining in tragic intermingled groupings blending lights and shades of lake and river, pass before their soul sights with ever-varying hues.

Neither Sir Donald nor Oswald Langdon has written. London detective bureau has lost all clews to whereabouts of the Laniers.

Sir Donald cannot locate either William or Mary Dodge. The lagging justice momentum is at full stop.

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Those red-handed villains continue their insolent defiance of outraged law. For more than a generation one victim has been waiting avenging. Still the murdered ward lifts unavailing hands toward brassy heavens, imploring just reckoning upon her brutal slayer. Over earth and sea, in unmerited exile, wanders an unfortunate victim of lying circumstance, fearless to a fault of personal harm, yet bound by filial fetters in unswerving fealty to family prestige and parental name. Doting father and mother sit around a desolate hearth, helpless to help, powerless to temper or withdraw the barbed arrow which has transfixed their souls. Tenderly fostered, idolized daughter, modestly brilliant, grandly human, with strong, sweet penchant toward self-sacrifice and for lowly, unassuming ministry, yet love-loyal to banished suitor, must bide uncertain issues, enduring that heartsickness which may find no specific.

These rasping human paradoxes are warrant for much bewildering thought. At such even Sir Donald Randolph's speculative, complacent optimism well may stagger.

How ironical seems talk of "time's compensation"! Who now may prate, "Evil is good misunderstood"? Surely such cogent blending requires some powerfully focalized far observatory height!

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As to London detective tactics, Sir Donald is becoming pessimistic. To Esther he says: "Indeed, there is little in results to justify further employment of this much vaunted agency. That there have been perplexities I am fully aware. Having given the subject such careful thought, I am not disposed either to minimize obstacles or to cavil at well-meant efforts.

"Upon review of incidents in this fruitless pursuit, I am impressed with the fact that all clews obtained came from your infatuation for hungry or sick people. The Paris hospital confession, finding of Mary Dodge in Calcutta suburb seclusion, revelations of this unhappy sufferer from Lanier subornation, and saving of both intended victims through timely intervention at that deserted house—all are due to your unconscious coöperation.

"I fail to see that I have directly contributed to these discoveries. It is not apparent that any of my well-matured plans even promised success. Every subtly framed purpose has failed.

"London sleuths are camping on cold trails, tracing misleading clews, poisoning for unavailing swoop upon flown quarry, densely ignorant of real Lanier purposes. These highly paid pursuers of ever-eluding outlaws knew nothing of that murderous assault upon William and Mary Dodge until after I had cabled the news to London. Their shifts had been so ineffective that no plausible theory could be advanced for farcical arrests, unwarranted detentions, failure to prosecute for undisputed felonious assaults, strange releases, or continued custody of the intended victim.

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"But for my promise made to Oswald Langdon, I now might abandon this search. There seems no justification for further employment of detectives. The expense has been large. Results are unimportant.

"That fellow so trustingly followed my advice, and promptly sailed without purposed haven on the tramp steamer, it now would be heartless desertion not to continue even doubtful agencies in solution of this most vexing problem."

Sir Donald well knows that his daughter feels interest in the success of this pursuit. Though mute as to proposed tactics, her startled mien, hopeful inquiring glances, close attention, quivering lips, turned-away, drooping eyelids, reserved silences, and far-off looks, cannot dissemble. Sir Donald sees these signs and interprets them aright. To Esther he says: "I will continue this

undertaking. Loyalty to human duty shall be my concern. Results may owe other allegiance. There may be accounting for those interlopers who, crossing boundaries of warranted care, trespass upon exclusive 'preserves' of more imperious power. Such presumption may be 'les majeste' against Providence." [251]

With such sentiment Sir Donald dismisses all idea of quitting this search.

Determined to do his utmost toward solution of all difficulties hindering unraveling of this web, he will visit London and talk over the whole matter with head of detective bureau.

In company with Esther, Sir Donald reaches London. They stop at a prominent hotel. He soon calls at the bureau headquarters and waits for appearance of the chief, who is closeted upon some important job. After about an hour Sir Donald is admitted. The chief warmly grasps him by the hand, expresses pleasure at his call, and with enthusiasm says:

"After years' unavailing pursuit of the Laniers, there is now hope of success.

"For months all trace of these villains had been lost, and our agency was about to quit the job, when by chance a sure clew is found. For some time both have been disguised in London. They occupy a basement room in a suburb of the city. Recently this discovery was made. One of our men was watching near a river boathouse for a burglar suspect who sometimes frequented that locality. A rowboat is seen drifting down the Thames. In the uncertain light it seems to have no occupant. As the boat nears, a stooping form appears to waken from a sort of stupor. The boat is turned toward the shore and fastened by a rope. The man walks rapidly down the bank, followed by this spy. After a long chase, he is trailed to an old stairway, down which the stranger disappears." [252]

"This was three days previous to present time. Double shifts were set to watch this basement entrance, resulting in seeing two men go out and in. From their strange conduct it became evident that both were in disguised hiding from some dreaded exposure, or were premeditating crime. The older limps in his walk. He goes out only in daylight, soon returning to their room. Nights are favored by the younger man, who acts very strangely. During all next day after this discovery employes of our agency watched that cellar entrance. The older man limped out toward evening, and was followed to a stall, where he purchased a few eatables. Soon after his return, the other passed out and moved rapidly away. He was followed to the river-bank. Unfastening the same boat used on previous evening, he rowed upstream. Our spy followed, keeping out of view. Soon this trailer is surprised to see just ahead a form emerge from clustering bushes, and watching the boatman, skulk along in same direction. To avoid detection our spy moves more slowly, at times waiting in shelter of bank shrubbery. In this way he is some distance back down the stream from the boat. The rower frequently pauses at points along banks of the river, and then moves on. Opposite a projecting bank there is a long stop. Here the man stands up. He moves back and forth across the river. The other watcher stands a little way down the stream, intently looking. Through uncertain shadows the one in rear dimly sees flash of a blade. It seems as if a thrust is made at some object in the water. After several minutes the man is seated, and turns downstream. It appears that the boat is simply drifting. Fore-most sentinel starts back, keeping nearly opposite. This compels the one farther down to make a circle and hide among some bushes several rods from shore. Coming back to the rear, he discreetly trails along at some distance, keeping boat and other spy in view. Near the boathouse the rower turns toward shore. Forward watcher stops a few rods upstream until the boat is fastened, then follows down the bank. After a long tramp our employe sees the forward man pass down those rickety cellar stairs, and the other spy cross over narrow alley into a small shanty, with window opposite that basement entrance." [253]

"Upon report of these incidents reaching the office, double watches are assigned to shadow both cellar and cabin occupants. It becomes evident that the cabin tenant is simply spying upon conduct of the others. Fearing that any decisive attempt to learn his 'lay' may work unnecessary complications, he has not been molested." [254]

"This same Thames programme and tableau were enacted each of the two succeeding nights. On last afternoon, shortly before dusk, both men came up the stairs. They walk along together for a while, when the elder stops at a stall where loaves of bread are exhibited. One of our agency men is just ahead, lounging along lazily, but intently listening. The elder, who slightly limps, softly says:

"'Get back early, Paul!' then glances nervously ahead. In subdued whisper comes the reply, 'Yes, father.'

"That evening former performance is repeated. This important clew was reported at headquarters shortly before your call.

"It cannot be otherwise than that Pierre and Paul Lanier are in London, occupying the basement room down those old stairs. Paul makes these night trips up the Thames to scene of his crimes. His conduct stamps him as the murderer of Alice Webster and Oswald Langdon." [255]

Sir Donald holds his peace while shrewd guesses are made as to causes of such suggestive actions.

Still referring to his memoranda, the chief continues:

"Paul is partially deranged. The bodies pitched over the steep bank, and he imagines will escape.

Knowing that Alice Webster had been rescued from the lake, he fears she may rise from Thames depths. Pausing at shrubbery along the shore and scrutinizing of projecting branches is through knowledge of how she was saved from that lake immersion. Perhaps Paul is sane on all subjects except the murders. Even as to these he may manifest much craft. Such crazed freaks sooner or later will lead to sure exposure. Pierre knows his son's disordered mental state. It is only necessary that both be well watched. Paul's irresponsible craze will do the rest. The 'lay' of this spy can only be surmised. Perhaps these villains are suspected of other crimes. It is improbable that any self-constituted detective is on their trails. However, this sleuth will be persistently shadowed. It is possible that thereby some important 'find' may occur. By such course our bureau will hedge against all interference."

Sir Donald is greatly encouraged. That the agency fully believes in murder of Oswald Langdon by Paul Lanier is immaterial. The death of Alice Webster is only too certain. Paul thinks he has slain both. It is not strange if thoughts of his awful crimes have caused at least partial madness. Sir Donald says: "This homicidal mania may lead to queer freaks. There are no reliable rules to follow in treatment of such a man. It will be necessary to guard against every possible surprise. Paul must be so carefully and constantly watched as to render his being at large harmless. Otherwise, more deaths may be chargeable to his account."

The chief agrees, and replies:

"It will not do for you or your daughter to remain in London. Sight of either of you might cause the Laniers to leave. Stay of these villains in London will promote exposure of their crimes through Paul's mad infatuation. It is possible Paul sometimes may appear in vicinity of Northfield. There is no telling but that his disordered fancy may find material in former lake memories."

Sir Donald sees the force of these suggestions. He will employ guards at Northfield and along shores of the lake. Father and daughter go home that afternoon. As if in reverie, he says:

"I feel renewed confidence in the London agency. There have been many obstacles. The system employed was faultless. It is unreasonable to judge by the results. Have not my own most subtle, well-matured plans proved unavailing? You never thought of taking part in this scheming for man-capture, yet every important link discovered should be credited to your sweet infatuation. I hardly have treated this agency with proper consideration."

"While kept posted by it, I have concealed much. Neither Paris hospital confession, nor Mary Dodge's story, nor strange romance of Oswald Langdon has been hinted at by me."

"There is no telling how much such information, promptly communicated, might have affected plans of these sleuths in unraveling such complicated villainies."

"It is true this agency might not have respected my scruples as to possible effects of such disclosures upon the fate of William Dodge or of Oswald Langdon. Such confidences still shall remain inviolate."

Thus cogitating and talking, Sir Donald passes the time between London and Northfield. Esther intently listens, but is silent. They pass up the flower-fringed path to front porch. Then there are joyful recognitions, ejaculated questions, and happy, tearful welcomes.

Long-absent son and brother is home again. Charles has been around the world. Though sending and receiving frequent letters, he had not written about his proposed return.

This surprise drives from the minds of Sir Donald and Esther all unpleasant memories of recent years. Return of this handsome young man, safe, sound, and joyous, to his childhood home after such long absence is happiness enough for the present. Many days pass before Sir Donald can fix his thoughts upon the Lanier affair. However, two servants have been detailed to watch along shores of the lake and to report any strange actions they may see. One is on day and the other on night duty. Similar precautions are taken about the mansion grounds.

Sir Donald hesitates to say anything to his son about these strange experiences. Still it is unwise to withhold such confidences. Charles is energetic, quick-witted, discreet, and decisive. He may prove a most valuable ally, and must be on guard against Lanier plots.

After hearing the story, Charles Randolph makes numberless inquiries and suggestions, but finds that his father has considered every phase of this entangled affair. The son talks most about that other spy who trailed the Laniers. He is greatly interested in those strange shadowings by mysterious person in Calcutta, and in disconnected dream-lines so dramatically declaimed by some wood-concealed orator along the lake shore. Charles is anxious to solve these mysteries. He suggests some decisive plans.

Sir Donald listens patiently, and quietly refers to the many hazards.

Charles is disposed to criticise the conduct of Oswald Langdon. "This man acted unwisely. He should have faced all with manly courage, and accepted the consequences."

His father so minutely elaborates each mitigating circumstance, with such profound array of all interests to be promoted by Oswald's whole course, that Charles feels an accusing sense. He frankly admits his error.

Esther's troubled face grows radiant. Sir Donald and Charles exchange looks. Their talk drifts to lighter subjects.

Esther and Charles are much together. Enthusiastic reminiscences often are followed by irrelevant questions and vague comments. From pensive moods Esther rallies with pretty, dissembling, sisterly interest.

All this has a charming pathos for Charles. He shrewdly diagnoses these symptoms. With much brotherly craft Charles approves of Oswald Langdon's erratic courses, speaking hopefully about prospects of full vindication. Such references electrify Esther. She makes little effort to hide her glad appreciation. After these sage comments, Esther gazes admiringly into her brother's face. This ermineless expounder counterfeits much gowned gravity, looking wisely impartial. [260]

To dispel moody, pensive abstractions requires that oft and anew this "Daniel come to judgment."

CHAPTER XXI

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PIERRE'S SEARCH FOR PAUL

Paul Lanier's crazed caprices grow more frequent. Tractable moods are now exceptional. Occasional lapses from petulant, domineering tempers to childish penitence and assurance of future amends greatly relieve Pierre's harassed mind, but such are rare.

The worried father is powerless to provide against any dreaded disclosures or notoriety. All disguises and secretive craft seem void of availing use, subject to such irresponsible, persistent crazes.

Pierre may not flee. Distracted by his son's emotional outlawry and fearful infatuation, Pierre Lanier has no desire to forsake the crazed Paul. He will risk ignominious arrest and gallows' accounting rather than leave this insane youth to his fate.

At times is felt a certain sense of dogged resignation. This cautious, crafty, resourceful schemer becomes strangely quiescent. With this stoical temper come moods of questioning reflection. He mutters:

"How fearfully void have been my plans and dubious courses! To what purpose was a trusting partner duped by hypocritical sympathy, lured to bankrupt's expedients and goaded to self-murder? Wherein consisted worth of embezzled funds? For whose advantage was the guileless ward defrauded out of princely inheritance? That villainous sham suit and those Thames murders, of what avail were such crimes? To what end was that subservient tool suborned, and afterward, with trusting wife, murderously assaulted in deserted Calcutta suburb? [262]

"That these should be followed by such terribly harassing flights, culminating in purposeless return to London, Paul's dreadful disorder and present helpless mazes seems direct sentence execution upon Pierre Lanier. Are not all these fateful perversities cumulative wrath upon my own guilty head?

"Such remorseless avenging!"

It seems to Pierre Lanier that Nemesis has found the most susceptible joint in his conscious being, and with relentless persistence is testing its capacity for torture.

Attempts at stoical endurance are but briefly availing. The dreadful presence of Paul's craze will not avaunt. This haunting incarnation of Lanier guilt and accounting shifts its boding menace but to appear more real at each altered view. [263]

Helpless to provide against any of the dreaded contingents hedging them about, Pierre's whole care is absorbed in avoiding Paul's capricious displeasure. He studies his son's crazed peculiarities. Childhood memories seem to exert most potent control over Paul's unfilial tendencies. However, such influences are uncertain, partaking of childish perverseness.

Since that time when Pierre learned his son's horrible Thames infatuation, he had not spied upon Paul's night vigils. Months have dragged their slow tortures.

At length there is a variation in daily worries at the Lanier room. Paul is missing. In fearful suspense the startled father waits all the first day and night. Doubtless Paul has made some bad break. Perhaps this insane boy has committed an assault on some real or imaginary foe. Possibly he is in need or in custody!

Pierre waits until the second morning, then, thoroughly disguised, goes out to look for Paul. Up and down the Thames, from the boathouse to a point miles above the rustic seat, this search is continued that day and the following night without avail. Guarded inquiry at police headquarters fails to disclose any clew.

Pierre's anxiety becomes so great that he relaxes habitual craft of a lifetime in his solicitude for Paul's safety. Pierre sees this poor, helpless, disordered child in want, bruised, and bleeding, calling in vain for his father's help. Paul is a little, trusting, crying, helpless lad again, but without that father's providing or protecting care. [264]

Just before day of the fourth night after Paul's strange disappearance Pierre is aroused from

sleep by deep, guttural sounds. He is petrified at the sight!

Black, uncombed hair in tangled disorder, blood-stains on face, hands, and bedraggled clothing, brandishing a new long-bladed dagger, stands Paul, staring into vacancy, incoherently muttering.

Wearied by his long search, despairing of Paul's return, Pierre Lanier had lain down and slept several hours. His loaded pistols are at hand. These now are useless. Pierre will not even make show of such defense. He may not trust his forbearance in this emergency. There is surfeit of tragic memories. Life's weight is sufficiently heavy without added burden of child-murder.

Paul continues staring, muttering, and brandishing his gleaming weapon. Pierre feigns slumber, but from shaded, half-closed eyes intently watches his son.

An alarm-clock sounds the morning hour of five. Paul starts, shivers, tiptoes to the door and tries the catch. He furtively looks at the transom, behind room furniture, and suspended clothing. Peering under both cots, he shrinks from reflected shadows. Then gazing confidently at the paternal face, Paul snuffs out the candle, and with childish assurance snuggles down on his father's arm. [265]

Hours pass before Pierre Lanier ventures to rise. He hesitates to move the hunted, distracted head. It seems heartless cruelty to risk disturbing this wearied child.

Memories of Paul's trusting, boyish faith come to mind. Pierre lives over again in swift review years of a misspent past. With comprehensive view of its wasted, perverted chances, the broad compass of desolating and desolated perspective is horrible.

Insensible of that relaxed weight upon his cramped arm, this guilty wretch hardly can suppress a groan. There is limit to conscious endurance. At this point Pierre looks toward the ceiling. Such upward glance slightly relaxes his tense strain. The relief is suggestive.

Pierre gently strokes Paul's temples, and in low tones says: "In this begrimed, blood-stained face I behold another boyish image, marred by paternal influence."

A ray of light steals through the transom, falling athwart that upturned youthful brow. Pierre smiles almost credulously. How deep that spirit sigh! [266]

More habitual concern soon is felt. Where is Paul's pearl-handled dagger? How came he in possession of this new weapon? What mean these blood-stains and bedraggled clothes? Was tragic pose at time of Pierre's startled awakening suggestive of some murderous assault by the crazed Paul?

Absorbed in other emotions, Pierre had given no heed to these weighty problems. Powerless to enforce counsels of his own experienced craft, Pierre now and then lapsed into vaguely sentimental moods.

Slowly withdrawing that benumbed arm, Pierre noiselessly arises from the cot. He examines the dagger and mutters: "It is new and of English make! There is no other clew. Has some additional danger been incurred?"

Pierre can but wait, powerless to avert or modify any impending crisis. It will avail nothing to catechise the secretive Paul, who is garrulous upon irrelevant hallucinations only.

During that day and the following night Paul slept, waking only once, about nine o'clock in the evening. This was his usual hour for trip up the Thames. Paul stared around sleepily, looked at his watch, dubiously scanned the new dagger, slowly sank back and slept on until morning. [267]

At seven Paul awoke with ravenous appetite. Pierre had prepared a substantial meal. This the hungry youth devoured with relish.

After breakfast Paul listlessly moved about the room. Spying in a small mirror his dirty, blood-besmeared face and matted hair, Paul starts backward, grasps the new weapon, stabs at that mirrored reflection, stares about wildly, and with maniacal yell bolts for the basement door.

To intercept this rash break, Pierre grasps his son about the waist, throwing him heavily upon the stone floor. Paul's writhing twists cannot loosen that hold. His muttering threats and curses move not Pierre's stern resolve. Frothing at the lips, Paul struggles desperately. He attempts to yell, but his voice weakens into gurglings. The neck relaxes and he sinks back unconscious.

Pierre loosens his hold. Bending over, he feels the pulse. Pressing his ear upon Paul's breast, he listens for heartbeats. Such look of blank despair and awful groan!

There is a noise on the stairs. Pierre heeds it not. He gazes at his son, his sight darkens, and bewildering rumblings are heard. Pierre gropes about blindly, stumbling across Paul's unconscious form.

The knocking grows louder, then the catch is forced, and five uniformed officials crowd through that cellar door.

SIR DONALD'S "FIND"

All seems calm at Northfield. Frictionless domestic appointments hint not the sentient pulsing of care.

Surrounded by every comfort, the idolized recipient of fatherly and brotherly attentions, Esther grows still more pensive. Many surprises are planned for her diversion. Esther tries hard to be pleased, but it is apparent that her thoughts are elsewhere.

Servants patrol the Northfield mansion grounds. There are daily and nightly watches along the shores of the lake. London communications report no changes in Lanier habits. Pierre seldom leaves that cellar room. Paul keeps up his night tableaux on the Thames.

To some vigorous suggestions of Charles, Sir Donald replies: "It is not prudent to hasten any crisis. Immature exposure would be unwise. None of the circumstances of this strange infatuation are legally conclusive of Lanier guilt. Without more direct proofs, such cogent evidence would not be even admissible.

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"How establish the 'corpus delicti'? Granted that either Oswald or Alice had been murdered, Paul's significant craze is legally irrelevant. Other bodies may have found quietus in Thames depths.

"The facts in possession of London bureau are incompetent to establish guilty connivance of either Lanier in any crime except those assaults on the Dodges in Calcutta.

"Though morally certain that these were prompted through fear of Dodge revelations, yet missing links render Lanier disguises, with suggestive craft and crazes, judicially meaningless.

"Aided by proof of either death and by sworn evidence of William Dodge, all irrelevant, circumstantial happenings would become powerfully coherent. I am sure of both, but can prove neither. I would stint neither labor nor cost to procure competent evidence of Alice Webster's death at the hands of Paul Lanier. Without other justification than yet afforded, I may not betray the Dodge confidence. No motive shall prompt disclosures as to Oswald Langdon.

"However, there need be no present qualms about concealment in the Dodge matter. Upon trial of either Lanier for murder of Alice Webster, neither Esther nor I would be heard to testify about the Dodge confession. This is inadmissible hearsay. In an action against these three villains growing out of that vile conspiracy to coerce this unhappy girl into an obnoxious marriage, the Paris hospital confession might be admissible, but such reckoning now would be purposeless.

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"The only way is to continue present shadowings and defensive precautions, while awaiting some decisive clues to missing links in this elusive chain."

Sir Donald's conscience is not clear as to this waiting game. The risk to innocent parties from Paul's crazed fancies and murderous tendencies is serious, while any possible disclosures are uncertain. There is danger that Paul's passionate tempers may involve him in some altercation. Such might result in his death.

Then Oswald Langdon's vindication would be remotely doubtful, and Esther's hopes—there always is a break at this point in Sir Donald's musings.

To either follow or abandon present tactics is dangerous. It weighs upon Sir Donald's troubled consciousness that on his chosen line of action hangs Esther's hopes, with this contingent menace.

An unexpected incident checks Esther's growing pensiveness.

Sir Donald has become more worried. It seems impossible to divert his daughter's mind from the sorrowful infatuation.

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Revolving in his troubled thoughts ways to relieve these despondent moods, Sir Donald is returning from a trip to the station. There seems no alternative but to await the uncertain issues of Lanier exposures. His horse shies at a moving bush by the roadside. A scared face peers through the foliage. With impulsive kindness he stops and speaks assuringly to this juvenile spy.

Losing her fright, the little girl takes a few steps toward the smiling horseman, then stands shyly mute, awaiting more persuasive speech.

Interested and charmed, Sir Donald dismounts, and fondling the straggling curls, inquires about the little one's name, home, and age.

These are given with innocent candor, but Sir Donald is not familiar with "Just-Bessie-That's-All," or "Granny." Having quite thorough knowledge of places within several miles of Northfield, he never has heard about the "lane up by the meadow, down by the woods."

The little stranger has no apparent idea of what "Papa" or "Mamma" signifies. Personal acquaintance seems limited to "Granny" and "Naughty-Dick-Pulls-Bessie's-Hair."

"Five years old next summer" is quite definite. To the question, "How did my little Bessie get here?" she looks scared, and replies, "Bessie hanged on!"

Concluding that this four-year-old had clung to the rear of some passing vehicle, and then

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dropped off, without the driver's knowledge, Sir Donald will take her to his home and make proper inquiry for "Granny."

Placing the hatless, barefooted tot before him on the spirited horse, he is soon at the Northfield mansion.

The child eats ravenously. It is evident some considerable time elapsed between that unbidden ride and queer "find."

After a big meal, little Bessie climbs upon Sir Donald's lap and is soon asleep. This pretty picture greets Esther and Charles on their return from a lake stroll.

Esther's sympathies are aroused. She arranges the softest kind of a cot in her own room. The downy spreads seem too heavy. Looking at the portrait of Sister Edith, Esther's eyes glow with a peculiar light.

Having gently washed dirt-stains from the little hands, face, and feet, Esther leads the way to where Sir Donald reluctantly deposits his new ward.

A load lifts from his heart. Temporary specific is found for that persistent heartsickness. The remedy seems so natural. Recent Paris and Calcutta retrospect chides his dullness of perception. He now fears "Granny" may veto the treatment. [273]

Esther does not sleep well. She makes too many inspections of that cot. The stone-bruises on Bessie's feet may prove fatal! What can cure the sun-browned face and hands? Suppose the child should roll off on the floor!

Two delicately embroidered handkerchiefs, saturated with healing lotion, she bandages around those bruised soles. Tanned face and hands are treated with other soothing liquid that does no harm. Chairs are placed at sides and ends of the cot. Bessie is "bottled" in "effective blockade" of cushioned upholstery.

A strange noise is heard. Intently watching the little sleeper, Esther locates this vocal mystery. She fears Bessie's throat and lungs are affected.

The spreads do not fit. A strange impulse comes. It dilates her vision. She trembles a little.

Looking through the open door, Esther sees the smiling portraits of her mother and Edith. Both profiles approve her caprice. She softly steps to a curtained alcove. There, in mahogany and curved-glass wardrobe, are relics of sister Edith.

Esther selects some downy hand-embroidered silk and lace-fringed spreads. These replace those covering that besieged cot.

With tremulous content she takes a long, approving look at Bessie and extinguishes the light. [274]

Straits of one self-banished outlaw are not dreamed of this night. Indefinite perils and unmerited gallows' menace to this interesting erstwhile suitor startle not love-loyal girlish fancy.

Little bruised feet, sunburnt face and hands, with straggling blond curls, usurp such function.

There is rustle of wings and happy smiling of familiar faces! The panorama concludes with vision of sleeping waif, upon love-beleaguered cot, illumined by mystic halo, and some high-browed watchers, gazing from child to maiden, uttering strangely significant speech about "one of the least of these."

Upon the next morning both Sir Donald and Esther rise late. Bessie still sleeps. With some doubt Esther leads her father to the cot. She is not quite sure about that quilt episode.

Sir Donald gazes at the child, and his eyes grow lustrous. Stooping down, he kisses the baby brow. Giving Esther a querulous smile, he returns to the library.

Weeks have passed since the arrival of Bessie at Northfield. Sir Donald made conscientious inquiry for "Granny." No one knows the child's antecedents. Bessie can furnish no clearer clews to her identity. She is happy in her new home. Many little surprises for the pleasure of Bessie are planned by the generous Esther. Interest in childish whims is so genuine as to check pensive, abstracted moods. These ministrations revive drooping spirits. Bessie's eccentricities become Northfield household tonic. [275]

Commenting on this change to Esther, Sir Donald says: "Relaxed emotional tension and less concentrated musings permit more hopeful view and brighter horoscope. I now feel greatly relieved. This generous disposition of yours I now regard as acme of human dower. Its Paris and Calcutta whims once seemed pretty symptoms of harmless infatuation. I am now impressed with the mystic coherence of detached coincidents. There is ever-widening horizon to that which 'cometh without observation.'"

Charles Randolph is in London. Much interested in the issue of Lanier action, Charles chafes under long delays. He so earnestly had tried to cheer Esther by favorable comments upon the conduct of Oswald Langdon and by hopeful words about early vindication as to become a most

zealous advocate.

As neither Lanier knew Charles, Sir Donald consented that he visit London.

Charles called at detective headquarters. Through his father's recommendation he was taken into full confidence. He assumed a disguise and shadowed the Laniers. Both at that basement room and upon the Thames he noted Lanier crafty shifts and fearfully significant crazes. [276]

Soon after reaching London, Charles became much interested in a middle-aged gentleman and a young lady who sometimes dined together at the same hotel where he was stopping. His diary tells its own story:

"Both have most serious, refined manners, and talk little except with each other. There seems to be some near relationship between them, but just what, I cannot determine. Occasionally the girl dines alone. Each has a low, well-modulated voice. It seems to me that there is restraint in their speech.

"The man has a dissemblingly observing glance, and while apparently unconcerned, notes all. The girl's face wears an expression of sad yet almost hopeful pensiveness.

"I rarely have seen so striking a girlish face. Such finely molded features with mobile lights and shades suggest romantic interest. It seems to me that this beautiful, pensive young woman is capable of both deathless devotion and much zeal in any fixed resolve.

"That her companion is no common mortal I clearly see. However, this impressible young man is most concerned with feminine traits. [277]

"It dawns upon me that both are aware of my presence. There is an almost imperceptible feigning of unconcern. Occasionally their eyes exchange significant glances, followed by commonplace remark or quiet reserve.

"It seems to me that there is coincidence in dining-hours. These people never precede, but almost invariably follow my appearance in the dining-room. At rare intervals I have detected interest in their observations of my table locality. The girl has slightly colored at my guarded admiring glances, and seemed nervously affected.

"Averse to needless or indiscreet notoriety at this particular time, I refrain from inquiry. Much as antecedents and purposes of these people interest me it will not be wise to risk vocal curiosity. I feel not only the restraints of good breeding, but of the situation. The Lanier exposures may be not even remotely hampered by sentimental interest in this young woman with most potent suggestions of a romantic past.

"I resolve to dismiss this subject from further thought. I will devote my whole time clearing up the Thames tragedy. This resolution is not so easy to carry out. That fascinating, pathetically mobile face confronts my inner vision. It seems to invoke sympathy and help in some indefinite crisis. [278]

"Such claims not lightly may be disregarded. Intangible verities are most insistent.

"Even when spying upon Paul Lanier's crazed performances, I often am startled by reflection of that other face with its questioning pathos of mute appeal.

"There has been a break in these regular nightly tableaux. Paul fails to appear. For some reason this insane actor abandons his accustomed river pantomimes. This is reported at headquarters. I wonder what has occurred to cause the change. Close watch of Lanier movements makes it certain that Paul left the cellar room, but had not returned. I spent most of the night along the river, but Paul did not appear.

"At the office there is much curiosity, but it is thought probable that upon the following night Paul will resume his fearful infatuation. He again fails to appear. An employe is sent to Northfield.

"I am absorbed in this unexpected change from Lanier habits. It is reported that Pierre knows not of his son's whereabouts. The older Lanier had gone out disguised in search of Paul. He had spent all of the previous night along the river-banks. Another day and night pass. Pierre has made inquiries at police headquarters for any news of unusual interest. [279]

"I now recall seeing neither of those interesting strangers within the last three days. I wonder if they really are gone. Perhaps I have been so much absorbed in disappearance of Paul Lanier as not to observe them.

"Upon reflection this is impossible. The sight of that sorrowful face would have riveted my attention. I would have noted the suggestive, dissembling, observing unconcern of her companion.

"There seems connection between the disappearance of these and that of Paul Lanier. The thought is startling. I now see some sure relation between the conduct of these strangers and the Lanier case. Such erratic conviction is most illogical, but positive. It is one of those soul-sights.

"I am sitting in my room at the hotel. It is the fourth night after Paul's last crazed performance upon the Thames. I see no natural or logical coherence between Paul's disappearance and that of these interesting strangers, but cannot free myself from this queer conviction. I am feeling an

uneasy sense of the mysterious. What is transpiring at Northfield?"

There is a timid tap! Going to the door, he is surprised to see a veiled female figure. The woman steps into the room. [280]

Making a hurried, nervous apology for her strange conduct, she urges Charles to go home without delay. "There may be danger to those you love."

Much mystified and alarmed by such unlooked-for warning, he begs for an explicit statement.

The reply rebukes him.

"Is it not enough that I come to warn you? Must I explain private matters? Would I come thus without good reason? Why not act promptly and ask no questions?"

These hurried interrogatories are both command and appeal. Charles promptly apologizes, giving assurances that he will at once heed her warning. In persuasive tones he asks:

"May I see you again?"

The answer comes:

"Possibly. I must decide that."

Without further word, this visitor passes out.

Making sudden preparations, Charles calls a cab and is soon at the station. In a few minutes more he is on the way to Northfield.

The substance and manner of this warning were mysteriously suggestive. Doubtless the veiled disguise was to avoid identification or some personal complications. This woman must know something about the Thames tragedy. There is relation between her strange visit and Paul Lanier's disappearance. Paul is surely in the neighborhood of Northfield. [281]

Charles is convinced that this visitor is one of the interesting strangers he so often has seen in the hotel dining-room. He recalls reported former mysterious shadowings at Calcutta and along the Thames. That spying upon the Laniers at the cellar room comes vividly to mind. How strange those declamatory utterances in hearing of his father and Esther, along shore of the lake. Northfield loved ones must be in imminent danger to prompt such warning.

This brooding mystery grows fearfully fascinating. It nerves Charles to intense resolve. He longs for opportunity to strike some decisive blow. Is there time to protect those at home from impending peril? The urgent warning seemed to imply that dispatch is essential and may yet avail.

The thundering train moves too slowly. It seems ages before his destination is reached. Rushing from the car, Charles soon procures a horse, and digging the spurs into sides of the animal, gallops homeward.

At the entrance to Northfield mansion grounds his horse shies at a prostrate body just inside the gate.

Dismounting, Charles is startled at an upturned bloody face. He recognizes one of the household servants. The body is yet warm. [282]

Charles is soon upon the porch. The door is locked. Passing around beneath his father's room windows, he finds these closed. Through lace drapings of Esther's room, he sees glimmer of a light. All outside doors are securely fastened. He is completing circuit of the house, when a rope is seen dangling from a second-story window. Grasping this, Charles pulls hard. It is attached to some immovable object in the upper hallway. He pauses, puzzled, then says: "An exit has been planned, but how was the entrance effected? Some one passed into the house through that hall window, and probably now lurks within. Perhaps all within have been murdered!"

Charles ascends the rope and enters the hallway. In the dim moonlight he sees a rod with hook attached. This is flexibly adjusted to the rope and drawn across lower window-casings.

Comprehending at a glance the method of entrance, he noiselessly passes along the hall and winding aisles into a room next that occupied by Esther. The connecting door is open. Glancing at the reflecting surface of a mirror, Charles is stupefied with horror. He staggers to the door. [283]

Knife in hand, Paul Lanier is bending over the sleeping Bessie.



"RAPTLY GAZING AT THE CHILD'S INNOCENT FACE, PAUL SOFTLY CROONS SOME CRADLE MELODY."

Charles raises his loaded pistol, taking aim. The finger pressing lightly responsive trigger seems paralyzed.

Raptly gazing at the child's innocent face, Paul softly croons some cradle melody. Oblivious to all hazards, unmoved by murderous craze prompting this night attempt upon lives of Northfield foes, Paul gently mutters a childhood refrain, thereby seeking to lull fancied wakefulness of this sleeping waif, of whose existence until then he had not known.

Still standing at the open door, with cocked pistol aimed at this crazed outlaw, Charles trembles violently. The sight and Paul's words unnerve his will.

The child moves upon her cot, talking disconnectedly.

"Please, Granny, don't cry! Bessie hanged on!"

Esther partially awakens. Vacantly gazing at the cot, she slumbers on.

Paul furtively looks about. Glaring at Esther, he moves toward the open door, stops, and then inspects his bloody knife. Muttering, Paul tiptoes back to Bessie's cot.

Again Charles raises his pistol, ready to fire.

Like robed priest upon ordained human sacrifice, Paul gazes at this dreaming four-year-old. Gently drawing the blade across his finger-tips, he sighs deeply. With low moan and gestured dissent, Paul again sheathes the knife. Moving away rapidly, by Charles, through adjoining room, he unerringly retraces his way to the hall window. Descending the pendent rope, Paul disappears in the darkness. [284]

In explanation, Charles afterward said: "No one but me witnessed this scene. I followed Paul to the window and witnessed his descent. To have slain this outlaw would have been easy. Only to save life would I take this responsibility. Sight of any Northfield sleeper under Paul's uplifted knife would have nerved me to unerring shot. However, too much had been said about the necessity of Lanier exposures for reckless attack upon Paul. This worthless life is too valuable for inconsiderate squandering. Upon its precarious, oft-jeopardized tenure hang potent issues and kindred weal.

"I called one of the laborers upon the premises. Together we carried into a small building the lifeless form found at entrance to the mansion grounds.

"The dead man had been repeatedly stabbed. From his torn clothing and Paul's bloody, dirt-begrimed appearance, it was evident there had been a fierce struggle. This servant was surprised and assaulted while on guard. [285]

"I did not awaken any of the family. It was not thought prudent to follow Paul. At such dark hour the craft of this madman would elude pursuit.

"Paul had entered the house to slay his enemies, and was restrained only by sight of Bessie. This surprise had diverted his murderous thoughts, thereby saving the lives of father and Esther."

Charles and his assistant remain on guard until morning. It is not much feared that Paul will return that night, but they take precautions.

Sir Donald rises early. He is greatly surprised at seeing Charles in the library. The night's experiences are graphically narrated. Sir Donald is profoundly moved. That London warning is mysterious. Murder of the faithful servant grieves him sorely. Paul's queer entrance evinces strange cunning. That this madman with bloody knife unhindered had entered Esther's room, and only by merest, unaccountable, crazed caprice was diverted from his murderous purpose, is too horrible for thought.

To allay his father's fears requires repeated assurances from Charles that both Esther and Bessie are safe. Sir Donald clings to his son's arm for support. Again looking proudly at Charles, he fondles this smiling youth, and excitedly hails him "Savior of Northfield!"

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Charles restrains his father from calling Esther and Bessie.

"It will be better not to say anything about Paul's entering the house. It would worry sister."

Servants are called, and the dead body is moved to a vacant building some distance from the mansion grounds. After official inquiry into the cause of death, the deceased is buried.

Sir Donald feels conscious-smitten. To Charles he says: "This life has been sacrificed to promote Esther's welfare. In pursuance of questionable tactics and furtherance of doubtful ends one death just has occurred. That many others have not been chronicled is surprising.

"Looking at Esther and Bessie, gratitude for their preservation from Paul Lanier's murderous knife is blended with grief for the dead servant and an insistent sense of indirect, personal accounting.

"Selfish, exclusive Randolph tactics always have failed. That our beloved Esther has not fallen a victim to her father's deliberate precautions resulted mainly from accidental finding of a juvenile human stray, without known guardian or antecedents. Even that mysterious warning was far more availing for fireside defense than my fatherly solicitude and protecting care. Nothing but a strange, crazed diversion restrained that blood-stained dagger. But for that, your unerring aim would have been too late.

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"I am now resolved that this insane wretch no longer shall menace human life. Lanier exposures must abide safe public interests. It now seems criminally imbecile longer to permit this madman to jeopardize lives of so many. Even Paul Lanier's own existence demands his detention in a madhouse."

Sir Donald determines that on the following day he will insist upon Paul's arrest. Only formal official inquiry as to the death of the servant prevents him taking the first train for London. This disposed of, the trip is made upon the following day.

Going to detective headquarters, Sir Donald is admitted to the chief's room. This man of many shifts is but coldly courteous. He awaits Sir Donald's explanations without interruptions. The whole tragic affair is explained, but there is no responsive suggestion.

Sir Donald urges the necessity of Paul's arrest and detention.

The chief is strangely reticent.

Sir Donald looks at him inquiringly, then detects a sneering expression. Waiting for some response, he is silent for a few moments. Rising with dignity, Sir Donald moves toward the door. This unfeigned resentment convinces the chief that there is a mistake. Sir Donald Randolph has not been playing double. The indignant pathos of that honest face precludes dissembling. Hastening to apologize for his error, the chief informs Sir Donald that both Pierre and Paul Lanier are in custody.

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"This morning the arrests were made, but without coöperation of our agency.

"Paul has been at Northfield. He haunted the shores of the lake. Our employe sent from London saw Paul lurking in the woods, and followed him to a steep ravine. Here Paul vanished. The spy waited, screened by some bushes, expecting to see him again. This watch was continued until daylight.

"Paul did not appear upon the following day. The employe returned to London and reported. About same hour the watcher assigned to duty in neighborhood of the Lanier room saw Paul go down the basement stairs. This was after four in the morning. Neither Lanier left the room that day or the following night.

"Charles did not report to the office, and we could not locate him anywhere in London. It was thought that Paul had been at Northfield, but attempted no violence, and that moved by some insane influence he had returned to London.

"Awaiting Northfield advices and Charles' appearance, the agency was dumfounded at news that both Laniers had been arrested. It occurred about eight o'clock this morning. We are not yet advised as to the causes for this unexpected move. The matter is being investigated. [289]

"Because of Charles' disappearance without notice, and these unaccountable arrests, we believed that you were in league with other parties to bring about Lanier accounting for their many crimes.

"It was known that a veiled woman called upon Charles the night he left London. After the arrests it had been rumored that Charles left London for Northfield on the night of this mysterious call and did not return. This female stranger and a middle-aged man were often together, and shadowed the Laniers. Our agency employes kept close watch of that spy who witnessed Paul's Thames crazes, and from his alley window overlooked the basement entrance. He had been followed and repeatedly seen with this male companion. That both the man and woman boarded at the same hotel where Charles stopped had been discovered. This spy sometimes called there. Charles had said nothing about these circumstances, and, we suspected, did not care to confide in the agency.

"The manner of Lanier arrests strongly confirmed our suspicions that some independent procedure was being pressed, with your knowledge and approval. [290]

"I was indignant at such supposed double-dealing. Strenuous, untiring efforts for years have been made to unravel this Lanier web. The agency dealt frankly with you, and is entitled to like treatment. You always insisted on caution and against premature action. The trials and convictions of these villains for double murder of Alice Webster and Oswald Langdon were not to be hampered by any other criminal issue. Taking into consideration all of these facts, your sudden change of purpose and advocacy of Paul's immediate arrest seemed the climax of insincerity.

"Believing that you were cognizant of all that had been done and procured the arrests, your report of recent Northfield incidents still further nettled me. To advise immediate arrests already made at your instigation was insulting effrontery. This apparently hypocritical talk intensified my suspicions into positive conviction of your deceit. Now I am sure there is a mistake somewhere. All of us are victims to counter-purposes of mysterious allied agencies."

Sir Donald saw the force of these explanations. He excused all as natural to the circumstances.

Both discussed the arrests in many possible and probable bearings. It was concluded that these bore relation to those before made in Calcutta. They can only wait. The mystery will soon clear. [291]

For a while at least there will be no danger from Paul's murderous mania. If these outlaws again are released, Sir Donald will procure Paul's detention as a madman. He will stay a few days in London, ready for any emergency.

Though Paul is in close confinement, securely ironed, Sir Donald feels uneasy for the safety of Esther and Bessie. He sends for them and Charles. They join him in London. All find accommodations at the hotel where Charles had stopped.

The family and Bessie are seated in the dining-room. Soon those interesting strangers slowly enter and take seats at a near table, not appearing to notice the Randolph group. The woman faces Sir Donald and Esther, but keeps her eyes cast down, coloring deeply. Her companion notes the gossiping shades, but appears unconcerned. It is evident that without looking at any person in particular, he critically surveys those staring in that direction.

Esther is pale and tremulous with excitement. Sir Donald's view has been riveted upon that same fascinating face; he longs for a look at those downcast eyes; the outlines and expression are familiar. [292]

Fine, glossy, raven-black hair is combed in profusion over brow and temples, but to him the disguise is apparent. An upward glance reveals that her identity is suspected. Esther's concentrated, startled stare and Sir Donald's look of recognition cannot be misunderstood. Charles sees that there is some strange discovery pending. From Esther and Sir Donald he looks inquiringly to that other troubled, flushed face.

The object of such combined curiosity casts an appealing glance at her companion, then quickly rising, leaves the dining-room.

Waiting for a few moments, the man, slowly and with no appearance of concern, follows.

Sir Donald briefly hesitates, then abruptly quits the table. Stepping to the stairway, he sees the man ascending. Calling to him, Sir Donald craves an interview upon "very important business."

With show of hesitation and vexed impatience, the stranger answers, "Well?"

Sir Donald ascends, and begging pardon for his abrupt manners, says:

"If I am not mistaken, the young lady who just left the table in such distress is supposed to be dead."

The man looks blank.

"Years ago she was reported drowned in the Thames." [293]

Sir Donald sees that he is right.

"Her name is Alice Webster."

Raising his hand appealingly, the stranger beckons Sir Donald to follow. They enter a room at the extreme rear of the building. It connects with one adjoining. This door is quickly closed. Offering Sir Donald a seat at the farther side, the stranger asks him to speak in low tones.

Comprehending that the woman is in the other room and that her companion desires her not to hear their talk, Sir Donald does as requested.

"I am overjoyed that Alice is alive."

"Why?" is the brief response.

Sir Donald hesitates; then cautiously replies:

"For many reasons."

Realizing that this man is craftily fencing against some hazard, Sir Donald will await more definite disclosures.

The stranger perceives this. He must confide in Sir Donald, and thereby secure his aid.

"Suppose it should prove that you are right, what then?"

"We all would be too happy," is the guarded reply.

"Would you and your family keep such knowledge secret until we consented to its publicity?"

Here Sir Donald judiciously temporizes.

"No light consideration would prompt any of us to oppose your wishes. However, to save an innocent person from suspicion of murder or to promote the happiness of some loved one, I would tell all." [294]

The stranger here looks puzzled.

"I cannot grasp your meaning. Who is suspected of murder? Whose happiness could be promoted by such disclosures?"

Sir Donald is now sure that this man knows nothing of the facts prompting these reservations.

"Alice Webster and Oswald Langdon are supposed to be dead. Alice is alive and now in the adjoining room. Paul Lanier committed the assault. Pierre Lanier has defrauded Alice out of a large estate. She is alive and interested in recovery of the property. I would do all in my power to aid her. Against any breaches of confidence I decline to make pledges. The time and money I have spent to right her wrongs show my sincerity. What assurances should you require that I will not betray this poor, long-suffering girl?"

The stranger seems affected by Sir Donald's positive speech and honest look. He is silent for a few moments, then rises and tells Sir Donald that what has been said will be considered.

"I doubt not we can arrive at some friendly understanding. If desired I will meet you here this evening at eight. It will not be necessary to suggest that nothing be said about our conversation." [295]

Sir Donald promises to call at the appointed hour.

Esther and Charles were in her room. Neither felt further table interest after this morning's surprise. Esther had told her convictions to Charles, and he was much elated. By turns she looked scared and joyous. With much impatience both awaited their father's return.

His report excites them still more. The time between morning and that evening appointment seems very long.

It is now sure that in some mysterious way Alice Webster escaped death at the hands of Paul Lanier. This simplifies all. Oswald Langdon needs no longer wander. That heavy load of fatherly care is about to lift forever. Esther's troubles will vanish. Storm-clouds will cease to lower over the Randolph fireside.

Only fear that through some fateful perversity he might lose the opportunity of seeing Alice and of clearing up this vexing affair nerved Sir Donald to such abrupt manners. This was an emergency in which decorum would be imbecile. What if these now escape? Possibly this cautious, far-seeing man may advise Alice to deny her identity or to remain in seclusion. There may be good reasons why the girl should seek to avoid scandal. [296]

Sir Donald will take every precaution to prevent their escape. He suggests these thoughts to Charles, and they are on guard. Both watch outside entrances to the hotel.

Neither the girl nor man appears at either meal. This further arouses suspicion. Just after dark a man and woman pass out of the side hall door. Charles follows them. The two move rapidly down the street. Charles crosses to the opposite side and keeps them in view. For some distance this line of action is pursued. They enter a passing cab, and Charles returns.

This move is bewildering. Sir Donald is now aroused. He will keep this appointment, and if the

stranger fail to appear, take decisive steps. He has seen Alice Webster, and would swear to her identity. This pair shall be traced, and the facts be given publicity. He will write to Oswald Langdon that Alice is surely alive. He sends Charles to detective offices with advices for the shadowing of these runaways.

He makes the appointed call. The other is there, receiving him courteously. His presence mystifies Sir Donald. It is impossible that this man could have gone out and returned.

The stranger opens with the remark:

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"I talked the matter over with the girl, and she is undecided."

Sir Donald responds, "About what?"

"She does not understand what you mean by your references to some one who may be suspected of murder and to some loved one whose happiness might be promoted by disclosures."

Sir Donald replies:

"These are matters I will not discuss further."

The man irritably responds:

"Then we decline to talk any more upon the subject. You are welcome to your delusion."

Here Sir Donald grows indignant.

"Alice Webster is alive and subject to your control. Through your advice she has left this house, intending to evade discovery. You are both watched. I know facts which would overjoy Alice. I may not confide them to either until her identity is confessed and her conduct explained. I have no desire to reveal a single fact about her escape from the Thames or her strange concealment, until she can be protected. I doubt not Alice feels regrets for the past. It is positively known that she had nothing to do with the assault upon Oswald Langdon. An eye-witness to this crime saw Alice and Oswald both fall into the river. Fully confide in me, and I will aid you in recovery of the big estate taken from Alice by Pierre Lanier. Do this without explicit pledges of any kind. I make no promises."

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The stranger hesitates.

"If we are to tell you all, why do you refuse us your confidence?"

Sir Donald replies:

"When the existence of Alice Webster is clearly proven, and her strange disappearance accounted for, I will explain what you ask."

There is a long pause. The stranger looks into Sir Donald's face fixedly, then grasping his hand, says:

"I will trust you implicitly. We will now find my niece."

The two pass out, down the stairs, and upon the street. The stranger beckons to a cabman. In about half an hour they stop in front of an inn. Giving the driver instructions, the stranger leads the way to a door, which he unlocks. Both enter, and Sir Donald is left with assurance that the man soon will return.

In about fifteen minutes Alice Webster appears, followed by this male enigma. She looks scared and greatly confused.

Sir Donald advances, and with courtesy says:

"I am happy to see you, Alice!"

The girl stammers and sinks back on the sofa. She soon becomes calmer, and presents her uncle, Thomas Webster.

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After a few remarks, the uncle leaves Sir Donald and Alice alone.

Seeing Alice's embarrassment, Sir Donald kindly says:

"I have not the least criticism of your conduct, Alice. Tell me all, and I will be your friend. It has turned out gloriously!"

Thus encouraged, the girl begins her strange recital.

How years before, with Oswald Langdon, she took the night row on the Thames, strolled along the river-bank, and chatted at the rustic seat, is brokenly described. The assault and fall of both into swollen stream are shudderingly explained. Alice pauses.

"Must I tell the rest?"

Sir Donald speaks assuringly.

They hear suppressed murmurs at outside entrance to the hallway. Thomas Webster goes to the door. Three men are in sight. One inquires for Sir Donald Randolph.

"It is important that we see him at once."

Alice still pauses.

Hurriedly her uncle enters. He advises Sir Donald to see these callers without delay.

Going to the hall door, Sir Donald recognizes Charles, who explains their unceremonious call.

"I went as directed to the detective office and reported. After some little time employes who had shadowed that Thames spy arrived. These expressed the opinion that the couple who left the hotel were the girl and this same mysterious watcher, and that they went directly to this inn. The strange spy often had gone there, presumably to report. These two employes and I took a cab to the hotel where we have stopped. We there learned that you and a middle-aged man a short time before entered a cab and were driven away. Then we believed that the two had gone to this inn. To circumvent any escape or trick upon you, I then insisted on finding you without delay. We have just arrived and will do as you think advisable." [300]

Sir Donald stepped back into the room and briefly explained to Thomas Webster what had occurred. They decided it would be better not to tarry longer. On the next day Alice could finish her story. These detective employes need not further trouble themselves in this matter. Scandal easily could be avoided. The next day, at three o'clock, Alice and her uncle would meet Sir Donald at his hotel, and she would tell all. Sir Donald would return with Charles and the detectives.

Bidding the two good-night, Sir Donald, Charles, and the detectives return at once to the hotel. Cautioning these sleuths still to shadow this pair and report, Sir Donald and Charles join Esther, who, with the sleeping Bessie in her arms, has been awaiting their return. [301]

These talk over the probable facts of this strange romance, and agree that whatever may have been her conduct, they will befriend Alice. The poor girl doubtless suffered greatly. What sorrowful memories were suggested by that sad face! All soon will be cleared. Oswald Langdon now may return without shame. Esther's eyes are tearfully luminous; Charles looks proudly expectant; over Sir Donald's fascinating features settles a gravely wistful smile.

Triple content concentrates in mute benediction upon curly head of baby tramp, dreaming unspeakable mysteries upon the arm of Esther.

CHAPTER XXIII

[302]

A STRANGE STORY

The appointed meeting takes place. Alice still is nervous.

Though her uncle had spoken most assuringly, she shrinks from the ordeal. Only through repeated assurances, much prompting, and many questions upon the part of Sir Donald is the strange story told.

"At the rustic seat on the river-bank, Oswald and I talked over my troubles. I was overcome at thoughts of the dark outlook. Oswald tried to comfort me. Perhaps our conduct was indiscreet, but I alone am to blame."

Here Sir Donald's curiosity is quickened, but he refrains from question or comment.

Hurriedly passing over this point, Alice tells of having suddenly risen and stepped with suicidal intent toward the bank. "There was nothing any longer in life for me. Oswald must have perceived my impulse, as he sprang between me and the stream.

"Using some harsh language about Paul Lanier, I begged Oswald not to forsake me. Just then a man came from behind a bush. Before time to warn Oswald, a blade gleamed in the moonlight. At almost the same moment I was stunned by a blow on the head, and lost all consciousness." [303]

"After an indefinite period I felt confused sensations, and awoke as from a horrible dream. Some time elapsed before surroundings could be discerned. Objects seemed evasive and bewilderingly unreal. The low ceiling swayed up and down, back and forth. The candle glowed and flickered, moving around, followed by tangle and chairs. Such a dreadful sensation of helpless bewilderment! There were harsh janglings of unnatural voices and glitter of fiendish eyes.

"When again aroused, I felt a dull, painful stupor. Then objects assumed distorted shapes, with wildly variegated tints, shrouded by mysterious hazes.

"How long this continued I can only surmise. All my ideas were confused. It seemed an age before any rational sense was felt. During these terrible hours there was frequent recurrence of those harsh, grating accents and repellent looks from sinister faces. Of these experiences I can give no clearer account. The brain-pressure caused by the temple blow produced queer sensations and frightful fancies."

Sir Donald listened with patient sympathy to these harrowing details. Such might be [304] irresponsible, but doubtless had been fearfully real to Alice.

Thought of that terrible chapter in her life's history so affects Alice as to cause almost hysterical emotion.

"At length I felt a sense of quiet rest and relief. It seemed as though we were again at Northfield. The air was musical with songs of birds. Oswald and Esther were with me; Oswald was reading. A shadow falls athwart the flower-fringed walk! I look up, and there stands Paul Lanier, as at his other Northfield call, after return from India!

"While looking at him with feelings of repulsion, the apparition changes. We are on the lake, and I am remonstrating with Paul, who pays no heed to my words. I speak more plainly and grasp his arm! Paul rises and pushes me overboard!

"I am on the shore with Oswald, you and Esther bending over me.

"Oswald and I are at the rustic seat, standing on the river-bank. Paul Lanier steps from behind a bush, takes a quick step, and strikes me into the water!

"The dream was so real that I awoke with a scream.

"Now fully aroused, I see a dark form disappear from the low, open door of the cabin. The sun is shining. I look around the poorly furnished room. I am lying on a cot. There is but one window. How came I here? [305]

"Trying to sit up, I am too weak, and the effort tires me. After several minutes a scared, black face peers through the smoke-bedimmed glass.

"Slowly this colored woman enters the room. Her face relaxes into a broadened grin. Showing two full sets of teeth, she stares as if curious what to say.

"'Law! chile, yo' scare Sarah Angeline mos' to def!'

"I put out my hand.

"The wench soothingly says:

"'Don' be 'fraid of Sarah Angeline; she won't hurt yo', honey!'

"I motioned the old woman to be seated.

"With much show of sympathy old Sarah sat down by the cot.

"I now asked where we were and how I came there.

"She looked troubled, and replied:

"'Deed, chile, I'se 'fraid to tell yo'! Dey mought hurt yo', honey, an' beat po' ole Sarah Angeline moughty considerable!'

"The sound of coarse voices is heard coming around the cabin. [306]

"Much excited, old Sarah raises her hand, whispering:

"'Shut yo' eyes an' don' say nuffin'!'

"There are four in the party now entering. From their voices I detect that two are men and the others women. They pass into the other room. I hear their talk, but cannot catch its drift.

"I was too weak for strong purpose, and with presentiment of harm, had no strength for resistance. I must have dozed. Old Sarah is now arranging some things upon a small table at head of the cot. To my look she soothingly says:

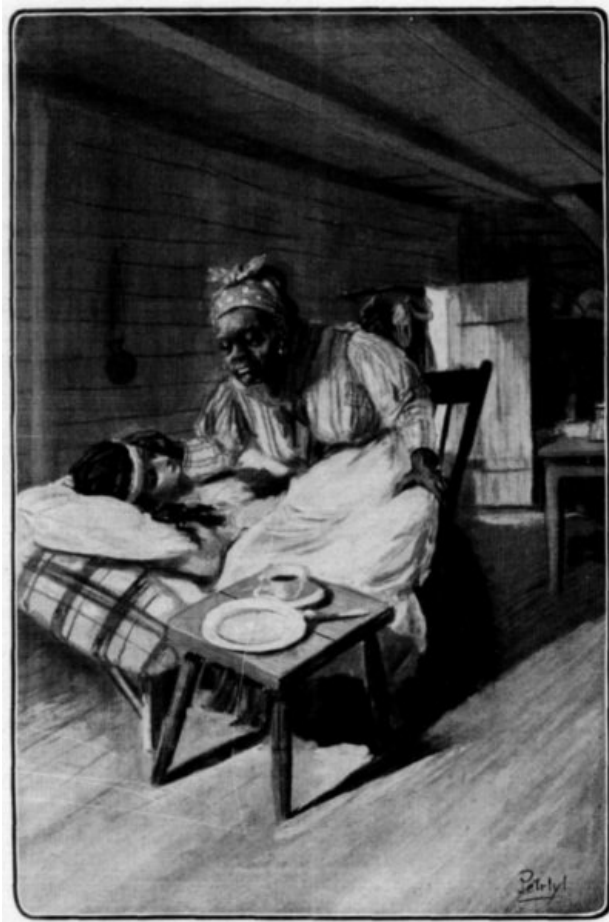
"'Yo' needn't be 'larmed; dey's all gone 'way. Yo' bettah pahtuk of some refreshments now. Dis tea an' toast moughty good for de s'port of yo' 'feebled system.'

"After partaking of the food, I felt tired and dizzy, and closing my eyes, appeared to sleep. The old negress moved around the room, muttering to herself. She gently placed her hand upon my brow, then said:

"'Po' sick chile! Yo' white face 'minds me of my own Mandy Car'line just 'fo' she died!'

"Softly stroking back my hair over this bruised temple, old Sarah says:

"'Suah some one struck yo' powerful hard! P'raps dis yere purty chile 'fused his offah an' he fro' her in the ribbah.'



**"PO' SICK CHILE! YO' WHITE FACE 'MINDS
ME OF MY OWN MANDY CAR'LINE JUST
'FO' SHE DIED!"**

"In semi-conscious stupor and with faint sense of the meaning of this talk, I dozed on.

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"Dey would fo'sake yo', honey, and leave po' old Sarah Angeline, 'less I leaves yo' heah to die all 'lone by yo'self in the dark.'

"I looked up into the black face bending over my cot.

"'Good Lawd, chile, doan' yo' look that way at po' old Sarah Angeline! Bress yo' heart, chile, I'se nevah gwine to fo'sake dis yere white baby in her powerful trials and deep 'flictions—'deed I won' now, honey!'

"Then, fully conscious, I again asked where we were and how it all happened. My recollections of that terrible night on the Thames seemed shrouded with a bewildering haze.

"The old black woman hesitated, shaking her head. Old Sarah for a while was silent, and then yielded:

"'Yo' po' sick chile, yo' knows Sarah Angeline can't 'fuse yo' nuffin' when yo' mo' and mo' 'zembles my Mandy Car'line ebery bressed minit, lookin' so pleadin' in her ole black mudder's eyes just 'fo' she died!'

"After many solemn warnings, 'nevah to say nuffin' to nobody, nevah, nevah!' the old negress told all she knew about how I came to be at this den in a London suburb.

"There had been a robbery in the city. Suspicion fell on two rough characters. These, with their girl companions, for several months had occupied this same two-room cabin.

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"Old Sarah had been installed as housekeeper for the four, and received quite good pay. She knew they were bad characters, but needed the money for her children and invalid husband, living in the same neighborhood.

"The four had been up the river, and were returning downstream. They saw two persons sitting near the bank. Fearing that these were spies upon their track, the men permitted the boat to drift past this point. Both forms on the shore seemed to rise and stand. The four were now past, a few rods downstream. They moved very slowly, all cautiously looking at the two on the shore. Just then a third form was visible. All saw a knife glisten in the moonlight, followed by a blow and thrust. The two fell into the river, sinking out of sight.

"The men quickly rowed toward the point of the stream where the bodies sank. Several rods down something gripped one of the oars. A face appeared above the water. The hands held that oar, until the girl was drawn into the boat. Nothing was seen of the other who had fallen into the stream.

"Now convinced that these were not spies, the four rowed up and down past this point, but seeing no signs, concluded to abandon the search. With the girl lying unconscious in bottom of the boat, rowing downstream for some distance, they landed on the opposite side of the river. Efforts to revive her were successful, but she relapsed again into an unconscious state. [309]

"The two men advised leaving her there, and that no one say anything about what they had seen or done. They were suspected of this robbery. This incident would make them notorious. The girl would die, anyhow.

"This plan was about to be adopted when voices were heard down the stream. The men, followed by the girls, rapidly bore me to an old, abandoned shed, about one hundred rods from shore. Here all remained until about three o'clock the next morning. As I was still alive, they finally concluded it would be less dangerous to take me to their cabin. Both girls favored this plan. The men were afraid to follow their own impulses, depending upon secrecy of these fickle-minded females. The four, with their load, reached the cabin just before daylight. Old Sarah let them in, and was cautioned to say nothing, under penalty of sure death.

"I had remained here over a week, in charge of this kind-hearted old negress, being nearly all this time in a seemingly comatose state, with only brief spells of semi-consciousness. No physician had been called, as these bad characters wished to avoid notoriety. London papers had referred to the deaths by drowning or murder of Oswald Langdon and Alice Webster. These two highwaymen dreaded any mention of their names in such connection. Old Sarah kept their secret, for fear of losing her position and of personal violence. [310]

"At times my chances of recovery had been doubtful. I had been delirious, but most of the time lay in a stupor. What to do with me the four could not devise. All dreaded an invasion by the police. They had discussed the proposition to leave me in the cabin, the four quitting London for some distant city, the men going first singly, the two girls following later. Still they feared that old Sarah would inform the police, as she had overheard this talk, and was much distressed about losing her job. It then was proposed that the five take some other house, and abandon me to my fate.

"To this old Sarah vigorously objected, and said:

"'I'se nevah gwine to fo'sake dat po' sick white baby who 'minds me so powerful much of my own little Mandy Car'line just 'fo' she j'ined de angel band!'

"This settled that proposal.

"Revolving in their minds many schemes to dispose of me and of the colored woman, the two robbers could not think of any safe plan. Too, they feared that these girls might confess. They threatened and flattered the negress, who said nothing in reply. [311]

"The night before had been the worst. The four, drinking heavily, lost their discretion. A loud quarrel ensued. One of the drunken brutes staggered into the room where we were lying asleep. He stood there, glaring first at one, then at the other. His actions aroused old Sarah, who, springing up and grasping a large bottle standing on the shelf, struck the besotted wretch such hard blow in the face that he fell heavily upon the cabin floor. This created a commotion, causing a noisy row.

"Old Sarah never flinched, but threatened to murder the first one who touched 'dat po' sick, unfortunate chile, who has no kind mudder to gib her good device, an' 'zembles my own little angel baby, Mandy Car'line!'

"The girls were not so far gone as to have no fear of results. They succeeded in getting these drunken villains into the other room. The excited wench slammed the door and bolted it.

"Through all this fuss I had not shown any signs of life, except heavy breathing and slight moaning. The faithful old colored woman kept watch until morning. [312]

"The four breakfasted late, and afterward went out singly.

"Having finished her morning work, old Sarah returned to watch at the cot. The poor old servant was feeling a sense of superstitious dread. She had just turned away her face when I made that awful scream."

In nervous, dramatic manner Alice related these experiences, with old Sarah's account of what had happened. Memories of this eventful period had shadowed after days and given somber hues to many dreams.

At breaks in the narrative Sir Donald made tactful suggestions, courteously prompting its continuation. As to those parts which Alice, through evident maidenly reserve, passed over hurriedly, he did not urge more explicit recital. However, his suggestions evinced thorough recollection of all that had been said and a tenacious hold on the natural drift of the story.

Aided by Sir Donald's discreet suggestions, promptings, and questioning, Alice continued her strange romance.

"For several days nothing of much account occurred at that old cabin. I suffered from peculiar pains in the head and confused sensations, sleeping much, but having frightful dreams. During waking hours my memory seemed almost blank, with only bewildering hints of events. Sleep was [313]

dreaded, as dreams again presented the awful past. Time, place, and incidents were grossly distorted. Yet each day I grew stronger.

"Slowly the brain-pressure relaxed. Dreams grew less fantastic. I had more distinct memories. With returning strength and clearer understanding of my condition came thoughts of past misfortunes. My then helpless position was appalling. That for an indefinite period I must be dependent upon the bounties of those depraved creatures who had rescued me from the Thames current seemed horrible. The presence of these I continually loathed and feared. It appeared fate's cruel decree that I should escape Paul Lanier's murderous designs but to suffer this prolonged, indefinite, loathsome danger. Yet such distress served to check the despondent outlook of future years. I became anxious for some immediate rescue.

"Old Sarah was my only hope, but could not devise any plan to help me. I studied that black, sympathetic face for inspiration. It seemed that my mute appeals greatly pained her, but she could give only high-sounding encouragement, while solemnly pledging everlasting devotion to one who 'mo' and mo' 'zembles my own little bressed baby, Mandy Car'line just 'fo' she died!"

"After weeks of suspense, only the girls returned from night visits to London scenes. They looked much depressed. Old Sarah was taken into their confidence, and appeared greatly troubled. The next day both girls moved, taking only articles of clothing, saying nothing as to where they were going. [314]

"The old servant seemed much affected, but soon grew more cheerful. She told me that these men had been arrested, charged with the robbery. The girls suspected the police would come that day to search the cabin for stolen stuff. They would go away, and old Sarah must keep quiet. She was to claim as her own everything in the cabin. The four had been only boarders, about whom she was to know nothing. As the price of her secrecy she could keep everything in the rooms. There were sufficient supplies for at least a month.

"All this and much more old Sarah told me in a hysterical burst of confidence. When entirely recovered, I could find my friends, and she would go home to her family.

"To me this unexpected turn was a great relief, and my simple-hearted old benefactress grew quite hopeful.

"The police raid did not occur. None of the four ever came back. What became of these criminal suspects I never heard.

"After a few weeks I was able to walk about the cabin. Determined soon as possible to cease dependence upon this poor old servant who so generously had befriended me in such need, I longed for speedy recovery. Old Sarah seemed to dread the hour when her 'new baby chile' would go away. [315]

"The colored woman indulged in much grief at our parting, bewailing it as a fresh bereavement. She explained that Mandy Caroline was her oldest child, and died at the age of twenty-four. Though having many other children, it seemed to her that I was a heaven-sent substitute for this lost daughter.

"Sarah and her husband were slaves on a Georgia plantation before the close of the American Civil War. They came to London as servants in the family of an Englishman who had been traveling through the Southern States. They afterward married in London.

"The colored woman would not listen to any talk of future repayment, but so pressed upon me the acceptance of a few small coins that I took them.

"I had intended to go home and explain all, but felt much fear after starting. How could my strange disappearance and long stay be explained? What would be thought of my staying in this disreputable den with criminals and social outcasts? To whom could appeal be made for proof, but to this poor, old wench, who had been in the employment of the four, two of whom are charged with highway robbery? Would not my friends and acquaintances feel averse to further association with such a person? They might suspect that both Oswald and I had practiced deceit in our disappearances. [316]

"These thoughts overwhelmed me with an unbearable burden of doubt and dread. I became confused and bewildered. My sense of London locations grew hazy.

"Calling to a passing 'coster,' I begged him to take me to some respectable inn.

"He objected, but upon learning that I was sick and had lost my way, consented.

"In about an hour he stopped at a cozy little house. Helping me to alight, he told me that lodging could be obtained there at reasonable rates. He generously declined to accept payment for the ride.

"I staggered into the hallway and sat down in a fainting condition upon one of the stair steps. Still dizzy, with severe pains in the head and sensations of nausea, I was shown a room.

"The proprietor gazed at me with surprise. Seeing my weakness, he left. [317]

"Soon after, a servant called, but hearing that it was only a slight attack, requiring quiet rest, disappeared.

"After several hours, I awoke with a start. The proprietor's wife, portly and sympathetic, stood staring in at the half-open door. She eagerly accepted my stammering invitation to come in and be seated. Seeing that I was weak and embarrassed, she refrained from questions as to my name or connections. I gave prompt assurances that my indisposition was not serious.

"Soon a tempting meal was served. Following more sympathetic suggestions, the kind-hearted lady withdrew.

"Left alone, I, late into the night, thought over my perplexing situation, but could not devise any plan of action. The only settled conviction reached was not then to meet any friends or acquaintances, but to await the clearing of the dark clouds.

"In this extremity came thoughts of past rescues. How strange my escapes from lake and river! Had not Paul Lanier's cruel malice been thwarted? That black benefactress surely had been an angel of deliverance from loathsome perils in London suburb. Perhaps I yet would live to outwit the crafty Laniers. Surely there would be a way out of these helpless, bewildering mazes.

"For some time I remained at this inn, neither going upon the street nor making inquiry. The landlady restrained all her curiosity as to my past life and present distress. With motherly kindness she shielded me from all questioning. I decided to leave London for some obscure English town, and there seek employment. What to do was very indefinite, but there must be something done. [318]

"As I barely had enough money to pay my bill, how to reach such a place was an important problem. In my weak state this obstacle grew more and more difficult. In desperation I was about to quit the inn penniless, and look for work. I had paid and was ready to start out on this hard search.

"From a whispered talk with her husband the landlady returned, and in a motherly way, placing one arm around me, slipped several small coins into my hand. I was hesitating, when a carriage stopped in front of the open door where we were standing.

"Quickly stepping down, a well-dressed gentleman gave low-spoken directions to the driver and entered the inn. With apparently unconcerned look he surveyed those present, but was visibly interested as I turned my face.

"I tarried, between curiosity and dread of identification, but became more confused, and started for the outside door. Bidding the surprised landlady a hurried good-by, I passed out and down the street. Having gone three blocks and paused at a corner, uncertain which way or where to go, looking back I saw the same carriage which a short time before stopped at the inn rapidly approaching. [319]

"I started on, and had gone only a few rods when the stranger passed. He turned around, stared, and the carriage stopped.

"The man stepped out, and coming up to me, in low, hurried tones said:

"'Excuse my rudeness! You are Alice Webster! Don't you know your Uncle Tom?'

"Between recognition and shame at my strange conduct I stammered some confused greeting.

"Seeming to notice this painful embarrassment, uncle gently said:

"'Do not worry, Alice. Your Uncle Tom is all right! Get into the carriage, and we will go anywhere you say! You have something to tell me, but take lots of time to tell it.'

"Seeing my hesitation, he carelessly says:

"'I will not take you home now, little girl.'

"My fears allayed, I accepted the invitation. We took a long drive, making many turns, uncle talking about the scenery, weather, and other subjects, but never hinting at any explanation of my conduct. Once I started to speak of what weighed upon my mind, but was silenced by: [320]

"'After a while, little girl; no hurry about that.'

"The day was warm. Giving orders to stop at a park, Uncle Thomas told me that we would take a stroll and have a confidential chat. When seated under a tree in a secluded part of the grounds, he says:

"'Now, Alice, tell Uncle Tom all your troubles. Make it just as bad as possible. I like to hear thrilling stories from real life.'

"Set at ease by this pleasant, insinuating bantering, I told all. When speaking of my final determination neither to go home nor to meet any old acquaintances, I hesitated to assign reasons for such course.

"Uncle seemed to understand this, and at once said:

"'No, you must not go home yet. We have much important work to do, and must soon quit London. We would leave to-day but for a little matter here.'

"We then decided to stop at a secluded hotel, where identification would be doubtful, and when

Uncle Thomas finished that 'little matter' would take a trip.

"During several days I saw little of Uncle Thomas. He did not stay at the hotel, but made brief daily visits. One evening he called, and said:

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"How would my little girl like a sea voyage?"

"I gleefully replied:

"That would be splendid!"

"Well, be ready to-morrow morning at seven. I will be here then."

"With these words he left.

"Upon the next day Uncle Thomas appeared. Taking out of a traveling-bag a pretty gown, neat jacket, and stylish hat, he told me to put these on, comb my hair low over the temples, and wear a veil, which was then produced.

"I made the change, and the simple disguise was quite effective.

"Uncle Thomas looked droll in old-fashioned long-tailed coat, ample trousers, sorrel whiskers, and silk tile.

"We took a closed carriage for the train, and in short time were on our way to Southampton, where soon after passage was procured on an ocean steamer for Bombay. Uncle Thomas had said nothing about his plans; I was ready to go anywhere away from London, and would trust my uncle's judgment implicitly.

"He had suggested that I speak to no one on the train, at the wharf, or aboard ship. This disguise should be kept up during the journey.

"In the privacy of my cabin Uncle Thomas explained that he wished our identity unknown, as persons were on the vessel whom it was necessary for him to 'shadow.' To watch the movements of these was his main reason for sailing so suddenly. Keeping track of them had been his work for some time in London. Learning their intention to sail from Southampton on this steamer, he had decided to take the trip. These had come from London on the same train. They were booked for Calcutta, but would land at Bombay.

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"Uncle Thomas was 'shadowing' two noted criminals. I must not be inquisitive, but Uncle Tom would tell all about it at the proper time. If on the voyage he appeared to neglect me, it would be to watch and checkmate these cunning rascals. If any one acted strangely or seemed to watch me, I was to appear unconcerned. He would take charge of the clothes which I had worn at and since the Thames assault until our departure from the London hotel.

"Much impressed by uncle's precautions, I strictly observed them during the whole voyage, never entered the dining-room, and rarely went on deck. Meals were served in my cabin.

"Uncle Thomas made many brief calls, speaking cheerily, but never referring to his interesting watch. The few times I saw him on deck he seemed not to know me.

"Only once during the whole trip did it appear to me that Uncle Thomas was alert.

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"A slim, dudish man, with close-cut, coal-black beard and heavy mustache, carelessly passed by, but seemed to give some signal, simply a slight backward turn of the wrist. Uncle turned abruptly and went below.

"After a tedious voyage, we landed at Bombay.

"Uncle Thomas had said that if possible he would secure private rooms somewhere in the city.

"From the landing this same dudish-looking man and two others went away together. Then uncle and I left, and after some time found three nicely furnished rooms in a private house, which we occupied during our stay in Bombay."

At this point in the narrative Sir Donald grows eager, and looks at the striking, flushed face of this beautiful girl with an admiring, querulous stare. New light is dawning upon some reported occurrences in that far Indian seaport. But it is apparent that Alice has grown weary with the strain of recital.

Sir Donald suggests deferring further explanations for half an hour while he attends to some small errands. Seeing Esther and Charles, he tells them not to stay in on his account.

Promptly at the appointed time Sir Donald is back for the story's continuance.

"In about a week after arrival at Bombay Uncle Thomas said:

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"I have kept some things secret for fear of worrying you at a time when you required rest and quiet. The sea voyage has done you much good, and you are now strong enough to help me a little in my work. While traveling through different countries at times I have been engaged in detective employment. The job now on hand staggers me. I am trailing two of the most adroit villains that ever committed crime. Embezzlement, perjury, conspiracy, attempts to kill and murder are some of the offenses these have committed. Perhaps you have heard their names? Pierre and Paul Lanier."

"I gave a scream.

"Do not be alarmed, little girl! Uncle Tom will take good care of you.'

"Uncle Thomas had arrived in London a few days after the report of Thames drownings was published. Careful inquiry into all the circumstances made it clear to him that the Laniers killed both Oswald Langdon and me. Aided by an assistant, he went to work on the case.

"He and this man shadowed both Laniers and William Dodge at London. Through this assistant was learned that a young woman, wounded nigh unto death, had been rescued from the river by four disreputable characters, and that for weeks she lodged in an old cabin, and only a few days before left for her home in the city. [325]

"These facts had been related by an old colored woman who nursed the girl back to life and shielded her from indignities attempted by one of these brutes.

"Feeling strong assurance that this girl might be his niece, he made diligent search, going to numerous hotels and other places, but never stating his purpose nor giving any hint of this settled conviction.

"On the morning of my leaving the inn he learned that a costermonger had found a young woman, sick and bewildered, who, having lost her way, was taken by him to a public-house. He learned the man's name and home. Finding him, the desired information was given. Rapidly driving to the inn, he entered, and saw my embarrassment. After my hurried departure he made some careless inquiry about an object of assumed interest, soon left, and found me trying to evade identification by running away from my own Uncle Tom.

"He understood my reasons for not wishing to go home, and thought I acted wisely. Uncle Thomas said:

"Alice, if you will be brave and help me, we will yet outwit those villainous Laniers.

"It will be hard for you at times, and most disgusting, but the aim justifies the means. The big estate stolen from your father by Pierre Lanier yet may be recovered, and perhaps both Laniers be brought to strict account for the murder of Oswald Langdon. I will devote time and money to this purpose, and need your help.' [326]

"To this generous appeal I could not be indifferent. While dreading the thought of having anything to do with these cruel foes, refusal would be base ingratitude. In fear I promised, but then had no idea of such long, terrible mixing in future 'shadowings.' The fearful part I was to play could not then have been clear to uncle's mind, but grew out of the situation's intensely dramatic promptings and tragic power.

"Through this same assistant who had helped keep watch of the Laniers, Uncle Thomas was advised as to their conduct since arrival at Bombay. This man had come from London and Southampton with them. He lodged at the same hotel.

"Paul freely spent money with a number of young fellows, who gave him information about the wealthier people of the city.

"Pierre and Paul were reported as very rich. They were seeking acquaintance with wealthy Bombay families. Both had been invited to a social function at the home of a prominent man.

"Uncle Thomas said:

"Alice, the money Paul is spending rightfully belongs to you. This red-handed wretch will try to marry some aristocratic heiress. How fine to snare him into a trap!' [327]

"Then he suggested that with little difficulty I could assume an effectual disguise.

"Your previous voice-culture will help out the ruse. The Laniers doubt not that you are lying in the Thames. Neither Lanier knows me. There may be a few people in Bombay who would recognize your Uncle Tom. I will avoid such, and as a precaution assume a new disguise. Through this assistant of mine I will acquire reputation of immense wealth. As Sir Charles Chesterton, a bachelor and multi-millionaire I will soon be an object of social interest. Much attention will be paid you as the niece and heir of such a rich uncle. You will be known as Agnes Randall. Thoroughly disguised and under these assumed names, we will entertain the Laniers. By playing well our parts, perhaps the whole Lanier conspiracy may be laid bare, these wretches be brought to strict account, and you recover your father's stolen estate.'

"Looking into my eyes, Uncle Thomas soothingly said:

"Take plenty of time to think about it, little girl. Uncle Tom always will be within call, and never let you be harmed. Be brave, and it will come out all right. What proper avenging of Brother William's death, your own wrongs, and of Oswald Langdon's murder!' [328]

"With but faint hint of terrible after strain, nerved by these strong appeals, I entered into this fearful covenant.

"Soon after this conversation Sir Charles Chesterton and Agnes Randall received invitations to a ball given by a prominent Bombay resident. They there met Paul Lanier.

"Formally presented, Paul soon became very affable, paying marked attention to both niece and

uncle. From the first, Paul appeared predisposed in favor of these new acquaintances.

"I was shocked, feeling a sense of fear mingled with utter aversion. The past so overwhelmed me as to render even common civilities loathsome, yet I endeavored to play the part assigned.

"Gayeties of the occasion helped to ease my emotional strain, but when all was over I felt much relieved.

"Uncle Thomas was greatly elated. He praised my acting, predicting success.

"That assistant had dropped suggestive hints concerning Chesterton wealth, and about a will bequeathing to favorite niece the bulk of a princely fortune.

"During the evening Uncle Thomas found opportunities for brief chats with Paul, and had been very pleasant. [329]

"Paul appeared favorably impressed with Uncle Thomas. He hardly had deigned to notice any one except Agnes Randall and Sir Charles Chesterton.

"After this ball I often felt uneasy and presentiments of dread. In dreams appeared vivid reproductions of past scenes.

"Uncle Thomas startled me with the announcement that he had invited Paul Lanier to dine at our apartments. We were to royally entertain Paul, but would be 'duly reserved, as befitted our wealthy and aristocratic tastes.'

"This affair passed off without hitch. Within two days Paul called.

"Uncle Thomas and I treated him with apparent consideration. When Paul was leaving, uncle said:

"Call any time and often, Mr. Lanier.'

"Paul seemed greatly pleased with uncle's cordiality, and left smiling.

"Seeing how frightened I was, Uncle Thomas said:

"Uncle Tom always will be eavesdropping when that lover calls.'

"My uncle had met Pierre Lanier. Shortly following Paul's call, Pierre received an invitation to dine with Sir Charles Chesterton. Uncle Thomas proved a most entertaining host, telling of many thrilling adventures in which he had personal part. His recitals greatly interested Pierre. [330]

"To me it seemed that uncle frequently had been mixed up in doubtful schemes, but always evaded detection. I began to doubt his morals, and finally concluded he had been a cruel, heartless trickster.

"Pierre seemed to note my pained embarrassment, and checked some vague hints at his own villainous past.

"I suffered much during Pierre's stay. Having thought Uncle Thomas the soul of honor, engaged in a high-principled crusade against crime, generously sacrificing time and means to punish guilt and to right the wrongs of the helpless, to hear him in low tones glibly telling of villainous performances, often furtively glancing at me as if fearing I might catch the drift of his talk, made me heartsick with growing mistrust and painful forebodings. Uncle's narratives had been so realistic that I began to dread Pierre's departure. My face must have expressed some of these feelings, for when Pierre left, Uncle Thomas looked me straight in the eyes and banteringly said:

"What a villainous fellow Uncle Tom is, anyhow! I never knew before I was so bad! If that close-mouthed old wretch dines here often, my little girl will think him better than Uncle Tom!' [331]

"I began to see uncle's crafty tactics, and must have looked at him in a questioning, half-apologetic way.

"Uncle Thomas responded with:

"Oh, you little suspicious innocence! I was only pumping.'

"I felt a heavy load lift from my heart, with growing admiration for this wonderful uncle who could so dissemble. The thought that I, too, might act such part and lure the cruel, vindictive, infatuated Paul by consummate deceit now became fascinating.

"Uncle Thomas's cunning suggested great possibilities in clearing the Lanier conspiracy. Neither Pierre nor Paul suspected my identity. They then thought Alice Webster at the bottom of the Thames. All friends believed me dead. I could return to London only when past conduct was justified. Without this horrible affair fully cleared, there could be nothing in life for me. What pressing claims awaited my actions! Here only was opportunity.

"For many long years father's wrongs had been awaiting avenging; Oswald Langdon was sleeping in Thames slime; I was an exile, robbed of home and fortune; and the guilty Laniers were at large, seeking to ensnare another victim.

"As supposed heir to fabulous wealth, how the real heiress would be avenged! With what dissembling arts the infatuated Paul would be lured to unwitting confessions! Through feminine [332]

wiles I would learn the facts of Lanier guilt, and bring both to justice. Why longer fear any harm from either of these cruel foes?

"Nerved by these sentiments, I became impatient for the test. Since through such strain, maidenly scruples had been stifled, I felt equal to any demands upon my dissembling arts.

"Both uncle and niece attended other social gatherings at which the Laniers were present.

"Though Pierre and Paul were much flattered by Bombay élite, they seemed most interested in Sir Charles Chesterton and Agnes Randall.

"The girl appeared to enjoy Paul's attentions. Soon it was rumored that Paul and Agnes were engaged.

"Paul proposed, and was conditionally accepted. He asked uncle's consent, who insisted on an inventory of all property belonging to the Laniers. Paul furnished the list. Uncle Thomas took time to look it over, and made copies. Concealed in a folding wardrobe, that assistant heard all Paul's talk.

"Paul called often. Through questions and hints from me, he told much of his past life, but gave wrong names, places, and dates. I would appear pleased at any story which promised some revelation as to Calcutta or London incidents. Paul was vague, and would abruptly change the subject. Then I appeared bored and listless, when he would tell more, but less disconnected, stories about his past. At each suggestive hint I would show renewed interest, again lapsing into listless preoccupation, uneasy dissatisfaction, or frigid unconcern. Paul noted each changing mood, suiting his conduct to these varying caprices. [333]

"At times I would feel an overwhelming sense of disgust at such deceitful, unmaidenly occupation. Past recollections intruded with startling clearness.

"Looking at the infatuated Paul, whose fingers, then nervously twitching, surely would strangle me if he knew, I often shuddered and felt deathly sick, but from such sensations rallied, with strong resolve well to act my part.

"Even these moods appeared to interest Paul, who was most persistently attentive.

"Through uncle's advice, Paul's calls were limited. Though dreading these visits, there yet was a sort of fascination in my strange part. The reaction from such strain was so depressing that I sought relief in renewed excitement, and despite fear and loathing, felt a growing passion and feverish zeal for success in outwitting these villains who were responsible for all my sorrows. The more to stimulate Paul's disclosures of past villainies, I made suggestive hints at infatuation for dubious exploits and admiration of cruel, vengeful, crafty successes which elude detection. [334]

"Paul grows more confidently boastful, omitting many connecting circumstances.

"All the main facts of his Northfield and London crimes are related, but with ingenious disguises.

"For some of the parts in these tragedies, fictitious characters are substituted in place of real actors and the places are changed.

"I appear wonderfully thrilled at these recitals, and ask many questions about obscure parts, insisting on frequent repetitions.

"Pierre Lanier accepted numerous invitations to dine with Sir Charles Chesterton.

"At first Uncle Thomas showed lack of interest in Pierre's guarded talk. As the intimacy between the two grew closer, Pierre relaxed much of his secretive caution. Over their glasses Uncle Thomas and Pierre seemed to compete with each other in tales of villainous performances. When Pierre grew unusually confidential, and touched on Calcutta or London crimes, Uncle Thomas would show signs of approval, but sometimes appeared to caution his guest against indiscreet revelations. After relating some horrible yarns about his own successes in amassing fabulous wealth and merciless crushing of all who impeded him in such schemes, Uncle Thomas would say: [335]

"'It is not proper for me to enjoin secrecy. I know you will never betray a friend's trust.'

"Pierre grows more confidential. He boasts of having acquired vast interests in Calcutta and India. With some changes, he tells about his heartless persecution, under friendly guise, of a slow-witted, unsuspecting, rich Englishman, a former associate in large business enterprises.

"Having induced this partner to make some large cash advances upon collaterals, and himself received the bulk of the money, he then brought about a crisis in which the Englishman required much ready funds. When, through Pierre's scheme, it became impossible for the partner to tide over such shortage, a Shylock accomplice, upon most grinding terms, advanced from cash formerly loaned by Pierre's unsuspecting victim a sufficient sum briefly to postpone the accounting. When the debts matured, payment was demanded. The helpless debtor made frantic attempts to raise the money, but failed.

"These pledged collaterals had been turned over to the last money-lender, but in reality to Pierre Lanier, who claimed to have lost them in a recent robbery.

"The creditor was obdurate, threatening legal proceedings to enforce his claims. Pierre enlarged [336]

upon the probability that all his partner's personal estate, if sold under the hammer, would not pay these debts. His business associate then would be worse than penniless. He induced the frantic debtor to deed him all real property except a small parcel in London, promising to sell at advantage, pay the claims, and faithfully account for the residue.

"After the deed had been delivered, Pierre induced this accomplice to threaten his harassed victim with arrest for fraud and conspiracy in thus disposing of all property.

"Under guise of friendly adviser, Pierre appeared much worried over his partner's troubles. He magnified the impending disgrace of bankruptcy and imprisonment.

"The proud, sensitive debtor, after a few days' hopeless worry, goaded by threats, made desperate through Pierre's crafty, hypocritical sympathy and deceitful insinuations, was found in the river.

"This partner had one child, a girl, who afterward died. There had been attempts to deprive Pierre of this property, which was now of great value. All adverse claims had been quieted. The shares of stock had advanced and dividends were regular. From the proceeds he and Paul were insured luxurious living and large, increased incomes, with swelling bank credits. [337]

"At times Pierre would seem to repent of his confidences and to plan against discovery by some adroit qualifications, but Uncle Thomas eased all concern by saying:

"'Oh, that's all right! I am deeper in the pool than you.'

"Whenever Pierre told of these exploits, the assistant was listening. Uncle Thomas kept his promise to act as eavesdropper during Paul's calls.

"After both Pierre and Paul had confided many of the facts of their criminal conspiracy and other offenses, Uncle Thomas told me that he purposed taking a trip to Calcutta. Thus might be learned details of what Pierre had suggested but ingeniously disguised. Perhaps, if we went together, the Laniers might grow suspicious. He would not leave me in Bombay if I feared to remain. I could limit Paul's calls to suit myself, and that assistant would be at my service.

"Trembling at the thought of being alone in Bombay, Uncle Thomas far off in Calcutta, and the Laniers making frequent calls, I felt desolate at the outlook. He guessed at my emotions, and said:

"'Just say the word, little girl, and Uncle Tom stays!'

"I then advised him to go alone, but to return as soon as possible. [338]

"Upon hearing of uncle's intentions, Pierre concluded to sail for Calcutta at the same time. Learning that I purposed remaining in Bombay, Paul decided that he did not care then to take another sea voyage.

"Uncle Thomas was gratified at both conclusions. He could use Pierre in Calcutta, and though it good to separate these rascals for a while.

"I felt much relieved that but one of these dreaded foes would remain in Bombay during uncle's absence. Uncle Thomas and Pierre Lanier sailed together.

"Paul made frequent calls. By practicing all sorts of capricious humors, I sought to smother feelings of dread and aversion, but at times became so interested in these deceitful practices and in watching their effects upon Paul as to forget former persecutions. While thus absorbed, it often seemed that the past had been but a cruelly delusive dream. It could not be that the soft, insinuating tones of Paul Lanier masked such base, bloody purposes. Those bejeweled fingers, tremulously eager to caress, surely were not those of a red-handed murderer! Yet if my wiles succeeded, those hands would wear manacles, those fingers convulsively clutch at vacancy, and that musical voice choke with tense strain of the hangman's knot. [339]

"At such times pity would unnerve my strong resolve, but Paul's realistic repetitions of his crimes dispelled such illusions, and I again aspired to be a scheming, determined Nemesis, aided by lure of woman's craft.

"Some time before uncle's return I had received a letter stating when he would sail, but did not tell Paul until after his arrival in Bombay. Then, with assumed glee, I informed him that uncle had left Calcutta and within a week would be back. His letter was cheerful, and he seemed to be very happy. I requested him to defer again calling for two days.

"Paul called on Thursday evening.

"Uncle Thomas, that assistant, and I had prepared a great surprise.

"I often had noticed that Paul was very superstitious, fearful of unreal dangers. It occurred to me that a scare would be suitable entertainment for Paul's last visit. Uncle Thomas had planned our departure from Bombay for Calcutta on the next steamer. The vessel would sail on Friday morning, and our passage already had been engaged. We would go aboard soon after midnight, and the ship was to sail in the early morning.

"I chose a tableau for Paul. Aided by Uncle Thomas and that assistant, the performance was staged. During that day there had been two rehearsals. That assistant manipulated the lights. [340]

Uncle Thomas had produced a copy of *London Press* containing a graphic account of the Thames drownings. This he ornamented with heavy red headlines. The paper is lying on a small table in uncle's room.

"Dressed in that Thames clothing, over which hangs a draping of seaweed, my hair combed back from the temples, I await Paul's evening call.

"With loaded pistols Uncle Thomas occupies my room. Fully armed, the assistant is hiding in the folding wardrobe.

"The house-servant is directed to admit any male caller into the room usually occupied by Sir Charles Chesterton.

"The bell is soon rung, and Paul is ushered according to directions.

"Pouring over my head a pitcher of warm water, daubing the temple scar with thin, red liquid paint, from darkened room I watch Paul through slightly open connecting door, which has been effectively braced against pressure from that side.

"Paul picks up the paper, glares frightfully, turns deathly pale, and shakes with fear.

"Just then, with uplifted hand, I slowly enter, approaching Paul as if to strike him down. Paul falls upon the floor, begging me to spare him. [341]

"Slowly stepping backward, and passing into the next room, I softly close the connecting door. Quickly slipping off the disguise, removing the paint-stains and arranging my hair, I recite parts of a poem about Eugene Aram, then light the gas and say something about Mr. Lanier being late. Paul opens the connecting door, and I explain how the mistake occurred.

"Paul seems satisfied, but nervous. He remains longer than usual, appearing afraid to leave. As midnight is near, I assume a listless air of indifference. Paul takes the hint, and goes.

"Shortly afterward, two vehicles drive up. Trunks are first taken, accompanied by that assistant sleuth. Disguised in suit of his clothes, I enter the other conveyance. Uncle Thomas soon follows. In a short time after bidding Paul Lanier good-night, I was asleep aboard the steamer, and did not awake until miles at sea."

Sir Donald intently had listened to that part of the girl's narrative about the trip from London to Southampton, and thence to Bombay. His wonder and admiration grew with her frank, dramatic, yet timid recital of tactics employed to elicit incriminating clues from the secretive Laniers. Alice had shown marked heroism remaining alone at Bombay, and in her strange treatment of the infatuated Paul. These experiences had left an indelible impress upon Alice, whose confiding sincerity and generous impulsiveness always must bear effects of the shock, but that tableau and recital revealed a tragic craft foreign to such a nature, bordering the verge of madness. [342]

How under pressure intense natures evolve new traits and latent powers become dominant!

Seeing that Sir Donald seemed in a reverie, Alice awaited invitation to proceed. Her face bore such a weary, questioning look that he proposed that they join Esther and Charles. To this Alice nervously objected, saying:

"I ought to see Uncle Thomas."

Sir Donald then suggested that she see her uncle, and that both dine with his family. Alice objected with some energy, closing with these words:

"Not until my whole story is told will I meet Esther or your son."

Sir Donald admired the commendable deference and spirit of the girl's sentiments. It was then arranged that on the following day Alice would finish her story.

The next afternoon the recital is continued.

"Though the trip from Bombay to Calcutta was rough, I felt great relief. The strain since arrival at Bombay had been fearful. Sitting on deck, gently swaying with the ship's motion, watching seabirds, looking at approaching squalls or tossing in stress of tropic storms, proved a restful quiet for my fevered consciousness. Such change reversed the whole current of thought, driving away the awful past. Neither Lanier would harass me on this journey. [343]

"Uncle Thomas left his old-time assistant at Bombay to shadow Paul. Arrangements to communicate with each other had been made. If Paul should quit Bombay, that assistant would be on the same vessel. We surmised that Paul would join his father at Calcutta.

"On board ship, Uncle Thomas and I assumed new disguises. In Calcutta we were known as father and daughter.

"Later Uncle Thomas often met Pierre Lanier, but himself remained unknown.

"Soon after our arrival, that assistant landed at Calcutta and reported to Uncle Thomas. Paul and he came from Bombay on the same ship.

"After the tenants left, Paul had called at Chesterton apartments. To his questions the family could give no satisfactory information. Paul seemed much worried over the removal of Agnes

Randall. He received a letter and awaited departure of next steamer for Calcutta.

"Paul engaged passage and was booked as 'Josiah Peters.' He was disguised as an old man, with stooping walk and white, flowing beard.

"Uncle Thomas continued his investigations of Calcutta property interests formerly owned by my father, but gained little further information. [344]

"Both Pierre and Paul were closely watched. Uncle enlisted the head of Calcutta police department to help shadow these men and to keep him advised of their conduct. From him uncle learned that you and Esther were there. You had been making search and inquiry for the Dodge family. In hopes to gain helpful clues and to keep posted as to exact condition of other investigations of Lanier crimes, that assistant shadowed you and Esther. At the same time Uncle Thomas and the police watched the Laniers.

"The assistant was a slim, dark-complexioned, trim man, with black close-cut whiskers and heavy mustache, but posed as an old, shabbily dressed fellow, with halting gait, gray hair, and snow-white beard, moving feebly by aid of a cane.

"Pierre had been traced to a cabin in a poor part of the city, where lived a needy woman with a family of small children. The Laniers inquired about the probable time when a certain vessel was expected, and haunted the landing. Night of the ship's arrival both visited this cabin and afterward saw passengers go ashore. One of these followed Pierre."

Alice now told about the Laniers and this stranger going to that deserted house in city suburb; how Pierre and Paul again called at the cabin, and of visit from veiled woman next day at that old house. Unexpected swoop of police and arrest of the three men followed. The stranger was William Dodge, and veiled caller his wife. As Sir Donald knew these facts, she would not relate them, further than to explain some things which he might wish to know. [345]

"Aided by Calcutta police, Uncle Thomas closely watched every movement of the Laniers, while his assistant shadowed you and Esther.

"Through you the police official learned that William Dodge was expected on the next steamer, and about his being in danger from these villains. In the same way the proposed meeting in that deserted house was discovered.

"Precautions against assaults upon Mr. and Mrs. Dodge were taken.

"Uncle Thomas and his assistant thought the time had come for a bold move. By arresting both Laniers and William Dodge the whole conspiracy would be confessed. William Dodge would accuse the Laniers, and they would implicate him. With Paul's and Pierre's Bombay confidences, corroborated by Dodge's expected confession, conviction of the Laniers would follow. William Dodge would explain that in bringing the London suit he was only a pliant tool of the Laniers, and they would blame all on him. Then he would retaliate by telling about the Thames murders. These recriminations, the vague Bombay confessions, supplemented by other facts already known, and further information obtainable through such powerful clues, would unravel the whole web of criminal connivance, bringing both Pierre and Paul to strict account." [346]

Alice then told of the tactics employed, William Dodge's Calcutta confession, and the Lanier reserve. Dodge had no actual knowledge of Paul's assaults upon Alice and Oswald, but related what he knew of the circumstances. He fully explained his and Lanier complicity in bringing the suit, with all after procedure in the action, including its dismissal.

Alice narrated some parts of this confession, which agreed with that formerly made in Paris hospital by William Dodge. It was full, but disappointing.

"Strenuous efforts to induce the Laniers to talk were fruitless. They made no responses. We surmised that neither cared to assert his rights by demanding a hearing or trial. They were kept jailed several weeks, in expectation of some revelations. At last the officers and Uncle Thomas decided to turn them loose, but still to keep William Dodge in custody. Thus might Lanier conduct be observed without danger of this important witness being spirited away or forever silenced. [347]

"William Dodge himself did not protest against his continued imprisonment.

"For a few days Pierre and Paul nervously moved about in Calcutta, and then quit the city.

"That assistant left at the same time, and following them to different points, reaches London, lodging across an alley, in full view of the basement stairway leading to the room occupied by Pierre and Paul.

"For a long time after the Laniers sailed, Uncle Thomas and I remained in Calcutta.

"Letters telling of Lanier movements came from that assistant to Uncle Thomas. Then during the following weeks nothing was heard. We began to worry, fearing some accident had happened. Perhaps he had fallen victim to Lanier vengeance. This would be most unfortunate for me. Sufficient facts already had been discovered upon which to base actions against Pierre Lanier for frauds upon the estate of my father, and for that London conspiracy involving the suit begun by William Dodge. I could not think of such notoriety until the Thames assaults and murder were cleared, and never would risk public scandal among friends in London.

"These were the motives inducing uncle to advise that Pierre and Paul be released from Calcutta [348]

imprisonment. Too, the murder of Oswald Langdon must be avenged."

Sir Donald smiled at Alice's earnest explanations, but awaited her story's ending.

"At length came a letter from London informing Uncle Thomas of Lanier arrivals and shadowings by his old-time helper. We soon after sailed for England. Full details were given by that assistant, and with much zeal Uncle Thomas resumed his former work.

"Much of the time I kept out of public view, lodging at the obscure inn.

"Pierre seldom left the basement room at night, but Paul then made many strange excursions, often prowling up and down the Thames.

"The assistant began to notice queer freaks in Paul's conduct. The first evidences of these were after their return to London.

"The reports startled me, as it seemed Paul feared I yet might rise from the river, and that he was determined to prevent it. Many nights Paul would skulk along the river-banks and peer over into the Thames from the place where we had been struck into the stream. Later he took boat-rides up and down the river, past this spot, closely scrutinizing projecting shrubs until opposite the rustic seat, when, rowing back and forth across the river, Paul would pause and strike at some reflection from the water, then be seated and drift downstream. [349]

"As these incidents were related by that assistant and Uncle Thomas, I felt horrible dread. This craze of Paul's seemed almost a judgment upon my head. Such determined malice against the girl he had slain, yet feared still might rise from her slimy grave, was beyond belief, yet I could not doubt the evidences. My curiosity was increased, and I felt a strong desire to witness Paul's new infatuation. In male disguise I watched from hiding some of this madman's night performances upon and along the river.

"Though at first dreadfully shocked and nearly dead with fright, my curiosity grew with each watch. Uncle Thomas refused longer indulgence, except at rare intervals.

"Before our arrival at London that assistant had followed Paul to Northfield.

"Paul's conduct there had been strange, but he seemed desirous of learning the whereabouts of you and Esther.

"Later, Paul again visited Northfield, and I witnessed some of his actions. Uncle Thomas, the assistant, and I were hidden in thick shrubbery near the spot where Northfield visitors often sat along the lake. Paul had been skulking through the woods, but could not see us. Between us and him was that steep ravine. Suddenly Paul struck a tragic pose, lifted his right hand, advanced a few steps, then slowly stepped backward out of sight beyond a cluster of bushes. [350]

"These movements, though very startling, were followed by still greater surprises.

"Soon out of leafy stillness came quotations from that poem partly declaimed by me at Bombay.

"Such utterances at that time and place from this crazed outlaw, reiterated with madman's unction, were horrible.

"After repetition of phrases, 'buried from my sight,' 'and trodden down with stones,' Paul hesitated, as if pondering the improbability of such fate to his victims' mortal remains; then broke out in a hysterical laugh.

"I was eager, and prompted:

"'And years have rotted off his flesh,'

"Paul turned, facing that way, uttered terrible curses, gave a crazed yell of fear, and stood staring into vacancy, when in deep gutturals I repeated:

"'The world shall see his bones.'

"At this Paul staggered, made wild thrusts with his dagger in direction whence came these promptings, and then fled.

"On the next train, watched by that assistant, Paul returned to London.

"Uncle Thomas and I saw you with Esther rowing upon the lake. This was just after Paul's flight. Until then we did not know of your return from Calcutta. [351]

"I felt a growing interest in Paul's Thames tableaux. One night Uncle Thomas allowed me to watch with him along the river-bank. Paul takes his usual row up the Thames. We are hiding in some shrubbery beyond the rustic seat. Paul's boat arrives opposite that point in the river, and he repeats former performances.

"After steadying the boat with an oar, holding in set teeth that gleaming dagger, moving back and forth across the river, peering over at watery reflections, and making savage thrusts, Paul is again seated, drifting down the stream.

"Uncle Thomas and I are following, when another spy emerges from a cluster of bushes farther down, keeping slightly in rear of the boat, a short distance from shore.

"Uncle and I are a few feet apart. I am ahead. Both of us are eager, but cautious. The grass and bushes rustle, but that spy is too intent for hearing or fear. The chase grows exciting.

"Drifting around a curve, the boat is out of sight. That stranger runs forward, trips and falls on the river's brink. I was alarmed, as it seemed sure that this man would fall into the current. I paused at the edge of leafy foliage. To my relief the fallen man recovers his footing. Giving a look to where I stood partly concealed, he hurries on, badly limping, as if in pain. Uncle Thomas signaled me to keep back, and we followed cautiously at greater distance, but soon after lost sight of this limping spy. [352]

"I was nearly exhausted with the chase. Just before reaching the point of starting, we rested over an hour, and then went to the inn.

"Next day that assistant told of both Pierre and Paul having spent most of the night away from their room. Contrary to custom, Pierre went out first. A few minutes afterward, Paul left, starting in an opposite direction from that taken by his father. Puzzled at this change in Lanier habits, and fearing some new flight, the assistant followed, but soon losing sight of Paul, returned to watch that cellar stairway.

"After midnight, Paul came back. Limping around the corner, faint and exhausted, hours later, Pierre staggered down the stairs.

"We were then sure this spy was Pierre Lanier, who for the first time had witnessed Paul's Thames infatuation. This was confirmed later by Pierre's limping walk.

"It became apparent to Uncle Thomas and his assistant that other shadowings were occurring. Spies upon their actions, as well as those of the Laniers, watched regular shifts. They suspected that in some way you were responsible for this, but doubted that you had any hint of their identity. [353]

"Another discreet helper was employed by Uncle Thomas, to report any interesting happenings at Northfield.

"That you visited London and called at a detective agency was reported. This helper followed you back to Northfield, and reported Charles Randolph's return from abroad. Later the same spy followed your son to London, and told Uncle Thomas at what hotel Charles stopped.

"In slight disguise we quit the inn, going to this hotel, and with but short absences remaining until I was recognized by you and Esther.

"It was known to us that Charles helped shadow the Laniers, often calling at the same detective agency formerly visited by you.

"Both Uncle Thomas and I had noticed that Charles seemed interested in us, but we attributed this to possible detection of our guarded observations of his actions. I sometimes wondered at Charles's interest, fearing that possibly he suspected my identity. At meals this feeling embarrassed me, but Uncle Thomas insisted on our dining at the same time, when he could watch Charles's actions.

"To me it often seemed strange that persons planning for like ends, engaged in similar work to right human wrongs and to punish the guilty, should spy upon each other, scheming and operating at cross-purposes. I hardly could refrain from appealing to Charles to help in my troubles, and from the first was sure he would be such a good, faithful friend. Why should not you, Charles, and Esther become my confidential allies, helping us to unravel this web? I hinted this to Uncle Thomas, who would not think of such a 'rash break.' [354]

"Later on, for a few days, we stopped at the inn.

"It had been reported that Paul was showing quarrelsome traits, and at any time might commit some murderous assault. These agency sleuths had become troublesome, hampering Uncle Thomas in his determined watches upon Lanier conduct. Through competing zeal at any time might occur some unfortunate clash. Those agency employes were argus-eyed, watching each move made by him and his assistants. Doubtless the man sent by Uncle Thomas to Northfield was being shadowed and his doings were reported to agency headquarters.

"For these reasons Uncle Thomas decided that we would return to that obscure inn. This change was made at a late hour, and I went alone. Uncle Thomas left before, and by a long route reached the ambush beyond the rustic seat.

"Next morning he reported that Paul did not appear. Calling at the cabin where that old-time assistant kept watch, Uncle Thomas learned that early the previous evening Paul left, but had not returned. Pierre was in the basement room. [355]

"The following night Uncle Thomas watched along the river, but again was disappointed. Next morning he called upon that assistant, but finding the door securely fastened, returned and slept a few hours. In the afternoon he again called, but could obtain no response.

"That night Uncle Thomas resumed his watch along the Thames. He saw Pierre Lanier prowling up and down the river, followed by that same assistant. Next morning Pierre inquired of police officials as to any arrests made within the last two days and nights. He then returned to the basement room, trailed by that assistant and Uncle Thomas.

"Pierre had gone out the previous morning, during all that day and the following night searching for Paul. The third night after Paul's disappearance was spent by Pierre along the river, trailed as before. Next day Pierre did not return to his room until afternoon.

"In the early evening a letter came by special messenger to Uncle Thomas at the inn. It was from that helper at Northfield, stating that Paul Lanier was then skulking about in the timber along the lake. On the previous night Paul had been close to the Northfield mansion grounds, but evidently became aware that a sentinel was on guard. Paul surely meditated mischief, but the writer thought sufficient precautions against surprise had been taken by Sir Donald Randolph. [356]

The contents of this letter, with knowledge of Paul's crafty malice and murderous zeal, greatly alarmed me. It seemed that ordinary watchfulness would not avail against Paul's crazed, homicidal mania. If you or Esther fell a victim to Paul's knife, it would be chargeable to your friendship for me. Was it right that through acquiescence in any mode of procedure advised by others I should permit such friends to be ruthlessly butchered by a madman?

"To Uncle Thomas I told my fears, but he thought there was little danger to any one at Northfield through Paul's crazy breaks.

"For months this insane wretch has been a harmless lunatic, practicing his night tableaux through some purposeless infatuation."

"With this remark he dismissed the subject, but went out, secured a cab, and drove to that cabin across the alley from the Lanier room. The assistant was directed to take the first train for Northfield, and keep close watch of Paul's every act. Uncle Thomas remained at the cabin.

"After uncle went out I still felt nervous and a strong presentiment that peril hung over the Randolph household. With each effort to think of other things, this feeling grew stronger. There was something so awful as to overpower all habitual obedience to Uncle Thomas. [357]

"I thought of Charles Randolph. Perhaps Charles was at the hotel, unconscious of dangers threatening those he loved. Without any plan of action I caught up the veil presented at London by Uncle Thomas, sped from my room, hailed a passing cabman, urging him to drive fast to that hotel. Going at once to the room occupied by Charles Randolph, I knocked, and was admitted. On the way there I had thought out a mode of broaching the subject to Charles and of hiding my identity, but when in his presence this all became blank, and some other things were said. He promised to go home at once, and I returned to the inn.

"I did not tell Uncle Thomas about this call. He remained at that cabin all night, the next day, and until the following morning.

"I called at the cabin. Uncle Thomas told me that Paul was in London. This seemed strange, but he explained that there was an early morning train from station near the Northfield premises. Paul doubtless came back, on that train, and reached the room before daylight. That day neither Paul nor Pierre was seen on the street. My uncle closely watched the basement room. [358]

"On early morning train of the following day both assistants came from Northfield and hurried to that old cabin. They explained Paul's assault on a guard at entrance to the Northfield mansion grounds and the murder of the sentinel.

"Uncle Thomas acted promptly. He went out and called up a prominent police official, notifying him to bring help and arrest two desperate villains.

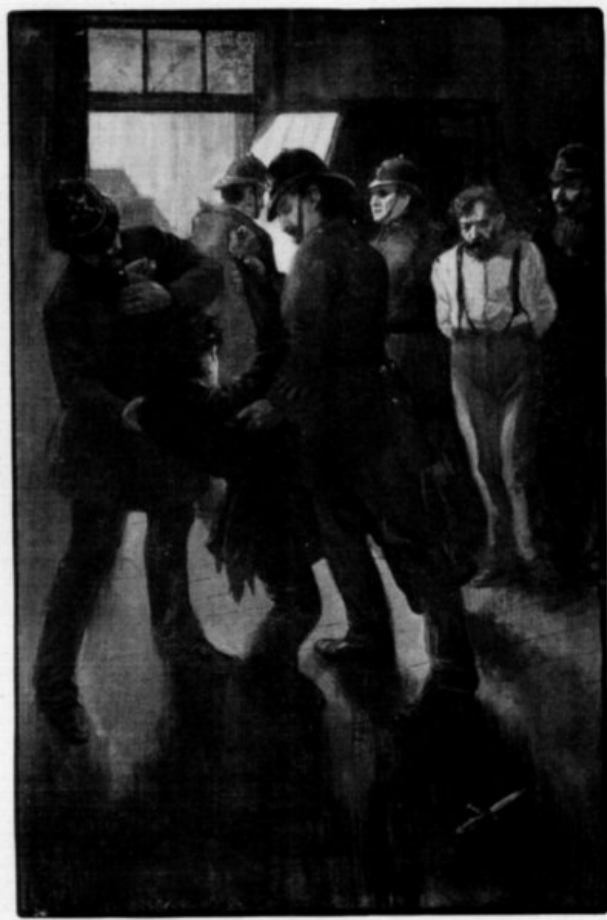
"The three men waited at the entrance to that old stairway until five police officials appeared.

"Listening at the basement door, these heard scuffling inside, curses, and suppressed yells. Then all noises ceased. There was no response to continued knockings. The door yielded to pressure, and the officials entered.

"With dirty, blood-stained clothing, hair disheveled, and face begrimed, froth upon his lips, lay Paul upon the stone floor. Across Paul's breast was Pierre, pale and motionless.

"At first both were thought dead. It was soon discovered that Pierre had only swooned. Water was dashed upon his face. He revived and stared about vacantly. Slowly what had happened dawned upon his mind, but he seemed stupid, saying nothing.

"Pierre intently gazed at Paul's unconscious form, but looked blank when questioned by the officials. [359]



"THEN BEHOLDING PIERRE IRONED AND HELPLESS, PAUL BURST OUT IN A HYSTERICAL LAUGH."

"After some time Paul showed signs of returning consciousness, slowly revived, and seeing his captors, became furious. Then beholding Pierre ironed and helpless, Paul burst out in a hysterical laugh, which was followed by frantic appeals for protection against his father's imagined wrath. Both were taken to prison.

"For various reasons Uncle Thomas then had procured the arrests. As news of that Northfield murder came through his agents, it was his duty to inform the proper officials. For months he and his employes had shadowed both Laniers, witnessing Paul's crazed acts, and it was known that they had done this. These assistants were in the immediate neighborhood of Northfield when this murder occurred. It would be inquired, why such continued shadowings, yet failure to prevent this crime? The whole matter would be thoroughly probed. This murder could not be concealed without guilty responsibility. Proof of Oswald Langdon's death was not conclusive. It never might be clearer with Paul hung or in a madhouse. If we had taken proper action to restrain this madman, the murder never would have occurred. Better to take decisive steps and assist the officers than appear to condone crime. All we had planned and worked for would fare better through prompt procedure. Possibly out of this very tangle might come clearance of the unhappy, troubled past. [360]

"Such motives prompted Uncle Thomas to decisive action in procuring these second arrests of Pierre and Paul Lanier.

"Just how or when my part in this drama is to be revealed neither Uncle Thomas nor I yet have decided. I greatly dread the trial.

"At times I seem standing, dizzy, bewildered, and speechless, upon the brink of a yawning chasm. Then appears a light beyond, beckoning me to try the plunge.

"Occasionally, in day-dreams, a hand, not spectral, but inspiringly real and familiar, seems drawing me toward new earthly life and joy; but such fancies are fleeting. The old dread of social ostracism and of suspicious aversion returns with increased power. I have no consciousness of wrong-doing, yet maidenly ideals have been shocked by my conduct, and the place for Alice Webster is outside the pale of social recognition.

"Afternoon of the day upon which occurred the arrests Uncle Thomas decided again to move. To show no attempt at privacy, we returned to the hotel. Both of us were surprised to see your family in the dining-room.

"Uncle Thomas could act unconcerned under any circumstances, but I felt so helplessly embarrassed. As you and Esther looked so intently I was sure you saw through that simple disguise. A sense of shame at such conduct made me faint and heartsick. To escape this I quit the table, going to my room. Soon after, through the open connecting door, I saw you and Uncle Thomas enter, and then knew a crisis had come. [361]

"Uncle Thomas related what you had said, and I was greatly puzzled. Your reasons for not promising to keep his proposed confidences then and ever since seemed unaccountable. He advised that we return to the inn, there to await clearing of increasing difficulties.

"What since occurred you well know. I hope to be forgiven for all my strange, unmaidenly conduct. The very worst has been told, except that words can never tell the painful experiences and sorrowful memories of the unhappy past."

Pausing, Alice gave a look of questioning appeal into the expressive, sympathetic face of Sir Donald Randolph. He seemed struggling with some unwonted emotional impediment to proper speech. Rising, he extended his hand, took that of this interesting young woman, and bowing low, in a husky voice said:

"Make no apologies, Alice! You are all right."

Alice felt much relieved, but the strain had been great. For a while she leaned back in wearied collapse. [362]

Sir Donald suggested that she await her uncle, while he saw his family. After the evening meal, he would esteem it a favor to have all meet at Esther's room.

This invitation was accepted.

Sir Donald notified Thomas Webster that Alice awaited him, adding:

"What a grand girl!"

CHAPTER XXIV

[363]

OSWALD IN NEW YORK

Oswald awakes early upon his first morning in New York. The significance of present surroundings dawns upon his mind. He is in the metropolis of that country about which so much had been written, told, and dreamed.

What vistas of destiny since that protest and affirmation received the sword's decisive arbitrament! With what sense of opportune occasion these two kindred nations are surely drawing toward that "modus vivendi," tentatively flexible, yet more potential, responsive, and insistent than treaty covenants, "triple alliances," or proscribed "spheres of influence."

But how capricious fate's fast-loose antics with individual destiny!

Not with complacent retrospect and cleared prospective does this intensely impressionable Englishman stand at the threshold of a new world's view.

That complex web remains intact, the dead lifts unavailing hands, justice is laggard, while the name of Langdon shrinks from pending odium. [364]

Springing up, he soon descends to the hotel office. After breakfast he writes that promised letter. Not knowing anything of Sir Donald Randolph's present address or plans, Oswald writes him at Paris.

Being very curious as to the Lanier affair, and to avoid delay, he addresses copies to Calcutta and to Sir Donald's Northfield station. The letter is brief, announcing his safe arrival at New York, intention to remain until some report comes from Sir Donald, and explaining that similar copies will be mailed to each of places named. He would mail and receive all letters at the general postoffice. No reference is made to the Laniers, as he knows Sir Donald will not need such reminder.

That day Oswald remained at the hotel. The notes of a trained orchestra charmed his musical sense, while sight of superbly clad, richly bejeweled hotel guests was interesting diversion.

Next morning he dined at a restaurant near the corner of Thirty-third Street and Broadway. Taking an elevated Sixth Avenue car, he rides to Park Place, thence walking to the postoffice and mailing his three letters. This important move now made, he is ready for sight-seeing.

Standing by the statue of that young patriot whose life was so freely offered upon Freedom's altar, Oswald marveled at such unselfish infatuation as found voice in words: [365]

"I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

Crossing to other side of Broadway, he narrowly escapes collision with an electric car. From the irritated conductor comes:

"Well, chump, you are just off of grass!"

This cheerful compliment is followed by another, more pointedly suggestive, from a wag who calls out:

"Indade yez a bloody jude from owld Loondin, but yez betther moind yer own way, or the polace will copper yez shoor!"

For a few moments the "modus vivendi" is much strained, but Oswald quickly recovers his self-control, and slowly strolls down street, pausing at St. Paul's Chapel.

Having read the chiseled memorial of that American officer who fell in attack upon Quebec, Oswald passes on, turning at Trinity Church into Wall Street.

When at the corner of Nassau, he stands for a few moments in front of the Sub-Treasury Building, looking up at the statue of America's first executive.

This heroic figure is fitting impersonation of successful revolt against oppressive exactions.

Oswald's sense of antithesis pictures in somber background that doomed spy hurried to his fate, and another swinging, strangling shape expiating through hangman's device the proven crime of "high treason." [366]

Such diversions are not conducive to cheerful reverie. His spirits droop lower under the clammy handicap. Memory of those greetings from petulant conductor and guying wag again intrudes.

Oswald is nearly opposite the Custom-House when just before him that newsboy shrieks:

"All about the murder of a young girl! Body found in the river! Police on track of the murderer!"

Tragic memories of those eventful years, augmented by petty, suggestive, yet meaningless recent affronts, shaded by somber-hued reveries, congest about the center of Oswald's sensitive consciousness at the parrot-like yell of a child.

Thought that past concealments and identity known, he now is closely trailed by New York police for the crime of Paul Lanier rouses Oswald's fighting temper to fierce heat.

There is no doubt that under such momentary emotional pressure this guiltless fugitive then would have incurred homicidal accounting by resisting to the death any attempted arrest.

Little Jack's fright at that awful stare was natural. [367]

The scared newsboy again resumes his stereotyped yell at corner of Nassau and Wall Streets.

Oswald had turned back, intending to procure a paper and learn about this reported murder. Returning to Trinity Church, he sees the boy, farther down on opposite side of Broadway, waiting pay for copy then so tenaciously gripped by that careful old financier, who had insisted upon assurance of positive "rigor mortis" as condition precedent to purchase.

Oswald starts across in direct line to where these are standing. At sight of Oswald, little Jack, speedily waiving payment, cuts across Broadway, down Exchange Alley, where he jostles reveries of that brass-buttoned official, and, through official duress, pilots him back to the street. Here Michael Patrick O'Brien hastily fits Jack's description of Oswald to that dazed old man, whom he pompously arrests and valiantly escorts toward "Old Slip" police station.

At a distance of a few rods, Oswald had watched the whole proceeding, and followed, curious to learn cause of the arrest.

Sight of that "willanous-lookin' rascal" still trailing him causes Jack to sidle over Broadway, and ignoring Michael's loud command, disappear at the next crossing.

Oswald concluded that there must be some mistake about this arrest. The man's conduct had appeared void of all criminal intent. The boy seemed to shun Oswald himself, through some unaccountable aversion. Probably the policeman's zeal had caused a serious blunder. The little fellow's strange scare, with hasty, ill-advised official action, resulted in arrest and possible detention of this harmless old gentleman. [368]

Oswald paused to reflect. Why should he concern himself, in a strange land, about such an affair? This mistake soon would be righted. For Oswald to show any interest or make inquiries, might lead to complications. What if he should be required to testify? His real name, former home, and antecedents might be asked. These must be given or he would be committed for contempt. Better not to meddle with this matter.

Oswald boards a Broadway car and gets off at Thirty-third Street. Going to his room, he ponders over the incidents of that morning absence. Recollections of his conduct are not pleasant. The experiences were annoying, but only his own action seems blameworthy. In some way he was responsible for the circumstances leading to arrest of that feeble old man, yet made no explanation or protest. What an initiative in a new world was such selfish, unfeeling discretion! Why hope for exalted aid in his own troubles, while shirking opportunity to help the helpless? [369]

Oswald left the hotel, returning to corner of Wall Street and Broadway. Inquiring of a shop-keeper, "Where are persons arrested in this neighborhood taken by the police?" he receives the answer:

"To police precinct station No. 2."

Going there, Oswald asks about an old man, that morning arrested on Broadway, near Trinity Church.

No such prisoner had been brought to that station.

He learns there will be a session of police court that afternoon at the new Criminal Court Building. The prisoner will be there for arraignment.

Oswald takes the elevated train to Franklin Street, goes over to this building, and awaits opening of that afternoon's session.

Looking about the court-room, he sees that same innocent-appearing old chap, still expostulating with his stern captor, who soothes him with the assurance:

"Yez will warble a different chune at Sing Sing!"

Oswald decides to await the court's action in this case before making any explanations. Possibly [370] no interference may be necessary. He observes that the newsboy is not present.

For over two hours Oswald listens to the proceedings of this tribunal. The docket is cleared of many trivial cases, and more serious matters are sent to the Special or General Sessions.

All this seems strangely offhand and informal, but he reasons that such, being of daily occurrence, sentimental scruples are in natural abeyance.

Michael Patrick O'Brien is signaled by a court official, steps proudly forward, and makes an explanation of his morning's prowess.

With skeptical smile the magistrate looks at that felonious, would-be kidnaper of a juvenile innocent, and asks for the boy.

Michael explains little Jack's sprinting performance, adding:

"It was ivident, yer honner, that the skeert child feart that owld vilyun more than the noime of the law."

Just then an officer who had been on duty near the South Ferry stepped forward and cleared the situation.

"This old man is a peaceful, respected resident, living a little way from Battery Park. He has grown sons and daughters in the city. With a score of grandchildren making bedlam at his home, it is not likely he would steal a newsboy." [371]

The old man looked both relieved and vexed. This unexpected intervention would help him out of trouble, but he preferred not being recognized in such a rôle. At the station he had refused to tell his name or residence.

With a smile, the judge said:

"Turn your kidnapper loose!"

Escorted by the crestfallen Michael, he left, returning to the station for money and watch.

The last words Oswald heard from this diplomatic representative of New York man-catchers were:

"Indade yez in luck to have inflooz! It was me own resarve that yez did not git the limits! If iver Oi nades a rickomindashun, yer noime will head the soobscripshun!"

Oswald learned that in the vicinity of this arrest, Broadway was the dividing line between police precincts Nos. 1 and 2. Having been arrested on the east side of Broadway, the old man was taken to precinct station No. 1, or "Old Slip."

Michael Patrick O'Brien was not a member of the regularly appointed city police force. He was a special, this being his initial exploit.

Oswald viewed numerous objects of interest while awaiting that letter from Sir Donald Randolph. Though aware that through uncertainty of Sir Donald's stay at any particular place there might [372] be prolonged delay, he feels sure that when his letter is received, answer will be prompt.

Often is felt unutterable loneliness. There is nothing like immense crowds of strangers in a strange land to make individual segregation absolute.

At times only that image-something, somehow, from somewhere, reflected into recesses of his consciousness, avails against childish fretting and petulant protest. From outer or inner depths, occasionally come suggestive glimpses and assuring voices.

The first Sabbath after his arrival in New York Oswald attended church. Not since that Northfield visit had this son of a clergyman heard a sermon or prayer.

The familiar ritual of the Episcopal Church is not used, yet responsive chords vibrate to some mystic touch. The church is plain and music faulty. In pulpit utterances there is nothing strikingly trite or profound. The preacher has none of oratorical gifts. Oswald cannot account for his own interest. While those imperfectly sharpened and flatted notes are sounding, he wonders if that peculiarly adjusted, harmonious Sense, quickening at scream of seagull or roar of ravenous beast, would not miss these poorly pitched tones more than Gabriel's highest or Creation's ever-echoing oratorio. [373]

Listening to doctrinal directions as to ceremonial observances radically differing from other beliefs, Oswald thinks of the big-hearted Father, tenderly amused at zeal of His children in their many ways of seeking that coveted smile.

Despite these surroundings, the morning's moods had been so comfortable that in the evening Oswald attended services at one of New York's prominent churches, where he listened to grand music by a skillful choir, and a scholarly sermon from an able preacher.

But the emotional key ranged capriciously.

A good-looking assistant, in dictatorial tones, told the world's Helper what was expected. The choir sang well a hymn, the burden of which was expressed in oft-repeated phrase:

"Save Thy servant who trusteth in Thee."

Oswald found himself wondering if there ever were any real need for such prayer. Loss of one such trusting, faithful soul would drape the stars in blackest bunting.

After the reading of scriptural selections, a slim, consumptive-looking youth, with a sympathetic, long-range voice, exquisitely sang a solo, the most effective part of which was:

"O Israel, He redeemeth thee."

From recollections of Bible accounts, Oswald thought Israel required frequent redemption, though that apostrophized by the impressive exclamation was neither exclusively nor peculiarly Semitic. [374]

The preacher's theme was "Overcoming the World."

Though the subject was ably and eloquently treated, that listener found his ideas ranging at various angles to those of the speaker. It seemed so characteristic of venerable manhood to dwell on old heroes whose exploits impressed youthful fancy, so hard to canonize any person whom we had met and understood.

In commenting upon great deeds of famous men, the nearest approach to present times was the preacher's reference to George Washington.

During the week Oswald had been reading about conspicuous actors in the American Civil War, and still more recent history of the Republic. Martial dreams had been renewed. While those ancient notables were being paraded before that congregation, others more recent posed upon Oswald's "boards."

Tall, lank ghost, thy patient, kindly brow marred by assassin's lead! Mighty warrior shade, bearing upon thy tense, heroic face traces of Mount McGregor's pain! Thou from Atlanta march! Thou from Winchester ride! Thou from Mentor Mecca, thy glazing orbs lighting with boyhood's longing for ocean's trackless wave! And ye mighty hosts of marching and countermarching nineteenth-century worthies, witness bear to worth of your most thrilling times! [375]

Still that sermon was very well prepared, and doubtless met the preacher's critical approval.

It ought not to be expected that this able divine gauge his expressed thoughts by fancies of an erratic youth under abnormal, emotional pressure.

Gazing at some of those richly attired communicants as in elegant carriages they were driven homeward, Oswald wondered if it were easy or hard for such to "overcome the world."

Though shunning the forming of any intimate friendships, Oswald longed for that sympathy which comes from human contact. Watching the exchanges of mutual good-will between many, he envied their freedom from his own restraints. At times even effusive flutterings of social butterflies seemed rational compared with such hampering reserve and forced discretion.

Oswald was an omnivorous reader, but never could restrain his interest to set pace of the author's art. In this haste many little touches of sentiment were overlooked, but strong points were quickly grasped and held by a tenacious memory. His waking hours were occupied mostly in sight-seeing and in this rapid process of book and paper assimilation. [376]

As in his perusal of American military exploits, which revived boyish fancies tempered by maturing thought, so sentiments appealing to lapsed memories and living pictures that suggested even profiles or silhouettes of once familiar views took on new significance and transfigured tints.

The second Sunday after Oswald's arrival in New York he attended morning services at St. Thomas' Church, and afterward strolled over to Central Park. He is seated near the statue of Alexander Hamilton. While pondering over the tragic fate of this "great secretary," Oswald failed to notice an elegantly dressed gentleman who in passing stared inquiringly. Looking up, he sees a familiar face smiling in questioning surprise. Claude Leslie grasps Oswald's extended hand, and with many an ejaculated "Well!" leads him to the carriage.

During Oswald's reverie, Claude, in passing, caught a view of that handsome face which so often lighted with its fine expressions in Himalaya camp. The carriage stops, and Claude returns to confirm his impression. With offhand cordiality, Claude takes charge of this interesting friend.

Though Oswald feels some embarrassment and a little doubt as to the outcome, he can but [377]

rejoice at such welcome change. Fortunately Claude is alone in the carriage. Explanations need not be heard by others. Besides, Claude had shown respect for Oswald's reserve.

During their ride through the park they chat pleasantly about former experiences. Claude asks where his friend is stopping, and suggests that when convenient he would like to show him the sights. However, he will not intrude on Oswald's time, except when agreeable.

"I have all the time there is, but you may have your own plans."

That evening Oswald accepted an invitation to dine at his friend's elegant apartments. There were no other guests.

Claude learns that Oswald will not object to limited acquaintance with congenial people, and likes seeing objects of local interest.

They mingled quite freely with prominent male residents, and met not a few popular local celebrities of the gentler sex.

Though having no hint as to the nature of Oswald's troubles, Claude was most considerate. When shielding his friend from possible embarrassments, there was such apparent offhand frankness that for the time Oswald forgot former stresses. Even Claude's silences or evasive replies to questions about his friend's past life seemed casual inadvertence or preoccupation. [378]

Claude Leslie had easy entrée to both business and social circles.

Oswald attributed gracious greetings and cordial welcomes to Claude's tact.

Doubtless he owed much to this source, but his own chastened manners, refined, brilliant conversation, suggestiveness of romantic interest, and good looks, were the most potent factors.

Among male acquaintances then formed were some prominent in business and politics. Oswald met young men who were social favorites in exclusive circles. Some of these soon afterward won robust renown at Las Guasimas and upon the slopes of San Juan.

Oswald's pensive reserve made him an interesting enigma to social belles. Claude jokingly remarked:

"It is evident that this Englishman is not seeking matrimonial alliance with any 'Gotham' heiress."

In explanation of his friend's occasional preoccupied, listless irresponsiveness, Claude said:

"Perhaps there is a continuing infatuation across the Atlantic."

One day Claude proposed that Oswald, as his guest, accompany him on a sight-seeing tour of the Western States. This was just what would have most pleased Oswald but for that expected letter from Sir Donald Randolph.

He every day looked for a reply. Oswald could not think of then leaving on a prolonged trip. [379]

Expressing gratitude for the invitation, he declined, assigning his daily expectation of important news from England.

Claude excused Oswald, adding, in pleasant banter:

"I hope congratulations soon will be in order, but bring her to New York!"

To this Oswald responded with a sadly suggestive smile.

Next day, at the Grand Central Station, these friends parted.

Oswald greatly missed Claude Leslie's congenial society and contagious enthusiasm. That expressive face became familiar to general-delivery mail-clerks, who could tell the non-arrival of expected letter, yet carefully looked, for his better assurance.

In this extremity Oswald seeks the society of an Italian guide, who as protégé of Claude Leslie often piloted these friends through parts of "darker" New York.

From the first Oswald felt an interest in Marco Salvini. This grew with each meeting. Though much pleased, the guide often responded with looks of blank wonder. Claude Leslie had noted this capricious favor, but regarded it as an out-growth from Oswald's peculiar temperament, influenced by self-inflicted social reserve. But these marked attentions soon suggested to Claude a cause more significant. The guide's likeness to that bandit who died in Himalaya camp was most striking. It seemed that this sentimental Englishman yet felt compunction for that fatal shot. [380]

After Claude's departure, Oswald's fancy again reverts to this Italian. Going to neighborhood of "Five-Points," he calls at proper number, but gets no information, except that Marco Salvini has been away two days. In front of "Five-Points House of Industry" he pauses to reflect.

A new sensation of dizziness is felt. Oswald braces against the brick wall, facing "Five-Points Mission." The bewildering faintness is brief, yet he still stands in reverie. In recent years much had been done for this formerly depraved neighborhood. His thoughts cross the sea to an embowered spot, near a beautiful lake, where one timidly and in faltering accents had announced her solemn consecration to like humble yet exalted ministry. In striking contrast appears a chafing, petulant suitor, privately protesting against such infatuation and indignantly railing at

spiritual advisers. The sacrifice now seems more rational, and the advice kindly considerate. Was that modestly brilliant, sweetly fascinating girl engaged in her chosen mission?

Oswald recalls Claude Leslie's accounts of charitable deeds and gifts by benevolent persons in support of this beneficent work among the poor. How worthy of emulation the helpful ministries and charities of one Gotham heiress, proceeds of whose inherited millions are finding distribution in these and kindred lines! [381]

Passing along Park Street to Mott intersection, Oswald meets the priest who officiates at the church near there.

That guide had spoken of this man, and Oswald thinks here is a possible chance to learn present whereabouts of Marco Salvini.

He is shocked to hear that two days before this Italian had been nearly crushed to death by a car collision, and is now at St. Vincent's.

Oswald loses no time in delay. Going promptly to the hospital, he is admitted to proper ward. Upon assurance of his friendship for the injured man, he is permitted to remain. For a week he watches, eating and sleeping little.

Oswald becomes ill, and is soon delirious. For a long time his strong will had braced against the insidious disease. The fever laid sure hold on that athletic frame, and its course was relentless.

Two days after Oswald was stricken, Marco Salvini died.

The continuous attentions of this quiet stranger at that Italian's cot had attracted the notice and won the regard of those in charge. [382]

From this patient there were neither confidences nor complaints. During earlier deliriums utterances seemed held in check by that coercive will, but as the disease wasted vital energies speech became strikingly suggestive.

With some disregard to order of their occurrence, many tragic happenings were reënacted during these delirious states.

Oswald is again at Northfield, along the lake, and upon the Thames. They are now on the road from Calcutta.

"What a dreary stretch! 'So foolish was I and ignorant!'"

The scene changes to Himalaya slope.

"Lie still, Karl! I will hit him hard!"

From another room come violin strains of "Ave Maria."

Opening his eyes with a start, they settle upon the crucifix pendent from the neck of the sweet-faced nun.

"Poor fellow! I shot too straight!"

Again he gazes on that sacred symbol.

"'Thou that takest away—takest away—away the sin of the world'—his sin, poor fellow! Mine too!"

Staring at his upturned palm lying on the spread, he exclaims:

"See that mark? It's blood! I shot too straight." [383]

Higher rise the notes of the violin.

Rapturously those grand eyes turn toward the ceiling.

"Look! look! Wild flowers arch the mountains! See the graves, Karl! The clouds drop wreaths!"

There is another quiet lapse, then the patient tosses feverishly. The weeping nun says:

"He is making a hard fight!"

In startling response comes:

"I was ever a fighter, so one fight more,
The best and the last!"

His view seems dazzled by the lights, and the good priest suggests that his eyes be shaded.

"I would hate that death bandaged my eyes and forbore
and bade me creep past!"

For a while Oswald seems quietly sleeping, then in confused accents mutters, and starting up, calls out:

"Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set
And blew; Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came."

These quotations fall upon the ears of priest and Sister of Charity with awfully solemn accents. They feel in presence of double mystery of life and death.

There is now naught to break the impressive silence but ticking of a clock and distant rumble of the elevated trains. No word had been uttered by this patient giving any clew to his religious training. The friend at whose cot this stranger so faithfully watched was a professed believer. Too, those fixed glances at the crucifix and solemn utterances suggested belief in the "atoning merits." Priest and nun exchange inquiring looks, then intently gaze at that quiet sleeper. [384]

Oswald stirs, opens his eyes, tosses feebly, and in low tones says:

"A squall! They reef the sails! A typhoon!"

After brief pause he whispers audibly:

"Dark! So dark!" Then exclaims:

"The star! the star! Mother!"

Somewhere in pulsing zone, circling this vexed human state, there is commotion. Rock-posing Barjona, think not to question this outgoing! At sight of inverted spike-prints echoes not yet that morning crowing in old Jerusalem?

Faster than light, swifter than sweep of angelic herald, quicker than aught else than Infinite quickening at human prayer, speeds the mystery of motherhood.

Gently ministering to most intricate throbbings of that suspended spirit consciousness, as her own had dominated embryo pulsings pending expectant miracle of birth, each disordered beat is soothed to rest. Who may more than hint those voices, sounding not above the din of life—whisperings to That, not always checked by vesturing clay nor indexed by crude registers of flesh? [385]

Oswald lay long in this still sleep. The fevered crisis past, he slowly returns to conscious memory. There seems no curiosity as to future plans. When there is but slight danger of relapse, the nun who had been present at critical stage asks his name, and suggests that he may desire his mail brought to the hospital. This seems proper. It soon arrives. There is only one letter, but this bears a suggestive postmark. Its contents electrify Oswald, who hardly can restrain his joy. His impulse is to confide the good news to that kind-hearted sister who stands smiling at this handsome patient. Oswald checks his feelings and remarks:

"It is only good news from England, sister!"

The nun now learns that Oswald's home is near London, and that he has been away for years.

The rigid reserve relaxes, and he talks freely, yet saying nothing about causes for such absence. Recovery is now rapid. The letter arrived in New York about three weeks before its delivery at the hospital.

Not knowing anything about Oswald's past life or name, there had been no call for his mail.

As he would not be able to take the sea voyage for several days, a letter is sent, addressed to Sir Donald Randolph, stating the reasons for delay in receiving and answering, with expectation of being able to start homeward within two weeks. This had been dictated to an obliging nurse. [386]

The now happy convalescent hardly can suppress within discreet bounds his longing for speedy return. Within three weeks from this date Oswald Langdon is aboard ship, booked for Southampton.

CHAPTER XXV

[387]

A ROGUE'S HEART AND CONSCIENCE

That evening's meeting was most interesting. Out of consideration for the feelings of Alice, Charles Randolph was absent until after those girl friends had exchanged tearful greetings and all embarrassments of the reunion were past. Sir Donald's and Esther's unfeigned hospitality eased any possible misgivings or restraints of their guests. Father and daughter seemed influenced by a glad hope that their future lives would find congenial association through this renewed confiding. Soon Sir Donald and Thomas Webster are conferring privately. That conditional promise is being kept sacred. The pledge is now without scruple. Reasons for such puzzling reservations are told. In abbreviated summary Sir Donald relates his own and detective tactics during that long pursuit of the Laniers.

Both clearly see the strange, romantic threads restraining them within coercive limits, interdicting helpful alliances while leading all at divergent angles of cross-purpose.

At a Randolph conference, Sir Donald said:

[388]

"I will privately tell the uncle about Oswald Langdon's escape from Thames drowning and

strange after conduct. Of this miracle Alice can learn through her Uncle Thomas."

Charles Randolph, who had endured with becoming fortitude his voluntary absence, returns at the exact time limit. He is now formally presented to the girl whose image fascination so often had intruded upon his sentimental musings, assuming conspicuous place in ambitious dreams.

Sir Donald and that interesting uncle remain in extended conference, but their absence leaves little void.

After they joined the circle, all lingered until a late hour. They separated with mutual understanding that all would plan and act together.

Sir Donald had not written to Oswald Langdon. He thought it prudent to wait until after Alice's completed story. There now can be no need of further delay. This unhappy wanderer must be notified of recent revelations. After the evening meeting Sir Donald wrote a clear, ringing letter, in substance stating that Alice Webster was rescued from the Thames; for good reasons, until recently, concealed her identity; now lived with a relative in London, and had spent the evening with his family. Both Laniers were under arrest, and could not escape. There was no possible necessity for Oswald to remain away longer. Charles Randolph had returned from a long absence, and Esther was well. Alice Webster did not yet know of Oswald's being alive, but would hear it soon. All past troubles were clearing, and the future was hopeful. Oswald could reach Northfield soon as a letter from New York, but it would be better to write anyway. The letter closed with cheering words:

[389]

"Esther and Charles join me in congratulations, and hope for your speedy safe return."

This was that delayed epistle which so electrified an interesting convalescent in hospital ward across the sea.

While at Northfield before the arrests, Sir Donald had received Oswald's letter from New York announcing arrival and intention to remain until answer came.

As there then was no very sure prospect of the conspiracy being speedily cleared, Sir Donald delayed answering until some definite progress could be reported. When at Calcutta it had been agreed that Sir Donald should not write "except upon some important development." Oswald seemed to have forgotten this, as he expected sure reply upon receipt of his letter by Sir Donald.

Thinking that Oswald might inquire for mail under the agreed alias, Sir Donald also sent a copy so addressed. Because of Oswald's truthful response when questioned by the nun, this copy never was delivered.

[390]

Sir Donald and his friend now devoted their combined counsels to securing for Alice her father's estate.

Paul Lanier surely would be officially declared insane. This wretched victim of parental greed and criminal connivance could only excite most profound pity. Against this poor crazed creature neither now feels the least vindictive impulse.

Proper proceedings are instituted, resulting in Paul Lanier being committed as a madman. Nothing was said about Lanier crimes except killing of that Northfield sentinel.

In the struggle Paul and the guard had exchanged daggers.

Paul's crazed actions were sufficiently described by witnesses to make insanity conclusive. There had been such evident reserve as to convince onlookers of some suppressed evidence through understood, concerted restraints. Pierre was brought before the tribunal, but declined to testify. Paul frantically appealed to his father:

"Save your own Paul from these stranglers!"

He then lapsed into reverie, and muttered:

"The world shall see his bones!"

After Paul had been adjudged insane, Pierre sent for Sir Donald Randolph to visit him in prison.

[391]

That proceedings were about to be commenced against him Pierre had no doubt. Since his arrest a settled conviction that he was now within the coils of justice had been always present. Paul's hopeless derangement seemed to unnerve that cold-tempered, persistent will.

Pierre never had planned crime without some reference to the future of his only son. All heartless scheming and precautions had tended to unrest, culminating in Paul's dreadful disorder. Possibly justice longer might be impeded, but its course would be none the less sure and crushing.

Old religious precepts, forgotten in tense devotion to criminal purposes, come to mind. Odd sentimental moods occasionally are felt. Pierre keeps thinking about his own responsibility for Paul's awful state. In the solitude of his cell, he mutters:

"That inherited taint which, through soothing specific of quiet living, for two generations lay dormant, now spreads its ravages within Paul's distracted brain. All this is the work of one who knew of that mental disorder in maternal line, yet heeding not, nor giving care to its restraint or healing, has slain his boy's reason through tenacious holding to the fruits of crime.

"Paul's mother gave her life for his, yet I, his father, who tenderly reared the motherless babe through early childhood, and proudly looked upon maturing growth, sacrificed all upon the flameless altar of consuming greed." [392]

At times Pierre's remorse is horrible. He thinks not of defrauded, murdered ward. Paul's victims raise no spectral hands of menace. To Pierre all other crimes shrink aghast at this most heinous incarnation of a father's guilt. He becomes indifferent to his own life. In despairing solicitude, he exclaims:

"Only that some relief come to that distracted head I gladly would pay the penalties of all my crimes!"

This desperate man even beseeches heaven for his son's relief. He prays not for himself, nor cares for personal deliverance. In all-absorbing concern for the crazed Paul, he dares appeal to divine compassion, without thought of self or pardon. Strange infatuation! Pierre grows hopeful, and feels some queer sense of grateful obligation. He slowly gropes and stumbles, while tenaciously turning his soul's blind orbs toward this dimly glimmering yet hopeful ray. Pierre faintly recollects the account of the "Gadirean" tenant of the tombs.

"Paul's case is not so serious as that, but who will pity my poor crazed boy?"

Pierre thinks of Sir Donald Randolph. This high-principled champion of the defrauded, murdered Alice Webster is Pierre's and Paul's uncompromising pursuer. That any other had set or kept in operation such tireless shadowings Pierre has no thought. This man can be neither cajoled nor bribed, yet may soften at frank avowal or direct appeal. [393]

Pierre gives no thought to his own accountings. Through troubled night he has been thinking about his crazed boy. Suppose it might transpire that the prison portal swings open and he walks forth into the light of day a free man, what is there in life for Pierre Lanier? The only ogre shape whose boding presence for him has terrors is this avenging "sprite," Paul's growing craze.

Pierre could seek respite in suicide, but not thus might escape a father's heavy accounting. He has no thought of such evasive shift. In all the worlds, it seems to Pierre, there is none but he to pity Paul. But for the irrational hope of in some way ministering to stresses of this afflicted son, that guilty, wretched parent would, with bared brow and unflinching front, welcome fate's worst.

Pierre will make a decisive throw of the fateful dice. Calling the turnkey, he asks for paper and pencil. These are brought. Pierre writes a brief note to Sir Donald Randolph, handing it open to the surprised watcher. It is a simple request that Sir Donald come at once to see Pierre Lanier upon important matters.

Upon reference to superiors the note is sent by special messenger to Sir Donald's hotel. In a short time Sir Donald Randolph and Pierre Lanier are holding their first conference. [394]

Knowing the crafty past of this schemer, Sir Donald anticipated some astute proposition in the Lanier interest. He was ill-prepared for one so direct and ingenuous.

Without the slightest attempt at preliminary fencing, Pierre says:

"I am run to cover and hopelessly besieged. I have no favors to ask, except such as may help my poor boy. I defrauded Alice, as you well know. I am ready to turn over to her estate, or to that of William Webster, all the proceeds of my embezzlement. The whole thing will amount in value to about six hundred thousand pounds. Do with me as you please, but because of my thus making your work easy it would not be amiss to have a care for Paul's comfort and cure. Except for that wronged child's good I care not what becomes of me."

To say that Sir Donald was surprised were mild reference to his amazement. For some moments he sat speechless, then in husky tones said:

"Your proposition seems most fair and honorable. I will think it over, and soon return."

In leaving, Sir Donald extends his hand. Pierre hesitates, then offers his own. Grasping that reserved palm, Sir Donald feels it tremble, while Pierre's body seems to collapse against the wall of his cell. [395]

That there is any shamming or covert deceit in this strange proposition, Sir Donald now has not a semblance of suspicion.

After a conference with Thomas Webster, Sir Donald hastens back to the prison. He assures Pierre that the offer will be accepted.

"No pledges have been exacted and none will be given, but it will be my pleasure to alleviate in all possible ways Paul's unfortunate state."

Sir Donald then says:

"May it not be hoped that you can find some help in your own troubles?"

To this Pierre makes no reply, but turns away his face. In leaving, Sir Donald asks:

"When will it best suit you to give an inventory and make transfers?"

Pierre answers:

"The sooner the better. Please attend to it at once. You will know just how to proceed."

Next day Sir Donald visits at the prison, and obtains a full statement of property in Calcutta and London in which the estate of William Webster has interest. There is nothing said about the manner in which Pierre obtained possession. This strange criminal is making no detailed confession, but Sir Donald doubts not that restitution will be complete. Pierre tells what Calcutta banks are custodians of papers, shares of stock, other muniments of title and moneys. Minute descriptions of real property and chattels are given. Much of all this is held by trusted agents as ostensible owners, but he gives their names and addresses. Pierre will sign proper orders, and convey at any time all his interests and equities. [396]

At an early after visit all necessary papers are duly executed, and Thomas Webster is constituted Pierre's lawful agent to make any further transfers. Pierre tells where may be found those unrecorded deeds perfecting Alice Webster's title to the London property.

The now earnest man evinces a strong determination that restitution be complete. To some suggestion of Sir Donald and Thomas Webster, that certain formalities could be waived, as they have no doubt of Pierre's good faith, he becomes impatient, and insists on compliance with every legal requirement.

Fortified with these documents, Thomas Webster soon left for Calcutta.

Nothing had been hinted about escapes of Oswald Langdon and Alice Webster from Paul's murderous assaults. Pierre still believes these had fallen victims to Paul's passionate, hasty revenge. Until the restitution becomes absolute by full recovery of all, Pierre will not be told about their strange escapes or after experiences. [397]

There now will be no occasion for bringing of civil actions against Pierre Lanier. Even that conspiracy to defraud Alice out of London property can not be clearly established. That Pierre had to do in any of Paul's murderous assaults is not susceptible of competent proof, except in those upon the Dodges in Calcutta. Of these favorable circumstances Pierre knows little and cares less. But for Paul he would have found grim satisfaction in paying the most extreme penalties.

That uncle, before starting on his trip, arranged for delay in proceedings against Pierre Lanier, and suggested that the whole case might be simplified by judicious waiting.

Pierre makes no demand for a hearing or arraignment. All remains in status quo through irregular, concurring sufferance.

Sir Donald and family, accompanied by Alice Webster, leave for Northfield.

A letter is daily expected from Oswald Langdon. Alice and Charles seem forgetful of all former experiences. The attraction is mutual. They talk and laugh as though no shadow ever crossed the path of either or hung like a menacing cloud over that Northfield household. Alice heard of Oswald's escape and romantic conduct. She so long had thought of him as dead that these reports sound like ghostly recitals. Oswald Langdon's living, corporeal presence would seem as one long dead, whose reëmbodied spirit had been clothed anew with vesture of flesh. In dreams had she not beheld that drowned form lying at bottom of the fateful river? In far Bombay Alice conjured Oswald's fleshless skeleton into a fearful ogre fright for Paul Lanier. Again, along the lake had she stampeded this crazed madman by impressive promptings about those bleaching bones. To Alice Webster Oswald Langdon is surely dead. But how instinct and tremulous with pulsing life is that other handsome, manly presence whose eyes seek hers! Does he not know her strange romance, yet seem to feel that all is right? Charles's unfeigned admiration and growing interest cannot escape that father's observing glances, yet Sir Donald seems pleased. Esther sees all, and smiles approval. If these who know the worst make no protest, why should Alice feel scruples about the unhappy past? [398]

Esther's expressive face lights at all announcements of letters, but grows pensive at each inspection of tell-tale postmarks. Sir Donald looks over each mail's assortment, and his eyes seek Esther's. That indulgent father remarks: [399]

"Oswald Langdon may be away from New York a few days, and some time could elapse between receipt of my letter and sailing of ship carrying English mails."

From day to day that letter is looked for, and Esther seems as though hourly expecting some interesting visitor at Northfield. Her pretty dissembling is sure proof, but all concur in its bewitching seeming.

In the privacy of her room Esther consults maps of travel and transatlantic ship schedules. Names, dates, and descriptive particulars are confusing. Many very essential items of information seem lacking. What ship will Oswald take from New York? Is it seaworthy? When will the ship sail? Will the vessel be crowded or the cargo too heavy? Are there severe storms at this season?

All these and many other items of general information about ocean travel have been omitted.

Tremulously confiding in Brother Charles, now regarded as sufficiently sentimental for a safe bureau agent of nautical information, all Esther's puzzling queries are answered in clearest detail.

"Yes, there can be no doubt; Oswald took the very safest ship sailing out of New York; that vessel

is never crowded or overloaded; in fact, only enough cargo is aboard for proper ballast; at this season the Atlantic is very calm; the ship is now near Southampton." [400]

This is sufficient for present assurance. As days pass without expected letter or arrival, Esther grows skeptical as to Charles's marine lore, and appeals to her father. Sir Donald smiles at her recital of Charles's positive assurances, and tenderly toying with Esther's glossy tresses, says:

"All will be well; I have no fears. Daughter mine, times and tides, storms and calms, clouds and sunlight, come not amiss."

Next day Sir Donald received a second letter. Its contents accounted for all delay and waiting. With certainty that Oswald will not leave New York before two weeks from date of this letter, Esther feels a sense of resignation. He has escaped death, and soon will start homeward. She feels some fear of a possible relapse, but reasons that Oswald will take proper precautions. Delaying sailing showed discretion. Esther has some doubts about two weeks being sufficient after such a terrible sickness. Just then she would have advised waiting a few days longer.

The next fortnight passes slowly. Then came a letter from Oswald to Sir Donald. Under advice of his physician, he will wait another week before starting homeward. His passage is already engaged, and he gives the ship's name, with date when it will leave New York Harbor. After arrival at Southampton, he will visit his parents, and then at Northfield. Some pleasant things were written about anticipated reunions, and the letter closed with wish for remembrance to Esther, Alice Webster, and Charles Randolph. [401]

There is regret at this waiting, but all approve Oswald's doing as advised by the physician.

Alice and Charles are not pensive over any delays. In conscious adjustment to the happy present, neither past nor future clouds their clear, sunlighted skies. Both feel that their lives soon will blend. Before that expected proposal neither doubted its utterance or acceptance. It came as easily as come responsive, happy greetings from eager lips and lustrous eyes. There is no doubt of that uncle's approval, but the nuptial ceremony can abide his return from Calcutta.

The next day after this betrothal came another letter from Oswald to Sir Donald, telling of his safe arrival at Southampton. He will visit his parents, and in three days from that date be at Northfield.

All experience a sense of expectant pleasure. Sir Donald feels that past worries are receding into waning retrospect. Charles is happy in his own right. Alice longs for a sight of that Thames resurrection while looking into the handsome face then smiling its admiration of her own. Bessie—well, this little fair-haired "find" says all sorts of pretty, indiscreet things, interrupts tête-à-têtes, intrudes upon conferences, artlessly domineers over everybody, closing each day's performances by going to sleep upon the arm of Sir Donald. [402]

Without mishap Oswald reaches Southampton. The ocean voyage had been pleasant, and he feels buoyantly hopeful. He is impatient for the home reunion with father and mother. Anticipating their glad surprise at his safe return, Oswald pauses at the familiar portal out of which he had fled a disguised fugitive years before. He hesitates, then rings the bell. The door is opened, and his father looks inquiringly. There is glad recognition, and the rector leads his son to a chair, but both remain standing. Looking tearfully upward, the father holds Oswald's hand and says nothing. Both fix their eyes upon a new oil portrait. Sinking into a chair, Oswald whispers:

"Where is mother?"

To this comes only:

"Gone home!"

For an hour these stricken ones sit with clasped palms, neither crying nor indulging in spoken grief. Then, as if by mutual impulse, both talk of other things. [403]

Oswald speaks of past troubles and present deliverances. He is now free from all suspicion, and can face the world without fear. Alice Webster is alive, and the Laniers are in custody.

The rector tells of his continued ministerial work and lonesome life.

That evening neither referred to their great loss. Upon the following day Oswald's father told about the mother's troubles after the son's flight, and related some of the incidents of her last sickness. Neither parent ever confided to any human being Oswald's plight, nor had either the least information about his fate.

"Mother talked and dreamed of her absent son. In sleep she sang cradle lullabys and gently reproved her 'own little Ossie.' For hours she would sit looking out of the window, expecting your return.

"Without apparent cause came that fatal attack. After a few days the physician said there was no hope. His diagnosis revealed no malignant disease, but indicated a total collapse of vital forces. For hours mother would lay at the window, clasping your boyhood miniature, often turning it toward the light of the sun or stars. Just before going into her last long sleep mother looked out into the rayless dark, and whispered: [404]

"Percy, dear, see that star! It is coming this way. Now I will go and find Ossie!"

"She has been dead two years."

Each bearing flowers, father and son visit the grave. Wife and mother is not there, but these floral tokens are sacred to loving, pathetic memories. Her ministries know, but feel not earthly limitations.

Oswald stands long with bowed, uncovered head. Neither speaks. There are no tears. Reverend Percy Langdon passes his arm through that of his son and slowly leads homeward.

Upon the next day Oswald starts for Northfield. He promises soon to return and talk over plans with his father.

Upon Oswald's spirits has settled deep pensiveness, so solemn as to check all buoyant exuberance, for the time restraining joyous tremor at thought of those waiting Northfield greetings.

There are upon the faces of that early-risen household looks of expectation. All seem self-possessed, except Esther. While bewitchingly trying to be very circumspect, Esther is consciously excited. Starting up, checking the impulse, with forced composure slowly sitting down, Esther steals glances at Alice and Charles, asks questions, answers to which do not interest her in the least, then hugs the spoiled Bessie, and quits the room. [405]

Sir Donald drives alone to the station. Soon the train arrives. After greetings, Oswald enters the carriage, and they slowly drive toward that elegant home. Sir Donald notes Oswald's subdued responses. His intuition suggests some recent sad revelation at the parental fireside. He inquires about Oswald's home visit and the health of his parents. The reply sounds like echo of requiem toll.

"Mother went away!"

Words of condolence would be incongruous. Silence is more expressive. Without reference to past tragic happenings, these talk about current matters of incidental interest, and are soon at the Northfield mansion.

Entering the family sitting-room, Charles is first presented. Then from an obscure corner, with scared smile upon her face, advances Alice Webster. Both look inquiringly as they extend their hands. Bessie gazes with large, curious eyes, and all are seated.

Sir Donald has relieved the tense embarrassment by some casual comments, when in the next room is heard timid, hesitating steps. Turning toward the connecting arch, Oswald's eyes meet those of Esther Randolph. Timidly advancing, Esther extends her hand, which soon trembles in his own, but hints not at withdrawal. That palm's tremulous lingering is most subtle, yet ingenuous assurance. Oswald's heart quickens at the sign. [406]

The evening is passed in refined conversation. Oswald's pensive musings cannot last in such environment. There is no haste to talk over past sorrows. Both Oswald and Charles recall having met on that "tramp" steamer.

As if for Oswald's better assurance, Esther lingers near, never seeming at ease except in his presence. At times she gazes upon that erratic erstwhile suitor as if fearful he again may leave upon some strange journey. Often to Esther it seems Oswald is unduly reserved, fearing long looking into her eyes or lingering touches of that confiding hand as useless toying with forbidden things. Her woman's intuition suggests the cause. Upon the lake's wooded shore years ago did she not respond to that eloquent avowal with stated consecration upon the altar of self-sacrifice? Oswald may believe that this decision is final. Too, this handsome, fascinating, imperious, masterful man has been away ample time to grow cold or meet some other attraction.

In their tête-à-têtes Esther shows continuing interest for charitable matters. She tells about Paris and Calcutta hospitals. Those calls at cabins in Calcutta suburb are related with harrowing incidents of the mothers' poverty. Oswald listens intently, but does not moralize. Esther looks troubled, and refers to happenings when Oswald first visited Northfield and Alice Webster was her guest. That quiet listener hears all, but seems in pensive reverie. [407]



**"THIS SAGE REPLY IS HEARD BY THE
EAVESDROPPING BESSIE."**

They are sitting in secluded bower within the mansion grounds. Sir Donald is taking his accustomed afternoon nap. Alice and Charles are out for a drive. Bessie is just awake, and has come out to survey her vested belongings. Esther hears the child's happy humming, and looking appealingly at Oswald, propounds this puzzling interrogatory:

"Under all the circumstances, Mr. Langdon, would you advise a young girl, with—with such a good home—who has such a kind father and brother—and—well—you know—like me—to—to—spend her life in hospitals?"

Quickly looking into that flushed face and those questioning eyes, Oswald needs no further assurance. Impulsively encircling the unresisting form, he answers upon those upturned lips. This sage reply is heard by the eavesdropping Bessie, who, as self-constituted ceremonial dictator, emerges and joins their hands in the wordless betrothal.

Soon, slowly leading Esther and carrying that spoiled four-year-old toward the mansion, Oswald [408] says:

"I will speak to your father." Esther's reply is a happy smile.

Thomas Webster's Calcutta trip had been a complete success. Alice received a letter from her Uncle Thomas, and expected him to be at Northfield within six weeks. A double wedding is set for a date soon after that uncle's Northfield visit. Oswald returns to his father's home and tells the good news. By Esther's and Sir Donald's special request, the rector soon accompanies Oswald back to Northfield. In this hospitable mansion father and son spend much of the time until those nuptial ceremonies.

Sir Donald receives a letter from Thomas Webster requesting him to be in London on a certain date. These two allies hold a conference, and upon the following day Pierre Lanier is released from prison. There had been no formal charge requiring investigation. All concerned had acquiesced in this irregular, unauthorized detention. Having fully accomplished that Calcutta mission, and received, direct to Alice, transfers of all property listed by Pierre Lanier, there could be no possible good result from longer detention of this miserable man.

Pierre is stupefied by this unexpected release. He seems neither elated nor curious at such good [409] fortune. Sir Donald was at the prison when Pierre came out. They walked away together. To Sir Donald's question:

"What can I now do for you, Mr. Lanier?" there is a long silence, then comes reply:

"How is Paul?"

Hearing that Paul is being kindly treated, Pierre looks grateful, and says:

"That is right. Paul is not to blame."

Sir Donald now offers to do all in his power for Pierre's future comfort, adding:

"I will consider it a privilege to help you."

Pierre smiles vacantly, stands in reverie, then extending his hand, in low tones says:

"My boy is innocent! His father did it all."

With Sir Donald's assurance that in a few days he will meet Pierre at a designated place in London, and tell him some good news, they separate.

When first confined in the asylum Paul had been fierce and violent. This was followed by more pacific moods, and he became quite tractable. At times Paul indulged in childish speech, and cried for his father's coming. After a long reverie Paul once said:

"No, I did not drown them! That was Alice at—at—what's the name of that place? That strong fellow could swim. What's his name? Yes, that's it."

Within a week after Thomas Webster's return occurred those happy nuptials. Because of tragic happenings there were few invited guests. All had resulted well. Past sorrows cast their inevitable forward shadows, but the present is nevertheless joyous in full content, luminous with halo of future hopes. [410]

Each day Pierre Lanier calls at the asylum. Through Sir Donald's previous suggestion, Pierre is accorded special privileges. Paul grows hysterically joyful when his father comes. Alone after these oft-recurring visits, Paul sobs bitterly.

From Sir Donald and Thomas Webster Pierre scrupulously declines any offers of personal assistance. This is not through pique or pride.

That restitution had been in nature of a bid for Paul's deliverance, but these would-be almoners were not contracting parties. To his clingingly audacious supplications in behalf of the crazed Paul, Pierre had heard an imperious voice whisper:

"Do equity!"

Pierre is not quite sure that this is a divinely stated "condition precedent," but will treat it as such.

With gropingly tenacious faith he stumbles toward this hinted adjudication. Without suspicion of selfish motive or accepted personal benefit, Pierre will keep his part of the solemn pact. [411]

"Paul is not to blame!" That awful inherited taint and a father's dominating, all-consuming greed!

These are at least mitigating claims.

Who may contest Paul's right "before the face of the Most High"?

Paul seems improving. Pierre is elated. That shriveled heart pulses with new hope. He even presumes to thank heaven for covenant fealty. With consummate audacity Pierre now hopes there may be found some "extenuating circumstances" in his own case.

Soon after the nuptials Sir Donald meets Pierre Lanier in London and tells him of the marriage ceremonies. Pierre turns pale, stares, and sinks upon the floor of his room. Sir Donald supports the trembling form. The romantic coincidences are partly related. Pierre smiles hopefully. Sir Donald invites him to confirm the queer story by a visit to Northfield, but Pierre is fully convinced.

"Then Paul did not kill them! My boy is innocent! Excuse me, please; now I will go to the asylum."

Sir Donald and Thomas Webster return to Northfield. Neither newly married couple took a wedding journey. The four had planned spending their honeymoons at Paris. Just before the nuptials, in presence of that little autocrat now nearing the ripe age of five years, Sir Donald is speaking about some objects of interest to be visited by these travelers. Bessie begins to cry, and clinging to Esther's hand, says: [412]

"Stay here with me and papa!"

There is instant approval. Oswald says, "Why not?" Sir Donald and Uncle Thomas both declare in favor of the change; Alice joyously assents; Charles announces his cheerful acquiescence; Esther kisses Bessie and is smilingly content.

Uncle Thomas tells about meeting Mr. and Mrs. Dodge while at Calcutta. When William Dodge was released from custody he accepted a lucrative position obtained for him by Thomas Webster, and promised when required to testify about the Lanier conspiracy against Alice. This weak-principled man still retained the position, and was waiting to comply with his agreement.

That assistant sleuth who had trailed the Laniers from Southampton to Bombay, accompanied old "Josiah Peters" over to Calcutta, then shadowed Sir Donald and Esther, kept track of Lanier peregrinations until this pair landed in London, watched at the alley cabin, followed both along the Thames, and was present at their final arrests, had gone on a recent trip to Alaska gold fields.

Alice Randolph insists on Uncle Thomas accepting fifty thousand pounds for his services and reimbursement. The uncle proposes a compromise of half that sum, but Alice and Charles are obstinate. To avoid a serious rupture between relatives, Uncle Thomas yields. [413]

In their complete content pity is felt for Paul Lanier. Alice cannot forget her part in that Bombay tableau or in those lake promptings.

Looking at Bessie, they often think of that crazed outlaw's strange caprice in sparing lives of Northfield sleepers upon the memorable night.

It is with much satisfaction that all learn of Paul's possible recovery. Pierre's strange restitution and refusal to accept any aid from either Sir Donald or Thomas Webster is matter for frequent Northfield comment.

Paul grows more tractable, showing signs of returning reason. Pierre becomes devoutly thankful.

Some believe Pierre hypocritical; others say:

"He cannot fool Heaven!"

Many look upon this enigma, the while thinking of one who "went to his own place."

Eternity is so long! A lost soul is such a fearful loss!

Possibly that ancient Tenderness, with bias for saving, hopefully "shadows" Pierre and Paul Lanier.

Transcribers's Note: Various inconsistencies in spelling and punctuation have been regularized. References are to folio (page) numbers:

20 - "disposition" second "i" added
43 - terminal "e" added to "appearance"
125 - accent removed from "employe"
186 - "...into the sea." was comma
276 - "...home again." period added
355 - accent added to "élite"
381 - ""Listening at the...." double quote added
422 - terminal "s" added to "status"
List of Illustrations, 327, Illustration caption - "Car'line" sometimes shown as "Caroline" in original

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OSWALD LANGDON ***

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