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The

House of Strange Secrets

A DETECTIVE STORY

BY

A. Eric Bayly

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CHAPTER I

THE STRANGE AFFAIR ON THE LONELY MOOR

"Squire Carrington's carriage, this way, please," proclaimed this magnificent powdered footman wearing the Marquis of Moorland's livery. His stentorian tones echoing from the porch, over which were suspended the nobleman's arms, interrupted an edifying conversation between Squire Carrington's coachman and the individual who presided over another local dignitary's stables, both of whom, with their carriages, had taken refuge from the inclement weather beneath the stately ash trees which were the pride of their noble owner and his gardener (by the way, a far more important personage).

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"Well, good e'ning to yer, Mr. Wilkes," remarked the Carrington coachman, flicking up his horses; "I'll tell yer some more about the ole man and 'is hexentricities next time I 'ave the pleasure of renooing our acquaintance." And wrapping his topcoat round him, so as to shield his valuable carcase from the drizzling rain, the venerable retainer in charge of Mr. Harold Carrington's spirited greys turned his horses' heads and drew up the carriage—a coach of out-of-date pattern—at the front door, which had been held open for two gentlemen in evening dress who were effecting an early departure from the annual ball given by the Marquis to all the neighbouring gentry.

The elder of the two was an extremely tall, cadaverous, and grizzled man of perhaps sixty years of age. This was Squire Carrington himself, the owner of the manse, situate in the neighbouring village of Northden; while his companion was his only son, Laurence, a handsome young fellow of two-and-twenty, quite as tall as his father, but, unlike Mr. Carrington, senior, well built and of athletic appearance.

The elder man paused for a moment in the porch.

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To the casual observer he would have appeared to be buttoning his glove, but to the keen eye of Laurence it seemed that the cause of the older gentleman's sudden stop was to give himself an opportunity of peering nervously into the night before taking the few steps necessary to reach the carriage waiting outside. This scrutiny being evidently satisfactory, Mr. Carrington hurried forward, entered the vehicle, and ensconced himself in the far corner. Laurence followed, after taking a glance back at the capacious hall, brilliantly lighted with fairy lamps and thronged with vivacious ladies and laughing men on their way to or from the supper rooms.

The front door closed, shutting out the gay scene from the young man's gaze. The coachman whipped up his horses, and in a moment the carriage was bowling down the dark avenue, presently emerging into the rain and the high road beyond.

"Shame to leave so awfully early," muttered Laurence, leaning back on the comfortable cushions and lighting a cigarette.

"You know my reasons," answered Mr. Carrington. "I—well, I don't like to have the carriage out too late, and, besides, it's twelve o'clock already."

"Twelve o'clock, yes; just the best time, dad, you know it is! And why couldn't I have walked home or got a lift in the Everards' waggonette, as I suggested? Another of these absurd fears of yours, I suppose. My dear dad, what on earth would the people say if they learned that you, a J.P., magistrate, and all the rest of it, were actually frightened out of your life of burglars?" [Pg 4]

"Laurence, you must not speak like that, nor take advantage of my little—er—weakness." And the old gentleman relapsed into a silence broken only by the patter of the rain on the carriage windows and the clatter of the horses' hoofs on the macadam road.

"Nice girl, that Miss Scott!" Laurence remarked, after a long pause; "not extraordinary pretty, but there's something awfully taking about her. Did you see her hair? Of course you didn't. But it was something worth seeing—a mass of golden tresses. I never saw anything like it. And her smile! I danced five times with her—all waltzes; but I suppose that was not wrong, eh? She's clever, and no mistake, for a girl her age. I don't suppose she's more than nineteen."

"Born in 1867, that is twenty-five years old now," mumbled Mr. Carrington half aloud.

"Twenty-five, Dad! How on earth do you know her age?" exclaimed the young man in tones of surprise.

"What—what? Did I speak? Oh, nothing. I was just then rather deep in my thoughts."

"'Pon my word," said Laurence, "I believe you're getting into your second dotage, Daddy." [Pg 5]

The old gentleman did not reply. He seemed too occupied with his own meditations to take any notice of his son's further remarks either upon the festivities at the Marquis's house or the young lady who had attracted him to no small degree, and whose praises he continued to sing throughout the first part of the eight miles' drive to Northden.

Those who are acquainted with that part of the North Riding of Yorkshire in which the village mentioned lies will recollect that the road between Northden and the Marquis of Moorland's seat runs for some little distance along the east edge of the extensive moor, from which, at a prehistoric period, some ancestor of the august owner of the neighbouring country took his title. The Carrington carriage was halfway across this stretch of heath—the most deserted part of the route—when the coachman suddenly became aware of the fact that some other vehicle or person was closely following in his rear. Turning round in his seat, he glared into the darkness behind, and fancied that he discerned the figure of a man on horseback riding immediately behind the carriage.

He thought nothing of this, deciding that the fellow-traveller was either a mounted postman riding home, or some country doctor who had been called out at a late hour to visit a patient in some distant part of his large district of practice. [Pg 6]

For some reason or other, however, the coachman happened to glance back again a minute or two later, when he was astounded beyond measure to see that the supposed man on horseback was a cyclist, and that, with what the coachman set down as "confounded impidence," he was riding alongside the coach, and cautiously peering in through the steam-coated window at the occupants of the carriage!

Now, James Moggin was a servant who had no little respect for the person of his lord and master (though he did occasionally allude to him in conversing with particularly intimate acquaintances as the "ole man"), and this cyclist's action he considered a dastardly outrage upon the privacy of Mr. Carrington and his son. He therefore drew up suddenly, and seizing his whip, intended, in his own words, to give the misdemeanant "a 'elp on 'is way." But though he did not know it, by so doing he gave the inquisitive cyclist the opportunity he needed.

The dark figure on the machine, pedalling suddenly forward, made his way in front of the carriage, dismounted lightly, and threw down the cycle upon the ground in such a way that the horses could not proceed without stepping upon it. Moggin, perforce, drew up hurriedly, and [Pg 7] bent forward in an endeavour to scrutinise the features of the strange bicyclist. In the darkness he was unable to perceive more than the mere outline of his form, but even that was sufficient to cause his feelings of surprise to give way to a sensation of horror. There was something strange, what he did not know, about the man who had so suddenly and silently compelled him to draw up in the dreariest part of the great bare moor. He shuddered, and noticed that the horses were both trembling.

Meanwhile let us return to the inmates of the carriage.

Laurence had vainly endeavoured to draw his father into conversation, but the old man seemed so engrossed in his meditations that his son eventually ceased from lamenting Mr. Carrington's peculiar behaviour, and gave himself up to the enjoyment of his cigarette and pleasant thoughts, in which the central figure was none other than Miss Selene Scott, his newly made acquaintance.

Of a sudden the old man sprang up in his seat, and clutched wildly at Laurence's arm.

"Good heavens!" he cried in accents demonstrative of mortal dread, "did you see that face at the window?"

"Don't be absurd, Dad," exclaimed Laurence somewhat angrily, "if you scream like that, old [Pg 8] Moggin will be getting down to see if I'm murdering you. Gracious me," he added after a pause, "what's the fellow stopping for?"

The young man did not have to wait long for an answer to his last question. With startling suddenness the right-hand window of the vehicle was struck by something outside that could not be seen owing to the steam. A loud clatter of falling glass ensued, and for a moment a large jagged hole in the pane yawned at them. Then in this space there appeared first a hideous-looking dark face, and then, when that portion of the intruder's anatomy was withdrawn, a long, bony hand gripping a cocked revolver which was directed precisely at Squire Carrington's head.

The report of a shot rang out, and almost simultaneously the opposite window glass smashed amid a terrific din. Through the smoke that filled the carriage Laurence turned and looked at his father. With a low moan, the Squire had flung up his hands and fallen forward senseless upon the floor! [Pg 9]

CHAPTER II

THE MAN THAT DISAPPEARED

Now, whatever his enemies (if he has any) may say against James Moggin, no one can deny the fact that, for a man of his age, his behaviour on the night when his carriage was "held up" on the North Moor was meritorious. On discovering that the "impident rascal" had deliberately broken one of the coach windows with the butt of a pistol, the worthy coachman's rage knew no bounds. Leaving his well trained but trembling horses, and still clasping the whip in his hand, he scrambled down from the box and fell upon the cyclist in the rear.

To speak more accurately, the latter individual fell back into his arms, an action on his part caused by Mr. Laurence having risen in the carriage and aimed a powerful blow with his fist at the face that had a second time appeared at the cracked window.

Moggin, had he flung down his whip, might easily have held the assailant until the arrival of Laurence, who was fumbling with the catch that fastened the carriage door, and which had been in some way jammed by a piece of broken window glass. As it was, the audacious cyclist managed [Pg 10] in the dark to wriggle himself out of the coachman's clutches and reach the spot where his bicycle lay.

Laurence alighted from the carriage with unbecoming haste, only in time to see the dusky figure of the highwayman throw his leg lightly over the saddle of his machine, and bound forward past the vehicle again with the dexterity of an accomplished rider. He noticed that his garments fluttered out behind him in a peculiar manner.

In his evening clothes and thin dancing "pumps," with the roads an inch thick in mud and puddles, young Carrington knew that pursuit was useless. Even if he requisitioned one of the terrified horses, he realised that the man would have disappeared from sight before the operation of unharnessing could be accomplished. One thing he did—that was to seize the whip from Moggin's hand, and, taking a couple of steps forward, cut sharply at the retreating form with the long lash. The blow went home, for the fellow gave utterance to a hoarse cry of pain. Even in that exclamation, both Carrington and the coachman were conscious of something unnatural and horrible.

And thus it was that the mysterious creature on the bicycle disappeared into the blackness of the night. [Pg 11]

Laurence waited until he had the dissatisfaction of witnessing the hasty departure of the unwelcome visitor; then he turned to the open-mouthed and shivering Moggin.

"Let us now see what has happened to your master," he said abruptly.

The two men hurried back to the carriage and carefully stepped inside.

Mr. Carrington was lying in precisely the same position as when Laurence had left him.

"Mercy, mercy," moaned the coachman, "surely he isn't dead?"

"No," responded young Carrington, "he is not shot, for look at the far window. It was smashed by the bullet."

"The hexplosion might have done that, sir," old Moggin suggested, as he assisted Laurence to place the motionless body of Mr. Carrington upon the seat of the carriage.

"Good gracious me, I never thought of that. Then the poor dad may be killed—murdered. Oh, why didn't I heed his suspicions?"

He bent down to peer into the old gentleman's face, and as he did so something caught his eye. He almost yelled aloud with joy. For there, through the top of Mr. Carrington's hat, was a circular hole. The same hole was to be found on the other side, showing that the bullet from the assassin's [Pg 12] weapon had penetrated through the hat without harming the unconscious man's head. (The bullet itself was afterwards found imbedded in a panel of the coach.)

No; Mr. Carrington had been unharmed by the attempt on his life, but the shock of seeing the

repulsive face at the window had thrown him into a dead faint, from which he was released after many minutes, thanks to the chafings and attention of his son.

When he first opened his eyes Laurence was horrified at the change in his father's appearance. The terrified look on his face was indescribable. He moaned faintly, as though in pain, and clutched nervously at the strong arm of his son, who knelt at his side on the floor of the carriage.

"Come, Daddy," Laurence said encouragingly; "you're better now, and the rascal is miles away. Sit up and let us hurry on home. The horses are almost perished with cold."

His son's cheery voice seemed to convince Mr. Carrington that he was safe, for he sat up and allowed himself to be carefully laid back into his favourite corner of the large carriage. Laurence gave orders to Moggin to proceed at once homeward as fast as he could, and so well did the coachman carry out his instructions, and so ready were the horses to proceed to their stables, [Pg 13] that Mr. Carrington found himself within his own grounds before twenty minutes had passed.

With Laurence's assistance he alighted and entered the Manse, where the aged butler, Kingsford, was dozing in the hall. He was then conducted to his chamber, and there helped into bed and dosed with a strong brandy-and-soda specially mixed for him by his son.

By this time it was nearly half-past one in the morning, and Laurence Carrington would have been quite justified in retiring to bed. Nevertheless, after leaving his father's bedroom he crept downstairs, much to the butler's astonishment, and, donning an overcoat and a strong pair of boots, made his way out of the house.

The rain had now stopped—a fact that seemed to please him much; not because he would have minded a four-mile trudge in the pouring wet, but because he would now be more likely to discover traces of the mysterious cyclist's tyre-marks in the muddy road that skirts the North Moor. For the rain, had it continued in a downpour similar to that at the time of the strange affair of an hour before, would undoubtedly have blotted out any tracks that the highwayman must have made in effecting his hasty departure. [Pg 14]

Whistling to keep up his spirits as he went, Laurence strode on at a quick pace towards the scene of the attack. The wind was howling across the heath and the unearthly noises that accompany any storm were such as might well have unnerved a less determined man than Carrington, particularly after the weird adventures he had gone through.

By the light of the moon, which was now shining brightly, he had no difficulty in discovering the exact spot at which the carriage had stopped, while his own footprints and those of the coachman, as well as the hoof-marks of the restive horses, were distinctly visible. With ease, too, he lighted on the thin track made by the stranger's bicycle wheel, but at first was much puzzled at finding that this trail lay on both sides of the road. Then he recollected that the rider must have left these distinct traces behind him both when on his way to the place where he had "held up" the coach and when hastening away on being repulsed by Moggin and himself. Therefore he concluded that, by following the double tracks, one on either side of the lonely road, he would not only discover whence the unknown man had come, but also whither he had disappeared. For a good mile he trudged on, never taking his eyes off the pattern impressed on the surface of the road. He had now reached a village, the only one lying between the house at which the ball had [Pg 15] been and that where he lived, and from which he had just come.

Half-way along the main street running through this village a branch road starts off to the left. To his delight, Laurence was able to trace the cycle tracks round the corner of and into this branch road, and once again did he start on, strong on the scent of his father's attempted murderer (for the idea that the cycling highwayman had fired at him never entered his head).

On and on did Laurence walk, the mud and water squelching under his feet, until the road again broke off into two lanes.

"Hallo!" he cried half aloud, "the stranger must be something of a neighbour to us," for the tracks in the mud betrayed to him the fact that his quarry had taken the lane which is one and a long way round to the Manse and the village of Northden, in which it stands. As he drew nearer and nearer to his home Laurence's amazement and excitement (if such a term may be used under the circumstances) increased correspondingly. Would the midnight stranger prove to be one of his father's own simple villagers? he asked himself. He had not even caught a glimpse of the stranger's face, so could not answer. [Pg 16]

He was now actually in the village of Northden, yet the marks, both coming and going, remained. Was he mistaken in any way? he wondered, but the idea of such a possibility had barely been dismissed from his mind as absurd when he suddenly stopped short. And why?

Because, without the slightest swerve or mark in the slush, both tracks stopped abruptly, and, however vigilantly he searched, he could not discover any further sign or clue to the manner of the disappearance of the mysterious bicyclist. [Pg 17]

CHAPTER III

Now, Laurence knew quite well that no cyclist could dismount from his machine without alighting with all his weight upon the ground. Why, then, was there no print of the stranger's foot at the spot where the cycle marks stopped? The moon shone out so brightly now that he knew he must detect such an impression in the muddy surface of the road were one there.

But there was none. Stay! What was the meaning of that oblong but rounded patch of ground being drier than the remainder of the road? Laurence realised that here was another important discovery, for there could be little doubt that the moisture on the foot-shaped patch had been sucked by some spongy mass pressed heavily upon it. What more natural than that the evil-doer, in order to conceal his tracks, should travel with thick socks or several pairs of stockings in place of shoes, which, though of the lightest description, would leave a distinct print behind them?

Further search led to the discovery of two more of these dry (or more or less dry) patches in such [Pg 18] a position that the young amateur detective perceived his man had, presumably carrying the bicycle, stepped across to the strip of common grass that skirted one side of the roadway. Once on this grass all traces of the mysterious cyclist vanished, and Laurence knew that, for the moment at any rate, he was baffled. The would-be assassin, whoever he was, must be a sharp man, Carrington decided. Had the rain continued, or the pursuit not been taken up until the following day, when the rising wind would have done its work, the dry patches in the mud would not have been found, and the man on the bicycle might well have taken to himself wings and flown, so suddenly and unaccountably did the tyre-marks break off. As it was, young Carrington knew that the stranger (if such he really was) had walked along on the grass. Therefore, he conjectured he might yet find further clues as to his hiding-place or destination in parts of the common-land where the grass was short or rubbed away.

He therefore continued his search, and had his efforts rewarded by the discovery of more dry patches, and, in places where the ground had been shadowed by trees, blurred, indistinct marks shaped like a man's foot; and, still on the track, he was surprised to find himself in close [Pg 19] proximity to the two largest—in fact, the only two gentlemen's residences in the now sleeping village. The plot of roadside grass ran along outside the grounds of both of these—the Manse, and another and older mansion, Durley Dene; but, before reaching either of these properties, he completely lost sight of the padded footmarks on the ground, and, strive as he might, failed to make any more discoveries that night.

The rain had commenced to fall again, and he made up his mind to return home. As he sauntered along he pondered over the strange case that he had, of his own free will, begun to investigate. Had the cyclist whose identity he was so anxious to discover disappeared into the grounds of either of the two adjoining mansions?

A sinister idea occurred to him. Was it possible that the man who had made so determined an attempt to murder old Mr. Carrington in cold blood could be one of his father's own retainers? If so, how did he know that the would-be assassin was not even now carrying out his horrible plan? The idea was truly a terrible one, but was quickly abandoned as impossible when Laurence remembered that neither Kingsford nor Head, the gardener, could ride a cycle, that Moggin was out of the question, and that the remaining men-servants, Nathaniel (the footman) and Tom (the [Pg 20] stable hand), were as incapable of the audacity and cunning displayed by the cyclist as the other servants, though their age and affection for their master were above suspicion. Therefore, if the unknown man had, by chance or otherwise, taken refuge in the Manse grounds, he must only have done so for temporary concealment, or have used these grounds as a short cut to his real lair.

But then, of course, it was equally possible that the strange highwayman hailed from the estate adjoining the Manse. And, like a flash of lightning, Laurence remembered the story he had heard of a retiring neighbour who lived at the Dene, and on whom not a single person in the village had yet cast eyes—the supposed invalid gentleman surrounding whose personality there was such a halo of mystery.

Was his father's determined and bloodthirsty enemy lurking in this adjoining house, whence he might steal out to repeat the attack on the old man at any moment?

The thought was, indeed, a horrible one.

In spite of the rain, something impelled the young man, when he reached the broken-down gate of Durley Dene, to pause for a moment in the shadow of the trees, and meditate upon the strange business that had brought him out of doors on so wild a night. He lighted his pipe, drew his coat [Pg 21] tighter around him, and leaned back against the massive fence.

The first question that he failed to answer satisfactorily was this—how was it that the Squire had made an enemy?—for he could not doubt but that the highwayman had some grudge against the old gentleman since he had so deliberately fired at Mr. Carrington. Had he been a maniac—the idea that he was possibly such occurred to Laurence—he would have shot blindly into the carriage, and not taken careful aim, as he had.

To be sure, the Squire was a magistrate, and as such had frequently been the means of sending rascals of all kinds to gaol. But Carrington's name was famous in the county for his light sentences, his remarkable leniency, his kindness, and his charity. A poacher, indeed, had once

threatened to have his revenge on the Squire, who had been compelled to inflict a fairly severe punishment upon him, but what judge or magistrate has not been thus threatened? And, besides, there was a certain undisguised skill and cunning demonstrated in the behaviour of the stranger on the moor that marked him as being something more than a common criminal. His idea of "holding up" the carriage while on a cycle, his ingenuity in concealing his tracks in the manner [Pg 22] already recorded, and the mystery of his eventual disappearance—all these proved him to be possessed of fertile brains that one could hardly expect to find in a poacher; while, as a matter of fact, if Laurence recollected right, the man who had uttered the threat against Mr. Carrington was still working out his "time" in prison.

Another peculiar feature of the case was the behaviour of the Squire himself. Laurence remembered how, during the last few months, his father's manner had changed. He had always been a particularly silent, thoughtful, and retiring man, but of late he had become childish in his conduct. He had purchased, as his son had accidentally discovered, a vest, fronted with chain armour, strong, but of such a kind that no one could know, when its owner wore it, that it was of so remarkable a nature. He had even gone so far as to have new bolts and catches fixed to the doors and windows of his house, while he had taken to putting a revolver in his breast coat pocket before setting out for a walk or drive. Whenever he left the house it was only in the company of his son or escorted by a servant, and he had instructed that no one, except those with whom he was personally acquainted, should be admitted to the house. [Pg 23]

He had given, in explanation of these extraordinary precautions, the information that he was nervous of attacks by burglars, and for some weeks past the young man had wondered whether his father's mind had not become deranged. Now, it naturally occurred to Laurence that the Squire must have been expecting this attempt on his life, and the idea much alarmed him.

If this were so, he argued, Mr. Carrington must have some secret which he would not even disclose to his own son. That secret, too, suppose the suspicion had any foundation, must be one which the Squire was most anxious to guard, for he had gone out of his way to remark upon the fear of burglary which had caused the numerous precautions he had adopted; and Laurence noted, too, that, in at least one way, his father's explanation was doubtful and apparently untrue. For instance, the chance of a burglar attempting the old gentleman's life was a very remote one. The conviction that the Squire really had some secret, and had been expecting and fearing some such outrage as that on the North Moor, seemed only too well grounded.

And then Laurence arrived at the question—Whence had the mysterious cyclist come, and how was it that he had disappeared into the grounds of Durley Dene? [Pg 24]

Laurence's suspicions on recollecting all he had heard of the occupant of the old house were at once directed against its owner. But was the repulsive face at the carriage window that of their unknown neighbour?

Here, again, was some mystery. And Laurence recalled all he knew about the neighbouring house since his father had settled down at Northden. Its original owners were the descendants of the blue-blooded Elizabethan dignitary who had built it. Owing to financial embarrassments the house was sold, and fell into the hands of a crusty, miserly old scoundrel of the name of Northcott, who had died shortly after.

After Northcott's decease the Dene was again put up for auction, but without being knocked down for the sum asked by the late owner's nephew, who had claimed the property. For years it had stood empty—to some extent a ruin—but within the last few months intelligence had reached the villagers that the Dene had been purchased by an invalid army man—one Major Jones-Farnell —who, in due course of time, arrived late one night, accompanied, it was reported, by his secretary. To the surprise and disgust of the neighbourhood, it became apparent that the owner of Durley Dene would employ no local servants, a man and his wife (so it was said) doing the [Pg 25] outdoor work and cooking respectively.

Now Laurence could not help wondering, was there not something peculiarly suspicious about the inhabitants of the residence adjoining his father's house? Was it possible that the advent of this Major Jones-Farnell had caused Mr. Carrington to take the remarkable precautions that he had? Undoubtedly his "fear of burglars" dated from about the time of the supposed invalid's arrival in Northden. Was it possible that——?

But suddenly the brown study into which Laurence had fallen was interrupted by the faint sound of someone moving among the trees that formed an avenue leading to the old house outside which he was standing. The disturbing noise was a faint one,—merely that of the snapping of a twig,—but it was sufficient to cause the young man to turn and peep over the fence in the direction whence the sound came.

For a long time he peered into the shadows without detecting any sign of a living creature; then he caught sight, all of a moment, of a dark figure moving swiftly and silently between the trees nearest the apparently uninhabited house. Laurence strove to shout and inquire what the person was doing at such an hour; yet, for some reason, he seemed unable to cry out or move. [Pg 26]

He stood there, his heart beating so loud that it seemed to outdin the patter of the rain upon the leaves, until the mysterious figure disappeared from view. So stealthily did it glide away that more than once Laurence rubbed his eyes, doubting whether he had really seen anything or only imagined that he had not been alone in the darkness of the night.

When the unknown figure was gone he regained his voice, and in loud tones cried out, "Who is there?" But no reply came save the echoing repetition of his own words, which died away gently in the swaying tree-tops.

He waited, glaring at the darkness. Then by chance his eye lighted upon one of the windows of the desolate Dene. It was a bow window, thickly curtained and draped with black. But what the midnight watcher saw—what filled him with a sudden coldness and an incomprehensible sense of horror—was that at one corner the curtain had been carefully drawn aside, and that a face with the nose pressed white against the pane was framed in the window and lighted by the moon's pale rays—a face as brutal and awe-inspiring as it was sinister and uncanny. Only for one moment did it remain before being withdrawn as suddenly as it had come.

With his nerves disturbed by the events of the night, Laurence vainly endeavoured to persuade himself that all he had seen had merely figured in his imagination. But the memory of the silent being among the trees and the strange face at the window was not to be effaced. And, still pondering on these irregular nocturnal events, the young man turned on his heel, and, reaching the Manse, was glad to place the stout oak door of his home between himself and the weird noises and shadows of the outside world. [Pg 27] [Pg 28]

CHAPTER IV

GOOD NEWS AND BAD

The Squire, with his marked punctuality, was down in the dining-room when Laurence appeared next morning. He was pale and moody, carefully avoiding any allusion to the event of the previous night. His son could not help noticing the bulge in his coat, that betrayed the hiding-place of Mr. Carrington's revolver. He was inclined to smile at the idea of the old gentleman attempting to defend himself, for he had made no effort to do so the night before.

After breakfast, Laurence made his way into the garden for a smoke. The day had brightened up, and the sun had made a welcome appearance in the heavens.

The Manse gardener was working outside one of the greenhouses, and respectfully saluted young Carrington as he strolled up to him.

"Well, Head," Laurence remarked, "seen anything of our mysterious neighbours?"

He had been careful to impress upon Kingsford and Moggin the necessity of keeping silent about the attempt on the Squire's life, and merely asked the question because it was one which interested him and the gardener also. [Pg 29]

"Yes, sir," responded Head promptly, "we're beginning to learn something about them. Either Major Jones, or his seckitary, or the hodd man rides a bicycle."

Laurence could not help staring at this intelligence. The gardener, however, did not notice his young master's movement, and proceeded.

"Well, you see, sir, it was this way. My little girl, she tumbled into the nettles late last evening, and, lor! wasn't there a shindy! The wife doctored the stings as best she could, and put the youngster to bed, she and I following soon after. Well, about half-past ten the poor child, not being able to sleep because of the blisters caused by the nettles, my wife said to me, 'Head,' she says, 'just you run out and gather some dock weed to lay on the blisters.' Up I got to do as she asked me, and went out. You know my house, sir? Well, I was going along the hedge at the bottom of the garden, just by the road, when I spied a cluster of docks at the corner by the fence that cuts our garden off from the Dene. As I was gathering some large leaves, what should I happen to do but look over the wall and see a queer man creeping along on the other side leading a bicycle. He jumps through a gap in the hedge, bicycle and all, and rides off down the road. Of course in the dark I couldn't hascertain what his features were like, sir." [Pg 30]

"Indeed," broke in Laurence, in a tone which was meant to signify that the incident did not interest him so much as it really did, "and this bicyclist of yours, from which direction did he come?"

"I suppose he came from the house, sir; where else? Though it did strike me as funny that he should go out of his way as he did, for he started off in the direction of the East Cave and the Markiss's."

"And you saw no more of him?"

"No, sir."

Laurence moved away in the direction of the house, whence simultaneously there emerged old Mr. Carrington and his watch-dog, Kingsford.

"My dear Laurence," said the former, in evident consternation, "read this. The Marquis has just sent it over by special messenger." He handed his son a pencil-scrawled note as he spoke. This Laurence took, and found that it read as follows:

"Dear Carrington,—

"A terrible event occurred at my place last night. Shortly after you left an alarm of 'Fire' was raised. You can imagine the scene of disorder that resulted! I managed to get everyone out of the way, when we found that the house was blazing in half a [Pg 31] dozen places. How it caught fire I cannot even dream, but I know that, were it not for the fact that I am well insured, I should be the most miserable creature on earth! Nothing but blackened ruins is left of the scene of yesterday's festivities! I am asking you to put up Mrs. Knox and her niece, Miss Scott, since I am unable to accommodate them. They were to be my guests for a fortnight, and cannot return home, as their own house is in the hands of the painter. Would you be so kind as to endeavour to manage at least a shake-down for the two ladies for a few days, as I do not wish to make them incur the inevitable annoyance and expense of an hotel existence? I am staying, and intend to do so, with Crooker, my agent, and have sent the wife to Southsea to stay with her sister. Let me know if you can oblige me. I believe you have met Mrs. Knox several times at my house.—Yours,

"Moorland."

Laurence perused the letter with a faint smile on his handsome face.

"Of course you will put them up?" he asked his father.

"Of course!" responded the Squire; "but what do you think of the fire? Isn't it terrible?"

"Terrible? How so? Fires must occur sometimes!"

"Of course, but this is the work of an incendiary!"

"Yes, Dad, it certainly looks like it; but why should you be so alarmed about it? The Marquis is well insured, and, if you are as frightened of fire as you are of burglars, why, it's hardly likely that [Pg 32] two blazes should occur in the same district within, well, a dozen years."

Laurence said this to pacify his father, who was almost trembling, with either fear or horror. But he little expected the Squire's response—

"I was thinking how narrowly we escaped, and," the old man muttered, half aloud, as he moved away, "how desperately this wretch is sealing my doom!" [Pg 33]

CHAPTER V

SELENE'S STORY

Laurence was an expert gardener, and, after despatching a reply to the Marquis's letter, he had, though deep in thought, settled down to assist Head in the greenhouses.

"We've got a thief in this establishment," the gardener remarked, after a lengthy pause in the conversation.

"Oh, indeed," replied Laurence absently. He was at the moment revelling in the prospect of Miss Selene Scott's company that afternoon, and did not find Head's conversation remarkably entertaining.

"Yes; my old coat has gone out of the barn since last evening—my old coat what the missus won't let me wear except I'm haymaking. Strictly, 'tween you and me, sir, I suspects the hodd man next door!"

Laurence was all attention at once. Anything concerning the unknown inhabitants of the Dene was of interest to him, and he begged for further details of the "robbery"(!)

But Head was ready for his dinner, he said, and promptly moved off towards the barn, to which [Pg 34] his meal was usually brought by one of his numerous olive-branches. Laurence followed, at the gardener's suggestion, to be shown whence the coat had disappeared in the night!

On the threshold of the barn a small boy was playing marbles alone. He rose and touched his cap on catching sight of young Carrington; then, addressing his father, informed him that "mother made you a shepherd's pie, what you likes."

Head walked into the barn to fetch this delicacy, but emerged a moment later.

"Where've you been, Tommy?" he asked.

"Tommy" disappeared into the great building, but he also returned a minute after with a blank look on his face.

"I put it in there a moment ago, Daddy, and now it's gone," was his lamentation.

"There now, sir," said Head to Laurence, "what did I tell you about a thief? He's stolen my dinner!"

Laurence, feeling almost inclined to laugh, in his turn accompanied the gardener into the barn. As he did so, he fancied he detected a rustling in the mountains of fresh-smelling hay that rose all around. Head had evidently heard the sound also, for he seized a pitchfork and commenced stabbing it into the portion which appeared to be that whence the rustling came, but with no result. [Pg 35]

As he poked about in the hay, the man stopped suddenly.

"What's this?" he said, picking up something upon which his fork had chanced. He held up to view a small revolver.

Could it be, Laurence wondered at the sight of it, the weapon with which the unknown stranger had attempted the life of Squire Carrington? Disguising his pleasure at the sight of what might possibly be a clue to the hiding-place of the Squire's would-be murderer, Laurence pocketed the small weapon, and moved away, leaving Head to grumble over his loss. But a subsequent scrutiny of the pistol was cut short by the arrival of Kingsford, who announced luncheon. Almost simultaneously a carriage bearing the Marquis of Moorland's coat of arms drove up the avenue, and deposited two ladies and a couple of small portmanteaux on the doorstep. The butler proceeded to open the door, and, perceiving that the visitors were Miss Scott and her aunt, ushered them into the drawing-room, where Laurence quickly joined them. As the young man entered the room he heard his father's voice call over the banisters to the butler:

"Don't let any one in; pray don't; bar the door. Say that I have got a pistol ready. What? Mrs. Knox and Miss Scott? Oh, that's all right. I thought it was a—a burglar!" [Pg 36]

A sigh of relief followed, and, after a moment or two, the Squire, looking paler and more miserable than ever, arrived in the drawing-room.

All through lunch he remained silent except when spoken to, while Laurence was being charmed by Miss Scott's graphic description of the fire, and Mrs. Knox paid undivided attention to the sumptuous repast laid out on the table.

"But the funniest thing of all, Mr. Carrington," said the young lady to Laurence during the course of the conversation, "was that when I was going down to supper, I happened to look out into the garden from a landing window, when what should I see but a figure creeping along the side of the house. Well, as auntie will tell you, if there's anything I'm frightened of it's a tramp. This looked like either a burglar or a tramp, but I knew that he daren't break in with all the servants and guests about, so I didn't mention the fact to anyone. To me it looks as if the person I saw had something to do with the dreadful fire, but why he should want to murder us all I should very much like to know. Well, but that isn't all. Soon after you'd gone—you went so awfully early, you know—I happened to go out on to the covered-in verandah for a breath of fresh air, and was [Pg 37] talking very privately to Maggie Haroldsworth. I had just mentioned to her that you had gone" (Miss Scott blushed as she noticed the colour rise to Laurence's cheeks at the mention of his name in the "very private" conversation) "mentioned that you and the Squire had gone, when suddenly the same figure I had seen before sprang up from some bushes, almost underneath where we stood, and dashed off into the shrubbery. The lawn was quite dark, so that I could not see very well what the person was like, but Maggie insisted that it was a woman with coloured skirts, though I doubt if it really was, for no woman I ever saw ran like that figure did."

At this point Squire Carrington roused himself from the state of lethargy into which he had fallen, and looked up, paying some attention to vivacious Miss Scott's story.

"Another thing Maggie insisted on, was that she distinctly saw the mysterious creature's features. She told me all about it afterwards, when we were bundling out of the house, for the alarm was raised before we had stopped talking about the woman—if it really was one. Well, she says that the light from one of the basement rooms fell on this creature's face as it dashed out of the bushes, and that she could take her dying oath it was a black woman! Why, Mr. Carrington, [Pg 38] what's the matter? Mr. Laurence, Auntie, the Squire has fainted!"

For the second time within twenty-four hours Squire Carrington had fallen forward in a dead faint! [Pg 39]

CHAPTER VI

THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

Only for a few minutes did the Squire remain unconscious. Before his son had time to lift him, with the butler's aid, upon a convenient sofa, he had opened his eyes in a nervous fashion, and asked where he was. It was with mingled feelings of pity and contempt that Laurence told him he was safe at home. The old gentleman's extraordinary behaviour displeased his son, who regretted that such an incident had occurred in the presence of the ladies (though in his thoughts Mrs. Knox had but a small place), and was especially annoyed, because it seemed to him that his father's sudden embarrassment was the result of some remark of Miss Scott's, though exactly what remark it was that had caused an elderly man, and a magistrate to boot, to faint like a servant girl or a delicate child was as much a mystery to him as the events of the previous night,

and the Squire's extraordinary precautions during the last few months.

No sooner had Mr. Carrington recovered, then, than, at his son's suggestion, he retired to his own room, expressing a hope that he would renew his acquaintance with the ladies at dinner. [Pg 40]

Mrs. Knox belonged to the noble army of "after-lunch nappers," and she, too, presently disappeared at the conclusion of the meal, leaving Laurence inwardly congratulating himself on the good fortune that removed the worthy old lady to her bedroom, permitting him to do the honours of the house to her niece alone.

At the girl's suggestion, a visit to the conservatories and flower gardens was the first event of the afternoon. But the day was warm, and two easy-chairs placed temptingly on the lawn proved a greater attraction than the walk which had been proposed by good Mrs. Knox.

"Well, and what is your opinion about this fire, Mr. Carrington?" asked Selene Scott, after a pause in the conversation.

"In my opinion it seems very much like a case of incendiarism," replied Laurence.

"So I imagine, and—why do you think your father was so upset when I mentioned the person I saw in the Marquis's garden last night?"

Laurence did not reply for a moment. He was deliberating with himself as to whether he should confide in his fair companion all he knew about the old gentleman's fears, the affair on the moor, and the mysterious inmates of Durley Dene. It was more than possible that a sharp, intelligent [Pg 41] girl, like Miss Scott seemed to be, might prove of considerable assistance to him in his efforts to account for the Squire's precautions and the uncanny attempts on his life.

On the other hand, he knew women to be credited with the bump of loquacity, and it was far from his intentions that his father should get to know of the efforts he was making to unravel the mystery surrounding old Mr. Carrington's terrible dread. In a conversation he had had that morning with the Squire, on being pressed by Laurence to confess that his fear was of something more than burglars, Mr. Carrington had begged his son not to allude to the subject at all. He could not, he said, and he would not, explain what the secret of his life was. "Even had I a secret, it were better," he had proceeded to say, "for your own sake, Laurence, that you did not know that secret, and it is useless for you to try and extract an explanation from me of my proceedings. And," he had added, as though fearing he had said too much, "you are wrong in imagining that my fear of burglars is a cloak for something else. I am, indeed, in mortal fear of—a—housebreaker!"

Consequently Laurence knew that it was useless to obtain a solution of the puzzle from his father, [Pg 42] and, to the best of his knowledge, no one could supply that solution but—possibly the mysterious bicyclist, and the equally mysterious Major Jones-Farnell, who, Laurence was convinced, were one and the same.

Therefore, it would certainly be easier, he argued, were he to work hand in hand with another person who might be likely to help him in his detective efforts. And the collaboration was likely to be more particularly pleasant when it was with such a companion as the young girl at his side!

Thus it came about that, after a promise of the strictest secrecy, Selene was given a concise "précis" of all the incidents that Laurence deemed to be in any way connected with Squire Carrington's secret and the mystery of Durley Dene.

The girl followed the narrative with the deepest interest.

"Thank you so much for confiding in me," she said at the conclusion. "I hope you will never have cause to regret unbosoming yourself. There is one thing," she went on, "that, it is quite plain, must be done."

"And that is to beard the lion in his den?" suggested Laurence.

"Exactly. We must pay an informal call upon Major Jones-Farnell, and hear what he has to say for [Pg 43] himself."

"That is easier said than done, I am afraid, Miss Scott," said Laurence, shaking his head; "he's a mysterious person in every respect. Why, there are four people living in the house, or supposed to be four, and yet but one of these (an old woman, who won't open her mouth, except to hurl imprecations at the village children when they cry after her) has ever been seen abroad in daytime. Then you must include in your list the creature I saw at the window, and the unknown bicyclist who doesn't wear boots, or, if he does, wears them under his socks, who, presumably, was also the person I saw in the garden; and that's all you know about Durley Dene. I believe the 'hodd man,' as our gardener calls one of the four residents, has been seen at night-time strolling about the grounds and smoking, but no one seems to have caught a glimpse of his face."

"Then," broke in the girl, "how does anybody know that there are four people at all?"

"That's smart of you, Miss Scott," replied Carrington, "but the house-agent's confidential clerk evidently considered it part of his duties to betray the confidence placed in him by passing the news on to a friend. That friend told his friend, and now everyone is aware of the fact." [Pg 44]

"Ah! But, on consideration, don't you think there is one course open to us which is better, and perhaps safer, than 'bearding' the Major in his weird den?"

"No, I can't say that I do."

"There now, I'm a better detective than you! Why, we'll get the sour old lady who indulges in profanity to solve the mystery for us."

"But how? She's as silent as the grave!"

"Yes; and so probably will the Major be, but surely you have heard that if a detective knows he has to obtain certain information either from a man or a woman, he first goes for the woman? You know the saying, 'Woman is weak'? Well, perhaps this crusty old lady is no exception to the rule. She may be assailable by bribes, or possibly by threats; but, in any case, it will be easier to attack her, metaphorically speaking, than the men in their own castle, to which it would probably be impossible for us to gain access."

Laurence agreed. The idea, hardly practicable as it seemed to be, was at any rate better than his own of going straight to the seat of the mystery and showing his hand in an interview, which he might or might not be allowed, with Major Jones-Farnell.

Further conversation between the young people decided them that no better means of attempting the solution was possible. [Pg 45]

The first question to be decided was where the "tackling," as Laurence called it, of the old woman should take place, how the scheme should be worked, and when it was possible for a start to be made.

For many reasons, the pair argued, it would be as well to set to work as soon as possible, since the first attempt on the Squire's life might at any moment be followed up by a second, and perhaps even more desperate effort.

There could be little doubt but that the position of anyone who attempted to frustrate the hidden enemy's murderous attempts was one of danger, and for this reason Laurence regretted, when too late, that Miss Scott should have elected to share that risk with him. In vain did he suggest that she should not endanger herself in any way, but remain behind the scenes, pulling the strings of the manœuvre by means of her suggestions and ready advice. She would have none of it. She was equally interested in the case as was her companion, and as to any question of endangering her life, she said that she had no fears on that account, since the mere encounter with a harmless old woman was hardly likely to prove a hazardous adventure.

At this stage of the important discussion afternoon tea and Mrs. Knox appeared on the scene, so, for the moment, further conversation on any but ordinary subjects was impossible. [Pg 46]

After tea, however, the elder lady, explaining that she had letters to write, again begged to be excused from accompanying the young people. So once more were they at liberty to resume their conversation.

Laurence, in the meantime, had been able, by a judiciously worded question, to learn from the butler that the mysterious woman from the Dene was in the habit of doing her marketing on Tuesday evenings. Since this was a Tuesday, an opportunity would probably arrive very shortly for the proposed encounter with that lady. It was therefore necessary that they should decide their plan of action without delay. And this they proceeded to do, while taking a walk round the orchards, that stretched for half a mile downwards behind the house.

By the time they returned to the Manse it was within an hour of dinner-time, so each hurried away to dress for a long and formal meal, that proved to be somewhat tedious to the young people, very agreeable, owing to its sumptuousness, to good Mrs. Knox, and evidently a mere matter of form to the Squire, who sat motionless in his chair almost from the beginning to the [Pg 47] end of dinner, hardly addressing a single word to his guests, or partaking of so much as a taste of the numerous delicacies placed, one after another, before him. It will have already been noticed that Mrs. Knox was not an exemplary chaperon, or perhaps she considered that Selene, or Lena, as the old lady called her, was sufficiently sensible to be able to take care of herself; or it is even possible that she was an expert match-maker. At any rate, she either did not notice, or did not mind, when, at the conclusion of the stately repast, and on the departure of the Squire to his own room, her charge, hurriedly donning a hat and cloak, left the house with Laurence Carrington. Had she known the intentions of the pair, she might have raised some objections, though anything that did not conduce to peace and quiet was hardly to Matilda Knox's liking!

On leaving the grounds of the Manse, taking as they did so a casual glance at the tumble-down, ivy-coated walls of the dingy neighbouring house, the two excited young people turned off towards the lower part of the village, where the few shops that the place boasted were to be found.

It was after nine o'clock, and beginning to grow dark. On the village green one or two stalls, surmounted by glaring "flames," were to be seen. [Pg 48]

Country women in picturesque costumes, and accompanied by a varied number of small children, roamed about the street, gossiping loudly and unceasingly, and laughing heartily, when, in their opinion, occasion required.

Laurence and his interested companion quickly intermingled with this motley throng, eagerly on the alert, the one to catch a glimpse of the woman whom he had already seen on such occasions

as this, the other depending upon her keen intuition to pick out from the rest of the crowd the person of whom they were in search.

For some time they sought in vain, and Laurence was beginning to fear that the woman had already returned to the Dene with her purchases of frugal provisions, when a harsh voice at his elbow caused him to turn sharply, and confront none other than the cloaked and closely hooded servant from the mysterious house.

"Keep close to her," he whispered to Selene. "We must follow her about, so that she doesn't give us the slip, but it will be impossible to speak to her until we get out of this crowd and into the quiet road."

They had not long to wait. After making a few purchases at the grocer's and butcher's shops (in both of which she was received with rude stares and uncomplimentary remarks, made aside), she [Pg 49] entered the saddler's, emerging a moment later with a stout dog-whip.

What was the meaning of this last purchase? Laurence wondered. To the best of his knowledge they kept no animals about the Dene, certainly no dogs, which would surely have made their presence known very quickly by howls, or wanderings into the adjoining estate. Here there seemed to be yet another mystery.

The woman had evidently finished her shopping for the day. She turned and hurried off in the direction of her destination, closely followed by Laurence and Lena. Already they had left the shops behind them, and reached a quiet turn of the road, almost within sight of the Manse, when the woman, who was stout and tall, and carried a market-basket, deliberately turned round and faced them.

"What do you want with me?" she asked, in a hoarse voice.

Her sudden action caused Laurence to forget the carefully worded denunciation he had decided upon. For a moment the young man could not reply.

"When the children come a-following of me I box their ears for them," the woman went on in a [Pg 50] loud, sneering tone; "take care I don't do the same to you!"

Her sarcastic words enraged young Carrington beyond measure. He took one step towards the scowling creature.

"Be careful," he said, suggestively raising a warning finger, "or I'll put the police on your track. There's something underhand going on at Durley Dene, and, if you don't tell me what it is, I will obtain a search-warrant, and then we will see who is going to be punished."

The woman started at his opening words, but as he went on, heedlessly confessing in his anger his ignorance of what actually was the secret of the Dene, she recovered herself, and sprang forward suddenly at the young man.

"Take that for your impertinence," she hissed, striking him a savage blow on the chest with the clenched fist of her left hand. Then, turning sharply round, she clutched at her print skirts, and fled precipitately down the road, disappearing in quick time into the grounds of Durley Dene. But in her activity, and when she had made the sudden attack upon him, Laurence noticed that the dark hood which had covered her head and effectually shrouded her face had been thrust aside. He almost gasped with astonishment when he perceived that the villainous countenance he was [Pg 51] now at liberty to scrutinise was that which he had seen on the previous night pressed against one of the windows of the Dene.

He had hardly recovered from his surprise when Lena, after satisfying herself that he was in no way hurt, turned to him.

"Mr. Carrington," she said, "the mystery deepens. It was a man in disguise, and no woman, that struck you so determined a blow." [Pg 52]

CHAPTER VII

THE HAUNTED BARN AND ITS STRANGE INHABITANT

With the discovery that the servant from the Dene was without doubt a man in disguise, the mystery surrounding the house adjoining the Squire's residence was considerably deepened instead of being in any way solved.

Laurence Carrington, as, smarting under the burly housewife's blow, he conducted his companion back to the Manse, hardly fulfilled his duties as host in silently meditating as to his next step. Suddenly he recollected himself.

"Excuse me, Miss Scott," he said apologetically. "This discovery has rather alarmed me, and for the moment I almost forgot that I was not alone. Come, it is getting late, and your aunt will be worrying about you. You must try and forget all about this skeleton in father's cupboard. It will be giving you bad dreams, and that would never do."

But if the young man charged Selene to think no more, for the present, about the uncanny state of affairs, he was unable, or did not intend, to allow this first reverse to put an end to his [Pg 53] attempts at the solution of the mystery. Having wished Miss Scott and her aunt "good-night" on their departure to bed, he lighted his pipe and stepped out through the French windows of the dining-room on to the lawn. Fumbling unconsciously in one of the pockets of his shooting-jacket, which he had worn during the day and donned after dinner before starting off for the village, his hand came in contact with the small pistol which Head, the gardener, had found amongst the hay in the barn.

So many and varied had the events of the day been that he had almost forgotten the incidents of the stolen dinner and the rustling in the hay. Now it appeared to him that here was the most important clue he had as to the identity of the attempted murderer of the Squire. It seemed to him extremely possible that this was the weapon used by the unknown cyclist, for whose else could it possibly be, when no one in any way connected with the Manse carried firearms, except the Squire, whose blunderbus was certainly not to be mistaken for this? Careful examination of the pistol failed, however, to reveal any sign of the maker's name, and the hope which had risen in Laurence's breast gave way to a feeling of disappointment. [Pg 54]

But a question of deepest importance that suggested itself to the amateur investigator was how it was that, if the strange cyclist came from the adjoining house, he had ventured into the barn which stood well within the Manse grounds. Had he been some chance enemy—the poacher, for instance, whom Laurence had already set down as a possible suspect—there was nothing more probable than that he should have taken refuge in the barn, but in the other case it was hardly likely.

One thing was undeniable, he had been there. Whoever the mysterious person was, he had stolen the gardener's plate of dinner and likewise his old coat. It certainly seemed improbable that Major Jones-Farnell, would-be murderer or no, should stoop to the robbery of old clothes and food. The poacher idea rose in the young man's mind, but was at once dismissed as out of the question. The Squire's secret had to do with something or somebody more mysterious by far than a mere poacher.

If the intruder had been in the barn at lunch-time, it was possible that he might be there still, though he had certainly disappeared completely before the gardener's manœuvres with the pitchfork.

At any rate, Laurence decided to have a look round before going to bed, and consequently [Pg 55] strolled down to the barn and crept noiselessly inside. The moonshine peeped in from a roof window, lighting up the whole of one side of the fine old rambling building as though it were broad daylight. Puffing silently at his pipe, Laurence glanced round, peering up into the rafters, down on the floor, and into the loosely piled hay that surrounded him.

Suddenly, by that strange instinctive intuition that comes at times to us all, he became aware and convinced of the fact that he was not alone—that some one was looking at him!

Strive as he might to dispel the eerie idea from him he was unable to do so.

Under such circumstances, and bearing in mind the incidents of the last two days, any ordinary person might have turned tail and fled. But Laurence was no ordinary person, and he was as keen on the scent of his father's enemy as the traditional bloodhound. Thus it was that, instead of taking to flight from what was only an imaginary fear, he struck a match and held it above his head, gazing round him again for any trace of the person who he instinctively felt was watching him.

A second and a third match revealed nothing; but by the light of the fourth he scanned what was perhaps the darkest and remotest corner of the Cromwellian building. As he did so he fancied he [Pg 56] saw something move on a ledge on which a roof support was fixed. In order to test his suspicions, he picked up a "stone," used for sharpening scythes, which happened to be on the ground in front of him, and flung it with all his athletic force and precision of aim at the indistinct mass which he believed to have moved a moment before.

A sudden shrill scream, about which there was something that (to use a well-worn phrase) froze the young fellow's blood with horror, broke upon the stillness of the great building, a scream which Laurence at once recognised as being exactly similar to that which the unknown cyclist had uttered when the lash of the carriage whip had caught him as he had fled away into the darkness.

And as that weird sound rent the air, the man who had caused it saw indistinctly in the gloom (for his last match had burnt itself out) a figure leap from the dark corner, and, with ape-like agility and speed, clamber up the rafters until it almost hung from the roof. Then, seizing some loose hay that had lodged in a cranny in the beams, it flung it down on the upturned face of the astonished spectator of this feat.

When Laurence had brushed away the hay from his eyes, the figure had disappeared, and, incredible though it may seem, no trace of it remained but the memory of that echoing, [Pg 57] inarticulate shriek to prove that the apparition was not a mere phantom of the imagination. [Pg 58]

CHAPTER VIII

THE SILENT HOUSE AND THE FOLKS THAT DWELT THERE

A sleepless night was Laurence's portion when, tired out, he flung himself upon his bed.

The mystery was deepening in an alarming fashion, and its intricacies were such as did not conduce to quiet sleep. That he had at last actually encountered his father's enemy he was quite convinced, but he was no nearer being able to account for the strange creature's enmity or even to recognise its identity than before he had met with this last adventure.

A few facts about the unknown creature were very apparent. Firstly, it was strangely agile and cunning; secondly, its voice was as remarkable as its agility, which was hardly human; thirdly, it was in possession of a bicycle, and yet was unable to obtain food and clothing without having recourse to theft; fourthly, it was of peculiarly small stature for a man; and lastly, it was able to use firearms, but with the loss of the pistol it had probably been deprived of its only offensive weapon, since it had not ventured to attack its assailant in the barn. [Pg 59]

Laurence used the word "it" because he was in no way decided in his own mind as to whether the thing was a man, a woman, or, the idea occurred to him, neither of these two. Not that he believed it to be something that was not human, but because the marvellous manner in which it had scaled the barn walls was so suggestive of the monkey race. The idea that the creature in the barn was a species of monkey he at once decided, of course, to be absurd. A monkey might have stolen the missing coat and dinner, have thrown the hay down in order to cover its retreat, and have uttered that piercing shriek on being hurt, but it was hardly likely to be able either to ride a bicycle or use a pistol.

That it was a woman was more possible, and the young investigator's foundation for the idea was the remark of Miss Scott that her friend had declared the person lurking in the Marquis's garden to be a black woman "with coloured skirts." This remark, it will be remembered, was very probably the cause of the Squire's sudden illness at luncheon, shortly after the arrival of Mrs. Knox and her niece.

A woman might have performed all the feats that the unknown person had. She might have set light to the Marquis's house, believing the Squire to be yet in the building; she might have followed the carriage on a bicycle on discovering that the man she was dogging had left (though how she came to have a bicycle was a mystery in itself); she might have "held up" the carriage and attempted to murder the old gentleman; and it was just as possible (or impossible) for her to clamber up the barn wall as for a man to do so. To be sure, she must be a very remarkable woman. Since she was "black," she might be a negress or certainly some foreigner. Uncivilised and fierce she certainly was. But how came it that a negress (if such were the case) had so bitter an enmity against the harmless old Squire that it was the cause of all Mr. Carrington's careful precautions, and of the spirited attack on the high road? The mystery seemed hopelessly incapable of solution. [Pg 60]

Morning came at last, and found Laurence no further advanced with his investigations. At one time he had decided to summon a detective, but recollecting how the Squire would take such an intrusion he considered it advisable to work alone.

What the relations of the woman (suppose it to be a woman) in the barn and the disguised man who had purchased the dog whip were, he had not yet ventured to guess, but one thing was quite plain: they were in some way connected. [Pg 61]

A fruitless effort had been made to attempt the solution of the problem through the "woman" servant in the Dene. Equally impossible would it be to obtain any information from the Squire. The idea of conversing in any way with the woman (?) in the barn (even if she were yet hiding there) was more than ridiculous. Consequently, the original scheme was the only one left which seemed in any way possible.

Laurence felt that the sole remaining course open to him was to interview "Major Jones-Farnell"!

During breakfast (at which meal the Squire did not appear) he cast all meditation and worry aside for the time being, and set himself to the task of entertaining the two ladies. Mrs. Knox, however, wanted little entertainment. A good breakfast was quite sufficient for her!

With Lena it was different. Two of her greatest charms were her vivacity and the brilliancy of her conversation, and both these characteristics were brought into play during the breakfast-table talk that ensued—talk that naturally enough, in Mrs. Knox's presence, contained no allusion to the subject uppermost in Laurence's mind, if not in that of both. Consequently, the morning meal was prolonged to a somewhat unusual length. The young man could not help thinking that (in his own words) but for the mystery which he had set himself to solve, he would be "making a fool of himself and falling in love." [Pg 62]

He was certainly given plenty of opportunities to do so, for Mrs. Knox made a point of retiring, as was her custom, at the conclusion of breakfast, after charging Lena to write a line to the Marchioness of Moorlands asking if she could be of any assistance to that lady or her husband in their present uncomfortable position.

"I'll get the letter written first of all," said Miss Scott to Laurence, after her aunt's departure,

"and then you must show me some more of your lovely country. As a letter takes me about three-quarters of an hour to compose, I should recommend you to devote that short period of recreation to having a quiet smoke by yourself! Then, after your play, you can prepare yourself for some good hard work, for I want to be shown the woods, the church, and everything else there is worth seeing in the neighbourhood." And with a smile she bustled away upstairs.

Here was Laurence's opportunity. If he waited until Lena's return she would probably insist upon accompanying him on his visit to Durley Dene. This he did not mean to allow. If, as he deemed very possible, the visit might not be without a dangerous element, Miss Scott must certainly not share that danger. So, without any hesitation, Carrington took his cap, and, leaving the house, made his way by a short cut to the entrance of the Dene. The gate was not locked, so he passed through, walked with a bold step up the dark avenue of swaying firs, and, entering the ruined old porch, pulled the rusty handle of the bell with energy. [Pg 63]

A distant clang disturbed the weird silence of the seemingly deserted mansion, but the bell was not answered, though Laurence waited for many minutes, deliberating in his mind the course of action he should take when admitted.

Once again he gripped the bell-pull, and dragged it out of its socket as far as it would go. Once again, too, did the harsh sound re-echo from within. This time the clang had hardly died away before a noise of shuffling footsteps was distinctly audible to Laurence's alert ear. The footsteps approached, the sound betraying the fact that the stone floor of the lobby was uncarpeted. Then there followed the metallic click of a bolt being drawn back, and the door swung open until slightly ajar. Laurence saw that the porter, whoever he was, had carefully fastened it with a chain that allowed an aperture of a few feet only. Simultaneously he saw part of a face that was glaring out at him. Though the interior of the house seemed uncommonly dark, he was able to recognise the features of the person in the doorway as those of the disguised man whom he had encountered on the highroad the previous night! [Pg 64]

"Well, what do you want?" was the gruff greeting that proceeded from within.

"I wish to see Major Jones-Farnell," replied Laurence coldly.

"Oh, then he can't see you," came the reply, and the door was about to close again.

"Wait," cried Carrington, placing his foot against it; "I'm your neighbour, the Squire's son, and I am desirous of making the Major's acquaintance."

"I tell you, you can't see him. He's engaged. Take your foot away."

"All in good time, my friend. Do I understand that you refuse to take my message to Major Jones-Farnell?"

"That's about it. And, d'yer hear, take your foot out of the doorway, or I'll put it out for you."

"Be very careful, my good man," exclaimed Laurence. "I know who you are. You're the man who struck me last night when disguised as a woman. I know you. There's something mysterious going on in this house, and I shall not stop until I've solved it. Admit me at once to your master, or whoever the owner of this house is, or I go at once to the police and obtain an order to search the place on suspicion. My father is a magistrate——" [Pg 65]

"So you think there's a mystery about this house, do you? Well, you're finely mistaken this time, my beauty. Even if there was a mystery it would take more than the likes of you to get to the bottom of it."

So saying, by sheer force the man thrust Laurence's foot back, banged the door, and shut down the bolt, leaving young Carrington in the same atmosphere of mystery as before.

And after the shuffling footsteps had died away down the corridor, unbroken silence once more fell upon Durley Dene. [Pg 66]

CHAPTER IX

THE MAJOR'S MESSAGE AND HOW IT WAS DELIVERED

Selene Scott had finished her correspondence when Laurence reappeared on the lawn of the Manse, and was waiting, ready dressed, to go for the promised walk.

"Where have you been?" she asked, evidently guessing from Laurence's face that something unusual had happened. "Tell me, you surely have not visited your neighbours without me? You promised, didn't you, that you would take me to see this mysterious Major of yours?"

There was only one thing to do, Laurence decided, and that was to confess that he had taken another step in his investigations. Miss Scott was much interested in his experience, slight though it was. She plainly showed her displeasure though, because she had not herself been permitted to have a share in the adventure. "The old fossil of a porter might have acted quite differently when a real live lady was standing on the doorstep," she said, with a smile. "Promise [Pg 67]

me, now," she added, "that if you go again you will let me accompany you. I am just as interested as you are, and quite as good a detective."

But Laurence politely refused to give the required promise. He foretold experiences far less pleasant than those that had already passed, before he would be able to say that he held the key to the mystery of his father's strange dread. When he recollected that Lena was a guest, and that her connection with the extraordinary state of affairs was unknown to her aunt and guardian, Mrs. Knox, he felt that he would be doing wrong to make a promise such as the girl asked.

However, as he had already confided in her the history of the whole series of events that had happened during the last few days (and he regretted that he had done so when it was too late) there was no harm in relating the story of his adventure in the barn on the previous night. But Lena was no more able to account for the queer creature's antics than he had been, though she agreed that there was a possibility of that creature and the woman in coloured skirts (the mere mention of whom had caused the Squire to faint) being one and the same.

The engrossing subject of what both rightly called "the" mystery filled their minds, and throughout the long ramble in the Northden Woods that occupied the best part of the morning, [Pg 68] no other topic of conversation was so much as touched upon. Yet in spite of this fact, Laurence felt that Lena was becoming more to him than a mere guest—a companion amateur detective!

A few minutes yet remained before luncheon, when the two found themselves back in the Manse grounds again, so Laurence fetched a couple of basket chairs on to the lawn, which was a small one, lying at the back of the house, and they sat down in the shadow of a monster holly bush, that was one of the most striking features of the place. From this spot they could obtain a mere glimpse of the tiled roof of Durley Dene, through a break in the line of bushes that, with a palisade of stout iron stakes, separated the grounds of the neighbouring houses. The holly bush must have stood at least sixty or eighty yards from the boundary line.

The young people had hardly ensconced themselves beneath the welcome shadow of the tree (for in height and size it was more like a tree than a bush) when suddenly something fell with a hard "plomp" on the soft turf, and rolled almost to their feet.

Laurence started up with an exclamation of surprise, and Lena also rose to her feet. [Pg 69]

"What is it?" she asked, and her companion hastily picked up the round white ball that had caused her remark.

Whence it had come was a mystery. No one was near. Judging from the direction in which it had rolled on reaching the ground, it must have been despatched, either from the barn or the laurel bushes that bounded the grounds.

It was heavy for its size, and Laurence, on examination, found it to be something wrapped in a piece of white paper, which was tightly fastened round it. Lena leaned over him, curious and excited, as he proceeded to peel off the paper. When he did so, out dropped an ordinary round pebble.

"There, it's only a hoax!" cried Lena, looking quite disappointed.

"No, no," answered Laurence: "there's something on the inside of the paper." He smoothed the white sheet out on his knee, and then read aloud what was marked upon it in a small, shaky handwriting.

"Before calling in the police please pay me another visit, when I will see you, provided you come alone, and after dark.—J. F."

"Jones-Farnell," exclaimed Lena, and for a moment or two neither of them spoke. [Pg 70]

"Of course you won't go," said the girl, after the brief pause.

"Of course I will, Miss Scott," replied Laurence promptly.

"But—oh, won't it be too risky for you to go—alone?"

"I hope I shall be able to take care of myself, Miss Scott."

"Yes, but——"

"But?"

"Suppose it's some trap to—murder you," whispered Lena. "Look at that letter. It is sent in a most mysterious fashion by a man you've never seen. It tells you to come alone and after dark. Doesn't that look frightfully suspicious? Don't you see that if they have got some secret, or are carrying on, as I shrewdly guess, some illegal occupation, what, Heaven only knows, don't you see, if this is so, and they know that you suspect them and are making investigations, that it will be greatly to their advantage to have you out of the way? You know what I mean."

"Yes, I understand your argument, and appreciate your good sense, but I'm sorry that I cannot take your advice. The matter, I feel confident, is one of life and death to my poor father. Is it not only natural that I should risk my own life for his, particularly when I am a strong man and he old [Pg 71] and getting infirm? Besides, there may be no risk after all. We may be mistaken, though I can't see how. At any rate, it is my duty to go to-night——"

"To-night! Oh, not so soon, surely——"

"Procrastination, you know, Miss Scott, is the thief of time. To-morrow may be too late. Hourly, almost, I am dreading a second attempt on the poor old Squire's life, and if I keep my appointment to-night I may yet be in time to save him."

"But let me go with you. Do, please!" Lena cried, pleadingly.

"No, no, you must not endanger yourself. What would Mrs. Knox say?"

"I don't care what auntie says in the least, and——" she stopped short.

"Tell me," Laurence cried, as he turned to his young companion and, looking into her clear blue eyes, where he fancied he saw a glistening tear, forgot everything, his father, himself, and the mystery that was deepening around them, "tell me, why do you say this, why do you mind my going? What can it matter to you? Is it, tell me I am right, that you are urged by the same feelings that I am when I refuse to take you with me? Say 'yes,' and you will make me the happiest being [Pg 72] on this earth, for the reason why I will not allow you to endanger your dear life is because I love you."

The effect of Laurence's confession of love on Lena in fiction would doubtless have been the dramatic and time-honoured remark on the "suddenness" of the declaration, but this was not the reception she gave to the young man's passionate outburst.

"Laurence," she said, and the pronunciation by her lips of his Christian name thrilled him with pleasure, "Laurence, when the mystery is solved, when you return safe from your interview to-day, then, and not till then, will I give you my answer."

She paused to catch her breath. With difficulty she had been able to pronounce the words that in cold print appear more formal and unsatisfactory than they seemed to Laurence, intoned as they were by the gentle voice of the woman he loved.

For the moment she was transformed from a laughing, vivacious girl to a silent and thoughtful woman.

How much in her own opinion the coming visit to Durley Dene meant to her she alone knew. She dared not betray her love for her new companion, though it was manifest in her eyes as she glanced at him; then, looking down, interested herself in the progress of a worm on the turf. [Pg 73] What was the secret that might—that probably would—be revealed in a few brief hours? Since it seemed that a woman was concerned, might not the grim skeleton in the cupboard prove to be a disgraceful as well as a gruesome one? And then? How often are not the sins of the fathers visited upon the innocent children?

And that was why she paused and refused her answer. Had not the lover been blind, as is the love-god himself, he would have read that answer as plainly as though it had been given in words. But Laurence, at any rate, felt he could not be discouraged. He had not been met with a blank refusal.

He caught Lena's little ungloved hand, bent down, and kissed it tenderly.

And as he did so the gong sounded for lunch, and they made their way back to the house, where they met the Squire for the first time that day in the dining-room. The old man's spirits contained something of their old joviality. At the meal he was once more, to some slight extent, the courteous, old-fashioned host and gentleman that he had been a few months back. Laurence heartily rejoiced at the change in his father's behaviour. Lena noticed it too. Mrs. Knox might perhaps have done so also had the viands been less palatable or her appetite less hearty. The [Pg 74] cause of the transformation was unknown to any of them, but Laurence guessed very rightly that the Squire's dread of his strange enemy had been lessened by the fact that no second attack had been attempted. As a matter of fact, Mr. Carrington was beginning to hope that his assailant of two days ago had departed under the impression that the victim had been killed by the cowardly shot fired into the coach as it crossed the moor.

Had he been able to glance into the mysterious future and learn what the events of the coming night were to be, it is possible that his behaviour would have been very different. [Pg 75]

CHAPTER X

THE AFFAIR OF THE BICYCLE

To the amazement of the venerable butler, Mr. Carrington intimated his intention of taking a drive in the closed carriage that afternoon. Mrs. Knox offered to accompany him. Lena, perforce, went too. For reasons that need not be explained to the reader who has followed this narrative, the Squire thought it fit to order that the footman should ride on the box of the carriage, an order which considerably annoyed that worthy, who, having never received similar instructions before, being an indoor servant, had planned a quiet perambulation with a certain young lady of his acquaintance.

Laurence did not accompany the party. He was not fond of driving in the closed carriage, and even though he deprived himself of the companionship of Lena by refusing the Squire's invitation, he did not greatly regret the fact, for at home there were many matters which required his attention.

The first of these was the barn itself, to which he repaired on the departure of the carriage. He [Pg 76] was determined to make every effort possible to discover the manner of the disappearance of the creature whom he believed to be his father's intended murderer. In broad daylight it was difficult to imagine that his grotesque experience of the previous night was stern reality.

With the aid of a step-ladder he swung himself on to the ledge where first he had caught sight of the lurking creature. To further follow in the stranger's footsteps he found quite impossible, but by other means he managed to reach the spot whence the hay had been thrown down upon him in order to conceal the vanishing figure's disappearance. But, search as he might, he was unable to discover any clue to the manner of that disappearance. No hiding-place was apparent. Certainly there was no crack or crevice in the roof in which it was possible for even a child to conceal itself. So, perforce, Laurence had to set this down also as a mystery, when he gave up the search and disconsolately returned to the house.

His next step was to prepare himself for the interview with the occupant of Durley Dene. Lena's common sense had assured him that the ordeal of the coming night might in all probability be attended by a certain amount of personal danger, and he decided to arm himself to the best of his [Pg 77] ability before setting out to interview Major Jones-Farnell. He had the small pistol found in the barn on the previous day, but, unfortunately, was not supplied with the necessary ammunition. There was, however, still plenty of time before dinner, so Laurence, not objecting to a little exercise, decided to ride over to East Cave, where he knew there was a gunsmith.

Carrington was a fairly accomplished cyclist, and the possessor of a machine, which he occasionally rode, though more usually his "mount" was a live one. His bicycle was kept in a shed adjoining the barn, and situated nearer the Dene boundary than the larger building.

Strolling down to this shed, he found the door unlocked. As he alone possessed a key to it he was somewhat astonished on making this discovery, but his astonishment gave place to a feeling of consternation when he entered the building to find that the machine was gone!

And then in an instant an idea flashed across his brain. The unknown man on the moor who had so desperately attacked his father in the carriage had ridden his (Laurence's) own bicycle on that memorable occasion!

Impossible as the idea seemed at first, on second thoughts Laurence realised how extremely [Pg 78] probable it was that the mysterious creature who haunted Squire Carrington should borrow on the French leave system, or even steal, the machine which would enable him to follow his terrified victim. He had been compelled to steal a dish of food and an old ragged coat; it was hardly conceivable that he should nevertheless possess a safety bicycle. And certainly there could be no doubt but that the machine had been stolen, for every one of the servants, whom Laurence next proceeded to question, professed entire ignorance of even the whereabouts of a key that would fit the lock on the shed door. Undoubtedly they had nothing to do with the disappearance of the "iron horse."

Since Carrington was anxious to procure the ammunition for his little pistol in time to be of use, if required, at the coming interview with Jones-Farnell, he ordered the stable-boy to saddle the Squire's mare, on which he would ride into East Cave. Until the animal should be ready he paid another visit to the cycle shed, and examined the lock on the door. It had been tampered with. The thief had used that harmless little tool which a professional burglar finds so useful when following his "profession"—a bent piece of copper wire. Examination of the interior of the little erection revealed no trace of the unknown man who had entered the shed. Who was he? That was [Pg 79] a question that Laurence could not answer until the approaching ordeal was a thing of the past. [Pg 80]

CHAPTER XI

IN THE LION'S DEN

It was already dusk when Laurence Carrington stepped briskly out of the gate of the Manse, and turned into the dark drive that led to the neighbouring house.

He had been unable to wish Lena "good-bye," for both the Squire and Mrs. Knox had adjourned with her to the drawing-room at the conclusion of dinner. He had muttered something about "having a smoke" when he left them, and looking to his loaded pistol, which was something more than a mere plaything, he had set out on his important errand, wearing an ulster which covered his dress suit.

On this occasion he was not left waiting long in the porch, for his pull at the rusty bell was almost immediately answered by a repetition of the incidents of the morning. The same shuffling footsteps sounded along the passage, the same grating noise of bolts being drawn followed, and the door was opened ajar in order that the janitor might satisfy himself as to the identity of his

late visitor.

The scrutiny through the chink of the door was apparently satisfactory, for the man inside proceeded to release the chain, after which Laurence was invited in a surly, gruff tone to "come in." [Pg 81]

Pitch darkness reigned supreme within, and the young man found his hand grasping the small fire-arm in his overcoat pocket as he took one step into the house, and the door banged upon him.

What little light there had been from the outside world was now shut out. With a shudder, Laurence realised how completely he had placed himself in the power of the unknown inhabitants of Durley Dene. In the gross darkness, what was to prevent this sour-faced porter, who had, when disguised, encountered him on the previous evening, from plunging a knife into his back as he stood there unable even to catch a glimpse of the man's outline?

Even as he thought thus a hand clutched his arm. The young man's fingers closed simultaneously round the pistol in his pocket, but his companion only requested him to follow upstairs, and guided him by the arm with an accuracy that denoted familiarity with the ins and outs of the house, up several short flights of uncarpeted stairs, until, presumably halfway down a narrow passage, which must have been on the highest floor in the house, he stopped short suddenly.

Then he fumbled about for what was evidently a door handle, and a moment later a flood of pale light burst out from a room on the threshold of which the two had been standing. The door had been flung wide open, and with the janitor still holding his arm, Laurence moved forward into the room, which appeared well furnished, and in the centre of which sat a man in an arm-chair. [Pg 82]

Half-blinded by the glare, Carrington stood for a moment motionless. Then the door closed behind him, and, turning, he saw that his late guide had withdrawn. He was in the presence of Major Jones-Farnell.

"A very good evening to you, sir!"

The man in the chair rose as he uttered these words. He was of more than middle age and height, was clad in a light-coloured shooting suit, and wore glasses and a grey moustache.

"Well, and so you have bearded the lion in his den?"

The words were those that Lena herself had used earlier in the day! Could it be that the Major had overheard them, or was it a case of mere coincidence?

"Come and sit down and let us have a chat," the stranger went on, beckoning Laurence to a vacant arm-chair.

"Major Jones-Farnell, I suppose?" was Carrington's first remark. [Pg 83]

"Yes and no," replied the other; "but that is neither here nor there."

"Indeed! And I believe you wished to see me," said Laurence coldly.

"I do," said the Major, "but pray make yourself at home, as far as it is possible, in such 'diggings' as mine. Here are some cigars that I think you will find palatable. Perhaps you will join me in a smoke. There's nothing so conducive to pleasant conversation as nicotine." And the master of Durley Dene pushed forward a small box of long cigars, each wrapped in embossed silver paper.

Now, had Laurence been ushered into the presence of some typical scoundrel who held a revolver in his hand while conversing, and offered to murder the young visitor if he actually carried out his threat of consulting the police, he would not have been in the least surprised, but he had little expected what he now found.

The room in which he sat was elegantly furnished in decidedly Oriental style. A magnificent Indian carpet, into which one's feet sank an inch or so, occupied the best part of the floor, while mats covered the bare corners of the room. Indian tapestry of fine workmanship hung from the walls, and many of the small chairs and bric-à-brac ornaments were of Oriental manufacture. A hookah, with ivory mouthpiece, and brilliantly worked coiling pipe, stood upon a table at Major Farnell's right hand. That gentleman's feet were encased in Persian bed slippers. In fact, little of the furniture but the arm-chairs was of a kind one would expect to find in England. Even the prevailing odour of the room was that of incense such as one reads of as pervading Eastern bazaars and temples. Certainly the Major had a good idea of comfort. [Pg 84]

And as Laurence noted these points in connection with the room he realised how they agreed with the supposition of his that the Squire's enemy was a "black" man or woman. But the Major gave him little time for thought.

"Oh, you must take a weed," said Farnell, when Laurence had at first refused the other's hospitality.

Fearing to displease, Carrington did so, carefully selecting one of the cigars from the bottom of the box. Why he did this will be quite evident. He considered it possible that some of them might be drugged. However, as the owner himself carelessly chose one of the top layer, it seemed probable that Laurence was over-suspicious. That, however, was no fault. The circumstances under which he had been brought face to face with the Major were remarkable enough to raise

suspicion.

"And so," said Jones-Farnell, when the two had lighted up, "and so you thought of sending the police here! May I ask why?" [Pg 85]

"I hardly think it necessary to explain to you what I am under the impression you already know," was the answer.

The Major looked surprised.

"I fear," he said, "that your impression is a mere misapprehension. Truthfully, I have no idea why you should object to my retiring habits in a house which is my own in every respect. I am inclined to think myself a peculiarly desirable kind of neighbour. I am sure no noise caused by me or my servant has ever disturbed you. I keep no fowls to wake you up by their crowing at daybreak. Never has either my servant or myself trespassed upon your grounds. I don't keep a dog——"

"Pardon me, but why, then, did your servant purchase a dog-whip only last night?"

And when Laurence made this quiet and apparently ordinary remark, he noticed a sudden flush rise to his host's brow. For a moment the Major did not reply. Then, affecting an off-hand manner, he said—

"Oh, that was for my Persian cat, Teddy."

But Laurence knew that he lied! [Pg 86]

CHAPTER XII

THE MAJOR REVEALS HIS SECRET

"My dear sir," Laurence resumed, after a short pause, "you are well aware that your remarks are idle ones. I have no cause for complaint on any such grounds as those you mention. As a neighbour you are the most desirable that man could have, except——"

"Except what?"

"Except in one particular—the cause, as you very well know, of my presence here to-night."

"I am quite at a loss to understand what you mean, Mr.——." He hesitated for the other to supply the name.

"Carrington, as you are also well aware."

"Carrington! Oh, indeed! No relation, I suppose, to Major Harold Carrington, who was formerly stationed at Madras?"

"No; I have not heard of any relative who was an Indian officer. Curiously enough, though, my father is Harold Carrington. But pray let us put an end to all this twaddle. I was forgetting that you know as well as I do all about my unfortunate father." [Pg 87]

"Really, Mr. Carrington, you amaze me. I can't imagine what you mean when you speak as you do. I was formerly intimately acquainted with a Major Carrington (who, as I have already stated, was an Indian officer of repute) when I was living at Madras, but since you say that your father is not that Harold Carrington, I regret that I have not the pleasure of his acquaintance, though you so persistently declare that I have."

Laurence did not reply for a moment. He was more than astonished at the convincing manner in which the Major spoke. Was he a marvellous actor, or was it possible that he had no connection with the Squire's would-be assassin? The latter idea was impossible. Had not he proved—and Lena, too—that there could be no doubt of the Major's close connection with the person whose headquarters seemed to be the Manse barn?

No, the man must be acting a part, as he might naturally be expected to do. And he was acting it so cleverly that Laurence was almost inclined to believe him to be ignorant of the terrible plot that was thickening round the unhappy Squire.

The man had already confessed—or had practically done so—that his name was not Major Jones-Farnell. He had been visibly concerned at the mention of the dog-whip. What did it mean? The first discovery clearly proved that the man was playing a part. The second surely pointed to the fact that he was not speaking sincerely. [Pg 88]

"Well, Major," said Carrington, after a pause, which he had occupied in deliberating thus, "let us then, for the moment, drop the question of how much or how little you know about my father, and revert to the cause of your invitation so strangely delivered to me this morning."

"Ah, now we are talking sense," replied Laurence's companion; "you mean you wish to know why I requested you not to go to the police? But first, pray tell me on what grounds you intend—or shall we say intended?—applying for a warrant to search this house. A retiring disposition is no crime—at least, so my knowledge of legal subjects leads me to believe."

"Of course not," responded Laurence angrily; "kindly do not prevaricate. But, by the way, how did you send me that message this morning?"

"As to that, my servant is the best person for you to apply to for an answer. I presume, though, that he delivered the note by means of his catapult, a weapon and instrument in the use of which he is extremely proficient. You must excuse the mode of delivery. I am short-handed—my establishment consists of myself and my man." [Pg 89]

"Indeed! and I am under the impression that the 'man' affects clothing that one does not usually see upon men!"

"For various reasons, I confess, my servant walks abroad in a harmless disguise."

"And attacks pedestrians in the high road!" muttered Laurence.

"Certainly not, unless they threaten him with pains and penalties that he does not deserve!" was the reply.

"Again let me impress upon you that the cause of my visit has not yet so much as been explained by you," exclaimed Carrington, enraged at the Major's repeated parrying of the question.

"I think you promised that you would first explain your reason for suspecting us, as you seem to, of crimes the nature of which you insist on refraining from mentioning."

"You know very well that I have good cause for suspicion. Tell me, what is the meaning of this darkened house; this secrecy; the necessity for disguise; and lastly, what is your connection with the person who stole my bicycle for a terrible purpose?"

Once again, as he made this last remark, did the visitor perceive noticeable tokens of concern on the face of his host. There was a look of dread—dread of exposure—in his eyes. He puffed rapidly at his cigar—a sure sign of discomfort—and shifted two or three times in his seat before replying. [Pg 90]

"You are pressing me very hard, Mr. Carrington," he said at length, "and I see no reason why I should answer your questions, which, you will pardon me for saying so, incline towards impertinence."

"I am entirely in the right when I request you to explain these mysteries to me. My father's position will enable me to obtain a search-warrant without much difficulty, and——"

"Very well, very well, I will tell you all," cried the Major, flinging his cigar stump into the empty fireplace, "though I must ask you to consider all I tell you as strictly private and confidential. Is that not so?"

"It depends entirely upon the nature of your confession," responded Laurence drily.

"Confession! You use hard-sounding words, Mr. Carrington. But here goes! First, my name is not Jones-Farnell. And, need I say, I am not an invalid."

"I knew that," Laurence interjected.

"In reality, I am one Orlando Meadows. Second, I am not of a military calling, my profession being that of medicine. Third, I am an authority on diseases of the brain, and particularly lunacy and its treatment; and, finally, I have in my charge downstairs a very savage lunatic." [Pg 91]

Laurence gasped with amazement. If this were the case—that is, if a maniac were really imprisoned in the house—was it not more than possible that he it was who had made the savage attack on the Squire, and who had been hiding since the night of the attack in the Manse barn?

"Tell me, what is he like?" he asked eagerly.

The "Major," or rather, Doctor Meadows, as he really was, looked at him with a puzzled expression on his well-formed features.

"He is gigantic," was his answer, after a moment's pause; "terribly powerful and repulsively ugly, but pray have no fear on that account. I have him under the strongest lock and key that London can supply."

But Laurence's hopes had been dashed to the ground. The description of Meadows' patient was as dissimilar to that of the person in the barn as it was possible for it to be, and the lunatic was safely locked up downstairs!

The confidence with which the visitor had accepted the doctor's confession was destroyed. Meadows was lying to him, that was quite certain, and yet his story had a complexion of probability about it that deserved attention. [Pg 92]

"Doctor!" cried Laurence sternly, "will you take your oath that you are telling me the truth?"

"This is an unpardonable insult," exclaimed Meadows in reply, rising to his feet and clenching his fists in the air. "How dare you insinuate that I am telling lies?"

"Keep calm, if you please, Doctor Meadows," said Carrington. "Prove your assertion by showing me this gigantic patient of yours."

Instantly there was a change in the doctor's behaviour. He collapsed into his seat with a groan of

despair.

"That is impossible," he muttered.

"Why so?"

"It would be unsafe; in fact, positively dangerous to both you and myself," he stammered.

"As a doctor you should be able to tackle your patient," said Laurence. "As a fairly strong and athletic man I can assist you. If necessary, there is also your servant. That is, we are three to one. No, Doctor, I can't take such excuses. You must prove your words by at least giving me certain evidence that you have a maniac in your charge downstairs."

"I cannot and I will not," replied the other.

"Then I shall go down and explore the place myself." [Pg 93]

"For Heaven's sake, don't," shrieked Meadows, starting up again; "it will be all the worse for you if you do. I forbid you to leave the room until I give you permission, and then my servant will accompany you to the door."

Laurence was puzzled beyond description by the doctor's behaviour. Why was he so anxious that his guest should not explore the house? Was it that he really feared his patient might break loose and attack him? For the matter of that, had he a maniac patient at all? Might not the story be entirely fictitious? Could it be that the black creature (if he or she were really black) who was waging such active warfare against the Squire was in lurking in Durley Dene?

This would account for Meadows' consternation when the idea of Laurence visiting the other rooms in the house was suggested to him. At any rate, the probability of such being the case was worthy of consideration.

"You have someone hiding downstairs—don't deny it!" cried Laurence suddenly.

Meadows' face became deadly pale.

"Yes," he replied hesitatingly. "I told you I had a lunatic—a fierce maniac—whom I am taking charge of downstairs, when I know that by rights he should be in the padded cell of an asylum." [Pg 94]

Again did the young man perceive that his companion was lying. His manner was that of a man who is telling a falsehood on which much depends.

"I tell you——" he began, but at that moment an interruption occurred.

The door was thrown open roughly, and a man entered. Laurence recognised him as the person who had played the double part of janitor and market-woman. He was a man of an unprepossessing, not to say criminal, type, and spoke in a surly tone.

"This bit o' paper were 'anded in by an old man a few minutes ago. To be given to Mr. Laurence at once," the man said.

"Then give it to this gentleman," the doctor replied, and the servant did so.

Laurence seized the roughly twisted note with a trembling hand. What was the meaning of a letter coming to him at the Dene? No one but Lena knew where he was. A glance told him that the words hastily scrawled in pencil on a half-sheet of paper were in Miss Scott's usually distinct handwriting.

And this was the terrible message the note contained:—

"Come at once. The Squire has been murdered!" [Pg 95]

CHAPTER XIII

THE HORRORS OF DURLEY DENE

"You must excuse me, Doctor," shouted Laurence, when he learned the terrible tidings contained on the slip of paper; "my father has been murdered! I must go this moment." And he rose, so saying, and darted towards the door.

"Stop him, for Heaven's sake!" shrieked Meadows to the dark-faced servant who stood in the doorway. And so it was that young Carrington found his passage blocked, and himself flung violently back with such force as one would hardly expect from a medium-sized man like the mysterious doctor's servant.

"Escort Mr. Carrington to the door," ordered Meadows, adding to Laurence, "Forgive me for such treatment. Go at once with Horn—er—Smith; I heartily sympathise with you—that is," was his strange remark, "if you are not deceiving me with an idle story."

But the young man hardly heard the other's muttered words and farewell. In an agony of dismay and horror at the awful intelligence, he dragged the man-servant from the room. [Pg 96]

"Guide me to the door," he cried hoarsely, "and quick."

In the weird darkness outside the well-lighted room in which the interview had taken place he was more than helpless in his anxious haste. He charged headlong against the walls and balustrades, the man swearing angrily at him as he clung to his arm.

"Steady, you fool," the guide shouted, "or I shall leave you to yourself, and then——"

But Laurence knew only too well that without the man's guidance he could not hope to find his way out of the house of gloom, for he had made the alarming discovery that he had used his last vesta to light his pipe after dinner. So he calmed himself as best he could, and permitted the man to lead him downstairs.

In the hall Carrington found himself stopped short.

"Come on, let me out, quick!" he exclaimed, horrified to find that the janitor had gripped his shoulders with the strength of a vice.

"All in good time, my pretty," replied the other, and in the darkness, which corresponded to the biblical description of that which "could be felt," the young man thought he had never heard [Pg 97] words pronounced in such a diabolical tone. "What would you say if I refused to let you go, my son? Ha, ha, you're in my power. Struggle as you may, I have got you as safe as if you were in Dartmoor, and, what's more, I shan't let you go until you make it worth my while."

He laughed coarsely and brutally. In the black gloom, and judging by his voice, he might have been some fiend from the nether world. Was there ever such a strange house and such strange inhabitants, thought Laurence, as he struggled to free his hand for one moment, so that he might seize the pistol with which to silence the man's demands and to assist his own departure to the home where he was so greatly needed.

There was no denying that Laurence Carrington was a fairly strong man, yet in the hands of this strange guide he seemed as helpless as a rat.

With anything but good grace he offered the servant half a sovereign if he would instantly open the front door for him and offer no further molestation.

"Make it a thick 'un," whispered the man, with something like a leer; "make it a sov., mister, and you shall go free."

"You scoundrel!" cried Laurence, "I shall report your conduct to your master." [Pg 98]

"Ha, ha! D'yer think I care?" replied the rascal; "he's no more to me than that." He snapped his fingers loudly.

"All right, let me out of the door, and I'll give you a sovereign."

"That I won't, unless you give me your word of honour as a gentleman that you don't produce any firearms," replied the man, with a dig at Laurence's ribs which caused the latter to lounge out with his knee at where he imagined the other to be.

"All right, I promise."

"There you are, then. Fork out the gold boy."

Laurence fumbled in his pocket on his arms being released, and produced a coin from his pocket —the first he laid hands on—and passed it to Smith. As he did so, a sound broke upon the grave-like stillness of this house of mystery—a sound that seemed to rise from the basement or cellars, a long-drawn, terrible cry—the unnatural, nay, fiendish shriek of a person in the agonies of death.

And simultaneously the door opened, and Laurence found himself thrust hurriedly out into the night.

Before he could turn, or could realise the meaning of that awful sound, the door clanged upon him.

Then once more there was silence, unbroken save by the sudden hoot of an owl in a distant tree. [Pg 99]

CHAPTER XIV

THE FIGURE IN THE MOONLIGHT

At last he was free from the horrors of that strange house—Durley Dene—and Laurence Carrington felt that for the moment he could breathe again. Then he remembered the cause of his hasty departure from Doctor Meadows' handsome sitting-room.

Running like mad down the dark drive and up the avenue that led to his home, he at length reached the front door of the Manse, opened it with his latch-key, and passed through at the height of his speed.

No one was about. The passages were deserted. But from upstairs came the sound of loud weeping. He leaped up the staircase, never stopping until he reached the Squire's bedroom, the door of which was open.

On the floor just inside the room sat Mrs. Knox crying loudly. A female servant stood by her in an equally hysterical state.

Laurence brushed past them, entered the room, and approached the old-fashioned bed, round which stood the butler, the housekeeper, and Lena. [Pg 100]

On the bed, fully dressed, lay the body of his father, the Squire, stretched out in death. The face was a ghastly colour—a slaty shade of blue. The veins in it stood out like strips of whalebone. The chest protruded in an unnatural manner. The eyes were yet half opened. The fingers clutched tightly at the bedclothes. There was no sign that any breath remained in the old gentleman's body.

"Have you sent for Bathurst?" Laurence asked hoarsely, addressing the butler.

"Yes, sir, I sent Head for the doctor and expect him every moment, but I'm afeard it's all up with the master. He was dead when I found him."

"Silence! He is not dead—he cannot be dead." And Laurence threw himself on his knees beside the bed, and laid his hand gently over his father's heart. But there was no perceptible movement.

The doctor, a big, powerful-looking man in a tweed suit, entered the room a moment later.

"This is indeed terrible," he said to Laurence as he made his way to the bedside. Then he leant down and ripped open the Squire's shirt at the neck, and in his turn felt for any movement of the heart. He shook his head ominously as he drew his hand away, and searching in his pocket produced a small mirror, which he held for a moment before the prostrate man's mouth. [Pg 101]

"No, he's not dead," he said quietly, after a short pause, "but in a very bad way indeed." Next he commenced giving his orders in an imperative tone to the servants who were waiting in the doorway. One of the first was that Mrs. Knox and the hysterical housemaid should be at once removed. Laurence whispered to Lena to take her aunt away, for the poor woman was incapable of understanding what was said to her.

The girl seized his hand and pressed it as she went to do as he had asked her. "Thank God," she murmured, "that you are safe," and the young man knew that this was something of an answer to the question he had put a few brief hours before.

Dr. Bathurst was an able physician. He had all his wits about him and did not lose them at the critical moment. Silently the butler and housekeeper, as well as Laurence, carried out his instructions. In a few moments the Squire's evening clothes had been removed and he had been placed between the sheets. Then the struggle between death and medical skill began, and so bravely did the doctor fight for the life of his patient that after two long hours of watching and unceasing attendance he was able to turn to Laurence, who had stood by his side throughout the vigil, and say, "He will live." [Pg 102]

Then, at Bathurst's request, young Carrington left the sick-room to inform those who were waiting outside that the crisis was past.

"What had happened?" Laurence had asked himself time after time as he stood by the bedside. It must surely be that the second attempt on the helpless old man's life had been made by his terrible foe—the attempt that he had been dreading since that night on the moor.

Lena met him in the passage. She had prevailed upon her aunt to go to bed, and now was returning for news.

"Oh, isn't it awful to think of the fiend who has done this!" she cried, after learning that the Squire might yet live. "To think that your father is encompassed by a fearful, lurking danger, more horrible than that of the battle-field. What has he done? What does it all mean?"

But Laurence could not answer the question any better than she was able to. Had he not been striving ever since the attack on the carriage to discover what his father's secret was and why he stood in such mortal danger? But he had failed. He was no nearer the solution of the mystery after his visit to Durley Dene than he had been before.

"How did it happen? Do you know?" he asked. They had moved along the unlighted corridor until [Pg 103] an open landing window, looking upon the lawn at the rear of the house, was reached.

"I know practically nothing at all about the sad event. The Squire went up to bed about an hour after you left, complaining of a headache. He had not been gone long when Kingsford appeared in a great state of alarm, excitedly exclaiming that he had entered Mr. Carrington's bedroom to assist him in undressing and had found what he believed to be your father's murdered corpse lying on the floor."

"On the floor! Then we might have known he was not dead, for he was clutching the sheets of the bed."

"Yes, he was laid on the bed directly I could get the butler to help me. Then I scribbled that note to you and sent Kingsford with it, much to his surprise on learning where you were. The rest you

know. But you—you escaped, then?"

"Yes, indeed, but I know no more than I did before I started."

"And Major Farnell?"

"Is a gentleman—a man of mystery. His real name is Meadows, or at least he says it is. He has a villain of a servant, who tried to frighten me, and, lastly, he has a secret. But whether he is the real enemy of my poor father I do not know. His certainly was not the hand that was raised against the Squire to-day, for I was with him when this second attack must have been made." [Pg 104]

"And the servant, was he in the room the whole time?" asked Lena, breathlessly.

"Great goodness, no! Why, who knows but that he is the man who wages such warfare against my father? And Meadows' secret is his knowledge of his man's mysterious connection with poor old dad! You're right; it must be so, Miss Scott. But," he lowered his voice to a whisper, "I have returned from Durley Dene, and once again I ask you the question to which you postponed your answer this morning."

"Hush!" replied the girl. "I cannot answer now, when death has come so near to the house, and this dreadful mystery is yet unsolved. But——"

His hand stole softly to hers, which lay upon the window-sill.

"But the fact that you have not said 'no' shows me that my chance is not quite hopeless, is that it?" he asked tenderly.

"Yes," she replied in so low a whisper that had he been any farther from her he would not have caught the welcome sound.

For a few moments neither spoke, then the girl withdrew her hand gently and whispered, "You must go back now and see how the dear old man is." [Pg 105]

Suddenly she stopped short as she gazed out of the window upon the shadowy little panorama below. Laurence felt her fingers clutch his arm as she exclaimed, under her breath—

"Look! there's a man creeping along the side of the yard. There, beyond the lawn, just a few feet from the wall."

Laurence stared out into the semi-darkness in the direction towards which his companion was pointing.

She was right. There was somebody moving along towards the palisade on the boundary between the Manse and Durley Dene. It was a man, groping and crouching in the shadows, evidently fearing lest he should be seen from the house. At first it was too dark for the young man to recognise who the midnight prowler was. But after a time, either when his eyes became accustomed to the dark or because the moon peeped out for a moment from behind her curtain of black clouds, he was able to see more plainly, and as the doubled-up figure paused before disappearing through the bushes into the grounds of Durley Dene, Laurence had been able to catch a glimpse of the features of the nocturnal visitor.

To his amazement he saw that the trespasser was none other than Doctor Meadows, alias Major Jones-Farnell! [Pg 106]

CHAPTER XV

MAJOR JONES' ERRAND

When Laurence visited his father's room at daybreak next morning he found that the doctor had not left the bedside since he had first been called in. The Squire was progressing as favourably as could be expected, Bathurst said, but it had been such a near squeak that the utmost care was necessary. To explain the nature of the attack on the old gentleman was, strange to say, more than the doctor could do with much accuracy. All he knew was that the patient's neck had almost been broken, the peculiar attitude of the body when found being the result of a powerful attempt by some person unknown to actually kill the victim by breaking his neck!

The doctor went on to recommend that a nurse should be sent down from town, suggesting that one of Burton's "private assistants" would be of peculiar value. It may be as well to mention that these "assistants" were men who were able to act very skilfully in their capacity of nurse, and were also reputable unofficial detectives. [Pg 107]

The idea of working with a detective had suggested itself to Laurence before now, but, as has been said, he had feared to call in professional aid lest his father, who was so anxious to retain the secret which he undoubtedly shared with his desperate enemy, might object to the man's presence.

Now, however, things were in a different state. The Squire was unconscious, and, according to Bathurst, might possibly be so for days. At the best he would have to keep his bed for several

weeks. During that time, with the assistance of a trained investigator, it seemed probable that the deep mystery which enshadowed Mr. Carrington might be cleared up.

Laurence accordingly despatched a telegram to Burton, the founder of the Private Assistance Bureau, requesting him to "kindly send down an able assistant at once," and then, after remaining a short time with Mrs. Featherston (the housekeeper), who had taken charge of the patient on the doctor's departure, he went downstairs to find the two ladies waiting for breakfast. Mrs. Knox was quite well again and inclined to abuse herself for the loss of her head on the previous night. Her indisposition had not, moreover, seriously affected her appetite. Lena looked pale and tired. She had hardly slept during the night, and no wonder. She alone, with the [Pg 108] exception, of course, of Laurence, knew all the details of the mystery, and with the knowledge of the weird attacks on her host and of the unfathomable secrets of the Dene and the Manse barn, sleep was quite impossible. How numerous had the events of yesterday been! First, the message from the Major, then Laurence's proposal, afterwards her anxiety for the safety of the man with whom in the short time she had known him she had fallen desperately in love. Next, the attempted murder of Mr. Carrington, and, finally, the discovery that the master of Durley Dene had visited the grounds of the Manse at midnight for some mysterious purpose as yet unknown. Mrs. Knox, though she plainly demonstrated the unwelcomeness of the idea, was compelled to suggest that she and her niece should no longer trespass upon the kindness of their young host, when so much extra work would necessarily be the result of the Squire's serious illness. However, Laurence would not hear of their going, and Mrs. Knox did not take the trouble to make any further suggestions on the subject.

As soon as they could leave the dining-room without raising Mrs. Knox's suspicion that her niece knew more than she seemed to do, Laurence and Lena went out together into the garden, when the former told Miss Scott that a nurse-detective was coming from London to assist in the [Pg 109] solution of the mystery. The fact that he was anything but an ordinary male nurse was to be kept a secret—even from Mrs. Knox herself, for such Laurence knew to be one of the particular requests made to all employing Burton's assistants.

"Well, Laurence," said the girl after a pause in the conversation (she had taken to calling him by his Christian name since his departure to Durley Dene), "well, and have you thought of any more clues?"

"Alas, no. I spent the night thinking, but am no nearer the solution than before. This secret seems inviolable, but perhaps Burton's man will be able to help us. One or two things, though, have impressed me as worthy of consideration.

"First, as I have already told you, it seemed to me at the commencement of my interview that Meadows (we will call him by that name, though I doubt his right to it) was a wonderful actor. If he was playing a part he played it well. Not only did he pretend not to know me, but seemed both surprised at and interested in my carefully guarded assertions of his connection with my father. Yet, later on, when I mentioned the dog-whip (on which alone hangs a secret, I am sure), and afterwards signified my intention of exploring the house, he did not in the least degree disguise [Pg 110] his concern. This leads one to think him a very poor actor, for had he some secret to keep he need not fear, since, as to the latter remark of mine, I could not have explored far in the darkness, particularly when I was one man against at least two others; while, as to the other matter, if he could bravado my assertion that he and the Squire had some secret, why did he turn pale and grow nervous when I reminded him of the purchase of the dog-whip? It was in no way a remarkable article to buy, nor one I would be likely to connect with a deep, unsolvable problem.

"A second matter worth noticing is this, that the servant, whom his master had addressed as Smith (though that is probably not his name), and the doctor himself apparently are not on the best of terms with one another. The servant certainly does not respect his master. Why? Because, if your idea is a correct one, Meadows knows that Smith is slowly sealing my father's doom (as the Squire himself said). He may really be a harmless man, though I doubt it, and Smith may know something about his past, for instance, which prohibits him from discharging the servant, though he knows exactly what is going on. But then, if this were the case, what was Meadows doing in the yard at midnight, after his interview with me last evening? No, clearly he is one of [Pg 111] the gang who are at such enmity with father.

"When the detective comes he will start from the assault last night, interview all the servants, and start his inquiry, so that it is of no use for us to do that now, but I am thinking that examination of the room may reveal some traces or clues. At any rate, now that we have called in the man, we must play second fiddle to him. It will be as well, too, to tell him all we know, and then do our best to run the poor old man's enemies to earth.

"Let us now, if there is nothing better to do, stroll down to the place where we saw the man Meadows last night, and see if he has left any clue behind him."

Together they crossed the lawn, and entered the courtyard in which stood the barn.

"That's where he was, that's where he went through the bushes and climbed over the palisade," said Lena, pointing in the direction of the Dene.

"Where did he start, though?" asked Laurence.

"Probably in the barn, or——" She ran forward, as though spurred by a sudden impulse. Carrington followed her in amazement to the little cycle shed, which she had entered.

"Look," cried the girl, and she pointed towards a corner in which stood the missing bicycle, caked with mud, and having the saddle lowered as though for some short rider. [Pg 112]

"Gracious me! What made you think that the bicycle would be returned?" asked Laurence, when he had recovered from his surprise, caused by the return of the machine.

"Common sense," replied the girl, with a light laugh. "It suddenly occurred to me that it was just as likely the Major would go out at midnight to the cycle shed as to the barn, for we know that he could have no reason for visiting the latter——"

"Wait," Laurence interrupted. "You are wrong there. He might wish to see the mysterious creature who displayed gymnastic tricks for my sole benefit the night before last."

"My dear Mr. Carrington," replied Lena (and she used that title only because she wished to see his look of regret), "your memory is failing you. Why, you told me yourself that the monkey-like creature—or presumably it—was now within the walls of Durley Dene."

"You astound me, Miss Scott," replied Laurence; "really, I have no recollection of making such a statement."

"You silly boy," answered Lena, with ill-disguised mirth, "what about the strange cry that disturbed your interview with Smith as you were leaving the house last night?" [Pg 113]

"Ah! Then you think that cry proceeded from the mouth of the person whom I encountered on the moor and again in the barn?"

"Well, it certainly appears to me that there is something similar in your description of the two sounds. But you yourself can judge better of that than I can."

"Yes; but why should this horrible creature scream as I was leaving the Dene, and if Smith is my father's would-be murderer, who is the person that used the barn as its headquarters?"

"If you knew that, Laurence, there would probably be no mystery at all. It is as to these points we have yet to decide."

"Then, do you mean that, in your opinion, the creature in the barn was not the attempted assassin?"

"We practically decided that last night when we noted the possibility of Smith having crept through the palisade and attacked your father in his room. From what you tell me about the man, I think it more than probable that we are at last on the right track. In brief, we have now come to the following conclusion—or, rather, supposition, for there is just the chance that we are wrong.

"Smith has some long-standing and, undoubtedly, fierce grudge against your father, which can only be paid off by death. He also has some control—powerful control—over this man Meadows. He compels the latter to take Durley Dene, and lets out through the house agent some ridiculous story about an invalid military gentleman of retiring disposition having taken the house. Learning the Squire's movements, he follows him to the Marquis's on your bicycle, which he kindly takes without asking your leave. Being shorter than you, he has to lower the saddle. After the attempt to murder the Squire by setting light to the house, he learns somehow or other that you have left, overtakes and shadows the carriage, and eventually attacks it. On being repulsed, he makes for home, concealing his tracks, as you are aware, by taking off his boots and carrying the bicycle into the Dene. He afterwards compels Meadows to return the cycle to the shed. Knowing who you are, he naturally objects to your having an interview with the sham Major, and is hardly polite when you apply for one. [Pg 114]

"However, wishing to make a second attempt on the Squire's life, and to carry out his vile design, he conceives the plan of getting you out of the way."

"Good heavens! I believe you are right."

"He knows you to be energetic and suspicious, and arranges an interview for you with the 'Major,' during the course of which he manages to get into the house and attack the Squire, whom he presumably thinks he has killed. He gets back in time to take up my message, delivered by the butler, to you. Why he induced you to give him money I do not know. Possibly he would have done more—would have enticed you into some room—yes, and murdered you—had it not been for that shrill cry that suddenly disturbed him." [Pg 115]

"Lena!" (the pet name slipped out unnoticed by both in Laurence's astonishment)—"Lena, you are a genius. You have solved the mystery."

"On the contrary, I am more in the dark than ever, for in addition to the secret of the man's enmity against your father, we have now to discover who is the strange creature of the shrill voice and ape-like agility, what his connection is with the people of the Dene, and, lastly, why, as I am firmly convinced, he is imprisoned in the basement of the house you visited last night." [Pg 116]

CHAPTER XVI

Doctor Bathurst visited the house a second time on the day following that when the Squire met with his injury. He reported that all was going on as well as could be expected, though the patient still remained in an unconscious state.

A telegram had reached Laurence early in the afternoon, informing him that "Nurse arrives nine to-night," and at precisely the hour specified in the message a cab drew up at the outside gate of the Manse, and presently a tall cadaverous individual in sombre garments, that somehow suggested the undertaker, was ushered into the dining-room, where supper and Laurence awaited him.

"The—ahem—gentleman from Burton's!" said the young man as the nurse-detective stepped briskly into the room.

"Between yourself and me, yes; to others simply Potter, a qualified nurse," was the new-comer's reply.

"Ah, then your name is Potter?" [Pg 117]

"Yes, Oliver Potter, formerly of New Scotland Yard. And the matter requiring my help?"

Laurence proceeded to explain, first motioning to the man to seat himself and try his hand at the viands. Not only did he describe the attempts on his father's life, but detailed his visit to the Dene, his adventure in the barn, and the incidents of the bicycle, which had been taken and eventually returned, and of the appearance of Meadows in the yard on the previous night.

"Ha! quite a nice little mystery," the detective remarked, with his mouth full, when Laurence had finished his narration of the events that seemed to have any bearing on the case in point; "a nice little mystery, apparently somewhat tangled, but no doubt quite superficial."

"I warrant that you will find it anything but superficial," responded Carrington, somewhat nettled at the remark, which seemed a reflection upon the efforts of Lena and himself to obtain some clue that might lead to the detection of the would-be murderer of the Squire. He went on to sketch briefly Miss Scott's undoubtedly ingenious manner of accounting for the various mysterious circumstances.

The detective smiled sarcastically.

"Ingenious, as you say, but most improbable. There must certainly be a simpler solution," he said. [Pg 118] "But what of the patient—is he progressing as could be expected? Yes. That is good. It will leave me more time to work in my investigating capacity. By the way, Mr. Carrington, I suppose you don't know if your father belongs to any societies—of an unusual kind, I mean? Nihilistic, for instance, or of a secret nature?"

"No, I am not aware of his connection with any illegal institutions," replied Laurence coldly. "I may as well mention that my father is a gentleman and a magistrate."

"Quite so. I ascertained that such was the case before I left London—reference books, you know. I should have discovered by this time, though, that he was a gentleman by your boots."

"My boots!"

"Exactly. I can always tell a gentleman by his boots and a lady by her fingers—rings, you know. If you are a gentleman presumably your father is also."

It was Laurence's turn to smile. He perceived that Mr. Potter was trying to impress him, but he was not impressed in the least.

"You're going to treat this case too lightly," he said; "it's something out of the common. There are none of your cheap-fictional secret societies in this mystery. There's something much deeper in it [Pg 119] than that. A plot it is, and a well-laid one, too, that will take even you a fair amount of skill to bring to light."

There was a marked emphasis on the word "you" that did not escape Mr. Oliver Potter's notice.

"Then you think we can, in your father's case, exclude any idea of a secret connection with some society, such as that I refer to? Take that useful word 'jar,' then, and remove the centre letter."

"Really, Mr. Potter, I fail to understand you. Is this professional jargon necessary? Personally, I am a plain-spoken person." Laurence had taken an almost immediate dislike to the man from Burton's, whom he perceived to be as full of the sense of his own importance as the proverbial egg is full of meat.

The imperturbable detective, however, seemed accustomed to what he no doubt considered the amateur jealousy of his employers, and merely explained that he was forgetting Laurence's presence.

"You see," he said, "I always classify my notes in a simple form—invented by myself—my own idea, sir. In such a case as this I start from the commencement. There must be some cause of these repeated attacks on Mr. Carrington's life. What is it? The possible ones are jealousy, [Pg 120] anarchy, robbery—J. A. R., see? Rather novel, isn't it? You can't forget things when you select a

word to remember them by. Well, then, you say anarchy is out of the question. This leaves us with jealousy and robbery. Are you aware of anything having been stolen on the occasion of last night's attempt at murder? No. Well, perhaps you haven't had time to find out whether any valuable has disappeared. Are you aware, then, of anyone who is jealous of your father? Any woman with whom there was some engagement or arrangement in byegone days? Any fellow-magistrate with a grudge? Anyone of that kind? No. Then the problem is harder than I anticipated. J. A. R., it must be one of those. My selection of the words is almost infallible. Stay! There's still the robbery possibility undecided. Perhaps your father possessed something, of the existence of which you were not aware. Yes, it must be a case of robbery. At any rate, we will start with that idea. Squire attacked twice. On first occasion out-of-doors. Presumably, the article the attacking party wants is something the Squire carries about on his person, incriminating letter, or what not. On the second attempt he evidently captures the 'something,' and decamps, leaving the Squire half dead—or, let me see, it was three-quarters dead, wasn't it?" (This without [Pg 121] the ghost of a smile.) "Problem, find the desperate party, and restore Squire to health. Yes, a nice little job. Thanks for sending for me. I don't often fail; never, I might say, except, of course, in very knotty cases. Well, good-night, Mr. Carrington, or perhaps you won't mind taking me to the sick-room? I've my bag here containing everything—nothing like a bag, you know, for holding things—and I'll take night duty to-day. Your good housekeeper'll want a little rest, no doubt. Upstairs, then."

Laurence opened the door and led the way to the Squire's bedroom. Horrified is the only word that will adequately express his impression of the man from Burton's. He had heard so much of the adroitness and ability of the nurse-detectives that he was at a loss to understand Potter's behaviour, which was almost that of a lunatic. The thin, garrulous specimen of humanity, with his absurd "ingenious words" and his nonsensical hypotheses, seemed more like a mummer than an investigator of crime. But no sooner had he entered the sick-room than the young man saw that whatever his very evident shortcomings as a detective might be, he was an experienced nurse. Every action pointed to that fact, and when Laurence, accompanied by Mrs. Featherston, left the [Pg 122] sick-room with the intention of retiring to bed, he was quite satisfied that his unconscious parent was in safe hands. But he felt instinctively that, as an assistant in solving the mystery, Lena was worth a dozen such as Oliver Potter.

Possibly young Mr. Carrington would have been surprised had he seen the change that came over the features of the man from Burton's when left alone with his insensible patient.

The stupid, grinning expression on his face gave place to one of cunning and delight.

"Aha, young man," he muttered to himself, "you've put me down as a fool, as I intended that you should. We'll see who is the fool before long. It was very necessary," he went on, "that he should think me a fool, too, for otherwise he would be eternally suspicious. As it is, he will consider me a mere child in the investigating line, which will give me the opportunities I want.

"As if I couldn't see through the whole thing! Green's 'Landed Gentry' told me how much Laurence would gain by his father's death. No doubt the youth has got into hot water. Creditors pressing. Bills much overdue. I know the sort of thing. I only wonder he wasn't more artful in making his plans. He looked a smart fellow, but then, appearances are deceitful. At any rate, he [Pg 123] seems a duffer to have failed to murder the old chap both times.

"I wonder nobody has seen through his game before. I must find the accomplice who played the part of the cycling highwayman on the heath. The idea of his being on a cycle is novel.

"I presume, when he found that the accomplice hadn't polished the old chap off, he decided to do the job himself. In order to avoid the possible suspicion of the women staying in the house he invents the story of the interview with the imaginary Major Jones-Farnell, and goes off to this Durley Dene, or pretends to. No sooner does he find that the old man has retired to bed than he goes in and makes a desperate attempt to kill him. He knows that he must kill the Squire outright, or he will be exposed immediately, should the old man live and be able to tell the tale. Unfortunately for him he is interrupted in some way, and leaves his father only half dead. The doctor compels him to send for me, otherwise he would not probably have done so. So long as the Squire remains unconscious Laurence is safe. If he recovers, then his assailant is done for. Therefore, the chances are that a final attempt to do for the poor old man will be made, if there is any probability of his recovering consciousness. I must be on the alert." [Pg 124]

But he was not as good as his word, and evidently made but a feeble defence against the onslaught of Morpheus, for within a very few minutes of settling down in the cosy arm-chair by the bedside he was fast asleep.

And while he slept that which he anticipated came to pass. [Pg 125]

CHAPTER XVII

MR. POTTER'S SOLUTION

The man from Burton's was a light sleeper—at least, so he believed himself to be. He woke from his arm-chair doze very suddenly—noticing by the clock on the mantelpiece that he had slept for

nearly two hours. He was conscious of having been awakened by some sound. Yet there was no one in the room. He started up from the chair. Was it fancy that, as he did so, he heard the closing of a door, as though someone had quietly left the room?

He glanced at the bed. Yes, someone had entered the sick-room, and for the hideous purpose that he had conceived to be possible. Only one thing assured him of this fact, but it was quite enough. It told him all.

A pillow which had reposed at the foot of the great bed when he had first entered the room was no longer in that place. It had been shifted to the other end, and now lay firmly pressed down upon the unconscious patient's face. Here was yet another attempt to murder the unhappy Squire. It had been placed there to suffocate him. [Pg 126]

Hastily, yet gently, the detective raised it from its position, and flung it into a corner. So recently had it been placed upon the patient's upturned face that no harm had been done. But Mr. Potter shuddered to think what would have happened had he not awakened in time to avert the catastrophe.

His first duty had been that of "nurse," now his detective instincts asserted themselves. While he had waited to learn whether the Squire yet lived, he had allowed the would-be murderer time to make good his escape. But he hurriedly opened the door of the sick-room and peered out into the dark passage. Not a sound disturbed the silence of night. Mr. Potter muttered something of the nature of an oath as he realised how he had been caught napping in both senses of the word. The heartless son, Laurence, of whose guilt he was so confident, had nearly got the better of him. He made up for his shortcoming by keeping awake and alert during the remaining hours of his watch. But nothing happened—no one came, and when Mrs. Featherston arrived at half-past seven to relieve him for a short period he threw up for the time the rôle of nurse, and walked out of the sick-room in his investigator's capacity to learn what he could about the true facts of the attack on the moor. [Pg 127]

His night had not been wasted. He had carefully examined the Squire's body, and convinced himself that a very remarkable, but unsuccessful, attempt to kill the old gentleman had been made. Yet a tiny, ragged cut on the front of the neck, almost upon the throat, was the only visible clue to the manner of that attempt.

He had further made a careful examination of the room and of the clothes that the Squire had worn. Yet he obtained but a slight clue that seemed likely to lead to anything. This was a yellow hair—or rather, yellow wisp of silk—that he found upon the patient's cravat. It was of a peculiar colour, but hardly likely, Potter thought, to prove of any assistance. Yet he carefully gummed it by means of a strip of court plaster to a page of his note-book, and proceeded to investigate the furniture in the room. Nothing in the way of a possible clue came to light. One thing alone caused him surprise.

This was the discovery of the body of an ordinary bat found lying in a dark corner of the room. The creature was dead—it had apparently been crushed when some furniture had been moved, possibly by the doctor's direction.

Mr. Potter carefully picked up his curious find, and placed it in a cardboard box on which his eye chanced. The box he placed on a high shelf in a convenient cupboard. It might, he thought, prove useful in the future. [Pg 128]

Confident though he was of Laurence's guilt, he determined not to be rash. To start from the beginning was his intention. And so his first move was to interview Moggin, the coachman, to whom he introduced himself as the "nurse." Cautiously guiding the conversation on to the subject of highwaymen of the present time, he was rewarded by a confidential description of the attack on the carriage, that had happened a few days before. Moggin had, of course, learned of the injury that had befallen his master, and confessed that he connected the two attacks with one another, as having been made by the same man.

Mr. Potter was annoyed. The coachman was certainly telling the truth. He had deemed it possible that Moggin might have been an accomplice in the so-called attack, and that no "highwayman"—not even another accomplice in disguise—had existed. This was evidently not the case. Ergo, there must be some other man in league with Laurence. This other accomplice was a very important person. He had, according to the detective, not only played the highwayman, but also the market-woman whom Miss Scott had decided was a man disguised.

Oliver Potter was at a loss to know what step to take next. Strange to say, it never entered his head to visit Durley Dene. In his confidence that he was on the right track, he evidently had little doubt but that the neighbouring mansion was uninhabited. For who knew anything about the persons that lived there? Only Laurence! Of course, the message that had been sent by means of a catapult from the grounds of the Dene had been despatched by the accomplice on whom Potter was so anxious to lay his hand. [Pg 129]

Then a brilliant idea struck the man from Burton's. Was Selene Scott that accomplice? Might not she have attacked the carriage on the moor? Might not the story of the market-woman in disguise, and the letter from Durley Dene, be false? When he came to think of it, Mr. Potter marvelled that he had not discovered this probability before. Why were Laurence Carrington and Miss Scott so apparently intimate? Was it not possible that they might be engaged—or even married? In which case it would be to their mutual advantage were the Squire dead, since then

his money would naturally come to them.

"Eureka," cried the man from Burton's, who was proud of his knowledge of half a dozen Greek and Latin words, "I hold in my hand the key to the mystery!" [Pg 130]

CHAPTER XVIII

AN ASTOUNDING CONFESSION

"Very well," said Lena, when she had learned the young man's impressions of Mr. Oliver Potter's capabilities, "we must do without him. We must work by ourselves. I have a suggestion to make. Let me visit Major Jones-Farnell, alias Meadows. It is somewhat irregular, I have no doubt, but in such a case as this we must not be too particular."

"Excuse me, but you must do nothing of the kind," was the reply.

"Then let me go with you, and see what the two of us can do towards discovering the secret of Durley Dene. I am sure that if once we can discover who this Meadows is, what his relations are with the man Smith, and who the creature that is held in restraint in the basement or cellar of the house is—then, and not before, shall we be able to solve the mystery."

"I don't at all like the idea of you coming with me. The ordeal was quite bad enough for me; what would it be to you?" [Pg 131]

"Sir!" Lena cried, with pretended severity, "I am able to stand any ordeal that you can. You see, I am not afraid, or why should I have suggested going alone?"

"Then shall we go together?"

"Yes, and as soon as possible. It is now eleven o'clock. Auntie will not reappear until lunch. The detective is surely capable of looking after your father's safety. What is to prevent us from going at once? You agree? Then wait one moment while I put on my hat."

She hurried off, returning a minute later, prepared for the morning visit.

Laurence, during her short absence, had filled his vesta case, and once again placed the little pistol in his pocket.

"Now we can come," said Lena. And without delay they started off, presently reaching the dark porch of the house of secrets.

Smith, as before, appeared in answer to their ring, but he was far from ready to admit the pair. Finally he said he would consult the Major, and banging the door in their faces, disappeared, to return in a few minutes with a sour grin and a summons to follow upstairs.

This time Laurence struck a match on entering the house. The servant did not object, but he kept very close to the visitors, eyeing the lady as though coveting the bracelets she wore. The faint light of the match revealed little, for the passages were unfurnished, and green mildew clung to the stone walls. It was, however, a considerable aid to their progress towards Mr. Meadows' sanctum. Anything was better, thought Laurence, than the grim, impenetrable darkness of the previous visit. [Pg 132]

As on the former occasion, the porter ushered them into the Oriental chamber in which sat the owner of the house, withdrawing immediately when they were once inside.

The doctor sprang to his feet immediately and held out his hand—which Laurence appeared not to notice.

"Good-morning to you," he said politely. "Madam, I am more than honoured by your visit. My only regret is the inefficiency of my establishment. I think, though, you will find this chair comfortable, and trust the smell of tobacco smoke does not inconvenience you. Unfortunately I have no drawing-room, as your brother—I believe he is your brother—no?—then your friend—will have told you."

He spoke fast, as though fearing that Laurence would commence by asking unpleasant questions.

"Doctor Meadows," said Carrington, "this lady and I have come to you to-day to endeavour to learn the reason of your remarkable behaviour of late. I am aware that you would do anything rather than receive a visit from the police, but that is one of the two alternatives I offer you now. The other is that you explain fully your relations with my father, Squire Carrington, of Northden Manse." [Pg 133]

"Mr. Carrington," replied the doctor, "I told you the night before last you are making some great mistake in connecting me in any way with your father. Must I tell you so again now?"

"Then, answer me this. What were you doing in the grounds of our house at midnight, shortly after my visit here and the attempt to murder my father in his room? What were you doing, I ask, on that occasion; and how comes it that on the following morning the stolen bicycle, by the rider

of which a former attack on the Squire was made, is found in the shed from which it was taken?"

As Laurence spoke in a sharp, determined tone, both Lena and he noticed that the colour died away from Doctor Meadows' cheeks. For a moment he could not reply. His concern was very apparent. At last he answered.

"Mr. Carrington," he said, "I see that it is no use for me to withhold anything from you. You have been too sharp for me. What if I were to tell you that my secret has nothing whatever to do with [Pg 134] your father or the strange attempts to murder him in cold blood, and that it is only by unfortunate circumstances I come to be suspected by you of connection with the plot against the Squire?"

"I shouldn't believe it," replied Laurence, frankly and deliberately; "however, I pray you to tell me your story. Do not forget, by the way, that you have confessed to telling a pack of lies on different occasions before now—about the Persian cat and the whip, the lunatic in the cellar, your invalid Major, and so on. By the way, let me advise you, if you wish to keep your secret from me, not to allow the creature imprisoned downstairs to shriek while I am in the house."

So great was the effect of these words on Doctor Meadows that at first Lena feared he was going to faint. He sank down into his chair, sweat standing out on his forehead; then he sprang up and darted towards Laurence as though about to attack him with his fists.

"Good God!" he cried. "How much do you know? Are you bent on ruining me? Tell me, quickly, exactly, how much you know?"

Laurence was more than astounded at this outburst. Acting on a suggestion of Lena, he had sprung upon the other a remark about the creature whom he had seen in the barn, and who, [Pg 135] according to Miss Scott's mode of accounting for the various mysterious circumstances of the case, was being held in restraint by the inhabitants of Durley Dene. That the chance shot had gone home was surely proved by the excited behaviour of Doctor Meadows.

For a moment Laurence hesitated. Should he play a game of "bluff" and pretend that he knew all? He felt inclined to do this, but reflected that he might be placing Lena in a position of danger were he to do so. For, once Meadows believed his closely guarded secret was known, what steps might not he take to compel those who had learned that secret to keep silence? Consequently, he replied, "That is surely my own business?"

But Doctor Meadows was not satisfied.

"That's no answer," he cried. "I must have an answer. How much do you know? Tell me!"

"All I know is," responded Laurence, "that one of the members of your household is moving heaven and earth to do away with my unhappy father, and I shrewdly suspect which of you it is. I know better than to believe that you and your servant alone occupy this house of dark deeds."

"There you are, bringing up that absurd notion that I (or, in your own words, one of my household) am the author of the attempts on your father's life. If you won't take my word for it [Pg 136] that no one living in this house is in any way responsible for the Squire's terrible position, will it satisfy you if I swear upon the Book that such is the case?"

"You dare not," said Laurence positively.

"Not only do I dare to, but I will do so," answered Meadows; "but first, tell me what you know about the person whom you allege is imprisoned in this house."

"In the first place," Laurence replied, "I know that, for some reason or other, he has been hiding in the Manse barn. Secondly, that he possesses the activity of an ape; and, thirdly, that he is black, and that his voice is the strangest I have ever heard."

"Thank Heaven!" muttered Meadows, not too low for the two visitors to hear it. He sat down once again, and the colour returned to his cheeks.

"Are you satisfied that I know something about him?" asked Laurence, none too pleased with the way in which the doctor had taken his information.

"I am quite satisfied that you know nothing whatever about that which you are pleased to call the mystery of this house. I confess that I have a secret. Who has not? Mine is one that I am very anxious to keep. Again, I say, who is not desirous of keeping secrets as such? Further, I confess that you have had good grounds for mistrust. That bicycle business was enough to lay me open to [Pg 137] suspicion. What I am now going to say I will repeat afterwards upon oath, if you so please, but, as a gentleman, I hope my word will not be doubted. That bicycle was found by my servant standing in the rear of this house the morning after what was evidently the first attempt on your father's life. Whose it was, and whence it came, was for the time a mystery. Then you honoured me with a visit, and I learned in what an uncomfortable position circumstances had placed me. As I say, I have no desire to emerge from the darkness of my retirement. I did not wish you to know that I had found the bicycle, for fear that you, doubting my word, would carry out your threat of communicating with the police, and having the house searched. Therefore, I secretly returned you the bicycle which evil destiny had given into my hands.

"This I can safely say—and swear, if it please you—that there neither has been, nor is, anything illegal or wrong going on in this house. Does that satisfy you?"

No one answered. Laurence was inclined to doubt the man's word. He had heard some equally astounding falsehoods from him before. Lena, also, knew not whether to believe the statement or not. [Pg 138]

"Then," said the doctor, "I will fetch a volume of the Testament. But before going any further, tell me if you know any man who would answer to this description—Medium height, iron-grey moustache, possibly a grey beard, but I doubt it; age about sixty; peculiarly courteous and old-fashioned as to speech; an abhorrer of tobacco in any form."

"That is the Squire—do you know him?" asked Lena and Laurence excitedly, and almost in one breath.

"Ah!" responded Doctor Meadows. But his pronunciation of the monosyllable was pregnant with meaning. [Pg 139]

CHAPTER XIX

A TRUCE AND A PROMISE

"Then you know my father?" asked Laurence, after the pause that followed the doctor's laconic remark.

"That I cannot say," responded Meadows, "but it seems like it, does it not?"

"You astonish me by confessing to a former acquaintance with Squire Carrington. Were you not on the point of taking your oath that you knew nothing about my father?"

"No, I was not going so far as that, I am only prepared to swear that I have had no hand in these attempts on your father's life, for I will tell frankly that I was almost confident I had met your father long before you told me that I was right in my description of his appearance. Life is indeed strange. A moment ago you were doubting my word—you may feel inclined to do so now, little thinking that probably I alone could throw any light on the mystery. You know this, for I think you have already told me as much, that Ma—Squire Carrington is keeping some deep secret from the [Pg 140] world—even from you, his son. What if I, and I alone, am able to reveal that secret?"

"You speak in riddles," replied Laurence. "You appear to know my father, yet last time we referred to the subject you told me deliberately that you had not 'the pleasure of his acquaintance.' What am I to believe? Now you deny all connection with these murderous attacks on his life, and yet you profess to be in a position to reveal the cause of them, and to throw light upon the Squire's well-guarded secret."

"As I have said," explained Doctor Meadows, "fate plays strange tricks with us mortals. I am speaking the truth when I say that I think I know more about your father's secret than any living creature, except the Squire himself, and his assailant. Tell me, though, what do you know of Mr. Carrington's past?"

"Very little," replied Laurence; "if I knew more I might be able myself to shed some light on the darkness. This alone I have been told by my father, who is one of those men who keep their private affairs a sealed book to the rest of the world—that my mother, who was of high birth, died when I was born, twenty-two years ago; that my father never followed any profession or trade, and that I am an only child." [Pg 141]

"Ah," murmured Meadows, "that is all you know, is it?" He sat gazing steadily at the fireplace, his brow knit up as though he was wrapped in thought. For a short space of time there was silence in the Oriental room.

"Well, do you agree," the doctor said at last, "to my proposal that I should play the detective and solve the mystery encircling your father's life?"

"I have already obtained the assistance of an investigator," replied Laurence, somewhat coldly.

"Ah, and is he quite satisfactory?"

Lena smiled at the question.

"No," she responded, "he is hardly all that one can desire. He comes from Burton's Private Assistance Bureau." She turned to Laurence. "You must not be ungracious," she said gently. "Doctor Meadows—I call him by that name for want of a better, though I am certain it is a disguised one—Doctor Meadows is most kind in making this suggestion. We have really no call upon his generosity at all. If he thinks he is in a position to assist us in our investigation, why not permit him to do so? Since he gives us his word as a gentleman that neither he nor his servant has any connection with the plot to murder the Squire, why, he is at liberty to have as many secrets of his own as he likes without being annoyed by suspicious young people like us. Under [Pg 142] the circumstances I am sure Doctor Meadows will not expect you to ask him to the house to pursue his inquiry, but please do let him help us as best he can from here. I am sure his forehead shows him to be an adept at detective work. It's quite as good a one as Sherlock Holmes had!"

Laurence meditated. He naturally could not refuse Lena such a small thing, and because she asked it he changed his behaviour towards the doctor, and became more polite to the old gentleman, who received the alteration with undisguised pleasure.

"If I could only tell you why this house is the house of strange secrets that you believe it to be, I would do so with all my heart. Alas! that is impossible. As you have discovered, I have a secret—one which I must keep at all costs. I beg you not to refer to it again. As you have cleverly discovered, madam, my name, too—the one you know—is a pseudonym. One day, perhaps, you will know why I have had to take such precautions. Then you will find that it is by no fault of mine that I am compelled to play the part I do. I thank you, both of you, for your kindness. I am in your hands. If you do not believe my word of honour, you can point out this house to the police and have it searched. By so doing you will ruin me. You will cause such a sensation in the world—yes, [Pg 143] I am not exaggerating—as has not been for years. And it will not do you the slightest good. Believe me, were you to do as you once suggested, Mr. Carrington, you would, rather than win any praise or honour, as you might if you exposed a gang of coiners or a murder-house, place yourself in a most unenviable position. But not for this reason do I ask you to refrain from taking active measures against me, but on the ground of humanity, and because I alone can explain the terrible secret that has blasted your poor father's life."

"Doctor Meadows, the more I get to know you, the greater enigma you become to me," said Laurence. "You must yourself agree with me when I say that such words as you have spoken are most remarkable. I cannot wonder at this, for you are the most remarkable man I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. As you say, perhaps one day I shall know your history and the cause of all that has raised my suspicions. Then, no doubt, I shall see you in your true light, but, until then, understand this: I shall take no steps whatever to unravel the mystery that surrounds you, and shall respect all that you have told me, never alluding to what is evidently a painful subject for discussion to you, without your permission. And here is my hand on it. When I speak as I do, I [Pg 144] think I speak both for myself and for this lady, who has done me the honour of promising to become my wife."

"Oh, you story-teller!" broke in Lena, in tones of mock displeasure; "I have not yet given my answer. If you aren't careful it shall be 'no.' At present I am the person to answer for myself, and I second all that Mr. Carrington has said," she added, turning to Meadows.

"Thank you," replied the old gentleman, "thank you, both of you. You will not regret the course you have adopted. But this detective whom you have engaged—can you prevent him from making things unpleasant for me?"

"I will do my best," replied Laurence briskly. "But," he proceeded, "you should really be more careful in your selection of a servant, doctor. One of my causes of suspicion was his very peculiar conduct in refusing to show me out of the front door, after our last interview, without my bribing him. That is hardly what one expects from a gentleman's servant, is it?"

"No, indeed," answered Meadows, with a sickly smile. "I must apologise for his misconduct. He is not the most desirable servant one could have, but he is very necessary to me. This time I will show you out myself, and I shall not trouble you for a 'pour-boire.'" [Pg 145]

CHAPTER XX

MR. HORNCASTLE, FROM DARTMOOR

"And now," said Meadows, as he lay back in his arm-chair, "now, as you have been good enough to promise to take me into your confidence, may I ask if you will give me a brief outline of the manner in which this plot against Mr. Carrington has been carried out?"

"Certainly," said Laurence; and he proceeded to sketch briefly the events of the last few days.

"Well," said the doctor, when his young visitor had concluded the narrative, "one thing is quite certain. Since you are now sure that the enemy is not lurking in this house, he must be even nearer home. I mean that the chances are he is still hiding in the old barn. By the way, do you happen to know of any secret place of concealment in that building?"

"No; that I do not. But I feel sure, from the manner in which the creature escaped from me on the night when I encountered him in the dark, that there must be such a hiding-place. Strange that a new arrival should discover a secret room, when I, who have explored the barn scores of times, [Pg 146] have not even learned of its existence."

"Now," pursued Meadows, "I have already told you that I am probably the one person who can throw any light upon the secrets and mysteries in which this weird creature plays so important a part, yet I must confess that I am unable to divulge one word of what I know—or, rather, suspect—about the Squire's secret. As you are already aware, I do know your father, Mr. Carrington; that is, I did know him many years ago, before you were born, and before his marriage. Were I to tell you any suspicions I should be breaking a promise I made, and have kept for all these years; and I would rather die than do so. I know that by telling you this I am probably laying myself open to further suspicion, but I have found, to my cost, that to tell the truth is the best policy,

whatever the consequences may be. One thing, though, I can do, and that is to help you to run this fiendish creature to earth. This I may as well tell you: the person who is haunting your father —the fear of whose coming has, indeed, haunted him for years—is not a woman, as you have at one time imagined. It is a man. And with all respect for your detective-nurse, his motive is neither jealousy, anarchy, nor robbery. It is revenge!" [Pg 147]

"I must say that I always considered that such must be the case," said Laurence; "hence my inclination to believe it was the poacher who swore to be even with my father one day."

"Ah!" remarked Doctor Meadows, "if it were only a poacher—a prince of poachers, even—then our task would be very much easier. As it is, we must prepare ourselves for a hard battle if we hope to capture the rascal. Though I know nothing about him personally, I can tell you that he is certain to be diabolically cunning and clever. You have already found that out yourself. But, tell me, have you discovered anything in the nature of a clue? Anything such as the feather the detective in fiction finds on the murdered man's bed, which may lead to the detection of the criminal?"

Laurence shook his head. He had left the work of searching the room in which the final attempt had been made on the Squire's life to the detective from Burton's. Whether Mr. Oliver Potter had taken the opportunity thus presented he did not know.

"Then, tell me, please, about your father's room. Is there a looking-glass over the mantelboard?"

"No; my father dislikes mirrors of any kind. He shaves even without the aid of a glass. But why?" [Pg 148]

"One minute. I think you said your butler found the bedroom door slightly ajar when he entered, and discovered that your father was apparently murdered? Yes? Well, then, do you recollect hearing whether any of the maids happened to be about in the corridor at the time when the assault must have taken place? A housemaid, for instance, with a slop pail?"

"No; I was not told that such was the case. Besides, the servants were at supper when Kingsford went upstairs to attend to the Squire's wants, so we may be quite sure that none of the women were on the bedroom floor. But why on earth do you ask? This has surely nothing to do with the case?"

"I am merely trying to obtain some proof that my theory is the right one, though, to be sure, proof is hardly necessary. What I wish to discover is why the assassin did not carry out his vile deed."

"He, no doubt, believed that he had killed the Squire," suggested Lena, who had been following the conversation with undisguised interest.

Meadows shook his head.

"Or he was interrupted by hearing the butler's footsteps in the passage," hazarded Laurence.

"In the latter case," said the doctor, "I should say 'no,' because, from what I can gather, there is [Pg 149] no suitable hiding-place in the room in which he could have concealed himself when the butler came in. There is always the bed, of course, but I am inclined to think that he was interrupted in some other way. The question is, how? It might be answered if we learned that anything had been found in the room—anything unusual, that is to say. However, we will not trouble about that now. What should be done is to have the barn thoroughly overhauled. Once we discover the hiding-place of this creature, we shall be well on in our investigation."

Laurence was about to reply when an interruption occurred. As on the occasion of the last visit to Durley Dene, the doctor's strange servant appeared in the doorway. This time his dusky face was pale, and he appeared to be in a great state of alarm.

"Here, quick, I want you! Come down at once, will you?" he whispered in the doctor's ear, but not so low that the visitors could not catch the words.

The man looked significantly at his master, who rose in haste.

"I regret that I shall have to close this very pleasant interview," he said, in a quivering voice. "Unexpected business causes my retirement. But, come, we must meet again before long. I will show you to the door. Lead the way, if you please, Horncastle." [Pg 150]

As Meadows uttered this last word the servant turned to him and frowned angrily, not aware that both the visitors were watching him.

"Lead the way, Smith, I mean. I always confound your name with that of my last valet," Dr. Meadows added, as though prompted by the servant's expression of annoyance.

The shutter of a landing window had been drawn back, so that the light from outside feebly pierced the darkness within. Thus was the journey downstairs made easier. The doctor walked in front with the servant. Laurence made way at the top of the staircase for Lena to go before him. This she would not do, however, but, fumbling in the semi-darkness, she found her lover's hand, caught it, and did not release her hold until the two were safely outside in the dazzling heat of the day.

The door closed behind them.

"How glad I am to get into the outside world once again!" cried Lena, joyfully, when they had

reached the gate of Durley Dene. "Doctor Meadows is very kind and nice, and a perfect gentleman, yet there is such a distinct air of mystery about the house, one is given such an impression that the place is peopled by ghosts, that I must confess I should have been frightened had I been alone there to-day. But, Laurence, the mystery is no more solved than ever. It seems to get deeper every time we make a fresh discovery. We know now that the doctor has nothing to do with the Squire—I mean that he is not connected with the assaults—and yet he informs us that he not only knew your father and his secret, but could explain the whole mystery, if allowed to do so." [Pg 151]

"That's what he says," answered Laurence. "Is it the truth? And what is the urgent business on which he was called away?"

By this time the porch of the Manse was reached, but the door being closed, and Laurence having mislaid his key, it was necessary to wait for a servant to answer the bell.

"Did you hear," asked Lena, "that he called the servant Horncastle, and then corrected himself?"

"Indeed I did; and in spite of all he said about truth being the best policy, I feel sure he was lying again when he explained that a former servant was called Horncastle. By the way, Horncastle is no common name, is it? Somehow I believe I've heard it before. Do you know anyone called Horncastle? I certainly have some reason for recollecting the name." [Pg 152]

At that moment Kingsford appeared at the door.

"Do you happen to know the name 'Horncastle'?" casually asked Laurence of the butler, as he followed Lena into the house.

"Horncastle, sir?" repeated Kingsford, who, as an old retainer, was never treated quite as one of the domestic servants. "No, I can't say I know anyone o' that name, Mister Laurence, leastways excepting 'the' Horncastle."

"And who is 'the' Horncastle?" asked Laurence, pausing to hear the old man's answer.

"I mean the famous burgiler, sir, what escaped from Dartmoor six months back."

"Good gracious!" muttered Laurence to himself, and Lena thought something that could only be described by an equally forcible interjection.

"Ah, of course," remarked the young man, fearing to raise the butler's suspicion. [Pg 153]

CHAPTER XXI

MR. POTTER SHOWS HIS HAND

"Glad to say, sir," was the butler's news after his remarks about Horncastle, "that the master's recovered consciousness, sir, and would be glad to see you. Dr. Bathurst has been and wished me to inform you that he is quite satisfied with the progress his patient is making. Only he must be kept very quiet, sir; and you'll pardon me mentioning the matter, sir, but, do you know, I don't quite like the looks of that man Potter, the nurse. Seems to me, with all respect, sir, that he's neglecting his duty, to ask questions about master's movements of late, and such like. Between you and me, sir, I suspect him of being more than he makes out. When I was in the service of Sir Hartfoot Greig, sir, there was a robbery, and just such a man as Mr. Potter came down from London to investigate. He did more harm than good, and Sir Hartfoot, he afterwards told me that ——"

But Laurence, well aware that when the old servant once got started on one of his long-winded yarns there was no stopping him, cut the story short by saying he would hear the rest another time, as he was very anxious to see his father without delay. [Pg 154]

Lena had already retired to her room to remove her outdoor garments, so Laurence at once proceeded to the Squire's bedroom, on the threshold of which he encountered the man from Burton's, who, with a mysterious air, drew him aside into a spare bedroom, explaining that he particularly wished to have a word with him.

"Well, what is it?" asked Laurence, impatiently.

"It's this, sir," replied Mr. Potter. "I think, all things considered, it would be best for you not to visit your father just now."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Only this, Mr. Laurence Carrington, that I have seen through your game, and shall feel obliged if you will consider yourself under arrest, and remain in this room until I have arranged for your removal."

The young man's remarks on hearing the nurse-detective's words were forcible and to the point. For this reason there is no necessity to chronicle them here. Sufficient it is to mention that an immediate explanation was required, and this Mr. Potter did not hesitate to give. His suspicions

and their cause have already been dealt with in a previous chapter. The detective, in tones that betrayed his triumph, briefly sketched the reasoning by which he had reached the conclusion that the Squire's assailant was none other than his own son, whose accomplice was the lady who answered to the name of Selene Scott. [Pg 155]

At the mention of Lena's name, and when the absurdity of the situation appealed to Laurence, the young man burst into a fit of hearty laughter.

"You old meddling blunderer," he cried, "what a fine mess you've got yourself into with your rapid deductions, your startling and original theories! Suppose I call the men-servants and have you kicked out of the house? It would be less than you deserved. My father's murderer! I've never heard anything so funny in my life. So Miss Scott was my accomplice?"

"Exactly," replied the detective, somewhat taken aback by the way in which "the criminal" had received the intelligence that his guilt had been discovered; "and if I may be allowed to give you a word of advice, you should control your mirth a trifle. Perhaps you are not aware that I am in a position to obtain your arrest on suspicion?"

"I certainly am not," answered Laurence. "The best thing you can do, I think, is to come with me to the Squire's bedroom. My father has regained consciousness, I believe. Let us see, then, if he is not able to prove the absurdity of your charge." [Pg 156]

"I will not degrade you with the 'cuffs,' but kindly permit me to take your arm. Don't try to commit suicide, now that I've proved your guilt. You can't try games like that on Oliver Potter, late of Scotland Yard, sir!"

With difficulty controlling his amusement, Laurence allowed the detective to hold his coat sleeve, while he led him into the Squire's room, and the presence of the sick man himself.

"Well, Daddy," said the young man, in a low voice, as he approached the bed, "so you are a little better, eh? That's good. You'll soon be yourself again, and let's hope you'll be no more troubled by the attacks of this ruffianly enemy of yours. I'm on his track, Father, and ere long I hope to have him safely between four walls."

"Ah, Laurence, my boy," replied the old gentleman, in a feeble voice, "it's a pleasure to hear your voice. How long have I been ill? What do you mean by my 'enemy'? It was a—a burglar, Laurence, that tried to murder me—the burglar whose coming I've been dreading for so long. The one who attacked us in the carriage, you know. Do you say you're on his track? That—that's all right, only you—you won't catch him, I'm afraid. But who is this person?" The Squire pointed towards Mr. Oliver Potter, who stood at Laurence's side in a great state of trepidation on hearing the patient's cordial greeting to his son. [Pg 157]

The detective felt almost inclined to indulge in profanity. He had been led off on a wrong scent. So much was very plain. "For once in your life, Oliver Potter," he muttered to himself, "you've made a bad blunder."

"Who is this person?" again asked Mr. Carrington. "Surely you have not engaged a fresh servant? It isn't the doctor, is it? Laurence, I don't like new faces. Ask that gentleman what he is doing here."

"This," said Laurence, seeing fit to disguise the real truth, "is a friend of mine who happened to be staying in the village. As he has had some experience of nursing, he was good enough to offer his services on hearing of your illness. While you were unconscious he rendered Mrs. Featherston valuable assistance. Now you are better, he will, of course, leave you. I will accompany him to the door, Father, and then will come back and see you again. Is your neck very bad?"

"It's very sore and weak, my boy. That's a good lad, go and show your friend out, and thank him for his kindness. Then return to me for a little talk. Mrs. Featherston, please stay until Mr. Laurence returns." [Pg 158]

"Now, sir," said young Carrington, when, with the detective, he had left the sick-room, "are you quite convinced of your absurd blunder?"

"I am, and I sincerely regret it, Mr. Laurence," replied the man from Burton's. "It's not often that I err. When I do I feel it—feel it, sir, deeply. I am obliged to you for your kindness in withholding the truth from your father. I shouldn't like Squire Carrington to think me incompetent, though for that matter——"

"We won't refer to the subject any further, Mr. Potter. I will now draw you a cheque and wish you a very good day, regretting that your valuable services are no longer required."

A few minutes later the detective was ready to depart.

"Glad to have made your acquaintance, sir," he said, as he stood on the doorstep. "I suppose I may use your name as a reference? Perhaps you may require my assistance another time. Here is my card. If you should ever want me again that address will always find me. By the way, I'm of a forgiving nature, and always like to help young amateur investigators—give them encouragement, you know. Well, I've left a clue to the mystery behind in a cardboard box in the cupboard of the Squire's room. Don't thank me—anything to help a young friend. Fine day, isn't it?" And Mr. Oliver Potter, late of Scotland Yard, walked briskly out of the house, upsetting the umbrella stand as he went, and chuckling beneath his breath. [Pg 159]

"Thank Heaven, he's gone!" muttered Laurence. "If ever there existed a greater bore than our friend from Burton's I shouldn't care to meet him."

He returned to the bedroom, and relieved Mrs. Featherston, taking a seat by his father's side.

"Daddy," he said, when the door closed upon the genial housekeeper, "I'm playing the part of an amateur detective. My one aim just now is to get to the bottom of the mystery of the two determined attacks on your life. It's no use for you to try to deceive me. You have some deep secret—something is haunting you every moment of your existence; and I shall not rest until I have discovered what it is."

"Laurence, don't, don't try! It's for your own sake that I ask it of you. When I am dead you will know all. Until then, do not try to discover what is not meant for you to learn. I want you to love and respect your father while he lives. Therefore do as I beg of you." [Pg 160]

"Don't talk like that, Daddy," said Laurence, gently, "as if anything could alter my feelings towards you. Is this secret anything that concerns my—mother?"

"No, my boy, thank God, it is not!"

"Then answer me this; have you ever heard of a Doctor Meadows?"

"Meadows! No. But why, Laurence?"

"Or a Major Jones-Farnell?"

"No, no! But——"

"Or of a fellow named Horncastle?" pursued the younger man.

"Never!"

"Then, have you ever mentioned anything about the matter which you wish to keep a secret from me to a living soul?"

"Why all these questions, Laurence? You know now that I have a secret, so there is no need for me to deny it. I have never before now breathed a word of this to a single soul, with the exception of one person."

"And he?"

"He is dead. My secret lies within my own heart. No cross-questioning shall drag it from me."

"One thing more, then I will not speak to you again for a little while, because you must be kept quite quiet. Were you ever in India? If so, did you happen to meet there a Major Carrington, of Madras?" [Pg 161]

With startling suddenness the sick man darted up in his bed. He stared silently at his son for a moment, terror plainly imprinted upon his features. Then, still speechless, he collapsed again upon the pillows. Presently he turned his face away, so that he could no longer see his son, whose words had so visibly concerned him.

"I am very tired, Laurence," he said, peevishly. "You have talked too long already. I must ask you to leave the room. Please do not annoy me any further with this absurd cross-questioning." [Pg 162]

CHAPTER XXII

WHOSE WAS THE WRITING?

After being practically dismissed from his father's sick-room Laurence went in search of Lena, whom he found in the garden with Mrs. Knox. The good lady had fallen off into a convenient doze in a comfortable deck-chair, so her niece welcomed the new-comer's arrival with pleasure.

"Let us come for a little stroll," suggested the girl. Needless to say, Laurence gladly concurred.

"Well," Lena began, "I am dying to hear if the Squire said anything to you—anything of importance, I mean, of course."

"Yes, he did. He satisfied me upon one point, concerning which I was much troubled. His inviolate secret has nothing to do with my mother, as I feared—though I did not mention it to you—that it might. One discovery of importance I have made. That is, though he didn't say it in so many words, he made it very evident to me that he had at some period or other been in India." [Pg 163]

"Ah, then you still think that Mr. Meadows is responsible for these attacks on his life?"

"Oh, no, I don't go so far as that," was Laurence's reply; "but I argue thus. According to your friend, the person who presumably set fire to the Marquis's house was of black complexion; but whereas we believed that it must be a woman, because it wore garments like skirts, we now learn on Meadows' authority that it was a man—a man in coloured skirts. We therefore naturally concluded it must be some foreigner. Now I come to think of it, the face of the highwayman on

the moor gave me the impression of being remarkably dark. The agility he displayed in the barn was further proof of his being semi-civilised, for you know that many of the coloured races can boast of agility that with us would seem nothing short of marvellous. Then we learn from Doctor Meadows that many years ago he knew my father—apparently intimately. One of the most noticeable features of Durley Dene is, you will agree, the Oriental fittings of the only room into which we have been shown. The conclusion one naturally draws is that Meadows has travelled, or more likely lived, in Oriental countries. Putting two and two together, I deemed it possible that Meadows might have made my father's acquaintance when abroad. Now, you will recollect my [Pg 164] telling you that, on the occasion of my first visit to the Dene, Meadows mentioned that he once knew a Major Carrington at Madras. Nevertheless, when he learned that my father was not a soldier, he distinctly said he could not have ever met the Squire. On the other occasion he equally distinctly stated that he had known my father before. He was, as you will remember, even able to describe his appearance. What does all this lead you to presume—to deduct, as our friend Potter would say?"

"I must confess that I am stupid enough not to see what you are driving at, in spite of your lucid reasoning," replied Lena.

"Why, this, that Major Carrington, of Madras, and Squire Carrington, of the Manse, Northden, are not merely namesakes, but one and the same person!"

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed Lena. "You clever boy! And you mean to say that the Squire is an army man, and yet not even his son knows it?"

"That is so, according to reasoning in which I can see no flaw, at present. I asked him just now whether he had ever been in India, and, if so, whether he had met a certain Major Carrington at Madras."

"Yes, and what did he say?" [Pg 165]

"He could not answer. He was plainly terrified by the question, and without further parley dismissed me on the ground that I was tiring him by conversation. No; of this I am confident, there's something very deep and mysterious about the whole business. One thing has been bothering me a good deal. Were we right in making that promise to Doctor Meadows? Is he really unconnected with our mystery, as he would try to make out? Does it not seem most improbable that there should be two men with closely guarded secrets occupying houses adjoining one another in a peaceful little country village? Yet there was something so sincere about the way in which he spoke that one could not help believing him. Now, in the recent conversation I had with my father, he told me that the only person who ever knew anything about his secret (except, of course, the creature who is responsible for the attempt on his life) is dead. Yet Meadows claims a knowledge of that secret. One of the two is not adhering to the truth. Naturally, I am inclined to think that Meadows is this one, though I confess it appears possible that my father might not be too careful about speaking the whole truth if he feared by so doing to place in my hand a clue to the revelation of his secret. But, supposing that Meadows' knowledge of my father is not of such [Pg 166] a kind as he would lead us to believe it to be, have we not, perhaps, acted unwisely in confiding in him to so great an extent? And the discovery that the servant's real name is Horncastle; what do you make of that?"

"I feel very much inclined," replied Lena, "to think that he is what Kingsford calls 'the' Horncastle, the man who was sent to prison for daring robbery about a year ago, and who escaped from Dartmoor six or eight months since. Oh, to think that you were in the clutches of such a creature, Laurence, and that you were practically alone with him in that dark house! Why, didn't they say that he was suspected of some murder out at Swiss Cottage? Yes, I'm sure they did. But what can he be doing in Durley Dene? Is he in hiding there? If so, perhaps that is the secret of the house. But it cannot be. There is something far deeper than that in the mystery of Durley Dene."

"I can easily prove that that is but a part of the mystery," said Laurence. "You remember how Horncastle said to me when I threatened to report him, 'Do you think I care whether you tell the doctor? He's nothing to me.' Well, to my mind, that remark implies that, instead of fearing his master (if he is actually such), he has the whip hand of Meadows. Why? Because he alone knows [Pg 167] the doctor's mysterious secret. He realises, of course, that the master of Durley Dene dares not expose him or hand him over to justice as an escaped convict for fear that Horncastle, in his turn, will reveal to the world his secret, which, according to Meadows himself, would electrify the world and prove one of the greatest sensations of the day. Thus we now know why Horncastle wears a woman's disguise when walking abroad, because, were he not to do so, he might be identified by anyone who had seen his portrait, copies of which were posted outside every police-station in the kingdom, with a notice to the effect that anyone apprehending Thomas Horncastle or giving such evidence as shall lead to his apprehension will be amply rewarded!"

"Really, Laurence," said his companion gaily, "you're quite smart. We are, I am certain, at any rate well started in our investigation of this maze of mysteries. But what have we here?"

The last remark was caused by the fluttering of a scrap of white paper, on which Lena's eye chanced as the young pair strolled down a path bounded on one side by the palisade dividing the garden from that of Durley Dene.

It has already been mentioned that, in addition to this palisade, numerous bushes of stunted growth formed a substantial barrier between the grounds of the adjoining estates. It was on a [Pg 168]

prickly evergreen that the scrap of paper, to which the girl's attention had been drawn by its fluttering in the soft breeze, was impaled.

"Surely not another message from our neighbour?" queried Laurence, with a smile.

"Not exactly," replied Lena, "but something belonging to Mr. Meadows, under his military alias, for all that."

"Indeed!" Laurence bent over the scrap of paper, which the girl now held out for him.

It was the left-hand portion of a torn envelope. In fact it was entire, save that the part bearing the stamp and the last few letters of each line of the address were missing. Such of it as there was bore the following address, written in a firm lady-like handwriting—undoubtedly the work of an educated woman—

"Major Farnell-Jo....
"Durley Den....
"Northd....
"Yorksh....
"England."

"So the worthy Major has lady correspondents who address him by his pseudonym and write from abroad," remarked Lena. [Pg 169]

"It's undoubtedly in a lady's handwriting," replied Laurence, "but how do you know it comes from abroad? The envelope is a thick one."

"That's simple enough. If the person who addressed that envelope had done so from England she would have been hardly likely to write 'England' at the foot of the address. Of course, in using the word 'abroad,' I include in this case Scotland and Ireland."

"I see. But surely that handwriting is familiar to me. Don't you know it? No? Well, I'm certain that I do. The peculiar formation of the 'J's' and 'Y's,' and the flourishing stroke to the 'N' of Northden, I know perfectly. Where have I seen that writing before?"

But, strive as he might, he could not recall whose it was. [Pg 170]

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MYSTERY OF THE MANSE BARN

"By all that's wonderful," cried Laurence to Lena after the solemn mid-day meal was at an end, "if I haven't forgotten about the clue Mr. Oliver Potter so generously gave me! Let me think—he said if I went to the cupboard in the Squire's bedroom I should find a cardboard box containing something which would prove of use in our investigation. If you will wait here for half a minute (I know you will excuse me) I will fetch the box, and we will pry into its mysterious contents."

He left the dining-room, returning, however, a few moments later with a yellow collar-box. From this he permitted Lena to remove the lid. The girl gave a cry of dismay when she caught sight of the unpleasant contents of the box. The odour that arose from the carcase of the bat which the detective had so carefully preserved was none too pleasant, while to a woman the sight of anything so closely resembling a mouse as does a bat is usually enough to cause an exclamation of horror. [Pg 171]

Laurence was much annoyed when he perceived the clue which Potter had left behind him.

"It's his pretty revenge for his dismissal," he said. "An extremely poor practical joke, which I am surprised that a man of Potter's age should descend to. Here, let me throw it away."

And he suited the action to the word by flinging the little carcase out of the open window and into the middle of a cluster of bushes.

"Now for the barn," Laurence proceeded. "Shall we make our examination of it at once, as Meadows suggested?"

"I am quite ready, if you are," replied Lena.

"Then let us go at once, before something else arises to cause us to forget what we were about to do, as something has done so many times before during this investigation."

A few minutes later they were both in the barn, tapping the panels of the wall and the floor and searching among the hay for some sign of the secret hiding-place, in which, according to Doctor Meadows' reasoning, the Squire's enemy was lurking.

Search as they might, though, no success rewarded their praiseworthy efforts. An hour passed, yet they still persevered, though Lena was hot and tired with stooping. Laurence had made the most minute examination of the roof, yet he had to confess himself beaten. [Pg 172]

"I cannot understand it," he said. "It didn't take me half a minute, or anything like so long, to

knock the hay which the rascal threw at me out of my eyes, yet in that short space of time our man managed, aided by the darkness, of course, to effect his escape. The question is, how?"

"Come, we mustn't be beaten. The secret trap-door, or whatever it is, must be somewhere in the roof. Try again, and instead of only tapping the wood, press it hard occasionally."

Laurence did as he was told. He reached the cross-beam on which the creature with the shrill voice had been discovered, and from there, by means of the ladder, reached the beam at the top of the building (which formed, with the point made by the meeting of the ascending sides of the thatched roof, a large letter A).

Here, as will be easily understood, the young man had to sit (on the cross-bar of the A) with head bent down owing to the proximity of the actual roof.

Once, however, while talking to Lena, who was standing immediately below him, he raised his head, forgetting that he was unable to do so without striking it against the top. Then a strange thing happened. [Pg 173]

The force of his pressure on the side of the roof caused it to roll back suddenly like a trap-door. It fell back, until a roomy space was revealed immediately above Laurence's head. And yet, looking through, young Carrington was astounded beyond measure to find that he couldn't (as might have been expected) gaze straight up at the blue sky, but what he saw several feet above him was a second thatched roof shaped exactly like that under which he had been sitting!

Then, in an instant, he knew the secret of the Manse barn. The roof was a double one, its mechanism being exactly similar to that of the double-bottomed boxes that for so long were the means of cheating our Custom-House officials of the duties payable upon articles which were by this means smuggled into the country free of tax.

Laurence informed Lena in low tones of his discovery, and, promising to return in a minute or two, raised himself by his arms to a ledge which presented itself immediately above him. No sooner had he done so than the sham roof closed down noiselessly, and young Carrington found himself in a long, low room or attic, unfurnished, and with apparently the dust of ages upon its panelled walls, its thatched roof (the real roof of the barn), and its uneven flooring. [Pg 174]

In the excitement of the moment Laurence paid no attention to the closing of the trap-door.

Thanks to a ray of light that stole through a rent in the straw thatch, he was able to look around him.

The room he was in was the exact size of the barn itself, only, owing to the low ceiling, its size seemed greater than it actually was.

Taking his match-box from his pocket, the young man struck a light, held it above his head, being careful not to ignite the dry straw of the roof, and gazed around.

He was able to assure himself that no one was hiding in the attic—in fact, there was no room for anything larger than a rat to hide. This, at any rate, was satisfactory. The feeble light also satisfied the investigator on another point.

Though the mysterious creature whom he had encountered by night below where he now stood was not at that moment concealed in this carefully hidden lair, there were unmistakable signs of him in a number of foot-shaped patches in the dust accumulated on the floor. Laurence noted with a feeling of delight that these patches were, in size and shape, identical with those he had discovered to be the footprints of the "cyclist highwayman."

Very quickly, after he had extinguished the match, did Laurence's eyes become accustomed to the semi-darkness, and he was able to prosecute his search without the assistance of any light. [Pg 175]

Another startling discovery was in wait for him. In a far corner of the attic there was a trap-door in the floor, in the manufacture of which no attempt had been made to conceal it from view, as in the case of the false roof. An iron ring was conveniently placed at one side of this, and, in a state of excited expectancy, Laurence without difficulty raised the trap-door, which revealed (as does the inevitable trap-door in children's fairy tales) a narrow staircase, dark and dismal.

Without hesitation, and carefully groping his way, he started down the staircase, which was so narrow and small that in places he was compelled to move down sideways and stooping almost double. In such a place, he thought to himself, height is a distinct disadvantage; yet, in spite of all, and though he considered it extremely possible that he might at any moment run against his father's lurking enemy, he pushed on downstairs until the bottom was reached.

He dared not strike a match, for fear that, if anyone was hiding near, he might lie in wait for the new-comer, and, knowing the place better than Laurence, overcome him without difficulty.

Where was he, and what did all these secret places mean? Only one solution was possible. The barn, in addition to having a false roof, had also a sham side to it, and there was sufficient space between the outer side and the panelled inner one for the staircase down which he had come, and which led to—where? [Pg 176] [Pg 177]

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FATE OF THE EAVESDROPPER

Once on level ground—which, he was surprised to find, was paved with stone—Laurence was able once again to stand upright and stretch out his hands, without touching anything in the pitch darkness.

He found the wall at length, and moved along it. Presently it came to an end, but, like the corner of a room, met another wall running at right angles to it. Some distance farther there was a break in the cold surface of the wall. Laurence concluded that it was the mouth of a passage leading off somewhere. He did not turn down this, though, but groped on until he reached another angle in the wall that seemed like a second corner of a room. A third time he made a similar discovery; then he came upon another passage, unbarred, leading away he knew not where. At last he found himself once again at the foot of the staircase down which he had come.

Plainly this pointed to the natural conclusion that he was in a large square room, in which there was apparently no living creature except himself, but out of which led two passages, in addition to the staircase that descended from the secret attic. [Pg 178]

As Laurence stood consulting as to what he should do next, he became aware of a muffled sound coming from above his head. The ceiling of the place in which he stood was high. He could not reach it without standing on tiptoe, when he found it to be of wood.

The sound he heard was a regular tap-tap, as though someone was moving about in a room directly above that in which he stood. What did it mean? Why, Laurence decided without hesitation, the sounds of footsteps were those made by Lena as she strolled about in the barn. The room in which he found himself must accordingly be exactly under the barn itself. And yet, throughout the years he and his father had spent at the Manse, not a suspicion had entered the head of either that the old barn—dating back, it was said, to the time of Cromwell—was the centre of a labyrinth of secret passages and chambers such as it now seemed to be.

There were two courses open to him, Laurence thought to himself—to return by the narrow staircase, find his way out into the light of day, and return later with a lantern and some weapon of defence; or to take one of the two passages which he had found, and discover whither it led. [Pg 179]

Wisdom and common sense urged the former course; daring and, perhaps, foolhardiness clamoured for the adventure that might be the result of further exploring. And, as might have, perhaps, been expected, the verdict of common sense was dismissed, the girl waiting upstairs forgotten, and Laurence, finding one of the dark passages close at hand, plunged into it, and, feeling his way with a hand on either wall, quickly left the square room under the barn behind him.

The passage seemed of interminable length, nor was there any break in the wall on either side. Not a ray of light pierced the grim darkness. Not a sound was audible save that of his own footsteps. The air was heavy with an odour of decay. Altogether the experience was one which an ordinary person would not relish. But then, as has been said, Laurence was no ordinary person. He hardly knew what fear was; the only time he had been really unnerved being after his experiences in tracking the cyclist on the moor. Every moment he considered it possible that he might encounter the man he believed to be lurking in the many possible hiding-places that there seemed to be. Yet he did not hesitate for one instant, though unarmed with so much as a walking-cane. [Pg 180]

'Tis a long lane that has no turning, and at length the prowler in the dark was brought to a sudden standstill by his outstretched hand coming in contact with something—either a wall or a door—that completely barred his way.

Laurence fumbled about, in the hope of finding some catch or handle which would assure him that he had reached a door. He naturally presumed that it would be a door, for otherwise what would be the meaning of the long passage were it to lead nowhere? For some little time he searched in vain, then, deciding that there was no fear of the creature into whose haunts he had penetrated being in his immediate neighbourhood, the young man struck a match and held it high above his head.

The sight that met his gaze when the light of the vesta flared up and then burned quickly before going out was a strange one, yet he was prepared for what he saw. The passage down which he had come closely resembled a railway subway, such as that at King's Cross Station, London. Though on the whole fairly straight, it swerved once or twice in such a way that he was unable, when looking back, to see for any distance the path by which he had reached the oak door before which he was standing. [Pg 181]

He was able to make a cursory examination of this door while the light lasted. It looked very old, and the damp stood upon it like beads of perspiration. It was heavily studded with iron knobs, and there was a massive-looking lock at the foot of it, and another near the top. Undoubtedly the man who had built the passage and this door had taken good care to have the best work put into them. What was the builder's scheme—the cause of all the secrecy? Nothing more likely than that it was an illegal one.

But Laurence's meditations on this subject were cut short by a sound that fell upon his ear.

Someone was talking—someone on the other side of the oak door.

The sounds became louder. Two persons were speaking, one in loud and rough tones. They were approaching the door behind which he stood.

As they drew nearer Laurence became aware of a gleam of light that shot through the keyhole of the lock at the top of the door. In an instant he was standing on the bottom lock, clinging by his hands to the iron knobs. With his eye to the keyhole he was able to see through into what looked like a spacious lobby or hall. The figures of two men were standing facing one another half a dozen yards away, their faces lit up by the yellow glare from a candle that the shorter one of [Pg 182] them was carrying. But for this artificial light the hall would have been as dark as the passage in which Laurence stood. As it was, the watcher was enabled to get a good view of the men's features. To his amazement he discovered that the speakers were none other than Doctor Meadows and his convict servant Horncastle.

The discovery so startled young Carrington that in his astonishment he slipped from the protruding ledge on which he was standing and dropped with a clatter upon the stone pavement.

Both men turned suddenly and glanced in the direction whence the sound appeared to come.

As quietly as possible Laurence clambered up again and peered through, to find the two faces staring straight at him. How was it that they did not guess there was someone behind the door? They certainly did not, for Horncastle exclaimed—

"Drat them rats! The place is haunted by 'em."

"Are you sure that was a rat?" asked Meadows. "The noise was much greater than any I ever heard a rat make. There must be a colony of them—or is it possible that there is something else behind the panels of that wall? The house agent mentioned to me a secret room." He lowered his voice. Laurence did not catch what his words were. Then he went on— [Pg 183]

"If that were the case there might be someone—someone suspicious; you know what I mean—overlooking us. Of course, the idea is absurdly improbable. Suppose we look behind that oak panelling, though? We can put it all back; we will, at any rate, drive the rats away."

"Well, you're a queer one, you are. Suspicious as I don't know what. I'm game, then, only I 'aves my pint o' gin afterwards, or else—or else I'll blab to that messing Carrington chap about——"

And to the eavesdropper's extreme annoyance, Horncastle broke off short when Laurence was thinking himself to be on the verge of a discovery acquired—though, in his excitement, he forgot all that—by means that could hardly be considered of exemplary fairness.

As the two men moved towards where he stood, Laurence's interest gave way to dismay. What might not these unscrupulous folks do when they discovered eavesdropping a man who had betrayed grave suspicions of the nature of their "secret"? At any rate, Laurence realised that he had a good start, and, as Doctor Meadows, throwing down a dog-whip which he had held in his hand, moved towards the panelling and ordered his convict servant to fetch the necessary tools, Carrington moved noiselessly down from his perch. He was about to turn back and effect his [Pg 184] escape, when something—something like the lash of a whip—brushed past his face and suddenly caught his neck. At the same time two hands from out of the darkness behind seemed to strike against the sides of his head, a knee was planted in the small of his back, a leg seemed to entwine itself round his, and, like a flash of lightning, his senses left him, as Laurence Carrington fell like a dead man upon the stone pavement of the secret passage. [Pg 185]

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE OAK-PANELLED HALL

It seemed to him like an age, but was really only a few minutes, before Laurence Carrington recovered consciousness. When he did so it was with a violent pain in his head and neck.

Old "Doctor Meadows" was bending over him as he lay on a bench in the hall at which he had peeped through the keyhole of the great oak door. The servant, Horncastle, was not to be seen.

Laurence struggled to rise, but the burning pain in his neck, and a feeling of dizziness and extreme weakness, prevented him. The "doctor" motioned to him to keep still.

"You will be better soon," he said encouragingly; "thank Heaven we were in time, or the brute would have done for you. Strange, stranger than strange," he went on, half aloud, "that we should have returned from the distant East, have allowed a couple of dozen years to pass without being so much as aware whether each other still lived, and that—that we should come together like this." [Pg 186]

Laurence saw that he was thinking aloud. He waited silently to hear what the old gentleman would say further. But though the young man could see his companion's lips moving, he was

disappointed, in that the "doctor" concluded his thoughts on the subject beneath his breath.

"What happened?" Laurence asked at length. "It was 'it' that attacked me, was it not?"

"Yes, 'it,'" replied the "doctor," with a shake of his head. "I trust," he went on, "that Horncastle will catch him."

"I should think," replied Laurence, "that the terrible enemy of my father and your convict servant would make a good match."

The old man leaped back as though shot.

"You know that?" he cried, evidently referring to Carrington's allusion to Horncastle—"you know that? What else do you know?"

Laurence shook his head.

"Not very much," he answered with a smile, as he raised himself to a sitting posture. "And you?"

"Me! Well, I know everything."

"What!" the young man shouted, "you know who my father's enemy is?"

"I do."

"And you know my father. What else do YOU know?" [Pg 187]

"I know," responded Meadows slowly, "that the 'long arm of coincidence' is, well, longer than the 'long arm of the law.'"

"What do you mean?"

"I have already told you. I mean that I, the suspected, spied-upon man of mystery (that's so, is it not?), I am the man who alone can throw light upon—can, moreover, effectually solve—the secrets of your father, Major Carrington's life."

"Then he is 'the' Major Carrington, of Madras?"

"He is."

"But," muttered Laurence, half aloud, "he told me that only one man (besides his enemy) ever learned his strange, inviolate secret."

"And I am that one man," responded the "doctor."

"Now," exclaimed Laurence angrily, "now I know you are lying. The man who held the Squire's secret died years ago."

"And," was the "doctor's" quiet reply, "so did I!"

And, before Laurence could find words to express his feelings at such a mad, mysterious remark, there came the sound of flying feet thundering along the stone passage and drawing towards the door, through which he had himself been dragged after the attack in the dark. [Pg 188]

The oak door now stood open. From within no one would have believed it to be a door, the oak panelling of the walls being so skilfully imitated on it.

Through it, like a madman, rushed the convict servant, Horncastle. His face was white as a sheet, his breath came in jerks. Terror was manifest on his repulsive features.

"Thank God, I'm free from it," he almost shrieked, as he rushed up to the other two men.

Lighted only by a single tallow candle, the scene was a strange one—one that an artist would have given much to have an opportunity of picturing. The shadows on the men's faces, the cunningly wrought panelling of the great lonesome hall, the air of mystery that seemed to hang about the place—all these made the picture one that Laurence never forgot.

"Well," asked Meadows, "why have you not caught him?"

"The darkness," explained the convict servant, "the darkness, the awful darkness! I'd stand up to any man in the kingdoms, but that cursed silence and gloom and its 'orrors are a bit too much. And that creature, 'arf man, 'arf beast, seemed like the 'old man' 'isself, the way he slipped out of my grasp, which ain't a light one, as this 'ere gent knows." And the fellow had the audacity to pat [Pg 189] Laurence on the shoulder. He was no longer the terrified creature of a moment before, when in the company of two of his fellow-creatures.

Meadows looked at him with ill-disguised expressions of disgust. But he did not speak. Instead, he motioned to the servant to depart.

By this time Laurence was able to rise and move about without being overcome by the pains in his neck and head. He turned to Meadows, who had astounded him a moment before by his casual remark that he was a man who had been dead many years.

"Please explain the strange observation you made when Mr.—er—Horncastle interrupted us by his return." The convict scowled, and looked daggers at Meadows, who, however, did not notice, for he was deep in thought.

"Mr. Carrington," he said at length, "I can tell you a little now, but not all. First tell me in what way you think you were attacked."

"I cannot. I only know that I felt as though someone was cutting my throat."

"Someone," replied "Doctor Meadows," "was doing more. He was trying to break your neck."

"Ah!" Laurence exclaimed, "like he did my poor father's. And how did he do it? It was all so quickly, so cleverly done." [Pg 190]

"It was done by a man who has made a careful study of murder."

"Good gracious, for what purpose?"

"For the purpose of murdering your father!"

"No, no, it cannot be!" exclaimed Laurence. "Why this enmity? What has the Squire done?"

"Nothing," responded Meadows; "and can't you see, now, who and what the creature is that is hiding in yonder darkness?"

"No. Who? What?"

"Don't you know what harmless weapon it is that when skilfully wielded deals death more cruelly than knife or gun? Why, a cord, a piece of silk cord!"

"Then," Laurence shouted, for the words shed light upon the dark subject that he had tried so hard to penetrate—"then the man is a—a——"

"A Thug," was the grim reply. [Pg 191]

CHAPTER XXVI

LIGHT IN DARK PLACES

"No, I can tell you nothing further," said "Doctor Orlando Meadows," in reply to Laurence's eager requests for information; "but even what little I have told you throws light upon much that was formerly dark to you. For instance, now you know the solution of the mystery of the padded footprints. The Thug, like many native Indians of his class—a low one—swathes his feet in strips of linen stuff. So you see he did not have to perform the distinctly difficult operation of removing his boots while on the machine!

"Next, you can now understand the meaning of the marvellous agility of the creature. I wonder you did not put two and two together before and guess that the wonderfully athletic foe who almost broke your father's neck in some mysterious manner was—a Thug. Those fanatics are the finest gymnasts in the world, besides being the most bloodthirsty creatures under heaven.

"One thing I cannot understand is why so desperate a scoundrel should pause in the middle of his deadly work, and leave your poor father living, though unconscious. It is deemed the greatest possible disgrace for a Thug to attack his victim with the 'noose' and fail to kill him. Of course, as a rule, the Stranglers—as they are called—work together, but against one old man a single Thug should be able to carry out his grim work thoroughly. I speak as one who knows something about India. You are convinced that nothing unusual was found in the room in which your father was attacked?" [Pg 192]

"Nothing, as far as I am aware," replied Laurence. "Of course, I left the detective to look for any clue in the bedroom, but whether he found anything I do not know. Had he done so I think on his departure he would have handed it over to me."

"And he didn't?"

"No—that is, he merely played a practical joke on me by leaving a cardboard box in a cupboard in which he said I should find a clue. On opening it I was disgusted to find nothing but a dead bat ——"

"A dead bat!" shrieked "Doctor Meadows"; "had he found it in the Squire's bedroom?"

"As to that I cannot tell you. But why?"

"Because," replied the old gentleman, "if he did I know why the assassin did not murder your father outright!" [Pg 193]

"Good gracious, what has that got to do with it?"

"Everything. The Thugs are the most superstitious people on earth. When they believe their patron goddess Kalee does not approve of their sacrifice—they call all murders sacrifices to her—they stop short in their deadly operations. In India if they are carrying out one of their gruesome murders, and a girl with a pitcher happens to pass near, they stop instantly. It is a sign that the goddess is displeased with their selection of a victim. That was why I asked you if it was possible

that a housemaid with a pail passed the half-open bedroom door when the attack was made. Again, should a murdering Thug see his victim's face reflected in water or a mirror, he will, for the same reason, stop in the very middle of his work. But one of the worst omens—a sign that Kalee is greatly displeased—is the passing of a small chattering bird, or a bat, while the murder is being carried out. The bat which by chance had got into your father's room must have fluttered about when the assassin was carrying out his foul deed. That bat saved your father's life!"

"But how did the Thug get into the room, and how did he escape?"

"That question, I think, you have yourself solved. I do not know how you came to reach that door"—pointing in the direction of the stone passage—"but presumably you came from your own house. I told you I believed there must be some secret hiding-place. Well, if you came through this passage, I suppose the Thug could do likewise. Only instead of coming in this direction he went in the other, and got into your house the same way you have got into this. The passage, I have heard, was built in the troublous time of the Civil War, when Charles I. and Oliver Cromwell struggled for the mastery. No doubt it was arranged for the inhabitants of one house to escape into the other when besieged or attacked." [Pg 194]

"But," said Laurence, "I entered that secret passage from the barn. If the Thug got out that way—he has evidently been hiding in the secret loft over the barn—how did he get into the Manse when he tried to murder my father?"

"I do not know; but do you mean to tell me that the passage leads only to the barn? I cannot believe it."

"Then don't, but—stay! There was another passage leading from a room under the barn which as yet I have not explored. In this the Thug was probably hiding when I passed the entrance, and, attracted by the light I struck, followed and sprang upon me from behind. That passage may, for all I know, end in the Manse itself." [Pg 195]

"Rest assured that such is the case," replied Meadows; and he added, "I should not be surprised if you were to find that that other passage led into the Squire's bedroom!"

Laurence gasped. If so, the affair was well-nigh solved. The thought of the mystery reminded the young man that here he was conversing amicably with the "doctor" in the very basement which he believed to contain the old gentleman's secret.

"Now," said Laurence, laying his hand on Meadows' arm, "tell me your secret and there will no longer be any mystery."

"No, no," cried the old man; "go away. You take advantage of my kindness. I have cleared up the mystery of your father's enemy as far as I am permitted to do so, and you treat me so. But," he said slowly, "in a day or two I may be able to tell you all. Then I will renew my acquaintance with your father, Major Harold Lester Carrington, late of Madras. Until then I can do nothing."

So saying, and in spite of his protests, Laurence was conducted by the "doctor" to the front door of the old house. As the door closed upon him, after he had bidden Meadows a more or less cordial farewell, he fancied he heard another cry from the lower part of the house of strange secrets. This time he thought the weird sound seemed less awe-inspiring, more pathetic, than before. And it was so low that the listener could not be sure whether his imagination had played a trick upon him, or if what he fancied he had heard was reality. [Pg 196]

With his head throbbing with the sickly pains caused by his injury, he turned and hurried away to the Manse.

Lena met him in the hall. She was deadly pale. At the sight of her lover she sprang forward, and, unconscious of the fact that Mrs. Knox was peering inquisitively over the banisters, flung her arms round his neck.

"Oh, thank God," she cried almost hysterically, "that you are safe! I thought you were killed. I had a presentiment that 'it' had attacked and murdered you in the dark loft. Where have you been; why were you away so long?"

And then, suddenly realising how forward she had been, she darted back as quickly as she had come. It was not because her aunt made her presence known by clearing her throat with unnecessary vehemence, but because she remembered that she had not yet confessed her love for Laurence, and because it seemed to her that her anxiety for his safety had triumphed over her natural modesty. [Pg 197]

Then, without another word, without waiting to hear what Laurence had to tell her, she hastened away to her own room, and, locking the door, flung herself upon her bed, where she calmed herself in the orthodox feminine manner—she had a good cry, but the tears were tears of joy!

She already knew that he loved her—now he knew that she loved him. And he was safe!

Meanwhile Laurence, wondering at Lena's—to him—strange behaviour, proceeded to his father's bedroom, where he dismissed the housekeeper and sat down by the Squire's bedside.

"Father," he said, after he had inquired how the sick man felt, "I have learned all."

Mr. Carrington lay motionless. He could not reply. The announcement had overcome him. His face grew very pale.

"What do you mean?" he muttered, raising himself, at length, upon his elbow, and peering into his son's face.

"I mean that I know who and WHAT your enemy is—your enemy who is trying to avenge that which happened over twenty years ago!"

"Who has told you?" asked the Squire excitedly—"not—not 'it'?"

"No, someone who says he died years ago!"

"What do you mean?" [Pg 198]

"I hardly know myself. Next door—I mean at the Dene—lives an old man who says he knew you more than twenty years ago."

"Don't believe it, Laurence. But-t-t how does he know my secret? You are sure that he—he is not the—the——"

"No, he is not the Thug."

At the mention of the last word the Squire fell back upon his pillows with a shudder.

"And you've not caught him?"

"No, but I know where he is hiding, and," he added, "if you won't tell me what I don't know, he will!"

"I cannot tell you. Yet, if I don't he will. Here, go to the desk in my sanctum, press the knob of the dummy drawer on the right-hand side, and bring me down the book that will fall out of the slit underneath."

With rising hopes the young man did as he was told. He returned to the sick-room shortly after, carrying a small red pocket-book, fastened with a piece of parchment sealed on the back and front of the Volume.

"Take it," said the Squire, "and read it, only not here. I cannot bear to think of it all. Go, now; you mean well, my boy, but you don't know the pain it causes me to hear you speak of my secret. [Pg 199] When you know all you will see that your poor old dad is not such a sinner as you think he is." And the Squire lay back on the pillows again, and closed his eyes, and, making a suitable reply, Laurence left the room.

He met a very shamefaced Lena in the drawing-room, and told her of all his afternoon adventures, not forgetting to offer a very sincere apology for leaving her in the barn. Then he produced from his pocket the little red note-book and pointed to the notice endorsed on it: "For my son, Laurence. Not to be opened until after my death." Then, assuring her that he had permission to read it, he broke the seals and opened the book, which was full of thin, straggling writing.

"Shall I read it aloud?" asked Laurence temptingly.

"Oh, please do."

"Sure you wouldn't like to read it aloud yourself?"

"Oh, no. I'm a terribly bad reader."

"Well, so am I."

"I'm sure you're better than I am," responded Lena.

"I'll tell you how we can settle it."

"How?"

"By each reading it separately." [Pg 200]

"But I want to hear the story now. And don't you, too?"

"Yes, we both can. That is—if you don't mind sitting on this sofa and looking over at the same time?"

Lena rose with a blush on her cheeks, that, in Laurence's opinion, made her look prettier than ever.

Then she settled herself by his side. He turned to the front page, and satisfied himself that his companion could see the writing and read it, then they commenced the perusal of the contents of the little red note-book. [Pg 201]

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SQUIRE'S STORY

(*Being the commencement of the narrative in the little red note-book*)

"To commence at the very beginning, my dear boy, and in orthodox fashion, I will state that my name is that by which you have always known me—Harold Lester Carrington, only son of a worthy naval officer and his wife, who was a younger daughter of the late Sir John Collyer. I was born nine-and-fifty years ago at Manchester, received but a moderate education, and entered the army at an early age.

"I was unfortunate enough to lose both my parents while I was quite a child, and, getting into bad company, led what my few relatives—they are all dead now—considered a wild life. I can safely say, though, that I never forgot I was the son of gentlefolk, for to both my parents I had been greatly attached.

"I must have been either twenty-one or twenty-two years of age when I first met Edith Rawson, the charming daughter of my old Colonel. It was at a garden party, and was a case of love at first [Pg 202] sight on both sides. Of course it was foolish in the extreme for me, a penniless lieutenant, to aspire to the hand of wealthy Colonel Rawson's eldest daughter, but the folly was inevitable. Miss Rawson was the most lovely girl I ever cast eyes upon. Mutual love in such cases as ours is hard to conceal—particularly from a woman—and Mrs. Rawson quickly perceived things after I had visited the house a few times. She communicated her suspicions to her husband, and a tremendous row was the result—the upshot of which was that I changed my regiment for one embarking for India, bade my loved one a pitiful farewell, re-echoed my vows of constancy, promising to return when, judging by Rawson's standard, I was in a position to claim Edith as my bride, and left England for the great Eastern Empire.

"I had been forbidden to write, even once a year, to my loved one, and it was with a faint heart that I started life again in Madras. But I knew that if I wished to succeed I must throw all my energy into the work, and strive my hardest to render myself fit to become Edith's husband in what seemed a very distant future.

"Years rolled by, and by degrees, thanks to sundry small skirmishes with discontented tribes, I [Pg 203] gained the promotion which meant so much. But it was a sad time for me. Folks may say that 'out of sight' is equivalent to 'out of mind,' but I speak truly when I say that never for a single day did anyone—any woman—figure in my thoughts except the loved one in the far-off old country.

"Periodically I got hold of old society newspapers, sent to us from London, and in these I occasionally came across the name of Colonel Rawson's fair daughter. Each time I was thrilled with pleasure to find that her maiden name still remained to her. Was she true to the devoted young officer in India? Of course she was!

"I was Major Carrington by this time, and young for that, still I knew a beautiful girl like Edith would never want for offers of marriage. Three or four years had passed since I had discovered the dear name in print. Two or three were likely to drag before there was any chance of my further promotion, after which Colonel Rawson had given me permission to return home, and, if the mutual affection still existed, marry his daughter.

"Then one day a copy of the *Times* chanced to reach me, and I casually commenced reading by a perusal of the births, marriages, and deaths column in that paper. Suddenly I caught sight of an announcement that caused me to cry aloud with dismay, with horror, with disappointment. It was [Pg 204] painfully brief, but, oh! so plain.

> "'SANDLYNG-RAWSON.—On the 28th ult., at St. Jude's, Aynswell-street, W., George Arthur Sandlyng, of the Priory, Parkham, Bucks, to Edith, daughter of Colonel Rawson, V.C.'

"Had I considered this paragraph in the light of common sense I would not have acted as I did.

"In the first place, I should have recollected that Rawson was no rare name, and that the combination of names, Edith Rawson, might occur in any other branch of the Rawson family than the one in which were centred all my hopes.

"I might, too, have made the following deduction: When I left England, ten years before, the Colonel had not the letters V.C. after his name. As far as I was aware he had not been engaged in active warfare since. Suppose, though, he had, and had won the Victoria Cross, would it not have been reasonable to suppose that ten years would have seen his promotion to a generalship, particularly if his conduct had been so conspicuous as to merit the award of the coveted V.C.?

"But I did not stop to take a rational view of the matter. To me, then, there was no doubt but that Edith—my Edith—had broken her vows to me, and had married. I was filled with murderous thoughts. For the time I was mad." [Pg 205]

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SQUIRE'S STORY (CONTINUED)

"I left the barracks and made my way into the lowest and commonest quarter of the city. My own

idea was to drown my thoughts, to forget myself, Edith, and the world, even if only for an hour or so. The sight of the familiar sign of the opium den over a low door stopped me in my mad ramble. Here was the chance of banishing my thoughts and misery. I entered. A hideous old Chinaman barred my way, but satisfying himself that I was not an objectionable person, he turned and led me down into the dark den itself. An unoccupied ottoman in a corner took my fancy. I flung myself down. Simultaneously a soft voice asked me in English what I required. At first I fancied I was a prey to my imagination. The voice was so soft, so gentle, that I thought it was hers—Edith's.

"Then I looked round full into the face of a maiden who leaned over me, so close that I felt her warm breath on my cheek as she repeated the words that had roused me from my drowsiness. She was in all respects the loveliest native girl I ever saw—so slim, so bright-eyed, and so [Pg 206] charmingly clad, that for the moment I forgot my misery in contemplation of her exceptional beauty.

"'You speak English?' I remarked.

"'Yes, indeed,' she murmured, seating herself gracefully on the arm of the couch; 'it is so much prettier than my own language.'

"'And what are you doing in this—er—hell?' I could not refrain from asking. She formed such a striking contrast to her surroundings.

"'Hush!' she responded quietly, and raised her finger in warning, placing it almost upon my lips. 'Hush, they may not all be asleep.' And she waved her arm, bare to the elbow, in the direction of the motionless forms recumbent on the other couches in the cellar.

"'What is your name?' I whispered, as I perceived that she was not averse to conversation.

"'Lilla,' she replied, blushing under her dark skin. I noticed that she had a little pipe in her hand. 'Half?' she asked.

"'No,' I said, 'not yet. I want a talk. That is, if you don't mind.'

"Again she blushed, and settled herself down at the foot of the ottoman. 'You know you're in danger here?' she muttered interrogatively. [Pg 207]

"'Why?' I asked, in no way alarmed, though.

"'Well,' she replied, gazing into my eyes, 'queer things happen here occasionally which would cause some talk were they to become known.' She shrugged her little shoulders suggestively. She was certainly a bewitching girl.

"'You are an officer?' she asked.

"'Yes,' I replied, foolishly betraying the fact, when, dressed as I was in civilian attire, I might have passed as a merchant or some other English resident of the city.

"For the moment I confess I was bewitched—powerless in the hands of the dark-eyed girl whose life was spent in such strange surroundings.

"For many an hour we sat there—she at the foot, I at the head of the couch, and our conversation disturbed a silence only broken occasionally by the heavy breathing or moans of one or other of the motionless figures stretched round us.

"'Lilla' told me much about herself and about those that kept the den. The latter were a native and his Chinese wife, the parents of 'Lilla,' which was an abbreviation of some eight-syllabled name by which she was known in her peculiar family circle.

"Yes, she had always lived in the den, she told me, and had waited upon the customers since a [Pg 208] mere child. She was now only seventeen, and confessed she was unmarried. She further told me that she intended doing what the English call marrying money, even questioning me, to my embarrassment, on my financial position.

"As the serpent bewitches, hypnotises, and eventually snares the rabbit, so I began to feel that this maiden of the opium den was beginning to bewitch me. Not that I was, or have been, an impressionable man, unusually susceptible to feminine attack, though I have, as you, my son, may have discovered, always been of a weak disposition. I do not know, either, whether, by permitting myself to fall a victim to 'Lilla's' charms, I was, in the words of a common expression, 'cutting off my nose to spite my face'—impotently avenging Edith's treatment of me by falling in love—no other words express my behaviour—with the first female I met after learning of what I believed to be her fickle inconstancy.

"I am more than inclined to think that the native girl was imbued with those powers that so many of even the humblest Indian folks possess—a power that, unfortunately, is getting a firm rooting in this country—that of mesmeric influence over a weaker mind!

"It will be sufficient for me to say that I found myself quite powerless in the girl's hands. I told [Pg 209] her the story of my life and love when she requested me to do so. I seemed unable to hide anything from her. I went so far as to mention that a severe punishment would result were it discovered that I had visited the den, the cholera then ravishing the country, and the troops, including the officers, being under special orders not to visit the particularly afflicted quarters of

the town.

"And this remark of mine must have been the cause of all my future trouble and misery—and, probably, of my death!

"The first day I remained in ignorance of the secrets of the opium den, and of that of opium smoking. But when I left, long after nightfall, it was with a promise on my lips that I would return next day, and I did. Strive as I might I could not battle against the invisible power that drew me, on the following afternoon, to the low opium den.

"This time I was horrified on entering the dim cellar to see Lilla curled up on a sofa with the stem of an opium pipe between her pearly teeth. Otherwise the room was empty. Not until afterwards did I discover the reason, which was that one of the visitors of the previous day had been seized with the terrible disease, and that either he had communicated the scourge to the other smokers who haunted the den, or the habitués had been too frightened by what they saw to return! [Pg 210]

"On closer investigation I discovered that a glass of neat spirit stood on the table at the girl's right hand! That the lovely young girl was an opium smoker and a drinker of undiluted spirit seemed too horrible. Instinctively I recoiled from her, and as she seemed half asleep, commenced to make my way from the room.

"The sounds I made caused her to awake.

"'Ah! it is the Sahib,' she murmured; 'come, come, and kiss Lilla.'

"How I had been deceived! How blind I had been! The girl who had bewitched and fascinated me on the previous day was now revealed in her true light. Now she seemed something despicable, hateful, loathsome. The beauty that I admired seemed to have vanished. The creature now appeared to be hideous. Whether the revulsion of feeling caused a permanent blindness of my eyes to her beauty I cannot say. Knowing what I do of India and its mysteries—mysteries that scientists have failed to solve—I am more than inclined to think that the girl was never so beautiful as she first appeared to me. My very eyes had been deceived before now by the marvellous tricks of the native conjurers and fakirs. In my own mind, I have no shadow of doubt [Pg 211] that the girl Lilla, by the powers she possessed, led me to imagine the charms I had only a day before seen in her, and by means of which she had fascinated me.

"Her words and the sight of her enraged as well as disgusted me.

"'You she-devil!' I shouted. Then I stopped because words failed me.

"The girl showed no astonishment at the epithet I had bestowed upon her. Instead, she softly stepped down from the sofa and glided, snake-like it seemed to me, towards where I stood.

"'You shall kiss me,' she hissed, and again I was impressed by her resemblance to a serpent.

"Even when I attempted to cast her away as she crept nearer and nearer to me I felt that I was powerless. My loathing for this creature was none the less, yet I could not prevent her from pressing those cruel thin lips, that had seemed so rosy and fascinating on the previous day, against my cheek.

"'There,' she whispered; 'I knew you loved me, Harold. You must marry me!'

"You fiend!' I shrieked; 'I detest you—I loathe your very existence. Away! I will not stay for another moment under the same roof with you. Sorceress, you have ensnared me, but——'

"'My love,' she replied, beneath her breath, 'as you say, you are ensnared. You are mine. You [Pg 212] shall not leave this house until you are even more mine—until you are my husband.'

"Then as she spoke I suddenly became aware of the fact that a face was peering through the half-closed door of the den—a shrivelled, yellow face, with oval slits of eyes, which were directed towards me.

"Then, evidently perceiving I was aware of this fact, the door was pushed open, and a hideous Chinese woman shuffled in, at once engaging Lilla in conversation in her native tongue.

"From what I gathered the woman was the mother of the girl!

"With startling suddenness the elder female turned on me after a moment's conversation with Lilla.

"'Sahib likee mazinloree?' she said with an intonation that implied a question.

"I shook my head, not understanding the creature's remark.

"'She says, "Does the gentleman like his mother-in-law?"' explained Lilla, with a leering laugh.

"'I have had enough of this nonsense,' I shouted, bubbling over with rage; 'let me pass or I shall clear you both out of the way.' [Pg 213]

"'No marry this girlee?' asked the old hag.

"'No, once again,' I exclaimed, and I thrust the woman to one side, and found myself in the dark passage.

"'Ha—ha—ha!' screamed Lilla; 'how will you like it when we tell the General where you have been?'

"I stopped short, horrified by her words. At once I saw how I had been 'let in.' The diabolical cunning of the enchantress—the siren—was only too plain. Unless I married Lilla she would report my visit to the forbidden quarter to the commanding officer at the barracks.

"'Tell me,' I said, ill-disguising my rage, 'how much you want!'

"'Hundred thousand seventee hundred 'pees,' giggled the old woman.

"'Nothing,' laconically remarked Lilla.

"'Name your price, you witch,' I said to the girl.

"'Your love,' she replied, in a tone that caused me to exercise all my self-control to prevent myself from striking her.

"There was the soft pat-pat of footsteps in the passage; then I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Turning, I confronted a gigantic Hindoo in gorgeous costume, who had come upon us from whence I did not know. [Pg 214]

"'This is the man?' he asked Lilla in Hindustani, a language with which I had a passing acquaintance.

"The girl replied in the affirmative. 'He refuses,' she added.

"The other evidently knew who I was, for, learning this intelligence, he at once sprang upon me, bearing me to the ground. Then I felt a sudden sharp blow on my throat, and I lost consciousness." [Pg 215]

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SQUIRE'S STORY (CONTINUED)

"When I recovered I found myself in a pitch-dark room. A terrible pain in my neck when I first moved was the first reminder of what had gone before.

"With difficulty (for I was weak and faint) I rose to my feet, thankful that, at any rate, I was not bound or fettered in any way. The darkness was unbearable. I sought the pocket in which I kept my vesta-case. It was empty, as were all my pockets. My watch was gone, likewise my cigar-case, match-box, scarf-pin, and, in fact, everything of any value. Fortunately, I discovered a couple of matches loose in my waistcoat pocket. One of these I struck on the sole of my boot. The bright light almost blinded me, but, after a moment, I was able to discover that I was in a large empty room. Empty? No, for what was that dark object in the far corner? I crept over towards it.

"It was the prostrate body of a man! Moreover, it was an Englishman, and a fellow-officer with whom I was very intimate. And he was dead. [Pg 216]

"What did it mean? How came Lieutenant Aubrey in the cellar (for such it was) of an opium den? Of what had he died? Not till afterwards did I learn of the man who had been seized with cholera in the den on the previous day. Otherwise I might have thought, for the moment, that my brother officer and the unhappy wretch were one and the same. But something about the position of the body caused me to give it a further investigation.

"Then I perceived that, without a doubt, Aubrey had been the victim of foul play. He had been murdered!

"What seemed even more significant to me, bearing in mind the nature of my own attack by the gigantic Hindoo, was that the head of the corpse was almost entirely twisted off. The face looked upward, pale, grim, and terrible; yet the body lay on the stomach. A thin red line was marked across the throat. The neck was evidently broken.

"'What did it mean?' I asked myself again and again.

"My last match had died out, burning my fingers. I was alone in an empty room—empty save for that terrible thing in the corner.

"And the door was securely fastened from without. [Pg 217]

"There was some kind of window, though, the bars of which, though stout, were rusty, as was their setting.

"Gifted, for the moment, with almost super-human strength, I managed to remove two or three of these, and then raised myself on to the ledge. I saw that it was pitch dark, and could not tell whether there was an easy drop or no. However, there was only one thing to do. I must risk it. And I did. Fortunately, I only had to fall a few feet. Then I found myself in a small courtyard.

"How I made my way out of this, what streets I traversed, and how long it took me to reach the barracks I do not know. I recollect being challenged more than once. But I made no reply, and in the darkness I passed through unobserved until I reached some kind of a shed, in which I fell down and slept heavily until daybreak.

"Of course, my absence had been noticed, as had that of Aubrey. Hurriedly deciding my course of action, I craved an interview with the commanding officer, Sir Bromley Lestrange, who had always been most kind and sympathetic to me in the matter of my love affairs, concerning which I had told him all.

"My first idea was to invent some satisfactory explanation of my absence, making no reference to [Pg 218] my discovery of Aubrey's dead body, or to the fact that I had laid myself open so indiscreetly to infection.

"To a stranger I might have been able to invent a tissue of lies, but to a friend, no. Accordingly, in the privacy of his own chamber, I told Sir Bromley the whole story. His horror on learning my news was as great as mine had been on perceiving how I had been ensnared by the girl Lilla, and more so when I made the gruesome discovery in the empty room.

"'We must hush this up—that's quite clear,' said Sir Bromley; 'it would never do to publish these facts abroad. Young Aubrey was no doubt drawn to the opium den by the same devilish means as those employed in your case. It will be a lesson to you, Carrington. But of that more anon. First we must recover poor Aubrey's body, and have it decently buried. Then we must do all in our power to have the wretches in the den handed over to justice. I think I can manage this quietly. Leave me now, and I will arrange the best I can. I am sorry for you, truly sorry, Carrington, but you might have expected it.' I knew that in his last sentence he referred to the paragraph in the *Times*, for I had not withheld any of the facts from him. [Pg 219]

"I took my departure shortly after, first explaining the exact locality in which the opium den was to be found.

"My misconduct was never known to anyone but Sir Bromley. Consequently, it was with unusual regret I learned a year or so back that the General had died suddenly of heart disease in India. I left the regiment shortly after, under circumstances I will proceed to explain, and never saw Lestrange again, but I cherish the memory of his kindness and leniency to this day.

"I subsequently learned that a police raid had been made on the premises of the opium den, when the body of Lieutenant Aubrey was found, and secretly returned to the barracks. I forget exactly how his death was explained, but as we had one or two cases of fever in the hospital about that time, I presume his relatives were led to believe that the young man succumbed to that disease.

"Of course, on discovering that I had escaped, or, perhaps, immediately after robbing me of all I possessed, the proprietors of the opium den decamped.

"But the corpse of my unhappy fellow-officer afforded a distinct clue to the clever, but lazy, native police. Aubrey had been slain by Phansigars, or, as they are better known to the world, Thugs! [Pg 220]

"The police were able to inform us, from my description, that Lilla was a well-known 'sotha,' or entrapper. How many victims she had secured for her terrible gang the police did not know, but she was considered a queen among her people—a position she owed to the fact that she had bewitched and ensnared more victims than any other candidate for the nominal honour. The old Chinese woman, her mother, was a 'guru,' or teacher, her occupation being the instructing of children in the art of Thugee—the so-called religion of Kalee, the goddess of scientific murder. The giant Hindoo, who was the husband of Lilla, combined the callings of 'bhuttote,' which means strangler with the noose, and 'lughaee' (grave-digger). There were several other members of the gang, which subsisted entirely on plunder.

"Once on the track of these inhuman scoundrels, the police quickly managed to effect the arrest of the whole gang, with the single exception of Lilla (or the girl I knew by that name). The latter was never captured.

"Exactly what punishment was meted out to the captives I never learned. I feel sure, though, that the death sentence was passed upon them, for the treatment of Thugs is very severe in India, as it necessarily should be. [Pg 221]

"The strangest part of my story still remains to be told.

"A few months later I was walking down an almost deserted street in Madras, when my attention was arrested by a roll of thin yellow parchment lying in the pathway, and on which was written my own name!

"Very naturally I picked up the sheet, and, unrolling it, was astounded to read the following message in Hindustani:—

"'My baby was born nine days ago. Siva (the husband of Kalee) has decreed that it should be a male. My vengeance will be slow. The boy shall be brought up as an expert "Phansigar" (another name for "Strangler") until he shall have reached manhood in five-and-twenty years. He shall be taught to avenge his father, and, as his father's and mother's son, shall give his life for that purpose and the fraternity. I am dying, but my mother will bring him up, and, after eight years,

sixteen years, and four-and-twenty years, shall inform you of his progress, lest you forget the day when you despised Lilla, the "sotha." When five-and-twenty years shall have passed away, your doom shall be sealed by Lilla's gift to the world. If you are dead, then shall the doom descend upon your dear ones. The curse of Devi (another name for Kalee) be upon you, but not until five- [Pg 222] and-twenty years have passed. In those years all that you shall do will prosper, but there shall be no peace for you, for the doom of Kalee and Siva shall rest upon you and your seed until that which I have prophesied shall have come to pass.'

"To say that I was frightened by the words in this strange letter would be to exaggerate my feelings. In those days I did not know what I do now about the Thugs and their so-called religion, or I should have given more heed to the warning. One thing I did, that was to lay the letter before Sir Bromley, who took a very grave view of it.

"'Those Thugs,' he said, with an ominous shake of his head, 'are devils. No other word can be so aptly applied to them. I have made a study of their art, for such it is, and I can say that there are thousands of authentic cases in which they have done marvels—really marvels—of brutality. Beware, my boy! If I were you I would try to change my regiment, and get out of the country as quickly as possible. Murder is not as uncommon in this part of the Queen's Empire as you might think; and the relatives of these captured Thugs would consider that they had done a good deed if they were able to put an end to your existence.'

"It was not for this reason, though, that I returned to England shortly after. The fact was, I [Pg 223] learned, about this time, that a man in London, for whom I had once been able to do a good turn, had recently died, bequeathing to me a sum of money which would, at any rate, make it unnecessary for me to work for my daily bread. 'Ah!' I thought, when I heard the good news, 'if only Edith had waited a few months longer!'" [Pg 224]

CHAPTER XXX

THE SQUIRE'S STORY (CONCLUSION)

"And so it came about that I returned to the old country, and, out of mere politeness, discovered old Colonel Rawson's address, and called one afternoon. I was ushered into the drawing-room, where sat a lady, whom I at once recognised as my beloved Edith.

"'Harold!' she cried, as she sprang forward.

"I looked at her left hand. There was no ring on the third finger!

"It was, as you, my son, may have suspected, all a mistake (how costly a one you have yet to learn) on my part. The Edith Rawson who had married was not even any relative of my Edith.

"Within three months, though, the latter was a bride.

"In the midst of all my happiness there was one troubling thought that disturbed me more than anyone knew.

"The prophecy contained in the parchment was coming true!

"I mean that prosperity had been promised me for the five-and-twenty years that would elapse [Pg 225] before the child which, according to the message sent me in so mysterious a fashion, had then just been born should reach what was evidently considered by his people his majority. Had I not experienced that prosperity in receiving the unexpected legacy and winning for my wife the woman whom I had believed to have proved false to me? But I felt that twenty-five years was a long time. It was no use worrying about a possible calamity in the distant future. And so I forgot the weird prophecy and my connection with India, and settled down to the four years of bliss that were my portion before you, my son, were born, and my darling, in giving you birth, sacrificed her own dear life.

"That was not prosperity, you will say; and I agree to a certain extent. But if she had not died perhaps I might, and then—if there was anything in the prophecy—the doom of the girl Lilla might have fallen upon her instead of upon me. But to proceed with my actual narrative.

"It was nearly four years after my Edith's death when I received a letter bearing an Indian stamp and a blurred postmark that I was unable to decipher. It was addressed to me at the War Office, with instructions to be forwarded, in a shaky handwriting—the work, probably, of an old man; and the sheet contained in the dirty, thin envelope bore the single word—'Remember!' [Pg 226]

"My feelings on receiving this epistle from a world that I had come to hope was dead to me were indescribable. I had learned from Sir Bromley some years before that the police believed Lilla was dead, since another queen had been appointed for the district over which my enchantress had held nominal sway, and thus I had put less belief in the prophecy contained in the parchment letter; but now, with the knowledge that my existence had not been forgotten by the Thugs, a great fear for my life came upon me.

"It was impossible for me to change my name, as my friends would have required some

explanation of my conduct, and such explanation I should not feel inclined to give. One thing I could do—I could become a civilian, and give up all connection with the army. This I accordingly did. I took the Manse at Northden, in Yorkshire, managed to persuade people to call me and address me as Squire instead of Major Carrington, dropped the latter title altogether, and as my friends died or were lost sight of, I found as years went by that my connection with the Indian Army or any other army was unknown, or, at any rate, forgotten. The name Carrington I knew was no rare one, and I accordingly hoped that I should never be recognised as the Major [Pg 227] Carrington who had visited the Madras opium den, and fallen a victim to the charms of the queen of the Thugs.

"Eight years passed after the receipt of the letter from India; then one day I caught sight of a paragraph in the agony column of the *Telegraph*, which caused me to shudder and dream of all manner of horrible things for months. The paragraph consisted only of a couple of words, and, I found, it had appeared for a week in every London paper.

"This was it—'Carrington, remember!'

"For fear of revealing my identity I took no steps to inquire at the offices of the newspapers whence the instructions for the insertion of the message had come. I should probably have done myself no good by making such inquiries.

"I knew well what those harmless-looking words meant. Sixteen years had passed since I had found the parchment in the deserted roadway. Only nine remained.

"From that day forward I have had no real peace of mind. Perhaps I have appeared harsh to you, my boy. Have I not had cause enough to make me irritable? I have made a point of never mentioning your mother to you, for several reasons. In the first place, it would be most painful for me to do so. In the second, you might have discovered that Miss Edith Rawson (had I told you [Pg 228] your mother's maiden name) had married a Major Carrington. An explanation would then have been necessary, and I had no wish to burden you with the secret which has ruined my life.

"The third message from across the seas reached me a few months ago, and was the cause of all the precautions I adopted. It was, as before, a paragraph in the agony column of the leading London newspapers, and ran—'Carrington, the bhuttote (strangler) left Madras to-day.'

"Possibly, those who had heard the queer name were puzzled by the message. You will understand how plain it was to me. It meant that my doom was sealed; that from that day forward I was in the position of a hunted criminal—to be hunted down by a more tireless, more terrible sleuth-hound than any that Scotland Yard possesses.

"The rest you know, or most of it. How the son of 'Lilla' found me out I cannot say. As I have stated, the marvellous powers possessed by these Thugs are terrible, beyond the realisation of the ordinary European. That he has done so you know. Now you know, too, why I would tell you nothing about my secret, why I would not assist you in your investigations, why I would not allow a detective to enter my house. What good would a hundred detectives do when this creature is so [Pg 229] determined to slay me at any cost? The attack on the moor is known to you. It is but a few hours since that happened. I am writing these words in the full anticipation of their being perused by you, my son, within a few days, though I have requested that this book shall not be opened until after my death. Thank God, I have never been coward enough to take my life, and lay you open to the attack of the avenger. If you have ever wondered whether my secret in any respect concerned your dear mother or your birth, set your mind at rest, and do not despise

"Your Loving Father."

[Pg 230]

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

There was silence for a few moments when the end of the Squire's story was reached. Then Laurence said—

"The mystery is well-nigh solved. We can now see what blunders we have made, how we have unjustly suspected 'Doctor Meadows' (or whatever his name is), and been led a dance by the freaks of coincidence. Our suspect, Meadows, has proved to be not only innocent of the charges we brought against him, but the man who, by some means we have yet to learn, has been able to put into our hands the key to the mystery. But for him I should not have obtained access to this book, and without it we might have gone on blundering in the dark for months, or even years. Take my word for it, Miss Scott, we are neither of us born to be investigators of mystery."

"How dare you say so!" replied the girl, with pretended anger, "when I have this very day made a most startling discovery, which may lead to the revelation of 'Doctor Meadows'' secret." [Pg 231]

"Oh," cried Laurence, "is that so? Of course, I mean that I am the poor hand at detective work, and you——"

"A poorer," Lena ended the sentence. "But for all that I really have made a strange discovery."

"Well, and what is it, if it is not criminal to ask?"

"You remember the envelope addressed to Major Jones-Farnell that we found in the garden?"

"Certainly. It was addressed in a lady's hand, from somewhere abroad; or, rather, from either Scotland, Wales, or Ireland, since it bore a penny stamp, and was marked 'England' in the address."

"Well, I have found out the name of the person who addressed that envelope to 'Doctor Meadows.'"

"And her name is that of someone I know well. I am convinced of that. Don't keep me in suspense any longer, please."

"Her name is that of someone you know very well—someone, though, that you know no better than I or auntie or—well, Kingsford does."

"What do you mean? Tell me, or I shall succumb to my anxiety." Laurence spoke in jest, but he was really more than interested to learn the identity of the "doctor's" fair correspondent.

"Well, then, the unknown lady is none other than the Princess H——!" [Pg 232]

"The Princess H——! No; you must be mistaken. It cannot be!"

"Two people do not write the same 'fist,'" Lena responded, warmly. "Where have you seen that writing before?" she added, taking up a magazine from a table. Opening it at a page the corner of which had been turned down, she pointed to a facsimile autograph letter by Princess H——, the wife of Prince H——, whose death, under mysterious circumstances, had caused much gossip some years before, and who, as the mother of a little prince who, had he lived, would in due course have ruled over Queen Victoria's dominions, was one of the Royal celebrities of the day.

"Well, do you doubt your own eyes?" asked Lena quietly.

"No; I apologise," Laurence replied. "I agree with you that the 'doctor's' lady correspondent is Princess H——. The writings are precisely alike. There can be no doubt about it. You have made a most important discovery."

"Further, I can prove my theory, if proof is required. The Princess was residing at Dublin up to a few days ago. That was why she wrote 'England' at the end of 'Major Jones-Farnell's' address. What her connection is with this gentleman of aliases I cannot guess. The discovery, however, tells us one thing—that what the 'doctor' said about the nature of his secret was true." [Pg 233]

"You mean that——"

"That he said if his secret was revealed to the world it would cause a general sensation—that it would do great harm to the world. The secret concerns the mysterious death of Prince H——!"

"But who, then, is 'Meadows'? What has he to do with secrets of such great importance?"

"That I cannot say, but I believe your father may know. Note this, though: your father denies the fact that he confided his secret to 'Doctor Meadows.' We have discovered that Meadows not only holds his secret, but has been bound by your father not to reveal it. If your father denies this, and is, nevertheless, really connected in some way with the 'doctor,' but will not confess to the fact, is it not possible that he, in his turn, knows something about Meadows' secret? I grant you that it does not follow that such is the case, but it is a distinct probability, to my mind."

Laurence could not reply. The argument was a fair one, but Lena's former hypothesis concerning Horncastle's connection with the attacks on the Squire's life had seemed so ingenious and probable a one and yet had been proved to be wrong in every particular. [Pg 234]

"At any rate," he remarked, after a pause, "you will agree that we have reached the beginning of the end of this mystery?"

"Certainly; but we have yet much to learn. I doubt not but that the secret of 'Doctor Meadows' will prove less easy to solve than that of your father. I agree with Meadows that much of the mystery we have almost solved should have been explained long ago. The discovery that the Squire had been an Indian officer, coupled with the fact of the unknown assailant's agility, etcetera, should have suggested to us the possibility of the creature being a Thug. The Squire's story has revealed one thing—the reason why he fainted at my mention of the woman in coloured skirts. He thought the avenger had come in the person of Lilla herself (whom he believed to be dead), when what I had seen was this Indian, whose clothing must certainly be somewhat similar to that we associate with a female. Now we know, too, that the 'robbery' of the gardener's coat was effected in order that the assassin might be less recognisable. One thing, though, strikes me as strange. How did this creature learn to ride a bicycle?"

"You mustn't forget that India, like all other countries, is advancing with the times. No doubt the Thugs encourage such a form of athletics among their children. Why he did not return the bicycle to the shed, though, seems difficult to understand; and what is another mystery to me is why he used a pistol on the first occasion, when that weapon is little known among the Thugs." [Pg 235]

"Perhaps, finding it so difficult to get into the house and murder your father, he cast caution and his usual weapon to the winds, and essayed the attack on the moor. By chance he discovered the

secret passages and room when lurking in that splendid hiding-place, the barn. Then, having lost his pistol, he entered the Squire's room by means of the secret door in the wall, and would have murdered the old man had it not been for the bat."

"But how do you know that the unexplored secret passage does lead to the Squire's room, as Meadows suggested that it might?"

"Because," replied Lena triumphantly, "I noticed that the wardrobe in that room had been shifted since the Squire's return to consciousness, and for no apparent reason. Mrs. Featherston, moreover, informed me that it was moved at the Squire's particular request." [Pg 236]

CHAPTER XXXII

THE WIZARD'S MARSH

It was the following morning.

Nothing eventful had transpired since Laurence's return from Durley Dene, save that in the night watches the young man had fancied he heard occasional sounds from the garden of the adjoining mansion. What these sounds were he could not say, and as it was too dark for him to perceive anything outside when he rose and peered out of the window, he was unable to discover whether or no anything unusual had taken place.

The Squire's condition continued to improve, but he made no mention to his son of the little red note-book and the life story it contained; nor, in fact, did he in any way refer to the matter foremost in point of interest.

Laurence was breakfasting with Lena and Mrs. Knox, who, as usual, did justice to the array of dishes judiciously placed within her reach by the elderly butler. The three had been conversing upon every-day subjects, when the door opened, and Kingsford came hurriedly in. [Pg 237]

"Please, sir," he said, "there's a man outside wants to see you very pertikler, at once, if you please."

Obtaining the ladies' permission for him to leave the table, Laurence followed the butler outside into the front hall, where stood a little man in a loud check suit and tight leggings. The man looked as though usually his face was rubicund; now it was white as the traditional sheet.

"Oh, my God, Mr. Laurence!" he almost shrieked on catching sight of Carrington; "they're after him! They'll kill him! They'll tear him in pieces! Quick, quick! What can be done, sir? Oh, they'll hang me for murder!"

"Calm yourself, my dear Nichols," replied Laurence, "and tell me distinctly what's the matter. Anything happened to the Marquis?"

"No, sir," replied Nichols, trembling with fear; "the Markiss's all right, but it's your visitor!"

"What visitor?"

"Why, the gent with the black face and the dress!"

"Gent with black face and dress!" echoed Laurence. "Quick, what do you mean? What has happened to him?"

"I was taking Tiger and Nap for exercise, sir, when suddenly, as though they scented something unusual, they both jumped forward, knocking me down. When I fell down I let loose of the leash, and they simply flew away across the fields in this direction—me after them. I vaulted the gate by the common in time to catch sight of a queer little gent with black face and an old black coat, and some kind of dress on, tearing down the road with the hounds after him. I tried to follow, but lost sight of 'em in no time. Then I ran back as hard as I could for a horse, and a lad at the gate told me he'd seen the black gent come out of your gate. Let me have the mare, sir, quick." [Pg 238]

"Yes, yes! Fetch her out at once. I will follow you on my bicycle." And the two men rushed from the house.

Laurence knew in an instant what had happened.

The Marquis of Moorland's savage bloodhounds were in pursuit of the Squire's enemy—the Thug!

Two minutes later Nichols (one of the Marquis's coachmen) was thundering down the road on the bare-backed mare, while Laurence, pedalling as hard as he could, followed close behind.

Villagers were scattered about along the lane. They shrieked out that the hounds had passed a few minutes before.

On and on the riders sped, Nichols freely using the hunting crop he had caught up on leaving the Manse stables. Still there was no sign of either the hounds or their quarry. [Pg 239]

There were trees at intervals along the narrow lane. Out of one of these, as the riders passed,

there protruded a head and a white startled face. Laurence glanced up, though knowing well that it could not be that of the Thug, since the bloodhounds were not visible.

To his astonishment he perceived that the man who had taken refuge in the tree was Horncastle, the convict servant from Durley Dene!

Now they had left the village—straggling though it was—far behind them. The road began to get steeper and steeper. They were ascending to the great moor. The pace began to tell upon the mare, and Laurence, being out of training, was beginning to feel pains in his calves; but still they kept on, the cyclist now abreast with the horseman.

How was it possible that a man on foot could keep up such a pace?—such was Nichols' thought. Laurence did not wonder. His father's story—contained in the little red note-book—had opened his eyes to the weird and wonderful accomplishments of the Thugs, and he had seen the activity demonstrated by this particular individual in the barn.

The road now became more and more uneven. In places the grass grew upon it. It had formerly [Pg 240] been used by carriers' and other carts, but the advent of the railway had thrown it into disuse. Now it was seldom, if ever, that a cart passed along it.

Once the mare stumbled and nearly fell, but Nichols managed to retain his seat. Then, with a din only equalled by the report of a gun, the tyre of the front wheel of Laurence's bicycle punctured, terrifying the already alarmed mare, who was cantering abreast of the cyclist. But neither stopped. The work for both cyclist and horse was becoming harder, the incline steeper, and the surface of the pathway less even. But the pace did not suffer.

At last they were on the plateau. Now they could see for miles over the flat scrubby moorland, on which hardly a tree appeared to break the monotony of the scene. Yet, wonder of wonders, there was no sign either of the hounds or their victim! And yet they could not have turned off in any other direction. Here and there on the wet road impressions of dogs' toe-pads had been visible even from the saddle. What had become of the fleet-footed Thug, tracked to his doom by the fierce bloodhounds of the Marquis of Moorland? Nichols pulled up his mount, drew a powerful-looking whistle from his pocket, and blew a long, loud blast on it. Why he had not done so before was a mystery. [Pg 241]

But there came no response.

It was impossible that either the man or the hounds could have disappeared out of sight, since, as has already been said, it was now possible to see for many miles across the flat country.

Nichols was wiping his ashy face with a red handkerchief.

"Good Lord, sir, what shall we do?" he moaned. "Those dogs are worth two hundred pounds, and —the gent, what's become of him?"

"Goodness only knows," replied Laurence. "They have all disappeared as though the earth had swallowed them up!" Then, as he uttered the words, an idea struck him.

Had the earth really swallowed them up?

"Come!" he shouted; "the Wizard's Marsh!" But on the rough, uneven surface of the ground he could not proceed on his machine.

"Leave the mare where she is," he called to Nichols, as he jumped from his bicycle and threw it down; "leave the mare, and let us run over to the marsh. Perhaps this——" But his words were lost, save to the sharp north wind, for he had rushed forward in the direction of a stone pillar that rose some thousands of yards on.

That stone quaintly announced that to proceed any farther in a certain direction would be fatal. [Pg 242] The traveller would suddenly step from hard, dry ground into a dark, fathomless depth of marsh, half a mile square—a grim pitfall for the unwary, of Nature's design, known to the local yarn-spinners as the "Wizard's Marsh," and to geologists as a queer and interesting natural freak.

Fresher than his companion, the young coachman quickly overtook Laurence, and the two coursed along in the direction of the venerable moss-grown warning stone. In places there were dots of marsh, in which the runners' feet sank to the ankle; but, heedless of anything in their excitement, they did not pause until the stone was reached.

Then, treading with the utmost caution, they commenced to circle the treacherous quagmire, seeking for some trace of the vanished man and his savage canine pursuers. And they did not search in vain.

Suddenly Nichols stopped. Pointing to a mark on the ground, he exclaimed—

"Someone has stepped here lately. A man in stockinged feet."

"That's right," cried Laurence; "the Indian does not wear boots."

"And never will," replied the coachman grimly. "His body and the hounds have gone down, down into the marsh. See, here is the mark of one of the hounds. They have all gone down together. [Pg 243] Oh, Lord, how awful, and all my fault!"

"No, not your fault, Nichols. You couldn't help the hounds escaping. They scented the Indian, and

for some reason or other started in pursuit. But what's this?" He bent down, picked up something that lay on the very brink of the bubbling marsh, and examined it.

It was a long, narrow strip of yellowish hairy cloth—the harmless-looking weapon by means of which the Thug had attempted the murder of Squire Carrington!

No possible shadow of doubt remained but that the terrible avenger from over the sea had perished in the Wizard's Marsh.

The Squire's dread and danger were at an end. His merciless foe was no more. [Pg 244]

CHAPTER XXXIII

A MAN FROM THE GRAVE

There was nothing to be done.

The possibility of recovering the Indian's body from the Wizard's Marsh was a remote one, and, even were it done, what would the advantage of such a recovery be? Christian burial would be denied to such a creature, and with good reason.

It was with a certain feeling of satisfaction, combined with horror at the nature of the Thug's end, that Laurence rode slowly home on his bicycle, accompanied by Nichols, mounted on the mare.

On their way they passed a woman, who was commencing the long trudge across the moor in somewhat tattered attire, and with a ponderous bundle on her shoulders.

Something in her figure being familiar to Laurence, he scrutinised her features as she tramped past.

"She" was the person who had taken refuge in the tree from the bloodhounds who were pursuing the fugitive Thug—the convict servant, Horncastle, from Durley Dene! What did it mean? Where was he going? [Pg 245]

Laurence had not to wait long for an answer to these questions.

He took leave of Nichols, and entered the dining-room on arriving home.

Lena was not present, but the young man was surprised to find Mrs. Knox still engaged in breaking her fast. The final events in the unravelling of the mystery surrounding the Squire's enemy had not covered a very great space of time.

"Young man," said the worthy old lady, "I would have a word with you." And she tried to look extremely severe.

"Certainly, Mrs. Knox. I hope it is something pleasant."

"Well, that remains to be seen. What I want to know is this: are you interested in my niece?"

"Really, now you come to mention it, I believe I am."

"More than interested?" the lady pursued, stretching out her hand for the marmalade jar.

"Perhaps. Why?"

"Well, I was wondering whether you knew she was already engaged?"

"Engaged! Lena engaged! Impossible! She has—er—practically engaged herself to me, Mrs. Knox."

"Precisely. That is the engagement to which I refer! I merely desired to ascertain whether your intentions were entirely honest." [Pg 246]

"I assure you, Mrs. Knox——"

"Quite so, Mr. Carrington; I understand. I have mentioned the matter to your papa, who leaves it entirely in my hands."

"Really! But don't you think Miss Scott and I are the first persons to be considered?"

"That, my dear boy, is a matter for you to decide between yourselves. Lena is in the drawing-room. Perhaps you would like to exchange a few words. I will not intrude just yet. As a matter of fact, I have only just begun my breakfast. I have been ailing lately. My appetite is not what it was, but there are one or two things your dear housekeeper has provided to-day which have tempted me to eat."

Laurence withdrew, leaving Mrs. Knox to congratulate herself on being an excellent match-maker. He entered the drawing-room, but was disappointed to find the room empty.

He hurried upstairs to the Squire's bedroom, where he was surprised to see Lena, who had been reading to the old gentleman.

"Father," he cried, "you are safe! He is drowned in the Wizard's Marsh!"

The Squire darted up in bed.

"Do you mean it? Is this true? How do you know?" he shrieked, clutching his son's arm, and staring into his face with eyes almost starting from their sockets. [Pg 247]

"We traced him there. He was chased by the Marquis's bloodhounds. And this—this was found on the brink of the swamp. In trying to escape the hounds he plunged into the marsh, and, followed by them, has gone down into its unfathomable depths."

And he produced the dead man's "noose."

"Then I am safe!" yelled Squire Carrington.

Laurence had barely time to assure him that such was the case when the door opened and Kingsford appeared.

"A gentleman to see you," he informed the Squire mysteriously.

"Show him in; show him in," replied the old gentleman, to Kingsford's unbounded astonishment. Once he knew that the grim shadow of dread and death no longer enshrouded him, the Squire was something like he had been five-and-twenty years before—the dashing Indian officer, striving his hardest for promotion, so that he might claim for his bride the woman who had now been dead long years.

"Show him in," he said, almost hysterically, wriggling about in his bed until the pains in his neck compelled him to desist. [Pg 248]

Kingsford departed, only to return in a couple of minutes, throw open the door, and announce in strident tones a name that caused the three occupants of the room to stare with unbounded astonishment in the direction of the doorway.

"Sir Bromley Lestrange," he said.

And, with light tread, there stepped into the room—"Doctor Orlando Meadows," alias "Major Jones-Farnell!" [Pg 249]

CHAPTER XXXIV

SOLVING THE MYSTERY

At the sight of the master of Durley Dene, Squire Carrington seemed dumfounded. At first he looked as though he fancied the new-comer would suddenly vanish into air.

"Good-afternoon, Major Carrington," remarked the visitor, with the utmost coolness; "you seem surprised to see me."

"Good heavens, Lestrange, I thought you were dead!"

"So did the whole world, and does now," responded the owner of the Dene.

So saying, he walked up to the bedside, and shook hands heartily with the Squire.

"Who'd have thought we should have met under these circumstances?" observed Sir Bromley.

"Ay, sir, in the hour of my joy. You are very welcome."

"Then he is dead? I congratulate you, Carrington, from the bottom of my heart."

He turned to Lena and bowed, shook hands with Laurence, then took a seat by his old friend's bedside. [Pg 250]

"Lestrange," said Mr. Carrington, "you look younger than you did twenty-five years ago."

"And I feel it now, though I didn't when these young people were trying to corner me, connecting me for some reason or other with these attempts on your life. So the—you know—is dead?"

And, without hesitation, the Squire, prompted where necessary by Lena and Laurence, commenced to relate the whole story of his career since he had left India, never stopping until he was able to announce that his merciless enemy was dead.

Laurence and the girl had heard the whole story before, except that part of it concerning the second attempt to murder the old gentleman. It appeared that the Squire was undressing on the eventful night, when, turning by chance, he saw the wall suddenly open and a terrible apparition enter. Then he fainted, and knew no more until he found Mrs. Featherston bending over him two days later. This announcement proved that, as Laurence and Lestrange believed, the secret passage under the barn led from Durley Dene into the Squire's bedroom.

Afterwards they explored the passage, and further proved that such was the case. [Pg 251]

The Squire's narrative concluded, Sir Bromley turned to the two young people, and with a smile informed them that the moment had now come when he could reveal his secret.

By this time, though, the Squire was quite tired out by his exertions, and, as he had but little interest in the secrets of Durley Dene, the party withdrew, Sir Bromley bidding his old friend a hearty "au revoir," and expressing a hope that he might see the Squire again ere long.

Once seated in the drawing-room, he seemed unwilling to relate the promised story, but, with a little persuasion from Lena, he gave way, and proceeded with a narrative that entirely cleared up the mysteries of the little Yorkshire village and its two largest houses.

"I am by no means sure, even now," he began, "whether I am doing right in divulging for your benefit the secret which I have been at such pains to keep unrevealed, and which you have tried so hard to unravel. At any rate, I have promised to tell you the whole story, and I am going to do so. But I must ask you to let it go no farther—never to refer to it even in conversation between yourselves. You promise? That is right. Then the Princess H—— need have no fear——"

"The Princess H——!" exclaimed Lena. [Pg 252]

"The Princess H——" repeated the gentleman slowly; "and, if you will forgive me for saying so, I shall be unable to tell my story if I have any interruptions, as I have much to do to-day.

"Well, as I say, my name is Bromley Lestrange, and further, I am, as you may see for yourselves, very far from being dead.

"To explain things intelligibly, I must go back five-and-twenty years. At that remote period, as your father, Laurence, has told you in the excellent synopsis of his career, I was commanding the 'Red Herrings' (as the old regiment was then nicknamed) at Madras. I was young for my post, but then I had good influence with the authorities. In passing, I may say that my looks are not a good indication of my age, which is—but what matter?

"As you know, I was able to assist Major Carrington in the unhappy affair connected with the Thug opium den. It was I, as you know, who first caused him to realise that the enmity of the Thugs was not to be thought lightly of. I had heard strange tales of the hideous vengeances of these human fiends. When Carrington left India, I did all that was in my power to learn the whereabouts of the girl Lilla, but failed. However, her death was reported soon after the Squire's return to England, and I hastened to acquaint my old friend with the news. Then, as things do, [Pg 253] the matter passed from my mind, and, except very occasionally, was not brought under my notice, until you," turning to Laurence, "told me your name on the occasion of your first visit to the Dene.

"After leaving the army and Madras, which I did soon after Carrington, I connected myself with the Court of the Rajah of Punneoda for a short period, then spent a number of years travelling. After which—it would be about the time Carrington took this house, sixteen or seventeen years ago—I returned to England, where I was able to be of some slight service to the Princess H——, who had then lately married.

"It is necessary for you to know the circumstances of this august lady's marriage. She was forced into a union with the late Prince H—— of R——, though, as the busybodies said, she was pledged to another man—a man without the necessary amount of blue blood in his veins.

"She married Prince H——, who, however, died shortly after, leaving her the mother of an infant prince, who, as you will recollect, would, had he lived, be now, with the exception of two lives, heir-apparent to the British throne. You may also recall the fact that the circumstances of Prince H——'s death, and likewise that of his son, were, to say the least of it, remarkable. In the first [Pg 254] instance, you may take it from me that the prince did not succumb to the illness specified by the two Royal physicians. He was afflicted with a far more terrible complaint than that of apoplexy. When I reach the end of the story you may judge for yourself what it was.

"Concerning the young prince there were also sinister rumours about the time of his birth. Some said he was born blind, others that he was deformed, a few that he had died and another infant been substituted without the mother's knowledge; but all these reports were incorrect, though there was, indeed, something peculiar about the Royal infant. In fact, the child from its birth was blind, deaf, and dumb!

"Very wisely, this terrible state of affairs was withheld from the world, but the difficulties to be overcome to ensure the secret being kept were very great. As you know, the Princess H——, until the death of her child, at the age of four, resided in the country, where she kept up a small establishment, and lived a remarkably quiet life. The papers stated that the Royal child had died of a severe chill, which had caused a relapse of bronchitis—an ailment to which the boy was supposed to be a martyr. The funeral was necessarily a public affair, but it was noticed that [Pg 255] remarkably few Royal personages were present. Why?

"Because," and when Sir Bromley said the words, it was in a whisper, "because the funeral was a sham one—because the child was not dead!" He paused, wiped his forehead with his silk handkerchief, then resumed—

"It was at this time that the newspapers were requested by his sorrowing relatives (all of whom were actually deceived) to announce the death of Sir Bromley Lestrange from cholera. 'The deceased gentleman,' it was said, 'had succumbed to the fell disease while spending a short

holiday in Shanghai.'

"Two or three weeks later, an elderly merchant, named Goode, bought a small house in the Highlands of Scotland, where he spent a number of years in the most retiring fashion, the only other inmate of the house being apparently his sister. As a matter of fact, there was a comfortably furnished room in the house in which a small child passed its miserable existence, but not a soul in the neighbourhood, beyond the worthy merchant and his sister, knew of the existence of the child. Need I say that Mr. Goode was Sir Bromley Lestrange, Miss Goode a Miss Lestrange, and the child the 'dead son' and heir of the Princess H——? [Pg 256]

"Years passed, and the child became more and more unmanageable. There were occasions when he seemed to be possessed of the strength of a Hercules. It required a second man to look after him. A young doctor was heavily paid to live in the house, and Miss Goode disappeared—to reappear in the world of society, after 'travelling on the Continent' for several years, as Miss Lestrange, 'younger sister of the late Sir Bromley Lestrange, Kt.,' the *Court Gazettes* mentioned in their 'chit-chat.'

"The young doctor made a discovery when he first examined the child in Mr. Goode's country residence, which, had it been noised abroad, would have explained the mystery of the father's (Prince H——) death.

"The boy was a raving maniac of the most dangerous kind." [Pg 257]

CHAPTER XXXV

THE LAST TWIST IN THE YARN

"This alarming discovery," proceeded Sir Bromley, "caused an alteration in Mr. Goode's plans.

"The doctor was so horrified at the idea of being compelled to live in the same house with so dangerous a charge that he threw up his remunerative appointment, with a promise of secrecy, leaving Goode to his own devices. This was less than a year ago. The doctor had given his opinion that the child—he was really a boy of sixteen—could not live more than a few months, but the merchant felt his position was not safe, for the young doctor had settled down to practice in the neighbourhood. It was absolutely necessary to leave Scotland, and one day, after nightfall, a special train carried an old gentleman, with a number of large packages, one labelled 'Live dog, with care,' being taken in the carriage to Derby, where sundry moves were made in order to throw a possible pursuer or busybody off the track.

"Shortly after, a Major Jones-Farnell moved into Durley Dene after carefully arranging matters [Pg 258] with a house agent. At Derby, a servant had been engaged by Mr. Goode, and this servant reappeared at Northden with Farnell. He had been discovered by mere chance. His name was Horncastle, and he had escaped from Dartmoor a few months before.

"To alter my story from the third to the first person, I had obtained the very creature I required—a strong man, who would be of real assistance to me in the care of the maniac prince, and one who, instead of being able to hold the threat of exposing my secret over my head, would be unable to breathe a word of it, for fear I in my turn should betray his secret—that he was a convict, wanted by the police.

"Unfortunately, the man soon perceived that I was more in his power than he in mine. My secret was one that I would not risk being revealed in order to punish Horncastle by handing him over to the police for his frequent misbehaviour. He compelled me to pay him good wages, and supply him with unlimited quantities of drink. Fortunately, he was never drunk, in spite of what he took. I say fortunately, for had he ever visited the room in which our prisoner was shut up while intoxicated, the cunning maniac would have certainly effected his escape, with dire results—to me, to the Princess H——, in fact, to Great Britain, for he would have at once been recognised, [Pg 259] since the boy was the very image of his dead father, whose features were well known to all who had ever opened an illustrated magazine, or inspected photographs in the book-sellers' windows.

"The lunatic was as cunning as he was powerful. I need not refer to the terrible cries he was wont to utter, for I believe at least one of you heard a specimen of his heart-breaking screams. At last it became necessary to drive him into a corner whenever the door of his cell was opened. Accordingly I sent Horncastle out one day for a whip, with which we were able to frighten him off when he attacked us. By the way, I presume I need not explain why the convict disguised himself as a woman. You will have already guessed as much.

"You will know, too, why you were not allowed to expose what you have so fancifully described as the 'House of Strange Secrets.' I think that is all.

"My patient was released from his sufferings last night. He was first taken dangerously ill when you visited me for the second time. He was buried by me at midnight. I have informed the unhappy Princess H—— of the fact, and expect to hear soon from her, and know whether all I have done has been satisfactory. It seems strange to have to bury a Royal child in unconsecrated [Pg 260] ground, but what else could I do?

"My duty to my country, for I consider it amounts to that, is accomplished. To-morrow Major Jones-Farnell and likewise Doctor Orlando Meadows will cease to exist, and the world will shortly learn that, by a strange series of circumstances, Sir Bromley Lestrange has returned from the grave. It will appear that he did not die of cholera, but while very unwell was kidnapped by Chinese pirates, by whom he was kept a prisoner for over a dozen years. He recently escaped, after hair-raising adventures, and returns to tell one of the strangest stories it is possible to imagine!

"What about Horncastle, do you say? Oh, I settled that gentleman very easily. Directly after the death of my charge I paid him a month's salary, and despatched him promptly, in his female disguise. He daren't betray my secret. If he did, who would believe him—a criminal and a convict of the worst type? Besides, he could never find the boy's grave. And I know he would not, even in revenge for his dismissal, sacrifice his liberty for some five or six years. No; I don't think we shall hear much more of Mr. Horncastle.

"Now, Miss Scott, I must bid you farewell for the present. If in my new capacity I shall be so [Pg 261] fortunate as to receive an opportunity of renewing our slight acquaintance, we must meet as strangers. You must never have met Sir Bromley Lestrange before. And the same applies to you, Carrington; is it not so?

"Well, I see that, now you have got all you want out of me, I am one too many. No? Ah, you are too polite to say so, but I was young once, and——To-morrow you will find the Dene uninhabited, the furniture it contains being left as a present to the next tenant. If you care for any little memento, you are at liberty to adopt Horncastle's profession for the nonce—you will find the door unlocked, and the old house is no longer a hiding-place for secrets and bogies. Well, good-bye. I think I have earned my rest."

He rose, and the young couple accompanied him to the door, where they took a cordial leave of him.

Returning to the drawing-room, Laurence informed his fair companion of the remarks made by Mrs. Knox.

"She said that we were to settle the matter ourselves," he added; "and now, dear, that the mystery is solved, you have no excuse for withholding your answer. What is it to be—Lena?" He paused, from nervousness, then proceeded, when the girl hung her head and made no reply: "You [Pg 262] know your aunt would be very disappointed if you didn't accept her choice of a husband!"

"Auntie wouldn't care in the least," replied Lena, laughing lightly. "You won't be angry, will you, if I confess I told her to say what she did?"

"Lena!"

"I thought it would be such a splendid joke to pretend I was already engaged, only auntie didn't keep it up long enough. She's a good old thing, rather dense, but good nature itself. I can twist her round my little finger."

"That's not the question," replied Laurence, seizing the opportunity—and her hand; "what I want to know is if I may twist something else—not Mrs. Knox—round one of your little fingers. May I?"

Lena's reply was not a verbal one, but it was quite as expressive as any words could have been!

THE END

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