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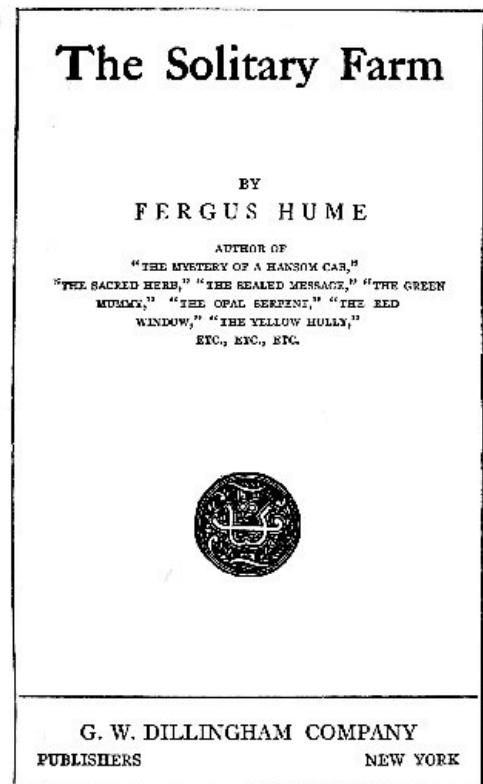
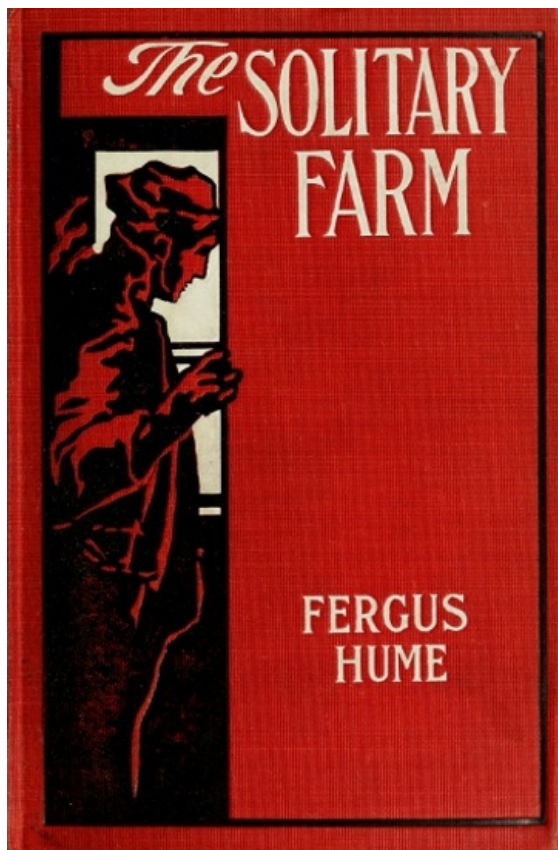
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## The Solitary Farm

BY FERGUS HUME

AUTHOR OF "THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB," "THE SACRED HERB,"  
"THE SEALED MESSAGE," "THE GREEN MUMMY," "THE OPAL  
SERPENT," "THE RED WINDOW," "THE YELLOW HOLLY," ETC., ETC.,  
ETC.

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**AS BELLA RAN INTO HIS ARMS HE DRAGGED HER INTO THE STANDING CORN.**

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# THE SOLITARY FARM

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## CHAPTER I

### THE DOMAIN OF CERES

"S' y' want t' merry m' gel, Bella!" remarked Captain Huxham, rubbing his stout knees slowly, and repeating the exact words of the clerical suitor. "S' thet she may be yer handmaiden, an' yer spouse, and yer sealed fountain, es y' put it in yer flowery pulpit lingo. Jus' so! Jus' so!" and shifting the quid which bulged his weather-beaten cheek, he stared with hard blue eyes. "Jus' so, Mr. Pence!"

The young minister and the elderly skipper discussed the subject of marriage in a shabby antique room of small size, which had the appearance of having been used to more aristocratic company. The dark-oak panelled walls, the grotesquely-carved ceiling-beams, the Dutch-tiled fire-place, with its ungainly brass dogs, and the deep slanting embrasure of the lozenge-paned casement, suggested Georgian beaux and belles dancing buckram minutes, or at least hard-riding country squires plotting Jacobite restoration. But these happenings were in the long-ago, but this stately Essex manor-house had declined woefully from its high estate, and now sheltered a rough and ready mariner, who camped, rather than dwelt, under its roof.

Captain Huxham, seated on the broad, low window-sill, thrust his hands into the pockets of his brass-buttoned pea-jacket, and swung his short, sturdy legs, which were enveloped in wide blue-cloth trousers. He was a squat man, with lengthy arms and aggressively square shoulders, and his large, flat face was as the winter sun for redness. Clean-shaven, save for a fringe of white hair which curved under his stubborn chin from one large ear to the other, his tough skin was seamed with innumerable wrinkles, accumulating particularly thickly about his eyes. He had gold rings in his ears, and plenteous grey hair hung like seaweed from under a peaked cap, pushed back from his lined forehead. He looked what he truly was—a rough, uneducated, imperious old sea-dog, whose knowledge of strong drink and stronger language was only exceeded by his strenuous grip of the purse which held the savings of many rapacious years. In this romantic room he looked entirely out of place. Nevertheless it was his own property, and while considering his answer to Mr. Pence, he examined it mechanically.

To the left he beheld a large open fire-place, which gaped under an ornate oak mantel-piece, carved with the crest and motto of the dispossessed family. A door appeared on the right, leading to the entrance hall, and this also was elaborately carved with wreaths of fruit and flowers, and with fat, foolish Cupids, entangled in knots of ribbon. The fourth wall was unbroken, and faced the window, but against it stood a common deal table covered incongruously with an embroidered Indian cloth. Above this, and leaning forward, was a round convex mirror, surmounted by a Napoleonic eagle. This was flanked on one side by an oilskin coat and a sou'-wester, and on the other by a sextant and a long brass telescope. A Louis Quinze sofa, with a gilt frame, and covered with faded brocade, fitted into the space between the fire-place and the casement. In the opposite corner, with its back to the outer wall, stood a large modern office-desk of mahogany, with a flexible curved lid, which was drawn down and fastened, because a visitor was in the room. Captain Huxham never received anyone in his sanctum unless he first assured himself that the desk was closed, and a small, green-painted safe near it fast-locked.

There were three or four rush-bottomed chairs, which looked plebeian even on the dusty, uncarpeted floor. On the mantel-shelf stood a lyre-shaped clock, bearing the sun symbol of Louis XIV.; several cheap and gaudy vases, and many fantastic shells picked up on South Sea beaches. Here and there were Japanese curios, Polynesian mats and war weapons; uncouth Chinese idols, stuffed birds, Indian ivory carvings, photographs and paintings of various ships, and all the flotsam and jetsam which collects in a sailor's sea-chest during endless voyages. The deal table was littered with old magazines, yellow-backed novels, and navigation books with ragged covers; while the fire-place was a species of dust-bin for matches, cigar-ends, torn papers, orange peel, and such like. Everywhere the dust lay thick. It was an odd room—at once sumptuous and dingy, markedly chaotic, yet orderly in an untidy way. It reflected more or less the mind of its present owner, who, as has been before remarked, camped, rather than lived, amidst his surroundings. In the same way do Eastern nomads house in the ruined palaces of kings.

Silas Pence, who was the minister of the Little Bethel Chapel in Marshely village, curled his long thin legs under his chair and looked anxiously at his meditative host. That portion of the light from the casement not intercepted by Huxham's bulky figure, revealed a lean, eager face, framed in sparse, fair hair, parted in the centre and falling untidily on the coat collar. The young preacher's features were sharply defined and somewhat mean, while a short and scanty beard scarcely concealed his sensitive mouth. His forehead was lofty, his chin weak, and his grey eyes glittered in a strange, fanatical fashion. There were exceptional possibilities both for good and evil in that pale countenance, and it could be guessed that environment would have much to do with the development of such possibilities. Mr. Pence was arrayed in a tightly-fitting frock coat and loose trousers, both of worn broadcloth. He wore also a low collar with a white tie, bow-fashion, white socks, and low-heeled shoes, and every part of his attire, although neat and well-brushed and well-mended, revealed dire poverty. On the whole, he had the rapt ascetic gaze of a

mediæval saint, and a monkish robe would have suited him better than his semi-ecclesiastical garb as a Non-conformist preacher.

But if Pence resembled a saint, Huxham might have passed for a grey old badger, sullen and infinitely wary. Having taken stock of his worldly possessions, recalling meanwhile a not altogether spotless past, he brought his shrewd eyes back again to his visitor's attentive face. Still anxious to gain time for further consideration, he remarked once more, "So' y' want t' merry m' gel, Bella, Mr. Pence? Jus' so! Jus' so!"

The other replied, in a musical but high-pitched voice almost feminine in its timbre, "I am not comely; I am not wealthy; nor do I sit in the seat of the rulers. But the Lord has gifted me with a pleading tongue, an admiring eye, and an admonishing nature. With Isabella by my side, Brother Huxham, I can lead more hopefully our little flock towards the pleasant land of Beulah. What says Isaiah?"

"Dunno!" confessed the mariner. "Ain't bin readin' Isaiahher's log lately."

"Thou shalt be called Hephzibah," quoted Mr. Pence shrilly, "and thy land Beulah: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land will be married."

"Didn't know es Isaiahher knew of m' twenty acres," growled Huxham, with another turn of his quid; "'course ef it be, es y' merry Bella, th' land goes with her when I fits int' m' little wooden overcoat. Y' kin take yer davy on thet, Mr. Pence, fur I've a conscience, I hev,—let 'em say contrary es likes."

It must have been an uneasy conscience, for Captain Huxham glared defiantly at his visitor, and then cast a doubtful look over his left shoulder, as though he expected to be tapped thereon. Pence was puzzled as much by this behaviour as by the literal way in which the sailor had taken the saying of the prophet. "Isaiah spoke in parables," he explained, lamely.

"Maybe," grunted Huxham, "but y' speak sraight 'nough, Mr. Pence. Touching this merrage. Y' love Bella, es I take it?"

"I call her Hephzibah," burst out the young minister enthusiastically, "which, being interpreted, means—my delight is in her."

"Jus' so! Jus' so! But does th' gel love you, Mr. Pence?"

The face of the suitor clouded. "I have my doubts," he sighed, "seeing that she has looked upon vanity in the person of a man from Babylon."

"Damn your parables!" snapped the captain; "put a blamed name t' him."

"Mr. Cyril Lister," began Pence, and was about to reprove his host for the use of strong language, when he was startled by much worse. And Huxham grew purple in the face when using it.

It is unnecessary to set down the exact words, but the fluency and originality and picturesqueness of the retired mariner's speech made Silas close his scandalised ears. With many adjectives of the most lurid description, the preacher understood Huxham to say that he would see his daughter grilling in the nethermost pit of Tophet before he would permit his daughter to marry this—adjective, double adjective—swab from London.

"I ain't seen th' blighter," bellowed the captain, furiously, "but I've heard of his blessed name. Bella met him et thet blamed Miss Ankers', the school-mistress', house, she did. Sh' wanted him t' kim an' see this old shanty, 'cause he writes fur the noospapers, cuss him. But I up an' tole her, es I'd twist her damned neck ef she spoke agin with the lop-sided—"

"Stop! stop!" remonstrated Pence feebly. "We are all brothers in——"

"The lubber ain't no relative o' mine, hang him; an' y' too, fur sayin' so. Oh, Lister, Lister!" Huxham swung two huge fists impotently. "I hate him."

"Why? why? why?" babbled the visitor incoherently.

The surprise in his tones brought Huxham to his calmer senses, like the cunning old badger he was.

"'Cause I jolly well do," he snorted, wiping his perspiring face with a flaunting red and yellow bandana. "But it don't matter nohow, and I arsk yer pardon fur gittin' up steam. My gel don't merry no Lister, y' kin lay yer soul t' thet, Mr. Pence. Lister! Lister!" He slipped off the sill in his excitement. "I hates the whole damned breed of 'em; sea-cooks all, es oughter t' hev their silly faces in the slush tub."

"Do you know the Lister family then?" asked Pence, open-mouthed at this vehemence.

This remark cooled the captain still further. "Shut yer silly mouth," he growled, rolling porpoise-fashion across the room, "and wait till I git m' breath back int' m' bellers."

Being a discreet young man, Pence took the hint and silently watched the squat, ungainly figure of his host lunging and plunging in the narrow confines of the apartment. Whatever may have been the reason, it was evident that the name of Lister acted like a red rag to this nautical bull. Pence ran over in his mind what he knew of the young stranger, to see if he could account for this outbreak. He could recall nothing pertinent. Cyril Lister had come to remain in Marshely

some six months previously, and declared himself to be a journalist in search of quiet, for the purpose of writing a novel. He occupied a tiny cottage in the village, and was looked after by Mrs. Block, a stout, gossiping widow, who spoke well of her master. So far as Pence knew, Captain Huxham had never set eyes on the stranger, and could not possibly know anything of him or of his family. Yet, from his late outburst of rage, it was apparent that he hated the young man.

Lister sometimes went to London, but for the most part remained in the village, writing his novel and making friends with the inhabitants. At the house of the board-school mistress he had met Bella Huxham, and the two had been frequently in one another's company, in spite of the captain's prohibition. But it was evident that Huxham knew nothing of their meetings. Pence did, however, and resented that the girl should prefer Lister's company to his own. He was very deeply in love, and it rejoiced his heart when he heard how annoyed the captain was at the mere idea of a marriage between Lister and his daughter. The preacher was by no means a selfish man, or a bad man, but being in love he naturally wished to triumph over his rival. He now knew that his suit would be supported by Huxham, if only out of his inexplicable hatred for the journalist.

Meanwhile Huxham stamped and muttered, and wiped his broad face as he walked off his anger. Finally he stopped opposite his visitor and waved him to the door. "Y' shell merry m' gel, Bella," he announced hoarsely; "m' conscience won't let me merry her t' thet—thet—oh, cuss him! why carn't he an' the likes o' he keep away!" He paused, and again cast an uncomfortable look over his left shoulder. "Kim up on th' roof," he said abruptly, driving Pence into the entrance hall. "I'll show y' wot I'll give y' with m' gel—on conditions."

"Conditions!" The preacher was bewildered.

Huxham vouchsafed no reply, but mounted the shallow steps of the grand staircase. The manor-house was large and rambling, and of great age, having been built in the reign of Henry VII. The rooms were spacious, the corridors wide, and the ceilings lofty. The present possessor led his guest up the stairs into a long, broad passage, with many doors leading into various bedrooms. At the end he opened a smaller door to reveal a narrow flight of steep steps. Followed by the minister, Huxham ascended these, and the two emerged through a wooden trap-door on the roof. Silas then beheld a moderately broad space running parallel with the passage below, and extending from one parapet to the other. On either side of this walk—as it might be termed—the red-tiled roofs sloped abruptly upward to cover the two portions of the mansion, here joined by the flat leads forming the walk aforesaid. On the slope of the left roof, looking from the trap-door, was a wooden ladder which led up to a small platform, also of wood, built round the emerging chimney stack. This was Captain Huxham's quarter deck, whither he went on occasions to survey his property. He clambered up the ladder with the agility of a sailor, in spite of his age, and was followed by the preacher with some misgivings. These proved to be correct, for when he reached the quarter-deck, the view which met his startled eyes so shook his nerve, that he would have fallen but that the captain propped him up against the broad brick-work of the chimney.

"Oh, me," moaned the unfortunate Silas, holding on tightly to the iron clamps of the brick-work. "I am throned on a dangerous eminence," and closed his eyes.

"Open 'em, open 'em," commanded the captain gruffly, "an' jes' look et them twenty acres of corn, es y'll git with m' gel when I'm a deader."

Pence slipped into a sitting position and looked as directed. He beheld from his dizzy elevation the rolling marshland, extending from the far-distant stream of the Thames to the foot of low-lying inland hills. As it was July, and the sun shone strongly, the marshes were comparatively dry, but here and there Pence beheld pools and ditches flashing like jewels in the yellow radiance. Immediately before him he could see the village of Marshely, not so very far away, with red-roofed houses gathered closely round the grey, square tower of the church; he could even see the tin roof of his own humble Bethel gleaming like silver in the sunlight. And here and there, dotted indiscriminately, were lonely houses, single huts, clumps of trees, and on the higher ground rising inland, more villages similar to Marshely. The flat and perilously green lands were divided by hedges and ditches and fences into squares and triangles and oblongs and rectangles, all as emerald-hued as faery rings. The human habitations were so scattered, that it looked as though some careless genii had dropped them by chance when flying overhead. Far away glittered the broad stream of the Thames, with ships and steamers and boats and barges moving, outward and inward bound, on its placid surface. The rigid line of the railway shot straightly through villages and trees and occasional cuttings, across the verdant expanse, with here and there a knot representing a station. Smoke curled from the tall chimneys of the dynamite factories near the river, and silvery puffs of steam showed that a train was on its way to Tilbury. All was fresh, restful, beautiful, and so intensely green as to be suggestive of early Spring buddings.

"When I took command of this here farm, ten years back," observed Captain Huxham, drawing in a deep breath of moist air, "it were water-logged like a derelict, es y' might say. Cast yer weather-eye over it now, Mr. Pence, an' wot's yer look-out: a gardin of Edin, smilin' with grain."

"Yet it's a derelict still," remarked the preacher, struggling to his feet and holding on by the chimney; "let me examine your farm of Bleacres."

Bleacres—a corruption of bleakacres—consisted of only twenty acres not at all bleak, but a mere slice out of the wide domains formerly owned by the aristocratic family dispossessed by Huxham. It extended all round the ancient manor-house, which stood exactly in the centre, and every foot

of it was sown with corn. On every side waved the greenish-bluish crop, now almost breast high. It rolled right up to the walls of the house, so that this was drowned, so to speak, in the ocean of grain. The various fields were divided and sub-divided by water-ways wide and narrow, which drained the land, and these gave the place quite a Dutch look, as fancy might picture them as canals. But the corn grew everywhere so thick and high, in contrast to the barren marshes, that the farm looked almost aggressively cultivated. Bleacres was widely known as "The Solitary Farm," for there was not another like it for many miles, though why it should have been left to a retired sailor to cultivate the soil it is hard to say. But Huxham for many years had sown corn on his twenty acres, so that the mansion for the most part of the year was quite shut off from the world. Only a narrow path was left, which meandered from the front door and across various water-ways to Marshely village, one mile distant. In no other way save by this path could the mansion be approached. And as guardian of the place a red-coated scarecrow stood sentinel a stone-throw from the house. The bit of brilliant colour looked gay amidst the rolling acres of green.

"The domain of Ceres," said Pence dreamily, and recalling his meagre classical studies; "here the goddess might preside. Yet," he added again, with a side glance at his rugged host, "a derelict still."

"Mr. Pence don't know the English langwidge, apparently," said Huxham, addressing the landscape with a pitying smile. "A derelict's a ship abandoned."

"And a derelict," insisted Pence, "can also be described as a tract of land left dry by the sea, and fit for cultivation or use. You will find that explanation in Nuttall's Standard Dictionary, captain."

"Live an' larn; live an' larn," commented Huxham, accepting the explanation without question; "but I ain't got no use for dix'onaries m'self. Made m' dollars to buy this here farm without sich truck."

"In what way, captain?" asked Silas absently, and looked at the view.

Had he looked instead at Huxham's weather-beaten face he might have been surprised. The captain grew a little trifle paler under his bronze, an uneasy look crept into his hard blue eyes, and he threw another anxious glance over his shoulder. But a stealthy examination of the minister's indifferent countenance assured him that the question, although a leading one, had been asked in all innocence. And in all innocence the captain replied, for the momentary pause had given him time to frame his reply.

"I arned m' dollars, Mr. Pence, es an honest man should, by sweatin' on th' high an' narrer seas these forty year'. Ran away fro' m' father, es wos a cobbler," added Huxham, addressing the landscape once more, "when I wos ten year old, an' a hop-me-thumb et thet, es y' could hev squeezed int' a pint pot. Cabin boy, A.B., mate, fust an' second, and a skipper by m' own determination t' git top-hole. Likewise hard tack, cold quarters, kickin's an' brimstone langwidge es would hev made thet hair of yours curl tremenjous, Mr. Pence. I made 'nough when fifty an' more, t' buy this here farm, an' this here house, th' roof of which I've walked quarter-deck fashion, es y' see, these ten years—me bein' sixty odd, so t' speak. Waitin' now fur a hail t' jine th' angels, an' Mrs. Arabeller Huxham, who is a flier with a halo, an' expectin' me aloft, es she remarked frequent when chokin' in her engine pipes. Asthma et wos," finished the widower, spitting out some tobacco juice, "es settled her hash."

This astonishing speech, delivered with slow gruffness, did not startle Silas, as he had known Captain Huxham for at least five years, and had before remarked upon his eccentric way of talking. "Very interesting; very commendable," he murmured, and returned to the object of his visit. "And your daughter, sir?"

"Y' shell hev her, an' hev this here," the captain waved his hand to the four points of the compass, "when I jine the late Mrs. Arabeller Huxham, ef y'—ef y'—thet is——" he halted dubiously.

"If what?" demanded Pence, unsuspectingly.

"Ef y' chuck thet Lister int' one of them water-ways," said Huxham.

"What?" cried the preacher, considerably startled.

"I want him dead," growled Huxham gruffly, "drown dead an' buried."

Perhaps his sojourn in distant lands on the fringes of the empire had familiarised the captain with sudden death and murder, for he made this amazing proposition in a calm and cheerful voice. But the minister was not so steeled to horrors.

"What?" he repeated in a shaking voice and with dilated eyes.

"All fur you," murmured the tempter persuasively, "every blamed acre of et, t' say nothing of Bella es is a fine gel, an'——"

"No, no, no!" cried Silas vehemently, spreading his hands across his lean, agitated face, "how dare you ask such a thing?"

"Jus' a push," went on Huxham softly, "he bein' on the edge of one of them ditches, es y' might say. Wot th' water gits th' water holds. He'd go down int' the black slime an' never come up. It 'ud choke him. Cuss me," murmured Huxham softly, "I'd like t' see the black slime choke a Lister."

Pence gasped again and recalled how the Evil One had taken the Saviour of men up to an exceedingly high mountain, to show Him the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. "All these things will I give thee," said Satan, "if——"

"No!" shouted Silas, his eyes lighting up with wrath. "Get thee behind me——" Before finishing his sentence, and before Huxham could reply, he scrambled down the ladder to rush for the open trap. The captain leaned from his quarter-deck scornfully. "Y' needn't say es I gave y' the chance, fur no one 'ull believe y'," he cried out, coolly, "an' a milksop y' are. Twenty acres, a house, an' a fine gel—y'd be set up for life, ef y'd only push——"

Pence heard no more. In a frenzy of horror he dropped through the trap-door, inwardly praying that he might be kept from temptation. Huxham saw him vanish and scowled. "Blamed milky swab," he grumbled, then turned to survey the bribe he had offered for wilful murder. He looked at the corn and across the corn uneasily, as though he saw danger in the distance. "No cause to be afeared," muttered the ex-mariner; "he can't get through the corn. It keeps me safe anyhow."

But who the "he" referred to might be, Huxham did not say.

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## CHAPTER II

### THE WOON' O'T

Imagine a man wrapped from infancy in the cotton wool of civilisation suddenly jerked out of the same into barbaric nakedness. Deprived of the strong protection of the law, brought suddenly face to face with the "might-is-right" theory, he would have to fight for his own land, even to the extent of slaying anyone who thwarted his needs. Such a man, amazed and horrified at first, would gradually become accustomed to his Ishmael existence, since habit is second nature. Silas Pence felt sick when he reflected on the offer made by Captain Huxham, and to him of all people—a minister of the Gospel, a follower of the Prince of Peace. For the first time in his guarded life, he became aware of the evil which underlies the smiling surface of things, and it was as though an abyss had opened suddenly at his feet. But although he did not know it at the time, the seed had been sown in his heart at the right moment, and would germinate almost without his knowledge. In a few days Silas could look back at the horrifying suggestion with calmness, and could even consider the advantages it offered.

But just now he felt sick, physically sick, and descending with trembling limbs to the ground floor of the house, staggered towards the hall and door. All he desired was to get away, and put the corn-fields between himself and the evil atmosphere of Bleacres. But his legs failed him as he laid hands on the latch, and he sank white-faced and shaking into a chair. In this state he was discovered by Mrs. Coppersley, the captain's sister and housekeeper. She was a buxom, amiable woman, with a fixed smile meaning nothing. The expression of her rosy face changed to one of alarm when she saw the heap in the chair. "Save us, Mr. Pence, what's wrong?"

Pence was about to break forth into a denunciation of Huxham's wickedness, but a timely recollection of the captain's last words—that his story would not be believed—made him pause. After all, Huxham was well known as a decent man and an open-handed friend to one and all, so there was nothing to be gained by telling a truth which would certainly be scoffed at. The preacher changed his mind in one swift instant, and replied nervously to Mrs. Coppersley's inquiry. "I have been on the quarter-deck, and it made me dizzy. I am not accustomed to——"

"Drat that brother of mine," interrupted Mrs. Coppersley angrily, "he got me up there once, and I thought I'd never come down. Here, Mr. Pence, you hold up while I get you a sup of rum."

"No, no! Strong drink leads us into desperate ways," protested the preacher. But Mrs. Coppersley was gone, and had returned before he could make up his mind to fly temptation. Silas was not used to alcohol, but the shock he had sustained in learning so much of Huxham's true nature prevented his exercising his usual self-control. With his highly strung nerves he was half-hysterical, and so, when forced by kindly Mrs. Coppersley, readily drank half a tumbler of rum slightly diluted with water.

"Drink it all, there's a good soul," entreated the housekeeper, forcing the glass to his lips.

"No!" He pushed it away. "I feel better already!" and he did, for the strong spirit brought colour to his cheek and new strength to his limbs. He stood up in a few minutes, quite himself, and indeed more than himself, since the rum put into him more courage than came by nature. "Wine maketh glad the heart of man," said Silas, in excuse for his unusual indulgence.

"Rum isn't wine," said Mrs. Coppersley, with a jolly laugh, "it's something much better, Mr. Pence. Now you go home and lie down."

"Oh, no! I feel as though I could charge an army," said Pence valiantly.

"Then wait in the study." She indicated the panelled room with a jerk of her head. "Jabez will be down from his quarter-deck soon."

"No." Pence shivered, in spite of the rum, at the thought of again having to face his tempter. "I

must go now. My presence is required in the village."

"Then you can take a message for me to Mr. Vand," said Mrs. Coppersley, with a slight accession of colour to her already florid face. "Say that I am coming to Marshely about seven o'clock, and will call at the shop."

This request changed Pence into the preacher and the leader of the godly people who called his chapel their fold. Vand was the son of the woman who kept the village grocery shop, and a cripple who played the violin at various local concerts. He was at least ten years younger than Mrs. Coppersley, who confessed to being thirty-five—though probably she was older—and the way in which the widow ran after him was something of a scandal. As both Mrs. Coppersley and Henry Vand were members of Little Bethel, Silas felt that he was entitled to inquire into the matter. "You ask me to take such a message, sister?" he demanded austerely.

The widow's face flamed, and her eyes sparkled. "There is no shame in it that I am aware of, Mr. Pence," she declared violently; "if I choose to marry again, that's no one's business but mine, I take it."

"Oh, so you desire to marry Henry Vand?" said Pence, amazed.

"It's not a question of desiring," said the buxom woman impatiently. "Henry and I have arranged to be married this summer."

"He is a cripple."

"I know that," she snapped, "and therefore needs the care of a wife."

"His mother looks after him," protested Pence weakly.

"Does she?" inquired Mrs. Coppersley. "I thought she looked after no one but herself. She's that selfish as never was, so don't you go to defend her, Mr. Pence. Henry, poor boy, who is an angel, if ever there was one, is quite neglected; so I am going to marry him and look after him. So there!" and Mrs. Coppersley, placing her hands akimbo, defied her pastor.

"Henry has no money," said Pence, finding another objection.

"As to that," remarked Mrs. Coppersley indifferently, "when my brother dies I'll have money for us both, and this house into the bargain."

"You will have nothing of the sort," said Silas, surprised into saying more than was wise. "Your brother's daughter will inherit this——"

"Oh, will she?" cried Mrs. Coppersley violently, "and much you know about it, Mr. Pence. When my late husband, who was a ship's steward, and saving, died ten year ago, I lent my brother some money to add to his own, so that he might buy Bleacres. He agreed that if I did so, I should inherit the house and the land. I promised to look after Bella until she got married, and——"

"Mrs. Coppersley," said Pence, with an effort at firmness, "your brother told me only lately that if I married Bella, he would give her the farm and the house when he died, so——"

"Ho, indeed," interrupted Mrs. Coppersley wrathfully, "pretty goings on, I'm sure. You call yourself a pastor, Mr. Pence, and come plotting to rob me of what is mine. I take everything, and Bella nothing, so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it, though you ain't man enough to smoke even a penny cigar. You marry Bella? Why, she's as good as engaged to that young Lister, who has got more gumption about him than you have."

"I advise you," said Pence, and his voice sounded strangely in his own ears, "not to tell your brother that his daughter is engaged to Mr. Lister."

"I never said that she was. But——"

"There is no but. The mere mention of such an engagement would send Captain Huxham crazy."

"In heaven's name, why?" gasped Mrs. Coppersley, looking the picture of stout amazement and sitting down heavily.

"Because for some reason he hates Mr. Lister, and would kill him rather than accept him as his son-in-law."

Mrs. Coppersley's florid face turned quite pale. Evidently she knew what her brother was like when roused. "Why should Jabez hate Mr. Lister?" she asked.

"You had better ask him," said Pence, opening the hall door; then to soften his abruptness he added, "I'll tell Henry Vand that you will see him." After which he departed, leaving Mrs. Coppersley still pale and still gasping.

After all there was no reason why the ship steward's widow would not marry the young man. Vand was handsome in a refined way, and very clever as a musician. He was only slightly crippled, too, and could get about with the aid of a stick. All the same, he needed someone to look after him, and as his own mother did not do so—as was notorious—why should he not become Mrs. Coppersley's husband? The disparity in age did not matter, as Vand, in spite of his good looks, was club-footed and poor. But Pence doubted if Mrs. Coppersley would inherit Bleacres after Captain Huxham's death, in spite of the arrangement between them. Unless—and here was



the chance for the housekeeper—unless Bella married Lister, notwithstanding her father's opposition. In that event, Huxham would assuredly disinherit her. "I'll point this out to her," said the preacher, as he left the manor-house, "and urge my suit. Common-sense will make her yield to my prayers. Moreover, I can plead, and——" here he smiled complacently as he thought of his pulpit eloquence. Besides, the unaccustomed spirit of the rum was still keeping him brave.

Pence sauntered in the glowing sunshine down the narrow path which ran between the standing corn. The path was not straight. It wound deviously, as though Huxham wished to make the approach to his abode as difficult as possible. Indeed, it was strange that he should sow corn at all, since corn at the time was not remunerative. But every year since he had entered into possession of Bleacres the owner had sown corn, and every year there had only been the one meandering path through the same, the very path which Pence was now taking. There was evidently some purpose in this sowing, and in the fact that only one pathway was left whereby to approach the mansion. But what that purpose might be, neither Pence, nor indeed anyone else, could guess. Not that they gave it a thought. Huxham was presumed to be very wealthy, and his farming was looked upon more as a hobby than a necessity.

The preacher brushed between the breast-high corn, and walked over two or three narrow planks laid across two or three narrow ditches. But where the corn ended was a wide channel, at least ten feet broad, which stretched the whole length of the estate and passed beyond it on its way under the railway line to the distant river. The water-way ran straightly for some distance, and then curved down into the marshes at its own will, to spread into swamps. On one side sprang the thick green corn, but on the other stretched waste-lands up to the outskirts of the village, one mile distant. There was no fence round Bleacres at this point. Apparently, Huxham deemed the wide channel a sufficient protection to his corn, which it assuredly was, as no tramps ever trespassed on the land. But then, Marshely was not a tramp village. The inhabitants were poor, and had nothing to give in the way of charity. The loafer of the roads avoided the locality for very obvious reasons.

Before crossing the planks, which were laid on mid-channel supporting tressels over the water-way, Pence looked from right to left. The evening was so very beautiful that he thought he would prolong his walk until sundown, and it wanted some time to that hour. He was still indignant with Captain Huxham for his base offer, and came to the conclusion that the ex-mariner was mad when he made it. Pence, in his simplicity, could not think that any man could ask another to kill a third in cold blood. All the same, the offer had been made, and Silas found himself asking why Huxham should desire the death of a stranger with whom—so far as the preacher knew—he was not even acquainted. Huxham had always refused to permit Bella to bring Lister to Bleacres, and indeed had forbidden her even to speak to the young man. He therefore could not be cognisant of the fact, stated by Mrs. Coppersley, that Lister and the girl were on the eve of an engagement.

Thus thinking, Pence mechanically wandered along the left bank of the boundary water-way, and found himself near a small hut, inhabited by the sole labourer whom Huxham habitually employed. He engaged others, of course, when his fields were ploughed, and sown, and reaped, but Tunks—such was the euphonious name of the handy-man—was in demand all the year round. He resided in this somewhat lonely hut, along with his grandmother, a weird old gipsy reputed to be a witch, and it was this reputation which set Mr. Pence thinking.

Remembering that Mrs. Tunks was of the Romany, he thought, and blushed as he thought, that it would be worth while to expend a shilling in order to learn if his suit with Bella would really prosper. The temple of fate was before him, and the Sibyl was probably within, since the smoke of cooking the evening meal curled from the chimney. It was only necessary to lift the latch, lay down a shilling, and inquire. But even as the temptation drew him, he was seized with a feeling of shame, that he—a preacher of the Gospel, and the approved foe thereby of witches—should think for one moment of encouraging such traffic with the Evil One. Pence, blushing as red as the now setting sun, turned away hastily, and found himself face to face with the very girl who was causing him such torment.

"How are you, Mr. Pence?" said Bella Huxham, lightly. "A lovely evening, isn't it?" and she tried to pass him on the narrow path. Probably she was going to see the Witch of Endor.

The preacher placed himself directly before her.

"Wait for one moment."

The girl did not reply immediately, but looked at him earnestly, trying to guess what the usually nervous preacher had to say. Bella looked more lovely than ever in Pence's eyes, as she stood before him in her white dress and bathed in the rosy glory of the sunset. She did not in the least resemble her father or her aunt, both of whom were stout, uncomely folk of true plebeian type. Bella was aristocratic in her looks, as tall and slim and willowy as a young sapling. Her hair and eyes were dark, her face was a perfect oval of ivory-white delicately flushed with red, like a sweet-pea, and if her chin was a trifle resolute and hard, her mouth was perfect. She carried herself in a haughty way, and had a habit of bending her dark brows so imperiously, that she reminded Pence of Judith, who killed Holofernes. Judith and Jael and Deborah must have been just such women.

"Well?" asked Bella, bending her brows like an empress, "what is it?"

"I—I—love you, Miss Huxham."

She could not be angry at so naive a declaration, and one coming from a man whom she knew to be as timid as a hare. "I am somewhat surprised, Mr. Pence," she replied demurely, "are you not making a mistake?"

"No," he stuttered, flushing with eagerness, for amorous passion makes the most timid bold. "I have loved you for months, for years. I want you to be my wife—to share with me the glorious privilege of leading my flock to the land of Beulah, and——"

"Stop, stop!" She flung up her hand. "I assure you, Mr. Pence, that it is impossible. Forget that you ever said anything."

"I cannot forget. Why should I forget?"

"You must not ask a woman for her reasons, Mr. Pence," she answered drily, "for a woman never gives the true ones."

"Bella!"

"Miss Huxham to you, Mr. Pence." She spoke in a chilly manner.

"No," he cried wildly; "to me you are Bella. I think of you by that sweet name day and night. You come between me and my work. When I console the afflicted I feel that I am talking to you. When I read my Bible, your face comes between me and the sacred page. To me you are Hephzibah—yes, and the Shulamite. The Angel of the Covenant; the joy of my heart. Oh, Bella, I love the very ground that you tread on. Can you refuse me? See!" He threw himself on the path, heedless of the fact that Mrs. Tunks might be at her not far distant window. "I am at your feet, Bella! Bella!"

The girl was distressed by this earnestness. "Rise, Mr. Pence, someone will see you. You must not behave like this. I cannot be your wife."

"Why not? Oh, why not?"

"Because I am not fit to be a minister's wife."

The young man sprang to his feet, glowing with passion. "Let me teach you."

Bella avoided his extended arms. "No, no, no!" she insisted, "you must take my answer once and for all, Mr. Pence. I cannot marry you."

"But why?" he urged despairingly.

"I have a reason," she replied formally; "don't ask me for it."

"I have no need to. I know your reason."

Bella flushed, but overlooked the bitterness of his tone because she guessed what he suffered. "In that case, I need not explain," she said coldly, and again tried to pass. Again he prevented her.

"You love that man Lister," he said between his teeth.

"That is my business, Mr. Pence."

"Mine also," he cried, undaunted by her haughtiness. "Your father's business, too. Mrs. Coppersley said that you were almost engaged to this man Lister. But you shall not marry him; you will not even be engaged to him."

"Who will prevent me?" asked Bella angrily.

"Your father. He hates this man Lister."

"How can my father hate a man he has never even seen?" she demanded; "you are talking rubbish."

"Miss Huxham"—Pence detained her by laying his thin fingers on her arm—"if you marry this man Lister"—he kept to this sentence as though it were a charm—"you will be a pauper."

She flashed up into a royal rage and stamped. "How dare you say that?"

"I dare tell the truth."

"It is not the truth. How can you tell if——"

"Your father told me," insisted the preacher, hotly.

Bella withdrew a step or so, her eyes growing round with surprise. "My—father—said—that?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" cried Silas feverishly. "I went to him this very afternoon to ask permission to present myself to you as a suitor. He consented, but only when he heard that you loved this man who——"

"You told him that?" demanded Bella, her breath coming quick and short.

"Yes," said Pence, trying to be courageous, "and it is true."

"Who says that it is?"

"Everyone in the village."

"The village has nothing to do with my business," she declared imperiously, "and even if I do love—but let that pass. You told me that my father said I should be a pauper."

"If you married the man Lister," he reminded her. "Yes, he did say so, and declared also that he would give me the manor-house and the farm when he died, if I made you my wife."

Bella shrugged her shoulders. "My father does not mean what he says," she remarked disbelievingly; "as I am his only child, the Solitary Farm, as they call it, comes to me in any case. And I see no reason why I should discuss my father's business with you. Stand aside and let me pass."

"No." Silas was wonderfully brave for one of his timid soul. "You shall not pass until you learn the truth. You think that I am a fool and weak. I am not. I feel wise and strong; and I am strong—strong enough to withstand temptation, even when you are offered as a bribe."

Bella grew somewhat alarmed. She did not like the glittering of his shallow, grey eyes. "You are mad."

"I am sane; you know that I am sane, but you think to put me off by saying that I am crazy. I have had enough to make me so. Your father"—here his voice took on the sing-song pulpit style—"your father took me up to an exceedingly high mountain, and showed me the kingdoms of the world. All of them he offered me, together with you, if I murdered Lister."

"What!" Bella's voice leaped an octave; "you—you—murder Cyril?"

"Yes, Cyril, the man you love. And if I dared——"

"Mr. Pence"—Bella saw the necessity of keeping herself well in hand with this hysterical youth, for he was nothing else, and spoke in a calm, kind voice—"my father has not seen Mr. Lister, and cannot hate him."

"Go and ask him what he thinks," said Pence fiercely. "I tell you that to-day I was offered everything if I would kill this man Lister."

"You are talking at random," she said soothingly; "go home, and lie down."

"I am talking of what may come to pass. Your father wishes it, so why not, when I love you so deeply? I offer you the heart of an honest man, and yet you would throw that aside for this profligate."

"Cyril is not a profligate," interrupted Bella, and could have bitten out her tongue for the hasty speech.

"He is. He comes from London, the City of Evil, that shall yet fall like Babylon the Great. But your soul shall not be lost; you shall not marry him."

"I shall!" cried Bella, indignantly, and becoming rash again in her anger; "and what is more, I am engaged to him now. So there! Let me pass."

She slipped deftly past him, and walked swiftly homeward. Silas Pence stood where he was, staring after her, unable to speak or move or to follow. Then the sun sank, leaving him in the twilight of sorrow.

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## CHAPTER III

### A TARDY LOVER

Miss Huxham did not credit for one moment the story which Pence had told her. It was ridiculous to think that her father would even hint at the murder of an unoffending man whom he had never seen, and to hesitating, timid Silas, of all people. Bella remembered that, months previously, when she had mentioned a chance meeting with Lister—then a stranger—at the cottage of the Marshely school-mistress, Captain Huxham had not only forbidden her to bring him to Bleacres, which the young man desired to see, but had ordered her to discontinue the acquaintance. Evidently the retired mariner deemed this prohibition sufficient, for he made no further mention of the matter. That he gave no reason for his tyrannical edict, did not trouble him; but because of this very omission, his daughter took her own way. By stealth, it is true, lest Huxham should exhibit annoyance—for annoyance with him meant wild-beast rage.

Now the girl felt puzzled. According to Silas, her father knew that she had disobeyed him, and she returned to the Manor in a somewhat nervous state of mind, quite prepared to do battle for her lover. But, to her surprise, Captain Huxham made no remark, and behaved much the same as usual, save that at odd times he was more observant of her comings and goings. In the face of his newly-acquired knowledge this very unusual demeanour should have made Bella more circumspect, but, being high-spirited, she did not change her life in any way. Also she believed that Silas had greatly exaggerated the captain's anger, and argued from his quietness that he cared very little what she did. She had reason to take this view, for Huxham was not an affectionate parent, and, save when things interfered with his own comfort, usually ignored his

daughter. And on her side, Bella could not subscribe to the fifth commandment. It was impossible to honour King Log, who had an unpleasant way of becoming King Henry VIII. when contradicted.

Several times, Bella, needing sympathy, was on the point of reporting Pence's conversation to Mrs. Coppersley, so as to learn her opinion as to the truth of the preacher's preposterous statement. But the buxom widow was too much taken up with her own love-affairs to trouble about those of her niece, for whom she displayed no great affection. She attended to the house-keeping, cajoled her brother into a good humour when necessary, and nearly every evening slipped out to meet Henry Vand, who usually awaited her arrival on the hither side of the boundary channel. He did not dare to venture nearer to the lion's den, as Captain Huxham, aware of his sister's desire to contract a second marriage, discouraged the idea. The captain being aggressively selfish, did not intend to lose Mrs. Coppersley, whose services were necessary to his comfort. Besides, as she managed everything connected with the domestic arrangement of Bleacres, assisted by Bella, Huxham was spared the necessity of paying a servant. It was better, from the captain's point of view, to have two slaves who asked for no wages, and who could be bullied when he felt like playing the tyrant.

To a young girl in the first strong flush of womanhood, life at the solitary farm was extremely dreary, Captain Huxham rose early and strolled round his wealthy acres until breakfast, which for him was a Gargantuan meal. He then shut himself for the whole morning in his den, where he laboured at his accounts, with a locked door. In the afternoon he ordinarily walked to Marshely and conversed over strong drink with cronies at the village public-house. He returned to walk around the farm again, and after supper again sought his room to smoke and drink rum until bedtime, at ten o'clock. The routine of the captain's life never varied in any particular, even to seeking the quarter-deck once a day for the purpose, apparently, of viewing the results of his life's work. Also from his eyrie, the captain, armed with a long telescope, could gaze at outward and homeward-bound ships, and so enjoy vicariously the sea-life he had abandoned these ten years. Of Bella he took scarcely any notice.

It was indeed a dull life, especially as Bella was intellectual, and felt that she required food for her active brain. For some odd reason, which did not suit with his rough nature, Huxham had given his neglected daughter a first-class education, and only within the last two years had she returned from a fashionable Hampstead school to live this uneventful, unintellectual life on an Essex farm. She possessed a few books, and these she read over and over again. Huxham was not actively unkind, and gave her plenty of frocks, ribbons, hats, gloves, and such-like things, which he presumed were what the ordinary girl wanted. But he overlooked the fact that Bella was not an ordinary girl, and that she hungered for a more moving life, or, at least, for one which would afford her an opportunity of displaying her social abilities. Bella sang excellently, and played the piano unusually well; but her uncouth father did not care for music, and Mrs. Coppersley scorned it also. The girl therefore allowed her talents to lie dormant, and became a silent, handsome image of a woman, moving ghost-like through the dreary mansion. But her chance meeting with the clever young man aroused all her disused capabilities; aroused also her womanly coquetry, and stimulated her into exhibiting a really fascinating nature. Warned that her father would have no strangers coming to the manor, by his own lips, she kept secret the delightful meetings with Lister, and only when the two met at the cottage of Miss Ankers could they speak freely. Bella thought that her secret attachment was unknown, whereas everyone in the village watched the progress of Lister's wooing. It came as has been seen, to Pence's jealous ears, and he reported the same to Captain Huxham. Knowing this, Bella was more perplexed than ever, that, as time went on, Huxham did nothing and said nothing. At one time he had been peremptory, but now he appeared inclined to let her act as she chose. And the mere fact that he did so, made Bella feel more than ever what an indifferent father she possessed.

For quite a week after his interview with the captain, and his futile wooing of Bella, the lovesick preacher kept away from the farm and attended sedulously to his clerical duties in connection with Little Bethel. The truth was, that he felt afraid of Huxham, now knowing what use the captain desired to make of him. For this reason also, Silas did not report that Bella was engaged to Lister. He feared lest Huxham, in a rage at such disregard of his wishes, should slay the young journalist, and perhaps might, in his infernal cunning, lay the blame on Silas himself. At all events, Pence was wise enough to avoid the danger zone of the farm, and although, after reflection, aided by jealousy, he was not quite so shocked at the idea of thrusting Lister to a muddy death, he yet thought it more judicious to keep out of Huxham's way. The old mariner, as Pence knew, possessed a strong will, and might force him to be his tool in getting rid of the journalist. Silas was wiser than he knew in acting so discreetly, for the sailor-turned farmer was a more dangerous man than even he imagined, despite the glimpse he had gained of Huxham's possible iniquity.

Things were in this position when Bella, rendered reckless by her father's indifference, actually met Cyril Lister in a secluded nook of the corn-field, and on the sacred ground of Bleacres itself. Usually the lovers met in Miss Ankers' cottage, or in Mrs. Tunks' hut, but on this special occasion the weather was so hot that Lister proposed an adjournment to the open field. "You will be Ruth, and I Boaz," suggested the young man, with a smile.

Bella shivered even in the warm air into which she had stepped out of the malodorous gloom of Mrs. Tunks' hut. "What an unlucky comparison," she said, leading the way along the bank of the boundary channel.

"Ruth left her people and her home, to go amongst strangers, and earn her living as a gleaner."

"But she found a devoted husband in the end," Cyril reminded her.

"Peace and happiness also, I hope," sighed Bella. "I have plenty of peace, but very little happiness, save of the vegetable sort."

"When we are married," began Lister, then stopped short, biting his moustache—"we shall be very happy," he ended lamely, seeing that Bella looked inquiringly at him.

"That is obvious, since we love one another," she said somewhat tartly, for his hesitation annoyed her. "Why did you change the conclusion of your sentence?"

Lister threw himself down on the hard-baked ground and under the shadow of the tall blue-green corn stalks. "It just struck me that our marriage was very far distant," he said gloomily.

Bella sat beside him shoulder to shoulder, and hugged her knees. "Why should it be far distant?" she inquired. "If I love you, and you love me, no power on earth can keep us apart."

"Your father——"

"I shall disobey my father if it be necessary," she informed him serenely.

Lister looked at her through half-shut eyes, and noticed the firmness of her mouth and the clear, steady gaze of her eyes. "You have a strong will, I think, dear," he murmured admiringly.

"I have, Cyril—as strong as that of my father. When our two wills clash"—she shrugged—"there may be murder committed."

"Bella!"—the young man looked startled—"what dreadful things you say."

"It is the truth," she insisted quietly; "why shirk obvious facts? For some reason, which I cannot discover, my father detests you."

"By Jove!" Cyril sat up alertly. "And why? He has never seen me, as I have kept well out of his way after your warning. But I have had a sly glimpse of him, and he seems to be a jolly sort of animal—I beg your pardon for calling him so."

"Man is an animal, and my father is a man," said the girl coolly, "a neolithic man, if you like. You are a man also, Cyril—the kind of firm, bold, daring man I like. Yet if you met with my father, I wonder——" She paused, and it flashed across her brain that her father and her lover would scarcely suit one another. Both were strong-willed and both masterful. She wondered if they met, who would come out top-dog; so she phrased it in her quick brain. Then abruptly she added, before Cyril could speak. "Be quiet for a few minutes. I wish to think."

Lister nodded, and, leaning on one elbow, chewed a corn-stalk and watched her in silence. He was a slim, tall, small-boned young man of the fair-skinned type, with smooth brown hair, and a small, drooping brown moustache. His present attitude indicated indolence, and he certainly loved to be lazy when a pretty girl was at his elbow. But on occasions he could display wonderful activity, and twice had been chosen as war correspondent to a London daily, when one or two of the little wars on the fringe of the Empire had been in progress. He was not particularly good-looking, but the freshness of his five-and-twenty years, and the virility of his manner, made women bestow a great deal of attention on him. Much more than he deserved, in fact, as, until he met with Bella, he had given very little attention to the sex. He had flirted in many countries, and with many women; but this was the first time he had made genuine love, or had felt the genuine passion. And with a country maiden, too, unsophisticated and pathetically innocent. So he meditated as he watched her, until, struck by the firm curve of the chin and the look of resolve on the tightly-closed lips, he confessed privately that if this country maiden were placed in the forefront of society, the chances were that she would do more than hold her own. There were Joan-of-Arc-like possibilities in that strongly-featured face.

"But, upon my word, I am quite afraid," he said aloud, following up his train of thought and speaking almost unconsciously.

"Of what?" asked Bella, turning quickly towards him.

"Of you. Such a determined young woman, as you are. If I make you my wife, I know who will be master."

"My dear," she said quietly, "in marriage there should be neither a master nor a mistress. It's a sublime co-partnership, and the partners are equal. One supplies what the other lacks, and two incomplete persons are required to make one perfect being."

Lister opened his brown eyes. "Who told you all this?"

"No one. I have ample time to think, and—I think."

"You asked me to be quiet, so that you could think," he remarked lazily; "may I ask what you have been considering?"

She surveyed him quietly. "You may ask; but I am not sure if I will reply."

"See here, my dearest"—Cyril struggled to his knees, and took her hand firmly within his own

—"you are altogether too independent a young woman. You always want your own way, I perceive."

"It will never clash with yours," said Bella, smiling.

"Why not?"

"Because you will always wish to do what I desire, and I will always be anxious to act as you indicate. You have your line of life, and I have mine, but the two are one."

"Humph! At school I learned that two parallel straight lines never met."

"Ah, Euclid was a bachelor, and ignorant. They meet in marriage, for then the two lines blend into one. What's the matter?"

She asked this question because Cyril suddenly let go her hands and swerved, blinking his eyes rapidly. "A sudden flash almost blinded me. Some one is heliographing hereabouts." He stood up, considerably taller than the already tall corn, and stared in the direction of the manor, shading his eyes with one slim hand. "There's someone on the roof there and——"

Bella pulled the sleeve of his coat, with a stifled cry. "Oh, sit down, do sit down," she implored. "It must be my father on his quarter-deck. The flash, perhaps, came from his telescope, and if he sees you—do sit down."

Cyril laughed and relapsed into a sitting position. "Dearest, your father cannot harm me in any way. I have heard of his quarter-deck. I suppose he has it to remind him of the bridge of a steamer when he was skipper."

"I hope he hasn't seen you," said Bella anxiously, "for then he would come straight here, and——"

"Let him come, and then I shall ask him to let me marry you."

"He will refuse. He wants me to marry Mr. Pence."

"What!" Lister frowned. "That half-baked psalm-singer? What nonsense, and what cheek. The idea of that Pence creature aspiring to your hand. I wish we could marry at once. But——" He paused, and shook his head. Lines appeared on his forehead, and a vexed look in his eyes. "It's impossible," he said with a deep breath.

"Why is it impossible?" asked Bella imperiously and very directly.

"My dear, I am very poor, and just make enough to keep my head above water. Besides, there is another reason."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you," he said in low voice, and becoming suddenly pale; "no one but the wearer knows where the shoe pinches, you know."

"Cyril." Bella wreathed her arms around his neck. "You have a secret. I have noticed several times that you have been worried. Sometimes you forget everything when we are together, and your face becomes like that of an old man. I must know your secret, so that I can help you."

"God forbid." Lister removed her arms, and grew even paler than he was. "The kindest way I can act towards you, Bella, is to go out of your life, and never see you again."

"Cyril, how can you when I love you so?"

"Would you love me if you knew of my troubles?"

"Try me. Try me," she implored, clasping his hand warmly.

"There are some things which can't be told to a woman," he said sternly.

"Tell them to a comrade, then. I wish to be your comrade as well as your wife. And I love you so that anything you say will only make me love you the more. Tell me, Cyril, so that I can prove my love."

"Upon my soul, I believe you'd go to hell with me," said Lister strongly.

"Yes, I would. I demand, by the love which exists between us, to be told this secret that troubles you so greatly."

Lister frowned, and meditated. "I cannot tell you everything—yet," he remarked, after a painful pause, "but I can tell you this much, that unless I have one thousand pounds within a week, I can never marry you."

"One thousand pounds. But for what purpose?"

"You must not ask me that, Bella," and his mouth closed firmly.

"Trust me all in all, or not at all," she quoted.

"Then I trust you not at all."

"Oh!" She drew back with a cry of pain like a wounded animal.

In a moment he was on his knees, holding her hands to his beating heart. "My dearest, if I could I would. But I can't, and I am unable just now to give you the reason. Save that I am a journalist, and your devoted lover, you know nothing about me. Later I shall tell you my whole story, and how I am situated. Then you can marry me or not, as you choose."

"I shall marry you, in any case," she said quickly.

"Do you think that I am a poor, weak fool, who demands perfection in a man. Whatever your sins may be, to me you are the man I have chosen to be my husband. We are here, in the corn-fields, and you just now called me Ruth. Then, like Ruth, I can say that 'your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.'"

"Dearest and best," he kissed her ardently, "what have I done to deserve such perfect love? But do not think me so very wicked. It is not myself, so much as another. Then you——"

"Is it a woman?" she asked, drawing back.

Lister caught her to his breast again. "No, you jealous angel, it is not a woman. The thousand pounds I must have, to save—but that is neither here nor there. You must think me but a tardy lover not to carry you off, forwith, and——" he rose, with Bella in his arms—"oh, it's impossible!"

"Do carry me off," she whispered, clinging to him. "Let us have a Sabine wedding. As your wife, you can tell me all your secrets."

"Bella, Bella, I cannot. I am desperately poor."

"So am I, and if I marry you my father will leave all his money to my aunt, for he told Mr. Pence so. But what does poverty matter, so long as we love one another with all our hearts and souls."

"Oh!" Cyril clenched his hands desperately. "Do not tempt me. Only one thousand pounds stands between us. If I had that I could make you my wife within a week. I would steal, or murder, or do anything in the world to get the money and remove the barrier. But"—he pushed her away almost brutally, and frowned—"you are making me talk rubbish. We must wait."

"Until when, Cyril?" she asked sadly.

"Until Destiny is kinder."

"You will tell me——"

"I tell you nothing. Give me one kiss, and then good-bye for——"

He bent to touch her lips, but was caught and hurled back. Bella uttered a cry of astonishment and dread, for between Cyril and herself stood Captain Huxham, purple with anger.

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## CHAPTER IV

### SUDDEN DEATH

"Y' shell not kiss m' gel, or merry her, or hev anything t' do with m' gel," said Captain Huxham, in a thick voice. "Oh, I saw y' fro' th' quarter-deck with m' gel. Jus' y' git, or——"

He made a threatening step forward, while Cyril waited him without flinching. What would have happened it is hard to say, for Captain Huxham was in a frenzy of rage. But Bella, recovering from her first surprise, threw herself between the two men.

"Father," she cried passionately, "I love him."

"Oh, y' do, do y'?" growled the fireside tyrant, turning fiercely on her, "an' arter I told y' es y'd hev t' leave the swab alone. Did I, or did I not?"

"Yes, but you assigned no reason for asking me to avoid Cyril, so——"

"Cyril! Cyril!" The captain clenched his huge hand, and his little eyes flashed with desperate anger. "Y' call him Cyril, y'—y'—slut." He raised a mighty fist to strike her, and the blow would have fallen, but that Lister suddenly gripped Huxham's shoulder and twitched him unexpectedly aside.

"If you blame anyone, sir, you must blame me."

"I'll break yer neck, cuss y'," raged the older man.

Cyril shrugged his shoulders, indifferently. "You can try, if you like, but I don't propose to let you do it. Come, Captain Huxham, let us both be reasonable and talk matters over."

"Y're on m' land; git off m' land," shouted Huxham, swinging his fists like windmills.

"Go, Cyril, go," implored Bella who was terrified lest there should be a hand-to-hand struggle between the two men. That was not to be thought of, as if Lister killed the captain, or the captain killed Lister, there would be no chance of her becoming the wife of the man she loved.

"I am quite ready to go," said Cyril, keeping a watchful eye on Huxham; "but first I should like to hear why you, sir, object to my marrying Bella." He spoke quietly and firmly, so that the level tones of his voice, and the admirable way in which he kept his temper, had a cooling effect on the enraged sailor.

Huxham, born bully as he was, found that it was difficult for him to storm at a man so cool, and calm, and self-controlled. "Y' ain't m' chice," said he in lower but very sulky tones; "m' gel's goin' t' merry th' sky-pilot, Silas Pence."

"Oh, no, she's not," said Lister smoothly; "she will marry me."

"If she does, she don't get no money o' mine."

"That will be no hindrance," said Bella, who was rapidly regaining her colour. "I am willing to marry Cyril without a penny."

"Y' shent, then," grumbled her father savagely.

"I have yet to hear your objections, sir."

"Yer name's Lister, and——"

The objection was so petty, that Bella quite expected to see Cyril laugh. But in place of doing so, he turned white and retreated a step. "What—what do you know of my name?" he asked, with apparent nervousness.

"Thet's my business," snapped Huxham, seeing his advantage, "an' I shen't tell y' m' business. Y' git off m' land, or——" he suddenly lunged forward in the attempt to throw Lister when off his guard.

But the young man was watchful, and, unexpectedly swerving, dexterously tripped up his bulky antagonist. Huxham, with a shout, or rather a bellow of rage like a wounded bull, sprawled full length amongst the corn. Bella pushed her lover away before the captain could regain his feet. "Go, go, I can see you to-morrow," she said hastily.

"Y' shell never see the swab again," roared Huxham, rising slowly, for the fall had shaken him, and he was no longer young. "I'll shut y' in yer room, an' feed y' on bread an' water."

"If you dare to say that again, I'll break your head," cried Lister, suddenly losing his temper at the insult to the girl he loved.

"Oh, will y'?" Huxham passed his tongue over his coarse lips and rubbed his big hands slowly. Apparently nothing would have given him greater pleasure than to pitch this man who dared him into the boundary channel; but he had learned a lesson from his late fall. Lister was active and young; the captain was elderly and slow. Therefore, in spite of his superior strength—and Huxham judged that he had that—it was risky to try conclusions of sheer brute force. The captain therefore, being a coward at heart, as all bullies are, weakened and retreated. "Y' git off m' land," was all that he could find to say, "an' y' git home, Bella. Es m' daughter I'll deal with y'."

"I am quite ready to go home," said Bella boldly; "but you are not going to behave as though I were one of your sailors, father."

"I'll do wot I please," growled Huxham, looking white and wicked.

Bella laughed somewhat artificially, for her father did not look amiable. "I don't think you will," she said, with feigned carelessness. "Cyril, go now, and I'll see you again to-morrow."

"Ef y' come here again," shouted Huxham, boiling over once more, "I'll kill y'—thet I will."

"Take care you aren't killed yourself first," retorted Lister, and was surprised at the effect the threat—an idle one—had on the ex-sailor.

Huxham turned pale under his bronze, and hastily cast a look over his left shoulder.

"Why do you hate me so?" asked the young man sharply. "I never met you before; you have never set eyes on me. Why do you hate me?"

"Ef I'd a dog called Lister, I'd shoot it; if I'd a cat called Lister, I'd drown it; and if I'd a parrot named Lister, I'd twist its blamed neck, same es I would yours, ef I could. Bella, come home;" and casting a venomous look on the astonished Cyril, the captain moved away.

It was useless to prolong the unpleasant scene, since Huxham declined to explain his objection to the young man's name. And again, as she took a few steps to accompany her father, Bella noticed that Cyril winced and paled at the coarse taunts of his antagonist. "What is the matter with your name?" she asked sharply.

Lister strode forward and caught her in his arms. "I shall explain when next we meet," he whispered, and kissed her good-bye, while Huxham grated his strong white teeth at the sight. Indeed, so angry was the captain, that he might again have assaulted his daughter's lover, but Cyril walked rapidly away, and without even a backward glance. Bella watched him with a heavy heart: there seemed to be something sinister about this mystery of the name. Huxham's inexplicable hatred appeared to be foolish; but Lister undoubtedly took it seriously.



"Kim home," breathed the captain furiously in her ear; "you an' me hes t' hev a talk."

"It will be a last talk if you do not behave properly," retorted Bella, walking proudly by his side, "even though I have the misfortune to be your daughter, that does not give you the right to treat me so rudely."

"I'll treat y' es I blamed well like, y' hussy. Y'll go t' yer room, an' eat bread an' drink water t' cool yer hot blood."

Bella laughed derisively. "There is law in this country, father," she said quietly. "I shall go to my room certainly, as I have no wish to remain with you. But there need be no talk of bread and water."

"Tea an' dry toast, then," grunted Huxham, looking at her savagely with his hard blue eyes. "Y' shell be punished, y' slut."

"Because I have fallen in love? Nonsense."

"Because y've disobeyed me in seein' this blamed Lister."

"Father"—Bella stopped directly before the front door of the manor-house—"why do you hate Cyril? What have you against his name?"

The captain quivered, blinked his eyes, cast his usual look over the left shoulder, and then scowled. "Shut yer mouth," he growled, "an' go t' yer room, cuss y'. This house is mine. I am master here." He rolled into the doorway and suddenly turned on the threshold. "I'd ruther see y' dead an' buried than merried t' a man of t' name of Lister," he snarled; and before Bella could recover from her astonishment, he plunged into his den and shut the door with a noisy bang.

The girl passed her hand across her forehead in a bewildered way. The mystery was becoming deeper, and she saw no way of solving it. Huxham would not explain, and Cyril evaded the subject. Then Bella remembered that her lover had promised an explanation when next they met. A remembrance of this aided her to possess herself in patience, and she tried to put the matter out of her head. But it was impossible for her to meet her father at supper and forbear asking questions, so she decided to obey him ostensibly, and retire to her bedroom. The next day she could have an interview with her lover, and then would learn why the captain stormed and Cyril winced when the name was mentioned.

Bella's room was on the first floor, and in the front of the mansion, so that she had an extended view of the corn-fields, of Mrs. Tunks' hut near the boundary channel, and of the pathway through the wheat leading deviously from the front door of Bleacres, across the channel, and to the distant village of Marshely. Standing at the window, she could see the red-roofed houses gathered round the square tower of the church, and the uncultivated fields, green and moist, spreading on all sides. The sun was setting, and the landscape was bathed in rosy hues. Everything was peaceful and restful outside, but under the manor roof was discord and dread. Huxham in his den paced up and down like a caged bear, angered exceedingly by his daughter's obstinacy, as he termed it. And Bella, in the seclusion of her own room, was trying to quieten her fears. Hitherto, she had lived what she termed a vegetable life; but in these ominous hints it seemed as though she would very shortly have more than enough to occupy her mind.

As the twilight darkened, Bella still continued to sit at the window vainly endeavouring to forecast a doubtful future. It was certain that Huxham would never agree to her marriage with Lister, and would probably insist that she should become the wife of Pence. As Bella had no money, and no expectations of any, save by obeying her father, she did not know what to do unless the captain ceased to persecute her. He would possibly turn her out of doors if she persisted in thwarting his will. In that event she would either have to earn her bread as a governess, or would be forced to ask Lister to marry her—a direct question which her maidenly pride shrank from putting. Moreover—as she recollected—Cyril had plainly told her, only a few hours previously, that he could not marry her unless he obtained one thousand pounds within the week. It was now Tuesday, and it was not easy to raise such a large sum within the next few days. Of course, Bella did not know what resources Cyril had to draw upon, and it might be that he would gain what he wanted. Then he could take her away and marry her: but until the unexpected happened, she did not know what to say or how to act. It seemed to her that she had come to the cross-roads of life, and that all her future depended upon the path she now chose. Yet there was nothing to show her how to select the direction.

Her idle eyes caught at the vivid spot of scarlet which came from the red coat of the martial scarecrow. There it stood, bound stiffly to a tall pole in the midst of the corn—the sentinel of those prosperous acres. Bella wondered that her father, having been a sailor, had not arrayed the figure in nautical dress. As it was, the red hue annoyed her, for red was the colour of blood, and there lingered in her mind the ominous speeches which had been made by her father and Lister, when quarrelling. "I'll kill y'!" said the captain; and "Take care," Cyril had replied, "that you aren't killed yourself first!" Also there was the wild tale of Pence regarding the offer made by Huxham to compass the death of Lister. These things flashed into Bella's uncomfortable mind, as she looked at the red and ominous figure of the scarecrow. Then, with a shudder, she rose and dismissed these evil fancies.

"I am growing morbid," she thought, looking at her anxious face in the glass. "To-morrow, when I see Cyril—oh, come in!" said she aloud.

She broke off to give the invitation, as a sharp knock came to the door, and it opened almost immediately to admit the plump figure of Mrs. Coppersley, carrying a tray. "Here's some dry toast and a cup of tea," said the widow severely; "your father says you are not to come to supper."

"I shouldn't come if he wanted me to," retorted Bella, as Mrs. Coppersley set down her burden; "and if he thinks to punish me in this way, he is very much mistaken. Does he think that I am a child, to submit to his tyranny?"

"He thinks that you are a disobedient daughter," said Mrs. Coppersley, drily.

"And what do you think, aunt?"

The older woman coughed. She thought that her niece was much too pretty, and much too independent, but had no ill-feeling toward her, save a natural petty feminine jealousy. "I don't know what to think," she said, sitting down to gossip. "Of course, your father is impossible, and always wants his own way. I don't see why folks should not be allowed to choose husbands for themselves. Jabez"—this was Huxham's Christian name—"objects to my marrying Henry, and to your becoming the wife of this Lister person."

"Don't speak of Cyril in that way," said Bella, with some impatience; "he is a gentleman, and the man I love. By the way, aunt, you might have brought up the teapot. I dislike anyone else to pour out my tea."

"Your father poured it out himself while I went to the kitchen for the toast," snapped Mrs. Coppersley; "he said you were to have only this one cup."

"What a petty tyrant he is," sighed Bella, pushing the cup away. "Aunt, what do you think of Cyril?"

"He is very handsome," rejoined Mrs. Coppersley cautiously, "but I don't know anything about his position or disposition."

"I know he is the dearest fellow in the world, aunt; but, like yourself, his position is unknown to me."

Mrs. Coppersley rose aghast. "Do you mean to say that you would marry a man about whom you know nothing?" she demanded.

"I know sufficient to choose him for my husband," retorted Bella, spiritedly; "and I intend to marry him, in spite of my father's bullying."

"Then your father will not give you a single penny," cried Mrs. Coppersley. "I approve of his doing so. You can't marry this man."

"Oh!" said Bella, bitterly. "I thought you agreed that a woman should choose her own husband."

"A woman like myself, who knows life, Bella—not a chit of a girl like you."

"I am twenty years of age," flashed out her niece.

"And have the sense of a babe of three," scoffed Mrs. Coppersley, moving towards the door. "Perhaps a night of loneliness will bring you to your senses, my dear." She passed through the door and closed it. "I am locking you in, by your father's wish," said Mrs. Coppersley from the other side.

Bella, white with rage at this indignity, sprang to wrench open the door, but almost before she reached it, the key clicked in the lock, and she knew that she was a prisoner. And the door was so stout and strong that there was no chance of a frail girl, such as she was, breaking it down. But Bella was in a royal rage, and it was in her mind to scramble out of the window and escape.

"But what's the use!" she thought, her eyes filling with impotent tears. "I have no money, and no friends, and no other home. What a shame it is for me to be at the mercy of my father in this way! I shall have to submit to this insult. There is nothing else I can do. But oh, oh!"—she clenched her hands as she again returned to the window and looked out into the rapidly darkening night. "I shall insist upon Cyril marrying me at once. If he loves me he surely will not stand by idly, when I am treated in this way."

Trying to calm herself, she walked up and down the room. The one slice of toast and the one cup of tea were on the table, but anger had taken her appetite. Inexperienced in the troubles of life, she was like a newly-captured bird dashing itself against the wires of its hateful cage. To and fro the girl walked, revolving plans of escape from her father's tyranny, but in every direction the want of money proved an obstacle impossible to surmount. Nothing remained but for her to wait patiently until she could see Cyril the next day. Then an exhaustive talk might lead to the formation of some plan whereby her future could be arranged for.

Faint and far, she heard the clock in Marshely church-tower strike the hour of eight, and began to think of retiring to bed. The night was hot, so she flung up the window, and permitted the fresh air to circulate in the close room. The atmosphere was luminous with starlight, although there was no moon visible. A gentle wind bent the rustling stalks of the vast corn-fields, and their shimmering green was agitated like the waves of the sea. White mists rose ghost-like on the verge of the farm, and into them the ocean of grain melted faintly. What with the mists and the luminous night and the spreading wheat-fields phantom-like in the obscurity, Bella felt as though

she were in a world of vague dreams.

Looking down the narrow path, which showed a mere thread in the semi-gloom, she beheld a tall, dark figure advancing towards the house. It was that of a man, and by the way in which he walked, Bella felt sure that he was her lover. Her heart beat wildly. Perhaps Cyril had come, or, rather, was coming, to see the captain, and to plead his suit once more. Greatly agitated by this unforeseen visit, she leaned out of the window as the man came almost directly under it. He was Cyril, she felt certain, both from his carriage and from the fact that she vaguely saw the grey suit he wore. During the afternoon, Lister had been thus dressed.

"Cyril! Cyril!" she called out cautiously.

The man looked up, and in the faint light she saw that he was indeed Cyril, for the eyes of love were keen enough to pierce the obscurity, and also her window was no great height from the ground. But the man looked up, making no sign of recognition, and stepped into the house without knocking at the door. Bella started back in surprise. She knew that the front door was always unlocked until ten, when her father usually retired to bed. But it seemed strange that Cyril, who had quarrelled with the captain that very day, should choose to risk his further wrath by entering the house uninvited. Also, it was stranger still that Cyril should have looked up without making some sign. He must have known who she was, for, failing sight, he had his hearing to recognise her voice. It was all very strange.

Bella twisted up her hair, which she had let down, and walked to the table to take up the now cold cup of tea. Her throat was parched with thirst by reason of her nerves, and she wished to refresh herself so that she might think of what was best to be done. Cyril and her father had quarrelled, and again she remembered the ominous threats they had used to one another. It was inconceivable madness for Lister to have heard the captain in his den, knowing what a vile temper the old man possessed. It was not at all impossible, or even improbable, but what the afternoon quarrel might be renewed, and then heaven only knew what might happen.

Drinking the cup of tea hastily, Bella thought over these things and resolved, if she could not escape by the door, to scramble out of the window. Then she could enter the house, and appear in the captain's den, to be present at what would probably be a stormy interview. Already she was straining her ears to catch the faintest sound of quarrelling, but as yet she could hear nothing. Certainly Cyril had closed the front door, for immediately he had entered she had heard him do so. And again, the walls of the old mansion were so thick, that it was impossible she could hear, when shut up in her bedroom, what was taking place below.

Anxiously she tried the door, but in spite of all her efforts, she failed to open it. Wild with alarm as to what might be happening, she crossed to her bed, intending to twist the sheets into a rope for descent from the window. But as she caught at the linen, she felt a drumming in her ears, and sparks seemed to dance before her eyes. Apparently the strain on her nerves was making her ill. Also she felt unaccountably drowsy, and in spite of every effort to keep awake, she sank beside the bed, with the sheets still grasped in her hands. In two or three minutes she was fast asleep.

The window was still open, and a bat swept into the room. He flitted round the motionless figure, uttering a thin cry, and again passed out into the starry night. The silvery voices of the nightingales in the copses round Marshely village came faintly across the meadows mingled with the cry of a mouse-hunting screech-owl. Still Bella slept on.

Hour after hour passed, and the night grew darker. The wind died away, the corn-fields ceased to rustle, the nightingales to sing. It became colder, too, as though the breath of winter was freezing the now moist air. The stars yet glittered faintly, and the high-pitched whistle of a steamer could be heard from the distant river, but on the whole, the earth was silent and weirdly gloomy for summer-time. During the small hours there came an ominous hush of expectant dread, which lasted until the twittering birds brought in the dawn.

Bella opened her eyes, to find her room radiant with royal red light. She felt sick and dizzy, for over her stood Mrs. Coppersley, shaking her vigorously by the shoulder. "Bella, Bella! Your father is dead. Murder, murder! Oh, come to the study and see the murder!"

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## CHAPTER V

### A MYSTERIOUS CRIME

"Murder!" The ominous word struck at Bella's heart, in spite of the fact that her dazed brain could scarcely grasp its significance. With unseeing eyes she stared at her terrified aunt. Mrs. Coppersley, in her usual morning dress, simply made, for domestic purposes, fell back from the motionless girl, and gripped the table in the centre of the room. Her face was white, her figure limp; and almost crazy with alarm, she looked twice her age. Nor did the sight of her niece's bewildered gaze reassure her. With a quick indrawn breath of fear, she lurched forward and again shook the girl.

"Bella! Bella! what's come to you? Don't you hear me? Don't you understand, Bella? Jabez is dead! your father has been murdered. He's lying a corpse in his study. And oh—oh—oh!"—Mrs.

Coppersley reeled against the table again, and showed signs of violent hysteria.

This spectacle brought back Bella with a rush to the necessities of the moment. She sprang to her feet, with every sense alert and ready to be used. Seizing the ewer from the wash-stand, she dashed the water over the sobbing, terrified woman, then braced herself to consider the situation.

Bella's thoughts reverted to the events of the previous night. She remembered that Cyril had come to the house and, without a sign of recognition had entered. She had not seen him depart, because—because—oh, yes, she had fallen unaccountably asleep. Slumber had overtaken her at the very moment when she was preparing to descend from the window, in order to—to—to—. Bella uttered a wild cry, and the ebbing blood left her face pearly white. The interview between her father and Cyril had taken place; she had not been there, and now—and now—. "What do you say?" she asked her aunt, in a hard, unemotional voice.

Mrs. Coppersley, quite unnerved, and drying her scared face with the towel, gasped and stared. "Didn't you hear? What's come to you, Bella? Your father has been murdered. I got up this morning as usual, and went into the study. He's lying there, covered with blood. Oh, who can have killed him?"

"How should I know?" cried Bella, harshly. "I was locked up in this room by you, Aunt Rosamund. I fell asleep after—after—" she stopped, aware that she might say something dangerous.

"After what?" asked Mrs. Coppersley, curiously.

"After you left—after I drank the tea. Oh, how could I fall asleep, when—when—ah!" Bella made a bound for the table, and took up the empty cup. Some dregs of tea remained, which she tasted. They had a bitter flavour, and a thought flashed into her mind. "You drugged this tea!" she cried.

Mrs. Coppersley flapped her plump hands feebly, and gasped again. Never a very strong-minded woman, she was now reduced to a markedly idiotic condition under the strain of the tragic circumstances. "I drug your tea? Save us, Bella, what do you mean?"

"I drank this tea and fell asleep," said the girl sharply; "although before drinking it, I did not feel at all sleepy. Now I have a disagreeable taste in my mouth, and my head aches. There is a queer flavour about what is left in the cup. I am sure this tea was drugged. By you?"

"Good Lord!" cried Mrs. Coppersley indignantly. "Why should I drug your tea, Bella? Your father poured it out himself in the study, when I was getting you toast in the kitchen. I told you so last night."

"Yes, yes. I remember." Bella passed her hand across her forehead. "My father evidently drugged the tea to keep me quiet. And so he has met with his death by violence."

"Bella," Mrs. Coppersley screamed, and made for the door, "what do you mean?"

Again the girl felt that she was talking too freely. If Cyril was implicated in the crime reported by Mrs. Coppersley, she must save Cyril. Or at least, she must hold her peace until she heard from her lover what had taken place during that fatal interview. It was just possible that Cyril had slain the captain in self-defence, and knowing her father's violent character, the girl could scarcely blame the young man. She expected that this would happen, and so had been anxious to intervene as a peacemaker. But the drugged tea—she felt certain that it had been drugged by her father—had prevented her doing what she wished. Now Huxham was dead, and Lister, whether in self-defence or not, was his murderer. The thought was agony. Yet in the midst of the terror engendered by her surmise, Bella found herself blaming her father. If he had not drugged the tea in order to keep her in her room, this tragedy would not have happened. Captain Huxham had paved the way to his own death.

But, after all, there might be extenuating circumstances, and perhaps Cyril would be able to explain. Meantime she would hold her tongue as to having seen him enter the house. But if anyone else had seen him? She turned to Mrs. Coppersley. "Where were you last night?" she demanded, suspiciously.

"I was with Henry Vand from seven until after ten," said the woman meekly, and evidently unaware why the leading question had been put. "I left your father in his study, and when I returned I let myself in by the back door and went to bed quietly. You know, Jabez always objected to my seeing Henry, so I wished to avoid trouble. This morning, when I went into the—ugh! ugh! come and see for yourself!" and Mrs. Coppersley gripped Bella's wrist to draw her towards the door—"It's murder and robbery!"

Bella released her wrist with a sudden jerk, but followed the elder woman down the stairs. "Robbery! What do you mean?"

"Come and see!" said Mrs. Coppersley hysterically. "We must send for the police, I suppose. Oh, my poor nerves! Never, never shall I get over this shock, disagreeable as Jabez always was to me. And he wasn't ready for heaven, either; though perhaps he did send for Mr. Pence to talk religion to him."

"Did my father send for Mr. Pence?"

"Yes. He asked me to go to the village with a note for Mr. Pence. I could not find Mr. Pence at

home, so left the note for him. Then I met Henry, and returned, as I told you, after ten o'clock."

"Did Mr. Pence come to see my father?" asked Bella anxiously. She was wondering if the preacher had by any chance seen Cyril enter the house.

"I don't know—I can't say—oh, dear me, how dreadful it all is!" maundered Mrs. Coppersley, opening the door of the study. "Just look for yourself, Bella. Your father lies dead in his blood. Oh, how I hope that the villain who killed and robbed him will be hanged and drawn and quartered! That I do, the wretch, the viper, the beast! I must get some rum. I can't stay in this room without some rum. I shall faint, I know I shall. What's the time? Seven o'clock. Oh, dear me, so late! I must send Tunks for the police. He has to be here to see your father, and oh, dear me, he can't see your father unless he goes to heaven, where I'm sure I hope Jabez has gone. But one never knows, and he certainly was most disagreeable to me. Oh, how ill I am! oh, how very, very bad I feel!" and thus lamenting Mrs. Coppersley drifted out of the room, towards the back part of the premises, leaving Bella alone with the dead man.

And Captain Huxham was dead, stone dead. His body lay on the floor between the desk and the chair he had been sitting on. From the position of the corpse, Bella judged that her father had suddenly risen to meet the descending weapon, which had pierced his heart. But not being able to defend himself, he had fallen dead at his murderer's feet. With a cautious remembrance that she must not remove anything until the police came, Bella knelt and examined the body carefully, but without laying a finger on the same. The clothes over the heart had been pierced by some extremely sharp instrument, which had penetrated even through the thick pea-jacket worn by the dead man. There was blood on the cloth and on the floor, and although ignorant of medical knowledge, Bella judged that death must have been almost instantaneous. Otherwise there would have been signs of a struggle, as Captain Huxham would not have submitted tamely to death. But the casement was fast closed, the furniture was quite orderly. At least, Bella judged so when she first looked round, for no chairs were upset; but on a second glance she became aware that the drawers of the desk were open, that the flexible lid of the desk was up, and that the pigeon-holes had been emptied of their papers. Also—and it was this which startled her most—the green-painted safe was unlocked, and through the door, which stood ajar, she could see that the papers therein were likewise in disorder. In fact, some of them were lying on the floor.

Strongly agitated, Bella constructed a theory of the murder, and saw, as in a vision—perhaps wrongfully—what had taken place. The captain had come to his desk for some purpose, but hearing a noise, or perhaps suspecting that there was danger, had unexpectedly turned, only to be stabbed. When he fell dead, the criminal took the keys of the safe from the dead man's pocket, and committed the robbery. Then he examined the pigeon-holes of the desk, and afterwards departed—probably by the front door, since the casement was closed. Robbery, undoubtedly, was the motive for the commission of the crime.

The girl rose to her feet, drawing a long breath of relief. Cyril certainly could not have slain her father, since Cyril would not have robbed. The young man assuredly had come to the house—she could swear to that herself—and if he had quarrelled with Huxham, he might have struck him in a moment of anger. But there was no reason to believe that Cyril would rob the safe. Hence there must be another person, who had committed both the murder and the robbery. Who was that person?

Mrs. Coppersley had stated plainly that Huxham had sent a message to Pence, asking him to call. Perhaps he had obeyed the summons, after Cyril left, and then had murdered the captain. But there was no motive for so timid and good-living a man as the preacher to slay and rob. So far as Bella knew, Pence did not want money, and—since he wished to make her his wife—it was imperative that Huxham should live in order to forward his aims. And it was at this point that the girl recalled, with a shudder, the fact that Cyril had confessed his need for one thousand pounds. Could Lister be the culprit, after all?

"No," cried Bella aloud, and in an agony of shame; "the man I love could not be guilty of so vile an act." So she tried to comfort herself, but the fact of Cyril's visit to the house still lingered in her mind.

Shortly Mrs. Coppersley returned with Tunks at her heels. The handy-man of Bleacres was a medium-sized individual, with a swarthy skin and beady black eyes peering from under tangled black hair. Lean and lithe, and quick in his movements, he betrayed his gypsy blood immediately, to the most unobservant, for there was something Oriental in his appearance. Just now he looked considerably scared, and came no further than the door of the room.

"There's your master," said Mrs. Coppersley, pointing to the dead, "so just you go to the village and tell the policeman to come here. Bella, you have not touched anything, have you?"

Bella shook her head. "I have not even touched the body," she confessed with a shudder. "Tunks, were you about the house last night?"

"No, miss," said the man, looking more scared than ever. "I went home nigh on seven o'clock, and was with my granny all the evening. I know nothing about this, miss."

"I don't suppose you do," rejoined the girl tartly, "but I thought you might have seen my father later than Mrs. Coppersley here."

"I left the house last night at the same time as you, ma'am," said Tunks, addressing himself to the

housekeeper. "You locked the back door after me."

"Yes," acknowledged Mrs. Coppersley promptly, "so you did. That would be at seven, as I came up and saw you, Bella, a few minutes before, with the tea and toast. You didn't come back, Tunks?"

"No, I didn't," retorted the gypsy sullenly. "You went on to Marshely, and I got back home. I never came near this house again until this morning. You can ask my granny if I wasn't in bed early last night."

"When did you see your master last?" questioned Bella.

Tunks removed his dingy cap to scratch his untidy locks. "It would be about six, just before I had my tea. He wanted to reduce my wages, too, and I said I'd give him notice if he did. But I suppose," growled Tunks, with his eyes on the remains, "it's notice in any case now."

"Never you mind bothering about yourself," cried Mrs. Coppersley sharply. "Go to Marshely, and tell the policeman to come here. Bella," she moved to the door, "let us leave the room and lock the door. Nothing must be touched until the truth is known."

"Will the truth ever be known?" asked the girl drearily, as she went into the hall, and watched her aunt lock the door of the death-room.

"Of course," retorted the elder woman, "one person cannot murder another person without being seen."

"I don't know so much about that, Aunt Rosamund. You and Tunks were away, and I was locked in my room, so anyone could enter, and—" she glanced towards the study door and shuddered.

"Did *you* see anyone?" asked Mrs. Coppersley quickly.

Bella started. "No," she replied, with unnecessary loudness; "how could I see anyone when I was drugged?"

"Drugged, miss?" cried Tunks, pricking up his ears.

Mrs. Coppersley turned on the handy-man, and stamped. "How dare you linger here?" she cried. "You should be half way to the village by this time. Miss Bella was having wakeful nights, and her father gave her a sleeping draught. Off with you," and she drove Tunks out of the front door.

"Why did you tell such a lie?" asked Bella when the man was hurrying down the path, eager, like all his tribe, to carry bad news.

"A lie! a lie!" Mrs. Coppersley placed her arms akimbo and looked defiant. "Why do you call it a lie? You *did* complain of sleepless nights, and you did say that the tea, poured out by Jabez, was drugged."

"That is true enough," admitted the girl quietly, "but I merely slept badly because of the hot weather, and never asked my father for a sleeping—"

"Oh!" interrupted Mrs. Coppersley, tossing her head. "What does it matter. I can't even say if the tea was drugged."

"I'll learn that soon," replied Bella drily, "for I have locked up the cup containing the dregs of tea. My father no doubt feared lest I should run away with Cyril, and so drugged it."

"The least said the soonest mended, Bella. Say nothing of the drugging at the inquest, as there is no need to blacken your father's character."

"I don't see that anything I could say would blacken my father's character, Aunt Rosamund. Of course, he had no business to drug me, but if I am asked at the inquest I shall tell the truth."

"And so your connection with that Lister person will come out."

Bella turned on her aunt in a fury. "What do I care?" she cried, stamping. "I have a right to marry him if I choose, and I don't care if all the world knows how I love him. In fact, the whole world soon will know."

"Well," said Mrs. Coppersley, with an air of washing her hands of the entire affair, "say what you like; but don't blame me if you find yourself in an unpleasant position."

Bella, who was ascending the stairs, turned to answer this last remark promptly. "Why should I find myself in an unpleasant position?" she demanded. "Do you accuse me of murdering father?"

"God forbid! God forbid!" cried Mrs. Coppersley piously and with a shudder, "but you cannot deny that you were alone in the house."

"And locked in my bedroom, as you can testify."

"Oh, I'll say that willingly. But you'd better wash out that cup of dregs, and say nothing more."

"I have already mentioned the matter in Tunks' hearing, so I must explain further if necessary. But I'll say why I believe my father acted so. Your story of sleepless nights will not do for me."

"You'll blacken the memory of the dead," groaned Mrs. Coppersley dismally. "Ah, you never loved

your poor father."

"Did you?" asked Bella suddenly.

"In a way I did, and in a way I didn't," said her aunt evasively. "Jabez never was the brother he should have been to me. But a daughter's nearer than a sister, and you should have loved him to distraction."

"In spite of the way he behaved to me."

"He had to keep a firm hand over your high spirit."

"Aunt Rosamund," burst out Bella at white heat. "Why do you talk in this silly way? You know that both to you and to me my father acted like a cruel tyrant, and that while he was alive we could do nothing to please him. I don't want to speak ill of the dead, but you know what I say is true."

"We are none of us perfect," snuffled Mrs. Coppersley, wiping her eyes, "and I daresay Jabez was worse than many others. But I was a good sister to him, in spite of his horrid ways. I'm sure my life's been spent in looking after other people: first my mother, then my husband, and afterwards Jabez. Now I'll marry Henry Vand, and be happy."

"Don't talk of happiness with that"—Bella pointed downward to the study—"in the house. Go and make yourself tidy, aunt, and I'll do the same. We have a very trying day before us."

"So like Jabez, so very like Jabez," wailed Mrs. Coppersley, while Bella fled up the stairs. "He always brought trouble on everyone. Even as a little boy, he behaved like the pirate he was. Oh, dear me, how ill I feel. Bella! Bella! come down and see me faint. Bella! Bella!"

But the girl did not answer, as she knew that Mrs. Coppersley only wished to gossip. Going to her own room, she again examined the cup with the dregs, which she had not locked up, in spite of her saying so to Mrs. Coppersley. Undoubtedly, the tea tasted bitter, and she resolved to have it analysed so as to prove to herself the fact of the drugging. She knew perfectly well that her father had attended to the tea himself, evidently to render her helpless in case she meditated flight with Cyril. And in doing so, he had indirectly brought about his own death, for had she been awake she could have descended from the window to be present at the interview which had ended so fatally. And at this point—while she was locking up the cup in a convenient cupboard—Bella became aware that she was thinking as though her lover were actually guilty of the deed.

Of course he could not be, she decided desperately, even though things looked black against him. Lister, honest and frank, would not murder an old man in so treacherous a manner, however he might be goaded into doing so. And yet she had assuredly seen him enter the house. If she could only have seen him depart; but the drug had prevented that welcome sight. Pence might have struck the blow, but Pence had no reason to do so, and in fact had every inducement to keep Huxham alive. Bella could not read the riddle of the murder. All she knew was that it would be necessary for her to hold her tongue about Lister's unexpected visit to the Solitary Farm.

"But I shall never be able to marry him after this," she wailed.

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## CHAPTER VI

### THE INQUEST

Tunks lost no time in delivering his gruesome message and in spreading the news of the death. While the village policeman telegraphed to his superior officer at Pierside, the handy-man of the late Captain Huxham adopted the public-house as a kind of St. Paul's Cross, whence to promulgate the grim intelligence. Here he passed a happy and exciting hour detailing all that had happened, to an awe-stricken crowd, members of which supplied him with free drinks. The marsh-folk were a dull, peaceful, law-abiding people, and it was rarely that crimes were committed in the district. Hence the news of the murder caused a tremendous sensation.

Captain Jabez Huxham was well known, and his eccentricity in the matter of planting Bleacres with yearly corn had been much commented upon. In Napoleonic times the fertile marsh farms had been golden with grain, but of late years, owing to Russian and American competition, little had been sown. Huxham, as the rustics argued, could not have got even moderate prices for its crops, so it puzzled one and all why he persisted in his unprofitable venture. But there would be no more sowing at Bleacres now, for the captain himself was about to be put under the earth. "And a grand funeral he'll have," said the rustics, morbidly alive to the importance of the grim event. For thirty years no crime of this magnitude had been committed in the neighbourhood, and the violent death of Huxham provided these bovine creatures with a new thrill.

Meanwhile the policeman, Dutton by name, had proceeded to Bleacres, followed—when the news became more widely known—by a large and curious throng. For that day and for the following days, until Huxham's body was buried, Bleacres could no longer be called the solitary farm, in one sense of the word. But the inherent respect of the agriculturist for growing crops kept the individual members of the crowd, male and female, to the narrow path which led from the boundary channel to the front door of the Manor-house. When Inspector Inglis arrived with three

or four policemen from Pierside, he excluded the public from the grounds, but the curious still hovered in the distance—beyond Jordan as it were—with inquisitive eyes fastened on the quaint old mansion. To them, one and all, it now assumed portentous proportions as the abode of terror.

Inspector Inglis was a very quiet man, who said little, but who kept his eyes on the alert. He inspected the body of the dead man, and then sent for a doctor, who delivered his report in due course. The study was examined thoroughly, and the entire house was searched from cellar to garret. Then Bella and her aunt were questioned, and Tunks was also put in the witness box. But in spite of all official curiosity, backed by official power on the part of Inglis, he convened the jury of the inquest, as ignorant of the truth as when he had begun his search. He certainly found a blood-stained dagger behind the massive mahogany desk, with which undoubtedly the crime had been committed; but he could discover no trace of the assassin, and three or four days later, when the inquest took place in the Manor-house, the mystery of the murder was still unsolved. Nor, on the evidence procurable, did there seem to be any chance of solution.

During the early part of the inquiry, Mrs. Coppersley had told Inglis how her late brother had sent her with a note to Marshely asking Silas Pence to call. When questioned, the preacher, not without agitation and dismay, stated that he had been absent from his lodgings until eleven o'clock on the fatal evening, and had not obeyed the summons of the deceased. Certainly on his return he had found and read the note asking him to call, but as the hour was late, he had deferred the visit until the next morning. Then, of course, the news of the murder had been made public, and Pence had said nothing until questioned by the Inspector. But he was quite frank and open in his replies, and Inglis was satisfied that the young preacher knew nothing about the matter.

From the moment when informed by Mrs. Coppersley of the crime until the inquest, Bella suffered greatly. At her request, Dr. Ward—the medical man who had reported on the time and manner of Huxham's death—had examined the dregs of the tea-cup. Beyond doubt, as he discovered, laudanum had been poured into the tea, and so largely, that it was little wonder she had slept so soundly. Even had there been a struggle, as Ward assured her, she would not have heard the commotion. And, as the state of the study showed that the murderer had taken his victim unawares, it was little to be wondered at that Bella woke in ignorance of what had taken place during the night. She was thankful to have the testimony of the young physician as to the drugging, since thereby she was entirely exonerated from complicity in the crime. For, dreadful as it may seem, there were those evil-seekers who hinted that Huxham's daughter, having been alone in the house, must be aware of the truth, if not actually guilty herself. But Bella knew that the evidence of Dr. Ward and Mrs. Coppersley as to the drugging and the locking of the bedroom door would clear her character.

It was therefore not on this account that she suffered, but because of the inexplicable absence of Cyril Lister. Since she had seen him enter the house shortly after eight o'clock on the fatal night she had not set eyes on him, nor had she received any communication. At a time when she needed him so greatly, it seemed strange that her lover should be absent, since the fact of the murder, now being known all over England, it appeared incredible that he alone should be ignorant. In spite of her desire to believe him guiltless, this conduct looked decidedly suspicious. If nothing serious had taken place between Cyril and her father on the night in question, why had Lister gone away? At least she surmised that he had gone away, as he did not appear to be in the village, and she heard no mention of his name from the many people who haunted the house. Try as she might, Bella, dearly as she loved the young man, could not rid herself of the frightful belief that he had struck the blow. Considering the circumstances, which she alone knew fully, he had every reason to commit the crime. Yet in the face of the strongest circumstantial evidence, Bella could not bring herself to credit Cyril's guilt. Day after day, like sister Anne, she climbed to the quarter-deck to see if he was coming. But the day of the inquest came in due course, and even then he had not put in an appearance.

The Coroner was a grim, snappy old doctor, who set forth the object of the inquest gruffly and tersely. The jury under his direction inspected the body and then gathered in the large and stately dining-room of the Manor-house to consider the evidence. Inspector Inglis confessed that he had few witnesses, and that there was nothing in the evidence likely to lead to the arrest of the murderer. Robbery, said the officer, was undoubtedly the cause of the crime, since the desk had been rifled, and the safe had been forced open. Mrs. Coppersley, the sister of the deceased, he went on to say, could state that she knew her brother kept at least one hundred pounds in gold in the safe. This was missing, so probably—

"We'll take things in order, if you please," snapped the gruff Coroner at this point of the Inspector's speech. "Call your witnesses."

Inglis was only too willing, and Dr. Ward gave his evidence, which proved that in his opinion, after an examination of the body, the deceased had been stabbed to the heart between the hours of eight and eleven on the night in question. Witness could not be more precise, he said, a confession which brought a grunt from the Coroner. The old doctor lifted his eye-brows to intimate that the young doctor did not know his business over well, else he would have been more explicit. But Dr. Ward avoided an argument by hurriedly stating that, according to his opinion—another grunt from the snappy Coroner—the wound had been inflicted with the dagger found behind the mahogany desk.

This remark led to the production of the dagger, a foot-long steel, broad towards the hilt and tapering to a sharp point. This was set in a handle of jet-black wood, carved into the semblance of



an ugly negro. And the odd part about the blade was that the middle portion of the steel was perforated with queer letters of the cuneiform type, and filled in with copper. The Coroner frowned when he examined this strange weapon, and he looked inquiringly at Mrs. Coppersley.

"Does this belong to your late brother?" he asked jerkily.

Mrs. Coppersley looked at the knife. "Jabez, being a sailor, had all manner of queer things," she said hesitatingly, "but I never set my eyes on that. He wasn't one to show what he had, sir."

"Was your brother ever in Africa on the West Coast?"

"He was all over the world, but I can't rightly say where, sir. Why?"

"This," the gruff Coroner shook the weapon, "is an African sacrificial knife in use on the West Coast. From the way in which the copper is welded into the steel, I fancy some Nigerian tribe possessed it. The members of tribes thereabouts are clever metal-workers. The handle and the lettering also remind me of something," mused the doctor, "for I was a long time out in Senegal and Sierra Leone and saw—and saw—but that's no matter. How comes an African sacrificial knife here?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir," said Mrs. Coppersley promptly. "Jabez, as I say, had all manner of queer things which he didn't show me."

"You can't say if this knife belonged to him?"

"No, sir, I can't. The murderer may have brought it."

"You are not here to give opinions," growled the doctor, throwing the ugly-looking weapon on the table. "Are you sure," he added to Ward, "that the wound was made with this knife?"

"Yes, I'm sure," replied the young practitioner, tartly, for the Coroner's attitude annoyed him. "The weapon is sharp pointed and fits the wound. Also the deceased wore a thick pea-jacket and only such a knife could have penetrated the cloth."

"If the blow were struck with sufficient force," snapped the Coroner.

"It was," rejoined the witness. "Have you any more questions to ask me?"

The Coroner nodded, and Ward gave surgical details to prove that death must have taken place almost instantaneously, since Huxham had been stabbed to the heart. "Apparently deceased heard a noise, and rose suddenly from his chair at the desk to face round in self-defence. But the assassin was too quick for him, and struck the knife to deceased's heart with great force as is apparent from——"

"That's all supposition," contradicted the Coroner rudely. "Stick to facts."

Boiling with rage, the young doctor confined himself forthwith to a bald statement of what he had discovered and then was curtly dismissed to give place to Mrs. Coppersley.

That lady was voluble and sharp-tongued, so that the Coroner quite met with his match, much to the delight of Dr. Ward, smarting under much discourtesy. Mrs. Coppersley deposed that she had left the house at seven o'clock, by the back door, with a note for Mr. Silas Pence from her brother, asking him to call at the Manor-house. She left the note at Mr. Pence's lodgings and then went on to the grocery shop to make some purchases and to see Mrs. Vand and her son Henry. There she remained until a quarter to ten o'clock and afterwards returned to the Manor-house. Mr. Vand saw her as far as the boundary channel and then went home.

"What time was that?" asked the Coroner, making notes.

"Just at ten," replied witness, flushing at the smile on the faces of those who knew of the love romance. "The clock struck ten while I was speaking to Henry—I mean to Mr. Vand—and not knowing that it was so late I feared lest my brother should be angry. Jabez was always very particular as to the house being locked up, so I thought he might shut me out. I went in by the back door, having the key, and retired at once to bed."

"Did you not see your brother?" asked the Coroner.

"No, sir. Knowing Jabez's violent temper I had no wish to see him, lest there should be trouble. I went on tip-toe to bed, after locking the back door."

"Did you hear Mr. Huxham moving about," questioned a jurymen, timidly.

"No, Mr. Tatters, I didn't. Everything was quiet as I passed the door of the study, and it was closed."

"Did you see a light in the window of the study when at the boundary channel with Mr. Vand?" asked the Coroner.

"No; I looked too," said the witness, "for if Jabez had been up, there would have been trouble owing to my being late. But there was no light in the window, so I fancied Jabez might have gone to bed and have locked me out. But he hadn't guessed I was absent, and so——"

"Did you see a light under the study door when passing through the hall?"

"No, and that made me believe that Jabez had gone to bed. But I didn't think of looking into the study; if I had," witness shuddered, "oh dear me, how very dreadful it all is. Well, then I went to bed, and next morning came down early to clean the study. When I entered I saw my brother dead in his gore, whereupon I ran up stairs and got Bella to come down. Then we sent for the police, and that's all I know."

The Coroner looked towards Ward. "This evidence takes an hour off your time of death, doctor," he said sourly. "You say that the man was murdered after eight and before eleven. Well then, as this witness reached the house just after ten and saw no light in the study the deceased must have been dead when she passed through the hall on her way to bed."

"Oh," groaned Mrs. Coppersley, with her handkerchief to her lips. "How dreadful if I'd looked in to see Jabez weltering in his gore."

"It's a pity you didn't," rejoined the Coroner sharply, "for then you could have given the alarm and the assassin might have been arrested."

"Yes," cried Mrs. Coppersley violently, "and the assassin might have been in the house at the moment, with only two women, mind, and one of them drugged. I should have been killed myself had I given the alarm, so I'm glad I didn't."

"Drugged! Drugged! What do you mean by drugged?"

"Ask Bella," retorted Mrs. Coppersley. "I've told all I'm going to tell."

"Not all," said the Coroner, "was the front door locked?"

"I didn't notice at the time, being anxious to escape Jabez and get to bed."

"Did you notice if it was locked in the morning?"

"Yes, when I opened it for Tunks to go for the police."

"It *was* locked," said Bella, rising at this juncture, "but Tunks opened it while I was talking with my aunt in the hall."

"You can give your evidence when I ask you," snapped the Coroner rudely. "Humph! So the front door was locked and the back door also. How did the assassin escape? He couldn't have gone by the front door after committing the crime, since the key was in the inside, and you locked the back door coming and going, Mrs. Coppersley."

"The murdering beast," said the witness melodramatically, "might have got out of the study window."

"Then he must be a very small man," retorted the Coroner, "for only a small man could scramble through the window. I examined it an hour ago."

"Please yourself," said Mrs. Coppersley, with an air of indifference, "all I know is, that I'm glad I didn't discover Jabez in his gore on that night and at that hour. If I had, you'd be holding an inquest on me."

"Possibly. If the assassin was in the study when you passed through the hall, Mrs. Coppersley."

"Ugh," shivered the witness, "and that's just where he was, depend upon it, sir, getting through the window, when he'd dropped the knife behind the desk. Oh, what an escape I've had," wept Mrs. Coppersley.

"There, there, don't bellow," said the Coroner, testily, "get down and let the witness, Luke Tunks, be called."

The Bleacres handy-man had very little to say, but gave his evidence in a straightforward manner. He had left the house with Mrs. Coppersley at seven and had gone straight home to bed, as he was tired. His grandmother could depose to the fact that he was in bed until the morning. Then he came as usual to the Manor-house, and found that his master was dead. He admitted that he had quarrelled with his master over a possible curtailment of wages, and they had not parted in a very friendly spirit. "But you can't say as I did for him," ended the witness defiantly.

"No one suggests such a thing," snapped the Coroner. "Had you any reason to believe that deceased expected to be murdered?"

Tunks scratched his head, "I have and I haven't," he said at length; "master did seem afraid of someone, as he was always looking over his shoulder. He said that he planted the corn so that there should be only one path up to the house. Then he rigged up that out-look round the chimney there," witness jerked his head towards the ceiling, "and he's got a search-light there also, which he turned on at times."

The Coroner nodded. The late Captain's search-light was well-known, but it was only put down as another freak on the part of a freakish man. But the remark of the witness about the corn was new. "Do you mean to say that the deceased planted the corn as a protection against some one coming on him unawares?"

"Yes, I do," said Tunks, sturdily, "corn don't pay, and there was always only one pathway left. Now my idea is——"

"We don't want to hear your ideas," said the Coroner; "get down. Silas Pence."

The young preacher's examination occupied only a few minutes. He said that he was absent from his lodgings until eleven, and then returned to find the note. As it was late he did not call, and went to bed, as his landlady could prove. He had no reason to believe that Captain Huxham expected to be murdered, and considered that the old sailor was more than capable of looking after himself. Witness was very friendly with the Captain and wished to marry Miss Huxham, an arrangement to which the Captain was quite agreeable. Witness presumed that Huxham wished to see him about the projected marriage when he wrote the note asking witness to call. Next morning when about to pay the visit, witness heard of the murder.

Bella was the final witness, and stepped before the Coroner and the inquisitive jurymen, looking pale, but composed. She gave her evidence carefully, as she made up her mind to say nothing about Cyril's visit on the fatal night. Also she was grateful that in his statement Pence had said nothing of Lister's rivalry. She noted also that Pence had kept quiet about the offer of her hand as a reward for the death of Cyril made by her father to the preacher. More than ever she believed this wild declaration to be due to imagination on the young man's part.

"What have you to say about this matter, Miss Huxham?" asked the coroner in his usual gruff way.

"Nothing at all," she replied.

"Nothing at all," he echoed, and the jurymen looked at one another.

"No. I had quarrelled with my father on the afternoon of the night when he met with his terrible death. He refused to let me come to supper, so I retired to my room. Mrs. Coppersley brought me up tea and toast and then locked me in my room."

"By her father's orders," cried Mrs. Coppersley, rising.

"Silence," said the Coroner scowling; "but surely, Miss Huxham, you could have heard if——"

"I heard nothing," interrupted Bella, straightening her slim figure, "for I was drugged."

"H'm!" The Coroner looked at her shrewdly. "Mrs. Coppersley said something of that. Why were you drugged? Who drugged you?"

"My father drugged the cup of tea, brought by my aunt, with laudanum," said Bella bravely, determined to speak out, yet conscious of the curious faces.

"Yes, he did," cried Mrs. Coppersley. "I brought the tea to the study and then went to get the toast. Jabez had poured out the tea when I came back, and giving me a cup told me to take it to Bella. I never knew myself that it was drugged."

"But I can state that it was," said Dr. Ward, rising. "Miss Huxham gave me the dregs to examine. I can prove——"

The Coroner intervened testily. "All this is very much out of order," he said. "Let us proceed with caution. Miss Huxham, tell your story, and then we can hear Dr. Ward and Mrs. Coppersley."

"I have scarcely any story to tell," said Bella, still apprehensive, yet still brave and discreet. "I am engaged to be married, but my father did not approve of my choice. He interrupted my meeting with my future husband——"

"Who is he, if I may ask?"

"Mr. Lister. He is a gentleman who has been stopping here——"

"Yes, yes, I know;" and the Coroner did know, for his wife was a great gossip and collected all the scandal for miles around. In fact he had heard something of the philandering of Lister after Miss Huxham. "Go on."

Bella proceeded. "My father would not allow me to come to supper, and sent up my aunt with tea and toast to lock me in my room. She did so. I did not eat the toast, but I drank the tea, and then fell asleep half on the floor and half on my bed. My aunt awoke me in the morning with the news of what had happened."

"And you heard nothing?"

"How could she," growled Ward, "when she was drugged."

"Silence there," said the Coroner sharply. "What time did you fall under the influence of the opiate, Miss Huxham?"

"Shortly after eight, so far as I can recollect."

"Did you know that the tea was drugged?"

"If I had I should not have drunk it," retorted the witness. "It was only next morning that I guessed the truth, and then I kept the dregs for Dr. Ward to examine. He says——"

"He can give his evidence himself," interrupted the Coroner. "Why did your father drug you?"

"I can't say, sir, unless he feared lest I should elope with Mr. Lister."

"Had you any such intention?"

"No, I had not."

The Coroner looked at her earnestly and pinched his lip, apparently nonplussed. The whole affair struck him as strange, and he cross-examined the girl carefully. When he examined Mrs. Coppersley and Ward, both of them bore out the improbable story—in the Coroner's opinion—told by the girl. Finally the old doctor accepted the testimony and dismissed the witnesses.

"I can't compliment you on the conduct of this case, Inspector Inglis," he said, when informed that no more witnesses were forthcoming. "You have collected nothing likely to solve the mystery."

"I cannot manufacture evidence, sir," said Inglis stiffly.

The Coroner grunted and made an acid speech in which he pointed out that the evidence laid before him and the jury amounted to absolutely nothing. Only one verdict could be brought in—"Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown." This was accordingly done, and the assembly dispersed. Only the Coroner remained to state sourly to Inglis that he considered the police in general to be fools, and the Pierside inspector to be the king of them.

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## CHAPTER VII

### CYRIL AND BELLA

Captain Huxham's death having been legally relegated to the list of undiscovered crimes, his gnarled old body was committed to a damp grave in Marshely cemetery. There was a vast concourse of people from far and near to assist at the funeral of one who had been so mysteriously murdered. So greatly had the strangeness of the deed appealed to the imagination of metropolitan readers, that many London reporters came down to see the last of the case, and if possible to begin it again by making enquiries. But ask as they might, they could learn nothing. They were therefore compelled to content themselves with picturesque descriptions of the ancient Manor-house amidst its corn-fields, and with inaccurately lurid accounts of the late owner's career as a sailor.

Mrs. Coppersley went to the funeral as chief mourner, as Bella resolutely declined to do so. She was sorry for her tyrannical father's violent death, but being very human, found it difficult to forgive him for the way in which he had behaved. He had bullied her and shut her in her room, and finally had drugged her by stealth. But as it turned out it was just as well that he had done so, as thereby she was able to prove that she knew nothing of the crime, even though she was alone in the house. Then again, there was the other side of the question to take—that if Huxham had not administered the laudanum he might have been alive and well at the moment. It seemed to Bella, overstrung with nerves, that some higher powers had dealt out a punishment to the Captain for crimes committed but undiscovered. Certainly she agreed with Tunks that her father had some dark secret in his mind, which led him to isolate himself in the midst of the corn.

However, he was dead and buried, so all debts were paid, and Bella sitting in the vast drawing-room of the Manor-house with a church-service open on her lap, tried hard to forget Huxham's bad traits of character, and to remember his good ones. This was somewhat difficult, as the captain had few engaging qualities. But Bella recalled that he had been kind in a gruff sort of way and had never grudged her the best of food and the gaudiest of frocks. Huxham had been one of those so-called good people, who are amiable so long as everything is done according to their liking; but who display the tyrant when crossed. But on the whole he might have been worse, and after all, as she anxiously kept in mind, he was her father.

The room wherein she sat, with the blinds down, was opposite the study and was a large apartment sparsely furnished. Huxham did not care for a drawing-room, as he preferred his den, but Mrs. Coppersley had bothered him incessantly until he provided her with furniture for the place. She selected the furniture herself, and what with her brother's stinginess and her own bad taste, the result was woefully bad. The room, spacious, lofty and stately, was decorated as beautifully as was the study, and required the most exquisite furniture to enhance its faded splendours. But Mrs. Coppersley had bought a magenta-hued sofa and many magenta-covered chairs, together with a cheap sideboard, so sticky as to look like a fly catcher, and two arm chairs of emerald green. The inlaid floor she had covered with lineoleum, diapered white and black, and her artistic taste had led her to paint the mellow oak panelling with pink Aspinall's enamel. As the curtains of the many windows were yellow, and the blinds blue, the effect was disastrous, and suggestive of a paint-box. An artist would have died of the confusion of tints, and the barbarism of destroying the oak panels, but Mrs. Coppersley was more than satisfied with the result, and when seated in the drawing-room on Sunday felt herself to be quite the lady.

At the present moment Bella's nerves were less troubled than usual; the blinds were down in sympathy with the funeral, and a dim twilight pervaded the room, hiding more or less the atrocious grandeur. She sat in one of the green arm-chairs near the fire-place, reading the burial service and listening to the solemn tolling of the bell. But after a time she dropped the book on

her lap and leaned back to close her eyes and reflect on her grave position. If only she had not seen Cyril on that night she could have married in ignorance that he had anything to do with the death of her father; but, enlightened as she was, it appeared impossible that she should become his wife. She had said nothing of his visit at the inquest, but the hideous doubt remained in her mind, although she strove to banish it by assuring herself over and over again that Lister could have had no hand in the matter. But how could she prove his innocence?

She was alone in that sinister house, and although it was bright sunshine out of doors she felt scared. The cool dim room, the dreary booming of the distant bell, the impressive words of the burial service which she had just been reading—all these things united in a weird appeal to her psychic instincts, to those mysterious senses which deal with the unseen. In the arm-chair she sat with closed eyes strung up to breaking-point, and felt that if the psychic influence which seemed to control her became more insistent, she would scream. A thought flashed across her mind that her father was walking that dim, chill apartment, trying to communicate the truth; and in her nervous excitement she could almost have sworn that she heard the heavy tread of his feet.

Thus, when she really did hear a light footstep in the entrance hall without, she uttered a piercing scream, and staggered to her feet. The hall door, she knew, had been left open since the coffin had been carried down the path between the standing corn, so that anyone could enter. Perhaps the assassin had come back to review the scene of his crime, or to commit another.

White-faced and panic-stricken by the power of her own emotions engendered by the circumstances, she clung to the back of the arm-chair, straining her eyes towards the door. At the sound of her thin high-pitched scream the footsteps had ceased for a moment, as though the intruder was listening. Now they recommenced and drew near the outside of the door. Unable to utter a sound Bella stared through the dim lights and saw the door open cautiously. A face looked in and the eyes set in the face blinked in the semi-gloom. Then the door opened widely and Cyril Lister stepped in.

"Oh, my darling!" With a sudden rush of relief Bella ran rapidly towards the door to throw herself into her lover's arms. Then a gruesome memory of that sinister visit made her falter and pause half way. Cyril closed the door and stood where he was, holding out his hungry arms.

"Dearest," he said softly. "Oh, my poor girl."

But Bella did not move; she stood looking at him as though fascinated. He wore a white drill suit made, tropic-fashion, high at the neck, with white shoes, and a panama hat. His white-clothed figure accentuated the twilight of the room, which now looked brown and grim. Considering that her father was dead and even now was being laid in an untimely grave, Cyril might have come to her dressed in mourning, unless—ah, unless. "Oh!"—she stretched out an arm as he advanced slowly—"don't come near me—don't come near me."

"Bella!" He stopped in sheer surprise. "Bella, darling, don't you know me?"

"Ah, yes, I know you," she gasped, retreating towards the chair. "Perhaps I know you too well."

"Because I have not been to see you before?" he asked, surprised. "Bella, dearest, I would have come but that I have been abroad during the week. I had to go to Paris to see a—a friend of mine."

She noted the hesitation and shivered. "When did you go?"

Cyril came near, and again she shrank away. "On the afternoon when your father found us in the corn-field."

"It's not true; it's not true. How can you lie to me?"

"Bella!" Cyril stopped short again, and in the faint light she could see that he looked thoroughly puzzled and amazed. "What do you mean?"

The girl's legs refused to support her any longer, and she sank into the chair. "My father is being buried," she gasped.

"I know, I know," he replied sympathetically. "I went to the funeral, but finding you were not present, I came here to comfort you."

"You—you—you went to the funeral?" her eyes dilated.

"Why should I not go. After all, even though we quarrelled, he was your father, and a last tribute of respect—"

"Oh, stop, stop. You can say this to me—to me, of all people?"

Lister frowned and pinched his lip. "This lonely house and this cold, dull room have unnerved you," he said after a pause. "I make every allowance for what you have gone through, but—"

"But you know, you understand."

"Know what? understand what?" he inquired sharply.

"I said nothing at the inquest. I held my tongue. I never—"

"Bella!" Cyril, now thoroughly roused, advanced and seized her wrists in no gentle grasp, "are

you crazy, talking in this way?"

"I have had enough to make me crazy," she said bitterly, "let me go."

"Not till you explain your mysterious behaviour. No"—he grasped her wrists tighter as she strove to release herself—"not till you explain."

"Ah!" she cried out shrilly, "will you murder me also?"

Lister suddenly released her wrists and fell back a pace. "Murder you also?" he repeated. "Am I then in the habit of murdering people?"

"My father. You—you——"

"Well, go on," said he, as the word stuck in her throat.

"Oh"—she wrung her hands helplessly—"I saw you; I saw you."

"Saw me what?" His voice became impatient and almost fierce.

"I saw you enter the house—this house."

"Saw me—enter this house? When?"

"On the night my father was murdered—at eight o'clock."

"What the devil are you talking about?" cried Cyril roughly. "I was in London at eight o'clock on that night, and went to Paris the next morning. I never heard of the murder, as I saw no newspapers. When I returned last night I read the account of the inquest in the evening papers, and I came down this morning to comfort you. I really think trouble has turned your head, Bella."

The girl stared at him in astonishment. Even though she had spoken so very plainly, Cyril did not seem to comprehend that she was accusing him of having committed a dastardly crime. Her heart suddenly grew light. Perhaps, after all, she was mistaken, and—and—"You can prove your innocence?"

"My innocence of what, in heaven's name?" he cried angrily.

"Of—of—the—the—murder," she faltered.

Lister stared, and scarcely could believe his ears. "You are not serious?"

"Oh, my dear:" she sobbed, "I wish I were not."

"And you accuse me of murdering your father?"

"No, no! Really, I don't accuse you of actually—that is, of really—but I saw you enter this house at eight o'clock, or a little after, on that night. I intended to come down, thinking you and my father might quarrel, but I drank the tea—you must have seen about the tea at the inquest—that is, in the report given in the papers. Then I fell asleep, and woke to hear that my father was dead. But I never betrayed you, Cyril. God is my witness that I have held my tongue."

Lister passed his hand across his forehead, and fell helplessly into a near chair. "You accuse me of murdering your father?" he said again.

"No, no;" she repeated feverishly, "but I saw you—you looked up—you wore the grey clothes, as you had done in the afternoon when father interrupted us."

"Bella! Bella! You must have been dreaming, or the drug——"

"I was not dreaming," she interrupted vehemently, "and I saw you before I drank the drugged tea. I called to you, and you looked up; but you entered the house without making any sign of recognition. Then I fell asleep, and—and—oh,—my dear"—she flung herself down at his feet and seized his hand. "What took place between my father and you? I'm sure you did not kill him. I am quite sure of that, and, remember, I held my tongue. Yes, I held——"

"Oh," groaned the young man, looking down into her agitated face. "I am losing my reason. You will shortly persuade me that I killed——"

"But you did not—you did not. Ah, never say that you did."

"No," said Lister shortly, and rose so suddenly as to let her fall, "and if you believe me to be a murderer, we had better part."

"I don't! I don't!" she wailed, stretching out her hands, as he strode towards the door. "Oh, Cyril, don't leave me. You are all I have."

Lister was in a white heat with rage, and stood fumbling at the door. But a backward glance at her pale face cooled him somewhat. He recognised that he was in the presence of some mystery, and that it was necessary for his own peace of mind, as for Bella's, to probe the mystery to the bottom. On the impulse of the moment he walked back, and lifting her, placed her again in the arm-chair. Then he knelt beside her, and took her hands. "Darling," he said, softly and firmly, "I swear to you, what I would not swear to any living creature, that I am innocent. If anyone but you had accused me, I should have——"

"Cyril! Cyril!" She wreathed her arms round his neck, "I only fancied, but I really did not think that——"

He removed her arms. "You should believe in my innocence in the face of all evidence," he said sternly.

"But my own eyes," she faltered.

He frowned. "That certainly is puzzling; still, the drug——"

"I saw you enter the house before I drunk the tea," she protested. "I told you that before."

"Your senses were quite clear?"

"Perfectly clear. And I thought that you had come to try and induce my father to consent to our marriage."

"Strange," muttered the young man. "I was not near the house."

"Are you sure? are you sure?"

"Oh!" Lister's tone was highly exasperated. "You will drive me mad, talking in this way. Hearken," he added, speaking calmer, "when I left you and Captain Huxham in the corn-field, I went straight back to my lodgings. There I found a letter referring to the thousand pounds I wished to borrow. I had to see the friend who was willing to lend it to me on that night. I therefore went to London by the six o'clock train. My landlady can prove that I left the house; the flyman can prove that I drove to the local station; the ticket office there that I bought a ticket, and the guard of the train shut me himself in a first-class compartment. That is evidence enough, I fancy."

"Yes. Yes, for me, but——"

"But I might have sneaked back, I suppose you mean?" he said bitterly, and rising to walk the floor. "I can prove an *alibi* easily. At eight o'clock I was at my friend's rooms in Duke Street, St. James's, as his man can swear. He had gone to Paris, and I arranged to follow. I went to the theatre, and to dinner with two friends of mine, and did not leave them until one in the morning, when I returned to my hotel. The murder took place at eleven, or between eight and eleven, so I can easily prove that I was not here. Next morning I went to Paris, and got the money from my friend. I lingered there with him, and only returned yesterday, to learn that your father was dead. Then I came down here this morning to—meet with this reception."

"Cyril! Cyril! Don't be hard on me."

"Are you not hard yourself?" he retorted. "How can I love a woman who doubts me? Besides, robbery was the motive for the commission of the crime. Am I likely to stab an old man, and then rob him?"

"No, I never believed, and yet——"

"And yet what?" he asked curtly.

"You—you—wanted a thousand pounds."

"Oh"—his lip curled—"and you believed that I robbed your father's safe to get it. Unfortunately, I understood, from your aunt's evidence at the inquest, that only one hundred pounds in gold were in the safe, so I must have committed a brutal murder needlessly."

"I never said that you murdered my father," cried Bella despairingly.

"You inferred as much," he retorted cuttingly; "also that I robbed——"

"No, no, no!" she cried vehemently, now thoroughly believing him to be completely innocent, and trying woman-like to recover her position. "But, Cyril, listen to me, and you will see that as things look I was justified——"

"Nothing can justify your believing me to be guilty of a double crime."

Bella bowed her proud head. "I can see that now," she said humbly.

"You should have seen it before," he replied harshly.

She raised her head, and looked at him indignantly, bringing into play the powerful weapon of sex. "You give me no opportunity of defending myself," she said, in the offended tone of a woman wronged.

"I ask your pardon, and give you the opportunity now," he replied coldly.

"I saw you enter the house," she repeated somewhat weakly.

"That is impossible," he rejoined briefly.

"Oh!" She clasped her hands together. "What is the use of saying that? It was not you, since I firmly believe what you tell me; all the same——"

Cyril sprang forward, seized her hands, and looked deep into her eyes "You believe me, then?"

"Yes, I do. But if the man was not you, he must have been your double."

"Was he so like me, then?"

"Exactly like you. Don't I tell you, Cyril, that I leaned out of the window and spoke to the man. I called him by your name."

"What did he do?"

"He looked up, but making no sign of recognition stepped into the house, as the door was not locked. I never believed for one moment that it was not you, and resolved to clamber out of the window to be present at the interview. Then I drank the drugged tea, and——" she made a gesture of despair—"you know the rest."

"How was the man dressed?"

"In a grey suit, just as you wore in the afternoon."

"You saw the face?"

"I saw it very plainly, although the twilight was growing darker at the time. But I could have sworn it was your face. Would I have spoken to the man had I not believed him to be you?"

"No, and yet"—Cyril stopped, and tugged at his moustache. His face had grown pale, and he looked decidedly worried. "The man was of my height?"

"He was like you in every respect. Perhaps if I had seen him in broad daylight I might have recognised my mistake unless—oh, Cyril, could it have been your ghost?"

"No," said Lister, in a strangled voice, "don't be absurd. I have an idea that——" he made for the door. "There's nothing more to say."

"Cyril, will you leave me? Won't you kiss——"

"There's nothing more to say," said Lister, now deadly pale, and walked abruptly out of the dim room. Bella fell back in the chair and wept. All was over.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### THE WITCH-WIFE

The interview between the engaged lovers had been a strange one, and not the least strange part was the termination. Apparently, after hearing the description of the mysterious double given by Bella, her lover could have explained much—at least, she gathered this from the hints his broken conversation gave. After his departure, she sat weeping, until it struck her sensible nature how very foolish she was to waste time in idle regrets. Whether Cyril felt so mortally offended by her doubts as to regard the engagement at an end, she could not say. But after some thought she believed that her remarks had given him a clue which he had left thus abruptly to follow up. Sooner or later he would return to explain, and then all would be well between them.

And in spite of his odd behaviour, she had one great consolation in knowing that he was innocent. His denial of guilt had been so strong; the *alibi* he set forth was so easy of proof, and so impossible of invention, that she blamed herself sincerely for ever having doubted the young man. Nevertheless, considering the weird circumstances, and the fact of the likeness of the double—whomsoever he might be—to her lover, she could scarcely regard herself as having been foolish. Nine people out of ten would have made the same mistake, and would have harboured similar doubts. Certainly, seeing that she loved Cyril devotedly, she should have been the tenth; but in the hour of trial her faith had proved very weak. She tried to remind herself that she had never really believed him to be guilty. All the same, recalling the late conversation, she had to recognise that her words could have left very little doubt in Lister's mind as to the fact that she believed him to be a robber and an assassin. Well, if she had, surely she had been severely punished, as was only fair.

Mrs. Coppersley returned from the funeral in a very chastened frame of mind, and in the company of Henry Vand, whom she had bidden to tea. The table was furnished forth with funeral baked meats, after the fashion of Hamlet's mother's wedding, and Mr. Vand did full justice to them—wonderful justice, considering his apparently delicate constitution. He was not very tall, and remarkably handsome, with his young, clean-shaven face, his large, blue eyes, and his curly, golden hair. His body was well-shaped all save the right foot, which was twisted and the leg of which was shorter than the other. Like Talleyrand and Lord Byron, the young man was club-footed, but otherwise had a very attractive personality. From his delicate fingers, it could be seen that he was a musician, and he had an air of refinement astonishing in one of his breeding and birth. Bella did not like him much. Not that she had any fault to find with him; but his eyes were shallow, like those of a bird, and his conversation was dull, to say the least of it. The sole way in which he could converse was through his violin, and as he had not that with him on this occasion, Bella preferred to remain absent from the lavish tea-table. Mrs. Coppersley did not object, as she wanted her darling all to herself.

However, Mrs. Coppersley was very severe on her niece for not attending the funeral, and had



many sweet things to say regarding virtues of the deceased which she had just discovered after his death. "He meant well, did poor, dear Jabez," sighed Mrs. Coppersley, over a cup of tea; "and if he did swear it was his calling that made him profane. Bella!"—her niece was standing at the door as she spoke—"to-morrow I'm going up to see the lawyer about the property."

"Oh, don't trouble about that," said Bella wearily; "no, thank you, Mr. Vand, I don't care to eat. I feel too miserable."

"Not trouble about the property!" cried Mrs. Coppersley, paying no attention to the latter part of this speech; "but I do care. Things must be settled somehow. I must arrange my future life," and she cast a tender glance on the handsome musician. "Your future must be settled also."

"I shall look after that," said Bella, not liking her aunt's tone.

"You had better be sharp, then," said Mrs. Coppersley, in a dictatorial manner, "for the sooner things are settled the better. I'm not young, and"—she cast a second tender glance on her swain, who was eating largely—"ah, well, its useless to talk of weddings when funerals are in the air. To-morrow evening, Bella, after I have seen the lawyer—and he lives in Cade Lane, London—I'll tell you what I have arranged."

Bella looked in astonishment at her aunt, who suddenly seemed to have acquired the late captain's tyrannical manner. Apparently Mrs. Coppersley forgot—as Bella thought—that she would not inherit the solitary farm, and needed to be reminded of the fact that her niece was the mistress of Bleacres. In fact, Bella was on the point of saying as much, when she remembered that Vand was present. Not being anxious to discuss family matters in his presence—even though he was about to enter the family as Mrs. Coppersley's husband—she abruptly left the room. Mrs. Coppersley poured herself out a second cup of tea, and remarked in a high tone of satisfaction, that some people's noses were about to be brought to the grindstone.

Bella heard the remark as she put on her hat and walked out of the front door. It accentuated her lonely feeling, for she saw plainly now what she had long guessed,—that Aunt Rosamund had very little affection for her. The late captain also had never cared much for his daughter, and now that Cyril had vanished in an enigmatic manner, the poor girl felt more wretched than ever. Listlessly she walked down the narrow path as far as the boundary channel, and wondered how it would all end. Had she been a religious girl she might have sought comfort in prayer, but she knew very little about true religion, and did not care for the sort preached by Mr. Silas Pence in the Little Bethel at Marshely. As his name flashed into her mind, she looked up and saw him standing on the opposite side of the channel, so it was apparent—although she knew nothing about such things—that some telepathic communication had made her think of him. The preacher was in his usual dismal garb, and had accentuated the same by wearing black gloves and a black tie in place of his usual white one. Patience on a monument might have been taken as a type of Mr. Pence on this occasion, but he was not smiling on grief in the person of Miss Huxham. In fact he did not smile at all, being shocked to see her out of doors.

"Why are you not weeping in your chamber?" reproved Silas, in his most clerical manner; "the loss of so good a father——"

"You have doubtless said all you had to say on that subject at the funeral, Mr. Pence," retorted Bella, whose nerves were worn thin with worry; "spare me a repetition of such stale remarks."

It was a horribly rude speech, as she well knew. But Pence had a way of irritating her beyond all endurance, and the mere sight of him was sufficient to set her teeth on edge for the day. It was intolerable that he should intrude on her privacy now, when she particularly wished to be alone. She intimated as much by turning away with a displeased air, and walked for a short distance along the bank path leading to Mrs. Tunks' hut. But Silas, absolutely ignorant of the feminine nature, and entirely devoid of diplomacy, persisted in thrusting his company upon her. Bella turned sharply, when she heard Silas breathing hard behind her, and spoke with marked indignation.

"I wish to be alone, if you please," she declared, flushing.

"Ah, no; ah, no," remonstrated Pence, stupidly. "Allow me to comfort you."

"You cannot," she retorted, marvelling at his density.

"Allow me to try. I was on the point of calling at the house to——"

Bella interrupted him cruelly. "You can call there still, Mr. Pence, and my aunt will be glad to see you. She has Mr. Vand to tea, so you will find yourself in congenial company."

"Your company is congenial enough for me."

"That is very flattering, but I prefer to be alone."

Silas, however, declined to be shaken off, and his reproachful looks so exasperated Bella that she felt inclined to thrust him into the water. And his speech was even more irritating than his manner. "Let me soothe you, my dear, broken-hearted sister," he pleaded in a sheep-like bleat.

"I don't want soothing. I am not broken-hearted, and I am not your sister."

Pence sighed. "This is very, very painful."

"It is," Bella admitted readily, "to me. Surely you are man enough, Mr. Pence, to take a plain telling if you won't accept a hint. I want you to leave me at once, as I am not disposed to talk."

"If I had my way I would never, never leave you again."

"Perhaps; but, so far as I am concerned, you will not get your way."

"Why do you dislike me, Miss Huxham?"

"I neither like nor dislike you," she retorted, suppressing a violent inclination to scream, so annoying was this persecution. "You are nothing to me."

"I want to be something. I wish you to be my sealed fountain. Your late lamented father desired you to be my spouse."

"I am aware of that, Mr. Pence. But perhaps you will remember that I refused to marry you, the other day."

"You broke my heart then."

"Go and mend it then," cried Bella, furiously angry, and only too anxious to drive him away by behaving with aggressive rudeness.

"You alone can mend it." Pence dropped on his knees. "Oh, I implore you to mend it, my Hephzibah! You are to me a Rose of Sharon, a Lily of the Vale."

"Get up, sir, and don't make a fool of yourself."

"Oh, angel of my life, listen to me. Lately I was poor in this world's goods, but now I have gold. Marry me, and let us fly to far lands, and——"

"I thought you were desperately poor," said Bella, suspiciously; "where did you get the money?"

"An aged and God-fearing Christian aunt left it to me," said Pence, dropping his eyes. "It is a small sum, but——"

"One hundred pounds in gold, perhaps?"

Pence rose, as though moved by springs, and his thin white cheeks flushed a deep scarlet. "What do you mean?"

Bella could not have told herself what she meant at the moment. But it had suddenly occurred to her to try and rid herself of this burr by hinting that he had something to do with the robbery, if not with the murder. Under ordinary circumstances she would never have ventured to do this, being a kind-hearted girl; but Pence exasperated her so greatly that she was, on the impulse of the moment, prepared to go to any length to see the last of him. "I mean," she said, in reply to his last question, "that my father had one hundred pounds in gold in his safe."

"You accuse me of——"

"I accuse you of nothing," cried Bella, cutting him short and flaming up into a royal rage. "I am tired of your company and of your silly talk. I only wish that Mr. Lister would come along and throw you into the channel."

The red faded from Pence's face, and he looked wickedly white. His eyes flashed with sinister lights. "I dare say you do," he said venomously, "but Mr. Lister had better keep out of my way, and out of the way of the police."

The girl felt her heart almost stop beating. "Now it is my turn to ask you what you mean?" she said slowly and preserving her coolness.

But the preacher saw that she was shaken, and followed up his advantage. "I think you had better make terms with me. Accept me as your husband, or——"

"Or what?"

"I shall tell the police what I saw," he finished spitefully.

"What did you see?" she asked in a shaking voice.

"On the evening of the murder I came here at a quarter to eight," said Silas slowly, his glittering eyes on her pale face. "I wished to adore the shrine wherein was my jewel; that is, I desired to gaze on the house, beneath whose roof you slept."

"Oh, stop talking like this, and speak plainly," she interrupted wearily.

"I shall speak plainly enough now," said the young man calmly. "While watching by the entrance through the bushes, on the other side of the channel, I was suddenly brushed aside by that Lister person. It was growing dark, but I recognised his figure, his insolent face, his lordly air of prosperity. He walked up to the house and I turned away, sick at heart, knowing that he had gone to see you. When I looked again, on my way back to Marshely, he had disappeared. So you see ——" He paused.

"I see what?" she questioned nervously.

"That the Lister person must know somewhat of this crime, if, indeed, he did not strike the blow himself."

"How can you say that, when you lately intimated that Mr. Lister—if it *was* Mr. Lister, which I doubt—had come to see me?"

"I remember the evidence given by yourself and your aunt at the inquest," retorted Pence sharply. "You were locked in your room, and were in a drugged sleep. Mrs. Coppersley had gone to my lodgings to deliver the note from your late father, which I found on my return. That Lister person must have seen your father, and, as they were not on good terms—"

"How do you know that they were not?"

"Because your late father hated the very name of Lister, and said that he would rather see you dead than married to him. Also in the note left at my lodgings, your father said that he had quarrelled seriously with this Lister person, and had locked you in your room. Now, if I showed that note to the police, and related how the Lister person had brushed me aside so that he could cross the channel, he would be arrested."

"No, he would not," said Bella doggedly, but her heart sank.

"Yes, he would. He hated your late father; he was alone in the house with him, and I believe that he killed him so that he might marry you."

"As if I would marry any man who murdered my father," said Bella angrily. "You are talking a lot of nonsense, Mr. Pence. Mr. Lister was in London on that evening, and afterwards went to Paris."

"I don't believe it. Who told you?"

"He told me so himself."

"Naturally he has to make the best of things. But I know the Lister person well by sight, and I am prepared to take my oath that he entered the Manor-house about eight o'clock on the night of the murder."

"Mr. Lister has a good *alibi*," said Bella, with a carelessness which she was far from feeling, and gathering up her skirts to go. "You can tell the police what you like, Mr. Pence. I am not afraid for Mr. Lister's good name."

"You will make no terms?" demanded Pence, annoyed by her feigned coolness.

"No," she said abruptly; "do what you like."

"I'll give you three days to think over the matter," cried Pence as she turned away; "if by that time you do not agree to become my wife, I shall denounce that Lister person to the police."

Bella took no notice of the threat, but walked swiftly away in the direction of Mrs. Tunks' hut. Hearing no footsteps she concluded that Mr. Pence had not followed, and a cautious look round revealed him crossing the planks on his way home. Bella felt sick with apprehension, and when she reached the hut had to lean against the door for support. But she had no time to consider matters, for unexpectedly the door opened and she fell into the bony arms of Mrs. Tunks.

"I knew you were coming, dearie," croaked the old creature; "the crystal told me."

"A glance along the path told you," retorted Bella, recovering her balance and entering the hut. "Why do you talk to me of the crystal, Mrs. Tunks? You know I don't believe in such things."

"Well I know your blind eyes and stubborn heart, lovey. Only trouble will make you see truths, and you ain't had enough yet. There's more coming."

"How do you know?" asked Bella, sitting down on a broken-backed chair with a sudden sinking of the heart.

"I know, I know," mumbled Mrs. Tunks, squatting on a stool near the fire. "Who should know but I, who am of the gentle Romany? Hold your peace, dearie and let me think," and she lighted a dingy black clay pipe. "Luke ain't here," added Mrs. Tunks, blowing a cloud of smoke, "so we've the whole place to ourselves, lovey, and the crystal's ready."

She nodded towards a bright spark of light, and Bella saw a round crystal the size of an apple, standing in a cheap china egg-cup. There was no light in the bare room, but the ruddy flare of the smouldering fire, and what with the semi-darkness, the fumes of Mrs. Tunks' pipe, and that bright unwinking spot, Bella felt as though she were being hypnotised.

The hut, built of turf, was square, and was divided by a wooden partition into two equal parts. One of these parts was again sub-divided into two sleeping dens—they could not be called bedrooms—for Mrs. Tunks and her grandson. The day apartment, which did for sitting-room, dining-room, drawing-room, and general living-room, was small, and dirty, and dingy. The ceiling of rough thatch, black with smoke, could almost be touched by Bella without rising. The floor was of beaten earth, the chimney a wide gaping hollow of turf, and there was one small window, usually tightly closed, beside the crazy door. The furniture consisted of a deal table, of home manufacture, with its legs sunken in the earthen floor, and a few stools together with the broken-backed chair on which the visitor sat. There also was a rough wooden dresser, on which were ranged a few platters of wood and some china. The whole abode was miserable in the extreme,

and in wet weather must have been extremely uncomfortable. Granny Tunks, as she was usually called, housed like an Early Briton or a Saxon serf; but she seemed to be happy enough in her den, perhaps because it was better than the rough life of the road, which had been her lot in life before she had married a Gorgio.

She was a lean, grim old creature with very bright black eyes and plentiful white hair escaping from under a red handkerchief. Her dress was of a brown colour, but tagged with bright patches of yellow and blue and crimson, and she wore also various coins and beads and charms, which kept up a continuous jingle. On the whole Granny Tunks was a picturesque figure of the Oriental type, and this, added to her sinister reputation as one acquainted with the unseen world, gained her considerable respect. The marsh folk, still superstitious in spite of steam and electricity, called her "The Wise Woman," but Granny dubbed herself "A Witch-Wife," quite like a Norse warrior would have done.

Bella stared at the crystal until she felt quite dreamy, while Granny watched her with a bright and cunning eye. Suddenly she rose and took the gleaming globe in her skinny hand. "You've put your life-power into it," mumbled the witch-wife; "now I'll read what's coming."

"No, no!" cried Bella, suddenly startled into wakefulness. "I don't want to know anything, Mrs. Tunks."

Granny took no notice, but peered into the crystal by the red light of the fire. "You've trouble yet, before you, dearie," she said in a sing-song voice, "but peace in the end. You'll marry the gentleman you love, when a black man comes to aid your fortunes."

"A black man! What do you mean?"

"There's no more," said Mrs. Tunks; "the vision has faded. A black man, remember."

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## CHAPTER IX

### THE COMING OF DURGO

The fortnight which followed the funeral of Captain Huxham passed quietly enough at the Solitary Farm. Mrs. Coppersley went several times to London for the purpose of interviewing her late brother's lawyer, who had his office in Cade Lane. She said very little to Bella when she returned, and on her part Bella did not ask questions. Had she been more versed in worldly wisdom she would have accompanied her aunt to see the solicitor for herself, so that she might learn what disposition had been made of the property. But Bella was an unsophisticated girl, and moreover was so anxiously lamenting the continued absence of Cyril that she neglected needful things.

Lister had disappeared from the neighbourhood, and Bella had neither seen him again nor had she heard from him. Considering what had taken place at their last interview, she was inclined to think that Cyril had passed out of her life for ever. But something told her that in spite of her unjust accusations he still loved her, and would return. Meantime, there was nothing for it but to wait in patience, and to busy herself with her ordinary pursuits. These, however, had lost their savour for the girl, since the whole of her mind was filled with the image of the man she loved.

Pence did not fulfil his threat of informing the police at the end of three days. Bella waited in dread for the arrival of Inspector Inglis to ask her questions concerning Lister, but the officer never appeared, and as the days glided by she began to think that Silas would say nothing. With her aunt she went on Sunday to the Little Bethel, and heard him preach, but he did not seek a private interview with her. Even when he delivered his sermons he sedulously avoided her eye, so she deemed that he was ashamed of the wild way in which he had talked. What struck her most about the young man was his wan looks. He seemed to be thinner than ever, and his cheeks had a more hectic flush, while his eyes glittered feverishly, as though he were consumed with an inward fire. But his discourses became more and more powerful and were greatly admired by his congregation, who liked melodramatic religion. Mrs. Coppersley was especially loud in her expression of approval.

"What a gift," she said to Bella, when they returned home on the second Sunday through the rapidly-yellowing corn-fields. "He spares no one."

"And that is just what I like least about his sermons," retorted the girl. "As a Christian he should be more merciful."

"You don't know anything about it," said Mrs. Coppersley tartly.

"I know what Christ preached," replied Bella quietly; "and Mr. Pence has not the spirit of His preaching."

"In what way, pray?"

"Mr. Pence does not do as he would be done by. I wonder how he would like to suffer the condemnation which he measures out so freely to other people."

"Silas Pence is a good man, and no condemnation is possible where he is concerned," cried Mrs. Coppersley fervently, and bounced into the house.

"In that case he should make allowance for those who are not good."

"Not at all," said the elder woman, stating her views uncompromisingly. "The good shall go to heaven, and the wicked to hell: that's Scripture."

"As translated by man," finished Bella neatly; "but the Sermon on the Mount, Aunt Rosamund —"

"Bella, you are irreligious," interrupted the lady, removing her hat and placing it on the kitchen-table. "I won't have freethinkers in my house."

Bella raised her finely-marked eye-brows. "Your house?"

"Yes," almost shouted Mrs. Coppersley violently, for she felt somewhat nervous as to what she was about to say, "my house. I didn't tell you before, as I have a kind heart, but it is time we understood one another. To-night I shall explain myself, so that you may understand your position."

"You shall explain yourself now," said Bella, pale but determined.

"I have no time," said her aunt brusquely; "Henry is coming to dinner."

"I don't care if Mr. Vand is coming to dinner twenty times over," said Bella, her eyes growing hard with anger. "You have said so much that you must say all, Aunt Rosamund."

"Don't bully and bounce me, miss."

"I shall act exactly as I please, and it is my pleasure that you would explain what you mean."

"I have to lay the cloth and see to the dinner. You know that Jane never can cook to Henry's liking. I daresay the meat is burnt and the——" Mrs. Coppersley was about to pass into the scullery where the one small servant, over whom she tyrannised, slaved at the mid-day meal, when Bella caught her by the wrist. "How dare you, Bella?" cried the stout woman.

"Come into the drawing-room, out of Jane's hearing," whispered Bella fiercely. "I shall not wait another minute for an explanation. This house is either mine or yours."

"Very well," cried Mrs. Coppersley, bouncing towards the kitchen door, "If you will have it, you shall have it. I have tried to spare you, but——"

"Go on to the drawing-room, please," interrupted Bella imperiously, as she saw the small servant peeping round the corner; "there is no need for us to discuss private matters in public."

"The whole parish shall soon know what I am about to say," snapped Mrs. Coppersley, and rolled towards the drawing-room.

"Rolled" is precisely the word to use in connection with Mrs. Coppersley's way of walking, for she was an extremely stout, well-fed woman, large-limbed and clumsy. Her round, chubby face was rosy and her eyes were as black as her hair. She did not look uncomely, but there was something coarse and plebeian in her appearance. Although she was in mourning for her late brother she could not altogether restrain her flamboyant taste, and therefore wore a red feather in the hat she had left in the kitchen, and yellow gloves, which she was now impatiently removing.

Outside it was extremely warm and brilliant with sunshine, but in the vast drawing-room the air was pleasantly cool and agreeable. The blinds being blue, only a faint light came through them since they were down, and the cerulean atmosphere was almost religious in its feeling. Bella, ever sensitive to the unseen, in spite of her ignorance of psychic phenomenon felt the grave influence, but her aunt, being of a coarser fibre, bounced red-faced and hot into the room, openly cross at having been summoned to what was likely to prove a disagreeable interview.

"Henry will be here shortly," she said pettishly, "and he doesn't like to be kept waiting for his meals."

"On this occasion he must wait," said Bella dryly, "it will do him good."

"Don't speak of Henry in that tone, miss; you know he is the most amiable man in the world."

"Your speech about his impatience for dinner sounds like it. However, we need converse only for a few minutes. I understood you to say that this house is yours, Aunt Rosamund."

Mrs. Coppersley flopped down into one of the emerald arm-chairs and placed her pudgy hands on her stout knees. "It is," she said, glancing round the vari-coloured room with great pride. "The house is mine and the farm is mine, and Jabez's income of five hundred a year, well invested, is mine."

Bella grew pale. Mrs. Coppersley spoke with such conviction that she believed her to be telling the truth. "And what is left to me?" she demanded in a low tone, for the shock took away her breath.

"Your aunt's love," said Mrs. Coppersley, in a matter-of-fact way. "Jabez asked me to look after you; and so long as you behave yourself I shall do so."

Bella passed over this petty speech. "Do you mean to say that my father has left everything to you?" she asked pointedly.

"Everything," assented Mrs. Coppersley, with an air of triumph. "Jabez wasn't so rich as folk thought him, and although he had enough invested to give him five hundred a year, he had little ready cash. When my late husband died he left me a good sum. Jabez borrowed this and added it to his own, so that he might buy Bleacres. I agreed, but only on condition that Jabez should leave me the whole property when he died. I saw that the will was made, and Mr. Timson, the Cade Lane lawyer, is now proving it. When probate is obtained, my dear," ended Mrs. Coppersley amiably, "I shall marry Henry and will be happy for evermore."

"What about me?" gasped Bella, utterly overwhelmed.

"You can stay here until you marry," said Mrs. Coppersley coldly, "as I am a Christian woman, and wish to obey Jabez's request. He left you to me as a legacy, so I will look after you; only behave yourself."

"Do I ever do anything else?" asked Bella bitterly.

"Oh, dear me, yes," returned her aunt complacently. "You run after men."

Bella rose with a flushed cheek. "That is a lie."

Mrs. Coppersley rose, also in a violent rage and quite glad to vent her petty spite on one who could not retaliate. "Oh, I'm a liar, am I?" she said shrilly. "You call me a liar when I am only keeping you out of charity——"

"Stop!" Bella flung up her hand and spoke firmly. "You are not doing that, Aunt Rosamund. In one way or another you have persuaded my father into leaving you what is rightfully mine. But I shall see Mr. Timson, and read the will; you shall not have it your own way altogether."

Mrs. Coppersley snapped her large finger and thumb. "Go and see the will, by all means," she scoffed in a coarse voice; "you won't find any flaw in it, as I was careful that it should be properly drawn up. I have a perfect right to the farm, as my money helped to buy it."

"So be it. Keep the farm, but give me the income. That, at least, you have no right to retain."

"I have the right of possession, which is nine points of the law, miss," said Mrs. Coppersley violently, "and the will is plain enough. Jabez did right to leave the money to me, and not to a chit of a girl like you, who would waste your father's hard-earned money on that wastrel from London."

"Of whom are you talking?"

"Don't pretend ignorance, miss, for I won't have it. I mean Mr. Lister, as he calls himself, though I daresay he is no better than he should be."

"You have no right to say that."

"I'll say what I like and do what I like. Remember I am mistress; and as you depend entirely on me, miss, I order you to give up all idea of this Lister scamp and marry Silas Pence, who is——"

"I shall certainly not marry Silas Pence, or anyone but Cyril," said Bella in icy tones. "You have no right to interfere in——"

Mrs. Coppersley stamped and interrupted in her turn. "No right! no right!" she bellowed furiously. "I have every right. This house is mine, and the food you eat is mine. If I turned you out you would have to starve, for I am certain that your fine lover would have nothing to do with you. He's a bad man; your father said so."

"My father knew nothing of Mr. Lister."

"He knew that he was bad; he said as much. Why"—Mrs. Coppersley pointed a fat finger towards the round table in the centre of the room—"there's a photograph of him, and in a silver frame, too. What extravagance. How dare you spend my money on silver frames?"

She dashed forward to seize the photograph of Cyril, which Bella had brought down from her bedroom and had left unthinkingly on the table. Doubtless Mrs. Coppersley would have destroyed the portrait, but that Bella secured it before the good lady could reach the table. "Mr. Lister gave me this," said Bella, putting it behind her back; "frame and all; it is mine."

"And you dare to bring into the house the picture of a wicked profligate whom your father hated," roared Mrs. Coppersley, her red face shining with perspiration and her little eyes flashing with wrath.

"My father being so good himself," said Bella ironically, and feeling quite cool. "Mr. Lister is not a profligate, Aunt Rosamund, and you are a bad woman!"

Mrs. Coppersley gasped like a dying dolphin. "Me a bad woman!" she cried, puffing out her cheeks ludicrously; "me, when Henry says that I am the best woman in the world. And I'd have you know, Bella, that I'm a lady and no woman, miss—so there."

The girl, in spite of her grief and dismay, laughed right out. "Even a lady must be a woman," she

observed sarcastically.

"Leave my house! leave my house," panted Mrs. Coppersley.

"No. I shall remain here until I know if the will is correct. I shall stay here, as I say, and shall receive polite treatment. If I do not, I shall dispute the will, and make things unpleasant."

Mrs. Coppersley snapped her fingers. "That for all the harm you can do," she said coarsely. "The will stands good in law. I have made sure of that by consulting Mr. Timson, who drew it up. You can stay here for a week; at the end of that time you pack up and go."

"Where to, Aunt Rosamund?"

"That's your look out, miss. But you don't stay here to spoil my honeymoon with my darling Henry."

Bella shrugged her shoulders. It really was not worth while losing her temper with a person whose methods were so crude. The more enraged Mrs. Coppersley became, the cooler Bella felt. "Do you know what you are, Aunt Rosamund?" she remarked coolly. "You are a bully, and a petty tyrant. While my father was alive you cringed to him because you were afraid. Now that you think you have the whip hand of me, you vent your spite on one whom you think cannot retaliate. If I had the money, you would cringe to me; as you have it, you take every advantage of your position. But it won't do, Aunt Rosamund, for I am not the girl to submit to your insults. I shall stop here so long as it pleases me to stop, and if you make yourself disagreeable I shall know what to do."

Mrs. Coppersley's face grew slowly white, and her mouth opened and shut like a cod-fish. Had Bella wept, she would have gone on bullying triumphantly, but this cool, calm, scornful demeanour frightened her. At heart, like all bullies, she was a coward, and knew well that if it were known how she had ousted Bella from her rightful inheritance, that she would be unpopular. As Mrs. Coppersley liked to be popular, and hoped, by means of her marriage with Vand, her wrongfully obtained income, and her possession of Bleacres, to be the great lady of the neighbourhood, she did not wish to drive Bella to extremes. She therefore wiped her face, and hedged.

"You mustn't be angry with me Bella," she said in quieter tones, "I wish you well, my girl."

"You wish me just as much as suits yourself," retorted Bella coolly; "so far you have had everything your own way. Now I mean to look into things for myself. You can go now, and entertain your darling Henry. I shall not come to dinner. Send up Jane with some food to my bedroom."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," protested Mrs. Coppersley feebly, for her late rage had exhausted her, and she did not feel equal to fighting this pale, steady-eyed girl.

"I have told you what to do; so go and do it!" said Bella, without raising her voice, and looked Mrs. Coppersley squarely in the eyes.

The mistress of Bleacres tried to face down the gaze, but failed, and thoroughly cowed and beaten, in spite of her better position, she slowly retreated, muttering to herself a vengeance which she was unable to fulfil.

Left alone, Bella gave way. Pride had kept her up during the quarrel with her aunt, but now, secure from observation, she broke down and wept. Never before had she felt so lonely or so helpless. Cyril was away, and she could not confide in him, for even if he had been present the terms on which they had parted forbade confidences. There was Dora Ankers, the school-mistress certainly—a good friend, but a bad adviser, as she knew very little of the world. And there was no one else who could help her in the dilemma in which she was placed. She had no home, no friends, and—on the face of it—no lover. It was a terrible position for a girl who hitherto had never met with serious trouble.

In spite of the drawn-down blinds and the cool atmosphere of the room, Bella could scarcely breathe, so she moved to a side window, drew up the blind, and lifted the lower sash. Outside, the brilliance of the sunshine was almost blinding, and through the quivering heads, across the still, stiff stalks of the corn, for there was no wind, she could see the gaudy red of the scarecrow coat. The mere glint of the violent hue made her head ache, and she returned to the middle of the room to walk up and down wearily thinking of what was best to be done in the circumstances in which she found herself. The photograph of Cyril in its silver frame she replaced on the table. The much-loved face smiled encouragingly on her. At least, in her over-wrought state she thought so, and the thought aided her to beat down the many fears which assailed her.

While musingly walking the room, she became aware of a slight noise, and turned abruptly towards the window to see a black face grinning at her, with very white teeth. At once her thoughts reverted to the prophecy of Granny Tunks, and she felt a sudden thrill of dread as she saw that a black man actually had come to the Manor-house. For one moment, the negro and the fair, young girl looked steadfastly at one another, she filled with nervous fear, and he, curiously observant. After an almost imperceptible pause—which seemed hours to Bella—the man leaped through the window, before she could regain her voice to forbid his entrance.

"Where is my master?" he asked, in guttural tones, but in fairly good English.

Bella did not immediately reply, as her nerves fairly thrilled with the weird realisation of what the witch-wife had seen in the crystal, and even now she had not her voice under command. The negro was tall, bulky, and powerfully framed, coal-black from head to foot, with tightly curled hair and sharp, white teeth like those of a dog. Bella had never seen so huge and strong a man, but in spite of his formidable appearance, his dark eyes had a kindly look in their depths, and his movements were extremely gentle. Apparently his bark was worse than his bite, though his uncivilised looks were enough to awe the boldest. Plainly but roughly dressed in an old tweed suit, with brown shoes and a bowler hat, he was not noticeable, save for his stature and enormous virility. The sensation he produced on the girl was overpowering, yet it was not entirely one of fear. In spite of his cannibal looks and unexpected entrance, and imperious demand, she felt perfectly safe.

"I am Durgo!" explained the negro, annoyed by her silence, as was apparent from the frown which wrinkled his eye-brows. "Where is my master?"

"I don't know where your master is," she replied, finding her tongue with some difficulty. "I do not know who your master is."

"My master," said the negro, "is my master. He came here two weeks and some days ago, more or less. I have come to find him. Where is he?"

"How can I tell you when I do not even know his name?" asked Bella sharply.

"His name is——" Durgo was about to satisfy her curiosity, when he caught sight of the photograph in the silver frame, which still stood on the table. With a guttural cry of delight, he caught this up in his huge hands. "Oh, my master! my master!" he gurgled, in an ecstasy of delight.

Bella stepped back a pace with a scared look. "Mr. Lister your master?"

Durgo nodded, and coolly slipped the photograph, frame and all, into the breast pocket of his tweed coat. "He is here! I shall find him," he remarked. "Did my master see Captain Huxham?"

"Yes," she replied mechanically.

"Did my master and Captain Huxham quarrel?"

"Yes," she replied again, and still mechanically.

"And did my master get what he wanted?" demanded the negro, rolling his eyes.

"I don't know what Mr. Lister wanted," said Bella faintly; "you must explain yourself, and——"

"I explain nothing until I see my master," was Durgo's reply. "Perhaps Captain Huxham knows where my master is?"

"Captain Huxham is dead," she gasped.

Durgo shut his strong white teeth with a click. "Dead!" he repeated. "Ah—aha—aha; Captain Huxham is dead. Then my master——"

"No," cried Bella, covering her eyes. "I don't believe that Cyril killed my father—I don't believe it."

"Cyril! father!" repeated Durgo, looking at her curiously. "I must learn if——" He broke off suddenly and moved noiselessly to the window. Bella stretched a helpless hand to stay him, but, lightly vaulting out of doors, he disappeared in a moment. She rushed to the window and saw him running down the path towards the boundary channel. There was no chance of catching him up, as she saw well, and therefore drew back.

"The crystal! the crystal!" she muttered to herself, shivering. "Granny must know what it all means. I must see Granny, and ask about the crystal."

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## CHAPTER X

### A LOVERS' MEETING

Having made up her mind to seek an explanation from Mrs. Tunks regarding the vision of the negro in the crystal—that is, if the old woman really had beheld the same—Bella lost no time in executing her purpose. In two or three minutes she hastily reassumed her hat, cloak, and gloves, which she had removed while conversing with Mrs. Coppersley. Then taking her sunshade, she left the Manor-house by the front door. In the dining-room she could hear the refined tones of Vand and the coarse voice of Mrs. Coppersley, as they laughed and chattered in the most amiable manner. Evidently the pair had quite forgotten the recent tragedy, which had invested Bleacres with so sinister a reputation. With a nervous shiver—for the merriment seemed to be singularly ill-timed—Bella closed the door softly, and walked down the corn-path. Glancing right and left, and straight ahead, she could see nothing of the black man, who had appeared and disappeared so mysteriously. Like the witches in "Macbeth," he had made himself into thin air, and had



vanished.

Bella felt remarkably uneasy, and on the face of it had great cause to be so. Apparently, and she had not the least doubt of this, Durgo was Cyril's servant, who came in search of him. She rather wondered that her lover should have so uncivilised an attendant, and resolved that if they married she would endeavour to get him to dispense with the services of the man. But what struck her most, were the questions of Durgo. He evidently expected Cyril to meet Huxham and to have a quarrel. Also the stated time—of two weeks and some days—corresponded with the midnight visit of Cyril to the Manor-house. She recollected then that the visit was paid, not at midnight, but about eight o'clock, and saw in the mistake she had made the perplexity of her bewildered brain. With a groan she tried to clear her understanding by swift movement, for she felt unable to follow any regular train of thought.

Nevertheless, Durgo's innocent speech re-awakened her old suspicions, though she dreaded to recall them. What if, after all, Cyril had been the visitor of a fortnight since? In that case, since Huxham had been found dead, Cyril must have struck the blow. The horror of the mere idea, which placed a barrier between them, made her turn cold, and she resolutely put it from her. Cyril was the man she loved; the man in whom she had every reason to believe. He had solemnly sworn that he was innocent of her father's blood, and if she entertained a grain of affection for him she was bound to believe his word, even in the face of strong evidence to the contrary. He must be guiltless; he *was* guiltless, as she assured herself; his looks and words and bearing convinced her of his guiltlessness. In one way or another, the promised explanation would solve the difficult problem. But when would that explanation be made?

Then, again, Mrs. Tunks must know somewhat of the truth, since she had so truly foretold the coming of the negro. Bella, entirely lacking the mystical sense, had no belief in visions, and assumed that the old woman, for her own ends, had played a comedy, based upon actual fact. Taking this view, the girl walked towards the hut of the witch-wife, resolute to learn how much Mrs. Tunks knew concerning Cyril's past life. Something she must know, else she could not have hinted at the appearance of the negro. Bella herself was ignorant that her lover had so sinister a servant, but it seemed that Mrs. Tunks was better informed. And since the old hag knew so much, she must know more. A few questions would doubtless bring forth the information, and then Bella felt that she would know how to act. But the position was extremely difficult, and the skein of life very tangled.

Thinking in this desultory way, she reached the end of the corn-field, and was about to turn along the pathway leading to the hut, when she heard her name called anxiously. Looking up, she saw Dora Ankers on the hither side of the boundary channel.

"Oh, Bella! I am so glad to see you," sang out the Marshely school-mistress volubly. "I really didn't want to go to the Manor and meet that horrid aunt of yours. Come with me, dear; he is waiting at my cottage."

"Who is waiting?" demanded Bella, greatly surprised by this address.

"Oh, my dear, as if to a girl in love there is any he but the one he in the world," said Dora, who was sentimental and impatient.

"Do you mean to say that Mr. Lister—"

"Mr. Lister? Oh, you cruel-hearted girl: do you call him that?"

"I mean Cyril," said Bella hurriedly; "is he—"

"Yes, he is. He won't come to the Manor, and can't very well see you in his own rooms, as that nasty-minded Mrs. Block might say things. She is such a gossip you know. In despair he came to me, poor dear, so I asked him to wait in my sitting-room while I came for you."

Bella drew herself up stiffly. She did not desire to appear too willing to obey the summons of her lover. Womanlike, she wished him to say that he was in the wrong, so that her pride might be saved. "I am going to Mrs. Tunks'."

"What for?" asked Dora, bluntly.

"Never mind," replied Miss Huxham, unwilling to confess that she was dealing with uncanny things beyond the veil. "I must go."

Dora tripped lightly across the narrow planks, and slipped her arm within that of her friend. "You shall do nothing of the sort, you cold thing," she declared. "Poor Mr. Lister is quite broken-hearted by the way in which you have treated him."

"Oh!" Bella became stiffer than ever. "Has he said—"

"He has said nothing! he is too much a man to say anything. But I saw his poor, pale, peaked face, and—"

"Does he look ill?" Bella was seized with a sudden qualm.

"Ill?" Miss Ankers' gestures and looks became eloquent. "Dear, he is dying."

"Oh, Dora!" Miss Huxham kilted up her skirts and fairly ran across the planks. "Why didn't you come for me before?"

"You don't seem to be in a hurry to come now," laughed Dora, crossing in her turn; "yet the poor, dear fellow is dying—to see you."

"Where has he been all this time?"

"I'm sure I don't know, dear. He came straight from London last night, and went to my cottage this morning to see me. I was in church, so he came again in the afternoon, and asked me to help him. Oh, my dear, he is handsome, and I felt that I could do anything for him. I wish he had made love to me," sighed the romantic school-mistress; "but all he did, was to ask me to bring you to my cottage for an interview. So come, dear, come, and save the poor darling from an early grave."

Bella needed no urging, for she was genuinely concerned over the news, and sped towards Marshely like a fawn, with Miss Ankers at her heels. Dora had no difficulty in keeping up, as she was a slim, small, dainty woman, more like a fairy than mere flesh and blood. In spite of her age, and she confessed to thirty-five, she had a pink-and-white skin, golden hair, and clear blue eyes. Dressed as she was, in pale blue, with many ribbons and ornaments, she looked like a well-arrayed doll, just out of a satin-lined box. But for all her innocent looks, Miss Ankers was a stern school-mistress, and during business hours behaved with great severity. Out of them, however, she presented herself to the village world in her true colours, as a sentimental, airy, sweet-tempered little creature, who was everybody's friend and nobody's enemy. Bella was always fond of her, but at this moment felt more attached to her than ever—as she had every reason to be, seeing that Miss Ankers had given up her snug sitting-room for a lovers' meeting, and had actually brought that meeting about.

"You're my good angel, Dora," said Bella, kissing her friend, as they drew near the cottage, on the outskirts of Marshely.

"Oh, what waste!" remonstrated Dora, opening her china-blue eyes to their widest. "What will Mr. Lister say to your throwing away kisses on me?"

Bella laughed, for her heart had grown unexpectedly light. She had a firm belief that all misunderstandings were about to be cleared up between her lover and herself. Also she acknowledged to herself, with great and thankful joy, that Cyril, in spite of her misgivings, had returned to her. Seeing how she had doubted and accused him, he might have departed for ever, and with every reason for such a course. But apparently he loved her so devotedly that he was willing to remain and explain himself. It was no wonder that Bella's heart leaped for joy, since the cloud, which had for so long overshadowed the sunshine of love, was about to be dissipated. She almost danced into Ankers' small garden.

"Mr. Lister is in the sitting-room dear," said that arch-plotter, pushing her companion into the cottage. "You'll find him there. I have to go to the church to run over the evening hymns."

Miss Huxham knew that this was a mere excuse, but loved Dora all the more for making it. Miss Ankers was much too romantic to mar the meeting by presenting herself as an inconvenient third. Therefore she turned away laughing, and Bella, anxious to lose no moment of joy, entered the small sitting-room with a bright, expectant smile. It died away at the sight of Lister's sombre face.

The young man was seated in an arm-chair, with a newspaper lying on his knees. But he was not reading, as his eyes were fixed darkly on the door through which Bella had just entered. For the instant, he did not appear to be aware of her presence; then he rose gravely and bowed. Even in the midst of her dismay at this reception, Bella was woman enough to note how spruce, and trim, and singularly handsome he looked. Certainly his face was grave and pale, but beyond this she could not see the dying looks which Dora had so eloquently described. When they came face to face an embarrassing silence ensued. Bella was the first to speak.

"Are you not pleased to see me, Cyril?" she faltered.

"I am very pleased," he returned gravely, and pushed forward a chair. "Will you not be seated?"

"Not until you explain why you receive me in this way," she declared indignantly. "You send for me, and I come at once only to find displeased looks."

"Our last interview explains my looks, Bella."

"No, it doesn't," she cried, up in arms at once; "I admitted my fault in suspecting you then, and asked your pardon. You left me without a kiss, and—and——" She stopped with an angry gesture. "It seems to me that I am the one who has the right to be displeased."

"No," said Lister, decidedly. "I love you very dearly, as you know; but——"

"How can I tell that you love me dearly?"

"My desire to meet you again shows that I do. Many a man would have left you for ever on learning, as I did, your cruel suspicions. You have no right to be displeased, as you said a moment since. I am the wronged person, for if you really loved me you would believe nothing against me."

"I do not; I do not."

"But you did."

"Only for a single moment. Oh!"—Bella uttered a cry of despair—"I am only a human being, and I saw you—as I thought—entering the house. I knew that on my account you had quarrelled with my father, so what could I think but that you had killed him? I don't pretend to be an angel." She broke off and sat down, pressing her hands hard together, then looked up with feigned self-control. "We discussed all this before," she said coldly, "did you invite me here to ask me to defend myself again?"

"No. I asked you here to learn from your own lips that you believe me to be guiltless."

"I do. I swear I do." Bella rose in her excitement. "And I ask your pardon for my wicked suspicions."

"Bella!" He sprang forward and caught her hands within his own. "Then you really and truly love me?"

"If you had gone away," she breathed faintly in his ear, "I should have died."

Cyril drew her closely to his breast. "My darling," he whispered, smoothing her hair, "I love you too dearly to leave you. I ask your pardon for my harsh words. On the face of it, I don't see what you could do but suspect me. It was unreasonable for me to ask you to do otherwise. That you believe my mere word, in spite of the strong evidence against me, shows that you love me as dearly and strongly as I love you. So far, all that is right. We trust one another."

"Wholly. Entirely. To the death we trust one another."

"That is well." Cyril sat down in the arm-chair, and drew Bella on to his knees. "Unity is strength. With you by my side I am not afraid."

"Then you have been afraid?" she asked softly.

"Of losing your love—yes. But now I am satisfied on that point, there is another thing that makes me afraid."

"What is it?"

"I may be accused of this murder. Other people may have seen me, as you saw me, dear."

"Then it *was* you?" she gasped.

"No, no! I have explained myself. If necessary, I can put forward an *alibi*."

"Who was the man then?"

"I can't tell you that." Cyril pushed her away, and rose much agitated.

"Then you know?" Bella stood back from him doubtfully.

"I can't be sure. I think—that is, I fancy—Bella, don't ask me anything just now. Later I may be able to explain."

"And you will explain?"

"If it be possible. Remember, I said that I *might* be able to explain, but of this I cannot be certain."

"I do not understand," sighed the girl, seating herself again. "Cyril, has this matter anything to do with you?"

"The matter of the murder?"

"Yes. I don't mean to ask if you are guilty, as I know you are not. But are you connected in any way with the matter?"

"No," he rejoined promptly, "if I were, I should be an accomplice after the fact. All the same——" He paused, looking paler than ever, and his face became peaked and haggard. "Don't ask me anything yet," he murmured.

"I am willing to trust you, dear," said Bella quietly, "but, as you remarked yourself some time ago, other people——"

He interrupted her. "Other people?"

"Yes. Some one else did see you on that evening."

"The person saw my double," corrected Cyril. "I was in London, as I told you, and as I can prove. Who is this person?"

"Silas Pence."

"Ah!" Lister's hands clenched. "He hates me because you are to be my wife. He will go to the police."

"I don't think so," said Bella slowly. "He threatened to go, but as yet he has held his tongue."

"Why, when he hates me so?"

"I think—I think," said Bella slowly, "that Mr. Pence knows more about this matter than he chooses to admit."

Cyril uttered an exclamation. "Do you suspect him?"

"Not of the murder," she replied promptly; "he is too weak and timid a creature to commit a crime. But I know that he was poor; now he is unexpectedly rich, and we are aware," she added with emphasis, "that one hundred pounds was stolen from my father's safe on the night of the murder."

"But surely you do not connect a harmless man, like Pence, with the crime?"

"I say nothing, because I know nothing, Cyril. But if Mr. Pence is entirely innocent, why does he not accuse you, whom he hates."

"He has no grounds to go upon, dear."

Bella shook her head. "He thinks that he has," she answered, "as he believed it was you he saw when he met your double at the boundary channel. Since he would like to see you in trouble, the very fact that he delays telling the police shows that his own conscience is not easy."

"It is strange," assented Lister. "However, if he does accuse me, I can prove an *alibi*."

"But what about your double?"

The young man turned away abruptly to the window. "I can say nothing on that point at present."

"When will you explain?"

"I can't say; sooner or later." Lister, with his hands in his pockets, looked out of the window as though to avoid further questioning. This behaviour puzzled Bella, as she felt sure that Cyril could tell her much if inclined to do so. But it was odd that he should so decline. She abruptly reverted to an earlier thought in her mind. "You did not tell me that you had a negro servant called Durgo."

Lister wheeled sharply. "I have no servant, negro or otherwise," he said in a decisive tone. "Why do you say that?"

Bella, wondering still more, gave him details, which Cyril heard with a perplexed frown. He made no comment until she had finished. "You say that this man recognised my portrait. In that case I can guess"—he did not finish his sentence, but became paler than ever.

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## CHAPTER XI

### A RECOGNITION

Bella found the interviews with Cyril eminently unsatisfactory. It was perfectly plain that he entertained strong suspicions regarding the unknown person whom she termed his double. But even when questioned point-blank he declined to explain himself. Yet if Lister knew of someone who resembled him more or less closely he surely could place his hand on that someone. When he did so the assassin of Captain Huxham would speedily be found. This being the case it was strange that Cyril should hesitate, and again and again Bella questioned him bluntly, only to find him more determined than ever to keep his own counsel. Under these circumstances it was useless to prolong the conversation, and the girl left the cottage feeling extremely despondent. It seemed to her that the problem would never be solved, in spite of the certainty she entertained that Cyril could solve it if he so wished.

Nor did Bella feel any brighter when she returned to the Manor, for Mrs. Coppersley chose to take umbrage at her niece's absence. Bella declined to say where she had been, and dismissed the matter in a few cold words. Not feeling sure of her ground, Mrs. Coppersley retreated for the time being, but next day returned to the attack with the evident object of making the Manor-house too hot for the girl. Bella was strong enough to quell open mutiny on the part of her aunt, but she could not defend herself against incessant nagging. Since the death of her brother, Mrs. Coppersley had become as bold as hitherto she had been meek, and in many skilful ways contrived to make her niece feel thoroughly uncomfortable. As Bella had quite enough to bear without being taxed further with these petty worries she became restive, and on the third day of hostilities demanded what her aunt meant by behaving so aggressively. Mrs. Coppersley, better at ambushes than in open warfare, would have shirked the battle, but Bella forced the quarrel since it was absolutely necessary to bring matters to a head.

"You never leave me alone, Aunt Rosamund," she complained wearily.

"Because you are a drone," retorted Mrs. Coppersley. "You eat, yet you do not work. And as St. Paul says—"

"I don't wish to hear what St. Paul says, thank you."

"It would be better if you did. I have your good at heart."

"Nothing of the sort; you merely wish to get rid of me."

Mrs. Coppersley grew vividly red, but did not make any denial. "Why should I not?" she cried loudly. "You treat me as though I were dirt under your feet, miss. Who are you to behave like this, I should like to know?"

"I am my father's daughter," said Bella, very distinctly, "who have been cheated out of my inheritance."

"I'll make you prove those words," said Mrs. Coppersley, turning from scarlet to white. "Go and see Mr. Timson in Cade Lane, and you will find everything has been done to make the will legal."

"I am quite sure of that, Aunt Rosamund, as you are too clever a woman to risk losing your spoil. But you have cheated me by inducing my father to disinherit me in your favour."

"I did not! I did not!" Mrs. Coppersley stamped wrathfully. "Your father borrowed money from me to pay for the farm ten years ago. I lent it on condition that I inherited Bleacres. I told you this before, and——"

"That will do," interrupted Bella imperiously. "I shall see Mr. Timson, and learn for certain if what you have told me is correct. Meantime, as it is quite impossible for me to remain in the house with you, I shall go and stay with Dora Ankers."

"She won't have you," taunted Mrs. Coppersley.

"I have already arranged to live with her until I am married."

"Then you are going to marry that wastrel?"

"I don't know who you mean."

"Mr. Lister, the man who was so hated by your father."

"Whether I marry Mr. Lister or not is my business," said Bella, drily; "and so far as I can learn, my father had no reason to hate him. Do you know why he did so, Aunt Rosamund?"

"No," said Mrs. Coppersley reluctantly, for she would have dearly liked to put a spoke in Bella's wheel, as the saying is. "Jabez's life before he came here was not known to me. But I am quite sure that it was shady, and——"

Bella interrupted again. "Leave the dead alone. You are benefiting by my father's work, whatever it might have been, and have no call to abuse him."

"I only got my own money back," said Mrs. Coppersley defiantly; "but if you leave my house you leave it for ever. I wash my hands of you."

"I am quite content that it should be so," said Bella icily; "but I can't leave my home penniless. Give me fifty pounds until such time as I can see Mr. Timson and learn how I stand."

"What?" Mrs. Coppersley became shrill in her anger. "Give you money to bring lawsuits against me?"

Bella looked at her very directly. "If everything is fair and square, as you say," she observed severely, "there is no danger of lawsuits. Come, Aunt Rosamund, I wish to leave Bleacres this afternoon. Give me the money."

"No!" shouted the older woman, and sat down with folded arms and a dogged expression. "You get no money from me."

Bella was perplexed. She could not use violence, and her aunt seemed very determined. For the moment she was nonplussed, and scarcely knew what to say. But at this moment Henry Vand entered. The conversation had taken place in the study, and Vand came into the room from the hall. Apparently he had just entered the house. In fact, he explained as much, and also confessed calmly that he had listened.

"I heard your voices raised," he said quietly, "and knowing Rosamund's violent temper I waited, so that I might interfere on your behalf, Miss Huxham."

"I want no interference," said Mrs. Coppersley jealousy. "I can manage my own business."

"That may be," said the young man drily, "but you seem to forget that I am your husband."

"Husband!" echoed Bella amazed.

"Yes," said Vand; while Mrs. Coppersley—or rather Mrs. Vand—looked sullenly at the floor. "We have been married for three months, secretly."

"Why secretly?" asked Bella, still wondering at the news.

"That's our business," said her aunt insolently.

"Pardon me, Rosamund," said Vand, who was as polite as his wife was rude. "It is only fair that Miss Huxham should understand the position."

"Have it your own way, then," muttered Mrs. Vand, tossing her head, "only make her understand

that I have had enough of her airs and graces. She can clear out of our house as soon as she likes, and leave us to ourselves."

"She is willing to do that for fifty pounds," said Vand politely.

"I shan't give her that amount."

"You are quite right, Rosamund; you will give Miss Huxham a cheque for one hundred pounds."

"Are you out of your senses?" raged his wife, starting to her feet.

"I don't want so much as that, Mr. Vand," said Bella, pleased to think that her new uncle by marriage was taking her part.

"It is a mere question of justice, Miss Huxham. My wife has inherited the Solitary Farm, so it is only right that she should recompense you."

"Mind," said Bella, suddenly, and thinking that this might be a bribe, "if I find anything wrong when I see Mr. Timson I shall bring an action."

"I told you so, Henry," remarked Mrs. Vand triumphantly.

"I have seen the will and the lawyer," said the man quietly, "and everything is correct. There is no flaw. With regard to my marriage, Miss Huxham, I agreed to a secret ceremony since your late father was opposed to my courtship of your aunt. But the time has now come to proclaim the marriage, so I have brought my luggage here to-day."

"And that is why my aunt wishes me to leave the house," said Bella, with a curling lip.

Vand, who was much the most self-controlled of the trio, looked at her very straightly. "You can come or stay as you please," he said gently. "I am quite willing that you should remain."

"Oh," cried Mrs. Vand furiously, "so you want her to remain. Perhaps you are in love with her; perhaps you would like to——"

"Aunt," interrupted Bella, blushing with annoyance, "how can you talk so foolishly. Mr. Vand loves you, or he would not have married you. As for me, I am going away to Dora's as soon as you give me the money."

"Not one penny."

Vand gazed steadily at the furious woman. In spite of his club foot he was certainly handsome, and looked as refined as his wife looked coarse. He must have had good blood in his veins in spite of his lowly birth, and, without appearing to do so, managed, on this occasion at least, to dominate the more animal nature. Bella neither liked nor disliked the cripple, but she could not help admiring the skilful way in which he mastered her aunt. Perhaps he magnetised her with his large blue eyes or the calmness of his manner may have had a soothing effect. But, whatever was the cause, Mrs. Vand winced under his silent gaze and lowered her voice, as she consented unexpectedly to do what he suggested. "I shall give Bella a cheque for one hundred pounds on condition that she does not trouble me again," she grumbled, going to the desk with an affectation of generosity.

"You seem to hate me so much that there is no need for me to see you any more," said Bella bitterly.

"But I warn you that if the will is not right I shall take steps to recover the farm, which I look upon as my property."

"It is not your property, it is mine; and Jabez's income also," said Mrs. Vand, looking up from the cheque she was writing, "and if you don't promise to leave things alone you shan't have the money."

"I refuse to sell my heritage for a mess of potage," cried Bella, impetuously.

"There is no need that you should," interposed Vand gently. "Rosamund, sign the cheque."

Mrs. Vand scowled, hesitated, but finally did as she was ordered, throwing it on the floor afterwards in silent fury. Her husband picked it up and handed it, with a bow, to Bella.

"There you are, Miss Huxham," he said with marked courtesy. "I hope you will be happy at Miss Ankers'. So far as I am aware, everything has been left to my wife, but later I shall endeavour to make some arrangement with Rosamund by which you will be benefited. And I beg of you not to leave this house in anger."

"I shall make no arrangement, now or hereafter," cried Mrs. Vand. "Bella has received all that she will receive. For my part, I'm glad to see the back of her," and with a red face and a scornful look she flounced out of the room, much to the girl's relief.

"I wonder why my aunt hates me so?" she asked Vand with a piteous look. "I have never done her any harm."

"She only gives way to her temper, Miss Huxham," said the cripple soothingly, "and doesn't mean half she says. Don't trouble any more about Rosamund. I am your friend. You will shake hands, will you not?"

Bella did not hesitate to take the hand extended to her, as she admitted silently that if Vand had not interposed she would not have received the money. Besides, her new relative throughout had proved himself to be so courteous and thoughtful that she had no reason to mistrust him. Howsoever Mrs. Vand had become possessed of the farm and income of the late Captain Huxham, her husband was at least innocent. "But I do not bind myself to take no steps if necessary to recover Bleacres," Bella warned the young man, as she shook his hand. "You understand that?"

"Perfectly; and indeed, if Rosamund has come wrongfully by the estate she must surrender it. Still, Miss Huxham, you cannot expect me to doubt my own wife, especially as Rosamund has been good enough to marry a cripple such as I am."

"I think, without flattery to you," said Bella, walking towards the door, "that my aunt has got the best of the bargain," and the last thing she saw when throwing a glance over her shoulder was Vand blushing crimson at the unusual compliment. But Bella meant what she said, as even ease and wealth were hardly purchased by marriage with a furious, coarse-natured woman such as Rosamund Vand. The girl wondered how she had ever come to have such an aunt; she might have wondered also how she ever came to have a parent so common and ruffianly as her late father had been.

That same afternoon Bella packed all her belongings and had them carried by Tunks to the hither side of the boundary channel. There they were placed on a hand-cart and wheeled to Miss Ankers' cottage. Mrs. Vand discreetly kept out of the way when Bella departed, or perhaps her husband insisted that she should not drive forth the girl with insults, as she certainly would have done. At all events she remained invisible, and it was Vand alone who said good-bye to the homeless girl. Bella felt a pang when she looked back along the narrow path of the corn-fields to see a stranger standing in the doorway. She was certain of one thing—that Mrs. Vand had found a master, and that for all his quietness and polite ways her husband would not allow her to have her own way as she had hitherto done. Doubtless her aunt had deemed Vand would be as harmless and innocuous as the scarlet-coated scarecrow, of which Bella caught a last glimpse; but there was no doubt in the girl's mind as to which of the happy pair would rule the house. Mrs. Vand's coarse bullying could do very little against the quiet persistence of a polite man, who was determined to govern. So far as Bella knew from Huxham, her aunt had ruled her first husband with a rod of iron; now she was about to be governed in her turn. "And much good may it do her," thought Bella, who was much too human to be forgiving.

Dora was delighted that her best friend should board with her, and received Miss Huxham with open arms. After tea, the two arranged Bella's bedroom to their satisfaction and unpacked her boxes. Then they had a talk as to the advisability of going to Cade Lane for the purpose of questioning Mr. Timson regarding the will. "You should attend to the matter at once, my dear," said Dora, who was extremely practical for all her doll-like looks. "Lose no time, for I am certain that your aunt has employed some trickery in getting possession of the property."

"I shall consult Cyril first," said Bella wearily, and little more was said on that night, as the girl was quite worn out with the events of the day.

Next morning Miss Ankers had to teach in school as usual, and Bella was left to her own devices. She assisted Dora's small servant to tidy the rooms and make the beds, after which she put on her hat and walked into the village to make some small purchases. Also—and this was by Dora's advice—she saw the manager of the small local bank, and opened an account with him by paying in her aunt's cheque for one hundred pounds. The manager courteously promised to send the cheque to London, and to notify Bella when it was honoured. Miss Huxham was somewhat relieved at this promise, as she did not trust her aunt, and knew that she was quite capable of stopping the cheque, especially when she had not given it with a good grace. But Bella need not have troubled her head; the cheque was duly honoured, as Mr. Henry Vand saw to that.

Having dispatched her business, Bella strolled out of the village, and found herself on the common. This was a vast expanse overgrown with gorse and broom, and with a miniature forest of saplings springing from an undergrowth of fern and bracken. Through this fairy wood, as some people called it, narrow paths were cut, so that one could wander for hours in and out of a kind of natural labyrinth. The saplings were scarcely six feet in height, so that an extra tall man could look over the green sea of vegetation. Bella loved this place, as she had often sauntered therein with Dora, and indeed with Cyril also. The wonderful tangle of fern and bracken and many-hued grasses, the brilliant colouring of flowers, and the fecund blossoming of the golden broom, made the common a home of delight. Bella walked meditatively through the cool green paths, and emerged at intervals on to wide, waste spaces where the purple heather grew thickly. Butterflies floated through the still air, bumble-bees visited the flowers, and the birds sang as in an enchanted garden. Bella stopped to hear the silvery carol of an invisible lark, for the bird, raining its music lavishly from the sky, was quite hidden by the dazzle of sunshine. As she paused, she felt a light hand touch her shoulder, and turned with a glad cry.

"Oh, Cyril, how you startled me!" she said, pleased with the unexpected encounter. "I am so glad to see you, dear. Have you heard——"

Lister threw himself contentedly on the fragrant heather, and drew Bella down by his side. "I have heard, and I am very angry," he said hotly. "Dear, what does your aunt mean by treating you in this way?"

Bella shrugged her shoulders. "I expect she wants the Manor to herself now that she is married. Who told you?"

"Miss Ankers. I met her coming out of school. She told me that you were returning to dinner, so I came to fetch you. I guessed that I should find you here, and so——" he waved his hand lazily.

"I am glad to see you," said Bella again, "but you look ill, dear."

Cyril shrugged his shoulders. "I am worried about this mysterious double of mine," he muttered, and lying full length on the burnt grass he tilted his hat over his eyes. He did indeed look ill, for his face was very pale and lines appeared on his forehead which should not have been there at his age. In some extraordinary way he seemed to have aged, as it were, in a moment. "I am very much worried," he sighed; "everything is going wrong. Now this abominable treatment to which your aunt has subjected you to makes things doubly difficult for me."

"In what way?" asked Bella, sitting up and hugging her knees.

"I don't know how to move," explained the young man. "While you were safe at Bleacres with your aunt I could wait. But now that you have no home, I should like to marry you at once." He sighed again. "But that is impossible, dear, owing to circumstances."

"You need not trouble about me," said Bella promptly. "I have got one hundred pounds, and I am quite glad to be away from Aunt Rosamund's incessant nagging. I can live with Dora and pay my way until such time as you can marry me."

"Heaven only knows when I can marry you!" groaned Cyril dismally.

"I can tell you," said Bella, removing the hat from his anxious face in order to look into his eyes; "as soon as you are frank with me."

"I have come to be frank with you," said Lister reluctantly.

"It sounds like it."

"My dear"—he sat up to speak more forcibly—"when I am frank you will be as unhappy as I am."

"What do you mean?"

"Mean? I scarcely know what I mean—that is, I scarcely dare put my thoughts into words. Of course, I may be wrong. I sincerely trust that I am wrong. All the same, there is no denying that I have grave grounds for my belief."

"What belief?" Bella asked the question in scared tones, as Cyril looked so wretched.

He did not reply at once, but moved restlessly about, evidently bracing himself to speak plainly. Even when he did open his mouth he was evasive. "I have an idea that my double—that is, the man who was mistaken by you and Pence for me on that night—might be—oh!"—he rested his head between his hands with a groan—"I dare not tell you who he might be."

"You have some idea?"

"Yes; I wish I hadn't."

"Is it anyone I know?"

"No."

"Is it——"

"Oh, my dear! don't ask questions which I dare not answer."

"You must answer," said Bella firmly. "I must share your griefs as well as sorrows. Tell me everything. Go on, Cyril, tell me quickly!"

"Hush!" Lister started to his feet with an alarmed look. "What's that? I swear that I heard a rustling in the underwood. Someone is listening." He glanced around anxiously, looking pale and nervous. Bella rose at the same time and caught his hand to give him courage, although she could not understand what he meant by his words and looks.

But the two had not to wait long. A distant crackling was heard, and in a moment or so a tall bulky man stepped from out the underwood.

"Durgo!" breathed Bella, recognising the negro.

He ran towards Cyril and dropped on his knees. "My master!" he cried; then leaped up. "You are not Edwin Lister," he growled with widely open eyes.

"My father! my father!" groaned Cyril in despair. "I knew it; I was certain of it. Now I know the worst," and he sat down to hide his face.

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## CHAPTER XII



## CYRIL'S STORY

Bella looked from the astonished Durgo to the despairing Lister, and wondered what the scene meant. That the matter at issue was serious Cyril's demeanour gave her fully to understand. But what the matter might be she could not guess, save that it had something to do with this mysterious double who had caused all the commotion. The negro appeared to be as puzzled as herself, and stared at the seated figure with an open mouth, scratching his woolly head meanwhile.

"Not my master, but like my master," he muttered, staring hard, and speaking in his usual guttural manner but not in the usual negro dialect, so rude and clipped. "If you're not my master, Edwin Lister," he added, addressing himself to the young man, "who are you, sir?"

"Answer him, Cyril," said Bella, seeing that her lover did not speak. "Did you ever see this man before?"

Lister looked up, pale and hollow-eyed. "Never," he said briefly.

"Did you ever meet Mr. Lister before?" Bella asked the negro.

"Lister! Lister!" gasped Durgo, retreating a step. "Is this young gentleman called Lister?"

"Cyril Lister," said that young man.

"But my master had no son."

"I am his son. Edwin Lister is my father."

"Oh!" A sudden light broke over Bella's face, and she clapped her hands. "And your double?"

"Yes," said Cyril in low tones; "now you can guess how afraid I was to lay my suspicions before you."

"No," she said boldly. "Why you should be afraid I cannot guess."

Cyril rose slowly, laid two heavy hands on her shoulders and looked directly into her eyes. "My dear," he said in a hard voice, "can you not understand that this double was my father, who resembled me so closely that this man"—he jerked back his head towards the still staring negro—"mistook me for him."

"Well," said Bella, inquiringly.

"Well," repeated Lister, impatiently, "You thought that I had committed the murder, but now that you know the truth——"

Bella shook herself free and grew pale. "It was your father who struck the blow!" she said in a low, horrified tone.

"Yes. And if my father killed your father, how can we marry?"

There was a dead silence, and the unfortunate lovers looked at one another with white faces. If Cyril's surmise was true, a barrier had indeed been placed between them, and for the moment they saw no chance of over-leaping it. Quite oblivious of Durgo, they stared until the black man grew impatient of the silence.

"What does this mean?" he growled, looking from one to the other. "I come to find my master, Edwin Lister, and he is not here. But I find one who calls himself the son of my master, Edwin Lister." He peered into Cyril's face. "My master never told me that he had a son, and yet"—he looked again—"I believe that you are my master's son."

"Am I so like my father, then?" asked Cyril smiling faintly.

Durgo struck his huge hands together. "The same in every way," he said firmly; "figure and face and colour and walk. Even the clothes"—he ran his eyes over Cyril's grey suit—"yes, even the clothes."

"Oh!" It was Bella who spoke. "Cyril, do you remember that the grey clothes worn by your father on that night aided me to make a mistake?"

Lister nodded. "That was a suit of mine," he said, "made for me. When my father came home from Nigeria he had no ready-made clothes, so he borrowed that suit until he could get fitted out in civilised garments. Well?"

Cyril addressed this last question to Durgo, who had started violently when Nigeria was mentioned.

"I am a Nigerian," he said in reply to the inquiry. "I was with your father at Ogrude, on the Cross River, for years. I came with him to London three months ago; but my master never said that he had a son."

"He had his reasons for keeping silence, no doubt," said Cyril quietly; "but I never saw you, Durgo, nor did I hear my father mention you."

"Yet you know my name," said the man suspiciously.

"Only because Miss Huxham mentioned it when you appeared just now."

"And I mentioned it to you before," Bella reminded him. "I told you how Durgo entered the Bleacres drawing-room and took your photograph, frame and all, from his pocket, and handed it to the girl."

"I thought that it was one of my master, Edwin Lister, taken when he was younger," he said simply, "but I see——"

"Yes! yes!" broke in Cyril impatiently. "I know what you see. I am a younger edition of my father."

"Yes! yes! yes!" cried Durgo, staring again. "Never did I see two so alike."

Bella glanced at the photograph and slipped it into her pocket. Her face was pearly white, and she dreaded the full explanation of what was to come. "We are still perplexed," she said quietly, and controlling herself with great difficulty. "You know nothing of Durgo, and he knows nothing of you. I think it will be best for us to sit down and discuss the matter quietly."

"I agree with you," said Cyril, dropping down promptly. "Durgo, tell your story and then I shall tell mine. When we each know what the other knows, we may be able to arrive at some conclusion."

"Regarding the murder," said Bella. "Perhaps," she added hopefully, "perhaps your father did not kill mine after all."

"I fear he did," said Cyril heavily. "Remember what was said at the inquest about the West African knife with which the crime was committed. Nigeria is in West Africa."

"My master had no knife of that sort," said Durgo bluntly.

"Have you a description of the knife," asked Bella.

"I read it in the newspapers," said the negro. "When you told me of your father's death, I read the papers."

"You can read."

"I can read and write and do many things," said Durgo quietly. "I have a black skin, but my education has not been neglected."

"So I should think from the way in which you speak English."

"The missionaries taught me much, and Edwin Lister taught me the rest."

Cyril frowned. "I notice that you do not say 'Mister' when you speak of my father," he said pointedly.

"I am a chief and the son of a chief," said Durgo proudly. "And for love of your father, who saved my life, I left my tribe and came with him. I called him master as a title of honour because I loved him, so why should I not say Edwin Lister?"

Cyril, with the white man's inborn superiority, objected to this familiarity, and, but that Durgo's services were necessary to the unravelling of the mystery, would have pointed this out. As it was, he simply nodded and asked the black man to be more explicit. Durgo sat down and complied without any argument. His manners for a negro were singularly good.

"There is not much to tell," he said in his guttural tones. "Edwin Lister was my friend and a trader in Nigeria, my country. He saved my life from a lion and won my gratitude. I helped him with his trading and left my tribe to do so. We heard of a treasure in the wilds of my country, and wished to fit out an expedition to find that treasure. Edwin Lister did, that is, and I was glad to do as he desired. But we required money, and it could not be had. Edwin Lister then thought of an old friend of his, Captain Huxham, who had also been in Nigeria——"

"My father!" cried Bella, startled.

"Yes, missy," said Durgo, bending his head towards her with grave respect. "He was well known in Nigeria many years ago, as he had a river steamer there. Edwin Lister then came to London with me, and afterwards came to see Captain Huxham here. That was some weeks ago, and he promised me to return. As he did not, I came down and then heard of the murder of Captain Huxham. But where is my master, Edwin Lister?" and Durgo looked from one to the other.

"Have you not seen him since?" asked Cyril anxiously.

"No." Durgo shook his head profoundly.

"What do you think has become of him?" asked Cyril, still white.

Durgo reflected. "I think," he said gravely, "that Edwin Lister killed Captain Huxham and ran away. Soon he will write to me and I can join him. Then we can return to Nigeria and hunt for the treasure."

"But why should Mr. Lister kill my father?" asked Bella.

"He wanted money," said Durgo simply. "If Captain Huxham would not give the money, Edwin Lister would kill him. It is quite simple. But I wish," added the negro wisely, "that my master had

let me kill Captain Huxham."

"Would you have done so?" cried Bella, horrified.

Durgo looked up in surprise. "Oh, yes, if Edwin Lister had wished it."

Cyril and the girl looked at one another. Durgo was still a savage, in spite of the veneer of education and civilisation, which the missionaries had given him. He would have killed Huxham as easily as he would have killed a fly. Perhaps also Edwin Lister had become de-civilised, and had acted in the same way.

"But what has become of my father?" asked Cyril.

"You do not know?" inquired Durgo politely.

Cyril shook his head. "I do not know," he said gloomily, "unless, as you say, he murdered Huxham to get money, and then ran away into hiding. He may be on the Continent—in Paris."

"In that case, I shall hear from him soon," said Durgo, rising. "When I do, I shall let you know."

"Come back," said Cyril, in an even tone, as Durgo was about to stalk away, "it is necessary for me to have your assistance."

"In what?" asked Durgo, looking over his huge shoulder.

"In finding my father."

"But if he is in Paris, I can go there."

"Have you the money?"

"I have plenty of money," said the negro with gravity. "I have my own money, so it is easy for me to search for my master."

"He may not be in Paris," said Cyril hastily; "that is only a guess on my part. Before searching for him over there, it will be best for you to assist me in looking for him in this district. He may be in hiding."

Durgo pondered, then returned to lie full-length on the grass. "I think that my master would have run further away after killing Captain Huxham," he said reflectively; "he is very cunning, is Edwin Lister. And, of course, he would have the money."

"What money?" asked Bella impatiently.

"The money for which he killed Captain Huxham."

"The sum stolen was only worth a trifle: one hundred pounds is the amount."

"Oh!" Durgo opened his eyes. "And my master wanted five thousand. It is a very difficult expedition right into the centre of Nigeria, and one hundred pounds is of no use. I could have lent that amount to Edwin Lister myself. Hai!"—he nursed his chin in his hand—"what you say, missy, makes me think that my master is waiting here to get the money for which he killed Captain Huxham."

"My aunt, Mrs. Rosamund Vand, has both the money and the estate."

"Then Edwin Lister will wait and see her," said Durgo gravely. "I must learn where he is hiding, and he half rose again."

Cyril put out one slim hand to prevent him. "Wait for one moment," he said quietly, "you must hear what I have to say, and then we can arrange what to do. Durgo, you loved my father?"

The negro nodded. "I would rather lose my life than see him dead."

Cyril looked at him curiously. "Strange! I did not think that my father was a man to inspire such devotion."

"He saved my life," said Durgo impressively.

"Humph!" murmured Cyril under his breath. "I'll be bound if he did so, that he took back the full value of his heroic act."

Bella looked pained. "Cyril, why do you speak in that tone of your father?"

"Because I know him better than Durgo," he retorted. "My father is a—but that is neither here nor there"—he waved his hand impatiently. "Durgo, I am about to speak plainly. I see that you love my father, so I don't wish to hurt your feelings. All the same, I must tell you something about my father which you will not like."

"Let me hear," said Durgo frowning, "and I can judge. But you are his son——"

"And therefore should speak well of him," ended Cyril bitterly. "I wish I could, but I have suffered too much at my father's hands to have any love for him. However, I shall be as brief as possible."

"And as kind," said Durgo meaningly.

"And as kind as I can be," retorted the young man cynically; "although my father will be the first to laugh at the idea of my talking kindly of him."

"He loves you," said the negro rebukingly.

"Did he ever tell you that?"

"No. He never mentioned your existence."

"Judge then how he loves me," said Cyril coolly.

"However, in spite of all, Edwin Lister is my father, so I shall speak as respectfully of him as I possibly can." He threw away a blade of grass he was chewing, and laughed ironically. Bella looked pained.

"Cyril! Cyril! your own father!"

"Quite so, dear. He is my father. I can say no more, and no less. As to what I know relative to this mystery, you shall hear."

The sky had clouded over, and the sun no longer shone. The lark was silent, and a chill wind seemed to breathe over the golden broom and the yellow blossoms of the gorze. Bella shivered, as the change of temperature seemed to suit with cruel exactitude the cynical tones of her lover. She had never heard him talk in this way before, but then she knew very little about him, and absolutely nothing of his past life. Now she was about to hear it, and, from the hard expression of his face, she judged that the story he had to tell was not a pleasant one. As for Durgo, he waited silently, and nothing could be read of his feelings from the dark mask of his face. Edwin Lister had saved his life, and no matter what was said, Durgo did not intend to change his opinion of his master, as the finest man in the wide world.

"My mother died when I was young," said Cyril, after a pause, "and I was brought up by a maiden aunt. My father I rarely saw, as he was always travelling round the world in search of a fortune which he never seemed to find. Sometimes he returned to England, and treated me with careless affection, but I saw very little of him. But for my aunt I should have been utterly neglected. Bless her! she is dead," and he raised his hat.

"Poor Cyril!" murmured Bella affected by this picture of a dull childhood.

"Thank you, dear!" he said, taking her hand. "My aunt did everything for me out of her small income, and I don't think my father gave one penny towards my education."

"But surely——"

"No, dear!" said Cyril, interrupting her; "my aunt told me, on her death-bed, that she had done everything, so you can see that my father was only one to me in name."

"He was working to make your fortune in Nigeria," said Durgo quickly.

"So he said when he came home, but I have not seen that fortune yet. Well, to continue; my aunt sent me to a public school, and afterwards to Oxford. I then became a journalist, and my aunt died, leaving me a trifle of money on which to live. My father came to London and borrowed that money—the principal of my small income—for one of his wild schemes, and I was left without one penny."

"It was your duty to assist your father," said Durgo uneasily.

"Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings," quoted Cyril, with a side glance—"the missionaries have taught you well, Durgo."

"I am a Christian," said the negro proudly.

"So am I, in a way. However, I must get on with my confession. I saw my father at various intervals, and meanwhile earned my bread by reporting and writing articles, and all the rest of it. My father appeared at intervals, like the rolling stone which gathers no moss, and always borrowed. I did not grudge him the money, and he always said that he was about to make his fortune, which he never did."

"He will make it this time," said Durgo vigorously; "the treasure is certainly hidden in the Hinterland of Nigeria, and when we reach it——"

"Yes, when!" scoffed Cyril. "I don't believe in my father's schemes, I tell you. The last time he came home was five months ago."

"With me," said Durgo gravely; "but I remained near the docks, and my master, Edwin Lister, went to the grand part of the town, coming down to see me when he required my services."

Cyril nodded. "That sounds like my father," he said, with a shrug; "however, on this occasion he told me that he intended to hunt for buried treasure in Nigeria, and wanted money. He did not mention Captain Huxham, so I expect that he intended to keep that part of his business secret. But"—Cyril hesitated—"well, my father—that is, he—he—never mind," he broke off abruptly, "I can't tell you just now. But he wanted the sum of one thousand pounds, which I tried to get for him."

"Oh, Cyril! was that the money you mentioned?" asked Bella in dismay.

"Yes. The sum for which you thought I had killed your father," said Cyril, nodding; then seeing that she looked pained, he hastily added, "Never mind, dear, that is all over, and we understand one another thoroughly. I went to Paris, as you know, to get the money. When I returned I heard of the murder, and when I called at my father's lodgings in the West End could learn nothing of his whereabouts. When you mentioned the double, Bella, it was forced on my mind that my father must have been that person. But, as I could see no connection between my father and Captain Huxham, I refused to believe this. However, from what Durgo says, there seems to be no doubt but that my father did come by stealth to the Manor on that night, with the idea of getting the loan of money. Perhaps he and Captain Huxham quarreled, but it seems clear that my father did commit the murder with that sacrificial knife, since it came, as he did, from Nigeria."

"I never saw that knife," said Durgo abruptly.

"You did not see many things," said Cyril, rising, for he felt somewhat cramped. "My father was probably as secretive with you as he was with me. You are well educated, Durgo, and have your wits about you. Ask yourself if it is possible for two men to have come, on this particular occasion, from Nigeria, and——"

"Two did come," interrupted the negro—"myself and my master."

"Quite so; but if you are innocent, my father must be guilty."

Durgo shrugged his great shoulders. "For myself I think very little of killing anyone," said he gruffly, "but you white men think differently, so you should not believe your father guilty, unless ——"

"Oh!" Cyril clenched his hand and grew pale. "Do you not think that I would give the world to believe him innocent? I love Miss Huxham, and this murder by my father places a barrier between us. If you knew all"—here Cyril broke off hastily, as he remembered that he was speaking to a black man. Already he regretted that he had said so much, but he had been carried away by the tide of his emotion. "The matter stands like this," he said, abruptly changing the subject. "My father has killed Captain Huxham, and has disappeared with one hundred pounds."

"But I thought that Mr. Pence——" began Bella, only to be interrupted.

"He is innocent," said Cyril hastily. "On the face of it, he is innocent. I go by the evidence of the knife from Nigeria, where Pence has never been, and by the fact that you saw my father, whom you mistook for me, enter the Manor about the time the crime was committed."

"I dare say you are right," said Bella vaguely, and regretted that she had so hastily condemned the preacher. After all, the truth of the legacy left by his aunt was not a fiction. "But what will you do now?"

"I ask the same question," remarked Durgo, sharply. "We are no nearer the truth than we have been."

Cyril looked in astonishment at the negro who spoke such excellent English, and so much to the point. Durgo, undoubtedly, in intellect was equal to, if not superior to, many Englishmen, and Lister saw in him a helpful coadjutor in solving the mystery. "We must work together to learn the whereabouts of my father," he said wearily, passing his hand across his forehead. "It will be necessary to get him out of the country, if what we believe is correct. But it may be, that my father has crossed the Channel."

"If that is so, he will write to me," commented the negro; he paused, and then asked abruptly, "If you learn that your father is guilty?"

"I shall do my best to get him away from England. Why do you ask?"

Durgo turned away, after a piercing glance. "I thought, from what you hinted, that you would not be sorry to see your father hanged."

"Don't talk rubbish, man," said Lister sharply. "My father is my father, when all is said and done. I only trust that we are mistaken, and that he is not guilty of this brutal crime."

Durgo shrugged his massive shoulders. "As to that, I care very little. From what I have heard of Captain Huxham in my own country, he was not a good man. He is better out of the world than in it."

Bella grew crimson. "You speak of my father," she said angrily.

The man bowed politely. "I ask your pardon, missy!" Then he turned to Cyril ceremoniously. "I am stopping at 'The Chequers Inn,' at Marshely," he informed him; "so if you will call there we can speak about this matter. Women should have nothing to do with such affairs. They are for men."

Lister frowned, as he did not approve of the superior way in which the negro talked. However, Durgo gave him no chance of making a remark, but swung off with a noiseless jungle step. Cyril watched him pass out of sight, and confessed that the man puzzled him. In spite of his barbaric origin and black skin and rough dress, Durgo spoke and acted like a gentleman, though he certainly had been somewhat rude regarding the feminine sex. "Yet I like him," commented Cyril half to himself; "he seems to be a square chap, and to have brains. He is not the usual Christy

minstrel of Africa. Humph! After all, I dare say that if you scratched him you would find the savage. His devotion to my father does him credit. I wonder"—here he was interrupted by a low sob at his elbow, and turned to find Bella in tears. "My dearest, what is the matter?" he asked in dismay.

"Can you ask?" she moaned despairingly. "If what you think is true, we must part for ever."

"Don't look at the worst, but hope for the best," he entreated; "we can't be sure that my father is guilty!"

"You contradict yourself," she said, wiping her eyes.

"I wish I could; I am trying to think that my father is innocent. But I do not know. My father has been my evil genius all my life."

A thought occurred to Bella. "Why did your father require one thousand pounds?"

Cyril looked at her sideways. "I did not like to speak out before Durgo," he said hesitatingly, "but the fact is, my father forged a cheque for that sum."

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## CHAPTER XIII

### MRS. TUNKS' DISCOVERY

So far it appeared extremely probable that Edwin Lister was the assassin of Captain Huxham. From the evidence of her own eyes, Bella knew that Cyril's father had called to see the old sailor, and that she had not seen him depart was owing to the fact of the drugging. By putting laudanum in the girl's tea Huxham had precipitated his own death, since Bella, with her wits about her, might have made a third at the interview, and so the blow would not have been struck. Neither Bella nor Cyril thought that Edwin Lister had come to the Manor intending to murder Huxham, although it certainly seemed strange that the former should have carried with him the Nigerian knife with which the crime had been committed. But howsoever this particular point might be explained, it was probable that the tragedy was the outcome of a sudden quarrel.

Edwin Lister had profited but little by his crime, since the sum of one hundred pounds was all that he had been able to find in the safe. Certainly many papers had been carried away, but there was nothing to show that these were of value, save the fact that they had been thieved. If Edwin Lister could only be found, an explanation might be forthcoming; but he seemed to have vanished completely. It was not improbable that he had walked to Tarhaven, some miles away, to escape on a steamer to the Continent; but if this was the case it was strange that he had not communicated with his savage friend. Durgo was a man upon whom Edwin Lister could rely entirely, setting aside the fact that Durgo was needed to guide the expedition into the Hinterland of Nigeria, where the treasure was concealed. It was now some weeks since the death and burial of the skipper, but as yet Edwin Lister had given no sign of his existence. And until he did so, there was no chance of solving the mystery.

True to his promise, Cyril called at "The Chequers Inn" to see Durgo, and found that the negro was looked upon as a royal guest. The lean landlady believed him to be an African prince, on a secret mission to England concerning the missionary question. She was right in one way, for Durgo undoubtedly was a chief, and the son of a chief; but it was questionable if he was the friend of the missionaries. However—as Cyril found—he made this excuse for his presence in Marshely, and Mrs. Giles, the landlady, a red-hot fanatic, was delighted that her house should be so honoured. Also Durgo paid largely for the sitting-room and bedroom which he occupied.

Cyril was amazed when he called one evening, to see this same sitting-room, as he saw evidence of great luxury in the articles brought by the negro to decorate the somewhat bare apartment. The furniture of the parlour—as Mrs. Giles called it—was plain and cheap, but there were evidences that it was occupied by a wealthy guest. Indian coverlets, gorgeously embroidered, adorned the chairs; there were splendid wild-beast skins on the floor, and on the side-tables appeared several silver vases rudely but skilfully wrought. Cyril noted a bronze incense-burner in which pastilles smouldered, several small golden images of ugly tribal gods, some beautifully-made spears and war-clubs, brightly-hued feathers, curious shells, and photographs of native towns and their inhabitants. Why Durgo should travel with such a collection of rubbish was not clear; but probably he did so, that he might be surrounded by memorials of his sunny country in the land of fogs and greyness.

Durgo himself was a surprise, as he received Cyril in a well-made smoking suit, and, quite in the conventional manner, offered him cigarettes of a good brand and the orthodox whiskey and soda. "Or champagne if you prefer it," said Durgo, laying his black hand on the old-fashioned bell-rope.

"Coffee for me," said Lister, throwing himself into a comfortable arm-chair, and accepting a cigarette. "Do you know, Durgo, that you are something of a puzzle to me?"

The negro rang the bell, gave an order for coffee to Mrs. Giles, who entered, and when she had retired turned to his guest. "How so?" he asked.

"Your very good English, the adornments of this room, your present dress—I did not look for such things in a—a——" Cyril hesitated.

"In an African negro," finished Durgo, sitting down, with a grave smile.

"Well, yes. People of your colour," added Cyril, with the covert insolence of the white towards the black, "don't usually——"

Durgo raised one large hand. "I know: don't proceed," he said with suppressed anger; "you think we are barbarians."

"Well, you are, as a rule."

"I am the exception to this rule." Durgo paused, and his eyes wandered to some photographs over the mantel-piece. "I told you that the missionaries educated me," he continued, "but if you look at those photographs, you might learn who was my real Alma Mater."

"Alma Mater," repeated Cyril, rising to approach the mantel-piece; "why, these are University photographs."

"Oxford. I was at Oxford some years ago."

"You?" Cyril looked at the groups of boating-men, cricketers, football players, and wondered. He wondered still more at a portrait of Durgo in a Master of Arts gown. "You!" said Cyril, completely surprised.

"Yes. Why not? My father was a great chief—a king, as you might say. But it was Edwin Lister who first fired my ambition to learn the lore of the white men, so that I might civilise my tribe. He induced my father to give me much money, and took me to England himself many years ago. I was at school, and at Oxford until I took my degree. Then I returned to my tribe in Nigeria—in Southern Nigeria—and as my father was dead I attempted to teach my countrymen and subjects what I had learned. Your father helped me, and it was then that he saved my life when a lion attacked me. I could do nothing, however," continued the negro bitterly, "as my countrymen were too much under the sway of the fetish priests. These raised an outcry against me, and nominating a cousin of mine as chief, drove me and your father away. We only escaped death by an accident, but I managed to bring some treasure with me, and came with your father to England."

"And now I suppose you want to find this treasure you spoke of, and regain your chieftdom," said Cyril, interested in this strange story.

Durgo fingered a cigarette carefully, and lighted the same. "There is no treasure," he remarked quietly.

"But you said——"

"I know I did, when Miss Huxham was present. Women, as I say, should know nothing or hear nothing of these things. To you I speak plainly, as you are the son of my master, and so are entitled to my regard and trust. I came here with your father," added Durgo slowly, "to get money from Huxham, so that we both might buy guns and swords and rifles, to re-conquer my tribe."

"But the British Government?"

"Quite so. The Government would not approve, so for that reason I remained in rough clothes, in rough lodgings, near the docks; while Edwin Lister went to live in the West End. He interested several adventurous spirits in our proposed expedition, but money was sadly needed, and I had not enough. Thus your father came down to see Captain Huxham, and get that which was required. Captain Huxham, whom your father had met in Nigeria, owed my father a lot of money, which he did not pay. I was only employing Edwin Lister to get back my own."

"I see. But how did my father learn the whereabouts of Captain Huxham?"

"*You* told him," was the negro's unexpected reply.

"I told him! I don't recollect——"

"Perhaps not, as you spoke hurriedly. But don't you remember that when your father one day asked you for money, you said that you wished to save all you could, as you desired to marry Miss Huxham. Your father questioned you, and learned that she was the daughter of an old sailor. It was therefore easy for him to guess that he had found the man for whom he was seeking."

"But I did not tell my father where Captain Huxham lived."

Durgo waved his hand, as Mrs. Giles brought in the coffee. "That was easy," he remarked, when she left the room, "you were followed here by your father. But now that you understand the position, will you work with me?"

"I will work with you to learn the truth about this murder."

"I understand," said Durgo shrewdly, "so that you may prove Edwin Lister's innocence."

"Yes," said Cyril, accepting the cup of black coffee which his host passed to him. "I am hoping to see my father and to learn that he did not kill Captain Huxham. If he did, there is no chance of happiness for me, as I cannot then marry Miss Huxham."

Durgo stirred his coffee calmly. "No, that is true. I am sorry for you. But if such is the case, and your marriage is an impossibility, why not come with us on our expedition to the Hinterland of Nigeria? If I win back my chieftom, I can do much for you."

"I don't want to go with my father," said Cyril, turning pale, "especially if he has—as I suspect—spoiled my life's happiness. If he is innocent, I can then marry Miss Huxham, and will stay at home."

"Quite so. I understand. But my offer is always open to you, if you choose to take it. Meanwhile, the first thing to do is to learn what Edwin Lister took away with him."

"One hundred pounds."

"Yes, and some papers. I wish to learn what those papers are, as Captain Huxham may have made a memorandum of the property he possessed. There may be other papers which may cast light on those which were stolen."

"But I don't understand," said Cyril perplexed. "Whatever property Captain Huxham possessed went to his sister, now Mrs. Henry Vand."

"The English property," said Durgo with emphasis; then seeing that his guest was still puzzled, he laughed in his guttural way. "Never mind. I have an idea which may or may not turn out to be correct. I shall know when Mrs. Tunks comes here this evening, and then I can explain myself fully."

"Mrs. Tunks—Granny Tunks! What has she to do with the matter?"

Durgo smiled in his slow way. "My friend, I have not been idle while in Marshley looking for my master Edwin Lister. I wished to search the Manor-house for possible papers to reveal that which I desire to know."

"What is that?"

"I shall tell you when I am sure," said the negro doggedly, "and not until then. But it was impossible for me to enter the Manor-house and search, as this man Vand is very clever and cunning, and more of a watch-dog than his stupid wife. I could have managed her had she been unmarried, by posing as a wealthy prince—in fact, I could have cajoled her as I have done Mrs. Giles—but her husband is suspicious and sharp. I could do nothing. Then I learned that this gipsy woman, Mrs. Tunks, is in the habit of charing at the Manor-house. I therefore offered to pay her a large sum if she would bring to me certain papers which are hidden in a sandal-wood chest, carved with the figures of the gods of my tribe."

"How do you know that such a chest exists or is in the Manor-house?"

"After I see Mrs. Tunks I can tell you," said Durgo softly.

"How will Mrs. Tunks know the chest?"

"I have described it to her. The figures of the gods are carved on soft white wood, and the lines are filled in with red and blue and yellow pigment. The design and the decoration are very noticeable. The work is, what you call in English, skrimshanking."

"I thought the word was a military slang one, meaning to shirk work," said Cyril, after a pause.

"Quite so, but I think the word is a nautical one. Sailors carve and colour their carvings in the way I mention, and call such work skrimshanking. I expect that when a sailor was not at his post the excuse made was that he was skrimshanking; hence the slang meaning of the word."

"Very interesting from a philological point of view," yawned Lister, taking another cigarette; "but had we not better get back to our talk of my father's whereabouts?"

"We can do nothing until I know what Edwin Lister took away with him," said Durgo again, "and that I can only learn if Mrs. Tunks brings the papers I mentioned this evening." He glanced at the travelling clock on the mantel-piece. "Nearly nine; she should be here soon."

"But will she have the papers?"

"Yes. Yesterday she told me that she saw the chest in an attic under a pile of rubbish, but had no chance of opening it. To-day she is charing at the Manor-house, and will be able to get what I want."

"But if Mrs. Vand catches her?"

"Mrs. Vand won't," was the confident reply. "Granny Tunks is too clever to be caught and moreover wants to earn the fifty pounds I promised her."

"Great Scott! are you so wealthy as to——"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted Durgo impatiently. "I have much money, but not enough for my expedition. Unless indeed Edwin Lister has carried these papers, which will show us how to get the money."

"Then my father knew about this chest also?"



"Yes. I expect he looked for it in Captain Huxham's study after the crime was committed. Unfortunately it happened, according to Granny Tunks, to be in the attic, so he missed it. But Huxham may have had the papers in his study."

"And that was why the room was so upset?" asked Lister thoughtfully.

"That was why. After the crime was committed——"

"Great heavens! man," burst out the other irritably, "don't talk as if it was certain that my father killed the man."

"If he did not, who did?" demanded Durgo coolly; then, as Cyril was markedly silent, he continued, "I think very little of the killing myself. If what I believe about the papers I require is correct, Captain Huxham deserved his death as a thief and a false friend."

"You speak in riddles," said Lister bewildered.

"Granny Tunks can solve them," replied the negro significantly. "Have some more coffee and try these cigars. They are superfine."

Cyril silently accepted this further hospitality, and stared furtively at the calm black face of his host. The nose was aquiline and the lips extraordinarily thin, so it was apparent that Durgo had Arab blood in his veins. Perhaps he was a descendant of those conquering Mohammedans who came down like a storm on Central Africa, in the Middle Ages. What with Durgo's looks, his educated speech and his air of command, Cyril wondered that he had ever taken the negro for an ordinary black. All the same he believed that, given the necessary environment, the savagery would break out from under the thin veneer of civilisation which the man had acquired at Oxford. Scratch a Russian and you find a Tartar; scratch a modern man, semi-civilised or wholly civilised, and you find the prehistoric animal.

While Cyril was thinking in this manner and watching the black man's face through the smoke, he saw Durgo suddenly listen intently, with the air of an animal scenting danger. Shortly footsteps were heard in the passage without, and the door opened to admit Granny Tunks, who was shown in by Mrs. Giles. The toss of the lean landlady's head, and her air of disdain, showed that she was by no means pleased with the ragged visitor. But a glance from the glossy Romany eye of Mrs. Tunks sent her shuddering out of the room. In spite of the religion taught by Silas Pence at the Little Bethel chapel, Mrs. Giles was primitive enough to believe in the power of the evil eye. And she had some reason to, for people who offended Mrs. Tunks invariably underwent a spell of bad luck.

"Here I am, master," said Mrs. Tunks with a cringing air, and Cyril started to hear her so address the negro. He was further surprised when he saw how commanding were the looks of Durgo.

"Have you got those papers?" asked the negro, extending his large hand.

Granny Tunks had them and said so, but it took her some time to find them, so ragged were her garments and so hidden her pocket. She still wore the brown dress tagged with parti-coloured ribbons, and her plentiful white hair still hung like seaweed from under the dingy red handkerchief. Also as usual she jingled with the multiplicity of coins which dangled from her neck, her wrists, and from various parts of her picturesque dress. In sixty or seventy seconds she managed to find a bundle of dusty papers tied up with faded red tape, and passed them to Durgo with ingratiating smiles. "There you are, deary——"

"Master!" snapped the negro, with sudden ferocity.

"Yes, master," stammered the woman, turning slightly pale under her brown skin. "I found them in the chest you spoke of. The cat"—she meant Mrs. Vand—"didn't see me, master, so no one knows but this gentleman; but he won't say a word; no, no, I'll be bound he won't."

"How do you know?" asked Cyril sharply.

Mrs. Tunks replied without taking her beady black eyes from Durgo. "I saw the coming of the master in the crystal, lovey, and told your dear sweetheart of the same. The master brings good luck to you both, so if you tell, it will part you and your deary for ever."

"We are parted as it is," said Cyril bitterly.

"Perhaps not," replied the old woman.

Lister rose from his chair and stared. "What do you mean?" he cried imperiously.

Durgo, who had been examining the papers, looked up on hearing this question, and shot forth a long arm in the direction of the door. "Go!" he said to Mrs. Tunks. "Go at once."

"And the money, master?"

"You shall have it to-morrow, as soon as I have examined these. Go, I say; I am not used to speak twice."

"But Durgo," cried Cyril, annoyed by the interruption, "I want to know——"

"You shall know what Mrs. Tunks has to say to-morrow," said Durgo, settling down into the chair and still examining the papers.

The witch-wife, who had moved slowly towards the door, had not looked at Lister once during her stay in the room. All the time her gaze was fixed almost reverentially upon the negro. In spite of Durgo's prohibition Cyril crossed the room to catch Mrs. Tunks by the arm. But the moment he touched her she seemed to wake up as from a magnetic spell, and opening the door slipped through like a snake. When the door was closed again Cyril, in some anger, faced Durgo.

"Why didn't you let me question her?"

"She would have said nothing," returned the man dryly, "because she knows nothing."

"She hinted that Bella—Miss Huxham, I mean—and myself would not be parted."

Durgo shrugged his shoulders. "Hai! The woman is a witch and knows doings of the unseen. She may have been told——"

"Oh, rubbish! I don't believe in such things."

"Possibly you don't; I do. I have been taught things which would open your eyes if I explained them. In Africa we know much that you don't know."

A sudden light flashed into Cyril's brain. "Is that why Mrs. Tunks addressed you as master?"

Durgo nodded absently, still reading the papers. But he did not reply in words, as his eyes were travelling over some faded writing and his lips were moving. Before Cyril could ask another question, as he was desirous of doing, the negro started to his feet with a fierce shout, which sounded like a warcry.

"As I believed; as I thought!" he shouted. "Hai! the good news."

"What is it?" asked Lister, surprised by the savage exultation.

Durgo thrust the papers into his pocket and began to tell a story without any preamble. "When my father was chief, there were two traders in his town whom he trusted. One traded inland, and the other commanded the river steamer. Maxwell Faith was the inland trader's name, and the steamer commander was Jabez Huxham. For services rendered, my father, the chief Kawal, gave Mr. Faith jewels to the value of forty thousand pounds. Huxham became jealous, and having murdered Faith ran away with the jewels. He brought them to England, to Bleacres, and feared night and day lest he should be assaulted and killed for the sake of the treasure. That is why Huxham planted the fields with corn, leaving only one path whereby to reach the Manor-house. He did not wish to be surprised. Huxham took Faith's papers also regarding the value and number of these jewels. The papers were in the chest I told you of, and I have these papers here—he tapped his breast—"but the jewels no doubt have been taken by your father, who doubtless killed Huxham to get them." Durgo nodded. "Good, very good. When my master Edwin Lister writes to me to join him, we can sell the jewels for forty thousand pounds and then can fit out our expedition to recover my chiefdom. Good-night, Lister. I have work to do; good night!" and before Cyril could recover from his amazement he found himself gently led into the passage and heard the door locked.

"What does it all mean?" he asked himself, but could not answer the question.

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## CHAPTER XIV

### WHAT SILAS PENCE KNEW

On that same evening, when Cyril was interviewing the strange negro, there was a concert in the Marshely school-house in aid of the prize fund. Dora had arranged the programme, and had asked Bella to be present. The girl would much rather have remained absent owing to the recent death of her father; besides, she did not feel able to enjoy music and frivolity and laughter. But to please her friend, who had been so kind to her, she came dressed in black and deeply veiled to the festival. For obvious reasons she took a seat at the lower end of the room, and near the door, so that she could easily slip out when the end came.

But Mrs. Vand was less retiring. In spite of her brother's tragic death she appeared dressed in all the colours of the rainbow, posing more as a bride than as a mourner. In fact, she displayed very little grief for the death of Jabez, and those who knew the late Captain Huxham were not surprised, as he had never been a man to inspire affection. Moreover, the secret marriage of Mrs. Coppersley to Henry Vand had created quite a sensation, and bride and bridegroom were much talked about and pointed at. Vand himself was one of the performers, as he played two violin solos. Some folk thought that both he and his wife would have displayed better taste by remaining away, but Mrs. Vand laughed at this opinion and flaunted her newly-found happiness in the face of all her acquaintances.

Luckily few people noticed Bella in her obscure corner, so she was not troubled with questions. Those who guessed who she was, felt that she had been very badly treated since the money had been left to Mrs. Vand, and indeed the sympathies of the entire neighbourhood were with the disinherited girl. Mrs. Vand, as everyone said, should have been ashamed of herself; but in spite

of the indecent way in which she thrust her good fortune on everyone's notice, no one was bold enough to tell her what was the general opinion of her conduct. As for Bella, she sat in her corner feeling ill and miserable. She had every right to be so considering the position in which she and her lover were placed. It was to ween her thoughts from this dismal state of affairs that the kind-hearted school-mistress had induced her to come to the concert. Hitherto the cure had not worked.

The programme was the usual village one. There were several sentimental ballads of the purely English drawing-room type; two or three recitations, the violin solos of Henry Vand, who really played with rare skill, and a reading by Silas Pence, who was the chairman. Pence looked leaner and more delicate than ever, and read the "Dream of Eugene Aram" as a cheerful contribution to the evening's entertainment. His sepulchral tones and dismal appearance cast quite a gloom over the close of the evening, which was only dispelled by the singing of a glee by the Marshely Choral Society. But some time before this point was reached Bella had slipped out of the room and had taken her way back to the cottage. She went early, as her aunt had noticed her, and it was just possible that Mrs. Vand, who dearly loved to make trouble, might start a quarrel if it came to a conversation between the two. Mrs. Vand had not forgiven her enforced payment of one hundred pounds.

Bella did not enter the cottage, as it was very hot within, and the night was simply glorious. She took off her hat and veil and seated herself in the tiny garden to enjoy the soft breeze. There was not a cloud in the darkly-blue sky, and a serene moon moved majestically across the starry heavens. The cottage, with the lamp light shining behind the pink blinds, looked pretty and picturesque, so Bella resolved to wait for Dora's return in the open air. She had ample to think about, for the concert had failed to inspire her with cheerful thoughts. How could it when the clouds which environed her were so densely black? Poor Bella was not religious, and had small faith in the goodness of God. This was natural as God's name had rarely been mentioned by Captain Huxham and his sister, who were perfect heathens of the animal sort. So Bella, having no hope to cling to and seeing no ray of light piercing the darkness around her, began to conceive a cheerless future in which the figure of Cyril did not appear. The fact that his father had murdered hers ended the chance of marriage once and for all. He would doubtless go abroad and try to forget her, while she, bereft of love, home, money, and father, would seek some humble situation as a nursery governess: and it must be confessed that, as things were, Bella Huxham had good reason to despair. Any chance of happiness seemed to be as far removed from her as was the moon in the heaven above her.

The seat upon which she was resting stood close to the white palings of the garden, and under a leafy chestnut, now in the full glory of its summer foliage. Occasionally a person would pass, or a child singing would run home, but for the most part the road was deserted. Nearly all the village people were at the concert, and it would not end for at least another half hour. Only then would the roadway be full, but in the meantime, save for occasional interruptions, Bella had solitude and peace. She was therefore extremely ill-pleased when a dark figure halted at the palings and, leaning over, removed its hat to reveal the delicate features of Silas Pence.

"I give you good-evening, Miss Huxham," said the preacher, in his refined but somewhat shrill voice.

"Good evening," said Bella coldly. "Had you not better return to the concert, Mr. Pence? As the chairman you cannot leave the platform."

"I have presided most of the evening and have recited my piece," said Pence eagerly. "Now, on the plea of feeling faint I have left that hot room, and I am here to commune with you in the glory of the night. Is it not beautiful, Miss Huxham?" and he recited the well-known lines of Addison:—

*Soon as the shades of night prevail,  
The moon takes up the wondrous tale,  
And nightly to the listening earth  
Repeats the story of her birth.*

"Did you come here to recite, Mr. Pence?" said Bella disagreeably. "If so I must go indoors. I have been entertained enough this evening."

"You should not have been at the concert at all," said the preacher rebukingly, "seeing that your dear father is scarcely cold in his grave."

"That is my business, Mr. Pence," said Bella in icy tones. "If you rebuke any one it should be my aunt, who is flaunting the property of which she robbed me in the face of everyone."

"I shall rebuke Sister Vand at a proper time," said Silas authoritatively. "In the meantime——"

"You rebuke me," said Bella, who had risen to her feet, weary of the conversation. "I decline to permit your interference."

"I don't want to rebuke you," cried Pence eagerly. "I wish to make you smile on me. Become my spouse, or fair lily of the valley, and you will have me always at your feet."

"I have told you before, Mr. Pence, that I cannot marry you."

"Then you still intend to wed that son of Belial, overflowing with insolence and wine?" questioned the preacher bitterly; "your father's murderer."

"Mr. Lister is perfectly innocent, as I happen to know."

"Can you prove his innocence?"

"Can you prove his guilt?" retorted the girl spiritedly.

"I saw him enter the Manor on that night."

"You saw a man who resembled him. Mr. Lister was in London and can prove that he was there. It is useless your using threats, Mr. Pence, for had you been able to carry them out you would long since have seen the police."

Pence frowned. "Who is this other man?" he asked.

"You can find out!" said Bella impatiently, "and I am going indoors."

"There is no other man," cried Pence angrily. "Why, I saw Mr. Lister quite clearly. I could not mistake him."

"You did, however."

"The police shall decide that."

"Go to the police. You threatened to do so before. Why don't you do what you say instead of trying to frighten me with stage thunder?"

Silas stamped and raged. "You will find the thunder real enough before I have done with you. This Lister man is guilty, and shall hang. You shall become my wife, my—"

"Never! never! never!" and Bella stamped in her turn.

"You will. As you have no name of your own you should be glad to take that of an honest man."

The girl started and stared. "My name is Huxham," she said angrily.

"It is nothing of the sort. When I wished to marry you, Captain Huxham, your supposed father, told me that you were a nameless waif whom he had adopted out of charity."

"It is wholly false."

"It is true! it is true!" Pence leaped the fence before she knew what was his intention, and caught her in his arms, "and you must become my wife."

"You beast! you villain!" cried the girl, struggling. "How dare—"

She got no further. Even while the words were on her lips a pair of very strong hands caught Pence by the shoulders, and wrenching him from the girl flung him over the fence. The next moment Cyril held Bella in his arms.

"Oh, my dear! my dear!" she sobbed, utterly broken down, "how glad I am that you arrived to punish him."

"I shall punish him more!" cried Cyril, striding towards the gate.

"No, no!" said Bella, stopping him. "Think of my good name. It is useless making a scandal. But ask him if what he says is true."

"What does he say?" questioned Cyril, with a note of savagery in his voice.

"Oh hush! hush!" implored Bella, clinging to him. "Speak lower. I don't wish everyone to hear what Mr. Pence declares."

"But what is it? what is it?"

"Ask him. After all, he may be wrong, and—"

Still holding the girl, Lister, mindful of her wish, spoke in a loud whisper to the dusty figure on the other side of the fence. Pence had just risen, sorely bruised, but, unable to leave his rival with the girl he loved, yet lingered in the roadway.

"Here, you," said Lister sharply, "what have you been saying to Miss Huxham? Speak out, you dog, or I'll thrash you thoroughly. Let me go, Bella; let me go, I say."

"No, no! We must avoid all scandal. Think of what might be—be—" she gasped, and without ending her sentence fell half fainting into Cyril's arms.

Then came Pence's chance to discharge the vials of his wrath, for he saw that Lister, hampered by the fainting girl, could not touch him. Stepping up to the palings with his face distorted with anger, he spoke in low tones of hate. "I say now to you what I shall soon say to all. Captain Huxham adopted the girl, whom you falsely say that you love. She has no position and no name and no money, so if you marry her—"

"Stop," said Cyril imperiously. "Can you swear to the truth of this wild statement? Miss Huxham always passed as the captain's daughter."

"She is not Miss Huxham," said Silas, insistently. "She is Miss—I don't know what. I can prove

what I say, if necessary. And I shall, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you renounce her so that she can become my wife."

Bella heard the words and stood unexpectedly erect with fresh energy, wrathful at Pence's persistency. "Nothing will ever induce me to become your wife. And if what you say is true my aunt would have told me."

"Mrs. Vand is not your aunt and Captain Huxham was not your father," said the preacher sullenly. "If needs be I can prove it."

"Then do so," cried Cyril quickly, "for by doing so you will remove the sole barrier to our marriage."

"What do you mean?" asked Silas, recoiling in sheer surprise.

"Let me speak," said Bella, guessing what her lover meant. "We mean that had you held your tongue Cyril and I might have been forced to part. Now that I know I am not Captain Huxham's daughter I can marry him."

Pence looked from one face to the other in the chill moonlight and drew his own conclusions with swift intuition, sharpened by hate. "Then this Lister man is the murderer of Huxham?"

"You have to prove that," said Cyril cheerfully. "I am not bound to incriminate myself, you know."

Silas raised his hands to the heavens in mute appeal, for he saw that in some way, not entirely clear to him, he had brought about the very thing he had been trying to avert. Enraged at his blunder and despairing of gaining his ends, the man, timid as he usually was, would have sprung over the fence to renew the struggle with his rival, but that many dark figures were seen coming along the road. Apparently the concert was over.

In spite of his anger, Pence retained sufficient sense to decide immediately on a sensible course. He mechanically brushed his clothes, and bent over the palings to speak with Cyril. "To-morrow," he said, in a tense whisper, "you will be arrested, on my evidence, and she"—he pointed a trembling finger at Bella—"will be known as a nameless outcast."

The girl uttered a faint cry at the insult, and Cyril would have struck the man who spoke. But Pence was prepared, and swerved away from the fence with a taunting laugh, to retreat rapidly down the road towards the advancing throng.

"Come inside; come inside," said Bella, plucking at Cyril's sleeve; "you must not be seen here with me at this hour. Mr. Pence will say nothing for his own sake. Come inside until Dora returns."

This was wise counsel, so the pair hastily retreated and closed the door, before they could be seen by the sharp eyes of the village gossips. Bella ran into the dining-room, where supper was laid, and sinking into a chair, mutely pointed to the water jug. Lister, seeing how pale she was, poured out a glass, and held it to her lips. Shortly she was more her old self, as the colour returned to her cheeks and the brightness to her eyes. It was then that she asked a leading question:

"Do you think that what Mr. Pence says is true?"

"I hope so. I fervently hope so," replied Cyril, sitting down to discuss the matter, "for then we can marry, and——" he started and stopped. It occurred to him that Pence's statement might be the cause of Granny Tunks' queer remark, an explanation of which had been prevented by Durgo. Then again, from the negro's action, and from the facts that Mrs. Tunks had seen—so she said—his coming in the crystal, and obeyed him so implicitly, it might be that Durgo knew much that he would only disclose at the proper time. Of one thing Cyril was certain—namely, that Durgo was his friend, and would do his best to put things right, if Lister assisted him to recover traces of his father and the jewels, which Edwin Lister was supposed to possess.

"I shouldn't wonder if Pence's statement was true," said Cyril, musingly, as he reflected on the present position of affairs. "It did seem strange to me that such a rough sea-dog as Huxham undoubtedly was, should have so refined a daughter as you."

"I thought it was my education, and——"

"No," said Cyril, looking at her searchingly in the light of the small lamp. "Your feet and hands are too delicate, and your features too clearly cut, and your whole bearing too well bred, to be the child of such a man. Huxham and his sister are plebeians: you are an aristocrat. I am quite sure."

Bella coloured at his praise of her beauty. "Perhaps what Mr. Pence says may explain why the money was not left to me."

Cyril nodded. "If you are not Huxham's daughter, of course he would not leave you the money. But it was strange that he should tell Pence—why, what is the matter?"

Bella had started to her feet, and was looking at him strangely. "I am unwilling to suspect Mr. Pence, seeing that it seems almost certain your father is guilty, but I don't believe that my father

—I mean that Captain Huxham told him."

"Why not?"

"It was not Captain Huxham's way to confide in anyone, and if he had kept silent for so long he certainly would not have told anyone later, especially Silas Pence. If anyone knew the truth it would be my aunt—I mean Mrs. Vand—and she hated me quite sufficiently to tell me that I was no kith or kin of hers. This she did not do."

"Well, and what do you make of the business?"

"This," said Bella, slowly. "I believe that Mr. Pence *does* know something of the murder, although he may not have struck the blow. Your father may have been disturbed by Mr. Pence, and may have taken the hundred pounds. But I am certain that Mr. Pence found some papers telling that I was not Captain Huxham's daughter, and has them in his possession now."

Cyril shook his head. "You have no proofs of this wild charge."

"No, I have not. All the same, I believe——"

"Belief is one thing, and certainty another," said Lister, decisively, "and, again, I must tell you that my father—if indeed he is guilty—got much more than one hundred pounds"; and he related all that had taken place in Durgo's rooms. Bella listened in silence, and was particularly struck with the use made by the negro of Mrs. Tunks.

"I believe that Granny and this black man are in league," she declared; "you know she foretold his coming by the crystal. And that is all rubbish."

"In this instance she foretold truly," said Cyril drily.

"Because she knew beforehand, and simply made use of the crystal to impress me," retorted the girl. "Do you think Durgo himself is guilty?"

"No, I do not," replied Cyril very decidedly. "He bewailed the fact that my father had not asked him to get Huxham out of the way. No, Bella, in some way, my father managed the matter himself. He might have killed the old sailor during a quarrel, and have secured the jewels and have gone into hiding either here or on the Continent. We can only wait until we hear from him. Then the mystery may be solved."

"I am not so sure that your father got the jewels," said Bella, after a pause. "After all, they were in the chest in the attic by Durgo's showing."

"The papers were, but Durgo was not certain if Huxham left the jewels there, my dear. You see, the old skipper might, and probably did, keep the jewels in his study for safety. But the jewels were in the house I am sure, for Huxham feared lest they should be stolen, and so planted the corn and used the search-light. By the way, I saw that used the other night."

"Henry Vand knows how to use it," said Bella indifferently; "my father showed him how to work it on one occasion. But what is to be done?"

"I must wait and see what Durgo intends to do. He knows much that we are ignorant of, and for my father's sake I think he will help us both."

"And Mr. Pence's statement?"

Cyril took her in his arms. "I believe it," he said, kissing her fondly, "so the barrier between us is removed."

"Thank God for that," said Bella reverently, and being unstrung wept bitterly.

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## CHAPTER XV

### DURGO, THE DETECTIVE

As has been seen, Durgo was no ordinary man, and even had he been white instead of black, would have passed for a clever member of the Aryan race. Undoubtedly the strain of Arab blood in him sharpened his intellectual faculties, and made him ambitious to play a leading part in the history of his tribe. That the members of it were savages mattered very little, since he had been educated in the lore of the ruling race, and could raise them sooner or later almost to his own level. Almost, that is, but not quite, for Durgo had no notion that any individual of his tribe should be as clever as himself. He wished to be a despot, and rule from an autocratic throne.

The one weak point in his character—if gratitude can be called weakness—was his adoration of Edwin Lister. That gentleman had undoubtedly saved his life, and assuredly had aided him to attain to his present position of culture by inducing the old chief to send his clever son to England. But Cyril knew, what Durgo in his blind idolatry did not—that Edwin Lister was not a man to work for nothing, and wanted much more than he ever gave. There was every chance that he would abuse the gratitude of Durgo, when the negro's ambition was achieved, and if his

protégé revolted from complying with the exorbitant demands which would surely be made on his generosity, he would speedily be reminded of what had been done for him. With an ordinary man this would have mattered little as such a one would decline unreasonable exactions. But Durgo's strongest trait was gratitude, and it was probable that in spite of his clever brain and European education, he would become the mere puppet of his benefactor. Thus the very nobility of Durgo's nature would reduce him to slavery, and he would be ruined because he possessed the rarest of all virtues.

Little as Cyril had seen of his father, he knew his character thoroughly, being able to read by intuition, as well as by observation. Edwin had only one god to worship, and that was himself—a deity so congenial that the egotist was most devout in his religion. Of course, Durgo's enslavement and Edwin Lister's tyranny had nothing to do with Cyril, as father and son had long since gone on their several ways. But Cyril liked the negro, and swore to himself that if Durgo aided him to marry Bella, he would stand by him when Edwin Lister played the tyrant. As yet—so much Cyril gathered—the trader had not shown the cloven foot, but he would do so sooner or later, and then Cyril hoped to open Durgo's eyes to the fact that his gratitude was being abused.

But there was much to be done before affairs arrived at this point, and the first necessary step to take was to discover the whereabouts of Edwin Lister. Durgo had learned much from Cyril, and something from Granny Tunks; now it was necessary that he should be informed by Bella of the accusation of Pence, and of her doubts about the preacher. She resolved to see Durgo for herself, and when Dora was at school, she watched at the window of the cottage for the coming of the negro. She did not even tell Cyril of her intention, as he disbelieved her statement that Pence had stolen certain papers and was connected in some way with the murder. That she had absolutely no grounds for such a belief troubled Bella very little, since she was very much the woman. All she knew was, that Pence could not have heard the truth about her not being Huxham's daughter from Huxham himself and it was necessary to find out how he came to know, let alone the necessity of making certain of its truth. Cyril would have scruples in assaulting Pence, and learning the truth at the sword's point, as it were. Durgo, being uncivilised, for all his education would have no such scruples, and therefore was the best person to apply to. He would undoubtedly twist Pence's slender neck as he would that of a rabbit, if he could force from him any information likely to forward his aims. And unless some such brutal course was taken Bella felt sure that Pence would hold his tongue. In her exasperation against the troublesome preacher, all the girl's worst traits came uppermost.

Durgo did not pass along the road in the morning, and Bella almost despaired of seeing him. She nearly decided to go to "The Chequers Inn," but a memory of Mrs. Giles' gossiping tongue prevented her risking so much. In the afternoon, however, Durgo lounged along the road, in his lazy, heavy, massive fashion, arrayed in his rough tweed clothes, and looking very much like a burly prize-fighter. Luckily there was no one in sight, as Miss Ankers' cottage was in a solitary corner on the outskirts of Marshely, so Bella ran hatless into the garden to beckon the negro into the cottage.

"Come in! come in! I wish to speak to you," she said hurriedly, when he stepped up to the white palings; and she glanced right and left, to be sure that no curious eyes were on her.

Durgo stared and frowned, as education in a world-famous University had not quite eradicated his contempt for women. However, when Bella ran inside again, and stood beckoning him in the passage, he resolved to enter, if only to learn why she acted in this bold way. So tall was Durgo, and so low the door, that he had to stoop considerably to enter, and when in the little drawing-room he bulked hugely as Gulliver in the Lilliputian temple.

"What is it, missy?" asked Durgo roughly, for he was not inclined to waste his time in saying pretty nothings to this Englishwoman, when so much was at stake. "I cannot stay here; I am busy."

"I wish to help you," said Bella, going straight to the point.

"In what way?" Durgo stared at her peremptory tone.

"I wish to help you on condition that you help me."

"In what way?" he asked again, and sat down on a chair, which creaked under his mighty weight.

"Listen," said Bella, speaking very slowly, and with her eyes on his strong, black face. "You are not of my colour or race, yet I am going to trust you, as Cyril told me all about you. Besides, we are both working for the same end—that is, we both wish to find Edwin Lister. Cyril told me what Mrs. Tunks discovered."

"He had no right," frowned Durgo; "I want no women——"

"Don't despise women," said Bella drily, "for you may need the help of one woman, and she is my own self. You know that I am supposed to be Captain Huxham's daughter?"

"Supposed to be?" Durgo noted the way she placed her words at once, which said much for his powers of observation, and the quick working of his brain.

"Yes, Silas Pence, the preacher——"

"I know him, missy. Go on."

"Loves me," continued Bella, with a blush; "and to marry me he would stop at nothing. Last night he declared that I was not the daughter of Captain Huxham, and that Captain Huxham had told him as much."

"Do you believe that?"

"Yes. That is, I believe I am not Captain Huxham's daughter, since the money was not left to me. But I do not believe that Captain Huxham told this to Silas Pence. I believe," Bella bent forward, "that Mr. Pence is concerned in this murder, and stole certain papers, which revealed the truth."

Durgo's eyes flashed. He saw at once the value of such information. "Can you prove this?" he asked in his throaty tones.

"That's just where it is," she answered quickly. "I wish *you* to prove it."

"How can I do that?"

"Question Mr. Pence, and make him answer. Force him, in whatever way you like, to show how he actually obtained the information. If he stole the papers stating the fact—and this I believe—he must have been in the room where the murder was committed some hour during that night. If so, he must have seen Edwin Lister, and must know where he is."

"Hai!" Durgo leaped to his feet. "That is true: that is probable. Perhaps he can say if my master got the jewels."

"Perhaps he can, but I am certain that he will not."

"Oh, I think he will! I think he will," said Durgo significantly.

"Don't hurt him," cried Bella, alarmed, for much as she disliked the preacher she did not wish him to come to harm at the hands of this African semi-savage. As a matter of fact, she was sorry to enlist Durgo's services at all; but, under the circumstances, there seemed to be no help for it.

"I shall not hurt him more than is necessary," said Durgo, catching up his bowler hat and placing it on his woolly head; "if he speaks plainly I won't hurt him at all. You have helped me, missy, and you will find that I am not ungrateful. When you marry the son of my master, you will be rich. I, Durgo, the king, will make you rich," he ended arrogantly.

"One moment," said Bella, detaining him; "these jewels belong to Captain Huxham. Have you any right to take them?"

"Every right, since they never belonged to Captain Huxham," said the negro decisively. "My father, the great chief Kawal, gave them to Maxwell Faith, and from Maxwell Faith they were stolen by Huxham. If Faith were alive I would return the jewels to him, and ask him to help me with my expedition. But he is dead; Huxham murdered him, and stole the jewels. Edwin Lister came to get back what belongs to me, and I think he has them."

"Supposing you find Mr. Lister, and learn that he has not the jewels?"

Durgo rolled his eyes ferociously. "I shall then enter the Manor-house by force, and learn where they are hidden."

"You would only be handed over to the police by Mrs. Vand and her husband, Henry. It will be better for me to search."

"How can you, since you are not friendly with Mrs. Vand?"

Bella laughed. "I know much more about the Manor-house than Mrs. Vand does, I assure you," she said significantly. "There are all manner of secret passages and unknown chambers in that ancient mansion. If I desired to enter, I could do so in the night-time by a secret door hidden behind the ivy at the back of the house."

"Then do so," said Durgo eagerly, "and search for the jewels."

"Not yet. Wait until you see Edwin Lister, and learn if he procured the jewels. By the way, where did your father get them?"

Durgo reflected for a few minutes. "I have heard much talk of my father's treasure, of which these jewels were part. You know how rich the Northern part of Africa was in the time of the Romans?"

"Yes. Cyril made me read Gibbons' History."

"Well, when the Arabs swept across Northern Africa, they looted the Roman cities, then possessed more or less by the Goths and Vandals. Many of the Arabs came South to Nigeria, and brought their plunder with them. I think that these jewels, which my father gave to Maxwell Faith, came into his possession from some remote ancestor, who so brought them. But I cannot say. Still, that is my opinion."

"It is a feasible idea, certainly," said Bella musingly, and astonished at the knowledge of the negro, quite forgetting that he had been educated at Oxford; "but where the jewels came from, matters little. What we have to find out, is where they are, and Mr. Pence——"

"I shall see this man," interrupted Durgo quietly; "he may lie to others: he will tell the truth to



me."

"No violence," warned Bella anxiously.

Durgo nodded. "I fear your police too much," said he, with an ironical grin, and strode out of the house, looking more burly and defiant than ever. Bella had regretted her employment of his services, but what else could she do when so much was at stake? Bella wished to marry Cyril, and, to do so, desired to be certain that she was not Captain Huxham's daughter. The papers—if her wild surmise was correct—would prove if what Pence said was true. Then, since Cyril's father had not murdered her father—she put it in this confused way—she would be able to marry her lover with a clear conscience. That he might be the son of an assassin troubled her very little. To get her way after the manner of a woman deeply in love, she would have set the world on fire, or would have wrecked the solar system. And in placing the safety of Pence in the hands of a semi-civilised negro, she undoubtedly was risking his life. But she did not care, so long as she attained to the knowledge which she was confident he possessed.

It will be seen that Bella Huxham was no Sunday-school angel, or even the amiable heroine of a *Family Herald* novelette, who never by any chance does wrong. She was simply an average girl, with good instincts, brought up so far as school-training was concerned in a conventional way. At home no one had taught her to discern right from wrong, and, like the ordinary healthy young animal of the human race, she had not passed through sufficient sorrow to make her inquire into the truths of religion. Bella needed trouble to train her into a good, brave woman, and she was certainly getting the training now. But she made mistakes, as was natural, considering her inexperience.

That same evening, Mr. Silas Pence was seated in his shabby sitting-room, making notes for his next Sunday sermon. He occupied lodgings in a lonely cottage on the verge of the common, and did so because his landlady was a member of the Little Bethel congregation, who boarded and lodged him cheaply in order to have the glory of entertaining the minister. The landlady was a heavy-footed, heavy-faced woman, with two great hulking sons, and occupied the back part of the premises. Silas inhabited the best sitting-room and the most comfortable bedroom. There was no fence round the front of the cottage, although there was a garden of vegetables at the back, so the sitting-room window looked straight out on to the purple heather and golden gorse of the waste land. An artist would have delighted in the view, but Silas had no eye for anything beautiful in nature, and paid very little attention to the changing glories of the year. The lodging was cheap, and the situation healthy, so he was perfectly satisfied.

On this especial evening, the young preacher sat at the red-repp covered table, reading his Bible and making his notes. It was after ten o'clock, and his landlady was asleep, as were her two sons, both agricultural labourers worn out with the heavy toils of the day. The sitting-room window was wide open, and the blind was up, so that the cool night breeze was wafted faintly into the somewhat stuffy room, which was crowded with unnecessary furniture. Silas made a few notes, then threw down his pencil and sighed, resting his weary head on his hand.

Pence was by no means a bad man, but he was weak and excitable. The pursuit of Bella aroused the worst part of his nature, and made him think, say, and do much which he condemned. The better part of him objected to a great deal which he did, but the tide of his passion hurried him away and could not be checked by the dykes of common-sense. At times—and this was one of them—he bitterly blamed himself for giving way to the desire for Hepzibah, as he called Bella Huxham, in his own weak mind. But, sane in all other ways, he was insane on this one point, and felt that he would jeopardise his chance of salvation to call her wife. Nevertheless he was sane enough to know his insanity, and would have given much to root out the fierce love which was destroying his life.

But the insane passion which he cherished for a woman who would have nothing to do with him led him deeper and deeper into the mire of sin, and in spite of his prayers and cries for help, the Unseen would do nothing to extricate him from the morass of difficulties into which he had plunged himself. At times Silas even doubted if God existed, so futile were his attempts to gain comfort and guidance. Much as he loved Bella, he desired to win clear of the unwilling influence which she exercised on his nature, and vainly prayed for light whereby to know the necessary means to get rid of the tormenting demon. But no answer came, and he relapsed into despair, wondering what his congregation would say if any member knew the unmastered temptations of his inner life. The struggle made him weak and ill and thin and nervous, and but that deep in his heart he knew vaguely that God was watching over him, and would aid at the proper time, he would have taken his own miserable life.

With his head buried in his hands, Silas thought thus, with many groans and with many bitter tears, the shedding of which made his eyes burn. Occupied with his misery, he did not see a dark, massive form glide towards the open window, nor did he hear a sound, for Durgo stepped as light-footed as a cat. The sill of the window was no great distance from the ground, and the big negro flung his leg over the sill and into the room. But in getting hastily through, he was so large and the window so small, that he made a sliding noise as the window slipped still further up. Silas started to his feet, but only to see Durgo completely in the room, facing him with a grim smile.

"I have come to speak with you, sir," said the negro.

Silas turned white, being haunted by a fear known only to himself. But he read in the eyes of this black burglar—or, rather, he guessed by some wonderful intuition, that his fear and the cause of

his fear were known to this man. Durgo saw the look in the preacher's eyes, and read his thoughts in his turn. The negro was not boasting when he hinted that he possessed certain psychic power. "Yes," he said, keeping his burning gaze directly on the miserable white man; "you stole papers from Captain Huxham's room, and I——"

"I did not," interrupted Pence wildly, and making a clutch at his breast coat-pocket. "How dare you——"

"The papers are in your pocket," interrupted Durgo, advancing, as he noted the unconscious action and guessed its significance. "Give me those papers."

"I have no papers. I will alarm the house——"

"Do so, and you shall be arrested."

"What do you mean?"

"You saw my master, Edwin Lister, enter the Manor-house, and thought that he was his son. Cyril Lister told me as much. From what you said to Miss Huxham about her not being the daughter of the sailor, I believe that you followed my master into the house. What took place?"

"Nothing! nothing! I swear that I did not——"

"Those papers," said Durgo, pointing to the white hand which still clutched feebly at the breast-pocket, "say that the girl is not Captain Huxham's daughter. I want to know whose daughter she is."

"You are talking rubbish. I have no papers."

"I am making a guess, and I believe my guess is a true one. Will you give up those papers, or must I wring your neck?"

With widely-open eyes, the preacher flung himself against the mantel-piece and clutched at a handbell. Just as he managed to ring this feebly, for his hands were shaking, and he was utterly unnerved, Durgo, seeing that there was no time to be lost, sprang forward and laid a heavy grasp on the miserable man's throat, ripping open his jacket with the other hand. In less than a minute he had the papers in his hand.

"No! no! no!" shouted Silas, and made a clutch at them.

Durgo thrust the papers into his pocket, and raising Pence up shoulder high, dashed him down furiously. His head struck the edge of the fender, and he lay unconscious. But Durgo did not wait to see further. He glided out of the window like a snake—swift, silent, stealthy, and dangerous.

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## CHAPTER XVI

### THE PAPERS

Next morning the news was all over the village, that Silas Pence had been seized with epilepsy, and in falling had cut his head open against the old-fashioned fender. He had just time—said the gossips—to ring the bell before the catastrophe, and the landlady being, fortunately, awake, had rushed into the room to his assistance. In an hour he had become conscious, and had been put to bed, after giving the explanation of how he came by the wound in his head. As Silas was fairly popular, everyone was more or less sorry, and many were the callers at the cottage on the common.

Dora heard the news from one of her scholars, and retailed it to her friend when she came home to luncheon. Bella turned pale when she heard of the affair. She guessed that this was the work of Durgo, and reproached herself for having enlisted his services. But then, she argued, that if Durgo really was responsible for the preacher's sickness, he would have appeared in Miss Ankers' cottage in the morning, to explain what had taken place, and possibly—supposing he had been successful—to show the papers. Then again, if this was Durgo's work, Bella wondered why the preacher had not denounced him. It seemed to her, on this assumption, that Pence feared to say too much, lest he should be questioned too closely. Dora certainly had no more suspicions than had anyone else, but what the story of the young man was absolutely true.

"He never *did* look healthy," said Dora, when the meal was ended, "so I am not surprised to hear that he has these epileptic fits."

"Perhaps he'll get over them," hinted Bella feebly, and not looking at her friend, lest she should betray herself.

"My dear, people with epilepsy never recover," rebuked Dora seriously, "and I wonder that the man dared to ask you to marry him, seeing what he suffered from. What a terrible thing to have a husband with fits."

"Are you sure that it was a fit?" asked Bella, trying to salve her conscience with the idea that Durgo had nothing to do with the matter—a vain attempt.

"My dear, am I sure that the hair grows on my head? Of course, I am sure. The man himself explained how he fell, just as he clutched at the bell. He hit his poor head against the iron fender—you know, dear, one of those old-fashioned kitchen fenders, now out of date. It's a mercy there was no fire in the grate, or he would have been burnt to death. Why, a cousin of mine once"—and Dora went off into a long and wearisome tale of a member of her family who had suffered in the same way.

When the little old school-mistress returned to her duties, Bella sat down to consider things. On the face of it, Durgo had done nothing, and Silas really might suffer from fits. But as he had never fallen before, and as Bella knew that Durgo would stop at nothing to get the papers, which she believed existed, she began to believe that the fall was by design and not by accident. This belief taking full possession of her, she longed feverishly to see the negro, and to ask questions. But, although she watched for quite two hours at the window, he never appeared. Then—as her nerves were strung up nearly to snapping pitch—she determined to call round at Cyril's lodgings and tell him of her interview with the black man. For the moment, she was unwilling to do this, as she guessed that Cyril would be angry. Still, as it was more or less certain that Durgo himself would tell her lover—always supposing the papers existed and had been obtained—Bella thought it would be wiser to be first in the field with her story. Besides, in any case, she would have to confess to Cyril, so why not now? The only chance of getting at the truth of the matter of the murder lay in herself and Durgo and Cyril working amicably together, and in keeping nothing back from one another.

There was a certain amount of risk in going to Cyril's lodgings, as his landlady, Mrs. Block, was one of the most notorious gossips in the village. She would be certain to talk of the visit, and to make unkind comments on the fact of a young lady choosing to visit a bachelor without a chaperon. And a chaperon Bella could not have, since she wished no one else to be present during her conversation with Cyril. A third party would mean that she would be unable to speak plainly and all knowledge of the case—inner knowledge that is—must be confined to herself, her lover, and to the negro. It would never do to let the outside world know of the means they were taking to arrive at the truth, and a chaperon might easily play the part of a she-Judas.

And after all—as Bella reflected, when hurrying along the road—she had no one to consider but herself, since it mattered very little what was said about her, so long as Cyril was true. She was at war with her aunt—if, indeed, Mrs. Vand was her aunt—she had no friend but Dora, and there was really no person whom she desired to conciliate. Under these circumstances, she took her courage in both hands and with a calm face, but with her heart in her mouth, she rapped at the door of Lister's lodgings. Luckily he had observed her from the window, and opened the door himself.

"I am so glad to see you Bella," he said, shaking hands in a conventional manner, as the stout form of Mrs. Block appeared at the end of the passage, "for I was just coming round to propose a walk on the common."

"It is a beautiful day," said Bella, likewise conventional.

"Very. Wait until I get my hat and stick. Mrs. Block, if anyone calls, I am going to the common with Miss Huxham."

"And a very lovely sweet walk it is," said Mrs. Block, coming nearer to see if Bella was dressed in sufficiently deep mourning for her presumed father, "as I said to Block, if he'd only make the money a man like him ought to make, I'd be strolling on that there common, dressed up as fine as nine-pence. But there, you never get what you want in this world, and ain't it dreadful, Miss Huxham, about poor Mr. Pence?"

"Very dreadful!" assented Bella politely, then as Cyril was ready, she went with him out of the gate, leaving Mrs. Block looking after them. Luckily for the couple, Mrs. Block had nothing to say against the visit. Indeed it was in her heavy mind that Cyril, having failed to take Bella out as promised, had been called upon by a young lady weary of waiting.

"So like a man," soliloquised Mrs. Block, standing on her door-step, broom in hand, "they never thinks, never, never! And if this Mr. Lister commences neglect afore marriage, what will it be when the honeymoon's over. Ah, poor Miss Huxham! what with her pa dying, and her aunt robbing, and him as should love her neglecting—it's a miserable life she'll have. Ah, well, there's always the grave to look forward to," and ending her soliloquy thus cheerfully, Mrs. Block entered the house and shut the door with a bang.

Meanwhile the lovers, quite ignorant of Mrs. Block's opinion, walked along the village street, and soon emerged on to the common. They passed the cottage wherein Silas Pence lodged, and this recalled the episode of the so-called fit to Cyril, as he had heard all particulars from his garrulous landlady. "I'm sorry for Pence," said Cyril, glancing at the cottage.

"Why?" asked Bella nervously.

"It's such an awful thing for a person to have fits. If I'd known that I should not have pitched him over the fence last night. Of course, he's a rotter, and a blighter, and a nuisance; but he's weak, and I shouldn't have treated him so roughly. I only hope," said Cyril gloomily, "that it wasn't the fall I gave him which brought about this beastly fit."

"You can be quite sure of that," said Bella sharply; "in fact," she hesitated, then spoke out boldly,

"I don't believe he had a fit."

"My dearest girl, he said so himself, according to Mrs. Block."

"I know he did, as Dora told me. And that makes me the more certain of his connection with the murder of my father. I suppose I must call Captain Huxham my father until I am certain of the truth of what Mr. Pence said."

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Cyril, stopping to stare at the down-cast, flushed face under the black hat. "Why should Pence tell a lie about his fall?"

"Because he didn't want anyone to know that Durgo had thrown him down."

Cyril stared harder. "Would you mind explaining?" he said politely, "I still cannot understand your meaning."

"I don't know that I understand myself," she replied nervously. "The fact is, Cyril, I believe that Durgo threw Mr. Pence down when he refused to give up those papers."

"What papers?" asked Lister, still bewildered.

"The papers which tell the truth about me."

"But, my dear girl, that is all supposition. We don't know if any papers exist, after all. Pence may have spoken at random."

"You believed that he spoke the truth."

"I did. I want to believe, as only by learning that you are not Captain Huxham's daughter can we marry," said Cyril dismally; "but the wish is father to the thought, in my case."

"Well," said Bella, plunging into her confession, "you had better ask Durgo if he assaulted Mr. Pence last night."

"Why should he?"

"I asked him to."

Cyril, who had walked on, stopped once more and stared. "You asked him to?"

"Yes." Bella was less nervous now. "I told him all that Mr. Pence said, and suggested that he should get the papers."

Cyril's face grew stern, as she knew it would. "Tell me everything that passed between you and that nigger."

"I have not said that I saw him," said Bella evasively.

"You could scarcely have asked him to assault Pence, unless you had seen him," retorted Cyril, who looked displeased, "come, be frank. Tell me all."

Bella did so, omitting nothing, although she every now and then stole a glance at Cyril's compressed lips and corrugated brow. At the end of her explanation he looked up, and his eyes were hard. "You have acted very wrongly," he said sternly.

"I know I have: I admit as much," said the girl penitently, "but, after all, I only asked him to get the papers. I did not tell him to hurt Mr. Pence."

Cyril shook his head impatiently. "You should not have seen this infernal nigger. I don't like any white woman to talk to niggers."

"I don't like them myself," said Bella quietly, "and you may be sure, had I not been anxious to learn the truth, I should not have spoken to Durgo."

"You could have asked me to speak."

"Would you have done so, seeing that you did not believe that the papers existed?"

"Nor do I believe now," replied Cyril, walking on quickly. "It is all guess work on your part."

"No, no, no!" insisted the girl, as they arrived at their favourite spot under a giant gorse bush; "the mere fact that Mr. Pence told a lie about his injury shows me that I am right."

"We don't know for certain that he met with his injury at Durgo's hands."

"Then I have done no wrong," said Bella promptly.

"Indeed you have," said Cyril in vexed tones, as they sat down. "You spurred on that infernal nigger to do what was wrong."

"I understood that you liked Durgo, and thought him a well-educated man."

"So I do like him; so I do consider him wonderfully well educated. He is an Oxford M.A., you know. But I daresay if you scratched him you would find that he is a common nigger after all."

"The son of a king?"

"An African king. Pooh! what's that? You must promise me, Bella, not to have anything more to do with him."

"But I have promised to seek for the jewels in the Manor-house," and Bella went on to state how she could enter Bleacres by the secret door. Cyril nodded and approved of the idea.

"But you must come to me and tell me what you find out. I don't want you to speak to Durgo more than you can help."

"That is racial instinct and injustice."

"Racial instinct is never unjust. I don't care if Durgo was a black Homer and Bismark and Napoleon rolled into one. He is a man of colour, and I detest the breed. Promise not to have anything to do with him—at all events unless I am present."

"I promise if you will not scold so much," said Bella wilfully.

"I am not scolding. If I did you would cry."

The girl slipped her arm within that of her lover's, pleased to have escaped so easily. "I begin to think that I am marrying a tyrant."

"You are marrying a man who loves you, and who wants to protect you from all dangers. Oh, Bella, Bella! I wish we could go away to London and get married quietly. Then we could go to Australia and leave this bad past behind. Will you come? I have money enough for a year, and by that time I'll be able to get something to do in Melbourne or Sydney."

Bella shook her head. "Dear, I love you dearly, but I can't marry you until I am quite sure that I am not Captain Huxham's daughter."

"In any case," said Cyril bitterly. "You will marry the son of a man who has committed a murder."

"I am not so sure of that. Now that Mr. Pence has told a lie I think that he may have something to do with the matter. He may be guilty."

Cyril groaned. "I have no ill-will towards Pence, in spite of his insolence to you, but for the sake of my name I wish I could think so."

There was silence for a few moments, and then Bella, who was looking along the path, spoke to her lover in a frightened whisper. "Here is Durgo!"

And indeed it was. The negro swung along bluff, heavy and ponderous. He was in dark clothes, and these, with his black face, made him look like a blot on the sunshiny beauty of the summer world. At once, with his keen eyesight, he caught a glimpse of the lovers and strode towards them, smiling and bland. Cyril nodded coldly. He could not forgive the black man's impertinence in speaking to Bella, quite forgetting that Bella was to blame and had sought the interview. Bella herself, remembering Cyril's warning and her own promise, did not dare to welcome the man.

"I went to see you," said Durgo, addressing Cyril, "and your landlady told me that you had gone to the common with Miss Huxham. I followed. I am glad to find you both together. I have much to say."

Bella could not contain her curiosity. "Did you——"

"Yes," said Durgo coolly, "I did. He would have made a noise, so I had to dash him to the ground. He hit his head against the fender. Mrs. Giles," he added with a grim laugh, "tells me that he accounts for the knock on his head by saying that he had a fit."

"What do you make out of that?" asked Cyril, casting a glance at Bella warning her to hold her tongue.

"Oh"—Durgo glanced from one to the other—"so Miss Huxham has told you?"

"About her interview? Yes! I am sorry you took her advice and saw Pence, for I knew that ill would come of it."

Durgo leisurely took a bundle of papers from his pocket. "Much good has come of it, as I am here to explain," said he quietly. "You were right, Miss Huxham. Pence had certain papers stolen from Captain Huxham's safe."

"Then he is guilty of the——"

"I can't be certain of that," interrupted the negro sharply. "I had no time to question Pence. As soon as I got the papers which he carried in his breast-coat pocket I slipped through the window. Lucky that I did so, for his landlady came in almost immediately in answer to the ring of the handbell. If he hadn't sounded it I should not have rendered him insensible, but I had to do so for my own safety."

"Well, well, well!" said Cyril impatiently, and looking at the papers, "we can talk of this later. You say that Miss Huxham's guess is correct?"

"It is. And I congratulate Miss Huxham on her clever brain. Pence was certainly a fool to say as much as he did, and especially to so talented a lady who guessed——"

"There! there! No more compliments. Tell us both at once. Did he speak truly when he stated that Miss Huxham was not the captain's daughter?"

"He spoke absolutely truly, as you will find when you read this," and Durgo placed a bulky roll of paper in Bella's hands.

"Oh!" she said, flushing a bright pink, "how glad I am. But whose daughter am I?" and she made to open the paper.

Cyril laid his hand on the bundle. "We haven't time to read all that now," he said gruffly. "Tell us shortly what you have discovered, Durgo?"

The negro nodded, and addressed himself to the girl. "Your name is Isabella Faith," he stated, "and you are the daughter of Maxwell Faith, who was my father Kawal's firm friend."

The lovers looked at one another. "But how did I come to pass as Captain Huxham's daughter?" she asked breathlessly.

Durgo shrugged his shoulders. "So far as I can read the story, which Captain Huxham has set down in that bundle you hold, he was smitten with compunction for having murdered your father and so adopted you."

Bella shuddered. "How terrible to have lived with such a wicked old man," she said. "I never liked Captain Huxham, but thinking him my father I tried my best to do my duty. No wonder he would not leave the property to me!"

"I think he intended to leave you the jewels, though," said Durgo, thoughtfully. "He mentions in those papers that he intended to make a will leaving them to you, since his sister, Mrs. Vand, claimed Bleacres and his income. It's my opinion that Mrs. Vand learned how her brother had murdered Maxwell Faith, and so forced him to make that will."

"Then the jewels really belong to you, Bella?"

"Yes," said Durgo, rising and making a courteous bow. "And when we find Edwin Lister, my master, he shall restore the jewels."

"But your expedition?" asked Bella in surprise.

The negro looked at the lovers humorously. "I fear that there will be no expedition," he said seriously. "I cannot rob you of your fortune, Miss Faith. Marry our friend here and be happy."

"But what will you do?" asked Cyril, touched by this self-abnegation.

Durgo shrugged his shoulders again. "I shall search out Edwin Lister and return to Africa. In one way or another I daresay we can manage to get back to my tribe. Then I shall measure my strength and education against my cousin, who is wrongfully chief. For the rest, there is no more to be said. The papers you have, Miss Faith, will prove your birth and reveal all the doings of Huxham. There is no more for me to do, so I shall bid you both good-day and wish you all good luck."

The lovers stared to one another and then at the retreating form of Durgo, who had so delicately left them together. It was Cyril who spoke first.

"He is a good fellow, after all," he said. "That black skin covers a white heart. Oh! Bella, how strange it all is."

"Take me home," said the girl faintly, and with white cheeks. "I can bear no more at present. Isabella Faith is my name now——"

"Until you change it to that of Isabella Lister," said Cyril, kissing her.

But she only wept the more, broken down by the unexpected revelation.

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## CHAPTER XVII

### A CONFESSION

On the way home from the common, Cyril and Bella agreed that it would be wise to say nothing about her true parentage. In the first place, it would benefit no one to be thus candid, and in the second, such a statement would lead to questions being asked which might get Durgo into trouble. After all, the lovers argued, since Pence, as the chief party, did not move in the matter, it was useless for them to fight his battles. The more particularly when Durgo had acted so generously in surrendering the jewels. The black man had behaved in a way for which Cyril would not have given him credit. Few members of the boasting white race would have done as much.

According to the arrangement which the lovers came to, Bella was to remain Miss Huxham to the world until such time as Edwin Lister could be found, and the truth of Huxham's death became known. Of course, with jewels valued at forty thousand pounds, the girl was quite an heiress, and

she proceeded to build castles in the air for the advancement of Cyril, when he became her husband. The young man did not say much, as he did not wish to damp her ardour, but he privately thought that if his father were in possession of the jewels he would not surrender them easily. If Durgo was generous, Edwin Lister, as his son knew, was not, and since he had risked his neck to get the treasure he would certainly not hand it over to a girl whom he did not know, for a mere sentimental whim. That the girl was to be his son's wife, and that the son would benefit by the sale of the jewels, would make no difference.

On the way back to the cottage, Bella recovered her self-control and her spirits. It was a wonderful relief to her to learn that she was not the daughter of the gruff old mariner, whom she had never liked. Looking back on her life at Bleacres, Bella no longer wondered that her supposed father had never shown her any affection, and she shuddered when she recalled the terrible fact that his hands were red with blood. On consideration, however, she gave Huxham full credit for the way in which he had acted towards her. He had come to England a thief and a murderer, it is true, but he could easily have left her in the care of the people who looked after her in a little Croydon house. Bella could scarcely remember that house or the woman who stood to her in the place of a mother, her own being dead.

Almost her earliest recollection was being taken from Croydon by Captain Huxham and placed with some friends of his at Shepherd's Bush until she was nine years old. Then she lived with Huxham for a few years, and ultimately was sent to the Hampstead boarding-school, whence she returned to Bleacres at the age of twenty. Thus the captain had educated her and had looked after her, and in his own coarse way had proved himself to be generous to a certain extent. Badly as he had acted in robbing her of her heritage, he might have behaved infinitely worse. And by her heritage Bella meant the jewels. With the property and the income left to Mrs. Coppersley, now Mrs. Vand, she had nothing to do, and she no longer grudged the woman what she had schemed to get. But it was probable that had Mrs. Vand not so schemed, Huxham, for very shame, might have given his adopted daughter his nefarious earnings.

"I must not be hard on Captain Huxham," said Bella, when Cyril brought her to the gate, "for, in his own strange way, he acted kindly. But I am glad that he did not leave me anything, as I am certain he earned his money in some shady manner."

"A kind of Captain Kidd," assented Lister gravely. "I agree with you. But the old ruffian had a soft spot in his heart for you, my dear."

"No," said Bella, shaking her head, "I would not say that exactly. He suffered from remorse and therefore looked me out when he came to England. I did not find him an affectionate father by any means. But he was just, in a grim way, and even generous. He grudged me nothing save ready money. I wonder if Mrs. Vand knows the truth."

"You said yourself that she did not," replied Lister quietly, "and I am inclined to think so too. A tyrant like Mrs. Vand would have been only too glad to tell you the unpleasant truth."

"Unpleasant? Why, it is a delightful truth!"

"Unpleasant from Mrs. Vand's point of view, since, had she known that you were not her brother's daughter, in no way could you claim the money."

Bella shrugged her shoulders. "I am very, very glad that she has got the money, and much good may it do her. But I am thankful that Captain Huxham did not reveal the truth about me to her. Now she need never know."

"It matters very little whether she knows or not," retorted Cyril. "She cannot gain possession of the jewels. Those are clearly yours."

"How are we going to gain possession of them?" asked Bella lingering.

Cyril looked hopelessly up to the blue sky. "Heaven only knows! The first thing to be done is to find my father and see if they are in his possession. And now that we are parting, Bella, and you feel better, I don't mind telling you that I don't think my father will give them up—if indeed he has them."

"But to me, his son's future wife—"

"My father is quite unbiassed by sentimental considerations," said Cyril very dryly. "What he holds, he keeps. However, there is plenty of time to talk of this matter when we meet my father. Meanwhile, what will you do?"

Bella shook the bundle of papers which she carried. "I am going to my bedroom to read these," she said seriously. "I wish to learn everything that concerns my true parentage. I may have relatives, you know."

"If you have," said Lister emphatically, "I only trust that you will leave them severely alone. I don't care for relatives; they ask everything and give nothing."

"Well," said Bella smiling, for she had quite recovered her spirits, "so long as I have you, I need no sisters or cousins or aunts. Good-bye, dear. No, don't kiss me; someone may be looking on."

"What of that? Everyone knows that we are engaged."

"It doesn't do to emphasise the engagement in public," said the girl seriously, and ran into the

cottage. At the door she turned. "I shall tell you all that I read in these papers," she called out, and vanished, while Cyril returned home to think over the strange turn which events had taken. And things were strange, for in striving to solve one mystery they had solved another. In seeking for Huxham's assassin they had found the true father of Bella.

Dora had not yet returned, so Bella, in the seclusion of her bedroom, felt relieved. She did not wish, as yet, to share her secret even with the little school-mistress, good friend as that amiable woman had proved to be. Locking her door she sat down and unrolled the bundle. It consisted of many sheets of foolscap, and appeared to be a kind of rough diary kept by Jabez Huxham, when he was in Africa. The script was in his crooked painful writing, but was legible enough, and after some practice Bella managed to read it fairly easily. Seated on her bed, she perused what was set down, and found the reading extremely interesting.

The sheets seemed to have been torn from a manuscript book, for the diary both commenced and ended abruptly and dealt entirely with Maxwell Faith and his doings. The old pirate had evidently ripped the pages from the diary which he kept and had placed them in the carved chest, which Mrs. Tunks had found in the attic. There also, according to Durgo's story, the jewels had been stored, so apparently Huxham had used the chest—which had belonged to Faith—as a repository for all that concerned the dead trader. But Edwin Lister could scarcely have gone to the garret to seek the chest and get the jewels, since he did not know his way about the old mansion. It was, therefore, evident that Huxham had kept the jewels in his study safe, and had removed the chest containing the torn-out leaves to the attic. Afterwards he had apparently placed the papers in the safe also, where Pence had probably found them. But Bella did not pause to think out these matters. She was too much interested in the story which was set down.

Huxham stated abruptly that he met Maxwell Faith at Calabar, and had been engaged by him to transport certain goods up the Cross River, Nigeria, as far as Ogrude, when they were to be taken in canoes up to Yahe on the stream of that name. The goods were for Kawal, Durgo's father, with whom Faith appeared to have had many dealings. Faith and Huxham—so the writer said—got on very well, and the former told the latter much about himself and his past. The trader declared that he was the son of a wealthy Huntingdon Quaker, but had been disowned by his family and by the Society of Friends, because he had married a lady who was a Roman Catholic. There was one daughter, who had been born in London and had cost the mother her life. Faith said that he had placed his daughter Isabella with some friends of his at Croydon, and had come to Nigeria to make money for her. From what Bella could gather, her father appeared to have been desperately fond of her.

Afterwards Huxham and Faith parted, but met again in the Hinterland at the chief town of Kawal and again became friendly. Then the trader told Huxham that because he had supplied the chief with guns and ammunition, and had proved his friendship in many ways, he had received ancient jewels to the amount of forty thousand pounds. He was going home to his daughter with the money. At this part of the diary a portion of the manuscript was torn away, apparently that which dealt with the murder of Faith by Huxham.

The story commenced abruptly again with the statement that the writer was going to England with his earnings and with the jewels; and intending to seek out Faith's little daughter and adopt her. Huxham gave no reason for doing so in his diary; but Bella, reading between the lines, guessed that the man was overcome with remorse—a strange thing for so hardened a sinner as Huxham undoubtedly was. Then came hasty notes of Huxham's fears lest he should be robbed for the sake of the jewels, and reference to an unknown man who was dogging his steps. Ogrude, Afikpa, Obubra and Calabar were towns mentioned as having been the scene of adventures with this man, whose name was not given. Afterwards the hasty notes detailed the finding of Faith's little daughter at Croydon, her adoption by the writer and her removal to Shepherd's Bush. A few remarks were made relative to the fears of Huxham, and of his determination to find some place in the country where he would be safe from pursuit. The final page was torn off in the middle, and Bella could read no more.

Putting away the bundle in her box, she reflected on what she had read. It was easy for her to find her Quaker relatives, as the name and address of the family were given. Evidently these same relatives were rich, but very stiff-necked in Quaker traditions. Bella, however, thought very little of this at the moment. Her brain was employed in wondering if Huxham had met with his death at the hands of the unknown man who had dogged his footsteps in Nigeria. Without doubt this man knew of the existence of the jewels, and that Huxham had murdered Faith to get them. It might be that he determined to get the jewels, and, having traced Huxham to England after long years, had killed him and so gained his end. And this man—Bella asked herself the question earnestly—was this man Edwin Lister? She resolved to tell Cyril and to give him the papers to read. He could decide better than she, and probably Durgo could throw much light on the subject.

But there was no doubt that Huxham had bought the Solitary Farm, and had planted the corn thickly, and had mounted the search-light on the roof of Bleacres, so that he might defend himself from robbery and possibly from death. But all his precautions had been in vain, and he had been struck down at last in his very fortress. And by Edwin Lister! Bella felt certain that, as Edwin Lister had been many years in Nigeria and had been a close friend of Kawal's, he must be the unknown man to whom Huxham had so often referred. Lister was the assassin; there could be no doubt on that point.

Very thoughtfully the girl locked up the papers, and descended to the drawing-room to wait for



the return of Dora. She greatly wished to speak to her friend about what she had discovered, but such a confidence was not to be thought of, as many things had to be done first. Until Edwin Lister was discovered, Bella felt that she would have to be silent. But her thoughts on this subject were brought to an abrupt conclusion when she opened the drawing-room door, for she unexpectedly beheld Silas Pence.

"I came to see you, Miss Faith," he said, using her true name, "and I told the servant not to announce me. I waited here till you came."

Speaking in this jerky, nervous manner, the young man did not attempt to rise, as he appeared to be ill and exhausted. His face was haggard and his head was bound up in a white cloth. Anything more weird than his looks Bella had never seen, and she recoiled on the threshold of the room, only anxious to escape from his unwelcome presence.

"Have you come to persecute me again?" she asked.

"No! no! no!" said Pence weakly, and yet with great relief in his tone. "I have come to ask your pardon for the way in which I have behaved. I was mad to trouble you as I did, but now I have recovered my reason."

"What do you mean exactly?"

Pence smiled in a ghastly manner. "Can you not guess," said he, touching the linen rag round his head. "The blow I received when I fell on the fender has changed my feelings towards you."

"But how can a blow do that?" asked Bella, relieved but puzzled.

"I cannot say," faltered Pence, resting his aching head on one thin hand. "I really cannot say; my brain won't think just now."

"Then don't think and don't talk," said Bella, kindly placing a plump cushion at his back. "Rest quietly and I'll make you a cup of tea."

"You give me good for evil," said the preacher, flushing painfully.

"No, no!" replied the girl hastily, and remembering her share in his trouble. "You did me great honour in asking me to be your wife, though you were a trifle difficult in some ways. But now——"

"It is all gone; it is all gone. I assure you it is all gone!"

"What is all gone?"

"All my love for you; all my desire; all my mad infatuation. I like you as a friend, Miss Faith—I shall always like you as a friend—but I can never, never worship you again in the way I did."

"Thank heaven for that!" said Bella fervently. She knew no more than did Silas how the change had come about. But it was evident that the blow on his head had suddenly rearranged his ideas.

"Up to ten o'clock last night I loved you madly, despairingly, and would have risked my soul to gain your hand. But since I fell"—he passed his hand across his forehead in a bewildered manner—"everything has changed."

"And for the better," Bella assured him. "Come, don't think anything more about the matter. I have rung the bell for tea."

"I rung the bell also last night. It brought in Mrs. Queen, very fortunately, or I might have bled to death, Miss Faith."

"Why do you call me Miss Faith?" asked Bella abruptly.

"Because you are Miss Faith," said the preacher, lifting his haggard face to her own in some surprise. "Did not the black man tell you?"

"How do you know that I have anything to do with the black man?"

"I have seen Mr. Lister with him. I saw you all three talking on the common. Oh, Miss Faith, you don't know how I have followed and spied on you!" and the man flushed with shame and dismay.

"Did you listen?" asked Bella abruptly.

"No; I did not fall so low as that, but I followed and watched."

"Why?"

"Because I loved you. That is all over now; I shall never follow or watch you again. I am glad that the black man threw me down last night. When I found this morning that my prayers had been answered and that I no longer suffered from this mad passion, I resolved to say nothing about what had taken place."

"And so invented the story of the epileptic fit?"

"Yes; but the truth is——"

"I know the truth: Durgo told everything to me and to Mr. Lister this morning, or rather this afternoon; also Durgo gave me the papers. I have read them, and know that I am not Captain

Huxham's daughter. By the way"—Bella looked sharply at the preacher—"are we friends?"

"Yes, if you will have me for a friend," said Pence meekly.

"By all means, now that you love me no longer. Be my friend,"—she held out her hand, which Pence grasped feebly—"and tell me how you got those papers."

"From your father's—I mean from Captain Huxham's safe."

"Then you were in the room on that night?"

"Yes. I saw the body."

"And you said nothing."

"No. Had I done so, I should have incriminated myself. When I entered the study Captain Huxham was lying dead under the desk."

"Did you see anyone about?"

"I saw no one, not even Mr. Lister, whom I had followed into the house."

"Just explain precisely what you did see," said Bella, anxiously.

Pence thought for a few moments. "I was watching the house as usual on that night because I loved you," he said, in a slow, feeble way, for he was still weak from loss of blood. "I beheld Mr. Lister coming towards me. He brushed past me, and entered the Manor by the front door. I watched for his return, intending to speak to him. But he never came out."

Bella sat up alertly. "He never came out?"

"No. I don't know how long I watched; but finally I grew tired, and stole up to the house. The front door was ajar. I saw that the study door was also open, so I went in. Then I saw Captain Huxham lying dead and bleeding, with the safe open and the papers in disorder. In the safe, or, rather, tumbled on the floor before the safe was a bundle of bank-notes. The Accuser of the Brethren tempted me," said Silas, with the perspiration beading his high forehead, "and I snatched up the notes, for I thought that if I had money I could marry you. I then saw that bundle which the black man took from me, and thinking there might be more notes in the bundle, I snatched that up also and fled."

"Why did you fly?" asked Bella, following this story with great interest.

"I thought I heard a noise, and feared lest I should be accused of killing Captain Huxham. I ran out of the study, and out of the house, and down the path between the standing corn, as though the devil was after me. But he was not after me," wailed Pence, standing up, "he was in my heart. Here is the money for which I sold my precious soul," and he threw a packet of bank-notes on the table with feverish eagerness. "It was all for your sake!"

Bella took up the notes. "The man you mistook for Mr. Lister was his father," she said quietly; "did you not see him in the room?"

"I saw no one. Did Lister's father kill Captain Huxham?"

"Can't you tell?" asked the girl, looking at him straightly.

"I have told everything," said Pence, with an air of fatigue; "now I die," and before she could help him he fell full length on the floor quite insensible. The interview had proved too much for him in his weak state.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE GHOST

The corn on Bleacres was rapidly ripening under the beams of the powerful sun. The Manor-house was islanded amidst a golden sea of grain, the waves of which rolled up even to its ancient walls. The winding path to the boundary channel was still the sole means of approach, but few people came up this to the house, as the Vands were not popular. Henry certainly was approved of, on account of his manners, his affliction, and his violin-playing; but the neighbours, ignorant of the truth, could not forgive his wife for robbing Bella of her inheritance. Now that she was rich and re-married, it was Mrs. Vand's intention to become the great lady of the district, but hitherto she had not met with much success in her bid for popularity.

But, in spite of cold looks and significant speeches, Mrs. Vand went from house to house, talking of a Harvest Home fete, which she proposed to give as soon as the grain was reaped. Her husband would not accompany her on these social visits, as he was shrewd enough to see that only time would ameliorate the bad impression which Mrs. Vand's callous conduct had created. In vain he tried to show his wife that it would be wise to retire for a short period. Mrs. Vand scorned such Fabian tactics, and did her best to take by storm the position she felt that her wealth and personality deserved. The more she was snubbed, the more she persisted, and there was no

doubt but what, in the end, she would gain what she wanted, by wearing down those who resented her conduct.

Mrs. Vand paid a visit even to Dora Ankers, choosing a Saturday afternoon, when she knew that Bella was walking on the common with her lover. The little school-mistress received her coldly, as she had never liked the woman from the first day she had set eyes on her. But Mrs. Vand, in the most flamboyant of costumes, was all smiles and small talk, refusing to see for one moment the chilly reception she was receiving.

"You really must come to our Harvest Home, Miss Ankers," she babbled; "what with Henry's taste and my money, it will be wonderfully gay and bright and artistic. Everyone will help to reap the corn, and in the evening we will have a ball, at which Henry will play old English tunes, to which we shall dance. You must come. I shall take no refusal."

"How can I?" asked Dora tartly, "seeing that your niece whom you have treated so badly, is stopping with me."

Mrs. Vand drew up her stout figure with great dignity. "That Bella Huxham left her home and my guardianship is purely her own fault," she replied. "I promised to look after her, at poor Jabez's request. But she chose to behave in a way of which I did not approve, and to engage herself to a man, who is not the husband I should have picked for her."

"Bella has every right to choose a husband for herself," retorted Miss Ankers.

"Girls are not clever enough to choose the right man. And Mr. Lister——"

"You know nothing about him, Mrs. Vand."

"That is exactly what I complain of," said the other woman triumphantly, "he may be a rogue and a scamp."

"He may be, but he is not. Mr. Lister is a gentleman."

"That doesn't prevent his being a bad character."

"Well," said Dora, rising to terminate the visit, "I don't care about discussing my friends."

Mrs. Vand rose also. "Let us shelve the subject," she said grandly, "and you can tell Bella that I am willing to forgive and forget. If she likes to come to our Harvest Home, she can do so. I am not the one to bear malice. It is the last Harvest Home we shall have," prattled Mrs. Vand, as her hostess skilfully edged her towards the door. "Henry does not intend to sow wheat again, and the grounds of Bleacres will be thrown open to the public."

"People are not fond of wandering in marshes," said Dora dryly. "If you want to please us, throw open the Manor-house. That is interesting, if you like."

"And haunted," said the visitor in a thrilling whisper; "do you know of any sad legend connected with the Manor-house, Miss Ankers?"

"No!" snapped Dora, tartly; then her curiosity got the better of her dislike for Mrs. Vand. "Is it really haunted?"

"There are footsteps, and whisperings, and rappings in the twilight. I told Henry that if this sort of thing continued, I should leave the place."

Privately, Dora wished that she would, and thus rid the neighbourhood of a most undesirable presence, but aloud she merely remarked that the noises might be due to rats, a suggestion which Mrs. Vand scouted.

"It's a ghost, a ghost!" she insisted—"all old families have a ghost. But do not let us talk of it," she continued, looking round with a shudder; "already the thing has got on my nerves. To go to a more pleasant subject: let me invite you for a row on the water."

"A row on the water?" echoed Dora, who knew of no lake in the neighbourhood.

"On the channel at the end of my grounds," explained Mrs. Vand. "Henry has bought a rowing-boat, and takes me far into the country. You can almost reach the railway line before you get to the swamps. Do come."

"I'll think about it," said Miss Ankers, only anxious to get her visitor out of the house before Bella came back.

"Do, dear, and come to our Harvest Home. It will be quite artistic: you have no idea of Henry's perfect taste, and if Bella comes I shall be glad to see her, in spite of her nasty behaviour, and—and——" Mrs. Vand could think of nothing more to say, so took herself off, with a gracious smile, quite sure that she had played the part of a great lady to perfection.

"Ugh!" said Dora, looking after the stout, gaudily-clothed figure, "you're a spiteful cat, if ever there was one. I shouldn't be surprised to hear that you had killed your brother yourself, in order to get the money."

Unaware of this amiable speech, Mrs. Vand sailed grandly through the village, dispensing smiles and patronage. Fortunately for herself, she was not a thought-reader, or her self-satisfaction

might have received a severe reproof. She was considered to be considerably worse than Jezebel, and in her stoutness was compared to the late Mrs. Manning, a notable murderess. To her face many were agreeable, but usually she was not received with the best grace. Finally, towards the evening, she returned to the Manor-house to report on her triumphs.

Crossing the boundary-channel, she saw the boat which her husband had lately bought. It was a narrow but comfortable craft of a light build, and the water-way was quite broad enough to permit of its being rowed very comfortably, even though the oars occasionally touched the banks. Mrs. Vand looked at this boat with a singular expression, and then, stepping across the planks, walked up to her lordly abode. She found that her husband was absent, and had left word with the servant that he would not be back to dinner. Mrs. Vand was annoyed, as she did not like eating alone; but in her heart of hearts she was afraid of her quiet husband, even though he was considerably her junior, and made no comment. However, the servant who brought in the seven o'clock tea had much to say, and Mrs. Vand permitted her to talk, for, as usual, the sinister influence of the Manor was getting on her healthy nerves.

"Master's gone to the village, to see his ma," said the servant, who was small and elfish and somewhat brazen. "Then he's going to see Tunks."

"What's the matter with Tunks?" asked Mrs. Vand, pouring out the tea.

"He's ill. He's been drinking hard for weeks, ever since that horrid murder, mum, and now the doctor says he's got delirious trimmings."

Mrs. Vand looked up sharply, and frowned. "He is raving?"

"Raving hard, mum. But master will see that he is looked after."

"Your master is very good," said Mrs. Vand, taking a piece of bread. "You can go, Sarah."

The servant departed somewhat unwillingly, as she did not like the big, bare kitchen, and felt the influence of the unseen as did her mistress. But as yet, ghostly doings had not been sufficiently scaring to make her throw up a good situation. Nevertheless, she shivered in the kitchen, and wished that Tunks was present to keep her company, as he often did, at the evening meal. But Tunks was raving at the present moment in the hut on the marshes, and there was no chance of anyone else coming to Bleacres.

Mrs. Vand sat and shivered in the dining-room also. She lighted three lamps, and although the evening was warm, she set fire to the coals and wood in the large, old-fashioned grate. It seemed to her that she could not have enough light or warmth to ward off the cold, malicious influence, which seemed to spread a sinister atmosphere throughout the vast room. Shivering at the head of the table, Mrs. Vand kept casting furtive looks here and there, as though she expected to see the blood-stained figure of her murdered brother appear like Banquo's spectre. Outside the twilight gradually deepened to luminous darkness, and although she had finished her tea, she did not feel inclined to move about the gloomy passages. Again and again, she wished that Henry would return.

At nine o'clock her nerves were still shaky, and she felt that she could not stand the dining-room any longer. Ringing the bell, she took a lamp in each hand, and told Sarah—who entered speedily—to take the other. The two women proceeded to the drawing-room, and Mrs. Vand, having pulled down the blinds, ordered Sarah to bring her work and sit beside her. The servant was only too pleased to obey, and for the next half-hour the two sat in pleasant gossiping confabulation, Mrs. Vand knitting a silk tie for her husband, and Sarah trimming a wonderful hat with aggressively brilliant flowers. There was no noise, as the wind had dropped, and everything was intensely still. Mrs. Vand and Sarah chattered incessantly to keep up their courage in the ghostly atmosphere. Suddenly—

"Listen!" said Mrs. Vand, raising her hand. "Do you hear?"

Sarah turned white through her dingy skin, and held her breath. There came distinctly the sound of three knocks from somewhere near the fire-place; then a long, dreary sigh. The servant shrieked, and sprang for the door. But Mrs. Vand was after her in one moment, and seized her. "Hold your tongue, you fool! It's only rats."

As if to give the lie to her statement, there came the swish, swish of silken skirts, and then the sigh again. This was too much for Mrs. Vand. She scuttled panic-stricken into the hall, followed by the shrieking Sarah. At the same moment, as though it had been prearranged, the front door opened and Vand appeared.

"Oh, Henry! Henry!" gasped his wife, and clung to him.

The young man shook her off. "What is the matter?" he asked in calm tones. But Mrs. Vand being too terrified to answer, Sarah did so for her. "The ghost! the ghost! the ghost!"

"What rubbish!" said Vand, easily; "there is no ghost, you silly girl, and if there is, here is one who can lay it."

He stepped aside, and Granny Tunks, lean and weird-looking, appeared at the door. She had a white cloak over her fantastic dress, and looked more witch-like than ever. Mrs. Vand stared at the woman in surprise. "Why have you left your grandson?" she asked, and glancing at Henry.

"He's sound asleep, deary, the fit having passed. A gal o' mine, of the true Romany breed, looking after him. Your sweet husband here"—she waved a skinny hand towards Vand—"asked me to come and see what I could do to lay this unquiet spirit who walks."

"Rubbish! rubbish!" said Mrs. Vand, now feeling more confident in company.

"It's not rubbish, deary," said Mrs. Tunks, mysteriously; "the dead walk."

"The dead?"

"Your poor brother, as is uneasy at having been pitched out of life so cruel. He's walking," and she nodded weirdly.

On hearing this statement, Sarah whimpered and clutched at Mrs. Vand's dress, whereupon that lady who was extremely pale herself—shook her off. "Go to bed, Sarah," she commanded.

"Me!" screeched the girl, "and when there's ghosts walking! I'd scream myself into fits if I went up-stairs."

Mrs. Vand appealed to her husband. "Henry, make her go."

The young man took the girl by the shoulders, and propelled her towards the foot of the stairs, but Sarah resisted wildly, and finally made a bolt for the still open front door. "I'll go home to mother," she cried hysterically, and disappeared into the darkness.

"There," said Mrs. Vand, angrily, to Granny Tunks. "See what you've done. The house will get a bad name. I'll give that minx warning in the morning."

Vand, seeing that it was useless to run after the terrified Sarah, who by this time was half-way to Marshely, closed the door, and shrugged his shoulders. "Come into the drawing-room," he said to Mrs. Tunks.

"No, no!" cried his wife, shaking; "the ghost is there. I heard the rapping and the sighing and the \_\_\_"

"Yes, yes, yes!" interrupted Vand, with less than his usual coolness; "that is why I have brought Granny. There is an evil influence in this house, and I want her to find out what it is."

"Do you believe in such rubbish?"

"You seemed to believe in it just now," said the cripple drily. "Yes, I do believe in the unseen, as I have had too much proof not to believe."

"Then get a priest, get a priest!" cried Mrs. Vand wildly, and looking twice her age. "What is the use of this old fool?"

Granny Tunks laughed in an elfish manner when she heard herself spoken of thus, and seemed very little put out. "A fool can do what a wise woman can't," she croaked; "your husband's wiser nor you, deary. He knows."

"Knows what?" asked Mrs. Vand, turning on the ancient gipsy fiercely.

"That there's danger coming to you and him."

Mrs. Vand cast one scared and indignant look on the withered face, and ran into the drawing-room. Henry had preceded her here, and was standing by the table looking round the room in an inquiring manner, evidently on the alert for the mysterious sounds. Mrs. Vand caught his arm. "Do you hear what this woman says?" she asked, shaking him.

"As the door was open I did hear," he replied coolly; "don't be a fool, Rosamund. I brought her here to see what she can tell us."

"About?—" Mrs. Vand faltered and broke down.

"Hold your tongue!" said Henry with an angry hiss like that of a serpent.

Usually the young man wore a mild and gentle expression, but on this night his face was haggard and his eyes were wild. He had all his wits about him, however, and forced his wife into a chair, where she sat trembling violently. "I've had enough of these ghostly pranks," he said in a fierce undertone, "and as Granny undoubtedly possesses clairvoyant powers, I wish her to learn all she can. Come in, Mrs. Tunks!" he added, raising his voice, and the old witch-wife entered the room, looking singularly weird in her white cloak.

"Is that the only reason that you have asked Granny here?" demanded Mrs. Vand, in a low voice. "Sarah told me that her grandson had been raving."

"You fool!" snarled the cripple. "Will you hold your tongue? I have another purpose, which you will find out shortly. Granny," he pointed to a chair, "sit down and tell us what influences are about."

Mrs. Tunks sat in the indicated chair, and lay back with closed eyes. Vand and his wife remained perfectly still, the latter gazing at the old witch in a terrified manner, as though dreading what she would say and do. The room was filled with shadows, even though three lamps were lighted, and the silence became quite oppressive. Mrs. Vand was a healthy animal, and not in the least

imaginative, but after a time she felt that some evil influence was in the room, and tightly gripped her husband's hand. The perspiration broke out on her forehead. Henry gave her no comfort, not even by pressing her hand. His eyes were fixed on the perfectly expressionless and still face of Granny Tunks. The séance had all the elements of terror about it.

The gipsy lay as still as though carved out of stone, and the watchers could scarcely see the rise and fall of her breath. Deeper and deeper grew the stillness, so that even the fall of a pin could have been heard, had one been dropped. Apparently the body of Granny lay supine in the chair, but her spirit was far away—roaming the house, maybe. After a long pause, the woman began to speak in a low, expressionless voice, and almost without moving her withered lips.

"Gems," she said softly, "rare gems, blue and red and green; jewels of price and pearls of the ocean. They are in an ivory box. Long ago the woman who is standing near me"—Mrs. Vand started, looked, but could see nothing, yet the monotonous voice went on, as though the speaker really saw the form described—"wore those jewels. She has the face of a Roman empress. In Africa, many centuries ago—yes, in Africa, and she sinned to get those jewels. Now she laments that she has lost them."

"How did she lose them?" asked Vand almost in a whisper, as though fearful of breaking the charm. Apparently—as Mrs. Vand guessed—this was not the first time he had assisted at so weird a ceremony.

"Fierce warriors in green turbans took them—warriors of Arabia. The jewels travel south, still with the warriors. There are many fights. The jewels pass from one hand to another, still in the ivory box. Now a savage has them—a savage, in a wild forest. They are buried in the earth at the place where victims are sacrificed to the gods. Long years pass: centuries glide by. The box of jewels is found: it is in the hands of another savage, who wears European clothes. He gives the jewels to a white man for services rendered."

Mrs. Vand interrupted with a strangled cry of terror. "Jabez—is he Jabez?"

"He is not Jabez Huxham, but a man called Maxwell Faith. But see"—the dull voice of the gipsy suddenly became emotional and loud—"they pass into the hands of Jabez Huxham, and the hands that bear away the jewels are stained with blood. The jewels pass with him across the sea to this land. In London first; then in this house. They are placed in a carved chest; it is in the attic. Now they are in the safe in the study, and now——"

Vand interrupted. "How did they pass out of Huxham's possession?"

Granny Tunks did not reply for a few minutes, during which Mrs. Vand clutched her husband's hand still tighter, and passed her tongue over her dry lips. "They pass from Jabez Huxham, as they came to him—by murder," went on the clairvoyant. "I see the study. Huxham is at the desk, and the ivory box of jewels is before him. There is a knife on the floor by the door, and the knife is bloody."

"But Huxham is not dead," said Vand, quickly and softly.

"There is blood on the knife," said Mrs. Tunks, without taking any notice of the question. "Huxham is so engaged in looking at the jewels that he does not see the door softly open. A man enters. He sees the knife and picks it up. He glided behind Huxham, who suddenly turns. Now—now the blow has fallen, and the jewels, the jewels——" She paused.

"What more?" gasped Mrs. Vand. "What more, in God's name?"

"There is no God here, but only evil," came the reply. "I can see no more. I see, however, that the man who struck the blow is a cripple, and——"

There came a cry, apparently from behind the wall. Vand and his wife turned astonished and terror-struck. On the left of the fire-place a sliding panel was pushed back, and they beheld Bella, pale but triumphant.

"So you murdered Captain Huxham!" she cried, "you and your wife. O God——"

"There is no God here," breathed Mrs. Tunks again, "only evil."

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## CHAPTER XIX

### AN AWKWARD POSITION

The appearance and accusation of Bella were so unexpected that Mrs. Vand and her husband became perfectly white, and obvious fear robbed them of all powers of movement. Granny Tunks sat up, rubbed her eyes, and stared at Bella with the open panel behind her in great surprise.

"Where have you come from, deary?" she asked, rising unsteadily.

"Never mind," said Bella, with her eyes on the guilty faces of the married couple. "It is enough that I am here to accuse these two of murder."

Mrs. Tunks uttered a screech. "What are you talking about, lovey? This good gentleman and kind lady have murdered no one."

Bella glanced at her in a puzzled way. "You declared that Henry Vand murdered my father," she remarked quietly, and keeping up the fiction of her being Huxham's daughter; "you said that a cripple——"

"Me!" screeched Granny again. "I never said such a thing."

"Of course not," chimed in Vand, who was the first to recover his powers of speech. "It's all nonsense."

"Your face showed that it was the truth just now," said Bella sharply, "when Mrs. Tunks talked in her sleep."

"Sleep? No lovey, no sleep. I sent my spirit away to learn things. What did I say? Tell me, my good gentleman, what did I say?"

"I don't remember. I forgot," said Vand striving to appear cool.

"I don't forget," cried Bella indignantly, "she spoke of the jewels and of my father's murder. How did you find out?" she asked Granny Tunks, who dropped into her chair and seemed to shrink. "How did you learn about the jewels and Maxwell Faith?"

"I never heard the name. I never knew there were any jewels," murmured the witch-wife. "I never said anything about murder. When I came back to my body I never remember anything. No, no, no! The spirit is stronger than the flesh and jealous of its secrets," and she went on murmuring and maundering like one in her dotage. Yet Bella knew well, that in spite of her age, Granny Tunks was very far from being intellectually weak.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Vand, who had sunk into a chair, had gradually recovered her colour and wits. "You are the ghost!" she said suddenly to Bella.

In spite of the strained situation, the girl laughed, though not very mirthfully. "Yes, I am the ghost!" she acknowledged. "It was I who sighed and rapped and rustled my skirts so as to drive you and Sarah out of the room."

"How dare you! how dare you!" shouted Mrs. Vand, rising wrathfully. "What do you mean by entering my house, and how did you get in."

"I got in by a way of which you know nothing," said Bella coolly, "and I am not going to reveal my secret. But I know this house better than you, Aunt Rosamund"—she gave her the old familiar name—"and I know of many secret passages. This,"—she touched the panel at her back—"is the entrance to one of them. In the old days many a conspirator concealed himself here. I have used the hiding-place to learn your secret."

"How dare you! how dare you!" blustered Mrs. Vand, and would have gone on abusing Bella wrathfully but that her crafty husband interposed.

"Miss Huxham, you have behaved wrongly in entering the house in this secret manner, seeing that I told you how welcome you were to come openly. Both Rosamund and myself would have been glad to see you."

"Not me! not me!" vociferated Mrs. Vand, with a bright spot of angry red on each cheek. "I always hated her, and I hate her more than ever."

"Hold your tongue," muttered her husband, and gave her plump arm such a pinch that she leaped aside with a cry of pain. Taking no notice of her distress he turned to Bella. "You should have come openly," he repeated. "May I ask why you made use of the secret passages?"

"You may, and I am quite willing to answer. I came to find the whereabouts of the jewels which belonged to my father."

"I know of no jewels," said Vand steadily; "do you, Rosamund?"

"No, I don't," returned Mrs. Vand aggressively. "There was the property and the income, both of which Jabez left to me by arrangement. But jewels? I never saw any; if I had I should have got hold of them, since they are mine—if they exist, that is."

"Granny here said when she spoke that they existed," insisted Bella quietly.

Mrs. Vand shrugged her fat shoulders. "I don't believe in hocus-pocus and hanky-panky. Henry thought that the house was haunted, as I did myself, and he brought Granny here to lay the ghost. She has done so, since she brought you out to talk in a silly manner. You are the ghost, Bella, so I don't believe that there are any such things as spirits."

"I don't believe in spirits either," said Bella promptly, "and so I wish to know, Mrs. Tunks, how you learned all you said."

"All what?" mumbled the witch-wife vacantly.

"All about the jewels and the murder and the——"

"I don't remember saying a word," interrupted Granny, rising slowly and with a lack-lustre look in

her beady eyes. "When I go into a trance I don't recall what I say. But let me go into a trance again and I'll tell you where the jewels are if you will give me a share," and her eyes began to glitter in an avaricious manner.

"No," said Vand, in his most peremptory tones, "we have had enough of this rubbish."

"Oh," sneered his wife, "you admit then that it is rubbish?"

"Yes, now that I know Miss Huxham played the ghost. Granny"—he turned to the old woman—"all your teachings of the unseen have proved false, so you can take yourself out of this house, and never come near it again."

Bella, quite believing that the old woman was a fraud, and knew the truth of what she had spoken when in her so-called trance, expected to see her defy the man she had accused. But in place of doing so Granny Tunks flung the tail of her white cloak over her head and moved towards the door. Seeing her retreat, Mrs. Vand, after the manner of bullies and cowards, became suddenly brave. Leaping towards the old creature, and before her husband could restrain her, she struck her hard once or twice between the shoulders. "Get out of this, you lying cat! Go to the devil, your master, you vile animal!"

Vand caught back his infuriated wife with a fierce oath, but Granny still continued on her way out of the room. As she passed into the dark hall she turned and sent a glance at Mrs. Vand which made that triumphant tyrant shiver in her shoes. But she did not defend herself in any way, and shortly the three in the vast drawing-room heard the front door open and shut. Granny Tunks was gone, and with her seemed to disappear the malignant influence which had hung over the house for so long. Bella did not believe in witchcraft, but she could not help thinking that the old woman must have exercised some evil spell, and now had departed taking her familiar with her. At all events, the air seemed to be clearer for her absence.

"Now then," said Vand, addressing Bella in his usual courteous way, "as you are satisfied, Miss Huxham, perhaps you will go also."

"No," said Bella determinedly. "I believe that Granny spoke truly, and that you and my aunt have something to do with the murder."

"It's a lie!" shouted Mrs. Vand furiously, and would have struck her niece, as she had struck Granny, but that Vand kept her back. "Why should I murder my own dear brother?"

"To get the heritage you now enjoy," said Bella firmly. "I don't say you actually murdered him, but —"

"I should think you didn't, indeed," raved Mrs. Vand, stamping in impotent wrath. "You heard what I said at the inquest. What I said then is true. I left this house at seven o'clock with Tunks, as he can prove. I was all the evening with Henry, as he can swear to, and he left me on the other side of the boundary channel. I came in quietly at ten and went to bed. I never knew that Jabez was dead until the next morning, and then I woke you. And as I was out of the house from seven until ten, how could I have murdered my brother—your poor dead father—when the doctor declared that he was struck down shortly after eight? How dare——"

"You forget," interrupted Bella quickly, "that Dr. Ward said the murder was committed between eight and eleven, so that gave you an hour to——"

"Grant me patience, heaven!" cried Mrs. Vand, casting up her eyes. "Why, the coroner himself said that the poor dear must have been murdered shortly after eight o'clock, since I came in at ten and saw no light in the study."

"Ah," said Bella significantly, "he declared that on your evidence and because he hated Dr. Ward, and wished to put him in the wrong."

"Then you accuse me of murder?"

"No; I accuse you of nothing."

"You say that I am guilty?" asked Vand, suddenly but quietly.

"I do not say so, but Granny Tunks did."

"If so, would she not have accused me to my face when I turned her out of the house?" said Vand earnestly. "I assure you, Miss Huxham, that I had no motive to kill your father. I was quite content to wait, even though Rosamund and I were secretly married. Besides, on that night I left Rosamund on the further side of the boundary channel, as she can prove. Also my mother can show that I returned to my home at fifteen minutes past ten, and that I was in bed by half-past. There is not a shred of evidence to support this unfounded charge you have made."

"I did not make it Granny said——"

"I know what she said," interrupted Vand imperiously. "Hold your tongue, Rosamund, and let me speak. Granny said what she did say in a trance. At one time I really believed in such things; now, and especially since our ghost has proved to be you, I have ceased to believe. You heard merely the raving of an old beldame. I dare say she wished to blackmail myself and Rosamund by bringing this unfounded charge, and chose this so-called trance to bring the charge. If she really has any grounds to go upon—and I swear that she has not—she will doubtless go to the police to—"



morrow."

"And I hope she will go!" cried Mrs. Vand angrily, "for then Henry and I can have her up for libel. No wonder everyone is so disagreeable! Granny, no doubt, has been spreading all manner of reports against us. I daresay we are regarded as a couple of criminal, gory, murdering assassins," ended Mrs. Vand, with a fine choice of words.

Bella was puzzled. Like the Vands themselves, she did not believe in the occult arts with which Granny Tunks was supposed to be familiar, and it was not unlikely that the clever old woman intended to risk blackmail. Certainly, if Mrs. Tunks could really prove the guilt of Vand, she would not have retreated so easily when he ordered her out of the house, much less would she have condoned the blow of Mrs. Vand. If Granny honestly could prove her case, she was mistress of the situation; but as she had slunk away so quietly, it seemed that she had merely spoken from conjecture. Bella began to think she had been too precipitate in revealing herself, as the Vands decidedly had right on their side.

"Yet, after all," she said reluctantly, "how did Granny come to know about the jewels?"

"Jewels! Had Jabez really jewels?" asked Mrs. Vand avariciously.

"Yes," said Bella coldly. "I read some papers which proved that he had jewels valued at forty thousand pounds."

"Where did you get those papers?"

"I refuse to tell you that," retorted the girl, anxious not to incriminate Mrs. Tunks until she had interviewed her.

"You must tell!" yelled Mrs. Vand, her face on fire with rage and expectation. "You've come in sneaking by these secret passages to steal. Jabez never gave you any of his papers. They are mine, and if they tell where the jewels are, you minx——"

"They don't tell where the jewels are," interrupted Bella, "but they state how Captain Huxham murdered Maxwell Faith in Nigeria to get them."

"You talk of your dead father as Captain Huxham," said Mrs. Vand sniffing.

Her husband made a gesture of silence. "Maxwell Faith was the name mentioned by Granny in her trance, and she also spoke of this murder. Did she see the papers?"

"Ah!" Bella was suddenly enlightened. Perhaps Granny had learned about the jewels from the papers which had been taken from the carved chest in the attic. But then in that first set of papers, as she thought, the name of Maxwell Faith had not been mentioned. "Granny saw one set of papers, but not the set I mean."

"Then there are other papers you have stolen," cried Mrs. Vand furiously. "Upon my word, Bella, you are a fine thief and no mistake. Give up those papers, so that we may learn where my jewels are."

"They are not your jewels, but mine," said Bella, stepping back into the hollow left by the open panel, "and you shall not have them."

"Where are they? where are they?" cried Vand, becoming excited in his turn.

"I wish I knew, but I don't. Captain Huxham had them, before he died——"

"Then the assassin must have them."

"Yes. Perhaps you can tell me who is the assassin?"

"I can't say; you know as much as we do," said Vand coldly. "If I had murdered the old man, as you were so ready to think, on Granny Tunk's ravings, I should have the jewels and long since would have cleared out with them. But the fact that I am still here with Rosamund proves that I am innocent."

"We must go and see the police to-morrow, Henry," said Mrs. Vand, "and have this wicked girl arrested. She must be made to give up the papers she has stolen. Oh!"—Mrs. Vand plunged forward—"I could scratch her eyes out!"

Undoubtedly the furious woman would have made the attempt, but that Bella was on her guard. Already in the secret passage, she had only to touch a spring and the panel sprang back into its place with a click. In the darkness Bella heard her so-called aunt hurl herself against the hard wood, using very bad language. Then came the beating of fists against the panel in the vain attempt to break it down. Bella knew that the panel was too strong to break, but thought it was best to leave the house as speedily as possible. Cyril was waiting for her near the boundary channel, and the sooner she joined him the better. As she turned to go she heard the high, screaming voice of Mrs. Vand raging wildly.

"Go up on the roof and use the search-light, Henry!" shouted Mrs. Vand. "The minx will get out of the house by some way we don't know of, and must get down the corn-path. I'll catch her there, and you show the light so that I can seize her. I'll tear her hair out! I'll scratch her eyes out! I'll make her ill, and——" what else Mrs. Vand was about to do to her, Bella did not hear, as there was no time to be lost in getting away from the dangerous neighborhood of the infuriated woman.

Bella sped along the narrow passage fearlessly, as long experience had made her acquainted with its intricacies. It was contrived in the thick dividing walls of the old house on the ground floor. At one part there was a shaft leading to another passage on the first floor, and up this it was possible to scramble by notches cut in the walls. Bella had half a mind to ascend to the upper story, and linger for a chance of escape. But as Cyril waited her at the boundary channel, it was possible that he might come into contact with Mrs. Vand, who would be furiously hunting. Therefore, she judged it best to leave the house and gain the corn-path before Mrs. Vand could intercept her. With this scheme in her mind Bella ran along the passage until she came to a door, which turned on a central pivot. This she twisted, and slipped like an eel through the opening to find herself in a kind of tiny chamber. Groping round this she soon discovered the hasp of a closed door, which she skilfully manipulated. The door—a narrow one and somewhat high—swung open, and the girl was outside in a quiet corner at the back of the house, and hidden fairly well by a projecting buttress. A screen of ivy clothed the Manor wall at this point, and the door was concealed behind the screen, so that its existence had never been suspected. Bella had discovered the exit from the inside, and had cut round the ivy that masked the door so that she could get it open. Of course, the cut ivy had more or less withered, but even so, no one guessed that there was a door behind the brownish oblong.

The night was dark and warm and silent. Bella stole along the footpath, which ran between the house and the tall, rustling stalks of the corn. Several times she paused, thinking she heard a noise, but everything was still, and she speedily turned the corner of the mansion. Apparently Mrs. Vand was not on the hunt yet, or perhaps she was busy with the search-light which she had asked her husband to use. However this might be, Bella saw that the course was clear, and stealing round to the front door, which she found to be closed, she sped like an antelope down the winding corn-path which led to the boundary channel. Just as she reached the top of this and was prepared to start down it, the beam of the electric light struck into the dark sky.

Huxham had rigged up the light on the flat roof, between the sloping tiles, but Vand had transferred it to the quarter deck, which was slung round the chimney. Thus he was enabled to sweep the whole horizon without being interrupted by the tall roofs of the Manor. The beam swung round here and there, pointing like a great finger, and finally settled on the corn-path and on Bella's dark figure running for dear life from the mansion. The girl heard Vand's shout as he espied her, heard also the front door opening, as Mrs. Vand rushed in pursuit.

But Mrs. Vand, like Hamlet, was stout and scant of breath, and with all the will in the world urged by a venomous hatred, could not gain on her detested niece, who ran like Atlanta. The search-beam revealed the path plainly, and showing the flying figure of Bella, with Mrs. Vand panting in vindictive pursuit. Towards the end of the path near the boundary channel Bella called softly and breathlessly, "Cyril! Cyril! Mrs. Vand is following. Hide! hide!"

At that moment the beam struck the boundary channel, and revealed the white-clothed figure of young Lister. It rested for a moment there, and then dropped back to aid the steps of Mrs. Vand. Cyril seized the chance of the friendly darkness, and as Bella ran into his arms he dragged her into the standing corn. In less than a moment they were lying some distance from the path amongst the crushed stalks, while Mrs. Vand blundered past, running unsteadily. If Vand had kept the beam on Bella, she and her lover would not have been able to hide, but having been forced to give light to his stout wife, the two were enabled to escape. They could hear Mrs. Vand puffing and panting like a grampus, as she searched round and round. In Cyril's arms, on Cyril's breast, Bella felt perfectly safe, and in spite of the position and of the near presence of her enemy, was bubbling over with laughter.

Mrs. Vand crossed the boundary channel, and finding no one on the hither side, concluded that Bella had escaped. She returned slowly, and, as Vand had now shut off the beam—for he also had seen that the search was vain—she stumbled up the path in a very bad temper. As her sighs and groans died away and the darkness gathered around, Cyril and Bella rose, and gliding back to the verge of the boundary channel, crossed rapidly. In a few minutes they were on their way to Marshely.

"What does it all mean, dear?" asked Cyril, when they were quite safe.

Bella told him all about her adventure.

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## CHAPTER XX

### THE MASTER MAGICIAN

Next morning, Dora being at school as usual, Bella received Cyril and Durgo in Miss Ankers' tiny drawing-room to discuss the position of affairs with regard to the Huxham mystery. In the negro's opinion it was no longer a mystery, for after hearing Bella's account of Granny Tunks' utterances while in the trance he unhesitatingly pronounced Henry Vand guilty.

"But on what evidence?" asked Cyril, who, like Bella, had small belief in the manifestation of the unseen.

"The evidence that Granny said that she did say," returned Durgo quietly.

"That evidence would not be accepted in a court of law," remarked Bella.

"I am aware of that. I have not been to Oxford for nothing, missy. But it gives me a clue, which I shall follow up. This afternoon I shall see Mrs. Tunks and question her."

"But if she really knows anything," said Cyril, after a pause, "it will prove that her trance statements were by design and from practical knowledge."

"I am sure they were," said Bella emphatically. "I fancied that as Granny did not see the second set of papers, which Durgo got from Mr. Pence, that she did not know the name of Maxwell Faith, my father. But now I remember that in the first set, which she found and delivered to you, Durgo, my father's name was also mentioned; also the number and the value of the jewels. All her talk was of the jewels."

"And of the murder of your real father by Huxham," said Durgo drily; "that was not in the first set of papers, and was only lightly referred to in the second set."

"That is strange," said Cyril reflectively.

"You no doubt think so," said the negro calmly, "as you disbelieve all that you can't see or prove. I know otherwise."

"But, Durgo," argued Cyril, surprised at this assumption, "you have been to Oxford, and surely must have rid yourself of these barbarous African superstitions."

"You call them superstitions because you don't know their esoteric meaning. But there is such a thing as magic, white and black."

"Magic! Pshaw!"

Durgo shrugged his shoulders. "Of course I never argue with an unbeliever, Cyril Lister," he said indifferently, "but the Wise Men came from the East, remember, and Europe is indebted to the East for most of her civilisation."

"But not to Africa."

"Africa has had her ancient civilisations also. In the time of the Atlanteans—but it's useless talking of such matters. All I say is, that there are certain natural laws which, when known, can enable anyone to part what you call the spirit from the body. When the spiritual eyes are open, much can be seen that it is difficult to prove on the physical plane."

"I don't understand what you mean by these planes," grumbled Lister.

"Quite so, and it would be useless for me to explain. But facts beyond your imagining exist, and had I the time I could prove much to you. Mrs. Tunks is what we call clairvoyant, and when in a trance state can see—well, you heard her say what she saw, Miss Huxham."

Bella was also sceptical. "She must have read the first set of papers?"

"Probably she did, since woman is an animal filled with curiosity," said Durgo good-humouredly. "I don't mean to say that Granny Tunks is entirely genuine. There is a good deal of humbug about her, as there is about all the Romany tribes. She may have known about the jewels, and even your real father's name, but she did not know about his murder. Mrs. Tunks has a small portion of clairvoyant power, which does not act at all times. When that fails her she resorts to trickery."

"Like spiritualists?" suggested Cyril.

"Exactly," assented the negro with decision. "In all phenomena connected with the unseen there is a great measure of truth, but charlatans spoil the whole business by resorting to trickery when their powers fail. And I may say that the spiritual powers do not act always, since in a great measure we are ignorant of the laws which govern them. But enough of this discussion. I do not seek to convince you. I shall see Mrs. Tunks this afternoon and gain from her actual proof of Vand's guilt."

"But I fancied that you believed my father to be guilty," said Cyril.

"So I did, and if he were I would not mind, since Huxham was a rogue. But from what Miss Faith —"

"Miss Huxham," interposed Bella hastily, "until this mystery is cleared up."

"Very good. Well, from what Miss Huxham overheard I am inclined to think that Vand murdered the old sailor, aided by his wife."

"For what reason?"

"You supplied it yourself, Miss Huxham; so that they might get his money."

"But what about Pence's confession?" said Cyril. "He might have committed the deed himself."

"No; he had no reason to kill the old man, who was on his side in the matter of the marriage with Miss Huxham here. Besides, if Pence was guilty he certainly would not have composed what he did, and assuredly would not have produced the one hundred pounds he stole. Now that his madness for Miss Huxham is past, Pence has behaved like a rational being, and will do his best to

assist us in solving this mystery." Durgo paused, then turned to the white man. "Cyril Lister, you put an advertisement into several London papers a week ago?"

"Yes; I did so without telling you, as I hoped to surprise you with a letter from my father telling us of his whereabouts. How do you know?"

"I saw the *Telegraph* yesterday and also the *Daily Mail*," said Durgo, nodding approvingly; "you did well. Have you had any answer?"

"If I had you should have seen it," said Cyril, wrinkling his brows as he always did when he was perplexed. "What can have become of him?"

Durgo struck his large hands together in despair. "I fear my master Edwin Lister is dead," he said mournfully.

"Why?" asked Bella and her lover simultaneously.

"Miss Huxham, you repeated to me that Granny Tunks in her trance said that the knife lying on the floor when the cripple entered to kill Huxham, was already bloody. Can't you see?"

"See what?"

"That if the knife were already bloody, Huxham must have killed my master Edwin Lister, and then was killed in turn by Vand the cripple."

Cyril looked impatient. "That is all the black magic rubbish you talk of."

"Well, then, if my master, your father, is alive and has the jewels, why does he not write to me or to you? He knows he can trust us both. Even the advertisements have failed. No"—Durgo looked gloomy—"my heart misgives me sadly!" He arose abruptly. "Meet me at the 'Chequers,' Cyril Lister, and I shall tell you what I learn from Mrs. Tunks."

"Can't I come also to see her?"

"Yes, if you like. Perhaps I shall be able to dispel your disbelief regarding these occult powers which she and I possess."

"Is that why Mrs. Tunks calls you master?"

"Yes. She recognised that I had higher powers than she, when we first met, and so I was enabled to make her get those papers. Do you think she would have done so unless I had controlled her? No. Not even for the fifty pounds which I am taking to her to-day. She can make a better market out of Vand and his wife. She knows their guilt."

"But cannot prove their guilt."

"Perhaps," said the negro indifferently. "Good-day", and he departed in his usual abrupt style, after bidding Cyril meet him at three o'clock at the hut of the so-called witch. The lovers looked at one another.

"What do you think of it all, Cyril?" asked Bella timidly.

"I really don't know. We seem to be involved in a web through which we cannot break? Durgo certainly seems to be a very strange being, and in spite of my disbelief in the existence of occult powers I am inclined to think that he knows some strange things. He looks like a negro, and talks and acts like a white man. Indeed, no white man would be so unselfish as to surrender those jewels to you as Durgo has done."

"He puzzles me," said Bella thoughtfully.

"And me also. However, the best thing to be done will be to leave matters in his hands. In one way or another he will learn the truth, and then we can get back the jewels and marry."

"Do you think your father has the jewels, Cyril?"

"My dear," he said frowning, "I can't be sure now that my father is alive. I begin to believe that there may be something in Granny's trances, after all, since she hinted at my father's death at Huxham's hands. And terrible as it may seem," added Lister, turning slightly pale with emotion, "I would rather think that he was dead than live to be called the murderer of Jabez Huxham. I would like to come to you," he said, folding Bella in his strong young arms, "as the son of a man whose hands are free from blood. Better for my father to be dead than a criminal."

The two talked on this matter for some time, until their confidences were ended by the entrance of Dora, hungry for her dinner. Then Cyril took his leave, promising to return and tell Bella all that took place in Mrs. Tunks' hut. Being anxious, the girl made a very poor meal, and was scolded by Dora, who little knew what was at stake. But Dora supplied one unconscious piece of information which surprised her friend.

"I think Mr. and Mrs. Vand are going away for a trip," she said carelessly.

"What do you mean?" asked Bella, starting so violently that she upset the water-jug.

Dora looked surprised. "My dear, you are not so fond of your aunt as to display such emotion. I merely say that the Vands are going away."

"When? Where? How do you know?"

"Very soon, I believe, as they are packing, but where they are going I don't know. Sarah Jope, the servant, whose sister is at the school, came flying home last night to her mother with a cock and bull story about a ghost at the Manor. This morning she went to get her belongings, as she insists upon leaving the house. She found Mrs. Vand and her husband packing for immediate departure and was bundled out by her indignant mistress, boxes and all, with a flea in her ear. Sarah Jope's sister told me this just before I came home to dinner."

"The Vands going away!" said Bella in dismay. This seemed to prove that they were guilty, and wished to escape. "I thought they were going to wait for the harvest home."

"I daresay they will be back in a month, and the Bleacres corn won't be reaped until then. I only wish they would remain away altogether. Your aunt is a horrid woman, Bella, though her husband is a dear."

Bella did not echo the compliment, for, after what she had seen on the previous night, she was inclined to think that Henry Vand was the worse of the two, evil as his wife might be. At all events, he was the stronger, and Rosamund Vand was a mere tool in his hands. She was on the point of going to Cyril's lodgings to warn him and Durgo of this projected departure of the Manor-house inhabitants, but on reflection she concluded to wait until he returned from Mrs. Tunks' hut. After all, the Vands could not leave Marshely before night-fall, and would have to pass through the village on their way to the far-distant railway station. If necessary they could thus be intercepted at the eleventh hour.

Mrs. Tunks was seated by the fire in her dingy hut, absorbed in her own thoughts, which she assisted by smoking a dirty black pipe. In the next room her grandson still turned and tossed, watched by a bright-eyed gipsy girl, whom the old woman had engaged from a passing family of her kinsfolk. But the man no longer raved, as the worst of the delirium had passed. He was sensible enough, but weak, and looked the mere shadow of his former stalwart self. Mrs. Tunks feared lest he should die, and was much disturbed in consequence, as he was her sole support. Without her grandson's earnings she could not hope to keep a roof above her head, as her fees for consultations as a wise woman were woefully small. She did not dare to make them larger in case her visitors should warn the police of her doings. And Mrs. Tunks, for obvious reasons, did not wish for an interview with Dutton, the village constable.

Smoking her pipe, crouching over the smouldering fire, and wondering how she could obtain money, the old woman did not hear the door open and shut. Not until a black hand was laid on her shoulder did she turn, to see that Durgo was in the hut with Cyril behind him. Paying no attention to the white man, she rose and fawned like a dog on the black.

"He's ill, master," she whimpered, clawing Durgo's rough tweed sleeve, "and if he goes there's no one to help me. Give him something to make him well; set him on his legs again."

"Do you think I can do so?" asked Durgo, with a grave smile.

Mrs. Tunks peered at him with her bleared eyes and struck her skinny hands together. "I can swear to it, master. You know much I don't know, and I know heaps as the Gorgios—my curse on them!—would give their ears to learn. Come, lovey—I mean master—help me in this and I'll help you in other ways."

"Such as by telling us who murdered Huxham," put in Cyril injudiciously.

"Me, deary! Lor', I don't know who killed the poor gentleman," and Mrs. Tunk's face became perfectly vacant of all expression.

Durgo turned frowning on the white man. "I said that I would let you come if you did not speak," he remarked in a firm whisper; "you have broken your promise already."

Cyril apologised in low tones. "I won't say another word," he said, and took a seat on a broken chair near the window.

Mrs. Tunks cringed and bent before Durgo, evidently regarding him with awe, as might her sister-witches the Evil One, when he appeared at festivals. The negro glanced towards the closed door of the other room. "Who is watching your grandson?" he asked sharply.

"A Romany gal, as I found—"

"That will do. I want no listeners. Call her out and turn her out."

The old woman entered the other room, and soon returned driving before her a black-eyed slip of a child about thirteen years of age. This brat protested that Tunks was restless and could not be left.

"I shall quieten him," said the negro quickly; "get out, you!" and he fixed so fierce a glance on the small girl that she fled rapidly. And Cyril saw that the girl was not one easily frightened.

"Now to put your grandson to sleep," said Durgo, passing into the next room, and Cyril saw his great hands hover over the restless man on the bed. He made strange passes and spoke strange words, while Mrs. Tunks looked on, shaking and trembling. In two minutes the sick man lay perfectly still, and to all appearances was sound asleep. Durgo returned to the outer room.

"You'll cure him, master, won't you?" coaxed Mrs. Tunks.

"Yes. I'll cure him if you tell me what you know of this murder."

"I don't know anything, master."

Mrs. Tunks looked obstinate yet terrified. Durgo stared at her in a mesmeric sort of way, and threw out his hand. The woman crouched and writhed in evident agony. "Oh, deary me, I'm all burnt up and aching, and shrivelled cruel. Don't—oh, don't! I'll be good. I'll be good;" and she wriggled.

"Will you speak?" said the negro sternly.

"Yes, yes! only take the spell off me, deary—master, I mean."

"You feel no pain now," said Durgo quickly, and at once an air of relief passed over Mrs. Tunks' withered face. She sat down on a stool and folded her claw-like hands on her lap. Durgo leaned against the fire-place. "What do you know of this murder?" he asked.

"I don't know much, save what he"—she nodded towards the room wherein lay her sleeping grandson—"what he said when he was mad with the drink. Get him to speak, master, and you'll learn everything."

"In good time I'll make him speak," said Durgo with impressive quietness. "Now I ask your questions. Answer! Do you hear?"

"Yes, master; yes, I hear. I answer," said the trembling old creature.

"Did you tell the truth in your trance last night?"

Mrs. Tunks looked up with awe. "He knows everything, does the master," she breathed softly, then replied with haste, "Yes. I spoke of what I saw."

"Did you see all you spoke of, or did you make up some?"

"I spoke of what I saw," said Mrs. Tunks decidedly, "and you know, master, how I saw it. I loosened the spirit, and it went to look. But I don't say but what I didn't know much from what Luke raved about."

"So you knew before Vand took you to the Manor-house for this trance, that he had murdered Huxham?"

"Yes, master, I did know, but I wasn't sure till I saw with the Sight."

"Luke"—Durgo nodded towards the inner room in his turn—"Luke knows that Vand murdered Huxham?"

"Yes, master. I believe," said Granny, sinking her voice, "that he saw the doings through the window of the study. He never said naught to me, though I wondered where he got so much money to get drunk every day. But when he was mad with the drink, he talked and talked all the night. Then I knew that he had got money from Mr. Vand for holding his tongue."

"Tell me what he said?" commanded Durgo.

"He raved disjointed like," said Mrs. Tunks with great humility; "but he talked of Mr. Vand coming in when Captain Huxham was looking at a box of jewels. There was a knife on the floor, and Mr. Vand stabbed Captain Huxham with that knife, and then dropped it behind the desk."

"Was his wife with him?"

"No. She was in the kitchen."

"Was there another man with Huxham before Vand came?"

"Luke said nothing of that. But he did say," added Mrs. Tunks quickly, "that he was going to America with Mr. and Mrs. Vand, and raved of the good time he would have with them."

"When are they going?"

"I don't know, master. Luke didn't say."

Cyril would have interrupted to ask a question about his missing father, as he could not understand why Durgo had not threshed out that important point. But at the first sound of his voice the negro frowned him unto immediate silence. When all was quiet, Durgo looked directly at Granny, and made passes. "Sleep, sleep, sleep!" he said, and Cyril could see by the working of his face that he was putting out his will to induce a hypnotic condition. "Sleep, I say."

The old woman must have been a marvellously sensitive subject, for she leaned against the wall—her stool had no back—and closed her eyes in apparent deep slumber almost immediately. Her face was perfectly expressionless, and her limbs were absolutely still. She looked—as Cyril thought, with a shudder—like a corpse. Durgo spoke softly in her ear: "Are you free?" he asked gently.

"Yes," said Mrs. Tunks, in a far-away, faint voice.

"Go to the Manor-house."

"I am there."

"Enter!"

"The door is fast closed," said Mrs. Tunks, still faintly.

"Doors are no bars to you now; you can pass through the door."

There came a short pause. "I have passed. I am inside."

"Seek out Vand and his wife," commanded the negro softly.

"I have found them."

"What are they doing?" demanded Durgo, sharply.

"Packing boxes," came the response, without hesitation; "they talk of going away to-night."

"Where to?"

"I can't say: they don't mention the place. But they leave the Manor-house under cover of darkness to-night."

"Look for the jewels."

"I have looked."

"Where are they?"

"In a small portmanteau, marked with two initials."

"What are the initials?"

"M. F. Oh!" Mrs. Tunks' voice became very weary. "The mist has come on. I can see no more. It is not permitted to know more."

Durgo looked disappointed, and seemed inclined to force his will. But after a frowning pause, he waved his hands rapidly, and spoke with great sharpness.

"Come back," he said briefly, and after a moment or so, the old woman opened her eyes quietly. Her gaze met the angry one of Durgo, and she winced.

"Have I not pleased you, master?" she asked, timidly.

"Yes. You have pleased me. But I wish you could have learned more."

"What did I say?" asked Granny, wonderingly.

"Never mind. Here"—Durgo produced a small canvas bag from his pocket—"this is the money you have earned."

Mrs. Tunks hastily untied the mouth of the bag, and poured a glittering stream of gold into her lap. "Fifty sovereigns, lovey," she mumbled, her eyes glowing with avaricious delight. "Thank you, master; oh, thank you."

"In an hour," said Durgo, indifferent to her thanks, "I shall send you a small bottle containing a draught, which you can give to your grandson. It will put him right; but of course a few days will elapse before he can get quite strong again. This place"—he glanced disparagingly round the dingy hut—"is not healthy."

"So I thought, master. And to-night Luke is going to my sister's caravan. It's on the road outside Marshely, and the gel can take him there. If Luke has a month or two of the open road, he'll soon be himself again. Anything more I can tell you, master?"

"No. But to-night I am coming here, shortly after moonrise. Get rid of your grandson beforehand, if you can."

"What is to be done, master?"

"Never mind. Do as you're told. Good-day," and Durgo, beckoning to Cyril, went out of the hut. The white man followed, in a state of great amazement.

"How did you manage all that?" he asked wonderingly.

"Hypnotism," said Durgo shortly. "You heard that Mr. and Mrs. Vand intend to fly to-night?"

"I have heard: yet I cannot believe in that hanky-panky."

Durgo shrugged his shoulders and argued no more. But when Cyril came to his lodgings, and found a note from Bella stating that she had heard of the Vands' intention of leaving the Manor-house, he disbelieved no longer. Nay, more, for on the authority of Mrs. Tunks' hypnotic confessions, he believed that the Vands also possessed the long-sought-for jewels.

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# CHAPTER XXI

## A DESPERATE ATTEMPT

When the darkness came on, and just as the moon was rising, Lister and Bella proceeded to the plank bridge of the boundary channel. Before leaving Cyril on that afternoon, Durgo had intimated that he wished Miss Huxham to meet him at that hour and at that place, and of course Cyril came also. He had every trust in the negro, who had proved himself in every way to be a man of sterling worth. All the same, he did not intend to let Durgo meet Bella without being present. The black man was far too intimate with unseen forces, to please the white man, and it was necessary to protect Bella, if necessary.

"He might put you into a hypnotic trance," explained Cyril, who had described all that had taken place.

"I should not let him do that," said the girl decidedly.

Cyril shrugged his shoulders. "Durgo might not care if you liked it or not. He would hypnotize you, if he wished."

"No, Cyril, he could not do that unless I consented. My will is my own, and it is a strong one. I suppose," said Bella, after a pause, "that he made Granny feel those aches and pains by controlling her subjective mind."

Lister glanced sideways at her in surprise. "You seem to know all about it," he declared. "Where did you learn those terms?"

"At my school at Hampstead there was a girl who could hypnotise people. She read all manner of books about hypnotism, and talked about the subjective mind, although I don't know what it is. I can understand so much of Durgo's power over Granny. But that sending her spirit to the Manor is strange. I don't believe that he did."

"He must have done so," insisted Cyril, "as Durgo did not know that the Vands were leaving, and Granny distinctly stated that they were, in my hearing. Also, if we find that the jewels are in the small portmanteau, marked with the initials M. F., we can be certain that her spirit really did travel."

"M. F.," repeated Bella, dreamily: "those are my father's initials."

"Maxwell Faith. So they are. Humph! There is something in this business after all, Bella."

"But do you really think anyone can separate the spirit from the body?"

Lister reflected. "I don't see why not. After all, as St. Paul says, we are composed of spirit, soul and body, so in certain cases the one may become detached from the other. I remember"—he looked thoughtfully up to the cloudy sky—"I remember reading in some magazine of a boat-load of people being saved, owing to one of them transferring his spirit to a passing ship, and leaving written instructions in the cabin where the ship was to steer to."

"Oh, Cyril, that's impossible."

"My dear," he said drily, "you can see the log of that very ship, containing an account of the incident, at Somerset House. However, we have no time to discuss these matters further. Yonder is Durgo by the bridge. I want to know why he asked you to meet him here. Such a night, too"—Cyril shivered—"quite a change. I feel cold."

"So do I. It will rain, Cyril. Look at that heavy bank of clouds behind which the moon is hiding. And oh, how dark it is!"

It certainly was dark, and the two came very near Durgo before they saw him. The sky was heavy with gloomy clouds, and undoubtedly there promised to be rain before midnight. Durgo, wrapped in a heavy military cloak, stood sentinel by the plank bridge. When the lovers came up he led them across to the other side, and when they stood on Bleacres he used his great strength to rip up a couple of planks.

"There!" said the negro, flinging these into the standing corn, "they will not be able to get their boxes across, even if they can cross themselves."

"Are you talking of the Vands?" asked Bella quickly.

"Yes; they are still at the Manor-house. Look!"

He pointed through the gloom, and they saw two or three windows of the old house lighted up brilliantly. Across other windows occasionally flitted more lights. Apparently Mrs. Vand was anxiously trying to impress the neighbours at least, such as might be abroad on this night—that she and her husband were ostentatiously at home. Durgo laughed grimly.

"They have quite an eye for dramatic effect," he said in his guttural voice, and very contemptuously. "Well, they shall have all the drama they want to-night, and more."

"Durgo," Bella spoke in an alarmed tone, "you won't hurt them?"



"Not if I can help it."

Cyril interposed imperiously. "I shall not be a party to the breaking of the law," he said with sharpness, "nor will I allow Bella to——"

"Cyril Lister," interrupted the negro, turning on him and addressing him by his full name, as was his odd way; "if I could bring the police on the scene I would do so. But you know, as I do, that we have no proofs save those of the unseen, which would not be accepted in a court of law, to prove that the two are guilty of murder—of a double murder for all I know."

"A double murder!" echoed Bella, drawing closer to her lover.

"Yes. Edwin Lister, my master, has disappeared, and Huxham is dead. The old sailor, certainly, may have killed my master, but on the other hand, as I believe, Vand murdered Huxham, and probably murdered Edwin Lister also. Howsoever this may be, we can prove neither murder, so it is not advisable to bring the police into the matter.

"It would be safer," said Cyril uneasily. He feared lest Durgo's barbaric instincts should be aroused against the couple at the Manor-house.

"It would not be safer," retorted the negro. "While the police were debating and searching, the Vands would be getting out of the kingdom, and we could not stop them. Besides, they have the jewels. I am certain of that from what Granny Tunks saw when I loosened her spirit. Once the Vands got news of the police being on their track they would hide those jewels, and we should never find them. I want those jewels for you, Miss Huxham, as, before I leave England, I wish to see you happily married to Cyril Lister here. It is the least that I can do for his father's son."

"But if my father is alive and has the jewels?" asked Cyril doubtfully.

"That will make a difference," assented Durgo, "although I daresay that Edwin Lister will not mind returning the jewels. We can arrange our funds for the expedition in another way. But I fear," he added in gloomy tones, "that my master is dead. If so, I can only avenge him."

"But with your occult powers, can't you learn if my father is dead or alive?"

"No," said Durgo very decidedly. "You forget that on the side of the unseen are mighty powers who have to be obeyed. I can do much, but not all, and for some reason I am not permitted to know the truth about my master. Sooner or later I shall understand about this. What we have to do at the present time is to prevent the Vands from escaping. Will you both help?"

"Yes," said Bella, anticipating Cyril; "that is if you don't intend violence."

"Be comforted," said Durgo ironically; "be comforted, missy. I have no wish to put a rope round my neck. I simply mean to force these devils to give up the jewels, and to solve so much of this mystery as they know. When I regain the jewels and know what has become of my master, I shall let them go, or if you like I shall hand them over to the police. But time presses," added Durgo impatiently, "and at any time the two may come along on their way to freedom. Will you help?"

"Yes," said Cyril simply. "What do you want us to do?"

"Missy"—Durgo turned to the girl—"can you work that search-light?"

Bella nodded. "For an evening's amusement my father—I mean Captain Huxham—once showed me how to manipulate it."

"Well it is in good order, as we know that Vand used it last night. You can get into the house by the secret passage and watch for the going out of our two friends. Then turn on the search-light and use it as a pointer."

"I can use the search-light, and I daresay it is in order since Henry Vand used it last night," said Bella quickly; "also I can get to the upper part of the house and on to the roof, through a kind of well which runs from the lower to the higher secret passage. But what do you mean by my using the light as a pointer?"

"Direct the ray on to Vand and his wife; they may come down this path, or they may try and escape in another way. But if you bend the ray of the search-light to where they are, I'll be able to catch them. Use the ray as a finger, as it were."

Bella nodded. "I see, and where will you be?"

"I shall hide in the corn somewhere or another," explained Durgo. "I don't know where, as I can't be sure how Vand and his wife intend to escape."

"They may take the boat," suggested Cyril, "and that is tied up some distance yonder. I believe they will use the boat."

"No;" said Durgo shaking his head; "there is no place where they can row to, as this channel ends in mere swamps. All I can do is to walk here and there, and watch for the finger of the search-light."

"What am I to do?" asked Cyril anxiously; "go with Bella?"

"No you wait in Mrs. Tunk's hut. I daresay she is alone, as I asked her to send her grandson away

to his gipsy caravan before I came. I shall walk down with you, while Miss Huxham goes to the Manor-house."

"I would rather go with Bella," objected the young man uneasily.

"I am quite safe," said Bella determinedly, "and if you came, Cyril, there would be no room for us both in that narrow secret passage. I shall go by myself. Have no fear for me, dearest."

"One moment," said Durgo, as she was moving away. "Since you think that I may use violence, I may tell you, to quieten your minds, that the police are coming, after all."

"When did you tell the police to come? I thought you said——"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted the negro impatiently. "I know what I said. But I saw Inspector Inglis the other day when I went to Pierside, and informed him of my suspicions. I wired him to-day asking him to be with three or four men on the bank of the boundary channel opposite to Granny Tunks' hut."

"At what time?"

"About eleven, as I don't suppose that the Vands will try and escape until everyone in Marshely is asleep."

"Did you tell Inglis about the jewels?" asked Cyril.

"No, there is no need to tell more than is necessary. Besides, the police might take possession of the jewels, and I want them for Miss Huxham. All Inglis knows is that I suspect the Vands of a double murder, and that they intend to fly. He will come with his constables to arrest them if there is sufficient evidence."

"But I say, Durgo. I wanted you to do as you say, some time ago, and you talked of it not being advisable to bring the police into the matter. It seems that you have done so."

"It is a fact," said Durgo drily. "I didn't wish to tell you all my plans at once, as you and Miss Huxham here seemed to be so certain that I intended blue murder. If you had not been ready to trust me, I should not have changed my mind or have told you about the presence of the police. You look on me as a barbarous black man."

"We look on you as a very good friend," said Bella quickly, for the negro seemed hurt by their suspicions.

"There! there!" said Durgo gruffly, but bowing to the compliment. "Go to the Manor-house, Miss Huxham, and do what you can."

"Good-bye, Cyril," said Bella.

The young man ran after her as she moved up the corn path. "Don't go without a kiss, Bella," he said, catching her in his arms. "God keep you, my darling, and bring us safely through this dark business!"

"I'm not afraid, now that I know Inspector Inglis and his men will be on the spot," whispered Bella. "Good-bye! and good-bye! and good-bye!" and she kissed him between each word. In a few minutes she was swallowed up in the gloom, which was growing denser every minute.

"There will be a storm," prophesied Durgo, as the two men proceeded side by side to Mrs. Tunks' hut. "Hark!"

Just as he spoke there came a deep, hoarse roll of thunder, as though the artillery of heaven was being prepared to bombard the guilty pair in the old Manor-house. Durgo, with the instinct of a wild animal, raised his nose and sniffed. "I smell the rain. Glory! look at the lightning."

A vivid flash of forked lightning zig-zagged across the violent-hued sky, and again came the crash of thunder. Already the wind was rising, and the vast fields of corn were rustling and sighing and bending under its chill breath. "It is going to be a fierce night," said Durgo, dilating his nostrils to breathe the freshness of the air. "Do you remember in Macbeth, Cyril Lister, of the night of Duncan's murder?" and he quoted in his deep voice—

*"—but this sore night,  
Hath trifled former knowings."*

Cyril looked at the strong black face, which showed clearly in the frequent flashes of lightning. "You are a strange man, Durgo. One would think that you were almost—" he hesitated.

"A white man," finished Durgo coolly. "No, my friend. I am an educated black man, and an ingrained savage." He spoke mockingly, then flung back his military cloak. "Look! Would a man be like this in your sober England?"

Cyril uttered an ejaculation, and had every reason to. In the bluish flare of the lightning he saw that Durgo had stripped himself to a loin-cloth, and that his powerful body was glistening with oil. The sole civilised things about him were canvas running-shoes which he wore, and the cloak. "Why have you stripped to the buff?" asked Cyril astonished.

"I may have hard work to catch those two this night," said Durgo, replacing his cloak, which

made him look quite respectable, "so I wish to run as easily as possible."

"But there was no need to strip. The police won't be stripped."

"It's my way, and was the way of my fathers before me."

"In Africa, but not in England."

"Pooh!" was all that Durgo answered, and the two trudged along, bowing their heads against the now furiously driving wind. Shortly they came to Mrs. Tunks' hut, and the door was opened by the old woman herself.

"I felt that you were coming, master," she said, nodding. "Enter."

"No," said Durgo, pausing on the threshold of the ill-smelling room. "I have to go back to my post and watch for the coming of the Vands. Mr. Lister will remain here. Has your grandson gone?"

"No, lovey—I mean master," said Granny coaxingly. "He's ever so much better for the medicine you gave him, and is quite his own self. But I've sent the gel to get a boat to take him to the caravan. They've moved it down the channel to a meadow near the high road. The gel will bring the boat up here in an hour or so, and take Luke back with her; then he'll go on the merry road with her and my sister."

"You should have sent Luke away before," said Durgo frowning, "for he knew all about the murder, and has blackmailed the Vands. Inglis and his constables will be on the opposite bank to this place soon, and they may arrest him. I shan't say more than I can help, but get him away as soon as you can."

"Yes, master; yes, deary; yes, lovey!" croaked the old woman; and Durgo, with a significant glance at her and a nod to Cyril, turned away into the gloom.

"Won't you come in, lovey?" asked Mrs. Tunks coaxingly.

"No," said Cyril, who did not relish the malodorous hut; "I'll stay here and watch for the signal."

"What signal?" demanded the witch wife.

"Never mind. Go in!" commanded Lister, and settled himself under the eaves of the hut to keep guard.

Granny scowled at him as she obeyed. She did not mind cringing to Durgo, who was her master in the black art, but she objected to Cyril ordering her about. Had Granny really possessed the powers she laid claim to she would have blighted his fresh youth on the spot. As it was, she simply muttered a curse on what she regarded as his impertinence, and went indoors.

Cyril lighted his pipe and kept his eyes on the distant mass of the Manor-house, which was revealed blackly when the lightning flashed. Across the ocean of grain tore the furious wind, making it rock like an unquiet sea. Flash after flash darted across the livid sky, and every now and then came the sudden boom of the thunder. Hour upon hour passed until the watcher almost lost count of time. Within the cottage all was quiet, although at intervals he could hear the querulous voice of Mrs. Tunks shrilly scolding the Romany girl. Lister began to grow impatient, as he dreaded lest Bella should have fallen into the clutches of the Vands, who would certainly show her no mercy. It was in his mind to leave his post and see for himself what had occurred. Suddenly a long clear beam smote through the darkness of the night, and he sprang to his feet.

"They have left the house," muttered Cyril, thrusting his pipe into his pocket; "what's to be done now?"

The lightning was not quite so frequent, so the vivid beam of the search-light had full and fair play. But as the lightning ceased and the thunder became silent, a deluge of rain descended on the thirsty earth. On its strong wings the wind brought the rain, and a tropical down-pour almost blotted out the haggard moon, which now showed herself between driving clouds. But through the steady beam of the search-light could be seen the straight arrows of the rain, and the vast corn-fields hissed as the heavy drops descended. Here and there swung the ray of light, evidently looking for the fugitives, but as it did not come to rest, Cyril guessed that Bella had not yet descried the flying couple. But the rain was so incessant, and the wind so strong, that he was angered to think how Bella, on the high altitude of the quarter deck, was exposed to its fury.

Suddenly, as sometimes happens in furious storms, there came a lull both in the wind and the rain. A perfect silence ensued, and Cyril straining his ears, heard the soft dip of oars. As he peered towards the black gulf of the water-way running past the hut, the ray from the Manor-house became steady, and the finger of light pointed straight to the boundary channel. Cyril heard a wild shriek and ran down to the bank. Coming along the stream he saw a light boat, and in it Mrs. Vand huddled up at the end in her shawl. Vand himself was rowing with great care: but when the beam revealed their doings he lost all caution and rowed with desperation. Again came a drench of rain, almost blotting out the landscape, but the ray of light still picked out the guilty couple, following the course of the boat steadily, like an avenging angel's sword.

"Row, Henry, row hard!" shrieked Mrs. Vand, crouching in the stern of the boat and steering down the narrow channel as best she could, "We'll soon be safe. Row hard, dear! row hard!"

"Stop!" cried Cyril from the bank. "Mrs. Vand, you must wait here until the police come. Stop!"

"The police!" yelled the terrified woman, and her face was pearly white in the brilliant search-light. "Row, Henry; don't stop!"

Lister whipped out a revolver, with which he had been careful to provide himself. "If you don't stop, Vand, I shall shoot," and he levelled it.

But the cripple was too desperate to obey. He bent again to the oars and brought the shallop sweeping right under Cyril's feet. Then, before the young man could conjecture what he intended to do, he stood up in the rocking boat and swung up an oar with the evident intention of striking the man with the revolver into the water. Lister dodged skilfully as the oar came crashing viciously past his ear, and fired at random.

Mrs. Vand shrieked, her husband cursed, as the shot rang out. There came an answering cry from the near distance, and into the glare of the search-light bounded Durgo, naked save for his loin-cloth, black as the pit and furious as the devil who lives therein. Showing his white teeth like those of a wild animal, he raced up to the boat, and without a moment's hesitation flung himself on the figure of Vand as he stood up. The next moment the light craft was overturned, and Durgo, with the Vands, was struggling in the water. At the same moment the beam of the search-light suddenly vanished, leaving everyone in complete darkness. And the rain, driven by the triumphant wind, deluged the fields.

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## CHAPTER XXII

### MRS. VAND'S REPENTANCE

Afterwards, Cyril, when questioned, could never clearly recollect what took place. Vand's oar had missed his head, but had struck his right shoulder with considerable force, so that his revolver shot had gone wide of its intended mark. When Bella shut off the beam—and Cyril wondered at the time why she did so—everything was dark and confused. What with the gloom, the rain and curses from Vand and Durgo, who were struggling in the water, and the shrieks of Mrs. Tunks, added to those of the half-drowned woman, Cyril felt his head whirl; also the blow from the oar had confused him, and he became sick and faint for the moment.

Granny Tunks with commendable forethought had brought out a bullseye lantern, which she must have stolen from some policeman. Flashing this on to the water-way, its light revealed Durgo and the cripple locked in a deadly embrace, and Mrs. Vand clinging to the bank with one hand while she clutched her shawl with the other. Cyril thereupon plunged down the incline and dragged the wretched woman out. Thinking she was about to be arrested she fought like a wild cat, and would have forced the half-dazed young man into the water again, but that Mrs. Tunks brought a chunk of wood with considerable force down on her head.

"What the devil did you do that for?" gasped Cyril furiously; "you've killed her, you old fool!"

"What do I care, deary?" cried Granny shrilly. "I'd kill them both if I could, for the master wants them killed, curse them both!" and she tottered down to the boundary channel, while Cyril carried the inanimate form of Mrs. Vand into the hut. Here he laid her on the floor, and hastily bidding the Romany girl attend her, hurried out again.

"They're dead, both of them! Oh, the master's dead!" yelled Granny Tunks.

With the lantern raised she stood on the bank peering into the water, but there was scarcely enough light to see what was taking place. All sounds had ceased, however, and only the drench of the rain could be heard. But even as Granny spoke, the Romany girl, anxious to see what was taking place, darted out of the cottage with a kind of torch, consisting of tow at the end of a stick steeped in kerosene. This flared redly and flung a crimson glare on the water-ways, and flung also its scarlet light on the bodies of Durgo and the Cripple. These lay half-in and half-out of the water, fast locked together in a death grip. There was no wound apparent on either body, so Cyril conjectured that in the struggle both had been drowned. Durgo's mighty arms were clasped tightly around the slender body of the cripple, but Vand's lean hands were clutching the negro's throat with fierce resolution. Both were quite dead, and even in death Cyril, although he tried, could not drag them apart. That so delicate a man as Vand could have contrived to drown the powerful negro seemed incredible to Cyril: but he soon saw that to kill Durgo the cripple had been willing to sacrifice himself. Probably he had dragged Durgo under water, and having a grip on the man's throat had squeezed the life out of him with a madman's despairing force. The weak had confounded the strong on this occasion in a most pronounced manner.

Meanwhile, Granny Tunks was bewailing the loss of her master, and the sharp-featured Romany girl echoed her cries. The screams of both brought out Luke, who appeared at the fire-lighted door of the hut looking much better than Cyril expected him to be, seeing how severe had been his last illness. He had something in his hands, and in the flaring light of the torch Lister saw that it was a somewhat small black bag. In a moment the young man guessed that Luke Tunks had been robbing the unconscious Mrs. Vand, as he remembered that she had kept a close grip of something under her shawl even while she was struggling with him.

"The jewels!" cried Cyril, too excited to be cautious, and leaped for the gipsy. "Give me the

jewels."

"They're mine, blast you!" growled Luke, trying to evade him. "Missus gave 'em to me. Leave me alone. Granny, help me!"

Mrs. Tunks ran to the rescue, for the mention of jewels stirred her avaricious blood like the call of a trumpet. But already Cyril had plucked the black bag from the still weak gipsy, and Luke was not strong enough yet to make a fight for it. Aided vigorously by the Romany girl, the old woman would have closed in, but that a shout from the opposite bank made all turn. A dozen bullseyes were flashing over the stream. Cyril, gripping the bag, dashed the woman and the man aside and sprang to the verge of the channel.

"Is that you, Inspector Inglis?" he shouted.

"Yes; who are you?" came the sharp official tones.

"Cyril Lister. Come over yourself, or send some men. Vand and Durgo, the negro, are dead."

There was a confused muttering of surprise amongst the constables. Then came Inglis's clean-cut speech. "We heard a shot. Is——"

"No. Durgo struggled with Vand in the water-way, and they were both drowned. These gipsies here are making trouble, and Mrs. Vand is unconscious in the hut. Come across and take charge."

"How the devil can we get across here?" demanded Inglis. "It's twenty feet of water. Here you men, go round by the bridge."

"It's broken down," yelled Cyril.

"Who broke it?"

"Durgo. Let go, you old devil!" and Cyril swung Granny Tunks aside. The woman was still trying to clutch the jewels. "Inglis, you'll have to swim across. There's no other way."

No sooner had Lister suggested this expedient than Inglis obeyed it with the promptitude of an Englishman. Several heavy bodies were heard plunging into the water, and the bullseye lanterns were seen approaching like moving glow-worms as their swimming owners held them above their several heads. Had Granny Tunks been strong enough she would have attempted to prevent the landing of this hostile force; but Luke was useless and the Romany girl still more so. All she could do was to enter the fortress of her hut and bar the door, which she accordingly did, while Luke, mindful that he might be arrested for the murders as an accomplice after the fact, slunk hastily into the standing corn. Shortly Cyril was shaking hands with a dripping police inspector, and surrounded by six dripping constables. As the half dozen men and their officer were already wetted to the bone by incessant rain, the plunge into the channel did not trouble them in the least; indeed, they looked as though they rather enjoyed the adventure.

"But we may as well get under shelter to hear your story," suggested Inglis, and knocked loudly at the door of the hut. As Granny would not open, he simply turned to his men and gave a sharp order. "Break it down," said Inglis, and in less than a minute the constables were marching into the small apartment over the fallen door.

"I'll have the law on you for this!" screeched Mrs. Tunks, shaking her fist.

"You'll get a stomach-full of law, I have no doubt, before I have done with you," retorted Inglis. "Who is this?" and he stared at the inanimate form on the earthen floor amidst pools of water.

"Vand's wife, who was trying to escape with him," said Cyril. "She is insensible from a blow this old demon gave her."

"She'd have had you in the water else," hissed Mrs. Tunks scornfully.

"It wasn't unlikely, seeing how she fought. Have you any brandy?"

"A trifle for my spasms," admitted Granny sullenly.

"Then bring it out and revive Mrs. Vand," said Inglis impatiently. "It will be necessary for me to question her. Mr. Lister"—he brought his mouth very close to the young man's ear and spoke in a whisper—"is what that nigger told me quite true?"

"About Vand murdering Huxham? I believe it is, but I can't be sure. I got these, however, from Mrs. Vand. Don't let the old hag come near or she'll try and loot them."

"Loot what?" demanded Inglis, on seeing Cyril open the black bag, after he had motioned the constables to surround the table. "Oh, by Jupiter!"

His surprised ejaculations were echoed by his men, for Lister emptied on the table many glittering stones, cut and uncut. Chiefly they were diamonds, but also could be seen sapphires, rubies, pearls, and emeralds, all glowing with rainbow splendour in the fierce radiance of the bullseye lanterns. Mrs. Tunks whimpered like a beaten dog when she saw what she had missed, and tried to dart under a policeman's arm. "No you don't!" said the man gruffly, and gripped her lean wrist as her hand stretched greedily over the flaming heap of gems.

"Whose are these?" asked the inspector, quite awed by this wealth.

"Miss Huxham's," said Cyril, making a ready excuse until such time as the matter could be looked into, for he did not wish Inglis to take possession of Bella's fortune. "Her father left her these and the house to Mrs. Vand; but the woman withheld the jewels from her niece, and tried to-night to bolt with them. Then Luke Tunks attempted to steal them from her, while she lay unconscious here. Luckily I was enabled to rescue them, and now I can restore them to Miss Huxham."

"Where is Luke Tunks?" asked the inspector, while Cyril packed the gems in a chamois leather bag which he found in what Granny had called in her trance the portmanteau.

"Gone where you won't get him," grunted Mrs. Tunks, who was holding a glass of brandy to Mrs. Vand's white lips.

"You must get him, Inglis," said Cyril insistently. "He knows all about the murder of Huxham, and has been blackmailing the Vands."

"So that nigger said. By the way, we must see to the bodies." Inglis turned to the door, then looked back at Lister. "I wish I knew what this all meant, sir," he remarked, much puzzled.

"You shall know everything in due time, and a very queer story it is."

The inspector might have gone on asking questions, but at that moment Bella Huxham, breathless and wet, appeared in the doorway. In the semi-darkness she could scarcely see her lover, and called him. "Cyril! Cyril! what has happened?" she panted. "I have run all the way, and—who are these?"

"Inspector Inglis and constables," said that officer. "Where have you come from, miss?"

"From the Manor-house. I went to see my aunt, and saw her run away with her husband. Where is she? Where is he?"

"There is Mrs. Vand," said Cyril, pointing to the still insensible woman, "and her husband is dead in Durgo's arms."

Bella shrieked. "Is Durgo dead?"

"Yes, unfortunately. Vand clutched his throat and dragged him under."

"But so weak a man——"

"He sacrificed his own life to kill Durgo," said Cyril. "What's to be done now, inspector?"

Inglis acted promptly. "One of my men can stay here to look after the old woman," he said officially, "and the rest can help me to take the bodies of Vand and the nigger back to the Manor-house. We must take possession of that place until everything is made clear at the inquest. What will you do, Miss Huxham? Better get home. This is no place for a lady."

"I must stay and revive my aunt," said Bella, who already was bending over the woman and had the glass of brandy in her hand.

"Good," said Inglis, motioning his men to file out. "I'll come back and question her when you get her right again. Mr. Lister!"

"With your permission, Mr. Inspector, I'll wait here with Miss Huxham," said Cyril significantly. "I don't trust these two women"—he looked at Granny and the Romany girl—"also Luke Tunks might be lurking about. If Miss Huxham were left here alone—" his shrug completed the sentence.

"Dutton will keep guard at the door," said Inglis, selecting the village constable, a fresh-faced, powerful young man, "and if these women try any games he can take them in charge. Also, Dutton"—he turned to the man, who had already posted himself as directed—"you can hold Luke Tunks should he turn up. I want to question him also," after which orders Inglis with a nod went out. Cyril followed.

The bodies were duly found, and the inspector uttered an exclamation of surprise when he saw that Durgo was nude. "What does this mean?"

"Mean!" said Cyril, who looked over his shoulder, "simply that Durgo, in spite of his Oxford training, was a savage at heart. He arranged a trap to catch the Vands, and stripped so as to be prepared for any emergency."

"Rum notion," said Inglis, who looked puzzled. "But what had he to do with all this murder business?"

"He was my father's friend," explained Lister, "and—" he stopped on seeing the eager faces around him, adding in lower tones, "what I have to explain is for your own ear in the first instance, inspector."

Inglis looked grave, and even suspicious. "There seems to be much to explain, Mr. Lister," he said seriously. "However you can stay here. I shall take the bodies to the Manor-house and thoroughly search the place. When I return I hope to hear your story and to examine Mrs. Vand. It seems to me," added the officer, as he turned away, "that the mystery of the Huxham murder is about to be solved at last."

"I think so myself," assented Lister soberly; and after seeing the six men take up their burden of the dead, he returned to the hut in silence.

Here he found Mrs. Vand, pale but composed, sitting up on the floor with her back propped up against the wall. Granny Tunks, looking very sulky, was on her hunkers before the fire smoking her cutty pipe, and the Romany girl could be seen lying on Luke's vacated bed in the inner room. Only Bella was attending to the woman she had called aunt for so long, and who had so persecuted her. She was urging Mrs. Vand to speak out.

"You must tell the truth now," said Bella, "for the police will arrest you."

Mrs. Vand could not grow paler, for she was already whiter than any corpse, but a terrified look came into her eyes. "You'll be glad of that, Bella?"

"No," said the girl earnestly; "I am not glad to see you suffer. You have been cruel to me, and I thought that I should like to see you punished; but now that you have lost your husband and are so miserable, I am very sorry, and both Cyril and I will do our best to help you. Tell all you know, Aunt Rosamund, and perhaps you will not be arrested."

"If I tell all I know I am sure to be arrested," said Mrs. Vand sullenly.

"But surely you did not murder your own brother?"

"No, I didn't. Badly as Jabez treated me I did not kill him, although I don't deny that I wished for his death. Well, he is dead and I got his money, and now—" she buried her shameful face in her hands wailingly—"oh! my poor dear Henry, I have lost him and lost all. As to you"—she suddenly lifted up her head to glare furiously at Cyril, who was leaning against the door-post a few yards from the watching policeman—"you have been the evil genius of us all. Where are my jewels?"

"They are in this bag," said Lister, holding it up, "and they belong to Bella."

"Jabez left everything to me," began Mrs. Vand, when Cyril interrupted.

"These jewels were not his to leave. They were the property of Maxwell Faith, who was a trader and——"

"I know all about that," said Mrs. Vand, cutting him short, "and Bella is his daughter, you were going to say."

"Yes; therefore the jewels are her property. Who told you of——"

"Luke Tunks told me."

"That's a lie!" snarled Granny from her stool near the fire.

"It's the truth," gasped Mrs. Vand, taking another sip of the brandy which Bella held to her lips. "Luke was dodging round the house on the night of the murder and peeped in at the study window. He overheard the interview between Jabez and Edwin Lister."

"What!" Cyril took a step forward in sheer surprise. "You know my father's name also?"

"I know much, but not all," said Mrs. Vand in a stronger voice, for the spirit was taking effect. "For instance, I don't know what became of Edwin Lister, but Luke does."

"Then Luke shall be arrested and questioned."

"He shan't!" muttered Granny venomously. "Luke's escaped—a clever boy."

Bella put her arm round Mrs. Vand to render her more comfortable. "How much did Luke tell you?" she asked softly.

"Only so much as cheated us—Henry and I—into paying him money."

"Oh," said Cyril quietly, "so that is why Luke got so drunk."

"He spent his money in drink," said Mrs. Vand indifferently. "We paid him a good deal. He never would have left us, and intended to go to America with us to-night, as he knew too much for our safety."

"How did you intend to escape?" asked Cyril sharply.

"We intended to row down the channel to the swamps; that is why Henry got the boat a few weeks ago. Then we intended to cut across the marshes to the high road, where a motor-car, hired by Henry, awaited us. It would have taken us to London, and there we could have concealed ourselves until a chance came to get to the States. Everything was cut and dried, but you——"

"No," said Lister seriously; "it was not I who stopped you, but Durgo."

"That negro? Then I am glad he is dead!" cried Mrs. Vand, who was getting more her old self every minute. "However, it's all done with now. You have the jewels, Henry is dead, and I don't care what becomes of me."

"But who murdered my father?" asked Bella earnestly.

"Jabez wasn't your father. Maxwell Faith was your father, for Luke overheard Edwin Lister say as much to Jabez."

"And what became of Edwin Lister?"

"I don't know; Luke never told me that. All he said was that he saw and heard the two talking. Then he left the window, and only returned to see Henry stab my brother."

"Oh!" Cyril and Bella both uttered ejaculations of horror.

"Yes, you may say 'oh' as much as you like, but it's true," said Mrs. Vand with great doggedness. "Henry came with me to the Manor-house on that night at ten o'clock. He did not stop at the boundary channel, as he declared. He only said that to save himself. But he came with me, and we saw my brother, who was in his study. We confessed that we were married, and then Jabez grew angry and said he would turn me as a pauper out of the house next morning. He drove Henry and myself out of the room. I fainted in the kitchen, and when I came to myself Henry was bending over me, very pale. He said he had killed Jabez with a knife which he found on the floor. I had seen the knife before when we were telling Jabez about our marriage. But in the excitement I didn't pick it up."

"Was there blood on the knife?" asked Cyril, remembering Granny Tunks' trance, as reported by Bella.

"I can't say; I don't know. I was too flurried to think about the matter. All I know is that Henry killed Jabez with that knife which Jabez brought from Nigeria, and then dropped it behind the desk."

"What took place exactly?" asked Cyril hastily, while Bella closed her eyes.

"Ask Luke; ask Luke," said Mrs. Vand testily. "He knows all," and she refused to say another word.

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## CHAPTER XXIII

### WHAT LUKE TUNKS SAW

As Mrs. Vand obstinately refused to speak, there was little use for Bella to remain in the hut. The girl was sick and faint with all she had gone through, and wished to get home to rest. Cyril also was anxious to follow Inglis and his officers to the Manor-house to see what had been discovered likely to prove the truth of Mrs. Vand's statements. But before going, Bella made a last attempt to induce her presumed aunt to confess all in detail. "It's your sole chance of getting out of this trouble," said Bella, who was now sorry to see her enemy brought so low.

"I don't care if I get out of the trouble, or if I do not," said Mrs. Vand wearily. "Henry is dead, just as we were on the eve of happiness, so I don't much care what becomes of me."

"Could you have been happy in America knowing your husband to be a murderer?" asked Cyril, skeptically.

"Certainly," returned the woman with great composure. "I knew all along that Henry had struck the blow; but I daresay Jabez goaded him into doing so, as poor Henry was so good and weak."

"Weak!" echoed Cyril, remembering all. "He was not very weak to kill an active man like Captain Huxham, and a strong negro such as Durgo was."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Vand exultingly, and contradicting herself in a truly feminine way, "Henry was a man—none of your weaklings. If we had only escaped with those"—she stared hard at the black bag which contained the jewels—"but it's no use fretting now. Everything is at an end, and Bella is glad."

"No, I am not, Aunt Rosamund—"

"I am not your aunt; I don't wish to be your aunt."

"All the same, I am very sorry for you," said Bella, with the tears in her eyes, "and if I can do anything to help you let me know. Good-bye, aunt, and may God watch over you." She bent and kissed the lined forehead.

"Don't you believe that I killed Jabez?" faltered Mrs. Vand, somewhat touched.

"No," said Bella quietly. "I believe what you say. Henry killed Captain Huxham, and like a true wife you held your tongue to save him. I should have done exactly the same had Cyril been guilty."

"You're a good girl, Bella. I'm sorry I was so hard on you. I don't suppose there's much happiness left me in this life, now that Henry is dead. But I shall repay you for those kind words. There! there! Don't kiss me again. I have been mistaken in you. Good-bye," and Mrs. Vand, lying down on the floor in an utter state of despair, turned her face to the wall.



Bella had to leave her in this unsatisfactory condition, as there was no chance of taking her home to Miss Ankers' cottage. Dutton still watched by the door, and probably had overheard all that she had confessed, even though she had not been so explicit as she should have been. But she had detailed quite sufficient to ensure her arrest as an accomplice after the fact, so it was not likely that Dutton would permit her to leave the hut until he received orders from his superior. Under the circumstances there was nothing to be done, but for the young people to go, which they accordingly did. Granny Tunks flung a curse after them as they passed out into the night, and flung also a burning sod to emphasise the curse.

"Old devil!" said Cyril, comforting Bella, who was crying. "Dutton, lend me your lantern, as the path along the channel is dangerous."

Dutton, having received five shillings, made no objection to this, provided he got back his bullseye later in the night. Cyril promised to return it when he came back to the hut with Inglis, and then, taking Bella's arm he led her carefully along the slippery path. The storm had passed and the wind had dropped, but the clouds were still thick enough to envelope the earth in murky darkness. They picked their footsteps carefully, until they came to the foot of the corn-path. Here they halted.

"How are we to get across, Cyril?" asked the girl, shivering.

Lister groped in the corn wherein Durgo had flung the planks, and soon recovered these. With the aid of Bella he fixed them again on the tressels sunk in the mud, and the two passed dry-shod over the channel. In walking to Marshely the young man gave Bella the bag. "Take this, dear," he said. "The jewels are in it. Be careful of them."

"Oh, Cyril," said the girl, awestruck, "did Mrs. Vand steal them?"

"Yes, and in spite of what she says I believe she and Henry murdered your father—I mean Captain Huxham—for the sake of the jewels. They were in this bag, marked with the initials 'M. F.'—your father's initials."

"Just as Granny saw it in her trance."

"Very nearly, only she called the bag—and it is a bag, as you see—a portmanteau. Either Granny or the unseen are at fault. But it matters little since the jewels are now in your possession. Keep them carefully."

"But Cyril," said Bella, as they drew near the cottage, "does it seem right for us to keep jewels that already have caused two murders? My father was killed because of these gems by Captain Huxham, and he met with the same fate for probably the same reason."

"I daresay in ages past, many and many a wicked deed has been committed for the sake of these jewels. Do you remember what you heard Granny say in her trance?—that a Roman empress had secured the jewels by crime. My dear girl, all jewels have a history more or less, and if one feared the sort of thing you mention, not a woman would wear jewels. No, dear: God has given you this fortune, and you have every right to make use of it. Here's the door, and by the light in the window I see that Miss Ankers is sitting up."

"I promised to tell her why I went out," said Bella, kissing her lover, "so, as she is our good friend; she must know all."

"Just as you please: tell her everything from the beginning. I have to tell Inspector Inglis what I know shortly."

"Will you tell him about your father?" asked Bella faintly.

Lister hesitated. "I must," he said at length with a mighty effort, "for if I do not Luke Tunks may be caught, and he will tell."

"Tell what?"

"I don't know: God only knows what happened when Luke peeped through that window. From the presence of the bloody knife on the floor, and the fact that Vand murdered Huxham, I am inclined to believe that Huxham stabbed my father with that knife."

Bella caught his sleeve. "If so where did Captain, Huxham hide the body?"

Cyril removed her arm gently, although he shivered. "We have had enough of these horrors for one night, dear," he said, kissing her. "Go inside and talk to Miss Ankers. To-morrow I'll come and see you."

"What are you about to do, Cyril?"

"I am returning to the Manor-house, and then shall go to Granny's hut with Inglis. There must be an end to all this mystery to-night. Bella"—he turned suddenly—"if it is proved that my father is alive, will you still marry me? Think of the disgrace he has brought on me."

"Why? In any case your father didn't murder Captain Huxham."

"No; his hands are free from blood in that respect. But this case will have to be thoroughly inquired into, and much about my father may come out. His doings were shady. As I told you, I had to borrow one thousand pounds to buy back a cheque for that amount which he had forged in

the name of an old college friend. Then there's the gun-running in Nigeria, and all manner of doubtful means by which he made his money. Bella, if you marry me, you marry a man with a soiled name."

Her arms were round him on the instant. "*You* have not soiled it," she whispered, "and that is enough for me."

Cyril's lips met hers in a passionate kiss, and, glowing with happiness, she ran into Dora's little garden as the door opened. Miss Ankers, hearing voices at this late hour—for it was nearly midnight—was looking out to see what was the matter. Cyril watched her admit Bella, and then turned away with a sigh. He intended to confess much about his father to Inglis, which he would much rather have kept concealed; but under the circumstances there was no other way of settling matters. Since the tragic death of Captain Huxham, these had been in a very bad way.

Very shortly the young man arrived at the Manor-house, and found a constable on guard at the door. But he was admitted the moment the man recognised him. It appeared that Inglis had been expecting him for some time. Lister walked into the study, wherein the inspector had established himself, and explained that he had been escorting Miss Huxham home.

"The poor girl is quite worn out," said Cyril, seating himself with an air of relief, for he also was extremely tired.

"No wonder," replied the inspector. "Is Dutton on guard?"

"Yes. Mrs. Vand and the old woman and the girl are all safe."

"I have sent along another man," said Inglis nodding, "so that there may be no chance of the three escaping. The house was locked up when we came here, Mr. Lister, and only by breaking a window could we enter. Look at this, sir"—and the inspector pointed to a small lozenge-pane in the casement, which had been broken.

"Well," said Cyril, after a pause.

"Through that broken pane Luke Tunks saw everything which took place in this study on the night of the murder."

Cyril felt his hair rise, and he thought of his father's probable danger, but he calmed down on reflecting that at least Edwin Lister was not guilty of the frightful crime. "How do you know?" he gasped with difficulty.

"We have caught Luke, and he will be here in a moment or so to confess."

Cyril looked surprised. "How did you catch him?"

"He ran out of the hut when we crossed the channel, and concealed himself in the corn. Then, remembering that the Manor-house was deserted he fetched a circle round the fields and came here. When we got into the house we found him nearly crazy with fear; he took us for ghosts."

"Where is he now?"

"In the kitchen guarded by a couple of men. He refused to confess, and I gave him an hour to make up his mind. Meanwhile, we have searched the house and have found that everything valuable more or less is gone. Some things left behind have been packed in boxes. I suppose the Vands hoped to escape and then get their goods later. But they carried off what they could."

"They intended to go to America," said Cyril, "the woman explained. She also declared that her husband murdered Captain Huxham."

"I expect she had a hand in it herself."

"She denies that."

"She naturally would," said Inglis very drily. "However, I'll send for Luke Tunks and see if he is willing to confess," and he gave a sharp order to one of the constables who was lounging in the hall.

In a few minutes the tall, lean gipsy, who looked extremely ill and extremely defiant, made his appearance at the door, held by two policemen.

"Bring him in," said the inspector calmly, and arranging some sheets of paper, which he took out of his pocket along with a stylograph pen. "Now then, my man, will you confess all that you saw?"

"If I do what will happen, governor?" asked Tunks hoarsely.

"You may get a lighter sentence."

"Will I be arrested?"

"You are arrested now, and shortly you will be lodged in gaol."

"Then I shan't say anything!" growled Luke defiantly, and folding his arms he leaned against the panelled wall.

"Very good," said Inglis serenely; "take him away. In the morning he can be removed to the Pierside goal."

The two constables advanced, and Luke bit his lip. In any case he saw that things looked black against him.

"You have no right to arrest me," he declared. "On what charge do you arrest me?"

"On a charge of murdering Captain Jabez Huxham."

"I didn't. I can prove I didn't."

"You can do so in court and to a judge and jury. Take him away."

"No, no! I'll tell you all I know now," said Luke, making the best of a bad job, and being imaginative enough to both see and feel a visionary rope encircling his neck. "Let me tell now, governor."

This was exactly what Inglis wanted, as he desired to obtain all available evidence for the forthcoming inquest on the bodies of the dead men, black and white. But he pretended to grant the man's wish as a favour. "As you please," he said with a cool shrug. "You two men can go outside and remain on guard on the other side of the door."

The constables did as they were ordered and closed the door. Inglis, Lister, and Luke Tunks were alone, and as the gipsy was still weak from his late illness the inspector signed that he could take a seat. "Now tell me all you know, and I shall take it down. You shall affix your name to your confession, and Mr. Lister and myself will be the witnesses. Do you agree?"

"Yes," said Luke hoarsely, and drawing his sleeve across his mouth, "for nothing I can say can hang me. I didn't kill either of the blokes."

"Either of the blokes? What do you mean?"

"I mean that Captain Huxham killed the man who called himself Lister, and Henry Vand killed Captain Huxham. I saw both murders."

Lister rejoiced, horrified as he was at the idea of his father's violent death, but thankful from the bottom of his heart that he had gone to his own place guiltless of blood. Inglis saw the expression on the young man's face, and asked a leading question.

"Was not this Mr. Lister your father?"

"Yes," answered Cyril promptly. "He came home from Nigeria some months ago with Durgo, who is the son of a friendly chief. My father, I understand, came down here to ask Captain Huxham for certain jewels—"

"Those you showed me, sir?"

"Yes, they were robbed from a trader called Maxwell Faith by Huxham, and my father wished to get them. Durgo came down to seek for my father, but we have never been able to find him."

"He is dead," said Luke abruptly.

"So you say; but where is the body?"

"I don't know; I can't say." Luke paused, then turned to the inspector. "Let me tell you what I saw through yonder broken pane."

"Very good." Inglis arranged his papers and prepared his pen. "Mind you speak the truth, as I shall take down every word you say. Afterwards Mr. Lister can tell me what he knows."

So it was arranged, and Tunks, as ready to tell now as formerly he was unwilling, launched out into his story. It appears that after leaving Mrs. Coppersley—as she was then—he went home to have some food. Shortly before eight o'clock he strolled along the banks of the river and saw Pence watching the house. Knowing that the preacher was in love with the daughter of his master, he took little notice; then, while lying in the corn by the side of the path smoking, he saw, as he thought, Cyril Lister pass him, and stealthily followed.

"Why did you do that?" asked Inglis, raising his eyes.

"I knew that this gent"—he nodded towards Cyril—"was in love with Miss Bella also, and knew that Captain Huxham hated him."

"Why did he hate him?"

"I can tell you," said Cyril quickly; "because of my father. Huxham knew my father in Nigeria, and as my father wished to get these jewels he feared lest he should force him to give them up. For this reason Huxham came down here and planted corn all round his house as a means of defence, and installed a search-light. He wished to be on his guard."

"Did your father intend murder?" asked the inspector, sharply.

"I really can't say."

"But he did," struck in Luke, who had been listening earnestly. "All that the young gent says is true, sir. I only followed, as I thought that there would be a row between Captain Huxham and—as I thought—Mr. Cyril. I waited outside the house, and then hearing loud voices in the study—in

this place," said Tunks looking round, "I stole to the casement and peeped through that broken pane. They did not know that I was there."

"What became of Mr. Pence meanwhile?" asked Inglis suddenly.

"He was watching the house, but I think he went away and then came back."

Inglis nodded. "That is unsatisfactory. I must examine Mr. Pence later. You go on, Tunks, and tell us exactly what you saw."

Tunks settled down to his narrative. "I listened and heard all about the jewels and the death of Maxwell Faith and all about Miss Bella being his daughter. I saw by this time that Mr. Lister was not Mr. Cyril here, and I guessed from his likeness that he was Mr. Cyril's father. Mr. Lister wanted Captain Huxham to give up the jewels for some expedition, but the captain refused. They began to quarrel, and then the captain pulled out a big knife from a drawer of his desk and rushed on Mr. Lister. There was a struggle and Mr. Lister tried to pull out a revolver. At length Huxham got Mr. Lister down and cut his throat."

"Which would account for the quantity of blood found on the floor here when Huxham's body was found. I thought there was too much blood for one man's corpse to supply. Go on."

"Oh, it's terrible—horrible!" said Cyril, covering his face. "What did you do, Tunks? Why didn't you give the alarm?"

"What, and be run in for being an accomplice!" said Tunks disdainfully, "not me. But I was frightened, and when I saw that Captain Huxham had killed Mr. Lister—I knew his name by that time, having heard them talking—why, I ran away as hard as my legs could carry me."

"Where did you go?"

"Home to Granny, so that I might be able to supply an alibi if necessary. I didn't tell her anything, but she found out a lot when I was raving with the drink in me. But I couldn't rest, and when Granny was a-bed I stole out. It was after ten by this time. I went up to the Manor and to yonder window. Then I saw Mrs. Coppersley—as she was—and Mr. Vand, talking to the captain and telling him they were married. The knife, all bloody, was on the floor near the door, but they were all three so busy talking that they did not notice it. But I wonder the captain didn't cover it up.'

"Where was the body of my father?" asked Cyril impatiently.

"I don't know; the body was gone. I've never been able to find out where the captain put up the body. But, as I say, he turned out Mr. Vand and his wife, as I knew she was then, and cursed up and down. But he didn't pick up the knife; in place of doing so, which would have been more sensible, seeing that he had murdered the Lister cove with it, he went to his desk and pulled out a black bag. He emptied this of jewels, and my mouth watered."

"Ah, so you recognised the bag when you tried to steal it from Mrs. Vand in your mother's cottage?"

"Yes, I did," said Luke sullenly, "and very sorry I am that I didn't get clear off with it."

"You have quite enough to answer for as it is," said Inglis sharply. "Go on, as I have got everything down so far."

"Well, then while the captain was sitting at the desk gloating over the jewels Mr. Vand comes in softly like a cat. He saw the jewels and his eyes lighted up. Captain Huxham, being busy, didn't hear him, so he picks up the knife lying near the door, and before I could cry out he rushed at the old man. Huxham turned to meet him, and got the knife in his heart. Then Mr. Vand, as cool as you please, dropped the knife behind the desk, and taking the bag with the jewels, he put 'em back—went away."

"What did you do?"

"I went home and tried to sleep, but couldn't."

"Why didn't you warn the police?" asked Inglis.

"No, sir. I'm only a gipsy, and they'd have thought I'd something to do with the business. If I'd accused Mr. Vand him and his wife would have accused me, and it would be two to one. Besides," said Luke coolly, "I wasn't sorry to see old Huxham downed after killing the other gent. Serve him right, say I. So that's all."

"Humph," said Inglis, finishing his writing. "You made capital out of this?"

"Yes, I did," said Luke defiantly, and taking the pen which Inglis held out to him. "I told Mr. and Mrs. Vand what I'd seen. They were frightened—it was the next morning, you see—and paid me heaps of money to hold my tongue. Then, like a fool, I went on the bend, and talked so much that Granny got to know heaps, and so set the nigger brute on our tracks. There"—Luke signed his name—"you can't hang me for what I've told you."

Inglis and Lister both signed as witnesses, and the inspector put the paper into his pocket. He was about to ask further questions—to cross-examine Tunks in fact—when the door opened and a young constable appeared in a mighty state of excitement.

"Sir," he cried to his superior officer, "Mrs. Vand has escaped!"

"Escaped!" cried the inspector, in a voice of thunder.

"Yes, sir. Dutton is lying drugged in the hut, and the old woman has been stunned. Mrs. Vand and the gipsy girl are gone."

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## CHAPTER XXIV

### A REMARKABLE DISCOVERY

Next morning there was a great sensation in the village of Marshely, as in some way the events of the previous night leaked out. Certainly, the accounts of these were more or less garbled, and no one appeared to know who was responsible for them. But this much of the truth became public property, that Vand and the negro prince who had been stopping at "The Chequers" were dead, that Mrs. Vand had fled to escape arrest, and that the police were in possession of Bleacres. Later in the afternoon it became known that Vand had killed Captain Huxham for the sake of certain jewels.

But the villagers were greatly astonished when they heard—from what source was not known—that another man had been killed. No one, save Silas Pence, had seen Edwin Lister enter the Manor, and Pence himself had presumed, until informed, that the man was Cyril, so no one knew that any person was missing. Now it appeared that the man who was murdered by Vand had committed a crime himself previous to his own death. But what he had done with the body no one knew, and the police could find no traces of the same in spite of all their efforts.

Inspector Inglis called at Miss Anker's cottage in the morning and interviewed both Bella and her lover. From them he heard the whole tale, and was greatly astonished by the recital. Under the circumstances he was inclined to take the jewels into official custody, but Bella refused to give them up; and undoubtedly they were her property left to her by her father, Maxwell Faith. Inglis admitted this, so did not press the point.

Afterwards the inspector examined Silas Pence, and heard from him much the same story as he had told Bella. The preacher was lying on a bed of sickness, as the blow on his head and the many worries he had been through of late nearly gave him brain fever. Of course—and Inglis told him as much—he should have reported at once the death of Huxham, as he had seen the body. But as Pence had not beheld the blow struck, the police could do nothing but admonish. Silas stated that in one point of his story when he confessed to Bella he had been wrong, which was after seeing Edwin Lister enter the Manor—or, as he thought then, Cyril—he had rushed away in the direction of the common in the vain attempt to rid himself of troublesome thoughts. When he returned Mr. and Mrs. Vand were in the kitchen, as Luke proved; and Pence was thus enabled to enter the house. Undoubtedly the guilty pair had left the front door open, so that blame might be cast upon some outsider—on a possible burglar, for instance. When they heard the noise of Pence's flight and found the money gone, they were quite determined to place the blame on a robber. Mrs. Vand confessed this later, although at the time of the robbery she had not dreamed the burglar was the talented young preacher whom she so greatly admired.

But the guilty woman was missing for some days. On inquiry being made it appeared that the Romany girl, bribed by Mrs. Vand to assist her flight, had made a cup of tea for the constable. As Dutton was wet and cold, he drank the tea only too willingly, never suspecting that it was drugged. But it turned out to be dosed with laudanum, and he fell into a deep sleep. Granny Tunks, as she stated on reviving, had attempted to stay the flight of Mrs. Vand and the Romany girl, but the latter had promptly knocked her down with the very chunk of wood with which Mrs. Tunks had struck the half-drowned woman. In this way Granny's sins came home to her.

Inglis found, on the detail of the motor-car being reported by Cyril, who had heard it from Mrs. Vand, that use had been made of the same. He advertised for such a car in such a neighbourhood, and speedily was called upon by a public chauffeur, who drove for hire. The man confessed very frankly that Vand had engaged his car to wait for himself and his wife on the high road to Pierside, and that thinking that nothing was wrong he had done so. Vand had paid him well, and the driver merely thought it was the eccentric whim of a rich man. Vand, it appeared, had engaged the car in London from the stand in Trafalgar Square. When Mrs. Vand left the hut the Romany girl had rowed her to the swamps in the boat she had brought for the removal of Luke to the caravan, and the woman had then crossed the marshy ground to the high road. Making some excuse for the non-appearance of her husband, she had been driven to London, and the driver, who had already received his money, dropped her in Piccadilly. That, as he confessed, was the last he saw of her.

Inspector Inglis was very angry with the man, and pointed out that he should have suspected that the couple were flying from justice from the fact of the large sum of money paid, and on account of the strange place where it was arranged that the car should wait. But the man exonerated himself completely, and in the end he was permitted to go free, as the police could not do anything. And after all the chauffeur, who did not look particularly intelligent, might have acted in all good faith.

However the point was that Mrs. Vand, dropped in Piccadilly, had vanished entirely. She had ample money, as it was proved that she had drawn fifty pounds in gold from her bank, and although she had fled from the hut with only the dripping dress she wore, there would be no difficulty in her obtaining a fresh disguise. The police advertised in the papers and with handbills, but nothing could be heard of the woman. She had vanished as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed her.

Strangely enough, it was from Mrs. Vand's solicitor that the first news came of her doings. Timson was the lawyer's name, and he came down to Pierside to see Inspector Inglis. On being shown into the inspector's office he broke out abruptly—

"Sir," said Timson, who was a mild-faced, spectacled, yellow-haired man, "I have a communication to make to you about my respected client, Mrs. Rosamund Vand, if you will hear it."

"Respectable, eh?" questioned the officer ironically. "Perhaps you don't know, Mr.—Mr."—he referred to the card—"Mr. Timson, that your respectable client is wanted for her complicity in the murder of her brother?"

"Sir," said Mr. Timson again and firmly, "my client—my respected client," he added with emphasis "assured me that she had nothing to do with the commission of that crime. She was in a dead faint in the kitchen when her husband, in a moment of passion, struck down Captain Huxham."

"So she says because it is to her benefit to say so, Mr. Timson. But the man who saw the murder committed swears that it was a most deliberate affair, and was only done for the sake of certain jewels, which——"

"Deliberate or not, Mr. Inspector," interrupted the meek little man, "my respected client had nothing to do with it. Afterwards she held her tongue for the sake of her husband, for his sake also paid blackmail to the man who saw the crime committed."

"We can argue that point," said Inglis drily, "when we see Mrs. Vand. You are doubtless aware of her whereabouts?"

"No," said Timson coolly, "I am not."

"But you said you had seen her—after the murder was committed, I fancy you hinted."

"I saw her," said Timson, quite calmly, "on the day following her flight from the hut on the marshes. She alighted in Piccadilly and walked about the streets for the rest of the night. Afterwards she went to a quiet hotel and had a brush and a wash up. She then called on me——"

"And you did not detain her when you knew——"

"I knew nothing. Had I known that she was flying from justice I certainly should have urged her to surrender. But the news of these terrible doings in Marshely had not reached London; it was not in the papers until the following day. You grant that?"

"Yes, yes! But——"

"No 'buts' at all, Mr. Inspector," said Timson, who seemed firm enough in spite of his meek aspect. "My client confessed to me that her husband had been drowned, and that he had murdered her brother in a fit of passion because Captain Huxham intended to turn his sister out of doors and alter his will on account of her secret marriage."

"That motive may have had some weight," said Inglis quietly, "but I fancy the sight of the jewels made Vand murder his brother-in-law. Did Mrs. Vand call to tell you this?"

"No!" snapped Timson, whose meekness was giving way. "She called to make her will."

"Make her will—in whose favour?"

"I see no reason why I should not tell you," said the lawyer, "although I never reveal professional secrets. But I will tell, so that you may see how you have misjudged my client. She made a will in favour of Miss Isabella Faith——"

"Faith? Ah! she knew, then, that the girl was not her niece."

"Yes. But she did not tell me that, nor did I inquire. All she did was to make me, or, rather instruct me, to draw up a will leaving the Bleacres property and the five hundred a year she inherited from the late Captain Huxham, to Miss Faith, as some token of repentance for having misjudged her. And now," cried Timson, rising wrathfully, "my respected client is misjudged herself. I come to clear her character."

"I don't see how that will clears her character," said Inglis coolly, "and from the mere fact that she made it I daresay she has committed suicide."

"Impossible! Impossible!"

"I think it is very probable, indeed, Mr. Timson, Mrs. Vand cannot get out of England, as all the ports and railway stations are watched, and there is a full description of her appearance posted everywhere. Unless she wants to get a long sentence for complicity in this most brutal murder,

she will have to commit suicide."

"I tell you she is innocent."

"Can you tell me that she is not an accomplice after the fact?"

"A wife is not bound to give evidence against her husband."

Inspector Inglis rose with a fatigued air. "I am not here to argue on points of law with you, Mr. Timson. All I ask is, if you know where your respected client is?" he laid a sneering emphasis on his last words.

"No, I do not," said Timson, taking up his hat, "and I bid you good day."

What the lawyer said was evidently correct, for although his office and himself were watched by the police, it could not be proved that he was in communication with the missing woman. The whereabouts of Mrs. Vand became more of a mystery than ever. Inglis told Bella of her good fortune, but of course until Mrs. Vand was dead she could not benefit. And there seemed to be no chance of proving the woman's death, even though the inspector firmly held to the opinion that she had committed suicide.

Meantime Timson went on to Marshely to look after his client's property, and seeing that the corn was ripe, he arranged with a number of labourers, under an overseer whom he could trust, that it should be reaped immediately. Thus it happened that four days after Mrs. Vand's disappearance, when Cyril came to tell Bella about the inquest, she was able to inform him that the Solitary Farm lands were about to be reaped.

"And we might go there in the evening to look," said Bella.

"My dear, I should think that the Manor was hateful to you."

"Well, it is. Even if I do inherit it from Mrs. Vand, I can never live there, Cyril. But I want you to come with me this evening, as I have a kind of idea that the body of Mrs. Vand"—she grew pale and shuddered—"may be found amidst the corn."

Cyril started back, astonished. "My dear girl, you must be mad!"

"No, I am not, Cyril. Think of how she is being hunted, and how her person is described everywhere, while all the ports and stations are watched. I believe that she, poor woman! went to see her lawyer, so as to prove her sorrow for having misjudged me, by making me her heiress, and that she then returned to die amidst the corn."

"Do you think she is dead there?"

"Perhaps yes, perhaps no. Granny Tunks is still in the hut, and she is very avaricious. Mrs. Vand had money. She may have bribed Granny to bring her food while she lay hid among the corn."

"But such a hiding-place!" said Lister, who nevertheless was much struck with what Bella was saying.

"A very good one and a place where no one would think of looking. Think how thick the corn is growing! No one ever enters it, and that scarlet coated scarecrow stands sentinel over it. Believe me, Cyril, Mrs. Vand has been hiding there. I wish you to come with me this evening. They have started to reap the corn by order of Mr. Timson. If Mrs. Vand is there, she will in the end be discovered. Let us find her, and save her, and get her out of the kingdom."

"That will bring us within reach of the law."

"I don't care," said Bella, quite recklessly; "after all, she had nothing to do with the crime, and only kept silent to shield her husband. I want to help the poor thing, and you must aid me to do so."

"But Bella, she never liked you."

"What has that got to do with it?" cried the girl passionately. "Our natures did not suit one another, and perhaps I behaved rather harshly towards her. She meant well. And remember, Cyril, she has made amends by leaving me all that would have been mine had I really been Captain Huxham's daughter."

Cyril nodded. "I admit that she has done her best to repent," he said after a pause, "and we should not judge her too harshly. I'll come."

"And help her to escape?"

"Yes. It won't be easy; but I'll do my best."

"That's my own dear boy," said the girl, kissing him, "and now what about the inquest?"

"A verdict of death by drowning has been brought in," said Cyril quickly. "I think if we can get Mrs. Vand away, everything concerning the Huxham mystery will be at an end."

"They won't put the whole story in the papers, Cyril?"

"No. Inglis will edit all that is to be given to the reporters and journalists. He will say as little as possible about the matter. It is known that Huxham was murdered by Vand, and in the absence of

my father's body no cognisance can be taken of that alleged murder."

"Don't you believe that your father has been murdered?"

"I don't know; I can't tell. Tunks says so, and I don't suppose he would tell such a story against himself unless it were true. But no body has been found, and until the body of the missing man is found, it is presumed in law that he is alive. But"—Cyril shrugged his shoulders—"who can tell the truth?"

"It will be made manifest in time," said Bella firmly; "your father, or your father's body, will be found. Where are Durgo and Henry to be buried?"

"In Marshely churchyard to-morrow. I shall go to the funeral. I am sorry for Durgo. In spite of his skin he was a real white man. And when he is under the earth, Bella, I think we had better sell the jewels and marry, and take a trip round the world in order to forget all this terrible business. I am quite glad it is over."

"It is not over yet," insisted Bella, "your father has to be found, and Mrs. Vand must be discovered."

"Or their bodies," said Cyril significantly, and turned away.

It must not be thought that young Lister was callous. His father had never been one to him, and, moreover, his son had seen so little of him, that he was as strange to the young man as he had been to the boy. Cyril deeply regretted the gulf that was between them, as he was of a truly affectionate nature, but his father always had repelled the least sign of tenderness. He only looked on Cyril as one to be made use of, and borrowed from him on every occasion. Had he succeeded in getting the jewels and had aided Durgo to regain his chieftom, he would have remained in Nigeria as a kind of savage prime minister, without casting a thought to his son. And whether his father was dead or alive, Cyril knew that he would have to repay the one thousand pounds which he had borrowed to cover his father's delinquency in respect of the forged cheque. How could such a son as Cyril Lister respect or love such a parent as Edwin of the same name?

Nevertheless, Cyril, although he said little to Bella, was very anxious to ascertain the fate of his father. It seemed very certain that Tunks had seen him murdered by the evil-hearted old sailor, but what that scoundrel had done with the body could not be discovered. In vain the police dug in the cellars of the Manor-house, tapped the walls, ripped up the floors, and dragged the boundary channel. The body of Edwin Lister could not be found, and as no one had seen him save Tunks, and Pence, and Bella, who had all mistaken him for Cyril, the police began to believe that Edwin, the father, was a myth. And Cyril could not make Inglis see otherwise for all his urging and confession.

"If the man is alive, why doesn't he turn up?" asked Inglis; "and if dead, why can't we find his body?"

There was no answer to this, and Cyril gave up his father's fate as a riddle, when he walked in the cool of the evening towards the Solitary Farm. The immediate object of his visit was to find if Mrs. Vand, dead or alive, was concealed in the thickly standing corn. Bella strolled by his side. But the lovers had taken no one into this particular confidence, not even Dora, and walked towards the well-known house, and up the corn-path, anxiously looking right and left. Then Cyril uttered an exclamation of annoyance. "What a bother!" he said, much vexed: "see, Bella, there are labourers still reaping—yonder, near the scarecrow."

"I suppose Mr. Timson wants the fields reaped quickly," said Bella, also much vexed. "I thought everyone would have been gone by this time. We must wait until the labourers depart, Cyril. It will never do to find Mrs. Vand while they are about. They would tell the police, and she would be arrested. That would be dangerous!"

"So it will be—if she is alive," said the young man, who was very doubtful on this point himself.

The setting sun cast a rosy glow over the fields of golden grain. The old house seemed to be buried in a treasure meadow. All round rolled the radiant waves, and the scarlet-coated scarecrow's task was nearly done. The corn was ripe for the harvest, and soon the acres of the Solitary Farm would consist of nothing but stubble.

As the lovers drew near the house, they saw a labourer approach the scarecrow. The corn had been reaped for some distance all round it, and now a man had cut a path direct to it in order to pull it down. Its task was over, and it was no longer needed to keep off the birds. Suddenly the man laid his hand on the quaint figure, which had been so familiar to every one for months, and uttered a loud cry of astonishment. Cyril saw him beckoning to other labourers, and shortly there was a crowd round the scarlet coat.

"What is the matter?" asked Bella, and the lovers hurried to join the group.

One of the labourers heard the question, and turned excitedly. "Master! Missus!" he said, in horrified tone, "it's a corpse."

He pulled the tattered gray felt hat from the scarecrow, and Cyril recoiled with a loud cry of surprise. "Bella! Bella!"

"What is it? what is it?" she said, startled by the discovery.



"It is my father. It is Edwin Lister."

All present knew of the tragedy, and of the hunt made for Edwin Lister. And now the missing man had been discovered. One of the labourers, mindful of public house gossip, touched the drooping neck of the figure, and shuddered. "Take missy away," he said softly to Cyril, and with a grey face, "this ain't no sight for her. His throat has been cut."

But it was not the man who led the girl away. Bella saw the labourer's face, guessed, with a shudder, what he had said, and, catching Cyril's arm, dragged him away from that awful spot. The young fellow, with a blanched face and tottering limbs, stumbled blindly along as she pulled him forward. In all his expectations, he had never counted upon such a terrible dramatic discovery as this. His father, the missing man, the murdered man, who had been hunted for alive and dead for many weeks, had been used by Captain Huxham as a scarecrow to frighten the birds. No wonder they had kept away from those sinister fields.

"Oh, great God!" moaned Cyril, sick and faint, "let this be the end."

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## CHAPTER XXV

### RUN TO EARTH

The quiet village of Marshely, in Essex, was getting to be as well-known through the length and breadth of England as Westminster Abbey. The murder of Captain Huxham had caused a sensation, the death of Durgo and Vand had created another one, but the discovery of the ghastly scarecrow which had warned the birds from the corn-fields of Bleacres, startled everyone greatly. The news flew like wild fire through the village, and in less than an hour the inhabitants were surveying the terrible object.

Shortly the constable of the village who had superseded Dutton—in disgrace for his share in the escape of Mrs. Vand—appeared, and, armed with the authority of the law and assisted by willing hands, removed the poor relic of humanity from the pole whereupon it had hung for so long. The explanation of its being there was easy. Undoubtedly Captain Huxham, after he had committed the crime, and while Tunks and Pence were away, the one through horror and the other through sheer worry, had carried out the dead body to fasten it to the pole. He undressed the straw-stuffed figure, with which everyone was familiar, and having destroyed it arrayed the corpse of Edwin Lister in its military clothes. Then he pulled the tattered grey felt cap well over the face so that it should not be suspected as being that of a human being, and bound the dead to the pole. Of course, no one, not even the Vands, suspected that the figure was other than what it had always been, and it said much for the cruel ingenuity of Captain Jabez Huxham that he had selected so clever a mode of disposing of the body. Had he thrown it into the boundary channel it might have been fished out; had he concealed it in the house, it would probably have been discovered; and had he buried it in the garden near the house, it might have been dug up. But no one ever dreamed that the scarlet-coated scarecrow was the man who was wanted. Huxham had been struck down almost immediately after he had put his scheme into execution, and it was doubtful if he had intended to leave the body there. Probably he did, as it was isolated by the corn, and when the field was reaped he doubtless intended to get rid of the corpse in some equally ingenious way. The removal of the scarecrow would have excited no comment when the fields were reaped, as its career of usefulness would then be at an end. The dead man's clothes still clothed his corpse under the scarecrow's ragged garments.

One result of the discovery was that everyone decided not to buy the corn which had flourished under so terrible a guardian. Far and wide the newspapers spread the report of the discovery, and Timson became aware that a prejudice existed against making bread of the wheat grown on the Bleacres ground. Not wishing to spend more money, since he would have to account for everything he did to Mrs. Vand, he withdrew the labourers. The Solitary Farm now became solitary indeed, for no one would go near it, especially after night-fall. The golden fields of wheat spread round it like a sea, and the ancient house stood up greyly and lonely like a thing accursed. And indeed it was looked upon as damned by the villagers.

An inquest was held, and, going by the evidence of Luke Tunks, it was decided that Edwin Lister came by his end at the hands of Jabez Huxham. Cyril was compelled to attend and give evidence, but said as little as he could, not wishing to make his father's shady career too public. He simply stated that his father was a trader in Nigeria, and being the friend of Durgo, the dispossessed chief of a friendly tribe in the far Hinterland, had come home to see Huxham and get from him certain jewels. Of course he could not suppress the fact that these jewels had been given by Kawal to Maxwell Faith, and had been stolen from the dead body of the man by his murderer, Captain Huxham: nor could he fail to state that Bella was the daughter of Maxwell Faith, since had he not done so the jewels might have been taken from her. But Cyril spoke as clearly and carefully as he could, quite aware of the delicate position he occupied. There was no doubt that Huxham, dreading lest the murder of Faith should be brought home to him, and anxious to retain the jewels which were the price of blood, had murdered Lister; afterwards he had disposed of the body in the ingenious manner explained. But Lister was dead; Huxham was dead; Vand and Durgo were dead, so the papers suggested that there should be an end to the succession of terrible events which made Marshely so notorious.

"And I think this is the last," said Cyril, when he returned to Miss Ankers' cottage from his father's funeral. "Bella, we can't stay here."

"I'm sure I don't want to," replied the harassed girl, who looked worn and thin. "The place is getting on my nerves. I'll marry you as soon as you like, dear, and then we can go away. But this morning"—she hesitated—"I received a letter from my father's relatives. They ask me to come to them."

"What will you do?" asked Cyril gravely.

"Write and say that I am marrying you and intend to go abroad."

"But, Bella, if you reside with your relatives you may be able to make a much better match."

"Yes," said Bella with a grimace. "I might marry a Quaker. No, dear, I intend to stay with you and marry you. I have done without my relatives for all this time, and I hope to continue doing without them."

"Bella! Bella! I have nothing to offer you."

"Yourself, dear. That is all I want."

"A stupid gift on my part," said Cyril, looking ruefully in a near mirror at his face, which was now lean and haggard. "You have the money, and also the sympathy of the public. I can offer you nothing but a dishonoured name."

"Oh, nonsense!" she said vigorously. "I won't have you talk in that way. Why, one of the newspapers referred to your father as a pioneer of Empire."

Sad as he was Cyril could not help smiling. "That is just like my father's good luck," he exclaimed; "alive or dead, everything comes to him. I expect his shady doings will be overlooked, and——"

"No one knows of his shady doings, dear."

"Well, then, he will be looked upon as a hero. It's just as well he is buried in Marshely churchyard, for some fanatic might propose to bury him in Westminster Abbey."

"You will be congratulated on having such a father."

"No!" cried Cyril violently. "I won't stand that, Bella. We shall go to London next week and get married in a registry office. Miss Ankers can come with you to play propriety."

Bella laughed. "I rather think Dora is so busy nursing poor Mr. Pence back to health that she has no time."

"Why, you don't mean to say that she loves Pence?"

"Yes and no. I won't say what may happen. She pities him for his weakness, and pity, as you know, is akin to love. Besides, only ourselves and Inspector Inglis know of the temptation to which Mr. Pence was submitted."

"Why, Bella, everyone knows he saw the corpse of Huxham and held his tongue."

"Yes, but everyone doesn't know that he took the one hundred pounds which he restored to me. He is looked upon as somewhat weak for not having informed the police of the crime, but on the whole people are sorry for him."

"I shall be sorry, too, if a nice little woman like Miss Ankers marries such a backboneless creature."

"Cyril! Cyril! have not our late troubles shown you that we must judge no one? After what we have undergone I shall never, never give an opinion about anyone again. I am sorry now that I did not behave better to poor Mrs. Vand. When my supposed father was alive I did treat her haughtily. No wonder she disliked me."

"My dear," said Lister, taking her hand, "don't be too hard on yourself. You and your so-called aunt would never have got on well together."

"But I might have been kinder," said Bella, almost crying; "now that she is dead and gone I feel that I might have been kinder."

"How do you know that she is dead and gone?" asked Cyril, in so strange a tone that Bella, dashing the tears from her eyes, looked at him inquiringly. "She is alive," he replied to that mute interrogation.

"Oh, Cyril, I am so glad! Tell me all about it."

"I don't know that I am glad, poor soul," said Lister sadly. "The police are on her track. I didn't want to tell you, Bella, but for the last two days the papers have been full of the hunt after Mrs. Vand."

"Why didn't Dora tell me?"

"I asked her not to. You have had quite enough to bear."

"Well, now that you have told me some, tell me all."

"There isn't much to tell. Some too clever landlady in Bloomsbury suspected a quiet lady lodger. It certainly was Mrs. Vand, but she became suspicious of her landlady and cleared out. Then she was seen at Putney, and afterwards someone noticed her in Hampstead. The papers having been taunting the police about the matter, they'll catch her in the end."

"Poor Mrs. Vand! poor Mrs. Vand!" The girl's eyes again filled with tears.

"We can't help her, Bella. I wish Timson could get hold of her and induce her to stand her trial. I don't think either judge or jury would be hard on her; more, I fancy that her brain must be turned with all this misery."

"And she has lost her husband, too," sighed Bella; "she loved him so. Oh, dear Cyril, what should I do if I lost you?"

Before Lister could reply with the usual lover-like attentions there was a noise in the road, and looking through the window they saw many people hurrying along. Dora came in at the moment from the other room, whither she always discreetly withdrew when not nursing Pence.

"It is only some policeman they are running after. He declares that Mrs. Vand is in the neighbourhood. If she is I hope she will escape."

"By Jove! I must go out and see," said Cyril, seizing his hat.

"I shall come also," cried Bella, and in a few minutes the two were on the road. But by this time the people were not tearing along as they had been, and one villager told Lister that it had been a false alarm.

"The old vixen won't come back to her first hole," said the villager with a coarse laugh, and Bella frowned at him for his inhumanity.

As there really was nothing to hurry for the lovers strolled easily along the road talking of their future. "Bella, you haven't many boxes?" asked Cyril.

"Only two. Why do you ask?"

"Will you be ready to come with me to London to-morrow?"

"Yes; I shall be glad to get out of Marshely, where I have been so miserable. Only I wish I knew where Mrs. Vand is, poor soul."

Cyril passed over the reference to Mrs. Vand, as he was weary of discussing that unfortunate woman. "There's a chum of mine got a motor," said the young man. "I wrote and asked him for the loan of it. He brought it down last night, and it is safely bestowed in the stables of 'The Chequers.' To-morrow at nine o'clock let us start off with your boxes——"

"And Dora?"

"No," said Cyril, very decidedly. "Dora can remain with Pence, whom she probably will marry. We will go to London and get married at a registry office in the afternoon, and then cross to Paris for our honeymoon. I haven't much money, Miss Rothschild, but I have enough for that. In our own happiness let us forget all our troubles."

"I'll come," said Bella with a sigh. "After all, we can do nothing. By the way, Cyril, what about Durgo's things?"

"Well it's odd you should mention that. He evidently thought that something might happen to him on that night, for he left a note behind him saying that if he did not return they were to be given to me. So I have shifted them long since to my lodgings. There they lie packed up, and ready to be taken away in our motor to-morrow."

"Cyril, you have been arranging this for some time?"

"Well, I have. It's the only way of getting you to leave this place, and you will always be miserable while you remain here."

"I only stayed in the hope that poor Mrs. Vand might return, and then I would be able to comfort her. Oh! how I wish Durgo with his occult powers was here to help us."

"I don't; Durgo's occult powers brought him little happiness, and didn't solve the mystery of my father's death. One would have thought that Granny Tunks, in her trances, would have told Durgo that the scarecrow which he saw daily was his dearly-beloved master's dead body."

"It is strange," said Bella thoughtfully; "but then, as Durgo said about something else, perhaps it was not permitted. What's become of Granny Tunks, Cyril? Is she still at the hut?"

"Yes; but I heard to-day that she is going on the road again with her old tribe of the Lovels. I daresay Granny will be at all the fairs and race meetings, swindling people for many a long day."

"And her son Luke?"

"He'll get off with a light sentence. He certainly had no hand in the murders, and there is no one to prosecute him for blackmail. Granny and Luke will soon be together again. I hope never to

hear more of them, for my part. Bella! Bella! don't let us talk of such things. We have had enough of these tragedies. Let us be selfish for once in our lives and consider ourselves. Hullo, what's this?"

The question was provoked by the sight of Inglis with three constables, who whirled past in a fly which they had evidently obtained from the station. As they dashed onward in a cloud of dust the inspector, recognising the two, shouted out something indistinctly, with his hand to his mouth.

"What does he say, Cyril?" asked Bella anxiously.

"Something about fire. I wonder where they are going? Oh!"—Cyril suddenly stopped short—"I wonder if they are after poor Mrs. Vand. Come, Bella, let us see where they go to."

"But where are you going?" asked Bella, as he rushed along the road dragging her after him swiftly. "Oh!" she cried out with horror, "look!"

At the far end of the village and in the direction of the Solitary Farm, a vast cloud of smoke was mounting menacingly into the soft radiance of the twilight sky. "No wonder Inglis said fire!" cried Lister excitedly, "I believe, Bella, that the Manor-house is blazing."

"No," cried Bella in reply, "it is impossible."

But it was not. As they rounded the corner of the crooked village street in the midst of a crowd of people who had sprung as by magic from nowhere, they saw the great bulk of the Manor-house enveloped in thick black smoke, and even at the distance they were could catch sight of fiery tongues of flame. The sky was rapidly darkening to night, and the smoke-cloud, laced with red serpents, looked lurid and livid and sinister.

"Come, Bella, come!" cried Cyril to the panting girl, and took her arm within his own, "we must see who set it on fire."

Bella got her second wind and ran like Atalanta. They speedily outstripped the crowd, and were almost the first to cross the planks over the boundary channel. Inglis and his policemen were already running up the corn-path. Why they should run, or why the villagers should run, Cyril did not know, as there was no water and no fire brigade, hose, or engine, and no chance of saving the ancient mansion. He and Bella ran because they wished to see the last of the old home.

"Who can have set it on fire?" Cyril kept asking.

"Perhaps a tramp," suggested Bella breathlessly, but in her heart she felt that something more serious was in the wind. A strange dread gripped her heart, and the name of Mrs. Vand was on the tip of her tongue, although she never uttered it.

As the weather was warm and the ground dry—for there had been no rain since the electric storm which raged when Vand and Durgo had gone down into the muddy waters of the boundary channel—the old house flamed furiously. The dry wood caught like tinder, and when Cyril and the girl arrived the whole place was hidden weirdly by dense black smoke, amidst which flashed sinister points of fire. Inglis and his men attempted to enter the house, but were driven back by the fierce flames which burst from the cracking windows; also the great door was closed and could not be forced open. They were forced to retreat, and the inspector nearly tumbled over Miss Faith, as Bella was now called.

"Can't you get her out?" asked Inglis breathlessly.

"Get her out!" cried the girl, terrified, and half grasping his meaning.

"Mrs. Vand; she is in there," and he pointed to the furnace of flame.

Bella screamed and Cyril turned pale. "You must be mistaken," he said.

"No, no," replied the inspector, who was greatly agitated, for even his official phlegm was not proof against the terror of the position. "The London police wired to me at Pierside that Mrs. Vand had gone down to Marshely. We waited at the station to arrest her, but she got off at a previous station and was seen by your village policeman to run across the marshes. He wired to my Pierside office, and the wire was repeated to the station we waited at. We got a fly and hurried here only to see the smoke. I cried out 'Fire!' to you as we passed. Great heavens, what a blaze!"

"Can't you get her out?" cried Bella, who was white with despair. Little as she had liked Mrs. Vand, the position was a dreadful one to contemplate.

"What can we do?" said the officer, with a gesture of despair. "There is no water and no buckets: and if there were, what bucket of water would put out that conflagration. You might as well try and extinguish hell with a squirt."

Bella paid no attention to the vehemence of his expression, but turned to Cyril. "What can we do?" she wailed. "Oh, what can we do?"

"Nothing, nothing. Look at the police, look at the villagers. We can do nothing. If Mrs. Vand is in that blazing house God help her."

There was now a great crowd of men, women and children all gathered some distance away from the burning mansion, trampling down the tall corn in their efforts to see. Bella, with the police

and her lover, stood the nearest to the house. "Please God she is not there!" breathed the girl, clasping her hands in agony.

At that moment, as if to give the lie to her kindly prayer, a window on the first storey was flung open and Mrs. Vand's head was poked out. Even at this distance Bella could see that her hair was in disorder, her face haggard, and her whole mien wild. Breaking away desperately from Cyril she rushed right up almost under the window, despite the fierce heat.

"Aunt, oh aunt," she cried, stretching up her hands, "come down and save yourself!"

"No! No. They shall not catch me! I shall not be hanged! I am innocent! I am innocent!" shrieked Mrs. Vand, and Bella could almost see the mad flash in her eyes.

"Bella! Bella! come back," shouted Cyril, and dashing forward he caught the girl in his arms and carried her away as the front door fell outward. A long tongue of flame shot out and licked the grass where Bella had stood a moment since.

By this time the house was blazing furiously, and every window save that out of which Mrs. Vand's head was thrust, vomited flame. The sky was now very dark, and the vivid redness of the flame in the gloom made a terrible and lovely spectacle. Bella, in her despair, would have rushed again to implore her aunt to escape, but that Cyril and Inglis held her firmly. "It is useless," they said, and the girl could not but admit that they were right.

Mrs. Vand apparently was quite mad. She kept flinging up her arms, and shouting out taunts to the police for having failed to catch her. Then she was seized with a fit of frenzy and began to throw things out of the window. Chairs, and looking-glasses, and rugs, and table ornaments did she fling out. Suddenly a devilish thought occurred to her crazed brain. She noted that a tongue of uncut corn stretched from the main body of wheat almost under the window. Darting back she plucked a flaming brand from the crackling door, and, regardless how it burnt the flesh of her hand, she ran to the window. "Off! off! off with you!" cried Mrs. Vand, and carefully dropping the brand on to the tongue of corn.

In one moment, as it seemed, the thread of fire ran along to the main body of the corn, and in an inconceivably short space of time, the acres of golden grain were a sheet of flame. The villagers, the police, both Cyril and Bella, ran for their lives, and it took them all their speed to escape the eager flames which licked their very heels. Pell-mell down to the boundary channel ran everyone. The plank bridge was broken, and many tumbled into the muddy water. Mrs. Vand stood at the window yelling, and clapping her hands like a fiend, and the whole vast fields of wheat flared like a gigantic bonfire.

Half swimming, half holding on to the broken bridge planks, Cyril, with Bella on his other arm, managed to scramble through that muddy ditch. Beside him shrieked women and cursed men and screamed children. The police having safely reached the other side stretched out arms to those in the water. Cyril and Bella were soon on dry land, and shortly everyone else was saved. Not a single life was lost, either by fire or water. And when safe on the hither side of this Jordan, the excited, smoke-begrimed throng looked at the flaming fields and the roaring furnace of the Manor house. The smoke and flame of the burning ascended to heaven and reddened the evening sky. Mrs. Vand, in setting fire to her last refuge, had indeed provided herself with a noble pyre and a dramatic end. Before those who watched could draw breath after their last exertions, the roof of the mansion fell in with a crash. Mrs. Vand gave one wild cry and fell backward. Then fierce, red flames enwrapped the whole structure, while far and wide the raging fire swept over the fields of the Solitary Farm.

"May God have mercy on her soul!" said Cyril removing his cap.

"Ah!" said Inglis, "if I had caught her, I wonder if the judge would have said as much."

"No," replied Bella, "she is dead, and she was innocent. God help her poor soul!" and everyone around echoed the wish.

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Bella and Cyril did not go to London the next morning as they had arranged, but three days later. In the meanwhile search had been made amongst the ruins of the Manor-house for the body of Mrs. Vand. But nothing could be found. In that fierce furnace of flame she had been burnt to a cinder, and not even calcined bones could be gathered together. In a whirlwind of flame the unhappy woman had vanished, and her end affected Bella deeply. Indeed, Cyril feared lest the much-tried girl should fall ill, and on the third day he brought round the motor-car to Miss Ankers' cottage, to insist that she should come with him to London.

"But if we marry so soon it seems like a disrespect to Mrs. Vand," argued Bella, "and she has left me her money, remember."

"My dear, don't be morbid," advised Dora; "you will be ill if you stay. Get married, and go to Paris, and try to forget all these terrible things."

"What do you say, Pence?" asked Cyril, who in the meantime had carried out Bella's boxes.

Pence, looking lean and haggard after his recent illness, but with a much calmer light in his eyes, nodded. "I say, go, Miss Faith, and get married as soon as you can."

"You wouldn't have given that advice once," said Bella, with a faint smile, as Dora assisted her to adjust her cloak.

"No. But I have grown wiser."

"What a compliment!"

"You have forgiven me, have you not?"

"Yes, I have." She held out her hand, "and the best thing I can wish you is the best wife in the world."

As if by chance, her eyes rested on Dora, who blushed, and then on Pence, who grew red. Afterwards, with half a smile and half a sigh, she got into the car beside Cyril. Dora hopped like a bird on to the step to kiss her.

Lister raised his cap, and the car went humming down the road on the way to peace and happiness.

"That's the end of her solitary life," said Pence, thankfully.

"On the Solitary Farm," rejoined Dora; "come and have some breakfast."

**THE END.**

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## **THE BEST NOVELS BY FERGUS HUME**

The Mystery of a Hansom Cab

The Sealed Message

The Sacred Herb

Claude Duval of Ninety-five

The Rainbow Feather

The Pagan's Cup

A Coin of Edward VII

The Yellow Holly

The Red Window

The Mandarin's Fan

The Secret Passage

The Opal Serpent

Lady Jim of Curzon Street

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