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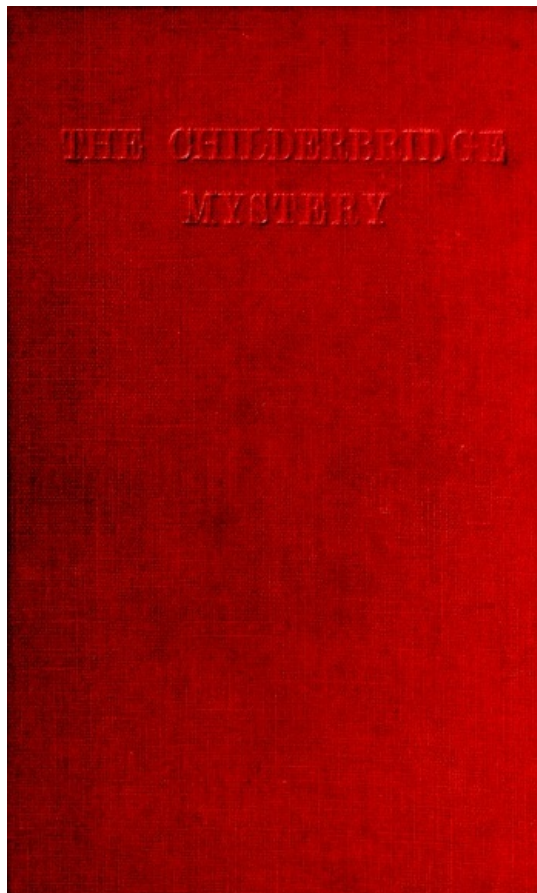
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The Childerbridge Mystery

By Guy Boothby,

Author of "Dr. Nikola," "A Millionaire's Love Story," "The Curse of the Snake," etc., etc., etc.

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The Childerbridge Mystery

CHAPTER I

One had only to look at William Standerton in order to realise that he was, what is usually termed, a success in life. His whole appearance gave one this impression; the bold unflinching eyes, the square, resolute chin, the well-moulded lips, and the lofty forehead, showed a determination and ability to succeed that was beyond the ordinary.

The son of a hardworking country doctor, it had fallen to his lot to emigrate to Australia at the early age of sixteen. He had not a friend in that vast, but sparsely-populated, land, and was without influence of any sort to help him forward. When, therefore, in fifty years' time, he found himself worth upwards of half-a-million pounds sterling, he was able to tell himself that he owed his good fortune not only to his own industry, but also to his shrewd business capabilities. It is true that he had had the advantage of reaching the Colonies when they were in their infancy, but even with this fact taken into consideration, his was certainly a great performance. He had invested his money prudently, and the rich Stations, and the streets of House Property, were the result.

Above all things, William Standerton was a kindly-natured man. Success had not spoilt him in this respect. No genuine case of necessity ever appealed to him in vain. He gave liberally, but discriminatingly, and in so doing never advertised himself.

Strange to say, he was nearly thirty years of age before he even contemplated matrimony. The reason for this must be ascribed to the fact that his life had been essentially an active one, and up to that time he had not been brought very much into contact with the opposite sex. When, however, he fell in love with pretty Jane McCalmont—then employed as a governess on a neighbouring Property—he did so with an enthusiasm that amply made up for lost time.

She married him, and presented him with two children—a boy and a girl. Within three months of the latter's arrival into the world, the mother laid down her gentle life, leaving her husband a well nigh broken-hearted man. After her death the years passed slowly by with almost monotonous sameness. The boy James, and the girl Alice, in due course commenced their education, and in so doing left their childhood behind them. Their devotion to their father was only equalled by his love for them. He could scarcely bear them out of his sight, and entered into all their sports, their joys and troubles, as if he himself were a child once more.

It was not, however, until James was a tall, handsome young fellow of four-and-twenty, and Alice a winsome maid of twenty, that he arrived at the conclusion that his affairs no longer needed his personal supervision, and that he was at liberty to return to the Mother Country, and settle down in it, should he feel disposed to do so.

"It's all very well for you young folk to talk of my leaving Australia," he said, addressing his son and daughter; "but I shall be like a fish out of water in the Old Country. You forget that I have not seen her for half-a-century."

"All the more reason that you should lose no time in returning, father," observed Miss Alice, to whom a visit to England had been the one ambition of her life. "You shall take us about and show us everything; the little village in which you were born, the river in which you used to fish, and the wood in which the keeper so nearly caught you with the rabbit in your pocket. Then you shall buy an old-fashioned country house and we'll settle down. It will be lovely!"

Her father pinched her shapely little ear, and then looked away across the garden to where a railed enclosure was to be seen, on the crest of a slight eminence. He remembered that the woman lying there had more than once expressed a hope that, in the days then to come, they

would be able to return to their native country together, and take their children with them.

"Well, well, my dear," he said, glancing down at the daughter who so much resembled her mother, "you shall have it your own way. We will go Home as soon as possible, and do just as you propose. I think we may be able to afford a house in the country, and perhaps, that is if you are a very dutiful daughter, another in London. It is just possible that there may be one or two people living who may remember William Standerton, and, for that reason, be kind to his son and daughter. But I fear it will be rather a wrench for me to leave these places that I have built up with my own hands, and to which I have devoted such a large portion of my life. However, one can be in harness too long, and when once Australia is left behind me, I have no doubt I shall enjoy my holiday as much as any one else."

In this manner the matter was settled. Competent and trustworthy managers were engaged, and the valuable properties, which had contributed so large a share to William Standerton's wealth, were handed over to their charge.

On the night before they were to leave Mudrapilla, their favourite and largest station, situated on the Darling River, in New South Wales, James Standerton, called Jim by his family and a multifarious collection of friends, was slowly making his way along the left bank of the River. He had ridden out to say good-bye to the manager of the Out Station, and as his horse picked his way along the bank, he was thinking of England, and of what his life was to be there. Suddenly he became aware of a man seated beneath a giant gum tree near the water's edge. From the fact that the individual in question had kindled a fire and was boiling his billy, he felt justified in assuming that he was preparing his camp for the night. He accordingly rode up and accosted him. The man was a Foot Traveller, or Swagman, and presented a somewhat singular appearance. Though he was seated, Jim could see that he was tall, though sparsely built. His age must have been about sixty years; his hair was streaked with grey, as also was his beard. Taken altogether his countenance was of the description usually described as "hatchet-faced." He was dressed after the swagman fashion, certainly no better, and perhaps a little worse. Yet with it all he had the appearance of having once been in better circumstances. He looked up as Jim approached, and nodded a "good evening." The latter returned the salutation in his customary pleasant fashion.

"How much further is it to the Head Station?" the man on the ground then enquired.

"Between four and five miles," Jim replied. "Are you making your way there?"

"That's my idea," the stranger answered. "I hear the owner is leaving for England, and I am desirous of having a few words with him before he goes."

"You know him then?"

"I've known him over thirty years," returned the other. "But he has gone up in the world while, as you will gather, I have done the opposite. Standerton was always one of Life's lucky ones; I am one of Her failures. Anything *he* puts his hand to prospers; while I, let it be ever so promising, have only to touch a bit of business, and it goes to pieces like a house of cards."

The stranger paused and took stock of the young man seated upon the horse.

"Now I come to think of it," he continued, after having regarded Jim intently for some seconds, "you're not unlike Standerton yourself. You've got the same eyes and chin, and the same cut of mouth."

"It's very probable, for I am his son," Jim replied. "What is it you want with my father?"

"That's best known to myself," the stranger returned, with a surliness in his tone that he had not exhibited before. "When you get home, just tell your governor that Richard Murbridge is on his way up the river to call upon him, and that he will try to put in an appearance at the Station early to-morrow morning. I don't fancy he'll be best pleased to see me, but I must have an interview with him before he leaves Australia, if I have to follow him round the country to get it."

"You had better be careful how you talk to my father," said Jim. "If you are as well acquainted with him as you pretend to be, you should know that he is not the sort of man to be trifled with."

"I know him as well as you do," the other answered, lifting his billy from the fire as he spoke. "William Standerton and I knew each other long before you were born. If it's only the distance you say to the Head Station, you can tell him I'll be there by breakfast time. I'm a bit foot-sore, it is true, but I can do the journey in an hour and a-half. On what day does the coach pass, going South?"

"To-morrow morning," Jim replied. "Do you want to catch it?"

"It's very probable I shall," said Murbridge. "Though I wasn't born in this cursed country, I'm Australian enough never to foot it when I can ride. Good Heavens! had any one told me, twenty-five years ago, that I should eventually become a Darling Whaler, I'd have knocked, what I should have thought then to be the lie, down their throats. But what I am you can see. Fate again, I suppose? However, I was always of a hopeful disposition, even when my affairs appeared to be at their worst, so I'll pin my faith on to-morrow. Must you be going? Well, in that case, I'll wish you good-night! Don't forget my message to your father."

Jim bade him good-night, and then continued his ride home. As he went he pondered upon his

curious interview with the stranger he had just left, and while so doing, wondered as to his reasons for desiring to see his father.

"The fellow was associated with him in business at some time or another, I suppose?" he said to himself, "and, having failed, is now on his beam ends and wants assistance. Poor old Governor, there are times when he is called upon to pay pretty dearly for his success in life."

James Standerton was proud of his father, as he had good reason to be. He respected him above all living men, and woe betide the individual who might have anything to say against the sire in the son's hearing.

At last he reached the Home Paddock and cantered up the slope towards the cluster of houses, that resembled a small village, and surrendered his horse to a black boy in the stable yard. With a varied collection of dogs at his heels he made his way up the garden path, beneath the trellised vines to the house, in the broad verandah of which he could see his sister and father seated at tea.

"Well, my lad," said Standerton senior, when Jim joined them, "I suppose you've seen Riddington, and have bade him good-bye. It's my opinion he will miss you as much as any one in the neighbourhood. You two have always been such friends."

"That's just what Riddington said," James replied. "He wishes he were coming with us. Poor chap, he doesn't seem to think he'll ever see England again."

Alice looked up from the cup of tea she was pouring out for her brother.

"I fancy there is more in poor Mr. Riddington's case than meets the eye," she said sympathetically. "Nobody knows quite why he left England. He is always very reticent upon that point. I cannot help thinking, however, that there was a lady in the case."

"There always is," answered her brother. "There's a woman in every mystery, and when you've found her it's a mystery no longer. By the way, father, as I was coming home, I came across a fellow camped up the river. He asked me what the distance was to here, and said he was on his way to see you. He will be here the first thing to-morrow morning."

"He wants work, I suppose?"

"No, I shouldn't say that he did," James replied. "He said that he wanted to see you on important private business."

"Indeed? I wonder who it can be? A swagman who has important private business with me is a *rara avis*. He didn't happen to tell you his name, I suppose?"

"Yes, he did," Jim answered, placing his cup on the floor as he spoke. "His name is Richard Murbridge, or something like it."

The effect upon the elder man was electrical.

"Richard Murbridge?" he cried. "Camped on the river and coming here?"

His son and daughter watched him with the greatest astonishment depicted upon their faces. It was not often that their father gave way to so much emotion. At last with an effort he recovered himself, and, remarking that Murbridge was a man with whom he had had business in bygone days, and that he had not seen him for many years, went into the house.

"I wonder who this Murbridge can be?" said James to his sister, when they were alone together. "I didn't like the look of him, and if I were the Governor, I should send him about his business as quickly as possible."

When he had thus expressed himself, Jim left his sister and went off to enjoy that luxury so dear to the heart of a bushman after his day's work, a swim in the river. He was some time over it, and when he emerged, he was informed that his presence was required at the Store. Thither he repaired to arbitrate in the quarrel of two Boundary Riders. In consequence, more than an hour elapsed before he returned to the house. His sister greeted him at the gate with a frightened look upon her face.

"Have you seen father?" she enquired.

"No," he answered. "Isn't he in the house?"

"He went down the track just after you left, riding old Peter, and as he passed the gate he called to me not to keep dinner for him, as he did not know how long it might be before he would be back. Jim, I believe he is gone to see that man you told him of, and the thought frightens me."

"You needn't be alarmed," her brother answered. "Father is quite able to take care of himself."

But though he spoke with so much assurance, in his own mind he was not satisfied. He remembered that it had been his impression that the swagman bore his father a grudge, and the thought made him uneasy.

"Look here, Alice," he said, after he had considered the matter for some time, "I've a good mind to go back along the track, and to bring the Governor home with me. What do you think?"

"It would relieve me of a good deal of anxiety if you would," the girl replied. "I don't like the thought of his going off like this."

Jim accordingly went to the end of the verandah, and called to the stables for a horse. As soon as the animal was forthcoming he mounted it, and set off in the direction his father had taken. It was now quite dark, but so well did he know it, that he could have found his way along the track blindfolded, if necessary. It ran parallel with the river, the high trees on the banks of which could be seen, standing out like a black line against the starlit sky. He let himself out of the Home Paddock, passed the Woolshed, and eventually found himself approaching the spot where Murbridge had made his camp. Then the twinkle of the fire came into view, and a few seconds later he was able to distinguish his father standing beside his grey horse, talking to a man who was lying upon the ground near the fire. Not wishing to play the part of an eavesdropper, he was careful to remain out of earshot. It was only when he saw the man rise, heard him utter a threat, and then approach his father, that he rode up. Neither of the men became aware of his approach until he was close upon them, and then both turned in surprise.

"James, what is the meaning of this?" his father cried. "What are you doing here, my lad?"

For a moment the other scarcely knew what reply to make. At last he said:—

"I came to assure myself of your safety, father. Alice told me you had gone out, and I guessed your errand."

"A very dutiful son," sneered Murbridge. "You are to be congratulated upon him, William."

James stared at the individual before him with astonishment. What right had such a man to address his father by his Christian name?

"Be careful," said Standerton, speaking to the man before him. "You know what I said to you just now, and you are also aware that I never break my word. Fail to keep *your* part of the contract, and I shall no longer keep mine."

"You know that you have your heel upon my neck," the other retorted; "and also that I cannot help myself. But I pray that the time may come when I shall be able to be even with you. To think that I am tramping this infernal country, like a dead beat Sundowner, without a cent in my pocket, while you are enjoying all the luxuries and happiness that life and wealth can give. It's enough to make a man turn Anarchist right off."

"That will do," said William Standerton quietly. "Remember that to-morrow morning you will go back to the place whence you came; also bear in mind the fact that if you endeavour to molest me, or to communicate with me, or with any member of my family, I will carry out the threat I uttered just now. That is all I have to say to you."

Then Standerton mounted his horse, and turning to his son, said:—

"Let us return home, James. It is getting late, and your sister will be uneasy."

Without another word to the man beside the fire, they rode off, leaving him looking after them with an expression of deadly hatred upon his face. For some distance the two men rode in silence. Jim could see that his father was much agitated, and for that reason he forbore to put any question to him concerning the individual they had just left. Indeed it was not until they had passed the Woolshed once more, and had half completed their return journey that the elder man spoke.

"How much of my conversation with that man did you overhear?"

"Nothing but what I heard when Murbridge rose to his feet," James replied. "I should not have come near you had I not heard his threat and seen him approach you. Who is the man, father?"

"His name is Murbridge," said Standerton, with what was plainly an effort. "He is a person with whom I was on friendly terms many years ago, but he has now got into disgrace, and, I fear has sank very low indeed. I do not think he will trouble us any more, however, so we will not refer to him again."

All that evening William Standerton was visibly depressed. He excused himself from playing his usual game of cribbage with his daughter, on the plea that he had a headache. Next morning, however, he was quite himself. He went out to his last day's work in the bush as cheerfully as he had ever done. But had any one followed him, he, or she, would have discovered that the first thing he did was to ride to the spot where Richard Murbridge had slept on the previous night. The camp was deserted, and only a thin column of smoke, rising from the embers of the fire, remained to show that the place had been lately occupied.

"He has gone, then," said Standerton to himself. "Thank goodness! But I know him too well to be able to assure myself that I have seen the last of him. Next week, however, we shall put the High Seas between us, and then, please God, I shall see no more of him for the remainder of my existence."

At that moment the man of whom he was speaking, was tramping along the dusty track with a tempest of rage in his heart.

"He may travel wherever he pleases," he was muttering to himself, "but he won't get away from me. He may go to the end of the world, and I'll follow him and be at his elbow, just to remind him

who I am, and of the claims I have upon him. Yes, William Standerton, you may make up your mind upon one point, and that is the fact that I'll be even with you yet!"

CHAPTER II

Childerbridge Manor is certainly one of the finest mansions in the County of Midlandshire. It stands in a finely-timbered park of about two hundred acres, which rises behind the house to a considerable elevation. The building itself dates back to the reign of Good Queen Bess, and is declared by competent authorities to be an excellent example of the architecture of that period. It is large, and presents a most imposing appearance as one approaches it by the carriage drive. The interior is picturesque in the extreme; the hall is large and square, panelled with oak, and having a massive staircase of the same wood leading from it to a music gallery above. There are other staircases in various parts of the building, curious corkscrew affairs, in ascending which one is in continual danger of knocking one's head against the ceiling and corners. There are long, and somewhat dark corridors, down which it would be almost possible to drive the proverbial coach and four, whilst there are also numerous secret passages, and a private chapel, with stained glass windows connected with the house by means of a short tunnel. That such a mansion should be provided with a family ghost, goes without saying. Indeed, Childerbridge Manor is reputed to possess a small army of them. Elderly gentlemen who carry their heads under their arms; beautiful women who glide down the corridors, weeping as they go; and last but not least, a deformity, invariably dressed in black, who is much given to sitting on the foot rails of beds, and pointing, with the first finger of his right hand, to the ceiling above. So well authenticated are the legends of these apparitions, that it would be almost an impossibility to induce any man, woman, or child, from the village, to enter the gates of Childerbridge Manor after dusk. Servants who arrived were told the stories afloat concerning their new abode; and the sound of the wind sighing round the house on a gusty night immediately set their imaginations to work, with the result of their giving notice of their intention to leave on the following morning. "They had seen the White Lady," they declared, had heard her pitiful death cry, and vowed that nothing could induce them to remain in such a house twenty-four hours longer. In fact, "As haunted as the Manor House" had become a popular expression in the neighbourhood.

When the Standerton's reached England, they set to work to discover for themselves a home. They explored the country from east to west, and from north to south, but without success. Eventually Childerbridge Manor was offered them by an Agent in London, and after they had spent a considerable portion of their time poring over photographs of the house and grounds, they arrived at the conclusion that they had discovered a place likely to suit them. On a lovely day in early summer they travelled down from London to inspect it, and were far from being disappointed in what they saw.

When they entered the gates the park lay before them, bathed in sunlight, the rooks cawed lazily in the trees, while the deer regarded them, from their couches in the bracken, with mild, contemplative eyes. After the scorched up plains of Australia, the picture was an exceedingly attractive one. The house itself, they could see would require a considerable outlay in repairs, but when that work was accomplished, it would be as perfect a residence as any that could be found. The stables were large enough to hold half a hundred horses, but for many years had been tenanted only by rats. The same might be said of the buildings of the Home Farm!

"However, taking one thing with another," said Mr. Standerton, after he had inspected everything, and arrived at a proper understanding of the possibilities of the place, "I think it will suit us. The Society of the neighbourhood, they tell me, is good, while the hunting is undeniable. It is within easy reach of London, and all matters taken into consideration, I don't think we shall better it."

In this manner it was settled. A contract for repairs and decorations was placed in the hands of a well-known Metropolitan firm, a vast amount was spent in furnishing, and in due course Childerbridge Manor House was once more occupied. The County immediately came to call, invitations rained in, and having been duly inspected and not found wanting, the newcomers were voted a decided acquisition to the neighbourhood. William Standerton's wealth soon became proverbial, and mothers, with marriageable sons and daughters, vied with each other in their attentions. James Standerton, as I have already said, was a presentable young man. His height was something over six feet, his shoulders were broad and muscular, as became a man who had lived his life doing hard work in the open air, his eyes were grey like his father's, and there was the same moulding of the mouth and chin. In fact, he was an individual with whom, one felt at first glance, it would be better to be on good terms than bad.

One evening a month or so after their arrival at the Manor House, Jim was driving home from the railway station. He had been spending the day in London buying polo ponies, and was anxious to get home as quickly as possible. His horse was a magnificent animal, and spun the high dogcart along the road at a rattling pace. When he was scarcely more than half a mile from the lodge gates of his own home, he became aware of a lady walking along the footpath in front of him. She was accompanied by a mastiff puppy, who gambolled awkwardly beside her. As the dogcart approached them the puppy dashed out into the road, directly in front of the fast-trotting horse. As may be imagined the result was inevitable. The dog was knocked down, and it was only by a

miracle that the horse did not go down also. The girl uttered a little scream, then the groom jumped from his seat and ran to the frightened animal's head. Jim also descended to ascertain the extent of injuries the horse and dog had sustained. Fortunately the former was unhurt; not so the author of the mischief, however. He had been kicked on the head, and one of his forepaws was crushed and bleeding.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am," said Jim, apologetically to the young lady, when he had carried her pet to the footpath. "I am afraid I was very careless."

"You must not say that," she answered. "It was not your fault at all. If my silly dog had not run into the road it would not have happened. Do you think his leg is broken?"

Jim knelt on the edge of the path beside the dog and carefully examined his injuries. His bush life had given him a considerable insight into the science of surgery, and it stood him in good stead now.

"No," he said, when his examination was at an end, "his leg is not broken, though I'm afraid it is rather badly injured."

In spite of the young lady's protests, he took his handkerchief from his pocket and bound up the injured limb. The next thing to be decided was how to get the animal home. It could not walk, and it was manifestly impossible that the young lady should carry him.

"Won't you let me put him in the cart and drive you both home?" Jim asked. "I should be glad to do so, if I may."

As he said this he looked more closely at the girl before him, and realised that she was decidedly pretty.

"I am afraid there is nothing else to be done," she said, and then, as if she feared this might be considered an ungracious speech, she added: "But I fear I am putting you to a great deal of trouble, Mr. Standerton."

Jim looked at her in some surprise.

"You know my name, then?" he said.

"As you see," she answered, with a smile at his astonishment. "I called upon your sister yesterday. My name is Decie, and I live at the Dower House, with my guardian, Mr. Abraham Bursfield."

"In that case, as we are neighbours," said Jim, "and I must claim a neighbour's privilege in helping you. Allow me put the dog in the cart."

So saying he picked the animal up and carried it tenderly to the dogcart, under the seat of which he placed it. He then assisted Miss Decie to her seat and took his place beside her. When the groom had seated himself at the back, they set off in the direction of the Dower House, a curious rambling building, situated in a remote corner of Childerbridge Park. As they drove along they discussed the neighbourhood, the prospects of the shooting, and Jim learned, among other things, that Miss Decie was fond of riding, but that old Mr. Bursfield would not allow her a horse, that she preferred a country life to that of town, and incidentally that she had been eight years under her guardian's care. Almost before they knew where they were they had reached the cross roads that skirted the edge of the Park, and were approaching the Dower House. It was a curious old building, older perhaps than the Manor House, to which it had once belonged. In front it had a quaint description of courtyard, surrounded by high walls covered with ivy. A flagged path led from the gates, which, Jim discovered later, had not been opened for many years, to the front door, on either side of which was a roughly trimmed lawn. Pulling up at the gates, the young man descended, and helped Miss Decie to alight.

"You must allow me to carry your dog into the house for you," he said, as he lifted the poor beast from the cart.

A postern door admitted them to the courtyard and they made their way, side by side, along the flagged path to the house. When they had rung the bell the door was opened to them by an ancient man-servant, whose age could scarcely have been less than four-score. He looked from his mistress to the young man, as if he were unable to comprehend the situation.

"Isaac," said Miss Decie, "Tory has met with an accident, and Mr. Standerton has very kindly brought him home for me." Then to Jim she added:—"Please come in, Mr. Standerton, and let me relieve you of your burden."

But Jim would not hear of it. Accompanied by Miss Decie he carried the animal to the loose box in the deserted stables at the back of the house, where he had his quarters. This task accomplished, they returned to the house once more.

"I believe you have not yet met my guardian, Mr. Bursfield," said Miss Decie, as they passed along the oak-panelled hall. Then, as if to excuse the fact that the other had not paid the usual neighbourly call, she added: "He is a very old man, you know, and seldom leaves the house."

As she said this, she paused before a door, the handle of which she turned. The room in which Jim found himself a moment later was a fine one. The walls, like the rest of the house, were panelled, but owing to the number of books the room contained, very little of the oak was visible.

There were books on the shelves, books on the tables, and books on the floor. In the centre of the room stood a large writing-table, at which an old man was seated. He was a strange-looking individual; his face was lined with innumerable wrinkles, his hair was snow-white and descended to his shoulders. He wore a rusty velvet coat and a skull cap of the same material.

He looked up as the pair entered, and his glance rested on Jim with some surprise.

"Grandfather," said Miss Decie, for, as Jim afterwards discovered, she invariably addressed the venerable gentleman by this title, though she was in no way related to him, "pray let me introduce you to Mr. Standerton, who has most kindly brought poor Tory home for me."

The old man extended a shrivelled hand.

"I am happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Standerton," he said, "and I am grateful to you for the service you have rendered Miss Decie. I must apologise for not having paid you and your father the customary visit of courtesy, but, as you have perhaps heard, I am a recluse, and seldom venture from the house. I trust you like Childerbridge?"

"We are delighted with it," Jim replied. "It is a very beautiful and interesting old house. Unfortunately, however, we have been able to gather very little of its history. I have heard it said that you know more about it than any one in the neighbourhood."

"I do indeed," Mr. Bursfield replied. "No one knows it better than I do. Until a hundred years ago it was the home of my own family. My father sold it, reserving only the Dower House for his own use. Since then the estate has fallen upon evil times."

He paused for a moment and sat looking into the fireplace, as if he had forgotten his visitor's presence. Then he added as to himself:

"No one who has taken the place has prospered. There is a curse upon it."

"I sincerely hope not," Jim answered. "It would be a bad look out for us if that were so."

"I beg your pardon," the old man returned, almost hastily. "For the moment I was not thinking of what I was saying. I did not mean of course that the curse would affect your family. There is no sort of reason why it should. But the series of coincidences, if by such a term we may designate them, have certainly been remarkable. Sir Giles Sheffield purchased it from my father, and was thrown from his horse, and killed at his own front door. His son Peter was found dead in his bed, some say murdered, others that he was frightened to death by something, or someone, he had seen; while his second son, William, was shot in a duel in Paris, the day after the news reached him that he had come into the property. The Shepfields being only too anxious to dispose of it, it was sold to the newly-made Lord Childerbridge, who was eager to acquire it possibly on account of the name. He remained two years there, but at the end of that period he also had had enough of the place, and left it quite suddenly, vowing that he would never enter its doors again. After that it was occupied off and on by a variety of tenants, but for the last five years it has been unoccupied. I hear that your father has worked wonders with it, and that he has almost turned it into a new place."

"He has had the work done very carefully," Jim replied. "It is very difficult to repair an old mansion like Childerbridge without making such repairs too apparent."

"I quite agree with you," said the old man drily. "Your modern architect is no respecter of anything antiquated as a rule."

"And now I must bid you good-evening," said James. "My father and sister will be wondering what has become of me."

He shook hands with Mr. Bursfield, who begged him to excuse him for not accompanying him to the door, and then followed Miss Decie from the room. They bade each other adieu at the gate.

"I hope your dog will soon be himself again," said Jim, in the hope of being able to prolong the interview, if only for a few moments. "If you would like me to have him for a few days I would do what I could for him, and I would see that he is properly looked after."

"I could not think of giving you so much trouble," she returned. "I think he will be all right here. I feel certain I shall be able to do all that is necessary. Will you give my kind regards to your sister? I should like to tell you that I admire her very much, Mr. Standerton."

"It is very good of you to say so," he replied. Then clutching at the hope thus presented to him, he added, "I trust you and she will be great friends."

"I hope so," said Miss Decie, and thereupon bade him good-night.

As he went out to his cart he felt convinced in his own mind that he had just parted from the most charming girl he had ever met in his life. He reflected upon the matter as he completed the short distance that separated him from his home, and when he joined his sister in the drawing-room later, he questioned her concerning her new acquaintance.

"She must lead a very lonely life," said Jim. "I was introduced to the old gentleman she calls grandfather, and if his society is all she has to depend upon, then I do not envy her her lot."

His sister had a suspicion of what was in his mind though she did not say so. Like her brother she

had taken a great liking to the girl, and there was every probability, as time went on, of their becoming firm friends.

"It may interest you to hear that she is coming to tea with me on Thursday," said Alice.

Jim *was* interested, and to prove it registered a mental vow that he would make a point of being at home that day. As a matter of fact he was, and was even more impressed than before.

From that day Miss Decie spent a large proportion of her time at the Manor House. In less than a month she had become Alice's own particular friend, and Jim felt that the whole current of his life had been changed. What Mr. Bursfield thought of the turn affairs had taken can be seen now, but at the time his views were only a matter of conjecture. That Jim and Miss Decie had managed to fall in love with each other was quite certain, and that William Standerton approved of his son's choice was another point that admitted of no doubt. Helen Decie with her pretty face, and charming manners, was a general favourite. At that stage their wooing was a matter-of-fact one in the extreme. Jim had no rival, and at the outset no difficulties worth dignifying with the name. He was permitted unlimited opportunities of seeing the object of his affections and, when the time was ripe, and he informed her of the state of his feelings towards herself, she gave him her hand, and promised, without any hysterical fuss, to be his wife, with the full intention of doing her utmost to make him happy.

"But, Jim," she said, "before you do anything else, you must see Mr. Bursfield and obtain his consent. He is my guardian, you know, and has been so good to me that I can do nothing without his approval."

"I will see him to-morrow morning," Jim replied, "and I fancy I can tell you what his answer will be. How could it be otherwise when he knows that your happiness is at stake?"

"I hope it will be as you say," she answered, but not with her usual cheerfulness. "Somehow or another grandfather always looks at things in a different light to other people."

"You may be sure I will do my best to get him to look at it as we want him to," her lover returned. "I will bring every argument I can think of to bear upon him."

Needless to say, Mr. Standerton, when he heard the news, was delighted, while Alice professed herself overjoyed at the thought of having Helen for her sister. In Jim's mind, however, there was the remembrance of Abraham Bursfield, and of the interview that had to be got through with that gentleman.

"It's no use beating about the bush or delaying matters," he said to himself. "I'll walk back with Helen and get it over to-night instead of to-morrow morning."

He informed his sweetheart of his intention. She signified her approval, and together they strolled across the Park towards the little gate that opened into the grounds of the Dower House. It was a lovely evening, and, as you may suppose, they were as happy a young couple as could have been found in the length and breadth of England. Their engagement had scarcely commenced, yet Jim was already full of plans for the future.

"I shall take you from that dreary old house," he said, nodding his head in the direction of the building they were approaching, "and we will find a place somewhere in the neighbourhood. How you have managed to exist here for eight years I cannot imagine."

"It has been dull certainly," she answered, "but I have the house and my grandfather to look after, so that my time is fairly well taken up."

"You must have felt that you were buried alive," he answered. "In the future, however, we'll change all that. You shall go where, and do, just as you please."

She shook her head.

"To make you happy," she said, "will be enough for me."

CHAPTER III

On reaching the house, Jim bade the butler inform his master that Mr. Standerton would like to see him. Isaac looked at him as if he were desirous of making sure of his business before he admitted him, then he hobbled off in the direction of his master's study, to presently return with the message that Mr. Bursfield would see Mr. Standerton if he would be pleased to step that way. Jim thereupon followed the old man into the room in which he had first made Abraham Bursfield's acquaintance some four months before. As on that memorable occasion, he found that gentleman seated at his desk, looking very much as if he had not moved from it in all that time.

"I wish you good evening, Mr. Standerton," he said, motioning his visitor to a chair. "To what may I attribute the honour of this visit?"

"I have come to you on a most important errand," Jim replied. "Its purport may surprise you, but I hope it will not disappoint you."

"May I ask that you will be good enough to tell me what that errand is," said the old gentleman drily. "I shall then be better able to give you my opinion."

"To sum it up in a few words," Jim answered, "I have this afternoon asked Miss Decie to become my wife, and she has promised to do so. I am here to ask your approval."

Bursfield was silent for a few moments. Then he looked sharply up at the young man.

"You are of course aware that Miss Decie is only my adopted granddaughter, and that she has not the least shadow of a claim, either upon me, or upon such remnants of property as I may possess."

"I am quite aware of it," Jim replied. "Miss Decie has told me of her position, and of your goodness to her."

"The latter of which she is endeavouring to repay by leaving me to spend the rest of my miserable existence alone. A pretty picture of gratitude, is it not? But it is the world all over!"

"I am sure she will always entertain a feeling of profound gratitude towards you," protested Jim. "She invariably speaks of you with the greatest affection."

"I am indeed indebted to her for her consideration," retorted the other with a sneer. "Unfortunately, shall I say, for you, I prefer something more than words. No, Mr. Standerton, I cannot give my consent to your engagement."

Jim could only stare in complete astonishment. He had never expected this.

"You do not mean that you are going to forbid it?" he ejaculated when he had recovered somewhat from his surprise.

"I am reluctantly compelled to admit that that *is* my intention. Believe me, I have the best of reasons for acting thus. Possibly my decision may cause you pain. It is irrevocable, however. At my death Helen will be able to do as she pleases, but until that event takes place, she must remain with me."

He took up his pen as if to continue his writing, and so end the interview.

"But, Mr. Bursfield, this is an unheard-of determination," cried the young man.

"That may be," was the reply. "I believe I have the reputation for being somewhat singular. My so-called granddaughter is a good girl, and if I know anything of her character, she will do as I wish in this matter."

Jim rose to his feet and crossed to the door as if to leave. When he reached it, however, he turned and faced Mr. Bursfield.

"You are quite sure that nothing I can say or do will induce you to alter your decision?" he enquired.

"Quite," the other replied.

"Then allow me to give you fair warning that I intend to marry Miss Decie," retorted Jim, who by this time had quite lost his temper.

"You are at liberty to do so when I am dead," Mr. Bursfield replied, and then continued his writing as if nothing out of the common had occurred.

Without another word Jim left the room. He had arranged that he should meet Helen in the garden afterwards. It was with a woe-begone face, however, that he greeted her.

"While he lives he absolutely refuses to sanction our engagement," he began. "For some reason of his own he declines to consider the matter for a moment. He says that at his death you are at liberty to do as you please, but until that event occurs, you are to remain with him. I consider it an act of the greatest selfishness."

Helen heaved a heavy sigh.

"I was afraid he would not look upon it as favourably as we hoped," she said. "I will see what I can do with him, however. I know him so well, and sometimes I can coax him to do things he would not dream of doing for any one else."

"Try, darling, then," said Jim, "and let us trust you will be successful."

They bade each other good-night, and then James set off on his walk across the Park. Dusk was falling by this time, and the landscape looked very beautiful in the evening light. As he strode along he thought of his position and of the injustice of Bursfield's decision. Then he fell to picturing what his future life would be like when the old man should have relented and Helen was his wife. He was still indulging in this day-dream when he noticed a shabbily-dressed man standing on the path a short distance ahead of him. Somehow the figure seemed familiar to him, and when he drew nearer he could not suppress an exclamation of astonishment. The individual was none other than the man he had seen lying beside the camp fire on the banks of the Darling River, and who, on a certain memorable evening, had caused his father so much emotion, *Richard Murbridge*. Whatever Jim's feelings might have been, Murbridge was at least equal to the

occasion.

"Good evening, Mr. Standerton," he began, lifting his hat politely as he spoke. "You are doubtless surprised to see me in England."

"I am more than surprised," James replied, "and I am equally astonished at finding you on my father's premises after what he said to you in Australia. If you will be guided by me you will make yourself scarce without loss of time."

"You think so, do you? Then let me tell you that you have no notion of the situation, or of the character of Richard Murbridge. Far from making myself scarce, I am now on my way to see your father. I fear, however, he will not kill the fatted calf in my honour; but even that omission will not deter me. Tenacity of purpose has always been one of my chief characteristics."

"If you attempt to see him you will discover that my father has also some force of character," the other replied. "What is more, I refuse to allow you to do so. I am not going to permit him to be worried by you again."

"My young friend, you little know with whom you are dealing," Murbridge retorted. "I have travelled from the other side of the world to see your father, and if you think you can prevent me you are much mistaken. What is more, let me inform you that you would be doing him a very poor service by attempting to keep us apart. There is an excellent little inn in the village, whose landlord and I are already upon the best of terms. The Squire, William Standerton, late of Australia, but now of Childerbridge, is an important personage in the neighbourhood. Everything that is known about him is to his credit. It would be a pity if——"

"You scoundrel!" said Jim, approaching a step nearer the other, his fists clenched, as if ready for action, "If you dare to insinuate that you know anything to my father's discredit, I'll thrash you to within an inch of your life."

Then a fit of indescribable fear swept over him as he remembered the night in Australia, when his father had shown so much agitation on learning that the man was on his way to the station to see him. What could be the secret between them? But no! He knew his father too well to believe that the man before him could cast even the smallest slur upon his character. William Standerton's name was a synonym for sterling integrity throughout the Island Continent. It was, therefore, impossible that Murbridge could have any hold upon him.

"You had better leave the place at once by the way you came into it," Jim continued, "and take very good care that we don't see any more of you."

"You crow very loud, my young bantam," returned Murbridge, "but that does not alter my decision. Now let me tell you this. If you knew everything, you would just go down on your bended knees and pray to me to forgive you for your impudence. As I said a moment ago, it's not the least use your attempting to stop me from seeing your father, for see him I will, if I have to sit at his gate for a year and wait for him to come out."

"Then you'd better go and begin your watch at once, for you shall not see him at the house," retorted Jim.

"We'll see about that," said Murbridge, and then turned on his heel, and set off in the direction of the Park gates. James waited until he had seen him disappear, then he in his turn resumed his walk. He had to make up his mind before he reached the house as to whether he would tell his father of the discovery he had made or not. On mature consideration he came to the conclusion that it would be better for him to do so.

For this reason, when he reached the house he enquired for his father, and was informed that he had gone to his room to dress for dinner. He accordingly followed him thither, to discover him, brush in hand, at work upon his silver-grey hair. That night, for some reason, the simple appointments of that simple room struck Jim in a new and almost pathetic light. Each article was, like its owner, strong, simple and good.

"Well, my lad, what is it?" asked Standerton. "I hope your interview with Mr. Bursfield was satisfactory?"

"Far from it," Jim replied lugubriously; and then, to postpone the fatal moment, he proceeded to describe to his father the interview he had had with the old gentleman.

"Never mind, my boy, don't be down-hearted about it," said Standerton, when he had heard his son out. "To-morrow I'll make it my business to go and see Mr. Bursfield. It will be strange if I can't talk him into a different way of thinking before I've done with him. But I can see from your face that there is something else you've got to tell me. What is it?"

Jim paused before he replied. He knew how upset his father would be at the news he had to impart.

"Father," he said, "I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you. I've been trying to make up my mind whether I should tell you or not."

"Tell me, James," answered the other. "I'll be bound it's not so very bad after all. You've probably been brooding over it, and have magnified its importance."

"I sincerely hope I have. I am afraid not, however. Do you remember the man we saw at

Mudrapilla in the Five Mile Paddock, the night before we left? His name was Murbridge."

The shock to William Standerton was every bit as severe as James had feared it would be.

"What of him?" he cried. "You don't mean to say that he is in England?"

"I am sorry to say that he is," Jim returned. "I found him in the Park this evening on his way up to the house."

The elder man turned and walked to the fireplace, where he stood looking into it in silence. Then he faced his son once more.

"What did he say to you?" he enquired at last, his voice shaking with the anxiety he could not control or hide.

"He said that he wanted to see you, and that he would do so if he had to wait at the gates for a year."

"And he will," said Standerton bitterly; "that man will hunt me to my grave. I have been cursed with him for thirty years, and do what I will I cannot throw him off."

James approached his father, and placed his hand upon his shoulder.

"Father," he began, "why won't you let me share your trouble with you? Surely we should be able to find some way of ridding ourselves of this man?"

"No, there is no way," said Standerton. "He has got a hold upon me that nothing will ever shake off."

"I will not believe, father, that he knows anything to your discredit," cried Jim passionately.

"And you are right, my lad," his father replied. "He knows nothing to my discredit. I hope no one else does; but—but there—do not ask any more. Some day I will tell you the whole miserable story. But not now. You must not ask me. Believe me, dear lad, when I say that it would be better not."

"Then what will you do?"

"See him, and buy him off once more, I suppose. Then I shall have peace for a few months. Do you know where he is staying?"

"At the 'George and Dragon,'" Jim replied.

"Then I must send a note down to him and ask him to come up here," said Standerton. "Now go and dress. Don't trouble yourself about him."

All things considered, the dinner that night could not be described as a success. William Standerton was more silent than usual, and his son almost equalled him. Alice tried hard to cheer them both, but finding her efforts unsuccessful, she also lapsed into silence. A diversion, however, was caused before the meal was at an end. The butler had scarcely completed the circuit of the table with the port, before a piercing scream ran through the building, followed by another, and yet another.

"Good heavens! What's that?" cried Standerton, as he sprang to his feet, and hurried to the door, to be followed by his son and daughter.

"It came from upstairs, sir," said the butler, and immediately hurried up the broad oak staircase two steps at a time. His statement proved to be correct, for, on reaching the gallery that runs round the hall, he found a maid-servant lying on the floor in a dead faint. Jim followed close behind him, and between them they picked the girl up, and carried her down to the hall, where she was laid upon a settee. The housekeeper was summoned, and the usual restoratives applied, but it was some time before her senses returned to her. When she was able to speak, she looked wildly about her, and asked if "*it was gone?*" When later she was able to tell her story more coherently, it was as follows.

In the fulfilment of her usual duties she had gone along the gallery to tidy Miss Standerton's bedroom. She had just finished her work, and was closing the door, when she saw, standing before her, not more than half-a-dozen paces distant, the little hump-backed ghost, of which she had so often heard mention made in the Servants' Hall. It looked at her, pointed its finger at her, and a second later vanished. "She knew now," she declared, "that it was all over with her, and that she was going to die. Nothing could save her." Having given utterance to this alarming prophecy, she indulged in a second fit of hysterics, on recovering from which she was removed by the butler and housekeeper to the latter's sitting-room, vowing as she went that she could not sleep in the house, and that she would never know happiness again. Having seen her depart, the others returned to the dining-room, and had just taken their places at the table once more, when there was a ring at the front door bell, and in due course the butler entered with the information that a person "of the name of Murbridge" had called and would be glad to see Mr. Standerton. James sprang to his feet.

"I told him he was not to come near the place," he said. "Let me go and see him, father."

"No, no, my boy," said Standerton. "I wrote to him before dinner, as I told you I should, telling him to come up to-night. Where is he, Wilkins?"

"In the library, sir," the butler replied.

"Very well. I will see him there."

He accordingly left the room.

A quarter of an hour later James and Alice heard Murbridge's voice in the hall.

"You dare to turn me out of your house?" he was saying, as if in a fit of uncontrollable rage. "You forbid me to speak to your son and daughter, do you?"

"Once and for all, I do," came Standerton's calm voice in reply. "Now leave the house, and never let me see your face again. Wilkins, open the door, and take care that this man is never again admitted to my house."

Murbridge must have gone down the steps, where, as Wilkins asserted later on, he stood shaking his fist at Mr. Standerton.

"Curse you, I'll make you pay for this," he cried. "You think yourself all-powerful because of your wealth, but whatever it costs me, I'll make you smart for the manner in which you've treated me to-night."

Then the door was closed abruptly, and no more was seen of him.

William Standerton's usually rubicund face was very pale when he joined his son and daughter later. It was plain that the interview he had had with Murbridge had upset him more than he cared to admit. Alice did her best to console him, and endeavoured to make him forget it, but her efforts were a failure.

"Poor old dad," she said, when she bade him good-night. "It hurts me to see you so troubled."

"You must not think about it then," was the answer. "I shall be myself again in the morning. Good-night, my girl, and may God bless you."

"God bless you, father," the girl replied earnestly.

"I do wish you'd let me help you," said Jim, when he and his father were alone together. "Why did you not let me interview that man?"

"It would have done no good," Standerton replied. "The fellow was desperate, and he even went so far as to threaten me. Thereupon I lost my temper and ordered him out of the house. I fear we shall have more trouble with him yet."

"Is it quite impossible for you to tell me the reason of it all?" James asked, after a moment's hesitation.

"Well, I have been thinking it over," said his father, "and I have come to the conclusion that perhaps it would be better, much as it will pain you, to let you know the truth. But not to-night, dear lad. Let it stand over, and I will tell you everything to-morrow. Now good-night."

They shook hands according to custom, and then departed to their respective rooms.

Next morning James was about early. He visited the Stables and the Home Farm, looked in at the kennels, and was back again at the home some three-quarters of an hour before breakfast. As he crossed the hall to ascend the stairs, in order to go to his own room, he met Wilkins coming down, his face white as death.

"My God, sir," he said hoarsely, "for mercy's sake come upstairs to your father's room."

"What is the matter with him?" cried James, realising from the butler's manner that something terrible had happened.

But Wilkins did not answer. He only led the way upstairs. Together they proceeded along the corridor and entered the Squire's bedroom. There they saw a sight that James will never forget as long as he lives. His father lay stretched out upon the bed, dead. His eyes were open, and stared horribly at the ceiling, while his hands were clenched, and on either side of his throat were discoloured patches.

These told their own tale.

William Standerton had been strangled.

CHAPTER IV

It would be almost impossible to describe in fitting words the effect produced upon James Standerton, by the terrible discovery he had made.

"What does it mean, Wilkins?" he asked in a voice surcharged with horror. "For God's sake, tell me what it means?"

"I don't know myself, sir," the man replied. "It's too terrible for all words. Who can have done it?"

Throwing himself on his knees beside his father's body, James took one of the cold hands in his.

"Father! father!" he cried, in an ecstasy of grief, and then broke down altogether. When calmness returned to him, he rose to his feet, clasped the hands of the dead man upon the breast, and tenderly closed the staring eyes.

"Send for Dr. Brenderton," he said, turning to Wilkins, "and let the messenger call at the police-station on the way and ask the officer in charge to come here without a moment's delay."

The man left him to carry out the order, and James silently withdrew from the room to perform what he knew would be the saddest task of his life. As he descended the stairs he could hear his sister singing in the breakfast-room below.

"You are very late," she said, as he entered the room. "And father too. I shall have to give him a talking-to when he does come down."

Then she must have realised that something was amiss, for she put down the letter which she had been reading, and took a step towards him. "Has anything happened, Jim?" she enquired, "your face is as white as death." Then Jim told her everything. The shock to her was even more terrible than it had been to her brother, but she did her best to bear up bravely.

The doctor and the police officer arrived almost simultaneously. Both were visibly upset at the intelligence they had received. Short though William Standerton's residence in the neighbourhood had been, it had, nevertheless, been long enough for them to arrive at a proper appreciation of his worth. He had been a good supporter of all the Local Institutions, a liberal landlord, and had won for himself the reputation of being an honest and just man.

"I sympathise with you more deeply than I can say," said the doctor, when he joined Jim in the library after he had made his examination. "If there is anything more I can do to help you, I hope you will command me."

"Thank you," said Jim simply, "there is not anything however you can do. Stay! There is one question you can answer. I want you to tell me how long you think my father has been dead?"

"Several hours," replied the medical man. "I should say at least six."

"Is there any sort of doubt in your mind as to the cause of his death?"

"None whatever," the other replied. "All outward appearances point to the fact that death is due to strangulation."

At that moment the police officer entered the room.

"I have taken the liberty, Mr. Standerton," he said, "of locking the door of the room and retaining the key in my possession. It will be necessary for me to report the matter to the Authorities at once, in order that an Inquest may be held. Before I do so, however, may I put one or two questions to you?"

"As many as you like," Jim replied. "I am, of course, more than anxious that the mystery surrounding my father's death shall be cleared up at once, and the murderer brought to Justice."

"In the first place," said the officer, "I see that the window of the bedroom is securely fastened on the inside, so that the assassin, whoever he was, could not have made his entrance by this means. Do you know whether your father was in the habit of locking his door at night?"

"I am sure he was not. A man who has led the sort of life he has done for fifty years does not lock his bedroom door on retiring to rest."

"In that case the murderer must have obtained access to the room through the house, and I must make it my business to ascertain whether any of the windows or doors were open this morning. One more question, Mr. Standerton, and I have finished for the present. Have you any reason to suppose that your father had an enemy?"

Jim remembered the suspicion that had been in his mind ever since he had made the ghastly discovery that morning.

"I have," he answered. "There was a man in Australia who hated my father with an undying hatred."

"Forgive my saying so, but a man in Australia could scarcely have committed murder in England last night."

"But the man is not in Australia now. He was here yesterday evening, and he and my father had a quarrel. The man was ordered out of the house, and went away declaring that, whatever it might cost, he would be revenged."

"In that case it looks as if the mystery were explained. I must make it my business to discover the whereabouts of the man you mention."

"He was staying at the 'George and Dragon' yesterday," said Jim. "By this time, however, he has probably left the neighbourhood. It should not be difficult to trace him, however; and if you consider a reward necessary, in order to bring about his apprehension more quickly, offer it, and I will pay it only too gladly. I shall know no peace until this dastardly crime has been avenged."

"I can quite understand that," the doctor remarked. "You will have the sympathy of the whole County."

"And now," said the police officer, "I must be going. I shall take a man with me and call at the 'George and Dragon.' The name of the person you mentioned to me is——"

"Richard Murbridge," said Jim, and thereupon furnished the officer with a description of the man in question.

"You will, of course, be able to identify him?"

"I should know him again if I did not see him for twenty years," Jim answered. "Wilkins, the butler, will also be glad to give you evidence as to his coming here last night."

"Thank you," the officer replied. "I will let you know as soon as I have anything to report."

The doctor and the police agent thereupon bade him good-day and took their departure, and Jim went in search of his grief-stricken sister. The terrible news had by this time permeated the whole household, and had caused the greatest consternation.

"I knew what it would be last night," said the cook. "Though Mr. Wilkins laughed at me, I felt certain that Mary Sampson did not see the Black Dwarf for nothing. Why, it's well known by everybody that whenever that horrible little man is seen in the house death follows within twenty-four hours."

The frightened maids to whom she spoke shuddered at her words.

"What's more," the cook continued, "they may talk about murderers as they please, but they forget that this is not the first time a man has been found strangled in this house. There is more in it than meets the eye, as the saying goes."

"Lor, Mrs. Ryan, you don't mean to say that you think it was the ghost that killed the poor master?" asked one of the maids, her eyes dilating with horror.

"I don't say as how it was, and I don't say as how it wasn't," that lady replied somewhat ambiguously, and then she added oracularly: "Time will show."

In the meantime Jim had written a short note to his sweetheart, telling her of the crime, and imploring her to come to his sister at once. A servant was despatched with it, and half-an-hour later Helen herself appeared in answer.

"Your poor father. I cannot believe it! It is too terrible," she said to her lover, when he greeted her in the drawing-room. "Oh! Jim, my poor boy, how you must feel it. And Alice, too—pray let me go to her at once."

Jim conducted her to his sister's room, and then left the two women together, returning himself to the dead man's study on the floor below. There he sat himself down to wait, with what patience he could command, for news from the police station. In something less than an hour it came in the shape of a note from the inspector, to the effect that Murbridge had not returned to the "George and Dragon" until a late hour on the previous night, and that he had departed for London by the train leaving Childerbridge Junction shortly before five o'clock that morning. "However," said the writer, in conclusion, "I have wired to the Authorities in London, furnishing them with an exact description of him, and I have no doubt that before very long his arrest will be effected."

With this assurance Jim was perforce compelled to be content. Later came the intimation from the Coroner to the effect that the Inquest would be held at the George and Dragon Inn on the following morning.

Shortly after twelve o'clock Wilkins entered the study with the information that a person of "*the name of Robins*" desired to see his master on an important matter, if he would permit him an interview.

"Show him in," said Jim, forming as he did so a shrewd guess as to the man's business.

A few moments later a small, sombrely-dressed individual, resembling a Dissenting minister more than any one else, made his appearance in the room.

"Mr. Standerton, I believe," he began, speaking in a low, deep voice, that had almost a solemn ring about it.

"That is my name," the other replied. "What can I do for you?"

"I am a Scotland Yard detective," the stranger replied, "and I have been sent down to take charge of the case. I must apologise for intruding upon you at such a time, but if the murderer is to be brought to justice, no time must be lost. I want you to tell me, if you will, all you can about the crime, keeping nothing back, however trivial you may consider it."

James thereupon proceeded to once more narrate what he knew regarding the murder. He discovered that the detective had already been informed as to the ominous suspicion that had attached itself to Murbridge.

"The first point to be settled," he said, when James had finished, "is the way in which the man got

into the house. You have not cross-questioned the domestics upon the subject, I suppose?"

James shook his head.

"I have been too much upset to think of such a thing," he answered. "But if you deem such a proceeding necessary, you are, of course, quite at liberty to do so. Take what steps you think best; all I ask of you is to find my father's murderer."

"I presume you heard nothing suspicious during the night?"

"Nothing at all. But it is scarcely likely that I should do so, as my room is in another part of the house."

"Who is responsible for the locking up at night?"

"The butler, Wilkins."

"Has he been with you any length of time?"

"We ourselves have only been a few months in England," Jim replied, "but since he has been in our service we have found him a most careful and trustworthy man. There cannot be any shadow of suspicion against him."

"Very likely not," the detective answered. "But in my profession we often find criminals in the most unlikely quarters. Mind you, sir, I don't say that he had anything to do with the crime itself. It is not outside the bounds of possibility, however, that his honesty may have been tampered with, even to the extent of leaving a window unfastened, or a door unlocked. However, I have no doubt I shall soon learn all there is to be known about Mr. Wilkins."

When he had asked one or two other important questions, he withdrew to question the servants. From the account James received of the examination later, it would not appear to have been a very successful business.

Wilkins asserted most positively that he had made every door and window in the house secure before retiring to rest. He was as certain as a man could be that no lock, bolt, or bar had been moved from its place during the night, and the housekeeper corroborated his assertions. The detective's face wore a puzzled expression.

"I've been round every flower-bed outside the windows," he said to the police inspector, "and not a trace of a footprint can I find. And yet we know that Murbridge was away from the inn at a late hour, and there's evidence enough upstairs to show that somebody made his way into Mr. Standerton's room between midnight and daybreak. Later I'll go down to the village and make a few enquiries there. It's just possible somebody may have met the man upon the road."

He was as good as his word, and when he returned to the Manor House at a late hour he knew as much about Richard Murbridge's movements on the preceding evening as did any man in the neighbourhood.

Jim dined alone that night, though it would be almost a sarcasm to dignify his meal with such a name. He had spent the afternoon going through his father's papers, in the hope of being able to discover some clue that might ultimately enable him to solve the mystery concerning Murbridge. He was entirely unsuccessful, however. Among all the papers with which the drawers were filled, there was not one scrap of writing that could in anyway enlighten him. They were the plain records of a successful business man's career, and, so far as Murbridge was concerned, quite devoid of interest. I do not think James Standerton ever knew how much he loved his father until he went through that drawer. The neat little packets, so carefully tied up and labelled, spoke to him eloquently of the dead man, and, as he replaced them where he had found them, a wave of intense longing to be revenged on his father's cowardly assassin swept over him. He was in the act of closing the drawer, when there came a tap at the door, and Wilkins entered to inform him that the detective had returned and was at his service, should he desire to see him.

"Show him in, Wilkins," said James, locking the drawer of the table, and placing the key in his pocket as he spoke.

The butler disappeared, to return a few moments later accompanied by the individual in question.

"Well, Mr. Robins," said Jim, when they were alone together, "what have you discovered?"

"Nothing of very much importance, sir, I am afraid," the other replied. "I have found out that Murbridge left the park by the main gates almost on the stroke of half-past eight last night. I have also discovered that he was again seen within a few minutes of eleven o'clock, standing near the small stile at the further end of the park."

"I know the place," Jim replied. "Go on! What was he doing there!"

"Well, sir," continued the detective, "that's more than I can tell you. But if he were there at such an hour, you may be sure it was not with any good intention. I have made enquiries from the keepers, and they have informed me that it is quite possible to reach the house by the path that leads from the stile without being observed."

"It winds through the plantation," said Jim, "and it is very seldom used. Lying outside the village as it does, it is a very roundabout way of reaching the house. What have they to say about him at

the inn?"

"Not very much, sir. But what little they do say is important. The landlord informs me that immediately after his arrival in the village he began to ask questions concerning the Squire. There is no doubt that your father was his enemy, and also that Murbridge cherished a bitter grudge against him. He did not tell the landlord who he was, or what his reasons were for being in the neighbourhood. It is certain, however, that had your father not been living here he would not have come near the place. On receipt of Mr. Standerton's letter, he set off for the house, and did not return to the inn until a late hour. In point of fact, it was between twelve and one o'clock when he *did* come in. The landlord is unable to give the exact time, for the reason that he was too sleepy to take much notice of it. He does remember, however, that Murbridge was in a very bad temper, and that he was excited about something. He called for some brandy, and moreover stated that his holiday was at an end, and that he was leaving for London by the early train next morning. This he did. That is as far as the landlord's tale goes. It seems to me that, unless we can prove something more definite against him than the evidence we have been able to obtain up to the present moment, it will be difficult to bring the crime home to him."

"But we must prove more," cried Jim, with considerable vehemence. "I am as certain in my own mind as I can be of anything that he was the man who killed my father, and if it costs me all I am worth in the world, and if I am compelled to spend the rest of my life in doing it, I'll bring the crime home to him somehow or another. It is impossible that he should be allowed to take that good, honest life, and get off scot free."

"I can quite understand your feelings, sir," said the detective, "and you may rest assured that, so far as we are concerned, no stone shall be left unturned to bring the guilty man to justice. Of course it is full early to speak like this, but if you will review the case in your own mind, you will see that, up to the present, there is really nothing tangible against the man. We know that he hated your father, and that he stated his intention of doing him a mischief, and also that on the night he uttered this threat the murder was committed. From this it would appear that he is responsible for it. But how are we to prove that he got into the house? No one saw him, and there are no suspicious footprints on the flower-beds outside. At the same time we know that he did not return to the inn until a late hour, and that, when he did, he was in an excited state. Yet why should he not have gone for a walk, and might not his excitement be attributed to resentment of the treatment he received at your father's hands? I am very much afraid it would be difficult to induce a Jury to convict on evidence such as we are, so far, able to bring against him. However, we shall hear what the Coroner has to say to-morrow. In the meantime, if you do not require my presence longer, I will return to the inn. It will be necessary for me to be early astir to-morrow."

James bade him good-night, and when he had departed, went upstairs to his sister's room. He found her more composed than she had been when he had last seen her, and able to talk of the dead man without breaking down as she had hitherto done. He informed her of the detective's visit, and of the information he had received from him. It was nearly midnight when he left her. The lamp in the hall was still burning, and he descended the great staircase with the intention of telling Wilkins that he could lock up the house and retire to rest. To his astonishment, when he reached the hall, he beheld the butler standing near the dining-room door, his face as white as the paper upon which I am now writing.

"What on earth is the matter, man?" asked James, who, for the moment, was compelled to entertain the notion that the other had been drinking.

"I've seen it, sir," said Wilkins in a voice that his master scarcely recognised. "I'd never believe it could be true, but now I've witnessed it with my own eyes."

"Witnessed what?" James enquired.

"*The ghost*, sir," Wilkins replied; "the ghost of the Little Black Dwarf."

Jim was in no humour for such talk then, and I very much regret to say he lost his temper.

"Nonsense," he answered. "You must have imagined that you saw it."

"No, sir, I will take my Bible Oath that I did not. I saw it as plain as I see you now. I'd been in to lock up the dining-room, and was standing just where I am now, never thinking of such a thing, when I happened to look up in the gallery, and there, sir, as sure as I'm alive, was the ghost, leaning on the rail, and looking down at me. His eyes were glaring like red-hot coals. Then he pointed upwards and disappeared. I will never laugh at another person again, when they say that they have seen him. May God defend us from further trouble!"

CHAPTER V

The inquest on the body of William Standerton was held next morning at the George and Dragon Inn in the village, and was attended by more than half the Neighbourhood. The affair had naturally caused an immense sensation in all ranks of Society, and, as the Coroner observed in his opening remarks, universal sympathy was felt for the bereaved family. Wilkins, who had not altogether recovered from the fright he had received on the night before, was the first witness. He stated that he had been the first to discover the murder, and then informed the coroner of the

steps he had immediately taken. Questioned as to the visit paid to the Squire by Murbridge, he said that the latter was in a great rage when turned away from the house, and on being asked to do so, repeated the words he had made use of. In conclusion, he said that he was quite certain that no door or window in the house had been left unfastened on the night in question, and that he was equally certain that none were found either open, or showing signs of having been tampered with in the morning. Jim followed next, and corroborated what the butler had said. A sensation was caused when he informed the Coroner that Murbridge had threatened his father in his hearing in Australia. He described his meeting with the man in the park before dinner, and added that he had forbidden him to approach the house. Examined by the Coroner, he was unable to say anything concerning the nature of the quarrel between the two men. The doctor was next called, and gave evidence as to being summoned to the Manor House. He described the body, and gave it as his opinion that death was due to strangulation. Then followed the police officer. The landlord was the next witness, and he gave evidence to the effect that the man Murbridge had stayed at the inn, had been absent on the evening in question from eight o'clock until half-past twelve, and that he had departed for London by the first train on the following morning. The driver of the mail-cart, who had seen him standing beside the stile, was next called. He was quite sure that he had made no mistake as to the man's identity, for the reason that he had had a conversation with him at the George and Dragon Inn earlier in the evening. This completing the evidence, the jury, without leaving the room, brought in a verdict of "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown," and for the time being the case was at an end.

"You must not be disappointed, my dear sir," said Robins, afterwards; "it is all you can possibly expect. The jury could do no more on such evidence. But we've got our warrant for the arrest of Murbridge, and, as soon as we are able to lay our hands upon him, we may be able to advance another and more important step. I am going up to London this afternoon, and I give you my assurance I shall not waste a moment in getting upon his track."

"And you will let me know how you succeed?"

"I will be sure to do so," Robins replied.

"In the meantime, there can be no harm in my putting an advertisement in the papers, offering a reward of five hundred pounds to anyone who will give such information as may lead to the discovery of the murderer."

"It is a large sum to offer, sir, and will be sure to bring you a lot of useless correspondence. Still, it may be of some use, and I would suggest that you send it to the daily papers without delay."

"It shall be done at once."

Jim thereupon bade the detective good-bye, and returned to the house to inform his sister of what had taken place at the inquest. She quite agreed with him on the matter of the reward, and an advertisement was accordingly despatched to the London newspapers, together with a cheque to cover the cost of the insertions.

Next day the mortal remains of William Standerton were conveyed to their last resting-place in the graveyard of the little village church. After the funeral Jim drove back to the Manor House, accompanied by his father's solicitor, who had travelled down from London for the ceremony. He was already aware that, by his father's death, he had become a rich man, but he had no idea how wealthy he would really be, until the will was read to him. When this had been done he was informed that he was worth upwards of half-a-million sterling. He shook his head sadly:

"I'd give it all up willingly, every penny of it," he answered, "to have my father alive. Even now I can scarcely believe that I shall never see him again. It seems an extraordinary thing to me that the police have, so far, not been able to obtain any clue as to the whereabouts of Murbridge. Look at this heap of letters," he continued, pointing to a pile of correspondence lying upon the writing table, "each one hails from somebody who has either seen Murbridge or professes to know where he is to be found. One knows just such a man working in a baker's shop in Shoreditch; another has lately returned with him on board a liner from America, and on receipt of the reward will give me his present address; a third says that he is a waiter in a popular restaurant in Oxford Street; a fourth avers that he is hiding near the Docks, and intends leaving England this week. So the tale goes on, and will increase, I suppose, every day."

"The effect of offering so large a reward," replied the lawyer. "My only hope is that it will not have the effect of driving him out of England. In which case the difficulty of laying hands upon him will be more than doubled."

"He need not think that flight will save him," Jim replied. "Let him go where he pleases, I will run him to earth."

Helen had spent the day at the Manor House, trying to comfort Alice in her distress. At nine o'clock she decided to return to her own home, and Jim determined to accompany her. They accordingly set off together. So occupied were they by their own thoughts, that for some time neither of them spoke. Jim was the first to break the silence.

"Helen," he said, "I cannot thank you sufficiently for your goodness to Alice during this awful time. But for you I do not know how she would have come through it."

"Poor girl," Helen answered, "my heart aches for her."

"She was so fond of our father," James answered.

"Not more than you were, dear," Helen replied; "but you have borne your trouble so bravely—never once thinking of yourself."

The night was dark, and there was no one about, so why should he not have slipped his arm round her waist.

"Helen," he said, "the time has come for me to ask what our future is to be. Will you wait for Mr. Bursfield's death before you become my wife, or will you court his displeasure and trust yourself to me?"

"I would trust myself to you at any time," she answered. "But do you not see how I am situated? I owe everything to my Guardian. But for his care of me in all probability I should now be a governess, a music-mistress, or something of that sort. He has fed me, clothed me, and loved me, after his own fashion, for a number of years. Would it not, therefore, seem like an act of the basest ingratitude to leave him desolate, merely to promote my own happiness?"

"And does my happiness count for nothing?" Jim returned. "But let us talk the matter over dispassionately, and see what can be done. Don't think me heartless, Helen, when I say, that you must realise that Mr. Bursfield is a very old man. It is just possible, therefore, that the event we referred to a few moments ago may take place in the near future. Now, owing to my father's death, I ought not to be married for some time to come. I propose, therefore, that we wait until, say, the end of six months, and then make another appeal to your guardian? It is just possible he may be more inclined to listen to reason then. What do you say?"

"I will do whatever you wish," she answered simply. "I fear, however, that, while Mr. Bursfield lives, he will take no other view of the case."

"We must hope that he will," Jim replied. "In the meantime, as long as I know that you are true to me, and love me as I love you, I shall be quite happy."

"You do believe that I love you, don't you, Jim?" she asked, looking up at her lover in the starlight.

"Of course I do," he answered. "God knows what a lucky man I deem myself for having been permitted to win your love. I am supremely thankful for one thing, and that is, the fact that my father learnt to know and love you before his death."

"As I had learnt to love him," she replied. "But there, who could help doing so?"

"One man at least," Jim replied. "Unhappily, we have the worst of reasons for knowing that there was one person in the world who bore him a mortal hatred."

"Have you heard anything yet from the police regarding Murbridge?"

"Not a word," Jim answered. "They have given me their most positive assurance that they are leaving no stone unturned to find the man, but, so far, they appear to have been entirely unsuccessful. If they do not soon run him down I shall take up the case myself, and see what I can do with it. And now here we are at the gate. You do not know how hard it is for me to let you go, even for so short a time. With the closing of that door the light seems to go out of my life."

"I hope and pray that you will always be able to say that," she answered solemnly.

Then they bade each other good-night, and she disappeared into the house, leaving Jim free to resume his walk. He had not gone many steps, however, before he heard his name called, and, turning round, beheld no less a person than Mr. Bursfield hurrying after him. He waited for the old gentleman to come up. It was the first time that Jim had known him to venture beyond the limits of his own grounds. The circumstance was as puzzling as it was unusual.

"Will you permit me a short conversation with you, Mr. Standerton?" Mr. Bursfield began. "I recognised your voice as you bade Miss Decie good-bye, and hurried after you in the hope of being able to see you."

For a moment Jim hoped that Mr. Bursfield had come after him in order to make amends, and to withdraw his decision regarding his marriage with Helen. This hope, however, was soon extinguished.

"Mr. Standerton," the old gentleman continued, "you may remember what I told you a few evenings since concerning the proposal you did me the honour of making on behalf of my ward, Miss Decie?"

"I remember it perfectly," Jim replied; "it is scarcely likely that I should forget."

"Since then I have given the matter careful consideration, and I may say that I have found no reason for deviating from my previous decision."

"I am sorry indeed to hear that. The more so as your ward and myself are quite convinced that our affections are such as will not change or grow weaker with time. Indeed, Mr. Bursfield, I have had another idea in my mind which I fancied might possibly commend itself to you, and induce you to reconsider your decision. You have already told me that Miss Decie's presence is

necessary to your happiness. As a proof of what a good girl she is I might inform you that, only a few moments since, she told me that she could not consent to leave you, for the reason that she felt that she owed all she possessed to you."

"I am glad that Helen has at least a spark of gratitude," the other answered with a sneer. "It is a fact that she does owe everything to me. And now for this idea of yours."

"What I was going to propose is," said Jim, "that in six months' time, or so, you should permit me to marry your ward, and from that day forward should take up your residence with us."

The old man looked at him in astonishment. Then he burst into a torrent of speech.

"Such a thing is not to be thought of," he cried. "I could not consider it for a moment; it would be little short of madness. I am a recluse. I care less than nothing for society. My books are my only companions; I want, and will have, no others. Besides, I could not live in that house of yours, were you to offer me all the gold in the world."

Here he grasped Jim's arm so tightly that the young man almost winced.

"I have, of course, heard of your father's death," he continued. "It is said that he was murdered. But, surely, knowing what you do, you are not going to be foolish enough to believe that?"

"And why not?" Jim enquired in great surprise. "I can do nothing else, for every circumstance of the case points to murder. Good heavens! Mr. Bursfield, if my father were not murdered, how did he meet his death?"

The other was silent for a moment before he replied. Then he drew a step nearer, and, looking up at Jim, asked in a low voice:

"Have you forgotten what I said to you concerning the mystery of the house? Did I not tell you that one of the former owners was found dead in bed, having met his fate in identically the same manner as your father did? Does not this appear significant to you? If not, your understanding must indeed be dull."

The new explanation of the mystery was so extraordinary, that Jim did not know what to say or think about it. That his father's death had resulted from any supernatural agency had never crossed his mind.

"I fear I am not inclined to agree with you, Mr. Bursfield," he said somewhat coldly. "Even if one went so far as to believe in such things, the evidence given by the doctor at the inquest would be sufficient to refute the idea."

"In that case let us drop the subject," Bursfield answered. "My only desire was to warn you. It is rumoured in the village that on the night of your father's death one of your domestics was confronted by the spectre known as the Black Dwarf, and fainted in consequence. My old manservant also told me this morning that your butler had seen it on another occasion. I believe the late Lord Childerbridge also saw it, and in consequence determined to be rid of the place at any cost. No one has been able to live there, and I ask you to be warned in time, Mr. Standerton. For my own part, as I have said before, though it is the home of my ancestors, I would not pass a night at Childerbridge for the wealth of all the Indies."

"In that case you must be more easily frightened than I am," said Jim. "On the two occasions you mention, the only evidence we have to rely upon is the word of a hysterical maid-servant, and the assurance of a butler, who, for all we know to the contrary, may have treated himself more liberally than usual, on that particular evening, to my father's port."

"Scoff as you will," Bursfield returned, "but so far as you are concerned I have done my duty. I have given you your warning, and if you do not care to profit by it, that has nothing to do with me. And now to return to the matter upon which I hastened after you this evening. I refer to your proposed marriage with my ward."

Jim said nothing, but waited for Mr. Bursfield to continue. He had a vague feeling that what he was about to hear would mean unhappiness for himself.

"I informed you the other day," the latter continued, "that it was impossible for me to sanction your proposal. I regret that I am still compelled to adhere to this decision. In point of fact, I feel that it is necessary for me to go even further, and to say that I must for the future ask you to refrain from addressing yourself to Miss Decie at all."

"Do you mean that you refuse me permission to see her or to speak with her?" Jim asked in amazement.

"If, by seeing her, you mean holding personal intercourse with her, I must confess that you have judged the situation correctly. I am desirous of preventing Miss Decie from falling into the error of believing that she will ever be your wife."

"But, my dear sir, this is an unheard-of proceeding. Why should you object to me in this way? You know nothing against me, and you are aware that I love your ward. You admitted, on the last occasion that I discussed the matter with you, that Miss Decie might expect little or nothing from you at your death. Why, therefore, in the name of Commonsense, are you so anxious to prevent her marrying the man she loves, and who is in a position to give her all the comfort and happiness wealth and love can bestow?"

"You have heard my decision," the other replied quietly. "I repeat that on no consideration will I consent to a marriage between my ward and yourself. And, as I said just now, I will go even further, and forbid you most positively for the future either to see or to communicate with her."

"And you will not give me your reasons for taking this extraordinary step?"

"I will not. That is all I have to say to you, and I have the honour to wish you a good evening."

"But I have not finished yet," said Jim, whose anger by this time had got the better of him. "Once and for all, let me tell you this, Mr. Bursfield: I have already informed you that I am determined, at any cost, to make Miss Decie my wife. I might add now, that your tyrannical behaviour will only make me the more anxious to do so. If the young lady deems it incumbent upon her to await your consent before marrying me, I will listen to her and not force the matter; but give her up I certainly will not so long as I live."

"Beware, sir, I warn you, beware!" the other almost shrieked.

"If that is all you have to say to me I will bid you good evening."

But Bursfield did not answer; he merely turned on his heel and strode back in the direction of the Dower House. Jim stood for a moment looking after his retreating figure, and when he could no longer distinguish it, turned and made his way homewards.

On reaching the Manor House he informed his sister of what had taken place between himself and Helen's guardian.

"He must be mad to treat you so," said Alice, when her brother had finished. "He knows that Helen loves you, and surely he cannot be so selfish as to prefer his own comfort to her happiness."

"I am afraid that is exactly what he does do," said Jim. "However, I suppose I must make allowances. Old age is apt to be selfish. Besides, we have to remember, as Helen says, that she owes much to him. No! we will do as we proposed, and wait six months, and see what happens then!"

But though he spoke so calmly he was by no means at ease in his own mind. He was made much happier, however, by a note which was brought to him as he was in the act of retiring to rest.

It was in Helen's handwriting, and he tore it open eagerly.

"My own dear love," it ran, "Mr. Bursfield has just informed me of what took place between you this evening. It is needless for me to say how sorry I am that such a thing should have occurred. I cannot understand his behaviour in this matter. That something more than any thought of his own personal comfort makes him withhold his consent, I feel certain. Whatever happens, however, you know that I will be true to you; and if I cannot be your wife, I will be wife to no other man.

"Your loving Helen."

CHAPTER VI

While the letter from Helen cheered James Standerton wonderfully, it did not in any way help him out of his difficulty with Mr. Bursfield. The latter had most decisively stated his intention not to give his consent to the marriage of his adopted granddaughter with the young Squire of Childerbridge. What his reasons were for taking such a step, neither Jim nor Helen could form any idea. It was a match that most guardians would have been only too thankful to have brought about. In spite of Helen's statements, he could only, after mature consideration, assign it to the old man's natural selfishness, and, however bitterly he might resent his treatment, in his own heart he knew there was nothing for it but to wait with such patience as he could command for a change in the other's feelings towards himself. He had the satisfaction of knowing, however, that Helen loved him, and that she would be true to him, happen what might. He was not a more than usually romantic young man, but I happen to know that he carried that letter about with him constantly, while he had read it so often that he must have assuredly known its contents by heart. All things considered, it is wonderful what comfort it is possible for a love-sick young man to derive from a few commonplace words written upon a sheet of notepaper.

After the momentous interview with Mr. Bursfield, the days went by with their usual sameness at Childerbridge. No news arrived from the detective, Robins. Apparently it was quite impossible for him to discover the smallest clue as to Murbridge's whereabouts. To all intents and purposes he had disappeared as completely as if he had been caught up into the skies. The reward, beyond bringing a vast amount of trouble and disappointment to Jim, had not proved of the least use to any one concerned.

Numerous half-witted folk, as is usual in such cases, had come forward and given themselves up, declaring that they had committed the murder, but the worthlessness of their stories was at once proved in every case. One man, it was discovered, had been on the high seas another had never been near Childerbridge in his life; while a third, and this was a still more remarkable case, was

found to have been an inmate of one of Her Majesty's convict establishments at the time the murder was committed.

"Never mind," said Jim to himself; "he must be captured sooner or later. If the police authorities cannot catch him, I'll take up the case myself, and run him to ground, wherever he may be."

As he said this he looked up at the portrait of his father, which hung upon the wall of his study.

"Come what may, father," he continued, "if there is any justice in the world, your cruel murder shall be avenged."

Another month went by, and still the same want of success attended the search for Murbridge.

"Alice, I can stand it no longer," said Jim to his sister one evening, after he had read a communication from Robins. "I can gather from the tone of this letter that they are losing heart. I ought to have taken up the case myself at the commencement, and not have wasted all this precious time. The man may now be back in Australia, South America, or anywhere else."

Alice crossed the room and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Dear old Jim," she said, "I am sure you know how I loved our father."

"Of course I do," said Jim, looking up at her. "No one knows better. But I can see there is something you want to say to me. What is it?"

"Don't be angry with me, Jim," she replied, seating herself on the arm of his chair "but deeply as that man has wronged us, I cannot help thinking that we should not always be praying for vengeance against him, as we are doing. Do you think it is what our father, with his noble nature, would have wished?"

Jim was silent for a moment. The desire for vengeance by this time had taken such a hold upon him, and had become such an integral part of his constitution, that he was staggered beyond measure by her words.

"Surely you don't mean to say, Alice," he stammered, "that you are willing to forgive the man who so cruelly killed our father?"

"I shall try to forgive him," the girl replied. "I say again, that I am sure it is what our father would have wished us to do."

"I am no such saint," Jim returned angrily. "I wish to see that man brought to justice, and, what's more, if no one else will, I mean to bring him. He took that noble life, and he must pay the penalty of his crime. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, was the old law. Why should we change it?"

Alice rose and crossed the room to her own chair with a little sigh. She knew her brother well enough to be sure that, having once made up his mind, he would carry out his determination.

On the morning following this conversation, Jim was standing after breakfast at the window of his sister's boudoir, looking out upon the lawn, across which the leaves were being driven by the autumn wind. His brow was puckered with thought. As a matter of fact, he was wondering at the moment how he should commence his search for Murbridge. London was such a great city, and for an amateur to attempt to find a man in it, who desired to remain hidden, was very much like setting himself the task of hunting for a needle in a bundle of hay. He neither knew where or how to begin. While he was turning the question over in his mind, his quick eye detected the solitary figure of a man walking across the park in the direction of the house. He watched it pass the clump of rhododendrons, and then lost it again in the dip beyond the lake. Presently it reappeared, and within a few moments it was within easy distance of the house. At first Jim had watched the figure with but small interest; later, however, his sister noticed that he gradually became excited. When the stranger had passed the corner of the house he turned excitedly to his sister.

"Good gracious, Alice!" he cried, "it surely cannot be."

"What cannot be?" asked Alice, leaving her chair, and approaching the window.

"That man coming up the drive," Jim replied. "It doesn't seem possible that it can be he, yet I've often boasted that I should know his figure anywhere. If it were not the most improbable thing in the world, I should be prepared to swear that it's Terence O'Riley."

"But, my dear Jim, what could Terence be doing here, so many thousand miles from our old home?"

But Jim did not wait to answer the question. Almost before Alice had finished speaking he had reached the front door, had opened it, and was wildly shaking hands with a tall, spare man, with a humorous, yet hatchet-shaped face, so sunburnt as to be almost the colour of mahogany.

The newcomer, Terence O'Riley, was a character in his way. He boasted that he knew nothing of father or mother, or relations of any sort or kind. He had received his Hibernian patronymic from his first friend, a wild Irishman on the diggings where he was born. He had entered William Standerton's service at the age of twelve, as horse-boy, and for upwards of thirty years had remained his faithful henchman. In every respect he was a typical Bushman. He could track like a

blackfellow, ride any horse that was ever foaled, find his way in the thickest country with unerring skill, was a first-class rifle shot, an unequalled judge of cattle, a trifle pugnacious at certain seasons, but, and this seems an anomaly, at other times he possessed a heart as tender as a little child. When William Standerton and his family had left Australia, his grief had been sincere. For weeks he had been inconsolable, and it meant a sure thrashing for any man who dared to mention James' name in his hearing.

"What on earth does this mean, Terence?" asked Jim, who could scarcely believe that it was their old servant who stood before him.

"It means a good many things, Master Jim," said Terence, with the drawl in his voice peculiar to Australian Bushmen. "It's a longish yarn, but, my word, I *am* just glad to see you again, and, bless me, there's Miss Alice too, looking as pretty as a grass parrot on a gum log."

With a smile of happiness on her face, that had certainly not been there since her father's death, Alice came forward and gave Terence her hand. He took it in his great palm, and I think, but am not quite sure, that there were tears in his eyes.

"Come in at once," said Jim. "You must tell us your tale from beginning to end. Even now I can scarcely realise that it is you. Every moment I expect to see you vanish into mid-air. If I had been asked where you were at this moment, I should have said 'out in one of the back paddocks, say the Bald Mountain, riding along the fence on old Smoker, with Dingo trotting at his heels.'"

"No, sir," Terence answered, looking round the great hall as he spoke, "I sold Smoker at Bourke before I came away, and one of the overseers has Dingo, poor old dog. The fact of the matter was, sir, after you left I got a bit lonesome, and the old place didn't seem like the same. I had put by a matter of between four and five hundred pounds, and, thinks I to myself, there's the Old Country, that they say is so beautiful, and to think that I've never set eyes on it. Why shouldn't I make the trip, and just drop in and see the Boss, and Master Jim, and Miss Alice in their new home. Who knows but that they might want a colt broken for them. As soon as I made up my mind, I packed my bag and set off for Melbourne, took a passage on board a ship that was sailing next day, and here I am, sir. I hope your father is well, sir?"

There was an awkward pause, during which Alice left the room.

"Is it possible you haven't heard, Terence?" Jim enquired, in a hushed voice.

"I've not heard anything, sir," Terence answered. "I was six weeks on the water, you see. I *do* hope, sir, there is nothing wrong."

Jim thereupon told Terence the whole story of his father's death. When he had finished the Bushman's consternation may be better imagined than described. For some moments it deprived him of speech. He could only stare at Jim in horrified amazement.

"Tell me, sir, that they've got the man who did it," he said at last, bringing his hand down with a bang on the table beside which he was seated. "Tell me that they're going to hang the blackguard who killed the kindest master in all the world, or I'll say that there's not a trooper in England that's fit to call himself a policeman."

The poor fellow was genuinely affected.

"They haven't caught him yet, Terence," said Jim. "The police have been searching for him everywhere for weeks past, but without success."

"But they must find him, run him down, and hang him, just as we used to string up the cowardly dingoes out back when they worried the sheep. If I have to track him like a Nyall blackfellow, I'll find him."

"Terence, I believe you've come at the right time," said Jim, holding out his hand. "Seeing the way the police Authorities are managing affairs, I've decided to take up the case myself. You were a faithful servant to my father, and you've known me all my life. You've got a head on your shoulders—do you remember who it was that found out who stole those sheep from Coobalah Out Station? Come with me, old friend, and we'll run the villain down together. *I* would not wish for a better companion."

"I'm thankful now that I came, sir," Terence replied. "You mark my words, we'll find him, wherever he's stowed himself away."

From that day Terence was made a member of the Childerbridge household. In due course, accompanied by Jim, he inspected the stables and was more than a little impressed by the luxury with which the animals were surrounded.

"Very pretty," he muttered to himself, "and turned out like racehorses; all the same, I wouldn't like to ride 'em after cattle in the Ranges on a dark night."

The sedate head coachman could not understand the situation. He was puzzled as to what manner of man this might be, who, though so poorly dressed, while treating his master with the utmost respect, conversed with him on terms of perfect equality. His amazement, however, was turned into admiration later in the day when Mr. O'Riley favoured him with an exposition of the gentle art of horse-breaking.

"He's a bit too free and easy in his manners towards the governor for my likin'," he informed the

head gardener afterwards, "but there's no denyin' the fact that he's amazin' clever with a youngster. They do say as 'ow he did all Mr. Standerton's horse-breaking in foreign parts."

It soon became apparent that Terence was destined to become one of the most popular personages at Childerbridge. His quaint mannerisms, extraordinary yarns, and readiness to take any sort of work, however hard, upon his shoulders, won for him a cordial welcome from the inhabitants of the Manor House. As for Jim and Alice, for some reason best known to themselves they derived a comfort from his presence that at any other time they would scarcely have believed possible.

On the day following Terence's arrival James stood on the steps at the front door, watching him school a young horse in the park. The high-spirited animal was inclined to be troublesome, but with infinite tact and patience Terence was gradually asserting his supremacy. Little by little, as he watched him, Jim's thoughts drifted away from Childerbridge, and another scene, equally familiar, rose before his eyes. He saw a long creeper-covered house, standing on the banks of a mighty river. A man was seated in the verandah, and that man was his father. Talking to him from the garden path was another—no less a person than Terence. Then he himself emerged from the house and stood by his father's side—a little boy of ten, dressed in brown holland, and wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat upon his head. Upon his coming his father rose, and, taking him by the hand, led him down to the stock-yard, accompanied by Terence. In the yard stood the prettiest pony that mortal boy had ever set eyes on.

"There, my boy," said his father, "that is my birthday present to you. Terence has broken him."

And now here was this self-same Terence in England, of all places in the world, making his hunters for him, while the father, who all his life had proved so generous to him, was lying in his grave, cruelly murdered. At that moment Alice came up behind him.

"What are you thinking of, Jim?" she enquired.

"I was thinking of Mudrapilla and the old days," he answered. "Seeing Terence out there on that horse brought it back to me so vividly that for a moment I had quite forgotten that I was in England. Do you know, Alice, that sometimes a wild longing to be back there takes possession of me. If only Helen were my wife, I'm not quite certain that I should not want to take you both back—if only for a trip. It seems to me that I would give anything to feel the hot sun upon my shoulders once again, to smell the smoke of a camp fire, to see the dust rise from the stock-yards, and to scent the perfume of the orange blossoms as we sit together in the verandah in the evening. Alice, that is the life of a man; this luxurious idleness makes me feel effeminate. But there, what am I talking about? I've got my duty to do in England before we go back to Mudrapilla."

At that moment Terence rode up, very satisfied with himself and with the animal upon whose back he was seated. He had scarcely departed in the direction of the stable before Jim descried a carriage entering the park. It proved to be a fly from the station, and in it Robins, the detective, was seated.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said, as he alighted; "in response to your letter, I have come down to see you personally."

"I am very glad you have done so," Jim replied, "for I have been most anxious to see you. Let us go into the house."

He thereupon led the way to his study, where he invited the detective to be seated.

"I hope you have some good news for me," Jim remarked, as he closed the door. "Have you made any discovery concerning Murbridge?"

The detective shook his head.

"I am sorry to say," he answered, "that our efforts have been entirely unsuccessful. We traced the man from Paddington to a small eating-house in the vicinity of the station, but after that we lost him altogether. We have kept a careful watch on the out-going ships, tried the hotels, lodging-houses, Salvation Army Shelters and such places, and have sent a description of him to every police station in the country, but so far without an atom of success. Once, when the body of a man was found in the river at Greenwich, I thought we had discovered him. The description given of the dead man tallied exactly with that of Murbridge. I was disappointed, however, for he turned out to be a chemist's assistant, who had been missing from Putney for upwards of a fortnight. Then a man gave himself up to the police at Bristol, but he was found to be a mad solicitor's clerk from Exeter. This is one of the deepest cases I have ever been concerned in, Mr. Standerton, and though I am not the sort of man who gives up very quickly, I am bound to confess that, up to the present, I have been beaten, and beaten badly."

"You are not going to abandon the case, I hope?" Jim asked anxiously. "Because you have been unsuccessful so far, you are surely not going to give it up altogether?"

"The law never abandons a case," the other observed sententiously. "Of course it's quite within the bounds of possibility that we may hit upon some clue that will ultimately lead to Murbridge's arrest; it is possible that he may give himself up in course of time; at the present, however, I must admit that both circumstances appear remarkably remote."

"Well," returned Jim, "I can assure you that, whatever else happens, *I* am not going to give up. If the authorities are going to do so, I shall take it up myself and see what I can do."

There was a suspicion of a smile upon the detective's face as he listened. Was it possible that an amateur could really believe himself to be capable of succeeding where the astute professionals of Scotland Yard had failed?

"I am afraid you will only be giving yourself needless trouble," he said.

"I should not consider it trouble to try and discover my father's murderer," Jim returned hotly. "Even if I am not more successful than the police have been, I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that I have done my best. May I trouble you for the name of the eating-house to which Murbridge proceeded on leaving Paddington?"

Taking a piece of paper from the writing-table, Robins wrote the name and address of the eating-house upon it, and handed it to Jim. The latter placed it carefully in his pocket-book, and felt that he must make the house in question his starting point.

When the detective took his departure half an hour later, Jim gave instructions that Terence should be sent to him.

"Terence," he began, when the other stood before him, "I am going up to London to-morrow morning to commence my search for Murbridge. I shall want you to accompany me."

"Very good, sir," Terence replied, "I've been hoping for this, and it'll go hard now if we can't track him somehow. But you must bear in mind, sir, that I've never been in London. If it was in the Bush, now, I won't say but what I should not be able to find him, but I don't know much about these big cities, so to speak. It will be like looking for a track of one particular sheep in a stock-yard after a mob of wild cattle have been turned into it."

Jim smiled. He saw that Terence had not the vaguest notion of what London was like.

That evening he informed Alice of the decision he had come to. She had been expecting it for some days past, and was not at all surprised by it. She only asked that he would permit her to accompany him.

"I could not remain here," she said, "and I'll promise that I'll not be in your way. It will be so desolate in this house without you, especially as Mr. Bursfield will not allow Helen to visit us, and I have no other companion."

"By all means come with me," said Jim, "I shall choose a quiet hotel in the West End, and you must amuse yourself as best you can while I am absent."

Later in the evening he wrote a note to his sweetheart informing her of his decision, and promising to let her know, day by day, what success attended his efforts.

Next morning they left Childerbridge Station at eleven o'clock for London. As the train steamed out of the village past the little churchyard, Jim looked down upon his father's grave, which he could just see on the eastern side of the church.

"Dear father," he muttered to himself, "If have to devote the rest of my life in bringing your murderer to justice, I'll do it."

CHAPTER VII

It was considerably past midday by the time Jim and his sister, accompanied by Terence, reached London. On arriving at Paddington, they engaged a cab and drove to the hotel they had selected, a private establishment leading out of Piccadilly. Terence's amazement at the size of London was curious to witness. Hitherto he had regarded Melbourne as stupendous, now it struck him that that town was a mere village compared with this giant Metropolis. When he noted the constant stream of traffic, the crowds that thronged the pavements, and the interminable streets, his heart misgave him concerning the enterprise upon which he had so confidently embarked.

"Bless my soul, how many people can there be in London?" he asked, as they drove up to the hotel.

"Something over five millions," Jim replied. "It's a fair-sized township."

"And we are going to look for one man," continued the other. "I guess it would be easier to find a scrubber in the mallee than to get on the track of a man who is hiding himself here."

"Nevertheless we've got to find him somehow," said Jim. "That's the end of the matter."

After lunch he sent word to Terence that he wished him to accompany him on his first excursion. Up to that time he had formed no definite plan of action, but it was borne in upon him that he could do nothing at all until he had visited the eating-house to which Murbridge had been traced after his arrival at Paddington Station. They accordingly made their way to the house in question. It proved to be an uninviting place, with a sawdust-covered floor, and half-a-dozen small tables arranged along one side. On the other was a counter upon which were displayed a variety of

covered dishes and huge tea cups. At the moment of Jim's entering the proprietor was giving his attention to a steaming pan of frying onions.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked, as he removed the frying-pan from the gas and came forward.

"I want five minutes' conversation with you in private, if you will give it to me," Jim replied, and then in a lower voice he added: "I stand in need of some information which I have been told you are in a position to supply. I need not say that I shall be quite willing to recompense you for any loss of time or trouble you may be put to."

"In that case I shall be very happy to oblige you, sir," the man replied civilly enough. "That is to say, if it is in my power to do so. Will you be good enough to step this way?"

Pulling down his shirt-sleeves, which until that moment had been rolled up, and slipping on a greasy coat, he led the way from the shop to a tiny apartment leading out of it. It was very dirty and redolent of onions and bad tobacco. Its furniture was scanty, and comprised a table, covered with American cloth, a cupboard, and two wooden chairs, upon one of which James was invited to seat himself. Terence, who had followed them, took the other, while he surveyed its owner with evident disfavour.

"And now, sir," said that individual, "I should be glad if you can tell me what I can do for you. If it's about the Board School election, well, I'll tell you at once, straight out, as man to man, that I ain't a-goin' to vote for either party. There was a young wagabond that I engaged the other day. He had had a Board School edecation, and it had taught him enough to be able to humbug me with his takings. Thirteen and elevenpence-alfpenny was what he stole from me. And as I said to the missus only last night, 'No more Board School lads for me!' But there, sir, p'raps you ain't a-got nothing to do with them?"

"I certainly have not," James replied. "I am here on quite a different matter. Of course you remember the police visiting you a short time since, with regard to a man who was suspected of being the murderer of Mr. Standerton, at Childerbridge, in Midlandshire?"

"Remember it?" the man replied, "I should think I did. And haven't I got good cause to remember it? I was nigh being worried to death by 'em. First it was one, and then it was another, hanging about here and asking questions. Had I seen the man? Did I know where he had gone? What was he like? Till with one thing and another I was most driven off my head. I won't say as how a detective oughtn't to ask questions, because we all know it's his duty, but when it comes to interferin' with a man's private business and drivin' his customers away from the shop—for I won't make no secrets with you that there is folks as eats at my table as is not in love with 'tecs—well, then I say, if it comes to that, it's about time a man put his foot down."

"My case is somewhat different," said James. "In the first place, I am not a detective, but the son of the gentleman who was murdered."

"Good gracious me! you don't say so," said the man, regarding him with astonishment and also with evident appreciation. "Now that makes all the difference. It's only fit and proper that a young gentleman should want to find out the man who, so to speak, had given him such a knock-down blow. Ask me what questions you like, sir, and I'll do my best to answer 'em."

"Well, first and foremost," said Jim, "I want to know how you became aware that the man in question hailed from Childerbridge? He wouldn't have been likely to say so."

"No, you're right there," the man replied. "He didn't say so, but I knew it, because after he had had his meal, my girl was giving him 'is change, I saw there was a Childerbridge label on the small bag he carried in his hand. I put it to you, sir, if he hadn't been there, would that label have been on the bag?"

"Of course it would not. And he answered to the description given you?"

"To a T, sir. Same sort of face, same sort of dress, snarly manner of speaking, spotted bird's-eye necktie and all."

"It must have been the man. And now another question. You informed the police, did you not, that you had no knowledge as to where he went after he left your shop?"

The man fidgetted uneasily in his chair for a moment, and drummed with his fingers upon the cover of the table. It was evident that he was keeping something back, and was trying to make up his mind as to whether he should divulge his information or not.

Here James played a good game, and with a knowledge of human character few people would have supposed him to possess, took from his pocket a sovereign, which he laid on the table before the other.

"There," he said, "is a sovereign. I can see that you are keeping something back from me. Now, that money is yours whether you tell me or not. If it is likely to affect your happiness don't let me know, but if you can, I shall be glad if you will tell me all you know."

"Spoken like a gentleman, sir," the other replied, "and I don't mind if I do tell you, though it may get me into trouble with some of my customers if you give me away. You see, sir, round about here in this neighbourhood, a man has to be careful of what he says and does. Suppose it was to

come to the ears of some people that it was me as gave the information that got the bloke arrested, well then, they'd be sure to say to 'emselves, 'he's standin' in with the perlice, and we don't go near his shop again.' Do you take my meaning, sir?"

"I quite understand," James replied. "I appreciate your difficulty, but you may be quite sure that I will not mention your name in connection with any information you may give me."

"Spoken and acted like a gentleman again, sir," said the shopman. "Now I'll tell you what I know. I didn't tell the 'tecs,' becous they didn't treat me any too well. But this is what I *do* know, sir. As he went out of the door he asked my little boy, Tommy, wot was playing on the pavement, how far it was to Great Medlum Street? The boy gave him the direction, and then he went off."

"Great Medlum Street?" said James, and made a note of the name in his pocket-book. "And how far may that be from here?"

"Not more than ten minutes' walk," the other replied. "Go along this street, then take the third turning to your left and the first on the right. You can't make no mistake about it."

"And what kind of a street is it?" Jim enquired. "I mean, what sort of character does it bear?"

"Well, sir, that's more than I can tell you," said the other. "For all I know to the contrary, it's a fairish sort of street, not so fust-class as some others I could name, but there's a few decent people living in it."

"And do you happen to have anything else to tell me about him?"

"That's all I know, sir," said the other. "I haven't set eyes on him from that blessed moment until this, and I don't know as I want to."

"I am very much obliged to you," said Jim, rising and putting his pocket-book away. "You have given me great assistance."

"I'm sure you're very welcome, sir," replied the man. "I am always ready to do anything I can for a gentleman. It's the Board School folk that——"

Before the man could finish his sentence, Jim was in the shop once more, and was making his way towards the door, closely followed by Terence.

"Now the first question to be decided," he said, when they were in the street, "is what is best for us to do? If I go to Great Medlum Street, it is more than likely that Murbridge will see me and make off again; while, if I wait to communicate with Robins, I may lose him altogether."

Eventually it was decided that he should not act on his own initiative, but should communicate with Detective Robins, and let him make enquiries in the neighbourhood in question. A note was accordingly despatched to the authorities at Scotland Yard. In it James informed them that it had come to his knowledge that the man Murbridge was supposed to be residing in Great Medlum Street, though in what house could not be stated. Later in the day Robins himself put in an appearance at the hotel.

"You received my letter?" James asked when they were alone together.

"I did, sir," the man answered, "and acted upon it at once."

"And with what result?"

"Only to discover that our man has slipped through our fingers once more," said the detective. "He left Great Medlum Street two days ago. Up to that time he had lodged at number eighteen. The landlady informs me that she knows nothing as to his present whereabouts. He passed under the name of Melbrook, and was supposed by the other lodgers to be an American."

"You are quite certain that it is our man?"

"There can be no doubt about it. He went to the house on the day that the murder was discovered. Now the next thing to find out is where he now is. From what his landlady told me, I should not think he was in the possession of much money. As a matter of fact, she suspected that he had been pawning his clothes, for the reason that his bag, which was comparatively heavy when he arrived, seemed to be almost empty when he left. To-morrow morning I shall make enquiries at the various pawnbrokers in the neighbourhood, and it is just possible we may get some further information from them."

Promising to communicate with Jim immediately he had anything of importance to impart, Robins took his departure, and Jim went in search of Alice to tell her the news. Next day word was brought to him to the effect that Murbridge had pawned several articles, but in no case were the proprietors able to furnish any information concerning his present whereabouts. Feeling that it was just possible, as in the case of the eating-house keeper near Paddington Station, that the detectives had not been able to acquire all the knowledge that was going, Jim, accompanied by the faithful Terence, set off in the afternoon for number eighteen, Great Medium Street. It proved to be a lodging-house of the common type.

In response to their ring the door was opened by the landlady, a voluble person of Irish descent. She looked her visitors up and down before admitting them, and having done so, enquired if they stood in need of apartments.

"I regret to say that we do not," said Jim blandly. "My friend and I have come to put a few questions to you concerning—"

"Not poor Mr. Melbrook, I hope," she answered. "Is all London gone mad? 'Twas but yesterday afternoon, just when I was settin' down to my bit o' tea that a gentleman comes to make enquiries about Mr. Melbrook. I told 'im he'd left the house, but that would not do. He wanted to know where he had gone, and when and why he had left, just for all the world as if he was his long-lost brother. Then this morning another comes. Wanted to know if I knew where Mr. Melbrook pawned his clothes? Did he appear to be in any trouble? Now here you are with your questions. D'ye think I've got nothing better to do than to be trapesing round talkin' about what don't concern me? What's the world coming to, I should like to know?"

"But, my good woman, I am most anxious to find Mr. Melbrook," said Jim, "and if you can put me into the possession of any information that will help me to do so, I shall be very pleased to reward you for your trouble."

"But I've got nothing to tell you," she replied, "more's the pity of it, since you speak so fair. From the time that Mr. Melbrook left my house until this very moment I've heard nothing of him. He may have gone back to America—if he was an American as they say—but there, he may be anywhere. He was one of them sort of men that says nothing about his business; he just kept himself to himself with his paper, and took his drop of gin and water at night the same as you and me might do. If I was to die next minute, that's all I can tell you about him."

Seeing that it was useless to question her further, Jim pressed some coins into the woman's willing hand, and bade her good-day. Then, more dispirited by his failure than he would admit, he drove back to his hotel. Alice met him in the hall with a telegram.

"This has just come for you," she said. "I was about to open it."

Taking it from her, he tore open the envelope, and withdrew the message. It was from Robins, and ran as follows:—

"Think am on right track—will report as soon as return."

It had been despatched from Waterloo Station.

"Why did he not say where he was going?" said Jim testily, "instead of keeping me in suspense."

"Because he does not like to commit himself before he has more to report, I suppose," said Alice. "Do not worry yourself about it, dear. You will hear everything in good time."

A long letter from Helen which arrived that evening helped to console Jim, while the writing of an answer to her enabled him to while away another half-hour. But it must be confessed that that evening Jim was far from being himself. He felt that he would have given anything to have accompanied the detective in his search. He went to bed at an early hour, to dream that he was chasing Murbridge round the world, and do what he would he could not come up with him. Next day there was no news, and it was not until the middle of the day following that he heard anything. Then another telegram arrived, stating that the detective would call at the hotel between eight and nine o'clock that evening. He did so, and the first glimpse of his face told Jim that his errand had as usual been fruitless.

"I can see," he said, "that you have not met with any success. Is that not so?"

"I'm sorry, sir," the man answered. "Information was brought me the day before yesterday that a man answering in every way the description of the person we wanted had pawned a small portmanteau at a shop in the Mile End Road, and on making enquiries there, I heard that he had come to lodge at a house in one of the streets in the vicinity. Accompanied by one of my mates, I went to the house in question, only to discover that we were too late again, and that the man had left for Southampton that morning, intending to catch the out-going boat for South Africa. Procuring a cab, I set off for Waterloo, and on my arrival there sent that telegram to you, sir, and then went down to Southampton by the next train. Unfortunately the two hours' delay had given him his chance, for when I reached Southampton it was only to find that the vessel had sailed half-an-hour before. I went at once to the Agent's office, where I discovered that a man whose appearance tallied exactly with the description given had booked a steerage passage at the last moment, and had sailed aboard her. But if he's got out of England safely, we'll catch him at Madeira. The police there will arrest him, and hold him for us until we can get him handed over. He does not know that I am upon his track, and for that reason he'll be sure to think he's got safely away."

"We must hope to catch him at Madeira then. The vessel does not touch at any port between, I suppose?"

Robins shook his head.

"No, Madeira is the first port of call. And now, sir, I'll bid you good-night, if you don't mind. I've had a long day of it, and I'm tired. To-morrow morning I've got to be abroad early on another little case which is causing me a considerable amount of anxiety."

Jim bade him good-night and then went in search of his sister, only to find that she had a bad headache, and had gone to bed. After the excitement of the day bed was out of the question, so donning a hat and coat he left the hotel for a stroll. He walked quietly along Piccadilly, smoking

his cigar, and thinking of the girl who had promised to be his wife, and who, at the moment, was probably thinking of him in the quiet little Midlandsshire village. How delightful life would be when she would be his wife. He tried to picture himself in the capacity of Helen's husband. From Helen his thoughts turned to Murbridge, and he tried to imagine the guilty wretch, flying across the seas, flattering himself continually that he had escaped the punishment he so richly deserved, finding more security in every mile of water the vessel left behind her, little dreaming that justice was aware of his flight, and that Nemesis was waiting for him so short a time ahead.

Reaching Piccadilly Circus, he walked on until he arrived at Leicester Square. As the sky had become overcast, and a thin drizzle was beginning to fall, he called a hansom, and bade the driver take him back to his hotel. The horse started off, and they were soon proceeding at a fast pace in the direction of Piccadilly. Just as they reached the Criterion Theatre, a man stepped from the pavement, and began to cross the road. Had not the cabman sharply pulled his horse to one side, nothing could have saved him from being knocked down. So near a thing was it that Jim sprang to his feet, and threw open the apron, feeling sure that the man was down. But near though it was, the pedestrian had escaped, and, turning round, was shaking his fist in a paroxysm of rage at the cabman. At that moment he saw Jim, and stood for a second or two as if turned to stone; then, gathering his faculties together, he ducked between two cabs and disappeared.

That man was Richard Murbridge!

CHAPTER VIII

Before Jim could recover from his astonishment at seeing the man whom he had been led to believe was upon the high seas, standing before him, the cabman had whipped up his horse once more, and was half across the Circus. Springing to his feet, he pushed up the shutter, and bade the driver pull up as quickly as possible. Then, jumping from the cab, he gave the man the first coin he took from his pocket.

"Did you see which way that fellow went we so nearly knocked down?" he cried.

"Went away towards Regent Street, I believe," answered the cabman. "He had a narrow shave and it isn't his fault he isn't in hospital now."

Jim waited to hear no more, but made his way back to the policeman he had noticed standing beside the fountain in the centre of the Circus.

"Did you see that man who was so nearly knocked down by a cab a few minutes ago?" he enquired, scarcely able to speak for excitement.

"I did," the officer answered laconically. "What about him?"

"Only that you must endeavour to find him, and arrest him at once," said Jim. "There is not a moment to be lost. He may have got away by this time."

"And he's precious lucky if he has," said the policeman. "Never saw a closer thing in my life."

"But don't you hear me? You must find him at once. Every second we waste is giving him the chance of getting away."

"Come, come, there's no such hurry: what's he done that you should be so anxious to get hold of him?"

By this time Jim was nearly beside himself with rage at the other's stupidity.

"That man was the Childerbridge murderer," he replied. "I am as certain of it as I am that I see you standing before me now."

"Come, come, Sir, that's all very well you know," said the policeman, with what was plainly a kindly intent, "but you go along home and get to bed quietly; you'll be better in the morning and will have forgotten all about this 'ere murderer."

After which, without another word, he walked away.

"Well, of all the insane idiots in the world," muttered Jim, "that fellow should come first. But I am not going to be baulked; I'll search for Murbridge myself."

He thereupon set off along Regent Street, but before he had gone half the length of the street the folly of such a proceeding became apparent to him. He knew that Murbridge had seen him, and, for this reason, would most likely betake himself to the quiet of the back streets. To attempt to find him, therefore, under cover of darkness, and at such an hour, would be well-nigh an impossibility. Then another idea occurred to him. Hailing a cab, he set off for Scotland Yard. On arrival there, he handed in his card, and in due course was received most courteously by the chief officer on duty. He explained his errand, and in doing so showed the mistake under which Detective-sergeant Robins had been and was still labouring.

"He shall be communicated with at once," said the official. "I suppose you are quite certain of the identity of the man you saw in Piccadilly Circus, Mr. Standerton?"

"As certain as I am of anything," Jim replied. "I should recognise him anywhere. I was permitted a full view of his face, and I am quite sure that I am not making a mistake. If only the cabman had pulled up a few moments earlier, I might have been able to have stopped him."

"In that case, you should be able to give us some details of his present personal appearance, which would afford us considerable assistance in our search for him."

"He was wearing a black felt hat, and a brown overcoat, the collar of which was turned up."

The officer made a note of these particulars, and promised that the information should be dispersed in all directions without loss of time. Then, feeling that nothing more could be done Jim bade him good-night, and drove back to his hotel. In spite of the work he had done that day he was not destined to obtain a wink of sleep all night, but tumbled and tossed in his bed, brooding continually over the chance he had missed of securing his father's murderer. If only he had alighted when the cabman first stopped, he might have been able to have secured Murbridge. Now his capture seemed as remote as ever; further, indeed, than if he had been, as Robins supposed, on board the vessel bound for South Africa.

Jim had just finished his breakfast next morning when Robins called to see him.

"This is a nice sort of surprise you have given us, sir," said the detective, when he had made a few commonplace remarks, "I mean your seeing Murbridge last night; I don't know what to think of it. It seems to me to be more of a mystery than ever now."

"The only thing you can think of it is that Murbridge is in London, and not on board the mail boat as you supposed," Jim replied. "You must have got upon a wrong track again. I suppose there is no further news of him this morning?"

"There was none when I left the Yard," the other replied. "At present we are over-hauling all the doss-houses and shelters, and it is possible we may make a discovery before long. When you think of the description we have of him—a man wearing a brown coat and a felt hat—it is not very much to go upon. There must be hundreds of men dressed like that in London. If only we had a photograph of him it would make the labour a good deal easier."

This set Jim thinking. In the lumber-room at Childerbridge there was, as he remembered, a number of cases containing books, photograph albums, etc., which his father had brought with him from Australia, but which had never been unpacked. He recalled the fact that his father had told him that he had been on intimate terms with Murbridge many years before. Was it not possible, therefore, that among his collections there might be some portrait of that individual. He felt inclined to run down and turn the boxes over. What was more, if he did so, he might chance to obtain an interview with Helen. He explained his hopes with regard to the photograph to the detective, who instantly agreed that it might be worth his while to make the search.

"In that case I will go down by the eleven o'clock train, and if I discover anything, I will wire you and post the photograph on to you by the evening mail."

"It is unnecessary for me to assure you it would be an inestimable help to us in our search," the other answered; "we should have something more definite to go upon then."

True to this arrangement, therefore Jim, Alice, and Terence returned to Childerbridge by the morning train. A carriage met them at the station, and in it they drove through the village. As they were drawing near the park gates, an exclamation from Alice roused Jim from the reverie into which he had fallen, and caused him to glance up the lane that led from the main road. To his unspeakable joy, he discovered that Helen was coming towards them. In a moment the carriage was stopped, and Jim alighted and hastened to meet her.

"My darling," he cried, "I never counted upon having the happiness of seeing you so soon. This is most fortunate."

"But what brings you back to-day, Jim?" Helen replied. "From your letter I gathered that I should not see you for at least a week. There is nothing wrong, I hope?"

She scanned his face with anxious eyes, and as she did so it occurred to Jim that she herself was looking far from well.

"Nothing is the matter," he answered. "We have merely come down to try and find some photographs that would help us in our search. But, Helen, you are not looking at all well. Your face frightens me."

"I am alright," was the reply. "I have been a little worried lately about my grandfather, and that probably accounts for my appearance, but we will not talk of that now. I must say 'How do you do' to Alice."

She accordingly approached the carriage, and held out her hand to her friend. They conversed together for a few moments, and then Alice proposed that Helen should return with them to the Hall, but this being, for more reasons than one, impossible, it was arranged that Jim should see her home across the park, a suggestion which, you may be sure, he was not slow to take advantage of. They accordingly watched the carriage pass through the lodge gates, and then themselves set out for the Dower House. As they walked Jim told his sweetheart of the ill success that had attended his mission to London.

"But, Helen," he said at last, as they approached the house, "you have not told me what it is that is worrying you about your grandfather. I hope he has not been making you unhappy?"

She hung her head but did not answer.

"Ah, I can see that he has," he exclaimed, "and I suppose it was something to do with me. I wonder whether I should be right if I hazarded a guess that Mr. Bursfield had been trying again to force you into giving me up? Is that the case, Helen?"

"I am afraid in a measure it is," she replied, but with some diffidence. "You may be quite sure, however, that whatever he may do it will not influence me. You know how truly I love you?"

"Yes, I know that," he answered, "and I am quite content to trust you. I know that nothing Mr. Bursfield can say will induce you to do as he proposes."

"Remember that always," she said. "But, oh, Jim, I wish he were not so determined in his opposition to our marriage. Sometimes I feel that I am acting not only like a traitor to him, but to you as well."

"That you could never be," Jim returned. "However, keep up a good heart, dear, and you may be sure all will come right in the end. In the future we shall look back upon these little troubles, and wonder why we so worried about them."

A few minutes later they reached the gates leading into the grounds of the Dower House. Here Jim bade his sweetheart good-bye, and, having arranged another meeting for the morrow, set off on his walk to his own home. Immediately upon his arrival there, he made his way, accompanied by Alice, to the lumber-room on the top story of the house, in which the boxes he had come down to over-haul had been placed. How well he could recall the day in Australia on which his father had packed them. Little had he imagined then that those boxes would next be opened in order to discover a portrait of the same kind father's murderer. When the first box had been overhauled it was found to contain unimportant papers connected with the dead man's various properties in Australia. In the second was a miscellaneous collection; which consisted of a variety of account books, with specimens of ore, wool, and other products of the Island Continent. It was not until they had opened the third box that they began to think they were on the right track. In this were a few engravings, perhaps half-a-dozen sketch books, filled with pen-and-ink drawings by Jim's mother, upwards of a hundred novels between thirty and forty years old, and at the bottom a large album filled with photographs, each of which looked out upon a forgetful world from a floral setting. Jim took it to a window, where he sat down on a box to examine it.

To my thinking there is nothing more pathetic than an old album. What memories it recalls of long-forgotten friends; as one looks upon the faded pictures, how clearly old scenes rise before one.

On the first page was a photograph of William Standerton himself, taken when he was a young man. His coat was of a strange cut, his trousers were of the peg-top description, while a magnificent pair of "Dundreary" whiskers decorated his manly face. With a sigh Jim turned the page, to discover a portrait of his mother, which had been taken on her wedding day. Then followed a long succession of relatives and personal friends, each clad in the same fashion, and nearly all taken in the same constrained attitude. But examine each picture as he would, no representation of the man he wanted could he discover.

"Well, I'm afraid that's all," said Jim to Alice, as he replaced the album in his box. "I am disappointed, though I cannot say that I hoped to be very successful. I shall have to write to Robins and tell him that I have found nothing."

Having relocked the boxes, they descended to the hall once more. It was growing dark, and the dressing bell for dinner had already sounded. They accordingly separated, and went to their respective rooms. If the truth must be confessed, Jim was more disappointed by the failure of his search than he cared to admit.

"It would have been of inestimable value," he said to himself, "to have a portrait of Murbridge just now."

He had tied one end of his tie and was in the act of performing the same operation with the other, when he stopped and stared at the wall before him with half-closed eyes.

"By Jove!" he said, "I believe I've hit it. I think I know where there is a portrait of him."

He recalled a scene that had taken place at Mudrapilla one winter's evening, many years before, when Alice and he were children. The lamp had been lighted, and to amuse them before they went to bed, their father had promised a prize to whichever one of the pair should recognise and describe by name the greater number of the portraits in the very album he had been looking through that afternoon. Jim remembered how on that occasion he had chanced upon a certain *carte de visite*, showing a tall young man leaning, hat in hand, against a marble pillar.

"Who is this, father?" He had enquired for he was not able to recognise the individual portrayed in the picture.

"Do not ask me," returned his father in a tone that the children never forgot, so stern and harsh was it. Then, drawing the portrait from the page, he placed it in the pocket at the end of the book. After that the game had recommenced, but was played with less vigour than before.

"I wonder if it could have been the same man?" said Jim. "I cannot remember father ever having expressed such a dislike for any one else save Murbridge. After dinner I'll go up and endeavour to find it. It was there for many years, for I can recall how I used to creep into the drawing-room and peep at it on the sly, wondering what sort of villainy he had committed that was sufficient to prevent his name being mentioned to us. Poor father, it is certain that he was not deceived in him after all."

Throughout dinner that evening his mind dwelt on the remembrance of that scene at Mudrapilla, and as soon as they rose from the table he begged Alice to excuse him, and went upstairs candle in hand, to recommence his search. He left his sister in the drawing-room, and the household were at supper in the servants' hall, so that, so far as the disposition of the house went, he had all the upper floors to himself. Entering the lumber-room, he knelt down and unlocked the box which contained the album. To take the book from the box, and to turn to the pocket in question was the work of a moment. It had been placed there for the purpose of holding loose photographs, and it extended the whole width of the cover. With a half fear that it might not be contained therein, Jim thrust his hand into the receptacle. He was not to be disappointed this time, however, for a card was certainly there, and he withdrew it and held it up to the light with a feeling of triumph. Yes, it was the picture he remembered, and, better still, *it was the portrait of Richard Murbridge*. Though it had been taken when the latter was a young man, Jim recognised his enemy at once. There was the same crafty look in his eyes, the same carping expression about the mouth. The man who had been so nearly knocked down by the cab on the previous evening was the same person who, in the picture, posed himself so gracefully beside the marble pillar "This must go to Robins to-night," said Jim, to himself, "copies of it can then be distributed broadcast. It will be strange after that if we do not manage to lay hands upon him."

So saying, he replaced the album in the box, locked the latter, and then placed the photograph in his pocket, and prepared to return to Alice once more. As he descended the stairs, he extinguished the candle, for the hanging lamp in the hall below gave sufficient light for him to see his way. He was only a few steps from the bottom when a curious noise, which seemed to come from the gallery above, attracted his attention. It resembled the creaking of a rusty hinge, more than anything else. He had just time to wonder what had occasioned it, when, to his amazement, he became aware of a little black figure passing swiftly along the corridor in the direction of the further wing. A moment later it had vanished, and he was left to place such construction as he pleased upon what he had seen. For a space, during which a man might have counted twenty, he stood as if rooted to the spot, scarcely able to believe the evidence of his senses.

"Good heavens! The Black Dwarf," he muttered to himself. "I must find out what it means."

Then he set off in pursuit.

CHAPTER IX

Hastening round the gallery of the hall, Jim endeavoured to discover some traces of the mysterious visitor, spectre or human, whom he had seen. The corridor, however, leading to the oldest and western portion of the house, was quite empty. Like the remainder of the building, it was panelled with dark oak, some portion of it being curiously, though richly carved. He searched it up and down, stopping every now and then to listen, but save for the wind sighing round the house, and an occasional burst of laughter ascending from the servants' hall, he could hear nothing. At the end of the long corridor a flight of stone steps led to the domestic offices below. These he descended, and having reached the servants' hall, called Wilkins, the butler, to him. When the latter emerged, Jim led him a short distance down the passage before he spoke.

"Wilkins," he said, "do you remember the night when you thought you saw the Black Dwarf on the landing?"

"I shall never forget it, sir," the other replied. "I can never go along that corridor now without a shudder. What about it, sir?"

"Only that I have just seen the figure myself," James replied. "I had been up to the lumber-room, and was descending the stairs when it passed along the further side of the gallery, in the direction of the west corridor. Now, Wilkins, I have come down to find out whether you would be afraid to come upstairs with me in order that we may discover whether we can come to any understanding of the mystery?"

"Yes, sir, of course I will come with you," said Wilkins. "At the same time I am not going to say that I am not a bit frightened, for it would not be the truth. However, sir, I am not going to let you go alone."

"Come along then," said Jim, "and bring a light of some kind with you."

Wilkins procured a candle, and then they ascended to the floor above. As they reached the corridor Jim turned and caught a glimpse of his companion's face. It looked very white and frightened in the dim light.

"Cheer up, my man," said he; "if it's a ghost it won't hurt you, and if it's a human being you and I

should be more than a match for him."

As he said this he opened the door of the first room on the corridor. It was empty, and quite devoid of either the natural or the supernatural.

"Nothing here," said Jim as they passed out into the passage, and into the next room. This was used as a sewing-room for the female servants, and was furnished with a long table and half-a-dozen chairs. They explored it thoroughly, and having done so, voted it above suspicion. The next room was a bedroom, and had only been once used since the Standertons had come into possession of the house. The walls were panelled, and there was a curious recess on the side opposite the door. Jim overhauled each panel, and carefully examined the recess, but without discovering anything suspicious. Thus they proceeded from room to room searching every nook and cranny, and endeavouring in every possible way to account for the creaking noise which had first attracted Jim's attention. The carving of the corridor itself was carefully examined, every panel of the wainscoting was tested, until at last, having reached the gallery of the hall, they were compelled to own themselves beaten. The fact that they had not been able to discover anything only added to Wilkins' belief in the supernatural agency of the Dwarf. Jim, however, had the recollection of that creaking hinge, before mentioned, continually before him. There might be ghostly bodies he argued, but he had never heard of ghostly hinges.

"Well, it doesn't appear as if we are destined to capture him to-night," said Jim, when they had finished their labours. "Now one word of advice; just keep the fact of his appearance to yourself, Wilkins. If the maid-servants come to hear of it we shall have no end of trouble."

Wilkins promised that he would say nothing about the occurrence, and then returned to the Servants' Hall, leaving Jim standing on the gallery ruminating on the behaviour of the figure he had seen.

"One thing is quite certain, and that is the fact that he disappeared in the corridor," he said to himself reflectingly. "Now I wonder where he came from?"

The only room on that side of the gallery then in use was Alice's bedroom, and to this Jim forthwith made his way. It was a strange scene that met his eyes when he opened the door. As he had good reason to know, Alice was always a most methodical and neat young lady; now everything was in confusion. The drawers of the dressing-table stood open and their contents were strewn upon the table and the floor. The writing-table in the further corner of the room was in much the same condition, while the wardrobe doors were open, and the dresses, which usually hung upon the pegs, were piled in a heap upon the floor.

"Good gracious! what on earth does this mean?" said Jim to himself as he gazed upon the scene of confusion. "Has Alice gone mad, or has the Black Dwarf been trying to see how untidy he can make the place? She must not see the room in this condition, or it may frighten her."

Thereupon he placed the candle upon the table and did his best to restore something like order. This task accomplished, he went downstairs to the drawing-room, where he found his sister seated beside the fire reading.

"You have been a long time upstairs," she remarked. "What have you been doing?"

For a moment Jim had forgotten the important discovery he had made. In reply he withdrew the photograph from his pocket and handed it to her. She took it with what was almost a shudder. Somewhat to Jim's surprise, she returned it without commenting upon it. He replaced it in his pocket, also without a word, and then stood before the fire, wondering how he should tell her of what he had seen. He knew it would cause her some uneasiness, but at the same time he felt that he ought to place her upon her guard.

"Alice," he said at last, "do you make a point of locking your bedroom door at night?"

"Lock my bedroom door at night?" she repeated. "No! Why should I?"

"I can't exactly say why you should," he answered, "but I want you to do so for the future. This is a big, lonely house, and we have to remember that you and I are the only people on this side. I wish my room were nearer yours, but as it is not, I think it would be safer if you were to do as I suggest."

"But what makes you say this to-night?" she asked. "What is it, or who is it, you suspect?"

"I suspect nobody," he replied. "You must not think that. But there are such people as burglars, and it would only be an ordinary act of common sense to make yourself safe, while you are permitted the opportunity. Ever since that terrible night I have been nervous about you, and for that reason I have decided upon something, which at first you may think strange."

"What is it?" she enquired.

"For the future," he answered, "I intend that Terence shall sleep in the room next to yours. Then, if any one makes trouble, and help were needed, we should have a sure ally at our beck and call."

"But I hope no one will ever attempt to make trouble, as you describe it," she replied, looking at him with startled eyes as she spoke.

"I also sincerely hope not," he continued. "Now I am going to see Terence about the matter."

He thereupon left her, and went to his study and rang the bell. On the butler making his appearance he instructed him to bring O'Riley at once. A few minutes later Terence put in appearance.

"You had better remain also, Wilkins," said Jim. "Just close the door behind you, in case any one should chance to overhear us. Now, Terence, I have something to say to you. Doubtless, since you have been in the neighbourhood, you have heard certain stories connected with this house. I suppose you have been told that it has the reputation of being haunted."

"Lor' bless you, sir," Terence replied, "I've heard all sorts of yarns about it. There's folk down in the Township yonder, as would no more think of coming up here after dark than they would of lying down in front of the train and having their heads cut off."

"You're not a believer in ghosts, I suppose?"

"Not as I knows on," said Terence candidly. "Though I don't mind sayin' as how there are things as have never been explained to my satisfaction. 'Twas said, as you may remember, sir, as how there was a ghost of an old man to be seen, some nights in the year, waiting to get over at the Thirty-Mile Crossing up the river. Then there was the ghost outside Sydney, that used to get on the fence beside the road, and ask everybody who would listen to him to have him properly buried."

James knew that the man before him was as brave as a lion. He was the possessor of nerves of iron, and did not know the meaning of the word fear.

"Well," he went on after a moment's pause, "the long and the short of the matter is, Terence, some little time ago a maid-servant saw what she thought to be the ghost of the Little Black Dwarf up in the gallery outside. Wilkins here was the next to see it. I thought at the time he must have been mistaken, but this evening I know that he was not, for I have seen it myself."

"You don't mean that, sir?" said Terence, while Wilkins plainly showed the triumph he felt. "And what may he have been like, sir?"

"I had no time to see that," Jim answered. "He disappeared into the western corridor almost as soon as I caught sight of him. At the same time I heard the sound of a creaking hinge. What would you think of that?"

"I should say that it was no ghost, sir," said Terence. "I've been told that this old house is full of secret passages, and, if you ask me, I should say it was somebody playing a game with you."

Wilkins stared disdainfully at him. He was quite convinced in his own mind of the ghostly nature of the mysterious visitor.

"I am inclined to agree with you, Terence," Jim replied. "The more so as, since I parted with you, Wilkins, I have made a curious discovery. At what time was Miss Alice's room made tidy?"

"While you were at dinner, sir, according to custom," replied the butler. "I saw the maid coming out just as I left the dining-room, and she would not be likely to leave it——"

"To leave it in an untidy state?" Jim put in.

"Of course she would not, sir," the other replied. "She would hear of it from the housekeeper if she did. No, she's a nice, steady girl, sir, and I'm told she does her work to the best of her ability."

"Well, it seems curious that when I entered the room after you had left me, I found it in a state of the wildest confusion. The contents of the drawers of the dressing-table were lying scattered upon the floor, as were the dresses in the wardrobe. Now I feel quite certain in my own mind that it was from Miss Alice's bedroom that the figure I saw emerged. I am equally sure of one thing, and that is that it is no ghost—at least," and he added this with a smile, "no respectable ghost, of course, would dream of playing such tricks with a lady's wearing apparel."

"Then, sir, whom do you suspect?" Wilkins enquired. "I can assure you that none of the staff would dare to take such a liberty."

"I am quite sure of that," Jim replied. "Yet the fact remains that somebody must be, and is, responsible for it. Now what I intend to do is to lay myself out to capture that somebody, and to make an example of him when I have got him. For that reason, Terence, I am going to ask you to sleep in the house, in the room next to that occupied by Miss Alice. It will go hard, then, if between us we cannot lay our hands upon the gentleman, whoever he may be, who is playing these tricks upon us."

Terence willingly agreed to the proposal, and that night occupied the room in question. His watchfulness availed him nothing, however, for no further sign of the Black Dwarf.

Next morning Robins received the photograph of Murbridge, and from that moment Jim awaited tidings from him in a fever of expectation. Day after day, however, went by, and still no good news came to reward his patience. The only consolation he derived was from sundry mysterious interviews which he had with Helen in a wooded corner of the park. With the cunning of lovers they had arranged a plan of meeting, and those little *tête-à-têtes* were to Jim as the breath of life. No sooner was one at an end than he hungered for the next. But he was destined ere long to receive a fright, such as he had never received in his life before. Winter was fast approaching,

and the afternoons drew in quickly. When he reached the rendezvous on this occasion it was nearly five o'clock, and almost dark. Helen had arrived there before him, and he discovered her pacing up and down the little glade, in what was plainly an agitated frame of mind.

"Oh, I am so thankful that you have come, Jim dear," she said, as she came forward to greet him. "I have been counting the minutes until I should see you."

"Why, what on earth is the matter?" he asked, placing his arm round her waist and drawing her to him. "You are excited about something. Tell me, dear, what it is."

"Something so dreadful that it has upset me terribly," she answered. "I scarcely know how to tell you."

He led her towards a fallen tree upon which they had often seated themselves on previous occasions.

"Now let me know everything," he said.

She looked about over her shoulder in a frightened way. Then she began almost in a whisper:

"Jim, what I have to say to you concerns my grandfather. I am very much alarmed about him."

"I hope he has not been making himself disagreeable to you again on my account," Jim replied. Then he continued angrily: "If so, I think I shall have to call upon him."

"Hush, hush," she said, "do not speak so loud, you do not know who may be listening."

"I will be all discretion, dear, now go on!"

"Well, this afternoon I was playing the piano in the drawing-room when a message was brought to me by Isaac to the effect that my grandfather desired to see me in his study at once. I went to him there, to find him seated at his desk as usual, at work upon his book, the 'History of the County,' you know. He signed to me to be seated by the fire, and when I had done so resumed his writing, not putting down his pen until I had been some minutes in the room. Then he looked at me with a very thoughtful face, in which I imagined I could detect an expression that I had never seen there before. Taken altogether, his manner frightened me. It was so strange, and so utterly unlike himself, that I did not know what to think. Then he took off his spectacles, and laid them on the desk before him, remarking as he did so, 'I am given to understand that you are still in correspondence with Mr. Standerton, Miss?' Then, before I could answer him, he continued—'and I hear that you have secret meetings with him in the park. Is this so?' I admitted that it was, and went on to say that as we were betrothed I could see no harm in it."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He rose from his chair and paced the room for a few minutes without speaking. Then he re-seated himself. As he did so he said, 'You are *not* engaged, and you know it as well as I do. Never let me hear you say such a thing again.' After that he began to pace the room once more, and finally hurled at me such a torrent of abuse that I was almost stupefied by it. He accused me of the most outrageous things, until I could bear it no longer, and rose to leave him. By this time, as you may suppose, I had come to the conclusion that the life of retirement he had lived for so long had turned his brain. No man could have said the things he did without his mind being a little affected."

"My darling, this is more serious than you suppose," said Jim anxiously.

"But you have not heard the worst yet. It appears that before I had entered the room he had drawn up a document which he now desired me to sign. It was to the effect that I would bind myself never to speak to you or see you again, and contained my promise that I would abandon all thought of ever becoming your wife. 'Sign that,' he said, 'or the consequences will be more terrible than you suppose. I am an old man, but remember even old men can be dangerous at times.' With that he handed me a pen, but I refused to take it."

"And then?"

"I cannot tell you how he looked at me as I said it. I could never have believed that his face could have undergone such a change. But I still refused to sign the document, and at last he discovered that it was impossible to force me to do so. 'Very well,' he said, 'since you refuse, the consequences of your action be upon your own head.' With that, opening the door, he bade me leave him. You can imagine for yourself how thankful I was to do so."

"And then you came on here," said Jim. "You were most imprudent, dear. He may try to revenge himself upon you when you return to the house."

"I don't think he will hurt me," she replied. "I am only afraid for you."

"There is no need for fear on my account," Jim answered, with a short laugh. "I do not think it is possible for the poor old gentleman to do me any harm. But the idea that you are shut up in the house with a madman, for a madman he must surely be, frightens me beyond all measure. You must see for yourself that you have no longer any reason to remain with him. He has threatened you, and that will be sufficient excuse for you to leave him."

"No, no," she answered, shaking her head. "If he is losing his reason, he should not be blamed,

and it is all the more necessary for his comfort that I shall remain with him. I feel sure I shall be quite safe. He is angry with me at present, but he will calm down. It is above all necessary, however, that you should not come near him. It will only irritate him and make him more excited than before. Think how good he has been to me, dear, for the past eight years, and try not to be angry with him."

"But I am not angry with him," said Jim. "I am only trying to be just. One thing is quite certain, I shall know no peace as long as you are in that house with him."

"Will it satisfy you if I give you my promise that, should he become very bad, I will at once send for you?"

"If you persist on going back there, I suppose I must be content with that promise," Jim replied, but with no good grace. "And now you had better be running in. If he finds that you are out, he might suppose that you are with me, and have another paroxysm of rage. In that case there is no knowing what might happen."

Helen accordingly bade him good-bye and left him, returning by the path to the Dower House. Jim watched her until she had disappeared and then turned homeward with a heavy heart. He felt that he had already enough anxiety upon his shoulders without this additional burden. He had never trusted Mr. Bursfield, but he was at a loss to understand his present malignity, unless it were to be accounted for by the fact that his brain had given way.

When he reached his home he let himself in by a side door, and made his way to the drawing-room, where he found Alice.

"How late you are," she said. "The gong sounded some time ago. You will scarcely have time to dress."

"Then dinner must wait," replied Jim. "Alice, I have bad news for you."

"Why, what is the matter now?" she asked.

Jim thereupon proceeded to furnish her with an abstract of his interview with Helen. She heard him without a word, but it was to be easily seen how distressed she was for her friend.

"My dear Jim," she remarked when he had finished, "this is indeed serious. What do you propose doing?"

"I scarcely know," Jim answered. "The case is an extremely delicate one. The old man has taken a decided dislike to me, and if I interfere between Helen and himself it will have the effect of adding to his wrath and do more harm than good. And yet I cannot allow her to remain there, and perhaps run a daily risk of her life."

"What does she think about it herself?"

"She has an absurd notion that her duty lies in standing by Bursfield in his trouble. That, of course, is all very well in its way, but no one could possibly expect her to turn herself into a keeper for a madman."

Alice, seeing the tired look on his face, crossed the room and placed her arm round his neck.

"Dear old Jim," she said, "you must not worry yourself too much about it. All will come right in the end. Helen is a girl of very marked character, and it is quite probable that, under her influence, Mr. Bursfield's condition may improve. Were I in your place, I should trust matters to her for a little while. You know that she loves you, and you may be quite sure that she will keep her promise, and let you know directly anything is very wrong. But there! what am I thinking about? I should have told you when you first came in that there is a telegram waiting for you. Here it is."

As she spoke she took an envelope from the mantelpiece, and handed it to him.

"I wonder who it is from?" he remarked as he tore it open.

Having withdrawn the contents, he read as follows:—

"Standerton, Childerbridge.

"Murbridge found. Come at once.

"13, Upper Bellington Street. ROBINS."

CHAPTER X

"Murbridge found," said Jim to himself as he stood holding the telegram in his hand. "At last, thank goodness, at last!"

Alice, however, said nothing. She had more of her dead father's forgiving spirit in her, and she was aware that he would have been the last to have desired vengeance on his assailant.

"What do you mean to do?" she asked.

"Catch the 8.40 train up to Town," said Jim, "and see Murbridge as soon as possible. The telegram says 'Come at once.' That is sufficient evidence that there is no time to be lost. Perhaps he has been wounded in a desperate struggle with the police. In fact, there are a thousand possibilities."

He gave the necessary instructions for dinner to be hurried forward, his bag to be packed, and the carriage to be ready immediately afterwards to take him to the station.

"You will not mind being left alone for one evening, will you, Alice?" he said to his sister, half apologetically. "Terence will be in the house and will keep a careful eye upon you. If you think you will be lonely I will take you up to Town with me, drop you at the hotel, and then I will go on to Upper Bellington Street."

Alice, however, would not hear of this arrangement. She declared that she would be quite content to remain where she was.

"Besides," she said, "if any news were to come from Helen, I should be here to receive it. It would not be wise for both of us to be away at this juncture."

Jim thereupon went out and sent word to Terence to come to him in his study.

"I am called up to Town to-night, Terence," he said, "and I am going to leave Miss Alice in your charge. I know she could not be in a better."

"You may be very sure of that, sir," Terence replied; "I wouldn't stand by and see anything happen to Miss Alice, and I think she knows it."

"I am sure she does," Jim returned, and then went on to explain the reason for the journey he was about to undertake.

An hour and a-half later he was seated in a railway carriage and being whirled along towards London at something like fifty miles an hour. If ever a young man in this world was furnished with material for thought, James Standerton that evening was that one. There was his errand to London in the first place to be considered, the singular behaviour of the Black Dwarf a few nights before for another, and the declaration that Helen had made to him that afternoon for a third. In the light of this last catastrophe the finding of the man whom he felt sure was his father's murderer sank into comparative insignificance.

What if the madman should wreak his vengeance upon her? What if in a sudden fit of fury he should drive her from his house? If the latter were to come to pass, however, he felt certain that the place she would fly to would be the Manor House, and in that case Alice would take her in and Terence would see that she was safe from the old man's fury.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when he reached Paddington. Hailing a cab, he bade the man drive him first to his hotel, where he engaged his usual room. When he had consulted a directory, he made his way into the street again. His cabman, whom he had told to wait, professed to be familiar with Upper Bellington Street, but later confessed his entire ignorance of its locality. Jim set him right, and then, taking his place in the cab, bade him drive him thither with all speed. Once more they set off, down Piccadilly, through Leicester Square, and so by way of Long Acre into Holborn. Then the route became somewhat more complicated. Through street after street they passed until Jim lost all idea of the direction in which they were proceeding. Some of the streets were broad and stately, others squalid and dejected, some wood paved, others cobblestones, in which the rain that had fallen an hour previous stood in filthy puddles.

How long they were driving, Jim had no sort of idea, nor could he have told you in what portion of the town he was then in. At last however they entered a street which appeared to have no ending. It was illumined by flaring lamps from coster barrows, drawn up beside the pavement, while the night was made hideous by the raucous cries of the vendors of winkles baked potatoes and roasted chestnuts.

"This is Upper Bellington Street, sir," said the cabman, through the shutter. "At what number shall I pull up?"

"Thirteen," Jim replied; "but you will never be able to find it in this crowd. Put me down anywhere here, and I'll look for it myself."

The cabman did as he was directed, and presently Jim found himself making his way along the greasy pavement—which even at that late hour was crowded with pedestrians—in search of the number in question. It was as miserable an evening as ever he could remember. A thin drizzle was falling; the sights and sounds around him were sordid and depressing in the extreme; while the very errand that had brought him to that neighbourhood was of a kind calculated to lower the spirits of the average man to below the mental zero.

After an examination of the numbers of the various houses and shops in the vicinity, he came to the conclusion that Thirteen must be situated at the further end of the street. This proved to be the case. When he reached it, he knocked upon the grimy door, which was immediately opened to him by a police officer.

"What is your name?" asked that official.

"James Standerton," Jim replied. "I received a telegram from Detective-sergeant Robins this

evening asking me to come up."

"That's all right, sir," the man answered. "Come in; we have been expecting you this hour or more."

"But how is it your prisoner is here, and not at the police station?"

"I doubt if he'll ever trouble any police station again," returned the officer. "He's just about done for. In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if he wasn't dead by now."

"What is the matter with him?"

"Pneumonia, sir, the doctor says. He says he can't last out the night."

At that moment Robins himself appeared at the head of the dirty stairs that descended to the hall, and invited him to ascend. Jim accordingly did so.

"Good evening, Mr. Standerton," he said, "I regret having to inform you that we have caught our bird too late. We discovered him at midday, and he was then at the point of death. He was too ill to be moved, and as he had no one to look after him, we got a doctor and a nurse in at once. But I fear it is a hopeless case."

"Will it be possible for me to see him, do you think?"

"Oh yes, sir; he's been calling for you ever since we found him, so I took the liberty of telegraphing to you to come up."

"I am glad you did," said Jim. "There are some questions I must put to him."

"In that case, please step this way, sir, and I'll speak to the doctor. You shall not be kept waiting any longer than I can help."

He led Jim along the landing, then opened a door and disappeared into a room at the further end. While he was absent Jim looked about him and took stock of his position. The small gas-jet that lit up the well of the staircase, served to show the dirty walls in all their dreariness. The sound of voices reached him from above and below, while the cries of the hawkers in the street came faintly in and added to the general squalor. Then as he stood there he recalled that first meeting with Murbridge beside the Darling River. In his mind's eye he saw the evening sun illumining the gums on the opposite bank, the soft breeze ruffling the surface of the river, an old pelican fishing for his evening meal in the back-water, and lastly, Richard Murbridge stretched out beside his newly-lighted fire. This would be their third meeting; and in what a place, and under what terribly changed circumstances! He was indulging in this reverie when the door opened once more, and a small, grey-haired man emerged.

"Good evening, my dear sir," he said, "I understand that you're Mr. Standerton, the son of the man the poor wretch inside is suspected of having murdered. However, they have captured him too late."

"You mean, I suppose, that he will not live?" said Jim, interrogatively.

"If he sees the light of morning I shall be very much surprised," said the doctor; "in point of fact he is sinking fast. You wish to see him, do you not?"

"I do," said Jim. "There is some mystery connected with him that I am very desirous of clearing up."

"I see," said the medico, "and in that case I presume that you would wish to see him alone?"

"If you can permit it," Jim replied.

"I think it might be managed," answered the other. "But if you will stay here for a moment I will let you know."

He returned to the room, and when he stood before Jim once more, invited him to follow him. He did so, to find himself in a small apartment, some ten feet long by eight feet wide. It was uncarpeted, and its furniture consisted of a broken chair, a box on which stood an enamelled basin, and a bed which was covered with frowsy blankets. On this bed lay a man whom, in spite the change that had come over him, Jim recognised at once as being Richard Murbridge. A nurse was standing beside him, and Robins was at the foot of the bed.

"Do not make the interview any longer than you can help," whispered the doctor, and then beckoned to the detective and the nurse to leave the room with him. They did so, and the door closed behind them. Then Jim went forward and seated himself upon the chair by the bedside of the dying man. The latter looked up at him with a scowl.

"So they sent for you after all?" he said in a voice that was little above a whisper. "They even took that trouble?"

"I received the message just before dinner, and came away immediately afterwards."

"Left your luxurious mansion to visit Upper Bellington Street? How self-denying of you! Good Lord, to think that it should be my luck to die in such a hole as this! I suppose you know that I *am* dying?"

"I have been informed that your recovery is unlikely," Jim replied. "That fact made me doubly anxious to speak to you."

There was a little pause, during which Murbridge watched him intently.

"You mean about the murder, I suppose?" he whispered.

"Yes!" Jim answered. "God forgive me for feeling revengeful at such a moment, but you took from me and my sister the kindest and best father that man ever had."

"You still think that it was I who committed the murder, then?"

"I am certain of it," Jim answered. "You were at the house that night; you cherished a deadly hatred against my father; you vowed that you would be even with him, happen what might, and you ran away from Childerbridge immediately afterwards. Surely those facts are black enough to convict any man?"

"They would have gone some way with a Jury, I have no doubt," the other replied. "But, as a matter of fact, I did *not* commit the murder. Bitterly as I hated your father, I am not responsible for his death."

Jim looked at him incredulously.

"Ah, I can see you do not believe me. Now, listen, James Standerton, and pay attention to what I say, for I shan't be able to say it again. I've been a pretty tough sort of customer all my life. There have not been many villainies I haven't committed, and still fewer that I wouldn't have committed if they tended to my advantage. The record I shall carry aloft with me will not bear much looking into. But on the word of a dying man, may"—(here he swore an awful oath which I feel would be better not set down)—"if I am not absolutely guiltless of your father's death. Will you believe me now?"

But still Jim looked incredulous.

"Ah, I can see that you still doubt me. How can I convince you? Think for a moment, what have I to gain or lose by saying such a thing? I shall be gone hence in a few hours, perhaps minutes. Even if I were the murderer, the police could not take me now. With old Bony behind me I can laugh at them and at you."

"But why did you run away if you were innocent?"

"Because I saw what a hole I had got myself into. You remember that I went up to the house and had an interview with your father? He turned me out, and in the hearing of yourself and the servant I vowed to be even with him. That vow I certainly should have kept, had not somebody else that night stepped in and took the case out of my hands. When I left the house, I went for a long walk. I knew my own temper, and also that I dared not trust myself with human beings just then. Good heavens, man! You don't know how desperate I was. I had followed your father to England, and the voyage had taken nearly all my money. What little was left I spent in liquor, and then went down to Childerbridge to screw more from your father. He refused point blank to help me except on certain conditions, which I would not comply with. Knowing his stubbornness of old, I cleared out of Childerbridge by the first train, vowing that I would be even with him by some means. Then in an evening paper I saw that he had been murdered. In a flash I realised my position, and saw that if I was not very careful I should find myself in Queer Street. Then came your reward, and from that moment I hid myself like a 'possum in a gum log. I didn't care very much about my miserable neck, but—but—well, you see, strange though it may seem, I was a gentleman once."

Jim did not know what to say. If this man's tale were true, and it bore the impression of truth, then they had been on a false scent from the first.

"I wonder what your mother would have said had she been alive to see it all," said Murbridge, after a pause. "Good Lord, to think that Jane Standerton's brother should end his days in a hole like this."

"What?" cried Jim, scarcely believing that he had heard aright. "Whose brother did you say?"

"Why, your own mother's to be sure," returned Murbridge. "Do you mean to say that your father never told you after all?"

"Can such a thing be possible?" Jim continued, in an awed voice.

"Yes; I am Jane Standerton's brother sure enough. If you look in that old bag under the bed, you will find evidence enough to convince you of that fact. My real name is Richard McCalmont, though you wouldn't think it to look at me, would you? That was how I got my hold upon your father, don't you see? I was convicted of forgery at the age of twenty-one"—(the man spoke as if he were proud of it)—"and did my three years. For a while after that I went straight, but at twenty-six there was another little mistake, with the details of which I will not trouble you, but which was sufficient, nevertheless, to again cause me to spend some years in durance vile. At the age of thirty-two they tried to convict me of an Insurance Fraud, combined with a suspicion of murder. They would have done so but for certain technicalities that were brought forward by my Counsel, who, by the way, was employed by your father. You see I am perfectly candid with you."

"And you are my mother's brother?" said Jim slowly, as if he were still trying to believe it.

"And your father's brother-in-law, too. And your uncle. Don't forget that, James," said the other. "Lord! How your father hated me! On certain occasions I made it my custom to call upon him in a friendly way. At the end of my last term of exile, I found that my sister was dead, and that you and Alice were growing up. It was my desire to play the part of the kindly uncle. But your father made himself objectionable, and vowed that if ever I dared to betray my relationship to you he would cut off supplies. As there was never a time in my life in which I did not stand in need of money, I was perforce compelled to deprive you of a life's history that would certainly have proved interesting, if not instructive, to you. However, I now have the satisfaction of knowing that I shall not die without having accomplished that task."

Here he was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing, which left him speechless for upwards of a minute. As for Jim, he was thinking of the mental agony his father must have suffered, year after year, with this despicable creature, the brother of the woman he loved so fondly, continually holding this threat over his children's heads.

"God help you for a miserable man," he muttered at last. "Why didn't my poor father tell me this before? He might have known that this would not have made the least difference."

"He was too proud," replied the other, when he recovered his speech. "Well, it doesn't matter much now, and in a little while it will matter still less. The police and I have been on the most friendly terms all our lives, and it gives one a homely sort of feeling to know that even my last moments will be watched over by their tender care."

He tried to laugh at his own hideous joke, but the attempt was a failure.

"For my mother's sake, is there anything I can do for you?" Jim enquired, drawing a little closer to the bed.

The other only shook his head. The effort he had made to talk had proved too much for him, and had materially hastened the end.

Seeing that his condition was growing desperate, Jim rose and went in search of the doctor. He found him in an apartment close at hand.

"I believe he is sinking fast," said Jim. "I think you had better go to him."

The doctor accordingly returned to the sick-room, leaving Jim alone with Robins.

"Well, sir," asked the latter, "did he confess?"

"We have been deceived," said Jim. "The man is as innocent of the crime as I am. I am convinced of that!"

"God bless my soul, you don't mean to say so," said the astonished detective, and asked the same questions Jim had put to the dying man. Jim answered them as the other had done.

"Well, this is the most extraordinary case I have ever had to do with," said Robins. "If Murbridge had wanted to place a halter round his neck he could not have gone to work in a better fashion. If he is not the man, then where are we to look for the real murderer?"

"Goodness only knows," replied Jim. "The case is now shrouded in even greater mystery than before."

Half an hour went by, then an hour, and still they waited. At two o'clock the doctor rejoined them.

"It is all over," he said solemnly. "He is dead."

CHAPTER XI

Between the time of Murbridge's funeral and his own arrival at Childerbridge, Jim had plenty of leisure to consider his position, and to make up his mind as to how much he should let Alice know of the other's story.

After mature consideration, he decided that he had better tell her everything. Yet it had been such a painful shock to himself that he could well understand how it would affect her.

It was mid-morning when he arrived at Childerbridge, and Alice had walked down to the gates to meet him. He alighted from the carriage on seeing her, and they strolled across the park together.

"I have been so anxious to hear from you," she said, linking her arm through her brother's. "What have you to tell me? Did you find that wretched man?"

"Yes, I found him," he answered, "and he was dying."

She paused for a moment before she put the next question.

"And did he confess?"

"No," said Jim. "I firmly believe I wronged him in suspecting him of—of what happened. But I made another discovery, and one, I fear, that will cause you some astonishment and not a little pain. I learnt from him that his name was not Murbridge, but McCalmont."

"McCalmont?" she echoed, as if she did not understand. "But that was our mother's maiden name."

"Exactly," said Jim, "and he was her brother!"

Alice looked at him in horrified surprise.

"Oh, Jim," she answered, "surely such a thing cannot be possible?"

"I am afraid it is only too true," Jim replied. "His story was most circumstantial. He was our mother's youngest brother, and was, I am very much afraid, a disgrace to the family."

"But if he had been our mother's brother, why did he entertain such a deadly hatred for our father?" she asked.

"For the simple reason that father had been successful, while he had been the reverse," Jim replied. "I rather fancy the poor old governor had helped him out of one or two of his worst scrapes, and such being the perverse nature of mankind, he hated him for the very benefits he had received from him."

They walked some distance in silence.

"Poor, wretched man," said Alice at last. "Oh, Jim, you don't know how thankful I am that he was not the author of that terrible crime. And now, before we say anything further, there's one thing I must talk to you about."

"What is that?" he enquired.

"It is about Helen," she answered. "I met her in the village this morning. I don't want to frighten you, but she is looking very ill. She seems to have come to look years older within the last few days. There is a frightened expression on her face that haunts me even now."

Jim was troubled. This was bad news indeed.

"Did she give you any reason for it?" he enquired.

"She tried to account for it by saying that her grandfather had not been at all well lately, and that she had had rather a trying time with him."

"Alice," said Jim, after the short pause that ensued, "I have come to the conclusion that old Bursfield is insane. Helen did not tell you, I suppose, that he uttered all sorts of threats against me the other day. For some reason or another he has taken an intense dislike to me."

"She said nothing about it," Alice answered. "I am sorry for her. What is best to be done, do you think?"

"It is difficult to say," Jim answered. "One thing is quite certain. She cannot go on living with him if he is to continue in this strain. Under such circumstances there is a limit even to a woman's fidelity. I must endeavour to see her as soon as possible."

"Would it do for me to go and see her, do you think?" asked Alice. "I should then be able to tell you something definite about Mr. Bursfield's condition."

Jim shook his head.

"No," he said, "such a thing would not be wise. I must think the matter over and see what is best to be done."

By the time he reached the house he had arrived at a conclusion.

"Do you remember, Alice," he said, "that clever young doctor that we met at the Caltrops on the evening that we dined with them, soon after our arrival in England? His name was Weston. Mrs. Caltrop declared that, before many years were past, he would be a recognised authority on mental diseases."

"I remember him quite well," Alice answered. "He took me in to dinner, and was so interested in Australia. He had a brother in Sydney, I think. What about him?"

"Well, I have made up my mind to telegraph to Mrs. Caltrop for his address, and having got it, to wire and ask him to come down and see Mr. Bursfield. He would be able to tell me then whether or not it is safe for Helen to go on living with him. If he says not, then she must leave him at once."

"I should think it would be a very good plan, provided always that you can get Mr. Bursfield to see him. You will find that the difficulty."

"Not at all," Jim answered. "I have a scheme that I think will answer. At any rate we will try it."

A telegram was accordingly despatched to Mrs. Caltrop, asking her to forward the address of the doctor in question. This done, Jim sent for Terence.

"Well, Terence," he said, when the latter made his appearance, "any sign of the Black Dwarf during my absence?"

"Never a one, sir," Terence replied. "I kept my eyes and ears open all night, and waited about after dark, but there's not been so much as a mouse stirring."

"I am glad to hear it," Jim remarked, and then gave Terence a brief description of his visit to London, and of what he had discovered there.

"Then if it wasn't he as did it," said Terence, "who could it have been?"

Before he answered, Jim looked at the door, as if to make sure that it was closed.

"Terence," he said, "I am gradually coming to the conclusion that the Black Dwarf, whoever he may be, was responsible for it."

"I've thought of that myself, sir," Terence replied.

"In the first place, he was seen by one of the maid-servants in the gallery on the night that my father was murdered."

"Don't they say, sir, as how another gentleman was murdered in the same way in this house?"

"I believe there is some legend to that effect," said Jim, "but how true it is, I cannot say. I don't think, however, we need take that circumstance into consideration."

"Then what are we to do, sir?"

"Watch and wait until we catch him," Jim replied. "When we've done that we shall be satisfied whether he is flesh or blood or not, and if he is, by what right he dares to enter my house."

There was a lengthy pause, then with a diffidence that was somewhat unusual with him, Terence said:

"You'll excuse me, sir, I hope, for saying such a thing, but between you and me, sir, I cannot help thinking that we was happier at Mudrapilla."

Jim heaved a heavy sigh. A longing to be back in the old home, and to be engaged in the pursuits he had been brought up to from a boy, had been with him a great deal of late.

"Yes," he said. "I think we were happier at Gundawurra. I must go back there soon, Terence, if only for a whiff of Bush air. I am very much afraid that playing the fine gentleman in England does not suit me."

When the other had left the room, Jim lay back in his chair and fell into a reverie. He closed his eyes, and was transported back to the old home where he had been born, and where he had spent his happiest days. How sweet it would be to settle down there some day, with Helen as his wife. He tried hard to realise the day's work upon the run; the home-coming at night, to find Helen at the gate waiting for him; the evenings spent in the cool verandah, with the moon rising above the river timber. Then he came back to the very real anxieties of the present. An hour later a message came from Mrs. Caltrop. It was as follows:

"Doctor Weston, Harley Street."

Whereupon he took another telegraph form and wired to the doctor to the effect that he would be grateful if he could make it convenient to travel down to Childerbridge that afternoon. In order that the latter might understand from whom the message emanated, he added the words, "Met you at dinner at Mrs. Caltrop's." Luncheon was scarcely finished before a message arrived from the doctor saying that he would endeavour to be at Childerbridge at four o'clock. Accordingly at half-past three Jim drove to the railway station to await his coming. Punctual to the moment the train steamed into the station, and he looked about among the passengers for the man he wanted.

Presently he descried him coming along the platform—a tall, good-looking man, resembling a soldier more than a Harley Street physician.

"Mr. Standerton, I believe," he said as he approached Jim.

"And you are Doctor Weston, of course," the latter answered with a smile.

"Now," said the doctor, "I will commence, Mr. Standerton, by saying that it is absolutely necessary that I should catch the six o'clock train back to London."

"I will arrange that you do so," Jim replied, and then the doctor surrendered his ticket and they strolled out of the station. "Now, perhaps, I had better tell you my reasons for asking you to come down to-day. Shall we walk a little way along the road. I have no desire to be overheard. I will now make you acquainted with the facts of the case, in order that you may go direct to the house of the gentleman I want you to see."

"He is not a member of your own family, then?" the doctor enquired.

"No, he is no sort of relation. In fact, I had not seen him until a few months ago."

They paused beside a gate and faced each other.

"I gather that it is rather an unusual case?" the doctor remarked.

"A very unusual one," Jim replied. "The matter stands in this way. I am engaged to a young lady who is the adopted granddaughter of the gentleman in question."

The doctor nodded, but said nothing. He listened attentively, while Jim told his tale, explained his fears for Helen's safety, and described the threats the old gentleman had made use of concerning himself.

When he had finished Dr. Weston drew some lines on the ground with the point of his umbrella, as if he were working out a difficult calculation.

"This is certainly a singular case, Mr. Standerton," he said at last. "You are not connected with this gentleman in any way, and he, not approving of your marriage with his granddaughter, has forbidden you his house. The young lady's only reason for believing him to be a little weak in his intellect is his treatment of you. I really do not know whether, under the circumstances, I should be justified in seeing him."

Jim's heart sank. He had not looked at the matter from this point of view. Observing his disappointment, the doctor smiled.

"Nevertheless," he continued, "I will see him, provided you will give me your promise that my report shall be considered a purely confidential one."

"Am I to understand that I am not to acquaint Miss Decie or my sister with your decision?"

"Of course, I will allow you to tell them, and equally, of course, provided it goes no further."

"In that case I will give you my promise most willingly," said Jim.

"And now the question comes as to how I can obtain my interview with him."

"I have thought out a plan that should enable you to do that," Jim replied. "I happen to know that for a long time past he has been engaged in writing a history of the neighbourhood, and my house in particular which at one time was the property of his family."

"Quite so; and the ruins a mile or two back, what are they called?"

"Clevedon Castle," Jim answered. "I believe it was destroyed by Cromwell."

"That should answer my purpose. And now with your permission I will drive to his house—not in your carriage, but in a cab. I shall see you afterwards, I presume?"

"I will wait for you here, or at my own house, whichever you please," said Jim.

"Your house, I think, would be better," the doctor answered. "I will drive there directly I leave Mr.—. By-the-way, you have not told me his name or given me his address."

Jim furnished him with both, and then the doctor hailed a fly and drove away.

It was nearly half-past five before Jim was informed by Wilkins that Dr. Weston had called, and that he had been shown to the study.

He immediately proceeded thither, to find the doctor sitting before the fire.

"Well, Mr. Standerton," he began, "I have seen Mr. Bursfield, and have had rather a curious interview with him."

"And what decision have you come to?"

"Well, I think your supposition is correct. Not to be technical, I might say that he is not really responsible for his actions. While we discussed archæology, and the history of the neighbourhood, he was rational enough, but when I chanced to touch upon this house, and your connection with it, his whole demeanour changed. If I were in your place I should avoid him as much as possible, for there can be no doubt that he would do you a mischief if he could. As for Miss Decie, I would not advise you to persuade her to leave him, at least not at present. It would in all probability immediately produce unfavourable results, and in so doing might snap the frail link that still connects him with Sanity. The influence she exerts over him, where you are not concerned, is undoubtedly a beneficial one."

"Am I to consider that she is safe with him?"

"I should say so," the doctor replied. "Of course, if he has many more of these paroxysms of rage it might be necessary for her to leave him. But she must be the best judge of that. Doubtless you can arrange that with her. And now I must be getting back to the railway station; if I wish to catch my train I have not much time to lose."

"I am exceedingly obliged to you, Doctor Weston," said Jim gratefully. "I cannot say that you have made my mind easier, but you have at least let me know exactly how matters stand with Mr. Bursfield."

"I am glad to have been of service," said the doctor.

James handed him an envelope containing his fee, and escorted him to the door. When he had seen him depart he returned to the drawing-room and communicated his intelligence to his

sister.

"Poor Helen," said Alice, "it is no wonder that she looks anxious. What will you do now, Jim?"

"I must take the night to think the matter over," he answered. "Since the old man is undoubtedly mad, and not only mad, but dangerously so, I cannot bear to contemplate her remaining with him, and yet I have no desire to hasten the crisis."

All the evening Jim brooded over the matter, imagining all sorts of dangers for the woman he loved. At last the time came for them to retire to rest. He was in the act of lighting Alice's candle in the hall, when the sound of steps on the gravel path outside attracted his attention.

"Good gracious!" cried Jim, "who on earth can it be at this time of the night?"

So saying, he hastened to the door. The lights from the hall shone on the steps, and showed him Helen Decie, standing, bareheaded, before him. For a moment the shock at seeing her there at such an hour, and in such a plight, deprived him of speech. Alice was the first to break the silence.

"Helen, my dear girl," she cried, "what does this mean?"

Then Helen stepped into the hall, and James closed the door behind her. He had scarcely done so, before she gave a little cry and fell to the floor in a dead faint. Picking her up, Jim carried her to the big settee in the centre.

"My poor girl," he cried, "what has he done to you?" Then, turning to Alice, he added, "What can have happened?"

She did not answer him, but sped upstairs to her bedroom, to presently return with a bottle of smelling salts. Under their restorative influence, consciousness very soon returned, and Helen looked about her in a dazed fashion, as if she could not realise where she was.

"Do you feel well enough to tell what has taken place, dear?" Jim asked, when she had so far recovered as to be able to sit up. "What has brought you here bareheaded at this time of night?"

"My grandfather has turned me out of his house," she answered falteringly.

"Turned you out of the house?" repeated both Jim and Alice together. Then Alice added: "Surely not? He ought to be turned out himself."

"You must not be angry with him," said Helen. "I really don't think he knows what he is doing."

"But this is an unheard-of thing," Jim said angrily. "He must have taken leave of his senses."

"He accused me of being in league with you to poison him, and bade me come to an instant decision as to whether I would give you up or leave the house."

"And my noble girl refused to give me up?" said James, kissing her hand.

"Helen acted nobly," said Alice. "Never mind, dear, you know where your real friends are, don't you?"

"But whatever shall I do?" the girl put in. "He bade me leave the house and never come back again."

"We will arrange all that to-morrow," Jim replied. "For to-night, Alice will take care of you. Do not worry, dear heart, all will come right in the end."

Then he proceeded to inform her of Dr. Weston's visit that afternoon, and of the report that gentleman had given of the old gentleman's mental condition.

"I cannot tell why," she said, "but I had some sort of suspicion that he came for that purpose. Poor grandfather, how sad it is to think of his being like this. Since he does not know what he is doing, we should not be angry with him for acting as he did."

At this juncture Alice departed to make arrangements for her friend's comfort for the night.

"Oh, Jim dear, what do you think will become of me?" Helen asked. "Think for me, for I cannot think for myself."

"I think I can hazard a very good guess what your fate will be," said Jim. "To-morrow morning I shall go up to London to obtain a special license, and the day after you shall become my wife."

CHAPTER XII

Unexpected as the events of the evening had been, Jim Standerton, as he stood in his bedroom before retiring to rest, could not declare that he altogether regretted the turn they had taken. On the morrow he would go to London, and afterwards, armed with the Law's authority, he would make Helen Decie his wife without delay. From that moment Mr. Bursfield might do his worst. Before retiring to his room he had visited Terence, and had received from him a positive

assurance that so far all was right for the night. Knowing that he might trust the latter implicitly, he had given him an account of what had happened that evening.

"The sooner, sir, they put that old man under lock and key the better it will be for everybody," said Terence. "Let him just come playing his little game round here, and he'll have me on his track like a Nyall blackfellow."

Half-an-hour later, Jim was in bed and asleep, dreaming that he was back in the Bush once more, and that he and Terence were chasing wild horses through a mountain range, and that, on the foremost horse, Helen was seated, clinging to his mane, as if for dear life. He was galloping after her as fast as his horse could carry him, when suddenly a hand clutched him by the throat, and tried to lift him out of the saddle.

At that moment, however, he woke to find that this was no dream, but the most horrible reality he had ever known in his life. Bony fingers were clutching tightly at his windpipe, rendering it impossible for him to breathe. He endeavoured to rise and to seize his assailant, whoever he might be, and throw him off. But his efforts were unavailing. Still those talon-like fingers retained their hold; try as he would he could not weaken their terrible grip. Little by little he felt himself sinking. The room was in such total darkness that it was impossible to discover whom his antagonist might be. In the last extremity of his agony he rolled from the bed and lay helpless upon the floor, entangled in the clothes. With the fall, his assailant lost his grip of his throat. Then something must have startled him, for a moment later the door opened, and he was gone. Disengaging himself as quickly as possible from the bed-clothes, Jim staggered to his feet, half stunned by the fall and the terrific conflict in which he had so lately been engaged. As soon as he recovered he lit a candle, hastened to the door, opened it and passed out into the gallery. No one was to be seen there, but he had not gone many paces before he heard the same clicking noise that had arrested his attention on the first occasion of his seeing the Black Dwarf. Making his way round the gallery, he reached the room occupied by Terence. The door stood ajar, and from the noises that proceeded from within, he gathered that his trusty servant was not only in bed, but fast asleep. He crossed and shook him by the shoulders.

"Get up, Terence," he whispered softly. "Get up at once."

"What's the matter?" asked the half-awakened man. "Why, it's you, sir. Is there anything wrong?"

"I should rather think so," Jim replied. "Look at my throat and see if you can detect any marks upon it."

The other held up the candle as he was directed. On either side of his throat were a number of bruises and scratches, and some of the latter were bleeding profusely.

"My gracious, sir!" said Terence; "it looks as if somebody had been trying to strangle you."

"You've hit it exactly," Jim replied. "Good heavens! Terence, I've been nearly murdered. You've no idea what a fight of it I've had in the dark. The man, whoever he was, finding that he couldn't finish me, bolted, and has gone down some secret passage in the gallery. Terence, we must catch him somehow."

Terence sprang out of bed, and while he was dressing, Jim hastened back to his room and also donned some clothes. This done, he returned to Terence's bedroom, to discover that worthy in the act of lacing his boots.

"It's a funny business this, sir!" Terence remarked. "I wish I had been behind that gentleman when he was trying to settle you. I'd have given him one for his precious nob, ghost or no ghost."

"I expect you would. Now be as quick as you can, for there is not a moment to lose if we want to catch him."

Terence immediately announced himself as ready, and then, taking their candles, they set off round the gallery towards the corridor where Jim felt sure his mysterious assailant had disappeared. Inspection showed them that the door of the stairs at the further end, leading down to the domestic offices, was securely fastened on the other side. Having made sure of this, they tried, as on a previous occasion, the various rooms along the corridor, searching each one most carefully. But no success attended their efforts.

"It is quite certain that he is not in any of these rooms," said Jim. "Now what we have to do is to discover the entrance to that secret passage. I shall not rest content until we have found that."

They accordingly returned to the corridor, where they set to work once more to over-haul the wainscotting. Beginning at one end, they worked to the other; their efforts, however, met with no more success than they had done in the searching of the rooms. Every panel of the wainscotting seemed as hollow as its fellow—each projection as firmly secured.

"And yet I am as certain that it is somewhere about here that he disappeared," said Jim.

At the entrance to the corridor from the gallery were two square pillars elaborately carved with fruit. Jim had explored his side, having pressed and pulled every pear and apple, with the usual result. Suddenly Terence touched him on the arm.

"Look here, sir," he whispered, "what's this? It seems to me that this grape is not very firm."

Jim turned to him and knelt down beside the bunch of fruit indicated. It certainly did seem as if

the lowest grape of the bunch were loose. It shook under his finger, and yet showed no sign of coming off.

"I believe we've got it at last," he said, pressing upon the grape, as he spoke, with all his strength. Yet it did not move. He endeavoured to push it in the direction of the gallery, but still it remained immovable. He tried forcing it from him towards the corridor, when to his amazement it left its place and moved half an inch or so away. As it did so there was a heavy creaking noise, and a portion of the panelling of the corridor, some three feet in width and six feet high, swung inwards, disclosing a black cavity, which might either have been a well or a staircase. Both men drew back in astonishment, half expecting that Jim's assailant, if he were concealed within, would dash out upon them.

"We've found the place at last," said Jim. "Now, if I'm not mistaken, we shall be able to solve the mystery of the famous Childerbridge ghosts. Hold your candle aloft, Terence, so that we can see what we are doing, and we'll descend and discover where it leads to."

"Let me go first, sir," Terence returned. "After the fight you had upstairs, you may not be up to the mark, and I'm dying to have a turn with him, if he's as big as a church."

But Jim would not hear of this, and bade the other follow him. Holding their lights aloft, they descended the narrow stone steps. They were longer than they expected to find them, and when they reached the bottom Jim knew that they must be some distance beneath the level of the foundations of the house. They were then standing in a passage, some four feet wide by seven in height. The walls and ceiling were of brick, the floor composed of huge blocks of stone. Everything reeked with damp while the air was as close and musty as a vault. Being resolved to leave no part of it unexplored, Jim pushed on closely followed by Terence. For economy's sake they blew out one of the candles, not knowing how far they might have to travel, or what might happen to them by the way. They had not been more than three minutes in the passage before Jim stopped, and turning to his companion, held up his hand.

"What's up?" he asked.

A sound as of heavy blows upon stone reached them from above.

"I can tell you what it is, sir," said Terence, after a moment's reflection. "It's the horses, and it means that we're under the stables."

"In that case it must run the entire width of the house and burrow under the courtyard. It means also that the direction is due east. This is growing interesting. Come along."

After this discovery they pushed on with increased speed, but the passage showed no signs of coming to an end. The air was close, but now and again draughts poured in upon them to prove that though they could not see them, there must be vent holes somewhere.

"I wouldn't have believed such a place could have existed," said Jim. "It seems as if we have come miles. By Jove, what's that?"

As he spoke the light of his candle shone upon a dark mass huddled upon the floor. A second later it became apparent that it was the figure of a man.

"Take care, sir," said Terence, as Jim hastened towards the prostrate form, "it may be the man we want, and he's as like as not shamming."

"We'll soon find that out," answered Jim, and knelt down beside the prostrate figure.

While Terence held the candle, Jim rolled the figure over until they were able to see the face. Then he uttered a cry of horror. *The man lying before them was none other than Abraham Bursfield!*

"Good heavens, this is too terrible," said Jim, after the long pause which followed, during which he had assured himself that he had made no mistake as to the other's identity. "Is he dead, do you think, Terence?"

"Quite dead, sir," Terence replied, after he too had knelt down and examined him. "If he's the man who tried to kill you, he'll never do any more mischief to anybody again."

But Jim did not answer. A sickening feeling of giddiness was taking possession of him. If it were Abraham Bursfield who had done his best to murder him that night, it was only logical to conclude that he was also the man who had murdered his father. Doctor Weston had declared him to be a madman that afternoon. Now he had certainly proved himself to be one of the most dangerous type. If that were the case what a narrow escape Helen had had.

"What's to be done, Terence?—what's to be done?" Jim asked almost piteously. "We could not have made a more terrible discovery."

"There'll have to be an Inquest, sir," said Terence.

"When it will be found that he entered my house and endeavoured to murder me. Then it will be remembered how my father died. Two and two will be put together, and the terrible truth will come out. That would break Miss Decie's heart."

"Good heavens! sir, I see what you mean," said Terence. "I never thought of that."

"He was mad, Terence, hopelessly mad, and therefore not responsible for his actions. Poor Miss Decie!"

"Aye, poor young lady. If she was so fond of the old gentleman, it would break her heart to know what he has been trying to do."

"She must never know," said Jim, who by this time had made up his mind. "I can trust you, Terence."

"To the death, sir, and I think you know it. I've served you, sir, and I served your father before you, and I don't think you ever found me wanting. Tell me what you think of doing."

"We must get him back to his own house, if possible," said Jim, "and let him be found dead there. No one but our two selves will know the truth, and if we keep silence, no one need ever know that we found him here. I cannot let Miss Decie be made more unhappy than she is."

"I don't know but that you are right, sir," Terence answered. "But how are we going to get him to the Dower House?"

"We must go along the passage and see where it leads to. If I am not mistaken it will take us there. This place must have been made years ago, when the two properties were one. We will leave the body here, and, if I am right in my conjecture, we can come back for it."

They accordingly allowed the remains of Mr. Bursfield to lie where they had found them, and proceeded on their tour of exploration. As it transpired, they had still a considerable distance to go before they reached the end of the tunnel. At last, however, they found themselves at the foot of a flight of stone steps, similar to those by which they had descended at the Manor House.

"Tread very quietly," Jim whispered to his companion. "We must on no account rouse the servants."

They noiselessly ascended the stairs until they found themselves at the top, and confronted by a door.

"I'll get you to stay here, Terence," Jim whispered, "while I open this door and see where we are."

He soon discovered what appeared to be a spring in the middle of the door, and when he had pressed it, had the satisfaction of seeing the door swing inwards. Shading the candle with his hand, Jim stepped into the room he found before him. His surprise at finding himself in Mr. Bursfield's study, the same room in which he had his last unpleasant interview with the old gentleman, can be better imagined than described. The secret door, he observed, formed part of the panelling on one side of the fireplace, a fragment of carving in the setting of the chimney-piece being the means of opening it. The old man's papers and books were littered about the table just as he had left them; a grandfather clock ticked solemnly in the further right-hand corner, while a little mouse watched Jim from beneath the sofa, as if it were endeavouring to ascertain his errand there at such an hour.

Having made sure of his whereabouts, Jim returned to the passage, closing the door carefully behind him.

"We must lose no time," he whispered to Terence; "it is already a quarter to three. Heaven grant that Isaac, his man-servant, does not take it into his head to look in upon his master during the night. He would then find him absent, and that would make it rather difficult to explain the fact of his being found dead in his chair in the morning."

By this time their first candle had expired, and it became necessary to light that Terence was carrying.

"If we are not very careful we shall be compelled to make our way back in the dark, after we have carried him up here," said Jim. "This candle will scarcely see us through."

"Never mind that, sir, so long as we can get him in here safely," said Terence. "I have got a box of matches in my pocket, and we can fumble our way back somehow."

They accordingly set off, and in due course reached the place where they had left the old man's body.

"How are we to carry him?" asked Jim.

"Oh, you leave that to me, sir. I can manage it," answered Terence. "If you'll go ahead with the light, I'll follow you."

So saying, he picked up the frail body, as if its weight were a matter of no concern to him, and they set off on their return journey to the Dower House. If the distance had appeared a long one before, it was doubly so now. At last, however, they reached the steps, climbed them, and a few moments later were standing in the dead man's study once more. In spite of his assertions to the contrary, it was plain that his exertions had taxed Terence's strength to its utmost. Between them they placed the body in the chair before the table.

This done, they left the room as quietly as they had entered it, and made their way down the steps once more. Jim's prophecy that the return journey would have to be made in darkness was fulfilled, for they had scarcely reached the place where they had discovered the body ere the

candle fluttered out and they found themselves in inky darkness.

Terence struck a match, but its feeble flicker was of little or no use to them. Fumbling their way along by the wall they continued to progress, until a muttered exclamation from Terence, who was leading, proclaimed the fact that they had reached the steps at the further end.

"Bad cess to 'em," said he, "I've barked my shins so that I shall have good cause to remember them to my dying day."

He thereupon lit another match, and by means of this modest illumination they climbed to the door in the corridor above.

"Heaven be thanked! we're safe home once more," said Jim, as they stepped into the passage. "I trust I may never experience another night like this."

Whispering to Terence to follow him quietly, he led the way round the gallery and downstairs to the dining-room, where he unlocked the Tantalus and poured out a glass of spirits for Terence and another for himself. Both stood in need of some sort of stimulant after all they had been through.

"Not a word must be breathed to any living being of this, Terence," he said, as he put his glass down. "Remember, I trust my secret to you implicitly."

"I give you my word, sir, that nobody shall ever hear it from me," answered Terence, and then the two men solemnly shook hands.

"Now, before we go to bed, I'll get you to come to my room and have a look at my throat," said Jim; "it's uncommonly sore."

This proved to be the case. And small wonder was it, for the finger marks were fast turning to bruises, while the scratches showed up as fiery-red as ever. Jim shuddered again and again as he recalled that awful struggle and compared his escape with his father's cruel fate.

"Another moment and in all probability he would have done for me too," he said to himself, and then added somewhat inconsequently, "Poor Helen!"

When his wounds had been dressed, he despatched Terence to bed; for his own part, however, he knew that sleep was impossible. In fact, he did not attempt to seek it, but seating himself in a comfortable chair, proceeded to read, with what attention he could bestow upon the operation, until daylight.

When the sun rose he dressed himself and went out, wearing a scarf instead of a collar, in order that the wounds he had received might not be apparent to the world. The memory of that hateful passage under the park haunted him like an evil dream. He determined to have it closed at once for good and all. While he remained the owner of Childerbridge no one should ever set foot in it again. He was still wondering how he could best carry out the work without exciting suspicion or comment, when he observed an old man crossing the park towards him. As he drew nearer, Jim became aware that it was old Isaac, Mr. Bursfield's man-servant and general factotum. It was also to be seen that he was in a very agitated state.

"God have mercy upon us, sir!" he said, as he came up to Jim; "I've had such a fright. Is Miss Helen with you?"

"She is," Jim replied, and then endeavouring to speak unconcernedly, he added—"Has Mr. Bursfield sent you to find her?"

"The poor gentleman will never send me on another errand," Isaac replied solemnly; "he has been sent for himself. He is dead!"

CHAPTER XIII

"What's that you say?" cried Jim, trying to appear as if he were scarcely able to believe that he heard aright. "Do you mean to tell me that Mr. Bursfield is dead?"

"Yes, sir," said the old man; "when I went into his study this morning to open the shutters, I found him seated at his table in the arm-chair stone dead. I ran up at once to Miss Helen's room to tell her, only to find that her bed had not been slept in. Me and my wife searched the house for her, but she is not to be found anywhere. Oh, sir, what does it all mean?"

"It means that Miss Decie came to my house last night at about eleven o'clock. Mr. Bursfield's condition was such that she was afraid to remain in the house with him any longer. You must have noticed that he has been very strange of late?"

"The poor old gentleman has been ailing for some days past," Isaac replied. "He always was quick tempered, but for the last month or so he doesn't seem to have been able to control himself. Perhaps it isn't right for a servant to say it, sir, but there 'ave been times lately when I 'ave been afraid that his reason 'ave been a-failing him. There was a time when he couldn't make enough of Miss Helen, but lately he's been scarce able to speak civil to her. It's a sad thing, sir, a very sad

thing, especially for a servant that's worked for him true and faithful for nigh upon forty years."

"His fit of rage last night must have hastened the end," said Jim. "The news you bring will affect Miss Decie very painfully. You had better go back and send at once for the doctor; I will return to the Manor House and tell Miss Decie."

"I humbly thank you for your kindness, sir," the man replied. "I will do what you say, and perhaps you will be kind enough to come over later."

When he had extracted the other's promise he hobbled off, and Jim returned to his own house. He found Helen and Alice in the hall, standing before the great fireplace in earnest conversation. He bade them as cheery a good morning as was possible under the circumstances, and when he had done so his sister enquired why his throat was wrapped up so closely.

"It's a trifle sore this morning," Jim replied, with some truth. "That's all. It will be all right very soon."

He then suggested that they should go in to breakfast. He had determined to break the news of Mr. Bursfield's death to Helen after the meal. This he did with great gentleness. The shock, however, was a severe one, nevertheless, but she did her best to meet it bravely.

"Poor old grandfather," she said after a while, "I always feared that his death would come like this. Oh how sorry I am that he should have died believing that I had ceased to love him."

"He could not have done that," Jim replied. "In his inmost heart he must have known that your affection was one that could never change."

She shook her head, however.

"Will you take me to him?" she enquired, and Jim, feeling that it would not be wise not to do so, consented to go with her to the Dower House. Side by side they crossed the park by the path they had come to know so well, entered the house by the little postern door, and were met in the hall by the village doctor whom Isaac had summoned.

"My dear Miss Decie," he said as they shook hands, "will you accept my heartfelt sympathy for you in your trouble. I fear it must have been a terrible shock."

"It has affected me more than I can say," she answered. "I had no idea, though I was aware that his heart was in a very weak state, that the end was so near."

"One thing I can tell you if it will make you any happier," said the doctor, "and that is, that I am certain his end was a peaceful and painless one."

Thanking the doctor for his sympathy, Helen left the room and went upstairs to the dead man's bedroom. Jim and the doctor went into the study.

"I suppose it will be necessary to hold an Inquest," said Jim, when they were alone together.

"I am very much afraid so," the doctor replied. "But it will be quite a formal affair. There are two circumstances, however, Mr. Standerton, about the affair, that I must confess puzzle me more than a little."

Jim felt himself turning cold. Had he left anything undone, or had he made any mistake?

"What are those two circumstances?" he enquired.

"Well, in the first place," said the doctor, "the old gentleman seldom went outside the house, not once a month at most, and only then on fine days. Yesterday, his man-servant tells me, he did not stir beyond the study door. Isaac is certain that he was wearing his carpet slippers at dinner time, and also when he looked in upon him before retiring, yet when he was found this morning he was wearing boots."

"That is most curious, certainly," said Jim, "but I must confess I fail to see anything remarkable in it."

"Not perhaps in the fact of his wearing the boots," said the medical gentleman, "but there is another point which, taken in conjunction with it, makes one pause to think. On the first finger of the right hand I found that the nail had been recently broken, and in a painful fashion. What is more, the second and third fingers had smears of blood upon them. Now with the exception of the nail to which I have alluded and which did not bleed, he had not a trace of a wound on either finger. That I am quite certain of, for I searched diligently. Moreover, there is not a trace of blood upon the table at which he was seated. And there is one thing stranger still."

"What is that?"

"As you are aware, it commenced to rain at a late hour last night. Unfortunately I know it, for the reason that I was compelled to be out in it. The roads were plastered with mud. Now though Mr. Bursfield, for some reason of his own, had put on his boots, he could not have ventured outside, for there is not a speck of mud upon them. In that case, why the boots, and where did the blood come from?"

"You are perfectly sure that he died of heart disease?"

"As sure as I can be of anything," said the doctor. "Nevertheless, it's altogether a mysterious affair."

This also proved to be the opinion of the Coroner's Jury, and as there was no one forthcoming to clear it up, a mystery it was likely to remain for all time. Had the Coroner and his Jury, however, known the history of the bruises under the thick bandage which the young Squire of Childerbridge wore round his throat, they would have been enlightened.

As nobody was able to account for anything save the doctor, however, a verdict of "Death from Natural Causes" was returned, and three days later, Abraham Bursfield was laid to rest with his forefathers in the little churchyard, scarcely fifty paces away from the grave of the man who had fallen by his hands.

"Jim," said Alice on the evening of the funeral, when they had brought Helen back to the Manor House, "I have a proposal to make to you. I am going to suggest that I should take Helen away for a few weeks to the seaside. The anxieties and sorrow of the past two months have been too much for her. I can see that she stands in need of a thorough change. If you have no objection to raise, I thought we could start to-morrow morning. We shall be away a month, and by that time she should be quite restored to health."

"And pray what am I going to do with myself while you are away?" he asked. "I gather you mean when you say that you are both going away that I am not to accompany you?"

"No; all things considered, I think it would be better not," said Alice. "But if you are very good you shall come down to us for two or three days during the month. Then if Helen agrees, and I have no doubt you will be able to induce her to do so, you could obtain a Special License, and be quietly married at the end of that time."

Jim, who regarded it quite possible that the marriage might be postponed for some time, clutched eagerly at the straw of hope held out to him, and willingly agreed to her suggestion.

"And now one other matter, Alice," he said. "I, on my side, have a proposal to make. Whether you will prove as complaisant as I have done is another matter."

"What is your proposal?"

"It can be resolved into one word," he answered, "That word is Mudrapilla."

He heard her catch her breath, and then she looked pleadingly at him.

"Jim," she whispered, "Oh Jim, dear, you don't mean it, do you?"

"If you and Helen will accompany me, I do," he answered. "Terence I am quite sure will not object. Will you agree, my sister?"

The answer she vouchsafed might have meant anything or nothing. It was:—

"Only to think of seeing dear old Mudrapilla again!"

So it was settled. Helen and Alice departed next day to a tiny seaside place in Devonshire, where Jim was under orders to join them for three days at the week end once during their stay. As soon as they were gone, he in his turn set off for London. His first act on reaching the City, and when he had deposited his bag at the hotel, was to drive to the office of the Estate Agent with whom his father had negotiated the purchase of Childerbridge. That portly, suave gentleman received him with the respect due to a man worth half a million of money, and the owner of such a palatial mansion and estate.

"But, my dear sir," he began, when he had heard what James had to say, "you surely don't mean to say that you are desirous of selling Childerbridge. You have only been there a few months."

"I am most anxious to be rid of the place as soon as possible," Jim replied. "As you may suppose it has the most painful recollections for me. Besides I am thinking of returning to Australia almost immediately, and scarcely know when I shall visit England again."

"In that case I must do the best I can for you," said the other. "At the same time I feel that I should warn you that the Estate Market is not in a very flourishing condition at present, and that a large number of properties that have been placed upon the market have not sold nearly as well as they should have done."

"I must take my chance of not getting its value," said Jim. "Find me a purchaser and I don't think he will be able to complain that I have not met him fairly."

The agent promised to do his best, and for the next fortnight Jim amused himself in a lazy fashion travelling about England, purchasing a variety of stock for his Australian stations, and longing for the time to come when he should be at liberty to present himself in Devonshire. At last, however, the day arrived. It was morning when he left London, it was evening when he reached his destination. It was winter when he left Waterloo, dull, dismal and foggy; when he reached Devonshire it was, in his eyes at least, perpetual summer. Both Helen and Alice were at the railway station to greet him, and immediately he saw them he realised the fact that a change for the better had taken place in his sweetheart. The old colour had come back to her cheeks, the old sparkle was in her eyes. She greeted him very lovingly, but if possible a little shyly. There were such lots of news to hear, and still more to be told, that it seemed as if they would never have

done talking.

The village had proved itself a delightful little place. It was far from the track of the tripper, and had not then been spoiled by the wealthy tourist. High cliffs hemmed it in on either side, and the sea broke upon the beach of shingles. They returned to their lodgings for tea, a charming thatched cottage, within a stone's throw of the primitive little jetty, beside which the fisher boats were moored. Afterwards the lovers went for a walk upon the cliffs.

"Helen, my darling," said Jim, "I can scarcely realise that it is only a fortnight since I saw you. It seems as if years had passed. You can have no idea how happy it makes me to see you looking like your own dear self once more."

"I could not help being well here," she answered. "Besides, Alice has been so good and kind to me. I should be ungrateful indeed were I to show no improvement."

But Jim had not brought his sweetheart out on the cliff to discuss his sister's good qualities.

"Helen," he said at last, "is it possible for you to be my wife in a fortnight's time?"

He took her little hand in his and looked into her eyes. The veriest tyro might have seen that the young man was terribly in earnest.

"It might be possible," she said softly, but without looking at him. "Are you quite sure you *do* wish it?"

"If you talk like that I shall go back to London to-night," he answered. "You know very well that to make you my wife has been my ambition ever since I first saw you."

And then he went on to tell her of his dreams, winding up with this question—"I wonder whether you will like Australia?"

"I shall like any place where you may be," she replied.

Could any young woman say more to her lover than that? At any rate Jim appeared to be satisfied.

On the Monday following he returned to London to learn from the agent that a probable, though unexpected, purchaser had been found for Childerbridge. He proved to be a wealthy American, who was not only prepared to take over the estate at a valuation, but also to purchase the furniture and effects as they stood.

On the day following the receipt of this news, Jim travelled down with the would-be buyer, conducted him over the property, and was in a position to assure himself, when the other had departed, that Childerbridge would be very soon off his hands. To the agent's horror the matter was conducted on both sides with unusual promptness, and in consequence, when, a fortnight later, Jim stepped into the Devonshire train with a special marriage license in his pocket, the sale was as good as effected.

The wedding was solemnised next day in the quaint little village church, and excited no comment from the humble fisher folk. The only persons present were the bride and bridegroom, Alice, and the family lawyer, who had travelled down from London expressly to give the bride away. Then, no impediment being offered, James Standerton, bachelor, took to himself for wife Helen Decie, spinster. The worthy old gentleman pocketed his fee with a smiling face, congratulated both parties, and then hurried off to another parish to bury a fisherman who had been drowned in the bay a few days before. An hour later Jim and Helen started for Exeter, *en route* for Scotland, while Alice accompanied the lawyer, whose wife's guest she was to be, to London, to wait there until her brother and sister-in-law should return from the north.

Four years have elapsed since that terrible night when Abraham Bursfield was found dead in the secret passage leading from Childerbridge Manor House to the Dower House in the corner of the Park. Those four years have certainly worked wondrous changes in at least four lives. One short sketch must serve to illustrate this fact, and to bring my story to a conclusion. The scene is no longer laid in England but on a rough Bush track on a very hot Australian afternoon. A tall good-looking man is jogging contentedly along, apparently oblivious to all that goes on around him. It is easily seen that he and his horse are on the very best terms with each other. He passes the Pelican Lake, descends into the hollow of what was perhaps a continuation of the same lake, and on gaining the summit of the next rise finds himself looking upon what, at first glance, would appear to be a small village. This village is the station of Mudrapilla, and the giant gums which can just be discerned some five miles or so to the right, indicate the spot where on a certain eventful evening, James Standerton first came face to face with Richard Murbridge. This same James Standerton, for it is he who is the rider of the horse, increases his pace as soon as the station itself comes into view. He passes the men's quarters, the store, the blacksmith's shop, and finally approaches a long and extremely comfortable looking one-storied residence, whose broad verandahs are confronted by orange groves on the one side, and the brave old river on the other. As he rides up one of the overseers emerges from the barracks, and hastens forward to greet his employer, and to take his horse from him. That overseer is no less a person than our old friend, Terence O'Riley, looking just the same as ever. Jim gives him a few directions concerning the

sheep in the Mountain Paddock, which he has visited that afternoon, and then dismounts and strolls on through the gates, and up the garden path towards the house. In the broad verandah a lady is seated in a long comfortable chair, and playing beside her on the floor is a chubby urchin upwards of two years of age. Helen, for as may be supposed, it is none other than she, rises on hearing her husband's step on the path, and catching up the infant brings him forward to greet his father with a kiss.

"I didn't expect you for half-an-hour at least, dear," she says, when she in her turn has kissed him. "The boy and I have been patiently awaiting your arrival. Did you meet the mail?"

"I did," he answered, "and I opened the bag upon the road. There are two letters for you, one I see is from Alice."

"And you?" she asks, as she takes the letters from him.

"Well, I had one of some importance," he replied. "It is from Fairlight—my old solicitor in England, you remember him—and what do you think he tells me?"

Helen, very naturally, could not guess.

"Well, he says that Childerbridge Manor was burnt down by fire three months ago and totally destroyed. The American, the owner, is going to rebuild it at once on a scale of unparalleled magnificence."

There was a pause for a few moments, then Helen said:—

"What do you think about it, Jim?"

"All things considered I am not sorry," he answered. "Yet, perhaps, I should not say that, for it brought me the greatest blessing a man can have."

"And that blessing?" she asked innocently.

"Is a good wife," he answered, stooping to kiss her. After which he disappeared into the house.

"And pray what does Alice say?" he asked, when he returned a few minutes later.

"She gives us such good news," Helen replied. "She and Jack will spend Christmas with us. She declares she is the happiest woman in the world. Jack is a paragon."

In case the reader should fail to understand who Jack is, I might remark that he is no less a person than Jack Riddington, the overseer, mentioned at the commencement of my story, and who was supposed to be Jim's best friend. Alice, after they were engaged, admitted that she had always entertained a liking for him, while it was well known that he had always been head over ears in love with her. During Jim's absence in England he had come into a large sum of money, had purchased a station one hundred and fifty miles south of Gundawurra, had married Alice within six months of her return, and was now living a life of undoubted felicity.

"They may be happy," said Helen, "but they can never be as happy as we are. That is quite certain, husband mine."

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CHILDERBRIDGE MYSTERY ***

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